
A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis/project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Adam Norman Francis Lee

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ABSTRACT

Through this project I have explored the possibilities of contemporary painting practice as a mode for investigating concepts of human-divine interrelationship, via an exploration of the themes of Eden, Exile and Babel derived from the Old Testament book of Genesis. These themes relate to the Genesis narratives of the Garden of Eden, the “expulsion from the garden”, and the Tower of Babel. I have explored the possibilities of these as thematic symbols in the development and construction of painting based artworks, which re-examine the content, imagery and meaning of Genesis and its possibilities as a re-interpreted textual source in contemporary painting practice. Specifically through the artworks I have explored notions of human-divine interrelationship in connection with the following: the possibilities of the natural world and landscape in painting as a metaphoric carrier of divinity; humanity as an “image bearer” of the divine; divinity in relation to a dimension of “timelessness” existing outside of linear or chronological time connected with ‘a-temporal’ zones of the infinite and the eternal; and the possibilities of painting as a medium embodying notions and experiences of divinity, and its potential to bend or slow time in relation to exploring human experience in connection to a divine dimension.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction
1.1 The research project

This project explores ideas of the interrelationship between human experience and the concept of ‘the Divine’ through the medium of contemporary painting practice. I have referenced the Old Testament book of Genesis as a central textual source in the development and construction of paintings, in order to establish a thematic framework for the project. While ideas of divinity are wide and varied in their interpretation within numerous religious and mythological settings, the concept of a divine entity or dimension of divinity existing outside of, but also in relation to, the material world of human experience has an important legacy in the history of art across cultures and historical settings. Having been widely explored over centuries by a broad range of artists, the Book of Genesis has played an important role within Western art history as a textual and conceptual source for artists seeking to investigate relationships between the human and the divine. Genesis also remains a source explored by key contemporary artists in recent years for a range of intended purposes.

The thematic framework developed for this project has involved exploring three specific themes derived from the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis, that I have titled these Eden (The Garden), Exile (The Desert) and Babel (The Tower). These reference the narratives of the Garden of Eden, the expulsion or exile from the garden, and the Tower of Babel, each found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Each of these themes has an extensive presence within art history, having been examined by a wide range of artists over time. This project considers the possibilities of Eden, Exile and Babel as enduring themes within art practice, by re-examining the content, imagery and symbolic meaning imbedded within these narratives in relation to contemporary contexts of human-divine interrelationship. I have investigated the possibilities for symbolic meaning derived from the imagery of these themes as conceptual ‘spaces’ within the artworks. This has involved a search for connection points between the temporality of human experience within the material world, and concepts of a dimension of divinity outside of material space and time in what could be termed “zones of timelessness”. I have also examined within these themes the possibilities of relationships between physical landscapes of human experience and internalised landscapes related to ideas of an unseen dimension of divinity.

This investigation has been developed through my ongoing studio practice focused on testing and expanding the properties of painting via the development of complex visual compositions and imagery. This has involved an examination of the possibilities of contemporary painting as a medium connecting human experience with a dimension of divinity. The studio based work is supported by research into the work of key historical and contemporary artists related to the research topic, as well as specific fields of study related to ideas of divinity, including art theorists, the study of related religious and mythological contexts, and relevant schools of theological and philosophical thought.

1.2 Aims and objectives

There are several objectives and aims of this research project: to test the possibilities of my own painting practice as a medium for exploring notions of human-divine interrelationship within contemporary contexts through the development and construction of artworks; to investigate ways of re-interpreting the Genesis themes of Eden, Exile and Babel as significant and enduring textual sources in art practice; and to explore the potential for painting as a contemporary medium embodying notions of a dimension of divinity. The artworks I have developed for this project are not intended to be read as didactic modes of biblical narrative or literalist story-telling, but rather as re-interpretations of symbolic themes derived from Genesis within contemporary contexts.

This project also aims to contextualise the artworks developed in relation to historical and contemporary artworks referencing Genesis themes and subjects, and considers the significance of Genesis as an enduring textual source in art practice within various historical and contemporary settings. This has involved addressing specific problems existing in the field of critical discourse related to the analysis of biblical themes and content within contemporary art practice.

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1 I have considered this concept in relation to the Genesis paradigm of a divine dimension existing outside of temporal zones of linear time and space. This is what, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is most often called a dimension of the eternal.
My research questions are:

In what ways can painting practice be used to explore the interrelations between human experience and the divine, via explorations of themes derived from the Book of Genesis within contemporary contexts?

How may a painting practice be used to explore connections between the temporal aspects of human experience and zones of timelessness related to a dimension of the divine?

1.3 Terminology

Considering the problematic nature of clearly defining ideas of the Divine and experiences of divinity, due largely to the enormous scope of its conceptual interpretations in connection with varying religious, cultural and historical contexts, it is important to clearly define my use of specific terminology and its meaning within this project.

My use of the term the Divine relates to the concept of a being or presence existing outside of the material world of human experience and time. My exploration of this concept relates largely to the biblical framework of Genesis which depicts the natural world, the cosmos and human life as created by a divine God. The use of a capital when referring to the divine is in keeping with historical tendencies which use this approach to denote or name a personal being.

References to divinity in this project may vary slightly from the intended meaning of the Divine in that this term may reference not only the concept of a divine entity but the spaces of human experience which result from interaction with the Divine. This is particularly present in references to human experiences related to both the external human body within the natural world, as well as the internalised world of the human mind and spirit. 

References to the Genesis text within this project relate to the written book of Genesis which forms the first book of the Jewish Pentateuch, being the first five books of the Bible. Genesis also forms an integral part of the Jewish and Christian religions, and to a lesser extent Islam, in establishing a framework for understanding the origins of the universe and humanity. My research into the history, content and meaning of Genesis has involved researching specific translations of the text and the Book of Genesis, taking into account various interpretations within different cultural and historical contexts and time periods. The main translation of the text I have used throughout the project is the New International Version (NIV), with reference also to other translations such as The Amplified Bible (AMP) and the contemporary translation, The Message Bible (MSG), written by Bible scholar Eugene H. Peterson.

1.4 Boundaries of the Research

For the purposes of this project I have focused the development of my research within clearly defined boundaries. The underpinning mode of research has involved the use and development of painting based materials within my own studio practice, including an evolving process of image and compositional development within the paintings. The studio practice has been my primary method of research.

Related to the development of the paintings is my investigation of the Genesis text and relevant related historical and religious contexts. My referencing of Genesis has acted as the central textual source in developing the conceptual foundations of the studio artworks and, because of varying historical interpretations and ways of defining the divine, it has provided an integral framework for exploring notions of human-divine interrelationship. While the nature of this project is not primarily focused on religious history or subjects, my research has included investigation into some of the historical and religious influences and contexts related to Genesis themes, in order to better understand its content, symbolism and meaning.

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2 I will specifically explore the Biblical definition of the human spirit, as pertaining to the internal, immaterial part of a person. Within the Biblical paradigm the spirit is connected with an unseen dimension of the divine and the eternal, but also exists in relationship with the material aspects of the physical human body and the material world around us.
This has involved specific research related to the belief systems of Judaism and Christianity, connections between Genesis and the wider biblical canon, as well as links with other historical literary sources where needed.

The themes of Eden, Exile and Babel have operated within the paintings as thematic images or spaces for exploring the ideas of the project. Through my studio practice I have also focused my investigation of these themes in connection with specific areas related to human-divine connections; the possibilities of the natural world and landscape imagery as carriers of a dimension of the divine; the idea of humanity as an “image bearer” of the Divine, highlighting possible relationships between the material or finite aspects of human experience and notions of divinity as a dimension beyond or outside of time connected with concepts of eternity; and the relationship of a personal experience of place and family in relation to examining ideas of divinity.

I have also explored specific references to Genesis themes and content within specific historical and contemporary artworks that are relevant to the project. This aspect of the project is not intended as an exhaustive survey of artworks referencing these themes but involves examining a selection of artists and artworks which specifically relate to the artworks I have developed and the themes I have explored for this project.

1.5 How the themes of Eden, Exile and Babel operate within the research

In relation to exploring the spaces of Eden, Exile and Babel as a thematic framework, I have considered the origins of these themes in Genesis and the ways these could relate to internalised human experience connected with a dimension of divinity. Each of these themes exists within the Genesis text not only in relation to human experiences in connection with physical landscapes and human constructs, but also as metaphors for internal contexts of human-divine interrelationship. In this way these themes have been investigated within the artworks in relation to the following; I have explored the possibilities of Eden or the Garden as a symbolic space within the studio work specifically in relation to human experiences of connectedness with the divine. I have considered the garden in historical contexts as a space often symbolic of experiences of spiritual enlightenment, as well as Eden as an image portraying the natural world as a divinely created and ordered phenomena reflecting a dimension of the divine. This has also involved exploring ideas of humanity’s role, place and experience within this created world and the importance this might have in relation to examining ideas of human-divine interrelationship. I have also examined notions of divinity within humanity, as reflected in the Genesis Creation narrative which essentially portrays humanity as a created being who is an image bearer of the divine, made “in the image of God”.

In connection with these concepts I have researched aspects of Eden as an idea in various historical contexts, taking into account a variety of interpretations of its meaning and application. This has involved researching key historical and contemporary artworks which appropriate Eden as an idea.

The theme of Exile or The Desert within the project pertains to the Genesis depiction of humanity’s experience of exile from the Garden of Eden, as described in Genesis chapter three. I have explored Exile as a space embodying human experiences of disconnection from the Divine and dislocation within the world. This is symbolised in the imagery and underlying biblical symbology of the desert or the wilderness as a physical landscape experienced by humanity but reflective of internally experienced spaces or landscapes. I have considered Exile in the artworks not only in relation to literal desert or wilderness landscape imagery, but also in relation to its connections with experiences of isolation. I have also explored the possibilities of the desert as a site of spiritual enlightenment and human-divine encounter. This has involved examining aspects of early asceticism, including movements such as the Desert fathers, who viewed the desert wilderness as a spiritual space related to human experiences of the divine, as well as early monastic traditions which evolved from experiences of hermits and monks in connection with the desert as a spiritual space. I have researched key artworks that explore the desert or the wilderness as a location of spiritual reclusion and divine enlightenment.

3 Genesis Chapter Two depicts humanity as created by God, in God’s divine image, and therefore carrying innate qualities of divinity alongside humankind’s humanity.
The theme of Babel or The Tower derives from the narrative of the Tower of Babel depicted in Genesis chapter eleven. I have explored the possibilities of Babel as symbolic of notions of human desire to reconnect with the Divine and what I have called an “edenic state of divinity”\(^4\), reflected through the human constructed cities and worlds that stand in contrast to the divinely created world of Eden. I have also considered the imagery of the tower or the constructed city as symbolic of human experience of transcendence, as well as its links with ideas of an imagined or heavenly city related to the divine. I have explored this concept not only via imagery of the tower or city but in connection with the establishment of civilisations and the profile of human dominance as a conqueror of the natural world. This has involved research into key artworks which appropriate the imagery of Babel for exploring various ideas and concepts within historical and contemporary contexts.

In this way, Eden, Exile and Babel can be viewed within the paintings in relation to the imagery of a journey, whereby I have explored ideas of human experiences in connection with each of these spaces or landscapes. I have therefore explored the ways in which these themes can operate within the artworks as visual symbols of both external and internal human states of experience. As a result imagery of external landscapes of the natural world, as well as the physical human body, are explored in the paintings as symbolic images of an internalised human journey connected to experiences of divinity.

The studio based work for this project is supported by examinations into specific fields of research related to ideas of divinity in connection with Genesis themes, including the work of key historical and contemporary theorists exploring notions of divinity, as well as relevant specific study in related fields of theology and philosophy. This has also involved research into several key philosophical ideas related to ways of defining ideas of the divine in the research. These have included examining the possible connections between notions of divinity and concepts such as the ‘Wholly Other’ or ‘Infinite Other’, and ‘the Numinous’.

I have also considered in the research the concept of time or ‘timelessness’ in relation to ways of defining divinity, and its possible connections with ideas of the transcendent, as a powerful theme present in the Genesis narrative and supported by themes of transcendence in many religious narratives historically. This has involved exploring the possible connections and contrasts between ideas of the material world existing in the dimension of the finiteness of space and time, and the biblical portrayal of a dimension of the eternal or infinite connected with the divine exists in what could be termed ‘a-temporal’ zones. This has also involved exploring the possibilities of painting as a medium with the potential to bend or slow time, via the painting surface and process.

1.6 Rationale

Ways of understanding concepts of the Divine and human experience in relation to it have been explored widely in art practice throughout history. Historical and religious texts such as Genesis have played a crucial part in many of these explorations, as a way for artists to examine, question and grapple with these concepts through the imagery these texts provide within culturally diverse settings. While shifts in thinking around ideas of religious content in art have occurred throughout numerous stages of the past two centuries (particularly via Post-modern paradigms) many have argued that a spiritual void has emerged within contemporary Western culture. Similarly an ongoing discourse has emerged relating to the idea of a “re-enchantment” of contemporary culture, including art practice. Writers such as Suzi Gablik have argued for the need for art to be transformative, whereby the artist “is actively involved in the process of cultural and social transformation; not merely content being a mirror that reflects the crises of our age, he sees the creative potential of life, and gives shape to things to come...”\(^5\).

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\(^4\) By this I refer to the Genesis depiction of humanity as dwelling within Eden in a state of innate connection and intimacy with the divine.

\(^5\) Suzi Gablik, Art Alarms: Visions of the End, Art in America, Vol. 72, 1984, p. 11-14
Related to this discussion are the long standing questions of the role and place of religion in art today, a topic brought into today’s context by recent explorations of Genesis subject matter by contemporary artists including Anselm Kiefer, Jake and Dinos Chapman and Damien Hirst. In recent years these artists have returned to exploring texts such as Genesis for the narratives, symbolism and meaning they may offer within contemporary contexts. Samantha Baskind sites the work of George Segal, who explored Genesis narratives in his sculptures throughout his life, suggesting that “these intimate morality tales challenged Segal as an artist and a thinker, and ultimately his sculpture demonstrates that the stories that shaped civilisation still have resonance for the present, both in art and in life.”

The research for this project is important because it seeks a re-engagement in contemporary art practice with the possibilities of the biblical text as a source for investigating ideas of human experiences of divinity within contemporary contexts. It raises questions regarding the role of religion today and its relationship to contemporary experience as well as recent and current art discourse. I believe the project contributes new knowledge to ongoing discussions relating to this topic. Importantly it also contributes new research within the area of recent discussions regarding the possibilities for a “re-enchantment” of contemporary culture that, in many ways, is linked with the topic of the contemporary dynamics of religion and art today. The project also connects with recent discourse regarding concepts of “A-temporality” at the turn of the millennium and puts forward the possibility of connections between these ideas and notions of a dimension of divinity outside of linear or chronological time. These topics are emerging as crucial themes in current social and cultural climates including the contexts of contemporary art practice.

1.7 Function of the exegesis

This exegesis will function as a written document outlining the project’s concerns and aims in relation to the development of the studio based artworks. Its role is to compliment the focus and development of the artworks, outlining the concepts explored through them and the ways these relate to historical and contemporary contexts of research.

In Chapter Two I will introduce my approaches in employing paintings as the research medium. I will also contextualise the project concerns within specific historical settings related to various religious and mythological contexts for exploring ideas of divinity.

In Chapter Three I will outline relevant fields of research that the project relates to and the ways in which the project contributes new knowledge to the field of research.

In Chapter Four I will discuss Genesis as a textual source, outlining its narrative, content and interpreted symbolism for exploring aspects of the divine in relation to human experience. This will involve introducing the themes of Eden, Exile and Babel and the ways in which they relate to the project focus.

Through Chapter Five I will deal with the conceptual concerns of the project, outlining the specific ways that I have explored ideas of divinity through the artworks.

In Chapter Six I will address the methodologies employed in my approaches to the studio artworks, outlining specific approaches to painting as the research mode.

Chapter Seven will involve an in-depth analysis of the theme of Eden in the artworks, setting out a historical context for understanding its content and symbolism both within biblical history and art history. I will also discuss the ways in which I have explored Eden in the artworks.

Through Chapter Eight I will outline the theme of Exile in the project, emphasising its symbolic meaning within historical contexts and my own uses of it within the artworks.

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7 Coined by writers William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, *a-temporality* is a recent term describing challenges in defining a specific time period in which to situate society at the turn of the new millennium. These writers argue that in an a-temporal zone time periods merge, whereby yearning for the future and reverence of the past are replaced with a state of an extended present.
In Chapter Nine I will discuss the theme of *Babel*, addressing historical contexts where the symbolism of the tower exists, as well as its implications within specific contemporary settings. I will discuss the ways in which I have explored the thematic imagery of *Babel* in the artworks.

Finally in Chapter Ten I will outline specific conclusions derived from the project, their implications within contemporary contexts and further research that could be developed from this project.
CHAPTER TWO

Defining a context for examining ideas of divinity through art practice
2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will introduce my own approaches to the development of the studio work, locating the project in relation to specific religious and mythological settings as well as historical and contemporary concepts of divinity.

2.2 Exploring ideas of divinity through painting as a medium

A fascination with concepts of the divine has been present throughout much of art history across centuries of artistic development and across almost all cultures in some form. Whether associated with religious experience and mythology, varying forms of spirituality, the politics of various times, the development of visual narrative or the human search for belonging, over time people have sought to use art forms as a mode for grappling in a tangible way with what is, in many ways, intangible: that of the nature of divinity and divine experience and humankind’s search for connection with it. While religion and mythology have been a vehicle through which people have attempted to understand the uniqueness of these experiences, art practice has also played a vital role in this exploration, at times developing important connection points with areas of religion and myth. What is evident over time are important parallels between the creation of particular artworks and a human desire for a transcendent dimension above the confines of the merely human, located in a realm of the divine.

Literary sources of various kinds have, at times, proven to be important components of this exploration, providing visual subject matter, narrative threads and materials through which to examine ideas of divinity. Perhaps no written source has been more extensively examined in western art than the biblical text, investigated by artists over the centuries for a wide range of concepts and intentions. None of these are more prevalent than the attempt to visually explore human experience in contrast to, and connection with, a wider divine presence in the universe. In recent decades, too, many contemporary artists have sought to re-examine the biblical text, often in relation to investigating ideas of divinity and divine experience. Many of these artworks highlight questions of the role and importance of the Bible as a textual source in relation to current times and issues, as well as in connection to contemporary art practice. They also highlight possible trends in recent years of artists seeking to re-examine ideas of divinity in relation to contemporary experience.

The approaches I have developed in this project have centred around my own investigations into the medium and usage of painting as a mode for exploring concepts of human-divine interrelationship within contemporary contexts. Importantly this has involved the use of the biblical book of Genesis as a referential source in the development of themes and imagery within the paintings. I have focused my approaches on the ways in which symbolic imagery sourced from Genesis can be employed in connection with testing the possibilities of painting as a medium. This has involved experimentation with a variety of painting applications and techniques within my studio practice, including the layering of numerous paint types over long periods of time and the role and use of scale and space within the artworks. It has also involved the development of a unique assortment of visual imagery connected with my own research into the Genesis narrative and, importantly, the testing of various groups of paintings through the process of public exhibition. I have sought through this process to explore connection points between the painting process and conceptual frameworks connected with ideas derived from Genesis. These include how the painting process might relate to ideas of a dimension of divinity in connection with concepts of timelessness, and ways that the sensory experience of reading the paintings within their presented spaces might engage the viewer in deeper ways with concepts of human-divine interrelationship.
The approach I have taken in this project is one of an exploratory nature, not only in relation to researching specific historical and contemporary artworks and writing related to the topic, but also in connection with the idea of exploration as something related not only to human action within the wider world, but connected with an internalised world of human experience. An important reference for me in approaching this research comes from the imagery of T.S. Eliot's poem, *Four Quartets*, where he employs the symbolization of an internalised human journey:

“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.”

2.3 Defining concepts of divinity in relation to the project

Definitions of the divine vary dramatically within different cultural and religious contexts across vast historical settings, so therefore it is important to establish a clear approach for examining ideas of divinity within this project. In this chapter I will develop a brief overview of some relevant religious and mythological settings that have influenced historical concepts related to the divine. I will also discuss how these might relate to a contemporary understanding of the imagery and content of Genesis in relation to ideas of divinity. In doing so I will highlight more clearly the context in which I have examined these concepts within the boundaries of the project.

2.4 Divinity in religion and mythology

The term *divine* originates from the Latin, *deus*, meaning “god-like”. In broader religious and historical contexts divinity usually relates to the condition of that which originates from a deity or supernatural power. It is most often related to the concept of what is referred to in the English language as *God*. Importantly it often carries associations with ideas of *sacredness* and *holiness*. Historically concepts of the divine have often been framed in relation to the idea of a realm or dimension above the confines of the temporal reality of human experience within the material world of time and space. Here ideas of divinity are strongly connected with concepts of an infinite or eternal reality that transcends the earthly or human domain and is often associated with ideas of an afterlife or a future heavenly world.

Concepts of the divine have been present in various forms since the formations of the earliest known cultures and civilisations. Archaeologists have unearthed Neanderthal graves containing the bones of sacrificed animals alongside everyday objects like tools and weapons. This suggests that belief in a dimension of divinity has been present since the early stages of civilisation. These ideas have often been intrinsically linked with the everyday objects of our experience within the world, as reflected in the tools and weapons buried alongside sacrificed animals. Over the last century it has been argued that even these earliest forms of divine worship and ritualistic practice originated from an overarching belief in one supreme power or being within the universe.

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9 Within the Jewish tradition from which Genesis originates, as well as within the Christian theology derived from it, holiness refers to that which is considered to be ‘set apart’ from usual human experience and associated with the higher dimension of the divine.

10 Through 1912 to 1954 Wilhelm Schmidt published his groundbreaking work *The Origin of the Idea of God*, in which he suggested that in the beginning a “primitive monotheism” existed where humans worshiped one supreme deity who was thought to be ruler of earth and the heavens. This god, sometimes called the Sky God, was not bound by the images or holy temples of the religious systems which were to come later on. He suggests that gradually that belief in a number of gods developed, along with the rituals and practices associated with various mythologies and religious structures.
Karen Armstrong, in her extensive comparative studies of religion and mythology, suggests that throughout the centuries human tendency toward the divine has involved a search for a sense of meaning in relation to our experience of the world. This has often led to the framing of human existence within the realms of an unseen dimension existing above the confines of the material world. She suggests that “we are meaning-seeking creatures”, and that “from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value.”\(^1\) This is closely linked with the common belief amongst most religious and mythological narratives that humanity possesses a soul or spirit that can commune with and experience elements of a divine realm. Over time, an awareness of the finiteness of human existence in contrast to the seemingly infinite universe above has orientated the human gaze toward objects of divinity. This is true of the search for understanding in relation to the origins of the universe and the workings of the natural world. It is also true of the search for meaning in connection with a sense of place within the world and the wider universe.

Religious scripture and mythological narratives have played an influential role in the development of this sense of meaning in relation to larger cosmic settings. Armstrong highlights the role of scripture as a means for adding value and meaning to the human experience which goes beyond the purely mundane;

“In almost all cultures, scripture has been one of the tools that men and women have used to apprehend a dimension that transcends their normal lives. People have turned to their holy books not to acquire information but to have an experience. They have encountered a reality there that goes beyond their normal existence but endows it with ultimate significance. They have given this transcendence different names - Brahman, dharma, nirvana, or God - but, however we choose to describe or interpret it, it has been a fact of human life...It has helped human beings cultivate a sense of the eternal and the absolute in the midst of the transient world in which they find themselves.”\(^12\)

It could be argued that this sense of an ‘encountered reality’ above the mundane and a desire for divine transcendence is central to most religious and mythological narratives. Importantly it places the divine in a reality above, but connected with, our own earthly experience.

In the ancient world mythologies played an important part in conveying the concept of a divine dimension. The *Perennial Philosophy*, present in various forms throughout many pre-modern cultures, saw “every single person, object or experience as a replica of a reality in a sacred world that is more effective and enduring than our own.”\(^13\) Concepts of transcendent realities or dimensions, such as heaven, paradise or nirvana, are apparent throughout the centuries in various forms of mythology helping shape a sense of meaning and value for human experience. Whether it be the ‘gods’ or God, these mythologies have usually always placed human experience in contrast with some form of divinity. Armstrong suggests that these myths “were metaphorical attempts to describe a reality that was too complex and elusive to express in any other way...it seems that in the ancient world people believed that it was only by participating in this divine life that they would become truly human”\(^14\).

Like mythology, religious belief, ritual and practice have also had an enormous influence on shaping ideas around the divine throughout the centuries, most often placing divinity in association with the idea of ‘God’. There is no definitive or unchanging idea of ‘God’ and concepts vary in an almost endless plethora of expressions and meanings throughout cultural, religious and historical settings right up to the present day. What is revealed throughout these varieties, however, is the importance of a wide spectrum of cosmic ontologies central within human consciousness over centuries, that attempt to explain the origins of the world, the universe and the experience of humanity in contrast with a divine realm or being. Revealed in this is a desire in humankind, across cultures and times, to connect with a greater presence within the world and the universe most often called ‘God’.

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The issues central to human experience, from the wonder of birth to the struggle with impending death, have often been reconciled to the presence of a greater force and realm above the earthly. Anthony Bond suggests this is “the idea of a two-way relationship between the nature of consciousness that yearns upwards and God’s intervention into His creation.”

Many of the early religious systems of the ancient world did not see the divine so much as one supreme being. Instead they believed in a collection of divine beings or in an ultimate reality, which permeated the world around them, drawing their attention to the existence of a higher reality above the human world. The paganism of the classical world developed polytheistic systems of the worship of multiple deities, while in contrast pantheistic systems of belief have portrayed the universe and the natural world as an ultimate expression of a divine reality. What is highlighted in many of the ancient world belief systems and practices is an ongoing conflict or relationship between the human and the divine, emphasised by the imagery of a realm of the temporal world of human experience and its yearning for an unseen divine dimension.

Often within these expressions certain objects and places considered sacred became symbols of divine power; a particular geographic location, a certain rock, the moon, sun and sky, all became objects directing human attention “to the mysterious essence of life”, where “all things together; humans, animals, plants, insects, stars and birds all shared the divine life that sustained the entire cosmos”. Likewise human acts of ritual often became embodiments of divine power and presence.

The concept of an ultimate reality is what in the Chinese tradition is called the Dao. Here the Divine is not personified but is portrayed as a presence or force which humanity can become attuned to via ritual and experience. In his extensive studies on the origins of religious belief and mythology Joseph Campbell describes that “the supreme aim of Oriental mythology, consequently, is not to establish as substantial any of its divinities or associated rites, but to render by means of these an experience that goes beyond: of identity with that Being of beings which is both immanent and transcendent...”. Here the experiential nature of the Divine is emphasised.

In contrast, the major monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity have depicted the Divine in relation to one all powerful God. This God exists above all things and is supreme in all things. While depictions of God also vary in the monotheistic religious systems they reveal the idea of one supreme God above the dimension of human reality but who intervenes in the human condition, reflected through the various holy scriptures. Within the wider Judaeo-Christian traditions, the image of God is depicted as multi-faceted and not bound to a singular image or form but is depicted as a spirit. Jewish and Christian traditions have held that God is set apart from everything else, “Wholly Other” and incomparable to anything human or finite. Theologian A.W. Tozer speaks of God as the “uncreated One”, who “is wholly outside of the circle of our familiar knowledge...One who lies beyond us, who exists outside of all our categories...”. The Jewish and Christian writings of the Bible reveal human experiences of deep awe and wonder when in connection with this ‘otherness’ of God. This is what David Jasper describes as encounters with the “Transcendent Other.”

