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**Symbolic Seeds: An Analysis of Pomegranate Usage in Selected
Artworks of the Past and Present**

Hannah Spry

Capstone in Art History 2019

University of Minnesota Morris

Abstract for “Symbolic Seeds: An Analysis of Pomegranate Usage in Selected Artworks
of the Past and Present”

The image of the pomegranate has been used in works by many artists of different periods such as Sandro Botticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1485), Rachel Ruysch’s *Fruit and Flowers* (1716), Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Proserpine* (1874), and Salvador Dalí’s *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee* (1944). Although the pomegranate is often interpreted as a symbol of fertility, there have been many other interpretations and usages of the pomegranate throughout art history such as mythological, religious, sexual, or simply as a natural object in a still-life study. The pomegranate has been referenced by scholars while discussing its symbolism in individual works of art but not examined over time and different periods of art. In this essay, I interpret each of the above artists’ use of the pomegranate through visual and iconographic analysis of their paintings. After analyzing each work, I discuss how they relate to my own work as an artist who is extending this tradition. In particular, I will describe the significance I see in the pomegranate as shown in my screen print *My Beautiful Vessel (Stretch marks or otherwise, 2019)*. I use the pomegranate’s physical attributes to express a body positive attitude in this work by highlighting both beauty and strength. By demonstrating the similarities and differences between my work and that of historical artists, I am able to provide further context and understanding for the use of pomegranate imagery of the past and present.

Symbolic Seeds: An Analysis of Pomegranate Usage in Selected Artworks of the Past and Present

The pomegranate has been utilized throughout history in a number of ways ranging from symbolic meanings to its aesthetic properties to its many health benefits. In European art history not only are the pomegranates rendered beautifully but they can also be a way to show symbolic or iconographic meaning. Unfortunately, you cannot search “pomegranate in art” in the library database and find a scholarly source that compiles the multifaceted use of the pomegranate in relation to specific works of art throughout different artistic periods. Since pomegranate imagery has been used frequently in art history but not discussed in scholarly writing on the subject, I will do so here. Currently, my own work contains pomegranate imagery, and this is due to my interest in its physical attributes and my own way of seeing the pomegranate; as well as pomegranates having always stood out to me when seeing them included in other works. In this essay I will examine the paintings *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487) by Sandro Botticelli, *Fruit and Flowers* (1716) by Rachel Ruysch, *Proserpine* (1874) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Waking* (1944) by Salvador Dalí in order to better understand what the pomegranate might symbolize, whether it be religious, mythological, or sexual in a given context. Then I will compare these interpretations to my own work, *Weight of Gravity*, and consider how my current work might be viewed as an extension of this tradition.

Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate*

The Renaissance period produced many artworks with Christian imagery, and a decent amount of those works have the Virgin and Child as subject matter, from artists such as Fra Filippo Lippi, Raphael, and Leonardo Da Vinci. Amongst these artists was Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510), who made his name alongside the Medici family in Florence, who were some of his most notable patrons. His parents sent him to apprentice under a family friend, Botticello, who was a goldsmith (Zöllner, 10). It was at Botticello's workshop that young Sandro got his nickname "Botticelli" (Zöllner, 11). During his time in the goldsmith's workshop, Botticelli turned more towards painting, and so his father sent him instead to apprentice under the painter Fra Filippo Lippi in 1461 or 1462 (Zöllner, 13). Eventually, Botticelli formed his own distinctive style, which had begun in the 15th century as an important way to identify artists (Zöllner, 12). Botticelli was known for giving his figures expressions of melancholy and painting with a delicate luminosity while still producing strong lines. He opened up his own workshop and began to receive commissions from the most notable of Florentine patrons, such as the Vespucci and the Medici families. Commissioning artwork with religious subject matter was popular at the time because families like the Medici were not only devote Catholic members of the community, but it was also a way to show off their extreme wealth.

Botticelli made his work *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (Fig. 1), also known as *Virgin and Child with Six Angels*, in 1487. It is thought to have been commissioned for a Florentine Magistrate at the time and was either housed publicly in the Bargello (Zöllner, 230) or more likely, in the Palazzo Vecchio, where the Magistracy resided until 1533 (Horne, 154).

