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ASCENSION

by

ALYSSA HOOD

Under the Direction of Serena Perrone, M.F.A

ABSTRACT

ASCENSION examines my experience growing up as a female member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and how the Church's visual culture influenced my perception of reality and the ineffable. These paintings and drawings explore the process of deprogramming my visuality. I appropriate sanctioned Mormon imagery and rearrange its narrative by remixing it with images lifted from the mainstream culture I was previously forbidden to engage with and observe. Through this process I expose the Church's contradictions, problems, and flaws and create new meaning for myself and the viewer. People viewing my work might not see the allusions to LDS teachings, but I enjoy giving viewers the freedom to come up with their own interpretations.

INDEX WORDS: Visuality, Painting, Drawing, Indoctrination, Control, Deprogramming, Spirituality, Collage, Pop culture, Low culture, Mormonism, Archetypes

ASCENSION

by

ALYSSA HOOD

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

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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Alyssa Hood
2023

ASCENSION

by

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May 2023

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Brandon, my son Henry, and my cat Sabine.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) seven years ago, after it adopted a policy that stated children of same-sex couples could not be baptized until the age of 18. I saw this policy as both hate-filled and controlling. I didn't want to be affiliated with the Church and its hypocrisy any longer. I sought the help of an attorney to officially remove my records from the Church, but even though I went through the formal process of quitting Mormonism, I wasn't mentally or emotionally prepared for how my departure was going to affect me. I suddenly found myself staring into the unknown without a Mormon safety net.

My decision to leave the Church was a long time in the making. Even as a kid, I had never felt like a true believer. Growing up, the first Sunday of every month meant fasting and attending a testimony meeting. During these meetings, believers of all ages would stand at the pulpit and speak about how the power of God told them that LDS was the one, true church on Earth. People described all sorts of experiences for how God conveyed the truth to them: some people endured burning from within, saw apparitions, had near-death experiences, or experienced an epiphany. I, however, never received an "A-ha!" moment. I felt overlooked by the Lord; spiritually empty and excluded from all the believers in the room who had been chosen to receive His wisdom. I wondered what was wrong with me, what "special ingredient" I was missing that would have unlocked the door to truth and spiritual enthusiasm.

I never fit in visually, either. By this statement I mean: the images that fascinated me as a child were not the ones I was meant to consume, and in the images I was meant to consume, I typically focused on the "wrong" things. For example: children's Sunday school lessons relied heavily on picture book versions of the Book of Mormon that depicted scripture in ways that children could understand. The stories focused on male hero protagonists, but I was more

interested in the female figures, whose hairstyles and dresses were strangely familiar, likely due to the fact that the illustrations were made using real women of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s as models.

By contrast, one day while innocently flipping through the family encyclopedias, I stumbled upon Hieronymous Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The depravity! The nudity! The fantastically bizarre landscape of plants and creatures!—it enthralled me and made my head spin. Over dinner that night, I excitedly showed the picture to my relatives. They were horrified, and their horrified reaction confused me. I didn't realize the works of Hieronymous Bosch were off-limits until my parents explained why I shouldn't be looking at pictures like these. I understood then that Christ's half-naked body was acceptable to look at, but a woman's naked body was shameful and unacceptable to see.

Education became my way of navigating the world after leaving the Church. Returning to school afforded me with the opportunity to learn about the world outside of the Book of Mormon and to delve into fields of study I had always been told to avoid. Moving across the country and entering the MFA program at Georgia State let me live in a world distinct from the one I had known. I finally had the space and distance I needed to look critically at the religious images and messages I had been inundated with since childhood. The methods and tools I learned during my graduate studies have given me the confidence to challenge Mormon visual culture.

The paintings and drawings in *ASCENSION* demonstrate my process of deprogramming my visuality to remove the traces of Mormon visuality. Using a mixed-media collage approach that appropriates, subverts, and remixes LDS images with "forbidden" imagery, I push myself to reinterpret narratives that I find difficult to purge from my memory. Although the final body of work represents a personal journey of transcendence, the imagery and style of my work invites

viewers to form their own interpretations. Refusing to dictate the viewer's experience is another act of artistic deprogramming. Unlike the Church's oppressive visuality that can only be understood one way, I welcome all.

2 VISUALITY OF THE MORMON CHURCH

“For nineteenth-century Mormons, sight was privileged as the sense affording the most direct access to truth.”

--Nathan Rees, *Mormon Visual Culture and the American West*

Mormons believe that with righteous diligence, one's perception of the holy spirit would indicate the truthfulness of the believer's testimony. I was taught that if I maintained the commandments, I too would be able to see and feel the truth just like the strong members of my family and community. Church artwork illustrated the visions of what we idealistically hoped to see and feel; these illustrations establish a carefully constructed system of aesthetics, or what I will call Mormon “visuality” (Reese 12).

Visuality is a term that has different definitions and was first used by Thomas Carlyle in 1840. Carlyle defined visuality as “The state or quality of being visual or visible to the mind; mental visibility,” and “a mental picture or vision” (Sand 89). The images that repeatedly bombarded my developing mind became internalized and constructed a value system of what was considered sacred and beautiful, and what wasn't. In this way, religious imagery influenced the cultural identity of my environment. It provided the narrative from which I would build a mental picture of what a spiritual experience was and what righteousness looked like. Duke Morgan, a professor of religious studies at Duke University wrote that:

The significance and power of popular religious imagery resides precisely in its contribution to the social construction of reality, whether in the everyday domain of visual and epistemological recipes that guide people through the day or the liminal passages of crises and transformation that dramatically shape their lives. Worlds are composed of both the ordinary and extraordinary, and images serve to configure each aspect of experience. (Morgan 17)

Mormonism is based on the teachings of self-proclaimed prophet Joseph Smith Jr., who claimed that he met God and Jesus in the wilderness of Palmyra, New York. God allegedly told Smith that all other religions were false and charged Smith to restore the true gospel to the earth. Through Smith's revision, racism became deeply embedded within LDS doctrine, and therefore within Mormon visuality too: Native Americans, for example, were seen as being cursed by God to have dark skin and dark hair (Smith 2Nephi 5: 21-23). Racist beliefs are cemented toward the end of Smith's *Book of Mormon*, when the battle between good versus evil reaches its climax and the evil Lamanites (people of color) kill off the righteous (white, blond) Nephites. In the modern era, racist LDS beliefs are evident in numerous hateful activities. The church actively participated in the Indian Placement Program, which sought to assimilate Native American Children into white Mormon American culture; it also didn't allow Black men to become priests until 1978. These facts support the Mormon ideal of white supremacy over non-white races and ethnic groups and marginalized these groups as "others" who must subjugate themselves to the LDS church in order to achieve salvation.



