Transformation Through Mortality

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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

Transformation Through Mortality

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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 Masters of Fine Arts

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Abstract

Throughout this paper I address topics of spirituality, time and rituals. These are things that I am constantly doing, reading about and experiencing. My art practice and the work I make are continually influenced by my journey through this mortal existence. Through understanding the movement of time geologically, physically and perceptually, I gain a greater understanding of the importance of this life and how I can become a better person. I have found that through rituals, change will begin to develop and I can better myself. These rituals range from personal to family and community development.

Some of the materials I use have a transformative aspect within them. Water and wax can change states multiple times becoming solids, liquids and gases. Clay chemically changes to ceramic once fired. By comparing and using the transformation and change of these materials, they can be used as a metaphor for human life. We can search and find what we need to change within ourselves to make this world a better place.
Introduction

As an artist, my art is tied to my spirituality. My spirituality is my faith, my religion, my relationship with God. My spirituality urges me to seek for truth in all that I do on my journey in mortality. As an artist, I search for that feeling of truth as I create. That gut feeling of truth is how I know I’m on the right track, and I have learned to trust that feeling as part of my artistic process. Creating is a spiritual experience and when I get that gut feeling of truth, there comes with it an urgency to create, usually not understanding what the piece means or where it is going. My process of making is like a dance. I gather and assemble materials together, then pull back, allowing the art to speak; to have a conversation and see what else it may need. It’s through this dance that I am able to find the truth that the art speaks.

As I seek for truth in creating art, I use duration of time, materials and rituals to bring about transformation and to highlight the journey of mortality. My hope is that the viewer will also experience a transformation and find truth in their journey as they interact with my art. I find the process of making art transformative. I yearn to be part of the building and making process and to sweat for my art; to get surrounded by the work and release my physical energy as I create. As the viewer experiences the work, it demands patience and observation. By pushing away the tendencies for immediate gratification, one’s patience is rewarded with a transformation within and hopefully insights to more truth.
Time

There are cycles that occur naturally in the world: birth and death, rotations of the earth and moon, the changing of the seasons, the rise and fall of ocean tides. There is a rhythm; a time element to all of these things. The Bible speaks of time. In Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 it reads, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted". As people have sought to understand time, tracking and measuring it, we have learned that there is a reality of time and a variety of perceptions of time.

Reality of Time

Picture an hourglass: it is a literal time keeper. You start by flipping it over so the sand begins to fall down. The top, filled with the sand, represents the future; the time that will happen. As it falls, the sand hits the neck. It is in the present for that one instant. After the sand passes through the neck, it continues to fall to the bottom. Those grains have fallen into the past. You can’t change that. That is the reality of time; always moving at a constant flowing pace.

In his book, A Brief History of Time, Stephen Hawking, a renowned theoretical physicist, states that time is directional. To illustrate this point, he describes a cup sitting on top of a table, then falling and shattering on the ground. Now, imagine this event happening backwards: the glass re-knitting itself, forming a cup and then jumping on top of the table. We understand that the latter example is backwards. That sequence of events doesn’t happen in real life. The second law of Thermodynamics actually forbids it. “In any closed system disorder, or entropy, always increases with time.” Disorder meaning decay, destruction, wear, breaking down, aging, etc.
Hawking says, “Disorder increases with time because we measure time in the direction in which disorder increases.” Time moves forward. For example, as humans, we age over time. Our bodies begin to wear and break down, leading eventually to death. There is a beginning and an end. Hawking describes these truths as arrows of time, saying it “distinguishes the past from the future, giving a direction to time.” It is constantly moving forward.

The perception of time, on the other hand is very different. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist, describes the difference between the perception of time and the reality of time as “personal time” and “clock time.” Personal time is the time a person thinks it takes to complete a task or a movement. Clock time is the actual time that the average person takes to complete a task or a movement. Clock time is the reality of time: it does not wait, slow, or stutter. The reality of time is constant and continues to move ahead.

