

A Project By  
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## References and Acknowledgements

# Abstract

This project is a discovery of self, fields, invisible forces and shapes. It starts off as a study of value systems that reveals the power of spirituality and an introspection of a physical body navigating in a hybrid field. It slowly evolves to a constellation of work intersecting spiritual ideologies, system diagramming, and computer graphic techniques. With a combination of research and studio practice, *An Altar is Wherever You Kneel* is a multi-channel video installation that explores the collision between old rituals and emerging technology, revealing an alternative way of experiencing spiritual practices through procedure contents and non-human centric narratives.

It was a hot summer day in 2006.

I was biking up a long hill. Light filtering through the branches, the shadows sway across my skin. All I could feel was life. I thought about the newly released episode of One Piece, and the half-finished watermelon in the fridge. A young life in an equally young summer, a moment glimpsed in a lifetime of searching — the bliss. Life is the resonance of moments, and 6-year-old me was so pure that the simplest formula could get me there. I felt this soft itchiness and warmth across my body, as I merged into my surroundings.

This project is dedicated to that feeling.

**Our existence is a prayer.**

2006年，炎热的夏天。

我骑在单车上，卖力的跨过漫长的上坡。我并不觉得疲惫，甚至感受不到两鬓的汗水。树叶间透过的光在我身上跳动，是我内心喜悦的显照。我的心里揣念着冰箱里的西瓜，冷气，和新出的动画。一个如此年轻的生命，在一个同样年轻的盛夏瞥见了那个无限接近终点的瞬间。

如果说漫长一生是为了瞬间的共振，彼时的我心灵单纯，只需要寥寥几个成分就可到达。

西瓜，冷气，动画片，它们是六岁的我对幸福的具像化。那是一种心痒痒的感觉，是与周遭融一，身体被空间接纳而达到的共振。

这个项目献给那种感觉。

为我们的存在而欢呼雀跃。

# Part I. To Praise, To Sing, To Chant.



## In the Genesis Lies the Hassle

“I” (Marshall) am an organic assembly constituting of two decades of human experience and a collection of ideologies with floating thoughts. During my not-long-enough human practice, I often wonder why I’m drawn to certain scenarios more than the others. Within the world of close and far, real and fiction, I feel as if I’m responding to the attributions of unseen influences.

This reminds me of the ālaya-vijñāna<sup>1</sup> and reincarnation. In Buddhism we believe one soul can be housed in multiple bodies. Bodies may decay but the soul remains. Our past experiences and emerging thoughts are stored within the soul, the Ālaya-vijñāna, which aggregate and influence the course of our life. I call them “seeds of consciousness”. Across the finite time our body holds, an infinite amount of cognitive responses sprout, bounce, and shape our trajectories. Mortals tend to pattern-find in randomness. Perhaps beneath the indeterminacy and silken dilemmas, there are dusks and dawns that slowly guide us to where we are.

The invisible path.

Through transient moments and the rolling wheel of history, the only thing we’re able to capture is the temporal fidelity of the instance. The forward-moving present. I create for now, and the now that lies ahead.

This project is an assembly of my personal interpretation of myths that science fails to explain. It’s an amalgamation of my social roles and assigned identities, nothing too special — an eastern woman, a creative practitioner, a bicultural researcher, a late Millennial or an early Gen Z, a daughter of a Buddhist mom, and a free-ish body. It’s an articulation with personal bias. It’s an introspection of self, the world, and the relationship between people and space. It’s an exploration and homage to the inexplicable mysterious forces. It should be private but transparent, require effort to access but self-evident, emotionally and intellectually challenging but open. It brings questions with no answers. It’s an attempt to name the unnamable, to brush the gaps in the void of language. *An Altar is Wherever You Kneel* is an inward appraisal of the body and mind, and an outward invitation to the artificial sublime.<sup>2</sup>

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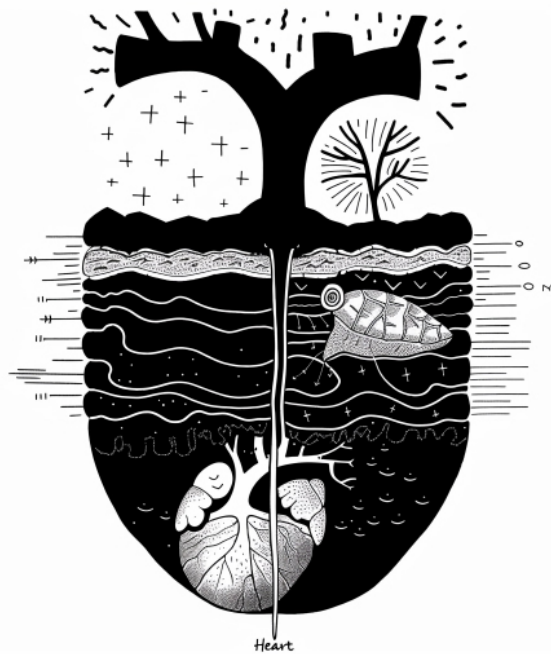
1 Waldron, William S. “A Buddhist Theory of Unconscious Mind.”

2 Bukatman, Scott. “16 The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects And The Sublime”

# The Origin of Thoughts

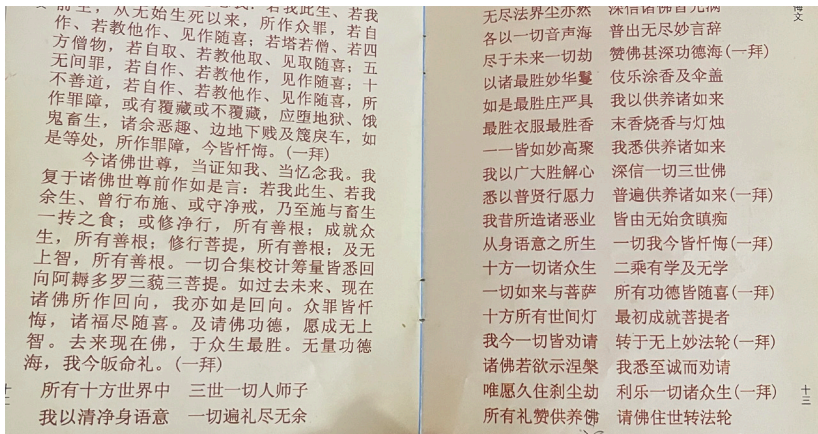
It's rarely straight-forward to bring hidden thoughts, unspoken tales, and fleeting moments to our tangible reality. Purpose-finding and meaning-giving is how I justify my impulse of depicting the inherent but invisible interconnectedness of everything that exists, and to create like an alchemist in the post-digital landscape.

