

BEYOND SIGHT

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A Thesis

presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

the Degree Master of Fine Arts

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled,

BEYOND SIGHT

presented by Caleb McMurry, a candidate for the degree of the Master of Fine Arts and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dedicated to Andrea Kirkpatrick

November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1974 to March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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Abstract

BEYOND SIGHT

Caleb McMurry

C. Pazia Mannella, Thesis Supervisor

*Beyond Sight* highlights the research, personal experiences, and conceptual underpinnings that inform Caleb McMurry's artwork in his homonymous Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition. Personally informative and subjective experiences, while not scientifically quantifiable, are no less valid. Such experiences, in combination with human beings limited sensory apparatus point to fault lines in our perceptual limitations and understanding of reality. Human beings may not be able to escape the world, but we can trace elements of higher order that push through the immediate.

## Chapter I: At Death's Door

I caught the much-dreaded swine flu. In a horrible forty-eight-hour period, I had a high fever, was unable to move without becoming nauseous, and every inch of body ached, inside and out. At one point, I got up to run to the restroom to vomit what little I had in my stomach, and subsequently fainted, waking up in a puddle of blood on the floor with a gashed eyebrow and chipped tooth. Time moved painfully slowly. I fell in and out of sleep and consciousness.

At one point in time, though the day and hour escape my recollection, I felt my consciousness leave my body behind, floating directly upwards and out of my physical, sleeping body, which lay behind. As I lifted, my body was rotating inwards, before finally becoming fully upright and peering downwards at my own detached body. I lingered there for a while, with a heightened awareness of my rather consequential exit. I began moving, I cannot say walking, because there was not the sensation of physical steps, towards the hallway nearby. This hallway, I knew, lead to the door, which lead to the outside hallway, which then lead out into the world. But what was this world? Was it as I had known before? Or something new? An alternative version of earth or some other realm altogether?

Before leaving my room. I paused at the doorway and gazed at the handle. There was a choice to leave, if I desired. Yet, I was simultaneously aware that leaving my body behind altogether might mean I would be unable able to return to it again. And with this thought, I quickly, as though sucked through a vacuum tube, returned to my physical body, still lying on the bed.

Awaking much later, some unknown amount of time passed between the out-of-body experience and my subsequent return to waking consciousness. I knew what had happened was real, while being both hard to describe and surreal in nature. To others, my story would have been certainly subjected to alternative perspectives of scientific reason, given my flu-ridden state, yet for me, it was a real, formative experience. In its anomaly, it felt truer than waking reality. It altered the way I looked at the world, giving it a new, deeper dimension, that I had a hunch existed, though had not lived. The theoretical disconnect between one's body, soul, and mind now felt discernable rather than discussed or studied from a distance. I had a new respect for the fragile space between life and death, returning from such an interzone myself.

## Chapter II. Subjective Experiences

Critical, scientific perspectives dismiss out-of-body and near-death experiences as subjective and at the hands of many determinate health and psychological factors, which are undergoing alteration during such instances of sickness or strain <sup>1</sup>. Yet such experiences, and other subjective ones like it, are the most meaningful things that ever happened to me. I began to unravel that others experiencing such events felt a similar way, especially in terms of shifting perspectives and perceptions of reality <sup>2</sup>. These individuals, myself included, have gone through a transformative experience that shook them to the core, changing them forever <sup>3</sup>.

Among the many accounts of out-of-body experiences, Dr. Eben Alexander's is one of the most fascinating and unusual. Alexander, a neurosurgeon, heard countless stories of out-of-body and near-death experiences after patients underwent or were recovering from brain surgeries or comas. Alexander devoted himself to medicine and science, as a medical physician and trained professional on the brain, seeking reasoning for these occurrences, passing them off as constructs of the mind, reconstituted memories and defense mechanisms, protecting the brain from their impending shut-down. In *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*, Alexander writes,

When your brain is absent, you are absent, too. As a neurosurgeon, I'd heard many stories over the years of people who had strange experiences, usually after suffering cardiac arrest: stories of traveling to mysterious, wonderful landscapes; of talk to dead relatives - even of meeting God Himself. Wonderful stuff, no question. But all of it, in my opinion was pure fantasy... [All of these

experiences] were brain-based. All of consciousness is. If you don't have a working brain, you can't be conscious (Alexander 9).

Alexander's opinion, while once grounded in this scientific logic, was completely changed when, at 54 years-of-age, he would suffer an incredibly rare form of infection called E. coli meningitis, in which typically, less than 1% of victims survive. Alexander was left in a coma, for seven days, without any function in the neocortex, the part of the brain responsible for consciousness. Alexander traveled deeper and further into realms which, in their totality, he believes to be tracings of a higher-dimensional afterlife, despite having any conscious brain activity for seven days straight. In the chapter, "The Spinning Melody and the Gateway", Alexander attempts to recount, though he admits, imperfectly due to their ineffability, the experience of his journey into this realm. There, time existed in a non-linear fashion and existed in concurrent multiverses, beyond a logical, human sense of time. He communicated to other beings in these realms as he traveled alongside his own personal guide through these higher planes. He spoke and was spoken to by other beings present in these realms, without physical speech but with perfect understanding.

Alexander has difficulty articulating these ineffable experiences, he assures that it was real. As he says, "real in a way that makes the life we're living here and now completely dreamlike by comparison". The medical community has criticized his book, denouncing it as unscientific and therefore invalid, Alexander is still convinced by his experience but also by examining his own medical records after-the-fact. He continually returns to the non-functioning inability of his neocortex during his coma, stating, "The more primitive parts of my brain - the housekeeping parts - functioned for all or most of

my time in coma. But when it came to the part of my brain that every single brain scientist will tell you is responsible for the human side of me; well, that part was gone. I could see it on the scans, in the lab numbers, on my neurological exams — in all of the data from my very closely recorded week in the hospital” (Alexander 135).

