Artifact

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Artifact

By:

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Jewelry Design and Metalsmithing

School/Department for American Crafts - Jewelry College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
October 30, 2019
II.

Thesis Title: Artifact

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ABSTRACT

During the creation of this work, I identified and acquired various contemporary objects relating to branding, consumerism, and fads. Through a process of artificial aging, ranging from abrading, cutting, and sandblasting to burying them in soil and chemical treatments of bleach, salt and ammonia, I made the objects appear as if they had been removed from an archeological site after centuries under ground. I incorporated these apparently ancient contemporary consumer items into new compositions using mostly silver and aluminum. These new objects are created using traditional metal-smithing techniques and bearing a resemblance to classicism in form as well. The designs reference ritual objects from a variety of world cultural and religious traditions combined with a retro-futurism science fiction aesthetic. By combining these new items that look old with fine metalwork that is classical but looks new I am creating an ambiguity of time, place, and tradition in order to transport the observer into a viewpoint that forces questioning of our own place in history. Like all science fiction literature or film, I am using the past and future to speak about contemporary issues. What I am interested in exploring is the functions and purpose of myth, ritual, and religion in past culture systems and identifying, in our modern world of science and reason that has been for centuries becoming increasingly secular, how it is that we have managed to fill the void created by the absence of the old rules. Whatever one chooses to call it, whether it is myth or ritual or religion, it has served an important functional role in the growth and sustainability of all cultural systems. These belief structures provided our ancestors (and many people still today) with a level of perceived objectivity, social cohesion and cooperation, order, stability, hierarchies, and a way to guide the members of cultural systems through the turmoil of birth, the pains of growing, the tension of adulthood, and finally through the mystery of death. What I am interested in identifying is what it is in our modern, secular cultural system that has filled the void created by secularization and replaced the old mechanism with new to provide similar functions. Through the process of ideation and creation of this body of work the major system I have identified as filling the role played previously by myth is that of consumerism, capitalism, and wealth. This question of the new mythic structure in the modern world is not a new question and I am not the first person to identify capitalism and its bi-products as filling this role, but through this body of work and its method of display I aim to bring the concept to a more literal and digestible examination.
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1. **ARTIFACT**

   I grew up next to a very large and prominent Catholic Church as well as attending it's adjoining elementary school for most of my primary school education. This experience was formative in many ways; some of which were obvious to me at the time and others that have only become clear to me through the process of making this body of work. My family is not overtly religious and I was sent to the catholic school, not for ideological reason, but to avoid the less than adequate public-school system of Allentown, Pa. From an ideological perspective, my parents supported the religious aspect of the church in my early childhood as a means of providing structure and moral guidelines in my formative childhood years rather than from any dogmatic perspective. Interestingly enough, they were apparently aware, whether consciously or not, of the same topic I am addressing in my artistic research: that myth and ritual provide a function to individuals in society beyond (and sometimes despite) what the liturgical texts say. The specific ritual and mythic structures, in this case, Roman Catholicism has stayed with me in an aesthetic appreciation far longer than any aspect of faith. The church I grew up next to was the head of the Allentown Catholic Diocese, directly adjacent to the Philadelphia Catholic Diocese, one of the largest in the United States. Therefore, this specific church was in charge of a large amount of money and was grand in its architecture and decorative interior, much like any prominent cathedral that comes to mind. The building itself was fairly old for the area, built in the late 19th century, and retained some of its antique features such as a well-worn, to the point of being slippery, cobblestone floor. The pews were all very old, weathered, and made of some type of hardwood. The gilding of objects on the inside was pervasive and ostentatious. The large candle holders were carved with classical scrolls and filigree, covered in gold and topped by large, ivory colored candles. I specifically recall the candles having a crimson red Chi Ro emblazoned on the front, which from a child's perspective, seemed even more cryptic, foreign, and mysterious as it does to me today. The altar was made of various colors of marble with ionic columns on either side. Behind the alter was what can only be described as throne made of similar marble and gilded accents. Above the bishop's 'throne' was a massive wall hang of a gold crucifix, a dying Christ intricately carved in marble, and backed by numerous radiating bronze beams and blades. On each side of the altar were two story tall oil paintings depicting scenes from the bible that were unfamiliar to me then. There was a baptismal font which was stocky, wide, hexagonal and made of carved and gilded marble with a hanging cover above made of fabric and gold resembling a Victorian lamp shade. The Tabernacle which was ornate with embroidered silk over a gilded frame, held a large golden decorated chalice. During the ceremonial
entrance procession, which is a highly ritualized affair, the priest, wearing the colorful robes and 2.
garments associated with whatever time period or holiday of the Catholic tradition, was flanked and
followed by monks swinging incense censers which filled the air with aromatics, and finally altar
attendants carrying various pieces of ritual hardware. All of these things made a distinct and lasting
impression on my sense of aesthetics as well as nurturing a strong sense of inquisitiveness and disdain
for following anything blindly. These obviously are not the character traits that Catholicism, or most
any mythic and ritual traditions, intend to indoctrinate their young followers with. The early religious
education that came in school bolstered this sense of questioning authority and convention because of
the way religion is explained to children; full of contradictions of logic, physics, and history. I
distinctly remember being scolded in grade 1 for incessantly asking what “came before God”. Despite
being reprimanded, questions like this have followed me throughout life and through my study of myth
and world religion I discovered that not only have philosophers throughout the ages pondered this same
thought, but also various religious traditions, texts, and prophets. I am by no means comparing myself
to these great thinkers of human history, rather I am saying that instruction in and observance of these
rituals from an early age cultivated a curiosity in other rituals and finally in a curiosity of myth,
religion, and ritual itself. Beyond the conceptual, it seems clear to me that my attraction to fine, ornate,
decorative, materials and products have driven my passion for gold-smithing, silver-smithing, and other
classical crafts.

