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I am who am
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Introduction

The clothes we wear, the people we chose to interact with, and the titles bestowed upon us by our culture portray an external expression of self. Although our outward expression is anthropologically interesting and perhaps indicative of much of our behavior and decision making, I am interested in examining a far deeper and richer relationship with life. I believe that our whole being and the relationship with our environment reveals a more primal self-awareness of our intimate experience with life itself. Rather than looking at a more conventional form of self-expression such as painting, poetry, or fashion, I seek to strip away cultural identities and lay bare our more intimate relationship to the Spirit—our Light and our Essence.

Because this concept is inherently metaphysical, I will rely on concepts from religion and spirituality, historical and contemporary photography, as well as film-making to aid in the discussion of my work. Throughout this paper, I will use the term “Light” to describe and represent the non-physical presence of - depending upon one’s beliefs – God, Holy Spirit, energy force and/or Qi. In addition to “Light”, the “Essence” of someone is also a crucial concept in this paper. I define “Essence” as one’s human experience with the “Light”.

One well-known Judeo-Christian example of this “Light” and “Essence” concept is the old testament story of Moses and the burning bush. As stated in the book of Exodus, God “reveals” himself to Moses as a conversing burning bush. Moses does not recognize that this burning bush is the “Light” revealed. Moses is both somewhat skeptical and dumbfounded; he asks the burning bush,

“Who are you?” The bush replies, “I am who am!” (Exodus 3;14. *Douay Rheims Bible*). This implies that the burning bush is the Light/God. Furthermore, the ‘Essence of Moses’ is Moses’ interaction with the burning bush. “I am who am,” as stated by the burning bush, is a depiction of Light/God and human beings’ Essence, or irreducible relationship with God.

This phrase, “I am who am,” resonates with me. As a Quaker (also known as the Religious Society of Friends), I believe that the Light resides in all living things. Moreover, all living things can directly experience the Light through personal prayer or meditative practice. It is not necessary to rely on a doctrine or formal religious creed. My body of work honors this “inner Light” and attempts to distill artifact distractions from a persons’ Essence or irreducible relationship with the inner Light.

The elements of these photographs and the short video are a metaphor for how one’s Essence creates a unique human experience unfolding from the internal Light. The movement of each collaborator’s body reveals individual Essence. The glowing orb in these works symbolizes Light. The reflection of physical light on the body is symbolic of that subject’s human experience of Light unfolding, or Essence, in that moment in time. The video, like the photographs, captures, in real time, the interplay between the body and the lighted orb. However, the video portrays a dynamic dance and emphasizes the constant movement of the body and the glowing orb of light. This, in turn, symbolizes the constant and dynamic unfolding of a person’s Essence or relationship with the Light.

I have been interested in portraying this type of spiritual experience through movement and body language since I first encountered Martha Graham's work as a high school student at Interlochen Arts Academy. I was introduced to Graham's choreography while I was creating a short documentary about her dance company. Graham was internationally-recognized for her Modern dance technique that initiated core-driven movement from the dancer. Graham's work expressed emotion that was driven by body language. I found Graham's work to be powerful and provocative because her work communicated how much could be depicted through gesture and movement.

While at Lawrence University, I have been involved with Studio Art, especially darkroom photography and media art. I have experimented with creating photographs that capture dancers' movement. I have also experimented with creating non-narrative videos. Although I have always been interested in the intersection of movement, spirituality and contemporary photography, this work began to coalesce into a physical project during the summer of 2011. I had a dream that contained imagery of a figure moving with a glowing ball of light. This glowing light reflected on the physical parts of a human figure differently depending upon the actions and engagement of the figure with the light. I had an overwhelming desire to express this relationship through my photography. I was also intrigued by the visual message that could be expressed through the dynamic movement captured by video. This body of work is the culmination of my dream and includes elements of contemporary photography, film-making that

captures dance on video, a book representing the body of work, and a solo exhibition in the Warch Campus Center Gallery at Lawrence University.

Section I of this paper addresses the techniques and tools I used in the process of creating this body of work. Section II acknowledges the contribution and influence of my collaborators. My collaboration with many different people in various disciplines significantly influenced the outcome of my work. These individuals also influenced my experience in the creative process. Section III includes a discussion of the contemporary artists who have influenced and informed my ideas. Section IV pays homage to the historical context and artists who have informed my project.

