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# Spirit, Art, and Care

By  
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A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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# Abstract

In textiles, installations, and interactive performances, I explore how spiritual practice becomes art practice. My experiences as a hospice volunteer, musician, and Buddhist inform my work's focus on contemplating impermanence as a path to spiritual transformation. Artmaking is a vehicle for exploring the nature of my reality, and both communicating what I find and sharing the path itself. I take inspiration from mystic/artists such as Hilma af Klint, Sengai Gibon, and Agnes Martin, who have sought to expound the path of awakening in artistic form.

In content as well as process, my work explores notions of empathy, awareness, ceremony, and aspiration. I seek to create an empathetic experience of meditative calm through subtle stitching. I externalize meditation in drawings and paintings, translating awareness practices into physical existence. I create improvised spiritual ceremonies using music and chanting, bringing ancient traditions into contemporary forms, to include others in my contemplative work as an offering. I utilize poetry to create a sense of aspiration, translating my highest ideals into material form. By bringing my spiritual exploration into the realm of the physical with artmaking, I hope to give others a piece of what I have received from the spiritual path – a calmness, a sense of the preciousness of life, and in the intention of serving others, a purpose for living.

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# Introduction

*As I was taught in hospice volunteer training, I imagine myself as a balloon - hollow and flexible. The balloon which is myself blows up bigger and bigger, pushing out my personal mundane concerns creating a vast, empty space inside.*

How does spiritual practice become art practice? For me, this has to do with the intention of my work, which is to become awake to the nature of my reality and communicate what I have experienced with the hope of benefiting others. I am an artist, practicing Buddhist, and hospice volunteer. I have had many occasions to contemplate the preciousness of life, the impermanent nature of things which causes us grief and at the same time creates space for new things to arise. Buddhist nun Pema Chodron wrote, “Death and hopelessness provide proper motivation for living an insightful, compassionate life.”<sup>1</sup> My hospice experience and relationship to Buddhist practice provide the sources from which my art flows.

I make images with my hands, stitching, drawing, and painting onto paper and fabric – humble materials connected to both spiritual and historical traditions. I clear my mind and observe the marks which emerge, always carrying the vulnerable quality particular to my handwriting. I channel sounds as well as images by pressing keys on a pump organ while my feet push the pedals. Intoning words, I join my voice with the sound of the reeds. I make patterns by piecing fabric, drawing shapes, and singing mantras. I put myself fully in the moment and create a space where my viewer may join, allowing us to contemplate together.

I began to be interested in Buddhism around the same time I became a hospice volunteer, and I find many points of coherence between the philosophy of Buddhist practice and the ideas behind hospice care. By being born into conditioned existence, we are beyond help – we will suffer, grow old, and eventually die. The task becomes to appreciate what we can while we have it – how we make the journey, up to the final step.

In training to volunteer with hospice patients, I learned the practice of presence - the simple human quality of generous, open attention. I learned to let go of my inclination to 'fix' the situation of a patient, or to explain it away, or to even shift the focus to positive ways of thinking. Instead, one contributes one's simple being - presence - to create a space where whatever the patient needs to happen or not happen may arise naturally. I make my art in this spirit, allowing ideas and forms to arise, appreciating them for what they are – even if they are uncomfortable, awkward, or not conventionally beautiful. The practice of presence informs my meditation practice, which informs my work in the space I give myself to create, as well as the space I seek to create in my work. The practice of presence has changed how I view the process of art making, from inception to reception, maker to viewer. I hope to be a positive influence in the world, and I try to make my work an act of generosity, a dedication to the increased wellbeing of others, to add to their inspiration and understanding.

I connect my work with artists in the mystic tradition, both ancient and modern, religious and secular. I am as much a mystic who happens to make art as an artist who happens to practice mysticism. My caregiving experience in hospice provides an impetus for my practice but produces no creative work itself. I consider myself a part of a lineage of artists for whom the boundaries between spiritual, artistic, and worldly activities are blurred or non-existent.

I practice contemplation on compassionate empathy and self-awareness – my work reflects this self-reflexive process, creating empathetic space where self-awareness may arise. I create ceremonies for myself. I put my highest aspirations into words – my work invites participants to take part in ceremony, and to share in imagining our highest aims.

# Empathy

*Following the instructions of Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lama Lena, I visualize something which causes a heart-melting feeling of love and compassion.<sup>2</sup> Lama Lena pictures a baby opossum she raised in her cleavage, and for me, sometimes it is my grandmother, sometimes my mother, sometimes my parent's cat. Sometimes it is a memory from hospice. Sometimes I simply cry because of how hard and beautiful life seems for all of us – so difficult, yet so precious.*



My works create a space in the material world where contemplation may take place. A key component to the kind of contemplation I intend is empathy. Through the opening of a space, emotions and experiences may be shared – grief, joy, and the tenuous nature of human existence. I create the conditions, through quiet installations of simple materials, where an experience of empathy may take place.



Figure 1: Jordan Geiger, *Humans Are Supposed to Be Gardeners*, sheet, steel, copper, fan, sound from Brittney Benton, recorded at Alchemy’s Apothecary, Bastrop, TX, 72”x 84”x 84”, 2023

In my installation *Humans Are Supposed to Be Gardeners* (fig. 1), a textile, sound, and an oscillating fan become vehicles to evoke a sense of nostalgic calm and explore the idea of impermanence. A white, slightly worn bedsheet hangs in the corner of an empty room, as if hung out to dry. Copper wire, a conductor of energy, serves as the clothesline. Sounds arise from a hidden speaker - field recordings recorded in the late summer and a conversation about one’s

connection to the Earth through gardening. A nondescript grey oscillating fan moves side to side blowing on the bedsheet, making its own repetitive breathy humming sounds.

The sound fades in, an encompassing buzz of cicadas for about five minutes before Brittney's voice begins to speak.

She says:

*Once you compost things, it's like coming to terms with death and dying and we are all compost. We all came from this compost and we are all going back to this compost...<sup>3</sup>*

The recording continues and Brittney and I discuss dying and being buried in a quilt embedded with seeds. In the final few minutes, gentle night-bug sounds fade in to finish the recording.

This experience is created with relatable elements: laundry hung out to dry, a discussion of death and burial, and the sounds of insects in a late summer evening. These simple means evoke a nostalgic experience as well as the loss felt as one reflects on the past. The conversation suggests that our ultimate demise may be embraced as part of the larger system of nature embodied in compost.



Figure 2: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991

Felix Gonzales-Torres iconic image of an empty bed creates a space into which the viewer may project an imagined presence (fig. 2). Gonzales-Torres shows the viewer an intimate, everyday sight – the place where two people recently slept. The depth of loss is made present with mundane, relatable materials. As a similar act of intimacy, empathy and remembrance of loss, I hope that *Humans Are Supposed to Be Gardeners*, with the roaring waves of cicadas and the repetitive breathing of the fan and bedsheet, creates a calm, nostalgic space within which one may explore one’s own impermanence.

