Edge of Epiphany

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

BY

Anna-Marie Zurlinden

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

May 2020
Certification: In accordance with School of Art and Design and Graduate School policies, this documentation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

//Cynthia Hellyer-Heinz//

Chair, Graduate Advisory Committee

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Date
CATALOG

EDGE OF EPIPHANY

(One-Person Exhibition)

BY

Anna-Marie Zurlinden

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between August 2017 and March 2020. It was presented in a virtual exhibition posted on Facebook and uploaded to the Huskie Commons in lieu of a physical exhibition as a precautionary response to the 2020 Coronavirus-19 pandemic.
List of Work

**Arteries**, Acrylic Ink on Wood Panel, 26" x 12", November 2018

**Buddha Illuminated**, Acrylic Ink and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", January 2020

**Christ Illuminated**, Acrylic Ink and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", January 2020

**Chrysalis**, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 24" x 18", April 2018

**Dream Weaver**, Graphite on Paper, 96" x 92", February 2020

**Edge of Epiphany**, Acrylic on Canvas, 36" x 36", December 2017

**Encoded**, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 36" x 78", August 2018

**Krishna Illuminated**, Acrylic Ink and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", January 2020

**Lao Tsu Illuminated**, Acrylic Ink and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", January 2020

**Migration**, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 16" x 24", January 2018

**Mitochondrial Eve**, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 10" x 10", March 2020

**Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA A**, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", November 2019

**Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA B**, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", November 2019

**Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA C**, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", November 2019
Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA Z, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019

Overview, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48” x 24”, January 2018

Reflected Self, Mixed Media on Canvas Panel, 16” x 21”, January 2018

Return to Earth, Acrylic Ink on Wood Panel, 78” x 36”, February 2020

Sacred Spirit of the Ancestors: Eastern European Hare, Acrylic on Canvas, Acrylic on Canvas, 31” x 16”, March 2020

Sacred Spirit of the Ancestors: European Brown Bear of France, Acrylic on Canvas, 90” x 90”, March 2020

Sacred Spirit of the Ancestors: Scandinavian Boar, Acrylic on Canvas, 90” x 90”, March 2020

Sacred Spirit of the Ancestors: White Stag of the British Isles, Acrylic on Canvas, 48” x 36”, March 2018

The Divine Comedy: From Purgatorio, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57” x 57”, March 2018

The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57” x 57”, September 2018

The Divine Comedy: Paradiso, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57” x 57”, January 2020

Threshold, Acrylic Ink on Wood Panel, 78” x 36”, January 2020

Urban Hive, Acrylic on Canvas, 60” x 48”, January 2018
EDGE OF EPIPHANY EXHIBITION

Objectives

This body of work deals with the human condition at large, but more specifically contemplates what is shared by mankind across time and culture and seeks to bridge the physical and spiritual of human experience. These commonalities and connections may be identified as the desire to experience the divine, a quest to understand the world, and a longing to know beauty. By associating seemingly disparate concepts of the cosmos and individual, *Edge of Epiphany* presents—through the lens of personal experience—some of those connections to share with viewers a wonder of the beauty in our synchronistic universe. Further, the recognition of our interdependence and connectedness is essential to overcoming human differences in a time of ever-increasing division on our planet and in our country. *Edge of Epiphany* seeks to encourage viewers to leave behind their focus on our divergences and take away some sense of our unity.

Another objective of *Edge of Epiphany* is to fill a vacant niche in
conceptual art by taking an alternative perspective on the current cultural values presented by the art world. One may note an emphasis on negativity in conceptual art. There appears to be an undercurrent of shame and victimhood. Much artwork draws out the nasty side of human experience. Especially among student artwork, themes take a woeful approach to social issues. There is certainly plenty need for pointing out the wrongs within society, but the counterbalance of highlighting what is of value is greatly lacking. Conservative viewpoints are also generally missing. While this body of work is not strictly conservative, elements of it might be uncomfortable to some more liberal members of the art world. Some conservatives might also find it too liberal. If so, it may be considered a successful opposition against the human tendency to groupthink. There is also an emphasis in contemporary art on turning aesthetics upside-down to focus on what cannot be considered beauty. Somewhere between Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Clement Greenberg’s kitsch essay, an idea developed that aesthetic appeal is not enough to make art *art*; it seems no longer legitimate for artists to expose sacred beauty rather than profane unpleasantness. *Edge of Epiphany* endeavors to present the alternative to these viewpoints.

One last goal of *Edge of Epiphany* is to comment on the lack of (or need for) the sacred in contemporary life. In a culture of increased secularism, individuals still seek sacredness and ritual wherever they can find it (e.g., in the art gallery). This thesis work endeavors to subliminally show
aestheticism has become a religion of contemporary society, the art gallery its sacred space, and the gallery visit its ritual.

**Aesthetic and Philosophical Concepts Related to Content**

The conceptual content of *Edge of Epiphany* is influenced by three concepts of universality: the Theory of Everything, Pantheism, and Everything-in-Everything. The scientific Theory of Everything is “a hypothetical single, all-encompassing, coherent theoretical framework of physics that fully explains and links together all physical aspects of the universe” (Dufour 135). Pantheism is a religious doctrine that holds the view everything is part of God (i.e., the universe and God are identical) (Merriam-Webster.com). Finally, Everything-in-Everything is a philosophical theory from 5th century B.C.E. that everything in the universe derives from the composition of opposites into wholes (Marmodoro). *Edge of Epiphany* asserts all things are connected through time and space and the physical and spiritual.

