

PAINTING THEOLOGY: HUMAN ENCOUNTERS WITH DIVINITY

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Abstract

The motivation in the creation of this project is to explore the connections between religion and art, and humanity and divinity through the process and product of painting. Through creating a series of paintings on the topic of encountering divinity, based upon digital abstractions of historical works, my goal was to understand the narratives of my faith tradition in my own context and connect the spiritual to the tangible through the art-making process. Through this process, I have explored the tension and balance between history and modernity in the context of art and religion. Furthermore, abstract art can be a spiritual practice in creation, narrative, and form.

Religion and Art: The Connection

Religion and the arts are historically intertwined; art has always been religious and expressive.¹ Artists make works about religious subjects, religious societies commission art and ban art. Many scholars of religion point to art as they study religion. Modern art, in particular, has adopted a particular spiritual essence, with abstraction being a positive expression of spirituality than traditional imagery². Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky describes art as one of the mightiest elements of spiritual life, differing in form but holding to a common inner purpose³.

So, what is the connection between the two? One key common denominator between religion and art is that they are both expressions of what it means to be human, while also reflecting a desire to connect to the spiritual realm. Religion and art are also both deeply personal and ever-changing. These connection points between religion and art serve as the basis of my project *Painting Theology*, as I explore these themes through the creation of paintings that reflect my own faith tradition.

Project Concept

The project *Painting Theology* is a group of works that are abstractions of historical, religious paintings. As in any ongoing creative project, the form of the project changed as it unfolded. Originally, I was most interested in color, color psychology, and human response to color. While color certainly informed the works and the process of abstraction, as I explored further historical paintings in light of my own faith, I moved into focus onto narrative. Ultimately, the central questions came to be about abstraction and narrative, and the expression of personal faith through the art making process. Through creating the works, several themes emerged, providing questions to guide the painting process:

Connection points between humanity and the divine. How do people encounter and interact with the divine? How does art serve this function?

Understanding narratives in abstract painting. My works seek to depict a specific, known narrative in abstract form. Seeking to explore how that narrative can be understood non-representationally was a compositional endeavor in each work.

Emotional and intellectual responses to form and color. Many abstract expressionist painters discuss the emotions, narratives, or spiritualism in their works, as well as the function of form and color. Furthermore, the study of color psychology was of interest in my idea development (although not specifically important for the final project). Do abstract forms and colors bring forth an emotional response?

Orthodoxy and modernity. Considering history and modernity in tandem begs the question of how the two can fit together or push against each other? Are they directly opposed? Is one more helpful than the other? Can both traditional imagery and modern abstraction be positive expressions of faith and religiosity?

Personal faith and creative activity. Creative activity can be a highly individual and personal endeavor. In processing ideas about religion, faith, and the bible, it was important to me to be personally present and honest with the subject matter. The process needed to include my processing of the narratives used in painting, and how orthodoxy and modernity affected me.

Research

Initial research for the project consisted of viewing as many images of paintings as possible, combing through books and online digital archives. The purpose of this was twofold: to get a sense of the scope of religious historical paintings and the path of modern art and abstraction in the past century.

The second step in research was time spent in-depth exploring relevant museums and installations. Visiting the Clyfford Still Museum, the Ellsworth Kelly *Austin* installation at the Blanton Museum, and Rothko Chapel, each gave insight into the contemporary context of spiritual art and insight into abstracted works. Furthermore, there is a vast difference in seeing paintings independent of the others works of the artist, on a screen or page of a book, and experiencing the work in person, as a part of an entire body of work or larger exhibit. As I was building my body of work, the experience of the collection was necessary to keep in mind. I approached my visits with little previous knowledge about the works and all that was behind their making, other than brief statements on the websites. The purpose of this was to experience the works with fresh eyes and an open perspective, to inform my experience of how others

will view my works, likely without knowing the full context and process of the pieces other than what is right there.

Clyfford Still Museum

The Clyfford Still Museum, located in Denver, CO, houses 95% of the artist's lifetime works, showcasing his vast body of abstract expressionist paintings as well as his earlier representational works, and is a very rare/unique collection. The single-artist format of the museum was formative in conceiving of *Painting Theology* as a cohesive body of work. Seeing how Still's works informed and reference each other is helpful as a young artist in forming my own series. It is evident how Still's works are connected as a holistic body of work.

