

Abstract

TANGIBLE EMANATIONS

By

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April 2011

Chair: Hanna Jubran

Sculpture Area

This is a report on my creative research. It is supplementary to my thesis exhibition of works of sculpture, images of which are included in this report. These sculptures explore the intangible emanations that emerge from a living being. My figurative sculptures depict archetypes of people with various types of auras. The auras emanate from one body and connect to another. In some pieces, they take on the shape of another life form, such as an animal.

Yoga postures are used as an entry point because yoga itself suggests a link between the abstract and the tangible. Tradition asserts that yoga can serve to produce an ephemeral spiritual enlightenment through physical fitness. Similar to a yoga practitioner using the palpability of the physical body to achieve the intangible, emanations are represented as physical things in these sculptures. The yoga postures and auras that are visualized and made into sculptures represent the intangible aura inherent in everyone.

TANGIBLE EMANATIONS

A Report of a Creative Thesis

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Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Art

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INTRODUCTION

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Auras, the very model of the intangible and non-material, are not standard subjects for sculptors. A range of personal experiences and some elements of my family background, however, have contributed to my interest in trying to capture these fleeting ephemera. I inherited my artistic genes from my mother, Elizabeth, who was not able to develop her artistic talents. Elisabeth Ann Beckon was in Japan and grew up in Taiwan. In 1968, she came to the US to receive a seminary college education; she studied psychology. Her family descended from a long line of Christian Norwegian-Swedish missionaries who lived in China. They survived the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the twentieth century, but were finally ousted by Mao Zedong in 1949. Her family fled to Taiwan, where some of the members remained until the 1990's. To this day, her family members have ties with both China and Taiwan. Perhaps it is this that helped me develop an interest in Tibetans, who too were sent into exile by Mao Zedong.

My father, Donald, grew up in Rockford, Illinois, a part-time Presbyterian minister and professional counselor, Donald Dean Denton Jr. influenced my viewpoint regarding the psyche of the mentally disturbed. For example, I first heard of an aura when he told stories of some patients who believed they could see them around other people. My curiosity about religion and spirituality also comes from an early involvement in behind-the-scenes church activities. My father's weekly sermon-writing, the choir practices, and the church elders pouring grape juice back into the Mason jar, to be used for next communion, were common experiences in my

childhood. When I was a boy, the elders of our Presbyterian Church would ask me if I was going to be a pastor like my father. Even though I would shyly reply in the negative, I could imagine myself leading a congregation in worship. Perhaps the potential for storytelling while preaching inspired me to become an artist. My father influenced my understanding of spiritual symbols. He is a published poet and author and taught me that words and objects can have many layers of meanings.

These experiences shaped my outlook. After learning about a number of world religions, I have come to the conclusion that no one religion is supreme. This has made me agnostic. Although many believers view agnosticism negatively, I do not; I simply believe that there are unknowns.

INTRODUCTION OF MY WORKS OF SCULPTURE

I have practiced yoga ever since I took an early morning class at School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2000. Yoga practice made me feel invigorated and contributed to clarity of mind that I had never experienced before. My practice of yoga postures in recreation centers and yoga studios over the years made me wonder if this was only a physical exercise or part of a religion. This very question, an ongoing debate in the contemporary yoga community, influences my creative research.

I had already been interested in using symbolic figures and mythical imagery in my artwork. Yet, it was not until I participated in the ECU Religious Studies Study Abroad trip to India in 2009 that my current body of artwork began to appear. I received funding to study the ancient and contemporary art in India and practiced yoga in Rishikesh. This exposure, and especially the introduction to Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala, strongly influenced my works of sculpture.

Tibetan Buddhism combines elements of a pre-Buddhist shamanistic belief system prevalent in the Himalayan Mountains, called Bon, with an esoteric branch of Buddhism from India.

Tibetans worship the serene Buddha, with which most Westerners are familiar; as well as Buddhist deities with many arms and multiple heads that look in all directions. Tibetan paintings and sculptures often depict Buddhist deities floating on clouds, standing on the bodies of their enemies, wearing necklaces of the severed human heads, and locked in sexual embrace.

Surrounding them are auras of clouds, flames, light, and flowers. In some images of

Avalokiteshvara (known as Chenrezig to the Tibetans), who out of compassion delays attaining enlightenment in order to assist others in the world, there is an aura of a thousand arms. These indicate his readiness to bestow favors to as many sentient beings as possible. I am intrigued by some of these images and their symbolism.

