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Paintings as Talismanic Vessels: An Investigation into Ritual through a Studio Practice

A Thesis in Studio Art

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Abstract:

A visual artist's studio practice may rely on rules and order to reach an intended outcome, what I would describe as a ritualistic activity. In this project, I investigate how following specific studio practices plays a role in the making of my paintings. Exploring the idea of ritual is the driving force behind my process for creating forms and utilizing color, with the studio being the site of these investigations. My work is a search for a visual solution through the repetitive and obsessive nature of the process. I also consider theory regarding the place of the body and religion in contemporary art. From a Judaic perspective, I investigate ideas of mysticism, Kabbalah, and notions surrounding the body. From a phenomenological perspective, any representation can be defined as an embodied one, or one that relates to the human body; this allows me to see paintings as embodiments. Additionally, an examination of Tantric paintings, contemporary work inspired by Tantric art, and Theosophical texts have clarified my approach to painting and understanding of my studio practice. This written portion of my honors thesis in studio art complements a body of work created in 2018-2019, primarily in oil paint on panel surfaces. In this paper, I will describe this body of work as a signifier for the idea of ritual; it is not an attempt to engage with a mystic power but rather a personal investigation into spiritual observances and practices.

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I. Introduction

Before beginning this recent body of work, I performed a variation on a Kabbalistic ritual practice within my studio space. This involved drawing a boundary, in red string along the floor and walls of my studio, a single string with seven knots. This was a personal investigation into a ritual where scarlet thread is tied around the left wrist, with the intention that it will be talismanic, providing the wearer with a type of apotropaic magic. The drawing of the boundary reflected similar intentions, an attempt to engage with protective powers within my studio space.

This investigation into a contemporary spiritual practice was fitting as the studio is the site of my own explorations into specific processes and repeated actions. Growing up in an environment that encouraged the practice of Jewish rituals, I found myself intrigued by the reasons it is believed that specific observances or rituals can result in a desired outcome. I have connected my painting practice to studies and experiences in religion and mysticism, and I have centered painting on an exploration into the observance of specific processes that have intended outcomes. There are two ways that the work relates to the spiritual. First, the practice models itself after a ritual, allowing me to consider the difference between process and ritual when making art. Secondly, the work itself alludes to ways in which religious objects are utilized. This body of work signifies the idea of ritual; it is not an attempt to engage with a mystic power but rather a personal investigation into spiritual observances and practices.

Painting can be considered in terms of ritual because the act of painting sets up a transformative experience, one that is bodily and tangible. As the artist, my body

translates forms that come from within the self onto a surface. These ideas about painting as embodied experiences can also be considered in terms of phenomenology, as suggested by the perspective of David Abram in his text *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Phenomenology is important to my practice because there is an emphasis on being fully present and having direct experiences. Painting is about the body, a physical record of emotions, actions, and movements; therefore, painting becomes a spiritual venture because of its personal nature, the complete presence of the artist, and the slowness involved in making a painting. When I am creating work, I am almost always considering events or emotions that I am dealing with in my own life. This appears to be the most significant part of my process; however, the work is not intended to be diaristic. Applying paint to a surface is a direct translation of a feeling to a tangible form. The paintings come to embody parts of my own experience, the internal and external. While the paintings are personal, the intention behind each one does not need to be understood or known by the viewer. Its importance is that channeling personal experiences and emotions are the driving force and primary motivation for me to create the work and to find forms and images.

The paintings I am creating relate to notions of life cycles, specifically from a female context. I see the work relating to cycles in a multitude of ways. Foremost, the work relates to direct moments, and I feel that experiences are cyclical and correspond to larger life events. Additionally, my work could be interpreted as relating to the body or depicting an ontogeny. The work corresponds to events or experiences within my personal life that are either beginning or ending, relating to events in a life cycle.

Viewers have observed that the work appeared to be talking about conception or birth; while this seems plausible, I find this reading to be too specific to the figurative nature of the work. Instead, my work relates to a metaphorical conception rather than a physical one.

I will begin this discussion by formally talking about my work and my process for making paintings; specific paintings will be used as examples. This will be followed by an examination of Kabbalah as well as a discussion considering ritual in regards to practice. I have also explored spiritual practices that involve making, such as the Tantric drawings of Rajasthan, India and ways of revelatory thinking as described in certain Theosophical texts.

II. My Painting Practice and the Embodied Experience

Channeling my personal experiences and emotions, my process involves reaching into spiritual dimensions to retrieve new forms and images. Prior to this body of work, I had been considering different types of subjects in my paintings; imaginative landscapes that utilized the arch window as a composition device turned into multi-paneled paintings that alluded to stained glass or altar pieces. This led to the creation of the recent body of work that is largely made up of a series of small paintings that are around 10 x 8 inches and larger paintings that are around 48 x 40 inches.

