I Do Not Pray, So I Paint

Candice J. Block

Washington University in St. Louis

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I Do Not Pray, So I Paint

By,

Candice Block

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Thesis Advisor
Monika Weiss

Primary Advisors
Richard Krueger, Monika Weiss

Graduate Committee
Cheryl Wassenaar
Andrea Stanislav
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Abstract

This thesis is a back and forth conversation I have with myself, my work, and a departed friend. These words thread together a belief, and lack of belief in an ontological infinity. I discuss how the loss of a friend relates to my work and my ever-changing thoughts in regards an eternity that I view as impalpable. Throughout my studio practice and poetry, I create a personal symbolic system in order to soothe my ephemeral thoughts around my knowledge of mortality. This system of iconography and meaning eases my ever-questioning secular mind as I try to find significance in life and in death.
Introduction
I guess this would be my first letter to you. I tried to find someone to talk to about your passing, but clearly I’m taking it the hardest.

For a while it seemed like your death brought everyone back together, I know how much this closeness meant to you. Hell, even [ ] and I are talking again.

You know he was the one that called me that morning.

I was so alone. I was so far away from everyone when I got the phone call.

They are saying that you killed yourself:

Is it because of [ ]? I really hope that is not true. What [ ] did to you was so wrong, it wasn’t your fault.

I thought you were over those kinds of thoughts.

When you became religious I know I kind of laughed at you, but I know it was good for you to believe in something. Especially because you said [ ] was a sin.

You didn’t do it did you?

It was an accident right?

We all have so many questions in regards to your death, and no one is answering them.

I am sorry my last words to you were not as kind as they should have been. I hate myself so much for that, I was just mad. You have no idea how badly [ ]

Please forgive me, I miss you terribly
Embedded within this thesis are letters to my best friend who passed away all to suddenly. I never got to say good-bye physically or metaphorically. In fact, my last words to him were not as kind as it should have been. At the time I was angry at him for not being able to see another side of life, one equal in depths to suffering. Though I am aware that my actions did not cause his death, it will continue to weigh heavily on my heart. After his passing it became clear that I knew a side of him not many had known. One that he shared with me and me alone. This knowledge felt like a never-ending cycle of melancholia. His secrets made me weary.

I began writing him letters in my journal as a way to talk to him. I held off this urge to do so because I have never identified with a religion. An afterlife was not something I thought existed, so the action seemed so pointless. However, after his death, it was something I longed to believe in. Since we were so close, we often talked about our beliefs and lack thereof. Being both anxious beings, we would talk each other down from our states of existential panic. The process of writing to him helped me comfort my day-to-day thoughts while not being able to actually talk to him. In the act of doing this I felt as though he had meaning in life and in death.

By slowing down my studio practice and beginning to think about the intentions behind my actions. I became aware of how much the death of my friend plays a part in my act creation. In a strange way, the process and emotions create images that seem like a conversation I would have had with my departed friend. Since both of us had become aware of our ephemerality at a young age, we coped with this knowledge by attaching meaning to our actions and intentions.

I find myself repeating this train of thought while in the process of creating my work. I attach lofty meanings to each individual action in my studio. The work from the very beginning opens up a conversation with me. In this process, the meaning I attach communicates its own
philosophy as I seek to soothe my mortal fears. I make certain decisions that seem to contradict each other and reflect my inconsistent thoughts and questions in regards to an “essence” of life.

In my studio practice, there is a sacrament I refer to as the alchemy. I look at this as a ceremonial process in which I attaching meaning to ephemeral objects. The process, on the other hand, feels as though I am prolonging their life by transforming them into a material. Through a performative ritualistic experimentation, I feel as though I will find a pseudo-infinity that I ultimately long for. This material metaphor not only soothes me but also in some way teaches me a philosophy on existence I can only grasp through these shifty conversations with the material.

These ever changing ephemeral thoughts is what drive my practice. I fear more than anything that I will live a short and unsubstantial life. I cannot help but let these thoughts rule every aspect of my existence, including my work. These fears, thoughts, and losses, compel me to try to ask as many questions as I can, but also to attach signification to every aspect of my life. In this sense, I view my work as a devotion to a longing for an infinite that may not even exist.

This significance or meaning is made apparent through a personal iconography and a correlation to historical references. I feel at ease about the linear quality of time by building upon said symbols that already have a charged significance. By attaching meaning to these specific symbols I am creating a sacrament or a memento moir. For instance, by building a personal iconography to the existing history of the vesica piscis (which is used to symbolize where heaven meets earth), I alter the conversation to the moment of birth and death. I then use this symbol in specific pieces to convey my fluctuating thoughts through a visual transience.

Embedded in this thesis are letters to my best friend who left this earth and I feel as though the conversations we had are embedded in everything I do. As young children, I
remember him and I trying to find meaning in everything, including our own suffering. Apart of me feels like maybe that is why he left this world. He stopped asking questions and searching for meaning. Through the process of creating, I have found that a meaningful life is one that never stops asking questions and searching for something intangible.
Process:
Place, Grid, Mask, Pattern, Stain
Walking into my studio, I always feel a sigh of relief. It is not visually the calmest place, but it is where calmness resides. The process of making correlates with a process of thinking. Each individual step in my process is connected to a specific thought or feeling. The work has the ability for me to be able to lose myself within it. This happens by attaching meaning to my actions and having an intention behind these steps. Viktor Frankl once said, “In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.”¹ I feel this is quite a lofty statement, but in the context of my studio practice, I believe it full heartedly. I have an obsessive fear of death, which I find drives most of my actions, and my work is no exception. I am always in a constant state of panic that I am not going to lead a significant life. This feeling dissipates with the act of attaching meaning to the actions in my studio. I often leave the studio feeling as though every aspect of my life, or life in general, is of importance.

To bring myself to this thought, I must be in the right place. This is not a physical place, but instead a place in my mind. My work cannot happen at any time; it is something that is felt. I must first be alone in my own thoughts. The solitude lets the mind wander freely and takes me to this place. This step is usually about an hour or so and comes in many different forms. I find myself doing this through preparation, organization, sauntering, or even just contemplation. The self-induced solitude brings a sense of longing. This is a place I normally do not want to go, but I must. This sense of loss is always within me and needs to be let out. It is a release manifests itself in the form of my practice.

Having these obsessive thoughts of death, I often wonder the purpose of existence. I go back and forth in my mind of wanting to believe in something and believing in absolutely nothing. With the loss of my best friend, I find myself questioning these thoughts more than

¹ Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (1959).
ever. I think of him during this hour of contemplation, longing for his advice and guidance. While all of these thoughts are present in my mind, it eventually becomes too overwhelming of an emotion to continue thinking about. This is when I know I am in the right place. I have to start working.
It seems like I am wasting so much of my life wishing I was in a different place. In particular, I want to be in the place I was when I was dreaming of being here.

Remember how you said I was going to be the one out of all of us who made it? Well I am here, and I am trying to make it out of that place, but something pulls me back to that conversation with you. I know how proud of me you were. I hope you are still proud. Even though a few times. Everything I do I hear you in my mind telling me that I’m , that I’m the one. keeps reminding me that you used to say this about me. Sometimes I wish he wouldn’t.

I’m upset that you never really had a chance to make it out though. Life wasn’t as easy for you. Why did your life end up so different from mine? I know part of it has to do with .

Maybe if there is life after this, you are the writer you always wanted to be: . I don’t know, you know I don’t believe in any of that. I’m tired of not believing in anything, but certainty scares me even more. I know you always said suicide was a sin, I hope your stupid religion was wrong. Picturing you really with me.

That conversation about the future still haunts me. Why couldn’t we both make it? How did I get to be so lucky? How is it that I ended up stronger than you? We both were ! Why am I so different?
Until I know that you are in the heaving you believed in I will not rest. Maybe when I have proved our wrong, then we both will have made it, even if you are gone.

Maybe I am living in that conversation still, but really I am just scared. Scared that the day I go back to where we grew up and have the courage to face I will lose your voice in my head.

I promise I am going to face someday when I am strong enough, but I am just not in the right place for it since you died.

Thinking of you always.
I start my work off with a labor intensive plan. It is mapped out through a simple geometry that is repeated in an obsessive amount. I call this part of the process the grid. It is just a skeleton of what the work could be, done in pencil and by hand. What speaks to me about this part of the process is that by using a substrate and the right measurements everything will work out the way I plan. These simple math equations are laid out with an idea of a “master plan”. This “master plan”, in a metaphysical sense, is something I go back and forth on, but is helpful to work out through this process.

