

THESIS

THE BOUNDARIES OF EXPERIENCE

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Patrick Price

Department of Art and Art History

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Suzanne Faris

Del Harrow

Mark Dineen

Silvia Soler Gallego

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## ABSTRACT

### THE BOUNDARIES OF EXPERIENCE

As I make my way through the world, I rely on my senses to inform me of the things and events around me that allow me to continue living and growing as a human being. I am keenly aware of myself as a living human consciousness that appears to inhabit a body. My mind is the center of this being, and my body and the senses it employs are the interface between this being within, and the reality without. My artwork explores the boundary between these worlds and how it gives shape to reality. With a focus on history, culture, and science, and how they affect identity, my research investigates the way these factors inform the creative act of being in the world. The sculptural objects and images I create attempt to reveal answers to the questions my artistic practice revolves around.

My work casting and fabricating objects and then placing them in specific contexts challenges the frameworks of collective and individual world-view constructs by revealing them for what they are. Material and landscape, objects and space, create harmonious or discordant relationships that aim to question what a culture can take as certainty. The trajectory of this body of work has led to my thesis *The Veil of Isis*, which through metaphor and allusion, points to the limits of what our senses can tell us about reality.

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## INTRODUCTION

As I sit here writing, beside me rests a cup of coffee. The surface of the black liquid is still enough to reflect an inverted view of the room I occupy, yet tiny convection currents show a gentle swirling underneath. Wisps of water vapor quickly probe upwards and immediately disappear, claimed by an errant draft. The coffee cup that holds the brew is white and ceramic with a handle shaped like the letter D. Descending from the lip is a translucent brown stain that describes the path of a droplet that escaped to halfway down the side of the cup. It is already dry. If I reach to pick up the cup, I know it will be warm to the touch because of the hot coffee it contains. I like my coffee warm, not scalding hot, and without any cream or sugar. By the time I finish writing this sentence, it should be just the right temperature. Having tasted the coffee, I see I was correct. It is just the right temperature to savor the lightly bitter, slightly sweet and nutty flavors, and inhale the distinct aromas of the Brazilian coffee beans. I set the coffee down next to my laptop to continue writing. How do I know that when I reach for another sip of coffee, the cup will still be there? One may answer: because coffee cups do not simply disappear. This is true, mostly. One of the first things a developing child learns is that objects continue to exist even when they can no longer be seen or otherwise interacted with. This understanding, as first described by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget,<sup>1</sup> comes early in a child's development and is called *object permanence*. It demonstrates the development of a mental model of the world that describes the real world around us. More importantly, it is the

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<sup>1</sup> Crystal Raypole, "All about object permanence and your baby", *Healthline.com*, July 30, 2019  
<https://www.healthline.com/health/parenting/object-permanence>

beginning of a model that creates the abstract notion of a *self* that inhabits this world. But there is more to the nature of reality than what the senses can tell. Is a coffee cup real? While reading the description of the coffee cup, you created a picture in your mind, incorporating the minute details I shared about it. If you were to compare it to a photograph of the same cup, how much would your mental image of the cup align with the photograph? {Figure 1}



*Figure 1, a coffee cup*

Surely there are some discrepancies. How much of this discrepancy was determined by the language I used to describe the cup? How much was created by the process of modeling within your own mind? If we could compare your mental model with that of your neighbor, how different would those cups look? What if you were reading this description in Russian? Or reading it on a rooftop café in Paris? Or if you absolutely abhor the taste of coffee? Without being aware of it, innumerable forces are at work which shape the way we incorporate sensory data into our mental models. In turn, this internal world view shapes the way we see the world, and the way we see ourselves.

I believe human beings experience the world through abstractions. Semiotics allow people to communicate and share these experiences and build bodies of knowledge. This ability is the basis for the incredible accomplishments human beings have achieved, including language, culture, science, and art. But an important distinction must be made about these abstractions and the real world we are a part of. An abstraction is a tool, a creation – it is not the thing itself it represents.