Our thoughts originate from the core of our being. I was told that they come from our heart. "Heart" being the infrastructure that holds our memories, experiences, and worldviews. The heart is the pump for our actions, and thoughts are like flowing streams of water.



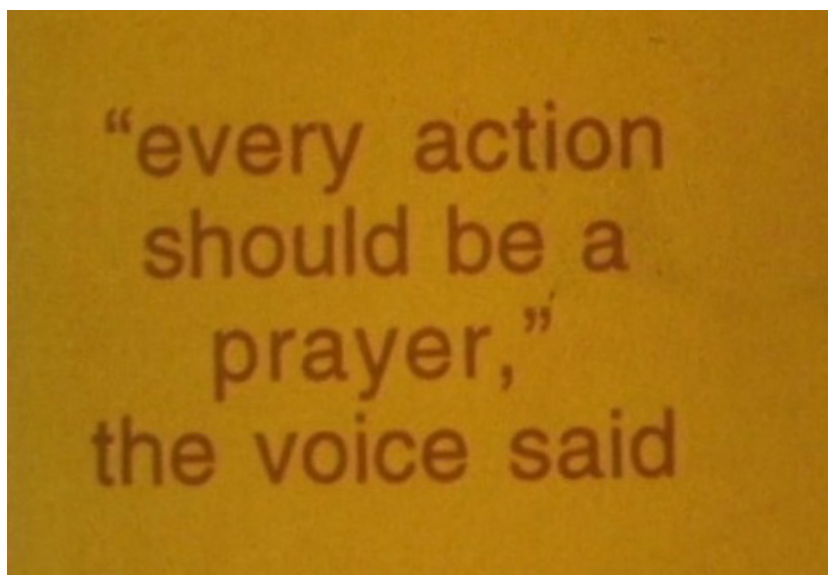
1.1 Diagram of heart + thoughts, AIGC by Mid Journey

Being thousands of miles away from home, I facetime my mom a lot. Everytime our conversation would lead to the same question where she asks "Did you confess today?" It then initiates a private ritual between us where I'd tell her about my day, and promise her I will pray before going to bed. The same question itself never bothered me even though I have the prayer routine every night for 13 years. It is never a repetitive question because I know, having the Pacific Ocean between us, this is her approach of checking how my day was. The strength of prayer comes from more than a religious routine — it bridges the social construct of time and space, bringing my mom and I together.



### 1.2 Sutra I read every night for the past 13 years

I pray for a lot of things. I pray for nothing. I pray to have the courage to desire out loud. I pray to friends. I pray to my plants. I pray when I feel like I don't deserve it. I pray to not feel alone. I pray to recognize and acknowledge the smallness of my body. I pray for the abundance this body has given me. Prayer is my entanglement with spirituality, an action to fill in the gap of the unexplainable encounterability happening within bodies and spaces. I started praying before the concept of "prayer" even existed in my mind. Individuals pray through all agents — through our body, through our words, through the internet. The substance of not having specificity in our wantings but still embedding them to a larger request offers us peace of mind. To pray is not to worship but to find the anchor. To pray is to self-navigate. To pray is to accept the voice.



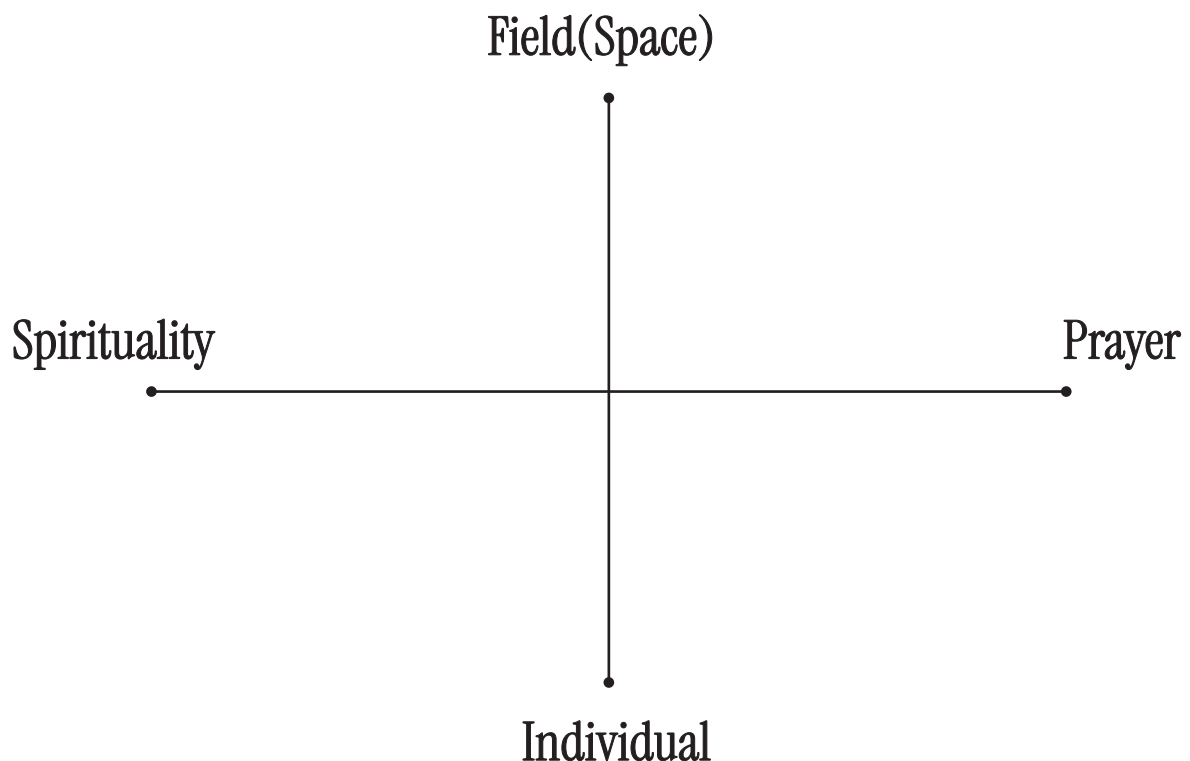
### 1.3 Image from Mekas, As I Was Moving Ahead

