

HELD

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November 2018

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The idea of the “spiritual” conjures notions of belief, wonder, and divinity for many people. I have come to understand the spiritual to be a part of my daily life, my inner thoughts and feelings, and the means to which I understand the world around me. To give a complete explanation of the meaning of this word would be taking on the task of defining God and is ultimately ineffable—too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words. Yet, living my life through the lens of the spiritual has offered me both solitude and relationship, a greater hope, and tranquility. Most of all it has offered me a haven and a sacred space to heal.

*Held* is a body of work consisting of small-scale sculptural objects that explore concepts of divine ecstasy, serenity, and reverential awe. These notions are expressed through containers that act as an allegorical expression of the soul and as a sanctuary for reflection. Creating these objects afforded me the opportunity to process my experiences into tangible form through therapeutic processes of making. Through this body of work, I intend to inspire wonder, contemplation, and imagination about our shared existence.



HELD

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

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November 2018

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## DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my beloved friend and mentor, Daryl Perry, for his constant belief in me and for teaching me to be a lover of God. To John for inspiring me and challenging me to be confident in creating the art I long to make. And To my parents, Brenda and Seaborn Roddenbery, who showed me true forgiveness and love when I needed it most and continue to support me in all I yearn to accomplish.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to share my gratitude towards my thesis committee for their guidance, wisdom, and careful critique as I sought to translate my ideas into artwork. To Ken Bova, my committee chair, for inspiring me with poets I won't soon forget and for sharing discussions about enlightenment and life. To Tim Lazure, who teaches me something new every time I encounter him. To Mi-Sook Hur, for inspiring me in different directions and giving me the courage to be bold. To Gerald Weckesser, who was always there to lend a hand, share a truthful word, and encourage me to speak from the soul. To Lisa Beth Robinson, for enlivening conversations, invigorating questions, and drawing out the answers. And finally, to Linda Adele Goodine, who stimulated my process and dared me to venture deeper.

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## INTRODUCTION

Filled

Hopelessness stole the light from my eyes  
I was the living dead  
Chemically bound and hard gripped  
I swallowed down lies encased in pills  
with acceptance and inhaled disbelief  
with rolled up dollar bills

Mortality and immortality confronted me  
as my heartbeat recklessly surged and came to a halt.  
One beat...two, three.....four.

Please God don't let me die like this

A clarity severed the constricting lies  
In a single moment, I was offered a glimpse  
into eternity's perspective and  
all that I had been was met with  
endless possibilities of what could be

A steadied heartbeat was birthed in me  
and hope arose upon breathing in divine presence  
It was sweet— like the first whiff of *nag champa*  
and warm with peace  
like Sunday sunshine that beckons stillness  
It disarmed my greatest offense, forgave my worst  
and restored me, Yes!

Like pure, cool rushing water  
quenching the fire and filling the void.  
My realization of the identification of this presence surmounted a great  
love—  
most grandeur, overflowing, all-consuming,  
take-my-breath-away-and-give-me-the-most-refreshing-breath-of-air-ever-  
breathed—  
kind of love immersed me—  
For me, this meant healing was possible  
and hope was ignited  
a flame within my soul

Peace came down with each raindrop  
and flood records were broken that summer.

Seven years have passed since the events contained in that poem altered the course of my life and still the retelling of it ushers in notes of fondness. A severe addiction to opiates almost claimed my life making me one of the 115 deaths that happen each day from this epidemic. This transitional experience combined with a brush with death awakened me to the possibility of life beyond our physical experience, relations with the divine, and a newfound respect for life. The yearning for healing placed me on a trajectory to accumulate an understanding of spiritual wealth and inspired wonder about life beyond physicality. Reflections on the spiritual have since become the catalyst for my artistic practice and the impact of this experience is contained in the undertones of each work of art. An intrigue with transcendent states such as divine ecstasy, serenity, and reverential awe has inspired me to express the beauty and intimacy between man and God through objects of sacred space.

The reflection of the inner life is an important component to grow and live well. I create bowls that represent the soul as I meditate on the transcendental lessons I have learned through growing my inner self. Each artwork in this series functions as a container and is symbolic of the soul being a vessel which contains the essence of life. As I make, I question what it might look like if I could see the phenomena of the spiritual in physical form. The small-scale sculptural objects illustrate ethereal nature and my existential experience through symbolism, metaphor, pattern, and atmospheric presence. I believe these objects made in service of devotion can be interpreted to visually represent the soul's expressions of wonder, tranquility, and awe that are ignited by divine presence. My poetry narrates the pieces, assisting me in expressing the various concepts. The literary imagery often inspired the visuals when written prior to the creation of the associated piece. Through the interaction of the viewer with the objects, I aim to inspire reverence and contemplation.

I intend for the audience to access the work from a place of stillness, imagination, and curiosity about the possibility of the unseen. The pieces in this body of work invite the audience close to gaze upon balanced, rhythmic compositions in an attempt to encourage reflection and inspire a sense of cosmic harmony. The adornment of the containers offers an abundance of details that are revealed only when the onlooker peers closer or stops to interact with the objects. Within this exchange, the pieces evoke a positive sense of wonder and curiosity.