There are times in my work where I will leave the grid, visible to be seen by a viewer. This is apparent in my work entitled Affliction (fig.1). Here the grid is visible through the pattern. In other instances, I cover it as if it were never even there. This is a direct reflection of my ideas of a spiritual “master plan”. Sometimes I feel as though I can see how everything is connected, that the hidden structures that are blind to me become apparent. Other times I am not sure there is a structure at all. Since this grid is done by hand, I realize that no matter the plan things are always subject to change. I am human, I have free will, and that taints the possible structure laid out before me. In this sense, I find myself aligned with Rosalind Krauss’s way of thinking about the grid who said:

The peculiar power of the grid, its extraordinarily long life in the specialized space of modern art, arises from its potential to preside over this shame: to mask and to reveal it at one and the same time. In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid’s mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction). The work of Reinhardt or Agnes Martin would be instances of this power. And one of the important sources of this power is the way the grid is, as I said before, so stridently modern to look at, seeming to have left no place of refuge, no room on the face of it, for vestiges of the nineteenth century to hide.
I believe that the grid is a metaphor for that which is spiritual and secular simultaneously. It walks this line of certainty and uncertainty. It creates an order, and order is both a math equation and a divine hierarchy at the same time. It is everything that ever was and everything that currently is. This is based on math, myth, and meaning. By revealing the grid, I see the structure and plan that was built before me. The literal skeletal structure of what I see. The grid is honest and does not hide anything, but it still holds so much mysticism around its origin. By hiding the grid, I feel the work creates more mysticism, leaving little evidence of its trace. The meaning that I often attach to the grid is not to discredit the things unseen, though I find myself more empirical in my thinking.
I know I can’t see you, but I feel you, I sense you every day.

I know you are gone, but that doesn’t mean you are not still here.

Where are you?
After the grid, I begin the masking process. At times, I mask off a pattern, other times I mask out the negative spaces. Masking takes many different forms, but it serves the same purpose, to repel the stain. It preserves an area or taints an area from a free formed pour of pigment. The masking of an area can also conceal a stain to save it from another. In the end, the mask can be peeled off to reveal the brilliance of one hue next to another. Here I am hiding an area to be revealed later. I am exposing the work of its layers and true foundation of another structure. In other work, I leave the mask. I hide the structure, questioning it as it taunts me. In my mind, I go back and forth between wanting to peel this mask off and wanting to leave it on. There are things I want to know; I want to peel the mask. I also am unsure about the certainty of life’s structures, the questions are far greater for me; I leave the mask.

Three of my pieces entitled Transposed, Cleansed, and At Once (fig.2-4) show the different ways the mask can be used. The painting Transposed (fig.2) exemplifies how the masking process can repel and conceal a color. This happens when an oil based mask is used to repel the fluidity of a water-based media. It preserves the brilliance of one hue next the other. Cleansed (fig.3) shows how leaving the mask on can heighten a pigment that is already there. This is done by adding the mask to the painting after the pigment is poured and then pour water on top of the panel to wash some of the pigment away. Lastly, in the close up of the painting titled At Once (fig.4), I show how the addition of a masking can add a new hue while simultaneously capturing the pigment being used. This happens through the latex mixture I use for the mask. The grooves and imperfections then collect the pigment that is poured. In all cases, the mask conceals and heightens a part of the image, while adding a sculptural human element to the work.
During the masking part of my process, my anxieties begin to subside a little. The task of creating this mask becomes a coping mechanism for me. Creating this with hand based symmetry leads me to a feeling of spiritual and logical solace. A place between the atheist and the need to believe. It temporarily mends my encompassing fear of my imposing transience. By creating this repetitive task, I am coping, forgetting, and remembering all at the same time.

The idea of the pattern has been important to me for a number of years. The first time I remember being completely awestruck by a pattern was in a natural history museum as a child. I remember seeing a resin cast of the human circulatory system. I could not find the words to describe how powerful this was for me to see. This complex system is inside me. It is inside all of us. All these small veins played such a vital role in order for life to be possible. Each part seemed so important. The smallest veins eventually turned into larger ones. The larger veins then connected to the heart. I felt as though I was a part of something much larger than myself. This amazing repetitive design is so crucial and is something that is a part of all of us. I felt so magnificent and humbled at the same time.

In the contexts of my earlier work, I remained interested in the branching pattern that resembled that circulatory system that struck me so profoundly. I became obsessed with said pattern and began to see it everywhere. I could not escape it. I saw it in the roots of trees, in the cracks of the sidewalk, under a microscope, and in images of cosmological structures. Once I was made conscious of the pattern, it became encompassing. At some point in my obsession with this pattern, it began to give me a sense of ease. I began to feel connected to everything that had this same form of repetition. It is inside me as well. In an earlier piece of mine titled, *Window Within* (fig. 5), I emphasize the biomorphic vine pattern that sparked my obsession with pattern. Pattern, in general, became a personal metaphor for an interconnectedness of all things.
These thoughts, even as a child, eased my already budding fear of the ephemeral. The patterns within my work have changed a lot from these simple branching patterns, but the metaphor has remained.

Apart from the biomorphic patterns, I became interested in patterns of ornamentations. In my work, this ornamentation is used to adorn a personal iconography and used as an elaborate devotion. The pattern can play an optical illusion using color causing a form of disbelief, a human attribute. In other instances, it is about the texture through the masking process that is equated to something human, it becomes skin-like. In my work titled Flume (fig.6), pattern acts as an encompassing metaphor of the infinite. The swirl of warm and cool blues create an optical trick that highlights my confusion of an indefinite infinity.

In the pattern making process, I have found that there is a second type of pattern of equal importance. This pattern is what I like to call a conceivable pattern. It is something I cannot necessarily plan for but has a capability of happening. I do not like to think about this type of pattern as chance, it is more of a cause and effect, even if I am not conscious of the cause. This pattern happens when the different pigments and paint binders interact with each other. This results in what watercolor painters call a “bloom”. This is when a wet surface interacts with a water-based media. Through changing the binders and other experimentations, the bloom begins to look cosmological and cellular simultaneously. An example of this is in my piece Circumnavigate (fig. 7). Here the red pigment chemically repels the washes of purple in the background. This conceivable pattern gives me a feeling of contentment because it resembles something inside of all of us as well as the outside world. The adorned pattern and the conceivable pattern gives me meaning through this personal metaphor.
Pattern seems to be some sort of a link to an infinite, an infinite that I view as impalpable and uncertain. Pattern has the ability to go on forever, it is just repetition. Though it can extend into infinity, it has to end at some point due to my mortal insufficiency. Throughout my practice, the pattern fluctuates between pristine and deconstructed, between the sacred and the human. While creating this pattern, I wander between thoughts. Though I long for a metaphysical infinite, I realize that comes with a price. I have a hard time trying to decide how I am better off. Am I better off knowing that there is something planned and laid out before me? Is it better to be ignorant of that knowledge? Maybe there is no plan. Maybe we are a beautiful accident that eventually dies and becomes nothing.

Against the background or foreground of a tightly controlled pattern, there is a stain. It is important for me to refer to this as a stain because for me it symbolizes something that is not easily removed. The term stain is more permanent to me. It is the same type of permanence I tend to long for in my mind. The stain is often applied with a series of pours or sprays. I do not use a paintbrush. I want the colors to bleed into each other to create its own sort of brushstroke, void of my physical hand. I set the parameters to where the pigment can flow naturally and do what it will.

Since I work in what watercolor painters call “wet on wet”, this process happens quickly. There is a set timeline of actions that correlates with a set dry time. The “wet on wet” actions make it seem as though I am racing time, whereas the grid and pattern are more about slowing down the time. I feel aware of the present transients of time. I am fighting with the ephemeral. Either I am trying to find a peace with impermanence or prolong it. The quickness feels like a release of a breath. I am trying to let go of my thoughts while they become absorbed into the panel.
Though this part of the process may seem a little manic, it is still broken down to a personal alchemy. Even if I am running around the panel pouring pigment down and spraying it with varies washes, areas are masked off and the pours are contained; nothing is without intention (fig. 8-9). Since the pours are methodical and intuitive simultaneously, there is a hint of anxiety that comes with it. Even though I set up the parameters, there are undetected anomalies that can alter the way pigment settles within the panel. The quintessential stain painter Helen Frankenthaler once said, “There are many accidents that are nothing but accidents-and forget it. But there are some that were brought about only because you are the person you are... you have the wherewithal, intelligence, and energy to recognize it and do something with it.” I agree with what she said, but I like to think of accidents more as anomalies. This is because the results are only a deviation from the expected, where accidents refer more to a chance. What I interpret from Frankenthaler is that when these anomalies become meaningful they are in turn no longer accidents.

The anomalies that happen in my process happen out of the inconsistency in the material. Since I prefer to make my own paint, some batches are a slightly different hue than the last. This variation adds an interesting subtle condition that I have learned to embrace. Another anomaly is in the levelness of the substrate. Since I work on the ground the water-based media is inevitably going to pool and flow in different directions. Even the slightest off-centeredness can cause this; there is no way I can realistically control the uncertainty. I have grown to accept this lack of control, but it came with an internal fight of trying to make meaning out of it. When I pour my washes, there are clumps of pigment that begin to dance around the panel uncontrollably and create a harmonious rhythm (fig.10). Though these are just a few everyday anomalies that happen in the studio, new ones will always arise; it is up to me to attach a significance.
These anomalies, however unplanned, have taught me how to cope with and understand my anxieties of the unknown. They have led me to understand that my questioning is more important than the answers. Since I am at heart a perfectionist in the studio, it took me a long time to be able to let go of my complete rigid control. In a more metaphorical way, my environment affects me and should affect my paintings as well. Anomalies change the course of a life, and should change the course of my painting. As the irregularities within my own life make me begin to question the world around me, I feel the paintings also begin to question the world around them through the artifice of their anomalies. I must find meaning in anomalies, and I must find meaning in suffering.

