CONJECTURE:
MIRACULOUS EVENTS THROUGH UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for
the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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ABSTRACT

This body of work is a way of telling stories about an aspect of the culture in which I live. In our culture, people construct personal systems of beliefs that dictate the way that they live their lives and how they respond to others around them. These systems are constructed around abstract spirituality based on centuries of ever-evolving manuscripts and then completed by the personal faith of the individual. To validate this faith, many look for an external sign to corroborate their beliefs, and these signs can take the form of miracles, apparitions, and relics. Miracles and apparitions are usually supernatural visions or paranormal events perceived by the individual, while a relic is a physical remain of a saint or holy person with spiritual significance attached to it. Relics can also be used to invoke blessings or be called upon to perform miraculous events. Many would discredit these occurrences, yet many also seek them out as a part of their devotion. My role as an artist is to collect these events and objects that could be used to validate certain belief systems, such as the potato manifestation or an apparition of the Virgin Mary on a rose petal, and then to examine and catalog these phenomena as photographic documents. All of these photographs have their genesis in either oral or textual narrative and are presented through photographs to examine the nature of the photographic document and the relationship of photography to both objective and subjective truth.
This visual project is neither an affirmation nor a denial of my personal beliefs; it is rather an examination of the influences that have touched my life during the various stages of my development, continuing through the present day. This reconstruction of found narratives creates a space in which to examine my perceptions of them as well as their underlying connection to western culture.
Dedicated to all those that believe.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When driving into town at night I listen to AM radio talk shows. In one of these shows, a
caller had been preparing dinner, and when he took his potato out of the oven, he sliced it to
discover that there were glowing crosses in either half of the potato. This discovery placed
the caller in a situation where he was unsure of the significance of the event as well as any
ramifications it might have. The host of the broadcast offered some opinions, but what I
found more fascinating was the response of the other callers. These suggestions included
everything from placing the potato halves on the eyes of the blind to cure blindness to
slicing the potato into smaller slices to be sold on popular Internet auction sites. This found
narrative stayed with me for a number of weeks, and I would later document it as a
photograph that is titled Potato Manifestation.

This photograph marked a pivotal point in the development of my thinking about
my artwork. I have long been interested in Christian themes, perhaps due to my Christian
upbringing, but this was a breaking point where my art practice shifted into something new.
Shortly after making this photograph, I became interested in the writings of John Calvin,
from the time of the Christian Reformation, in which he addressed the idea of keeping relics
from the bodies of saints and other venerated, holy people. This led me to construct
photographic documents of these relics in order to explore the social power they held for both those that believed and those that did not. From this point forward, I continued to seek out and recreate new accounts of miracles and divine apparitions.

The most recent series in this body of work is based on my research on Unidentified Flying Objects. This series is a set of photographs documenting the UFO population between Columbus, Ohio and Indianapolis, Indiana. These photographs further this investigation of the photographic document as a source for empirical knowledge and suggest a new layer of paranormal context to the religious miracles and relics.

This photographic research culminated in an exhibition titled Conjecture in the Hopkins Hall Gallery at the Ohio State University on June 3rd–7th, 2002.
CHAPTER 2

PHOTOGRAPHIC CONNECTIONS

Historically, the photograph has been a device for the recording of objects, people, and places. Louis-Adolphe Bertillon was one of the early practitioners of the information archive, which would both change and shape the way the photograph was used to identify. Bertillon joined the Paris police force in 1879 and began working with the task of organizing systems of information. Earlier in the decade, a large portion of information and records had been burned, and it was then made possible for people to invent false identities for themselves because there were no records to prove that they were other than who they said they were.1 Bertillon began devising methods for keeping such records on the growing populace. One of his early systems was called anthropometry, which utilized a series of ten bone measurements to identify criminals. This system also began to integrate photography as a means to identify these criminals. 2

Bertillon and his assistants devised a standard method of photography because "photography was exact but susceptible to many variables." The same criminal could appear to be a different person based on photographic elements such as lighting and point of view. To counter these variables, Bertillon photographed the criminal from the front and from the side. These two photographs were taken of each criminal in the same lighting style to

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minimize the stylistic differences. Both photographs were then reproduced at one-fifth life size and mounted on cards alongside the bone measurements of the criminal.\textsuperscript{8} This card with the combination of image and textual information was then filed into a system to be retrieved on demand.