I am attracted to use symbolism that is found across other religions or can be read cross culturally to facilitate inclusivity and shared experience although my initial influences stem from Biblical imagery. For example, the geometric patterning used in many of the pieces visually relates to the stained-glass windows of the church, the sand mandalas of Tibetan Buddhists, and the decorative and architectural components of Islamic temples. Other works feature soft organic curves referenced in nature, a language in which all cultures are fluent.

## CHAPTER 1: THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty advocated for a type of embodied encounter with art, reasoning that “the senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and are mutually comprehensive without the intervention of an idea.”<sup>1</sup> Detailed patterning, atmospheric color, and the surrounding support structure add layers to my container forms to suggest a narrative that is to be read with the senses or with what some may call “the spirit.”

The word *spiritual* is highly subjective and its appearance in art is complex, multifaceted, and always progressing. In *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art* by Leesa Fanning, spirituality represents and encompasses a broad spectrum of possibilities: compassion, considerations of living well in our complicated world, the search for ultimate meaning, truth, or reality. Questions of being and belief; the mystery of life and death; a sense that all things are interconnected; ritual practice signifying life-changing events; and mind-altering transformation are also associated with the spiritual. An understanding that spirituality is a direct and immediate experience involving felt bodily experience links the ephemeral to the physical. Ultimately, the spiritual is in connection with the inner self and is highly intimate.

My aspiration is to produce a body of work that goes beyond the surface of organized religion and the repetition of depicted doctrine to articulate the spiritual in a renewed manner with consideration of how spirituality and religion is perceived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Neuroscientist Sam Harris declared that spirituality “must be distinguished” from religion because people who believe, as well as those who do not, have all had spiritual experiences, including “self-

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<sup>1</sup> Fanning, Leesa, Ladan Akbarnia, Stephen Gilchrist, Eleanor Heartney, Mary Jane Jacob, Karen Kramer, and Karen Milbourne. *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*. Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2018, 35.

transcending love, ecstasy” and “bliss.”<sup>2</sup> Charlene Spretnak expanded the definition of the spiritual to include “a sense of embeddedness in the larger context: the exquisitely dynamic interrelatedness of existence, the vibratory flux of the subtle realms of the material world, and the ultimate creativity of the universe.”<sup>3</sup>

Philosopher and psychologist William James wrote that the ineffable is a primary aspect of spiritual experience and that “no adequate report of its contents can be given in words; it must be directly experienced.”<sup>4</sup> Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explained the difficulty of conveying metaphysical thought, the problem of expressing the inexpressible, by describing it as “running against the boundaries of language” and remarked “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”<sup>5</sup> The idea of this reverential silence is an acknowledgement that has been influential to the function of these sculptures as meditative objects. I am sensitive to the way the sculptures read visually and emphasize the minimalistic character of simplicity that introduces purity or tranquility. Definitions of the spiritual must address its ineffable quality and art provides a solution to the inexpressible facets of the spiritual because it represents the ineffable.<sup>6</sup> My practice of creating these works of art appeases the yearning to express my experience of the spiritual in a less representational and more sensual manner that is consistent with the ineffable aspect. I believe that this gives the viewer an opportunity to interact on an intimate and personal level with the work which in turn gives the sculptures a possibility of functioning as a meditative aid.

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<sup>2</sup> Fanning, *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Fanning, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Fanning, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Fanning, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Fanning, 34.

## CHAPTER 2: THE VESSEL FORM: A METAPHOR OF THE SOUL

The unifying aspect that is consistent in each piece of this body of work is the utilization of the vessel as a metaphor. In Judaism and Christianity, the body is regarded as the vessel of the soul and the vehicle through which it finds its way to God.<sup>7</sup> The container form, or cup, is used throughout scripture and in other cultures to express the experience of life. A well-known example comes from a line in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that reads “my cup overflows” and communicates the experience of gratitude and abundance. Another positive image of the cup is found in the 116<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Here the psalmist raises the cup of salvation as a thanks offering to God, in effect offering the sum of his life to his lord.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Christ requests “to let this cup pass” during his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane thus symbolizing his experience of pain, degradation, and death.

The vessel form is also a metaphor for the container of the soul in Eastern philosophy. An example of this is acknowledged in the familiar Zen Buddhism riddle referred to as “overflowing tea” or “Empty your cup.” The riddle tells of a conversation between Zen Master Ryutan and the scholar Tokusan. When Tokusan approached the Zen Master, Ryutan re-filled his guest’s teacup but did not stop pouring when the cup was full and tea spilled out. When Tokusan requested him to stop pouring, the Master Ryutan replied “You are like this cup; you are full of ideas. You come and ask for teaching, but your cup is full; I can’t put anything in. Before I can teach you, you’ll have to empty your cup.”<sup>9</sup> In this story, the cup represents the container as the soul and the

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<sup>7</sup> Fanning, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Elwell, Walter A. "Cup Definition and Meaning - Bible Dictionary." Bible Study Tools. Accessed November 07, 2018. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/cup/>.

<sup>9</sup> O'Brien, Barbara. "The Old Chinese Zen Saying, "Empty Your Cup"." ThoughtCo. July 4, 2018. Accessed November 07, 2018. <https://www.thoughtco.com/empty-your-cup-3976934>.

liquid as experience and knowledge. Also of Eastern origin, the Japanese practice of kintsukuroi alludes to the bowl/soul metaphor. Kintsukuroi is a process of repairing broken pottery by filling the gaps with gold. The custom shows an appreciation for the beauty of brokenness and indicates undertones of healing.