As someone who has experienced an out-of-body experience, I did not find it hard to relate to the ineffability and reorienting nature of such an experience. Similarly, his viewpoint did not convince me of something new, but instead only affirmed what I had been through myself. Putting my own personal bias aside, Alexander’s medical records and non-functioning state are an anomaly in the world of near-death experiences. His account offers up an alternative viewpoint into the discussion of reality, as based on consciousness.

Ultimately, there is still no way to prove the authenticity of such experiences, but, they can be thought of kinesthetically. I lived and felt it. It was real to me. This begs the question, does something need to be physically tangible or scientifically provable to be real? Love, from the standpoint of science or tangible reality, would then render itself as fiction — an imaginative falsity that gives rise to delusions and misperceptions about the world, because it is not quantifiable. Like love, which is unquantifiable, I cannot look past or write-off my out-of-body experience. I keep returning to it, mulling it over, considering its implications because it was personally enriching and meaningful, changing the way I looked at the world and what I considered to be reality.

### Chapter III. Perceptual Limitations

If we leave such subjective matters to quantifiable evidence, the question then becomes, *by what instruments do we measure reality and can the senses be trusted?* Human beings exist and operate with many perceptual and sensory limitations. Our apparati, while highly adapted and functional, do not account for the whole scope of things. Take the eyes, for example. We see only the visible light spectrum. Yet, we know that through scientific evidence, this is but a small fraction of the electromagnetic wave scale, 0.0035% to be exact. The scale of wavelength varies from highly energized, short gamma waves on one end of the scale, to less energized, longer radio waves on the other.

We are also bound in our vision by our vantage point as well as by our peripheral and distance capabilities. If we look straight ahead and don't move our heads in any direction, most human beings are able to see about sixty-two degrees in our left and right peripheries, or roughly one-hundred-and-eighty degrees total. Comfortably, we can look up twenty-five degrees and down thirty degrees or roughly fifty-five degrees total. This can be pushed a little bit more but causes strain and discomfort on the eye. Our vantage point also determines our range of vision. Our bodies must move in order to take in a larger scope of vision. We only perceive a slice of the world, through a limited vantage point.

There is also the limitation of perceivable time. We experience time moment-to-moment, trapped like water on its route down a river. Human beings cannot see time simultaneously, as some astrophysicists might suggest to be possible in other dimensions.

We can talk about the past, be in the present, and speculate about the future. We can point to evidence of shifts and landmarks in geologic and cosmic time but cannot register the event in a way that feels like anything other than a trace of it — *evidence*, rather than *experience*. We know the Himalayas are still growing, their formative tectonic plates still rising, through such evidence. We cannot see time laid out in such a fashion that we can experience its growth. Instead, we trace it, measure it, and speculate it to be real. These matters are mostly studied and observed in a second hand-fashion, with the exception of the occasional volcanic eruption or earthquake. Similarly, astrophysicists can deduct the estimated age of our planet, our solar system, and our universe through carbon dating of the oldest geologic findings and by measuring the expanding rate of the cosmos, but only in the way that one might hear an echo from the real source of a sound.

While there are four other senses, each with their own limitations, as an artist, my research is foremost concerned with sight. If nothing else, I've been trained in my education to pay attention and to look more closely at the world around me. I continue to often wonder, can sight be trusted? Not only is this called into question by some of the previously mentioned misperceptions but is also compounded by my out-of-body experience. Why should an experience outside of my immediate senses, reorient my worldview to such a strong degree? In both my research and personal experience, I have continued to conclude that conceivably our species does not see things fully as they are. Perhaps what I experienced during the flu is a trace of another higher reality. Something which is usually invisible on a day-to-day basis, but in moments of vulnerability or receptibility, becomes evident.

This idea of the traced, second-hand, or obscured nature of reality is not a new one. The ancient Greek philosophers also speculated on this same phenomenon. In book seven of Plato's *Republic*, this idea is presented in what has become known as, "The Allegory of the Cave". In the allegory, Plato describes a theoretical "den" or cave, in which its entrance is open toward sunlight. Inside the cave, there are prisoners, whose legs and necks have been chained so they cannot move and can only see the cave wall in front of them. Directly behind them, before leading out to the entrance of the cave, is a low wall. Behind and raised slightly above this low wall, a fire burns, casting shadows onto the opposite wall of the cave, which faces the prisoners. After setting up the description of this theoretical den, Plato goes on to state the philosophical importance of the allegory, stating, [for the prisoners] "the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the of the images" (Plato 225).

Plato's allegory, in a philosophical gesture, suggests that human beings do not see reality fully or in an objective manner. We attempt to make meaning based on misinformation, like the shadows on the wall of the cave. This misinformation stems from our perceptual and sensory limitations. We are prisoners to our senses, bound to time and space and therefore do not see things fully as they are.

It is not hard to imagine similar illustrations of the relationships between senses, perception, and reality, on a more tangible level. Photographic advancements in the twentieth century suggest other ways of seeing. Infrared, ultraviolet, or X-Ray film all suggest coexisting, concurrent realities that we cannot see. These film processes then take on bigger implications. What if we could see in these other wavelengths? What if we saw the full spectrum of light all at once? Even if we completely take out the

possibilities of other higher dimensional realities which we cannot see and ones that exist beyond the immediate senses, it is not hard to imagine how seeing in another, or simultaneous ranges of light would affect our perception of reality.