Perception of Time

In his book, The Principles of Psychology, William James a philosopher and psychologist, has a chapter “The Perception of Time”, where he speaks about how humans view and understand time. He says, “A space we measure by pacing appears longer than one we traverse with no thought of its length.” Think back to a time you were driving to a location you have never been to before. As you travel to new locations you are more aware of the different homes, trees, sounds, smells, roads and street addresses; you are trying to determine where your next turn is. It seems to take longer then what your Google Maps had indicated. In contrast, if you are traveling to somewhere familiar, your mind isn’t constantly experiencing the newness of your environment.
Your traveling time will never be exactly the same to and from the same two locations. Although your personal time will vary with the clock time, there is a noticeable difference in how you feel and understand the time spent during a drive to a new location, verses a familiar location.

Time and Materials

I am interested in the difference between “personal time” and “clock time” as described by Sacks, and sought to illustrate this difference visually through my Lewis Center first floor gallery performance piece Minutiae (Fig. 1). This performance lasted nearly one hour and twenty-four minutes. The structure I employed was made from wax, stained wood, sisal twine,

Fig. 1
Samuel Carpenter
Minutiae, 2017
Wood, Sisal Twine, Gravel, Wax, Silica Sand, Steel, Electric Hotplate
186 x 64 x 44 inches
From the Artist
gravel, silica sand, and steel. The performance was made of repeated motions of pouring wax down a line of sisal for what I perceived to be one minute without counting, and then walking to refill the ladle with more wax.

Sand was the base of the piece. I applied it as a flat plane, about one hundred eighty inches by sixty inches, which touched the entirety of the back wall and part of the side walls. The sand was brushed smooth with no prints left behind. Placed in the sand was a minimal wooden structure, dark stained, that is one hundred twenty inches wide by nineteen inches deep by forty four inches tall. Two vertical structures held in place a horizontal wood crossbeam, to which sixty lengths of sisal twine were tied, each suspending a stone.

To the right side of this armature was a twelve inch steel pot with two steel ladles. The ladles have wooden handles, which are stained slightly lighter than the wooden frame. The pot rested on a coiled electric burner. Wax was melted down to be prepared for pouring during the performance. The wax had a little film at the top that began to harden as it cooled.

When the performance begins I walk onto the sand and lift out a ladle with wax from the pot. I walk over to the first line of sisal and begin to pour down the line for what I perceive to be one minute. The wax is at a temperature that is near its cooling point, so it borders between liquid and solid. This allows the wax to harden as it flows downward. There is a lot of wax that drips from the pouring and splashes on the sand. After my perceived minute is done, I walk back to the pot and replace my ladle with the other one that has been warming to minimize the wax buildup. This was repeated sixty times representing an hour of my perceived time.

As the wax poured down the vertical line, the drippings that pooled on the floor slowly created a horizontal line of wax: a miniature landscape. The vertical lines in the piece draw the
eye up or down, symbolizing looking up towards heaven, or heaven giving from above. The act of pouring the wax is one of giving; it’s a creation.

The wax needed to be changed in order for it to accomplish its purpose. Over time, it went from a solid to a liquid; poured and then formed into a new state that then hardens again. This change can be likened to returning to the pot to spiritually refill. When change happens within a person, it occurs over time; a portion of their thoughts have been altered.

A continual pathway was created as I walked in a loop (Fig. 2). With each act of returning to the pot to get more wax, this loop progressively got larger as I walked over familiar paths already trodden, but reaching further and gaining more ground than before.

Among other contemporary artists using walking in instrumental ways, Richard Long’s work stands out. In his piece *A Line Made By Walking* (Fig. 3), 1967, Long walked back and forth in a field, creating a line where the grass had been trodden over again and again, allowing the light to reflect on it differently than on the unaltered grass. He was the only one present, and after he was finished he took a photograph of
the line that was created. When the work is displayed, the viewer sees a photograph of the remnant of his walking, which is the line. Long did this piece while he was in graduate school and later said, “My first work made by walking … was a straight line in a grass field, which was also my own path, going ‘nowhere’.” In our journey in mortality, we will walk over familiar paths or at times feel as if we are going nowhere. The challenge is to continue to reach beyond and stretch—to be refilled.

The act of returning to the pot to refill is important. There are many things I do daily and weekly to refill my spirituality: I return to church each week; I return to prayer and scripture study daily. These rituals help in keeping me on my path, realigning my focus and allowing me to change and reach further in my devotion. This returning and growing doesn’t happen quickly: it is a process that happens over time: “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little”.

