Process as Practice: Expressions of the Numinous

Morgan Dowty

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/undergrad_open

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Contemporary Art Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/undergrad_open/36

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses—Unrestricted by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
Morgan Dowty

Process as Practice : Expressions of the Numinous

1 May 2015

BFA in Studio Art, Concentration in Printmaking

Washington University in St. Louis
Abstract:

This statement explores the ways in which language and art making approach description of spiritual and largely ineffable experiences. Through the lens of Rudolf Otto’s discussion of the numinous, visual languages, including darkness, scale and silence, are explored as methods for expression of the spiritual. Throughout the exploration of material and process, an emphasis is placed on exploring a relationship between the transcendental and the everyday, between the physical and spiritual world. The making process is highlighted for its ability to create space and time to reflect on these questions. Printmaking as a translator of both object and image plays an important role in bridging leaps from personal studio practices to a shared experience of looking.
Raised to view my existence through the lens of religion, specifically Christianity, I am often confronted with an inability to express the significance of the spiritual in my life. I realize that this failure to describe the metaphysical is not limited to my own experience and certainly not only to those who profess to be religious. The continual and inevitable falling short of language to describe the spiritual has been the subject of much art, music, poetry, and literature. Disjuncts between the material, banal world and the internal experience of the transcendental creates a challenge for those wishing to have a discourse surrounding moments when these domains intersect. Within my artistic practice I am concerned with simultaneous need to make tangible attempts to understand our own existence, and the impossibility of ever fully doing so. In order to confront these ideas, my work operates with a certain visual language that seeks to communicate such a spiritual or religious experience. This language includes notions of the body, its presence and absence, the need to touch and grasp, and scale— specifically the miniature or handheld.

Early 20th century theologian, Rudolf Otto in his book The Idea of the Holy coins the term ‘numinous’; he defines the term as something outside of the self which causes “the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (Otto 10). My work is currently situated within a longstanding conversation with the numinous, which has been a subject of art-making perhaps as long as people have been making. Otto later addresses attempts to express the numinous through both religion and art making, emphasizing the difficulty of the task. He recognizes, in religious imagery and language, a tendency toward utilizing the ‘mysterious’ and ‘uncomprehended’ to describe or evoke the divine. Otto cites the “special emotional virtue attaching to words like ‘Halleluja’, kyrie eleison, ‘Selah’, just because they are ‘wholly other’ and convey no clear
meaning” (Otto 65). For me, making art provides a particular opportunity in which to explore that which is ‘other’ or may have no clear meaning.

Within the trajectory of Western art, Otto draws out two methods of depicting the numinous, through the “negative, viz. darkness and silence” (Otto 66). Within my artistic practice, I work to create a certain silence, which allows the viewer to achieve a quiet within themselves through looking. I set out to create quiet through being silent myself, creating a quiet space or time for prayer or contemplation, traces of which the viewer is invited to consider.

In an effort to create these spaces for contemplation and quiet, I make objects which develop personal significance to me. I become quite attached to the situations and objects which I have set out to facilitate my own reflection. This method of working places a special importance on my own process of creating the work itself and the work taking form as a trace of a past action.

Anish Kapoor is an artist who is dealing largely with the numinous, yet outside of the context of any specific religion. His early pigment pieces titled, 1000 Names (Fig. 1), appear like colorful icebergs protruding from the surface of the floor or wall, suggesting that they are part of a larger invisible whole. He speaks of emptying his works, “making things voided.” Yet, he acknowledges that this attempt inevitably in turn fills the work instead with, in Kapoor’s words, “something unspeakable, unknowable, unmeetable” (Kapoor). Kapoor’s pigment pieces have the appearance of being partially submerged underneath the floor, a quality which allows for the viewer’s to enter and complete the work, contemplating both the mechanisms behind Kapoor’s construction and the life of the work itself in wholeness, rather than the partialness which the artist presents.
Ann Hamilton, an artist who works largely in installation, strives to create work which allows for an audience to gather and “be alone together”; her work relies on a sense of connection outside of the self. In an interview with Krista Tippett, speaks of an importance of creating headspace for herself to think during the making process, “something about the rhythm of hands being busy and then your body falls open to absorb and concentrate on what you’re listening to, but not completely because you have two concentrations. And then from that, that sort of cultivates a kind of attention.” (Hamilton) The attention cultivated by this action of the hands is a space in which I locate my making process.