Rochelle Forrester discusses this very idea in her book, *Sense Perception and Reality: A theory of perceptual relativity, quantum mechanics and the observer-dependent universe*. She deduces that in order to better understand reality, we must first understand our own set of senses, both in their abilities and limitations. She states,

We cannot use the laws of nature or our scientific laws to tell us about reality, because those laws are dependent upon our observations and our observations are unreliable and contradictory. Our observations are necessarily a priori to our scientific laws and any defects in our observations would be carried over into our scientific laws. The fact that human sensory apparatus gives all humans a very similar (but not identical) view of the world, but a view similar enough for most humans to be able to agree on the scientific laws, does not mean that those laws are necessarily correct and will enable us to understand the real world. A completely different sensory apparatus would produce different observations and would result in quite different scientific laws than those produced from observations made with the human sensory apparatus. A wide variety of completely different sensory apparatus can be seen in the animal world (Forrester 7).

Forrester presents numerous examples of various animal senses and how they differ from that of human senses<sup>4</sup>. In example after example, there is the commonality

that completely different sets of realities exist simultaneously, based on each individual species of animals. She notes, “Some animals have perceptual systems that have no human counterpart” (Forrester 8). These systems give individual species special abilities that give them an adaptive functioning advantage. After listing numerous examples, she makes her conclusion that, “Many of the senses possessed by other animals are so different from those possessed by humans that those animals must be considered to be in some sense living in different worlds from each other and from humans” (Forrester 8).

If we relate Forrester’s research back to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, it is not hard to deduce that human beings are truly bounded by our senses, just like other species. As Forrester suggests, “Our understanding of the universe is completely dependent upon the sensory apparatus available to us. Different animals have different sensory apparatus and so will have different but equally valid views of the universe.” (Forrester 7). As both Forrester’s research and Plato’s allegory suggest, our perception *is* our reality. As creatures of adaptation and change, we have evolved to the best of our capabilities. Like other animals, we have allocated senses that have allowed us to survive. We naturally take what we consider to be our well-tuned, well-adapted sensory aparati as indicators of a verbatim reality. But again, this is problematic. Forrester addresses this very dilemma of reality, based on limited sensory aparati, as she states,

Our senses have evolved over millions of years in order to help us to survive. They give us information as to whether food is safe to eat, where potential prey may be and whether potential predators are around. They are designed to give us information relevant to our survival. Information not relevant to our survival, will not normally be available to us. Our senses are not designed to give us an

accurate objective view of the world. They require a certain amount of energy to operate and human survival requires that energy is not wasted in providing us with information not relevant to our continued survival as a species. It is hardly surprising our senses do not give an accurate or objective view of the world. They are simply not intended for that purpose (Forrester 17).

If we have evolved for survival, then naturally, an out-of-body or near-death experience would come as something unexpected — something foreign and bewildering. Spirituality in our evolution has always been secondary to making sure we are not eaten alive by predators in our origins on the African plains. Such experiences are outside of the senses which we have evolved. They would rightly be beyond description, because the usual senses and descriptions do not apply, existing beyond the senses necessary to survival. It is easy to understand how scientific reasoning would write off such an experience, because the criteria for validating such an experience is not easily accessible and operates in a different set of senses altogether.

The astrophysicist Carl Sagan illustrates this idea in the television mini-series, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, which was originally aired in 1980 on the Public Broadcasting Station. In one of the episodes, Sagan attempts to explain the phenomenological nature of what it might be like to experience a higher, fourth dimension. He uses an allegory of a completely flat, two-dimensional creature attempting, but failing, to make sense of an encounter with three-dimensional one. In this allegory, viewers are presented with a square, which stands in for our human perception and understanding. This square has “width and length, but no height at all”, and appropriately exists in a place Sagan refers to as ‘flatland’, a place that is “absolutely

flat”. This square knows “about left and right, forwards and backwards, but has never heard of up and down”. (Malone, Adrian, et al).

Sagan continues the allegory by representing the two-dimensional square’s encounter with a three-dimensional creature, which he illustrates by the use of an apple. In an inter-dimensional greeting, the three-dimensional creature wishes to greet the square. The square sees nothing about his house in flatland, feeling only a voice from within, and gets a little paranoid he is imagining things.

Annoyed with the square, “the three-dimensional creature is unhappy about being considered a psychological aberration, and so he descends to actually *enter* flatland” (Malone, Adrian, et al). Sagan continues by explaining the three-dimension creature would only appear as a two-dimensional shape to the square, which he represents by stamping the apple in an inkpad and placing the stamp in said flatland.

The square continues in its panicking confusion, seeing slices of the three-dimensional creature mysteriously appear in his flat room. The square fears it is losing his mind altogether. The three-dimensional creature, annoyed, makes contact with the square and sending him fluttering above flatland, gaining perspective of it from above. For the square, this is baffling, and “completely beyond his experience” (Malone, Adrian, et al).

Returning back to flatland, the square is greeted by his similarly two-dimensional, flat creatures. To them, the square has mysteriously appeared out of thin air. They approach the square saying, “‘For Heaven’s sake what’s happened to you?’ The poor square has to say, ‘Well, I was in some other mystic dimension, called up.’ They will pat

him on his side and comfort him. They'll ask, 'Where is that third dimension? Point to it.' The poor square will be unable to comply" (Malone, Adrian, et al). Sagan concludes the allegory when the square returns to its home. He insists that, "our flatlander couldn't imagine a third dimension but he could surely deduce it", based on his experience (Malone, Adrian, et al).

