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Mindful Escapism

Kench Weathers

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MINDFUL ESCAPISM
by
KENCH LOTT WEATHERS

(Under the Direction of Marc Moulton)

ABSTRACT

“Rocks and hard metals hold an endurance no mortal flesh can own”¹

This thesis examines the art work included in Kench Weathers’ MFA thesis exhibition. This work explores major themes such as the sacred, contemplation, optical illusion and paradox. The installations involve multiple three-dimensional geometric shapes that are formed with steel tubing (welded together). These works have various inspiration; both contemporary secular and sacred and are influenced by sacred paradox, both visual and ideological. The mixture of the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional creates multistable perception within the viewer. The work introduces visual and perceptual distortions of depth and dimensionality. These forms are nonrepresentational but act as a catalyst for the viewer. I create to escape, in hopes the viewer will have a similar cognitive experience. One could compare the aesthetic to minimalism wherein art objects focus on a pure form of the idea. My art is about arrangement and object and how they are presented and perceived by the viewer.

INDEX WORDS: Omnipotence paradox, Cognitive tension, Mindfulness, Contemplation, Sacred, Optical illusion, Paradox, Multistable perception, Trompe l’oeil, Dichotomy

¹Cohen, Jeffery. Stone: An Ecology of The Human History. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Print. Page 1

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A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of The Requirements for the Degree

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the late Kench Lee Lott. His achievements and encouragement have truly inspired me to shape my future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	4
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	6
Paradox	7
Visual paradox	10
2 INFLUENCES	
MC Escher	13
Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian	14
Isamu Noguchi	17
Alicja Kwade	18
3 DEVELOPMENT OF THESIS WORK	
Phase One.....	19
Phase Two.....	22
Phase Three.....	24
CONCLUSION.....	29
REFERENCES	30

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Image of Thurible.....	6
Figure 2: Buroq illustration.....	8
Figure 3: Portait of Taisen Deshimaru.....	9
Figure 4: Image of a Triquetra.....	10
Figure 5: Image of Cairns.....	11
Figure 6: Image of a Zen Rock Garden.....	12
Figure 7: MC Escher, Main with Cuboid1958.....	13
Figure 8: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians in studio.....	14
Figure 9: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians, Lightening for Neda 2009.....	15
Figure 10: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians, Cube within a Cube.....	16
Figure 11: Isamu Noguchi in Studio.....	17
Figure 12: Alicja Kwade, Untitled 2017.....	18
Figure 13: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2016.....	19
Figure 14: Ambiguous Cube :example of multistable perception.....	20
Figure 15: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2016.....	21
Figure 16: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2016.....	23
Figure 17: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2016.....	24
Figure 18: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2017.....	25

Figure 19: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2018	26
Figure 20: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2018	27
Figure 21: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2018	28
Figure 22: Kench Weathers, Untitled 2018	29

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Growing up I was fascinated by optical illusion; I can remember visiting the Scitreck Museum in Atlanta and being completely captivated with the exhibitions. I also had a keen interest in MC Escher's tessellations and the illogical nature of his cuboid. I would spend hours trying to emulate his illustrations.



Figure 1: Image of Thurible

I was raised in a protestant household and attended church on a weekly basis. I attended a catholic secondary school, it was there I attended mass for the first time. I was captivated by the ritual; the use of the thurible, mantras and wardrobes of the priesthood. I learned not only of the prophets, but the life of the monks. This gave me an objective insight into Christian tradition, as well as the doctrine of other major religions.

Conceptual Paradox

Paradox is typical within religious tradition²; whether it be conceptual or visual. Abrahamic religions are no stranger to such illogical truth. Starting with Jewish tradition, within Genesis in the conception of life itself. The terminology used to describe God creating earth; while making light. He separates light from darkness; which makes no sense in scientific theory (light is not a construct of light and darkness mixed). While making light, he refers to light as day. Why not just call it light? “Let there be light,” but not darkness? Darkness was something that pre-existed without God? without getting bogged down with technicalities. It is obvious that this was never intended to be taken as literal truth. It is metaphor; light is good, God is the creator of light; therefore, he is good.³

Within Christian tradition, the interpretation of the trinity is an ongoing debate⁴. Although labeled “monotheistic,” the conceptual foundation is quite perplexing. This idea states there is one omnipresent God that is split within three parts; one being the Godhead, one the spirit and one the son of the Godhead; while all entities obtain full sovereignty. Three is one, one is three and split into three parts equals one.