I use humble materials and processes to explore profound concepts, embracing the metaphor of alchemy: the transformation of base metals into gold. The site of the encounter of participant and artwork is the container in which this process takes place. In the book *Buddha Mind In Contemporary Art*, Jacquelynn Bass writes that Marcel Duchamp “...spoke of a gap that is filled by the participation of the spectator, whose own realization is a ‘phenomenon of transmutation’: an act of ‘transubstantiation’ in which inert matter is experienced as a work of art.”<sup>4</sup> I seek to create a similar gap, to transmute my own experiences into a space in which spiritual realization is made possible for those who experience my work.

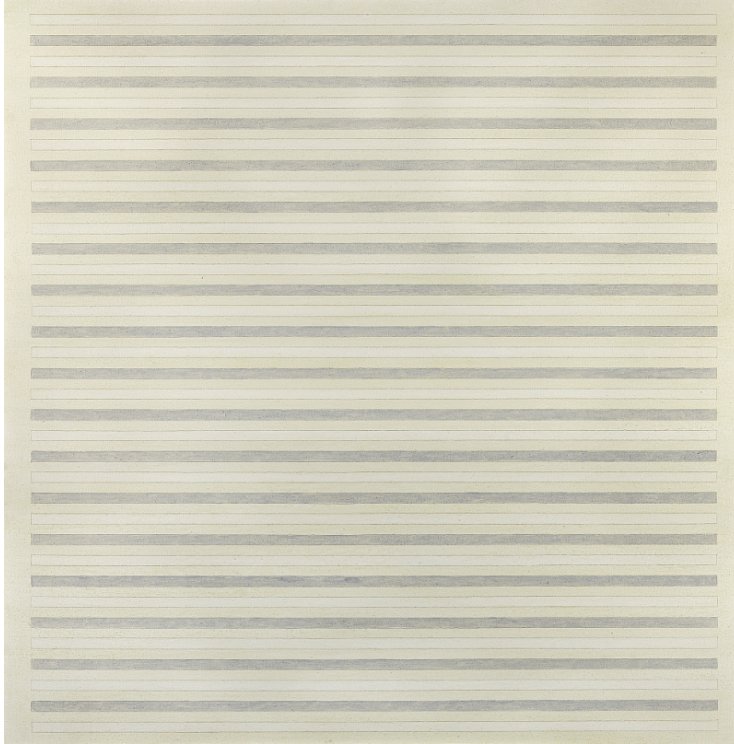


Figure 3. Agnes Martin, *White Flower II*, 1985

Agnes Martin wrote, “Perception, reception, and response are all the same. Sometimes we perceive, sometimes we receive and sometimes we respond but it is all the same.”<sup>5</sup> She suggests a space where boundaries become fluid – between perceiver and perceived, artist and viewer. I had an experience of calm when I first saw Martin’s *White Flower II* (fig. 3). In a moment, standing before the canvas, I grasped the power of her work to evoke a specific condition in the viewer, to suggest of a way of being. In person, her piece functions as an experience – a meditation in physical form. While the soft lines and blocks seem to form a regular pattern, when seen up close, the subtle variations of tone and texture of the graphite and acrylic reorient the viewers perception, sharpen the senses, and bring one into a state of mindful reception. Perhaps this is the state Martin was in while seeing a white flower and making the piece. I seek this place where the overall experience of a work becomes a whole – an irreducible empathetic experience.

## Awareness

*I sit on my quilt and try to clear my thoughts, which are swirling with anxious motion. I take my pen, a Pilot V5, out of my front pocket and begin to draw from the place where I last left off, breathing in and saying 'Om' inside my head as I draw the line up and to the left, overlapping and just next to the triangle drawn last in my previous session. After four counts, the line turns right as I hold my breath and say, "Ah" to myself, breath held. Finally, I draw the pen back and down and say "Hung" in my head, then after four counts start a new triangle next to the one I just drew.*

My work always begins with meditation. I calm my breathing. To the best of my ability, I clear my mind of thoughts and find an openness, empty and responsive, a grounded space of possibility, beyond trying to fix or control anything. This is the space of awareness, within which a wide range of activities may take place. I utilize disciplined repetition, serene devotion, and improvisational freedom to explore inner states and represent them in ink, paper, fabric, and paint.



Figure 4: Jordan Geiger, *Triangle Meditation*, paper, ink, antique quilt, 42” x 62” (drawing), 22” x 24” (quilt)

In my drawing *Triangle Meditation* (fig. 4), I externalize an internal meditative process on paper with an ink pen. I represent a Tibetan Buddhist breathing practice of breathing in, holding the breath, then breathing out, accompanied by an internal mantra.<sup>6</sup> I visualize a ball tracing an upside-down triangle, corresponding to each breath, measured by four counts each. I

draw a line as I practice this meditation over and over and create the patterns of overlapping triangles. I completed the drawing over the span of a few weeks while sitting on my antique crazy quilt<sup>7</sup>, which is displayed on the floor in front of the piece.

