PhD thesis

Blood, death and desert: engaging with radical theology through art practice, history, and theory

Johnson, C.

Blood, Death and Desert

Engaging with Radical Theology Through Art Practice, History, and Theory

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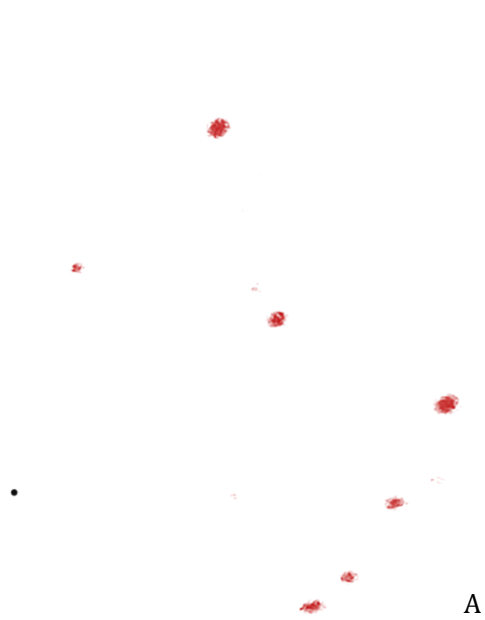

Art and Design Research Institute, Middlesex University London

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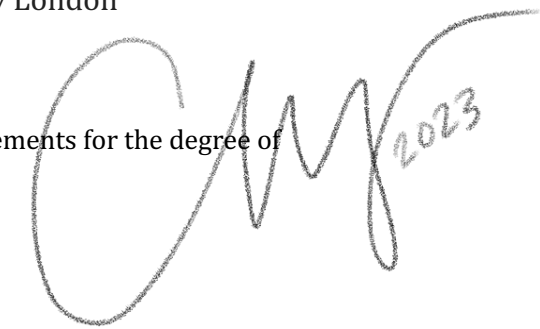
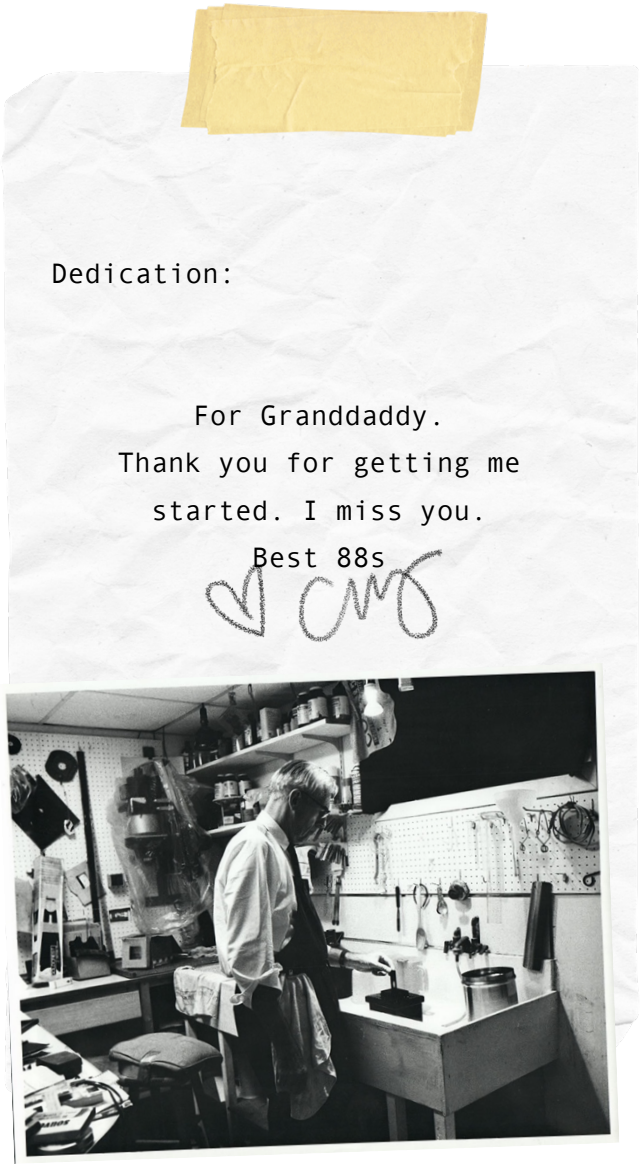


A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



Acknowledgements

Much of this work was catalysed by a two-hour interview of Peter Rollins on the podcast *You Made it Weird with Pete Holmes* that I listened to dozens of times (Holmes 2014). This led me to reading all of Rollins' books and participating in his fascinating "Atheism for Lent" programme in 2016.

* * *

Thank you to my friends and colleagues in the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department at University College London for your unflagging support and invaluable advice through this whole process. Most particularly, thank you Professor Lily Kahn and Vanessa Richards for your daily support and encouragement.

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Abstract

This work uses a practice-led methodological model to investigate the complicated relationships between contemporary art, Christian radical theology, the desert landscape, blood, and death.

It is practice-as-research comprising both constructed and documentary photography, combined with interdisciplinary research into art history, contemporary Evangelical Christian visual culture, the art and landscape of the Great Basin and American West, Christian iconographies, theology, and various strands of radical theology. This situates my art practice within the canons of contemporary and religious art between which there is a growing discourse. Radical theology, also referred to as 'death of God theology' or 'Christian atheism', informs this discussion.

Connections with the Crucifixion of Jesus and the death of God lend themselves to a detailed investigation of both blood and death. Blood has long been a powerful and enigmatic player in the human story, particularly in the Christian tradition. Blood is proximate to both life and death, and it is here the exegetics of blood and abjection intertwine with radical theology. In another connection, the desert plays a role in sacred texts as both a place of tribulation and

Colour Key:

Art

CMJ Art Practice

Important

Emphasis

Theology

Radical Theology

refreshment. A landscape with deep ties to the roots of Christianity, the desert operates as both subject matter and a means for articulating the sacred. The sacred and social landscape of the American West is central to this work.

This work contributes sensible knowledge and original art exploring issues articulated around an iconography of blood, the corpse, and the desert, from the very particular standpoint of an unorthodox Christian thematic as well as contributing to the current debates about the place between religion and contemporary art through the critical engagement of this text with other informed writers. The visual art is significant in contributing to the almost exclusively text-based field of radical theology.

Manicules (throughout):

La sfera del mondo di M. Alessandro Piccolomini (1566) Published by Giovanni Varisco & Compagni, Venice. The Robert Gordon Map Collection, Stanford Libraries. Digitised by CMJ 2016, Stanford University.

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Contents

A Note on Context and Language

European Imperialism

While this project is not about oppression and colonialism per se, it is impossible to discuss Eurocentric Christianity, North America, or blood and people who bleed monthly without addressing systemic oppression, genocide, and colonialism. I have made a concerted effort through my research and throughout this document to acknowledge these historical (and in many cases, ongoing) tragedies in order to investigate and discuss the Christian tradition and European art with integrity and acknowledgement while avoiding being distracted away from my research goals. One way of acknowledging inequity and not accepting White Europeans as the default identity is by capitalising "White" the same way it is appropriate to capitalise "Black" as a created and socially accepted identity. Capitalising "White" is not yet the accepted norm for traditional grammaticists, but it is commonly used in anti-racist spaces (Mack and Palfrey 2020).

Gendered Language

When writing about menstruation and people who menstruate I use the term "menstruants" since not all women menstruate and not all who menstruate are women.
I use "woman" or "women" when referring to people who do not outwardly present as men and are therefore subjected to the social and religious attitudes, expectations, and

misogyny not experienced by men. This definition is broad because systems of oppression tend not to be interested in the nuances of gender or sex— and, as Eugene Rogers, Jr. puts it, "I repeat a cultural construction of gender to expose and subvert it" (2021, 84).

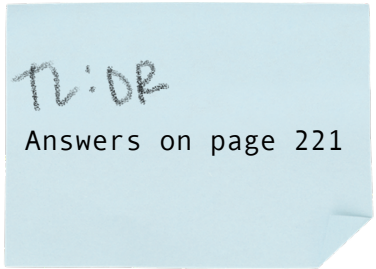
While of great interest, where nonbinary and gender nonconforming people sit more specifically within this discussion and with relation to Jesus' disruption of gender in blood is not within the scope of this research but may be pursued in further research and art practice.

Introduction

Research Questions

How do the specific themes of the sacred, death, and bleeding, addressed by both death of God theology and my practice, relate to similar works of contemporary art? How does this contrast with more traditional religious iconography?

How does contemporary art involving blood, the dead Christ, or the desert wilderness relate to traditional Christian ideology and where is my practice placed within this relationship?



How does the use of blood in my particular practice situate into how it is being used and perceived in contemporary art? How does this compare with blood as a symbol of sacrifice and redemption in Christian tradition?

Are there are established visual artists working within the intentional and specific purview of radical theology? If so, what are they doing, how are they doing it, and how does it compare with my methodologies, methods, and artistic output?

Aims and Objectives of the Research

The aim of this research is to investigate through art practice the complicated relationships between contemporary art, Christian radical theology, the desert landscape, blood, and the corpse of Jesus Christ. By creating art from constructed photography, using secondary research into relevant texts, and identifying relevant contextual contemporary art, I will examine the complicated interplay between radical theology, desert, blood, and the corpse of Christ, and situate my own art practice within the canons of both contemporary and religious art.

It is difficult for me to articulate with text *why* I have chosen these themes of blood, death, and desert and how it is they fit together. To me, the connection is so obvious it feels impossible to describe outside of my images. They came to me together—not quite in a vision or dream, but by accident when a friend invited me to go camping in the desert and bring our cameras. I was obsessed with working with blood and pig hearts at the time and brought some with me. She and I did some creative photography over several days in Death Valley and I was hooked. I've been back at every possible chance since then, unable to quite scratch the itch that trip started. I have let this practice lead the research since together blood, the desert, and death are greater than the sum of their parts, in a way that a great

lover of art or someone religious can understand. Together they are more than the sum of their history and symbolism.

After years of reflecting on the convergence of blood, death, and desert, I realised that they come together in the person of Jesus Christ. However, because of my history as a formerly devout Christian, I am not sure if that conclusion is an old reflex surfacing or not. So then, for someone fluent in Christianity, blood, death, and desert speak of the bodily personhood of Jesus Christ; and for someone outside this tradition or less familiar with it, the sacred desert, a dead saviour, and the shedding of blood speak to an existential grief and a way of understanding a world in pain. Not everything has a happy ending—hope can be crushed, loved ones die, and systems of oppression live on. Radical theology does not offer an antidote to pain the way that traditional Christianity does in the Resurrection of the Savour. Instead, kenosis[1] is complete in death.

Because being emptied out (kenosis) and dying are completion for the divine, we can then see ourselves reflected in their pain and estrangement. Where emphasis on resurrection and heaven and being "saved" *sounds* hopeful and wonderful, in fact it can leave one feeling lost,

[1] Kenosis is a Christian theological term meaning "the renunciation of the divine nature, at least in part, by Christ in the Incarnation" ("kenosis, n." 2021)

afraid, or estranged from their community if they don't have that "blessed assurance" of a future eternity of joy themselves. In radical theology and in my artwork, one does not have to put on a happy face, but rather can find affirmation in suffering. For many, myself included, it is preferable to be *seen* and validated in pain rather than to constantly reach for impossible perfection (Matt 5:48[2]). This project sets out to examine the confluence of art and religion in addressing the suffering of existential despair. This is a task made all the more urgent in the years since this project began.

My artwork is engaged in and informed by spiritual pursuits, but independent of religious dogma in dealing of the motifs of the dead Christ, the sacred desert, and the shedding of blood. The work responds to the challenge of radical theology but exists outside the oeuvre of "Christian art" because it is heretical in refusing to acknowledge a resurrection. I am no religion's official artist, mainstream or otherwise. However, because I am fluent in both art and Christianity, I can use my particular position to place my artwork in a space between them to respond to the problem of a world in pain.

[2] "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." New International Version of the Holy Bible used for all references unless otherwise noted.

This research examines a place for liminality, death, and theology in contemporary art by engaging with an expanded theological discourse: radical theology, also referred to as 'death of God theology' or 'Christian atheism', will inform most of this discourse. Though a niche field, the precepts of radical theology—including death, exile, religion, and abjection—are already widely examined in artistic, philosophical, and theological spaces. Those familiar with Nietzsche will remember that his character Zarathustra declared God dead in 1883. Søren Kierkegaard is practically the patron saint of religious existentialism (if such a thing existed) and he is often discussed and cited[3] within radical theological texts. For the deconstructed Christian or Exvangelical[4], radical theology offers a way to deal with the pain of living in a broken world.

Interest in the Crucifixion of Jesus and the death of God lend themselves to the investigation of both blood and death. Blood has long been a powerful and enigmatic player in the human story, particularly in the Christian tradition. It may be proximate to life, but it is not identical with it—it is here that the exegetics of blood and abjection intertwine with radical theology.

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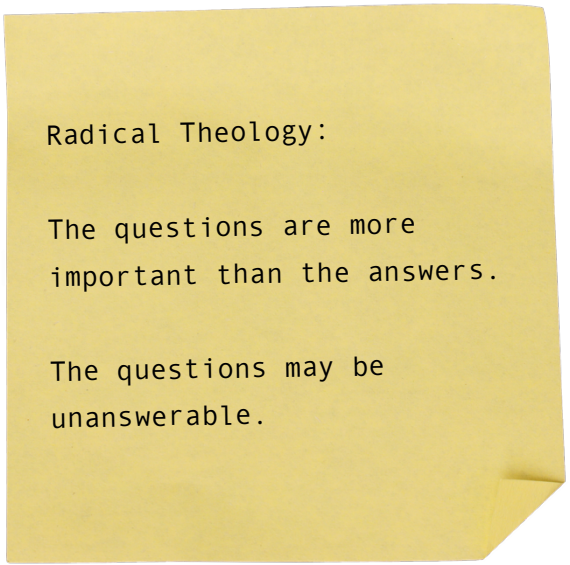
[3] Nietzsche and Kierkegaard along with Karl Barth, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and William Blake (among others) were oft cited and discussed by Altizer and his ilk (Pearl and Rodkey 2018, 50, 60, 62).

[4] A term used most often by Millennials and Generation Z referring to those who have left Evangelicalism behind, and explains a "generational dissonance" (Batchelder 2020, vii).

In death we come to the intersection of research investigating Death Valley, the death of God, and blood as an equalizer.



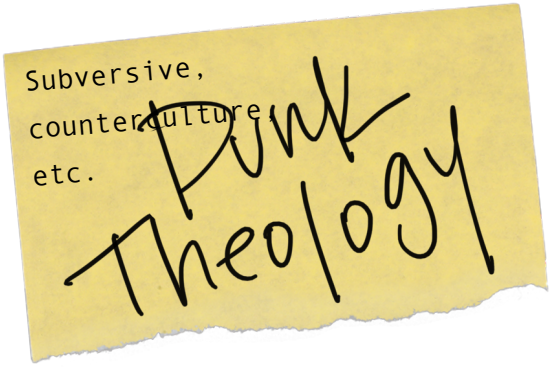
Research Contexts

Radical Theology

> Radical theology is, by definition, a hard-to-define phenomenon, with roots in the American "death-of-God" movement of the 1960s but subsequently developing in several directions, with branches in church-related theology, philosophical theology, and political theology. (Carlsson Redell 2018, 13)

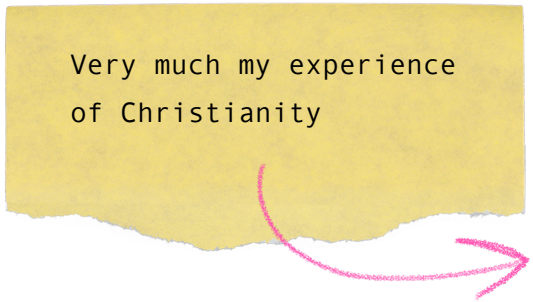
To frame the research and artworks in the coming chapters, I will explain some of the basics of radical/death of God theology, a theology more interested in asking questions than seeking answers (Crockett and Robbins 2018, 28). Thomas J.J. Altizer is widely acknowledged to be the originator of contemporary radical theology and became famous in the 1960s when he proclaimed God dead. For Thomas J.J. Altizer, the Death of God is a metaphysical and dialectical statement about the being of God. The transcendent father God incarnates in and as Jesus, and this divinity dies on the cross. The death of Christ attests not to the resurrection of Christ, but to the death of any transcendent otherworldly God. For Altizer, the Resurrection refers to the spiritual presence of Christ in the community of

believers, who carry on this powerful insight. The Christian Church then appropriates and domesticates the "good news" of the death of God (Crockett and Robbins 2018, 27). Altizer considered the Crucifixion of the embodied God in Jesus to be the consummation of the Kingdom of God and that the resurrected Christ is "inseparable and indistinguishable" from the crucified Christ (Pearl and Rodkey 2018, 57, 59). My art practice responds to the challenge that this theology puts forward and aims to *illuminate* (though, crucially, not necessarily *illustrate*) these precepts visually.



Death of God theology can also be viewed as a "radicalization of theology" that questions the relevance of traditional theology (Crockett and Robbins 2018, 28). The extensive chronology of radical theology in the *Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* includes Martin Luther's *95 Thesis* and subsequent excommunication (1517-1521), Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation of God's death (1882), and the first cases of AIDS reported in the USA (1981) (Rodkey and Miller 2018, 33-34, 37). This is because "radical theology always feeds off the dominant tradition and responds as the subversive minority" (Rodkey 2009, 165). The work of popular philosopher Peter Rollins and others who identify as radical theologians does not seek comfort in redemption (or Resurrection as the case may be) as in traditional Christian teaching. Rather, in subverting dominant traditions, they embrace despair:

> While standard religious systems postulate a kind of separation between ourselves and the sacred-object… Christianity draws us into an embrace of the idea that there is a gap operating within

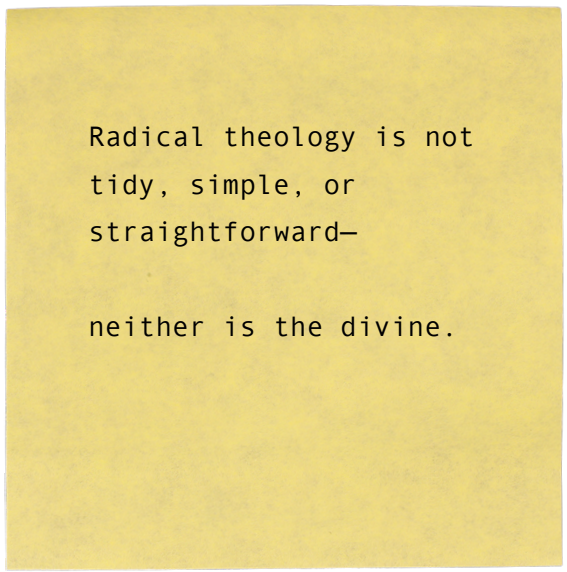


> the sacred-object itself… In short, the sacred-object does not offer wholeness, because it is not itself whole. At the very heart of the Christ event we see that the gap we experience between ourselves and what we think will make us whole is actually a fiction. (Rollins 2015, 71-72)

Such theology has a broad reach into modern and contemporary philosophy and more commonly engages with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Georg Wilhelm Hegel, rather than with mainstream Western Christian orthodoxy[5]. In one of their many scholarly articles on radical theology, Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins helpfully demonstrate this when they write, "In terms of theology as an intellectual discipline, American and British radical theologies internalize in a number of ways Nietzsche's philosophical proclamation that God is dead" (2018, 27).

My aspiration to add to the notion of radical theology and to explore new sources of inspiration also affects the choice of theological conversation partners. I will forge a pathway through the feminist and liberation wing of radical theology. The presentation of the Passion in its various stages and forms presents a glorious sacrifice of Son for Father and

[5] Matthew Henry, A.W. Tozer, Charles Spurgeon, John Wesley, John Calvin, and Dwight L. Moody are some of the best-known orthodox theologians.



Father for Son. It is a profoundly male narrative, and radical theology tends to be the domain of white American and European men, and of people who "have the luxury of living without any God" (Carvalhaes 2018, 668). On the other hand, liberation theology belongs to anyone oppressed by western White patriarchy:

> All of the liberation theologies have in some way or another killed God, a certain God, moving and shifting ways of thinking and practicing God. Black theology has killed the white God; Latinx theologies have killed the individualized borderless God; Queer theologies have killed the heterosexual [and gendered] God; Feminist theologies have killed the patriarchal God; Asian liberation theologies have killed the monolithic, monotheistic Imperial God; Indigenous theologies have killed the colonizer God; Disabled theologies have killed the able-body God; Eco-feminism theologies have killed the dualistic God detached from the earth… While killing certain aspects of a Western, Neoplatonist, non- referential, ahistorical, self-enclosed God, these theologies persisted on keeping a certain form of God alive on the side of the poor. (Carvalhaes 2018, 668)

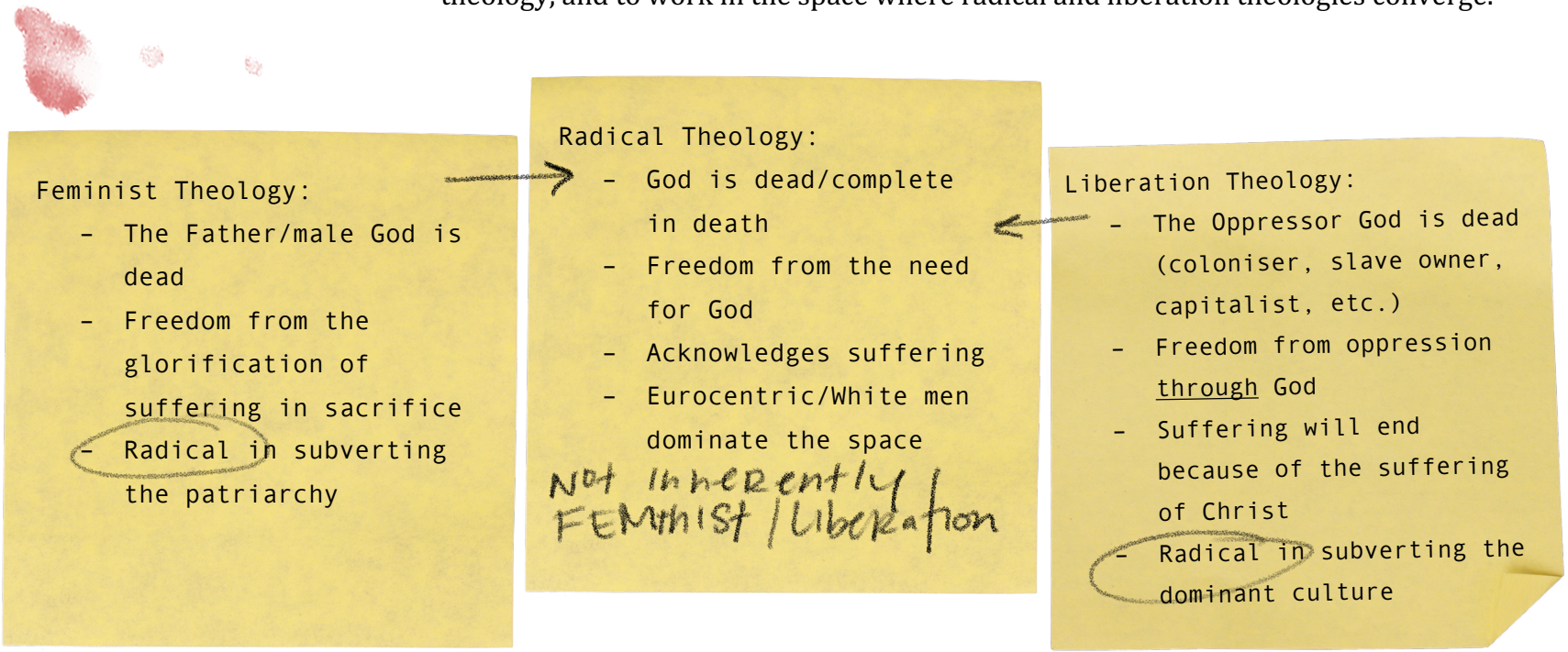
Lisa Isherwood summarises the problem of the glorification of sacrifice beautifully when she writes:

This illustration of Abraham about to murder his son Isaac in the children's Bible my grandparents read to me before bed is left an indelible mark on my young psyche.

The Children's Bible in 365 Stories (1985) by Mary Batchelor, Illustrated by John Haysom, Lion Publishing Corp., Batavia, Illinois, USA

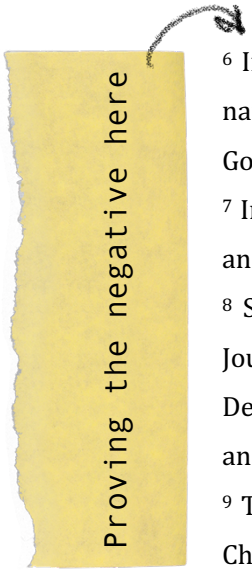
The image of a son sacrificed to his father in order that good may come of it is a common theme in masculinist mythology. In short, they are stories about male bonding and fathers teaching sons invaluable lessons about the role of the hero and the glory of sacrifice. Christianity has such a story at its very heart and has spoken of it as the tale of universal salvation. Not unsurprisingly, women have found themselves alienated and victimized by the story. Women have found that their lives do not speak of sacrifice and suffering as salvific; rather the story crushes the very humanity they strive to rejoice in. Womanist theologians were among the first to engage critically with the notion of glorious sacrifice. Delores Williams is adamant that the cross legitimizes the surrogacy experience of black women; it makes the bearing of other people's burdens legitimate when it is actually inhumane. She argues that the cross reminds us of how humans have tried to destroy right relationships and maintain the destructive status quo. The whole notion of the sacrifice and death of Jesus has been a tricky one for womanists, many of whom acknowledge that their foremothers found great comfort in the idea that Jesus could save them from their suffering through his own. (Isherwood 2018, 569)

According to Cláudio Carvalhaes, Brazilian theologian and contributor to the *Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, "Liberation theologies and radical theologies are siblings from different parents" because both theologies castigate the contemporary Evangelical expression of Christianity with "the dishonest scheme of its structures, the fraud of its hidden metaphysics" (2018, 667). Radical theology declares the death of and freedom from God and his structures, while liberation theology declares the death of the God of the rich and privileged (Carvalhaes 2018, 667). In contextualising my research and practice within radical theology it is important to me to acknowledge the privilege evident in a death of God theology, and to work in the space where radical and liberation theologies converge.



Religion in Contemporary Art

In months of searching through databases[6], scouring art publications[7], and sifting through publications both scholarly[8] and otherwise[9], I was unable to find any established artists working within the intentional and specific purview of radical theology. The closest I was able to find was a group of art exhibited as a thematic group in the 2008 exhibition in Paris, *Traces du Sacré*. Art by Caspar David Friedrich, Carl Gustav Carus, August Strindberg, Henry De Groux, Edvard Munch, Lucio Fontana, Gino De Dominicis, and Damien Hirst were organised together and presented under the heading *Traces of the Fugitive Gods* ("Press Release for Traces of the Sacred at Centre Pompidou in Paris, France" 2008; "Apr. 8, 2008"



[6] Including searching for "Altizer," "radical theology," "death of God," and many, many, more terms and names in Art Full Text, Arts and Humanities Citation Index, JStor, SAGE Publishing, Box of Broadcasts, and Google Scholar.

[7] Including but not limited to: Frieze, RA Magazine, Aesthetica Magazine, ArtReview, Juxtapoz, ARTnews, and Artforum.

[8] Some of the journals I specifically searched through are, Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, Journal of the Philosophy and the Visual Arts, Feminist Theology, Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Death Studies, Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation, Religious Studies, and Religion and the Arts

[9] These include, The New Yorker, The New York Times, Time Out, The Guardian, The Washington Post, Christianity Today, and of course multitudinous Google searches.

2008). According to Alena Alexandrova, the author of *Breaking Resemblance: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art*:

> [The section *Traces of the Fugitive Gods*] was focused on the idea that God is dead, and that art has inherited the task of being in dialogue with a transcendent, invisible world. Caspar David Friedrich is considered to have expressed the presence of God in nature as well as to have represented the death of God with the motif of the ruin. (2017, 124)

Since the field of artists working within the domain of radical theology is so slim as to be empty, the many examples of modern and contemporary art that are used throughout this submission have been selected to examine, in both accordance and contrast with, the major themes in radical theology and my own artwork. This work contributes original photographic practice to the field of contemporary art, exploring existential issues articulated around an iconography of blood, the body, death, and the desert, from the very particular standpoint of an unorthodox Christian thematic. It contributes to the field of radical theology by creating visual art that explores the specific themes of this field of theology/philosophy.

The grounding context of this investigation within art is the history and current state of modern and contemporary art's treatment of religious themes. While I do not feel my work

subscribes to any specific dogma, I do deal in intentionally religious themes from a place of sincerity. Throughout European history the institutions of art and Church were intimately entwined. During antiquity and the Middle Ages, art very often depicted biblical motifs, was made for a church interior, or expressed devotion. After the Renaissance this relationship grew increasingly tenuous (Elkins 2004, 7). In his account of the motion toward separation between art and religion, theologian George Pattison notes that, "Modernism… has tended to see in ecclesiastical religion everything it loathes: dogma, tradition, authority, establishment, etc." (1998, 3). He continues by using Vincent van Gogh's abandonment of vocation as a preacher to become an artist as an allegory for the relationship of art and church, because "art itself became a vehicle for passions which faith once inspired. The canals of religious belief ran dry and the life of the spirit, it seemed, moved elsewhere" (Pattison 1998, 3).

Despite this perceived alienation, many major artists in the Modern period were comfortable engaging with the Christian themes both within and outside the paradigms of organised religion. Artists including Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keefe, Marc Chagall, and Paul Gauguin made art exploring explicitly Christian themes (Crumlin and Woodward 1998) and Henri Matisse spent the end of his life redesigning a Dominican oratory[10] (Judd 1998, 96).

[10] However, James Elkins does argue that this "might be the only example of 20th-century painting that is both a consecrated religious work and also a certified member of the canon of modernism." (2004, 14)

With the Postmodern movement, art became increasingly critical and the break from religion more decisive as the pushback against "dogma, tradition, authority, [and] establishment" intensified (Elkins 2004, 12; Pattison 1998, 3).

In an article discussing the relationship between art and religion, Fredrick Mennekes, a German theologian and curator, quotes Joseph A. Shapiro, the founding president of the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, as he discusses this symbiosis:

> Through images, symbols, and metaphor, art makes the mysteries of existence capable of being experienced and given shape. It thus embodies the power to lay out structures of order and to ward off the chaos of fractures and dissolutions. "Since the age of Enlightenment, the arts have been a vehicle for conveying much of the mystery and transcendental yearning the Church was able to contain before it became rationalized," writes Shapiro in his foreword to *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives,* 1996. Art works, like religious rituals, were giving shape to the deepest experiences of human beings. As a kind of ersatz religion they were fighting against the doctrine of misery in this time of anxiety and inhumanity. (Mennekes 2000, 175)

There is a growing body of art that explores the contemporary place of religion in art and it is to this conversation I would like to contribute. Some critics, like James Elkins, assert that "serious art has grown estranged from religion" (2004, 22). However, artists like Bill Viola and Andres Serrano have proven religious sincerity does not preclude the creation of "serious art".

Methods/Methodology

Methodology

This study contributes to the evolving debate within and between the oeuvres of contemporary and religious art, through both practice and critical engagement within the written element of the submission. Combining practice with theoretical research is critical to my aim, as text alone tends towards linear or prescriptive thinking. David Morgan discusses textuality at length in *The Sacred Gaze*, describing it as "the intelligibility, or legibility, of [reader, text, referent, and writer] fitting together in a coherent order" (Morgan 2005, 89). This need for coherence and order appears to be a particular problem in religious thought as it tends to reduce cosmic concepts into simplistic narrative that can be understood as unambiguous instructions or stories without nuance[11]. When Morgan goes on to write, "for conservative Protestants, belief is often inseparable from its articulation"

[11] This will be exemplified well in the discussion of Warner Sallman in "Chapter 2: Blood".

(Morgan 2005, 89) he, somewhat ironically, articulates what I have long understood as the reason for my deep need to connect my artwork to my religious life. In contradiction to the importance of text in religious thought, art offers a mode of investigation that escapes the instrumentalization of post-Enlightenment knowledge. Thus both visual art and religious experience are aligned in offering an antidote to narrative thought; or as Stephen Scrivener, an art researcher who has long examined the dilemma of making art to create knowledge put it, "art making is concerned with providing ways of seeing and ways of being in relation to what is, was, or might be" (n.d.; 2002, 12).

Practice

Methodology

Practice-led research:
- Evocative
- Not solution oriented
- Output without answers
- Artefacts as outcome

Radical Theology:
- Not salvation oriented
- Questions (contemplation) without answers

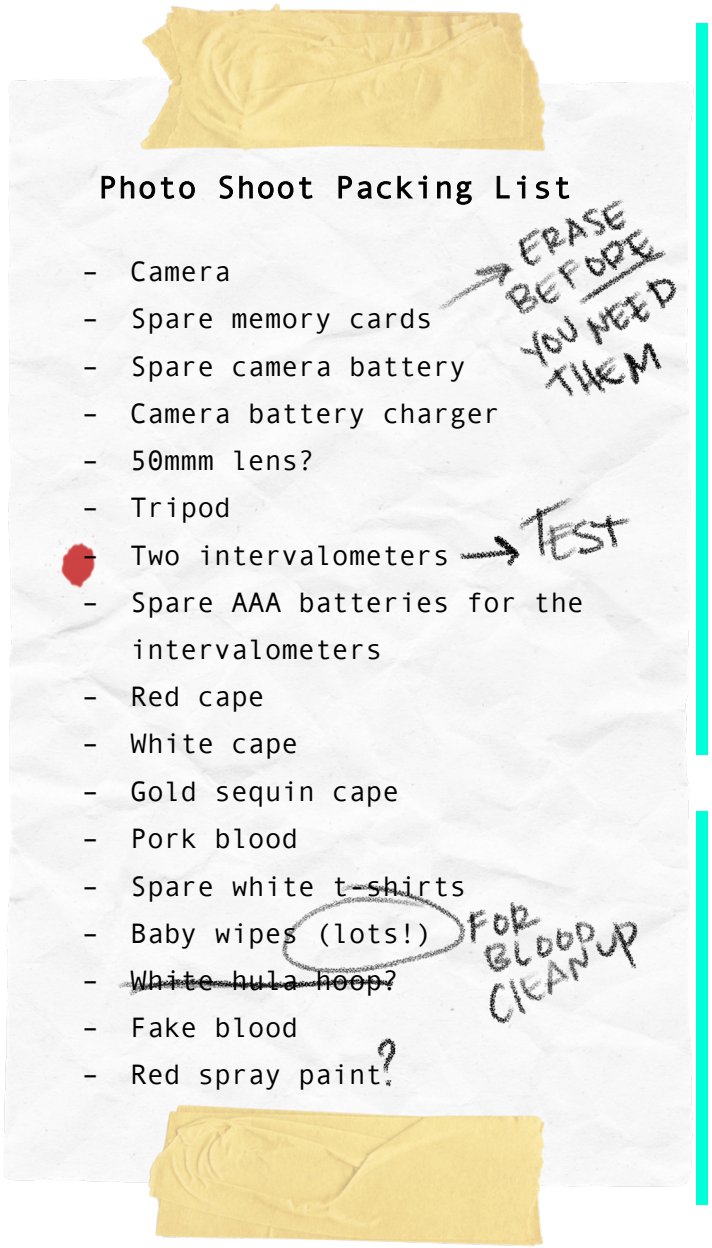
My artwork follows a methodological model that researchers Hamilton and Jaaniste have defined as "evocative" and practice-led. This is different to effective and practice-based research, which sets out to solve a problem (2009, 2). The difference between these approaches of effective/practice-*based* research and evocative/practice-*led* research "arise out of a distinction in research intent and the role of the artefact" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2009, 3). For example, in a design related project the outcome is the solution to a problem. "The artefact produced through research functions as an innovated (new or improved) solution... In reference to its intent to effect change, we describe this form of research as effective research" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2009, 4). For Hamilton and Jaaniste, such "evocative" research emerges from an established art practice and does not set out to solve a problem. Instead the research is more open and exploratory in nature with an aim to "contribute to human experience more broadly" by cultivating "affect and resonance

This is my fundamental reason for pursuing a PhD that is practice-led rather than practice based or purely theoretical.

through evocation" (2009, 4). Engaging with visual art requires critical and creative thinking and an emotional response. Therefore, self-reflexive art praxis is crucial to the matrix of research. The practice of moving theories, history, and philosophies out of the language centres of the brain and into image and paper forges new connections and communications that would not be possible with linear thinking and research into relevant texts alone. The reciprocation I intend to set up between theory and practice is well summarised in Stephen Scrivener's essay *The Art Object Does Not Embody a Form of Knowledge*:

> Although we may be able to talk of knowledge being conveyed by art this tends to be of a superficial nature that doesn't approach the deep insights that art is usually thought to endow into emotions, human nature and relationships, and our place in the World, inter alia. (Scrivener 2002, 8)

My body of artwork consists of constructed, as opposed to captured or documentary, photography in the desert, coupled with captured images documenting my journeys into the desert. Specific interest is paid to the religious and sacred dimensions of both the particular and general landscape traditions at hand. During my undergraduate study, my Head of Department, mentor, and tutor, Dr Phillip Hofstetter, regularly categorised photography as either constructed or captured— I have found this delineation to be enormously useful in considering my work. A constructed image has been controlled and created by the photographer—this can mean a fashion shoot, family portraits, still life, or anything that is



created or constructed in order to be captured by the photograph. Captured photography relies more on the decisive moment and awareness of one's surroundings and encompasses documentary, photojournalist, landscape, and candid photography among others. My artwork is very carefully constructed with a found landscape, created capes, and thoughtful placement of the human form. My constructed photography incorporates landscapes where the subject is frequently situated within and manifest in symbolic symbiosis with the surrounding landscape as a primary tool of research and expression. The choices of landscapes are specific and play equal role in the portrayal of ideas. Most of this work has been shot in Death Valley National Park and on the shores of a decaying desert paradise, both of which occupy the Western end of the very large desert that makes up Southeast California and stretches thousands of miles through Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. My images most often include a cloaked human figure wearing a handmade cape or metres of fabric that resemble religious vestments or a death shroud.

The desert as "a place of testing, judgement, punishment, purification, self-denial and sacrifice" is a compelling symbol throughout Christian scripture (Welland 2015, 188). This lends context to understanding the desert as a place to move into and out of periodically— a liminal place where one's physical or spiritual journey is paramount. Repetition has become critical to my artwork, too. While I was raised outside any liturgical tradition, I love the idea of praying a rosary or praying Hail Marys over and over. As is evidenced by the body of artwork submitted with this research, I find doing the same thing over and over again is a

Methodology

Photo Shoot Set Up

- Always stay within line of sight (or yelling distance) of car/parking lot/populated area

- Bring two intervalometers in case one breaks (not necessary when travelling with a companion who can be the shutter release)

- Set up iPhone to record movement/action to review before next shoot session

- Think through the light: keep the sun behind/above the camera (and remember dramatic lighting is beautiful but doesn't translate

- Make sure camera is loaded with two fresh memory cards

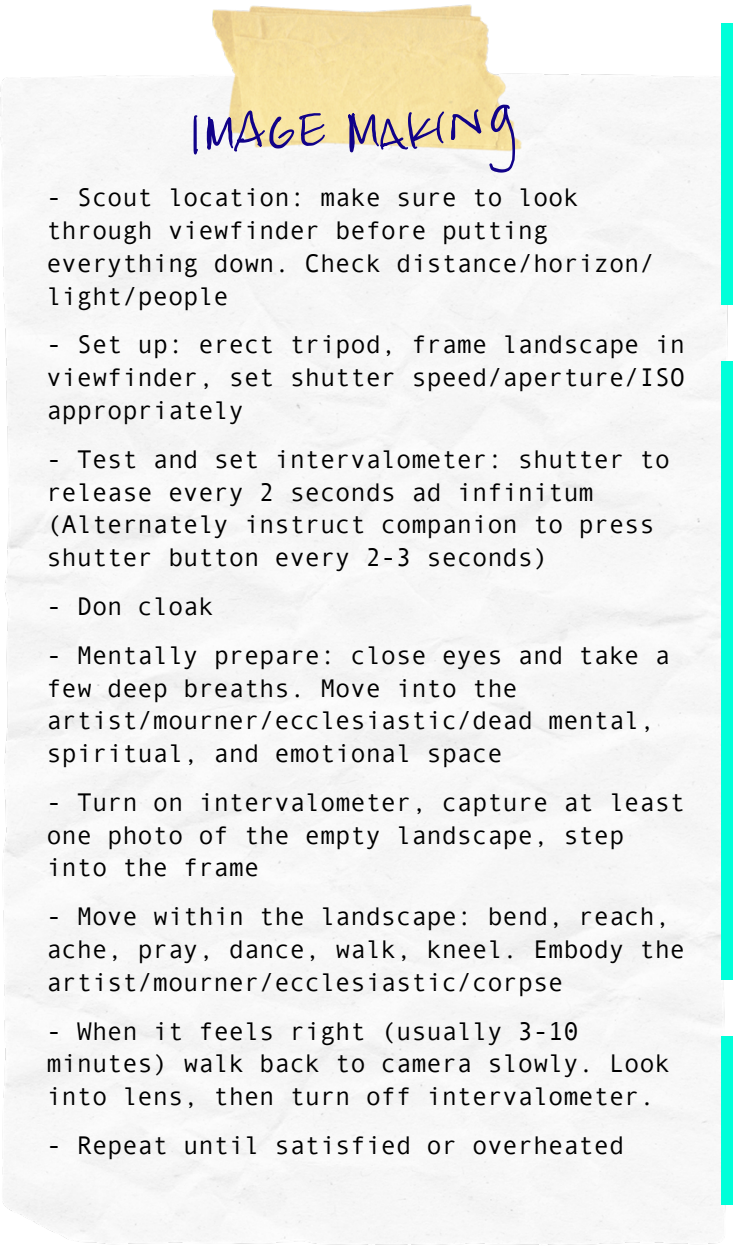
- Additional capes, blood, props, cold water piled at the base of the tripod

- Remove shoes (if reasonable)

kind of ritual of devotion: driving into the desert, camping on the same campsite, donning the same robes, and moving through the landscape over and over.

