

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: VOICES TO BE HEARD
Zachariah Chyanne Benson, Masters of Fine Arts, 2017

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My work serves a purpose.

I have a desire to build things, as most of my pieces show, to lift people up, to redeem people and to redeem materials. My work captures the aspects of life that I feel need to be highlighted, whether those be hardships, turmoils, conflicts, boldness or civility. Pieces have explored the Syrian refugee crisis, the US/Iraq war, persecution of religious groups, US elections, and faith-based ideas such as Holy Communion and the Ten Commandments. I want my work to inject emotion and possibly even change in my viewer. I have toiled over these aspects of life and society that are concerning, meaningful, or just overwhelming and I want the viewer to have the opportunity to grapple with these ideas as well.

VOICES TO BE HEARD

by

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BACKGROUND

Modern life is overwhelming; with being an empath, it's particularly challenging to navigate through difficult issues. Through my studio, I allow myself to focus on aspects of life that I feel need attention: good and evil, joy and heartbreak, encouragement and hate. My studio is a place I navigate certain happenings, news stories, personal beliefs, and anthropological perspectives and allow myself to concentrate on the ones that grip my attention.

What makes me identify with the stories that my work explores? It is the human element. I am a feeler, full of empathy for others. Yes, I struggle with only empathizing with stories or ideas that I relate to in some way, but in the end, I want my art to make me aware, to make me empathetic to all stories, to all people, to all happenings around me. I want to care for all humanity, not just specific causes or new stories. My art allows me the opportunity to grapple with such ambitions on a personal level. At a talk at Goucher College, Ann Hamilton, a visual artist internationally recognized for the sensory surrounds of her large-scale multi-media installations, stated, "My work starts by just being in the world".¹ I follow a similar philosophy. My ideas come to me through my being in the world and walking through life with other human beings. I can understand, connect, and therefore, make about others simply based on my humanity. The process of making art is how I think.

¹ "Ann Hamilton : Recent Work." Ann Hamilton : Recent Work. Goucher College, Kraushaar Auditorium, Baltimore. 30 Mar. 2017. Speech.

My wife and I recently visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. for the first time. One of the things that stood out to me and that can speak to every piece in my studio is this quote by Martin Niemöller.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

As an artist, I want to be the one that speaks, because in the end, I want my art to declare that I stood for *something* and stood up for *someone*.

The issues that I speak to in my work are critical to our world, our society, and me personally. Ai Wei Wei, a contemporary Chinese conceptual artist working with ideas such as the Syrian refugee crisis and government surveillance, states, “An artwork unable to make people feel uncomfortable or to feel different is not one worth creating. This is the difference between the artist and the fool.”² I, too, want my work to create a dialogue about subjects that are sometimes taboo or unpopular. Like Wei Wei, I do not just fight for approved causes or ideas—some are controversial, hot topic issues. How then do I ask, or sometimes even force viewers to grapple with these issues or situations; viewers who might be apathetic or disagree with what I am

² Ai, Weiwei, and Lee Ambrozy. *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT, 2011. 9. Print.

bringing to their attention? As Ann Hamilton would argue, “Your job is not to make the piece but to make it open so people can come into it.”³ With that said, there are several ways in which I make the work so the piece feels confrontable and accessible.



Figure 1- Ai Wei Wei, *Straight*, 2008-12 rebar

First, I collaborate with individuals and established organizations that promote a similar sense of empathy, who are doing work in a similar vein as me. Recently, I was invited to the Library of Congress to speak about my piece *Unavailing Regulation*. China-Aid, an international non-profit Christian human rights organization committed to promoting religious freedom and rule of law in China, asked me to come speak about the social issue my piece represents. Through the creation of the piece I was able to speak to members of congress and delegates about the issues I find important

³ Ann Hamilton : Recent Work." Ann Hamilton : Recent Work. Goucher College, Kraushaar Auditorium, Baltimore. 30 Mar. 2017. Speech.

to address. My work has allowed me to have a greater voice in the world, and that is where I see my work potentially heading; allowing me to engage with larger audiences who themselves can have an impact on the situations that my work speaks to.



