Church of Kicks

Ricky Warren

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doi: https://doi.org/10.57709/7026744

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Church of Kicks

by

Ricky K. Warren

Under the Direction of Stan Anderson, MFA

Abstract

Church of Kicks is an art installation that deals with product fetish, consumer behavior, and influential power of brands. Using the basketball sneaker consumer subculture as the main subject of focus the exhibit shows how excessive advertising and publication feeds into object idolization, which can lead to extreme, chaotic, and sometimes violent buying behavior. Given its almost identical characteristics with religion in terms of structure and the degree of influence on individuals, consumer culture is religion. By identifying the entities and methods that take part in raising hype and exploiting the extremes of a brand’s cult following, the exhibit makes an attempt to stimulate consumer self-reflection on their own product fetishes and the degree to which they are willing to go to satisfy the urge to fulfill a material obsession.

Index Words: Consumer Behavior, Design in Advertising, Object Fetish, Cult Branding
CHURCH OF KICKS

by

RICKY K. WARREN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015
CHURCH OF KICKS

by

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2015
DEDICATION

To Hilary, our guardian angel, rest peacefully.

To Vivian, my pride and joy. Let this work be proof that all things are possible when you put forth your best effort. You are destined for greatness.

To William, my mentor, my friend. May you rest in peace…and Semper Fi.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In every step of the process of pursuing my MFA, my family and friends have been major sources of support and motivation. This especially includes my wife Trinadi, my mother Barbara, and sister Shantia. Thank you for persistently believing in me and being the backbone that keeps me going.

Much appreciation goes to my thesis committee Stan Anderson, Elizabeth Throop, and Jeffrey Boortz for their highly valuable time, effort, expertise, and guidance. I also thank you for lending me insightful books from your personal collections, as well as passing along helpful articles, imagery, artists, and several other inspirations. Special acknowledgments to the rest of the graphic design department: Melissa Paige Taylor, Jason Snape, Phillip Webb, and Carrie Brown for their camaraderie and support.

I greatly value the faculty and staff members of the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design for their time and effort in my path to graduation. Special thanks goes to Anthony Mangle for the encouragement to pursue the topic for this thesis.

Most importantly, I would like to give honor to God who is the head of my life and remains with me throughout all ventures that I endeavor. Thank you for continuously allowing me to be in your favor and guiding me through this journey.
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INTRODUCTION

Church of Kicks began as a personal reflection on sneaker related crimes and how its continual occurrence has affected my buying choices as a basketball shoe consumer. My lifelong involvement in collecting sneakers, especially those that are of a limited edition, has been substantially weakened by the visual and written reports of extremely desperate behavior committed by competitive buyers. Reports of sneaker related crimes are nothing new, having been a trending topic in mainstream American media since as early as 1987. That year, 15-year old Michael Eugene Thomas was strangled by his friend for his Air Jordan sneakers. The report initially caused a nationwide shock, and since then the number of harmful acts have done nothing but increase substantially. Now more than ever before, riots, stampedes, fights, beatings, and killings are among the acts that are popularly associated with waiting in line for the release of highly demanded footwear at local retail stores, malls, and boutiques.

In reaction to the growing rate of negative basketball shoe buying instances, I assess my previous and current engagement as a consumer. I identify the factors that influence personal decisions then question how and why they have an impact on me. Whereas my early years were a blur of unconscious, nearly obsessive buying behavior to fulfill the identity as the cool kid at school, arriving at the 30-year-old milestone prompted a more critical evaluation of what impresses me. Reaching a higher level of maturity entailed prioritizing responsibility over desire. As a result the commitment to waiting in line for a sneaker release has declined greatly to avoid the increased risk. Not only have I grown weary of the potential danger associated with high demand shoe consumption but also gained consciousness of the corporate-driven promotitional tactics that encourage a do-or-die mentality and contribute to buyer misconduct. Being an older enthusiast of
the culture, I take concern in the mental and physical well-being of future collectors and therefore have the aspiration to diminish the currently growing risks and negativity looming over the community. *Church of Kicks* is an initiative toward raising awareness of dangerous vulnerability within sneaker culture and provoking an individual thought process that may lead to a gradual change in overly obsessive buying behavior.

Like the basketball sneaker subculture, religion has also been known to be associated with acts of violence and disorderly behavior (Fig.1). Like the basketball sneaker subculture, there are messages and elements within the realm that contribute to the cognitive connections that have caused entities to commit harmful acts. The most extreme cases of religious violence are holy wars such as the Crusades and Thirty Years War. The several accounts of violence by the ISIS group are more recent occurrences of religious violence. The concept of fighting in the name of faith can prove to be even more violent than war based on secular reasons.

*Church of Kicks* is built on the idea that consumerism is religion. It explores basketball sneaker fanatic culture and identifies the similarities between religion and consumer subcultures. Given the parallel between the structure of consumption and the systematic workings of religion, the high demand basketball sneaker community is a cult. Despite my affinity with popular brand, limited edition shoes, I believe that brands have too much dominance in American society. They immorally use that prominence through manipulative advertising and publicity. In my eyes, the corporate entities hold the most responsibility in the pandemonium that develops for their products. In contemporary consumerism, the brand is the divine authority, utilizing its powerful voice to strictly advertise and sell, and never to address the realistic ramifications of its highly
influential promotion methods. In consideration of the parallels between religion and secular brand management, we can understand the powerful driving forces behind the chaotic, sometimes violent, actions to buy limited edition shoes.