Sagan also suggests, similar to Plato and Forrester's writing, we are bound and trapped in our perception. We are flatlanders, to use Sagan's metaphor, attempting to make sense of our baffling experiences of other dimensions. In the same way that a scientific perspective might write-off out-of-body experiences, so too would a flatlander be unable to relate to the encounter with a three-dimensional being. It is not so difficult to point to traces of other ways of seeing and experiencing other realities that are simultaneously present within our short human life-span. Our sensory apparati operate based on adaptive, evolutionary function. Human beings only have senses adapted for what is vital for survival and therefore, as Plato suggests, our perception follows suit. In our limited perception, we are constantly attempting to perceive reality through faulty sensory apparati, attempting and failing to point to traces of higher dimensionality. Similarly, continuing Plato's metaphor, we are prisoners, attempting to make meaning based on misinformation through our limited sensory aparati.

So exactly why are out-of-body experiences, like my own, so difficult to describe? Going back to Rochelle Forrester's writing in *Sense Perception and Reality*, she elaborates on the implication of her findings, concluding in a mantra-like manner:

- 1) There is no way in which we can know the world, other than through our senses. The only reality we can know is phenomena.
- 2) Our senses give us only some information about the world.
- 3) The things we can perceive can be considered to be in our world, the things we cannot perceive can be considered to be in other or different worlds.

Therefore:

- 4) As there are many things we cannot perceive there are many worlds other than our own.
- 5) There is no reason to consider that any world is more real, more true or more valid than any other world.
- 6) If there is no reason to believe any one world is truer or more real than any other, they can only be treated as equally true or real.

Therefore:

- 7) Any one world is as valid and real and true as any other.
- 8) There is a wide variety of senses and each sense has thresholds which limit perception.

Therefore:

- 9) There must be a wide variety of worlds.

10) As the senses of different people and species overlap some of the worlds overlap.

11) As any being may have senses which are quite unlike those of any other being many of these worlds will not overlap. Such beings will live in totally separate worlds from those of other beings.

12) There seems to be no reason to believe there is a finite limit on the range of potential sense organs.

Therefore:

13) There is no finite limit on the number of potential worlds that may exist (Forrester 55).

Like myself and others who have experienced out-of-body or near-death phenomenon, Sagan's square would not be able to properly explain what had happened to it because the description for such occurrences are beyond usual perceptual and sensory criteria required to describe the experience. It felt more real. Relating this back to my own out-of-body experience, more real than the sensory apparatus-based nature of what I deemed to be reality. An ability to describe an out-of-body and give an accurate account of its occurrence still falls short, because it is in a world of its own.

## Chapter IV: Possibilities of Other Worlds Through Imagination

While Forrester suggests the idea of other worlds being theoretically plausible and unique for each species, it is not difficult to imagine how they also occur on an imaginative, individual level as well. Carl Sagan wrote, “Imagination will carry us to worlds that never were. But without it, we go nowhere” (Sagan 2). In this statement, Sagan implies that a keen imagination is fundamental to travel to other worlds, both literally and figuratively, even if that other world is not one existing in the vastness of outer space, but rather one present in the realms of one’s innerspace. Creativity always begins with imagination and then the work can unfold. This is certainly true in my own life and in my life as an artist.

I was homeschooled for a year, as a young child in the first grade, as my father built our family’s new home. Our family temporarily moved to my grandparents’ house, who live in the Missouri river valley in central Missouri. My mother would go over my lessons with me in the morning before I would spend the better part of the afternoon alone, wandering the hills and hollows of the farm. I would naturally find myself daydreaming, imagining myself in different times and places altogether, finding new places to explore with each outing — pushing deeper to the edges of the property and into my own imagination.

During this year of homeschooling, my grandmother gave me a book on the Viking explorer, Leif Erikson. On these cherished afternoon outings, I would often imagine I was Erikson — an explorer discovering a new world. As I would venture out

further into my grandparent's property, it was not hard to imagine myself landing in some unknown land, because I was exploring new distances on their property myself.

One day, I came to the end of a very long, hilltop field on the farm. Trees banked the edge of the field, except for one small opening, which lead out to another field beyond it. Drawn in by the possibility of another unknown landscape, I hurried over to the opening in the trees. But I was soon halted, discovering a small barbed fence separating the openings between the two fields. My grandfather's words about these fences reminded me I was to venture no further, because it was the end of their property. In that moment, I know longer imagined, but felt what Leif Erikson might have as he landed on the shores of what is now modern-day Newfoundland and Labrador. I stood for a while at the boundary, peering into where I could not go — knowing the world was far bigger than I perceived.

Exploring has always stirred my imagination. There was such a simplicity yet profundity to the act that I understood even at a young age. Now, with the perspective of time and research, I have come to understand that this principle has held true for many cultures and individuals throughout time. Rebecca Solnit, in her book, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, touches on the profound simplicity and thought-provoking nature of walking. Solnit writes, "Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains" (Solnit 13). This is largely because walking allows the mind to stay alert and excited about the unfolding landscape, while still leaving freedom for it to ruminate and focus in on thoughts. Solnit suggests a similar idea that, "Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them. It leaves us free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts" (Solnit

5). It is not long after setting off for a solitary walk that one finds imagination as a companion.

The imagination, mixed with anticipation of exploration and the beauty of the landscape, opens the walker to notions of eternity, if they are willing to find it, whether within themselves or in the world. Frédéric Gros, in his book, *A Philosophy of Walking*, touches on the immediacy of this sensation.

The first eternity we [the walker] encounter is that of the rocks, of the swooping contour of the plains, of the skylines: all that is resistant, unchanging... it is to experience these quietly and humbly insistent realities — the tree growing between rocks, the watchful bird, the streamlet finding its course — without expecting anything (Gros 82).

Similarly, but on a less immediately physical level, the walker also quickly journeys into the self, because of the pace of thoughts and the vividness of the imagination. Gros suggests this as he continues in his reflections, “You’re doing nothing when you walk, nothing but walking. But having nothing to do but walk makes it possible to recover the pure sensation of being, to rediscover the simple joy of existing, the joy that permeates the whole of childhood. So that walking, by unburdening us, prizing us from the obsession with doing, puts us in touch with that childhood eternity once again” (Gros 83).