In ancient Egypt containers were recognized not as a metaphor but as a host for the soul to reside in during the journey to the afterlife. The mortuary customs were meticulous for this reason. Canopic jars were used to house organs and amulets, and magical texts were included to address the other spiritual facets which made up an individual.<sup>10</sup> These jars were buried with the dead in their tomb. The soul was believed to exist in nine different parts and each component had distinct aspects. For the soul to function the body had to remain intact, making mummification an integral part of mortuary rituals.<sup>11</sup> The use of vessel forms was highly important to this culture as a means of transporting the soul.



Figure 1: *Egyptian Canopic Jars*  
712–664 B.C  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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<sup>10</sup> Mark, Joshua J. "The Soul in Ancient Egypt." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. March 02, 2017. Accessed November 07, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1023/the-soul-in-ancient-egypt/>.

<sup>11</sup> Mark, Joshua J. "The Soul in Ancient Egypt." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. March 02, 2017. Accessed November 07, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1023/the-soul-in-ancient-egypt/>.



### CHAPTER 3: PRAYER OBJECT #1



Figure 2: *Prayer Object #1*  
Holly, Purple Heart, Silver, Rayon  
2017. 12" x 3" x 1" (HWD)



Figure 3: *Prayer Object #1*. Back view.

When creating *Prayer Object #1*, I began with the intention to create a physical container to hold an ephemeral prayer. In clarifying my intentions, I concluded that the soul is the “container” of prayer and the object was analogous with the soul. The piece functions as a sculpture, a vessel, and a meditative aid. I used the process of veneer inlay and delicate piercings to showcase devotion through craftsmanship. The sculpture is made from American holly wood and anchored with a tassel made from silver and hand-dyed nylon strands.

The geometric design of the pierced lid expresses harmony and balance in association with divine perfection. The shapes display a radial unfolding motion beginning at the bottom and

becoming larger at the top. Sacred geometry is referenced throughout the design and the associated symbolism breathes narrative into the pattern. For example radial symmetry, a type of symmetry that surrounds a central axis, is used in association with the circle and the monad. In sacred geometry, the monad is coupled with ideas of wholeness.<sup>12</sup> Often associated with the belief that a god is the geometer of the created world; sacred geometry is a branch of philosophical mathematics in which symbolic meaning is assigned to geometric shapes that are governed by numbers. This belief influenced the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, who explained in his *Timaeus* that cosmic order and harmony are contained in certain numbers.<sup>13</sup>

Subtle suggestions of other symbolism are imbedded within the design as well. The body of the piece may be interpreted as a seed and the tassel as a root. The idea of a seed contains universal notions of growth. The shape of a flame can be seen at the bottom of the geometric pattern on the lid. A flame is often symbolic of fervor or spiritual light.<sup>14</sup> I view the flame shape to represent meditative stillness, the folding of hands in prayer, and the upward notion of a church steeple.

The act of becoming still through meditation is especially beneficial to healing after addiction. I use trāṭaka meditation as a personal practice of centering. Trāṭaka is the exercise of balancing the self through concentrating focus on a single candle flame. The flame senses the subtle energies of the body and dances in the presence of unsettled emotions. Only when the self becomes centered with peace does the flame become still and grow tall. This meditative practice and the act of stillness is depicted through the flame shaped symbols in my work.

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<sup>12</sup> Schneider, Michael S. *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe: The Mathematical Archetypes of Nature, Art, and Science*. New York, N: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Wittkower, Rudolf. *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. Chichester, West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998, 105.

<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, George Wells. *Signs and symbols in Christian art*. Oxford, 1954, 41.

## CHAPTER 4: PRAYER OBJECT #2



Figure 4: *Prayer Object #2*.  
Holly, Silver, Rayon, Acrylic.  
2018. 12" x 4.5" x 2.25" (HWD).

Flame-shaped elements are also used in “Prayer Object #2” as the design consists of a container in the shape of a flame. This shape is borrowed from the almond shape which is known as the *vesica piscis* in terms of sacred geometry. The almond shape of the *vesica piscis* is believed to represent the number two in sacred geometry. This shape is formed by the intersection of two circles and is a *yoni* (Sanskrit term for the female generative organs) through

which the geometric shapes and patterns of our universe emerge.<sup>15</sup> The cathedral door is a symbol of spiritual passage and the *vesica piscis* is used functionally and symbolically in the construction of doors or portals between the mundane and spiritual space.<sup>16</sup> I am attracted to the pointed arch of cathedral doorways which also inspired the design of this piece.

