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Jacob Muldowney

Washington University in St. Louis, jacobmuldowney@gmail.com

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Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Graduate School of Art
Washington University in St. Louis

On Thresholds

By
Jacob Muldowney

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of
Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Thesis Advisor:
Buzz Spector

Primary Advisors:
Michael Byron
Jamie Adams

Graduate Committee:
Adrian Cox
Lyndon Barrois, Jr.

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Abstract

Thresholds, as a sign for that which is transitional, are ripe with metaphorical potential. One threshold that plays a major role in my work is the veil. The veil, as an object, provides more of a visual than a bodily obstruction. Because of this, some of the most potent metaphors surrounding the veil have to do with the threshold of human perception. By utilizing various veiling techniques, my work addresses the limitation of perception from multiple angles. Ultimately, encountering the boundary line of one's perceptual capabilities gives insight into the possibility of the simultaneous existence of things both visible and unseen. The paradox inherent in such moments forms the basis of my artistic investigation.

The Allure of the Liminal

The image of the threshold is intriguing in its potential for expressing that which is liminal, or at the verge of transition. While thresholds exist as literal architectural devices, the term threshold can be used to describe a host of different liminal experiences. Yet while the form of the symbol may remain consistent, its meaning has been appropriated and applied to multifarious scenarios.

Consider, for example, the origin of the word liminal: “In physiology and psychology, limen is a threshold between psychological and physical experience ... Indeed, the body itself can act as a threshold between the self and the material world.”¹ Thus the body becomes a threshold as the point of transition between our interior selves and the exterior world.

In that same vein, the eye is often compared to a threshold:

The eye as the window of a person’s psyche onto the exterior world was one of Durer’s basic interests in his portraits [hence, his formula of depicting a reflected window in the eye (Fig. 1)] ... The assumption is tempting that Durer got the idea for doing the eyes of his figures this way from this classical topos; that in painting the window reflection in a person’s eye Durer visualized the idea of the eye as a window of the soul.²

This quote not only supports the idea that the physical senses—as mediated by the eye—are a threshold to the exterior world, but it also proposes that the reverse is true, suggesting that the eye, “as a window of the soul,” is the threshold whereby one can catch a glimpse into another person’s psyche. It is also telling, in this instance, to note the use of the term “window,” which represents another form of architectural threshold.

I Shew You a Mystery³

Perhaps the most consistent reason for use of the image of the threshold is its aura of mystery. “For artists ... the ambiguity of the door ... must have been especially appealing.”⁴ The threshold image comes laden with aesthetic qualities. Because it represents a point of transition, the threshold is charged with a sense of potentiality. Practically all you need to do to construct a mysterious picture is somehow incorporate the image of a partially opened door into it. Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916) crafted a successful career largely by following that blueprint (Fig. 2). Aside from its aesthetic qualities, however, threshold imagery has long held a metaphorical connection to the great mysteries of life, or rather the possibility of life after death. As it so happens, “The door is an ancient symbol of death, understood as a passageway from this world to the next, and it has had this function in art since time immemorial.”⁵

The research and discovery that has been expended in an effort to solve such mysteries is a tribute to their power of fascination, and as human endeavor has delved deeper and deeper into the mysteries of life, it has ultimately uncovered, as its greatest pearl of wisdom, “an aporia in human reason, expressing the boundary of our conceptual powers.”⁶ Again, the idea of a threshold is inferred, this time relating to human understanding. While the current threshold of human understanding may yet be extended, there will remain an infinite series of doors still to be passed through.

This realization of a limitation of perceptual powers has brought about two basic responses. One is an experience of the sublime. “Einstein knew that there are underlying patterns in the Universe that exist independent of humans, and that we stand before them, awaiting discovery and understanding of a great hidden mystery. To him, anyone who

cannot experience that mystery can no longer feel wonder and amazement.”⁷ The other response to a realization of our insignificance and our ignorance of an afterlife is to experience an existential crisis: a crushing sense of horror. As the poet A. E. Housman (1859-1936) wrote:

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

Could man be drunk for ever with liquor, love or fights,
Lief should I rouse at morning and lief lie down of nights.
But men at whiles are sober and think by fits and starts
And if they think, they fasten their hands upon their hearts.⁸

Sooner or later everyone comes to an awareness of his or her impending demise. Kenneth Lang observes that the majority of our lives are spent “with blurred vision and cloudy mind, viewing the world through the filter of our selfish interests and the blinkers of everyday habit. There are computers, televisions, and the random perturbations of life that might dull our minds and keep us from thinking.”⁹ But when we do think! “Suddenly we wake up and become aware ... the dull mask of daily life shatters like ice.”¹⁰ And when we wake up we think of the hereafter. Whether these mysteries inspire us to awe or fill us with terror, we eventually come to the same question:

Is this all there is? This is what everybody wants to know, the only question that bothers us. If you can answer that definitely, then our troubles are over; there is nothing left to worry about ... It’s the answer to that question that satisfies us, and everything else we can forget about.¹¹

Without answers to these questions, existential angst can make it difficult to operate. Since intellectual inquiry has not yet provided any satisfactory answers, religion maintains its age-old relevance.

As religion deals largely in the currency of these types of questions, one form of threshold that particularly interests me is the veil. Perhaps better than any other type of threshold, the veil captures the essence of all of the questions above.

Before the Veil¹²

In contemporary society, the fabric of which veils are made is often assumed to be gauzy or transparent in quality. Depending on the intended function for which a veil is created, however, the fabric may be more or less opaque. The *paroketh*, the curtain separating the Holy from the Holy of Holies in the Hebrew temples and tabernacle, was not transparent. Indeed, the veil of the Temple of Herod was purported to be some four inches thick.¹³

All veils, regardless of relative transparency or opacity, form some degree of barrier between the viewer and that which is veiled. Even a diaphanous cloth distorts or blurs, while an opaque cloth four inches thick, hides entirely. In the particular case of the *paroketh*, the need for this visual barrier to be absolute was imperative both to its practical function and also to its metaphorical significance as a division between celestial and terrestrial spheres. Furthermore, the inclusion of imagery on the surface of the veil—“he made the veil of blue, and purple, and crimson, and fine linen, and wrought cherubims thereon”¹⁴—served as further psychological fortification of the opacity of the veil. Although the veil of the temple can ostensibly be conceived of as being a doorway

or passage between spaces, the inclusion of imagery on the surface of the veil simultaneously renders it as a picture and a wall. The perception of a piece of fabric as a picture tends to discourage our identification of it as permeable, and lends a psychological barrier to what was already a visual barrier; after all, we don't often attempt to walk into paintings.

We find an interesting correlation to this pictorial aspect of the *paroketh* veil in the practice, prevalent in Europe during the 16th century, of putting curtains or shutters in front of altarpieces. Certainly, on a practical level, these curtains and shutters “were supposed to protect the painting from dust, light, and moisture,” but the presence of painted imagery on many of the protective coverings themselves, much like the cherubim on the *paroketh*, alludes to a more metaphorical function. Indeed, “their choice of subject-matter also reveals their liturgical use,”¹⁵ rather than their mere decorative purpose. We find the connection between these altar covers and the veil of the Hebrew temple corroborated in that the altarpiece curtains were intended to “symbolize the veil hung between the columns of Solomon’s temple ... to separate the sanctuary ... [of] ... the Ark of the Covenant ... from the rest of the sacred enclosure.”¹⁶

With this connection established, we can begin to ascertain the metaphorical significance of the veil. According to Hugh Nibley (1910-2005), ancient temples, including the Hebrew temple, were, intended to be “a laboratory for demonstrating ... principles by use of figures and symbols, which convey to finite minds things beyond their immediate experience.”¹⁷ We can conclude that, aside from its purposes in an architectural sense, the veil was intended as a symbol for something larger than itself as a material entity. As the demarcating apparatus between “the sanctuary ... [of] ... the Ark

of the Covenant” and “the rest of the sacred enclosure,” we can assuredly deduce that the veil was intended not only as a literal threshold, separating humankind from the presence of God, “represent[ing] man’s place in the cosmos,”¹⁸ but also as a symbol of that threshold between celestial and terrestrial modes of being, the former being a veil over the eye, the latter being a veil over the mind.

A first-hand account of how altarpiece veils were incorporated into the Catholic liturgy proves enlightening: “When, at the conclusion of the Gospel reading is said: ‘but, Jesus hid himself and left the temple,’ the veil prepared on top of the altar table is pulled up ... on ropes that pass from grooves fixed on high and thereby this veil covers up all the painted images.”¹⁹ The altarpiece coverings were employed as a kind of dramatic device, something to illustrate and lend interest to the narrative of the liturgy. Far from being simply a piece of dramatic flair, however, the veiling also lent additional symbolic meaning to the worship service. This gesture employed in the worship service sheds interesting light on the Catholic interpretation of the meaning of the veil of the Hebrew temple. “The veil alluded to the darkness that overshadowed the human mind before Christ’s ... sacrifice ... However, just as the veil of Jerusalem’s temple was torn asunder at the moment Jesus died, so were the altar hangings lowered and reopened on Holy Saturday to manifest God’s Word.”²⁰

Certain apocryphal writings offer further insight into the concept of a veiling influence over the mind:

Adam, you recall, had lost memory of his former existence. “I have caused a sleep to come over Adam,” says the Abbatôn (a significant early writing of the apostles), “and a forgetting.” Adam’s sleep was the putting of a veil between him and his former knowledge. It enveloped him like a garment, and, while his

memory was shut off by it, his epinoia (intelligence) retained its force. He remained smart, but he forgot everything.²¹

Most people are used to considering threshold imagery as symbolic of the passing into an afterlife, but this intriguing passage suggests birth into this world as another form of threshold.