With *Church of Kicks* installation I propose that the power of brand needs to be minimized in the minds of consumers in order to progress toward a more safe and responsible buying experience when purchasing limited edition, high demand items. An outward display of intense product fetish and its driving factors may effectively reduce corporate influence. Understanding that change is a gradual process, I initially set the goal of getting the intended viewer to at least consider the extent to which commercial entities influence them, which opens the opportunity for further contemplation and self-evaluation.

## 2 INFLUENCES

The approach of correlating branding with religion was influenced by the research of Douglas Atkin, who originally explored the connection between religious cults and brands.\(^{ii}\) Atkin says, "The same dynamics are at play behind the attraction to brands and cults. They may vary in degree of strength (although not always), but not in type." In his research, subjects who identified with religious cults and subjects of consumer groups were asked to recollect reasoning for joining and pledging loyalty. They all explained strong urges to belong, decipher meaning, feel secure, have order within chaos, and create identity.\(^{iii}\) Atkin identified these justifications as essential desires of human nature that are universal, no matter whether one identifies as religious or secular.
Contrary to the popular belief that people join religions and cults to conform, Atkin’s research finds that people join cults and religions to become more individual. He describes this dynamic in four steps:

1. The person feels separated, even alienated, from their current world.
2. The individual becomes receptive to the idea of finding a more compatible environment.
3. Once found, the person feels a sense of security in the compatible environment.
4. Self-validation is felt within a group of like-minded others.

In addition Atkin points out the tactic of “demonizing the other brand.” Using examples such as the Apple v. Macintosh rivalry, he rationalizes the strategy as a means of establishing and strengthening brand loyalty.

Given the insightful information drawn from Atkin’s research, we can assume two ideas. First, brands do not create the cult; the consumers are responsible for finding and forming the cult. And second, though brands do not form the cult, they are aware that consumers are filling an inherent need to seek satisfaction and reinforce a desired identity. It is for this reason that sneaker companies consistently tap into their consumer’s uncontrollable urges in an effort to routinely capitalize off of their customers.

The studies of marketer Douglas Van Praet aroused my interest and made an impression on my goal to visually promote deeper reflection on cognitive associations with specific brands and the resulting behaviors. He utilizes cognitive science to argue that we must tap into the unconscious
mind of the consumer in order to change behavior. We think the rational mind is making the
decisions because it speaks to us, but science proves that several fundamental brain processes
take place automatically without the involvement of consciousness.⁶ That is why we must take a
more in-depth look into the universal, unconscious mental procedures in order to understand the
most essential ways to understand and change behavior. Praet says, “We go from perceiving to
feeling to thinking to doing to finally becoming.” He proposed a seven-step process to achieve
behavior change with the intention on making a better, more genuine connection with
consumers:

1. Interrupt the pattern to get attention.
2. Create comfort to build safety and trust in a new pattern.
3. Lead the imagination to the benefits of a better life.
4. Shift the feeling to arouse value.
5. Satisfy the critical mind.
6. Change the associations in order to change perceptions.
7. Take physical action to make the experience deep-rooted in the unconscious.

Though his studies and proposed methods are intended primarily for improving marketing
strategies, the application of Paet’s ideas will be equally effective my artistic study of
influencing change in harmful basketball sneaker consumer behavior since the effort is aimed at
buyers as well. In other words, I intend to use Paet’s methodology to fight fire with fire.

The devotional art of fourteenth to sixteenth century Italy and Northern Europe has been a visual
inspiration for me throughout this process. To be specific, the work of Giotto, Jan van Eyck, and
Rogier Van der Weyden are the most intriguing in terms of their artistic intentions and resulting
decisions. Being in the practice of fine art during a time when religion and piety influenced almost every aspect of an individual’s life, these artists were still able to effectively communicate issues within both the religious and secular realms. While biblical scenes such as the Annunciation of the Virgin, Crucifixion of Christ, and The Last Judgment communicated piety on the forefront, the inclusion of gold leaf or lavish, seemingly candid personal objects within compositions would suggest high social status. I notice the exact same dynamic between devotion and secular aspirations in the exclusive basketball sneaker consumer subculture. On one end of the spectrum there is a necessity to display an outward pledge of loyalty, and on the other end an aspiration to be identified in the eyes of the public as stylish, trendy, unique, and having a higher level of prestige than their social counterparts.

3 SOCIAL CONTEXT & RELEVANCE

Within the research phase of my creative process, I prioritized gaining complete understanding of the hierarchal structure of the high demand sneaker market. My investigation took consideration of the orderly phases of product concept and development, then promotion, to manufacture, distribution, and finally consumption. The detailed components that established and maintain the system were considered as well, such as the brand, athlete endorser, non-athletic endorser, mass media, and local retailer. Analyzing the construct of the consumer culture made realize surprising similarities between the institutions of consumerism and religion. I noticed how the aforementioned entities within the commercial environment functioned in the same way as particular elements within the godly atmosphere. The discovered likeness drove my decision to have the resulting body of artwork make straightforward comparisons between secular desire and churchly devotion.
3.1 BRAND = GOD

Both consumerism and religion glorify a supreme deity that is held in regard as the reigning authority over the entire organization. My upbringing in Christianity influenced my perception of who God is and his function within the divine order. I have come to the understanding that God is the omnipotent creator of the world that possesses all power. Having no known physical presence, many believe him to be a spiritual presence, and the only way to experience that presence is through a close relationship with God.\textsuperscript{viii} It also my understanding that those who are faithful, obedient, and serve their due diligence will put themselves in God’s favor and ultimately experience his riches. Even for those who sin and do not fully comply with his divine will, his love is unconditional and is therefore willing to show mercy and grace to those who repent to their sins. To sum up all of the aforementioned characteristics, an ideal relationship with God is much like that of a parental figure. For this reason, the Holy Bible refers to him many times as the “Heavenly Father.”\textsuperscript{viii}