² Gaita, Raimond. *The paradoxes and politics of belief*. www.abc.net.au. ABC 2018

³ Encyclopedia Britannica. Bereshit. www.britannica.com. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. ©2018

⁴ BBC. *God: Unitarian views of God*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk>. BBC © 2014

Another mystifying element is the son being fully human and yet fully divine. Christian existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard preferred this ideology. This idea was relatable due to the abstract nature of life.⁵



Figure 2: *Buraq on a reproduction of a 17th-century Mughal miniature*

As mentioned in the Hadith; prophet Muhamad traveled on a Buraq (flying horse-like creature) from Mecca to Jerusalem and back during the “Isra and Mi'raj” or “Night Journey”. Traditional Persian art portrays this creature with a human face, but this is not mentioned in the literature. It is however a hybrid creature made from horse, bird and super natural parts. Whether or not one believes in this story, it has strong symbolic meaning. This entity was sent from the heavens, giving it a divine quality. Buroq directly translating to lightning; light almost always represents good. Therefore, making this journey a mission from God. Granting Muhamad the sole ambassador of this expedition.⁶

⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Practice in Christianity*. Georgia: Mercer University Press 2004. Print

⁶Encyclopedia Britannica. *Buraq: Islamic Tradition*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc 2018

Reza Aslan, (Persian American author and Muslim) speaks about how historically believers in the Abrahamic religions did not take the scriptures literally. The literal interpretation is a modern phenomenon. It was well recognized that these “truths” worked on a metaphorical level rather than literal.⁷

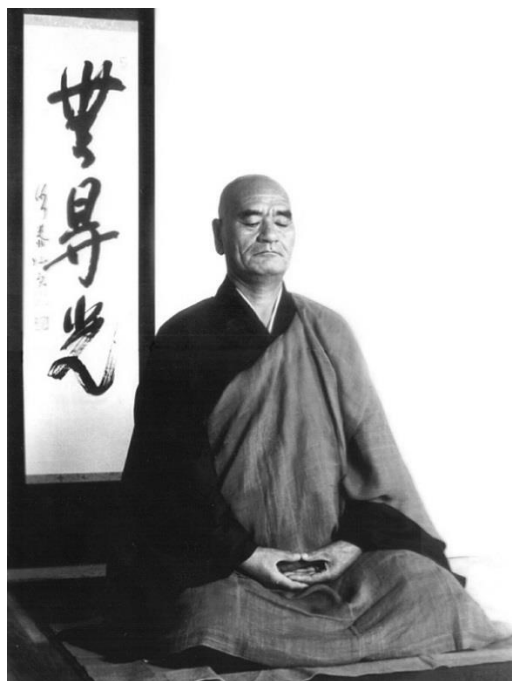


Figure 3: *Portrait of Taisen Deshimaru (Yasuo Deshimaru)*

Zen Koans (found primarily in the Rinzai sect) work in a different way, but further generates the mind into a contemplative state. Traditionally Zen masters have introduced stories for their subjects to recite. These mantras are illogical and irrational, but the purpose is not to “confuse”, but to get the mind working in an abstract way. And maybe even to reveal how superficial and possibly irrelevant most worldly concerns are.⁸

⁷Aslan, Reza. *God: A Human History*. Aslan Media Inc, 2017. Print

⁸Encyclopedia Britannica. *Rinzai: Buddhist Sect*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. ©2018