This act of filing and archiving information is a human compulsion. In this example, the compulsion serves the function to uphold the dominant society's notion of justice. The process is rooted to the idea of collection; in this case it is the collection of information. Criminal information is collected and archived in an attempt to understand the nature of the criminal and to be able to identify them at a later date. This early use of photography is intricately linked to our desire to believe in the objectivity of photographs to record the world around us.

The photograph lends itself readily to this idea of the document, and in photography we refer to the "documentary" style or genre. Robert Coles, in his book \textit{Doing Documentary Work}, describes the term "documentary" as "suggesting an interest in what is actual, what exists, rather than what one brings personally, if not intentionally, to the table of modern day actuality." He further asserts, "a documentary attempts to portray a particular kind of life realistically."\textsuperscript{9} Coles speaks of a documentary action as an attempt "to construct or produce with authentic situations or events" and furthermore "to portray (these situations) realistically."\textsuperscript{9} Photography is implicated in our notion of documentary as a means of recording the world and its objects in actuality.
In the aftermath of the Great Depression, The Farm Security Administration employed photographers to document the effects on the citizens of the United States. This became part of a “significant photographic and cultural movement” utilizing the camera as “an instrument of social awareness.” Dorothea Lange became one of the more important photographers to emerge from this movement.

In her “Migrant Mother” photograph, Lange is showing us a Depression era woman with three children. One of the children is a baby in her arms, and the other two hide their faces in the mother’s shoulders in a moment of fright. The mother herself has a look of despondence on her face as she touches her chin in a worried manner. This image has become an icon and, as such is deeply ingrained in our American culture.

This image reflects the ease of manipulation that is inherent in the photographic medium. The photograph is framed tightly, eliminating the background information and focusing only on the figures. The figures are removed from the context of their surroundings and become only rooted in their clothing and expression. The photograph may tell us about these people at this time, but it tells us nothing about the physical circumstances that they live in, which was what the FSA had intended for their photographers to document. Lange has shaped the photograph and the truth that it tells through her subtle choices of composition, framing, and point of view.

As Coles points out, moments before taking this famous photograph, Lange made a series of exposures with the same people and in the same location. The first alternate take
shows the same woman and the same children inside their makeshift tent in the middle of a dusty field. This time, another woman is included in the photograph, and I begin to wonder about her relation to the “migrant mother.” There is a good deal of distance between the subjects and the camera, and this has the effect of distancing the subjects from the viewer. The close up of the published photograph has the effect of creating an intimacy between the woman subject and the viewer, arousing sympathies through the proximity. The alternate photograph’s distance does not allow one to identify as closely with the subjects, and no opportunity is given to get closer. There is a line of trees in the background, which suggests that some life can survive in this otherwise barren land.

The second alternate photograph shows the “migrant mother” with her head tilted to one side and her eyes closed and with the baby nursing in the tent. This time, we are allowed to see a small portion of the tent, complete with a lantern and the suggestion of possessions. The woman is sitting on a box with the word “ale” printed on the side. A small slice of the surrounding land is shown to the right side of the photograph, indicating a barren world. This photograph is not as sharply composed as the version that we all know, and the head of the mother breaks the top of the frame in an awkward manner.

The third photograph combines the intimacy of the famous photograph with the more information present in the other two alternates. This photograph is taken from a sharper angle to the left and combines the mother, baby, and older child as the subjects. The older child rests her head on the mother’s shoulder with one hand on the tent post. The
baby is no longer nursing and appears to be asleep. The mother gazes directly ahead with her brow creased in concern, but we cannot see her eyes from our vantage point. We see a section of the tent and a intern and possible food-serving dish on top of a long box. There is again a tiny slice of background information, but this time we see the suggestion of a tree in the distance, which seems less desolate than the previous photograph that eliminates the tree.

By selecting the famous photograph, Dorothea Lange made editorial choices to make it more accessible to anticipated audiences. She selected the closest framing to bring us into the world of that woman, rather than distancing the viewer through camera placement. This intimacy is achieved through the point of view of the photographer and the choices she makes while shooting. The first alternate, which includes the most information about the location, would be a better choice for a document because of all the information that it includes. Lange shapes our response to the photograph by the framing and point of view and shapes her version of truth about this woman and her children in the process.