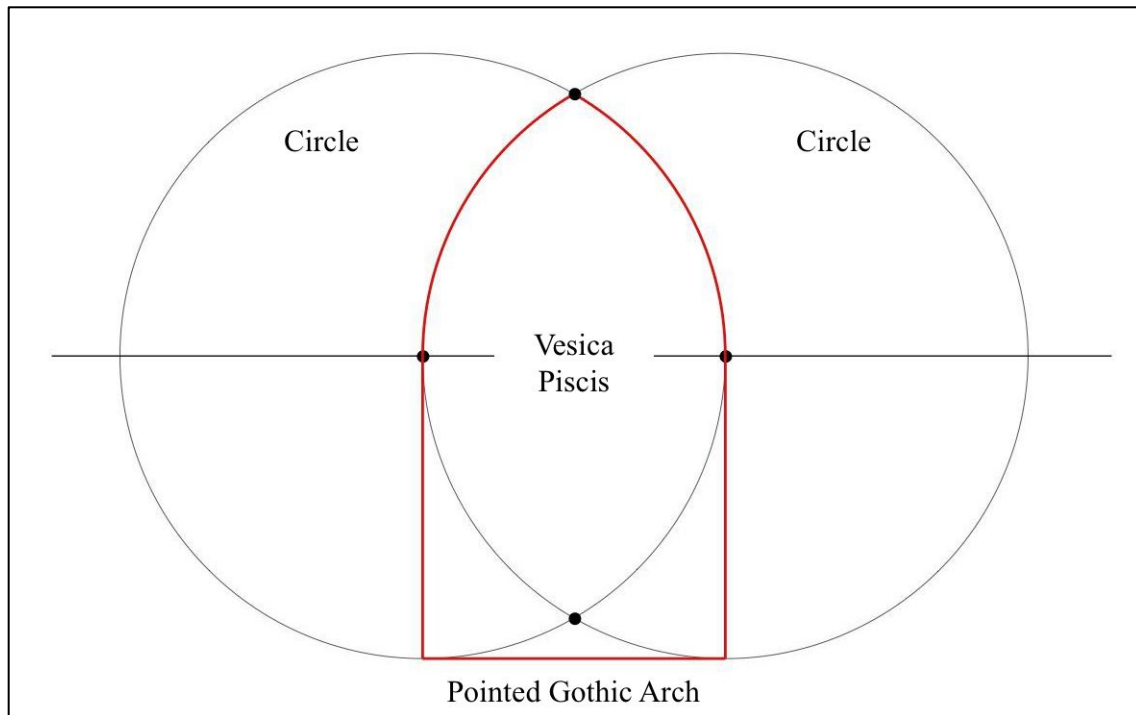


Figure 5: *Diagram of the Vesica Piscis*

Two translucent, pierced wood doors slightly conceal the inside. The arms of the door fold open at an angle and suggests the idea of a haven in the form of wings. The open doors act as an invitation for the viewer to participate in reflection. The inside of the doors and the back of the container is adorned with silver wire that is inlaid into the surface of the wood in a cohesive geometric pattern. The repetitive act of inlaying the silver is both meditational and devotional. I

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<sup>15</sup> Schneider, Michael S. *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Schneider, 33.

used an air-brushed gradient of color on the inside of the container to introduce another layer of depth.



Figure 6: *Prayer Object #2*. Detail image.

The gradients of blue color within the object depict an atmosphere representational of the night sky or deep waters and references the Creator. Nature has been a way to connect in worship and divine communion for so many as well as myself. In 1638, a French translator by the name

of Jean Baudoin likened the whole world to a painting “in which the things painted make us admire the worker who make them.”<sup>17</sup> I also admire the thoughts of Cardinal Federico Borromeo who wrote that “paintings enclose in narrow places, the space of earth and the heavens, and we go wandering, and making long [spiritual] journeys standing still in our room.”<sup>18</sup> The atmospheric reference in the piece presents a potential sacred space for reflection. Numerous times I have found myself before the ocean and night sky in a state of reflection. Gradients of deep blue colors have since become a symbol for meditation and are incorporated into my work. “Prayer Object #2” and the accompanying poem was inspired by a personal experience during one of my times of reflection before the ocean and serves as a marker of commemoration.

### The Ocean

I long for the shore of a stormy beach  
Wind wrapped and roaring waves  
The brine covers me- damp  
A reckless wave crashes against  
The steep bank of Sand

The Ocean has torn a new face onto the  
Edge of the shoreline  
The waters are erratic, unforgiving  
And I, still alone.

Where are you, God?

Tears roll off my face  
Like a leaking ocean  
Warm and Salty  
Thick—like the first drops of a mad, mad storm  
I'm waiting for rescue.

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<sup>17</sup> Wine, Humphrey. *Claude: The Poetic Landscape*. London: National Gallery, 1994, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg, Pierre, and Keith Christiansen. *Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 76.

In Biblical literary imagery, deep waters are associated with a call for deeper intimacy with the divine that is often fostered by trials. This correlation is best summarized by an expression recorded in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm and recounts “deep calls unto deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.” The strength of the waters is compared to the uncontrollable tribulations one experiences in life. The Book of Psalms contains a collection of lyrical poems expressing the author’s viewpoint of their relationship with God. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm narrates the writer’s longing for the presence of the Creator during a trying time in which he felt abandoned. Ultimately the psalm is uplifting as the writer encourages himself to keep in faith.

## CHAPTER 5: PRAYER OBJECT #3



Figure 7: *Prayer Object #3*.  
Holly, Silver, Rayon, Acrylic.  
2018. 18" x 2.5" x 1.25" (HWD)

Prayer Object #3 is a sculpture that also celebrates the beauty of nature as the Creator's masterwork. Through this object of sacred space, I sought to memorialize a personal experience of a magical night alongside the shore. I led a friend onto a desolate beach for an evening walk. Upon arrival, I was captivated by the sight before me and was awed by the divine presence that seemed to accompany it. In the past I had experienced the green bioluminescent waters particular



to this beach but this night was different. The green glow flooded the shoreline and the water emitted a neon light with each crashing wave.

