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Artifacts of Imagination

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Artifacts of Imagination

Rachel Emily Simpson

Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts with an emphasis in
Intermedia and Photography

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School of Art and Design

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sacred art, objects

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Abstract

Artifacts of Imagination

Rachel Emily Simpson

My MFA thesis and supporting exhibition focus on works ranging from video and sculpture to installation. The work has evolved from an intimate spiritual dialogue and interaction with the terrestrial world. This personal narrative is a jumping off point to pursue more universal themes and ideas of layering of information, shared versus collective perceptions and creating systems of understanding. Many of the processes involved in this exhibition contain some form of collage. The use of these various collage techniques furthers the idea of complexity in perception and expression and the many layers of experience. I will explain how the creation of this art work is born from a personal and universal desire to observe, collect, organize and interpret our own systems of understanding.

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Introduction

I am an avid collector of images and objects. The things I collect, photograph and catalog are often overlooked. They remind me of my intimate connection to the terrestrial and celestial landscapes. These objects and images also become touchstones for my memories and experiences. A deeply engrained intention for my work is to reveal a profound respect for terrestrial life forms, especially the ones that tend to go unnoticed by most, and to express the notion that there is more information than what is available on the surface of things. Ultimately, the underlying intent is to create my own systems of organization and understanding.

For most of life I have been an image maker, creating photographs to find and define my place in the world. There is value in the innate ability of the photograph to freeze and capture moments of time previously elusive before the invention of the medium. Photographic memories help to create a personal narrative, giving me a sense of a larger web of pattern and purpose. My curiosity draws me to subject matter that reveals the physical effects, or traces of time and transformation. The photographs I take investigate surfaces, detecting familiar patterns. I often find reflections of human forms in the structures of my environment. My mind uses these as portals, or access points to an invisible world of information below the visible surfaces of things.

My work involves layering, both physically and conceptually, which is produced using various forms of collage, from encaustic, to digital and sculpture. This layering is a way of expressing the complexity that I experience in the material world as well as the realm of ideas. The objects I create are meant to be personal relics from my own interior interactions with the natural world and their many layers. Creating layers of interactions alludes to the idea of multiple meanings. One of the processes I use is resin casting, which has a certain “working time” innate

to the material. I enjoy the manipulation that occurs in a set window of time and how this produces unique aesthetic results. Working with various elements, I add, subtract, paint, scrape, scratch, and layer until the surfaces are activated by my hands and ideas. This layering is both a process and a conceptual theme that weaves through much of my artwork, manifesting itself through various techniques. Whatever methods are employed; I believe this engagement with surface quality gives my work a sense of authenticity.

There is sometimes a spiritual quality to my work due to that fact that I hold a very high reverence for the terrestrial world. A way of defining this is *animism*. One definition of animism is “the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena, the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe.”¹ Throughout my work, there are subtle references to religious alcoves and reliquaries, but the symbols are altered, deconstructed, and re-contextualized as private precious objects. I find the process of collecting objects and images and then encasing them in the resin invites a dialogue about memory and what remains with us mentally and emotionally over time. Oftentimes, memories are not accurate accounts, but more of a recreation of how we want things to be; a new narrative born from recollection and imagination.

This fascination and connection to the natural world and my fervent collecting led to the creation of my own systems to organize and protect the items and images I treasure. I was instinctually drawn to creating little worlds inside various boxes (Figure 1). This was partially out of the necessity to preserve these items, and as a way of creating a personal narrative around the objects that had become sacred to me. This is reflective of the mind’s innate desire to preserve memories as well as establishing a sense of order, or personal hierarchy of thought.

¹ “Animism,” Dictionary.com, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/animism>.

