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Making as a tool of self-examination and search for meaning:

Sifting through remaining residue as the tide of faith ebbs away

An exegesis presented with exhibition as fulfilment
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PROLOGUE

I have a church but it is empty.

I have a boat that does not float.

I have kites that crash to the Earth.

Do I own a soul, one that feeds my creative ability?

If I do, can lose it?

Can I not throw it away?

ABSTRACT

At the commencement of this thesis I saw myself standing at the outer limits of my knowledge with my nose pressed against a wall of demarcation. This wall was built from my willingness to tolerate systems of control in silence and from my unwillingness to make my beliefs and personal convictions known. I set out at the start of this journey with two intentions. I want to raise my voice because I didn't want to pretend about my faith anymore. And for the first time use my art practice as a mouthpiece to tell these truths.

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not one believes in god, whether we describe ourselves as theists, atheists, or even anti-theists, we all live in a world that is profoundly influenced by concepts of god.
(Baldessari & Cranston, 2004, p.9).

I have become aware that I am nearing the end of my personal accumulative knowledge, hit a wall so to speak, and am at the stage where I am trying to source answers for questions about God's existence and the meaning of my own. Questions that have gone unanswered. My worldly outlook has up to this time been informed and perhaps handicapped by my family's traditional Roman Catholic upbringing. This faith-based doctrine created an environment of such absolutes, that as a child growing up I never dared to question the Church or my parents' teaching, particularly the latter. Over time this inability to oppose authority developed into an avoidance of anything that may lead to confrontation. Be it religion, politics, sexual morality or mainstream behaviour, whatever the Church or my parents took clear position on were the rules and the 'Truth', and if I had ideas that deviated even slightly I would keep it to myself. Over time, this fear of confrontation and of disappointing my parents resulted in me withdrawing, and avoiding responsibilities and has ultimately left me with significant blind spots bordering on ignorance. This may seem like an overstatement bordering on self-indulgence but a necessary analysis is in order to properly to launch an examination into my religious experience. The journey I have set out upon is, one of expression *and* discovery intended to shed light upon my life's meaning and convictions.

On the surface my predicament seems to hinge on faith, belief and choice. Much of my life was spent relying on faith; of what I was being told about a spiritual life was the truth. Then I went into the world and saw that much of what I had learnt I no longer believed. However what followed was an extended period where I remained silent. That was a choice I made then, based on self-preservation, where as now, I am making a greater choice, one of speaking out and stating my position.

There was a time when superstition and religion offered the only solutions to nature's mysteries. This of course changed as the accumulation of knowledge grew but we are still baffled by the wonders of the universe. Unfortunately, there is a tendency for religion to try and find the knowledge gaps that still exist and fill them with God. Similarly, I have been re-examining what I know about God, identifying the gaps and slowly filling it with logic.

1. BEGINNING: KNOW THYSELF

"One must know oneself before knowing anything else. It is only after a man has thus understood himself inwardly, and has thus seen his way, that life acquires peace and significance; only then is he rid of that tiresome, ill-omened fellow traveller, the irony of life, which shows itself in the sphere of understanding, bidding true understanding begin with ignorance (Socrates) like God creating the world out of nothing." (Kierkegaard, 1835 as cited by Dru, 1938, p. 18).

I am an artist, raised a Roman Catholic and one that comes with all the trimmings. Sin, Guilt, Repression, and Denial are all embedded in my psyche and behaviour, all of which I have managed to avoid addressing as an artist (or person) until now. My family and the Catholic Church have played the most decisive and positive roles in developing my character while simultaneously being the most controlling forces in my life.

What do I believe? I have found myself in an existential predicament that has seen the focus of my art practise stalled and diverted in the search for answers to this question. Though committed to working as a professional artist, I commenced post-graduate studies filled with self-doubt in regard to my personal convictions and the motivations behind my practice. My thesis research began as a search for a 'God of explanation' and answers to the obvious, generic metaphysical questions. Over the course of the past twelve months, I have recognized that such a difficult and spiritual journey will likely take most of my life, and instead have come to realize that I cannot underestimate the importance of the *asking*. This asking is a definite sign of progress in my thesis, but only a starting point for the longer journey ahead.

INTENTIONS

During my childhood there was a constant presence of the Church and religion that aimed to shape my development, which in my late teens I chose to walk away from. It is clear to me now that I never truly escaped these influences, as I find myself compelled to deal with issues that to date I have ignored and neglected. So my path is set before me as an individual and artist, beginning with a confession; what I truly believe separated from what I have quietly obeyed, and the fortitude to admit ignorance and to continually question and critique. This will be followed by my penance; the making of truthful, tangible and inescapable objects as an expression of these truths and questions. Atonement for what I have and have not done.

Therefore, the focus and thrust of my thesis will be two-pronged; firstly, my first honest attempt at knowing myself, something needed if I am to know or learn anything else. Establishing my fundamental beliefs and social position that currently seems to sway between faith and reason. Second, is to develop a visual language to explore and express such a retrospective journey.

The importance and relevance that religion plays in my life (past, present and future) is what is under question, instigated by my inability to reconcile myself with much of the Church's teachings and opinions. Those that dealt with the body and sexual morality were ultimately the ones that I could not abide or follow, becoming the catalyst for challenging myself, my show of resistance, and re-evaluation of my faith. Once this had occurred, the floodgates were open to the myriad of objections, big and small, that I had previously ignored and tolerated. This has since triggered a broader examination of the control systems I have lived under through the re-assessment of my religious and family history.

THE BODY & SOUL

Christian morality considers the body itself as being a source of sin. After all the Church teaches that we are *born* with original sin, the belief that as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience and expulsion from paradise, we come into the world as feeble and weak beings, not only physically but spiritually. It is also believed that each body is a vessel containing an everlasting soul that we receive at the moment of our conception. My recollections of how the soul was described to me as a child are of a bright but invisible centre of my being, something that one day will pass out of my body to float upwards to Heaven were it/I would live out eternity as a ghostly version of myself. I would also be able to look down on those I love, as would an omnipotent God, Jesus and Holy Spirit. It did however concern me that if this were true, God and my relations that had passed, would be able to see me get up to all sorts of mischief and such, which embarrassed me. Granted, they could not 'dob' me in but it was an effective strategy to make children police themselves and control their behaviour.

Bad behaviour, or sinning, was punished by marks against the soul and graded on a gradual scale. Small, or venial sins, once confessed could simply be prayed away, whereas mortal sins, the gravest of evils will cast your soul into everlasting hell. The idea of the soul, my soul, was something I took for granted and accepted as part of my physical body, meaning it was something that needed to be looked after, could be damaged or malformed; even lost if wilfully neglected. The existence and substance of the 'soul' is of course a point of contention with a broad range of definitions, secular and denominational.

The work I have made tends to be heavy with symbolism and metaphor, a heightened visual language drawing from

experiences within the Church; it's pomp and ceremony dense with visual stimulus and symbolic language. Liturgical stained glass, Stations of the Cross, even the architecture, is used to inspire and demand reverence and awe, perhaps even suggesting the sublime. Rich vestments, gold and incense are supported by hymns accompanied with organ music that can seem to lift one's spirit to heaven. And it works. There is no denying that one can be spirited away by an impressive show of devotion to the arts. For it is in the Church that I became aware of performance as a sure-fire way to present ideas or doctrine, though as child I was not aware of this potential. Serving as an altar boy, I found comfort in the familiar, stylised and repetitive rituals; especially the consecration and transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. My childlike understanding of this 'happening' I put down to God's magic, and faith was something that was obviously needed.

PREVIOUS WORK

The original proposal for my Masters thesis was to explore the medium of performance and song in a contemporary art context. This was a continuation of the work I had created in the first semester of 2008 (the final year of my BFA) where I tried to establish a new way of communicating with my audience, and exploring the artist-audience relationship. It seemed a natural progression and maturity for my practice but one that I have since realised upon reflection, was focused on the 'what' I was doing rather than the 'why'. The 'what', though interesting, was the easier path where I was making art-about-making-art with no apparent consideration to *why* I was making it in the first place. I considered this problematic for two reasons; firstly that it seemed to lack significance or purpose and secondly that I was forgetting my original decision to return to study, specifically to discover the 'why' I was an artist.