Figure 2.1 Jesus Teaching in the Western Hemisphere, John Scott (1969)

The image *Jesus Teaching in the Western Hemisphere* by Mormon artist John Scott is a good illustration of the racism inherent in LDS doctrine and how these beliefs influence Mormon visuality. In this painting, we see Jesus preaching to “the lost sheep of Israel”¹ (Smith, 3Nephi:16). Note that every person, including Jesus, is white, subtly conveying the idea of white purity and LDS morality as inherently tied to whiteness. The background, however, depicts Mesoamerican pyramids and plants typically seen in tropical Central American climates. The models are also, somewhat confusingly, dressed in speculative historical costumes.

As we can see in *Western Hemisphere*, a central piece of Mormon visuality deals with race: who is represented in church imagery and how they are depicted. This scrutiny of skin and hair as visible signs of race and ethnicity extends to LDS church members too. My mother is primarily Latin-American. The dark hair and other physical characteristics I inherited from her made me noticeably different from the rest of white Mormon kids. People told me I was a

¹ Mormons believe that Jesus Christ ascended to America after his crucifixion to lead the righteous Nephites and sinful Lamanite people.

descendent of the bad, sinful Lamanites, and this lineage was the reason for my dark hair. These judgments on my physical appearance instilled feelings of unworthiness from an early age. My quasi-acceptance within the church community was largely based on the public knowledge that my father was white and active in the church.

As seen in the situation described above, family genealogy is very important and closely monitored within LDS communities. My family's history contains a religious and cultural divide right down its middle. My mother's side of the family is Latin-American and Catholic, though my mom converted to Mormonism prior to marrying my father. My father's side of the family is typically Mormon: blond haired, blue eyed, corn-fed, and wholesome looking. Having half of my family being non-Mormon created an interesting parallel in my childhood; it opened a window through which I could observe a different lifestyle and belief system that was much more visually opulent than what I experienced attending LDS churches. The church building where my family worshipped throughout my childhood and teen years was completely bland. From the beige walls to the white lace curtains and plain frosted glass windows, the house of the Lord was boring.

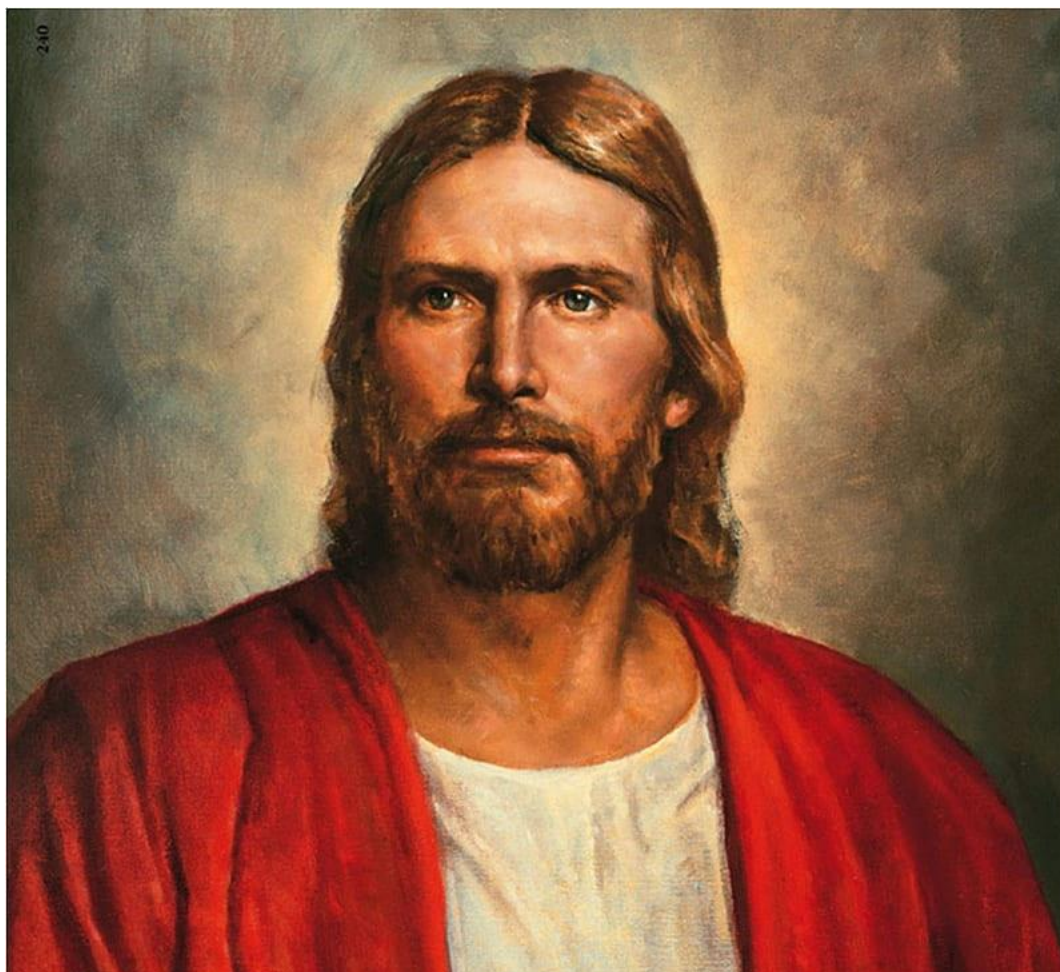


Figure 2.2 Jesus the Christ, Del Parson (1983)

On the few occasions when I did attend Catholic church services, I remember staring at my surroundings. I was half terrified and half mesmerized by the crucified Christ hanging above the altar. Weeping tears of blood, gashes in his skin, this image of Christ's suffering was gruesome; nothing like the images of Christ I was shown in Mormon Sunday school. The image *Jesus the Christ* by Del Parson was the depiction of Jesus Christ I understood: a white guy with golden-brown hair who would one day return to the earth wearing red robes (Smith D&C, 33:48). Someday, we believed, this version of Christ would return to earth after a sequence of strange and horrific events that would culminate with the world being cleansed by fire. The

firestorm could happen today, tomorrow, or years from now; the lack of a specific date created anxiety in my young LDS mind. We were constantly on high alert, looking for signs that doomsday approached. The two vastly different visions of Christianity I experienced growing up make for an interesting paradox: although the Catholic church's images showed more suffering and were more terror-inducing than those of the LDS church, Mormonism's doomsday predictions instilled much more spiritual, psychological fear, even though LDS images are much more sanitized and bland.

