

**hands channel faith: a collection of daily prayer**  
[spiritual + material collide]

natalie bultman // 2023



## artist statement

I started this project seeking the Divine through making in clay. To me, more than a symbol or a ritual, knowing and following Christ has been characterized by life-giving heart transformation. I asked myself: What if rituals feel empty to some because they don't know God personally? What if I tried starting from the place of trusting in the salvation from sin that Christ offers--then could a daily ritual of making in clay lead me closer to God? I discovered daily time in clay could create a space for prayer.

Pressing and forming in clay, my hands intuitively moved. A daily time project evolved: Make in clay and seek to know Christ more. This led me to forms that are small, intimate, and detailed. The fingerprints mark the forms, holding memory and capturing my prayer in remnant form. The small forms have different shapes and glazes because each day I investigated a variety of words like unconditional forgiveness, heavy doubt, searching faith, and overwhelming joy. Through the daily time, I began to see the importance of the larger growth happening in my life. I created the winding forms that capture the journey of my faith being refined over time.



## (above ground)

Traveling to Germany, my camera pointed high above my head. I lifted my camera to the ornate, beautiful ceilings of old baroque pilgrim churches finding questions in the space. I overlaid twine with the photographs, discovering this process captured my curiosities with the church space. This led me to ask: Could the rituals of church deter people who don't know the salvation of Christ personally? My photographs acknowledge the foundation of rituals is important, but my focus is more on how necessary it is to know Christ's redeeming grace for ritual practices to be lifegiving. In my investigation, I discovered that the church space can feel empty for some. I wondered how I show the freedom, life, and joy I experience from knowing Christ? Then could a ritual be transformative?

## (on the ground)

I came home from Germany and all of my photos were from the ground: I captured the rocks, trails, the cracks in the sidewalks, my feet in the snowtracks, and all the texture of the earth.

My faith starts on the ground right where I am at. Christ came to me in my humanity. The dust from his sandals was divine yet human: Instead of leaving it up to me to work my way to God, to perform better, to have more rituals, or to clean myself up, He said, "actually, I'll come to you."

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I gather up the dust, the dry earthen materials and mix it together with water—the materials gather, forming a ball of clay.



*Deep Yearning*, Natalie Bultman, 2023.

## (further into the ground: clay)

I take the ball of clay, wedging all of the air bubbles out and aligning the clay particles. The clay is ready to be formed. The possibilities are left to the imagination of the creator. I start by slowly bringing my hands to the clay.

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The best part of looking at my photographs of the ground is that I connected my faith to clay. In my search, I realized that the Bible is full of references to clay:

But now, O Lord, you are our Father;  
We are the clay, and you are our potter;  
We are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4:6-7)

Clay is in my roots. It's in my humanity and it's a part of my faith as a follower of Christ.



## (the conversation around us)

I've dug into the clay and dug into my faith, finally finding space for the overlap through prayer. From reading books discussing aspects of Christianity, I was challenged to move forward with my work connecting clay and my faith.

Through readings like the 2020 book *Art + Faith: A Theology of Making*, author Makoto Fujimura writes about his experience as a Christian making art. In the book, Fujimura reflects on the beauty of God's presence that he encounters in his studio practice. This relates to my interest in making as a form of worship. I asked, "Could I know God more through the act of making?"

The book *God Has a Name* written by Pastor and author John Mark Comer in 2017, is written for Christians and non-Christians to gain a fuller, deeper understanding of who the God of the Bible really is, clearing up misconceptions. This book offers investigation of the Bible's context, history, and God's relevance to our daily life now. *God Has a Name* pointed me away from making a religious space or including any representation of God. I realized that my finite mind should not and could not capture the essence of God. Instead this book challenged me to think about the character of God and dig into a deeper relationship to him.

The book *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer helped me to see that knowing God goes beyond an intellectual level to an emotional and spiritual connection. The book guided me to think about knowing God with comparison to an earthly relationship—that it takes time, active persistence and intentionality over time to know someone further. *Knowing God* talks about the importance of the day to day, seemingly mundane moments as an act of worship bringing glory to God. This challenged me to think more about the daily aspect of God being near in the simple, small moments.

I looked at the Dear Data Project, created by two designers in different parts of the world. They recorded day to day activities, making a work of art and sending it via postcard. Between the *Knowing God* book and the Dear Data Project, I became so intrigued with capturing the importance of knowing God in the day to day. I realized in my own life and faith, seeking God each day, even moment by moment, is one of the most beautiful aspects of being in a friendship with God, who also draws near to me. Dear Data Project encouraged me to pursue a time based project.

