My artwork is the material representation of the process within me that seeks to derive meaning from experience. This is an ongoing process of discovery that is never completely realized. My search takes shape in both concept and form through a juxtaposing of historical and contemporary symbols and techniques. The result is allegorical images culminating from the past and filtered through the present. They are enigmatic images that reveal meaning for me as the creator while still allowing a variety of interpretations for viewers.

Viewers described my work as allegorical many years before I did. This is because I associated allegory with predetermined illustrations often accompanied with propagandistic messages. This was problematic because I didn’t think my paintings functioned in that way. However, I have come to understand that this concept of allegory is a hold-over from the 19th century when the Symbolist movement opposed the aristocracy’s use of allegory to assert their political agendas. It is clear that the reputation and role of allegory has fluctuated throughout its long history. At certain times in history it has been a valuable mode of interpretation for poets and philosophers while at other times it has been viewed as a manipulative anachronistic device used by politicians and preachers. For most of the past two centuries, due in part to its insistence on looking backwards and reliance on historical knowledge, allegory has been condemned “as aesthetic aberration or the antithesis of art”.¹ However, in the recent past, philosophers and critics, like Walter

¹ Owens, 67
Benjamin, have re-introduced it as a viable mode of exploration. With this understanding of allegory I now believe it is the best way of describing my painting.

A Definition of Allegory

My paintings are often described as mysterious, ambiguous or enigmatic. For many viewers they appear to be puzzles with hidden solutions. Often I am asked to explain or provide the key to solving the puzzle. A common question, concerning my painting titled *Sisyphean Execution* (fig 1), is “why is that hooded man holding a cardboard box?” The ability of my paintings to stimulate questions is the result of the most broadly understood quality of allegory which is its ability to say one thing and mean another.2 However, there are slightly more specific approaches to defining allegory. One of the other ways of understanding it is as an extended metaphor. This idea may be better understood in the following analogy: “Allegory is to thought what metaphor is to the single word.”3 While a metaphor states that one thing is the same as another thing, allegory adds an element of narrative to this relationship. This is one possible distinction between allegory and the various other rhetorical devices. Maggie Bowers, in her book *Magical Realism*, writes that an allegory is “a narrative that has two levels of meaning – the one of the plot, and the other of a covert alternative meaning. In allegorical writing, the plot tends to be subsumed by the importance of the alternative meaning.”4 This definition suggests that the literal interpretation of the events of a narrative provide one form of meaning, while an alternate interpretation of those same events provides an alternate meaning which is more valuable. The alternate meaning is seen as more important because it is often associated with

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2 Fletcher, 1
3 Kelley, 22
4 Bowers, 129
intangible or transcendent knowledge that is hidden behind the literal level of the image. This is precisely what gives allegory its power. It promises hidden or secret knowledge that can only be gained with the proper interpretation. However, the alternate meaning is not as easily secured as the literal interpretation. This gives allegorical images their enigmatic and mysterious quality and is also what motivates the creation of each of my paintings.

How Allegory Functions in my Paintings

Discovering alternate or hidden meaning is the primary function of my paintings. At least that is how they function for me as the creator. I juxtapose images and objects from the past and the present. Some have pre-existing meaning attached to them, like master artworks, while others are less recognizable and more open ended. By bringing them together into one scene my hope is that the associations will reveal something not previously understood. The best example of this occurring in my own work comes from the painting titled Autumn of 2014 (fig 2). The original idea for this painting was a solitary female figure holding a circular lantern. I wasn’t sure what the image meant, but I began painting her despite the lack of meaning associated with her at the time. As time went on other objects and images, like the bee boxes and the background from Delacroix’s painting titled Liberty Leading the People (fig 3) began to emerge in my mind. I associated meaning with these objects, for example Delacroix’s image referenced concepts associated with Romanticism and the French Revolution, but, how they related to the original female figure was not clear. Many different images might come to mind during the creation of a painting, but some seem to belong where others don’t. This is one of the most important stages of my painting process. I choose which images belong and which do not through a combination of intuition and intention. Sometimes meaning never emerges and the image
remains unclear, while at other times the meaning begins to develop throughout the process.

