

A Portrait of Faith

The role of photography as an expression of that which is invisible

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I thank my husband Leon for his unwavering support and encouragement, my children for their joy and their understanding, for my Mum and Dads support to enable this to happen. I thank friends that edify and encourage, friends that love.

Dedicated to the Rock of Ages

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Title: A Portrait of Faith. *The role of photography as an expression of that which is invisible*

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Abstract.

Since the early 1900's, photography has been used as a medium to explore the spiritual and existential states. This dissertation traces this history and discusses contemporary artists that continue to use photography in similar exploration. It examines the nuanced and complex relationship that exists between religion and the contemporary art world, and questions the place of Christian art specifically. Additionally it suggests potential new ways of how photography could represent the relational aspect of a Christian experience through the work *Grace 2022-2024*, a three-body piece of photographic work by the author. The dissertation concludes with how photography, with its unique capacity to make visible the invisible, may facilitate a way of seeing and perceiving the others state, and perhaps in that 'seeing' could enable greater empathy.

Keywords.

Photography, Faith, Belief, Christian, Religion, Relational, Experience, Perception, Participatory Research, the Lived experience.

Contents

Introduction

Part 1 Invisible made Visible,

Part 2 Art and Religion

Part 3 The Place of Christian Art

Part 4 New Ways of Representing the Relational aspects of Christianity through Photography.
Grace

Part 5 Conclusion; Making Way for Empathy

Appendix

Life Experience Tool

Interview: Yvette Monahan

List of Figures

References & Bibliography

I remember sitting on the front lawn of our home in the country, my younger brother Simon and I. We couldn't have been much older than 7 and 10. He asked me, "What does an ear wig look like". I did not know. We moved on in conversation and rolled down the hill, taking full advantage of a rare opportunity to have dry grass at any time of year in Tipperary. A minute later I felt something in my ear, a small, thin, unfamiliar insect. We ran up to the house as fast as one could whilst carrying fragile cargo in between two small hands. I cannot remember which of my parents we asked about the insect, all that remains are the words, "That's an ear wig".

Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear

Isaiah 65:24

Introduction

Since its inception photography beholds a unique capacity to record. In 1826 Niépce sought to record his ‘pont du vue’, followed by the developments of Fox Talbot in 1834 and advancements of Daugerre in 1839. Through its evolution as a medium, photography has provided evidence, traces and as such has offered radical possibilities for depicting and interpreting the world, and conveying subjective experiences. Photography is not simply a tool for visual representation, it is a medium for thought and response to the societal demands and peculiarities of its time, (Greaney¹ 2022 p. 115)

Within our time, 1 in 5 adults and 1 in 8 children in *Northern Ireland* have a probable mental illness (Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2023). “The NI Mental Health Strategy alone is insufficient to stem the tide of poor mental health that is thwarting progress and prosperity... it cannot sit by itself and hope to improve mental health outcomes”, Mental Health Champion (2023).. *Ireland* has some of the highest rates of mental illness in Europe (3/36) with 18.5% of the population suffering from anxiety, bipolar, depression or substance misuse, (Mental Health Ireland 2016). But Ireland is not alone in this, “America is up to its eyeballs in false emotion, self-pity, hysteria, and a vast roaring deeply hurt and deeply hurtful deafening emptiness. A national trauma”, Stellar (2003). Hungarian Canadian physician Gabor Mate² suggests,

“The relative health of any life-form is a function of its essential needs being met, or not met. Thus, to know what kind of beings we are is to know what we need in order to be those beings to the fullest. Who we take ourselves to be dictates how we set up our lives, individually and collective, and determines the extent to which a culture does or does not meet the requirements for optimal health and functioning”, (2022 p 116).

Further, scripture states, “for every tree is known by its fruit”, (Luke 6.44, New King James Version, NKJV), therefore it begs the questions; who do we take ourselves to be, how do we set up our lives, what are the trees in our society that are bearing such fruit, what fundamental human needs are no longer being met in our culture and society?

¹ Ailbhe Greaney, artist and Professor of Photography at Ulster University

² Gabor Mate. physician, specializing in trauma, addiction and child development, author of award winning *In the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts*, *When the Body says No*, *Scattered Minds*, and producer of *The Wisdom of Trauma*.

‘A world in glitch’, which Company³ suggests that when recognised, “the world appears to stop, and we stare, feeling a gap has suddenly opened up between the given world and its meaning”, (2024). How can photography, with its power to act as a way of thinking and responding to society, present through the act of looking. Thereby helping us make sense of the world, the place of self in the world and the other.

³ David Company, British curator, writer, editor, and educator. He teaches at the University of Westminster London, and is Curator at Large for the International Center of Photography, New York

Part I Invisible made Visible

Since its invention in the 19th century, photography has been used as a tool of documentation (Wells 2021). In 1902 however Clarence White and Alfred Stieglitz⁴ pioneered new ways of thinking about the medium and its use, emphasizing artistic expression over the technical skill of the photographer or mechanics of the camera. Their vision to elevate the medium's status to that of fine art, known as pictorialism, focused on its ability to express emotion and artistic vision. This was largely achieved through the Photo-Secession group, founded in 1902, of which both were members. Additionally, the group formed an association with the British society 'Linked Ring', founded in 1892 by Henry Peace Robinson, which together were instrumental in advancing the perception of photography as high art in both American and European society.

Art is, "not about movements but rather about talented individuals who evolved new tendencies in art that reflected both inner and outer ontological necessities – political, spiritual or otherwise – in response to modernity", argues Cole⁵ (2015 p10). In this context, we use photography not only to document the visible, to provide an 'index' of what exists, it also has the capacity to make the invisible visible, to provide evidence, and this creates tension (Greaney 2023).