While this work is rooted in theory, it is an "open-ended approach that allows the practice and artefact to remain irreducible in its meaning" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2009, 6). My process involves travelling for many days alone into the desert wilderness (See: "Appendix 1: CMJ On the Road"). Each time I visit I see new facets of the desert; each time I visit the sky and the weather are different and create new tableaus of colour and shadow to work within. These trips punctuate seas of theoretical research with long, dusty days outside that pull theory into material existence. This repetitive interplay between physical and theoretical is the heartbeat of the project— the art practice is the guiding force leading the theory toward a conclusion.

Some of my travel days are filled with driving and some are full of materially constructing the image, though because of the scale of the region my days are usually filled with many hours of both driving and image making. The retreat from everyday life and the travels through the region are as much a part of the art making process as the actual time spent making images. To spend days living out of a car traversing familiar roads and exploring new dusty corners of the region feels akin to an ascetic tradition. Though my trips are punctuated with burritos and petrol stations, the feeling of removal from the everyday comforts of bed, shower, and mobile service are a part of the process. The quiet evenings



and early mornings of reflection over a fire or cup of coffee are not unlike the silent solitude of the desert ascetics, and the repetitive nature of the trips and the work echo through my life and research like the repeated prayers of the Ave Maria. There are travelogues written during and about my desert trips and artmaking throughout to illustrate and narrate these trips and other parts of my art practice methods and experiences.

As discussed before, my wilderness images are constructed—they feature a mysterious cloaked figure wearing a handmade cape that resembles religious vestments or a death shroud. The process of producing the garment and props for my images involves sewing and occasional carpentry or sculpture. The fabrication of the garment and anything else used in the process is done on a tight budget and requires significant time, decision making, and problem solving to find just the right textiles and objects. Resource gathering is the first part of the art making process in which the ideas become manifest, and therefore the first part of the process in which concessions and adjustments must be made. I spend days combing fabric shops and textile markets for just the right material to make my capes. I have experimented with a variety of different materials and embellishments, but hyper saturated red continues to be my favourite.

Solitude and reflection are critical in the sacred wilderness and continue through the process of image culling and editing, and the praxis of collaging, image manipulation, and living with my artwork. Reflecting on and writing about ongoing artwork and further

Methodology

Practice

research and theorising inevitably lead to further art making in a rhythm reflective of the action research cycle. Living with large prints and collaged or painted photographs develops my own understanding of my work and enables me to push it further. By living with a photo or mixed media piece on my own walls, I can see past the striking colours and what I like or dislike about the image to see the theoretical research and contemplation behind the image come out. This understanding guides further research and thus a cycle has emerged: "evocative research may evolve intuitively through the interests, concerns and cultural preoccupations of the creative practitioner, it is rounded out and resolved by analytical insights" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2009, 8).

Contribution

This work contributes original contemporary art, exploring existential issues articulated around an iconography of blood, the corpse of Christ, and the desert from the very particular standpoint of an unorthodox Christian thematic. In addition to this, my original photographic practice contributes to the exploration of the religious dimension of the American desert landscape which often remains implicit rather than explicit. It also contributes to the current debates about the place between religion and contemporary art, through the critical engagement of text and art practice with other artists and writers. The interplay between radical theology and visual art is rife with opportunity for contribution to knowledge as this field is primarily engaged through textual means. I have contributed here

not only with original photographic practice, but also in investigating what it means to engage with radical theology through image, and how that reflects the trajectories of European art and orthodox Christianity.

Chapter Plan of the Thesis

The first chapter sets the tone for this research study and was by far the hardest to write. It began in early 2020 as a chapter on death and the body and was necessarily abandoned with the outbreak of Covid-19 because death was suddenly ubiquitous. After several false starts the chapter was finally written in the summer of 2021 and focuses on the corpse of Jesus Christ. Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) sits as an anchor to which we keep returning in this chapter while looking at the artwork of Andres Serrano, Kehinde Wiley, and others including the exhibition 'Dead: A Celebration of Mortality' from the Saatchi Gallery in 2015 that I found exceptionally compelling. As I investigate these works, I discuss the state of death of the body in contemporary art, the dead body of Jesus Christ, the corpse in my own work, and where a dead messiah fits the framework of radical theology and contemporary art.

In the second chapter, I turn to examine another thematic concern of my work: blood. Blood has long been a powerful and enigmatic entity in the human story.

> In some mysterious way, [blood] represents primary evidence of the flow of both life and death, and therefore of the order and succession of things, it becomes a hinge, a threshold, between this world and the next, so much so that occasionally it can bring them together. (Gabriele 2002, 35)

The use of blood in the artwork of Andres Serrano, Stephen King, Franko B, and others will be explored and discussed, with particular interest paid to Ana Mendieta's relationship with blood and the earth which is tied to her Catholic upbringing and Santerían influences in Cuba.

The final chapter is on the desert landscape. The desert has a rich spiritual history and is a profound example of the paradox of negative and positive significations of the wilderness. Accordingly, the desert as temporal exile and spiritual paradise is fertile ground for artists, writers, mystics, ascetics, and adventurers seeking catharsis. From Abraham to the American pioneer to me, the desert is a place to journey.

The chapter on the desert landscape took significant time and effort to research as landscape art and photography were subjects about which I knew virtually nothing. The research degree registration process illuminated the importance of the landscape, specifically the desert, to my work. I had always taken the vast desert wilderness for granted. It became useful to explore and understand the particular history and significations

of the landscape I engage with, and to situate this within a wider understanding of landscape traditions. Given the subject matter, this research focused around the religious and the sacred dimensions of both the specific and general landscape traditions discussed.

In the case of the American West, photography played a tremendous role in propelling manifest destiny which drove hordes of people toward the fertile "promised land" on the other side of the Great Basin. Death Valley National Park is of particular interest because for me it embodies the mysterious siren song the desert is reputed to have. *Zabriskie Point* (1970), possibly the most prominent artwork made in Death Valley, plays into the narrative of the Great American Road Trip, which is pervasive in literature about the region (Respini 2009, 15). My own artwork echoes some of those who have tread before me like Timothy O'Sullivan and Laura Gilpin, though it is only recently that I have discovered that my interest in the desert and its significance in my work classifies me as a "landscape photographer."

Following the final chapter on the desert landscape is a short concluding discussion.

Chapter 1: The Corpse of Jesus Christ

Preface: 13 January 2021

Boris Johnson Addresses the UK, 23 March 2020

A mass grave in New York City on April 9. 2020. NPR, John Minchillo/AP

After spending the better part of six months researching and writing, shifting, and then rewriting this chapter, I abandoned it in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the United Kingdom. My already troublesome anxiety became crippling—many will understand how difficult the level of cognition required for academic research is to attain when one's nervous system is in hyperdrive. In clearer moments when I sat down to work, I realised the death, fear, and grief swirling through my life, my community, and the entire world made academic contemplation of death impossible.

To consider death from a distance; to consider it as a natural and inevitable end to living and therefore something to be probed, explored, and considered requires either considerable bravery or academic detachment. Before Covid, I thought I was brave. I am not. Before the pandemic, I would have heard the opening words of the Netflix series *Surviving Death*, spoken by Mary Neal M.D., an orthopaedic spine surgeon who had dramatic a near death experience in 1999, "As a physician, I know most people don't think about death until they are forced to" (Stern 2021; quoting Mary Neal M.D) and thought, "Not me. *I'm different*." The

Covid era has taught me that I am indeed not so brave as I thought. It taught me that despite personal bereavements, I have mostly considered death from a distance. Sure, death has visited my life; but until now it had not maimed it in the way I thought it had.

So now, at the start of 2021, living in full lockdown in Central London where the hospitals are in a state of emergency, a partner on a vaccine trial, an ever-increasing number of acquaintances who have passed away, constant fear for my family living in America, the consuming fear that I will accidently spread the virus and hurt someone, and the hope that regime change in America does not become violent again (as it was a few days ago on January 6); I again attempt to consider death. Death, who seems to linger far too close to my loved ones, whose stench tickles my nightmares and seems to hover on the other side of my front door.

I do not mean to wax poetic— not really. The words associated with death do that to me. It is difficult in the face of such extreme global suffering and medical need to step back into the academy and consider my research, but it is now more relevant than it has been in my lifetime. The circumstances in which I find myself mean the task I have taken on in this research has gathered a new kind of urgency and importance. As I revisit and rewrite this chapter for the sixth time, I do not know what lies ahead. I do not know how long we will stay in lockdown, when I can see my family again and meet my new niblings, or in what direction death's close contact will take me as I again attempt to put the death of God in art

into words. As I have been considering this I think over and over of Julia Kristeva's words in *Black Sun,*

> A depressive moment: everything is dying, God is dying, I am dying. (Kristeva 1987, 130)

Many times since I wrote this,
since submission,
since my viva,
since being sick in bed for months,
since having major surgery,
since war broke out —twice,
since my sister's diagnosis,
since being on the receiving end of antisemitic violence,
These words have rung to me more true than any other words. What is life but a slow march toward death?

Figure 1.1 *Untitled (Badwater),* 2017. Digital photograph

Figure 1.2 The dead Christ as painted by Hans Holbein the Younger and his contemporaries in the Northern Renaissance. *Top*: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb,* 1521. Tempura on canvas with wood supports. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel. *Bottom Left*: Maerten van Heemskerck (d. 1574, Haarlem), *Lamentation on the Dead Christ*, 1566. Oil on wood, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft. *Bottom Right*: Albrecht Dürer (d. 1528, Nuremberg), *Lamentation for Christ,* 1500-1503. Oil on wood, Nuremberg, German National Museum.

Colour Key:

Art

CMJ Art Practice

Important

Emphasis

Theology

Radical Theology

If you know nothing else about Christianity know this. →

FOR THEM, IT'S BINARY. ONE IS A BELIEVER OR ONE IS NOT

Introduction

Practice

Methodology

That is me there inside that red cloak-cum-body bag (figure 1.1) lying quietly on the desert floor, hoping everything is wrapped up tight and that my feet and head are discernible shapes in the images I am making. I lie there for a moment and rest. I feel the crusty salted earth under my head and the heat of the sun pounding through the fabric. My face gets hot and sweaty under the synthetic layers, but I keep still. I want this moment to last longer. To really, for a moment, be dead under a scarlet cape in the middle of Death Valley. It seems only then that I can touch the spiritual heart of the desert basin named for those who have died within its clutches. This glorious death is undermined by the loneliness of it all. In the quest for the perfect landscape and stark tableau I have removed myself from my busy life in the city, from mobile phone service, from people altogether. The image of the red cloaked figure in repose is reminiscent of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* more than it is any of the milieu of peace and mourning in the Lamentation of Christ (figure 1.2).

Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected, and worshiped as God himself is the doctrine on which Christianity is centred.[12] The Crucifixion and Resurrection are always considered together—never is one mentioned without the other because, for Christians, without

[12] The Nicene Creed is a widely used statement of belief that originated at the first Council of Nicaea in 325AD (Martland 1992, 49l; O'Donoghue 1981, 464). The full text is in Appendix 3.

The subject of the art is what is important here. Recognising and appreciating the difference between a painting/image of grief versus a painting/image of a corpse is central.

Corpse
Human
Ending
Pain
Sorrow

Only death, no eyes on Resurrection

VS.

Grief
Ecumenical
Mother/Mary
Followers
Lamentation

Deification

Resurrection there is no point in Crucifixion. Without Resurrection there is no point in Christianity. The corpse of Christ is rarely spoken of or written about and there are few pieces of art where the subject is explicit in its depiction of the Christ as a human corpse rather than centring the grieving of Mary and his followers or deifying the dead body to hint at Resurrection. One such piece is the painting that I will reference regularly in this chapter: *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) by Hans Holbein the Younger (figure 1.2 and 1.5). While I have an interest in creating images that refer to spiritual journey (to be explored further in Chapter 3: Landscape), I consider the cloaked figure in my photographs to be a corpse. In the untitled image in figure 1.1, the figure lies in repose similar to the figure of Christ in *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb.*

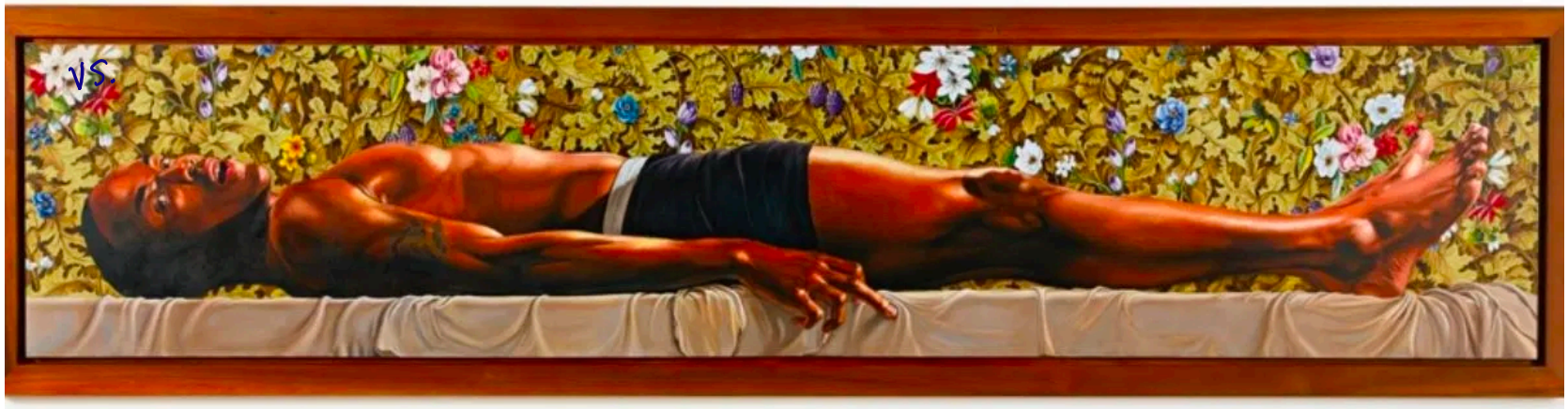


Figure 1.3 Kehinde Wiley, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 2007. Oil and enamel on canvas, 30 x 144 inches

Traditional iconography, radical theology, and my work all regard death, and in particular the death of Jesus Christ, as transformative for both human and divine. For the orthodox believer,[13] the death of Christ signals a moment of mourning before salvation. For radical thinkers such as Thomas J.J. Altizer, this moment signals the completion of God themselves (Pearl and Rodkey 2018, 63). For me, this moment is one to sit in between these two theologies and consider the entombed corpse of Jesus Christ. Kehinde Wiley's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (2007) (figure 1.3) can be interpreted as a theologically radical version of Holbein's painting with the same title; where Holbein's version does not kill the male God, the ableist God, or the Eurocentric God, Wiley subverts art history canon by putting a young black man—someone white Christians have oppressed, lynched, and blamed for all manner of evils—on the pall in the place of Christ.

Mainstream contemporary Christians rarely, if ever, speak a word of the Crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ without speaking of his Resurrection in the same breath. It is nigh impossible to find Christian artwork addressing the explicitly dead, lifeless Christ without hint of divinity or Resurrection. I started making my own artwork to respond to this under-

Practice

[13] 'Orthodox' meaning "in accordance with the accepted theological or ecclesiastical doctrines," rather than any specific denomination of Christianity ("orthodox, adj. and n." 2021).

populated space in Christian visual culture. As someone who was raised in and then (mostly) abandoned that tradition, the dead Christ is deeply fascinating to me and the aim of this chapter is to not only shed light on the lack of visual representation, but to also explore what the corpse means in both my own artwork and the work of contemporary artists.

Toward the end of this chapter I will look at contemporary art, first addressing Andres Serrano's consistently inflammatory imagery in which he creates "taboo icons" (Shine 2015). As art historian Tyler Shine has defined this term, "Taboo icons are in a dialectical relationship in which two seemingly antithetical elements are entangled in the unstable spaces of the sacred and profane, creating images that are simultaneously traditional, polarizing, and can be perceived as dangerous" (2015b, 25). While his work makes for interesting context for my research, it first exploded on the artworld some four decades ago, and so it is in some senses no longer contemporary. I have looked for more recent work by artists creating images or works to do with corpses and death. In so doing I found Andra Ursuţa's *Crush* (2011; figure 1.9) which is a sculpture of a deflated looking corpse of a woman inspired by bodies recovered from peat bogs. The pain on the face of Holbein's Christ is the antithesis to the sullied peace in the face of Ursuţa's *Crush.* It is remarkable how death in disappointment and loneliness can manifest so differently for different artists.

Overview of the Corpse of Christ

As noted above, the most central doctrine of Christianity is the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Christ is worshipped as an ideal—the perfect human as well as God himself. He controls the weather, feeds the hungry, heals the sick, raises the dead, and overcomes social hierarchies and taboos (Matt. 8:23-27, 9:6-7, 14:13-21; John 4:1-26, 11:38-44). This emphasis on godly perfection often negates the humanity of Christ and the mortal body he inhabited despite how foundational the human incarnation and death of Christ is to those practicing the Christian faith (Finaldi 2000, 169). Without Jesus' bodily death there is no Resurrection, and without his Resurrection, there is no Christianity. For the believing Christian, if there is no bodily Resurrection Jesus is merely "a prophet, a madman, or a myth;" something I heard repeated often in my Evangelical childhood. This probably comes from C.S. Lewis' trilemma that says Jesus was either divine, evil, or deluded (often spoken about as "mad, bad, or God") (Lewis [1952] 1996, 55).

Holy Saturday is the day after Good Friday which marks the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and the day before Resurrection or Easter Sunday. The traditional dogma of Holy Saturday which emerged before the fifth century held that the body of Christ lay dead in the tomb while his soul descended into "the abode of the dead" to fully conquer death and bring those who died before him up into Heaven with him (Pitstick 2007, 9-10). This view was then held "universally" until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century when a single

"correct" view ceased to exist (Pitstick 2007, 1). In her book on the Catholic theology of Christ's descent into hell, *Light in Darkness*, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick writes a clear and simple summary of the Holy Saturday theology that dominated for over a thousand years thus:

> First, Christ descended in His soul united to His divine Person only to the limbo of the Fathers. Second, His power and authority were made known throughout all of hell, taken generically. Third, He thereby accomplished the two purposes of the Descent, which were "to liberate the just" by conferring on them the glory of heaven and to "proclaim His power." Finally, His descent was a glorious one, and Christ did not suffer the pain proper to any of the abodes of hell. (2007, 28, quoting the Catechism of the Council of Trent, 1566)

The final sentence stands out to me as someone raised in Evangelical and mainline[14] environments. While I have heard it discussed and have considered that Christ did indeed

[14] 'Mainline' refers to the "Seven Sisters" of Protestantism in America: The Congregational Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Convention, and the Disciples of Christ (Lantzer 2012, 1). Colloquially, 'mainline' has a less rigorous definition and generally refers to American denominations with historical roots in the United States and are not outside of the general Reformation era heritage of the denominations named above (Lantzer 2012, 121).

descend into hell, I have only ever understood it as an act or penal or substitutionary punishment. Penal substitution (a subset of substitutionary punishment) "is the heart and soul of an evangelical view of atonement" according to New Testament scholar Thomas R. Schreiner (2006, 67). This means, broadly speaking, most Evangelicals believe Jesus died for them and in place of them. The simplest explanation of substitutionary punishment I found comes from a popular text on systematic theology:

> Since death is a consequence of sin and Christ is sinless, he did not have to die. Nonetheless, as a true human being composed of body and soul, he was able to die if he freely chose to do so. Because of the dignity of his person as true God, his death is of infinite value and constitutes the necessary satisfaction for sin. Incarnation is the necessary presupposition of a necessary redemption. (Galvin 2011, 276)

The Catholic dogma then diverges from the Protestant in what the actual consequences of sin are. For Catholics, there is a descent into hell in triumph while many Protestants understand the descent to be in deficiency and therefore filled with horror and torment. There are hundreds of worship songs that illustrate this view. One such ubiquitous song I sang often at gatherings in my youth goes,

> Lord I lift Your name on high
> Lord I love to sing Your praises

Usually more implicit than explicit

I'm so glad You're in my life
I'm so glad You came to save us

You came from heaven to earth to show the way
From the earth to the cross, my debt to pay
From the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky
Lord I lift Your name on high (Founds 1989)

This and many other songs, books, and sermons frame Christ's death as an act of pure triumph and power despite his sojourn in hell.

The doctrine of descent as part of the punishment for sin "has been abandoned in many circles, particularly conservative evangelical, ones" (Emerson 2019, xii). To rephrase, it is commonly believed in Evangelical circles that the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was an act of substitutionary punishment. Substitutionary punishment means that Jesus, who was sinless, died in sin in place of sinful people. Sinful people are believed to go to Hell; therefore, Jesus died and went to hell in place of sinful people. However, the discomfort of imagining the glorious saviour being dead and tormented in Hell means that there is a gap in popular social consideration for a death of God theology and iconography to emerge.

Because the power and glory of the death of Christ is linked to his Resurrection—or triumph over death—in Christianity, the corpse of Jesus Christ is rarely considered. It is the death of Christ and not the dead Christ. Virtually ubiquitous among liturgical traditions, the Nicaean

Non-liturgical and/or non-denominational churches typically write their own "statement of faith"

(See: Church websites in Easter citation)

Creed mentions the dead Christ being buried, yet there is very little scholarship on the dead Christ. The theology of the Saturday between the Crucifixion and Resurrection when Christ lies entombed is so often glossed over as to even be forgotten at times. This is especially true within non-liturgical Christian traditions such as Evangelicalism. For example, I used to attend a very large church in suburban California (c. 2009-2013) that held Resurrection Sunday services on Saturday evening in addition to Sunday morning so more people could attend for Easter. A cursory search through 2019 church calendars in the United States and United Kingdom reveal many more such services ("Easter at the Creek" 2019; 2019; "Celebrate Easter at Woodlands Church" 2019; "Easter Service: Saturday, April 20, at 5 pm" 2019). While diving deeply into the theology and cultural attitudes to Holy Saturday is not within the purview of this research project,[15] the fleshly corpse that is the focal point of that day is. In the words of Blaise Pascal, the sepulchre "is the supreme mystery of the Passion and Redemption" ([1670] 1995, no.560)

[15] The theology, attitudes, and art created around the day of Holy Saturday rather than the dead saviour are of interest for further research after my studies.

Figure 1.5 Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521. Tempura on canvas with wood supports, 30 cm x 200 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb

I shall anchor this investigation into the corpse of Jesus Christ by returning to *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) by Hans Holbein the Younger throughout this chapter. *Dead Christ* is a well-known and critically acclaimed painting of one of the most painted subjects in art history—to a point. It is an unusual depiction of the moments after Christ's death. This painting is special because it is so different from its contemporaries – or even images of the dead Christ in other eras.

Would injuries from the crown of thorns have lent divinity to the image?

> Unlike virtually all other images of Christ, [*Dead Christ*] deflects emotional identification… the slightly open eyes are frozen in a forever inaccessible blank stare. In other comparable images Christ's eyes are nearly always closed. (Nuechterlein 2011, 85)

Additionally, there are no mourners, no one carefully and lovingly removing him from the cross, no one laying him to rest. Christ is alone, and he is dead. There is no divinity left in the cold bluish flesh of the man on the pall.

Rumour has it, Hans Holbein the Younger used the body of a Jewish man who drowned in the Rhine to paint his intensely realistic corpse of the Christ in *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (Nuechterlein 2011, 85). It is unclear for whom or what this painting was made, though the most credible theories on the origins of *Dead Christ* postulate that it was made for a predella in the Upper Rhine region, as a covering for a sacred Tomb, or an independent altarpiece (Nuechterlein 2011, 89-91). *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* is a deceptively simple painting of the figure of Christ laid out in a tight sepulcher bearing the marks of the Crucifixion he has just endured—holes in his hands, feet, and side—though curiously absent are the marks from the crown of thorns. *Dead Christ* as an image of Christ is plainly descriptive rather than narrative or devotional (Nuechterlein 2011, 85).

A predella is a base or platform for an altar.

Unlike Holbein's painting, other Renaissance art "ennobles" the Christ during and after the Passion (Kristeva 1987, 112). The figure of the dead or dying Christ is almost always

Were it not for the title of the painting, it could be any crucified criminal dead on a pall.

Which I think is the most actually Jesus-like thing about it.

surrounded by the grieving faces or Mary or the saints. Though they are "immersed in grief" we are also to believe they are certain of the coming Resurrection, "as if to suggest the attitude we should ourselves adopt facing the Passion" (Kristeva 1987, 112). Including other figures also "introduces compassion into the picture" (Kristeva 1987, 116). Unlike Andrea Mantegna, whose *Christo in Scruto* (c.1480) is sometimes considered a kind of prototype for Holbein's *Dead Christ*, and others in his tradition, Holbein "isolated, pruned, condensed, [and] reduced" his rendering of the Christ until he had rendered his "vision of Christly death devoid of pathos" (Kristeva 1987, 115). In this painting of a corpse there is no divinity, no hope, no power. Were it not for the title of the painting, it could be any crucified criminal dead on a pall.

Hans Holbein the Younger was known to have a close connection with Erasmus, whose writing on Christ may well have influenced *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (Francis 1934, 57; Nuechterlein 2011, 28). In *Translating Nature into Art: Holbein, the Reformation, and Renaissance Rhetoric*, art historian and Holbein specialist Jeanne Elizabeth Nuechterlein refers to an exchange between Erasmus and French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples where they disagree about the interpretation of Hebrews 2:7 which, quoting the Psalms, says to God of Christ, "You made him a little lower than the angels" (Nuechterlein 2011, 86-87). Further reading of this exchange reveals the following which Holbein's *Dead Christ* seems to illustrate:

Poverty is a heavy burden,
he was willing to be the poorest of all.

Pain is harsh,
he took upon himself the severest tortures.

Death is the most painful.
still more death at the hands of others such as his,

he took this too upon himself.

More bitter still is disgrace,
he was willing to be spit upon and be showered with insults.

to the extent that he was poor, he lived in dire hardship,

in being mortal, he was equal with us

in choosing to die such a death,
he cast himself down beneath the great mass of mankind.

From Erasmus [1517] 1998, 36-37

THIS IS WHAT KEEPS ME CONNECTED TO JESUS, I THINK

[Christ] was exalted to the extent that nothing could approach his divine glory; he was humbled to the extent that nothing could reach so low; yet truly he was humbled and truly he was exalted. If someone humbles himself, he casts himself down; and he who has been humbled is at some point lower, otherwise he will not be said to have been humbled; and if he is said to have been humbled for this reason, namely, because like a servant he has been obedient unto death, even death on the cross, and has stooped to receive those afflictions which no one among mortals has suffered, or could perhaps suffer, then what impiety is there in saying that Christ degraded himself below even the lowliest of men? Poverty is a heavy burden, yet he was willing to be the poorest of all. Pain is harsh, yet he took upon himself the severest tortures. Death is the most painful of things, still more death at the hands of others and such a death as his, yet he took this too upon himself. More bitter still than death is disgrace, yet he was willing to be spit upon and be showered with insults. To the extent that he took on human form, he was on a level with other men; to the extent that he was poor, that he lived in dire hardship, he was beneath many men; in being mortal, he was equal with us; in choosing to die such a death on our behalf, he cast himself down beneath the great mass of mankind. (Erasmus [1517] 1998, 36-37)

While Erasmus criticized the use of images in worship, Holbein's view was that though "undue dependence" on images and objects of veneration should be avoided, not all of them constituted "a dangerous distraction" (Nuechterlein 2011, 97-98). Distrust of images and iconoclasm increased rapidly in the years after *Dead Christ* was painted, and Holbein certainly had access to the pamphlets and materials espousing this Reformationist point of view (Nuechterlein 2011, 26, 99). In fact, when Luther's tracts were collected and published in 1520, they had a printer's mark on them designed by Holbein (Nuechterlein 2011, 29).

In considering Hans Holbein the Younger's internal life and conversion to the Protestant church in 1530, Julia Kristeva postulates he "probably experiences a true revolution, even an erosion, of belief" and that "in his own particular way, [he integrated] various aspects of the religious and philosophical currents of his time—from skepticism to rejection of idolatry—and remodel, for his own use, by means of art, a new vision for mankind" (1987, 122, 123). However, he contributed little to Reformation imagery despite the market for such things (Nuechterlein 2011, 34).

Julia Kristeva wrote about *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) at length in her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987). Her psychological (rather than theological) perspective on the painting helps to open up the questions of what *Dead Christ* means now. Both her interpretation of Dead Christ and her idea of melancholia are useful in illuminating my relationship to a dead Christ and how it manifests in my artwork. Kristeva

begins *Black Sun* by writing, "I am trying to address an abyss of sorry, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (Kristeva 1987, 3). She goes on to use intense, almost poetic language to describe living with depression:

> A life that is unliveable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back or shed, a total despair, scorching at times, then wan and empty… I have a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted, time has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow… (1987, 4)

Not only have I lived with depression myself, but the despair Kristeva is describing is on par with the feeling of cleaving myself away from the belief system that no longer suits me. While some of my experience in this may be unique, "heavy daily sorrows" and the pain of the familiar and sacred losing meaning are not. Though she does not explicitly say why she chose to write about *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb,* I expect it has something to do with the fact that,

> Christly dereliction presents that hell [of depression or melancholia] with an imaginary elaboration; it provides the subject with an echo of its unbearable moments when meaning was lost, when the meaning of life was lost. (Kristeva 1987, 133)

Kristeva's perspective and interpretation of the painting diverge from that of art historians and opens up questions of what the painting may mean now, and how it might open up to experiences of existential grief and despair. Where Jeanne Elizabeth Nuechterlein writes of *Dead Christ*, "This body attracts more attention by the stark power of its subject than by the identity of that subject" as if the identity of this body could ever be doubted after Holbein titled it *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (2011, 85). Kristeva's assessment is that, "Christ's dereliction is here at its worst: forsaken by the father, he is apart from all of us" (1987, 113). He is here simply a dead man; a once messiah is now just a mass of rotting flesh with an "empty stare" that in no way hints at triumph, divinity, or a coming Resurrection (Kristeva 1987, 110).

In forgoing "any laboured reference to the passion" Holbein maintains and humanises grief in his painting rather than glorifying or deifying the Christ (Kristeva 1987, 114, 117). Rather than follow in the traditions of his contemporaries, by glorifying the person of Christ in death, he "examines how death transforms once-human beings into cold uncaring matter" (Nuechterlein 2011, 86). To my mind, the hands and face of Holbein's *Dead Christ* evoke "the pale green wash of death" mentioned by Rublev, in Rowan Williams' eponymous poem about the icon maker (1994, 33). Kristeva considers that his hair and hand fall off the edge of the sepulcher because they cannot be contained, "as if the frame could not hold back the corpse" (Kristeva 1987, 114), but to me the hand looks like a claw of pain too stiff and wretched to fall dawn flat by his body, not reaching out but clenching. His face, too, has a

strangled look about it, the face of a man in intense pain with his eyes rolled back in his head. The pain appears to go beyond the physical and into the spiritual. On his face I can see etched deeply his cry that echoes through time, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"[16] (Matt. 27:46) Maybe his eyes rolled back after death, or maybe he was looking up in the moment of death searching for the God and father that forsook him. This body is now dead, the pall under him is wrinkled, and his sepulcher is cracked. "Here lies an imperfect Christ who offers no possible hint of the Resurrection to come, no sign of a transcendence that would compensate for the suffering endured (Lechte 1990, 342). Indeed, "anyone approaching this painting hoping to access Christ is confronted instead with a representation of dead matter" (Nuechterlein 2011, 88).

In contrast to more traditional religious iconography, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* presents us with a truly dead saviour. It is a hopeless painting. There is something of a paradox in the hopelessness of the content of this painting and the title which lets us know it is indeed the Christ—and anyone with any knowledge of his identity understands him as resurrected and a source of eternal hope. There is a *je ne sais quoi* about this almost hidden paradox that mirrors death of God theology and my own art practice. While the subject is existential despair, an end, or a kenosis—there is something more that lies just beyond the

[16] "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

An illustration of the death of god

content. In the case of radical theology, it is the validation of feelings of despair and the illumination of learning to understand the world differently—the edification found from moving out of a tradition that claims all the answers and into one that has mostly questions. My own artwork started in despair, in melancholy, and moved into radical theology. The motion in moving out of both physically and spiritually comfortable spaces to act out the questions inside a cape in the desert holds for me the same unspeakable je *ne sais quoi* that the liminal space between the image of the corpse of Christ does with the title reminding you that he is the Christ well known to Christianity and all that entails.

The ghost in the machine

The Corpse and Me

I am so drawn to the idea of the corpse—the literal dead body of Jesus Christ—for a few reasons. For one, as someone who has been part of Christianity since birth, I find it odd that a tradition so obsessed with a death pays so little consideration of the actual being dead that happens after one dies. Surely there is a reason Jesus did not instantly resurrect after he died. Surely there is a reason that there is a full day between dying and coming back to life. That is a full day of *being dead*. One third of Easter weekend is by and large ignored. Secondly, it is while Jesus is dead that conventional and radical theology align. For one day God is dead for the traditionalist and the radical. It is the one day within the tradition that my own personal history aligns with perceptions.

The Cloaked Figure and Dead Christ

As discussed above, I see a lot of similarity in the existentialism of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) and my own artwork in the desert. Both probe the problem of a dead saviour—the loss of someone we thought unlosable. On the surface, the untitled image of mine from 2017 in figure 1.1 has a few similarities with *Dead Christ* and vast differences. *Dead Christ* is a 500-year-old oil painting from the Northern Renaissance, and figure 1.1 is a digital photograph endlessly replicable in its original form. My work is brightly coloured, outdoors, an image of the artist, and made several thousand miles from Europe. Holbein paints with Rublev's "gold, brown, and pale green wash of death," and my own "chromatic pains of flesh" are bold, stark, and often hyperreal colours (Williams 1994). My artistic style—clean lines in unadulterated desert, bright colours, images so stark as to verge on graphic— seeks perfection in the idealised form. This pursuit is not at all unlike the Christian's interior spiritual journey— that is, my own spiritual journey before I left the Church. Jesus' directive in his famous Sermon on the Mount, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" is an unattainable decree meant to push the Christian ever forward in seeking to be better, ever more perfect (Matt. 5:48).

Practice

The similarities between the images are more evident when one has considered radical theology and the context of my artwork. In both a body lies in repose, presumed dead. Alone. The violently empty expanse inhabited by my figure imposes a feeling eerily similar in its extremes to the overly cramped quarters inhabited by the *Dead Christ*: unmistakable

loneliness. Kristeva writes that it is the composition of the distinctly *alone* figure that carries the "major melancholy burden" in *Dead Christ* (1987, 112). This is true of my own desert work as well—especially in the case of the presumed corpse in figure 1.1. Rather than a grand outdoor adventure, the composition of a single figure completely alone in an enormous expanse coded as sacred and harsh (more on this in Chapter 3: Landscape) speaks to the grief of a dead God, dead saviour, a belief system that has outgrown the hegemony of Christianity. The deep connection I see between my own body of work and Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* is, as described by Julia Kristeva, "an economical, sparing, graphic rendition of pain held back within the solitary mediation of artist and viewer" (1987, 126).

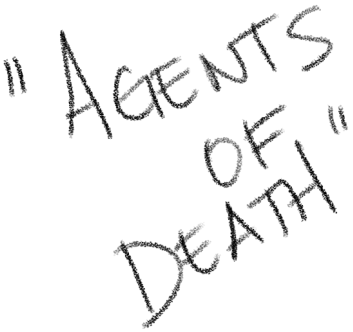
Photography and the Corpse

In her essay on Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* Kristeva addresses the artistic compulsion thus:

> Very much like personal behaviours, artistic *style* imposes itself as a means of countervailing the loss of other and of meaning: a means more powerful than any … for it fills the same psychic need to confront separation, emptiness, death. Isn't the artist's life considered, but [themself] to start with, to be a work of art? (Kristeva 1987, 129-30)

MY LIFE IS NOTHING IF NOT A WORK OF ART

Practice



And yes, my life, my spiritual journey, and my road trips are a work of art with photography as the nucleus. Since I began creating artwork specifically relating to my spiritual journey and theology, I have aimed to convey a Kierkegaardian moment because it would mean my art is more than the sum of its parts and does justice to the enormous themes on which I avail myself. Kierkegaard describes it thus:

> "The moment" is a figurative expression, and therefore it is not easy to deal with. However, it is a beautiful word to consider. Nothing is as swift as a blink of the eye, and yet it is commensurable with the content of the eternal. ([1844] 1980, 87)

He continues:

> The moment is not properly an atom of time but an atom of eternity. It is the first reflection of eternity in time, its first attempt, as it were, at stopping time…The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other. ([1844] 1980, 88-89)

This decisive, eternal moment intersects with Roland Barthes' grief-stricken theory of photography that calls photographers "agents of death" because portrait photography "[forces] us to confront the mortal limit of the human moment" (Barthes 1981, 92; Phelan 2002, 982).

Camera Lucida is Barthes' seminal text on photography theory alloyed with grief over his dead mother. In it he writes:

> Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. *Life / Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print. (Barthes 1981, 92)

Practice

As this project moves on, I find myself more and more drawn to using images that hint at my identity—using glimpses of my hair, tattoos, or jewellery to give the smallest context to the figure—place it in time and space with a body. In so doing, I create an image of myself that no longer exists because the temporal moment has passed into eternity; the me in the photo is dead. Photography addresses a future gaze and while I am not dead now and most of my images hide my identity as a way to attempting to move outside time, the me in every image taken as part of this research and art project is dead. I am not that person anymore and I never again will be. The Christian Casey is dead. The camping Casey is dead. The road tripping Casey is dead. The Casey grappling with bereavement and existential despair underneath cheap red polyester at the lowest point in North America is dead. Photography captures a moment "that-has-been" in the same way mourning a death reflects "that-has-been" (Phelan 2002, 980, 982).

Connected to death of god and liberation theology:
Photography and "that-has-been"

That me is dead.

Christian Casey is dead.

Camping Casey is dead.

Road tripping Casey is dead.

The grief-stricken Casey is dead.

This notion of a moment that is more than itself and the "that-has-been" in photography reminds me of Francesca Woodman and her work. In discussing her photographs, scholar of art and feminism Peggy Phelan says:

> Dancing toward and against the drift toward self-creation and self-cessation, Woodman's photographs stage her encounter with a memory of her own death within the life of her art. (2002, 999).

This reading of Woodman's images of herself applies also to my images as an artist and menstruant[17] "dancing toward and against the drift toward self-creation and self-cessation" cloaked in colour alone in the desert.

The Dead Christ in Radical Theology

Thomas J.J. Altizer is widely acknowledged to be the originator of contemporary radical theology and became famous in the 1960s when he proclaimed God dead. In their writing on his life and work for *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, J. Leavitt Pearl and Christopher D. Rodkey explain the substance of Altizer's theory of death of God:

[17] Menstruation and the relationship of menstruants and women to theology, the Church, and my artwork will be addressed in the next chapter.

Incarnation means the Death of the Heavenly God, God the Father, celestial being.

> The transcendent father God incarnates in and as Jesus, and this divinity 'dies' on the cross. The death of Christ attests not to the Resurrection of Christ, but to the death of any transcendent otherworldly God. (2018, 27)

Therefore, in radical theologies, Nietzsche and Altizer's proclamation that God is dead is a "metaphysical and dialectical statement about the being of God" (Crockett and Robbins 2018, 27). The death of the transcendent God in the death of the Christ is the "consummation" of the Kingdom of God (Pearl and Rodkey 2018, 63). In other words, God's act of "extreme kenosis—that is, negation or self-estrangement" is a fully complete act of love. Death makes God in Christ an "ever more universal body" that is, the whole being of God *in* the world. Ergo, "Christ is most truly understood as the source of all life and energy whatsoever" and in death his self-estrangement is expanded and made complete (Pearl and Rodkey 2018, 66-67). Death of God theology is not atheism, agnosticism, or even cynicism—it understands God as complete and finished.

