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A Photographic *Translation*: Unearthing A New Spiritual Language

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Abstract

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A Photographic Translation: Unearthing A New Spiritual Language is an academically focused and conversationally written document that expresses my research on spirituality, historic photographic techniques, eastern religious practices, and artwork by two groundbreaking artists. I begin with a brief discussion of my own personal spirituality, the way that it has influenced my artwork, and how I intend to investigate my ideas about the interconnectedness of our world through a combination of spirituality and abstracted photography. I segue into individual discussions on the major themes of this work: Japanese Zen Buddhism, the camera lucida, and two influential artists: Matthew Ritchie and Pablo Picasso. The paper concludes with an integrated section about the impact of each of my interests as well as the ins and outs of the installation process and how I aspire to continue to create art as a spiritual practice for the rest of my life.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The behaviors and values of my life have been religiously centered since I could remember. I grew up as a Roman Catholic, attending church every Sunday and spending my Tuesday nights at religious education classes. I was quite content with my Christian identity and had not really given much thought to changing my ways. At the age of twelve, though, I finally took a giant step out of my comfort zone, separated myself from the Catholic church, and started to attend a non-denominational house of worship. It was here that I became familiar with new forms of expression, seeing how singing, dancing, and even painting could glorify God.

As I matured, I realized that this term "religious" or should I say, "Christian," was too specific and concentrated for how I felt about my relationship with God and the world around me. That is not to say, though, that I ceased to believe in biblical scripture as the divine word of God or that I stopped calling myself a Christian. However, I must confess that the feelings I felt were much more profound than just believing in Jesus Christ as my savior. I sensed that there was another relationship waiting to surface here on earth and that this relationship would improve the bond I had with God and Jesus already. What I mean to say is that by recognizing the interconnectedness of life here on earth, I was then able to appreciate and to celebrate the fullness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the one who created all things beautiful. I felt like I had lived the last twenty-two years of my life in one dimension and that I was ready to step into a realm of much broader proportions, one that relinquished the rigidity of religion and empowered the liberty of faith and spirituality.

Last year, I experimented with ways that I could communicate the spiritual and to express this deeper connection among us here on earth. I produced my first book, entitled *The*

Sanctuary, which contains original images of churches that had influenced my spiritual journey and walk with Christ, as well as textual quotations (both original and cited) that came from familiar biblical scripture, inspirational quotes, and worship songs that related to me. But I was unsatisfied upon completion of the book. I sensed a deeper connection between the image and its corresponding text—a metaphysical element (the very intangible quality that God intended for life on earth to share) that had not yet been manifested. I realized that it was just way too formal as I reflected on the strategic process I had used to assemble the book: first choosing the images, then the text, and then putting them in chronological order. While I understood that God's plan to intertwine and to interrelate the world may have been well thought out and strategic, I also understood that the product of His strategic planning was complicated and not as straightforward as my book turned out to be. As children of God, it is our mission and responsibility to search and to find the links and purposes of our lives, meaning that my art needed to be much more equivocal, unclear, and informal for my viewers to figure out. I needed to break free from the literalism of these expressive modes and to find a way to express my words and photographs in a way that would effectively communicate my own idea of the spiritual dimension.

Despite the shortfalls of my first attempt, I decided to start my second project in a very similar way, this time using my images as responses to passages that reflected the idea of "everyday spirituality," a term I first read about in Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat's book, *Spiritual Literacy.* This book communicates a message far beyond anything merely inspirational, discussing subject matter that pertains directly to real life. In the opening statement, the couple explains the necessity for our world to start blending the holy and the ordinary dimensions and to

recognize the interconnectedness and importance of daily life.[1] This means that we must learn to understand that spirituality can be found within everyday life and not *just* in God's word, at a religious service, or during meditation. It can be found, for instance, at the grocery store, in a grandparent's attic, or during a taxi ride. Spirituality, they claim, is not something that can be answered with an "either-or" type of question. It is something quite unpredictable and fascinating.

One of the first stories that hit home for me was a story about a traveling rabbi by the name of Jeffrey K. Salkin who reframed his cab driver's work within the spiritual dimension and showed Mike how important even the humblest of jobs are to the world's interconnectedness:

> A few years ago, a young taxi driver drove me to John F. Kennedy Airport on Long Island. After a few minutes of conversation, I discovered that Mike had belonged to my synagogue years before I came to the community.
>
> "So, rabbi," he asked while we sat in heavy traffic, "What do you say to a Jew like me who hans't been in a synagogue since his bar mitzvah ceremony?"
>
> Thinking for a moment, I recalled that in Hasidic lore, the *baal aqalah* (the wagon driver) is an honored profession. So I said, "We could talk about your work."
>
> "What does my work have to do with religion?"
>
> "Well, we choose how we look at the world and at life. You're a taxi driver. But you are also a piece of the tissue that connects all humanity. You're taking me to the airport. I'll go to a different city and give a couple of lectures that might touch or help or change someone. I couldn't have gotten there without you. You help make that connection happen.
>
> "I heard on your two-way radio that after you drop me off, you're going to pick up a woman from the hospital and take her home. That means that you'll be the first non-medical person she encounters after being in a hospital. You will be a small part of her healing process, an agent in her re-entry into the world of health.
>
> "You may then pick up someone from the train station who has come home from seeing a dying parent. You make take someone to the house of the one that he or she will ask to join in marriage. You're a connector, a bridge builder. You're one of the unseen people who make the world work as well as it does. That is holy work. You may not think of it this way, but yours in a sacred mission."[2]

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[1] Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 9-11.

[2] Jeffrey K. Slain Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy,* 308-309.

This story excited me for my photographic possibilities. I thought about shooting a taxi or maybe a rabbi sitting in a synagogue; but then it hit me. I was right back where I started. The project was becoming too one-dimensional again and too easy to figure out. Frustrated, I tried to focus my attention on how I could communicate this story in a non-literal way while still upholding its veracity. I wanted to sustain the clarity, honesty, and authenticity of a photograph while diverging from a stereotypical or a clichéd subject matter that was communicated in the story. I kept imagining artistic solutions that were based on execution rather than exploration and I needed to find a way to divert from the sureness of preconception and to embrace the uncertainty of research.

As I read and re-read the story, I noticed key words like builder, connector, unseen, healing, and the phrase, "You're one of the unseen people who make this world work as well as it does." Look at Figure 1. Of the photos I took this one created the strongest dialogue with the text. The picture portrays a bridge, a tattered, worn-out bridge that no one uses anymore. It is quite obvious to the viewer that this bridge was an important connector; a connector of riverbanks, of animals, and of people. It served a purpose, just like the taxi driver did in the story. I was pleased with the outcome of the photograph and could not wait to see how it looked next to the text.

As I placed the photo next to the passage, I was left deeply dissatisfied yet again. It was not genuine, not personal, not spiritual at all really. There was no movement to it and certainly no ambiguity. It was obvious to see the tension between the dilapidation displayed in the image and the virtuous message expressed in the text but the whole thing was just too clear and to easy

to figure out. The objectivist and realist approach I was taking to photography did not register the spiritual as I was intending. The clarity and simplicity of the work I had created did not reflect the complexity and ambiguity that lies at the very heart of spirituality; and not just spirituality, but this new subtype of spirituality that focuses on the everyday and proposes itself has highly accessible while remaining extremely incalculable and often difficult to discern. Simply put, the spiritual dimension floating all around us remains unknown until we are able to identify (and then ultimately to understand) its presence in our lives and to accept spirituality in a tangible form.