## CHAPTER ONE: PORTALS

My interest in semiotics and ancient history converged in the series of objects, installations, and images I have come to refer collectively as portals. I'm fascinated by ancient ruins and artifacts of forgotten civilizations. Archeologists postulate the date and culture of any particular object through the application of logic and science by associating it with previously discovered and studied precedents. Objects in the Portals series present the viewer with a similar problem; of objects removed from the culture that made them. {Figure 2}



Figure 2, Patrick Price, *Speculative Arrangement IX*, 2018

The portal series is presented in two ways; as objects in the gallery and as photographs documenting these same objects within a landscape. Initially I placed these objects alone or in groups on a pedestal in a gallery. In this context, the viewer's interpretation is directed by material, form, and arrangement, as well as the cultural expectations of the "white cube" gallery. In this exhibition a placard indicates the materials as concrete and resin, and provides a title "*Speculative Arrangement IX*." Rather than clarifying the purpose or meaning of the work,

this title introduces another layer of uncertainty, indicating that the precise function of the objects is unknown or uncertain. The title alludes to the practice natural history presenting an artistic representation of how objects were believed to be used or would have appeared in their original context.<sup>2</sup> Since the “true” purpose and arrangement of these objects is uncertain, (this is just one of at least 9 speculated arrangements after all,) the viewer is invited to imagine or invent their own purposes for themselves.

Later I would create small Diorama-like environments for this form that were meant to stand-in for spaces outside in nature. The variable effectiveness of this method led me to what I consider to be the most successful recontextualizations of this form; a series of photographs which places the object or objects into Colorado landscapes. {Figure 3}



Figure 3, Patrick Price, *Portals*, 2018

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<sup>2</sup> Ana Fota, “Whats Wrong With This Diorama? You Can Read All About It” *New York Times*, Art and Design, March 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/arts/design/natural-history-museum-diorama.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>

The process of image making adds other dimensions of complexity both in execution and the stories the work can tell.

In November of 2018 I packed up the sculptures, a sled, camera equipment, and supplies I would need for car camping in the high country in late fall. When I arrived in the San Luis valley it was pitch black and bitterly cold. I parked at the UFO watchtower campground just outside the tiny town of Hooper. As the name suggests, the campground boasts a large metal platform straddling atop a small geodesic structure that serves as the watchtower's office and giftshop. Because of the time and season, there were no other campers. It was eerily still and quiet as I ascended the platform to survey the landscape in the moonless night. The San Luis Valley is vast, and at over eight thousand square miles, covers more area than the state of Connecticut. With no light pollution, the innumerable stars magnified the immensity of the sky in the valley, dwarfing everything, including the distant Sangre de Cristo sierra. I became acutely aware of every tiny sound; the metallic ring of each footstep, the rustling of my jacket as I turned my head. A nameless sense of moving through time in an ineffably timeless place swelled within me. I held onto this indescribable sensation and would hope to find it again in the morning.

A deep blue, the skies were unblemished by a single cloud as I arrived at the parking lot that allowed closest access to the dunes. The dunes are deceptively enormous. There were few other visitors this morning, but spying hikers climbing the dunes revealed the true heights and distances within the dune field, as the figures were tiny specs in the landscape. I loaded four concrete castings and one resin casting of my portal sculptures into a snow sled I had attached a loop of rope to for the purpose of pulling them to the locations I intended to photograph.

Unencumbered, it takes about a half hour to get to the base of the dunes, and about two hours to the top of the nearest large dune. This dune, aptly named High Dune, is about 655 feet high (the tallest dunes are around 755 feet high) and could easily swallow all the great pyramids of Giza. Because I was dragging around 110 pounds through loose sand it would take me about an hour to get about 2/3rds of the way to the base for my first series of shots. It would take me another two hours to get to the top of the first real dune, about halfway to High Dune.

As the temperatures rose from below freezing at sunrise to the high forties, the wind began to pick up and would gust periodically throughout the day. Trudging through the sand, breathing laboriously in the high valley, and feeling my leg muscles burn with the effort, I would find myself moving between being extremely present in the physicality of the work, and in my own mind, imagining the processes that created this landscape and the deep time involved with them.

