

Spring 5-2013

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Kidd, Angelina, "Imagining the Unknown" (2013). *MFA in Photography and Integrated Media Theses*. 6.
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Imagining the Unknown

By Angelina Kidd

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography.

The Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University, 2013

INTRODUCTION

It is true that there is no scientific proof of life after life or of the human soul. However, I believe there is a soul and that it is energy manifested as light. Our lifetime is a mere pulse when measured against the evolution of earth. We are connected to the cosmos through the very calcium in our bones and the iron in our blood, which originated from stars that died billions of years ago. My belief is that the earthly body is separate from the soul and that our light energy returns to the cosmos. Energy will not cease to exist, as it cannot be destroyed according to Laws of Thermodynamics. Therefore, if the soul is light energy, then it does not disappear and is instead transformed.

Historically, humans thought the world was flat or that the sun was “fire pulled across the sky by a chariot of the gods,”¹ and both of these beliefs proved to be wrong. We have not scientifically proven that there is an afterlife yet but that does not mean it will not eventually be proven.

When my great-grandmother died, I was not yet old enough to fully understand her passing. Through my imagination of the unknown, akin to accounts of near-death

¹ Kevin T. Favero, *The Science of the Soul: Scientific Evidence of Human Souls*. Edina, Minn: Beaver's Pond Press, 2004, 3.

experiences, my great-grandmother visited me daily. Her presence comforted me when no one else could. In a similar way, my mother still lives on within me and will never grow old. Twenty-three years ago, my mother's life was transformed by cancer. As I approach the same age of her departure, I am constantly aware of my own existence. This is why my investigation into the unknown is relevant and personal.

JOURNEY

Human Soul & Consciousness

What are we made of? Do we have a soul? What is consciousness? Research into these questions indicates that there are no absolute answers. We cannot view our souls under a microscope; indeed, we do not have any concrete scientific evidence of a soul. Scientists think neuroscience has “the only branch of scientific study relevant to one’s understanding of the soul.”² That does not mean the soul is an actual object or verifiable. Instead, scientists consider the soul to be a psychological idea or belief that contradicts science. Alternately, from a spiritual viewpoint, the soul is the attribute of a living thing. Having a soul makes us alive. If one believes in God, then he can attribute the soul to God’s creation. This is not proof of a soul; instead it is belief based on faith. When things such as love cannot be scientifically proven, we use faith to validate the emotion or the unseen thing.

Pondering if humans have souls is not a novel concept. The ancient Greeks questioned the idea of being nothing, not least because the two words form an oxymoron. In the 1600s, philosopher Rene Descartes used logical reasoning to deduce that “his ability to

² Robert Lanza, *Do We Have a Soul? A Scientific Answer*. 20 Apr 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2013.

doubt his own existence provided evidence that there must be a thinking thing that was doing the doubting.”³ Over 200 years ago, philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote about human autonomy. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Kant “argues that the human understanding is the source of the general laws of nature that structure all our experience; and that human reason gives itself the moral law, which is our basis for belief in God, freedom, and immortality.”⁴ Therefore, all that we experience is within our mind. Scientist Robert Lanza tackles this concept head-on with his theory of Biocentrism. According to Wikipedia, “Biocentrism states that life and biology are central to being, reality, and the cosmos — life creates the universe rather than the other way around. It asserts that current theories of the physical world do not work, and can never be made to work, until they fully account for life and consciousness.”⁵

Just as the soul cannot be scientifically explained, physics cannot explain what creates consciousness. Our brains are complex and contain one hundred billion neurons. Eyeballs see the world upside down and the brain analyzes this information in thirty visual areas. The brain would seem to be an ideal place to house consciousness. However, I think the soul and consciousness are one and the same, made up of energy that is separate from the brain. No one knows for sure whether we originated from Adam or Eve or from the Big Bang but what we do know is that 50,000 to 75,000 years ago, our ancestors rapidly

³ Favero, 259.

⁴ Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), 19 Apr. 2013.

⁵ “Biocentrism (theory of everything).” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., Web. 19 Apr. 2013.

advanced. Dr. Ramachandran⁶, a neuroscientist, writes:

I believe that these neurons may have played an important role in human evolution. One of the hallmarks of our species is what we call culture. Culture depends crucially on imitation of parents and teachers, and the imitation of complex skills may require the participation of mirror neurons. I think that, somewhere around 50,000 years ago, maybe the mirror neurons system became sufficiently sophisticated that there was an explosive evolution of this ability to mime complex actions, in turn leading to cultural transmission of information, which is what characterizes us humans.

