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Parallel and Allegory

Kody Keller

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Bryon Draper, Chair
Brian Christensen
Joseph Ostraff

Department of Visual Arts

Brigham Young University

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Abstract

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Kody Keller

Department of Visual Arts, BYU

Master of Fine Arts

Parallel and Allegory is a series of four pieces that look deeper into specific Christian beliefs. Most directly addressed those that dealt with specific parallels and allegorical relationships. Specific symbols such as nails, hammers, wood, trees, people, fruit, a cup, knife a rope and a stone were the focus of the pieces in the exhibition. Four combinations of these symbols were created to create dialogue and introspection.

Key Words: nails, hammers, wood, trees, people, fruit, a cup, knife, rope, stone, parallel, allegory, symbol

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al·le·go·ry

a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another. or a symbolical narrative¹

par·al·lel

having the same direction, course, nature, or tendency; corresponding; similar; analogous.²

Introduction

“Parallel and Allegory”, my Masters Thesis exhibition, is the embodiment of four allegorical concepts. The four pieces that I produced each have a particular thought process that began with a study and pondering of the scriptures. I have developed these thoughts and created artwork that forms a specific dialogue for each one. My intent was not to teach but to question, and to inspire thought about these subjects and their inherent dual nature.

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/allegory?>

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/parallel?s=t>

Symbols of my belief

From as early as I can remember I have been learning from symbols. I learned that certain things meant or took the meaning of others. As early as I can remember bread and water were eaten in Sacrament Meeting to help me remember the body and the blood of Christ. The Savior introduced these two symbols to his disciples just before his crucifixion:

19 ¶And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

20 Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.³

As I grew older, I came to realize that these symbols were much deeper than I had originally understood. The bread was a symbol of the Savior's body, but more it was a symbol of the resurrection and His victory over death. I learned that the blood was a symbol of the victory over sin, making it possible for us to repent. In the Book of Mormon Amulek spoke of the Savior's act of overcoming death, which is symbolized by the bread:

42 Now, there is a death which is called a temporal death; and the death of Christ shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised from this temporal death.⁴

³ Luke 22:19-20

As I studied more, I slowly I began to see that there was a constant stream of symbolism in the teachings of the gospel. I started to learn about metaphors, idioms and allegories that taught about a myriad of gospel topics. The most interesting thing to me was that in each of these teaching styles, I was able to learn something more from the symbols and stories as I grew in experience. I was especially interested in the allegories and parables. I was amazed at how the Savior could tell a story about a pearl, or a beggar, ten virgins, or a sower, and time teach about deep doctrinal topics like spiritual power, The kingdom of God, and missionary work. In teaching this way he taught to the level of the student. I seek for my sculptures to work in the same way. I create an object, based on an allegorical concept or relationship that will cause others to ponder, question and look deeper. As a person grows and experiences life the piece will have a different and deeper meaning than before. The meaning may be different for each person that experiences it.

Contemporary Influences

I have always been drawn to the figure, and have always tried to include some figurative aspect in my work. I have sought out others that have done this effectively in the contemporary art world. I can remember walking into Bryon Draper's office one day while pursuing my BFA, and seeing an issue of *Sculpture Magazine* on his desk. It had an image of Ron Mueck's "Big Man" on the cover. I immediately was in love with his work. I have ever since been a huge fan of Mueck's figures. I think that a large part of it was that I had found someone who was using the figure successfully in contemporary art. Since then I have also come to study the work of Manuel Neri, Stephen Destabler, Willy

⁴ Alma 11:42

Virgener, Gehard Demetz, Bill Viola, and many others that have changed me and my work. I will mention some of these as I talk about the work that makes up “Parallel and Allegory”.