There are differences in the ways that the small and larger works are created and how they relate to one another. Small works are created within a contained amount of time with a known approach. Larger works allow for more expansive approaches. I have also begun to explore the tension between the symmetrical and the asymmetrical as well

as the iconographic composition and the less central within these works. Many of these works begins by attaching elements to the painting surface. Additional raised surfaces create compositional challenges for me to resolve due to the tension between the flat and raised surface. Painted using oils, forms can easily be manipulated, subtracted, and altered. Working primarily on wood surfaces and supports, I understand these paintings as objects, particularly the smaller works.

The use of wood surfaces is significant as it relates to ideas of the religious or the painting as object. Wood supports were importantly used for religious paintings such as altar pieces; this historical significance of painting on wood panels is compelling. Additionally, wood allows for the flexibility of applying paint in a manner that is appropriate for my practice. Painting on a canvas or linen surface does not allow for the same resiliency when paint is repeatedly subtracted from and added to the painting surface using rags and other materials to manipulate the paint.

My work has recently become more sculptural with three-dimensional elements that refer to domestic furniture and architecture, while appearing bodily or at times phallic. Attaching sculptural elements is a tactile response to creating the painting. The attachment of these elements, primarily made of wood, occurs at the beginning and throughout the process of painting. There is a new type of dynamic activity and physicality involved when attaching sculptural pieces to the painting surface.

Another impetus for the sculptural nature of this body of work was an interest in certain types of composition. The work evolved from a fascination with an arch shape. For me, the arch was a window that allowed for a transition between two types of

consciousness. The sculptural elements allow me to distort the composition of the arch; however, its underlying structure is still present in many of the works. Although the arch composition is no longer clearly visible in much of the work, it is there in some form and subsequently the notion of it is embedded into the work.

Even when it is not visible, I believe that I am always painting an arch. This shape also relates to the idea of a capsule or cell that is holding something within it. The attached pieces on the upper corners frame the inside form, much like the curtains in Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1512), the corners reveal another layer (Figure 10). I read Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* as using the curtain motif as a Eucharistic device to present a vision of the Madonna and Child. Madonna is standing upon a sea of clouds in the center of the composition and holds her child, Christ. Green curtains on a curtain rod reveal the Madonna and Child. Additionally, on either side, she is flanked by Saint Sixtus and Saint Barbara as well as two cherubs at the bottom of the painting. The curtain or window as a compositional device for a transformative experience became an idea I thought about frequently while creating work. This image of the *Sistine Madonna* is one that I keep in my studio because I find it to be fascinating and strange both in color and what the composition depicts. In another way, Raphael's painting has become its own work in my studio; my small, postcard-size reproduction seems to float around my studio and could be seen as an apotropaic device. This small image symbolized the similar intention of the red string boundary I created in my space, a protective source or field.

The transformation of the work to a talismanic object comes from my own interpretations of Tantric images as well as consideration of other objects used in religion

that provide protective forces. Talismanic objects have been an important part of my own experience in the world. I think of the paintings as objects that are similar to the Jewish tradition of hanging a mezuzah on one's doorframe. The mezuzah is a decorative case that holds a parchment with a prayer on the inside, with a function of being protective. The paintings model a similar function, holding an inner energy. I paint the sides of the small and large paintings; oftentimes, the hue has a high value, emitting or containing this energy. Since this work deals with a constant and consistent feeling of discomfort in my own life, thinking about these paintings as having an inert, invisible energy is useful.

I find that the work holds an intense awkwardness; however, one can find solace in this lack of comfort. Comfort and embodiment can also be considered in terms of cultural or religious understandings; for this, I referred to both how Jews consider their own body and how Jewish bodies have been perceived historically. Lawrence Fine's chapter, "Purifying the Body in the Name of the Soul: The Problem of the Body in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah", in the collection *People of the Body Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, describes the body as both a vessel to seek out God but also a place of anxiety about purity (Fine 136). This chapter is important to understanding my own relation to the mystical and its connection to my own body and feelings of discomfort; the work deals with this feeling through the set of rules that I create for myself.

My work depends on rules, one of these rules being that the challenge only exists within the painting. The challenge starts and ends within the boundaries of the

composition. Therefore, I no longer make preliminary drawings for these paintings; drawing is done directly on the painting surface. The paintings are direct translations of my feelings about a situation, channeling these direct experiences. Each work is time-specific in two ways. First, I set rules for myself about how long and when a painting should be finished. Secondly, the work directly corresponds to events and experiences occurring in the present.

My practice of applying paint or other materials to a surface is intimate and bodily. My smaller works are often composed on the ground, using rags and other materials to apply, drag, and scrub the paint across the surface. There is a lot of physical movement involved in the creation of these paintings. These small paintings usually have had a handful of paintings created on the same surface that have all been wiped away and replaced with a new one. Since there are no preliminary drawings, all initial marks occur directly on the painting surface, creating a history of marks as they are successively wiped away. This process is sometimes visible in the transparent layers of oil. Occurring quickly and within a specified time frame of one day, multiple paintings will have existed on the same small painting surface, until one remains that makes sense. In terms of speaking about process as ritual, this final image or form is the result of the ritual, the endpoint.