Atheism is a rejection of belief in god or believing the divine does not exist,

The *a*/theism of radical theology is distinct from this in that it acknowledges the existence of the Christian god, but that god has died and therefore there is *no longer* any god.

The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb as a Radical Image

As an example of iconographic artwork representing the death of Christ, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* is a "striking departure from tradition" (Nuechterlein 2011, 86). Thumb through a tome like *The Image of Christ* (Finaldi 2000) or *The Life of Christ in Masterpieces of Art* (Ross 1957), or walk through a museum or cathedral, and you will notice that most images of Jesus depict a peaceful Christ—one who, even in suffering and death,

has closed his eyes and accepted his "bitter cup" (Matt. 26:39). In Holbein's unadorned representation of anguish in the corpse of Christ, the corpse of God, we can draw connections with Altizer's theology of the death of God. For him, though the moment of incarnation is the death of God, so too is the Crucifixion because the incarnation, though a redemptive act, did not complete the redemptive process (Pearl and Rodkey 2018, 66-67). *Dead Christ* "is one of the rare if not a unique realization located at the very place of the severance of representation" that Hegel postulates when speaks of the death of infinite love (Kristeva 1987, 136).

While his contemporaries painted Christ in glory, Kristeva says of the *Dead Christ*:

> [Holbein] proposed another vision—that of a man subject to death, man embracing Death, absorbing it into his very being, integrating it not as a condition of glory or a consequence of a sinful nature but as the ultimate essence of his desacralized reality. (1987, 119)

So by stripping away the "aura of glory and unwavering hope" from the figure of Christ, Holbein brings us to the "ultimate edge of belief" (Kristeva 1987, 134-135). Therefore, it is not unreasonable to think of Holbein's *Dead Christ* as an icon of radical theology because it "is devoid of all supernatural connotations or spiritual transcendence" while avoiding a "less traditional Christian symbolism that often exudes a pathetic, and intimately sentimental vision of the Crucifixion" (Katz 2015, 203; Lechte 1990, 343).

The person who directly confronts the death of God does not necessarily become an atheist, but, like someone consuming *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, they may take a "disillusioned [and] serene"— an arguably a/theist—stance in the face of the dead Christ (Kristeva 1987, 119). A/theology is one manifestation of death of God theology. Many post-Christian thinkers and writers in the radical theology sphere consider themselves a/theists—an intentionally ambiguous term since God is dead rather than non-existent. In *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* Mark C. Tylor defines a/theism thus:

"Road Trip Thought"

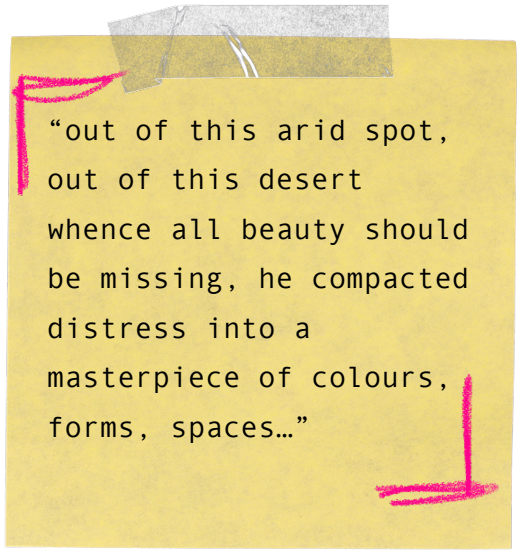
"Camping Thought"

"Wandering through the Desert Thought"

"Highways & Byways Thought"

> The a/theologian asks errant questions and suggests responses that often seem erratic or even erroneous. Since [their] reflection wanders, roams, and strays from the proper course, it tends to deviate from well-established ways. To traditional eyes, a/theology is, in fact, heretical. For the a/theologian, however, heresy and aimlessness are unavoidable. Ideas are never fixed but are always in transition; thus they are irrepressibly transitory. For this reason, a/theology might be labelled "Nomad Thought." This erring nomad neither looks back to an absolute beginning nor ahead to an ultimate end. (Taylor 1984, 13)

In her unintentional but brilliant connection to a/theology (and therefore radical theology) Julia Kristeva writes in her essay on *Dead Christ*:



> Living with death and smiling about it in order to represent it… heralded…the technician's amoralism without consideration for the beyond, one who sought a form of beauty somewhere between deprivation and profit. Paradoxically, out of this arid spot, out of this desert whence all beauty should be missing, he compacted distress into a masterpiece of colours, forms, spaces… (1987, 126)

LIVING WITH DEATH & SMILING about it.
↓
compacting distress into a masterpiece
THIS IS THE GOAL

The Corpse of Christ in Feminist and Liberation Theologies

The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb is very different from its contemporaries in theme, but not in status, context, or privilege. Radical theology is an alternative theology dominated by white European men just as the Reformation was. The fact that the dead Christ in Holbein's painting presents as White European (despite aforementioned rumours) sits, unfortunately, comfortably within radical theology as it stands. In order to be truly radical and to embrace the subversion of the dominant culture, I would like to forge a pathway for this research through to the feminist and liberation wings of radical theology.

Methodology

The *Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* helpfully defines liberation theology as follows:

> Liberation theologies and radical theologies are siblings from different parents. They both attest to the death of God: liberation theologies from the rubble of Marxist materialist historical approach and radical

> theologies from the remains and debris of, among others, the Nietzschean-Kierkegaardian-Tillichian ground(lessness) of being. Both theologies work with and against the onto-theological normativity of western thought. These theologies play in the cemetery of assured theologies and breathe heavily the dust of the modern-western-civilized Christianity… both denounce the scam of our current popular expressions of Christianity, the dishonest scheme of its structures, the fraud of its hidden metaphysics. Radical theology proclaims that God is dead because we can finally be free from it… As for Liberation Theology, it will show how this Christian God of the rich is dead, [and that radical theologians] have no clue what to be poor is all about and…[because they] have the luxury of living without any God. (Carvalhaes 2018, 668-667)

That is to say that radical theology is a theology of privilege because we can live without God. Liberation theology is similar to death of God radical theology in its rejection of contemporary mainstream and mostly White lived Christianity, but it does not reject it all out of hand. Liberation theologies kill off the White, patriarchal, heteronormative, ahistorical, nationalist, etcetera God "in order to keep a certain form of God alive and on the side of the poor" (Carvalhaes 2018, 668). I refuse to believe one can make an extended

inquiry into radical theology with any integrity and not bring liberation theologies into the fold.

The *Dead Christ* and innumerable other images that illustrate the Passion in its various stages present to us a glorious sacrifice of Son for Father and Father for Son. This is a profoundly male narrative and one that is a very "common theme in masculinist mythology" (Isherwood 2018, 569). Unsurprisingly, masculinist theology does not generally resonate with people who are not men, and over the centuries such people have found themselves "alienated and victimized by the story" because the glorification of suffering tends to produce more suffering (Isherwood 2018, 569). Holbein's *Dead Christ* is a painting of a White-presenting saviour in a European style that is not representative of liberation theology. While this painting is a departure from more traditional images and might bring up more questions about Christ's death than answers, it is still a product of its time. It does not kill the male God, the ableist God, or the European coloniser God.

Kehinde Wiley's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*

Kehinde Wiley's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (2007) (figure 1.3) can be interpreted as a liberation theology version of Holbein's painting with the same title. As a subversion of classic art history canon, Wiley's *Dead Christ* is Holbein's "sibling from [a] different parent."

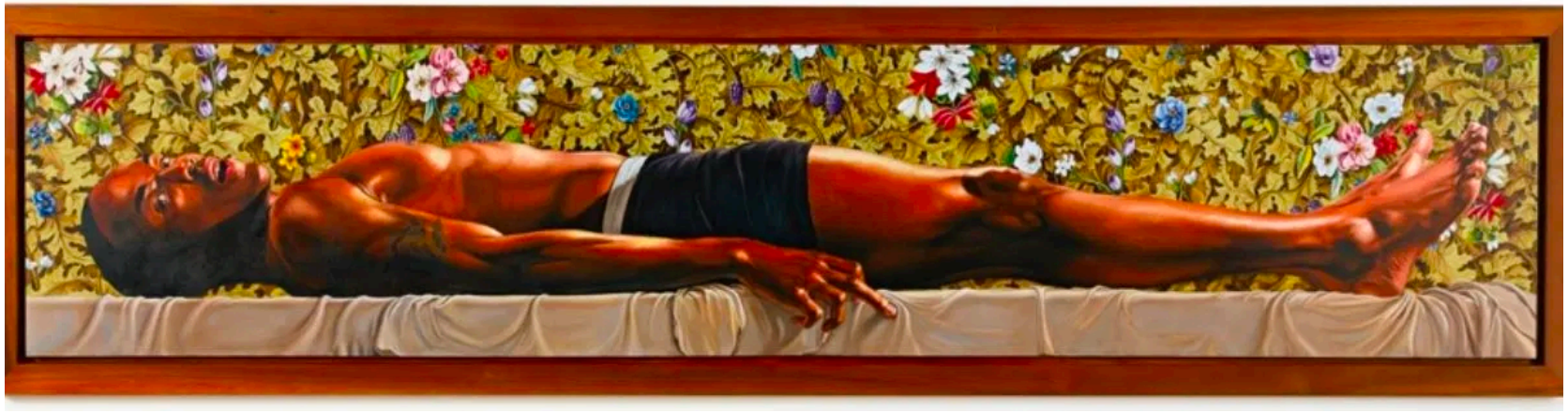
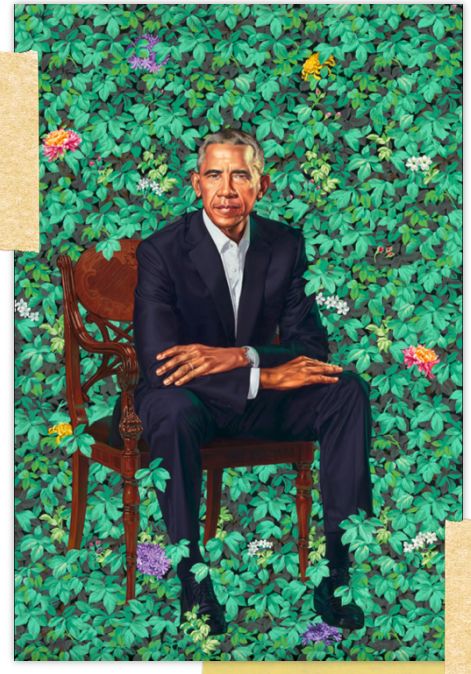


Figure 1.3 Kehinde Wiley, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 2007. Oil and enamel on canvas, 30 x 144 inches

Kehinde Wiley was rocketed into international consciousness in 2018 when the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery unveiled Wiley's portrait of President Barack Obama (Caragol 2020, 1). A Los Angeles native, Wiley entered the artworld in 2001 after earning his MFA from Yale University's School of Art (Wiley 2016, 418; Caragol 2020, 14). He became a sensation while living in New York and street casting his "larger-than-life" portraits of Black men in Harlem (Caragol 2020, 14). Wiley's paintings are very large and present strong "visual dualities" by combining classical poses with contemporary figures and bright, graphic backgrounds (Prater and Smith 2015, 46). By positioning his subjects against intricate two-dimensional graphic backgrounds and using domineering and familiar poses

from European art history, Wiley asserts the presence and power of Black men into the art history canon (Caragol 2020, 16). In so doing, Wiley proclaims the humanity and worth of people who have been systematically marginalised or altogether erased from the broadly Eurocentric art canon. (Caragol 2020, 10-14). Richard Schur, a White man whose scholarship focuses on racial narratives in American culture, writes that rather than deconstruct, Wiley "*re-orients* the critique of Western racism or racialization" (2007, 651; emphasis mine). A re-orientation mirrors a renewed understanding of theology found in liberation theologies as opposed to the deconstructionism central to death of God theology.



Barak Obama (2018), Kehinde Wiley. Oil on canvas. National Portrait Gallery

Next page:
Iconic (2014), Kehinde Wiley. kehindewiley.com

In an unusual book chapter on Byzantine art, art historian Roland Betancourt uses images from Kehinde Wiley's *Iconic* series (2014)—a set of small portraits of contemporary figures painted and gilded like Byzantine icons—to identify Byzantium as "not so much a region or a temporal bracket, as it is a condition of perpetual exile" (Betancourt 2020, 218). In doing so he articulates Wiley's oeuvre:

> In Kehinde Wiley's art, we find a more articulate vision of these recuperative gestures, which takes on negated figures across different historical pasts to create a room for representation (pasts that are prolific and multifaceted in Wiley's sources). Through gestures of appropriation, Wiley is able to subvert the violences of the history of art by in a sense mimicking its tactics to produce ethical spaces of representation. But, in doing so, his work also demands that we as

> scholars also begin to perceive figures who have not been so simply absent from Western representation, but rather who historians have wilfully ignored, overlooked, or downplayed. In other words, what Wiley's work teaches me as an art historian is a way of looking at the past through the figuration offered by present marginalized subjects. (Betancourt 2020, 241)

Wiley is known for meeting people on the street and asking them to pose for him. He typically meets people in American Black urban communities, but his more recent work has him travelling around the world and visiting rural as well as urban areas (Wiley 2016, 418). The exact pose is the choice of the subject and is chosen from art history (Thompson 2009, 482). This means that at one point there was a moment when a young Black man recognised himself in Holbein's image of an emphatically dead and alone Christ before Wiley transformed him into a redemptive—or liberated—image of life. This young Black man, this *Christ*, is very much alive. His Blackness and vitality undermine the original painting and push back against White Eurocentric Christianity. Here the White Eurocentric God has died, but the god of the oppressed and marginalised remains. While Wiley's paintings are rarely considered in their relationship to specifically religious artwork, in subverting a painting of Jesus Christ he also subverts the image of Christ in contemporary Eurocentric consideration. Seeing a young Black man in place of Christ brings into consideration the way Black people

are treated by society, the Black Lives Matter movement, and recalls viral videos that auto-play on social media of Black men being murdered by police.

Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Barak Obama is a reformulation of historically White political power (Caragol 2020, 19-20). His far less famous *Dead Christ* is a subversion of the entire culture of Christian White supremacy. It is known that Wiley uses his art "to make visible and enfranchise those who have been systematically denied opportunities, recognition, and full citizenship" (Caragol 2020, 22). In the face of generations of subjugation, lynching, oppression, and inequalities, Wiley's Christ bears no stigmata— no pallor of death. The pall is still there, still wrinkled, but the gloom, the close quarters, and the sepulchre are lost in favour of the bright, two-dimensional background that Wiley is known for. In this rearticulation of Holbein's *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Kehinde Wiley has killed off the Eurocentric Christ of radical and orthodox Northern Christendom in favour of a much more vibrant and alive "figuration offered by present marginalized subjects" (Betancourt 2020, 241). This new Christ radiates vitality and makes eye contact with the viewer; gone is the emaciated man with eyes rolling back in pain, here is someone alive who understands pain and yet survives. Here is a Christ of liberation—of hope.

The Corpse of Christ in Christian Visual Culture

As noted in my introduction, the dead body of Jesus Christ is rarely glimpsed in the largely iconoclastic contemporary mainline or Evangelical Christian church. As mentioned earlier, the death of Jesus is only ever mentioned in tandem with his Resurrection—the two are never separated. Occasionally in Protestant settings one will see a depiction of the Crucifixion, but just a simple cross is far more common. As will be discussed further in the upcoming chapter on blood, Protestant traditions—including Evangelicals—are averse to images and art in sacred spaces except when those images are mass produced and understood as illustrations of sacred texts. Where they do occur, "Christian images are themselves inherently iconoclastic, by virtue of the fact that a central theme [of Christian art] is the death, or the "breaking," of God's true image— Christ" (Alexandrova 2017, 13).

History of the Dead Christ in Christian Liturgy

In the late Middle Ages, Good Friday "was a day of deepest mourning. No Mass was celebrated, and the main liturgical celebration of the day was a solemn and penitential commemoration of the Passion" (Eamon 2005, 29). Easter Vigil was observed by consecrating three hosts on Maundy Thursday, one each for the Eucharist on Thursday, Friday, and Sunday; the host for Sunday was kissed by the congregation then wrapped up and placed in a sepulchre until Easter morning. The sepulchre "was normally a timber

frame, probably the shape and size of the [coffin] which, covered with a pall, formed the focus of the normal obituary ceremonies at funerals…. A watch was then kept before it continually till Easter" (Eamon 2005, 29-30). "In this way, the medieval Christians literally buried the body of Christ… then [kept] vigil until Easter morning, when the host was returned to its usual place above the altar" (Pickell 2020, 7). During the Protestant Reformation (c. 1517- c. 1600) images, rites, and rituals were almost completely done away with because the Reformers were highly suspicious of such things and often ordinary people did not fully understand the ceremonies being used in worship anyway (Bradshaw 1999, 5). Because of this, most rituals and liturgies—for example, being marked with ash on one's forehead for Ash Wednesday—were eliminated from everyday lived Christianity meaning Holy Week lost much of its gravity and even Easter was "much like any other Sunday of the year" (Bradshaw 1999, 5). Anglican priest, theologian, historian of liturgy, and academic Paul F. Bradshaw says of this change in observance:

> In examining the Christian feast of Easter… we are faced with [the] phenomenon, where the same name persists, but the liturgical celebration to which it refers changes its form and function quite radically in the course of history. (1999, 1)

These days, Christians have no problem fixating on the actions of the Passion—on the dying and rising of Christ— "but the *being dead* of Christ has found relatively little expression in its

theology and liturgy" (Pickell 2020, 1; emphasis mine). During the course of the change in observance noted by Bradshaw, Pascha—which was celebrated as a Christian version of Passover— became Easter. Critically, the observance of Easter shifted from "Christ, the Passover lamb,18 sacrificed for us" to "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" (Bradshaw 1999, 1-2). In a recent article for *Christianity Today*, a mainstream Christian magazine with a wide readership, Thomas Ryan Pickell, a religious studies and divinity scholar writes of contemporary attitudes to Holy Saturday:

> [In Christians'] eagerness to express Easter joy, [they threaten] to eclipse, and therefore obscure, the theological integrity and significance of Holy Saturday … a liturgical gap—a pregnant pause—could be a meaningful way to attend to the meaning of Holy Saturday. In practice, however, we tend to treat the extended silence of Good Friday as a way to simply move on. (2020, 3, 5)

The Presbyterian Church, for example, concludes its liturgy for Good Friday with the instructions, "All depart in silence. The service continues with the Easter Vigil, or on Easter

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[18] "Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." (1 Cor. 5:7)

Day" (*Book of Common Worship* 1993, 291). Even in the Catholic tradition, "Holy Saturday is the only day of the entire year without a liturgy of any sort. It is purely a day of waiting. And the children, it is said, play by the tomb without realizing what is going on" (Leliaert 1989, 109). Anecdotally, I spent the first 30-plus years of my life very involved in every church group I could get my hands on and enthusiastically dedicated my life to living out my religion the best I could. I was a model participant and never once considered the dead body of Jesus or heard the term "Holy Saturday" until I began academic inquiry into my faith systems and its relationship with art and my artistic aspirations during my master's degree studies.

Figure 1.4.i Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ,* 2004. [*Dead*] Screen capture of the corpse of Jesus Christ

The Passion of the Christ is a Problematic Icon

Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* depicts the hours leading up to the death of Jesus Christ by Crucifixion. Because of repeated antisemitic, racist, homophobic and misogynistic incidents, Mel Gibson is not someone whose work I am happy about bringing

into my research, but to discuss depictions of the death of Jesus in an Evangelical setting is to discuss this film (Malina 2021; Wagmeister 2020). It was widely anticipated when it was released. My own church even booked out the cinema so we could all go together and bring friends. I was attending Community College, working at Starbucks, and running a young adults group at my church at the time. I was excited to invite friends from work to the film so they could get an idea of the faith that was central to my life. I do not remember with any

Figure 1.4.ii Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ,* 2004. [*Lamentation*] Screen capture of the corpse of Jesus Christ

clarity my own feelings about the film in the moment, but I remember sitting in the cinema next to a work friend who was sobbing her eyes out through almost the whole film. I later learned that she had been raised in a Christian household but had backslidden.[19] Seeing the film seemed to change something in her, and at least in my imperfect memory, was a turning point in her life when she re-dedicated her life to Christianity, and we became lifelong best friends. She does not have the same memory of *The Passion of the Christ* being such a specific turning point in her life, but because this is so firmly rooted in my psyche the film takes up more space in my personal history than it otherwise would. I watched *The Passion of the Christ* for the second ever time on a laptop for this project. I admit it was very hard to watch and I did not actually make it all the way through the film. It is gruesome and awful to watch someone being beaten for almost the entirety of the film. It is also *very* White, and uncomfortably antisemitic—it is clearly a film made by someone (Mel Gibson) with a very specific and very 2000s White Evangelical interpretation of who Jesus was and what he was about.

[19] A Christianese term for when a Christian "falls back into sin" (Rice 1943, 4). I do not think people mean it to be a particularly derogatory term, but it is judgmental and something to be feared.

Figure 1.4.iii Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ,* 2004. [*Pieta*] Screen capture of the corpse of Jesus Christ

Jesus dies in the final five minutes of the two hour and seven-minute film. His dead body—as opposed to the dark sky, earthquake, Mary, or the other grieving people around him—is only fully the subject of the film and imagery for 4 seconds (1:52:22-26) immediately after he breathes his last breath. Once he has been stabbed in the side by a Roman soldier, the body is in the background of the frame as chaos breaks out around it because of a great wind and earthquake. His badly bruised and bloody body is then slowly lowered from the cross to

form the familiar tableaus that have proliferated through Christian history (1:55:46-1:56:03; figure 1.4). Focus is soon moved to his mother Mary as the death scene ends with a pietà. The screen fades to black briefly before a glorious Resurrection sequence. The grief and pain of Holbein's Dead Christ and the waiting of Holy Saturday is completely glossed over in this film made for contemporary Christians.

The Passion of the Christ is like my artwork in that it is obsessed with blood and gore, but the discernible similarities end there. It is useful as a point of reference though because it is emblematic of my history as a middle class White American Christian. By this I mean that I consumed this work of art in good faith. I brought people I cared about to see the film with me, and I believed it to be an honestly intentioned and authentic representation of the hours leading up to the death of the Saviour and prophet I worshiped. This film was my first real brush with iconography. It stood as an icon or representation of what I believed in a way nothing else ever had before in my tradition. I realise with hindsight that this film was a commodification of my sincere beliefs created at the hands of someone with hateful ideologies, which the Jesus I knew would have condemned in the strongest possible terms. I can see now that the iconoclasm of the culture of my youth meant that I did not find myself as an artist until my late twenties— at about the same time as I began to outgrow Christianity. Where *The Passion of the Christ* is an icon for White Christianity, my artwork aims to be a steppingstone toward an iconography of radical theology beholden to no one but myself—a personal icon not aiming to be all things to all people.

Practice

Figure 1.5 DETAIL *Corpus* David JP Hooker, 2013. "Antique" corpus of Christ, dust from vacuum, adhesive. Approx. 5ft x 5ft (exact size unknown), image from davidjphooker.com

The Missing Corpse

After finding nothing about the dead Christ in the *Christians in the Visual Arts*[20] twenty-five-year celebration publication (*Faith + Vision: Twenty-five years of Christians in the Visual Arts* 2005) or anywhere else I looked, I was happy to finally come across an interesting piece from American artist and Wheaton College professor, David JP Hooker, called *Corpus* (2013, figure 1.5). The piece is a large ceramic European-looking crucified Christ that has been coated with the detritus from vacuum bags the janitorial staff at Wheaton College provided for the artist. Hooker points out that the vacuum bags come from the dorms, so they contain hair, nails, skin cells, and other debris from students. *Corpus* is Latin for "body"— this is where the word "corpse" comes from ("corpse, n." 2021). Using human dirt to cover the Christ is not something I have seen or considered before so was intrigued to look further into this piece. I was disappointed to find the artist describes *Corpus* as "a sculptural meditation on the death *and* resurrection of Jesus." (Hooker n.d.; emphasis mine) It is never

[20] Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) is a non-profit organisation that hosts exhibitions, publishes books and "encourages Christians in the visual arts to develop their particular callings to the highest professional level possible" ("About CIVA").

the death or dead Christ; Resurrection must always be muttered with the same breath[21].

Along with the matter of the missing corpse in Christian visual culture, the grief and waiting associated with the Crucifixion of Jesus has been wiped from contemporary lived Christianity. In orthodox traditions, Holy Saturday is a day of anticipation, rather than grief, because though the night is dark, "joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5b, English Standard Version). The faithful know the score and are confident Christ rose from the dead on the third day. In an article on grief and Holy Saturday for the journal *Death Studies*, Richard M Leliaert writes:

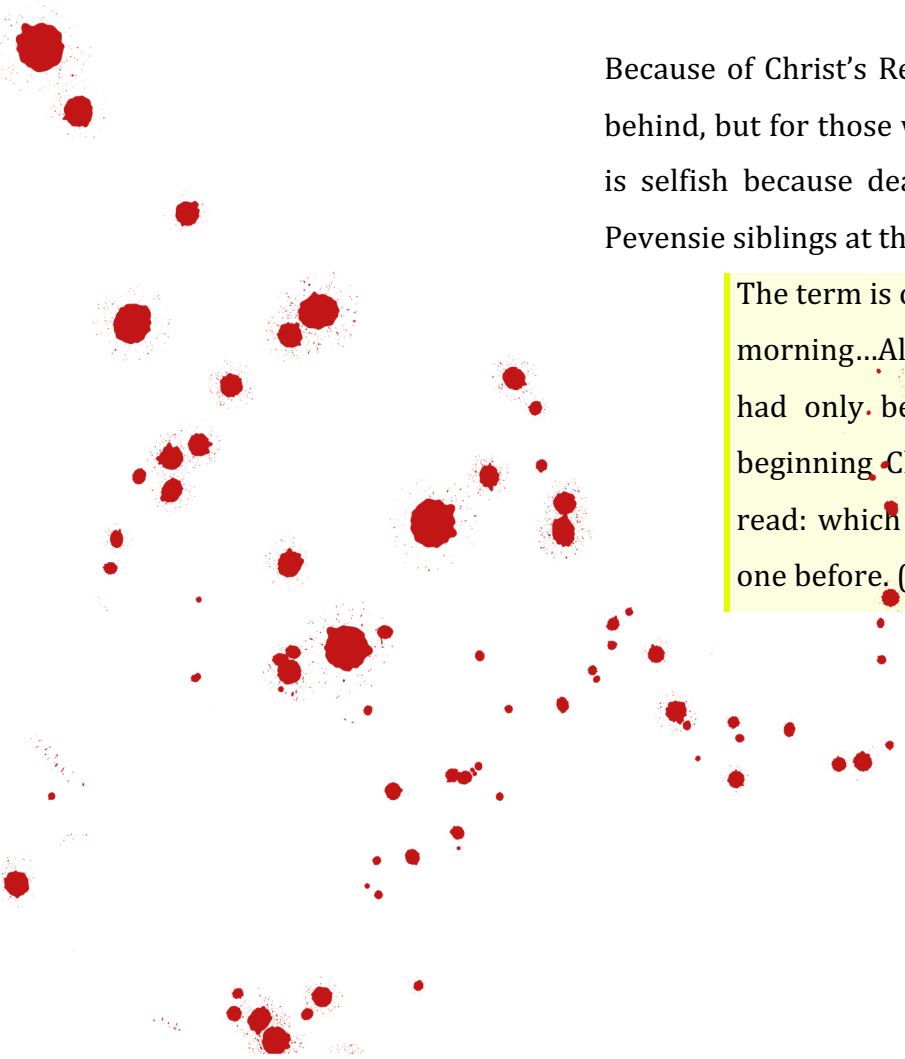
> While Good Friday and Easter rightfully comprise the real hope of the believing Christian, much as the Exodus from Egypt and the entry into the promised land might do in the Jewish tradition, I sense a need in grief bereavement work for a more explicit theology of Holy Saturday, on the one hand, and of the wanderings in the wilderness on the other. Just as Christ did not pass instantly from death to life, but endured Holy Saturday in between, so bereaved people suffering from loss do

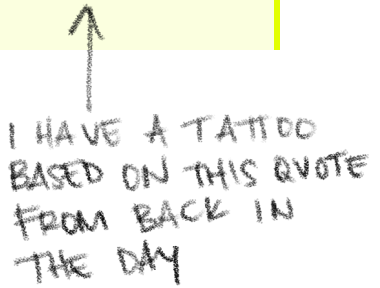
[21] I searched through three monographs on the theology of Jesus Christ and incarnation including a digital search that yielded three or fewer results for the word "dead" in each—none of them referring to Jesus Christ (Shoop 2010; Root 2007; Altizer 1997).

> not move immediately from grief to joy. It takes time to work through grief, and the path of the journey is often winding and uncertain, much like the wanderings for 40 years in the wilderness for the Israelites of old. (Leliaert 1989, 108)

Because of Christ's Resurrection and promise of eternal life, death is painful for those left behind, but for those who die it is a glorious beginning to eternal life to be celebrated. Grief is selfish because death is not really real to a Christian. When C.S. Lewis killed off the Pevensie siblings at the end of his famously allegorical *Chronicles of Narnia* series he wrote:

> The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning…All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (Lewis 1956, 113-114)





The Corpse in Contemporary Art

Contemporary art is variously defined and exists without fixed boundaries—sometimes it means from 1947 on, sometimes it means art created since the 1970's, and the Tate has defined it as art made "in the last 10 years, on a rolling basis" ("Contemporary Art" n.d.). In their article on *The State of Art History*, art historian Terry Smith points out that contemporary art is often a "hot topic of informal discourse, but rarely has it been framed in historical terms" (2010, 366). Smith goes on to define contemporary art thus:

> Place making, world picturing, and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being. Increasingly, they override residual distinctions based on style, mode, medium, and ideology. They are present in all art that is truly contemporary. Distinguishing, precisely, this presence in each artwork is the most important challenge to an art criticism that would be adequate to the demands of contemporaneity. Tracing the currency of each artwork within the larger forces that are shaping this present is the task of contemporary art history. (Smith 2010, 380)

As such, the 1990s can and does very often fall into the category of 'contemporary art' and for the purposes of this research and for contextualising my own art practice, using art from the 1990s is as appropriate as anything else. Though it seems impossible, there is little in the

Figure 1.6 Andre Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987, digital image, andresserrano.org

art world looking at corporal death right now, and indeed, there are virtually[22] no artists who are working with corpses. For example, *Mortality: A Survey of Contemporary Death Art*[23] curated by Donald Kuspit at the American University in Washington D.C., does not feature a single corpse (Kuspit and Curcio 2020). I expect this will change with Covid-19; just as there was a dearth of artwork about the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s, the harsh reality of death—of friends, family, and members of one's community dying—has returned to the forefront of world consciousness with a force even more dramatic and more destabilising than the AIDS epidemic. Anecdotally, I have noticed a shift in the interests and behaviours of myself and the people around me and a constant referring to life as pre- or post-Covid-19 pandemic.

Andres Serrano

Andres Serrano's famously controversial *Immersions* series (1987-1990) shocked and enraged Christians around the world (Chrisafis 2011; Holpuch 2012). The most famous and provocative from the series is *Piss Christ* (figure 1.6; 1987) in which Serrano reminds us of

[22] Here again I find myself in the difficult position of trying to prove a negative, but after weeks of searching through art databases, the Middlesex University and UCL libraries, dozens of art publications, and deep diving on Google, I cannot find any artists working with corpses in the last decade.

[23] Ironically cancelled due to COVID-19 but originally scheduled April 4-May 24, 2020.

the dual nature and fleshly reality of the Christ figure. Jesus Christ was a person who ate, drank, slept, bled, shit, vomited, and died. Though often taken for blasphemy (Chrisafis 2011), Serrano's *Immersion* series can be taken to "imply a meeting of the human, physical body (the substance of the urine) and the non-corporeal spiritual dimension of Christ, represented both by his statue and its illumination" (Wood 2001, 1214). Indeed, Serrano himself says of his work, "To me they're icons... I've never felt that I destroy icons, I just feel as if I'm developing new ones" (Weintraub, Danto, and McEvilley 1996, 162; Shine 2015, 25). In his article on *Taboo Icons*, Tyler Shine explains why Serrano's photographs are so inflammatory:

Figure 1.7 Andres Serrano, *Homicide*, 1992, digital image, andresserrano.org

> [Art historian] W. J. T. Mitchell proposes that there are two beliefs at play when people are offended by images which are helpful when thinking about the controversies that accompany Serrano's photographs. First, there is the notion that the image is somehow transparently and immediately connected to what it represents and second, it is believed that the image possess some kind of vitality. The latter view is a "magical" and "superstitious" attitude towards images… [and] modern viewers are not exempted from this way of thinking. (2015, 29)

"Magical" thinking applies to both Art & Religion

Andres Serrano's infamous *The Morgue* series is a set of photographs taken in a morgue. The corpses are anonymous, and each photograph is titled by how the person pictured died, for example *Rat Poison Suicide* (1992) and *Jane Doe Killed by Police* (1992). The images range from a simple tableau reminiscent of Caravaggio such as *Homicide* (1992, figure 1.7) to gory and disturbing in unflinching documentation of a decimated body such as *Burn Victim* (1992), which shows a charred man in profile with his neck flayed open, his head is thrown back, and his mouth open in a way that reminds us that this is a real person who died in pain, and not merely an uncanny slab of meat on a table.

Serrano has said that he did not go out looking for violent deaths when he made the series, it just happened that was who was there at the time[24] (Coulthard 1998, 22:52). When exhibited, these photographs are printed at approximately 50 by 60 inches—much larger than actual size and large enough to make the images demand the whole attention of the viewer. While I disagree with the sentiment, in the *Morgue* series it is clear to see why Andres Serrano has been repeatedly criticized for aestheticizing and trivialising death (Shine 2015, 39). In a 1993 interview with BOMB Magazine about this series he says,

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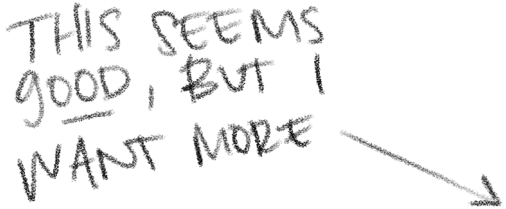
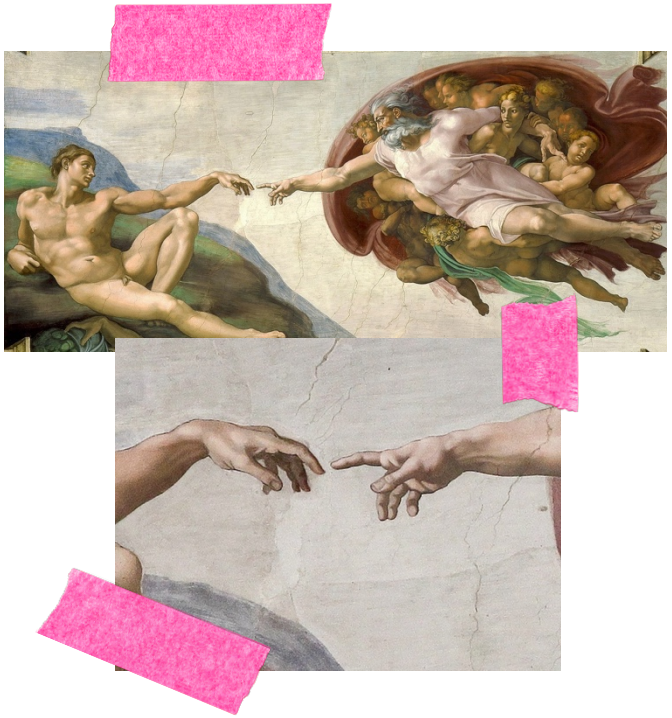
[24] It took Serrano ten years from conception to creation because access into a morgue was so difficult (Coulthard 1998, 08:49).



The morgue is a secret temple where few people are allowed. Paradoxically, we will all be let in one day. I think you're upset and confused that I've brought you there prematurely. My intention is only to take you to this sacred place. The rest is entirely up to you. (Blume

Figure 1.8 Left: *Knifed to Death*, 1992 Right: *Knifed to Death II*, 1992 Both: Andres Serrano, digital image, andresserrano.org



1993)

My own strong attraction to Serrano's work and his *Morgue* series in particular is resonant with what Tyler Shine points out in *Taboo Icons: The Bodily Photography of Andres Serrano* when he writes, "the visceral and seductive qualities of Serrano's practice positions his photographs in dialogue with a longer and polemical tradition regarding experiencing Christianity through the body" (Shine 2015, 27). The *Morgue* series illustrates well a medieval sort of Christian visual culture in its "comingling and separation of the material and immaterial in the individualized spiritual experience" (Shine 2015, 27). I will further discuss medieval traditions of bodily Christianity with regards to blood in Chapter 2. The images *Knifed to Death I* (1992) and *Knifed to Death II* (1992, figure 1.8) not only hint at bodily Christianity, but also bring to mind *The Creation of Adam* (c. 1508-1512) by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, and the stigmata of Jesus Christ. Though the wounds of Christ from Crucifixion are most often depicted at the centre of his hands, I was taught in Sunday School that the nails would have gone through his wrists since his hands would tear holding up his weight. In my mind's eye Christ's wounds looked just like the wound in *Knifed to Death I.* In investigating this in scholarly sources, I discovered that where Christ's hands/wrists were pierced is not something we can know for sure as Romans crucified people in "a wide variety of positions" and no Roman era instructions for how to crucify someone have been discovered (Maslen and Mitchell 2006, 185-186).

Practice

The 1990s as a period of "heightened anticipations and retrospections" with the AIDS crisis a recent painful memory, and the millennium looming large, may be what compelled artists like Andres Serrano and Sally Mann to confront death so literally and viscerally in their *Morgue* (1992) and *Body Farm* (c. 2000) series respectively (Burwick 1999, 117). In discussing his *Morgue* series for the television documentary *Vile Bodies*, Serrano says,

> For me, that is what death is all about: something creepy, scary, or eerie. I think that photograph is very indicative of how a lot of people feel about death. They fear it and sometimes they don't quite understand what they fear. (Coulthard 1998)

After a decade as difficult as the 1980s—especially for queer communities—and with no idea what chaos Y2K/the millennium would wreak, it makes sense that artists would spend the 1990s probing death and fears of the unknown.

DEAD: A Celebration of Mortality

In 2015 the Saatchi Gallery put on an exhibition, *DEAD: A Celebration of Mortality* (2015). I was lucky enough to visit and spend hours wandering the gallery, and it made a huge impression on me. When I went back to research the artists and works that were presented, I thought I had remembered several pieces that would relate well to this research project, including corpses, but I was mistaken. In looking back though my photos of the exhibition and researching several of the artworks presented, I learned about the power of curation—*DEAD* as an exhibition was far more than the sum of its parts. The way the art was selected

Figure 1.9 Top: View of one of the exhibition rooms at *DEAD: A Celebration of Mortality*, 2015. Bottom: *Crush* (2011) by Andra Ursuţa at *DEAD: A Celebration of Mortality,* 2015. Digital photographs by Casey MacKenzie Johnson.

and put together gave every piece exhibited more impact and meaning than any individual artwork. In curating *DEAD* the Saatchi Gallery summoned "the ghost in the machine." I only wish that instead of a book of tales of odd deaths, Saatchi had produced a comprehensive catalogue to go with the show (2015).

One piece exhibited as part of *DEAD: A Celebration of Mortality* was Andra Ursuţa's *Crush* (2011; figures 1.9 and 1.10) which has been described as "self-mortification [in] its glorious all-time low" (Bell 2016, 11). In this cast urethane piece, the deflated corpse of the artist is naked except for her shoes. Her eyes are closed, and the corpse has the dry, deflated look of someone long dead. In an interview with *Time Out*, Andra Ursuţa says that *Crush* is "a very dark joke" inspired by bodies pulled from peat bogs (Laster 2016). A white substance has been dripped along the body—it represents the ejaculate of all of Ursuţa's romantic crushes (Bell 2016, 11). Put more dramatically, "this Palaeolithic mummy has been crumpled by the invisible weight of unrequited love—killed by it even" (Bell 2016, 11). Ursuţa says of her piece, "If you add up all the rejections in a woman's life, they would sort of flatten her out, perhaps. So, in the case of this woman, she isn't flattened by peat but by the semen from all the times she's made love" (Laster 2016). In *Crush*, Andra Ursuţa is using "parody and blasphemy to expose the vulnerability of the human body" (Phillips 2016, 7).

