RECONCILIATION: PAINTING THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

by

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Reconciliation: Painting the Seen and Unseen

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# Table of Contents:

I. Introduction..............................................4  
II. Materials and Process.................................6  
III. Early Work............................................7  
IV. Transitional Work.....................................9  
V. Thesis Paintings.......................................14  
   A. Saints  
   B. Patterns  
   C. Nature and Imagery  
VI. Conclusion............................................24  
VII. Thesis Images.......................................27  
VIII. Bibliography.......................................31
Introduction

Much of my work is about reconciliation, about the attempt to squeeze disparate ideas and worldviews into a cohesive picture, to reconcile the competing voices. In my paintings I am exploring spirituality as an individual construction in a world that can seem hostile to such endeavors. This interest stems from personal experience, and branches out into what I have observed in the wider world, specifically the ongoing attempt to reconcile the disparate worldviews that occur within myself, my family, my community and the world. In my paintings I attempt to give visual representation to the internal struggle that we must each go through to find an authentic, or even merely functional, way of looking at and dealing with the world. I would like these paintings to provide a meditative experience for the viewer, a moment to question what the world is and the possibility that it may not be at all what we thought.

Religion has been an undercurrent in my work for most of my graduate research, sometimes subtly, at other times more overtly. I use the language of religion, in particular Christianity, as a means to look at the issues I am thinking about. This is mainly for personal reasons, because it is what I know and also because it provides a touchstone, symbols that are fairly universally understood to point to the realm of the spiritual. In my thesis work, I am combining these religious motifs with images that recall scientific and medical illustration – imagery that calls to mind the physical world that can be observed and studied. I am interested in how these two realms of thought coexist in the contemporary world. Many scholars have written about the effect of applying the values of the Enlightenment to traditional religion in an effort to combine the two into a cohesive system. I recognize these efforts in my own thought patterns and deeply sympathize with the longing to make everything fit. My paintings meditate on these ideas and whether they can work.

Each of these paintings is the result of methodical, repetitive detail as well as intuitive, improvisational decision making. A drawing that took hours may be buried in layers of wax and paint.
and later be revealed, fragmented into cutout patterns and shapes. Representation and abstraction coexist in nebulous spaces; elements coalesce into strange, dreamlike landscapes. My working process—collaging, building up layers, cutting, scraping, carving, filling spaces back in—represents the process that goes on in each of our minds as we attempt to build an internal framework for dealing with the world; a reconciliation of the seen and unseen.
Materials and Process

For several years I have been working with encaustic wax. I was originally drawn to it for its mixed media possibilities and its ability to combine fragments of drawings into a larger image more seamlessly than collage would. The wax also creates a unique atmospheric quality in the paintings. It is mostly translucent, but becomes cloudier and murkier as the layers get thicker. Light also plays a large role in encaustic, penetrating through the semi-translucent layers in a way that it cannot with paint. Considering the spiritual references in my work, light is an important element.

As the themes of my work have evolved, the wax has taken on new meanings and references. Its solid, sculptural quality lends itself to the creation of paintings that are as much objects as images; referencing shrines and reliquaries. The encaustic wax itself comes directly from natural materials: beeswax and damar resin from trees. It is probably one of the least processed painting materials available, which relates to my interest in nature and to the human body. The wax is an incredibly tactile material, soft enough to scratch and carve into and while it hardens quite a bit, it retains the appearance of softness and pliability. In my more recent works I have played up this reference by layering the wax over red and orange colored papers to give it flesh-like undertones as well as incising lines in colors that evoke veins and blood vessels. The analogy of wax to skin in one that has been explored by several contemporary painters and sculptors, but my work combines references to the body and to the decorative in a way that I think constitutes a unique exploration.
Early Work/Development of Ideas

From the beginning, nostalgia, loss, and longing have been important themes for my work though they have taken a variety of different forms. In my early drawings and paintings these ideas took the form of images related to homesickness and yearning for a sense of place. Growing up, I lived blocks from the houses where my mother, grandparents, and great-grandparents all lived at different times. I went to the same elementary school that my mother and grandfather attended and to the same church where my parents and grandparents were married. Shortly before I started college my family moved from the Midwest to Florida; from a nearly century old house to a brand new subdivision. I have always had strong attachments to places and my extreme nostalgia for the place I grew up was a theme that ran through most of my drawings and paintings for many years.