Fig. 1. Author, *Regressive Action #1*, 2008

My art practice in the years of my BFA, up to and including 2008 was predominately experimental performance, whereas my final work was an object-based installation revolving around the performative act of chopping wood. *Regressive Action #1* (2008) was my last major work of 2008 and it pre-empted the themes my practice has since explored in my Masters. [See Fig. 1 & 2] For once I was not simply examining external ideas of interest but exploring personal issues around themes of belief, faith, responsibility and denial. Though at the risk of being perceived as self-indulgent, I felt I needed to clarify my position within Catholicism, which I felt had stifled my ability to know myself. By way of inquiry, this would eventually lead to broader questions of metaphysics. It was to be a search for meaning and identity, as Max Beckmann said, “What are you and what am I? – These are questions that pursue and torment me, but which also perhaps help to make me an artist... The Self is indeed the greatest and obscurest secret in the world.” (Beckmann, 1938. as cited in Spieler, 1995, p. 7)



Fig. 2. Author, *Regressive Action #1*, 2008

For *Regressive Action #1*, I selected the performative act of chopping wood, re-creating my personal experience of a rite of passage, or coming of age. The occasion where my father trusted me enough with the axe to chop wood for the fireplace, one that I recall as a milestone closer to becoming a man, of responsibility. However, in my installation it took on a tone of opposition, of a rejection of duty and became a deliberate regression to that of a man chopping kindling as if for a fire but making aeroplanes instead; objects that hold connotations of taking flight, escapism and for me personally, boyhood dreams unrealized. The work relied heavily on process to create a narrative, a cycle of actions

repeated over and over. Chop, bind, hang and repeat. There was no end to the process, meaning that the installation had the potential to grow endlessly, even obsessively.

This installation was a major step in my personal and artistic development. It was my first outward show of defiance against systems of control that until now had had a debilitating hold on my life. Although, I had not entirely found my voice in this work, the few quiet words it did say bravely announced a new direction.

2. INTENTIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

“Why does art exist? Who needs it? Indeed does anybody need it? Many ask themselves that question, and anyone connected with art gives his own particular answer. In any case it is perfectly clear that the goal for all art is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence.” (Tarkovsky, 1986, p. 36)

The intention of this Masters research can be described as an opportunity to come clean about my loss of religious faith and how that has come about. It is a decision that I do not take lightly and one made after much reflection and research. My approach has been to incorporate a broad spectrum of influence, one that examines the arguments concerning ethics and logic put forth by secular and non-secular philosophers. Their opposed theories on the existence of a super-natural power that we call God, are quite often only separated by a chasm called Faith.

It may make no difference to anyone other than myself whether I resolve this existential dilemma; variations of this internal struggle have been played out over and over since humankind gained self-consciousness and needed something to explain influences it did not understand. (Gray, 2008; Hitchens, 2007).

In the search for a meaning or purpose in what I do as an artist, the role of responsibility comes into question. When writing about his observations and spiritual experiences as an artist, Wassily Kandinsky claimed that artists had a triple responsibility, the first and most telling was that “He must repay the talent given him”. (Kandinsky, 1946, p. 94) This is assuming that we as artists receive our talents as if a gift, like manna from heaven and innate in the chosen ones from birth. I find it insulting that my passion can be reduced to the result of God’s grace rather than an

amalgamation of skill and hard work. I feel as though I do have a responsibility and that is to myself and to make sure I am aware of what it is that I'm doing to further myself. To dismiss the results of my life's collective experience, putting it down to 'natural, God-given talent' is a disservice to myself. As Tarkovsky said, my purpose as an artist is to seek knowledge to explain the meaning of existence. I believe this cannot occur if I allow a God of explanation to dull my wits and act an evasion.

3. THE NARRATIVE

"...As the art of the third post-modern generation has demonstrated by tackling themes like that of the Pieta or reconstructing ancient rites of propitiation: the more science pushes us forwards, the more art forges links with tradition."
(Paparoni, 2007, p 12)

If I were to locate my practice in current contemporary art history, I would look to the writings of Demetrio Paparoni and his theory on the generation evolution of the Post-Modern. The first generation used painting and photography to 'revisit themes of the sacred and of history [...] rejecting the concept of narration [...] free from the classical properties of representation...' (Paparoni, 2007. p 7). The second generation that followed in the 1980s reacted against these historical attitudes, with their art instead overlapping with new technology and modern life. Among others, Paparoni credits the 1990s art practices of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002) and Damien Hirst's dissected animals in formaldehyde, with reintroducing narrative as an accepted theme in contemporary art. [See Fig. 3 & 4] Their narratives refer to the historical, the sacred and the ritual; calling upon religious symbology and in the case of Hirst, death and mortality in all its vivid and gory detail. Hirst's cadavers, unlike paintings or photographs representing death, are presented, laid out for the audience to see without the filters of additional or distractive mediums. This *presentation of narrative* is something I aspire to, my body of work being imbued with my personal narrative that draws almost exclusively from my religious and family life; the favoured approach of this expression is through sculpture and installation. An artist who uses narrative in the form of a complex process based practise is Turner Prize winner Simon Starling. His now famous *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)* (2005) contained a characteristic, cyclical narrative where he dismantled a readymade shed, turning it into a boat which he sailed down the Rhine to be reassembled upon reaching the

Museum of Contemporary Art, Basel. [See Fig. 5] Simon Starling is quoted as saying, “When I’m making art, I’m thinking up novels in a way... I’m involved in an activity which is similar to that of a narrator.” I see my own practice located at the end of this lineage of artistic practices, stemming from the third generation of the post modern to today.



Fig. 3. Matthew Barney, The Goodyear Waltz, 1995

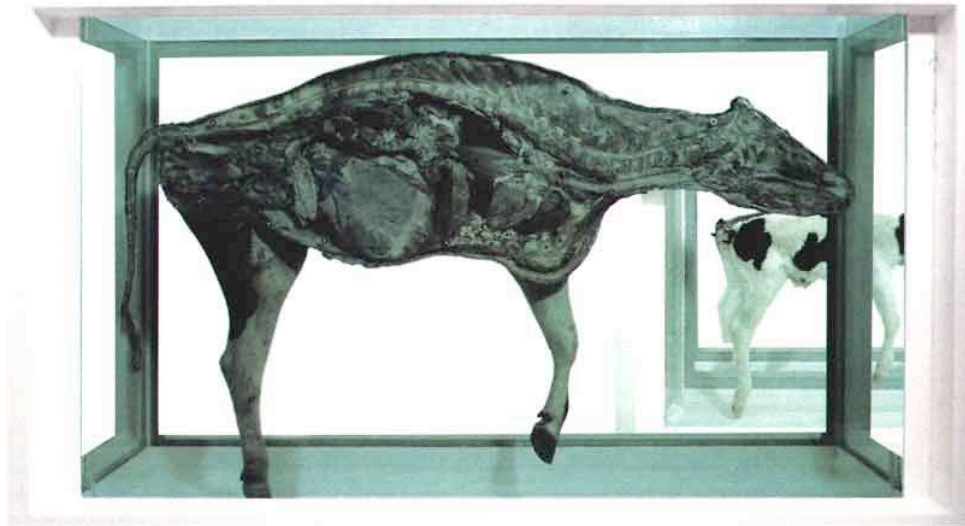


Fig. 4. Damien Hirst, *Mother and Child, Divided* 1993



Fig. 5. Simon Starling, *Shedboatshed*, 2005

4. CATHOLICISM & THE LAPSED

'It's hard not to be jealous of Catholics – especially lapsed ones. Their work is stoked by all that guilt and gilt. Protestant, Jewish, Islamic and Hindi kids have their own awakenings into the hypocrisy of organised religion, but somehow the iconographic oomph of various chopped martyrs, incense-scented brocade and stern nuns with rulers seems to spark former Catholic visual artists[] with especially vehement energy. That energy however must be harnessed - otherwise it can overwhelm a mere work of art. (Duncan, 1997)

Hell may not have fury like a woman scorned but an angry, lapsed Catholic artists may give her a run for her money. When does a calculated critique of Catholicism, become licentiousness and sacrilegious? Artists such as Andres Serrano (1950-) and Robert Gober (1954-) have made a name for themselves as fervent opponents of the Catholic Church, their works attracting great controversy usually from moral watchdogs and religious groups. [See Fig. 6 & 7] I find some of their work sensationalist and lacking finesse, something that I constantly keep in mind when developing my own ideas. Serrano's photographs and Gober's installations interest me as works made by iconoclasts (crucifix in piss, sewer pipe through Virgin Mary) but suffer from a misplaced energy. To be heavy handed or lazy with a topic as loaded as Catholicism, is to invite criticism and deservedly so.

