

Spiritual Traces

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Spiritual Traces

*Reflections and Conversations
on Contemporary Art*



AARON ROSEN



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

SPIRITUAL TRACES

Reflections and Conversations on Contemporary Art

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To Michael Takeo Magruder
Devoted Artist and Friend

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	xvii

PART I. REFLECTIONS

Reinventing Tradition

1. The Bible and Contemporary Art in America 3
2. Curating Interfaith Dialogue: An Exhibition as Pilgrimage 18
3. Michael Petry's Old-New Paganism 33

Making Memory

4. Contemporary Artists Confront Europe's Religious Heritage 37
5. Remembering the Witnesses: Jack Montgomery's *Soul Survivors* 43
6. The Kiln Decides: Trauma and Healing in Jesse Albrecht's Ceramics 47
7. How to Curate a Dystopia: *Memory Palace* in London 50

Navigating the Void

8. Picturing Nothing: Finding Meaning in Monochrome 55
9. The Face of the Deep: Bosco Sodi Plumbs Creation 64
10. Mindful of the Gap: Arent Weevers's Multimedia Installations 70

CONTENTS

PART II. CONVERSATIONS

Sacred Geometries

11. Alyssa Sakina Mumtaz: Stitching across Traditions 77
12. Askia Bilal: Patterns and Problems of Identity 82
13. Armen Agop: Shaping Concentration 86
14. Barbara Takenaga: Chasing Cosmic Waves 89

Intimate Space

15. Anne Mourier: The Quiet Power of a Gentle Gaze 93
16. Cate Pasquarelli: America the Uncanny 100
17. Kylee Snow: Good Bones 105
18. Sobia Ahmad: Here Is a Ritual 109

Control and Surrender

19. Bernd Haussmann: Dark as Light 113
20. Devon DeJardin: Time to Gather Stones 118
21. Tom Gick: Beauty Abides 124
22. Ezra Bookman: The Rite Way 128
23. Sarah M. Rodriguez: Keeping Tracks 132

Homelands

24. MyLoan Dinh: Walking on Eggshells 136
25. Emmanuel Osahor: Not Yet Eden 142
26. Eric Aho: Behind God's Back 146
27. Shahed Saleem: Adaptation and Innovation 151

Science and Medicine

28. Stephanie Rayner: The Heartbeat of the Cosmos 155
29. Hanae Utamura: Life Breaths 160
30. Adam Belt: Engaging the Infinite 165
31. Jocelyn Mathewes: Seasons of Inquiry 169
32. Jordan Eagles: Taking the Pulse 175

Bibliography 179

List of Figures

COVER IMAGES

- o.1. Hanae Utamura, *For European Larch, Prospect Park, Troy, NY*, 2024.
- o.2. Michael Takeo Magruder, *Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Great Falls io-1b*, 2024. Copyright and courtesy of the artist.
- o.3. Yvonne Maiden, *Portrait of Aaron Rosen*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas.

PART I

- 1.1. Michael Takeo Magruder, *The Horse as Technology v1.0*, 2014. Modular installation (in view: SLS 3D print), 2014. Installation as part of *De/coding the Apocalypse*, Inigo Rooms, Somerset House, London, UK, 2014. Photograph by Jana Chiellino, copyright and courtesy of the artist.
- 1.2. Sam Van Aken, *Tree of 40 Fruit: Tree 75*, Spring 2019. Courtesy Sam Van Aken Studio.
- 1.3. Siona Benjamin, *Zodiac Floor*, 2015. Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, porcelain tiles, 15 ft. diameter.
- 2.1. Pilgrimage walk with the Anglican Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, and the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, for *Stations of the Cross* exhibition, London, 2016.
- 2.2. Güler Ates, *Sea of Colour*, 2016. Performance on February 2, 2016. Salvation Army International Headquarters, London. Photograph by Cilin Deng. Copyright Güler Ates.
- 3.1. Michael Petry, *At the Foot of the Gods*, 2017. Patinated bronze, various dimensions, cast at the Arch Bronze foundry. *In League with Devils* at the Parsonage Gallery, Searsport, Maine, 2024. Photograph by Aaron Rosen. Copyright and courtesy of the artist.

