Communion

By: Benjamin Caleb Winans

B.F.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, 2018

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in Art

Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

April 23, 2021

Approved by:

Jim Cogswell, Graduate Committee Chair

Endi Poskovic, Graduate Committee Member

Kelly Askew, Graduate Committee Member

David Chung, Director MFA Graduate Program

Date Degree Conferred: Aug 2021

STAMPS SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

STAMPS
SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

2021

Communion

Benjamin Winans
Candidate, MFA
University of Michigan
Spring 2021

Benjamin, Winans MFA ‘21

STAMPS SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Communion

Benjamin Winans

Candidate, MFA
University of Michigan
Summer 2021

Acknowledgements

This work owes a tremendous debt to the meaningful conversations and engagement of so many. I am deeply thankful for the words and deeds of Osman Khan, Irina Aristokhova, Carol Jacobsen, Rebekah Modrak, and Marianetta Porter during these past two years. To four people, I am most grateful, and here I will call you out:

Jim Cogswell: we connected as two lost missionary kids from Japan in my first month here, and from that moment, you committed yourself to pushing me out of my shell whether it was your intent or not. I will never forget our conversations, and how much you taught me about embracing mistakes while committing to engagement and growth.

Endi Poskovic: you never ceased to fight for me from the start. Your ferocity as a maker and mentor inspired me to never stop, even if I thought the work might be through. And you make the best iced tea in the entire world.

Kelly Askew: throughout the time I've known you, your perspective and understanding have changed the way I see and speak about my work, and it is stronger for your influence. Your generosity has left an impact on so many. I am a fortunate one.

Jennifer Metsker: what can be said? This thesis document is the form it is because you encouraged me to write with fearlessness and honesty. Some-

how, in spite of myself, we created something I am immensely proud of.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And lastly, to Christine Bruening (my fellow “Get Through It Gang” member, brilliant mother, fierce friend, generous collaborator, etc. etc. etc.), Nate Byrne, Rey Jeong, and Kristina Sheufelt (metals master, tireless cheerleader, and collaborator who will get it done no-matter-what just because she’s excited by the idea), with whom I started this journey: you have taught me as much as anyone, and I am proud and thankful to call you friends and colleagues.

Contents

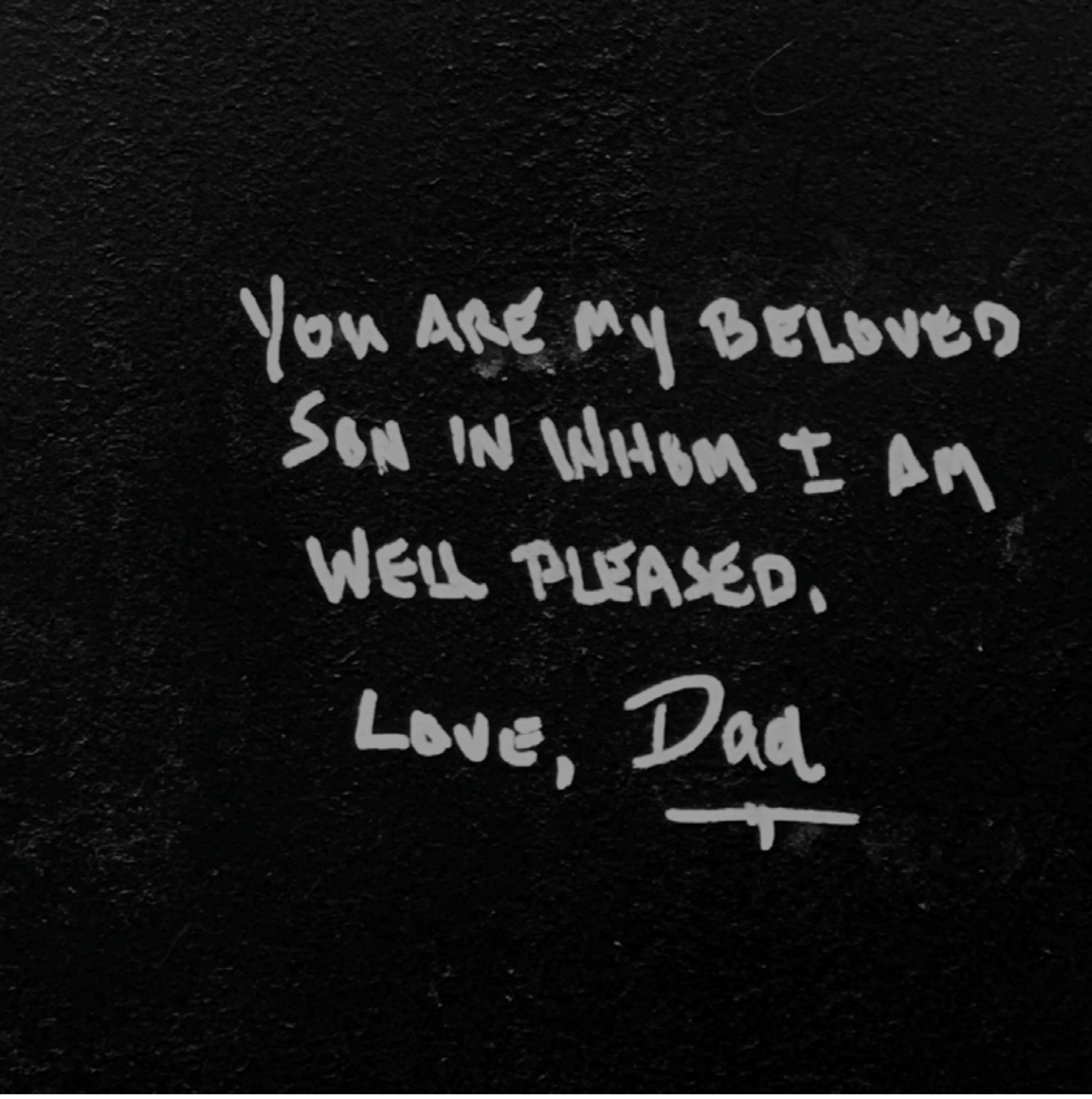
Abstract

Communion presents sculptures and installation work made from re-purposed, destroyed, and corrupted church pews, and remade American and Christian flags in a chapel-like gallery with audio, video, and photographic documentation to expose relationships between the patriotic, sacred, and often violent power structures in American political culture and Christianity. These broader themes are examined through my own personal past, growing up in southern evangelical Christianity, which I offer to the viewer as an intimate record of embodied moments. Through the work, a methodology of deconstruction is proposed: one that asks to test our most deeply held beliefs and in the potential ruin, to discover the beauty and empathy exposed through doubt.

Keywords

Christianity, Christian nationalism, deconstruction, embodiment, faith, fine art, iconoclasm, process, race, sculpture.

FOREWARD



On January 1, 2021, I lost an uncle.

My mom has three brothers. With each, I have a special connection. My uncles are my mentors; best friends; peers; confidantes; the drivers of the best in me. We did not spend much time together. Life overseas or separation between states kept us apart. And yet, these relationships were the kind that always stuck with me and picked up effortlessly upon our next meeting.

When I say I lost an uncle, I mean to say that I lost my Uncle Phil. He was a man whose booming laugh made you feel as though you were clearly the funniest person he had ever heard. His presence in a room was unmissable, and all present were lucky to bask in it. His deep voice was a source of comfort and carried with it the tremendous knowledge and curiosity that he himself contained. Everything in this thesis is a direct result of conversations that he and I shared: a passion for politics and the contemporary state of Christianity. His legacy is a key to unlocking the lessons within.

Uncle Phil's death comes at a time when I have done a lot of soul searching regarding the direction of this thesis. When I started the journey towards my MFA over a year and a half ago, I had been thinking a lot about the corruption of Christianity and its fusion to right-wing politics in the United States. I thought a lot about the myths generated about the founding of the country, and about the disturbing connections between Christianity, white supremacy, and a fundamental rejection of truth. Over the past year, all of my hunches, theories, and questions were forced into the public consciousness, and are now forefront in the American—and global—mind. Monuments are being toppled or fought over. American Christianity has hitched its horse to Trumpism, white supremacism, and denial of truth. Six days after Uncle Phil passed away, right-wing rioters; insurrectionists; traitors broke into the Capitol. Among the many signs and flags, I noticed "Jesus Saves", saw the Christian flag, and watched as, in Lansing, MI, a giant cross was erected on the capitol grounds. It was a climax, and I was left reeling. I wonder, what would Uncle Phil have to say about it all? On January 9th, my family met on Zoom to watch my uncle's memorial service, and a question I had been turning over in my mind was voiced during the few words said by my Uncle Steve—Phil's brother.

My Uncle Phil endured a Glioblastoma, a cancer of the brain he fought for over a year and which finally took him, and the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which kept him from traveling and seeing family

and friends the world over during his last year on Earth. Most of us do not have to experience that particular combination, but we are affected daily by circumstances beyond our control. It feels heavy; the year 2020 especially weighed on everyone. What is the lesson? I, for one, am in agreement with my Uncle Steve, who asked that question as he grieved the loss of his brother: "that the world does not revolve around us. That we are part of relationships, and part of people's lives, and we need to take that seriously. And we need to give what we have been given, to others. We need to bless others with the blessings we have received, as Paul says.[1]"[2] My Uncle Phil gave of himself always. He lost everything at more than one point in his life. Yet still he gave, and still gives. He called out the truth when he heard falsehood. He loved deeply and he loved fiercely—even his enemies. He was passionate about lifting others up. He loved knowledge and consumed all he could read about any subject. All these things he gave to everyone he met, and I am a fortunate one to have received them.

Followers of Jesus often have a life verse. It is a favorite verse that becomes like a mantra, something that deeply resonates with the life of that particular person. During my uncle's memorial service, I learned of his: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face."[3] Within this verse, there is an acknowledgement that life is temporal, we must have hope. Yet, despite the perception of religion being a passive and prescriptive set of rules, the Bible is filled with people who assert their will over life, "arguing" and fighting for their own ways.

Through reading this thesis, you will become familiar with my own life verse. It comes at a time when a man named Jacob wrestles with God so fiercely that it lasts all night. Jacob comes away from the fight wounded but alive, recognizing that he had been spared, and wondering: "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."[4] In both this verse and the one above, there is the underlying knowledge that what we have is temporal and is not guaranteed. We

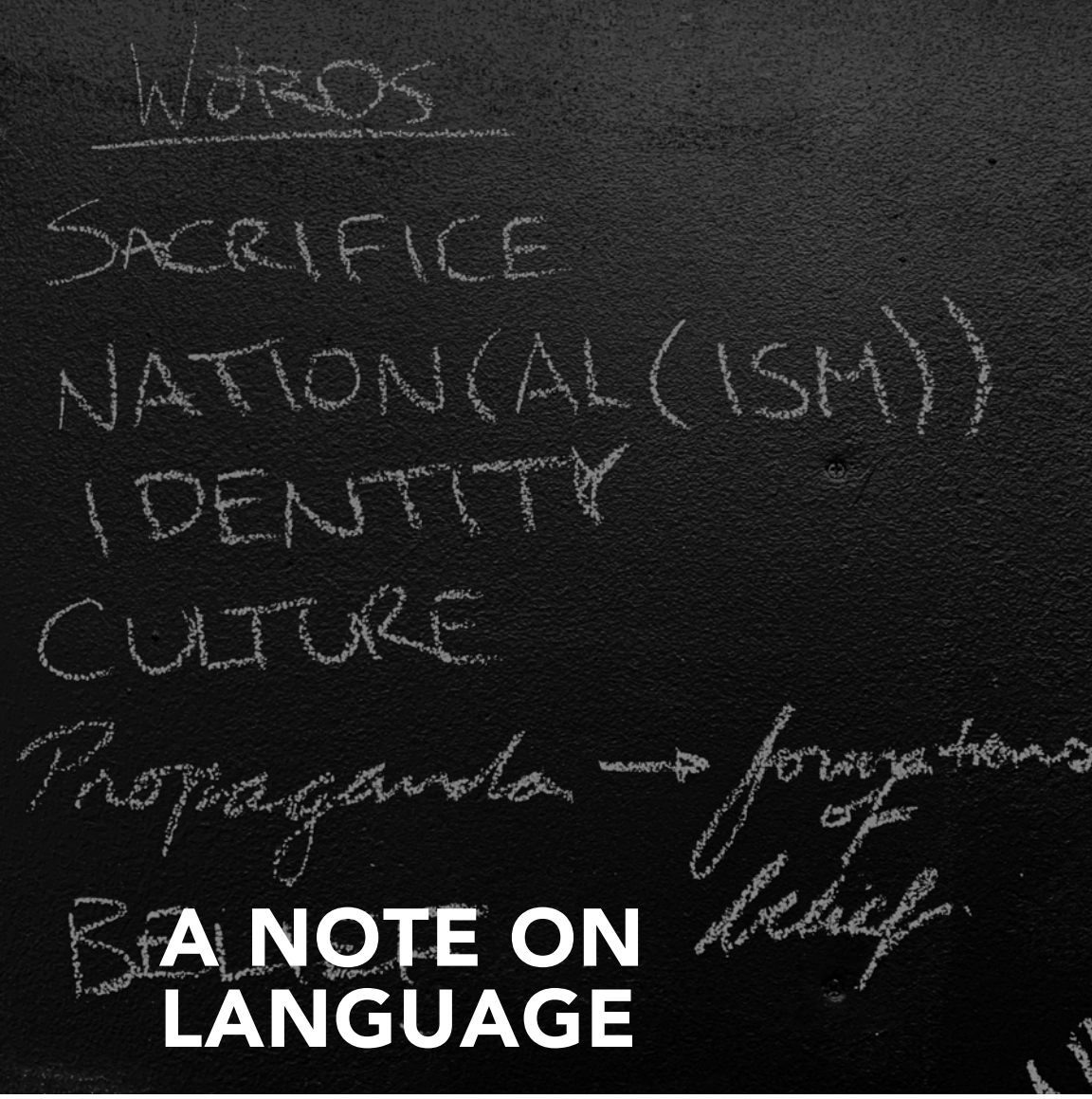
are at the mercy of forces beyond our control. We are all but one fraction of a moment away from having everything stripped from us.

Yet there is hope. No matter what you believe, each of us holds within us a faith in the community we have helped to build by our very presence on this earth and by the "ways" we argue into existence.

I want to dedicate this thesis writing to the memory of my Uncle Phil, and the lessons that he taught me and all those who knew him: to pursue truth, to love others deeply and fiercely, and to love them well.

Benjamin Winans

January 19, 2021



A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

This thesis focuses on many issues that necessitate a certain transparency of language. Being a white, cis-male writing and making work about religion, race, white supremacy, and patriarchy is a daunting task in the political climate of 2021, but dismantling systems of oppression from within is imperative. As a way of making sure I am constantly learning and making an effort to be more inclusive—especially considering the complexity surrounding individual and collective identities—I want to clarify terms.

I chose to use the English Standard Version of the Bible in all biblical quotations. This is mostly out of my own familiarity with it. The English Standard Version (ESV) was first published in 2001 as a revision of the Revised Standard Version of 1971. It is known for an accurate attempt at word-for-word translation in the same historical tradition as the King James Version of 1611. All this is said with the important caveat that translations themselves are problematic. Each translation tries to capture texts written thousands of years ago for specific cultural usage. The Old Testament spans an enormous era of Jewish history while the New Testament touches upon an era that saw Greek power fade, Roman power rise, and a fractious Jewish state as different sides wanted to fight, blend in, or actively curry favor with the Romans. Biblical translation attempts to capture the feel of this historical world while shifting the messages for today's audience. As such, there is a history of using non-gender-inclusive language in many available translations. The ESV was translated by a team of over one-hundred evangelical scholars and pastors. There is inevitably doctrinal bias due to this fact, and I will endeavor to make sure such instances are addressed whenever they may arise.

In addition to the note on Bible translation, I seek to follow the work of Nicole Maurantonio, professor of communications, rhetoric, and American studies at the University of Richmond, with a note about writing on race. I will be capitalizing "Black" to reference "a culture, ethnicity, or group of people" while I will not capitalize "white", which has throughout American history been "deployed as a signifier of social domination and privilege rather than an indicator of ethnic or national origin."[5] This is done to join an effort by scholars to dismantle white supremacist language in academic culture.

I will refer to "slavery" as a system, but I will not use the term "slaves" unless it is a direct quote from a source. I will instead use the term "enslaved people" to recognize slavery as a condition imposed upon very real men, women and children. Likewise, I will use "enslavers" rather

than "masters". This is to continue to call attention to the fact that people enslave other people. People are responsible for other people: this is important for my work, but also for my call to imagine a future for this country. Their actions had—and still have—real consequences, and as such, their actions need to be named.

I will refer to "Black people" or "Black individuals" rather than "African-Americans" or "blacks" unless it is a direct quote. This is in recognition of a cultural diversity that is global in nature, and alludes to a question within my work: "What exactly is 'American'?".

I will have made errors, and I claim them as my own with the faith that you understand learning is a lifelong process. This work will be critiqued and evaluated, and I am sure that I will learn much that will need correcting. In recognition of this fact, I remain thankful that I am a human being and am, just like the rest of us, capable of change.

Finally a note on representation. Anthropologist Webb Keane notes that

> [r]epresentations offer a privileged location to a viewer, such that both viewer and model clearly stand apart from that reality as an object. This, [Timothy] Mitchell tells us, is distinctively modern and Western. The modern West is a world in which representation produces the effect of there being a world of objects that exist external to it, and of subjects that stand outside that world, which is made unavailable for them by means of these representations.[6]

I want to acknowledge that my representation is messier than a traditional scholarly paper. I am not separate from the Christianity of which I speak. I am not an observer commenting on "the other". I was raised an evangelical. Though I may have departed from the faith of my childhood, I will always be an evangelical in thought—it is how my mind was conditioned to observe and interact with the world. I am not examining subjects that have little to no connection to myself. In fact, I assert

the opposite: that my subjects and myself as an observer are fundamentally interconnected, and my work (and your understanding) would suffer if that were not the case. My historical and theoretical context will necessarily be seasoned with personal anecdotes and experiences. My own past was lived in the histories I reference and thus becomes a primary source. It must be so.