Sand dunes, particularly ones of great size, represent the passage of extremely long periods of time. Associated with the sands in an hourglass, and with ancient civilizations that have been literally buried by advancing desert sand, dunes act as a reminder that time endlessly advances, and will eventually touch and devour everything that human hands have created.

This trip resulted in a series of images. With these images I was hoping to capture a balance between the moment and the timeless, the concrete and the abstract. I was also thinking about the human activity of making monuments, how they operate within cultural frameworks, and the meaning or purposes they communicate, potentially across great periods

of time. Furthermore, I wanted to provoke questions about the photographic image, especially as it relates to the idea of it as an objective record of reality.

In figure 3, the stony material suggests a survivability that makes it unclear if this is a recent addition to the landscape or a rediscovery of an older object. The objects become monuments, but specific identification is elusive. They are seductive, mysterious, inviting a search for clues, purpose, meaning. Monuments are associated with power hierarchies, the marking of time, and history. Others have spiritual significance or celestial meanings. If these objects are monuments, what function do they serve?

Figure 4 shows how framing and material can radically change the interpretation and



*Figure 4, Patrick Price, Portal, 2018*

meaning of the work. The solitary object in the landscape no longer evokes the monumental. Instead, it appears strangely alien, divorced from the natural space it inhabits. The translucent

material glows, capturing sunlight emerging from far side of the dune. It seems conspicuously set in place. Reading the surrounding environment, it becomes clear that it cannot have been there long, and belies its own transience, suggesting an unseen hand shaping the scene.

Taken together as a series, the images reveal the photographs as carefully crafted artifacts. In preparing the objects on location, and in the framing of the shots, something happens in the creation of a still photographic image that creates something entirely different than mere documentation. The limits of the frame selectively filter the reality of a place and the subject of the photograph.

The photographer Patrick Nagatani creates photographs by building elaborate miniature sets and by staging them in a way that connects them to other sites and landscapes, inventing fictional histories of mysterious lost cultures. {Figure 5}



*Figure 5, Patrick Nagatani, Bentley, Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England, 1987/1999*

He says of his *Excavations* series,

“This project expresses my interest in testing the realities that can exist within the realm of photography and physical documentation. I am interested in how the photograph is also recognized less as a window on the “real’ and far more as a malleable picture space – constructed and contrived for the purpose of examining representation rather than reality. I am interested in the potential of photography to tell a story.”<sup>3</sup>

As an artist working in photography , Nagatani understood the problems with the way people understand photo images, and their potential for exploitation and propaganda.

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<sup>3</sup>Patrick Nagatani, “Excavations” *patricknagatani.com*, Nagatani-Ryoichi Excavations TAB, Statement, <https://www.patricknagatani.com/>

## CHAPTER TWO: SENTINEL

In response to the experience of making this series of images, I would return to and reassess the way the sculptural objects I make exist and communicate in place. I became interested in how to create the kinds of experiences I had while making the portals images that could not be transmitted through an image. I would be drawn to creating more objects that could be installed in different locations and further exploring the relationship between scale and monument. The sculpture Sentinel shows some of these different considerations while also attempting to integrate other concepts {Figures 6,7}. I was also thinking about the many

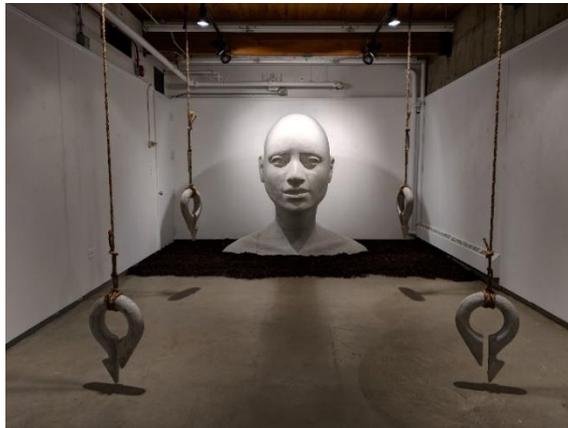


Figure 6, Patrick Price, *Installation*, Mini Gallery CSU, 2019



Figure 7, Patrick Price, *Sentinel*, Cache la Poudre river, 2019

dimensions of individual and social identity and how they are entangled with history, culture, and language.