In contrast, the German Jesuit priest Friedhelm Mennekes has since the late 80s been directly involved with re-establishing links between the Catholic Church and contemporary art. As the overseer and director of the St. Peter Art Station he has written many articles in support of his theory that art and religious practices have similar aims in examining the existential meaning of existence. "Religion responds with a system of rituals, meditation, revelation, even mysticism. Art operates through creativity, form,

and images, through a visual exploration of the unknown.' (Stals, 1989, p. 57)



Fig. 6. Andre Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987



Fig. 7. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1997

THE CHURCH: FINDING MY VOICE

An opportunity arose to exhibit in February, within the first weeks of the Masters. It was intended to be a BFA graduate show but seeing as the gallery was small and my installation too large, an agreement was made between the director and myself that a new work would be appropriate. It offered the opportunity to begin working immediately without the stalling and reluctance I

assumed would take place at the start of the paper. With all the pressures and frustrations of time spent with my family still fresh in my mind, I made a snap decision to put aside my proposed medium of performance and singing. Instead I committed to fabricating a sculpture, one that would be my first attempt to reflect on and confront my Catholic faith in order to ask some serious questions.

The decision to make a scale model church for the gallery came out of a conversation held in the exhibition space. The director had a kennel situated in the courtyard of the gallery and commented on her designer's distaste for it. My immediate reaction was to build another and place it directly into the gallery as a response. Though intended as a cheeky rebuttal, I quickly realised the power of such an image; a church reduced in scale to that of a kennel. This idea both excited and terrified me, I could not shake the concept from my mind and within days I knew I would make it. Mainly due to recognising that the fear I felt indicated my first opportunity to begin a line of questioning about my Church, something I had never done, and more often, avoided.

A very careful balance was required if the work was going to defend itself against readings of it being a one-liner or easily dismissed, tasteless joke. I knew it must be beautiful at first sight, the craftsmanship and time spent apparent. All the details would have to be to correct scale, as a caricatured, cartoonish construction would resemble a Wendy house or worse, a novelty kennel. This would displace the humour and undermining the seriousness of the work's questions, resulting in no discussion at all. This would be disastrous as my whole intension was to create a dialogue between the work and the audience. I did not want to pretend I had any answers, on the contrary, I had none, hence the creation of the work. I wanted the audience to question what they were looking at, as well as my intended meaning.

MATERIALITY & SCALE

Materiality - While researching the desired look for the scale model I came across a Catholic Church in Greytown in the Wairarapa, New Zealand. To avoid a caricature of a church, the model was built as close to real colonial architecture as I could. Foundations and inner wall frames were designed and built, carpentry texts were used to calculate and construct the A-frames in the ceiling. I individually cut and fitted the weatherboards and floorboards, polishing the later to a shine to reflect the sunlight passing through the windows. I resolved to remove the vestibule's front wall, leaving the structure permanently open and remove any decorative elements that might denote denomination. The lancet windows retained their pointed arches, stained glass was omitted, as was any carved symbol in the oculus window in the front wall. The crucifix remained absent from the top of the spire and no belfry made apparent in the steeple. All deliberate choices with the intension of keeping the possibility of dialogue open around meaning and intention. [See Fig.8]

The main body of the church adhered to a simple illustration of a church; four walls with an A-framed roof running from front to back. Apart from the vestibule and steeple, the building resembled a kennel's basic design. The removal of the front wall of the vestibule was the only reference to a kennel that survived the making process. A reference that some missed entirely, suggesting a refusal to allow themselves to see anything other than a small model of a church. Interestingly enough, small children, when asked, saw a kennel every time; something I put down to a lack of self-censorship and the scale of the model, which matched the dimensions of the gallery's kennel.



Fig. 8. Author, *An Abiding Notion*, 2009

Like that of the sculptures of Ron Mueck, when seen in isolation or particularly in photography, the scale of *An Abiding Notion*, can be deceptive and uncanny. The sculpture was located in the gallery where it could be seen from the street. From that position, the work gave the impression of seeming quite small, almost as if from a scale-electric set. However, as one approached the sculpture, it began to take on an odd appearance, something caught between the scale of a miniature and that of a Wendy house. [See Fig. 9]



Fig. 9. Author, *An Abiding Notion*, 2009

The placement of the sculpture on the floor is an obvious reference to its association to the kennel, one that was always at risk of causing the greatest offense. For in this position the church is no longer high or elevated, quite the opposite, there is baseness to it, a lowness that could be interpreted as 'down & dirty'. In her book, *Formless: A Users Guide* (2000), Rosalind Krauss discusses such

lowness, drawing from the theories and writing of Surrealist, Georges Bataille (1892-1962). Within Modernism, Bataille argued in opposition to the accepted theories on aesthetics (those defined by Clement Greenberg (1909-1995)), highlighting what he called 'base materialism', the belittled, degenerate and repressed. (Grauer, 2002, p.3) When experiencing Catholic architecture, the face is constantly turned upwards with angels in the rafters, frescos of Saints on the ceiling and parables told in radiant stained glass, as if emanating holy light. It is only in prayer and penitence that one bows their head and looks to the ground. This downward gaze that occurs when looking upon my sculpture is intended to contain the work, as if reducing a problem of overwhelming scale into one that you believe is solvable.

When the work was formally critiqued, the first thing I noted was the complete lack of any surprise or offense taken by the audience that I was so anxious about at the start. The audience was also divided, which I expected, as each person brings their bias to the work. To some, the object left them cold not allowing them a way into the work as if it was as monolithic as some find Catholicism. Others, who admitted growing up in similar religious circumstances, even if they disagreed with what they thought the work was saying, understood it none the less. This attempt at showing and finding empathy was my wish for the work. I wanted An Abiding Notion to say, "I don't know the answers, but I want to talk about it. How about you?"

5. HUMOUR

"A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."

Mary Poppins

Akin to the tradition of the court jester, the artist is able to use humour to negotiate provocative material in order to highlight hypocrisy, without suffering the normal social restrictions and repercussions. One particular artist known for playing this role very well is the Italian, Maurizio Cattelan (1960-). *La Nona Ora* (1999) depicts an incredibly realistic wax-work of Pope John Paul II having been struck down by a meteorite that has crashed through the glass ceiling. [See Fig. 10] The title of the work is taken from the book of Matthew 27: 46 when in the moments before he died, Jesus cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"



Fig. 10. Maurizio Cattelan, *La nona ora*, 1999

I consider it a witty suggestion that challenges notions of belief. Is it a random act of nature, or of God? But why would an omnipotent God allow his representative on Earth to be struck down? Not surprisingly, this touring work gained international attention and

attracted much criticism, none more so than in the Poland, the Pope's birthplace, where two outraged members of parliament removed the meteor and tried to lift the effigy onto its feet. Perhaps they forgot that it was made of wax and not the man who had already survived an attempt on his life at the hands of a would-be assassin.

Retaining a sense of humour in my work has always been important, particularly when examining such a potent and serious topic as religious belief. My intention is never to mock or belittle with humour as audiences tend not to respond. Instead I try to use it as a leveller and icebreaker through irony and sometimes in the tradition of the calculating fool.

6. THE BOAT

Discovery. I came across the boat sitting on blocks, exposed to the elements in a contractor's yard around the time I exhibited *An Abiding Notion*. It was clinker built with a distinctive stub-nosed bow that was so beautifully designed that I became convinced I could use it sculpturally. [See Fig. 11] So I acquired it, not knowing exactly what I intended to do with it, all I knew was it fitted into my theme of religious research; the boat having been used in various metaphors and symbols throughout the history of Christianity. The boat is a traditional symbol for the church, a secret symbol used by the first Christians, "tossed in the sea of disbelief, worldliness and persecution but finally reaching safe harbour with its cargo of human souls." (Wilson, 2009) [See Fig. 12]The use of the boat metaphor was re-enforced literally when the nave (the Latin, *Navis* meaning ship) design of Christian churches in Europe began to resemble the shape of an upturned hull of a boat, again referring to the spiritual journey, the ship of souls and to the ark that would save the worthy from the deluge. [See Fig. 13]