W. Eugene Smith is another photographer in the documentary photography tradition. Active from the 1940s through the 1970s, W. Eugene Smith immersed himself in ongoing situations of the time, and recorded them with his camera. Smith went to Africa in 1954 to photograph Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a humanitarian doctor who was working in an impoverished South Africa. This essay would eventually run in Life magazine, although in an abbreviated version.
In one of the photographs from this photo essay, titled "Dr. Albert Schweitzer marking timbers during construction project," Smith represents Dr. Schweitzer marking a timber with his right hand. Behind him is an African worker resting on a timber. The timbers behind Dr. Schweitzer come together to form the shape of a cross, and the white hat that Schweitzer is wearing bears a striking resemblance to a halo. There is a striking contrast between Schweitzer, who is dressed all in white, and the worker, who is wearing darker clothes in the shadow.

This image ran in the magazine and was considered to be a factual image, one that represents reality. In actuality, this image is manipulated in a number of ways. Much like Lange, this image is subjected to the photographer's formal craft of framing, composition, and point of view. The image is further manipulated by Smith's printing techniques, which include burning the image in the darkroom to get the dark tones. In the final stages of print finishing, Smith carefully bleached the highlights with a brush, bringing out the striking contrast in both the face as well as lightening the hat to create the halo effect.¹ This post manipulation takes this moment and removes it from the actual for the purpose of dramatic effect. Smith manipulates the print by hand to make his intentions and point of view clear but, in essence, removes the truth of the moment and places it into subjective vision.

Unknown at the time, it was later revealed that this photograph is actually a composite created from two different negatives.² Smith deliberately combined these two elements to tell a truth as he saw it, based on his inner vision rather than external
observation. His inner truth takes the appearance of an external observation, and he deliberately did not inform his editors at Life magazine or the readers of Life. In doing so, he created an image of Schweitzer that never occurred in actuality and created a moment "that never was." Smith brings the elements together to create a photograph that contains the Chris references that he feels is appropriate to reflect Schweitzer's interactions with the South African people.

In contemporary art, the idea of the photograph as a document has become suspect. Joan Fontcuberta is a Spanish photographer who actively explores the relationship of photography and other documentation to our notions of truth. In the late 80s Fontcuberta created a body of work called "Fauna," and published a book under the same name. The book begins with an introduction about the life of a scientist named Peter Ameisenhaufen. The narrative chronicles this scientist's life and research and his discovery of new species of animals. The photographic plates in the book consist of documentation of these animals, ranging from the scientist's field journal with sketches to photographs of the animals. All of this information is presented in a convincing manner by following scientific conventions and mirroring a museum exhibit. None of the information is real; the scientist and all of the animals are fictional creations.

In one such species of animal, the Selenoglypha Poliodida, Fontcuberta takes the body of a snake and adds six pairs of legs to the body. With this created animal, he exhibits supposed X-rays of captured specimens as well as drawings, journal notes, and a detailed
textual account of the animal. One of the photographs included is titled “Being Captured” and shows someone in a lab coat gripping the animal around its snake-like body with latex-gloved hands. The face of the person is cropped out of the photograph, as is the face of the animal. What remains is a photograph without specific identity information but one that feels like it was snapped in the moment of action. In reality, it is plausible that the photograph was created in a photography studio, and carefully constructed from the lighting down to the framing.

The account of this creature also includes a close-up of the claws, showing fur on the legs that disappear as the leg connects to the body. The framing on this photograph is very close, and Fontcuberta is employing a similar device to the Lange photographs by creating a psychological closeness through proximity to the camera. In this case, Fontcuberta is using it as a device to gain the viewer’s confidence; surely there is no room for deceit if one can examine every angle of the creature.

Fontcuberta extends these ideas of plausible fiction into a more recent body of work published in Blindsport Magazine in 1997. With this body of work, he creates a Russian Cosmonaut, Colonel Ivan Isstchnikov. Fontcuberta shows a portfolio of images intended to document this cosmonaut’s historic journey into space, ranging from an “official portrait of the pilot” to Ivan and his space dog Kloka’s “historic space-walk.”

Examining these images subtly reveals the fictions that Fontcuberta is creating, though at first glance, they are strikingly well put together and plausible. The “official
portrait" is a head and shoulders photograph of Ivan. Under careful observation, it is apparent that the space helmet actually has pieces of old speakers attached to the outside, functioning as high tech gadgetry.

The "historic spacewalk" photograph shows the cosmonaut floating in space above the earth and tethered to his dog by a thin line. The dog is outfitted in its own space helmet and suit. The photograph itself is of very high quality, and there is a wide tonal range in the image. This quality is in contradiction to the quality of the imaging equipment likely to be aboard such a spacecraft during this time period. This internal evidence seems to indicate Fontcuberta's willingness to admit his fictions because he could have certainly degraded the image quality if he so chose.