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16 The Upanishads, a collection of Vedic texts, revealed the contrast between this divine realm and the temporality of the human dimension. These portray what is called the ‘brahmanatman’, thought to be the ultimate reality beyond this earthly world. It exists in contrast to what is termed *maya* (translated as an ‘illusion’), a term attributed to the temporality of the world of humanity.
18 The Aryans, from whom Hinduism originates, used sound as a symbolic expression of the divine, believing that as the priest chanted the Vedic hymns the air was filled with a divine presence, permeating human consciousness.
19 The Dao can be translated as ‘the Way’ and is thought to be a force unbound by form or matter, which cannot be seen but only experienced.
21 Wholly Other is a term used in Jewish and Christian theologies, a well as in some philosophical contexts, as a description of the difference between God and everything else. It suggests the condition of “suigeneris”, a Latin phrase meaning “of its own kind, unique in its characteristics”, where God is distinguished as completely different from all other things in existence.
The concept of the numinous has also been linked with ideas of the Wholly Other and the divine, popularised by the German theologian Rudolf Otto in his 1917 publication *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto explored the concepts of the numinous as "a non-rational, non sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the Self," also using the related word numen to refer to God or the Divine. The numinous, he suggested, could be experienced in varying ways; in relation to what he termed numinous dread or the mysterium tremendum, being a powerful sense of awe or fear in the presence of the numinous, or God; a state of stupor wherein a realisation of the divine as Wholly Other and unlike anything we have ever encountered leaves us in a state of dumb astonishment; and experiences of the shudder, where the inward state of a person is left speechless and trembling inwardly as the mystery of the numinous begins to loom before the mind. Importantly Otto likened our experience of the numinous in relation to a growing awareness of our experience of our own spiritual condition in relation to experiencing a divine presence in the world.

Despite the various depictions and beliefs related to the divine, what is apparent in the varying religious narratives and mythologies throughout time is that the nature of the divine is not wholly definable in human language, leading to the forging of beliefs and rituals that orientate the human consciousness toward an unseen transcendent dimension. What is important are the ways these various expressions have connected human experience within the world with something larger in scope than can be fully comprehended and are innately experiential. These varieties of religious and mythological ritual, symbolism and practice “are but ferries to a shore of experience beyond the categories of thought...”.

2.5 My explorations of divinity within the project

My use of the Book of Genesis as a textual source, specifically my reference of the three themes of Eden, Exile and Babel, has been central to my investigation into ideas of divinity in relation to human experience. Through experimentations with the medium of painting, Eden, Exile and Babel operate as thematic symbols and conceptual spaces in the artworks for exploring concepts of divinity. Through the artworks I have explored these themes in relation to the movement of a journey through distinct landscapes of human experience. These “landscapes” can be viewed not only in relation to physical landscapes connected with the natural world and human-constructed environments, but also as internalised landscapes of human experience connected with notions of divinity. In this way I have sought to visually engage with various concepts of divinity by using painting as a contemporary medium for exploring internal states and spaces related to the human condition.

The concepts of divinity I have specifically investigated in the artworks relate to the following: notions of the divine as a presence in the natural world and the cosmos, the image of the divine in humanity, the possibilities of divinity as a dimension outside of time connected with the eternal, and the ways in which experiences of place and connectedness might relate to the realm of divinity. Each of these areas have involved an examination of the possibilities of painting as a medium embodying ideas of divinity.

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24 Of Latin origin the numinous is traditionally associated with the concept of a divine presence or reality. It was also historically associated with the Imperial cult of ancient Rome, which bestowed ‘divine power’ on the Emperor.


This concept of a journey in the artworks mirrors the Genesis narrative itself, which portrays humankind as moving through different landscapes and environments that are symbolic of internal struggles and experiences. What I have examined in the artworks is a move from an original state of connectedness with the divine and with the natural world, reflected through the symbolism of Eden, through the experience of disconnection from the divine and a sense of dislocation within the world, reflected through imagery of Exile and the imagery of the desert or the wilderness, and ultimately toward attempts to re-connect with a divine state symbolised through the human construct of the Tower of Babel.
CHAPTER THREE

Fields of research
3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the project in connection with specific existing fields of research and relevant areas of research to which the project may contribute new knowledge. This will involve contextualising the project in relation to crucial issues of religion in contemporary art, as well as recent ideas of a “re-enchantment” of contemporary culture.

3.2 The project in relation to religious thought in contemporary art

“The bridge-work necessary to connect the two disparate domains - critical theory of art and the world of religious institutions, on the one hand, and the popular culture of religious visual practice, on the other - is not highly developed...the relationship between art and religion remains deeply conflicted.”

“...You cannot understand the world today if you do not understand religion...Religion is not a separate domain but pervades all culture and has an important impact on every aspect of society.”

This project relates to several ongoing fields of research and discourse and may add significant further insight into specific areas today. A crucial issue raised through this project that I have considered throughout its development is the relationship between religion and contemporary art practice. While this project is not focused on exploring religion or religious artworks as a primary objective, it raises crucial questions about the ways in which religious thought and experience is framed in relation to art contexts today, and how artworks examining religious subjects are placed within the broader discourse of contemporary art. The questions on religion in art raised here are one of the important areas of new research contributed to the field of knowledge.

Lynne Herbert, in discussing the work of James Turrell, suggests that;

“Religion has become an unwelcome word in critical discourse about contemporary art - and unfairly so. It has fallen victim to those who would narrowly define it as being part of this or that specific ideological group or situation when, in fact, religion is defined as an individual’s recognition of some higher unseen power.”

James Elkins suggests that “a certain kind of academic art historical writing treats religion as an interloper, something that just has no place in serious scholarship.” He suggests that many artists, especially younger art school students, may be making artworks infused with religious or spiritual content and meaning without even realising it and that this is due largely to a lack of academic discourse engaging with these subjects in a meaningful way. As a result a tendency exists for many artists to avoid labels such as ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ because of the baggage these may carry within contemporary contexts. He goes on to suggest that:

“Straightforward talk about religion is rare in art departments and art schools, and wholly absent from art journals unless the work is transgressive. Sincere, exploratory religious and spiritual work goes unremarked....the absence of religious talk is a practical issue because it robs such artists of the interpretative tools they need most.”

31 Ibid, p.xi, xii.
Throughout the course of developing this research I have encountered these very issues. I became aware of a lack of meaningful art discourse and critical theory that directly engages with issues of the relationship between art and religion today, even when discussing the work of artists who openly engage with religious subject in their work. To my knowledge only limited critical writing has been produced in this area in recent years. Writers including James Elkins, Mark C. Taylor, David Morgan and Suzi Gablik have all contributed some key insights into this area, highlighting a lack of thorough discussion examining religious issues and content. All of their contributions suggest the importance of engagement with religious and spiritual issues through art practice today, as well as the need for re-engagement with these concerns in current art discourse.

One reason for this lack of rigorous critical discourse may be due to trends arising from the post-modern abandonment of past traditional systems of belief including institutional religious thought and practice, and its liberation from attempts to hold to previous structures of truth and meaning historically imbedded in religious modes.

Roger Lundin argues that;

“If modernism represented a desperate effort to have art and culture fill the void created by the decline of religion in the West, then post-modernism stands as the affirmation of the void, as the declaration of the impossibility of ever filling it.”

While religion has historically been concerned with the search for truth and meaning in relation to the human experience, Lundin suggests that “the postmodernist, on the other hand, is far more likely to abandon the search for truth altogether and turn instead to a therapeutic understanding of human experience.” Lundin suggests this model for a ‘culture of the therapeutic’, in which the focus is upon the management of experience and environment interested only in a manipulatable sense of the well-being of its citizens, may explain much of the phenomenon of American, and I would argue western, culture today. Here, discussions of divine presence and experience within the world are sidelined and “questions of ultimate concern - about the nature of good, the meaning of truth, and the existence of God - are taken to be unanswerable and hence in some fundamental sense insignificant.”

Lundin goes on to propose that “the postmodern self is free to see itself as neither defined nor confined by the historical or communal narratives that make claim upon it.” This raises questions as to the wider role and place of religion and spirituality in contemporary culture and highlights some of the problems existing in critical discourse about art that attempts in some way to engage with religious and spiritual subjects.

Mark C. Taylor argues that;

“One of the most puzzling paradoxes of 20th Century cultural interpretation is that, while theologians, philosophers of religion and art critics deny or suppress the religious significance of the visual arts, many of the leading modern artists insist that their work cannot be understood apart from religious questions and spiritual issues.”

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33 By therapeutic understanding Lundin refers to what American sociologist and cultural critic Philip Rieff has described in Triumph of the Therapeutic as “the un-religion of the age, and its master science,” where there is “nothing at stake beyond a manipulatable sense of well being.”

34 Lundin, p.5.


In *Refiguring the Spiritual* Taylor argues that some of these problems in art discourse are indications of wider social and cultural dispositions toward religion and spirituality today, resulting from the secularisation of western culture;

“For more than a century, widely held assumptions about religion and modernity have led to a failure to recognise the important relationship between spirituality and the visual arts. Many social analysts and cultural critics have long argued that modernisation and secularisation go hand in hand - as societies modernise...they become more secular. This process was supposed to be inevitable and irreversible. Recent developments, however, make it clear that this narrative is seriously mistaken. There has been a global resurgence of conservative religion throughout the world that all too often has resulted in growing intolerance and even violence. This unexpected turn of events has led to an understandable reaction against religion in all of its manifestations.”

Taylor suggests that while traditional religious practice has been widely subjected to ongoing criticisms in the West, trends of alternative forms of spirituality have emerged and these are crucially important in recognising and understanding what amounts to a paradigm shift in western religious thinking today. These trends are, of course, present within the practice of many modern and contemporary artists. Taylor suggests these spiritual concerns can be seen clearly in the work of artists like Paul Klee, Barnett Newman, Anselm Kiefer, Matthew Barney, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy, and others, and that these artists all share a common vision of “art as a transformative practice that draws inspiration directly and indirectly from ancient and modern, as well as Eastern and Western, forms of spirituality.”

A crucial point of Taylor’s argument is essentially that in today’s context “art has lost its way.” He asserts that many of the approaches to art making associated with modernism and related ideas of the avant-garde emerging in the late eighteenth century were concerned with art as a transformative medium connecting the politics of human experience with spiritual concerns. He argues that these concerns have been largely subsumed in recent times with a corporatisation and commodification of art as a market, as well as a disregard for the place of religion and spirituality in modern and contemporary art as an important factor in contemporary western culture and society.

Like Taylor, Professor of Religion and Art History David Morgan argues that;

“Even if there is a large market in art about spirituality, the professional discourse on art will resist recognising it because it does not fit the grain of the discourse, which does not run in the direction of personal or institutional affirmation of metaphysical commitments...we should not be surprised at the desire among artists and large numbers of the public to make and appreciate art that involves spiritual meaning. What is perhaps more surprising is that many art critics, art school professors, and art historians should express contempt for art that intends to do so and viewers that welcome it.”

An important aspect emerging from my own research is a greater awareness of the fact that an engagement with ideas, issues and experiences of religion and spirituality is a core concern in the work of many key contemporary artists. These artists are, in some way or another, seeking to re-imagine the role and place of religion and the spiritual today, often via appropriations of traditional and historical religious texts, artworks and mythologies. What much of this work does is re-interpret historical notions of divinity in relation to human experience today.

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39 Ibid., p.xii.
41 Morgan, p. 17.
British artist Chris Ofili, most notably known for his works exploring African heritage and black issues, popular culture and what many call the often controversial relationship between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’, has had an ongoing thread within his work for decades which is concerned with religion in relation to contemporary life. He explains that religion is one of the centrally important themes today;

“I think religion and beliefs around religion are very, very important. I think how people express that varies so greatly that the paths don’t cross. But I do think it’s an important part of existing... It’s very much a part of our history that has gotten pushed to the sides, really, once Modernism swept in. But it’s bloody interesting trying to grapple with it in a painterly way.”

In many ways several of Ofili’s artworks and installations, such as *The Upper Room* and *Within Reach* that I will discuss in the following chapter, could be seen as reminiscent of spiritual experiences traditionally associated with church or temple environments. These works allow the viewer into an experiential space that connects our awareness of a higher transcendent dimension. Similarly artist Julian Schnabel discusses the role of art as a form of religious experience today which, for him, focuses human experience outside of the traditional institutions of religion to something greater within human consciousness;

“Duccio and Giotto were painting in a society in which there was actually belief in God... People had religious experiences in front of paintings. The painters were connecting people to something bigger than life, something bigger than their individual experiences. I think people still have religious experiences in front of paintings. The only difference today is that religion isn’t organised or prescribed - it’s consciousness. To get religion now is to become conscious, to feel those human feelings.”

What Schnabel raises is the issue of how we define ‘religious art’ today and what characteristics, if any, religious artworks might have in contrast to historical or traditional forms of recognised religious art. This highlights the need for a re-imagining of the relationship between the two spheres. As an example Robert Rosenblum suggests the work of Casper David Friedrich might have introduced the presence of a new type of religious subject and experience to “fulfil the transcendental expectations of religious art...” Philosopher George Steiner raises issues similar as to the validity and role of art as a medium for engaging with larger notions of divinity, suggesting that the fundamental questions that underpin all art forms are ultimately connected with the same questions religion is concerned with; the human search for ways of connecting with the divine. He writes that “the questions: ‘What is poetry, music, art?, ‘How can they not be?’, ‘How do they act upon us and how do we interpret their action?’, are, ultimately, theological questions.”

Importantly, though, within this recognition of existing problems in contemporary art discourse, David Morgan suggests that art “offers the possibility of becoming a ‘site of revelation’, an ‘avant-garde’ that might render the ordinary extraordinary.” Here the suggestion is that art can become a new form of religious expression, as a site for spiritual experience perhaps not unlike the “spiritual awakening” Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc wrote of in their 1911 Manifesto *Der Blaue Reiter*.

The artworks developed for this project highlight the need for further discourse on the relationship between religion and contemporary art practice in connection with wider issues of the role and place of religious and spiritual experience today. It offers new insight into this field through the contribution of the artworks developed.

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46 Morgan, p. 19.
3.3 Re-enchantment

Another significant area that this project may contribute new knowledge to is the ongoing dialogue of Re-enchantment. Several writers have contributed to this area, suggesting the need for a re-enchantment of contemporary culture, meaning a reconnection with a sense of the wondrous, the magical and the spiritual in culture. Whilst varieties of discussion about re-enchantment exist in the fields of social science and art theory and practice, I have specifically considered how aspects of my project, particularly my exploration of the Genesis symbolism of Eden (and the idea of a return to an edenic state), might relate to what Suzi Gablik has called “the collective task of re-enchanting our whole culture.” She argues that;

“One of the peculiar developments in our Western world is that we are losing our sense of the divine side of life, of the power of imagination, myth, dream and vision. The particular structure of modern consciousness, centred in a rationalising, abstracting and controlling ego, determines the world we live in and how we perceive and understand it; without the magical sense of perception, we do not live in a magical world.”

The concept of a loss of enchantment may relate to Lundin’s argument of a disconnect in contemporary Western culture from traditional influences of religious subjects and a loss of spirituality in relation to contemporary culture. What many, such as Gablik, have argued is that a disenchantment has emerged in our culture, causing a separation from the experiences of myth, magic and the spiritual once associated with traditional forms of religious experience and once prevalent in the arts. In The Re-enchantment of the World: Art versus Science Gordon Graham describes contemporary disenchantment as the loss of spiritual value in contemporary Western culture. Here he argues that a “de-sacralisation” of traditional spiritual belief and ritual has emerged, in which ideas of mysticism and the supernatural as ways of understanding the nature of being have been replaced by the scientific rationalism prominent in contemporary Western culture.

The concept of disenchantment was first developed by Max Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism where he argued that a gradual “elimination of magic from the world” can be related to the rise of rationalisation, science and capitalism in the West, but that in traditional societies “the world remains a great enchanted garden.” What emerges from this loss of enchantment is the need to re-connect with a dimension of the divine. Mariano Artigas asserts that;

“According to Weber, the disenchantment of the world is closely related to a process of ‘rationalisation,” which replaces the ancient “magic” features of thinking with scientific naturalist explanations. The disenchantment of the world, Weber concludes, steadily grows as scientific thinking grows.”

48 Ibid.
Translators of Weber have linked his concept with the idea of _Entgotterung_, meaning a “de-divinisation”, a phrase used by Friedrich von Shiller in his 1788 poem _The Gods of Greece_, where he referred to “nature from which the gods have been eliminated.” Debate exists as to whether Weber was quoting Shiller directly, but what remains is a link between what Weber calls a “disenchantment” and the concept of a loss of divinity in the world. Again Mariano Artigas argues that;

“It is important to recall that the de-divinisation of the world possesses two different meanings. It means first that the world is neither a part of God nor can be identified with Him... In a second and completely different sense, de-divinisation means that there are no traces of God to be found in the world. This is the meaning used by Schiller and Weber. "Disenchantment" translates the German _Entzauberung_, and expresses that, as a result of scientific progress, the world cannot be considered anymore as a clue to discover the hand of God acting in nature.”

According to philosopher Charles Taylor contrasting experiences of _enchantment_ can be found in the pre-modern world where people lived in a world orientated by the spiritual. Figures and objects like saints and relics played an important part in the human psyche, often seen as holding supernatural power and acting as reflections of a divine world. In this world people “placed meaning within the cosmos” which was seen to have “reflected and manifested a Great Chain of Being”.

Here the nature of human experience was framed in relation to greater universal forces outside human reasoning. Taylor suggests that, “in the enchanted world, the meaning exists already outside of us, prior to contact: it can take us over; we can fall into its field of force. It comes on us from the outside.”

In _The Re-Enchantment of Art_ Suzi Gablik outlines her own sense of disenchantment with “the compulsive and oppressive consumeric framework” of contemporary culture, arguing that “we live in a culture that has little capacity or appreciation for meaningful ritual,” one which has "lost its soul." She asserts that traditional religion has done very little to solve this contemporary problem and that the possibilities of re-enchantment “means stepping beyond the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism, and scientism - the whole objectifying consciousness of the Enlightenment - in a way that allows for a return of the soul.” Gablik’s argument is that contemporary Western culture must re-evaluate the ways in which value is placed not only on human intellect and the mind, but on the soul or spiritual dimension of human experience. Art, she argues, can play a crucial role in this renewal, opening up a dialogue with the ‘magical’ elements associated with new forms of religious and spiritual thought.

These ideas and ongoing discourse are an important area to which my project relates. As the artworks have developed over time I have considered these areas of discussion and the possible framing of my research in relation to them. In this way my project may contribute new and further knowledge to this ongoing dialogue.

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53 Artigas, p. 113-125.


55 Ibid.

56 Gablik, p. 3.

57 Morgan, p.16

58 Gablik, p. 11.
An important text for me in considering how my research might relate to this area has been *Re-Enchantment*, edited by James Elkins and David Morgan. In his introductory essay David Morgan suggests the possibilities for a “re-enchantment” in terms of relationships between art and religious thought. Enchantment, Morgan argues, “remains a living part of the fabric of modern life.” It can result in a “condition for haunting” in which suppressed ghosts arise in the human imagination and, whether folklore, religious narrative or ways of describing love by use of terminology of the magical, these “ghosts” linger in the human mind as a way of interpreting human experience in relation to the unseen or the indescribable. Connections can be made here with concepts of human-divine interrelationship explored in this project, raising questions of the importance of art practice in developing dialogue about the role of textual sources such as Genesis as possible modes for re-enchantment in a contemporary context.

Morgan importantly addresses the possibilities of art as a mode of *re-enchantment* in contemporary culture, arguing that “...art is widely believed capable of saving a nation’s or a people’s soul...providing access to timeless and universal goods, revealing truths of transcendent value...” He suggests that art holds a unique role in this re-enchantment process of renewal, as it “can re-enchant us by taking us back to the mysterious origins that our modernity has occluded.” He cites Gablik’s concept that re-enchantment “points to a more shared belief that art is a spiritual good” and “a way of exercising the primordial power of dreaming, imagining or envisioning that re-establishes a connection with a non-rational, mythical domain shut out by modern science and consumerism.”

While this project does not explore ideas of re-enchantment as a primary aim it does exist in connection with the ongoing dialogue exploring the possibilities of art as a contemporary mode of re-enchantment. It connects, via the text of Genesis, traditional influences of religious and spiritual thought with experiences of divinity in a contemporary art practice context and its wider implication socially and culturally. In exploring an historical text such as Genesis my work engages with some of the ideas related to the discussion of re-enchantment, specifically ideas of the connections between human experience and divinity in contemporary culture and society, and may contribute further knowledge to this discussion.

59 Morgan, p.11.
60 Ibid, p. 16.
61 Ibid.
63 Ibid, p.16.
CHAPTER FOUR

Genesis and the divine
4.1 Introduction

Considering the vast history of Genesis as a text within both religious and historical contexts, as well as in relation to art history, it is important to establish a context for understanding Genesis in relation to the project. In this chapter I will outline relevant aspects of the historical setting of Genesis, and its content and interpreted symbolic meaning within the wider biblical text and tradition, in order to frame my usage of it as a textual source in the development of the artworks.

4.2 Framing the Divine within the Genesis paradigm

The Book of Genesis is the first book in the Bible. It is a book of origins. Thought to be authored by the Jewish forefather Moses, it has been widely studied as an important ancient world text of enormous significance particularly within the major monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam. It presupposes as central to its framework the concept of the divine as God who exists in a dimension outside of the materiality of the natural world and the physical human body. This is described in the Bible as a dimension of the spiritual, often referred to as the “divine” or “supernatural realm”. This is closely linked with concepts of heaven, the afterlife and an eternal dimension outside of time and material space. In the Bible, this dimension, while being unseen to the human bodily senses, exists in intimate connection with the material world and human body. The God depicted in Genesis creates the universe, the world and humanity from this supernatural dimension, establishing a paradigm where the context of the natural world and human experience interact and collide with a supernatural world. Regardless of whether the book of Genesis is read as religious myth, human history or spiritual revelation, the narrative of Genesis is heavily loaded with symbolism pertaining to the experience of humanity within the wider world, in relation to the internal world of human identity, and in connection with ideas of divinity.

The content and imagery of Genesis can be understood as multi-dimensional in its meaning. It has been interpreted symbolically, literally, metaphorically and in liturgical contexts, having been used within both public and corporate contexts often related to religious ritual, as well as for private contemplation and spiritual experience. Religious historian Karen Armstrong suggests that;

“Genesis has been one of the sacred books that have enabled millions of men and women to know at some profound level that human life has an eternal dimension, even though they have not always been able to express this insight in logical, rational form. Like any scripture, Genesis points to a reality that must essentially transcend it.”

In contrast to the many ancient world mythologies and other religious narratives, Genesis uniquely frames God as a person. Throughout Genesis and the wider biblical text the characteristics of the Person of God are gradually revealed, establishing perhaps the most important aspect of the Genesis narrative, being the relationship between humankind and God. Here the divine God seeks to relate personally with the people he has created and people in turn seek to connect with him. Joseph Campbell comments that, “the high function of Occidental myth and ritual, consequently, is to establish a means of relationship - of God to man and Man to God.” This established framework is carried throughout the rest of the Jewish Torah, as well as the wider biblical cannon of Christianity, where we see men and women communing with God in a very personal, relational way. Later on in the Biblical text the divine God is also personified in the form of humanity through the Christian incarnation.


Jewish philosopher Martin Buber examined this concept of God as Person in his 1923 book, *I and Thou*. Buber suggested that “the concept of a personal being is indeed completely incapable of declaring God’s essential being, but it is both permitted and necessary to say that God is also a Person.” He addressed human existence and experience in relation to two contexts; what he called the “I-It” relationship, meaning the relationship between the person and the object that is separate to itself, used or experienced; and what he termed the “I-Thou” relationship, being the relationship of the person toward the subject, where we begin to experience relationship without bounds. He suggested it is this I-Thou relationship which can lead us toward encountering the presence of the divine, or what he suggested is a relationship between humanity and the Eternal Thou. Donald J. Moore suggests here that a “paradox is evident when we consider the meaning of person. Person implies an independent self, but self limited in the totality of its being because there are other independent selves; this cannot be true of God.” He suggests that Buber overcame this problem by referring to God as the “absolute Person”, that is “the Person who cannot be limited”. Buber asserted that, while the use of human personages to describe the divine nature of God are ultimately flawed it is necessary to employ language and figures which humanity can relate to when exploring ideas of divine experience. In this way he suggested that there can exist a human relationship with the Person of God, asserting that “It is as the absolute Person of God that enters into direct relation with us.” What Genesis does is present as image of the divine as wholly outside the realm of human understanding and yet one who makes himself known to humanity.

Genesis begins with the Creation narrative, which depicts the origins of the cosmos, the natural world and humanity as created by God. This created world is brought forth by God’s spoken word whereby life and the material world are declared into existence by an all powerful God. While God is depicted as existing outside of the realms of space and time, the world in which he creates is placed within the confines of space and time, marked by the creation of day and night and the seasons.

It also traces the establishment of the first civilisations mentioned in the bible, including the family line of the Jewish forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and here it acts as a historical account of the forming of Jewish traditions and culture. It has been referred to as a text exploring the deepest questions of human life, including the origins of humankind in connection with the vastness of the cosmos. Genesis Bill T. Arnold goes on to argue that;

“Many cultures, ancient and modern, have produced similar philosophical speculations about the nature of God, humanity, and cosmic origins, but none has left the impact on world history and thought as that of Genesis...the book of Genesis addresses the most profound questions of life. Who are we? Why are we here? And, more to the focus of Genesis, who is God...?”

Karen Armstrong suggests that the purpose of the Genesis narrative “is to help us to contemplate the human predicament. Why is human life filled with suffering, back-breaking agricultural labour, agonising childbirth and death? Why do men and women feel so estranged from the divine?” Importantly Genesis offers a unique ontology that places everyday human experience in relation to a larger transcendent dimension of the divine. Bible scholar Francis A. Shaeffer suggests one way to frame the Genesis narrative is “as revelation in regard to an upper story”. The imagery in Genesis is a connection between the materiality of the created world and of human experience, with the infinite or eternal realm of the divine. This “upper story” frames human experience as existing within the earthiness of the material world, and at the same time vitally connected with this higher realm or dimension of divinity.

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68 Buber, p.135-136.
In many ways Genesis frames human-divine relationship in connection with this transcendent reality. Throughout history biblical scholars and theologians, and historians of religion and mythology, have argued that human desire for transcendence of the mundane and the material world, toward a realm of divinity, is a characteristic of almost all religious or mythological narratives. Genesis depicts human stories and experiences where the realms of the earthly day to day lives of people intersect with the dimension of the divine.

This dichotomy between the earthly and the divine is portrayed vividly in the Genesis account of the creation of human life. Here humanity is portrayed as created in the “image of God”\textsuperscript{72}. The text describes God taking the dust of the earth and breathing into it divine breath, creating human life. This is generally considered by theologians and Bible scholars to be one of the crucial aspects of the Genesis paradigm, setting up a context for the entire biblical text in which an interrelationship is established between human beings and God. In Genesis humanity is unlike anything else created by God. Only humanity possesses this image of the divine. Humankind is distinguished amongst the rest of the created world as a creature possessing a divine quality at the core of his being. Shaeffer suggests that “God sets man apart...Man stands in marked contrast to everything which has been created before.”\textsuperscript{73}

The description of humankind in Genesis as made “from the dust of the earth” with the breath of the Divine frames human experience in relation to both these dimensions, whereby humanity becomes like a medium between two. This has been an ongoing concept explored in much of the work developed for this project. It reveals a deep desire in the recesses of humanity for what Karen Armstrong has called an “apprehension of transcendence”\textsuperscript{74}, both from the struggles and pains of life and from the mundaneness of the everyday. Important connections are revealed between the material and immaterial worlds - the finite realm of human experience contrasted with the infinite dimension of the divine. In Genesis humanity becomes a carrier of the Divine image and the God of Genesis seeks to relate personally to the humanity he has created.

