

NOT OF THIS
WORLD

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By

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ABSTRACT

Not of This World: Visualizing the Teachings of Jesus Christ

By

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Not of this World is a group of artworks inspired by the teachings of Jesus Christ. The project comprises of painting, sculpture, video, installation, and photography that draw upon transformative experiences bonded by the common theme of “truth.” It has been a natural evolution of my art inspired by my heritage, family, and faith. The main sources of the works are the gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John, from the New Testament. Jesus said, “You are of this world. I am not of this world.” I develop an artistic language that transcends traditional Christian semiotics. The works in this project don’t rely on depictions of historical figures or iconic scenes. They are intense and provocative, yet, unlike abstract works, are tangible. Like the teachings of Jesus, the topics engaged are neither “good” or “bad” but rather “truth-seeking” layered themes of judgment, love, reconciliation, abundance, eternity, faith, permanence, innocence, accountability, and more. Examples of works that reflect the *teachings* of Christ are far and few between, and in a world with 2.2 billion Christian followers, I want to understand where Christianity sits in the art world today.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Nazis used ropes to ease a giant bell into the truck.” my father writes, recounting one of his earliest childhood memories. It was 1943, and he was five years old. They lived near the farmer’s market just outside the giant Virbalis church in Lithuania. The bell was heavy and landed in the truck with a resounding thud, reverberating into his mind forever. He documented this story, among others, along with a photograph of the church taken in 1923. He notes that he was standing somewhere around the white houses near the church. This detail of the story seems trivial, but it is in fact, the most important foundation of my work. It gives this little boy credibility; the voice of a witness, rather than a mere observer. The Germans were undoubtedly collecting metal and melting bells into bullets. Sadly, the church was destroyed during the war, but the memories survive. These are the stories that preserve my heritage and forged me into the person I am today.

As with most Lithuanian families, *Pensive Christ*, the image of Jesus in a seated position holding his head, resembling Rodin’s *The Thinker*, sat on the fireplace mantle of my childhood home. This object was passed on to me, and I continue our family tradition of collecting these hand-carved wooden sculptures today. This icon has had a profound affect on me. Rather than portraying Jesus in horrific pain as a martyr on the cross, he is concerned for the troubles of our world. Perhaps he is contemplating how best to help us, or perhaps we are to pause and empathize with his heavy burdens. This is how I grew up thinking of Jesus.

As much as I revered and admired this sculpture, I never see this figure of Jesus in today’s art world. The image of Jesus I see in galleries, museums, and art magazines, are

used as shock value to accentuate an idea or as a banal figure depicting a historical scene. Jesus is reinvented, twisted, and bastardized to promote an agenda or cause that is usually politically charged or critical of the church. Otherwise, images are decoration or safely composed scenes without something new to say. I empathize with Jesus, whose image has become fodder for artists rather than a messenger of truth as intended. It seems as though the spiritual message of Jesus ceased evolving in the art world and has evaporated. I am exploring his teachings, reconnecting to his words, and seeking his messages in today's world to see what kind of fresh perspectives and new experiences can be delivered.

CHAPTER 1

Definition of terms

For this writing, the term “today’s art” or “today’s art world” is defined as *contemporary art of the 21st century*.

“Christianity” is a vast subject and a term that encapsulates many religious sects, including the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox churches, and Protestant churches. The common thread of these groups is the definition used throughout: *followers of Jesus Christ and his teachings*.

CHAPTER 1

Limitations of the project

With more than 2,000 years following the death of Jesus, it is important to note that Christian research of this project is based on my personal life experience. I was raised Catholic and accepted the holy sacraments of baptism, communion, confirmation, and marriage. I also attended and graduated from a Lithuanian Catholic Saturday school (kindergarten through high school). Furthermore, Christian academic research applied is limited to my interpretation of the four canonical gospels of Mark, Luke, John, and Matthew in the New Testament (King James, New International, and American Standard versions).

CHAPTER 2

Background of the project

My American friends could not relate to *Pensive Christ*. The fact that they had not shared this semiotic experience, led me to consider the durable influence cultures have had on Christian symbols. My friends were used to copies of Leonardo's *Last Supper* hanging in their grandmother's living rooms and murals of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the sides of markets in our Los Angeles neighborhoods.

Although my friends saw me as foreign and different with an unpronounceable name, my family has a classic story of American immigration. As the son of Lithuanian World War II refugees, my siblings and I grew up speaking Lithuanian at home. Our parents sent us to Lithuanian Saturday school in Los Angeles, where we learned the language and history of our parents' homeland. We participated in Lithuanian folk dancing and singing festivals, scout camps, and observed Lithuanian national holidays, remembrances, and Catholic traditions. As a child, I remember being informed in politics as I watched Alan Arkin portray the lead role in the 1978 television special, *The Defection of Simas Kudirka*. Later I also met Mr. Kudirka and spent time in Saturday school writing letters to Congress defending Lithuania's right for freedom from the "Evil Soviet Empire."

The United States never formally acknowledged the occupation of Lithuania, but it was clear that the Soviet Union was in control. My parents still had extended family and friends in Lithuania, who were being persecuted on every level. Religious freedom didn't exist and the Soviets employed gross tactics to keep people down: Priests were tortured and sent to Siberian work camps, printing pious newsletters and materials were

illegal, and St. Casimir's (patron saint of Lithuania) church in Vilnius, had been converted into the Museum of Atheism.

My grandfather Bronius Kviklys (1913–1990), was a preeminent historian and collector of interesting, historically significant objects. As a child, I pored through his vast collections of Lithuanian coins, stamps, maps, and mazes of shelves filled with a staggering 30,000 books, magazines, letters, and various ephemera. Only later in life did I appreciate how much this prolific writer had accomplished with his typewriter as a publisher, editor, and author. During my childhood, he published a seven-volume set of books, *Churches of Lithuania*, in which he documented every church every built in Lithuania. He did this in the early 1980s, during Soviet rule, through a network of priests and other courageous people who risked their lives smuggling out the needed information. For this work, he was awarded a gold medal from Pope John Paul II.

After the Pope died in 2005, I asked my mother how she felt about his passing. She paused and then replied without filter as usual, "I think he could've done a lot more for women." She didn't say this with zeal to be critical and relish in his passing, but rather, with respect, in her reliable, fearless way of stepping in to speak up, when others might not (Perhaps it can be partly attributed as a Lithuanian survivor's trait.). As large as Lithuanian culture and the Roman Catholic Church was present in my life, I never felt my upbringing was rigid or conservative, but rather, artistic and dynamic.