This part of my process tends to put me in a trance. Though I have to work on my toes there are moments of quiet contemplation. This happens as I get lost in watching the colors bleed into each other or repel one another. As I am working on putting the pigment down, I stop and think about how the colors should play with each other. I think a part of me already knows the answer, but I need to stop and contemplate to remain present. The colors suck me in during these moments of contemplation. The saturated colors become hypnotic. I have to catch myself before I spend too much time watching them bleed around the panel. There is an importance in losing myself here.

In between these moments of contemplation, something much bigger happens. I begin to feel as though I am a part of something greater. In this flow state, I act out of pure instinct. When I do the pour I can have no distractions, no one can even walk past my studio. Even though solitude is necessary, I do not think I would even notice someone walk by because of how hyper-focused I become. In this moment, it is pure excitement and ecstasy. I get lost in the experience. The moment is so powerful and rids me of my anxieties. It is something larger than
myself. It flows through me and from me at the same time. In this state, it is as if I go to a
different world and come back with the realization of whatever it is on my panel.

When I get the painting just right, I can no longer touch it. Though the colors may run
into each other and go off into unwanted areas they will eventually freeze. I often like to watch
this stain dry. It seems like I am watching something become eternal, like a simultaneous birth
and death. Soon, this action becomes frozen, an extension of a transient moment.
Alchemy:
Material Metaphors
I refer to the way I choreograph my studio as a form of alchemy because it seems transcendent. The Medieval Alchemists, who were interested in turning base metals into gold or silver, also had a more profound interest. They believed that the philosopher’s stone could create an elixir that would extend human life and possibly result in immortality. My way of thinking is too empirical to believe in this sort of magic, but I do find a beautiful metaphor buried in this idea. In the making of my materials and in a ritualistic experimentation of the process, I work to prolong the life of the organic matter used to create my pigment.

Before I get to the studio, I take long saunters in solitude. On these pilgrimages, I find myself compelled to collect little reminders of where I have been. I soon turned to plant life in the process of gathering. This is in part because I cherished a brief eternity. Eventually, I began drying them out and either grinding them into a powder or boiling them into a dye in order to paint with. Though this started from an intuitive process, it began to take on a more meaningful existence in my practice.

I view the material I create as a still from a moment of contemplation. By picking these plants, I am capturing these moments of conversations with my ego and make something new from them. I do not know what these plants are when I pick them. I also do not keep a documented record of what I collect. This intuition process results in a different makeup of washes in my work. Though I do not know what they are, I collect them, I hold them, and even cherish them.

This alchemy takes much experimentation. Working off instinct I will often, I end up with nothing but dirty water. In hues that are almost unobtainable to create using the material I find, I will change the saturation with said muted water. The experimentation of this process results in an unpredictability and an acknowledgment of the humanlike quality of the material.
Since I insist on making my own washes, there is a different way in which I handle the paint. I
would not handle the pigment with the care that I do if my paints were store bought. I am
reminded of the time, energy, and personal value I attached to this material. I then become
aware that the painting could very well turn out wrong.

This process speaks to a conflicting feeling I have on the knowledge of death. The idea I
am thinking of was eloquently stated by Ernest Becker, in his book *The Denial of Death*, when
he said: “To live fully is to live with an awareness of the rumble of terror that underlies
everything”. The impending doom that underlines is the personal weight I have attached to this
material. This metaphoric death knowledge changes the intentions behind the way I use the
washes. The hours I spent collecting the material and their symbolic life can all be wasted at any
second with a not yet significant anomaly. Experiments can inevitably ruin any facet of a
“master plan” I have once created.
Whenever I am scared of doing anything I think back to those times skateboarding with you. The abuse our parent’s health insurances must have taken huh? I still will never forget that time you busted your lip and you thought that if you smoked a cig you were going to automatically get cancer. Or remember that time we ran away from home and I stole so we could buy . I will never forget sleeping at the skate park that night. To be honest, I was never going to run away. But you, you should have. and were so horrible to you.

I remember all the times we would fall, but somehow found the strength to get back up. We never seemed to stop until we landed the trick we set out to do, or until the cops were called. Ha!

You taught me this grit, and I try to have this drive in everything I do. Sometimes , but that grit is what really keeps me going during those times I miss you the most. It’s almost like you were preparing me for your death.

I have a lot of major decisions I have to make and it scares me so much.

Fortunately, if you taught me anything form those late night skateboarding sessions, it is that we are the most alive when we are the most afraid.

Please look after our , they could really use you right now. I heard is doing again, I know he could have used you right now.

P.S. you were right, was no good from me, I should have listened.
I feel experimentation is a mode of collecting knowledge in a state of uncertainty. I am not sure how things will turn out, but unlike a scientist, it is not cause-and-effect I am after, it is the thrill of the exploration. It is the fear of not knowing that drives me and cleanses me at the same time. I can set the constant variables, but the anomalies within the nature of the way I paint are susceptible to unpredictable mutations. These mutations give me a sense of anxiety as well as an exhilaration, a voyage of uncertainty. This energy of nervous excitement resembles that “rumbling terror” that Becker professed. These uncontrollable anomalies come at any moment in my painting process, much like the fact that death can also come at any time. This undeniable consciousness of death is what makes me want to stay awake for days trying to create as much as possible so there is meaning in life and in death. In this process, I feel a kinship to this material because of its transience. The plants obviously die, but by turning them into a pigment I prolong them to an infinity only found in meaning.

This meaning based infinity is also brought upon by the stain. These moments of solitude and contemplation become frozen in time. The stain becomes a sort of memory of moment between me and the earth. These moments make me realize that I exist, that this act of creation would not be possible without me. I, for a brief moment, feel as though I have drunk the “alchemist elixir”, that I am forever. It is as if by creating something “permanent” from something that is supposed to die, I too become “permanent”. On the contrary, a tangible infinity could mean nothing. Maybe the paintings I am creating will only outlive me. Although, it seems as though the action and the intent are what really transcend my ephemeral existence. Either way, my intentions become ritualistic as I create a sacrament with these plants.

A piece of mine that emphasizes this sacrament is my installation titled To Wither, To Mend (fig.11). The work emphasizes the ephemerality of the plants while giving them a
meaningful death. I pierced all of these plants and arranged them in a circle. These plants are in different stages of death to evoke the cycle in which all living things are born into. I adorn their death in order to find a meaning in the suffering I endured during the loss of my friend. This piece became a performative and ceremonial process for me. Since I was not able to go to my friend’s funeral, I put intention behind every plant I pierced. This became an act of remembrance, like putting flowers on a grave. This alchemic process taught me that the passing of time, its wither, makes a life no matter how short more meaningful.
We wanted to put flowers where you crashed your car.

The man who lives there yelled and said we needed to take them down.

Your death really fucked him up.

I can’t blame him though.

He watched the gates of death open up on his front lawn.

I know you didn’t want to hurt anyone else, but death is so very scary to the living.

Especially those who have an appreciation for life, I am starting to learn that now.

Why did you pick the pole in front of his lawn?

Did you know him?

Or did you just see heaven open up there?
This piece, though visually different from my other work, still speaks the same language of ambiguity between birth and death and the meaning placed in-between. *To Wither, To Mend*, shares a similar ideology to the work *Wreaths to Pleasure* (fig.12) by the artist Helen Chadwick. Though her work tended to lean more towards a sexual nature, this series emphasized birth and decay through a ceremonial series of thirteen round photographs. These photos are of floral arrangements that hover within a transient state of domestic fluids. These pieces seem to attract and repel while confusing the sensations. The floral arrangements are in the form of ambiguous constellations referring to male and female genitalia. Though her work was about the intimate and erotic through self-reflection, in these pieces, it reads as conception. By photographing these flowers through toxic materials, it also reads as death. She often referred to the flowers in her work as “dying organs”, because the flowers are on a specific timeline, and her work is what outlived said timeline. What I feel is the most significant about the ephemerality of these “dying organs” is that the intention behind her work is what outlives their set timeline. She was simultaneously adorning both life and death through the metaphor of plants.

When these plants become martyrs to my stain, the alchemic performance can truly take place. As stated in a prior chapter, I often lose myself in this process. It is as though I am in a constant state of awe for however long it takes to pour the pigment or spray the wash. When I pick up these paints it is one of the few times I feel my ontological anxieties reside. For a moment in time, my panic of death turns into a fading abstract thought, and I begin to look at the world more curiously. This is the reason I create because in this moment I am greater that meat or flesh, I feel transcendent. In my mind, I travel to this place of infinity that the alchemist strived to achieve; but it is brief. I am not sure exactly “where I go” in this state but when the trance breaks my panel is finished.
This performative aspect of the alchemic processes is reminiscent of the late artist Hilma af Klint. Klint was a female painter in the late 1800’s and said to have pioneered abstraction way before the likes of Kandinsky. After the loss of her sister, Klint became interested in the spiritual and hypothetical phenomenological world. Her alchemy differs quite a bit from mine, but she also went to an unexplainable place. Instead of being in a place of cognitive awe, which I refer to my process as, she would use meditation and perform séances to contact those who have passed. Those on the other side gave her certain indications of symbols and color choices in order to create her compositions (fig. 13). Her paintings, much like mine, became automatic in this way.

