

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

ATTEND

Monroe Isenberg, Masters in Fine Arts 2019

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Is there a *space between* the animate and inanimate? Where is consciousness held? Exploration of these questions guides my practice and research. Art-making drives my effort to explore the intangible, mysterious place where matter and consciousness collide. My thesis work is an attempt to translate the inexplicable mystery encountered in this unseen *space between*— the moments that Martin Buber describes as the “*I and Thou*”— into elemental forms and installations. By investigating the invisible, I endeavor to make the unnoticed—visible and excavate the overwhelming connectedness that is present in this world. This Thesis is a reflection of the philosophy I have learned and artwork I have created to contemplate our connected reality.

Attend

by

Monroe J Isenberg

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## Chapter 1: The Encounter

The summit— to climb through the old growth forest laden with cool glacial-fed streams, ancient trees, and thousands of individual species that make up a vast network of perfect ecology. The trek totals fifteen miles and ascends 10,000 feet. My eighty pound pack lightens as I begin to notice vibrant greens, blues, and browns which tune my awareness to the energetic buzz of life so prevalent around me. Life's sounds merge into its movement coalescing with the subtle smell of earthy must and the sweetness of evergreens. Among this energy, the mind quiets. Listening becomes easier and my body feels a great and inexplicable truth. To enter this silent state of being is to see, hear, smell, taste, touch and feel with more clarity— to approach greater understanding and connection. As I near the summit— the ultimate view— my relationship to the world becomes fluid and more intuitively clear.

At the peak the sun strengthens, the temperature cools, the air thins, and the sounds of the forest fade into lower altitudes. This height offers a wider perspective, one that requires work, sweat, solitude, frustration, and pain, but also joy, laughter, and companionship. To encounter the world at this 12,000 foot altitude is breathtaking, sublime in the true sense of the word— terrifying but glorious. Much like the completion of a work of art, the summit is not the end, it is merely the middle. For it is necessary to continue back through the unknown wilderness to the beginning— the sense of self altered by the days-long journey in some wondrous and inexplicable way.

The summit is a crescendo among other crescendos, but also an important point of rest, contemplation, and reflection. Looking across the vast space between mountains, valleys disappear into thick veils of atmosphere made of smoke from the south and mist from the

rainforest, which fades into bluish-white nothingness. Over the horizon line, perception heightens and one becomes acutely aware of life in this giant spec of a world. Mountaintops jet out of the clouds below and become safer resting points for the eyes. The surrounding nature, laden with my human emotion, becomes more mysterious and beautiful. I merge with it, as it merges with me into *the space between*— the unique pull of unification that dissolves the separation between the self and the world.



Fig. 1 - Isenberg, Monroe. Photo of Olympic National Park. Summer 2018

This is the encounter. It lasts only moments and disappears as the movement of thought interferes. Felt through our imperfect sense perceptions, the encounter communicates some fuzzy truth and catalyzes a more reciprocal and creative way of being human in the world. This

connected state brings with it senses of belonging, knowledge, and natural lessons. The *animacy* of the world— environments and materials included— glimmers in being acknowledged.

The mountain at which I sit atop is alive, not a thing the way our English language would like us to think. The mountain grows, moves, changes, becomes, and eventually will crumble, shrink, and wear away all while providing great gifts: clean water and complex ecosystems that support interconnected webs of life, material and spiritual medicine, and many forms of relationships. This profound truth becomes apparent in *the space between*, glimpsed in a moment in time and during connection.

### **The Creative Moment, Self, and Things**

My work sparks from *the encounter*— a small but energy packed moment foundational to my creative practice. The encounter is the beginning, the end, and the beginning again— an unexpected cyclical meeting lasting only seconds between the self and an obscured truth contained in *Things*. The capitalized term, *Things*, relates to the being of everything outside the self and is used to give truth a name. As Jacques Maritain states, “We will invest in this empty word [Things] the feelings of a primitive [human] looking at the all-pervading force of Nature.” (Maritain 10) During the encounter between the self and *Things*, a unity emerges. This mysterious architecture cannot be accurately described because language is insufficient. Alternatively, this place can be felt through intuition—emotion imbued with human knowledge. For this reason, I work through feeling to translate and create contemplative architectural spaces for conscious connection.