The Clyfford Still Museum also provides an overview of Still's path to abstraction and a defense of modernist work. Specifically, one gallery guides viewers through Still's path to abstraction by placing three works in tandem that demonstrate how Still moved away from representational imagery, narrowing down on high impact color, reduced forms, and expressive paint application. These three concepts influenced my work with abstraction, as the building blocks for creating each composition and grounding each work as a painting while utilizing digital means.

Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*

Austin is an installation located at the Blanton Museum in Austin, TX, designed by Ellsworth Kelly. The white stone building includes two multi-colored glass windows that illuminate the space. The walls include black and white stone panels, and front and center is a large wooden totem. In essence, the installation seems like a cathedral reduced into simple forms, high impact color, strict geometry, and non-representational imagery. The space references spiritual spaces and feels like a religious piece, however the design was intended to be secular. The reason the space feels so religious is the references to traditionally sacred architecture. The colorful glass windows reference stained glass, and the central totem is reminiscent of a grand altarpiece. The experience of visiting *Austin* parallels visiting a well-known cathedral, from the path visitors took through the space, to the quiet reverence to the forms themselves. From this secular installation that feels spiritual, it can be concluded that, even in the most reduced forms,

people respond to traditional religious imagery in a religious or spiritual manner, and that sacred spaces often draw upon attractive design and simplified forms for aesthetic purposes.

Rothko Chapel

Located in Houston, TX, Rothko Chapel is a religious, civic, and cultural space, intended to be used by the community for events and spiritual practices. Upon entering the chapel, there are shelves of spiritual texts for visitors to read in the space should they so choose. Like the *Austin* installation, the Rothko Chapel draws upon traditional sacred space motifs, in layout and in inclusion of literature. Nearly all the other visitors at the chapel when I was there were practicing some form of prayer or mediation, utilizing the rows of benches and cushions set up in the space. A distinctive feature of the space are the massive color-field paintings for which Mark Rothko is known. The paintings are very dark in color and simple in composition, providing an intense atmosphere for the space. Soon after I visited the chapel, the space was closed for renovations that will add more light into the space.

Visiting both *Austin* and Rothko Chapel were formative in the process of creating *Painting Theology*. The context of modernist spiritual art endeavors framed my understanding of modernism in relation to tradition through their connections with traditional sacred spaces. These two spaces also demonstrate that the public can and does respond to reduced forms in spiritual works.

Method

Selection of historical paintings

When considering the genre of religious art, there are thousands of reference materials available. In creating my own body of work it was necessary for me to narrow in my reference point, first by only considering paintings, which still leaves a vast field. After further consideration on works and historical events, I narrowed my lens to the 16th and 17th centuries. There is a vast body of significant works from this time period to choose from, and conversation about religious art due to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. I was consistently brought back to the era in my viewing of historical works and noticed many of the paintings of interest came from Italy, Spain, and France, which further narrowed my search.

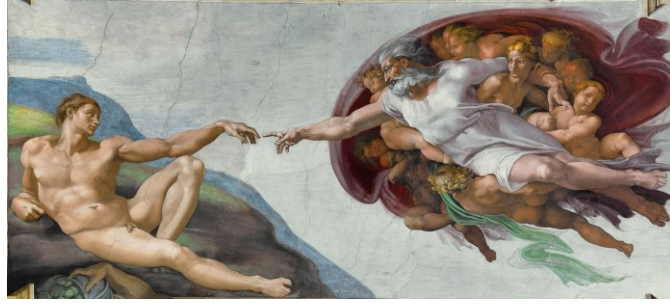
With the exception of one 19th century French painting, all reference works emerge from 16th and 17th century Italy, Spain, and France.

The final element for consideration was subject matter. Each painting selected has a specific biblical reference point and narrative, meaning that each work is not referencing a broad concept but rather a specific story. This was important to me in pursuing narrative in abstract painting, as well as the history of religious painting and the common practice of visualizing the text. Additionally, I wanted to reflect on the stories, as a person of faith, to empathize with the characters. Furthermore, each narrative is specifically about a human encounter with God. Because, *Painting Theology* is about using painting as a medium for the study of God, I felt that the mystical encounter between person and divinity needed to be central. The interaction and experience depicted mimics the practice of painting as spiritual exercise.