Techniques & Tools

For the black and white images, I photographed the individuals with the glowing orb against a black fabric to neutralize the space. I asked my collaborators to interact with the orb in any way they felt comfortable. I responded to the subjects' gestures through placement in the frame. Since there was little direction given, the positions and movements produced by my collaborators were essentially the subjects' unguided interaction with the lighted orb. As such, each subject's experience with the orb, as captured on film, is unique to that subject at that particular point in time.

In printing, I manipulated the photographs only enough to keep the viewer from associating the background with a particular space in the physical world. I scanned my negatives and edited them in Photoshop. I used Photoshop as a

“digital darkroom”, manipulating the “curves” and “brightness/contrast” to obtain the tones I envisioned. I organized my photographs by the movements, positions, and how these movements and positions related to each other. The digital “darkroom” allowed me to maintain a consistent tone for different images between the background and orb. The result was to create a sense of intimacy for the viewer. It was my intention for the viewer to understand the subjects’ inner self-reflection created by the synergy between the play of the body, their spontaneous movement, and the orb.

I photographed four individuals against a black seamless using a Hasselblad camera with 120 black and white 400-speed film. The only light source was from the orb that emitted light from an LED. This source of light illuminated only areas of the body closest to the orb. As parts of the body moved further away from the light source, they became enveloped in shadow and eventually disappeared into the void. I used this lighting technique specifically to emphasize the interplay between the body and the orb of light. Again, this interplay is symbolic of the subjects’ Essence and Light.

I printed my images “full frame” and did not crop any of them. This is an important point to understand when viewing my photographs because I am interested in the subjects’ gestures that portray spiritual experience within the space given. If I had cropped the images in any way, this would have distorted the gestures by adding my editing bias to what was captured within the square frame. It was important to maintain the square format to unify all of the images and create a compositionally-stable ground for the round orb.

For the short video I used a digital Sony Nex-5 HD camera to capture Rebecca Salzer, Visiting Professor of Dance at Lawrence University, interacting with the orb in an empty theatre space. I chose this HD camera for its portability. This allowed me to record Salzer's spontaneous experience without interruption. The theatre space was comprised of a black stage with black curtains. The stage provided ample space for her to move. The space was visually consistent with the black background of my still photographs. I edited clips together that communicated her deepest engagement with the orb. The video cuts back and forth between close ups, where the viewer observes a more intimate and exaggerated perspective of her movements, and long shots to show the entirety of the movement from a distance. This is similar to an actual stage performance. My intention was for viewers to see the full body movements as if the viewer were an audience member and to also have exposure to the intimate experience expressed by Salzer's movements, as conveyed through close-ups.

Music was another important dimension of the video. I worked with two Lawrence students during the winter term course "Introduction to Electronic Music," taught by Professor Asha Srinivasan. These two students composed two separate soundscapes for my video. They created two distinct relationships between sound and movement. The soundscape created by Alex Babbitt, a freshman at Lawrence University, most clearly aligned with my concept for the project and is the audio I chose to use. He composed organic transitions between the different sounds and was particularly conscious of and respectful of Salzer's movements. The process of listening to and reflecting on two different

compositional interpretations of the film, significantly enlivened and informed my creative process. I am grateful to both students for their efforts and willingness to participate in my creative process.

I also created a book for this project because the sequence of photographs, as published in the book, would enable me to communicate the serial connection between the images in the sequence. Turning the pages with the still photographs creates a cinematic rhythm that is more accessible than when the photographs are viewed separately. As the viewer turns from one page to the next, they can see the figure moving with the orb.

From beginning to end, the pages reveal a flowing dance. The first image is balanced and symmetrical. Then, throughout the sequence of photographs, the figure moves in various ways with the orb. The book culminates with a balanced image of the orb on the left side of the frame and the figure completely separated from the orb on the right side of the same frame. This portrays the finality of the experience between my collaborator and the glowing orb as the interactive play ended. For me, the decision to end the series with this image conveys the end of this human experience in that moment.