Fontcuberta's photographs challenge the viewer to think about photographic truth. Photographs documenting animal species and cosmonauts are typically taken at face value without questioning the reality of the situation. In this case, though, Fontcuberta is re-contextualizing this style of photography into an art context and challenging assumptions of truth.
CHAPTER 3

MIRACULOUS MANIFESTATIONS

The Potato Manifestation has many layers. The object was purported by the radio host to be a message from the Christian God, and the message was intended to change the person who received it to follow the rules of the Christian religion. The potato seems to be a particularly strange object to reveal a divine message since the potato is a common food item that could be described as mundane. The potato is a common item, and many families describe themselves as “meat and potatoes.” The potato makes me think of the earth as well as the working class.

My photograph contains two halves of a potato on a dinner plate with floral patterning on the outer ring. Each half of the potato has dark cross shape in the center, with a slight halo around the edges of the cross shapes. Above the dinner plate is the suggestion of other dinner items, such as a beer bottle and cutting board with crumbs and the blade of a knife. To the right of the plate is an envelope partially covered by the cutting board. The address is partially legible, and there is a sticker label with the word “return” in two different languages. Beneath the plate is a Stanley “Life Guard” tape measure, extended to eight and one half inches. Both the tape measure and the potatoes cast darker shadows on the white
dinner plate. All of these choices are intended to situate the event within a specific time and place as well as to suggest a relationship between the event and its surroundings.
Figure 3.1: Potato Manifestation, 2001
Figure 3.2: Tortilla Manifestation, 2002
The *Tortilla Manifestation* depicts the front of a stove photographed from an angle so that the stove cuts a triangle into the darkness behind and beside it. The stove itself is not new, and the labeling of the burners on the front is rubbing off. The rear panel of the stove has some kind of icon, which appears as an abstracted light bulb with lines emanating out from the symbol. On the stove, we see two burners, and the suggestion of a third in the lower right corner. On the front left burner of the stove, there is a frying pan with a tortilla shell in it, and within the tortilla, a face appears. The most prominent feature of the face is the nose, which emerges while the eyes blend with the darker burn marks on the tortilla. In the pan with the tortilla, there is a pair of surgical implements: forceps and tweezers. Between the front burners, there is a metal spatula, which casts a shadow through the openings in the end piece used to turn a food item. To the right and rear of the spatula, there is a commercially purchased and produced package of "Manny's" tortillas. The script of the packaging reads "Low in Fat" and also gives the net weight. This package obscures the rear right burner and partially obscures the left rear burner.

The lighting in this image is dramatic, perhaps suggesting a connection to Film Noir, and with that suggestion comes the suspense of a mystery unfolding. Something has happened, and it feels like a second event will happen directly after this photograph is taken. The worn stove associates the event with a certain income level and reflects the person who owns the stove and made the tortilla.
This face of Christ appeared to a woman in New Mexico who would go on to make a shrine to the object in her home. I first read about the narrative in a book, and the author of the book used local newspaper accounts of the miracle as the primary source for this section of the book. After making the image, an acquaintance of mine from New Mexico told me that she had been to view the actual object. That shifted something for me and made my photograph even more meaningful to me somehow. I later discovered multiple tortilla manifestations with the aid of the Internet: two on soft tortillas and one on a tortilla chip. These additional manifestations added another layer of external context to the image because of the cultural knowledge many people have of these events.

WORKING METHODS

In my approach to these photographs, I am adopting the language of the document and of the archive. To this end, I have been looking at medical photographs, crime photographs, historical photographs, photo forgeries, and snapshots on the Internet. I have tried to familiarize myself with the wide range of ways that people use photographs to document an experience lived or an event that has occurred.

One of the methods I have employed to suggest study of the photographs is to include an internal reference to scale in the photographs. In some photographs, for example Stigmata (Hand), a caliper is used as a measurement device to suggest a scientific inquiry.
Other photographs, such as *Broken Keychains*, use an everyday object such as a “No. 2” pencil to suggest the scale relationship.

