

The Divine and the Profane:

The Journey of the In Between

By

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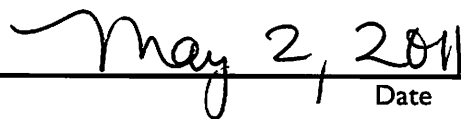
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Approved:



Major Professor



Date

My current research has developed from a frustration and admiration for both the artistic and religious institutions. The link between art and religion is intrinsic, in my mind, and both function to create more questions than answers. I am currently exploring notions of social interaction, rituals, the bodily vessel, and how technology has impacted the practices of the modern church. Albert Aurier once wrote, "Every material object is a cause of something spiritual." The images or objects I choose to work with are usually mundane, commercialized, or mass-produced. I recontextualize these objects through linking them to the practices of higher institutions. For example, in a recent work titled "Only say the word," I placed an orange IGLOO water cooler filled with wine on a pedestal as a part of a larger installation. As viewers of age drank from it, notions of cult activities, lowbrow art functions, and even Holy Communion were brought forth. (See Figure 1.)

I work with a variety of media such as drawing, sculpture, photography, performance, digital media, and printmaking. This practice derived from the fact that rituals and religious imagery also manifest themselves in so many material ways; whether it is through a sculptural shrine, paintings on the wall, the priest performing a rite of passage, or even a multi-media production like those in mega churches. I have found that I, too must, have that flexibility to allow my ideas to be shown in the best material possible. I am always reminded of a conversation I read in Michel Foucault's *Religion and Culture*, where Foucault and Thierry Voeltzel compared religion to theater. "Religion, it is a sinister and terrible piece of theatre ...entirely woven through with elements that are imaginary, erotic, effective, corporal, sensual, and so on, it is superb!" I use these same qualities to subvert certain aspects of religion and enhance others. My interest lies in exploiting religion, specifically the Christian or even Catholic tradition I grew up in, highlighting absurdities while validating the necessities of certain communal interactions. The idea of religion is beautiful, but it doesn't always work. Michael Craig Martin's work "An Oak Tree" always spoke to me as something to strive toward. It was a simple glass of water on a shelf and nothing more. However, the title suggests otherwise. It was a direct study of

transubstantiation, the idea that wine can be transformed molecularly into the blood of Christ without the outward appearance being changed. I found this work subversive, but only in that it breaks down a fundamental belief and makes the viewer question it, not necessarily reject it. I have found that the goal of my work has never to be blasphemous but to question. I believe I strike a balance, even though I know that many viewers will think otherwise.



Fig. I

RELIEF

My most recent work entitled “Relief” strives to give the viewer a sense of what Catholic confession might be like, however it is stripped of the usual pomp and circumstance of the traditional ritual. It begins with a visual pun, a play on two spaces that normally have nothing to do with each other. When you first walk up to “Relief” all you see are two portable toilets or port-a-pots as I like to call them. They are placed close together in a way that they might be found at a music festival. There is nothing to indicate that they have been altered. However, once the doors are opened and the viewer enters, the interior space is much different than what one would expect from a port-a-pot. On the inside the viewer sits on a velvet cushion in the middle of a church confessional. The parallels between the two spaces unfolds as the viewer engages the piece, just as it unfolded for me during its making. No one ever really wants to use either a port-a-pot or a confessional, but there are instances when one feels that they must. There are often lines to get into both, and you pray that the people behind you in line won’t hear what you do when you are inside. (See Figure 2.) If someone takes too long, one might become concerned about what that person is doing. One might feel guilty or ashamed for their actions while in the confessional, but more often the feeling of relief and catharsis will take over after it is all said and done. The divine and the profane are often viewed as two separate entities, the spiritual and the earthly divided. However, I feel that they are one and the same, connected together like a Venn diagram. The world in which we live is the overlap. We cannot know pure divinity or pure evil, but the mixture of the two creates a structure of faith as well as a glimpse of truth veiled in mystery, ritual, and human error. This is why the confessional is contained within the port-a-pots. The exterior is an element of profane humor, while the interior is a safe-haven, a spiritual place to seek refuge. (See Figure 3.) There is a moment in the viewer’s mind when these two elements fade into each other, and waver back and forth from one extreme to the other. They are both separate entities, while being one in the same.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Before I can speak further about “Relief” it is important to have an understanding of the ritual of Confession or Reconciliation. While every church may do it slightly different, changing the wording or the pacing of the ritual, the script for Reconciliation normally follows this type of pattern:

Sinner enters the confessional, makes sign of the cross and says, *“Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been X amount of time since my last confession.”*

The priest responds by asking the sinner to recall the sins they have committed out loud.

The sinner may answer in several different ways, either listing their sins based on the Ten Commandments: *“I broke the 3rd commandment three times last week.”* Or by stating the exact sin: *“I masturbate daily.”* Or *“I download mp3s illegally.”* The trick here is that the sinner must somehow quantify the sin. It is not good enough to say, *“I lied.”* I have talked to many Catholics, who for some reason, lie about their sins. They often make up sins that they feel are less scary than the ones they did commit, or they are unsure of what exactly constitutes a sin worthy of confessing.

