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# Fabricating Divine

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FABRICATING DIVINE

A Thesis Presented

by

JAMES W. RHEA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Art

FABRICATING DIVINE

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE MARK

The world was made with heat. Fire as passion moves us. We fear it and we seek its warmth. We try to control it; we often fail to harness its immense power. From the beginning of societal progress, we have recorded our way of being, and the present state of our lives in this world. Civilizations pulled sticks from fire, set them against stone, and then deliberately pressed into the surface, making an indication or a mark. These examples of existence, as reminders of our past, have been carved like petroglyphs all over the scarred surface of earth.

The mark is one of the human race's first, and most necessary concepts established throughout its development. Marks literally record proof of life's existence, from starting points to end points. As marks evolved in complexity, did they somehow contribute to the materialistic culture in which we now exist? I know this is a very large leap, but the evolution of making marks ultimately led to more advanced communication, creating systems of organization, education, invention, and innovation. A mark can be the starting point in a series; the marks that belong to my series are created with fire. Scorched steel manipulated at my will. I force it to become a voice for my thoughts, as well as my hopes and fears.

I am obsessed with the evidence of our existence. The marks of my torch upon steel show signs of time, skill and care. Cutting shapes with sharp points, inflicting heat-fused burns, holes, and dents formed by blows from my hammer, each creates a record in the act of making. These marks also tell stories of healing. A torch cuts and

also joins, destroys and also builds. These are basic reciprocal actions in the process of life. Fire burns. Fire welds. Welding is a skill that I truly admire, because it records the intense moment when fire melts steel, and then cools to form an unbreakable bond.

For this body of work, metal is my medium. I created most of my sculptures utilizing the m.i.g. (metal inert gas) welding technique. Although iron is generally perceived to be immobile and rigid, it is actually very malleable. Iron can behave similarly to clay, with small, flat particles that slide over each other when they're stretched. Fire is needed to bring out the medium's potential; metal becomes "plastic" only in its heated state, remaining workable for a short time as it cools. There is a sense of immediacy in creating this type of work. Steel, unlike clay, has a very quick construction time. There is very little preparation involved, and once the welding has stopped, you only have to wait briefly for the metal to cool before addressing the finishing options.

By cutting, shaping, and forging, I create body parts that will later be assembled into external and structural forms, resembling angels. The final stage of construction is fabrication. Using a stitch-weld technique, I create the bonds that hold my sculptures together. Stitch-welding creates unique raised beads, which I usually set in patterns, both providing a rhythm and bringing unity throughout these sculptures.

Daily, I express myself in the act of creation. Learning different ways of constructing, assembling, and improving my craft, have all become driving forces in my life. Those who are aware of my work habits have labeled me a "Bricoleur". This word is of French origin, literally meaning "handyman". It describes the ability to construct things from a diverse range of available materials, and involves the process

of building by trial and error. Working habits stimulated by chance, risk, and experimentation, can sometimes lead to unintentional injury. I admit that I am certainly not shy about working in the studio.

Scars can define how we remember certain times in our lives. By triggering emotional responses or memories from within, scars can remind us of being branded by the act of doing something well, representing our glory. The diving catch, or the game-winning tackle are moments brought to life again by scars. I can't get into a baseball batters box without starting to sweat. I lick my lips and feel my childhood scar, made by a baseball hitting me square in the face. Like a war veteran, who may have sacrificed life to an extreme degree, scars from battle wounds can recall painful accidents, tragedy, or loss. Forest Gump told Lyndon B. Johnson, "I got shot in the buttocks". A scar can often become a legend.

They are badges of experience, permanently fixed upon our "uniforms" of flesh. Scars on the body reveal injuries, beginning as new, raw areas of skin that are vulnerable to outside forces. Scars expose areas that we often tend to give extra care for and sometimes cherish. Once they heal over, scars become stronger than the unbroken skin that once existed there. The patchwork "stitched skin" of my sculptures explains how scars ultimately give strength to structure.

I am completely enthralled by the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction in life. I use this idea as a catalyst for my working process. I first cut apart a single sheet of steel into hundreds of small pieces. I then search for just the right size and shape, and reconstruct the parts into a new image. I also deconstruct a gentle thought, such as an angel, and reconstruct it into a new, and quite violent image.



In total, all of the work on display represents over six hundred hours of work. Thankfully, the most recent angel took a mere thirty hours compared to the first, named “faithbomb”, which took fifty. I only used one appropriated object in the entire show, which was a practice mortar, in the sculpture “faith bomb” (image provided below).