*Church of Kicks* views the corporation as The Alpha and Omega of sneaker consumption. They are the essential power from which the design, promotion, and influence behind product fetishization originate. When the brand speaks to the public, its loyal followers listen with their undivided attention (Fig.2). If the cultish customer maintains a consistent buying relationship with the brand, then he will experience its riches. I chose to focus my investigation and resulting artwork content on Nike and Air Jordan brands, mainly due to their level of influence on myself and the majority of the sneaker market. There was a time when I, like many others, decided to wear strictly Nike and Jordan shoes because their products were a surefire way of bringing
attention to the individual who wore them. To understand their business strategies is how I was able to best learn the factors behind their substantial impact on the unruly consumers extremely obsessive behavior.

### 3.1.1 Creating Cool: The Role of Design in Sneaker Fetish

The design of basketball sneakers plays a significant role in Nike and Jordan Brand’s market domination and customer loyalty to the brand. While quality and functionality are factors for positive buyer feedback, the footwear designer’s capability to consistently embody their customers’ perceptions of cool that is the key to the sneaker giant’s cult following. But how do we define cool? What are the characteristics of cool basketball footwear? Though specific impressions of cool are unique to each individual, there are collective similarities in conceptions of cool across Nike and Air Jordan’s fan base. A 2009 European study of Generation Y (anyone born between 1980 and 1994, also known as Millennials) gathered responses from over 5,000 subjects aged 17-29 on their perception what defines cool and how their concept of cool influences their buying decisions. As part of that study, the subjects were asked to identify keywords that they would use to characterize anything that they would consider cool. Among the most common attributes used were the words: trendy, creative, unique, original, authentic, appealing, high status, exclusive, innovative, and retro.\(^{ix}\)

To dedicated exclusive basketball sneaker collectors, the most coveted shoes visually possess all of the aforementioned qualities. Among the wide selection Jordan products, retro basketball sneakers are the most desired by contemporary consumers. Of the $2.25 billion in reported U.S. basketball sales of Jordan sneakers in 2013, the retro designs make up roughly half of the brand’s
Tinker Hatfield, designer of the most coveted Air Jordan editions, is highly regarded by the sneaker community for his now-retro creations and has been even referred to as a ‘design god’. He also designed the futuristic self-lacing shoe that was featured in the film *Back to the Future II* (Fig.3). When Nike and Jordan select a retro Tinker design for an upcoming Jordan release, loyal consumers prepare themselves to line up and buy without question. Other visual factors that play into the perceived coolness of limited edition basketball sneakers are exclusive color combinations, prints, patterns, and materials (Fig. 4).

Due to Nike and Jordan Brand’s success in the release of collectible retro basketball sneakers, other footwear brands have followed suit to compete in the market (Fig.5). Mutumbo, Shaqnosis, Patrick Ewing). Adidas re-released their Mutumbo basketball shoe, originally endorsed by legendary NBA center Dikembe Mutumbo. Reebok pushed out the Shaqnosis, worn by Shaquille O’Neal. Even Patrick Ewing’s brand footwear has found its way back into retailers and is quite successful in its sales.

### 3.1.2 Exclusivity and Value

Those who understand the fundamentals of American consumerism know that low supply for a high demand product equals significantly raised monetary value. While this is a major factor in the fiscal success of Nike and Jordan’s extremely coveted basketball sneakers, it is the primary and direct cause of disorderly and violent consumer behavior. To the obsessive, obtain-at-all-cost consumer, the very thought and actuality of being on the outside of the owner’s circle for a specific limited edition shoe causes mental repercussions that are incomprehensible to individuals on the outside of the basketball sneaker cult, and the cognitive ramifications of non-
ownership may in turn translate into hazardous conduct in the physical realm. The lack in sympathy by outside spectators is why I propose the awareness of responsible behavior needs to derive from the internal community.

The value aspect of exclusivity also raises the potential for mental and physical harm. Not only are there buyers who have deep emotional attachments with specific shoes, but also a vast population of consumers exists who target highly coveted basketball sneakers to resell in online markets such as EBay. Depending on the type and brand, a basketball shoe can double to quadruple in value once sold out, receiving the label of what the sneaker community calls “dead stock.” In consideration of the potential value inflation, we also have to consider the potential for criminal-minded behaviors such as robbing, stealing, even killing to obtain basketball shoes to resell in the same market. The anonymity of secondary online selling makes it easy for such individuals to gain profit from immoral acts.

3.2 **THE ATHLETE ENDORSER = JESUS**

The use of Jordan as the physical, influential face on the frontline of Nike’s most prized basketball sneakers has striking similarity to Christ’s role in God’s ultimate plan to win the souls of man. The Christian faith identifies Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the physical manifestation of God in the flesh, and followers view him and his life as the human example of perfection. A breakdown of the term Christianity reveals its meaning of “Christ-like”, so its followers find importance in living a life like Christ in order to please God. Meanwhile, I think about the Gatorade ads in the early 1990s that encouraged viewers to “Be Like Mike.” The acquisition of Michael Jordan as the prime endorser for Nike was a milestone for their success in
the basketball sneaker market. As the years have passed and Jordan’s following continues to reach great heights their collaboration has flourished, expanding the Jordan Brand into its own division of Nike. In 2012 the Jordan Brand alone controlled 58 percent of the entire basketball shoe market.\textsuperscript{xii} And in 2013 the brand’s shoe sales contributed $1.75 billion to Nike’s total reported sales of $26 billion.\textsuperscript{xii}

The Jordan memorabilia collected in my childhood years (Fig.6), mostly show the iconic figure in heroic moments of athletic performance. I see a correlation in visual presentation between the athlete endorser and Jesus (Fig.7), and perceive both of them as means of providing their respective audiences with a physical role model. As a result I understand how one might be led to eagerly develop a religious following of arguably the most influential sports player of all time.