4.3 Humanity and God, and the symbolism of Eden, Exile and Babel

The portrayal of humanity as a created being made in the image of the divine is vital to understanding the content and meaning of Genesis. There exists in Genesis a depiction of humankind as possessing a divine quality intertwined with humanity. The first man and woman are portrayed as dwelling in a state of innate connectedness within themselves, with the natural world around them and with God, emphasised through the fact that “they were naked and felt no shame”.\textsuperscript{75} Importantely, this connection is symbolised through the imagery of the Garden of Eden, a place where life is sustained within this human-divine connection. In Eden humanity’s role is to care for the natural world. There is freedom within this state of existence.

Subsequently, Genesis depicts this connectedness between humankind and God as ultimately suffering fracture, through the narrative of “the Fall”\textsuperscript{76}, whereby humanity’s experience of God becomes one of disconnect and rupture. The narrative describes that, through The Fall, the eyes of the man and woman were opened to a higher realm of knowledge in which they immediately become aware of their nakedness and make for themselves coverings made of leaves. As a result they are expelled from the garden and from the presence of God, left to wander in a wilderness of exile outside of the divinely ordered Eden. Here the man is forced to work the land to survive and the woman now bears the pain of childbirth. For the first time humanity experiences the hardship and loss of life outside of the connection with God. The symbolism of the landscape of the desert becomes central to the Genesis narrative here, indicative of the internal state of human exile outside of connection with the divine.

\textsuperscript{72} Genesis 1:27.
\textsuperscript{73} Shaeffer, p.39.
\textsuperscript{74} Armstrong, p.5.
\textsuperscript{75} Genesis 2:25.
\textsuperscript{76} Historically within the Jewish and Christian traditions “the Fall” refers to the temptation of the first man and woman and their exit from the Garden of Eden and the presence of God. In the Genesis narrative they eat of The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and move from a condition of immortality to death.
Throughout the rest of Genesis, humanity is portrayed as striving to re-connect with God through the establishment of a man-made world. Here humanity gradually establishes civilisations and cities, the pinnacle of which is reflected in the city of Babel whereby the people attempt to build a tower toward the heavens in order to become like God. Theologians have viewed the symbolism of Babel not only in relation to human endeavour and achievement, but also in connection with human desire to re-connect with God and an original state of divinity experienced in Eden. Jean Delumeau suggests that in Judaeo-Christian belief;

"...human beings must regain familiarity with God and the elimination of death. Humanity's journey to the 'promised land' will enable it, provided it submits to God's law, to gain definitive possession, in the eschatological paradise, of the blessings that it possessed only in a precarious way in the garden of Eden".  

4.4 Eden, Exile and Babel as symbolic themes in the research

The three themes of Eden, Exile and Babel have been integral in the development of conceptual spaces explored within the artworks for this project. They act as thematic symbols in the artworks for exploring ideas of a human-divine interrelationship. My investigation has involved exploring these themes in relation to the movement of a journey through the distinct landscapes offered up by Eden, Exile and Babel. Within the artworks the idea of the landscape relates not only to the external landscape of the natural environment and the human-constructed world, but the internal landscape of human experience in connection with the divine. Eden is representative of states of divine connectedness of heavenly paradise; Exile, or the desert, reflects internal experiences of disconnection from the divine and states ultimately transcending it; and the imagery of Babel reflects a relationship between the constructed worlds of human endeavour and human desire for re-connection with an edenic state of divinity, while also referencing ideas of the heavenly city. In this way Eden, Exile and Babel have come to represent a movement of human experiences of divinity, traversing states of connectedness, disconnection and ultimately desire for reconnection, with a dimension of the divine. Bible scholar Bill T. Arnold suggests humankind's "spiritual history runs from innocence to disobedience, and on into moral decline which the beginnings of civilisation can do nothing to arrest".

David Jasper suggests this symbolism of internalised landscapes in relation to human-divine experience, exists within the biblical text somewhere "between a lost garden and an envisioned city, folded between the pages of the sacred text: from the Eden of Genesis 1-2 to the Heavenly City described in Revelation 21". He suggests this symbolism of the journey runs through the entire biblical text, offering insight for understanding the human condition in relation to ideas of a divine presence in the universe. Within the Genesis narrative images such as the Garden of Eden and the constructed world of Babel become symbols of the transcendence of an imagined or heavenly city, a paradisiacal state of human-divine connection. Jasper suggests that many of the characters described in the Bible, like so many of the religious ascetics who followed them through history, "were traveling towards the paradise garden and "the heavenly city...". Here time may relate to both a movement backwards to past states of experience, as well as forward to an unrealised future world.

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80 Jasper, p.43.
This symbolism of the external and internal human journey mirrors themes established throughout Genesis and the Judaeo-Christian tradition arising from it, where human experience within the world is likened to internal experiences related to divinity. Anthony Bond describes this tradition as follows;

"In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, this life on earth is not a rehearsal but the real thing, our one chance to grapple with the nature of being in the world and to ponder what, if anything, lies beyond the parentheses drawn about our individual existence. Many of these narratives are structured around a journey, often taking the form of creation stories that extrapolate from lived experiences of individuals to the genesis of the material universe and whatever animates it."

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CHAPTER FIVE

Conceptual focus of the artworks - my examination of divinity
5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the approaches I have developed for exploring aspects of divinity in my own artworks for this project. This will include discussing the conceptual aspects appropriated from Genesis and expanded upon in the artworks. I will also compare and contrast these to specific historical and contemporary approaches to depicting concepts of the divine in art practice.

5.2 My approaches to exploring the divine in the project

As mentioned in chapter one there are several specific aspects of divinity which I have explored in the artworks. These have included notions of the divine as a presence in the natural world and the cosmos; humanity as a carrier of the image of the divine, highlighting possibilities for the interrelationship between the material or finite aspects of human experience and ideas of the infinite in connection with divinity; the concept of divinity as a dimension outside of time and connected with the eternal, and the ways in which experiences of place and connectedness might relate to the realm of divinity. Each of these areas has been examined via ongoing experimentations into the possibilities of painting as a medium embodying ideas of divinity.

The symbolism of Eden, Exile and Babel has helped to form the imagery and conceptual framework for investigating these areas in the paintings. Within the artworks Eden has come to represent human experiences of connectedness with the divine as well as ideas of a divine order and design to the natural world and humanity’s role and place in relation to it. In the paintings Eden also relates to concepts of a heavenly paradise in connection with a timeless dimension of divinity.

Exile exists within the artworks alongside the imagery of the desert or wilderness and can be connected with experiences of disconnection from an edenic state of divinity and a sense of dislocation within the world. This human dislocation within the world moves toward the desire to establish a place of security in which to belong, reminiscent of images of Eden and reflected through the imagery of a wandering in the wilderness of landscape. There exists within these wilderness scenes not only the human struggle to survive in harsh landscapes of isolation and seclusion but also human encounters with the divine which are associated with the transcendent and the revelatory.

The image of Babel has developed within the artworks as a symbol of human desire to re-connect with the divine and with an original edenic state of divinity experienced in Eden. Babel is reflected through the human constructed cities and worlds that stand in contrast to the image of a divinely created world in Eden. The image of the tower can also be connected with ideas of a future imagined city connected with the concept of heavenly paradise.

5.3 The paintings as windows into the divine

An important aspect in my approach to developing the artworks and their conceptual framework has been exploring ways in which the paintings might operate as “windows” to a divine dimension, connecting the viewer with ideas of a realm of the eternal and the transcendent. Links can be made here with the history of illuminated artworks, whereby the use of stain-glass windows and illuminated religious texts in places of worship reveals historical traditions which attempt to connect a dimension of human experience within the material world with that of a divine dimension. Anna Clabburn comments that “...early illuminated images were believed to be a physical conduit between the mundane and ethereal realm whereby the acts of ‘listening’ and ‘looking’ facilitated direct access to a transcendent dimension”.

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In this way I have investigated how the paintings might be developed as possible windows, or in Clabburn’s words acting as “a physical conduit”, between two realms of experience. I have sought to discover ways of connecting experiences of the temporality of the physical body and the natural world with that of an unseen dimension of the divine. I have also considered Clabburn’s notion of “listening” and “looking” and the ways painting might provide an opportunity for the viewer to slow down, entering the space of the artworks and engage on an experiential level with concepts of divinity in the works. An important text I have explored in relation to these concepts has been George Steiner’s Real Presences in which he proposes the notion of God’s presence as underpinning all forms of human communication, including art:

“...any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence... the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, infers the necessary possibility of this ‘real presence’. The seeming paradox of a ‘necessary possibility’ is, very precisely, that which the poem, the painting, the musical composition are at liberty to explore and to enact.”

Links can be made here with the language of painting and the spaces that the artworks might open up before the viewer, providing encounters which allude to a dimension of divinity carried in the presence of the artworks. This can be likened with the ideas of spaces of prayer or mediation, whether church, synagogue or private spaces of worship and the role illuminated and other artworks have played in the facilitation of these spaces and experience.

A contemporary artwork that was influential in the early development of the project is the painting installation The Upper Room by British artist Chris Ofili, which I visited at the TATE Britain in 2011. The Upper Room presents thirteen luminous paintings of Rhenusus monkeys presented in a purpose built room made from walnut, entered by visitors through a thin corridor leading into a darkened cathedral-like space. Ofili has suggested the paintings are representative of a Christ figure and the twelve disciples, reminiscent of the Last Supper. Made from reflective substances such as gold leaf and varnish, the paintings glow within the space and provide an experience reminiscent of a space of meditation and worship. Ofili has commented that in developing the exhibition space, “it was important for the space to feel akin to a space of worship”. Judith Nesbitt suggests that the long approach viewers took through the entry corridor “was intended to slow the viewer down. Entering the wooden casket invoked the sudden change in emotional tempo experienced upon entering a chapel”. She suggests that the strange and ambiguous subject of the installation “was an ecumenical, collective invitation to transcendence through the senses and the imagination”.

I have attempted to explore in my own paintings the notion of lifting the viewer’s gaze is upward to a higher dimension above the material world, represented in the temporal materials of the paintings themselves.

83 George Steiner, Real Presences, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 3.
86 Ibid.
5.4 Personal narrative in the work

I have also explored the role of narrative as a function in the artworks. While I am referencing specific themes from the narrative of Genesis I have not explored these as didactic or literal narrative representations of the biblical story. Rather I have sought to use narrative in the paintings in connection with a personal narrative embedded in the artworks, imbuing the images, compositions and painted surfaces with a sense of my own personal experience or journey in connection with ideas of divinity. One way this personal narrative has been developed is through the use of visual imagery taken from personal family photographs and used as source images to develop parts of the painting compositions. In this way I have explored elements of a personal history within my investigation and use of Genesis as a textual source. This connects the concept of Genesis as an ongoing story of people encountering the divine in the world with my own experience and story.

A link can be made here with Robert Rosenblum’s suggestion in relation to Casper David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea*, that the painting possesses the quality of a “personal confessional, whereby the artist, projected into the lonely monk, explores his own relationship to the great unknowables, conveyed through the dwarfing infinities of nature.” In a similar way I have attempted to create multiple readings in the paintings, which explore universal human concerns as well as personal ones in relation to wider concepts of divinity. Dan Rule reflected on this aspect of my work in an essay he wrote for my exhibition *The World Travailing*, at Kalimanrawlins in 2012 (Fig. 1):

“There’s a personal currency to these images too, and this is perhaps their greatest strength. In the exhibition’s title work, a woman and man can be made out perched on a bank of lake, the scene encircled by soaring snow-capped peaks. They blend into the landscape as if apparitions. The couple are in fact Lee’s late grandparents, who died before he was born. The painting is in fact an ode. It whispers of the frailty of human life as much as the importance and resilience of memory, be it recalled or conjured. For memories are figments of our imagination as much as they are imprints of experience.”

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Fig. 1 *The World Travailing* 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
198cm (h) x 274cm (w)

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In this way the artworks developed for this project can be read and experienced on various levels in relation to exploring ideas of human-divine interrelationship. There is the level of the broader context of human experience and the human condition in relation to ideas of divinity, as expressed in the stories of Genesis, the history of artworks inspired by ideas of divine encounter and the traditional spaces of worship and divine reflection associated with religious ritual and spiritual experience. There is also the level of the deeply personal, related to my own personal family history and experience as well as the personal histories carried by the viewer. These histories can be seen as trans-generational, existing beyond time, in the timeless and the eternal.

5.5 Divinity in the natural world and landscape

The use of landscape imagery has also been an important aspect in the development of the artworks for its possibilities as a carrier of ideas of divinity. Certainly there exists a long history in Western art of exploring the relationship of concepts of divinity within landscape and images of the natural world. Thomas Aquinas wrote that "Nature is nothing other than the ratio of a certain art, namely, the divine, inscribed in things." Specifically I have explored in the artworks the ways that landscape and imagery of the natural world can be re-interpreted through the painting process in order to allude to ideas of “other-worldly” environments. This allusion can be associated with ideas of heavenly Paradise, the transcendent and a dimension of divinity outside of the material world. In this way aspects of landscape in the paintings can relate to the external natural world, the interior world of human experience, as well as the wider world of the cosmos and its associations with the a heavenly dimension.

Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko by Robert Rosenblum has been an influential text in the development of this aspect of the project. In a chapter titled ‘Friedrich and the divinity of landscape’ Rosenblum discusses approaches Casper David Friedrich developed in the late 19th Century to explore ideas and experiences of divinity as depicted or represented through landscape painting traditions. He portrays Friedrich as “a pivotal figure in the translation of sacred experience to secular domains” who saw the “need to revitalise the experience of divinity in a secular world that lay outside the sacred confines of traditional Christian iconography”.

Rosenblum refers to what he calls Friedrich’s ongoing exploration through painting of “the divinity of landscape”. Friedrich’s approach was to create “an experience in which the individual is pitted against, or confronted by the overwhelming, incomprehensible immensity of the universe, as if the mysteries of religion had left the rituals of church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world”. Here the landscape of the natural world becomes the setting for an identification of a divine presence in the natural world and its possibilities for drawing the human mind toward something greater and unseen.

In many ways this concept of divinity in the landscape can be linked with the writings of Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel, who likened human experience of awe and wonder within the natural world with an apprehension of the “ineffable”. Heschel describes this sense of the ineffable in terms of a sensing of a higher reality or dimension found in the phenomena of the natural world and the cosmos.

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90 Rosenblum, p.15.
92 Ibid, p.10.
He suggests this is what lies beyond that which the human mind can wholly grasp or convey through language:

“What characterises man is not only his ability to develop words and symbols, but also his being compelled to draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into words...the stirring in our hearts when watching the star-studded sky is something no language can declare. What smites us with unquenchable amazement is not that which we grasp and are able to convey but that which lies within our reach but beyond our grasp; not the quantitative aspect of nature but something qualitative; not what is beyond our range in time and space but the true meaning, source and end of being, in other words, the ineffable.”

Heschel suggests that any experience or awareness of the ineffable moves us to look beyond that which can be physically seen or rationally comprehended, toward experiences beyond the realm of the senses and ultimately leading to an encounter with the divine who is Wholly Other;

“The sense of the ineffable introduces the soul to the divine aspect of the universe, to a reality higher than the universe. However, in stating that to be means to be thought of by God, that the universe is an object of divine thought, we have affirmed the existence of a being who is beyond the ineffable.”

Part of my approach has involved researching the possibilities of landscape as a subject imbuing the natural world with concepts of the supernatural. Rosenblum argues that “for Friedrich there was no boundary between the natural and the supernatural” and that he “imposed upon everything he drew and painted an explicit or implicit sense of supernatural power and mystery in nature...”. This is an important aspect in contextualising the artworks developed for this project as it highlights the possibilities of my own use of imagery of the natural world in painting as a mode for visually exploring aspects of the divine.

Another aspect of my use of landscape has involved developing imagery in the paintings which marries elements of landscape with the human figure, where the two at times may cross over or appear inseparable. This is suggestive not only of human connectedness with the natural world, most predominately associated with the theme of Eden, but also the idea of human connectedness with the unseen realm of the divine associated with internal human states and experiences whereby the figure encounters a transcendent dimension. In this way the figures in the paintings can be viewed in terms of what Heschel called “citizens of two realms”, whereby images of the natural world, the physical body and elements alluding to a higher realm of the divine appear layered over one and other.

Considering some of the difficulties encountered in attempting to visually depict the ultimately “unrepresentable” subject of divinity, images of the landscape and the natural world become important aspects of the paintings as carriers symbolic of divinity. They attempt to connect human experience within the natural world with the idea of the landscape of a supernatural world, that of the realm of the divine, which, whilst remaining fundamentally ‘unseen’, may be represented or reflected through visual references to the wonder of the natural world. This also links the paintings with the concepts appropriated from the Genesis narrative, where humanity is placed within a divinely created world representative of a divine order and design, mirroring the internal experiences of human-divine interrelationship. I have explored these ideas through the Original Camouflage paintings discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

94 Abraham Heschel, Man is Not Alone, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1951, p.4, 5.
95 Ibid.
96 Rosenblum, p.24, 25.
97 Heschel, p.8.
5.6 Divinity in humanity

I have also investigated in the artworks the concept of a presence of divinity in humanity. As described previously a central aspect of Genesis is the idea of humankind as an image bearer of the divine, the first man (Adam) having been formed “from the dust of the ground” with the divine breath of God breathed into him. This concept has been a hugely influential one in the development of the conceptual framework for the paintings. Genesis describes that God created the first woman (Eve) out of the rib of the man, creating what many biblical theologians have considered a context for the symbolism of a connectedness between human beings. Bible scholar Bill T. Arnold suggests that the narrative of Genesis portrays humanity as “a creature fashioned from earthly matter, God-breathed and God-like...”. There exists here a dichotomy between the earthiness of the man made from the dirt, reinforced by the original Hebrew used in the text for man, Adamah, meaning “man” or “earth”, intertwining with the breath of the divine which. It reflects an image whereby the material or physical aspects of humanity, such as physiological and psychological components of the human body and mind, are portrayed as co-existing in a continual relationship with a divine presence in humanity.

This dichotomy between the earthly and the heavenly is a conceptual thread I have explored throughout many of the paintings developed for the project and, again, one of the ways in which I have explored this is via the development of imagery that connects the human figure with elements of the natural world. Figures appear at times enveloped by elements of the natural world, creating a sense in the paintings of connections between the figure and environments where, in parts, the two seem inseparable.

5.7 Divinity and timelessness

The relationship of human experience to time, and to a zone of the timeless, is an important aspect of various religious narratives including Genesis. Another aspect of divinity I have explored in the paintings is its connection to ideas of time and timelessness. In Genesis, and throughout the biblical text, a contrast exists between the temporality of human experience within the material world and a dimension of the divine outside of linear or chronological time and material space. A.W. Tozer asserts that “God dwells in eternity but time dwells in God. He has already lived all our tomorrows as He has lived all our yesterdays.” The imagery in Genesis is one where time itself exists in the very nature of God, who is neither bound to it nor limited by it. The idea of humanity as possessing the image of the divine opens up spaces of a transcendent reality above the temporal which is accessible to humanity, where human experience collides with an eternal dimension. Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as in many other religious spheres, this idea is also reflected in the belief that human life is essentially spiritual in matter, connected with eternity and therefore continues on even after the death of the physical body.

I have explored connections between divinity and a dimension of the timeless in the paintings in several ways. Through the development of specific imagery and the building up of the painted surface, the paintings are not fixed within particular timeframes or places. In this way there remains ambiguity in the artworks as to the time in which the paintings are set and where the images are geographically located, abandoning any linear reading of the artworks. The figures and landscapes could depict historical settings, the present day, future events and places or a crossing over of all of these. The imagery could also relate to events and places completely outside of the known world and its timeframe.

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98 Genesis 2:7.
An important text in my experimentations with these ideas has been the recent publication *Anachronic Renaissance* by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood. They argue that;

"Many societies have figured to themselves the ramification, the doubling, the immobilisation of time: in the naming of planets and seasons; in the promise of reincarnation; in narratives of the rise and fall of worldly empires understood in cyclical terms; in the time travel of dreams and prophecies; in religious ritual; and, in the Christian tradition, in the mystical parallel between Old and New Dispensations, read between the lines of holy scripture. Such contrivances mirror the sensation, familiar to everyone, of time folding over on itself, the doubling of the fabric of experience that creates continuity and flow; creates meaning where there was none; creates and encourages the desire to start over, to renew, to reform, to recover."\(^{101}\)

What Nagel and Wood touch upon here is not only the presence of various ideas of time in multiple forms across various cultural and historical settings, but also a human desire to connect with sensations that take us outside of time as we know it. Whether related to the uncovering of past civilisations across time, science fiction genres, religious narrative and ritual or cosmic settings where time slows or speeds up, the relationship of humankind to time and ideas of timelessness remains a point of huge interest culturally and artistically. Ideas of a timeless dimension of divinity have, at times, been intertwined with these historical interests.

Importantly Nagel and Wood argue that the role of the artwork may hold a particularly unique place in this discussion due to its ability to bend time in on itself. Because of its capacity not only to touch upon human experience in relation to time but to also exist in relation to multiple time zones and cultural or social settings, works of art may be used to explore our perception and experience of time in ways other modes of research cannot. Artworks can project into the past to previous times and artworks, into the future, and importantly toward a realm of divinity outside of time;

"No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made or designed by an individual or by a group of individuals at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artefact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity."\(^{102}\)

I have examined how painting could be employed in such a way as to touch upon these streams of time and their connection with human experience in relation to a zone of timelessness connected with divinity. Nagel and Wood’s idea of the artwork as something which can bend or slow time and point toward an origin “outside of time, in divinity”, has been of particular interest to me in exploring the ways the paintings can investigate connection points between the human and the divine. British artist Chris Ofili discusses his own approaches to painting in terms of an experience of the slowing of time, commenting that;

"Sometimes you see a film and time goes very quickly...and I think you might see an incredible painting...and for that short or long period of time you feel as though you’ve fallen into that painting and you’re in there and you’re not necessarily one of the characters but you’ve allowed your mind to forget that you’re looking at a painting...”\(^{103}\)

Here our experience of the artwork can cause time to slow down or stand still where possibilities exist for the space of the artworks to touch upon a dimension of divinity unbound by time. The experience of the painted surface might lead the viewer to encounter what Ofili describes as spaces which take them “outside of themselves.”


\(^{102}\) Nagel and Wood, p.6.

This concept of artworks facilitating a slowing of time, their ability to relate to various points in time and also to the possibilities of a time-transcendent realm of divinity is a major point where my project can be situated to this recent study. Importantly for this project are my own experimentations into the ways the painting process can relate to time, in the bending or doubling of time through the extended process of layering colour and transparent layers of paint over long periods.

Conceptually in the project ideas of time also relate to the use of Genesis as a textual source and its implications upon various understandings about time in connection with a divine dimension. Nagel and Wood suggest that;

“Theologians...read sacred texts as indications of a super-historical divine plan that suspended earthly time. The theology of typology identified formal rhymes between historical events that revealed the pattern imposed on reality by divinity. One event was the shadow, the image, the figure of another. For the theologian, therefore, merely secular time was overcome through metaphors of figuration that invoked the powers of imagination and intuition.”

This suggestion of a reading of time and events as something shaped and formed by a divine dimension is certainly a undercurrent in theological interpretations of Genesis. In its narrative, Genesis depicts people and the events shaping their lives as intrinsically linked with and influenced by a divine reality. Within Genesis time is subject to God’s higher realm and a sense of divine purpose infiltrates the lives of seemingly ordinary men and women.

A contemporary painter who I have referenced in relation to exploring ideas of the timeless is the German artist Neo Rauch, whose first major retrospective I viewed in Munich and Leipzig in 2011 as a part of my doctoral research. Rauch has described his approach to painting as “a peristaltic flirtation system in the river of time.” Concepts of the bending, blurring or stretching of time are recurring themes in his work and can be linked to his interest in the writing of 19th Century Catholic Polemicist Leon Bloy, who believed in the simultaneous occurrence of events. Rauch describes that;

“We only see a tiny element of what forms part of an enormous pattern. So what we see is a horribly sober simplification of this pattern that expands in all directions. Clairvoyance or prophecy can be explained by the fact that certain people can briefly glimpse a larger part of this pattern. Hence, in my paintings, figures come from all sides or times.”

In this way my study of Rauch’s work has aided in my own development of imagery and painterly approaches that attempt to create a sense of the timeless in the artworks, and a connection between the two worlds of the material and the immaterial. In my own painting I have explored ways of developing conceptual spaces, whether through the layering of painted surfaces, the use of landscape and figuration or the application of colour, which connect the viewer with an experience of timelessness.

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106 Ibid.
5.8 A-temporality

Related to these concepts is the recent emergence of discussions around ideas of a-temporality. As a concept a-temporality relates to challenges in defining the time context in which we now exist. Several writers, including William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, have argued that at the turn of the new millennium society exists in a period that cannot be situated within a specific period of time in line with historical forms of periodisation. Historian Kazys Varnelis has argued that we have seen the end of historical tendencies for a naming of eras since the rise of network culture, suggesting that "The lack of a proper name for the decade is no mere product of a linguistic difficulty or a confusion between century, millennium, and decade. Rather it suggests that we no longer seem capable of framing our time." Many of these writers have argued that within an atemporal zone, yearning for the future and reverence of the past are replaced with a state of an extended present.

Forever Now, an exhibition at MOMA in 2014, presented the work of 17 painters whose approach to painting reflects these recent characterisations of a-temporality. In the exhibition the term was used to describe "a cultural product of our moment that paradoxically doesn't represent, through style, through content, or through medium, the time from which it comes...A-temporality, or timelessness, manifests itself in painting as an ahistorical free-for-all, where contemporaneity as an indicator of new form is nowhere to be found, and all eras coexist." The notion of particular artworks transcending any clear time periods in which to be neatly situated and therefore opening up a reading in the work where "all eras coexist" is a thread running through almost all of the artworks I have developed for this project. In this way many of the spaces and landscape settings in the paintings might relate to actual places I have photographed and then painted, but also to past or future locations or places completely outside of this world. This is what John Berger describes, in discussing Jitka Hanzlova's photographic series Forrest, as spaces existing "in-between" times. He writes, "In a space without gravity there is no weight, and these pictures of hers are, as it were, weightless in terms of time. It is as if they have been taken between times, where there is none." Berger suggests that in looking at particular artists work like Hanzlova's it is necessary to reject European notions of time developed during the eighteenth century with its limitations of "the notion that a single time, which is unilinear, regular, abstract and irreversible, carries everything." He suggests the importance of looking at cultures outside of Europe, that "have proposed a coexistence of various times surrounded in some way by the timeless." Certainly examples are present in many ancient world cultures, whereby structures such as temples and monuments were built to emphasise connections between human beings and the cosmic realm. Many of these examples highlight alternative ways of addressing or viewing time.

Mircea Eliade relates ideas of time to his notions of the profane and the sacred, suggesting that there exists profane time and sacred time. He emphasises the role that myth plays in describing a time that is fundamentally different from historical time, or what modern Western society considers "normal" time. Eliade comments that, "In short myths describe ... breakthroughs of the sacred (or the 'supernatural') into the World." He asserts that in the mythical age time represents the moment when the sacred entered our world, giving it form and meaning.

The paintings developed for the project connect with ideas of timelessness by the fact that they can be read as relating to multiple zones of time. These include the time in which the artworks were made, as well as to historical contexts related to my own family history and wider historical references, and also to future periods of time yet to come. As mentioned earlier the exploration of personal narrative and history in the paintings can be seen as relating to trans-generational settings, existing beyond time in connection with the eternal. This transcendence of a static time period in the paintings also places them in connection with zones outside of time altogether, in divinity, where there exists this "breakthrough of the supernatural" into temporal settings.

