

Commentary

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Sacred Scripture as a Catalyst for Creative Expression: An Endless Ocean of God's Ancient Inspiration

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Abstract

Why is scripture a catalyst for cultural expression and how can the writings of Baha'u'llah infuse a fresh dynamic into this process? This paper examines the relationship between visual art and scripture through examples taken from the visual art practice of the author. Specific pieces of artwork are described and illustrated along with the verses from Baha'u'llah's The Hidden Words that inspired them. These pieces aim to translate the verses into visual metaphors and through this interpretation discover more about the direct correlation that exists between visual art and sacred text. This unfolding process provides a framework for exploring wider implications that are relevant to contemporary life and philosophy. Comparisons are made with other creative practitioners who have drawn their inspiration from spiritual teachings and particular interest is placed on the cultural expressions of the Islamic tradition. The metaphorical meanings of key motifs such as veils, layers, light, gems and silence are described, along with examples of how they have been used by artists throughout history. These examples attempt to open the reader's eyes to an awareness of the signs and symbols of the divine that penetrate all aspects of creation. The cyclical energies of the creative process are compared to the cyclical nature of divine revelation and the spiritual progress of individual souls. The power of minimal art is seen as a reflection of the ineffable and the challenge of postmodernism is highlighted as an attempt to unify this emptiness once more with the diversity of contemporary life. These observations illustrate how academic study and contextualization of an artist's practice can provide a framework that, far from restricting creativity, offers a deep grounding and springboard into the freedom of spontaneous improvisation.

Keywords

sacred arts
visual metaphor
creativity
The Hidden Words
Baha'u'llah
veils
ineffability
palimpsest

Scripture has always been a catalyst for creative expression. This is testified to by all the diverse cultures that have grown out of the teachings of the world's religions. 'Abdu'l-Baha describes the acquisition of the sciences and arts as the greatest glory of mankind on condition that our 'river flow into the mighty sea, and draw from God's ancient source His inspiration'.¹ Why is scripture a catalyst for cultural expression and how can the writings of Baha'u'llah infuse a fresh dynamic into this process? This paper explores this

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1982) sec. 72, p. 110.

2. Bahā'u'llāh, *The Hidden Words*, Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, London, 1932, reprinted 1975.

question by describing the impact that faith has had on one artist (the present writer). Specific pieces of artwork are presented alongside the quotes from Baha'u'llah's *The Hidden Words* that inspired them. This provides a framework for exploring wider implications that relate to contemporary philosophies and ancient spiritual teachings. The work is viewed through an understanding of the historical context in which it stands and compared with that of other creative practitioners who have informed its development. Particular emphasis is placed on Islamic and Oriental art and the influence the East has had on 20th-century western art. There is a progression from silence and minimal art as an expression of the ineffable to particular motifs such as grids, veils, layers, threads, gems and pattern. With each piece of artwork described there is a search for visual resolution, to find a place where the piece reflects back insights related to the metaphorical meaning of the quote, but within the context of the artwork's own visual terms. Each finished piece of artwork teaches something cognitively explainable within the realm of words and therefore provides material for this written dissertation.

This study of the relationship between art and scripture is based on a book written by Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, called *The Hidden Words*.² This book is chosen because it is an all-encompassing synthesis of the universal ethical teachings of religion. In the introduction to *The Hidden Words*, Baha'u'llah says, 'This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous.' This 'brevity' implies that *The Hidden Words* is a microcosm of the macrocosm, condensed into a single point and then reflected out again through mankind's interpretation of these teachings, like the spectrum of light that emerges from a prism. Baha'u'llah emphasizes this when he concludes the book by saying, 'Let it now be seen what your endeavours in the path of detachment will reveal.' These words can be applied to the patterns of everyday life but can also be translated into creative artistic interpretations.

The aim is not simply to illustrate *The Hidden Words* but to use the text as a basis for creating self-sufficient pieces of artwork. Starting the creative process by meditating on sacred text helps focus the attention on a place of harmony and unity in tune with the absolute. From this point it is possible to pull the diverse elements of a composition into harmony with the artist's inner state of being. By meditation on the inner mood there is less danger of putting too much emphasis on the outer form of the metaphor rather than its meaning. The spiritual meaning can often be best described through abstract forms, colour and tonal shapes that unify the visual field and point to a placeless eternal realm.

The diversity of all-embracing themes contained within *The Hidden Words* requires a very wide variety of styles: decorative, symbolic, abstract, minimal and representational; as well as a diversity of techniques and materials. This diversity brings out, by contrast, the distinct characteristics that define each of the 153 verses. Rather than referencing a multitude of comparisons with other artists' work that has inspired individual pieces, this paper looks at some of the overarching patterns and relationships. The obverse of this diversity is a failure to discover one distinct language of visual expression, just as, at this stage in the development of the Baha'i Faith, there can be no single style of art that can be described as representing the Baha'i dispensation.

Where East meets West

The artwork described emerges from a transcultural theology, an inherited set of presuppositions derived from the artist's roots within a Christian (Protestant) society, combined with a fresh impulse from an adopted faith in Baha'u'llah, whose teachings were revealed within an Islamic culture. The synthesis of eastern and western influences has had a strong impact on the development of 20th-century art. An underpinning for scholarly study into the relationship between art and spirituality is found in the Indian author Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's interpretation of the mystique of orientalism to the western world. A recurring theme that runs throughout many of Coomaraswamy's synoptic essays (1932–47) is the importance of understanding the spiritual motivation that inspires traditional art. His study of traditional art, although based on medieval and oriental art, applies to most human manufacturing, or making of art, apart from the two most conspicuous ages of human decadence, the one late classical, the other the age in which we now live. Coomaraswamy places much emphasis on the artist's priestly or ministerial function, the aim of which is not to entertain us but literally to 're-mind' us. He describes the essential nature of visual art as a symbol of the silence of contemplation. If creation is in God's likeness, our imitation of nature must be of its symbolic meaning, an imitation of an intelligible rather than a perceptible model. An example is seen in a Chinese ink painting that has to be executed once and for all time without hesitation or deliberation, and no correction afterwards is permissible or possible. The painting itself is thus closer in kind to life than an oil painting can ever be. Although there may be much preliminary study from nature, this external knowledge then becomes assimilated inwardly, until the essence of the subject becomes understood and reveals itself again in its entirety in the imagination of the artist. The viewer will then be stirred by the work that evokes a sense of reality akin to that felt in the presence of living forms.³ Oriental art is not concerned with nature but with the nature of nature and differs essentially from Greek art and its prolongations in Europe. Greek types are ideals of being external to experience; and conceived of as though reflected in phenomena; Indian and Chinese symbols express an understanding of life through the relationship to yang and yin, heaven and earth, and the phenomenal tensions between these polar opposites.

The 20th century embraced a return to non-representational symbolism in the form of abstract art. The art historian Roger Lipsey extended Coomaraswamy's understanding of the relationship between art and spirituality into an exploration of the spiritual dynamics underpinning the rapid sequence of art movements throughout the 20th century. This extract from *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* describes the underlying and often overlooked motivations:

Kandinsky sought an art endowed with what he called an 'inner sound'. Brancusi sought to embody an elusive 'essence' in works of stunning simplicity and formal sophistication. Mondrian intuited 'the universal that towers above us' and wished to bring it into the world without denaturing it; he too sought to release the essential from the world of accidental appearances. Henri Matisse sought the image of a stable and luminous equilibrium beneath changing appearances.⁴

3. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism* (ed. Roger Lipsey, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977) 33, 112, 309.
4. Roger Lipsey, *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988) 3.

5. Arthur C. Danto, 'Upper West Side Buddhism', in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (ed. Jacquelynn Bass and Mary Jane Jacob, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 54–6.
6. Mark Epstein quoting Thomas Cleary in Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (eds.), *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (London: University of California Press, 2004) 34–5.
7. *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* 216.
8. This version is from Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957) 126.

Roger Lipsey concludes *An Art of our Own* by acknowledging that the diversity of spiritual teachings available to us in this age is overwhelming but that we still have a duty to deal in essentials as best we can. A key factor seems to be the importance of an artist's living faith. For example when the contemporary western American video artist Bill Viola went to study traditional Zen art he soon discovered that that kind of artist no longer existed. A friend suggested that he was looking at it in the wrong way, that he should study Zen instead, then everything he did would be Zen art.

The early 20th-century Japanese Buddhist philosopher, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, was influential in spreading interest in Zen and Shin (and Far Eastern philosophy in general) to the West. He taught at Columbia University from 1952 to 1957 and his teachings had a strong impact on artists such as the musician John Cage and the movement towards minimalism.⁵

Beyond minimalism, postmodern artwork tends to integrate the emptiness once more with the diversity of everyday life. *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, a book that grew out of a series of symposia (2001–4) exploring the relationship between creativity and the meditative mind, highlights how an integration of emptiness with direct experience of life in all its manifestations has resulted in a contemporary perspective that seems to consist in approaching creative work with a mind of 'don't know', framing a question but not searching for an answer.

