

REFLECTION

by

Jacquelyn Aiko Ohashi  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Visual Art

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Fairfax, VA

[Title]  
Reflection

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University.

By

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, & others .....	LGBTQ+
medium density fiberboard .....	MDF
the transgender community at large, equivalent to T/trans* .....	T/trans

## **ABSTRACT**

Jacquelyn Aiko Ohashi, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2023

Thesis Director: Prof. Peter Winant

My thesis work focuses on gender identity, religion, and speculative design. The thesis exhibition and body of work is simply named REFLECTION for its quality to reflect the identity of myself and the identities of others.

This work began four years ago when investigating topics that many viewers harbor misconceptions about: religious faith, transgender, and in the unexpected places where they meet. In response, I have designed and built hypothetical religious objects that both describe and offer solutions to the various questions and struggles I face as a trans man, Lutheran, and human being. The work I created examines the possibilities of being transgender in a profound and endearing way.

## **EARLY IDEATION**

I chose to pursue a master's in fine art because I was unsatisfied with the corporate, entrepreneurial, fake-eco ethos that permeated the world of industrial design. My excitement for the work was in its craft and user interaction. I was particularly excited by the Speculative Design Studio I took during the senior year of my undergraduate study, wherein we designed satirical products to comment on a reality near our own. This was the path I took for the first year and a half of my graduate journey. As a proud transgender man with a background in design and anthropology, the opportunity to poke fun at the ironies and struggles of being trans through hypothetical products was irresistible.

### **Hypothetical Products**

Speculative design is the design and exploration of hypothetical realities through creating artifacts. Terms commonly used to relate to this field are futurology, science fiction, conceptual design, radical design, unreality design, hypothetical design. These projects become useful in their ability to propose an alternate paradigm into tough topics, like the environment, gender, wealth, space travel, health, and politics. Results can be pessimistic, optimistic, and/or humorous.

Speculative design is so new that it does not officially have any credited “founder/s,” so allow me to ascribe it to Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, who literally wrote the book on it in 2013. Design is a tool for problem solving. Speculative design is a

“catalyst for collectively redefining our relationship to reality” (Dunne & Raby 2013 p. 2). Simply find an issue, ask “What if...?” and dream up what that reality looks like.

### ***Trans Storyline Decision Wheel***

My first piece commented on the Trans victim/villain narrative. This harmful narrative of Trans (and Trans-coded) people either being the victims or villains in movies, TV, books, etc. It is mocking the tradition of “narrow and injurious representational conventions that limit and caricature transgender and nonbinary people” (Getsy & Gossett 2021 p. 107). To name a notable few of the long, long list: Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*, Norman Bates in *Psycho*, Song Liling in *Madame Butterfly* (1993), Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry*, Dil in *The Crying Game*. This injurious representation closely follows the same victim/villain narrative gay and gay-coded characters, which has considerable overlap.

Envisioned as prize-wheel selector that lands on the answer, the *Trans Storyline Decision Wheel* can be placed into writers’ rooms and offices for all major and minor production studios (Fig 1). Optional outcomes are overwhelmingly either Victim or Villain with a small chance of a ‘Healthy Well-Written’ storyline (Fig 2).



Figure 1: The *Trans Storyline Decision Wheel*.



Figure 2: *Wheel detail.*

### *Height Meter*

Dysphoria is not required to be Trans. All people (not just trans) feel dysphoria in unique ways. Height dysphoria plagued me as I transitioned into a man at the none-too-prestigious height of five-foot-one. Reckoning with the standard for attractive men being at least six feet was disheartening. I could not possibly make myself significantly taller. I would wear six inch elevator shoes only to still be a “manlet.” There is an unspoken rule that real men are tall, so short men are not men at all.

The *Height Meter* was made to respond to this arbitrary measure of masculinity like height to determine who is a “real” man. The hokey, colorful form of a carnival ride height gauge is used to invoke the absurdity of such a metric (Fig 3). Bright orange and blue are used to reference stereotypical “boy” colors used in the West. The first

presentation of the *Height Meter* provided an accompanying sideboard with a count of who was a man or not as well as chalk to mark the height reached on the meter (Fig 4).

The sideboard has since been removed and the chalk erased to keep the form clean.

Minimal vandalism was sustained, as was expected, and was easily removed with a damp cloth (Fig 5).



Figure 3: Installation view of *Height Meter*.



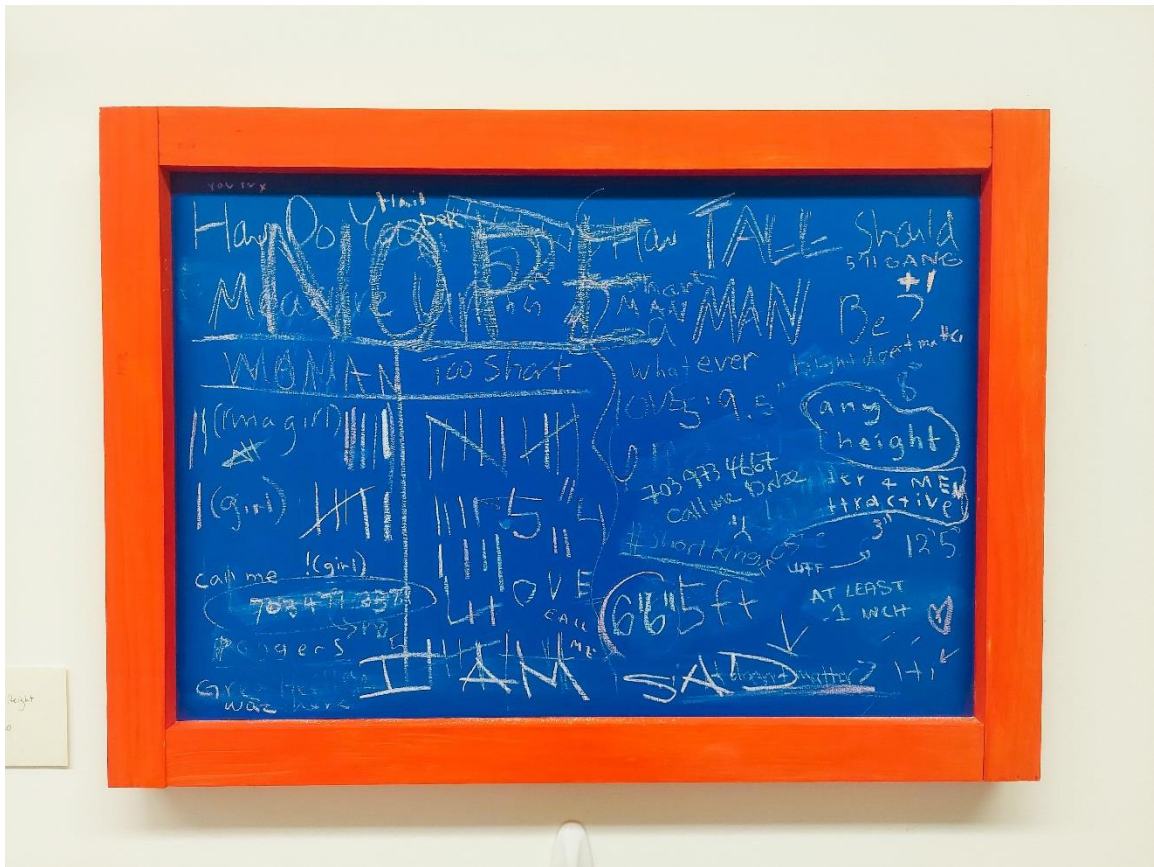


Figure 4: The *Height Meter* sideboard after a few weeks on show.