## **Anacostia: The Bringer of Gifts**

My translations have resulted in installations, sculptures, and collaborative performances, three of which are detailed below with their related encounter. The artworks, each with attention to material and making, redefine space and play with perception by engaging scale, balance, repetition, sound, technology, water and light. The clean organization of form and the absence of visual noise activates a state of silence and stillness resulting in curious feelings that approach mystery. Each artwork, stemming from a different encounter and is detailed below, conjures up the sense of the present moment and activates connectivity.

### ***Stone and Remember Being Stone?***

Both *Stone* and *Remember Being Stone?* are explorations into the secret life of the Anacostia Parkway and made from 100 pound granite stones retrieved from the river. *Stone* is set in a dimly lit room on top of a white platform. A line of light can be seen exiting out of a thin slit I have cut into the stone, which energizes a previously unseen architectural space.

*Remember Being Stone?* is a funny and somewhat awkward-looking sculpture at first glance. It is a balanced, cantilevered form made from joining a fabricated steel tapered tube with Anacostia granite. Upon approaching the end of the tube, which sits at eye-level, one can hear the song, “Cool Water” by Marty Robbins, which references colonial mentality, transcendentalism, and consumption of natural resources. Paired together the form and song foster conversations that relate to our unexpected connection to nature.

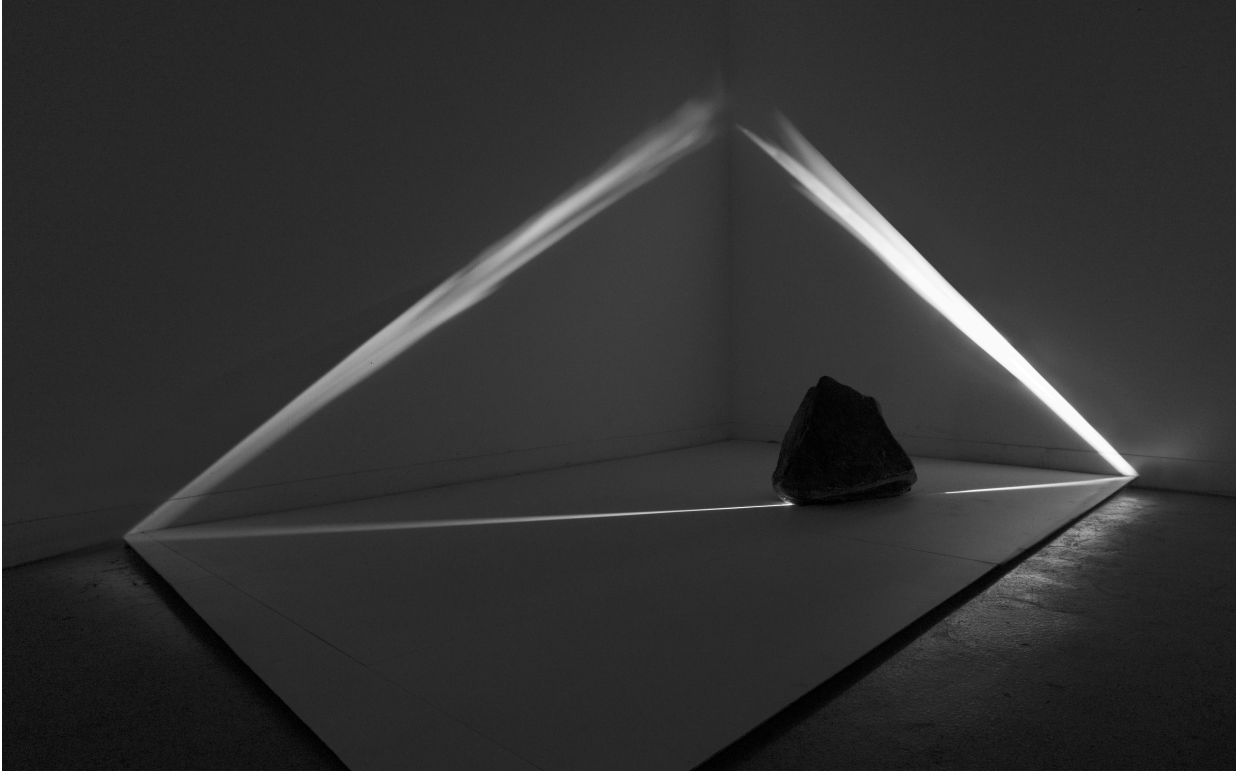


Fig. 2 - Isenberg, Monroe. An exploration into the animacy of material. Also collected from the Anacostia River, this 120 lbs stone, emits a line of light that interacts with the surrounding architecture and activates a previously undefined space.