Figure 1. Faithbomb

To construct this figure, I used mild steel sheets, copper sheets, aluminum rivets, and various thicknesses of cold rolled steel, and flat stock. The fabrication process for constructing all of the angels was the same, except for differences in the sizes of sheet metal. Most of the adjustments were made with hammers.

Although some of my larger hammers were purchased, I used them to make more specialized tools, like smaller hammers, chisels and tongs. With these tools I

made the smaller parts: fingers, toes, noses, eyes and such. On some of the wing forms, I used blind rivets to secure the copper sheeting; this is a very laborious process. It was done by cutting and welding the frame of the wing out of 1 ¼ inch wide and a ¼ inch deep flat stock, then cutting the sheet copper to mimic the shape of the wing, and finally drilling through both the sheet copper and the flat stock. Lastly, a hand-powered rivet gun is used to press each rivet into place.

The last part of my fabrication process is to make new steel appear old and worn. I create the illusion of eroded metal using a plasma cutter. By shooting hundreds of tiny holes through the metal, it looks like worms have devoured the surface. Then I add acid to the steel, forcing the metal to oxidize. I complete the sculptures with a few coats of clear enamel that arrests the erosion process.

It is very important that these angels do not appear new. Rust reveals age; it shows the reaction that occurs when iron endures contact with air and water. Corrosion slowly eats through iron or iron alloys, like steel, and converts it to dust. This process of oxidation represents non-permanence. Although humans often try to halt the aging process with scientific advancements and technology, eventually everything returns to dust. The parallel that happens between human flesh and steel is something I really enjoy; it is no coincidence that I use it as part of my creative language.

My work focuses on the transition from life to death and beyond. The subjects of my art are depicted as they suffer; it feels almost masochistic as I watch them suffer. In my sculptures, I try to capture that visceral moment, that struggle between life and death. My personal struggle deals with the fact that I have a love/hate relationship with my faith.

I enjoy my faith because it enables me to control worry. Religion provides me with a scapegoat that I can load down with my angst, strife and fear. Belonging to a church places me in a small community with people who have similar experiences, and give me advice and support. It allows me to humbly wish goodwill and hope to others.

I do not enjoy the rules and regulations that govern everyone involved with organized religion. I do not like the “god complex” that makes people think they are better than others. These thoughts cause violence. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is forgotten in the fires of burnt, bombed abortion clinics. I don’t understand how we can hate so very quickly when we know these folks especially need to be loved. The church was supposed to be a sanctuary for those that are poor and weary. All I see now is this: “We cannot let those [insert undesirable minority here] into my church.” Faith can often cloud one’s vision and cause the endorsement of ignorance and intolerance.

I am worried that my faith is more illegitimate than legitimate. This feeling explains why, as a Christian, I’ve always felt like a bastard. Geologically, we know that the world is a lot older than the biblical timeline can explain. By failing to reinterpret the nuts and bolts of the bible, the church is losing its ability to stay relevant in today’s society.

I believe that the church is being led in the wrong direction, following fears that religious freedom will die, instead of investing wholeheartedly into the future of the community. Fear is the primary motivation for the downturn, misled by spiritual peer pressure. If the church is a family, I feel like the family I am living with is not mine.

I am able to tell my story through sculpture, but I can only speak about life through my own feelings of internal struggle in the personal search for truth. I am

referring to histories that evoke feelings of desperation, transformation, and hope.

Within the contradictions, I can see evidence of deconstruction as well as construction.

Transformation is the essence of life. We cannot grow without change. When I create work, I change the form of an object, like a sheet of metal, into a recognizable form. My sculptures look familiar at a distance, and then gruesome details are revealed as we step closer. In my work, the word "evolve" implies transforming of energy from one state to another. Lava starts from the core of the earth and is spewed out in rivers of fire and destruction. Over time, its rage is cooled on the crust of the earth and begins forming a new stage of evolution.

Completing this body of work has unearthed many emotions and responses to my faith as an idea. In the evaluation of my upbringing, I have been gradually constructing an overall understanding of my own reasoning. Every part of my sculpture originated from me, as a direct result of socialization. I have always been told that there are two planes of existence. One plane holds everything that we see and experience every day, and the other plane is where the spirits and souls exist. Some people think that these two planes cross paths every now and again.