Not only do Mormons believe in racial supremacy, but they also believe the Church to be the one and only true church on the earth. This superior attitude gives them the authority, the right, and the duty to save the rest of mankind: Brigham Young University's motto, posted at the campus entrance conveys this idea: "The World is Our Campus." Religious supremacy and the need to proselytize influences LDS artistic imagery and places particular emphasis on images to spread the church's message: "This perspective had a profound impact on Mormonism's understanding of the power of images: just as sensate visionary experience had the potential to reveal truth, so did visions that were distilled and fixed into images" (Rees 13). Sunday school books filled with carefully vetted Mormon illustrations are one tactic for ingraining the correct vision into young children's developing minds: even before I was able to read, I was shown images of Christ, illustrated stories from the *Book of Mormon*, and depictions of epic visions that established the Mormon belief system and its values.



Figure 2.3 Lehi's Dream, Steven Lloyd Neal (1987)

Paintings of prophetic visions like *Lehi's Dream* were always fantastical and represented the glory of God as a wondrous light that outshone the rest of the composition. This divine glow bathes righteous white people who are either shown making the correct decisions that will lead to their eternal salvation or who are already heaven-bound. Mormon visuality makes you fear eternal damnation and separation from your family if you step out of line. The threat of living in eternal darkness is the fate of all who fail to fulfill the sacred covenants agreed upon with God.

Similar visually based moral lessons covered the church-distributed posters and scripture cards I received throughout my teen years. As a strategy for tamping down the teenage angst and rebelliousness that could lead to questioning the church's teachings, these images reminded us to do our sacred duty and obey the rules of the church; in this way, we could avoid the shame associated with fighting against Church doctrine. Because they were designed for a teen audience, the cards and posters adopted a slightly different aesthetic: they incorporated contemporary scenes and modern-looking people to demonstrate the importance of church

principles. The MormonAd below is a prime example of a slightly more youthful take on Mormon visuality.

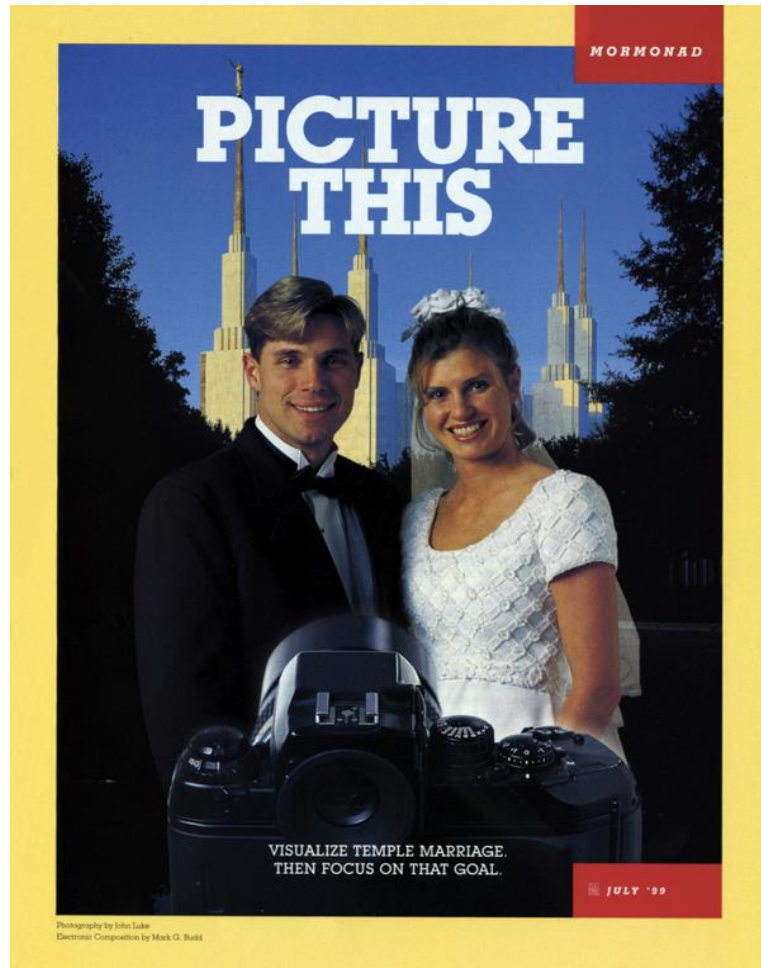


Figure 2.4 Photo by John Luke (1999)

All these images formed the bedrock of my visual mind. They were created to give a false sense of safety and assurance that was repeated until the illusion was naturally believable. It demanded to be an indisputable reality of which I was to prioritize it above everything else, including my own life. This is how visual communication functioned within my experience in

the church, and I will not be upholding this. This work will represent the transmutation from Mormon Visuality.

3 SPICE UP YOUR MORMON LIFE

Being raised Mormon, I was supposed to feel blessed that I was born into the truth. All I had to do in order to escape doomsday was to follow the formula laid out for me: get baptized, get married in the temple, and have as many children as humanly possible. My time, focus, and energy should all be funneled into the church, and I should sacrifice myself happily, with a heart full of God's glory. I had no idea what this sacrifice was supposed to feel like, which worried me because I felt out of place within the Church's idealized vision.

During my time in the Church, single women past the age of 21 were considered too old, too unattractive, or too domineering to be marriage material. Single women on their own had no function within the Church other than being a source of labor for service projects. Mothers and married women, on the other hand, were celebrated. The image of the divine female was embodied in the images of Mary the mother of Christ, Mary Magdalene, Esther, and faithful white pioneer women who trekked across the plains. *Miracle of the Gulls* (1935) by Minerva Teichart conveys the Mormon story of the pioneers praying for their crops to be saved and God sending in seagulls to devour the locusts. The figure of the pioneer woman is emphasized by her central position and her illuminated face looking up to the sky sets her apart from the rest of the figures. She appears empowered by her faith in God and surrenders herself on her knees with open hands. These were the archetypal Mormon women we were supposed to model ourselves after and embody in our everyday lives. A good Mormon woman placed all others before her own needs and wants; she maintained her physical appearance and her family's image. We

breathed in these perfectionistic pressures every time we learned about the selfless women who came before us. The overall message was: subjugate yourself and love every moment of it.



Figure 3.1 Miracle of the Gulls, Minerva Teichart (1935)

Growing up in a conservative bubble in the mountains meant that I didn't have much access to underground music and youth subcultures. Mainstream media was the only thing that my eyes and ears could reach through television, radio, and films. My older siblings and I would occasionally watch prohibited networks like MTV or VH1, networks whose music video countdowns kept us informed about the trending music and styles at the time. It was in the summer of 1997 that I first heard "Say You'll Be There" by the Spice Girls on the radio. I was

immediately intrigued the all-girl pop group from England, and the music video for the song further cemented my fandom, even as it shook my idea of what it meant to be a woman. The video for “Say You’ll Be There” depicts the Spice Girls as a grindhouse group of combat fighters who conquer men with their weapons and powerful sex appeal.