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110 Berger, p.127.
111 Ibid.
In many ways a-temporality is a current discussion in which this project can, in part, be contextualised. My exploration of human-divine interrelationship and the ways that notions of timelessness might exist in connection with this can be situated in relation to a-temporality as a phenomenon of a dimension of the timeless. While a-temporality is a way of describing the unique zone we currently exist in as a global society, I argue that it may well also importantly relate to ideas of an infinite realm of the divine. Here, as human experience interacts with this dimension, time zones blur, stand still and cross over, opening up spaces of experience which are not bound by historical readings of time.
CHAPTER SIX

Methodology
6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the initial approaches I developed in researching the project topic and the ways I established the methodology in the research. I will discuss my approaches to exploring and contextualising the content, meaning, and symbolism of Eden, Exile and Babel. I will also discuss some specific early artworks developed for the project and the ways in which these aided the emergence of later bodies of work constructed. This will include outlining specific field trips conducted for research of museum and gallery collections, and particular exhibitions that helped the initial formation of the concepts for the project.

6.2 Initial approaches to developing the research: Reading the biblical text in context

My initial approach to establishing the methodology for the research was multi-faceted. Initial readings and study of the Genesis text helped to establish a clear understanding of its context and meaning within the Jewish and Christian traditions, and as a textual source in historical art practice. This helped in establishing a broad fluency with its narrative and the possibilities of its symbolic meaning in relation to exploring ideas of human-divine interrelationship. I researched specific translations of Genesis, taking into account various interpretations within different cultural and historical contexts. The main translation of the text I have used throughout the project is the New International Version (NIV), which is a completely original translation of the Bible.

In parts I have also consulted other translations and versions of the Bible, including The Amplified Bible (AMP) and The Message Bible (MSG).

6.3 Preface to Genesis

Considering Genesis is a book of Middle Eastern origin of the pre-modern world, establishing an understanding of specific cultural and historical contexts was important in this process in order to familiarise myself with intended layers of meaning in the text that may be misunderstood or missed entirely in a contemporary Western context. My approaches to the text also involved reading a selection of writing concerned with traditional and contemporary forms of biblical hermeneutics, as well as broad reading in relation to the operation of the Bible as a text which is multi-dimensional in its structure, content and implied meaning.

I also developed some broad reading of texts discussing various cultures of the ancient world and societies, specifically investigating aspects of Eastern narratives and beliefs regarding the divine and the origins of the world. While this is not a focus of this project it did aid me in establishing a broader context in which Genesis as a religious text of the ancient world exists. In order to investigate concepts portrayed in Genesis, I developed specific reading on various theological interpretations of Genesis within Jewish, Christian and historical settings, and select philosophical texts relating to ways of defining concepts of the divine. Some of these comprised several works by theologian A.W Tozer, including The Knowledge of the Holy, Rudolf Otto’s famous 1917 publication The Idea of the Holy, works by the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel, writings by David Jasper on the symbolism of Genesis and the desert landscape, such as The Sacred Desert, and several works on religious histories and Genesis in contemporary contexts by historian Karen Armstrong. Another text that has influenced the development of the conceptual basis of the project in relation to divinity and timelessness has been Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood’s 2010 publication Anachronic Renaissance.

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113 The NIV was first published in 1973. It has been developed by more than one hundred bible scholars who have translated from the best available manuscripts in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages in which the biblical texts were written. These have been translated into contemporary English language context and continue to be updated on a yearly basis, taking into account constant shifts and developments in English Language uses.

114 The AMP attempts to take into account both the original word meaning of the bible manuscripts alongside the cultural and historical contexts of the texts in order to accurately translate the original text. It offers explanatory alternate readings and “amplifications” to help contemporary readers to comprehend more fully what the intended meaning and implication of the texts might have been.

115 The MSG was written by bible scholar Eugene H. Peterson. While Peterson still consulted original texts his version is not intended as an accurate or literal translation of the original texts but as a companion to scholarly translations like the NIV, offering a sense of “the spirit”, feeling and rhythm of the text for contemporary readers.
6.4 Approaches in the studio based artworks

The approaches I have developed within the artworks in relation to visual and thematic appropriations of Genesis should be viewed within the confines of this project as a re-interpretation of the text, as well as an exploration of some of its possibilities as a source in contemporary art practice. I have likened my approach here to what Jewish-American artist George Segal suggested was his main concern in appropriating biblical subject matter in his art practice:

"I have no agenda beyond exercising my own personal interpretation and the right to put that into an artwork. I ask no one to accept it, but I advocate the openness of biblical interpretation." 116

In this way the artworks developed for this project are not intended to be literal interpretations or visual narratives of the Bible. Instead they investigate themes and concepts derived from the text and explored in relation to the contemporary context of my own art practice and its investigation into ideas of the human-divine interrelationship. An important aspect of this process has been my exploration of the relationship between this approach and my own personal history or journey in relation ideas of divinity, of which the Genesis themes have become starting points or foundations from which to develop the artworks.

My own reading of Genesis, along with research into the connected texts mentioned, affected me in a range of ways in relation to approaching the development of the studio artworks. The interrelationship between the text and narrative of Genesis and the pictorial spaces of the paintings became an integral aspect of the methodology and process. While the Genesis narrative deals largely with the establishment of Jewish history and culture, as well as the origins of human life within the natural world, it became apparent as I studied the text that there is largely a personal undercurrent to the narrative. This involves the stories of individuals and families experiencing struggle, hardship and also wonder both in relation to the natural world around them and the world of the divine. This aspect became important to many of the methodologies developed, as I became interested in exploring in many of the painting’s aspects of my own personal heritage and family experience in connection with the imagery of Genesis. The use of personal family photos as source material and references to family members such as my late grandparents became a part of my own exploration into these ideas generated from reading Genesis and the ways that experiences of family and personal history could be connected with a sense of connectedness with the divine.

The other main aspect in which I was affected by my reading of Genesis relates to the imagery of the relationships between the natural world and a supernatural world. By drawing upon a wide range of visual source material related to natural environments and landscape imagery, as well as my experimentations into colour relationships and various paint applications on different surfaces, I was able to develop approaches to constructing visual depictions of this relationship within the paintings.

The methodology I have used in the development of the project has involved essentially organic processes centred around the painting process in a studio context. In this way, while initial plans in how to approach the paintings were developed, I have adjusted and expanded areas of the project in an intuitive approach to the paintings that allows for experimentation in painting methods and treatment of painting surfaces. In this I have attempted to focus on allowing the artworks to develop over long periods of time and to undergo significant changes and development along the way. With this in mind I have also developed key strategies to aid the painting process, including the development of a broad range of visual source material and drawing based works on paper, the development of a broad range of colour palettes in the paintings, and conducting specific research trips for the viewing of specific international exhibitions and collections.

6.5 Initial source material and drawing

An important aspect of my methodologies in developing and constructing the paintings involved collecting, over a long period of time, a wide selection of visual source material. As the project developed this collection became quite extensive. These images included a wide range of natural history imagery, explorer photographic records, a range of very early photography including hand coloured colour-chrome photos, a selection of personal travel photos and older family slides (Fig. 3), as well as images collected from magazines, books and the internet. These source images included content ranging from animal imagery, assorted clothing types, landscape and architectural imagery and figurative compositions. Many of these photos were inverted into negative colour arrangements in photoshop in order to explore a variety of colour relationships for the paintings (Fig. 2). Examples of a selection of my source imagery can be viewed in the DVR.

![Fig. 2 Colour inversion photograph taken at the artist at the Museum of Natural History, New York](image)

The source images were then referenced in a range of ways through the development of initial exploratory drawing based works on paper, in order to visually realise concepts, colour relationships and compositional structures for the paintings. This was particularly important for dealing with the challenges of depicting ideas of divinity via painting compositions. The drawings were often developed on a smaller scale to the paintings and generally employed watercolour mediums for its connections with oil and acrylic paint used in the paintings.
I experimented with using an array of surfaces that included handmade watercolour papers sourced while traveling in India and Europe in order to test various surfaces and their relationship to the large scale paintings. Some of these were very quick, rough sketches of composition ideas and others were eventually worked into more resolved works on paper. As the processes and methodologies developed, selections of these drawings became the basis for developing the final paintings.

In relation to my approaches with the methodologies, drawing became an integral aspect of my working process as it allowed me to visually test ideas, images, compositional arrangements and the possible readings of images in various settings. Subsequently many of the drawings became resolved works themselves and integral to the presentation of final artworks for the project (Fig. 5).

6.6 Developing the role of colour in the artworks

My use of colour has also been a key aspect in the artworks. This has involved experimenting with various approaches to paint layering over long periods of time and the use of oil washes over high pigment synthetic polymer paint as undertones. This has allowed me to test the ways in which colour and paint surfaces might be used to allude to ideas of the paintings as conduits or windows. At times colour has been used in the paintings in highly luminous applications and in transparent layers to allow the under layers to show through in parts. In this way there is a sense of time present in the works, not only in the reference to the time taken to construct the artworks but in a conceptual sense, whereby a connection is made with concepts of a layering of time and place in the works.

Experimentations with various colour palettes and painted surfaces in the artworks was also an important aspect of the overall methodology. The drawings and source imagery played a crucial part in the testing of numerous colour uses. By creating the inverted photographs and referencing a selection of colour-chrome photos, I was able to test the possibilities of various colour arrangements for the painting compositions and the ways these might be explored through different applications of high pigment paint in the final artworks (Fig. 8). The “negative” aspect of the colour in the inverted photos allowed for a “ghostly” like quality to the figures and landscapes in the source imagery, and this related well with the content I was exploring in relation to ideas of divinity as a largely spiritual subject.
Likewise the colour-chrome photos, which historically are some of the earliest colour photographs, appear somewhere between photos and paintings (Fig. 7). Many of these give a sense of the 'other worldly' in nature. Their particular colour relationships were of particular interest to me in developing my own unique colour palettes for the paintings. While these were not copied or literally represented in the paintings, they played an important role as guides and beginning points for testing my own methodologies for using colour. Much of the final colour developments were resolved organically in the final paintings.

6.7 Field trips

Another important aspect in developing the methodology involved several overseas field trips conducted at different points in the project. These were for the purposes of viewing international museum collections and exhibitions, and for collecting a range of imagery to be later used as source material. These trips helped me not only in identifying historical settings related to the project topic but also to establish a contemporary context for the project. Some of the collections and exhibitions viewed during these trips related directly to the project themes about divinity, while others related to developing source material and viewing a variety of paintings in order to aid the development of my own approaches and processes in the paintings (Fig. 8).
Over the course of this project I undertook several journeys to London where I was able to view a number of museums, collections and survey exhibitions. Noteworthy examples include the 2008 Peter Doig retrospective, the 2010 Chris Ofili retrospective and *The Art of the Sublime*, each at TATE Britain. Visits to the British Museum and the National Portrait Museum were also influential in developing imagery and concepts for the project. I made two trips to Germany to see surveys of the work of Walton Ford at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Berlin (Fig. 9), and the Neo Rauch retrospective at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich and the Museum der Bildenden Kunste, Leipzig (Fig. 14). These were particularly important in developing my own approaches to the use of oil paint and watercolour mediums. I travelled to the United States where I viewed collections at the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Natural History in New York, the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago. Some of the exhibitions viewed included *Chris Ofili Night and Day* at the New Museum, New York, 2014, *Francis Bacon A Centenary Retrospective*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2009 and *Cy Twombly: The Natural World, Selected Works 2000-2007*, at the Art Institute of Chicago also in 2009.
Throughout the course of the project I frequently travelled to India where photographic source material related to landscape and ageing structures was collected. Many of these images were used in the development of content for paintings exploring themes of Babel. A range of exploratory works on paper were also developed during these trips. In early 2015 I travelled to Vienna to view Bruegel’s paintings at the Kunsthistorisches, specifically The Tower of Babel (1563).

A crucial location I encountered during one field trip was The Garden of Exile at the Jewish Museum in Berlin (Fig. 10). Designed by architect Daniel Libeskind as a monument to Jewish experiences during the World War 2, the garden consists of forty-nine concrete pillars that rise out of a square plot situated on a 12 degree gradient designed to create a sense of disorientation as you walk through the pillars. A series of Russian willow oaks grow out of the tops of the pillars, representative of hope amidst the disorientation. As Libeskind describes, the experience of the garden attempts "to completely disorient the visitor. It represents a shipwreck of history."[117]

Fig. 10 The Garden of Exile, Jewish Museum, Berlin, photo by the artist

While the garden operates as an experiential monument designed to facilitate a greater awareness of the exile and re-settlement of Jewish people during and after the Second World War, the imagery and experience of the garden helped me to clearly define the themes of Eden, Exile and Babel as being central to the project. My experience with The Garden of Exile aided in establishing a greater awareness of the ways artworks can facilitate an experience of physical space which is representative of internal human experiences and conditions. These also relate here to both environments of the natural world, as well as the constructed world of humankind. In this way The Garden of Exile experience significantly solidified my initial approaches to the project which were later more fully realised in the artworks.

6.8 The painting process

Importantly my explorations with various uses of paint as a medium on a variety of surfaces has been a central focus of my approaches to the methodology. This has involved experimentation with a wide range of different types of high pigment quality synthetic polymer and oil paint, as well as water based synthetic paint as a medium for developing brightly coloured, thin initial layers in the paintings. These have then been worked over in parts with high pigment oil paint, involving the testing of different types of traditional handmade oil paint and the ways these can interact with the water-based under painting. Developing a variety of types of acrylic and oil mediums has been a crucial element of this process in order to develop different transparent and opaque layers which interact with each other on the surface. Trials with different types of colour washes used as initial grounds in the paintings have also been important to this process.

I have also experimented with different surfaces, ranging from handmade watercolour papers to high quality linens and cotton duck canvases. Because of the large scale of many of the paintings undertaken for this project, I have had to rely on a trial and error process, whereby certain canvas and linen types simply did not work successfully on a large scale when painting with many layers over a long period of time and on a large scale. Eventually this process has led me to identify certain surface types that work extremely well with my approaches to building the painting surfaces in thin layers. These have included heavy duty 640gsm watercolour paper and Indian made 100% cotton duck canvas.

6.9 Developing notions of timelessness in the artworks

The concept of time has played a significant role in this aspect of the methodology, whereby certain paintings have been developed over a number of years which has allowed me to extend the experimentation process. This has involved testing how the paintings might develop compositionally, visually and conceptually with the extension of time as a process in the project. This also opens up the conceptual readings within the artworks in relation to notions of time and timelessness associated with a dimension of the divine. The nature of the studio process and the long extension of time spent working on particular paintings, can cause time for the artist to seem as if it slows down. The layering of paint in thin washes over these periods of time also adds to this reading, allowing the viewer to see in parts the underpainting involved in the process in connection with the more recently painted areas. As a part of these experimentations I documented the floor of my studio over eighteen months, by laying a piece of watercolour paper on the floor and allowing it to trace the paint that would fall onto the floor during this time (Fig. 11). In this way it became like a tracing of the history of my studio environment for developing the paintings.

Fig. 11 Documentation of the artist's studio floor over a period 18 months. Photo by the artist, 2012-13
The notion of time as a thread woven into the paintings is evident in a painting developed for the project titled *The World Travailing* (2012) (Fig. 1). It shows two ghost-like figures sitting amidst a luscious green landscape. The figures have been painted in transparent layers over a long period of time, creating an almost apparition-like quality to them, where the landscape and figure begin to merge into one and other. They appear almost unseen at first glance, receding into the landscape as figments. They are encircled by an orb shape which acts almost as a divider between two spaces - the outer painted surface surrounding the painting, revealing layers upon layer of dripping paint, and the inner space of the landscape and figures. The shape is reminiscent of a womb or a portal looking from one world into another. My intention with this compositional device was to connect the image with ideas of multiple time frames and spaces or as if through the veil of time.

The approach I developed here involved leaving the paint to drip and sit while drying over long periods of time, before being re-worked again with subsequent top layers. In this way time plays an important role in the painting, not only in terms of the drawn out period of time in which it was created but also its conceptual basis in dealing with ideas of the timeless, whereby the exact location and time setting in the work is purposefully left ambiguous.

The figures represent my late grandparents, one who passed away the year before I was born and the other the year after I was born. Having grown up with a sense of these people formed by stories and anecdotes passed onto me, they have been present in my mind only as mere impressions. They exist in my mind not as memories as such but more like shadows of people imagined in my mind and yet intrinsically linked with my experience of self, family and place.

In this way the painting explores ideas of timelessness or the merging of time zones, by suggesting a layering of generations connected with my own personal history in relation to the ongoing process of painting. The investigation of my experience relates not only to the movement of time in a generational sense but also in relation to the concept of our connection with people, places and events ultimately situated outside of a linear or chronological experience of time. In this way my attempt has been to create in the paintings connections between my own experience of time as a phenomenon linking myself with ancestral origins and more universal ideas human connection outside of time, in a dimension of divinity.

The process of developing the painted surface and a fluidity with the medium can also be connected with ideas of time in the project. By gradually beginning to draw out the painting process over longer periods, aided in part by the use of higher quality oil paint that allows for a slower and extended drying process, more time for reflection and evaluation of the artworks emerged. This has become a component of the process just as integral as the act of building the painted surface itself. The concept of time here in relation to extension of painting materials and process can also be related to conceptual explorations of time and timelessness in the artworks.

An influence in developing *The World Travailing* (2012) was the German artist Neo Rauch who speaks of his own approach to painting as something “from behind the mirror of the times.”

Here connections are made between the experience of humankind in relation to the temporal world and our experience of a greater dimension that remains unseen to the natural eye but connects us with forms which are possibly on the other side of time.

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Through my own approaches to developing the painted surface in relation to the use of a collection of source material, I have attempted to develop connections in my paintings between a personal history, universal human experiences and ideas of a wider dimension associated with divinity. The methodologies developed for the project have allowed me to experiment with multiple possibilities due to the variety of source material, as well as many different approaches in paint application. They have also allowed me unique ways of examining how the Genesis text can be used as a referential source in the development of artworks, specifically through the ongoing construction of a personal visual language through painting and drawing based materials. Throughout the course of the project these approaches have been refined and focused in order to more fully explore the ways painting can be used to investigate ideas of an interrelationship between human experience and concepts of the divine.

Fig. 12 Image taken during a field trip to Munich, Germany to view the Neo Rauch retrospective at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 2012. Photo by the artist
CHAPTER SEVEN

Eden (the garden)
7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the ways I have explored *Eden* as a theme in the artworks, analysing relevant areas related to its context and symbolic meaning within Genesis as well as other historical settings. I will also discuss select examples of *Eden* in art history and contemporary art practice.

7.2 The symbolism of *Eden*

For centuries *Eden* has remained a vivid idea in art history, religious thought and mythology. It is a theme widely present in art practices across different time settings and has often been explored in relation to a vast range of connected ideas. Historically it has been appropriated largely as a metaphor for concepts of a relationship between the earthly and heavenly and that of paradise. This has often been associated with a nostalgia for a lost place or state of being where humankind once dwelt in harmony with the natural world and the divine realm. Over time it has also come to represent a picture of the order and beauty of the natural world and associations with wider ideas interconnected with the possibilities of a future utopian world.

The origin of *Eden* is found within the context of the Creation story in Genesis Chapter One and Two. Genesis simply states that “...God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed”. It is distinguished as a place formed by God in which created humanity was to dwell. It is described as a place of immense beauty and capable of self-sufficient life, existing in a state of ordered harmony. It is a picture of a world where a connectedness existed between humankind and the divine. It is what bible theologian Francis A. Shaeffer describes as a world where “each created thing is operating in the circle of its own creation, standing in its proper place, and all things are at rest and in balance.” Importantly it is described as a place where human beings played the vital role of caring for the garden, signifying what many bible scholars believe was an ordered relationship between humankind and the natural world. Genesis frames *Eden* as symbolic of internal states and experiences whereby a harmony existed between humanity, the created world and the divine. The implication reflected in the world of *Eden* is that humanity’s sense of belonging is intimately connected with its place within this created order and in relation to the Creator.

The 7th century Syrian monk Saint John of Damascus wrote that;

“Since God intended to fashion man after His own image and likeness from the visible and invisible creation to be a sort of king and ruler over the whole earth and all things in it, He prepared a sort of kingdom for him in which he might dwell and lead a blessed and blissful life. And this divine paradise prepared in Eden by the hands of God was a treasure house of every joy and pleasure. For “Eden” is interpreted as meaning “delight”...In truth it was a divine place and a worthy habitation for God in His image. And it dwelt no brute beasts, but only man, the handiwork of God”.

Within the biblical tradition *Eden* has come to symbolise over time a lost world of perfection and divine order, where humankind once experienced an intimate, but now fractured, connectedness with God. As mentioned in Chapter Three, *Eden* is the place where Genesis depicts what is commonly referred to as “the fall of man”, describing a disconnection that ultimately occurs between humankind and God through the expulsion of the first man and woman from the garden. What ensues throughout the biblical text is the attempt of humanity to re-connect with this lost edenic-state of paradise and harmony with the divine.

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119 Genesis 2:8.
121 Genesis 2:15 describes that God delegated authority to humankind to “tend and keep” the garden. Theologians view this as a crucial aspect of the narrative, as it reveals the importance of the natural environment within the biblical paradigm, distinguishing humankind as partners with God in sustaining the created world.
In his extensive study on the history of myth and tradition connected with Eden, Jean Delumeau suggests that a common belief in the ancient world linked with Eden was that of a “primordial paradise” where “human beings got along well with each other and lived in harmony with the animals. They also communicated effortlessly with the divine world.”123 He suggests that these beliefs “gave rise to a collective consciousness to a profound nostalgia for the lost but not forgotten paradise and to a strong desire to recover it”. Overtime, both within the biblical tradition and in various other cultural and mythological settings, Eden has come to represent a yearning for this lost world of divine experience and the longing for a future world of harmony and peace often associated with images of heaven and paradise where humankind will experience liberation from the confines of the temporal world. Similarly Karen Armstrong suggests that “the Garden of Eden clearly resembles this yearning for paradise and a lost harmony.”124

Importantly, in relation to its biblical roots, Eden is also carried throughout other parts of the wider biblical narrative whereby its imagery reoccurs as a metaphor emphasising this lost world of human-divine connection and the longing for its restoration through a future heavenly paradise. Jean Delumeau points out that “even during the time of the old covenant the picture of paradise that had been given in Genesis was confirmed and enriched with more details by many other texts.”125 Often during periods of exile or captivity to occupying nations many of the biblical prophets spoke of the future restoration of God’s people and of the earth. The prophet Ezekiel declares that;

“They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.”126

What is evident is that Eden has remained an important idea over time, representing an ideal world of harmony, order and beauty either forgotten in time or possible for the future. It represents a view of human experience rooted in mythical or religious narrative, which places humankind in relation to divine forces. It exists as both an image of nostalgia for a lost world, as well as a yearning for a future divine utopia that re-establishes the origins of a connectedness between humanity and the divine realm.

7.3 Eden in art practice

“Eden, ultimately, remains a persistent and valuable contemporary idea – an inspirational vision of beauty, order and ease quite foreseeable and real to modern people, our own hands the evolutionary instrument of its realisation.”127

As a symbolic image Eden has existed as a vehicle in the imagination of artists for centuries, having been appropriated and explored over time for a wide variety of means, especially in association with ideas of paradise. From early catacomb depictions of biblical stories to more recent explorations of issues of the environment and migration, Eden has remained an important idea which symbolises the relationship of humankind to both the environment of the natural world, as well as to a wider world of an imagined paradise connected with the divine.

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123 Delumeau, p. 4
125 Delumeau, p.4.
126 Ezekiel 36:35, 36.
127 Erica Green, Eden and the Apple of Sodom, University of South Australia, 2002.
Its presence in art history has included explorations of themes including the origins of the universe and humankind, depictions of religious subjects and narrative, as well as the beauty and order of the natural world connected with landscape painting traditions and their possibilities for inhabiting notions of divine experience and heavenly paradise, such as Thomas Coles’ *The Garden of Eden* (1828).

Importantly *Eden* also remains a contemporary idea explored by numerous artists in recent decades in relation to a range of issues, including environmental concerns, the politics of race and gender issues, and depictions of the Australian landscape. What is evident in many of these usages is the historical weight embodied in *Eden* as an image of a paradise connecting human experience with a divine reality.

Robert Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis* (2009) in which the artist illustrated the entire book of Genesis in his well known graphic style, explores the text via a literal interpretation. Crumb describes his approach as one where he attempted to remain faithful to the actual writing of the text, refusing to add unnecessary content to what he frames as “a powerful text with layers of meaning that reach deep into our collective consciousness, our historical consciousness…” As Paul Morris describes;

“Informed by multiple translations, secondary sources, Sumerian mythology, and even movie stills from Hollywood Bible epics, the resulting works is a sensitive and comprehensive exegesis, depicted without a trace of irony. Crumb’s Genesis, when divorced from theology and treated as an historical text, comes alive foremost as a political story, rife with deception, scheming, incest, and brutal violence.”

Howard Finster started building what became known as the *Paradise Gardens* in Summerville, Georgia, in the 1960’s, a large property he gradually transformed into a site specific work recreating his own version of the Garden of Eden. It included various chapel houses and monuments, including parts adorned in a vast array of biblical scripture.

Recently the Douglas Hyde gallery in Dublin ran *The Paradise* series, consisting of close to forty exhibitions where artists such as Agnes Martin and Vija Celmins were invited to explore their own responses to the theme of paradise, defined by the curators as “an enclosed garden - the garden of Eden - a place of bliss, felicity, or delight - heaven.” These exhibitions represented a collection of contemporary responses to notions of paradise in connection with the origins of the *Eden* imagery.

As environmental issues have moved more to the forefront of community awareness *Eden* has also come to symbolise the possibly of a harmony achievable between humankind and the natural world. In addition to carrying associations of wonder and beauty, over time it has come to represent the idea of a paradise not of this world - a heavenly place unseen to the human eye but reflected through the beauty of the world around us.

The exhibition *Eden and the Apple of Sodom*, curated by Erica Green at the University of South Australia Art Museum in 2002, featured work by Lauren Berkowitz, Anthony Hamilton and Janet Laurence and explored issues of environmentalism and migration through the metaphor of *Eden*. Green used the symbolism of the Genesis *Eden* story as a means for discussing these issues within a contemporary Australian context, likening the experience of many migrants to Australia as “driven by the lure of material blessings in this land of plenty, our beautiful Eden.” Here *Eden* becomes a device for artists to engage with the politics of our time and the dynamics of current social issues.

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130 Rev. Howard Finster believed that God had inspired him to produce tens of thousands of artworks he called ‘Message Posters’. He has described the *Paradise Gardens* as a modern day Garden of Eden.
132 Green, p.3.
British artist Chris Ofili explored ideas of paradise and its associations with \textit{Eden} in relation to issues of race and African culture in his project for the British Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. Titled \textit{Within Reach}, the installation consisted of a custom made space housing a series of bright paintings and gouaches, that allowed the viewer glimpses into the world of two lovers, or whom Stuart Hall called them Ofili’s “Afro Adam and Eve”.\footnote{Stuart Hall in \textit{Chris Ofili in Paradise: Dreaming in Afro}, from \textit{Chris Ofili: Within Reach}, Victoria Miro Gallery, 2003.} Adrian Searle comments that “the space within the paintings themselves is also a place: a tropical memory, an artificial paradise, a glittery, spangled, overripe night club floor-show fantasy of Eden”.\footnote{Adrian Searle, \textit{A Fine Romance, Chris Ofili: Within Reach}, Victoria Miro Gallery, 2003, p.5.}

Ofili’s work has been known for its mix of elements such as the sacred and the profane, whereby rap culture and porn images sit alongside the Virgin Mary and the Bible. Various religious references underpin much of Ofili’s work. In each of the paintings in \textit{Within Reach} the Adam and Eve couple are surrounded by a densely bright and colourful garden, decorative with patterning. The complex which housed the paintings was covered with a large sun-like dome of glass, overlooking the artworks as if it were a sun-god. The artworks themselves, housed in darkened rooms with bright reflective light on the paintings, allow the viewer to enter the space of the artworks, both in a physical sense and also in terms of the conceptual spaces they offer up.