Collaboration

Collaboration was a significant part of my creative process. I considered the people I photographed to be “collaborators” because I responded to and wanted to incorporate their Essence in each photograph. Each person reacted to being photographed or filmed as a unique individual. This was of critical

importance to my project. I was trying to capture individual “Essence,” and I wanted each subject’s personal experience to be revealed on camera. In order to have their “Essence” revealed I guided the subjects through the experience of being photographed to help them understand the limitations of my medium.

At times, I was very “hands on” and even interacted with the orb myself to demonstrate the “interplay” I was requesting of each subject. I coached my collaborators to give them direction and allow them to be contributors to creative process. At other times, my approach was “hands off;” I would ask each subject to hold a position so that I could capture it on the film.

Using the medium of photography to show movement required patience and agility from both photographer and subject. As the photographer, I needed to work quickly to set up the camera and make the proper adjustments necessary between each shot. Conversely, my subjects needed to move slowly and even hold positions so that I could capture the effect of their interaction with the lighted orb. Since I photographed in low light, many of the poses needed to be held for up to 30 seconds in order to compose, focus, and expose.

My interaction with Professor Rebecca Salzer, a choreographer known for “screendance” work, also influenced my work and informed the outcome of the project. Before I began filming, I explained to her that I was trying to capture her Essence through her movement with the orb. I then asked her to move and interact with the orb in whatever way inspired her. After our shoot, I asked her to write a brief reflection about the experience. This reflection is included in my book.

Another important collaborative element of my project involves the space in which I photographed the subjects. Even though the space is essentially a vacuum, because it eliminates most elements of our environment, it greatly influences the individual subject's experience. The space allows for an intense dynamic between the figure, the orb, and me.

Many elements of a physical space influence people emotionally. The surroundings, including the temperature, the lighting, and the amount of open area all played a role in how people felt during the experience interacting with the orb. The comfort level that a subject felt in the environment influenced the positions they were willing to reveal and explore. Because of this, I chose a small space to encourage an intimate connection between myself, my subjects, and the orb. I chose a dim light to create a calm and quiet atmosphere. The temperature was adjusted so that my collaborators would be comfortable unclothed.

My collaboration with the students in the 'Introduction to Electronic Music' class was not only an important artistic pillar in my work, but also a valuable learning experience. Music is a significant part of how a viewer interprets a moving image. Working with a musical composer required both communication and open-mindedness to an array of artistic interpretations. Alex Babbitt created a soundscape that incorporated the dancers' movements and emotional experiences into the music. The soundscape seemed to synchronize perfectly with the visual aspect of my video, making the auditory experience almost inseparable from the visual experience. I have learned a great deal working and

collaborating with artists in musical composition, dance, and other media for this project. Additionally, these collaborations have greatly strengthened my work by having several senses utilized –hearing and sight- to convey my ideas.

Contemporary Context

Mona Kuhn, a contemporary photographer, was a great influence on *I am who am*. In her work *Bordeaux Series*, she photographed nudes in a particular room in her summer home in Bordeaux, France. This home was minimalist with no electricity, instead it used oil lamps for light. She photographed close family and friends with the same red-patterned backdrop and chair. The people were photographed in a straightforward style that Kuhn said is “sympathetic of the plainness and simplicity of the place”¹. Her body of work had three thematic intentions: First, she captured the nature of her artist’s home conveying its simplicity; second, she preserved the memories of her family and friends visiting and sharing her intimate place; and third, she documented the interaction between the individuals and the space based upon the subject’s body language and chosen postures in individual images.

Although I chose to illustrate the subjects’ experience differently than Kuhn, I appreciated how she recognized and conveyed the interaction between the subject, the experience, and the place. I chose to have my collaborators interact with the orb in a space that could not be related to any space in the physical world. I felt that by having my collaborators perform in the “neutral” space of the studio and theatre, the individuals would be more likely to step

¹ Mona Kuhn, “Boudreaux Series,” (accessed March 9, 2012), <http://www.monakuhn.com/>.

outside cultural expectations, thus enabling them to be more authentic to their Essence. While Mona Kuhn used space as a critical element and tool for exploring the identity of her subjects, I used space as a way to negate cultural influences so that the subjects could step outside of their identity and fully express their Essence.