In Dharamsala, where Tibetans now live in exile with their religious leader, the 14th Dalai Lama (an incarnation of Chenrezig), I was able to see a life-sized gilded statue of Kalachakra. Contained within this powerful image are some of the mystical characteristics described above. I wrote a research paper, titled '*The Kalachakra Image in Tantric Buddhism*'. It helped me explore the connection between yoga, auras, and my art that I describe in this thesis.

My agnostic point of view and my Christian Missionary family background influence my approach to yoga postures and auras. I am actively questioning auras through this body of work.

VISUAL VOCABULARY

EMANATIONS

I use the word, emanations, to generally describe the various colors and forms surrounding my figurative sculptures, because it describes an abstract but perceptible thing that originates from a source. These can be called by different names, and they take on different meanings depending on the cultural context. The visual depiction of an aura in art history often connotes a person of power or holiness. Sometimes, all living things and objects are said to possess an aura. Halos are usually depicted surrounding just the head, whereas an aureole is a golden glow surrounding the entire body.

Kundalini is a Sanskrit word meaning “coiled” like a snake; according to yogic ideologies it is thought to lie at the base of the spine. It has been described as a powerful reservoir of pure desire. In many esoteric traditions, it is thought of as being one part of the yogic physiology. *Kundalini* comprises seven chakras or “force centers” that are placed between the base of the spine and the head. It is believed that the *kundalini* can be unleashed through advanced meditation.

The combination of beliefs and ideas from different religions compel me to use an all-encompassing descriptive word for auras, halos, and *kundalinis*. In my work I attempt to

develop these concepts with my own interpretation. Because these ephemeral entities all issue from the body, I call them emanations.

WAVY SCALLOPED SHAPES

I use the scalloped archway iconography to symbolize the energy of an aura. These shapes are similar to the design in the mosque and palace architecture of Mughal India and in the auras surrounding deities in many depictions in Hinduism and Buddhism. They also relate to waves of water, wood grain patterns, and wind-swept sand dunes. The repeating scalloped shapes emerge from different parts of the figures to represent their thoughts, feelings, and desires. This patterning also manifests itself upon the skin or surface of the figures that I have created. Each has a slightly different pattern that seems to slither and move across their skin, following the contours of the body. These raised lines help reflect light making these figures seem extraordinary.

CLOUDS

I used a stylized cloud-shaped motif, because it is similar to the aforementioned scalloped shape and also because clouds are both real and unattainable, like auras. They represent to me something physical that everyone can see and relate to, but also something that is unrealistic or fantastic to imagine standing and riding on. In many Eastern traditions clouds are often depicted in art as the pedestal or vehicle of the deities. My sculptures can be related to as both secular and sacred.

MY WORKS OF SCULPTURE



PLATE I "BALASANA WITH DEER" 32 x 24 x 21 INCHES
PAINTED ALUMINUM

BALASANA WITH DEER

The concept of what form an aura can take is stretched in this sculpture. I am proposing that it can take the form of another living being. In this case, a young deer stands in alarm on a human figure in the *balasana* yoga posture. This *asana*, or yogic posture, is a resting and relaxing position; it contradicts the deer's alert stance. The two are united by the fluorescent orange, which gives the sculpture an optical glow. The paint emits its own emanation that both attracts the eye and is hard to look at. The color cautions the viewer, while the unusual juxtaposition of forms draws one closer.

Deer hunters in the United States wear safety orange so other sportsmen can easily see them. In Buddhism, deer imagery is a direct reference to Buddha's first sermon in Deer Park at Sarnath (a site in India I was able to visit).

While this sculpture was on display in the Joyner Library at East Carolina University, onlookers interpreted it in various ways. One person saw the deer as a triumphant conqueror of the hunter in a revenge story. Another interpreted the two as existing together in harmony. Another viewer saw the deer as a spirit animal for the man, as many Native Americans believe. Other people asked me curiously, "If the deer is dominating the man, then why is it in alarm, as if it's about to run away?" Another viewer told me that, by giving his first sermon in the Deer Park, Buddha implies that unlike the deer, that is easily frightened and is always trying to evade the hunter, he has overcome his fear of death. The recumbent figure in this work could allude to death and the

deer's alert stance could refer to Buddha's awareness that he is no longer afraid of dying. These different interpretations all add to the sculpture.