The old adage goes “The grass is always greener on the other side” and growing up in the urban
environment of the city, I yearned for experiences involving the natural world. Tactile experiences of
mud, rocks, and bugs were what I yearned for as a small child. The house I grew up in had no yard but
had a small area in the back with raised beds for flowers. One of my favorite activities, as with many
small children, was digging holes in the dirt. Not for any purpose, not for any utility, not for any gain;
rather just the act of digging in the ground to see what was down there and how far I could go. I spent
many hours as a child digging in these beds and disrupting or destroying my mothers meticulous
gardening. I was interested in the worms and beetles and ants that lived down there away from the sun
and my own prying eyes. Seeing as it was a city, down there amongst the insects and roots, I would
find old pieces of trash; soda cans, bottle caps, shreds of plastic, and ambiguous pieces of rusted metal.
I collected these objects as if they were buried treasure, and in a sense they were. This act of revealing,
not only bugs but artifacts of the recent past, was exhilarating. At the time I had no sense of why or
concept of purpose, but as I look back and examine, as one does when attempting to decode our
meaning and origins, I have come to think that this act of revealing what is under the dirt has been
3. important in many aspects of my life. The pieces in this body of work consist of parts which appear to have been aged and weathered deep down there amongst the soil in an attempt to mimic the look and feel of archeological artifacts. The 'artifacts' in this work are, although, easily identifiable objects from our own contemporary time. The act of unearthing hidden ruins, bones, or clay tablets is an act of revelation. It is an act of sweeping away the dusts of time. This act, much like the religious and ritual traditions of the past and scientific endeavors today, is a search for truth. This truth, along with many others, lies quiet beneath our feet and hidden under the earth.

Yet another aspect of my childhood that plays into this body of work is that of understanding and appreciating the value of craftsmanship and working with one's own hands. My father is an amateur wood-worker and furniture maker. I grew up with a full wood shop in my house and received my first saw, hammer, drill, and Swiss-Army knife on my fifth birthday. I spent many weekends walking the aisles of hardware stores and constructing useful objects with my dad in our basement. I would sand and paint while my father cut, chopped, planed, turned, and swore. Not only have these experiences led me to a career in making well-made objects, but also a focus on objects themselves. As I described the cathedral earlier, it is clear that what I am remembering is individual objects rather than a larger sense or feeling of the space itself. While I find it comforting to think my focus on material objects is due to a sense of appreciation of manufacturing process, it is just as likely, if not more so, that this appreciation can be accredited to the material and consumer culture that we have all been born into.

Simply put, I am interested in history for what it can tell us about the future and I am interested in theories and thoughts on the future for what it can tell us about ourselves today. Dan Carlin, a popular podcaster of historical subjects, put it best in his piece on the Cuban Missile Crisis and nuclear armament theory. The piece is titled “Destroyer of Worlds”, which is a reference to a piece of scripture from the Bahgadavita that was quoted by J. Robert Oppenheimer when he recalled watching the first atom bomb explode in the deserts of New Mexico. In this piece he details why history is important and explains how “history is prologue”. In the same way that many novels and movies would be hard to understand completely without the information that comes before the story begins, history provides context for what is occurring right now before our eyes. Without understanding what happened before, it is near impossible to understand what is happening now. Also, history is able to help us understand what may happen in the future because, as Carlin also states in the previously mentioned piece, “history may not necessarily repeat itself, but it certainly does rhyme”. That is to say, while we can not use history as a predictor for the future, if we better understand how humans behave
under certain circumstances in general, we can extrapolate from that information certain scenarios that may occur in the future under similar circumstances. This is not only important for a general understanding but also essential for the comprehension of specific subjects such as religion, psychology, nationalism, and silversmithing. Without understanding what came before, and how all information is built on itself, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully conceive of where those subjects are today. Everything that happens is derivative of something that has happened.

What interests me most about science fiction is its unusual ability to speak about our current conditions, relative to the time period when it is created. If, in the year 1931, I was to read a scholarly article about the role of industrialization, standardization, tribalization of nations and the potential dark side of certain scientific advancements, as a lay person, I may not fully understand or even finish the article. On the other hand, if in the year 1931, I pick up a first edition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* - I, as a lay person, will be fully immersed and have a greater chance of grasping the ideas in the book and how they relate to my own current condition. Like many works of fiction, it paints a more vivid landscape of my own place in time than can be described by the nightly news caster. This, like history, does not predict the future. It is in fact still fiction. We have not (yet) brought back dinosaurs by cloning, colonized far away planets, or interacted with alien life. In the case of "Brave New World", while industrialization has continued unencumbered, the exclamation “Oh my god!” has not been replaced with the phrase “Oh my Ford!” Regardless, all of these works of science fiction provide a more digestible and nuanced look at our own selves and situations.

