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A Space for the Contemplation of a Sacred Subject

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A Space for the Contemplation of a Sacred Subject

Katie West

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

A Space for the Contemplation of a Sacred Silence

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This paper discusses a Fine Art Master thesis exhibition. The show was on the topic of the Latter-day Saint doctrine of a Mother in Heaven. It contains a project statement detailing the theological meanings and reasons, an overview of the visual elements of the exhibition, and a section contextualizing the exhibition within the art world.

Keywords: fine art, religion, Heavenly Mother, installation art, labyrinth, mythology
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Picture of a panel of embroidery from thesis exhibition
Picture of labyrinth entrance from thesis exhibition
PROJECT STATEMENT

The members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, hereafter referred to as LDS or Mormons, believe that God is the literal father of all human spirits. This creates an interesting situation, since a male cannot be a father unless he has the help of a female. Largely because of this logic, the LDS Church believes that there is a female as well as a male deity, a mother to go with the father. This belief can be traced to the early beginnings of the faith, starting with its founder, Joseph Smith, Jr. Yet, it is rare to hear mention of this Mother-God in the meetings of the Church. My thesis exhibition explores the LDS doctrine of a Heavenly Mother and the cultural taboo that keeps people from speaking about Her.

First, let us look at the origins of the doctrine. At the funeral of his close friend, King Follett, the prophet Joseph Smith declares to the congregation that, “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!”1 He goes on to say that we will progress from grace to grace, until we dwell in immortality and glory. He says that we “shall be heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ . . . to inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a god, and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before.”2 According to Joseph Smith, we are gods in embryo, with the capacity to become like our Father, immortal and exalted. By living the commandments, we will someday be able to become like God, and create our own worlds and spirit children. Since Joseph Smith does not say only men would have this opportunity, we can

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2 Ibid.
assume that women have the ability to progress in a similar manner, which means that women have the opportunity to become gods.

The information found in the King Follett sermon is reinforced and built upon in the scriptures of the LDS faith. In *Doctrine & Covenants*, a book of scripture sacred to the LDS religion, section 132, the voice of the Lord tells us that we must be married by the proper authority in order to be exalted. Without being sealed to a companion we will not be able to progress. But, if we are married with the proper authority, we are given exaltation and many other blessings. Verse 20 says that those who are married in the covenant will “be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.”

More recently, in 1995, in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, the first presidency of the Mormon Church gave this message:

“All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”

Through this we know that each of us was created in the image of God, as children of Heavenly Parents. We know that we will retain our gender throughout the eternities.

Combining all these pieces of information, Mormons believe that if we are married to a partner of the opposite sex, by the proper authority, we can become like

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God. God was once as we are; we can become like Him. Knowing these things, we can extrapolate that God could not be God unless he were married. There must be a Mother to go with the Eternal Father. Gender is eternal, so we know that they did not just merge into one being. She is there, and since she has been exalted along with her husband, she is equal to him. If this is the case, why do we not talk about God’s other half? Where is the information on Heavenly Mother?

There are many reasons that people give. Some people say that we do not talk about God the Mother because she is too sacred. If we were to talk about her, we would be subjecting her to the ridicule that the Father and the Son put up with from disrespectful humans. Others think that we do not talk about her because there might be more than one. Even for Mormons, who have a heritage of a polygamous past, the idea of eternal polygamy is just too confusing and uncomfortable to give emphasis. Others say that we just do not know enough, and anything we would say is speculation, and it is wrong to speculate and perhaps spread untrue information.

I do not believe that these should be issues. According to a study by Paulson and Pulido, there has never been a case where a general authority has told the members of the church not to talk about Heavenly Mother. In fact, their study found over 600 references to Heavenly Mother. For instance, the LDS Proclamation of the family refers to “heavenly parents,” which includes Heavenly Mother. Many conference talks use the same term. If you think about it, there is not a whole lot that we know about God the Father, yet we talk about him all the time. Most of what we know, we know through the Son. If both of our Heavenly Parents are eternal, equal and perfect, then we can assume

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that most things we know about God would be a good description for the Goddess. She is, after all, equally exalted with Him. They could not be Gods without being married and sealed.

We know that she is there, and we know that all women have the ability to become like Her. Yet, the general membership of the LDS church rarely talks about her. Although the general authorities do mention heavenly parents, they rarely mention her directly. As a Mormon woman, I would like to be able to talk more about the one who should be my role model. What does an eternal woman do with her time? Does she eternally give birth to numberless spirit children while her husband is ruling worlds? Or is she more equal, ruling and creating by his side?