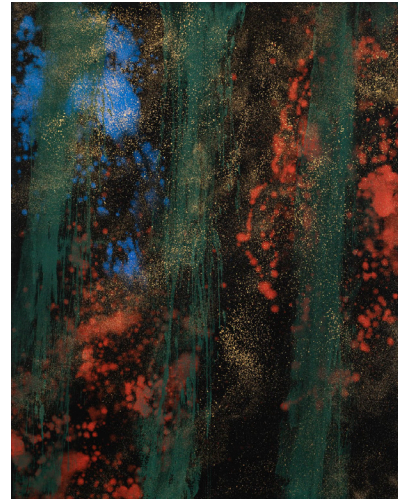
## (looking at others)

In my research, I found it very difficult to find artists making contemporary work about Christianity. This raised more questions for me: People have historically made work about God throughout all of time, why is there less now? Is there space for exploring faith in an academic setting? How could my own experiences with this traditionally Eastern religion be put into the context of today's world? I struggled to find Christian artists as a reference, so I looked mostly to artists making work with spiritual concepts or themes:

-Makoto Fujimura creates paintings from slow layering techniques. As a Christian, his work directly references topics from the Bible and his studio practice has become a space for connecting with God through the making. By looking at Fujimura's work, it challenged me to think about what portions of the Bible directly relate to my work. Additionally, I was encouraged to examine how my time in the studio could become a place for prayer.

-Andy Goldsworthy investigates the natural world through site specific installations. The work uses repeating, organic forms to create a larger piece. Similarly, I started making small pieces and working to arrange the work together. I noticed similarities in the meditative process of repeating forms. By looking at Goldsworthy's work, I was able to see the importance of repetition of forms.

-Michele Oka Donner has created a piece with small, organic, repeating forms and talking about an essence of spirituality in her commentary. The work rests on the ground. By looking at this installation, I was encouraged to find freedom in laying my pieces on the ground.



*John-In the Beginning, Four Holy Gospels*, Makoto Fujimura. 2011.



*Started Climbing*, Andy Goldsworthy. 1987.



*Glyphs, Fluent in the Language of Dreams*, Michele Oka Donner. 1966.

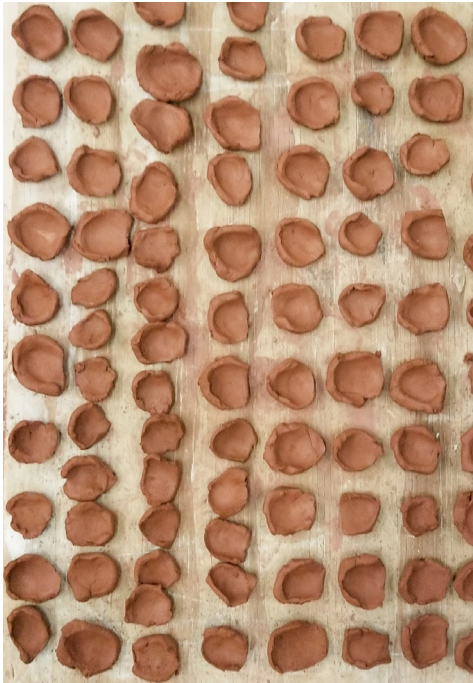
## (through daily time)

From my research, I realized I needed something simple, an approachable way to create space for the spiritual and material worlds to collide. I started a daily practice with the simple goals of 1) make in clay for an hour and 2) seek to know God more. After one round of this practice, I refined the goals to incorporate verbs to guide my hands further. I investigated words like “unconditional forgiveness, overwhelming joy, bending trust, heavy doubt, and searching faith” through creating.

I’ve been interested in how people know God through their everyday, seemingly mundane moments, and how faith could be intersecting into our everyday lives.

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Spiritual time is slow, unhurried. My Divine Creator is never in a rush, he is always seeking closeness like a father does with a child. I am the one who is in a rush.



Detail shots of the daily time project.



## (prayer)

I discovered my daily pursuit in clay most closely aligned with prayer: To me, prayer is a space of fellowship with God, calling on the name of the Lord in all moments of struggle, doubt, sin, or in worship, praise and thanksgiving (1 Samuel 1:15, 2 Chronicles 32:20, Ephesians 3:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is meant to be for humans to draw near to the heart of God (Psalm 73:28). In other words, prayer to me is a simple form of communication with a divine being who, out of deep, deep love, wants to be in connection with me.