Fig. 3
Richard Long
A Line Made by Walking, 1967
Photograph
From richardlong.org
Minutiae has multiple elements of time that are combined together. There is a measurement of geological time between the stones and the sand. Over time, though it takes many years, erosion causes stone to wear and break down. There is the presence of my perception of time. A minute is a small measurement when compared to an hour or a day. As the years go by, that minute continually gets smaller, almost nonexistent or trivial. The wax that is cooling and transforming back to a solid is a marker of a passage of time and it also makes that passage of time physical by the residue that has been made.

As the performance went on I began to get physically tired. The position I put myself in to see and pour began to strain my body. There was also a mental fatigue that developed. I was concentrating very hard, trying to get the wax to pour down the twine. About halfway through I began to chant to myself, “Endure. Endure. Endure.” Soon after though, it turned into a prayer, where I focused on my breathing and began to repeatedly say, “God, help me.” There were times where it felt like I did gain some endurance and help; some relief and strength.

Teaching Hsieh is a performance artist. In his work One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Fig. 4), he purchased a time clock and every hour, on the hour, for a full year he punched in, creating a time stamp on the timecard. He says the length of one year is his “symbol for life”, while “punching a time clock is my symbol for work”. This symbol for work is additionally emphasized by the uniform he wears, consisting of a buttoned up long shirt, a name patch, pants and boots.

In Minutiae I used the length of one hour as the perimeter for my performance and spent that time documenting it’s duration. To emphasize this time continuation, Hsieh choose to shave his head and face, and did not shave again until he was finished with the work a year later. He
also took a photograph of himself next to the time clock each time he clocked in. He turned these images into a film—nearly 8700 images viewed in about six minutes. As the film is watched, the viewer sees Hsieh’s hair slowly grow out to go a little beyond his shoulders.

Although Hsieh was getting about ten hours of sleep every day, it wasn’t consecutive because he needed to be awake every hour. He began to have bad dreams where he wanted to quit. “I dreamed I wanted to stop punching the time clock and stop being an artist.”

Hsieh didn’t stand in the same exact place every time a photo was taken, so within the film his body is shaking and moving rapidly, almost appearing as if he were having convulsions. This shaking alludes to the weakness his body and mind underwent throughout his performance. His appearance also changed drastically in the film. You can see his physical body wearing down, getting more and more tired. It is apparent that he wants to quit. Those physical and mental experiences are parallel to my own experience.
as I performed *Minutiae*. Although on a much smaller scale, I also felt a physical and mental weakening.

**Rock Project**

There are instances throughout biblical history where people travel to the peaks of mountains to commune with God. I feel that the journey to the mountain is of upmost importance. It is in the preparation, in getting ready to call upon God for guidance, that is key. I grew up surrounded by the mountains and see them as sacred places where we can slow down, escape the journey of mortality and commune with God.

As the Mormon Pioneers built a temple in Salt Lake City, Utah, they traveled to a granite quarry in the mountains, and occasionally used water to help in mining the stone. In the winter, they would drill multiple holes into the granite, fill the holes with water and then plug the top. The water would freeze and then expand. The expansion would crack a large chunk of rock off the mountain. The bolder would then be taken to the temple and cut up into the specific sized pieces.

I have collected three stones from areas I that have lived in my adult life. I have journeyed to these locations looking for stones. These stones are pieces of the mountain that I have brought with me. When each stone was found it weighed between seventeen and twenty five pounds and was roughly ten cubic inches.

Within my *Rock Project* (Fig. 5 and 6), I take those stones, submerge them into buckets of water and put them into a freezer. One of the properties of water is that it will go wherever it can. Rocks have little grooves and crevices, so the water will flow into those areas. When the water freezes, it begins to expand, and over time it slowly breaks down the stones, as it did in the
rock quarry. After the water has completely frozen, I take rocks out and put them into a pot to boil them. Putting extreme temperatures on the rocks in a short timeframe causes stress and fragmentation. I then collect the sediment that has been broken off. The process is then repeated over and over.