This explains the origin and evolution of humans, but it is not the origin of life. I have a dualist opinion on this. On the one hand, I do believe there is a higher power—someone or something that created humanity. As a result of studying human physiology and anatomy, I am in awe of the human body and find it difficult to believe that we were entirely created by the Big Bang. On the other hand, I believe we are from the cosmos with atoms of stars within us.

I think our consciousness is more than an organ. A computer has a “brain,” but it does not have intuition, nor does it purport to have a soul or have consciousness. I have no evidence for the human soul or the afterlife, as my research does not set out to prove this. Instead, my consciousness chooses to have faith in having a soul and this leads me into an artistic investigation of how I perceive the afterworld. My light constructions are made by hand and I find the process of gathering and building the environment to be a

⁶ V S. Ramachandran, *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Imposter Poodles to Purple Numbers*. New York: Pi Press, 2004, 38.

contemplative act in the exploration of the afterlife.

Light Energy & Connection to the Cosmos

Our solar system is estimated to be 4.6 billion years old. The universe, as of today, contains 112 elements and has dark and light energy. However, dark energy and matter, which make up 23 percent of the universe, are a mystery. Electromagnetic radiation can be viewed as energy moving through space as light. For life to exist, there needs to be carbon and oxygen. Carbon is a product of nuclear fusion created by stars. The calcium in our bones and the iron in our blood are from stars that died thirteen billion years ago. We also have hydrogen atoms from the Big Bang inside of us. Furthermore, according to Nova, “Everything else, every other chemical element, including carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and all the other elements essential for...life, is thought to have been fabricated in stars.”⁷ Stars have a certain type of immortality, as their atoms and molecules live on within us. I believe the human soul is energy in the form of light within a body that decays. Our soul as light will not expire because the First Law of Thermodynamics states energy cannot be destroyed. It can only change from one form to another. Author Earnest Becker remarks that man “is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it.”⁸

For those that believe in heaven, it is always above or in the sky, never underground. Heaven, if you believe in it, is beyond earth. Light is a vital concept in my creative process because I associate luminosity with stars.

⁷ Peter Tyson. *The Star in You*. 02 Dec 2010. Web. 20 Apr 2013.

⁸ Ernest Becker. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973, 26.

Mortality & Grief

While death is a universal experience, my work is not specifically about the occurrence of death. Instead, it is primarily concerned with what comes after. Growing up in Hawai'i, I was raised in a large family and within a tight knit community. My earliest memories are of spending time with my great-grandmother on the front stairs of her green plantation home with a red metal roof. I loved my great-grandmother for her kindness and spent a lot of time with her while my mother, a single parent, went to work. My great-grandmother passed away when I was about seven years old. I remember this as a pivotal time of understanding—or more specifically, of coping—with death. The Hospice of Southeastern Connecticut Bereavement Program states that a child six to nine years old “begins to understand the finality of death.... Sees death as a taker or spirit that comes and gets you [and].... Continues to have difficulty comprehending abstractions such as heaven, spirituality.”⁹ I did not fully understand that death was the end. In retrospect, it was a confusing event. My grandmother was wailing while dressed completely in black, and the sadness was suffocating. On the mainland, being dressed in black is normal, but one rarely dresses this way on the islands. Conceptually, this is why my imagery is not heavily dark or black as I equate this with unbearable grief.

I didn't quite understand what was going on. I was confused because the adults were mournful at the funeral, yet there was a party afterwards with food and music all around. As a child, I expected my great-grandmother to come back to celebrate with the family. Instead, she came to visit me each night when I was alone and would comfort me as I

⁹ Hospice of Southeastern Connecticut Bereavement Program. *Children's Understanding of Death*. Web. 13 Apr. 2013.

went through this extremely confusing event. No one had talked to me about death, so I did not know it was not normal to have your “dead” relative visit you. This experience shaped my belief in life after life. What matters is not whether it is true or not, but that it was a crucial event in my childhood that solidified my opinion that souls are separate from the body and that death is not the end.