INTRODUCTION

Communion is one of the most sacred rituals in the Christian church. In Protestantism, it is the taking of bread and wine, which symbolize the body and blood of Christ in order to keep the memory of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus alive. Communion is more broadly defined as "the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level." In both, there is community, sharing, practice, and embodied experience with symbolism at the center. The practice of communion uses symbols and ritual

as a catalyst for meditation, usually in a church building also surrounded by symbols that signify community built around a shared language and set of beliefs. There are many other locales where symbols and ritual define community and set parameters for interaction. I think of the political spaces, courts (which strangely mimic church spaces), and halls of education. But what if we were to deconstruct the symbols to learn of their history, and that history's relationship to the present?

This thesis proposes art practice as communion. The work I present—sculptures and installation made from repurposed, destroyed, and corrupted church pews, remade American and Christian flags—is situated in a chapel-like space with audio, video, and photographic documentation to propose a way of interrogating belief and questioning symbols.

I share with the viewer my doubts and my loss of faith. These works are artifacts of a fight: a struggle within myself that I offer to you, and that I assert is the thesis itself. Audio documentation of a conversation with my father about faith, racism, and art reveals my personal history—raised as an evangelical Christian in the American south, I implicate my own past through creative inquiry as I test the relationships between evangelical Christianity, white supremacist ideology, and Chirstian nationalism— a particularly problematic ideology that teaches America is a Christian nation, and that seeks to bring American law in line with *certain interpretations* of Biblical law.

My communion is doubt. I asked myself, through the deconstruction of past belief and present material, what I was exposing in the questioning of beliefs that once defined me? This is a question that I continue to ask myself, and a question I ask of those who view my work: broadly put, "When we examine the systems of belief that define us, what is exposed?"

What I will present in this written work is heavily wrapped in history, illustrating the arc of Christianity from a fringe cult reacting to the corruption of religious leaders to its embrace by Rome, and then European colonizers, culminating in its corrupting influence on American politics and the harmful ideology of Christian nationalism, which gave birth to the American Tea Party in 2010; the ideology is overwhelmingly responsible for the election of Donald J. Trump to the White House in 2016. I argue that this history is fundamental to understanding a quadripartite cord—Christian Nationalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and individualist capitalism, that was present at the foundation of the United States and works against empathy, equality and com-

munity. Altogether, these four ideologies strangle any notion of justice in American society. Embedded within Christian nationalism is the tolerance of white supremacist action and a system that caters to the powerful, allowing those in need to slip through the cracks at the best of times and outright killed at the worst. This corrupted foundation is at odds with the high language of the U.S. Constitution and the Bible. It is certainly at odds with the words of Jesus Christ himself (as told in the Bible), who spent his life healing the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the incarcerated and the social outcasts, and holding the powerful religious leaders of his day accountable.

This will not merely be an academic exegesis, however. Each of these larger themes will be wrapped in my own personal narrative as I present the altered ruins and artifacts presented in my thesis exhibition. I seek to follow the example of Friedrich Nietzsche who called us to "cross-examine idols"[7]. Nietzsche wrote on how to philosophize with the hammer. I write on how to make art with one. The artwork presented is about the pain of historical and religious trauma, religious deconstruction, loss, grief, confronting misinterpretation, grace, redemption, and ultimately reconciliation. My methods rely on the iconoclasm of religious and patriotic symbols, ruin, and reconstruction to complicate relationships between viewers and ideologies.

How can visualizing symbolic iconoclasm both disenchant viewers while also giving them permission to reimagine America's future? How can iconoclastic artworks act as a bridge between art in-groups and out-groups? My sculpture called *Phantom Limb* is, as of this writing, on loan for the duration of the thesis exhibition to First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor. Its absence from the gallery space forms a cross-disciplinary conversation that is so important to my work. One must go to the church itself to experience Phantom Limb where it blends in with the materiality of the church space itself only to be discovered when one actively looks for it. The move from the gallery to the church is unconventional. Church spaces rarely entertain contemporary

artworks—much less those that can be viewed as critical of religion and that open the conversation to doubt.

While the work is a result of a very personal experience, the actual making reveals a complex war between an America that holds onto a dying past represented by traditions, ritual, and the maintanence of white power juxtaposed against a society crying out for justice, equality, and the recognition of inalienable rights of *all* human beings.

Other artists have addressed this in their work, but very few approach it through religion. I see this as a glaring omission in the story of contemporary institutional critique and activist art. Religion is responsible for inspiring horrible acts of violence, propagating slavery, and oppressing minorities in the name of personal interpretation of scripture, and yet it is also uniquely positioned to offer a way to justice and reconciliation. As you will see, I lean heavily on the language and embodiment of religion, shining light on its flaws while celebrating its power to heal.

Figure 1. Reckoning (Detail), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

MESSAGE

There is a story in the Biblical book of Genesis to which I keep returning. It is a story that has marked my relationship with God, with ideas, and with theories, and which I now consider key to understanding the process of my making artwork. In Genesis chapter 32, verses 22-32, Jacob, the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, finds himself alone. It is unclear in the Bible what the circumstances are, but he eventually finds himself wrestling a man (Fig. 2). This combat is so intense that it lasts all night, neither prevailing over the other until finally the man reveals

Figure 2. Gustave Dore, Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, 1855

himself to Jacob by touching his hip and putting it out of socket. Even so injured, Jacob would not relent, saying "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man blesses Jacob, and renames him at that moment, calling him Israel, which means "He strives with God". Jacob recognizes, not that he was victorious, but that he was saved. He named the place of the battle Peniel, which means "the face of God", saying, "[f]or I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."[8]

My artworks are the products of such a combat: one where I put myself

mentally and physically into the act of making. The making itself is not a need or impulse—rather, it is an imperative that cannot be ignored. I cannot grapple with the complexities of history, my own embodied experience in religion and white, Christian society, or the commentary these assume upon America itself without the act of making. Said another way, as I gain knowledge and seek wisdom, the only response I am capable of is to make. As such, the visual works presented with this thesis are less the outcome of a careful plan, and more of an improvisational, unchoreographed fight between myself and the material and ideas I work into my pieces. They are the latest physical incarnations of the true content: the fight; the conversation; the call and response between myself and the intangible weight of historical and social ideas that manifest in the material with which I work, and which will continue long after presented to the viewer.

Before I truly understood this imperative, I worked with a question in mind: How can an artwork offer grace, mercy, and redemption? As I researched and responded to the role of evangelicalism in American colonialism, I attempted to answer this question through erasure and abstraction. Working on a series of three large-scale (62" x 25", 25" x 62". Fig. 3-5) subtractive drawings, I practiced the act of adding and taking away: soiling my paper with graphite and charcoal; erasing lines through the surface; leaving marks that would withstand even the most aggressive erasure; tearing the substrate itself; reapplying certain torn portions--all this in a ritualistic effort to respond to my meditation on cultural sin and the process of grace and forgiveness [9]. In addition to the four subtractive drawings, I made a 52" x 75" ink drawing of a white rift breaking through blackness (Fig. 6) while I considered Barnett Newman's series *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabbacthani*.

When Barnett Newman, a man of Jewish background, finished his body of abstract work based on the seventeenth-century iconographic ecclesiastical pilgrimage *The Stations of the Cross* (Fig. 7) in 1966, he began his artist statement by saying:

Figure 7. Barnett Newman, Stations of the Cross, 1958 - 1966 (National Gallery of Art).

> "Lema Sabachthani — why? Why did you forsake me? To what purpose? Why? ...This overwhelming question that does not complain, makes today's talk of alienation, as if alienation were a modern invention, an embarrassment. This question that has no answer has been with us so long - since Jesus - since Abraham - since Adam - the original question."[10]

By adding Christ's famous last words to his series title, *lema sabbachthani*, "Why have you forsaken me?", Newman emphasizes the *Stations* as a continuous agony—not merely a series of episodes to be experienced and engaged separately—and unites the Passion into a continuous climax. As art critic Lawrence Alloway put it in the original show catalogue for the Stations Guggenheim opening, Newman, "regards the group as a cry. Christ's question is, as it were, the irreducible human content of the Passion, the human cry which has been muffled by official forms of later Church art."[11] Towards the end of his statement, Newman asserts that Christ's cry—the cry he sought to interpret in his work, positions him as a witness to "each man's agony: the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed—world without end". "No one gets anybody's permission to be born. No one asks to live. Who can say he has more permission than anybody else?"[12] Newman transcends the traditional narrative of

the *Stations* by positioning his work thus, using it to call attention to death: the state which connects all humanity. What is hopeful about Newman's *Stations* is that they come from the standpoint of one who is very much alive. In this way, his *Stations* underscore connectedness without giving any particular object of meditation, requiring only active engagement. They are at once a prayer and an at-one-ment.

Newman said of his work, "I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time, of his connection to others who are also separate" [13].

For all of the intentions of my erasure drawings, the outcome fell flat. Their value came not in the works themselves, but in the combative nature of their creation: the imperative to respond through an obsession with the metaphor of physical erasure as a means of penance and a search for grace and redemption. Thinking in the terms of Christianity, values are explained and lessons are taught through parable and allegory. I was trying so hard to rebrand my experience in the language of the art world I so desperately wanted to be a part of that I attempted to bury that which I was most familiar and held most dearly. Abstraction and erasure go hand-in-hand: abstraction acts as a removal of certain representational qualities with the goal of bringing another meaning to the forefront. This process worked for Barnett Newman in the 1960s, but for a fighter like myself in contemporary America, I needed something more tangible with which to grapple. This search was not abstract. Rather, it was my own embodied experience in religion—my own "striving with God"—that would provide the right narrative for the larger conversation I wanted to have in my work.

Embodiment is important. It offers representation to that which is intangible. My grandfather's favorite Bible verse is Galatians 2:20. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." I was raised to believe

that I am indeed myself. However, at the same time, that everything I am is because I am of God and to live is to embody that important truth. Once I rejected the faith of my family, I needed to find my own embodied presence in the world; to tell the world who I was. So, who am I? And what material could possibly represent my experience in the world?

My childhood memories are of spending my time accompanying my parents to church where my dad worked as a Minister of Music until I was eleven years old. He directed choirs, handbell ensembles, and praise groups each of which had weekly practices. My mom performed in each of them, and so I followed. The church was my childhood home, and I consider it as one would normally consider their own childhood bedroom. During rehearsals, I had free reign of the large Southern Baptist church my dad worked at in Raleigh, North Carolina. My favorite game was to start at the entrance to the massive sanctuary and to see how close I could get to my mom and dad before anyone noticed I was there. This meant climbing under the rows of pews and under the memorial tables, pausing to take note of gum under the seat or a scratch or scuff made from a restless congregant during a particularly arduous sermon as they crossed and recrossed their legs, their polished high heels or loafers marking the undersides of the pew.

Figure 3. Untitled 3 (Contrail), 2019.

Figure 4. Untitled 1 (Contrail), 2019.

Figure 5. Untitled 2 (Contrail), 2019.

Figure 7. Untitled 4 (Contrail), 2019.

Pews

Such memories flooded my mind as I browsed Craigslist one afternoon in October of 2019 and found that a decommissioned Lutheran church had been sold to a growing Islamic Youth Center in Dearborn, MI. They had an overabundance of pews that needed to be moved out of the sanctuary so that they could turn it into a musallah—an Islamic prayer room. The significance of this cannot be overstated. In one moment, I found a material that operated both as a link to my own embodied experience within the church—a potential anthropomorphization of evangelical congregants, and a symbol of a changing demographic in American society as white, Christian American power wanes. These pews were a call for response, and an opportunity to grapple deeply with the concepts being considered in my work.

I bought six, fourteen-foot long pews (Fig. 8) from the Hadi Institute Youth Community Center (formally Our Redeemer Lutheran Church), carrying them to the U-Haul on a cold November morning in socked feet out of respect for the new musallah space and transporting them back to my studio. My first task was to figure out where to store these massive artifacts and to reacquaint myself with them. They were familiar—I immediately noticed gum lining the bottom, the scuff marks, the feel of the oak wood, the worn finish where countless congregants had made visible impressions of their devotion in the seats and the scent of over fifty years of use in a church that had loved them well, but due to change, had discarded them. I don't know why Our Redeemer closed. I looked into it and only found posts of a loss felt in the community by its closing. What concerned me was to take that which was rejected by the Hadi Institute and give new it life [14].

Certain things become meaningful to me as I make. It is part of the content in my works even if just for me (and now, you). There was nowhere to store my pews in the studio where they would not get in the way of others working, and out of necessity I had to shorten them.

Seven is a good number in the Christian faith—the number of perfection and completeness—and so it made sense to cut my pews in half to a more manageable seven feet. I went to work with a Sawzall.

When I speak about the fight I feel when making art, this particular example consistently comes to mind. There was no one at the studio when I cut my pews in half. It was silent but for the quiet breath of the air conditioning and air filtration systems. I set up the pews in a common area: a large, warehouse-like room with exposed metal ceilings, beams, and concrete floors. What I remember most vividly was the sound. A roar echoed throughout the building, permeating my body as I felt the resistance of the saw blade shudder throughout my arm. The struggle to bisect the heavy oak was exhausting and the sound was deafening until, finally, the saw broke through and the pew collapsed in one last thunderous crash as over 100 pounds of wood slammed into the concrete floor (Fig. 9). After five more punishing rounds, I was left, sweat pouring and body aching, contemplating how meaningful was the act of conveniently storing these pews and knowing that the real work of transforming them had yet to begin.

I did not yet know what I should do with the pews once I finished sawing them in half. I hadn't pictured their final form. I had vague ideas of transforming them into a sculpture, breaking them into pieces and arranging them in… what shape? Something out there in the void, some abstract thing—maybe hanging from the ceiling or rising from the floor; maybe coming out of the wall. Each sketch I made seemed disingenuous. What I really wanted to do was to investigate the posture I knew so well as a child, spending long hours sitting in the pews where I first knew I loved art: drawing on church bulletins, filling the spaces with sharks and dinosaurs and once, to my parent's horror, a dragon. (I did not know the dragon was an incarnation of Satan.) Even if the end result was still a pew, I wanted something to be different about it. I just didn't know what yet.

The one thing I did know is that I wanted to refinish the wood; to strip

Figure 8. Pews, 2019.

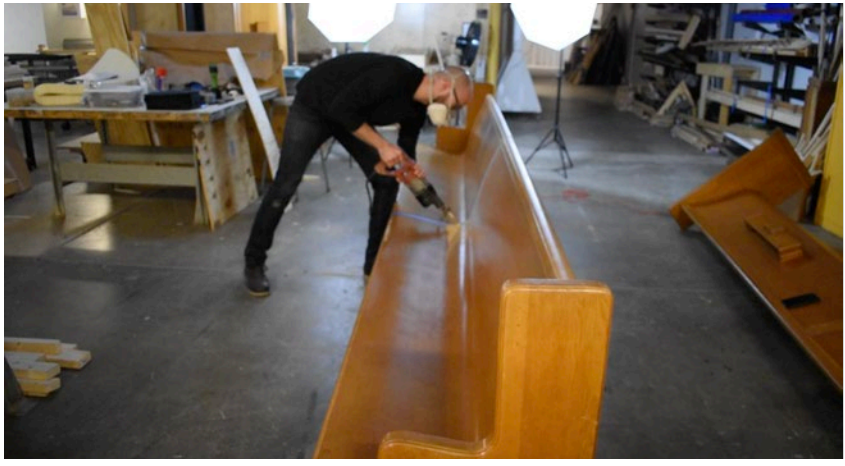


Figure 9. The artist chopping pews, 2019.

the surface varnish and expose the raw oak. And so, once again, I engaged, sanding the finish off of one of the pews. This battle was no less physical than sawing the pews had been, but the monotonous tone of the rotary sander and the meditative back-and-forth of my arm allowed my mind to wander. I listened to audiobooks on the history of evangelical Christianity in the United States, comparing the conservative fundamentalist ideals of early to mid-twentieth century Christian thinkers like R.J. Rushdoony, Billy Graham, Francis Schaeffer, and Jerry Falwell to the radical, and revolutionary roots of Christianity itself. The timeless message of grace, mercy, and love was forced into a societal box when values were strict, inequitable, and repressive--something we as a nation have not recovered from.

The original Christians (literally, "Christ followers") were cult-followers of a Jewish man named Jesus who lived in the area now known as Israel. His family was from Nazareth. He was born in Bethlehem and worked as a carpenter with his father, Joseph. He was raised in Judaism and proved extremely proficient, teaching in the synagogues from the age of twelve[15]. Little is known about his life after that moment until he was around thirty, when he began his ministry: he travelled around the area now known as Israel, Syria, and Jordan teaching how to live a moral and fulfilling life: how to conduct one's self toward others in a way that is pleasing to God. It must be understood that, during this time, Roman power was growing in the region. Jewish people were viewed negatively by the Roman powers specifically because they refused to worship the pagan gods. Eventually, Rome gave in and issued decrees of Jewish tolerance, but this did not stop the religious persecution of Jews. The Jewish people had several reactions to Roman rule. Some sought to bide their time, continue their traditions, and curry favor with the Roman governors. Others sought to fight Roman oppression. Jesus himself advocated peace, saying that God's will was higher than the will of men[16]. It was up to the people to conduct their lives in a way that would help others who suffered—nothing could be done about those who hold power. (This is a case raised today about

how the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, is in effect anti-Biblical—if God ordained powers, a good Christian people would not revolt.) The Jewish religious leaders at the time saw Jesus as a threat, for he preached that power was located in every person who followed his words: words that uplifted the poor, the hungry, the sick, the immigrant, the downtrodden, "poor in spirit", "those who mourn", "the meek", "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"[17], "the merciful", "the peacemakers", and "those persecuted because of righteousness". His message decentralized power and criticized those who exploited others for personal gain. To a rich man, Jesus said, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven"[18]. He said this often. When Jesus was around thirty-three years old, Jewish leaders had enough. They organized for Jesus to be arrested, and brought him before a Roman court to be executed for an alleged attempt at insurrection as his followers had begun calling him the "King of the Jews". Though the judge, Pontius Pilate, could find no wrongdoing, he recognized the need to appease the Jewish leaders and keep peace in the area, and so he gave Jesus over to be executed by crucifixion. Jesus died and, according to the Bible and followers of Jesus, was resurrected three days later. The writings of his most intimate disciples survive afterwards as they became the first leaders of the Church of Christ, originally meaning the body of believers in the words of Jesus, who was said to be the son of the Jewish God.