# The Woven Web

We live in a carefully knitted, but constantly expanding web. It's a dynamic interplay — life gathers and forms habitats, habitats shape social forms, and social forms alter habitats, redefining them. We follow the web laid down by our ancestors, reweaving them into the narrative of our present realities. The interconnected web is spanning into the digital space — our extended reality We're always on the web. In this gigantic infrastructure we build and nest in, spirituality flows within the fluid network.

How will the field of vows take shape on this web?

How to portray the relationship between bodies and nests, and how to visualize the unseeable connections through computational methods? Can we cater a spiritual experience through the abstract? What will spiritual forms look like? A blown-up pixel can be a part of a healing text. A prayer lyric can be coded as a wavy line. If the state of resonance can be made tangible through a watermelon and an episode of anime on a hot summer day, can it be conveyed through system mapping and diagramming? Between domains, humans, technology and spiritual practice, lies the vast exploration of forms. This is the web I'm knitting right now, the web of abundance and interdependency.



# The Particularity of Spirituality

What comes to one's mind when someone claims they're spiritual?

Is it the smell of burning sage? Scattered crystal rocks on a tribal patterned blanket? An astronomy chart hanging on the wall? Or a Buddha statue? Spirituality is over-used as a buzzword and under-defined within the status quo. A surface level connotation of spirituality leads us to give up on trusting ourselves as the engine of change, and allows the power of a symbol, an act of ritual, or higher entities the power to take full charge. But spirituality is never specific, and it's anti-binary. We all practice it differently. It's not about believe or disbelieve — spiritual moments happen outside of rituals, and they appear in the segments of connection. It can be a breakthrough, a let-go, or an awakening.

"There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks when decades happen."<sup>3</sup> In the fast and slow, spirituality lies within.

In the gentle breeze in the summer day, in the "aha moments", in every footstep we make knowing the firm support is coming from the ground. It lies in the mental scans of introspection and reflection. It lies in the constantly shifting infinity. It lies in the enigmatic flow of being. It's interchangeable, collective and private; grand or casual; traditional or unconventional. The network of spirituality is an adaptable system; a classy gesture; a vernacular, peculiar expression.

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<sup>3</sup> Quote from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, also in sync of what's happening in the world right now

## Part II. A Network of Bliss, Towards Our Techno Body.

# The Shrine and the Machine

I feel different each time I pray. Prayer evokes a sense of humility and acknowledgment of powerlessness in the grand scheme of the universe. However, this acknowledgment of limitation will lead to connection, strength, enlarging the capacity to reach out to something greater. In the constructed feedback loops we build to construct ourselves, knowledge passes, and old rituals are reinvented. Wishes carried through different agents, from spoken language to written words, from relics to the machines.

I want to make a network of machines, hosting digital simulations that carry wishes and prayers. It's a gentle rub on the soul, a sensorial experience, and a futuristic mantra.

If the fundamental aspects of living experience are in a flickering flame of hope and reverence, how can limitlessness be conveyed through a defined space?

Shown in Busan Biennale 2023, *Ocean Briefings*<sup>4</sup> by Gary Zhexi initiated a conversation with the sea. In the installation, fictional narratives are generated with AI, referred to as "Thought-Forms," and displayed on the screen, as an attempt to comprehend and communicate the complexities of oceanic ecosystems. In the constantly changing scenery of the oceanview, the juxtaposition and negotiation between the messages and waterbody create private moments in a public space. "Part cosmic weather report, part geo-strategic briefing, part romantic novella, *Ocean Briefings* is a series of daily transmissions telling tales of logistical breakdown, geopolitical scrambling, meteorological anxiety and erotic intrigue, it takes inspiration from the instability of a world in the making....it functions as a 'subtitle' to Ilgwang Beach, framing the sea in search for signals in an ocean of noise." Simple yet impactful touch that leads to a poetic, generative result.

*Ocean Briefing* is an inspiring combination of cosmology and ceremony. An intersection between technology, nature, and spirituality. A conscious environment created, a spiritual machine made.

Tying into this project, where technology is seen not as separate from nature but as an integral part of the larger cosmic web, I decided to create a multi-channel video installation to explore the relationship between procedure contents, rituals, and human perception.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ocean Briefing*, LED panel, square pipes, 608×32cm. Commissioned by Sea Art Festival 2023



2.1 Ocean Briefing by Gary Zhexi

## The Cartographer, the Shapeshifter, the Witch

We tend to seek meaningful patterns in meaningless data. We see systems where none exist. Apophenia<sup>5</sup> is part of my perception, memory, and bias self. Exploring the intersection of technology, spirituality and human experience, a made-up system is there to support the randomness in shaping our understanding of techno spiritualism.

How to draw a connection that doesn't exist? Can I diagram the nature of consciousness, existence, and our relationship with technology and the divine? What will the anatomy of the sacredness look like?

The attempt of it, granted me the power of a cartographer, a shapeshifter, and a witch.

**Being a creative practitioner is all above.**

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<sup>5</sup> The tendency to perceive a connection or meaningful pattern between unrelated things



**I'm constantly shapeshifting**, as people define my practice to align with their intention. Sometimes I'm "the graphic designer", sometimes I'm just a researcher, occasionally I can be an artist, but most of the time my identity remains anonymous. There's no perfect title I can just sit on, and I'm sitting on a pile of things, anxiously seeking the perfect box to sit on. Maybe there's no box to sit on. Maybe I'm just me, an enthusiastic maker that shapeshifts for fun.

**I'm consistent and system-driven.** I like to position myself in a pre-built framework and jump between them. Forms are not just shapes; they are intricate systems. To draw the invisible connection is like crafting the anatomy, atlas, diagram, topology, and a taxonomy of the spiritual beings — a complex endeavor made with tales and puzzles.