For Autumn of 2014 (fig 2) the meaning came after it was completed. I began to think that it represents the last stage of my academic career and how I felt about my future role as a non-student. The female figure represents my new path that will be determined by placing more trust in my own personal vision. I now understand the figure as leaving the battle, which I relate to my own experience of trying to hold onto romantic ideals throughout my academic career. The bee boxes represent the knowledge I gained throughout my academic career, but now it is organized and controlled. Despite this seemingly clear interpretation, the clarity of meaning I have given here is never fully experienced. I still believe that it might reveal new meaning. I find this to be allegory’s most beneficial quality, to continually generate alternate meanings depending on the context it is interpreted within. For example, one of my first graduate level paintings, titled Above or Undergloom (fig 4), means something different to me now than it did when I finished it. It now reveals how lost I was during the transition from my long time home in Ohio to my new home in Michigan. Whereas, when I first completed it I thought it had more to do with how I felt as a traditional painter in a contemporary art world.

How my Paintings Function for the Viewer

Although my work functions allegorically for me, that does not mean that I expect a viewer to derive the same meaning from them. For instance, my wife, who is the model for Autumn of 2014 (fig 2), interprets the painting more biographically. She believes it represents her desire to become more confident in herself as she struggles with fertility issues. I accept and welcome the idea that my work functions differently for different viewers as well as for me, the creator. Viewers often interpret meaning that I did not intend.
or did not interpret myself. Whereas for me, the work functions as a mode of discovery by revealing a more mysterious and meaningful reality, others may simply see random images, images that relate to their own life or even puzzles that cannot be explained or interpreted. Gordon Teskey suggests that allegory tends to be interpreted either through polysemy or irony. He wrote that when one interprets allegorical images, they “either [use] polysemy to interpret, thereby doing what allegory wants one to do, or one ironizes and demystifies, using antiphrasis as a kind of abrasive to escape away the allegorized gods that have, as it were coagulated on top of the substance.”\(^5\) What Teskey suggests is that an allegorical image can function as a tool for revealing a multiplicity of meaning or as a tool for supporting the lack thereof. Viewers can understand the multiplicity of meaning attached to an object as revealing a more complex reality or they can understand it as a contradiction that supports a more nihilistic viewpoint. Those who chose to see my work as antiphrasis or irony will see only a literal surface containing random images that mean nothing, while those who chose a polysemic lens will interpret them as meaning generators. Even if they are seen as meaning generators there is no guarantee what the meaning will be. My paintings’ ability to function differently for every viewer is embraced and seen as a quality rather than a fault.

My paintings are capable of suggesting multiple levels of meaning, which allows for a variety of interpretations, some that support meaning and some that suggest nothing. However, Angus Fletcher suggests, “we must avoid the notion that all people must see the double meaning, for the work to be rightly called allegory.”\(^6\) By considering my images allegorical I am simply claiming that they are capable of suggesting the presence of an

\(^5\) Teskey, 398
\(^6\) Fletcher, 8
alternate meaning. This does not mean that the audience will recognize it or even has to in order to appreciate them. Ultimately, accepting the notion that an audience may or may not recognize the existence of an alternate meaning in my work is a way of recognizing the gap that exists between all objects and their significance. The gap between objects and their meaning provides the original impetus for my artistic process, which is the quest to reduce the distance between my experience and meaning.

Allegory Reveals the Gap between Objects and Meaning

My paintings reveal a gap between objects and their meaning by demonstrating an inability to secure a specific meaning for a variety of viewers. The gap I am referring to is exactly what Walter Benjamin considers the real value of allegory. Benjamin suggests that allegory’s greatest attribute is its ability to point to its own inadequacy or in other words its inability to clearly communicate. Benjamin wrote that “the dialectic quality of [allegory] is misunderstood, and mistrusted [as antiphrasis]... the basic characteristic of allegory, however, is ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning. But the richness of this ambiguity is the richness of extravagance; nature, however, according to the old rules of metaphysics, and indeed also of mechanics, is bound by the law of economy. Ambiguity is therefore always the opposite of clarity and unity of meaning.”

The ambiguous nature of my paintings says something about the nature of communication, which is that it is not singular. They also suggest that there is meaning to be found through the viewer’s desire to clarify and understand them. Allegories suggest a richer sense of reality as opposed to a more singular viewpoint. My paintings extinguish “the false appearance of totality” through their

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7 Benjamin, 175-76
ambiguity, while at the same time they imply that meaning exists by stimulating curiosity.\(^8\) This is evinced every time a viewer asks “what does it mean?”

