

Letitia Hill
Position Statement
Framing a Ritual

Historical and Critical Studies
Burren College of Art
Dr. Eileen Hutton
24 March, 2021

Framing a Ritual

The frame is at the core of my graduate research. Philosophically it is explored not as a container, not as a given, nor as a stable form, but as a means for juxtaposing the ritual theory, fictioning theory, and the Moebius theory. I investigate the harvest ritual's migration through four thousand years of its evolution and inquire into its continued relevancy in world culture communities as an annual celebration (Castells, 2012). I attempt to demonstrate the structures of ritual and the complex methodologies that it supports. Embedded in rigorous research, my practice navigates local histories, herstories, rituals and mythologies. Collaboration with local craftspeople and traditional makers plays a critical role in my practice, influencing each work's creative process and material selection. My installations pay homage to people past, present and future, celebrating the universality of the human condition, commemorating lives lived and tales untold. Through an interdisciplinary approach, I reinterpret traditional painting, sculpture, photography, sound, video and installation through new technology that inspires and challenges the conventional methods and material uses. The work is created from a deep sense of empathy and intention to provide nourishing and safe environments for stories to be told and heard.

Rituals are humankind's evolutionary companion. They bring grounded structure to complex emotions and dramatic change, strengthening the peoples' connection with their community, the divine while promoting a deeper meaning of life beyond the everyday mundane. They reinforce beliefs, behaviours and values, as well as support a specific frame of thought. Whether a ritual is religious or not, it strengthens conformity, social bonds and a sense of belonging (Stephenson, 2015). It provides humanity with the stability that in nature is indescribable, unstable and heterogeneous (Bell, 1992; Handelman, 2004; Stephenson, 2015). Ritual is still not fully understood or defined but is often highly contentious in academic circles (Stephenson, 2015). Nevertheless, it has been duplicated and adapted as a plutocratic strategy of misappropriation to cohere, congeal, control, misguide and abuse the masses. (Kertzer, 1989) When a plutocratic strategy takes advantage of the people's intrinsic need for ritual, it is possible to lose what binds a society; individuals become disconnected from one another, and 'fall out of meaning' (Bell, 1992; Blackie, 2018; Habermas, 1983; Stephenson, 2015 p. 102).

In a world of political instability and the hubris of climate change denial, it is the fertile landscape to sow seeds of corruption, exploitation and injustice through ritual. Civilization, for centuries, has methodically disbanded from its cultural identity. (Said, 1978) Decades of war, colonialism, contemporary ideology and philosophical dogma have cleansed

most societies of its indigenous roots, intuitive inclination to connect with nature, create and express. The consequences encourage cultures to reject and doubt the anima mundi, conditioning us to dismiss our instincts as well as the compelling urge to merge with the infinite (Blackie, 2018). This disguise and dismissal of ritual obstructs our visceral understanding of universal paradigms such as unity, continuity, connectivity, reverence and awe.

At some point in human history, the indigenous western cornerstones of spiritually were overwritten and committed to myth (Blackie, 2019). These myths, which were imprinted generation after generation by the collective unconscious, developed social structure event symbols and assumptions that were then ingrained into the human psyche and defined by archetypes (Bell, 1992, p. vii; Jung, 1991; Campbell, 1968).

In a climate of "posts", it is an opportunity to re-envision a fictioning of the modus operandi to encompass collaboration as its model, where ownership and value synonymously create empathy, hybrid cultures, new personal archetypes and mythologies. (Burrows 2019) Through a delicate dance of agency, modality, and ritual, I engage a feminist lens to build empathy for my protagonists. Similar to Jill Soloway, I championed the cause, challenging the creative industry to "make space for women to take the lead in shaping female protagonism." Clarifying that "the Female Gaze is not a camera trick; it is a privilege generator that positions the woman as the subject... not the object... protagonism is propaganda that protects and perpetuates privilege." (Soloway, 2016) Writing our mythology allows us to become the protagonist. Therefore, we are creating self-propaganda; internally, this creates an opportunity for empathy, giving us access to privilege without objectification or marginalization. We then fall back into myth which provides us with meaning, depth and connection. Therefore, I consciously create empathy through art as a political tool to counter privilege and rewrite mythology to recognize my matriarchy (Blackman, 1922; Burrows, 2019; Chicago, 1997; Danaher, 1994; Davis, 1917, Gimngutas, 2005 Muvey, 1975).