Although my father was an engineer and my mother was a librarian, they were also collectors and champions of the arts. In the late 70s, they acquired an antique Lithuanian wooden folk carving of a Madonna with seven swords in her heart. This particular example was highly prized as it was in very good condition. All of the swords

were removable yet accounted for, and the paint on the sculpture was original. My father built a custom white shelf for it, and it sat respectfully in our living room. Our family didn't pray or make the sign of the cross in front of it, but treated as a museum piece. I admired the craftsmanship, appreciated the Lithuanian origins, and marveled that this fragile object had survived the ages. I was particularly fond of the surface paint that, once bright, upon close inspection, was now a lovely pale stain.

When I pray, I search my heart and it responds with abstract imagery based on my emotions. I don't think of a God with a white beard as depicted by Michelangelo, or other traditional Catholic symbols. The idea that what you see is not nearly as important as what you feel is the basis for a seven-year drawing odyssey that I embarked on in 2002 called the Madonna etchings.

I made two drawings to illustrate the contrasting emotions of joy and sorrow. One side is the birth of Christ—the joyous love of mother and son in *Madonna and Child*. The other side is the death of Christ—the solemn pain of the *Sorrowful Madonna*. I opted for etchings because I wanted the work to be additive and thought of them as homages to Lithuanian graphics or folk art. In this tradition, I draw, scribe, and etch states, to make my Madonna as ornate as possible.

On the *Madonna and Child*, I decorate the crown with real flowers and sugar crystals by etching their impression using a soft ground acid resist made from beeswax. I pause only to make one print—the images are beautiful, but predictable. I've seen these types of icons before. The emotional, spiritual undercurrent is missing. I need to push further. I scrape out the faces and carefully polish these areas making them smooth and blank, then replace them with unexpected imagery: the shiny Rolls Royce hood ornament

I admired as a child and a photo of my mother as a young woman.

The seven swords puncturing the Virgin Mary's heart in *Sorrowful Madonna* seem timid, considering the mother is experiencing what some devout Christians consider the saddest moment in the universe, the death of her son, the torture and execution of Christ. I push the boundaries of tradition and add hundreds of swords. I add skulls to her shroud and wrap a serpent around her. One tear becomes hundreds until I etch her face harshly with an acid wash and pull a print using blood red ink.

I press on, further altering the images as they become more complicated, less recognizable. I finally merge the two plates into a single print. The result is an abstraction of the original images where a combination of sorrow and joy culminates into a somewhat serene visual, that emotional tug I was searching for.

It was during this time my marriage was dissolving and I was haunted by the notion of splintering my family. This ritualistic, meditative, repetitive drawing, scribing, etching, and printing, was therapeutic, and kept me somewhat grounded through it all. I think of it as my alone time with God.

Years later, in 2016, my teenage son Matas, and I, bonded during a series of road trips during what he describes as a "...pretty low point in his life" as he combatted depression, anxiety, and suicidal thinking. Our conversations covered in-depth topics such as the cosmos, purpose of life, friendships, comedy, art, jazz, politics, religion, feelings of hopelessness, and God. During the day, I documented our travels using my 8x10" film camera loaded with black and white film, while at night, this budding astrophysicist located deep space phenomena using his 10" Dobsonian telescope.

America's great west served as a backdrop for our father/son collaboration called, *Before the Eclipse*.

Along our journey, my faith had been tested but it never wavered. I was secure in my relationship with God and grateful that my son was on the mend. Existential conversations did leave me wondering about my standing in the universe. I knew God wanted me to succeed. It was not my business to know what success looked like or when it would happen. But just knowing that I was loved and that the glass was perpetually more than half full, gave me great solace.

CHAPTER 2

Teachings of Jesus

In anticipation of this work, I studied the teachings of Jesus all along. Specifically, I started studying the words of Jesus as found in the can King James Version of the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament, which are generally recognized as the “witnesses” or demonstrated unity in the message of Jesus.

I started with an audiobook with narration by the booming voice of James Earl Jones and expanded my repertoire with a variety of dramatic readings of various bible translations (King James Version, New International Version, New American Version, etc....). The constant replay, like the sound of the bell in my father’s story, reverberated in my memory. I gained a deep appreciation of the words, contemplated the spirit of their meaning, and kept the themes at top of mind throughout my daily travels and encounters.

I had always belonged to small communities, and they are my comfort zone. For example, I grew up in La Palma, the smallest city in Orange County, California, with a steady population of 15,000. The Lithuanian community in Los Angeles is the third largest in the country, with only several thousand members. Lithuania’s population has been dwindling and currently stands at approximately 2.8 million. By comparison, in 2017, I completed my photographic series, *Yosemite People*, documenting the people, rather than the nature in Yosemite National Park. At that time, approximately 5 million people visited the park every year-almost twice the current population of Lithuania. Being immersed in so many small cities, I wondered what the largest populations in the

world were. Social media came to mind. However, the communities of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like, don't feel durable or reliable.

It occurred to me that I was not only Lithuanian, but also Catholic, under the umbrella of an even larger, Christian community. The fact that the global Christian community stands at over 2.3 billion is astounding. 75% of Americans identify as Christians, 37% of whom self-report as "highly religious" (based on church attendance and the importance of religion in their lives).

It seems that many works of notoriety in the Contemporary art world tend to be critical of religious institutions, rely on depictions of common Christian symbols, or use semiotics to mix messages that result in new meanings. These new meanings often point to current relatable societal themes or express political views. Jesus or related Christian icons tend to be used as symbols for "the church" as an institution. Examples of works that translate the *teachings* of Christ are far and few and I will explore this later in the essay.

I will use significant sources (references below) to find works in which artists and or curators have either stated that works are Christian-based and Christian semiotics are present and determine if they can:

- A. Be linked to visualizations of the teachings of Christ or
- B. If they are being used for another purpose.

The research subjects will be artists who are listed in contemporary art books and included in contemporary exhibitions and institutions. Demonstrating a gap in this segment of the art world has many questions and implications. Given the global population of 2.2 billion, what is the status of this type of art? I am making this type of

art. How “alone” am I? Who else is making this type of art? Are curators thinking of this art as they organize exhibits and build museum collections? In a climate of tremendous inclusivity and discussion of identity, is Christian art overlooked?

CHAPTER 2

Where is Christian Art?

Some contemporary artists use abstract expressionist painting toward the sublime to connect to God or Jesus Christ. Makoto Fujimura, professor of art at Fuller Theological Seminary, works in this genre and states,

“...Art taps into the glory of the transcendent, and earthly, realities of the new heavens and new earth. Good art (whether created by Christians or non-Christians) should produce a longing for that reality.” (2016)

Whatever the agenda, Christian or not, the idea of painting fields of color and texture to match moods, sentiment, or spiritual states, is not a new concept. The Museum of Modern Art breaches the subject of “Abstract Expressionism and the Sublime” citing Rothko, Barnett Newman, Louise Nevelson as artists whose work explored these themes more than 70 years ago.