Although I do not really believe in being able to talk to “the other side” as she did through her séances, I understand the feeling and wants attached to the action. The feeling is somewhere between rapture and joy, exuberance, and sadness while simultaneously feeling nothing at all. It really is something that is indescribable, but once it is felt one will know what it is. It is a meditative place one can only achieve through this act of creation when one’s ephemeral thoughts eventually subside. I also understand her need to try to contact the dead, but instead of séances, I write letters and attach meanings to my paintings as a way to communicate with my departed friend.
Your death was ruled a suicide. God damn it Candice. I was hoping this wasn’t true.

I know it was because [redacted]. You never would have [redacted] wouldn’t have done that to you.

There is only a POSSIBILITY of heaven. Why would you take that chance? There could be nothing after this, and you would have left us for nothing. I might not ever see you again and you’re the one that did this.

Did you kill yourself because you [redacted]? Or is it because the nothingness brought you peace after all the suffering you had here on earth?

I just don’t get why you would take that chance.

I don’t want to be mad at you, but I am just hurt you left.

Remember I was [redacted] too, I am still here.
Do you realize how difficult is making this for all of us?

thinks it is our fault for not being there for you more.

Like we already don’t think this as it is. I have so much guilt and I know does as well. I just want him to leave us alone. You know I loved you so much, you could have called. Why didn’t you call one of us? You know we would have answered.

Who the does he think he is, he was supposed to be and it was on us to constantly take care of you?

He was never there for you. He has no right to act like this and harass your family.

, , and I where the ones that took you in. We let you live with us because we loved you. He clearly didn’t care about you.

If I recall, he is the one who made you and . When he was the one that.

Dealing with him now makes me realize how bad you .

I AM SO SICK OF PEOPLE PRETENDING THAT THEY CARED ABOUT YOU!

I cant believe

They didn’t know you like I did.
I remember the day my best friend passed away. It was early in the morning when I got the phone call. I cannot believe how quickly life can change with just a few short words. In that instance, I felt myself become an entirely different person. I do not remember much after that call; everything just seemed like a blur. The most difficult part was that I was alone. Everyone who was also mourning his loss was over six hundred miles away. I longed to be with them, to grieve with my friends and family. Unfortunately, obligations kept me elsewhere. I tried to drive home that weekend, but a snowstorm trapped me before I could get there; ultimately, I missed his funeral. Even though I knew there was no way I could have made it, somewhere deep inside me I hold this against myself.

I had an overwhelming series of thoughts that followed within the next few weeks. The main question I kept asking myself was, “why him, why not me”. A question I am sure most asks themselves when experiencing a loss. I asked myself this question quite a bit because we grew up together, at one point lived together, and shared some of our best and worst memories together. I could not make sense of why he was gone and I was still here. I longed to know what that meant, or if it meant anything at all.

A few years before he died he disclosed to me that he experienced a traumatic event in his childhood. I too had experienced a similar trauma. I am not thrilled that either of us had to face this sort of hardship, but I was happy neither of us had to be alone. We would ask each other for advice and guided one another on how to rebuild our lives. Being exposed to trauma at a young age changed our worldview immensely. A symptom of such trauma is a fear or belief that one will not live a long or meaningful life. Ultimately, this is why we became meaning making individuals who questioned our purpose and a life after death.
The night that he died the horrors of his trauma caught up to him and took my best friend away from this world. When he killed himself, I became emotionally immobile. We had a similar history, we asked many of the same questions; how did his questioning lead him down this road? How could he just leave me like this, and by his own choice? Though I would never follow in his footsteps, I had a hard time is not asking myself “what makes me so different?”.

That summer we were given the police reports. I cannot and will not go into detail about what it said, but reading about someone you love in such a graphic and honest detail is one of the most painful things I think I will ever have to do. It was so matter-of-fact like he was a number or any other John Doe they dealt with on a day-to-day basis. He was not just a number he was my best friend.
We got your ashes today. It was so hard to look at that stupid _____ tin they put you in. We wanted to do right by you but none of us can afford it. 

When we opened that tin you were in a plastic bag. Did you see how hard we cried? I wonder if you could have seen us now if you would have changed your mind. That stupid _____ plastic bag is going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

_____ and I got a few of your belongings as well. I wanted to keep your skateboard, but _____ should have that, I guess we owe _____ that.

I wish I could have gotten your poetry. The police said your journals were _____ and I wouldn’t have wanted it. Judging by the awful things in the coroner report, I am sure they were right.

I love you man, but I can’t stop thinking about those ashes and that _____ report. I know you were looking for peace, but leaving us like that is not a way to find it. I wish we wouldn’t have read it, I don’t want to remember you like that. This is really going to mess _____ and I up for a long time.

I kept most of your ashes and, I know that’s what you would have wanted. _____, I, and _____ put some in your favorite skate spots, and the place we all meet as kids. I figured you were okay with that.

I keep replaying that report in my head like I was there.

I can’t sleep anymore.
As some of his closest friends, we were ultimately in control of his ashes. This moment in my life was almost as emotional as the moment I found out he had passed away. A person I grew up with, who had hopes and dreams and opinions, was reduced down to nothing more than a plastic bag full of ashes. His whole childhood, his secrets, my secrets, his once joyous outlook on the world, none of it seemed relevant when I was holding this plastic bag of ash.

I fear the thought of this plastic bag almost every day of my life. I am afraid of our insignificance. To me, there is nothing beautiful about this kind of death or its outcome. Nothing to be adorned, no marker of a soul, no signifier of a life lived, just a bag of matter that once made up my best friend. In this sense, I am reminded of the article *Holbein’s Dead Crist*, by Julia Kristeva. In this passage, she dissects Hans Holbein’s painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (fig.14) in which he depicts Christ in a disturbing humanizing way.

The unadorned representation of human death, the well-nigh anatomical stripping of the corpse convey to viewers an unbearable anguish before the death of God, here blended with our own, since there is not the slightest suggestion of transcendency. What is more, Hans Holbein has given up all architectural or compositional fancy. The tombstone weighs down on the upper portion of the painting, which is merely twelve inches high, and intensifies the feeling of permanent death: this corpse shall never rise again. The vary pall limited to a minimum of folds emphasizes, through the economy of motion, the feeling of stiffness and stone-felt cold.\[11\]

Kristeva is saying that by rejecting the more traditional beautification process, Holbein emphasizes an essential part of humanity, death. This passage makes sense in terms of my own studio practice and my questions in regards to death. Since my work is often pure adornment the process of beautification eases my fear of not living a long or meaningful life. In some ways, I feel as though I am adorning a passage of death through my work. This is not only my death but the death of my loved ones as well.
Death exists somewhere in the back of my mind at all times. Growing up secular I never believed that anything would happen when I died. As an adult, I seemingly live in a state of flux about my thoughts in regards to life in death. All our ideas, all our potential, our moments of love and sadness; and this is how it ends in a sack of ashes? As a conscious being aware of my own mortality, I long to know that I am worth more than that. Thus, after my best friend died instead of believing in nothing, I started believing in questioning and confronting said fears. Maybe the wonder of not knowing and the quest for understanding is what drives me.

Though my questioning comes from a fear of death, I also believe that asking questions is a part of human nature and should be cherished. In talking about Christianity, Kristeva says, “faith be analyzable does not necessarily imply a method for getting by without it-although this too may be. The questioning of any and all entities, including belief and its objects is one of Christianity’s most impressive legacies; and humanism its rebellious child must not be prevented from developing this legacy.”¹² Though I do not identify with a religion, I find myself very moved by this passage. What I interpret this writing to mean is that at the root of all hypothetical answers (which religion brings) is questions. Kristeva values these questions and feels this act of humanism should not be prohibited. I agree with her statement, but I branch off in another direction of thinking. For me, it is the questions and wonder that make meaning, and meaning is what brings a glimmer of peace when thinking of my own ephemerality.

One series of questions I have is on the nature of mortality. I have trouble comprehending if this knowledge of mortality helpful or hindering. On one hand, I fear it more than anything in this world. The idea of complete nothingness gives me great anxiety. I find myself asking what is the point of doing anything if all we do is fall into nothingness. I then go
on to wonder if maybe that is the point. I want to believe that the time we have here on earth is so precious and that is the reasoning for doing anything.
I never know if I am making the right choice. I am thinking about leaving Jesse, you know how abusive he has been.

You know I have always had so much anxiety about ‘wasting my time’. You were always the one that was still up at three in the morning to reassure me what I was doing was right. Really what you were doing though was calling me out when I was about to make the wrong decision.

I almost feel like I can’t make up my mind without you here.

I have so many things I want to do in my life, but I feel like I am constantly watching my time run out.

I’m so scared I am going to die before I get to...

Remember all those dreams you had before you died? It breaks my heart that you will never be able to marry Nikki like you thought you would.

Why did you have to start doing heroin again?