I believe that Heavenly Mother and Father are co-equal and co-eternal. Both have vital roles in our lives. With this thesis exhibition, I am hoping to create a space where a conversation about Heavenly Mother is possible. I have so many questions about what my eternity will look like, and I feel that She is the answer. I would also like to hear how other people have experienced God the Mother. I hope that, through this installation, we may all explore the beauty of the feminine divine.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

My project consists of a labyrinth made of fabric. Each section of fabric contains a concept that pertains to the Heavenly Mother. Many of them come from statements made by the leaders of the LDS church. They also come from journal articles, poetry, children’s books,
hymns, and primary songs. For example, I have a section of Eliza R. Snow’s hymn *O My Father* embroidered on one panel.\(^5\)

One of the main problems I faced while working on this project was how to depict my search for the Heavenly Mother. I decided on creating a labyrinth while reading Joseph Campbell’s book *Goddesses*.\(^6\) Joseph Campbell is an influential mythologist and scholar of religion and philosophy. In the book, he points out that the labyrinth motif is very connected with ancient goddess cultures. He cites many instances when the labyrinth is used in ancient myths and the many goddess figures that have been found with a labyrinth inscribed on them. He says that, “going through the labyrinth takes you through a psychological or spiritual crisis.”\(^7\) Some labyrinths appear in the Christian world as well. Chartes Cathedral has one on the floor, which might have been used as a substitute pilgrimage for those who could not make the journey to Jerusalem. For me, the labyrinth invokes the feeling of a journey. I want the viewer to sense that I am taking her on a journey of discovery similar to my own.

I choose to use white fabric with white embroidery for several reasons. I wanted to use a material and method that has traditionally been considered feminine. I choose white in order to create a sense of a sacred or holy space. White has long been seen as the color of purity and holiness. I choose to use white thread to embroider with in order to keep the sense of sacredness, but also to make the writing and images hard to decipher. I wanted to make the experience of going through the labyrinth as close to my own journey of discovery as possible. Since I have searched for over two years to find my information, I want the viewers to take their time in

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\(^6\) Joseph Campbell, *Goddesses*, 42.

\(^7\) Ibid.
uncovering the information for themselves, which is why I chose to make it a little difficult to read the white on white panels.

In the center of the labyrinth is a large pillar of light. It hangs from the ceiling with no visible support. The purpose for this light source is to give the viewer something to walk towards, to create a sense of curiosity and discovery when they happen upon it. It also serves to create a large source of light, which is meant to stand for the knowledge that our true source of light and truth regarding Heavenly Mother will come from the Divine. All the quotes that I have provided are only the thoughts of humans who cannot know everything. The light source represents additional knowledge and insight that the quotes cannot encompass.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Most art consists of weaving together what has gone before in order to reach a new truth; mine is no different. In my art, I find that my predecessors have at sometime already said what I would like to say. Their voices come back to me, as Emerson said, “with a certain alienated majesty.” As I explore their voices, I am able to create my own conceptual tapestry. This tapestry is limited to the space and time that is my life. But I recognize that this sort of process is the human process, the process of creating oneself out of the heritage that one has been given.

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AESTHETIC INFLUENCES

Ann Hamilton

Ann Hamilton is an international installation artist who lives and works in Ohio. She was born in Lima, Ohio in 1956. She attended a textile design program at the University of Kansas, and received her MFA from Yale in sculpture. She entered the art world in the 1980s, and quickly came to the attention of the public with her 1987 installation *the earth was never flat*. She was the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship in 1993, and in 1999 was the American representative at the Venice Biennale. She taught at the University of California at Santa Barbara from 1985 to 1991, after which she returned to Ohio.

Ann Hamilton’s works are all connected through an interest in language and connections. She says of her work:

Thinking about the way we know things, through phenomenological experience, from our senses, from material, from things in the world, bodily senses, embodied thinking, and the relationship between the ways we think through bodily experiences and the ways these experiences are structured by language—that has been in my work since the very beginning.  

Most of her installations include some type of language component, be that written, spoken, recorded or sung. Her interest in materials, especially cloth is evident by looking over her works. A remarkably accomplished artist, she has had so many honors and shows in prestigious places, that listing them all would take more space than available. Her installations create new worlds for the viewers to experience, often inviting visitors to use all of their senses to perceive the work.

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9 Dent, “Ann Hamilton” 175.
My thesis exhibit fits in with Hamilton’s in that we both create experiences for the viewers. My work, a maze made out of cloth that fills an entire gallery, aesthetically matches some of her works, such as *the event of a thread*. Both her piece and my own use large pieces of cloth to make a visual impact, and both of us tend to use white fabric. Hamilton, like myself, has the viewer interact somehow with the fabric. Viewers walk through the fabric corridors in my piece, and in *the event of a thread*, the viewers’ swinging moves the cloth around.