The crucifixion of Christ is believed to be the ultimate sacrifice for man, and he is highly venerated by believers of Christianity as a savior. Such an act of sacrifice has led to the development of a methodical presentation of devotional imagery featuring Christ that has influenced religious followers since the days of antiquity. The perpetual presentation of this visual system encourages followers to effortlessly associate the physical appearance of Christ with interpretational imagery of his likeness. In the most extreme cases, there are some followers who actually believe such imagery to be authentic representations of Jesus and therefore consider the image itself holy enough to worship.

On the subject of consumer disorder and violence at the releases of his exclusive basketball sneakers, inquiries exist as to what stance Michael Jordan has in the matter and if he takes any
kind of responsibility. So far the only record of his response lies in the pages of an special issue of Sports Illustrated released in 1990 titled *Your Sneakers or Your Life*, in which he stated, “Everyone likes to be admired, but when it comes to kids actually killing each other, then you have to re-evaluate things.” Since then Jordan has been silent, which resulted in critical response and even calls to action directed toward him. Still the athlete chooses to keep his silence in the matter and continue to collect his earnings and royalties from his cult following.

*Church of Kicks* takes into account the relationship between The Savior and God to express my newfound perception of the agreement between the iconic endorser and the powerful corporation. Did Michael Jordan die for the sins of his and Nike’s followers? Like the “Heavenly Father,” was it in Nike’s plan to communicate Jordan’s image with a sense of “perfection” for the sake of fulfilling the material wants of the people, and ultimately making a huge profit? Has the sneaker corporation advised or encouraged the endorser to be a silent, yet still highly influential, force? Due to conflict of interest, it is most likely that these answers will never be answered by the two entities. Therefore it is in the best value of consumers to assume they will not take part in striving to wholeheartedly address harmful buying behavior at retail releases.

### 3.3 AFFLUENT NON-ATHLETES = ANGELS

Studies within the Christian faith have led me to the perception that God used angels to carry forth messages between him and man. Though the concept of being a messenger may seem relatively insignificant, angels are indeed important to the master plan, and therefore greatly influential to believers of the religion. Though not worshipped like God and Christ, they can assist in moving people to do what is requested of them by the higher powers. In reference to
biblical stories such as that of Moses or Noah \textsuperscript{xiv} where God put himself directly in the presence of human figures, I noticed situations in which man tended to directly question God of his commands to them. This firsthand experience of man’s doubtful expression seemed to be undesirable to God. On the other end of the spectrum, in biblical occurrences where angels carried forth messages from The Heavenly Father such as the Annunciation, mankind seemed more open and willing to accept messages that came indirectly to them.

The highly impactful impression of footwear corporations and its representatives led to the development of indirect promotion though non-athletic celebrities such as musicians, actors, and other affluent figures. Seemingly candid to the unconscious buyer, endorsement deriving from a wealthy and powerful social group enables an association of limited edition sneakers with high status, which feeds into the aforementioned consumer-perceived qualities of cool. Nike and Jordan Brand use a massive amount of their resources to conduct preliminary releases of exclusive basketball sneakers to the most influential entities. In the current age of new technology companies know that a premature shoe release to high society will create a massive early buzz within the media that is routinely used by the sneaker collector subculture. Evidence of early releases to celebrities appear mostly in the form of uploaded photography to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, sneak peeks and updates on sneaker consumer community websites like Sole Collector, Just4Kicks, and Sneaker News, and several other features in print magazines and televised programming (Fig.8).
3.4 MASS MEDIA = THE BIBLE

On the subject of media, one of the most important elements of religious faith is the sacred text. Christianity has the The Holy Bible, Islam has the Quran, and The Church of Latter Day Saints has the The Book of Mormon. Even Scientology, a relatively new religion beginning in the 1950s, has Dianetics. Though each of their texts differ in teachings and beliefs, they serve a universal purpose of instructing their devotees on how to think, believe, and live in way that is appropriate in the eyes of their supreme authority.

Contemporary media takes on the same functionality within American consumerism, especially in the basketball sneaker fanatic cult. Like the athletic and non-athletic endorsers, media assists in the brand’s effort to extend intended messages to the consumer. Once a footwear corporation initiates communication of a limited edition release, the message rapidly circulates across the wide variety of media that is readily available to the loyal consumer seeking the next product to fulfill the fetish (Fig.8).

Contrary to the belief that media does not influence buying behavior I take positioning that there is too much media hype for exclusive shoe releases. I am however aware of American media’s entitlement to simply report the news, and therefore do not intend on taking an inevitably unproductive attempt to remove their constitutional right. Rather, via the Church of Kicks installation I highlight the media’s contribution to the problem at hand with the aspiration that the American consumer will contemplate on how modern broadcasting impacts the mentality and potential behavior of die-hard consumers.
3.5 LOCAL RETAILER = THE CHURCH

Churches and temples are the physical dwellings in which those of similar religious beliefs congregate under the same roof to collectively give veneration to their divine authorities. This is also where followers receive verbal instruction on how to conduct themselves in order to receive their spiritual and worldly blessings. Given its functionality, there is a parallel between the church and local footwear retailers such as Footlocker, Champs Sports, and the many sneaker boutiques throughout the United States that make their establishments available for consumers to line up and receive their chance at obtaining highly coveted shoes (Fig.9). Like churches and temples, they directly house the objects of the collector’s idolization. Within the vast collection of media hyping the product, retailers put out their own advertisements in the form of email-blasts and web banners to ensure a sellout within the release date.

