The Allegory of Good and Bad Government; Ambrogio Lorenzetti 1339

THE ALLEGORY OF GOOD AND BAD GOVERNMENT AND THE AFFIRMATION OF THE MORAL-POLITICAL SELF

by Zoë Shulman

Normally, I make colorful post-structural (non-binary) work about emergent truth, contextual meaning, and relativism, as a both a critique of modern formalism and a means of providing space for me to exist as a queer woman in today's art world. But nothing is normal anymore. The 2016 election changed everything for me, as a whirlwind of neofascism, corruption, and fake news infiltrated our executive branch. Sadness, fear, and anger consumed me as I strained to make sense of the American political and cultural landscapes. Within this frustrating "alternative reality", I wasn't always sure that two plus two didn't equal five. But ultimately clarity prevailed and I knew I had to take a stand. In that moment, everything became black and white: I was an American and I made the conscious political choice to fulfill my civic duty, however small, to protect democracy and global stability. And, as an American painter, this meant I had to make political work.

To quell my anxiety, I took refuge in art history and traced the origins of western democracy back to depictions of Greco-Roman government. During my research, I remembered a medieval fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti that I had visited eight years ago during a study abroad program in Sienna, Italy. "The Allegory of Good and Bad Government" was a stunning sight, with an epic juxtaposition of good and bad government spanning three large walls. In its composition, civic officers and magistrates are guided by stately figures, angels, and demons. Other parts of the fresco not depicted here display the effects of good and bad government playing out across the city and country. As the viewer stands in the middle of "The Allegory's" moral ultimatum, they are forced to compare idealisms between the work and their own political reality. In the context of today's American democracy, the experience evokes a sense of responsibility in determining one's moral priorities and how they manifest as a political choice with cascading effects.

The Allegory of Good and Bad Government; Zoë Shulman; 2017

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It was then that the subject had become clear to me: I knew that if I could locate a moral definition of government, I could achieve my political goal of promoting a more ideal democracy. My process involved translating Lorenzetti's fundamental allegoric structure into a system of geometric symbolism that could convey a moral American government. There was only one problem: How do I approach this flat, illusionistic fresco of seemingly dualistic and universally moral subject matter from my post-structuralist position? I felt conflicted, as if I was arrogantly touting my moral superiority as the epitome of righteousness. How could I take on such a proposition when the American political landscape has multi-dimensional complexity with connected and contradictory spectrums of truth that are relative to each individual?

Central to my work is the concept that painting, whatever the painter's definition, does not exist in isolation. I believe that it is relative to the architectonic dimensions of all other media, and that there are multiple "right ways" to paint. Many of my paintings are made without paint, exist within multiple spaces simultaneously, and break down the frame by engaging the viewer's bodily subjectivity. For me, the wall presents an oppressive paradigm of purist-modern-formalist-objectivist dogma that has a history of excluding the perspectives of women, LGBT individuals, and people of color. When I use the wall, it is with extreme caution and my primary intention is to inform the growth of my works off-the-wall. From this vantage point, making a moral work of art for the wall felt like two plus two suddenly equalled the cow jumped over the moon.
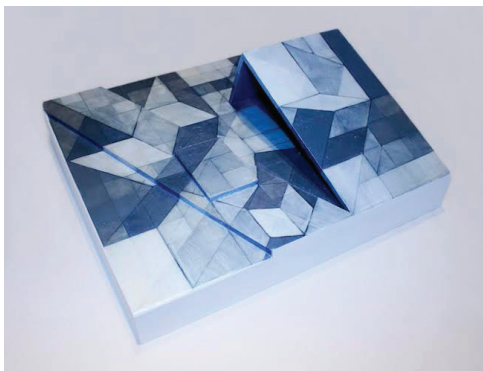
Cyberspace I; 2014; by Zoë Shulman

Attractor II; 2016; by Zoë Shulman

Electro-Pop
Lady Grid I and
II; 2016; by
Zoë Shulman

And then, an epiphany. Intentionally-political art, regardless of
morality or spatiality, is always about perspective, and it pushes
back against the white male painter's narrative of so-called "pure art
for art's sake". Furthermore, I realized that Lorenzetti's "Allegory"
was just that — an allegory! It was not to be taken literally as a
universal truth, but rather as his idealized Sienna, in which morality
and politics come together to shape our pragmatism and give us a
sense of control over the future. And within the individual's moral
and political subjectivity, duality can exist and achieve affirmation
through the frame and flatness. So then I understood my need to
flatten my political work and put it on the wall: I simply needed to
affirm my values and locate myself within the larger American
political zeitgeist.