In the past few paragraphs I have described how thinking about both the past and the future is often more revealing about our own place in time than any other. Much in the same way that science fiction or historical non-fiction, placing this body of work in the context of past/future, I can place the viewer in a similar position to that of a reader of the described types of literature. The main hurdle to overcome in creating this sense in my work and its installation is how to best suggest to the viewer the feeling of past/future. Suggesting the sense of the past is a much more straightforward task as most of us are familiar with old and weathered artifacts on display in history museums or antique stores. Through a process of trial and error I was able to develop methods of artificially aging the objects I had selected to create the appearance of being ancient and weathered. The more difficult task is suggesting the feeling of something futuristic to the viewer. The method I chose was to use design elements from a style popular in the early 20th century known as “retro-futurism”. This style became part of the cultural zeitgeist and developed as a way of depicting something as being “futuristic”. In “The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction”, the author describes retro-futurism as such: “If futurism is sometimes
called a science of anticipating what will happen, retro-futurism is the remembering of that
5.
anticipation” For example, this is the aesthetic style used in such popular culture as Buck Rogers, The
Jetsons, Seattle's Space Needle, Jules Vern, H.G. Wells, and many others. By using a visual style so
clearly associated with what we collectively recognize as 'futuristic' combined with objects that are
visibly 'ancient', I aim to impart on the viewer a clear sense of the intersection of past and future as a
means to speak about the present.

Myth is an often spoken of and often misunderstood term. In modern vernacular myth is often a
synonym for a lie or tall-tale. This definition, while not entirely without reason, is not accurate and not
the meaning I am implying when use the term. Joseph Campbell, perhaps the most famous scholar of
mythology in the 20th century, broke down the meaning of the word myth into it's most easily
understood form by describing myth and mythology as “other people's religions”. This description is
not intended to denigrate any individual's beliefs but rather to draw a line connecting all major belief
systems while inviting us to question our own. While I would hesitate to contradict a scholar of this
caliber, I do find it necessary to slightly amend this definition. By calling myth “other people's
religion” we skip over large portions of what can be described as modern-day myths. Nazi Germany, as
all nationalist movements have, used exaggerated or fabricated “histories” of their own origins to
coerce their citizens into a belief of their own superiority. Other clear examples of these modern
nationalistic myths are found in the educational systems of all modern, cohesive, developed nations.

The most local example is that of the American Revolution and George Washington. In early
education, American students are taught of a deified version of this founding father, including the
obviously false claim that in his lifetime he never told a single lie. This exaggerated description of what
impartial history shows us an obviously virtuous and righteous figure in his own time is, while not
without some small shred of basis in fact, is without a doubt not entirely true. Building from the
foundations laid out by the early Americans, the cultural concentration of individualism, capitalism,
and a specific idea of freedom, a unique national mythology was created and has grown and evolved
over the short span of a couple of centuries. Because of the relatively short time scale in which this
myth has taken root, it is difficult for those of us inside this specific cultural tradition to view it as
anything other than a truism. These national mythologies are examples of both how myths can begin,
grow, evolve, and even be manipulated and perverted to fit specific goals of those in control of the
narrative. This is not a new phenomenon and is present in all belief structures throughout all of human
history. This is because myth serves a function for human societies and by studying the myths and their
functions we can gain a greater understanding of human history and our contemporary place within it.
Now that I have defined the term myth, it is possible to explore its function in human cultures throughout time. Part of what I find interesting about myth and religion is the connections and similarities between many of them and what we can learn about the diversity of human interests and goals by examining the differences. While there are as many similarities as there are differences between cultural mythologies in the vast expanse of human history, certain functions remain evident. These functions have evolved as culture has developed but there are many similar functions for today's myths that were evident for our earliest civilized ancestors.

A myth provides an “objective” guide for those within its bounds to judge hierarchies, morality, individual purpose, and place in the social structure. In medieval Europe, the interpretation of the Christian texts by both secular and religious authorities provided a framework for the social structure that allowed society to continue after the fall of the previous cultural framework of the Roman empire. Ancient Sumerian and Babylonian societies existed much longer than our current social structures based on strict hierarchies, class purposes, and morality that was both religious and worldly. The Hindu caste system provided a structure for an incomparably stable cultural system that has existed for millennia and arguably still exists today. While these are all examples of religious systems that influence societal structure, the aspects of deities and supernatural powers are, as is exemplified in the present day, not necessary for myth or for its social functions. All of these are examples of what myth has provided societies throughout time: objectivity, cohesion, cooperation, order, and stability. The mythic structures provide a framework to guide individuals from birth, through the struggles of life, and finally the mystery of death.

As I have described, myth has provided certain functions for humanity that have eventually led to our current state, yet for those of us existing in contemporary society, there are also obvious differences in our current state. Because of phenomenon such as “The Enlightenment”, “The Scientific Revolution”, and “The Industrial Revolution”, challenges have been raised concerning the legitimacy of almost all previous mythic systems and subsequently their functions on culture and society. Without a faith in a certain mythic system that creates cohesion and place in society we are presented with many questions that our ancestors did not have to ponder. Our place and purpose in our culture has become increasingly indefinable and therefore we have replaced the old framework with a new one.

A major aspect of myths is the use of symbols. Joseph Campbell says of symbols: “Symbols are derived from the psyche to speak to the psyche by reflections from apparently outside forces,” It is my interpretation that what this means is the symbols used in mythology both come from inside of us as
well as our interpretation of our environments but also as that symbols are merely guides to a greater understanding of ourselves. All myths are organic creations with purpose and symbols are specific to the cultural system of the myth-maker. While their a myriad of symbols used throughout time, many are also common between vastly different cultures and many outlive their use and become disconnected from the original purpose. This is an extremely brief explanation of ideas that many scholars have worked lifetimes to expand.