My process of creating work involves words and writing that influence the forms. The act of writing words down is important both before and during my process. I keep multiple notebooks that I fill with words and phrases that I hear. Often, I find that these words transform into forms or are in some ways referenced in the work. I have also

found myself writing lists of words on scraps of drawing paper while painting or even painting these words onto the surface. Often, I find that these words or phrases that I write down whether on a piece of paper or underneath layers of paint come from conversations I have had with people I have close relationships to. Words also are significant in the way in which I title my work. Most of this body of work is titled using Hebrew or Biblical terms that have multiple meanings due to translations. The words that I select refer to Kabbalah or specific Jewish rituals.

Small Works

One of the first paintings made in this body of work was (Figure 2) *Ezrat Nashim*. I think of this painting as both a capsule and a passageway. It has been suggested that this painting appears as a cross-section of a fruit or bodily form. The titles of each piece in this new body of work are deliberate, and many are in Hebrew. Here, *Ezrat Nashim* refers to a courtyard, specifically for women, in the temple in Jerusalem. Later on, this word was used to talk about the section within a synagogue intended for women.

A painting made directly following *Ezrat Nashim*, the same night, was *Tahorah* (Figure 3). I see both paintings as representing a capsule. Tahorah refers to purification or cleansing. Both paintings are a creation or conception in that they give birth to a new insight. The painting, *T'vilah* begins to play with the sculptural element as form by using parts of a chair that has been attached to the surface. The Hebrew word t'vilah refers to a type of immersion that occurs in a mikvah, moving water, as part of Jewish ritual. These works begin to represent ideas of new beginnings or metaphorical births.

Another small painting (Figure 8), *Eruv*, begins to use the sculptural elements in new ways. Here the sculptural elements become the form and the painting surface. For me, there is a sense of dissonance or awkwardness about the compelling colors of this painting and the strangeness of the surface that the sculptural elements create. This feeling about the work perhaps extends to how I chose to title it; *eruv* refers to a boundary that extends private space into public areas for the Orthodox Jewish community on the Sabbath. This boundary allows this community to extend their private space into a public area, and furthermore, it pushes private performance into public space. The transcendence of private space to a public one is intriguing and relates to the painting in that there is a tension between form and surface, they are collapsible. Sculptural elements become forms, but they are also new surfaces to apply paint to. Here, the way in which the work has been made comes to the forefront. There is a specific, repeated action to the painting of applying pieces within a structure.

The painting titled, *For Her*, represents the use of sculptural elements in a different way. Here, parts of a chair have been deconstructed and attached around the panel surface. It has been suggested that the elements here serve as a frame for the panel surface. However, I initially saw these parts of the chairs as an enclosure or casing around a capsule or vessel type form.

Large Works

Larger works are composed differently from the smaller works. Instead of making a slew of successive images until I find the right one, I begin larger paintings by

knowing a singular form or word that gets applied to the painting surface. I think about the way that the larger paintings are composed with a different thought process, perhaps because there seems to be more pressure for the forms to be correct. Under the layers of paint, I often have written phrases or singular words in oil on the painting surface that are eventually wiped out. In this way, I conceal these words sourced from within.

Frequently, in these large works, these words become motivations for the types of forms that exist on the visible painted layer.

I consider the larger works to be a different type of object than the smaller, more intimate works. These paintings function differently in space. The larger works are more related to the self because they are more closely aligned in scale to the body. The large paintings are like windows or portraits rather than small capsules that can be handheld.

Making the larger painting, *Rizpah* (Figure 4), was informed by the processes and experiences that I began to explore when creating the smaller paintings. I similarly see this painting as a capsule-like form, and it could be interpreted as a birth canal. This reading of the painting is of interest to me as the title of the work was intended to relate to the maternal. Capsules or vessels are often devices used by artists I find myself in conversation with. As an example, Agnes Pelton, a member of the New Mexico based Transcendental Painting Group, saw the vessel as “her own body, a clear association of nature’s abundance with a feminine procreative force” (Moss 80). I think that the paintings I am making are in many ways portraits or images of the self; therefore they relate to Pelton’s idea about the vessel being her own body.

Rachel (Figure 5) is a step in a different direction; it is no longer a capsule but a mechanical form. Protrusions are added to the painting surface during the process of creating the work. I started adding sculptural elements after the creation of a sculptural work entitled *Kadosh Kadosh* (Figure 7). These sculptures were created out of found chairs that were partially deconstructed. I view these chairs as being figural due to their form, association with the human body, and vertical axis.

Domestic Furniture and the Intimate

Domestic furniture, specifically chairs, are compelling objects to manipulate. The act of sitting and standing is an important part of religious or ritual practice. For example, those in a religious service might be asked to sit and stand, or to “rise”. There is also a relation between the two chair sculptures (Figure 7). Chairs are objects that people sit in, many times to have a conversation. Depending on how the chairs are oriented, there are different implications. They represent a relationship to me in that way, one that could be romantic or platonic. Yet, these chairs are not ones that can be sat in due to the protrusions where one would normally sit.