LIST OF FIGURES

- 3.2. Michael Petry, *Gifts of Apollo I-V & VII*, 2021. Solid bronze, silver and gold plated; cast at Arch Bronze foundry and silver and gold plated by Elliot Fitzpatrick. In *League with Devils* at the Dadian Gallery, Henry Luce III Center for the Arts & Religion, Washington, DC, 2023. Photograph by Lisa Helfert. Copyright and courtesy of the artist.
- 4.1. Arent Weevers, *Well*, 2017. 3D stereoscopic installation. Duration: 3'36".
- 4.2. Michael Takeo Magruder, *Lamentation for the Forsaken v1*, 2016. Site-configurable artwork with LED TVs, digitally-printed acrylics, computer, audio system, and bespoke structure. St Stephen Walbrook, London, UK. Copyright and courtesy of the artist.
- 5.1. Jack Montgomery, *Alfred Kantor*, 1998. *Soul Survivors* series. Copyright and courtesy of the artist.
- 5.2. Jack Montgomery, *Rose and Jutka's Hands*, 1998. *Soul Survivors* series. Copyright and courtesy of the artist.
- 6.1. Jesse Albrecht, *Room 200*, 2021. Wheel thrown and cast white earthenware ceramic with underglaze, underglaze decals and glaze. Low fired in oxidation. 20 x 12 x 12 inches.
- 6.2. Jesse Albrecht, *Room 200*, 2021. Wheel thrown and cast white earthenware ceramic with underglaze, underglaze decals and glaze. Low fired in oxidation. 20 x 12 x 12 inches.
- 7.1 Sam Winston, *Modern Gods*, 2014. Image by Andy Sewell. Left to right: *Book*, *Modern Gods*, 2014; *Simcard*, *Modern Gods*, 2014; *Watch*, *Modern Gods*, 2014.
- 7.2. Sam Winston, *Simcard*, *Modern Gods*, 2014 (detail).
- 8.1. *o,10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting in Petrograd* (St. Petersburg), 1915. Wikimedia Commons.
- 9.1. Bosco Sodi, *Pangea*, 2010. Bronx Museum, New York. Image courtesy of the author and © Kevin Kunstadt.
- 9.2. Bosco Sodi, *Heavens and Earth* exhibition, 2019. Blain Southern Gallery, London. Image courtesy of the author and © Peter Mallet.
- 10.1. Arent Weevers, *Ecce Homo*, 2015. 3D holographic video installation. Duration: 2'41".
- 10.2. Arent Weevers, *Triptych*, 2019–2020. Video installation on loop.

LIST OF FIGURES

PART II

11.1 Alyssa Sakina Mumtaz, *Constellation (Broken Mala)*, 2018. Twenty-four-karat shell gold on handmade indigo wasli paper. 21 x 15 inches.

11.2. Alyssa Sakina Mumtaz, *Portal*, 2021. Colored pencil, opaque water-color and collage on handmade cotton rag paper. 52 x 32 inches.

12.1. Askia Bilal, *Anti-icon-Of many hats (none of which fit the way the sky do)*, 2023. Oil over acrylic on canvas. 20 x 24 inches.

12.2. Askia Bilal, *How to disappear completely 1 (or son of the moment)*, 2023. Mixed media. 16 x 20 inches.

13.1. Armen Agop, Detail of *Mantra 59*, 2020. Ink and acrylic on canvas.

13.2. Armen Agop, *Untitled 116*, 2014. Black granite. 9½ x 37½ x 10 inches.

14.1. Barbara Takenaga, *Green Light*, 2013. Acrylic on linen. 42 x 36 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery.

14.2. Barbara Takenaga, *Two Falls*, 2023. Acrylic on wood panel. 24 x 20 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery.

15.1. Anne Mourier, *Little Box*, 2010. Handmade and altered miniatures. Each 5.5 x 7.5 x 3 inches.

15.2. Anne Mourier, *Taking Care: The Feet*. Performance at The Invisible Dog Art Center, Brooklyn, NY (December 2020) and The Parsonage, Searsport, ME (August 2022).