I see my Rock Project as being a lifelong project, one that cannot be rushed. Participating in this ritual forces me to slow down: I cannot rush the freezing and melting process. It allows me to metaphorically travel to the mountains, commune with God and reflect on my journey.

In Wolfgang Laib’s piece Milkstone (Fig. 7) there is a white, rectangular marble stone which he has sanded smooth, with a lip of one eighth inch around the edge. The stone is placed on the floor and a little bit of milk is poured onto the stone. He then pushes the milk all around
until the stone is covered. More milk is added and the process is repeated until an even surface tension is created across the stone.

Fig. 7
Wolfgang Laib
*Milkstone*, 2010
Marble, Milk
2½ x 11¼ x 15 inches
From Buchmann Galerie, buchmanngalerie.com

Since milk curdles and becomes sour, the stone needs to be cleaned every evening and then poured again the next morning. Laib teaches the gallery or museum staff how to go about doing this. Describing her experience pouring the stone, Beth Skirkanich, an exhibits specialist says, “You have to concentrate, you have to be patient, or it will spill. It’s a deal between the stone and the person doing it. There’s a give and take.” Pouring the milk onto the stone cannot be
rushed. Similar to my *Rock Project*, this piece also requires the participant to slow down, to be reflective and patient.

The erosion process is breaking down my stones. They are placed in extreme circumstances in order to produce sediment. The longevity of this project conjures up thoughts of the Children of Israel in the Old Testament. They wander in the wilderness for forty years that God “might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end.” \(^{12}\) They were in extreme circumstances as God sought to help them transform and become better. During this long time of wandering, God did not forget them; He daily fed them Manna from heaven. It is the time we spend in extreme circumstances along our mortal journey that transforms us.
Rituals

Rituals are actions done by all societies, cultures and people throughout the world. These actions or behaviors are specific and do not alter or change often. Rituals are interconnected to time on multiple levels. Like time, they cannot be avoided. Whether or not a person realizes it, they participate in some type of ritual. It takes time to physically perform the ritual. In many instances, it also takes a long period of time to fully realize and experience the transformation of that performed ritual.

Oliver Sacks shares an experience he had with one of his patients who had Parkinson’s disease. He would often see his patient, Miron, sitting still in the hallway. At different times, Sacks would see Miron with one of his hands hovering over his knee or near his face. One day he decided to ask Miron about the different “frozen poses” Sacks had seen him doing. Angrily Miron responded, “What do you mean, ‘frozen poses’? I was just wiping my nose.” At first, he thought Miron was joking with him, but after that conversation Sacks would again see Miron on the ground sitting still in these frozen poses. Sacks then proceeded to test Miron by taking his photograph periodically for a few hours. After he was done photographing, Sacks stapled them together and flipped through the images. By flipping through the images, it sped up Miron’s movements to reveal his actions. Sacks was surprised to see that Miron really was wiping his nose, but at a very slow speed.

This idea of frozen poses is interesting to me. Rituals are transformative in nature. The daily marks we make are indicators of our daily rituals: they show what we do most often and thus, who we are. These marks might be cryptic to the public, but to the maker they are a source
of identity and memory. By encasing moments in time, or frozen poses, we are capturing moments of transformation.

Rituals and Materials

In my piece, *Bodily Impressions Over Twenty-one Days on Dining Room Table* (Fig. 8 and 9), I wanted to capture moments of transformation happening within my own family. So, with the permission of my wife, I rolled out a solid slab of clay that covered the top of my dining room table. I wrapped the clay with plastic to keep it from drying out.

Whenever my family and I, or visiting friends, would sit around the table, the weight and pressure we applied would displace the clay and leave a mark. Throughout the time the clay was on my table I made written documentation of the marks, movements and dialog of those surrounding the table. After a month, I cut the clay into slabs, and fired them in a kiln to 2345°F. At this temperature, the clay has vitrified—it has changed, or transformed, to glass—it is no longer porous. When the slab was clay, it was malleable and porous—
accepting the energy willingly from me, family, and friends. By vitrifying the clay, it sealed that energy into the form; the moments were encased in time and serve as a reminder of identity and memory.

I built a steel table based off of my dining table dimensions to allude to what things would normally happen at a table: food, eating, dialog, conversation, movement, gesture, frustration, arguments, smiles, crying, laughing, reading, studying or contemplation. These objects, emotions and actions slowly, day by day, contribute to who we are.