The obscenity and abject nature of the long dead corpse of a woman, covered in anonymous ejaculate, is complicated by the neutrality of the woman's face and the bloodlessness and

Figure 1.10 Detail of *Crush* (2011) by Andra Ursuţa

inhumanity of a bog body. The woman's face is not twisted in agony like Holbein's *Dead Christ*; rather, there is a quietness and detachment to her death. While the pain on the face of Holbein's Christ may be the antithesis to the sullied peace in the face of Ursuţa's *Crush*, both bodies used to belong to people who were crushed and killed by the shortcomings of humanity in sin and desire. Both artworks represent an embodiment of death in lonely martyrdom though one is obscene and one curiously devoid of divinity. This crushing loneliness and the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is present in all of my artwork as well. I have been making images of Jesus Christ for nearly ten years—some images more literal than others, but there has always been an emphasis on the crushing suffocation of suffering.

Deconstructing → "Crumpled by the weight of unrequited love" (LOSING GOD)

Conclusion

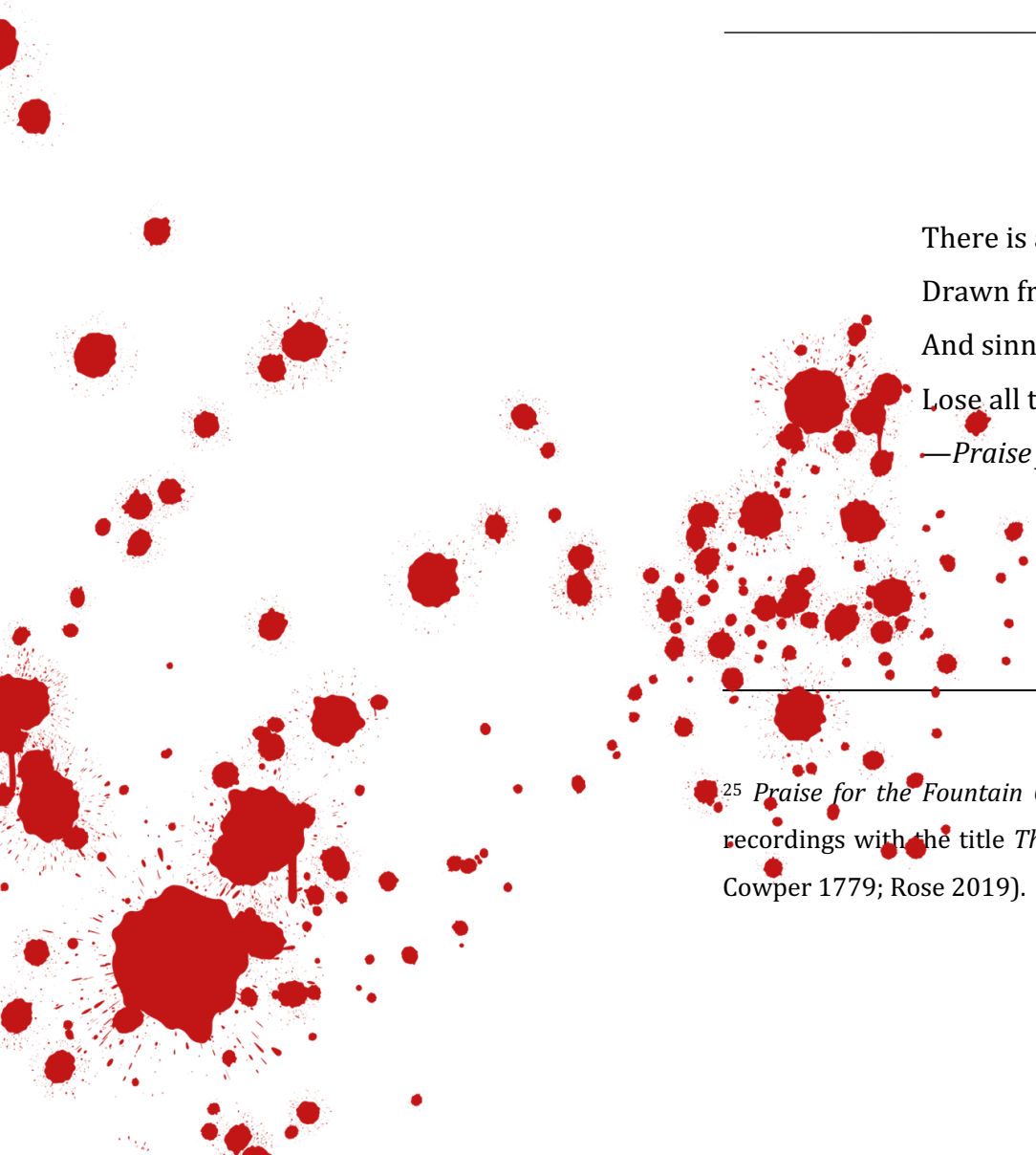
No medium is more suited to capturing a moment, both suspended within and outside of time, as the photograph. A photograph is always a moment that has already passed. In my work, moving through space and time with my body and my cloak with the express purpose of capturing a moment—of capturing the something that is more than the sum of its parts—I am staking a claim to misery and death, living in death now, and making my way toward finding peace in that despair. To me, it looks like Hans Holbein the Younger was doing the same thing. By spending time painting the image of the dead Christ he was sitting with the dead body, sitting shiva perhaps, to mourn the death of a saviour, spending time with that

death in order to come to terms with it. My cloaked images are my own *Dead Christ in a Tomb*—figuratively sitting with a lost saviour who was supposed to provide a safe and happy life, but instead died.

This body of artwork as a whole is a cognizant response to the theological, existential, and political issues raised in this chapter, which has been filtered through my own worldviews and unconscious bias. This project and my artwork in the desert began with a search for meaning after a personal tragedy. After several years of work, my own heart has healed but I have seen the world crack open. My work in the desert—including the long drives, fireside contemplation, and setting up and creating images of a cloaked figure moving through a ghastly space—is a metabolizing of the news: of a war in Europe, of another unarmed black man murdered by police, of another mass shooting in a school, of millions dead from a virus.

I cannot claim, though, that my work is all melancholy—the bright colours, blue skies, and dynamic movements also bring life to the work in the same way Kehinde Wiley painted life into the corpse of Christ with his own version of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. He painted a vital young Black man with unmarred skin and a clear gaze, subverting the politics and dogma of White supremacy. My figure is moving and alive and roaming free through the wilderness shaking free of dogma, everyday social requirements, and the oppression of masculinist theology. Though art does not offer the concrete answers we so often crave, this work offers commiseration, movement and freedom—and in those a taste of refuge.

Chapter 2: Blood



There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's vein;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains
—*Praise for the Fountain Opened* by William Cowper 1779[25]

[25] *Praise for the Fountain Opened* is a classic hymn notably sung by Aretha Franklin in her first ever recordings with the title *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood* on her album *Songs of Faith* (Newton and Cowper 1779; Rose 2019).

The blood of Jesus is the blood of Christ;
the wine of Communion is the blood of Christ;
the means of atonement is the blood of Christ;
the unity of the church is in the blood of Christ;
the kinship of believers is in the blood of Christ;
the cup of salvation is the blood of Christ;
icons ooze the blood of Christ;
the blood of Christ is the blood of God.
—From *Blood Theology* by Eugene F. Rogers (2021, 254, line breaks mine)

Colour Key:

Art

CMJ Art Practice

Important

Emphasis

Theology

Radical Theology

Introduction

The second major focus for this investigation is blood—specifically, the blood shed by Jesus Christ on the cross, the blood of the Eucharist, and the blood of humans shed in violence or menstruation. The theological focus of this work is to situate how blood is being used and perceived in contemporary art and how this compares with blood as a symbol of sacrifice and redemption in the Christian tradition. Blood is a means for articulating a sacred or religious subject matter as it relates to the balance of life, death, sacrifice, and suffering. As such, it is useful to explore and understand the historical and cultural significations of "the blood of Christ" and, to some extent, menstruation. This exploration will focus in particular around medieval blood cults as the beginning of Christian fascination with blood, on contemporary evangelical attitudes toward the cleansing power of the blood of Christ, and on a menstruant in the desert working toward an iconography of radical theology.

Transubstantiation is the theological term for the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine literally transforming into the body and blood of Christ while their appearance remains the same (Toner 2011, 217). This chapter offers a series of critical observations on various theological and aesthetic viewpoints with regard to the blood of Christ from a specifically radical position of liberation, feminist and queer theologies and politics. The critique stops, however at the various theological debates within and between Protestant denominations and between Catholic and Protestant dogma. For example, it is not within the purview of this

research to argue the controversies, merits, or faults regarding the various theologies of transubstantiation.

Figure 2.2 *Death of an Onion,* 2012, digital image salvaged from an old

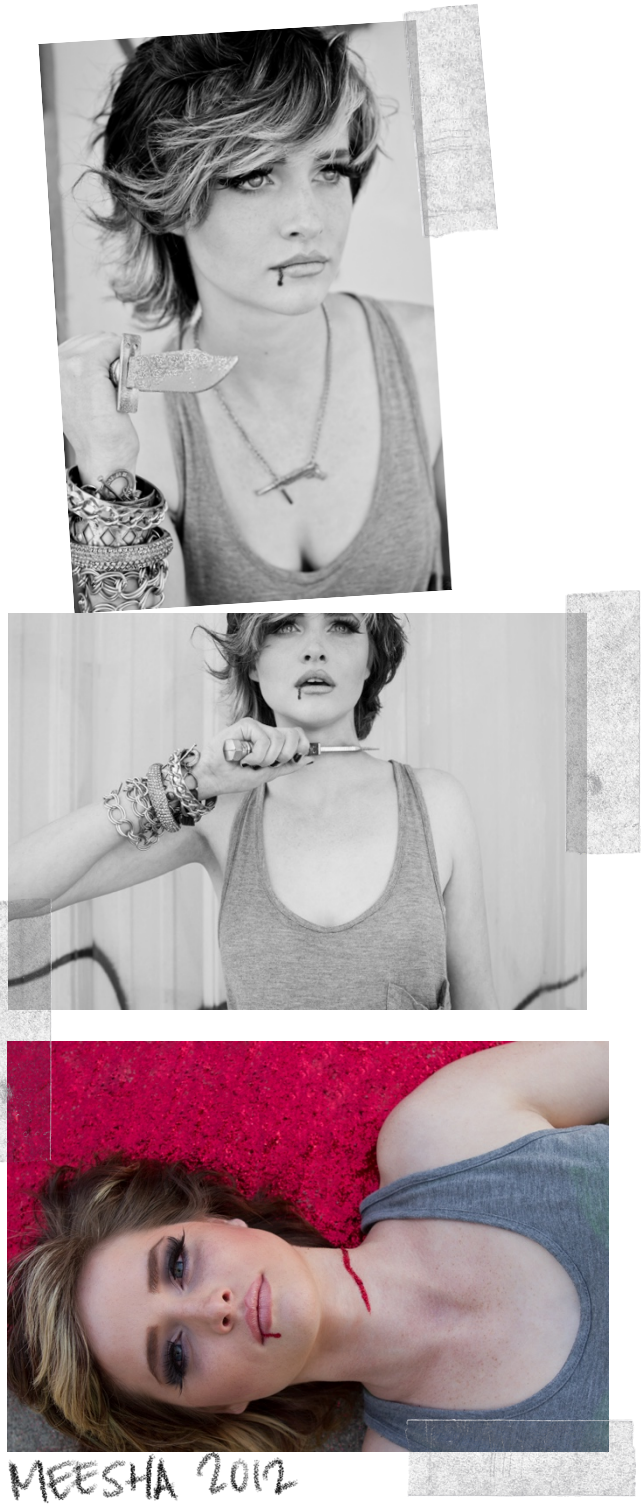
My History with Blood

My fascination with blood began in earnest in 2011, as I was coming to terms with my identity as an artist. It came upon me slowly—it started with a series of blurry, otherworldly

photographs that told an ambiguous story of an unknown woman in the forest—she seemed to be running or escaping and then died—or did she? The final image in this series is of the woman lying on a blanket with her eyes open to the camera; it is unclear if she is meant to look alive or dead.

My proximity to blood creeped closer with a photoshoot under an overpass featuring a tragic hero fleeing an unknown pursuer. At the time, I was creating series of images regularly with the same model and makeup artist. We worked very well together, and they executed my imaginings perfectly. Every editorial series was a story with an ambiguous ending. In the first series where I used glitter for blood under this overpass in the industrial part of town, I imagined this beautiful, strong woman who saw something she was not supposed to, and mysterious gatekeepers were out to silence her. She is tense and crouching in several black and white images when a glittered and gilded knife slits her throat. The final image in the series is a full colour photo of her direct and challenging stare into the camera with a slit across her throat and the top half of her body surrounded by a pool of red glitter blood.

These two series were exhibited as part of my second solo exhibition, *OMGCMJ* (figure 2.1), in 2013. They will forever be some of my favourite images I have ever created and the



capstone of my renaissance as an artist. During this season of my life I found my voice and was prolific with the help of my next-door neighbour, and a fellow barista[26], who I called the Dream Team. At the time, I was commenting on and aiming to exist within a liminal space between popular culture/fashion and the more "credible" space inhabited by fine art. The photos were printed 24 x 36 inches and hung in a rectangle gallery on walls that I painstakingly covered completely with editorial pages from fashion magazines I had been hoarding for almost two decades.

[26] My forever gratitude to Meesha Jones, model and muse, and Brianna Westphal née Scheff the mind reading genius makeup artist. We have all moved on, but I aspire to bring the team back together some day.

Figure 2.1 *OMGCMJ*, 2013, installation images inside Old Kiln Gallery, University of California East Bay, Hayward, California

What I realise now, is that I was also using my editorial images to tell stories of death and resurrection. I did not know yet that I was beginning to probe the depths of the religious culture and system of belief that was so deeply ingrained into me I could hardly see it. Notably, I did not realise that, like much of society, I was "culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death" (Bronfen 1992, 3).

← Cited to acknowledge, but further inquiry is outside the purview of this research.

I felt like as long as I used glitter to skin knees, slit wrists, and cut throats in my editorial work I was able to be a true artist and not someone who used *shock value* to get a response out of people. As long as the blood was glitter and therefore somehow not violent, I did not need to worry about my artwork being attention seeking, taboo, or disturbing. This changed when I murdered my first onion. One afternoon at home, I decided to photograph a white onion on a white background and use dollar store Halloween blood and a vicious looking kitchen knife to make the onion bleed with every slice (figure 2.2[27]). It was while making this striking series of images that I fell in love with the aesthetic beauty of liquid blood, though I had yet to consciously connect this messy crimson fluid highlighting the curves and shape of the onion with Christ's blood about which I had been singing for decades.

The Definition of "Blood"

The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on "blood" is *long* and some of the various uses are highly metaphorical and even antithetical to one another in their connotations (e.g. "bloodbath", "young blood", or "own flesh and blood") ("blood, n. (and int.)" 2020). As such, I shall make explicit what I mean when I discuss blood for the purpose of this research. In referring to blood in art I am considering artworks in which the "red fluid flowing in the

[27] To my forever chagrin, the originals have been lost to early career ineffective backup organisation.

arteries" is outside the body for art's sake ("blood, n. (and int.)" 2020). In performance art this is usually, though not strictly, blood that was once part of a living body—the artist's or otherwise. For the purposes of this research, the origin of liquid/dried/frozen/etc. blood (human, animal, or artificial) is of little consequence. "Blood in art" also encompasses the representation of viscous red fluid flowing from the body in painting or other visual mediums.

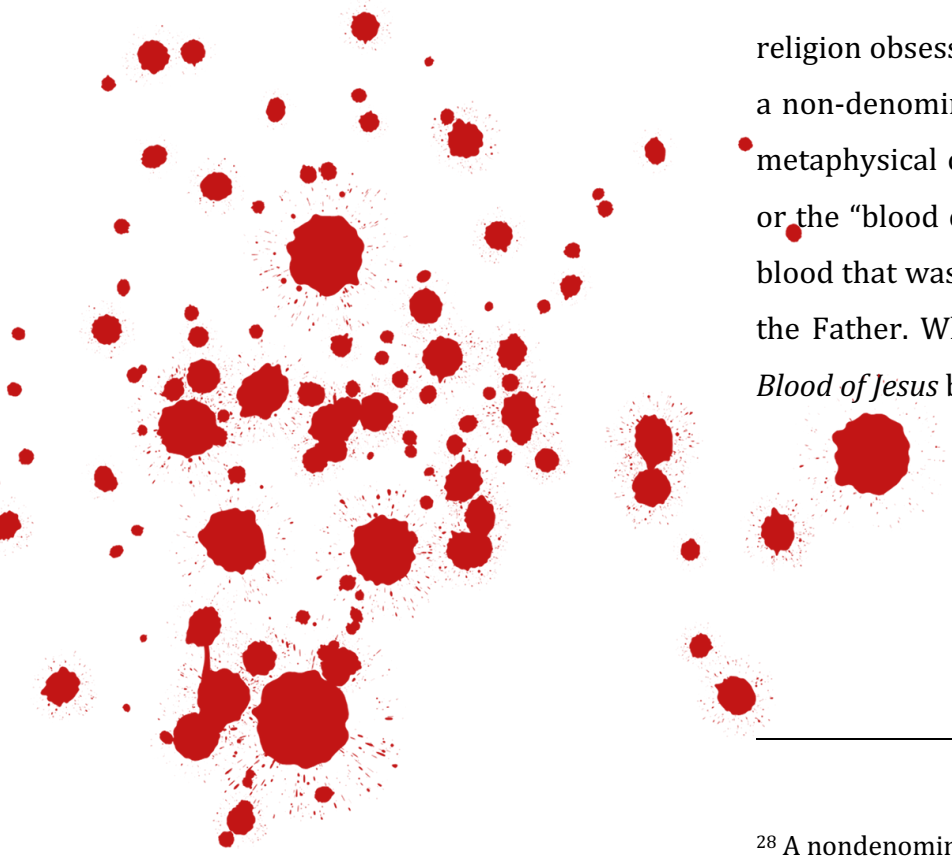
In our contemplation on the "blood of Christ" (also called "Christ's blood" or "Jesus' blood") I am again referring to the "red fluid flowing in the arteries" that was spilled from the body of Jesus Christ during and immediately after his death. Pinning down a definition for "the blood of Jesus" and "the blood of Christ" (and sometimes "the blood of the Lamb") within the Christian tradition and evangelical framework is more difficult. With songs and proclamations about being washed in the blood of Jesus and Evangelicals proudly claiming the blood of Jesus will protect them and their gatherings from Covid-19 they are clearly no longer discussing "red viscous liquid" even though they are using the language of blood (Tuchman 2020). As I will discuss in the ensuing section, the blood of Jesus is no longer a relic or memory of literal blood to be venerated but has become a powerful idea to be called upon and brandished.

Figure 2.3 This image appeared on Twitter in July of 2021 (@TheTweetOfGod 2021)

Overview of the Blood of Jesus Christ

For large swaths of the world including Europe and North America, the most iconic image is that of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Richards 2008, 108). It is possible that the cast of Christ's red blood over Latin Christendom is such an intrinsic part of this society that we hardly see it anymore (Bucklow 2016, 164). It is blood that separates the sacred from the profane, the religious from the secular, and the church from the state. "The holy is "sanctified", a word that comes from the Latin, san-ctus, which is derived from sanguine unctus, or "anointed with blood"" (Bucklow 2016, 164). In 2021 after the majority of the research for this chapter was complete, Eugene Rogers, Jr., a queer religious studies academic, released *Blood Theology: Seeing Red in Body- and God-Talk* a fascinating 200-page monograph on blood in Christian traditions. In the first chapter, "Blood Marks the Bounds of the Body", he points out that the words "bless" and "bliss" share an etymology with the Old English *blóedsian* which means to consecrate or make holy with blood ("bless, v.1" 2022; Rogers 2021, 34).

There is an enormous disconnect between contemporary Evangelical and mainline protestant Christianity and the horror of blood spilled in violence. The blood of Christ in Christianity today has been far removed from the torturous murder at the centre of a



religion obsessed with death and the apocalypse as to be beyond recognition. Growing up in a non-denominational[28] Evangelical church near San Francisco, I was comfortable with the metaphysical cleansing properties of blood. "The blood of the Lamb," "the blood of Christ," or the "blood of Jesus" were interchangeable terms for the sacrifice that sanctified me. The blood that was shed cleansed me of my sins and allowed me to have a relationship with God the Father. When I was around seven years old, I sang the classic hymn, *Nothing but the Blood of Jesus* by Robert Lowry (1826-1899), in front of my grandparents' congregation.[29]

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[28] A nondenominational church stands against "the tide of centralisation" and has the appearance of being completely local (Swatos 1981, 226). In practice, this means they are vaguely Protestant with no church hierarchies to keep leadership accountable (or otherwise as the case may be) (for example: "Celebration Church: What we Believe- Statement of Purpose").

[29]According to my family, my grandparents (who were born in the 1910s) grew up in Congregational (grandmother, Boston) and Baptist (grandfather, Northern California) churches but never identified themselves as members of a particular denomination. By the time I arrived in the 1980s they were heavily involved in both a nondenominational Evangelical church and a Baptist church.

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain:
Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my hope and peace,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Now by this I'll overcome—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Now by this I'll reach my home—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Glory! Glory! This I sing—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus,
All my praise for this I bring—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

(Lowry 1876)

"The only way to kill sin, true black sin, was to drown it in the blood of
(she must be sacrificed)
a repentant heart… Had not God Himself commanded Abraham to take his son Isaac up on the mountain?"

-Margaret White, mother of Carrie White (King [1974] 2011, 147)

Blood in Medieval Christianity

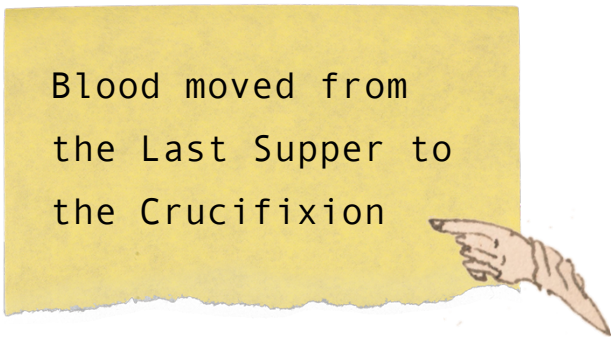
There is an asymmetric relationship between body and blood in medieval Eucharist and relic devotion (Bynum 2002, 691). During the sacrament of the Eucharist, the cup contains wine or grape juice and represents drinking shed blood of Christ. The host (from the Latin *hostia* which means “sacramental victim”) is the sacramental wafer or bread that represents the body of Christ (Bildhauer 2006, 156; "host, n.4" 2020). While the cup has never been as ritually significant as the host, blood was extremely important when it came to the veneration and degradation of the host and to miracles bequeathed through the host (Bynum 2002, 689). For example, St Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) who is well known for her fixation on the blood of Christ, found blood pouring from her mouth when she received the host and experienced the wafer as “waves of blood” (Bynum 2002, 689-690).

It remains unclear to me why the host bleeds and not the the cup: the cup that is ostensibly a cup of blood.

The phenomenon of bleeding host appears to have begun in the thirteenth century with a German priest, Peter of Prague, who doubted the transubstantiation of the host. It is written that when “he finished the words of consecration, the host he was holding above the altar began to drip blood over his vestments and down over the floor” (Freeman 2011, 187). Thus an enduring and dangerous belief that a host could bleed when it was doubted was born. The body of Christ is continually or repeatedly transformed, in relic, ecstasy, and ritual, into

flowing blood. The ability of blood and transubstantiation to turn a non-believer into a believer serves to highlight its properties of transformation.

There are three types of holy or divine blood revered by medieval blood cults: that which bled directly from the body of Christ on the cross, that which bled from the sacramental host, and that which bled from objects of devotion (Bynum 2002, 692-694). Devotees cared not where the blood came from as their attitude was that the blood of Christ was his regardless of what or who bled it out (Bynum 2002, 694). Similarly, I have found in my own artwork and in researching art made with or about blood that the origin of the blood medium generally matters little[30] because the story of the blood is more important than the fact of the blood.



The intense veneration of blood began to move the Eucharist away from the Last Supper where Jesus first asked his followers to break bread and drink wine in remembrance of him (Matt. 26:26-27, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20), and toward the Crucifixion. This is important because the Last Supper was about Jesus communing together with his friends and followers while he was still in his unscathed body so they could remember him as such.

[30] With the obvious exception of the uproar over Barton Lidicé Beneš *Lethal Weapons* (1992-1997), a series of objects that contained his HIV+ blood (Abumrad and Krulwich 2013; Fialho 2015).

Conversely, the Crucifixion is a brutal violent death and penance for the sins of humankind. This then shifts the eucharist from celebration of community and relationship with Jesus into a memento mori celebrating his painful and selfless death. This, intentionally or otherwise, centres the individual consuming the host and chalice in remembrance of the gift of sacrifice they have received, rather than remembering the community gathering and wholeness represented at the Last Supper. Upon consideration, I am sure that this eucharistic shift has remained in modern times. While I have known about the Last Supper so long that I cannot remember a time not knowing, I have always associated communion (as we call Eucharist in less formal traditions) with the sacrifice that Jesus made for me as an individual. The familiar, "This is my body broken for you" as one is handed bread and "this my blood shed for you"[31] as one is given juice or wine, emphasise the individual sacrifice Jesus made for me personally[32].

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[31] The phrases are commonly said when receiving the sacrament come from 1 Corinthians 11:23b-25,

> The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.

[32] There is much more to say about the Protestant turn toward individualism, but it is outside the purpose of this research.

Left: Figure 2.4 Crucified Christ with female figure bathing in his blood, Strasbourg, early 16th century, illuminated manuscript, Inv. Ms. St Peter., pap 4, fol. 30v Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek

Right: Figure 2.5 Brian de Palma, *Carrie*, 1976. Cropped still.

I have long been fascinated by medieval artwork and illuminations depicting the blood of Jesus. They seem more honest to the Christian tradition as I understand it than more contemporary devotional art. *Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*, a song that I have known by heart since I was a small child, is about being washed clean with the blood of Jesus, but it was not until I was well into adulthood that I thought to question what this would literally look like. My religious predecessors, however, did contemplate just this as we can see in figure 2.4. The Crucifixion is ruinous in the rupturing of the divine body, but this rupture provides access to his blood (Bynum 2002, 708); the broken body of Jesus allows a part of him to flow down onto the woman below, providing her with direct access to his divinity. The woman is in a tub bathing under the crucified Christ as his blood flows down upon her in a gory bath/shower under the cross. However, this too is a sanitised version of what bathing in blood would look like. To be truly cleansed by blood I imagine a scene like Carrie at her prom (figure 2.5) in Brian de Palma's eponymous film (1976) based on Stephen King's debut novel of the same name (1974). In the climax of the film Carrie is literally covered in blood as if she is standing in a shower when a bucket of pig blood is dropped on her at prom.

Figure 2.6 Stackable Communion Tray from Amazon.com

Conversely, while there is much singing about and speaking of blood flowing, cleansing, and saving in modern Christianity, there is not a speck of the red liquid in sight. In most Evangelical churches, even the Eucharist involves only the consumption of tiny plastic cups full of sickly-sweet grape juice and a torn piece of bread or broken up cracker. There is nothing abject, divine, filthy, or sublime about the ubiquitous gold trays (figure 2.6) that

were passed between pews once a month through the entirety of my childhood and early adult life.

Complex and problematic blood devotions and relics proliferated through the Middle Ages (Bynum 2002, 704). The dark side of this reverence for the blood of Christ was the belief that Jews, heretics, and others who broke social mores were out for its destruction (Bynum 2002, 690). As discussed before, the host would bleed when it was doubted, so the notion of host desecration by Jews also proliferated. This is how the racist *blood libel* conspiracy was born. The literalism of Jewish belief was used against them in the notion that they could actually get a host to bleed (Biale 2007, 5). Inherent in the duality of blood is a means to both piety and accusation that can be a dangerous "spark…from which a frenzy of guilt, love, and longing can be ignited" (Bynum 2002, 702). Texts on medieval blood cults are full of horrifying stories about the accusation and massacre of Jews in the name of the veneration of the host and blood relics. Many (if not most) blood relics were themselves bleeding to "display insults and accuse perpetrators" (Bynum 2002, 707). The fact of their existence is down to Christians' animosity for heretics and Jews in particular. From here, the perception that Jews stole Christian blood propagated widely with horrific consequence. There is, again, much more to say on this matter both in the birth of the blood libel myth and how it proliferates even today in the QAnon conspiracy and beyond, but it is outside the range of this research.

Blood in Contemporary Christianity

Growing up in the suburbs of San Francisco and Silicon Valley I always knew that, as a Christian, I was persecuted. (I will note here that in the Evangelical mind there is a simple binary: one is either a Christian or not.) I knew people would hate me, make fun of me, and want to hurt me because of my beliefs. The clang of persecution was a constant. I was told that because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is foolishness to those who don't believe (a common paraphrasing of 1 Cor 1:18) I was a target. Of course, that was all nonsense. When I look back on my teenage years — in particular when I led prayers in the middle of my high school quad between classes and was the founder and president of the campus Christian club—I realise no one cared. I had lots of friends, an active social life, and was in no way any kind of pariah. I cannot recall a single instance of someone making fun of me or bullying me for my Christian faith. If anything, my atheist friends respected that I believed something and followed through on it. In discussing this with peers from similar backgrounds (middle class White millennials actively raised in church), there was unanimous agreement on the pervasiveness and absurdity of the persecution complex.[33] For both this kind of Evangelical Christianity and medieval blood cults, persecution is a bulwark—it seems their *goodness* and *correctness* only shine in opposition to those who are bad and wrong.

[33] I sent the draft of the last paragraph to nine White millennial Christian or former Christian friends in the United States and United Kingdom for feedback and got resounding and enthusiastic agreements.

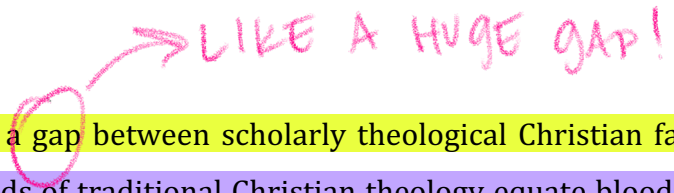
Figure 2.7 Christian protest banner seen on Twitter (@Sharon_Kuruvila 2020)

In researching the theology and attitudes around the blood of Christ in medieval Christianity, I was surprised how much the cult of blood reminded me of the right-wing Evangelical cult of Donald Trump. Medieval blood devotion was about maintaining piety, but this piety was entrenched in accusation of the self and, more importantly, accusation of Jews. For some groups, it seems that personal piety depends more on an impious scapegoat than one's own actions. Then as today the scapegoats are people deemed different, secular, evil, or any other heterodoxy they feel challenges their piety. This means Jewish people, Democrats, the mythic Antifa cabal, or the LGBTQIA+ community, and anyone else they feel wants to commit harm against their specific understanding of Jesus Christ or his Church (figure 2.7). As Caroline Walker Bynum put it so well in her article for *Church History*, "Medieval blood devotion was a piety of horror, accusation, and self-accusation as well as an encounter with God" (Bynum 2002, 714). I am not sure I have ever read words that more accurately sum up my impression of contemporary Christian Evangelicalism.

In his chapter for *Holy Bones, Holy Dust*, historian Charles Freeman calls the veneration of blood in the Middle Ages a "reflection of a more emotionally intense form of Christianity" (2011, 186). While he does not specify exactly what it is more intense than, it seems he is implying that the intense "belief that Christ's blood had been outpoured for the salvation of humankind" was deserving of ecstatic veneration (Freeman 2011, 186). As I will discuss

below, I argue that this is as true today in charismatic churches across Latin Christendom as it was during Middle Ages before Christianity expanded so far across the world.

Anthropologist Miranda Klaver spent time doing fieldwork inside a Pentecostal community in the Netherlands. The resulting article is useful in describing the beliefs of Pentecostal (also called *charismatic*) communities around the world (Klaver 2012). "Pentecostal believers… see themselves as re-enacting first-century Christianity, awaiting supernatural signs and miracles like those recorded in the New Testament" (Klaver 2012, 251). Old Christian rituals and liturgy are not important to charismatics because they have individual and direct access to God through his Word (the Holy Bible) and the Holy Spirit (Klaver 2012, 251).



Researching this topic reveals a gap between scholarly theological Christian faith systems and popular belief. Many strands of traditional Christian theology equate blood with death, but in popular Christian consciousness blood is more often associated with the protection of life and healing (Stibbs [1962] 2011, 49; Anidjar 2016, 47). Calling on the blood of Jesus is so common in Christian circles that it almost functions as a talisman.: "you can hear it about five times on a Sunday" (Rogers 2016, 251). Praying, 'we plead on the blood of Jesus' and 'cover us with your blood' add power and immediacy to one's prayers so that the blood of Jesus is "appropriated by the believer as a spiritual attribute or object" (Klaver 2012, 258).

Figure 2.8 Screen capture from CNN.com report in April 2020

In April 2020 during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, a news clip went viral when CNN Reporter Gary Tuchman interviewed an unnamed woman (figure 2.8) in her car as she left a church service in Ohio. Asking her if she was concerned about getting sick with COVID-19 or infecting other people, the woman replied, "No, I am covered in Jesus' blood… They [people in Walmart or the grocery store] could get me sick! But they're not because I am covered in Jesus' blood" (Tuchman 2020). I often wonder if she survived.

In popular belief, the blood of Jesus is not only protection and power, but deliverance (Klaver 2012, 252). Those of us who have spent time in Evangelical communities have heard countless stories of the blood of the Lamb 'setting the captive free.' This can mean deliverance from addiction or a life of crime; being healed from illness or injury; becoming a 'born again virgin'; being 'healed' of homosexuality; or anything else that can be seen as a blight[34] is fodder for deliverance. Klaver points out that "redemption is not only primarily located in the death of Christ but extended or even shifted to the magnitude of his suffering, concentrated on and even materialised in the blood of Christ, which atones for the sin of man" (Klaver 2012, 255). When I was part of this community, I remember people very

When I was searching for a shirt to cover in blood for my viva in January 2023, I was served up *hundreds* of "The blood of Jesus is my vaccine" t-shirts when I searched for "Jesus + blood". It was difficult to find anything else— cheesy t-shirts or otherwise.

[34] The relationship between Christian theology, Evangelicalism, and the far right is far too complex to fully cover here. As with blood-libel, the examples are relevant, but a full discussion does not fall within the scope of this PhD.

regularly invoking Isaiah 53:5[35] which ends with "by his wounds we are healed." Miranda Klaver goes on to write:

> Multisensory religious experiences like those experienced in a small prayer group, big tent revival, or other charismatic event allow these believers to speak and experience the power of blood in a concrete and material religious form. (2012, 261).

The perceived materiality of the experiences involving the blood of Christ are in direct opposition to the immaterial arts associated with the Protestant church. There are countless songs about blood and death on a cross, but the visuals associated with them have been sanitised. I considered at length whether 'sanitised' is the correct term to use here. While the term may read as casual or metaphorical, it does say what I mean: within mainstream contemporary Christianity, much of what has been venerated for centuries has been "rendered more acceptable…by the removal of undesirable…. material" ("sanitize, v." 2021).

[35] The full verse reads,

> But he was pierced for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
> and by his wounds we are healed.

In so doing, the abject nature of death by Crucifixion and the obscenity of eating and drinking flesh and blood become tidy, palatable traditions carried on without serious thought about the literal death and desecration of a person (divine or otherwise). When pain and suffering are removed from the bloodletting of the Christ, the sacrifice and blood that has been let is then debased.

Bloodless Art in Evangelical Christianity

If modern Protestants have icons, they are the paintings by the most reproduced artist of the twentieth century, Walter Sallman (1892-1968). His most famous painting is the most popular image of Christ in the modern era: *The Head of Christ* (1940) (figure 2.9). What I find fascinating about Sallman's work is how White and sanitary it is. Even his painting of *Christ in Gethsemane* (1941) is peaceful, tidy, and shining with Christ's purity. This is in almost direct opposition to the scripture which reads, "…being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

This just does not look like a man in anguish to me.

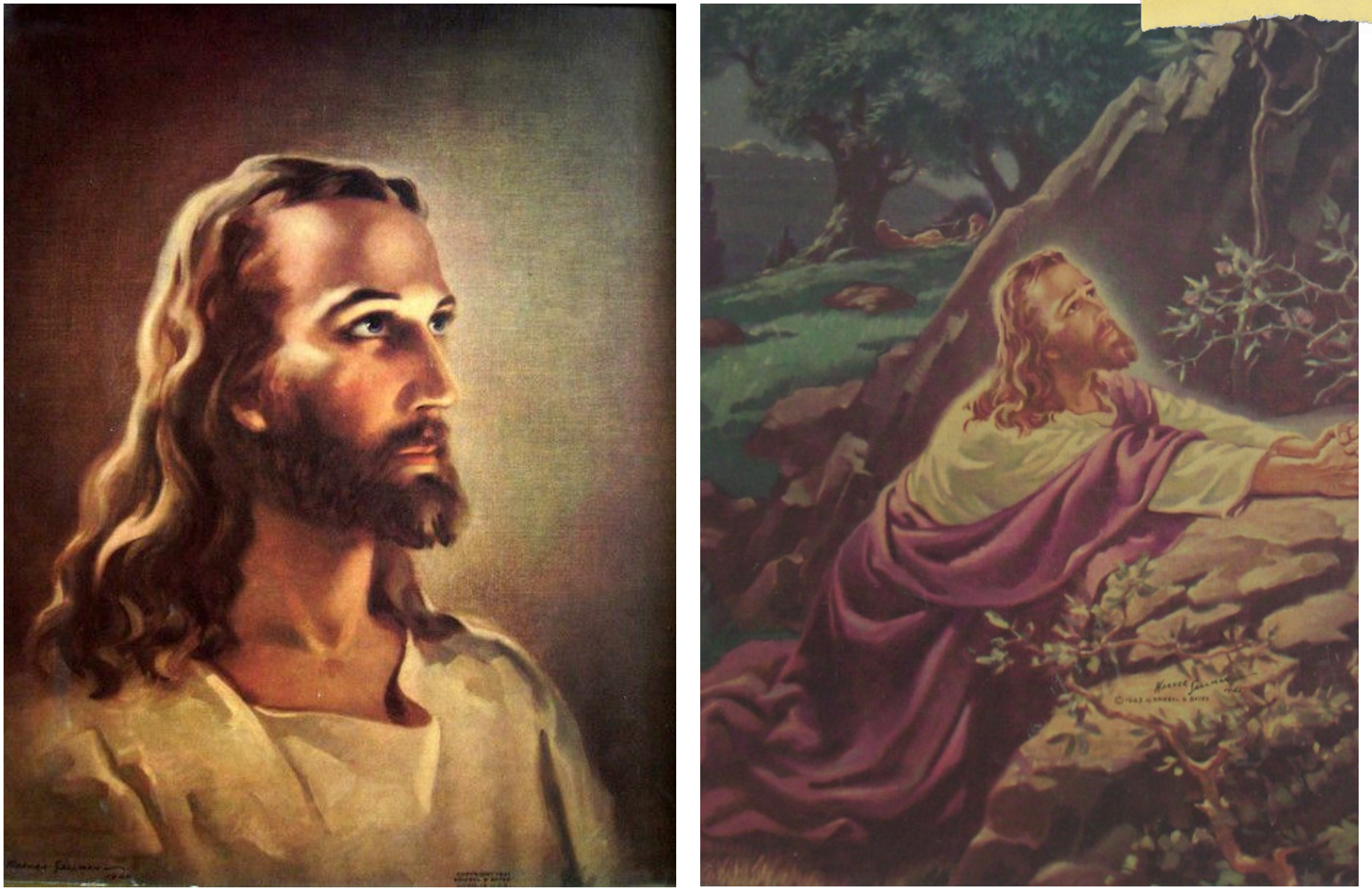


Figure 2.9 Left: The Head of Christ (1940); Right: Christ in Gethsemane (1941) both by Walter Sallman

THESE ARE VERY FAMILIAR

> Mass produced images were acceptable to the otherwise iconoclastic Protestants because they were accustomed to seeing woodcut illustrations in their Bibles. So, the images they were comfortable with contained no "surplus of meaning" and only illustrated a known or accompanying text (Morgan 1996, 15). "Visual legibility" has always been important in Protestant visuals, and that tradition has changed very little, if at all, in the contemporary era (Morgan 1996, 17). Sallman's paintings are titled simply and descriptively as was the tradition at the very beginning of the convention of titling artwork (Xhignesse 2019, 438).

As a mainstream Protestant painter, Sallman produced artwork that has a lot in common with earlier works with religious patrons. It has been argued that "no image can ever be wholly independent of verbal context," and with the advent of public art museums and growth of print journalism in the nineteenth century "many more people were getting into the business of interpreting pictures by naming them" (Yeazell 2015a, 3,13). Titling images was a "by-product" of their mobility: the majority were no longer created strictly for patrons with very specific purposes or venues in mind (Xhignesse 2019, 441). In Sallman's case I think harking back to early church patronage is important to his work, intentionally or otherwise. It gives the people who appreciate and live with prints of his paintings the sense that they are connected to the long and holy tradition of Christianity and Church. Because there is no room for interpretation, there is no room for the devil to creep in and cause temptation, doubt, abjection, or blasphemy. It may seem strange to use Sallman's work as

my primary example of blood in Christian artwork, but it is directly indicative of the sanitisation of Christianity over the centuries.