Visual Paradox

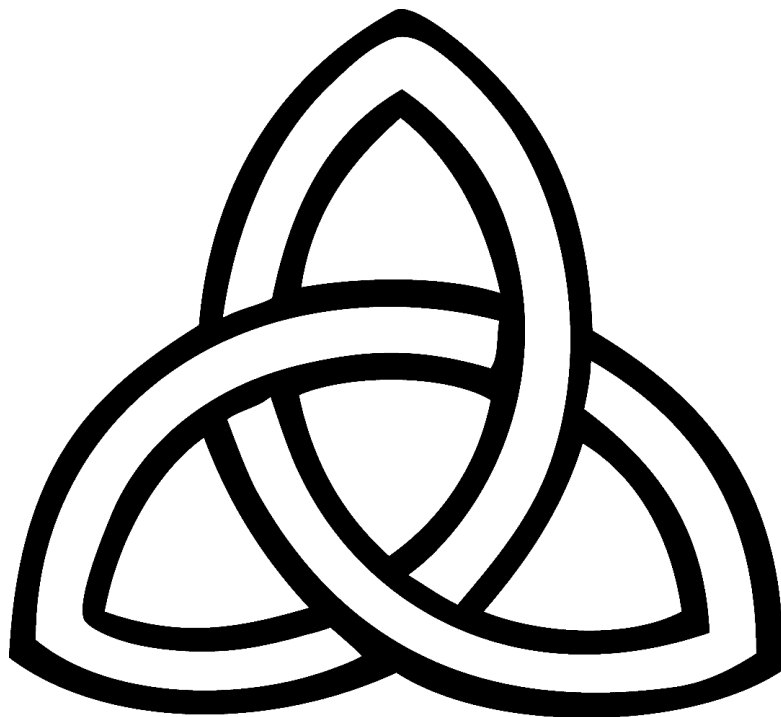


Figure 4: Image of a Triquetra

The Triquetra is a graphic illustration of the Holy Trinity derived the Celts. The Triquetra was first recognized as a Christian symbol in 7th century AD. It is not exactly known what the original meaning sought to illustrate. Whether it was a representation of pagan gods or decor. In contemporary culture, this design seeks to represent the Holy Trinity. The Triquetra illustrates an ideology, a story, a narrative that is abstract to the rational mind. The illustration seeks to challenge the viewers perception of logic and represents an illogical idea.

⁹ Study. *Triquetra: Definition & History*. www.study.com. Study.com ©2018



Figure 5: Image of Cairns

The art of stacking stone, called cairns, originated in many different cultures, stone stacking has had utilitarian, religious and aesthetic functions for all cultures. Historically stacking was used to mark trails, set burial sites (as both monument and location marker), build borders, astrological purposes, to form sacred spaces and for purely (nonfunctional) aesthetic purposes (modern times). One of the most primitive functions of the cairn is the trail marker. Trail markers function as a survival mechanism and are placed along all types of terrains so that people may find their way safely.¹⁰ Some markers point identify dangerous places or paths; such as cliffs, unstable terrain or heavy currents. Others may show where a food source is located while others mark where the correct trail is located. Some paths are identified by painting, chipping or cutting of the stone; the types of cuts can hold cultural significance. They can range in scale, shape and configuration. The placement of burial tombs on higher ground served both practical and religious functions.

Practical by protecting the body from animals and the elements and religious by establishing a hierarchy of “closer to the heavens”.



Figure 6: Image of a Zen Rock Garden

Rock Gardens were introduced to Japan during the Heian period (794–1185). Largely representational these gardens emulated oceans, mountain-scapes, rivers and streams. Later becoming a bit more abstract depending on the Zen master’s interpretation; all resembled nature either metaphorically and/or aesthetically. Object (stone) placement and stacking has been a tradition in both the east and west.¹¹

¹⁰ The Britannica. Cairn. <https://www.britannica.com>. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 2018

¹¹ Encyclopedia Britannica. *Japanese garden*. www.britannica.com. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 2018

CHAPTER 2

INLUENCES

MC Escher



Figure 7: *Main with Cuboid*. 1958. Wood engraving. 64x64 cm

Dutch artist and graphic designer Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972) is primarily known for his tessellations and impossible constructions (like the cuboid). Escher took interest in Islamic architecture and frequented the Alhambra mosque, once in 1922 and later in 1936. While visiting in 1936, he sketched out some of the elaborate tile work this greatly influenced his development of tessellations. The non-representational qualities of Islamic art ran parallel with his earlier work; while later becoming representational.¹²

He developed friendships with mathematicians throughout the years, one of those being Lionel Penrose. He took great interest in optical illusions such as the Penrose Triangle and the Moebius Strip. You can see this transpire in his work, especially with the development of the cuboid.¹³

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian



Figure 8: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians in studio

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians is an Iranian artist whose aesthetic is heavily influenced by traditional Persian art, Islamic tilework and western abstractions. After returning from New York, where she attended Parsons New School for Design and Cornell University; she began her interest in religious art.¹⁴

¹² Locher, JL. M.C. Escher: Life and Work. Harry Abram Publishing 1992. Print

¹³ Wade, Mike. Roger Penrose on his friend MC Escher. www.thetimes.co.uk. Times Newspapers Limited 2018

¹⁴ Mancoff, Debra. Monir Farmanfarmaian. www.britannica.com. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. ©2018



Figure 9: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians, *Lightening for Neda*. 2009

She is most known for her mirror mosaics, which transpired after visiting the Shah Cheragh Mosque in Shiraz, Iran. The use of mirror within traditional Persian culture was initially utilitarian; passed down from father to son. She took aspects of this Persian custom and mixed Sufi mysticism with contemporary elements.