Barbara Baert (b. 1967) refers to “The role of the veil in the area between real presence and imagined, or represented, reality.”²² What this means becomes clear when we recall that the altarpiece veils had imagery on them, thereby transforming them into paintings for the purpose of concealing other paintings. As mentioned above, the normal everyday situation of these altarpieces was to be concealed behind their respective veils or covers. It was only on Holy Days or Feasts, such as Holy Saturday, that the curtains were raised to mark the importance of the day. Thus, the faithful lay worshipper of the time period would be more accustomed to seeing the paintings on the veils than the altarpiece paintings themselves. The coverings would have been what they considered normal, whereas the dramatic veiling and unveiling of the altarpieces on Holy Days would have taken on a supernatural air. Further, connecting the altarpiece veils to the mundane or earthly, the type of imagery generally depicted on altarpieces was of a more sacred character than that which was depicted on their coverings. For instance, altarpieces would depict scenes from the life of Christ, whereas their covers might depict “images of the saints to whom they were dedicated.”²³

A related trope observed in another form of painted veil, also from the Roman Catholic tradition, is the practice of painting representations of fabric on the frontals of the altar. The result is a *representation* of fabric or a veil on the surface of an *actual* veil.

“These frontals imitate textiles, often costly brocades. Some of them even show ... angels pulling the painted textiles aside, thus presenting an imagery that would have rhymed even more with the real curtains of the altarpieces.”²⁴ This practice is interesting on a self-referential level, but it also has metaphorical significance. Creating a confusion between real and representation calls into question the assumption that, because what can be physically observed seems to be most real, what cannot be seen must therefore be non-existent or less real. Thus, in the previous case of the altarpiece covers, their imagery can be seen as representing profane perception. It is only an act of revelation that shows the cover to be nothing more than a façade. As William Blake (1757-1827) put it, “If the doors to perception were cleansed, then everything would appear to man as it is— infinite.”²⁵

Through a Glass, Darkly²⁶

Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them.

—*Gen. 15:5, King James Version*

The human eye is subject to a host of discrepancies and shortcomings. Aside from physiological anomalies that produce errors in sight, such as near-and far-sightedness, aphakia, astigmatism, cataracts, and scotomata there is infinitude of ambient information floating around in the very air we breath and that we are not able to perceive with the naked eye. This includes not only microorganisms, but also certain wavelengths of light and even “electromagnetic energy vibrations.”²⁷ Bill Viola (b. 1951) points out that, ‘The spectrum of ... [these] ... vibrations that make up the universe at large far exceeds the narrow band-width, or “window” open to us through our sensory receptors.’²⁸ Clearly, there is much we do not, and cannot, see.

Viola posits a key component to beginning to understand our limitations, and thereby beginning to conceive of what is outside of those limitations.

As philosophers through the ages have stated, the human senses can ... be considered “limiters” to the total amount of energy bombarding our beings, preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the tremendous volume of information existing at each and every instant. *Imagination is our key to the doorway of perception* [emphasis added].²⁹

In referring to the human mind as the key to overcoming the physical limitations of perception, Viola also calls attention to a further limitation of the human perceptual faculties: the mind itself. The very fact that the mind requires “limiters” to filter out excessive information implies that there is a certain “volume of information” that would

be excessive. It follows that, were the human mind to become overstimulated with information it would become “overwhelmed.” Thus, as powerful as the imagination is, perhaps more powerful than physical perception, it is ultimately limited as well.

Infinity and Beyond

We begin to see this when we recognize that the infinitude of information present in the universe exists not only at the micro, but also at the macro level. Consequently, “The unseen Cosmos is something like the Japanese rock garden ... [that] ... consists of 15 rocks set on raked sand, but only 14 are visible at a time.”³⁰ This image is a neat illustration of our inability to grasp all information, that “There is always something that remains unseen, something to know more about ... [that] ... is either hidden, or viewed dimly from restricted angles or at a distance.”³¹ Nevertheless, the ratio of seen to unseen rocks, the idea that at most 14 of 15 stones can be seen at any given moment, seems an overly optimistic estimation of the amount of information that humanity has acquired or comprehended regarding the Universe. The vastness of what we do not know, what we cannot see, is inconceivable. In order to even approach a sense of the enormity of our ignorance, of our infinitesimal smallness in relationship to everything else, we are required to speak in analogies, such as the Japanese rock garden. Another such analogy is the visual artistic trope of linear perspective.

According to some scholars, the converging of orthogonals to a vanishing point on a horizon line was initially intended as a symbol of infinity:

The viewpoint and vanishing point do not in fact designate points, but a line on which they both lie. This line connects the eye of the subject with infinity, which, in a painting, the eye will never comprehend, or for that matter perceive.

Although infinity's sign is located on the horizon in the picture, its meaning must rather be found behind it. Similarly, the line of vision does not end in the viewer's eyes, but stretches out beyond his or her head, just as the concept of infinity goes beyond one's comprehension. There is not one infinity, as geometry teaches us, but two: the infinitely big and the infinitely small.³²

Perspective can only achieve a sense of infinity by implying something beyond perception. The thing that linear perspective actually depicts is that which is as far as the eye can see: everything to the horizon line, everything up to the vanishing point on the horizon line, which indicates the point where the eye is no longer able to perceive the converging lines. This understanding of infinity aligns neatly with the ancient Egyptian “word for everything [which] is *ntt fwtt*: everything I know and everything I don't know.”³³ It is only as the viewer sees for a very long way—even to the horizon line—and then realizes that the convergence he is witnessing must infinitely continue to converge beyond what he is capable of perceiving, that the crushing sense of infinity begins to set in. As awesome as is the idea that the distance between viewer and horizon is very short in comparison to infinity, the analogy nevertheless only begins to promote the *sense* of infinity. Realizing that infinity is something very big is one thing; comprehending infinity in its entirety is another thing altogether. There is no way the human mind, a finite organ, can comprehend infinity.

Scientific Progress Goes “Boink”³⁴

Returning to things of a measurable nature, it is worth pointing out that scientific inquiry has done a great deal towards extending the boundaries of accumulated human knowledge. Through the lenses of the microscope and telescope, our vision has literally been extended so that we now understand much more about the nature of

microorganisms, as well as the vastness of cosmic space. Advances in technology have made it possible to measure those materials that cannot be observed with the unaided eye. However, just as the above example of the horizon line and vanishing point indicates that it is only when a viewer sees for a very long way that they truly begin to recognize how small is their field of vision in comparison to infinity, so scientific progress increasingly demonstrates how little we know. The more we know, the more we realize how little we know.

Furthermore, technological advances notwithstanding, Rosalind Krauss (b. 1941) notes the insuperable difference between knowledge garnered through technological quantification and that gained strictly through the physical senses in her comments on the difference between real and perceived color:

For us, as human perceivers, there is a wide gulf between "real" color and "seen" color. We may be able to measure the first; but we can only experience the second. And this is because ... color is always involved in interaction ... Even if we are only looking at a single color ... the retinal excitation of the afterimage will superimpose on the first chromatic stimulus that of a second, which is its complementary.³⁵

Ironically, because scientific instruments allow us to detect and measure things beyond the scope of the physical senses, it takes a leap of faith to trust the so-called empirical information that such instruments communicate. Moreover—assuming that such information is accurate—the supposition that if something is measurable it is therefore conceivable is a fallacy. “Could there be something like a singularity? Some condition or state hereafter ... Which could be real, but we just don’t conceive it? That’s what black holes and quasar stars are ... real, yet nobody can describe them, or even conceive of

what they are like. Still they are there, *they are measurable*” [emphasis added].³⁶ Even things that are measurable can remain beyond the scope of human comprehension.

Human perception is also always limited by human experience. Kenneth Lang explains it this way: “Everything we see is molded, shaped and constrained by our education, background, and past experience. They determine our individual perception ... and it isn’t all heredity. Genes count, but differently in different environments.”³⁷ If awareness is so influenced by a person’s education, experience, or upbringing, then it can safely be assumed that, as each individual is unique, not only in their genetic makeup but also in their experiential makeup, everyone sees things differently and notices different things. Even among the things we can see, we inevitably fail to notice even a fraction of it all.

Background and experience not only influence what we notice, but also how we interpret what we notice. This concept is one of the great difficulties with the scientific method. It can never be conclusive. Not only are we incapable of gathering all information the Universe generates, but even within the realm of data that has been gathered and codified, different scientists are able to come to vastly different interpretations of the data based on their own unique perception of things. Consequently, “you don’t have to believe in the laws of Newton anymore. For 300 years, they were absolute gospel, which no scientist would dare question ... today they are just one of a number of competing systems. They are not the only possible explanation of how gravity works. Einstein made Newton’s system just one among several competing systems.”³⁸

We learn of this contingency of perception in the allegory of Plato’s cave. Plato sets the scene for his allegory in this manner:

Picture men dwelling in a ... subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which the show the puppets ... See also ... men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent.³⁹

As a result of their imprisonment, all that these prisoners could see of the world outside of their confines was derived from the shadows cast on the cavern wall by the people traversing the pathway between the prisoners and the fire, and the echoes of the voices of said passers-by filtering down into the cave. In short, all that they “knew” of the world was based off of secondary experience. “In every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows,” concludes Socrates.⁴⁰ Given the proposed circumstances, it hardly seems possible that they could come to any other conclusion themselves. And even if the prisoners did suspect the immateriality of the shadows they saw, it hardly seems likely that they would be able to imagine “reality” with any sort of accuracy, given their limited scope of experience.