My practice is about looking beyond just a singular view and glimpsing a multitude of possibility and complexity, both visually and conceptually. My images and objects deify sometimes overlooked natural elements, little things that I deem necessary to a larger mythology that is playing out. My art is my story, and my story reflects my personal experience of the forces around us and the spirit world coming together, revealing wisdom about the underlying patterns and symbols existing in matter and time. When humans, animals, and plants all work together, wonderful revelations can occur, creating memories of mythologies and narratives that haven't happened yet. Often, the world we move toward is first created by our ability to imagine and weave together seemingly unrelated elements to encourage new thought patterns and possibilities. In many cultures there have been those who interpret symbols from nature, dreams and divination in order to make sense of the world and how humans fit into the larger web of life. My attempt to understand these various means of perception and hidden information has led me to study the methods and means employed by many shamanistic cultures around the world. My desire to express these insights has led down a path to study collage and mixed media techniques.

Research

Early on, I was inspired by photographers Jerry Uelsman(1934-present) and Maggie Taylor(1961-present) who create very different styles of imagery, one black and white the other illustrative and colorful. Yet, both these artists produce surreal and often fantastic images using various photographic and digital collage techniques. These images have complex symbolic or metaphorical meanings expressed through the process of layering.

Conceptually, much of my inspiration comes from many of the *Earth Works* artists, including Ana Mendieta, David Nash, and James Turrell. Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) was a

Cuban American artist who I appreciate most for her “earth-body” work. Her work spanned sculpture, photography and film and dealt with issues of identity and displacement through an intimate connection to the natural world. In the series titled *Silueta* (1973-1977), which was primarily performance documented using photographs, she would literally place her body into the earth, leaving indentations that would perhaps be filled later with flowers, twigs, stones or blood. She described these works as, “magic, knowledge, and power of primitive art...to express the immediacy of life and the eternity of nature.”²

British artist David Nash (1945-present) influences me mostly with his works occurring directly in the natural world. A primary example is *Ash Dome* (1978-present), which is a circle of twenty-two trees that Nash has been gradually tending to grow in the shape of a dome that meets at the top. As a peripheral part of the Land Arts Movement early on Nash was not always in agreement with his fellow practitioners. He says about the *Ash Dome* project, “Part of the point was that nature actually gets on very well when a human being is caring for it and lives with it.”³ The idea that we are not separate from nature but an integral part of it is what inspires me about his work.

The inspiration I take from James Turrell(1943-present) is his absolute mastery over forms, shapes and light. Turrell is an American artist born in California, and his most famous work to date is in the *Roden Crater* (1977-present), which is located in the Painted Desert of Arizona. This massive endeavor in the volcanic crater is, “...the culmination of the artist’s lifelong research in the field of human visual and psychological perception, Roden Crater is a

²“Ana Mendieta, Biography,” Artsy.net, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/ana-mendieta>.

³John Grande, “Real Living Art: A Conversation with David Nash,” *Sculpture*, December 2001 Vol. 20 No.10, <https://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag01/dec01/nash/nash.shtml>.

controlled environment for the experiencing and contemplation of light.”⁴ I am inspired by the way Turrell uses the element of light to activate human perception of space and the environment. Although I am inspired by different aspects of each of these artists work, the thing they all share is a unique and personal connection to the natural world and an interest in the transformation of materials.

Josef Beuys (1921-1986) is another influential artist whose experiences in the natural world influenced his personal artistic process on an even deeper psychological level. Born in Germany, Beuys fought as a pilot during World War II, and was injured in a plane crash in 1943. This experience and his survival would strongly mold his artwork in the years to come. After his plane was shot down Beuys was found by a remote Crimean tribe of Tartars who saved his life by wrapping him in fat and felt.⁵ In my opinion this near-death experience and emergence from his transformative cocoon gave Beuys insight into the invisible realms of death and spirits. There is also a distinct possibility that the healing of Beuys could have involved a shaman from the Tartar tribe. One of Beuys performances after this experience was titled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (November 26, 1965). In this performance, Beuys (coated in honey and gold-leaf) first locks the onlookers outside the gallery while he walks around looking at the pictures on the wall, holding a dead hare in his arms and speaking to it. He then opens the doors and proceeds to sit with his back to the onlookers for the rest of the event. By separating himself from the viewers, he implies that what is happening between him and the hare is a private,

⁴“Roden Crater, James Turrell,” James Turrell.com, accessed April 3, 2019, <http://rodencrater.com/about/>.