The circular painting (or tondo) is still in its original frame with the Florentine lily pattern, or fleurs-de-lys, decorating the perimeter, which further points to the painting being placed in a judicial building such as the Palazzo Vecchio. *Madonna of the Pomegranate* has an eight-figure and vertically symmetrical composition. The Virgin Mary, center, holds the Christ child in her lap, both of whom are haloed. She cups Christ underneath his bottom with one hand and in the other lightly holds a pomegranate fruit, which Christ is also grasping with one hand. Surrounding them are angels, three on each side of Mary, who hold either lilies or books, and who stand behind roses. All of the figures' gazes seem to be focused in different directions, and half of the figures seem to be fixated on something outside the picture plane which implies that there is something else which the viewer can't see that is taking their attention away from the Virgin and Child. A bright light shines down in gold onto the figures below and illuminates the scene.



Figure 1.
Sandro Botticelli
Madonna of the Pomegranate
1487
Tempera on panel
Renaissance
Diameter 56.5 in
Galleria degli Uffizi,
Florence

Even without the angels and the haloes, the image of a young, adult woman holding a baby boy can be assumed to be an image of Mary and the Christ child, especially a woman wearing the colors red and blue, with blue being symbolic of Heaven (Hall, 324). What is not usually included in the Madonna and Child image is the pomegranate, which in the context of the painting has purely religious symbolism, although it might first be interpreted as a symbol of fertility due to its many seeds. This interpretation works for *Madonna of the Pomegranate* since it is a painting whose main subject is the mother of Christ. However, it is more likely that the pomegranate is used here as a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and eventual resurrection. James Hall, in his *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, notes that the pomegranate can be a symbol of the Resurrection when used in a Christian context (Hall, 249). Hall's interpretation connects the symbolism of the pomegranate to the Passion of Christ since before resurrection there has to be death. Christ's impending death could be why the angels all look in different directions, almost agitatedly, with varying states of melancholic expressions. It is likely that the angels who are looking directly at the viewer do so to draw the viewer into the artwork, but perhaps here they do so as a warning. This look of warning could tie to an interpretation made by Herbert P. Horne, an artist and author of *Botticelli*, which states that the pomegranate is representative of the Fall (Horne, 154). This could be from a popular idea that the pomegranate fruit is also sometimes referred to as the "forbidden fruit" (Atré, 2) from the Tree of Knowledge that Adam and Eve ate from which cast them out of the Garden of Eden, and thus began mankind's need for redemption and Christ's eventual death "for our sins". This interpretation might be less obvious than the possible fertility iconography but is backed up by the lilies held by the angels to symbolize purity (Hall, 192), not only that of the Virgin Mary but

also the souls that are purified after death. As well, the books held by the angels could possibly be the New and Old Testament. The Old Testament story would reference Adam and Eve's "original sin" which marked mankind's initial downfall, and the New Testament would reference the Passion of Christ so that man could be forgiven of sin.

Ruysch's *Fruit and Flowers*

Still-life painting during the Dutch Golden Age (i.e., the seventeenth century) was a subject that interested many patrons with its floral arrangements that could neither flourish or decay, or food that would forever remain untouched or half-eaten. During this time new flowers, such as tulip bulbs, were being introduced to the region, but they were not readily available to a large segment of the population because of their extreme expense (Taylor, 2). Still, the flowers' novelty and beauty excited people. Being able to afford a painting of a bouquet of flowers was a way for them to preserve the beauty they sought without the expense of flowers that would eventually die. At the time, such a painting probably seemed well worth getting for their homes or collections. Rachel Ruysch was especially successful in painting floral still-lives because she paid extremely close attention to the detail of each new flower and was very aware of botanical sciences.

Rachel Ruysch (1664- 1750) was the daughter of Frederick Ruysch, an anatomy scientist, whose collections of scientific specimens influenced Ruysch's career as a still-life painter (Tomasi, 162). She studied under the painter Willem van Aelst and became a well-known artist in her time; eventually she received the honor of working as a court painter, where she produced works for the Elector of Palatine of the Rhine, Johan Willem, in 1708 (Dabbs, 269). Her

paintings are almost all large, extravagant, floral arrangements that fill the space of the canvas, and sometimes contain fruit or bugs. Her deep understanding of light and depth is a clear marker for Ruysch's artistic style. However, the work I will analyze, *Fruit and Flowers* differs from her earlier work when she heavily used chiaroscuro to make her paintings appear more three-dimensional (Taylor, 188). As a result, this example looks less realistic.