It is important to understand that in Buddhism one great mistake is warned about time and again. Understanding of emptiness, or *shunyata*, does not permit reification of nothingness. In opening up access to the third space of intermediate experience, Buddhism asserts that there is something positive, something joyful, something creative that underlies all experience. While the self, or the object, may not be the concrete, self-sufficient entity that we imagined, the alternative is not nothingness ... The great challenge of emptiness is the ability to truly appreciate the stuff of this world, qualified, as it is in the Buddhist teachings, by 'mere existence'.⁶

Contemporary art tends to reflect the Taoist teaching that the ideal is not a station to be attained but a constant state of flux at one with the diversity of everyday life. You have to move through annihilation of self, initially, before you can integrate this awareness into everyday life. For example in Kimsooja's performance art piece *A Needle Woman, London, New York, New Delhi, Mexico City, Cairo, and Shanghai* (1999–2001), she positioned herself in a busy street in each of these cities and filmed the crowds coming towards her as she stood still. In the beginning she felt self-conscious and resisted the energies of all the people coming towards her, but after a while she became centred and liberated from the attention.⁷

This story by the Chinese Zen master Ch'ing Yuan describes three stages of seeing:

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw the mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got the very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.⁸

This story relates to the author's own development as an artist that originated with representational images primarily of the landscape. Its origins are in a series of devotionals within a 'Tranquillity Zone' in a counselling centre. The Tranquillity Zone started in April 1998 in Swindon in England as a community service project based at the Swindon Health Hydro to celebrate the Centenary of the Baha'i Faith in the United Kingdom. Tranquillity Zones were also set up as outreach projects in Swindon Borough Council, local businesses, a local hospital and various other charity organizations. The Tranquillity Zone project spread throughout the Baha'i community of the United Kingdom, organized by local communities and offered as a service to the wider public as a means of helping people attain inner peace in this crowded and frenetic world. There is no special 'spiritual technique' involved, no mantra and no specifically religious practices. It is held in a beautiful candlelit tent-like setting, surrounded by fragrant flowers and drapes. Guests can enjoy a few unhurried moments to reflect on some inspiring words, mainly from the Baha'i writings, with soothing music, specially chosen to uplift the heart, rejoice the soul and refresh the spirit.

For these Tranquillity Zone sessions, 12 programmes were formulated that used music, readings and the colour of the interior lighting to emphasize the mood of each theme. The arts acted as a bridge in and out of a period of silent meditation. This inspired the creation of a book called *Horizon of the Unseen* that is divided into 12 chapters. Each chapter contains illustrations of quotations on a specific theme. The relationship between the text and the music within the Tranquillity Zone devotionals is translated into the relationship between the text and images in the book. The first six themes related to representational imagery but the second six themes: transcending suffering, happiness, peace, unity, the soul and nothingness, required non-representational symbolism. After prolonged exploration within these categories, the diversity of influences became overwhelming, and rest was found within the final theme of nothingness.⁹ This all-encompassing subject was similar to the silent meditation at the centre of each of the Tranquillity Zone sessions and provided a coherent focus. Beyond this point there emerged diversification out, once more, into pieces based on specific Hidden Words. Each piece references the emptiness, whilst simultaneously translating the specific written metaphors into visual equivalents.

The void

Minimal art focuses the mind away from diversity and fragmentation into the ideal, the pure and transcendental. When we meditate on paintings such as those by the American abstract-expressionist Mark Rothko we find that there is power in what is left out. In contemplation on a dark empty design the viewer can find the opposite: inner light and richness in response to the outer poverty.¹⁰ Hosewki Hisamatsu in *Zen and the Fine Arts* shows how poetry can describe inner space through his commentary on the following verse.

A bird cries. The mountain quiet deepens.
An axe rings out. Mountain stillness grows.¹¹

9. Corinne Randall (comp. and illust.), *Horizon of the Unseen*, Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005.
10. 'Think of man as endowed with two kinds of sight; when the power of insight is being used the outward power of vision does not see.' 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks. Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahā in Paris in 1911* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 11th edn. 1969, reprinted 1979) 175.
11. Hosewki S. Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971) 88.

12. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 74 from the Persian.
13. Thomas McEvilley, *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 108.
14. The declaration of the Bab took place on the eve of 23 May 1844.
15. McEvilley, *The Exile's Return* 47.
16. McEvilley, *The Exile's Return* 87.
17. Lipsey, *An Art of our Own* 170.
18. Coleman Barks (trans.), *The Essential Rumi* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) 146.

He explains how a verse reading 'Not a bird cries. The mountain is very quiet' would be bereft of life, indicating nothing more than a dull and monotonous quietness. The quiet that appears from the bird's cry is different and echoes through the valley in our imagination. The contrast between sound and space creates expansive meanings rather than a simple absence.

In *The Hidden Words* Baha'u'llah says, 'All will I gather beneath the one-coloured covering of the dust and efface all these diverse colours save them that choose My own, and that is purging from every colour.'¹² A corresponding silence or purging from every colour can be found in the history of modern art. If we see life in terms of a cycle, each cycle begins and ends at a moment of death or emptiness, and then rebirth. Such a move towards the death of representational imagery started when J. M. W. Turner's seascapes (1840–5) changed and finally dissolved the figure in the ground of the painting, the colours being mixed back to the point just before they return to neutral grey. This is the point often referred to as the birth of modern art.¹³ It is significant that 1844 was also, according to the teachings of the Baha'i Faith, the beginning of a new era in human history.¹⁴ The prophetic cycle had finished. Prophecy is always looking forward; now time from the old perspective had finished and a new holistic paradigm of time emerged, the cycle of unity, no longer striving towards an ideal future but more grounded in the present. From this point there was no turning back, as visual art became more and more abstract and then minimal. Thomas McEvilley in *The Exile's Return* highlights 1951 as marking the pinnacle of importance put on the monochrome or single-colour field painting and delineates it as the only important religious icon produced in the 20th century. He points to the Rothko chapel (Houston, Texas 1965–6) and the monochrome paintings within the chapel (1971) as 'arguably, the last great monument of Modernism and the abstract sublime.'¹⁵ Artists such as Ad Reinhardt believed they were making the last, or next to last, artworks (the works that would herald and precede the final absorption of matter into spirit).¹⁶ From 1960 until his death in 1967, he painted nothing but square canvases of one size, in which two barely distinguishable coats of black paint present a cruciform division of the surface.

For a believer the emptiness of death is full of hope and possibilities for rebirth and in a similar way a state of inner emptiness, cleansed of self and passion, is full of creative potential. The *tabula rasa* of an empty mind allows openness to the inspiration of the moment. Emptiness and freedom from the daily concerns of life provide the space necessary for creativity and relate to the Buddhist concept of *Shunyata* (Emptiness) or the Christian concept of Renosis, the emptying that precedes any possibility of grace.¹⁷ Through the use of emptiness in art it is also possible to focus attention onto the existential qualities of materials and sublimate to the laws that each domain of the natural order was created to obey. Possibly, by meditation on its essence, we become aware that every created thing is distinct from, but also connected to, the oneness. The 13th-century Sufi poet Jalalu'd-Din Rumi describes this through the analogy of a hollow reed 'wailing a tender agony' of its severance from the reed bed.¹⁸ This is particularly strong with Mark Rothko's fields of colour that are given the space to exert their own individual character and presence. The distinct nature of the

broad colour expanses make their relationships with adjacent colours even more poignant as they sing of their separation from each other.

Islamic architecture also preserves its realism and refuses to create the illusion of an ideal that is not in the nature of the material and the space with which it is concerned. Islamic building makes full use of light and shade, and their heat and coolness, wind, water and earth with its insulating and protective properties. Seyyed Hossein Nasr says:

Islam itself is based on the nature of Reality. It is profoundly 'realist' in the traditional and not the modern sense of the word. It is realist in that it emphasises that God is God and man is man, that the material world is the material world ... There are no created tensions, no upwards pull to a heavenly ideal in Islamic architecture as one finds in Gothic Cathedrals which are based on another spiritual perspective than that of Islam. The space of the sacred structures of Islam rests serenely and nobly in a stillness which conforms to the inner nature of things here and now rather than seeking to participate in an ideal which belongs to another level of existence and is contrary to the nature of the material at hand.¹⁹

The art critic associated with abstract expressionism, Clement Greenberg, describes the avant-garde poet or artist as trying in effect to imitate God by creating something that is valid solely on its own terms, in the way that nature itself is valid.²⁰ This poem by Jalalu'd-Din Rumi draws on a similar analogy.

I told the secret of union with the Friend
To the east wind alone.
Then, through the purity of its own mystery,
The east wind whispered, 'Like this.'²¹

Lipsey describes this quality as relating to the Buddhist idea of *Tathata*.