PLATE II "OH, SPLENDID LADY" 50 x 24 x 24 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM AND STAINLESS STEEL



PLATE III "OH, SPLENDID LADY" (DETAIL) 50 x 24 x 24 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM

OH, SPLENDID LADY

This sculpture portrays a woman in an introspective mood. She does not represent a particular person. She exudes the full-body aureole that is represented here in swirling texture and in color. When viewed indoors the paint is a reflective and glittery black, but outside in direct sunlight it shimmers like a rainbow. The use of rainbow colors within black symbolizes deep thought brought on by meditation.

Oh, Splendid Lady is cast aluminum and painted with powder-coat. These materials were selected for their durability in the outdoors and for their brilliance of color. The stainless steel base is polished to reflect like a mirror. Because auras are regarded as being composed of light, I chose to polish the very top surface of the pedestal, where the figure's feet rest so that it reflects both light and image. This reflection and the wavy shape of the sides reinforce the idea that this base is an emanation.



PLATE IV "SPLENDID MAELSTROM" 36 x 27 x 21 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM

SPLENDID MAELSTROM

This sculpture represents archetypes of a man and a woman together in meditation. The female is the same figure as in *Oh, Splendid Lady* and stands with arms crossed and standing upon the back of the male figure, which is in same position as in *Balasana with Deer*. Even though her facial expression looks contemplative, the colors and patterning on her resemble a swirling hurricane. Despite the stillness portrayed on her face, she emanates the potential for violence, opposed to the male figure's blue color which is calming and represents the ocean. These colors and textures represent their relationship together, but also that he is the ocean and she the storm. When this sculpture is displayed in close proximity to *Balasana with Deer* and *Oh, Splendid Lady*, another aspect emerges. The same female and male figures are shown, but in different circumstances. Their auras can change and have different meanings.



PLATE V "COILED KUNDAURASANA" 47 x 27 x 21 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM AND STEEL



PLATE VI "COILED KUNDAURASANA" (DETAIL) 47 x 27 x 21 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM AND STEEL

COILED KUNDAURASANA

This sculpture depicts a man in deep concentration and with intense energy in a yoga posture as he attempts to unleash his inner emanation. The eyes are just slightly open and his mouth is ajar, as he breathes deeply to hold this pose. His hands are fists as he flexes his biceps to build energy and heat. The patterning and colors on the surface reveal that he is almost at the point of achieving enlightenment. This figure's color acts like an aura and signifies a change in perception, a change from sober thought to ecstasy, or change from passive living to energized and awakened living. The black has the same rainbow highlights that can only be seen outside; yet it is more subdued because of a cream color worked into the crevices of the surface. I used a cloud-shaped pedestal to show that this yogi is in another state of consciousness as the *kundalini* prepares to be unleashed. It references many Tibetan deities that are depicted as standing on clouds.



PLATE VII "UNCOILED KUNDAURASANA" 47 x 27 x 21 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM AND STEEL



PLATE VIII "UNCOILED KUNDAURASANA" (DETAIL) 47 x 27 x 21 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM AND STEEL

UNCOILED KUNDAURASANA

This cast aluminum sculpture is of a muscular yet rotund man in an awakened state brought on by yoga postures. He stands in an *asana* that connotes power and grace as in the previous piece, *Coiled Kundaaurasana*, but with the addition of a scalloped serpent-like shape connecting the top of his head with the base of his spine. This additional appendage to the figure combines the idea of an external aura with the idea of an internal *kundalini* to make a unique emanation. *Kundalini* is believed to be an unconscious libidinal force which is coiled like a snake at the base of the spine. It is believed to be a corporeal energy that can be unleashed through advanced training in yoga or meditation. With this sculpture, *kundalini* is imagined as uncoiling and emanating from the figure like an aura. The neon pink emanation references the inside of his body, where *kundalini* is thought to lie, and the unnatural color that does not exist in the human body.

Kundaaurasana in the title is an invented word, derived from three words, *kundalini*, aura, and *asana*. This is appropriate because this sculpture depicts these three things in synthesis. In the postural yoga tradition, it is common for names of postures to be compound words in Sanskrit usually ending with *asana*. For example; *balasana*: *bal* means child and *asana* means posture. So the meaning I attribute to the term *Kundaaurasana* is a *kundalini aura posture*.

I have chosen an unrealistically dark coloring to portray that this is not the figure's actual skin color. Not only does the black have rainbow glitter contained within it, but it is highlighted by a saffron. Saffron is a sacred color in Hinduism, as well as in Tibetan Buddhism. It is the color

used for Tibetan Buddhist monks' robes and ceremonial head covering. These saffron highlights, along with the neon pink *kundalini* and the cloud-pedestal he stands on, are meant to denote a powerful spiritual moment.