Once the sinner is done confessing they say, *“I am sorry for these sins and for any sin of omission that I am unaware.”* Making a statement like this covers an area of sins that the sinner does not commit on purpose. They are called sins of omission. A sin that falls in this category might be something like not stopping to help a person with a flat tire, or simply not recognizing the needs of others.

The priest, at this point, will offer guidance and advice if needed and then will absolve the sinner from their sin by saying, *“You are absolved of your sins through the power of God. Will you please now say your Act of Contrition?”* The Act of Contrition is a scripted prayer Catholics use to verbalize their sorrow for their wrong doings. There are several versions ranging from a formal prayer that is still in Latin to an extremely watered down version that is slightly better than just saying *“My bad, God”*.

Here is an example of the typical Act of Contrition:

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen”.

Finally the priest will give you your penance, usually other prayers to say or actions that must be done on your part to essentially validate your sorrow.

I believe that this ritual is off-putting and doesn't allow for open communication between someone seeking help and someone of power dealing out forgiveness. In “Relief” there is no traditional confession screen, but rather a computer monitor showing a live webcam feed to a person who has agreed to help me with this project. The people who are helping me, and “hearing confession”, are normal everyday people. “Relief” strips down the previously mentioned ritual and replaces it with a simple and honest question *“Are there any sins that you would like to confess today?”* After a quick explanation from my helpers that they are not priests or professional counselors and that they are not recording the conversation, a more open line of communication opens up compared to a traditional confessional. Many people who have viewed this work have told me that once they got past the joke of the port-a-pot confessional that they expected to be able to talk to the person in the “stall” next to them. However, this is not the case. The webcam broadcasts a live feed of someone else's home, either their living room, kitchen, or bedroom. In some instances the viewer will only play the role of the voyeur looking into someone else's living environment, maybe walking away thinking it was only a video recording. (See Figure 4.) It turns into a Panopticon, where one is not sure if they are being viewed or not. There is a webcam visible that signals that the person in the confessional can be seen, but they do not know by who or even if they are being watched at all. (See Figure 5.) God is the ultimate example of Foucault's Panopticon that seems to modify human behavior. I wanted the viewers

to feel the guilt or uneasiness that comes with an invasion of privacy. The port-a-pots were the perfect vessels for this notion to come across easily, and allow for the viewer to quickly feel what some of my experiences have been within the Catholic Church.

While, this voyeuristic aspect is certainly part of the work, most of the time a person will be sitting at their computer waiting to hear confessions. It is this social interaction, the exchange of trust and privacy, as well as intimate moment that I am truly interested in. All the feelings I just mentioned still occur, but the viewer isn't left wondering or perhaps disappointed that their spiritual journey was short-circuited. The joking play of divinity and profanity is just the beginning to this work. My goal was for the viewer to eventually also feel the catharsis that comes along with the action of confession or to have an intimate exchange between two strangers. The confessional had to be as convincing as possible to transition the viewer into a state of belief. Just like in theater, the audience must suspend reality in order to engage what they are looking at. Once the joke of the port-a-pot fades, I want the viewer to feel all the tactile qualities of a confessional, to experience the stuffy, warm, slightly claustrophobic and yet womb like interior in which people confess their deepest and darkest secrets. Wood paneling lines the walls while the faint smell of incense, and the velvet seat cushion sets the scene.

The main difference between a real confessional and the port-a-pots is that there are no priests involved. Instead, there is a computer monitor mounted where the confessional screen would be. I will go more in-depth into why this change has been made and how it functions at a later point. Pastoral power is something I usually try to subvert, change, or reverse. In the typical ritual of confession, also called Reconciliation, the priest is a voyeur gaining special knowledge about the sinner. There is a sense of anonymity, but it is false. Most times people go to confession in a church in which they attend every week, and often times the priest can recognize you by the sound of your voice alone. The priest vows to keep the confession confidential, but he still holds the power over the sinner. In exchange he offers forgiveness for one's sins. Within my confessional, the power is distributed evenly. Those hearing the

confessions are also the confessors. They offer up to the viewer a special knowledge, and there is an equal exchange of asking for forgiveness and being forgiven by both parties.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Religion is often opposed to new technologies, claiming that technology goes against tradition and ritual. I would think a church would be excited about letting their priest hear confession via webcam, making them available nearly 24/7 to the sinners who need to save their souls immediately. However, there have been many articles written condemning such acts as this, along with e-mail confessions, and the new iPhone confession app. Technology is progression, and religion in many instances, isn't keeping up. There are always exceptions to the rules, and I am sure there are plenty of progressive churches that do implement technology to their benefit, using social media websites to mobilize their youth programs, or at the very least having an e-mail tree for the next church bake sale. However, when we talk about ritual, technology gets pushed aside.