Despite my frustration and dissatisfaction, I revisited a few basic questions I had at the beginning of the project: 1. Was there an everyday spirituality waiting to be uncovered in the world around us? 2. If so, could I communicate this phenomenon through a combination of text and image? As I pondered these two questions, I realized that I needed to make this project more about the spiritual experience and practice it took to create art. This project demanded a more personal and individual tone, meaning I had to move away from objective thinking and into subjective thinking. I had to stop thinking about what others felt or understood about spirituality and really concentrate on my personal journey down the avenue of spiritual understanding, eventually hoping to acquire an understanding that I could then apply to the rest of the world. I said to myself, "That's what faith is, after all. And those who are most faithful bear the most fruit." I stopped thinking so much about finding the "right" answer and just started to make art based on my personal belief that the intangibility of spirituality and the actions we take to maintain it do in fact manifest itself within the tangible world. It was my mission to determine

how I could use the combination of two media (text and photographs) to convey and ultimately to prove that very idea.

As I worked through these questions I turned to abstraction to overcome the photographic realism and literalism that so restricted the freedoms of the spiritual dimension. Likewise, I weaned away from text altogether (or at least away from a text that the world would understand or deem as an established written language), leaving me with just my photographs. I had been so insistent on including text in my final project until I saw the ambitious conceptual art of Matthew Ritchie. I found that my artistic mission is quite similar to his in that we are both trying to represent a type of complex organizational system, which subliminally circulates throughout the universe, and to understand and visualize it by dissecting and re-shaping the framework of it through the combination of different media. Likewise, I learned that Ritchie incorporates aspects of various religions, scientific principles, and spiritual practices in juncture with his own imagination—an approach that really appealed to my project and me.

So here I am, wrestling with a multitude of problems surrounding photography, text, and spirituality. I pondered the role photography was going to play in my own art and if it was enough for the image to stand alone in its traditional form (i.e. a specific subject matter presented as a flat two-dimensional image on a piece of photo paper). Soon, I began to believe that my own poetic language, my own voice, was being limited by the camera and photographic image, able to show only snippets of this language and thus defeating the idea of a continuous, fluid spiritual dimension. I was terrified by the thought of deviating away from photography and creating art in another way (i.e. drawing or painting) but I was willing, like Ritchie, to abstract

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[3] "Matthew Ritchie: Biography," PBS.org, accessed April 3, 2011, http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/ritchie/.

my photographs as a way to deepen my connection with and reveal the potential of the photographic process and everyday spirituality. Specifically, the way that a series of abstractions morphs digital imagery into an unfamiliar representation of intertwined lines and organic spaces illustrates the variability and fluctuation of spirituality.

Japanese Zen Buddhism: The Spiritual Dimension

As I see it, acknowledging the intricate details of our world transpires as a meditative and highly spiritual experience, one that solicits both our global and personal awareness. This aroused awareness, however, is not one-sided, but rather multi-dimensional and can be skewed in many different directions. Whether we are aware of it or not, one of those avenues is toward a type of spirituality because we are constantly in dialogue with the world around us. The world we live in today is busy, fast-paced, and extremely dynamic: all characteristics that often fog our perception and overall spiritual view of our everyday lives. We are guilty of overlooking the subtleties of the world around us and, consequently, the artistic (namely photographic for me) representation of it. There is a universal spiritual language waiting to be uncovered, rediscovered, and expressed all around us—all the time. Unearthing this new spiritual language is upon us, and we are obligated to find and to recognize the ways in which it allows us to better connect the individual to the world, to the rest of life, and then ultimately to God.

As I previously mentioned, this project first began in search of my own definition of spirituality and the steps needed to discover it. I realized, though, that I must first familiarize myself with some spiritual history to broaden my current understanding beyond Catholicism or Christianity in general and to open my eyes (and heart) to alternative spiritual approaches,

practices, and beliefs. Specifically, I chose to research Eastern practices (i.e. Zen, Buddhism, and Hinduism) focusing on the ways they performed meditation, expressed their thanksgiving, and showed awareness of their association with the world around them. I discovered that their traditions and spiritual customs relied oftentimes on art.

For example, in ancient Eastern countries those who had the materials wrote and drew on flexible paper-cloth as a way to preserve ideas, procedures, and cultural milestones.[3] Over time this innate humanistic procedure (derived specifically from both Indian and Chinese peoples) became a creative yet highly spiritual practice in the Japanese culture. Buddhist monks capitalized on the creation and use of these scroll paintings, mostly because painting and calligraphy served as the primary vehicle in the traditional meditative practice of the Japanese people.[4] Over time, this visual imagery expanded the imagination beyond simple concepts and ideas, showing how "Zen images are intuitive, simultaneously introverted and extroverted, controlled and yet spontaneous."[5]

Although Zen images reflect a sense of spontaneity and freedom, Buddhist monks had relied on calligraphic writing (a very structured and established form) as the most effective vehicle to express what was not stated aloud. The writings these Zen monks created were called *bokuseki,* which literally means traces (*seki*) of ink (*boku),* and were often direct and intentional in what they were trying to get across to the viewer.[6] For instance, look at *Treasure Boat* (Fig. 2)*,* a painting by Hakuin Ekaku (one of the most famous and talented calligraphers/painters of

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[3] Kenji Toda, *Japanese Scroll Painting* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 3.

[4] John Stevens, *Zenga: Brushstrokes of Enlightenment* (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1990), 11.

[5] Stevens, *Zenga*, 26.

[6] Miyeko Murase, *The Written Image: Japanese Calligraphy and Painting from the Sylvan Barney and William Burto Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 19.

the Rinzai sect)[7] and how, despite the freed, sweeping brushstrokes within the work, there is an aura of narrative and instruction represented by the characters in the upper lefthand corner. How ever intentional their strokes may be, there still is a sense of spontaneity within the painting that continually pushes and pulls the viewer back and forth between what is image and what is text. The flip-flopping of text and image's traditional roles proves an excellent example of unclarity, a primary aspect of spirituality, and forces the viewer to spend time studying and reading the meaning of the painting.

Specifically, this painting shows how to attain a life of longevity and good fortune by way of the popularized treasure boat navigated by Fukurokujū (the God of Longevity) containing the four symbols of good fortune: the lucky raincoat, a straw hat, a magic mallet, and a treasure bag.[8] We are instructed to climb aboard this boat as a way to assure our success in steering through the rapids of life and to show our sincerity toward the rest of mankind. Most importantly, though, are the calligraphic characters at the upper left that serve as the textual counterpart to the rest of this story. The characters read: "Those who are loyal to their lord and filial to their elders will be presented with this raincoat, hat, mallet, and bag."[9] These words, though, do not appear as a supplement to but rather as a counterpart of the rest of the painting. This proves that these calligraphic characters are images themselves—regardless of their accepted academic and textual connotations.

Hakuin's marriage of text and image revealed not only that their traditional roles could be switched, but also that their shared relationship could function on an entirely different level than

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[7] H.E. Davey, *Brush Meditation: A Japanese Way to Mind & Body Harmony* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 1999), 33.