Fig. 3- Isenberg, Monroe. Using sound, stone, and steel, Remember Being Stone? is a playful investigation into the animacy of a stone collected from the Anacostia River.

### ***Related Encounter***

The daily car commute— filled with mundane rushed experience— crammed with radio *blah-* and the rumble of car engines totals forty minutes. Here, stillness is hard to come by. There is nothing to do but think and swell my ego with nothing real. The biking commute is different. Powered by muscle and open to the will of the winds, this commute fills my soul. Shielded from busy, arterial streets, the path meanders through a green parkway situated along the Anacostia river.

The river has changed, surrounded by urban invention, it is polluted with plastic, runoff, and other human-made detritus. This change reflects its history. Once inhabited by generous Nachatank Native Americans, the Anacostia River was known for the abundant wild game, mild climate, healthy forests, and its busy fishing and trading posts. The Nachatank understood that the Anacostia was the source of their sustenance and the bringer of these great gifts. (Burr 169) The river brought species together, sustaining an interwoven environmental and economic ecosystem that produced abundance and balance. With colonization in the 1650s, the destruction of this balance and beauty came with it.

Yet— the presence of life and giving of gifts persists. Anacostia joy and spirit remain hidden but glistening. As I bike through the parkway and over the bridges feeling the *klank klank* of the old, wooden slats bearing my weight underneath, I feel the secret life in Anacostia. One must simply pause, listen, and look to see the abundance of life and history that surrounds the river: people exercising, families out for a walk along the path, a fox trotting through the underbrush tracking its prey, the *shhhh* of leaves overhead, and the sound of rushing water over large rocks set in the river bed. To be stone nestled in Anacostia, slowly uncovered and

reawakened by the water's current, is to witness Anacostia's birth, life, and becoming. Rocks have a much longer existence in time than us humans. I wonder how this feels?

## **Habitus**

*Habitus* is a video of a performative sculpture that activates with movement and creates gentle sounds reminiscent of rain. The visual effects produced by the sculpture's movement allude to prairie grass blowing in the wind, but is visually reminiscent of a chestnut seed, or sea anemone. The object embodies the gentle spirit of protection and beauty often found in nature.



Fig. 4 - Isenberg, Mornoe. Still image from the video *Habitus*— A collaborative project featuring Shawn Stone, a professional acrobat and MFA candidate in contemplative movement and dance at the University of Maryland.

*Related Encounter*

Prairie grass waving in the wind. There is nothing like it. To see each individual stem unite and form real ripples in the solid landscape sparks awe. The invisible, but very real forces acting on single stems to create this choreographed movement teach the power of collective action and its accompanied oneness. Being part of a larger system, an individual among many other individuals, and uniting under a chaotic and unpredictable wind reminds me of an animate being. After all, what is the body if not a collection of moving individual cells that unite to form the vast networks that become a receptacle for consciousness itself? Is the network of grass conscious during this unified movement in the wind?

## Chapter 2: Creating from the Language of Animacy

Out of the investigations in *Stone, Remember Being Stone?*, and *Habitus* emerged in me an interest in the *language of animacy*, detailed in Robin Wall Kimmerer's writings— *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

“To name and describe you must first see, and science polishes the gift of seeing... But beneath the richness of its vocabulary and its descriptive power. Something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world. Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native languages of these shores.” (Kimmerer 49)