The most recent work explores DNA, which is the link to our ancestors of the past, each other in the present, and our progeny throughout the future. The work also contemplates our place within the universe and what we choose to pass on to those who follow us and to learn from those who have preceded us. In part, the artwork is a response to a dangerous trend in identity politics. One cannot watch the news without seeing some story
about xenophobia or that pits one special group against another. One cannot miss either the abundance of contemporary advertisements encouraging individuals to test their DNA to find out from where they come; however, these ads fail to convey the true lesson DNA testing teaches us. We are all related. In a widely quoted 2004 article, Yale statistician Joseph T. Chang notes that the estimated most recent common ancestor of everyone alive today lived about 3,000 years ago (Yale University). Other statistical models suggest all people of European decent now living share a common ancestor as recently as 1400 C.E. and can trace their ancestry to Charlemagne and the royal houses of Europe (Zimmer). All mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal DNA (passed mother to child and father to son respectively) trace back to Mitochondrial Eve who lived in southern Africa between 99,000 and 148,000 years ago and Y-chromosomal Adam who lived in Africa 180,000 to 200,000 years ago (Callaway). World history is our personal family history. Chang notes:

No matter the languages we speak or the color of our skin, we share ancestors who planted rice on the banks of the Yangtze, who first domesticated horses on the steppes of the Ukraine, who hunted giant sloths in the forests of North and South America, and who labored to build the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Yale University).
Perhaps because humans all come from the same roots, we all share common basic ideas. Explorations of art, history, philosophy, science, creative literature, mythology, and religion have led to this conclusion: the truth and meaning of our existence are encoded in everything from the infinitesimal to the infinite, time-bound to timeless, and internal to external. At the core most people, regardless of their culture, want the same things: to live in a safe place, to be able to provide for their families, to live their lives as is their want, to watch their children grow up happy, and to experience joy. We also express ourselves in similar ways. Analogous themes occur in art, religious practice, and philosophical thought—not just across cultures, but through the span of time. Similarities also occur in contemporary theories of quantum physics and those of ancient metaphysics and how the micro world, such as the formation of atomic particles, often mirrors the macro cosmic world of solar systems and galaxies. These are the subtle patterns of our experience that reassert themselves over and over again.

Religion and other systems of knowledge are an attempt to make sense of those patterns; they are human explanations of the universe in which we all live. Once our society—and those throughout history—viewed the world through a primarily religious lens. An inquiry into world faiths reveals at their root they all teach the same golden rule endorsed in 1993 by the Parliament of the World’s Religions: “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others...What you wish done to yourself, do to others!” (Parliament of the World’s Religions). This law of reciprocity is widely
endorsed in religious and other ethical beliefs and yet rarely practiced. Throughout history, groups have battled over who is right and emphasized their differences rather than noted their commonalities. This unfortunate fact has led many to reject religion altogether. Others, like literary academic Joseph Campbell and psychologist Carl Jung, have dismissed religion as myth or a manifestation of collective experience (Moyers). Still others, like scientists Carl Sagan and Stephen Hawking, found more comfort in the proof of science than the uncertainty of faith (Achenbach and Hawking 38). Regardless, secularism has replaced the sacred in contemporary society, but human beings still have a need for sacred rituals.

According to biobehaviorist Ellen Dissanayake, ritual, play and art serve the same purpose, helping us make meaning of life (Dissanayake. What is Art For? 70). She notes, “For some primitive societies the observance of ritual permeates the whole of life in aesthetic ways so that their existence is referred to by anthropologists who describe it as itself a work of art” (Dissanayake, What is Art? 45). Oscar Wilde claimed, “Life imitates Art,” and William Shakespeare wrote that “All the world’s a stage.” (Wilde 3 and Shakespeare 622). Although used in different contexts, these three quotes remind us that life is ritual—whether mundane routine or sacred reflection. Regardless of our status in modern Western culture or in an ancient primitive society, the experience of humanity is essentially the same: we are born, and we die. In between, we experience all life has to offer (love, fear, etc.); we
cope with it, interpret it, and try to make meaning of it. We endeavor to pass this wisdom to later generations.

In Dissanayake’s epilogue of What is Art For?, she argues that in our present society we have replaced literacy with ritual to interpret and pass down this information. She implies that we analyze rather than experience, observe rather than feel. Perhaps, we have just changed the rituals. Maybe, we have forgotten the sacred, or maybe we hold something different (like knowledge) sacred. Christenings, marriages, and funeral rites are all practiced today, but Dissenayake claims we are emotionally distanced from them and they are mediated by strangers. Maybe, our society is just too new to have reconciled modern values and experience into appropriate ritual.

This show was based on the premise that the museum space and its close relative, the art gallery, are substitutes for sacred space in contemporary society, and a visit to one is a modern ritual. According to sociologist and anthropologist César Grana, museums are civic sanctuaries, where “the untouchability of the objects and the hushed decorum demanded of visitors is like a religious experience” (Grana 105). The connection between museums, particularly art museums, and religion or spirituality was also made by 19th century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. He thought of art as the manifestation of the spiritual. He believed art sprung from the “absolute Idea” and “pronounced its end to be the sensuous presentation of the Absolute itself” (Hegel 70). For Hegel, the absolute Idea was the core idea of all things from which everything resulted; it was
something akin to the spirit of God or the universal consciousness. This aesthetic idea relating art and Spirit is reaffirmed by the subject matter of this show, which deals with the spirituality of humankind’s physical experience. More on how this show employs these aesthetic concepts is in the following section, “Structural Concepts.”

**Structural Concepts Linking Physical Design to Content**

Hegel identified architecture of a space as a prime example of symbolic art, that which signifies the absolute Idea. According to Hegel, the form and material of architecture could provide a place for the Idea, art’s content, to exist. Architecture manifests the Idea in the following way:

[I]t levels a place for the god, forms his external environment, and builds for him his temple as the place for the inner composure of the spirit and its direction on its absolute objects. It raises an enclosure for the assembly of the congregation...and it reveals in an artistic way, even if in an external one, the wish to assemble. This meaning it can build into its material and the forms...(Hegel 84).

While this concept may apply to encounters with the Divine, it may equally apply to secular circumstances such as visiting an art gallery or
exhibition. The art space in which this thesis work was designed to be exhibited capitalizes on these aesthetic linkages between art and spirituality as well as semiotic theory.