Figure 5: Height Meter notes and vandalism after a few weeks on show.

The *Height Meter* has since been destroyed in a video piece where I have sawed it in half.

### ***Trans Stole and Trans Prayer Book***

A stole is an ecclesiastical vestment worn over the shoulders and trailing down the front to the thigh or knee. The ends are either left loose or held in by a waist cord. The stole itself signifies being tied to Christ in all ways of life, literally mantling the wearer in threads that trail down the body. Confirmation stoles are worn by traditional Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist confirmands. Custom stoles are the choice of the individual. Confirmation stoles are not often seen in contemporary American Lutheran churches.

I did not believe in God until the summer of 2018. Like those raised religious who rebelled early on, I found my own way back to it. I did not get Confirmed at the usual time for Lutherans when I was in high school. I rejected Christianity at the time, and I am glad I did. I was not sold on something I had no confidence in. I had to also figure out myself and my own uniquely queer identity, which at the time I had no words for. When the scales fell off my eyes, I was settled on God being Love and proud of my church's unassuming acceptance of queer members of the congregation. I decided to get Confirmed on Palm Sunday 2020. (The ensuing covid-19 pandemic pushed the date back to Transfiguration Sunday 2021.) I talked with my pastor and planned to make my stole.

The colors were the order of the stripes from the Trans Pride Flag (blue, pink, white, pink, blue), and set at an angle to avoid plainness and the illusion of uneven sides. The final embroidery was done in gold (Fig 6, 7). A second stole was created in the style of the first, slightly wider, to be worn by my pastor (Fig 8).



**Figure 6: A test of the symbol on the stole.**





Figure 7: The finished confirmation stole modeled by me.



**Figure 8: My pastor modeling the stole sized for him.**

The *Trans Prayer Book* remained a digital draft and was never printed or completed. Designs from this book were used again in the *Hearts Together Banners* piece in my thesis.

### **Throughlines**

The throughlines for these early concepts were my own trans identity in tandem with my relationship with God/the sublime. Significant research was done in these areas to better understand the “f-word” that powers them both: Faith. My research questions became; How could someone put so much belief into things that they cannot have any “real” evidence for? How is the mechanism of faith in one’s identity the same as their faith in religion? How does the way we make art about these topics differ? Are the culture wars in both these areas so close they are the same? What interpersonal issues tie these concepts together?

When our graduate cohort evolved into two distinct schools of thought, once jokingly referred to as the “Haters” and the “Healers,” I knew I wanted my work to be part of the latter. The Haters were those whose work was angsty, provocative, and often socio-political focused. The Healers made works that were more introspective, interactive, and involved personal reckoning. I believe fully in the power of kindness and love to persuade more than outrage and disgust. I was also tired of the angry, aggressive trans activist stereotype. Anger is an easy emotion to access. Love is harder. Love requires understanding and understanding requires work. I wanted to design something to make that work a little easier.

### *Signifiers of the Sublime*

*God's love causes the beauty of what He loves, our love is caused by the beauty of what we love.*

-Jacques Maritain

To invoke feelings of the sublime is to touch on what separates us from animals. Interacting with the sublime is a key factor in what makes us so uniquely Human. “For human sensitivity is omnipotent in immaterial reality...” says Yves Klein, “It is our effective supply of extradimensional power” (Klein 1961 p. 232). It is inwardly infinite and able to be conjured into any space or form, as it is not limited to real space. The concept of the sublime is inherently as intangible and varied as we are. This creates a tricky problem in how it is invoked.

We feel in the sublime what Barnett Newman calls “a concern with our relationship with the absolute emotions” (Newman 1992 p.173). Absolute emotion is often associated with pure shapes, sounds, and color. It cannot be depicted with “the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful” (Harten 1999 p. 9). Doreet LeVitte Harten asserts the same, but quickly reminds us that “...if the sublime was to be made incarnate and described through a field devoid of signifiers, there was a danger of total annihilation of meaning: for how could a spectator make a connection between exalted nothingness and its tokens, if icons were not to be used” (Harten 1999 p. 11)? Alas, the depiction of the undepictable is no easy task. Artists who work with feelings of the sublime, such as James Turrell, choose to use no objects at all, but light and space alone. The immediate association with religious space is apparent. In studying mid-century Catholic artists and designers, a similar



argument for abstraction was found. “Instead of taking the typical conservative line that abstraction was a rejection of the human figure, or an indulgence in anarchy and nihilism (...) Thomasts argued that abstraction had helped to restore the dignity of painting, freeing it from its bondage to pure representationalism” (Wolfe 2010 p. 19). There is freedom in abstraction. There is an elasticity in ambiguity. This is where I wanted my work to live.

My goal became not to make parody or pastiche of existing objects, as they would not be free “from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you,” but instead touch on all at once in abstraction (Newman 1992 p.173). The works rely on human sensitivity to universal and archaic forms, such as the altar, book, and phallus. These forms are useful because their age makes them ubiquitous, recognizable, and timeless. No work could be a completely unattached, signifier-free space, so multiple signifiers, icons, and narratives were intentionally combined to obscure them into one transubstantiated form.

### ***(Trans) Identity***

*The problem with gender is it prescribes how we should be, rather than recognizing who we are.*

-Chimamanda Nquzi Adichie

There is an academic and social caesura in the space where transgender lives. Biology never creates binaries, only spectrums. Faith operates in the same way. Gender identity mirrors the sublime in that it is part of how all of us tailor our identities through interaction with the world around us, and how varied the result can therefore be. The concept of gender immediately had more (but not necessarily accurate) metaphors to represent it than the sublime: genitalia, spectrums, scales, clothing, language, body types,

iconography, charts, statistics, etc. Choosing one of these to work with would trap me into the pitfalls they live in. Gender is more than genitalia/reproductive ability. It is not as spot in between man and woman - nor outside them. These are terms that exist in “excess and defiance of the categories man and woman” (Getsy & Gossett 2021 p. 103) in a quest for accepted existence. In fact, the current representations of gender were so caught in misconceptions that I needed to start elsewhere.