Mash-ups of symbols from artists have become notoriously controversial and include Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), and Murizio Cattelan’s, *The Ninth Hour*, (2005). Apart from owning a provocative title, *Piss Christ* shows a plastic, common, Brooklyn neighborhood bodega type crucifix immersed in the artist’s urine. Serrano juxtaposes the sublime with bodily fluids—a combination that many consider offensive. *The Holy Virgin Mary* adopts a formal Madonna portraiture with a “mother earth” figure with applied elephant dung and background decoration that is upon closer inspection images collaged from pornographic magazines. Ofili says his African roots and states inspired him and states,

“When I go to the National Gallery and see paintings of the Virgin Mary, I see

how sexually charged they are. Mine is simply a hip-hop version.” (2018)

The Ninth Hour is a three dimensional hyper-realistic sculpture depicting Pope John Paul II struck by a meteorite. The symbols wrestle with science vs. religion battle where the meteorite wins. All of these pieces use Christian symbols to make commentary on Christianity, society, the institution of art, and/or on institutions that are willing (or not willing) to display this type of art.

Corita Kent was an artist and practicing nun who used her art to celebrate and explore her Christian faith. Initially, as pictured in *Madonna*, 1956, Kent use painting, drawing, and printmaking to make stylized, colorful, depictions of classic Christian figures to express joy. Later, as her 1950s art evolved and as society entered the Vietnam War era, Kent left her illustrative approach and moved towards text-based images and sentiments of peace and love as in *Stop the Bombing*, 1967. Her messages were a response to issues at the time. The art consisted of posters, greeting cards, and murals often politically charged. Some were direct quotes from the bible while most of Kent’s own words, colorful, positive, and spiritual, were drawn from her Christian faith.

Patty Wickman, a painter and professor of art at the University of California, Los Angeles, has developed a personal, annual painting tradition entitled “40 days.” Wickman has developed a ritual of painting a small painting a day for 40 days. She calls them “40 days of scrutiny” and regards them as a daily meditation—a method of connecting with God. She paints the ordinary and the act of doing it, the ritual, adds meaning. The combination of ritual and meditation, some would argue reaches the sublime. This practice pulls from the tradition of Lent that Christians honor a 40 days of observance of Christ. The tradition of Lent was developed after the death of Christ as a preparation for

Easter and is attributed to his fasting in the wilderness for 40 days before he started his teachings. The series doesn't directly translate the lessons, however Lent is implicitly related to Christ's living example.

Robert Gober is an artist who has used highly emotionally charged Christian-based imagery. In *Virgin Mary*, 1997, Gober's installation is uniquely complex. It is centered on a life size white sculpture of the Virgin Mary with a screwed conduit inserted directly in her abdomen. Christopher Knight from the LA Times describes it as,

"Hollow, the conduit makes the sculpture into another cruciform shape. An inescapable image of phallic penetration merges with the mysterious void of her womb." (1997)

The installation had many components and multiple viewing stations. The sculpture was standing on a series of layered grates with moving water under it with small suitcases and collection trays with spare change. Because the main image was so highly charged, it drew much attention, controversy, and protest from the Los Angeles community where it was presented (Museum of Contemporary Art). Roberta Smith, NY Times commented, "... many who wrote outraged letters to The Los Angeles Times, seem to have seen only a photograph of its central figure." The Gober piece seems to have many layers of meaning that become muddy, but what is clear, is that crude symbols mixed with Christian icons are used here for intentional commentary if not shock value. Gober, who is openly gay, often makes work that revolves around homosexuality and AIDS. Apart from the crucifix Virgin Mary semiotics, various critics have speculated that the underground nature of the installation implies purpose of underground culture. Whatever the case, the implication is not readily clear. It isn't clear if the piece is inspired by or

attempts to translate the teachings of Christ, but rather uses the Christian icon of the Virgin Mary as a dramatic starting point that sparks exploration of meaning and conversation of sorts.

Bill Viola is an artist who combines highly produced video and Christian semiotics. Rather than combining symbols or medium to create a political statement or discourse, Viola, uses it to captivate his audience and explore emotion. Viola, himself a Buddhist, admires the formal figure paintings of the renaissance which he was exposed to on a visit to Italy as well as during research during an internship at the Getty Institute. As a child, Viola nearly drowned, and he draws on this experience when creating his art. It was a traumatic, yet somehow memorable and surreal emotional experience that he projects. It is an “old vs. new” medium exercise in his video, *Resurrected Christ*, 2002 inspired by Pietà by *Masolino da Panicale*, 1424. He combines Christian iconography and formalism with technology to accentuate his goal of projecting raw emotion.

“Ecco Homo,” Latin, translates as *Behold the man*. This is what Pontius Pilate said to the crowd as he presented Jesus Christ after being scorned, beaten, and humiliated with a crown of thorns placed on his head. *Ecco Homo* is also the title of a sculpture by Mark Wallinger, 1999. Wallinger presents a realistic depiction, a white life-size sculpture, of Christ at this moment. The sculpture was installed on top of the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square in 1999. *Ecco Homo* is later installed at the top of the steps at St. Paul’s Cathedral, in London, 2017 and later at the Centro Pecci Gallery, in Italy 2018. The moment captured is not the commonly used Christ on the cross or the baby in the manger. Wallinger chooses another route with tremendous impact. He has chosen a scene that is the beginning of the end for Christ. Pilate has washed his hands of Christ and the

crowd demands execution. Jesus doesn't fight and can't be provoked. It is a profound moment of resistance. This is the power that Wallinger captures. It is not implicit teaching of Christ, but rather, again, the notion of capturing Christ's *living example*.

What Wallinger also does well is manipulate the gaze of the viewer with the strategically placed installations. *Ecco Homo* on the plinth demands a relational aesthetic—all are invited to consider Christ as a hero, perhaps the moment of absolute non-violent protest. *Ecco Homo* at St. Paul converts to a situational aesthetic. Given the global crisis of faith the church is experiencing, *Ecco Homo* may now serve not only as a hero to the people but rather as a guardian who will no longer tolerate abuse against its parishioners. It can be argued that the placement in a gallery setting becomes institutional; that is, how did this symbol that has long been absent in the contemporary art world wander in this institution? How is it that he is so lifelike and human void of the cross? It is uncommon and out of the comfort zone of the art world audience.

