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The End of All Learning

Maddison Colvin

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

The End of All Learning

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Science and religion are systems that work to organize experience into a manageable understanding of the world. Both of these systems gather information - one through mental/spiritual experience and the other through empirical/physical evidence - and then reorder it within a structured framework. They both work under the premise that truth is both existent and attainable within the context of their system. This separation is viewed as necessary in the knowledge/experience-gathering process, but when that knowledge is accumulated, neither science nor religion has the ability to access or communicate truth in its entirety. Plainly speaking, truth is vast and knowledge is limited. I am especially interested in the limitations of knowledge. These limitations (and their occasional transcendence) are what I seek to explore with my work. W. B. Yeats once said, "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it". I believe that art has the ability to meld the physical and the spiritual into an unquantifiable object. It melts duality. This makes it an ideal medium in which to explore the relationship between religious (spiritual) and scientific (empirical) learning, while using their methods to make objects embodying knowledge. In my work I visually explore the limits of knowledge and make attempts at understanding through the processes of information-gathering and transformation through ritual.

Keywords: art, studio, painting, drawing, conceptual art, MFA, religion, science, phenomenology, belief, empiricism, knowledge, physical, spiritual

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I. STATEMENTS

Science and religion are systems that work to organize experience into a manageable understanding of the world. Both of these systems gather information – one through mental/spiritual experience and the other through empirical/physical evidence – and then reorder it within a structured framework. They both work under the premise that truth is both existent and attainable, but only within the context of their system. If something cannot be communicated within the framework of the system, it is difficult to fit into that system's idea of truth. Science values empirical fact and disregards phenomenological experience, while religion marks physical evidence as less useful to a transcendent experience of truth. This separation is viewed as necessary in the knowledge/experience-gathering process, but when that knowledge is accumulated, neither science nor religion has the ability to communicate truth in its entirety. They may have access to truths, but not The Truth. I believe Truth lies somewhere in the Venn diagram between the physical and spiritual, the scientific and religions; a space that can be approached through a third, unifying function. In my case, art is that mediator, providing me with a space in which to explore the systems that so interest me.

Science uses a process of systematically observing, measuring, and testing physical evidence in the framework of hypotheses that may prove false (and therefore need to be modified) or may prove true. The most rigorous study of the molecular structure of a grain of sand can tell us what it once was, what it now is, and what it could become; but this does not tell us what part it has served in the creation of a beach, what has occurred on that beach, and what, if any, meaning those occurrences hold. Science without context is also without weight or function. A scientific fact may be *a* truth, but it is not *the* truth; that is beyond the strict

boundaries of what a fact is allowed to say about itself. Science does not regard meaning's role in the synthesis of truth. It relies on a ground-up approach: empirical and/or rational information from both the individual's experience and other authoritative sources building an understanding of the physical world as it can be perceived. It is a structure with innumerable gaps, slowly being expanded and re-formed by the accumulation of collective human knowledge. Science attempts to overcome the unknowable by chipping away at it piece by piece.

The religious or spiritual process attempts to access truth in a more direct and singular way. Rituals such as prayer, meditation, or reading scripture may result in a mystical moment of insight (which is the ultimate goal of such ritual). These experiences are numinous, that is, filled with a sense of the presence of divinity (or we may say 'truth') and cannot (unlike scientific research) be empirically proven or duplicated. They exist in the realm of the purely experiential, and to the subject, their reality is beyond expression. Experiences like these may give one knowledge, but it is personal knowledge limited by language's inability to communicate it. They can be borne witness to in powerful ways, such as in the writings of Teresa of Avila or St. Augustine, which can prompt a similar experience in others. However, it is almost impossible to describe such an experience in literal terms rather than through metaphor, analogy, and symbolism. Religions (speaking gener(al/ous)ly) are systems built to understand, foster, and organize numen, and therefore must deal with the issue of communicating the incommunicable. Metaphor and symbol ordered into the framework of a religion can function as a simplification of the unknowable or as an access point into a numinous experience. Religion engages the unknowable by naming it, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