The sight and atmosphere was altogether enchanting. I yearned with excitement to describe the scene to my friend who has been visually impaired since birth. The relationship I have with her often leads me to meditate on the seen and the unseen and the faith we place in sight. I began to depict what I was seeing and feeling with childlike wonder when she stopped me and uttered about her experience of the shore; “nothing is separating me from God right now.” Her conclusion best summarized the feelings of wholeness that mesmerized us that night by the sea. The poem below was inspired by that event and represents the experience of the atmosphere along with the sculpture:

## Enchantment

The Air Enchanted  
Thick with heavenly presence  
The veil was thin that summer  
And magic leaked into the night  
We were in alignment with the sea  
A Bioluminescent Beach  
I wanted her to know  
The waves were illuminated  
With green glow  
That moved to the beat  
The rhythm of the divine  
Breathing on the shore  
Interwoven with our steps

She told me right now  
Nothing was separating her from God  
Nothing was Hidden  
Nothing was Broken  
And the Sea Resounded

To Her, I am the Sighted One  
She assures me of things unseen  
She assures me of things unseen  
To Her, I am the Sighted one

And the Sea Resounded  
Nothing was Broken  
Nothing was Hidden  
Nothing was separating her from God  
She told me right now

Interwoven with our steps  
Breathing on the shore  
The rhythm of the divine  
That moved to the beat  
With green glow  
The waves were illuminated  
I wanted her to know  
A Bioluminescent Beach  
We were in alignment with the sea  
And magic leaked into the night  
The veil was thin that summer  
Thick with heavenly presence  
The Air Enchanted

Both the sculpture and the poem use vertical symmetry to create rhythm and reflect the tides of the ocean. The visual symmetry of the geometric design on the lid of the container also creates balance and harmony depicting ideas of wholeness. The form of the object was inspired by the shape of a boat, a vehicle that often represents the journey through life. In the book of James contained in the New Testament, the writer uses the imagery of a boat in comparison with a person's navigational journey.<sup>19</sup> The writer urges the respondent to consider the tongue to be like the rudder of a ship that steers a person.

The inside of the container is painted to mimic the colors of the bioluminescent waters. I created this using an airbrushed gradient from green to blue. The color is emphasized by streaks of silver wire inlay adding an element that is reflective of light. The object can be peered into as the pierced geometric design on the lid allows the colors to be seen from the outside. The hinged lid can also be opened for a more inviting experience.

All three of the sculptures in the "Prayer Object" series feature a tassel-like element that consists of individual rayon cords that hang in suspension by a metal component and create a division of space. I use this fiber component as a reference to "the veil" which is a symbolic metaphor for the separation of heaven and earth. The term "beyond the veil" refers to the unknown state of being after death and originates from a figurative reference to the veil in the Jewish Temple which separated the main body of the Temple from the tabernacle.<sup>20</sup> This part of the temple is referred to as the "Holy of Holies," or the most holy place and is the place where

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<sup>19</sup> "BibleGateway." James 3:1-11 NIV - - Bible Gateway. Accessed November 07, 2018. [https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James 3:1-11&version=NIV](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James%203:1-11&version=NIV).

<sup>20</sup> "Beyond the Veil." The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. 2018. Accessed November 07, 2018. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/beyond-veil>.

God's presence resided. The power of this holy presence is alluded to by the prescribed cleansing rituals that took place before the priest could enter this room during one day of the year, the Day of Atonement.

The curtain that separated this inner sanctuary, known as the "veil," was made of fine linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn.<sup>21</sup> The veil metaphor gains further significance by the omens that took place at the moment of Christ's death on the cross. The Book of Matthew describes the omens in Chapter 27: "At that moment the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked and the rocks were split." The torn veil implies the accessibility of the presence of God by all through the sacrificial atonement of Christ. The imagery of the veil is repeated several other times in the New Testament writings of the Apostles. Hebrews 6:19-20 presents a poetic statement about the significance of the torn veil: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." The placement of the veil component at the bottom of the sculptures was inspired by this literary image.

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<sup>21</sup> Reed, Sarah. "The Holy of Holies and the Veil." OnFaith: The Holy Of Holies And The Veil, Explained. May 16, 2015. Accessed November 07, 2018. <https://www.onfaith.co/text/the-holy-of-holies-and-the-veil>.

## CHAPTER 6: DIVINE TEAR



Figure 8: *Divine Tear*.  
Tupelo, Silver, Gold Leaf, Blue Topaz, Acrylic  
2018. 12" x 3" x 2.75" (HWD)

The work titled “Divine Tear” functions as a sculptural vessel that is displayed on the wall. Easily viewable from the outside, the inner area of the container features a silver tear that hangs above a topaz stone set at the bottom. The lip is highlighted with gold leaf which frames the inside with the appearance of an aura. A pattern of silver wire inlay rests on the inner walls and contrasts with the solid outer surface of a light blue color.

The tear drop shape is a personal symbol that stands for the passion and yearning for and from the divine. Over the years, I've seen people weep in the presence of the divine and have experienced this phenomenon as well. This piece was created as I reflected on the emotion that stands behind a single tear. A companion to the sculpture, the poem below was inspired from meditating on the passion that stood behind the story of the Crucifixion.