16.1. Cate Pasquarelli, *Small Town No. 2*, 2023. Oil on canvas. 32 x 24 inches.

16.2. Cate Pasquarelli, *Two Houses*, 2021. Glass cloche, clay, basswood, cotton, artificial grasses, acrylic and enamel paint, sandpaper. 9 x 8 x 4 inches.

17.1. Kylee Snow, *Home Turf*, 2024. Graphite and clay on linen. 25x30 inches.

17.2. Kylee Snow, *Organic Habits*, 2022. Graphite on paper. 25 x 38 inches.

18.1. Sobia Ahmad, *Rhythms of Being*, 2022 (film still).

18.2. Sobia Ahmad, *Marking Here(s)*, 2020-ongoing. Socially engaged mail weaving art project, mixed media quilt.

19.1. Bernd Haussmann, *Dark Night Dark Light*, installation view, October 28, 2023. The Parsonage Gallery, Searsport, Maine.

LIST OF FIGURES

- 19.2. Bernd Haussmann, *From the Nature of All Things*, 2022. Digital print on PVC. 82.5 x 55 inches.
- 20.1. Devon DeJardin, *Veil of Power*, 2023. Oil on canvas. 72 x 60 inches. Image courtesy the artist and albertz benda New York | Los Angeles. Photo by Julian Calero.
- 20.2. Devon DeJardin, *The way is not in the sky*, 2023. Oil on canvas. 60 x 76 inches. Image courtesy the artist and albertz benda New York | Los Angeles. Photo by Julian Calero.
- 21.1 Tom Gick, *The Grandmother*, undated. Charcoal and powdered pigment. 107 x 77 inches.
- 21.2 Tom Gick, *Grandmother Lullaby*, undated. Powdered pigment and magic marker. 160 x 112 inches.
- 22.1. *Us*, written and performed by Ezra Bookman for Lab/Shul, 2018. Grand Prospect Hall, Lab/Shul, New York City. Photo: Ali Levin Photography, courtesy of Lab/Shul.
- 22.2. *The Slow Down*, ritual design by Ezra Bookman for Lab/Shul, 2018-2020. House of Yes, Lab/Shul, New York City. Photo: Ali Levin Photography, courtesy of Lab/Shul.
- 23.1. Sarah M. Rodriguez, *Los Angeles Aggregate*, 2019, resin, dirt, clay, snakeskin, 56 x 30 inches.
- 23.2. Sarah M. Rodriguez, *Los Angeles Aggregate* (detail), 2019, resin, dirt, clay, snakeskin, 56 x 30 inches.
- 24.1. MyLoan Dinh, *Off White*, 2019. Mixed media - eggshells, boxing gloves and acrylic. 18 x 13 x 5 inches. Photo credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography.
- 24.2. MyLoan Dinh, *Thangka*. 2024. Mixed media - oil and acrylic on canvas, satin, gold leaf, eggshells, Dao (Vietnamese sword), metal bowl, wooden box, hair. 92 x 85 x 50 inches (scroll), objects variable in size. Photo courtesy of the artist.
- 25.1. Emmanuel Osahor, *Room for Two*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 90 x 108 inches.
- 25.2. Emmanuel Osahor, *Lilacs (for Farah)*, 2021. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 90 inches.
- 26.1. Eric Aho, *Fallen Tree, Rapids*, 2020, Oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches. Private Collection.

LIST OF FIGURES

26.2. Eric Aho, *Ice Cut (1937)*, 2015, Oil on linen, 74 x 95.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

27.1. Shahed Saleem, Detail of a concept sketch for *Three British Mosques* at Venice Biennale.

27.2. Shahed Saleem, Reconstructions from Brick Lane Mosque, a former Huguenot church, including the female prayer room in the underground vaults and a sundial on the façade inscribed with its inception date of 1743 and the Latin script *Umbra Sumus* (we are shadows).

28.1. Stephanie Rayner, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. Gold cross, gilded birdcage, hornet's nest made from the pages of The New Testament, red wishbones, communion wafer, bronze, meteorite. Meteorite and bronze base are 12 x 10.5 x 22 inches. Bird cage is 15 x 11.5 x 8.25 inches.