Semiology, the study of signs and symbols, emerged as an interdisciplinary discipline at the fin de siècle with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Semiotics”). The repeating imagery and themes of the artwork in Edge of Epiphany forms what later semiologist Roland Barthes, would call “myth.” Myth is the way in which signs communicate. According to Barthes, “Myth is a type of message” (Barthes 217). His choice of word, myth, is notable. It comes from the Greek word, mythos, meaning "speech, thought...anything delivered by word of mouth" (Online Etymology Dictionary). Myth’s significance, according to Barthes, is not what it communicates (i.e, the meaning), but rather how it conveys that meaning. Barthes describes the process as layers that build upon each other like a geometry theorem. In the simplest of examples, a preexisting signifier (e.g., a rose) and a preexisting signified (e.g., the idea of passion) combine to form a sign (e.g., a rose symbolizes passion). Barthes additionally postulates that myth has a second layer of signifier and signified leading to another sign, a process that can repeat infinitely. The signifiers, signified, and signs can have parallel and overlapping meanings that then link back upon each other in a webbed, associative manner. Myth requires a common cultural symbolic association so widely accepted it occurs naturally, and as the subconscious
associations of myth form, myth distorts and morphs meaning. (Barthes 217-238). The layering of signifiers, signifieds, and signs creates new meaning Barthes calls “the sum of signs” (Barthes 223). Basically, myth is a type of shorthand for communicating meaning; it’s the conflation of established symbols to form a single new idea.

The physical layout of Edge of Epiphany employs semiotic theory in its design. Semiotics is an inherent part of object display, particularly in museums. Museum objects have “a 'sign-function', as 'signifying units' used in the construction of messages and 'discourses', manifested or hidden in museum exhibitions...” (Horta i). Meaning is conveyed through the selected objects for display and how they are exhibited. The display’s context may also alter interpretation. For example, an inexpensive piece of everyday rustic pottery might be selected by a museum to signify a particular culture. Place it under a vitrine and suddenly it becomes valued art. When placed in a museum exhibit of other artifacts, it may no longer signify the original maker’s culture but rather the present owner or viewer’s wealth, knowledge, taste, or prestige. Museum professional Maria de Lourdes Parreiras Horta provides this example:

[A]n automobile can be seen from many different perspectives and viewpoints: the physical level, the mechanical level, the social level, the economic level, the semantic level (as a
'cultural unit'); the same would be pertinent for any kind of object we may have (Horta 33).

Semitotic signs are not limited to text or image; “‘Signs’ include all carriers of meaning used by humans, verbal and non-verbal, all the many ‘languages’ through which communication takes place...” (Australian Museum 1). *Edge of Epiphany* uses this knowledge of how semiotics work in museum display to create a visual and experiential presentation of artwork in the gallery. In fact, the artwork within this exhibition may be considered a single installation artwork.

The design of *Edge of Epiphany* transitions the individual artworks into an installation through a cohesive narrative, intentional atmosphere, and sequenced experience. The artwork selection and layout (Maquette of Exhibition_Maquette Overview #2) are designed to guide viewers in associating cultural signs and symbols in new or different ways. The aim is to deliberately homogenize distinctions between science and religion, past and present, and individual religions by highlighting similarities. The spatial concept is intended to move the viewer from the physical to the spiritual and back to the physical. Simultaneously, viewers will transition from imagery of the microscopic world to a cosmic environment. Together these sequenced themes signify universality. There is also some sense of temporal movement from the past into timelessness and back into the present, signifying eternity. Since visitors are not restricted in their route, these elements may be
experienced in reverse; however, the passages are planned to gently encourage visitors to move along a particular path that one might associate with a pilgrimage.

The artwork in *Edge of Epiphany* makes some direct references to sacredness, but the display of it is meant to subtly reinforce the idea through the use of sensory stimuli to enhance an atmosphere of sacredness such as ambient music (or lack of sound) to create contemplative space and scents evocative of worship places. These are non-visual symbols found at religious sites everywhere. Also, niches and passageways will create confined space that may be associated with caves, chapels, and meditation rooms creating a correlation between the gallery and historical or traditional sacred spaces (Maquette of Exhibition #4, #16, #23, and #40). Lighting may enhance the mood as well as subtle visual cues like benches featuring a Gothic arch motif. Finally, a didactic booklet containing piece statements and selected quotes will underscore messaging and may be interpreted by some as a prayer book or church missal. As theory and practice merge, these signifiers of worship space become new signs of the sacred gallery.

As previously mentioned, the artwork in *Edge of Epiphany* makes some direct references to sacredness through the signs or symbols employed. The most prominent sign featured in the thesis artwork is the shape of the circle, or mandala, representing the universe, wholeness, spirituality, and the sacred. The shape of the circle is repeated in celestial bodies, historical depictions of the divine, the campfire circle (a symbol of hearth and home),
the wedding ring (indicating eternity), and much more. It can represent the
singular self as well as the totality of the collective whole. Jung believed the
mandala was a cryptogram of the Self (Jung 196). If he is correct, the
mandala is just another form of self-portraiture. Campbell noted the circle’s
ability to signify the totality of space and time; it simultaneously contains the
whole within and ends where it begins (Moyers). Some may consider the
circle form a trite trope, but it is the repetition of it that speaks to its deeper
meaning as the most basic, unifying symbol of universal expression and
experience. Campbell said, “It is an ever-present thing. It’s the center from
which you come and that to which you go” (Moyers). The circle is both
signifier and sign many times over and is perhaps the best example of the
potentially infinitely repeating process of myth Barthes references. The circle
is dynamic in its meanings and associations however static it may be in
physical form.