Creating these sculptural chairs that I view as paintings, I began to think more carefully about the way I was using sculptural forms in my work. For a time, I have been trying to understand how sculptural elements interact with my work and what it is about these elements that interest me. I have gravitated towards including elements that come from furniture in my work. Many of these elements are parts of chairs and I have realized that this is because of the intimacy associated with domestic furniture. Bodies

interact closely with domestic furniture. The body touches a chair when sitting in it; but the chair is also touching the body. The body conforms to the shape of the chair.

I have found that the design used in domestic furniture relates to the body. Partly, this is because the body needs to interact with the furniture, so its design is functional. Disassembling furniture or finding parts of furniture has become an important part of the process of creating these works. Finding bodily forms in furniture has become an unplanned part of the process. Pieces from furniture can read as appendage or phallic-like. Since paintings are body and furniture holds the body, I am equating these two ideas by attaching parts of furniture to the painting surface. The body is a spiritual vessel held within the painting. The body interacts with the painting surface in the same intimate way that a body sits in a chair. By deconstructing these elements from furniture, I remove the function and the focus shifts to the shape and form.

III. Ritual, Kabbalah, and the Shekhinah

In trying to understand my own relationship to spirituality in my work, reviewing the scholarship of others has been important. This research has been symbiotic in the creation of my work. While these texts have influenced the direction of my work; the work also exists independently from the research and guides the direction of my readings. Foremost, the catalog *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* has provided an introduction to spirituality, the occult, and esoteric thought as part of the history of abstraction. This text has allowed me to contextualize my work within this genre. Another important text by scholar, Barbara Baert, is *Fluid Flesh: The Body, Religion and*

the Visual Arts, a compilation of essays dealing with the relationship between the body and religion in art. Important to my investigation were two essays in this text, James Elkins' "Liquid Thoughts on the Body and Religion" and Jan Koenot's "When the Body Speaks Louder than Words: The Image of the Body as a Figure of the Unknown". Elkins writes about representations in contemporary art being part of an embodied experience, and therefore all pictures being "pictures of the body" (Elkins xi). Elkins' essay has allowed me to come to clearer understandings about the use of the body in my own work. I have also explored other writings by Elkins that discuss the place of religion in modern and contemporary art.

While I would not consider myself spiritual or holding belief in the existence of "the sacred", the term used in religious studies to define a divine figure; the creation of images becomes one centered in mysticism for me. Here, the mystical refers to a direct experience of the ultimate reality, which could be a divine figure (Galbreath 376). For Judaism, the mystical tradition is the Kabbalah (Galbreath 376). Thinking about mysticism is of value to my painting practice as it involves an experience meant to obtain "mystical union and enlightenment" often occurring unsolicited, but can be procured through activities of ritual such as meditation (Galbreath 376). Painting can be a mystical way of creating imagery, it is both direct and mysterious. I understand that some may see thinking about painting in these type of magical terms as "romantic or regressive and fear it will draw them away from the world of modern consciousness, fixing them in archaic states that are unsuitable to contemporary life" (Gablik 47). However, I find it

important to enter a less conscious state when working; one that allows for more freedom and less logical thinking.

Kabbalah was developed in thirteenth-century Spain; it is oriented around ideas from mysticism, theosophy, and magical thinking (Tuchman 372). In Kabbalah, meditation and prayer bring the qualities of God to the believer (Galbreath 372). Ritual practices are closely tied to mystical thinking. Leo Bronstein's *Kabbalah and Art*, written in the form of reflections and meditations on artwork, links the creation and viewing of artwork to Kabbalistic ideas of Jewish mysticism. Bronstein argues that "art in its history and in its born-again incarnations as this painting, this vision, or that, is the Kabbalah itself (the 'same as itself'), knowing, knowledgeable, dazzling, and explosive of spirit" (Bronstein XVIII). Bronstein relates ideas of incarnation and birth to Kabbalah in the process of viewing art. Therefore, Bronstein understands art as being a part of the direct experience in mysticism that brings one closer to "the sacred". It is important to my own practice to find this direct experience and translate it into the work.

Bronstein refers to "[t]he Secret Woman --- the Shekhinah...image-abstraction, image without attributes never image-icon, image-body—image nevertheless—*chatoyant* silk" (Bronstein 39). The Shekhinah, is the last of the ten Sefirot, and refers to the female attributes of God (Fine 120). God is described in terms of two aspects, the *Ein-Sof*, which is the part of God beyond human apprehension and the ten *Sefirot*, the attributes or emanations accessible to humans (Fine 118). Sefirot refer to bodily attributes, sometimes becoming sexual or dealing with reproduction. Therefore, I see Kabbalistic ideas as

relating to notions of female bodies and life cycles. I have been interested recently by the idea of bodies, specifically female bodies and related life cycle events.