Above, Kimmerer refers to a *language of animacy*— specifically Potawatomi. In this language and many other Native American languages, many of our English nouns are treated as verbs, and there is no word for it. Instead, *Things* seen as objects in western culture are referred to as subjects and acknowledged as living. (Kimmerer 55) Rocks, water, place, instruments and songs, —stories even— are just a few things understood as animate. For example, a bay is not simply *a bay*— instead, the language is structured as— *to be a bay*. (54) The simple addition of two words changes the meaning of the bay in a profound way. *A bay* is an inanimate object, a thing with no past or future story. *To be a bay* gives history to the water living in the bay at that particular time. *To be a bay* implies the water at one point was not a bay in the past and will not be a bay in the future. The language acknowledges the water's life of becoming. The water in the bay once existed as rain, spring, or ocean. *To be a bay* is to be a moment in a cycle. The water meanders across this earth, meeting new lives everyday bringing with *it* life-bringing spirit.

To understand objects as subjects drastically alters how one places themselves in the world. In acknowledging the animate nature, consciousness or ‘personhood’ of another *Thing*,

humans can find connection to previously ignored realities. In speaking this language, the human-centric hierarchy begins to disintegrate, opening up the possibility of a connected web of *animacy*.

Where can humans place themselves in this vast web? Is it simply to survive and reproduce as evolutionary biology states? Perhaps, but this answer gives life a simplified material purpose, and it lacks the *something* Kimmerer eloquently describes. I am drawn to the notion that our place is to create in return for what has been created, because it implies a responsibility of reciprocity with Earth and its inhabitants.

We live on a planet of all types of creators— trees produce oxygen for us to breath and build their trunks from carbon they pull from the air, bowerbirds make and curate their unique nests from detritus, ants build colonies, bees make honey. These are just a fraction of a fraction of nonhuman creative acts. Creation is a form of alchemy and perhaps a form of divination; the balance of life and its symbioses depends on each species' ability to make and create. Creative action grounds us to truth, fills the soul and spirit, and connects us to the becoming of Earth. The very existence of life depends on the interaction between what has been made, what is being made now, and what will be made in the future. It is for this reason that creating something (anything: including ideas) is important.

## Chapter 3: Transfixed

I once stood completely transfixed to a small horizontal lavender blue sculpture at the National Gallery of Art made by Anne Truitt— funny how a painted block of wood can bring me to the brink of tears. Contemplating on this observation, I realize that the work is not a painted block of wood. How could an object bring such feeling into the depths of my soul? This false cartesian perception dissipates and I see that the work is more of a vessel through which I can feel Truitt's consciousness.

### Minimalism, Mind, and Feeling

Truitt's artwork gifts a feeling to the viewer. Her monoliths' painted, layered surface lift through each other and react with light to form a type of visual and spiritual levitation. When properly lit the sculptures radiate emotion, each different according to their color. These works



Fig. 5 - From The Baltimore Museum of Art's *Anne Truitt: Intersections*. Obtained from <http://www.annetruitt.org/exhibitions/anne-truitt-intersections/installation> Accessed March 3, 2019

feel timeless, existing in their own reality, flowing into the viewer as the viewer flows into the work.

Truitt gives herself to natural process, allowing reality's fluid nature to guide her creative action. In doing so, she approaches questions of ontology, while crossing conscious thresholds and rejecting life imbued with self-defined positions set in a self-defined world. Having complete faith in the outcomes of process, Truitt's acts of thinking through making connects her mind to the becoming of past, present, and future. (Truitt 37)

### **Phenomena and Beauty as Knowing**

Since encountering Truitt's sculptures, I have grappled more with questions that concern consciousness, becoming, ontology, and phenomenology. More specifically, what can perception of phenomena tell us about the truth or being of *Things* and their relationships to consciousness? How is it that perception can be both a clear and fuzzy lens into the metaphysical connection of the world? How can a practice in art polish the lens to see more clearly?

Robert Irwin approaches these questions by redefining the art object as a phenomenological vessel. Originally a painter and later an installation artist, Irwin's early dot and disc paintings activate an unfamiliar, 2-dimensional visual phenomenon that sucks the viewer's perception into the fuzzy surface. The artwork strips the viewer of their ability to categorize the work into recognizable materials, parts, and ideas. In this unfamiliar state, language becomes insufficient. The sudden confusion caused by Irwin's work leads to a momentary slip in perception and unveils the mystery inherent in our world— a world of subjects, where connectivity becomes clearer.