Figure 10: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaians, Cube within a Cube

Her friend Frank Stella influenced some of her work as well, this cubed mirror construct is an example of this influence. Although not Minimalist; the design elements and geometric construct contain a similar aesthetic.¹⁵

¹⁵Mousse 50. There Is No Art without Geometry. www.moussemagazine.it. Mousse Magazine 2015

Isamu Noguchi

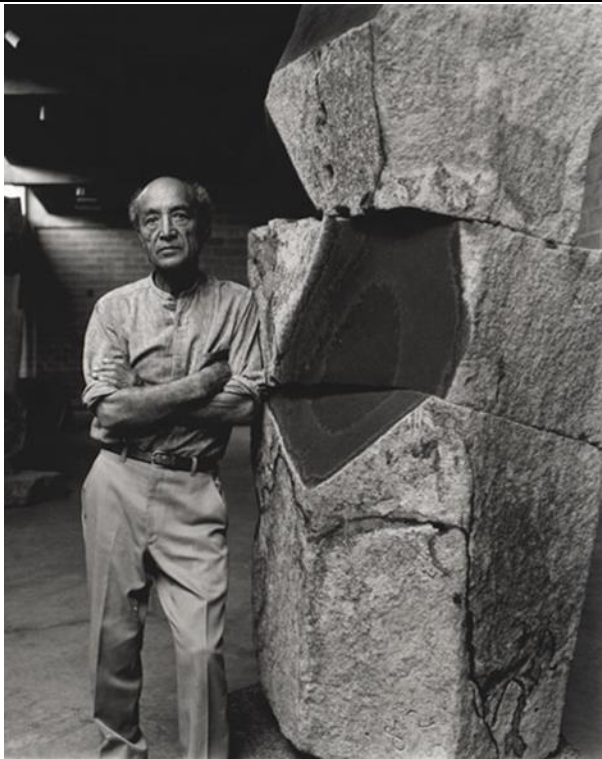


Figure 11: Isamu Noguchi in Studio

Noguchi was born from an American mother and Japanese father; by default, he had both eastern and western perspective. His American and Japanese upbringing brought about influences from modern art and Zen philosophy. Although working with different mediums, he is most known for his stone work. While working on his stone structures, he kept segments untouched; keeping with the wabi-sabi technique.¹⁶

¹⁶Ashton, Dore. *Noguchi: East and West*. California: University of California Press, 1992. Print

Alicja Kwade



Figure 12: Untitled by Alicja Kwade 2017

Alicja Kwade is a contemporary artist of Polish origin; her exhibitions are shown throughout internationally. I had the luxury of witnessing her installation first hand at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017. Her work consists of metal frames, mirrors and various objects (usually stone). She arranges the objects in a conscious way; sometimes with the intent of illusion, sometimes not. Her work is visual research into our modern times. It is meant to question the reality we live in, both philosophically and physically.¹⁷

CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT OF THESIS WORK

Phase One

Figure 13: Untitled 2016 (welded steel)

Using a combination of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch steel tubing I began to weld three dimensional structures. Making sure some the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch rods are a short distance behind the $\frac{1}{2}$ inch rods aligns into this concept; giving the viewer a sense of depth trickery and trompe l'oeil in real space.

Although crude in craftsmanship, my concentration was on the form. Heavily influenced by MC Escher's Cuboid and the Penrose Triangle, I began to experiment with optical illusion and multi-stable perception. I started to experiment with different angles and perspective, giving my work a sort of optical illusion. The lines seem to be a bit more emphasized than the implied planes.