⁵“Josef Beuys Biography,” Artnet.com, accessed April 1, 2019, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/joseph-beuys/biography>.

personal, internal event. The honey and gold are also symbolic references to sacred materials used in ceremony or ritual.

Speaking to the spirits of animals as well as the spirits of the dead are both methods by which many shaman gain insights into the invisible worlds beyond the surfaces of consensus reality. Interestingly, in Beuys' case, the etymology for shaman is from the German word *schamane*, which Merriam Webster Dictionary defines as "a priest or priestess who uses magic for the purpose of curing the sick, divining the hidden, and controlling events. Another definition of shaman is, "a person who acts as intermediary between the natural and supernatural worlds, using magic to cure illness, foretell the future, control spiritual forces, etc."⁶ Often, one becomes a shaman by surviving a near-death experience, or due to a psychological condition such as schizophrenia, where the individuals often hear voices. I believe that Beuys thought that each person had the potential to be a creative participant in building a reality that is shared by all. He states, "Every human being is an artist, a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives."⁷

With much of my work, I layer elements together and these multiple elements create a momentary cohesion, which has been refined from a constant stream of input. Shamans can create images, or effigies, of something and that allows them to interact with it, or even control it to some extent. In a similar way, my current body of work is comprised of personal artifacts that are meant to contain information and insights from multiple frequencies of visual information that I am bombarded with on any given day. Often times in order to heal or divine, shamans enter a fantastic or alternate reality in which information hidden from most can be gleaned and put to

⁶ "Shaman," Dictionary.com, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/shaman>.

⁷ Beuys, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/joseph-beuys/>.

use in the material world. In my work, I attempt to bring things that may be hidden to the surface, much like a shaman.

Author Terence McKenna wrote about a plethora of esoteric topics, including a lecture that speaks to the idea that artists are also shamans in their own right, that they are in fact “the prototypic model for the artist and the scientist.” One of the abilities of the shaman/artist is to recognize patterns that exist in the visual world. McKenna believes that the shaman/artist has an aptitude for seeing into the world, for seeing beyond just the surface of things. The visual information gathered by this is then “internalized and re-expressed”. He says this “shamanic model is basis for authentic art.”⁸ My work involves tapping into other parts of consciousness and experience, seeing patterns in the natural world and expressing those patterns in visual forms. Shamans see the multiple layers of meaning and information and then translate that into ceremony to heal, or to adjust a perceived imbalance between certain forces. These gifted and often tortured people can see the world in its various manifestations, between thought and idea, creation and destruction.

My installation, *Things Fall Apart*, deals directly with this idea and shows in material form how matter can exist in multiple facets at once. *Liber Lux* reflects the shamanistic perspective of multiple layers to reality and the importance of being able to access those layers visually, because this perceived information is helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the way the world functions. In turn, these insights grant the viewer knowledge condensed into a visual document, the book. Often, shamans are accessing the shared historical knowledge of

⁸ “Terence McKenna, The Shaman as Artist,” You Tube Video, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KB-nXSWrIQ>.

humans, or genetic memory, in order to gain insight to achieve various goals. This collective knowledge is a shared consciousness referred to as the collective unconscious.

Carl Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology, pioneered the idea of a shared collective unconscious and suggested the presence of shared archetypes and symbols within every human psyche. Jung may say that this is the shaman's talent for seeing into the "collective unconscious". This term is defined by Britannica Encyclopedia as, according to Jung, "that part of the mind containing memories and impulses of which the individual is not aware) common to mankind as a whole and originating in the inherited structure of the brain...contains archetypes, or universal primordial images and ideas."⁹ Many of the Surrealist artist like Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978), Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) and Max Ernst (1891-1976) to name a few, discovered that making art using certain methods could allow entrance into this collective unconscious of shared symbolism.