Ruysch painted *Fruit and Flowers* (Fig. 2) in 1716, the same year that her patron, Johan Willem, passed away (Dabbs, 270) so potentially it was created in reaction to the death of her benefactor. The composition of the painting is mostly that of a giant floral arrangement on a marble table, with blooming and weeping flowers. Butterflies lightly sit on the arrangement while other small bugs are integrated within it. Three pomegranates sit in the bottom left corner of the painting, with one opened to reveal the interior and seeds. The pomegranate placement adds more red hue to the bottom portion of the canvas in order to pull the viewer's eyes toward them. Ruysch strategically placed each floral and foliage form to accommodate the canvas size and overall synchronicity of its composition.



Figure 2.
Rachel Ruysch
Fruit and Flowers
1716
oil on canvas
35 in x 26.5 in
Baroque
Palazzo Pitti

Fruit, in some Dutch still-life paintings, took on a Christian allegorical meaning (Taylor 163). As in *Madonna of the Pomegranate* it could be assumed that the insertion of the three pomegranates symbolize the Resurrection and new life. Or equally probable, the pomegranates could mean the other side of resurrection- which would be *death*. This is evident in the inclusion of the butterflies that are representative of the cycle of life, as the caterpillar to butterfly transformation refers to the Resurrection (Hall, 54). Further evidence that the painting (and thus, the pomegranate's symbolism) contains the theme of death are the flowers that are in varying degrees of their life-cycle. First, the flowers stand tall in full bloom at the top of the canvas then

they pull the viewer's gaze down toward the bottom as they slowly wilt. If the painting was created after Johan Willem's death, these illustrated cycles of life could further speak to that.

Rossetti's *Proserpine*

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), considered one of the foremost painters of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the nineteenth century, began his career with an apprenticeship at an early age, then went to attend the Royal Academy Antique School in London, 1846 (Robert de La Sizeranne, 74). While in school, he also studied under the teaching of Ford Madox Brown, a painter residing in London at the time. As an art student, Rossetti founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 with six other artists (Robert de La Sizeranne, 23). The P.R.B.'s ideas revolved around not imitating their masters, modeling instead of generalizing figures, paying great attention to detail, and placing importance on originality and earnestness (Robert de La Sizeranne, 30). The woman modelling Proserpine in the painting is Jane Morris, who was seventeen when Rossetti met her and who went on to marry William Morris, a close friend of Rossetti (McGann, xix). Later, Rossetti and Jane began a romantic relationship when she began to sit for Rossetti while he painted. This relationship flourished as Rossetti used Jane Morris in much of his work thereafter.

It was near the end of his life that Rossetti created *Proserpine* (Fig. 3). The theme behind *Proserpine* originates from the myth of the Greek goddess, Persephone. The myth begins with the abduction of Persephone by the god Hades, who takes her with him to the underworld. While there, she eats from a pomegranate whose seeds bind anyone who consumes the fruit to the underworld. Hades eventually grants Persephone four months of the year to be with her mother,

Demeter, hence gracing the earth with springtime and new life. Without the pomegranate, Persephone would not be bound to the land of the dead for most of each year.

Rossetti's *Proserpine* is an elongated painting of a beautiful woman clutching a pomegranate. She is turned to the side, her body in profile view with her head turned $\frac{3}{4}$ view to look outside of the painting towards the viewer's left. She is tightly confined within the space of the painting, with a source of light coming from in front of her, like a window or an opening, based on the light cast on the wall behind her. It almost seems as if she has been confined to this space and this is the moment she is being let free. There is ivy creeping up the wall to her right and an inscription in the top right corner of the painting. Placed in front of her is an incense burner. Her gown is a lustrous, silky, teal-blue material that is delicately portrayed by Rossetti. Everything in the painting seems to have a soft, almost hazy surface texture that makes the painting look almost dreamlike. Rossetti probably created this surface by using the technique of *sfumato*, which is a technique that makes use of fine shading, so it looks soft and almost smoky.



Figure 3.
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Proserpine
1874
oil on canvas
49.3 in × 24 in
Pre-Raphaelite
Tate Britain, London

Proserpine's designation as the goddess of springtime- and hence, new life- lies in direct juxtaposition to the circumstance that the underworld's fruit set upon her, that she be trapped in the land of the dead. Although the pomegranate here could be interpreted as a symbol of Persephone herself and her gift of life to the earthly realm, it is more than likely symbolizing death, because of her lost time in the underworld as well as the decay of the natural world after she leaves to go back to the underworld. The folds of her clothing, the position of her left arm,

her cupped hands, the curve of the hanging ivy plant, the alignment of her head and neck all pull the viewer's eyes around the painting and lead straight to the pomegranate at the center. The central pomegranate's color matches the color of Proserpine's lips which could be done purposefully to emphasize the act of eating the fruit.