Remarkably, the beloved Fred Rogers does the same in his way. As a student of theology and ordained minister, Rogers pursued a passion in television production and developed the popular long running children's television program, "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood." Like Corita Kent, during this time, Rogers routinely surveyed the political and social climate of the day and infused his television programs with lessons to help children understand the world around them. In *Episode 1065*, 1969, Rogers draws on Christ's living example implicitly. In this episode, similar to the depiction of Giotto's *Christ Washing the Disciples Feet*, Giotto, c1305, Rogers washes the feet of his neighbor, Officer Clemmons. Clemmons is an African American neighbor and friend who visit Rogers on a hot summer day. Rogers offers to let Clemmons rest his

feet in the cool water of the pool and offers to share his towel with him. At that time, the civil rights movement was in full swing. Rogers was reacting to a story in the news, whereas a white owner of a private pool, wanted to get African American children out of his pool so he started adding dangerous chemicals into the water to force them out. Rogers capitalized on this teaching moment by using Christ's life example of washing the feet of his disciples. As in *Suppressed*, Rogers gazes at the camera as if to say, "How say you?"

I would be remiss to mention television without touching upon film. Most important to note is that the most successful feature films attached to Christianity are stylistic depictions and historical narratives. These films range from direct Bible translations (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964), psychedelic musical fantasy (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, Norman Jewison, 1973), straight narratives (*Jesus of Nazareth*, Franco Zeffi Relli, 1977) and brutal realism (*Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson, 2004). Nothing new is revealed. From a content standpoint, the stories are told as they were written in the New Testament. The outlier is *Last Temptation*, Martin Scorsese, 1988. This is an adaptation of the 1955 book by Nikos Kazantzakis. Kazantzakis explores the idea of what Christ's life might have looked like after the resurrection as he lived alongside humanity and adopted a family life. It makes for interesting fiction, but, of course, strays from the teachings of Christ. These films are entertaining, well crafted, and thoughtful, but don't translate the teachings of Christ in new ways. They serve more as devices for entertaining storytelling.

Apart from individual artists, my research led me to curated exhibitions. "Made in LA 2018", the UCLA Hammer Museum's biennial exhibition bills itself as "...works that

are deeply engaged with vital aspects of our contemporary culture,” featuring 32 artists between the ages of 29-97. In an interview with the *L.A. Weekly*, Curator Anne Ellegood states,

“As we were identifying the artists we wanted to work with, it happened that it was two-thirds women, two-thirds people of color. I think it just grows out of the fact that this is a very diverse city and there are artists of all backgrounds who work here who call this city their home, and that’s reflected in the exhibition.”
(2018)

After reviewing the works, artist statements, and exhibition descriptions, my finding is that Christian art is not represented in the exhibition.

The 2019 Whitney Biennial, a showing of 75 artists and collectives touting, “...a profound consideration of race, gender, equity” has a minor sampling of Christian-related art in two pieces. Steffani Jemison’s performance art piece, “Sensus Plenior,” is a mimed Christian gospel meant to accentuate emotion. That being said, the focus on the meaning isn’t the teachings of Jesus, but rather on identity, as Jemison puts it, “...thinking about ways in which black radical expression can flourish...” Another piece, *Maria-Maria*, a sculpture by Daniel Lind-Ramos, is a figure that can be interpreted as the Virgin of Guadalupe, built from a blue tarp, and other materials attributed to the hurricane that ravaged Puerto Rico. I place this work in the category of Christian semiotics utilized for social commentary.

The publication, *Religion + Art in the 21st Century* by Aaron Rosen, 2015 has a promising chapter called “Sweet Jesus,” complete with 18 images. Of the 18 images, *The Bell*, by David Shrigley, 2007 rings closest to the teachings. A shiny brass hand-held

school bell sits next to a card with a handwritten message that reads, “Not to be rung again until Jesus returns.” I agree with Rosen who states,

“On the one hand, this sculpture could be read as simple sarcasm, it juvenile script mirroring a childish hope. On the other hand, it seems to exude a pure, unwavering faith...it is just this sort of ambivalence—the uncertain boundary between mockery and piety—that has proved so infuriating to reactionary critics when confronting contemporary art, especially about Jesus.” (2015)

As much as I agree with Rosen, the Chapter is essentially reinterpreted depictions of Jesus or similar. Of the 18 images, this includes three Pietàs, six crucifixes, one performance installation of a crucifix, four Last Suppers, one depiction of Jesus walking on water, one depiction of Jesus made of ashes. The cover of the book comes from this same Chapter. Photographer David LaChapelle has reinterpreted The Pietà with a bit of role reversal. A tattered, short sleeved, modern day Jesus assumes the position of the Virgin Mary, who is holding a dead Michael Jackson. Once again, Christian symbols are utilized as a short cut for commentary on pop culture.

In 2016, Biola University Gallery hosted the exhibition “And Who is My Neighbor?” curated by Nery Gabriel Lemus and Jeff Rau. 13 contemporary artists were selected based on works that matched Jesus’ teaching of the story of the Good Samaritan. The basis of the show was directly tied to the teaching of Jesus. The problem is, the works themselves were not. They were, to the curators’ credit, a “best match” for the stated theme. It also feels like the cart before the horse. For example, the included work, *Carpoolers*, by Alejandro Cartagena, 2014, is from a series of photographs taken from above, documenting traffic flow from Monterey towards San Pedro, Mexico, which

shows many “maestros” or construction workers, crammed into the back of pick up trucks on the way to work. The sentiment of empathy for the tough conditions and tenacity for these workers is implied. Cartagena, a native of Monterrey Mexico, describes his work as projects that “employ landscape and portraiture as a means to examine social, urban and environmental issues.” Regarding Carpoolers, in an NPR interview, Cartagena states, “This project was a perfect fit to see how people [are] willing to do whatever it takes to own a house but still go to the city, where there is work.” Cartagena makes no mention of Christianity or loving his neighbor. He states his intentions as a study of human nature. The series is a personal observation and social commentary. Like forcing a square peg in a round hole, curators assigned Good Samaritan to the question of “Who are our neighbors?”

CHAPTER 3

Project “Not of This World”

In the gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples, “You are of this world. I am not of this world.” This inspired me to create a trio of allegorical paintings. I realized that all of my thinking around God hadn’t included religion, and this served as the starting point for my research. I felt that I had to cleanse my palette and consider how I felt about the state of Christianity. When I read the papers, scanned the media, or simply had day-to-day encounters with friends or conversations at the counter of my neighborhood café, I was faced with a lot of sad, hostile, and disconcerting information and energy. Reports of priests hurting children and priests protecting these same priests were horrific. Believers were disgusted and losing faith. Others were judged and pushed out of the church. These stories were outweighing the good feelings and reports of good works that I knew were still out there.