Tathata is the irreducible, indescribable nature of an object, a sound, a person. From the point of view of the perceiver, it is a recognition of the fullness and sufficiency of each thing in itself. Aesthetic and intellectual grammars break down under the impact of this perception; associations matter not at all, while direct wordless perception matters a great deal.²²

He says that the keen vibration of paint, the dense 'suchness' of stone is not to be subordinated to schemes of intellectual meaning; to do so is to subordinate primary life to secondary reflection. Painting must speak simultaneously of meaning and emptiness, symbol and sheer being.²³ The theme of emptiness provides the potential catalyst and starting point for all creativity, coming out of the void and growing with the force of its own momentum. Coomaraswamy says, 'Art begins in a potentiality of all unuttered things, proceeds to expression, and ends in an understanding of the absolute simplicity of sameness of all things.'²⁴ The contemporary Spanish artist Antonio Tapies also suggests that all art is 'an attempt to penetrate the unknown void that appears when we arrive at the limits of knowledge, that great mystery in whose presence we feel equal and united with all the beings of the universe.'²⁵

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987) 55.
20. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) 173.
21. William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000) 151.
22. Lipsey, *An Art of our Own* 123.
23. *ibid.* 473.
24. Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism* 100.
25. Antoni Tapies, *Painting and the Void* (ed. Carmen Gimenez, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995) 60–5.

26. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 12 from the Persian.
27. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* 186.

Words, veils and silence

Figure 1 shows a page from an artist's book of prints called *Words, Veils and Silence* by the author (completed December 2006). Each quote within the book poetically describes the power of silent contemplation summed up in Baha'u'llah's words:

Close one eye and open the other. Close one to the world and all that is therein, and open the other to the hallowed beauty of the Beloved.²⁶

It seems almost paradoxical to express through visual art a realm that strives to transcend the senses. The arts do, however, provide a bridge between these two worlds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his description of Islamic architecture explains how the void, or that which is empty of things, is a trace and an echo of God in the created order. If, however, all objects were to be completely unreal and absolutely nothing, there would be no existing objects to start with and no art could justify its existence. The true reality of the situation encompasses both the illusory aspect of objects and also their nature as spiritual reflections and positive symbols. Together they depict the full truth of an object, chiselling away its unreality and illuminating its essential reality as a positive symbol and harmonious whole.²⁷ *Words, Veils and Silence* reflects this duality within the two sides of the book page. The words are laser cut out of the pages, so that from one side they are seen in their mirror image, the shapes of the calligraphy extended into visual

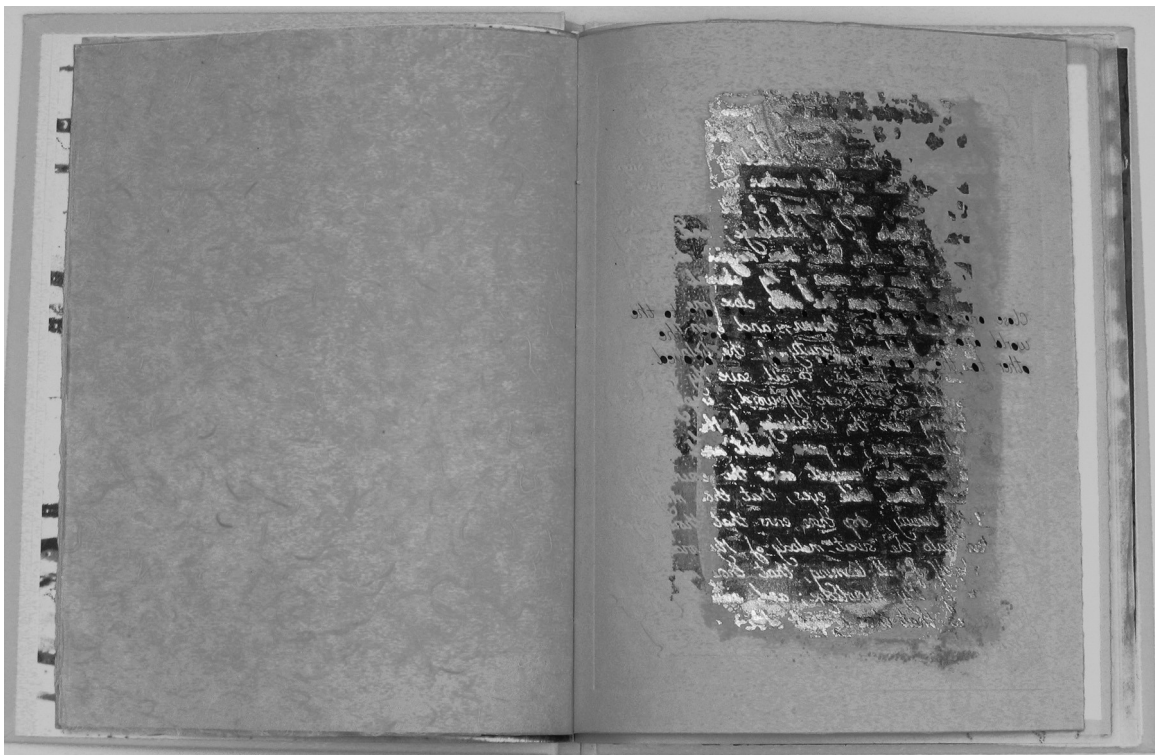


Figure 1: Folio from artist's book. *Words, Veils and Silence*, Chine colé etching with gold leaf laser cut, 39cm x 61cm, 2006.

repeating decorative patterns. When the veil of the page is turned over the laser-cut words can be read within the empty underside of the folio. The blank sheet of paper enables the viewer to read the words whilst also describing the emptiness referred to in the text.

Immanuel Kant's philosophy, defined in the mid-18th century in *Critique of Judgement*, saw the three routes to knowledge – aesthetic, cognitive and ethical – as distinct entities. The more separate they were from each other the purer their expression. The ideal artwork would therefore demand the complete absorption of the viewer in the aesthetic contemplation of the beauty of the form, colour, etc. These were the abstract qualities of the work and any cognitive faculties, such as sentimental identification with the subject matter, got in the way of the aesthetic experience. It is only because of the relationship between the aesthetic and the cognitive, however, that we are able to write about art, otherwise the work would be self-explanatory and an overlay of discourse would be irrelevant. Figure 1 grows out of the dynamics between words, veils and silence, three themes that are linked to these three faculties; words to the cognitive, veils to the aesthetic and silence to religion (the ethical). There is a harmony with McEvilley's description of art after the 1980s as incorporating the aesthetic, cognitive and ethical aspects equally.²⁸ Art now strives to bring together the three aspects of life that Kant saw as irreconcilable. A piece of artwork may contain a moral message or incorporate text, although these conceptual aspects may detract from the aesthetic impact and silence of the piece.

The traditional sacred arts are rooted within the Word of God. The art of illumination is like a visualization of the luminous inspiration that flows from the sacred text. This is the spirit that inspired the early medieval Christians to illuminate the Bible, as is seen in the late 7th and early 8th-century *Lindisfarne Gospels* or the *Book of Kells*. The same motivation also infuses the tradition of illuminating the Koran with decorative adornments prevalent within the Middle East. The influence of sacred text on the visual arts, expressed through calligraphy and illuminated manuscripts, then transcends the book format and its influence pervades the wider environment. Places of worship and larger pieces of artwork lead the viewer into a wordless space of contemplation. A sense of harmony with the absolute is felt through the direct presence of the physical form. This immediate physical power is most strong in abstract art that holds the viewer in a state of loving suspense, whilst focusing their attention onto the silence of the mind. Figure 2, *The Swift Still Movement of the Spirit*, looks as if it could represent a section of a wall in a mosque; the movement of the poured paint is reminiscent of calligraphic marks. The Hidden Word it relates to also describes an architectural place of worship as a metaphor for the human being.

O Son of Utterance! Thou art My stronghold; enter therein that thou mayest abide in safety. My love is in thee, know it, that thou mayest find Me near unto thee.²⁹

Beyond the emptiness

The infinite possibilities latent within the *tabula rasa* of an empty block of stone before it has been carved are compromised and constricted by any

28. McEvilley, *The Exile's Return* 206.

29. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 10, from the Arabic.