During the Paleolithic period, shamans also visited with spirits. According to archaeologist David S. Whitley, “Shamans used trance to call the primordial spirits from this half reality, spirits whose existence was perceived by all humans in daily experience.”¹⁰ Due to the human ability to be reflective, our species is the only one aware of its own mortality and capable of contemplating death. We know death is inevitable because it is scientifically proven. Having knowledge of this does not make it any easier. Heidegger “argued that the basic anxiety of man is anxiety *about* being-in-the-world, as well as anxiety *of* being-in-the-world. That is, both fear of death and fear of life, of experience and individuation.”¹¹ There is a level of fear of death in humans and repressing this fear is a coping mechanism. However, humans also fear life as well. As William James remarked, fear is “fear of the universe. It is the fear of childhood, the fear of emerging into the universe, of realizing one’s own independent individuality, one’s own living and experiencing.”¹²

Memory & Immortality

The ancient Greeks highly regarded everlasting life in the memories of others, but this

¹⁰ David S. Whitley. *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief*. Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2009, 210

¹¹ Becker, 53.

¹² Becker, 145.

was not a replacement for the afterlife. When I consider my mother's last days in this life I am reminded of three things: the cosmos, photography, and the separation of the body and the soul. My mother and I lived on two different islands in the Hawaiian chain; on the occasion of her last visit with me—one that neither of us knew was to be our last time together—we observed the cosmos. In the darkness of the night above the Big Island of Hawai'i, we viewed the living sky, as the universe appeared to dance. In our conversation, we envisioned being together in the stars. Perhaps this was my mother giving me a tangible place for heaven.

A few days later, after returning home to O'ahu, she was admitted to the hospital. Her cancer had spread from her lungs to her brain. We spoke on the phone and instead of being scared of death, she told me she was enjoying her time with Sage. I knew the end was near because Sage, my infant son, was with me on Hawai'i. In what I thought of as the darkness of death, my mother was going towards light. Her spirit was finding solace in time with the grandchild she was leaving.

I got on a plane and traveled to her hospital bedside. I will never forget what my mother looked like. It was her soul in an outline of a body with skin draped over its form like a shroud. My vibrant mother was barely there. Twenty years later, that memory still causes immense sorrow. I recall her words as she apologized for all the wrongs she felt she had done to me. My mother was making peace and saying her final goodbye. Then she asked me to go to her home to retrieve a red bag. I didn't want to leave and did not know what was in the red bag but obliged. Within the hour I returned to the hospital but was stopped in the corridor. I knew she had passed. When I opened the red bag, it was my mother's camera. At the time, I questioned why she would send me away to get her camera then

die alone. In time I understood that photography was more than a hobby to my mother. It was her passion. Photography was my mother's final gift to me. She lives on through me in my art and consciousness.

The use of silhouette in my photography is the optimal expression of how I visualize the afterworld. There is freedom constructing the scenes by hand. I can fabricate whatever my imagination provides. My inspiration often comes from my dreams. When we dream, we transition from the earthly body to the unknown. In both dreams and the afterlife, our consciousness is traveling but exactly to where is a mystery.

HISTORY & CULTURE

Ancient Egyptians' Afterlife & China's Emperor Qin

Humans are predisposed to believe in the afterlife, according to research from the University of Oxford. Experiments conducted in China and Belfast “suggest that people across many different cultures instinctively believe that some part of their mind, soul or spirit lives on after-death. The studies demonstrate that people are natural ‘dualists’ finding it easy to conceive of the separation of the mind and the body.”¹³

As early as pre-3100 B.C., during the Prehistoric & Predynastic Period, there is evidence in Egypt of a society that believed in the afterlife. Ancient Egypt was one of many cultures around the world that have believed that there is life after the death of the body. They placed faith in the belief of the afterlife, even though there was no scientific proof and no one returned to confirm its existence. The unknown place where souls traveled

¹³ University of Oxford. "Humans 'predisposed' to believe in gods and the afterlife." *ScienceDaily*, 14 Jul. 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2013.

after death was another world, or in the cosmos.

The Egyptian afterlife did not guarantee eternal life, as one could potentially die again—this time, permanently. The soul, including the shadow, needed to be protected in the afterlife to avoid forever being locked in the darkness of the tomb. Pharaohs possessed everlasting life by means of reincarnation and returned to a human body to repeat the cycle of life. The instructions, spells, and precautions to help one on the journey to the afterworld were written on papyrus and placed in the tomb. We commonly know of this manuscript as *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, but the accurate title is *The Book of Going Forth by Day*. The *Sheut* was the shadow or silhouette and one of the multiple parts of the soul according to Ancient Egyptians. When a person died, it was the *ka* that would leave the body. However, a person would not be without her shadow, even in death. Working with shadow is a central theme in my work as a visual representation of the soul.