Ultimately, we can acknowledge our subjective truth and still accept
relativism as a larger condition of that truth. This is the key to
making any work active. Fascists won't appreciate the truth in what
I'm making, and I think that's incredibly powerful and important at
a time when democracy itself is being likened to mere "political
correctness". For me, this is the real stuff of painting. Being
engaged in painting is more than just medium specificity; it's a
larger conversation about how our experiences get expressed
through space, dimension, and surface so that we may delve more
deeply into the nature of truth.
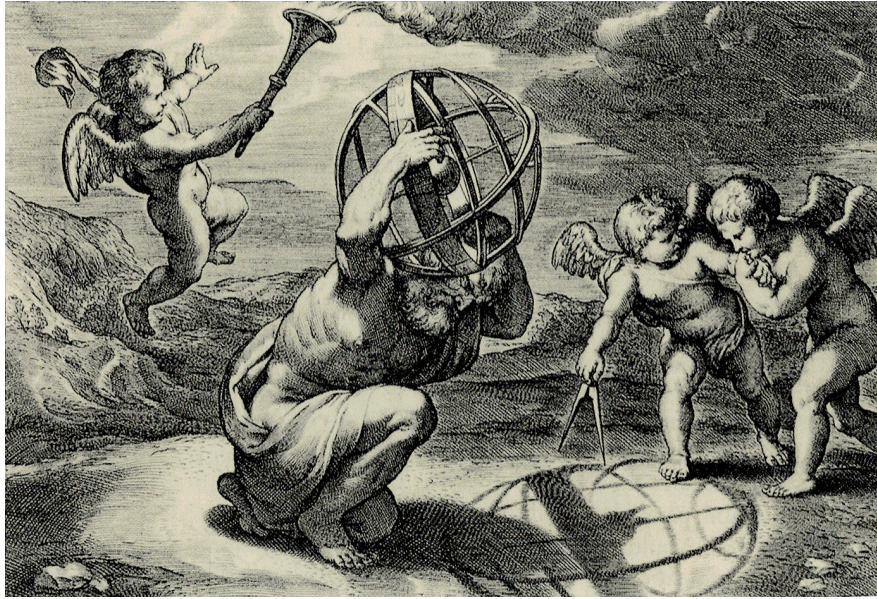
Optica by Peter Paul Rubens,1613

THE MORAL–POLITICAL AFFIRMATION AS DIGITAL PAINTING

Digital painting expresses my moral-political affirmation by unapologetically confronting and condemning bad government. All too often, digital art is mischaracterized as a deceptive medium that lacks handmade authenticity while simultaneously air-brushing the truth. To the contrary, I believe digital art has historical relevance in today's political climate and may be used as a form of cultural jiu-jitsu against Vladimir Putin's cyber-warfare. In relation to geometric abstraction, its smooth, high-gloss, rigidly-flat, pixel-measured, Pantone-charted certainty is what solidifies my work as hyper-intentional, subjective political art. Desperation and lack of representation drive my need to raise my voice and make an empowering statement. Thus, the subtle architectonics of hand-painted physicality have no place here. My goal is to use fixed subjectivity to shine a light through three dimensions and get to the allegoric structure of truth by revealing its flattened shadow. I believe painting is as much a state of mind as it is a physical act. By thinking like a painter, I can manipulate light and shadow to render a subjective moral-political truth that holds as much weight as Caravaggio's oily chiaroscuro.

EXHIBITION SYNOPSIS

"The Allegory of Good and Bad Government" is a series of twenty digital painting and mixed media works printed on aluminum hexagons. The prints are arranged as diptychs in which the virtues and vices of government, expressed as elaborate geometric symbols, contrast chiaroscuros within a candle-lit gallery space. The exhibition's large centerpiece juxtaposes good and bad government, while smaller meditations of the individual virtues and vices line the gallery walls. Like a religious shrine, the diptychs offer a space for inner transformation, moral enlightenment, and salvation in the face of fascism.