Figure 3.2 Say You'll Be There, Virgin Records (1996)

The Spice Girls were produced and heavily marketed by Virgin Records. There wasn't a lead singer, and each member had her own attitude and style that was based on some aspect of her personality. Each woman's band nickname (Sporty, Scary, Baby, Posh, Ginger) hinted at her unique identity within the group. The camaraderie of five women with different personalities joining together and supporting each other through “Girl Power” attracted me and other pre-teens who trying to figure out our identities. It was from the Spice Girls that I first encountered feminism; the Riot Grrrl movement didn't quite penetrate my corner of Utah, so it wasn't

something I heard about until years later (thanks, internet!). Sporty, Scary, Baby, Posh, and Ginger were my pop-culture-laced introduction to female empowerment. It may seem bizarre, but the Spice Girls validated my feelings of dissatisfaction over male dominance in the Mormon church.

The Spice Girls provided me with an alternate vision of womanhood. Mormon girls wore modest clothing that covered shoulders, cleavage, midriff, and anything above the knee. We could have one piercing in each ear, no tattoos, and no extreme hair colors (*For the Strength of Youth* 6). We were to always conduct ourselves as women of God, and treated our priesthood leaders with respect and love. The Spice Girls were spontaneous and loud. They wore clothes that showed off their womanly figures and spoke their minds. Watching them made me wish I had the freedom to dress and act like they did.

Across the street from the main tabernacle building in my hometown was a lingerie store called The Persian Peacock. The shop was a notorious establishment in my youth, as the shop's owners kept their neon "LINGERIE" sign on all day, every day, much to the chagrin of pious churchgoers. When we walked out of the tabernacle we were greeted by entertaining window scenes composed of mild sex toys and metaphysical objects. My parents told me not to look at this place and keep walking, but I couldn't resist sneaking a peek. I found the pulsating lights and sexual enticement captivating, and I frequently wished I could go inside to find out what else was in there. My gaze locked onto the details of everything I wasn't supposed to see.



Figure 3.3 Persian Peacock, Julie Sulunga Hard News Cafe (2001)

Before graduate school I had been creating paintings that captured a shop window and the world it encapsulated behind glass. I exaggerated the intense lighting and colors to merge the window's reflections with the street outside, creating confusing juxtapositions between the two worlds, interior and exterior. Using reflections on glass to depict a character's inner life was used by Krzysztof Kieslowski in his film *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991). The film's plot follows two identical women living separate lives in Europe. One of women dies early in the film, leaving the other inexplicably affected by the loss of her doppelganger. Through a process of self-discovery, she gradually learns the mysterious reason for her anguish. Kieslowski's film depicts deeply metaphysical themes using everyday phenomena such as light and reflection to

create a spiritual experience. These humble approaches this filmmaker used to represent spirituality and self-discovery appealed to me and echoed similar techniques I had been experimenting with in my paintings.



Figure 3.4 The Double Life of Veronique, Krzysztof Kieslowski (1991)

The shop window series I had been painting evolved into a series depicting sex-shop windows. It was amusing to allow myself to openly concentrate on subject matter that was risqué, completely forbidden by my old Mormon life, and constructed for a male gaze. The mannequins were positioned in various ways: sometimes in dominant and powerful, other times demure and “ladylike.” The pieces of lingerie they modeled were occasionally made of shiny vinyl that reminded me of a Baby Spice costume I wore in the fifth grade. The outfit was completely modest, but the material it was made from unsettled the adults around me. Something

about the vinyl fabrication instantly made the costume “sexy” and therefore (in the eyes of my family) inappropriate for any woman, never mind an 11-year-old girl, to wear. People with conservative ideologies call women who dress in tight, skimpy outfits “bimbos” or “whores” but part of me rebels at these shallow judgments. Why can’t a woman also enjoy looking at these women? Why shouldn’t women look at the forbidden, unashamedly, and out in the open? Why not dress however we choose, regardless of whether we’re in public or in private spaces?

I depict mannequins wearing lingerie to think through these questions, a technique artist Lisa Yuskavage employs for similar purposes in her own work. Yuskavage is a figurative painter who portrays women with exaggerated bodily proportions. These images arise from her imagination and from pornography. Yuskavage resists oppression from misogynists and feminists alike; their criticism of her has only fueled her to keep producing these images. She has said about her use of these female figures, “I don’t work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together”(Gould, 10). I feel similar about painting these mannequins in my work: I am like them and I want to elevate them using pictorial motifs I have seen in religious art.



Figure 3.5 Eyes Wide Open, acrylic on canvas (2019)

Yuskavage's series *Bad Babies* (1993) features figurative paintings that were created from the artist's imagination (*The Brood 71*). The male gaze is exploited as she identifies as a female artist using art references from low-culture magazines, and art historical painting techniques that elevate the "ur-blonde archetype" into a vibrant landscape (*The Brood 71*). Yuskavage controls what scintillates the male gaze and turns it against itself as the image

radiates in hypersexualized technicolor indulgence. In Yuskavage's *Edge of Towners* (2011) there is a figure of a woman relaxed on the ground staring at an apple in her hand. The figure's large breasts are just below the horizon line of the landscape immediately catching eye-level. The gaze is being controlled using the maximum level of attention grabbing seduction.

The use of colors and radiant light in Yuskavage's paintings design another world that make you feel like you are transcending into another world. Yuskavage said that her use of intense colors is a reference to Renaissance paintings: "Rainbow-like hues are understood to indicate the presence of the supernatural in a painting – as, for example, in the angels' wings in an Annunciation painting" (*The Brood* 73). Yuskavage is also comfortable creating images that risk being misunderstood by viewers, "I prefer to work from the point of view that what I am doing is wrong rather than right. And I also like to keep in mind that it isn't truly dangerous, it's just fiction. But I also know how powerful good fiction can be" (Gould 11).



Figure 3.6 Edge of Towners, Lisa Yuskavage (2011)

I was inspired to create my own fictional scenes using mannequins to depict what I imagine a spiritual experience would feel like. An apparition that you have been given from God that also satirizes the Mormon notion of the Holy Ghost. Seeing other women living free from the strict Mormon definitions of ideal womanhood empowered me in my decision to leave the Church. These new role models owned their bodies and behaved fearlessly. I wanted to live my life and create imagery on my own terms too.

The surrealist artist Leonora Carrington was an artist that grew up a misfit in a Catholic family, and had interest in mysticism and female empowerment. “Carrington has the ability to construct alternate worlds, both fantastical and believable. Lifting the veil of ordinary sight, she permits us a momentary glimpse into another dimension where traditional special relationships collapsed and where strange entities are often frozen in gestures evocative of both ritual and dialogue” (Humphries 7). In her painting *The Giantess (Guardian of the Egg)*, Carrington was inspired to create an image of an enormous female figure standing in a landscape with smaller human figures at her feet. The giantess stands out with greater contrast with their gold hair and illuminating white cloak against the darker background. Three female figures are huddled together between the feet of the giantess, implying the symbol of the triple goddess. In this composition Carrington positions women as the central focus of female power and also as protector of life and nature.