Shigeo Fukuda (1932-2009) expands on similar ideas in a series of shadow sculptures. *Lunch With a Helmut On* (Fig. 3), ostensibly a sculpture comprised of hundreds of forks, knives and spoons welded together, casts a remarkably true shadow of a motorcycle when a spotlight is shining on it from a very specific angle. In the vein of the allegory of Plato’s cave, no one, judging solely from the shape of the shadow of the piece, could accurately predict the nature of the object casting the shadow. The inability

to accurately predict this object's true nature based on its shadow would surely apply to both those viewers who had never seen a motorcycle before, as well as to those who had. Even when granted experience outside of the cave, we can still be fooled by shadows. Indeed, given that, for many of us, our previous experiences have included seeing a motorcycle, it's likely, based on our preconception of the nature of shadows, that we would be more easily fooled by the shadow than a person who had never seen such a vehicle in their life.

The Limitations of Painting: a Metaphor

Among the blind a one-eyed man is king.

—A. E. Housman

The limitations of representational painting are in many ways the limitations of human perception. Regardless of a practitioner's technical skill in believably transcribing the act of seeing, there is no possibility of their ever arriving at an exact replica of the seen world through the medium of paint. It is for this reason that representation is such an apt metaphor for the limitations of human perception.

While not all representational painting is intended to be persuasively illusionistic, *trompe l'œil* painting is one instance where the achievement of a convincing illusion is of paramount concern to the painter. The phrase *trompe l'œil* means literally to “fool” or “deceive” the eye.

The aim of *trompe l'œil* ... is primarily to puzzle and to mystify... This disquiet is brought about by a conflict of messages conveyed to the brain by the eye. The appearance of reality is so skilfully feigned by the painter that although the brain knows that what the eye is seeing is not three-dimensional and solid but only a

thin, artfully worked veil of paint ... [on] ... canvas there yet remains a certain degree of uncertainty sufficient to warrant a closer examination.”⁴¹

Some examples of *trompe l'œil* painting are so complete in their illusion that, removed from the context of painting, they are mistaken as the objects they represent. One story goes that a man, seeing what he believed to be a drawing in red chalk tacked onto an easel, discovered, upon attempting to pick the drawing up, that the whole setup was a painting. “I moistened my handkerchief and rubbed it over the drawing for I could not believe that it was not executed in crayon.”⁴²

As an interesting sidebar, one common use of *trompe l'œil* in 17th century European painting was to mimic “a curtain half drawn across a painting,” hanging from a (painted) curtain rod apparently not a part of the painting itself⁴³ (Fig. 4). This illusion evidently refers to the common practice of putting a protective “curtain over a particularly prized canvas as a protection against the smoke ... and presumably the attentions of flies and bluebottles,”⁴⁴ which strongly associates the use of *trompe l'œil* with our earlier discussion of altarpiece coverings.

Nevertheless, as stated above, no matter how painstaking a painter’s approach, there will always be more visual information in real life than can possibly be recorded in a painting. Zoom in close enough and the illusion of the painting will always eventually fall apart. This reality mandates that a painting, no matter how detailed and precise, will always remain a simplification—an abstraction—of reality. The two-dimensional nature of paintings also serves as a barrier to a painting’s accuracy in imitation. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) lamented this limitation, saying:

Painters often fall into despair ... when they see that their paintings lack the roundness [i.e. the sense of three dimensional form] and the liveliness which we find in objects seen in the mirror ... but it is impossible for a painting to look as rounded as a mirror image ... except if you look at both with one eye only.⁴⁵

It is interesting that da Vinci notes the flattening influence of looking at things with one eye closed. Looking at objects in space via binocular sight affords viewers a sense of their relationship in space to the objects being viewed. This sense cannot be fully achieved in a two-dimensional format because the painted picture, as a static representation, does not shift according to viewpoint. Because of this, the triangulating effect of binocular vision cannot but recognize the flatness of the picture plane. This establishes the viewer's relationship in space to the object *of* the painting, but not the objects *in* the painting, hence, a *trompe l'œil* painting can fool the eye from one angle, but loses its illusion as the viewer shifts to other angles.

Aside from its two-dimensionality, painting is further limited in that there are certain visual events that it cannot literally describe. The phenomenon of light is one example. E. H. Gombrich describes the difficulty associated with depicting light in painting: "Imagine ... [a painter] ... matching a white tablecloth with his whitest white—how could his palette then still yield the extra brightness of a sunlit patch or the brilliance of a sparkling reflection?"⁴⁶ A painter may, through painstaking control of relative value, create the illusion of light in a painting. Within the relativity of the picture something may appear to be emanating light, but a comparison with any actual light-emitting object, such as the sun, reveals the painted depiction's shortcomings. Paint does not emit light. The sun does. The sun emits a light so dazzling that it is physically painful to look at. The

“lightest” that paint can get, an undiluted white pigment is, in truth, not the true white that results from a full spectrum of light.

Another phenomenon of light that cannot literally be described in the medium of paint is the visual paradox of reflectivity that can sometimes be observed in panes of glass, a material used for its ostensibly transparent properties. “In certain cases, when the balance of illumination is favorable, observers can alternate their perception and, without moving their head, see either the reflection or the underlying picture, simply by *deciding* to do so.”⁴⁷ In other words, glass can appear both transparent and reflective at the same time.

The difficulties in representing this visual simultaneity in paint are significant. Because our perception of the transparency or reflectivity of glass is contingent to a shift in focus through three-dimensional space, replicating this shift in the medium of paint becomes problematic. Because the painting, as a two-dimensional object, can only be looked at and not through, and because the entirety of the image resides on the surface of the painting, there can be no shift in focus from foreground to background. Foreground and background are on the same spatial plane. Thus, depicting the simultaneity of reflection and transparency in glass, through the medium of paint, becomes a matter of congealing the fluidity of visual information into a static resemblance. While, in doing so, a painter may achieve a convincing illusion of the visual phenomenon frozen at some arbitrary point of focus, the product ultimately cannot perfectly equate the real-time visual experience (Fig. 5).

Veiling Strategies

Because the veil can be conceived of as being both a literal, physical object and a metaphor for a condition of perception, my own work undertakes to not only represent the *image* of the veil, but also to simulate the effects and the sensation of veiling. There are several strategic approaches to achieving this intention.

The Image as the Veil

Their blindness ... came by looking beyond the mark.

—*Jacob 4:14, The Book of Mormon*

In addition to depicting the image of the veil as a veiling strategy, the very nature of images in and of themselves can form another kind of veil. “In revealing, the image veils the screen as that which hides, it veils the veil.”⁴⁸ Visually, a painted or drawn image veils its support through the accretion of material. The building of a superstructure of painting or drawing material serves to hide what is underneath, both underlying layers of material as well as the painting’s support itself. When materials are transformed into images—pictures of objects or places that we can recognize—it further creates a psychological veil. Images can lead us to perceive of a painting as a window or a mirror or a screen, rather than a painting: something to be looked through, rather than looked upon. This psychological shift serves to conceal the painting’s support because our eyes no longer perceive the painting’s surface, but instead look through it.

Additionally, when representation become convincing in its illusion, the illusion of the image tends to veil the nature of the material of which it is constituted. In short, when looking at a really believable painting of a vase filled with flowers, we no longer

recognize it as being constituted of paint, but rather we think of it as an image of a vase filled with flowers. The more illusionistic a representation, the less likely we are to think of it as a painting. This is not to say that, when observing painted images, we do not conceptually understand that the image is constructed of paint. Rather, when we concentrate on the painted aspect of an image, we see only the paint and not the image, and vice versa. The two pictorial elements cannot be seen simultaneously. They veil each other.

Between Abstraction and Representation

In certain cases where images might become too quickly accessible to the viewer because they are images in common use, it becomes necessary to “hide” the images in an attempt to make them less obvious. The embedding of hidden imagery within a piece can be achieved by the conflation of representational imagery with non-representation or abstraction.

Treading the line between abstraction and representation is a risky business. In my work, the primary objective of treading this line is to delay recognition of images, but if the images become too hidden, they run the risk of suspending recognition indefinitely, or at least suspending recognition long enough that the viewer loses interest and moves on. On the other hand, imagery that is not disguised enough runs the risk of appearing to be a mere stylistic gimmick. Ideally, achieving a balanced resolution between the two promotes in the viewer a sense of indefinable recognition: the idea that they *are* looking at something, something they believe that they should recognize, but which they cannot. This feeling of unspecified recognition stimulates the viewer into a more active mode of

contemplation, spurring them to continue the experience of looking until they are finally able to decipher what there is to comprehend.