The goal of this exhibition is to provide a vision of America's democratic republic that is both morally introspective and politically active. My process involves translating the fundamental allegoric structure of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's medieval fresco, "Good and Bad Government", into a system of geometric symbolism that conveys a moral American government. Informed by cross-cultural symbols, biblical and religious themes, and the ancient philosophy of alchemy, this geometric symbolism resonates with humanity's timeless aspirations and fears, prompting the viewer to compare idealisms between the work and their own political reality.

Exhibition installation concept sketch by Zoë Shulman
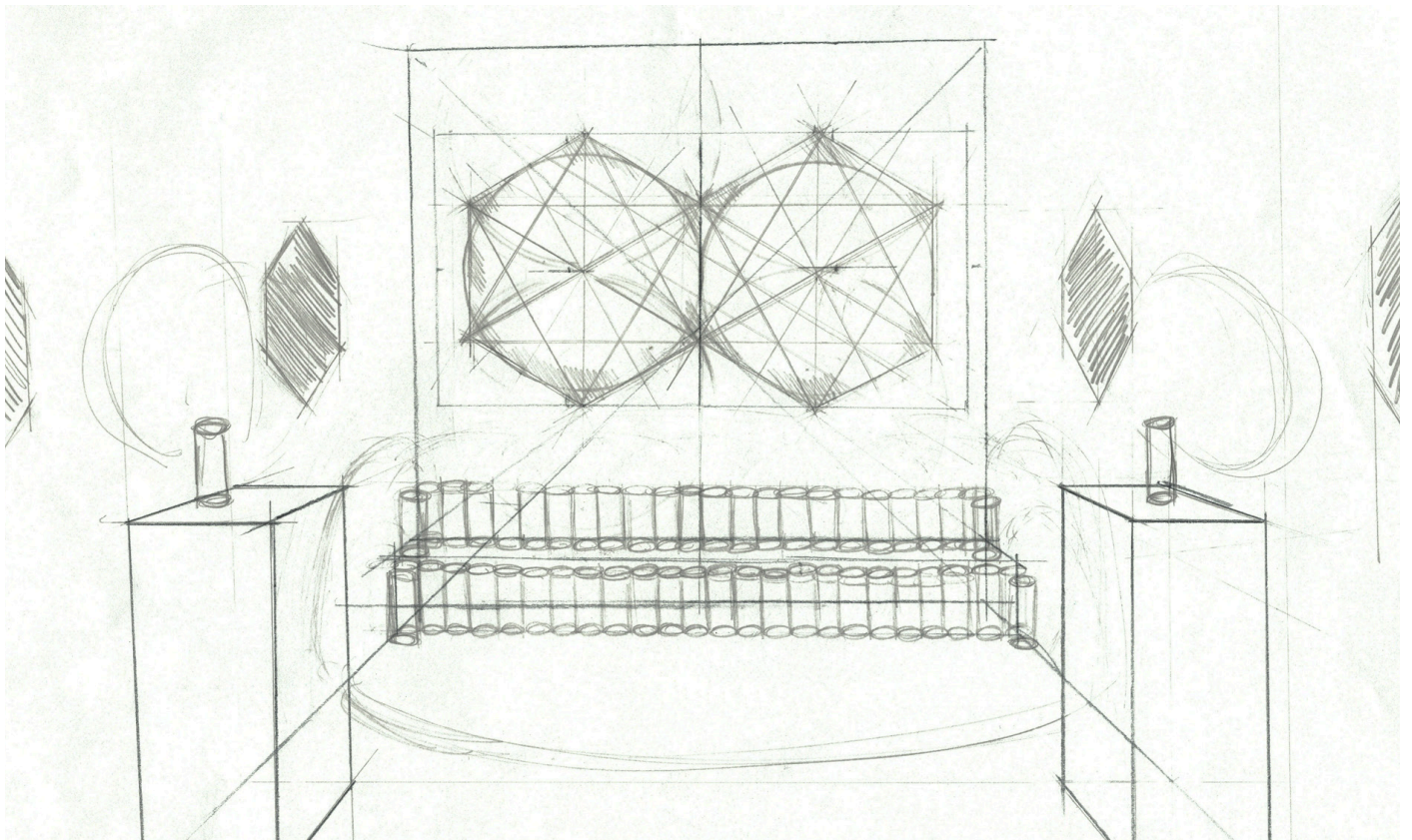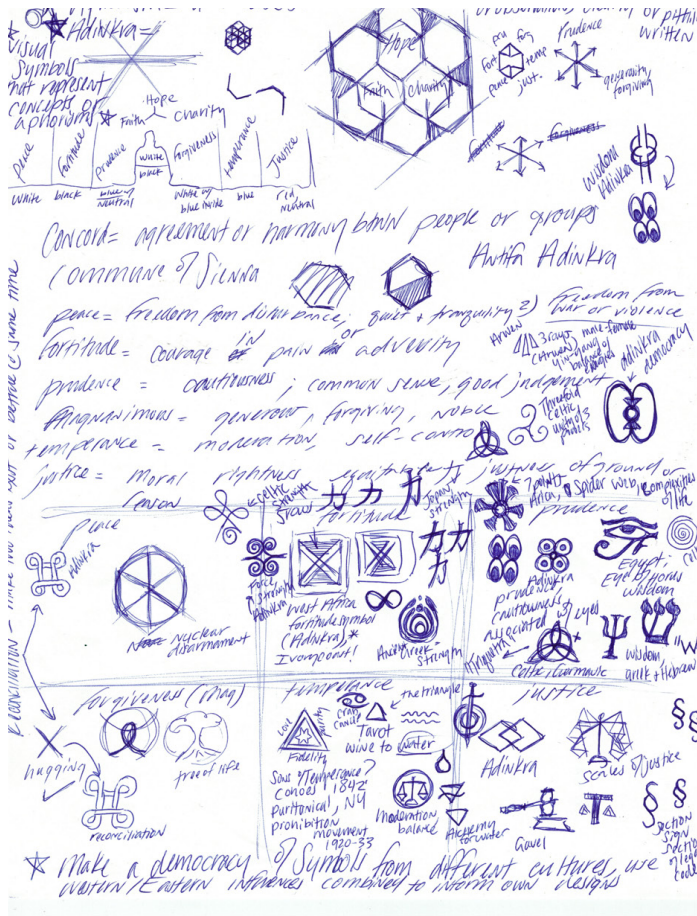
Symbol chart sketches and notes by artist Zoë Shulman