My earliest graduate works reflect my feelings about these ideas using objects and imagery personal to me as well as relating to universal ideas of home and sense of place. Often these pieces combine several distinct elements. The first element is a drawing of a disaster scene, houses on fire or in the wake of a tornado, often collapsed or completely upside-down. These images are flat, photographic, and often appear aged or antique. They are combined with drawings of small objects rendered in trompe l’oeil detail to appear as if they are sitting on top of the photographic image. Usually small tokens from nature, leaves, dried flowers, stones, seed pods, they do not appear to relate to the disaster image but have the quality of a souvenir or talisman; an object of remembrance. As I will discuss in the next section, I have always been interested in relics. The Latin word *reliquus* means “something left over or kept behind”.¹ Like lots of children I habitually collected things from nature. I grew up next to Lake Erie and collected hundreds of shells and rocks to which I instantly developed strange attachments. Once picked up, to leave them behind would seem like abandoning them. The

objects in the drawings refer to this near-anthropomorphizing of random objects and relate to the idea of a relic – a scrap or shard of everyday material which is separated out and signified as something more than it appears. The natural material of the objects – leaf, stem, wood, shell – for me is a stand in for the degradable material of the human body.

As time went on these images began to also incorporate architectural details that recall churches or shrines: detailed arches surround tumbling houses, intricate wallpaper patterns dissipate into the smoke from a house fire. These details relate to our tendency to build a shrine to the past but also began to take on further meaning as I started to think more about what I was nostalgic for beyond a physical place.

Fig. 1) Storm, encaustic and graphite and charcoal drawings on panel, 12”x 36”, 2011
Transitional Work

Shortly into graduate school I began to grow dissatisfied with these motifs of houses and everyday objects. I had been working with them for quite a while and I wanted to look at ideas that have more to do with universal experiences than just pertaining specifically to my life. While the ideas that I began working with in these works certainly grew out of my own experience, I have tried to imbue them with a feeling that speaks to the human experience as well.

Religion and spirituality are themes that I am deeply interested in and which in many ways relate to the ideas that I had been previously working with. Moving from a community where Catholic beliefs and traditions were important to many of the people I knew, to a much more varied and secular environment in college was probably a jarring experience even if I didn’t quite realize it at the time. I began to think about the ways that traditions and beliefs of my ancestors, developed centuries ago, relate to the contemporary world and to my own life.

In many ways, my first experiences of art were comingled with religion: throughout grade school I drew hundreds of pictures of the nativity, the Stations of the Cross, and other biblical scenes. Each of my classrooms from kindergarten to high school contained a statue of Mary, a crucifix, and often reproductions of religious paintings and there were many religious art objects in my and my grandmother’s homes. While from an early age I was certainly aware of secular art, for me religious art was part of everyday life, not artifacts relegated to museums. With the amount of space religion has taken up in my life and especially in my childhood, it seems natural that these images and ideas would work their way into my paintings.

Philosopher and mystic Romain Rolland invented the phrase “oceanic feeling” to describe the feeling of expansiveness, of higher power that leads one to religious belief. It is this feeling that I began attempting to convey in paintings like Shrine. Freud, a contemporary of Rolland, questioned the origin of this feeling of inspiration and expansiveness, claiming that it is a remnant of the psychology of
infancy, before the independent ego is formed. In my pieces I attempt to convey this feeling but with a hint of nostalgia - perhaps not unlike the nostalgia Freud may have detected for the security of infancy, before the discovery of limitations and mortality. I think many of us probably feel nostalgia for the simplicity of the religious beliefs of children, before the complications of more mature questions.