Jesus was a master communicator. He used parables, stories, straight talk, life examples, and, if one believes, miracles. He was quickly able to gauge his audiences and choose the most impactful means of communication. To be effective in my work, I chose to use a medium that I find accessible to most, representational oil painting. My first painting, *Suppressed*, shows a lamb wearing a muzzle, adorned with a halo, suggesting the Lamb of God, as referred to by John the Baptist in John 1:29, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” As the title indicates, his mouth, his words, are suppressed with the muzzle. The lamb is not panicking yet his gaze is directed towards the viewer as if to say, “What say you?” The grass is brown and dry; yet, there is always a bit of green, implying that there still may be time for a change.

Forsaken introduces a conversation of when the teachings of Christ are abandoned. A lamb is tied to a stake alone in a desert-like atmosphere surrounded by cliffs and a clear starry night's sky. There is a flood of what appears to be moonlight or another divine source. There is a sense of vulnerability and tension, as if something menacing lurks in the shadows or may suddenly enter the scene. Atop the surrounding cliffs appears to be the glowing lights of a city or civilization. The lamb appears serene, as if meditating.

Banished speaks to those who have been driven out of the church for no fault of their own. Perhaps they have been labeled “gay,” “sinners,” “other,” or “different”. What is apparent is that the lamb is not welcome. Peering through a thicket of thorns, the viewer sees the lamb being chased by a shadowy mob with torches in the night. The scene is confusing and harried. As before, this lamb isn't panicking. It flees from the torches, and like Jesus, slips away into the night.

There is much to say about the state of Christianity in our world today, but this trio of lambs satisfies for now. I think about how Jesus wanted us to treat one another as he famously said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” My work has evolved to creating art that focuses on the *teachings* of Jesus and examining ideas that are *not of this world*.

The first piece of this body of work reflects on the story told in John 8:3-8:7. A mob of men was threatening to stone a woman to death, claiming she was an adulteress and that they had the right to fulfill the law and stone her to death. They tested Jesus, asking him to sign off on this act. Jesus replied and diffused the mob by saying, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” I researched stoning in today's world and found it to be a practice today in 16 countries. It takes place in many

forms, but a prevalent method is to cover the accused with a shroud, bury them to their waist, and stone them at sunrise. The silhouette of this figure makes for an unusual form. As it is not initially easily recognizable, I opted to paint this life size in a representational style. There is no blood or markings or signs of violence because I have chosen to paint the moment right before the stoning. My goal is to have the viewer experience more than a painting, but instead, a transformable experience. For this reason, I augment the scene by placing the painting on the ground, leaning in the corner of a space, to create a crowded, uncomfortable atmosphere. Stones are placed in the space that seems random in position yet converge into a large pile placed “throwing distance,” in front of the painting. These are real stones that are dense and heavy. My hope is that the viewer will realize the scene, consider the moment, and contemplate various themes of judgment in their life.

In John 4:14, Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman at a well and speaks of abundance, willingness, and faith: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” Inspired by the idea that the answer or gift is free and here and readily available—just drink from this well. I painted representational life-size water well (oil on canvas, 72”x90”). It is imagined as a painterly wonder to partake in: The well is a cylindrical arrangement of rocks topped by an infinity pool. The image is centered and static, composed in a direct manner. An interrupted horizon line reminiscent of a desert mirage separates the sky from a ground of unearthly color in a seemingly arid mid-day environment. The rocks of the well are rough yet firmly set and the water is luscious. To make for a more contemplative experience, a simple, yet custom wooden

bench is positioned directly in front of the painting. It is designed to be a comfortable experience for one viewer at a time.

In January 2020, I had the opportunity to visit with nuns at the monastery of St. Gertrude as an artist in residence where I developed a photographic body of work titled “Still Life” inspired by John 9:5, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” I asked one of the sisters, “What mostly do you do here?” She replied, “Mostly...we eat and we pray.” My movement in the monastery was limited as many of the rooms and sections of the building are off limits. The snow picked up and walking outside required winter gear I wasn’t prepared for. The overcast skies and the dark monastery rooms made for poor light conditions so I resorted to shooting digital and in color. Because the premises are private, photographing the sisters wasn’t possible without obtaining twenty-six release forms. Silence is observed from 9 pm to 9 am in the monastery. My photographic options had become extremely limited. I took this moment to pause and embrace this monastic living, this still life. I joined the sisters for daily prayer and shared meals three times a day. *We eat and we pray* became my mantra. Stop wandering. Stop seeking. Stop projecting. The answers aren’t out there. Break bread in this dining room. At this table. This place. Right here. Now. The dining room tables were covered with thick, transparent, protective, plastic, table coverings. I set up my tripod and studied this clean yet bumpy surface and took a photograph with a micro view that caught the light bouncing off of what resembled the crest of a wave. Various colored tablecloths gave the appearance of mysterious liquids. I delivered a dozen of these photos to Sister Placida Wemhoff who agreed to hand bound these into a book with a burgundy, cloth, hard cover. The photos are edited as a linear story that culminates with the turn of an

onion skin sheet revealing the edge of the table, a hint of the dining room, and the source of light—a glimmering mosaic of transparent golden tiles in the shape of a cross that glows across the room.

Penny trays are found in convenience stores and markets all around America. When I noticed these during my regular daily travels, I thought to myself, “This is what’s working in society. We need more of this.” I thought of Jesus’s words, “...Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Mark 12:31). Most trays are commercially fabricated, while others are hand made. There is no law or formal rule applied as to how to use them. If one has an extra coin, they pay it forward. Someone else finds a willingness to accept help and takes it. One doesn’t know if the person who left the penny was “good” or “evil” and it isn’t clear how the penny will be used at all. This unwritten contract seemingly built on kindness persists. To make this series interactive, I opted to make a large scale sculpture of a tray. I chose to mimic the most common, recognizable penny tray shape and material, sculpted an enlargement (18”x16”x6”), and casted a form from plastic. The tray is filled with 10,000 newly minted pennies and sits on a counter height pedestal. The material allows for the potential of indoor and outdoor displays and incarnations.