The Corn Dolly Triptych is a homage to humans instinctual and compelling urge to merge with something greater than ourselves through ritual, bringing us closer to that visceral understanding of universal paradigms such as unity, continuity, connectivity, reverence and awe. Assembled from traditional materials of water reed and straw, The Corn Dolly Triptych embodies the complex framework and methodologies surrounding ritual theory, fictioning theory, and the Moebius theory. Based on the monumental fibre art installations of Jagoda Buić, the masterful material manipulation of Tara Donovan and the sculptural integrity of Arlene Shechet, these twelve-foot sculptures radiating in their temple imbue a goddess

presence for those in their midst, whispering blessings upon those who seek their guidance and comfort. The triptych shadows the harvest ritual's legacy through thousands of years of human evolution through place and historical tropes. Their journey commences in ancient Egypt tombs during the 18th Dynasty, through early century Gaelic Irish folklore of Putting in the Hare, followed by a fictioning of a contemporary restrictive embodiment informed by the overall arc of reclamation of the universal heritage of the feminine divine.

The first corn dolly, Renenutet, represents the Egyptian goddess of the harvest – traced back to Egypt's 18th Dynasty. Her garment is embellished and fashioned from the ancient craft of marquetry. Each straw veneer is hand-dyed from natural pigments and is cut with precision to form the surface pattern, influenced by Egypt's primary architecture, the pyramid, and the religious symbolism of the Ra, the Sun God. The design on the front of the garment emulates the work of Hilma af Klint and Judy Chicago. The garment's back hints towards the geometry of future influences of Agnes Martin and Dannielle Tegeuder. A Wesekh, a broad collar of hand-dyed straw in indigo complements her dress, giving her a regal demeanour.

The second dolly, Tailtiu, the great Celtic earth goddess, honours the earth's elemental force and innate abundance. Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes and Ludmila Chakunova, Belarussian fashion designer, inspires Tailtiu's garment. Embellished in circular shapes of stained birch wood, beads and fringe swathed in a traditional Galway Shawl interpreted through a South Korean process called Dansaekhwa. The paisley designed shawl historically made in Scotland was a family heirloom for the women of Ireland. I employ Moebius theory as a "single frame which is both external and internal, outside and inside to itself". (Rosen, 1994) I apply a paste of oil paint mixed with beeswax from the back of the hessian potato sack, pushing the paste through the weft and warp creating impasto filament on the front, then manipulate the filaments into a texture of line and form dissolving the rigidity of the frame, creating a polymorphic methodology contained within itself. The repetitive ritual of the process highlights the infinite complexity and multiple opportunities available to frame the ritual (Bateson, 1972; Handelman, 2004).

The third dolly, aka Robot Maria, is the radical goddess of the harvest future. Transcending through fictioning theory, a metallic corset covets her form. Inspired by Lithuanian artist Severija Incirauskaite-Kriauneviciene and Spanish fashion designer Francisco Rabaneda Cuervo, the square metal tiles embroidered gently with delicate thread made of straw, adding to the tension by softening the hard metal edges of the confines of her corset and linked by chainmail. She is imbuing modern industry and biotechnological

elements whilst also alluding to a restrictive political, economic, social and environmental paradigm that we currently face.

The Corn Dolly Triptych resides in the Temple of the Harvest, the Harvestum. In attendance at the Harvestum are members of the Cult of the Corn Dolly, ushering the way for both pilgrims and worshippers from far and wide. From my theatrical design background, I have designed the Harvestum as a sanctuary of visual delight and wonder through light, scent, sound and atmospheric techniques transporting the viewer to a place of reverence and connection, tugging at the collective peripheral memories of primal ritual and our instinctual connection to nature. Inspired by the iconic visualization of Jesse Jones, Tremble Tremble, an immersive installation produced for the 57th Venice Biennale, sets the tone of the Harvestum. Influenced by Philipp Contag-Lada, a projectionist and media artist who develops digital content for theatre and Robert Irwin's site-specific, architectural interventions that alter the physical, sensory and temporal by using scrims have directed the material choices used in the development of the installation. The vast body of work from Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, creators of immersive multimedia sound installations and audio/video walks, influencing the project's dissemination. Finally, Florian Hecker's dramatized sonic theory on placement and control of sound, throwing sound around spaces using mirrors, informs the immersive installation's sound component. Despite the complexities this project offers, I always return to the intent. I hope to facilitate an opportunity for the viewer to experience a deep sense of empathy, in a nourishing and safe environment.