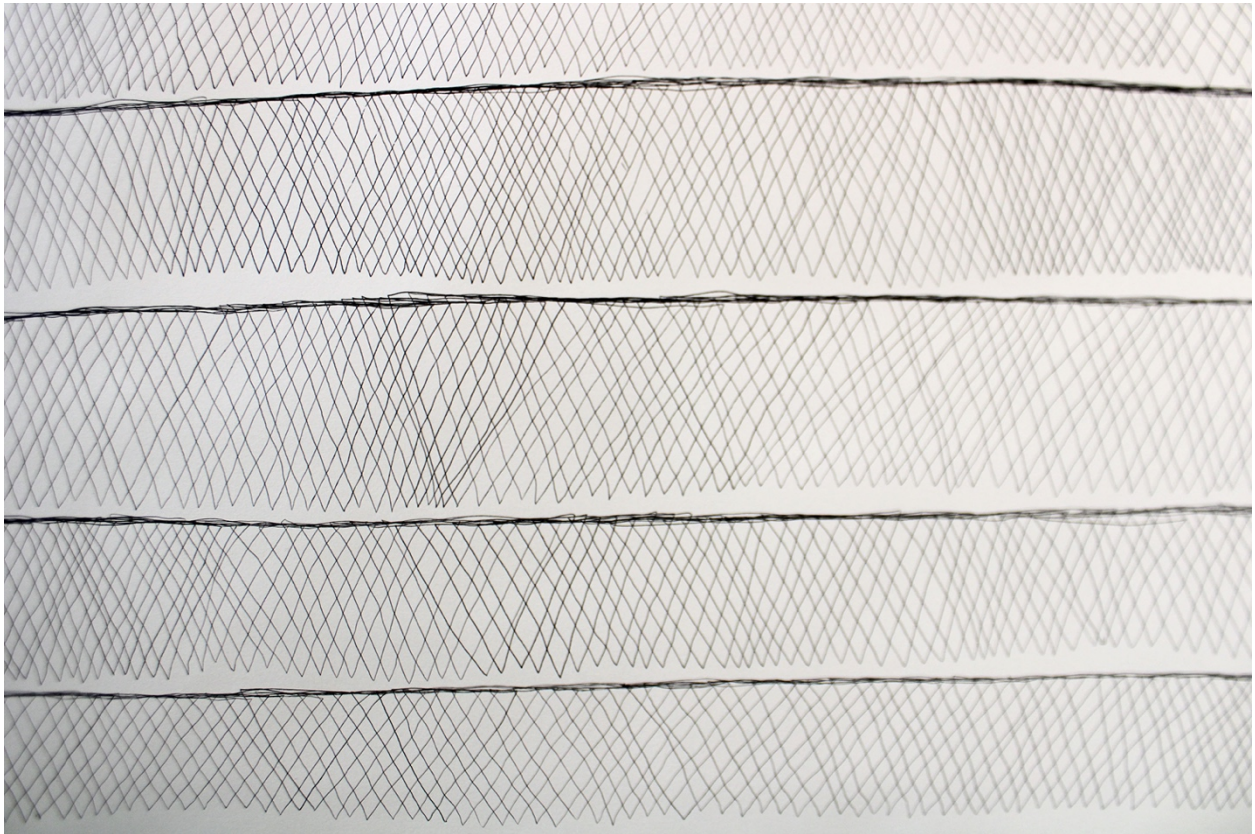


Figure 5. *Triangle Meditation* (detail)

Glimpses of my mental state are evident in the patterns - days where I was anxious and drew the triangles faster or slower, resulting in differing line qualities, days where I bore down on the pen with more force as I worked, days where my mind and hand wandered, becoming calmer. *Triangle Meditation* is a representation of my state during the time I produced the drawing, as if the unrepresentable inner life of a person could be made manifest in form.



Figure 6: Nakahara Nantembo, *Staff*, no date

A Zen artist's mental state is evident in their mark. In *Bo* by Nantembo, the force of being struck by a staff is represented by the splatter of the paint and the energy of dragging the brush down the paper, the mark of which makes the body of the staff itself (fig. 6)<sup>8</sup>. I imagine Nantembo clearing his mind, perhaps with the ring of a bell, writing the characters on the left of the page (which make up the first part of his name: Nantem), then striking the paper and dragging it down to coincide with the 'bo' in his name. Nantembo's piece is an abstract mark, a depiction of a walking stick, a graphic depiction of a name, as well as a self-portrait. This spirit



animates much of my work, in that they depict a state of being as well as a visual form to be experienced.

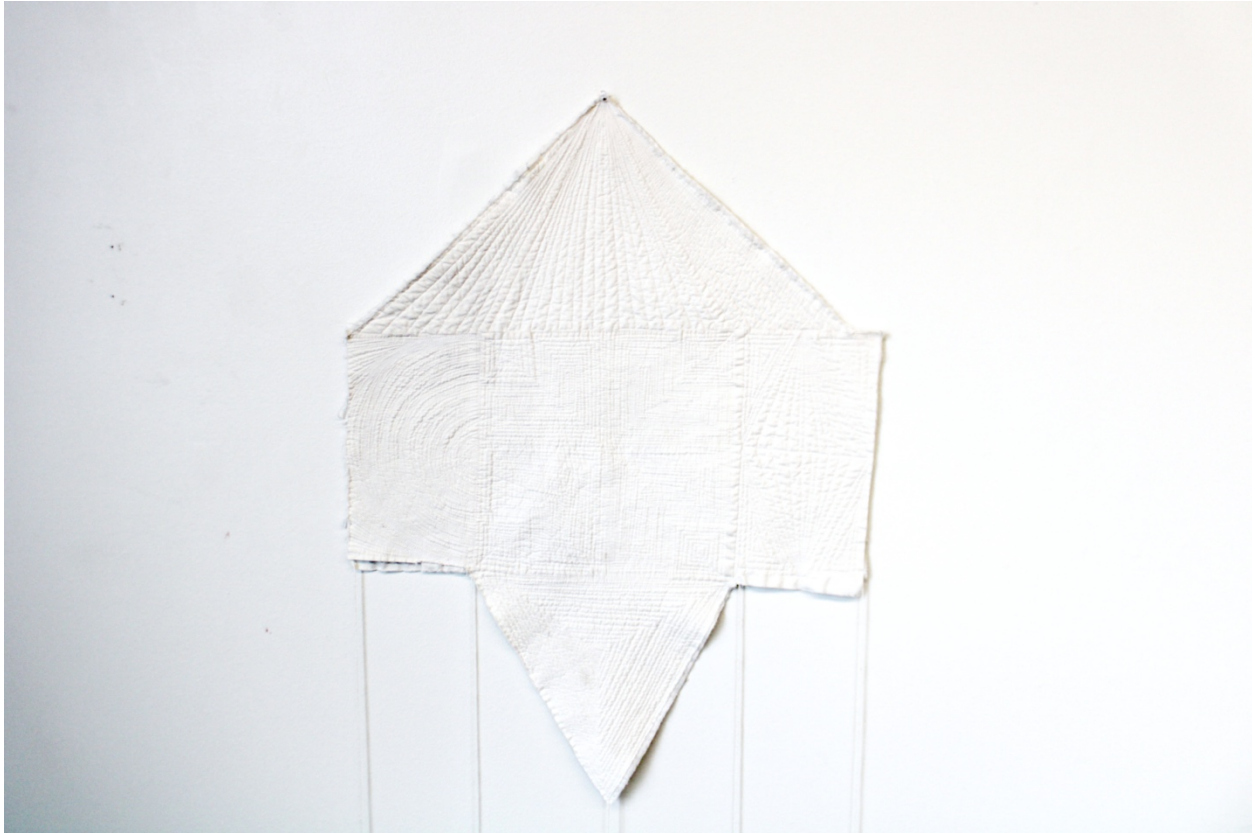


Figure 7: Jordan Geiger, *Quilted Drawing*, cotton fabric, cotton batting, thread, 30" x 22", 2022

My textile work, *Quilted Drawing*, gives form to a serene mental state (fig. 7). I draw upon the tradition of white-on-white whole cloth quilting to create a subtle, tactile drawing. The image arises out of textural differences in a field of sameness. To me, this is suggestive of the arising of images in the space of the mind. The cloth becomes a warm skin-like surface containing all colors, a compressed rainbow, a unity in diversity from which my mark may

emerge by the act of mindful stitching. It is a serene act of devotion and asks the viewer to reset their perceptions to the subtle contrast. A quiet space where one may choose to enter.

I also seek to represent awareness by the process of automatic drawing. Inspired by the transcendently channeled forms of Hilma af Klint, I move from form to form as fast as possible, to not allow my mind to determine what form appears next. Klint created drawings during seances where she worked as a medium to spirits, and she also was informed by newly emerging representations of energy in the realm of science (figs. 8 and 9). My process focuses on the opening of a space of possibility where any form may emerge. By opening this space and allowing forms to emerge as they will, I create a record of my shifting creative awareness over time. Making this record and reflecting on it is itself a spiritual process, a form of meditation.