Figure 3.7 The Giantess (The Guardian of the Egg), Leonora Carrington (1947)

Growing up around so many images that were predominantly of men receiving glorious revelation from God or were portrayed in a way that described them possessing Godly power. I wanted to see images of women that were just as powerful and connected spiritually to heaven

and earth. In my painting *Alpha and Omega* I placed a mannequin figure to be the one that embodied a presence in heaven and touching the ground on earth. A surrealist landscape allows me to add my personal symbols combined with reappropriated imagery and abstraction together to convey a place that is free expression for myself.



Figure 3.8 Alpha and Omega, acrylic and oil on canvas (2022)

4 DEPROGRAMMING

“Cultic groups can create...total obedience through systems of control that are focused on each member’s submission to the perfectionistic belief system and utter worship of the charismatic leader” (Lalich, 2018).

I went through the process of removing myself from the Mormon church seven years ago after the church created a policy refusing to baptize children of same-sex couples until the child turns eighteen. The policy has been struck down, but this event started a mass exodus of members who resigned and finally removed us from the Church. The experience of leaving this institution fractured the traditional life formula I had been taught and left me with a mind full of questions and a terror of the unknown.

Over time, as I studied early LDS history, I became angry at the way the church appropriated rituals and beliefs from religions and tailored doctrine to suit the whims of various leaders. I found it interesting that, according to the first prophet certain policies were fine, but the next prophet in power would change policies after supposedly receiving revelations from God. Why would God command changes – sometimes contradictory changes – to something he previously commanded? Wasn’t God omniscient? Obeying these ever-shifting rules and regulations was aggravating and amounted to religious gas-lighting. I wanted to make my paintings similarly. To demonstrate the ridiculous amalgamation of paradoxical “revelations,” I jumble contradictory images together to create tableaux that juxtapose the sacred and profane, the holy with the debased. The strength of belief systems like LDS lies in individuals being kept under constant surveillance by other members of the group. They can fully operate their own programming to keep people in line. This total submission to the Church begins in childhood

with a regimen of daily activities and weekly meetings that use images, songs, scriptures, and prayers, to indoctrinate young minds. Eventually, by age fourteen, my seminary teachers challenged us to diligently read our scriptures and pray to receive a message of the truth of the gospel from the Holy Ghost just as Joseph Smith did. This message never arrived, and so began my disillusionment with the church, accompanied by shame, confusion, and perceptions of reality that seemed real one minute then dubious the next.

Female sexuality does not exist in the Mormon worldview, except for the mandate that married women need to make babies. I recall Church leaders telling all the young women that it was our duty to help the boys behave, as if we weren't entitled to have sexual desires ourselves. Sexual sins were serious infractions, as they were seen to "defile the power God has given us to create life" (Strength of Youth, 26); having premarital sex was considered nearly as bad as committing murder. I am interested in exploring these attitudes about female sexuality within LDS symbolism and see what these concepts juxtaposed together would look like for me.

The summer before my senior year of high school I attended a weeklong Mormon training camp. Each day's schedule included gospel lessons and group activities designed to prepare us for life after high school, which for girls meant marriage and motherhood. Towards the end of the week, a girl who was still a teenager spoke to us about her personal experience with repentance. Her story turned out to be a public confession: she had premarital sex with her boyfriend and then was forced to confess her sins to the bishop. I remember witnessing her shame and fear as she stood in front of us and tearfully wailed, "I let a guy treat me like a piece of meat." She closed with her testimony of Christ's atonement; she knew she would be forgiven, but, she continued, she could never get back her virginity.

I use a mannequin in my work to model lingerie and pose in the positions I choose. I control the mannequin completely, just as the Mormon church controls its members. Dressing the mannequin in lingerie alludes to my childhood experience of seeing flashy, loud, sexually liberated women on television. These women were confident in their bodies and their sexuality; their lack of shame blew my mind. I wanted to be like them, brave and unafraid of other people's judgement. Like other aspects of Mormon life, sexuality was tightly controlled. Female members were taught that chastity was a prized virtue, and that virginity was the sole possession of value a girl had. Sunday school lessons compared girls' bodies to smashed cake and chewed gum as if to say that once a man has had his way with you, you're worthless garbage nobody wants.

The first painting I made in graduate school, *Telestial Landing* (2020), depicts the view through a glass windowpane with the church building from my childhood in the background and the figure of a woman dressed in lingerie descending from the sky. It was my first attempt at taking control of the images from my youth and reorganizing them to subvert Mormon tropes: instead of the key figure being Jesus Christ, we see sensuous woman. The mountain and desert landscape refers to the iconic Utah scenery that reinforced isolation from the outside world.



Figure 4.1 Telestial Landing, acrylic on canvas (2020)

In my painting *Seraphim* I started with a 1950s image of Mormon women working together on a quilt. The idea for the composition began with a focus on the domestic labor Mormon women are expected to perform. These restrictive gender roles were what made me grow dissatisfied and angry with my Mormon upbringing. I spent countless hours witnessing my mother and other female church members working their lives away for ultimately meaningless reasons. I interrupt this scene of domestic labor by cutting into it with the reflective presence of

large lingerie shop window. The mannequins in the window are illuminated, bathed in a holy glowing light, though they are sinfully dressed, clothed in sexy lingerie. I also incorporated images of seagulls into the composition. Seagulls are an important motif in early Mormon folklore; according to the stories, God sent seagulls all the way inland to Utah to save the pioneers' crops fields from locusts. Adding seagulls to the scene augments the bizarre narrative as heavenly avian messengers peer into the lingerie shop window. This painting represents the beginning of a new technique I hadn't used before; I wanted to continue this layering of narrative and combining of sacred and profane.



Figure 4.2 Seraphim, oil on canvas (2021)

Kiki Smith grew up in the Catholic church and has subverted Catholic iconography in her work as a way of breaking down concepts and reorganizing them to challenge their understanding. Smith's *The Virgin Mary* is a sculpture that at first appears to be an anatomical figure that shows musculature and fat deposits in the body. Studying the work closely reveals that the artist created a surface texture that emulates sausage casing stretching over the top of the body, as if preparing the "meat" for consumption. The title is the only indication of who this figure is, creating a shift in how we perceive the woman whose name is holy but appears to be vulnerable.



Figure 4.3 Virgin Mary, Kiki Smith (1992)

There are many policies and doctrines that have evolved over time within the LDS faith. Mormons are commanded to simply accept and obey the changes without ever questioning them.