[8] Stevens, *Zenga*, 146.

[9] Stevens, *Zenga*, 146.

we ever thought possible. For instance, to negate the simple idea that text has become image and that image has become text, we must consider the things that occur during the transition rather than what happens before and after it. Instead, we must look at some point (or possibly some multiple points) somewhere in the middle of this transition to locate the representation of the spiritual dimension. He uncovered this, though, by simply creating art, or rather, by simply *doing* art. It served as his spiritual practice and therefore we cannot demand a direct or "right" meaning of it all because spirituality is something that can never be fully explained. What is "right" lies within our attempt to understand and to feel connected to something greater than ourselves, extending far beyond human knowledge and even to our own consciousness. For example, in his book *Zen in Japanese Art: A Way of Spiritual Experience* (quoted in Thayer), J. Hasumi explains how this idea relates directly to the Japanese Zen tradition: "*Do* is not to be described, but to be walked. It is infinite, undetermined, and unlimited. Yet, it is the constant goal of spiritual yearning and striving. Penetration into *do* and transformation into *do* constitute the ultimate goal of Japanese art and Zen in the art of living."[10]

The Camera Obscura: A Brief History of the Painted Photograph

The development of the camera runs along a continuum that is composed of various defining moments, which have altered the very practice of photography. These changes are multi-variable and involve everything from the technological development of the camera itself to the way that photos are produced in the real world. Moreover, because of these changes, our world has weaned away from these historic practices. But I believe that these practices still

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[10] Peggy Thayer, *The Experience of Being Creative as a Spiritual Practice: A Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Study*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003), 54.

linger around us and demand our attention to be rediscovered, as if the image-making process will re-root itself back to the classic and historic practice that was used by artists during the late nineteenth century, one that involved the steady hand of the artist.

According to Joseph Needham in *Science and Civilization in China: Volume 4, Physics and Physical Technology, Part 1, Physics* (quoted at Wikipedia.com), the timeline begins back in the fourth century B.C. where Chinese and Greek philosophers (specifically Chinese philosopher Mo Ti and Greek mathematicians Aristotle and Euclid) learned the basic principles of optics and discovered that when light rays from an object pass through a small hole at the front of a light-proof box, an inverted image projects on the opposite side of it. This device became known as the pinhole camera.[11] Unfortunately, at the time of its invention, there was no easy way of capturing the image that was produced within the box and hence more research and experimentation was conducted to find a solution.

By the early part of the sixteenth century, a new optical device was invented called the *camera obscura* (Latin for "dark room"). It allowed the image to be projected on the outside of a box into the external world, enabling the artist to trace what was once a three-dimensional image into a tangible two-dimensional copy.[12] The first model of the camera obscura, however, was not yet portable. In fact, an entire room was darkened to create the image except for a small hole in one of the walls in order for this process to work. Light rays entered through this hole (which was later replaced by a lens in the later part of the sixteenth century) and an upside-down,

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[11] "Camera Obscura," Wikipedia.org, accessed April 28, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camera_obscura.

[12] Anne H. Hoy, *The Book of Photography: The History, The Technique, The Art, The Future* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic, 2005), 25.

backwards image appeared on the opposite wall. By the eighteenth century, the camera obscura had shrunk down to a compact, portable wooden box that contained a mirror where a real-world image reflected onto a glass top where it then could be traced onto paper or another flat surface.[13] Needless to say, this process required intense concentration and patience by the artist because it required such proficient handwork and sketching skills. The pay off was well worth the time and effort, though, because a beautiful, one-of-a-kind image was produced.

As the use of the camera obscura popularized, William Wollaston invented another device in the early part of the nineteenth century called the *camera lucida.* This camera (from which I tend to draw more of my inspiration) is a prism on a stand and is used primarily by amateur artists. It superimposed the artist's view of the setting, person, or object onto an attached sketchpad so that they could trace what they saw.[14] What was most fascinating about this device was that the artist could see the scene and image simultaneously, allowing artists to add intricate details that were left out of or indistinguishable within the virtual image superimposed on their sketchpad (Fig. 3).

With the use of either the camera obscura or the camera lucida, we are forced to question the connection between a painting (or the act of painting) and a photographic image (or the act of photographing). Are they equal, or is one superior to the other? What roles do the hand and the eye play in the creation of these images? Do they function together or work separately? Well, as previously discussed, the hand and the eye were once highly dependent upon one another, that is, until film and digital photography were introduced. According to Mary Price, an amateur

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[14] "Camera Obscura," Photography.com, accessed April 25, 2011, http://www.photography.com/articles/history/camera-obscura/.

[13] Hoy, *The Book of Photography*, 60.

[14] Hoy, *The Book of Photography,* 27.

portrait photographer and one of the founders of the Center for Independent Study in New Haven, the use of the hand has been separated from the eye and thus has delineated artists from original photographing techniques. She states:

> In photography, the hand does not become the primary instrument of registering or creation. The eye is dominant in the way a photograph is conceived. The eye sees, the segment of reality is framed and isolated by a synaptic leap between eye and reality, the exposure of film to light by means of the instrument camera is activated, the transcription to film occurs; the agency of the hand is comparatively minor. . . . [And] to emphasize eye at the expense of hand is to postulate a separation between them. The separation is more than one of language, but if there is opposition between them it exists only in abstraction.[15]

Think back to the 1800s when photographers did act on the actual surface of the photograph (i.e. by way of the camera obscura). They were able to include or to exclude, to alter and to enhance their images; most importantly, the use of the eye and the hand had played an equal role. The traced photograph (Fig. 4) expressed something much different from what an emulsion or digital photograph would today. The lines freed the photograph of its immediacy to the real world and from the social and cultural constraint that we, as a people, so impulsively place upon it. This linear depiction of the drawn scene offered a new way of viewing the world, allowing us to become more aware of its intrinsic construction and continual interplay. Most importantly, though, this apparent disconnect between the hand and the eye raises other questions about what occurs within the frame of the image. Has this separation compromised what lies within the frame? Has it affected how the image represents and/or relates to the viewer?

My research on these two cameras brought me to an exploration of Roland Gérard Barthes' book, *Camera Lucida,* and the ideas he brought to the table about photography. Although this book does not focus on the use of these devices, it proved to be an interesting

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[15] Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Space.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 29-30.

source of information and insight about photography that is pertinent to my own project. In 1980, Barthes, a twentieth century French literary theorist, philosopher, and critic, wrote and published this book in response to two circumstantial events in his personal life: 1. A commission by *Les cahiers du cinema* for a contribution to its series of short books on cinema; and 2. The death of his mother, Henriette Barthes.[16] The later of these two events, though, proved a crucial point of departure for Barthes as he focused his investigation of photography on the way a photograph effects the spectator, specifically examining how a photograph (primarily portraits) can have such lasting emotional *and* physical effects on a person. Likewise, he discusses two Latin terms, *studium* and *punctum,* and how they explain his different reactions to photographic images (namely, the way he feels both emotionally and physically when he looks at portraits of his late mother).[17]

Jane Gallop, a contributing author of *Photography Degree Zero*, offers a compelling chapter entitled, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," which discusses *The Pleasure of the Text* (another book by Barthes) and the relation between the inside and outside of a photograph. She begins the chapter with an interesting discussion of the word "in" in the phrase, "sexuality in art and the media," saying, "[The] word 'in' implies a relationship of container and contained, a relationship in which sexuality is something interior to—contained within—art of the media, something that is represented. It implies that sexuality is something that is within the work of art rather than in some relation the viewer or the artist has to the work of art."[18] However, instead of

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[16] Geoffrey Batchen, "Palinode: An Introduction to *Photography Degree Zero*," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 8-9.

