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Iconography: At the Intersection of Historical & Personal

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Iconography: At the Intersection of Historical & Personal

Alyssa Johnson
Chancellor's Honors Program Thesis
Fall 2016

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"In the icon, the visible & the invisible embrace each other from a fire that no longer destroys but rather lights up the divine face for humanity."
- JEAN-LUC MARION

"That which we have believed to be true through the faculty of hearing, we consolidate through pictorial imitation for our greater assurance. For being compounded of flesh and blood, we are compelled to confirm that which affects our assurance in regard to our souls through the faculty of sight."

Mansi, Concilia XIII

Introduction

This, my final semester, serves as a summation of practices & beliefs developed over the four-year span of studies at the University of Tennessee's School of Art. What follows is both a written and pictorial record of the conclusion of a body of work & research regarding Christianity's history of iconography vis-à-vis the iconographical vernacular of my own.

The purpose of this exploration is to identify conscious and subconscious symbols used throughout my own work, compare them to established iconography, and then track the possible modernization of these symbols. In doing so I hope to absorb what lessons I can from past voices in order to extend my own vocabulary within the realm of art & religion. It is necessary to express this using the appropriate languages: written words for the text-rich, record-heavy voice of religion, and created images for the emotive and unnamable voice of art. Therefore, textual references will be made in the form of scripture, research readings, and my own personal notes & journal entries; all images used for reference will be chosen from both my body of work and from a historical context. Comparisons from the past and present will be recorded and investigated.

Far from influencing the read of the artwork, I feel that these explanations will provide a deeper background for the viewer in relation to my work and allow them to begin to hear the language that I speak.

*My faith feels very much like a mustard seed right now.
But I'm asking you to still use it.*

Artist Statement

Two voices.
I heard you before I knew Mom&Dad and
clown sheets and
palmettos. You were steady,
assuring.
You are full of better words. You speak
in salves and jet fuels and dusks. You talk circles
around my head like a halo;
sometimes I balk, sometimes I reach for them.

You are untranslatable. My textbooks are
7 editions behind, my sentence structure
sloppy, my inkwell on reserves.
I need to know what you are saying.

Two voices.
I'm smarter than you think I am. I'm
smarter than you. You can't even pin me
down, can't even talk about me without
getting choked up or red in the face or
mopey and pitiful.
But I know you better than your parents.
Better than your lovers and your teachers
and your own head. The words you want
to say and the things you want to do--I see
those. I own them. I am the one shoving
them up from your intestines and pushing
them, dripping, out into light. You need
me.

I want to know difference and weakness. I want to know why realism seems the least
transparent and abstraction is direct and knowable. Perspective is not static; it is one of the
clearest ways I can express my shifts of trust between faith in blood and
redemption through paint.

Nimbus

"The Glory is constantly adopted by artists, both in painting and sculpture, as a characteristic ornament; it either encircles the head alone or the entire figure. As an attribute it serves to denote a holy person, in the same manner as the crosier or the scepter distinguishes a bishop or a king."

(Hourihane, 22)

Nimbus is a term for the denotation of a holy being in the form of a shape encircling the head. Similar denotation can exist for the body as a whole, but terminology would be changed. The most recognizable form of the nimbus, the circle (not to be confused with "halo," which is also circular but exists in a three-dimensional plane instead of two-dimensional), is also the most widely used in Christian art. Many nuances exist for the nimbus; size, shape, ornamentation, and interior decorations are only broad examples of possible differences that can be accounted for. What is most pertinent to this discussion, though, is shape.