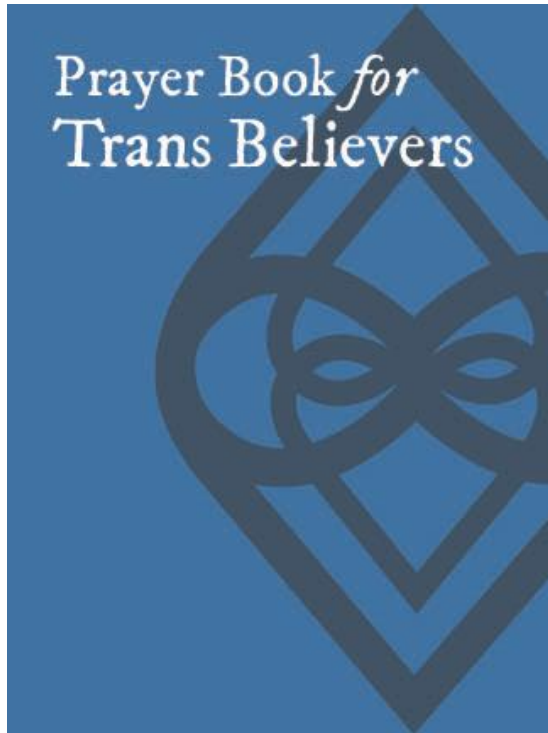
What does gender identity look like? How is it formed? How is trans identity unique to cisgender? These questions led me to artists using geometry and fibers to attempt defining Trans. In *Brain Storm*, Rebecca Jordan-Young describes the “confused, confusing, and contentious” configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality as a “three-ply yarn” and endeavors to untangle the “strands that are simultaneously distinct, interrelated, and somewhat fuzzy around the boundaries” (Vaccaro 2015 p. 273). The three-ply reference resonated with me for its connection to a trinity. One is never just one thing or two, but three or more. Jeanna Vaccaro asks, in reference to hyperbolic crochet, “What if we expanded our definitions of transgender to a new form of life, a constant process of making that could be figured by or alongside something like coral or handicraft” (Vaccaro 2015 p. 278)? The elasticity, strength, and sensory capacity of fiber offer a way to “manipulate, hold, touch, pull, and disassemble a physical model of hyperbolic space” (Vaccaro 2015 p. 282). The appeal of thinking of identity at large as fractal was nearly tempting enough to change my thesis! The use of fibers, however, did not appeal to me. I wanted objects, I wanted vessels. I did not think a display of geometrically driven tangles

would relate “transgender” and “wondrous” to viewers the way I wanted. I wanted to offer viewers a glimpse into the story of faith in oneself.

The mechanism that powers the thinking behind identity fits very well as a fractal/fabric metaphor (and a reference to fractals and geometry appears in the piece *Record Trio*) but the metaphor works for all identity, not specifically trans. The trans experience, like all experiences, is not monolithic, but there are patterns one cannot ignore: the constant creation of the self, death argot, visibility paradoxes, being misunderstood, finding others like you in time and space. “The things of nature are only immediate and single, but man as a mind reduplicates himself,” says Hegel (Hegel 1970 p. 57). “Inasmuch as prime facie he is like the things of nature, but in the second place just as really is for himself, perceives himself, has ideas of himself, thinks himself, and only thus is active self-realizedness [*sic*]” (Hegel 1970 p. 57-58). Those are what I chose to focus on, and I wanted it to feel personal. I wanted to touch on the multitudes inside of oneself.

There were also certain things I wanted to avoid in the Trans discourse: the Trans victim narrative, bathroom-focused work, and surgery.

**Appendix for the First Manuscript: Pages from the unfinished *Trans Prayer Book***



## PRAYER BOOK FOR TRANS BELIEVERS


Jax Ohashi

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## The Symbol

When you see  it is your privilege to use whatever name or word you chose to refer to God. For example:

*Lord, Father, Mother, God, Goddess, Jesus, One, Life, Universe, World, Fate, Love, Mom, Dad, Messiah, Savior, Friend, etc.*

Like your own gender identity, your religious identity is personal, so whichever word you use to pray to God is valid. And when you need it, pray to yourself, for the blessing of God dwells within you like a living fire.



*love*



*inside and  
outside*



*above and  
below*



*always*

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## Prayer for Self Love



Give me the eyes to see the good things in my life, big and small, and to help me become more cheerful. Let me be aware of the love and care surrounding me from near and far, even when I feel alone and unloved. Let me feel you in my heart, cheering me on, always.

For my body to be healthy, my heart and mind must be, too. Teach me to appreciate the body I have and to treat it rightly for my sake and Yours.

Amen.

*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*

*Psalms 147:11*

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## Notes

Many times we are our own worst critic or bully. Ask yourself, would you talk to a friend the way you talk to yourself?

Are you the best person to be judging yourself right now?

What's one way you could be treating yourself better?

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## Prayer for Dysphoria



Remind me that true dysphoria is not my spirit fighting against my body, but my spirit and body together fighting against the broken world I'm in.

I am wonderfully and fearfully made, inside and out, and I contain the blessing and multitudes of your strength and confidence. You do not make mistakes; You made me as your own child and continue to guide me to become the person I'm meant to be.

Amen.

*Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with*

*you wherever you go.*

*Joshua 1:9*

12

## Notes

What did God put you here on Earth to do?

You are wonderfully and fearfully made. God does not make mistakes. He would not have made you trans to make you sad, but to see you grow into the person He already knows you will be.

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## Prayer for Parents/Family That Do Not Yet Understand



Let me know I am not ever as alone as I feel, for you are always with me. Let me feel your hand on my shoulder giving me strength as I face those who do not yet understand. Your love is an example of a perfect and unconditional love and understanding. Help me guide them towards it in the image of Your love and patience.

I pray for the hearts of my parent/s and my family. Please open their heart/s to your love. Please watch over me when I am around them.

Amen.

*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!*

*Isaiah 49:15*

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## Notes

Did Jesus care that people doubted he was Lord, or did He keep an open dialogue?

Coming out of the closet doesn't happen just once; you have to do it every time you tell someone new, and sometimes multiple times to the same person. You also might find the door slammed shut right back in your face by those you love most

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## Prayer for Strangers on the Internet



The world is filled with bigots, fear, and anger. People are saying and doing hurtful things.

I pray for the intolerant to learn that their bad behavior comes from fear and confusion. I pray for them to be brave and try to see things a more loving way. Most of all, I pray for my patience and restraint in how I handle all this nonsense.

We have so much to learn from each other, and I know if they didn't hide behind the shield of their screens we could get along.

Amen.

*Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky, How is it you don't know how to interpret this present time?*

*Luke 12:56*

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## Notes

The lens of the Internet can be insidious. It brings out behavior in people they normally wouldn't perform.

Ask yourself, is this worth my time?

Is this how the people I know in real life really act or feel, or is the Internet pushing the worst message to the top?

How would God react to such hatred?

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## Prayer for Friends Lost After Coming Out



We do not get to choose our family, but we do get to choose our friends. Let the people I once held close in fall away like dead skin to allow me to grow into the person I am meant to be.

Our goal in life is to love and learn as much as we can about ourselves and what we care about. If someone I cared about cannot learn from me to become a better person, please grant them peace.

Amen

*The Lord will grant you that the enemies who rise against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you one way and flee before you seven ways.*  
Deuteronomy 28:7

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## Notes

To someone who doesn't understand growth, the change of an acorn into a tree or a caterpillar into a butterfly would look like complete destruction. It is not your fault if someone is not ready for that level of change.

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## Prayer Before A Doctor's Appointment or Surgery



*Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*  
Joshua 1:9

20

## Notes

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## Prayer for Frustration and Anger



## Prayer of Self-Confidence



Thank You for the strength to take whatever life comes at me with. Let this confidence I feel in myself spread out to all those who need it. Let me be a pillar to my communities in their times of need.

How good it is to be alive!  
How good it is to be me!  
How rare and special I am!

Amen

*A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.*

*Proverbs 11:16*

*Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to*

*stand against the whole land...*

*Jeremiah 1:18*

22

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## Prayer for Anxiety



You never give me more than You know I can handle; You must know I'm very strong. Help me to see that as well.

Every feeling of panic will have an end. Who am I to know what will and will not happen? When I surrender to the moment, I will feel more in control. Help me to become a calm observer of my worries.

Amen

## Notes

How do you feel about your faith in yourself and your God to handle the current worry on your mind?

When you're a worrier, everything can seem like an emergency. But notice this about all your anxious arousal: It's temporary and you're not alone. Every feeling of panic or anxiety comes to an end and God is right there with you.

*Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*

*Luke 12:25*

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### Prayer on New Femininity



I am blessed by you to be at the forefront of a new form of femininity. You knew who I was before I was made flesh - and I pray to learn of that knowledge of myself as I live everyday. I am as I identify and I am exactly as you made me to be.

I am one trans person. I can be me and still be trans, no matter what. I am the authority of the things I do and wear.

Thank you for putting me in charge of my life and for the opportunity to change the minds of all the people I meet through your gentle love.

Amen.

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### Prayer on New Masculinity



I am blessed by you to be at the forefront of a new form of masculinity. You knew who I was before I was made flesh - and I pray to learn of that knowledge of myself as I live everyday. I am as I identify and I am exactly as you made me to be.

I am one trans person. I can be me and still be trans, no matter what. I am the authority of the things I do and wear.

Thank you for putting me in charge of my life and for the opportunity to change the minds of all the people I meet through your gentle love.

Amen.

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### Final Prayer



I pray for the world to get over it.

Amen.

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## MOTIFS

This section comprises of a review of the motifs in the body of work comprising my thesis exhibition. The form of the obelisk, color palette, coded script, use of light, and bespoke furniture is discussed in no particular order.

### The Obelisk

In my early ideations of height meters, wheels, and stoles, I was still relying on existing forms with minor change. The pieces were on-the-nose and stood as cheap one-liners. The search for a vehicle to blend and explore these topics revealed its form to be the obelisk. The first model was made hastily from MDF and hot glue after I read the untrue fact that their forms were taken from the look of a ray of sun for the Egyptian sun god, Ra. I was researching if their form was historically associated with or intended as a phallus. To me, it seemed related to the Hindu *linga*, which is directly from the form of the penis (its *yon*i counterpart being a vulva). The obelisk has no proven inspiration for its iconic shape.

Originally, obelisks were used in pairs in ancient Egypt to give information on what a building's purpose was, the dedication, who built it, etc. "True" obelisks are monolithic: carved from one solid stone. Obelisks first made it into European hands when Egypt fell to the Romans in 30 BCE (Curran et al. 2009). Emperor Augustus' prefect, Cornelius Gallus, and Augustus himself were the first to appropriate Egyptian obelisks to celebrate their victory over Egypt, inscribing their own names over hieroglyphs, relocating them wherever they pleased, and adding new bases (Curran et al. 2009). The

importation of obelisks persisted until the (first) fall of the Roman Empire (Curran et al. 2009). The Middle Ages and Renaissance saw the obelisk rediscovered in the ruins of Rome (Curran et al. 2009). They became objects of antiquarian and mystical study. The High Renaissance saw the popes appropriating, redecorating, and relocating obelisks for their own renown (again) (Curran et al. 2009). The Napoleonic era saw a race for obelisks to be taken from Egypt (again), as Emperor Bonaparte sought to conflate himself with Emperor Augustus. The use of the form to represent regency and conquest caused imitation obelisks to pop up in capitals across Europe and into the New World.

Thus, thousands of years later, their use is so ubiquitous it has been reduced to mere kitsch. Paired with the overt phallic imagery, this made obelisks the ideal, timeless vehicle to express my ideas of both ancient and contemporary thoughts of identity, masculinity, and mystique.

### **The Writing/Script**

A recognizable language is not useful for the abstract. Words tend to divide and mislead. The writing seen on various pieces is a coded script I created in 2018 to hide my private thoughts when I began to earnestly explore my identity and options as a trans person. The script is called Bleedthrough, for its appearance of forward writing bleeding through the back of a page, as well as the ability of things you want to hide always bleeding through, for better or for worse. Bleedthrough is written with the left hand. Like Hebrew or Arabic, it is written from right to left and incorporates calligraphic flourishes. Calligraphy is a traditional technique-driven style imbued with personal context. This is an intentional reference to decorative scripts used in religious and royal texts.

Backstrokes and descenders are emphasized. Crossbars and tittles are eliminated. The entire motion of the script trends upwards and to the left.

No translation of the text is given. In the words of the artist Shahzia Sikander, “The beauty of the written words supersedes everything else” (Sollins 2001). The purpose of the writing is to be a secret for only one person to know, and the meaning is ultimately not as important as the presence of the words.

## **Gold**

For all human history, there has been a worldwide fascination with gold. The symbolic power of gold infiltrates the English language in many metaphors (silence is golden, golden rule, gold standard, good as gold, golden goose, etc.). Its symbolism itself has become conflicting; “gold has been used as a symbol for everything from devotion to wealth and power,” but is also “imagined as the suppressor of human agency (...) dominating humans instead of serving them” (Holland 2005 p. 139; de Witte 2013 p. 9). Gold is both what gods are made of and desire as well as what turns us from them.