### Divine Tear

The divine tear streams from  
What the divine eye sees  
All knowing  
Wrought with passion  
A tear for all humanity  
Borne the cross from which it fell  
And planted the sweet sorrow that  
Blossomed into the joy of being reunited

A single drop fell the distance  
That separates heaven and earth  
And shattered the silence  
Upon planting itself in the river of tears  
Previously shed

The ripple broke the waiting  
And continues to expand  
Washing over me  
Quenching the fire and filling the void

Associated with emotion experienced in the presence of a holy being, I am intrigued by the idea of religious ecstasy and sought to express it visually through this wall piece. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* narrates the experience of religious ecstasy through portraying the emotional component of it in felt bodily form. The sculpture depicts the St. Teresa's mystical experience of being ignited with divine passion and illustrates the mystic idea of "transverberation." This terminology comes from the Latin word *transverberare* which

means “to pierce through” and summarizes the vision of a visitation from the angelic being, Seraphim, who pierces St. Teresa with a golden spear. Bernini was inspired by St. Teresa of Avila’s written account of her transverberation:

“I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God. The pain was so great that it caused me to utter several moans; and yet so exceeding sweet is this greatest of pains that it is impossible to desire to be rid of it, or for the soul to be content with less than God.”<sup>22</sup>

St. Teresa of Avila is a well-known Spanish mystic who lived during the time of the Counter-Reformation and recorded her visions and expressions of the divine in descriptive writing. In describing the spiritual experience, she elaborates on the challenge of recounting the ineffable presence of God by commenting “I am laughing to myself over these comparisons for they do not satisfy me, but I do not know any others.”<sup>23</sup> She, like many, continues to enlist a wide variety of imagery and compares the presence of God to a palace, a spark, a fire, a fragrance, a treasure, a precious jewel in a reliquary, wine, sweetness, tenderness, expansion, delightful pain, peaceful and refreshing.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Peers, E. Allison. *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*. London, 1927, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Steinbock, Anthony J. *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Steinbock, 53.



Figure 9: *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1652.



Figure 10: *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* Detail.

In portraying Teresa's spiritual ecstasy so physically, Bernini offers a powerful challenge to our conventional understanding of two different forms of love.<sup>25</sup> The expression of spiritual ecstasy is often interpreted as sexual because both orgasm and divine presence invoke intense pleasure. Christian spirituality is often infused with sexual imagery. For example, Song of Songs is a book in the Bible and an erotic love poem containing imagery of breasts and thighs that was frequently allegorized in the medieval church to describe the yearning and panting of the soul for God.<sup>26</sup> Other interpretations include the comparison of the church as the "bride of Christ" and the relationship of God and Israel to husband and wife. The spiritual and the sexual are both experiences that evoke the senses. The expression of pleasure and ecstasy through visual cues in my artwork may be perceived to intertwine with sexuality. Christianity puts greater emphasis on

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<sup>25</sup> "Sexuality and Spirituality: Bernini and the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa." Pneuma. Accessed November 07, 2018. <http://www.pneuma.org.uk/art/sexuality-and-spirituality-bernini-and-the-ecstasy-of-saint-teresa/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Sexuality and Spirituality: Bernini and the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa."



the transcendence of nature and many artists immersed in the tradition frequently regard corporeal experience as a portal to a heightened sense of consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fanning, 228.

## CHAPTER 7: ARTISTS OF INSPIRATION

Contemporary artists who have influenced my work are Dan DiCaprio, James Turrell, and Kimberly Winkle. The work of Turrell impacted my conceptual ideas; while I was inspired by how DiCaprio and Winkle use material and processes. Dan DiCaprio works small-scale to create forms that often intertwine plant and animal anatomy. The pieces investigate his interest in adaption and are constructed from wood and metal. He considers his sculptures to be “organisms beginning their evolutionary path” and reflects on people’s roles in the living world during his process of making. Many of his works function as wearable body adornment in association with his career as a metalsmith.



Figure 11: Dan DiCaprio, *Vessel Brooch*.  
Ebony, Silver  
2012. Photo: Taylor Dabney

DiCaprio also uses American holly wood as a material and rhythmically adorns the surface with a unique method of silver wire inlay. He retains a sensitivity towards the subtle treatment of form and the sensual perception of it. I adopted his method of wood carving and silver inlay after briefly learning from him during a two-week session at Haystack Mountain

School of Crafts. After studying his carefully crafted small-scale forms, I was influenced to work with more organic shapes as opposed to the geometric designs of the “Prayer Objects.”

James Turrell has been highly influential to the formation of my concept involving intimacy and atmosphere. The Roden Crater, located in Northern Arizona, first attracted me to Turrell’s work. The crater walls extend above the natural level of the landscape reducing the environment to experience land and sky in its purest form. I was fascinated by the level of intimacy that this form establishes among the earth, sky, and man. The Roden Crater is a large-scale artwork created within a volcanic cinder cone. It functions as a controlled environment for experiencing light, celestial events, and contemplation. The work is the culmination of the artist’s lifelong research in the field of human visual and psychological perception. It links the physical with the ephemeral, the objective with the subjective, in a transformative sensory experience.<sup>28</sup> Considering Baudoin’s statement that nature makes us admire the Creator, the earthwork presents a unique atmosphere that facilitates an intimate spiritual experience and inspires contemplation about time and place.

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<sup>28</sup> "About." Roden Crater. Accessed November 07, 2018. <http://roden crater.com/about/>.