God started the conversation by making me from clay, from earthen material. And now I've had the opportunity to respond back through clay: Prayer: It's simple, raw, and present. Just like the clay.

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I prayed expressing praise, thanksgiving, confession, doubt and need as my hands moved the clay. I was met with unfathomable grace and joy by meditating on scripture and God's promises. Reflecting on specific words like grace, trust, and forgiveness through making kept pointing me to the gospel of Christ. I would enter into the space and through prayer I would transform the clay and I would leave transformed.

from sinful to forgiven  
from empty to overflowing  
from prideful to humble  
from striving to rest  
from worry to peace  
from doubt to assurance



## (in fingerprints)

My hands moved in a rhythmic manner. The hands move similar to making music: My hands create with staccato and legato. Short and long, quick and slow: The rhythm is intuitive, spontaneous. The rhythm is like jazz. The beauty of the simple notes stay in the clay, rescuing the fleeting moment by capturing the record of my prayer in the form. The fingerprints are small, intimate.

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Determined by fingerprints, the shapes inherently capture my human capacity and limitations. The fingerprints repeat, searching for depth, for more beyond the material of the clay. The limitations of the human hand leads me into belief in the spiritual.

The God I believe in is not defined by the confines of our time and space. Introduced as God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit (God dwelling among us) the Trinity is one being, harmonious in community and love. So vast and great, yet I experience this love as tangible, present. Put in other words: God's fingerprints are all around us and I see the beauty in our own fingerprints. The Bible starts with the opening line expressing that God has power in his breath to speak and form with unrestrained creativity "In the beginning God Created..." (Genesis 1:1). The pinnacle of His joyful creativity is me— a human being who can now multiply, build, create, grow and love Him back if I choose.



## (under fire)

The Bible has room for doubt and challenge. My doubt was so heavy it weighed me down. The questions about Christ dug deep. I put my faith through the fire, ready to abandon my truth if I needed to.

Could the doubts of the bending clay be met by the assurance of the maker?

Could the firing refine the trust of the clay?

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I put the work into the fire, the raw clay underwent a chemical reaction and turned the glaze into glossy finish. I took the pieces from the kiln and the pieces emerged stronger, more durable, and with more resistance to the weathering of time and outside conditions.

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Faith in Christ, to me, is trust that my salvation is found in him alone. I doubted my faith for a period of this project. I was left with a decision. Am I all in? Do I believe to the point that I would bet my life on these stakes? I couldn't deny the way I was brought from death to life. From sinful to forgiven. From worry to peace. From striving to rest.

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I look at the glazed work, twisting and turning it in my hand. I notice the way the glaze materializes, holding all of the past marks from creating and encapsulating it in time. The glaze records a remnant of the past, assuring the maker of every detail from the process.



## (by arrangement)

I moved the small glazed pieces back and forth on the ground. I put them in clumps, I put them in lines. I moved them into winding lines. I hung the pieces from twine. I crouched down and put them into assortments based on time. I took the work and covered the floor.

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A crucial realization came when I covered an area on the ground. During the time based making process, I kept thinking it was all about the daily pursuit of a relationship with God. Yes, that time was very important, but when I stepped back the larger collection of small pieces was impactful. The bigger collection captured the larger growth and closeness to God that developed.

## (through the journey)

How could I capture the daily time and heart transformation? I looked at my sketches and found two standout themes 1) grid patterns and 2) line work that looked like topographical maps. I discovered the grid pattern was evolving from the repetition of my daily time practice. And the lines from the inner growth that happens from encountering the presence of God. I moved out of the time project and I began to create the larger winding shapes. As the lines took shape, I asked: What would it be like to connect the grid work with the line work? This led me into making organic forms to be able to hold my small ceramic pieces.

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My hands know what to do before I even tell them. My hands tell me. My hands bring the clay into form, shape, and bring nothingness into somethingness. My hands intuitively make, pinching and pressing.



## (in sharing)

I put the small pieces on the floor and my friends would come in and sit down and start picking up the pieces, holding them, arranging them. We would pass the pieces around and share about our faith, asking each other, “What is your spiritual background? And where are you now on your journey?”

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In the making process, the pieces on the ground invited people to come and sit down and start arranging the work. By sitting together and talking about the work, people found a safe place to talk about their spiritual journey. Experiencing the work as a process was meaningful. For the installation, the conversation is around my pieces by looking and walking through. This leads me to ask: What could it look like to create a space that is an invitation to come and engage in conversation by holding the work?