In the artworks of Hilma af Klint,<sup>6</sup> system thinking takes shape through spiritual forms, vibrant colors and abstracted compositions. They skillfully blend invisible guidelines of generating with their unique articulations, whether it's through a feminist, soft approach or a more geometric and primal aesthetic. In Klint's work, where a reconciliation of long-held religious beliefs with scientific advances can be found through the combination of biomorphic and geometric forms, I see a spiral temple in her abstract vocabulary, all self-explanatory.

To use system thinking as the core approach in constructing my making, a space will be made for distinct languages and open dialogues. In this fluid system, mapping comes in a spectrum, from abstract to precise, from familiar construct to organic representation. A circle is never just a circle, it's a metaphor.



2.2 Tree of Knowledge, No. 1

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<sup>6</sup> Hilma af Klint is a Swedish artist and mystic whose paintings are considered among the first abstract works known in Western art history. Her works are my all time favorites.

## Weaponized Aesthetic, But For Holy Purpose.

I think about look and feel a lot. As a creator who naturally gravitates towards visually stimulating work, my practice and taste has always been “funky”. My eyes like to be challenged by complicated forms and “noisy” shapes that try to make a loud point. A unique, almost unapologetic observation, or with a strong presence through a powerful, destructive way of articulation. I enjoy the chaotic and loudness in design, a subject in which clarity and communicativeness are usually valued the most.

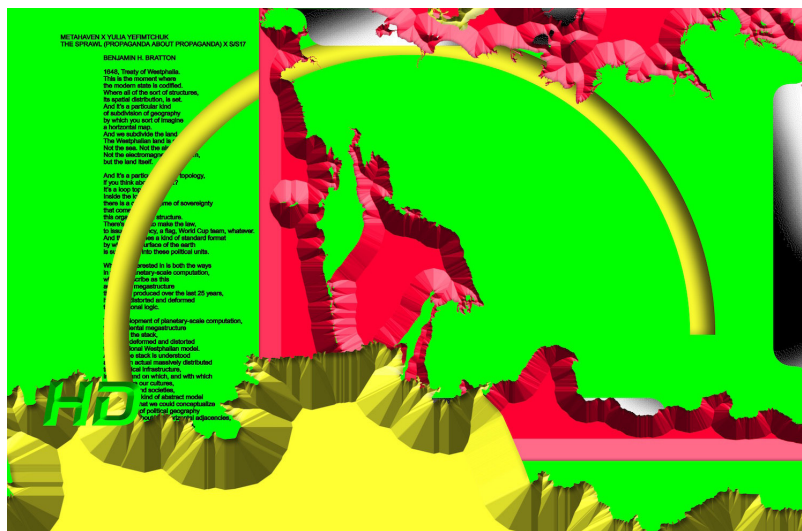
I wonder why.

Design does not always allow ambiguity, it’s process-oriented, procedural, it has protocols and guidelines. However, we are being overly protective about the established rules and systems, and trying too hard to be direct about the message we’re delivering. We neglect the fact that forms can exist as themselves, standalone, and they have the power to create impact and convey political viewpoints in untraceable manners. Aesthetics carry a lot more information, messages, and hidden associations than we think. Whether these ideologies are economic, geo-political, or cultural.



2.3 Captives of Cloud by Metahaven

In Metahaven's works, where highly political and highly aesthetic works are hard to categorize, the idea of "aesthetic as weapons" comes across, teaching us a lot about what the politics of the future will look like. In their graphic novel *Captives of the Cloud*, where vibrant color is fighting over with sharp shapes and expressive typography, composition happens anarchically and simultaneously — delivering striking messages. Likewise, project *Sprawl* goes against the traditional impression and prerequisite of what is considered to be a good design. It also challenges the common belief of "form follows function" by using forms and design as a radical tool of artistic expression and radical critique, to comment on the established hierarchy of the infrastructure we live in.