The use of gold in religious objects in the West for ornamentation, illumination, and gilding was of specific interest to me. Gold elevates anything it is added to into a luxury (or at least, the appearance of luxury). To put it dramatically, “gold operates at the thresholds of life and death, security and insecurity, freedom and bonding, certainty and unpredictability, anxiety and aspiration” (de Witte 2013 p. 9). Gold has followed humans into death for thousands of years, as evidenced by grave loot, immune to entropy due to its anticorrosive inertia. Its influence has reached the status of some kind of ironic false god. Few other substances have been deified and vilified like gold.

Its ability to glow and reflect light is used to transform pieces to an almost kitschy level of importance. The luminance of the material and history within religious art made its inclusion essential. When testing gold to use, metal leaf was the best representation. Oil pen, heavy body acrylic, and brass are the other form gold appears in on the work. Interestingly, the cheaper metal leaf (a gold-colored alloy) outshone the real gold leaf. More interestingly, the color of acrylic used to simulate gold on the banners and mandala of *Coffin With the Handle on the Inside* is not sold as gold, but as bronze. The gold from the brand's color line was far too pale.

### ***The Other Colors***

Blues, burgundy, black and white are the other colors in the color palette of the work.

Bright blue was the first non-black/white/gold color, introduced in the *Reliquaries* set. The royal azure is complimentary to the gold and a reference to masculinity, specifically memories of attending my brother's Blue and Gold Banquets from the Boy Scouts. It is also the 'world's favorite color,' indicative of the sky, hope, the ocean, openness, etc. Of all colors considered, it had the least negative associations across cultures. An effusion of blues appears in the *Angels Triplet* as well.

The first navy piece was *The Five Stages* coffin and its obelisks. The colors black and deep brown were tested to simulate the look of a real coffin, but the effect was more indicative of a Halloween decoration. A velvet matte navy paint and matching navy faux suede were used instead. Navy became a dominant color in the show, with the same paint

being used for the backgrounds of the *Angels Triplet* and the same fabric for the *Hearts Together Banners*.

I call red that I use “oxblood,” though I often use the term “burgundy” for clarity. *Coffin With the Handle on the Inside* was the first piece to be oxblood. The second coffin could not be navy; this would create a connection to *The Fives Stages* coffin that did not exist. The *Coffin With the Handle on the Inside* ended up oxblood because it told me it wanted to be oxblood. I have no further explanation for why it is this color.

Red (burgundy), blues, yellow (gold) are the primary colors from which all visible colors are formed. This creates a fitting trifecta. Red and blue make a subtle reference to gender dichotomy and its varied expression, as either color has been used to indicate gendered things. Black and white are just the deepest or lightest shade/tint of any color visible to humans, but I am counting them as colors, as any sane person should. They are useful “voids” and “quiet” colors. The limited color palette built a strong pillar for which the show could stand. Looking at the resulting body of work, one could never guess my favorite color is green.

## **The Music**

Sound became another way of invoking the sublime without objects, but music is also beholden to signifiers through instrumentation, melody, and music tradition, etc. Music for the show was the last element added to the work. It was inspired by religious music, ambient meditative soundscapes, and peaceful video game soundtracks. It was composed using a computer keyboard and mouse, the digital program Arturia Augmented Strings, and a lot of hand cramps. Some tracks correlate to a specific piece of work, using



elements of the pieces to inform the melodies. It was included to provide the gallery space with the mood of a shrine. Simulated instruments include cello, violin, viola, and pipe organ.

A speaker was mounted in the center of the ceiling and connected to a power supply. An mp3 player loaded with the tracks was connected via Bluetooth. The ceiling speaker lasted about two days before being unable to charge sufficiently while playing music. A second, springer speaker was placed by the gallery side door, hooked up to power, and connected to the mp3 player. This configuration lasted for the remainder of the show's run with great success.

**Table 1: List of music tracks.**

Track Name	Duration (minutes)	Notes
Prelude	14:04	an introduction to the space
Going Underwater	11:05	a quieter, descending mood
Resurfacing	4:49	the journey back to a better place
The Navy Coffin (Give Thanks)	8:11	a motif of five ascending notes and the tune to the hymn Give Thanks
It Is Well	9:48	inspired by the hymn of the same name
The Five Reliquaries	12:18	inspired by the heights of the windows of the reliquaries

## **Light**

Light is a basic symbol in many faiths. The control and use of it in sacred spaces could go back as far as the caves of Lascaux. Stained glass windows, the work of the artist James Turrell, and candlelight were the inspirations for including light. Colored

LED strips and spotlights backlight many of the works to elevate their auras into something familiar yet sublime. Gaff tape, vinyl, screws, and self-adhering acrylic spacers were used to incorporate the lights and cords as seamlessly as possible.

The first piece to have lights tested on it was the painting *Ancient* from the *Angels Triplet*. The desire to have the paintings, which were also inspired by the look of stained glass, look like they were lifting off the wall and emitting light was essential. Wooden spacers were added to the back of the canvas to create space for the LEDs to live. Batteries had the best effect, leaving no visible wires and creating a bright halo around the work. However, tests revealed that batteries faded after several hours. Due to the number of lights in the show, all the lights were wired to wall power.

### **The Furniture**

When the finished pieces were tested with typical white rectangular pedestals, the look of the boxy white shapes distracted from the rigid craft of the work. Therefore, custom tables, pedestals, and stands were designed and fabricated to match the art they hold. The tables echo the form of the ellipses, tapering angles, gold edgework, and color scheme of the show. Seven low stools were also constructed for visitors to sit on and rest while looking at the works.

The largest two tables are nearly identical. One has a longer top. The cross pieces used to support the legs of these two tables and two pedestals are held in place by physics. The tops are also held on by nothing but their own weight. The base of *Coffin* *With the Handle on the Inside* is several stacked ellipses with no glue. The dowel

crossbars holding the U-shaped supports of *The Five Stages* can also slide out. The ability for these to flat pack is intentional for easy storage and transportation.

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## THE WORK

The following section is to provide details on the story of the works and expound on the show notes included in literature at the exhibition. The works are presented in roughly the order they were created.

### **The Five Reliquaries**

Reliquaries are thought of as Catholic objects of reverence. They are vessels of holy relics attributed to Christianity, saints, and miracles. Some cross the line into being ridiculous in their literalness (e.g., a saint's toe bone being encased within a life-sized, bejeweled foot). The word "reliquary" itself comes from the word "relic," which denotes an object of significant historical interest or significance.