All of these photographs are in black and white, which is linked by convention to scientific studies and other forms of “objective” documentation. The art critic Henry Geldzahler comments in his essay “What I Know about Photography” on the shift of meaning between black and white and color photography:

> Color always seems to have a second agenda. Color seems to have an underside that undermines its verisimilitude. There are kinds of color photography, there are choices within color photography. Is a book, as you're turning the pages, if they're by the same photographer, made by the same system, and reproduced the same way, you can fall into that way of seeing in a rather nice way. But the minute you put the book down, and you look around and back at the pictures again you realize their arbitrariness. It's something about dye, about color, about the way the ink sits on paper. You can accept it as a coherent system, but not as anything natural. With black and white you don't have that feeling. Somehow black and white seems more natural.10

By eliminating the color variable from my photographs, I am reducing the photograph to the essential elements. Black and white is more easily trusted because of the tradition associated with its use in documentation.
Figure 3.3: Stigmata (Hand), 2001
Figure 3.4: Broken Keychain, 2002
I give a lot of thought to context when making these photographs. My photographs are sets, and when I construct a set and frame it with the camera lens, I give a lot of thought to the types of objects that are included in the photograph. I am curious about the events that happen, i.e. the miracles, but I am also interested in the context in which they happen. I am additionally interested in the kind of person that would be open and willing to accept these events, as well as the kind of person that would be more susceptible to these paranormal activities. This line of questioning has stayed with me, and it feels that it is consistently on the brink of my consciousness when thinking about my work.

An example of this is Crying Statue, Tears of Blood. This image is actually the fourth revision of an idea, and each revision is based on tweaking the internal context of the image. In the photograph, a statue of Jesus is crying tears of blood. The statue is on a bookshelf in front of a full shelf of books. The books include a series of graphic novels by Dave Sim (social satire, which includes critique of the Church), books by Beat authors Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and the Book of the Damned by Charles Fort. To the left, there is a stack of compact discs, including Built to Spill’s “Keep it Like a Secret,” Patsy Cline’s “Angel”, Radiohead’s “Amnesiac”, the Eels “Southerner”, and Morphine’s “Cure for Pain.” All of these items reflect the owner and tells the viewer some information about the owner’s
interests. There is also some ironic play between the titles and the statue, as well as the broader system of beliefs that the statue represents.
Figure 3.5: Crying Statue, Tears of Blood, 2002.
GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

This series of photographs is based on accounts of smaller sects within Christianity who believe that faith empowers the believer to perform miraculous events in order to demonstrate their faith. These events sometimes take the form of a supernatural power and also the form of immunity to a dangerous action. People of these sects will voluntarily submit themselves to danger to prove their devotion to their beliefs.

In my photographs, I assume the role of the believer, and I perform miraculous events for the camera to document. To date, the camera has recorded luminosity around my head, levitation near a shrine, immunity to poison, the handling of a five-foot long black snake, immunity to fire, and immunity to a severe electrical discharge. In all of the photographs, I am wearing khaki pants, a short-sleeve white shirt, and a black striped tie that is linked with my perceptions from personal history with organized religion.

Fire Immunity consists of two hands, presumably belonging to the same person, against a black background. The left hand has a wristwatch with a silver face and a black band. The right hand holds a cigarette lighter with a warning label turned towards the viewer. With the lighter, the right hand appears to be touching it to the ring finger of the left hand. The left hand has two fingers extended, two fingers curled, and the thumb in an upright position. The left hand is slightly blurred, which implies a sense of movement or flight. The lighter casts shadows of the ring finger and index finger on the palm of the left hand. Other
than these shadows, the hands are lit uniformly. The position of the camera relative to the viewer might imply that the hands either belong to the cameraperson or to the viewer.

To me, this image holds many implications through the gestures in the hands. The left hand extension of the two first fingers and the "cocked" position of the thumb makes me think of a gun. The hand position also associates with the gesture that many Jesus statues portray. In that gesture, Jesus' hand points upward with the first two fingers extended, the next two fingers curled, and a heart behind the hand.

The action further brings different associations to the image for me. In high school, I knew of a group of kids who would inflict pain on their bodies. Sometimes it would be cutting their flesh; sometimes it would be burning their flesh. This action for me implies a sense of desperation, a desperate action to feel something, anything.

Additional complexity is added by the title of the image, *Fire Immunity*, which links the image to the context of a devotional action. In this context, this crude demonstration speaks of hopefulness that faith will prevent harm. From this perspective, this action is not harmful, but intended to demonstrate a positive statement about the system of beliefs that the subject in the photograph holds.
Figure 3.6: Fire Immunity, 2001
CHAPTER 4

RELIQUES AND RELIQUARIES

A relic is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "some object, such as a part of the body or clothing, an article for personal use, or the like, which remains as a memorial of a departed saint, martyr, or other holy person, and as such is carefully preserved and held in esteem or veneration." Historically, relics are prevalent through Roman Catholic divisions of Christianity, though other divisions have a tradition with them as well. Relics have been linked with ideas of faith and devotion but have also been attacked by reformers as objects of idolatry.