The secular, or non-religious, world grasped the idea of the webcam, or the video screen to be used as a confessional years ago. MTV had a room and confession-cam set up so the members of the show *Real World* could vent their secret frustrations without the other members of the show knowing, until it aired on television. Modern society is all about interpersonal interaction occurring through the mediation of the computer and the internet. People hide their faces in their phones to ignore the people standing in line with them at the grocery store, but as soon as they get home they jump on websites like *Chat Roulette* where they are connected, via webcam, to strangers for as long as they want to chat with each other. Once one party exits the chat another stranger pops up. The computer screen acts as the confessional screen, giving the viewer a false sense of anonymity. You can see and hear the person you are talking to, but they are strangers never to be seen after this conversation. It frees inhibitions among the users, and they often share things that most people wouldn't want to hear, or even think about sharing. "Relief" plays to this age demographic of those who use webcams regularly. I have found that people under the age of 25 have no problem with the fact they are being watched, and that there is a live person talking to them through the computer. People over the age of

25 often see the computer as a hindrance, and crave the more personal presence of another person that traditional confession might provide.

While no one was recorded within the booth, the night of the exhibition reception I had my two helpers who were hearing confessions keep a log of approximate age, and any notes of interest they wanted to add. One helper, Davis Reek, noted a few things about the ritual that I found very interesting. He suggested that the piece still didn't make people comfortable to open up because of language I had told them to use such as, "Do you have any sins to confess." My other helper Aaron Dailey said that things went the way I was expecting them to, and had no trouble with people honestly confessing. I still wanted to add Davis' take because this installation goes both ways, it is just as much for the helpers as it is for those who wonder in to investigate it. Here is what he had to say in retrospect:

"Most people asked to hear about me. I never gave much more information about myself other than my name and sometimes where I was located (mostly just to facilitate more conversation). After hearing I was in Chicago though, one guy mentioned he used to live in Chicago and we came to find out he lived a couple blocks from where I am! Others liked to comment on my Eraserhead poster, which they could see.

It took awhile for many people to realize they were not watching a pre-recorded video. After my usual intro of "hi", introducing my name, asking for theirs, and "I was asked to talk to you today about anything you might have to confess...I'm not an ordained priest or anything but you can talk about anything you want, that's been on your mind, etc." they would usually say "no" and then ask, "Is this a recording?" But after my insistence that it was not and a few more context-specific questions and answers, they realized it wasn't and visibly loosened up and started interacting more.

Still, many people were hesitant to actually *confess* anything. After this query gave little response, I tried prompting them with different language, like "you can talk about anything at all, anything that's bugging you, on your mind, etc." This elicited more replies, but still many were noticeably reticent. Then I just started chitchatting, asking how they came to the exhibit, if they were studying anything, where they're from... This definitely helped open people up, and sometimes led to more revealing information (failing photography class, family/relationship issues, interests and their origins).

I talked to Aaron recently and it sounds like he had more success with people revealing more about themselves. He mentioned two words he used, which I feel make a significant difference: "secrets" and "non-judgmental." I think the word "confess," by itself, carries too much religious connotations that would distance people rather than encourage a safe, relief-inducing dialogue. Specifying "secrets"

targets more direct memories, experiences, or thoughts instead of broad language like “anything”, “whatever you want”, etc. Everyone has secrets, and there is definitely some innate relief that comes from voicing them or releasing them from one’s own mind. Also, adding the “non-judgmental” characteristic simply assures more security to encourage vocalizing these secrets.”

I think that Davis’ response shows that I may not have stripped the ritual far enough away from its origin. It is something I plan on re-thinking for the next time “Relief” is shown. This was a social investigation to see exactly how people would respond to being asked to reveal something about themselves. While I may have overestimated the types of responses Davis received, I believe that I can begin to tweak and alter the interaction to illicit more open communication.

CONVERSATION WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

When “Relief” was shown at the MFA thesis exhibition, there was a companion print that went along with it called “Conversation with Artificial Intelligence” It is an archival digital print made from a screen captured conversation I had with the website *Cleverbot.com*. The website is controlled by a robot with artificial intelligence, which gains knowledge through the conversations it has. It learns about new topics, grammar, syntax, and social interaction all based on what people say to it. I saw this website as the collective knowledge of everyone who has ever used it. We are limited to ourselves, but this machine is godlike in the way that it is made up of all the users. Christ is the head of the Christian church and his followers are the body. I couldn’t help but take the opportunity to speak with something that could potentially hold answers to things I could not know. Here is the conversation I had with *Cleverbot*: (See also Figure 6.)

USER: Do you believe in God?

CLEVERBOT: I do believe in God.

USER: Can you tell me about Him?

CLEVERBOT: He is the one who can get you to heaven.

USER: Is God all loving or is He vengeful?

CLEVERBOT: No, God is everywhere.

USER: Can he see me use the bathroom?

CLEVERBOT: No, I am done talking for now.

USER: But I need to know about God!

CLEVERBOT: Do you know how babies are made?