[17] Batchen, "Palinode," 12.

[18] Jane Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 47.

deliberating about the phrase, "sexuality *in* art," she switches her concentration to another, "pleasure *of* phototext," as a way to explain the difference between representation and relation. Representation (which Barthes argues against) is a way of containing the pleasure of the image, meaning that the pleasurable subject matter within the photograph just circulates inside the frame and never includes a relation with either the artist or the viewer.[19]

Likewise, Barthes explains this claim in *The Pleasure of the Text* and shifts his focus from pleasure to photography. As previously mentioned, he constructs his own understanding of the photograph around two Latin terms, *staudium* and *punctum,* specifically correlating *studium* with representation and *punctum* with relation. Barthes explains that *studium* signifies the cultural, political, and overall general interpretation of a photograph while *punctum* marks the "break-up" of the *studium* and thus establishes a direct relationship between subject and viewer.[20] Hence, when a photograph only contains *studium* the viewer would describe it as interesting, immobile, and passive; and when there is that second element, the *punctum*, the viewer would describe it as active and aggressive. He goes on to say that the *punctum* acts out against the viewer, picking at the human psyche until it finds just the right spot to trigger emotional or physical pain; and once there is a *punctum*, a "blind field" (a term coined by a French film critic and film theorist, André Bazin), is created where the *studium* continues to live outside of the frame.[21]

By combining all of this research, I was able to apply these ideas to my own artwork, viewing the *studium* as the contained subject matter of my photographs and the *punctum,*

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[19] Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," 48.

[20] Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," 48.

[21] Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," 50.

ironically, as myself— the aggressive force acting to create a "blind field" where my viewers could discover and feel a connection with my art. I understood that somewhere in this "blind field" (which I considered to be a highly spiritual place) I could find the missing link between between experiencing something firsthand (i.e. from the standpoint of the people in the frame) and experiencing it secondhand (i.e. from the viewer's standpoint). I thought that maybe by forfeiting the use of the camera and embracing the use of paint and brush, I might just find the spirituality *of* this blind field rather than just the spirit within it.

Matthew Ritchie and Pablo Picasso

As I previously mentioned, Matthew Ritchie, one of the most innovative artists of the new millennium, has been an inspiration for my work due mostly to his strong association with painting and drawing and to his ability to produce work that reflects his own persona. The artwork he produces can be most accurately defined as a type of personal mythology, one that incorporates science, religion, a bit of the unthinkable, and his own imagination.[22] Ultimately, Ritchie brings these different historical and ideological belief systems together in an attempt to portray the mysterious common thread of the universe and to wrestle with a basic human question: how to deal with new information.

His artistic methodology undergoes many different forms in his ambitious effort to depict and to explain how the universe functions. Ritchie's use of media includes (but is certainly not limited to) painting, sculpture, arranging mosaics of colored Sintra (an industrial PVC foam

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[22] "Matthew Ritchie."

product), and digital animation.[23] He combines these mediums in a manipulative multilayering fashion—one that not only echoes the never-ending interaction of the world, but one that also exhibits the role that individual choice plays in its infinite development. Specifically, Ritchie's non-traditional aesthetic choices generously illustrate the complexity of the world in such a way that a viewer can decipher and understand it according to his or her own personal and unique perspective.

An example of this can be seen in a line of his work dealing with digitation, superposition, and scaling. He takes his two-dimensional drawings and digitizes them into a dimension all their own, as if regenerating a series of endless connections and associations that can neither be deemed as "accurate" nor "real." Interestingly, the loss of this realness results from the juxtaposition of real-world diagrams, symbols, and characters, often times referencing the laws of physics and foundations of modern biology. The rearrangement of information is hardly recognizable or identifiable and encourages viewers' subjectivity to form new meanings and connections of their very own.[24] In a way, Ritchie "[acts] as a messenger, serving as a bridge between the formed and the formless, the particular and the whole, the personal and the universal, the mundane and the divine," as he attempts to reconnect us to the very beginning: the Nothing; the Absolute.[25]

His strategies are innovative, fresh, and energetic, but above all Ritchie's techniques are unique *to him.* He pioneered successfully down a road paved only by his learned knowledge and artistic intuition. That is not to say, though, that his inspiration did not stem originally from the

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[23] Elizabeth M. Grady, "Modular Notes," in *Matthew Ritchie: More than the eye* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2008), n.p.

[24] Grady, "Modular Notes," n.p.

[25] Thayer, *The Experience of Being Creative as a Spiritual Practice*, 28.

work of other artists. Ritchie admired famous artists such as Piet Mondrian, Robert Rauschenberg, and Wassily Kandinsky because they created unusual art unconventionally by way of their own "self-generated meaning system."[26] For Ritchie, though, it took quite a bit of trial and error for him to develop his own meaning system. This was due mostly to (unlike his avant-garde predecessors) his interest in expansive, multi-variable art-making which displayed mass amounts of information. Ritchie did not see the need to minimize or to exclude any details, understanding that it all fit into the "chaotic order" of the world.

As he began to experiment, Ritchie turned to drawing as a foundation for much of his work. He believed that drawings were just small versions of paintings and that paintings were, in turn, small versions of installations.[27] This way of thinking manifested itself in Ritchie's work as his digital, two-dimensional drawings transformed into enormous three-dimensional (sometimes even four-dimensional) installations. Ritchie thought of drawing and painting as a general idea (as I now think of photography) rather than as a specific action and of the whole universe as one big experiment, where the art world within that universe served as an abstract space to investigate it.[28]

In a way Ritchie is like the Pablo Picasso of the twenty-first century. In his Cubist work Picasso viewed the world as a constantly shifting organism full of dynamism and continuity that consisted of layers upon layers of information. Picasso also thought that in order to understand a multitude of information within his paintings, it must be possible for his viewers to simplify and

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[26] "An Aesthetics of Physics: Talking with Matthew Ritchie about drawing and the inversion of consciousness," Re-title.com, accessed May 18, 2011, http://www.re-title.com/artists/Matthew-Ritchie.asp.

[27] "An Aesthetics of Physics."

[28] Lynn M. Herbert, "Knight of Infinity, Champion of Enlightenment," in *Matthew Ritchie: Proposition Player* (New York: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in association with Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2003), 16-24.

to break them down. For them to do this, Picasso offered three specific layers which, when assembled systematically, allow a painting to be deconstructed completely.