The Sefirot speak to the connection between the mystical body and the human body, a site of interaction and physicality. I am interested in this tension between the knowable and the unknowable as well as the separation and balance between the feminine and masculine attributes. Kabbalah uses attributes of the feminine and masculine as analogies for abstract spiritual concepts. I have made a series of small drawings based on the Sefirot because it is a structure that interests me. An example of this is Figure 1 which is based off existing ideas about the structure of the Sefirot.

The Sefirot are compelling to me as a visual language as they are described in diagrammatic terms. When creating paintings, I am thinking about a similar diagrammatic language. Forms connect or are positioned in relation to one another. An energy is passed between these visible forms. Like the Sefirot, these forms can also relate to parts of the body or characteristics in relation to themselves and other bodies. There is a structure to how forms are connected to one another.

Defining Ritual

Ideas about ritual, mystical, and the occult come into my painting practice in other ways. Suzan Gablik describes ritual in her book *The Re-Enchantment of Art* as a signifier that “something more is going on than meets the eye--something sacred...the inner willingness to transform--this is what makes any ritual come alive and have power” (Gablik 42-43). For example, a painting practice can become ritualistic due to routines

and rules set by the artist. A repeated way of working and making art can be considered a ritualistic practice with a desired endpoint. This body of work has explored the ideas related to specific, repeated observances, a gesture toward the idea of ritual. If ritual is defined by actions that are ordered, then many contemporary artists retain repeated, or potentially ritualistic, processes within their studio practices.

I think about my practice in terms of modeling it as an ordered observance. The practice becomes ritualistic due to its obsessive nature; forms are repeated in multiple compositions until they reach their limit or are transformed into a new formation. Obsession around an idea or form allows me to not only be experimental but to reach what I consider the correct form. Repetition of painting allows me to find or locate the true image for the work. Paintings come from a vision in which I know one form or color that the painting begins with and the rest is built upon that. They do not start from a place of representation or an attempt to represent the body. However, the forms seem to read as bodily, sexual, or cosmic; bodily or organic forms are usually the ones that I accept while others may be rejected. I ascribe this to painting coming from the body and being an external emanation of the internal.

The paintings take on issues and conflict whether they be external or internal. Often, these challenges coincide with the end or the beginning of an event or relationship with another person. Challenges are also related to the idea of the work as an investigation into ideas of ritual, with a desire for a higher answer. I believe that conflict is where the desire to create a challenge within the work comes from. At first I was largely unaware of the challenges I was setting up for myself. However, as people have

entered my studio and conversed with me about works in progress, I began to realize that I was purposely setting up challenges for myself with the work. The work is a way of figuring out a painting problem, and this translates to me working through an issue outside of the work. This involves the creation of boundaries and rules within the studio that I have chosen to follow. Like a ritual, when working through a challenge there is a desire to find some sort of solution or end point, similar to the ritual's realization.

IV. Spirituality and Visionary Thinking

Contemporary artists frequently attempt to exclude discourse on religion or spirituality in art (Elkins xiii). There is a hesitation in equating contemporary work with a sense of spiritualism or religiosity:

Many young artists explore religious and spiritual ideas in their art, but do not feel comfortable talking about them. Other young artists make work that appears religious or spiritual, but they themselves do not think of their art in those terms... Artworks that lack such obvious religious signs can be even more elusive... But in other cases it is unclear whether a religious interpretation does justice to an artwork that hides from such meaning—even if that artwork also thrives on that very meaning (Elkins xiii)

Therefore, it is often unclear when it is appropriate to talk about contemporary art in relation to the spiritual. Some artists are eager to embrace these understandings of their work while others are uncomfortable with them (Elkins xiv). There is a discomfort in contemporary culture over what we cannot see or know (Gablik 53).

In my practice, I have chosen to embrace the spiritual background from which this work takes form. Additionally, there is a difference between work that is spiritual and that is religious (Elkins and Morgan 71). I am able to embrace the spiritual motivations for the work as an investigation or query into systems of belief. However, I understand

the urge to dissociate one's work from the spiritual, it is the same hesitation I find in boxing my work into the category of the body or the figurative. The approach I take is a personal investigation into systems of belief and spiritualism rather than an attempt to lead or impress an idea upon society or viewers of my work; it does not attempt to be prophetic.

My interest in studying religion is derived from the idea that religion can be the study of material culture; aspects of religious objects and spaces are associated with the sensory experience. For this reason, I became particularly intrigued by Tantric religious practices, where sight and the visual play an important role (Jamme 10). The anonymous Tantric paintings from Rajasthan, India are created as part of a spiritual practice of the esoteric tradition, Tantra. The makers do not consider themselves artists. The creation of these images is described as a ritual “practice...[f]irst for the ‘artist’ himself when he paints a piece, and then for the people who are later going to work on seeing this image, to meditate on it and its meaning-- and what is more, through this meditation, finally to make the divinity herself appear” (Jamme 14). There is an emphasis on process in revealing the image. The Tantric images serve as “supports of visionary imaginary processes” and “cosmic visions” (Jamme 11). These images are described as being both yantras and mandalas (Tuchman 55). Yantra is a visual aid that is used in meditation in order to understand “the sacred” (Ringbom 133). These visual aids allow for a transformative experience to take place. While the tantric images are guided by rules, there is a certain freedom to them (Jamme 10).