The gap between object and meaning that allegory reveals is evident in my painting titled Sisyphean Execution (fig 1). In this painting there are a variety of symbols used, from a more personal symbol, like the hooded man holding a cardboard box, to the slightly more familiar symbol of the roman soldier guiding and directing the figure holding the box. Many of the symbols used in this painting are derived from historical artworks created by artists like Courbet, Tiepolo, and Manet. The Roman soldier is derived from a Tiepolo painting titled Rinaldo Leaving Armida (fig.5). Courbet’s self-portrait The Desperate Man (fig. 6) is located in the upper right corner, while the environment and many of the other characters are loosely derived from Manet’s The Execution of Emperor Maximilian (fig 7). Although, each of these objects may have an easily recognizable alternate meaning, it is their relationship with each other in a new environment that adds to the pre-existing alternate meanings. I might associate the pointing roman soldier with concepts like idealism, but when I look to where he is pointing I immediately realize that he is pointing to an area in the painting that is not associated with idealistic painting concepts. In fact, he is pointing to the Courbet self-portrait and the pink painted surface that denies the painting’s ability to act as a window into another realm. Each of these comes with meaning, for example soldier is associated with classicism, Courbet with empiricism, and the pink with materialism, but what their inter-relationships mean is more ambiguous and left up to the individual viewer. In this scenario the meaning associated each object becomes more than what they brought with them. For me the full meaning of this remains unclear, yet I am still left thinking it is meaningful. As Benjamin suggests, the meaning

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\(^8\) Benjamin, 176
will never be clear and it is through its lack of clarity that the real meaning all allegory is revealed.

The objects in my paintings promote an allegorical interpretation by appearing to belong together while at the same time not revealing exactly why or how. This is also evident in my painting titled Heritage (fig 8). This painting depicts three figures in a close grouping. Two of them are derived from master paintings. The third is a personal symbol. The first figure is a little boy playing a flute. This is a reference derived from Manet’s painting titled The Fifer (fig 9). The second figure, directly behind the boy, is a gentleman derived from an Albrecht Durer painting titled Piper and Drummer (fig 10). The last figure to the left of the boy is a contemporary figure playing air drums that is an original image. Although each of these figures are associated by their proximity and/or playing of an instrument the meaning that can be derived from their affiliation is not readily available. It is only after realizing that there may be an art historical significance attached to each figure that meaning may be derived from them. The art historical meaning, like the idea that Manet’s paintings deny the illusion of a window into another realm, only provides a clue, without providing a conclusion. What meaning can be derived from their relationship is not guaranteed to the viewer. It is left ambiguous allowing the viewers to come to their own interpretation.

The Importance of History for Allegory and My Paintings

The use of recognizable symbols from the past is a common attribute of allegorical images. This is because historical images have a richness of meaning that when combined with other symbols they create an extravagance of meaning. Benjamin argues that allegory is dependent on history for this very reason. Allegory depends on history because it derives its multiplicity of meaning from the various ways the objects have been interpreted
throughout their existence. For example, in my painting titled *Sojourn* (fig 11), several levels of meaning are being suggested as a result of historical understanding. Dante’s original text is being referenced; Delacroix’s interpretation of a moment in Dante’s text (fig 12) is being referenced, as well as my own contemporary interpretation of Delacroix’s interpretation. In this way the objects provide a multiplicity of meaning that can only be derived from the passing of time and the occurrence of history. History is important because it is responsible for the culmination of meaning that is exemplified in *Sojourn* (fig 11). History adds the ambiguous and mysterious quality to my paintings. While, many of the art historical images in my paintings have meaning already associated with them, once they participate in their new environment I create for them, they take on even more layers of meaning.

Allegory’s relationship with Implied Narrative

My paintings are also sometimes described as narrative. This is because allegory employs some narrative characteristics. The characteristic that allegory and narrative share is the ability to suggest alternate meanings. However, narrative images provide a more conclusive result than allegory. I suggest that my images are not narrative, but rather that they are implied narrative. Whereas a narrative is a conclusive sequence of events an implied narrative is one event that suggests the presences of other events. The conclusive nature of narrative is the result of its ability to represent a cause and effect relationship that appears necessary. In other words, this happens because of this.  

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9 Carroll, "Narrative Closure."
which appears more factual and conclusive. Like allegory, implied narratives suggest the potential for meaning without conclusively providing it.