Fig. 11. Author, Boat as when found, 2009



Fig. 12. Bark of St. Peter, pictograph from Roman catacomb

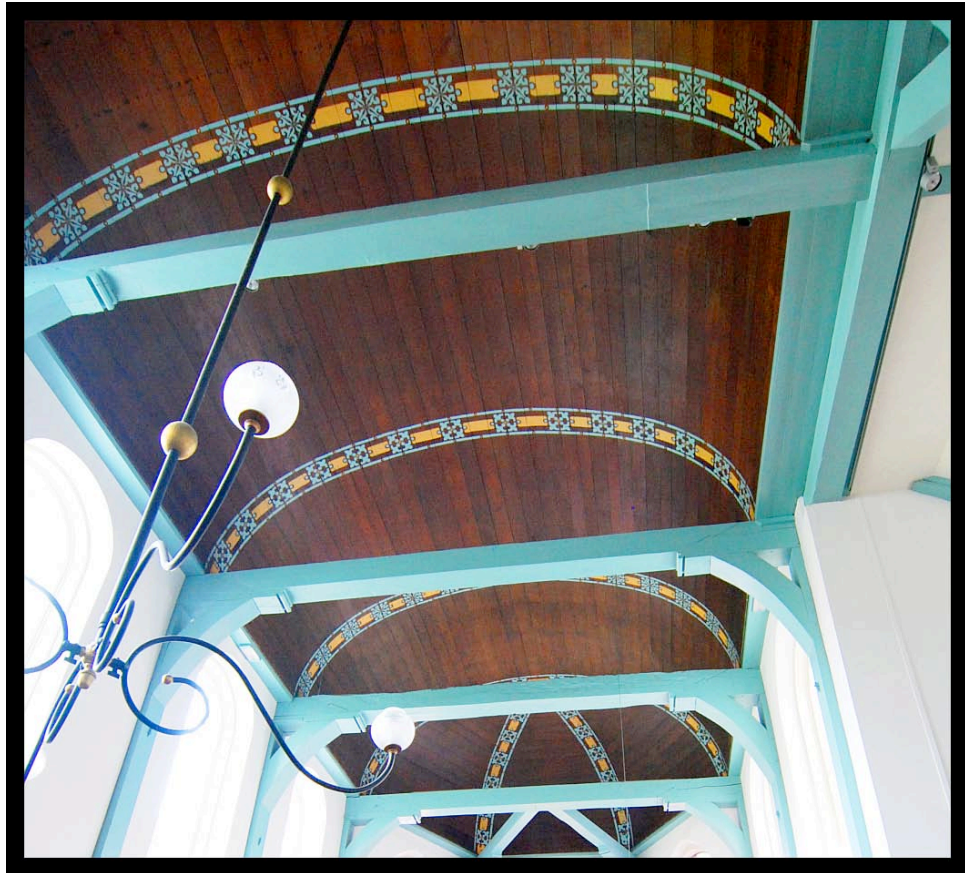


Fig. 13. Nave, English Reform Church

TRANSFORMATION

Ron Mueck (1958-) is a sculptor that works with the timeless themes of self-portraiture, mortality, ageing and birth. His work *Man in a Boat* (2002) is no exception, shifting subtly between birth and death. The highly realistic, small-scaled figure of a naked man sits in an empty wooden boat, arms crossed and neck slightly

craned as so to discern the path of the boat. As it is a grown man depicted, it would be easiest to suggest he is passing into death or the afterlife in the tradition of the Soul Boat. [See Fig. 14]



Fig. 14. Ron Mueck, *Man in a Boat*, 2002

Though the burning of soul boats at sea was made famous by Viking tribes, the use of the boat as the vessel for crossing over is used all over the world. Many Vikings of Norway and Sweden not only burnt, but also buried the boats containing the deceased with their precious belongings; both rituals are evident in Russia amongst the inhabitants along the banks of the Volga. [See Fig. 15] In fact evidence of the use of boats in burial rites, to cross the ocean, can be found throughout the European continent, Asia Minor and North America. Even when an actual boat is not used, payment for a Charon, or ferryman, can be found in the graves, known by some as Peter's pence. More common is the belief that a river must be crossed to reach the afterlife such as the Nile, Euphrates or the Rhine. (Wardrop, 1892) However, when associated with the soul, the boat does not always connote death or passing over but can also suggest birth.



Fig. 15. Heinrich Siemiradzki, *Funeral of an Old Russian Nobleman*, 1883

Medvedev Mead (2005) discusses “the boat” as both a symbol of transcendence and renewal, a duality of life and death where a person (or soul) must journey to the underworld in order to complete their ‘life’s journey’. The after-life has mystified individuals since the beginning of time. Where we have life, we must also have death. Millions have seen the ‘crossing-over’ as a journey and the boat was the natural vehicle for making that journey into the unknown realm. As discussed earlier, while the many different cultures may have performed different ceremonies to farewell their dead, the use of the boat as the vessel has been almost universal at one time or another. Irrespective of nationality or religion, the mystery surrounding death still exists and often promotes discussion about faith. Therefore, the opportunity to incorporate this fundamental object in my work examining the mysteries surrounding the Church became almost compulsory. While not completely sure of the final design specifications, it was easy to imagine that the foundations would be strong both physically and spiritually.

Christianity accepts the boat or ship as a symbol for the Immaculate

Conception (*navis institoris*) and Virgin Mary's womb, the vessel that brought Jesus into the mortal world. (Greeves & Wiggins, 2003, p. 27) The archetypal, almond shape of a hull is comparative to that of the vulva, the source of life; which gives Mueck's sculpture a touch of optimism as the man peeks curiously towards his uncertain future. This balancing act between these opposites; death and life, optimism and pessimism, I have tried to emulate in my work.

The visual language I have elected to use to critique Catholicism is the very same language that is used by the Church to ennoble itself in the eyes of its disciples, with the association and reliance on religious myth. With two thousand years of rich source material (four thousand if Judeo-Christian history is included), the biggest problem I have faced is avoiding the risk of my work being smothered under the historical weight.

So began the task of discovering the purpose of the boat, starting with the removal of the retrofitted elements such as the rotting top deck, the cabin and the rusted inboard diesel engine. I wanted only the original kauri hull to remain, open and exposed to show the boat builders' amazing skill and the beauty of the ribbing, held in place with copper nails as tradition dictates; an educated guess dating the boat quite possibly back to the 1860s when it may very well have been used for whaling. [See Fig. 16] Once stripped of extraneous materials, a waiting game commenced where I lived and worked with the boat, researching and experimenting with drawings in the hope I would strike upon the 'correct' use for the hull. The difficulty then was to avoid being seduced by the object

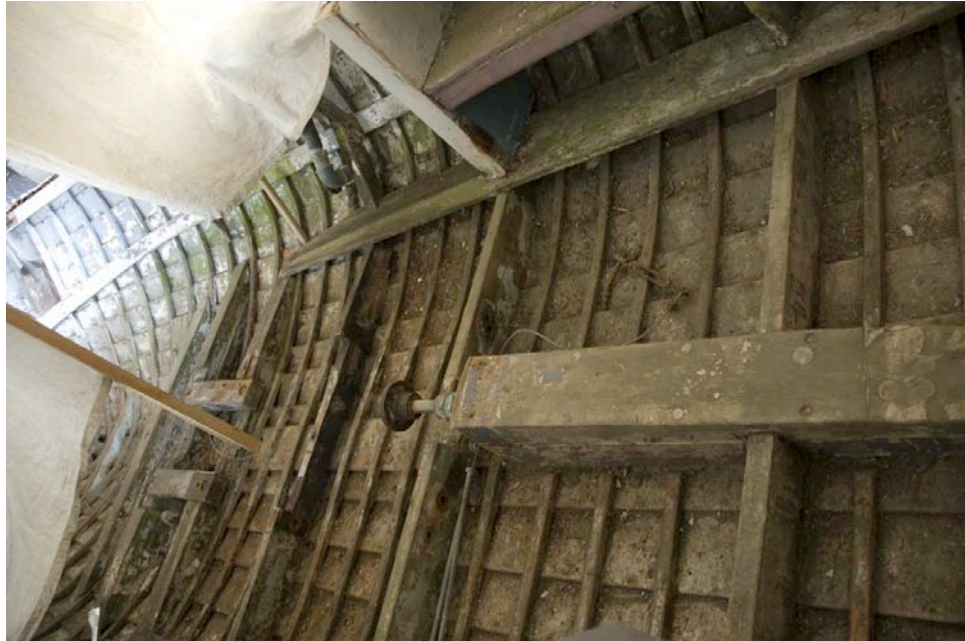


Fig. 16. Author, Boat interior, 2009

MAKING & INTUITION

My approach to research has been similar to that of Starling (1999, cited in Birrell, 2006), in that artistic research cannot always be carried out in the traditional way, but through the dissemination of “verbal information, story telling [...] things stumbled upon by accident...that at some point [become] significant.” In this way, the artist is forced to gather his understanding in parts that have been derived from his context or place in the world, and as such does not create something new and bold, but “creates new relationships” instead of “new objects.” The boat was imbued with history, evident from the age and skill taken to construct it. I was convinced that with time the right use for object would become apparent. It was an exercise in intuition, and I wanted to avoid starting work with a completed sculpture already in mind, instead I’d prefer the thinking to naturally evolve from the making.