When analyzing my past as a woman and how "relics" of it still live on in my body and memory, I wanted to find a way to suitably house and respect those parts of my past. Unlike other Trans people who may wish to destroy their past selves, I do not feel the need to kill the woman I was. Jax (female) is the reason Jax (trans man) exists today. Quoted directly from the brochure: *There are things in my past I don't want to forget about but don't need now. A play on Catholic reliquaries, personal remembrance, past milestones, and things you want to forget in your life but don't want to lose.*

The MDF maquette of the first obelisk inspired the form of my reliquaries. The shape of the obelisk also lent itself to a base and top separation so these reliquaries can be opened and accessed, if needed. The upper part simply lifts off. The bottom front of each sports iconography leads the viewer to infer why these relics are important to preserve.

The original window design was an inset trapezoid. The draft of this idea proved visually clunky and difficult to cut from the wood. The elliptical shape of the window serves as a pleasing, femininely curved eye-like form, and visual gag on the vulva (just as the obelisk is an angled, masculine phallus).

Originally two reliquaries were built: a black and white pair. *Anthurium: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* and *The Creation of Man* were planned and finished as a matching yin-yang set during the fall of 2020. They were later heavily updated as my technique improved. Soon, another pair was born. *A Monument to Eggs* and *Dilemma* were finished during the lockdown of spring 2020 and underwent minor edits to their interiors after safe access to the studio was established. Lastly, a fifth reliquary was added to round the number to five. The theme of pairs, threes, and fives became a motif as the body of work developed, and *I Don't Know What My Face Looks Like* was added to the family. This created a second white reliquary that lent a harmonious order for the five to be arranged in (blue-white-black-white-blue) (Fig 9). This accidentally created a “pride flag” of sorts, echoing the mirrored five-striped trans pride flag (blue-pink-white-pink-blue).



Figure 9: *The Five Reliquaries* installation view.

### ***A Monument to Eggs***

The term “egg” is trans slang for someone who is Trans but has not realized it yet. The phrase “cracking your egg” means realizing you are Trans. The reliquary *A Monument to Eggs* contains a white hollowed-out chicken egg mounted on a gold wire stand. The front of the base has feminine version of the trans sun symbol I have created as well as tally marks, which denote waiting (Fig 10). This reliquary is for the folk still in their eggs, who have hatched since, and will crack the eggs of others.





**Figure 10: A Monument to Eggs.**

### ***Anthurium: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman***

This is one of the two original reliquaries. The base depicts a flowering anthurium and the inside holds a gold-leafed, 3D-printed bust of myself from 2018 (Fig 11). When dreaming up new symbols for trans identity, the anthurium came to mind. In Hawai'i, where the Japanese half of my family settled, anthurium is known as “the boy flower.” I grew up calling it this cheeky nickname. I would not be the first to draw parallels to

flowers and genitalia, and the anthurium has references to both internal and external physiologies. I would also not be the first to use a plant to symbolize hopes for growth.

The anthurium here marks the beginning of a “blooming” into the current me. It also commemorates what I used to look like. The bust is made from a photogrammetric scan which is accurate down to the folds in my shirt. Interestingly, when my friends from the fencing team saw this piece in my show, they did not recognize the woman inside as me.



**Figure 11:** *Anthurium: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman.*

### ***The Creation of Man***

This is one of the two original reliquaries. The base depicts the hands of Adam (and God from Michaelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* (c. 1508–1512) Sistine Chapel. Above the hands is a masculine trans sun symbol of my own creation. The inside houses a rib bone mounted on gold wire stand (Fig 12).

This ironic nod to the biblical creation of man challenges how men are “made.” The pride-inspiring reference to trans men as ‘self-made men’ influenced this piece. Altering my hormones to “become male” is as arbitrary as removing a rib to be more like the original man, Adam. There is nothing biological about being a man. The body has nothing to do with it.

This reliquary also challenges the misconception that being trans or choosing to transition is going against God's plan. If one agrees God does not make mistakes, then it is indeed His plan for me to be male. He gave me the mind and means to be an artist and a maker, so I will use them to create and make myself.



Figure 12: *The Creation of Man.*

### ***I Don't Know What My Face Looks Like***

The overtly titled reliquary *I Don't Know What My Face Looks Like* is a reference to my struggle to produce an essential piece of any artist's portfolio: the self-portrait. Through art classes in high school and undergraduate, I had been unable to produce an accurate self-portrait. I could draw someone else's face, grid and trace my own, or mess up completely. It was not until I used photo editing software in an undergraduate design class to gender bend myself male that it made sense; I did not know what my face looked like because I had never seen it. I had been seeing my face as something yet to be changed (into male). I could not see it as a man's face and therefore

could not draw myself correctly. I was trying to draw it without realizing what I wanted it to be or why.

Since transitioning, I have been able to capture my self-portrait in many forms. This reliquary contains an eighth-scale dollhouse mirror and a transformative sequence of my own profile turning into a pair of mirrored questions marks (Fig 13).



**Figure 13:** *I Don't Know What My Face Looks Like.*

## ***Dilemma***

*Dilemma* houses an eighth-scale dollhouse toilet. Its base has the symbols for men's and women's restrooms with the women's sign peeled off to expose the raw MDF (Fig 14). This references the classic dilemma of choosing which bathroom to use for my own comfort and safety (or between my own comfort or safety), a dilemma faced by millions of trans people each day. This reliquary offers no answers but acts as a vital clue to what the content of the reliquaries refers to. Bathroom anxiety is a classic trans experience. I have shed my female identity, but that does not stop the world from seeing me as a woman because of how I look. So, the dilemma stands. This reliquary was the easiest for viewers to understand.



Figure 14: *Dilemma*.

### Refusal Trio

This piece, like *The Five Reliquaries*, was also originally a pair. It was inspired by the pure feeling of laying down to rest. Quoted from the show brochure: *I refuse to stand up anymore. I just want to lie down. Sometimes standing tall is too much effort for the result. Sometimes I want to lie down and rest. Sometimes you need to just be low and quiet and take time to listen. Sometimes you're done being seen and need to be unseen.*

This feeling of lying down is a refusal to stand, but not a permanent one, nor is it a violent action.

The *Refusal Trio* also became the crowd favorite in the exhibition (Fig 15).





Figure 15: *Refusal Trio* installation view.

## **Record Trio**

The three obelisks in *Record Trio* hold my thoughts on identity as a fractal, how far back being trans goes in history, and the angst of finding yourself at any day and age. These three obelisks do not have official front faces. When on display, I often turn them to new sides each day. The large, central, black obelisk holds thoughts on going back in time and history to make sense of how things are now. A type of cladogram is seen on one side. The two smaller oxblood obelisks hold thoughts akin to the fractal metaphor of identity and the mind-boggling mystery of the self. Asymptotes are seen on several faces, which are a useful metaphor for getting closer and closer to a solution but never being able to reach it in human time.

The table they stand on has such a high gap between the legs because another obelisk was planned to possibly sit underneath (Fig 16).



Figure 16: *Record Trio*.