28.2. Stephanie Rayner, *Boat of Eternal Return*, 1998–2012. Pine, tulip poplar, mahogany, ebony, moose ribs, guanaco coccyx, mare pelvis, ruler, dice, DNA sequencing gels from the Human Genome Project, score of Mozart's Requiem, cello components, hand-worked glass, spirit level. 9 x 30 x 2¼ feet.

29.1. Hanae Utamura, *Seafloor Core Breath Glass*, 2020. Glass, breath, terrigenous volcanic seafloor. 4.25 x 5.5 x 4.25 inches. Supported by the Lamont-Doherty Core Repository.

29.2. Hanae Utamura, *Into the Light*, 2023. Acrylic on paper, 57.5 x 42 inches.

30.1. Adam Belt, *Font (Oval)*, 2019. Mixed media, water, crystal growing solution, copper filings. 36 x 32 x 42 inches. Photo credit: Philipp Scholz Rittermann (Quint Gallery).

30.2. Adam Belt, *Rock of Ages*, 2019. 30 Layers of crushed rocks mixed with resin in order of age from 4.6 billion years old (Campo del Cielo Meteorite) on the bottom to 5 years old (I-5 Freeway Expansion) on the top. Approximately 4 x 5 x 3 inches.

31.1. Jocelyn Mathewes, *30 Days*, 2021. Set of mixed-media collages constructed using vintage Betty Crocker recipe cards, road maps, vellum, embroidery, ink, paint, cyanotype, prescription information sheets, medical detritus gauze, hospital bracelets, and wire.

LIST OF FIGURES

31.2. Jocelyn Mathewes, *Do I want to be made well?*, 2022. Mixed media on canvas, with vintage road maps, cyanotype origami shapes, acrylic paint, glitter, cotton gauze, spray paint, medical wrap, prescription sheets, and more. 18 x 24 inches.

32.1. Jordan Eagles, *Blood Mirror*, 2015-present. Installation view, Trinity Wall Street, New York, NY, 2015. 59 human blood donations, blood of Oliver Anene, Blue Bayer, Howard Grossman, M.D., Kelsey Louie, Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., Reverend John Moody, Loren Rice, Ty Spicha, CPT Anthony Woods, 50 PrEP advocates, preserved in UV resin. 84 x 28 x 28 inches. Photo by TheDustyRebel.

32.2. Jordan Eagles, *Jesus, Christie's*, 2018. Christie's sale catalogue, medical tubes, needles, and blood of an HIV+ undetectable long-term survivor and activist; plexiglass and UV resin 26.75 x 19 x 3 inches.

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to a dear artist friend as well as godfather to my son Arthur, Michael Takeo Magruder. Michael belongs to a group of artists who profoundly shaped my development as a curator and thinker about contemporary art during my years in London. By the time I met Michael—as well as artists Güler Ates, G. Roland Biermann, and Leni Dothan, who also became close friends—I had already trained as an academic and was ensconced in my first permanent academic post at King's College London. And yet in many ways it was not until I started working closely with artists on creative projects that I recognized how little I really knew about how artists think and work through dilemmas.

While working with Michael and others, I realized the extent to which technical challenges can simultaneously constitute philosophical quandaries. Not unlike the way rabbis in the Talmud debate seemingly mundane matters only to end up formulating important theological distinctions. For all intents and purposes, I found my footing as a curator by apprenticing myself to artists, letting them teach me not only how to curate their work but how to ask them the right kinds of questions, the ones that jar loose new insights and revelations. The essays and conversations in this book channel those lessons, which I am still learning from those artists and many others. This book would have been impossible not only without the artists who appear in these pages, but the ones who first trained my eyes and hands.