Figure 2- Zac Benson, Talk at Library of Congress, January 31, 2017

Secondly, I use craftsmanship, repetition, and using unique, mundane materials that instinctually capture interest. I don't mean to trick the viewer, but rather gain their trust and interest by showing my sincerity of craft, scale in repetition, and value in reclaiming material that has not historically been affiliated with the traditions of sculpture. Material such as metal chair legs, fluorescent light diffusers, glass vials,

cork boards, and used communion cups has found its way into my work. By using these unassuming materials, the viewer's interest is captured and I then allow the piece to speak softly to harder issues that we all have to face. When these aspects of my process come together, my work speaks to these delicate issues so calmly and intimately because I have come to the issues sincerely and humbly, not using bold statements or materials. Therefore, my hope is that the viewer will come to the concept with the same sincerity and emotion that I have. In the end, change will happen, even in the simplest of ways, such as taking a second glance at a cross that is degrading in a glass vial, gazing at weathered ladders colliding with delicate beads representing individuals who died for their cause, or pulling a chain that allows one to stand in faith, hope, or love.

MATERIAL

One of the unique and key aspects of my studio is my choice of materials. I seek out materials that have a unique, intrinsic history, which serve as a conduit for my voice. My studio becomes a resting place for materials that I have found—mainly reclaimed, manufactured materials. I am drawn to materials that have the ability to complement a story that I am trying to spell out to the viewer.

This process of gathering unique materials has been vital in each of my pieces. Finding and collecting materials is often a serendipitous discovery. As I go through my daily life, I am always searching for materials. Whether it is fluorescent light diffusers being disposed of due to new lighting in an educational building, glass vials from the Department of Plant Science and Landscape Architecture at the University of Maryland, or 100-year-old planks from a Red Oak in New York City that was being hauled away, each work starts with a reclaimed material. I never know what I will find, and while I may not initially know what story they will eventually tell, the history of the material becomes the starting point in developing a social narrative in the piece. From there I spend a great deal of time with the material and allow it to speak to me while in the studio space. In a sense, it becomes a living and breathing process as the material is re-contextualized. While the found material no longer functions in its initial purpose, it captures a conceptual significance to convey a broader expression on social issues.



Figure 3- Gathering materials to be used in *Torn Between One Way and Another* (2016) and *Opportunity Awaits* (2014), University of Maryland

RECENT IDEAS

My pieces serve as vessels, which I use to delve into what I truly believe, to take the hard issues in life and traverse them the best way I can. I navigate using art. I'm not trying to convince the viewer that I have the right answers or that they should believe what I believe, I am just trying to become the best individual I can by sorting it out in my studio through my art. There are many times in which I have changed mindsets solely based on the research and making of my pieces.

A perfect example of this is *Wages of War*, a piece that responds to the engagement of America in the Iraq War. On Oct. 21, 2011, President Barack Obama announced that the last combat soldier would leave Iraq by the end of that year, drawing the eight-year war to a close. "Our troops will definitely be home for the holidays," Mr. Obama said during a press conference at the White House. Less than three years later, he told a national television audience that he would send 475 military advisers back to Iraq to help in the battle against the Islamic State. By April 2016, more than 5,000 American troops were in Iraq. This is when I personally started to become aware of the wages of war. Before this, I was apathetic to war—disengaged. I started to understand the weight of decisions that were being made around me and I wanted to speak to them. I wanted to call not only the people making these decisions, but also myself, to a higher standard. I began to research the men and women of the United States military that lost their lives during this war. I remember vividly clicking on each of their names and seeing their pictures, mostly in uniform, many of which remain engraved in my memory. The final piece consists of 4,497 images of

the men and women who died while serving in the Iraq War from 2003-2011 and 535
Congressmen and women that were sitting and voted to enter this war.