Sagan’s notion of visiting other worlds, if there is a willingness on behalf of the walker, begins to take on this very notion of the eternal — of inner, rather than outer space. The immensity of the self, coinciding with the child-like wonder at the immensity of the world, unfolds slowly, like the pace of thoughts, and settling in like the vastness of the

sea. Gaston Bachelard, in his book, *The Poetics of Space*, articulates this idea clearly and with simplicity: “Immensity is within ourselves” (Bachelard 184).

John Muir, the Scottish-born conservationist and purveyor of the United States’ National Park system, in his personal diaries from his time wandering California’s Sierra-Nevada mountain range wrote that, “The power of imagination makes us infinite” (Muir, John, and Linnie Marsh). My love of walking and exploring never dissipated, but instead, grew as I continued to age. I have grown to love the physicality of walking, which engages the body, allowing the mind and body to visit new terrains. I have experienced this sensation numerous times in my life as a long-distance hiker, spending days, weeks, and months out in the backcountry. Imagination connects us with the inner and outer world, creating a new space within ourselves.

## Chapter V: *Beyond Sight* Exhibition Installation

I am still interested in creating new spaces twenty-plus years later. I am still motivated, as an artist, by the idea of traveling to other worlds, in creating spaces that open up inner spaces of immensity for viewers and exposing the thin and subjective veneer of reality. The aforementioned chapters are the conceptual underpinnings that coalesce into the themes present in the thesis exhibition. The title of the exhibition, *Beyond Sight*, implies a struggle to accept reality verbatim. From out-of-body experiences, to our sensory limitations, to the very vividness of imagination itself, the most meaningful moments in my life and others, have existed beyond sight. Personally meaningful experiences shape us, like islands being born into the sea. As the magma cools, the new mountains sweep above the ocean, giving way to new perspectives and insights, as we look further beyond. These personally meaningful experiences, combined with one's own imaginative power give a new way of looking at the world around us.

Then it is not perhaps without a bit of irony that the work throughout the exhibition tends to command a lot of close inspection and observation on behalf of the viewer. Eyes certainly have their perceptual limitations, yet paradoxically as humans are also all we have. While the eye can be trained to pay attention and inspect closely, observation alone does not take into account a way of decoding the world. It also does not take into account formative experiences that change our perspectives. The title, *Beyond Sight*, also touches these perceptual fault lines.

The viewer entering the gallery is immediately confronted with a thirty inch by forty-inch handmade paper work on the opposite wall to the entrance. *Upon Re-Entry*

portrays a black doorway-like shape floating on the dark blue substrate of the paper. Across the diagonal length of the gallery, this archway motif is visually paralleled by a larger, four by eight-foot piece titled, *Near the Door*. The viewer is drawn across the gallery floor towards this work, due to these similarities in forms.



Figure I

Both works are made of handmade paper, comprised of blue and black dyed abaca pulp. These darker colors choices create a contemplative space for the viewer. The black archway becomes both a portal and a tombstone, a space to enter and to rest. Black represents both a void and an unknown. This use of black also reflects the perceptual phenomena of the duality of simultaneous absence and presence. The black archway-like shape becomes an embodied absence by its use of figure-ground relationship. This gives

rise to the feeling of a space that could be called into question, an illusion, one similar to the nature of out-of-body experiences, which are subjective and often dismissed.



Figure II

Photographs are interspersed with the handmade paper work, throughout the exhibition. The images, which are either twelve by fifteen or twenty-four by thirty inches

in size, are large enough to render details that entice the viewer to closer inspection, bringing their eyes closer to the picture surface. The scale of the photographs mimics the personal, intimate scale of the creative process. I captured much of the subject matter in the photographs at a close proximity. These close proximities render long exposure times. I would have to wait for extended periods of time while making the images.

This motionlessness, which I experienced during the creative moment is also paralleled, as viewers also become motionless before the work. The subject matter, ranging from suggestions of terrestrial physicality and otherworldly poetry, command a presence that quiets the viewer into an imaginative space. This motionlessness relates back to the idea of innerspaces, which I experienced in pre-visualizing the final image. The viewer then experiences this same motionlessness when looking at the work, opening them up to the photographic world created. In this motionless state, Gaston Bachelard's notion of immensity surfaces. In *The Poetics of Space*, he states, "As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of the motionless human. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming" (Bachelard 184). It is not long after viewing works like *Parallax*, that the viewer, like myself in the creative process, becomes motionless — the portal-like imagery suggesting for the viewer a reality beyond the present.



Figure III

The shadows cast by the light source in the gallery create abstractions on the wall beneath. Many galleries use a traditional, two-point lighting system, which minimizes shadows. However, I used a single light above each image to create more dramatic lighting in the gallery space. Gallery directors typically keep this shadowplay to a minimum, keeping any distraction at bay. But in *Beyond Sight*, the shadows in the gallery carry physical weight despite their physical weightlessness. This illusion, even if on a subtle level, has a referentiality to Plato's seminal essay, *The Allegory of the Cave*.

The photographs capture moments that mix reality with imagination, continuing on the idea of illusion. Photography has the curatorial ability to crop out the world,

allowing only what is most visually engaging to enter the picture plane. I must pre-visualize and imagine how what I see in the world will translate into the resulting image, working with an analogue four by five film camera. Pre-visualization is not only necessary, but when considered in relation to my specific body of work, becomes essential. So much of the work is capturing my way of seeing, where what is physically present before me, is grafted with the referential material and potential for imagination that allows me to travel beyond the picture plane. I want to capture moments that reveal the power that referentiality and imagination to create new contexts and meanings, in the same way that a photograph of a sink drain, like the one in *Event Horizon*, can become a suggestion of a black hole.