Digital Sketching and Abstraction

Paintings were abstracted using a computer through a process I call digital sketching. The digital sketching process was particularly helpful in the planning process for each painting and focusing on form and color in the works. Utilizing digital tools allowed me to create multiple sketches and edit them quite quickly in order to land on the optimal composition. Digital sketching provides opportunities to adjust color and transparency in ways that manual sketching rarely includes. Because these works are from historical masters, the reduced compositions were quite strong.

After selecting historical paintings for use, I ran each through artistic filters in Photoshop and saved each individual filtered image. These new images were then layered on top of each other with varying degrees of opacity, so that all were visible and interacting with each other. The process is outlined below, showing the manner in which the different layers build on each other. Every painting includes the “cutout” feature, which flattens the image to geometric form with hard edges and into color fields. Below is a visualization of the process for one of my paintings.



Painting Process

Each painting began with an imprimatura layer and quick compositional sketch in the same color. I then built up each composition in layers of colors. The overlapping of colors and forms built up over time. Several works were done in tandem. As layers dried on one, I worked on another. The paintings were also in view on the walls of the studio, facing each other and forming a literal conversation with the other works. While there are differences in the paintings, they are also deeply connected to each other in style and subject matter. The coherence in my series of paintings was necessary in exploring and enhancing the topic while allowing viewers to explore my concepts as they move from image to image. Each individual painting was created through a process of layering colors. I often worked on more than one at a time, because the drying time between layers was extremely important. The layers of color was especially important because the individual layers are very thin and flat, so in order to cover the surface and create depth the build-up of color was very important. As a large part of my research project including the creation of artworks, I will summarize each piece and its key findings in the following section.

Paintings

A. *Transfiguration*, Oil on panel, 30" x 40", 2018

Referencing: Raphael, *Transfiguration*, 159" x 109",
Tempera on wood, 1516-20

Transfiguration is the first painting I completed in the series. Beginning with a dark, flat background, the composition includes a mix of organic and geometric forms in bright colors, with a few references to figures in motion. The work references the event in three gospels where Jesus transfigures into a bright light, which is depicted in my



painting as titanium white triangles overlaid on the background layers.

B. *Imago Dei*, Oil on Panel, 36" x 96", 2018

Referencing: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 110" x 224", Fresco, 1512



The Creation of Adam is a piece of the Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco, and, is a well-known piece in contemporary culture, referencing the creation of man in Genesis. Calling my work *Imago Dei* and splitting the composition into a diptych were choices I made to make the famous piece my own. I chose to split the piece so that the God figure reached across both works, to ensure that the pieces belong together and as a personal reflection of an encounter with divinity as being God coming to this world. This piece was pivotal in the development of the remainder of the project, as I worked in more layers in my digital sketches and began working in transparencies and visible brushwork into the painting process.

C. *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Oil on Panel, 12" x 12", 2019

Referencing: El Greco, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 41" x 31", Oil on Panel, ca. 1577-87

This El Greco reference painting is primary about the figure, taking up the majority of the composition. What interested me most about the piece, however, was not the figure but the mood of the piece. Because of this, I chose to nearly eliminate the figure with the exception of a hand and an outline of a head. This piece was also changed in dimension from the original, stretching the composition wider.



D. *Agnus Dei*, Oil on Panel, 12" x 12", 2019

Referencing: Francisco de Zurbarán, *Agnus Dei*, 15" x 24", Oil on canvas, 1635-40

Depicting a slain lamb, this painting comes from the many images of Jesus as a lamb throughout the New Testament. This painting was one of the most difficult to abstract, as the representational form of the lamb was challenging to move away from. The lamb is composed of geometric forms layers on top of each other, with some layers of transparent colors overlaid throughout the edges to give a glowing effect. Working dark to light in this painting meant that the layers will were up slowly, and that the lighter areas are thicker to create texture and depth.