3.6 CONSUMPTION = THE TITHE

The tithe is considered to be a sacred religious practice. It is a form of worship that is believed to exhibit devotion, sacrifice, obedience, and diligence towards the supernatural authority. Participating in the tithe is a way of remaining in God’s favor and gaining access to spiritual and secular riches. In all of the churches that I attended, the members of the congregation are instructed (using biblical reference) to give 10 percent of their income along with an offering as an a sign of dedication to God’s will for them to give. Because it is pleasing to the higher powers, followers of religious groups are ready and willing to give anything that it takes to please God. The same can be said in reference to loyal basketball sneaker consumers. The
extreme shoe buyer is not only ready to give their money, but also eager to wait in line for several hours or days, which are a secular display of the aforementioned signs of worship.

4 THE CHURCH OF KICKS INSTALLATION

The *Church of Kicks* installation was designed to serve two functions. First, it is intended to be a pedagogic tool that identifies the intense devotional behavior of a religious cult following. In addition it informs consumers of the driving factors of the same kind of following in the basketball sneaker subculture. In order to effectively carry out this function, my primary focus was to ensure that the main correlation between religious devotion and basketball sneaker fetish possessed capability to be comprehended with sufficient clarity.

The second function for the collective body of work is to create opportunity for contemplation on individual fetish. Within examination, it is ideal that the viewer will observe and reflect on the religious and secular components separately, make the correlation between both realms, then ponder on their own product obsessions and gauge how their fixation may or may not have an impact on buying behavior. Whether or not a viewer determines if fetish affects their consumption does not determine the success of the work, but rather to spark a cognitive process of self-assessment is the goal.

As a child that spent much time within church walls, I took notice and interest in the common items of American church interiors. The most interesting element of the church associated objects was the imagery applied to them. Seemingly taken for granted as mundane articles used
strictly for material purposes, I also recognize the psychological value of the visuals placed on the items. As a result, *Church of Kicks* takes an approach of exhibiting worship that imitates the devotional fine art displayed in church interiors. The selected method has the most potential to clearly communicate the concept that the basketball shoe collector community is a cult. In addition, the approach strongly suggests perspectives of intense faithfulness and desperate consumption behavior.

### 4.1.1 2-Dimensional Works

Devotional Portraits is a series of 5 manipulated photographs showing profile images of highly coveted basketball sneakers from my personal collection (Fig.10-14). The specific shoes chosen for subject matter are the Air Jordan V, XI, and XIII editions, the Nike Hyperposite, and Air Jordan Son of Mars. I chose these designs mostly for their style and current influence on the sneaker culture. Also, the selections most exhibited the keywords describing popular perceptions of cool that were revealed in the aforementioned studies of Behrer and Van den Bergh: creative, original, authentic, high status, exclusive, appealing, and retro.

In the photographic process, I chose to shoot only one basketball shoe at a time rather than as a pair to narrow the focus of the viewer. The minimization to a singular subject also helps communicate the idea of sneaker idolization. After the initial photographic process, the images were edited using Adobe Photoshop CS6. I removed the sneaker from its original backdrop, then copied and pasted to a solid black background. Once completed, I noticed that the highly exposed photographs did not integrate well with its new surrounding. The basketball sneaker imagery was then copied, pasted and a Multiply blending effect was selected to reduce the
original light exposure and improve blending to the solid black background. The chosen photo manipulation process gave the desired look that was needed to mimic the dramatic lighting commonly used in devotional imagery.

My studies in the devotional art of fourteenth to sixteenth century Northern Europe and Italy highly inspired the infused imagery and framing utilized in each piece. I used photography from some sneaker release events that I attended and manipulated them using the same blending tools from the sneaker imagery. For further dramatic effect and to communicate the concept of unconscious devotion, I did not want the image to be easily recognizable. As a result I applied a duplicate layer of every photo, layered them on top of the basketball shoe image, and increased the transparency, which significantly darkened the photographic imagery but kept the basketball footwear visible. Though on the top layer, the ghosted artwork does not extend beyond the form of the shoe, which gives the realistic illusion of the image being naturally part of the shoe.

Not only did I find the religious aspect of commissioned masterpieces interesting, but also the underlying secular intentions of the patron. Gilded wood frames covered in carefully applied layers of gold leaf subconsciously associated the devotee with high status. The visual experiences inside of churches also remind me of the seemingly lavish framed portraits I used to gaze at, showing iconic religious figures and notable church authorities such as pastors and board members. I obtained frames with a gilded appearance from secondhand sources and applied a premium gold spray paint to mimic the extravagant frames from the influential era.
The piece entitled *Altarpiece w/ Reliquary (Triptych)* (Fig.15-16) is a more evident personal reflection in comparison to the pieces, simply due to the fact that I use imagery of myself and my child within the piece. Through presentation it shows influence from similar eras as the *Devotional Portraiture* series. I chose the triptych form so that I could easily communicate the piece as an altarpiece. Its function of being used in routine prayer has a sense of faithfulness that ties in effectively with consumer loyalty and fetish. In addition, the collapsible triptych form provided easy transport. The selection of medium-density fiber wood (MDF) was due mainly to its smooth surface and ability to absorb paint. The imagery on the foreground of the piece presents a central poster of Michael Jordan in the act of performing a slam-dunk, a heroic moment and iconic image in the eyes of his fanatics. The right panel presents the photograph of myself wearing the Air Jordan retro XIII “Barons” edition, a highly popular sneaker that sold out within the first day of its release. On the left side of the piece is another photographic image that shows my daughter, Vivian, wearing toddler-sized Air Jordan retro VI “Lilac.”