Figure IV

This same idea of the universe unveiled in the self is paralleled in the work of Carl Sagan and his aforementioned quotation. His influence on my work can be seen in the images, *Distant Relatives*, *Spiral Galaxy*, *Granules*, *Nebula*, *Contacts*, *Gravitational*

*Field, Lunar Mountains, Missing, and Division.* These images all are observed moments in the world that reference the traces of geologic and cosmic time. The images, as discussed in chapter two, suggest the subjectivity of time, as geologic and cosmic time are only traced by our finite human perspective. These misperceptions, are reflections of realities that exist concurrently, whether we can experience on a first-hand basis or not.

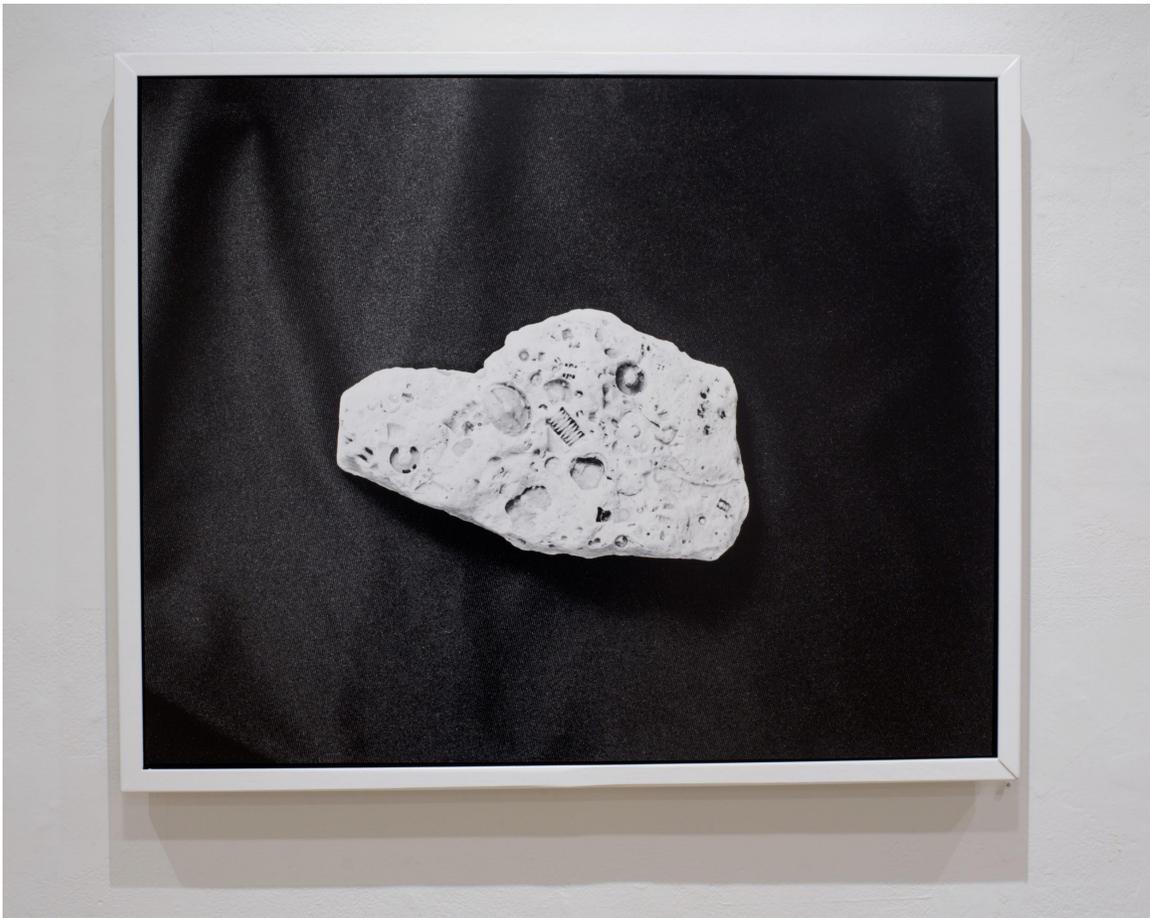


Figure V

Throughout the gallery, there are pairings of handmade paper works alongside photographic images. These pairings mimic the notion of a personal, subjective, and ultimately, abstract experience, like an out-of-body or near-death experience. The fibers work appears to float on the wall, hovering at eye level. The crumpled, textural nature of the surface makes the work feel alive and still in the process of shifting. The fibers work

throughout the exhibition alludes to the present whereas the photographic works allude to the past, this is due to the fact that the fibers work is unframed and suggests movement, whereas the photographs are literally moments frozen in time. Similarly, the fibers work contains color, which formally always adds a visual energy to the piece, giving it life. The black and white photographs reference the early photographic history of spirit photography. This contrast between past and present also adds to the dialogue of misperceived realities.