In Spanish, the word for story and history are the same - historia. In English, the unspoken distinction between the two is that history is a collection of objective facts about the past, and that a story is narrative usually with a protagonist who we, as the invisible spectator, root for, and is just as likely to be fictional as to be true. The book "*Guns, Germs, and Steel*," by Jared Diamond reveals what we think of as history is actually a story as well.<sup>4</sup> Like most stories, it is narrated to champion the protagonist. It is the product of the society that created it, with the purpose of justifying political and social actions and reinforcing cultural identity constructs.

History is not a singular record of objective facts – it is a living subjective story about relationships revolving around events. This story depends upon the perspective of the participants involved. If we are searching for the truth in a history, we must treat it like an investigation. Like a detective in a solving a case, we must be aware when we are too closely tied to the subject, lest we succumb to biases. For this reason, we must assume that most histories, especially those that are autobiographical, have been tainted by bias, and as such must be, to a degree, flawed. Flawed or not, there is human need for histories, especially origin stories.

Origin stories act as an anchor for our individual and communal identities. They provide a basis for the value systems we adopt and, much like an origin locates us on a map, an origin story locates us in time. What becomes problematic about these histories, however, is that because they are tied to our identity constructs, we have a very hard time dealing with the

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<sup>4</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel : the Fates of Human Societies* (New York :Norton, 2005.)

inaccuracies when they are discovered. Cognitive biases inhibit rational judgement, and rather than modifying the story to fit the facts, often, the facts are discarded to preserve and protect the identity construct. Personally, I'm fascinated by the stories we create about ourselves, especially the origin stories, true or not.

The *Sentinel* sculpture and installations continue to examine the relationships between object and environment, this time through a monumental human head. These sculptures play upon our desire to tell (hi)stories by removing and adding signifiers. With this intentional ambiguity can the viewer still identify or connect with the figure, or does this create a barrier, turning the being into an object or symbol? In the case of my installation, adding identifiers even if somewhat ambiguous, immediately transforms the work and constrains interpretation.

{Figure 8}



Figure 8, Patrick Price, *Untitled installation*, Mini Gallery CSU, 2019

For many viewers, this identifier, the fabric head covering, made a connection with gender, and culture, now interpreting the figure as female and potentially associate with a faith tradition. This response was variable in its effect, as each person's specific interpretation was based upon the precedents acquired from life experiences and exposure to different cultural

traditions. The imposing scale of the work, I believe also fostered the potential for viewing this as spiritual in some way, associating the large scale with a greater purpose in its creation. Reflecting on this and responding to spending time with this sculptural object in its different manifestations led to new ideas and inspired the direction my next project would take.

### CHAPTER THREE: FRAGMENT

Fragment is a sculpture about identity and the conflict between the internal and external ideas of self. {Figure 9} Like the self, the form and meaning of this work changed



Figure 6, Patrick Price, **Fragment**, Glass Box Gallery CSU, 2020

dramatically in the process of making. This sculpture takes the form of a partial human face, a kind of mask. The exterior hard and impenetrable. The interior is soft, colorful, and invites haptic interaction. The exterior represents the image of the self that is presented to the world around us. The interior of this mask represents the way individuals see themselves. {Figure 10}



Figure 10, Patrick Price, **Fragment**, Glass Box Gallery CSU, 2020

Fragments of used clothing adorn the interior complicated layers. Throughout its construction, the surface, material, intention, and interpretation connected to this work was in a nearly constant state of flux. I found myself conflicted about what it was I wanted from the work. I was wrestling with a lot of ideas. I have often heard the axiom that “art is the product of its age.” In my third year of grad school I was processing Stiegler’s critique of post-industrial culture (Stiegler calls it the Hyperindustrial epoch)<sup>5</sup>, when the world was plunged into crisis by the coronavirus pandemic. Already beleaguered by the political polarization spawned by new culture wars, this corona virus threat, the resulting economic crisis, and violence rooted in this country’s systemic racism seemed to challenge whether we ever held a coherent cultural identity. As an artist I felt a responsibility to respond, but how that emerged in *Fragment* is uncertain. Most simply, it is about trying to make sense of being alive in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery* (Cambridge :Polity Press, 2014)