Rossetti was both a painter and a poet. He distinguished himself from other artists of his time by creating "two-sided" works of art (Golden, 395) meaning he would write a sonnet on a specific subject and then create a painting to accompany it. This is exactly what he did with *Proserpine*. The poem, also titled *Proserpine*, is the text in the top right corner of the painting that reads:

Afar away the light that brings cold cheer
 Unto this wall, — one instant and no more
 Admitted at my distant palace-door.
 Afar the flowers of Enna from this drear
 Dire fruit, which, tasted once, must thrall me here.
 Afar those skies from this Tartarean grey
 That chills me: and afar, how far away,
 The nights that shall be from the days that were.
 Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing
 Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign:
 And still some heart unto some soul doth pine,
 (Whose sounds mine inner sense is fain to bring,
 Continually together murmuring,)—
 "Woe's me for thee, unhappy Proserpine!"
 -Rossetti,
 (McGann, 195)

The sonnet, or in some cases partial sonnet, is included on the canvas itself and not on its frame, as would have been customary for Rossetti when pairing text with painting (Golden, 395-96). By including it on the canvas, Rossetti made sure that there was a clear description of

the painting alongside of it, even if the painting was reframed. The following is a quote from Rossetti in a letter further describing the work:

The figure represents Proserpine as Empress of Hades. After she was conveyed by Pluto to his realm, and became his bride, her mother Ceres importuned Jupiter for her return to the fruits of Hades. It was found, however, that she had eaten one grain of a pomegranate, and this enchained her to her new empire and destiny. She is represented in a gloomy corridor of her palace, with the fatal fruit in her hand. As she passes, a gleam strikes on the wall behind her from some inlet suddenly opened and admitting for a moment the light of the upper world; and she glances furtively towards it, immersed in thought. The incense-burner stands beside her as the attribute of a goddess. The ivy-branch in the background (a decorative appendage to the sonnet inscribed on the label) may be taken as a symbol of clinging memory. (Sharp, 236)

In these descriptions, Rossetti confirms each object's meaning and why he used them. Here he sets the scene directly in both words and paint. Most importantly, Rossetti confirms the pomegranate's role in the painting which is that of the "chain" to her unfortunate circumstance. By the time Jane modelled Proserpine, Rossetti had already fallen in love with her. Their relationship as artist and muse eventually turned into an obsession on Rossetti's part (McGann, xxi). *Proserpine* could be interpreted as being representative of the circumstances surrounding their relationship in that he could only be with Jane at certain times, like when she sat for him.

Dali's Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Waking

Surrealism in the early 20th Century was about contradicting the social, sexual, or cultural norms of the time in order to shock and intrigue the public with art that was subversive in subject matter. Its artists also "sought to raise consciousness and expand understanding of existence as a fluid state in which chaos and contradiction are resolved by transformation and metamorphosis,"

(Chadwick, xiii). Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) is one of the most notable and famous artists within the Surrealist movement, and maybe even of modern art.

It would be an understatement to say there is a lot happening in Salvador Dalí's *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Waking* (Fig. 4) painted in 1944. The compositional setting of the painting is in a classic Dalí fantasy world equipped with an elephant with extremely long, spidery legs that are as tall as a cliff in the top right section. There are floating rocks, a seascape, and a colorful sunrise. In the center is a woman sleeping peacefully while a gun is being pointed at her. The gun is followed by a tiger baring its teeth and claws, which is coming from the gaping mouth of an even larger tiger, which is partially jumping from the mouth of a gigantic fish. Finally, the goldfish seems to be sprung from an opened pomegranate floating above the sea. It can be assumed that the bee next to the pomegranate at the bottom of the painting is the same titular bee that has caused this fantastical dream since it is included flying around the pomegranate and is next to the sleeping woman.



Figure 4.

Salvador Dalí

Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Waking

1944

Oil on panel.

Surrealism

20 in × 15.9 in

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum,
Madrid

I believe that instead of the painting being a rendering of a dream that Dalí had, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee* is what is going on in the dream of the sleeping figure. Since the woman is the one sleeping in the painting, it would make sense that this is her dream and that everything else in the painting is what is happening in her dream. It appears that the sleeping woman in the painting is about to be attacked, but by waking up, and therefore leaving the nightmare, she will be safe and unharmed. I believe that she will be safe because, as indicated by the title, this is happening in her dream and is only caused by a bee outside of it. The potential violence of the approaching tigers and gun contrasts with the seemingly slow movement of the

gentle giant that is the elephant, influence both peaceful and urgent undertones that make me want to both whisper so as not to wake her, and shout at her in warning. The pomegranate here seems to be used as another symbol of impending death, that of the sleeping figure who is unknowing of what is about to happen, which would make the painting's theme more like that of a nightmare and not a dream.