Similar to the Surrealists, I believe that art making is a way of accessing parts of the unconscious, both collective and personal. Many of the works these artists created contained symbolism that was both personal and universally significant, giving way to multiple interpretations of the art work.

In my work, I explore the connections between objects, memories and imagination. I often employ the method of collage to create these visual layers and multiple meanings. The term collage comes from the French word *coller*, which means "to glue".¹⁰ The term collage was originally coined by the artists Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) who were credited with founding the Cubist art movement around 1910. Early collages were made

⁹ "Carl Jung: collective unconscious," Britannica.com, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/science/collective-unconscious>.

¹⁰ Kelly Richman-Abdou, *Exploring the Cutting-Edge History and Evolution of Collage Art*, accessed February 2, 2019, <https://mymodernmet.com/collage-art-collage/>.

from paper and wood and would involve cutting and pasting photographs, using painted forms and sometimes even incorporating three-dimensional objects. This process allowed the artist to deconstruct and then reconstruct visual components to create meaning. Collaging gained popularity among many artists throughout the twentieth century and gradually became more experimental and varied.

The Dadaists were inspired by the work of Picasso and Braque and created collage works using a wider array of materials including “reinterpreted portraits and figures rooted in fantasy.”¹¹ The Dada movement was a reaction to the horrors of war and as a general practice pushed art in many absurdist directions, inevitably redefining what was traditionally perceived as art. Members of the Dada movement were known for taking what many people would have seen as trash and transforming this “ephemera into polished pieces.”¹² These works became more assemblages due to their three-dimensional nature. The Surrealists adopted this collage method and adapted it to work with their ideas of art relating to the subconscious. They moved away from the Cubists’ focus on still life and incorporated more strange and bizarre subject matter, relying on the subconscious as fuel for these artworks which became more unique narratives of interior worlds.

Artists like Andre Breton (1896-1966) and Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) were creating vignettes of increasingly more fantastical worlds. Joseph Cornell (Figures 5, 6, 15), an American assemblage artist, was born in Nyack, New York about 30 miles north of New York city, in 1903.¹³ Cornell considered collage and assemblage “true poetic forms”¹⁴ in that these methods allowed him to juxtapose unlike images and objects. There is a particular attention to not only

¹¹ Richman-Abdou.

¹² Richman-Abdou.

¹³ Kynaston McShine, *Joseph Cornell*, (Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y., 1990), 92.

¹⁴ Mc Shine, 11.

the imagery in Cornell's works but also to the surface areas. He would sand and varnish the sides of his boxes and attach old maps and book pages to give the works the appearance of age. Obviously, in order to create all his collages, boxes and later installations, Cornell had to do a large amount of collecting of materials.

The collection and arrangement of objects has been a pursuit of artists and scientists alike, as a way of understanding the world through the categorization of objects. (Figures 7, 8, 9) Cabinets of Curiosity, also called *Wunderkammer*, or *wonder cabinets*, began to first appear during the Renaissance in Europe. "While cabinets participated in modern taxonomic projects to systematize nature, they also registered and proliferated more imaginative readings of the Book of Nature," claims Maria Zytaruk. These wonder rooms were actually predecessors to modern museums. "Cabinets of curiosities, also known as 'wonder rooms', were small collections of extraordinary objects which, like today's museums, attempted to categorize and tell stories about the wonders and oddities of the natural world."¹⁵ As a voracious collector myself, I have been inspired to explore ways to organize my own eclectic collections, such as cabinets with individual compartments and plastic bags stapled to a sheet of wood.

A new direction in my work has been informed by the work of Dustin Yellin, the Starn Twins, and James Turrell. First, Yellin, began using resin to construct small simple "boxes" with forms inside them. In a more recent series, *Psycho Geographies* (2018), Yellin is working with many sheets of glass layered together in elaborate life size forms "each one...an archive of culture through our ripped-up media."¹⁶ Part of my attraction to Yellin's work is the concept that

¹⁵ "Cabinets of Curiosity," British Library website, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107648.html>.