Figure 12: James Turrell, *The Roden Crater*.

During a time when I craved solitude, I would often imagine myself alone in this crater, cupped by the earth, watching the sun pass over me followed by the moon. This sentiment was carried with me as I sought to create a container with a quality of inner atmosphere. A relationship of solitude is established through placing the viewer in the midst of a small-scale object where proximity creates intimacy. The gradients of color used on the inside of the vessels are inspired by sketches of the transitioning colors of the skyline before dawn and after dusk. These intervals between night and day stimulate me toward contemplation.

Finally, the artwork of Kimberly Winkle has had an impact on the direction of my work. She is a maker who creates furniture and objects using wood and paint; her work displays a balance of form, color and surface pattern. Winkle comments on her work by saying “I strive to create objects which possess an apparent sense of spontaneity, balance of chaos and order, rhythm and gesture, all working in concert to imbue the object with individuality and charm.” In a playful manner, the designs activate the painted surface of the forms. She uses pen to create a

simple vocabulary of the dot and line. Other patterns consist of scribbling configurations comprised of various colors. Her use of streamlined forms in proportion with ornamented surfaces influenced my choice of minimalist shapes in ratio to surface design



Figure 13:  
Kimberly Winkle, *Olive Green Scribble Oculus Mirror*.  
Polychrome poplar, fiberboard and glass.  
18" x 18" x 4" (HWD)



Figure 14: Kimberly Winkle, *Riff Rattle*.  
Polychrome wood, horse hair, thread, ball bearings.  
3" x 6" x 3" (HWD)

Skilled in wood turning, Winkle creates her cylindrical forms from wood. She uses the process of split-wood turning to achieve symmetrical curved surfaces that are joined with other wood components. I employed this method of wood turning to create many of the oblong bowl forms in my body of work. In this method of turning, the shape is created by cutting the wood in half and gluing brown craft paper between the two pieces of wood before it is shaped on the lathe. After the desired shaping is achieved, the piece can then be split in half using a chisel. This technique was used to create the convex surface with a flush back in my piece titled "Cradle" as well as in many other pieces.

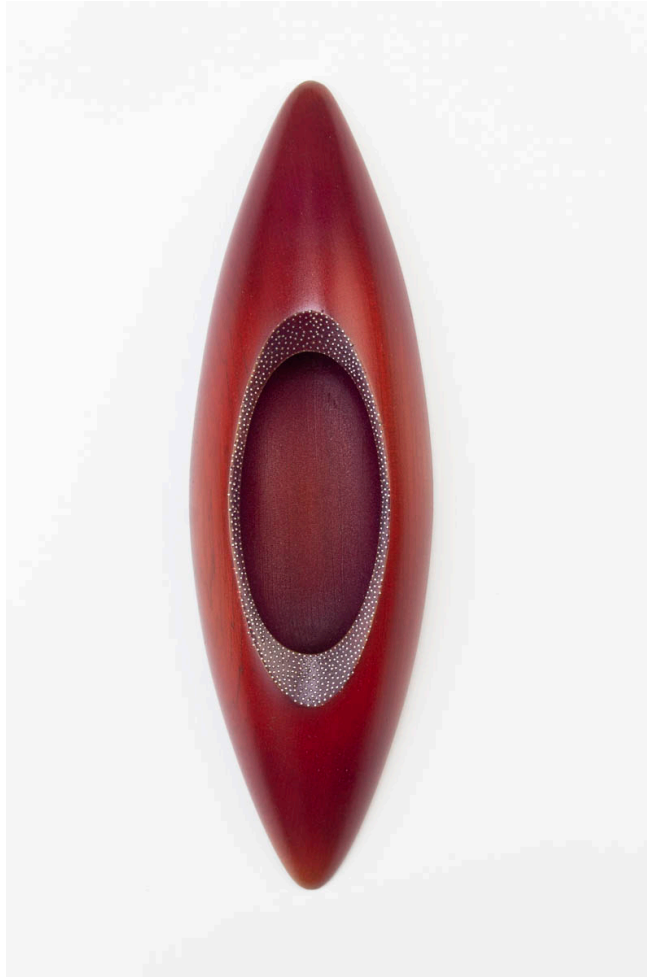


Figure 15: *Cradle*.  
Cedar, Silver, Acrylic  
2018. 7" x 2.75" x 1.5" (HWD)

During the making of this body of work, I took a two-week class with Kimberly Winkle at Penland School of Craft where she taught me how to turn a bowl form and encouraged me to experiment with different ways to adorn the surface of wood. The outcome of our time together influenced the scale of my work as I became confident in working with larger structures. Winkle's bold surface treatments in her pieces also inspired me to begin setting gemstones into wood. This piece titled "Nectar for the Spirit, Ointment for the Soul" was constructed during my time at Penland and features blue topaz stones that are carefully inlaid into the wood using prong settings.



Figure 16: *Nectar for the Spirit, Ointment for the Soul*.  
Maple, Poplar, Silver, Blue Topaz, Milk Paint  
2018. 36" x 14" x 14" (HWD)



Figure 17: *Nectar for the Spirit, Ointment for the Soul* Detail Image.