¹⁷303 Gallery. Alijca Kwade: Biography. <http://www.303gallery.com>. New York: 303 Gallery. 2018

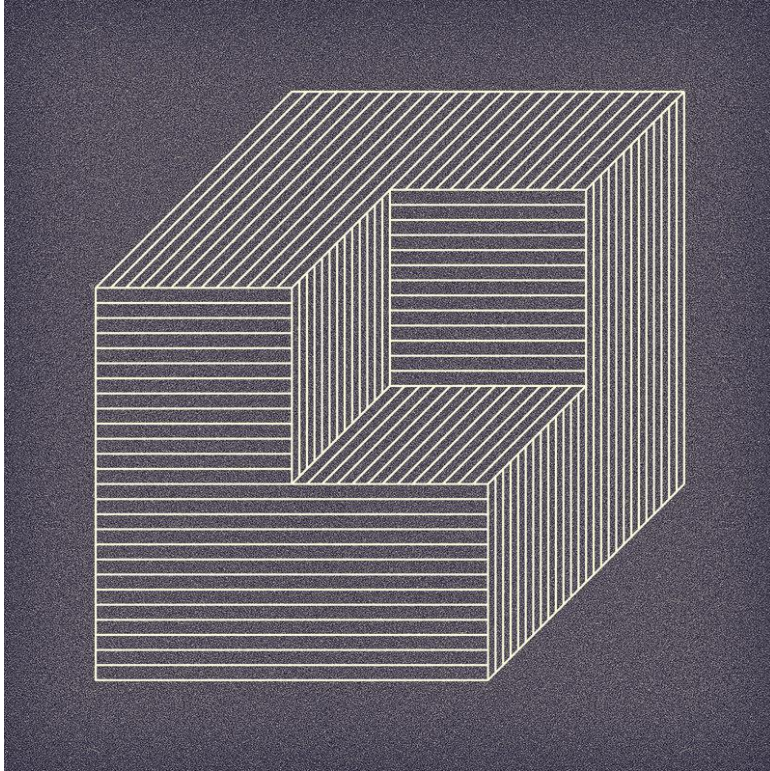


Figure 14: Ambiguous Cube: example of multistable perception

Multistable perception is an occurrence within the human psyche where one misinterprets sensations. The visual component can confuse the depth of an object or image; making it difficult to distinguish what angle is correct. Ultimately offering the viewer an illusion where multiple angles or images are correct.¹⁸

¹⁸Science Direct. *Neuro Science: Multistable Perception*. www.sciencedirect.com Science Direct

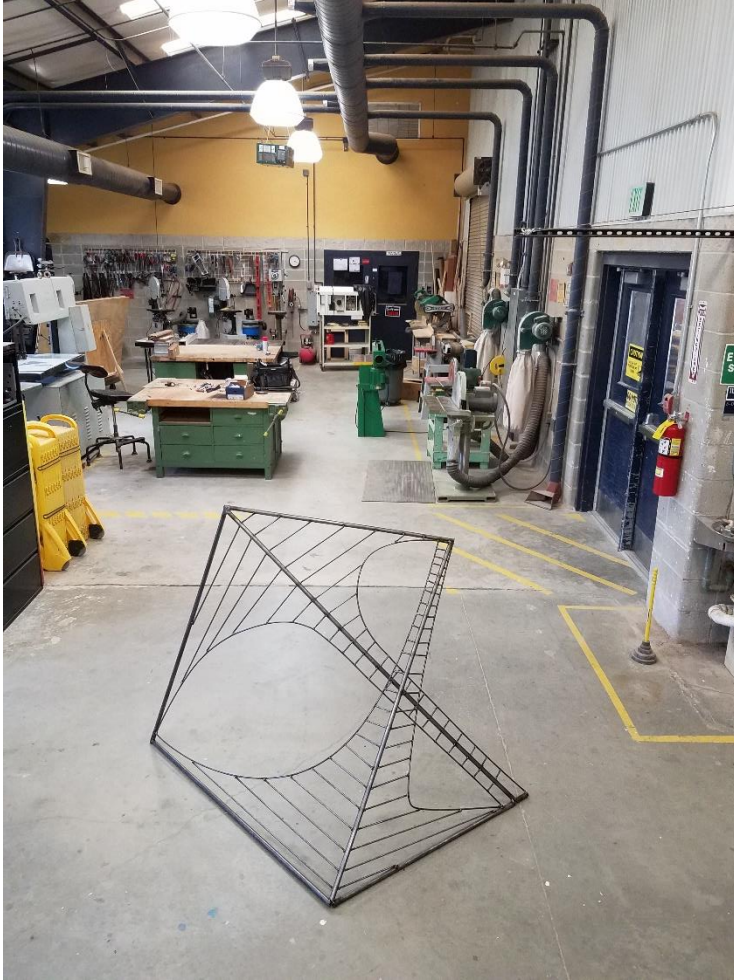


Figure 15: *Untitled 2016*

Using similar size steel rods and tubing as figure one, I attempt to refine my practice while retaining a similar visual experience. While forming this structure I welded the rods (in the frontal region) about two inches closer together, than the back region. I also created this sculpture to display a sense of flatness; all these attempts are to distort the viewer's sense of depth and space.