Fig. 6 - Robert Irwin, "Untitled" (1969), acrylic paint on shaped acrylic, 53 1/4 in. diam., installation view, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (artwork © 2016 Robert Irwin / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York, photo by Cathy Carver) obtained from <https://hyperallergic.com/320293/how-robert-irwin-breaks-the-rules-of-art/> accessed March 6 2019

## The Three Truths

Irwin opens avenues that stimulate connection between the viewer and the work. Traveling across these avenues are three principals that I have come to understand intuitively and that Irwin explains explicitly in *Being and Circumstance*. (Irwin 20)

**Quantities are no more real than qualities**

**Intellect is no more true than feelings**

**Truth is no greater an aspiration than beauty**

Within these simple statements lie radically different understandings of the world than what the status quo might offer. As Irwin states, "In Western thought, the search for the quantitative in *everything* has come to affect every facet of our understanding. As a consequence, we seldom trust our 'feeling' in matters of

‘importance,’ and we pass over the wonders of our seeing for one practicality or another.” (20) More so now than ever, we live in a data-driven society— one that likes to think it is ruled by logic and by highly accurate computation. Having time to contemplate is now a privilege and so too is escaping from the data that we inevitably produce and consume.

The data explosion and its subsequent collection has greatly affected our understanding of the importance of intuition, our ability to perceive reality and gain knowledge through feeling. In feeling the quality of something, phenomenological information unseen in quantification, is noticed and understood more creatively because feelings are not bound by logic. A perceiver will come upon different ideas and understandings of the world by focusing on qualitative aspects of things rather than quantitative aspects. These understandings are intuited and can appear gradually or in one big flash. The power of this type of inquiry is evident in aha! moments, such as Einstein’s discovery of the Theory of Relativity. Ultimately, it is necessary to have time and space to contemplate both quantitative and qualitative elements of reality for both a more logical and creative understanding of the world. Contrary to contemporary belief, *logical or quantitative perception is no better than qualitative or intuitive problem solving.* (20)

Take, for instance, learning how to ride a bike. To successfully describe to the learner and transfer knowledge in a logical or algorithmic way of riding a bike is impossible. Describing the physics behind the activity would confuse the rider. In reality, the learner must feel the balance of the bicycle and learn intuitively how to compensate for imbalances caused by speed, acceleration, centripetal force, and gravity. The rider does not think— when turning I must force the bicycle into the curve in the opposite direction of the imbalance, in which the radius is proportional to the square of the bicycles velocity of the angle of imbalance—let alone need to know that these factors even exist. (24) While the math is important in our power to describe the action of riding a bike, it does not tell us how to do it. The rider learns intuitively through trial and error, falling a few times in the process. They must perform and feel the action of bicycle riding in order to learn the truth of how to ride a bicycle. *In this respect the intellect is no more true than feeling or intuition.* (24)

There is no doubt about the beauty of riding a bicycle. And there is no doubt that there is beauty in the descriptive power of the mathematical formula that describes the factors in riding a bicycle. Both

approaches lead to truth and neither can replace one another. But how do these different ways of knowing approach the experience of beauty and the truth contained within the phenomenon of beauty?

What is evident from the example above is that the math describing the art of turning on a bicycle is separated from the act itself. While there is power in describing this act mathematically, with incredible detail, the algorithmic description does not include the feeling of joy that riding a bicycle gives or the real kinesthetic intuitive knowledge one needs to ride. The math, while able to describe truth, is unable to translate the feeling of beauty, which generally brings the most visceral joy. The intuitive approach however, while lacking in its descriptive detail, is able to attain both the truth of riding a bicycle and also the direct experience of the beautiful. In effect, it can be said that knowledge is contained in the direct individual experience of the beautiful (or phenomenological) but the reverse is not always true. In this way of understanding Irwin's third statement— *Truth is no greater an aspiration than beauty* — the idea of beauty as knowledge becomes more understandable. (20)

### **Stillness and Attention: The I and Thou**

How do Irwin's three statements apply to art-making— and more broadly— how can these notions be extrapolated to form greater connection to people, place, non-human animals, and things?