Parallel and Allegory

As stated before, parallels in religious belief enthrall me. One thing that I have done consistently for about 19 years is study the scriptures. I love to learn and compare gospel truths. A few years ago I was been hired by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to work on the Jerusalem set in Goshen Utah. One of my duties was to sculpt a life size olive tree for the Garden of Gethsemane. After finishing I was surprised to find in my study of the scriptures trees are constantly used as a symbol of people and vice versa. This was a huge breakthrough for me. I began to search more and more to find more of these examples. I found that there was even a hierarchy of trees and that the olive tree was at the top. I began to conceptualize new sculptures that I wanted to create that would address the discoveries I was making. I was finally able to come up with some ideas that I was passionate about. I have since gone on to study deeper, and have found that the tree allegory is found in many different religious beliefs. I have tried to reflect this in my art and find relevant subjects to portray. I have since looked at other allegories and parallels in my religious belief. I am very interested in work that dwells on these relationships. I have been interested to see the abstract way that symbols are used many times in religious teachings and how we are all very comfortable with their uses. Some of them could be seen as very strange from an outsider’s perspective.

Limb

I happened upon this quote and was amazed at how well it fit in with this piece:

A sculptor is a person obsessed with the form and shape of things, and it's not just the shape of one thing, but the shape of anything and everything; the hard, tense strength, although delicate form of a bone; the strong, solid fleshiness of a beech tree trunk. (Henry Moore)⁵

"Limb" is a singular form that is a combination of a humerus, or upper arm bone, and a tree branch. Both sides are the same material and color. I did this to create a unity and oneness to the between the two halves. I have been very interested in the constant parallels between trees and people and I have searched extensively and I am still finding new examples of this relationship. I have found many instances in the scriptures that speak of this, for example:

17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

⁵ *Understanding art*, Belmont, CA.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007, pg 177. Chp 9.

xv, 560 p.: col. ill.;

20 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.⁶

In these scriptures the Lord is not talking about trees but is talking about people. Bringing forth fruit, either good or bad is a reference to a person's acts. One reason He has chosen to use the symbol of a tree is that the people would have been very familiar with the subject of working with vineyards. Trees seem to always fit. Our similarities are numerous, and easy for students to relate to. They are a symbol that is used over and over in the scriptures.

I have found that this is a common theme in various religious teachings and beliefs, not just my own. For example, the Ashvattha, or Tree of Brahman, is a sacred Hindu tree that is symbolic of man perfected. The symbolism is very similar to ours, in that it signifies deity in one instance, and also those that emulate to be such. I have also found many examples in the English language that show how this relationship can be found in our language. For example, the title of this piece: "Limb". The word limb can be used to identify a branch on a tree or an appendage of a human body. Some other examples would be trunk, roots, fruit, and seed. I would not say that this relationship is a duality per se, because I do not think that they are in contrast to one another. Rather, they are complimentary to one another. There seems to me to be a deeper theological reason for combining these two symbols. I have yet to understand it fully.

⁶ The Bible. English KJV, (Mathew 7: 17-20)

I was highly influenced in the making and the presentation of this piece by the work of Ron Mueck. Mueck's subject matter is usually the abnormal and the socially repulsive. He nonetheless forces the spectator to confront things that they would usually avoid. In "Dead Dad", Mueck did a small-scale version of his dead father, nude and sporting real hair from the artist. He uses scale that would not be the usual atmosphere for his "sculptures". I really like the way that he uses the figure to help us relate to the dialogue he is creating. I felt that his piece, "Dead Dad", in part, inspired "Limb". It feels so exposed, alone and bare.

Bitter Keys

I started thinking about this piece when my wife read a book called *The Peacekeeper*. In the book it talked about a kinship between Adam and Christ in that either would have been a lone man in paradise had they not partaken of either the "bitter fruit"⁷ or the "bitter cup"⁸. This parallel enthralled me. Adam was stuck alone in the Garden of Eden. Eve had partaken of the fruit. Adam must choose to stay or to go. The fate of all of God's children is weighing on his decision. Adam partakes, opening the gates of paradise to let us out, bringing mortality and sin to all of God's children and thus enabling their eternal progression. In turn Adam creates a condition upon which in the future the Savior will have a similar decision. Now the Savior must partake to open the gates of paradise that we might follow him in. Paul spoke of this act in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