2.4 Sprawl by Metahaven (Propaganda About Propaganda) X S:S17 (1)

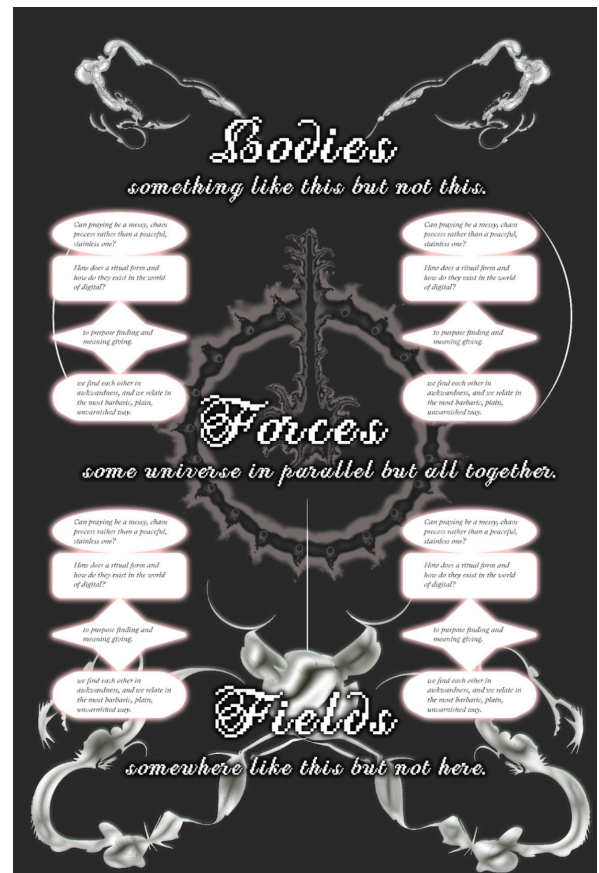
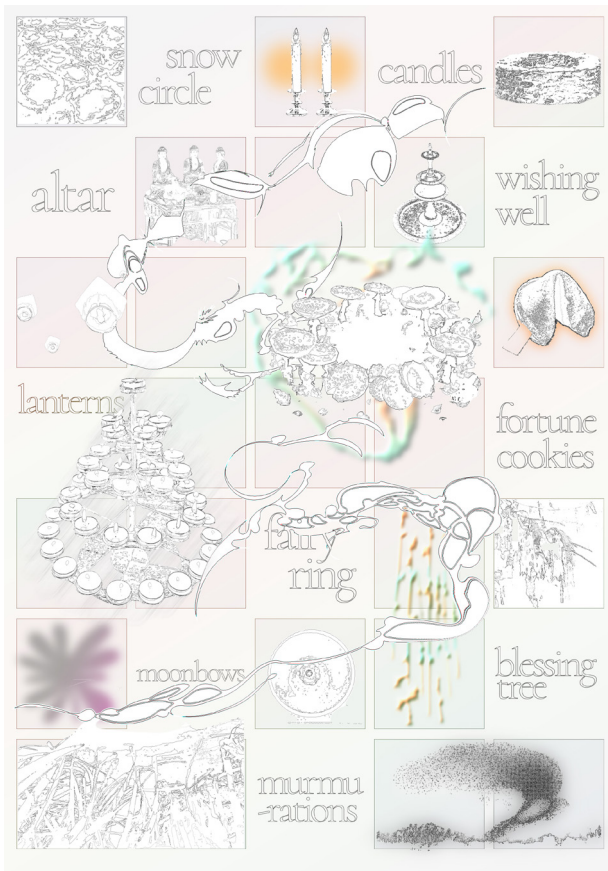
Inspired by the ideology of intuitive forms and anarchical expressions, I started to explore ways to position them into this project. Particularly by gathering web images and memes that reveal a sense of holiness. Can a divine image also be unsettling, casual, ambiguous, ambient, visually striking, and "not pretty"? Following the visual research I conducted, where spirituality is translated through cyber expression and vernacular language, I started to explore a way to weave all the memes and cyber images into my thinking process. Nothing I created in this project is new, but by creating new associations through rearranging and decontextualizing images and words, the definition of spirituality is given a new form and adapted to a new skin, something between low brow and classical. In the process video of this project, I used a lot of internet-found memes to decontextualize prayer, an action which the sensation is hard to explain through given words or images, but easy to relate through memes and cringy affirmation posts. Honesty and transparency flows, within the compressed, low-fi visual images and funny expressions.

## Part III. Our Existence is a Prayer.

# The Taxonomy of Prayer

Like many infographics or data visualization vessels, taxonomy is a flexible form in revealing information, and puts a variety of contents in perspective. Can I create a centerpiece that embodies an ambient feeling without directly borrowing from religious or spiritual frameworks? Thus leading to the exploration of building a creative container that can host my thoughts and concepts. I start to envision a taxonomy that hints at the divine, a taxonomy of blessings categorized and represented on a spectrum. From collective to singular, and from artificial to natural.

A taxonomy that reveals a tiny tinge of god, an accumulation of blessings — from a wishing well, a fortune cookie, a charm, to fairy rings, moon bows, and stone circles. Here comes my first attempt making the taxonomy:



3.1 Taxonomy of the Prayer, iteration 1

The initial exploration of the taxonomy is a collage made of a collection of artifacts and natural motifs that hints on spiritual powers and mystical forces. How to move from literal representations to a more ambient, condensed, and abstract form? In my second attempt, I try to let the form flow. Through breaking and reimagining familiar constructs I embrace the ambience and ambiguity of this design. Here I have these duo surrealistic pieces, where symbols and metaphors are broken down and reconstructed into a graphic diagram, floating in the air. In this iteration, two semi-symmetrical compositions represent the constant shifting wheel of life. Chaos and harmony sit side by side.



3.2 Taxonomy of the Prayer, iteration 2a

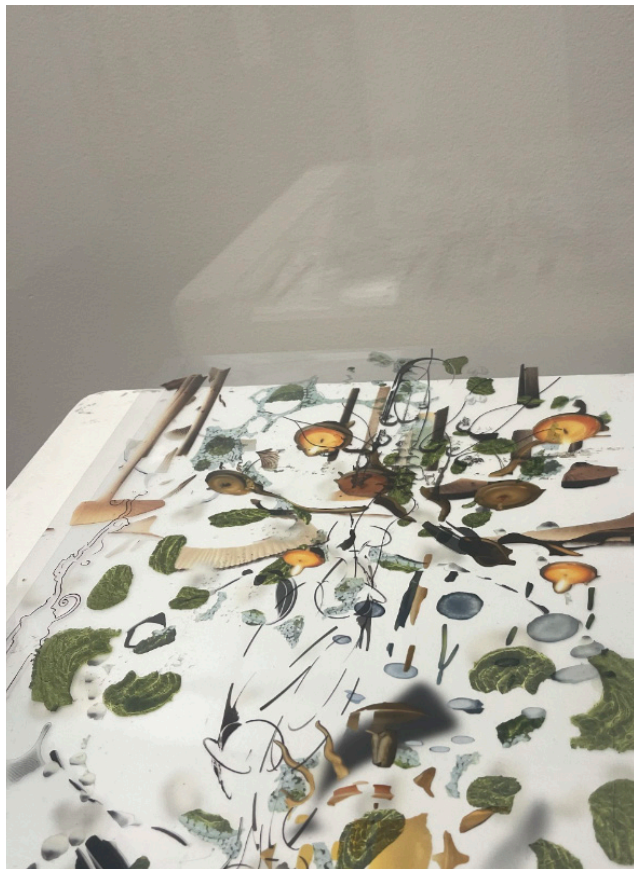


3.3 Taxonomy of the Prayer, iteration 2b

In my final taxonomy, I merge symbols and motifs to create a visual language that speaks volumes through its aesthetics, composition, and representation. While the forms remain open to interpretation, their spiritual significance is clear and direct; seamlessly transitioning from individual elements to collective narratives, blending organic and artificial elements to weave metaphors of blessings throughout the canvas—an expansive realm of aspiration.

Diving into material exploration, I experimented with various printing techniques, from translucent film to heavy craft paper to silk. Finally, I landed on the idea of a woven blanket. This medium serves as a poignant analogy, symbolizing the intricate interconnectedness and the nuances within relationships among beings.