I resisted making a direct reference to a Soul Boat at first, as if it was lazy or too easy a design choice. Instead, I developed ideas that used the boat in its originally intended role somehow, be it in water or mounted on dry land with sails and cargo. I even

considered placing my church model into the boat, as if adrift, however I saw this as repeating itself as the two objects are used in Christianity to symbolize each other. So I searched for additional complimentary objects and materials such as wood, canvas, rope and copper, in the hope that their combination and altered context may help develop a narrative. For the sake of experimenting, I pitched an old scout tent in the boat, well aware that sailors, being a thrifty bunch, historically recycled sails, making them into tents and hammocks and the like. [See Fig. 17]



Fig. 17. Author, Boat with tent test, 2009

This had two positive results; the first was shortly after my action with the tent, when I found reference to the Russian ritual of laying the deceased inside a tent, pitched in the burial boat. The

second was the way the tent reminded me of the conceptual prints and drawings I had seen of the first attempts at flying machines. They were modified versions of boat-like vessels with sails or canopies that were given bird-like characteristics, such as Lauro de Gusmao's *Passarola* (Great Bird) of 1709 [See Fig. 18] or De Lana's *Flying Boat*, of 1670. [See Fig. 19] The former was meant to use hot air to inflate the canopy (or tent) to lift the craft, steering with feathered tail and wings while the latter, designed as a lighter-than-air vessel with copper spheres pumped free of their air to create a vacuum. (Taylor, 1968).

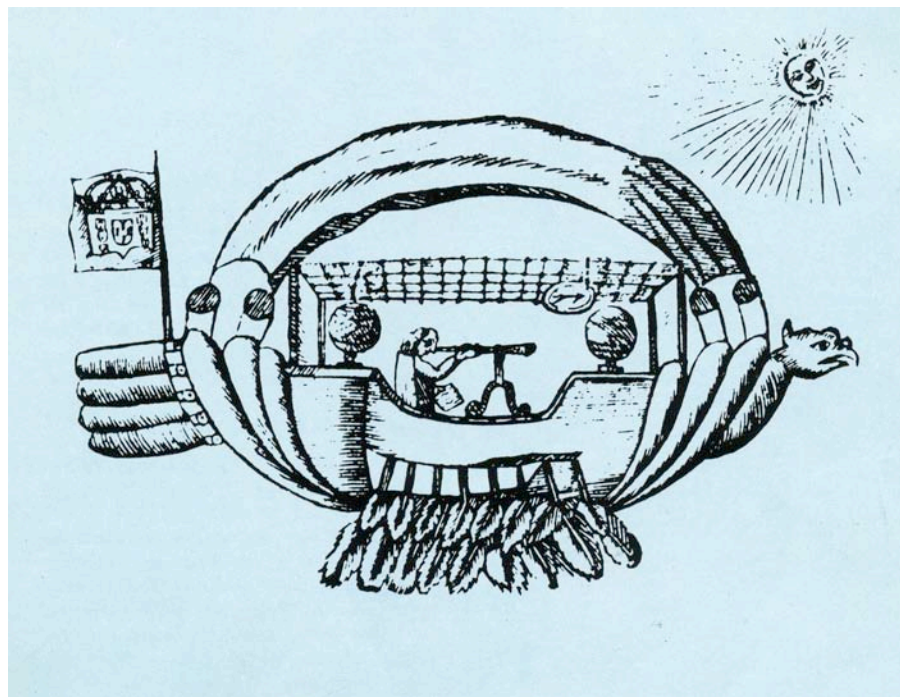


Fig. 18. Diagram of Gusmao's *Passarola*, date unknown. Lithograph.

These flying ships, though impractical, were none the less loosely based on some form of physics or science. I felt inclined to draw inspiration from even more fanciful and romantic notions of travel; such as the tale of Cyrano de Bergerac, his hair wet with the ocean's spray being lifted into space by the moon's magnetic pull on the tide. Or the fable of Pierrot the moonstruck fool sailing his ship into space by climbing tracks made of chains, propelled by pumping bellows into the sails. [See Fig. 20] The intention was to

create my own imaginary reality with its own form of logic. Making it clear that the intention of the sculpture is not to abide by the limitations of the natural laws of physics but instead to transcend the rational and encourage suspension of disbelief to explore the spiritual and metaphysical themes of my work.

With these ephemeral themes in mind, I set about turning the boat into a flying ship perhaps with flapping, canvas wings or a flock of birds like the ancient Persian King Kai Ka'as. [See Fig. 21]



Fig. 19. De Lana's *Flying Boat*



Fig. 20. Pierrot leaves for the moon

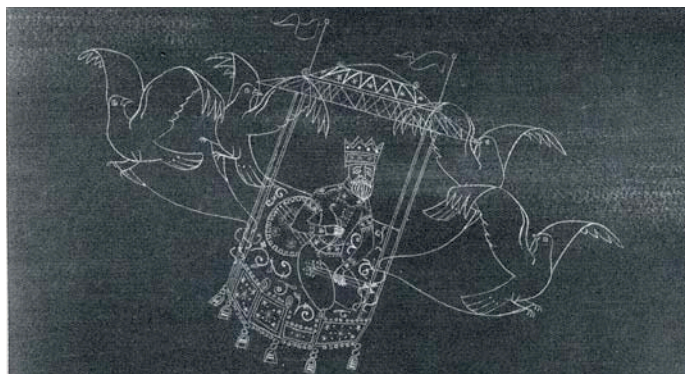


Fig. 21. Kai Ka'us, King of Persia.

7. INVERSION: BOAT BECOMES ROCKET

The decision to flip the hull happened suddenly. I had no intention of hiding the fact I was working with a boat; however the upright hull and its scale, overwhelmed any ideas I had for its transformation. The simplistic, but significant gesture of turning the hull over came about by chance when I was remembering the Irish Carrachs I had seen on the West Coast of County Claire. [See Fig. 22] The traditional wooden framed fishing boats with tarred canvas skins are dried on shore by turning them upside-down in the sun. In this position a boat is transformed, for even in the imagination, when upside-down, the boat can no longer formally function for the purpose it was built. The world over, boats are essentially the same with their pointed front, wide mid-section and watertight skin. For thousands of years, the function of the boat has not changed; therefore the basic design has not altered either. By flipping the boat, I capsize all that it is, destabilizing this reliability of form.



Fig. 22. Carrachs galore- Galway West

But as a flying machine, where the open sky would become its new destination or ‘ocean’ in an inverted world, a strange logic dictates that an inverted boat could sail it. The existing design of the boat quickly made my choices very easy, I was to make a rocket. The keel would easily extend backwards into a tailfin, meaning all that was needed were two additional fins, and a rocket booster

mounted at the rear to complete the classic rocket design. [See Fig. 23] Immediately, the boat took on the look of a 50s sci-fi conception of a quintessential spaceship, not unlike that of Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon. [See. Fig. 24]

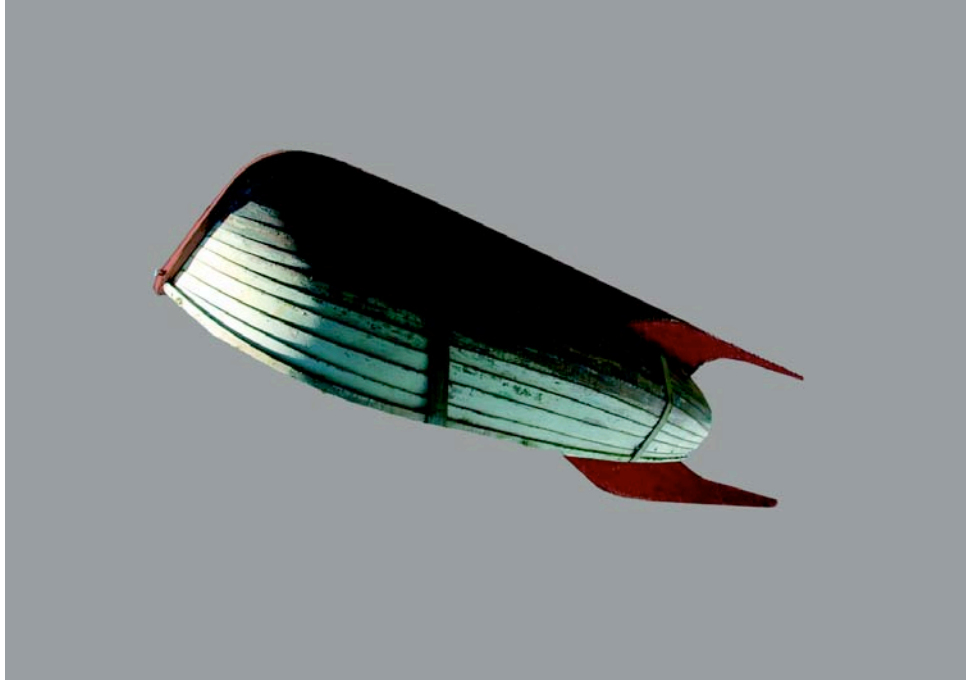


Fig. 23. Author, Rocket/Boat photoshop test. 2009.