These statements apply directly in art making and can serve as a means for conducting ourselves with more imagination, empathy, reciprocity, and creativity. Irwin's understanding that within the perception of beauty comes truth, directly relates to Kimmerer's ideas regarding the *language of animacy*. Both of these paradigms dictate that those who attend—that is those who are equally attentive to *quality and quantities*—will discover more imaginative relationships, problem solve with more creativity and see the world as more interconnected. In acts of attention, stillness, or contemplation, a human's relation to the world shifts from experiential to relational— transitioning from a world of material objects to phenomena and subjects. This change in conscious understanding implicates, a more reciprocal way of being human in the world and reveals an ecological and spiritual connectivity that runs deep through our consciousness and materiality.

The interpretation of this mystical relationship is detailed greatly in Martin Buber's writings of *I and Thou*. (Buber 53)

The world is twofold for [humans] in accordance with [their] two fold attitude.

The attitude of [humans] is twofold in accordance with the two basic words [they] can speak.

The basic words are not single words but word pairs.

One basic word is the word pair I-You [Thou].

The other basic word is the word pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.

Thus the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It

At the core, Buber describes the *I and Thou* as a relational mode of existence and the *I and It* as an experiential mode of existence. Ingrained in these two words (relational and experiential) are two radically different ways of proceeding through the world. Relational is abstract, implying connectivity, unity, and universality. Experiential is physical, individual, and implies something to be taken, used, and objectified for self understanding. In the *I and Thou* mode of existence, the line between the self and *Things* dissolves. This momentary glimpse of unity soon gives way to the *I and It*, where the act of categorization occurs to better understand what is individually experienced.

A mystic's life is an oscillation between these two modes of existence and is a place from which my artwork begins and ends and begins again. The swinging between these modes of existence inspires my interest in elemental and minimal forms that produce sense-dependent phenomena. Creating in this way, I work to simultaneously engage in the experience of objective, physical material and the subjective relationship to nonmaterial phenomena.

## Chapter 4: The Simple Taper— Form and Phenomena and Phenomena in Form

It is necessary that the formal elements of my work be minimal so as to not distract from the produced phenomena. In effect, the form of the work is not questioned and the viewer becomes free to participate in the work as a whole. Instead of asking why the form is the way it is, becoming distracted by the objective nature of the sculpture, the viewer can more directly engage and *be* in the work's material, form, and space.

Common in my minimalist practice is the tapered line, which I draw directly from the natural growth of plants and midcentury modern furniture design. I use tapered forms because the form is beautiful and it evokes a sense of life, visual movement, and plays with weight. Below are two examples that involve the tapered line and its associated phenomenology— *Intersect and Lighthouse*— each stepping stones to my most recent MFA thesis work.

### **Intersect**

The sculptures from the *Intersect Series* reframe architecture and evokes Fred Sandbeck's notion of "pedestrian space"— an idea relating to how a participant's perception changes as a result of the performative role they play in viewing a nonobjective sculpture. (Zwirner & Wirth) Each *Intersect* sculpture carries with it unique objective aesthetic qualities, which depend on the lighting, installation, pieces of wood used, and construction. Activated by light, *Intersect* creates contemplative, warped, and impossible geometries, unveiling the art object's hidden impact in space and crossing pictorial and phenomenological boundaries. In the act of traversing these boundaries, the work prompts the viewer to recognize that our simplest perceptions are fluid.



Fig. 7- Isenberg, Mornoe. Each Intersect sculpture (18 total) takes on a strange yet familiar animal nature. The sculptures use light, shadow, and minimal tapered sculptural lines to activate undefined architectural space and

## Lighthouse

Continuing my investigation in light and form, I constructed *Lighthouse*, in which a massive, inverted steel obelisk hovers above a square of light in the center of a darkened gallery. Contained within the top of the sculpture is a pool of water above eye level. Underneath, a hidden electronic assembly subtly activates the surface of the water. The movement of the rippling water is projected onto the four surrounding gallery walls via lights embedded in the top corners of the sculpture. The work— a beacon for reflection—results in an immersive phenomenon reminiscent of an aurora borealis, surrounding the participant entirely. *Lighthouse*'s elemental form and associated phenomenon work together; the form becomes phenomenon and the phenomenon becomes the form.