As with nature, ritual is pluralistic and complex and yet described as flexible, intuitive, sustainable and eternal (Stephenson, 2015; Handelman, 2004). Ritual is as strong and influential as ever and comes in many forms; religion, faith, entertainment, sports, politics, education, farming, households, childrearing. So, what happens when a ritual fails, when calamity strikes, leaving a disruptive path of trauma, migration, exile, and death? How does the removal of people and place reshape the act or the memory of it? Is it the removal of communal rituals that bring the most significant trauma? Through this body of work, The Corn Dolly Triptych, my art practice investigates these complex questions through multi-sensory experiences reminding us to remember.

Reference List

- Bartky, S. (2011). *Femininity and domination*. New York: Routledge.
- Beard, M. (2017). *Women and power: a manifesto*. London: Profile Books, LTD.
- Beauvoir, S. (2011) *The second sex*. London: Vintage Press.
- Bell, C. (2009). *Ritual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, C. (2010). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blackie, S. (2019). *Enchanted life*. Tewkesbury: September Publishing.
- Blackie, S. (2019). *Firefox, wolfskin and other stories of shapeshifting women*. Tewkesbury: September Publishing.
- Blackie, S. (2019). *If women rose rooted*. Tewkesbury: September Publishing.
- Bordo, S. (2003). *Unbearable weight*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burrows, D. and O'Sullivan, S. (2019). *Fictioning*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Butler, J. (2007). *Gender trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope. social movements in the internet age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Polity Press
- Chicago, J. (1997). *Beyond the flower: the autobiography of a feminist artist*. London: Penguin Books
- Danaher, K. (1994). *The year in irealand: irish calendar customs*. Cork: Mercier Press.
- Davies, N. (1917). *The tomb of nakht at thebe*, [online] Robb De Peyster Tytus Memorial Series, Vol
1. <https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15324coll10/id/177424/rec/10> [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021].
- Gimbutas, M. and Dexter, M. (2005). *The living goddesses*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press
- Golberg, A., Rabinowitch, H.D. and Rubinsky, B. (2010). *Zn/cu-vegetative batteries, bioelectrical characterizations, and primary cost analyses*. *Journal of Renewable and Sustainable Energy*, 2(3), p.033103.
- Grippio, V. (n.d.). *Analogía I*, (2da. versión). [online] The Art Institute of Chicago. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/196410/analogia-i-2da-version> [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021].
- Habermas, J. (1983). *Modernity-an incomplete project*. Seattle: By Press.
- Handelman, D. (2012) *Postlude: framing hierarchically, framing moebiusly*. [online] *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 267 (2), pp. 65-77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44368856. [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021.]

- Handelman, D. (2004). *Why ritual in its own right? how so?* [online] *Social Analysis*, 48 (2), pp. 1-32. Berghahn Books, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9m0w6d. [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021.]
- Herman, N. (2015). *The art of dansaekhwa*. Seoul, South Korea: Kukje Gallery.
- Houseman, M. (2012). *Pushing ritual frames past bateson*. [online] *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 26 (20, pp.1-5. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44368852. [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021.]
- Isherwood, L. and Harris, D. (2014). *Radical otherness*, London: Routledge.
- Kertzer, D. (1989). *Ritual, politics, and power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lippard, L. (1995). *The pink glass swan*. New York: New York Press.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of the state*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press
- MacKinnon, C. A. (2007). *Women's lives, men's laws*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Marquis, F. (2020). *A frame laid bare: a review of Letitia hills the lumper project*. Not published.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. 16 (3), pp. 6–18. Glasgow: University of Glasgow.
- Reeves-Evison, J. and Shaw, T. (2017). *Fiction as method*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Rosen, S. (1994). *Science, paradox, and the moebius principle*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Smith R., (2014) *Kinaesthesia and touching reality*, [online] 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 0(19). doi: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.691>
- Stalder, F. (2008). *Manual castells*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Stephenson, B. (2015). *Ritual*. New York