Related to the shape of the circle and concepts of universality, the body
of work includes “celestial pours” (The Divine Comedy: Inferno #37, The
Divine Comedy: From Purgatorio #38, and The Divine Comedy: Paridisio
#39). These works are an extension of other artworks that focus on the
“overview effect” and lend to a topographical feel (Arteries #17 and Overview
#18). The overview effect is described as “a cognitive shift caused by the
experience of seeing firsthand the surface of Earth from space, which is
immediately understood to be a tiny, fragile ball of life. From space, national
boundaries vanish, the conflicts that divide people become less important” to
those that experience it (Write 4). Other mandala series reflect on the similarities between the fractal patterns in DNA and the sacred symbol of the Celtic knot, which symbolizes the continuous cycle of existence resulting from the connectedness of all things and relates to ideas of spirituality and divinity (Neither Created Nor Destroyed series #5, #6, #7, #8; Dream Weaver #22; Illuminated series #32, #33, #34, #35, and Mitochondrial Eve #30).

These artworks link the sign of the circle to the micro and macro universe, physical and spiritual realms, human and divine beings, and scientific and religious fields. Viewers may note references to Earth, vegetative growth, halos, the human body, space, and atomic particles. Through the layering of these symbols, this body of work associates the physicality of human existence and the spirituality of it.

The remainder of artworks in this thesis body of work reference science, archaic religion, mythology, and architecture through their subject matter, symbolism, and visual qualities. Their role is to associate time with the physical and spiritual. One repeating sign is an abstracted human figure. This series of abstracted figures serve as proxies for humanity and may suggest cocoons, mummies, sleeping bags, death shrouds, body bags, bindings, oneself, or votive offerings (Migration #24, Reflected Self #26, Chrysalis #28, Mitochondrial Eve #30 and Return to Earth #41). They also hint at ideas of death, transformation, solitude, and antiquity. The environment in which they exist further implies their individual stories and morphs their meanings. Another sign is that of the spirit animal (Sacred
Spirit of the Ancestors series #12, #13, #14, #15). These creatures reference historical sacred spirit animals of the regions of the artist’s four largest contributions of DNA. The hide-like shape of two pieces suggests jackets made of animal skin, an idea that may translate to the larger pieces that are pinned in a similar fashion as the “hides.” The ethereal animals and reference to old religions and genetic history suggest identity is a remnant of the past donned like a costume. The tacit message is that human identity is universal regardless of culture or time. The underlying message is to convey an idea of the continuum and universality of human experience, which is underscored by the show’s semiotic design concept.

**Technique, Process, and the Concept of Artmaking**

The process of making visual art is as important as the end product. Art is experiential and expressive, and manifests in the intangible and physical aspects of being. For the artist, it is the act of transmuting a formless idea into concrete reality, and for the viewer, it is reinterpreting the physical into new or expanded thought. The active experience of making art is inextricably linked to its physicality; the act cannot be completed without the materials that enable its tangible creation. On a deeper level, the materials themselves can lend to the expression of the original idea for which an artwork is created through their associations, physical properties, or method of application. Material exploration is therefore an important component of
this body of work's development. The material exploration encompasses how the materials symbolize thematic content; look in terms of color, texture, and form; and behave when applied singularly or used together.

From a practical standpoint, material exploration is simply about finding the best substance to create a particular effect and is often the first step to problem-solving. From a conceptual perspective, material exploration is a metaphor for content and a type of kinesthetic learning technique for processing it. The act of creating is a means of learning about all of creation. One might relate artmaking to ideas of play and ritual. Indeed, the behavior of art is like play and ritual and may not be distinct from them. All three behaviors share as a common denominator, what Dissanayake calls “making special” where “[r]eality...is elaborated, reformed, given not only particularity...but import...” (Dissanayake, What is Art For? 92). Explorations into material processes are the play and ritual of artmaking.

In simplest terms, this body of work asks the age-old questions, “Is there a god; what is the meaning of life; and what is of value?” At its root, art itself is an investigation into our humanity. From the quotidian to the spiritual, art—either making it or viewing it—helps us understand our existential experience. While many questions may go forever unanswered, it is the very act of contemplating those questions that makes us human. Through imagination (expressed in art, ritual, and play) and trial and error (experimentation), human beings test hypotheses about the answers to these immemorial questions. There are four instances of how material process
exploration similarly reflects on these questions, thus becoming metaphor for the content of the body of work and a means for understanding it. These examples are explorations into pouring paint, using acrylic mediums and construction goods, testing scrap-booking techniques and supplies, and drawing with traditional materials.

Experiments in pouring paint are perhaps those most directly tied to content. The act of paint pouring is that of creating order from chaos, controlling the uncontrollable, and perfecting the unperfectible. It is a type of meditation that enables reflection on nature, the world, and the universe in which we live. A strong influence to this body of work is the fleeting fractal patterns found in fluid mechanics and the more established ones existing in nature, such as land formations, river patterns, and vegetative growth. The way in which paint mediums interact and move on a surface demonstrates these processes, mimics these formations, and recalls the idea of Earth's genesis and that of the universe at large. Pouring these scenes is like playing God, which inevitably begs the question, "Is there a creator god, and if so, for what purpose does the created universe and everything in it serve?" These questions directly connect to the human condition. Humanity is filled with duality, capable of the most awe-inspiring genius, creativity, and compassion and also capable of the most evil acts imaginable. We can choose to make beauty or to destroy it. In a sense, we are gods who create the world in which we live. This idea is one bridge between the physicality of our existence and the spirituality of it.
Like poured paint, and sometimes in combination with it, acrylic media and construction supplies can imitate geological formations. The actual process of making artworks with these materials is an exercise in creating the world in miniature, and construction materials, in particular, connect to the idea of building something new. The tactile nature of these materials also lends to experiencing an artwork’s imagery in a more physical sense than with two-dimensional photography, paintings, and drawings. That imagery, which is often topological, comes up repeatedly in the work, and relates to the overview effect phenomena. The overview effect encapsulates the idea of intangible human connectedness and directly links to the physicality of Earth's topography. The experimentation with materials is an attempt to simulate that perspective in miniature for viewers.