While my work does not reference spirit photography overtly, I am interested in operating under similar principles and questions that it raised at the time and continues to raise to this day. The implications of spirit photography are still relevant, as suggested in Charlotte Cotton's, *Photography is Magic*. Like the idea of spirit photography, Cotton highlights the movement of artists that mix reality with surreality in their photographic work. The most interesting idea behind spirit photography that motivates my work is that it "was another way of articulating photography's ability to see the invisible and reveal truths beyond the powers of the naked eye". Kaplan continues in his essay, *Paranoid Meets the Paranormal: Speculation on Photography*, "The discourse of spirit photography revolves around such paranoid questions as, 'Are we seeing the truth' or more complexly, 'Can such a truth be seen at all?'" (Kaplan 2)? Often in my work, I wrestle with these same questions. In a sense, photography, and artmaking in general, is a constructed illusion, to get at some higher truth. Mark Alice Durant comments on this idea in his article on spirit photography, *The Blur of the Otherworldly*, saying of images, "They are not just lifeless signs, yet they are also not quite life. The image lives at the threshold, standing between us and the abstractions we use to represent ourselves. The

image is a window, a doorway, a passage between the flesh of our existence and the cluttered forest of signs we have invented to communicate our inchoate selves” (Durant 9). In my work, the idea of portals to the otherworldly then is concurrently true of the nature of images themselves, leading us to spaces that are difficult to articulate.



Figure VI



Figure VII

The gallery layout reinforces this idea of interportality. Works with portal-like references are placed in such a way that suggest the walls themselves could be pierced, creating a tunnel between works. The architectural layout of the George Caleb Bingham Gallery allows for such an opportunity, with so many nooks in the space, the walls jut out from the typical, straight-away walls you might expect to see in contemporary art spaces. This exemplifies these same notions of inter-dimensionality, suggesting that perhaps even walls, surfaces which we take as barriers, are more malleable than we think. Walls, like our faulty perception, are human constraints.



There are many works that, rather than creating portals, appear to emerge from the walls which they hang. Works like *Emerging* imply a malleability to the otherwise rigid structures. This pushing and pressing, is symbolic of the way in which abstract experiences in our lives push through the immediate reality and often, feel more real than day-to-day experiences. This is heightened by the material substrate, by being constructed from paper, the emerging forms break the otherwise passive, ubiquitous substrate, suggesting the potential for transformation.

So often in the photographic images, I am making meaning for myself, inviting viewers into the other worlds I suggest that exist. In the BBC podcast, “Living with the Gods”, host Neil MacGregor interviews the contemporary artist, Grayson Perry. For Perry, “Making meaning is what art is about. About giving some fragile foothold in the

moment, in the chaos of life” (MacGregor). In my own work, I want to capture those moments in life where the ordinary, the banal, suddenly shifts and transforms into something extraordinary, transportive and otherworldly. Even if, as previously mentioned in chapter four, this transportive effect takes place by way of the imagination. These moments give one a sense of a higher reality that ground them amidst the grind of daily life. In my work, I hope to capture the idea of such meaningful and grounding experiences. Neil MacGregor continues in his podcast, touching on this idea as he continues, “Images can show us worlds beyond our own, where the usual rules of meaning and time do not apply. Worlds normally accessible only to prophets, mystics and shamans. Where language often struggles, images can accommodate ambiguities and contradictions and invite us to inhabit them, rather than resolve them. They are rooted in the artist’s imagination but have to be made sensible by every viewer for themselves” (MacGregor). In my artwork and research, I acknowledge that images and words fall short. But my goal is to create work that provides a doorway for discussion on the nature of experience and how those experiences alter our perception and therefore our reality.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

Thinking back on my life, the moments that have impacted me the most have existed beyond sight, connecting me to a reality beyond my own. These moments transcended the banality of the everyday. This banality becomes the liminal space in which I wait patiently for next meaningful experience. Other worlds abound, if one is looking. Whether they exist in transformative experiences or represented as a longing in the imagination, human beings are prisoners to our perceptual limitations, with the desire to connect with something substantially real. C.S. Lewis, a Christian theologian and scholar expressed this same idea, saying, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world” (Lewis 75). We may not be able to escape the world, in this bounded three-dimensional plane, but we can trace elements of higher order that push through the immediate.

Though we are limited in our individual experiences and perceptions, this does not mean that we are “living in our own little worlds”, in the sense that we are disconnected from one other, ignorantly living in our own bubbles. Rather, when realized for the self, this perspective opens one up to be more sensitive to other’s viewpoints, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies. There are other realities present for each person, confirmed as real for themselves. Perhaps this is said best by Kahlil Gibran’s in his book, *The Prophet*, in which he says, “beauty is life when life unveils her holy face. But you are life and you are the veil. Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror. But you are eternity and you are the mirror” (Gibran 76). Each person has their own valid viewpoints and set of experiences that one should allow themselves to be patient with and seek to understand others.

As scientific evidence and understanding of our universe continue, new mysteries will unfold and new questions will arise, leading still to other mysteries. Science will continue to reveal more about the universe through reasoning and yet, far less, by the pervasive mystery that will continue indefinitely. At some point, we have to decide what can be deducted as real and true for ourselves, leaving experiences like my own to the extremes of speculation from science on one end, to mysticism on the other. Perhaps even questioning their nature at times myself, faith becomes the bridge that carries me to both meaning and hope. It is in these vulnerable moments that faith carries me and scripture comes to life because, “Faith is the assurance of things you have hoped for, the absolute conviction that there are realities you’ve never seen” (The Voice Hebrews 11:1). Like Moses on Sinai, meaningful experiences are not the face, but the back of their reality — something greater waiting still.

## **Epilogue: A Visitor**

In our apartment where my wife and I currently live, there is an east-facing window in the back room. The window leads through the room, to the main hallway, and towards the front door entrance. Yet, this window and front door do not line up perfectly, as one might see in a “shotgun house”. They are offset by a couple feet, creating a diagonal, rather than straight line, from point to point. If one were to stand with their back to the east-facing window and look down the hallway towards the front door, there are only a couple of inches of visibility between the offset distances.

One early morning last December, before dawn, I was fumbling around, still waking up, and preparing for the day. Nothing was particularly special or unusual about the morning. I went about my morning business, quite content, making breakfast, drinking coffee, and checking the weather.