The decision to choose personal photographic subject matter replicates the compositional choices of Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpieces (Fig.17-18). Though photography is not used in the piece, presentation of the devotees themselves within the side panels to communicates religious piety and secular prestige at the same time. I bought my daughter the featured Jordan sneakers for her first birthday, along with several other Nike shoes, and later reflected on the idea that my buying behavior is now transferring onto what I purchase for my children, and ultimately offers her up to Nike as a new follower. While in this mode of thought, I remembered a bible scripture from Proverbs 22:6 that reads “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”
The reliquary is a three-dimensional piece that sits under the altarpiece, displaying the sole of a Jordan sneaker and a piece of the Nike “Swoosh” logo pulled from the same source. The sneaker pieces sit on velvet within a gold painted shadowbox presentation case. The presentation mimics that of a relic one would find in a traditional Catholic church setting. Altarpieces commonly house relics that were believed to be in direct relation to a divine religious figure. Pristine presentation of the altarpiece in combination with encased sneaker relic supports the approach to communicate worship as a result of cognitive associations with memorable figures from the same realm.

*Let it Shine* (Fig.19) utilizes a stained-glass style to produce style to produce the illusion of church windows. The central, heroic image of an athlete is intended to replicate the interpretational images of Christ applied to glass windows of church dwellings. These architectural decorations are constant reminders of the believed savior who is worthy of high praise and worship. Considering the fact that stained glass church windows are significantly large, in addition being costly and time consuming to produce, I made the decision to print my design on a clear acrylic plastic sheet to best replicate the appearance of stained glass. To further mimic the representation of a window, multiple Nike shoeboxes were used to create a threshold for the printed panel (Fig.20). This added dimensionality to the piece and provided the opportunity for a more engagement from the viewer. Florescent lighting was added behind the piece to convey sunrays shining through the window.
Church Fans (Fig.22) also began as a childhood observation of intriguing functionality of the seemingly mundane when considering its combination with religious visuals. The fuse of normality with devotional imagery reveals an intentional campaign to reinforce dedication to the divine cause. My memories of handheld fans I found between the pews of the church sanctuary mostly recall the images printed on the front of them (Fig.21). My recollected images include Warner Sallman’s Head of Christ, a young girl praying at her bedside with Christ behind her, a family of four standing together as they read a large bible, along with several other scenes of devout Christianity. To communicate media hype in the religious realm, Church Fans takes on the form of the handheld fans found in church interiors. The imagery that I chose imitates the ideology of displaying photographic representations of highly dedicated sneaker consumer behavior to speak to the secular side of the spectrum.

4.1.2 3-Dimensional Work

Angels (Fig.23) addresses the correlation of the affluent endorser of exclusive basketball sneakers with the angelic functionality of being a divine messenger. The work presents a prefabricated angel sculpture, obtained by secondhand sources, to convey the religious realm. On the side of intense sneaker behavior, the figurine is completely covered in gold shoelaces. As with all the pieces in the installation, the color gold is used to highlight the importance of the shoe subjects and symbolize the perceived high social status associated with them. I chose to add a gold-framed collectible trading card from my memorabilia of Michael Jordan and Mars Blackmon, portrayed by celebrity actor and director Spike Lee, and placed it in front of the lace-wrapped angel so that it appears as if the angel is praying to the imagery. When viewed
collectively, the work expresses the population of celebrity endorsers that make up the angelic body.

*Tithe & Offering* presents the parallel between the act of exclusive sneaker consumption and the religious practice of collecting the sacred tithe (Fig.24). The concept of utilizing a brass collection plate derives from observation of the common materials used in tithe collection. Rather than simply placing money within the collection plate, I considered the addition of currency in the form of retail receipts, which conveys monetary sacrifice in the secular realm. I also used my recollection of church tithing envelopes to design and incorporate a replication of the same piece of collateral. The design of envelopes contributes to the perception of a predetermined systematic visual system that makes mental and physical impressions on devotees.

*Exaltation* (Fig.25) is a piece that addresses the high frequency of exposure from collective media hype and how it enhances the possibilities of consumer idolization and fetish. Printed media representing mass media completely covers the base, signifying the buildup of publicity. Rising out of the immense hype is an illuminated acrylic plastic body that represents the resulting unconscious cognitive associations. The golden sneaker appears at the top to show how the currently coveted basketball shoe has been raised to a level beyond being simple footwear. Scaled at approximately 7 feet, the work forces the viewer to look in an upward direction to make eye contact with the Jordan sneaker. Placement above eye level conveys perceptions of superiority.
4.2 Gallery Setup

The *Church of Kicks* exhibition opening took place in the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design large gallery, which is located within the Georgia State University campus. I was allotted the back half of that space to showcase the collection of work. Once I decided on a gallery, I took photos of the designated area so that I could develop preliminary visuals of potential artwork arrangements. I also received a floor plan with approximate measurements of wall lengths and ceiling height to work out issues with spacing prior to installation. Once the time came to install, my aspirations for the gallery setup remained mostly the same with minor changes in mounting solutions and wall hanging altitude.