This idea of collection can be traced back to the idea of the relic. Collection as a term refers to the systematic absorption of objects into a larger grouping. With the relic, the objects are being collected for both spiritual and secular reasons. A spiritual reason would be to gain insight into divinity or to achieve some level of closeness to that divinity. A secular reason could be to attract pilgrims to a particular church and raise funds based on the incoming "tourist trade."

To collect a relic is to possess it and to assimilate it into the collection of objects. A relic could also be thought of as a souvenir or memento, a reminder of something external from oneself. To possess a relic is also a reference to containment. The act of possession
removes the relic from its context in the larger world and relegates it to a new private world determined by the collector. The collector creates a new context for it and determines the frequency of viewing, if there is any public viewing at all. The photograph could be thought of as means of preserving a moment and artificially suspending it from time. This act of collection is a similar act; it removes the object from its natural place in the world and preserves it under very specific conditions. The object thus loses any function it might previously have had and exists in a state of unreality where its only function is to be that which other people project it to be.

Once absorbed into the collection, the relic ceases to exist as an object in its own right. Rather, the object exists by the definition of the collector. For example, a piece of fabric ceases to become a piece of fabric and instead becomes a “rare specimen of a saint’s clothing,” which is then worthy of veneration. The specimen is no longer that which defines it internally, cloth, but rather what defines it externally, a holy relic. This marks a fundamental shift in how the object is perceived; the object becomes larger than itself and now has added cultural impact.

Richard Treadler describes a woman who is able to detect relics in his book, The Journey of the Magi. This woman is described as being “immediately sensitive to the presence of a relic when she approached one.” In the narrative, people bring their relics to her to find out if their relics were actually what they were said to be.” This anecdote raises interesting ideas about faith and belief. On one level, the possessors of the relics are
questioning the "genuine" nature of their relics and not relying on faith but at the same time are transferring that faith to the opinion of someone else. Is this person better informed to make these decisions? It is still an act of faith to believe in the authority of an external source.

I am interested in this shift from an, otherwise mundane, object to this object of veneration. How is this object validated? Why is this object selected over objects with similar physical qualities? At what point does an object become a relic? The crown of thorns became a relic because it pierced Christ's body and also because Christ wore it on his head when he died. Which of these is a more important reason? Is it more important because it entered Christ's body and mingled with his bodily fluids (blood where it touched his head)? If this is the case, then is the object still a relic if none of the thorns that pierced the flesh remain? All of the thorns have been distributed as relics over time, so do the vine sections that remain still have the same level of significance? Or do the vines gain significance because they were once attached to the thorns that pierced the head of Christ.

One of the key ideas to the relic is the idea of faith. One must accept the objects as they are labeled; the splinters of wood must be accepted as a piece of the true cross. Without this faith, the meaning of the object vanishes back to the ficta, or the wood becomes the wood again.

With the case of St. Gerard, his veins were opened at his death so that the layperson could dip cloths in the blood.17 The cloth was always in the possession of the people, so is
the cloth a relic or is the blood on the cloth a relic? Does the cloth become a relic once the blood touches it, and if the blood is washed out, is it still a relic? If an object, a cloth, touches a relic such as a fragment of the true cross, does this cloth become a relic by extension? With this idea as a threshold, at which point does it cross the threshold and become something more than itself?

WORKING METHODS

In my photographs, I am presenting the viewer with a relic based on history. The first image of the series is a vial containing a white fluid, which is identified by a tag in the image as being “the Milk of the Virgin Mary.” The text of the tag further identifies the date and location of the relic in addition to a note that reads “as fed to Jesus.” Beneath the relic and the tag is a six-inch wooden ruler. The negative space in the image is a neutral white color.
The ruler is an internal reference to scale in the photographs. When entering these objects into the imagined archive, it is important to note the approximate dimensions to categorize them properly. The ruler as a device is used in the pursuit of empirical knowledge of dimensional objects. The ruler in the photographs, however, provides the base information about the relic, but leaves the important questions unanswered. The key issue is whether the objects are of a divine or spiritual nature, and defining the physical dimensions only touches that on a rudimentary level. For example, with the index finger of John the Baptist, measuring the bones to be approximately the size of a human index finger becomes important to verify that it falls into the realm of the possible, that it is plausible that it could be bones from a human finger. The measurements are of trivial importance, though, because it does not address the issue of authenticity. It could be bones of the correct size, but it could be from an animal. Or if it is human, it could be any human. No records exist for the dimensions of John's fingers while he was alive, so therefore it becomes difficult to ascertain whether these could be, in fact, his finger. The ruler begins to touch at this grounding of plausibility, but there are no concrete answers to be discovered within.