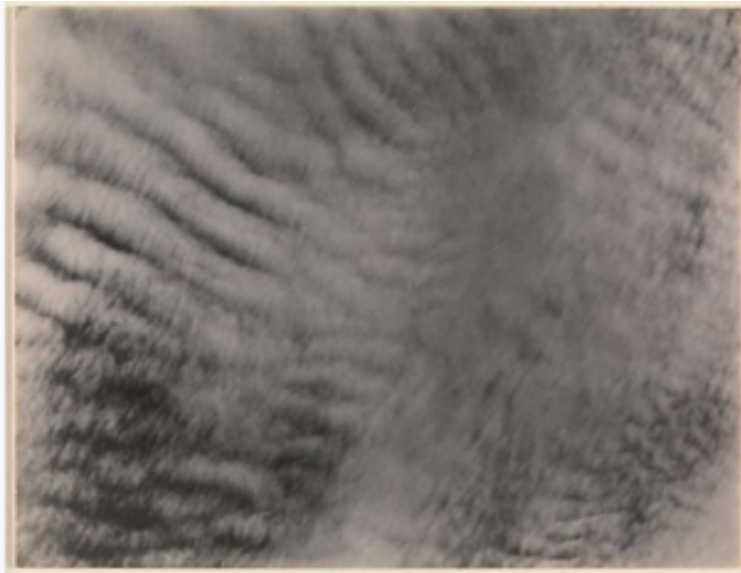
Between 1922–1931 Steiglitz had returned from Europe to New York with ideas rooted in symbolism. As a pioneer of the photographic medium, and in response to feeling isolated from peers, he created 'Equivalents'. A series of black and white clouds, shot without anchoring context, to communicate mood directly, as one would musical tones, making visible the invisible. This abstract use of photography marked a turning point in the use of the medium. From that point on, photographs were, "either grounded in reality – a record, a document, a reflection of the world – or the product of imagination, storytelling and illusion. On occasion, they can be both", New Gallery of Victoria (2023).

⁴Alfred Stieglitz 1864–1946, American photographer, publisher, writer, founder of 291 Art Gallery, co-founder of Camera Work photographic journal.

⁵Brendan Cole is an Art Historian and artist who specialises in late-nineteenth century non-realist art. He has published widely in leading international journals on the work on Jean Delville, Fernand Khnopff



Equivalent, Stieglitz, 1926



Equivalent, Stieglitz 1927

Minor White⁶, a descendant of Stieglitz, would continue to propagate the concept of Equivalents as a path to inner growth through the use of the camera. His philosophy around photography was to, “see profoundly the world around him... recognize the relationship of his medium to his whole life, on any level he chooses to recognize it, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. And when he gets through, he would come at photography with control over the medium and a certain attitude. just as he asked the medium to serve him, something higher was asking him to serve it”, (Hall 1978). Hall⁷ interviewed White on the work, ‘Sound of one hand clapping’, noting the last conversation he had with White;

“I’m just a machine. When certain forces reach me I react in a certain way. When other forces reach me I react differently. And those forces change. I realize I’m just a little puppet out here, somebody else is pulling the strings. And it’s interesting to become aware that that’s what’s happening. It’s not a loss of ego, but to the ego it’s a great loss. But another part of me is saying, gee, this is fascinating,” (Hall 1978).

Whilst Minor White had many diverse faith-based references in his lifetime, this final conversation with James Baker Hall would suggest his final insistence of abandonment of the body and mind, for the way of the spiritual to make work, to exist. Similarly in parallel, Frederick H. Evans⁸ was making photographs that dealt with the metaphysical aspects of life suggesting, every object in nature has a corresponding spiritual quality, influenced by the philosophy of Swedenborg⁹, and all spiritual life is clothed in the garments of nature. Thus photography emerges as a unique and useful medium to encounter the spiritual and metaphysical dimension, and further has the power to bring a visibility to an experience what would be otherwise invisible. Harvey¹⁰ further accentuates this, stating, “Spirit, unlike any other subject matter that the camera would survey, drew attention to the paradox of photography’s double identity; at one and the same time an instrument for scientific enquiry into the visible world and, conversely, an uncanny almost magical process able to conjure up the semblance of shadows and, with it, supernatural associations.” (2007 p 7), highlighting the duality of the medium as a tool of evidence and a conduit to the supernatural.

⁶ Minor White (1937–1942) artist and curator of the George Eastman Gallery in New York. Lecturer with Asnel Adams in California School of Fine Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Co-founder of Aperture 1952.

⁷ James Baker Hall (1935 – 2009) American poet, novelist, photographer and teacher.

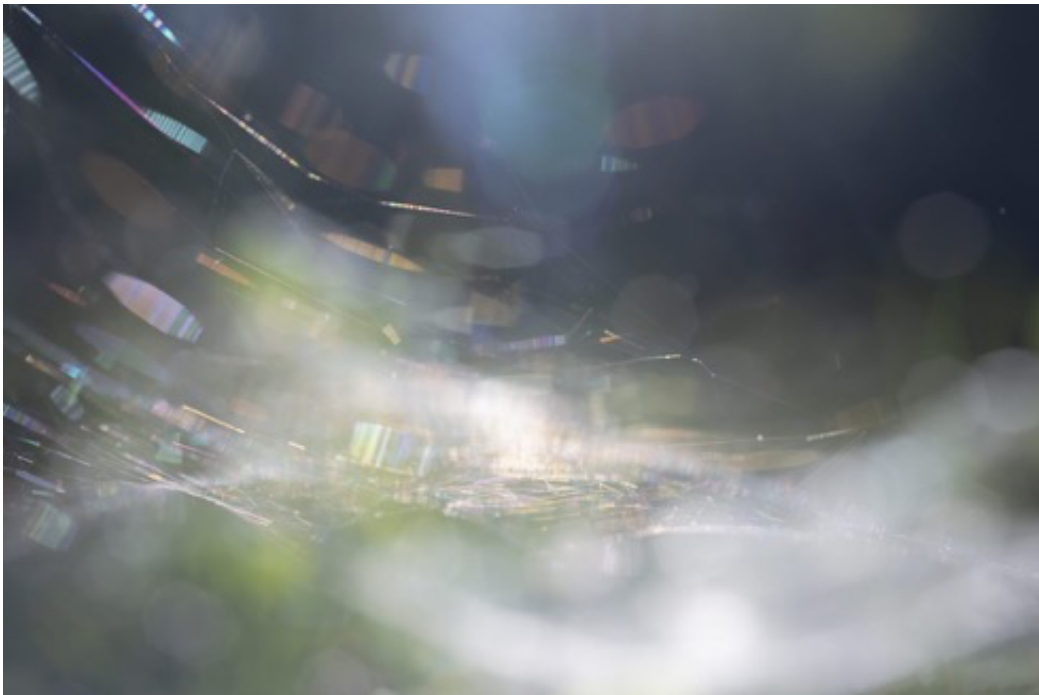
⁸ Frederick H. Evans (1853–1943), photographer, member of the Lined Ring and Photo succession

⁹ Swedenborg (1688–1772) Swedish Christian theologian, scientist, philosopher and mystic

¹⁰ John Harvey, author of *Exposures* (2007), The University of Chicago Press. Drawing upon eighty images taken between 1860 and today, John Harvey explores spirit photography from the various perspectives of religion, science, and art.