During the late 1980’s, artist Dominique Mazeaud began an art project called The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River. On the same day every month, Mazeaud went to the river and picked up the trash strewn along the banks and in the water. She then took all of the collected trash and debris and displayed it for people to come and see. She also kept a diary of her experiences with this project and the river. Similar to my piece, Bodily Impressions Over Twenty-one Days on Dining Room Table, Mazeaud captured moments of transformation happening within the river and along its banks through her rituals of walking, collecting and displaying.

The Sacred and Profane

Hans H. Penner, Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College, wrote the Encyclopedia Britannica article on Ritual. Penner uses the terms “sacred (the transcendent realm) and profane (the realm of time, space, and cause and effect)” when describing rituals.

What is sacred or profane may differ from one culture to the next. I am a Christian, and am thus a member of that culture. More specifically, I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and my identity is strongly connected and intertwined in the LDS
culture. Penner indicates that one identifying characteristic of a ritual is a feeling or emotion one gets when encountering the sacred. It doesn’t matter if the emotion is positive or negative. One person could be having a transformative experience and be completely consumed in the action, while another person could have feelings of interest and others might even be scared of the process or fearful of the outcome.

Religions are full of examples of rituals. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ introduces a new ritual to His followers called the Sacrament. In the Bible, the book of Matthew 26: 26-28 speaks of this ritual. “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

This ritual was instituted for the followers of Christ to remember Christ and His Atoning sacrifice. I partake of this Sacrament ritual each week during my church service. I have participated in this ritual since I was a child, and I know that by doing so, I have come closer to Christ. This weekly action of remembering Him has been transformative over a lifetime as I have tried to grow closer to Him.

Death often gives place for many rituals. The book, Strengthening Our Families, edited by David C. Dollahite states, “Buddhist and Shinto funerary [rituals] are meant to help deceased family members on their way in the afterworld. They also provide opportunities for family members to grieve, support one another, and remember their ancestors.”

Lewis Hyde, in his book The Gift, speaks of a ritual he terms to be “threshold gifts”. Threshold gifts are gifts that make the passage from one place or state into another. He speaks of
a common funerary custom in the country of Wales, dating back to a couple centuries ago. The coffin of a recently deceased person was placed on “bier”\textsuperscript{19}, or a stand specifically for the coffin to be placed upon. It is elevated for viewing and can easily be moved around. The coffin was placed on the bier, just outside the door of the house of the deceased. One of the family members would give bread or cheese to the poor, but the food was distributed over the coffin. Often, this food would have money baked or cured inside. The poor, knowing of this custom, would gather gifts of their own, whether flowers or herbs, to give. These gifts from the poor were “to grace the coffin”; to honor the dead, and decorate the coffin.\textsuperscript{20}

The Welsh people believed that death was not the end, but that there is another area where the spirit will dwell. Thus, their threshold gifts make the passage from one place (earth) into another (spirit world). These threshold gifts are found in many other places: baby showers, birthdays, anniversaries, graduation, weddings.

These threshold gifts represent a transformation in two people. First, the receiver is approaching a new state in their life and they are profited not only with the gift, but with this new threshold in their life. The second is the giver. He is leaving his current state by giving his state to the receiver and bestowing the gift.

Hyde admits that he favors the threshold of death, because of the imagery it provides.\textsuperscript{21} In order for a true transformation to occur, the old life must die so that the new life can enter.

**Balance and Rituals**

In my work, *Uplifted Beacon* (Fig. 10), there are two red straps that run parallel to each other about five and a half feet above the ground. They’re connected to two adjacent walls, stretching across a corner, hooked to eyelet screws in the wall. Both straps have extra length:
one strap is hanging and touching the ground, the other’s excess is loosely wound around the parallel straps.

There is a ceramic piece in between the two parallel straps and is held in place by their tension. It is cylindrical with a spiraling upward motion and is about eighteen inches tall and seven inches deep. The ceramic is thick and condensed at the bottom, gradually decreasing in density towards the top. The ceramic piece has an interior steel armature. There is a second ceramic piece on the floor with the excess strap going through it. It is a dome-like structure built from the same ceramic and steel, about four inches tall and four inches wide. Both of the ceramic pieces have multiple cracks and breaks, exposing the dark steel structure below.