Ofili describes his interest in paradise “as this kind of idea of redemption or being liberated”\footnote{Hall.} and Hall writes, “Ofili’s vision of paradise may refer somewhere to the Bible, Heaven and the Promised Land.”\footnote{Ibid.} While these works explore issues of afro culture and black pride, they also draw heavily on the imagery and narrative of the Garden of Eden and its associations with earthly and heavenly paradise. These are paradises connected with both a nostalgia for the past and a longing for an imagined future.

Australian painter William Robinson has explored various aspects of edenic concepts in relation to painting the Australian landscape. Robinson has extensively looked into notions of the landscape as a carrier of divine presence, order and beauty. Hannah Fink suggests that “Robinson’s landscape is unquestionably a God-revealed world.”\footnote{Hannah Fink, \textit{Light Years: William Robinson and the Creation Story}, Artlink, Vol 21, no.4, 2001, p.1.}

Many of his landscapes are not only distinctly Australian in their tone and colouring, but primordial in their reference to the ancientness of the natural world. They conjure up imagery of the Genesis Creation and in them lies an assumption that \textit{Eden} can be found and experienced now in the landscape around us. In discussing his \textit{Creation} series of landscape paintings Fink describes that “Robinson’s subject is essentially the first few chapters of Genesis...The artist’s ambition, immodestly, is to trace God’s exuberant creativity; his subject is nothing less than the sheer genius of creation itself.”\footnote{Fink, p.2.} What these examples reveal is the unique presence of \textit{Eden} as an idea connected through art practice with contemporary issues and ideas.
7.4 *Eden* in the artworks

I have explored the theme of *Eden* through several groups of paintings developed over the course of this project. These have been titled the *Original Camouflage* series, *The Watchman* series and *The Pregnant World or Lacuna* paintings. Through these groups of artworks I have examined the symbolism embedded in *Eden* for investigating connections between humankind, the natural world and a divine dimension.

**Original Camouflage**

*Original Camouflage* is a series of artworks I developed that explores a range of concepts relating to the symbolism of *Eden* in connection with the relationship between humankind and the natural world. Consisting of a group of paintings and drawings developed over the course of the project, parts of this series were exhibited in a solo presentation at Motorworks Gallery in 2011, titled *For Signs, for Seasons, and for Days and for Years*. The series examines relationships between humankind and the natural world as a metaphor for human interaction with a divine dimension. In each of the artworks figures appear surrounded by the vegetation and growth of the natural environment, covered in what appears like foliage-made suits or garments worn on the human body. As Mark Amery comments;

"Adam Lee’s *Original Camouflage* (Fig. 13) has a man swathed in bands of texture, stumbling out of a painterly wet morass of delicate colours and traceries of plants. It’s as if he’s gathered the landscape like a fat suit around him, a metaphor for the way we carry the environment forward with us."\(^{139}\)

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**Fig. 13** *Original Camouflage* 2010  
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
168cm (h) x 231cm (w)

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The artworks in this series also explore ideas of the natural world as an image of divine presence. Where *Eden* can be viewed as symbolic of connectedness between humankind and the divine, in *Original Camouflage* I have investigated the natural world itself as a carrier of divine experience. In this sense the human body, in carrying the natural environment almost like a garment, also becomes a carrier of the divine. This reflects the Genesis concepts discussed in earlier chapters relating to the ideas of humanity as a carrier of the divine image. Dan Rule, in writing on the artworks, suggests the importance here of the colour palette in the paintings. He suggests that in the paintings there exists “a kind of super nature – deep, dark and green – unhindered by the chainsaw or the engineer. It sweats with pools of moisture and blooms with beauteous foliage, mould and fungi; it speaks of age and the accrual of time. The figures...don’t so much wander this damp world, but are ensconced and camouflaged within it.”

The conceptual basis for this series came from reading Genesis Chapter Two, which describes the events following the Fall, where the first man and woman become aware of their imperfect state. It describes that “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” Having previously dwelt in the garden naked and without shame in close connection with God, they now become aware for the first time of their nakedness.

Source imagery used in the development of the paintings included pictures of animals in natural environments, hunters using elaborate camouflage techniques in order to hide from animal prey and images of various military uses of camouflage within different environments, particularly military sniper suits (Fig. 15), which employ the grafting of natural materials to the clothing to literally blend in to the surrounding landscape. I also referenced photos taken during a research trip to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, showing early traditional ceremonial suits worn by witch doctors and tribal shamans (Fig. 14). I also took some self portrait photographs of myself in natural foliage. These were used as source material from which to begin developing drawings which became the basis for the paintings.

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141 Genesis 3:7.
Other influences in the development of the series included several paintings by Per Kirkeby, specifically for his exploration of the predominately abstract painted surface as an allusion to natural world environments, and J.G Ballard’s 1963 science fiction novel *The Drowned World.*

In many of the artworks the feet of the figures are obscured and rooted into the natural environment, as though they are firmly grounded in this world, literally growing from within it like trees taking root. It is uncertain whether the figures are emerging from the natural world or being swallowed up by it. Again Michael McCoy comments that;

"...questions arise from Adam Lee’s Original Camouflage series. It’s difficult to say whether the figure is emerging from nature, or whether he’s being swallowed up in it. Have his feet just been uprooted, allowing a new mobility, or is he slowing, every footstep threatening to cement him to the ground? Is he receding into a cocoon of protection against hostility, or is he emerging into a benign environment?"*143*

In this way the artworks examine how we carry the environments around us and the ways this might be connected with internalised states and conditions of our experience. The paintings refer to both the external world we encounter and the internal world within us, and the ways that a dichotomy might be revealed here between our relationship to the temporal world and that of an unseen dimension of the divine. It also reflects the idea portrayed in Genesis of humankind made from the dust of the earth but bearing the divine image.

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*Fig. 16* Tiller of the Ground 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
87cm (h) x 72.5cm (w)

*Fig. 17* The Weight, the Glory 2011
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 55cm (w)

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*142* Ballard’s novel portrays a future world in which humanity faces catastrophic danger as cities are encroached upon by a rapidly expanding natural environment, gradually turning the world back in time to a pre-jurassic period. The novel conjured vivid imagery of a world returning to an edenic state and raises issues of contemporary society’s relationship with the natural environment.

*143* Michael McCoy, *For Signs, For Seasons, For Days and For Years,* Motorworks Gallery, Melbourne, 2011.
I explored this idea in several other paintings including *The Weight, The Glory* (2011) (Fig. 17), which illustrates a man covered in organic matter. The artwork connects the figurative image with the idea of "divine glory", a concept that is depicted throughout the biblical text, whereby God is seen as glorious. I have explored in the painting the Genesis depiction of humankind as made from the dust of the earth as well as “made in the image” of God. The dichotomy between these two realities is accentuated in the painting by the reference in the title to the Hebrew origins of the word “glory” (*kavod*), meaning "weight" or "heaviness." In this sense the figure can be seen as carrying the weight of the divine upon the material body, visually portrayed via physical matter attached to the figure.

In the artworks I have also examined the symbolism of the construction of garments made of the natural environment as a form of camouflage or protection. The image of nakedness in the Genesis narrative can be interpreted as a metaphor for innocence and vulnerability. In the Adam and Eve story the acquisition of divine knowledge brings an awareness of human vulnerability within the world, leading to the desire to cover the body and to hide. This awareness moves humanity away from a state of innocence and connectedness with God, toward a state of dysfunction and isolation, apparent in the subsequent expulsion of the man and woman from the garden. The artworks explore these concepts through the painted imagery of a merging between the natural environment and the human body. Here the natural world as a garment becomes symbolic of human need to camouflage or blend into one’s environment as a form of security and protection.

![Image](image-url)

**Fig. 18** *For Signs and for Seasons and For Days and For Years* 2010

Pencil, pastel and charcoal on two sheets of paper

45cm (h) x 75cm (w)
In some ways I have also approached several of these paintings as a kind of self portrait. My approach here has been concerned not so much with creating portraits of physical likeness but in examining the symbolism embedded in the Genesis imagery in relation to developing aspects of personal narrative in the artworks. An example of this can be seen in a work on paper titled *For Signs, for Seasons, and for Days and for Years* (2011) (Fig. 18) which depicts a kind of double portrait of myself and my wife. In the image we both appear in suits made of natural foliage and, in some ways, this can be viewed as a reference to the first man and woman. Through its imagery, the drawing relates a sense of my own personal experience of connection to others, to the natural world, and to ideas of a divine dimension. This idea was extended further in one of final paintings constructed for the project, titled *Paradiso Terrestre* (2015) (Fig. 19).

*Fig. 19* Paradiso Terrestre 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
275cm (h) x 200cm (w)
This large scale painting depicted the imagery of a small figure standing before a vast Eden-like landscape. It referenced a family photograph of my wife as a young girl visiting Yosemite National Park in North America. The use of personal family photographs as source material imbues many of the artworks with a sense of the personal, relating the Genesis narrative to everyday experience. In this way I have attempted to develop in the Eden a sense of personal history and narrative, relating aspects of my own history to the wider universal concerns explored.

The Watchman

Another group of paintings and works on paper I developed that relate to the theme of Eden were titled The Watchman. This series was developed out of my research into the statement in Genesis 2:15, which describes how God “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and guard and keep it.” This aspect of the narrative highlights what some theologians have called humankind’s ‘co-labouring’ with God, revealing a unique role humankind played within the created world of Genesis. The original Hebrew word used in the text for “man” is “Adam” and this is considered in the Jewish tradition to be a term representative of all of humanity, not just one person. The Hebrew word for “keep” that is used in this statement is the word “shamar”, meaning “to protect or to guard.” Some bible theologians link this concept with the role of the watchman, a common term used in the ancient world for guards who would be posted to watch over a city at night.144

This concept of shamar or the watchman reflects a unique attribute of human identity within the Genesis narrative, whereby humankind is assigned a role within the created world of Eden. Author Rick Joyner suggests that within the Genesis paradigm humanity is established as “a governor of the earth, a mediator between God and the creation.”145

This imagery of humanity as a medium between the earthly world and the heavenly dimension of the divine became the underpinning concept in The Watchman series. Within many of these paintings intersections between the human figure, the landscape and aspects of the cosmos emerge. In The Watchmen (2010) aspects of the natural world and the cosmos merge and intertwine with the human figure, suggesting an interconnectedness between the human body, the temporal world and a wider divine dimension. As in the Original Camouflage paintings, this imagery is suggestive of a connectedness between humanity, the natural world and a divine realm. Again here, the human figures carry elements of the world around them on their bodies as a reflection of internal states of experience.

144 The Old Testament Book of Psalms often likens the imagery of the watchman standing guard over the city as symbolic of humankind waiting and watching for God. Psalm 130 records, “My soul waits for the Lord, more than than the watchman waits for the morning”.

The Watchmen (2010) (Fig. 20) was also exhibited in my solo exhibition titled For Signs and For Seasons and For Days and For Years in 2011. The exhibition title referenced part of the Genesis Creation story where God places the stars in the sky and declares, “Let them be to mark signs and seasons and days and years”. My use of the title explores the idea of human experiences of a divine dimension both inside and outside of time. In this way the paintings explore ways in which human experience exists in relation to time within the confines of the temporal, recorded by the passing of days, nights and seasons. This stands in contrast to the upward gaze of humankind toward a cosmic realm of outside of time as we know it and the ways this might relate to an unseen world of the divine. Once again the figures again become intersection points between the material world and a divine dimension.

The Pregnant World/Lacuna

Another aspect of Eden that I have explored in the artworks relates to its connections with the Genesis Creation story and the ways this could be explored in connection with personal narrative in the paintings. As mentioned in the Chapter Three the Creation narrative depicts God as creating the cosmos, the earth and humanity, and the Garden of Eden first appears within this context as the location for humankind and God to dwell. In studying the story I became interested in the opening passages of Genesis, which describes the world before the Creation;

“Now the world was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

This image of a formless, voided world before the creation of life became the central concept in a series of paintings I developed called The Pregnant World. In these artworks I examined links between the conceptual imagery of the void as a place of emptiness as well as a space where life and creation can occupy.

I investigated this imagery in three connected paintings made over the course of four years, titled Our Pregnant Condition (Lacuna) (2010), The Pregnant World (Lacuna) (2012) and Lacuna (Remix) (2013). These paintings were developed during a period of time in which my wife and I became parents. During the course of making these paintings we experienced a miscarriage, a period of pregnancy and then the birth of our first child. In this way the artworks explore the use of a personal narrative in connection with the Genesis imagery, which also examines more universal ideas related to the project topic.

Through these paintings I examined links between the Genesis concept of a voided world into which divine life is spoken, and the imagery of a womb or a lacuna as an internal space pregnant with the possibility of life. The imagery of the paintings touches upon these ideas as reflective of internal states of human experience within the world and in connection with the divine dimension. These ideas relate to Eden as a landscape or space symbolic of these internalised conditions of human experience, where life emerges out of chaos and where an interrelationship between humankind and the divine might be revealed.

146 Genesis 1:14.
147 Genesis 1:2.
148 The term Lacuna relates to the idea of an unfilled space, cavity or gap.
149 The Message Bible describes the created world of Genesis by using the terminology of pregnancy. It describes the natural world and humanity as pregnant with the presence of God. This was of particular interest to me in developing the imagery for these paintings.
Two of the paintings were based upon drawings I made of a group of figures standing around a crater-like hole (Fig. 21). In the background sits a building alongside a destroyed structure, reminiscent of something intact and in ruins. I decided to use this image of the crater to reflect the concept of a lacuna. The first painting constructed out of the three, *Our Pregnant Condition (Lacuna)* (2010) (Fig. 22), was developed at the time of my wife’s miscarriage. The lacuna motif became symbolic of an empty womb in which something was missing. It explores the experience of disconnection from the creation of life depicted in the Genesis narrative.

This painting marked a significant turning point in my work, both in a painterly sense and in terms of the development of its content. It was the first painting I had constructed to date that successfully used this type of figurative imagery in the landscape as reflective of internal states of experience. At the time, this was also the largest painting I had ever undertaken, allowing me to fully explore working on such an expansive scale. Conceptually it was an important step in marking new territory I had not surveyed in terms of linking ideas derived from Genesis with figurative imagery, as well as developing a sense of visual analogy connected with a personal history.
Later I made *The Pregnant World (Lacuna)* (2012) (Fig. 23), shown as part of *The World, Travailing* exhibited at Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne in 2012. In contrast to the first painting in the series this artwork navigated the period of my wife’s pregnancy. The composition centred around the motif of an ‘orb’ shape, again connected with the idea of a lacuna, and reminiscent of a womb. This aspect can be seen as relating to the idea of the paintings as “windows” into a divine world, where the viewer enters the space of the painting via this orb motif. The painting depicts a vast natural landscape of mountain peaks that appear cropped within the womb-like orb. Arts writer Dan Rule commented on this work that;

“A womb-like orb frames the vast scene, the detritus of underpainting left to fester around the perimeter. Elements of process reveal themselves; tests and false-starts peek and peer from the edges of the canvas. It is as if we view the scene via a portal.”

The idea of the viewer looking through a portal or window may speak of connections between ideas of the natural world as a material space imbued in time, and an unseen world of the divine outside of time and space. In this way the paintings become conduits of the divine, connecting the viewer with a sense of an infinite realm beyond the limitations of the painting materials and surface. It also relates to an inner world connected with a state of pregnancy, where, as in the Genesis Creation, life is brought forth out of emptiness. A body of water runs down the centre of the mountains, pooling in a drippy mass at the bottom. Here I connected the imagery of a lacuna with its Latin counterpart, *lacus*, meaning “lake” and referring to a pool or cavity of water. This idea can be linked in the artwork with the Genesis depiction of God’s spirit “hovering over the waters” at the Creation. I became interested in what I believe is a unique image portrayed here of the world being “birthed” into existence by God, beginning with the emptiness of a void that enlarges and expands as God speaks the world into existence.

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Fig. 23 The Pregnant World (Lacuna) 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
198cm (h) x 274cm (w)

150 Rule.
This relates within the painting not only to the personal narrative of my wife’s state of pregnancy but also to the process of painting as a reflection of this point of divine creation through temporal substances or materials. The development of the painting involved a long process of applying many layers of fluid paint to the canvas which built up over a long period of time, creating within the painting a strong sense of fluidity. In this sense I explored the possibilities of the painted surface as a carrier of divinity. This aspect can be linked with an idea James Elkins discusses in his book *What Painting Is*. He likens the process of painting to that of alchemy, connecting the imagery of the Creation story in Genesis with the genesis of a painting. He references the *materia prima* in connection with this process, suggesting that it “must be like the nebulous silent waters that felt the shadow of God’s spirit floating overhead.” He suggests that, like alchemists, painters experience the *materia prima*; “…as a moment of silence before the work begins: the colours on the palette are empty, “without form and void.” Before creation the waters are still, colourless, odourless, lightless, motionless: they are pure potential, waiting for the movements and light that will disperse them across the canvas.”

In this way I have investigated links between the painting process and the imagery of the divine Creation in Genesis as a mode for potentially creating something out of nothing, where the painted surface might become the carrier for ideas of a divine dimension.

The final painting in the series, *Lacuna (Remix)* (2013) (Fig. 24), was shown as a part of a solo exhibition titled *Into the Heart of the Sea and to the Roots of the Mountains*, at Station, in 2013. This painting was the largest canvas work I had embarked upon to date, at almost four meters long. It had a wide cinematic-like panorama composition revisiting the original image in *Our Pregnant Condition (Lacuna)* (2010). Here the colours are more saturated and the cavity in the centre of the composition is rendered in many layers of drippy fluid paint, referencing the idea of a layering of time seen through an excavated section of ground. The ruined house in the background of the first painting is replaced here by two large trees emerging out of the fertile ground, signifying the birth of new life.

![Fig. 24 Lacuna Remix 2013](image)

*Fig. 24 Lacuna Remix 2013
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 360cm (w)*

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151 *Materia prima* or first matter relates to the belief that the alchemy process starts with a base substance from which all other matter can be derived.  
153 Ibid.
The composition is divided by two diagonal lines into three sections where many of the colours shift from one section to another. Here the composition alludes to the possibilities of an interconnectedness between the temporal world and the unseen worlds of our internalised human experience and a world of the divine. The painting was developed as the final in the series, a response to the birth of our first child. It is a setting in which life is born, where the human figures belong to a world embedded in the material realm and at the same time closely related to ideas of divine paradise.

The artworks developed in connection with the theme of Eden have allowed me to explore ways in which the imagery of Genesis can be connected in the artworks with elements of personal history and experience as a mode of exploring ideas of human-divine interrelationship. It has also provided a vivid representation for exploring human interaction with the natural world, as a signifier of a divine realm of experience. The use of landscape and natural world imagery and my investigations into ways of connecting it with the human figure and body have been key to this process. The painting process itself has developed through these approaches as a way of layering the artworks with the physicality of the medium. This opens up the conceptual layerings of reading within the paintings, relating their imagery to ideas of timelessness and an interrelationship between human experience and a divine dimension.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Exile (the desert)
8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the context and symbolism of the theme of *Exile* within the project and its connections with the imagery and experience of the desert or wilderness. I will establish the precedence of *Exile* in relation to the Genesis narrative and its implications within the wider biblical context, as well as in relation to other key concepts in historical and contemporary settings. I will discuss the ways in which I have explored the symbolism of *Exile* in the artworks, its thematic references and meaning and its possible implications within contemporary contexts for investigating ideas of human-divine interrelationship.

8.2 Exile within the biblical narrative

It is important to establish an understanding of the symbolism and meaning of *Exile* as a theme within the biblical narrative and its origins in the Book of Genesis. Considering that the Old Testament can be viewed as a record of the establishment of the nation and people of Israel, a basic understanding of the Jewish people and customs is needed in order to contextualise the theme and experience of *Exile* in the biblical narrative. The Jewish experience of *Exile* from the homeland of Israel during periods of captivity to occupying nations at different points in its history is a crucial aspect of Jewish heritage. Whether within Egypt, recorded in the Book of Exodus, or the Babylonian captivity recorded in books like Jeremiah and Nehemiah, the experience of *Exile* is a recurring theme through parts of the biblical text. Not only does it relate to the physical experience of people in exile but, like many symbolic images through the Bible, also exists as a mirror to the internal struggles and experiences of people in relation to their connection and disconnection from God and a divine realm.\(^{154}\)

The Jewish *Exile* experience is closely connected with a sense of identity intertwined with the land of Israel. Exile from this land, which symbolises a sense of home and belonging, is often marked by the imagery of the desert or the wilderness as a symbol of internal struggle and dislocation.\(^{156}\) This struggle to maintain a sense of identity can also translate into contemporary contexts. Eugene Peterson describes the experience of *Exile* as follows:

“The essential meaning of exile is that we are where we don’t want to be. We are separated from home...Its is an experience of dislocation - everything is out-of-joint; nothing fits together. The thousand details that have been built up through the years that give us a sense of at-homeness - gestures, customs, rituals, phrases - are all gone. Life is ripped out of the familiar soil of generations of language, habit, weather, story-telling, and rudely and unceremoniously dropped into some unfamiliar spot on earth.”\(^{156}\)

Peterson suggests the biblical accounts of *Exile* reflect a dichotomy between one’s homeland and a sense of belonging and identity. He notes that “our sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When that changes, violently and abruptly, who are we? The accustomed ways we have of finding our worth and sensing our significance vanish.”\(^{157}\)

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\(^{154}\) Examples of this can be seen in instances where the Old Testament prophets would announce the importance of the *Exile* experience as an indictor of God’s judgment and a reflection of the people’s isolation from a place of security and protection, symbolised not only in the loss of land and homes but also in the loss of divine connection.

\(^{156}\) The experiences of Israel as slaves in Egypt, their subsequent exodus into forty years of wandering in the desert in search of a promised land (recorded in the book of Exodus) and the location for the temptation of Christ (recorded in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 4), are all examples of the desert imagery as symbolic of internal struggle.


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In her book *Jewish Artists and the Bible in 20th Century America* Samantha Baskind discusses the experiences of Jewish immigrant artists living and working in America during the 20th century and the ways in which many sought connection points in their work with their Jewish history and homeland via the biblical narrative. She notes that,

“A touchstone and focus of Jewish identity, the Bible functioned as a site of Jewish memory when enclosed communities…disappeared. It is my argument that the Bible encouraged a Jewish connection when traditional forms of kinship in Jewish communities and affiliations were dissolving. The Hebrew Bible allied these artists with the past; scripture served as a sort of pilgrimage to the past that helped make sense of the present.” 158

Here the *Exile* experience could be seen as relating to a fractured sense of place in regards to shifting locations, whereby the narratives in the Bible serve not only as rich textual sources in art practice but as connection points to personal history.

The origins of the *Exile* experience within the biblical narrative are traced back to the Genesis account of the expulsion of the first man and woman from the Garden of Eden discussed in previous chapters. Following this experience Genesis describes that the experience of humanity was no longer to dwell in divine communion and harmony but to wander the wilderness outside the garden, in which the man would have to work the ground for food and the woman would endure the pain of child birth. In Genesis God announces;

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” 159

The biblical imagery of exile from Eden is one of disconnection between humanity and God and an experience of dislocation within the world. Robert Coles suggests that “*in the biblical chapters that follow the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Lord’s terrain, so to speak, much is made of the consequent and subsequent physical hardship, pain; floods and pestilence and drought; the hunger and illness that accompanied them.*” 160 Coles highlights that within the biblical tradition the experience of *Exile* relates also to the mind and “*the burden of knowledge* brought about by the Fall. The shift away from Eden sees “human beings as exiles, as wanderers, as people paying (forever, it seemed) a price for an act of disobedience, a severe transgression that carried with it the death penalty.”” 161

Importantly Genesis describes that as humanity gradually moves further away from Eden toward landscapes of isolation, experiences of disconnection from God and dislocation within the world deepen. Within the biblical narrative this involves a worship of human-constructed objects and practices in the place of God, which Genesis portrays as a distortion of the original experience of human-divine interrelationship in Eden. The edenic image of God as the Creator is replaced by human-constructed images in the likeness of Eden. 162

159 Genesis 3:17-19
160 Coles, p.13
161 Ibid.
162 A strong example of this within the biblical narrative is in the account of the Golden Calf described in the Book of Exodus. Here the Israelites, after their miraculous delivery from slavery in Egypt, fashion an idol in the form of a gold calf. The act angers God, and their leader, Moses, highlighting the powerful contrast made within the biblical text between human worship of God and that of human forms of divinity in the shape of objects made by people. The biblical paradigm is one which views the latter as a move away from the true image of the divine in humanity, toward distorted and ultimately flawed imitations of divinity.
8.3 Examples of Exile in art practice

For many artists over time the theme of Exile has come to represent a wide range of ideas and experiences. Certainly the theme of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden has a strong precedent in art history. It has been examined not only in relation to its narrative foundations in Genesis but also as an embodiment of human experiences of disorientation and struggle within various landscapes. Thomas Cole’s Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (1828) shows the figures of Adam and Eve moving away from the beauty and light of Eden toward the darkness of a harsh wilderness outside of the Garden. The contrast of landscapes is evidence of the consequences of human disconnection from a state of divine union.

Similarly George Segal’s sculptural installation, The Expulsion (1986), examines what Rosemary Crumlin describes as “a sense of loss and loneliness…” Segal has said that the artwork probes the ramifications of the biblical Fall and that he was “drawn to the modernity of the characters in Genesis. Their complexity and contradictions seemed remarkably similar to my own…now Adam and Eve inhabit our worldly space. They are ashamed, naked, condemned and rewarded by this life we know and share.” For Segal the Exile experience embodies the human struggles encountered in daily life.

Arthur Boyd’s The Expulsion 1947-48, part of a cycle of biblical-themed artworks that the artist began in 1944, reflects a theme long examined by artists; the narrative of the expulsion of humanity from the Garden. Here Boyd’s figures can be seen as a reference to early Renaissance pictorial concepts exploring the theme, but in this case the setting is transported to an Australian landscape. Here Eden represents the not so much the beauty or harmony experienced in the Garden between humankind and God but a fractured setting in which the naked man and woman are sent away from God’s presence and out of Eden.

In 2004, British artist Damien Hirst collaborated with Sarah Lucas and Angus Fairhurst in an exhibition titled In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida at Tate Britain. The exhibition overtly explored themes of humankind’s “fall from grace” within contemporary contexts, revealing various approaches in using the themes of Eden and Exile as metaphors for human behaviour in relation to cultural and social circumstances. Hirst’s Adam and Eve Towards the End (2004) is one of six vitrine works that use the biblical figures of Adam and Eve to represent man and woman in contemporary contexts to explore what he calls the “ongoing problem about relationships between men and women, or couples, or two people trying to be together.” Mark Beasley describes that “on the mortician’s table Adam and Eve’s plastic genitalia are exposed as their chests pneumatically rise and fall. The genitals, the somatic symbol for desire and creation presumably exist here to remind us of human fragility and fallibility.” Hirst has described the use of Adam and Eve to explore these relational dynamics as “variations on decay”, revealing a reinterpretation of the symbolism of the Genesis story to investigate the fragility of human relationship dynamics and aspects of disconnection in human experience within contemporary contexts.

165 The title of the exhibition originates from a song on the 1968 LP by rock band Iron Butterfly, which was originally to be called In the Garden of Eden. Apparently, in his attempt to articulate the words in a drunken state, the band’s keyboardist, Doug Ingle, pronounced the title as “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida”.
8.4 East of Eden

Another historical aspect connected with the theme of Exile relates to the concept of humanity moving “east of Eden”. This idea is derived from the Genesis narrative that describes humanity’s transition after The Fall away from Eden toward the east. While within the biblical narrative this can be seen as symbolic of a move away from a world of harmony and security through connection with God, overtime the concept has come to represent aspects of a disfunction and a loss of innocence in human society. John Steinbeck’s 1952 novel East of Eden paralles many of the themes of Genesis to explore the fragility and dislocation of human experience within the landscape of Californian farming communities in the early years of the 20th Century. Philip-Lorca diCorcia’s photographic exhibition, also titled East of Eden, shown at David Zwirner 2013, took inspiration from Steinbeck and the political and economic climate in the United States towards the end of the Bush era. The exhibition explored experiences of contemporary disillusionment following the Global Financial Crisis and “seems to depict people and events just after “the fall.” The artist has commented that the series was “provoked by the collapse of everything, which seems to me a loss of innocence. People thought they could have anything. And then it just blew up in their faces. I’m using the Book of Genesis as a start.”