European and local folklore, DNA analysis, shifting first vision accounts, and Joseph Smith's polygamy record are just a few things the church has chosen to omit and ignore. Changing the truth is a common practice, and members are expected not to challenge it only accept it. Brigham Young was the second Prophet to take control of the church; he was responsible for moving the Church westward to Utah. Young preached his own doctrine regarding creation, that Adam was God in the beginning. His version of the story became known as the Adam/God theory, an idea that has since been abandoned and disregarded, as were many other of Young's teachings and policies. It fascinates me that a man who claimed to have spoken with God put forth a theory that was accepted for a while but was later rejected by the same Church he helped to establish. I created my painting *Adam/God Theory* to explore the fragility of religious belief. By collaging imagery taken from LDS publications together with visible reconstruction I highlight the church's hypocrisy and willingness to play fast and loose with members' faith.



Figure 4.4 Adam/God Theory, Acrylic and oil on canvas (2022)

I am influenced by German artist Neo Rauch and the elaborate narratives embedded in his work that combine themes of his childhood in East Germany and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Rauch and many other artists at the Leipzig School experienced drastic changes to their daily lives as jobs were lost, familiar products vanished, and they had to learn how to be citizens of the new unified Germany (Eisman 249). Loss of the familiar from your childhood is

disorienting and is expressed in Rauch's work through disproportionately scaled figures and abstract shapes that intrude into otherwise representational compositions. Art historian April Eisman notes about Rauch's work, "The collage-like quality of the figures in the painting can be seen to reflect the sense of being ripped out of reality" (Eisman 249). An old way of life vanishing and the mixed emotions that arise are destabilizing; integrating into the new reality is challenging with nothing familiar to grasp for stability.



Figure 4.5 Zustrom, Neo Rauch (2016)

After removing myself from the Church I felt like I had a gaping hole in my life. At first, I tried to fill that hole by replacing Mormonism with other religions. I attended a few Catholic and Episcopalian church services, but I felt strong resistance towards any organized religion. This adding and removing of religious and spiritual constructs made me curious about how people held onto their beliefs with such reverence and power. I had an urge to view the different fragments of these religious images alongside the opposite subverted image. Collaging became a method I relied on to take pieces of church imagery, cut them up, and position them alongside images that conveyed my idea of empowerment.

Drawing re-enacted moments of abuse and betrayal in *Untitled* allows me to express emotions while reflecting on traumatic memories and struggles I've had with recovering my autonomy. My emotions work through my hands as I fight against the *pentimento*-like evidence of my decisions. Erasing previous decisions with a new perspective and allowing all marks to exist together. Interruptions to the initial image occur and I leave the evidence of marks to be part of the process. Perfection is not attainable. I struggle against patriarchal authority, but also against myself. I am working simultaneously with referenced information and inventive mark making from my hands.



Figure 4.6 Law of Obedience, Charcoal on paper (2022)

The act of appropriating LDS images and changing the intent of their original meaning while addressing my own problematic relationship to them has strengthened my autonomy to be my own person. Years of indoctrination taught me to fear questioning authority. I am now using

my visuality to look critically at the world around me and to create imagery that breaks down the sacred into malleable components and also face the re-creation of my trauma. The act of making these images and viewing them allows me to see the satire of these controlling ideas and reframe the painful experiences from the life within the church. In viewing these images, I am able to expel the emotions and process the decisions and experiences that have made me who I am today.

5 EXHIBITION

Upon entering the gallery space, viewers first encounter the center wall, where I installed the show title, thesis abstract, and the drawing *Godly Sorrow*. This piece contains multiple abstract figures and serves as both the starting point and ending point for the show's arc. It represents myself finally delivering a defensive hand palm strike to my opponent's face. This is a known self-defense move to break free from your attacker. I wanted the clarity of this moment to be highly rendered compared to the expressive marks in the rest of the drawing series.

Six drawings hung in the left side of the gallery, while the right side contained four paintings. Placing *Godly Sorrow* between the paintings and drawings created a feeling of a fracture or disjuncture in the overall arrangement, meant to signify my cognitive fracture from the LDS Church and its teachings. Including both paintings and drawings in this exhibition was another symbolic choice, as doing so illustrated my process and journey.



Figure 5.1 Ascension thesis exhibition by Alyssa Hood. Installation image (2023)

I arranged the pieces within each grouping in a progressive narrative, starting with the paintings and continuing through the drawings. I believed that the paintings' vivid colors would draw viewers' attention first, before the drawings' black and white imagery. *Telesstial Landing* marks the beginning of my journey through breaking and reappropriating LDS imagery. This painting was one of the first pieces I created in graduate school, and it has been a constant reminder of everything I wanted to accomplish in this body of work.



Figure 5.2 Telestial Landing, Acrylic on canvas, (2020)

Alpha and Omega represents another early point in time. In this painting, I explore my childhood fear of what it would be like to live through and witness the end of days, an event that my elders described as an ever-present and inevitable danger. With *Alpha and Omega* I reframed this story by constructing a mash-up of an LDS image of Christ's return to earth combined with an image of a female mannequin. The Christ-mannequin figure is a paradox: he-she exists somewhere between the heavenly realm and the earth. The top and bottom of this canvas reinforce

the here-and-nowhere idea: the highway and car are everyday realities, while the trumpeting angels represent ethereal, unseen forces.