A fable drawn with stick figures is inspired by “... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” Matthew 5:44. The story follows two figures divided by a deep trench. They initially shout and bark at each other, and then attack each other with arrows from supporting armies, ultimately finding themselves in a pit, frightened together, left holding each other. This narrative gets its start from another story from Jesus “And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” (Matthew 15:14), is inspired by a song my brother Andrius Kulikauskas, of the musical group, Naujas

Kraujas, wrote in 1988 called, “Kur Žmogus Tik Žengia”, as well as an image from a series of oil paintings I did, commissioned by poet Charles Sweetwine 1987-88, depicting warring soldiers on opposite sides of a cliff. Initially envisioned as a children’s book, I chose to use simple cartoons that are easily digestible, suitable for all ages, and get straight to the point. The story is tightly edited and delivered at any scale as a digital slide show with only the whirring sound of the projector’s fan and the click of the slides. The stop motion effect of the animation creates a charming and memorable tempo that harkens back to analog presentations of my childhood.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Matthew 24:35. The idea that this world is not permanent and that words cannot be unheard is haunting and primal. Perhaps partly because our brains are formed as children and partly due to my passion for things old and well crafted, I choose to use a stripped down pencil sharpener from the 1940s, commonly found mounted on a desk or wall in a classroom. On a modest wooden pencil, I have scribed the words that I think best exemplify permanence: “THIS WORLD.” The pencil is loaded into the sharpener that is open and mounted on a block of pine. A few turns of the crank grinds the pencil into wood and graphite dust. The pencil and words are left hanging in the chamber...to be continued. A further turn of the crank is an open invitation.

“Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit”, Matthew 7:17. As a father, this quote makes me think of how accountable one is for their words and deeds around children. I consider how the senses our development beginning with sounds outside a mother’s womb or from the taste and nourishment of mother’s milk. I thought of a symbol of infancy and the first objects one

might use to distract or occupy babies. Whether “good” or “bad”, infants actively absorb their surroundings. I wanted to highlight this fact and chose to use the symbol of a crib for this purpose. I painted a crib a neutral primer grey and have it stand with an empty grey mattress on a grey soft deep shag carpet. A mobile hangs from a sturdy arced arm. Rather than the expected soft toys or geometric, “Calder-like” shapes dangling from the arm, under closer inspection, it appears the mobile is made of grey painted, common, stripped down, hard-wired speakers. Some speakers project a muffled white noise. A cacophony of world sounds emanate from another speaker: A dog barks while a bird chirps in the distance, a father calmly reads the popular children’s book, *Good Night Moon*, a couple bickers leading up to a fight with curse words flaring, a monotonous computer game is played perpetually, audio channels are flipped bringing the news, announcements, and music. Three, primer grey, painted microphones on stands are located twenty-five to fifty feet from the crib. Each microphone is set to the “on” position and is attached to a cable. Microphones number one and two operate as intended and can be used by viewers to send intentional messages to the crib, or unknowingly have their conversations and sounds transmitted. The cable on microphone number 3 is clearly severed, never reaching the desired destination.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

I am making art closest to the teachings of Jesus as possible. The impact of this work has potential in the following ways:

- A. Inventing and expanding a new inventory of Christian symbols beyond crucifixes, Virgin Mary, saints and other known imagery would be groundbreaking.
- B. Shifting a focus of visualizing the teachings of Jesus from being critical of the church could start a new movement in contemporary Christian based art.
- C. Shining a light on a gap in collections, exhibitions, and curator interest could reveal discrimination of the subject.

I'm hard pressed to find contemporary artworks that unapologetically connect to the teachings of Christ. I do see artworks that dance around the subject of Christianity or capitalize on Christian symbolism pushing an agenda. Works can be categorized as abstract, social commentary, political, symbols, identity, vague, historical, and stylized. Most contemporary Christian art is decorative.

In 2018, I asked artist Andres Serrano, his thoughts on why there are very few contemporary, positive, art pieces on the subject of Christianity. He replied, "Religious art went out of favor centuries ago. I think it's possible to reclaim pious art, but it may not have the reaction the artist intended. It's better to make art with sincerity instead of intentions." I've since taken Serrano's words to heart and sought a balance of sincerity and intention to heart, developing this body of work.

I plan to continue observing and noticing. I will disregard deciphering what is "good" or "bad" but, rather, pursue truths. It is curious why an art world that on all

accounts strives to be open minded and progressive, that seeks diversity and inclusion, in my mind, remains closed to Christianity. Although founded on perfection with countless righteous works, I can only conclude that the human-made church has also poisoned today's well with a history of centuries of injustices, stances of exclusivity, and crimes against the most innocent. I am baffled at how members of religions and churches built on the words of Jesus have drifted so far from his teachings. Today's churches operate by people, as Jesus points out, "...of this world." The teachings, we're led to believe, are "Not of This World."

As I encounter the next challenge of what is worthwhile and true on my journey of this world, I will do my best to be bold and deliver the best creations possible. If and when ideas feels uncomfortable, or unpopular, or there is resistance, I will understand I may be on the right track. My hope is that I will move past small matters that whisper in the shadows, but rather, have conviction and be brave enough to shout from the rooftops truths that are of consequence.

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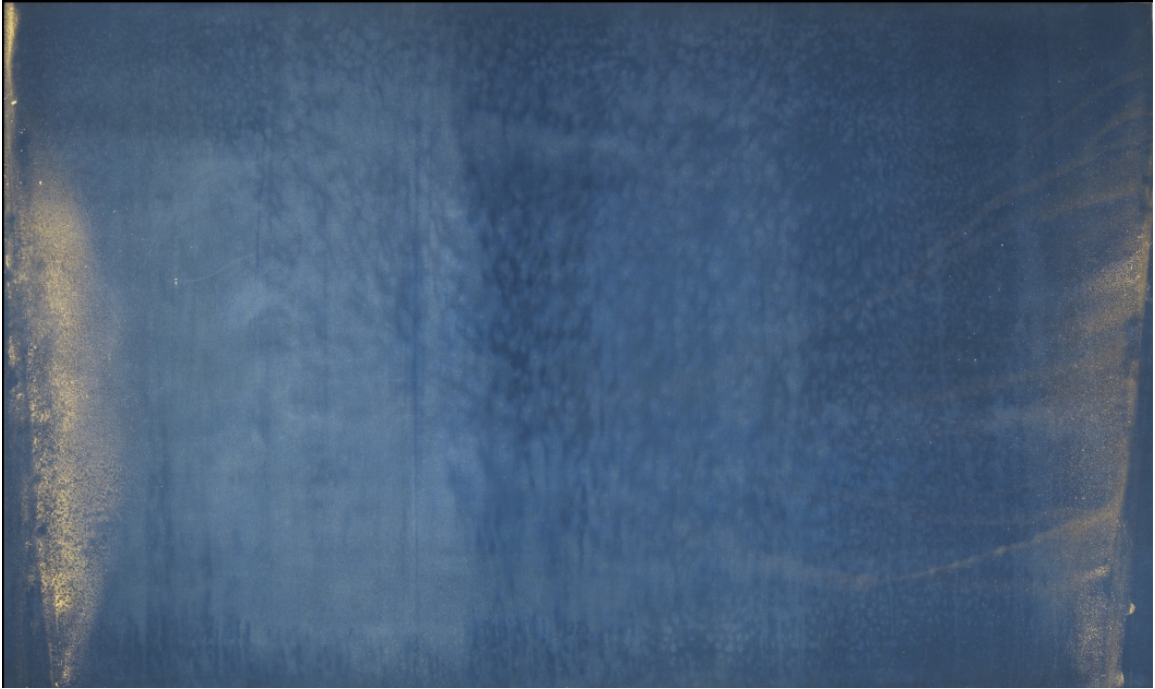
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APPENDIX
List of illustrations