Company warns however, “Under today’s mass image regime all experience is threatened with commodification, especially the spiritual, which has come to mean a sort of vague post-theistic longing for oneness, a soothing balm for the alienations of modern life, or a kind of blissful existentialism without the angst”, (2019). However, the ‘Modes of Spirituality’ section in Trigger magazine (2023) featuring work by Yvette Monaghan, Hiễn Hoàng, Sebastian Koudijzer, and Léonard Pongo, might suggest something different. This special edition on Energy, examines energy as a physical resource and as a spiritual energy. The issue addresses typical associations with energy such as “consumption, crisis, central heating, colonialism, conflict calculation, cars, calibration, control”, but as the editors suggest often overlooked aspect such as; “*culture, creativity and collectivity*”, Gelezova et al (2023). It probes how contemporary artists might define spirituality through work, myths, traditions, or cosmologies invoked, and explores the multifaceted notion of what is ‘energy’. Despite lacking representation from Christian or Islamic perspectives, it provides an insightful and rich contemporary conversation around shamanic, Kejawèn, Buddhism, Hinduism. It purports spirituality as a means of transcendence, a way to reevaluate the relationship between cultural heritage and contemporary art, and connection with ancestors, indigenous memory, and cosmology. The idea if spirituality can also be encountered in the work of Rinko Kawauchi¹¹, who’s work invites a deep looking, a conscious attention and a lightness of touch that makes tangible the spirit. She states, “I often choose nature as my motif because it is a motif that is very easy to understand in the sense that it is something that we should coexist with in our daily lives... I believe there are things that we usually cannot see. One of the challenges in creating my work is to see how far I can get into this unseen part of something”, Fotografiska Stockholm (2024).

¹¹ Rinko Kawauchi, Japanese artist

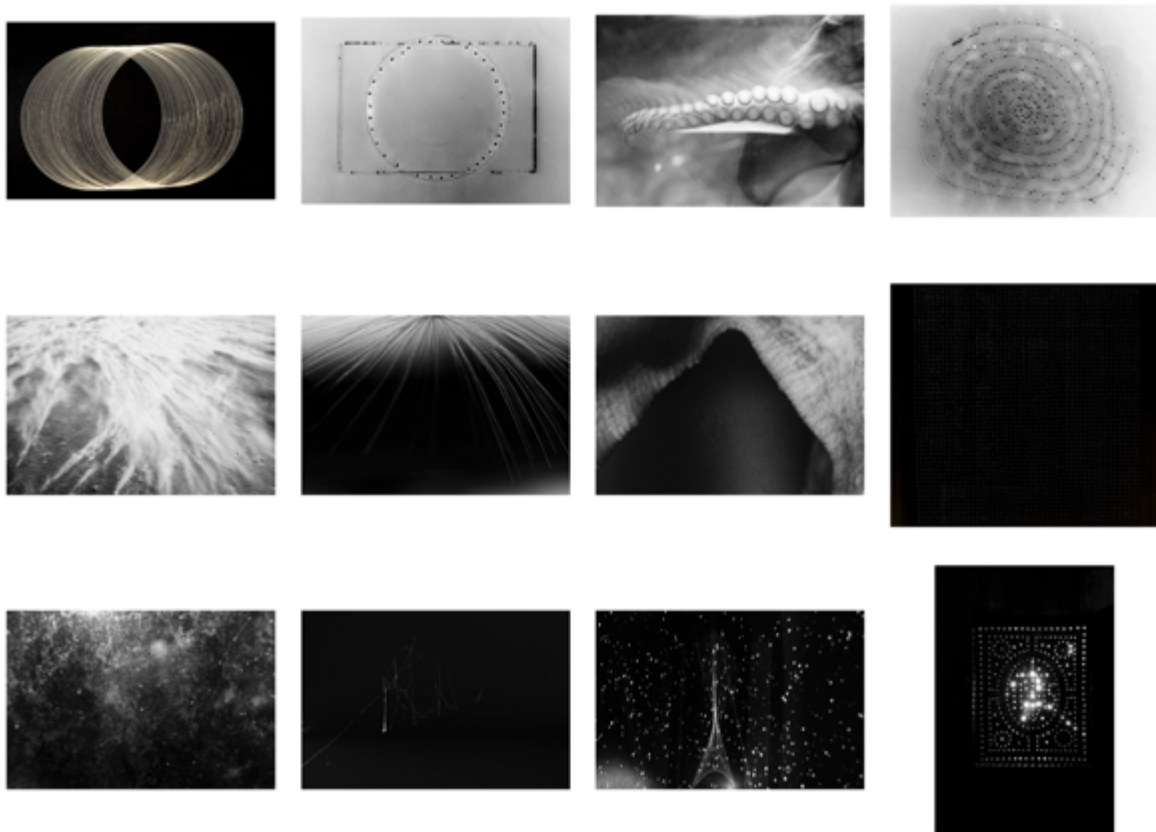


Rinko Kawauchi

Rinkos work delves into the metaphysical realm through the motif of nature, and while Alexandrovas¹² (2017) purports; “It is no longer au courant, in the twenty-first century regime of mass production and infinite digital reproducibility, for the post-modern artist to author original, particularly spiritual, expressions”, I contend, as a laywoman, that the essence of life is found in

¹²Alena Alexandrova, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen

the spirit, and therefore the fountain from which art flows. To deny the spiritual expression is to deny the essence of art. Monahan¹³ makes work from accessing that deep, mysterious place within herself for which she uses transcendental meditation to access that place, aligning with the Louise Bourgeois' belief that subliminal communication is stronger than language, Interview with author (2024). This accentuates the enduring significance of spirituality in artistic practice, despite modern challenges.