Why didn’t keep you going?

Please come back!

I don’t know what I am doing without you.

I’ve made so many mistakes and I know is one of them.

Why the hell did you leave me here to do this on my own?

You’re not the one in hell, I AM!

I hope you are happy
After my friend passed away I really began to wonder how I was using my time and for what. Maybe this is what makes mortality so important. I realize that my time here is brief, so I hopefully use this time to the best of my ability. Without our own decay maybe we would not love, make art, or ponder the cosmos. Is it that immortality is what would make life pointless? Maybe knowing that everything is only temporary is why we attach meaning to things. Yet it could be that this knowledge is what helps one to enjoy the subtleties in life.

In thinking like this, I am reminded of a Roland Barthes quote in his book *A Lover’s Discourse* where he states, “love is the romantic solution to the problem of death.”\(^1\) I interpret this to love as hard as possible because we know it is not forever. Though this is a beautiful and poetic statement, there is much sadness to it. Is this all love is? Something to fill our time with to make death easier? Maybe this is why we have friendships and lovers, that being with someone is what makes our fears of ephemerality much easier. I want to know that our interconnectedness means something more than this.

Though I believe there is some truth to Barthes’ statement, I am often reminded of an opposing viewpoint. In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* the character, Father Zosima states, “By the experience of active love. Strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably. In as far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and the immortality of your soul. If you attain to perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without a doubt, and no doubt can possibly enter your soul. This has been tried. This is certain.”\(^1\) How I interpret this is that when you love or feel something for another person you become more sure of *God*. Could it be that our own transcendence is only found in the interconnectedness of each other? That caring for one another is the highest form divinity,
maybe love is the route to holiness. It is plausible that the infinite remedy to mortality is in the eyes of the ones we love and hell is found in the solitude of loneliness.

Since I do not align myself with any religion, I have a hard time digesting the word God. This being said, I find myself aligned with Emmanuel Levinas who refers to the quest for something intangible and God-like as the metaphysical desire for the “other”. In an interview, Levinas stated, “faith is not a question of the existence or non-existence of God. It is believing that love without reward is valuable.”15 I feel he is saying that through our metaphysical desire that can have absolutely no remedy, we can still remedy our own ephemera thought through love. This love is one without reward, which is pure love without any expectations. If one were to view this as valuable, they will live a meaningful life and potentially have a meaningful death. If God or “the other” is love, love is the true infinity.

So many have declared so much on the concept of love and infinite. I, on the other hand, have no idea what to think. Day by day, I seem to change my mind on what the real remedy for our ephemeral thoughts maybe, but I really have no clue. By searching, and reading, and creating, I find little philosophies that help temporarily fulfill these questions. I think that it is more the meaning we attach to love that helps us cure our existential panic. This love can then be viewed as the intention I placed upon my paintings. In turn, my friend’s death becomes significant because I placed that meaning within the confines of my panels. Unfortunately, this infinite we find in each other may only last as long as one is around to place said meaning.

When thinking of loss and mortality it is hard not to think about the work of Félix González-Torres. One of his works that fuel this ever-changing philosophy of mine is Untitled (perfect lovers) (fig.15). This work contains two clocks that were once marked at exactly the same time. The was used to symbolize his love for his partner who had passed. Though our
work is visually different, we both have a similar driving force. This force is a fear or question of our own and others mortality. González-Torres also did not believe in a God. He believed letting go of this perceived notion of God made him aware of how precious his time was. That time was something to be cherished and personified in this work.\textsuperscript{16} After my own loss, his work became pivotal to me. There was a ritualistic-like quality in the remembrance of mortality throughout his work. These clocks show time. Technically time is something that never ends, but the life of the clocks (or our loved ones and ourselves) eventually will.
Candice,

I wish you could see Mike's daughter. She is so beautiful. It is amazing how much life has changed in the short time since you have passed. She was born on December 24, so it was crazy I got to be home for that. In this weird way I feel like somehow it is connected. One life ends so another begins.

It sounds crazy, but it makes me feel better to think like that.

It’s so crazy to think of Mike as a Dad though, I just can’t stop picturing him doing drugs and stealing from his mom. I guess we got to grow up sometime.

When I held her and looked into her eyes I realized how beautiful and pure she is. It is weird to think that we all start off like that.

I’m scared for her though. I am sure you know why

Please remember to look after Mike and Hayden if you can.
After my friend died, I began looking at the world differently. This is not just out of loss, but the realization that all my feelings of reverence were because of the impermanence of all things. It started to seem as if I could not feel any type of love or happiness without it leaving a taste of sadness in my mouth. I began to mourn the things I have not even lost yet. That I felt nostalgia for a time that was currently happening. Even when holding my goddaughter for the first time, I experienced great sadness in the love I felt for her. The extreme feeling of automatic love and awe was happening simultaneously with a feeling of mourning her inevitable death sentence. I am not sure if this is something that I do consciously, but it is something I noticed after my own experience with loss. It is in those moments like holding my goddaughter for the first time, that bring me to the point of tears, but I am not even sure what kind of tears they are. I am already thinking about that person’s death and mourning them a little each day I get to know them. Inside all of the beauty I see, there is entropy. I want to absorb it; I want to eternalize it.
I was thinking about Mike’s daughter a lot today. Children are so God like aren’t they? It is crazy to watch her just absorb everything with such wide eyes. I am so excited for her, but I am also scared for her. I don’t want her to ever be raped like we were. There is no way to shield her from this though. She is going to suffer. She is going to hurt and have her heart broken. She will someday lose someone like I lost you.

I don’t want her to feel this.

You know, somedays I don’t know who to mourn.

She was born into this world where she will eventually lose everything. Then again, she is born into a world where the impermanence of all things will take her breath away. She will love harder, she will hold tighter, make her cry.

But where are you?

Maybe there is nothing, maybe that’s peaceful. I cannot believe that thought, things are to beautiful here I mean despite . Maybe it is more beautiful where you are.

Are you looking down on here in disgust?

Who should I mourn, you or ?
We have the capability to love without reward and achieve grand human accomplishments; I do not want to think it was all for nothing. How can we contemplate the cosmos and simultaneously watch ourselves decay? When I am lost in this train of thought, I begin to wonder if there is something after this life. Again, since it is the questions I find the most compelling, it is only right that I begin to question my own beliefs in nothingness. Maybe certain ideologies are right, that there is something beautiful waiting for us when we die. It would be nice to see all of our lost loved ones again in some capacity. Death could potentially just be another grand journey into something we can never be able to comprehend; this “invisible otherness” as Levinas puts it. I long to be able to deny this nothingness, the nothingness we were born from and will eventually go back to. I do not know if humans were meant to make peace with this concept or if we are supposed to fight it at all costs.

I am reminded of two writings that have informed my practice in the quest of asking questions and forming meaning. The first is the famous poem, *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night* by Dylan Thomas. In this poem, he is saying that we should not go quietly. To never accept death, to always fight against death. He is saying that we need to contest death at all costs. Life is always worth living and fighting for and death is deplorable. In a metaphorical sense, I often think of this poem a sort of call to form a belief system that does not “accept” death. This is reminiscent of the book *The Immortalist* in which Alan Harrington states, “The philosophy that accepts death must itself be considered dead, its questions meaningless, its consolation worn out”. Meaning that death is a disease on the human existence, and that we cannot tolerate it. Harrington used this book as a sort of call-to-action against death, in a biological and technological sense. He believed that death is the equalizing mortal enemy of the human race, but the biggest driving force. Both of these pieces make me wonder if the fear of
death is really just an appreciation for life. Though a part of me aligns with these two writers, I want my life to be more than a constant fight against death. I want more than anything to find myself aligned with a tangible and certain infinite.

Since I am an atheist in a perpetual state of questioning, I wonder if it is even productive to think that there is something after our lives that we can live in some sort of infinity. It could just honestly prohibit us from ever progressing forward as humans. If we were aware of existence after death, it is possible that we would not take life so seriously. Maybe we would not worry too much about the unimportant aspects of life. In opposition, if we did have this consciousness of life after death, would we still find a need to make meaning? Would we stop asking questions? I wonder, would our birth and our death be empty?

Every time I enter the studio, my mind fluctuates between all these thoughts. I see a value in all of them, but I also see the faults. In a romantic solution, love is what keeps us infinite. The idea that love transcends mortality is beautiful but lofty. The religious solution seems like a way to remedy this ontological longing with answers, but with no empirical basis. We can embrace death, and we can deny it, but both seem to take the wonder out of life. I travel back and forth in my mind from the idea that we are sentient beings and the idea that we are nothing. Though it gives me much panic, I am sure the truth would not make me feel any better. I feel as though the constant state of questioning and mulling over of these ideas is what gets me out of bed and into the studio every morning. Weather I love someone harder because of their entropy, or because I wish to eternalize them, I love because I question it all.