Fig. 24. 1934 Buck Roger 25th Century Rocket Ship, tin toy.

This is when the Boat/Rocket started to take shape as an expression of my attempts to clarify my search for information within the Catholic Church. Just like *An Abiding Notion* (2009), I

wanted the reading of this work was to balance between two possible destinations; both involving the soul and the baggage that accompanies it. Either the Boat/Rocket is a vessel used for an escape, exploration and a type of freedom through flight; or else it is the carrier of a cargo that is being expelled, a dangerous payload that is being shot into the unknown.

RAMP & JACOB'S LADDER

For the work to address the oppression and hostility I saw within Catholicism, I looked at the design of the V1, better known as a Doodlebug or Buzz Bomb; robot bombs that were used as random weapons of terror. [See Fig. 25] The V1 did not have a vertical launch but rather a long, thin inclining ramp that was pointed in the direction of the target and the V1's pulsejet would 'throw' the bomb aloft. I had the idea to build for my Soul Boat/Rocket, a similar low-lying launching ramp that would project out and away from under the hull as if to indicate the intention to launch. [See Fig. 26] The Rocket's lower line of projection was intended to be gestural, to imitate the action of an arrow from a bow or bullet from a gun.



Fig. 25. V1 ramp.

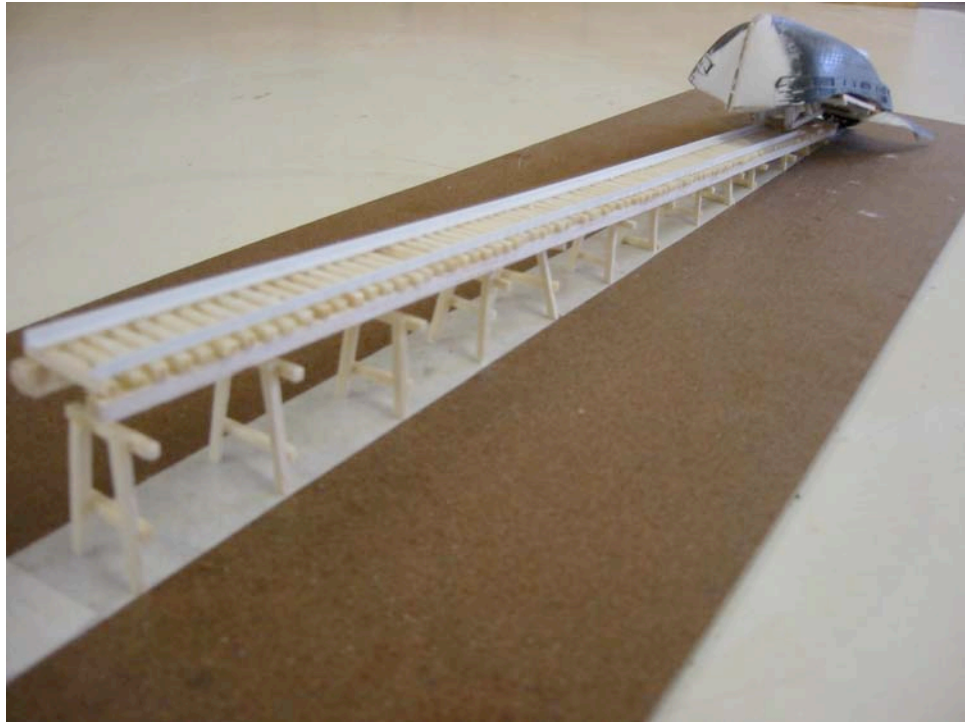


Fig. 26. Author, Marquette of *Behind everything beautiful there is some kind of pain*, 2009.

I wanted the ramp to have twin rails resembling train tracks, therefore wooden pallets, those used for industrial deliveries, were the material I chose for its construction. Their shape, materiality and original use (transportation) suited the work perfectly but I needed to alter their construction enough to avoid accusations of using pallets simply due to their economic availability. The aesthetics of the ramp structure began to show subtle traits of Russian *Productivism*, particularly that of Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) and his Monument to the Third International (1919-20), with its focus on industrialised construction rather than traditional techniques of sculpture. [See Fig. 27]

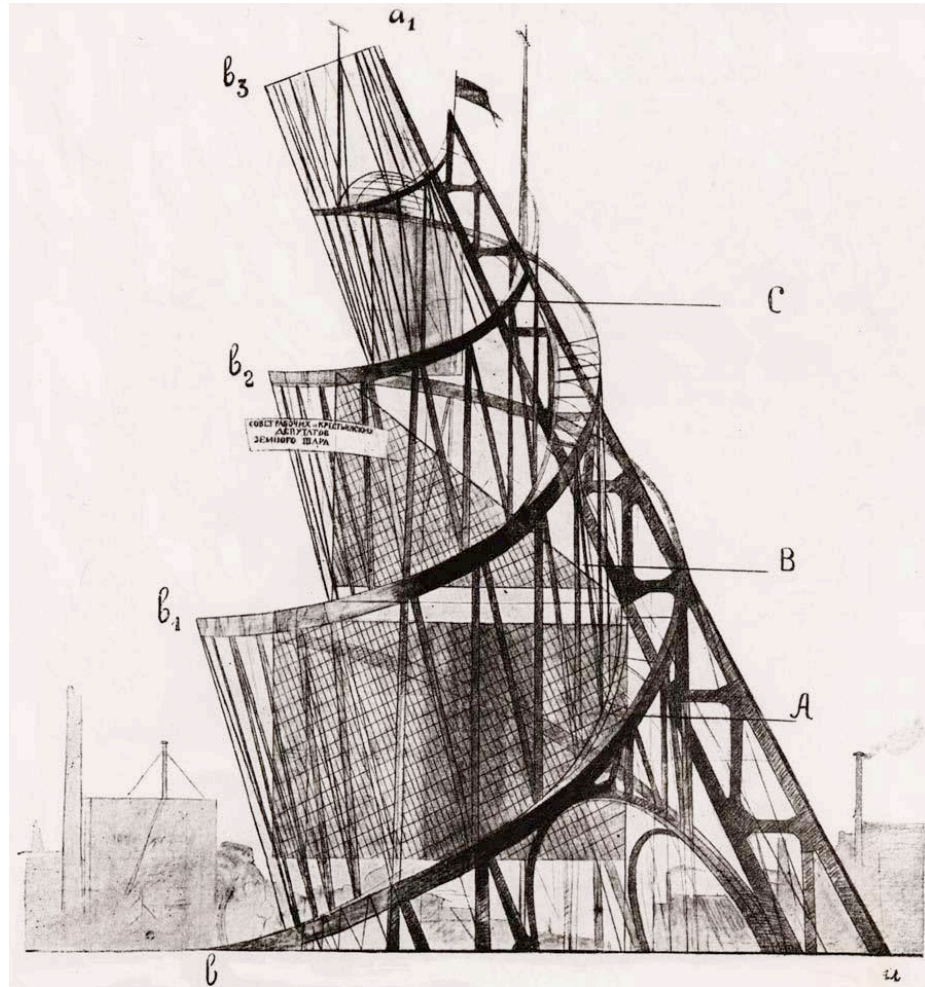


Fig. 27. Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, 1919-1920.