The Ample Veil of Allegory⁴⁹

*Make the heart of this people fat ... make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes;
lest they see ... and hear.*

—*Isa. 6:10, King James Version*

Another veiling strategy is the use of allegory. Paradoxically, depending on a person's understanding of the symbols involved, allegory can be both an obstacle to understanding and a means of communicating the incommunicable. This latter function can be understood in the description of linear perspective as a metaphor for the concept of infinity. For those who have no understanding of “vanishing points” or “orthogonals,” however, the metaphor remains indecipherable. In some instances, the use of symbolic communication has been employed as an intentional barrier to comprehension.

A classic instance of that is the destruction of Pythagoras's school in Calabria. The books are protected by sealing and hiding ... and buried in the earth or hidden in crypts. But above all they are protected from dangerous exposure by the cryptic and symbolic signs and language in which they are written; *and, even if they could be read, the information is disguised as myths and parables* [emphasis added].⁵⁰

Allegory takes on two forms in my work: image as allegory and language as allegory.

Images are always symbolic. As mentioned above, even the most painstaking transcription of an object into an image will always turn into an abstraction. We cannot, after all, paint atoms and molecules; and even such minute measurements as atoms can be

broken into infinitely smaller components. What, then, are images symbolic of? “If one makes a sketch of a mountain, what is it? A few lines on a piece of paper. But there is a solid reality behind this poor composition . . . it still attests to the artist’s experience of the mountain as a reality.”⁵¹ In this example, image becomes a stand-in symbol for reality. At their most elementary level, images are a symbol visual experience. Not all reality resides within the realm of the visual world, however, and just as letters can typify phonetic sounds, and notation on a staff can represent musical tones, images can stand for realities of a less visually concrete nature.

Language can certainly fill a similar role, and in the arena of visual art, language often takes on the form of titling. A few specific examples of how titling operates in my own work will suffice to shed light on its use as an allegorical veil.

In order for a title to be a veil, it must contain language that is not instantly accessible to most people. In my own practice, this includes words from languages other than English, words using characters from different alphabets, and technical terms outside of the scope of average experience. Utilizing such words in my titles is not an attempt on my part to be elitist or abstruse but rather an attempt to suspend comprehension on the part of the viewer. Those already in possession of the symbols may speedily comprehend the meaning of the work, while those of an inquisitive disposition may, with the effort of a little research, themselves gain possession of the symbols. For those who cannot be bothered with expending this effort, my work remains as a “book that is sealed.”⁵²

It is important that a title both relates specifically to a piece’s form, and that its meaning may be interpreted on a variety of different levels. Doing so provides a payoff

for anyone who bothers to research the title, and it also dispels any notion that the titles are needlessly obscure. As a simple example, the title of my painting, *Ingressus et non Egressus* (Fig. 6), is a Latin phrase that translates roughly “Entrance but no exit,” or “I went in but not out.” That is one level of understanding the allegory. Discovering this translation is an easy task. A further level of research into the phrase would reveal that those words are inscribed over Auguste Rodin’s (1840-1917) *Gates of Hell* (Fig. 7) and that his *Gates of Hell* is a representation of Dante Alighieri’s (c. 1265-1321) descent into the underworld, as described in his *Divine Comedy* (1320). This second level of understanding unfolds a much larger set of meanings.

Allegory, in its form as language, is intimately connected with allegory in its form as image. An example of this in my own work is found in a series of pieces individually titled *Scotoma* and collectively titled *Scotomata* (Fig. 8-9). Scotoma is a medical term for a blind spot, an aberration in one’s field of vision. While most forms of blindness progress from the periphery inward, a scotoma often progresses from the inside out. In connection with this meaning, the formal quality of each *Scotoma* painting assumes a scotomatous composition. Although, in each painting, the viewer gets the sense that an object or a space is being depicted, whatever that object or space is cannot quite be deciphered due to its being obscured, even pushed to the margins, by a large, dark, centrally located spot: the painterly representation of a scotoma.

A secondary meaning of the word scotoma finds its roots in psychology. In its secondary sense, the word scotoma infers a psychological blind-spot, a failure to recognize in oneself certain personality traits, specifically personality traits we find irritating in others which we also exhibit ourselves. With this additional context, the

depicted image of the scotoma also takes on an added meaning. It becomes not only a sign for a visual impediment but also emblematic of a psychological or conceptual limitation preventing us from seeing the full picture. In the broader context of the veil, it suggests that these two sources of human perception, the mind and the eye, as thresholds between the interior self and exterior experience, are ultimately under the influence of a veil. Indeed, the limitations of these organs themselves become the veil.

Painting as an Act of Veiling

Painting is always, more or less an act of veiling. Even the traditional materials from which painting supports are constructed include textiles such as linen, the very material from which the veils of the Hebrew temples and tabernacle were made. Even apart from the material constitution of painting supports, painting is always a process of covering up. Granted, many painters employ reductive techniques, removing or reducing layers of material accumulation. Nevertheless, just as the act of unveiling is impossible without the prerequisite presence of a veil, the process of reduction is impossible without first there having been a buildup, and veiling over, of foundational layers with paint.

A quintessential example of the dually veiling and unveiling nature of the painting process is found in the studio practice of Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). For the purposes of this paper, I will limit the discussion of Richter's work to the ongoing series of abstract paintings he creates with large, plexiglass squeegees, such as his well known *Abstraktes Bild* from 1994 (Fig. 10).

The 2011 film, *Gerhard Richter Painting* by Corinna Belz offers a glimpse of Richter's working process.⁵³ He begins each painting in a conventional manner, using

brushes to apply highly saturated, gestural marks, à la Willem de Kooning. And yet, after realizing often-sophisticated compositions in this manner, Richter then proceeds to obliterate this foundational layer by running a massive, paint-laden squeegee across the surface of the entire piece. Laying on copious amounts of paint with oversized squeegees is the fundamental gesture employed by Richter and is emblematic of the obsessive layering and covering over of the painter's process (Fig. 11). Nevertheless the under-layers in Richter's works are often "re-achieved" by scraping down through layers of paint with the same squeegees, or large palette knives that he has on hand. The characteristic peeking through of under-layers and fissuring of over-layers, so often associated with this oeuvre, would not be possible but for the veiling nature of paint as a medium and painting as a process.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, painters have long acknowledged an association between paintings and veils.⁵⁴ If titles are any clue to intentionality, then painting series such as Morris Louis's (1912-1962) *Veils* series (Fig. 12), Robert Ryman's (b. 1930) *Surface Veil* series (Fig. 13), and Izhar Patkin's (b. 1955) *The Veil Suite* (Fig. 14), or his recent exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art titled *The Wandering Veil*, clearly indicate that this connection continues in the minds of painters. And while all of these artists have decidedly different conceptions of the veil—Ryman, for instance, derived the title *Surface Veil* from the brand name of a material he used in creating the first pieces of the series,⁵⁵ whereas the stain-painting technique of Louis achieves effects that are more directly connected to the look of a curtain—the fact that all three artists have created series of paintings surrounding this connection, rather than a solitary piece here or there, signifies the continued potency of the symbol in their art.

While the mediums I employ are by their nature analogous to veiling, I do not scruple to enhance or call attention to this nature when circumstances permit it. One way this can be achieved is through the application of very thin layers of translucent or transparent paint. Applying paint in this way allows the viewer to see the ghost of an under-layer through the body of the top layer of paint. This ghost acts in a similar way to the “characteristic peeking through of under-layers and fissuring of over-layers” in Richter’s work and, by the act of unveiling, reveals the veiling properties of paint. This observation leads us to a discussion of the principle of an unveiling agent.

Velarius

In ancient Rome, large rooms in residences were often divided into several smaller chambers by using curtains or veils to divide the space. When a person desired to move from one enclosure into another, a servant, assigned specifically to the task, would be there in order to pull the curtain aside. This servant, a sort of doorman, was assigned the title *velarius*.⁵⁶

The principle of an unveiling agent, such as a *velarius*, becomes important in the discussion of veils because often it is by means of an unveiling agent that the nature or presence of a veil is realized. This is particularly true in such instances as when a veil becomes a picture, such as the veils and shutters of the aforementioned Italian altarpiece. Until our interpretation of such a veil as a picture is altered, that is until its nature as a veil is made evident to us, we view it as a tableaux. But when our assumptions are interrupted, when, as it were, the veil is unveiled, when the altarpiece coverings are moved aside to reveal the actual painting, then the true nature and function of the veil is revealed.

Bill Viola's video installation, *Ocean Without a Shore* (Fig. 15), beautifully demonstrates the operation of an unveiling agent. In its original form for the 2007 Venice Biennale, *Ocean Without a Shore* was installed in the 15th century Church of the Oratorio San Gallo. The installation was comprised of three video screens, each positioned on a separate stone altar, with each altar being positioned against a different wall. As a result of this configuration, a viewer approaching the piece would be directly facing one screen, with the other two screens facing each other on the viewer's left and right hand side. Subsequent installations of the piece outside of the Church of the

Oratorio San Gallo have positioned the screens in a like manner—not on altars, but on pedestals resembling altars—so as to preserve the sanctuary quality of the setup.

The video sequence for the piece runs roughly as follows: each screen begins by displaying a video of staticky, black and white picture quality, not unlike what one observes in the footage of a security camera. In each screen, by turns, the image of a shadowy figure resolves out of dark obscurity as it walks forward, toward the viewer. Eventually, each shadowy figure encounters a barrier—a thin sheet of cascading water. It is important to note that, until encountered, the barrier of water is invisible. As each figure passes through the film of water, the picture quality becomes crisp and rendered in full color, revealing that the previously poor picture quality was an effect of this cascading barrier of water. After a pause, each figure turns around and walks back through the sheet of water, returning to their former ethereal quality. This process cycles through each of the screens so that, as one figure is approaching and/or passing through the barrier in one screen, a second figure is just beginning to appear out of the darkness in another screen, while a figure can be seen retreating into obscurity in the third.

