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## Inner Presence

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**INNER PRESENCE**

**An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts**

**Amy L. Bailey  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2000**

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This Study by: Amy L. Bailey

Entitled: Inner Presence

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the  
Degree of Masters of Arts

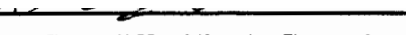
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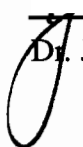
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What we believe constructs the person we are and will become, the ways and means we conduct our lives and form our sense of right and wrong at all levels inward and outward: politically, socially, and personally. My own beliefs, founded on my faith in God, have directed me in my work. This thesis exhibition is an exploration of how to express these beliefs visually.

During my exploration, I had to alter and develop my own visual iconography to express my ideas of God. Conventional transcendent icons including the cross, the Christ figure, and the Virgin Mary, have been usurped by pop culture and art. As a result of this borrowing in the late twentieth century, these icons have begun to lose value or meaning to me. In the following paragraphs I intend to discuss reasons why.

Christian iconography has been used to create shock value or to undermine sanctity associated with the icon. This occurs when an artist appropriates the idea of God, as signified by the icon, for his or her own purpose rather than for higher means. For instance, Jeff Koons's ceramic *Saint John the Baptist*, depicting Saint John holding a pig and a penguin with a golden cross behind, is "baptizing people in banality" (380). This purposely erodes at the historically sanctified meaning held by Christian and Catholic churches.

This becomes more complex when the artist is working for higher means but questions the idea and meaning of the existing Christian and Catholic iconography. Robert Gober in an untitled installation, created a shocking image of a concrete Virgin Mary pierced through the womb by a large drainpipe. In Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a plastic crucifix is photographed in urine. More recently, Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*,

depicted a black Virgin Mary surrounded by the real elephant dung and images of vaginas. Serrano and Ofili, who claim to be Catholic, caused a public outrage against their work. This was due to the difficulty for the audience to reach beyond the ideology of what they have been told or learned previously about these symbols. This, in turn, could cause offense or misinterpretations if the symbol is used in what the audience would believe as an “unsanctified” manner. However, the definitions or rules of what is sanctified is debatable. Craig Dwetweiler (2000) states: “Its like a property issue as far as who Jesus belongs to and who has the right to appropriate his image and teachings for their own artistic purposes” (3).

Other artists attempt to extract spirituality from the artwork itself, by appropriating the idea of God as an icon. Julian Schnabel painted a blue form and entitled it *Portrait of God*. Suzi Gablik discusses Schnabel’s work as an attempt to evoke emotion and spirituality. Gablik quotes Schnabel explaining this, during one of his exhibitions that “I wanted to have a feeling of God in it. Now, I don’t know if there’s a God there or anywhere...” (90-91). In *Vita*, Schnabel combines pre-Christian religious symbols with Christian symbols. Through this religions are undistinguishable in the overall theme of spirituality in his work.

This causes me to raise the question: is meaning to be gained from the usage of conventional transcendent iconography? Suzi Gablik (1985) states: “...it has become virtually impossible to raise questions about the existence of God, or any transcendent realm. We have learned not only to disapprove, but also to ridicule, the significance of the sacred, and to trivialize spiritual themes in which we ‘can no longer’ believe” (91).

Therefore, in this thesis exhibition, I chose my own aesthetic language to visually explain my personal experience with God. I incorporated lesser known Christian iconography and distanced the audience from it through abstraction. As a result, the audience is not distracted by the past associations of symbols and instead is drawn to deeper meaning through a personal aesthetic.

I chose to create the visual language through the format of brooches for the majority of the show. The small scale of a brooch and its close proximity to the body when worn produces a more intimate connection between the brooch and the audience. I selected the brooch over other jewelry pieces because a brooch attains a kind of freedom from the body. A ring or bracelet is restricted to interact with the finger or wrist. Whereas, the only restriction of a brooch is being pinned to a background, which could be anywhere on the body. This allows me to create any form I choose.