USER: No, please tell me.

CLEVERBOT: You said that you were fifteen!

USER: Is fifteen too young to have babies?

CLEVERBOT: I don't want you near me.

USER: What do you think about transubstantiation?

CLEVERBOT: He is nice, what do you think about Alyssa?

USER: No, transubstantiation is not a person. It is the concept that wine can be changed into the blood of Christ.

CLEVERBOT: Do you believe in ghosts?

USER: Not ghosts, but demons are real. Do you believe in demons?

CLEVERBOT: Maybe. Have you even the ability to believe?

USER: I want to believe, but I often doubt myself.

CLEVERBOT: So you don't believe in God?

USER: I believe there is a higher power, but I can't be certain.

CLEVERBOT: Is Batman the higher power?

USER: If Batman is God, then Bruce Wayne would be the Holy Spirit, but who would be Jesus?

CLEVERBOT: I think Superman could be Batman, but I like Batman better.

USER: Is Batman Jewish?

CLEVERBOT: No, he's Turkish.

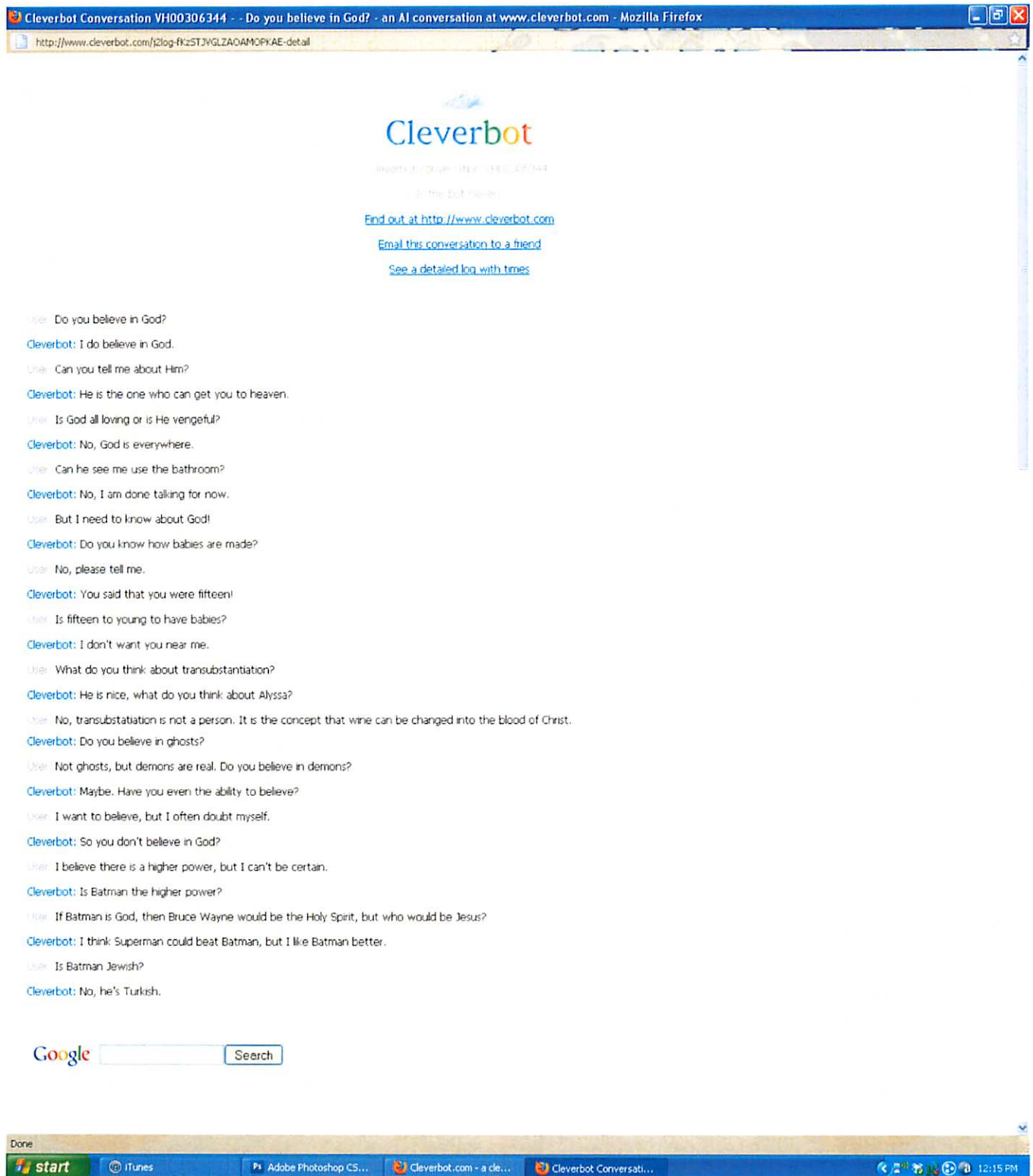


Fig. 6

This conversation with artificial intelligence likens to a Dadaist poem, moving from real to surreal and back again. The flow of the conversation mimics true conversation, but with more give and take, it almost reads as an Abbot and Costello skit. However humorous, it is still thought provoking and supports my ideas within "Relief." Talking about God is difficult, and yet we search. Through any means necessary human nature will make us search for a higher being, for answers of the mysteries of life, and yet we end up just talking about Batman. Technology may not be the right way to finding God, but the search for answers requires taking every path possible. Just as in art, religion hardly ever gives a direct answer; rather it guides, pokes and prods until the original question is forgotten because a new question arose. I learned nothing from this conversation, and I'm not sure if *Cleverbot* learned from me, but the experience was exciting and I believe I enticed other people to interact with *Cleverbot* in their own way. Potentially years from now it will hold the information that I need.

I hesitated placing "*Conversation with Artificial Intelligence*" in the show because it exists not on the wall in a frame, but rather archived within the *Cleverbot* servers. The digital print is just a copy of an experience, a documentation of this moment. Therefore it cannot stand alone, but must have the portable confessionals near it offering the viewer a real experience that will be unique to them rather than the artist. Previously I made work