Experimentation with contemporary scrap-booking techniques and supplies also relates to topography. The process of collage used in scrapbooking is reminiscent of creating map overlays, where data are compiled and layered to create a more comprehensive and intelligible information set about a given region. In collage, information (imagery, material, or text), is layered to both conceal and unveil meaning. Parts may be obscured to hide old meanings while what is revealed can create new connections between seemingly disparate information. In cutting, piecing, and combining mixed media, ideas are transmuted into new forms, and like paint pouring, order is created from chaos. This process is what Dissanayake identifies as one of the five purposes of art, “dishabitation,” which serves to
prepare people for the unfamiliar by disordered the familiar and offering options for response (Dissanayake. *What is Art For* 69-70). It is a means of looking at a given aspect of the world in a new way. The process of collage is closely linked to techniques for visualizing information, such as link and pattern analysis, as well as map and imagery overlays. This visual language repeats frequently in the artwork.

Finally, the process of drawing is the most meditative method of artmaking employed. The simplicity of materials rarely connects to content, rather it is the meditative aspect of observing detail and the ritualistic procedure of replicating it that makes the process worthwhile. Drawing is an opportunity to notice external beauty and turn attention inward to contemplation of the sublime in the most ordinary or extraordinary of subjects. This process relates to another purpose of art identified by Dissanayake, which is to enable the direct experience and appreciation of things in an emotional sense (Dissanayake. *What is Art For* 70). There is no better way to learn about an object than to closely note its detail and attempt to recreate it. According to psychologist James Gibson, who studied visual perception, “to perceive the world is to coperceive oneself....The awareness of the world and of one’s complementary relations to the world are not separable” (Gibson 141), We are all a part of the world and universe in which it resides. We cannot perceive the universe outside ourselves without also perceiving ourselves. Moreover, when we perceive, we ascribe meaning and therefore also create/re-create ourselves and the universe in which we live.
Perception of the physical is tightly bound to perception of the non-physical or spiritual.

**Art Historical and Contemporary Influences**

The work and philosophies of artists like Anselm Kiefer and Wassily Kandinsky, who have addressed concepts of the spiritual, are strong influences on this body of work. Kiefer focuses on the cycle of creation and destruction reflected in the “breath of the universe” and the cycle of life on earth (qtd. in Salgado). In a video documentary of his work, Kiefer described the artmaking process this way:

> You know it's like in the cosmos. It's always construction, demolition, reconstruction. All the stars that die and some others are reborn. It's always like this...When a star explodes, all its matter is there. It doesn't go anywhere...and then one day it will be recomposed, another star (qtd. in Salgado).

His layered and tactile work transforms ugly remnants of destruction into new and beautiful creations. They are physical and usually large-scale, dwarfing the human form, and incorporating diverse organic and inorganic materials. When one looks at a Kiefer piece in person, one can enter the universe of his artwork. Kiefer is a master at dishabituation, disordering the
familiar and re-creating it so that viewers might experience it anew.

Kandinski, on the other hand, strove to find the perfect abstraction of the spiritual, and he found beauty and the spiritual in point, line and plane. For him, the form was the concept. He was trying to eliminate visible objects and symbols to get at the fundamental “inner” reality, which was to express the spirit. He believed the way to do that was by dematerializing objective reality and abstracting art into its basic elements. His endeavor to entirely eliminate symbols is unlikely to be achievable; it is human nature to ascribe and associate meaning even where there was once none. However, as one contemplates what those fundamental elements might be, geometry (i.e., point, line, and plane) and color seem to be the answer. These elements, though, have associations that trace the millennia to the earliest scratches on rock. Kandinsky is also important in that he cemented abstraction in the art world’s consciousness and paved the way to abstract expressionism and other fluid artmaking practices and philosophies. His work laid the foundation for much of the studio investigation into this body of work.

Three contemporary artists who pour paint in one form or another—Bruce Riley, John Sabraw, and Emma Lindstrom—also influence this body of work. Each has a unique style. Emma Lindstrom work’s is extraordinarily beautiful due to the color and forms the paint acquires. About her inspiration, she states that she is “continuously inspired by life itself and the energies that push everything forward and at the same time keep everything together” (ArtisticOdyssey.com). Regarding process, she touts the value of
experimentation with different media and techniques (ArtisticOdyssey.com). She is perhaps the most influential artist when considering exploration into paint pouring processes and materials. The color and depth of Bruce Riley's work is also stunning. He states about his artmaking philosophy:

My processes are difficult to control. Accident dictates the painting’s direction as much as intention does if not more...Since I’m not trying to define space or an idea, engagement with process and materials becomes my primary focus (Riley).

The approach to materials used in this body of work is different in that there is an attempt to control them, an ultimately unattainable goal. Accepting a degree of unintended consequence and embracing both process and material are lessons taken from Riley's work. He finds perfection in the imperfect. John Sabraw’s work is also filled with striking color, a result of the sludge he uses to make his paints. Like Kiefer, he is an expert at dishabituation, transforming the toxic material he uses into new and meaningful beauty. His themes are environmentally based, and his recent work is strongly influenced by maps and charts. His inventive use of materials and topography-related works that are closely linked to his concept teach one to consider carefully the content of poured artworks.

Lesser, but still relevant, influences include Cubist collage, medieval
art, ancient art, and Modernist Primitivism. Cubist collage, introduced by Georges Braque and Pablo Piccasso, first used scrap-book techniques as a form of fine art. Not only did their work validate collage as an art form, but it also highlights the dilemma presented by Clement Greenberg: what is fine art and what is kitsch? Due to the spiritual aspect of this body of work’s content, an important influence is medieval art, which habitually addressed the spiritual aspects of life. Regardless of the art movement within this era, the subject matter and myriad ways religious themes were presented influence this art practice. Perhaps, it is the variety of style that is most intriguing because it emphasizes the commonality of symbolism and theme throughout the entire era. Further, many of the symbols, like the mandala form, used in medieval art trace to earlier eras and continue to reassert themselves in contemporary artwork. These symbols are firmly embedded in the universal consciousness and transcend time and culture.