The “new myth” of our modern globalized world has not replaced the myths of antiquity but has often been merely adopted as a secondary framework for understanding our place, our morality, and our purpose. This addition of new myths to old is not just a recent occurrence. Because all ideas are derivative of earlier ideas, many times throughout history we can find examples of “old myths” being combined with “new myth”. The most commonly cited example of this is the evolution of the Christian religion. Christianity began as a sect of Judaism, an ancient cultural system that had (and continues to have) its own mythic evolution. Many of the major texts of early Christianity are shared with the Jewish tradition, and those texts were written, compiled, and edited over the course of a couple thousands of years. The religious texts of the early Christians began to diverge from the older Jewish texts, not by removing those stories but by adding new stories to the cannon. This selection of texts has been fiercely argued over by leaders of the Christian church almost from the time of its conception and has had a unique evolutionary process creating divergent ideologies. Another example of the amendment process of the Christian texts is the influence of another ancient religion called Zoroastrianism. Many connections involving the duality of the good deity and the evil deity, such as god and satan in the Christian tradition, which is not present in the earlier Jewish texts, can be traced to the Zoroastrianism tradition of what is now modern day Iran. Another step in the evolution by addition is during the 3rd century when the Roman Empire adopted what was once an outlawed religion as the official state religion. Numerous structural changes needed to be made for this union to be achieved. The clearest example is the early Christian belief of non-violence to the level of fanaticism. This ideology could not coexist within an empire built on conquering by the sword. This, along with other inconsistencies, were worked out in various councils of the early Roman/Byzantine church eventually leading the first split between what are now referred to as the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. Yet another step in the evolution was after the fall of the Western Roman empire, the church needed to fill the governmental void left by the dissolved empire. This was achieved by church scholars finding, interpreting, and occasionally removing pieces of old texts, justifying and explaining the churches new governmental powers. This evolution continued further but I believe I
have provided sufficient examples to detail my point that mythologies are not static. Mythologies evolve by addition, subtraction, and mutation based on the needs of the devotees, and that multiple mythic systems can often coexist even in spite of clear contradictions.

For the purposes of this body of work I have used ideas and symbols clear to a person of a modern, western background and replaced the original usage of such symbols with things that are more relevant to our modern experience. One of the overriding themes of this body of work is the glorification of materialism, capitalism, and wealth. Through the exploration of this idea I have described the general myth, or religion, to be capitalism over all. In this theory the scripture of this religion are not ancient texts but those of Adam Smith, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson. I have used contemporary symbols of wealth and status and converted them into analogs for earlier sacred objects. By doing so I aim to convey to the viewer both the fluidity of these mythic systems and how we relate to them and there overall functions, but also to simply shed light on the mythic tradition in which we exist but often do not recognize.

The reasons why capitalism has evolved from a theory of how the economy of nation states should function into our modern myth are too numerous and too complex to be fully explored fully in this writing but I will attempt to point out some of the important mechanisms responsible for this transition. The theory of capitalism was developed in the “old world”, what is today Europe and the Levant. While it would be inaccurate to say that similar monetary systems were not present in various cultures in the past, it is not until the time period of The Roman Republic that a relatively modern system of capital, loans, and interests was developed. Even after this period, this system dissolved along side the Roman Empire, and was not adopted again until the late medieval times in Europe and West Asia. The ability to obtain capital for business ventures by nobles and merchants not only benefited the business owners but the system of collecting interests on capital loans benefited the lender and led to a rapid increase in economic development. This economic development is the underpinning of many of the major steps of progress the west enjoyed during this time period. Everything from the arts of the renaissance, the scientific revolution, the protestant revolution, and the “discovery” of the American continents were the result of this change in economics. Subsequently, all of these changes created further advances that only increased the economic development. For example, The “discovery” of the Americas was based on a desire for more capital wealth and was financed by parties that expected a greater return on their investment. This is what began the age of exploration and colonialism that brought western Europe to the peak of all human wealth concentration in all human history. Another example is the Scientific revolution that, through its ideology of experimentation and
objective observable evidence, directly led to the development of new technologies that increased rates of production, agricultural advances and decreased famine, discovery of more effective medicines, and a greater understanding of the physical world. This, along with ample natural resources, directly led to the Industrial Revolution that put all of these advancements into warp speed. From the vantage point of a benefactor of these developments, this new ideology that sets the foundation for these developments, capitalism, can be seen as a net good for the heath, wealth, and comfort of the followers of the ideology of capitalism. Because of these obvious benefits, new ideas of morality emerged in these cultural systems that were combined to the earlier mythologies in the same way I have described previously.

This, of course, is not the full story of capitalism and the rise and dominance of western Europe over the rest of the world. It is also not the only reason for this occurrence, as Jared Diamond lays out in his book “Guns, Germs, and Steel”. The paragraph above is an incomplete representation because of the unfortunate side effects of capitalism's implementation, such as colonial domination, oppression, slavery, unequal wealth distribution, and ecological degradation of the Earth.

While it is simple to describe the duality of results of the ideology of capitalism, there are certain examples of cultures that exist somewhere in between as well as outside of the bounds of this new myth. The cultures that I find most relevant to this body of work are those of what is known as “Cargo Cults”. There are numerous examples around the world, the most widely known are those in the Melanesian Islands and New Guinea. In these cultures, there is a traditional belief explained in a variety of myths that involve ancestors or deities arriving via the sea or air bringing gifts of food, items, and good fortune. These myths have gone through an evolutionary process directly alongside with the technological development and cross culture diffusion caused by the rise of capitalism in the west. The traditional stories of these cultures have come into contact with unknown, foreign people arriving on the island shores in ships and planes bringing industrial items previously unknown to the traditional cultures. These items can be almost anything from industrialized production because these items were completely unknown to the inhabitant of these islands. Because of the entirely “un-natural” and foreign nature of these items bearing their strange scripts and other-worldly materials, and because of the clear technological divide between the inhabitant and the visitors, these items, or “cargo”, combined with the specific traditional myth of the inhabitants, a new myth has evolved creating an estuary between cultures, religions, and time periods. The importance of the cargo cults to this body of work is that they provide a real world example of how one completely foreign culture of a specific time period and another completely foreign culture of a different time period can explain, adopt, fetishize, and ritualize
the tangible artifacts of the other. This is not the only example but there exists a fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation and in my opinion, the cargo cult example falls somewhere outside those bounds.