The final choice for the gallery layout was one that appropriately conveyed churchly devotion (Fig. 26). There was significant amount spacing between each piece to provide them with their own viewing area and convey intense dedication. Having been in the gallery on several occasions it was always my intent to set the Devotional Portraiture Series in a straight row on the back wall, as it is the only wall with the capacity to fit all five images. In-the-round works such as Angels, Church Fans, and Collection Plate were on three separate pedestals that were at a central location within the collective arrangement. All three works had their own spotlight for pristine presentation. I committed the Altarpiece to the central front wall because of the piece’s functionality as a devotional prayer piece. Also the lighting in that area is very prominent, giving it the attention that I felt was appropriate for a triptych and reliquary. Since Exaltation and Let It Shine already had strong illumination within the pieces the decision to place them on the far left and far right walls with minimal gallery lighting seemed to be an optimal location. The distance of the two from the other works prevented any unintentional clashing of light sources.
4.3 Identity

As a graphic designer, I found it necessary to develop a visual identity system for the *Church of Kicks* that would initially include a logo, flyer, and poster design. Since I intended for the exhibition to be a moving installation the identity will function as a means to convey distinctiveness, as well as establish and maintain viewer recognition across various geographic locations. For this initiative, I wanted something minimal in presentation that would intrigue the viewer enough to come to the venue to see the entire collection of artwork.

The logo displays a strictly typographic approach, which we refer to in the field as a logotype (Fig. 27). For the words “Church of”, I chose the Baskerville Old Face typeface. Its unique varying of weight and use of serifs remind me of the signage that one would commonly find outside of many traditional Baptist churches. The word “Kicks” uses the Futura Bold typeface, which has similar qualities as the typeface used in Nike’s trademarked logotype. Originally the Futura typeface stands upright, so I chose to manipulate the text to replicate the right slant used in the Nike brand. The flyer and poster also takes a minimal approach, in which I only showcase one artwork image and the *Church of Kicks* logotype in each piece (Fig. 28-29). I used Futura for the detailed information text in order to keep consistency throughout the identity set.

5 VIEWER RESPONSE

*Church of Kicks* exhibition took place from March 30- April 3, 2015. I conducted an artist talk on March 31 and an opening reception on April 2, both of which provided opportunities to speak with the audience and gather viewer feedback. In my conversations with a total of approximately 15-17 viewers, I chose not to outwardly ask if the work communicated intense devotion and if
they attempted to perform self-reflection. Rather I indirectly provoked an informal chat and pulled key phrases from their responses to gauge how the body of work impacted them.

Recollecting the discussions that I had in regard to the installation, there seemed to be a mutual understanding of the intended message. When asked about what specifically conveyed meaning to them, pristine presentation and intense decoration of each piece seemed to be the most common response. They felt that these two factors explicitly display diligence. Other individuals identified the use of gold color, spatial arrangement, size dimensions of the artwork, and content as elements that clearly expressed religious devotion. In their own ways all of the respondents communicated undergoing a mental process of considering the current level of power that brands have on people. They recognized the concept of the extremely desperate consumer behavior and contemplated on how advertising feeds into such a mentality. I even witnessed an individual give an assessment of his own affinity for Jordan brand sneakers and why he too has chosen to avoid going to local retailers during an exclusive release. Prior to attending the show he realized the need to formally address this issue to the sneaker community and extend a call to action.

The overall response to the exhibition seemed to be mostly enthusiastic. There were no reports of confusion in terms of meaning and people seemed to be impacted by the visuals in a positive way. As intended, the work aroused a deeper investigation in commercial institutions and how they can potentially use advertising and publicity to manipulate their mental associations with certain products.
6 CONCLUSIONS

After personal reflection on each body of work and outside viewer response, I assume that the installation effectively conveys the intended messages that I set out to communicate. It exploits the extremes of a material obsession and the profit-oriented methods of the powers that feed into product fetish in an unhealthy manner. The goal for the audience to perform contemplation after visual analysis was successfully achieved. Attaining this goal proves to me that *Church of Kicks* has the capability to provoke a more engaging thought process within the target audience, contemplation that is more elaborate and critical once they understand their role within the larger scope.

The thesis exhibition is not the end of *Church of Kicks*. Rather, there is opportunity to greatly expand on the initiative’s aspirations, messages, and visual communication methods. Continued efforts on the project will only progress it further toward living up to its full potential. In the conceptual phase of my process I identified other issues involved basketball sneaker consumption that could definitely be brought to light, such as the impression that massive sneaker hype leaves on consumers of specific race, gender, and location. After receiving a mostly positive response to the recent presentation of fine art I aspire to further develop the body of work with more compositions that would individually have a narrowed focus, but still contribute to the collective cause of revealing “the bigger picture.”