While the “*velarius*” of ancient Rome and in Viola’s *Ocean Without a Shore* are both human, an interrupting agent need not be a person in order to properly perform the operation. Any gesture that tends to reveal the presence and nature of the veil can be considered as an unveiling agent, such as a breeze that causes a curtain to stir minutely along the ground, the slight distortion of light in an antique pane of glass, or a crack in the paint of an otherwise convincing trompe l’œil painting.

There are three basic ways I incorporate the idea of an unveiling agent within my own work; two of these are a natural byproduct of the processes I employ. The mediums I

employ lend themselves to an exploration of the veil because painting is an act of veiling. The veiling aspect of the act of painting is integral to my process. A perennial dissatisfaction with the initial stages of each piece I execute requires me to perform an obsessive editing and re-editing. Subsequent layers serve to obscure, or veil, the more foundational layers.

Pentimenti

In *Ocean Without a Shore*, our awareness of the thin sheet of water between viewer and shadowy figure is only realized as the body encounters the barrier, interrupting the smooth flow of the water and causing it to splash everywhere. This same sort of transgression of a veiling threshold occurs as a byproduct of the extensive layering processes I employ. Art conservators use the term *pentimento* to describe the visible traces of the under layers of a painting. In the context of older paintings, *pentimenti* are often an unintended consequence of the finishing layers of a painting becoming more transparent with time, thus revealing the underpainting. Through applying layers of variously opaque, semi-opaque, translucent and transparent materials to my own work, the pieces accumulate a similar quality of *pentimenti*, which serves as a transgression of the veiling properties of the medium by allowing what is veiled—in this case the underlayers—to be seen (Fig. 16).

The overlaying of incompatible materials, one on top of the other, can further promote this *pentimento* effect: in the case of my work, pastel on top of graphite. Pastel and graphite have a relationship similar to the relationship between acrylic and oil paint or oil and water; they do not readily mix. While oil paint sits well on top of acrylic paint,

acrylic paint applied over oil paint will eventually crack and flake off. In like manner, graphite may easily be applied over pastel, but pastel has a hard time clinging to the slick surface that graphite offers. Any attempts at applying pastel over graphite tend to leave something of the ghostly under-layer showing through (Fig. 17).

Texture

Another byproduct of the processes I employ is the formation of a prominent texture. The idea of texture is innately connected to the image of the veil, for it is “The texture of textiles [that] turns them into veils.”⁵⁷ The materials from which veils are constituted “possesses the capacity both to mask and to unveil. Between the shifts from transparency to opacity, a mysterious dynamic of concealing and revealing emerges.”⁵⁸ In other words, the uniquely textile quality of the veil’s material is one of the things that allows us to recognize it as a veil, rather than a picture or a wall.

As mentioned above, the act of painting is an act of veiling. In many cases, a painting’s support and foundational layers are entirely covered with paint and are no longer visible to the viewer. But in the case of underlying textures created by a rigorous layering process, the veiling nature of painting becomes more evident. As in Bill Viola’s *Ocean Without a Shore*, it is at moments when the veil is brushed up against or transgressed in some way that its presence becomes evident. Without a transgressing moment in Viola’s video installation, we naturally assume that the grainy picture quality is a result of the camera. It is only when the figures come into contact with the film of water, emerging into crystal clear, high definition that we “see” the water barrier as the

agent of the static of the picture quality. This phenomenon is similar to what occurs in the event of mirror reflections:

In one sense it is unarguably true that when a surface approximates to the condition of a perfect mirror is no longer to be seen as a surface. Nevertheless, as long as observers have good reason to identify what they see as a reflection, they 'see' the surface notwithstanding the fact that there is nothing visible to justify such a perception ... If something is recognizable as a reflection, the surface which affords it becomes subjectively visible.⁵⁹

The texture in my work is achieved as a result of my foundational drawing. The nature of this texture is such that, no matter how extensive a layering process I employ in creating a piece, the underlying texture of the piece always influences its outcome (Fig. 18). This presence of texture represents a paradox inherent in paint as a "two-dimensional" medium. No matter how flat a painting may be, paint as a material nearly always manifests its materiality through three-dimensional texture. In paintings that embrace the materiality of paint, the texture can become quite evident, even to the point where, as in my own work, the texture achieves an aspect of bas-relief. In heavily textured paintings that simultaneously attempt illusionistic representation, the depiction of illusion comes increasingly into conflict with the paint's materiality. Building texture with paint tends to call attention both to the painting's surface, and its underlayers, which in turn weakens the illusion of space and believable form.

In this fashion, the texture in my work, like the *pentimenti*, serves as an unveiling agent. It does so by demonstrating the presence of unseen layers in the painting that, nevertheless, exert an influence on the painting's final appearance. By operating in this way, texture serves as evidence of the invisible, a threshold between that which can be

seen and that which, while existent, cannot be seen. Furthermore, by manifesting its own materiality, the paint controverts the illusionistic depiction of deep space or sculptural form and reveals its two-dimensional nature (Fig. 19).

This concept is taken one step further by employing my variation of frottage technique. Frottage is the process of using dry media, in my case graphite or pastel, to take a rubbing from a textured surface. First used in art by Max Ernst (1891-1976), who purportedly discovered the technique by taking rubbings from his floorboards⁶⁰ (Fig. 20), this technique produces a remarkably accurate “negative image of the texture underneath.”⁶¹ It is for this reason that archeologists prize the technique as a means for retrieving information off of decrepit gravestones or relief sculptures that would otherwise be indecipherable due to weathering and surface discoloration.⁶² Just as frottage can be used to reveal something that would otherwise be indecipherable, the application of a layer of graphite over a heavily textured surface in my work reveals or enhances the underlying texture (see Fig. 16). This further serves to highlight the presence and the influence of the invisible.

Evidence of Things Not Seen⁶³

*The wind bloweth ... and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell
whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.*

—*John 3:8, King James Version*

Reflectivity promotes a shift in perception based on vantage point. My interest in reflectivity extends both to the representation of reflective imagery—such as the aforementioned visual phenomenon of simultaneously seeing through and on the surface of a pane of glass—as well as the incorporation of literally reflective materials into my work. Jonathan Miller provides a useful explanation of the way reflectivity and non-reflectivity work:

The surface of physical objects is more or less densely pitted with microscopic irregularities from which the rays of incident light are reflected in optical disarray ... But not all surfaces disrupt the incident light to the same extent. The amount by which they do so depends on the depth and frequency ... of their optical imperfections. The smoother and less pitted a surface is, the more coherently the rays of incident light are reflected from it. And in the limiting case, such as the mirror ... the coherence of the reflection so accurately reproduces the image of the source that it more or less precludes the visibility of the surface from which it rebounds. The result is that in contrast to a matt surface which displays nothing but its own local characteristics, the visibility of a polished one is almost entirely due to the imagery, which it reflects.⁶⁴

The literal transcription of certain reflective phenomena onto a two-dimensional surface is not possible, and I use it in my work as a metaphor for the impossibility of describing the ineffable. The image of reflection possesses other innate and historical metaphysical connotations, one of which is derived from the potential that reflective surfaces have to reflect light sources. “In mystical thinking light was a manifestation of Divinity.”⁶⁵ An example of this association is found in the writings of the 17th century

German theologian, Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), who, "... staring into the reflection of light on a metal pitcher ... saw God in a vision."⁶⁶ Furthermore, painters of the Medieval and Renaissance used glass, as a substance that both reflects and is transparent, as a metaphor for spirit.⁶⁷ It is easy to see the how the reflection of light on a surface can be understood as a metaphysical symbol. It is an event that manifests itself visually but is not also tactile, suggesting the idea of an immaterial (or hyper-material)⁶⁸ spiritual substance.

The incorporation of reflective materials into my work serves a similar purpose. One such material is graphite, which is generally prized for its use in drawing as a midtone-to-shadow value but also possesses innate reflective properties that can serve to subvert its use as a darker value. This has been the cause, no doubt, of great frustration on the part of countless draftsmen. On the other hand, and to the advantage of my own process, the material properties of graphite make it possible to be used both as a shadow and a highlight, depending on what angle it is lit from, or what angle the viewer observes it from. This double appearance becomes increasingly evident when the reflective material is transposed against a matte material of the same, or a similar, value (see Fig. 6).

Because the "visibility of a polished ... [surface] ... is almost entirely due to the imagery which it reflects,"⁶⁹ when a reflective material is applied to a matte surface of similar value, the reflective material can appear to belong to the value of the matte surface from one angle, while reflecting the light source and becoming a highlight from another angle. In short, the reflective material can "appear" or "disappear" depending on the angle from which it is viewed. This is particularly true of graphite, which is not

polished but in its reflection retains a quality of color and value. When used in this fashion, graphite and other reflective materials promote multiple vantage points from which to view an artwork, each angle invoking a “new” painting. What can be seen from one perspective becomes invisible from another, even as it remains demonstrably present.