So far I may have given the impression that I dislike either or both of these systems of organizing experience. This is not the case; they are both valid ways to reach for truth. Science is easily defensible as a truth-seeking system. Its dedication to evidence allows it to communicate information on a minute level. However, this minuteness limits its ability to synthesize this information into a larger, more logically problematic truth. Religion is all about the existence of this greater truth, and its limitations lie in the tendency of its social structure to interpret symbols as language. The metaphors common in discussion of spirituality and religion can too easily neutralize the unknowable, turning it into a set of rote phrases and simple answers to impossible questions. Symbols are arguably the most effectively communicable access point into the numinous experiences they represent, and some symbols or metaphors have elements of universality across religions that point to a kind of collective truth. Examples of this might be heaven as a high place, hell as below (the underworld), flood mythologies, the circle as a holy shape, light and clarity as embodiment of truth and good, darkness and obscurity as embodiment of evil, et cetera. These metaphors can function on a certain level, but are inadequate to any kind of scrutiny. Because science is founded upon evidence (which is empirical and communicable), and religion is founded upon experience (which is phenomenological and incommunicable), science is much easier to defend as a system. It uses transferable information and can be put into language without resorting to fallible metaphor. Both structures of understanding function within their processes of gathering either evidence or experience, and cross-pollination in the gathering process is a problem. Intuition rightly isn't a part of the scientific process, neither should spiritual experience try to deal with evidence or proofs. However, I believe any final truth must be composed of both empirical and phenomenological knowledge, and if this is the case, a synthesis

must happen somewhere down the line. That synthesis is an attempt at total knowledge. I believe it to be a wonderful and impossible effort. Plainly speaking, truth is vast and knowledge is limited. I am especially interested in the limitations of knowledge. These limitations (and their occasional transcendence) are what I seek to explore with my work. W. B. Yeats once said, “Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it.” I believe that art has the ability to meld the physical/empirical and the spiritual/phenomenological into an object that can embody something unquantifiable. It melts duality. This makes it an ideal medium in which to explore the relationship between religious (spiritual) and scientific (empirical) learning, while using their methods to make objects embodying knowledge in all its beauty and imperfection. In my work I visually explore the limits of knowledge and make attempts at understanding through the processes of information-gathering and ritualistic transformation.

II. CONTEXT

The world we live in is conceptually cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and collectively a product of postmodern deconstruction beginning in the 1950's. Postmodernism holds a position of relativism, breaking down historical claims on universal reality and encouraging a pluralistic, relativistic approach to all knowledge. Metanarratives such as Christianity, Modernism, Capitalism, Marxism, Progress, Psychoanalysis, etc. are, in a postmodern world, insufficient on their own for a comprehensive understanding of life. For decades, artists have been breaking down these metanarratives and restructuring them according to their own needs. Postmodernism is reflected in art's unwillingness to speak in universals and in its obsession with subjective experience. However, a return of certain elements of a Modern mindset has been a particular trend of the past decade. Cultural critics have posited that the late 90's and early 2000's have

been characterized by a return to hopeful sincerity, pragmatic idealism, and an interest in universal truth. “Notes on Metamodernism”, a 2010 essay by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, focuses on the shift in cultural practice away from irony and relativism towards a sort of earnestness. This “informed naivety” is of course tempered with a post-postmodernist acceptance of relativism, but still yearns for a universal truth that postmodernism rejects. While the theory of Metamodernism is still extremely new and undeveloped, it seems to manifest itself in artists’ willingness to engage with truth-seeking devices. Matthew Ritchie’s work, for example, is a convoluted mythic narrative of order and chaos spanning all types of media. His goal is to attempt to represent structures of knowledge and belief visually. He has said he is more interested in “having a conversation that’s based on an idea of looking at things than [he is] in the rhetoric around science. As a person is it possible for you to grasp everything and see everything?” His work attempts to be all-encompassing. It draws from religion, gnostic traditions, string theory, the occult, molecular imaging, and any number of other disciplines and beliefs to weave together a universe of his own understanding. World-building artwork like this is more interesting to me in concept and resource than in execution, but it remains representative of a trend that is relevant to my interests.

Another area of the art world of particular interest to me are artists working with themes of cataloguing and research. Prominent in this field since the 70’s are/were Bernd and Hilla Becher (Bernd died in 2007). They are known for their “typologies” project, spanning 30 years and many countries. This project consists of hundreds of photographs of architectural structures with distinct similarities- from spherical gas tanks to gable sided houses. More often than not they are industrial structures that serve a purpose specific to their architecture. These structures

are photographed meticulously so that each building occupies the same space in the frame, with the only variations between structures in a series being the small details. What results is an overwhelming body of visual research that is reticent to draw any conclusions. The titles do not offer interpretation, only information; captions are nothing more than time and location. There is a purity to this kind of work that I find particularly appealing; cleanly presented information taking on a kind of mystic repetition that is entirely grave and lovely. Other artists in this vein are Jason Salavon and his amalgamations, Candida Hofer and her beautifully sterile interior photographs, and Manuel Montalvo's meticulous catalogue sketchbooks.

All of the artists mentioned above are, in their own ways, pursuing truth. Some sanctify objects, others build mythologies, while still more catalogue the perceptible world. They are all maneuvering between form and content, object and meaning, physical and spiritual, in varying degrees. These artists use systems and processes that engage the unknowable.