In *Turning Over, Back* (Fig. 2), a scanned Bible floats in the center of a dark panel, the text of sewn over line by line with a single strand of thread. In making this piece, I was
eager to create a space for these two concentrations of which Hamilton speaks. The thread which follows each line of the text is meant to cover the passage as I read it, both a record of my own attention and an act of erasure. The text is made unavailable both to myself and the viewer, yet the making process and a certain relationship to the text is expressed. The silence of the piece allows the viewer an opportunity to enter the work and to consider its making.

Fig. 2 - *Turning Over, Back*, 2015, photolithography on muslin, 13 x 14 in.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit considers the significance of resting in unknowns, particularly through wandering physically into unknown territory. It is within this
context that she draws from a section on ‘emptiness’ in Stephen Batchelor’s *Buddhism Without Beliefs:*

“*shul*, a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by— a footprint, for example. In other contexts, shul is used to describe the scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the channel worn through rock where a river runs in the flood, the indentation in grass where an animal slept last night. All of these are shul the impression of something that used to be there. A path is a shul because it is an impression in the ground left by the regular tread of feet, which has kept it clear of obstructions and maintained it for the use of others.” (51)

*Shul* is a great example of how I want my work to operate; I cling especially to the idea of keeping a path clear and maintained for the use of others. The description also an appropriate link to my work in terms of describing bodily absence in relationship to the earth.

Last year, I witnessed a man kneeled in prayer in a secluded grassy area. Upon passing by the spot a little later, the man had left, but his impression held in the grass. I was struck by the record of an act of devotion matched with its location in something so the ephemeral as grass. My response was to build a space for myself, utilizing grass, in which I could record my own time in prayer. This project (Fig. 3) has been a point of departure from which much of my current work has developed. The proposal was to construct a box $5' \times 3' \times 6''$ and to grow grass (both seed and sod) within it, subsequently providing water and light for my small indoor lawn. I have used this spaces as an area for prayer, the grass shaping to my body after repeated use, in an effort to create a physical impression of a spiritual process.
From this project, I created *Wake* (Fig. 4), utilizing photolithography, a process which allows photographic imagery to be translated into print. Making an image of the grass impression through photography and then printmaking effectively converts the experience into an image that the viewer can enter and contemplate in a similar way to my contemplation within the grass box itself. The image is rendered soft and not entirely comprehensible. Use of transparent inks became essential to the final product as the grass becomes as elusive as my original experience of prayer.

Having been translated into print, the impression of my body in grass becomes “shul” in another sense. Solnit describes the creation of a path “maintained for the use of others”. This is a concept which I have attached to the role printmaking in my own work. As an object facilitating
my own prayer or contemplation, is translated into print, it becomes a path for the viewer to experience his or her own quiet. For this reason, much of my work requires a certain attention and proximity of looking.

Fig. 4 - Wake, 2015, photolithography on paper, 30 x 40 in.

*Wake* recalls for me Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas*, ephemeral land works which she created following her exile from Cuba in 1961. Consistent throughout her investigations, an impression or silhouette of her body in the earth, created in natural materials, begins to outline the island of Cuba itself. One piece in particular, *Isla* (Fig. 5), is a large black and white photograph of a Silueta that she made in the mud. This piece is a unique example of a transformation of the original documentation of Mendieta’s work into a more contemplative piece. The photograph,
taken head on and turned ninety degrees, relates to the viewer’s body in a way that evokes both the presence and absence of the artist.

Another example of an artist employing traces of the body in her work is Janine Antoni, especially in *Lick and Lather* (Fig. 6). The piece itself consists of a series of seven chocolate and seven soap self-portrait busts, each of which Antoni has shaped through licking or washing herself. Of the piece, Antoni says “For me, that removal is a generous act, in the sense that it creates a place for the viewer. Imagining the process is so much more powerful than watching
me do it.” (Antoni) She speaks of an effort to “remove in an effort to connect,” meaning that the removal of her body, of information about the act, allows the viewer the freedom to enter the work themselves.

![Image of two sculpted busts](image)

Fig. 6 - Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather*, 1993

The relationship and coexistence of absence and presence is a theme which recurs within my work. I consider this relationship as inherent to the medium of printmaking. An image is created only as it is also separated from the plate; the final product is an impression, a translation or estimation of some original. Additionally the process of photolithography, which plays a role in each of my works discussed here, incorporates the photograph as a first or initial act of removal.