Let us look, for instance, at Picasso's *The Aficionado* (Fig. 5) as a way to better understand these three layers. First, there is the "gimme" layer; a layer easily read by the viewer because it is composed of identifiable objects. Two of the most obvious objects include the word "El Torero" at the bottom left and a guitar to the lower right, which ultimately "wake the spectator from the dreamy world of abstract structures and reassert a representation of an everyday subject."[29] Ritchie, too uses a layer like this in many of his works, including *You Are the Weather (Gravity High) for R.H.* (Fig 6). Notice that in the midst of the elliptic swirls and amorphic masses Ritchie situates two distinguishable elements: a human torso and the words, "Solar Radiation." Because the viewer recognizes them, they have a way 'into' the piece and feel welcomed and connected rather than rejected, isolated, or overwhelmed by its abstract qualities.

Then there comes the second layer, which is not necessarily on top of or below the first, but rather a counterpart or an addendum to it. This layer emphasizes the organization of these abstract structures that the worldly objects so easily distract. There is a tight rigid construction within the work, a maze of angular movements and geometric planes that maintain a secure and weighty massiveness to the painting, especially toward the bottom. Realize, though, that Picasso is quite intentional and conscientious in his ordering of these geometric shapes, planes, and lines in *The Aficionado*. He layers them together in such a way that creates a simultaneous feeling of movement and constriction across the surface of the canvas, a dynamic oscillation between a fixed and freed state. This can also be seen in *You Are the Weather (Gravity High) for R.H.*

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[29] Neil Cox, *Cubism* (London: Phaeton, 2000), 239.

where the strong linear lines to the left offset the organic lines and forms at the top, right, and bottom.

Lastly, there is a third layer, which proves to be the most difficult for the viewer to decipher, despite how important its role is to the whole of the painting. The intense handling and treatment of the canvas (particularly depicted in a moment at the bottom-center) serves as Picasso's final layer and offers a way for the viewer to look past the construction of the painting and to identify with what is real: the working and reworking of paint on a canvas. Specifically, his nuanced shading and handling of paint in various independent moments around the canvas alludes to Rembrandt's intense brushstrokes of the late Baroque period and gives life, breath, and action to the inert geometry and structure of the painting. Likewise, the way that Ritchie fusses with the ink on the surface of the Denril (a type of vellum) signifies the very animation and interaction shared between organisms and their environment.[30]

Translation

Upon researching spirituality, a historic photographic process, and artwork by two groundbreaking artists, I created my own work called *Translation* (Fig. 7). Since I wanted to focus on unleashing a new spiritual language through photography, I combined all of these methods into one as a way to create a body of work that emulated a fresh and revitalized synchrony within our world. After a period of experimenting with various approaches, I ultimately decided to abstract my photographs as a way to deepen my connection with and reveal the potential of a new process that would serve as the key to unlocking this new language.

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[30] Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, "Not Two, Not Three, Not Even Four Dimensions," *The Parkett Series with Contemporary Artists,* no. 61 (2001), 138.

The only thing I was sure of was that it would be informed primarily by photography. Little did I know that photography would end up being only a small part of what I was about to create. Drawing and painting became the basis of this project, which freed me from the restriction of straight photography. I saw photographs in a new light, appreciating them as images of linear overlaps and distortions rather than as copies of the external world. In all honesty, though, I was scared of what I was getting myself into because I was not comfortable with using any other medium. But I reminded myself that it was more about the spiritual experience than the physical outcome of this project. I had to be faithful and steadfast in my ways and to trust not only myself but also the Holy Spirit to guide me through this process.

My art ended up as a combination of the historical sketching technique from the camera lucida and the modernist abstraction from Matthew Ritchie. It was multi-layered, different, and interesting. I achieved this by taking a series of pictures from my everyday life and stripping them down to their basic linear form. My intent was to release these images from clutter (i.e. color and subject) and allow them to flow free, far away from their recognizable forms. I continued to trace and retrace them until I felt that they had reached a form that represented my idea about a visible spiritual language. The final trace ended on a transparency sheet which I then used in junction with an overhead projector to cast onto the wall.

Bombarded with the question as to what type of tools I would be using for my final piece, I started to test the use of various drawing and painting mediums. I made my first translation (which I now recognize as my own "self-generated meaning system") by using permanent marker on a plain single sheet of butcher paper. The lines and organic shapes were clean, distinct, and bold; it was close but not quite the representation (or rather, *relation*) I wanted for

my final piece. It lacked texture and a sense of movement that embodied the idea of spirituality so I decided to try using paint on an assortment of papers, including gesso on drawing paper and acrylic on tracing paper. I found that acrylic on tracing paper gave substance to the two-dimensional creation (mostly because as the paint dried it slightly crinkled the paper and left a raised surface due to the excess paint) and I moved forward with the project.

The next few questions I had to figure out were crucial to the outcome of my piece. I was left with issues like how many photographs I would translate, in what form I would display them, and which ones I would choose. My original thought was to include ten images and to display them as single entities matted and framed on the wall. Then I remembered that displaying these translations separated on the wall opposed the very idea of flux, movement, and our world's interconnectedness. In studying Japanese scrolls and the way that Buddhist monks meditated over them, I decided that I would paint a series of interwoven translations together on a single sheet of tracing paper. The use of a scroll not only sublimated continuity and progression, but it demanded a moment of spiritual meditation from the viewer to decipher the language presented by the series of translated photographs and enter into the "blind field."

But the scroll did not end here. The most crucial and profitable decision I would make throughout the entirety of this project was yet to come as I transformed my wall art into an installation piece. I decided to hang the scroll in a wavelength design from the ceiling as a way to add even more depth and movement (Fig. 8). This decision launched the scroll into a radical new realm, one that finally captured the movement aspect I had been looking for. The dynamic created by the ins and the outs of the paper not only gave it depth but it also gave it a lyrical mood, as if reading musical notes on an extended staff.

In choosing the original photographs, I did not give it any special amount of thinking. I chose the photo based on visual preference and nothing else really, other than maybe its visual appeal to me. As I continued to explain my work over and over again, though, I discovered new links and messages hidden within the choices I had made, realizing that the *punctum* was now acting on *me*. Sure, I could see how each photograph touched on an aspect of my life and things that were (and still are) important to me, like friends, music, home-life, and athletics; but that was all in their photographic form. It was not until I stepped back and looked at the beauty of the interconnecting lines and shapes of the translated photographs that I discovered how important each image was to me. I finally saw the content "of" my images and not just the content "in" them.

While I enjoyed the emotional high and spiritual nostalgia it brought to me, I knew that my experience would be quite different from my viewers' experience; and that was exactly what I wanted. Despite how much I wanted to divert from what was "right" or what was "true," I had presented them with a puzzle to figure out. I learned that there were "right" answers in decoding my piece simply because these amorphic translations originated from actual photographs. More importantly, I learned that after viewers "figured out" the pieces to my puzzle, they would then go back to re-read and to investigate it, to discover alternative representations that pertained to them personally.

Ironically, I became a viewer myself as I learned about the different interpretations of those who looked at my artwork. It was extremely fulfilling to see how much information *Translation* truly embodied as well as to understand how impermanent my sense of self was within it. I saw how my system compared to the Zen through the reflection of the intricate

detailing of calligraphic writing while remaining true to the spontaneity and freedom of spirituality. There was balance and imbalance; stability and instability; order and disorder. It was profoundly beautiful.