Like her work, my works are also connected thematically. Although she uses language and weaving, my works are all connected through mythology. A piece of ancient myth is always present somewhere in my work. Also, both of us highly value that a sense of labor is apparent in our work. She often showcases this labor by having people present working in the gallery, or having large amounts of repetitious items in the gallery. My art is a little subtler in its use of work. My labor is only present in that I choose to hand-do things that could be machine done, such as embroidery. I also tend to use repetitious items.

*Casey Jex Smith*

Casey Jex Smith received a BFA from Brigham Young University in 2003 and an MFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 2005. A relatively new artist, there is not a lot of information to be found on him. He has shown in Allegra LaViola Gallery in New York City, the Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo, Utah, and Galerie Polaris in Paris, France as well as many other locations. He mainly does works on paper, although many of his shows use video and installation as well.

He says of his own art: “My work mixes religious rituals, level-up narratives, with a dash of institutional critique in the style of a second-rate Durer making Diablo fan art.”

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for Smith to reference his Mormon background in much of his work. In a piece titled *Backpack of Infinite Holding*, which was installed in the Brigham Young University Museum of Art in the 2012 show *We Could Be Heroes: The Mythology of Monsters and Heroes in Contemporary Art*, Smith painted a grid which contained different types of weapons and other items. Many of these items were drawn from the LDS faith that he grew up with, such as the sword of Laban and the Standard of Liberty.

This piece also draws from the video-game culture in which Smith is involved. He has been part of a show that consisted of several artists playing Dungeons and Dragons together. His love of this sci-fi sub-culture is very evident in his work.

His work is often large scale. He says, “Occasionally I start with a big idea usually dealing with some sort of existential crisis. I’ll think about the idea for months and when I get the proper setting and motivation roll out a big piece of paper and start working. Usually at the beginning of the summer when I finish teaching. The bigger the drawing, the bigger the idea. Most of the time I’ll put a blank piece of paper in front of me and start drawing a landscape until something appears. Sometimes I’ll grid out a piece of paper and react to the grid.”

Another series of work that he has done uses contemporary politics and game imagery. In these images, he created character cards for Mitt Romney and Barak Obama. Each are given a different name and special stats, such as Romney becoming Lord Spelldyal, gifted with a Phasing Two-handed Sword, an Invisible Helmet of Authority and 14 strength. Obama becomes King Belian Shipsale and his card informs us that he has the Dragon Crown of Mass Control, the Robe of Protection and 11 strength. Bloomberg.com described these pieces: “President Barack Obama wears a dragon crown, holding a wizard’s staff; Mitt Romney has a hermit’s thick, long

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11 Ibid.
beard. The two are no longer political rivals but heroic characters in a fantasy world.” These works clearly come out of his sci-fi, gamer background, yet there are still subtle hints of Mormon influence, such as the Romney character having an “Invisible Helmet of Authority,” a reference to the Mormon priesthood.

My work fits in with Casey Jex Smith’s work conceptually. Like him, the Mormon religion and imagery has a great deal of influence on my work. We both use subtle Mormon symbols that might be more difficult for someone who is not LDS to spot. Although there are times when both of us can be rather obvious as to the Mormon symbols in our work.

My use of Mormon symbolism differs from Smith’s in that I am currently making art about a Mormon subject and not just using imagery from the religion. Although some of his work does use Mormonism as subject matter, it is far more common for him to utilize only the imagery, especially in his more recent work. My work, on the other hand, is dealing directly with a topic of Mormon doctrine, the Heavenly Mother. Most of my past work has been about something else, but most of my recent work focuses on this rather obscure piece of Mormonism. So, Smith’s work tends to use more Mormon imagery, whereas mine use more Mormon themes.

Gabriel Dawe

Gabriel Dawe is an international artist currently living in Dallas, Texas. He received an MFA from the University of Texas at Dallas. He creates site-specific installations that “explore the connection between fashion and architecture, and how they relate to the human need for shelter in all its shapes and forms.” He has shown work in the US, Canada, Belgium and the

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UK. He has also been featured in many different publications including *Sculpture Magazine*, and *Art Fundamentals*. Dawe works mostly with textiles, creating large shapes out of thread. His other works include embroidery, small sculptures made out of clothing and pins, and small toys.

His large-scale installations of thread are made to fit each location. Covering sections of the color spectrum, they look like light made visible. They are created by stringing thread from one place to another, going back and forth between locations. This creates a new understanding of the space, almost transforming it into a new, and perfected space. It is almost like what Maria Whiteman said in *The Solemn Geography of Human Limits*, “Utopias and heterotopias perform the same function: they reveal the ways in which spaces are connected and space is constructed.”

Dawe must keep meticulous notes to be sure that each thread is reaching its proper place. These installations have been put into sites such as museums, private residences and galleries. Each piece is titled *Plexus* and given a number. Each one takes many, many hours to put together. When the installation has run its course, Dawe returns to the site to collect the thread, which he uses in another series called *Relics*. Each piece in the *Relics* series is the thread from the *Plexus* pieces gathered and displayed in some way. Each is completely unique.