The new religion of the world is capitalism. Its prophets are people such as Adam Smith. It's scripture is “The Wealth of Nations” and “Atlas Shrugged”. Its bishops are CEO's. Its Scribes are accountants. Its priests are small business owners, and it's devotees are the population. This body of work is not a judgment on this ideology. Capitalism has contributed to both the greatest goods on Earth as well as the greatest evils. This body of work is simply an invitation to the viewer to look into the historical mirror and impartially recognize that Capitalism is our modern mythology and it influences our morality, our goals, our hierarchies, and our cohesive cultural structure.

Artifacts are often thought of as pieces of ancient past, such as pottery shards, arrowheads, musket balls, and religious objects, but an artifact is really anything made by a human being. Archeologists learn a great deal from what cultures throw away as well as by what they preserve. Anything a person in the contemporary era has, that happens to survive the degradation of time, and is found by a person of a later era will be an artifact and will carry with it an opportunity to greater understand the older civilization and culture. These small pieces of material culture, whatever they may be, lead to a greater understanding of the ancient culture using a little detective work. In this body of work, I exhibit present day objects, that are simultaneously both banal and culturally significant, as artifacts of a culture that has come and gone. By presenting these objects in this way I am suggesting to the audience an invitation to look at our own time period in the unbiased way an archeologist or anthropologist might look at it. My goal is to remove the cultural blinders from the viewer to allow the audience to look at ourselves through a fresh lens.

For anyone of my generation, we have been born into a world that is existentially threatened from multiple and diverse angles. This is somewhat true for all human beings: the ever present scourge of disease and violence is obviously prevalent in most situations humanity has found itself forever. One of the angles at which we are threatened only became a reality on July 16, 1945 in the desert of New Mexico. Ever since that date, despite waxing and waning international tensions, the threat of atomic annihilation has increased alongside the development of technology. This event ushered in a new paradigm into the human condition; we now have the power to destroy ourselves wholly. Since the end of the “Cold War”, this issue has faded into the distance, often fooling us into a sense of complacency, but it is without a doubt, still the quickest way for our entire global civilization to collapse. Something that provides a much slower and gradual threat to our global civilization is something newer that
increases in intensity daily; the gradual over consumption of resources and degradation of nature often referred to as climate change. These are only two of the possible death sentences for our current society, but they are far from the only ones. Both of these scenarios, genocidal war and loss of natural resources, would be understandable to our ancestors, in fact, historians can describe myriad examples of when these same scenarios destroyed previous civilizations. The differences I see in our contemporary context are two fold. First, the civilization we are now speaking of “ending” is not localized but rather global and total. Second, most previous civilizations lived in time periods in which they could identify time periods in their own past in which technological achievement was occasionally lower, but also higher than their own contemporary context. This is a scenario that is difficult for most of us to comprehend; the idea that there may come a time in the future in which technology is not only less developed, but our own global society might be an archaeological enigma. This sense of historical mystery is what I am attempting to exemplify in the apparent mixing of time periods in this body of work. I hope to make the viewer aware of our own precarious situation, the collective hubris of our society's response to existential threats, and the differences in how we currently view the past as opposed to how it was viewed by our ancestors. There is a sense that we are on an infinite upward climb of the technology rollercoaster. This could in fact turn out to be true if we are to solve our energy and conflict issues here on earth and expand our collective human culture beyond the bounds of this solar system. While this is possible, the more likely scenario is that history will continue to rhyme and we will follow the paths of our ancestors; rising to great heights only to fall yet again.

Joseph Campbell, responding to a question of modern day myth in his famous interviews with Bill Moyers, claims that he does not believe that there is a current modern day system of myth. His explanation is that the world is changing far to quickly and our understanding of reality is constantly evolving, rendering our society incapable of fitting inside a mythic structure. My response to this claim would be that cultures from the Sumerians, Babylonians, Greeks, Franks, to the British Empire would also make such a claim, even though from our vantage point in the 21st century they undoubtedly do function within a mythic framework. Myth creates boundaries and parameters for thought and action, and from inside this framework, it can be difficult to distinguish the mythological system in which we function as individuals. Campbell is undoubtedly correct in his claim that our society is changing to quickly for us to have the same type of surety of our cultural myth, but that does not mean that it is not present. Like technology, art, and systems of government, all myth is derivative of past forms and does not fit within clear boundaries. This can be exemplified by the numerous denominations and sects of christians, jews, and muslims; all of which are derivative of a small handful of stories held in common.
The modern myth that I am speaking of is obviously something distinctly western and, possibly, specifically American, but I can only examine what it is that I have experienced. Our current myth system is an amalgam of Judaeo-christian philosophy, Greek ideas of governance, European ideas of the value of the individual, industrial revolution era ideas of capitalism, and nationalistic myths of the creation of America. We, as do all cultures, struggle to see the myth from the inside, while we find it easy to discern and describe the mythic systems which guide other groups and cultures.