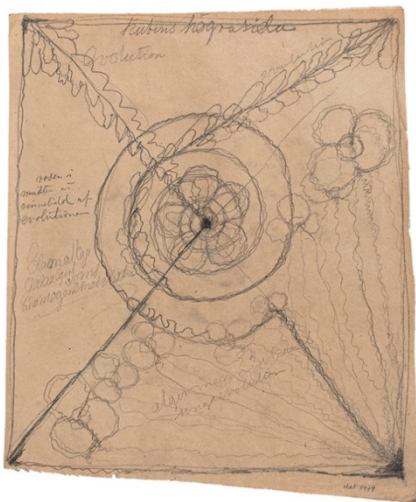


Figure 8. (left) Hilma af Klint, as a part of *The Five*, *untitled*, 1903, .Figure 9. (right) Hilma af Klint, *Primordial Chaos no. 16*, 1906-07



Figure 10: Jordan Geiger, *JORIYA Temple* (2063), Cotton, batting, thread, paint, ink, ceramic, 77" x 44" x 132"

I use automatic drawing, meditation, and mindful stitching in *JORIYA Temple* (2063) (fig. 10). This textile altarpiece takes inspiration from Hilma af Klint's *Altopiece No. 1* and traditional sources such as the *Ghent Altarpiece* of Jan Van Eyck. I want to communicate a space of spiritual practice— a place of vibrancy, openness, and inspiration.

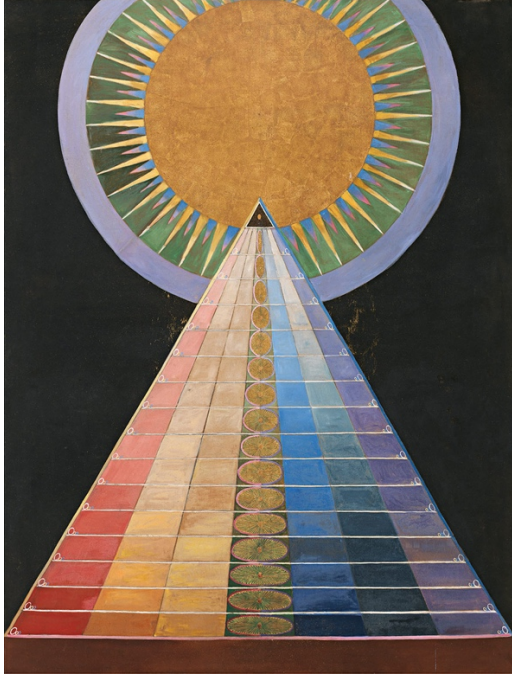


Figure 11. (top) Hilma af Klint *Altarpiece no. 1*, Figure 12. (bottom): Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*

My altarpiece is constructed of three elements – a large composition of many colorful layers, a central ink drawing resembling a calendar or grid structure of forms with a mandala-like shape at the bottom, and sections of white-on-white quilted drawings, the forms of which are taken from the central panel. The piece presents the workings of my creative mind in several forms – from subtle white to cacophonous color, dissonance and consonance in mark-making –

in service of a larger harmony. The stark black-on-white or the blankness of layered whites emit calmness and serenity, while in the upper section an explosion of vibrant colors interact, suggestive of the joy of the process of creation and in perceiving the interactions of form and color. As Agnes Martin wrote, “Joy is perception.”<sup>9</sup> I am delineating the contours of my awareness - the common factor among these different modes of expression.



Figure 13: Jordan Geiger, *JORIYA Temple* (2063) (detail)



Figure 14. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Deluge*, 1517-1518

*A Deluge* by Leonardo da Vinci is a work I return to again and again in my practice (fig. 14). DaVinci is depicting water by seemingly representing the individualized energetic patterns within a whole. To me, this is a spiritual notion, a way once again to put the interrelation between the relative (the waves and eddies of the water) to the absolute (the body of water) into form, to represent the unrepresentable. I often seek this relation in my works, a fullness which becomes a void.

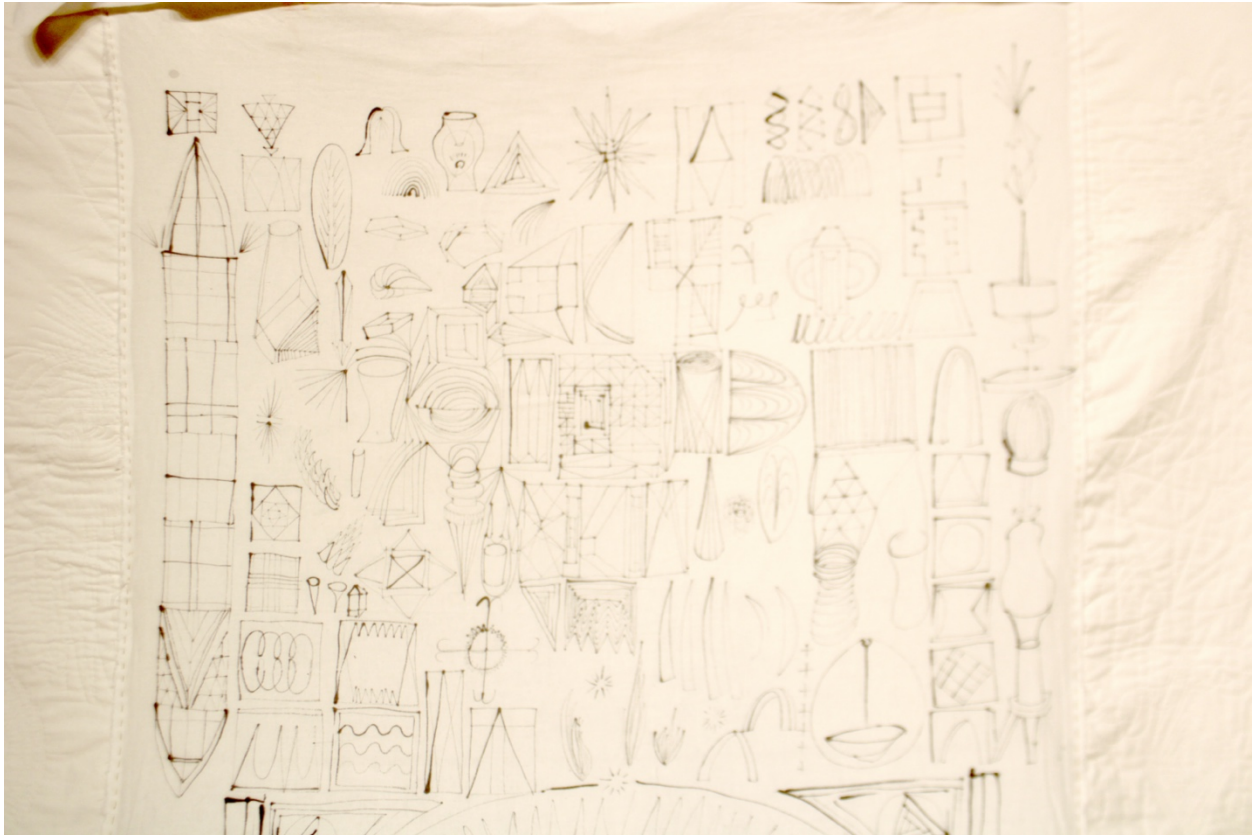


Figure 15: Jordan Geiger, *JORIYA Temple* (2063), detail – central panel



Figure 16 (left): Jordan Geiger, *JORIYA Temple* (2063), detail, meditation mat.