The ramp's train track design, resembling rungs of a ladder, is intended to refer to Jacob's Ladder, a ladder seen in a dream by Jacob, described in the Old Testament as stretching between Heaven and Earth. (Genesis 28:12) [See Fig.28] The interpretation of the ladder differs between and even within Judaism and Christianity, but similar enough to all speak of the soul and it's connection to Heaven. Either it is a gateway to Heaven used by souls to ascend and descend, or that the ladder is the soul itself. The site that Jacob dreamed this vision is believed to be on Mount Moriah, the location of the Jerusalem Temple. Making it a direct line of communication between Heaven and Earth, the chosen people and God. (Jacob's Ladder, 2009)

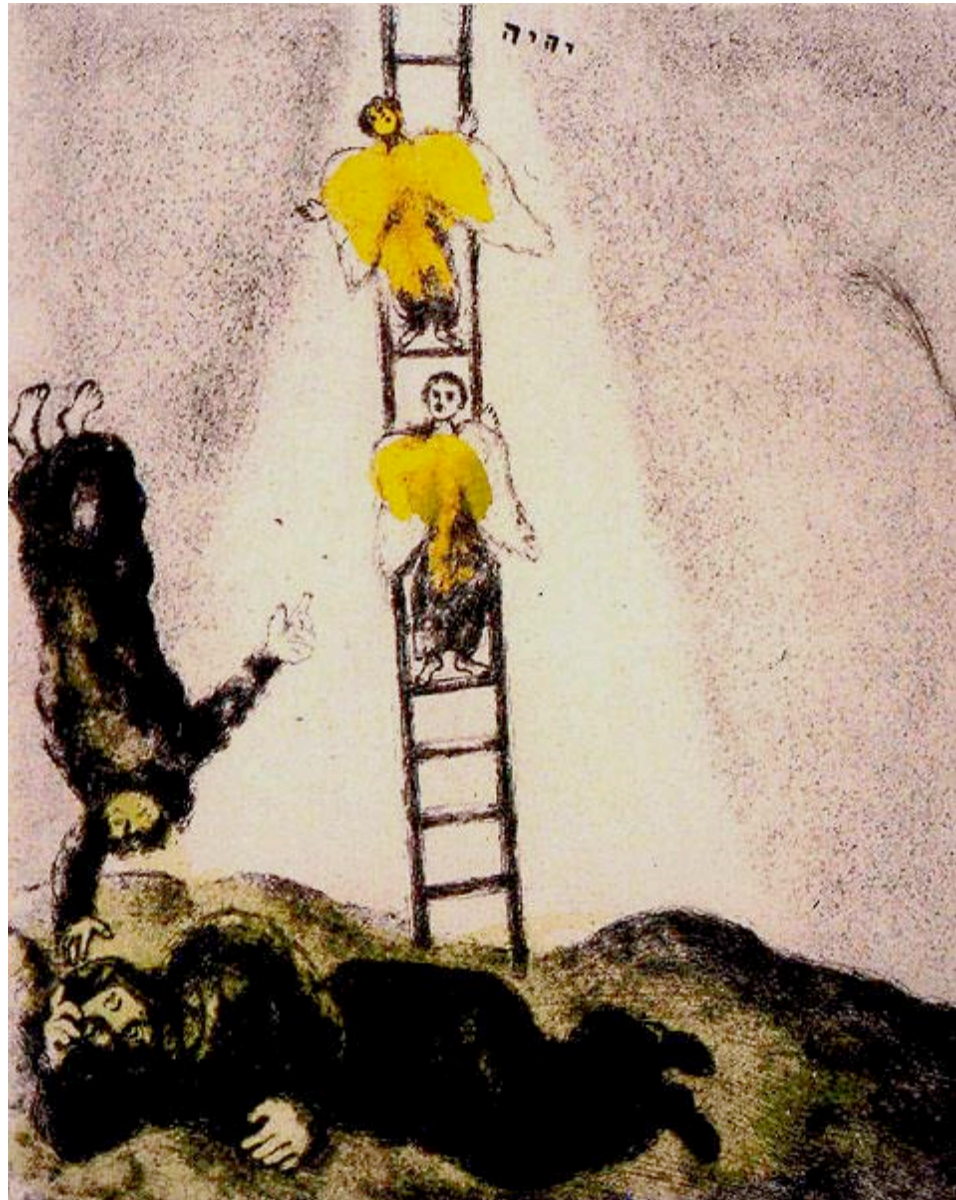


Fig. 28. Marc Chagall, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1931-1939

8. KITES

It was inevitable that I would research the kite when developing ideas around the flying boat, come Rocket. A quick look at the history of flight shows that the fixed aeroplane wing evolved from lessons learnt observing kites. In fact the design used by Wilbur and Orville Wright in their historical 1903 flight of the first self propelled, piloted aeroplane was first tested as a kite.

But short of introducing the physics of flight, I struggled to locate the kite within my field of interest. Aesthetically, flying machines organically evolved from inept birdlike contraptions with flapping, feathered wings, through to the first successful aeroplanes. With their bamboo and spruce spars, high-tension wires and taut canvas and linen skins, these aircraft owed their look and success to the kite. Amongst the varied uses of the kite throughout history (entertainment, flight, science and war and reconnaissance), were Guglielmo Marconi's experiments with kites in the advancement of wireless communications. In 1901, Marconi successfully sent a Wireless Signal across the Atlantic, picked up by an aerial lifted 400 feet aloft by a canvas, hexagonal kite. [See Fig. 30] This inspired in me a mental image of a literal line of communication running upwards, disappearing into the heavens. A strikingly poetic and naïve moment, like a child sending a letter to God via a chimney's updraft. I was reminded of something that a primary school music teacher of mine used to say, that a hymn was twice as powerful as a prayer, something she credited to a music-loving saint. It may have been a tactic to encourage us to sing better, but it also made me think about a literal version of lifting ones voice to God. Prompted by this, I began to construct paper kites made from sheets of conjoined rice-paper pages, taken from a Christian Hymn Book. [See Fig. 31] I planned to play with ideas around prayer and the belief in a God of intervention; one that listens to requests to heal the sick, stop wars and improve traffic conditions. After I had made several kites I stalled, not knowing the best way to proceed.

So instead of forcing the work, I put the kites aside to wait for the right opportunity to arise.



Fig. 30. Marconi Kite. *George Kemp, formally Marconi's Chief Assistant*



Fig. 31. Author, *A hymn is like praying twice*. Kites in studio, 2009

9. ESCAPISM THROUGH FLIGHT

Vaclav Havel (1936), "Individuals need not believe all these mystifications [produced by the communist system], but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them...For this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system." (Bartelik, 1996)

Though ideologically opposed, I found Havel's description of living under the system of Communism incredibly similar to my own views of abiding the systems within Catholicism. In *The Atheist Delusion* (2008), John Gray draws parallels with their shared ideals of utopia or a New World, of tearing down the old to be reborn in the new. One is expected to suffer in this life for the greater good, and in the case of Catholicism, rewarded in the next. I have concluded that this not only helps keep people relatively content in their misery, but also risks discouraging believers from bettering themselves; a voluntary ignorance one may call it. It is my wish to no longer support and 'make the system' by tolerating it, instead I intend to escape.

The Rocket symbolised escape from the beginning, but the narrative of who was involved was unclear. Did I intend to cast myself in the role of the pilot or cargo? Was I intending on blasting off on an adventure of discovery? Or perhaps I felt overwhelmed with the urge to break away from the Earth's certainties; gravity, dirt, death.

I came to realize that the cargo is in fact my subsisting soul and my faith, both stowed aboard a soul boat for a funeral ceremony I can perform myself. In the end my body will go into the ground much like the Rocket would if it made it off the end of the ramp. But in spite of my efforts, the Rocket maintains an aura of hope. The

hope that others project onto it, wishing it airborne; and the hope within me that persists, wishing that I could believe, hoping that take-off fails and I don't send these things away.



Fig. 32. Author, *Behind everything beautiful is some kind of pain.* 2009.



Fig. 33. Author, *Behind everything beautiful is some kind of pain.* 2009.



Fig. 34. Author, *Behind everything beautiful is some kind of pain.* 2009.

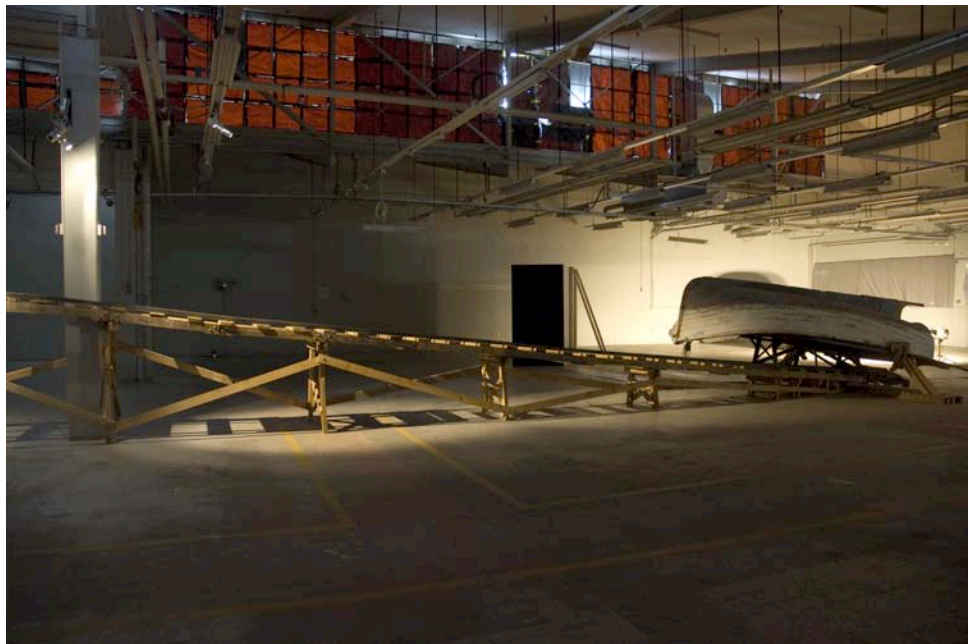


Fig. 35. Author, *Behind everything beautiful is some kind of pain.* 2009.