CROSS-CULTURAL SYMBOLS

My system of geometric symbolism is an elaborate democracy that subtly and ethically combines shared design elements from across various cultures to create a contemporary, yet timeless aesthetic. Throughout my research, I drew inspiration from studying Egyptian hieroglyphs, Hebrew characters, ancient Greco-Roman art, Gothic architecture, Christian symbolism, Hindu yantras, Japanese characters, Medieval torture designs, Native American symbolism, Celtic knots, West African Adinkra symbols, and modern hazard and peace symbols.
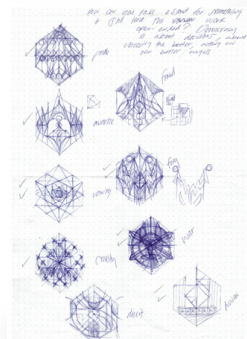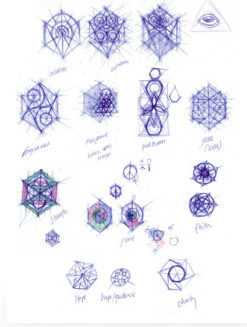

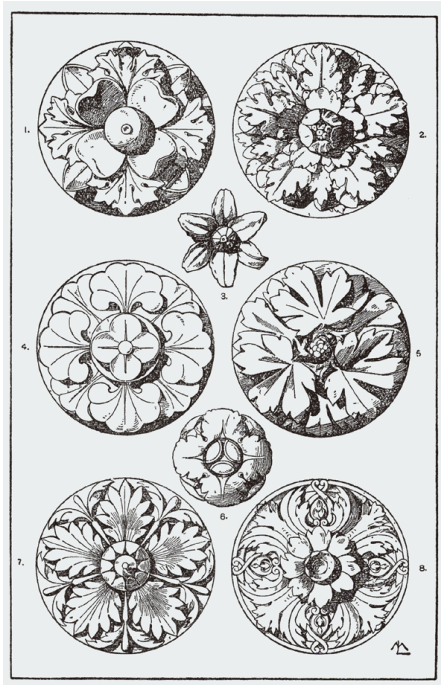Rosette concept thumbnail sketches by artist Zoë Shulman

BIBLICAL AND RELIGIOUS THEMES

In the process of translating Ambrogio Lorenzetti's allegoric structure, many biblical and religious themes entered my work. Akin to the seven deadly sins, the nine vices and their virtuous counterparts construct the moral building blocks of good and bad government. Altogether, the diptych becomes a metaphor for heaven and hell, in which the morality of government creates a positive and negative reality. Within my "Allegory of Bad Government", I related laissez faire capitalism to the Tower of Babel and used the Eye of Providence as another metaphor to express man's hubris reaching a pinnacle of power and ultimately sowing division via the unfair allocation of resources.