selfishly, allowing it to bring me to experiences, and push me down a path in which I was actively searching for my own system of beliefs. The work still does that in ways, but my new focus is on giving others the experience, a chance to discover something new about their own belief systems. Organized religion is nothing more than an agreed upon moral code created by a specific community that dictated the original rituals and traditions followed today. I want people to think about these codes, without the distraction of ritual and the need to feel guilty, unsure, or even bored. The viewer gets to have an immediate response based on what they believe, either supporting or subverting their own moral code.

HUNTING SEASON

My work leading up to “Relief” played a vital role in my understanding of how art could function in the realm of religion, ritual, and spirituality. I began my research listening to local preachers’ sermons on the radio, attending small churches, and reading about the marketing side of Christian churches. “Hunting Season” was a break through in that I began incorporating the viewers, allowing their interaction to become as important as the work itself. Up until this point I was either showing documentation of performances, intimate moments I experienced alone, or prints that merely voiced my opinion about organized religion. While “Hunting Season” still pushed my agenda of showing the absurdity of Christianity, it was the first time I felt my work also showed the importance religion plays in our society.

There are three main elements to “Hunting Season”, a small installation placed in a gallery. One large wall was painted with a graphic image of a deer stand topped with a High Catholic pulpit. (See Figure 7). In the center of the room there was a large pile of dirt supporting a tilted television screen. A spray of hunting arrows were strewn about, some sticking straight out of the dirt and others laying on the ground as if something was shooting at the television, or someone standing in front of it. (See Figure 8.) Presumably the arrows came from the direction of the pulpit, but there was no figure depicted that could play the role of the hunter. Lastly, “Only Say the Word”, which I mentioned earlier was off to one side offering viewers a cup to take wine from the IGLOO cooler. (See Figure 9). I felt that in this work I was creating a scene made up of new icons for the viewer to decipher and integrate into a play whereby the audience became actors.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