The collaborative dance and performance artists, Eiko and Koma, were also a significant influence on my artistic process for this project. Their work focuses on capturing the primitive human experience in contemporary dance performances. They often include themselves as performers in the environments they have created, such as outdoor settings or gallery installations. Eiko and Koma use a particular technique they created, consisting of slow and articulated body movements, that is intended to capture the audience's sympathy.

One piece by Eiko and Koma, titled *Fragile*, was a continuation of their earlier piece, titled *Naked* (2010), in which they created a human-sized bird's nest on a stage. The theme of the piece *Naked* focused on the beauty of vulnerability in human birth and decay. The human-sized nest paralleling the naked bodies of Eiko and Koma was reminiscent of the vulnerability of a newborn bird exposed to the dangers of the world.²

For the subsequent piece, *Fragile*, Eiko and Koma used the same set as *Naked* and also performed nude again. This time they had a string quartet on stage with the dancers, forming a semi-circle that faced the audience. The

² Joan Acocella, "Dancing Bare Truths," (accessed May 7, 2012), http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/dancing/2011/04/11/110411crda_dancing_acocella?currentPage=all

quartet played continuously while Eiko and Koma danced. The four-hour long production was a choreographed soundscape installation. The audio and imagery was striking with the live instrumental performance and sound clips of Japanese student riots, newscasters reporting on the recent earthquake in Japan, and a recording of the peace bell from Hiroshima memorial park played several times in the composition.³ This emotionally-impacting soundscape juxtaposed with the peacefulness of the movements had an impact on the audience. One critic noted that, “The movements are so slow it is like a moving painting”⁴

My work, while not connected in the literal sense to Eiko and Koma’s, shares common attributes: the interaction of soundscape and performance is a significant characteristic of Eiko and Koma’s work and is a crucial element of my video. Eiko and Koma choreographed their piece and then had the musicians work on the soundscape. Similarly, I filmed my dancer and finished all of the editing of the video before the composers began to work on the soundscape. This approach to collaboration encouraged my composers to be influenced by the dancer’s movements within the video, rather than the dancer being influenced by the music, which is a more common practice. Salzer and my collaborators on the photography were unencumbered by the influence of music

³ Carmel Morgan, Eiko & Koma and Kronos Quartet, (*accessed May 7, 2012*), <http://www.ballet-dance.com/201105/Eiko22Feb2012.html>.

⁴ Lisa Triager, Nature is embraced in movement piece, (*accessed May 7, 2012*). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/performing-arts/eiko-and-koma-fragile,1212491/critic-review.html>.

and thus able to more fully embrace my ideas of internal reflection and essence that I shared with them “in the moment” of the shoots.

Nudity played an aesthetic and conceptual role in both *Naked* and *Fragile*. Eiko and Koma used the term “naked” rather than the term “nude” to describe this aesthetic decision. They explain this decision in an article in the *Washington Post*:

Naked is more existential and more interesting... What's important for me is the nakedness itself. Nude has sexual connotations, but the main idea with naked is it's the whole body and the whole mind that is present ⁵

Conversely, I believe that the term “naked” has the cultural construct of sexuality surrounding its meaning. Therefore, I chose to use the term “nude” to describe the figures in my work. I wanted to focus on the body as a neutral expression of my collaborators’ identity. The nude body was a canvas for movement and response.

My sense of the cultural interpretation of the words “naked” and “nudity” are opposite to Koma and Eiko’s interpretation. What is similar, however, is that Koma, Eiko, and I intentionally and actively address the “risk” of emphasizing the sexual connotations over that of the essential bare, unclothed body-mind. Koma talked about the word “nude” having sexual connotations. I, too, realized it would be difficult to avoid issues of the “male gaze.” Like Koma and Eiko, I purposefully made the aesthetic decision to not emphasize the sexuality that can be implied by nudity.

⁵ Ibid.

To further support the non-sexual nature, I chose not to reveal my collaborator's face in the photographs. I felt this was important because my collaborators' facial identities would distract from the movements and interactions with the orb. I also did not emphasize genitalia as a primary part of the photographs in order to encourage the viewer to see the body as a whole body-mind form rather than as dissected body parts. This allowed me to focus on the imagery that emphasized unique body positions, and relationship between the orb and the body.