¹⁶ "Dustin Yellin," TED Talks October 2014, accessed February 5, 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/dustin_yellin_a_journey_through_the_mind_of_an_artist?language=en.

our reality exists in a layered, composite of space and time. I also appreciate the semi-transparent quality of the materials and the suspension of the forms inside them. These materials direct the interpretation of the work to a place outside of everyday mundane reality and into a world of imagination. The Starn Twins use of torn images and a layered, sculptural, aesthetic not only suggests the work of human hands, but also invites the idea that the world is not always perfect, symmetrical and tidy. One of the themes I relate to in the Starn Twins work is the exploration of the “interconnectedness of human memory and thought and the patterns that exist in nature”¹⁷, like a naked tree or a snowflake. As mentioned previously, the consistent attention shown to light as a powerful aesthetic and conceptual tool in James Turrell’s work, also resonates with my new-found interest in creating art that illuminates itself.

Earlier Bodies of Work

In the photography series, *Elementals* (2017) (Figure 10,11), I explored imagined forms in the natural world. These digital composites combine two layers of imagery: close-up views of organic patterns such as rust and lichen merged with details of carved headstones from cemeteries. On some level, I am monumentalizing nature the same as headstones honor the lives of dead individuals. These works are a form of digital collage. At work here is the desire to express not only a humanistic presence, but universal symbols emerging from the collective unconscious and from the visual surface.

In the *New World Relics* (2017) (Figures 12,13) series, sculptural forms are created using poured resin, pigments, and various objects embedded in the material during the setting-up

¹⁷ “Mike and Doug Starn,” Artnet.com, accessed August 24, 2018, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/doug-and-mike-starn/>.

process. While creating this series, I was becoming more aware of the importance of the specific shapes of the molds and how that informed the meanings. I chose an elongated seed-like form that to me represented the potential innate in the seed as well as this idea translated to individual human potential. The objects imbedded in these forms are forms of the feminine archetype. Some resemble the Blessed Virgin and others are a more sexualized manifestation of a female. My animistic beliefs hold that the earth is the provider and facilitator of human life. Therefore, I equate the Earth with feminine energy, the mother. These relics represent a return to matriarchy and a moving away from the current paradigm of patriarchal worship.

The *Illuminated Vials* (2018) (Figure 14) series are poured resin castings containing old bottles. These objects represent my own sort of philosopher's stone. "The original "stone", which the seeker must mine for himself, symbolizes the deep inner longing to find our true spiritual nature..."¹⁸ The search for the philosopher's stone is not simply looking for a physical material that turns lead into gold, it is a spiritual undertaking that seeks to first discover ones' own nature then to endeavor to refine the spiritual self, or psyche. The material contained within the resin inside the vessels is a mystery; it could be poison or perfume. This mystery is meant to engage the viewers' imagination, encouraging them to ponder different possibilities. The viewer is meant to think and wonder what could be inside the vials. The point is that all is not known, we never get all the answers, and sometimes there are only more questions. This is sometimes the nature of the world and of this body of work. The connection to the philosopher's stone is in the search for knowledge and refinement, the idea that we seek to understand and transform ideas and ourselves into the essence of what we are. These unique sculptural objects are lit from below by custom built light box structures, further reinforcing the idea that they are meant to be

¹⁸David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols*, (Duncan Baird Publishers, 1993), 149.

something precious. They are a symbolic representation of what is left after the refining and condensing of ideas and knowledge. “The sculptural process in itself is a ritual, for the logic and organization that goes toward giving form to these invisible entities simultaneously “imprisons” them and gives the sculptor a sense of power and control.”¹⁹ The *New World Relics* and *Illuminated Vials* series lead me to a new body of work dealing with the symbolism of books as containers for knowledge, insight and visual information.