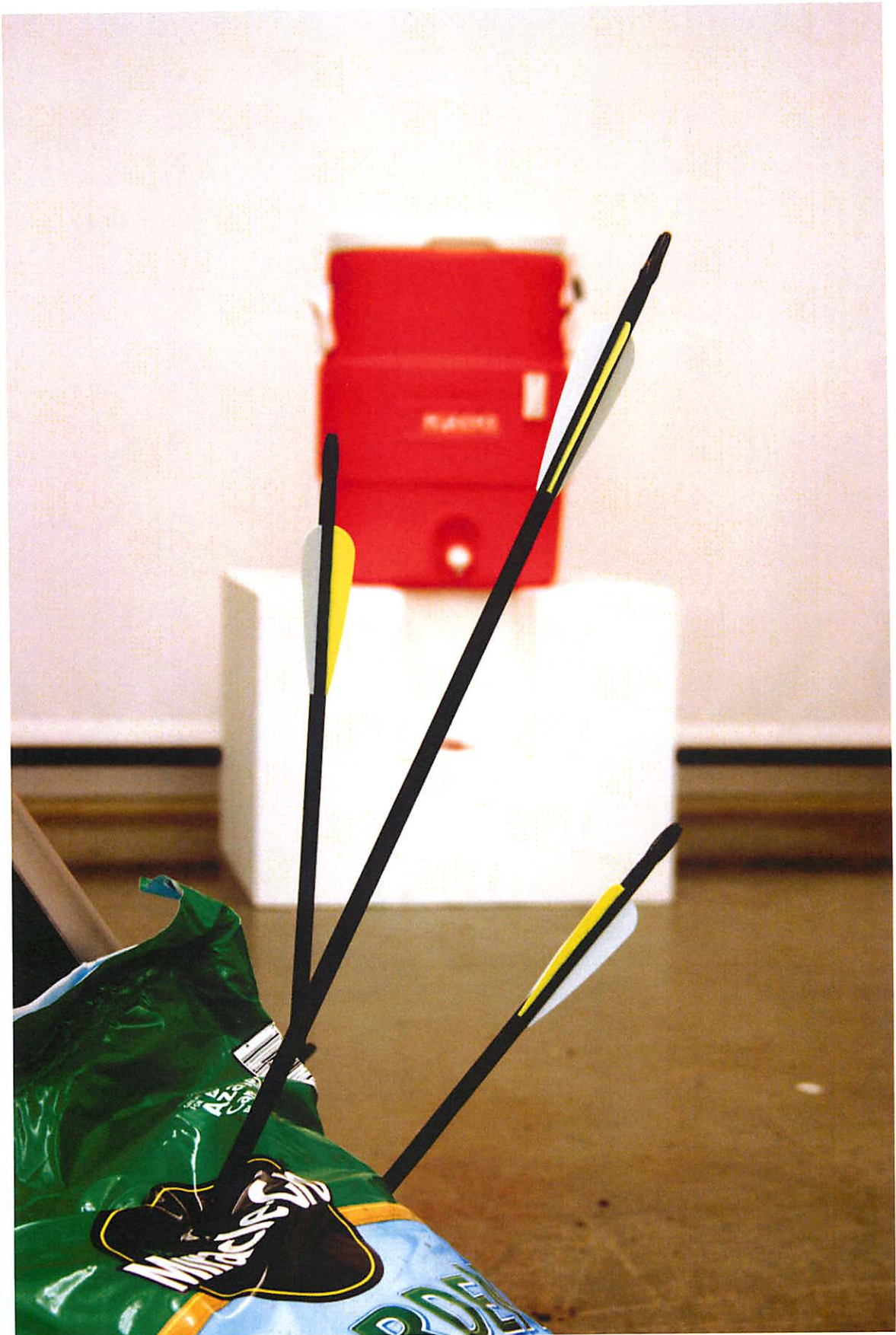


Fig. 9

This installation focused on rural Christianity, taking the idea of big tent revivals into account, showing the “church” in its most aggressive state of proselytization. A “church” is only as strong as the amount of people in its congregation and the power of their belief. The deer stand painted on the wall depicted a mobile preaching device that could easily be hauled by a truck to wherever the preacher felt the word of God needed to be heard. A “church” does not need to be a building, but rather a congregation of followers with the priest as their shepherd. This piece focuses on DIY religion and the necessity for a religion to live on, despite being too poor to own all the statues and stained glass windows. “Hunting Season” holds two sides to a coin, it celebrates rural Christianity and its follower’s fervor in faith, but it also shows the danger of preaching as if we already know the answers to all the questions. I think of this installation as a warning against the fire and brimstone type preachers who believe with every ounce of their being that their beliefs are the only correct ones. “It is precisely when we think we know something about God that we start erecting boundaries and instituting discipline” (Smith, p 119).

While there is nothing wrong with trying to spread the love of God, “Hunting Season” highlighted the absurd extremes that can occur, along with modern means that have been accepted by the masses. The television stuck in the dirt pile played Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of The Christ” on an endless loop. Anyone who entered the gallery could stop and watch the movie in its entirety, or for only as long as they could stomach to watch. “The Passion of The Christ” was the first movie to make it to mainstream media through the support of churches. It was the first Hollywood movie to ever be screened in a mega-church. Despite any anti-Semitic controversy about the movie, I wanted to show the danger of it, as far as its ability to water-down an entire religion into 126 minutes. I am reminded of Andreas Serrano’s “Piss Christ” and its attempt to bring to light how modern Christianity was only in it for their own personal gain, using Jesus as pawn in their power games. “The Passion of the Christ” is the type of movie that employs Hollywood cinematic tricks to help viewers suspend their beliefs and

begin to see what the director wants them to see. There is a reason why this movie was so highly acclaimed by Christians around the world. I wanted to show the movie for what it was, and proclaim that Christianity has become nothing more than a consumer item. "Marketing, then, is driven by investing products with social, sexual, and even religious value, which makes them something much more than they are...capitalizes on fundamental structural human desires for meaning and transcendence..." (Smith p.104).

The aesthetic quality of the movie sucks the viewer in, and as they stare motionless at the torture of Jesus Christ there is a moment that occurs outside of the viewer's knowledge. When you watch the television your back is toward the pulpit and to an onlooker you may look like a deer at the feeder unknowingly about to get shot with an arrow similar to the ones you are standing in. The church is powerful because its beliefs are powerful. "Society makes individuals in its own image, and the tools for such manufacturing are the disciplines of power" (Smith p.104). The looming pulpit emphasizes that the "church" feels like it is the powerful one, mistaking the strength of the congregation for its own. The moment the "church" begins to become anything more than a servant of the people it becomes profane in its usage of its power.