This Unending Story (2019–2023) Yvette Monahan

¹³ Yvette Monahan, Irish photographer and artist

Part 2 Art and Religion

In his 2004 book, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, James Elkin¹⁴, investigates the nuanced, ambiguous and often difficult challenge of discussing religion, in relation to the contemporary art world. Elkins shares real-life experiences and conflicted positions he has been in as an educator as he tried to navigate the slippery subject of religion, Christianity specifically. He describes the hesitance and ‘strangeness’ within academia and art circles to engage in dialogue about something that he suggests is so intrinsic to the human experience. Elkin suggests that, “Straightforward talk about religion is rare in art departments and art schools, and wholly absent from art journals unless the work in question is transgressive”, (2004 p xi). This observation strongly resonates with my experience, not just with in the university setting but across the broader art landscape which I have encountered. Concurrently, as Elkins released the afore mentioned book, John Baldessari and Meg Cranston curated the Exhibition 100 Artists see God. They believed God as a subject of wide interest, “God is news”, (2004) and approached it as an experimental endeavour. The exhibition, which travelled, considers faith as a subject, but not specific doctrines, and brought together works that represented observed phenomena. Representations were grouped these under the following headings;

“Artists see

God as Architect,
The annunciation of God
God everywhere
God and Ends
God in the flesh
God as ineffable
God as Light
God as Love
God as Miracle worker
God as Mother
God Take Many Forms
God as Extraordinary Force of Nature
God as the Great Organizer
God as Someone Who Suffers
God as Tyrant
God as Word”

¹⁴ James Elkin American art historian and art critic, E.C. Chadbourne Chair of art history, theory, and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago,

“We see the and question how issues about the place of God and spirituality thread their way through the entire fabric of culture internationally, sometimes demanding centre stage, sometimes almost buried by other concerns, but always present”, stated Executive Director of the exhibition Richards, (200 p 6). Further, what is clear for the exhibition is that contemporary artists are ‘willing to see god if you ask them’, although it remains ambiguous whether their openness is based on the question posed, or the requirements of the artistic output. This ambiguity however does not detract from the significance of the enquiry, and the dialogue about God in the arts continues to be a relevant and provocative subject.



100 Artists See God. Baldessari, J. & Cranston, M. (2014)

As one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, Gerhard Richter’s perspective on art as an expression of religious feeling and a manifestation of the human capacity for faith highlights the deeply interwoven relationship between artistic creation and spiritual belief, and expresses that our, “ability to believe is our outstanding quality, and only art adequately translates it into reality”. However he cautions against substituting genuine faith with ideology, using art to propagate ideology rather than space for genuine exploration and expression (1998).



Overpainted Photographs (2000) Gerhard Richter

According to Hofmann his work is;

“intimately based on an existentially tensional polarity of the drive to understand reality on the one hand and the inability to understand the incomprehensible reality on the other hand.. using.. subtly balancing the antinomies of presentation and representation, planning and arbitrariness, closeness and distance, precision and blurring, in his creations, without ever giving up on his idea that there is one-all- exceeding being that reconciles these contradictions in the end. The transient other can be perceived in that ‘more’ which is located beyond the artist’s personality, establishing itself in the genealogy of his work. Consequently, Richter’s art extends to a metaphysical sphere that repeatedly stirs religious associations”, (2012 p 526).

Richter uses photography to explore doubt and belief, coexisting elements inherent to any journey of sincere enquiry to understand. If what Richter suggests is true then art, when engaged authentically, then art and belief are fundamentally intertwined, and allows for a wrestling of doubt and belief within the nature of human spirituality. This dynamic interaction between art and spirituality enriches both fields if the conversation is allowed and provides a deeper more nuanced understanding of each.

Monaghan (2024) noted that the major institutions reflect movements in society and as such she has witnessed a shift towards the area of spirituality in the arts, noting such exhibitions as ‘As Above, So Below. Portals, Visions, Spirits and Mystics (IMMA in 2017) which included over 200 works presenting a diverse range of perspectives on spirituality.

She also noted exhibitions on the work and spiritual practice of Hilma af Klint, at both The Guggenheim, 2019 and Tate 2023, reflecting an effort to articulate mystical views of reality. In 2017, the same year as the IMMA exhibition, George Voronov¹⁵ produced the work, ‘We Became Everything’ (2017) and through the work explored the idea of, “the existence of two worlds; the familiar ‘real’ world as well as an elusive spiritual dimension that lies beyond the boundaries of normal perception”. Verenov advocates photography as, “the medium that pulls, stretches, and freezes time—is thus the perfect tool to capture these glimpses of the divine. The acts of making these pictures, sequencing them, and believing in their power are all acts of faith. The practice of photography therefore becomes a spiritual practice”.



We Became Everything (2017) George Voronov

¹⁵ George Voronov, Fine Art Photographer

Part 3 The Place of Christian art

In the 18th and early 19th century explicit Christian artwork, such as *Seven Words* by Holland Day, was embraced and placed in the centrefold of society, Steichen¹⁶ wrote, “Few paintings contain as much that is spiritual and sacred in them as do the ‘Seven Words’ of Mr. Day”.



The Seven Words (1989) F. Holland Day

However modernism emerged in the late 19th and 20th century, and with it came a significant departure from religious frames of reference, which Anderson¹⁷ (2021) asserts came from, “Strong secularization theory¹⁸, and “a heavy reliance on critical models that privilege highly suspicious hermeneutics, in the lineages of Marxian, Nietzschean, and Freudian critical theory”. Instrumental in the movement was James Joyce, Picasso, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Elliot. In support of the movement, Marcel Duchamp¹⁹ suggested the pursuit of notions of God as a *mad folly*, noted in Erickson (2007). A similar sentiment echoed by contemporary photographer Martin Parr,²⁰ shared in reference to the disclosure of the Christian underpinning of my work *Grace*. This secular shift led to art, and literature, being created from a newly perceived position of godlessness, creating from the resulting nihilism or creating a replacement for religion. It also resulted in what Clifton²¹

¹⁶ Steichen (1879 – 1973) American (b. Luxembourg), Director at MOMA 1947–1962 and curator of “The Family of Man” in 1955

¹⁷ Johnathan A Anderson; Art critic, theologian, author, Kings College London

¹⁸ A sociological thesis positing that a society’s modernization necessarily entails its secularization.