To create the ceramic pieces, I took fencing wire and cut it into sheets, bending it to make forms. I did this multiple times in order to create layers and more crossing joints. I put clay chunks into some sections, and then dipped the entire piece into slip. As the clay is fired in the
kiln, it goes under a transformation. The chemicals are actually changed and it becomes a new substance. The clay shrinks around the steel armature, causing the ceramic to crack. The clay alludes to life, to a body.

I used straps to hold the ceramic piece, and they became a medium within the work. Straps are common tools used to secure or apply pressure, in order that objects don’t move or shift. They connote images of labor, hard work and masculinity. Their purpose is to bind. In this piece, I felt an urgency to assemble materials together. The straps were an immediate solution and created a contrast to the made objects.

The ceramic form is propped up precariously; it’s being held up very lightly and is fragile. It is seeking a balance; seeking to hold itself up, such as what we do in our mortal journey. Each person has many roles that they need to fill in life; for me, I am a father, a husband, a son, a student, an employee, a provider, the list can go on and on. As I seek to find balance in fulfilling all of my roles, there are times when I feel tension, when I feel that I am propped up precariously and am on the verge of collapse.

Wolfgang Laib’s, Milkstone, has similar notes of balance. As Skirkanich said, you need to be patient and concentrate as you are pouring the stone. In addition to requiring the participant to slow down, as discussed in relation to my Rock Project, it also requires balance. To pour the stone and work with the milk, there needs to be balance. If you move too quickly or are unsteady, the milk will spill.

There is more to the nightly cleaning of the slab than simply throwing out the milk. Skirkanich says, “You take a cheesecloth rag and fold it and soak up the milk, and wring it out, and then refold it and lay it down again. It’s very ritualistic. A beautiful process, actually.”
While seeking for balance on my journey in mortality, rituals like prayer, scripture study and partaking of the sacrament have enabled me to find balance. But balance isn’t something that you can find and then check off your list. It needs to be kept and nurtured by the regular performance of rituals.

**Family Rituals**

In her article, *Maintaining Family Memories through Symbolic Action: Young Adults' Perceptions of Family Rituals in Their Families of Origin*, Ria Smit, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg, states that rituals are “promoters of stability in daily family life as well as challenging times of strain.” Rituals being viewed through the lens of “repetitive behavior to which we attach symbolic meaning.” These family rituals literally tie us together emotionally and give meaning and success to the family members’ lives. What are these family rituals? They can vary between each family, but the important aspect of a ritual is that it gives "meaningful interaction and contact" to those who are involved.

William Doherty, a family counselor and scholar, states in his book *The Intentional Family: How To Build Family Ties In Our Modern World*, “At heart, the Intentional Family is a ritualizing family. It creates patterns of connecting through everyday family rituals, seasonal celebrations, special occasions, and community involvement.”

For example, the daily performances of preparing food together, eating together and cleaning up afterwards all have meaningful interaction. It is not simply the physical act of going through the motions, but the nurturing of relationships as those tasks and rituals are taking place that give meaning. Daily rituals provide a foundation in family life that creates stability for the
family members. When times of stress or chaos enter life, these rituals are there, providing strength and familiarity.

Smit conducted a study among young adults in South Africa to see how they viewed their family rituals. One participant of the study said, “What we do in our family in terms of rituals and traditions are important. Why? Because it helps us to feel the connection among us and it reminds us of who we are. We feel some sort of connection and wholeness…The special things we do together remind us and show others that our life, our family has meaning.”

Living in a society that is so impacted by social media, these rituals gain greater importance, giving family members connection, instead of isolation.

In the book *Helping and Healing Our Families*, many religious families are interviewed about rituals that have sacred meaning for them. One Catholic family described how each year at Christmas, the kids run down to the tree and before opening their presents, they kneel as a family to say a prayer of gratitude for Jesus. One year, the father, Brian, told the kids not to get up so early. He said, “But no, they’d got up early. [But] the kids were just waiting; they were all kneeling down and waiting right under the tree. I’m like, ‘Wow!’ And they did it…on their own.”