All things are derivative. This is true of the physical world (big bang occurs, hydrogen forms, more complex molecules form, life occurs, conciseness emerges, a few other things happen, then I write this thesis) as well as the conceptual world (agriculture is developed, hierarchies form and create rigid social systems, steam power is utilized, Salvador Dali paints clocks, the atom is split, more things happen, then I write this thesis). It is impossible to fully understand what we are currently experiencing and participating in without understanding the occurrences that have led to this point. It is impossible to understand the modern state of Israel without understanding the events of WW1. It is impossible to understand the era of European colonialism without understanding Chinese policies of isolationism in the 14th century. For this reason, those of us who wish to gain a greater understanding of the world in which we live must try to understand the events from which it is derived. This is the reason I have used the concept of past and future in this body of work to speak about our collective present; it is a mechanism to form the context in which to have this conversation.

A piece of cinema from the 1960's was integral in the theme of this work, not only for its overriding theme, but especially for one specific climax in the film. The movie is “The Planet of the Apes”, starring Charleton Heston. At the apex of the film, Heston's character, who believes he is on a distant planet controlled by intelligent ape-like creatures who live in a post stone age type civilization, discovers that he is instead on Earth in the distant future, when he discovers The Statue of Liberty mostly covered by the sand and the surf. This moment in the film is the exact feeling that I aim to convey to the viewer with this body of work. In this moment, the audience comes to a new realization; that our current world is not permanent, time and technological progress are not co-linear, and no part of the future is certain other than our own demise and the rediscovery of our own contemporary artifacts by other humans sometime in the distant future.

Another point of interest in this sense is the rediscovery of the Elamite city of Sousa, located in modern day Iran. Elam was an ancient bronze age empire existing contemporaneously with Babylon, Assyria, and Sumeria. When the city was excavated in modern times, a large trove of artifacts was found buried beneath the sands of time. Included in this trove were pieces of art from a wide variety of
cultures as well as time periods. Today it is believed that what was discovered was an ancient museum
showcasing the relics of conquered people, but when it was first un-earthed, it was an mystery. The
collection made no sense in terms of time periods and places, but the reality could not be denied that all
of these items from so far out, were in fact collected in one place. This confused early-modern
archeologists for decades and that sense of temporal and geographic ambiguity is an integral part of this
body of work.

Yet another example is the story of Xenophon's retreat. Xenophon described his journey in his
writing, “The Anabasis”. In this story, Xenophon is a general leading a group of Greek mercenaries in a
fight within a Persian civil war. After there defeat, the Greeks are forced to retreat from Persia back to
Greece. This journey leads them through territory unknown to those fleeing. The part of the story that
is important for this body of work is the time the Greek forces spend outside the destroyed city of
Nineveh, the Assyrian capital from about 300 years before that time. The city lies in ruins and is
essentially uninhabited. Despite the derelict appearance, the foundations and structures of the city's
ruins point to a civilization greater than anything the Greeks were aware of, either in there own time or
times past. Whatever the emotion those mercenaries felt viewing something much older and much
grander than there own state is a sense that is common throughout human history but entirely foreign to
us in contemporary times. It is my goal to convey to the viewer some small (piece) of this feeling that
time and progress are not co-linear and that our own situation is both special and incredibly fragile.

It is my belief that this change of vantage point is an important, if not existential, question for
our own contemporary global civilization. What will happen to us? Where will we go and why? What
will we leave behind? What will be the cause of our own fall? And, maybe most importantly, what will
the archeologists of the far future discern from our artifacts and what will be there judgements? To gain
some idea of the results of these questions, we must examine how it is we answer them when
concerning cultures that proceeded our own.

The first thing we must realize is how history is compressed more and more the farther back one
examines. Rome is so vivid and colorful to us not because they were more vivid and colorful than
other civilization but because they kept extensive records, were highly literate, left many artifacts, and
therefore are much more fleshed out than other examples. The ancient civilization of Sumeria, on the
other hand, comes down to us in a much more monotone way because of our lack of evidence for
anything else, despite our own knowledge that human beings of all time periods are complex and multi
faceted. The contemporary view of the past is based primarily on the evidence we have and the more
evidence we have, the more multi dimensional the past becomes. What is important about this fact
concerning this body of work is that the view of a “future” civilization about a “past” civilization rests solely on the artifacts left behind by the “past” and rediscovered by the “future”. I intend to pose the question to the audience of what it is, based on our artifacts, will be our legacy to the future. How will they view us? How will they understand us? How will they judge us?

The Cadillac pendant, entitled “Amulet”, exemplifies the idea of reuse of artifacts without the understanding of the original meaning or function of the artifact, much in the same way as a cargo cult re integrates artifacts from industrialized society into the existing mythological framework of there own. The Cadillac hood ornament, while in current times is a common branded symbol of wealth and luxury, is integrated in this piece upside down. The idea is that without the knowledge of it's use and meaning, a unfamiliar person might interpret this object using symbolism common throughout human history.

The ornament is turned upside down and resembles ancient symbols of both crescent moons, horns of a bull, and wheat sheaths. All of these are commonly important symbolism throughout human history. The piece is combined into a composition that utilizes many aspects of a retro-futuristic aesthetic, such as graduated rings, polished silver, and brushed aluminum.

The piece is made of several distinct parts: The ornament, the aluminum, and the polished silver. It is also accented with black sapphires and black diamonds. The very bottom on the piece culminates with a hand cut tektite bullet. A tektite is a terrestrial mineral created by the impact of a meteor with soil, creating a glass-like material as the result of the collision of earth and the sky. This stone has long been recognized as being of extra-terrestrial importance and it is likely that it will continue to be viewed as such. The Cadillac hood ornament is aged and degraded to resemble an object pulled from the dust of an archaeological dig. The effect is achieved by a combination of various abrasive techniques, ammonia/salt treatments, and simply being buried underneath acidic soil.