Christianity spread throughout Rome for a hundred years after Jesus' death. Around 250 CE, the Roman emperor Decius desired a return to Roman pagan religion. In 297 CE, Christianity was outlawed under the rule of Diocletian as Roman power was coming under threat from Persia, the Germanic tribes, and a period of economic hyperinflation. Christians were forced to sacrifice to Roman gods or be killed. It was a bloodbath. Christians were murdered: executed in the coliseums where their deaths provided entertainment. Still, Christianity spread. In 313, emperor Constantine I issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized Chris-

tianity—along with many other religions. In 325, Constantine called the Council of Nicaea, where Christian leaders (remember, until this time it was a cult without any organized doctrine) came together to author the Nicene Creed, establishing a formal orthodox Christianity, which was finally adopted as the official religion of Rome in 380 CE by emperor Theodocius.

Christianity was not aligned with power until the 300s CE. It found itself on the outskirts, tolerated by leaders in the best of times but mostly persecuted. When it officially became the Roman Church, it was appropriated to declare war, label outgroups (non-Christians, heathens, pagans), and most importantly spread via colonization, which became an integral part of Christianity—to save the unbeliever from their own sinful ways became a code phrase for conquering others and became justification for holy wars in the name of spreading the message of Christ throughout what is now Europe and the Middle East. As I will later discuss, this *modus operandi* recurs throughout history.

The Catholic Church (literally "the Universal Church" as penned by father Ignatius of Antioch around 107 CE)[19] flourished throughout the centuries that followed through the imperialism of Rome. Latin was the official language of the Church: most of the population of the conquered northern lands were illiterate, and thus power remained concentrated in Rome despite the efforts of church leaders who desired people to understand the words of the Bible for themselves. Additionally, the development of hand-written manuscripts meant that even if one could read, the expense of purchasing a book was well beyond the means of most people. Books were a sign of wealth both because of cost and the luxury of time and ability to read them.

In 1440 CE, a metalsmith called Johannes Gutenberg changed the world when he invented the first printing press with movable type, revolutionizing the way books were made and consumed. His most famous work, published around 1454, was his 42-line *Gutenberg Bible* (fig. 10), recognized as one of the most beautiful books ever made. By

1500, printing presses had expanded to more than two-hundred cities throughout Europe, and these presses had produced some twenty-million books. It was during this time when the information technology of the press met Christianity head on, and it is not hyperbolic to say that everything changed.

In 1517 CE, Martin Luther, an ordained priest of the Roman Catholic Church and professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg, published ninety-five theses as an academic disputation against the sale of plenary indulgences—certificates that were believed to reduce the temporal punishment in purgatory required for the removal of sins before entrance to heaven. According to Luther, these indulgences were a shallow means of repentance and did not reflect a genuine change of heart. Moreover, the rich were the only ones with access to these certificates which undermined not only the beneficial position of the Church at the core of society but also the spiritual value of giving to the poor in direct opposition to the commands given in the Bible[20]. Luther penned his theses in an effort to provoke discourse and renewal within the church. He did not want to start a fire that would burn the church down. The Church, however, saw the theses as a direct assault on the wealth and power it had held for centuries and pushed back in an era known as the Reformation, which splintered the Catholic Church. Whether he meant it or not, Luther's writings benefitted from the presses operating around Europe, and his critique circulated. His followers, the Lutherans, spread and soon theologians throughout Europe who split from Catholicism would become known as Protestants[21].

A look into the history of Christianity shows an origin that was meant to challenge the powerful and hold them accountable, reminding them that there are people who cannot help themselves, and that it is a worthwhile—even holy—existence to dedicate one's life and wealth in pursuit of lifting those less fortunate up and thereby making a difference. The popularity of that simple message was co-opted again and again by the powerful as a justification for the spread of empire and

Figure 10. Johannes Gutenberg, 42-line Bible, c. 1454.

the individual subjugation of self-reflection for the purpose of maintaining the status-quo. Yet, as can be seen by Luther's example, the simple decentralizing power of the original message challenged the authority of the Church, breaking it in two with the reminder that the message serves "the least of these"[22] and puts the onus of responsibility on the greatest.

Blood

It so happens that I am prone to nosebleeds. I get them often, especially when I physically exert myself. As I was leaning over, applying a finishing sand to a small piece of one pew, my nose started to bleed heavily. Before I could catch it, several drops of blood fell onto the freshly sanded surface. Above, I briefly mentioned the role of improvisation in my process: how it is part of that "spiritual" battle I wage in making artwork. This moment is one of many standouts as I immediately grasped the significance of what had improvisationally happened. I knew that to transform the pew would take sacrifice, and I knew that

blood was the appropriate symbol of that sacrifice. Jesus himself was a divine sacrifice: God made flesh, abject, living among man exposed to sin and temptation, yet resisting. All the while, he taught his disciples how to live well. Finally, he gave his own life so that they—and we—should understand what might be asked of them—and us. I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The blood of Jesus, spilled for us, is powerful. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace."[23]

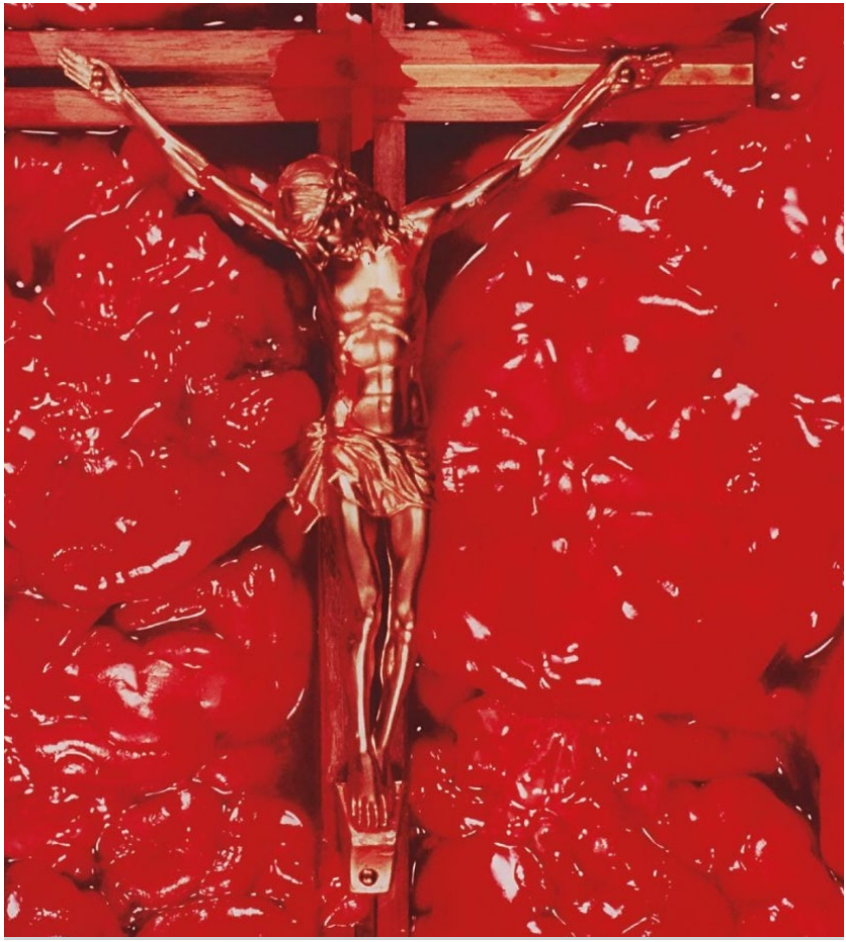


Figure 11. Andres Serrano, Gold Christ (Detail), 1986.

In the symbolic shedding of Jesus' blood is a cleansing of sin and the transformation of believers in Christ, but the actuality of blood is unclean and abject. One can say they've stained a pew. The image is unsurprising. But if I describe my work as a pew stained in blood, the automatic viewer impulse is to imagine violence. It brings to mind the work of Andres Serrano (Fig. 11), who used bodily fluids, including blood, as a way of connecting faith with corporeality and iconography, saying "I like to believe that rather than destroy icons, I make new ones." It evokes Hermann Nitsch, one of the original Viennese Action Artists, who developed the *Orgien Mysterien Theater (O.M. Theater)*—a feast and festival that was meant to glorify our "being here", leading into the essence of ancient tragedy. Nitsch's *O.M. Theater* was known for its mysticism and connection with spirituality, and featured mock crucifixions, the tearing of flesh, and so much blood (Fig. 12). Nitch later went on to make abstract paintings, some with paint and others with blood, that spoke the language of abstract expressionism and were, in his view, the ultimate iteration of the ideas presented in *O.M. Theater*.

Figure 12. Hermann Nitch, Orgien Mysterien Theatre, 1971 (Hermann Nitch).

The decision to stain the pew in blood opened new challenges. How do I get enough blood to stain the entire pew? I found Scholl Slaughterhouse in Blissfield, Michigan—$10 for a quart of blood, I brought the container. How do I keep the blood from clotting so I can apply it? An obscure occult website taught me the key ingredient to making ink from the blood of doves was citric acid. What would it look like? That is to be seen.

Early on a Wednesday morning in October, I drove south from Ann Arbor and soon found myself on a highway winding through midwestern farmland. I say midwestern, but in reality I could just as easily have been driving through the fields of South Carolina where I lived for two years from ages eight to ten. I don't remember much about that time in my life. My family moved there when my dad took a job at First Baptist Church in Hemingway. We left the church with the big sanctuary and the pews I had grown to know so well with a congregation of 1500 people to a town with a total population of 800. Tobacco and cotton were the primary crops grown in and around the rural town. I say I don't remember much about those two years. In retrospect, that period taught me vital and formative lessons about three quintessential themes of the American story: violence, racism, and class.

Memories of living in South Carolina went through my mind as I drove across the windswept fields (Fig. 13). It was cold that day. The sky was angry with swirling clouds and American flags snapped straight on their poles. Hemingway Elementary School was 98% Black. I remember only one other white student in my class. He and I vied for the school's academic awards: always competitors in what I would come to recognize as extreme privilege. His family had money. Mine did not. I related more to my Black friends with whom I shared a tight bond. One friend and I were particularly close. We did everything together. When a special event was to take place at First Baptist Church, Hemingway, I naturally wanted to invite him. Dave Dravecky, a professional baseball player, motivational speaker, and devoted Christian had just published

his memoir *Comeback*. (I would later learn that Dravecky was a member of the John Birch Society: a far-right organization that advocates limited government and made a resurgence with the American Tea Party in the 2010s, and that Dravecki noted was a logical extension of born-again Christian philosophy.) The pastor of the church had gotten a couple of copies, and was going to give them to someone who brought a friend to church. My friend loved baseball, and so I invited him. What I did not know at the time was that First Baptist Hemingway was not accepting of people of color. Though my friend and I were not bothered during the event, my dad as a leader in the church was immediately told he needed to talk to me about with whom I spent my time. I remember the controversy, and the anger my dad had at the church members who were bothered by my bringing a friend to church. It was the first time I had ever encountered intolerance due to nothing more than the color of one's skin. I was nine years old. I learned during an interview with my father in December of 2020 that this incident led to a period of attempted reconciliation between First Baptist and the Black church in the neighboring town of Johnsonville, and that after months of the pastor and my father building relationships with the Black leaders, First Baptist would not entertain the idea of integration. This led both my father and the pastor to resign their positions in frustration and anger.

I would be dishonest with you and myself if I did not admit that I do not

Figure 13. Liberty, N.C. (Landscape), Digital Collage, 2019: Photographs by artist, 2007.

feel adequate nor qualified to discuss the Black experience in America. I have spent years listening and learning from so many who powerfully articulate their lives as ways to be seen; ways to teach; ways to assert their presence which was long denied. My thesis would be incomplete, however, without my own contribution to the growing choir of people of every race and creed who are calling for Christianity to account for the detrimental role it played in dehumanizing and oppressing people of color while supporting white supremacy throughout the history of the nation.

Before Thomas Jefferson penned that "all men are created equal" (while also himself enslaving people), Christianity had ideas of justice and the inherent equality of people embedded in its teaching of human beings as *Imago Dei*: the image of God[24]. As historian and author Jemar Tisby notes, "nothing about American racism was inevitable. There was a period, from about 1500 - 1700 when race did not predetermine one's station in society. ... [D]uring the initial stages of European settlement in North America, ... [r]ace was still being made"[25]. The first victims were the indigenous peoples whom Christopher Columbus saw as nothing more than "blank slates on which Christian missionaries could write the gospel."[26](Fig. 14). This patriarchal view of evangelism, where the "unchurched" are as children who need guidance to find their way is still very present in the American church of today. When the indigenous tribes proved capable of fighting for themselves, did not take to the message of "European religion" because it meant a loss of tribal identity, or were wiped out from disease, colonizers turned to slavery to meet the demands of Europe. In the fervor that was Christianity in America, however, how was it possible to reconcile the enslavement of another human being with the recognition that that person was also made in the image of God?

Colonizers to the Americas adopted a religio-cultural language to describe themselves; to be European was to be "Christian", and to be anything else was to be "heathen". The goal of evangelism is to save

the soul of heathens, and they believed they were doing just that by civilizing tribal societies (nevermind the pride and arrogance it took to ignore the intensely complex social systems of any tribe, whether First Nations or African, or that Christianity had arrived in Africa through Egypt and Ethiopia in the third and fourth centuries CE and was very much a part of the culture[27]). A sort of double-think was adopted by Christian missionaries and their Christian enslavers: one could carefully craft a version of Christianity that would focus on the eternal reward of heaven to be found after living a life of obedience on earth. This is the message enslavers allowed to have taught to the enslaved persons to ease their own "Christian conscience" by redeeming the souls of the lost while still maintaining the deplorable institution of slavery itself. The stories of liberation and freedom throughout the Bible were conveniently ignored and even excised (there were "Slave Bibles", which omitted important stories of liberation). Jesus' famous decree that "the truth will set you free"[28] was watered down to indicate obedience was the only way to freedom, and that this freedom would be achieved in death when the vast riches built up by earthly obedience would finally

Figure 14. Theodor de Bry, Columbus Arrives in America, 1594 (Library of Congress).

be granted. This bastardized gospel message continues throughout evangelicalism and has spawned a prosperity gospel where the more one gives of themselves, the more they will receive (and maybe even on this earth) as well as a mentality among all Christians whether Black or white that self-control and obedience are the only ways to eternal salvation.

Please keep in mind that these are not necessarily biblical constructs—they are social constructs supported by a selective interpretation of the Bible. There were many pastors that tried to resist--many joining the abolitionist movement. Chris Ladd writes about the nature of Southern churches:

> Generation after generation, Southern pastors adapted their theology to thrive under a terrorist state. Principled critics were exiled or murdered, leaving voices of dissent few and scattered. Southern Christianity evolved in strange directions under ever-increasing isolation. Preachers learned to tailor their message to protect themselves. If all you knew about Christianity came from a close reading of the New Testament, you'd expect that Christians would be hostile to wealth, emphatic in protection of justice, sympathetic to the point of personal pain toward the sick, persecuted and the migrant, and almost socialist in their economic practices. None of these consistent Christian themes served the interests of slave owners, so pastors could either abandon them, obscure them, or flee.[29]

According to Stewart, "Christian nationalism came of age in the American slave republic. In the eyes of proslavery theologians, the United States was the "Redeemer Nation"—a "nation which God's own hand hath planted, and on which He has, therefore, peculiar and special claims," as one Alabama cleric put it. When the United States was divided by the Civil War, God's hand unmistakably settled on the Confederate States of America, which was understood to be waging a holy war on behalf of Christian civilization against the impious Union"[30].

Books can and have been written on Christian views of the institution of slavery before and during the Civil War, and the issue itself is complicated, though a general understanding will be adequate for the purposes of this thesis: generally northern churches opposed slavery, generally southern churches supported it—even within denominations.

I grew up as a Southern Baptist. My parents were Southern Baptists, and my grandparents were Southern Baptists. Before 1845, the Baptist denomination in the United States was unified under one doctrine and with outreach organizations such as the Baptist Home Mission Society (BHMS). In an effort to get the Baptist denomination (read, the northern Baptists who were averse to slavery) to explicitly take a stance on whether or not it was a sin to enslave people, southern churches sent applications for slaveholding ministers to become missionaries in the BHMS in 1844. The organization was responsible for sponsoring missionaries within America to evangelize unbelievers and spread the gospel. It refused to take a stance, however, until finally pressured by the Alabama Baptists when it finally issued a statement saying, "If ...anyone should offer himself as a Missionary, having slaves, and should insist on retaining them as his property, we could not appoint him. ... One thing is certain, we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery"[31]. In May of 1845 nearly twenty years before the first shots of the Civil War, the Baptists drew their battle lines forming a new association called the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The first president, William Bullein Johnson, explained the separation: "These [northern] brethren, thus acted upon a sentiment they have failed to prove--That slavery is, in all circumstances sinful"[32]. The SBC would not formally apologize for its support of slavery until 1995, and it wasn't until 2017 that the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary—the SBCs flagship school—released a formal investigation into the racism and support of slavery that played a part in its origin and growth. The president of the seminary at the time, Albert Mohler, Jr, wrote, "We have been guilty of a sinful absence of historical curiosity. We knew, and we could not fail to know, that slavery and

deep racism were in the story. We comforted ourselves that we could know this, but since these events were so far behind us, we could move on without awkward and embarrassing investigations and conversations."[33]

The Civil War marked a turn. White power in the south was threatened (but not close to vanishing), and the economy was in shambles: because of the war, but also because the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution made slavery illegal (with the exception of punishment for a crime—itself deeply problematic), wiping out an entire economy built on the backs of free slave labor. Five years later, the Fifteenth Amendment gave all citizens the right to vote. South Carolina had a Black elected majority between 1867 and 1876, and they set about rebuilding the shattered economy by levying land taxes (mostly falling on personal property held by professionals, bankers, and merchants). Historian Heather Cox Richardson describes the policies implemented by this majority, writing, "The legislature then used state funds to build schools, hospitals, and other public services, and bought land for resale to settlers—usually freedpeople—at low prices"[34].

