Opening the Box: Exploring the Myth of Pandora

An Honors Thesis  (ART 415)

By

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Abstract:

Stories, particularly stories like the Greek myth of Pandora’s box, are how we as humans explore, explain, and examine the human condition. This is exactly what Opening the Box: Exploring the Myth of Pandora does as well, in a fabricated space not unlike mythic or fantastic worlds such as Mount Olympus or Middle Earth. It examines the myth of Pandora itself in its many versions, and more closely investigates possible evils that Pandora let out of the box. Through underwater photography combined with mixed media (watercolors, oil pastels, graphite, ink, and acrylic paint), I create work inspired by different interpretations of Pandora’s story as well as the possible evils that could have been released. By creating imagery that does not directly illustrate, but rather is loosely based on Pandora and her literary cousins, in an imaginative space, with unique connections between stories, I hope to offer a new look at the human condition and all that it entails.

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Why do we, as humans, treat each other so often with malice, spite, and vindictive cruelty? Why do bad things happen to good people? These are universal questions, ones that everyone from every age and race has grappled with since the beginning of time. This is evidenced by how many times this theme comes up in the folk tales, mythologies, and stories from every culture across the globe, and is what I am exploring with this body of work. Like the myths that first intrigued me, the final art pieces in *Opening the Box* are set in imaginative fantasy spaces, achieved by innovatively combining watercolor and drawings with ephemeral, painterly underwater photography. The final body of work is divided into three parts: the original Pandora story, the evils released from the box, and related stories in other cultural myths and legends.

Arguably the most well known explanation for the human condition is the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Perhaps the runner up for proposed explanations is the Greek myth of Pandora’s Box. An abridged version of this story is that the god Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and brought it to Earth so that man could benefit from its warmth. Zeus was enraged and so he created Pandora, the first woman, who was a beautiful disaster. She was to be the downfall of man, for her insatiable curiosity was meant to unleash all of the evils, with which we currently deal, from the forbidden and infamous box. Zeus gave Pandora as a gift to Prometheus’s brother, Epimetheus. She became his wife, and it is here that the different texts start to vary. In some retellings, Pandora was given a box as a gift from Zeus with strict instructions not to open it. In other versions, there is a box or jar in Epimetheus’s house with all of the evil things left over from creation of humanity. Either way, Pandora is told under no uncertain terms to never open the box (or jar), and invariably she is unable to resist temptation. She opens the box, and unleashes evils onto the world for the first time.

After reading several different accounts of the Pandora myth, from mythology textbooks to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s play *The Masque of Pandora*, I created several artworks inspired by specific lines of text. These artworks make up part one of my final body of work and are accompanied by the direct quotes that motivated them.

For example, there is a line in Longfellow’s play in which Pandora is curious about the forbidden box, but her fear overpowers her curiosity. Noticing the mirrors that adorn
Epimetheus's house, she makes the remark, "a crowd of shadowy faces from the mirrors that line these walls are watching me. I dare not lift up the lid. A hundred times the act would be repeated, and the secret seen by twice a hundred incorporeal eyes."

This line immediately called to mind the effect that can be achieved by photographing someone or something just below the surface of the water at exactly the right angle. The resulting photograph that accompanies this line is exactly that. The box has just been opened, and the action is visible refracted and repeated in distorted and numerous ways by the movement on the surface. This particular photo is one of the few that did not include any painting or drawing. I was able to achieve exactly the effect I was after with the object and the water alone. Since it is a close up image of just the box and hands, there is not much background, and the lighting conditions of that particular photo shoot as well as the pool itself led to a final photo that needed no additional push into the realm of myth or fantasy.