8.5 The Desert as a site symbolic of divine revelation

“...the devil haunts every desert place in an endlessly repeated and always renewable story.”

The role of the desert or the wilderness as a symbolic landscape connected with Exile is important within the biblical story. Not only is it symbolic of human struggle and isolation, but it often also exists as a site of divine revelation and enlightenment. In The Sacred Desert David Jasper emphasises the desert as a place of divine revelatory experience in which the finiteness of humanity comes into contact with the infiniteness of God, ultimately emerging as a location of the transcendent. He describes the transitory move of humans through wilderness landscapes toward divine enlightenment, emphasising the role of the desert experience as a theme running throughout the entire biblical narrative;

“The experience of the desert is an experience of the overturning of human finitude, the opening of human being to the mystical basis of its identity. This place is where the divine as “God” empties itself into finite human being and where finite human being discovers its own deep participation in transcendence. This is the place of the desert encounter: the encounter of the self with itself, encounter of the self with the other self, and encounter of the self with the unknowable Transcendent Other...”

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168 Genesis 3:16.
170 Ibid.
172 Jasper, p.xii, xiii
Jasper touches here upon the history of the desert experience in connection with an encounters with a divine dimension. For the early Jewish and Christian ascetics, such as the Desert Fathers, the desert represented a place of immense spiritual enlightenment in which divine revelation could be encountered, mirroring examples in the biblical narrative. In this way the imagery of the desert and the wilderness exists historically not only in relation to human experiences of harsh and testing climates but also as reflective of internal states of experiences toward God.

The monastic traditions throughout history reveal individuals who lived hermitic or nomadic lifestyles in order to seek refuge and isolation from society in remote places such as the desert. Often their lifestyles were marked by an abstinence of pleasure and self denial as a path to spiritual enlightenment. While many of these individuals lived solitary lives, many developed communities whereby the collective group lived together in isolation from common civil life. Gradually many of these groups developed into what is now known as the monastic traditions, building actual communities and monasteries as places of refuge and safety. There exists in these historical examples where the desert symbolised experiences of divine awakening and experience, but also led to the building of communities and homes. This concept can be linked with the ideas surrounding the loss of an edenic space of refuge and divine connection, and the yearning to re-establish it.

Jasper describes the early Christian ascetics as people who “went into the desert seeking a lost paradise...haunted by two biblical images that impelled and grounded their search...that of the lost Eden” and “the New Jerusalem...” Their’s was a search for reconnection with the original paradise of Eden, while at the same time journeying toward an envisioned heavenly paradise or city. Here time zones of history and the future merge together, revealing the wider expanse of a timeless dimension of divine encounter. As Jasper describes;

“At one and the same time they were traveling towards the paradise garden and the heavenly city, of which they lived as true citizens, and thus past and future become one and time moves from the sequential narratives of history.”

8.6 Ways in which I have explored Exile in the research

In the artworks I have explored themes of Exile and its possibilities for examining ideas of human-divine interrelationship in relation to several areas; the idea of a fracturing of human-divine connectedness reflected through desert and wilderness landscapes as metaphors of internalised and transitory human experience; the desert as a location of Exile but also as a site of revelatory enlightenment leading humanity toward deeper encounters with divine states; and Exile as a symbolic image of tragedy, loss and grief linked with the imagery of the desert and the ways this might be related to concepts of divinity. In this sense I have examined the desert as a landscape in the artworks which is symbolic of both experiences of isolation and disconnection from the divine, as well as places of deeper encounter between human beings and a divine dimension. Here concepts of a journey through external landscapes as reflective of internal experiences connected with a larger dimension of divinity also relate closely to the theme of time or timelessness explored in the artworks.

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173 The Desert Fathers were Christian hermits, monks and ascetics who, beginning around 300 AD, lived mainly in the Scetes desert in Egypt. They saw the desert as a location for pure divine revelation and experience, seeking abstinence from worldly pleasure in order to find solitude and isolation. Later they formed communities of monks and hermits and are viewed today as the founders of Christian monasticism.

174 Figures such as John the Baptist described in the Gospels reveal interconnections between divine experience and the landscape of the desert.

175 This is a theme running throughout various parts of the Bible, including the experiences of Israel’s exodus from Egypt recorded in the Book of Exodus, whereby the Jewish nation wandered in the desert for a period of around forty years in search of a promised land. It is also reflected in the imagery of Christ’s temptation in the wilderness recorded in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter Four.


177 Jasper, p.
8.7 Specific influences in developing the *Exile* artworks

In connection with investigating the symbolism of desert landscapes there have been several influences connected with Genesis that I have used in the development of the artworks exploring *Exile*. These include Herman Melville’s *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847),\(^{178}\) from which I explored the concept of *Omoo* as a reference to transitory figures who exist between two worlds and the ways this could relate to the symbolic imagery of *Exile*.

Another literary source has been Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985)\(^{179}\) which influenced the development of ideas relating to desert landscapes within the artworks. McCarthy’s vivid description of landscape and its possibilities as a mode for discussing internal conditions of humanity aided me in developing some of the imagery for the *Exile* paintings. David Jasper suggests that while being specifically American in its narrative and depiction, *Blood Meridian* is a story of “all time and no place…biblical and of no time and no place….a journey that is locked into the origin of all things, into the fabulous ruins of babylon, into all the mythic and deadly beasts of the desert which haunt the imagination, of the pilgrimages of the Fathers seeking Nothing...”\(^{180}\) Here landscape plays the important role of embodying not only internal conditions of human experience but also a sense of a timeless zone connected with ideas of divinity.

As discussed in Chapter Six, a visit I made to *The Garden of Exile* at the Jewish Museum in Berlin was one of the initial points of research for developing the project themes, and was a particular influence on the artworks I later constructed related to *Exile*. My experience of encountering the garden helped me in approaching ways of visually exploring experiences of disconnection and dislocation. The links between my physical experience of the structure and the ways it connects with the internal experiences of Jewish exiles during and after the second world war, helped me to begin thinking about ways in which the paintings could connect imagery and painted surfaces with ideas of human *Exile*. It formed an important part of my initial approaches in relation to using the imagery of the desert or the wilderness as a metaphor in the artworks.

8.8 *Exile* and the desert as a symbol of human-divine disconnection

I developed several groups of paintings based around ideas of humanity’s move away from an edenic state of divinity, as portrayed in Genesis, toward wilderness and desert landscapes symbolic of human states of isolation and disconnection from the divine. The role of landscape, and specifically the desert, as a site symbolic of internal human states has been an underpinning theme in the paintings. Much of the imagery I have explored in the artworks relates to figures experiencing transitory spaces that touch upon states of dislocation. As in the *Eden* paintings, I have also probed the possibilities of landscape as a carrier of divine experience.

\(^{178}\) Melville’s novel depicts the experiences of sailors who abandoned their posts on whaling ships to seek new lives on the native islands encountered while out at sea. The title is taken from the Polynesian term referring to an island rover or a transitory person caught between two cultural worlds.

\(^{179}\) *Blood Meridian* traces the brutal encounters between American head hunters and Mexicans in the late 1800’s. McCarthy uses the subject matter to explore deeper concerns related to human experience in various environments, whereby he often presents humanity at its base level through acts of brutality and death which reveal a lack of regard for human life. The figures in the novel traverse harsh desert landscapes of the American wilderness which mirror internal landscapes of human nature.

\(^{180}\) Ibid, p.105
In paintings such as *The Other Side (The Omoo)* (2013-2015) (Fig. 25), which references Melville’s novel, I have examined a sense of human experience moving through a transitory journey from the garden, through the desert and toward a kind of a promised land. These people appear as though from another time and place, moving between spaces which relate as much to internal landscapes of experience as they do the physical locales.
Similarly *Days of Dust* (2014) (Fig. 26) explores the temporality of human life in contrast to the vastness of the natural world as a reflection of an unseen divine realm. The painting reveals a figure on horseback who appears within a strange environment contrasting both the darkness of night alongside the luminosity of the natural environment in the foreground. The figure here represents the journey of humanity through a merging of temporal time zones toward a dimension of the timeless. It is a painting reflecting the transitory nature of human life within the temporal world, while touching upon a yearning for connection with a dimension of the eternal. In these paintings the landscape of the desert wilderness stands as an embodiment of humanity’s move away from the divine, populating spaces of isolation and timelessness.
I have also explored in the paintings ideas of the desert as a location of divine enlightenments, including in a series of paintings referencing the idea of the sojourner. Here I investigated human experience in relation to a dimension outside of the material world, where the human figure often appears to be moving from a temporal setting toward the eternal, or from this world into another. In several of the paintings ascetic-like figures inhabit spaces and landscapes which appear located outside of this world, referencing ascetic and monastic traditions. In paintings such as Sojourner (2011) (Fig. 27) and Desert Landscape (After Friedrich) (2015) (Fig. 28), motifs such as the rainbow appear in many of these paintings, reminiscent of its implications within the Genesis narrative of Noah and The Flood as well as reflecting ideas of a divine realm.

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181 A sojourner being one who resides only temporarily in a place, moving from one location to another.

182 Genesis describes that after The Flood God caused a rainbow to appear to Noah as a sign of his promise to never again flood the earth.
In the development of the paintings I referenced historical examples of artworks exploring mystical and ascetic traditions, such as Diego Rodríguez Velázquez’s *Saint Anthony the Abbot and Saint Paul, the First Hermit* (1633)\(^{183}\) and Casper David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* (c. 1809). In this way, the landscapes in the paintings and the figures who occupy them belong to both this world and an unseen world of the divine. In many of these paintings, the figure of the hermit became important as a symbol of human experience existing between the two realms of the temporal and the eternal, where the reality of this world becomes blurred with a sense of the divine. The hermit figures in many of the paintings become embodiments of divine experience, which is both rooted in the material world of the body while at the same time intrinsically linked with a wider dimension. They exist in places outside of time and space, suggestive of a transcendent heavenly paradise. As Jack Willet writes, “Lee's hermit never holds the one form nor exists in every representation of this world...the hermit is always clouded, occulted, speculative, and obscured, but there is always enough of reality to make it fictional and yet relational.”\(^{184}\)

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\(^{183}\) Velázquez's painting explores the mythical meeting between Saint Anthony the Abbot and Saint Paul the Hermit, as described by Jacobus de Voragine in *The Golden Legend*. Here, Saint Anthony has a dream in which he is led to visit Saint Paul. On his journey he is miraculously guided to the hermit's cave by a satyr, a centaur and a wolf, and each of these scenes is depicted in the background of Velázquez's composition.

These ideas were also explored in *When the Desert had Become Like a City* (2015) (Fig. 30), shown as part of a solo presentation titled *Eden. Exile. Babel*, at Station in early 2015. The painting takes its title from a statement made by Athanasius of Alexandria, the biographer of the famous Desert father, Anthony the Great. When describing the early monastic movement of the Desert Fathers and the communities that grew out of the desert experience, Athanasius suggested that the desert has become more like a city. The painting explores ideas of the desert as a landscape of divine enlightenment where new cities and human communities emerge, reminiscent of human yearning for a heavenly city or paradise. Whereas in the *Eden* paintings the human figure exists as an image bearer of the divine and acts as a medium between the material world and a divine dimension, in these paintings the desert emerges as the medium between these two worlds of experience.

*Fig. 30 When the Desert had Become Like a City* 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 300cm (w)

8.9 *Exile* and Idolatry

I have also investigated in connection with these concepts the idea of humankind’s move away from the role of *image bearer* of the divine and *watchman* over the created world of *Eden*, toward devotion to human-constructed objects which reflect a distorted image of divinity. This idea can be linked with the biblical concept of *idolatry* as reflective of a fractured experience of divinity. Here, these human-constructions take on the form of aspects of the natural world as objects of human devotion in place of the divine, and in the process humankind’s sense of belonging and connectedness once experienced in *Eden* becomes distorted.

\[\text{185} \text{ In the biblical text idolatry is seen as the worship or reverence of anything substituted for God, most often being objects fashioned by human hands to represent various deities taking the place of God.}\]
Biblical theologian A. W. Tozer discusses this concept in *The Knowledge of the Holy*, whereby he suggests that human experience of God became distorted when people began attempting to fashion their own images and objects of divinity in place of God. Tozer highlights that these objects could never be true reflections of the nature of the divine because, quoting the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, these objects were “*fashioned after the likeness of men and birds and beasts and creeping things.*”\(^1\) Genesis and the wider biblical narrative frames this human tendency toward idolatry ultimately as a consequence of a disconnection from God experienced after *The Fall*. The imagery of the desert or the wilderness is important here as a site symbolic of humanity’s experience of isolation from God, as well as the struggle to obtain a sense of divinity lost in *Eden*. An example of this can be seen in the Exodus story of the golden calf, a story reflecting humanity’s erroneous attempt to regain a sense of divine connection outside of God, whereby the divine is replaced by a human substitute.

**Strange Fire**

I explored these ideas in a group of paintings called *Strange Fire* (Fig. 31). The title is taken from a term originating in Jewish temple traditions, where priests would offer sacrifices to God on the temple altar and God would then set the sacrifices ablaze. The idea of *strange fire* related to any sacrifice which was offered at the altar but was set alight by human hands rather than by God. It was viewed within the biblical tradition as a temple offering which was human-made rather than honourable to God.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) The Old Testament Book of Leviticus Chapter Ten records the story of Nadab and Abihu in offered “*strange fire*” on the altar before God, an act which God was so displeased with that He consumed them with fire.
In the Strange Fire paintings my intention was not to make literal visual depictions of these traditional beliefs, but rather to explore concepts derived from biblical history that reflect an aspect of the Exile experience. In several artworks all titled Strange Fire I explored the imagery of smoke rising from human figures populating desert-type landscapes. This was a visual reference to the idea of the immaterial emanating from human life, rising upwards toward a divine dimension. In many of these artworks, however, the smoke rises and then falls, joining with another person. The implication, here, is of humanity offering something of the temporal upward to an infinite realm of the divine, only to be bound by the limitations of human finitude. These artworks reference the desert as both a site of divine disconnection and as a location for the possibilities of divine revelation.

Man as Beast

Ideas of Exile were also explored through a group of artworks titled Man as Beast. In paintings, such as Man as Beast (2010) (Fig. 33), figures wear suits and garments reminiscent of animal creatures, exploring the concept of humanity’s “fallen” state of existence after being cast out of Eden. Here human behaviour shifts away from a divine dimension of experience and becomes likened to that of the animal kingdom. Like in the Original Camouflage paintings the outer covering of the natural world is again seen as cloaking the human figure like a garment, but in these paintings it becomes more animalistic in its nature. In In the Likeness of Birds and of Beasts and of Creeping Things (2012) (Fig. 34) the image of the animal becomes something inhabited by humanity, reminiscent of the golden calf narrative, and a reflection of an internalised state of divine disconnection and transitory existence.
As the Original Camouflage imagery suggested a reference to internal states of human experience related to connectedness with the divine and the natural world, the Man as Beast paintings suggest internal states of disconnect and dislocation. In my notes during the early development of these artworks I wrote the following:

“Many of the images I am developing out of this process seem to be exploring the idea of what I call “man as Beast”. This is an exploration of the battle in humankind, wrestling between the man and the beast,. It refers to the wilderness or the natural instinctive animal encountered in the natural world, as well as the idea of the beast within, the image of the man as a beast, referring to our capacity and our tendency toward “beastly” actions. This obviously raises ideas within the biblical paradigm of the consequences of “the Fall”. These artworks also explore those aspects of human nature associated with dominance over one’s environment. It explores those characteristics and behaviours observed in creatures such as the bear or some other beast, like violence and cunning to dominate and to survive or thrive. It also depicts man in a ridiculous fashion, literally as a man in a bear suit, as a kind of mock way of showing man as trying to inhabit a place not necessarily his. There is something of the farcical about these images.”

The idea of human “dominance over one’s environment” stands in contrast to the affinity existing between humankind and the natural world explored in the Original Camouflage and The Watchman paintings. Here, as a result of divine disconnection, the relationship of humanity to the natural world is distorted, whereby the position of watchmen or caretaker over the world is obsolete and one of dominance emerges.

188 Taken from the artist’s notebook, May 2010.
A duality exists in the conceptual reading of the *Man as Beast* paintings, revealed in the presence of a sense of the ridiculous and the sinister side by side. The animal costumes the figures are adorned in cause them to appear almost clown-like, while at the same time the imagery of humankind as “beastly” creates a sense of danger or threat. Here humankind is degraded to the position of a wild animal. Whereas the artworks referencing *Eden* were associated with a sense of belonging and peace, the *Man as Beast* series represents a sense of human wandering in a search for a place to belong, reflected through the figures being situated within landscapes of isolation and loneliness.

**The Wildebai**

Another group of paintings I developed which explored similar conceptual terrain to the *Man as Beast* and *Sojourner* series, was a group of paintings titled *The Wildebai* (Fig. 35). Comprising several initially small exploratory paintings and works on paper, that were later developed into two large scale oil paintings, these artworks also explored elements of ascetic history and monastic traditions. The title for these artworks referenced the wildebeest animal, also called gnus, which are a genus of antelopes. I reworked this name into the invented title *The Wildebai*, a reference to an imaginary group of mystical-like figures who appear “other-worldly” and ghostly. It is as though these figures exist as part of another time and place and, yet, are still very much embedded in the imagery of the natural world. They are like “wild beasts”, a reference to several biblical concepts which liken humanity to “the beasts of the field”, such as the story of King Nebuchadnezzar recorded in the Book of Daniel.\(^{189}\)

\(^{189}\) Daniel records the story of King Nebuchadnezzar who turned away from God and eventually became like one of the animals of the wild because of his stubbornness toward God.
The Wildebai paintings further develop the concepts explored in the Man as Beast series, where aspects of the natural world collide with the human figures who appear animalistic in nature. The paintings can also be linked with the Original Camouflage series where the figures appear almost as though they have become a part of the landscape around them. However, unlike Original Camouflage, however the figures here appear like shrines or monuments emerging out of the ground, animal-like in their appearance and adorned with strange stick-like ornaments and robes. In this sense I explored in the imagery links between human disconnection from the divine and the idol worship which emerged out of it within the Genesis narrative.

The Wildebai (All Men are Like Grass) (2011) (Fig. 37) links this imagery with a recurring theme in the Bible that likens the temporality of human life to the grass of the field, which withers and dies away.\textsuperscript{190} The painting contrasts the finiteness of humanity with the infinite dimension of God. These are figures in exile from the divine, representative of the futility of human attempts to attain states of divinity outside of the knowledge and experience of God.

\textsuperscript{190} Such as Psalm 103:15.
Exile in relation to tragedy, loss and grief

The final area I have examined in the artworks related to the theme of Exile has involved exploring its connections with ideas of tragedy and loss. This has formed another aspect of the ongoing development of a personal narrative in many of the artworks and has involved exploring my own experiences with loss and tragedy in connection with my own family history. This has specifically involved a very personal engagement in several of the paintings with my experiences in dealing with the death of a family member through suicide, which occurred at the beginning of the project. The examination of the themes has also involved exploring the experiences of my wife and I in regard to the miscarriage of our first child, which I have described at length in the previous chapter.

In this way Exile has come to represent within many of the paintings internal spaces dealing with loss and tragedy connected with the personal narrative of family. Here the imagery of the desert or the wilderness can be likened to experiences and locations of struggle, isolation and grief. In these artworks, however, these landscapes relate closely with a personal process of grief and loss. Following the suicide, the process of painting became a personal exploration of my own grief and an attempt to emotionally deal with these experiences. Through a number of early artworks developed for the project, I experimented with ways of connecting the theme of Exile with photographic imagery derived from personal family records. These were referenced as source material in the development of exploratory works on paper and composition designs for large scale paintings.
As these artworks developed, I became aware of the links existing between this grieving process, which was an acutely personal one, and the wider themes existing in the project related to the experience of *Exile*. Here, *Exile* became symbolic of the landscapes of grief and loss, facilitated via personal narrative in the artworks, such as in *Sensing Eternity* (2009) (Fig. 39). These concepts can also be related to aspects of the three *Lacuna* paintings, discussed in detail in the Chapter Seven. Here the experience of grappling with miscarriage, and its implications as an image symbolic of a voided space or experience of loss, relates closely with the imagery of *Exile* and the landscape of the desert. In this way the *Lacuna* paintings, as well as investigating concepts related to *Eden*, can also be viewed as related to *Exile*.

**Fig. 38** *Peniel (Kingdom Come)* 2009
Watercolour and ink on handmade paper
38cm (h) x 24cm (w)

**Fig. 39** *Sensing Eternity* 2009
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
150cm (h) x 200cm (w)
An important aspect in examining these ideas relates to the ways that the painting process might embody a process of grieving. Here the act of developing the paintings over a period of time facilitated a realisation of human finitude in contrast with a dimension of the infinite. The exploration of personal narrative and experience may also open up within the paintings conceptual readings which carry wider universal implications. These relate to understanding human experience in relation to loss, grief, and a sense of both connection and disconnection to a realm of divinity. Like the ascetics of the desert, human experience may begin to move away from tragedy and loss, transcending the material and temporal world, toward a higher realm of divinity. In this way tragedy, and the experience of Exile, may become a catalyst for deeper human-divine connection. George Steiner touches on this in his discussions of tragedy as a theme in the context of art-making, suggesting that;

“Tragedy, in particular - and it may be, until now, the most eloquent, concentratedly questioning of all aesthetic genres - is God-haunted...it posits man unhoused at those crossroads where the mystery of his condition is made naked to the ambiguous intercessions of menace and of grace.”

The theme of Exile has been explored in the artworks in a range of different ways, all of which reveal connection points between external human experience within landscapes which symbolise internalised states related to a transcendent dimension outside of time. The painting process has been a key in this, both as a facility for discussing these ideas through imagery and compositions, as well as a mode for exploring personal narrative and experience in relation to ideas of divinity.

191 George Steiner, Real Presences, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 219
CHAPTER NINE

Babel (the tower)
9.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the artworks I have developed in relation to the theme of Babel and its connections with the imagery of the tower. I will outline the context and symbolism of the Genesis narrative of the Tower of Babel in relation to other key concepts connected with the symbolism of the tower in historical and contemporary settings. I will also discuss specific works by key artists referencing the imagery of the Babel narrative in historical and contemporary contexts.

9.2 Contextualising the content and meaning of Babel (the tower) as a theme in the research

“All of us, after all, have experiences of towers that might be aspirational and spectacular, or sinister, or indeed manifestations of power and appalling oppression.”

The image of the tower has a long history of meaning and symbolism for various ancient world, pre-modern and contemporary cultures. Certainly within the biblical tradition of Genesis, as in many other cultural narratives of the ancient world, the tower has been a symbol for humankind’s attempt to attain god-like status. Its implications within the narrative of the Tower of Babel described in Genesis Chapter Eleven emphasises an image of a human constructed world that exists in stark contrast with the vastness of the created universe described at the beginning of Genesis.

I have explored the theme of Babel in this project as another possible symbolic image of an interrelationship between humankind and a divine realm. Within this investigation I have considered links between the symbolism of Babel and other historical and contemporary structures. These include the temple, the pyramids and ziggurats of the ancient world, as well as early oil wells associated with the industry of modern day economies. I have considered these various references within the artworks as symbolic of internal human states of experiences related to ideas of divinity.

9.3 The tower in historical settings

In many ancient world cultures the tower symbolised connections with a divine realm. Linked with the palaces, temples, and pyramids of human-constructed cities, these structures were often seen as images of heavenly cities, reflecting an interaction between the world of human beings and the divine. The establishment of these great monumental structures gave people a sense that they were partaking in the divine world of the gods. Karen Armstrong explains that in ancient Mesopotamian culture “The gods lived in the cities, side by side with the men and women in temples that were replicas of their palaces of the divine world...these early city-dwellers saw their cultural attainments as essentially divine.”

The Mesopotamians believed that they were able to participate in the creativity of the gods, who had taught them how to build the great ziggurats and cities, transforming their world into transcendent images of divine order.

The enormous ziggurat structures built in the ancient Mesopotamian valley and the western Iranian plateau were important symbolic structures within these cultures, considered to be mediums between an earthly world and the divine realm. For many of the Near Eastern cultures the ziggurat temples were seen as structures signifying a midway point between earth and heaven where human beings could interact with the divine dimension.

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9.4 The tower in Genesis

Within the Genesis narrative the idea of the Babel tower as a medium between the human and the divine can also be linked with a human transition from the divinely connected world of Eden, through the landscapes of Exile, and toward attempts to regain a sense of the divine through the constructions of human hands. As Armstrong suggests;

“...men and women were able to console themselves for this loss of divine intimacy by building their magnificent cities and founding mighty civilizations....its (Babel's) builders had attempted to create, by means of a new technology, a ladder to the divine.”

Babel appears in Genesis as a relatively short story. Within the Jewish and Christian traditions it stands as an image of the futility of human achievement which attempts to attain god-like status by human effort alone. Genesis Chapter Eleven describes the following;

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

The imagery within the narrative is one where all of humanity was united by one language, implying a connectedness between people and a commonality of society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many theologians consider the symbolism of eastward as an important aspect throughout parts of the biblical text, which suggests a human move away from God. In Genesis it is out of this move eastward that the first human constructed cities are established. The implication in the Babel narrative is of a people who are gradually moving further away from the experience of divine connectedness in Eden, toward human-made structures which attempt to re-connect with a state of divinity through human means alone.

The emergence of new technologies plays a part in this narrative, through the invention and refinement of brick making techniques which, supposedly, enabled the people to build a greater structure than they had previously seen. Links can be made in the Babel narrative between human appetite for the industry of establishing new cities and worlds, and an inward desire to “reach to the heavens.” Again, Armstrong argues that “the great ziggurat or temple-tower of Babylon made a profound and unfavourable impression on the ancient Israelites. It seemed the epitome of pagan hubris, motivated solely by a desire for self-aggrandisement.”

Genesis portrays the human motivation to make a name for themselves as an ultimately futile attempt reflecting the arrogance of human ambition outside of the human relationship with the divine. As Philippe and Francoise Roberts-Jones suggest, there exists in the imagery of Babel contrasts “between the desire to build, the extravagance of the project, the scale of the defeat, and the lesson that can be drawn from it.”

An important aspect of the narrative for this project is the idea of humanity's desire to reconnect with the divine and an original state of divinity experienced in Eden. I have considered the symbolism of Babel as an image of human aspiration “to create, by means of new technology, a ladder to the

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This human desire to reconnect with the lost paradise of Eden is not uncommon amongst other ancient world narratives, including some of the cultures surrounding Israelite society at the time of Genesis. A recurring theme amongst many of these narratives is the symbolism of the city, the tower or the temple, not only as an image of human arrogance, but also of the desire within humanity to reconnect with a lost state of divinity. This may be further emphasised by the fact that many of the ziggurats and temples of these ancient world cultures had eden-like gardens at the top of their structures. Armstrong, again, describes that:

“...the people of Mesopotamia themselves saw the city as a place where they could encounter the divine. It was - almost - a recreation of the lost paradise. The ziggurat replaced the mountain at the centre of the world, which had enabled the first human beings to climb up to the world of the gods.”

9.5 Babel in art practice

“There is nothing new about the tower. Indeed it is almost as old as Methuselah, an early descendent of Adam and Eve”.