⁷2 N 2:15

⁸ Doctrine and Covenants 19:18

21 For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.⁹

I was very interested in the fact that these two characters as symbols have an intertwined relationship, and that there was such interesting parallel in this symbolism. I then sought to create a piece that would portray what I wanted to say. While working on this piece I have pondered decisions that individuals make, and the consequences that these decisions cause others to deal with, and how in turn they then have decisions that are to be made to reconcile the first. I eliminated as much of the figure until it was only two forearms reaching in opposite directions. On one side of the piece the fingers reach for a small cup, on the other a fruit. This piece deals with responsibility, accountability, and the long-range consequences of our choices. I was strongly influenced on this piece by the symbolic work of Gehard Demetz, who deals with similar symbolism. I became interested in his work when another student showed me his work in a *High Fructose* magazine in 2013. I was instantly impressed with, not only the high level of skill and accuracy, but also the rich content and symbolism that his work exudes. His sculptures have a very symbolic nature as he combines objects and figures in a cohesive and symbolic way. His works start as just a simple stack of wood blocks. He leaves large and small gaps between many of the blocks to add a rougher and unfinished effect. I feel that this choice makes them more human and much more interesting. Also, his choice of using Lime wood adds a pallid, almost sick look to his pieces. They look kind of spooky. For subject matter he uses images of children and puts them in the roles of adults, some of

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15: 21-22

them famous and some infamous. His goal is to portray young people making adult decisions and living in a grown up world. In speaking of this Demetz said:

My subjects transmit the awareness of becoming adults and thus losing, their ability to “listen” to their unconscious. They live with the burden of guilt transmitted from generation to generation that in fact does not belong to them. They are children who feel sad about not being able to really be children, but who, on the other hand, still have the possibility to choose to become adults, independently, thus freeing themselves little by little of all the influences transmitted by their ancestors. They are witness to all the effort involved in the process of growth and development, which is achieved through individual will and concentration.¹⁰

One piece that was driven by his disgust of moneymaking and the “ruthlessness of industry” is “Be Priest”. In speaking of this sculpture author Kirsten Nordahl said:

A small girl armed with an oil pump, created in 2010 at a time when the whole world was watching one of the most devastating ecological disasters unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico after an explosion had occurred

¹⁰ Nordahl, Kirsten. *Little big creatures They never look at you – they watch you.* 2011. Article.pg 1

on the oilrig Deepwater Horizon. The initials of the title of the sculpture are a discreet allusion to the oil company responsible for the disaster.¹¹

In this piece the young girl is holding the oil can like it is a pistol. I feel that his work and mine have a certain likeness to them. In his work he joins a figure and an object. His pieces are very ambiguous, and very symbolic. I have tried to emulate this in “Bitter Keys”.

father to son

father to son

Father to Son

Every son sees things in his father that he says he will never do or be. Inevitably every father finds himself doing some of those exact things. The concept for this piece is one that I had been thinking about and studying for years. As a father it has had particular meaning to me. I had been interested in the irony of Abraham’s situation, as he stands above his son, ready to sacrifice him.

Early on in Abraham’s life his father was practicing human sacrifice. It was something at the time that many people in Egypt did. Eventually Abraham finds himself bound and as an offering to the “gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmackrah, Korash, and also

¹¹ Nordahl, Kirsten. *Little big creatures They never look at you – they watch you*. 2011. Article.pg 1

a god like unto that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt”¹². Just before he is to die however, an angel of the lord saves him.

15 And as they lifted up their hands upon me, that they might offer me up and take away my life, behold, I lifted up my voice unto the Lord my God, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and he filled me with the vision of the Almighty, and the angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands;¹³

Understandably this type of sacrifice was something that Abraham detested and he quickly removed himself from this group of people and this practice. Years pass and he and his wife are unable to have posterity. Until finally he has a son named Isaac. Isaac is a fulfillment of promises given to him of priesthood and prosperity. Things go well until one day Abraham is asked to do the unthinkable.