Contemporary artists have used tantric images as an influence in their own work. A 1980 exhibit at the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery at University of California, Los Angeles, brought together a group of contemporary Indian painters who were inspired by Tantric tradition and sought to reinterpret it and investigate it within painting, under the title of *Neo-Tantric* (Tonelli 11). These contemporary painters are not intending to be practitioners of Tantric tradition, but rather, “their affinity with tantra is only emotional and intellectual, or, at most, spiritual, as it opens new vistas to harness their own latent energies and to transform esoteric doctrines for the creation of their aesthetic theories” (Tonelli 17). These artists are investigating these Tantric drawings in a similar way to my interest in the application of ritual in the art making process. I am harnessing my own energies, emotional and spiritual, to create forms.

I understand the text *Thought Forms*, as being similar to the ideas that Tantric drawings present. This theory involves meditating on a form or color that transcends the visual. In the nineteenth century, texts about Eastern mysticism became popular, and in 1875, the Theosophical Society was created. The theosophical text *Thought Forms* by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater was an influence on many artists who invoked spiritualism in abstraction (Tuchman 136). This text describes how thoughts become forms with specific colors. Theosophy provided artists with an array of forms to represent the spiritual (Tuchman 137). These types of forms are broken down into three categories:

- (1) That which takes the image of the thinker... When a man thinks of himself as in some distant place, or wishes earnestly to be in that place, he makes, a thought-form in his own image which appears there.

- (2) That which takes the image of some material object. When a man thinks of his friend he forms within his mental body a minute image of that friend...the painter who forms a conception of his future picture built it up out of the matter of his mental body, and then projects it into space in front of him, keeps it before his mind's eyes, and copies it.
- (3) That which takes a form entirely its own, express its inherent qualities in the matter which it draws round it. Only thought-forms of this third class can usefully be illustrated, for to represent those of the first or second class would be merely to draw portraits or landscapes...Thought-forms of this third class almost invariably manifest themselves upon the astral plane, as the vast majority of them are expressions of feeling as well as of thought. (Besant 33)

In my painting practice, I find that the forms I create relate most to the first and third notions. In conversation with the first type of form, the images I create are images of the self. These images are biographical. In regards to the third notion, I am making an image that is made manifest from a feeling. I am not creating forms made from the material object, as stated in notion two.

This way of thinking about creating visual forms from thoughts and feelings also defined the meaning behind colors. The meanings associated with colors by Besant and Leadbeater are similar to the choices I make about color. The color blue is written about as a color of devotion. Historically, this color is important for religious paintings, specifically in a Christian context. The color is described as “the virile vigor of the splendid spire of highly developed devotion which leaps into being before us...it is the outrush into manifestation of a grand emotion rooted deep in the knowledge of fact” (Besant 41). This understanding of the color is similar to how I use it in my work such as in Figure 4. Here ultramarine envelops the organic form; it consecrates the matter it surrounds.

I also understood the descriptions of the color pink in respect to how it is used in my own work, specifically pink as both “Vague Pure Affection” and “Vague Selfish Affection”. This color can be representative of an inner state of someone who “is happy and at peace with the world” but also a selfishness that arises out of affection (Besant 36-37). The way I think about colors and the choices I make relates to these ideas about the mystical. These colors are described as having meanings related to internal emotions which can be a reflection of the self.