Maybe through my practice I am pursuing an epiphany. Something larger than myself that I find in that “other place” I go to in the alchemy of my studio. The act and intention of creation in itself seems so much like a holy act. It becomes a way to immortalize an aspect of
myself and the ones I love. Though this is a temporary remedy, the meaning and intention behind this act seem transcendent.
I have been thinking a lot about the future. I never thought I would have made it this far, considering [censored] number of times. I defiantly didn’t think I would be here without you. It seems so weird to prepare for a future while yours is still frozen in time. I wish that you were here, you always seemed to be able to make something from nothing. I wish you could have realized this before you died. I know around the time that you [censored] you were feeling pretty stagnant, but you always seemed to find a way to make paint it gold.

What changed?

I know what [censored] did to you really messed you up, but I know you could have found a purpose through that.

I wish you would have never picked up [censored], I don’t think you know how badly that hurt all of us.

I wish you wouldn’t have changed.
Iconography and the Quest for Meaning
Much like my unsettling mind, the visual elements of my work also lie within the realm of uncertainty over certainty. My transient thoughts often contradict each other and my work visually personifies this. Through my thoughts, I am grasping at a meaning, trying to make sense of things. In the process, I am learning what each step has to teach. In the alchemy, I am attaching significance through a ritualism. The visuals, on the other hand, are a mix of these simultaneously. Since I cannot have one thought at a time, the narratives of each differ from piece to piece. My back and forth philosophy creates them, and the visual iconography helps create my thoughts.

The root reason that I use iconography in my work is that by attaching meaning to the visual, I then intern view life as more meaningful. Someone who has personified the importance of meaning in everyday life is the physiatrist and author Viktor Frankl. His book *Man’s Search for Meaning* has become a pivotal read in my life and in my practice. Frankl wrote about his accounts living in a Nazi death camp and how he survived through finding meaning in everything, including death and suffering. Frankl then went on to create a type of therapy known as logotherapy. This practice is driven by the idea that it is human nature to search for purpose and attach meaning. A segment in his book I found most compelling states:

An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfillment in experiencing beauty, art, nature. But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: namely, in man’s attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is meaningful life at all, then
there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.\(^\text{19}\)

Frankl is speaking on the meaning, which encompasses all aspects of life even in the darkness. As someone who has a studio practice, if I find meaning in my work and therefore, I must find meaning in death as well. I became attached to his writings because I fear meaningfulness. Frankl argues that in all situations, no matter how horrific, life will always have meaning. When we attach meaning to anything, even if it is taken away from us, its’s significance will exist forever. He also argues that the search for meaning is the primary motivation in life. If one were to give up on such a quest, it would have vast consequences. He views this quest as the “will to meaning”. A quest set up by one and achieved and obtained for one.

I am human, I will inevitably suffer, but my work tends to act as a form of logotherapy. Logos translating to meaning, and therapy meaning healing. I place a significance upon certain symbols and compositions to talk about my ephemeral anxieties. By placing value and understanding on my work, I then for a moment in time, lose sight of those anxieties. This is my “will to meaning” because for a moment in time I found a bliss. I agree with Frankl that searching for meaning is the ultimate quest. This is not only through iconography, but also through the questions that drive said iconography. I often think Frankl was a hopeless optimist. However, these lofty ideas ease my circle thinking thoughts so I continue to attach meaning to the iconography in my work.

I attach my own essence to iconography with an already complex history. By doing so, I feel as though I transcend the linear version of time that I fear. For some time now, I have been obsessed with the shape that is made when two circles meet known as the vesica piscis or a
mandorla. This shape is used within religious or spiritual art to speak on the place where heaven and earth meet. In Medieval Art, the symbol is shown as an aureola to the Virgin and Child. Through Medieval Artwork, this pointed oval is used to symbolize the Virgin Mary’s womb and also the wounds of Christ (fig. 16).\textsuperscript{20} The word mandorla translates from Italian to English meaning almond, which is one of the first trees of the season to flower, since it begins its flowering in early February. Within the bible, the almond is used as a subjective symbol latent with meaning. In Ecclesiastes 12:5 the almond tree which bears a white flower is thought to embody old age, because of whitening of hair.\textsuperscript{21} Throughout the bible, Moses and Aaron’s staffs were a pivotal part of many miracles and were coincidentally made from an almond tree. What I find the most compelling is the use of the almond in the book of Numbers. Here, the Israelites made their pilgrimage to the land that was promised to Abraham. Along the trip of forty years, there was a proclamation of priesthood to reinvigorate the Israelites who were losing faith in God. This is when Aaron’s staff sprouted almonds overnight. By following God’s path, the almonds became sweet and edible to nourish the hungry.\textsuperscript{22}

Since this shape symbolizes the virgin’s womb, and the wounds of Christ, I feel as though the point where heaven and earth meet is in birth and death. I am not Christian; I do not know if I will ever even claim to be religious, but there is something I find so moving about this metaphor. The almond tree, which is the first to flower also, symbolizes old age. It simultaneously is birth and death, while creating miracles along the way. It is interesting to think of these two processes of life as the same thing. The plausibility of this parable gives me a sense of reassurance.

In my work, I use this symbol to speak on my questions surrounding both birth and death. In my piece, entitled \textit{Earth is Where We Met, Where Will We Meet?} (fig. 17), I show a literal
form of the Mandorla. The center is plated gold to emphasize the adornment of both life and
death. I also embellished said pointed oval with a sacrament. Inside the gold, I adhered one of
the plants I collected that have been dipped in resin. Here, I am trying to prolong the life of
something that will ultimately wither. These two intersecting circles (bodies) form a vaginal-like
opening that presents a life I wish to preserve.

In *Gated Void* (fig.18) I masked off the positive shapes in order to let the stain become
the vesica piscis. The stain, which through the process I interpret as that which makes something
infinite, is repelled by the masked pattern, an interconnectedness of all people. Emphasized in
this piece, and consistent within my work, there is a visual and actual depth. The pattern acts as
a gate being raised off the surface in which the vesica piscis is but unattainable void.

However unattainable this void may seem, there is still something earthly and human
about this shape. This is articulated and translated profoundly in Carlo Scarpa’s *Brion Cemetery*
(fig.19). Through a commission by the Brion family, Scarpa used the vesica piscis as a portal to
the sarcophagi. He used the colors red and blue on the outer circle to symbolize the union of
man and women, which speaks on both conception and death. This gesture is a non-threatening
way to talk about both a meaningful life and death through the use of geometry. The vesica
piscis acts as a viewing device either toward the dead or toward the field of Cyprus plants. 23 To
me, the entrance or exit calls upon the viewer’s sensibility toward their own existence.

In these examples, I am reminded of Levinas because the creation of this symbol marks a
longing for “the other”. In his book *Totality and Infinity*, he states, “The distance between I and
the other is good. Transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my
own reality, yet without the distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying
the distance.” 24 The ontological “other” is something that needs to be at a distance from us.
Longing it is something that is profoundly human and transcendent in itself. We loathe the
distance, but we need the distance. Trying to understand the reality of the “other” is the reason
why we place meaning on things and have symbols such as the vesica piscis.

Another aspect of my work that is heavily weighted with personal iconography is my use
of color. What intrigues me the most about color is that it has an elusive quality. Through the
human retina, color can cause a psycho-physiological phenomenon of deception. Therefore, the
visualization of color is an attribution of mortal beings, and mortal beings are as mysterious as
color.  

The relativity of color can make one question what one is seeing. Certain hues are
perceived differently by what is laid next to it. When this happens, I question the empiricist
within me. The shift in color is made apparent in my piece Vibration (fig 20). Here the raised
parts of the pattern is in different saturations of blue but appear as different colors based on the
surrounding hues as they fade from yellows to dark reds. This work is more spiritual than some
of my others because of its trance-like ability. Here, I call on the questioning of my own bias
toward collecting knowledge through the visual. I then begin to wonder if there is a need for the
spiritual “otherness”. By attaching this meaning on the flux of color, I can carry on a
corversation through the hues and saturation.

In this practice, I find myself aligned with the artist Richard Anuszkiewciz (fig.21). He
claimed that he did not try to imitate or interpret nature, but instead respond to it. He wished to
use the behavior of color to create a conversation that runs parallel with the human experience of
reality. By using striking color contrast, optical mixing, and after image, Anuskiewciz was
able to talk about the way visual dynamics enhance our knowledge of reality. His use of color
and vibrating patterns give his work a special depth that are also apparent in my own practice.
This was a common theme among many other Op Artists. These artists were interested in the phenomenon of the visual perception, which often include these stark color contrasts.

The colors I use tend to be extremely saturated and have meaning embedded within that. As previously stated, I make most of my pigments in order to obtain a pure color. When hues are saturated, I feel as though they sit on the cusp of emotion. An example of this is within my use of the color blue. Blue has an ability for me to resemble aspects of the world around us. It can be as encompassing as the night sky and as calming as the seaside. By changing the saturation of said color, I can control an emotion. Keeping this color saturated I feel as though it becomes otherworldly. This is the world I wish for my work to live in because this is the world my thoughts live in. This personal symbolic system is meant to let the colors remain in this place of duality. By using these extreme colors, I feel as though it openness the doors to a different universe. A universe where the mystical, the alchemic, and the cosmological “other” meet. One in which terror and excitement run parallel.