As I began to further explore these ideas, I drew a lot of inspiration from photographs that I had taken of small town churches and shrines in Southern France where I spent a semester while working on my bachelor’s degree. These churches were richly decorated in a very accumulative, almost folk-art style. Everything was decorated: the faux marble walls, ceilings painted with stars, gilded sconces, elaborately dressed statuary. They seemed like the ancestors of my childhood parish church, whose multi-wallpapered interior I used to study while daydreaming during Mass. This aesthetic began to figure into my drawings and paintings, contributing to the collage sensibility in my paintings: combinations of different patterns and materials like gold leaf, decorative papers and dried flowers. Encaustic paintings already have a very solid, object-like presence which I enhanced by adding three dimensional sculptural elements. In particular I experimented with stones cast in wax which began to encrust the surface and sides of the panels (fig. 2). These stones have several references for me. They recall devotional grottos and smaller yard shrines (similar in spirit to so-called “bathtub Madonna’s”) found in Catholic neighborhoods throughout the Midwest. They also resemble centuries-old structures called Bories; huts built of stacked, rough-hewn limestone slabs that I saw while traveling in Southern France. Fred Tomaselli, whose work I admire for its decorative quality and spiritual themes says: “You can find very simple folk art and patterns but there is usually the tendency to embellish the hell out of things...It’s almost like you’re petting or stroking this object with obsessive-compulsive marks. It gives the object more value, more worth, more resonance, and more magic somehow... I feel the same thing.

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Fig. 2) *Shrine*, encaustic and mixed media on panel, 12” x 12”, 2012

Fig. 3) *Xavier*, encaustic and mixed media on paper, 36” x 24”, 2012
can happen in contemporary art.\textsuperscript{3}

As I mentioned earlier, I have always been very interested in relics. Every Catholic church contains a relic and I remember as a child being shown the reliquary compartment in the alter of my parish church that contained the relic, though I have forgotten now what it was. Many people have questioned the true origins of relics, pointing out the fact that there are enough splinters of the true cross to make dozens of them, but what is important to me about relics is the link Catholicism sees between the spiritual and physical worlds – that something of one’s soul can be contained in a fragment of their body. In the 2012 painting Xavier (fig. 3) I consider the interconnection between the body, spirituality, and nature. Drawings of fallen leaves, dead flowers, and dried fungi form a large figure that makes up most of the painting. Earth tones covered in wax suggest corporeality and bright red paper patterned with gold evokes both blood and peeling wallpaper in antique shrines. The silhouette of the figure is taken from a statue at the tomb of St. Francis Xavier, believed to be the first saint whose body was posthumously divided and distributed as relics. Renderings of gnarled tree branches form the figures outstretched arms. The pose vaguely recalls the crucifix as well as the Siluetas of Ana Mendieta, female figures created of a variety of materials including mud, plants, fire, and blood (fig. 4). I have long been fascinated by Mendieta’s work which explores themes including spirituality, the body and mortality through the traditions of Catholicism and Santeria.

Fig. 4) Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Silueta series, Mexico)* earthwork and tempera paint, 1976.
Thesis Paintings

“How can a large group of people accept an enchanted cosmos when in fact Creation has been demystified and demythologized? Does not disenchantment rule the modern world?”

– Andrew Greeley

The ideas in my previous work have led me to the overarching question that I am currently considering in my work: namely, what is the relationship between an individual’s system of beliefs and a world that is increasingly materialistic, technological, scientifically positivistic, a world which can seem overall antithetical to traditions and narratives that date back hundreds, even thousands of years. I am not interested in religion in terms of a specific morality or values. What I am exploring is whether there is a possibility for belief in a power outside of humanity, an afterlife, and an individual soul and how each of us construct our own internal system of beliefs over a lifetime.

In these works I have developed a set of personal symbols, which include figures borrowed from traditional religious art, decorative patterns and motifs, and realistically rendered images from nature. These symbols create more of a sense of a narrative than in my previous works which tended to function more as static objects, as sorts of shrines or icons. Through these personal symbols I intend to convey a meditation or a record of my own thought process allowing the viewer to interpret the narrative according to their own life experiences, instead of a specific interpretation. I think of these paintings as frames from a half-remembered (or perhaps misremembered) story or dream. They are conglomerations of images from different worlds; sometimes meeting, sometimes coexisting, sometimes clashing, sometimes oblivious to each other.