2 And [the Lord] said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.¹⁴

Abraham obeys, and now he stands over his bound son, ready to take his life. Abraham has become his father. The thing that he hated most about his father has now made its way into his life. The piece I created consists of four items: a knife, rope, firewood and a flat stone. All the tools needed to offer a sacrifice to the lord. I saw these

¹² Pearl of Great Price.English,(Abraham 1:3)

¹³ Pearl of Great Price.English,(Abraham 1:15)

¹⁴ The Bible. English KJV, (Genesis 22:2)

as symbolic hand me downs from one generation to the next and to the next. In the Title the last Father to Son is capitalized to convey the similitude of the sacrifice both the Son and the Father. The Prophet Jacob spoke of this, and explained the importance of this act in the life of Abraham:

5 Behold, they believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name, and also we worship the Father in his name. And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him; and for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son.¹⁵

Abraham, with knife in hand, stands ready to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac. He is spared the act of sacrifice. Through this he has been handed down an understanding of the act of the Father and his sacrifice on His firstborn. Abraham has become his father.

Hammer, Wood, Nails

A few years back I became very interested in the irony of the Savior's relationship with hammers, wood and nails. I was interested in writing a poem about this relationship and started to conceptualize it in my mind. This concept stayed there for some time until I began to form concepts for my final show. I felt that this one fit perfectly with the

¹⁵ Jacob 4:5

direction I had chosen. This piece speaks of the tools that Christ was trained in as a child. Jesus was a “carpenter’s son”.¹⁶ He had seen his father use these tools throughout his young life. Even as a child he would have become aware that ancient prophets foretold that in the future these tools would be used to harm him.

16 For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

17 I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.

18 They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.¹⁷

He became skilled in these tools and began to use them to provide shelter and create protection for others. These would have been tools that would have become familiar to him and that he grew to love and trust. Later in his life these same tools would be used to cause him excruciating pain and even death. He would however be using them again, through the atonement, to provide shelter and protect His family. In speaking through Joseph Smith to Martin Harris the Lord said:

16 For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

17 But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

¹⁶ Mathew 13:55

¹⁷ Psalms 22: 16-18

18 Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—




19 Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.

The hammer, wood, and nails became tools for providing our eternal protection and shelter us from the effects of death.

The Show

In arranging the pieces of this exhibition, I wanted them to each find an individual space. My intent was that each would stand on its own. I did not want it to feel like there was a flow from one side to the other. The pieces were cohesive in that they all speak allegorically, but one did not lead to another or vice versa. In displaying them, I chose pedestals that would accentuate each piece. I placed them far enough apart that they were on their own, but close enough to the others to create cohesion. The narrow foyer of Gallery 303 was an ideal venue for “Parallel and Allegory”. The feedback that I got was very positive. I found that the pieces catalyzed thought and pondering. I was happy to see that this exhibition moved people to look deeper at these doctrines that apply to all of us.

Appendix of Figures

 A sculpture of an olive tree with a thick, gnarled trunk and a dense canopy of green leaves, set in a naturalistic outdoor environment.	<p>Olive Tree, Kody Keller</p>
 A sculpture of a large, bald, muscular man sitting on a grey surface, leaning against a white wall, with his head resting on his hand.	<p>Big Man, Ron Mueck</p>
 A sculpture of a limb, possibly a leg, lying on a dark, textured surface, with a white, bone-like structure visible.	<p>Limb, Kody Keller</p>



Ashvattha, or Tree of Brahman



Dead Dad, Ron Mueck



Bitter Keys, Kody Keller



Be Priest, Gehard Demetz



father to son
father to son
Father to Son

Kody Keller



Hammer, Wood, Nails, Kody Keller



Image of Parallel and Allegory



Image of Parallel and Allegory

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