“Amulet” is hung on a chain made of stainless steel, plated with 24k gold, and is mass produced, inexpensive, and widely available. The chain, in its newly purchased state, is supposed to appear of similar weight and color to a real, solid, high karat gold chain while costing less than ten dollars. Both this chain and the Cadillac hood ornaments are superfluous, unnecessary, and arbitrary displays of wealth and luxury without necessarily reflecting the true status of the person wearing it. While these objects, in our current context, may or may not convince a contemporary person of wealth or status, they would likely be recognized as objects intended to display that message by future excavators based on the materials and of the historical context of the symbolism.

Something I was interested in exploring during the making of this exhibition was ritual and ceremonial objects. These tools are present in many, if not all, mythic cultural systems and many are
shared by or similar to other mythic cultural systems. It was intention to create a series of objects that suggest an appearance of a cohesive set of ritual devices used by some future priest in a civilization built on the ashes of our own.

In many cultures, ceremonial drinking vessels are part of religious traditions. Whether it is the cups made from the skulls of defeated enemies of the Mongols, the kykeon bowls of the Mithradatic cults of Greece, or the Scottish Quaich, ritual drinking vessels are common throughout world history. Likely, the most recognized example of this archetype in western culture is the “Holy Grail”, the cup that Jesus is supposed to have drank from during the last supper. This ritual drinking vessel is a well known theme in popular culture from DaVinci’s “The Last Supper”, Arthurian Legend, and even an Indiana Jones movie.

Because this theme is common through so many world cultures through time, I created a piece to be part of this exhibition to coincide with that theme. This piece is entitled “Grail” and is composed of a variety of different parts. In the center is a weathered Coca-Cola cup made of green glass. This cup is cheap, easily attainable at any dollar store, and commonly found in many restaurants in the USA. The shape of the glass is similar to many of the chalices used in the ritual of mass in the catholic tradition and has been artificially weathered and aged by means of abrasion and applied pigment. The Coca-Cola glass is topped by a silver domed lid, accented by synthetic rubies, with a cone-shaped silver finial. The design of this part directly references medieval European silver-smithing. Hidden inside the opaque glass is a silver tube protruding from the bottom, culminating in another synthetic ruby, and with graduating rings along it's length suggesting some sort of measuring system. The glass rests on, and is connected to the handle, by a another silver piece suggesting both the influence of medieval European silver-smithing as well as 20th century retro-futurism. It is composed of a rhythmic series of polished silver rings of varying size and style. The center of this part has an large ring extending outside the main body of the piece and is decorated with more synthetic rubies. The silver center of “Grail” connects the vessel to the machined, brushed-aluminum handle which connects the base of the piece, a rusted old nozzle valve. The nozzle valve was found in a junk-store and needed no artificial aging to make the part look ancient. It also has a banal beauty in the radiant geometric design, not immediately visible to those who recognize the object for it's utilitarian use. Separating the base from the handle is a silver plate with a raised silver ring and accented by yet more synthetic rubies. Taken all together “Grail” is composed of obviously different parts from varying styles and eras but remains a gracefully composed single unit that retains it's visual suggestion of its ritual purpose.

Many ancient rituals involved some sort of long, hand held tool for divine purposes or to
express hierarchical rank. Examples of this objects can be found in the staff of the ancient Roman senate or the aspergillum of catholic tradition. This tradition is continued in contemporary examples such as the judge's gavel and the mace of the British Parliament or the US Congress. The version of this tool in this exhibition is entitled “Pan-Planar Connective Instrument”. The focal point of this piece is a black iPhone that has been artificially aged and weathered using various chemical and abrasive techniques as well as plain old hammer blows. Is is framed and contained by the silver box, surrounded by a decorative frame and accented using synthetic rubies. Protruding from the top of this box is a line of silver rods of varying length topped with rubies resembling some sort of antenna system. Protruding from the sides of the box and connecting the iPhone to the handle are graduating rings. The handle of this piece is a long machines brushed-aluminum piece. It is topped with a rhythmic series of polished silver rings of varying size and styles and culminates on the bottom with a silver dome with a pointed synthetic ruby in the center. Along the edges of this silver dome is a silver ring that is embellished with a cryptic pattern suggesting an enigmatic inscription of some unknown language. Like the “Grail” piece, this piece is composed of varying parts of different eras, styles, and materials but retains an elegant unity in its composition. The iPhone was chosen as an integral object for this exhibition before this piece was imagined or designed because of it's current cultural importance for both function and fashion. The iPhone is a symbol of a technological revolution, that is still ongoing, that has drastically altered the way we communicate with others. It is also a relatively expensive version of a product that can be attained for less cost and is therefore a symbol of wealth and status while still being incredibly common. It is easy to conclude that future archaeologists will discover these objects while exploring the remnant of our current civilization and without means to access the data once stored on these objects, they may conclude a much different use or meaning for them.

Many ritual and ceremonial objects throughout history have been used to achieve a meditative or transcendental state of consciousness. Examples of these ritual objects are prayer beads, rosaries, singing bowls, stained glass, or Tibetan prayer wheels. All of these examples given have in common not only there purpose but also there manual use. The ritual tools listed all require the constant use of one's hands, often combined with a repetitive mantra or prayer, to bring the mind to a singular focus. There are many examples of tools for similar purposes in contemporary time but few as common as the current fad of what are known as “fidget-spinners” These objects are incredibly inexpensive and are popularly thought to help those with attention deficiencies focus on whatever task is at hand. While these fidget-spinners are entirely secular, there obvious hand-held nature and repetitive use might suggest some sort of ritual use to the unfamiliar observer. For this reason I chose to use an artificially
aged and weathered fidget spinner as the focal point of this piece, entitled “Ritual Meditation Device”.