Figure 17 (right): Jordan Geiger, *JORIYA Temple* (2063), detail, temple robe

In front of the altarpiece of *JORIYA Temple* (2063) sits a meditation mat and next to it on a ceramic hanger hangs a temple robe (figs. 16 and 17). One could imagine putting on the robe and sitting on the mat and looking up in contemplation, dressed in the material of the divine image, grounded on pieces of contemplative reflection. The image on the altar is an open-ended idea – that connection to a higher order arises from the contemplative action itself, an intelligent loop of reflection and manifestation, embodied in the practice of an artist. In my work, I take the act of self-awareness and externalize it in the form of drawing and sewing. These forms I assemble and distill in ways meant to point out the essence of creative awareness itself.



## Ceremony/Offering

Just as the chameleon naturally and spontaneously changes color as the chemistry of response works in his body, so the yogin changes [their] *mudrā* (gesture, posture) and *mantra* (spoken word) as the *bodhicitta* of compassion floods [their] being at the inception of each new human situation in the sense fields<sup>10</sup>.

*The Flight of the Garuda*

I create gentle improvised situations for others to experience, ceremonies during which I interact directly with the space and those who experience my work. I put myself in the practice as a conduit through which ideas and forms may be passed. I consider the use of my body, voice, and intuition as an offering; a symbolic or literal act of giving, which is impressed upon the viewers consciousness and persists as memory in their participation. I lead participants through actions – visualizations, performances, and experiences.



Figure 18: Jordan Geiger, *The Mustard Seed*, crackers, beet puree, mustard seeds, mustard greens, sea salt, dill, Tibetan offering bowls, tea light, bell, table, antique quilt, broth (not pictured,) 2022

*The Mustard Seed*, my interactive food meditation, creates a space of contemplation in the participant through words and guided actions (fig. 18). I lead the experiencer through a meditative process of creating a small bite of food. Letters representing a loved one who has passed are painted on a mustard seed cracker in beet puree with a brush, then more letters are added, representing someone to whom the participant looks forward to seeing, then finally a series of symbolic ingredients are added and the layered cracker is eaten. The participant repeats after me, “I plant this seed so that it may grow,” and I ring a bell. This piece arose out of two stories involving mustard seeds, one a parable of Jesus, the other of the Buddha Shakyamuni.<sup>11</sup> Visualization is crucial to this piece – it relies on the ability for humans to project their consciousness into the past and future, and to create emotion from the contents of their inner vision. I use the materials I have at hand – a quilt, a table, a plastic bell, an electric votive candle to connect this embodied contemplation from ancient tradition to the present.

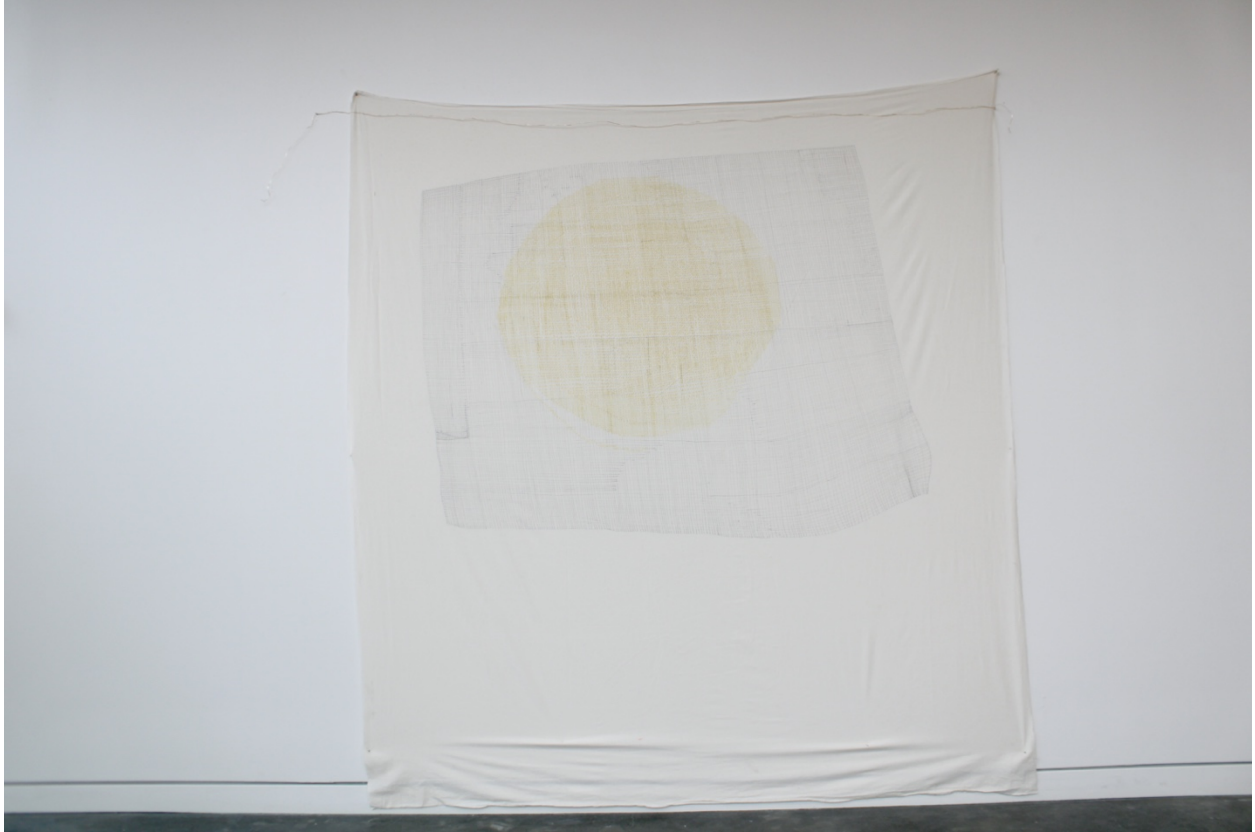


Figure 19: Jordan Geiger, *84/44 Years of Days*, unbleached plain weave cotton, marker, 87” x 79”, 2024

In my textile piece, *84/44 Years of Days*, I mark all the days I have lived on a grid - 44 years of small yellow X’s, marked in a calendar of 84 years of days (fig. 19). A chart of the time I have left, and of the possibilities afforded to me. A visual representation of my own impermanence radiating outward like a sun. This textile is installed in a corner, and I play my portable pump organ while sitting in front of it. I am accompanied by my friend and colleague, the artist Lynne Smith, who reads a poem I have written.<sup>12</sup> This poem is a question to myself – What will you do with the time you have left? Every line of the poem, titled *Ocean of Days*, has been painted on an individual fabric strip, which Lynne hands out to the crowd as she reads each

one. A collaborative ceremony is created, with all involved in its creation. A gift is offered to the participants, in the form of fabric strips, as well as in the gesture of group contemplation.