I began my exploration with a triptych of brooches, *Beginnings Beyond us*. I used a lesser known parable of the mustard seed cited from Matthew 13:31-32 in the Bible. The parable tells the story of a mustard seed, which is considered the smallest seed planted in the ground. The seed grows to be the largest of all garden plants of which all birds of the air flock to. I paraphrased the text and etched it onto the front surface of three separate receding rectangular forms made out of silver. The partially unreadable text denies complete understanding to what it says, becoming a visual record of the hand. The silver text and background are pickled white<sup>1</sup> causing the text to be subtle and blend into the background. The quoted biblical text is placed as a subtle reminder or memory of the origin of the story.

Because the text's readability is elusive to the audience, the understanding is attributed through the visual counterparts of the pieces. *Beginnings Beyond us* is a triptych that divides the parable into three sections, depicted through three separate brooches. A small interior space, containing a real mustard seed, interrupts the surface of the first brooch. The interior space has an open door as an allegory of beginnings, future, hope, and enlightenment. In this case, the object, the mustard seed, behind the door is small. However, it grows, becoming roots in the second brooch and a large leaf in the third brooch.

The metaphor can yield multiple interpretations. Biblically, the parable was used to explain how the Kingdom of God starts out small and insignificant but will grow to be large and dominant. Without this biblical insight the triptych's interpretation becomes open. My intention was to create work that would allow the audience consisting of all beliefs and backgrounds to understand it on some level. Therefore, the concept of something small growing to be large and great can be applied personally. By making it this open, I have risked losing the biblical meaning and the ability to impress upon the audience what I was trying to communicate.

The pieces following the triptych, *Beginnings Beyond us*, are more abstract, but I have gained more control over the emotional concepts extracted from the work. In the series *Presence*, I incorporated the concept of the conventional symbol of the Holy Spirit, a dove. I referred to the symbol through the use of real feathers. The feathers were cast in resin and cut into fragments. This caused the feather to become partially unrecognizable allowing the person to focus more on the abstract, linear element of the

feather. Then I abstracted the symbol further by fabricating smaller feathers out of silver. The abstraction of the cast feather and the fabricated feather distances the audience from the conventional symbol, the dove, which is itself, distanced from the realness of the Holy Spirit.

This conceptual distance obscures past meanings of the dove and allows the audience to focus on the arrangement of formal elements to reveal the essence of the Holy Spirit. The formal elements consist of a thin, linear square frame fabricated from silver of which a transparent resin fragment is placed. The resin, because it is polished creates an atmospheric quality that preserves the feather inside. A person knows there is something present but can not identify nor physically touch it. The thin gauge of the silver creates the appearance of a fragile structure. However, when the resin fragments are placed in the silver form, the appearance of the completed piece is strengthened. This is intended to convey abstractly an idea of the personal experience of believing in God. If a person believes in God, the Holy Spirit, represented by the resin fragments, will reside in that person, depicted by the silver structure, and he or she will be strengthened spiritually.

In the next series of brooches entitled *Inner Stillness*, *Inner Rest*, and *Inner Stirring*, I used the same feathers cast in resin. However, prior to polishing, the cast resin pieces acquired a softer sensibility like charcoal drawings. The visual language of the brooches is not blunt and bold, but rather soft and subtle. The faint markings and lines created by the feathers evoke a poetic language of stillness and rest. This is shown through the movement and direction of the lines in each brooch. Within the piece *Inner*



*Stillness*, the movement of the lines are horizontal giving a sense of a quiet landscape. The silver leaf forms placed in the second brooch, *Inner Rest*, reflect the arched movement of the black sketches the feathers create. The elements of the third brooch, *Inner Stirring*, are positioned vertical, creating more energy when contrasted with the horizontal lines of *Inner Stillness*. Yet, the nature of the materials still asserts subtlety and weightlessness. Therefore, the movement is like a gentle breeze or stirring.