III. WORK

I wish to clarify that I am more interested in the results of processes reaching for the unknowable than I am in achieving total truth in the work itself. This is manifested especially in a project like "Catalogue" [1], which is an extremely limited list of things that I know, without research. I have painted objects, environments, features – "nouns", you might say – on the front of each square card. I then typed information from my own knowledge on the back. This information uses the language of scientific neutrality and authority but is flawed, incomplete, and probably partially false. The hundreds of cards stowed in one small wooden box represent many hours of labor and many years of data collected, but ultimately fall pathetically short of truth in the visual and contextual information they provide. I may have painted a dog, but dogs are

almost infinitely variable in their appearance. I may have typed everything I can think to type about a rake, but that does not include anything about the history, manufacture, and ever-changing design of rakes. Hundreds of examples of these inadequacies add up to a lot of information, but nowhere near the amount of specific knowledge that exists in the world.

Where “Catalogue” is screamingly subjective, other processes are less obviously fallible. In projects like the “Template” drawings [2,3] and “Overlay” photographs [4,5] I accumulate images through research. In the case of these works, the images came from a process of documenting over 100 churches throughout London and Europe. I charted out the churches on a map of the city and walked from church to church in a path many miles and weeks long. Once at the church, I took exterior photographs (which I later drew individually), then entered, paced to the mid-point of the central nave, and took a vertical-format photograph of the altar and apse. This process took on qualities of both ritualistic and documentarian practices. I viewed it as both a pilgrimage with image as souvenir and a field study with image as evidence. I then compiled the images and compressed them into a united form- either by drawing the drawings on top of each other, or layering the digital photographs so they form a “result” work, the average of all the structures. These works turn religious architecture into data, which is then transformed into a single dense object emblematic of accumulated experiences. Denseness is manifest in much of my work. Packing information and image into a single object creates a complexity that echoes the result of accumulated knowledge.

In other pieces, I reverse the source/result process, taking images and objects that represent scientific knowledge and transforming them into objects of reverence¹ through the use

¹ It's important to note that I don't want to sanctify the banal à la Jeffrey Vallance. The sanctification is of an object that already has value; this value is scientific rather than spiritual but is value nonetheless. Hence; hominid skulls and birds rather than fresh turds and supermarket chicken.

of religious metaphor and symbol. The most prominent of these symbols is the mandorla, an oblong pointed ovoid shape formed by two circles intersecting edge-to-center. This is also known as a “vesica piscis” shape and is seen in Christian art, Gothic architecture, mystic practices, sacred geometry, and religions across the world. In both Buddhist and Christian art it encompasses divinity, protecting them and symbolizing a merging of the spiritual and physical worlds. Assigning a symbol like this “innate value” is tricky, but its appearance across cultures makes it a good access point into a tradition of religious imagery. In “Mandorla 01” [6] I painted an anthropoid (ancestral pre-human) skull surrounded by fossilized teeth, which have symbolic power as well as scientific significance. Teeth are emblematic of vitality, power, and self-sustenance, and are the most durable part of the body. They have been used in religious and totemic functions and, due to the extraordinary hardness of enamel, are often the best-preserved remnants of ancient life. I used these teeth in my painting thinking of their symbolic power, then reinforced it by mummifying the entire painting in a layer of beeswax. In “Mandorla 02” [7] I sourced hundreds of images of birds from field ornithologists’ photographs and museum specimens, selecting species based on Christian and American symbolism. I then painted these birds with watercolor on vellum, cut, pressed, and mounted them individually to create an image with depth. The human hand is again present in the laborious translation of object to image and back and, as in the research-based pieces, builds a visual denseness packed with time and work. The evidence of this labor takes the images from a purely empirical function to one loaded with obvious flaws, the work of a laborious but imperfect human hand. This functions as a kind of act of devotion, translating the impersonal to something imbued with personal experience and belief. Furthermore, both of these pieces’ symbolic shape further allows the objects ordered within them

to shift in function from scientific to sanctified. I explore sanctity in my sculptural work as well in pieces like “Paranthropus Boisei” [8], (a fragile porcelain hominid skull under glass), and “Votive” [9] (an evolving sculptural piece with candles made in the shape of teeth). However, it is with the two-dimensional pieces that I find the process most approaches something unknowable and fascinating.