E. *Conversion*, Oil on Panel, 12" x 12", 2019

Referencing: Caravaggio, *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, 91" x 69", Oil on canvas, 1601

Conversion on the Way to Damascus is a painting that has been glued to my memory since first learning about the work in an intro art history class because of the intensity of the composition and color, and for this reason is a work I was excited about including in my project. The high contrast and drama of the work is appropriate in depicting encounters with divinity as well as in the conversion of the author of the New Testament. Like *Agnus Dei*, this piece included a buildup of layers from dark to light in the horse form, and the rest of the forms were built in layers as well. I also wanted to highlight the figure's outstretched arms in the work. This



piece is also a transformed composition in terms of dimension, as I painted the work on a square panel.

F. *Wrestling*, Oil on Panel, 30" x 40", 2019

Referencing: Alexander Louis Leloir, *Jacob Wrestling the Angel*, Oil on canvas, 1865



The only reference painting from outside the reformation era, I included Leloir's painting because the narrative and its relation to my project. In this story, Jacob wrestles with God, and his hip is displaced. He is forever changed by his experience physically, and because this encounter his name is also changed. The narrative of this story is so compelling to me for many reasons, one of which is the idea of being changed by spiritual experiences and the struggle of wrestling with divinity. Through this painting, I pushed further with layering of colors and transparencies. I also utilized masking to create strong geometric edges and forms across the painting, most of which are brighter colors than what is behind them.

G. *Burning*, Oil on Panel, 30" x 40", 2019

Referencing: Sebastien Bourdon, *Moses and the Burning Bush*, Oil on canvas, 1616



Sebastien Bourdon's painting depicts the story of Moses in Exodus 3. The least representational of my works, in this painting I explored even thinner paint application and allowing the under layer to show through the shapes, as the burnt orange underpainting felt appropriate for the subject matter. Bourdon's story, behind this painting and his work as a whole, is what drew me into his work. Painting as a secret Protestant in a Catholic country⁴, Bourdon's work is most always direct biblical references, as a reflection of his beliefs. Despite his status, Bourdon sought to express his ideas in his works, which is something I was also hoping to do through my works.

Findings

Creating *Painting Theology* resulted in a body of paintings as well as reflections about the research questions. While I may not have answers to them, the process of painting was a study in them. From my research and creation, I've come up with the following findings.

Painting is a thing in itself, and one which I learned a great deal about. The process of painting is both technical and artistic. In creating this body of work, I grew in my technical abilities and explored different methods. Paint application was of particular interest, as I utilized thin layers of paint and expressive brushwork in new ways. Working with mixing colors and transparencies was another skill I gained and grew more confident in. The artistic pursuit of idea development and processing composition is another area of growth. The digital sketching method I developed for this body of work Abstraction in painting was a key exploration as well. Abstraction can depict narrative, however the narrative may be up to further interpretation by the viewer. The process of abstraction can be a spiritual practice through the reshaping and breaking down of what we see into something different.

There is a spiritual experience of creating something tangible. Not only is the title *Painting Theology* an explanation of the works as pieces about biblical, spiritual topics and the narratives of encounters with divinity, but also an explanation of my personal approach to the work as a person of faith. The process was meditative for me, from selection of material to the physical painting. The creation of work in and itself was also spiritual, through the connection to the object.

How to balance honoring history and embracing modernity. We shouldn't abandon our traditions, and we can reshape them into our own. There are clearly multiple solutions to this question, and what I have done is one viable option. The narratives we are handed and the innovations that make up our current world can exist in tandem, but dealing with both on a personal level is vital. History and modernity does not need to be an either/or situation, but rather they can be explored in tandem. As artists, we are influenced by both as the cumulative tradition of art continues to be formed.

Art is both personal and public. Go to any museum or gallery and you'll hear rumblings from visitors of "what does this work mean" or "I wonder what the message behind this work is." Artistic works have a capacity to deliver a public message to the audience. However, the works are also reflective of the artist. There is a dialectical relationship between the artist and their message in the work. With each brush stroke the artist pours out meaning onto the work and with each stroke that message is also reflection back upon them. As I worked on each painting, I formulated an idea and sent forth a message, about abstraction, history, and narrative. However as I shaped this message, so too did it reflect back upon me and shape me. My personal understanding of art and my own faith have been shaped by the works, as they were expressions and studies of my ideas. Because of the personal/public nature of my work, I am hoping to show the pieces in the future.

Painting Theology is a spiritual study through art, in both process and product. The research and creation has formed for me a deeper understanding of art making and my own faith, and carries a message about approaching our religious heritage in a modern context.

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