The second part of the body of work consists of more abstract representations of evils that could potentially have been released by Pandora and her curiosity. While I was
planning, composing, photographing, and painting for each image, I always had a specific evil in mind that I was aiming to capture. Therefore, in the final images, I see the specific vices I focused on: theft, lust, greed, alcoholism, vanity, loneliness, despair, and deception, to name a few. However, I chose to leave the artworks untitled in their final form, because I wish to leave them open to interpretation. Rather than direct my viewers to one implicit meaning in my work, I prefer to give them only the information that this group of photos represents the evils of the world. What they bring to each piece informs whether they see exactly the same evils I see, or whether they understand the images as totally different ills. In this way I allow my viewers to come to deeper understandings about their psyches and life experiences as well as my own.

\[\text{Untitled. Mixed Media. 2012.}\]

The first step in all of the photos was brainstorming. I read and researched the stories, but for this section especially, I was mostly on my own. Several texts mention one or two examples of evils, so I pulled from all of those to make a coherent list. This evil, which
in my mind is alcoholism, but which could also represent excess, gluttony, or any other addiction, is a prime example of the mixed media that was such a huge aspect of this project. This particular photo was born of an interest in depicting gluttony, which quickly turned into alcoholism when I noticed the empty wine bottles from my friend’s home brewing experiment. The idea to repeat what was physically present in the drawings was suggested during an in-progress critique. With the addition of the drawn bottles and spilled wine, this piece truly became powerful.

This section of the project became the bulk of the exhibition *Opening the Box*. It was on display at the Cornerstone Art Gallery at Cornerstone Center for the Arts in downtown Muncie from April 5-30th, 2012 as part of the show *Senior Photography Exhibition*. I chose to exhibit nine of the best and most interesting evils, along with the photograph representing hope, because this part of the project is the theme that is at the core of the entire undertaking. Inspired by everything from the seven deadly sins, to lists in the various Pandora stories, to simply asking people “what are some evils?” these photos most deal with the heart of the project. They are the evils that we have to deal with today. Whether Pandora, Eve, or ourselves are to blame for the human condition, this is it. Everyday everyone has to wrestle with evils. It’s no wonder that the ancient Greeks devised a scapegoat like Pandora on which to pin them all.

The third part of my project explores the universality of the search for the origin of evil. From Native Americans to African tribes, people around the world have always looked for ways to explain the human condition. Usually these stories deal with the dawn of evil in the world. Remarkably, many stories and myths include themes of curiosity and disobedience leading to either all of humankind’s or the individual character’s downfall. Even though the character is told not to do X (open the box, open the jars, eat the apples, enter the west wing, unlock the door of the closet, etc.), even with the warning that if they do X, bad things will happen, the characters seem unable to simply trust that the threat is sincere. Or they convince themselves that it is worth the consequential evils to gain for themselves the knowledge of what is in the box, jar, closet, or what have you. In the case of Eve it is literally divine knowledge that she is after; the knowledge of good and evil. In many other stories around the world, from common fairy tales to Japanese lore, the main character’s desire for hidden (and usually forbidden) knowledge leads to despair. The artworks in the final group were all inspired by these literary relatives of Pandora—the other characters throughout
history and legend who have been unable to resist opening their own box, jar, or door of misfortune.

In the Japanese folktale of the Crane Wife, an old poor man is rewarded for a selfless good deed with a beautiful wife and inexplicable wealth. His wife frequently would enter a closet, after first making him promise to never open the door. She emerged hours later with beautiful white silk cloth, which they sold for more money than the man had ever known. One night, however, the man became too curious. Despite the usual warning that he was not to open the door under any circumstances, he cracked it open and peered in. He was shocked to discover that his wife was the crane that he had selflessly saved, and that she was manifesting the wonderful silk from her own white feathers.

Seeing that he had broken his promise, the crane mournfully explained that now that he knew the secret, she could stay with him no longer, and she flew out the window over the sea. The old man watched her go, cursing his stupidity, and thinking that she was the queen.
of cranes, and he had lost her forever. He would frequently visit the sea and gaze regretfully at the cranes in the distance, always able to pick out his queen. *Queen of the Cranes* depicts the end of the story. The queen of the cranes is soaring over the sea, away from the generous but foolish man that once saved her life. *The Crane Wife*, a companion photo to *Queen of the Cranes*, depicts the woman spinning the magnificent silk, and also features the opened door that ruined it all (Hamilton, Virginia 84-85).

Stories, particularly the story of Pandora, are how we as humans explore, explain, and examine the human condition. At its core, this is exactly what *Opening the Box* does as well, in a fabricated space not unlike mythic or fantastic worlds such as Mount Olympus or Middle Earth. It examines the myth of Pandora itself in its many versions, and more closely investigates possible evils that Pandora let out of the box.