Another reflective material I employ is adhesive mirrored vinyl. My use of this material is not intended for the surface of the painting but rather as a framing device. The effects of this are twofold. By applying mirrored vinyl to the exterior sides of the painting supports, it causes them to “disappear.” (Fig. 21) The wall on which a piece is hung merges seamlessly with the reflection of the wall on the piece’s side, creating the illusion that the piece is not attached to the wall, but is floating off of it—perhaps a supernatural event—again alluding to the idea of invisible presence. Additionally, when this treatment is applied to a grouping of pieces meant to be viewed together, such as in a diptych or triptych, the mirrored sides opposite each other create an infinity mirror, pointing again to the finite capacities of human perception.

Interference paint works in a similar way to reflective materials. In this context, “interference” is basically synonymous with “iridescence,” an “optical phenomenon ... that occurs when the surface of a material refracts light, producing a ... shimmering effect ... reminiscent of mother of pearl.”⁷⁰ Interference paint is not designed to refract the full spectrum of light. Rather, the texture or grain of each color is designed to refract mostly that color. The color exhibited in interference paint is not the result of pigment but of the refraction of light. Like reflective materials, when applied to a painting, the refraction of the interference color is visible from one angle but practically invisible from another (see Fig. 16).

Fire is another phenomenon that is visible—its effects can even be felt—and yet it is apparently immaterial. For example, you can pass your hand through fire. Fire is weightless. In the vein of weightlessness, “Van Helmont’s (1597-1644) sensational discovery of gas ... provided the nearest thing to spirit so far discovered, standing at a sort of interface between the worlds.”⁷¹

More importantly for my purposes, however, fire also has many innate historical and metaphysical connotations. Fire is often used in a Judeo-Christian religious context to refer to things Heavenly or Holy. For example, “The angel of the Lord appeared unto ... [Moses] ... in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.”⁷² When the children of Israel escaped from Egypt, “The Lord went before them ... in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.”⁷³ “And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.”⁷⁴ And finally, “For our God is a consuming fire.”⁷⁵

In addition, fire is used both as a literal purifier and as a symbol of purification. Thus, the image of the “refiner and purifier of silver ... [that] ... shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver”⁷⁶ refers to the literal purifying power of fire and is also a type of spiritual purification. Likewise, Isaiah recounts:

Then said I, Woe is me! ... because I am a man of unclean lips ... for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips ... thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.⁷⁷

Fire appears in my work in the form of images, but also as a medium: vine charcoal is created through the process of burning wood, as are most ivory black pigments which are used in both pastels and paints. Fire as a phoenix-like representation

of life after death, or life generated from ashes, is thus personified in these materials. Through the incineration of a living entity, and transformation of its material constitution, is generated the media and tools for artistic creation. It loses its life in one form in service to its use in another. Moreover, while the coating of charcoal over the textures in my works produces a *trompe l'œil* effect resembling charred timbers, my working process also partakes in a literal charring through the application of extreme heat and flame (Fig. 22), which is another form of creation through destruction.

Paradox

Paradox is a function of perspective. I have been at pains to demonstrate the limitations of human perspective precisely because human perspective, mediated as it is through the limitations of perception, prevents us from comprehending paradox. The limits of perspective may even induce us to see paradox where, from another perspective, no paradox exists. Anamorphosis neatly illustrates the idea that because we cannot perceive something from one perspective does not preclude its existence: a mere shift in perspective may be all that is needed to reveal the image.

Shifts in Perspective

Similar to what occurs in the use of reflective materials and the conflation of abstraction with representation, veiled imagery may also be achieved through “anamorphosis.”⁷⁸ Gaspar Schott (1608-1666), 17th century Jesuit priest and scientist, was the one who coined the term. At its Greek roots, the word “literally translates as distortion” or “that which lacks a proper shape.”⁷⁹ An anamorphic image is one that, when seen from the “viewpoint” of linear perspective, is distorted beyond recognition. We must not, however, assume that any distorted image constitutes anamorphic imagery. The real affect of anamorphic imagery is that, although illegible from a frontal vantage point, it becomes recognizable when considered at an oblique angle.

One of the most well known instances of anamorphosis in western art is the painting *The Ambassadors* (Fig. 23) by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543). At surface value, *The Ambassadors* appears to be no more than an innocuous, albeit masterfully executed portrait of two wealthy gentlemen surrounded by objects

symbolizing their wealth and education. Further scrutiny might lead the viewer to notice a strange smear or amorphous, diagonal shape spread across the foreground of the piece. The strange thing about this shape is that it does not seem to fit with the meticulously rendered perspectival recession present in the depiction of the tile floor. Indeed, the shape does not itself appear to represent anything recognizable. Because of the quantity of rich detail and accuracy in the piece, however, it is easy to entirely overlook this anomaly when first viewing the painting, and even ignore or dismiss its incongruity after it has finally been noticed. When viewing the painting slantwise, however, the hitherto amorphous shape begins to assume attributes of a recognizable object. It is only when the painting is viewed almost perpendicularly (Fig. 24) from the right hand side with the eye positioned at about the middle of the painting's height that the anamorphic image reveals itself for what it is: a skull (Fig. 25).

The creation of a believable anamorphic image like the skull in Holbein's painting can only be achieved through scrupulous adherence to rules of perspective.

We should remember that [while] anamorphic art gives the impression of radically breaking with linear perspectival conventions ... it is created strictly according to perspectival rules. Unlike perspective's initial promise to enable the creation of ... illusionistic pictures, anamorphic art uses perspective's own weapons against it in order to pursue its opposite: rather than showing images, it hides them.⁸⁰

Because of this, anamorphosis is fundamentally different from the disguising of imagery through abstraction. In the latter case, an image becomes hidden as a result of material alteration of its appearance, an accumulation of abstract signs and gesture, whereas anamorphic imagery becomes disguised as a result of the viewer's physical point of view. As a result, it begs the question, which point of view is the "correct" one?

Historically, anamorphosis was often employed to hide information of a controversial or sensitive nature, such as “dangerous political messages.”⁸¹ A good example of this would Erhard Schön’s (ca. 1491-1542) *Vexierbilder* woodcuts. (*Vexierbilder* translates literally as “secret images.”)⁸² In one such *Vexierbild* (Fig. 26) we see portrayed what initially appears to be a river meandering through a country landscape. When we assume the proper angle, however, it transforms into the four faces of “Charles V, Ferdinand I, Pope Clement VII, and François I,” controversial political figures of the time.⁸³

Additionally, anamorphosis was often thought of in a metaphysical context. “[Gaspar] Schott was convinced that all natural and technical marvels were manifestations of the supernatural.”⁸⁴ Furthermore:

[Anamorphosis’] immanent structure of disguise and revelation also served as an allegory of God’s omnipotence as it manifested itself in or behind all natural phenomena. The chaos of the world was compared to the jumble of lines and colors behind which a perfect order was assumed to hide. For the one who truly sees, this perfection would become visible.⁸⁵

An example of this latter interpretation of anamorphosis can be found in a practice, “highly popular in the seventeenth century,” of creating anamorphic murals.⁸⁶ Such murals were often “constructed so that on caught a glance of the proper image solely upon entering the room.”⁸⁷ The interesting result of this it that “*The viewpoint thus lay on the threshold*, in the doorway, where one would see the image literally in passing” [emphasis added]⁸⁸ (Fig. 27). This brings us full circle to the allure of the threshold and the image of the doorway, that symbol of transition from one state of being into another.

Many contemporary artists continue to incorporate anamorphosis into their work in a variety of ways. Among those who dabble in it, such as William Kentridge (b. 1955) and Matthew Ngui (b. 1962), there are a handful of artist who base their entire practices around the phenomenon. Jonty Hurwitz (b. 1969) extends the idea into the realm of sculptural anamorphosis, while Felice Varini's (b. 1952) large and colorful, geometric anamorphic shapes painted onto large spaces, coalesce, at certain vantage points, and appear as if they are flat shapes stenciled on top of a photograph of the space. Perhaps no current artist has used the technique to greater effect than Jan Dibbets (b. 1941) in his *Perspective Correction* series.

In the *Perspective Correction* series, Dibbets photographs ordinary scenes—his studio, a cornfield, a grassy lawn. “In every picture in the series ... [a] ... square disrupts the spatial coherence of its environment [Fig. 28].”⁸⁹ The effect is similar to what occurs in the works of Varini, the squares appear as if “drawn on the photograph,”⁹⁰ rather than belonging to the photographed environment. This effect is achieved because the squares are, in fact, anamorphic figures and appear as square “only at the point from which the photograph was taken.”⁹¹ Were the squares to be observed from a less oblique angle, they would appear to be trapezoids, with the apparently horizontal side actually diverging slightly to counteract the converging effect of perspective.⁹² By capturing these shapes from an angle where they appear to be square, Dibbets' corrections represent “anamorphosis in reverse.”⁹³ By so doing, Dibbets challenges us to “view linear perspective from the point of view that anamorphosis proposes.”⁹⁴ When one does this, the anamorph becomes correct and everything else becomes a distortion.