## CHAPTER 8: MATERIAL & PROCESS

The body of each piece is made from wood and various techniques are implemented to create form, color, and adornment. I experimented with several types of wood before concluding that American holly works best with the techniques I employ. The bone-white color of the wood resonates with the idea of purity and provides a canvas for color. As the grain pattern is minimally visible, the carved form becomes the primary focus. Because of the density of Holly, it is not easily manipulated during the sanding process. The wood is also resistant to dents without being too difficult to carve as it has a lighter sponge-like quality. When inlaying silver wire into holly, the density of the wood holds the wire in place properly.

I use a variety of methods such as turning, cutting, and carving to give the wood form. The pierced lids of the prayer objects were first created by cutting through the wood by laser cutting but it charred the surface making a time-consuming job of sanding it back to its original color. I resolved this by carefully piercing the wood using a scroll saw and filing and sanding to a smooth surface. The nature of this work being at an intimate scale caused me to gravitate towards shaping methods that involved the use of traditional metalsmithing tools. For example, the flex shaft, or rotary tool, is used with carbide burrs to give the pierced wood rounded edges and is also utilized to carve out the concave surface of the containers. Additionally, the symmetrically curved surfaces are fashioned by shaving the wood with appropriate blades on the wood lathe. This method of shaping is a favorite practice as I found the rhythmic shaving of the wood to be meditative.

Many of the processes I have chosen to use are repetitive and allow for therapeutic reflection alongside patience, stillness, and precision. For example, inlaying silver wire into wood is a practice that requires repetitive acts of drilling, gluing the wire into the wood, and



snipping the surface of the wire flush. The act requires patience and attention to craftsmanship. I view the application of the process as a metaphor for gardening as I plant pieces of silver or wood into the body of the form, cover the surface with paint, and then burnish the areas of inlay to shine. The silver interacts with the light in the surrounding environment adding an additional layer of information as light can be thought to hold spiritual connotations associated with “holy light.” The subtle use of reflective light incites the act of discovery as the viewer encounters the piece.

The effect of the silver wire inlay is created by the following process. A shallow hole is drilled into the wood using a drill bit that matches the size of silver wire. The silver wire is dipped into cyanoacrylate glue and nested into the drilled hole. Flush snips work best to cut the wire to the surface of the wood and save material. After the whole piece is inlayed, it is sanded with 220 & 400 grit sandpaper. The color is applied to the wood after the inlay process because the inlay process risks uneven snips of silver wire and super-glue spillage. An air brush system is used to apply thin layers of water-based acrylic paint. The air helps to achieve the subtle blushes and gradients of color that I desire. The inlays are camouflaged by the layers of ink and each dot of silver is revealed using a scribe to scrape the paint from the metal. This also burnishes the heads of the silver thus encouraging reflective sheen. Scraping the paint from the surface of the wire inlay is a process of detection as the paint covers just enough that the wire is not visible. The change in texture of the paint indicates where the wire is buried. The application of this technique encourages wonder and discovery and reminds me of *The Parable of the Treasure* described in Matthew 13. The parable reads “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

The wood veneer inlay involves a more delicate process. I prefer thin wood veneer that is 1/32" in thickness for its ability to be cut with an x-acto knife or stacked, taped, and sawed with a jeweler's saw frame. The thin veneer offers a more compact fit when working at such a small scale. Recently, I have utilized a laser etcher to cut intricate shapes from the veneer. After cutting the veneer to the design, I take each piece of veneer and use it to trace its shape onto the flat wood surface where I want inlay. Using an x-acto knife, I cut into the wood where I've traced the shape with pencil to create a "boundary line." A Dremel tool with a router head attachment is used to hollow out the shell creating a flawless fit for the wood veneer. A thin layer of wood glue is applied to secure the wood and the piece is clamped to prevent warpage. The veneer is an additional way to add color and surface design to flat surfaces of wood. The silver wire inlay does not interact as well with light on flat surfaces compared to curved forms thus making wood veneer the better choice for flat areas. The silhouette pattern I achieve with the veneer can be likened to a stained-glass window design which holds a context of seeing into the spiritual.

Additionally, traditional methods of small-scale metal fabrication are used to assemble the silver components in each piece. Sterling Silver was selected for the reflective quality of the material and for the purity of its color. In "Prayer Object #1" the fine silver is raised to the surface giving the metal a pure white color after treating in sodium bisulfate, a metal cleansing solution. The process of soldering was used to join the metal pieces together to form hinges, chains, and settings for stones.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary spiritual art has an effect on the world; it changes minds, broadens understandings, and transforms lives.<sup>29</sup> My main objective with this body of work is to express tranquility and intimacy that can be experienced through being in touch with the spiritual. Presently, the erasure of the spiritual dimension in art continues in favor of the secularized version of art history that currently holds sway.<sup>30</sup> I believe viewing artwork from the perspective of the spiritual allows the viewer to access greater depths of understanding held within the work and perhaps even yield a positive transformative experience for the viewer. Charlene Spretnak, author of *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art*, agrees that dismissing the dynamics of belief systems does violence to our understanding of artists' intentions and their art's meaning.<sup>31</sup> The objects I make work cohesively to affirm a place for the spiritual in the contemporary art world.

These works are intended to awaken the public eye to imagine what it feels like to be swept away with a sense of joy, to experience grace, and commune with the sublime. It is my hope that this series will continue to re-enchant people with wonder, the hope for redemption, and transcendence.

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<sup>29</sup> Fanning, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Fanning, 223.

<sup>31</sup> Fanning, 224.

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