Above: Figure 4- Zac Benson, *Wages of War*, 2015, 6' x 15', Digital prints

Left: Figure 5- Zac Benson, *Wages of War* (detail), 2015, 6' x 15', Digital prints

Another example of how I navigate the intricacies of life in my studio is the piece *Wrestling with My Roots*. On July 9, 2015, South Carolina's governor signed a law that called for the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the State House grounds and had it sent to a museum. Being from Tennessee, I have seen and thought about this flag for much of my life. While this flag was initially meant to proclaim Southern heritage and pride, it had been used as a symbol of hate and racism. The controversy surrounding this flag has been apparent to me for years, and once again, I took to my studio to explore my thoughts. The material I used for the final piece, metal fencing, allowed me to navigate what I believed and what I was feeling as metal fencing is often used to divide or keep someone out. So, in the end, I could place the concept of my conflicted feelings about the battle flag on the material, allowing them to stand together in collaboration. How I decided to display the piece is the most important. I rolled it up, to make it feel intimate, small, and like it's hiding in a corner. Like it's saying "don't look at me, please don't see me, I'm ashamed."



Figure 6- Zac Benson, *Wrestling With My Roots*, 2015, 5' x 1' x 1', Metal fencing, acrylic paint

VOICES TO BE HEARD

As for the pieces in my thesis show, *Voices to Be Heard*, they are all very different yet still very cohesive. They deal with contemporary happenings, both in a personal and autobiographical way as well as on a more global scale. Nonetheless, I allow my work to speak to situations that surround me or that I feel connected to on some level. One way I connect with issues is through my personal beliefs, mainly my faith, and that is where the cohesion exists within these three pieces. My Judeo Christian faith helps me to connect with stories from other believers, people groups, and societies. I follow 1 Corinthians 10:24 “No one should seek their own good, but the good of others”⁴ and 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a which states, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”⁵

⁴ "1 Corinthians 10:24." *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2015. N. pag. Print.

⁵ "1 Corinthians 13:4-8a." *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2015. N. pag. Print.

THEIR CAUSE IS MY CAUSE

Between 2003 and 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has brutally murdered over 1,100 Christians. In my research of ISIS, I came across an article titled ‘Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You’ produced in the Dabiq, an online publication that the Islamic State produced. It states,

“The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam. Even if you were to pay jizyah (a per capita yearly tax historically levied by Islamic states on certain non-Muslim subjects—dhimmis—permanently residing in Muslim lands under Islamic law) and live under the authority of Islam in humiliation, we would continue to hate you. No doubt, we would stop fighting you then as we would stop fighting any disbelievers who enter into a covenant with us, but we would not stop hating you.”⁶

Their Cause Is My Cause acknowledges my sincere response to these brutal killings of innocent people and this hatred and controversy between groups. The piece consists of seven spire-like ladder structures, resembling both spires of ancient European Catholic cathedrals and steeples atop Protestant churches. The ladders were made in-part by wood from a 100-year-old Red Oak tree from New York City.

⁶ "Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You." Editorial. *Dabiq, Issue 15*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2017. <<http://clarionproject.org/factsheets-files/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf>>.

In the midst of each of the spires are highly polished, charred, wooden vessels. Each of these vessels are carrying delicate gold beads (which were sourced to me by the Institute for Research in Electronics and Applied Physics at the University of Maryland), symbolizing the passage of the 1100 martyrs described above from the harshness of this life into the grandeur of the next. As for the title, it stems from one of the hundreds of occurrences during these times. On Feb. 15, 2015, ISIS released a video entitled, ‘ , which shows 21 Coptic Christians being beheaded one by one on a sandy beach. Ryan Hammill, a writer for the website Sojourners, states,

“It is perhaps a bit misleading to call these martyrs ‘21 Coptic Christians.’ All of them were migrant workers abducted while they were in Sirte, Libya, but only 20 were Egyptian Copts. One, whose name is given as ‘Matthew Ayairga’ or ‘Matthew Ayariga’ was either from Chad or from Ghana. According to one source, he was not a Christian. The terrorist questioned whether he would reject Jesus as God. Seeing his fellow prisoners slain with Jesus’ name on their lips, he replied, ‘Their God is my God.’ And he died for it.”⁷

⁷ Hammill, Ryan. "Martyrs in Orange: One Year Later Coptic Orthodox Church Observes Feast Day of 21 Christians." *Sojourners*. N.p., 07 Mar. 2016. Web. 11 Apr. 2017. <<https://sojo.net/articles/martyrs-orange-one-year-later-coptic-orthodox-church-observes-feast-day>>.