PLATE IX "REVOLVEDOGASANA" 40 x 32 x 25 INCHES
POWDERCOATED ALUMINUM AND STEEL



PLATE IX "REVOLVEDOGASANA" 40 x 32 x 25 INCHES
ALUMINUM, STEEL, AND POWDERCOAT

REVOLVEDOGASANA

This sculpture depicts a yogini, or female *asana* practitioner, in a posture called *Parivrtta Parsvakonasana*, which means “revolved side-angle pose”. Looking upward with her in this yoga posture is her trustworthy dog. They are connected by a branching fiery emanation that goes from the eyes of the person to the eyes of the dog (or the reverse). This dog and human relationship is similar to the deer and human relationship in *Balasana with Deer*. Except the deer is represented as an aura-type figment of imagination, whereas the dog in this sculpture is a real character that is connected to its master by means of yoga and displays the deep connection many dog-owners have with their pets.

The yogini is lunging deep with her right leg, while twisting and pressing her palms into each other to aid in the twist. The hands are simultaneously in a praying hand gesture and an athletic hold. The difference between calling this a *mudra* (symbolic hand gesture in Hinduism and Buddhism) and merely calling it an athletic hold is a small part of a central issue within contemporary yoga. The argument is whether yoga is an exercise or religious practice and whether yoga should be practiced with dogs (or pets) fall under this discussion. This sculpture enlivens this debate by showing what a yoga practitioner could look like in a moment of meditation, enlightenment, or euphoria through exercise with a dog.

The pastel-fluorescent green of the dog and person are an optical aura. The texture on this piece is rougher than all the previous sculptures. As a more challenging yoga posture, it seems

appropriate for there to be a rougher texture, because this pose will make a practitioner shake if held for a long period of time. The connecting emanation turns from the cool green into a red flame with neon pink highlights. The cloud pedestal is lifted off the floor to give the illusion that the whole sculpture is floating.