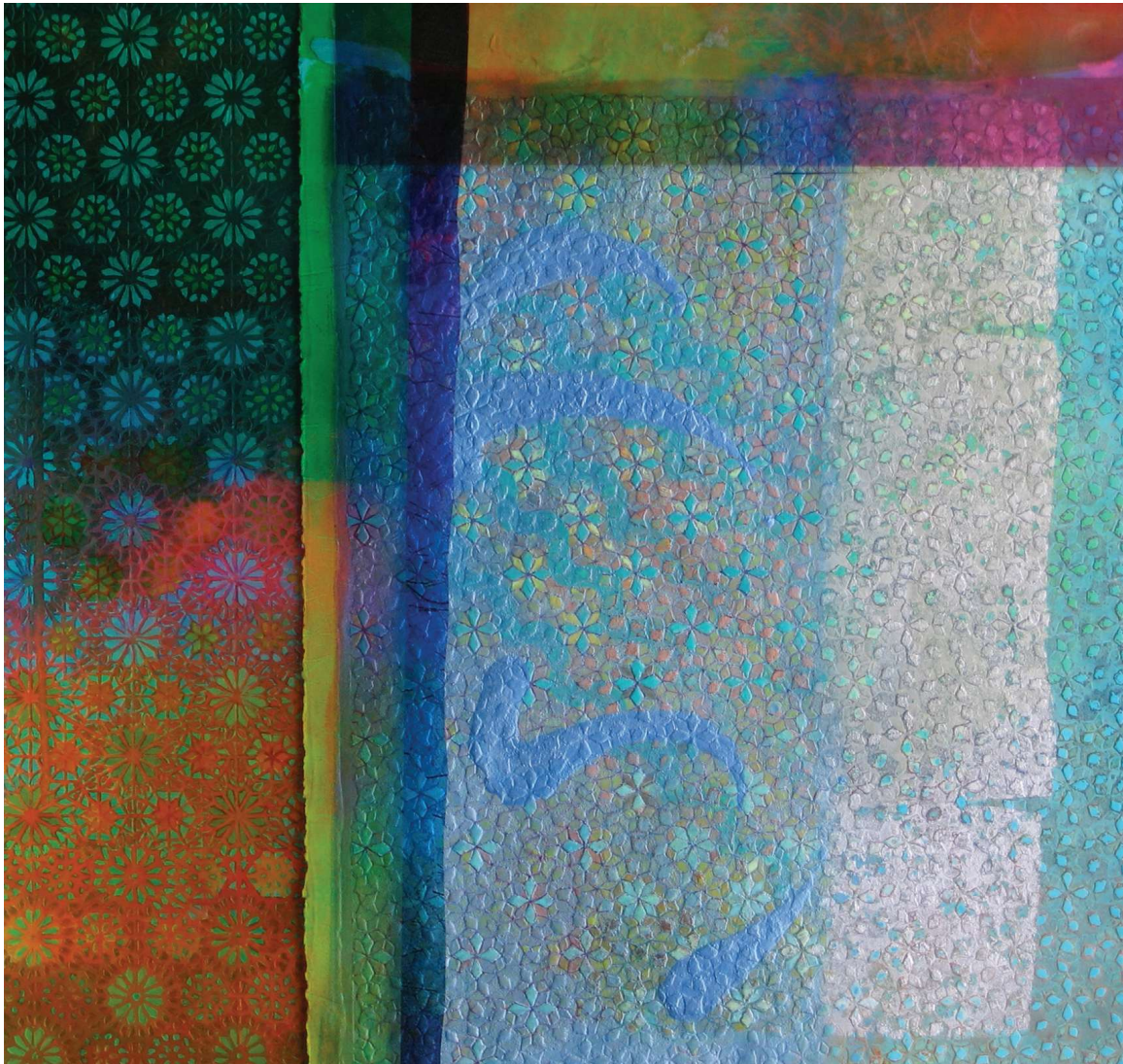


Figure 2: The Still Swift Movement of the Spirit, Mixed media, 64cm x 68cm, January 2008.

30. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 45, from the Arabic.
31. Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin: The Awareness of Perfection* (Exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. 1992) 94–5.

carving into it of actuality. The Word of God also contains this potential. It is the primal point. It emanates out of the oneness and is the first stage into the diversity. *Canopy*, Figure 3, is a piece of embroidery based on a verse from The Hidden Words that says, '... repose with Me beneath the canopy of majesty behind the tabernacle of glory.'³⁰ This piece draws on two influences. The first is a minimal grid inspired by the work of the American artist Agnes Martin, whose compositions are constructed of rectangles within a square format. Her paintings incorporate subtle imperfections within the regularity, such as the hand-drawn quality of the lines that reflect the imperfections of nature. She found the point just before the infinity is compromised. She said that we are able to see perfection but not do it. By holding back on the doing aspect she leaves room for the seeing of perfection within the viewer's imagination.³¹ This minimal grid provides an aesthetic starting point, from which to move one step out of emptiness into specificity.

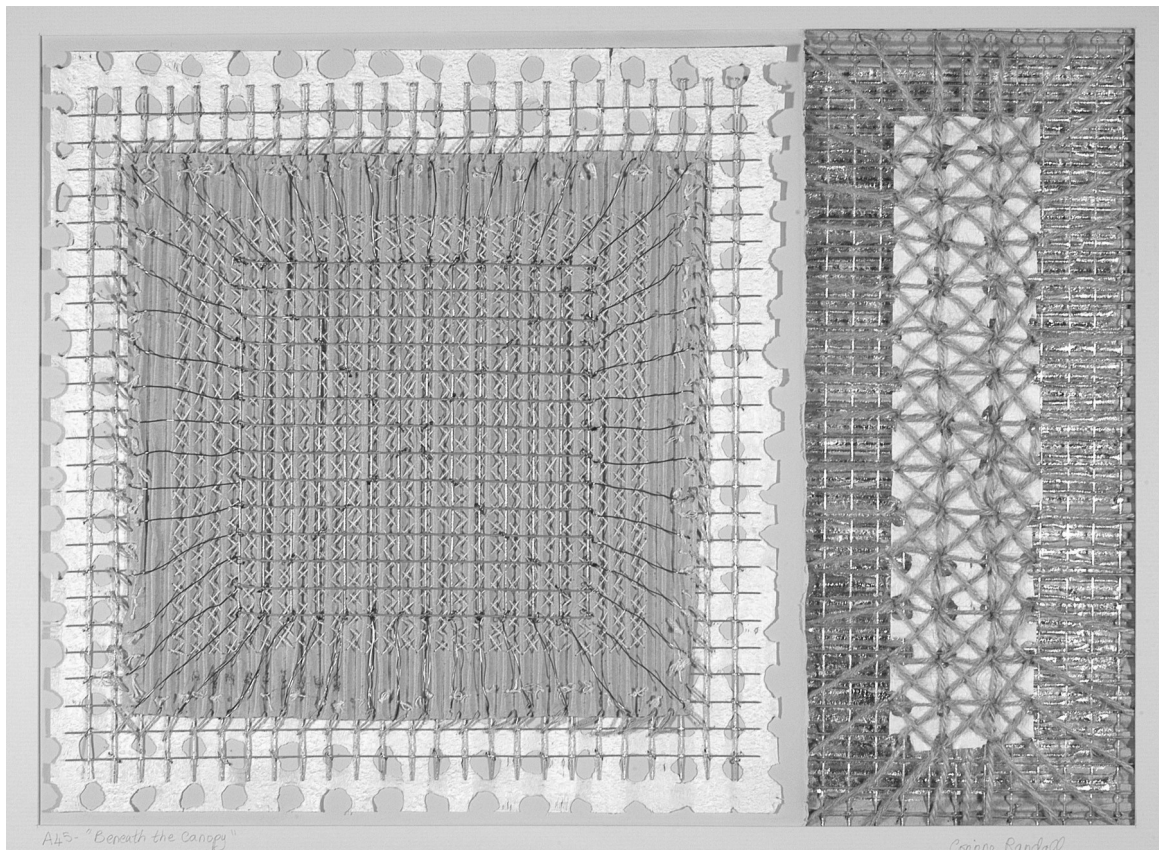


Figure 3: Canopy, Mixed-media embroidery, 52cm x 37.5cm, April 2006.

The second influence is the Word of God, which provides a cognitive and ethical starting point. Peace and repose is expressed in the emptiness of the grid that initiates a detached way of looking where there is no focal point. The threads are a symbol of the link between God and Man. When we rest in God and give up all desires, we become like a puppet, inspired to act according to the will of our Creator. When the viewer's eye is free to wander around the composition without becoming fixed, the act of observing becomes more akin to the meditative state, where the eye scans with detachment paying equal interest to the complete field of vision. This detachment is achieved by using a recurrent theme or pattern to define the empty space in the middle of the composition, with more contrasting intensity at the peripheral margins and asymmetry characteristic of Zen aesthetics.

A key feature of the end of modernism was a shift from the illusionistic towards the sculptural presence of painting. Artists such as Eva Hesse, for example, brought the monochrome down to earth, the spirit being held identical with the physical surface, not a special spiritual presence within it.³² Figure 4, *Free Thyself*, also fluctuates between painting and sculpture. The border moves inwards and restricts the freedom of the composition in the middle. The only release is through the perforated holes that act like Lucio Fontana's slashes in the empty canvas.³³ The quote says, 'Free thyself from the fetters of this world and loose thy Soul from the prison of self.'³⁴ The words are crudely cut with a plasma cutter out of the steel at

32. McEvilly, *The Exile's Return*, chapter 2.

33. 'It is those abstract artists who accepted the inherent ambiguity of their pictorial statements whose work has survived deflation. This ambiguity is particularly marked in the case of Fontana, whose immaculately painted, slashed, and sometimes jewelled canvases of the fifties and sixties can be interpreted as ultra-sophisticated art objects of a highly commercial sort, or as blatant attacks on painting as an art form.' Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1989) 261.

34. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 40, from the Persian.
35. I use the term 'archetype' in the meaning associated with the 'divine names and qualities' which, in the Sufi tradition, occupy a middle position between the Absolute and the sensible world.