"Cleansing Blood"

> *In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*
>
> Hebrews 9:22

In discussing Hebrews 9:22 as a particular example of the whole, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. writes:

> If you look into Christian commentaries on 'without shedding of blood' you find either *domestication*, so that, in Aquinas, bloodshed needs no explanation; or you find *evasion*, as in Calvin who reduces blood to 'faith.' (2016, 252)

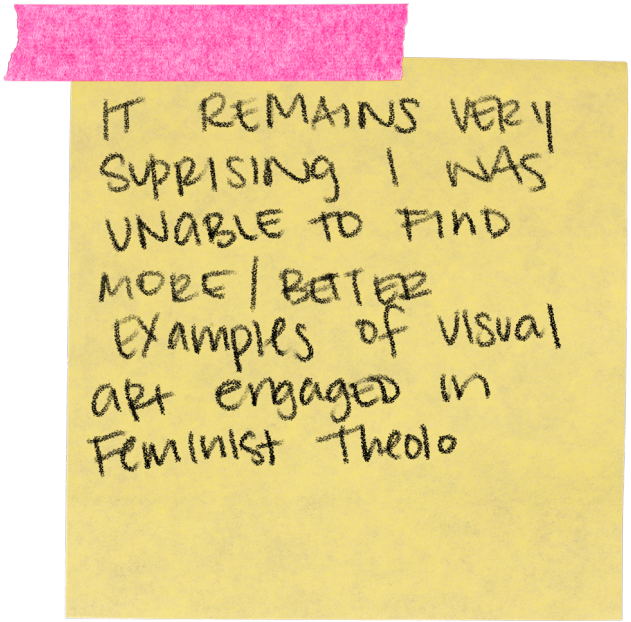
Rogers discusses the sanitisation of modern Christianity further in in his essay "The Fire in the Wine" and quotes Jewish philosopher and theologian Michael Wyschogrod who writes:

> Enlightened religion recoils with horror from the thought of sacrifice, preferring a spotless house of worship filled with organ music and exquisitely polite behaviour. The price paid for such decorum is that worshipers must leave the most problematic part of themselves

> outside the temple, [only] to reclaim it when the service is over and to love unencumbered by sanctification. Religion ought not demand such a dismemberment of [the human being]. (Wyschogrod 1996 quoted in; Rogers 2016, 253)

The "dismemberment" and sanitisation of the religious person and practice including colonisation and Whitening of Jesus is perfectly illustrated by the disembodied, glowing, White *The Head of Christ* (1940) by Walter Sallman.

Blood in Feminist Theology



> *Inside, blood carries life. Outside it makes a body fertile or at risk.*
>
> (Rogers 2016, 252)

While 'blood' is mentioned in the New Testament three times as often as the cross and five times more often than the death of Christ, the fathers of radical theology have little to say about blood (Stibbs [1962] 2011, 20). Both traditional and radical theologies are androcentric but it still came as a surprise that the only substantial discussion of blood in the entire 793-page *Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* is in the single chapter on feminist theology (Rodkey and Miller 2018; Isherwood 2018, 567-578).

Feminist theologies tend to question the fundamental tenet of original sin.[36] Rather than concern themselves with an idea that all humas are sinful and in need of saving because the first woman succumbed to temptation and in turn tempted the first man, feminist theologians are more concerned with systemic structures plaguing the world like sexism, racism, and classism (Buck 2020). Feminist theology is a reaction to the "idea and image of God as an old White man who rules from outside as a justification for male dominion" (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 145). And so, as a reaction to the dominant patriarchal theologies, feminist theology is radical theology.

In researching the chapter, I found it surprising how difficult it was to find commentary about blood or menstruation in feminist theology. I expected a simple database search would turn up full articles or books on the matter to be read and compared. Instead, I have found myself scouring obscure books and reading dozens and dozens of articles from

[36] "Original Sin" is the concept that all humans are born sinful as a result of the Fall (*The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* 2005, 420). The Fall happened when the first humans God created, Adam and Eve, ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden after God had explicitly ordered them not to, but the Serpent (Satan) tempted them. This sin of disobeying God caused *the fall* of man into sin and is the root of all that is evil in this world (*The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* 2005, 208). In this traditional view, humans are inherently sinful and in need of saving from an eternity in Hell.

Methodology

Practice

Not that any trip into the desert is truly fruitless.

It often feels that way when I come home with more empty memory cards than full ones, but it is all part of the process. My move into and through the wilderness is as valuable as the images that move out of the wilderness with me.

feminist theology, religion, feminism, and philosophy journals to find commentary on the matters at hand. This experience mirrors my last two trips into the California desert. I have moved through both the physical landscape and the library looking for Shangri-La and finding only frustration. It seems someone should have written the book on this long ago! The connections between blood and feminist theology seem so obvious, yet it takes chiselling through oblique research to find sources and connections. Just as in the desert with its beauty so stark and wonderful, finding the location to set up my tripod and camera should not require so much sweat, tears, and long fruitless camping trips. So, between the bloody fragments I have found within feminist theologies and Eugene Rogers Jr.'s illuminating chapter "Jesus and the Gender of Blood" (2021, 83-114) I am forging a space where my artwork fits as an ambassador of the radical and the bleeding.

Sacrifice linked to the shedding of blood is central to the Christian narrative (Green 2009, 15). This is problematic in patriarchal religion because menstruants bleed monthly without injury[37] and therefore subvert the powerful Christian sacrifice symbolism. Throughout history women's ability to bleed and not die has been linked to mysterious power, filth, pollution, and "awe and fear of the death side of the lifecycle" (Green 2009, 15; Ruether

[37] It is worth noting that while the bleeding part of menstruation is generally not injurious or painful, other symptoms of the menstrual cycle can be debilitating.

1986, 218). In "Jesus and the Gender of Blood", Eugene Rogers, Jr., with input from doula and fellow academic, Sarah Jobe, writes of menstruation and childbirth at length. Jobe points out that childbirth is only particularly bloody when something has gone terribly wrong, so they consider that it is not in childbirth that menstruants parallel with blood sacrifice, but in bleeding monthly (Rogers 2021, 85, 99). Menstruation then is the "sacrifice [that] makes birth possible" and childbirth is akin to resurrection because "our blood disappears into the child" (Rogers 2021, 99; quoting Sarah Jobe).

Because of their ability to bleed without injury, women's bodies, therefore, have been associated with impurity, defilement, weakness, and the "corrupting" flow of menstruation (Green 2009, 15). While of course none of this is remotely true of the bodies of menstruants, this belief has led to women being dominated by men in the name of God and his dominion over man.

> The Church Fathers who were so concerned with church order were right to be concerned about the body and control over it. In seeking to develop and sustain a hierarchical structure they did well to recognize that once bodies are controlled then societies can be tightly regulated. (Isherwood 2000, 14)

Even the oft venerated Martin Luther, father of Protestantism, taught that women have "lots of filth and little wisdom" (Green 2009, 15).

A specialist in feminist theology, and a priest in the Church of England, Ali Green's commentary on menstruant priests sheds new light on my own artwork:

> The woman priest at the altar is not refuting traditional association of sacrifice and death, violence, punishment and so on. But she is enriching the symbolism by being herself a visible symbol of bloodshed in connection not only with violent death but also with bringing forth new life, of nurturing, of feeding the family, of sharing and caring, of relationship and community. (2009, 22)

Over the course of many trips to the desert and hours culling images I have begun to include images where I am recognisable in my images—this is opposed to my original intention for the figure to be timeless and genderless. In using images where I, a menstruant, am visible and recognisable as an adult woman of reproductive age, I carry with me the subversion of patriarchy and dominant sacrifice narratives just by being who I am. If I am working toward an iconography for radical theology, then a menstruant in the desert might just be the ticket.

Practice

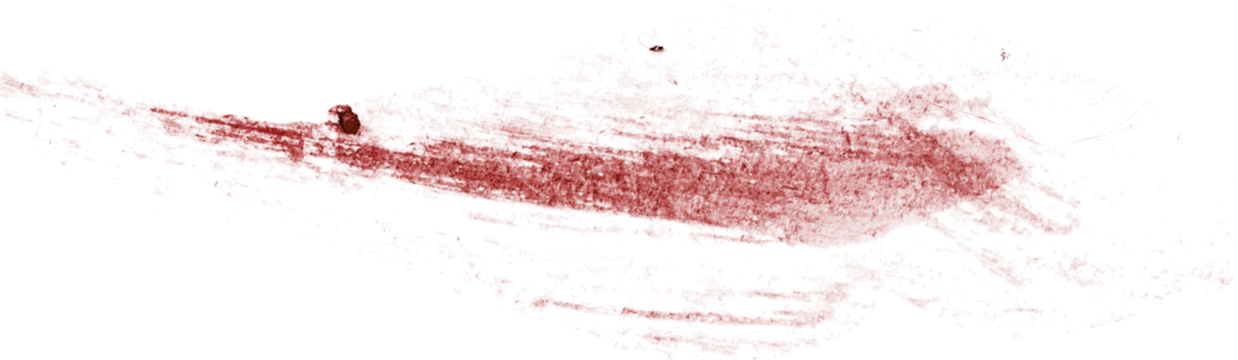


Figure 2.10 Left: The Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy, 331r (cropped), before 1349, French. Attributed to Jean Le Noir (French, active 1331–75) and Workshop. Met Museum. Right: Prayer to the Five Wounds of Christ, Book of Hours fol 110v. Dutch, mid 15th century. Masters of the Delft Grisailles. Digital Waters.

Blood Types and Gender: Sanguis and Cruor

Very often the blood of Christ shed while he was dying is identified with the Latin word *sanguis*, connoting sweet and fertile, more akin to the blood of menstruation or childbirth than that of violence (Welland 2015, 15; Bucklow 2016, 163). This "female transforming blood" is opposite to *cruor*: blood that was shed in violence and seen as "corrupt" (Holtorf 2002, 21; Bucklow 2016, 163). I have read in various texts that crucifixion is a largely bloodless death because one suffocates, but I do not think this takes the beating and flogging of Jesus before he was nailed to the cross into account (Matt 27:29-30; Mark 15:15-19; John 19:1-3). Immediately after Jesus' death, "one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (John 19:34).

Childbirth and crucifixion both have a much bloodier reputation than they deserve. However, the blood, mess, and repetition of menstruation give it mystique and power and the flogging, beating, and piercing of Jesus during and after his death stir imaginings of blood, mess, and power; maybe it is no mistake, then, that in medieval illuminated manuscripts the cuts in Jesus Christ's side often look like bleeding vulvas (figure 2.10). The blood and water spilled from Christ's side when a spear is shoved into his corpse is sometimes considered to be nourishing like mother's milk. There are several traditions that consider milk to be "whitened blood" (Rogers 2021, 87). This means that the baby Jesus was not only borne of Mary's unshed menstrual blood but nourished by her blood in infancy as well. *Cruor and sanguis* are typically gendered respectively as male (violent) and female

(lifegiving), but sacrifice (men) is cleansing while menstruation (women) defiles. The binary here is important because blood takes on gendered roles and "reinforces and complicates" them (Rogers 2021, 84). Jesus has always been gendered male in the scriptures; his death was violent (male) and sacrificial—therefore cleansing—gendering it male. However, Jesus' death was an ultimate sacrifice for humankind and his blood shed on the cross is female because it is *sanguis*[38], the blood of life, akin to the "flow of birthing" (Bucklow 2016, 165; Bynum 2002, 705). *Sanguis* is the blood gendered female and seen as transformative and lifegiving (Holtorf 2002, 21).

> [Jesus' blood] is cleansing water, life itself, quencher of thirst, and intoxication; it is a spark or flashpoint, from which a frenzy of guilt, love, and longing can be ignited. (Bynum 2002, 702)

Further complicating things, Rogers writes:

> Because Jesus has no earthly father, his blood is entirely the blood of his mother. It is Mary's blood that is the blood of God, Mary's blood shed on the cross, Mary's blood that works in the Eucharist. The Virgin birth queers the gender of blood by making the blood that the Son of God bleeds a woman's blood. (2021, 85)

Jesus transgresses gender with his blood.

This is honestly so cool, and I am dying to pursue this in my work.

I THINK THIS IS WHERE I'll GO NEXT

[38] Only very rarely has it ever been argued that the blood shed by Christ on the cross might be *cruor* despite his suffering and violent death (Bynum 2002, 702).

Jesus transgresses gender with his blood. Someone perceived as male in life, filled with the blood of his mother in birth, who bleeds blood coded as female in his death subverts our culturally constructed idea of gender. On top of this, not only is menstruation seen as filth, but a man who "bleeds without limit" like a woman is defilement upon defilement[39] (Rogers 2021, 87). The dripping wound/vulva in Jesus' side bleeds down his legs but because Jesus is a man and his vulva is a wound his gender bending is "plausibly deniable" (Rogers 2021, 88).

Feminist Theology in Art

After much searching, it would appear that the only artwork discussed with any seriousness by contemporary feminist theology publications and authors is Christa (1974) by Edwina Sandys[40] (figure 2.11). I had hoped to find more recent or rousing work to discuss along with compelling feminist theology, but it appears she remains the creative nexus of feminist theology. Christa was the first[41] female figure on a cross in modern sculpture (Ursic 2017,

Figure 2.11 Edwina Sandys, *Christa,* 1974. Resin with bronze patina on Lucite cross. 104.1 x 88.3 x 19 cm

[39] To make it very clear, I do not agree with this sentiment. I am considering here social norms through history.

[40] Edwina Sandys is the granddaughter of Winston Churchill (Barron 2016). This no doubt contributes to the notoriety of *Christa*.

[41] I am deeply sceptical of this claim but have been unable to disprove it.

318). She was hung in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York during Holy Week in 1984 (Barron 2016). The backlash was fast and furious -- *Christa* was removed[42] from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York after eleven days (Ursic 2017, 319). The backlash was from people angry about the "blasphemous" feminisation of Christ and theologically incorrect nature of the sculpture, but I would have been upset with the hanging of this artwork, too, because of the way the divine feminine is presented (Barron 2016). Professor of practical feminist theology Nicola Slee writes:

> Feminists themselves are divided in their reactions to the Christa figure, with a number objecting to what they see as an image which assumes the male gaze, encouraging a voyeuristic, potentially sadistic attitude toward the female body. (2012, 73)

I strongly agree. While I empathise with the need to feminise the divine and to understand the feminine in Christ, putting Christa up on the cross affirms the message that suffering in itself is redemptive which is one of the key problems feminist theology has with more orthodox, male dominated atonement theologies (Buck 2020, 240). More frustrating even, is the look of *Christa*. She is an idealised form of a White European woman: she is slim with a narrow waist and large breasts, high cheekbones, a pointy chin and long straight hair. Only

[42] *Christa* made her permanent return to St. John the Divine in 2016 (Ursic 2017, 324).

the smallest minority of women look like *Christa,* so how can she represent us or represent a bridge from us to the divine? Surely the medieval devotions with illustrations of the wound in Christ's side (figure 2.11) are a more feminist image of Christ than a sexualized conventionally attractive European woman on a cross.

Blood in Contemporary Art

Blood has been a constant within Christian discourse and iconography for centuries, but the other primary context for my work is questioning the ways that blood in contemporary art extends and challenges the metaphors and attitudes around blood within the Christian tradition. As discussed in "Chapter 1: The Corpse of Jesus Christ", the definition of contemporary art is murky. In my extended trawling through various art databases, university libraries, and art publications, I was surprised to find fewer artists working with blood than I anticipated. Since my own fascination with blood is so enduring, I thought there would be *much* more blood centred artwork. Given my own penchant for covering myself in blood (figure 2.12) I thought for sure I would find more work similar to the maximalist use of blood found in the bloody work of the Viennese Actionists. I find the images that capture their actions—and in particular the work of Herman Nitsch—exciting, spectacularly beautiful, and magnetic.

Figure 2.12 Self-portrait with pork blood, 2016

Practice

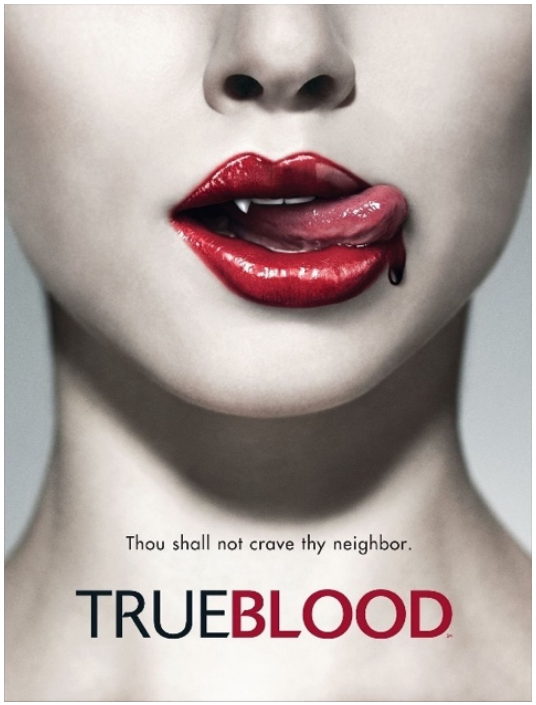
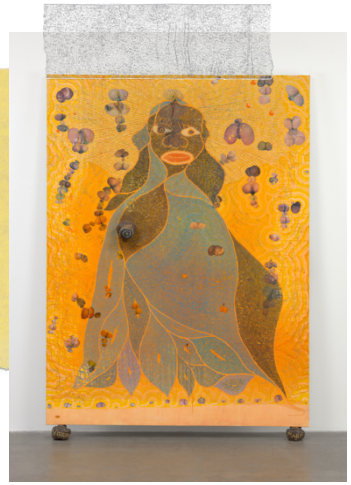


Figure 2.13: *True Blood* Series 1 marketing image, 2008. Text reads: "Thou shall not crave thy neighbor." Owned and created by HBO.



Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996). Acrylic, oil, polyester resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on canvas. 96 × 72in. The Museum of Modern Art.

Despite the fact that it is literally a bodily fluid, there is something of the sublime in blood. A preponderance of contemporary art centred on the body is concerned with abjection and human's baser nature: it is about piss and shit and ejaculate and the vulgar parts of what it means to be a human animal. On the other hand, blood is a mark of the sacred. While we eat, drink, and defecate daily to stay alive, blood is shed in violence or menstruation. The human animal does not bleed as frequently as it expels food waste, and even menstruation does not last for the duration of one's life the way other bodily functions do. Blood is different. It is beautiful and symbolic. The colour is pleasing, and the flow of the liquid looks like paint. I see beauty in blood that is absent in other bodily functions and fluids—and I am not alone in this sentiment. Unlike other bodily fluids, blood is commonly used in advertising campaigns and in mainstream popular culture. For example, when I lived in Los Angeles in 2008 a poster depicting a bloody mouth with vampire fangs licking dripping blood (figure 2.13) was inescapable. It seemed like this image was on every bus, billboard, and park bench in the entire city. It is hard to imagine realistic depictions of other bodily fluids in mainstream popular culture being accepted in the way blood has been—the controversy raised by Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) painted using elephant dung immediately springs to mind (Roediger 2021). In fact, some scientists suggest that human's disgust response to faecal matter developed to protect us from the disease it can carry (Curtis, Barra, and Aunger 2011, 396).

Figure 2.14: Still from a video captured at home on 18 June 2020 after cutting myself preparing a meal.

As an artist fascinated by blood, I have experimented extensively with store-bought Halloween blood, homemade concoctions made to look like blood, fresh pig blood[43], and my

[43] Readily purchased off the shelf at local markets in California, I have thus far only been able to buy it frozen in London.

own blood[44] (figures 2.15 and 2.17). To my mother's distress, I tend to reach for my camera before a bandage when I injure myself. The images in figure 2.14 are stills from a video captured after I nicked my thumb cooking dinner in the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020— I only wish I had had a plain white towel to hand so there was no colourful printing behind my hand distracting from the bright red running through the creases in my hand and saturating the paper towel beneath. Toward the start of this research project, I discovered that I am severely anaemic and probably have been most of my life. I have to be careful about keeping my blood inside my body wherever possible and take iron supplements religiously. It is impossible to know if my fascination with blood is a subconscious response to my anaemia, in addition to responding to Christian vernacular culture. Either way, blood, including my own blood, is precious.

Brief Overview of Blood in Contemporary Art

Over the years, self-harm, menstruation, and HIV-positive blood has been used to highlight and challenge systems of oppression and subjugation— most notably of White menstruating

[44] Unlike several of the artists mentioned in this chapter, I have never injured myself on purpose and consider self-harm to be outside the range of both this research and my own interest. I take my own health and safety very seriously. In the images of my bloody hand (figure 2.14) there is a small cut on my thumb from cutting vegetables.

Figure 2.15 Self-portrait with pig's blood, 2016

women and HIV+ gay men— in performance art. In the 1970s Gina Pane performed a series of "highly charged" actions including one that involved "the insertion of cuts into her skin in order to trigger a response in the viewer" (Maude-Roxby and Li 2018, 198). Also in the 1970s, Carolee Schneemann dried spots of menstrual blood on tissue in her *Blood Work Diary* (1972.) In the 1980s Schneemann created an 11 minute performance art film *Fresh Blood – A Dream Morphology* (1982–86) based on a performance of the same name (1983) in which she holds an umbrella that represents a vulva (understood as able to bleed) while symbols are projected over her figure (McLean-Ferris 2016). Ron Athey, who is HIV-positive, has made a long career of self-mutilating performance art that is bloody and extreme—making use of "scarification, flesh hooks, branding, anal penetration, [and] surgical staplers" in his performances (Abraham 2014, quoting Ron Athey). Much of Athey's work takes titles and themes from Christian traditions despite him calling his Pentecostal upbringing "delusional, perverted, and illegal" and proclaiming there is "no line to God. No Christ. No Bible" (Athey 2015).

Marc Quinn's widely acclaimed *Self* (1991) is a sculpture of the artist's head made from ten pints of his own frozen blood. After completing the first iteration he decided to reproduce *Self* every five years to document the aging process (Fullerton 2014). Barton Lidicé Beneš's *Lethal Weapons* series (1992-1997) contains objects like a water pistol, perfume atomiser, and toy airplane that are filled with his HIV-positive blood. More recently, Ingrid Berthon-Moine photographed women using their menstrual blood as lipstick for her MA project *Red is the Colour* in 2009 (Berthon-Moine 2011). In 2016, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu created *Can't Help Myself*: a giant robot arm constantly sweeping up coloured water meant to look like blood. This work was commissioned for the Guggenheim Museum in New York and meant to portray "an absurd, Sisyphean view of contemporary issues surrounding migration and sovereignty" (Weng 2016). The work of Herman Nitsch, Ana Mendieta, and Franko B shall be explored below in more depth than our whistle-stop tour above, as they stand out in ritualism and nod to religiosity lending scope and context for comparing and contrasting my own art practice.

Herman Nitsch's Maximalist Action Paintings

It is true that "one cannot deny the religious and spiritual involved" in the artwork of Hermann Nitsch, a Viennese Actionist who worked extensively with blood and paint (Duerckheim 2010, 6; Schmied 2006, 34). "Viennese Actionism" is the art-historical term for

Figure 2.16 Hermann Nitsch, *20th painting action*, Venezia 2022. Installation view. Image courtesy of Marcin Gierat – Zuecca Projects

the violent, disorderly, and ritualistic performance art of Austrian artists Hermann Nitsch, Gunter Brus, Otto Muehl, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler that has "elicited visceral reactions and legal condemnations" since their genesis in 1960 (Wirth 2014, 5; Klocker 2014, 97). Their work was dynamic and disparate but "linked by liberating performative gestures" and by their intention to impact the role of art and artist in society (Klocker 2014, 8). The

movement began when Nitsch, Brus, Muehl, and Schwarzkogler began working together to "develop strongly body-centric performances that originated in criticism of the painted picture" in response to a conservative post-war Austria, and the powerful optimism present in the New York School (Klocker 2014, 7-8). In so doing, the Actionists expanded the definition of painting and picture (Wirth 2014, 5). Their performances, often done in private, left behind photographs and paintings shifting the familiar visual art mediums from art pieces themselves to artefacts of a performance "painted in space and time" (Klocker 2014, 91).

Hermann Nitsch is of particular interest to me because of his decades long obsession with blood and religion and the chapel-like spaces he sets up to display the aftermath of his actions (figure 2.16). Part of what draws me to his work is well encapsulated by a speech at the opening for an exhibition of his work:

> [It] will, on the one hand, reveal something entirely earth-bound, dynamic, something that moves us all, unsettles us, takes us beyond our zone of comfort and security. On the other hand, there is also something deeply spiritual, I would say, something religious, something that anchors us in the here and now, but also propels us forward towards the future. (Essl 2010, 10)

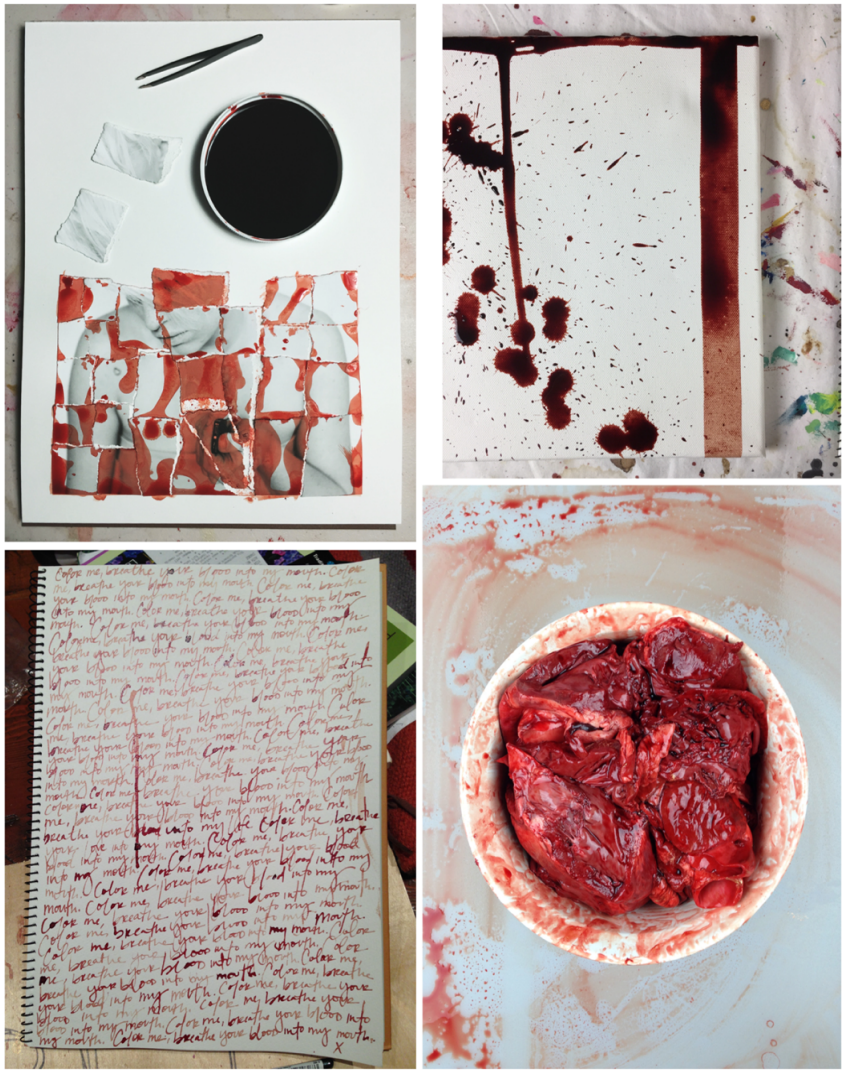


Figure 2.17 Blood Relics 2015-2018 Clockwise from top left: Self-portrait glued together with pork blood; detail image of blood painting; broken hearts: cut up pork hearts; blood text

Nitsch was a "painter, draughtsman, graphic artist, director, writer, composer, musician, and teacher" (Schuster and Raue 2006, 27). Unlike most of his large-scale oeuvre, his first paintings were small and painted onto wood "like altarpieces or icons" (Klocker 2014, 49). He considers that his painting actions began in 1960 and his performance actions started in 1962 when he had Otto Muehl splatter him with blood while he was bound to a wall wearing white with his arms outstretched—his first "real" performance (Klocker 2014, 51; Schmied 2006, 36). As he did this, Ludwig Hoffenreich, a retired journalist, photographer, and eventual long-time collaborator with the Actionists, photographed the scene (Klocker 2014, 51). "Visions and visual art methods are at the core of [Nitsch's] concept of performance" and "several [of his] key actions were orchestrated expressly for the camera" (Fuchs 2010, 20; Klocker 2014, 98). Similarly, my own work can in many ways be considered performance "orchestrated expressly for the camera."

Nitsch and I both have a keen interest in the intersection of art and religion and the ritual quality that can be ascribed to both. In both his work and mine there is an "aesthetic liturgy" present in the art as "relic" of actions past (Vergine 2000, 177; Colorado Public Radio 2011). For Nitsch the actions are well documented and world-famous performance

art. For me, my blood art is a relic from the action of living, grieving, dismantling a supposed unassailable personal Christian faith, and responding to pain that demands to be felt. Like both Nietzsche and radical theologian Peter Rollins, Nitsch held that "whoever says 'yes' to the world and our existence in the world must also say 'yes' to the suffering and the pain, to the blackest abysses of this world" (Schmied 2006, 33; see also: Nietzsche [1883] 2006, 66, 125; Rollins 2011, 131-132; Harvey 2016). He felt there is "a deep correspondence between creation and the suffering of the world" and that "Genesis and the events of the Passion belong together in artistic existence" (Schmied 2006, 33). Art historian Wieland Schmied presents Nitsch's thinking this way:

> Genesis and the Passion are inseparable, precisely because the Passion also implied the yearning for a new beginning and a different cycle of the ages. From the evening of Golgotha back to the morning of the sixth day of Creation, from the twilight and despair of the Mount of Olives back to the brightness and innocence of Paradise—this is impossible, but the art of Herman Nitsch persuades us to imagine this thought with him and to forget, when only for a moment, the pangs of sorrow at the impossibility of its realisation. (2006, 33)

Figure 2.18 Hermann Nitsch, *20th painting action*, 18-21.2.1987 at Secession, Vienna. ©Hermann Nitsch; Photo: Heinz Cibulka

Practice

In his 1991 writing on the white garment ubiquitous in his work he compares the white shirt with priestly vestments and says that "the artistic practice is an activity to be equated with the activity of a priest[45]" (Nitsch 2010, 26). So, "it is no coincidence that he has characterised several of his poured paintings with painters smock (figure 2.18) as Stations of the Cross" (Schmied 2006, 33). Slaughtering and disembowelling animals is a "recurring ritual" as is tying naked people to a cross and covering them in blood and animal flesh in a "multi-layered recollection of a terrible event [the Crucifixion of Christ]" (Schmied 2006, 34). In both Nitsch's and my artwork "the body in its naked materiality is a medium for inscription and the central means of expression of direct, incisive political statements" (Wirth 2014, 5). My vestments/cloaks are a way of using the body and tapping into ritual, while attempting to opt out of fashion, and without bowing to the patriarchal norm of female nakedness in art. Nitsch says of his white vestments:

[45] I will note here that "priest" is not a gendered term; it refers to "a person whose office is to perform public religious functions" ("priest, n." 2022). As such, Nitsch using priestly vestments is not inherently misogynist unless one brings their own conceptions that only men can be priests to the work with them.

Figure 2.14 Ana Mendieta, *untitled*, 1973. Lifetime colour photograph. 23.5 x 18.4 cm. Collection Hans Breder. Original documentation: 35mm slide.

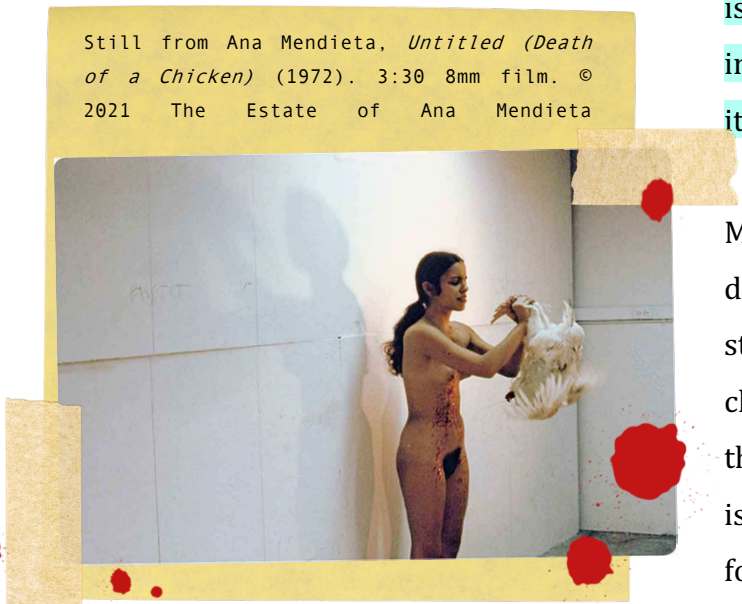
> The descent of the painter in the direction of the unappetising, of perversion, death, murdering, sacrificing, being-murdered, being-sacrificed… the base energies determining us become visible in the blood-coloured fallout on the shirt. It is as if the painter prosing open our inner abyss comes close to sweating blood, to draining the cup of sorrow, to the flagellation, the Crucifixion… his priest shirt, his sacrificial shirt is marked by the damp stamp of kenosis. (Nitsch 2010, 26).

Later in his career, Nitsch started working with new colours—purple, blue, green, then finally yellow. "All of Nitsch's colours are of symbolic value… black and purple, which are the colours of religion and pain, the Passion of Christ…yellow, the colour of resurrection" (Essl 2010, 12). While a little disappointing and incongruent with my work and interests, it is hard to be surprised that a man deep into old age would begin to consider resurrection.

Ana Mendieta on the Personal and Universal

Ana Mendieta's use of blood is ritualistic and messy. Her untitled image from 1974 in which a figure wrapped in white cloth is on the ground covered in blood with a heart on their chest (figure 2.14) is exciting and resonant with

my own imagery of a cloaked figure and my previous work with blood and pork hearts (figure 2.12). Mendieta's "exploitation of the 'slipperiness' between the universal and the specific" is also resonant as I feel my work slips between both as well (Viso 2004a, 30). In making artwork that feels deeply personal and specific to a place and time in one's life, there is a connection with what it means to be human, to desire connection with the divine (or the intangible, universal, or whatever one may choose to call this). This work becomes liminal in its connection of personal and universal.



Still from Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)* (1972). 3:30 8mm film. © 2021 The Estate of Ana Mendieta

Mendieta's first work known to use blood was in 1972 for *Untitled (Death of a Chicken),* documented in 35mm slides and Super-8 film (Viso 2004b, 63-64). In these, she is seen standing naked against a wall holding a very recently beheaded chicken by the feet. The chicken flaps around in its death throes splattering blood all over Mendieta's naked body, the wall, and the floor (Viso 2004b, 63-64). This work with its strong "ritualistic undertone" is inspired by Afro Cuban rituals which, alongside Catholicism, existed as a "potent cultural force" in her Cuban background (Herzberg 2004, 150; Iles 2004, 208). In her essay for the book *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*[46] (a book she also edited) Olga M. Viso says of Mendieta's art rituals:

[46] I did look at Ana Mendieta in my research for the chapter on landscape, and ultimately decided to leave her out of that discussion though it could be relevant to address her work as subverting the "monumental

> [Her] powerful appropriation has been interpreted by some critics as the artist's misunderstanding of Afro-Cuban ritual practices, or, conversely, as a powerfully subversive act that reveals a more sophisticated appreciation of Afro-Cuban ritual that she appropriated to her own ends. (2004b, 64)

Her mentor and lover, Hans Breder, introduced her to the Viennese Actionists so it is also said Mendieta's blood rituals we inspired by them in her use of animal sacrifice, mock ritual, and spilling blood onto the body (Herzberg 2004, 152).

Franko B is not a Cheap Jesus

A note on Franko B and Blackface

> *I have seriously considered cutting the following discussion of Franko B's work from my thesis because of his racist series* Love in Times of Pain *(2008, 2010) in which he paints himself completely black. I am unsure if leaving it in with this*

---

gestures" of male land artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. (Viso 2004a, 22) However, the themes and processes in her land work are centred around the body and its mark on the landscape, while my work is about the specific land in which I am working and how the figure moves within it.

warning is adequate to maintain my own integrity and commitment to anti-racism while pursuing academic rigour.

That Franko B painted himself black for his art just as the minstrels of the early 19th century did is an issue that needs to be addressed but is outside the purview of this research.

I have been unable to find critique of his behaviour or work, online or in various libraries about these images or performances being minstrelsy. In researching Love in Times of Pain *(2008, 2010) to confirm to myself that I* really *was seeing a White man painted black and that no one seemed to care, I found Amelia Jones' contribution about the series for the exhibition catalogue on Franko B's website. In her essay, Jones, a curator, theorist, and historian, does not consider the racist implications of a White man wearing black skin. In fact, she finishes the essay:*

> *The master is dependent on the slave.*
> *The body is full of holes.*
> *The White male body is wounded, permeable, and queer.*
> *(Jones 2006)*

> *There is a lot to unpack here, and Jones does spend some time discussing an abstract slave/master narrative but does not so much as touch on race, the history of slavery, minstrelsy, or the fact that Franko B is in blackface at all.*

Franko B, an more recent artist than Mendieta and Nitsch, has used his own blood in his performances and actions multiple times. It is clear that his body of work is useful in examining blood in art and comparing to my own images. However, paging through the exhibition book *Oh Lover Boy / Franko B* gave me a stomach-ache. While he says of his work, "I am somebody who wants to create very beautiful images and I see the images as a sort of painting" (2001, interview 6). I find his work disturbing in its grotesque nature— his work truly embodies the concept of the abject.

Franko B's bloodletting in *Oh Lover Boy*[47] reminded some critics of the Crucifixion with the artist himself interpreted as a Christlike figure. Like so many performance pieces that involve blood, *Oh Lover Boy* "resonate[s with] the iconography of religious suffering" (Richards 2008, 108). In her essay *Specular Suffering (Staging) the Bleeding Body* for the

[47] Franko B regularly re-uses titles. This version of *Oh Lover Boy* involved Franko B painted white and laying on a large canvas while blood flowed out of cannulas on the inside of both elbows (2001, interview 1).

Performance Art Journal, Mary Richards draws very strong correlations between *Oh Lover Boy* and the Crucifixion writing:

> In contemplating Franko B's stigmatic performance work, we are exposed to the sort of physical and visual intensities usually associated with medieval and pre-modern worshippers' relationship with devotional representations of Christ's suffering. (2008, 113)

Richards also says of the piece, "The spectator becomes Thomas to the artist's Christ, one who serves as live witness to the punctures and wounds in order to vouch for their reality" (Richards 2008, 109). I find that Franko B's work is a misappropriation of the suffering Christ. We are spectating his various injuries (depending on what action or performance is being watched), but we are merely spectators watching an artist paint with his body. When asked about the religious or suffering themes in his work, Franko B insists he is a "non-believer" and that "[sacrificing] is not what I am doing. I am not interested in that" (2001, interview 5, interview 8). In another interview he says, "I am not a cheap Jesus. I am not here to save the world" (2001, interview 8).

Franko B displays his naked humanity in all its abject and ignoble glory. The published photos of *mama i can't sing* (2001). gave me a visceral reaction—my notes say, "it seems more like summoning demons than exorcising them." By this I mean that I have always understood art as a release or as a way for the artist to process the world they inhabit (it very much is for me, and I know I am not alone in this). First and foremost is the artist's

relationship to the world— the artwork, whatever the medium, is that relationship somehow processed or in process. In much of his work, but most particularly *mama i can't sing* that relationship feels reversed to me (2001). Franko B seems to be putting trauma and ugliness into the world instead of metabolising it himself. While I find the argument that there are deep religious complexities in his work alluring (Franko B was raised Catholic) (2001, interview 5), and do indeed see the clear references to the Crucifixion of Christ in his *Oh Lover Boy* performance, I do not agree with how strongly Richards presents the religious angle. On watching the video of the performance a few times (and conceding that this experience is nothing compared to being in the room) it does not come across as profoundly to me as Richards asserts.