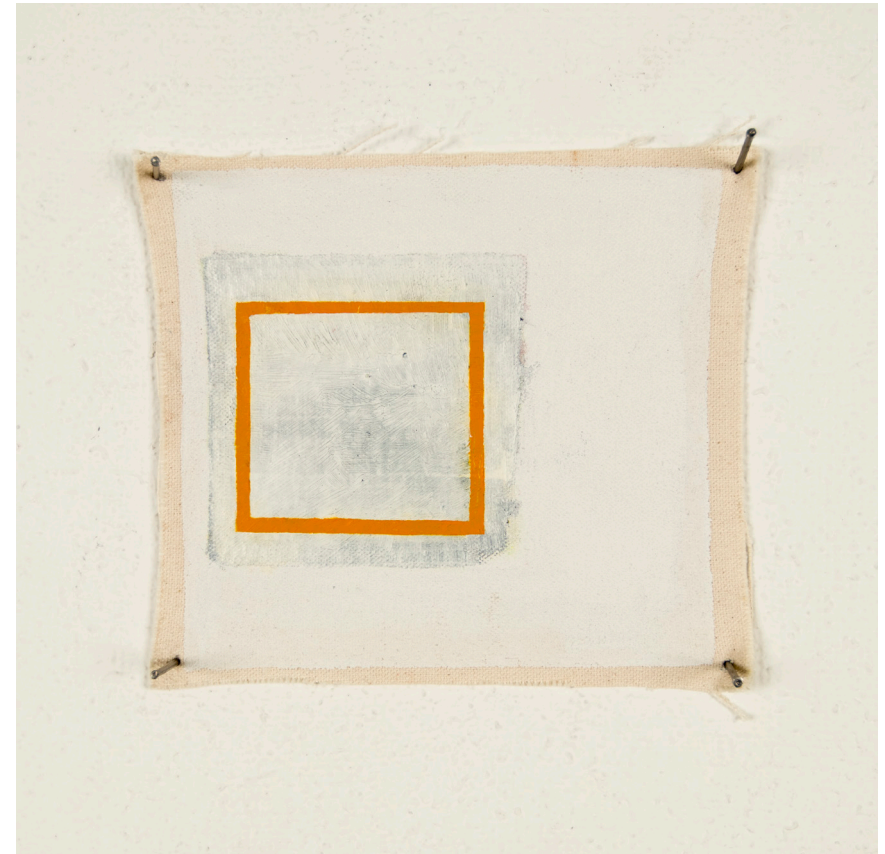
Although the circular form was at times used to adorn the head of a saint or highly religious person, the square nimbus was never ascribed to any member of the Trinity. The square nimbus was reserved for the still living "virtuous mortals", even if they were seemingly more holy than previously canonized persons—the living were still confined to the inadequacy of humanity. "[The square nimbus], in the opinion of neo-platonists and pythagoreans, symbolizes the earth; and the earth, in symbolism as well as in reality, is inferior to heaven, of which, according to ancient ideas, it can at most be only the pedestal" (63).



Detail of *St. Gregory IV With a Square Nimbus*
Roman Mosaic in St. Mark, IX Century

The first iteration of the nimbus I created was unknowingly done. The painting began as a study of the view from my studio: leaves on branches, sunlight & shade, and the glass in between this and me. As I continued to add layers on such a small canvas, the subject matter seemed increasingly impossible to fully capture, and in frustration I coated all the layers in white acrylic house-paint. The thin nature of the paint allowed for the textures of the previous layers of oil to remain visible, and provided me with a new canvas to work on. However, I quickly became more interested in the suggestion of previous marks rather than making new ones. The painting still held an air of incompleteness so I chose to solve this with the addition of structure, a frame of sorts. The color and size and shape all came from the precise moment of painting and were unplanned.

Clarice Lispector speaks of the unnamable; in art, I have encountered this increasingly. Understanding the different iterations of the nimbus after already completing this particular painting has given me answers for questions I did not know I was asking. Just as the impetus for the painting was never fulfilled, so will my efforts to become like Christ be. The square nimbus is a representation of the perfection of humanity—it is in one moment granting holiness while still insisting inadequacy.



Little Nimbus
Oil on unstretched canvas, 2016

Pants

"Wrath or Anger is frequently represented as a combat between animals, knights, soldiers, or even between husband and wife. Marital combat centers on the quest for control or who will wear the pants in the family. The scene appears to differ according to location. This struggle is most violent in Great Britain, where the wife pulls the husband by his hair, drags him on the ground, or prepares to throw a spindle at him. In these battles, the wife always wins. In France and Belgium, the husband and wife have not yet reached this stage. They grasp between them a pair of trousers, and we never actually see the victor. On a pair of misericords in France, the wife wears the pants on one, while the husband is shown spinning on the other; the same role reversal occurs on another pair in Spain. Thus the sin of wrath crosses national barriers, but in different ways."

(Hourihane, 172-173)



Detail of misericord from Collegiate Church of Notre-Dame (1473-87), Villefranche-de-Rouergue (Aveyron), France

I do not think of clothing when I consider iconography. Strange to not consider it, since it has been—and is still—used daily as a form of social symbolism, not to mention being frequently featured in a biblical context. The swaddling in the New Testament's introduction, the leaves that first covered man, the lack of clothing in the prostitute's story all carry deep contextual and historical weight as symbols, enriching the reach of iconography's vocabulary.