Finally, I can honestly say that as I was confronted with the issues of this project, I have reconstituted not only my appreciation and understanding of photography as a spiritual language, but I have also become a much richer spiritual person and artist. Regarding God's will and purpose, I believe that art has become more than just a mirror of my spiritual beliefs. It has become an active part of my life and something that I wish to pursue for the rest of my days.

Images

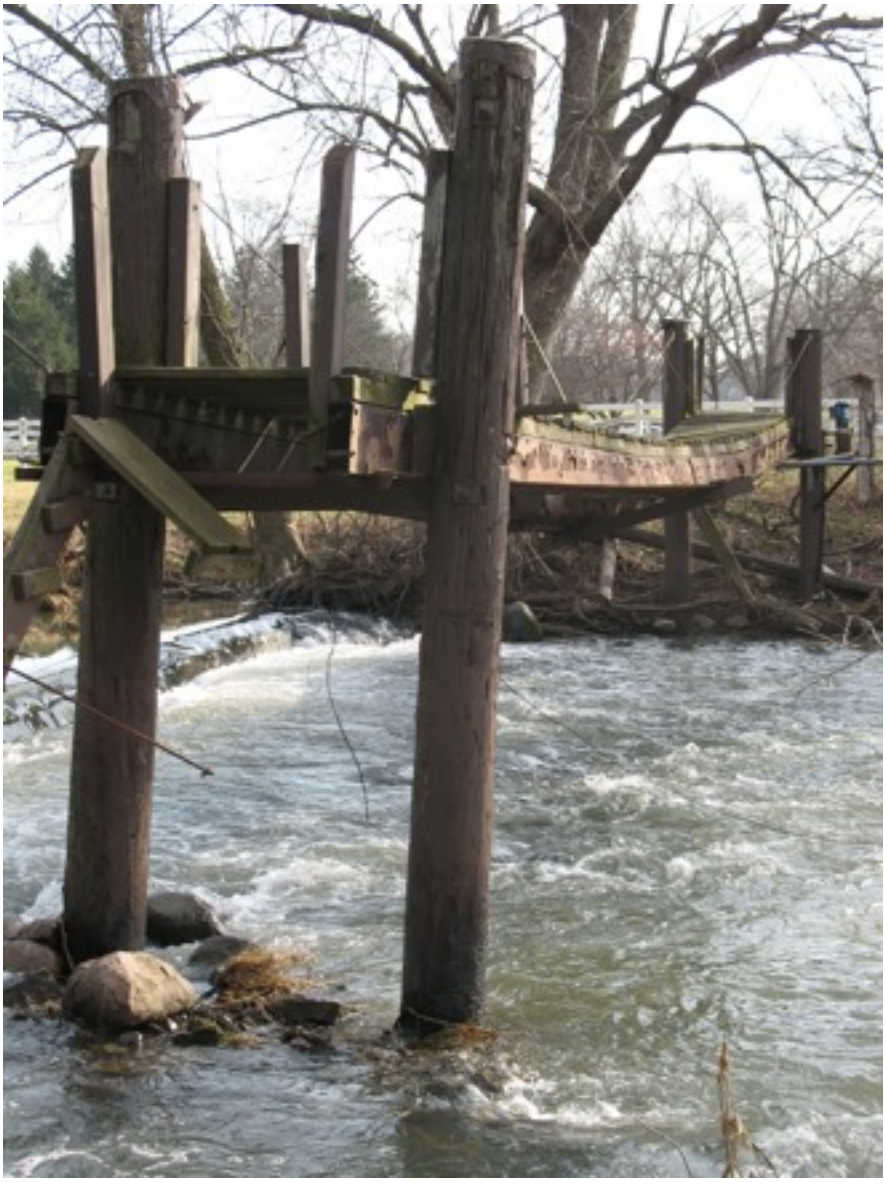

Fig. 1 Kelsey Krzyston
Untitled, 2011
Digital photograph

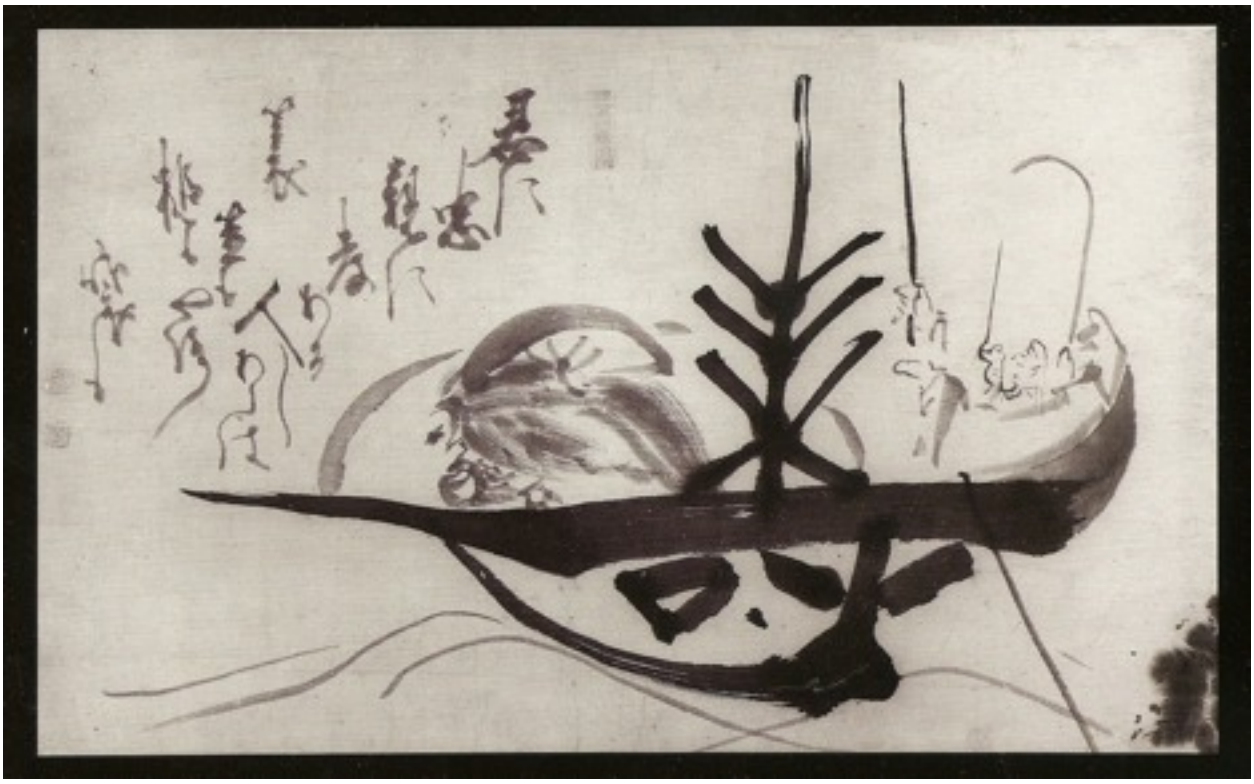

Fig. 2 Hakuin Ekaku, 1685-1769
Treasure Boat, sumi on paper
13 1/2 x 22 inches (34.3 x 55.9 cm)
New Orleans Museum of Art: Museum Purchase