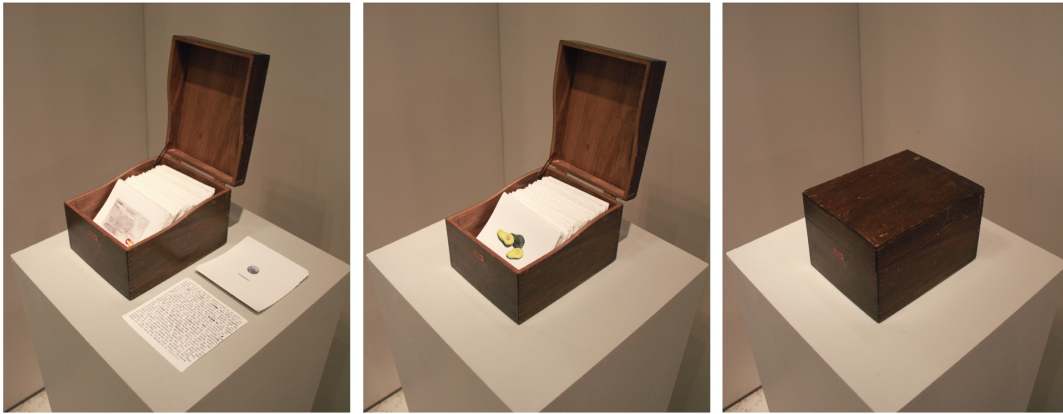
IV. POTENTIAL

As I continue making work I plan to expand my process while refining content. I have been mostly concerned so far with the abstractly religious; using a scientific process to organize religious imagery or using religious symbolism to transform scientific objects. However, I am a practicing Mormon, and am interested in using Mormon and Christian tradition more directly in my work. Some of my newest work, like “Divination Apparatus” [10] deals with traditions, rituals, and scripture taken straight from religious practices. The accumulation projects will also continue and increase, sourced from or through scientific documentation. I hope this balance of direct religious subjects and more rigorous scientific practice will allow me to maintain a stance of neutrality in my approach to artmaking. I cannot control my audiences’ response to the work, and bias will of course exist in its interpretation. However, I wish to avoid this in the process of making. The only agenda that I want my work to serve is that of learning; learning through spiritual experience, empirical evidence, noesis, whatever – but learning first and foremost. To appropriate Milton’s phrasing, the end of all learning is to know truth, and out of that knowledge to love and imitate it. If truth is the end, the aim, the intent of learning, then that constant accumulation of knowledge, image, fact, and context will continue to provide me with rich material for my work.

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DOCUMENTATION



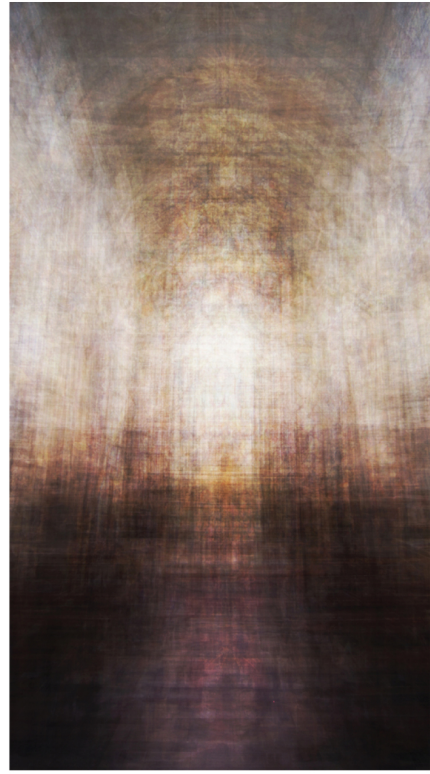
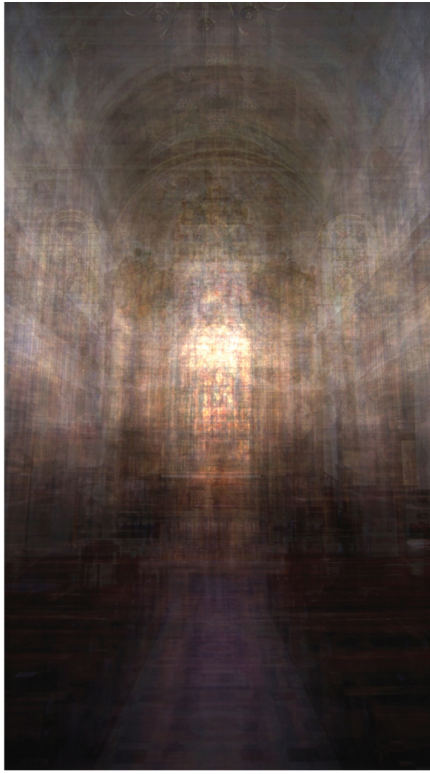
1. "Catalogue", watercolor, type, wooden box.



2. "Template (London)", graphite on paper



3. "Template (Utah)", graphite on paper



4, 5. "Overlay 005, 005". 75 churches across Europe systematically photographed and composited



6. "Mandorla 01", oil and encaustic on wood



7. "Mandorla 02", watercolor on vellum



8. "Paranthropus Boisei", porcelain.



9. "Votive 001", handmade wax candles



10(a). "Divination Apparatus", (detail)



10(b). "Divination Apparatus", book of scripture, bones inscribed with scripture references, ceramic bowl.