The arrangement of hexagons within my composition forms a large rosette similar to the rose windows of Gothic church interiors. As a painter, I consider much of my work to function as windows, and with my "Allegory of Good and Bad Government", I intended to open a holy window and allow a path of light to illuminate a moral narrative. As an exhibition, the work becomes a candle-lit shrine that evokes moral introspection and political activism. Drawing inspiration from geometric Hindu yantras used in meditation, I sought to present the work as an open-ended reflection on America's democratic republic, where the viewer contemplates the morality of their political decisions.
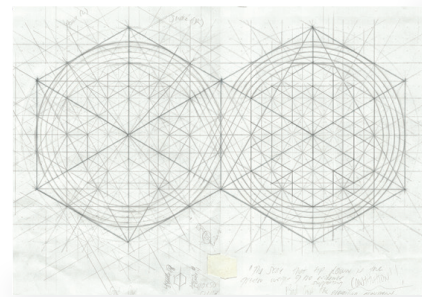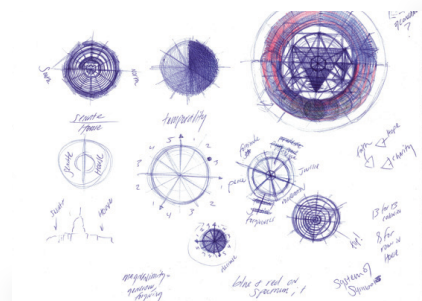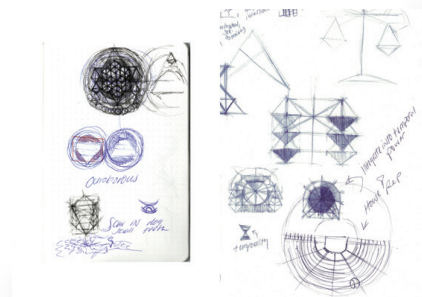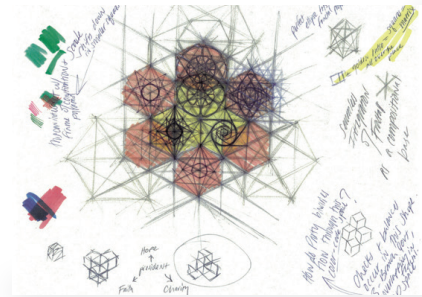
Compositional concept sketches by artist Zoë Shulman

ALCHEMICAL SYMBOLISM

I use the philosophical and subversive aspects of alchemy to reference an older, more occult America, in which spirituality is visualized by geometric symbolism. Throughout history, alchemy has been practiced as a secular philosophy to achieve inner transformation, enlightenment, and salvation. To disguise themselves from the intolerant church, alchemists developed geometric symbols to share profound esoteric spiritual meaning. By bringing this hidden language into view as political art, I believe it can aid in an American spiritual revolution that will transform hearts and minds, leading to a moral enlightenment and reclamation of core democratic values.

Rosette illustrations by Franz Sales Meyer, 1898

Perhaps the most prominent symbol within my alchemical vision of America's democratic republic is the cube-rosette. Used as ancient motifs in both Eastern and Western art and architecture, rosettes are circular floral designs that often decorate religious shrines and capitol domes. Intrigued by the rosette's ability to bridge sacred and governmental themes, I decided it was the perfect architecture for my work's central composition. The alchemical cube symbol, which represents the basis for all matter, as well as the throne and highest moral power, was combined with the rosette to become the executive branch, in which Lorenzetti's nine vices and virtues construct the moral building blocks of good and bad government. Additionally, the work's hexagonal format expresses the significance of flattened euclidean space as it relates to using fixed subjectivity to shine a light through three dimensions and reveal the allegoric structure of truth.