In this sense, I feel that color takes us beyond the gates of our perception and into another place. The subtle changes in saturated color compel me to go inward to find knowledge. They remind me that I am alive and that I have the capability to think beyond a present reality. It is in this state that I begin to realize what Carl Jung is saying when he said, “The conscious and unconscious contents of the mind are linked together… Part of the unconscious consists of a multitude of temporary obscure thoughts, impressions, and images that, in spite of being lost, continue to influence our conscious minds.” To expand on this I think it is the saturated colors, that seem otherworldly, that close the gap between visible and the invisible. That maybe color, in some way, can tap into our longing for the ontological “other” that resides somewhere in our unconscious. It is in my drawings that I tend to emphasize this even more (fig.22-23). My
drawings come from a purely intuitive place. The color choices I use have less conscious meaning attached to them but I use what I know feels right. This automatic process lets my mind wander and chose the colors that are already latent within me. Here I am not so concerned about a visual narrative, but the sensation through the subtleties of color.

Another use of personal iconography is what I call, near symmetry, and near geometry. From first glance, the work seems to use symmetry and geometry to convey a specific metaphor. Upon further investigation, it becomes apparent that this is more of a near symmetry/geometry than an exact. To me, this nearness is what adds the meaning and wonder to the work. I could easily create images using computer programs, but that is not what I am after. In fact, the symmetry and geometry used are not even that complex. It is in the obsessive quality that gives the work its intricacy. Again, it is not the complexity of the math that I am interested in, it is more the essence of mathematics. I am compelled by the human act of building upon a “sure” foundation in order to create something new. By using equations and geometric shapes of said “sureness” the conversation can shift from an empirical world to one full of wonder. The more complex the mathematics is, the closer it becomes to understanding the way the world is.\textsuperscript{28} By being driven by the essence of mathematics, I feel as though I am more interested in what lies before and after life, and only questioning the way things are.

The crux of this near symmetry is contingent on my hand. I strive for a certain degree of perfection, but I am aware of my own human capabilities and embellish them. For me, this is a strive to find something tangible to believe in. I want to believe that there is a symmetry to life, that things have to be certain divine way in order for existence to be possible, and the shakiness of my hand allows room for indecisiveness. I am reminded again of the quotation from Kristeva in her book \textit{This Incredible Need to Believe} where she says “That, from this point of view, faith
be analyzable does not necessarily imply a method for getting by without it—although this too may be. The questioning of any and all entities, including belief and its objects, is one of Christianity’s most impressive legacies; and humanism, its rebellious child, must not be prevented from developing this legacy.”29 In this context, I believe she is saying that it is within our human right and nature to question everything even if it is something that we believe. To deny this questioning is to deny the essence of human nature, however this is not to discredit our need to believe. This is the reason I allow my hand to shake. The shake is a result in my hesitation, my human questioning. I question my actions; I question “the other”. I am not God, I am not striving for spiritual perfection, and I am simply trying to figure out the questions in my head. The symmetry therefor must not be perfect; if it were perfect, it would be too close to an unrealistic infinity.

The compulsive nature of my compositions speaks to the anxieties I have linked to a supposed infinite and its relation to the pattern. The work must be done by hand; I have to go through the motion of painstakingly making each part of the pattern hours at a time. The reason for this is summed up in this quote by Earnest Beaker in his book The Denial of Death. “Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness of the largest possible level.”30 This way of thinking is also reminiscent of Viktor Frankl’s Logotherapy because it is a way of healing through meaning for me. In this repetitive task, I lose myself. My hope is that the viewer will too. The rhythm passes the time, it slows time; it helps to remember, and it helps me forget.

The embracement of my hand is where I find myself differ from the Op Artists. For instance, the work of Bridget Riley becomes so exact that it tessellates within the mind (fig.24). Her work plays with the illusions created in the eye-brain system. That is the human aspect of
her paintings, the interplay and dizzying effect that the work can have on the viewer. Though her paintings were done by hand, she almost eliminates it from her work.\textsuperscript{31} For me, I am interested in the waving of the hand to show a struggle to understand.

This struggle is something that I find when looking at the work of Agnes Martin. Her graphite grids begin to waver against the lose quality of paint washes. This waver is the wrestling of the ideas of perfection and in my eyes the infinite (fig.25). In Arnold Glimcher’s book \textit{Paintings, Writings, Remembrances} Martin is quoted, “I hope I have made it clear that the work is about perfection as we are aware of it in our minds, but the paintings are very far from being perfect- completely removed in fact-even as we ourselves are.”\textsuperscript{32} In her notes throughout this book, it is clear that she believes that perfect geometry is to \textit{God-like}. This is what I find interesting, her apparent struggle with this idea of perfection and near perfection.

Similar to Martins stripe paintings, is my series \textit{Subtle Thoughts} (fig. 26). In this series, I have four panels in which the same pattern is repeated. It is something that could easily be done to perfection on the computer or using a laser cutter, but there is something transcending by the hand striving to perfection yet aware of its limits. I believe that the points where the hand wavers exemplify my human potential to question this infinite I find myself pondering. The color variations fluctuate in a more fluid wash than Martin’s, but the idea seems to come from a similar place. Through near geometry and near symmetry both the works seem like they are actively trying to find order and structure while simultaneously wrestling with it. In both bodies of work, I am reminded of my own transience. When slowing myself down, I realize the fleeting temporality of all things. This is why I am able to see those subtle variations in the shifts of color and the waver of the hand.
The patterns, being this link to an inconceivable infinite, can be seen as the connection that all mortals have with one another. This becomes a metaphor for the interconnectedness of life. The pattern, as Barthes would put it, is the “romantic solution to the problem of death”. At times, I view the patterning as something that is synonymous with love. It is a bond with one another and the connections we have that allow us to ease our ephemeral thoughts. Unfortunately, I only strive to believe this. This is why in most of my work the pattern ends, it is cut off, it is not infinite (fig.27).

The conceivable pattern also has an iconographical metaphor. It is a visual representation of the cosmological and biological. As stated in a previous chapter, the conceivable pattern is what makes me feel at ease, because the systems within me are outside of me as well. This notion is most evident within my small-scale drawings (fig.28-29). They become otherworldly while simultaneously looking inward. The artist Gordon Terry also reflects this likeness between the outer and inner structures. His work can read as cross sections under a microscope, and a galactic snapshot. His painting titled *Black Holes, Bohemians, Colonials, and Bouddoris* (fig.30) emphasizes said similarity by using the shape of a circle to mimic a viewing device. This viewing device can be seen as a microscope lens or a telescope lens. The more I contemplate his work, the more I see these circles as portals that extend to the otherworldly.

Another painter that I have found that soothes this ontological anxiety through a conceivable pattern is Ross Bleckner. Bleckner has often described his work as sentimentally romantic. During the 1980’s and the rise of the AIDS epidemic, Bleckner lost many friends to the disease. When looking at his work I can see this sentimentality toward a “romantic solution”. His paintings resemble cells dividing and cells dying, through a conceivable pattern created in his watercolor blooms. The author Jose Luis Brea once described his work as an oscillation
between the melancholy and the sublime.\textsuperscript{35} I obviously find a deep love for Bleckner’s work because we share similar thoughts on mortality. His oscillations are made most apparent through his watercolor paintings (fig.31). The diminishing of the repetitive, cell-like symbols read as though they are dying out while the bold saturated colors read as though they are dividing or on the cusp of becoming something new. Through these repetitive blooms, he simultaneously talks about birth, death, and a longing for the metaphysical reasoning of both. His work becomes an entryway for something unachievable.

I often think of this entryway or portal when constructing my panels. The depth of them become a form of iconography. I do not mask off the sides. I let the paint flow over and stain them. This reminds me that the paintings, however, otherworldly they seem, are still objects. With such saturated colors and high detail, it becomes easy to get completely lost in the work. By reminding the viewer that the painting is an object, one will begin to have a similar contradictorily thought of the transcendent. Here, I mix the object and the “other”, the human and the divine.

Throughout my work, I have created a series of meaning making within a metaphor of iconography. By creating this visual system, I am on a quest to find meaning, a meaning that is essential to my existence. I build upon the history of others while attaching my own personal significance to said symbols and elements. Nothing within the studio lacks intention; it is these moments where I find some sort of purpose. It is in the meaning of each individual part where I find solace from the questions that haunt me.
I wonder where he is now,

I wonder what it is like there.

I hope he hears the things I say about him,

I wonder if consciousness is a thing in the afterlife.

I hope he can hear my thoughts; I think of him daily.

I wonder if he still watches me, or if he even can.

I hope his passage of death did not involve suffering.

I want to [ blank ] he is at peace.
The Visual Transient
My beliefs around life and death are constantly changing depending on the mood or the affairs around me. This back and forth existential battle happen within my own work as well. My imagery has many contradictory elements whether within a single piece or my practice in general. As a whole embodiment, the work creates its own train of thought and takes on a new meaning than I ever could have intended.

My work fluctuates between two main realms, the visual narrative, and the visual sensation. In many cases, these two types of work act as one. The visual narrative is often marked with a hierarchical iconography while the visual sensation plays with color, movement, and resist. I have always been compelled to do both. The visual narrative works as a type of philosophy that longs a certainty while the visual sensation opens the doors for more questioning. As a viewer of my own work, the visual narrative seems to tell a commanding statement while letting one travel through the visual depth of the work. The visual sensation, on the other hand, acts as a point of entrance through its openness and movement of pigment across the panel.