## **False Dichotomy**

This piece has perhaps the most pretentious name of all the REFLECTION show. A false dichotomy is an informal fallacy where two things are touted as the only two options when there are more. It is also known as false bifurcation, false dilemma, and the either-or fallacy. Quoted from the show brochure: *You can get as close to a mirror as you want, but you cannot touch yourself. You are flipped around. You've never seen yourself how other people see you. You aren't real in the mirror. It is a relief. Spending too much time getting closer and closer to something that isn't supposed to be real will make you sick.*

*There are ideas that seem so disparate, but are essentially the same, yet they can never touch. How are they similar enough to be twins?*

The idea that you and your reflection/conception of self are different is a false dichotomy (they cannot be fairly compared). The idea that LGBTQ+ and religion cannot go together is a fallacy. As mentioned before, nature does not make binaries. Having two options for things is not a natural occurrence. The two obelisks are identical, and only appear differently because one has been inverted and suspended (Fig 17).

When placed on a rectangular pedestal, the effect was just as conflicting as the other obelisks against straight-lined forms. A veneered or papered cylindrical pedestal was the original preference for this piece. Due to time, however, the base for this piece ended up being a cut down Sakrete® tube with the end capped off. This resulted in the (distracting) spiral on the current base. Fishing line was used to mount the upper piece to a hook on the ceiling.





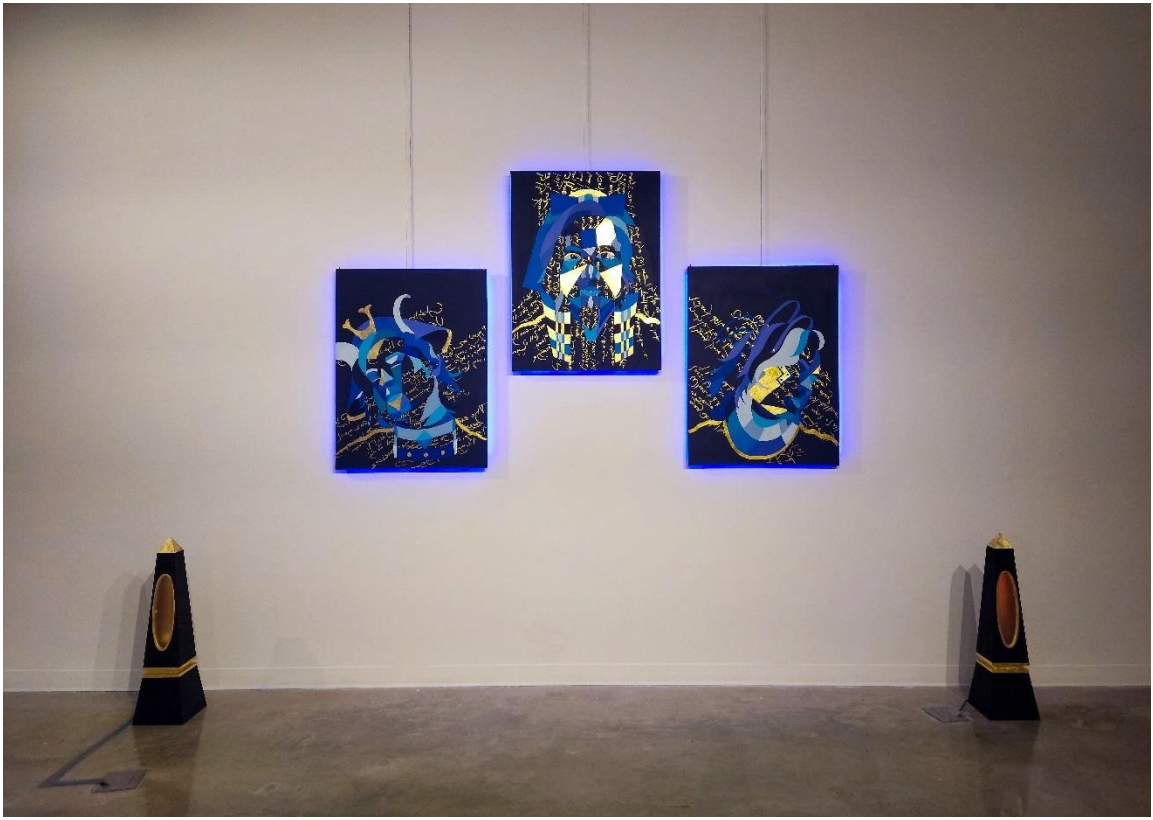
**Figure 17:** *False Dichotomy* installation view.

## Angels Triplet

The *Angels Triplet* is inspired by stained glass windows, tri-fold altar pieces, and the metaphor of the geometrical construction of the self. The faces are based off my own, but the angels are not supposed to be me. I wanted them to be androgynous, but I cannot see them as anything but female. I am not bothered by this but remain unsure of why this is because I do not see myself as a woman. Originally the *Angels'* faces were fully painted in. Parts were covered back in with navy to allow writing to show through and connect them. Tests were done with text written directly onto the walls to connect the three pieces, but the results suggested a dirty wall.

The two “lanterns” were added to frame the *Angele*. They were inspired by tōrō (Japanese stone lanterns). These lanterns have windows but no objects. The insides are painted gold, and a small line of yellow-orange LEDs illuminate the gold to a warm shine.





**Figure 18:** *Angels Triplet* installation view.

### ***Ancestor***

*Ancestor* is the angel on the left (Fig 19). She wears a stylized version of kabuto, a type samurai helmet. She is there for all those in my history who watch over me on Earth.





Figure 19: *Ancestor with the kabuto helmet.*

### ***Ancient***

*Ancient* is the angel in the middle of the three (Fig 20). She wears a stylized pharaonic Khat headdress. On top of her head is a stylized bow, the likes of which is also seen on female kokeshi dolls. She is there for all those who were like me in our shared human history. Her eyes are open and observing.

She is mainly inspired by the female pharaoh Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut was not the first female pharaoh, but she wore the traditional male regalia of the Pharaonic office, including the Khat, false beard, and kilt. She was rendered as androgynous in all her official depictions. It is unclear whether she did this to reinforce her right to rule or if she was trans.





Figure 20: *Ancient* with the pharaonic headdress and kokeshi doll bow.

## ***Androgyny***

*Androgyny* is there for the things I do today that make me Me. Her place is on the right. Her headgear is a stylized fencing mask (Fig 21). Fencing is the sport I love most, and the first sport where I competed as male. The protective gear hides many physical characteristics, collegiate teams can be mix-gender, and the sheer number of LBGTQ+ fencers I have met makes fencing the place where I feel completely myself.