In discussing Franko B's work in her eponymous essay from *Franko B: I Still Love* (2010), art critic and curator Francesca Alfano Miglietti says that he,

> turns upside down the internal/external relationship of the body. He chooses to display the most intimate, the most personal, the most hidden aspect of his being and his own interior with the leaking of his own body fluids onto the 'external façade' of the existing and external aspect of things. (2010, 17)

This, to me, makes a lot more sense than any other description of Franko B's work I have seen, and most closely resembles my own fascination with blood. In piercing the skin one transgresses one's own human boundary as the divine was ruptured in Jesus' wounding. Our

skin is our shield and mediator to the outside world—to all things external. When a needle, a canula, a knife, or nails trespass from exterior to interior we are laid bare. Lyn Gardner from the Guardian says in her review of *Oh Lover Boy*,

> Tempting though it is to look for religious iconography, *Oh Lover Boy* is a wholly secular experience…It recalls the blood-letting techniques of early medicine, the idea that only by a free flow of blood can there be release, some kind of catharsis…He turns his body and blood into a canvas and invites us to view it, not as a freak-show but as an object, a living painting, in all its vulnerable, ugly beauty. (2001)

Practice

Where all of Franko B's blood artwork is made with his own blood, including with self-mutilation or carving into his body by actors, I do not feel it is important to use my own blood in my artwork. I have tried it[48] dripping my own blood out of vials onto canvas or using a bamboo pen to write. There is a particular feeling of the sacred to it, and as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "Of all that is written, I love only what a person hath written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit" (Nietzsche [1883] 2006, 27).

[48] For this experience, I safely had my blood drawn by a trained medical professional and friend; I have not done this or used my own blood for the purposes of this PhD project.

However, I find the self-harming implications[49] of working with one's own blood to be far too distracting from the beauty in the idea of blood as a fluid of life. Fake blood and red paint remain bright red in perpetuity and the colour acts more like a supernormal stimulus drawing more attention than human or animal blood which is dark and dries brown.

Conclusion

The blood shed by Jesus Christ on the cross, the blood of the Eucharist, and the blood of humans shed in violence or menstruation is "one of the most powerful and ubiquitous of human symbols. It signifies both life and death, health and disease, power and powerlessness" (Bradburne 2002, 11). In both medieval Christianity and contemporary art, blood is a means for articulating a sacred or religious subject matter. While blood is used as a symbol of sacrifice and redemption in the Christian tradition, contemporary vernacular Christian culture engages very little, if at all, with blood as the viscous liquid flowing in our veins. These days, the art world is more likely to re-enact a bloody Crucifixion or bleed out for the sake of exorcising the self and the sacred in abjection than anything else.

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[49] As mentioned before, not only am I adverse to self-harm, I am also anaemic so my blood is that bit more precious and must stay inside my body.

My practice explores a territory positioned between an anodyne or “sanitised” imagery and that which fails to bring catharsis and because it remains lodged in the abject. By making work that is sincere, critical, and fluent in Christianity, radical theology, and contemporary art I am addressing both specific and universal themes of existentialism, pain, and death.

Colour Key:

Art

CMJ Art Practice

Important

Emphasis

Theology

Radical Theology

Marginalia:

Destruccio Iherosolime (1493) Hand coloured woodcut, 26 x 53cm. Published by Anton Koberger, Nuremberg.

Vue & description de la ville de Jerusalem telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui avec les tombeaux (1719) Hand coloured copper engraving, 39 x 50cm. Published by L'Honoré & Châtelain, Amsterdam.

Ierusalem moder (approximately 1680) Hand coloured copper engraving, 15 x 10cm. Publisher and place not identified.

All: Leonard and Juliet Rothman Holy Land Map Collection, Stanford Libraries. Digitised by CMJ, 2016, Stanford University.

Chapter 03: The Desert Landscape

Introduction

In the desert, you see, there is everything and nothing… it is God without mankind.

(de Balzac [1830] 2018, 12)

Methodology

A fundamental focus of the practical investigation in my work is engagement with landscape. More particularly, Death Valley and the surrounding desert of the Great Basin in the western United States are where the vast majority of my art practice is grounded and is the focal point of this part of the research. Furthermore, a key aspect of the work, which has an explicitly theological focus, is to explore the landscape as a means for articulating a sacred or religious subject matter. In this regard, it is useful to explore and understand the particular history and significations of the landscape we are engaging with, and to situate this within a wider understanding of landscape traditions. Given my subject matter, this

exploration will focus in particular around the religious and sacred dimensions of both the particular and general landscape traditions discussed.

'Landscape', ordinarily defined as the visible features of land or a picture representing the land, is a word which is "fully integrated with the world of make believe" (Tuan 1974, 133). In the original Dutch, '*landschap*' described farms, homesteads, or other such pedestrian spaces. It was the English who pulled the word up into the world of art and divorced it from reality. By the end of the sixteenth century 'landscape' denoted an aesthetic or artistic representation of the land or the background (Tuan 1974, 133). Environmental humanities researcher Rod Giblett takes the definition further in applying it directly to photography: "Landscape photography [is] the creative, photographic inscription of the visual appreciation for the surfaces of the land in the three major aesthetic modes of the sublime, the picturesque, and the beautiful" (2012, 15).

Practice

For the purposes of this chapter defining 'desert' presents itself as a straightforward endeavour, but then one is reminded that 'desert' (to abandon) and 'desert' (an arid region) are the same word, and that the desert is both a temporal and metaphysical place. It seems, too, that nearly all of the texts cited herein take for granted that the reader has a working comprehension of the term 'desert' and fail to articulate specifics. For the purposes of this investigation, I will define 'desert' with the admittedly poetic words of petroleum geologist Michael Welland:

Me at my grandparent's house in Prescott, Arizona, USA circa 1984

> The desert is a place of contrasts, of extremes, a place of staggering beauty and unimaginable violence, a place where the margins between success and failure, between life and death are slim, a place of timelessness and ephemerality, a place of good and evil. (2015, 9)

I will add that there lies a deep sense of the sacred within the slim margins and paradoxes of these vast and bewitching landscapes.

(intentionally vague definition)

My own love of the vast and bewitching desert came later in life. Though I grew up in a maritime climate near the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean, my grandparents lived in a small, isolated town in the high desert. We made the fourteen-hour drive to visit them several times a year all through my childhood. These long (long!), hot drives through the Mojave Desert where everything looked the same and we had to drive without air-conditioning so the car would not overheat have blurred together into a hot and boring mush of drives that felt like an eternity. These drives are a blur of books on tape, hot pavement, overheated cars on the side of the road, and soul-destroying boredom. Sometimes on our trips to the high desert we would make the two-hour drive "down the hill" (as my grandparents said) to Phoenix to visit my cousins and go to big box stores. My sister and I have always joked that Phoenix feels like opening the oven door to pull something out—unless it is windy, then it feels like being inside a hairdryer.

While I love my family and deeply miss my long-departed grandparents, I hated the desert until well into my adulthood. This changed with two major life events: a road trip and a big move. In 2009 I was living in Los Angeles, working in fashion with celebrities, had a boyfriend I thought was forever, and lived in a cool flat on the intersection of Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards in trendy Silverlake. Within one week, I lost my job and my flat, and my boyfriend broke up with me out of the blue. I had no idea what to do with myself, so when I moved out, I put everything in storage and hit the road with a few essentials and my dog, Stella, in a late model sedan. I did not have a plan or a destination, but I drove straight into the desert since that was where Jesus and Moses went. I ended up spending more than three months on the road and drove more than 13,000 miles. I slept in my car, camped, bathed in rivers and McDonald's bathrooms, made friends and learned how to be alone, as I made my way around the USA on backroads with an atlas and a broken heart. I learned then to love the outdoors, the balm on the soul that the deep wilderness can be. I went on a literal spiritual quest that started in the desert and transformed my life and my outlook. Reflecting on this season in my life, I can see that learning how to suffer and how to be alone in the wilderness and forge my own path through life was the first seismic shift in my religious practice and relationship with Christianity, which ultimately led me to radical theology.

The attachment to the desert wilderness that began in 2009 was consolidated while I was making plans to move to England. I went to a wedding in Palm Springs, California, the summer of 2012, less than a year before I moved to the United Kingdom. On my drive there

through the Tehachapi Pass something in my mind and soul clicked. The rocky, mountainous pass is always beautiful and fun to photograph because it is covered with thousands of wind turbines, but this time the hills were bathed in golden light as the sky lit up like fire behind me—not something I had never seen before, but this time it hit differently. I had to pull over on the high-speed two-lane highway to take a moment to myself. It dawned on me that this harsh and colourful landscape is so very unique and that I would miss it deeply when I moved 5,000 miles away.

I suppose one does not appreciate what one has until it is gone. I spent a year of my life in the desert living with my grandparents as a child and hated it. Now that it is an enormous production for me to get out into that harsh expanse, I realise part of my heart lives there. I learned how to be a photographer from my grandfather when I lived with and visited him in the desert. I learned how to be alone, how to slow down, and how to suffer on my road trip through the desert. And I learned how to love where I am from and how special the desert is when I left.

Practice

When I set out on this research, I thought it was the desert in general that I was drawn to, but I realise now it is specifically the Mojave that matters to me. There was a period where I was thinking about taking my work to different desert landscapes, but I realised how the specific history and geography of the American West are in fact central. This decision mirrors my realisation about the importance of feminist theologies and menstruation in the

To this particular project

Because it is so personal

other dimensions of this research. Negotiating this particular desert and its connection to both my individual and cultural history allows it to connect more critically to the political and social-historical dimensions of a subversively religious or sacred art practice.

I am not alone in my desert travels; from Abraham to the American pioneer, the desert is a place to journey. *Manifest destiny* drove Americans from east to west where they discovered the Great Basin and a fertile promise land on the other side. This expeditious growth brought the struggle between the colonizers and nature into focus and this conflict would inform art of many stripes for generations. Photography played a tremendous role in the exploration and settlement of the American West. The medium was invented only ten years before gold was discovered in California, and so was used by the U.S. Government to document this 'uninhabited land' (which was very much inhabited), and by artist activists like Ansel Adams, to convince the government to protect more of the beautiful land.

Death Valley has become particularly special to me because of the spectacular and unusual topography and macabre name. I return there year after year to make my images—there is always more to explore, and the salt basins look different with every visit. The film *Zabriskie Point* (1970) is possibly the most prominent artwork made there and contributes to the narrative of the Great American Road trip which is pervasive in art and literature about the

region. On one such road trip, I discovered *The International Car Forest of the Lost Church* (c. 2011; figure 3.11). This eccentric art piece/place with a bizarre backstory[50] is a commensurate illustration of the scale and character of the desert west— something I would argue establishment artists like Michael Heizer have not been able to do with credibility. My own as yet independent artwork echoes some of those who have tread before me like Timothy O'Sullivan and Laura Gilpin, though I admit I find myself an accidental landscape photographer, as I was drawn to this locale by the same siren song as countless artists and ascetics before me.

Practice

The History of the Landscape in Art

Landscape is a relatively new addition to the canon of fine art, with the tradition of naturalistic landscape appearing in Holland in the 17th century (A.J. Adams 2002, 35).

> Something dramatic happened around 1620 in Haarlem, so the narrative goes, as if scales had suddenly and collectively fallen from seventeenth-century Dutch artists' eyes, and they could suddenly see, and faithfully transcribe, the land in which they found themselves. (A.J. Adams 2002, 35)

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[50] See *Excursus II: Goldfield, Nevada*

Of course, that does not actually stop me from trying! →

Political nuance Controversy ↓

Figure 3.1: Jan van Goyen (Dutch 1596-1656), *River Landscape with Pellekussenpoort, Utrecht, and Gothic Choir*, 1643. Private collection.

Until the shocking revelation that I have become a landscape photographer and began researching this chapter, I thought landscape photography and painting were boring and largely unnecessary. I feel strongly that no one can truly capture the essence of what it really feels like to be in the wilderness or the grand scale of the desert, mountains, or plains. However, I have discovered that although on the surface it seems an orthodox and established genre, landscape is a nuanced medium which "has evolved through controversy and hard-won innovation" (Warrell 2012). This is evidenced at the very beginning in Dutch painting. Jan van Goyen's painting from 1643, *River Landscape with Pellekussenpoort, Utrecht, and Gothic Choir*, (figure 3.1) appears to be a serenely picturesque scene meant to celebrate the view. However, religious tensions in the newly reformed 17th Century Dutch Republic ran very high (A.J. Adams 2002, 62). Some art historians contend that Van Goyen's paintings are "meticulously non-denominational" despite his purported Catholicism (Powell 2017, 399). It seems more likely that Van Goyen was in fact making a controversial statement on the current political climate and the issues arising between church and state (A.J. Adams 2002, 63). In *River Landscape with Pellekussenpoort, Utrecht, and Gothic Choir*, Van Goyen composed a formerly Catholic Gothic cathedral adjacent to the ancient city gate of Utrecht, which is the former seat of the Catholic bishop and the city known to have the highest remaining proportion of Catholics (A.J. Adams 2002, 63).

In combining familiar land and cityscapes, Van Goyen at once celebrates the pastoral ideal typically associated with the city gate (A.J. Adams 2002, 63) and asserts his now oppressed theology. Amy Knight Powell says of the Dutch landscape artists, and of Jan Van Goyen in particular,

> Image-making may be more a matter of erasing and altering the old than birthing the 'new'. This negative side of the topos flourished in the post-iconoclastic period in the Netherlands, with artists there quietly expressing scepticism about the imagination in a poetics of not seeing that came to define a certain style of landscape. It is not an accident that this happened in a world that had recently seen violent iconoclasms. These events set the stage for what was to come. In this context, not seeing was a theological matter, but it was also a matter of aesthetics and a corresponding ethics of encountering the non-human world. (2017, 400)

In other words, the creative reaction to violent revolution is not always creating something new but can be an erasure of the old. Capturing or creating landscape, the "non-human world," in art can carry deep political, theological, philosophical or other meaning, despite what may appear to be a rather innocuous image of the scenery.

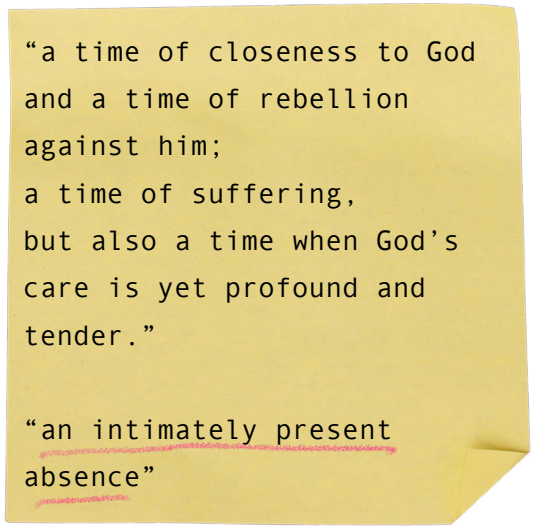
See Also:
- Westward Expansion/ *Manifest Destiny*
- Colonialism
- The wilderness paradox
- Etc.

The Desert

The Desert as Wasteland

Three thousand years ago, God asked a 75-year-old man and his family to leave his country, his people, and his father's household to travel into the desert wilderness, in search of a land of promise to populate with his descendants (Genesis 12:1). Going out into the wilderness, especially a desert wilderness, is no easy task. 'Wilderness' "is used over and over again in the King James Version [of the Holy Bible] to refer to places on the margins of civilization where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair" (Cronon 1995, 70). While these days, the wilderness has romantic connotations of adventure and intrigue,

> As late as the eighteenth century, the most common usage of the word 'wilderness' in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be 'deserted,' 'savage,' 'desolate,' 'barren'—in short, a 'waste,' the word's nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was 'bewilderment'—or terror. (Cronon 1995, 70)



The old man sent into the wilderness, “Abraham—Abram—Ibrahim—would become the patriarch of the three religions of the Book[51], the great monotheistic religions of the desert” (Welland 2015, 186). Generations later, his descendant Moses would lead his people out of slavery in Egypt back into the desert wilderness for 40 years of wandering. I find that in this story the liminality of the desert and the paradox of the wilderness takes shape. This season in the desert wilderness was “a time of closeness to God and a time of rebellion against him; a time of suffering, but also a time when God’s care is yet profound and tender” (Jasper 2008, 16). During their wanderings God is an “an intimately present absence” in feeding and leading the wandering tribe and speaking directly to Moses while yet remaining unseen (Jasper 2008, 16). Jesus himself began his ministry with 40 days of fasting in the desert, leading up to his great temptation.

The wilderness paradox is the fact that, “In the Bible the term ‘wilderness’ brings to mind two contradictory images. On one hand, it is a place of desolation, “the unsworn land frequented by demons; it is condemned by God” (Tuan 1974, 109). Adam and Eve were thrown from the garden into the wilderness. The warnings and castigations of the prophets and the temptation of Christ all “emphasise the negative— and dominant— meaning of wilderness in the Bible” as a terrifying and brutal place (Tuan 1974, 110). However, the

[51] Islam, Judaism, and Christianity

wilderness is also a symbol of God's presence on earth (Cronon 1995, 75). After only a short time wandering the desert,

> Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the Lord: for he hath heard your murmurings. And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that *they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.* (Exodus 16:9-10, King James Version; emphasis mine)

The desert as the site of "testing, judgement, punishment, purification, self-denial and sacrifice" is a "common and powerful" symbol throughout the Bible (Welland 2015, 186, 188). Environmental historian William Cronon writes of the role of wilderness in the Christian sacred texts,

> When Adam and Eve were driven from that garden, the world they entered was a wilderness that only their labor and pain could redeem. Wilderness, in short, was a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling. (1995, 71)

The wilderness as somewhere to fear is carried on through to the New Testament of the Bible when Jesus took 40 days and nights to be confronted and tempted in the desert (Welland 2015, 188; Jasper 2008, 17).

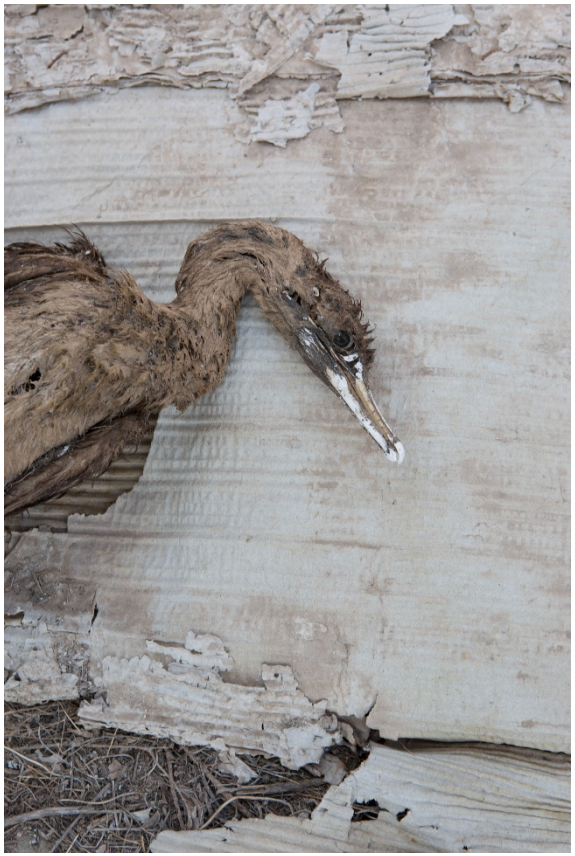


Figure 3.2 Mummified bird, Bombay Beach, 2015

The punishing desert wilderness felt like the obvious locale in which to explore my own broken heart and failing faith. Being in the dangerous, desolate desert where human life is barely sustainable brings into sharp focus the fragility of life. Corpses do not decay and disappear into the soil in the arid desert as they do elsewhere, and as a result one encounters with some regularity mummified corpses (figure 3.2) or bones picked clean by scavengers—I think particularly of the bone strewn beaches of the Salton Sea. The death without decay found in the desert reminds me of Holy Saturday, that is to say, *a place between*. A place of losing and grieving without redemption.

The desert wilderness in many ways could be considered a physical manifestation of what Christian existentialist Paul Tillich refers to when he discusses estrangement:

> Estrangement points to the basic characteristic of man's predicament. Man as he exists is not what he essentially is and *ought to be*. He is estranged from his true being. The profundity of the term "estrangement" lies in the implication that one belongs essentially to that from which one is estranged. Estrangement is not a biblical term but is implied in most of the biblical descriptions of man's predicament. It is implied in the symbols of the expulsion from paradise, in the hostility between man and nature, in the deadly hostility of brother against brother.... (1967, 45)

Practice

When this research project began, I was estranged from the faith that raised me, a stranger in a land of disbelief—very much expelled from the paradise of my previous utter confidence in how the world worked. Travelling into the cruel beauty of the desert to explore and mourn my shifting-or-maybe-dying faith and to deal with the grief of a bereavement soothed my soul and artist's heart. In making artwork in the desert, I was performing my grief as shrouded death, moving through the same landscape as the patriarchs of the faith I was leaving behind.

Desert as Sacred Sublime

Paradoxical to the last section, the wilderness is also venerated as a place to encounter the divine. As William Cronon writes, the wilderness is "seen as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time's arrow" (1995, 79). In the sacred texts, the desert is also presented as a place to encounter God the Father and to be refreshed. There is an Algerian saying that articulates this beautifully: "The desert is the Garden of Allah, from which the Lord of the faithful removed all superfluous human and animal life, so that there might be one place where He can walk in peace" (Welland 2015, 188). Jesus repeatedly went into the wilderness to pray, and the Israelites were cared for by God while they wandered the desert for a generation (Luke 6:12; Exodus 16:4-31). In his book *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture*, David Jasper, Professor Emeritus of Literature and Theology,

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Genesis 32:24-30

writes of the desert as "a place of community" as well as a place "of self-discovery through pain, solitariness, and suffering" (Jasper 2008, 15). This observation rings with truth as there is a unique sense of community in the desert where people on the fringes of society come together to create their own kind of rules (see: "Excursus II: Goldfield, Nevada" and "Appendix 1: CMJ On the Road"). More important to me, though, is the journey "of self-discovery through pain, solitariness, and suffering." While I have not gone hungry or come near death on my journeys into the desert wilderness, through my lonely art practice I have moved forward on my journey of self-discovery, untangling the complex ties that bound me: Christianity and my strong affinity for the existentialism and uncertainty found in radical theology.

Practice

In his book *The Desert: Lands of Lost Borders*, geologist Michael Welland writes, "The desert has long been a source of inspiration, a strangely fertile stage for human imagination" (2015, 179). It certainly has been fertile ground for my own imagination, and I find it doubtful that it is any coincidence that the desert is the seat of the major monotheistic religions. For all the wandering, suffering, temptation, and struggle the desert represents in Christianity, it is a place of transformation. It is a place separate from daily life where one can encounter and wrestle with the divine and be changed (Gen. 32:24-30[52]). For me, the desert is a place to explore, to revel in beauty, and to don my cloak and make artwork over and over with

[52] See left margin for full text.

repetition echoing Catholic prayers, in hopes of unravelling the mysteries of the universe and moving closer to peace and refreshment within my mourning. Countless other artists, writers, mystics, ascetics, and adventurers over the ages have also found the desert wilderness to be deeply compelling. “The desert is seductive, with some strange allure that, once experienced, invites—or even compels—return” (Welland 2015, 180).

The Flight of the Alone into the Alone

The desert wilderness as a paradox of suffering, growth, and tender care— particularly in the life of Jesus— is well illustrated in Luc Olivier-Merson’s 1879 painting, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (figure 3.3). Here we see the Holy Family (Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus) completely alone in a wide expanse of barren desert after an angel urged Joseph to take his young family and flee the tyranny of King Herod (Matthew 2:13-18). The party appears asleep and Mary and Jesus have found “refuge in the arms of a welcoming Egyptian sphinx” (Reid 2018, 261). In this moment, the vulnerable party rests and finds refuge while also suffering the weary journey of refugees escaping tyranny. David Jasper writes that the desert journey is,

> Experienced as an erotic participation in the bodily suffering of Christ, the imagery of communion maintains its association with the physical extremes of the wilderness that is at once both heaven and hell. (2008, 16)

Figure 3.3: Luc Olivier Merson (French, 1846–1920), *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 71.8 x 128.3cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Here the Holy Family experiences both heaven (safety, refuge) and hell (leaving home, uncertainty). As the Tuareg people of the Sahara are quoted in *The Desert: Land without Borders*, "for the body the desert is a place of exile, whereas for the spirit the desert is paradise" (Welland 2015, 185). Written originally for a publication called *Menorah: A Monthly Magazine for the Jewish Home* and quoted in *Israel in Exile: Jewish Writing and the Desert*, Josephine Lazarus captures the sentiment of the American Jew and the depth of their relationship with the desert:

> The West has never originated any great religion. It has only adapted and elaborated theologies and systems of philosophy, fitting or misfitting them to Western forms and purposes. But we Jews still carry in our hearts the divine spark—the day star of the Orient… We still bear in our soul the soul of the desert—the wide, vast spaces, the great silence, the great solitude, the silent watches of the night under the calm, large stars of the East, the flight of the alone to the Alone. (Lazarus 1905; Omer-Sherman 2006, 5)

Rest on the Flight into Egypt or indeed any of my own desert artwork could be reasonably retitled, "*The Flight of the Alone to the Alone*."

Laura Gilpin

Laura Gilpin "…never thought of herself as a 'female' photographer and eschewed any discussion of gender related to her work" (2015, 178-224). This, of course, has not stopped critics from doing just that. One such critic cannot help but discuss the deeply cringe-inducing "'feminine' way of seeing" the landscape with the "potential to sustain domestic life" (Sandweiss 1987, 73). I draw attention to Gilpin's gender identity because I often find myself contemplating Deborah Bright's nagging question from *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography*:

Something I'd like to investigate further

> The sorts of questions we might ask concern what ideologies landscape photographs perpetuate: in whose interests they were conceived; why we still desire to make and consume them; and why the art of landscape photography remains so singularly identified with a masculine eye. (1987, 63)

While these are excellent questions that I would love to pursue one day, they are outside the scope of this project.

Like Laura Gilpin, I feel right at home in the great west, though to many it is "an alien land where great mountains and featureless deserts dwarf humans to insignificance" (Sandweiss 1987, 64). Born and raised in Colorado, "Gilpin had a strong connection to this heroic strain of explorer-photographers" (Sandweiss 1987, 64). This and her formal training in the pictorial tradition were crucial to her emotive and successful career in landscape photography (Sandweiss 1987, 64). Also akin to my own trajectory, early in her career Gilpin was "connected with a suspect persuasion in photography—pictorialism… she relied on pictorialism's characteristic soft-focus lenses and composed in the emphatically simplifying manner of her teacher [Clarence White]" (R. Adams 1988, 74). Offering an antidote to the anesthetizing documentarian photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan, "Pictorial landscapes… frequently became metaphorical images, revealing more about the photographer's feelings toward the land than the land itself" (Sandweiss 1987, 64-65). Laura

Gilpin eventually moved away from this style, but she continued to see photography as a "personally expressive art" (Sandweiss 1987, 65).

Figure 3.4: Laura Gilpin, *A Chance Meeting in the Desert*, 1950. Gelatine silver print, 33.5 x 45.5cm. Laura Gilpin Collection, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

Laura Gilpin seems to escape the wilderness paradox, seeing neither foreboding nor sublimity in the vast open spaces. "For Gilpin, the southwestern landscape was neither an empty vista awaiting human settlement nor a jewel-like scene resisting human intrusion." (Sandweiss 1987, 63) As she "strove to capture a spirit of place" (Sandweiss 1987, 63), Gilpin would shoot the wide sweeping views of seemingly endless land for which she became known. In an article for *Aperture*, photographer Robert Adams says of her images, "[they] stand by themselves as important records of the geography's light and shape. At their best these views are calm; whether in soft or sharp focus they are 'straight' in a way that gives that word its full meaning" (1988, 73).

It is easy to imagine myself in this moment as either the lone traveller or in Gilpin's shoes.

The world at large has changed dramatically since the 19050s and climate change and the extremes of weather in the landscape are so different as to be almost unrecognisable from one visit to the next; but some things remain the same. The unique, if momentary, connection between desert wanderers that sparks a moment of kismet so many miles from the maddening crowds.

In her 1950 photograph *A Chance Meeting in the Desert* (figure 3.4) a man on horseback and a man on foot appear to be conversing in the middle of wide, open desert, while an arresting ominous sky threatens to unleash upon them.

> Gilpin notes that she was so intent upon watching a young shepherd in one direction "that we did not see a young man approaching on foot from another. Then up out of a wash appeared a lone horseman who stopped to talk to the young man on foot. After a while each went his own way and we watched them all disappear." (Sandweiss 1987, 70)

What could be a road is barely visible in the wash to the left, which could lead one to believe the confluence of these three travellers is not so unusual after all. However, anyone who has spent much time out in this immense desert knows that these confluences are rare and are often serendipitous,[53] reminding one of Jesus and John the Baptist's relationship with the desert as not only a place of sacrifice and testing, but also a sacred community.

[53] I cannot help but be reminded of the many times I have been off the beaten path and run into a fellow adventurer who has shown me kindness or, better, given me a tip on a little-known place to visit. One kind soul even took the time to draw me a map to the "cheese holes" near Beatty, Nevada. (I never found them.)

Figure 3.5: Untitled image, Rainbow Basin, 2018

Practice

Methodolog

There is a connection between my work and the work of Laura Gilpin. For both of us, the west is home; there is a deep bond to the land and spirit of adventure;[54] and an allegiance to personal expression. My images, too, can be described as above: 'wide, sweeping views of seemingly endless land' and "records of the geography's light and shape… 'straight' in a way that gives that word its full meaning" (R. Adams 1988, 73). Much connects my work to Gilpin's, though much also separates us. I became a landscape photographer by accident. I, too, started with a more pictorial approach to photography and gradually moved away from it into simpler, more direct images. In the pursuit of simplicity and sublimity I began photographing cloaked figures in the desert. It was not until I had been working this way for a few years that I realised that I had accidently become a landscape photographer.

In this 2018 untitled image that I made in Rainbow Basin (figure 3.5) there is a cloaked figure with their back to the wind. The cloak is a striking red that stands out sharply from the bright blue sky, light dusty ground, and parched looking vegetation. The flatness of the foreground and an almost firmament-like sky give weight to a bright image. The cloak appears to be whipping but is frozen in time. The clouds, while fluffy and idyllic, add unexpected dynamic movement. In the background we see two Joshua Trees raising their

[54] While this spirit is tainted by a history of brutal colonisation, the romance of the Great American West will always be part of my identity— for better or worse.

arms[55] to the heavens. A mysterious figure cloaked in the colour of blood, earth, and creation myth is the obvious focal point (Bucklow 2016, 158). In contemplating the figure, consider what Michael Welland says of the desert dweller:

> Out of the desert came powerful gods and prophets, and back to the desert have gone monks, ascetics, romantics, and those (particularly in the Christian tradition) on the margins of human society in search of the divine and themselves. (2015, 186)

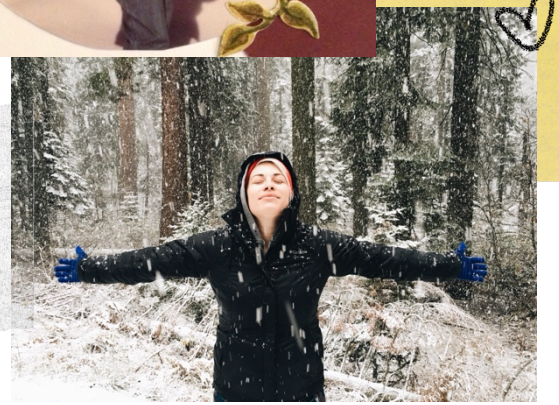
The anonymous cloaked figure—alone in an expansive, harsh, desert—estranged from society and from themselves, could be a religious figure in unfamiliar robes, a weary traveller exiled to the arid wilderness, or death itself. As the artist I am both inside the cloak and behind the camera. Underneath the rich red I exist between thinking and abstraction—between states, inhabiting the liminality of the desert. In this image the figure, whether artist or anonymous, carries the weight of the desert mythos within folds of red cloth.

[55] Legend says Joshua trees (*Yucca brevifolia*) were named by Mormons moving west in the nineteenth century because the trees look like Joshua lifting his hands in prayer. Joshua was Moses' successor in leading the Israelites (Joshua 1:1).

Landscape in the American West

As Josephine Lazarus notes, “the West originates no great world religions.” However, as a native Californian who creates the majority of my artwork as photography in the great American West, a grasp on the unique history and mythos of this part of the world is critical to understanding where my work has come from and the underlying context of my landscape imagery. I share with many Americans, past and present, a deep identification with the wild untamed[56] land of the Western United States. From the founding of my now expansive country of origin, the United States of America’s identity has been profoundly shaped by images of its landscape (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 39). It was around 1820 when the American landscape began being appreciated and painted by mostly urban artists (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 42, 46). Though the nation was about to experience a rapid expansion, in the 1820s landscape painting was still centred around New York City and the culture there— with most paintings made, sold, and exhibited within the city (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 46).

Enjoying Sequoia National Park, California with my mom in 1983 (left) and in a sudden blizzard (2106, below)



Untangling and rewriting this narrative farce—even just in regard to my own work—is a project in and of itself; and after consideration, outside the scope of this Phd.

[56] Of course, the ideology of the American wilderness as completely untouched by human hands is a farce, but it is the farce that forged my experience of and relationship to our National Parks and wild spaces..

Manifest Destiny

Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, had ideas about industrial expansion and materialism that dominated the period from 1824 to 1848. During this time, the indigenous population were seen by the US government as part of the landscape rather than people deserving of life and dignity. The Indian Removal Act passed during the western expansion is an utterly shameful and "brutal act of ethnic cleansing" (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 49). Rooted in American imperialism is the idea that only Anglo Americans were able to dominate and civilise the land and its people (Wilsey 2017, 4). In the 1840s American expansionism was coined *manifest destiny* by Christian nationalist and columnist John L. O'Sullivan (Wilsey 2017, 1). *Manifest destiny* "meant expansion, prearranged by Heaven, over an area not clearly defined. In some minds it meant expansion over the region to the pacific; in others, over the North American Continent; in others, over the hemisphere" (Merk and Merk 1995, 24). This kind of expansionism is also called a dominion mandate. "The dominion mandate was the commandment of God given to humans shortly after Creation to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Wilsey 2017, 5). In other words, per this theology, the wilderness was wasteland before human intervention—it represented only the negative side of the paradox discussed earlier.

THANKS to MY MOM FOR Digging through the garage for a photo of me panning for gold on a SCHOOL TRIP

I do not remember learning about manifest destiny in school; it seems like I have always just *known* about it and about how my brave ancestors "tamed the wild west". Manifest destiny is an idea so ingrained that it was not until I was an adult questioning my own role in upholding White supremacy and colonisation that I began to realise how deeply embedded it was into my formative education. We learned about the brave pioneers that went before us and visited gold country to play at panning for gold, but the genocide that took place in order for my life in California to take place was barely mentioned. The vigorous and often violent "development of the United States took the form of a confrontation between mankind and the environment [in an] an epic transformation" (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 40). The human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes of the attitudes of early Americans,

> Pioneers did not appreciate the wilderness; it was an obstacle to overcome in the winning of a livelihood and it was a constant threat to that livelihood. The preachers of the early Colonial period saw wilderness as the habitation of demons and only rarely as the protective environment of the church. (1974, 111)

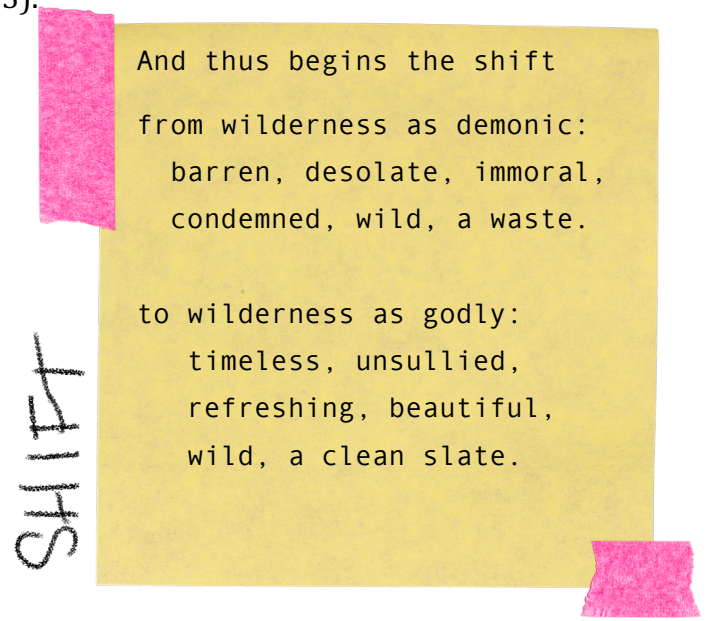
Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (1862) by Emanuel Leutze (figure 3.6) is possibly the most vivid emblem of manifest destiny and the desire to transform wilderness. The large-scale mural in the House of Representatives wing of the United States Capital building provides a "sweeping view of broad terrain [that] implies the power of a colonising force over a subjugated region ("Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" 2016;

Wilton and Barringer 2002, 57). The panorama painted below the main image is of San Francisco's Golden Gate, which represents the completion of the westward expansion. This is a literal affirmation that "imperial politics and landscape aesthetics are mutually reinforcing" (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 57).

Figure 3.6: Emanuel Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1862. Mural 20 x 30 ft, House Wing, west stairway, U.S. Capital, Washington DC

As mentioned previously, the manifest destiny of imperialist Americans was believed to have been appointed by God himself. The *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* mural includes a young Black man leading a mule carrying a young woman and infant— a scene that very clearly evokes images of the young Holy Family. They are not, however, escaping King Herod and certain death, but eagerly and (relatively) safely journeying toward salvation and a new Holy Land flowing with milk and honey. This new version of the Holy Family represents the birth of a Christian nation in which all things are possible. In 1868 art critic Anna Brewster asked Emanuel Leutz, "Did you not mean this group to teach a new gospel to this continent, a new truth which this part of the world is to accept… The young, beautiful Irish woman, too, is she not your new Madonna?" To which the artist purportedly assented. ("Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (Mural Study, U.S. Capitol)" 2012)

Given the obsession with westward expansion, it is no surprise that landscape painting was the most popular art form for the quickly expanding and transforming fledgling nation (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 39, 40). “The competing claims of the urban and rural, of expansion and consolidation, of cultivation and wilderness…” and the “sometimes violent collision of nature and culture” meant ample fodder for artists and an insatiable appetite among those able to patronize the arts (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 39, 40). The era of Andrew Jackson brought an end to the ties with the colonial past and ushered in the “uniquely American political, social, and cultural identity” (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 51). Because of these attitudes, there is poignancy in American wilderness landscape and a sense of urgency in appreciating them because “the expansion of agriculture and industry usually implied the wholesale destruction and transformation of the natural environment” (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 51). As Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “Once society has reached a certain level of artifice and complexity, people would begin to take note, and appreciate, the relative simplicities of nature” (1974, 103).



Human versus Nature

Thomas Cole, an immigrant from England and an important figure in the Hudson River Movement[57], had mixed feelings about the westward expansion. As such, his paintings relish both the wilderness and pastoral scenes during an era of dramatic transformation (Avery 1987, 7; Boettcher 2002, 253; Wilton and Barringer 2002, 40). When looking upon Cole's tumultuous landscapes, I tend to agree with curator Andrew Wilton when he states, "the Picturesque was invented for making sense of America" (2002, 23).

Figure 3.7: Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*, 1836. Oil on Canvas, 130.8 x 193 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

The aesthetic principle of the picturesque is rarely mentioned without 'beauty' and 'sublime', as it is a "subcategory of the sublime" (Landow 2015, 240). In his chapter "The Sublime in the Old World and New" for *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*, Andrew Wilton says of Thomas Cole, "the elements of picturesque composition are deployed with imagination and confidence in almost every canvas" (2002, 22). According to art critic and thinker John Ruskin, the picturesque can be understood as "a

[57] "An entire generation of painters, based in New York City, came retrospectively to be known as the 'Hudson River School' through their enthusiasm for the apparently virgin wilderness of the upland regions of New York State traversed by the [Hudson] River" (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 48). The opening of the Erie Canal from the Hudson River in 1825 cemented New York City's role as commercial hub of the east coast and allowed for the westward movement of people. The scenery one passed through on the 12-hour journey from New York City to Albany was spectacular (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 47).

combination of the sublime and the beautiful and is midway between them, a reduced, gentler, less exalted form of both" (Landow 2015, 239). In Cole's 1836 painting *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)* (figure 3.7), as with many of his works, the wilderness paradox is clear. The painting is dominated on the left by a wild and untamed tangle of broken branches on a hillside and wild, dark, ominous storm clouds; the right half shows a sunny, idyllic, and controlled tract of farmland.[58] During Cole's era, with help from the romantics, the mountain— effectively, the wilderness at grand scale—

> [Became] an icon of the sublime: a symbol of God's presence on earth…In effect, romantics like [Henry David] Thoreau joined Moses and the Children of Israel in Exodus when 'they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.' (Cronon 1995, 75; quoting Exodus 16:10)

The dynamic struggle between humans and nature will continue for generations, as will the artist's need to replicate it. The celebrated Californian land artist Michael Heizer feels

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[58] In many ways, *The Oxbow* also reminds me of the work of the photographers of the New Topographics who used photography to castigate civilisation and create "intense focus on darker places, which have been entirely used by people" (Danzer and Holler-Schuster 2015, 18).