Saints

If these paintings are narratives, then the characters are figures that I refer to in my imagination as “saint-ghosts”. These figures are the main element that separates the thesis paintings from most of my previous work. Paintings like Xavier appear more like abstract compositions or like Shrine, as static objects, but in these newer works the figures become a catalyst for dynamism and action in the piece. Thus, the other elements in the painting are not simply presented to the viewer, but through the inclusion of the figures become nearly anthropomorphized themselves. In Holy Fools/ Ziggurat (fig. 12), the large, tubular plant-like object becomes more than an interesting form, it becomes another character, interacting with the figures. The starting point for these figures is Xerox transfers of saint or angel images from Byzantine icons, literally cut out from their original contexts. As a young child in Catholic school angels and saints were vivid characters. While some would suggest that these sorts of elements are superfluous to religious belief, I think that they probably played an important part in shaping my artistic imagination. Priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley has written in depth on what he calls the “Catholic imagination” stemming in part from the needs of the early and Medieval church to inspire the illiterate masses to at least an elementary level of religious understanding. As he puts it “the church shaped faith through shaping imaginations”.

In choosing images of saints and the occasional angel with their biographical details obscured, I am attempting to convey the aura of a religious or spiritual mindset not to make any comment, positive or negative, about specific Christian dogma. I use Christian imagery, though deliberately not images of Christ, because these paintings are in large part personal, and Christianity is the tradition that I come from and am familiar with. I feel comfortable using Christian symbolism in a way that I would not with symbolism from other traditions, though allusions to other types of religious art may drift in from time

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5 Greeley, 31.
to time. I feel confident in my use of these images having lived with them all of my life and, I think, having a fairly comprehensive understanding of their connotations and histories.

While today, icons are not Catholic imagery (they belong to the Orthodox Churches), they are universally potent symbols of steadfast belief. The style of icon paintings has been developed over centuries to clearly present a reality beyond the physical world (fig. 6). Perspective is deliberately eschewed to show the transcendence of the blessed characters portrayed. Icon images are not lit from outside light sources but from a glow from within the figures. The saints have no shadows. They have no use for this world, but “point to a supernatural and eternal reality”. When used as collage images in the paintings, even when partly obscured by paint, rough image transfers, and competing elements in the works, the icon figures instantly register as saints because that is what they have been developed over hundreds of years to do. While I am using the figures for their recognizibility as saints, in the paintings they are taken from their strictly two-dimensional, symbolic settings and transported to an alien dimension of enigmatic spaces and giant, perhaps threatening plant forms. The saint-ghost forms contrast with detailed renderings reminiscent of scientific illustration. I am interested in the narrative tension created between the saint figures and the incongruous environment that they find themselves in. Are they masters of this domain, controlling the stars and plants like the sorcerer’s apprentice? Or are they bewildered by their surroundings, holding up their hands in supplication or self-defense?

Hierarchy is very important in traditional Byzantine icons. A less important character can never block the viewer’s access to the more significant figures and size has everything to do with religious status, not position in space. Key figures are always frontal, creating a direct line of sight with the viewer. In these thesis paintings hierarchy is abandoned. Removing Mountaintops/ Wasp Nest (fig. 10) includes wild fungi and sea anemones looming larger than the saint figures who themselves tower over the landscape, using a flat mountaintop as a pedestal. Both spatial relationships and pecking order are

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7 Ibid.
ambiguous. Rather than making eye contact with the viewer, the saints’ halos obscure their faces as well as their intentions and give them a ghostly quality. Like ghosts, they are present and not present. Have they purposely blocked themselves from the viewer and their surroundings—living in their personal halo-bubbles? In some images the halos create a kind of fog, making the figures look like deep-sea divers or fortune tellers lost in their crystal balls. Often the shapes of the saints’ hands are cut out of the wax to reveal the colors and patterns of the layers beneath the surface. Along with the halos, the hands are the parts of icons that I find the most interesting. They often have very specific hand gestures, similar to the mudras of Hindu and Buddhist figures, which I try to capture in silhouette. In these paintings the hands are open with palms raised in a gesture of offering or supplication. They become abstract forms as well, resembling arrows, birds, or insects. In some images they gesture towards another part of the painting, while in others they frame the shape of a cluster of figures—outnumbering the halos to suggest a multi-armed, Shiva-like figure. In still others, the hands seem to free themselves from the rest of the bodies and roam off on their own—creating a trail to other parts of the image or to other saint-clusters.