The fidget-spinner is between two symmetrical pieces composed of various parts. Connecting to the center object are two cone shaped pieces plated in 24k gold. On top of each these pieces is a cone-shaped ring and and a silver ring extending outward connected to the main body by 8 silver spokes. The top of the piece is a adorned with garnet bullets in a geometric pattern with a pointed faceted garnet in the center. The bearings that allow the spinner to move are preserved so as to allow this new composition to still function, and still fit between the thumb and middle finger as to still be hand held.

The last ritual object in this exhibition is entitled “Transporter”. The focal point of this piece is Jordan Nike sneaker that has been aged and weathered using bleach, salt, abrasives, and simple soil. This specific object was chosen for similar reasons to the iPhone: it is very common but also much more expensive than similar products and therefore is meant to display wealth and status. The sneaker is adorned with polished silver, over 75 moonstones, and red anodized brushed aluminum. One the toe of the sneaker is a fitted silver piece with a shape resembling a crown or tiara and adorned with graduating sizes of moonstones. Many other parts of the sneaker have also been replaced with similar decorative silver pieces. On the back of the sneaker is a machined brushed-aluminum piece resembling some sort of antenna. On the sides of the shoe there are spaces in which a mesh netting was once placed, but after surviving the ravages of time, the mesh has worn away and has been replaced by a red aluminum plate connected to the body of the sneaker using over 60 silver and moonstone accents. The tongue of the show still remains, along with its iconic branding of a human figure, but where the laces once were has been covered by a large red aluminum plate. The most eye catching and futuristic looking part of this piece is the red aluminum ring that floats around the outside of the shoe, connected by silver rods and brackets resembling some sort of industrial hose or insulated wires. The imagery for the ring around the sneaker derives from retro-futuristic examples of clothing as well as Jetson-esque fashion.

The final piece in this exhibition is not a single piece at all but rather the pieces created and arranged to display the ritual objects. The “pedestals” are arranged in such a way as to remind one of a ritual space, much like stone-henge in Britain or Gobekli Tepe in Turkey, and to suggest to the viewer a method or sequence of viewing each piece. The pedestals are arranged in a circular fashion with two large pillars in the front creating the entrance. These pillars are made of a steel and rebar core, much like a common structural pillar. They are covered in graffiti and tags that have been eroded and worn while the pillar itself has been cracked and broken to reveal the rusted steel interior. They have rebar protruding form there uneven tops suggesting that they may have been part of a larger structure at some
point in there past. The remnants of what was once a painted sign on the top of one pillar is still visible
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and despite missing certain letters, the phrase “Private Property” is still legible. Behind each of these
pillars are two cinderblock pedestals or various heights. These were painted white and then artificially
weathered using abrasives, dirt, and strategically places cracks and fissures. In the back, a larger
cinderblock pedestal that resembles a broken portion of a cinderblock wall completes the circle. To
heighten the sense of a ritual space, a ring of cement dust has been laid on the ground enclosing all of
the pedestals. Even in the absence of the ritual objects they are intended to display, these objects
arranged in this composition could exist as a piece on its own. It suggests a reuse of common
contemporary pieces of architecture in a way, at some future date, that glorifies these objects in a way
we do not often view them today.

I made the conscious choice to not include any name tags or artist statement in display of these
pieces. The decision to not include these things, and therefore leaving the viewer questioning the
purpose of these pieces, was made for a specific reason. It was my intention to create a space that was
of some ambiguous ritual use to some unknown future people as the art piece, not to create an gallery
or museum exhibition of said people's ritual objects. The space and the work is meant to evoke a sort of
un-answerable question in the viewer as well as use objects, symbols, and themes to evoke a similar
mysterious feeling in the viewer as ritual spaces do for there devotees.

A question that I continued to ask myself during the creation of this exhibition was: If my point
is to convey the remnants of our current civilization, how can most of my objects be, in one way or
another, as specifically western or American? The first reason is simple, but possibly somewhat
unsatisfying. I am a product of the culture I have been born into and therefore all of my views and
conclusions are framed within that context. While I have studied many other cultural traditions and
have a deep fascination for world history, I am as influenced by cultural lens as we all are. The second
reason is more relevant to the theme of this collection of work. Because of the industrialization and
European colonialism that has occurred over the last 500-600 years, The entire globe, and its various
cultures, are more homogenous than ever before in human history. Much in the same way the European
connection to North America caused the greatest transfer of biological life that has ever occurred,
transferring plants, animals, and microbes between the “old world” and the “new world”, cultures have
also been combined and mixed together, often with a dominant western flavor. This is by no means to
say that all cultures on earth today are the same, but cross cultural influence has unquestionably led to a
greater similarity amongst many.
CONCLUSION

As with most art, it is difficult to define the purpose or intention of this exhibition. All viewers will view this body of work through their own personal lens and with their own cultural blinders, but it was my hope that, by including many different common mythological symbols and objects, and by displaying these objects in the designed space, each viewer could interpret this exhibition not as any specific mythology but rather as an ambiguous mythology devoid of place at some unknown time. By doing so, it was my intention to communicate to the viewer a sense of the interconnectedness and similarities of cultural mythologies throughout time and geography. The decision to translate this intention of timeless and placeless mythology is also intended to endow a sense of our own societies mortality, much in the same way civilizations before ours have known of both the progress that had been attained by their ancestors, but also of the civilizational low points that have traditionally followed those cultural peaks.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

I: “Amulet”
II: “Grail”
III: “Pan-Planar Connective Instrument”
IV: “Ritual Meditation Device”
V: “Transporter”
VI: Overall view of exhibition space and displays
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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