

A Conversation Between Abraham Adams and Francesca Hummler

Abraham Adams: Tell me about the origin of “Rituals.”

Francesca Hummler: I was looking for a way out of my current living situation and found an advertisement for a spot that opened up a workshop with Antoine d’Agata in Arles. Two weeks later I was in the South of France for the first time, looking for inspiration in old Roman churches. As I often do when I start working with a new topic, I began taking self-portraits. Antoine urged me to push the work and soon I was “borrowing” props from the cathedrals, something Antoine jokingly washed his hands of. I collaborated with the other residents on images loosely related to biblical parables. The semi-blasphemous nature of the work, like the image in which my friend Jack and I tied a statue of the Virgin Mary to the front of his van, was incredibly enjoyable to make. Of course, this work ties into my family and my upbringing, but it’s the first series I started working on alone after working so directly with my family. With Antoine egging me on, I felt like I could lean into my bitter humour and have the freedom to stretch representations without worrying about my family’s feelings. The work developed into a way to Take back the power in my relationship with the church, the bible, and faith generally. Since that summer two years ago, I’ve been working on it sporadically, creating little rituals for myself.

AA: It’s nice to hear about your enjoyment making that piece. That is of course a traditional place for a deer or other large animal to be tied after it’s been killed by hunters. So it seems to me a characteristic gesture of yours: things out of place. Your photography itself is at a very high standard, in terms of craft, but I am most interested in this practice of yours, simply putting things where they don’t belong, which typically deals in the material culture of home and family. So this is somewhat outside your usual subject matter. How do you see this work as similar to or different from what you have done in the past?



Strapped to a Van, 2022, Arles, France.

FH: I see the work as a branch on the tree of my practice. I think aesthetically, it has darker color tones, and there is a certain underlying rage that might be missing from earlier projects which are visually more whimsical. There is a certain shift away from the domestic in this work, with the “home” being replaced by the so-called house of God. The gestures I’m making include putting things which don’t “belong” in

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the church in the frame. Like the image where I'm hiding underneath the altar cloth, it's a lot about taking the sacred and turning it on its head. There is less clarity for me in this work, as my religious education from childhood is a bit hazy. In a way, this relates to the generational memories I worked with in my other projects. Instead of pinning down details about my grandparents or my sister's past, I'm asking myself to recall details like if Jesus cried blood or sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. In a way, these details don't matter and are all fodder for me to play with. This series could go on forever, as there always be another gesture I could make, mimicking the way that faith stays with you and affects you beyond the time when you're dedicated to studying scripture. Lastly, I think this is the first series I've made where I've put things about myself and my own biography out there in a plain way. Before, experiences I have had relating to my gender and sexuality were touched upon through other members of my family. Even here, they're a bit hidden, but I'm finally not shying away from talking about them.

AA: I love the idea of working with the remains of memory. It reminds me of Emma Kay's 1999 *Worldview*, in which she attempted to write down all of human history from memory. On the one hand, what could be a more innocent material—the form of things we happen to have not forgotten yet. On the other hand, so many heretics died in early Christianity because of beliefs that to us now might seem only slightly out of place—about whether the Trinity is one or three entities, whether Jesus is to be considered fully or partly human or divine, etc. Maybe that's why some of the quietest interventions here speak the loudest to me. Can you tell me a little about *Baptismal Mound*, for example?



Baptismal Mound, 2023, San Diego, United States

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FH: I developed an obsession with getting a candle that was an exact replica of my baptismal candle. There are varying ways to treat baptismal candles, as they symbolize the light of Christ in a child's life. The candle can be lit during milestones like Confirmation or if you get married, which does not apply in my case since I'm the first woman in my lineage to remain unmarried at my age. My baptismal candle has never been lit, despite my having been confirmed, my mom keeps it tucked away in its original box. Luckily, my sister went to a university down the street from the church I was baptised in, and she brought me a copy of the candle. For about a year, I carried it around with me from place to place, unsure how to photograph it. It started to feel really dramatic, especially when my grandfather died and I found out that baptismal candles are burned to their end on the day of our deaths.