## CHAPTER FOUR: INSPIRATION FOR THE VEIL OF ISIS

*The Veil of Isis* is a metaphor used in various times and contexts throughout history. *Isis* is an Egyptian goddess, the personification of nature. The veil represents nature as something secretive or hidden. In the fifth century BCE the Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote *On nature*. Only parts and phrases of this work have survived and are collectively known as the *fragments*. One *Fragment* has been translated as “Nature loves to Hide.” Though this translation has been debated endlessly,<sup>6</sup> most scholars agree that this phrase points to the idea that aspects of nature or reality remain hidden and unknowable. This concept was personified as Artemis, the Greek analog to the Egyptian Isis. {Figure 11} Artemis was depicted as a woman who was veiled



Figure 11, Auguste Puttemans, *Isis, Goddess of Life*, 1922

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<sup>6</sup>Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: an Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 7.

to indicate that Nature's true form was hidden or secret. At the base of Auguste Puttemans' sculpture "Isis, Goddess of life," The text reads "Je suis ce qui a été, ce qui est et ce qui sera, et nul mortel n'a encore levé, le voile qui me couvre" - "I am what has been, what is, and what will be, and no mortal has yet lifted the veil that covers me"

Historian Pierre Hadot states, "With the rise of science and the improvement of scientific instruments, people of the 17th and 18th centuries considered that the human mind could penetrate the secrets of nature and therefore raise the veil of Isis."<sup>7</sup> Barrias' sculpture, *Nature Unveiling Herself to Science*, {Figure 12}, reflects this new sensibility, that human

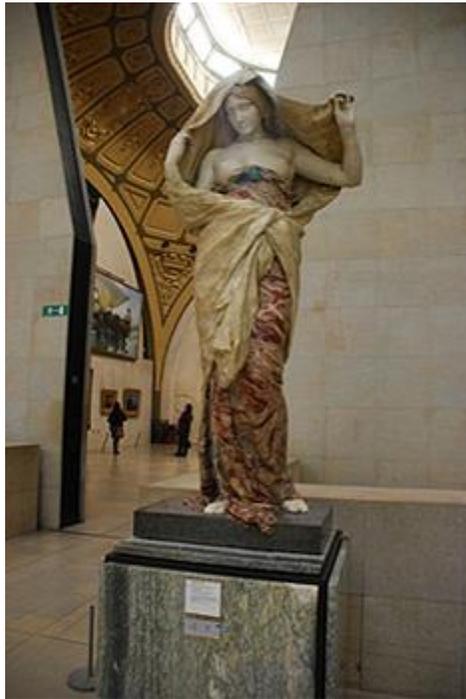


Figure 12 Barrias, *Nature Unveiling Herself before Science*, 1899.

investigation through the sciences could finally reveal the true nature of reality.

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis : an Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* (Cambridge, Mass. :Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 238.

The scientific method offered a framework to investigate the truth of the world in a way that relied on facts and testable, experimental theories. As this body of knowledge grew it seemed to be revealing that nature, and reality, was subject to a number of physical laws that appeared to apply universally. The more we could understand and define these properties, the more we could know about ourselves and everything around us. This led to a mechanistic view of the universe. As human beings entered the industrial age, the universe itself became a machine.

The predictive power of this outlook seemed to be reach new terrible heights in the atomic age. The powerful language of mathematics employed through physics allowed us to break reality into its most fundamental building blocks. Einstein's revolutionary contributions incorporated time and space itself into this new model and through his Nobel Prize-winning discovery of the law describing the photo-electric effect, helped to usher in an entirely new branch of theoretical physics: Quantum Mechanics. Ironically, discoveries in this new theoretical quantum physics seemed to break with some of the core tenets at the foundations of the special relativity that Einstein only recently laid in place. Try as he might, Einstein was never able to reconcile these apparent paradoxes. It would later be experimentally verified that properties of reality described by Einstein's special relativity are in fact violated in experiments that describe the behaviors of electrons. It appears that Nature not only loves to hide, but this property of being hidden may in fact be a fundamental aspect of all reality. The startling ramifications of these experiments bring us back to some of the most ancient

philosophical ideas posited by Heraclites and Plato- that the universe is not a static lifeless machine – it is alive in its infinite potential and in a constant state of becoming.<sup>8</sup>