Figure 20: Jordan Geiger, *Ocean of Days*, performance with Lynne Smith at Des Lee Gallery, 2024

I use music – my pump organ and voice – for a variety of purposes in my work. In *Liv, Laf, Luv*, I recite a mantra while accompanying myself on a portable pump organ (fig. 21). I ring a bell, then repeat the phrase ‘live, laugh, love’ over and over at one pitch while improvising music around the mantra, which continues for 7 minutes before I ring the bell to conclude. In *I AM Mountain*, also bookended by my bell, I play a sparse organ improvisation while sitting under a pile of fabric, lit by a flickering, felted lightbulb (fig. 22). Both pieces complicate the form of a standard musical performance. In *Liv, Laf, Luv*, I emphatically embrace a cliché and

attempt to transform it through earnest repetition. With *I AM Mountain*, I put a mound of canvas and cotton between myself and the viewer to transform the interaction between audience and musician. In being experienced, these pieces function as transformational ceremonies where the expectations of performance are suspended for the sake of the creation of a spiritual space.



Figure 21 (left): Jordan Geiger, *Liv, Laf, Luv*, performance w/cotton, paint, quilt, Estey Chaplain's Organ, 2023

Figure 22 (right): Jordan Geiger, *I AM Mountain*, performance w/cotton, canvas, quilt, Estey Chaplain's Organ, lightbulb, wool, 2024



Figure 23. Alice Coltrane, *Turiya Sings*, cassette, 1982

Alice Coltrane was a master in the ceremonial transformation of musical form. Her 1980 cassette *Turiya Sings* features devotional songs in which she chants in Sanskrit while accompanying herself on electric organ and synthesizers (fig. 23).<sup>13</sup> The songs were created as hymns for group worship at the ashram she founded. As Anastasia Tsiolcas writes, “...this is music that – just as in both the traditional gospel and Hindu devotional styles – demands participation: The particulars of what or who you believe in (or don't) may not even matter. Either you're going to be using your voice to sing along, or your heart.”<sup>14</sup> Like Alice Coltrane, I seek to create my own musical and spiritual world in my work, and to invite others to take part. Inspired by Coltrane’s synthesis, my own background, research, and personality – the Midwest, late 20<sup>th</sup> century popular music, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, deadpan humor – combine to form a Buddhist Americana. In this mode I create ceremonial practices to respond to my time, place, and culture.

# Aspiration

*I dream Grandma Opal comes to me in the backyard, it's as if she's still alive. I show her my garden and she nods her approval.*

You must want joy for all not just for yourself. The exact same joy, want it whole-heartedly for all.<sup>15</sup>

Agnes Martin  
"What is Real"



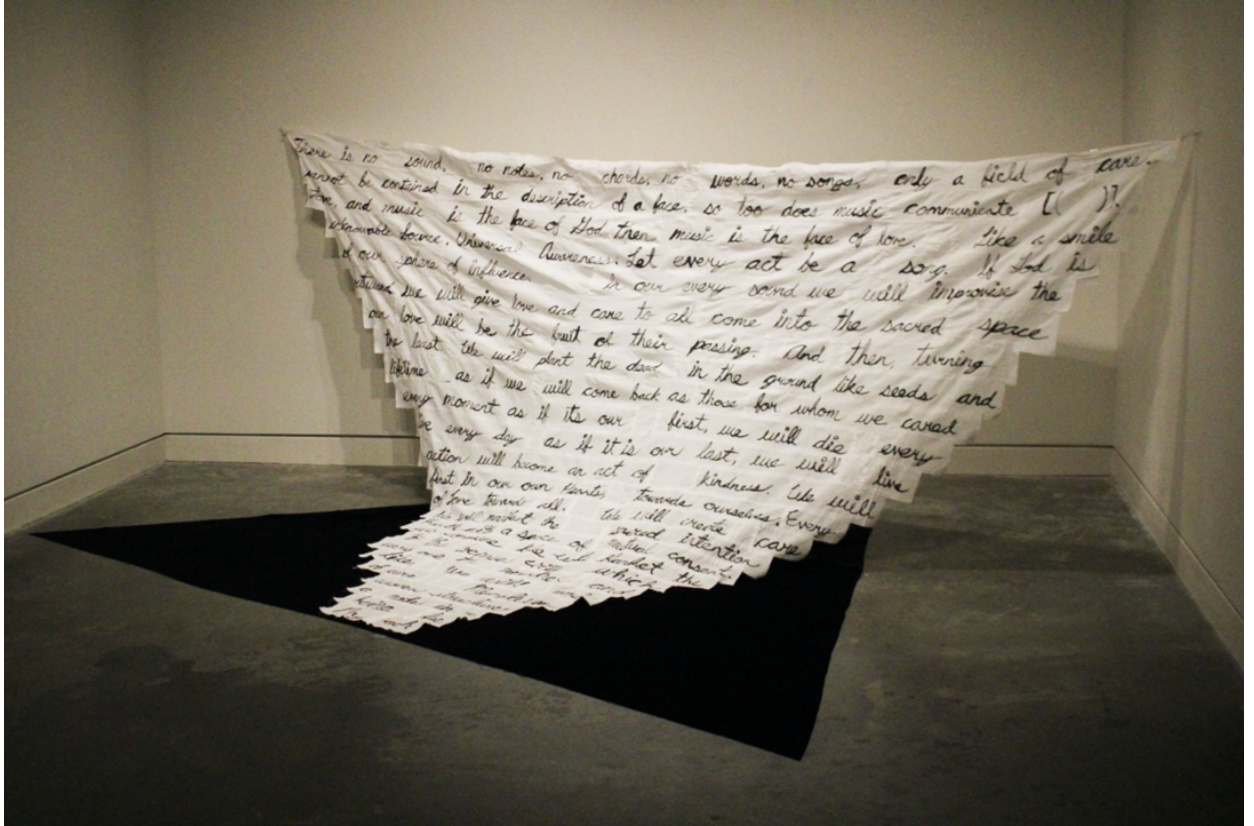


Figure 24: Jordan Geiger, *Prayer for A New Era*, Cotton, velvet, thread, ink, 48”x 96”x 84”, 2023

I follow the tradition of mystic artists who interpret the spiritual in highly individual ways and seek to influence the world positively with their work. Artists and musicians such as Hildegard von Bingen, William Blake, Joseph Beuys, and musician Washington Phillips all contribute to my practice lineage. I believe art can communicate the highest aspirations, even (or especially) through humble, everyday materials.