I also want to thank two mentors who passed away in recent years, each of whom knew intuitively how to look with artists' eyes. The first is my beloved doctoral supervisor at Cambridge, Graham Howes. Graham was a collector in every sense. The walls of the home he shared with his wife, Shirley, were festooned with books and art, the ornaments of a life rich in adventures great and small, geographic and intellectual. In a sense, Graham taught me what it meant to be a curator of one's own life, from the books

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

one read to the friends one drew close. Graham reveled in the company of clever people, and while that might sound elitist, it was in fact the opposite. Despite spending nearly his entire student and professional life at Cambridge, Graham was prepared—indeed thrilled—to see gifts in people of truly any background or identity. And he was profoundly committed to offering assistance, especially when he felt someone was unappreciated, whether by others or themselves. For my part, Graham offered the perfect blend of paternal propping-up and light-hearted encouragement. As I labored under obscenely self-important struggles with my thesis, Graham reminded me frequently that the PhD was, in the end, “just a vocational degree.”

After leaving Cambridge, I served as a post-doctoral fellow at Yale, where the retired priest Ralph Peterson tracked me down based on shared interests in religion and modern art. Incurably optimistic, Ralph had an unabashed belief in the power of the arts—enough to make many Protestants blush! Countless times, I remember him earnestly paraphrasing Dostoevsky: beauty will save the world. Beauty for Ralph was no mere indulgence, it was serious stuff and among the most enduring things communities can achieve together. It is fitting then that the crown jewel of Ralph’s professional life was commissioning the serene Louise Nevelson Chapel for St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in New York City. We rightly give a lot of credit to artists, especially an artist as great as Nevelson, but visionary patrons are their own rare creative species. Ralph knew this innately, and proudly retold what he considered Nevelson’s greatest compliment to him, “Ralph, you old fucker, you’re an artist like the rest of us.” Only a special kind of priest could see this for what it was: a benediction. In a similar spirit, I have come to see myself, if not as an artist, as at least a fellow traveler. This book is an invitation to join those travels.

Introduction

A HALF DOZEN YEARS ago, when I began most of the essays and interviews in this book, I would not have dreamed of calling it *Spiritual Traces*. During my years in Cambridge, I remember a senior academic dismissing talk of spirituality as “all a bit Californian.” In other words, spuriously new age, unworthy of serious study. This insouciant remark, and the presumptions behind it, stuck with me longer than I care to admit.

In retrospect, I imbibed too readily the notion that spirituality was merely a convenient label for diffuse feelings about religion. It has certainly become trendy, even reflexive in some communities, for people to declare themselves “spiritual but not religious.” And sometimes this does obscure more than illuminate the reasons why an individual rejects a specific faith or casts off a congregation or community of origin. But designating oneself “spiritual” can do much more than name a negative, and I underrated this in some of my earlier writings on art and religion.

Spirituality can of course mean myriad things to different individuals and communities. And it remains notoriously difficult to define, whether at the individual or social level. One of the first issues is that the oft-invoked dichotomy between spirituality and religion rarely holds up in everyday life. In fact, recent surveys have shown that the people most likely to define themselves as spiritual are those who identify as religious, confounding easy binaries.¹ It might seem easier to focus solely on those who explicitly disavow religious affiliation. Indeed, a great deal of attention in recent years has focused on the rise of religious “Nones” in the United States: individuals who answer “none” when asked by researchers to name the religious group to which they belong or with whom they identify. This group has ballooned dramatically in the twenty-first century—for reasons we are just beginning to understand—to the extent that Nones are “now the same size

1. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, *Spiritual Tribes*, 4.

INTRODUCTION

as both Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants,” the two largest religious groups in the US.² Yet even this stunning statistic is just as liable to confuse as clarify, since these Nones are hardly a monolithic group and can run the gamut from committed atheists to lifelong spiritual seekers. Moreover, spiritual Nones rarely live separate lives from “Somes”—Elizabeth Drescher’s egalitarian term for the religiously affiliated—with whom they exist in “frequent spiritual proximity.”³

In the end, rather than vainly seeking to pinpoint the perimeters of spirituality writ large—or worse yet, impose them—we are better off listening closely to the “spiritual stories” that people tell about their lives, letting narratives rather than theoretical constructs guide our inquiries.⁴ Sometimes, studying a sufficient number of these stories will enable scholars to sketch wider trends. Yet even when that proves challenging, and broader features remain elusive to theological and sociological analysis, the endeavor is hardly less interesting, or less important. This book offers an exercise in listening, anchored by the belief that some of the most compelling spiritual stories being told today are those of visual artists, both through their art itself and the way they describe their process of art-making. For all their diversity, one thing we can say about the finest artists—of all stripes—is that they are devoted to deep self-reflection. So when they describe themselves or their art practice as spiritually engaged, our ears should prick up.