Historical

Pictorial photographer Anne Brigman (1869-1950) has been the greatest influence upon me as an artist to date. Brigman is well-known for her work with the female nude in the landscape of the Sierra Nevada in California. Much of her work involved the female physically interacting with the rocky terrain, perched on large tree stumps as if reaching for something beyond this physical world.

Brigman's work resonates with me because of her focus on the nude body and its relationship with the environment. As I have previously stated, I am interested in capturing the physical and spiritual experience of the person I'm photographing. In the Sierra Nevada series, Brigman put significant focus on both the majestic landscape and the spiritual ecstasy one might experience in such an environment. My project also focused on the spiritual experience one can obtain in a particular space. In contrast to Brigman's emphasis on the terrain, I eliminate the physical space by using a black backdrop in the studio.

Eliminating the physical component effectively makes the space an internal one, which is physically captured by my collaborators' interactions with the orb of light.

Experimental filmmaker, Maya Deren (1917-1961), is another artist whose work relates to my short video. Deren was a photographer, dancer, and poet, and her work incorporated all of these in her work. Her film, *A Study in Chorography For Camera* (1945), depicted a dancer performing a single dance in several different locations ranging from outdoor natural environs to a living room. The rhythm of her editing and the choices for framing successfully encouraged the viewer to experience the various physical and emotional spaces the dancer was moving through.⁶

In my video, I was interested in revealing glimpses into the physical and emotional space of the dancer as well. Like my photographs, I use a black background to eliminate the physical so that the dancer and the viewer enter a more internal space. Deren used recognizable spaces in her film. The slow pans and deliberate framing of the shots, along with the editing style, brought the viewer into a distinctly emotional space. In my video, I also used camera shots and editing styles to emphasize different facets of Salzer's movements with the orb. I edited wide shots of Salzer moving with the orb to communicate a theatrical performance on stage, while the close up shots reveal the more intimate aspects of her performance. I believe these cinematic choices and Salzer's performance

⁶ Steven Higgins, "*Still Moving: The Film and Media Collections of the Museum of Modern Art*," (accessed May 7, 2012)
http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A6912&page_number=4&template_id=1&sort_order=1.

with orb revealed an internal emotional and spiritual experience, rather than a cultural one.

Conclusion

My work “I am who am” portrayed my collaborators’ Essence through body language and movement. I believe that their primitive identity was revealed by how my collaborators interacted with the lighted orb. In turn, this depicted the Essence or most essential nature of Being and the irreducible relationship with the Light or God or Spirit. I believe these metaphysical components of identity are crucial when examining the human experience. I show this by having my collaborators move and engage with a glowing orb of light in a neutral setting. I chose to illustrate these aspects of identity through a series of still photographs, a short video, and a book.

Throughout my project there were many aspects of collaboration that make it interdisciplinary. Some of these elements included working with artists such as Rebecca Salzer and Alex Babbitt on my short video, and photographing four collaborators for the still photographs. Working with different artists had a significant influence on the outcome of the project. The individuals’ willingness to reveal their Essence in the photographs significantly influenced the outcome of the images because they alone chose the gestures and positions they wanted to reveal.

I am interested in the relationship between place and the individual, which is why I find the works of contemporary photographer Mona Kuhn, contemporary

dance artists Eiko and Koma, pictorial photographer Anne Brigman and filmmaker Maya Deren so intriguing. All of these artists' work with the relationship between the person and their environment. Similarly, my work focused on the interaction between space and the individual but in a significantly different manner. I chose to create a "neutral" environment achieved by the use of a black seamless in the photographs and the dark stage in the video. This freed the individuals from their external space so that they could examine and reveal their internal space; which was captured by the collaborators interaction with the glowing orb of light. This, in turn, revealed Essence.

This project shows the viewer a provocative and introspective way to reflect on the temporal manifestations of the self and its metaphysical elements. The spiritual existence within an individual is what I wanted to capture in this work. The attention to the relationship between spirituality and self, and capturing the life force within us has left me with a deeper awareness of my own Essence and the Light, and communicating this spirituality as an artist.

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