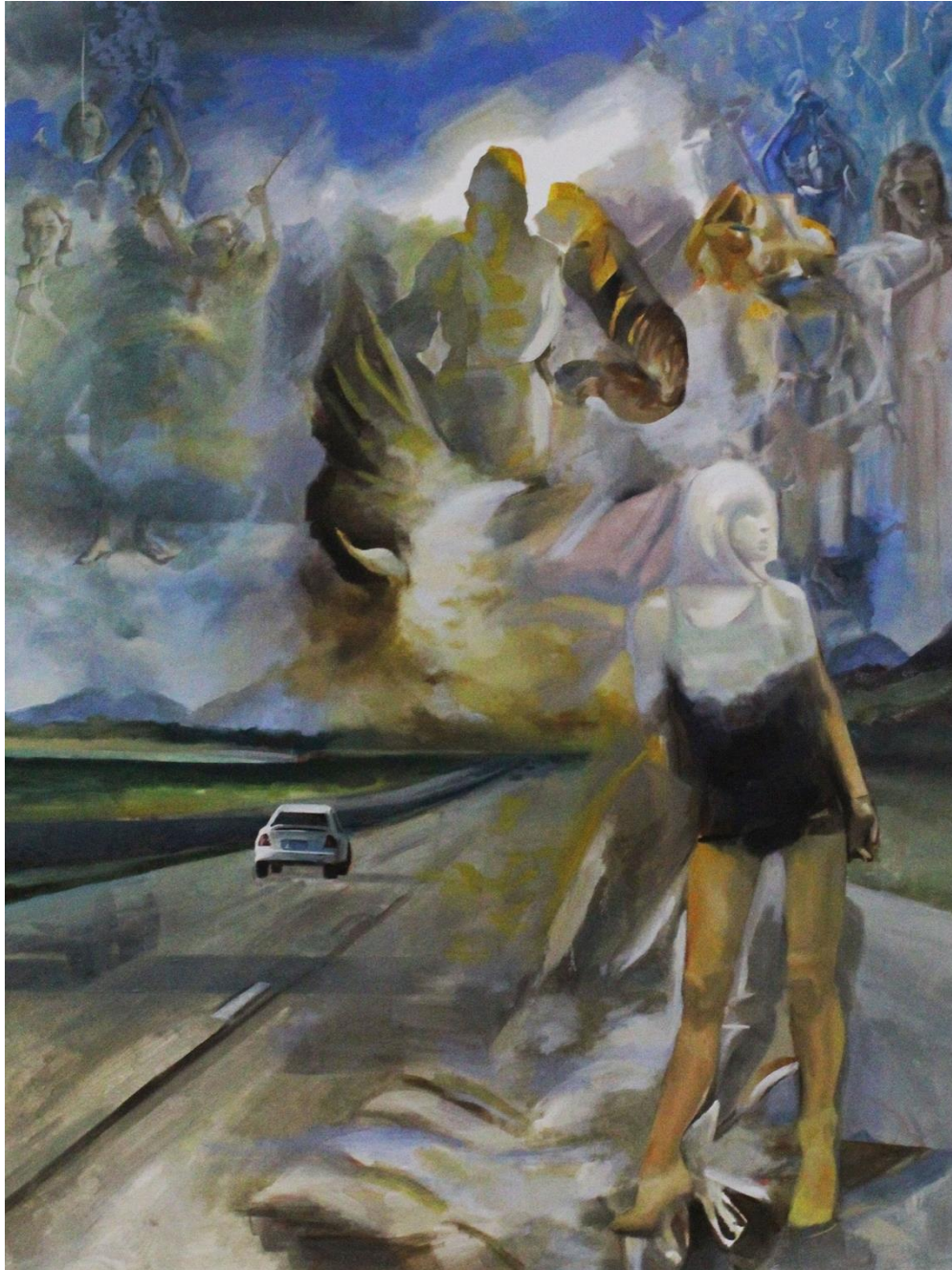


Figure 5.3 Alpha and Omega, Acrylic and oil on canvas, (2022)

With *Adam/God Theory* I was still thinking back to the time before I left the Church, but was beginning to experience frustration over church leaders' ability to change doctrine, seemingly at whim. In Brigham Young's foundational writings, Young calls Adam God, but LDS leaders later on stripped Adam of his godly status. This rather massive change in the church's teachings was handed down to members with little rationale; we were simply supposed to believe the new teaching and not overthink or examine it—and certainly not criticize or question it. In this painting, I become the one controlling the story by replacing standard church imagery with a fractured narrative.



Figure 5.4 Adam/ God Theory, Acrylic and oil on canvas, (2022)

The final painting in the exhibition, *Covenant* represents the end of my relationship with the Mormon church. In this piece, I show the mirror-doubled figure of a woman dressed in full temple garments. She sits in a room, waiting. The mirrored image echoes back on itself infinitely, to eternity. There is no progress. She is stuck, bound forever by the strict womanly perfectionism she was taught to uphold.



Figure 5.5 Covenant, Acrylic and oil canvas, (2022)

The drawing *Godly Sorrow* is the largest work I've attempted thus far. It proved to be a demanding drawing that required full-body effort to produce expressive mark making. The paper fought me as I pushed it, hitting back with my hands and with charcoal, trying to force as much pigment into the paper as it could hold. Placing this work in the middle of the show's narrative arc parallels my break with the LDS church: both were monumental undertakings that tested my strength and resolve. For the drawing's subject matter, I have depicted myself attempting to stop a suited man's actions. Other figures in motion surround us to create a chaotic composition of violence and confusion. But in the middle of this chaos, there is a moment of female power and focused stillness.

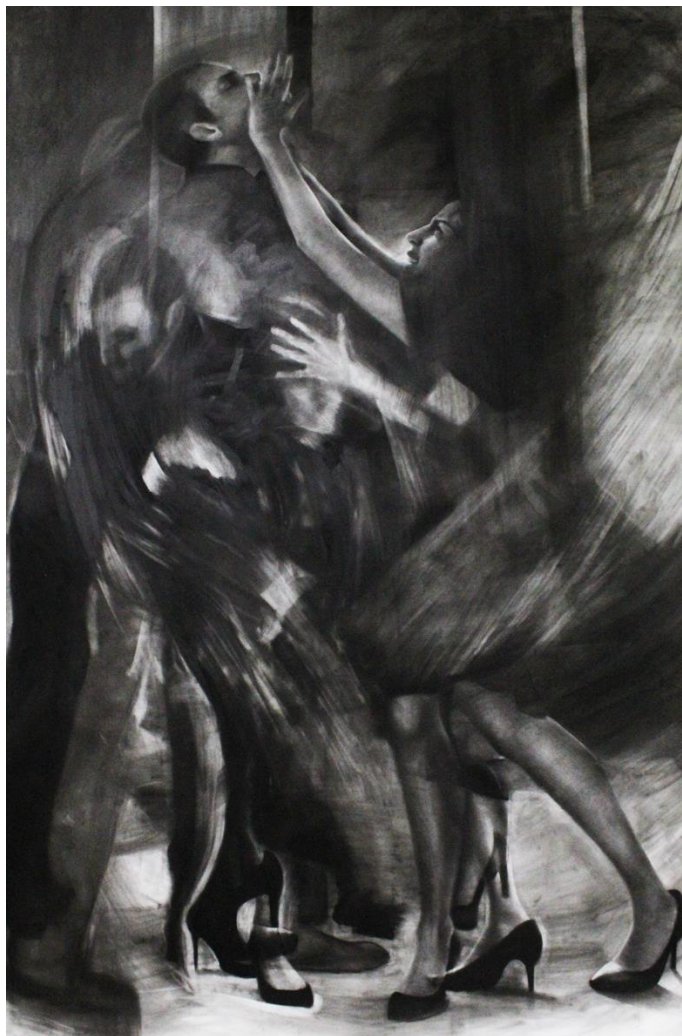


Figure 5.6 Godly Sorrow, Charcoal on paper, (2023)

I installed this drawing in the middle of the exhibition. Below it, but on that same wall, I hung two smaller drawings. These both depict intimate moments that carry intense emotions. *Do you Know Where You're Supposed to Be?* reflects on the vivid memory of a bishop grabbing my neck once when I was visiting a church ward for sacrament service. Instead of fighting back against this man's inappropriate physical contact, I sat in shock and tried to answer his questions. "Do you know where you're supposed to be?" he asked me repeatedly. I didn't have an answer. I

never felt like I truly belonged, and I knew I'd never be fully accepted. In this moment I knew I was not okay, even though I was following my elders' demands; moments of cognitive dissonance between controlled obedience and an inner desire to revolt. I wanted to fight back but couldn't.