## The Altar of Aspirations



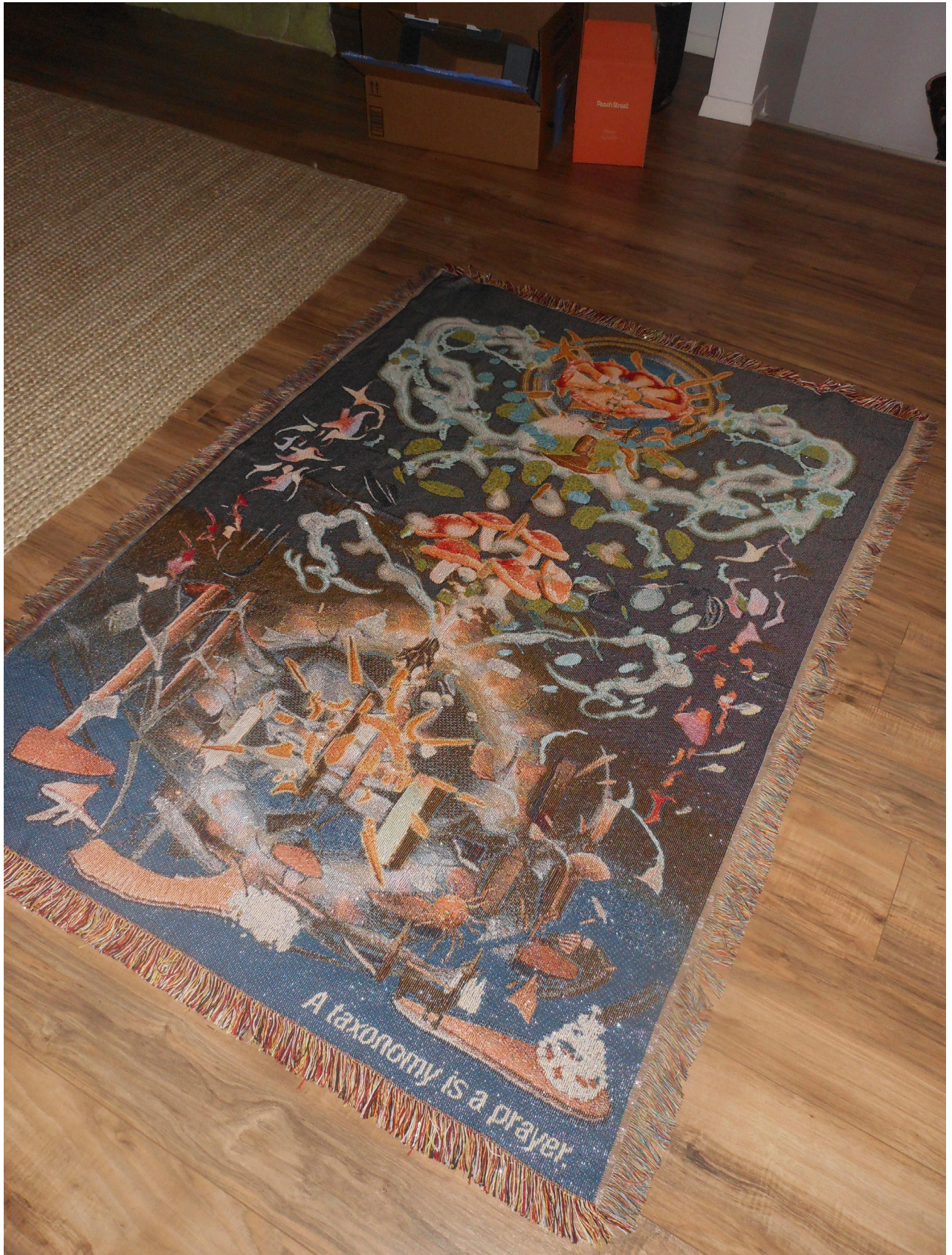
3.4 Material testing





*A taxonomy is a prayer.*

3.5 Taxonomy of the Prayer



3.6 Prayer blanket\_1



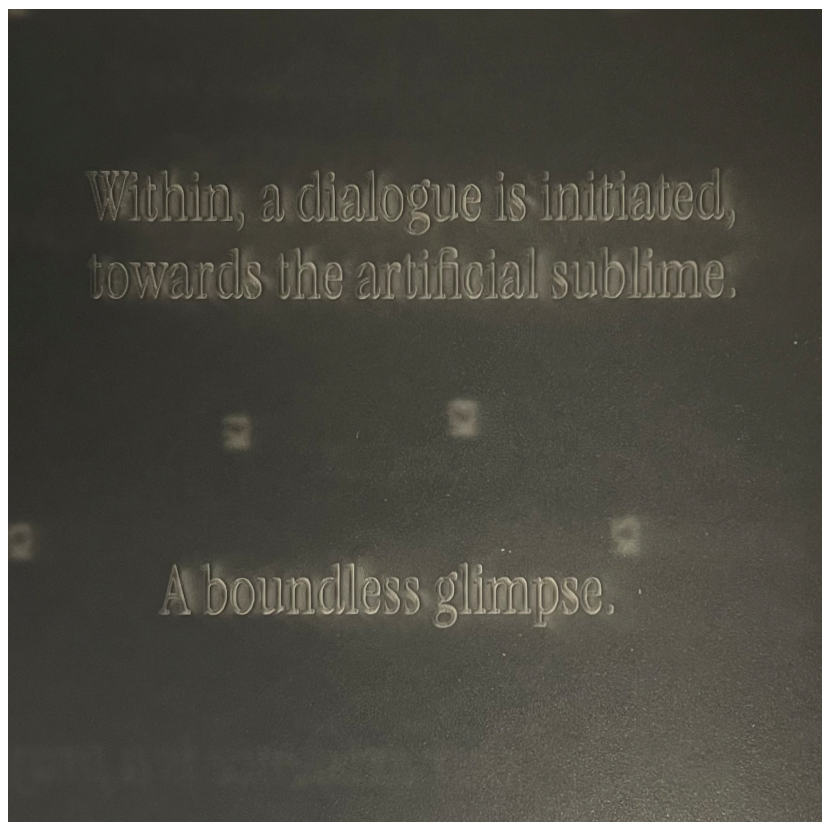
3.7 Prayer blanket\_2

## A Booklet, Made for Us

For this project, this booklet serves as a guide, a documentary, a poetic mantra, a diary of self-navigation, a permanent mark left on the milestone, and an ultra abstracted guideline of how to find peace in the status quo.