Phase Two



Figure 16: *Untitled 2016*

Using welded steel tubing I complete the form by use of shadow. After reading “*In Praise of Shadows*” by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki I understood the importance of shadow, both physically and metaphorically.¹⁹

¹⁹ Tanizaki, Junichiro. *In Praise of Shadows*. Leete's Island Books, Inc., 1997. Print



Figure 17: *Untitled 2016*

Using a variation of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch steel rod with steel rod; although geometric the forms suggest a somewhat organic quality. The use of light is a bit different than figure fifteen, the direct light in figure sixteen implies depth. While figure fifteen completes the form only.

Phase Three

Figure 18: *Untitled 2017*

The transition from wall seeks to engage the viewer's real space. One could see this as either both absorption and/or theatricality. I interpret this as absorption, but with the painterly quality of the welds it also brings a sense of theatricality²⁰. It's a mix of both, which furthermore extends the cognitive tension in which I want my viewers to experience.

²⁰Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago



Figure 19: *Untitled 2018*

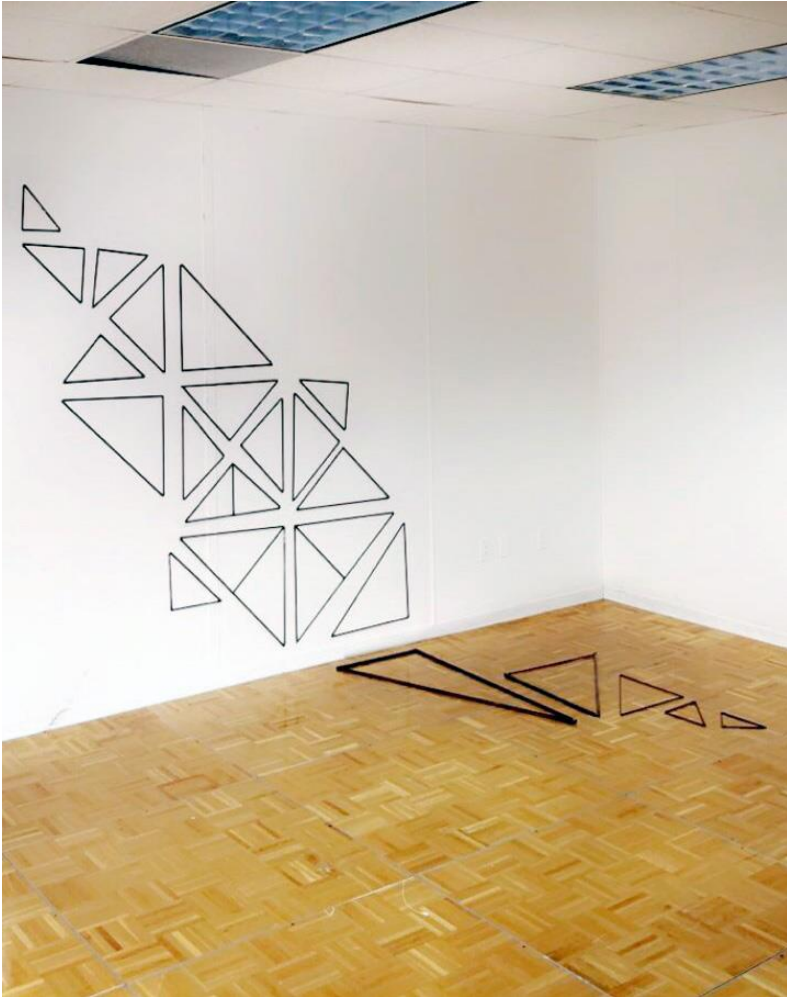


Figure 20: *Untitled 2018*

Figure twenty and nineteen both engage the viewer in a similar way as figure eighteen. Figure nineteen combines both two dimensional with the three dimensional. The transition from the wall to the floor in figure eighteen and figure nineteen is quite different than in figure nineteen; where the floor transition is disconnected. Although physically disconnected, it involves implied continuity. Figure twenty is also completely two dimensional, while obtaining the same physical and conceptual intent. This would not be possible without my prior works; it makes sense only in context with my other works.