Figure 5.7 Do You Know Where You're Supposed to Be?, Charcoal on paper, (2022)

Working through these memories helped me see ways in which I was still toeing the line instead of challenging myself, questioning but not letting my true emotions be heard. In response to this revelation, I decided to build a series of five drawings that aligned with the five temple covenants that LDS members are sworn to uphold. In the series *Law of Obedience* I took on this subject matter using experimental techniques such as energy charged mark-making, rapid removal, and decreased commitment to observational accuracy. I wasn't sure how these drawings would turn out, but as I worked, remixing reference imagery and erasing information, meaning gradually began to emerge. Eventually, I let go of my reference imagery altogether, began studying the light and shadows, and started inventing marks.



Figure 5.8 Ascension thesis exhibition by Alyssa Hood. Installation image (2023)



Figure 5.9 Law of Obedience, Charcoal on paper, (2022)

The momentum created during the making of this work carried into *Law of Consecration*, a drawing that uses heavy unblended marks I wouldn't have felt comfortable leaving in a finished work prior to making this series. *Law of Consecration* also depicts a similar tension between using reference images and discarding them; in this drawing, too, I eventually trusted my creative instincts. In *Law of Sacrifice* I depicted myself falling to the floor. A male figure grabs me from behind as I struggle to regain my balance. While creating these scenes in my studio, I acted out the struggles of fighting in heels and a dress. These pieces demonstrate the unrealistic expectations patriarchal society places on the female body: be beautiful, provide pleasure, have children, serve others, be selfless, sacrifice everything before giving anything back to yourself.



Figure 5.10 Law of Consecration, Charcoal on paper, (2022)



Figure 5.11 Law of Sacrifice, Charcoal on paper, (2023)

In the piece *This is the Only Way* I wanted to explore these same themes but on a larger scale to see how my experimental way of working would translate. The two reference images for this piece demanded greater clarity than the previous pieces in this series and the larger scale challenged the size of my hand and the medium. In order to achieve a similar expressive quality as the other pieces, I had to break away from reference images yet again and override realism with abstraction and rapid mark-making.



Figure 5.12 This is the Only Way, Charcoal on paper, (2023)

Growing up, I was taught to be pure in mind, body, and action. I constantly monitored myself so that I would not be seen as impure, unchaste, shame-filled, and worthless. In *The Law of Chastity*, I have depicted myself wearing a veil, a cultural signifier of female purity and virtue. The veil acts as a barrier, obscuring my features. Just as the veil obstructs the viewer's gaze, the shame (represented by the veil) I experienced throughout my childhood and adolescence obstructed my identity and self-expression. Shame was an encasement, a shell I was trapped inside that kept me subdued and constantly seeking repentance.

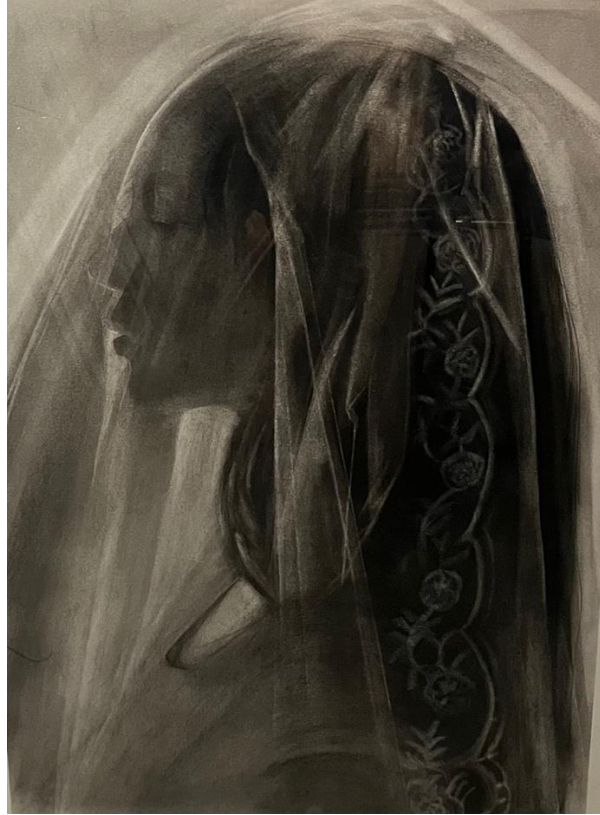


Figure 5.13 Law of Chastity, Charcoal on paper, (2023)

Law of the Gospel is a true self-portrait. I stand awkwardly in my church clothes and carry my scripture bag. The other works in this series incorporate images of my face and body, but merely as a stand-in, generic female form. In this piece, however, I took time to observe myself fully and do some self-analysis through art-making. I wanted to draw myself as the good girl. As I modeled for myself, I wanted my expression to recall the feeling of trying to fit into something I wasn't. I had the photographer repeat things I had been told growing up to find the right expression in myself I was looking for. To be the good girl I had to pretend to be perfect, or at least pretend I was happy trying to be perfect.



Figure 5.14 Law of the Gospel, Charcoal on paper, (2023)

The artist Kara Walker, in discussion with curator Dr. Katie Geha, once said: “Shame is the most transgressive, the most pervasive of personal emotions.” (Harvey) Walker has the incredible ability to bring her shame into the conversation rather than pushing it away; seeing her work expands the way I think about strength and healing. Developing these works for my thesis exhibition, I came to view my creative process as a restorative one: as I recorded my thoughts and emotions about the shame I experienced during my childhood and adolescence, I found myself able to acknowledge, observe, and let go.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Some viewers said that the drawings and paintings seemed like two separate shows, but I see them as two parts of the same whole. I needed all these pieces to tell my story because they are fragments of me. Making and showing a body of work that addresses my shame and its roots would, I knew, disappoint my family and respected mentors. Remaining committed to this path, however, challenged me to overcome my desire to appease others. I wanted to sit with my feelings of shame and learn how to move forward with them.

I think my pursuit of researching my experience of leaving a religion that informed my perception of reality will always be something that influences me. I do not think I will be addressing Mormon themes any longer, however it has opened some doors for other interests to be researched. I've enjoyed the methods of working that I've discovered along the way in drawing and painting. I plan on developing the techniques I have picked up along the way in other future work.

If any LDS family members or friends have read this thesis all the way through, I want to thank them for doing so. I understand that it might be uncomfortable and even offensive to read my thoughts about LDS teachings and to see some of the images I have made. One day I hope you can accept that there are many different life paths that bring about true happiness, not just one. People who do not accept gospel teachings are not bad people. In my experience they've been the most accepting and loving people I've ever met. Everyone deserves love and acceptance.

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