Buddhist practice begins with an aspiration prayer. The highest intentions are put into words. We remind ourselves, over and over, what it is we are trying to embody. For Buddhists, this is to dispel the miseries of the world for the sake of all sentient beings.

I made my own aspiration prayer, in the form of fabric strips painted with words.<sup>16</sup> In the installation *Prayer for A New Era*, I painted the words of my prayer with black ink on white

strips of cotton fabric, then stitched them together, with my mother's help, in the form of an upside-down pyramid (fig. 24). I loosely laid each layer on top of the last and hand stitched them, leaving the rough edges intact. I hung the textile on copper wire – a conductor of energy.

The prayer references textiles, music, and spiritual ideas of impermanence and compassion. My aspiration begins with attempting to grasp the tenuous, impermanent nature of our existence. The fear and insecurity engendered by the fact of death is transformed into compassion for others, who share in this universal condition. Compassion becomes the motivating factor behind one's actions. This idea of altruistic intent comes from the Buddhist tradition, and I have found it in action in hospice volunteering, which is a deep source from which this piece is drawn.

We will live every day as if it's our last, we will live every moment as if it's our first, we will die every lifetime as if we will come back as those for whom we cared the least.



Figure 25: Jordan Geiger, *The Buddha Maitreya*, cotton, batting, thread, ink, bench, 2024

While examining the idea of aspiration, I ask a question of my practice – What message do I want to put in the world? *The Buddha Maitreya* begins to answer this question. It is a white-on-white whole cloth quilt featuring an image of a piano – my grandmother’s piano. In front of

the piano sits the original bench, upon which are a stack of 108 fabric strips, each with a hand-drawn image and a phrase – The Buddha Maitreya is a community of Love. 108 is a sacred number in Buddhism, representing the wholeness of the universe. Viewers are encouraged to take a fabric strip from the pile on top of the bench until all are given.



Figure 26: Jordan Geiger, *The Buddha Maitreya* (detail)

The piece arises out of the idea of forming compassionate connection. Vietnamese Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh said, “The Buddha of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – Maitreya, the Buddha of love – may well be a community rather than an individual.”<sup>17</sup> I further connect the piece to the Buddhist tradition by referencing Sengai Gibon’s *The Universe* (fig. 27). Sengai’s circle, triangle, and square become three portals – a quilt pattern, a mountain-like emanation, a toroidal tubelike shape.

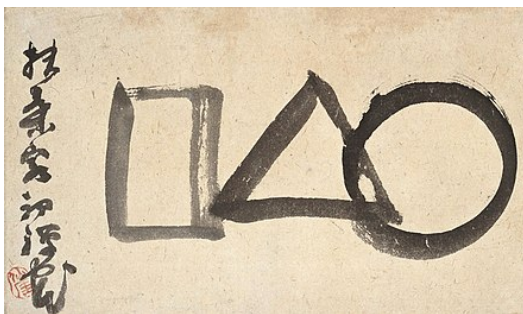


Figure 27. Sengai Gibon, *The Universe*, Ink on paper, 1800

The piano image arises out of the field of white thread on white. *The Buddha Maitreya* looks nearly blank from more than 10 feet away. I hope to draw the viewer towards it, encouraging the exploration and mindful looking which is necessary for the image of the piano to arise. The piano presents a mandala-like form, an apparition of sorts. Not a ghost exactly, but more like a memory, or something from a dream – existing outside time and only partially seen— through an image which draws the viewer into it like a whispering voice. For me, the stitched image of the piano coming into focus as one gets closer to the work is a metaphor for an idea arising in mind – the magic of a form coming into being. When I sit at the keys of a piano, I sit facing myself and wait for the music to arise. It is an experience akin to facing a blank page, pen in hand.



Fig. 28: Jordan Geiger, *The Buddha Maitreya* (detail)

Through my work *The Buddha Maitreya*, I bring a wide-ranging aspiration into form – the hope for a community of compassion to arise from which we may respond to the oncoming crises of our world. By connecting this lofty idea to my personal life and practice – honoring my grandmother, offering a humble gift, asking one to look closely – I humbly suggest a way forward. I hope to fortify compassionate intent in those who experience my work, to offer a gift to carry the idea into their daily life, and to offer a path towards the inner life which has provided such meaning in my own experience.

# Conclusion

Buddhism appeals to people today because it places less emphasis on belief and more on practice. It entails doing something - transforming yourself- through a range of methods and exercises.<sup>18</sup>

Stephen Batchelor  
“Seeing the Light: Photography as Buddhist Practice”

I find myself asking the inverse of my original question: How does art practice become a spiritual practice? Through my work in textiles, drawing, installation, and performance, I have explored the boundaries between contemplation and manifestation, spiritual faith and artistic concept, and care for self and for other. I seek to dissolve these boundaries. I offer an evolving exploration of creativity as spiritual practice itself, where all the world is my material to transform into tools for spiritual liberation.

My practice serves as a laboratory and vessel for exploring and communicating spiritual practices. I explore how ancient spiritual traditions may be interpreted and synthesized with modern sensibilities. I seek the points of coherence between the figure of the mystic or yogi and that of the artist. Both figures seek inspiration in their inner life, and to transmit what they find outward in their actions. A mystic is a person who connects themselves with the absolute, and in doing so, seeks to make the world a better place. I am not a spiritual teacher; I am a spiritual learner. I simply seek to share.

Spiritual practice, art practice, and caregiving are responses to my situation in the world. I know that I am going to die, and everyone I love is going to die. This is the motivator for spiritual practice. Images arise in the space of mind – a shape, an energy, a particular way of laying paint on fabric or stitching a line. From these images come works of art. I recognize people suffering – from sickness, grief, death, anxiety. Recognition is turned into action. I cannot take away suffering from the world, just as I cannot live forever. Nor can I manifest an idea into the world directly from my mind. However, I can attempt to bridge the gap between death and life, ideation and realization, empathy and indifference. Perhaps all attempts of this nature will inevitably fail. In the trying, in walking the middle path, I find life, communication, and care.



To me, spiritual practice moves from the inward to the outward and back in cycles. Contemplation in one's mind while on the meditation cushion is brought out into the daily sphere of interacting with the world, then those observed results are brought back inside, back home, for further clarification. My art practice works this way. I lead viewers through a variety of experiences by putting them in my place – as spectator, traveler, caregiver, and philosopher – as a human on a spiritual journey. Then I offer myself up as conduit, facilitator, and initiator, to communicate some of what I have found on my journey. Though it may be experienced, it may not be named.