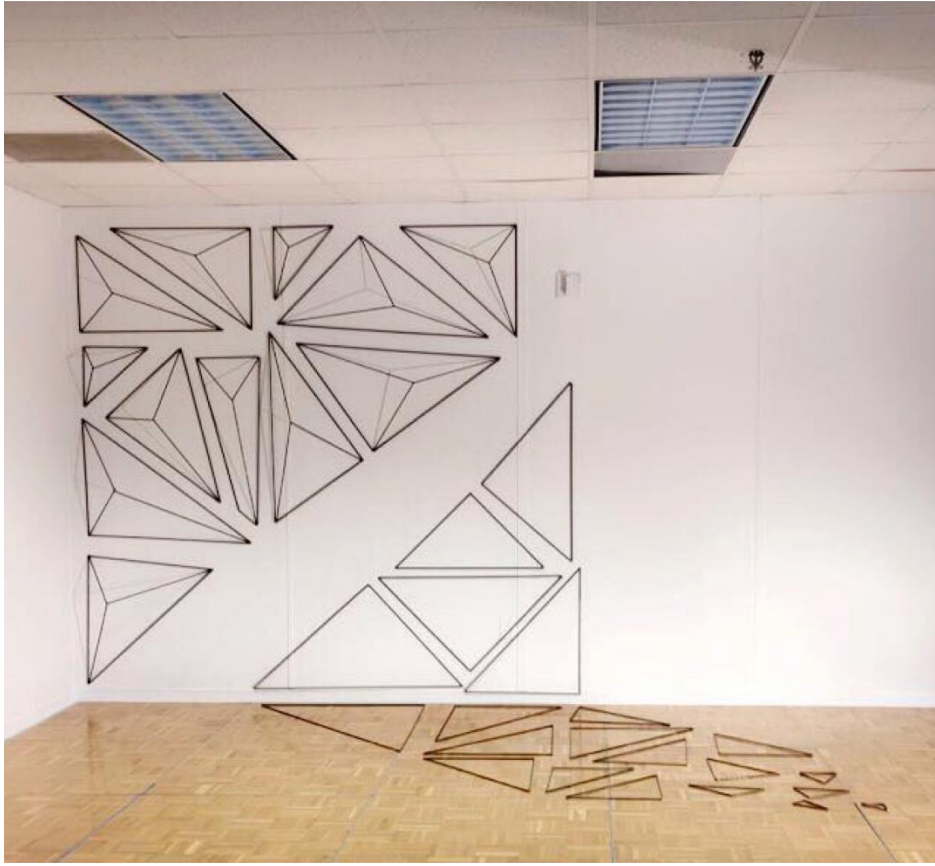


Figure 21: *Untitled 2018*

Using a similar configuration in previous installations, figure twenty-one is somewhat different. The mixture of the two-dimensional and three-dimensional structure is apparent, but with a distinct linear space in between. The recent series seems to be much more about placement rather than illusion.



Figure 22: *Untitled 2018*

Figure twenty-two displays a much different configuration than previous work. This experimental piece is comprised of two granite stones stacked vertically. The foundation consists of a blue vinyl strip. The stone structure uses actual volume, as opposed to implied volume in other works. The strip acts as a shadow, continuing the illusionistic qualities as other works.

CONCLUSION

Escapism is the intent both in my studio practice and the presentation of the work. Techniques to induce distortion of depth and dimensionality is important in this process, but not the only element. While researching I have recognized that a mere placement of object (or objects) is major element in creating a sacred space. By sacred, I mean a place that is separate from the daily pattern, not necessarily spiritual and/or religious. My work seeks to communicate to a broader demographic; not just academic elites. The placement and manipulation of non-representational forms help to complete this objective.

Placement of stone and other formal objects even predates the representational cave paintings; this type of expression is something that makes us uniquely human. I wish to create a place of contemplation for all, because I believe this is an essential core of the human experience.

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