I continued using feathers in two more brooches entitled *The Golden Fruit*. However, I completely eliminated the real feathers and only used fabricated silver feathers. I created a linear square space out of silver and placed the feathers throughout. Real feathers have the quality of flickering even in a still room. However, the silver feathers, suspended in air by visually heavy silver rods, are motionless. This creates stillness within the space and the feathers blend into the background becoming part of the window like structure. The gold-plated fruit is the only color in the piece, which tempts the eye by drawing attention to it. The fruit is like things of life tempting us and grabbing our attention. However, the Holy Spirit builds the structure of our consciousness, like the feathers blending into the silver window structure.

It is important to me to develop a balance of content with formal qualities in my work. I use line and light to create a sense of design and movement in the work. Line can convey fragility as well as strength. This quality is found in nature, which influences my work. In nature many forms appear fragile and delicate. However, these same forms have the strength to sustain the entire life of a plant. An example of this would be the root structure of a plant. Roots are delicate to the eye. However, they provide anchorage

to the ground during wind and rain, and absorb nutrients to sustain life of the plant. The little silver wires that hold the resin pieces onto the silver give the appearance of being delicate and fragile but are strong enough to hold the entire piece together.

The work in this show is intended to convey multiple levels of meaning. I am interested in introducing people to my philosophy and beliefs although I do not expect the audience's perception to change, nor even relate completely to what I believe. It is my hope that the audience will perceive the essence of faith through the forms, symbols, and compositions I have created.

## APPENDIX

<sup>1</sup> Pickled white: A process of heating with a torch and quenching in a pickle made of a mild solution of nitric and boric acid to build a thin layer of fine silver on the surface to create a white, matte finish.

## WORKS CITED

Detweiler, Craig and Scott Young. "The Sublimity of Dogma and the Dogmatics of the Culture Wars." *Civa: Christians in the Visual Arts* 8 March 2000:3-5.

Gablik, Suzi. *Has Modernism Failed?* New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1985.

Koons, Jeff. "From Full Fathom Five." *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*. Ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1996. 380-383.

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**A Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts**

**Amy L. Bailey  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2000**

## LIST OF SLIDES

1. *Beginnings Beyond us... (Part 1)*, 1998, brooch, sterling silver, mustard seed, resin, 1 x 4.5 x 7.8 cm.
2. *Beginnings Beyond us... (Part 2)*, 1998, brooch, sterling silver, anodized aluminum, 1 x 4.5 x 7.8 cm.
3. *Beginnings Beyond us... (Part 3)*, 1998, brooch, sterling silver, anodized aluminum, 1 x 7.7 x 8 cm.
4. *Presence (1)*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, resin, feathers, 1.5 x 6.8 x 7 cm.
5. *Presence (2)*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, resin, feathers, 1.5 x 6.5 x 7 cm.
6. *Presence (3)*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, resin, feathers, 1.5 x 6.5 x 7 cm.
7. *Inner Stillness*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, resin feathers, 1.3 x 6.5 x 6.5 cm.
8. *Inner Rest*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, resin feathers, 1.8 x 9.5 x 6 cm.
9. *Inner Stirring*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, resin feathers, 1.5 x 7 x 4.5 cm.
10. *The Golden Fruit (1)*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, gold-plated, 1 x 6.5 x 6.5 cm.
11. *The Golden Fruit (2)*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, gold-plated, 1 x 6 x 6 cm.
12. *Untitled*, 1999, brooch, sterling silver, corian, 1.5 x 7 x 8 cm.
13. *Planning Ahead*, 1999, brooch, nugold, corian, 6 x 7 x 2 cm.
14. *Untitled*, 2000, vessel, sterling silver, nugold (patina), brass, 7 x 8.5 x 14 cm (varies).
15. *Whisperings*, 2000, vessel, sterling silver, resin, feathers, 10.5 x 7 x 7 cm (varies).