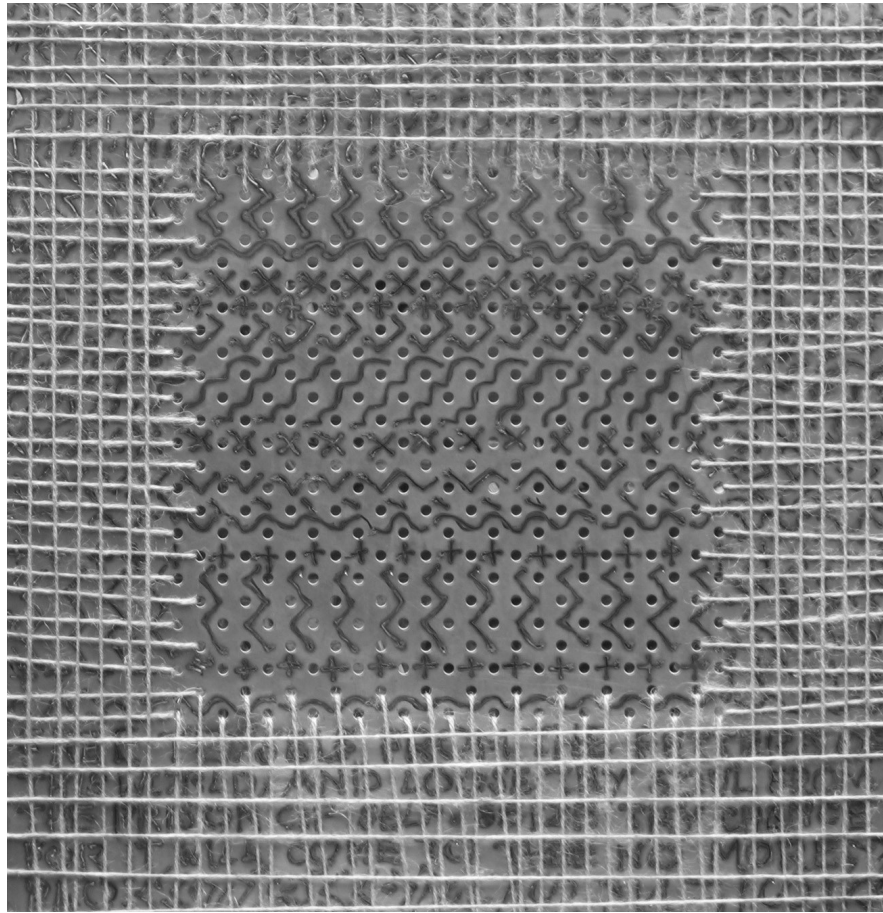


Figure 4: *Free Thysel, Perforated steel and string, 52cm x 48cm, February 2007.*

the bottom of the composition. The constraining hemp string signifies the fetters of this world, while the loose plasma-cut marks contained within the regular grid describe the prison of self. The alternative freedom of the spiritual dimension is represented by the holes and their lack of materiality in comparison to the physical presence of the quasi-sculptural artefact. The piece is crude but it moves out of the void just as much as is necessary to create an aesthetic metaphor. It describes the perfection in our minds but screams of the imperfection of the artefact and material object.

Although many of the verses in *The Hidden Words* refer to transcendence and emptiness or *via negativa* as a route to mystical experience, others describe a *via affirmativa* or ecstatic identification and unification of the self with the divine. Denial/monolithic unity and affirmation/unity of pluralities are two sides of the same coin, of death and rebirth. Islamic art is able to reconcile these two aspects. The void or areas of empty space are used to express transcendence, while intensely patterned decoration symbolizes the divine attributes to be found within the archetypal forms of creation.³⁵ The walls in Islamic architecture are either richly decorated or empty. Light defines the space and makes possible the use of intensely white structures that reflect the purity and levelling of all multiplicity before the one. The

contrasting areas of intensely coloured edifices appear as an earthly reflection of a paradisiacal state. In the arabesque used in decorative Islamic art the negative space and the positive 'form' play an equally central role. Through the use of arabesque the void lifts from material objects their suffocating heaviness and enables the spirit to breathe and expand. It removes from the eye the possibility of fixing itself in one place and from the mind the possibility of becoming imprisoned in any particular solidification and crystallization of matter.³⁶

Figure 5, *Rejoice*, is a visual response to a verse in the The Hidden Words that admonishes us to 'Rejoice in the gladness of thine heart that thou mayest be worthy to meet Me and to mirror forth My beauty.'³⁷ Unlike the calmness of the meditative state, you cannot constantly be in at state of rejoicing; these are glimpses of subliminal moments that occasionally rise to the conscious surface.³⁸ To express rejoicing it is necessary to move away from the empty field of an isometric grid and allow clusters of greater intensity to repeat within the ground. Affirmation/unity of pluralities is expressed through a repeating pattern, that exists one step out of the emptiness and into the specific, whilst continuing for eternity within the laws of its own

36. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* 188.

37. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 36, from the Arabic.

38. The meditative state can be compared to a state of prayer. 'Abdu'l-Baha said that 'Man must live in a state of prayer.' Words of 'Abdu'l-Baha cited in *Star of the West*, vol. 8, no. 4 (17 May 1917) 41.



Figure 5: *Rejoice*, Embossed paper and watercolour, 39cm x 44cm, March 2007.

39. Chittick, *Sufism* 13.
40. Olafur Eliasson, *Weather Project*, installation at the Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, 2003. A massive circular light in the ceiling representing the sun, a mirrored ceiling and an atmospheric cloud of mist filling the hall. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/eliasson/default.htm>.
41. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* (Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1983) 178.
42. Chittick, *Sufism* 13.
43. Chittick, *Sufism* 151.
44. Muhammad ibn 'Abdi'l-Jabbar al-Niffari, *The Mawaqif* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935) 55:30; quoted in Chittick, *Sufism* 152.
45. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* 76.
46. Man, in order to know God, must be a partaker of the Divine nature.' Ralph Inge (1860–1954) *Christian Mysticism* (Montana, USA: Kessinger Publishing Company) 5–8.

domain. As soon as the grid is changed, from a geometric to an isometric grid, the composition demands more decoration evocative of celebration, because the restrained balance is upset by the loss of right angles and their relationship to the edges of the picture frame.

Veils

God is an unknowable essence and therefore is revealed to humankind through a veil, or behind a cloud, or to Moses within a fire.³⁹ The veil enables us to see the sublime, otherwise we would be blinded by its strength and powerless to conceive of or describe its grace. It is the cloud and atmosphere that add to the appeal of Joseph M. W. Turner's sunsets or Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* installation.⁴⁰ The veils acknowledge the truth of our powerlessness to describe the ineffable. All physical reality is a veil or hollow shell, an echo of the true spiritual meaning it encapsulates in physical form and there is, therefore, an inherent beauty in the honesty of such a symbol.

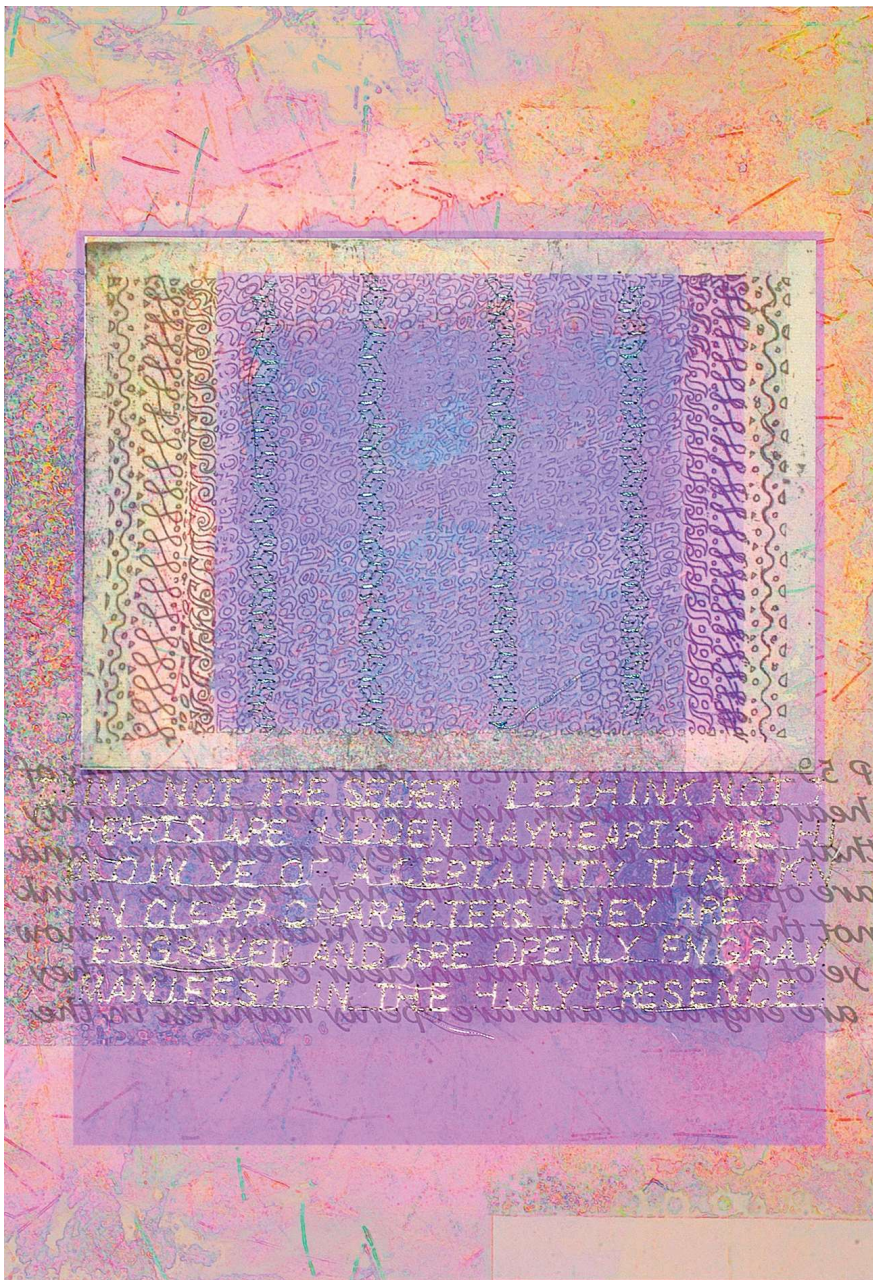
... all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them ... So potent and universal is this revelation, that it hath encompassed all things visible and invisible. (Baha'u'llah)⁴¹