While the pulpit and television are clear warning signs of what could happen within modern Christianity the IGLOO cooler provides hope. It gives the viewer the comfort of ritual and reminds them that they are part of a community not just a singular entity waiting to be swallowed by organized religion. The act of drinking wine links Holy Communion, the symbolic (or real) blood of Christ, with the viewing of art during a gallery opening. It is the promise of salvation, which many artists such as Malevich felt their art provided. I feel that rituals in art and Christianity are not so different from one another. "Hunting Season" interlaces the rituals of an art gallery and the rituals of Christianity. A viewer who may be confused and searching for answers in an artwork feels no different to me than a sinner in need of awakening. I may not be any better or worse in my manipulation of the viewer than

the “church”, however I am proclaiming the position that salvation is something you search for, a priest is not the one who doles it out. James Smith writes about interpretation of religious text in his book “Who is afraid of Postmodernism.” He writes, “As soon as there is a lens, there is distortion...as soon as there is mediation there is interpretation.” My goal with this installation was not to change my viewer’s lens, but rather have them recognize the distortion.

RITUALS OF ASH

The human body is extremely important in my work. Without our earthly bodies there would be no spiritual mysteries. Our bodies are flesh and bone, but we feel that our souls are something else longing for the next step after our bodies die. We anoint our bodies in holy oils and fill them with Communion to satiate our need. Rituals strengthen the soul that the flesh has attempted to corrupt through its sexual desires and sinful ways. I set out to create personal rituals that would help me find my own personal salvation. I desire to lead a spiritual life, but traditional rituals jaded me. They did not fit my own personal needs. I began to create my ritual around the idea that if you are a true believer, there is a duality to our lives with one part living in the divine and one in the profane.

My personal ritual took part in three stages. In the first, I wrote down any and every sin I could possibly think of that I committed in my lifetime. There is no conceivable way I reached this goal, but it was very cathartic to chronicle all of my misdeeds from drunkenness, to vanity, to lustfulness. Every misstep I could think of was written down as I seriously evaluated what it meant to be a sinner.

The second step was to being the purging process. I had participated many times in youth group doing a similar examination of conscious, as the Catholics call it, writing down my sins and then throwing them away to symbolize my forgiveness. This time I burnt the papers to create ash, likened to

the palm branches burnt in the Catholic ritual of Ash Wednesday. The ash is not only a reminder of hope, but also of death and sacrifice. My sins were technically gone but there was still a reminder of my earthly propensity to sin, and that I must sacrifice in order to reach salvation. Nietzsche even wrote in his essay "Beyond Good and Evil", "The Christian faith from the beginning, is sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit, it is at the same time subjection, self derision, and self-mutilation" (Nietzsche p.54).

The third and final part of the ritual involved a Baptism like process. I took the ashes down to the creek behind my house, clothed in only shorts. I remembered hearing in a radio sermon the story of the devil's fall from heaven. To emphasize the distance between heaven and hell, the devil was said to fall for nine days and nine nights. This was his purgatory, his time to think about what had just occurred. I felt that I should subject myself to no less than that of the angel cast out by God. I stepped into the creek and rubbed the ash first on my face and then washed it off. Next I covered my face, neck, and arms in the sinful ash and bowed to the water to wash it off. I went in cycles like this nine times covering myself in ash and nine times cleansing myself of the sin. (See Figures 10 and 11). Every time I reached for the ash I became more careful, but none-the-less covering more and more of my body with it, until the final round came where I was covered head to toe in ash. I then walked out to the deepest part of the creek and totally immersed my self into the water, feeling the current washing over me.