Finally, ancient art and its related modern movement, Primitivism, influence the artmaking within this body of work. One may ask, what about this type of art is meaningful to both ancient and modern man? Why is modern man attracted to the same shapes and symbols that ancient peoples used? In Dissenyake’s *Homo Aestheticus*, she recounts what Marianna Torgovnick presented in her 1991 work, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects*,

*Modern Lives:*
Torgovnick invokes Georg Lukács’s notion of transcendental homelessness, the longing within a secular society for the sacred...She suggests that ‘going primitive’ may be viewed as trying...to go home...Torgovnick concludes that rather than projecting our needs onto primitive peoples, our task may better be to trace alternative patterns in Western history to do for us what we have wanted primitive societies to do: ‘to tell us how to live better, what it means to be human, to be male or female, to be alive and looking for peace or to accept death (qtd. in Dissanyake _Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why_ 7-8).

Torgovnick views Lukács’s “transcendental homelessness” as a negative trend to project secular needs onto “primitive” societies who are viewed as less complex, but she misses the mark. Western history traces to the same origins of those so-called “primitive” societies. This “longing” is not a _projection_ but a means of _reflection_. Viewing “primitive” art retells a human history that enables one to contemplate those issues like how to live better. Primitive art, whether made in the ancient past or today or by non-technical or technologically advanced societies, distills art to its essential elements—the common denominator—to which all human beings might respond and relate. The reference to sacredness and secularism also punctuates the human need to express and experience the spiritual. It is this elusive quality of
essentialness of spirit for which Kandinsky searched in the attempt to eliminate symbols. In comparison, the circle or mandala form prevalent in this thesis of work is also a reflection of that query. It is a spiritual symbol that permeates art from present back to ancient times, and another link between all humanity.
DOCUMENTATION OF ARTWORK

File List for Edge of Epiphany by Anna-Marie Zurlinden

01_Edge of Epiphany Virtual Exhibition.mp4

02_Maquette of Exhibition_Maquette Overview.jpeg

03_Edge of Epiphany.jpeg, Edge of Epiphany, Acrylic on Canvas, 36" x 36", December 2017

04_Maquette of Exhibition_Exhibit Entry.jpeg

05_Neither Created Nor Destroyed DNA A.jpeg, Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA A, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019

06_Neither Created Nor Destroyed DNA B.jpeg, Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA B, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019

07_Neither Created Nor Destroyed DNA C.jpeg, Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA C, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019
08. Neither Created Nor Destroyed DNA Z.jpeg, *Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA Z*, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019

09. Maquette of Exhibition, *Neither Created Nor Destroyed Series*.jpeg


11. Maquette of Exhibition, *Threshold*.jpeg


17. Arteries.jpeg, *Arteries*, Acrylic Ink on Wood Panel, 26” x 12”, November 2018

18. Overview.jpeg, *Overview*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48” x 24”, January 2018
19_Encoded.jpeg, Encoded, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 36" x 78", August 2018

20_Urban Hive.jpeg, Urban Hive, Acrylic on Canvas, 60" x 48", January 2018

21_Maquette of Exhibition_Oversview Wall.jpeg

22_Dream Weaver.jpeg, Dream Weaver, Graphite on Paper, 96" x 92", February 2020

23_Maquette of Exhibition_Dream Weaver.jpeg

24_Migration.jpeg, Migration, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 16" x 24", January 2018

25_Migration_Detail.jpeg, Migration, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 16" x 24", January 2018

26_Rreflected Self.jpeg, Reflected Self, Mixed Media on Canvas Panel, 16" x 21", January 2018

27_Rreflected Self_Detail.jpeg, Reflected Self, Mixed Media on Canvas Panel, 16" x 21", January 2018

28_Chrysalis.jpeg, Chrysalis, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 24" x 18", April 2018

29_Chrysalis_Detail.jpeg, Chrysalis, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 24" x 18", April 2018

30_Mitochondrial Eve.jpeg, Mitochondrial Eve, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 10" x 10", March 2020

31_Maquette of Exhibition_Mummy Man Series.jpeg


36. Maquette of Exhibition_Illuminated Series.jpeg

37. The Divine Comedy Inferno, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57" x 57", September 2018

38. The Divine Comedy From Purgatorio, *The Divine Comedy: From Purgatorio*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57" x 57", March 2018


40. Maquette of Exhibition_Divine Comedy Series.jpeg

41. Return to Earth, *Return to Earth*, Acrylic Ink on Wood Panel, 78" x 36", February 2020

42. Maquette of Exhibition_Return to Earth Exit.jpeg

43. Announcement Card.jpeg

44. Announcement Poster.jpeg

45. Announcement Flyer.jpeg

46. Bench for Exhibit (1 of 2).jpeg
Figures

Figure 1 - Edge of Epiphany Virtual Exhibition, video file

Figure 2 - Maquette of Exhibition, Maquette Overview
Figure 3 - *Edge of Epiphany*, Acrylic on Canvas, 36" x 36", December 2017

Figure 4 - Maquette of Exhibition, Exhibit Entry

Figure 5 - *Neither Created Nor Destroyed*: DNA A, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", November 2019
Figure 6 - *Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA B*, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019

Figure 7 - *Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA C*, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019
Figure 8 - *Neither Created Nor Destroyed: DNA Z*, Charcoal and Graphite on Paper, 30” x 30”, November 2019

Figure 9 - Maquette of Exhibition, *Neither Created Nor Destroyed* Series
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Figure 20 - *Urban Hive*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60" x 48", January 2018

Figure 21 - Maquette of Exhibition, *Overview Wall*
Figure 22 - *Dream Weaver*, Graphite on Paper, 96" x 92", February 2020

Figure 23 - Maquette of Exhibition, *Dream Weaver*

Figure 24 - *Migration*, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 16" x 24", January 2018
Figure 25 - Detail of **Migration**, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 16” x 24”, January 2018