Displaced/Replaced Mass (1 & 3/3)
30-ton granite block in concrete, Silver Springs, Nevada, 1969

Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, chromogenic print, 27 x 41 in. Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art

"sculpture [needs] to express the character and scale of the great western landscapes" and that "art had to be radical, it had to become American" (Beardsley 1998, 13). Heizer's work does not hem the wilderness into two dimensions to be admired and sold in a gallery like so many of his predecessors. One of his early works, the now dismantled *Displaced/Replaced Mass* (1969), was three enormous boulders from the Sierra Nevada Mountains hauled down into the Nevada desert and placed in large concrete pits. Much like *The Oxbow*, by moving mountains *Displaced/Replaced Mass* examined the "daring balancing act between the archaic, ritual procession and the modern technical and logistical feat performed by the machines of heavy industry" (Lailach 2007, 52).

Thomas Moran, perhaps the best-known painter of the western expansion, engaged the European sensibility of sublime and picturesque in his vast landscape paintings of the American West, but his handling of paint differs from his contemporaries (Wilton 2002, 34). He leaves behind the painterly textures in favour of "the clear presentation of the facts of view—a statement that has all the authority of his drawings: thorough, precise, scientific" (Wilton 2002, 34). Moran's style of painting reminds one of the scientific photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan hired to document expeditions through new American territories. "[Moran] brought a new scientific spirit into the epic landscape tradition of Cole… His concern for the West, indeed, was a vivifying thread that fortified the old notions of the Sublime in the perception of new scenery, new conditions of light and climate" (Wilton 2002, 36). Thomas Moran was deeply influenced by David Roberts, an artist known for

Thomas Moran, *Shin-Au-Av-Tu-Weap (God Land), Cañon of the Colorado. Utah Ter.*, (cropped) 1873-1874, Watercolor and pencil on paper, 4.75 x 14.5in. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

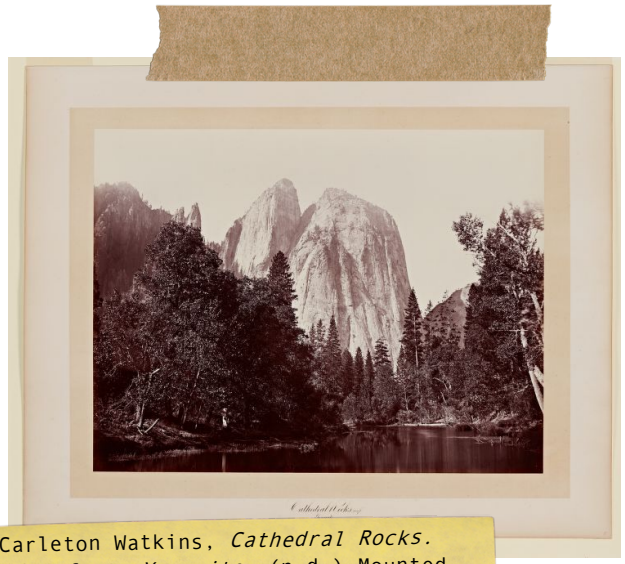
painting the Egypt and Near East (Wilton 2002, 34). Moran saw in the American West what Roberts saw in the seat of Christianity:

> God resides in the rocks and the desert, and these cliffs and pinnacles are the walls and spires of His temples, a New World equivalent of the holy places of Palestine and the monuments of Egypt. (Wilton 2002, 35)

While Moran's work brought a new commitment to representing the American West with precision and enchantment, when it comes to manifest destiny and the dream of the wild west, "Photography… was the more powerful promotional tool, as it purported to provide an accurate record of fabled Western wonders—even if many photographs were carefully constructed to adhere to predetermined ideas." (Respini 2009, 11)

Photography and the American West

It seems the American West and photography were made for one another. Photography was invented in 1839; a mere nine years later, gold was discovered in California— opening the floodgates of east to west migration. Photography played an outsized role in perpetuating manifest destiny in the wild new frontiers of America by helping to establish a national identity and energising westward expansion by showing the wild land to be appealing and habitable (Giblett and Tolonen 2012, 69). In her book *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image*



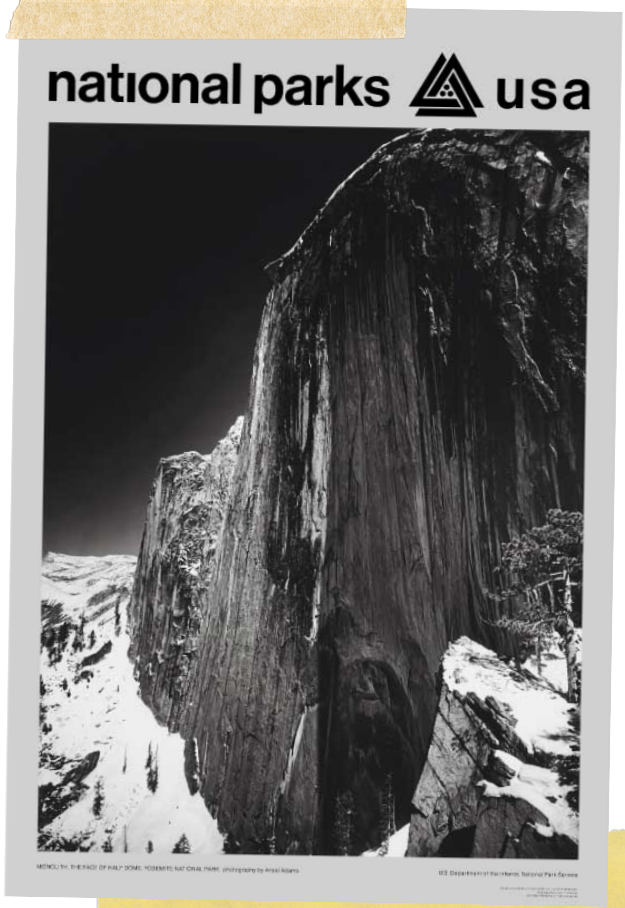
Carleton Watkins, *Cathedral Rocks. 2630 feet. Yosemite.* (n.d.) Mounted photograph. Collection of Stanford University Libraries, Department of Special Collections

of the American West, Eva Respini writes of this relationship, "Photographs provided a vivid and tangible image of this unknown land, paving the way for travellers, industrialists, settlers, and tourists" (2009, 10).

Carleton Watkins, arguably the world's first famous landscape photographer, initially photographed Yosemite—the West's most "supreme symbol of unclaimed bounty" in 1861 (Respini 2009, 12-13). Of course, this land was the furthest thing from "unclaimed". It was the home of Native Americans— a mixed tribe of Northern Paiute, Southern Sierra Miwok, and other indigenous tribes. "The [indigenous] name for the valley was, and still is *Awani* (or *Ahwahnee*), which was the name of the principal village in the valley, and by extension, the name of the people also" (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 49). The *Awani* were driven out by military force in 1851 (Carr 1987, 286).

> The removal of [the indigenous population] to create an 'uninhabited wilderness'—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place— reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is. (Cronon 1995, 79)

It was Watkins' picturesque photos of the Yosemite Valley that helped to convince Congress and then president, Abraham Lincoln, to designate the valley as public land in perpetuity (Respini 2009, 13). This aesthetic would become deeply influential in the settling and



National Park Service Yosemite poster featuring photograph by Ansel Adams, 1968. NPS History Collection, HFCA 3082

protecting of the land in the west through the 19th century, particularly in the photography of Ansel Adams and his work with the Sierra Club.

> Adams did more than photograph places that Americans have wanted to see; his images also confirmed their devout expectations of pristine majesty in those places, for he cropped out the tawdry concessions that have become such a part of the national parks, and he portrayed those scenes with flatteringly parted clouds, deep shadows, and brilliant shafts of light. In this way Adams's work resonated with what has been a commonplace in American attitudes toward nature, a resilient nineteenth-century romantic view of nature as an amalgam of the beautiful, the serene, and the transcendent. (Peeler 1998, 1032)

Ansel Adams talked his parents into a vacation in Yosemite in 1916 when he was just fifteen years old; he returned every year of his life henceforth (Woodward 2008, 15). In 1932 Adams formed Group f/64 with ten other photographers. The group stood in favour of crisp focus (hence their name) and a high level of clarity and precision in the darkroom. As one member, Edward Weston, put it, “The camera should be used for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself” (Woodward 2008, 16). Adams’ “perfect photography”, as Alfred Stieglitz called it in a 1938 letter, situates readily within the picturesque landscape tradition of Thomas Cole and Thomas Moran (Woodward 2008, 17; Peeler 1998, 1032). For Adams and those that follow in his tradition, the

Practice

"wilderness had ceased to be a place of satanic temptation and became instead a sacred temple, much as it continues to be for those who love it today" (Cronon 1995, 76). As a fellow native Californian, I have hardly worked in a darkroom, photography lab, or even classroom without a large black and white poster print of one of Adams' striking images of Yosemite. As such, it is hard to remove myself from his influence and see objectively how his work has shaped my work and experience of landscape photography except to say that I cannot drive through Yosemite without stopping a dozen or so times to take pictures.

Timothy O'Sullivan & the desert sublime

Desolate sublime: both demonic and godly wilderness

The work and career of Timothy O'Sullivan introduces us to the desolate sublime in the American West and modern landscape photography. Eva Respini explains:

> Some of the earliest and best photographs of the West were made under government patronage after the Civil War [1861-1865] … Each survey photographer—half "scientific technician" and half "publicist"—had a different way of approaching and interpreting what he came across. (Respini 2009, 11-12)

Of these photographers, O'Sullivan, is "perhaps the most celebrated" and certainly my favourite (Respini 2009, 12). Between 1867 and 1874 O'Sullivan served as the documentary photographer for two major expeditions where he made over one thousand photographs of the Great Basin region of America (Snyder 2002, 190; Giblett and Tolonen 2012, 80). Prolific

and generally unknown in his day, O'Sullivan is an antithesis to Ansel Adams and to the other picturesque photographers of his generation. Many years after disappearing from the national conversation, Ansel Adams rediscovered and elevated O'Sullivan's work despite regarding it as "technically deficient" because he found it to be "surrealistic and disturbing" (Snyder 2002, 192). Since then, his images have been considered precursors to the modernist photographic practice (Snyder 2002, 191). In the book *Landscape and Power*, Professor Emeritus History of Photography Joel Snyder captures some of what I find so compelling about O'Sullivan's work:

> [his photographs] repeatedly deny what [Carlton] Watkins's photographs characteristically confirm, namely, the possibility of comfortable habitation, of an agreeable relation to humans to the natural landscape. They portray a bleak, inhospitable land, a godforsaken, anesthetizing landscape. (2002, 191)

One of Timothy O'Sullivan's most striking and oft cited photos is *Desert Sand Hills near Sink of Carson, Nevada* (1867) (figure 3.8). Like many of his images, it portrays the West as "wild and austere, even uninhabitable" (Respini 2009, 12). In it, a darkroom wagon pulled by four mules is alone in a stark bright landscape hemmed in by what appear to be sand dunes. We can tell from the tracks that the wagon entered the scene from the right and then turned around about halfway into the frame to face outward. Multiple sets of footprints are visible,

Figure 3.8: Timothy O'Sullivan, *Desert Sand Hills near Sink of Carson, Nevada,* 1867/ Albumen silver print 22.2 × 29.2 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

presumably the photographer's—coming and going from the wagon to where the camera is set up on a higher dune. The image is fairly closely cropped to centre on bright, windswept sand dunes but darker hills can be seen in the background. While no humans can be seen, their presence is obvious, though "the vacated wagon and forlorn horses underscore the insignificance of humans in the windswept, arid landscape" (Respini 2009, 12). The image is striking for its austere beauty and complete loneliness. The placement of the carriage within the frame accentuates the desolation and danger of the uninterrupted expanse of desert west, not only by adding scale, but we as viewers are able to place ourselves within the frame with the insertion of a human element. If "the sublime is a delight that turns on pain," then for the brave, the boundless and enigmatic desert is an excruciating delight (Giblett 2009, 64). "With travel and hardship redefining people's experience of the arid West" the spirit of the sublime in the desert is amplified (Stentiford 2014, 348). David E. Nye starts his book, *American Technological Sublime*, by cataloguing the myriad features and disasters of the natural sublime in the North American continent and succumbing to the temptation "to say that had no theory of the sublime existed, Americans would have been forced to invent one" (Nye 1994, 1). Likewise, I am tempted to list the stark peaks and valleys, lunar cliffs, dead lakebeds, droughts, oppressive heat, flash floods and blinding sun of the desert to mirror his assertions.

In considering the theological implications of O'Sullivan's work I cannot help but think of Joel Snyder's descriptors from the quote above: "bleak", inhospitable", "godforsaken", and

"anesthetizing". His aromantic images of the harsh landscapes of the American West tidily illustrate the barren wasteland of religious imagination. It looks godless and dead—the antithesis or better yet—subversion— of Carl Watkin's lush, beautiful, good Yosemite Valley.

Death Valley

> *The valley that we call Death is not really that different from much of the rest of the desert West. It is just a little deeper, a little hotter, and a little drier. What sets it apart more than anything else is the mind's eye. For it is a land of illusion, a place in the mind, a shimmering mirage of riches and mystery and death. … It is a land of the deluded and the self-deluding, of dreamers and con men. Even its hardest facts are tinged with aberrations.* (Lingenfelter 1986, 1)

To those unfamiliar with her ways, the desert is a place of thirst and death—a desolate wilderness where the struggle to survive is constant. The history of Death Valley is full of men disappearing, bones found, and murdered natives (Lingenfelter 1986). To the people native to the place imperialists named Death Valley, the land is known as *Tomesha*, meaning 'the land of ground afire'. The macabre moniker 'Death Valley' was bestowed on the region in 1850 by a party who was stranded for 26 days although, miraculously, only one of their

Figure 3.9: Michelangelo Antonioni (Italian 1912-2007), *Zabriskie Point*, 1970. Film stills

number actually died (Lingenfelter 1986, 8). Death Valley National Park is treacherous even in the era of air conditioning and mobile phones since both are rendered useless because of the danger of overheating engines, treacherous unpaved roads, and lack of mobile service due to remoteness of the area ("Safety: Death Valley National Park" 2018). This surreal and sublime valley has drawn artists of various ilk for decades: Timothy O'Sullivan, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Johan Hagemeyer, Michelangelo Antonioni, Cady Wells, and countless others have been drawn to the vivid sky, lunar topography, and harsh beauty of the Valley.

Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point* (figure 3.9) is perhaps the best-known artwork created in Death Valley. In this "visually stunning, severely flawed masterpiece," two attractive young strangers, Daria and Mark, meet out in the dusty desert during a time of social unrest (Flatley 1970). Mark is fleeing police in a stolen airplane after he is falsely identified as a cop killer at a protest; Daria is the secretary for a real estate developer who is driving across the desert to meet the boss who may also be her lover. The film presents itself as commentary on the American political scene of the late 1960s with debatable levels of failure (Chatman 1985, 166). For lack of other accolades, "critics who needed something to praise in a film by a respected director marvelled at the sheer beauty of the photography" (Chatman 1985, 167). Antonioni denies the film has any political aspiration or comment, telling a *New York Times* reporter, "I wasn't trying to *explain* the country — a film is not a social analysis, after all" (Flatley 1970). Quoted elsewhere Antonioni says of the film, "the image is a fact, colours are the story" (Chatman 1985, 167).

The focal landscape of *Zabriskie Point* is the region between the peaks of Zabriskie Point[59] and Badwater Basin at the bottom of the valley. Antonioni told the *New York Times*, "I love the landscape—that's why I chose Death Valley, because it's so beautiful and not because it's dead" (Flatley 1970). As evidenced by the amateurish acting, "cultural mistakes," and critical failure, it is clear that the spectacular landscape and colours carry the film (Chatman 1985, 161, 163). Antonioni "rejected backhanded compliments that treated *Zabriskie Point* not as fiction film but as a travelogue" (Chatman 1985, 167). However, I find this to be one of the most charitable and useful interpretations of the film—for it is in Daria's drive across the desert where *Zabriskie Point* best fits the narrative of twentieth century America.

One contributor to the British Film Institute's *Antonioni: Centenary Essays* suggests Death Valley must be seen as a "strict correlative" to the copious development of Los Angeles featured at the beginning of *Zabriskie Point* (Restivo 2011, 90). His postulations reflect those of Jean Baudrillard in his text, *America*—the wide-open space and open road are not only fundamental to what it means to be American; the speed, repetition, and vast expanse represent a vanishing of the individual (Restivo 2011, 91). "For the desert is simply that: the

[59] Zabriskie Point is the first major visitor parking area and trailhead upon entering Death Valley National Park from Las Vegas.

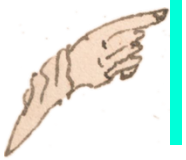
ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance" (Baudrillard 1988, 5). Despite his dubious handling of the young American socio-political scene, Antonioni instead nails the American "aesthetic of disappearance" in the still, vast desert (Baudrillard 1988, 5). The size of desert in the American Southwest is anonymising while the repetition of mile marker after mile marker passing by with little change in scenery for hundreds of miles is hypnotising.

> Driving like this [for distance at speed] produces a kind of invisibility, transparency, or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out. It is a sort of slow-motion suicide, death by an extenuation of forms – the delectable form of their disappearance. (Baudrillard 1988, 7)

Figure 3.10 (left): Edward Weston, *"Hot Coffee," Mojave Desert*, 1937. Printed 1953/54 by Brett Weston (American, 1911–1993), Gelatin silver print, 18.7 x 24.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago. (Right): "*Coffee Ern's," Parker AZ*, 2015, digital.

The Great American Road Trip

The road trip is ubiquitous in literature about America. The open road and long, lonely highways are a siren song; the "absolute freedom" and anonymity of the open road replaced the nineteenth century dream of striking gold and starting fresh in the wild west (Baudrillard 1988, 5). In the twentieth century, "the road trip, especially via the legendary U.S. Route 66 (Chicago to Los Angeles), became an American rite of passage and a staple for many photographers working in the West" (Respini 2009, 15). And so here again, in the work of an Italian film director in love with the beauty of the American West, as with the colonial frontiersmen, the Holy Family, and Moses leading the Israelites, we find that the desert is a place to journey.



In 1937 The Guggenheim Foundation awarded Edward Weston their first ever fellowship for photography so he might spend a year on a major road trip "making a series of photographs of the West" (Sandweiss 1987, 65). Departing in April in order to miss the "unconscionable heat", Edwards and his would-be wife Charis set their sights on Death Valley and the Mojave (Wilson 1978, 19, 21). Among his standout images from the year long trip is *"Hot Coffee", Mojave Desert* (1937) (figure 3.10); Eva Respini calls this photograph both "ironic and surreal" and "at once witty and sober" in her essay on photography of the west *Discoverers, Dreamers, and Drifters* (2009, 221). This simple image of a clumsy, oversized coffee cup and saucer advertising roadside sustenance does well to summarize

the quirky, fringe elements of human intervention in the Mojave. *"Hot Coffee"* could have been shot in 1937 or 2015 (figure 3.10)— the human element in the Mojave Desert might be relatively occasional, but it is full of playful surrealism.

Practice

I have driven through the desert countless times, and it is always something different. While I had planned to make several trips throughout this research project, because of Covid-19 I was only able to make three. My most recent road trip through the desert was in late 2019. For the first time, I made a detailed list of where to go and when, as I felt I needed to get a lot done for this project. I had new sites to visit, props and ideas for photos, and a few days at my old faithful locations, so I knew I could at least bank some good images. While it seems disingenuous to call the trip a disaster (because at least it was fun), it was nothing like I had hoped. My trips into the desert began as sort of spiritual quests with documentation images and then sort of performance/movement/image making when the time and place felt right. Once I added pressure and productivity into the mix, I spoiled the spiritual journey aspect of my method and ended up with a clanging clash between idealised forms of the desert wilderness as symbol in my photographs and an encounter with a landscape full of tourists, fences (private property), border guards, and rapid climatic fluctuation.

My mentor and head of department in undergrad, Philip Hoffstetter, pointed out that whether I am capturing or creating images I consistently seek out an idealised form in my work. In 2019 I drove and drove and drove and could not find my ideal portion of desert for

Only time will tell →

the first time. This could be because of my spiritual disconnect and my earnest desire to be a good student, or this could be as a result of encroaching civilisation and climate change.

Visual Culture of the Desert West

The pervasive visual culture of the remote Great Basin is the surreal absurdity captured by Edward Weston on his travels, and so many sojourners and locals before and after him. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of eccentric art installations in the region. I think especially of the Goldwell Open Air Museum (figure 3.10) in the ghost town of Rhyolite, Nevada—although, nothing to my knowledge is more eccentric, and more indicative of the peculiarities of this region than the *International Car Forest of the Last Church*[60] (c.2011; figure 3.12) in Goldfield, Nevada, an old mining town in the desert east of Death Valley National Park.

Famed land artist Michael Heizer is known for his large-scale land interventions like *Double Negative* (1969-1970), *City* (1972-ongoing), and the afore mentioned *Displaced/Replaced Mass* (1969). His largescale work in the landscape is a response to the "character and scale" of the land, but also to the art marketplace (Beardsley 1998, 13). Since his work cannot be

[60] See: "Excursus II: Goldfield, Nevada"

Figure 3.10: Goldwell Open Air Museum, 2017. Left: Charles Albert Szukalski, *The Last Supper*, 1984. Right: Hugo Heyrman, *Lady Desert: The Venus of Nevada*, 1992.

contained within the walls of a museum or gallery, "the position of art as the malleable barter-exchange item falters" (Beardsley 1998, 13). However, his work relies on conventional patronage and is now some of the most famous in the world, setting him square within the established art world whether he likes it or not (Beardsley 1998, 17). Antithetically, we find outsiders Chad Sorg and Mark Rippie and their *International Car Forest of the Last Church*; the pair built the installation of half buried and painted cars, trucks, and busses as "a place where artists are invited to come and find themselves" (Sorg 2011).

Figure 3.12: International Car Forest of the Lost Church, 2016.

Frustrating in the contrast between Heizer's work and *The International Car Forest of the Last Church* is the fact that Sorg and Rippie seem to have accomplished what Heizer set out to do in capturing the scale, character and outsider qualities of the great western landscape. Yet there are no academic critiques, art manuals, or anything written about the car forest except Chad Sorg's eccentric artist blog (Sorg 2012), various news stories about Mark Rippie's frequent confrontations with the law (Department of Justice 2015; Harris 2018), and a few Nevada travelogues (McManis 2018). I visited the site in 2016 and spent several hours

making photographs—and indeed Rippie was right to call his *Lost Church* an "artist's playground" (McManis 2018).

Conclusion

> *It is very hard to live with silence. The real silence is death and this is terrible. To approach this silence, it is necessary to journey into the desert. You do not go to the desert to find identity, but to lose it, to lose your personality, to be anonymous. You make yourself void. You become silence. You become more silent than the silence around you, and then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak.*
>
> Edmond Jabés quoted by Mark C. Taylor
>
> (Jabés 1993, xvi)

The desert is a liminal place—somewhere to travel through, to go into and to come out of. Over and over we see the desert journey: from Abraham and Moses, the Holy Family, then Jesus and his cousin John; and again, in American history with the great western migration and tradition of adventure photographers. Even in considering those native to the desert there is constant movement, a constant search for sustenance and water.

The desert is a place of hardship and suffering, and it is a place to seek ascension—be that through spiritual transcendence or the pursuit of a better life. In my image discussed in "The Desert" (figure 3.5) we find an acutely temporal scene of cloaked figure moving in the desert, but this scene also embodies the metaphysical liminality of the desert space—the silence, the suffering, the purification. "Silence in the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it." (Baudrillard 1988, 6)

Excursus I: Salton Sea, California

On a warm April morning in 2009 I followed handwritten directions down a lonely highway along an enormous lake. When I passed through the blink-and-you-miss-it town of Niland I was to take the only left onto a long dirt road that leads to Salvation.

That first visit to Salvation Mountain was a transformational experience. I spent the day sweating, mixing adobe, and slinging it onto hay bales with the artist, Leonard Knight (1931-2014), and a handful of volunteers and filmmakers. We laughed, shared lunch, and enjoyed one another's company before I moved on— filthy and happy from a day's work in the sun. It was that day that I began to fall in love with the beauty and the oddity of the desert. A harsh and beautiful place occupied by people choosing to live on the literal edges of society.

Over the years I have explored more of the area around the Salton Sea in California's Imperial Valley. California's largest lake was created accidentally in 1905 when an irrigation diversion was breached and filled in the Salton Sink ("Salton Sea, History"). Because the lake is sustained by agricultural run-off from the surrounding Imperial Valley and does not have an outlet, it continues to increase in salinity and agricultural nutrients that cause major toxic algae blooms, which kill off fish (Levy 2019; Montazar n.d.) This means that the beach is made up almost entirely of shells and fish bones and carcases, crusted with salt, and often has a sulphuric smell.

In its heyday in the 1950s, the Salton Sea was referred to as the "miracle in the desert" or the California Riviera drawing celebrities and families out to enjoy water sports and fishing only a few hours' drive from Los Angeles. However, by the 1970s this sunny vacation spot had been all but totally abandoned due to flooding, algae blooms, and a crumbling infrastructure (Taete 2013). In many cases it looks like people just never returned to their vacation homes. In Bombay Beach—a town right next to the water—the abandoned properties are full of furniture, empty food cartons, clothing, and personal effects.

The story of the Salton Sea and the human geography are fascinating and fertile grounds for imagination. A catastrophic accident created a beautiful lake and vacation site, which turned toxic and fetid. The subsequently abandoned towns are not completely so—they are populated by the very few and mysterious. Between the smell, the dead fish, and the occasional mysterious figure cycling down a lonely road, the area around the Salton Sea is downright apocalyptic and I cannot get enough of it.[61]

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[61] Apparently, I am not the only one who feels this way. In 2016 a very wealthy Los Angeles based trio, Tao Ruspoli (aristocrat and filmmaker), Stefan Ashkenazy (hotelier and philanthropist), and Lily Johnson White (socialite), founded the Bombay Beach Biennale (Swann 2017). On my 2019 visit I was intrigued and a little disappointed to see many of the properties in the small town turned into art. (See: Appendix 1 CMJ on the Road: A Travelogue, Day 16: Bombay Beach)

Figure 3.12: Vintage postcard c. 1950's. Back of postcard reads: "DESERT SHORES (234 ft. Below sea level) Salton Sea, California. This popular resort on the west shore of this sea in the desert provides all types of accommodations for the vacationing public. The boating facilities are the best and a modern motel, trailer park and cafe will add to your vacationing pleasure here on the shores of the world's fastest body of water. Copyright Ferris H. Scott, Santa Ana, Calif."

Excursus II: Goldfield, Nevada

Highway 95 weaves through the blink-and-you-miss-it town of Goldfield, Nevada. Just after the bend in the highway is a strange, waving, confederate flag, and a roadside store selling gold, gold jewellery, and refreshments, run by goldminer Bill. Bill alleges to own and operate a gold mine where he has yet to strike gold—though he is sure he will make it to the motherlode one day. He made me buy a two-dollar bottle of water before giving me directions: "Straight at the bend down the dirt road. Turn right when you can then past the burnt-out trailer. It's just a little further than you think it will be." He finished by adding, "Oh, and don't worry—the guy who buried all the cars is still in prison." If I was not worried about being alone in this strange outpost without mobile phone service before, I was now! As it turns out, "the guy who buried all the cars" was in prison for two years for owning guns despite his stint in the mental institution (Rippie n.d.).

Chad Sorg and Mark Rippie are best known, if they are known at all, for the *International Car Forest of the Last Church* (figure 3.11). Just west of Highway 95 in Nevada are 40 or so half buried cars, trucks, and busses. Mark Rippie is a long-time resident of the Goldfield area and has been known to local law enforcement for at least 48 years (Department of Justice 2015). In 1971 he pled insanity to an armed robbery in Colorado and spent some time in a mental institution (Department of Justice 2015).

Somehow, he became the owner of dozens of junked cars and several acres of desert. Rippie wanted to make an “artists playground” and to get into the Guinness Book of World Records with the largest car forest (McManis 2018). Nevada artist Chad Sorg got involved when he was driving down Highway 95 and saw a car sticking out of the ground. ‘“He came out and talked to me,” Sorg recalled. “He had his gun on his waist. It was a little scary, but I figured if this guy put these cars in the ground for art, for something creative, then he must not be too bad”’ (McManis 2018). Sorg moved to Goldfield in 2011 to help Mark build the installation and do most of the original painting. The two collaborated for several years while Sorg promoted Goldfield and got involved with city politics (Sorg 2012). Their relationship eventually broke down. Said Sorg in a newspaper interview, “That’s just the kind of guy he is… We did the project, and then he was done with me” (McManis 2018).

Rippie was detained again in early 2018 for assault with a deadly weapon after threatening suicide then wielding a large knife at a Bureau of Land Management Ranger (Harris 2018). I will be checking the local news for his whereabouts before I return to the car forest!

Conclusion

One day, God wa
squinting agains
said, Colour me,

I said, Here is the
these are our bru
crimson, rust, an

These (god) are
I said, I trust I sh
O I shall stain you with the scars of life

For ever, I shall root you in the wood,
under the sun shall bake you bread
of pine, never let you forth

to the white desert, to the starving sand.

Don't worry, this is also in the appendix (page 284) and in the visual submission.

Are you going to read the thesis conclusion or the commentary first?

Check yes or no

☐ Yes ☐ No

Conclusion

I do not know if it is possible to *choose* to engage sincerely with radical theology or if everyone arrives eventually to find that there is nothing for it but to fall into the abyss of a dead god a world in pain without the hope of salvation, joy in the morning, Resurrection in the next breath, or "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect".

In the simplest language, radical theology does not provide answers, or relief, or even a bandage for a world in pain. Instead, radical theology demands one deal with it. It does not even "purport to address a world in pain[1]" it simply points it out and removes the safety net (or maybe illuminates that the net was an illusion all along). One

[1] Examiner question, *PhD – Viva Report and Minor Amendment Requirements* (January 2023)

The most important conclusion to this research is encapsulated in the visual portion of this submission alongside the reimagined version of Rowan Williams' "Rublev" (1994) that prefaces this conclusion. I have changed the vocabulary to represent my own artistic response informed by radical theology to the problem of iconography. In it, I have shifted the locale, the materials[62], made the language stronger, and ended the poem after the metaphor of crucifixion.

As a practice-led research project, the pandemic was detrimental as it stymied several trips to the desert and had a hugely detrimental effect on my mental health and wellbeing. It also shifted this research project in ways I could not have imagined before the Lockdown Era. When I began this research, I understood my medium to be staged or editorialised photography and mixing media when exhibiting my images. Whereas, and it will come as no surprise to the people who know me best, my medium is also the motorcar. Being unable to travel meant I had to repeatedly comb through my archives of photos, videos, voice notes,

Methodology

[62] Great Basin bristlecone pine trees (Pinus longaeva) are found high in the Eastern Sierra and are thought to be the oldest living trees in the world. At up to 5,000 years old they have seen the rise and fall of human empires, growing where very little else can ("Bristlecone Pines: Ancient Trees" 2021). There are a multitude of stories about the origins of the wood of the Holy Cross; some Eastern Orthodox Christians believe pine is one of the three types of wood that made up the cross of Christ (Baert 2004, 306).

is forced to come to terms with a world in pain or die trying.

The problem with using such an existential and nihilist framework for doctoral research and combining it with evocative and practice-led research, is that there are *no answers*.

I suppose I knew this going into the project-- not least because writing research questions was like squeezing blood from a stone-- but I thought five years on the case would give me the tools I needed to articulate the truth of the non-answers. This knowledge I need to somehow bestow--the non-answers-- is not ownership[2], mastery, domination, or some bastion of objectivised rationalism[3] delivered smoothly in

[2] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "knowledge, n.", September 2023.
[3] Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

Conclusion

field notes and journal entries to put myself into the research mindset, and so that I could metabolise the theoretical research I was doing with the practice that I was unable to continue. Instead, I revisited the work I had done over the last several years and re-edited what I had. One of the manifestations of this exercise is the travelogue in Appendix 1.

When I began this project, I thought I understood death and grief. I understood that *"those who are in pain will tell you that they have the right to be taken seriously"* (Vergine 2000, 8; author's italics). As you will have read from my asides, notes, and footnotes throughout the thesis, the intensity of the pandemic made death even more *real* to me: it stopped being a theological or philosophical concept to consider and became a predator to be avoided. In April 2020 someone from my daily life died of Covid and then one of my parents caught the virus. My parent was ultimately fine, but I learned that I was not as close to and as understanding of death as I thought I was. In response to this this, I shifted my research from the concept of death and a dead Christ to the more physical and substantial corpse. A corpse is just the meat a person leaves behind, so I was more able to conceptualise and critically research and engage with the subject while being immersed in a health crisis and daily uncertainty and anxiety over my own health and the health of the people I love.

When I began this project, I was not actively fighting anaemia, severe chronic fatigue, panic attacks, endometriosis, or perimenopause and I was blissfully unaware of how well I was managing undiagnosed learning disabilities. I got sick in my first year of this degree and

a navy hard bound book (or compressed PDF file as the case may be).

The whole point of abandoning textuality[4] (mostly) and letting the art lead the investigation is because the images-- both as a body of work and as stand-alone photographs-- do what words cannot: share "sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, feeling)[5]" in order to convey "the truth of something[6]." In this case, the very specific truth of one erudite, but very sick and constantly demoralised artist's existential and academic journey through the post-Christian demonic wilderness[7] during a world-halting health crisis that has killed nearly seven million people[8].

[4]See: Page 28,
[5]Viladesau, 11.
[6]*OED*, "acknowledge, v."
[7]See: Pages 169 & 185.
[8]World Heath Organization Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, 30 October 2023.

have been dealing with multiple diagnoses since. It is impossible to say for sure that this has not shifted the content of my submission, but it did mean extensions and tears and a much more difficult time than I could have ever imagined. Were I to start all over again in 2023, it would be as someone who has been through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4 KJV) and as a person who no longer menstruates or has ovaries or a uterus. I wish I had known what lay ahead when I stepped onto the Research Degree Wilderness Trail so I could have better incorporated the COVID-19 pandemic and my own health problems and subsequent shift in relationship with blood—but if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.

Findings

In this research I have mapped-out some of the relationships between contemporary art, Christian radical theology, the desert landscape, blood, and the corpse of Jesus Christ. In contextualising my research and practice within radical theology it is important to acknowledge the privilege evident in a death of God theology, and work in the space where radical and liberation theologies converge—given that the aim of this research is to investigate through art practice the complicated relationships between contemporary art, Christian radical theology, the desert landscape, blood, and the corpse of Jesus Christ. Since visual art offers a mode of investigation that escapes the instrumentalization of knowledge and is an antidote to narrative thought, and "provides ways of seeing and ways of being in

And so, just as story can be more true than facts, the collection of images created, gathered, curated, edited, considered, and ultimately submitted in partial fulfilment of a research degree (and to a lesser degree, the visual format of this thesis) more accurately and adequately convey the truth of the findings of this research and the non-answers to the-- frankly, *non-asked* research questions[9] that I was browbeaten out of asking.

- To what extent do western social systems of belief need to engage with despair and mortality?
- How would confronting our mortality in art consumption benefit individuals and society?

relation to what is, was, or might be" (Scrivener 2002, 12), the accompanying visual artwork is the most important articulation of the conclusion.

The visual component that is submitted alongside this thesis represents where my practice is now, whereas the thesis represents the whole of the process and journey and is more representative of my constructed artwork. Working through the travelogue (Appendix 1), coming to terms with being unable to travel, and the compulsion to share documentary images of my travels with advisors in conjunction with my final images gave me a new understanding and appreciation for the place where I create my work. Not just the wide vistas and beautiful landscape, but the quirky art and desert churches in even the smallest of communities.

In the first chapter of the thesis began as an inquiry into Holy Saturday. I realised quickly that the place where radical and traditional theology overlap is on Holy Saturday when the Christ and therefore God was/is dead. I also discovered fairly quickly that most of the art made about the death of Christ is centred on his divinity or hints at resurrection. I used *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) by Hans Holbein the Younger throughout the chapter to discuss the implications of a corpse Christ. The second chapter, Blood, discusses the powerful and complicated history and implications of the blood of the Christ and blood as a signifier of both life and violence. This narrative about blood has been dominated by men for

[9]Copied from my (accepted) PhD proposal, November 2016.

- In what regards has the textual approach to modern structures of belief affected western ideologies?

Clearly, those questions are unrefined, unspecific, and not answerable within the framework of doctoral studies, nor do they have objectively rational answers. However, though clumsily articulated, the spirit of those questions remained at the heart of my investigation while I endlessly (it felt like) reworked my research questions in the attempt to pare this pursuit down into something my supervisors found acceptable and answerable,

centuries, but with some investigation there is a rich history of feminine blood and a close connection between the Christ and menstruators.

My visual practice, therefore, exists within the vernacular creative responses to this sacred experience of the desert, the feminist and queer wings of the radical theology movement, and the distress of a corpse Christ. These experiences and ideas are not easily translatable into the linear format of text or the register of academic knowledge. The final chapter of the thesis text established my own relationship with the desert landscape while explaining and interrogating the desert as a sacred space in which one can be either nourished or starved spiritually—a place to move into and out of periodically—a liminal place where one's physical or spiritual journey is paramount. I had considered producing work in other locations—even working on the black beaches in Iceland at one point, but it became clear to me that the Great Basin and particularly Death Valley with its specifically American histories and community-on-the-edge-of-community that exists around that desert as a sacred and odd space.

> Although we may be able to talk of knowledge being conveyed by art this tends to be of a superficial nature that doesn't approach the deep insights that art is usually thought to endow into emotions, human nature and relationships, and our place in the World, inter alia. (Scrivener 2002, 8)

Findings (Answers)

Q: How do the specific themes of the sacred, death, and bleeding, addressed by both death of God theology and my practice, relate to similar works of contemporary art?
A: The sacred: nothing is sacred, in the desert I find nothing[10].

Death: "everything is dying, God is dying, I am dying."

Bleeding: Bleeding was more interesting in antiquity these days there are a few artists using blood to make points about oppression, but no one is dancing in blood and revelling in the richness of its symbolism.

Q: How does this contrast with more traditional religious iconography?
A: Pre-reformation art was deeply engaged in these themes, but

[10]See page 268.

My photography and art practice respond to the challenge of radical theology in a way that acknowledges but is liberated from Christian visual culture. In culling through, re-editing (in some cases) and laying out my images to create a singular complete work in the form of an artist's book, I have been able to communicate the outcomes of my research.

Contribution and Future Research

The body of artwork I have submitted with this text contributes original photographic practice to the field of contemporary art, exploring existential issues articulated around an iconography of blood, the body, death, and the desert from the very particular standpoint of an unorthodox Christian thematic informed by radical, feminist, and liberation theologies. My artwork is a paradox of liberated and existential. In addressing the motifs of the dead Christ, the sacred desert, and the shedding of blood, it responds to the challenge of radical theology but exists outside the oeuvre of "Christian art" because of the refusal to acknowledge Christly resurrection.

Since I was unable to make trips out to the desert for the latter half of my research, I had to revisit the images I had and work with them—reimagining how I would present them for submission since it is far too perilous these days to plan an in-person event as involved as a solo art exhibition. Because I am fluent in both art and Christianity, I can use my particular

then religious (as in explicitly North American/Western European Protestant) art has largely avoided them.
Q: How does contemporary art involving blood, the dead Christ, or the desert wilderness relate to traditional Christian ideology?
A: Blood: Where Christianity is the dominant culture, art with blood in it appropriates the ubiquity of sacrifice or Crucifixion narrative to make other statements-- usually about oppression.
The dead Christ: N/A (none found.)
The desert wilderness: This seems to stick the closest to Christian ideology since that ideology is a paradox of demon infested waste and place of solace to find God.

position to place my artwork in a space between "Christian art" and the art world at large in order to respond to a world in pain and address audiences that rarely come together.

There is still ample room for research and process with blood, the corpse, and the desert in future trips I had planned before border closures in 2020 and have still not been able to take. As noted throughout the text, there are several avenues available for further contextual research as well. Foremost in my interest is to continue research into the cultural significations of blood and gender and how that related to the gender of the Christ, and Christian vernacular and contemporary art.

