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The Materiality of the Spiritual

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THE MATERIALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Art, Studio

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This year I have been interested in the ways in which art reaches beyond itself and approaches a sort of universality, a spirituality. Beyond imagery itself, there is the concern of material, which is the focus of my recent exploration. For this project, I investigated how a work's substrate enhances its imagery in the pursuit of a spiritual dialogue/ interaction between art and viewer.

I began my research into materiality by examining the ways in which different cultures make use of different materials for religious or spiritual icons, texts, sculptures, and objects. I began by looking at cave paintings from France and Spain from 30,000 years ago, wondering if the fascination and spirituality they inspire among contemporary audiences is due to their age, their imagery, or to the material itself. In addition, I looked at Persian miniatures and illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages, wondering about whether the benefits of works on paper had mostly to do with the economy of reproduction, scale, and portability of the objects, or if there was something more personal and spiritual that comes through the material itself. I also wanted to explore the western religious tradition of Quattrocento and Renaissance Italy that makes use of canvas and wood panels. Beginning in the Renaissance, paintings functioned as windows into alternate worlds. Is this quality one that can be ascribed to the frame and materials of the works, or does it have only to do with imagery and technique? Throughout my creation of these works of art, I focused not on imagery but on the material and how I could make the imagery interact with it in the way I wanted. I considered standardizing the imagery across the materials I was testing, but I thought that this would be too contrived—instead, I committed to working intuitively, as I normally would, using abstracted figurative imagery and motifs already present and established in my personal visual language. The materials I began with were paper and cardboard. I struggled with trying to figure out how to use a flat material, because I wanted my work to interact bodily with the viewer to evoke spirituality. Ultimately, I realized that paper's strengths for me were its accessibility and its ability to capture extreme detail and subtle texture; its smaller scale allowed for a more gradual, intimate spirituality, giving the work a feeling of direct communion between image and viewer. Next I worked with canvas and wood panels. While I stuck to the traditional use of a wooden panel I explored canvas both in its traditional, stretched form and in a more sculptural way. I discovered that while the scale of the stretched canvas and wood panel I used creates an atmosphere in my work that evokes spirituality, the rigidity of the materials made my imagery feel impenetrable and unapproachable. The sculptural piece I made with the canvas broke down this barrier, and imbued a sort of life into the work itself—it existed on a similar plane as the human body, and the viewer's relationship with it evoked the effect I was after. Then I explored plaster and cement; while these materials lent incredible psychological (and physical) weight to an image, the plaster seemed almost too fragile for my taste, while the cement seemed distractingly uninviting when coupled with my imagery.

I learned from this experiment that each material has a wide range of uses and effects, both historically and in my studio practice. Although I had originally thought of material as a purely formal concern, I realized that there is more that goes into creating a harmonious balance between form and image—for me, the consideration of scale is incredibly important, as is dealing with the viewer's relationship to the object: can they touch it, hold it, or only look at it? I went into this project assuming I would end with a decisive aesthetic formula relating the aim or concept of my work and my imagery to the materials, but that was not the case. Instead, this project forced me to consider the ways in which material can be used for various effects, and how to better understand what type of substrate might best enhance the type of imagery I am looking to use in my work.