¹⁹ Marcel DuChamp, French artist associated with Cubism, Dada and Surrealism

²⁰ Ulster University Crit on the presentation of the idea of Grace, November 2023

²¹ Clifton, Curator of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston Texas

describes as the ‘ghettoization’ of Christian art. Once central to societal and cultural discourse, Christian art has been limited to museums and galleries with explicit Christian associations and viewed through a narrative of art history of style, disregarding its original subject matter and initial function, (2007). The legitimating metanarrative is one of the ‘secular over the sacred, or the displacement of the sacred by the aesthetic’, (2007 p 107). Elkins states that contemporary art discourse has an almost-nonexistence of religion, representing the fundamental gap I had observed in my research around *Grace*, noted as a fundamental issue in postmodernism. Elkins further suggests that whilst, “artists critical of religion can find their voice in the art world, but religion itself, including spirituality, is taken to be excluded by the very project of modernism”, (2004 p 9). Further, Morgan²² (2009) identifies art theorists lack of effective methodologies to engage with religious content in art, both critically and empathetically. The complex landscape invites further exploration and dialogue, and perhaps the issue of communication is best addressed by Covey’s²³ suggestion that, “the biggest problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply”.

The tension between modernism’s secular leanings and the spiritual intentions behind sincere art touches on fundamental questions of the purpose and scope of art itself. Elkins critique that, “most (contemporary) religious art is just bad art, that sets out to convey spiritual values (that) go against the grain of the history of modernism”, (2004: 20), however perhaps this critique over simplifies the depth and sincerity to be found within such works, which wrestle with profound existential and spiritual questions. The role of the artist however is to challenge the boundaries set, as Chan²⁴ asserts, “to take on the responsibility of reflecting on and manifesting the many facets of life (including those that involve spiritual and religious experience), to capture a flash of friction in time and make it burn as bright as the night is long”, (2009: 62). To create opportunity for dialogue. If photography’s highest vocation is to ‘explain man to man, and man to himself’ (Steichen), and arts highest vocation is to explore and communicate human experience in all its complexity, then dismissing religious themes outright limits the scope of what art can explore and convey. So regardless of the complexity and challenges, is it not our responsibility to ask questions of the ways of being, spiritual encounters, which can include the Christian experience, to reflect and make manifest these facets of life? Personally disinterested in institutional religion, but in reverence of Truth, the bible is my foundation, and the well from which I drink, a facet of life, if not life itself. Photography provides me with a way to explore this well of being, this experience, the self, the Other, the other, that I might be able to capture a flash

²² David Morgan, Professor of Religious Studies at Duke University

²³ Steven R. Covey- author Seven habits of highly effective people

²⁴ Paul Chan, New York artist and writer

of friction and make it burn brought as the night is long. To challenge the boundaries set by secular modernism and assert relevance of spiritual exploration through art, and perhaps illuminate something of the universal quest for meaning, connection and truth, a quest as relevant today as ever before.



The Road to Saint Pauls, Bill Viola 2018

Bill Viola²⁵ ‘s delineates perception into three elements; thought (belonging to mind), feeling (belonging to heart) and also Spiritual language/ voice of the spirit “, (2023) . His work articulates this deep-seated belief, a belief in art’s capacity to transcend the purely tangible, and touch upon the profound spiritual dimensions of human experience. He references ‘eddys, in his Bodies of Light (2018) work; tributaries and movements outside mainstream religion and culture. Similarly, C.S. Lewis²⁶ viewed Christianity not as a conventional religion but as *a way of life*, closer to nature than a religion, suggesting a nuanced understanding of spirituality and personal journey. These are closer to my own experience and journey. Perhaps the work *Grace*, quietly hopes for our hyper connected society, yet searching, to move beyond thought and feeling and to, “ look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal,” 2 Corinthians 4.18 (NKJ) and that as Weston hoped with his work; that it might, “show to them (and to me) what their own unseeing eyes had missed”.

²⁵ Bill Viola, American contemporary video artist, exploring humanistic and spiritual issue.

²⁶ Clive Staples Lewis was a British Write, literary scholar and Anglican lay theologian.

Du Deuve²⁷ argues that, “Faith has become a private matter to be settled according to individual conscience. Religious practice is no longer the social mortar it once was,” and, “modernity is so over typified by a warning of religion in every field, and art itself has not escaped the overall secularization of human relationships”, (2000 p 11). However Elkin (2004) would suggest that a, “thread of spiritual assertion ran through modernism, in all the arts”, and art and religion continue to remain a deeply entangled, which is both fascinating and perplexing. Company is also interested in why that might be so, stating, “While the spiritual seems to be invoked by an ever-greater number of photographers—be they artists, professionals, or amateurs—the more telling contemporary works are those that reflect on why this drive is so strong, and where it might be leading us, ”, (2019).

“It seems ironic in this post post industrial era that we live in now; an era where our generation has been the generation that is carrying the transition from that post-industrial period to the now digital one, we’ve had to try to re-establish new meanings that were once more easily grasped”, Wylie²⁸ (2024), which might suggest our quest for meaning and belief, persists regardless of all the new knowledge that the digital era has brought. Singapore hosted its first international biennale for the visual arts in 2006, centered on the theme: “Belief” and highlighted enduring ‘big questions’ about existence that challenge all humans regardless of faith. *Are we beyond belief or at the threshold of its revival?* Greaney (2024) suggests the current era demands a plurality of expression and ways of working that are not a fixed or closed narratives. Tracey Emin’s *I felt you and I knew you loved me* (2008) serves as an example of how religious spaces like churches and cathedrals are adapting to appeal to broader audiences. The non-neutrality of spaces can affect the way in which artwork is seen and experienced, the significance of context noted. Aryan²⁹ (2023) suggests that,

“in a secular venue this blaring pink neon sign spelling out a provocative message is cheap and tawdry, throwaway even. Its installation under the west window in Liverpool Cathedral in 2008, however, transforms its meaning into an appeal of religious devotion, a testimony of faith. The simplicity and accessibility of its message conveys its power in such a setting where one is equal under God.”

²⁷ Thierry De Duve, Belgian historian and philosopher, Professor of modern art theory and contemporary art theory at Hunter College, City University, New York.