Closing Remarks

> The need to be loved for what one is and for what one wants to be—the need for a kind of love that confers unlimited rights—the need for what is called *primary love*. This is what gives this art its dimension of inevitable delusion... (Vergine 2000, 7)

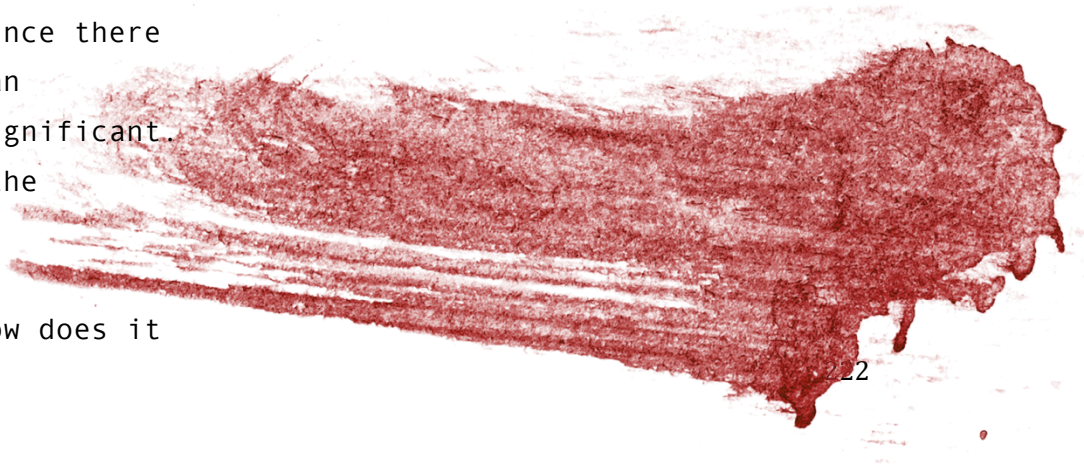
Using blood and the desert to consider death and radical theology through the medium of art did not initially seem as unusual as I ultimately found it to be. As I mentioned in my introduction, to my mind they made perfect sense together. However, my sources vary widely and very few of my secondary sources tie these themes together and are cited in

Q: Where is my practice placed within this relationship?
A: Honestly? Even after years of searching I think my practice is unique in bringing these together and therefore sits adjacent to rather than within the relationship.
Q: How does the use of blood in my practice situate into how it is being used and perceived in contemporary art?

more than one chapter. The connections are obvious to me but apparently less to other scholars. I was happy to see Eugene Rogers Jr.'s book *Blood Theology* (2021) come out—and even more gratified that we used many of the same sources. There is a distinct lack of writing about the social (as opposed to medicinal) relationships to blood. I have also discovered that there are not any notable visual artists working specifically within the purview of radical theology, though if one is to take a step backward to the philosophical ideas that underpin it there are vast options of artists and artworks dealing with death, loss, existentialism, and suffering.

As happens in the desert, this project has been quite the journey.

A: Hundreds of hours of work and the glib answer is still mostly accurate: It isn't. (See first question)
Q: How does this compare with blood as a symbol of sacrifice and redemption in Christian tradition?
A: The straightforward comparison is almost inappropriate since there is so little contemporary art with blood in it-- were this an objective study the sample group would be statistically insignificant.
Q: Are there are established visual artists working within the intentional and specific purview of radical theology?
A: No.
Q: If so, what are they doing, how are they doing it, and how does it compare with my methodologies, methods, and artistic output?
A: N/A



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Appendix 1: CMJ on the Road (A Travelogue)

Practice

Introduction

The outbreak and continued spread of COVID-19 means I have not been on the road or gone camping since Autumn 2019. In normal times, I would fly to California or Arizona to visit family and go road tripping twice a year. Thus, I have not been able to drive, camp, explore, reflect, and create images periodically through the entire second half of my PhD research. Since I have not been able to travel, I have put together the following travelogue using field notes, old blog posts, post-trip reflections, and memories from life on the road. It is an amalgamation of pre-Covid travels.

This travelogue is a tool for research and reflection. I put it together to help me access the headspace, feeling, and reflections of life on the road in order that I might better write about my practice led research process while living in the centre of a city 5,000 miles away. I include it as an appendix to the thesis to act as an insight into these trips and also as a bridge between the thesis and the art book that is submitted as the visual component of this

research project. I have added images throughout to help communicate the visual culture of the American Southwest that I connect with whilst travelling.

The writing changes tenses and is very casual to reflect how I take notes while I travel: sometimes in the moment, and sometimes in the evenings when I have time to think and reflect on the activities of the day.

Day 1: Exodus

The car is packed, and I am ready to go. I have my camping gear— including the percolator I found in my mom's camping gear that is definitely older than I am, the vintage canvas camp chairs I rescued out of someone's trash pile, a box of capes and fabric, a giant gold disk, a hula hoop I painted white, a cooler full of blood, and several gallons of water in case I get stranded in the desert. I have made sure to pack a sun hat, comfortable shoes, and all my camera gear, and I have checked my roadside safety kit to make sure everything is in order. My family knows by now that I will keep them updated about where I am heading and where I plan to spend the night as best I can, but they also know not to worry about me if they do not hear from me for a couple days since there is no mobile service or internet access throughout most of the Mojave.

My forever view of the passenger seat

Once the car is loaded, I'm settled and ready to pull out the driveway. I put "On the Road

Again" by Willie Nelson on the car stereo, and I am off.

Day 2: Yosemite

Tioga Pass in Yosemite National Park

The best (read: most scenic and most direct—not the fastest) way to get from the San Francisco Bay Area to the Eastern Sierra is through Tioga Pass in Yosemite National Park. It is nice to always start or end a road trip through such stunning and famous scenery—no matter how many times I make the drive I cannot help but pull over at nearly every scenic point to take a photo, watch a river rush by, gaze at a waterfall, or just shiver and enjoy the mountain air while I have the chance.

I am not as enamoured of Yosemite as some of my friends are— it bothers me how many tourists are around and how busy the parking areas are. Crowds in the wilderness give me an unease that I can only describe as similar to the uncanny valley. However, seeing such familiar landscape that has been the subject of some of the world's most famous photography fills my spirit. It is exciting to me that I am part of this; I am from here, my grandfather was friendly with Ansel Adams, and I have been camping in Yosemite since I was a toddler. This is *my* complicated history as much as it was Adams'.

Day 3: Eastern Sierra

Mono Lake, California

I am at South Tufa— what I had thought was a little-known area 20-30 minutes down dirt roads off the main highway just east of Yosemite. I have actually tried in past trips to find this particular part of Mono Lake and have not been able to before. When I pull in, there are two cars parked here, but within a few minutes ten more join them—I find myself simultaneously surprised and annoyed.

This looks like it could be a good place to set up and shoot, though I am a little concerned it might be too visually interesting—I think how striking and unusual the landscape is would distract from my figure. This part of Mono Lake is pretty recognisable, and the unusual landscape and water might be more of a distraction than an appropriate setting for my tableau. I am going to try two of my new capes (gold lamé and white and gold sequins), along with my red old faithful, to see what works and if this location speaks to me.

Later

Well, the photoshoot was a bust. I'm back in the car now and I have had a good cry.

I am quite frustrated with how many people are here. There is a group of old White men with tripods and excessive camera equipment, along with four carloads of tourists, complete with little kids. I haven't encountered such crowds before when scouting and shooting in

hidden places like this. This is really pretty far off the beaten path—25 minutes down an unmarked dirt road!! I only know about this place because my grandparents brought me here when I was little.

On the way back to the car, I pass even more families, a bunch of photographers, and some dogs. It just is not practical to do what I do with that many people around. It is one thing for a car or some hikers to pass me by, but I am not here to perform for tourists. Plus, the beach is legitimately crowded now. I don't really understand why or how all these people are here, but I have taken my scout images, and I know this locale is here and how to find it. (Finally!) I am going to come back someday— maybe early in the morning or during the heat of the summer so I can find it empty. I don't know if it is worth making the trip out to Mono Lake specifically to shoot here, but if I am in this region again, I really would like to come back here and try. It really is a remarkable landscape; it feels so lunar and surreal! I love feeling like I am truly in the wilds and the huge barren white hills do exactly that.

I am going to head down to Alabama Hills now and set up camp. It is a wilderness area I just heard about— I can't find it on my map, but I know the general area and will wing it. I saw it on the Bureau of Land Management Instagram a few months back, and it looks really cool. It's a different sort of arid Eastern Sierra landscape south of here near Lone Pine and Owens Lake.

Day 4: Alabama Hills

I am bunking down for the night in the Alabama Hills. I have never been anywhere quite like this. I am used to disbursement camping in National Forests, but this is a designated camping area with no camp sites— you just set up camp wherever you want. It is listed as a campground, but there are no designated spots or toilets, or anything of that nature. Fortunately, I am prepared for all eventualities - and by this, I mean I've packed a shovel.

It was very dark when I arrived, but I found a semi-sheltered spot in the boulders to pull into. After I was settled, I tried to take some iPhone pictures because there is a super bright half-moon casting a distinct moon shadow tonight. That was a bust, so I decided to get my camera out and do a couple of long exposures of this beautiful landscape. It reminds me of Joshua Tree National Park— one of the campgrounds there is right in the big boulders like this—although there are no Joshua trees here, just a few bitty shrubs.

I got my camera out and it looked great, so I decided to try photographing my red cape out of curiosity, and it ended up looking amazing. I started with a 2 second exposure, and then went down to 1 second, after which I dropped my ISO down and added a light. I tried doing night photography with my red headlamp once in Death Valley in 2015 and once in the Yukon in 2016; both times it was too cold for my companions, and so I have never had time to work through it at all.

So, I tried my red cape and then I got out my white cape and my white hoop, which happens to be a light-up hula hoop. I had seen the lights as a problem to be covered rather than a feature but decided to just try and light it up for a long exposure— and it ended up looking pretty cool though I can't imagine I will actually use them in my project. I tried a bunch of different things this evening, including my new sequin cape— though it was a bit lacklustre in the dark. All in all, I think I was at it for about an hour and a half. I am really looking forward to getting these images into my computer— they look great in the back of my camera, but of course it can still go either way.


The road out of Alabama Hills in the shadow of the Sierra Mountains

I feel really happy and glad I got something in the can today. And it is something different. Even if it does not work, I can build on it or consider why not. I think I want to try some more night photography tomorrow night. It is quite different than what I normally do, and I found it hard to get into the flow. I did at a couple points move to the higher plane, but I think because it is a long exposure and I have to be still, so it is necessarily a stop and go process. I want to try tomorrow and see if I can overcome that somehow.

Yeah, I am feeling really happy. Ok, goodnight.

Day 5: Owens Lake/Death Valley National Park

I got up and had a wander around the Alabama Hills area, and it was really cool but not really right for my photography. I am glad I walked around though, I enjoyed it. And now I know I would come back there to camp, but not to shoot. (Although I think I am happy with my night photography there.)

Private home next to U.S. Route 395 near Lone Pine.

I have stopped at the visitor centre in Lone Pine headed toward Owens Lake. I have a weakness for a visitors' centre! I love talking to the volunteers or park rangers and checking out whatever parks-based merchandise they have. Since living overseas, I love having national park posters up in my flat and stickers on my coffee mug. The visitor centre just outside Lone Pine is super-nice—it must be newly built or refurbished. I am not sure why I have never stopped here before. I spent some time looking at the exhibits about the landscape and talking to the volunteers before I headed off. As I was leaving, someone came in furious about a National Park Pass or something. They wanted a refund on something non-refundable that the poor woman behind the counter had no control over. As this person left, they slammed the door so hard they somehow broke the glass!! It was shocking!! I ran out to see if I could get a licence plate number. I couldn't, but I did see that they were driving a very distinctive purple van. I waited around for a while so I could give a statement, and then headed out to try and find the pink salt in Owens Lake.

Afternoon

No luck at Owens Lake. I am beginning to think the pink salt flats are a myth!

I did get the guts to drive out to Ballarat for the first time. It is known for being one of the places the Manson Family lived, and supposedly is still home to Charles Manson's old truck. There was a man hanging around who owned the local store (I use that term very loosely) who talked my ear off. I left as soon as I could after seeing all the damning political paraphernalia around his place. It was super-creepy, and I can't imagine I will ever go back, though after driving past the turnoff so many times over the years I am glad I finally scoped it out.

Campground reflections

I have been thinking a lot about productivity and all the research and preparation and planning that has gone into this trip. I really put a lot of pressure on myself to do a lot while I was out here and to try a lot of new things. I totally forgot that I have to factor in that I have to slow down in order to get this done and it has to feel right, otherwise it won't turn out well. If it doesn't feel right and my gut isn't telling me it is the right place and time to shoot, then why do it? It will be a waste of my time and resources. The work will be forced, and it won't properly reflect my process. So, I haven't shot today, and I don't plan on shooting tonight. Frankly, I don't see night photography working in Death Valley. I kind of think that last night was a one off, but we will see when I get into the computer and see how they look.

Peanut butter and jelly: a standard roadside lunch in Death Valley

I am feeling a lot better today than I was yesterday and feeling like I will have a lot to write about practice-wise, and a lot to consider when I get back. Even though I don't have a lot of images, I do have a lot to bring back to London with me.

A lot of this trip (in fact, way more than I expected) has been about going places and attempting new things and seeing basically that things don't work, and I am telling myself that is ok. Tomorrow I am planning to get down to Devils Golf Course as early as possible to get shooting and get some work done, then go down to Badwater Basin. I want to get all of that done before it gets too hot, as it is forecast to be unseasonably warm tomorrow.

When I am done with the places I know, I want to check out some new parts of the park since I am here for the first time with four-wheel drive. I am planning to get up with the sun and utilise all of the daylight— though I have to be careful to spend time in the air-conditioned car in the afternoon, so I do not overheat.

Day 6: Furnace Creek

Texas Springs campground in Death Valley National Park is a first-come, first-served campground—meaning one cannot book reservations. I have found it is good to get here mid-week as early in the day as possible, and that it is certainly worth the effort to get here

to get a campsite. My favourite campsite is on the edge near the entrance. To the front and side is a little road, and then just hills and desert. I've camped on this site probably three or four times— I have been lucky enough to get it more often than not. Though I have found myself in the worst possible campground, too! The rest of the Death Valley campgrounds feel more like glorified parking lots but one of them actually is. I got stuck there a few years ago surrounded by huge recreational vehicles—it was not ideal.

I think part of the reason I love Texas Springs is because it's familiar. There is something really special to me about having my familiar places in the wilderness. It makes me feel like I belong in this spectacular place, and I am part of the millennia of people who love this land. The familiarity makes this harsh, stark, dangerous beauty become mine in a way. It feels more like a part of myself and exploring a part of myself than it feels like going on an adventure. (Plus the bathrooms are nice.)

Once I pulled in and got myself set up, I built a fire and warmed up some dinner. I normally don't drink alcohol when I'm travelling alone, but I just needed a beer or two after a long hot day. I sat by the fire in the dark staring into the flames and enjoyed a couple of beers while I watched the flames slowly consume my firewood. I was supposed to be reflecting on my artwork, on the day, and thinking about what to do next, but I pretty much zoned out. It felt good to just be quiet and turn off for a bit to enjoy the cooling air, the warm fire, a cold drink, and the feeling of being alone in a mostly empty campground in a vast national park in an

enormous desert. I don't know how long I sat by the fire— long enough for it to mostly burn out. When I decided to finally crawl into bed, I dumped sand and water on top of the fire to make sure it was completely out, so I didn't accidentally start a fire (not that there's any vegetation to burn).

Comfortable in my Honda Element in Texas Springs

Since I have my Honda Element, I'm sleeping in that, rather than tent camping. I've got the moonroof removed, so I'm open to the air and all the windows cracked so I don't boil to death when the sun comes up. I crawled into bed dirty, tired, and a little tipsier than I'm necessarily comfortable with, but I feel good. Really good.

This is home, this is belonging, this is living.

This is what I was made for. I feel the most like myself when I'm alone, I haven't showered for several days, there's dirt in my hair, and I'm a little bit sunburned and a lot tired from the sun. It is just me and the land. No one expects anything from me tomorrow or the day after— I'm just here, it's just now.

I've always had problems sleeping. Since I was a child, I found falling asleep really difficult. The only time I ever consistently fall asleep quickly and sleep well is when I'm camping. I can be sleeping on hard pebbly ground, I can be absolutely freezing my buns off in the Yukon tundra, I can be in a hot car in Death Valley, or in a frozen car on the North Rim of the Grand

Canyon— I've slept in a lot of cars— but once I make my little cosy nest and crawl in, I just…sleep. I fall asleep quickly and I sleep soundly and it's just wonderful.

Day 7: Badwater Basin

I don't know if I can explain the change that happens in me when I start to shoot. It's like my DNA changes shape. I can put this change on like a cloak, but it somehow still remains the deepest thing in me. I can tap into the deepest echoes of who I am and who we have always been; all while, on another plane, my brain goes into overdrive running through options, problem solving, and working out camera settings. The two sides work together to get the closest to what I have imagined in my assorted meditations and reveries. Sometimes, they work together to surprise me; other times, my ideas don't work, and must live forever in my mind.

I am sitting in the driver's seat letting all this come over me. I have to give the primal art soul some space and a push to come down onto me, so I start with the problem-solving and deciding. I fill my yellow backpack with the equipment and cloaks I will use, then change my shoes and walk out onto the salt flat. It's cool in the shade, and even though it is not much past 8 am, the sun is already hot. I find my place, set up my tripod, work out my exposure settings, and then get ready to go. For the first time, I take my shoes off to shoot; not just

because the salt flats are delicate and I don't want to damage them, but to feel nearer to nature.

My bare feet in the salt flats of Badwater Basin

(Several weeks ago, I found myself at a Quaker meeting. When the topic turned to the environment, one of the speakers asked when the last time we had our feet in the earth was. He said that since humans wear shoes all the time, we are less connected with the earth. This intrigues me— and even though I camp a lot, I can't remember the last time I had my feet in the dirt. I think it must be decades since I had really dirty feet.)

So, I remove my shoes. The salt feels glorious— cool and delicate under my feet. The sun is hot, the sky is blindingly blue, and my feet are trying to balance on top of the film of white crystals beneath them. It is beautiful.

I put on my handmade thick white cloak of knit polyester, safety pin it at the neck, and walk away from the camera toward the horizon beyond. I step carefully on the crust of earth, in a state so intense I am almost catatonic. The world as it is falls completely away, and I exist only in these moments. I do this death dance because it must be done. I feel the death in the earth flow up through my feet. The salt gathers between my toes, cool and almost moist from the record rain. I walk away and away until I get to the spot I've picked out with my eyes. It's in the centre of the frame and feels like the right distance to get a strong image.

I move. In my conscious mind, I know leaning as far back as I can is a strong look, and that moving my arms quickly will give me the movement I want in my images. I've done this enough times to know what I am doing and what I want. I know this, but I am also feeling the movements. I embody the sacred desert and death herself. With my body and my cloak, I make what I struggle to say with words. In these images, I state the point that feels incommunicable with language. I feel like a dancer, though I know I am neither graceful nor coordinated.

I close my eyes and sway as if to the music of death and life. I move through the landscape and feel as though I am part of it. I am Kierkegaard's dancer. I am his knight of faith. In those minutes I am part of the eternal web of being. I am more than just a student in a homemade cloak: I am dancing between life and death in the landscape that most beautifully bridges those places. Death Valley. The Valley of the shadow of death; so beautiful it seems otherworldly. And maybe it is.

The colour blue is known as a bridge between heaven and earth - that's why Mary, the Mother of Jesus, wears a blue cloak in so much artwork. And here, in the valley of the shadow of death, it's obvious that that is what the blue sky is: a bridge between heaven and earth. The sky is blindingly clear, bright, glorious blue and it reaches all the way down to earth. And still I move. I come closer to the camera, covering my face and pulling red strings from my pockets. I want to bleed on camera, bleed into this perfect landscape.

I swing the blood around, dripping it down my back and throwing it into the blue sky. I know the camera will freeze these moments. It will capture the beauty of the dance and erase for all time my clumsiness, my denim shorts, and my sweaty forehead.

Day 8: Death Valley

I am just pulling out of the ruins of Eagle Borax Works Westside Road in Death Valley. It's a new spot I have never been to before. Since I have four wheel drive this trip, I opted to do a bit of exploring, so I am driving Westside Road along the western edge of Badwater Basin.

There was a really cool spot that had the same kind of lumps as the Devils Golf Course, but I didn't shoot there because the light was wrong; I am kind of hoping to loop back around there this afternoon. Then I stop at the ruins of Eagle Borax Works, but it appears the ruins burned down; there is nothing here but a big black patch on the ground. It isn't sooty, though, and it didn't make me dirty. So maybe not a fire? I have no idea.

I thought it would be interesting to shoot here with the black, burnt-out ground. The unusual blackness is really beautiful, and I feel like it imaged really nicely, but something is off. I think it might be the amount of vegetation in the image, or how much colour variation there is. I try a new red cape—it is a thicker material than my usual one and I like the way it


Death Valley wagon from a wagon train, 2019

drapes. Now that I have used it in situ though, I have decided I don't like it. I get back in the car to have some water and air conditioning and look through the photos on the back of my camera. I am not sure if I don't like the images because I don't like the cape, or if it is the location. Something is off though, so I try again with my white cape. I overheat really quickly so I didn't work out there as much as I might have liked, but it looks like I got a couple pretty good shots. I am not sure if I will end up using them but it is all part of the process!

I packed up and got back in the car and looked at my images and spent several minutes eating nuts and drinking water trying to get my energy up. My energy is very low today, and everything feels kind of off. I feel like I shot in this location because of the pressure I have put on myself, and not because it was right.

That evening

I am absolutely exhausted. I did quite a lot today. After my shoot by the borax mine, I ran into a wagon train—an actual old timey wagon train! They are living history enthusiasts on a two-week trip across the desert, they were really nice, and it was amazing! I would absolutely love to do something like this one day.

The Westside Road, which I was so excited about, ended up being pretty far from the salt flats. I went all the way down that 60-mile dirt road and then back up Badwater Road and none of the spots where I have shot before are there anymore. I thought I had it in the bag, I

would get loads done and none of what I was looking for was there anymore. It has all really changed with the very wet weather in the last couple years. It was hugely disappointing. I guess that is just part of what happens when you do outdoor photography. Only having a few years to do a whole body of work on location like this is just really asking a lot. There is nothing I can do about it. I prepared as much as I possibly could, and I am just doing what I can.

I pulled out off Badwater Road onto the east side where it is a wash up to the mountains near Artist's Palate, and I did some shooting there that I think I am going to be really happy with. I tested my hula hoop and my gold disk, and I'm really pumped about how they turned out! I am not as sure about my new sequin cloak- I didn't try it there because the colours were not right.

Then, I moved on to the Devil's Golf Course, but the sun was bad. It was starting to go down and I couldn't get good lighting in the direction I wanted to shoot. I quickly tried my sequin cape and then the white with the hoop before the shadows were too long.

Today was a mixed bag—it was really fun, and I did get some shooting done, but not a fraction of what I thought I would get.

Day 9: International Car Forest of the Lost Church[63]

Gold nugget shop where Goldminer Bill sells gold, bottled water, and directions to the car forest. Note the horrifying Confederate flag in very rural Nevada.

So, I am at a car forest in Nevada about to do a photo shoot. My dad told me about this place—he saw it on some Nevada backroads program and thought I would be into it. It seems like a rad place to do some photography that might capture the oddity of the desert visual culture, along with some of the sort of inherent mystery of the desert. One of the locals, a gold miner named Bill, says not to worry because the guy who buried all the cars is still in prison.

My extremely orange cape makes sense here. The red is too honest—too straightforward and literal about what it is and what it represents. The orange feels right—it looks perfect with the setting, and it confuses the message in a way that appeals to me and makes sense with the visual culture of this part of the world.

I feel like a spectre in this forest of defunct, painted up cars. No one is around for miles (probably), and I wander faceless in this field of history and possibility. Unobserved except when I want to be seen by my camera. I am under an almost vertical bus, in the driver's seat of an RV sandwich. It feels good to let go and play.

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[63] See: Chapter 3: Landscape, Excurses II: Goldfield, Nevada

Later I learned that the men who built this place wanted it to be an "artist's playground."[64] Mission accomplished!

Day 10: Oatman

I am just south of Oatman on Historic Route 66. I drove through here in early 2015 after I was forced to leave the UK, so I associate this location with heartbreak. It is both incredibly beautiful and totally deserted along this byway.

I have decided to shoot by the side of the road. It is a little bit different than what I have been doing. It is 5:25 and sunset is supposed to be at 6:08 so I have about 50 minutes dramatic light— not only is the sun going down, but there are storms approaching from almost every direction. This is a high point so I can see for miles and miles and there is no threat of flash flooding. The sky is shouting its glory this evening!

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[64] McManis, Sam. "Visit the Car Forest in Goldfield, Nev. – but Don't Speed to Get There." Sacramento Bee, 2018.

Old Route 66 near Oatman, Arizona

Nothing, Arizona. Population 4

Later

Okay well, I just finished a shoot just as the sun is really going down and the sunset is dramatic—really beautiful. I'm pretty close to the highest point on the hill between Oatman and Topock and I've just shot with my new gold cape, and it photographed really well. I went with a pretty dark exposure so you can see the detail in the sky. The ground is grey stone and then the sky is— oh my God it's amazing—you could see the rain and sun and mountains. Right now it's gone really orange and pink. My iPhone photos are not doing this sky any justice, I am hoping some of my cloak images do. Anyway, it felt good to put my cape on and let my body move in the way that it wants to move in relation to the landscape. I continue to think about whether or not my art it performative and if that performance is a necessary part of it.

With regards to the experimental aspect of this shoot: this the first time in quite a while I have shot somewhere that isn't just a stark, barren landscape. I wanted to try it— I don't know if I will like the images. I think it'll work better because I did gold, and the gold is so sort of otherworldly and because cholla [waist high nubby cactus] are all over and they look strange. I am obsessed with the salt basins, but I wonder if they limit me. I wonder if there's more to this desert landscape that's capturable as an idealised sublime—like the almost perfect stark landscapes that are almost colour blocked.

Roy's Motel and Café on Route 66 between Mojave National Preserve and Joshua Tree National Park, California

Please don't feed the coyotes!

I really feel drawn to this place. To me it feels like a place of desolation and loss but it's so unbelievably beautiful the mountains, the cactus, even just the open road where you just don't run into any people. The beauty is aching— it's impossible describe with words.

For one, there is the sheer size of it. I mean, the scale is unbelievable. And it's so brutal, the plants want to kill you, all the bugs want to kill you, there are predators— coyotes, rattlesnakes and God only knows what else. And yet, for a couple of months a year, the weather is glorious, and it does not seem so mean out here after all.

Day 11: Mojave National Preserve

Miles from anything, I am at the Kelso Sand Dunes also known as the Devil's Playground. I have hiked about three quarters of a mile from the parking lot up into some sand dunes, set up my shot and somehow am now waiting for people to get out of my shot. I don't know how this has happened.

I hit the road this morning at about 11— no 10— I am really tired today and just not really feeling it. I thought the dunes would be a good idea, but I don't know. They are not as bare as I had hoped—there is a lot of grass on them that give them sort of a beachy look which is not what I wanted. I am going to try anyway. I think a red cape will look great with the sand though I am not convinced sand dunes are right for what I am doing. We shall see.

Later

[Out of breath] Now I am walking back to my car in Devil's Playground near Kelso Junction. Walking in sand is awful, I am huffing and puffing! My three-quarter mile walk back to the car seems a lot longer because I am walking through sand! This area is cool I guess, but it is pretty low impact landscape. I mean, it is beautiful—but I would call it more picturesque than sublime.

I did one location, two rounds with the red cape and briefly considered two other spots but it just didn't seem worth the time, the sunlight, the editing, because it just is not quite right. I may get home and find an image in the can that I love, but I sincerely doubt it. I think this is just an exercise in experimentation and trying something new and following the brown signs off the highway!

Day 12: Joshua Tree National Park

Sometimes (oftentimes) the best way to travel is slowly. Take the long way, stop and smell the desert rain, eat a sandwich on the side of the road while the sun goes down.

This is how I like to travel. Avoiding interstates, absorbing the land and enjoying my own company.

Roadside hotel, Western Arizona

Day 13: On the Road

I parked in the parking lot of a Best Western and slept in my car. There was a nice patio for some quiet time, and lots of lights and surveillance cameras to make me feel safe. Once I fell asleep I slept like a rock until about 8:30 when the sun started baking me in the back seat. I could have laid there longer, but it was just too warm.

I went to the McDonald's down the street and around the corner to change, wash my face and get my morning cup of joe and was on my merry way to Salvation Mountain. Ah, the life of a nomad— glorious!

Day 14: Salvation Mountain

Note: Salvation Mountain is a folk-art monument in Niland, California built by Leonard Knight (1931-2014) who lived on site without water or electricity in a truck for 28 years until his health gave out. He was a simple and kind man with a simple message he wanted to proclaim to the world: that no matter who you

> *are, God is Love. I was lucky enough to meet him several times and have wonderful, inspiring and engaging conversations with him over the years.*[65]

I drove to Niland, CA with bated breath. I was so excited to see Salvation Mountain, I could hardly stand it! When I passed the sign for Slab City my heart started to beat like I was going on a first date… and when the Mountain came into view shortly after it did not disappoint. When I got out of my car, I was a little nervous and pretty overwhelmed. Not so much that the mountain is that special or beautiful, but that this is truly a sacred place, like an altar or a temple, like people built in the deserts of antiquity.

I was nearly brought to tears watching the artist, Leonard Knight, show a group of college kids around and telling them about this place with enthusiasm rarely seen in someone over the age of 10. As soon as they left, he greeted me and gave me a tour. He pointed out the difference between “tire trees” and “tractor tire trees” (they are bigger) and showing me where they mix the adobe to keep adding to the monument.

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[65] Sources: Personal conversations with Leonard Knight; and Huey, Aaron. "Remembering a Folk Art Visionary." National Geographic, 14 February 2014.

Photos from Salvation Mountain over the years. Top Row: Welcome sign out front; wide view of the main part of the monument all build from adobe; Leonard Knight in 2011. Bottom row: The Lord's Prayer detail image; the "museum" inside the mountain; detail of the outside of one of many decorated vehicles on the site; Another view of the site including a postbox.

Leonard is usually alone to build and show people around, but a group of guys from Pasadena came to help for a few days while one of them filmed a documentary about the place. I ended up spending the better part of today at Salvation Mountain making a total mess of myself mixing and slinging adobe with an actor from Burbank, a couple from Alberta, Leonard, and a band from Pasadena. It was one of the best days of my life.

Oh, and we all went to Bobby D's (the only restaurant in town) for lunch down the street in Niland.

Day 15: Slab City and East Jesus

What does one even say about Slab City? It calls itself The Last Free Place. Being in the wilderness alone is freeing and feels like home. Being at the edge of the wilderness, on the blurry edge between society and nature, can be scary. I think it might be my least favourite place—though I expect this is because I travel alone, and this sort of place heightens my feelings of vulnerability.

A fork in the road.

I recognise the stage and community centre in Slab City from the film *Into the Wild* (2007) and drive further into the… village? Town? Whatever this place is… until I get to a literal fork in the road. Someone has made a giant fork and put it in the road. Amazing.

A giant wall of painted TVs (artist unknown/anonymous) is my favourite installation at East Jesus in Slab City, California.

I love it here.

Then I find East Jesus. I have always wanted to come here—of course by "always" I mean ever since I learned it existed. I don't even care what it is, really. I am absurdly fascinated by a place called East Jesus. It turns out it is a sort of outdoor gallery/museum/art installation. There is room to park and then I entered through an archway into another world. These are the artists that theorists and critics should be writing about. This is art untethered to the capitalist art world. The work here appears to mostly be made from found objects. It gives the feeling if having something to say—of something to contribute to the conversation, but without being overwrought or self-conscious in the way so much contemporary art can feel. It isn't alienating or elitist… it just is.

Day 16: Bombay Beach

I have spent about 2.5 hours wandering around Bombay Beach after camping nearby last night. I tried a few different spots on the beach to try and shoot, but the area has really changed a lot since I was last here. There are a lot of car tracks on the beach, and I didn't see any fish bones which is weird and disappointing. Plus, there were teenagers getting high or something down by the water. Just quite a lot of people around. So, it seems Bombay Beach isn't as "off the beaten path" as it used to be.

I spent maybe an hour trying to work out a good spot to shoot on the beach and ultimately decided it was not worth doing because none of it was untouched anymore which was the whole point of it- it felt post-apocalyptic before. Now it has been *Mad Max*-ed over. It still has that abandoned quirky weird feel to it, but I think the proximity to Los Angeles has become a detriment to the place.I think possibly the art festival that was here a year or two ago has really changed the face of the town (if you can call it a town). There is a lot of trendy sort of LA art here now—it clearly took a lot of money to make most of these pieces happen. I think it still classifies as 'outsider art' but someone with money, or a few people with money have really built a lot here. It has sort of an eerie Marfa feel to it.

Bombay Beach, California in 2015

Bombay Beach, California in 2019. Top row: Bombay Beach Drive-In; The Last Resort; Museum Number 2 “M N 2” welcome sign; Museum Number 2 interior; Museum Number 2 green room. Bottom Row: Foundation Foundation; large cigarettes installation; Southeby’s Bombay Beach; Bombay Beach Opera House.

Day 17: Salton Sea

I've just had a stop and look around at the turnoff across from a new CBP station. [Customs and Border Patrol, even though we are at least 50 miles from Mexico.] The sign at the turnoff said it was a boat ramp (there was no boat ramp). There are a few abandoned buildings and no people (thank goodness) but lots of tire tracks from ATV's and such.

I maybe could have shot there, but it didn't seem quite right and also, I think I am getting sun stroke. It's not that hot out, but the sun is causing me problems. So, I am going to carry on driving to the mud pots and hopefully a half hour in the car in the shade and air conditioning will have me feeling a bit better and ready to do some shooting, should the landscape be conducive.

This beach was maybe 1.5 miles down a dirt road and there were a few RV's, but I didn't see any sign of life. It was quite an interesting place. Obviously, there is much less out here, but it reminds me of what Bombay Beach used to be like. Some broken down docks, some bird bones, fish bones— though not as many as in years previous. It was an interesting place. I am glad I stopped.

To be honest, I am not sure I will come back to Salton Sea to shoot after this trip given how many people there are (not to mention border control!).

Later

Right, so now I have driven down to the only mud pots I have ever been able to locate around here, though I am sure there must be more somewhere. The mud pots are at the corner of Davis and Schrimpf Road next to a big geothermal plant. There are quite a lot of signs posted that say *No Trespassing, Violators will be persecuted*. So, I have decided not to trespass.

So, I think what we are going to do is have some lunch somewhere and carry on through Joshua Tree. The Salton Sea has just been a total wash this trip. I can't say that I think I will come back here. I don't really feel sad about it, but I feel disappointed that it wasn't the fruitful day I was hoping for – but I guess that is part of the process. I suppose if I am going to do my work in the wilderness, I am at the whim of nature, of the climate, and of changing tourist patterns.

Given there is so much out of my control, maybe something to consider is the balance of preparation and control in my process, and if there are parallels to that in the critical theory I am looking at. Something to the fact that regardless of how much I prepare, I am not in control, and thus am unable to manufacture outcomes. I can only do my part and then the rest of it is down to the whim of fate/nature/whatever.

No shooting so far today then, but it doesn't mean I won't stop somewhere and get the old camera out. Though I am having a really hard time with the sun today, so we'll see how it goes.

Day 18: Mojave

I was about 20 or so miles east of Glamis on my way to the Algodnes Dunes, and I stopped for 45 minutes to an hour on the side of the road. I drove about half a mile off the highway down a dirt road in a warm brown, rocky desert landscape which might be slate or flagstone. The land here is barren— littered with just a few cholla cactus and ocotillos.

I started with my usual red cape with two different framings. Then, I tested my lavender fabric-- quite disappointingly, I accidently didn't buy enough to make it into a cape, so I made do with a two-meter square of fabric. It was a frustrating oversight on my part. Anyway, I tested the lavender and I think I can work with it. I think it's what I want; the colour certainly works as I imagined. I am going to look at the images again when it is dark out so I can see better what is happening.

Then I did my first test with pigs' blood. I have this image in my head of the top of my face covered by the white cape and the bottom half with blood just staining my lips. In trying to execute this, I got a little enthusiastic with the blood and ended up with a vampire-like look

which I expect won't end up working. I made a spare white cape with inexpensive fabric to get blood on for just such an occasion, but in my enthusiasm, I used my good one— and got blood all over it. So, I am either going to be doing a lot of Photoshop, or I'm just going to have a bloody cape in the next set of images.

Day 19: The long drive home

The drive home is always the longest day. I put it off as long as I can before I pack up to leave.

I have Taco Bell for lunch and dinner—a treat for their biggest fan. I have covered about 2,000 miles, shot who-knows-how-many thousands of images, eaten more than a dozen peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, sat by six campfires and even managed two real showers. It has been a wonderful trip weaving in and out of the wilderness, stopping at truck stops and fast-food restaurants between dusty campgrounds and nature preserves. I could keep going for weeks. I have, once. When I was in my twenties and lost my job, boyfriend, and flat I took off and drove around the United States for a little over three months without a plan. Even then, I only came home because I ran out of money and needed to find a job. Someday I hope I can do this for a year or so. Buy something big enough to sleep in but with 4-wheel drive and just explore my home country without agenda. Just making art and exploring to my heart's content.

Later (somewhere along Interstate 5)

It is the 'large energy drink, bag of popcorn, and deep reflection' portion of the drive now. The drink and snack keep me awake while the reflections on a wonderful trip and what it all means are inevitable as I drive toward home on this very dark and not quite lonely highway.

The desert is a sacred space in my tradition. It called to me, and I answered.

It was never a conscious choice to centre my artwork around the desert, it just happened. I have spent the last several years working backward— starting from knowing the desert is where my work belongs and moving towards figuring why it belongs there.

The desert is where people go when they are looking for answers; it is both sacred and liminal. The Israelites wandered the desert for 40 years after they were freed from slavery; Jesus was alone in the desert for 40 days before he started his ministry of preaching and miracles; I went straight into the desert without a plan in 2009 after I lost my job, my home, and someone I thought I would marry.

The desert calls to the lost and the broken. The beauty and danger of this sacred landscape feeds us so that eventually we can come back out and move on. Loving and appreciating the desert— but hoping we never have to go back.

The cloaks hide my face and body because I want my images to exist outside of time. This also means I do not want someone to be able to look at the clothing or hairstyle in an image and know when it was made. The cloak hides modernity and hints at antiquity, fantasy, and the sacred. That split second where the robes are billowing— that instant exists only once, and it exists outside time.

Red is for blood; the blood of Christ, the blood of the innocents, menstruation, violence; it is all blood. Blood is our equaliser, our saviour, and our demise. The figure is almost always cloaked in blood. In the cruelty, beauty, and pain of the desert one bleeds—literally or figuratively—there are wounds that need to be healed that bleed out onto the white salt and sand.

The symbolism of blood is central to the Christian tradition. Jesus shed his sacred, divine blood so that I might be saved from death. In the millennia since this happened, the contemporary Church has become largely disassociated from actual blood. They sing of being bathed in blood, and speak about being covered in blood, and yet their tradition is bloodless. I do sometimes use real or fake liquid blood in my work, but in the huge expanse of the desert, donning a red cloak makes more impact and tells the story better.


A familiar scene on a desert highway at dusk.

The first spark of this project was borne of bereavement from a heart that was taught that life is eternal, and death is temporary because Jesus overcame death in his Resurrection. But death does not feel like it has been overcome. In radical theology death is death, and the death of God is a gift, not a denial or a tragedy. The finality of the death of God does not feel nice like the confidence in heaven and eternal life I used to carry, but it allows us to understand the finitude of life and to move through it with appreciation. This also means there is an inherent lack, a hole, in the heart of a former believer—in me. The lack makes sense in a world where loved ones die, corruption is rewarded, and where groups that should be protected are oppressed. That lack, that hole in the heart, exists in direct conflict to the stone-solid confidence of someone who has the world figured, and knows exactly where they will go when they die.

Christian doctrine, radical theology, and my artwork all regard death, in particular the death of Christ, as a transformative. For the Christian, the death of Christ signals a moment of mourning before salvation and then eternity. For the radical thinker, this moment signals the completion of God themself. For me, I suppose this moment is one to sit in between these two theologies and consider death as another kind of transformation.

Later

3:14am and I am home. Dirty, tired, happy.

I have pulled into the driveway of our family home in Livermore, California. My parents and sisters are asleep, though not for long. When I walk in the door the dogs will announce my arrival to the household. I will drag in my camera and the cooler and leave everything else for tomorrow. I will forgo personal hygiene to collapse into bed and fall asleep. I am home.

Appendix 2: Rublev

Rublev

One day, God walked in, parched from the arid desert,
squinting against the sun, and stopped,
said, Colour me, breathe your blood into my mouth.

I said, Here is the blood of all our people,
these are our bruises, blue and purple,
crimson, rust, and the pale wash of death.

These (god) are the chromatic pains of flesh,
I said, I trust I shall make you retch,
O I shall stain you with the scars of life

For ever, I shall root you in the wood,
under the sun shall bake you bread
of pine, never let you forth

to the white desert, to the starving sand.

CMJ (2022)

One day, God walked in, pale from the grey steppe,
slit-eyed against the wind, and stopped,
said, Colour me, breathe your blood into my mouth.

I said, Here is the blood of all our people,
these are their bruises, blue and purple,
gold, brown, and pale green wash of death.

These (god) are the chromatic pains of flesh,
I said, I trust I shall make you blush,
O I shall stain you with the scars of birth

For ever, I shall root you in the wood,
under the sun shall bake you bread
of beechmast, never let you forth

To the white desert, to the starving sand.
But we shall sit and speak around
One table, share one food, one earth.

Rowan Williams (1994)

Appendix 3

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit
and the virgin Mary,
and was made human.
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
He spoke through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come. Amen.

(Nicene Creed)