Examples of Babel are present in the contexts of both historical and contemporary art practice. Pieter Bruegel the Elder made two very famous paintings of the Babel tower, relating these to the contemporary contexts of his own time. I was able to travel to Vienna while developing the final stages of this project to view The Tower of Babel (1563) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Fig. 40). In the foreground of the painting the king is led in a procession of dignitaries in front of the tower, while tiny people, presumably workers still constructing the tower, appear as ants scattered in the background.

Fig. 40 Photo of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's, The Tower of Babel 1563, taken by the artist at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

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Philippe and Francoise Roberts-Jones suggest that in Bruegel’s tower paintings, “Babel could be Rome, indicated by the reference to the Colosseum, and in that case the work might be an attack on the ostentation of Catholicism, just as it could also, on the contrary, deplore religious divisions and the loss of common faith.” In Bruegel’s paintings the Genesis tower comes to represent the politics of the time. It can be viewed as a symbol of monumental human endeavour and ingenuity, as well as a metaphor for the establishment of human power structures, where those at the top of the hierarchy possess a “god-like” status and use the underclasses of society to build their empires. As Philippe and Francoise Roberts-Jones describe, Bruegel’s “image remains a human one, despite its psychological force, yet it embodies a society that has put humans in second place.”

Importantly Babel also exists in relation to contemporary contexts. The idea of Babel as a reflection of human desire to build “a name for ourselves” may be exemplified in early twentieth-century developments in architecture. Robert Hughes points out that the author Paul Scheerbart, in 1914, suggested that:

“The surface of the earth would change totally if brick buildings were replaced everywhere by glass architecture. It would be as if the Earth clothed itself in jewellery of brilliants and enamels. The splendour is absolutely unimaginable. and then we should have on earth more exquisite things than the gardens of the Arabian Nights. Then we should have a paradise on earth and would not need to gaze yearningly at the paradise of the sky.”

This image of the 20th Century architect as builder of new worlds reflective of a greater glory than the heavens, elevating humankind to god-like status, is certainly reminiscent of the Babel narrative. In contrast Walter Gropius declared, within the context of the emergence of the Bauhaus movement in the early twentieth century, that:

“There are no architects today, we are all of us merely preparing the way for him who will once again deserve the name architect, for that means: Lord of Art, who will build gardens out of deserts and pile up wonders in the sky.”

Reminiscence of the Tower of Babel narrative, Gropius’ statement can be read as an indication of the industrialism and expansion of the modern era. In this sense Babel’s symbolism can be viewed in regards to both the arrogant undertones of humanity’s ultimately flawed attempt to “reach the heavens,” as well as an indication of human achievements in ever-increasing technological advancements within contemporary contexts. As Philippe and Francoise Roberts-Jones suggest:

“The theme of the tower of Babel, though biblical, is equally an image of the society that decided: ‘Let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven’. A double declaration, therefore, of pride aiming for the sky on the one hand, and of a desire to build on the other.”

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201 Roberts-Jones, p.250.
205 Roberts-Jones, 250.
Babel, an exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille in 2012 presented a range of historical and contemporary artworks referencing or exploring aspects of the theme of Babel and the tower. The exhibition, "proposed to revisit the artistic wealth that surrounds the myth of the tower, a famous architectural allegory of art history that has been treated repeatedly, particularly in contemporaneous creations..."206 Through various mediums, including painting, photography and film, the exhibition explored the Genesis narrative of the tower, in which "contemporary and futuristic Babels are represented as organic architecture, via which as in a mirror, we recognise our vanity, and the pride that suffuses all we do and the irrational aspect of human ambition. In this moral, philosophical perspective, contemporary expression formulates a critique of the yearning for power via the image of Babel."207

The exhibition included Jakob Gautel's giant tower, La Tour de Babel, (2006-2012). Constructed out of 15,000 stacked copies of various books, from Dante's Divina Commedia to L'Anniversaire de Babar via Malraux's Le Musée Imaginaire, is reminiscent of Bruegel's tower paintings. Gautel offers that, "The Tower of Babel, that abandoned building site, in its infinite rising spiral, never completed, is also a symbol of humanity's need to take a break, to stop and think about what is essential, about what project to pursue, and about what is worth preserving or not."208

In many ways the symbolism of the tower continues to evolve along with the ever changing power structures and political dynamics of history. Certainly for many in the post 9/11 world it has come to exist as a symbol of terror or violence, with its implications of the fragility of the structures upon which much of contemporary society is built upon. In many ways these experiences, too, can be linked back to the history of Babel. As Norman Rosenthal comments, "The Biblical metaphor of the first tower is in its own way an explanation of the tensions, conflicts and fragilities of history."209

Jake and Dinos Chapman have explored aspects of the symbolism and imagery of Babel and the tower in various sculptural works. Nein! Eleven (2013) reveals two towers sculpted with piles of human bodies and body parts, a blatant reference to the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers and the now common reference to 9/11 in contemporary language. References to Second World War era German history is evident, but it is also obvious that the work points to a deeper condition of humanity, one in which humankind is presented at its worst.

Tower of Babble (2013) references the story of the Genesis tower and is also reminiscent of Bruegel's towers. It is re-interpreted within a contemporary context in order to explore ideas of a rapidly dissolving world. In contrast to the ideas of the tower as a link between humankind and the divine, the work reflects a hellish world of the making of human imagination. In contrast to the ambitious human constructions of Bruegel's painting, here we are confronted with a tower made of human flesh and bodies, perhaps an image of a demonic underworld. The reference to Babble (in the place of the historical Babel) is an indicator of the biblical meaning behind the word, a reference to God's act of dividing the people via the creation of numerous languages in order to limit their ability to establish the tower. It might also be a reference to the notion of a collective dislocation in contemporary society and culture.

207 Ibid.
Anselm Kiefer is another contemporary artist who has explored the symbolism of the tower in various forms, referencing numerous images and structures relating to the tower, the ziggurat or pyramid and other architectural forms over recent decades. Often his use of these structures investigates the frailty of human endeavour in contrast to the magnitude of history and of the natural world. Janet McKenzie suggests that in Kiefer’s work, “architectural ruins are used to symbolise human vanity, the ephemeral nature of much of human creation and the inevitability of destruction”.

Important to any reading of Kiefer’s use of these structures is his interest in exploring concepts of the passing of time and of the accrual of age. The use of ancient structures such as ziggurats places the activity of human history in relation to cosmic and divine settings outside of linear or chronological measurements of time. Katharina Schmidt suggests this “relates individual human life to cosmic time.” In his essay Towards the Towers discussing Kiefer’s recurring interest in the tower, Norman Rosenthal suggests that “Anselm Kiefer’s towers...can be, indeed must be, read as echoes of history (a history both divine and real in all its mystery and tragedy over millennia).”

Like the ancient Mesopotamian structures, Kiefer’s towers explore the possibilities of connection points between the earthly and the divine, and the merging of historical timezones with a wider cosmic realm of the timeless. In Your Age and My Age and the Age of the World (1997) Kiefer quotes Ingeborg Bachmann’s poem The Game is Over. In it he depicts an enormous pyramid, reminiscent of the Great Pyramid of Giza. At almost five meters long the painting stands as a monument to the passing of all time, suggestive of origins far beyond the reach of human knowledge. In this way, like in many of Kiefer’s artworks, the painting suggests connections between dimensions of time and knowledge outside of the material world and beyond the horizons of linear or chronological space and time. The temple structure has become the embodiment of all time. As Heiner Bastian has written;

“If these works have a metaphor at all, it is the metaphor that conveys their poetry far away, in the half-obliterated lineaments of the past. One line of a poem takes the analogy far beyond the horizon of paintings, of the horizon of books, to a place where mysterious objects of knowledge exist. As well, this is a painting of agony, of a journey through a bleak and devastated landscape. For, into symbolic beauty, the destructiveness of reality enters.”

9.6 My explorations of Babel in the artworks

I have explored the theme of Babel through various motifs and imagery in the artworks. The ziggurat, temple or pyramid structure has become a recurring image within several paintings as symbolic of human-divine interrelationship. The imagery in these artworks relates to the Genesis imagery of the human-constructed tower as a reflection of human desire to attain higher states of divine experience. The use of these structures in the artworks also relates to concepts of the movement of time through historical settings and the ways in which these structures might point toward zones of the timeless in relation to divinity. I have examined the imagery of thrones in several paintings as another form of the Babel construct, as well as colonial style portraits of men adorned with medals as reflective of human endeavour to build worlds akin to the imagery of Babel. In this way I have explored in the paintings the possibilities of embedded symbolism in these structures and imagery, as sites for human-divine connection points. Within these artworks is the inference of the outward constructions of humanity, whether the tower, the throne or the medal of achievement, as suggestive of internal states of human desire for re-connection with the divine origins of Eden.


212 Rosenthal, p.71.

9.7 Source imagery developed for the Babel artworks

The imagery I developed in relation to *Babel* in the artworks came from a variety of source material collected over some time. These included historical photographs of tower-like structures, temples, thrones, and early colonial portraits, as well as photographs I took while traveling. I also investigated various photographic source imagery related to early American oil wells which appear reminiscent of temple structures and towers. While travelling in India I took an array of photographs of brick kilns, tower structures and factory chimney’s, largely because they seemed to embody a sense of history as structures from another time and place (Fig.41).

![Fig. 41 Photos from the artist's source material collection, taken in South East India](image-url)

Several other sources also influenced the development of imagery for the *Babel* paintings, including Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2007 film *There Will be Blood.* I also researched the historical story of Simeon Stylites for its imagery related to the tower as both a platform for human pride and a hermitic structure linked with ascetic enlightenment. I explored the duality reflected in these structures which may be seen as representing, as in the Tower of Babel narrative, both the positive human desire to invent and expand the world, and the futility of human arrogance in attempting to reach a ‘god-like’ status through human constructions.

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214 The film follows the lives of an oil prospector, Daniel Plainview, and a young preacher, Eli Sunday, and is essentially a morality tale story about the corruptibility of the human heart by power and lust for wealth and status.

215 Simeon Stylites was an fourth century Syriac ascetic saint who lived atop a large pillar as a new form of asceticism. His actions were viewed as both an extreme example of spiritual humility and an obvious example of human pride.
The imagery of early oil wells was particularly important in developing the paintings, as a symbolic image of these dual human attributes. I investigated in these oil structures not only the idea of humanity building upward “towards the heavens”, but also the process of digging downward into the earth as a means of obtaining valuable substances. I re-worked several of these images into some of the paintings, not as direct references to oil wells but as suggestive of another version of the Babel tower theme. These structures can be seen in the paintings as relating not only to the building of human constructions but also in relation to concepts of an internal searching for re-connection with divine states of experience.

Ironically, I did not become fully aware of Kiefer’s ongoing use of the ziggurat or temple image until many of my own artworks exploring this motif were already underway. In discovering the many variations of this subject in his work I referenced several of Kiefer’s artworks in the development and construction of my own paintings, such as *Golden Bull (After Kiefer)* (2011) (Fig. 42). This painting referenced the use of the pyramid structure in Kiefer’s work, such as in *Pope Alexander VI: The Golden Bull* (1996). In my painting the idea of humanity building objects of divine worship and adoration, such as in the Old Testament story of the golden calf from the Book of Exodus, is linked with the ziggurat structure on a monumental scale. It draws upon the history of temple structures in the ancient world as mediums between the earthly and the divine, and in this way a sense of timelessness exists in the artwork. The ways in which the structure merges with elements of the natural world relates to the *Eden* paintings and suggests connections here with human desire for an original edenic state. The painting is both a reflection of human endeavour to connect with a divine world, as well as the ultimately futile attempt to attain this via human constructions.

*And They Built For Themselves Kingdoms*

Many of the paintings developed in relation to the tower structures were grouped within a solo exhibition at Tristian Koenig in 2011 titled *And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms*. Many of the artworks in this exhibition were also given this title, which is suggestive of the history of human endeavour to build empires and kingdoms and the ways in which this might reflect the symbolism of the Babel imagery.

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Fig. 42 *Golden Bull (After Kiefer)* 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
120cm (h) x 135cm (w)
In my developmental notes during this time I recorded the following in relation to the conceptual basis for these artworks:

“Through using the images of oil industry technology throughout the 1800 and 1900’s I’m not so much interested in depicting these specific times through my work, but to instead draw from these images as a means of depicting a more universal state of development in mankind...I am interested in exploring the implications of the image of the tower or structure built by the hands of man almost as a way of attempting to reach the divine or attain a god-like status in our own eyes.”

This idea of human endeavour and industry as linked with the theme of Babel and the image of the tower, is juxtaposed in the artworks with elements of human desire for re-connection with the origins of Eden and divine settings. This is reflected in many of the paintings through connections between the natural world as a carrier of divinity, and the structures built by human hands.

One of the central components for And They Built For Themselves Kingdoms was a very large painting titled Eastward (2011) (Fig. 43). Here an enormous ziggurat structure sits within a barren desert landscape, as though rising from within the earth or, like the Original Camouflage figures, could be being slowly encapsulated by it. The lines running down the surface of the structure suggest lines of passing time or of generations, reminiscent of the inner rings of a tree. In this way the painting may insinuate not only the passing of time but connections between human endeavour and a timeless dimension in which the divine is encountered by humankind.

![Fig. 43 Eastward 2011](image)

Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
276.5cm (h) x 188cm (w)

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Notes from the artist’s journal, February 2011.
The exhibition also included several paintings developed from the source imagery of the oil wells. In these artworks it is unclear whether the structures relate to the history of human industry or are, in fact, oriental style temples or shrines. This ambiguity is important in the paintings, as it opens up the space within the artworks to multiple readings and inferred meanings. In And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms (2010) (Fig. 44) smoke rises from the figure presented, reminiscent of the Strange Fire paintings Here I attempted to link the strange fire concept with that of the tower construct similarly as a tainted altar offering. Whereas in the Eden and Exile artworks humanity or the desert landscape exists as a medium between the earthly world and the divine, in these paintings the tower can be viewed as a flawed human attempt to establish a medium between these two worlds.

**Fig. 44 And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms 2010**
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
110cm (h) x 89.5cm (w)

**Fig. 45 And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms 2011**
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)

*Man With Medals*

Similar ideas were also examined through a series of portraits titled *Man With Medals*, some of which formed a part of the And They Built For Themselves Kingdoms exhibition. While drawing upon colonial era portraits of various timeframes these paintings and works on paper are not easily defined within any particular time setting. As a result they can be seen as relating to all times, both historically, presently and in relation to possible futures to come. The paintings depict men in regal uniforms and suits, adorned with medals as recognition of achievement and power. As the tower structures have been used to explore ideas of human endeavour and the building of civilisations, similarly the *Man With Medals* series explores the figure of humanity adorned with prestige and wealth, trappings of human achievement and conquest.
I attempted through many of these portraits to portray the figures as almost ridiculous in their stature, attire and expression, reflective of ideas of the futility of human endeavour in connection with the theme of Babel. As suggested in a catalogue essay for the Churchie Emerging Artist Award, in which one of the Man With Medals portraits was exhibited;

“The effect of the medals, which publicly recognise acts beyond the call of duty, in Lee’s deft handling make the wearer less chieftain-like and worthy, more faintly ridiculous and frail. The red blotch in the old man’s hair might be seen as the bell suspended on a court jester’s hat, capping off his portrait with ruddy cheeks and a red nose.”217

This aspect was also expanded upon through linking several of the portraits with the character of Ahab, from Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, whose arrogant obsession with enacting revenge on the whale ultimately leads him to his own death. This accentuates the suggestion in the paintings, as in the Babel narrative, that human effort to elevate human power to god-like status is ultimately flawed. In the Babel artworks this sense of power is eroded when the temporality of human existence emerges when confronted with the infiniteness of a divine dimension.

![Fig. 46 Man With Medals 2010](image1.png)  ![Fig. 47 Ahab 2013](image2.png)

**Fig. 46 Man With Medals 2010**
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
50cm (h) x 38cm (w)

**Fig. 47 Ahab 2013**
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)

Thrones
A further aspect explored in the artworks in relation to the theme of Babel has involved the use of various images of thrones. In several paintings I have examined this imagery as another reference connected with the establishment of human kingdoms throughout history. The paintings developed in relation to this were exhibited in one of my final presentations for the project, titled Eden. Exile. Babel at Station in early 2015.
The use of human constructions such as the throne (Fig. 48) can be seen in the artworks as an indication of human desire not only to build worlds but to control them, as a form of security and protection. This idea relates closely with the narrative of exile from Eden, whereby humanity, once naked and unashamed is now exposed and threatened. Whereas the Original Camouflage paintings reveal the construction of garments made of the natural world as a form of camouflage and security, here the throne acts, as does the tower, as a form of human protection from vulnerability. This emphasises an innate loss of divine connection and the attempt to establish a substitute for it. Again, as suggested in the Churchie Emerging Artist Award essay;

“The notion of inadequacy, that leads humans to blend into their surroundings, lies at the heart of “And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms”, where the surroundings can be constructed. Through a resolutely contemporary delivery...Lee's work is an accomplished and finely pointed example of how art can prickle the braggadocio of civilisation.”

In this way the paintings undermine a sense of human achievement and power and portray human character not as dominant but flawed.

One of the central paintings exhibited in Eden. Exile. Babel, titled Babel (2015) (Fig. 49), explored imagery of a meeting between two groups, one suggestive of western military figures and the other of indigenous occupants of another time. The two central figures sit chieftain-like on their thrones, presumably surrounded by figures submissive to their stature and position. While this painting is not a direct examination of specific cultures or times, it does reference ideas of colonisation as another possible form of the ideas derived from the Babel narrative. Like in many of the other paintings there exists here a sense of the timeless, whereby there is no clear time zone in which to situate the group of ghost-like figures. The painting touches upon not only ideas of human-constructed worlds and kingdoms but of a dimension outside of this world connected with humanity's interrelationship with the divine.
The artworks related to the theme of *Babel* can be viewed within the focus of the project as having overarching implications for wider human civilisation within both historical and contemporary settings. While the notion of the establishment of worlds reflects human endeavour for expansion and creativity, perhaps reminiscent of *Eden*, the artworks also seek to touch upon the ultimately flawed reality of human pride embedded in the *Babel* story. This contrasts human arrogance with the vastness of an infinite divine dimension. The structures of human ambition, as well as the adornments of achievement, are presented as ultimately undermined by humanity’s attempts to attain divine-like status once encountered in *Eden.*
Conclusions
10.1 Conclusions

Upon extensive evaluation of the development of the studio based artworks in connection with the research questions, two central conclusions have emerged from this project; that painting can be employed as a highly effective contemporary medium for examining the interrelationships between temporal states of human experience and ideas of divinity, particularly in connection with zones of timelessness; and that the biblical text continues to offer unique and relevant themes and imagery within contemporary contexts for engaging with ideas of human-divine interrelationship, and that it therefore remains an important referential source in contemporary art practice.

Reflection on the project outcomes also reveals several important points of new knowledge contributed to the field of research. These include contributions to the field of painting as a contemporary mode of research for examining ideas of divinity. The project also adds to the ongoing discourse related to ideas of Re-enchantment, as well as discussions related to the role and place of religious subject matter in contemporary art settings. An important conclusive aspect to emerge in connection with these points is the foundation laid for further research to be expanded upon in these contexts post-doctorally.

10.2 Painting in relation to human temporality and divinity

While this project has taken into account historical and contemporary examples of artists investigating ideas of divinity in relation to the subject matter of Genesis, key developments have emerged within my own art practice. These have involved the formation of a greater awareness of the possibilities of painting as an effective medium for exploring the temporality of human experience in contrast to a divine dimension. An important dichotomy has emerged within my practice between the physical materiality of painting and the transformative possibilities it offers through spaces of conceptual reading. Through this process ideas of the temporal in relation to human experience have become closely connected with the physical, organic materials employed in the painting process. The act of making things by hand from these materials has come to represent within the paintings ideas of the “earthiness” of human experience in relation to the natural world and the physical body.

At the same time expanded conceptual spaces have emerged within the paintings which can connect the viewer with ideas and experiences of a wider divine realm. Here the paintings transcend the materiality of their physical makeup and begin to signify something much greater than the limitations of the materials employed. They carry the potential to open up spaces of reading and experience that connect the viewer with an unseen dimension beyond the compositional elements used, touching upon spaces beyond the domain of linear space and time. The layering of paint over long periods of time and the exploration of its potential for creating a sense of the slowing or bending of time, has embedded the artworks with layers of conceptual reading which place them and the viewer in relation to zones of timelessness connected with an infinite realm of divinity. Few modes of contemporary research are capable of engaging with these elements like painting can, and this has emerged as one of the crucial conclusive points of the project. This highlights the successful use of the paintings within the project as a mode for responding to the research questions and aims. It also highlights the ways in which the studio process, while often being a very private and personal experience for the artist, can ultimately be used to engage with more universal issues and concerns related to human experience.

The development of personal narrative in the paintings has also played an important part in this process. Considering some of the challenges in visually exploring concepts of divinity, the nature of the project has required me to formulate distinct approaches in the development of visual subject matter. Historically artists have relied heavily upon symbols and iconography in order to visually engage with concepts of divinity. I have avoided these approaches and concentrated on exploring the materiality of painting alongside the development of a unique visual language in the imagery used. This has allowed me to create artworks not bound by religious or historical interpretations, but rather centred around the development of my own approaches to the painted surface and image based compositions. Aspects of personal narrative, whether references to my own family experience and history or personal photographic source imagery used, has allowed me not only to explore personal experience in relation to the project aims, but also to enhance the artworks through developing unique imagery which carries wider universal meaning.
10.3 The role and place of the biblical subject in art practice today

Perhaps the most significant points raised through this project is the role of divinity and divine experience in relation to evolving contemporary frameworks for understanding human experience. Highlighted here is the important part religious narratives and mythological histories can play in establishing these frameworks, particularly in relation to re-connecting with states of divinity embedded in historical contexts. My use of the Genesis text has been crucial here, as I have tested the capabilities of its narrative for ongoing re-interpretation and application within contemporary settings. The engagement of my art practice with this process of re-interpreting the imagery and symbolism Genesis offers has lead to a facilitation of a greater awareness of divine experience.

The contrast between human temporality and a divine dimension which has emerged through the artworks is one deeply embedded within the Genesis themes of *Eden, Exile and Babel*. These themes have been integral to the project outcomes, having been successfully employed in the artworks as images carrying significant symbolism for exploring ideas of human-divine interrelationship.

My use of these themes also highlights the enduring relevance of the biblical text as a referential source in art practice. Both its legacy in historical settings and its ongoing usage within contemporary spheres, highlights questions of the role and place of the Bible in art practice today. When I first embarked upon this project I held certain assumptions about the nature of what I might discover through the research. Many of these were significantly altered by what emerged through the development of the artworks and my research into a variety of artists related to the project. Initially I assumed that few, if any, significant contemporary artists might be referencing or exploring the Book of Genesis as a vehicle for examining concepts of divinity. My assumption was that any significant reference to the biblical text would most likely remain only on the fringes of current art practice. What surprised me as the project developed were the kinds of artists I discovered who have re-visited Genesis through their work in recent years for a variety of purposes. Many of these artists are considered to be working at the forefront of art practice today.

What this project highlights here is that, while existing as a text widely explored through various stages of western art history, Genesis still remains a relevant and contemporary textual source in art practice today, particularly in relation to engaging with concepts of divinity. It continues to offer significant material related to ideas of human experience in connection with the natural world, the dynamics of human relationships, as well as in regards to human interaction with a world of the divine. In many ways its possibilities as a referential source in art practice are endless.

As a result questions emerge as to the ways in which contemporary art practice which engages with religious content such as Genesis is framed within current art discourse. Problems and challenges currently exist in the relationship between religion and contemporary art. Despite numerous examples of artists working today who are engaging with religious subject matter, thorough and informed critical engagement with the religious content and meaning of the artworks often remains limited or even, at times, absent. James Elkins writes that;

"Straightforward talk about religion is rare in art departments and art schools, and wholly absent from art journals unless the work is transgressive. Sincere, exploratory religious and spiritual work goes unremarked....the absence of religious talk is a practical issue because it robs such artists of the interpretative tools they need most."219

These tendencies may also reflect wider challenges in Western society and culture today. One of the legacies of Post-modernism's perceived liberation from traditional forms of religious influence is the emergence of what could be called a ‘spiritual void’ now existing in contemporary Western society. A sense of the divine which once permeated social attitudes and experience has led to what Weber described as the “de-divinisation” of the world, or what Gordon Graham calls its “de-sacralisation.” This loss of divine experience may be felt on almost all levels of society today. Mark C. Taylor argues that;

"With so much hanging in the balance, the future seems more uncertain than ever. There is a palpable anxiety afoot today that I have never before experienced. The crisis of confidence plaguing individuals and institutions is a crisis of faith. We no longer know what to believe or whom to trust."\footnote{220 Mark C. Taylor, Refiguring the Spiritual, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, p.15.}

Arguments for a re-enchantment of contemporary culture, articulated by writers such as Suzi Gablik and David Morgan, may signify emerging social and cultural trends toward reconnection with traditional forms of meaning embedded in texts such as Genesis. While these traditional forms of influence, which once helped frame human experience in relation to larger dimensions of a divine world, might have been pushed to the peripheral or even relegated to the past, a yearning for re-connection with divine states of experience is evident in the practices of many artists working today. Understanding the themes of Eden, Exile and Babel and their symbolism for states of human connectedness, disconnectedness and desire for re-connection with the divine, may be more imperative than ever before.

The challenge now exists to establish new fields of reference in relation to framing concepts of divinity in an increasingly secularised world. How religion and religious influences, such as the Bible, are characterised within this process is crucial. To ignore or misinterpret the emergence of new usages of these traditional forms of influence limits the insight they may offer in redefining human-divine dynamics in contemporary settings.