Thesis Exhibition Work

Artifacts of Imagination (2019) (Figures 16,17) is a multi-media exhibit featuring sculpture, installation and video work. The work in this thesis exhibition revolves around the theme of curiosity about the terrestrial and celestial world, engaging imagination and creating our own systems of understanding.

In the series, *Liber Lux* (2018-19) (Figures 18,19), I used the same techniques of making molds and creating three-dimensional resin forms with images and objects embedded in them. In order to explain the world, we put things into categories, often understanding something best by what it is not. There are items and images contained in these books that the viewer can see and other parts that are hidden. The spaces between layers of visibility are the mysteries that often can keep minds engaged. It is the individual imagination and wonder that fills in the gaps of perception. The *Liber Lux* are my way of creating a system of organization for objects and images that have caught my eye, capturing memories, or inventing connections between things that were not previously there. I chose the book format because the book is a receptacle and a means of dispersing knowledge. Books have been a significant and profound part of my life.

¹⁹Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult* (Rochester: Vermont, Destiny Books, 1992), 32.

They are both as windows and doors to imaginary worlds as well as containers of knowledge that others have gleaned from personal experience or imaginings.

Liber Lux brings together my tendencies for collage and for collecting and adds the elements of a sculptural dimension. With this series, I am creating my own version of a wonder cabinet in the resin forms of various open books. I am working with the idea of visual information contained within the objects and that in order to extract, or understand this knowledge, the imagination must be engaged. These pieces are explorations of my own interior iconography. Similar to the *Illuminated Vials* (2018) series, these resin books are lit from below using a light box structure. These new light podiums are based on a combination of how one may view an antique book in a museum, or the type of podium someone may stand behind while giving a lecture, or speech. This shape is significant because it references a place where knowledge is shared. The glowing light of the books draw the viewer in, revealing visual information illuminated by the light from within. The *Liber Lux* (2019) series deals with the ability of the imagination to create meaning from the engagement with disparate objects and ephemera, while also satisfying my own will to organize and express information in a complex visual fashion. These resin books are visual symbols themselves, which contain images and objects representative of complex personal experiences of moments in time or places. By combining this complex experiential data into these visual forms, I am hoping to condense and convey this information in a more concise and instinctual way.

Portals (2019) (Figures 20,21) consists of two free-standing, painted wood, three paneled screens. Each screen is embedded with varying sizes of resin circles containing objects and images. The individual circles act as portals that connect patterns and ephemera from the terrestrial world. They are arranged in a formation meant to resemble constellations to suggest

that patterns above in the skies can be similar to patterns below on the Earth's surface, and to reinforce the idea of pattern and randomness working in tandem. These pieces are about a person's ability to study the world around them and our innate human desire to connect objects and moments into narratives and meaning. From this observation and engagement, one is meant to understand the futility of always seeking a cohesive system of understanding. This idea leads to my hierarchy of beliefs and the way I organize my world, that all is not ordered and often things fall apart. The panels are meant to be viewed from both sides, suggesting that the little things that make up our understanding and beliefs should be viewed from different angles and perspectives.

Things Fall Apart (2019) (Figures 22,23) is an illuminated, floor-based installation including many cast plaster pieces, some broken, and some whole. These plaster fragments represent states of creation and destruction in both the material world of objects and the nonmaterial world of ideas. There are also chunks of raw plaster (no comma necessary) that have no specific shape or form. These non-descript objects are meant to represent the basic material that life is built from, and also the birth and creation of ideas. This piece explores the connections between ideas and objects, what is form and what is not. It also encourages the viewers to look closer in order to find familiar shapes and forms. At first, you see a pile of white plaster chunks, but upon closer examination the specific forms begin to emerge. This is meant to engage and inspire the curiosity of discovery. I used plaster because of the monochromatic tone that simplifies the shapes in order to compare these various states of being. The whiteness of the plaster happened to take on the colors from the video piece that was projected on an adjacent wall, which enforced the idea of multiple layers and meanings.