Silence, 7'x11', Makoto Fujimura, 2015



40 Days, Patty Wickman, 2013



Ninth Hour, Maurizio Cattelan, 2005



Piss Christ, Andres Serrano, 1987



The Holy Virgin Mary, Chris Ofili, 1996



Pietà, Masolino da Panicale, 1424



Resurrected Christ, Bill Viola, 2002



Madonna, Corita Kent, 1956



Stop the Bombing, Corita Kent, 1967



Virgin Mary Installation, Robert Gober, 1997



Ecco Homo, Installation on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, Mark Wallinger, 1999



Ecco Homo, Installation St. Paul's Cathedral, Mark Wallinger, 2017



Ecco Homo, Installation at Centro Pecci, Mark Wallinger, 2018



Christ Washing the Disciples Feet, Giotto, c1305



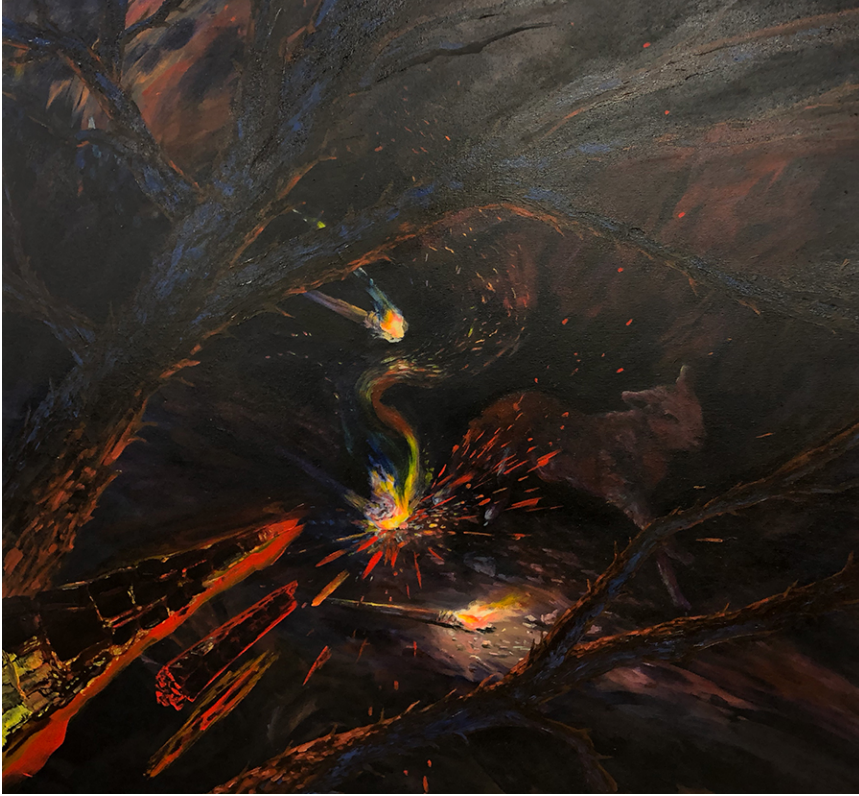
Episode 1065, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, 1969



Suppressed, oil on canvas, 32"x48", Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



Forsaken, oil on canvas, 39"x64", Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



Banished, oil on canvas, 44"x44", Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



Untitled, oil on canvas, 60"x48" with 100 stones, Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



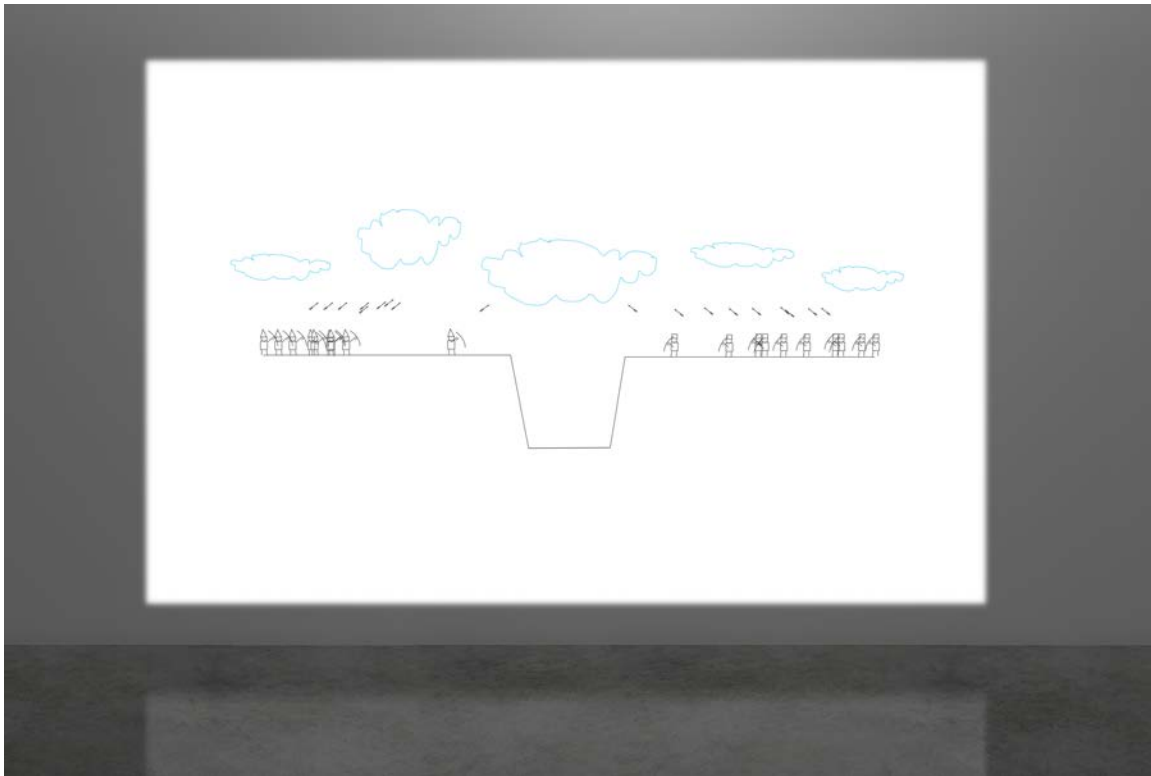
Untitled, oil on canvas, 72"x90" and bench, Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