V. Conclusion

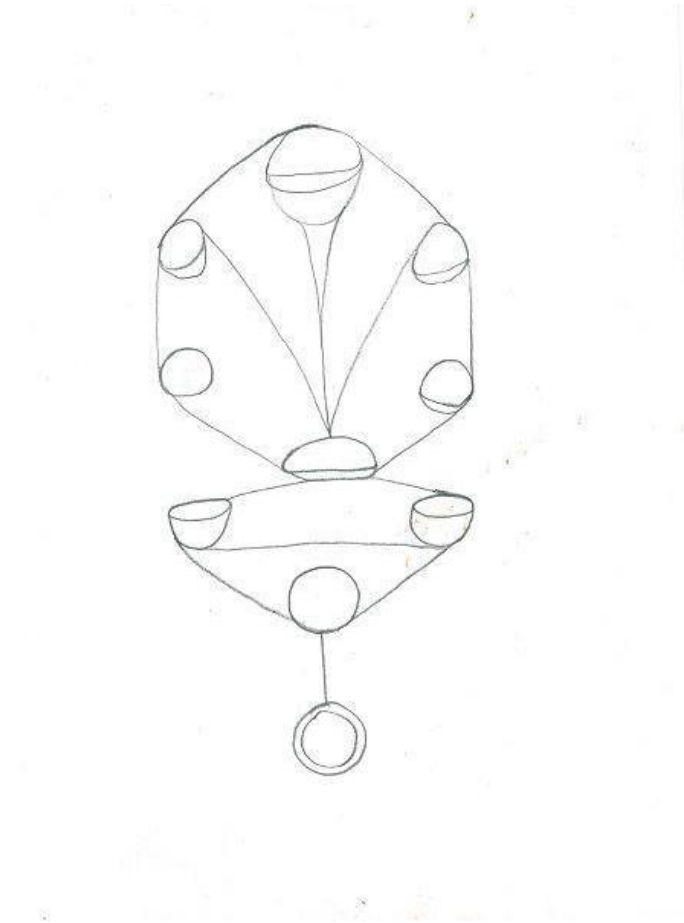
The practice is spiritual because it is a reflection of the self, and while the paintings might not hold mystical powers, they offer their own personal protection to me as they are embodiments of the self. The creation of that boundary in red string that I drew in my studio before creating these works was a critical moment for my art practice. The ideas that I had been thinking about ritual and practice coalesced there. I had to consider how I was understanding ritual. Was this just an academic investigation into the idea of ritual, or was there a sense that this red string could actually provide a protective force in my space?

The creation of this body of work has allowed me to consider spirituality in new contexts. The making of this work has existed somewhere between the ideas of process and ritual and questions what the difference is between these two practices. I have begun to more carefully examine the way that I orient and organize my studio practice.

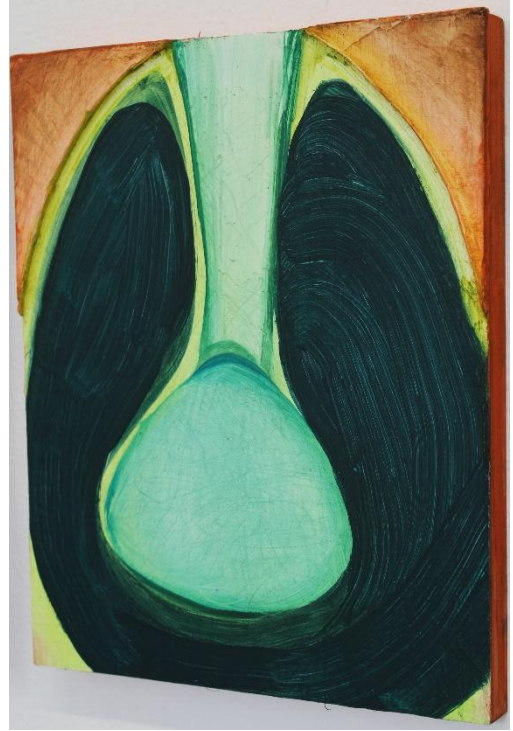
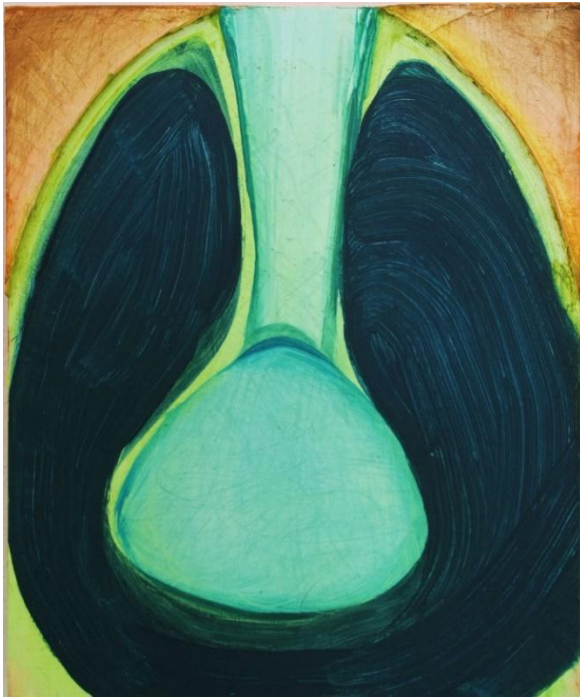
Through these considerations, my practice has expanded; paintings become objects that serve as gestures or signs for ideas associated with the religious and ritual practice. I see future paintings as an opportunity to further engage with and develop the ideas that I have begun to explore through this research.

There is room for expanding this body of work as I move forward. I can see the work going in one of two directions, either becoming more specific about the idea of ritual or moving away from a practice that is dictated by a certain amount of rules or order. I would like to further explore Tantric drawings and other similar practices that rely on making visual forms as a means for meditation or ritual. This will take me closer to locating a visual solution in the work.