I investigate the battle that exists between the spiritual realm and reality. What happens in those dark places? Should we be frightened of that which we cannot see or explain rationally? Strangely, I have never been frightened of such things because I had confidence in an angel that was guarding me. As I grew older, I began to question some things I had previously accepted, and asked myself, "Did I need a guardian angel?" "What was she guarding me from?" And now today, with our technology, why could I not guard myself?

People protect things only if there is a danger that someone is coming to get it, and as a youngster, that conjured up some very entertaining daydreams. Along with my favorite cartoons and comics of the day, these thoughts fueled my imagination, creating startling images that I am only now able to construct. As I matured into adulthood, things became much more complicated. Rules that once seemed so simple to abide, became muddy and I could not see the faded lines, overly apparent just a few years before. I suddenly saw that all of my role models were so easily flawed, and could never live up to their expectations. So my angel began to rot. She did not die, but she contracted leprosy. She is now “unclean” with contradictory beliefs and weakened faith.

## CHAPTER 2

### ANGELS

Angels are icons of transcendence, yet mine are formed from iron. My angels desperately want to be messengers or guardians of the spirit world, but instead they slump, sprawl, and crouch, badly in need of physical supports. Their metallic shells look to be capable of holding something, but they are empty. One has wings allowing it to travel, but it just crumples to the ground. They all exude a sense of vacancy that I have only experienced at funerals. I am drawn to the idea of angels as iconic forms of the ideal. It is ironic that I use the angel as my voice, since the angels I portray are disheveled by their evolution through time.

This question always arises in my work: “Why do you use the female form for the body of your angels?” The female form is my muse. My sculptures have always involved a human image or presence. I may be crossing doctrine and my imagination in what I’m trying to say, but I have used the female image as my metaphor for the church. The church has been labeled the “bride of Christ” (at least, of course, from a protestant perspective). My angels are disintegrating. I’m trying to say that the church is now just a shell of what it was, or at least it is in a state of disrepair and neglect. We can plainly see that she was beautiful, but now we are drawn to watching her exist in tragedy. Caretakers of the “bride” have allowed her to appear less than she is worth.

By arming the angels with guns, I am giving them some instant power. The viewer must take them seriously because the gun is the great equalizer. I create these guns in the same manner as the angels - they are external shells. They hold none of the real components to make them work. Viewers can see straight through the guns’ barrels.

The angels have been upgraded, and at least fashionably equipped to deal with today's problems. They are most definitely not our father's angels.

## CHAPTER 3

### INSTALLATION

Upon entering the gallery, viewers are greeted by ten angelic figures. They are represented in various states of being, and reveal themselves in many different confrontational or passive positions. Some are fully intact while others are in a state of decomposition. It appears as if there was an altercation among them and their enemies, or between themselves. There is a somber mood to the space, as the angels seem to be fading away. I imagine this will not be a comfortable place for most people.

I am showing in the main room of the Hampden Gallery. For the reception only, metal roses will be scattered in a random pattern through the gallery. Compositionally, roses will help direct the viewer through the space, but the angels will not engage with them. The roses themselves are an anomaly; they exist completely on their own. Their color indicates their meaning: Black signifies farewell and death, while blue symbolizes the unattainable, or the impossible. All roses will be removed from the gallery following the reception.

Some angels are displayed on boxes of light, while others are located under a focused beam of light from above. By lighting some figures from underneath, I am trying to adjust and focus the viewer's attention. Bottom-lighting some of my sculpture increases drama in the gallery, by enlarging my sculptures with dark shadows that reach overhead and meet across the room.

The light boxes I constructed give the space an ethereal feeling. Their construction was purely for sculpturally aesthetic purposes. Controlling light in the room allowed me to transform the space more convincingly into the angel's realm.



Because I was on a tight budget, all the light boxes were made using 1"x 10" pine boards for the sides and an 1/8<sup>th</sup>" plywood bottom. The tops are 1/4 " plexi glass, sanded on one side with white kilz latex primer. They were lit with various sized florescent light fixtures. Each box contains only one cord, leading out the bottom on one side, and plugs into a standard 110 outlet.

Light boxes are tools used primarily for the careful observation of a specimen. I have personally seen broken bones, dislocated parts, and kidney stones, all through light boxes. In the medical world, they are used to examine the insides of people. These devices enable viewers to see an object "correctly" over proper lighting, making it possible to see the truth revealed once the details are more clearly scrutinized.

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