According to the official website of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, where the painting is currently housed, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee* is a return for Dalí to his ““paranoiac-critical method”” and “his view—based on Freudian theories—that images were open to multiple interpretations [which] made him one of the leading members of the Surrealist group,” (Alarcó, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza). The pomegranate here too could have religious symbolism since according to Alarcó the bee is often symbolic of Mary (Alarcó, MNTB). Dalí explains that his intention was to:

[put] into an image for the first time Freud's discovery of the typical dream involving a long story argument, resulting from the instantaneity of an accident causing awakening. Just as the dropping of a rod on the neck of a sleeper gives rise simultaneously to his awakening and to a very long dream ending with the descent of the guillotine blade, here the sound of the bee provokes the sensation of the sting which wakes Gala. (in Alarcó, MNTB)

Like Rossetti, Dalí explains his work and therefore confirms some of the reasoning behind what he does, but unlike Rossetti, Dalí only explains his use of Freud's theories about the conscious and unconscious mind and not each object's symbolism. He does, however, also describe why he uses the bee as the reason for awakening, which is its associated sting that startles Gala awake.

The sting of the bee is one of the ways that *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee* contains sexual connotations. The stimulation of the sting, the woman's nudity and the exposed position of her body, and most importantly, the pomegranate's exhibited seeds and potential fertility symbolism point also toward a theme of sexuality in the painting.

Personal Themes

In my own work as a printmaker, I often use the pomegranate image to aid in portraying the theme of each edition, as seen in my current series of screen prints. Each work uses the pomegranate in different ways in order to convey a different emotion, but not in terms of any particular prescribed meaning. In my work, I tend to draw from personal experience and circumstances that have impacted my life. My work utilizes the cohesion between organic and linear aspects- or chaos and order- in order to imitate the emotions born from various life experiences and project them outward instead of keeping them to myself. When choosing an object to best convey my desire to share these experiences with others, I felt that the image of the pomegranate was the ultimate model of the shifts between *isolation*- the pomegranate's tough exterior- and *connection*- the seemingly infinite seeds that spill out once opened- and so I used the image of the pomegranate in order to illustrate various states of introspection.

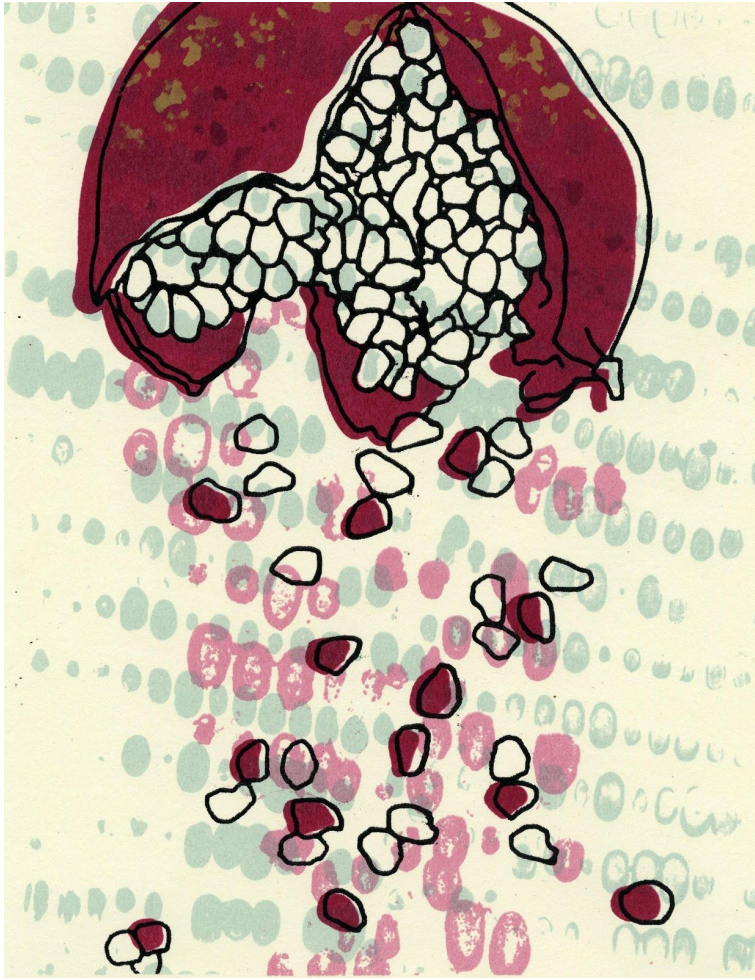


Figure 5.
Hannah Spry
Weight of Gravity
2019
Screen print
9 x 7 in
copyright 2019 Hannah Spry