I also draw a lot of inspiration from illuminated manuscript images of the Middle Ages—in particular a series of images from medieval Spain illustrating the Commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana (fig. 5). These images are incredible in their creativity and beautiful use of color. In the past I have drawn a lot on the use of color in these illustrations especially the significant use of red. I am also drawn to the organization of space and viewpoint in these works. The same image will show a figure in a traditional viewpoint placed in a setting rendered from a bird’s eye view. I have a learned a lot from these images on how to organize space and have used them to create the dreamlike settings of my paintings. Illuminated manuscripts also of course famously utilize a lot of decorative embellishment to point to the otherworldliness of the subject matter and the sacred nature of the text. While the
imagery that I have been specifically looking at is simpler than say the Book of Kells, I have a deep attraction to the decorative element in much historical religious art as I will discuss next.

Fig. 5) Magius of the Commentary on the Book of the Apocalypse, *The Morgan Beatus*, f.112. Opening of the Sixth Seal, 10th century CE.

Fig. 6) Unknown, *The Nativity of Christ*, 16th c. Crete, egg tempera on wood, 55.5cm x 34.5cm
Pattern

“At bottom each mind, and what is convenient to call nature share the same reality, have the same origin, are the issue of the same cosmic energy.”

— Romain Rolland

Each of these paintings have repeated patterns interwoven throughout the layers of the piece which are submerged and resurface periodically throughout the composition. For example, in Ladder a repeating linear pattern of purple intertwining lines lies beneath most of the painting but can only be seen in a few areas, either as faint shadows beneath more translucent areas or in clearer patches cut out from the central diagonal form that is the main element of the piece. Patterns like this appear in the paintings in a variety of colors and materials; sometimes as red rivers of inlayed wax, sometimes as calligraphic curves of gold ink, and sometimes only as faint pencil lines. The specific patterns in these paintings are taken from a series of woodcuts attributed to Durer known as the “six knots” (fig. 7). Said to be constructed by Durer from fragments of prints by Leonardo Da Vinci, each of the six knot prints is an intricate circular pattern of complex interwoven lines resembling Celtic knots. In my paintings, I have broken the patterns back down from the circle into infinitely repeating patterns that seem to underlie the painting, creating a grid or a matrix from which the rest of the imagery grows. Based on other representations of circles in Christianity – the wreath, the circular church calendar – I can assume that the circular design of the original knots represents infinity, the everlasting nature of God. In my images the intertwining patterns still retain a sense of the infinite but are also very clearly finite, bounded by the straight edges of the square and rectangular panels. They intertwine with grace and a sense of inevitability and order but often stop abruptly when they should continue or trail off into obscurity.

Often, as in Ladder (Fig. 11), the decorative pattern intersects with more abstract cellular-looking patterns which are in fact abstracted from microscope images of cell cross-sections. So in

8 Parsons, 509.
Ladder, the central element is made up of an intertwining of the religious decorative pattern and the pattern taken from nature. The shape of this element, as suggested by the title, refers to the Genesis story of Jacob’s ladder which is usually depicted in icons as a diagonal ladder bisecting the picture plane. In my painting the angels that are traditionally pictured climbing up and down the ladder have been reduced to shadowy silhouettes receding into the background of the painting. At the same time, the intertwining of the cell shapes recalls the double helix of a DNA molecule.

These patterns also carry with them a meditative quality. In Catholic school I was introduced to meditation using a labyrinth – not as in a maze filled with dead ends, but a large circular pattern on the floor that one walks along as it winds its way, meanderingly but reliably, to the center. The patterns in my images are traced by hand and often retraced many times in each piece as they recur throughout the layers. The lines themselves often contribute to the reference to the body found throughout the pieces. Red lines incised into beige or pinkish wax gives the impression of cuts or scratches. Faint green and purple pattern blurred beneath several layers strongly resembles veins visible beneath skin.