The candle became a representation of my soul, and I wanted to make an image of different candles extinguished at the same time, as if their faith or lives were ending. I went to Home Depot with my sister and picked up a bunch of dirt with the idea of making a grave similar to what Ana Mendieta did in her *Silueta* series. While shooting, it turned into something else, with the baptismal candle being the only candle lit and extinguished with an almost imperceptible splash of water. What, or who, the other candles are can be interpreted in different ways. These kinds of impulses inspired by objects, using object-oriented ontology, often go in a direction I do not see at first, other times, the image turns out exactly the way I see it in my mind. Usually, it depends on whether or not I have considered properties like gravity when I first envision an idea.

AA: The image of wine pouring on an illustrated plate half-buried in sand also presents a symbolic artifact activated by the earth that could be interpreted in different ways. It strikes me that these pieces aren't conventionally located in time, perhaps because of the absence of people. Could we say that these scenes playing out "impulses inspired by objects," which gives them a sense of magic power, belong to the time of myth?

FH: I have an aversion to creating images that can be easily tied to a specific moment in time unless it's essential to the gesture I am making. For example, I generally try to avoid any "modern clothing" in my portraits, leaving nudity as an obvious choice. While I wouldn't directly link the sense of magic in my work to magic realism, I do find inspiration in a half-conscious, dreamlike state before I fall asleep where ideas often come to me.

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Spilt for You, 2022, Arles, France

On the subject of myth, I'm intrigued by how mythical themes are interpreted within religious communities and how they necessitate a suspension of disbelief. Beyond the literal belief in God, I've observed that many Christians, both in my upbringing and those active in the United States today, are taught to hold two conflicting ideas as true simultaneously—paradoxes that breed hypocrisy. Children in the church learn to accept contradictions, such as being told, "You're a sinner, but God loves you." Christians tend to focus on isolated positives rather than addressing systemic and narcissistic abuse. This becomes a problem when they form relationships as adults since any personal transgression, including domestic violence, can be healed through prayer and repentance.

I'm not saying people don't deserve forgiveness. But this indoctrination normalizes suffering and victimhood, encouraging us to valorize endurance rather than getting out of a bad situation. I find that the greatest myth perpetuated by religion is the idea that we must forgive abuse. I know that the 12-Step Program includes a caveat stating that addicts shouldn't seek to make amends if it might injure or harm someone else. But how can we really know if something will harm someone else, especially if that person is a child? Seeking forgiveness can be very selfish, and in my life, I have been practising leaving harmful situations since all the women before me in my family have been brainwashed into staying. I think real faith is about demanding more love from our communities and ourselves, not just about the parts of life where you're broken. Too many people use the expectation of forgiveness never to change and become better people.

I aim to capture this "magic of disbelief" that trickles into our interpersonal lives from the church in my photographs. In my work, I play with objects the way a child might collect objects sentimentally, allowing me to work through the myths I learned to believe about being a woman in the church. The image you reference shows the French board game "Jeu de l'oie" (Game of the Goose). Historically, this game has

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been used to teach children patience, ethics, and religious doctrine. In some interpretations, it even represents a pilgrimage route, where stages of the journey are marked by rewards for good behaviour, warnings of danger, and punishments like imprisonment or death. This gamified form echoes the choreographed rituals and teachings within the church— like the songs sung with dance moves that reinforce doctrinal messages. This is the magic power I explore in my work—the confrontation of these ingrained narratives and the challenge to the timeless so-called sanctity of suffering.

AA: Is there anything else you'd like your viewers to know in visiting this show?

FH: I'd like viewers to remember that while the work specifically addresses Christianity, its themes can resonate universally across different religious systems. I've had meaningful conversations about the work with women from Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds, reinforcing that these experiences are not just personal but shared among many, particularly women within faith communities. I hope this universality will be reflected in the photobook I plan to create from "Rituals."