I have photographed the relics against neutral black or white backgrounds to place the emphasis on the object itself and to remove it from the context of its surroundings. The manner of lighting is similar in each as well, diffused lights above the object. I have attempted to approach each object in a similar fashion to try to minimize the subjective
nature of the camera. This working method was enacted carefully and consistently so that the specimens can be compared amongst themselves. The removal of context created by the backdrops is additionally intended to focus the attention of the viewer on the object itself as well as the relationships that are created between the ruler, the tag, and the method of containment.

The tags in the photographs define the objects. Perhaps it would be possible to ascertain the visual reference in purely visual terms, but the tags lead the viewer to a direct conclusion in a similar manner that a viewer of the relic is informed of the nature of the object. One might find a ring of thorns in a garden and think nothing of it, but when viewing that object in the context of a shrine, it immediately gains the voice of authority. The object is defined as the crown of thorns by the context of the church, so authenticity is assumed by the layperson. Likewise, the tag in the photograph solidifies any doubts as to the intended identity of the object in the photograph.

Photography as a medium cannot escape the problem of the real: it always references a specific moment in time. Unlike painting, photography is more easily seen as illusory reality. It is difficult to look at a painting without thinking about the artist, partially due to brushstrokes and other telltale evidences of the "hand" of the artist at work. Photography has no brushstrokes to disturb the illusion of objectivity and is thus given a level of trust by the everyday viewer. It is precisely this preconception that I attempt to exploit within the photographs.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Protestant reformer John Calvin denounces the idea of relics as "trash." Calvin is concerned that Christians have left the "principal to follow the accessory." He attacks different relics in his treatise on relics and uses logic to examine the objects. After a logical discussion, it becomes difficult to believe these objects are what they are said to be. He attacks the notion of authentic relics by counting the number of repetitions within the proclaimed bodies of particular holy people; "it would then seem that every apostle had more than four bodies." Calvin further points out

"We carelessly approve of a thing without taking the necessary time to examine what it really is, and we are thus deceived for want of warning; but when we are warned, we begin to think, and become quite astonished at our believing so easily such an improbability." Calvin sews the seed of skepticism by encouraging the reader to take the time to examine proclaimed relics and to not be so quick to approve each item as we are told that it is something.

With the photographs, I attempt to create an initial belief that the object is or might be what it is labeled to be. I hope that notion will then fall apart as the viewer looks closer, examines the internal evidence in the photographs and considers probabilities and the likelihood of such an object being available to pose for my photograph. With this strategy, I
hope that the viewer will consider the idea of the relic and the implications of the relic.

Furthermore, I also hope that the viewer will begin to formulate awareness that the photograph is merely a communications tool that can shape falsities as easily as words, further dispelling the myth of the photograph as an objective document.
CHAPTER 5

UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

In April 2002, I began to photographically document the UFO population that resides between Columbus, Ohio and Indianapolis, Indiana. These photographs began when I was walking with my camera near campus and observed a triangular shaped unidentified flying object flying relatively low overhead. I was fortunate enough to quickly aim my camera, and I photographed the object emerging from behind some tree branches and above a light post. When I looked carefully at the photograph later, I noticed that it is indeed a fully formed craft, complete with a cockpit for the pilot.

I have been interested in accounts of UFO's for some time, but this event led me to conduct further research on the nature of this craft. My Internet sources confirmed that the craft was indeed not of man-made origin. This made me even more curious, and I delved further into my research.

After extensive reading, my senses became heightened, and I began to become aware of these different types of craft lingering overhead, sometimes just out of sight. I would walk with my camera more frequently and began to document more of these crafts in the skies. When I walk, I have to try to will myself into a state where I will be receptive to the presence of the craft overhead. It begins with a tingling sensation in the back of my consciousness,
almost as if I am being watched. When I get that sensation, I know that a craft is close, and I ready my camera to try to capture a photograph for my collection. In the course of my walks, I have been able to capture different, distinct types of UFO's, ranging from the traditional notion of the saucer to the triangular craft I first sighted.