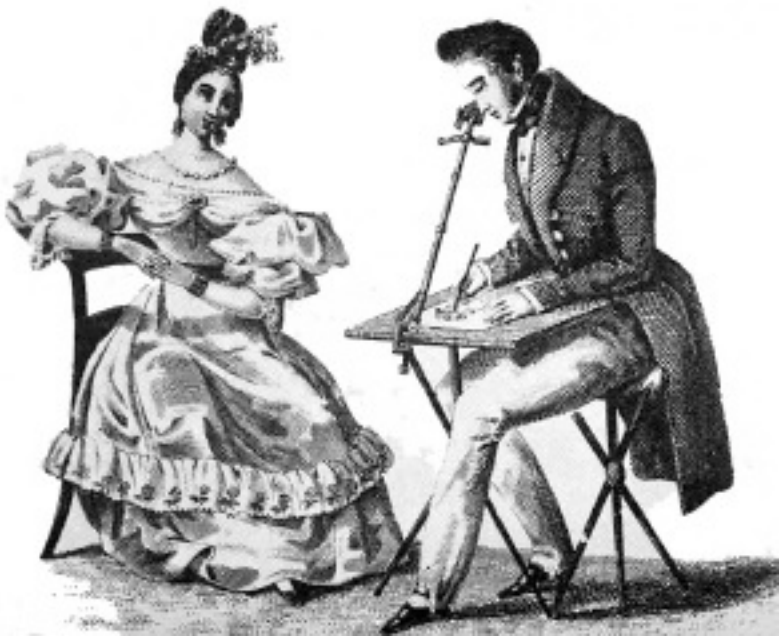

Fig. 3 Unknown
Camera Lucida, 1807
Engraving of *camera lucida* in use
Found on Wikipedia Commons

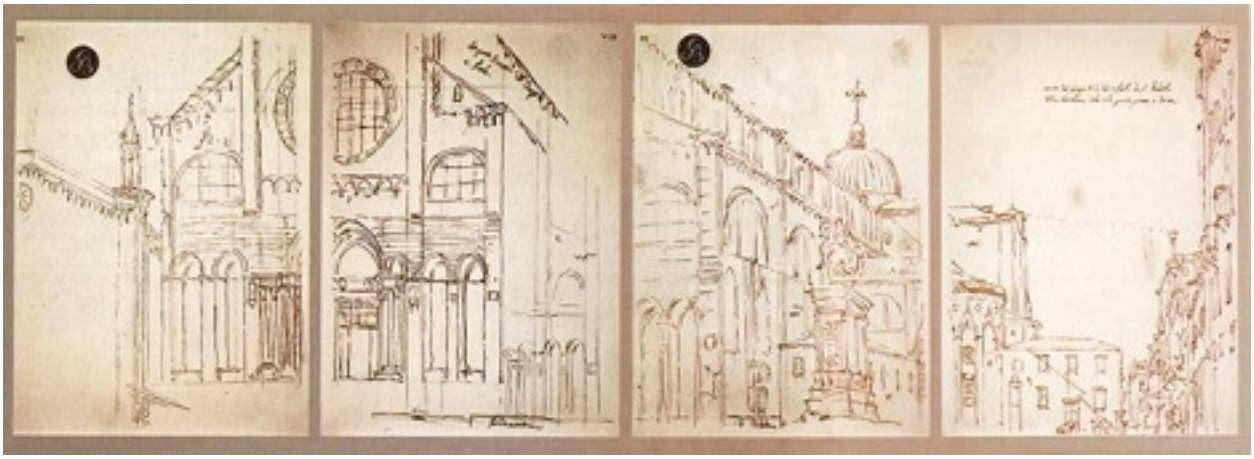

Fig. 4 Four drawings by Canaletto representing Campo San Giovanni e Paolo in Venice
Obtained with a *camera obscura*
Venice, Gallerie dell'cAcademia
Found on Wikipedia Commons

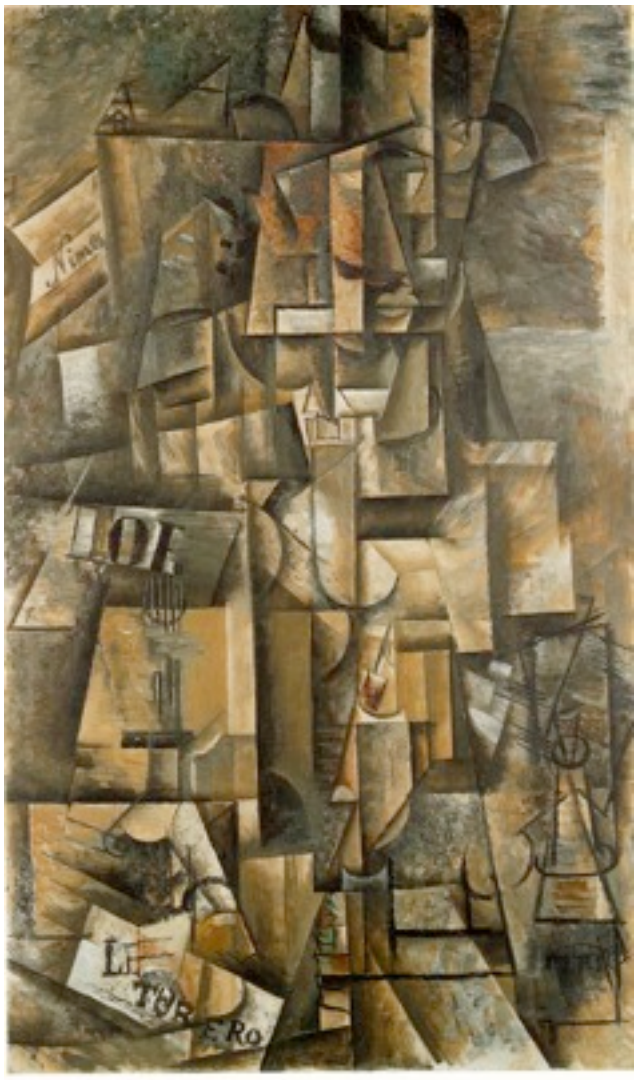

Fig. 5 Pablo Picasso
The Aficionado, 1912
Oil on canvas, 53 1/8 c 32 1/4 inches (135 x 82 cm)

(Image removed for copyright reasons)

Fig. 6 Matthew Ritchie
You Are the Weather (Gravity High) for R.H., 2005
Ink on Denril, 12 x 9 inches (30.48 x 22.86 cm)
Published in *Matthew Ritchie: More Than The Eye*