Fig. 7) Albrecht Durer, Pattern from the Series of Six Knots, 1505-1507.
Nature and Imagery

As with the patterns, meditation comes into the work through drawing as well. The paintings always include carefully rendered graphite drawings which are layered at different depths beneath the wax. Drawing, particularly from nature, has always been an important part of my work. In earlier works like Xavier (fig. 3), discussed previously, I used images like dried leaves, branches, and dead flowers to reference the body and mortality. In the thesis works those references are still present, but the images from nature are often more unusual – coral formations, sea anemones, meteorites, crystals, tumors and neurons- to name a few. Often these are things that are difficult to access: high in the mountains, deep beneath the ocean, from outer space or within our own bodies. They are things that without modern science and technology would be completely unknown to us and were completely unknown to our ancestors. The contrast between these images and the saint figures speak to the dissonance that can sometimes be felt between traditional beliefs and the modern world. The saint figures wander in an alien world filled with beautiful but sometimes threatening life forms.

I think that spirituality and a relationship to nature are deeply interconnected. In his study of the “Catholic imagination” Greeley observes the tendency of those raised Catholic to feel a deep connection with nature, recognizing the presence of God in everything while other Christian denominations tend to view God as detached from the physical world. In some ways these nature images point to a supernatural presence in their mind-blowing variety, intricacy, and astounding intertwining systems. In other ways they lead to a more solidified view of the world; providing explanations and squelching mystery. The images of stars in the sky, intaglio-printed in a variety of colors, appear often in these paintings. For me, this image embodies the dichotomy I have been discussing. The original image comes from a photo taken by the Hubble telescope, evidence of scientific and technological advancement and humankind’s penetration into the mystery of space. Stars are used

9 Greeley, 6.
often in religious imagery. Mary is often portrayed with a crown of stars symbolizing her status as Queen of Heaven. Several of the paintings have the word ziggurat in the title, referencing Middle Eastern temples built to be a meeting place between heaven and earth. In Ziggurat/Outcropping (fig. 13), pyramidal shapes formed from patterns based on cellular structures reach towards each other from the top and bottom of the painting. Spaces cut out of the top pyramid contain stars, while the spaces in the bottom pyramid contains rendered sections of a tree branch. These forms stretch towards each other but just fail to converge.

I have recently become interested in the paintings of Philip Taaffe and have looked at them for guidance on how to use imagery, particularly of nature, without the image interfering with the viewer’s experience of the painting. Many of Taaffe’s paintings employ the layering of silk-screened images from 19th century natural history engravings (fig. 8). Watery, atmospheric compositions of dancing seashells, diatoms, and starfish welcome the viewer into the image but don’t allow their forms to force meaning. The starfish is a starfish but also a fascinating object, organizer of space, and vehicle for texture and detail. It is a starfish but also a fragment of something greater, something mystical and universal. Taaffe writes:

“"The specificity of the image is a starting point, a pretext. It’s a way of describing what’s there, the typological distinctions...I only find them compelling once they’ve been mutated, turned into something that’s unidentifiable. What do they become? That’s what interests me. I’m less involved with them as scientific specimen per se, or as wonderful old engravings that I have reworked. I’m really interested in where they take me, in their potential as a catalyst, in how they move towards a situation of plenitude, and beyond.""10

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I use imagery in a similar way. I have struggled with the use of imagery throughout my graduate studies and have come to find that it is necessary to my work but that I have to be careful to let it enhance the painting without becoming a distraction to the viewer. I am interested in forms that are ambiguous and have multiple references. A floating, spherical form could be an entire planet or a single cell; taken from its context it is hard to know. Either way it still connotes an alien body, something created by something other than human beings.