As subsequent generations take on their inevitable role as accountable buyers, businesses will continue to carry out the essential functions necessary to their survival in the market: to promote
their brand and make a substantial profit. Due to the scientific fact that core human instincts determine our behavior to an unfathomable extent, it is vital that the vast population of impressionable American consumers strengthen the link between their moral sense and external actions. I understand and recognize the concept of free will, and do not depend on people to immediately change how they conduct themselves at limited edition basketball shoe releases. Change is a gradual process. It begins with an open mind to measure whether or not the current behaviors are beneficial to well being. The success of the *Church of Kicks* installation is not defined by ending unfavorable buying behavior. Rather, its effectiveness is measured in the ability to better connect the American consumer with the ideas of responsibility and humanity.
Figure 1. Screenshot of Air Jordan XI “Concord” release at a metro Atlanta mall (Above).
Photograph of outbreak of religious chaos between armed forces and Christian protestors in Egypt (Below).
Figure 2. Nike ads and promotional signage displaying quotes of diligence.
Figure 3. Tinker Hatfield with the Nike Air Mag 2013, a concept design for the blockbuster movie *Back to the Future II* that was released on the retail market 26 years later by popular demand.
Figure 4. Exclusive Sneakers showing highest coveted design elements.
Figure 5. Other retro basketball sneaker competitors. (Top) Reebok Shaqnosis. (Middle) Adidas Mutumbo 1. (Bottom) The Patrick Ewing basketball sneaker.
Figure 6. Michael Jordan collectible memorabilia from his days as an active NBA player. Courtesy of Ricky Warren.
Figure 8. Photos of celebs in early-released exclusive basketball sneakers.
Figure 9. 34th Street Footlocker in New York and a church front.
Figure 17. Rogier Van der Weyden. Beaune Altarpiece (The Last Judgment) c.1445
Figure 18. Rogier van der Weyden. Annunciation Triptych. c. 1434. Oil on Wood.
Figure 19. Ricky Warren. *Let it Shine (Vector illustration version)*. 2015. Print on clear acrylic plastic: 24 x 48 in.
Figure 20. Ricky Warren. *Let it Shine*. 2015. Mixed media, graphic print on clear acrylic plastic. 3.5 ft. x 6.5 ft.
Figure 21. Vintage church fans. Mid – Late 20th Century.
Figure 22. Ricky Warren. Church Fans. 2015. Photographic print, wood. Dimensions per fan: 6.5 in. x 10 in.
Figure 23. Ricky Warren. *Angel*. 2015. Mixed media. 7.5 x 4 in.
Figure 25. Ricky Warren. *Exaltation*. 2014. Mixed media on acrylic plastic and medium density fiber wood. 12 x 72 in.
Figure 26. Ricky Warren. *Church of Kicks* installation at the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design Large Gallery. 2015. Photos courtesy of Ricky Warren.
Figure 27. Ricky Warren. Church of Kicks logo design. 2015. Adobe Illustrator CS6.
Church of **KICKS**
An MFA Thesis Exhibition by Ricky Warren

**MARCH 30 - APRIL 3, 2015**

**OPENING RECEPTION**
Thursday April 2, 5pm - 8pm

Large Gallery, Back Side
Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design
Georgia State University - Arts & Humanities Building
10 Peachtree Center Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30303

*Figure 28.* Ricky Warren. *Church of Kicks exhibition flyer.* 2015. Adobe InDesign. 6 in. x 4 in.
Figure 29. Ricky Warren. *Church of Kicks exhibition poster*. 2015. Adobe Photoshop. 18 in. x 12 in.
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NOTES

i Sophia Jones. ISIS Boasted of These Christian Deaths. Here are the Lives They Lived. Jones reports the capture and decapitation of 21 men from Libya, occurring on Jan. 3, 2015. The men were allegedly captured and killed by members of the ISIS group for being Christian believers.

ii Atkin coined the term “Cult Brand”, defining it as “a brand for which a group of customers exhibit a great devotion or dedication.”

iii Atkin. Introduction, xiii.

iv Atkins. 4.

v Atkins. 6.

vi Praet, Douglas. Unconscious Branding: How Neuroscience Can Empower Marketing. 5. In 2008 a group of scientists led by John-Dylan Haynes from the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Germany tested the role of the unconscious in decision-making. Subjects were presented with a button and asked to push the button with either their left or right hand. They were asked to indicate at what point they made the decision in their mind and had no time constraint in when they decided to push the button. Using brain scans, the researchers observed micropatterns of brain activity, and in were able to predict the subjects’ choices before the participants themselves knew them.

vii My developed perceptions of experiencing the presence of God derived from teachings of the Holy Bible. John 14:6 reads “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

viii An example of godly reference as heavenly father, Matthew 3:14 reads, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”
Other keywords commonly used to describe cool were clean reputation, successful, fun, cheerful, own style, changes a lot, luxurious, clearly stands for X (X=specific claim or positioning), contemporary, and honest.


New York News reporter Bernie Augustine wrote a column titled *Can Michael Jordan Help Stop the Violence Caused by Fighting Over His Shoes?* in which he wrote “Jordan undoubtedly wields incredible power within Nike, and if he said he was tired of seeing his namesake on the nightly news over video of brawls at malls across the country, the sneaker giant would certainly accommodate him.” In addition Dazie Williams, founder of Life Over Fashion and mother of the late Joshua Woods, whom was murdered in 2012 for his Jordan sneakers on the day of release, has directed messages toward Jordan and Nike on several occasions. On the lifeoverfashion.org website, she writes, “These release dates are Death Dates. You’re feeding the individuals that prey on innocent lives, like my son and many others. When these shoes have a release date on them, where people need wrist bands, tickets, and have to stand in long lines for hours just waiting to make a purchase of these shoes, you are giving some individuals applicable time to plan and plot on how to get their hands on these shoes, and that includes murdering someone. There has to be a more Responsible, Affordable, and Productive way of selling and releasing the Air Jordan’s Shoes and this is a Major Problem in our nation that has to be solved. So Michael Jordan, and Nike, I’m asking you, is it time for you to RE-EVALUATE things?”
In the biblical story of Noah, God came to Noah and instructed him to build an ark in preparation for a great flood that would wipe out all of mankind. In the story of Moses, God came to Noah in the form of a burning bush and commanded that he return to Egypt to free the Hebrews from the bondage of slavery.

Biblical reference to the tithe can be found in Genesis 28:22, “And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”