In light of these challenges questions arise as to what role art might play in facilitating a greater sense of the divine in relation to human experience today, and therefore offering a sense of hope for the future in light of “a crisis of faith”. Taylor goes on to suggest that, “at such a moment art might seem an unlikely resource to guide reflection and shape action. If, however, God and the imagination are, as Wallace Stevens insists, one, then perhaps art can create an opening that is the space for hope...art might redeem the world.”\footnote{221 Ibid.}

What this project illuminates is the importance of a sense of the divine in relation to understanding human experience, and the function art can play in opening up spaces of divine experience. The exploration of personal narrative as representative of both individual and universal human histories, the landscapes of Eden, Exile and Babel as symbols of internalised human experiences, and the possibilities of the painted surface as a space facilitating greater awareness of a divine realm, all pilgrimage toward a sphere outside the limitations of human reason embedded in a collective sense of human-divine connection.
APPROPRIATE DURABLE RECORD
Our Pregnant Condition (Lacuna) 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 260cm (w)
The Pregnant World (Lacuna) 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
198cm (h) x 274cm (w)
Lacuna Remix 2013
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 360cm (w)
Original Camouflage 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
168cm (h) x 231cm (w)
Original Camouflage 2010
Watercolour on handmade paper
38cm (h) x 24cm (w)
For Signs and for Seasons and For Days and For Years 2010
Pencil, pastel and charcoal on two sheets of paper
45cm (h) x 75cm (w)
The Arborist 2010-11
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
250cm (h) x 200cm (w)
The Watchmen 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
250cm (h) x 200cm (w)
EDEN (THE GARDEN)

The Artworks
Every Seed Bearing Plant 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)
Original Habitation 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)

Night Watchmen 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)
Glory on Their Faces 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)

The Virtue 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)
The Pregnant World 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
213cm (h) x 355cm (w)
Interior History 1 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on linen
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)

Interior History 2 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on linen
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
The Virtue (Sojourners) 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on linen
202cm (h) x 170cm (w)
The World Travelling 2012
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
198cm (h) x 274cm (w)
Woman and Man 2015
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
117cm (h) x 87cm (w)

Rückenfigur 2015
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
117cm (h) x 87cm (w)
Tiller of the Ground 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
87cm (h) x 72.5cm (w)
Paradiso Terrestre 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
275cm (h) x 200cm (w)
Peniel (Kingdom Come) 2009
Watercolour and ink on handmade paper
38cm (h) x 24cm (w)
Sensing Eternity 2009
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
150cm (h) x 200cm (w)
Funeral 2009
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
150cm (h) x 200cm (w)
Man as Beast 2010
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
45cm (h) x 65cm (w)
Man as Beast 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
105cm (h) x 76cm (w)
The Wildebeal 2011
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
171cm (h) x 203cm (w)
The Wildebai (All Men Are Like Grass) 2011
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
203cm (h) x 171cm (w)
Wilderbeest 2011
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
48cm (h) x 55cm (w)

Sojourner 2011
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 55cm (w)
EXILE (THE DESERT)
The Artworks
Burning Ones 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
203cm (h) x 171cm (w)
Sojourn 2011
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 55cm (w)

Burning One 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
80cm (h) x 65cm (w)
Strange Fire 2010-12
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 150cm (w)
In the Likeness of Birds and of Beasts and of Creeping Things 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
275cm (h) x 198cm (w)
In the Likeness of Birds and of Beasts and of Creeping Things (Owl Man)  2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
202cm (h) x 170cm (w)
Like the Beasts That Perish 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
202cm (h) x 170cm (w)

Owl Man 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
67cm (h) x 46cm (w)
All the World and All There In 2013
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 280cm (w)
The Prophet 2013
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
37.5cm (h) x 47.5cm (w)
Hermit 2013
Mixed media on paper
46cm (h) x 36 cm (w)
Days of Dust 2014
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on linen
202cm (h) x 171cm (w)
The Veil/ The Unknown 2013
Watercolour on paper
113cm (h) x 87 cm (w)
Obedience of Hermits 2014
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on linen
171cm (h) x 203cm (w)
Two Hermits 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
68cm (h) x 48cm (w)
When the Desert had Become Like a City 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200cm (h) x 300cm (w)
The Other Side (The Omoo) 2013-15
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
170cm (h) x 220cm (w)
Desert Landscape (After Casper David Friedrich) 2015
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
87cm (h) x 117cm (w)
BABEL (THE TOWER)

The Artworks
And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)

Altar 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
65cm (h) x 45cm (w)
And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
110cm (h) x 89.5cm (w)
Man With Medals 2010
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
50cm (h) x 38cm (w)
Man With Medals 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
87cm (h) x 75cm (w)
Man With Medals 2014
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
87cm (h) x 65cm (w)

Ahab 2013
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
Golden Bull (After Kiefer) 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
120cm (h) x 135cm (w)
Eastward 2011
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
276.5cm (h) x 188cm (w)
Babel 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
220cm (h) x 350cm (w)
Throne 2015
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
172cm (h) x 137cm (w)
Hermit Kingdom 2015
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
117cm (h) x 87cm (w)
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Of All the Heavens and of All the Earth 2015
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
117cm (h) x 87cm (w)
Ancient of Days 2014
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
154cm (h) x 102cm (w)

Man With Medals 2014
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
38cm (h) x 29cm (w)
SUPPORT WORK

Preliminary works on paper and select reference imagery
Various preliminary works on paper from notebooks, 2010
Sizes variable
Colour studies and experimentations with watercolour mediums on various types of paper, 2013 each 46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
Watercolour study (Jonah) 2013
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
Colour studies and experimentations with watercolour mediums on various types of paper, 2013
each 46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
Watercolour study for Strange Fire 2013
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
Watercolour study for *Strange Fire* 2010
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)

Watercolour study for *The Wildebai* 2010
Watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on paper
46cm (h) x 36cm (w)
Various preliminary works on paper in studio, 2013
Sizes variable
Colour inversion source photograph, taken by the artist at the Museum of Natural History, New York, 2010

Colour inversion photograph of the artist, used for reference material in developing Original Camouflage, 2010

Research photograph, taken by the artist at the Museum of Natural History, New York, 2010

Colour inversion source photograph, taken by the artist at the Museum of Natural History, New York, 2010
Colour inversion source photograph, taken by the artist at the Museum of Natural History, New York, 2010

Research photograph taken by the artist, used for Strange Fire series, 2012

Colour inverted section of Eggishorn, Grand Aletsch Glacier, with Aletschhorn, Valais, Alps of, Switzerland c.1890-1900 photoglob co., Zurich photomechanical print, photochrome library of congress, prints & photographs division, photochrome collection
Research photograph of the artist's wife, Yosemite national Park, 1994, taken from personal family photograph collection and used as source imagery for Paradiso treasure, 2015.
The artist's studio, 2012
The artist’s studio, 2013, showing progress of *All the World and All There In*
The artist's studio, 2014, showing progress of Lacuna Remix.
Time lapse images showing working progress of Babel, 2014-15
Time lapse images showing working progress of *Babel*, 2014-15
Time lapse images showing working progress of *Babel*, 2014-15
EXHIBITION INSTALLATIONS
Exhibition installation of *For Signs, For Seasons and For Days and For Years*, at Motorworks Gallery, Melbourne, May 2011.
Exhibition installation of *For Signs, For Seasons and For Days and For Years*, at Motorworks Gallery, Melbourne, May 2011.
Exhibition installation of *And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms*, at Tristian Koenig, Melbourne, November 2011
Exhibition installation of *And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms*, at Tristan Koenig, Melbourne, November 2011
Exhibition installation of And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms, at Tristan Koenig, Melbourne, November 2011
Exhibition installation of *The World Travelling*, at Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne, October, 2012
Exhibition installation of *The World Travelling*, at Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne, October, 2012
Exhibition installation of *Into the Heart of the Sea an to the Roots of the Mountains*, at Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne, November, 2013
Exhibition installation of *Into the Heart of the Sea an to the Roots of the Mountains*, at Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne, November, 2013
Exhibition installation of group exhibition, *In the Dust of This Planet*, at Station, Melbourne, October, 2014
Exhibition installation of *Eden. Exile. Babel*, at Station, Melbourne, February, 2015
Exhibition installation of *Eden. Exile. Babel*, at Station, Melbourne, February, 2015
Exhibition installation of *Eden. Exile. Babel*, at Station, Melbourne, February, 2015
Installation view of project examination exhibition, RMIT School of Art Gallery, August 2015
Installation view of project examination exhibition,
RMIT School of Art Gallery, August 2015
CATALOGUES
Adam Lee - Eden. Exile. Babel

Adam Lee's paintings present strangely familiar imagery. His images draw from a wide range of sources, including historical photography, Biblical narratives, natural history and contemporary music, literature and film. While compositions and subject matter may have been found on the internet, in-print publications and inspired by art exhibitions, Lee pushes a mercurial brush to investigate aspects of the human condition, especially in relation to ideas of the spiritual and the natural world.

Man With Medals is part of a current series of works titled And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms, exploring the achievement and the conquests of man. The series draws on early colonial portraits and historical images reminiscent of a time gone by or a time yet to come. The deadpan title Man with Medals reveals little backstory for the aging subject who is literally decorated with symbols associated with valor, the remnants of heroic acts in war. The effect of the medals, which publicly recognise acts beyond the call of duty, in Lee's deft handling make the wearer less chieftain-like and worthy, more faintly ridiculous and frail. The red blotch in the old man's hair might be seen as the bell suspended on a court jester's hat, capping off his portrait with ruddy cheeks and a red nose.

In some of Lee's earlier works from 2009, raw and unfinished negative spaces in the composition created tension in the picture plane, indirectly providing value judgments as to the importance or otherwise of pictorial elements. Man with Medals likewise employs this strategy, focusing on the chestplate, but leaving the belly empty.

The series And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms is importantly connected to a parallel body of work Original Camouflage that draws on the imagery of the Garden of Eden narrative from the Old Testament book of Genesis in which the first man and woman become aware of their imperfect state and make for themselves garments constructed of leaves in order to cover their nakedness and hide. The notion of inadequacy, that leads humans to fit into their surroundings, lies at the heart of And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms, where the surroundings can be constructed. Through a resolutely contemporary delivery, resonant with the visual register of painters Peter Doig and Elizabeth Peyton for example, and the intimacy of historical interiors painter Walter Sickert, Lee's work is an accomplished and finely pointed example of how art can prick the braggadocio of civilisation.

Adam Lee has presented numerous solo and group exhibitions across Australia, and his work appears in private collections in Australia, Europe, United States and India. Lee is also currently a PhD candidate at RMIT Melbourne.

Artists Profile article, November, 2011
Artists Profile article, November, 2011
Critics’ CHOICE

Given the vast scope of modern ART, choosing work in which to invest can be DAUNTING. We canvass the experts for their pick of emerging Australian talent.

WORDS: JANE ALBERT

Lisa Haviland describes it as a palpable energy that runs through her; Amanda Love says she must be both moved and engaged; Scrap Wull defines it as “beauty that bends the mind”; Nick Tobias falls in love instantly – or doesn’t; while Mark Hughes asks: “Would it hold up in the city that invents (and breaks) the rules, New York?“ And for James Rolan and Bicci Berini, it’s all about generous support.

We’re talking tomorrow’s contemporary artists, so let you may not have heard of them, some of them are starting to feature in Art Basel Switzerland, Miami Beach and Hong Kong, while others are emerging from arts-run initiatives or even graduate shows. They’re the future Shara Gladwell, Patrick Piccinini or Ricky Swallow.

As the scale of contemporary art and its creators continues to expand, the mind boggles at what’s on offer, with individuals describing themselves as sound artists, painters, videographers and sculptors – and that’s just one artist. The breadth of talent knows no bounds in 2014. Faced with the daunting task of traversing the country’s galleries, exhibitions, fairs, forums and pop-up spaces and wading the online world’s magazines, sites, blogs and social media, it’s easy to feel bewildered by the scope.

If you don’t have the means to visit the world’s art fairs or simply lack confidence in choosing, help is at hand. Figure selected experts, collectors and curators immersed in the visual art scene who all share a deep and abiding passion for art. They’ve each nominated artists whose work they feel compelled to follow, artists who may not yet be household names, but whose work you will certainly be seeing again.

Vogue article, February, 2014
MARK HUGHES
For Australian art consultant Mark Hughes, recognising an artist has something special is instinctive. Having returned home a few years ago after more than a decade of working in New York galleries, Hughes has found plenty of local artists of interest.

Among those of note is Melbourne painter Maya McKenna, whose debut solo show caught Hughes’s eye for the way it drew on various cultural forms, including a production she’d seen of Philip Glass’s avant-garde opera Einstein on the Beach. "Returning to Australia, daily life and familiar objects in the painting, the stories narratives that are both in colour and beautifully ambiguous," Hughes says of McKenna, whose paintings are included in the Melbourne Now exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, on until March 23.

Adam Lee, also from Melbourne, works mainly with paint and woodcut. "He takes us on a gentle journey through the blinding shards of fantasy inhabited by masked figures and branded serrated ageing figures, which return the viewer’s gaze with a heretical intensity," says Hughes. Lillian O’Neill has grown up in the digital age yet chooses to work in age-old collage. "The work imagery from old publications to explore notions of love, resulting in a balanced, romantic Tintoretto-esque finish. Last year she presented her solo show Total Romance at Sydney’s Commercial Gallery."

Then there’s multimedia artist Ben Barretto, whose works range from abstract wool hangings to paintings in dipthych form, the second painting formed after being passed against the loosely layered paint of the first, “almost like a wall sculpture made from paint”, says Barretto, whose work featured in 2013 at the pop-up Gallery A.S. in Sydney, and was included in Art Basel in Miami last December.

“To me, an exciting artistic role is one that’s relevant to what’s going on now, not necessarily politically, but representing the times we live in,” says Hughes.

LISA HAVILAH
"Cross-disciplinary work is the most interesting work I’m seeing today … artists are making video, doing performances … their practices cross every known area," says the director of Sydney’s Carriageworks Lisa Havilah. And the best place to find that, Artists, in Sydney, is in the unique galleries from West Space in Melbourne to Beaux Arts in Brisbane. In her current role, Havilah curates events such as 24 Frames Per Second, where 24 artists will create new works responding to the collaborative nature of the visual arts, choreography and film. "It’s when you see something that doesn’t necessarily say something new but says something in a new way," says Havilah of the artists whose work excites her.

Sculpture, installation and performance artist Rebecca Baumann is one such artist whose collaboration with Ladbroke.
Nick Tobias

"Art has always been central to my life," states architect Nick Tobias, principal of Tobias Partners. Introduced to the arts at a young age by his artist and musician grandmother, Tobias was hooked when he visited an art gallery and made his first serious purchase in his early 20s after his friend Sue Cato introduced him to sculptor Neil Smee.

Since then, Tobias and his wife, artist Miranda Darling, have been collecting voraciously with one very clear directive: they want to live in their house and make their day-to-day experience as rich as possible," says Tobias.

Tobias is particularly fond of a Torres Strait Nikau painting he recently purchased for Darling, executed by the first, renowned, radical, Torres-Straits inspired style. The Melbourne artist achieves with paint, marble dust, gold and silver leaf. Then there's the Lego wall sculpture documenting the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion by husband-and-wife artists Sean Cordeiro and Claris Healy. "You begin to see the strength of the work not only because of the tragedy but because of the space one, that desire to go higher and further," says Tobias.

Cross-disciplinary Japanese-born, Australian-based artist Hiroko Tango represents yet another direction. A photographic self-portrait she shot in Brisbane following the tremendous success in 2009 of the couple's collection. It is full of all sorts of flowers and coffee and puddles, totally over-the-top," says Tobias. These emerging artists sit alongside more established artists in their collection, but, as Tobias explains, the artists they have collected, "there's the overarching intuitive connection to the work.

Amanda Love

When it comes to visual arts, art consultant Amanda Love knows what works. "An artist needs technical talent plus the imagination and insight to synthesize a history in an original way that's relevant now," she says. But her golden rule: "Choose art that moves you, provided it's from what's objectively worldable."

Love has been following other indigenous artists who deal with issues linking local and international history with current concerns. They include: Arthur Moore, who produces interdisciplinary works embedded in Aboriginal politics that also engage with broader concerns; Brook Andrew, whose multimedia practice stimulates new ways of thinking around the presence of memory; and Daniel Boyd, whose paintings address intercultural, the "my job," says Love, "is to wander through everything and weed out what's irrelevant or ordinary."
SCRAP WALL

"What excites me in the transfer of a thought process to a tangible result. Transcending boundaries excites me, the space between cultures and Jonathans Zawalls work to me is the most fascinating," says Scrap Wall, the new article director of Art Month 2014. Like Hawah, Wall is excited by the collaborations of culture and parallel between different codes of practice.

Zawall is an established graphic and fashion designer whose talents range from designing the Parsons album artwork to Colab t-shirts to New York Times illustrations. But he’s recently decided to work exclusively as an artist. “What I find so exciting is that his design aesthetic and extracurricular activities are [so diverse] — there are many different elements to his art,” enthuses Wall.

Wall is drawn to works that appear familiar but have a slightly foreign edge, works that those of traditional photographers Jutine Varga. A Primavera 2013 artist whose art is also held in the AGNSW collection, she creates what Wall refers to as “hilarious” photographs that could almost be mistaken for drawings.

Painter Camille Hannah also impresses Wall. “It’s bright colours and movement and a magnification of the mark, which I usually step away from, but in this case, the event of creation composed in colour is like a meditation in paint — captured movement without a shift of the hand. Reverse painting” “Trapped as it is behind a reflective surface, Hannah’s work subverts the sensitive value.

JAMES ROLAND AND BECKY SPARKS

When they wed, Jutis Roland and Becky Sparks vowed to buy an artwork from an emerging artist to celebrate each wedding anniversary. Somehow that duty got lost. Married nearly nine years, they’ve amassed hundreds of artworks, so many they can’t display them all and regularly lend them to friends and galleries. Nevertheless, they are resilient in their support of young and emerging Australian artists.

“It’s a bit like an addiction, we’ve spent more than we set out to, but I think it’s the best money we spend,” says Roland, a committee member of Firstdraft and the AGNSW’s Contemporary Collection Beneficiaries committee. “In our view art and philanthropy are undervalued in this country, and we think it’s important that we contribute in some way. We feel the best use of our money is by supporting artists themselves — they get more confidence, we get something in return, and it keeps life interesting.”

Their collection thus far would indicate they’re artists collectors — Munte Gladwell, Adam Cullen and Alan Jones are among the earliest purchased works — and more recently works by multidisciplinary artist Mauro Patirano, whose work interrogates themes of revolution. Often working as a sound artist, Patirano collects clips and parables concerning international riots, highlighting their common narrative. His work has also included a Melbourne Now. Some of the artists they have been early to collect include works by multimedia artist, writer and curator Bolen Pop_utc, who is now the inaugural artist-in-residence at the Australian War Memorial. Lillian O’Neil, Marden Dawson and Arupha Gutter-Saupe. Other acquisitions include works by Gall Hastings, Newell Harry and Todd McMillan.

“We like to collect artists of our generation. In doing so, we look at the work, the artists and where they’re trained, what institutions are collecting their work, and what galleries are showing their work,” says Roland. “We hope that one day our collection will provide a relatively interesting snapshot of our generation of artists.”

Vogue article, February, 2014
Me and my generation, and all those that follow, seem to share a craving for connection: for connection with one another, connection with the best of the past and for connection with the natural world, with all its cycles and rhythms. We're a very long way from achieving the latter. In fact, the depth of longing is probably a measure of just how disconnected we really are.

My own deep need for contact with the soil and the seasons drove me to shed any thoughts of an academic life and become a gardener. There I discovered the perfect historic narrative about man's changing relationship with nature. I was already familiar with the garden/religion connection, particularly in relation to the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden, out of whose dust humans were formed, and over whose perfect balance humans were placed as watchmen, and in which the most sensational stuff-up occurred.

As for extant manmade gardens, I came to understand that the earliest, in Persia, were created as oases – walled spaces that were a buffer against an essentially hot and hostile climate. In the middle ages, monastic gardens were walled against wild beasts that would either eat what the residents were growing, or eat the residents themselves. Following the Renaissance, gardens lost their walls and pushed out into nature in a relationship that wasn’t so much of comfort, but of control. Then late last century gardens began to explore a regret at the imbalance of man’s total command. Whole branches of garden thinking and design now celebrate wildness and minimal interference from man.

These changing perceptions about nature ran deeper than the physical threat she posed. To 17th Century Puritan eyes, the woods of America were places of deep spiritual darkness. Current thinking couldn’t be more opposite, living as we do in an age of new-Pantheism, with nature being considered a source of some vague salvation. Nature as demon has morphed into Nature as deity. Interpretations of the green man motif that has appeared in art and architecture for nearly a thousand years, showing faces that are covered in leaves, or disgorged stems and leaves from the mouth and every other facial orifice are likewise ambiguous. Are they symbols of salvation, or of deep suspicion at nature’s malignancy? Naturally, we make them speak our language. Our generation has largely rendered them harmless and decorative.

Similar questions arise from Adam Lee’s Original Camouflage series. It’s difficult to say whether the figure is emerging from nature, or whether he’s being swallowed up in it. Have his feet just been uprooted, allowing a new mobility, or is he slowing, every footstep threatening to cement him to the ground? Is he receding into a cocoon of protection against hostility, or is he emerging into a benign environment? Like the bedroom of Maurice Sendak’s Max, it’s as if Adam’s studio has been invaded by trees, and he’s been frolicking with heavy monsters, whose benevolence or malevolence is either in fragile balance, or is undecided.

These thoughts, these concepts have sailed, like Max, from that place “back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day...”

to this very second, with you standing right where you are now.

Michael McCoy, July 2011

Michael McCoy is a Melbourne based garden designer and writer on issues of nature and gardening.
Adam Lee, *The World Travailing*

Adam Lee's vast landscapes aren't really landscapes, just as his portraits aren't really portraits. It might seem a trite proposition, but it's one worth making. Describing Lee's paintings purely in terms of representation – either straight or stylised – is missing the point. At once lithe and laboured, these lush, dense and fluid scenes, vistas, orbs and figures belong to a wider, more allegorical and atmospheric kind. They are memories and imaginings, ancient and enveloping.

From the one vantage, this isn't anything new for Lee. His 2011 exhibition *And They Built For Themselves Kingdoms* used the symbology of the pyramid – an image inspired by early American oil wells – and the arcane bearded figure to explore humankind's interface with the natural world. The paintings weren't without grounding; rather, they were awash with Lee's loose reappropriation of historical photographs, textual and Biblical references. But the meaning, orientation and references are buried a little deeper in the detail here.

His increasingly lush palette is of key importance. *The World Travailing* is a kind of super nature – deep, dark and green – unhindered by the chainsaw or the engineer. It sweats with pools of moisture and blooms with beauteous foliage, mould and fungi; it speaks of age and the accrual of time. The figures – the owl people, bearded men and cloaked women – seem both archaic and slightly absurd. They don't so much wander this damp world, but are ensconced and camouflaged within it.

One of the key images, *The Pregnant World (Lacuna)*, eschews the figure entirely, replacing it with a violent river rushing and spaying its course down a valley bordered by towering alpine ranges. A womb-like orb frames the vast scene, the detritus of underpainting left to fester around the perimeter. Elements of process reveal themselves; tests and false-starts peek and peer from the edges of the canvas. It is as if we view the scene via a portal.

Lee's titles find their grounding in the Book of Romans from the New Testament. The notion of the world's “pregnant condition” resonates. While somewhat removed from our own literality, these paintings are loaded with a very real tension.

There's a personal currency to these images too, and this is perhaps their greatest strength. In the exhibition's title work, a woman and man can be made out perched on a bank of lake, the scene encircled by soaring snow-capped peaks. They blend into the landscape as if apparitions.

The couple are in fact Lee's late grandparents, who died before he was born. The painting is in fact an ode. It whispers of the frailty of human life as much as the importance and resilience of memory, be it recalled or conjured. For memories are figments of our imagination as much as they are imprints of experience.

*Dan Rule*
Not ‘metafiction’ or ‘mise en abyme’, not even the more abstract ‘fiction within a fiction’ — the lost book within the book — rather a fiction that finds its dawn in a somewhat clouded obscurity. A speculative but factual origin with a truthful unfolding that is forced into intermission then ‘fictionalised’. Taken apart and reconfigured before being sent on a new course which runs concurrently with that of ‘reality’, a self-contained separate reality, a parallel reality.

Such discourse is not only confined to tales in books, cinema and art. So much of history is shrouded in an occulted mist of speculation, yet the past always leaves a trace: ruins, a Homeric poem, theological writings, cave paintings or fossils. Even so, these elements — often somewhat ambivalent — are only seen in hindsight from a present-day view, or else only discovered in the present. This legacy substance opens up fictional possibilities for the allowance of ‘world building’, but a particular branch of world building that holds onto our ‘real’ metaphysical construct (known history), not 100% fiction, just enough reality to make the fiction plausible — at least at some point in time. Hazy moments, structures, people, events etc that are placed in the ‘world’ to set the scene, then taken and adapted, or preserved for longer than reality should have allowed.

The world building which Adam Lee has undertaken over much of his artistic oeuvre seems to have perpetuated its own fictionalised reality, from the time of the cradle of civilisation, in a Mesopotamian oasis 300 B.C.-cum-third century A.D. land that exists somewhere between two ‘Greats’. That of Alexander the Great, King of the Greek Empire, and Anthony the Great, Christian Saint and hermit leader of The Desert Fathers. Though in Lee’s fiction, both Greats inhabit the same time: the Christian hermits, and the cities and structures before Christianity, rest in this world of fluid colourful motion. The Mesopotamian Tower of Babel, with its conjectural origin as the Etemenaki ziggurat of Babylon, stands in this world with a ‘purple haze’ sky, whilst contemplative hermits sit in caves thinking radioactive thoughts.

Lee has crafted his own Cthulhu Mythos, the fictional universe coined by August Derleth to describe the world building within H.P. Lovecraft’s horror fiction. Canonicalised by the ‘Great Old One’ Cthulhu, this world took shape in many of Lovecraft’s tales, alongside the appearance of other Old Ones and the recurring ‘lost book’: a grimoire by the ‘Mad Arab’ Abdul Alhazred titled The Necronomicon. Such mythic elements became so magnetic that Cthulhu Mythos began to emerge in other texts within the genre — the fictional world within the fictional tale that leapt into another fictional tale of another mind, and so it continued. If we conform to this model of Lovecraftian identification, Lee’s principal character would have to be the desert hermit and therefore his world: the ‘Hermit Mythos’. Acting as the central figure within the larger tale that runs throughout, Lee’s hermit never holds the one form nor exists in every representation of this world, and just like Cthulhu, the hermit is always clouded, occulted, speculative, and obscured, but there is always enough of reality to make it fictional and yet relational.

— Jack Willet
APPENDIX 1

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Adam Lee
Born 1979, Melbourne, Australia Lives and works in Macedon Ranges, Victoria

Education
2008        PhD Candidate, RMIT University
2003-06     Masters by Research in Fine Art, RMIT University
2001-02     Bachelor of Arts Fine Art (Honours), RMIT University
            Post Graduate Diploma in Education, Melbourne University
1998-00     Bachelor of Arts Fine Art, (Painting), RMIT University

Solo Exhibitions
2015        A Long Obedience, Beers London
            Eden. Exile. Babel, Station, Melbourne
2013        Into the Heart of the Sea and to the Roots of the Mountains, Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne
2012        The World Travailing, Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne
2011        And They Built for Themselves Kingdoms, Tristan Koenig, Melbourne
            For Signs, for Seasons and for Days and for Years, Motorworks Gallery, Melbourne
2009        Peniel: Marking the Places We’ve Been, Red Gallery, Melbourne
2006        The Big Issues: A Recent Study of Homelessness in Melbourne, The Counihan Gallery in Brunswick, Melbourne

Group Exhibitions
2015        The Arthur Guy Memorial painting Prize, Bendigo Art Gallery
            The Fantasy of Representation, Beers London
            I Heart Painting, Angell Gallery, Toronto
2014        Geelong Contemporary Art Prize, Geelong Gallery
            National Works on Paper Prize, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery
            Ready Player One, Station, Melbourne
2013        The Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize, Bendigo Art Gallery
2012        The Churchie National Emerging Artist Award, Griffith University, Brisbane
            Contemporary Australian Drawing 2: Drawing as notation, Text and Discovery, University of the Arts, London
            Art Stage Singapore (with Karen Black), Tristan Koenig, Singapore
2011        Royal Bank of Scotland Emerging Artist Award, Sydney
            The Churchie National Emerging Artist Award, Griffith University, Brisbane
            Remnants in Documentation, General Store for Contemporary Art, Sydney
2010        Rick Amor Drawing Prize, Ballarat Art Gallery, Ballarat
            Redlands Westpac Art Prize, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney
            Sir John Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales
2009        Off the Wall, Art Melbourne 09, Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne
2008        Secondary Sources (curated by Dr. Phil Edwards), RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
2006        Sir John Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
2004        Siemens Fine Art Traveling Scholarship, Storey Hall, RMIT, Melbourne
2003        Siemens Fine Art Traveling Scholarship, Storey Hall, RMIT, Melbourne (Awarded Post Graduate Traveling Scholarship)

Awards/Prizes
2015        The Arthur Guy Memorial painting Prize, Bendigo Art Gallery
2014        Geelong Contemporary Art Prize, Geelong Gallery
            National Works on Paper Prize, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery 2013
            The Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize, Bendigo Art Gallery
2012        The Churchie National Emerging Artist Award, Griffith University, Brisbane
2011        The Churchie National Emerging Artist Award, Griffith University, Brisbane (judges special commendation award)
2010        Redlands Westpac Art Prize (Nominated by Jon Cattapan), Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney
            Rick Amor Drawing Prize (Finalist), Ballarat Art Gallery, Ballarat
            Sir John Sulman Prize (finalist), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
2009        Off the Wall (selected artist), Art Melbourne 09, Royal Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne 2006
            Sir John Sulman Prize (finalist), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
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