Hanneke Grootenboer poses the question, in reference to the title *Perspective Correction*, “Which or whose perspective must be assumed the correct one, to which the other must adjust?”⁹⁵ Well, neither, necessarily, and both, at the same time. It is possible to “see” the square as trapezoids when we assume the prevailing perspective of the environment is correct, and it is also possible to “see” the environment as flat surface when we assume that the square is really a square. According Grootenboer, “the only way out of the impasse that the perspectival paradox creates is to realize that looking straight (at the photograph) and looking awry (at the square) may occur simultaneously in one moment” but this realization can only occur when “we accept the resulting confusion and ambiguity as part of our visual field.”⁹⁶

That anamorphosis promotes a simultaneity of perception based on vantage point is significant to my practice. This confusion and ambiguity is analogous, really, to the human condition and the limitations of human perception. “Anamorphosis, too, [like the veiling nature of representational painting] hides and shows at the same time.”⁹⁷

Interestingly, in the case of anamorphosis, a shift in perspective from the seen to the read may go nearly as long a way towards revealing the image as a physical shift in perspective. While initially considering the woodcut *Vexierbild* (see Fig. 25) by Erhard Schön, I knew that it contained anamorphic imagery, yet I was unable to decipher its contents from a traditional, straight on perspective. After reading a description of what the piece depicted, however, I was able to decode the image, recognizing faces in what I had initially presumed to be a depiction of a riverscape. The relevant aspect of this experience is that I did not have to be *shown* the piece from the correct angle in order to begin decoding the anamorph, I merely had to *read* what the corrected image would be,

and was then able to decipher it. We may not physically be able to get to the proper angle to decode the distortion, but we may be able to bring about a shift in perspective simply by looking in a different way.

Return to the Cave

Returning to the allegory of Plato's cave, Socrates outlines the condition of those prisoners who, freed and dragged unwillingly from the darkness of their cave into the light of day, begin to see things as they really are:

[A prisoner taken from the cave] would be at a loss ... he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him ... if he were compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes, and would he not ... flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out? ... There would be need of habituation ... to enable him to see the things higher up.⁹⁸

Those of us who as have experienced a sudden shift from darkness into light, such as when the light in a dark room is unexpectedly switched on, can attest to the pain of the experience. Likewise, effecting a change in perspective can be a jarring experience. In the first place, it damages one's ego: no one likes to admit that they are in error. Oftentimes, however, it is also a matter of comfort. Our views are old and familiar to us. We are used to them. And beyond that, a shift in viewpoint often requires that we learn to exercise new muscles.

Socrates goes on to describe the condition of those who take the time to habituate themselves to the light of day, following the necessary gradual steps to acclimatize themselves to the light, looking first at the shadows, then "the likenesses or reflections in water ... later, the things themselves"⁹⁹ and finally observing the celestial bodies, including "the sun and the sun's light."¹⁰⁰ After finally building the stamina to see, what would these erstwhile prisoners think of their former dwelling place?

If he recalled to mind his first habitation and what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow-bondsmen ... would [he] count himself happy in the change and pity them? ... [Moreover,] ... if there had been honours and commendations among them ... and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass ... do you think he would be very keen about such rewards, and that he would envy and emulate those who were honoured by these prisoners?¹⁰¹

"I think that he would choose to endure anything rather than such a life," concedes Glaucon.¹⁰²

The Terrible Questions¹⁰³

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

—*Ps. 90:2, King James Version*

The philosopher cuts a ridiculous figure, according to Socrates, being so preoccupied with things on an altogether different plane.¹⁰⁴ "Do not be surprised," he forewarns, "that those who have attained to this height are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men, but their souls ever feel the upward urge and the yearning for that sojourn above."¹⁰⁵ He continues, "I ... am unable to suppose ... that any other study turns the soul's gaze upward than that which deals with being and the invisible."¹⁰⁶

The value in contemplating "being and the invisible"—or as I would interpret them, mortality and our place in the Universe—is that it causes a shift in perspective. Anyone who has been forced to contemplate his or her own mortality in an immediate way, such as the terminally ill patient or the survivor of a life-threatening disaster, is afforded clarity of perspective in deciding what activities are most worth their time. Considering the vastness of the Universe affects a similar shift in perspective.

Unfortunately, conversations regarding existential questions often dissolve into a morass of meaninglessness. Falling back on empty futility seems too facile an answer to the questions, and also more than a little irresponsible. My intention in addressing these things is not to discourage or devalue the power of human action. The questions regarding “being and the invisible” may not be the *only* important questions, but they are the *most* important questions. Without arriving at an answer to these questions, we can never assess what actions are of greatest value.

What, then, is our place in the cosmos? We stand at the threshold. “We stand in the middle position ... The *marksa same u erseti* of the Babylonians means the knot that ties heaven to earth ... It is the middle point at which the worlds above and the worlds below join.”¹⁰⁷ In a sense, our present existence is a liminal space, a threshold from eternity into eternity. Thinking of it in this way requires a dramatic shift in perspective.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1



Albrecht Dürer, detail from *Self-Portrait*
Oil on wood, 26" x 19", 1500.

Figure 2



Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with Ida in a White Chair*
Oil on canvas, 22" x 19", 1900.

Figure 3



Shigeo Fukuda, *Lunch with a Helmet On*
848 welded forks, knives, and spoons, 73" x 31" x 42", 1987.

Figure 4



Gerard Houckgeest, *Interior of the Old Church in Delft*
Oil on panel, 19 ¼" x 16", 1654.

Figure 5



Jacob Muldowney, *Through a Glass Darkly*
Oil and graphite on panel, 80" x 63", 2014.

Figure 6



Jacob Muldowney, *Ingressus et Non Egressus*
Acrylic, graphite, and pastel on paper mounted on panel, 17" x 16", 2014.

Figure 7



Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell (Le Porte de l'Enfer)*
Bronze, 20' 10 ³/₄" x 13' 2" x 33 ¹/₂", 1880-1917.

Figure 8



Jacob Muldowney, *Scotoma I*
Acrylic, graphite and pastel on paper mounted on panel, 18" x 18", 2014.

Figure 9



Jacob Muldowney, *Scotoma II*
Acrylic, graphite and pastel on paper mounted on panel, 16" x 17", 2014.

Figure 10



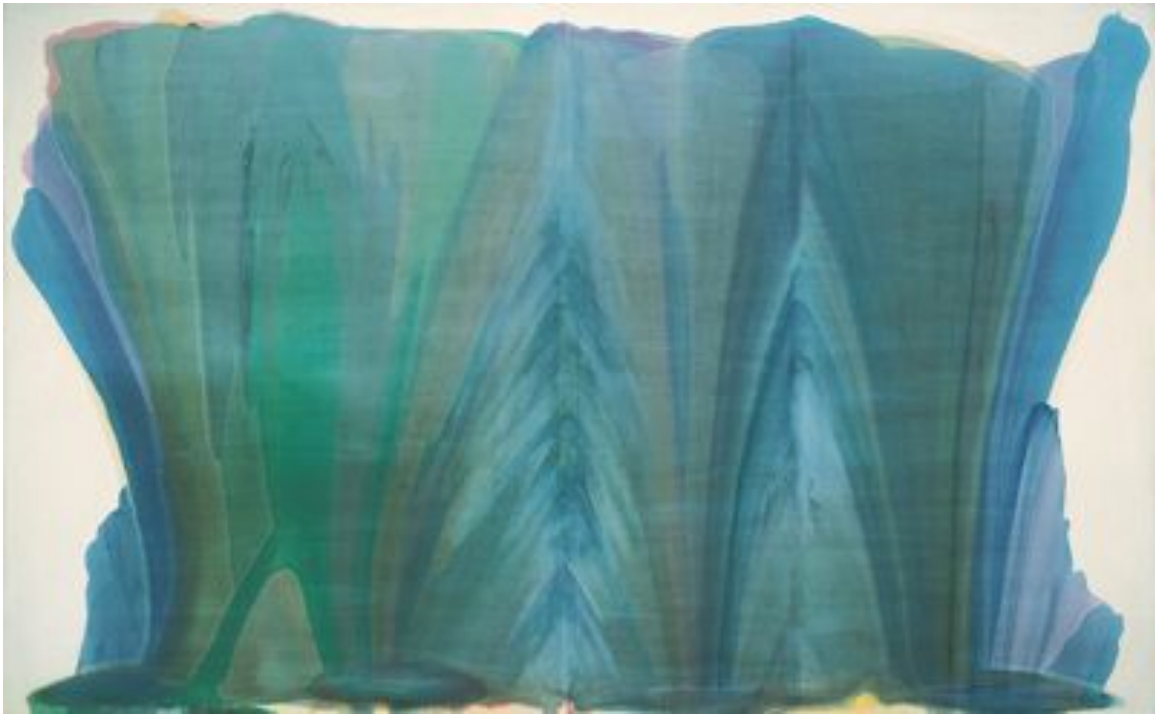
Gerhard Richter, *Abstraktes Bild (809-4)*
Oil on canvas, 88 ½" x 78 ¾", 1994.

Figure 11



Example of Richter's distinctive squeegee technique.

Figure 12



Morris Louis, *Tet*
Oil on canvas, 95'' x 153'', 1958.

Figure 13



Robert Ryman, *Surface Veil I*
Oil and blue chalk on linen canvas, 144" x 144", 1970.

Figure 14



Izhar Patkin, *The Veil Suite*

Ink on pleated tulle, installation on four walls, 14' x 22' x 28', 2007.

Figure 15



Bill Viola, *Ocean Without a Shore*
Video and sound installation, running time: approx.. 90 minutes, 2007.

Figure 16



Jacob Muldowney, *Arcosolium*
Acrylic, interference. Graphite and pastel on paper mounted on panel, 18" x 16", 2015.