I set off to discover “spiritual traces” because I was interested in those places where spirituality feels latent, ephemeral, or on the edge of possibility. In other words: anything but stable and obvious. It was important to me to write about and interview artists whose approach to spirituality needed to be teased out, where a certain amount of sleuthing was required and rewarded. While I would hardly claim to be the first to do so, it is astonishing how seldom this kind of groundwork has been done. In the vast corpus of contemporary artist interviews, for example, it is relatively rare to hear interviewers press their subjects on spiritual matters, even when artists leave the door tantalizingly ajar.

There are even fewer books devoted to exploring spiritual questions with contemporary visual artists. One exception is the work of the sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who interviewed dozens of practitioners for *Creative*

2. Burge, *Nones*, 2.

3. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 9.

4. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 14.

INTRODUCTION

*Spirituality: The Way of the Artist.*⁵ While the range of Wuthnow's conversations is impressive, his decision to cover "the artist" in a broad sense—from poets to musicians to visual artists—offers little opportunity to learn what sensory strategies, source material, or influences might be common to visual artists. For the most part, actual works of art fade to the background as Wuthnow dwells on artists' accounts of what it means to be an artist. Ironically, this ignores a key piece of the puzzle, for to be a visual artist, in particular, is to wager on the capacity of things and images to accomplish the work of meaning for—and indeed beyond—them.

An indisputable champion of creatives, Wuthnow appears caught between defensive and offensive imperatives. On the one hand, he wants to shield artists from marginalization as mere "spiritual dabblers,"⁶ while on the other hand he speculates that artists might "increasingly become the spiritual leaders of our time."⁷ A quarter-century onward, amidst a wider spiritual turn, Wuthnow's defenses feel less urgent. Meanwhile, as a flurry of self-appointed spiritual gurus and other lifestyle influencers flood social media, it seems like wishful thinking to hope that serious artists might rise to the role of society's "spiritual leaders."

So what can we say about visual artists today and the spiritual trajectories they pursue in their work? One feature that emerged frequently in my interviews and discussions with artists is the increasing number who noted the importance of ritual in their spiritual and creative lives. A significant catalyst appears to have been the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst monotonous stretches of quarantine, my family and I certainly found that the demarcation of sacred time offered by ritual—in our case the weekly observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays—quieted our minds and introduced a spirit of anticipation.

As later research and reporting has shown, my family was hardly alone in turning to spiritual traditions for a sense of structured, sacred time in this strange period. Meanwhile, spurred in part by the Black Lives Matter movement, discourses around self-care and rest as tactics of replenishment, resilience, and resistance for minority communities has offered complementary ways to think about sacred time. In my discussions with artists, both the desire to initiate sacred time and attend to self-care appeared often

5. Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality*.

6. Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality*, 10.

7. Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality*, 266.

INTRODUCTION

as motivations for observing ritual, sometimes in tandem, as Sobia Ahmad describes.

Several artists told me that meditation was a regular part of their studio life, including Bernd Haussmann, who teaches workshops on mindfulness, intertwined with creative practice. Other activities mentioned by artists included offering prayers or taking a contemplative walk before commencing work, lighting candles or incense in the studio, or using music to set a spiritual metronome for themselves. Indeed, I found the discussion of ritual cropping up in conversations enough that over time I began to ask artists directly if there was a ritual that they used to focus their creative energies. Interestingly, in some cases artists began by saying no, as Barbara Takenaga did, but in the process of describing their practice they realized that they did in fact incorporate ritual in their practice—they simply had not framed it to themselves in that way previously.