My work, *Weight of Gravity*, will illustrate one of the ways I do this. *Weight of Gravity* is based on personal experience with feelings of being weighed down, whether it be by work, stress, relationships, my art, etc. I wanted to convey a feeling of being overwhelmed as well as the relief felt once you let go what was weighing you down. I wanted to truly look at my own mental process and the emotions I was feeling during that experience.

I show this personal examination in *Weight of Gravity* by first drawing a pomegranate that is torn open and apart, placing it at the top of the print so that is it upside down, making it look like seeds are falling out. The seeds represent all of the apprehensive thoughts inside of me

that were weighing me down and I am therefore allowing them to fall away. Some seeds change color as they “fall” which is also representative of the relief felt and the change that is happening through this process. The blemishes on the pomegranate’s rind are also representative of change because they appear once it ages or bruises. This was important to me because I feel that the weight of stress or difficult times have left behind “blemishes” on my mind and body even though I eventually let them go.

I use complementary colors, and color in general, to visually aid my work’s themes. In *Weight of Gravity* the colors I chose were partly because of my typical use of triadic color scheme (which is when all colors are evenly spaced from each other around the color wheel) but also is darker than usual here because of the subject matter. The pattern in the background is an organic corn kernel texture that I use often in my work. I placed this texture in the back simply to add texture and elements that are visually interesting when looked at closely. I added a second fewer-seeded layer in a color close to the oxblood-pink on top so that it would balance the color weight from top to bottom.

Traditionally, the pomegranate symbolizes life and growth, which can also equate to beauty, prosperity, and fertility. When I look at a pomegranate, I see mystery, strength, and an object that could be a symbol of every aspect of life, from emotions, struggles and achievements, to physical traits like blemishes on the rind or on the human body (without actually showing the human body). If looked at closely, the pomegranate is both an orderly and chaotic network of seductive organic qualities, geometric shapes, and intense colors. Along with its unique coloring- think of the bright red seeds and the soft yellow membrane that surrounds them on the inside of the fruit and then the deep red-pink of the rind- the contrast between a firm outer shell and

masses of gemlike seeds make the pomegranate an intriguing and almost unearthly-looking piece of art. I use these qualities to create images that represent myself and different aspects of the life experience.

Comparison and Conclusion

Unlike the works of the past, I use pomegranate imagery in my screen prints as the sole object in the composition that portrays the emotional subject of the print. I do this in *Weight of Gravity* by putting the pomegranate in the foreground. Although this foregrounding of the pomegranate seems to give the object itself more precedence, it does not mean that the pomegranates of the other works are not just as important. Each artist included the pomegranate to illustrate the artworks theme, making it important to its comprehension.

It is interesting that the pomegranate is used historically in themes such as death and Christ's resurrection, and more interestingly, that these themes are paired with feminine imagery. Whether that be the actual figure of a female as in Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate* or surrounded by "feminine" objects as in Ruysch's *Fruit and Flowers*, it would seem that death, female imagery, and pomegranates were synonymous. However, unlike the male painters that I've shown here, neither Rachel Ruysch's nor my work actually show female bodies in conjunction with the pomegranate, although they do reference a feminine subject matter in other ways.

It could be argued that all of the mentioned works have *change* as one of their themes- Botticelli's theme being that of death to resurrection; Ruysch's as life cycle; Rossetti's as life, to death, and back to new life; Dalí's as a shift from sleep to awakening or dream to reality; and

with mine, as the feeling of being weighed down transformed to a feeling of lightness. The inclusion of the pomegranate strengthens the theme of change, and thus its symbolism is vital to understanding a possible meaning of each of these works of art.

Although each artwork selected for this analysis has a different subject matter varying from religious, mythological, sexual, or emotional in content, and exhibits varying stylistic choices, it is possible to find substantial connections between works from varying artistic periods. Starting in the Renaissance with Botticelli and continuing to the present, through closer observation and analysis we can still see the significance in using the pomegranate to illustrate one's theme or to create symbolic meaning in a work of art.

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