Figure 17



Jacob Muldowney, *Deposition*
Acrylic, graphite, and pastel on paper mounted on panel, 39" x 29", 2014.

Figure 18



Jacob Muldowney, *Paroketh*
Acrylic, graphite and pastel on paper mounted on panel, 45" x 47", 2014.

Figure 19



Jacob Muldowney, *Astigmia*
Acrylic, graphite, charcoal, and pastel on paper mounted on panel. 39" x 29". 2015.

Figure 20



Max Ernst, *Shaving the Walls*
Collotype after frottage, 19 ½" 12 ¾", 1926.

Figure 21



Mirrored vinyl adhered to the side of the painting support.

Figure 22



Jacob Muldowney, *Scotoma III*
Acrylic, graphite, pastel and heat gun on paper mounted on panel, 18" x 16", 2015.

Figure 23



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*
Oil on oak, 81" x 82 ½", 1533.

Figure 24



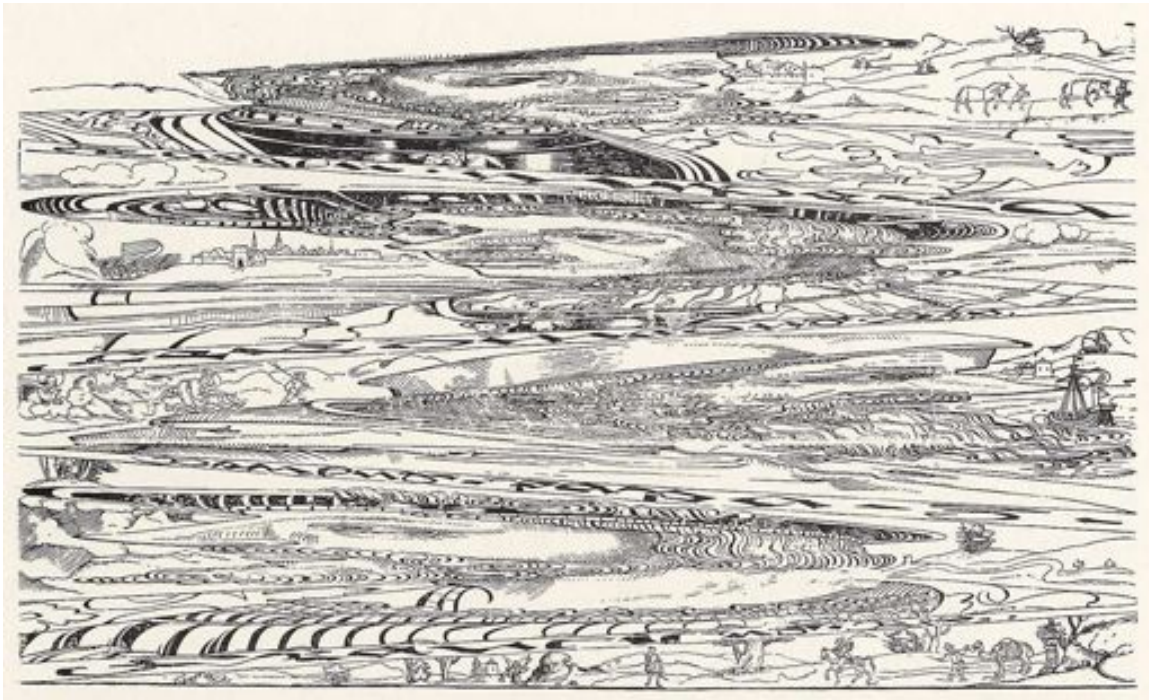
An approximation of the angle one would need to assume to “correct” the anamorphic skull in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*.

Figure 25



A fully corrected version of the skull from Holbein's *The Ambassadors*.

Figure 26



Erhard Schön, *Vexierbilder*
Woodcut, ca. 1530.

Figure 27



Emmanuel Maignan, *St. Francis of Paola*
Fresco on wall, dimensions variable, 1642.

Figure 28



Jan Dibbets, *Perspective Correction, My Studio I, 2: Square with 2 Diagonals on Wall*
Gelatin silver emulsion on canvas, 45 1/2" x 45 1/2", 1969.

NOTES

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- ¹ Nathan Salant. *Liminality and Transitional Phenomena*. (Wilmette, Ill.: Chiron Publications, 1991), xix.
- ² Jan Bialostocki. *The Message of Images: Studies in the History of Art*. (Vienna: IRSA, 1988), 92.
- ³ 1 Cor. 15:51 King James Version
- ⁴ Bialostocki, *The Message of Images*, 36.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 14.
- ⁶ Holly Faith Nelson. *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*. (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 4.
- ⁷ Kenneth R. Lang. *Parting the Cosmic Veil*. (New York: Springer, 2006), 1.
- ⁸ A. E. Housman. "Last Poems IX-X." In *Complete Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York: Holt, 1959.), 108-109.
- ⁹ Lang, *Parting the Cosmic Veil*, 3.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*. 2-3.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*.
- ¹² Lev. 4:6 KJV
- ¹³ Paul M. Zehr. *God Dwells With His People*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 97.
- ¹⁴ 2 Chron. 3:14 KJV, see also Ex. 36: 35 KJV
- ¹⁵ Alessandro Nova. "Hangings, Curtains, and Shutters of Sixteenth-Century Lombard Altarpieces." In *Italian Altarpieces 1250-1550: Function and Design*, 177-200. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 186.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*. 179-180.
- ¹⁷ Hugh Nibley. *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 19.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*. 112.
- ¹⁹ Nova, "Hangings, Curtains, and Shutters," 179.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*. 179-180. See also 2 Cor. 3:14-15 KJV
- ²¹ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 309.
- ²² Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert, eds. *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and Their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 160.
- ²³ *Ibid*. 197.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*.
- ²⁵ Bill Viola. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*. Edited by Robert Violette. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 60.
- ²⁶ 1 Cor. 13:12 KJV

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- ²⁷ Viola, *Reasons for Knocking*, 40.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Lang, *Parting the Cosmic Veil*, 1.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Hanneke Grootenboer. *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting*. (The University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 2005), 122.
- ³³ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 7.
- ³⁴ Bill Watterson. *Scientific Progress Goes "Boink": A Calvin and Hobbes Collection*. (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1991.)
- ³⁵ Rosalind Krauss. "Grids." *October* 9, no. Summer, 1979 (1979): 50-64. Accessed August 24, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778321>, 57.
- ³⁶ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 345.
- ³⁷ Lang, *Parting the Cosmic Veil*, 2.
- ³⁸ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 325.
- ³⁹ Paul Shorey. *Plato: The Republic*. Vol. II. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 119-121.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 123.
- ⁴¹ Martin Battersby. *Trompe L'oeil: The Eye Deceived*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), 19.
- ⁴² *Ibid.* 155-156
- ⁴³ *Ibid.* 33.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 34.
- ⁴⁵ E. H. Gombrich. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 96.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 38.
- ⁴⁷ Jonathan Miller and Valerie D. Mendes. (*On Reflection*. London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), 47.
- ⁴⁸ Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 126.
- ⁴⁹ Edward Gibbon. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (New York: Heritage, 1946), 1:356.
- ⁵⁰ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 388.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.* 203.
- ⁵² Isa. 29:11 KJV
- ⁵³ *Gerhard Richter Painting*. Germany: Zero One Film, 2011. DVD.
- ⁵⁴ Leon Battista Alberti. *On Painting*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 30.

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- ⁵⁵ Robert Storr. *Robert Ryman*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 134.
- ⁵⁶ Bialostocki, *The Message of Images*, 24.
- ⁵⁷ Rudy, *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing*, 159.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ Miller, *On Reflection*, 59, 64.
- ⁶⁰ Werner Spies and Joseph M. Bernstein. *Max Ernst: Frottages*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 6-7.
- ⁶¹ Edmund Burke. "The Interaction of Medium and Meaning." In *Varieties of Visual Experience*. 4th ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 291.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ Heb. 11:1 KJV
- ⁶⁴ Miller, *On Reflection*, 15.
- ⁶⁵ Bialostocki, *The Message of Images*, 91.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ Dave Hickey and Jennifer R. Gross. *Josiah McElheny*. (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1999), 34.
- ⁶⁸ Joseph Smith. *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Containing the Revelations given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet with Some Additions by His Successors in the Presidency of the Church*. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 131:7-8. These verses posit that, "All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter."
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 15.
- ⁷⁰ Hickey, *Josiah McElheny*, 44.
- ⁷¹ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 411.
- ⁷² Ex. 3:2 KJV
- ⁷³ Ex. 13:21 KJV
- ⁷⁴ Heb. 1:17 KJV
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 12:9 KJV
- ⁷⁶ Mal. 3:3 KJV
- ⁷⁷ Isa. 6:5-7 KJV
- ⁷⁸ Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 101.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 98.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.* 102.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 101.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 102
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 106.

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- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
⁸⁸ *Ibid.*
⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 97.
⁹⁰ *Ibid.*
⁹¹ *Ibid.*
⁹² *Ibid.*
⁹³ *Ibid.* 98.
⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 100.
⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 99.
⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 129.
⁹⁸ Shorey, *Plato: The Republic*, 125.
⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 125.
¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*
¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 127.
¹⁰² *Ibid.*
¹⁰³ Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 336
¹⁰⁴ Shorey, *Plato: The Republic*, 127-129.
¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 131.
¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 181.
¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 19.

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