²⁸ Donovan Wylie artist and Professor of Photography at Ulster University

²⁹ Rina Arya is a Reader at the University of Wolverhampton who is interested in the visual and material culture of religion



For You (2008) Tracey Emin (2008)

With this in mind, if the Christian church is intent on engaging contemporary audiences with the gospel, as I have experienced powerfully in South Africa, it must embrace ‘aggiornamento’, not by altering its truths but revitalizing the methods used to convey these truths. Photography with its unique capacity as the visual language of the contemporary world can play a pivotal role in this. Additionally, while I believe art of a Christian essence should not be ghettoized, my research has identified natural places of rest for contemporary Christian art work. These include The Loyola University Museum Chicago, the Museum of Biblical Art New York, and the Museum of the Bible in Washington, of which the later I had the privilege of presenting their curatorial board in March 2024.

Part 4

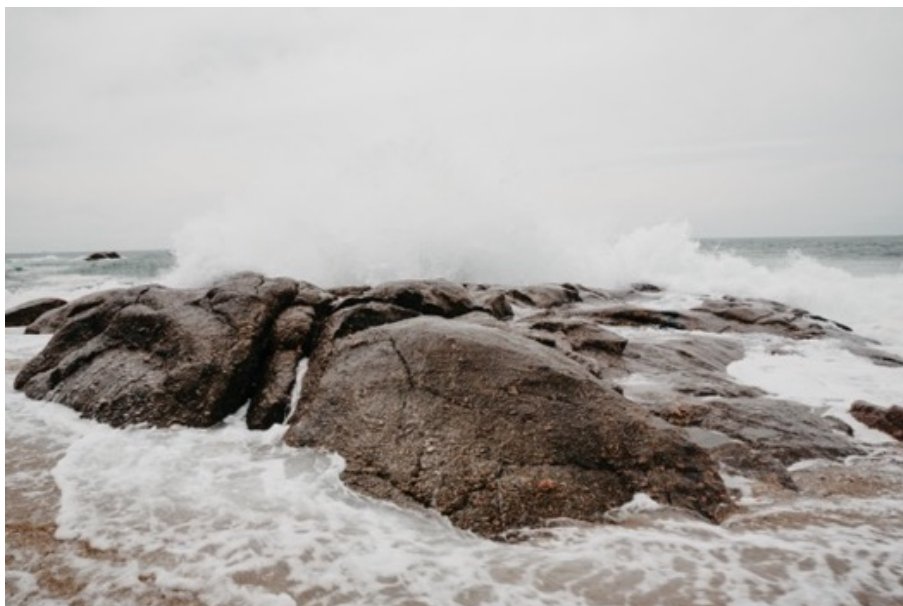
New ways of representing the relational aspects of Christianity through Photography.

GRACE

Frank Burch Brown claims that, “art that has the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion but rather that art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms needs most to see”, (1989, p. 111). Arya (2023) adds that such art, transgresses religion boundaries, either by challenging what is regarded as sacred within the context of the tradition in question, or through pushing the limits of acceptable religious representation. Consisting of three bodies of work, the authors work ‘GRACE’ seeks to do the latter through the exploration of the concept of *relational* within the context of a Christian faith.

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” – Teilhard de Chardin De Chardins

After returning to Ireland after 14 years in South Africa, **If They Don’t Speak** (I) explores the idea of *rocks crying out* in the absence of conversations around faith in Ireland. The photographs are meditations within this new landscape, and documents solitary paths tread in literal exploration of the scripture Luke 19:40 (NKJ), six hundred kilometers, in five countries, over a four month period.







The journeys were woven with questions about how to share the message of Christianity without causing alienation, how to disarm perceptions and prejudice. I shared with friends about my “*simple creative acts of walking*”, referencing Richard Long, ways of walking, and scriptural underpinning. Conversations began to emerge in a natural way around the Christian faith as a *lived experience*. It came to me that perhaps the point was not the rocks in themselves, but in seeking them out brought me to the walks, photographic meditations and resulting conversations, which led me to the idea of human testimony. Human testimony as a story of a life lived, a journey shared with Christ.

At random I opened the Bible one evening and landed on the scripture; “And they overcame him (accuser³⁰) by the Blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony”, Revelations 12:11 (NKJ). Scripture suggests to overcome this fallen mindset that accuses and criticises we need the blood of the lamb (which has been done through Christ Jesus) and the word of our testimony. *Testimony*... what is testimony, what does testimony look like? What is similar what is different? How can photography make visible the invisible human testimony, what could it mean?

Testimony (II) charts the experience of faith in relation to a life’s journey. For the believer an authentic relationship with *Jesus* brings a revelation of Love, manifested through lived experience.

³⁰ The Hebrew word for accuser is διάβολος / diabolos (Strong’s G1228) which means slanderer, false accuser, unjustly criticize, to hurt and condemn, derived from diabolos/ fallen mindset.

In collaboration with 18 believers, the work represents a six-month process undertaken by each individual to collaboratively seek to understand and represent how Christians navigate the complexity of life. The narratives aren't merely portrayal of life but mirrors to society, reflecting deeply root belief, cultural norms, and internal conflicts faced when trying to reconcile the highs and lows of life with spiritual growth. These testimonies were then scribed by light against the South African sky in the location each person identifies as home.





This was a private exploration of journey of life, with all its joys and epilation's, and its many trials and tribulation. The tool developed³¹ enabled the participants to engage in this process of reflection and phenomenological enquiry of sorts. Revelations varied depending on the person but one thing that held through for all who undertook the process was a new perspective, that God is in the profane and the profound, the sadness and laughter, the bitter and the sweet, "Jesus is in it all, I would be lost without Him", "a reframing of God as near, God in us, God in the other". A further common thread that ran through the outcome of the process was that whilst it was challenging, it brought about a revelation that life comes in waves, and "at my lowest, it is still not my first rodeo, I will make it through". The process was reported as liberating, a blessing and gave a sense of ownership of ones life story.

On being presented with the work, to which they had no visual representation previously of what it could look like, all but one cried, and one other was not able to look at all. Photography made possible a 'seeing' that was otherwise impossible. Upon viewing the work all together, almost all reported that they felt more human, more 'normal', as their stories made visible alongside others showed that life is full of highs and lows for all people, that they were not alone in their suffering, to which Robert Adams alluded to as the proper goal of art.