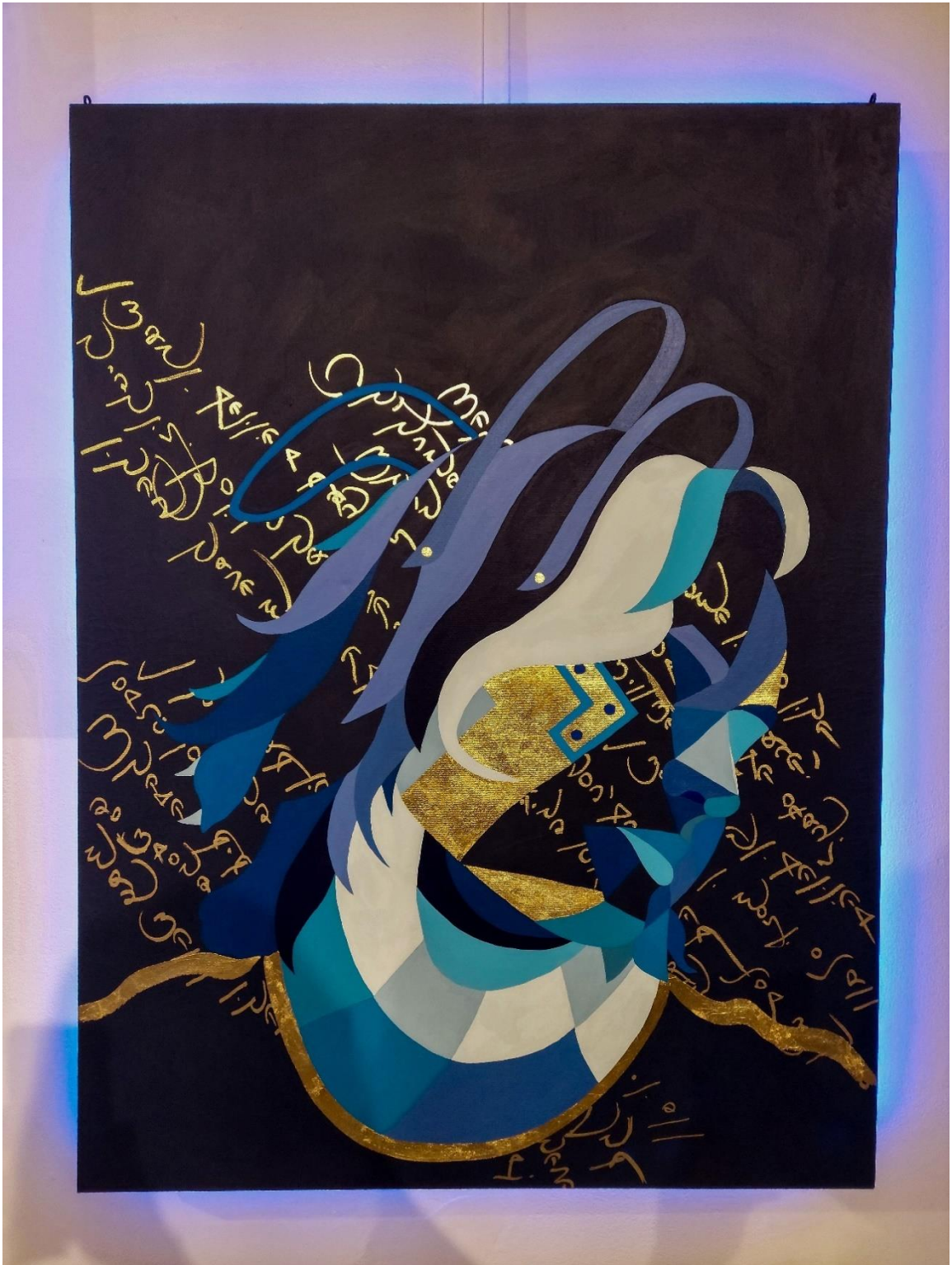


Figure 21: *Androgyny with a heavily stylized fencing mask.*

## **Prayer Books**

My prayers are wind beneath my wings. This pair of prayer books were inspired by various elongated prayer books from east and southeast Asia, such as sutra books or the *Tripitaka*. The books hold my hopes and thoughts for the future of my life and the lives of others like me.

The shape is the elongated trapezoid created by the front face of an obelisk. The pages are MDF and held together with pairs of hinges. Each book has six pages, to make a total of twelve. Each front and back page has a cover glyph inspired by the content inside. Unfolded and held by each hand under the arms, they resemble wings (Fig 23).



Figure 22: *Prayer Books* installation view.





Figure 23: *Prayer Books* held aloft by me.

## The Five Stages

The five obelisks inside are either rising out or going to rest. *The Five Stages* is a play on death/dead terminology in trans argot, the five stages of grief, remembrance, and rest. Each obelisk holds a glyph indicating the period of my life it represents. The obelisks are in order, the smallest being the oldest and the largest being the most current. Three sides on the largest obelisk are left blank to represent the period not yet finished.





**Figure 24:** *The Five Stages.*

### **Coffin With the Handle on the Inside**

*Coffin With the Handle on the Inside* wins the award for the piece with the most obvious name in RELFECTION. Before it had a name, I referred to it as “the tall coffin,” “the red coffin,” or simply “the closet.”

Quoted from the show brochure: *A coffin is a resting place. It is a safe place. Upright, it is a niche or closet.*

*A closet is a secret space, a hiding place, and a storage space. It is a long-time metaphor for having something concealed. LGBTQ+ humor has long disparaged the*

*closet, but it must not be forgotten that you might need it to survive. The door of this coffin has the infinite hearts mandala on the inside.*



**Figure 25:** *Coffin With the Handle on the Inside.*

## CONCLUSION

There is a quote I came across when I was reading materials to prepare for my thesis. The words were spoken just five years before I was born by Maria Abramovic. She explains a goal of her work; “Breaks with conventional ‘understanding’ are important to me; I want to produce a ‘mental jump,’ want to lead people to a point where rational thinking fails, where the brain has to give up. The confusion which then arises in the brain is also an interval. Another world can open up. I shall point the way, no more.”<sup>1</sup> Leading people to that “‘mental jump’ (...) where rational thinking fails” are the perfect words for what I wish to accomplish with this thesis. Shifting someone’s paradigm closer to how things really are or to a more plastic state of being is my goal. To be rigid is to be primed to fail. To be plastic is to be ready to expand and mold into new places, thoughts, and ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Abramovic, Statements from conversation with the author (1992), quoted by Doris von Darthen, in her essay “World Unity: Dream or Reality, a question of survival,” in Marina Abramovic (Berlin: Nationalgalerie/Ostfildern-Ruit: Edition Cantz, 1993) 236-7.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Jacquelyn Aiko Ohashi (Jax) was born and raised in Fairfax, Virginia. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Industrial Design from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 2019, then went on to George Mason University to pursue his Master of Fine Arts in 2019. In 2023, he will graduate and continue learning, teaching, and making things until he dies.