The artwork of Vicent Desiderio, a contemporary artist who works in a traditional style, provides a good example of implied narrative. Desiderio’s painting, titled *Without Words* (fig. 13) is comparable to my painting titled *Monday Morning Drive* (fig. 14). Both *Without Words* and *Monday Morning Drive* represent one event which implies or suggests the existence of other events. For instance in *Without Words* (fig 13) the literal surface of the image represents a man holding a woman who appears to be hurt or even dead. Upon viewing this image the audience cannot help forming ideas about the events that occurred prior to, or immediately after the depicted event. In *Without Words* (fig 13) the audience is likely to think that the man might have hit his wife or that she simply fell ill. They may also imagine how the man might cope with the experience after the fact. Similarly, in my painting titled *Monday Morning Drive* (fig 14) the audience might think that the two figures have fought prior to the event depicted, or that there is a decision to be made, yet there is no direct evidence to point to this conclusion. The imagined sequence of events is the result of the desire of the audience to formulate a story and therefore derive meaning from it. Like allegory, implied narratives suggest the potential for meaning without actually providing it. Both allegory and implied narrative recognize their inability to guarantee a definite interpretation. Paintings like *Without Words* (fig 13) and *Monday Morning Drive* (fig 14) accept this premise by suggesting meaning for viewers rather than determining it for them.

Fundamental Motivation of My Paintings

What motivates the creation of my paintings on a fundamental level is the idea that meaning exists despite our inability to secure it for ourselves or others. This is similar to
the ideas of German Philosopher, Theodor Adorno. Adorno prescribed an approach to reality called “ethics of metaphysics.” Adorno thought that “metaphysically, philosophers must find historically appropriate ways to speak about meaning and truth and suffering that neither deny nor affirm the existence of a world transcendent to the one we know.” Having experienced Nazi propaganda during WWII, Adorno could not completely accept idealism because he recognized its ability to justify destructive ideas, yet he could not completely dismiss idealism because without the potential for an ideal world there would be no hope. The ability to hold unto this paradoxical position is the underlying quality of allegory. Allegory never loses sight of the potential for meaning while at the same time it also points to its inability to securely capture it. My allegorical paintings represent this position by appearing to be meaningful while not providing a conclusive interpretation.

Even today, contemporary authors argue that the value of allegory is as a device that does not guarantee meaning, but points to its possibility. Authors, like Joel Fineman, argue that the persistence of allegory reveals a longing for knowledge and significance in a world that does not allow for it. He “argues that the allegorical desire begins not from a firm point of origin, but rather from a gap, an emptiness which is signaled by the point that we must start, not from the thing itself.” Fineman suggests that allegory was never motivated by a secure source or position, but rather from awareness that meaning could not be secured. Fineman understands allegory as a journey toward knowledge rather than a statement of it. This idea of allegory as a mode is also suggested by Angus Fletcher. Fletcher suggests that allegory “is a mode of writing about what is impossible to know or

10 Zuidervaart
11 Zuidervaart
12 Tambling, 167
impossible to articulate: God, Love, Truth, the animal, the not human."  

Allegory in this sense is not about securing knowledge as much as it is about the human desire for it. My paintings represent my own individual desire for meaning. They are the manifestation of a process within me that searches for it. Their value “lies in getting [me] closer to truth” not in securing it.

I believe that the culture I live in is continually working to diminish the meaning of existence. I suggest that this is the result of a dominate epistemology that implies an extreme relativistic and empirical position. This position argues that because meaning cannot be secured or guaranteed through communication it cannot exist. My argument is that something can exist whether it can be proven definitively to oneself or others. I believe my paintings reveal meaning rather than prove it. Like Adorno and the other scholars mentioned I believe it is important to not give up on the potential for meaning in a reality that does at times seem impossible of providing it. My paintings are relevant today because they point to the existence of meaning without determining it. They continually reveal a more complex reality, one that is always just beyond understanding, while at the same time they provide enough hope to continue the pursuit. It is my hope this is evident to the viewers of my paintings, although the beauty is that it is not necessary.

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13 Copeland, 268
14 Copeland, 269


1. *Sisyphean Execution*, Oil on Canvas, 2014

2. *Autumn of 2014*, Oil on Canvas, 2014
3. Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830

![Image of Liberty Leading the People by Eugene Delacroix]

4. *Above or Undergloom*, Oil on panel, 2012

![Image of Above or Undergloom by Oil on panel]
5. Tiepolo, Rinaldo Leaving Armida, 1742-45

6. Courbet, The Desperate Man
7. Manet, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*

8. Heritage, Oil on paper, 2015
9. Édouard Manet, *The Fifer*, 1866

10. Albrecht Dürer, *Piper and Drummer*, c. 1503 – 1504