Images



(Figure 1) Untitled, 8.5 x 6 in., graphite on paper, 2018



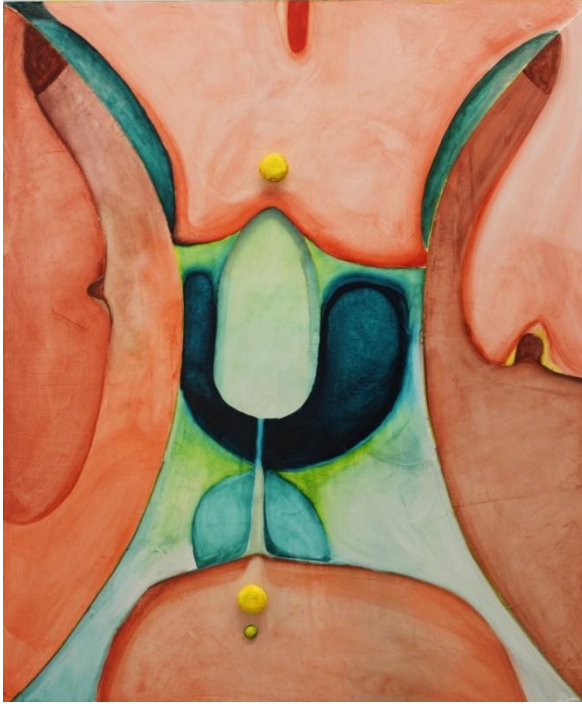
(Figure 2) *Ezrat Nashim*, 10 x 8 in., oil on panel, 2018



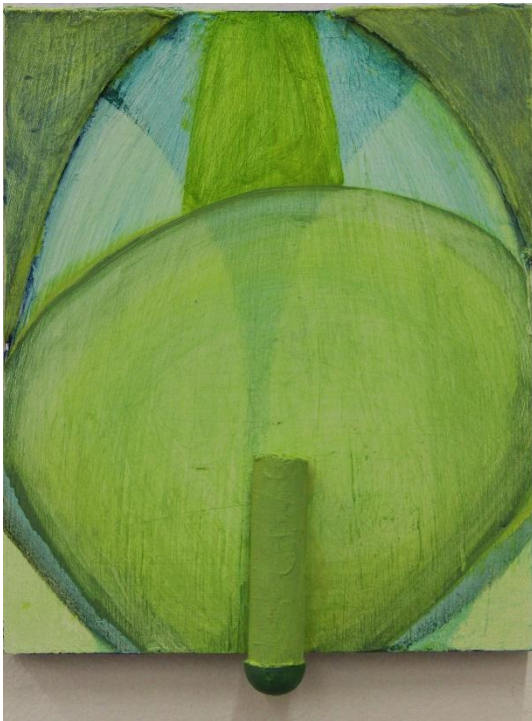
(Figure 3) *Tahorah*, 10 x 8 in., oil on panel, 2018



(Figure 4) *Rizpah*, oil and oil stick on panel, 48 x 40 in., 2018



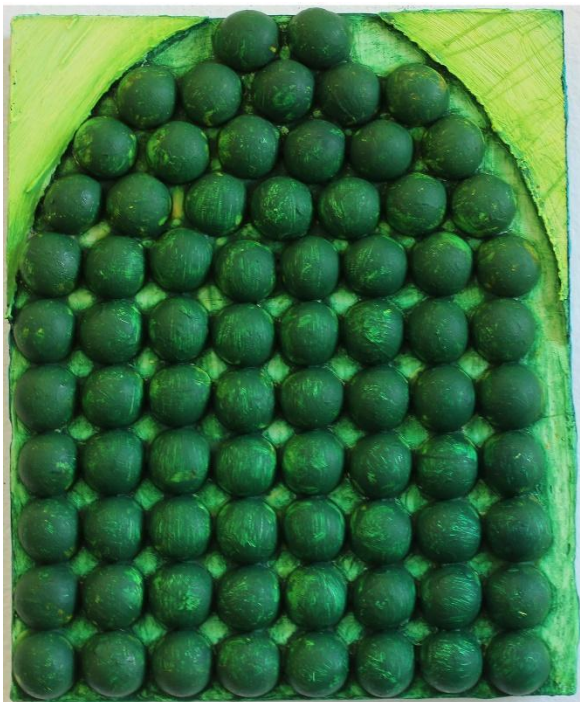
(Figure 5) *Rachel*, oil and oil stick on panel, 48 x 40 in., 2018



(Figure 6) *T'vilah*, oil on panel, 10.5 x 8 in., 2018



(Figure 7) *Kadosh Kadosh*, oil and acrylic on wood, 43 x 17 x 14 in. each, 2018



(Figure 8) *Eruv*, oil on panel, 10 x 8 in., 2019



(Figure 9) *For Her*, oil on panel, 10.5 x 8.5 in., 2018

(Figure 10) Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, oil on canvas, 269.5 x 201 cm, 1512-13,
Gemäldegalerie (Dresden, Germany)

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-sistine-madonna/CgEiMJRg7ZS6DA>

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