Though South Carolinians objected to the race of these elected officials (most of them were free, professionals, and property owners before the Civil War), there was an awareness that to build an argument against the officials based on race would not work in the rapid changes of the time. They instead turned to an argument that would recur throughout the twentieth century and affect us to this very day. The argument was to promote the view that Black members of the legislature were nothing more than "lazy, ignorant field hands using public services to redistribute wealth"[35]. This argument not only undermined the elected status of official in South Carolina, but also planted the seeds of white resentment of Black success, and shows that the conservative fear of "socialism" started long before the Bolshevik Revolution and the American "Red Scare"; its origins were based solely on racist views. The script was flipped: whites wanted to remain in power

and viewed Black success as not only a threat, but as persecution. This was an adoption of what Nietzsche called "slave morality" (though he did not mean it in connection with race in America) in his 1887 book *Genealogy of Morals*.

> [T]he slave morality says 'no' from the very outset to what is 'outside itself', 'different from itself', and 'not itself': and this 'no' is its creative deed. This volte-face of the valuing standpoint—this inevitable gravitation to the objective instead of the subjective—is typical of 'resentment': the slave-morality requires as the condition of its existence an external and objective world, to employ physiological terminology, it requires objective stimuli to be capable of action at all - its action is fundamentally a reaction. (emphasis added).[36]

This mentality cast white society as the hard working victim of Black freeloading greed, and a reaction was necessary to maintain the status quo. The reaction came in the form of Jim Crow legislation that codified segregation into law and stripped Black people of their rights as citizens of the United States of America.

It is long past time for a religion-wide reckoning into the role Christianity has played in undermining the personhood of Black people. For too long religious leaders have grown comfortable with the power they have held, and it has brought harm to the marginalized, women, the LGBTQ+ community, and yes, even white men who were complicit in the deceit and conditioned to believe they were above all others because God had made it so[37].

I finally arrived at Scholl Slaughterhouse—a small but sturdy building on a hill that rose slightly above the surrounding fields. The owner met me in a comfortable lobby area, and said, "Perfect timing! We're just about to bring one down!" Intrigued and nauseous, I placed the quart-size soup containers on the counter and waited until, 10 minutes later, he placed them back on the counter filled to the top with blood (Fig. 15).

It was still warm. Once again, memories of Hemingway, SC, came to mind. I was pulled out of school after third grade. Middle school started in fourth grade in Hemingway, and my mom was nervous about me being in school with eighth graders. I began homeschooling then, and was homeschooled until the end of eighth grade, long after we moved away from Hemingway. The curriculum my mom chose was a Christian curriculum, and I remember science the most. We did projects such as constructing a giant model of the ear canal out of chairs and blankets using cookie sheets as the eardrum and branches as the small bones. When we learned about the construction of the eye, my mom went to a local butcher in Hemingway and picked up two cow eyes which we dissected. This left a profound impression on me, along with other scenes of violence that pervaded my life in Hemingway: the first time I saw a deer being dressed after a hunt, hanging skinless and upside down as a bucket caught the blood and innards.

Figure 15.Scholl's Slaughterhouse, 2019.

Real blood is warm; real blood is unclean; real blood is common: I thought these things as I left Scholl's Slaughterhouse, placed the containers of blood gently on the floorboards of my car and drove back to my studio in Ann Arbor. I thought about sacrifice—another bible story where Abraham fought his own human instinct as a father to a son, Issac, for whom he pleaded to God for years. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Issac, and Abraham obeyed. Before he plunged the knife into Issac, God sent a ram. The sacrifice of Issac was meant to test the faith of Abraham[38]. Jesus was meant to disrupt the long tradition of sacrificing animals by offering himself as the final sacrifice. His blood, pure from sin, was offered to save all humankind. Before Jesus died, he offered another symbol with a close relationship to his blood: wine. ("And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood'"[39].) All of these things went through my mind on my drive home, and because I didn't know if the three quarts of blood would be enough, I decided that I would mix the blood with wine as a binder for the stain. By this decision, the blood would transform the pew and, maybe, the wine would transform the blood.

But what would it look like? When I got back to the studio, I dumped the already clotting blood into a large, five-gallon bucket, poured in a bottle of wine, sprinkled a quarter cup of powdered citric acid into the mix (the occult website I had consulted didn't have a ratio for cow blood—only dove for use in ritual blood ink, so I had to guess), and blended it all together. I tested the mix on a scrap piece of pew to see if it was worth doing. The blood mixture was thick as I brushed it on the surface of the wood (Fig. 16). To my surprise, the color was absolutely banal--a shade redder than the original stain. The difference was in the grain of the wood. The blood settled in, bringing out the grain and giving a beautiful luster to the wood. Had I not myself picked up the blood from a slaughterhouse and felt it's warmth, I would have questioned

its authenticity. But no, I knew that it was real. I felt transfixed by the process.

The visual mundanity of the stain interested me. So much of the Christian faith is making the invisible visible. It is by one's actions, not their words, that one lives the gospel of Christ. Likewise, God himself is invisible. He sent his son, Jesus, so that we could "see" him, and it was through the actions of Jesus that Christians know how to live to bring glory and honor to God. The violence, symbolism, and the very reality of the blood I used as stain was hidden under a truly unassuming surface, only to be revealed, I decided, through the text of a material list--only to be found by those who seek.

I had made my own paint before using historical material—ruins from the past upon which society is built. In Richmond Virginia, I created a painting that was made of dirt I collected on the Richmond Slave Trail: a path that runs through downtown Richmond where, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, enslaved people were brought from ships on the James River under the cover of darkness to the markets in Shockoe Bottom. It also included paint made by crushing stones from the gallows upon which Gabriel Prosser and 25 other enslaved people were hanged in June of 1800. Material has deep meaning. Viewed within the context of my current work, I recognized once again the fight between myself and material—a deconstruction of historical legacy. Even then, I pulverized the granite stones to dust in order to make my own paint. The outcome, like my drawings I made from the beginning of this section, was unconvincing aesthetically—my attempts to speak in the language of art history seemed clumsy, and the minimalism I referenced did not do justice to the subject matter. Those early missteps, however, laid the foundations of the work I am presenting with this thesis both in subject matter and in method.

During the process of staining and rebuilding my pew, I considered my thoughts driving home from Scholl's Slaughterhouse. I thought about

Figure 16. Brushing a mixture of blood and wine onto wood, 2019.

the violence and racism in Hemingway, the American flags that were ubiquitous among the rural landscape of southern Michigan, and the far-right views of Dave Dravecky, which he shared with the overwhelming majority of evangelical Christians. In front of me, I saw the tangled web of politics and religion and the tremendous harm it was causing in America. I needed something to pair with the pew. Something that demonstrated the fight in the form of a conversation. After all, one does not sit in a pew only to look at a wall! There is a speaker positioned before it. The speaker opines at the pulpit, sharing their contemporary perspective on the application of ancient wisdom. The listener should not merely absorb these opinions, but attempt to grasp them and weigh them against their own experience. This is the mental back-and-forth that should be: critical discourse, critical understanding. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."[40]

Flag

It was the flag that inspired me. The American flag is a powerful symbol. It is viewed by many as a symbol of freedom; immense pride is felt when it is flown. To others, it is a symbol of oppression. In August of 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem, refusing to stand for a flag that represented a country where black and brown people were disproportionately killed by police (Fig. 17). This action drew a line between sports players that used their platform to draw attention to areas in American society that did not represent freedom or equality and those who call themselves patriots, who unquestioningly accept the myth that America is the ultimate representation of goodness and righteousness. Flags are burned to protest; worn to shield; flown to honor; lowered to mourn; folded to remember.

I've always been interested in flags. They remind me of mission weeks in church growing up, when we would learn about missionaries and the work they do overseas. Every country I've been to, the first thing I used

Figure 17. Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem (Newsweek).

to do was find a flag from that nation. Learning the flags was a way to connect with the countries, and the people they represent. The International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention has a training center located outside of Richmond. It's a large compound where missionaries live and work for 2-8 weeks in preparation for the mission field. In three of the main buildings—the cafeteria, the children and youth center (where I helped paint a mural), and the main hall—flags from every nation where the IMB has a missionary are displayed; grey flags represent the nations where being a missionary is illegal, and one could be arrested or executed for talking about Jesus to others.

I knew that I wanted to make a flag. It was not enough to buy one. I knew from experience that power of reimagining and testing came in the fight: the making and altering of the symbols I chose to use. I knew that the colors of the American flag unofficially stood for something: the blue stands for vigilance and justice, white for innocence and purity, and red for the valor and hardiness present in the blood of patriots. What effect would the removal of symbolic patriotic blood have on the flag? What would the experience be of looking upon a white American flag? I began to think about whiteness and how, in Christianity, that meant purity from sin: cleansed by the untainted-by-sin blood of Jesus' sacrifice. When viewed in the American narrative, however, whiteness represented a different kind of blood-purity; free from the taint of "Africanness", wholly Western European, and possessing the alleged heritage of Christendom (while ignoring the cultural validity of other othodox traditions based in Eastern Europe and African nations such as Egypt and Ethiopia). Those two definitions of purity somehow fused together in America when, I thought, they should be vastly different. The purity Christ desired was a purity born out of love, not ritual. Love for one's neighbor, and "the least of these".[41]

The labor of flag-making is tremendous. I think of all the storied history that has come from that labor: Betsy Ross and the first American flag; the design of the Confederate "stars and bars", sent out across the

south to be reproduced by women (in churches). All this ran through my mind while making the flag. What happens to the symbol I'm altering? What new symbol am I creating? How will it be read? Who will it represent?

Sonya Clark is known for her labor disrupting the symbol of the flag. Her most famous works take the Confederate battle flag and change the way we experience it. Anyone who has grown up (or spent any time) in the southern United States is familiar with the ubiquity of the Confederate battle flag. Red with a blue St. Andrew's cross and thirteen white stars, it has become the symbol of the Lost Cause myth of Southern heritage, and keeps that history deep in public memory. Clark rethinks this symbol through her work. In *Unravelling & Unraveled* (Fig. 18), Clark recruits fifty volunteers to help her unravel a cotton Confederate battle flag—a metaphor for the work we must do to unravel the complex relationship America still has to the Civil War, and through that, slavery and a history of racist policy. Left after the unravelling are three piles of cotton: red, white, and blue, which bring to mind the fabric of America itself. *Monumental Cloth: The Flag We All Should Know* (Fig. 19) is a different form of iconoclasm. Clark reimagines the last official Confederate flag: the humble dishcloth used for the surrender

Figure 18. Sonya Clark, Unraveling & Unraveled, 2015 (Sonya Clark).

of the Confederate army at Appomattox Courthouse. Clark invites us to hold that flag as the standard of the Confederacy by handweaving a replica of the original waffle knit design, recontextualizing the labor of the hundreds of women who made the original battle flags in Southern churches, and enlarging it to a monumental scale.

If flags are powerful symbols, and perhaps none are as powerful as the American flag, then its deconstruction becomes a meaningful endeavor. According to anthropologist David Kertzer, throughout the 1950's, 60's and 70's, the American flag had become "the holy icon of American civil religion." Thus, to talk about "desecrating" the flag was to reframe the conversation surrounding acts of protest, such as flag-burning, that centered around the symbol of the flag. Former Nixon speech writer William Safire said of the issue that "[d]esecration is rooted in sacredness. Americans do not consecrate—make holy—our political signs and documents, nor can anyone 'desecrate' them"[42]. Artists have a long history of using the flag in artworks to provoke the viewer into reimagining the symbol (or confronting their deeply held beliefs about it). In art, the American flag has been reimagined[43], used to protest[44], and directly defiled (Fig. 20)[45].

Figure 19. Sonya Clark, Monumental Cloth, 2020 (Carlos Avendaño).

Figure 20. Dred Scott, What is the Proper Way to Display and American Flag?, 1988 (Dred Scott).

When I first staged the installation I once called Transubstantiation (named for the conversion of the substance of the Eucharist--the bread and the wine—into the body and blood of Christ himself), a second instance of improvisation occurred. I had decided to affix the flag to the wall across from the pew in the interest of time. (My decision to make the flag came late, and I had just finished it the day before my critique). After I pinned the flag to the wall and arranged it as though it were hanging limply on a pole, I stood back and realized that the whiteness of the flag and its slack position on the wall made it look

Figure 21. Ex Americus, 2019. Photo by PD Rearick.

remarkably close in form to the hood of a Knight of the Ku Klux Klan (Fig. 21).

I had not until then made any direct reference to the underlying issue of race in my research though I knew it had always been there. As a white male, I am aware of my position in any discussion of race. I am aware of my privilege to engage as an observer. My friendships and experiences in Hemingway are far removed, and too often have racist actions been dismissed because of the "black friends". I learned these lessons the hard way. My grandparents are from North Carolina: my grandfather grew up in a tiny town called

Liberty, the son of a butcher and justice of the peace. My grandmother was from the far more urban city of Durham. My grandfather lists among the formative moments of his life an encounter with a black church near his house, lying in the fields and listening to hymns and sermons delivered with a soul that could only have come from centuries of oppression and a longing for a freedom denied them--even in scripture. Eventually, my grandparents were called to be missionaries to Vietnam. They arrived in 1962, serving the people of Vietnam and sharing the gospel of Jesus throughout the war until they were forced to flee in 1975 with only a suitcase per-person when Saigon fell to the communist North Vietnamese. Today, my grandfather still tears up when he describes the feeling of losing the country that had adopted him, and to which he gave everything.

And yet, despite the years spent overseas, my grandparents still hold fast to the American patriotic creed and the unequal views that pump through the veins of every southerner. It is important to understand that I too grew up with these paradoxical views. Though I did not approve of the Confederate battle flag, I defended the rights of others to fly it. I was a proponent of the Civil War as a war for the rights of states to govern themselves; slavery was only a secondary reason. I felt angry as a poor student from a poor family looking for opportunities to apply for scholarships and not finding any because I never fit

into any criteria. I grew up in the south, but I never thought I identified with it. I came of age overseas as my parents followed in the footsteps of my grandparents, serving as missionaries in Mauritius and Japan, and I came back to America looking down on the backward views held by so many around me--and yet I was just as ignorant. I began to open my eyes when the policeman who killed Michael Brown was cleared of all charges in March of 2015. I was completely transformed in August of 2017 when the "Unite the Right" rally overtook the town of Charlottesville, VA, less than an hour away from where I lived in Richmond. I began to look at the symbols around me: the battle flags flying in neighborhoods surrounding my own; the monuments that lined Richmond's storied Monument Avenue and that I had defended because of their historical and aesthetic significance; the crosses staked into the ground in front of churches; the evocation of burning crosses staked into other ground in another time, but present in the very symbols that surround us today. I began to see America for the first time as a broken nation where millions of people avert their eyes and perform ignorant rituals while millions of others cry out in pain to be noticed, aided, and validated as human beings worthy of life and liberty. At the same time, I am aware of the religiosity of that language—the implication being that a savior is needed to put the pieces back together.

Figure 22. Andy Warhol, Sixty Last Suppers, 1986.

Fire

It may seem like a strange transition for me to direct your attention to Andy Warhol. Known for his remarkable portraits of stars done by screen-printing massive canvases, few know that Warhol was a devout Catholic who attended mass every Sunday and fed the homeless of New York City every Thursday until his death in 1987 [46]. His experience as a child attending St. John Chrysostom Eastern Rite Russian Greek Catholic Church in Pittsburgh every Sunday with its religious icons designed to direct your thoughts to their subjects may have had an impact on his work. You may consider his shallow fascination with celebrity and his cool and calculated persona that was so fixated on fame; yet his work was often a meditation on death and the temporality of life. He repetitively printed the portraits of celebrities, but also electric chairs, and car crashes. (Later in his life, he turned his focus to religious iconography itself. Fig. 22.) Warhol used the ubiquity of celebrity and fame as a symbol, probing it more deeply to reveal meaning hidden underneath, thereby revealing insecurities and giving us a *memento mori* wrapped in glamor and bright colors.

According to art writer and religious scholar Jane Dillenberger, Warhol played the "holy fool" (*yurodivy* in Russian Orthodox tradition): one who acts intentionally foolish in the eyes of man only to direct their thoughts to a higher purpose [47]. (Fig. 23 is a portrait taken after his assassination attempt by Valerie Solanas—this improvisational pose embodies the posture of Jesus showing his wounds to the doubting disciples after his resurrection.)

This persona of Warhol is one I am constantly drawn to. His maniacal obsessions that spanned the decades and a prolific output of work were a way to draw others to him in a way that I argue is rooted in his religious upbringing. As I mentioned, when one is a believer, one adopts the mantle of "savior", dead in themselves and living only as an embodied manifestation of Jesus Christ, and it often becomes second nature

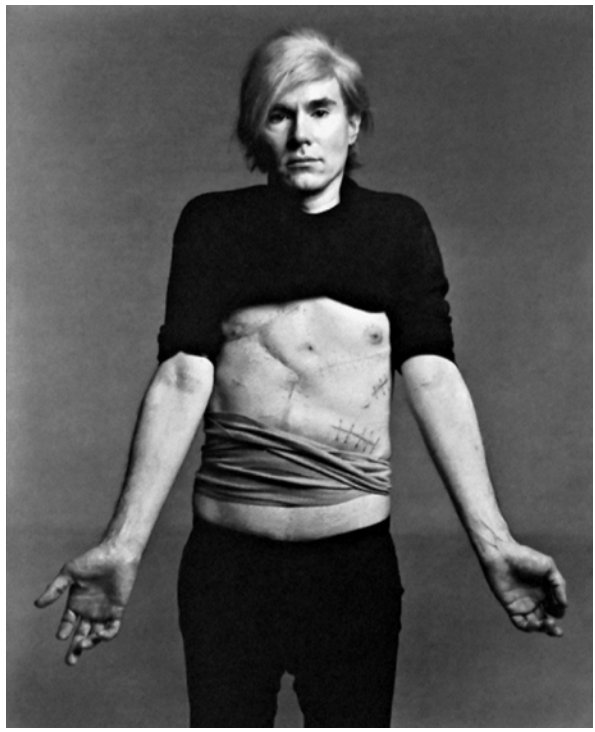


Figure 23. Richard Avedon, Andy Warhol Portrait, 1969.

to manifest that identity to others [48]. By stripping iconography through repetition to the point of absurdity, Warhol pointed our attention, like Newman, to the most democratic of all human experiences: that of death itself. In that way, Warhol offered a sort of salvation to us all, allowing ourselves the gift of community: of "15 minutes of fame" and a connection to the eternal that is celebrity. The Eastern Orthodox "Holy Fool" appears in other traditions as being "crazy for God", or as another symbol I began to imagine through my investigations in deconstructing symbols: to be "on fire" for God.