My Heart is a Dark Bird Moving Through Time (2019) (Figure 16,17) is a video piece inspired by the ideas of certain shamanistic cultures. Many indigenous cultures have a member known as the shaman. This individual is charged with communication to the spirit worlds. This insight allows the shaman to perform rights of healing, protection, and divination. One of the methods for gaining insight into these “other worlds” is through shapeshifting. During this process the shaman switches bodies with another entity, often an animal. The spirit of the animal inhabits the shaman’s body and the shaman inhabits the animal’s body. This grants the practitioner the unique perspective and insights the animal would have. In his 2012 book, *Breaking Open the Head*, Daniel Pinchbeck defines shamanism as a “technology for exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness in order to accomplish specific purposes: healing, divination, and communication with the spirit realm.” It can also involve “magical transformation of humans into animals, prophetic dreams, and interaction with the souls of the dead.”²⁰ In *My Heart is a Dark Bird Moving Through Time*, the salamander is the terrestrial aspect of my psyche and the dark birds are the aerial perspectives that I experience during my times in the terrestrial world. The montaged sections are reflective of the multiple outlooks I experience and how I perceive all matter as being connected.

Conclusion

The theme of sacred objects is beginning to take shape in this thesis body of work, and I find myself reflecting on other forms of sacred artifacts such as statues, relics, and illuminated manuscripts. The thesis exhibition, *Artifacts of Imagination* (2019), was essentially about

²⁰ Daniel Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism* (Broadway Books, New York, 2002), 26.

creating my own systems of understanding about the world around me, primarily the natural or terrestrial world. It is my belief that humans are a part of the natural world, and therefore, our perceptions are a component of the overall creation of reality. William Blake states, “I must Create a System or be enslaved by another Man’s. I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create.”²¹

In this exhibition, I combined my processes of layering with mechanisms of illumination and the use of symbolic shapes and forms. All the pieces have aspects of complexity, light, and forms from the terrestrial world. Photography has been the jumping off point for my artistic explorations and remains a core element in the works I create. Working with layering furthers the expression of the complexity I experience. The terrestrial world is the well from which I draw my deepest inspirations and the basis for my system of understanding of reality. By combining sculpture and light, I am able to further express the many dimensions I feel exist in the world and in human perception. Video adds yet another element by expressing the notions of time and movement. I have chosen to work with all these elements because they each contribute another layer to the incredibly complex world I perceive. I collect, capture, combine, form and arrange these elements to encourage the viewer to look closer, to be curious, and to imagine possibilities. I believe this is what inevitably creates a more dynamic and a richer experience for us all.

²¹ Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 48.

Illustrations

(Figure1) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Balance*, 1990.

(Figure 2) Joseph Cornell, *Medici Princess*, 1948.

(Figure 3) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Objects*, 2018.

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(Figure 5) Joseph Cornell, *Collections*, 1940.

(Figure 6) Joseph Cornell, *Collections*, 1940.

(Figure 7) Frans Francken the Younger (1581 –1642) *Cabinet Detail*.

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(Figure 10) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Rusted Fruit*, digital composite, 2018.

(Figure 11) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Woodgrain*, digital composite, 2018.

(Figure 12) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Blessed Virgin*, New World Relics, 2018.

(Figure 13) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Chaos*, New World Relics, 2018.

(Figure 14) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Illuminated Vials*, 2018.

(Figure 15) Joseph Cornell, *Penny Arcade*(detail),1964.

(Figure 16) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Artifacts of Imagination*, 2019.

(Figure 17) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Artifacts of Imagination*, 2019.

(Figure 18) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Liber Lux*, 2019.

(Figure 19) Rachel Emily Simpson *Liber Lux*, 2019.

(Figure 20) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Portals*, 2019.

(Figure 21) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Portals*, 2019.

(Figure 22) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Things Fall Apart*, 2019.

(Figure 23) Rachel Emily Simpson, *Things Fall Apart*, 2019.

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