Quantum Physics demands a re-assessment of the object -subject relationship. Erwin Schrödinger wrote,

“By this [principle of objectivation] I mean what is also frequently called the “hypothesis of the real world” around us. I maintain that it amounts to a certain simplification, which we adopt in order to master the infinitely intricate problem of nature. Without being aware of it and without being rigorously systematic about it, we exclude the Subject of Cognizance from the domain of nature that we endeavor to understand. We step with our own person back into the part of an onlooker who does not belong to the world, by which this very procedure becomes an objective world.”<sup>9</sup>

What Schrödinger suggest with this statement is that the view of the universe as objectively real (local realism) is an abstract tool human beings use to understand and navigate through life in the world. While this “principle of objectivation” may be useful in day to day life, it limits our understanding of reality.

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<sup>8</sup>Shimon Malin, *Nature Loves to Hide : Quantum Physics and Reality, a Western Perspective*. (New York :Oxford University, 2001), 26-86.

<sup>9</sup>Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life? with Mind and Matter and Autobiographical Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE VEIL OF ISIS

The Veil of Isis is many things at once; a multi-valent metaphor. The Veil appears to be fabric, draped across and partially defining the face and neck of a woman as it presses against them by the force of a breeze. {Figure 13} This seven-foot-tall object appears to hover, hanging



Figure 13, Patrick Price, *The Veil of Isis*, 2021

vertically a foot above the floor. Spotlights create dark shadows and bright reflections on the undulating white façade. As one approaches and moves around the veil, it becomes apparent the figure described by the contours on the front surface does not exist. The entirety of the sculpture is a single membrane, one-quarter inch thick. It is not cloth or fabric, It is not moving

or responding to the wind, and it is revealing no-one. In reality, this object is made of layers of urethane resin and fiberglass. The process of making this object is one of coming-into-being.

This object is a metaphor for being in the world; apprehending the things around me and finding meaning in that experience. It uses the veil as a symbol for the barrier between the human mind and the true nature of reality. *Barrias' Nature Unveiling Herself Before Science* {Figure 12} suggests that science can provide an enlightened understanding by distilling the essence of the world to a fundamental state, explaining all natural phenomenon as permutations of a primordial state of being. This understanding would also give human beings the power to look back at the origins of the universe with certainty, and to predict the future.

My work suggests is that there are limits to what one can know about reality. It suggests there is no solid being, no Isis, behind the veil. "Reality" is only the Veil itself. This veil represents the boundary between the abstract mental models the human mind creates and the real world of experience. It is a convergence of the mind and matter and at that interstitial boundary is experience. This experience cannot be separated from the experienter; it is this *relationship* that creates reality.

Looking at this metaphor with quantum physics in mind, the veil represents the Collapse of the waveform, where the state of a particle moves from a non-local, atemporal state of probability to an actual physical state of being through an act of consciousness. This movement between states suggests that, while human beings can only seem to experience the world in the physical or "collapsed" state, the non-local, state of probability (of uncertainty, of everywhere/when and nowhere) *is no less real*. It suggest that Isis, or the underlying

nature of reality that gives form to experience, *is* in fact real, but humans can never see her, except as through what is intimated by experience.

In this way the sculpture is also a metaphor for identity. The veil represents the boundary between this true self and the world we encounter and engage with. Are there things about the self that an individual cannot change, or is a human being defined only by their actions? Within the self, where does the mind exist?

Finally, this sculpture is a metaphor for my artistic practice, and any creative act. In moving from a concept, existing only as a possibility, to a fully realized sculptural object, the veil defines the boundary between an idea and being in the world. Each viewer brings their own perspective and personal world view to the experience. I cannot be sure that my intentions will be understood; uncertainty is a natural state of existence.

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