I was on fire for a large part of my life—born again and baptized at the age of nine, I loved that my parents worked for the church, therefore God. When they told my sisters and me they were praying to become missionaries, I eagerly prayed with them, thrilled at the idea of sharing

the love of God with others around the world. When I was a senior in high school, I began to falter in my faith. I began to immerse myself in philosophy, and attempted to reconcile free will with God's plan, predestined at the foundation of the world. I began to question whether or not there was a god, much less the God, and the fire burned out. What is left when the fire of faith burns out?

In the Bible, fire is a symbol of both the consuming power of God, and as a cleansing entity—a metaphor for the trials of existence that refine our hearts as fire refines metal. "In this you rejoice, ...you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." [49] I spent twenty years of my life dedicated to the sole purpose of dying to myself, taking up the cross of Jesus, and advancing the Kingdom of God. Through the course of my research, I discovered a community of people who have progressively dismantled Christianity. Some still believe. Most have been too hurt by church history to even consider being a part of it again, dealing with feelings of resentment, anger, frustration, and a deep depression. Still others have thrown off the yoke of God altogether. The fastest growing "religious" group in the United States today is the religiously unaffiliated. Of those who religiously identify as "none", 78% were raised in religion while six in ten Millenials will leave the faith of their childhood. We are scarred and battered; carriers of trauma that psychologists are just now beginning to name as "religious trauma syndrome". In the words of author Alice Greczyn, her "own self-deception [of devoting her entire life to a belief that turned out to be harmful] had caused [her] to fear believing in anything ever again, including what we call reality" [50]. Through all of this, what is there to be redeemed? I argue that the complete deconstruction of a worldview we held as an ultimate truth has led to a remarkable resilience. We were raised to die for our beliefs, and we now fight with the same ferocity for the right to hold doubt, and in that uncertainty we find immense beauty.

The deconstruction of which I speak is akin to what anthropologist Bruno Latour identified as "iconoclash" in his 2002 catalogue for a German art exhibition of the same name. He contrasts it with iconoclasm: the fanatical destruction of a symbol in an attempt to wipe out every trace of what it represents. "With iconoclasm, one knows that the act of breaking represents, and what the motivations of apparent destruction are. For iconoclash, one does not know: one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive." [51]

Latour pairs iconoclash with the concept of the "factish". A hybrid of "fact" and "fetish", Latour explains that the factish complicates the cycle of denunciation where the fetish, held by the believer as vital to their existence, is emptied of value and belief by others, who then ask the new unbeliever to put their faith in another construct deemed more appropriate by those responsible for the initial disenchantment. The factish is an acknowledgment that belief itself is a construct made by human beings in order to exist in a world that may otherwise contradict our own worldview. The example can be given if one imagines a group with an established cultural code and a religion with gods represented by idols. If a Christian missionary came upon this group, they would be horrified and immediately try to strip the idols of divinity, trying to convince the group that the God of their own book was the true god--this because their own belief that Christian culture is more civilized and to believe in their God is to embrace a more civilized world complete with its own set of symbols and icons. I offer deconstruction as a means of questioning belief on our own terms, not to accept another "blessed assurance" (to quote an old hymn) but to embrace our own limitations in understanding—to walk humbly and without pretense.

Symbols are, by definition, representations and are widely understood within in-groups. They represent an identity, object, function, or process. Because of their simplicity, it is easy for symbols to fall into the dangerous dichotomy of good or evil; us or them. Factishes. But what

if, rather than destroy a symbol, one changes it; takes it apart and puts it together in new ways; disrupts our way of seeing and understanding that symbol? By taking a church pew (an ever-present symbol representative of the Christian posture of receiving teaching) and breaking, burning, or staining it in blood, what new ways of seeing or experiencing that symbol emerge? Latour observes that "freedom becomes the right not to be deprived of ties that render existence possible, ties emptied of all ideals of determination, of false theology of creation ex nihilo" [52]. Disrupting symbols that have such deep ties is an embrace of this kind of freedom.

I decided that I would continue the fight using the symbol of fire to alter a second pew. The first stage was to torch the pew in the Japanese method of "yakisugi"—a method of preserving wood by burning the surface until it is blackened (Fig. 24). In the process of burning the pew, I discovered that one of the legs was damaged and would no longer support the weight. Around this same time, I read an essay by the author Sara Nović. One passage in particular reached out to me:

> "I say I have sloughed off religion like a diseased limb, like it is no longer of use to me, but that's not entirely true. Without it I am unsteady, vulnerable in a way I couldn't be when I was not of this world. The thing about religion is that when you have it it feels good, and, like any opiate, the withdrawals are painful. I do not feel cured or free. Instead I hang in the disquiet of remission. Sometimes, if I visit my hometown and find myself in a room of people singing or praying, I can still feel something, a phantom limb of faith. I wait to see if I am out of the woods, or if my body will again light up the scan with that most feared diagnosis - a malignancy formed in and of oneself, spreading and reclaiming control." [53]

I knew I had to fight for the pew, amputating the leg, and making a prosthetic limb that would support the work. I cut the leg off, made a mold and, with the help of Kristina Shufelt and 555 Detroit, I cast the

Figure 24. Phantom Limb Prototype, 2020.

Figure 25. Aluminum Leg, 2019.

leg in aluminum. The result was a gnarled piece of metal: impure and violent (Fig. 25). It looked strange attached to the pew. Foreign. The result was, like my drawings, not entirely successful, and I knew it needed something else. Perhaps another layer.

While the beginning of *Phantom Limb* was grounded in my own personal experience of faith, I had begun to view things differently due to the history evoked by the hanging flag. I began to think about metal as a symbol, remembering the controversy that came to a violent head at the Unite the Right rally in August of 2017. Charlottesville had at that time a monument to Confederate general Robert E. Lee. It was around that monument that far-right extremists protested, activating counter protestors who supported its removal. Many were attacked by the extremists, resulting in several beatings. The day hit its awful climax when a white nationalist drove his grey Dodge Challenger into a group of counter protesters, injuring dozens and killing 32 year-old Heather Heyer. The outrage at the events in Charlottesville spilled into Richmond as the eyes of the city turned to our newly elected mayor Lavar Stoney to do something about the white nationalists that had flocked to our own city to rally around the many prominent symbols of the Confederacy erected throughout Richmond (Fig. 26).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, a myth known as the "Lost Cause" spread in the hearts and minds of Southerners. The myth saw the Civil War as a fight for "heritage, not hate"; for the freedom of self-governance promised in the Constitution. Of course, this narrative is absolutely false, but it was and is a prevalent belief not only in the south, but throughout the United States today. Symbols became an important catalyst for supporting these myths in public memory. I notice the language of historian David Blight when he writes, "History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be critical and skeptical of motive and action, and therefore more secular than what people call memory. If history is shared and secular, memory is often treated as a sacred

Figure 26. Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, VA, c. 1910 (Library of Congress).

set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community" (emphasis added). Memory itself is a broad subject, and so to narrow it down, I want to draw special attention to public memory, defined by philosopher Edward Casey as a gathering of "place, people, and topics in its encompassing embrace by acting as the external horizon that encircles … the human situation, the human condition, the place we are always at when we are not merely standing by others or with family and friends." It's power "resides in the capacity to be for the most part located on the edge of our lives, hovering, ready to be invoked or revised, acted upon or merely contemplated, inspiring us or boring us" [54].

In addition to public memory, sociologist Genevieve Zubrzycki writes that "mundane and monumental modes of materiality …[compose] national identity through everyday practices" and are involved in "concretizing states control over definitions of the nation" as well as "[fomenting] nationalist sentiments and collective actions" [55]. From these two concepts, you can begin to build the idea that materiality is an important part of the development of identity, and that public memory, which constitutes identity through sacred ties that lie in the

background of a society, is supported by material.

When we examine the systems of belief that define us, what is exposed?

I was horrified by Charlottesville, and yet I was on the wrong side of history. I argued for leaving the monuments up, and encouraged the city through community conversation and emails to build more monuments that would broaden the story of the history of the city; perhaps allow artists to interact with Confederate statues in order to recontextualize and problematize them. I thought that, as the city was quickly gentrifying due to the cheap cost of living attracting entrepreneurs from New York City and Los Angeles, the removal of the statues would be an excuse to conveniently ignore the deeply rooted racism and inequality that affected so many people of color in the city. I still believe Richmond needs a reckoning, but the statues must (and many have) come down.

Monument

What is a monument?

My hometown of Richmond, VA was the capital of the Confederate States of America. It is difficult to relate how deeply the Confederacy permeates the city. One may walk down any street in the city to find a plaque describing the history that happened on that very spot, or identifying the house where Robert E. Lee lived. Most prominently, a street called Monument Avenue is a grand boulevard that marks one of the most affluent (and white) neighborhoods in Richmond with a collection of monumental figurative sculptures representing Robert E. Lee (erected in 1890 and unveiled before a crowd of over 100,000 people[56]), Confederate president Jefferson Davis (1907), generals J.E.B. Stuart (1907) and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson (1919), and naval commander Matthew Fontaine Maury (1929). (In the summer of 2020 following the

extrajudicial killing of George Floyd, all of these, with the exception of Robert E. Lee as of this writing, were removed.) The earliest of these monuments was dedicated twenty-five years after the end of the "War Between the States", as southerners refer to it. Funded by the Daughters of the Confederacy [57], they were built to honor the valiant leaders who fought to defend the rights of their states to govern themselves without the interference of government overreach. The right they were defending was explicitly the right to own and enslave another human being.

I had never thought much about monuments until I moved to Richmond where they were at once a tourist attraction (as recently as 2015, Monument Avenue was named "Richmond's crown jewel" [58]) and a lightning rod for controversy and protest. Monuments to the Confederacy are not rare in the American south, yet Richmond stands apart in both scale and concentration. The avenue itself was once a plantation where 700 enslaved people were forced to work and, in 1873, it was divided and sold as an expansion of Richmond. Though the land was mostly sold by the time the Lee monument was built, an economic crisis in 1893 meant that development could not start until the early 1900's, but when development began it became clear just what kind of expansion was planned for this space. An advertisement in 1913, listed under "Restrictions", made clear that no land on Monument Avenue was to be sold to people of African descent, and that it was guaranteed to be a "profitable investment" [59]. So it was that Monument Avenue grew to be an affluent neighborhood of stately mansions and unrivaled whiteness. Along with the prosperous white community went the churches, which were the centers of community. Between 1911 and 1929, each of the major protestant denominations in Richmond had relocated to Monument Avenue addresses: First English Lutheran Church (1911, Fig. 27), St. James's Protestant Episcopal Church (completed 1913), Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, (1922), St. John's United Church of Christ (1928), and First Baptist Church, Richmond (1929).

Figure 27. Protesters gather at the J.E.B. Stuart statue on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Va., on June 1, 2020. (Bob Brown/AP)

In his book *If You Can Keep It*, evangelical author and Christian nationalist Eric Metaxas [60] laments the contemporary turn against monuments—which he calls "public expressions of the heroic" [61]. Though he understands the necessity to tell the darker truths about America, to only do so is hopeless and cynical, and that to really love America, we must create art: "like *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and ...the magnificent Iwo Jima statue" [62] (two works which I myself reference in my deconstructing monument *Reckoning*) which honor America and give us a shared public memory—"...mythic and heroic stories, [lest Americans lose] touch with ourselves ...We are more than political ideas. We are a people who live those ideas in common" [63]. In his view, monuments were constructed to inspire us; to bring out greatness within each person who views them. Nevermind that the figures who hold high places of honor on Monument Avenue fought for the rights of States to enslave people who look like the majority of the population

of Richmond itself.

Why do we build monuments? To reinforce the status quo. They may inspire some, but their purpose is to mark territory. Professor Nicole Maurantonio identifies Monument Avenue as a diorama. Most represented at museums of natural history (and remembered by many as social studies projects), the diorama exists as a pedagogical tool for world-building and imagining a past frozen in time. The romance and nostalgia of a by-gone era told through the life-like taxidermied animals and sometimes-real plants were meant to establish a connection to the viewer—to evoke "sympathy for animals, the efficient conservation and exploitation of natural resources, successful adaptation to changing environments, and the physical processes by which life organized and advanced" [64]. This drive represents much of why Monument Avenue is consistently protected and preserved: Southern heritage manifested in bronze and granite to be seen, unblemished, daily.

In addition to the diorama, monuments are also future ruins. Nothing made by human beings is eternal. We are surrounded by the ruin of past civilizations—the reminders of traditions and cultures. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, theorist Walter Benjamin writes, "In the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting" [65]. He then goes into the use of ruin to establish a lineage: renaissance artists, for example, set the birth of Christ or the Adoration in antique Romanesque ruins, which would not have been ruins—nor actually existed—at the time when Jesus was supposedly born. This was done to establish a sense of allegorical authority. So it also is with Monument Avenue, featuring sculptures crafted in Neoclassical style to give a weight and grandeur to the figures represented. "The legacy of antiquity constitutes, item by item, the elements from which the new whole is mixed. Or rather: is constructed." [66]

A monument is both a future ruin and a diorama: decaying, reminding society of a history and creating memory while also freezing history in one point of view. That which is memorialized is cast in immovable

Figure 28. Barnett Newman, Broken Obelisk, 1969 (Elizabeth Felicella).

bronze and lifted to a place of honor with the intention of remaining forever--and yet nothing lasts forever. It is a phantom limb to honor a myth kept alive through the very symbol itself.

Though known as a painter, Barnett Newman created a powerful sculpture which now stands at the entrance of Mark Rothko's chapel: a space dedicated to all faiths and spiritual meditative practice in Houston, Texas. *Broken Obelisk* (1969, Fig. 28) was created to recognize the civil unrest of the late 1960s around the time of Martin Luther King Jr's assasination. The form mirrors that of the Washington Monument, only it is broken in two--the top portion inverted and placed point-down on a pyramidal base. The act of breaking a form that has immense history and presence disrupts our notions: it is the thing, but different, and this stops us in our tracks asking us to consider more than the icon itself. It is at once mournful, but also transcendent, echoing his call for individuality within a connection to others.

It was the desire to connect that led me to think of my burned pew as a monument. Through the generosity of Stamps funding from the

Wagstaff family, I was able to realize the connection to the material of monumentality by recasting the amputated leg in bronze during the summer of 2020. In addition to the bronze leg, I realized that the artwork was not, as I originally intended, about a personal loss of faith, though it is important that it started that way. My own recognition that I no longer believed the truths of my youth—both the Christianity I was raised in as well as the Southern tradition—went hand in hand with a work on the memorialization of ideas that no longer had a place in contemporary society.

In the middle of my research on the monuments, the world itself caught fire when, on May 25, 2020, four police officers in Minneapolis knelt on the neck and back of George Floyd, slowly suffocating him to death. Immediately, protestors took to the streets to demand justice and accountability, sparking a political firestorm in the midst of a year marked by turmoil.

I began to rethink fire as preservation, and thought of the symbol of the burning cross that came to mind as I viewed the white American flag. Translated to the pew, the charred wood might have referenced the burning cross vaguely, but it unmistakably evoked the history of white terrorism during the American Civil Rights Movement as Black churches were bombed and burned throughout the 20th century. The mild char that acted as a sort of veneer on the pew did not stand to the profound implication of the shift that both the work and history itself demanded. I weighed whether or not the pew should remain intact or whether I should burn it to the point of uselessness. I decided on the latter, and once again went to battle.

I pulled my pew outside to the back of the studios, filled a 10 gallon bucket with water for safety, and built a pyre underneath one half of the pew. Once I lit the fire, there was little time. I was amazed at the quickness with which the fire consumed the pew (Fig. 29). I did not want the fire to choose what it took, and so I spent 45 minutes running around the pew with a bucket of water and a small container, throwing

water on parts I wanted to save, stoking parts I wanted gone. After a couple of hours, I had what I wanted. The pew was burned in half. All that was left was to place the cast bronze leg on the amputated section, and mount the entirety to a plinth I constructed in the form of the plinths upon which the monument to Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart sat in Richmond (Fig. 30), and another monument built as a response to Monument Ave.

In December, 2019, Richmond dedicated a monument at the VMFA on the newly renamed Arthur Ashe Boulevard. It was an equestrian statue modeled after the sculpture of J.E.B. Stuart—only the rider was a young Black man in Nike shoes, stylishly ripped jeans, a hoodie, and dreadlocks. This monument, titled *Rumors of War* (Fig. 31), was a recontextualization by Kehinde Wiley, who has made a successful career out of portraying the Black people he brings in off the street to model for him in grand, historic style. *Rumors of War* is Wiley's largest and most expensive commission, made especially for the VMFA after he came to Richmond for an acclaimed solo exhibition in 2016. When he saw the Monument Avenue sculptures, he said, "People took a lot of time to make something powerful, beautiful, elegant. And menacing." His sculpture was "not about honoring one particular individual" [67]. Rather, it was an everyman brought in off the street to pose for Wiley who could become an icon of resistance against the menacing power of the Civil War generals using the very language of monument that Richmond had come to speak in the one hundred twenty-nine years since the Lee monument was installed. Wiley's figure is defiant, thrust into a conflict he did not choose. In his response to Monument Avenue, Wiley created an iconoclash, saying at the dedication of his statue,

> In these toxic times, art can help us transform and give us a sense of purpose. This story begins with my seeing the Confederate monuments. What does it feel like if you are Black and walking beneath this? We come from a beautiful, fractured situation. Let's take these fractured pieces and put them back together.