Figure 26 - **Reflected Self**, Mixed Media on Canvas Panel, 16” x 21”, January 2018

Figure 27 - Detail of **Reflected Self**, Mixed Media on Canvas Panel, 16” x 21”, January 2018
Figure 28 - *Chrysalis*, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 24” x 18”, April 2018

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Figure 30 - *Mitochondrial Eve*, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 10” x 10”, March 2020
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Figure 32 - Krishna Illuminated, Acrylic Ink and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 30", January 2020

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Figure 36 - Maquette of Exhibition, Illuminated Series
Figure 37 - The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57" x 57", September 2018

Figure 38 - The Divine Comedy: From Purgatorio, Mixed Media on Canvas, 57" x 57", March 2018
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Figure 40 - Maquette of Exhibition, *Divine Comedy* Series
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Figure 42 - Maquette of Exhibition, *Return to Earth* Exit
EDGE OF EPIPHANY
23 MARCH – 27 MARCH 2020
Public Reception 26 March, 5-8 p.m.

EXPLORING MANKIND’S CONNECTEDNESS TO EACH OTHER AND THE ETERNAL

MFA Thesis Show Presented by
ANNA-MARIE ZURLINDEN

EXHIBIT LOCATION
ANNETTE AND JERRY JOHNS ART GALLERY
Jack Aevidu Hall
330 Gilbert Way
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois

Hours
Reception: Thursday, 26 March 2020 5 p.m. – 8 p.m.
Regular Hours: Monday – Friday: 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday: Closed

DIRECTIONS
From Route 23 / Fourth Street,
Turn West onto Route 18 / Lincoln Highway,
Turn North onto Cottage Drive,
Turn East onto College Avenue and proceed one block.
The Visual Arts Building, Jack Aevidu Hall, is on the northeast corner of College Avenue and Gilbert Way. Parking is open after 5 p.m. and may be found on the south and west sides of the building and across the streets to the north and south. The Johns Gallery is on the second floor.

Figure 43 - Announcement Card, Double-sided 100lb Gloss Cover, 5” x 8.5”
Figure 44 - Announcement Poster; 80lb Gloss Cover on Foam Core, 24” x 36”

Figure 45 - Announcement Flyer; 80lb Gloss Cover, 16” x 20”
Figure 46 - Bench for Exhibit (1 of 2), Wood, 17.5" x 42" x 18"

Figure 47 - DNA B Paper Flowers for Entry, Parchment Paper, Wire, and Metal Beads; 8" x 8"
Figure 48 - Edge of Epiphany Booklet (Back and Front Cover), Double-sided 80lb Gloss Text, 5” x 8.5”
ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Noticing and creating beauty in the world is my artistic pursuit. I am largely influenced by the patterns found in landscapes, sacred geometry, fluid dynamics, fractals, textiles, and ancient man-made art and architecture. The repetition in these systematic forms is cyclical and infinite and conveys to me a sense of what is shared by mankind across time and culture—the desire to experience the divine, a quest to understand the world, and a longing to know beauty.

My most recent work explores our own Disk, which is the link to our ancestors of the past, each other in the present, and our progeny throughout the future. My work also contemplates our place within the universe and what we choose to pass on to those who follow us and to learn from those who have preceded us. Through these artworks, I share with viewers my appreciation of beauty and recognition of what is good in the human spirit—the desire to create something splendid and worthy in a world too often filled with woelessness and destruction.

DEDICATION

The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt. —Frederick Buechner (Writer and Presbyterian Minister)

This exhibit is dedicated to those family members who have passed through the threshold of life during the course of my NU art studies.
Grandma Marie Richards Komm (Juhlenden) 2013
Grandpa Richard Juhlenden 2014
Aunt Loretta Redd Morris 2015
Aunt Sheri Snelka Redd 2015
Aunt Karen Van groin red 2016
Uncle Gerald “Butch” Hall 2016
Aunt Darlene Redd Ross 2016
Uncle John “Jack” Redd 2019

Figure 49 - Edge of Epiphany Booklet (Inside Front Cover and Page 1), Double-sided 80lb Gloss Text, 5” x 8.5”
Edge of Epiphany

On the edge of epiphany
I straddle the event horizon
Of ignorance and understanding
As I contemplate forever,
Where time and space exist as one,
And nearly do I reach the edge
How far does nowhere go, I wonder?
At least as far as everywhere there is,
Where each thing is defined by its negative space,
And my inner eye spins through that emptiness
With dizzying much speed from bang to silence
Every thing extending into no thing
Until equilibrium of mass is reached
Or it falls back in to itself
And all existence becomes nothing again
So here I stand between an ending
Empty or dense
Contemplating the moment now
In a thought so fleeting it has already
Sighed its last breath into the other
Before I ever comprehended its existence
And in my reflection of the universe
I see myself, more nothing than thing
And wonder, how far does nowhere go?

Neither Created Nor Destroyed Series

Everything is energy... Energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another. – Albert Einstein (Theoretical Physicist)

These drawings are inspired by computer models of four DNA cross sections, known as structures DNA A, B, C, and Z. This series reflects on the similarities between the fractal patterns in DNA and the sacred symbol of the Celtic knot, which symbolizes the continuous cycle of existence resulting from the connectedness of all things.

Threshold

If the doors of perception were cleansed
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. – William Blake (Poet and Artist)

Recalling the form of ancient monolithic structures full of mystery, this threshold beckons you to enter and discover what is within.
Thresholds mark entries into the unknown, and doors may be open or closed. We each choose whether to cross their boundaries and explore what is on the other side, but how we wrestle meaning to the experience is a matter of our unique perception.