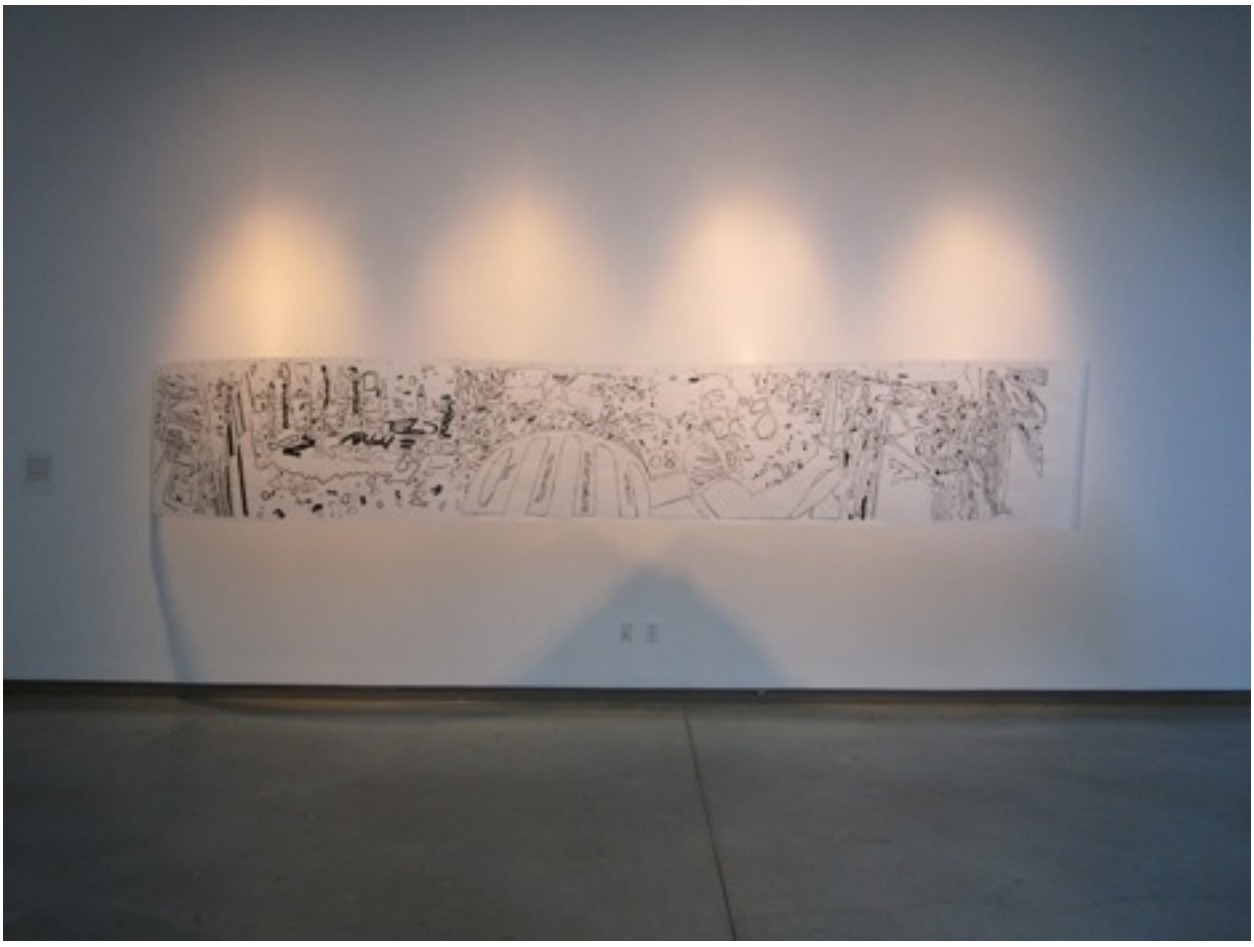

Fig. 7 Kelsey Krzyston
Translation, 2011
Acrylic on vellum, 3 x 18 feet
Visual Arts Gallery at Emory University

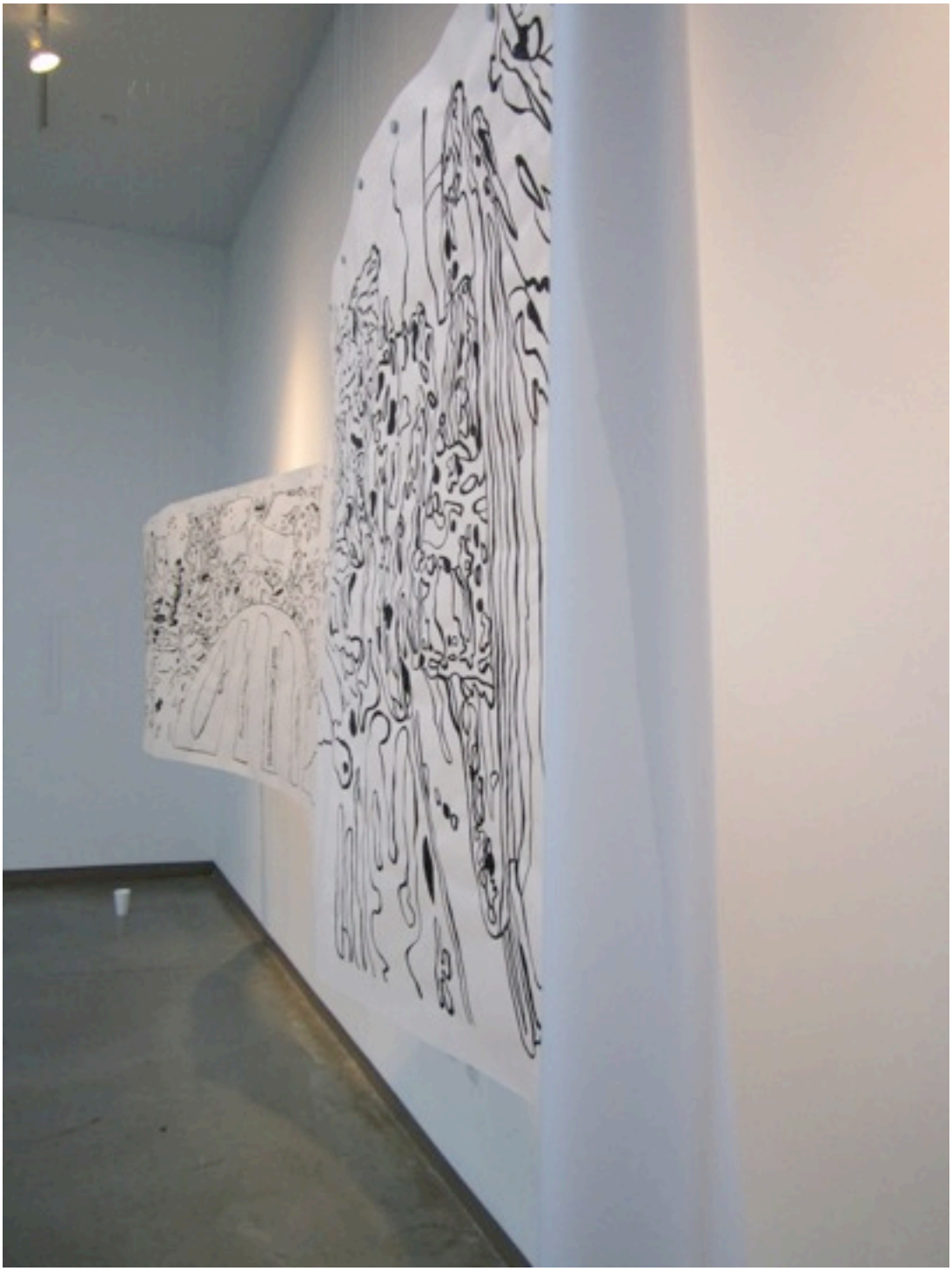

Fig. 8 Kelsey Krzyston
side view of *Translation*, 2011
Acrylic on vellum, 3 x 18 feet
Visual Arts Gallery at Emory University

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