Physical reality can be regarded in two ways: from one direction it is a distraction, a mirage; the other way of observing sees the physical veils as signs and symbols leading back to the Creator. According to one formulation of the Sufi tradition,

Each existent thing can be said to have two faces. These two faces are the 'eastern face' and the 'western face'. If we look at the western face of things, we find no trace of the sun, since it has set. If we look at the eastern face of the same things, we see the sun shining in its full glory. Everything displays both faces at the same time, but the vast majority of people see only the western face.⁴²

William C. Chittick says that true knowledge is not really 'unveiling'. Rather it is the lifting of the far veils so that the near veils may replace them, or it is the recognition of the veils for what they are.⁴³ 'You will not stand in vision until you see my veil as vision and my vision as veil.'⁴⁴

The Word of God is the ultimate veil of form revealed by God through His prophets as a ladder of ascent for the soul, and Baha'u'llah says that its veil of concealment is none other than its own self. He then says that should the Word of God be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a revelation.⁴⁵ This description of sacred text as a veil of concealment refers to the hermeneutic responses it initiates. A reader will only understand the text if it is confirmed through direct experience and knowledge of their own divine nature.⁴⁶ Sacred scripture as a veil of concealment is reflected in Figure 6, *Secrets of Hearts*. This piece illustrates outwardly the opposite of the apparent meaning of the text. The artwork, instead of attempting a description of the domain of spirit to which it refers, moves the emphasis onto the text itself and demonstrates that the words are only a facsimile of hidden realms. A quote by Baha'u'llah is embroidered into the paper.



47. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 59, from the Persian.

48. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* 49.

Figure 6: *Secrets of Hearts*, Embroidered inkjet print, 23cm x 33cm, March 2007.

'Think not the secrets of hearts are hidden, nay, know ye of a certainty that in clear characters they are engraved and are openly manifest in the holy Presence.'⁴⁷ In this design the characters are anything but clear because these are not the 'secrets of hearts' themselves; only words that refer to a far more mysterious and indescribable reality. As Baha'u'llah has said:

Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men. He is, and hath ever been, immensely exalted beyond all that can either be recounted or perceived.⁴⁸

49. Madan Sarap, *Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 58.
50. Sarap, *Post-structuralism* 35. See also Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 123.
51. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks* 87.
52. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 20, from the Arabic.

Pointing to the impossibility for the signifier to truly represent the signified references the deconstruction of the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida, unravelling the unity of a concept by analysis of the 'loose ends' or 'traces' that it harboured from a prior metaphysical assumption. 'Signifier' is a term used to describe a sound, image, written shape, object, practice or gesture invested with meaning. Deconstructionists tend to say that if a text seems to refer beyond itself, that reference can finally only be to another text; just as signs refer only to other signs, texts can refer only to other texts, generating an intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called intertextuality. There is a proliferation of interpretations and no interpretation can claim to be the final one.⁴⁹ Derrida also uses a technique of crossing out words to say this is only a symbol, it is not sufficient to describe the concept I am trying to communicate but it is the only means I have.⁵⁰

Our bodies are vehicles for our spirits just as the essence of a lamp is the light and not its physical form. Without the light it is a dead object. As 'Abdu'l-Baha has said:

... look at this lamp: is not the light within it superior to the lamp which holds it? However beautiful the form of the lamp may be, if the light is not there, its purpose is unfulfilled, it is without life – a dead thing. The lamp needs the light, but the light does not need the lamp.

The spirit does not need a body, but the body needs spirit, or it cannot live. The soul can live without a body, but the body without a soul dies.⁵¹

It is the same with art that comes to life when it is able to reveal a glimpse of the signs of the absolute that exist within the inner reality of all created things. Figure 7, *Manifest Light*, is a reflection of this metaphor. It consists of a digital print of glowing colour onto clear film that is lit from behind. The first layer is covered with a sheet of translucent Japanese paper that attempts to obscure the intensity but is powerless to do so. It is a response to the following words of Baha'u'llah:

O Son of Spirit! My claim on thee is great, it cannot be forgotten. My grace to thee is plenteous, it cannot be veiled. My love has made in thee its home, it cannot be concealed. My light is manifest to thee, it cannot be obscured.⁵²

It is difficult getting the right balance of colour illumination with objects lit from within. If the external light is strong it washes out the internal light but, alternatively, in the artificial light of night the colour becomes too intense. This is reflected in the object itself. The top of the piece derives interest from the internal light, pale layers softening the intensity; whilst at the bottom there is greater tonal contrast on the external surface.

Palimpsest

Originally *The Hidden Words* was called the *Hidden Book of Fāṭimih*. Shi'i Islamic tradition tells how the Holy Spirit personified as the Angel Gabriel descended upon Fatimih and addressed certain words to her.

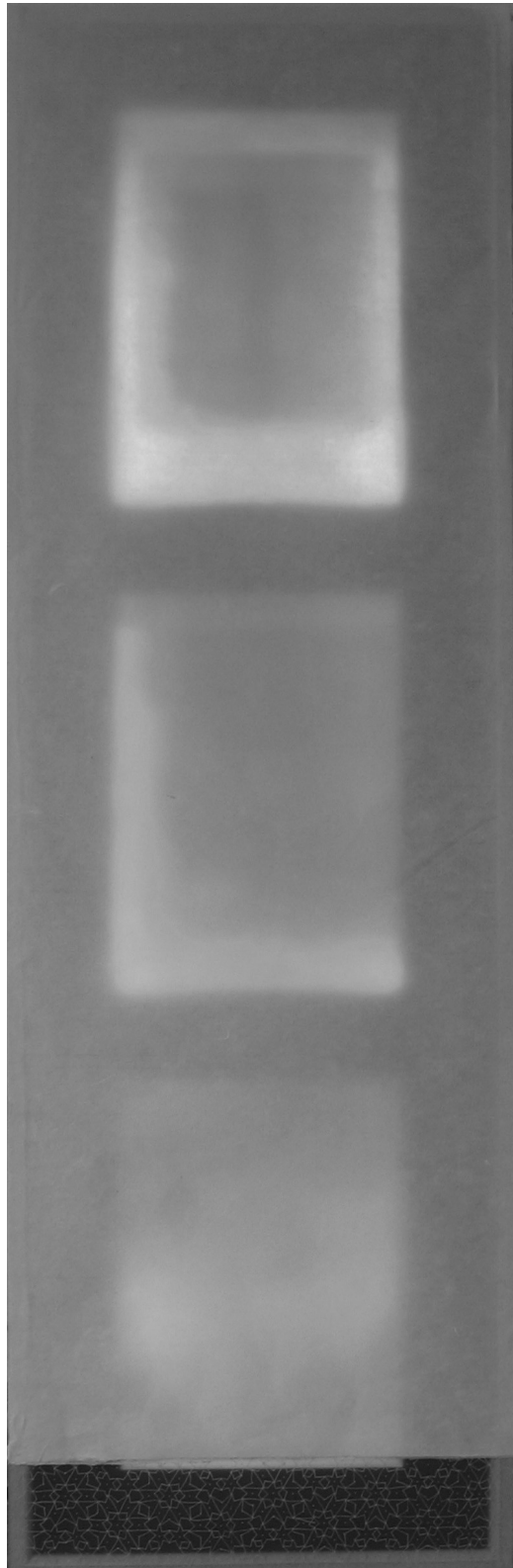


Figure 7: Manifest Light – veiled, Light box, 34cm x 107cm, October 2006.