Although the impetus behind this work was borne out of personal dealings with the church, there was no intent to include a symbol directly relatable to religion or spirituality. I knew I wanted to depict a figure within a populated landscape, but I felt strongly about only providing partial identity. In order to achieve this, I gave enough information as I felt was necessary: feet, a waist, and a large pair of pants. Subconsciously, I understood that pants of such size would connote power and authority. Because of the looser fit and boxier silhouette, masculinity can also be assumed. (Gender roles would only be emphasized if a religious read were assumed; many restrictions on women's clothing still pervade different denominations.)

When considered in relation to the context they were once found in, the pants seem best represented by the disquieting orange hue. Wrath and anger are emotions typically depicted using warm colors, like vibrant reds and yellows, and the orange seems particularly out of place within the calmer blues and whites of the landscape. The stance of the legs is commanding, yet quietly incorporates the shape of a steeple in the space between.



Legs
Oil on panel, 2016

"While He was going, the crowds were nearly crushing Him. A woman suffering from bleeding for 12 years, who had spent all she had on doctors yet could not be healed by any, approached from behind and touched the tassel of His robe. Instantly her bleeding stopped. 'Who touched Me?' Jesus asked."

Luke 8:42-45 (HCSB)

"When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! What am I going to do?' So they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a young goat, and dipped the robe in its blood. They sent the robe of many colors to their father and said, 'We found this. Examine it. Is it your son's robe or not?'"

Genesis 37:29-32 (HCSB)

"So the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard You in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.' Then He asked, 'Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from? ...What is this that you have done?'"

Genesis 3:9-13 (HCSB)

Hands

"The artist's hands...are not, however, an ever-present element. They appear when the artist chooses to represent a half-length, three-quarter, or better yet a full-length [self] in front of his work in his studio. The hands then come on the scene, interpret with changing postures a range of expressions, eloquent gestures, mainly characterizing the role and dignity of the artist, as a creator of the artwork".

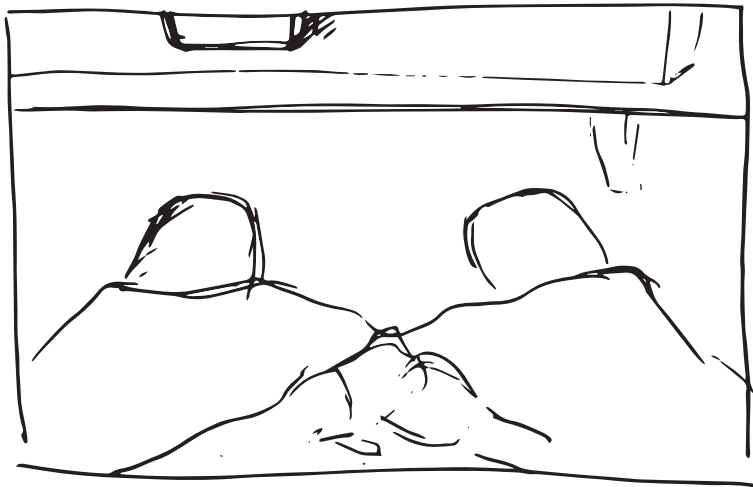
(Cassini, 2011)



Caravaggio's *The Denial of St. Peter*
Oil on canvas, ca. 1610



seduction vs. repulsion



KLIMT

"Lying Woman" drawing study.

Pleasure in the self ≠ pleasuring oneself
"Study for the Virgin"

"At times [artists] will depict the meaninglessness & the lack of faith in much of modern life; yet their firm convictions of the values to which they aspire are a dynamic force rooted in the same deep levels of personality from which faith arises."
-ART & THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH

So still — what are you wanting to say?
Do I need to know what I want to say in order to say it?

Caravaggio was a close companion in my studio during the execution of *8:30*. Many of his paintings communicate using figures' hands, not only by the actions they are involved in, but also through the directions in which they lead the viewers' gaze. One painting in particular was valuable for me as a guide: *The Denial of St. Peter* (ca. 1610). The hands of both the guard and the woman lead to Peter as he presses his own hands tightly to his chest in abjuration of his relationship to the Christ. Learning how Caravaggio used details like clenched fists in conjunction with the bent angles of wrists to simultaneously express denial and self-accusation (Prendeville, 2013) allowed me to consider the pictorial use and power of the hand in my own work.