# Appendix 1

## *Humans Are Supposed to Be Gardeners*

Brittney:

*You know, those are the actions that help process emotions. Because we are... I feel like humans are supposed to be gardeners, like everything else. And that's why I think it's so helpful with grief, because it's like, you still have a purpose, you're still here, to do something, to make... to create more life, and participate in that process and cycle. And then once you compost things, it's like coming to terms with death and dying and we are all compost. We all came from this compost and we are all going back to this compost... That's why I would just prefer to be buried with a basket weave, something cool, but something very compostable. The mushroom suit is a great idea too.*

Jordan:

*Yeah. Just wrap me up in a big ol' quilt.*

Brittney:

*I mean, yeah, a quilt would be beautiful. Especially if you imparted seeds and stuff into the cotton, or just left the seeds in the cotton batting, ya know?*

Jordan:

*Yeah.*

Brittney:

*But I guess you'd have to be pretty shallow. It would be like a hundred years later or something when the soil got eroded. Seeds can germinate after that long, you know. Poppies do.*

## Appendix 2

### *The Mustard Seed*

The disciples said to Jesus: Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like. He said to them: It is like a grain of mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds; but when it falls on tilled ground, it puts forth a great branch and becomes shelter for the birds of heaven.

- *The Gospel of Thomas*, saying 20<sup>19</sup>

A woman came to the Buddha asking him for medicine to heal her child who had died. He told her to go to the village and collect a mustard seed from a household in which there had never been a death.

All of her neighbors were willing to give her mustard seeds, but they all told her that their households had been touched by death. They told her, “The living are few, but the dead are many.”

- *Dhammapada*, verse 114<sup>20</sup>

## Appendix 3

### *Ocean of Days*

#### Ocean of Days

How will you cross this immense ocean of days?  
This most precious journey  
Upon which you have embarked.  
How will you open yourself to this world most immense?  
To what will you attend?  
What will you intend?  
What seeds will you plant in this season  
To harvest in another season  
And feed to the soil another season hence?  
Another day, another day.  
From where do these images appear?  
Where do they go when they are gone?  
Can you see the rainbows before the storm?  
Are we moving forward, or only changing states?  
What offering will you lay at the foot of the world?  
This moment has always existed.  
There is only one moment, you are experiencing it now.  
Look! We are in a new place than we were only moments ago.  
A new world, reborn again and again.

Written with Sarah Moon

## Appendix 4

### *Prayer for A New Era*

May each being be a node in a woven structure of care.  
Mycelium-like we will pass care one to another and to the species with which we commune.  
We will blanket the Earth with a space of mutual consent.  
We will manifest the sacred intention of love towards all.  
We will create care first in our own hearts, towards ourselves.  
Every action will become an act of kindness.  
We will live every day as if it's our last, we will live every moment as if it's our first, we will die every lifetime as if we will come back as those for whom we cared the least.  
We will plant the dead in the ground like seeds and let our love be the fruit of their passing.  
And then, turning outward we will send love and care to all come into the sacred space of our sphere of influence.  
In our every sound we will improvise the unknowable Source, Universal Awareness.  
Let every act be a song!  
If music is the face of God, and God is Love, then music is the face of Love.  
Like a smile cannot be contained in a description of a face, so too does music communicate [( )]  
\*that which cannot be said\*.  
There is no sound, no notes, no chords, no songs, only a field of care.

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3. Agnes Martin, *White Flower II*, 72" x 72", Nelson-Atkins Museum, 1985
4. *Triangle Meditation*, paper, ink, antique quilt, 42" x 62" (drawing), 22" x 24" (quilt)
5. *Triangle Meditation* (detail)
6. Nakahara Nantembo, *Staff*, ink on paper, mounted on fabric scroll 53 15/16" x 12 13/16", Mildred Lane Kemper Museum, no date
7. *Quilted Drawing*, cotton fabric, cotton batting, thread, 30" x 22", 2022
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19. *84/44 Years of Days*, unbleached plain weave cotton, marker, 87" x 79" 2024
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21. *Liv, Laf, Luv*, performance w/cotton, paint, quilt, Estey Chaplain's Organ, 2023
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# Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Chodron, Pema, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice For Difficult Times*, Boston, Shambhala, 2002, p. 42

<sup>2</sup> I took refuge as a Buddhist with Lama Lena (Tibetan name Yeshe Kaytup – ‘wisdom can speak’) in 2020. She gave me the Tibetan name Yeshe Dawa, which means ‘wisdom moon.’

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1, *Humans Are Supposed To Be Gardeners*

<sup>4</sup> Baas, Jacquelynn & Jacob, Mary Jane, ed., *Buddha Mind In Contemporary Art*, University of California Press, 2004, p.20

<sup>5</sup> Martin, Agnes, *Writings = Schriften*, Ostfildern : Cantz Verlag, , 1991, p. 96

<sup>6</sup> Om, Ah, and Hung are Tibetan seed-syllables which represent the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha, as well as dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya – the three levels of reality encompassing the Universe. They also represent the Three Jewels of Buddhism – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I learned this meditation from the book *Luminous Clarity* by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche.

<sup>7</sup> Judging from the embroidery on its surface, my crazy quilt was made by three members of a family named Cox. It was purchased in the early 2000’s by a friend at a Goodwill store in Bastrop, Texas and gifted to me in 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Nantembo’s name literally means Nanten staff. Nanten is a decorative shrub, bo means staff. The story goes that Nantembo used a branch of a Nanten bush as a walking stick and to strike students, which is a tradition in Zen.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, Agnes, *Writings = Schriften*, Ostfildern : Cantz Verlag, , 1991, p. 96

<sup>10</sup> Dowman, Keith, *The Flight of the Garuda: The Dzogchen Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 1994, p. 20

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 2, *The Mustard Seed*

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 3, *Ocean of Days*

<sup>13</sup> My self-given spiritual name is Joriya, a combination of Jordan and Turiya, in honor of Alice Coltrane, who contributed to my spiritual awakening through her music. Joriya represents the middle place between Universal Awareness, Turiya, and my historically-conditioned identity, Jordan.

<sup>14</sup> Tsioulcos, Anastasia, “Review: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda,” NPR Music, April 27, 2017

<sup>15</sup> Martin, Agnes, *Writings = Schriften*, Ostfildern : Cantz Verlag, , 1991, p. 96

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 4, *Prayer For A New Era*

<sup>17</sup> Nhat Hanh, Thich, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, Broadway Books, NY, 1999

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<sup>18</sup> Baas, Jacquelynn, “Nowhere From Here” in *Buddha Mind In Contemporary Art*, Baas, Jacquelynn & Jacob, Mary Jane, ed., University of California Press, 2004, p.24

<sup>19</sup> *The Gospel According to Thomas*, trans. André Gagné, Brepols Publishers, 2019

<sup>20</sup> *Wisdom of the Buddha, The Unabridged Dhammapada*, trans. Müller, F. Max, Dover Publications Inc., 2000. My interpretation of Kisogotami Vatthu, Dhammapada verse 114.