The visual narrative stems from my interaction with illuminated manuscripts. There is a certainty about them that I crave. The pages of these manuscripts are adorned with such intricacy, and I can almost feel the power of belief within the scribe’s hands. It seems as though their convictions were embedded within the context of their pages and encapsulated for hundreds of years.

I remember researching the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves* in a course I took in undergrad entitled “Women in Theology”. Catherine of Cleves commissioned this book in the 1440’s soon before she imprisoned her distant husband. She became a figure of radicalness for me because the book was adorned with her coats of arms and not her husbands. This book was hers and hers
alone. I remember thinking that the work was oddly intimate but still otherworldly. The reason this manuscript stuck out in my mind was that at this time in the Netherlands they wanted to shield women from the sight of hell but in this book of hours, hell was portrayed many times. Though this work depicted demons and death, it was still brightly adorned with ornate pattern and precious metals. Though the book was filled with typical manuscript imagery, it was the adornment of the dead I found most compelling.

Catharine of Cleves requested that her book of hours be filled with multiple prayers for the week. One prayer was for her dead friends and relatives who she believed were stuck in the fires of purgatory. The depiction of purgatory is horrific. There is an image of the hell mouth, within a hell mouth. There are demons pulling souls into the distant mouth that appears to be on fire. In the background, there is a palace that seems to be a castle of pain where there are hellish furnaces and souls being torn apart. The whole scene is being held up by a green demon with scrolls coming out of its mouth that depict the seven deadly sins.36

I remember thinking how terrifyingly commanding this image was, there was a sense of certainty, and one I was uneasy about. There is a correlation between this work and my work that has a visual narrative. The Hell Mouth (fig.33) image has portal-like openings to another world that I use within my own practice. These portals draw one in and pull one back out at the same time. Although I do not depict hell, I often like to think of the portals in my work as the passages of death or the portals of life. Much like this book of hours, my work revolves around the visual narrative and is highly adorned, even if I see it as a journey to the afterlife. This is most exemplified in my work The Tangible Intangible (fig.33). The work is commanding, certain, and never timid. The violet opening symbolizes where the heavens meet the earth, but can also be seen as an abstracted birth passage. This vessel is then adorned with spikes, which
obviously read as something dangerous or frightening. Though frightening the opening cradles delicately what I see as geometrically abstracted portal to a different world. I then adorned this piece with a leaf-like pattern, not just for decoration but also to put something earthly tangible as a sacrament to life in death. In the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, there are also many places where the pages are adorned with plant life and other human comforts. There is an importance in the order to show that entropy is necessary in the cycle of life.

Though the work that I call visual narrative do not necessarily depict death the same way as many manuscripts, including Catherin of Cleve’s, there is still a correlation. She had this part of her book made in order for her to be able to pray for the souls of friends and family who were stuck in purgatory. I, on the other hand, started working on this piece the day my best friend died. I wanted to know where he was and I wanted him to hear me, but I do not pray, so I painted.
The morning I got the phone call from [redacted], I painted for about twenty-four hours straight.

Do you feel the intention I am putting into them?

Sometimes I feel like I am painting for you, because you can no longer [redacted].

Sometimes I put your name on the back of them, it’s like a secret you and I have.

Everything I do, I find myself doing it for you.
Another artist that drives my visual narrative process is Remedios Varo. She used narration, metaphor, and symbolism to describe the process of life through death. She was attributed to the Surrealist Movement but often stayed on the outskirts of the group. She was influenced by the dreamlike psychoanalysis of their work, but hers was uniquely her own. Varo’s paintings were not as automatic as other Surrealists, she carefully planned out her paintings because she believed in a structured order visualized in her composition. Her work *Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle* (fig.34) has a visual narrative, which tells the story of her view of how the earth was created. A creation of a “master plan”.

Similarly, in my piece titled *Circumambient* (fig.35) my mind was on the question in regards to where all life comes from or goes to. The patterns saturation becomes duller around the center while the blue background contradicts this. This is what I see as a portal-like entrance to a different place through a hierarchical personal iconography.

I am also heavily influenced by the visual narrative based paintings of William Blake. What draws me to his work is that he often used saturated colors as a rejection of the representational natural world. The work, in this sense, becomes otherworldly. Blake also rejected most sciences that propels one closer to truth. He thought that it would destroy the wonder that he saw within spirituality. Though I do not necessarily agree with this idea, I am interested in the way he created a personal narrative, based on themes in regards to his own belief systems.

I am most attracted to his etching and watercolor piece entitled *The Ancient of Days* (fig.36). Blake painted this piece while on his deathbed for his friend Frederick Tatham. In this work, Blake shows *God* as his mythological character Urizen, a marker of reason. The name *Ancient of Days* refers in the bible to God’s existence before time began. This work is depicting
a creation of the world. The tool the figure is holding is an architecture tool, referring to the true architect, or God. The figure, who is reaching down into the void, has a limited measurement of the world. This shows that no matter how holy, there are limits. 40

Instead of having a set mythology and ideology like Blake, I create work based on questioning a specific meaning. In the piece titled Dawn (fig.37), I used the circle as a symbol of iconography, a part of the vesica piscis. I then included a pattern that incorporates these circles to act as a form of creation. By deconstructing the pattern, I then hint on a form of collapse. Again, a simultaneous birth and death.

These three examples are sources in which I find compelling when constructing my own personal narrative. Although I am not setting up a straightforward narrative, I am using a personal system of meaning to create spaces of contemplation. In opposition to the visual narrative, I am also interested in what I refer to as the visual sensation. At this point in my practice, the visual sensation is a rather new development and one I intend to explore further.

What compelled me to mimic this type of sensation was an experience I had with Mark Rothko’s work at the Tate Gallery in London. This gallery was a room dedicated to his Seagram Murals (fig. 38). These paintings were originally commissioned for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York. After making thirty paintings, when the space only required seven, he backed out of the commission. 41 These works now live in the Tate Gallery together that create a somber contemplative place.

Walking into the gallery I felt like time had slowed down. Many people were there, but they all faded into my peripherals. The room had an aura about it, one that sucked me in. I was
paralyzed for a moment before I could even look at the work. My mind seemed to be thinking so fast that it appeared as though I was not thinking at all.

The work gave me such a subdued feeling by looking at the subtleties of the washes. I am reminded of my thoughts in regards to my questions around mortality. Even though Rothko’s work slowed things down to where I felt as though I was stuck in an intimate infinity, it also reminded me of my own transience. This is through his attention to the subtle in his paintings. Staring at these pieces in a mindful conscious introspection, I became lost and my fears and anxieties of the ephemeral subsided.

After backing away from the pieces, I felt the opposite. I began to realize that these works were also simultaneously violent and assertive. This was in part due to the portal-like dark washes that lay on top of the surface of his paintings. I found myself wanting to travel into them and pull back away. I was completely awestruck over how the work could make me feel simultaneously terrified and eased at the same time.

Although I do not have specific work that directly relates to the feeling Rothko gave me that day, I am reminded my free association drawings that create a visual sensation (fig. 28-29). These drawings are done in an intuitive way, but that is not to say I am not conscious somewhere of what I am doing. Instead of having a stark contrast, I work to have the colors purely flow into each other. Here, I am more interested in the subtleties. With the subtle shifts in color and the change in a conceivable patterning, I purely allow the paint to be the paint. Though I set specific parameters within the drawings, I purposefully let go of any dominance.
What happens when creating these paintings is that I begin to realize that I can control some aspects of my life, everything is subject to change. The unconscious process seems to sit somewhere in the middle of fear and excitement. A place I seem to always be stuck in.
Conclusion
Embedded within my practice is a personal ritual and symbolization that I need in order to comfort my knowledge of death. The process creates tiny metaphors of meaning in which I use to ease my day-to-day thoughts. I find myself asking questions in regards to my own mortality, and the mortality of the ones I love. I struggle with the acceptance and the denial of death, but work to find an essential meaning in between. Through a conversation a have with my work, I create a dialog based on a longing for something to believe in. I want to know that we as humans matter, that everything we do is not for nothing. When I attach a purpose and significance to the intentions behind my actions, I begin to see the philosophies that the material has to teach. I start to feel as though the meaning I attribute to the work will live on, even past my own life. This meaning is the importance, it is the infinite. I am not sure where we came from or where we are going after we die, maybe that is not even important. What I do know is that if I can create work with intention; my life will always have meaning.
Notes

29 Julia Kristeva, This Incredible Need to Believe, “The Big Question Mark”. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ix.
33 Robert Morgan, Optical and Visionary Art Since the 1960's, “Eternal Moments: Artists Who Explore the Prospect for Happiness”. (San Antonio Museum of Art), 47.
41 Mark Rothko, Oliver Wick, and Delia Ciuha. *Mark Rothko, “Do the negate each other, modern and classical?: Mark Rothko, Italy and the yearning for Tradition”*. (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 5-27.
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