Underwater photographs have always been reminiscent of some other realm. They are abstract and otherworldly. Sometimes eerie, but always ephemeral and magical, underwater photographs seem to be from, of, or about another reality, where earthly rules of physics do not apply. With the *Pandora* project, I am after this otherworldly effect. I want the pieces to have the dreamlike, fluid qualities of underwater photography: the flowing fabric, abstract ripples and bubbles, and ethereal feeling. By adding the paint, I remove them from the context of the pool and place them instead in an ambiguous, universal “underwater” space- a fantasy space. The value of which is the same as the value of fantasy literature.

The editors of the book *Fantasy* offer a profound take on the merit of fantasy literature (and by extension, all fantasy art.) They state that fantasy authors create new worlds in order to rid their readers of preconceptions and prejudices that are found in day-to-day life. By removing these biases, moral standards and truths can be examined in new, fresh, ways, and hopefully, lessons can be learned that would otherwise be out of reach (Mass).

With *Opening the Box*, I am attempting to do the same. I am literally painting a new background with watercolors into the underwater photographs. Thereby creating a fantasy space visually removed from any real pool or other body of water, I allow my viewers to examine the human condition, the evils that Pandora might have let out of the box, in a new and unusual manner and perspective. The drawings add further to the imaginative fantasy of the work, extending the images beyond what is physically possible.

In his article “Children and Fairy Stories,” JRR Tolkien argues for the validity of fantasy as a genre in literature. Fantasy in this and most other cases, includes everything from
ancient myths and legends, to folklore, to the classic fairy tales, to Tolkien’s own *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. Tolkien makes the point that “the goal of fantasy is to lead the reader to a keener understanding of himself and his world.” The idea being that in the fictional work can be found deeper truths about the world around us. So by reading the story, we can better understand ourselves and our world. RG Collingwood demands almost the same exact thing of art in general in his aesthetics. He claims that the artist proper works with the world from beginning to end to help the world see what he (the artist) sees; to help them find out things about themselves through the art. He says that the artist, instead of being “the great man who imposes upon the world the task of understanding him, will be a humbler person, imposing upon himself the task of understanding his world, and thus enabling it to understand itself” (p 289). The hope is that people viewing my work in the context of the new fresh combination of technique and media will perhaps gain some insight into themselves or their world.

It could be argued as silly and childish to, instead of just presenting the truths as they are, tangle them up in magic and fantasy and other impractical, unrealistic nonsense. Why on earth would a person ever combine underwater photography and Greek mythology? What does Pandora’s box have to do with being underwater? It is all very nonsensical. However, I offer the counter-argument that no matter what your age, there is something incredibly powerful about coming to the realization of truth on your own. Often all it takes is a fresh perspective, or a unique combination of ideas. There is an old Native American proverb that goes something like “Tell me a fact and I’ll learn. Tell me a truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.” I would like to extend “tell me a story” to include all the various visual arts. Paint me a picture, and I will never forget.

In the same way that fantasy authors create fictitious worlds in which to explore themes of the human condition, I am creating fictitious, fantasy spaces in which to explore the very same themes. The sagacious GK Chesterton makes the point in *All Things Considered* that fairy-tales (fantasy) are powerfully profound and relevant because “so far from being lawless, [they] go to the root of all law. Instead of finding...a rationalistic basis for each Commandment, they find the great mystical basis for all Commandments.” With the *Pandora* project I am exploring the great mystical basis, not necessarily for the Commandments, but for truth in general; for humanity at its core, and life on earth.

Though we have exponentially advanced our scientific understanding of the world since the time of Ancient Greece, I would argue that humanity as a whole is no closer to
understanding questions such as “why is there evil?” Therefore, it bears going back to the roots of humanity and civilization, to all of the varying cultures that developed across the world, to look at the explanations they formulated. Perhaps in this universal archetypal story can be found a commonality that provides at least a hint of the answer. By creating imagery that does not directly illustrate, but rather is loosely based on Pandora and her literary cousins, in an imaginative space, with unique connections between stories, I hope to offer a new look at the human condition and all that it entails.
Bibliography