Figure 7- Still from the video, ‘A Message Signed With Blood to the Nation of the Cross’, February 15, 2015

A few months into my research, the United States began to have discussions about what was happening between ISIS and other groups. A report by the Knights of Columbus was submitted to the State Department in 2016 that documented these atrocities. The Knights of Columbus state in their Executive Summary that, “ISIS is committing genocide — the ‘crime of crimes’ — against Christians and other religious groups in Syria, Iraq and Libya. It is time for the United States to join the rest of the world by naming it and by taking action against it as required by law.”⁸

On March 8, 2016, the United States House of Representatives unanimously

⁸ *Genocide against Christians in the Middle East*. Rep. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Genocide Report*. Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians, 9 Mar. 2016. Web. 12 Aug. 2016.
<http://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/reports/Genocide-report.pdf>.

approved (383-0) a resolution that declared that the Islamic State was committing genocide against Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East. That Thursday, March 10, 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry declared, "My purpose here today is to assert, in my judgment, [ISIS] is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control including Yazidis, Christians and Shiite Muslims."⁹ Kerry went on to say, "The fact is Daesh (the Arabic acronym for the group) kills Christians because they are Christians, Yazidis because they're Yazidis, Shiite because they are Shiite."¹⁰



Figure 8- St Mary's Cathedral (Church of England), Edinburgh Castle, Scotland

⁹ Westcott, Lucy. "John Kerry Says ISIS Is Committing Genocide against Religious Minorities." *Newsweek*. N.p., 29 May 2016. Web. 11 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.newsweek.com/isis-genocide-kerry-yazidis-christians-shia-437944>>.

¹⁰ Westcott, *Newsweek*



Figure 9- Zac Benson, *Their Cause Is My Cause*, 2017, varying dimensions, Red Oak, Pine, gold beads, patina



Figure 10- Zac Benson, *Their Cause Is My Cause* (detail), 2017, varying dimensions, Red Oak, Pine, gold beads, patina

UNAVAILING REGULATION

In 2013, the Chinese government implemented a three-year campaign called “Three revise and one demolition” that was claimed to be aimed at hastening urbanization and “building a more beautiful Zhejiang.” Amid this campaign, over 2,000 crosses have been removed from atop religions buildings and several churches have been razed. Some observers suspect the campaign has the backing of the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and could be a pilot project before a nationwide crackdown.

China Aid, a non-profit organization whose goal is to exposes abuses in order to promote religious freedom and rule of law in China, reported that on April 14, 2016, a government contracted company was dispatched to raze Beitou Church in Zhumadian, Henan province. In an attempt to stop the demolition, the pastor of the church, Li Jiangong, and his wife, Ding Cuimei, stepped in front of the bulldozers. “Bury them alive for me,” a member of the demolition team said. “I will be responsible for their lives.” What ensued is something that one would think only happened during war time. The crew attempted to bury both alive and successfully buried Ding Cuimei alive and killed her.¹¹

¹¹ Nong, Qiao, Carolyn Song, and Brynne Lawrence. "Church Leader's Wife Dead after Buried Alive during Church Demolition." *China Aid*. N.p., 18 Apr. 2016. Web. 14 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.chinaaid.org/2016/04/church-leaders-wife-dead-after-buried.html>>.



Figure 11- Image of Ding Cuimei after being buried alive, Photo: China Aid

Unavailing Regulation speaks specifically to this campaign and consists of 2,000 handmade ceramic crosses that are placed in glass vials filled with filtered water. These vials are organized precisely so that from afar they look identical, symbolizing the nature of a communist country, though, upon further investigation, each vial is quite unique in that it contains a different number of crosses and has specific church

names engraved behind them. Over time, these individual crosses decompose yet the substance of the cross still remains, symbolically referencing the unavailing nature of this kind of regulation. Behind each vial, on the acrylic glass, are engraved the names of the churches that have been affected. Most of these churches are unknown due to the withholding of information in China, so those churches are marked with an asterisk.