10. FAILURE: OVERLOADING, GRAVITY, COMMUNICATION

An Abiding Notion was made back in February and I have lived with the sculpture since that time. Apart from minor detailing problems (that have since been fixed), the only issue I had with the work was the risk of it being overloaded with intent. One work could not embody all of what I wanted to explore in this theses, nor did I want it to. I knew that several works were required to explore the varied terrain, comparable to several debates around the same subject.

Indoors, a boat loses its function and becomes a representation of an idea, or at least part of one. When remade as a rocket that is presented indoors *Behind everything beautiful there is some kind of pain*, lost its functionality due to beams, walls and ceiling surrounding the vessel preventing it from escaping, even if it was ever to take flight. When discussed in a critique, there were those who voiced disappointment in the placement of the beam in the middle of the ramp. It was as if they were able and willing to suspend their belief enough to want to see the rocket fire-up and take off, but the beam prevented them from satisfying that fantasy, because the beam is finite, an impervious obstacle. Its original placement was to deliberately symbolize the unlikelihood of the whole enterprise, but with hindsight there existed enough physical and material elements embedded in the sculpture to potentially sabotage the flight from the get-go. If tension in the work can be maintained, even if only a glimmer of hope or possibility, then the sculpture has a chance to remain agile. This 'lightness' is immediately lost with the inclusion of the beam, scuttling any attempts to launch in the imagination. When presented for the examination, the Rocket will be loaded with cargo under the nose, held into place by a tarpaulin lashed to the gunnels. I expect it to resemble a whale which its mouth full.[See Fig. 36] At bursting point, and literally overloaded, the Rocket will sit at the base of the ramp with great expectations. The whole sculpture will sit outdoors on the top of a cleared hill, overlooking the city towards the

sea. I'm predicting that the sky above and the cleared ramp will allow the work to regain the potential previously lost when indoors. A sense of hope and of melancholy.

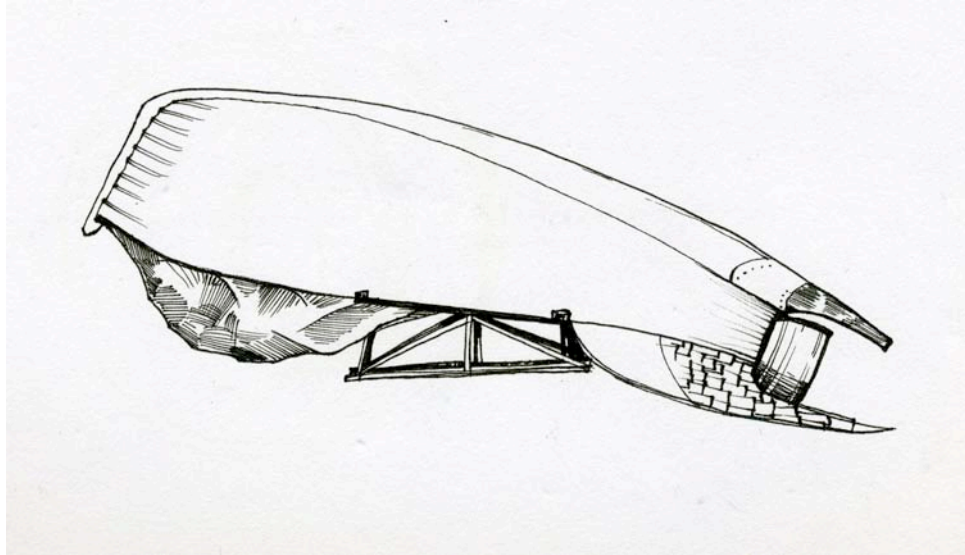


Fig. 36. Author, Addition of cargo, 2010. Drawing.

The theme of failure and uncertainty has remained with this work from its conception, although as the work has progressed and resolved it exists only as an ambient, background noise of reluctance. If *An Abiding Notion* was about speaking out for the first time, then *Behind everything beautiful there is some kind of pain* is about an *attempt* at rejection and expulsion of what I no longer believe. Without explaining the work away, I suspect that the failure that was apparent into the first version of the work illustrates the unwillingness I still feel about this rejection of my faith. Not because I consider myself to be delusional, but because of the repercussions that are bound to reverberate through my family relationships.

The hexagonal kites, *A hymn is like praying twice*, had been constructed for several months without designated roles within the body of my work's explorations. That was until I paused to question what it was I was hoping to say with them. It may have been the lapse in time, because I found newfound confidence to have fun

with the concept of prayer and communication.

The addition of tin cans to the ends of the kite strings to convert them into primitive can & string phones, seems apt and necessary to establish the correct, whimsical tone for the last version of this work which I intend to call, *The silent treatment* (2010) I intend to fly the can phone/kites on the planned installation site of the Rocket, fighting the wind and the construction flaws of my kites, I will attempted to intercept a message, much like Marconi although rather than Morse-code, I would be trying for a heavenly transmission. Deliberately childish I know but amazingly accurate to how I've come to view communiqués with the Almighty without the aid of faith or belief. If the kites survive without becoming trapped in the surrounding trees, I will exhibit their remains along side a slick photo document of me trying to get the message.

When a boat is capsized, the contents spill out. At sea, it would drift with the current or sink, surrounded by flotsam and jetsam and all onboard could be lost. This is not the case when one thinks of the nave of a church, as the symbolic capsized 'hull' acts as a shelter to its cargo of souls. Where as, my Rocket still retains its boat form and by all rights should spill its innards onto the ground. However, when it was exhibited in November, the hull was empty and nothing spilled onto the ground. What I assumed would be a distraction ended up standing out as the biggest weakness of the work. Yes, the Rocket was a vessel but it was not meant to be empty like the church.

Identifying the contents should not be clear. The canvas tarp should strain under the weight and all that can be made out are the vague outlines and mass of the cargo. It may have an aroma and the canvas may be stained with colour or an oily billow. Ron Mueck's boat was 'empty' as was my church. The decision to leave the Rocket empty was an attempt at restraint, however in comparison, Mueck's boat wasn't empty at all. The figure of the man with his neck slightly craned as if to look into the

future said enough hence his decision to forgo the planned cargo he was to take along. Where as, my vessel specifically carried nothing at all. This concentrated the focus on the vessel only, leaving the audience's interpretation of what the cargo 'could be' far open and vague. This became clear through discussion following it's exhibition, proving once again that showing was the right thing to do for the work.

11. CONCLUSION

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!
(Rudyard Kipling, 1910)

We all want to live forever and I am no exception as I recognize within myself the need to leave a mark in the world. Be it in the memories of loved ones or a legacy of any sort. It makes sense that I am an artist, seeking encouragement and recognition.

I have had to admit to myself that I have lost my faith. I no longer have faith to belief that God spoke to man in the desert and dictated his word. I no longer have faith that an afterlife awaits me when I die. I no longer believe that this life should be spent in preparation for the next. I chose my Masters to open discussion and to reflect on my experiences and musings, expressing my process and journey through my practice. I feel as though I have only just commenced this journey of discovery and there is still much I do not know. However, because of these last twelve months of searching, that vast unknown that awaits me is that little bit smaller.

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Production still, C-Print in self-lubricating plastic frame; 43 ¾ x 53 ¾ inches. Photo: Michael James O'Brien. Retrieved January 20, 2010 from <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/barney/card1.html>

Fig. 4, Hirst, D. *Mother and Child, Divided*, 1993. 208.5 332.5 109 cm (x2)

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Fig. 17, Author, Boat with tent test, 2009.

Fig. 18, Diagram of Gusmao's *Passarola*, date unknown. Lithograph.
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