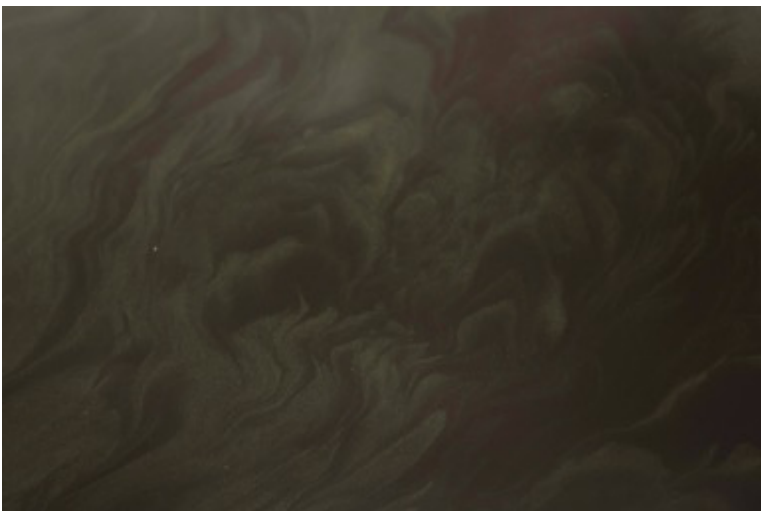
"If the proper goal of art is, as I now believe, Beauty, the Beauty that concerns me is that of form. Beauty is, in my view, a synonym for the coherence and structure underlying life.....why is form beautiful? Because I think, it helps us meet our worst fear, the suspicion that life might be chaos and that therefore our suffering is without meaning." Robert Adams (1981:6)

³¹ Life Experience Tool_Testimony- see Appendix

In commenting on the work Rinko Kawauchi's work 'Utatane', David Chandler observes, "Life's jarring notes and complexities are finally resolved into something that we recognize as a kind of harmony. The waking nightmares subside, things balance out, and we have good cause to be hopeful", (2001:1). It is my hope 'Grace' might evoke a similar response, revealing deep-seated harmonies within our complex life experience. Some participants also shared that it makes them see with different eyes the other person, and themselves. Walsch³² posits, "divine purpose behind everything and therefore a divine presence in everything", (1995 p 60).

The lived experience is a starting point for inquiry and reflection, and as Merleau-Ponty stated, "The world is not what I think, but what I live through" (1962 p xvi-xvii). Through the process of Testimony, it became apparent that my husband was struggling to 'settle' in Ireland. Somehow through a weekend fishing in Cavan, this lived experience (phenomenon) *showed itself in the way that it gives itself while living through it* (Van Manen, 2023). The language of photography enabled an experiential concreteness, vividness, and descriptive detail of what was hidden, what was concealed. Steichen shared before passing, "Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood", (2019 p 2). Photography captured, and it also unraveled and uncovered. **Sumballo** (III) is a photographic interpretation of the experience of faith. Fishing, photography, and faith are acts of hope in things not yet seen; a surrender, a coming in and going out, a way of being.

³² Neale Donald Walsch, author of international best seller *Conversations with God*





Wolfgang Tillman suggests, “When you have a humble approach (to taking a photograph), that humility, or that genuine interest in the subject, is somehow what can be felt, what is visible” (38. 2019). Interestingly, the Hebrew word “συμβάλλω” (Sumballo G4820)– is defined as– *converse, consider, ponder to bring together in one’s mind, confer with one’s self, to come together, to aid, to join, combining, a pulling together*. This word derives from the two words: “**σύν**” (Strong’s G4862) *with, beside, association* and “**βάλλω**” (Strong’s/G906); *to throw, let go without caring, to give over ones care UNCERTAIN about the result*. This was a beautiful revelation that came after the process, when it was the very experience that taught me the act of surrender, to get lost in contemplation– higher form of consciousness, through the gift of the photographic process.

GRACE invites the viewer into a contemplative space where time slows and solace offered in the prospect of the *relational* in a Christian context. Could this plurality of expression and way of working that is not a fixed or closed narrative, as suggested by Greaney (2023), and serve as a means to raise genuine points of concern, to unearth aspects of our human condition within a complex time of uncertainty. Could this ultimately foster dialogue with the wider world about the place of Christianity in the arts, in society, and in the individual?

Part 5 Conclusion. Making Way for Empathy

When we are born our brain, with no direct contact with the outside world, sits in the darkness of the cranial cavity, however it is not a tabula rasa, but contains lots of ‘pre-programmed’ information gifted at birth, such as the world is a three-dimensional (3D) environment, that natural light comes from above. Therefore, we do not see what is really there, but what we unconsciously assume should be there and thus reality is something constructed by your brain, termed perception (Vermulen 2023). Thus our ‘experiences’ are therefore not a direct impression of the world, but are the brain’s best interpretations of sensory signals it receives every day, as shaped by embedded knowledge.

The mention of ‘religion’ has the capacity to divide, alienate and to ‘other’, to increase the sense of a stratified being in the world, however photography, with its unique ability to freeze and stretch time, offers a profound tool for examining and challenging our ingrained perceptions, particularly in the area of the religious and spiritual. As scripture point out, “Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness”, Luke 11:34 – 35 (NKJ). Dorethea Langue suggests the camera is, ‘an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera’, and thus educates our perception. Through this medium, both believers and non-believers can gain new insights into themselves and the other, to consider something anew, potentially fostering empathy and understanding across spiritual divides.





In her book *Atlas of the Heart* (2021) Dr Brene Brown³³ defines empathy as a way of connecting with others that enables a feeling deeply *with* the other, without judgement, and a sharing of their perspectives. This definition aligns closely to the Hebrew concept of compassion—which means to listen and be moved within your very organs. Greaney highlights, “Photography

³³ Dr Brene Brown, Shame and Vulnerability researcher, author of *Darling Greatly*, *Rising Strong*, *Atlas of the Heart*, and *Gifts of Imperfection*.

allows us to look directly at the differences, and to know it as our own” (2022 p 120) and thus revealing how this medium can bridge divides. Browns research identifies vulnerability as crucial in fostering such connections, as it involves delving into our own experiences in order to connect with the other. This process not only enhances empathy but also cultivates a sense of belonging.