Ouroboros Illustration by Theodoros Pelecanos, 1478

The infinity loop Ouroboros

Coiling around the rosettes is a serpentine Ouroboros, which entwines the diptych in an infinity loop, symbolizing the eternal death and rebirth of moral government. The Ouroboros' head is depicted as a coyote skull, a nod to the Native American totem of paradoxical trickery, shape-shifting, and truth within chaos. It devours its tail to proclaim the reign of bad government, while the jaws of foreign interference emerge from a pit of shadows, viciously ensnaring the loop and deadlocking the Scales of Justice. The four- and eight-ring halves within the infinity loop combine with the hexagonal format to illustrate the United States Senate and House of Representatives in their fragile oscillation between good and bad government.

Originally designed as the watchful eye of God in the Great Seal of the United States, the Eye of Providence and its lower pyramid have been reframed to symbolize class power. Like a capitalist pyramid scheme, a small pinnacle of power profits off the backs of America's middle and lower classes. Between good and bad government, the pyramids' distinct orientations form the alchemical triangles of water, earth, fire, and air. The water-earth Eye of Providence gazes gracefully upward, sustaining life and growth for the greater majority, while its fire-air counterpart glares wrathfully downward, spreading death and destruction.
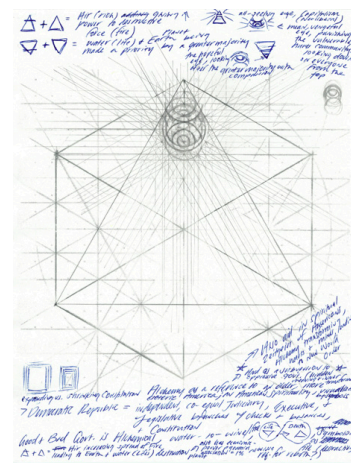
The Eye of Providence concepts and sketches by Zoë Shulman

ALLEGORICAL TEXTURES

Textures play a vital role in illustrating the metaphors within my "Allegory of Good and Bad Government". My process involved collecting and scanning various objects such as a crystal, a glass orb, tree leaves, ammonite fossils, petrified wood, rattlesnake skin, and a coyote skull. Working in Adobe Photoshop with painterly layers of these digital textures, I created illusions that provide a sense of mass through which paths of light illuminate a moral narrative.

Using objects with varying degrees of transparency was key in guiding the light through this narrative. For example, the crystal glows with divinity throughout good government as a metaphor for governmental transparency and integrity. This is echoed by the glass orb, which functions as a political pendulum that illustrates a healthy transition of power within the legislative branch. Within bad government, the crystal becomes shiny objects that mislead the viewer through a maze of immoral shadows. The immoral pendulums originate from atop the Eye of Providence, plummet down through the United States Senate and House of Representatives, and weigh down the Scales of Justice, reducing them to a stagnant anarchy.

In contrast, pulsing tree leaves form the living-breathing frame of the United States Constitution. The frame's glowing edges expand to encompass a greater majority and achieve a more perfect union against the fossilization of originalist dogma. Ancient ammonites and petrified wood calcify throughout bad government's brittle, decaying constitution as rattle snake scales slither ominously through the shadow America. For now, the Ouroboros has completed its revolution in darkness, but the ever-ravenous jaws of the coyote skull slouch towards the truth within chaos.
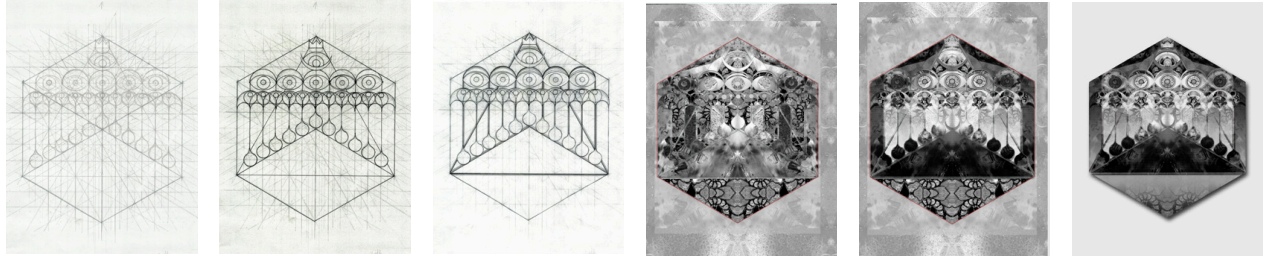
Artist's layering process for "Rosette of Pride"

"The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats, 1919

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?