I remember one of my conversations with Gail Swanland, a poet, graphic designer, writer and educator who spent over 40 years teaching, and my mentor from undergrad back at CalArts. During one conversation I asked her if there's anything in the world she wants that she could have immediately, what would it be? Her answer still shocks me today. "I'll be happy with a stone," she said. The answer is not religious, but deeply rooted in spirituality. Maybe this is where the idea of making a booklet with a rigid body came from, just like the acrylic panels of the installation.

The entire book was made out of acrylic board, laser cutted and engraved.



3.8 Details of engraved letters

## **An Altar is Wherever You Kneel**

A project dedicated to you and me.

You're standing in a field of vows.

Time and space are social constructs. It's anti-random, forward-moving.

Seeds of consciousness float in the air, as we drift through space.

Slowly to stretch, to expand, to find meanings, to connect, to land on consensus.

Seeds sprout, the temporal is us.

Abundance woven in a dynamic web —

Traveling between domains and bodies,

We're souls portrayed through representations.

This is where you kneel,

An altar is wherever you kneel.

"Did you confess today?"

A private, but collective; intimate, but remote; messy, but direct ask.

A feedback loop we construct to construct ourselves.

To all hidden thoughts, unspoken tales, and fleeting moments,

Our existence is a prayer.

The anatomy of sacredness is in constant negotiation and synchronization.

Here a dialogue is initiated,

Towards the artificial sublime.

A boundless glimpse.

What is the paradigm of existence?

Our body is not a body, our body is not ours.

Our body is not ours, our body is a network.

Our body is ours.

After the taxonomy, I started to reimagine it in a space. A holy space, a field of aspirations. The idea of creating an Altar came to mind. To serve as a research vessel, an engine that carries conflicted yet overlapping thoughts between the traditional and the modern, a mirror crafted to reflect our beings.

In Nam June Paik's TV Buddha,<sup>7</sup> the idea of the observer also being observed is clearly communicated through a surveillance camera constantly rendering and updating the Buddha sculpture. It initiates dialogues of the old and new, and self-regulation. There's an introspective and conflicted aspect in the concept of an Altar too, where it's private; it's public; it's intimate; it's remote; it's structural; it's customized; It can be automated and transportable. Altars are inherently rich in context, and highly adaptable in catering for specific spiritual demands. It has the ability to transform, and evolve through time. Human experience taught us how to navigate in intricate environments and how to process signals around us. We're stumbling between synchronization and negotiation. An altar is a divine space. An altar is a feedback loop we construct to construct ourselves. An altar is a holy place dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, a saint, or religious figure. An altar is a focal point for beliefs, prayer, and offerings. An altar is a stand-alone structure used for rituals. An altar is a space that reflects one's abundance.



3.10 TV Buddha by Nam June Paik

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<sup>7</sup> Can we achieving a higher level of consciusnes through our digital-self?

“The Altar is wherever you kneel.” The name of this project comes from a quote from Camille Pagila’s book *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, Although borrowing it from a seemingly different context, the part of how she approaches sex and art, and how I approach spirituality remains similar: both topics deserve a more open and accepting ideology that embraces the complexities and nuances of human expression.

It’s a perfect analogy, or a description of action, to capture the tension between the multitude of spirituality, the body-space relationship, and the computational method and procedural images. The altar itself is a highly personal, experimental playground meshed with many different objects and wishes. The most exciting part of this is the incorporation of emerging technologies into a traditional, humanistic practice. My mom would call her altar “a field of aspirations”(vows), and her altar is very private. In the process of making the taxonomy I think about how collectiveness can play a part into this personal space, forming a stronger bond that can travel through time and space, channeling prayers and wishes all in one tiny field. Can an altar experience be private and public at the same time? Can the presentation remain particular but universal? I think it’s worth investigating the possibility of the automation process of the installation, and pushing the experiential understanding of the space through digital expression. Can I bring new to an old ritual? How should I play around with familiarity and strangeness in the Altar? What’s the essence of this particular altar?

**Altar is..**

- a divine space.
- a feedback loop we construct to construct ourselves.
- a holy place dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, saint, or religious figure.
- a focal point for religious devotion, prayer, or offerings.
- a standalone structure/table used for religious rituals, sacrifices, and offerings.

**Altar can be..**

- wherever a ritual take place, freedom of transportability
- public & personal, adaptable by choice
- brutalistic, post-technological look

**Altar contains..**

**(A.)decorative elements;**

- 1.a door/passway suggesting transcendent experience
- 2.earthy elements(地水火风); Material/things found in nature, like stone, wood
- 3.engraved, text, key messages
- 4.bones(a bit extreme eh)

**(B.)Sacred significance(a god, a centerpiece);**

- 1.the taxonomy, the collective blessed;

**(C.)Ritual artifacts that has symbolic meaning/associations to divine;**

- 1.candles, candle holders
- 2.talisman
- 3.things you offered for blessing(sacred food/fruit/water/bread!)
- 4.beading(not sure if this is a stretch)
- 5.a rug!
- 6.a rotating disc(circulation of life)

**(D.) Subject of choice**

1. a piece of personal fabric
2. a bouquet of flower



3.11 On Altar making, early installation concept

**The final Altar installation has three parts:**

The taxonomy blanket as the centerpiece; A five channel video installation with reel projection on acrylic stands; and the acrylic booklet on the altar shelf.