It is Dawe’s embroidery work that matches my work aesthetically. He creates small drawings on old pieces of clothing, using needle and thread. These works, in fact his use of textiles, comes out of his childhood when his grandmother would not teach him how to embroider because he was a boy. Embroidery is only for girls in Mexico. One of his embroidery series is called *Fear*. In this series, Dawe has hand embroidered different insects onto old pieces of clothing. Each insect represents a different fear. Dawe says of this work, “Choosing insects as

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a metaphor for fear comes from the way we seem to be afraid of what we don't have control over."\(^{15}\)

Hand embroidering each insect allows Dawe to reflect about each fear and how it shapes his life. He says of his choice to do the work by hand, “In choosing this process I had to deal with my fear of inadequacy that comes from growing up in a milieu that states that boys do not work with needles.”\(^{16}\) This choice was what truly started him down the path to art.

In my own work, I also use hand-embroidery, which is what links my art to that of Gabriel Dawe’s. We each have made the decision to use an old and highly time-consuming process in order to advance the ideas of our piece. Although our work does not match conceptually or truly aesthetically, I am using Gabriel Dawe to contextualize myself because it is rare, from what I have seen, that a fiber artist manages to use embroidery and still have their work consider art, and not a craft. Having a successful artist who is also using a craft-like process legitimizes my use of the process.

Kiki Smith

Kiki Smith is an international artist of great fame who was born in Germany to a family of artists. Her work addresses the human condition, often using stories from mythology to convey a sense of spirituality. Much of her work has to do with being a woman, and she often uses her own body to make her pieces. She uses all types of materials, ranging from sculptural works to printmaking. Her choice of material plays a strong part in her work, she recently said:


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
In making work that's about the body, playing with the indestructibility of life, where life is this ferocious force that keeps propelling us; at the same time, it's also about how you can just pierce it and it dies. I'm always playing between these two extremes about life. For me using the paper is very hardy. My paper sculptures are made out of paper that is used for archival purposes and is very tough and strong.¹⁷

Much of her work tends to be about the body, and often about the female body. Like Shirin Neshat, Kiki Smith’s work could be viewed as a coming from a “context which could be read as a case of women’s self-empowerment from a feminist viewpoint.”¹⁸

Her work often uses elements from mythology and religion as a starting point. The Brooklyn Museum says of her, “Religion, mythology, and spirituality surface repeatedly throughout Smith’s work.” In her installation in the Museum, Smith created a site-specific installation using an old needlepoint piece called *The First, Second and Last Scene of Mortality* by Prudence Punderson as a starting point. The needlepoint piece was about the life-journey of a woman. Smith created an installation that follows the journey of a female artist, starting “from the position of the adult female artist and cycles through a series of experiences and artistic genres that venture far beyond the autobiographical.”¹⁹

One of her pieces that really influenced me is her 1995 piece, *Woman on Pyre*. In this piece, Smith created a woman in bronze kneeling on a large pyre made out of wood. “Tiny, fragile hands reach out with dissipated energy from a body whose torso is aged, worn, and damaged. Her small head gently tilts back to gaze into the viewer's space, and the face and poise

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are expressive of spiritual redemption, suffering, and humility.” This piece references the burning of witches, and several episodes from classical mythology including the death of Dido and Hercules. Another piece that she created that has connections to mythology is her work *Siren*. In this piece she is again referencing classical mythology. In this case, she is referencing the *Odyssey* of Homer, with the sirens that sang and drew men to their deaths. Another of my favorite pieces of hers is *Lilith*, a bronze female figure that hangs upside down on the wall. This piece is referencing an ancient Jewish tradition that before God created Eve, he made another woman for Adam, named Lilith. This first woman was created at the same time as Adam, and from the same dirt. Lilith was cast out of the Garden for not being subservient to Adam.

Many more of Kiki Smith’s work uses mythology as a way of communicating her ideas. Her mythological figures are often “eclectic female images from religious and mythological figures from the Old Testament, Greek mythology, Celtic folklore, and Egyptian cosmology. Smith portrays them as figures defiant of human nature, supernatural and touched by the fantastic.”

My work is similar to Kiki Smith’s conceptually. We both heavily draw on mythology and religious narratives, and have themes that relate to women’s issues. Our work is also similar in that we both use many different mediums. Neither of us sticks to just one form of working, but stay very similar thematically.

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CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to give an overview of my thesis exhibition. I discussed the theological basis for the doctrine of the Mormon Church I was discussing with my art, and the practical choices that I made. I also discussed a few artists that show that my art has a place within the art world. This exhibition was meant to start a conversation about the Mormon Heavenly Mother, and I believe that within the Utah Mormon community, it did.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