A number of the artists I feature in this book reference specific religious rituals. Alyssa Sakina Mumtaz created a series of paintings of Muslim prayer beads that she uses daily, which she envisions as “simultaneously a love letter to the many other religious traditions that utilize beads as a support for prayer.” MyLoan Dinh has also found herself creating works with prayer beads, including malas used in Buddhist and Hindu prayer and meditation. Anne Mourier began her career creating works that honored the daily, unheralded rituals often performed by women in the home. Over time, she has increasingly sought to involve her audiences in the performance of ritual, drawing inspiration from humble acts of devotion and fellowship, such as Mary perfuming the feet of Jesus (John 12:3). Ezra Bookman, meanwhile, utilized the lessons he learned from curating ritual experiences at the “God-optional” Jewish community of Lab/Shul in New York to found Ritualist, which he describes as “the first ever creative studio specializing in the design of secular rituals.”

Most of the interviews in this book initially appeared in *Image Journal*, a quarterly magazine dedicated to “art, mystery, and faith.” It has been an honor over the past half dozen years to serve as the visual art editor for *Image*, working with James K. A. Smith, Mary Kenagy Mitchell, and a host of other talented editors. *Image*’s reputation for thoughtful explorations of spirituality and the arts means that some artists have found me through the journal, while others have opened up about spiritual connections in ways they might not have shared with other communities of readers. The gestalt of *Image*, which favors slow, deliberate forms of creation

INTRODUCTION

and contemplation, also means that I have adapted my interview style since *Brushes with Faith*, my previous volume of collected essays and interviews.⁸ Rather than beginning with audio recordings, I now favor informal, unrecorded conversations with artists, followed by the rather old-fashioned form of epistolary interviews (the fact that by epistolary I mean email exchanges makes me a generational relic in another sense!). The insightful responses by artists in these interviews reflects their ability to take a deep breath and compose their thoughts. What is lost in spontaneity—not many inadvertent admissions or Freudian slips to be found here, I am afraid—is gained in sustained, deliberate reflection.

Like *Brushes with Faith*, this volume is divided evenly between essays—primarily commissioned for exhibition catalogues—and interviews. I see the division as a formal and heuristic one. In reality, this entire book is rooted in my relationships and conversations with artists, whether the result in a given instance was an essay or an interview. As I wrote in my previous book, I hope that “what I lack in distance, I make up for with the kind of details and disclosures that can only be conjured through intimacy and reciprocity.”⁹ If anything, this closeness has only deepened in recent years, as I have grown into my vocation as a curator, alongside—and often interwoven with—my roles as a scholar and writer.

Some of my first forays as a curator occurred when I founded the Stations of the Cross public art project, curating iterations in London, Washington, DC, and New York City, which I reflect upon in one of the essays in this volume. However, my greatest growth as a curator has occurred over the past several years, since founding the non-profit Parsonage Gallery in coastal Maine. When I decided to move back to my home state with my son Arthur, to the former ship-building town of Searsport, I had the good fortune to stumble across an historic estate, much in need of restoration yet clearly destined to be a gallery. It was built in 1831 as a parsonage for an important abolitionist minister, Stephen Thurston, and his wife, Clara Thurston (née Benson). When I started looking at the local archives, I discovered that Clara was Winslow Homer’s aunt. Winslow and his mother Henrietta Benson Homer—a gifted watercolorist who taught him the form—stayed at the parsonage and Winslow even produced some of his juvenilia here.¹⁰ With this artistic and religious lineage, the space seemed

8. Rosen, *Brushes with Faith*.

9. Rosen, *Brushes with Faith*, xix.

10. Cross, *Winslow Homer*, 5.

INTRODUCTION

perfect for a gallery exploring the intersection of spirituality, ecology, and creativity.

In a modest way, the Parsonage has become a beacon for artists attracted to these themes, both within New England and beyond. Many of the conversations recorded in the pages of this book evolved organically into exhibitions at the gallery, embellishing the spiritual traces first sketched out in conversations. To me, this signifies a sense of promise not only for my own experiment here in Penobscot Bay but other artistic endeavors in venues outside metropolitan centers. The overstory of the art world gets a lot of attention, but as the twenty-first century progresses, I suspect that the most exciting and sustainable growth is likely to happen at the ground level, nourished by engaged communities. And what is fruitful for art may prove equally so for spirituality.