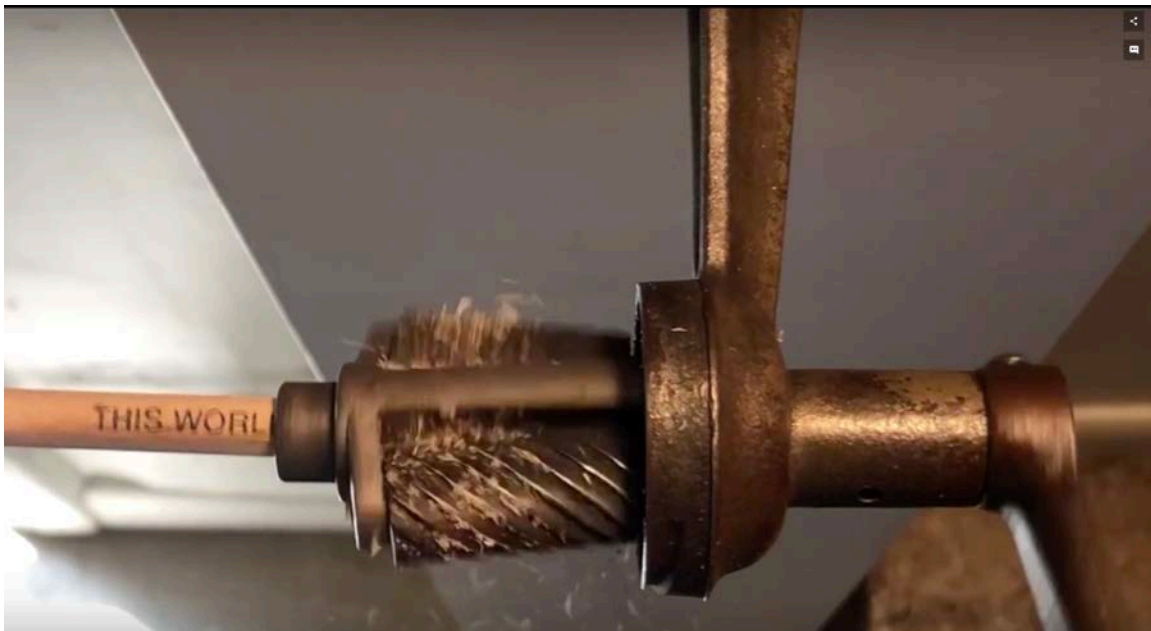
Still Life, hand bound book, 9"x11.5", Jonas Kulikauskas, 2020



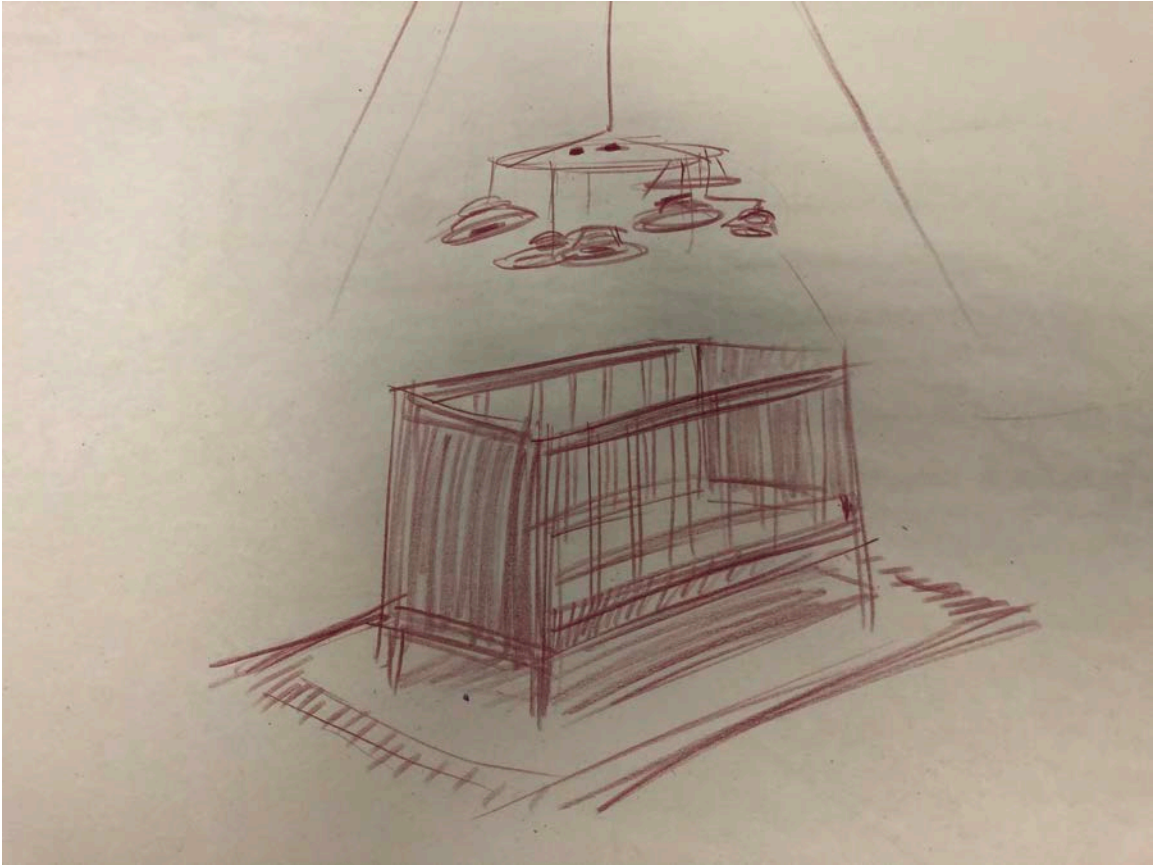
Untitled, cast urethane with 10,000 newly minted pennies, 16"x18"x6"
Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



Untitled, animation slide show projection, Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



Untitled, vintage pencil sharpener with "This World" pencil, Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019



Untitled, concept sketch, Jonas Kulikauskas, 2019