After finishing and cleaning up breakfast, I headed back down the main hallway, which leads towards this particular rear, east-facing window. But before I even began down the hall, I stopped abruptly, noticing the visitor that had entered the space.

Sunlight. Sunlight so perfectly positioned that it passed through the offset distance, traveling the diagonal length of the hallway and penetrating the opposite wall in the living room.

I didn't just stop because it was beautiful, though the low-angled rays of the early morning December sun were a lovely radiant orange. I stopped because I was made acutely aware of the phenomena and wonder of it all — the sun's presence and location in the sky — the time of year and time of day that allowed for light to pass at such an

angle *through, and into*, such a space. I was struck by the wonder of being at my apartment at that time of day — not sleeping or off doing anything else for that matter. There during the brief few days in the calendar year where the sun's light could actually make such a journey into our residence. Such a brief window of time for such a quickly passing moment to slip by. But I was there for it.

The penetrating rays rendered the brevity of the moment, aligning myself in position with the sun and the universe. In my mind, I traced the light from the source of our local star to its shining on to our rotating, orbiting sphere, to its entrance into our living room. It was a bit of majesty — moving and transportive in its temporality.

And perhaps my life is no different. I go about my days, day in and day out. Routines, schedules, and plans. But then, I'm interrupted by something unexpected. Something spectacular happens. Something catches my eye and attention so perfectly, and with such divine wonder, that the ordinary falls to the wayside, making way for the extraordinary — like the light on my living room wall that morning, left humbled and thankful, sharing the moment quietly before God <sup>5</sup>.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> — James Whinnery, in *Psychophysiological Correlates of Unconsciousness and Near-Death Experiences*, writes, “One plausible physiological model attributes NDEs to decreased oxygen (hypoxia) or to complete lack of oxygen (anoxia), because that appears to be the final common pathway to death” (Whinnery 231).

<sup>2</sup> — Touching on this phenomenon, author Bruce Greyson in *Near-Death Experiences and Spirituality* writes,

Some individuals when they come close to death report having experiences that they interpret as spiritual or religious. These so-called near-death experiences (NDEs) often include a sense of separation from the physical body and encounters with religious figures and a mystical or divine presence. They share with mystical experiences a sense of cosmic unity or oneness, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, noetic quality or intuitive illumination, paradoxicality, ineffability, transiency, and persistent positive after effects. Although there is no relationship between NDEs and religious belief prior to the experience, there are strong associations between depth of NDE and religious change after the experience. NDEs often change experiencers' values, decreasing their fear of death and giving their lives new meaning. NDEs lead to a shift from ego-centered to other-centered consciousness, disposition to love unconditionally, heightened empathy, decreased interest in status symbols and material possessions, reduced fear of death, and deepened spiritual consciousness.

Many experiencers become more empathic and spiritually oriented and express the beliefs that death is not fearsome, that life continues beyond, that love is more important than material possessions, and that everything happens for a reason. These changes meet the definition of spiritual transformation as "a dramatic change in religious belief, attitude, and behavior that occurs over a relatively short period of time." NDEs do not necessarily promote any one particular religious or spiritual tradition over others, but they do foster general spiritual growth both in the experiencers themselves and in human society at large" (Greyson Page 393).

<sup>3</sup> — Greyson again touches on the impact of such experiences, stating,

Perhaps the most important feature common to both mystical experiences and NDEs, however, is the transformative impact of the experience. NDEs generally have a profound and apparently lasting impact on many people who experience them, often precipitating a significant change in values and attitude toward death and a new sense of purpose or meaning in life. Similarly, mystical experiences have been recognized for more than a century as leading to sudden and lasting changes in character and values (James 1902), including changes in the person's relationship with God, perception and appreciation of nature, attitude toward self, and, perhaps most significantly, attitude toward other people (Starbuck 1906). As one of James's informants described the transformation, "I was very selfish . . . now I desired the welfare of all mankind (James 1902, 157)" (Greyson 399).

<sup>4</sup> — Rochelle Forrester, in *Sense Perception and Reality: A Theory of Perceptual Relativity, Quantum Mechanics and the Observer Dependent Universe*, elaborates on these perceptual systems, stating,

Some animals have perceptual systems that have no human counterpart. Some seem to be able to detect vibrations in the Earth giving rise to beliefs that some animals are able to predict earthquakes. Bird migrations occur under particular weather conditions probably because birds are able to measure atmospheric pressure. Some snakes have heat sensors connected to the part of the brain that deals with vision that enables them to produce a crude image showing the presence of warm blooded prey. Some animals such as the water strider can detect ripples on the surface of still ponds. This enables them to locate prey on the pond surface and to identify mates as the males and females each generate a particular pattern of ripples which the other can recognize. Many animals such as butterflies, bees and birds seem to be sensitive to the Earth's magnetic field and use this to find their way when engaged in long migrations. Whales involved in long migrations also appear to use the Earth's magnetic field to assist in navigation and whale strandings seem to result from this navigation system going wrong. Electrical impulses travel throughout animal's bodies and can travel through water. Many aquatic animals, such as the duckbill platypus and fish have developed the ability to detect other animal's electricity which assists them in finding prey. Some fish actually generate electric fields around themselves and have electro-receptors capable of picking up distortions in the field caused by objects such as other fish. The electro receptors are connected to the part of the

brain creating visual images so the fish will probably see objects disturbing the electric field but probably as a crude shadowy image. Electric fields are generated in order to catch prey and to communicate with other fish for mating and to assist navigation. Some fish are able to generate enough electricity to stun or kill prey (Forrester 8).

<sup>5</sup> — This scriptural reference comes from Psalm 62:5, which says, “Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him.”

Psalm 62:5 New Living Translation (NLT)

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