Just as Ancient Egyptians prepared for their eternal life with elaborate tombs, China's Emperor Qin created a world for the afterlife filled with terra-cotta soldiers, rivers flowing with mercury, palaces, and even dancers and acrobats. During the emperor's reign of thirty-six years, more than 700,000 people constructed the mausoleum. In one palace, the reception hall is over 3,000 feet long and almost 500 feet wide. To keep the jewels safe, "the workmen who installed the finishing touches were buried alive to ensure that the secret of the entranceway died with them."¹⁴ Due to the danger of high levels of mercury in the tomb and the potential for deterioration of the artifacts when exposed to outside air, the complete excavation has not been completed.

The First Emperor of China desired everlasting life and during his lifetime obsessively

¹⁴ S. Shapiro, N.p.. Web. 18 Apr 2013.

constructed a replica of his belongings to forever live his current life after he died. In the *Book of Rites*, an early Chinese text written in the late first century B.C., the *po* or soul returns to earth after death. This would explain why Emperor Qin would create a lavish replica for his soul to return to. Not only was he preparing for the afterlife, he also sought immortality while alive, according to Wolff¹⁵:

During his life Qin had tried several ways to find the answer to eternal life: he drank elixirs of jade and mercury, he climbed mountains (the legendary resting places of the gods), and he even sent hundreds of children out onto the sea to search for the rumored islands inhabited by wise men who supposedly knew the secret to immortality.

Perhaps because immortality proved to be elusive, Emperor Qin did what he could control: he built his afterlife while he was living.

I do not plan to build a replica of my life in preparation for the afterlife, but I do construct environments that are calm and peaceful, i.e. how I envision what the afterlife will be like.

Silhouette & Cave Paintings

I am drawn to the duality of light and dark—conceptualized as absence and presence—and find the combination of silhouette and photography to be the best medium for revealing this. Kara Walker’s concept of using silhouettes was an inspiration. She “strips the silhouette of its own identity and presents us instead with its deformation and a de-sublimation of the political history it harbors.”¹⁶ Her subject matter can be dark and I thought it was brilliant that she uses silhouettes for her narratives. The gentleness of the

¹⁵ Jennifer Wolff, *Emperor Qin in the Afterlife*. Web. 18 Apr 2013.

¹⁶ Kara E Walker, Ian Berry, and Darby English. *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*. New York: Rizzoli, 2007, 162.

silhouette pulls the viewer in before she is shocked by the theme.

Cave paintings in southern France could be considered the earliest silhouettes dating back to the “Upper Paleolithic period, roughly from thirty-five thousand to ten thousand years ago.”¹⁷ Archaeologists theorize that the cave paintings are images depicting the supernatural world created by shamans. The mythical cave art depicts metaphors of death and transformation. It has been speculated that the cave paintings were done solely for the sake of art, but once the location of the work is taken into account, as in the case of the Salon of the Bulls, one can conclude that there was a deeper intention. The art was done “where it is hardest to draw and least likely to be seen”.¹⁸ The main gallery is over ninety-eight feet long. At the end of this, there is a shaft that is over twenty-six feet deep. The paintings not only are on the walls but also on the ceilings. Imagine the type of equipment these artists used twenty thousand years ago to paint the ceilings. The scope of the paintings was sizeable, with one bull as large as seventeen feet. The expanse of the works of art points to a community of artists with intentions about which archeologists can only speculate. What we know for sure is that the artists were skilled. They understood perspective and could make a two-dimensional piece appear to be moving. Recent archeological interpretations of Lascaux propose that biological time was of great importance to the artists. Seasons, mating and life connected to cosmic time and from “the entrance of the cave to its very depths, the great book of the first –the founding – mythologies unfurls before our eyes, with its central theme, the creation of the world.”¹⁹ The cave paintings speak to us on a deeper level. In the darkness of the cave we are

¹⁷ Whitley, 25.

¹⁸ Whitley, 28-29

¹⁹ Lascaux, . N.p.. Web. 17 Apr 2013.

transported into the time, place and mythology of our ancestors from thousands of years ago.

During the Archaic age in the seventh century B.C., Greek artists used silhouettes to depict mythological scenes on their pottery. Due to the influence of trade routes to Egypt and the East, Greek artists incorporated the other cultures' styles into their own mythology. This silhouette painting was known as 'black figure pottery'. The skilled painters made detailed silhouettes of sphinxes, sirens, and griffins. Around 530 B.C., the black figure pottery was replaced with the red-figure technique.