Antoni throughout her work employs materials with a rich history and a wide range of collective associations. Her use of chocolate and soap hones in on their physical properties and metaphorical potential, chocolate as a symbol of indulgence and soap of cleansing purifying.
Through the use of common or ubiquitous materials (grass, salt, bleach, dyes) in my work, I map a relationship between the everyday and the sublime. I am deeply interested in where these intersect—again, how we navigate a pull toward the something outside of ourselves while existing within the limitations of an often mundane physical world. I am drawn to these materials for their potential to hold a compelling metaphorical meaning.

Fig. 7 - the hand being the measure, 2015, photolithography on paper, 11.5 x 15.5 in.

In the early stages leading up to the series of prints, the hand being the measure (Fig. 7), I dyed strips of canvas black and later dipped them in bleach. I began working with salt in the dyeing process— it helps the dye take to the fabric— and was drawn to consider its multiple roles and uses as a material. In his book Salt: A World History, Mark Kurlansky delves into the many
and various associations salt has had across time. In his introduction, he notes, referring to the use of salt as a primary tool for preservation until very recently, “This ability to preserve, to protect against decay, as well as to sustain life has given salt a broad metaphorical importance—what Freud might have considered an irrational attachment to salt, a seemingly trivial object, because in our unconscious, we associate it with longevity and permanence, which are of boundless significance” (Kurlansky 7). Kurlansky describes a collective tendency to try to negotiate between the complex cultural history of salt and its role in everyday life. I relate this concept directly to my thoughts about the spiritual and the everyday, and the relationship of each to religion. There is a fine line between banal and sublime, one which is often impossible to predict or define.

Bleach is a material I am drawn to for it’s ubiquity as a household item, but additionally for its nature as both an agent of cleansing and destruction. In his book, Kurlansky also covers bleaching, a process derived from chlorine. In this short passage, he covers the range of uses for chlorine, from water treatment and cleaning to its use in gas warfare, most notably in mustard gas. This dual nature of chlorine (or household bleach) makes for an interesting tension visually. In working with the dyed canvas pieces, dipping them into bleach essentially creates a burn, which is reflected in the captured interaction between the bleach and the dye. The image burned into the cloth appears explosive, cosmic— a result of chemical reaction, yet calling to mind a momentous event. Within the hand is the measure, a potential skyscape is contained within the space of a few square inches. This relationship between cosmic and handheld, sky and touch, draws on the notion of having a “grasp” as both a physical and mental handling.
Scale necessarily has a relationship with the numinous, as the concept itself involves a distinction between oneself and something larger. Susan Stewart writes in *On Longing* in depth on the subject, she notes that “the hand [is] the measure of the miniature”. (46) Both miniatures and religious ritual, each heavily reliant on material and touch, are means to approach understanding of the incomprehensible. Both reflect an effort to translate or reiterate that which is ineffable.

The bleached canvas pieces are measured to fit comfortably in the hand and it is important to me that they are held—turned over and over— as a means for contemplation, analogous to the role of a worry stone. The small cosmic explosion which occurs on each piece
provides a visual point of focus for the holder. Yet, the canvas strips themselves- as with the box of grass- remain a largely private part of my studio practice. The prints which make up the hand being the measure are a result of the strips having been scanned and printed onto a Japanese paper and then cut out and fixed to paper using chine-collé technique. Thus the original fabric is translated into print, and physical touch becomes separate from the experience of the work. Instead, the viewer is invited to consider the interactions between bleach and dye. Creating prints of these small pieces allows me to draw attention to their scale, while harnessing the desire to touch and eliminating touch simultaneously. Treating the objects with such care and elevating them through print, has the effect of communicating to the viewer the significance of this object.

Gaston Bachelard writes, “The cleverer I am in miniaturizing the world the better I possess it.” (150) Through the miniature, touch and the handheld we attempt to collect, contain and understand the world around us, any notion of the divine, and our own selves. These modes reveal a shared language between the worlds of religion and art making. Within my own work I strive to introduce concepts of the cosmic and eternal through small and unimposing works.

“One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small”

Gaston Bachelard

When one is overwhelmed with one’s own smallness, turning from logic becomes necessary. Turning to quiet, turning to making, to listening, finding ways of being “alone, together” as Ann Hamilton put it, are all ways of attempting to grasp what cannot be understood. It has been through my own personal exploration of these ideas through making and through printmaking specifically that I have created a space for myself to enter and grapple with a necessary silence.
Bibliography