It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.
Henry David Thoreau (Transcendental Philosopher and Writer)

It is entirely possible that behind the perception of our senses, words are
hidden of which we are unaware.
Albert Einstein (Theoretical Physicist)

Figure 50 - Edge of Epiphany Booklet (Pages 2 and 3), Double-sided 80lb Gloss Text, 5” x 8.5
Sacred Spirit of the Ancestors Series

We are not physical beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a physical experience. — Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Dissident Philosopher and Jesuit Priest)

These creatures reference historical sacred spirit animals of the four largest contributions of the artist’s personal DNA composition. Like leather jackets made of animal skin, the unique genes to which we attribute our identities are no more than remnants of the past that we don like costumes to cover that which makes us one.

Ateries

We are all connected. To each other, biologically: To the earth, chemically: To the rest of the universe atomically. — Neil deGrasse Tyson (Astrophysicist)

This map-like artwork is influenced by multispectral satellite imagery where live vegetation (chlorophyll) shows up as hues of pink, red, and magenta while inorganic material or dead vegetation shows up in blues, greens, and black.

Overview

To clarify our attention to terrestrial matters would be to limit the human spirit. — Stephen Hawking (Quantum Physicist)

Remnants of the earth as seen from above in a map or overhead image, this work takes the perspective of looking down at the world from the vantage of a bird, a plane, or a god. What do you see?

Encoded

The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself. — Carl Sagan (Astrophysicist and Astrobiologist)

The universe is also a way for us to know ourselves. The truth and meaning of our existence are encoded in everything from the infinitesimal to the infinite, time-bound to timeless, internal to external. Fractals are found in the structure of atoms and replicated in solar systems and galaxies. These repeating patterns pervade all existence. They exist in the flow of water (or paint), the erosion of shorelines, and the growth of trees. They also present in the fields of our DNA, which forms the code that makes one uniquely individual and yet a part of the whole of humanity.

Urban Hive

We are all connected to everyone and everything in the universe. Therefore, everything one does as an individual affects the whole. — Sema Nahil Ha’ung (Hawaiian shaman)

This painting was created on the anniversary of 9/11. It references haunui, human vitality, urban living, and DNA electrophoresis (how DNA is analyzed). It also resembles images of the falling Twin Towers. The actions of many individuals that day transformed the world and remind us that we too are agents of positive or negative change.
DREAM WEAVER

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream. — Edgar Allan Poe (Writer)

This cross section of DNA is layered in symbiosis to physical and spiritual life as reflected in similar forms such as rose windows, dream catchers, mandalas, and Celtic knots. Wisdom seekers have long pondered the question of our true nature: is the reality we perceive an evolving construct woven from our inherited cultural and religious knowledge, personal experience, scientific discovery, and new philosophical thought? Is our destiny fated by the nature encoded into our DNA or a matter of how we choose to nurture each other and our environment?

MUMMY MAN SERIES

For every worm beneath the moon draws different threads, and late and soon spins, twisting out his own cocoon. — Alfred Tennyson (Poet)

This series of abstracted figures serve as proxies for humanity and may suggest cocooned, camouflaged, body bags, bindings, creosol, or votive offerings. They also hint at ideas of death, transformation, solitude, and antiquity. The environment in which they exist further implies their individual stories.

Life is a culmination of the past, an awareness of the present, an indication of a future beyond knowledge, the quality that gives a touch of divinity to matter. — Charles Lindbergh (Aviator)

ILLUMINATED SERIES

Within each of us is a light, awake, encoded in the fibers of our existence. Divine ecstasy is the totality of this moving creation experienced in the hearts of humanity. — Tony Samara (Spiritualist)

Referencing the Celtic-influenced artwork of medieval illuminated manuscripts, this series reflects upon the idea of enlightenment. Krishna, Christ, Lao Tzu, and Buddha are humans of divine status from four world religions. They each teach us to search for the spark of divinity within.

DIVINE COMEDY SERIES

I come from a place where I long to return to. — Dante Alighieri (Poet)

This series is inspired by Dante’s narrative poem, Divine Comedy, where he described a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven during a moment in his life of spiritual adversity and awakening.

RETURN TO EARTH

My soul can find no staircase to Heaven unless it be through Earth’s loveliness. — Michelangelo (Artist and Poet)

Return to Earth and rediscover her divine beauty. When we leave the sacred space of the galaxy, we metaphorically ground ourselves in mundane earthly matters, but let us not forget Earth is also holy ground. One day we will each literally return to earth in death. Until then, revel in this brief moment of eternity on this tiny vessel within the vastness of infinity.
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Anna-Marie Zurlinden grew up in Streator, Illinois, but has lived in many places in the United States and abroad. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Millikin University, Decatur, Illinois, in 1991 and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Studio Arts with an Art History minor at Northern Illinois University (NIU), DeKalb, Illinois, in 2006. She also received a graduate certificate in Museum Studies from NIU in 2018. Between schooling, Anna-Marie served in the United States Air Force, specializing in information and intelligence operations. The ideas and experiences to which Anna-Marie was exposed through her education and prior career heavily influence the themes and content of her artwork.

SPECIAL THANKS

I give my most heartfelt appreciation to the people without whom this show would not have been possible:

To my dad, Rick Zurlinden, for all the construction projects that have helped me make, store, and present my artwork.

To my committee members, Cindy Weller-Heintz, Rebecca House, and Billie Giese for their encouragement and sound advice.

To my museum studies instructor, Peter Van Atel, for giving me installation advice and exhibition know-how, and

To my photographers, Michael Allen and Amy Fleming, for their outstanding documentation of my work.

The most recent common ancestor of all alive today lived about 14,000 B.C.

No matter the languages we speak or the color of our skin, we share ancestors who planted rice on the banks of the Yangze, who first domesticated horses on the steppes of the Ukraine, who hunted giant sloths in the forests of North and South America, and who labored to build the great Pyramid of Khufu.

Joseph T. Chang (Yale Statistician)

Figure 53 - Edge of Epiphany Booklet (Page 8 and Inside Back Cover), Double-sided 80lb Gloss Text, 5” x 8.5
WORKS CITED