This above narrative is a persona developed in response to the questions of how these photographs come into existence. At first I felt as if I was presenting them as if they were found objects, but I came to realize that as the artist I was claiming responsibility for the images and presenting them as mine. The images are indeed generated by me as art objects and the ridiculous nature of the persona furthers my agenda to make people question the nature of the photographic document.
Figure 5.1: UFO-04, 2002
CHAPTER 6

CREDENTIALS

I was ordained as a Reverend by mail on May 11th, 2002, by World Christianship Ministries.

Ordination, become an ordained minister, the key to your new ministry. World Christianship is a worldwide Christian ordination outreach ministry with over 22 years of service to the Christian Faith. We provide a seminary alternative for individuals who wish to be ordained as Christian clergy in a simple way, without delay, in order to begin your ministry or church. We invite you to browse through our site concerning ordination, doing weddings, true to the Word Bible study courses, handbooks to help your new ministry get started, fellowship, Christian music, religious freedom laws and more. World Christianship is an established ministry with extensive experience in ordaining sincere Christians by mail almost immediately. We have ordained clergy in every state of the USA, and in over 85 foreign countries. All over the world you find Christian ministers who received ordination by WCM. World Christianship is a Christian non-denominational ministry providing Christian ordination almost immediately.2

I am also a registered Ghost Hunter with the International Ghost Hunters Society.

The IGHS membership is free. The Society is dedicated and committed to the research, documentation, education, and investigation of ghostly phenomena recorded through EVP, digital, film and video photography. The IGHS is a Society of ghost believers, ghost hunters and ghost researchers.29
These credentials are another layer of the persona that is referred to in the previous chapter. They lend me the appearance of credibility as I pursue these phenomena and hopefully make people pause to think of the nature of both the credentials and the images. The credentials will not and are not intended to hold up to serious inquiry in a similar fashion to how the images are not thoroughly plausible when carefully considered.
CHAPTER 7

EXHIBITION

The exhibition Conjecture took place in the Hopkins Hall Gallery from June 3rd – 7th, 2002. The gallery space consists of one long room, with an outside lobby area also suitable for hanging artwork. The gallery space is divided from the lobby area by glass windows and a glass door. The back wall of the gallery is also glass, and reveals a building hallway.

The work was divided into two categories, the first dealing with paranormal religious occurrences and the second dealing with secular paranormal occurrences. The religious work was hung inside the gallery, and included images of Miracles, Relics, and Gifts of the Spirit. The exterior focused on images of Unidentified Flying Objects. The division was intended to suggest a transition from secular occurrences to the interior world of religion.

For my exhibition, black velvety curtains were hung at both the front and the back of the gallery. The purpose of the curtains was two-fold. The first was to make the gallery a private space for contemplation, as well as to visually separate the interior of the gallery from the exterior. The second was more ornamental, with the curtains suggesting a relation to ritualized religion.
On the door to the gallery, a sign was hung politely requesting that there be no more than twelve viewers in the gallery at any one time. This perhaps suggests a certain amount of reverence with which the exhibition is to be viewed. Furthermore, it alludes to the precious nature of a rare collection.
CHAPTER 8

SYNTHESIS AND SUMMATION

“To say that photographs lie implies that they might tell the truth; but the beauty of their nature is exactly to say nothing, neither to lie nor not to.”

- Stanley Cavell

I am becoming more aware of external context as I have further opportunities to show my work. I deliberately make my images multi-layered to challenge the viewer to consider the photograph and to interpret meaning. When I show my work in art contexts, viewers tend to read them as critical of organized religion, which I believe to be related to the longstanding link between art and social criticism. However, I have shown the images to very religious people, and some read them as devotional. This leads me to want to show my images in a religious context for a religious audience. This issue of context is an ongoing experiment that relates directly to my artistic practice.

I think of photography as an opportunity to make anything you want to happen, happen. It is possible for an artist to create situations that reflect longing and desire, and it is also possible to make an event occur. Photographs can make thoughts real. They can both
ask and answer questions. The photograph can become my personal vision. Or my personal version.

Most of these events never happened to me. I recreated them based on accounts and photographed them. In some cases, they may not have happened at all; perhaps the story was made up for any number of purposes. In any case, the event exists now, made real through my photograph. I am implicated in the act of creating the event through the act of making the photograph. The actions involved in this process function on two levels: inwardly questioning the empirical way that we know things, and externally questioning the photograph as a means of truthful representation.
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