Fig. 8) Philip Taaffe, *Metacrinus Angulatus with Smaller Sea Stars*, oil pigment on paper, 26”x 20”, 1997.
Conclusion

“The task of restoring awareness of our symbiotic relationship with nature becomes the most pressing spiritual and political need of our time. In the modern world, no life is sacred because we do not recognize it as such”

– Suzi Gablik.\(^1\)

There is a dichotomy to the presence of images from nature in my paintings. In part they represent modern science and by extension the contemporary world, but they also represent spirituality and a relationship with the earth. As I mentioned in the introduction, I am interested in the ways that the values of the Enlightenment have changed the modern approach to religious belief. Theological scholar Karen Armstrong has written about how the application of the scientific method to traditional scriptures has resulted in a dangerous fundamentalism not only among religious believers but among atheists as well. She argues that our society has lost its understanding of myth, trying to assimilate ancient texts into a modern mindset with problematic results.\(^2\) In *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik writes about the relationship of humankind to nature, which was also radically changed by the shift to more rigid scientific values. She explains that human beings went from hardly recognizing a difference between people and the rest of “nature”, to seeing the natural world as a distinctly separate entity from “civilization” even as a resource to be used for humankind’s benefit. She discusses art that works to pull culture into a new mode of thinking particularly focusing on “reharmonizing our out of balance relationship with nature” and regaining a more mythical mindset.\(^3\) There is a connection between the ideas of these two scholars that I am exploring in my work. Whether discussing organized religion as Armstrong does or spirituality more broadly as in Gablik’s writing, there is a disconnect in our ways of

\(^{13}\) Gablik, 44-45.
viewing the world that is causing harm and needs to be eased. My work, in a small way, calls attention to this disconnect and urges the viewer to consider repairing it.

Work that attempts to repair this cultural disconnect has been going on for the past several decades using a variety of perspectives. Earlier I mentioned the work of Ana Medieta who in the 1970’s created performance art and sculpture that attempted to recapture humanity’s place in nature in a world that was increasingly embracing technology. She explored these ideas through the vehicle of her own cultural background, drawing on traditional Cuban beliefs as a means to accomplish this reconnection. Kiki Smith has also been an important influence for me. Her work calls attention to the deficit of spirituality in modern culture through a variety of means including the influence of her Catholic upbringing, fairy tales, folk stories, and the exploration of craft and materials. I am particularly drawn to her work that points to the corporeality of the human body that is often glossed over in modern culture. She calls attention to the baser aspects of the body while at the same time elevating it with the use of beautiful materials (fig. 9). Smith writes: “I was very influenced by the lives of the saints when I was a kid – you have the body with attributes and artifacts evoked by a sort of magic…Catholicism is always involved in physical manifestation of physical conditions, always taking inanimate objects and attributing meaning to them. In a way it’s compatible with art”.

Today, a variety of artists make work that attempts to heal this rift especially towards the environment in the way that Gablik prescribed. Natalie Jeremijenko quotes Hippocrates to explain the bases of her work: “the greater part of the soul lies outside of the body...treatment of the inner requires treatment of the outer”. In real world projects that deal with issues like air and water quality, Jeremijenko works within already established confines of society to heal the schism with nature that has occurred since the industrial revolution.

What my work shares with the work of these artists is the exploration of the rift between nature and society. Like Mendieta and Smith, I am looking at this issue through a spiritual lens. This thesis body of work has a unique voice in that it considers the link between spirituality and nature through the language of traditional religion, more so even than Smith despite her appropriations of Catholic images. Like Jeremijenko I am working within an established structure, in my case the language of religious iconography, to explore the need for society to reconnect with natural systems. I plan to continue to explore these themes in my future work and to attempt to voice more strongly the need for what Gablik calls “reenchantment”, a reordering of values towards a more harmonious coexistence with the rest of the world. I feel that I have just begun to explore the possibilities of this body of work and look forward to developing it further.

Fig. 9) Kiki Smith, *Red Spill*, glass, 1996.
Fig. 10) *Removing Mountaintops/Wasp Nest*, encaustic and graphite drawing on panel, 24” x 36”, 2014
Fig. 11) *Ladder*, encaustic and graphite drawing on panel, 24” x 24”, 2014
Fig. 12) *Holy Fools/Ziggurat*, encaustic and graphite drawing on panel, 32"x 24", 2014
Fig. 13) Ziggurat/Outcropping, encaustic and graphite drawing on panel, 24” x 24”, 2014
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