Figure 29. Burning Phantom Limb, 2020.

Wiley does not say it, but I would argue that *Rumors of War* is not merely about putting the pieces back together. Rather, it is about imagining something new, employing deconstruction of tradition and offering reimagining.

Once *Phantom Limb* was finished, I knew I wanted to exhibit it outside of the gallery. This is mostly because of my primary audience: my own family. Though the work I make touches on universal themes, it comes from a place of intense personal narrative, and becomes through making a conversation between who I was, represented by my own family, and who I am now. I reached out to several churches around Ann Arbor, and heard back from only one. David VanderMeer, the minister of Music and Fine Arts of First Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor had been looking for a way to interact with the students at Stamps, but had not yet found one, and was thrilled when I reached out about a potential satellite thesis show. When I showed him the work, he immediately agreed and we began planning the logistics: a physical sculptural installation along with a digital exhibition of the work to be installed at Stamps Gallery. My interest was in the reaction of church-goers to a sculpture

Figure 30. Empty plinth where the J.E.B. Stuart monument sat, Richmond, VA, 2020.

Figure 31. Kehinde Wiley, Rumors of War, 2019.

that could very well be viewed as an implication with the hope that I would eventually be able to install it in my native South. Would the sculpture be well received? Or would it be viewed (like the work of Serrano and so many other artists who address religion) as blasphemous?

The drive to expose institutions through art is not novel. The philosopher and theoretician Thedor Adorno wrote that "[a]rt ...always was, and is, a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions ...no less than it reflects their substance" [68]. The field of institutional critique originated in the 1960s and 70s as a reaction to the perceived failure of the promises of European Enlightenment. Artists themselves turned the lens of critique on the arts institutions themselves, wondering about the motives behind their choices or the history they refused to address. Hans Haacke described his work as "real-time social system[s] operating in an art context" and that he and other artists that align themselves with institutional critique act as "'double-agents' that enter into the institution of art to show that much of what it presents as natural is actually historical and

socially constructed"[69]. In one of his most famous works, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (Fig. 32), Haacke meticulously exposes the dealings and transactions of Harry Shapolsky, one of New York City's biggest slum landlords. This work, to be exhibited in a solo show at the Guggenheim Museum, connected Shaposky's holdings to a number of the Guggenheim Museum trustees, leading to a cancellation on the grounds of impropriety by the director of the museum. Due to his support of Haacke's work, the curator Edward Fry was fired.

Haacke's work blends sociology with art and exposes systems that lie underneath the surface of our consciousness. My work seeks to build on his example, but I instead take institutional critique and turn it inward. By presenting *Shapolsky*, Haacke implicated the Guggenheim trustees. In a similar way, my presentation of *Phantom Limb* in the sanctuary of First Presbetyrian Church in Ann Arbor is meant to examine belief in context to the weight of Christian history and the destruction and pain it has caused through its institutional pressure.

Figure 32. Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971 (Whitney).

Figure 33. January 6, 2021, Washington D.C. (Baptist News).

Christian Nationalism

On January 6, 2021, I sat in my studio refreshing the news feed on my phone. I watched in profound sadness as a mob descended on the U.S. Capitol as legislative leaders counted the votes that would officially elect Joseph R. Biden as the forty-sixth president (Fig. 33). I watched with sadness, but not surprise. I knew those who marched on the Capitol that day--not personally, but I grew up under their system of belief: that God appointed the leaders of the nation, and that his hand was on them--especially if they were conservative and paid the slightest lip service to the evangelical right who had enormous electoral control ever since the rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s. From the news feed, I glanced to the corner of my studio where there stood a flag that I had finished towards the end of 2020 (Fig. 34). It was a mash-up: the red stripes of the American flag which represent the blood of patriotism attached to the Christian flag: a white flag with a blue corner rectangle (called the canton) surrounding a red cross. I had considered this flag as a sort of final vision of the Christian nationalist state: a true theocracy headed by God. I have been following Christian nationalism ever since high school, where my Christian curriculum taught me about the faith of the founding fathers (cleverly omitting their devout deism, which is the belief God created the world and then let it go without in-

Figure 34. Christian-American Flag before altering it, 2020.

tervention), and the freedom inspired by the Bible that was given to all Americans through the blood spilled by patriotic men who fought and died for us all. I believed that version of America. Soldiers were saviors, fighting against tyranny. I later learned, through a lot of self-study, that this was a view of America lacking any kind of nuance, and I came to reject it. That said, I was and am aware how deeply those beliefs root themselves in the American psyche.

The history of Christianity reveals a back and forth: revolutionary ideas break the status quo only to be absorbed and appropriated by the

powerful—used to assert dominance. Such is the case when Christianity came to the land now known as the United States. For centuries, Christianity was synonymous with Europe, and as Europe became a dominant power in the race to colonize as much as possible, Christianity spread. Note that Christianity from then onward became entangled in economic pursuits. Christianity spread primarily because of European demand for resources from other geographic locations. This history is important to understand because it lays the groundwork of myth that will reinforce the events of today, including the conservative obsession with appointing judges, the election of Donald Trump, the resistance of evangelical Christians to societal progression, and the willingness to reject truth and prosthelytize conspiracy. The fusion of Christianity, politics, and patriotism is exemplified in Christian nationalism. In her book The Power Worshippers, journalist Katherine Stewart defines Christian nationalism as:

> not a religious creed but... a political ideology. It promotes the myth that the American republic was founded as a Christian nation. It asserts that legitimate government rests not on the consent of the governed but on adherence to the doctrines of a specific religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage. It demands that our laws be based not on the reasoned deliberation of our democratic institutions but on particular, idiosyncratic interpretations of the the Bible.[70]

Christian nationalism is founded on two distinct myths. The first is that Pilgrims and Puritans (two distinct groups of settlers often conflated) came to the American colonies to flee religious persecution. The truth is that they came to the American colonies not for religious freedom, but to actively pursue a form of self-governance and the establishment of a society dedicated to their interpretation of the Christian religion, and worked to banish, massacre, and torture those who did not fit into that specifc norm. [71] The second is that the drafters of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were Christian men who relied on the

Bible to define a society built on freedom and equality. The truth is that the drafters used language that was common to people at the time, calling upon "nature's God" and "our Creator" (both ambiguous terms at best), and were, for the most part, deists who believed that God did not have any role in the everyday occurrences of life, who were influenced by Enlightened thinkers such as John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, and Thomas Paine, and who, in much writing, were elitist and actively hostile to religion. Benjamin Franklin once wrote on the role religion plays in the lives of "great a portion of mankind".

> You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life without the assistance afforded by religion; you having a clear perception of the advantages of virtue, and the disadvantages of vice, and possessing the strength of resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common temptations. But think how great a portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes habitual, which is the great point for its security. [72]

The Bible says, "Train up a child in the way that he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it"[73]. This view, exemplified in Franklin's elitism, is the antithesis of my work. Franklin's view argues a need for indoctrination without questions so that a population should bend to the will of power, whether that power is God or a set of elites controlling the future of a nation.

Another reason for the allusions to a god in the founding documents was because the best way to get out a message was to get it into the minds and hearts of the clergy, who held great influence in America at the time of the Revolution. A period known as the Great Awakening happened in the British American colonies, and this fervor carried over to the Revolutionary period itself. It began in 1734 when a New English minister named Jonathan Edwards, a Calvinist descendent of the Pu-

ritans, began to sow the seeds of evangelicalism in America, preaching "that individuals could have a direct relationship with Christ - and that Christ would save not just the apparently worthy, but all those who would receive His grace" [74]. This message differed from previous "revivals", which were essentially covenant renewals between congregants and the order of ministers and magistrates that were over them. It was public preaching uniting with the personal message of rebirth--dying as oneself and adopting the personhood of Christ - that became hallmarks of American evangelicalism. The first Great Awakening peaked in 1740 when an English evangelist by the name of George Whitefield became the first intercolonial celebrity, travelling the entire Eastern coast on an evangelical tour where he captivated the population with his emotional pleas and powerful delivery. He was so popular that an estimated 80% of the population of the American colonies had heard him speak at least once [75]—and more has read his sermons which were widely published in newspapers and pamphlets, and were preached by ministers throughout the colonies.

What is important to know in this quick overview of early Christianity in America is that the contemporary Christian nationalist myth is based on conjecture and misreading—if not outright lack of reading—that is not much different from American attitudes towards the Bible itself. It is an all encompassing ideology that "provides a metanarrative for a religiously distinct national identity. That identity depends on historical myths ...the glue that unites the Christian part of this identity with the American part of the identity. Christian nationalism is, at least in this sense, more important than religion, political party, or any other factor in American life [76].

It is not a fringe ideology: 65% of American adults identify as "Christian" (This number is in rapid decline, down 12% in the past decade, but that does not change the fact that it is absolutely necessary to understand what the vast majority of Americans consider the center of their lives, base their decisions on, and form their worldview). Christi-

anity has been at the center of American discourse since the outset—if not as a direct influence than as a common tongue. (Christianity did not directly influence politics at the beginning, though the two became increasingly entangled starting in the 1930s. As for Christianity as common tongue, think of Abraham Lincoln's reference to "a house divided" in the Gettysburg address - not meant as a religious sermon, but as an illustration of the devastating consequences of the Civil War). This thesis is about the importance of how belief influences life and how a closer examination of belief can allow for greater nuance, becoming a catalyst for empathy. If the majority of America believes in the Bible, it should at least occupy some space in the discourse of how society functions.

In their book *Taking America Back for God*, sociologists Andrew Whitehead (Indiana University) and Samuel Perry (University of Oklahoma) also argue this point, asserting that, "it does not even matter whether the United States is or ever was a Christian nation. What matters is that a significant number of Americans believe that it is'' [78]. Whitehead and Perry go on to define parameters of their study, relying on significant polling data, and dividing responses into the four categories of Christian nationalism: those who reject it outright, those who resist it, those who accommodate it (not speaking out against it when it is brought up), and those ambassadors who actively promote Christian nationalist ideology. Their results are staggering. Those who promote and accommodate Christian nationalism makeup 51.9% of the country; one-fifth of the nation are active proponents of the ideology [79]. If you pair this data with 2016 data that shows a supermajority (81%) of white evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump and that most of his support came from prominent evangelical ministers such as Jerry Falwell, Jr. [80], Robert Jeffress [81], Franklin Graham [82], James Dobson [83], and their millions of followers, you start to get a picture of just how important it is to consider the role of Christianity is in our contemporary society.

Figure 35. The American Flag and the Christian Flag.

I became disgusted by the flag I had made. It was a thought experiment in destruction, tainting the normally white background of the Christian flag with red stripes representing blood—an iconoclash. The ideas it represented, however, were marching through the Capitol: smearing blood and feces, breaking windows, stealing congressional memorandums and computers, and murdering police officers. I was originally planning a performance with the flag to demonstrate my own complicated relationship with the symbols embedded in the fabric (Fig. 36). After January sixth, the problems were made even more apparent with an experience I had at Home Depot in the days following the insurrection.

I needed a flag pole sturdy enough to wave my flag—I was still entertaining the idea of performing with it. The least expensive one came with a polyester American flag, and so I picked it up and took it to the register. The cashier was a Black woman. I greeted her, and when she saw what I was purchasing, I felt her demeanor change. Her face seemed to fall, and she hardly said anything at all to me. Suddenly, as if I was viewing the scene from the third person, I saw myself: a six-foot two white male with a shaved head wearing a black hoodie under a

Figure 36. Test performance with the Christian-American flag.

black denim jacket purchasing an American flag. I saw my potential self amongst the crowd of insurrectionists at the Capitol, or in the crowds at Charlottesville during the Unite the Right rally. For the first time, I was ashamed of the American flag. Until then, I had been proud of it at the best of times and indifferent at the worst. Once, when I had to show a military kid around my beloved Tokyo home while living in Japan, I was embarrassed at being American, but I was never ashamed because I had always believed that to be American was to strive for the best in all of us. Of course, this could be viewed as naive. America has time and time again fallen short, but therein lies proof of the humanity of ideals. If we missed something the first time, surely we can recover and reach higher the next time.

I might have imagined her demeanor change. She might have just been tired or annoyed—a feeling I remember from my own experience working customer service. But the feeling of shame stayed with me as I drove back to the studio and unpacked the flag. What I learned that day was that even my own belief in the hopeful narrative of the American experiment needed to be questioned and new lessons learned in the fragments. After hanging my own Christian nationalist flag on the pole, I took the American flag that came with the pole and spray painted it black (Fig. 37). I don't know why this felt important, but the desecration of the flag took on a special meaning that was liberating. The American flag is a piece of cloth that becomes a symbol, representing the actions of a nation that simultaneously loves and hates it. It was as if by covering the flag in paint, I gave it a monumental weight.

Meanwhile, I had started another sculpture. Based on the form of the *US Marine Corps Memorial* (Fig. 38, itself based on a photograph of marines raising the American flag on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima during WWII) and Emanuel Leutze's famous painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Fig. 39), my idea was to take my destruction of symbols in another direction. I had disassembled pews; burned them; soaked them in blood; put them back together. I now wanted to break

Figure 37. Spray Painted Flag, 2021.

Figure 38. Felix de Weldon, US Marine Corps Memorial, 1954.

Figure 39. Emanuel Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851.

them apart and reassemble the pieces in a new form.

The process of destroying the church pews was a new level of physicality. Rather than cut them into pieces using a Sawzall (as I had used when cutting them in half), I opted to chop them apart with an ax. This allowed for greater variation in size and an unpredictability of shape while also, through process, relieving some of the physical tension I felt I was carrying from the events of the past year. There was snow on the ground when I pulled five pew halves outside and began chopping them into pieces. The experience was exhausting while it was cathartic. I let my mind wander in and out of my task, realizing that each time I attacked the pews, I learned something new about them. I learned from staining them in blood how the wood absorbs. I learned from disassembling them how they were crafted with care. I learned from fire how fragile they could be--easily burned to the point of breaking. I learned from chopping them how their interior construction made them strong enough to support seated congregants. If my pews were metaphors for people, which was how I had by then come to see them, then each act of destruction, like the biblical book of Job, argued their ways to my face[84].

In the Bible, Satan was cast out of heaven for wanting to be like God, challenging almighty authority. In the Bible, Adam and Eve, the first humans, were cast out of the Garden of Eden for eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which the serpent said would make them like God. In the Bible, Jesus comes to earth with all the authority of God and, in the Bible, we are told to be as Christ, accessing the divine within ourselves to conduct ourselves while on this earth as Jesus did; to love. As I chopped the pews apart, sweating profusely, nose running, lungs burning from the cold, dry Michigan winter air, I thought of Nietzsche's famous quote, "God is dead". In his book, *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes of the madman who cries:

> God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? [85]

While most popular culture references to this quote stop at "God is Dead!" as a celebratory exclamation, reading further reveals the immense responsibility that the death of God means for those of us left behind. By killing the idea of God we are not free. We are complicit in the actions of humankind because there is no fallback to ask for forgiveness and grace. Are we ready for that?

I brought the Christian nationalist flag home while I decided on whether or not I would perform with it. Its presence in the apartment made both my wife and me uneasy. Those feelings only became progressively worse in the weeks it sat in the corner. I decided then that there was no way I could perform with the flag. The image of January 6th was too raw, and the meaning of the original idea—that I was showing the complicated nature of my own relationship to the object-- had changed completely. The sculpture I would call *Reckoning* was nearing completion, and I needed a flag to mount on a pole that jutted from the sculptural wreckage. I decided to try out the Christian nationalist flag. It completely overtook the entire sculpture. The weight of the icon was too bold for the delicate and fragile nature of the form. As time was running out before I had to begin packing my work for the thesis exhibition installation, I decided the flag needed to be as broken and stained as the sculpture itself. Implementing what I had learned from the painting of the polyester American flag, I knew my flag needed to be more subtle. Because I was already referencing Japan in the form of the soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima, I used sumi ink to stain the

fabric. Made from pine soot, sumi provided the perfect pairing with the sculpture, which was burned and broken. The sumi aged the flag, and took away its potency (Fig. 40). It was complete: a monument to all the deconstruction I had been doing throughout my two years in grad school.

The physical act of altering found objects allows for better understanding of the symbols and the creation of something totally new with the capability of reaching out to others. This phenomenon was observed by anthropologist Alfred Gell when he wrote that "[t]he work of art is inherently social in a way which the merely beautiful or mysterious object is not: it is a physical entity which mediates between two beings, and therefore creates a social relation between them, which in turn provides a channel for further social relations and influences" [86]. When I introduce artifacts and icons into a work--such as an altered and tainted Christian flag—I am using a signifier that acts as a catalyst for mediation "between two beings". Whether or not the viewer understands the symbol becomes part of the social conversation, revealing both potential insecurity and also, it is my hope, empathy between worlds.

In that strange "in-between-ness" of art lies all possibility; we have already become accustomed to approach art with hesitancy and the instinct to release assumption. Art historian W.J.T. Mitchell states that "people ...maintain a 'double consciousness' toward ...representation in a variety of media, vacillating between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naive animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes" [87]. It is my intention to take advantage of that instinct in order to reach out through history and symbol, asking the viewer to doubt with me; to look critically at our own foundations, and from that place of deconstruction to build empathy and possibility into our language as we look to the future.