**Rituals as a Protection**

Rituals can be protective in nature. Nancy Gibbs wrote an article for *Time Magazine* in 2006 entitled *The Magic of the Family Meal* and stated, “There is something about a [regularly, reliably] shared meal… that anchors a family.” Gibbs spoke of the “power of this habit” or ritual, and said that “social scientists say such communion acts as a kind of vaccine, protecting kids from all manner of harm.”
But much of the benefits from this ritual of eating together as a family, aren’t witnessed until much time has passed. Gibbs continues, “It’s in the teenage years that this daily investment pays some of its biggest dividends. Studies show that the more often families eat together, the less likely kids are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay having sex, eat their vegetables, learn big words and know which fork to use.” As previously stated, rituals are interconnected with time. In many instances, it takes a long period of time to fully realize and experience all the effects of a performed ritual.

The Old Testament illustrates the reality of the protective nature of rituals. The Lord tells the Israelites in Exodus chapter twelve that in order to protect themselves from the coming plague, they must take a lamb “And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it.” The Lord then gives them specific instructions that they must follow in this ritual. He continues, “And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.” Those people who participated in this ritual were passed over and were protected. This ritual of the Passover is still practiced in the Jewish faith.

Performance Rituals

Janice Ross is a Lecturer in Dance History at Stanford University, and wrote an article entitled Anna Halprin’s Urban Rituals. Halprin has been a well known dancer and performance artist since the 1960s. Ross’s article analyzes some of Halprin’s performances and her ideas behind the work.
One of the most basic rituals Halprin does is a sequence of movements and exercises that she does every morning to get her body moving and her muscles stretched and warmed up. These rituals, called by Halprin “Movement Rituals”, keep her strength and muscle memory from deteriorating. Halprin says, “A way to create ritual is to invest the object of our daily life with new significance. Ritual and ceremony can happen anywhere at any time.”

For Halprin, the most important characteristic of a ritual is “performance.” Anywhere a ritual is done, there is some sort of performative action. When a family sits down to eat and they pray over the food, it is a performative ritual. Athletes rituals are seen and performed throughout a game. For example, when shooting a free throw, some basketball players will slow down and bounce the ball in a specific rhythm. They do this ritual to get into that motion and memory, in order to help them make the shot.

A recent ritual Halprin performed is *Still Dance* (Fig. 11). She performed in the nude a series of twenty different

Fig. 11
Anna Halprin
*Still Dance*, 1999
Photograph by Eeo Stubblefield
From Eeo Stubblefield, stilldance.net
renditions of the “final ritual of life”. Halprin’s body was coated in different natural materials such as clay, sand, bark, grass, mud, and plants. She would then be disguised among her environment. As she lay there, with only her assistant and camera present, the ritual became meditative. In seeing a photo or video of the work, one gets the sense that this work is more contemplative. Seeing Halprin’s body being covered by elemental materials prompts thoughts of the end that will come to us all, but the beauty of the work helps in making this process more peaceful and welcoming.

A Consciousness Uncovered

In my final project, *A Consciousness Uncovered* (Fig. 12), there is a figure made of ceramic and steel resting on a fabricated frame which is connected to casters. Because of the wheels, the body is raised off of the ground about 6 inches. It is life size, about six feet long, and the body is segmented into three pieces. There is a layer of wax that goes down the center of the body and begins to thin, feathering out along the inside of the body. At some points the wax extends outside the body. There is a red strap going through the inside of the body along the back where the spine would be. The strap goes from the bottom of the neck to the ankle where it then loops and connects on itself in the chest. The strap is mostly covered with wax.

Above the horizontal figure is a structure made from wood. It is about 9 feet tall and is attached to and angles off of the wall. The structure is held together at 90 degree angles with clamps and zip ties. It is attached to the wall with roofing brackets and is held against the wall by a strap.

The structure supports a second figure which appears to be coming through a plane made from muslin and wax. There is twine connected to the muslin figure and the structure. There is
poured wax on the structure and the muslin figure. The two figures are facing each other at an acute angle with their feet almost touching.