8:30
Oil on unstretched canvas, 2016

"However, most of the hidden carvings, those on the misericords, served an entirely different purpose. They were intended to seduce the monks from the scenes of salvation at the altar and guide them toward hell... In this way misericord carvings actually attacked the liturgy. The monks who succeeded in resisting the evil that was depicted beneath their seats were considered spiritually strong and therefore attracted nobles and wealthy merchants who contributed money and paid for works of art to glorify the church. The more licentious the carvings, the greater the attraction for patrons, since the monks needed even greater spiritual force to counteract the evil depictions... To the medieval mind it appeared evident that the monks seated on the most evil carvings would be the best intercessors."

(Hourihane, p. 177)

8:30 came from a contemplation of repulsion and seduction. My religious background never included much open discussion about sexuality, and it seemed that practices the "secular" world deemed seductive were consistently viewed as repulsive once seen through the "religious" lens. Masturbation was one such topic that had never been introduced to me inside church walls, and to push my understanding of the issue I wanted to give the two topics a space in which to have a conversation. Depicting a realistic hand opposite an abstracted church pew challenged me to identify both sides and question the presuppositions carried for each—warping the perspective also allowed me to invite the audience in as both observer and participant.

At the core, I want the painting to mirror the task of the misericords. Viewers may be inclined to react to the painting with intrigue or disgust, both knee-reactions. However, a calm temperament free from judgment would desire to be still with the painting and ask why these reactions took place, giving strength to faith.

Reflection

I began researching iconography in the summer before my final semester. In my prior semesters I had purposely avoided incorporating any direct reference to my religious beliefs in large part because I felt the line between didactic and trite was razor thin. I did not want to paint Jesus healing a leper. I felt no emotional connection to depictions of stairs to heaven or footprints in sand. I believed there was a concise and intelligent way to approach the matter of faith in art, and I challenged myself to find it.

Doubt became my focus. Perhaps I had indulged in self-censorship as a defense mechanism—the less I put down on canvas, the more I could hide my uncertainties and questions about Christianity. Yet the more I studied and read, the more I found I was not an exception. Adam and Eve paved the way for generations of doubters, but still maintained communication with their God; Sarah's laughing doubt ran so deep it bordered on disbelief, but she still mothered a nation; the infamous Thomas is forever characterized by it, but Christ still welcomed him to touch and see. My repression of this doubtfulness seems pharisaical, in retrospect. The outside of my cup looked calm and assured while the inside was a mess of uncertainty and fear.

A work by Enrique Martinez Celaya entitled *Thing and Deception* (1997) was a turning point in my thought process. At first glance, this painting had so little to do with religion—a shrouded chocolate bunny sat alone amidst an off-white background. But as I studied the work and the author, I discovered Celaya had skillfully created his own language of icon to indirectly discuss beliefs. The background was not simply white; upon closer inspection the white had been used to cover up layers and layers of unreadable marks and textures. Cracks marking the rabbit suggested attempts had been made to repair multiple breaks, and the shroud falling over the chocolate holiday treat pooled into deep reds at the base of the figure. Celaya's moves were subtle yet rich in implication, allowing the viewer to interpret (or not) at their own pace.

"Either [modern churches] show little or no awareness of the spiritual values of art and its function in the service of God, or are satisfied with a weak echo of the past, often trying to make up in sumptuousness what is lacking in vitality. Far too often they cling to an outdated, stereotyped "popular" kind of religious art that is characterized by anemic correctness and sugar-coated sentimentality."

(Nathan, 1961)

This exploration has been a key episode in my practice as an artist. I have discovered, through research and reading, through trial and error, that expressing my waverings in Christianity are not only possible, but can produce thoughtful and intellectual work. I have learned that the history of iconography does not limit me in my use of meaningful symbols, but rather informs my process of creating new ones for myself. I have found similar voices in the art field to look to for direction and advice, voices who have shared my distrust of the religious system while still longing for quiet conversations with God.

"Here I must say emphatically: art must never be used to show the validity of Christianity. Rather the validity of art should be shown through Christianity."
—H.R. Rookmaker p. 153

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