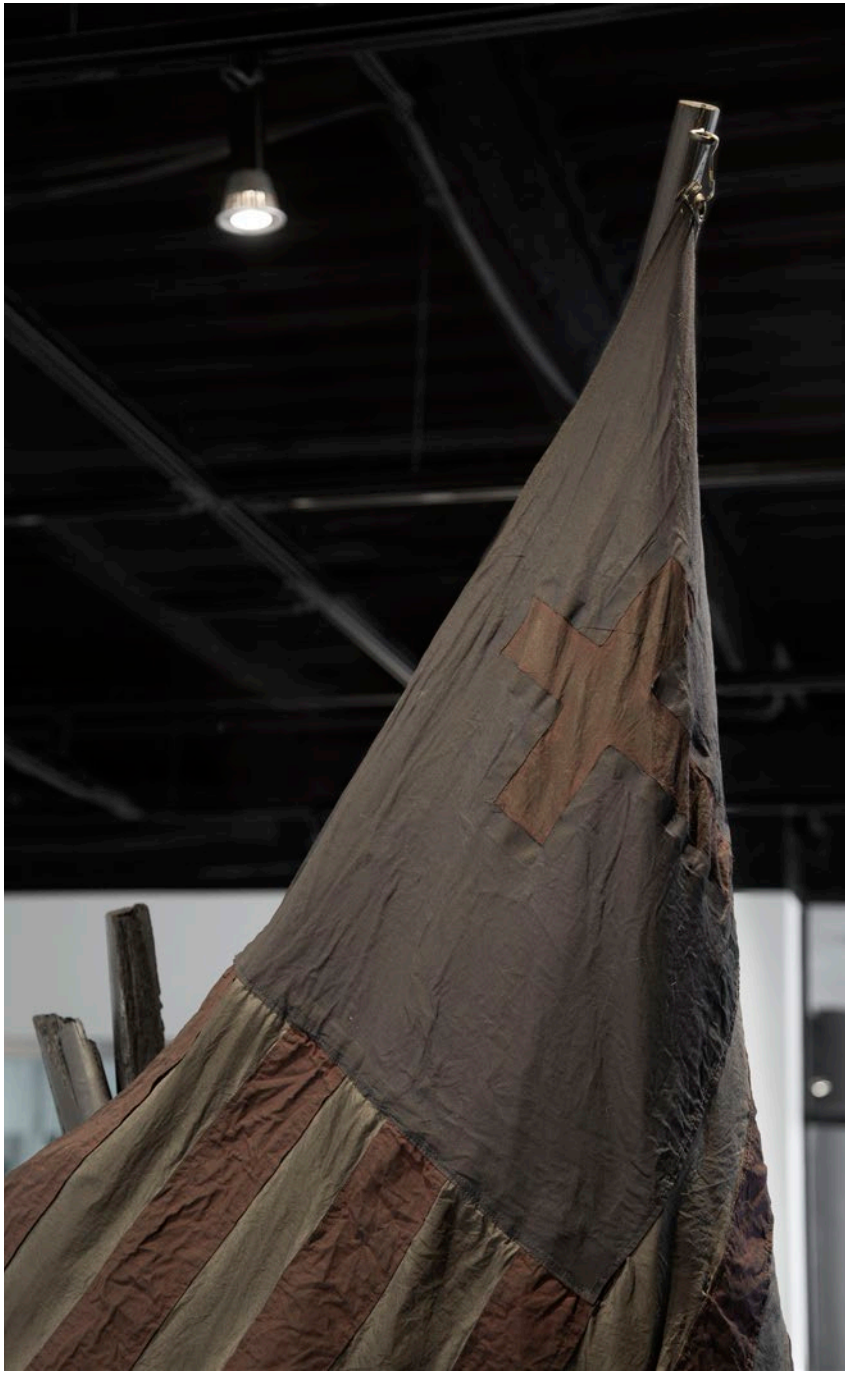


Figure 40. Reckoning (Installation Detail), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

COMMUNION

My thesis thus far has been a narrative account of the thought process and making of my work. As you read, you got to know me and the artwork on a more intimate level. Now, I would like to invite you to walk with me through my thesis exhibition, collectively entitled *Communion*. The exhibition consists of five main components: (1) a "memorial" sculpture made from the shattered and burned fragments of church pews and a handmade flag distressed with sumi ink; (2) a large-scale installation containing a blood-saturated pew with a small screen

mounted in the hymn rack which features a three-and-a-half minute textual video, a red oval carpet, a second handmade flag, and a forty-four minute stereo audio piece; (3) two documentary self-portraits; (4) a twenty page handmade book; and (5) an off-site "monument" made of wood, a burned pew, and bronze that was installed at First Presbetyrian Church in Ann Arbor.

I have been conditioned throughout my evangelical Protestant and Western education to accept that the word has primacy. Part of the

importance of art is to break apart this condition, and to assert that, while words have the benefit of precision, they also rely heavily on interpretation. Artworks have the potential to undermine certainty and promote openness. Before you enter the chapel-like space I created to house my installation, this text is written on the wall, marking an introduction to my work:

> *Communion is a sharing of one's intimate thoughts, especially in spiritual matters.*
>
> When we examine the systems of belief that define us, what is exposed? In my thesis work, I propose art practice as communion, offering my southern evangelical Christian upbringing--my doubts, my loss of faith--to you. My questioning is manifested in the altered ruins and artifacts of Christianity, presented to test their relationships to history and to reveal greater societal undercurrents, asking us to reimagine reckoning and reconciliation for the future.

As we walk through the exhibition, you will notice how text works as a signaling device to point the viewer's attention in a certain direction. Sometimes it is vague, alluding to context and dependent on audience interpretation. Other times, it becomes an important component in the work in such a way that to miss it will disrupt the experience of the art itself.

Reckoning

The first piece of mine we encounter in Stamps Gallery is a sculpture titled *Reckoning*. Constructed from church pews, broken apart with an axe, built up, set on fire, saved with the improvised application of snow, and blackened with a torch, it was created to reference two artifacts that live powerfully in American public memory: the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima, immortalized in bronze in the *National US Marine Corps*

Figure 41. Reckoning, 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

Memorial as well as architecturally in the *National Marine Museum* in Quantico, VA, and Emanuel Leutze's famous painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Each of these works inspires patriotism, nationalism, and exceptionalism. These references are best seen from the front, however it is made to be viewed in the round. As we circle the piece, which reaches a full height of over eight feet, there is an energy about the work. While *Reckoning* adopts the language of monumentality—a piece fixed in time—closer inspection reveals detritus and structural degradation: it is deconstructing itself, bursting from the plinth it is set upon, holding onto its pieces, and struggling to hold its flag high.

The flag itself is not the American flag as is represented in the famous references. It is instead a mixing of the American flag and the lesser-known Christian flag. Thirteen alternating stripes, seven red and six white, form the standard while the canton (the corner rectangle of a flag) is blue with a red cross (rather than the fifty stars of the union). Put together, they represent the end goal of the Christian Nationalist movement: a theocratic society built on a misguided view that God has chosen the United States, and that its citizens must follow a certain view of the scriptures in order to maintain his blessing upon the nation. This "Christian nationalist" flag is not bright as you may expect a flag on a pole. It is not proud or defiant. Instead, it is dingy, blackened, and disgraced. Because material is important in my work, I dyed the flag in sumi ink--a material reference both to the pine soot used to make the ink, echoing the char of the pews, and to its country of origin: Japan, where my family lived as missionaries for five and a half years. A meditation on the references used to craft *Reckoning* reveal the sources' imperialist origins hidden under benevolent intentions. Whether the revolutionary period where the American ideal was being defined, staking claim to land that was already stolen or the heroic image of the American flag being planted on foreign soil. In WWII, America was fighting against the tyranny of Japanese empire, but it was also expanding on its own. In less violent ways, my own family was responsible for ideological imperialism, teaching the people of Japan about a ver-

sion of Jesus rooted in American cultural mores. This deconstruction of my own complicity in their ministry was an important starting place for the sculpture. Even if the underlying meaning is not available without reading this thesis text.

As an introduction to my work, I am asking you to decipher deconstruction, and what it might mean for public memory and the concept of a memorial. It is a mournful monument, seemingly standing to spite its degradation. In time, it will fall over. Maybe.

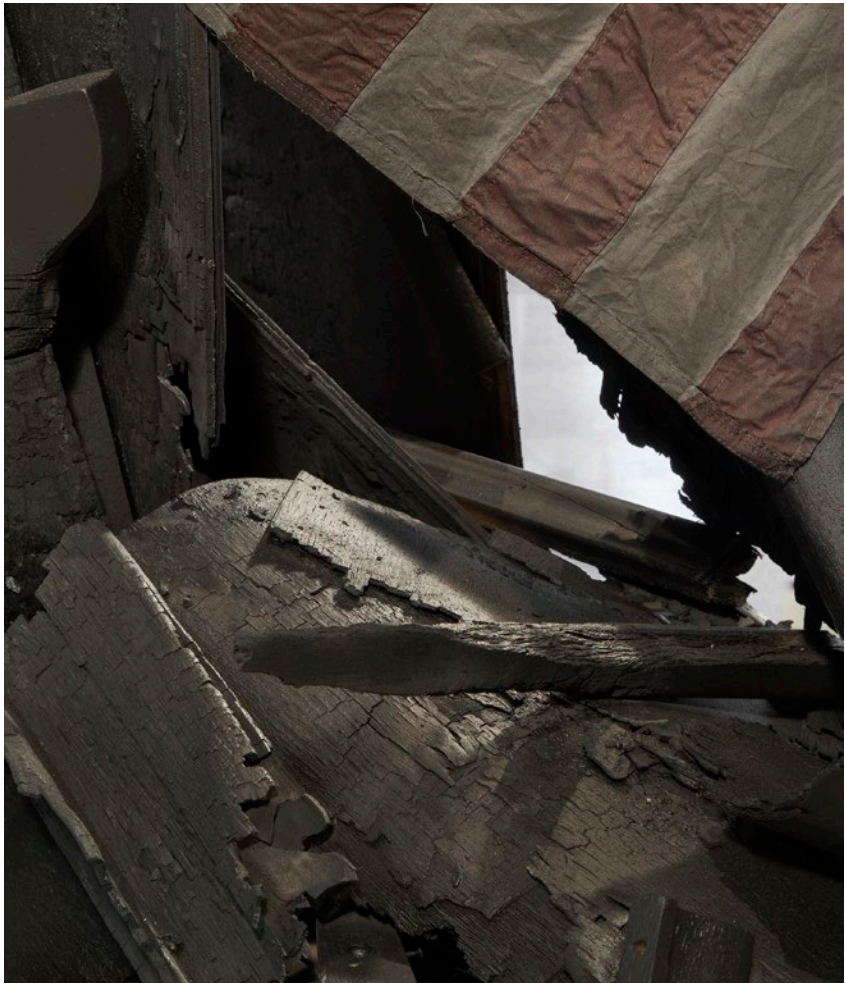


Figure 42. Reckoning (Detail), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

Figure 43. Communion (screen detail), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

Communion

Let us walk further, past *Reckoning*. In the center of the chapel-like gallery is what looks like a normal pew sitting on a red carpet. Turning right, we see the pew faces a flag, limply hanging on a white wall. It is the recognizable blue with white stars of the American flag, but the red stripes, representing the blood of patriotism and courage shed for the freedom of Americans, has been removed, leaving the field bleached cotton. In form, there is the realization that, hanging as it is, the flag looks like the floating hood of a Klansman. This layer of white supremacy moves under the surface of all of my work, though it is not explicitly referenced. I ask you to dig into the work with me, adopting the strategy of Nietzsche, who advocated "sounding the idols" with the hammer of critical, philosophical, and visual language to find if they ring true. Not everything is as it seems on the surface. Once the Klan hood is recognized, one may remember the rubble of pews in Reckoning, and how, if history is considered, they evoke the public memory of church burnings and bombings: specific targets of white domestic terrorists to disrupt the church, which is historic heart of community.

With the understanding that a certain violence underscores my work, an investigation of the title card of the pew itself reveals that it has been refinished with blood—information only accessible by the astute

observer (and you, reader). Forming an inverted conversation with the symbolic absence in the flag, the very real corruption of the pew itself lies under a surface that looks entirely ordinary.

Let us interact with the work—above the pew hangs a speaker which plays a longform conversation between myself and my father as we walk around the James River in my hometown of Richmond, VA. During this conversation, we discuss political differences, Christianity, art, worship, and his experience fighting racism in a church he served in South Carolina. We can sit for a while in the pew and listen, where the interview can best be heard. Though we might not stay and hear the full forty-four minute conversation, the snippets caught become an informative glimpse into another world far removed from the gallery setting as we are invited to consider the flag across from us, and to meditate on the multiple versions of America presented through both the conversation, the memory of *Reckoning*, and our own experiences.

Though this is a space for contemplation, it is also one where we become part of the work. By sitting on the corrupted church pew, we are implicated both by the blood on which we sit and by the textual video that plays in the hymn rack behind the pew seat. On this small, two-by-twenty-three inch screen, selected text from the US Constitution digitally glitches in and out along with select interpretations of

the Bible. The phrases interrogate the Christian nationalist belief that the Constitution itself is a divinely inspired document while also acting as didactic for anyone who might be sitting in the pew at the time. Will the label read, “We the People”? Or, “lost”? What about, “Children of God”? Each phrase builds on the other in a digital poem that explores the directive of both the Bible and the Constitution not merely as a list of fundamental rights or rules, but ways of treating others so that equality may perhaps be realized should we take the message seriously and in our time.

Figure 44. Communion (Pew), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

Figure 45. Communion Installation (viewed from behind), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

Deconstruction I & II

Behind the pew, forming the shape of an inverted cruciform structure (imagine a cathedral with the pews facing the back rather than the front) with the flag on the front wall, hang three photographs, two of which are self-portraits entitled *Deconstruction I* and *Deconstruction II*. The two portraits may seem strange in an exhibition featuring mostly sculpture and installation, however these were a direct response to the evolution of my work during quarantine. Though my work has always been personal, I had not yet begun to weave my own experience of deconversion until the period after our studios closed due to the novel Coronavirus pandemic. The summer was one of small works and a lot of reading and thinking about current events. It was also a time of introspection, and I began to see my own story embedded deeply in the work I was making. I found an online community of like-minded people who had left the Christian faith (and many other systems of belief) discussing a movement called "deconstruction", which shares a lot of ideas with the post-structuralist movement in philosophy. Applied to Christianity, deconstructionism examines harmful theological structures and breaks them apart. Sometimes, faith is rejected outright. Other times, faith is completely reconstructed in ways far healthier than the formal structure of the Christian church. The thing in common is the relative and very personal nature of the journey of deconstruction. Though people have been deconverting for a long time, the "cultural Christianity" of the 1990s has left an indelible mark, and it is currently older Millennials such as myself that are starting to vocalize the experience while building community without dogma and with deep respect and love for the individual and their journey.

In the photo on the left transept of the inverted cross, *Deconstruction I*, I am sitting on the blood-saturated pew surrounded by the broken fragments of other pews. It is the document of a moment shortly after I had finished chopping the pews apart and had piled them in a studio room before preparing to build Reckoning. I was physically exhausted,

and was beginning to realize the gravity that my thesis work was not merely a project for the completion of a degree, but a life-long process that had seen me tear apart a worldview just as I had taken apart these pews. The self-portrait is not posed, but rather a capture of a moment of contemplation in a posture of prayer: head bowed to the right, right hand grasping my left arm, and bent over in meditation. It was a powerful moment, and deserved a place in the exhibition—if only for myself.

The second photo on the left transept is *Deconstruction II*. Unlike *Deconstruction I*, there are no religious symbols, but my posture is still bent in a prayer-like, meditative stance. This self-portrait is blurry--a long exposure. Wrapped around my shoulders is a vintage American flag (c. 1960s) a friend had sent me for my birthday and during the unrest surrounding the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd. When I received it, I spent a lot of time looking and handling, fascinated by its age, symbolism, and, yes, power. Though difficult to tell in the photo, the flag was held upside down: the international symbol for a vessel in distress. The symbol of the upside down American flag would be used widely over the summer, and each time I saw a photo in the news, I smiled. Flag burning is an aggressive act of protest--showy in a manner that has become almost trendy, yet remains divisive. Flying a flag upside down, however, is a recognized symbol; a subversion of the status quo; an iconoclash. Just as I had deconstructed Christianity, I was witnessing the deconstruction of American power as systems that seemed unquestionable were being prodded and found weak: the pandemic exposed the tremendous inequity of American capitalism; stay-at-home orders and the need to work from home underlined the amount of space wasted with office buildings and the vital nature of high-speed broadband Internet for all; even nature seemed to breathe again—if only for a moment. This photo represented determination for a generation who has grown exhausted by the way things have been, and longs to reimagine the future.

Figure 46. Deconstruction I, 2021.

Figure 47. Deconstruction II, 2020.

Figure 48. A protester carries a U.S. flag upside-down, a sign of distress, next to a burning building early Friday, May 29, 2020, in Minneapolis (Julio Cortez / AP).

Between These Worlds

At the crossing, behind the pew and between the two photographs, stands a small podium three and a half feet high. Lying open on the podium is a small book, nine and a half by seven inches, duo-tone bound in black and white leather with a bright red strip of fabric running between the two. The book is twenty screen printed pages arranged in a tête-bêche fashion—the book can be read in both directions, meeting in the middle.

The text of the book takes advantage of the dual-read nature of the layout. Read one way, the text is an indictment of the church, condemning it for not living up to the charge for "doing justice and loving mercy"; for being so focused on the judgement of others, that it seemed to forget about the charge to help others, loving them by feeding them when hungry, giving them water when thirsty, clothing them, and visiting them in prison. The other side is a statement of frustration of the academic "ivory tower" for its lack of recognition of the

symbols so dominant in the news coverage of the January 6th Capitol riots, heavy with Christian nationalism. In the process of making and researching my thesis work, I have had countless conversations with people across academic disciplines at the University of Michigan. Some identified as Christians, and were shocked that someone was actually doing serious academic work about faith. Others had grown up as Christians, rejected it, but were excited to talk about something that I realized, over the course of our conversations, they did not get to discuss often. Just as in artistic circles, Christianity seems rarely studied in a rigorous manner in academic circles. Browsing elective courses each of my four semesters at the University of Michigan, a tier-1 research university and one of the greatest public universities in the world, I found zero courses dedicated to studying the Christian religion. Why the ignorance?