Similar to *Uplifted Beacon*, I used fencing wire to create a large, wired form in three sections. Each section was dipped into slip and then fired. As in *Uplifted Beacon*, the clay shrunk around the armature, causing the ceramic to crack as it underwent its transformation. These sections are held together, or fastened with a strap to create a larger form in the shape of a figure. The second figure was made by wrapping the first form in plastic, and covering it with muslin that had been dipped in wax.

*A Consciousness Uncovered* alludes to the ritual of death, similar to Halprin’s *Still Dance*, but also to the existence of a Spirit world and a resurrection. As with *Uplifted Beacon*, the clay alludes to life. Clay is from the earth, and thus are all living things, as Adam and Eve were made from the dust of the earth.
For me, the elevated muslin and wax figure represents the spirit that has left the body at death and is now returning. The muslin acts as a plane, or a veil that separates the physical and spiritual worlds. The figure is coming through or passing through this veil in order to be reunited with the body. Poured wax helps in creating the form of the figure.

In *Minutiae* wax was used to make the concept of time physical. Similar to *Minutiae*, I performed a one hour wax pour onto the prone figure, who is dead, alluding to the limited time we have in this life. One hundred years of life is a very short time compared to eternity. Our bodies are slaves to time during our mortal existence on earth. Time ages the body, and over time, our bodies die. Yet, there is hope of a resurrection and a reuniting of the body and spirit.

The spiritual world and the mundane world are interacting in this piece. The figures are in close proximity of each other and are in direct correspondence. The prone figure is resting upon a frame which is attached to casters. The purpose of casters, or wheels, is to transport objects from one place to another. Having them placed under a figure that represents one dead, the casters evoke the passage of the dead at funerals. This is used as a symbol to remember and to metaphorically take our dead with us. Remembering our ancestors, their stories and their sacrifices helps to strengthen our lives. We don’t see the spiritual world with our physical eyes, but it is permeated throughout our existence.

The clamps are holding the joints of the structure together and add an emphasis to tools that are used to bind, holding joints together until they are set with glue. Because the clamps don’t reach all the way around the wood, the zip tie is there to prevent the wood from slipping out. It’s wrapped around the wood and the clamp. This makes me think of Jesus Christ when He is crucified, as nails were driven through His hands and feet, binding His body to the cross.
The presence of clamps also alludes to the presence of a builder or creator. Clamps are used in the process of building and they are generally removed once their function is no longer needed. Christ is the ultimate Builder and Creator. He was also the first to be resurrected and because of Him, our bodies and spirits can be bound together again after death. We will always need Christ.

During Jesus Christ’s ministry on the earth, a synagogue ruler’s daughter died. Christ went with this ruler to see his daughter and said to him, “Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth.” The scriptures say that those in the room laughed at Christ, because they knew she was dead. But Christ “took her by the hand, and called, saying, Maid, arise. And her spirit came again, and she arose straightway.” He opened the way for us to follow. There is hope of a better world and an eternal existence with our families because of Him.

**Conclusion**

Rituals have the power to transform our lives, if we give them the duration of time and commitment necessary to produce a change within. As I search for truth along my mortal journey, I find great comfort and guidance in the metaphors found in the use and transformation of materials as I create art. For me, there is no art without spirituality. The process of making art is spiritual and transformative. It is my desire that as the viewer experiences my work, giving it the time it demands, they can be rewarded with a transformation and hopefully insights about how better to live.
Notes

1 Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 (King James Version)


3 Ibid., 167.

4 Ibid., 164.

5 Oliver Sacks, “SPEED,” in *The Quick and the Dead*, 1st ed (Minneapolis : New York: Walker Art Center ; D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers [distributors], 2009), 84.


8 2 Nephi 28:30 (The Book of Mormon)


10 Ibid.


12 Deuteronomy 8:16 (KJV)


16 Matthew 26:26-28 (KJV)

17 David C. Dollahite and Brigham Young University, eds., *Strengthening Our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 2000), 379.


19 Ibid., 51.

20 Ibid., 52.

21 Ibid., 54.


24 Ibid., 355.

25 Ibid., 356.


30 Ibid.

31 Exodus 12:7 (KJV)

32 Exodus 12:13 (KJV)


34 Ibid., 52.

35 Ibid., 61.

36 Luke 8:52-55 (KJV)
Bibliography