3.12 Early Altar setup





3.13 Final prototype of the Installation

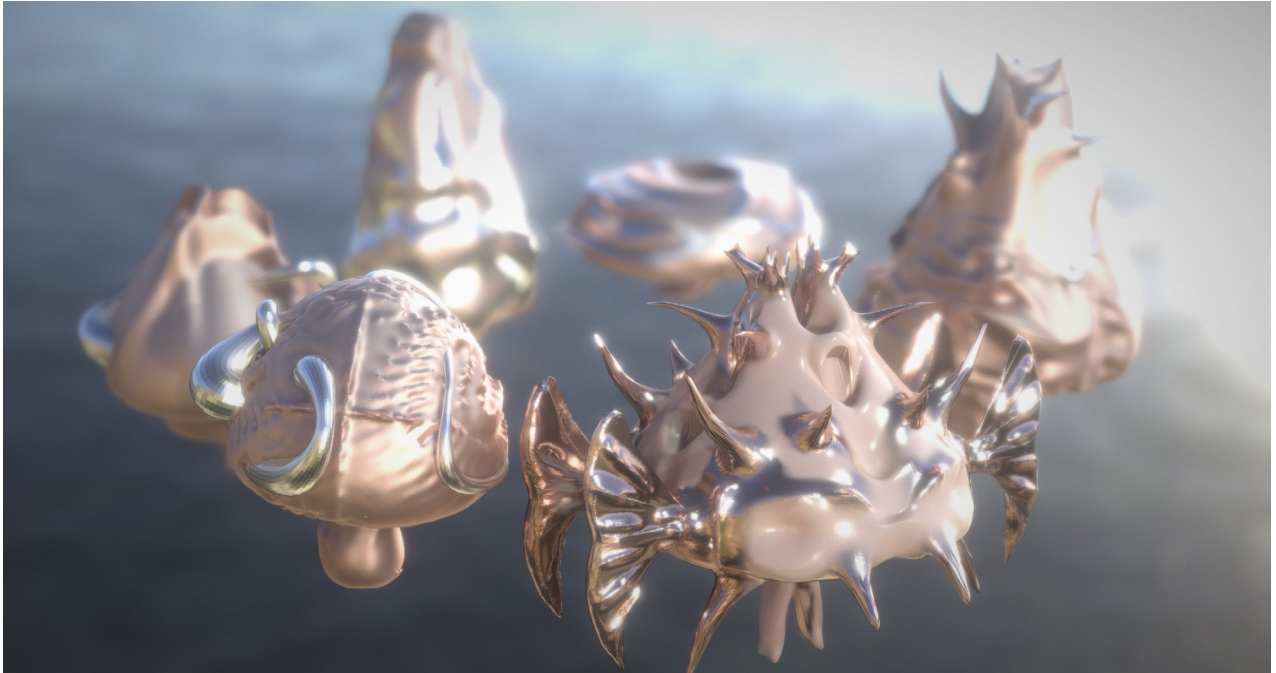
The video aspect is a continual work in progress, evolving with ongoing additions planned for the future. I've extracted motifs from the taxonomy and translated them into 3D models, integrating them into the landscape of vows. These symbols will continue to develop over time, ensuring that the video remains in a state of perpetual expansion. Below is some documentation of the building process.



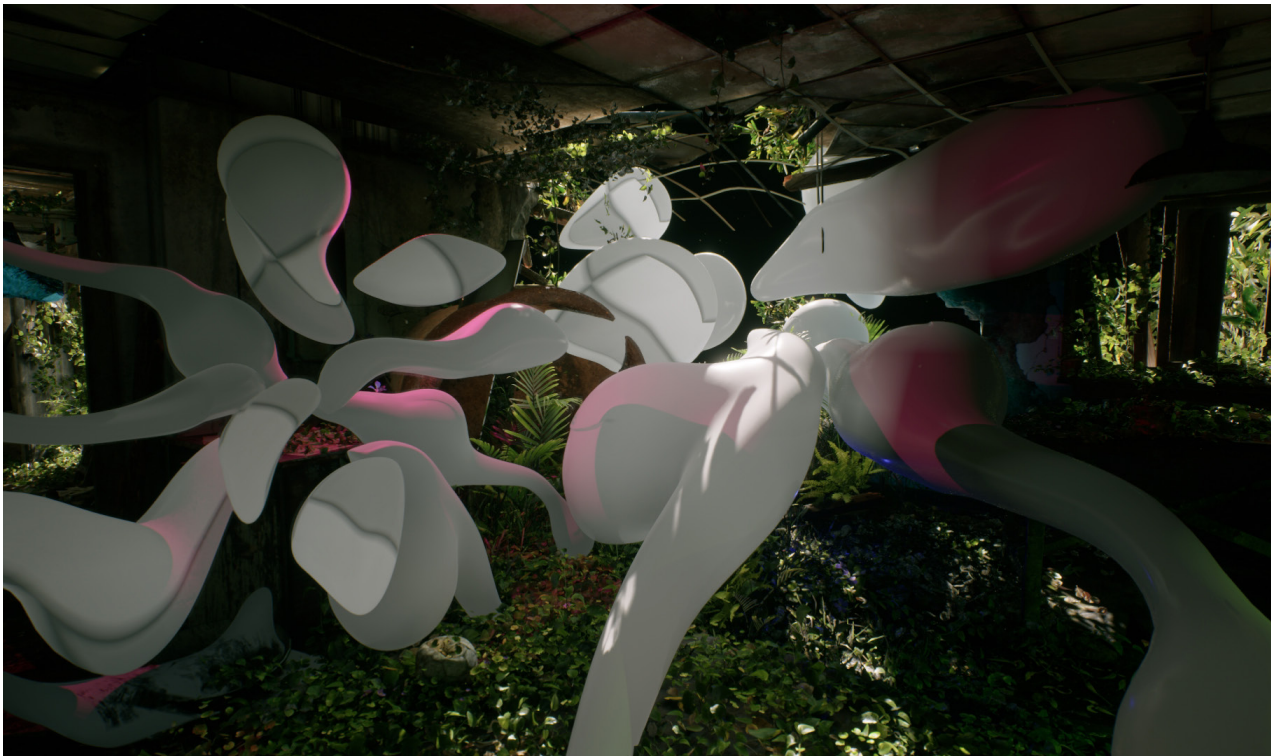
3.14 Charms and motifs



3.15 Unreal Engine work in progress



3.16 Selection of renders, fairy rings



3.16 Selection of renders, sun drops

# Acknowledgements

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If You Made It This Far,  
Thank You For Being Here With Me.