PLATE XI "INVERTED SKULL" 125 x 120 x 120 INCHES
ANTIQUE CERAMIC ROOF TILES, LATVIA

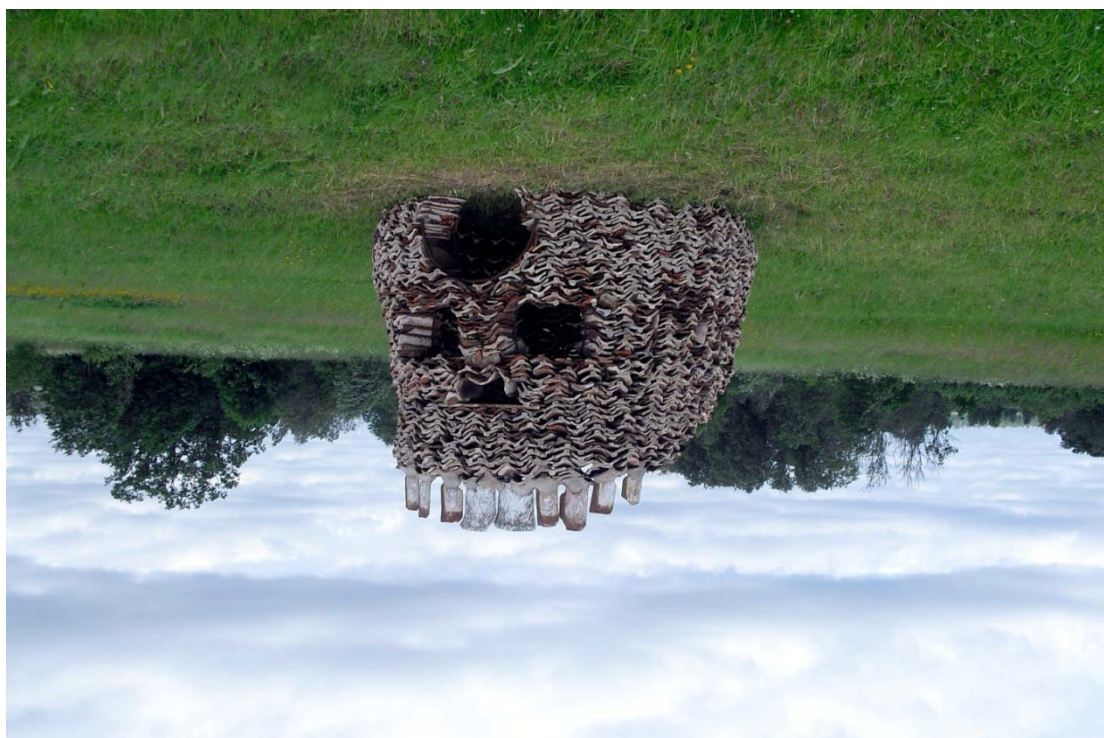


PLATE XII "INVERTED SKULL" 125 x 120 x 120 INCHES
ANTIQUE CERAMIC ROOF TILES, LATVIA



PLATE XIII “INVERTED SKULL” (WITH BUTOH DANCER) 125 x 120 x 120 INCHES
CERAMIC ROOF TILES, LATVIA



PLATE XIV “INVERTED SKULL” (WITH BUTOH DANCER) 125 x 120 x 120 INCHES
CERAMIC ROOF TILES, LATVIA

INVERTED SKULL

In June 2010, I created a site-specific sculpture at the Open-Air Art Museum at Pedvale in Latvia during my studies abroad with the ECU Sculpture program. It was constructed by stacking 200 year old roofing tiles. This upside-down skull stands at about nine feet tall. Its wide open third eye is big enough for a grown adult to crouch down and enter at the ground-level of the structure. Central to many religions, this entrance represents the “mind’s eye” or the “eye of enlightenment.” It is also associated with visions, clairvoyance, and the ability to see chakras and auras in American esoteric spirituality.

When the Latvian tractor drivers that helped me move these tiles from one end of Pedvale to the site, saw the finished sculpture, one pointed to his forehead and asked, “Hindi?” This is a fellow who does not speak a word of English and by this I presumed to mean that he acknowledges that the idea of a third eye originates from India.

I gave a presentation to my fellow students and members of the local Latvian art community, speaking with the aid of a translator; I explained that I had been making work that explored what an aura could look like in sculptural form. Many of my sculptures were of figures with emanations around them, but here in Latvia I built an aura that a person could enter inside. As I gestured with my arm, I invited them to walk into the skull to meditate and contemplate their life.

As a sculpture designed for the contemplation of life, I thought it would be poetic for the shape to represent death. When we arrived at Pedvale and were challenged with making an on-site installation piece, in a sculpture park known for its activities that combine art happenings and pagan rituals, I wanted to make a structure that people might incorporate with these activities. When Butoh dancers later performed at Pedvale, *Inverted Skull* became a part of this modernist Japanese dance style (PLATES XII-XIV).

A skull being built upside down adds to its meaning. Because the viewer can sit inside and clearly see the sky suggests a connection between the meditating participant with outer space, stargazing, and solitude. When the *Inverted Skull* is displayed in an upside-down photograph (PLATE X11) the clouds in the sky become the foreground in an optical illusion. Having clouds at the “base” of this on-site installation ties it in with the visual vocabulary of my other sculptures that have pedestals shaped like clouds.

CONCLUSION

My family background and beliefs influenced my artwork. I chose to be agnostic at an early age; perhaps that is what leads me to explore spirituality through my works of sculpture.

Yoga postures are used as an entry point for a few reasons. Firstly, my sculptures incorporate yoga postures that have invigorated me and helped me attain peace of mind. Secondly, it is practiced both as physical and spiritual exercise. Thirdly, modern tradition asserts that yoga postures can produce an ephemeral spiritual enlightenment through physical fitness. Analogous to a yoga practitioner achieving the intangible through the palpability of the physical body, these sculptures represent auras as physical things. I blended the idea of halos, auras, and *kundalinis* to allow these forms to emanate from my cast aluminum figures in new ways. My interpretations, called emanations, are depicted as wavy texture in the surface of the figures, scalloped archways, and clouds forming the bases of the sculptures.

I believe the different interpretations I have heard from viewers are as valid as mine, and I welcome them. I acknowledge that these sculptures have a surplus of meaning, some of which I am aware of, and some I will never be aware of. These possibilities add to the sculptures' meaning. Just as I say that my agnosticism is not a dystopian viewpoint, but a belief that there are unknowns in life, my sculptures attempt to portray an aspect of these unknowns.

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

Plates I – XII by Andrew William Denton

Plates XIII and XIV by Laura Fieldberga

Fieldgerga, Laura. Butoh Improvisations of Movement. 11 July 2010. Pedvale, Latvia.

<http://www.pedvale.lv/139/675/>. 11 July 2010.

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<http://www.pedvale.lv/139/675/>. 11 July 2010.

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