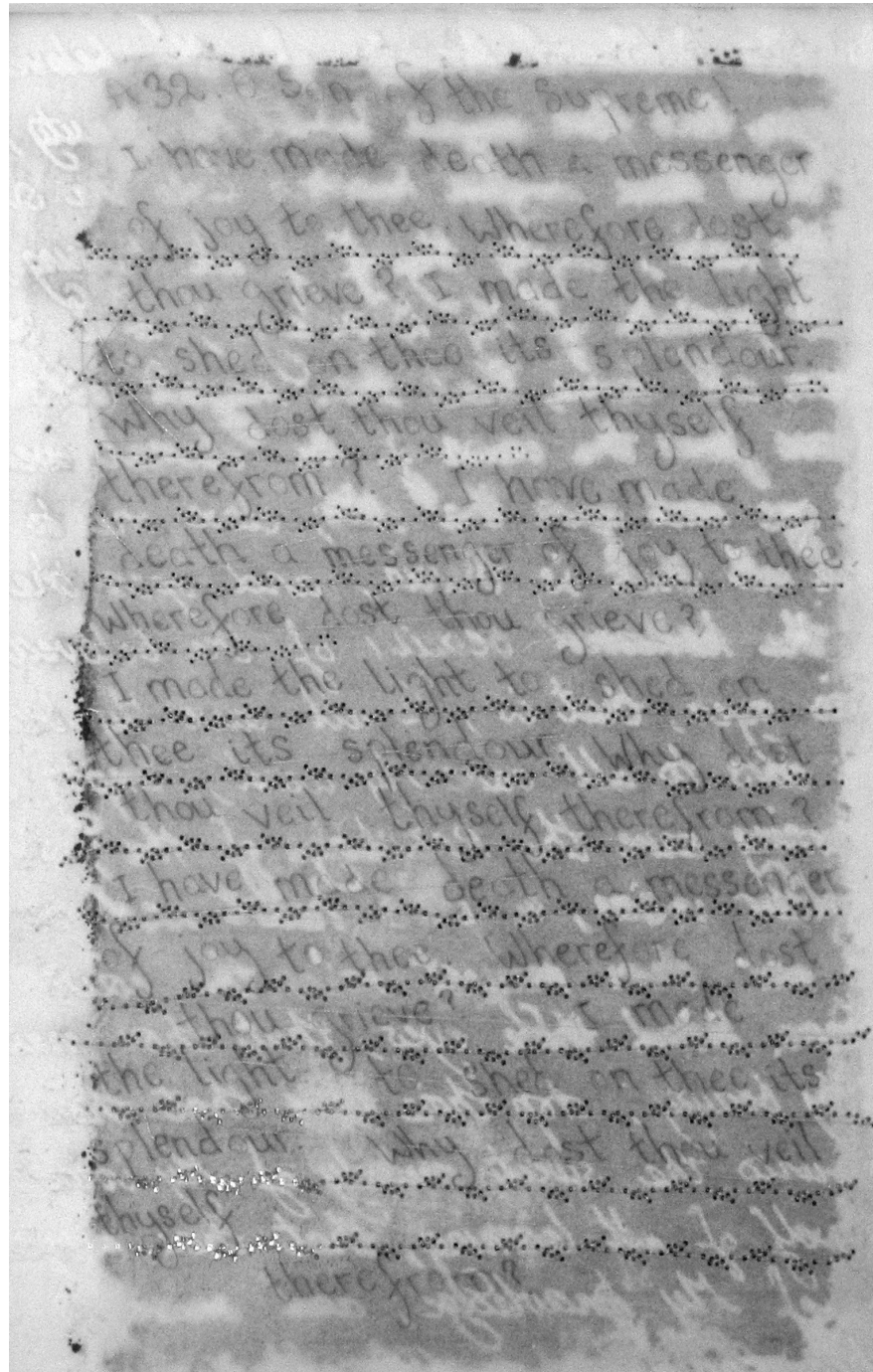


Figure 8: Messenger of Joy, Mixed media, 18cm x 27cm, November 2006.

These were dictated to 'Alī, her husband, and were revealed to bring consolation to her soul in her bereavement after the passing of her father, the prophet Muhammad. This parallels a similar, although more allegorical reference to The Hidden Words, that can be found at the end of chapter 21 of St John's Gospel. The disciples are downhearted after Christ's martyrdom and unable to catch any fish. The resurrected Jesus

appears to them on the beach and although they do not recognize him they follow his command to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, consequently catching 153 fish. These 153 fish can be said to represent the 153 short verses of The Hidden Words revealed to Fatimih. These historical connections are like a palimpsest, a manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for a second writing. The layers of time build up on top of each other and add significance, not in a linear historical line but through association and repetition of a theme. Each cycle repeats the same pattern and brings hope for the future at the death of the prophet. Figure 8, *Messenger of Joy*, is created out of a palimpsest of layers of text. It is an illumination of the following verse by Baha'u'llah describing death as a messenger of joy.

O Son of the Supreme! I have made death a messenger of joy to thee.
Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendour.
Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom?⁵³

The verse is laser cut out of transparent paper and embroidered onto an underling layer of embossed paper that is lit from behind. Specific words are hidden within the overall design as the verse is repeated continuously like a mantra. Either you can meditate on the glimmer of blue light glimpsed through the veils of paper or you can read the text. The viewer needs to use either one side of the brain or the other whilst looking and reading but afterwards a unity and synthesis can be found within the imagination. This reflects the bittersweet duality of death as a veiled messenger of joy.

Inner gems

Art is self-expression but sacred art is born out of the higher self, linked to universal truths that are common to all. Ironically we can only find these universals within when we concentrate on the unique and individual aspects of ourselves. Our distinct purpose in life and creativity opens up knowledge of ourselves that leads to divine knowledge. Figure 9, *Treasury*, is based on a sentence from The Hidden Words that says, 'Ye are My treasury, for in you I have treasured the pearls of My mysteries and the gems of My knowledge.'⁵⁴ This quote brings together objective and subjective knowledge: objective knowledge from God's Manifestations and subjective knowledge that is found within. This is translated into visual art using the mathematical grid of a sheet of perforated steel that corresponds to objective truth. An improvised repeating pattern is hand drawn onto the grid and by breaking up the regularity describes subjective inner knowledge. Beads sparkle giving diverse glimpses of colour to portray the inner gems and the patterning dissolves into emptiness symbolizing annihilation and transcendence.

The 20th-century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized the unique individuality of each person but saw 'bad faith' as a trap that we can fall into because we are scared of our own individuality. He said that man's freedom is unbearable; by knowing that everything is open to us we are freed from the comfort of excuses. We lapse into 'bad faith', pretend that we are not free, adopt a role and conform to society's conditioning.⁵⁵ This is not necessarily a bad thing. An artist can, for example, adapt to work within given parameters and we see this phenomenon often within modern art (e.g. Mark Rothko, Kasimir

53. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 32, from the Arabic.

54. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 69, from the Arabic.

55. Mary Warnock, *Existential Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1967) 31.
56. T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* quartet no. 4: 'We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.' See <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets>.

Malvevich, Agnes Martin). In *Treasury* the choice to work within an isometric grid was a free decision to allow the grid to restrict the choices. This is symbolic of the choice to follow a code of moral teachings. We choose these teachings out of our own free will and then submit to the guidelines, whilst remaining aware that circumstances are constantly changing and we must continuously revisit this decision to see if it is still relevant. The restrictions of boundaries provide a focus, and constraints present a framework, within which greater depths of experience can be discovered.

Completing the cycle

T.S. Eliot's poem says that at the end of our journey we will arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.⁵⁶ Figure 10 completes the cycle by reintroducing a representational element back into an abstract ground. There is progression in this spiral; previous experience intuitively informs each successive development. The focus moves out of abstraction with its ambiguity of infinite possibilities back into the specifics of the contingent