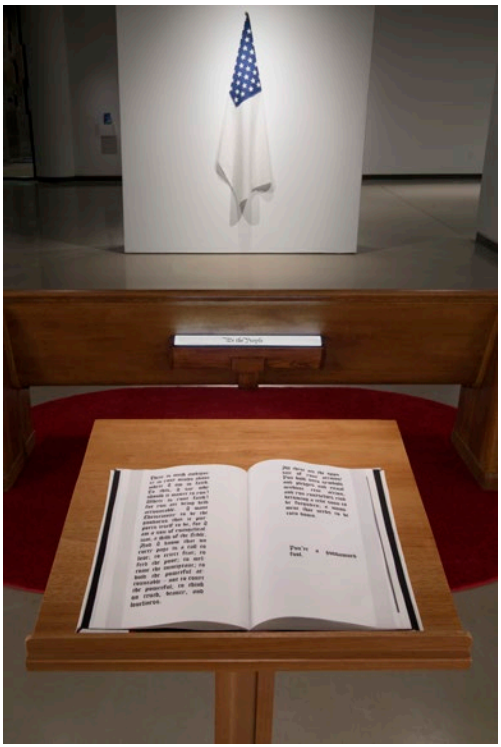


Figure 49. Between These Worlds (Installation shot), 2021. Photo by PD Rearick.

Phantom Limb

The final photo located in the back of the gallery is of a sculpture placed in a church sanctuary. It is the key piece in my exhibition. The sculpture is titled *Phantom Limb*, and during the thesis exhibition it was installed at First Presbetyrian Church (FPC) in Ann Arbor. The sculpture's absence in the gallery space forms a cross disciplinary conversation that is so important to my work. The half-burned away pew floats ominously above a wooden plinth supported only by a bronze leg, referencing both the form and materiality of a monument, but the work was made in mourning, once again thinking about the belief systems that prop society up, and the public memories we choose to evoke. Upon installation at FPC, I was amazed at how my understanding of the work shifted. Though I commissioned dramatic photographs of the work inside the vast sanctuary surrounded by pews and light and stained glass, *Phantom Limb* was installed in the far more mundane vestibule of the church (Fig. 52, pg. 131). Part sitting room, part waiting area for entry into the sanctuary, the sculpture almost blends into the environment. I felt as though I had brought it home. In the vestibule, this piece finds itself among the plaques, coat racks and furniture--a work to discover, ever present but not necessarily jumping out at you, and so different than an austere sculpture sitting powerfully stark against the non-neutral walls of the gallery space.

In my discussions with David VanderMeer, the minister of music and fine arts at First Presbyterian, I wanted to make it clear what I was doing with the work at the church: to reach out beyond the gallery and interact with those who may never find themselves in a dedicated arts space. How was the work experienced? Though I could not have any programming due to restrictions surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, I was able to ask VanderMeer to share his thoughts about the work as well as get the impressions of a few employees of the church while I installed. This is what I learned:

> Fire destroyed the sanctuary of my youth when an arsonist came through town in 1992, as a rash of fires in the south. I remember seeing pictures though I was in seminary so I was not at home at the time. When I look at [*Phantom Limb*], I feel the trauma of what happened in that beloved place of preaching the Gospel from my pastor who was there for 40 years, and his father, who was in the pulpit for the 40 years before him. I also think of the shootings in churches and the damage they inflict, the ripping of our places of worship. And what I see is resilience. Just as we have done damage to our own faith and the Gospel time and again, God always leaves us a remnant. There is something to re-build. We are more than the pews, we are more than the tangible flesh and bones of church — but to have even a piece remaining is a sign of hope and a reminder of our fragility. In our weakness is our strength[sic].
>
> I loved this piece and wanted to share it with families via email or on [Facebook]. To me, it reminds me of a conversation I had with another pastor, Bethany Peerbolt at FPC Birmingham, MI. We were talking about what to do with the leftover pews a couple of years ago and she said to put them out front and allow people to beat them. I know this sounds harsh to many, however, the point being... how many times has the church been hurtful to people. Racism, Sexism, anti-LGTBQI+.... this piece of art and the description remind me of that conversation and sad truth for many people [sic].

These powerful reminiscences give me hope—hope for the future of America and for the faith I left behind, but to which I still feel a strong connection.

Figure 50, next page, spread. Phantom Limb (Installation photo by Nick Azzaro), 2021.

BENEDICTION

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

— 1 Corinthians 13:13

Love has never been a popular movement. ...The world is held together, really it is held together, by the love and the passion of a very few people.

— James Baldwin

I suppose it is the purpose of a conclusion to restate one's questions in order to provide answers. This is not a conclusion, however, but a benediction: a closing with the understanding that the work of change is not yet finished, and a blessing for you, reader, as you hopefully found something in these words that inspired you.

Here is the question: When you have broken everything down—even the foundation—what is exposed? What is left behind? Ruin. The detritus of belief; the fragments of worldview. But what else? In the act of

deconstruction, what was exposed?

I began this creative inquiry wondering what I would discover--what I would learn about America; about Christianity. I realized that the knowledge was there--that was the easy part. What else is there to say when I stand on the shoulders of academic giants devoted to that work? What I lacked was the understanding of my own positionality, and this is what I offer to you.

When I bought six pews because I felt compelled, I had to learn to trust myself and my own embodied experience; the posture of playing under and around pews was there from childhood. The MFA experience has been a dark night where I, like Jacob, grappled with faith and realized that I had not lost it. I had only discovered a new sort of faith. I have fought Christian ideology, anger, and grief my entire life, and this struggle gave me the urge to deconstruct what I had known so well. I leaned into this impulse, and discovered deconstruction as a methodology. The battle that had until now taken place in my mind could be realized as an actual clash with the material symbols of the past. From the ruin, I was made aware of new possibilities; I found new ways of seeing and experiencing the icons. The act of deconstructing offered historical transcendence--a way to critique the institutions while reimagining the future from the very wreckage of those systems. Deconstruction also resulted in a new body of work, made from the broken, burned, and bloodstained memories of a life lived—and still being lived. The pews were placeholders for my family, friends, and loved-ones, but also for each and every person trapped in a system of belief without having examined it to the extent of taking it apart. The sculptures that resulted are a remnant of belief—but the belief is still there—still affecting and asking the viewer, “what will you do with me?”

It is possible that the remedy for the future lies in the fragments of the past. Christians are supposed to believe that the philosophy of Jesus is a vision of society built on a deep and crazy love—one that has profound implications and a powerful social safety net; that sees the rich

giving everything of themselves for the sake of the poor; that sees the powerful humbled and on bended knees, ready to empower the lives of others. However, this vision is one that you will not often see taught from the pulpits and stages of televangelist and celebrity preachers throughout America. It does not match the nature of power that has taken hold of religious leaders as they advance themselves based on the measure of a certain American dream. In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century"[88]. He recognized that the church was becoming nothing more than an idol at risk of losing its authenticity. Nietszche said we must test it with a hammer.

But this is not merely a call for the church to do better. It is also a challenge for us all, regardless of our faith or lack there-of. Do we have the courage to examine the foundations of our own faith in the art world and the ivory tower; our own opinions and beliefs we share with or project to our students? Are we giving them the tools to deconstruct unhealthy structures; to "cross-examine the idols"? Or do we, like the megachurch pastors, seek power and affirmation through our roles as institutional leaders and purveyors of education, using the very activism we deem virtuous as a red herring to hide our own insecurities and doubts? Let the doubt free. Normalize being a flawed human being who is in the process of learning. Break the idols.

Though the work I have presented bears the enormous weight of history and memory, it is not without hope. I believe that the American political structure and American Evangelical Christianity have caused incalculable harm to not only this nation, but to the globe. I also believe that the tenets of forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation have the potential to provide healing and allow us to create a whole and healthy society for future generations. This is the underlying lesson

of my thesis: that, once deconstructed, the fragments of our past can relocate our sight, breaking through historical narrative, and allowing us to reimagine a future built on justice, compassion, empathy, and love.

And now, reader, I ask that you go, and do not fear the making of ruin from your deeply held beliefs. From that tendency to doubt, you cannot know what new opportunities arise to empathize with another; to create community; to change community. Go in peace and love.

Figure 51. Phantom Limb, 2020.

Notes

1. 2 Corinthians 8-9 are about blessing others because we have been blessed.

2. *Memorial Service for Phil James*. Fullness Christian Church, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N7XynGkk-4.

3. Job 13:15.

4. Genesis 32:30.

5. Maurantonio, Nicole. *Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century*. University Press of Kansas, 2019, xv.

6. Keane, Webb. Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 11.

7. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Compass Circle, 2019, 1.

8. Genesis 32:22-3.

9. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Psalm 51:9

10. Alloway, Lawrence. *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross Lema Sabachthani.* New York, NY: The Solomon R. Guggenheim uggenheim Foundation, 1966, 9.

11. *Ibid*, 14.

12. Hellstein, Valerie. *Barnett Newman*, *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabbachthani. In Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*. 2014. https://

mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/barnett-new-man-stations-cross-lema-sabachtani.

13. *Ibid*.

14. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 118:22-24.

15. Luke 2:41-52.

16. This is directly from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, and would be very familiar to one who studied the Jewish holy scriptures his entire life: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" Isaiah 55:8-9.

17. Mark 5:3-10.

18. Mark 19:21.

19. Whitehead, Kenneth D. "How Did the Catholic Church Get Her Name." *Global Catholic Network* (blog), June 1996. https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/teachings/how-did-the-catholic-church-get-her-name-120.

20. "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." 1 John 3:17.

21. Ryrie, Alec. *Protestants: The Faith That Made the Modern World*. New York, NY: Random House, 2017.

22. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Matthew 25:40.

23. Ephesians 1:7.

24. "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27 (NIV).

25. Tisby, Jemar. *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019, 26.

26. *Ibid*, 28.

27. *Ibid*, 37.

28. John 8:32.

29. Ladd, Chris. "The Article Removed from Forbes, 'Why White Evangelicalism Is So Cruel.'" *Political Orphans* (blog), March 12, 2018. https://www.politicalorphans.com/the-article-removed-from-forbes-why-white-evangelicalism-is-so-cruel/.

30. Stewart, Katherine. *The Power Worshippers*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. Kindle Edition, 110.

31. Tisby, 2019: 78.

32. *Ibid*, 78.

33. Gjelten, Tom. "Southern Baptist Seminary Confronts History of Slaveholding And 'Deep Racism.'" *NPR* (blog), December 13, 2018. https://www.npr.org/2018/12/13/676333342/southern-baptist-seminary-confronts-history-of-slaveholding-and-deep-racism.

34. Richardson, Heather Cox. "March 28, 2021," March 28, 2021.

35. *Ibid*.

36. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003.

37. The Bible is full of patriarchal teachings that man is always in front, and women should be submissive. This was the culture of the time, and is an example of the dangers of rigid adherence to a two-thousand

year old text written for a certain culture during that specific time. In addition, the story of Ham in the book of Genesis was consistently brought up to justify the dehumanization of Black people based solely on skin color when Noah cursed his son for seeing him naked, which cursed the descendents of Ham, the Caananites, who were said to have darker skin.

38. Genesis 22:1-19.

39. Luke 22:19-20.

40. 1 John 4:1.

41. Matthew 25:40.

42. Kruse, Kevin M. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015, 284.

43. David Hammons, *African-American Flag*, 1990.

44. Holly Hughes wrapped herself in the American flag as a performance and statement as part of the "NEA four" in 1990.

45. Dred Scott's MFA thesis show at the Chicago Art Institute, *What is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag?*, 1988 where he put a ledger for viewers to leave him memos. The only way to access the ledger, however, was to step on an American flag, which was placed on the ground in front of the book stand and a sign that shared the proper ways to handle and display the flag.

46. Though Warhol never participated in mass, opting rather to stay in the back of the cathedral--he did not feel welcome as gay.

47. Dillenberger, Jane Daggett. *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*. New York, NY: Continuum, 1998.

48. Though altruistic at its core, this mentality is also deeply problematic. It comes with a certain connotation of "white saviorism" when one is fundamental in their beliefs and cannot perceive nuance in the

message of the Bible. This "dead to oneself" belief is also often the source of deep trauma for those who leave the faith, as it becomes a challenge to explore one's own identity apart from the identity built on an interpretation of the Bible taught by, usually, white male pastors in power.

49. 1 Peter 1: 6-7.

50. Greczyn, Alice. *Wayward: A Memoir of Spiritual Warfare & Sexual Purity*. Austin, TX: River Grove Books, 2021, 314.

51. Latour, Bruno. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 68.

52. *Ibid*, 59.

53. Nović, Sara. "Remission." *Catapult Magazine*. catapult.com, November 13, 2015. https://catapult.co/stories/remission.

54. Maurantonio, 2019: 4-5.

55. Zubrzycki, Geneviève, ed. *National Matters: Materiality, Culture, and Nationalism*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017, 1.

56. Maurantonio, 2019: 12.

57. Daughters of the Confederacy is headquartered in Richmond near the former grounds of Lee Camp 1, an association for Confederate veterans until 1941 and now the location of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

58. Maurantonio, 2019: 121.

59. *Ibid*, 129.

60. Yale graduate in English literature, screenwriter for the popular Christian cartoon Veggie Tales, and frequent guest on Fox News.

61. Metaxas, Eric. *If You Can Keep It*. New York, NY: Penguin Random

House, 2016, 118.

62. *Ibid*, 235.

63. *Ibid*, 131.

64. Maurantonio, 2020: 127.

65. Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Theater*. London: Verso, 1998, 178.

66. *Ibid*, 178.

67. Capps, Kriston. "Kehinde Wiley's Anti-Confederate Memorial." *The New Yorker*, December 24, 2019. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/kehinde-wileys-anti-confederate-memorial.

68. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011, 2.

69. *Ibid*, 6-7.

70. Stewart, 2017: 4.

71. Seidel, Andrew. *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*. New York, NY: Sterling, 2019, 99.

72. *Ibid*, 48.

73. Proverbs 22:6.

74. Fitzgerald, Frances . *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition, 17. Evangelicalism—a nomer which describes people who believe that every person has a moment when they became "born again" through baptism; that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and it is by faith in this sacrifice that humanity is saved; that this belief should be openly shared with others; that the Bible is the God-breathed word written by divinely inspired men—would come of age in the 1950s under the influence of Billy Graham.

75. Kidd, Thomas. "The Great Awakening." *Bill of Rights Institute*. The Great Awakening (blog). Accessed December 15, 2020. https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-great-awakening.

76. Seidel, 2019: 6.

77. Pew Research Center, Oct. 17, 2019, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

78. Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. *Taking America Back for God*. Kindle Edition. Oxford University Press, 2020, 4.

79. *Ibid*, 26.

80. Evangelical pastor, son of the founder of the Moral Majority, and the founder of Liberty University.

81. Pastor of the megachurch First Baptist, Dallas.

82. Son of prominent evangelical Billy Graham.

83. Founder of Focus on the Family, an influential association that pushes conservative social agendas in politics and in the home.

84. Job 13:15.

85. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Kindle Edition. Cambridge University Press, 2001, 120.

86. Gell, Alfred. "The Art of Anthropology." *London School of Economics Monograms on Social Anthropology*, 67 (1999), 172.

87. Mitchell, W.J.T. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 7.

88. The Atlantic Monthly; August 1963; *The Negro Is Your Brother*; Volume 212, No. 2; pages 78 - 88.

Figure 52. Phantom Limb at FPC, 2021. Installation photo by Nick Azzaro.

Works Cited

Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Alloway, Lawrence. Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross Lema Sabachthani. New York, NY: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966.

Benjamin, Walter. The Origin of German Tragic Theater. London: Verso, 1998.

Capps, Kriston. "Kehinde Wiley's Anti-Confederate Memorial." The New Yorker, December 24, 2019. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/kehinde-wileys-anti-confederate-memorial.

Dillenberger, Jane Daggett. The Religious Art of Andy Warhol. New York, NY: Continuum, 1998.

FitzGerald, Frances. The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America. Translated by Jacques Roy. Newark, NJ: Audible, 2017.

Gell, Alfred. "The Art of Anthropology." London School of Economics Monograms on Social Anthropology 67 (1999).

Gjelten, Tom. "Southern Baptist Seminary Confronts History of Slaveholding And 'Deep Racism.'" NPR (blog), December 13, 2018. https://www.npr.org/2018/12/13/676333342/southern-baptist-seminary-confronts-history-of-slaveholding-and-deep-racism.

Greczyn, Alice. Wayward: A Memoir of Spiritual Warfare & Sexual Purity. Austin, TX: River Grove Books, 2021.

Helklstein, Valerie. "Barnett Newman, The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabbachthani." Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion. (blog), 2014. https://

mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/barnett-new-man-stations-cross-lema-sabachtani.

Keane, Webb. Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Kruse, Kevin M. One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015.

Latour, Bruno. On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Maurantonio, Nicole. Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century. University Press of Kansas, 2019.

Memorial Service for Phil James. Fullness Christian Church, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N7XynGkk-4.

Metaxas, Eric. If You Can Keep It. New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2016.

Mitchell, W.J.T. What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Gay Science. Kindle Edition. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Genealogy of Morals. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. Twilight of the Idols. Compass Circle, 2019.

Nović, Sara. "Remission." Catapult Magazine. catapult.com, November 13, 2015. https://catapult.co/stories/remission.

Pew Research Center. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace," October 17, 2019.

Richardson, Heather Cox. "March 28, 2021," March 28, 2021.

Ryrie, Alec. Protestants: The Faith That Made the Modern World. New

York, NY: Random House, 2017.

Siedell, Daniel A. “Altars to the Unknown God: Modern Art for Modern Christians.” Image Journal, no. 59 (2008). https://imagejournal.org/article/altars-unknown-god/.

Stewart, Katherine. The Power Worshippers. Kindle Edition. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

Tisby, Jemar. The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019.

Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. Taking America Back for God. Kindle Edition. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Whitehead, Kenneth D. “How Did the Catholic Church Get Her Name.” Global Catholic Network (blog), June 1996. https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/teachings/how-did-the-catholic-church-get-her-name-120.

Zubrzycki, Geneviève, ed. National Matters: Materiality, Culture, and Nationalism. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017.