Paper cut art can be traced back to the early twelfth century in China. The use of silhouette in shadow Puppet Theater dates even earlier in the Middle East. The shadow puppets represented dead spirits and were used for religious narratives. The term silhouette comes from Étienne de Silhouette, a French Finance Minister in the eighteenth century. Originally, the silhouette or shadow of a person was considered to be the essence of the subject. Art was fascinating in that a person could be in one location and their cut silhouette or shadow could be in another place. This might be hard to imagine in contemporary culture, filled with instant photos of the self. However, the silhouette predates photography, putting the fascination with representation of a cut silhouette in perspective. Silhouettes were a less expensive form of portraiture compared to a painting or sculpture. In the late nineteenth century, paper cut artists preferred the term "likenesses" instead of silhouettes.

Myths and Parables

Cultures around the world use myths and parables to "explain a culture's history or

philosophy in a simple way.”²⁰ The author Joseph Campbell describes myths as “the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.”²¹ Myths also have the ability to speak to different levels of understanding within a community. Myths are insight into a culture, as they carry a message.

Growing up in Hawai’i, my childhood was full of mythology. I know firsthand how the stories have roots in religion, art and philosophy. As a child of the islands, Hawaiian mythology taught me the connection people have with each other, nature and the afterlife.

Pele is the goddess of fire and volcanoes and resides in Halema’uma’u, a volcanic crater on the Big Island of Hawai’i. She will appear as a vision and sightings have been reported for hundreds of years. She can be beautifully young or a frail old beggar. The purpose of her visit is to test one’s generosity and kindness. If you provide food to Pele, disguised as the old woman, then you are rewarded. If not, then your greed and unkind behavior will be punished. She is also represented as flowing lava and as a goddess, has immortality.

Another demigod is Kamapua’a; he can change his form from a man to a plant or fish, though is mainly known to change his form to a pig.

The Hapu’u fern can live for 100 years. Eventually, when it does fall to the ground, it

²⁰ James Hamilton-Paterson, and Carol Andrews. *Mummies, Death and Life in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Viking Books, 1979, 23.

²¹ Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Novato, Calif: New World Library, 2008, 1.

then sends out roots to continue living. The “Hapu’u is believed to be a kino lau (body form) of the earth goddess Haumea. Like Hapu’u, when she ages, she defies death and is restored to youth. Haumea also gave unusual birth to other creatures, each emerging from different places on her body.”²² The myths of Pele, Kamapua’a and Haumea are inspirations in my work.

The ‘aumakua are our protectors who take on various forms, including animals, rocks and nature. For some it could be the shark, turtle, crow or hawk; for me it is the Pueo or owl. Relatedly, our ancestors continue to live as protectors in the form of ‘aumakua. The ‘aumakua are there to protect human beings through dreams or visions, and the plants and animals in my light constructions represent the ‘aumakua.

In Hawaiian song or poetry, there is usually a kaona, or hiding meaning. For instance, the song could ostensibly be about the ocean and how the sun caresses one’s skin. The hidden meaning, story or reference could be about a love affair. The key to understanding the kaona is knowing the language. A parable works in the same way: the short narrative does not explicitly state the meaning. I employ the same concept in my light constructions. By using an embryonic quality of light, I seek to provide a visually calm and peaceful environment to illustrate an abstract idea of the afterlife.

CONCLUSION

I desire an afterlife and believe in it because I want to. I find solace in my faith that there is more after the decay of the body. Recent events such as the senseless shooting of

²² Jay Robinson. *Halema’uma’u Trail Guide*. Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park. Web 20 Apr 2013.

children in Connecticut and the recent bombings in Boston have only served to strengthen my hope that there is more to this life. The afterlife is not solely about light energy, reincarnation, or cosmic travel; as long as we are able to remember, the souls of the departed continue on. Each of us will live on through the living.

The belief of the afterlife can be traced to prehistoric times. The ancient Egyptians prepared for life after death, as did China's Emperor Qin with his Terracotta Army. The historical evidence suggests a natural human tendency to believe in life after life. Eastern religions believe in reincarnation, karma, and nirvana. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam believe in resurrection. Research has proven that religious concepts are deeply rooted in human thought and part of human nature. What we know for sure is that death is inevitable and an equalizer. Life is fragile and short, and grief is inherent in the loss of a loved one. With my light constructions, I do not seek to exploit this emotion; rather, I aim to provide a visual salve and to encourage my viewer to consider that after death, life will be unknown. Through allegory and visual parables that both children and adults can relate to, I ask my viewer to return to that sliver of time in childhood when she believed anything was possible, even life after life.

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