Grey³⁴, discusses the transformative power of artistic expressions on consciousness, and purports that when artists give form to revelation, their art can advance, deepen, and potentially transform the consciousness of their community, (2018). Can art change the world? Can art change a man? Ultimately this rests with the reader, their (our) willingness to engage with the work, having an openness to being moved emotionally, and otherwise, allowing it to unfold or make meaning (Ayra 2023). Baltasar Gracián, a 17th century Spanish Jesuit and philosopher suggests, “When the eyes see what they have never seen before, the heart feels what it has never felt”, noted in Philips (2000). This suggestion, coupled with photographs ability to make the invisible visible, allows the reader to ‘see’ anew. By doing so, it could potentially reshape emotional response to the other.



Arnold Newman once said, “We do not make photographs with our cameras. We make them with our minds, with our hearts, with our ideas, as noted in Philips (2000:10). This echoes the biblical passage from 1 Corinthians 23 which reminds us, “Now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain. faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love, 1 Corinthians 13 (NKJ). In a time when the world appears to be in *glitch*, our human being demands

³⁴ Alex Grey, artist exploring the metaphysical and consciousness.

moments of recalibration, of mental scrambling to find a new explanation to fill the void, a new account of appearance, which appearance itself cannot supply, “a photograph freezes and stares, offering no obvious explanation of what it shows, but an occasion for making appearance thinkable, contemplable”, Company (2023). Through its ability to freeze time, photography not only captures but also contemplates, serving as a conduit for hope, belief, and for deeper exploration and expression of the invisible, reflecting the spirituality within.

Chan suggests, “A numbing peace has been achieved, momentous pressure exerted by contemporary life to make everything join and work together; art and life would rather belong to the world than be free in it,” (2009 p 64) however Käsebier’s³⁵ suggestion for artistic photography was to, ‘work out your own thoughts’ and, ‘If a thing is good it will survive”, and that is what I have aspired to do, through the process of Grace. I will continue my mad folly and genuine exploration around the notions of God, as a relevant and enduring inquiry, and perhaps the very nature of photography, as Minor White put it, could reveal ‘a splinter of divinity in the world’, Bourland (2019), that might unite and not divide.

My hope is as WB Yeats’ penned in 1892

Where my books (*work*) Go.
All the words (*experiences*) that I gather,
And all the words (photographs) that I write (make),
Must spread out their wings untiring,
and never rest in their flight,
Till they come where your sad, sad heart is.
And sing to you in the night,
Beyond where the waters are moving,
Storm darkened or starry bright.

³⁵ Gertrude Käsebier (1852–1934) American photographer and member of the Linked Ring.

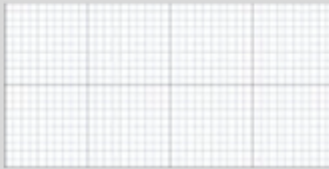
ANÓTHERN I FROM ABOVE

To make invisible visible- the human testimony
 Make tangible and give ownership of life story
 They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" Revelations 12:11
 Point to Hope-Jesus, connection



VIDEO & INVITE

Explain the Vision, Purpose, Use
 Collaboration & Consent



LIFE JOURNEY MADE VISIBLE

Life experience mapping
 Scribe corresponding numerical values
 onto graph paper
 7 year segments



POWER OF YOUR TESTIMONY

With red marker/crayon/pencil scribe
 times, seasons, moments when in
 relationship with Jesus



SCRIBED ACROSS THE SKY

Using testimony as blueprint
 Scribe testimony using light
 Heaven and earth conversation
 Capture using photography



OWNING TESTIMONY

"They triumphed over him by the blood
 of the Lamb and by the word of their
 testimony" Revelations 12:11
 Photograph person holding testimony



INSTALLATIONS

Exhibition
 Book
 High Places tubular lighting installations-
 galleries/musemes
 Solar installations on hill/mountain top-
 light in the dark



Interview April 2024

with Yvette Monahan

& Aoife Kelly de Klerk

What is your unique understanding of spirituality?

As an all-encompassing idea, I believe in the mystery.

What has inspired you in this way of thinking

From a young age, I had several very strong experiences where my intuitive sense was amplified. It prompted me to try to understand what that was and where it came from.

I have practiced Transcendental Meditation for the past ten years. Before that I had a different practice. I need a daily practice to stay in touch with the mystery.

What are other artists that are dealing with similar areas of interest?

Agnes Martin, Hilma af Klint, Emma Kuntz, John Cage, Carl Jung, Louise Bourgeois,

Do you believe that there has been a shift in recent years towards/away from the area of spirituality in the arts?

I would say towards. In IMMA in 2017, they had a show titled 'As Above, So Below. Portals, Visions, Spirits and Mystics. It presented perspectives on spirituality from a range of unique viewpoints in over 200 works.

In 2019, The Guggenheim exhibited Hilma af Klint for the first time with a show titled Paintings for the Future. Produced between 1906 and 1915, the paintings were generated in part through af Klint's spiritualist practice as a medium and reflect an effort to articulate mystical views of reality.

In 2023, Tate exhibited Klint's work alongside Mondrian. The major institutions reflect movements in society.

Is that your experience specific to Ireland/other countries.

Ireland has only recently been released from the firm grip of the Catholic church. This has led to people to search for their own version of spirituality outside of the major religious institutions. I feel like this is being reflected in art practice and public facing outcomes.

Any must reads/considerations from your research in this area you would like to share.

Some books on my desk at the moment.

The Other Side. A journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World by Jennifer Higgle.
Where the Heart Beats. John Cage on Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists by Kay Larson.
Agnes Martin. Paintings, Writings, Remembrances by Arne Glimcher
Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching. A book about the Way and the Power of the Way by Ursula Le Guin
Walking on the pastures of Wonder, John O'Donoghue in conversation with John Quinn

What is the use/usefulness of photography/alternative processes in relation to your subject?

The usefulness of both photography and alternative processes for me allows a delving into the unconscious. This way of making is an attempt to access what Agnes Martin calls the 'second mind'. Transcendental Meditation also helps access the intuitive place. I try and make work from there so that I am accessing the mysterious place within myself. I use Louise Bourgeois' framework that subliminal communication is stronger than language.

List of Figures

Page 8

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Page 11

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Page 12

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Page 14

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Page 15

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Page 17

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Page 19

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Page 21

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Pages 22-24

If they don't speak, Aoife Kelly de Klerk (2022-2024)

Pages 25-26

Testimony, Aoife Kelly de Klerk (2022-2024)

Page 28-29

Sumballo , Aoife Kelly de Klerk (2022-2024)

Pages 30-32

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