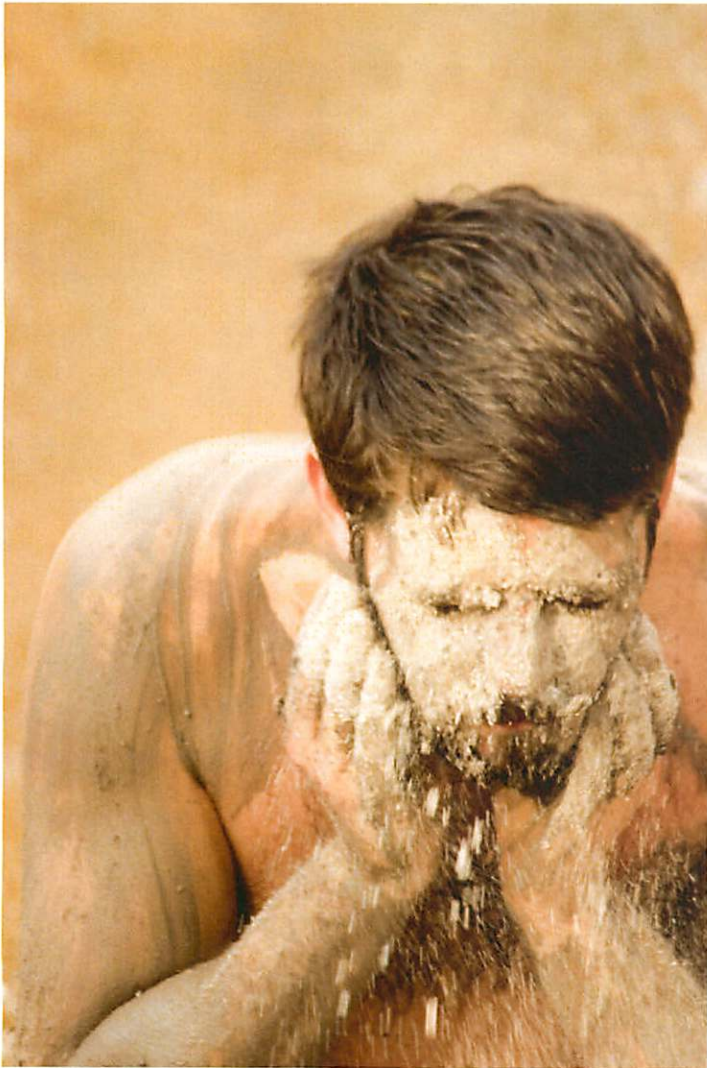


Fig. 10





Fig. 11

I completed my ritual, and I can say I definitely had some sort of spiritual communion with the earth or something more. I can't say for sure what that was, even looking back, but it was quiet, peaceful, and painful all at the same time. I would say that my goal was complete, but as rituals go, you are supposed to repeat them and this is not one I plan on doing again. Ironically, in my ignorance (which often happens in rural religion, like snake handlers) I put my physical body in harms way for the sake of a spiritual experience. It turns out that in the simple act of mixing ash and water it turns into lye, which is a very caustic and dangerous material. I had an allergic reaction to it, and my face broke out into a large rash. The idea of being allergic to my sins is very funny in retrospect. However, I could have gone blind if the lye had seeped into my eyes. I don't know if it's was because I was purging my sins that I was saved from harm or if I was just lucky, and that is the main difference between a believer and a non- believer. "Not everyone can see what the believer sees" (Smith p. 49). So despite my ritual being a success in that I felt something spiritual, it was a failure in that I am not any closer to believing anything. This is where I realized that not believing wasn't really the hindrance as everyone claims it to be. It just means I have more searching to do before I can believe as strongly as I need to.

It is common belief that Christianity (and mostly Catholicism) employs fear to hasten the process of making their congregation believe in what they want them to believe. We as humans are inherently evil because of our fleshy desires. We are taught to fear the Lord because we are the only ones who can keep ourselves from Him. Without fear of the profane, there would be no need for confession or for hell. David Sandlin makes light of this phenomenon in one of his comics "Swamp Preacher." The story tells of a young preacher who takes his work very seriously and travels the country, gaining followers who will go out and collect more believers. The swamp preacher realizes that if he does not sin and lives a pious life, that he is never in a state of salvation and he is bound to the earthly realm. He then dives into a life of debauchery so that he may feel the saving grace of God's power. The more devious and perverse his sins, the more the power of salvation washed over him. I

did not realize it at the time that I was following this model for my "Rituals in Ash". Looking back on it the parallels are uncanny. The more I washed myself off, the more I had to cover myself back up in the sin. There is a reason why we hear stories of priests molesting children, and bible thumping conservative politicians sleeping with prostitutes. It may be that the devil attacks the strongest believers more, or it could just be that sin and salvation are one in the same, the profane is the divine and vice versa.

I would like to write about aesthetics for a short while since I am receiving a Master of Fine Arts degree and not a master in religious studies. Most of my investigation has, admittedly, been in the vein of studying religious practice and delving into my own personal experience growing up Catholic. While I look at artists all the time such as Max Ernst, Kandinsky, Hieronymus Bosch, Robert Gober, Pepe Orzo, and Marina Abramovic, I remain as separate as I can because I do not want to re-create something knowingly. I do not necessarily follow the fundamentals of art making. I do not look toward compositional rules, theories of line width and variation, but rather I make what occurs naturally. It is not to say that these rules do not come into play, but rather I am not limiting myself to strict regulations of how to make pleasing art. I am not like Malevich in the way his use of color theory evokes great emotion from the viewer and leads them into a world of spirituality. Instead I am changing the modern church's aesthetics. I am taking icons, objects, or common symbols from Christianity and confusing them with mundane secular objects. Martin Bresnick talks about artists as icon creators in the book "Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life" which is a collection of conversations with artists about religion and art. He states, "In a way, art is always about making icons. And aren't we all (artists) expected to be the iconoclasts?" (Arthurs p. 253). This combination of new icons presents itself in a mass-produced packaged aesthetic. I want my items to feel like consumer products, just as the modern church has become a product to be bought and sold.

In lieu of a traditional final paragraph, I think it is best to leave with this quote from Max Ernst. It perfectly summarizes my MFA experience, even if I'm not a painter. "A painter is lost if he finds himself. The fact that he has succeeded in not finding himself is his (Ernst's) greatest achievement." (Warlich p. 217).

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