These are the stories that I want to bring to notice in my work, ones that effect individuals, and therefore drive me to an empathic response. Though *Unavailing Regulation* is not based solely on Ding Cuimei's death, each of the over 400 vials carry at least one story of a group of individuals wanting to practice their religion in peace but cannot due to a dominant government. I am driven to create work about their situation, to somehow confront the wrongdoing while sharing my compassion and empathy.



Figure 12- Zac Benson, *Unavailing Regulation*, 2016, 22" x 120" x 3", Glass vials, acrylic glass, ink, clay, filtered water

THE DECISION IS YOURS

On February 28, 2017 my father called me and I will never forget how he sounded, different than any other time he has talked to me in the previous twenty-nine years. Like any great father in a tumultuous time, he was trying to keep it together all the while not being able to. All he could say was “You need to start praying, Zac, Sissy (Mary Elizabeth, my older sister) was rushed to the hospital.” At 35 weeks pregnant, she was taken to the emergency room due to having severe shortness of breath and they took her straight to the ICU and found that she had a mass the size of a grapefruit in her chest. At 6:39am that morning, my father texted the whole family, “Just took her down for her biopsy and to put the drain tube in. Had a fairly rough night. Cried when she left. Difficult journey ahead. But this is our first step. God is good. God is great. We're building a bridge day by day sometimes hour by hour to get her across.” What I did not know at that moment is that we were actually building a bridge second by second and trying to help her walk over. The evil we were up against, or as my father would say, the name of the heinous, was Primary Mediastinal B-Cell Lymphoma.

As an artist I make work because that is how I think, process, and sometimes, find hope. *The Decision Is Yours* speaks to all three. During this time, when my sister has been in the most fragile state a human can be in, I was helpless—faith, hope, and love was the only thing I could cling to. Faith in that I could not heal her but that she would be miraculously healed. Hope in that the cancer would die, literally, die. And lastly, but not least, as 1 Corinthians 13:13 states, “And now these three remain: faith,

hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”¹² Love is the connection of hearts and souls, the bond between family members, friends, and even strangers. While all three sustain us and nourish us, love is the strongest because it can not only overwhelm us but also give us strength at the same time.

The interactive nature of the piece is paramount. Allowing the viewer the opportunity to be able to stand under, and pull on the light of faith, the light of hope, and the light of love brings the attention to themselves, not my experience. I am allowing the viewer to decide to love, hope, or have faith at that very moment. They can easily stand under each one but not participate in the act of pulling the chain to turn on the light, and therefore not see faith, hope or love. This experience with my sister has taught me that faith, hope, and love are all decisions, and I wanted to present those decisions to the viewer—to allow them the opportunity to decide whether they were going to turn on the light and have faith, have hope, or have love. In the end, the decision is theirs, and it is so with this piece as well.

¹² "1 Corinthians 13:13." *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2015. N. pag. Print.



Figure 13- Zac Benson, *The Decision Is Yours*, 2017, 7' x 1' x 1' (3), Acrylic glass, wood, ceiling light diffuser panels, light



Figure 14- Zac Benson, *The Decision Is Yours*, 2017, 7' x 1' x 1' (3), Acrylic glass, wood, ceiling light diffuser panels, light

CONCLUSION

My work serves a purpose. As I walk through life, I toil over the complexities of modern day life that are concerning, meaningful, or just overwhelming. My studio is a place where I allow myself to focus on the difficult aspects of life and navigate them the best way I can. I want my art to make me aware, to make me empathetic to all stories, to all people, to all happenings around me. I want to care for all humanity, not just specific causes or new stories. My art allows me to the opportunity to grapple with such ambitions on a personal level. Yet through my work I also invite the viewer to contemplate these ideas as well with the hope to inject emotion and possibly even change in my viewer. As an artist, I want to be the one that speaks, and ultimately, I want my art to declare that I stood for *something* and stood up for *someone* and in some way allow their voices to be heard.

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