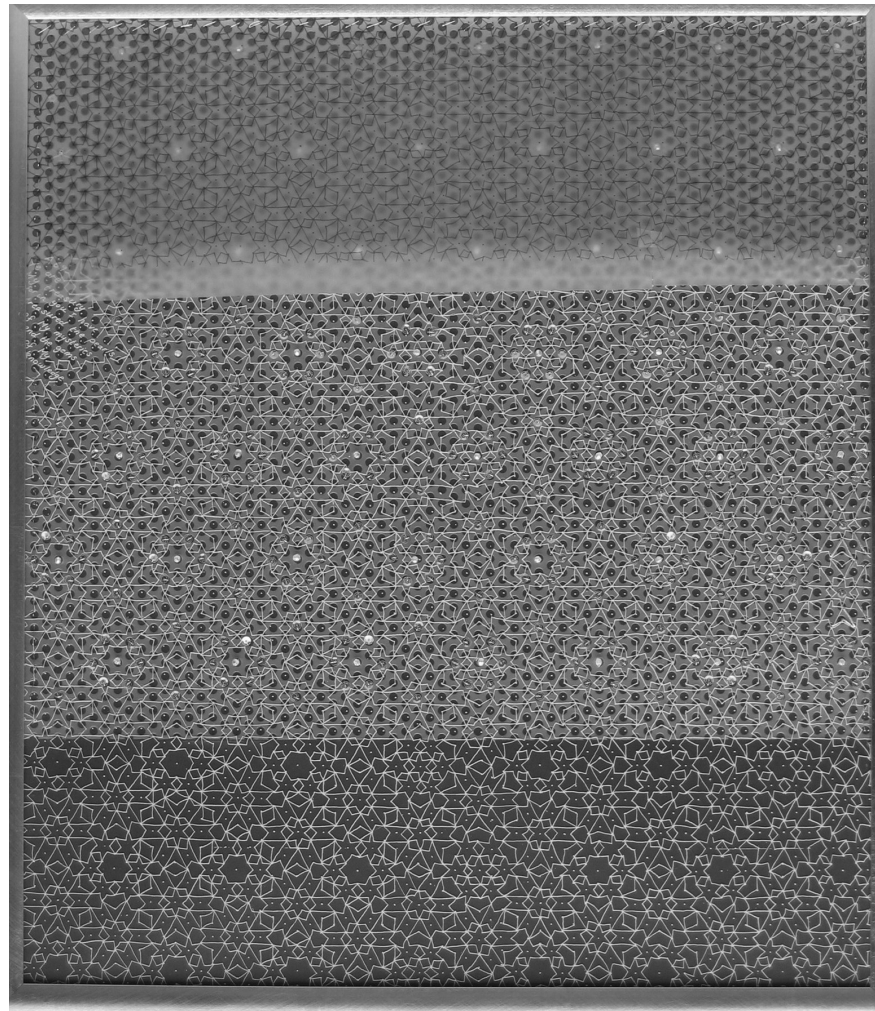


Figure 9: Treasury, Perforated steel and embroidery, 53cm x 60cm, February 2007.

realm. It is in the play between these two aspects that art demonstrates how entirely interdependent are the spiritual and physical domains. Persian miniatures designed to work with the flat format of a book page inspire the composition for Figure 10, *Sorrow Not*. There are no convergent perspective lines and the stylized imagery remains true to the two-dimensional support. There is no tonal shading derived from an external light because the illumination comes from within. The viewer is guided to an intermediate world with its own space, time, movement, colours and forms where events occur in a real but not necessarily a physical manner. The plants are not simply those of physical nature but stylized to allude to its archetypal paradisiacal nature. In Persian miniatures the colour of each mountain, cloud or sky is unique unto itself and different from natural colours. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes the strange appeal of this world in the following way:

In its negative aspect this world is the cosmic labyrinth of veils which separate man from the Divine, but in its positive aspect it is the state of paradise



Figure 10: *Sorrow Not*, Acrylics on digital print on canvas, 80cm x 101cm, February 2008.

57. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* 180–1.
58. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* no. 35 from the Arabic.
59. McEvelley, *The Exile's Return* 104: 'Kant had said that the aesthetic, ethical and cognitive faculties were equal and separate. Hegel agreed more or less when he said that art, religion and philosophy were three equal channels to spirit.'
60. *ibid.* 102.
61. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 26.

wherein are contained the original forms, colours, smells, and tastes of all that gives joy to man upon this world ... the space is depicted in such a way that the eye roves from one plane to another, moving always between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional.⁵⁷

Persian miniatures and illuminated manuscripts are often arranged asymmetrically within the context of the book page as they respond to the spine and adjacent folio. This non-symmetrical arrangement is transferred into the composition of *Sorrow Not*, and the imagery emerges as if in a dream or forgotten memory, half hidden and half alluded to. It refers to the following verse of the Hidden Words:

O Son of Man! Sorrow not save that thou art far from Us. Rejoice not save that thou art drawing near and returning unto Us.⁵⁸

The contrasting elements of joy and sorrow are brought together within this composition. By reconciling diametrical opposites into a harmonious and unified whole, art can highlight the expansive nature of the metaphorical process and therefore has a valuable role to play in breaking down the polarized viewpoints of religion. Metaphor is grounded in the concrete whilst simultaneously linked to the spiritual. Its influence is creative because of the infinite range of ineffable interpretations it can facilitate within the imagination. A problem with the use of metaphor within sacred text is that fundamentalists do not interpret the text inwardly but take it literally. This is extremely dangerous and leads to superstition, the reason why the mass of contemporary opinion sees organized religion as a negative influence. This attitude is a fixed barrier if it is used to dismiss a whole dimension of the rich tapestry of human experience and can lead to the other extreme of a materialistic outlook. Through observation of the links between art, psychology, religion and philosophy we discover an understanding of the true nature of the metaphorical process and the relationships that exist between all aspects of life. Sacred art therefore has a valuable role to play in increasing awareness of the beauty and fathomless depths of significance contained within the Word of God.

Conclusion

In the 1960s the transition to postmodernism occurred when significant numbers of people realized that they could no longer believe in the force of progress. Contemporary philosophy tends to see time as cyclical rather than linear, no longer linked to Georg W. F. Hegel's definition of the purpose of civilization as leading to the eventual aim of the supremacy of spirit over matter.⁵⁹ The postmodern form of representation is to embody modes or styles of expression: the film, the comic book, the classical painting and the advertising mode. In this referencing of one signifier to another, Thomas McEvelley sees 'something like the end of the age – end of the world? – inventory to this parade of the various dreams of ourselves that have historically passed as ourselves.'⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida says that 'the philosophy of art is a circle of circles ... When we study art from the point of view of its end we see that it turns upon itself and in annulling itself it links into other rings' such as religion and philosophy.⁶¹

In this age, ideal beauty is dismissed; each individual is free to express their own version of life as long as they do not try to force this vision on others or maintain its universal relevance. Artwork inspired by scripture possesses its own validity as one individual's creative vision, but it also goes against the tide of contemporary thought in upholding essential principles. Perhaps there is justification, however, within a historical context simply because artists always strive to push boundaries and fight against prevailing assumptions. McEvilley says 'What we have called Post-Modernism may only be a temporary ascendancy of the critical over the transcendentalist mood.' In the history of western art there has always been a constant wrestling between the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman limbs of our heritage.⁶² The Baha'i perspective is that this is an age of adolescence. There are two simultaneous forces occurring, the breaking down of the old world order and the building up of a new spiritually based civilization.

The Word of God forms a base from which artists can proceed, adapting the inspiration to different materials and techniques, always trying to bring out their inherent qualities. The beginning of the creative process is an inner vision but the outcome can never be preconceived, as the work demands its own unique resolution. After the struggle a place of peace is found where every element of the composition is unforced and has an integral right to exist. The finished artwork then often reveals new insights of which the creator was originally unaware. This inner cycle of the creative process that results in each individual piece of artwork is reflected in larger cycles of conscious planning followed by intuitive making. A period of conscious reflection and interpretation, such as is described in this article, offers a rich vocabulary of motifs and a mine of deeply felt motivations to draw upon that, far from restricting creativity, provides a springboard into the freedom of spontaneous improvisation. Baha'u'llah says, 'Spirit, mind, soul, and the powers of sight and hearing are but one single reality which hath manifold expressions owing to the diversity of its instruments.'⁶³ Art is an attempt to penetrate the void at the limits of knowledge that links these faculties.

It is impossible to portray through art the true meaning of sacred scripture. Our Creator is intimately near and all we can hope to do is mirror this act of creation ourselves. Intellectual searching cannot find the way, only a harmony with creativity and a joyful expression of being can. Creativity can motivate and carry people through the difficult times of life. Art can become a route to healing because it unifies physical materials with inner spiritual emotions. The enjoyable act of creation can empower practitioners by showing them how they have the ability to manipulate and change the world around them. The process of making art, when it is open to the inspiration of the moment, can also show us how to listen to the guidance from within that can help to integrate the divided self. The therapeutic process of creativity, without putting emphasis on the finished product, derives its inspiration from a positive vision, or a sense of beauty and harmony that faith delivers. All that is necessary is to work on inner transformation through prayer and meditation and the rest will come naturally. Resolution is up to the viewer who makes the necessary leap of imagination to give the artwork life, meaning and beauty. Just as heaven or paradise is not a destination but a continual state of growth and movement, so the finished

62. McEvilley, *The Exile's Return* 108.

63. Baha'u'llah, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 2002) 154.

artwork is an outer manifestation of a far more profound inner transformative process of confirmation and learning, which occurs within the creative practitioner, as they strive to express the ineffable. The artwork is only an end product, it is the creativity itself that feeds the soul and gives life joy, meaning and beauty.

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Corinne Randall received an MA in Multi-Disciplinary Printmaking from the University of the West of England in 2007. The artwork for this course was published in a full-colour illustrated version of *The Hidden Words* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008). She has also created *Horizon of the Unseen* (Bristol: Intellect, 2005, extended edition 2009), see text of article for details, and *The Eternal Soul* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), an illustrated compilation of Baha'i writings on life after death. Her work is exhibited in the Bristol Baha'i Centre gallery.

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