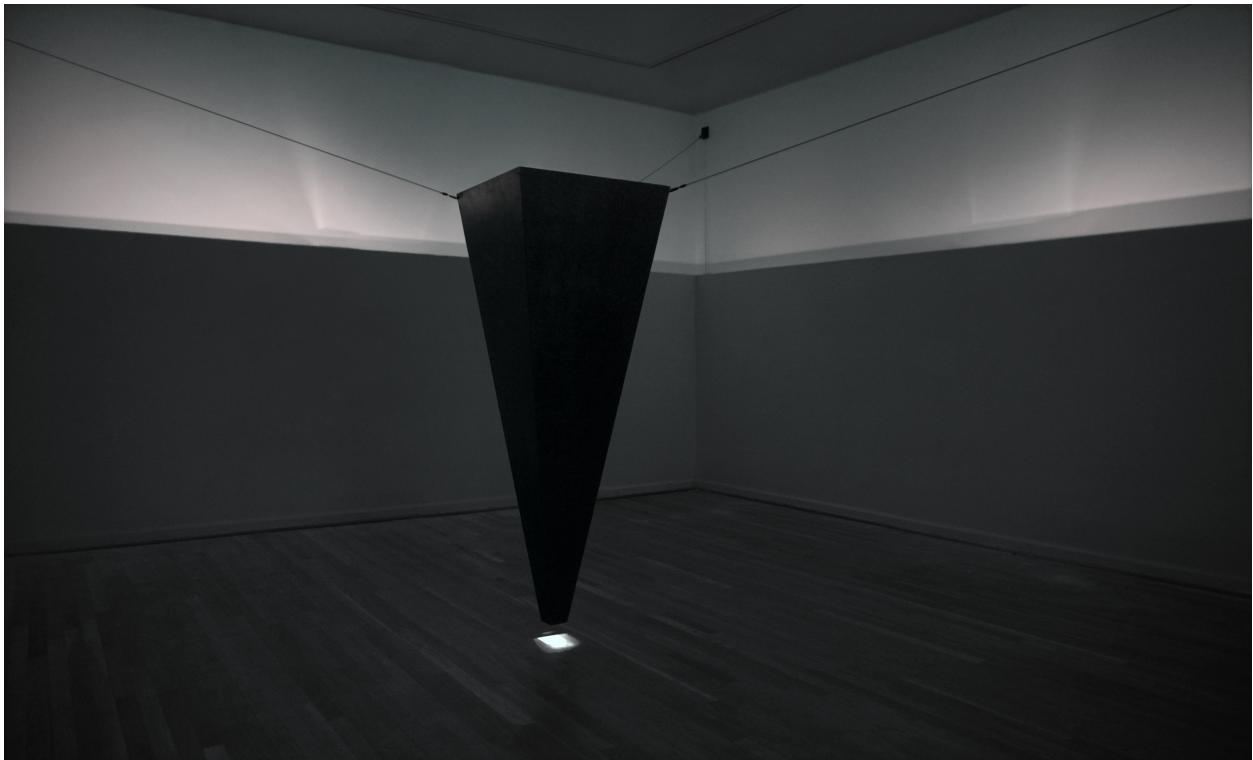


Fig. 8 - Isenberg, Monroe. Image of the installation of *Lighthouse* at the Hillyer Art Space. 2018

## Chapter 5: Mystically Mundane

Light, space, water, and elemental materials— such as earth, iron compounds, and wood aid in my effort to discover through art making. I understand these materials to have agency and view my work as a collaboration, where I am guided by the materials as much if not more so, than the materials are guided by me. Through experimentation with and listening to these seemingly mundane and overly abundant materials, their importance becomes clearer.

### **Light and Space**

I am drawn to light and space for multiple philosophical, scientific, spiritual, and intuitive reasons. Light and space (or energy and mass) are the most important phenomena in the universe. We owe our existence to a simple but profound truth— without light and space, consciousness, relationships, questions, ideas, feeling, and life could never be. It is no wonder early humans formed religions around the sun, the moon, and stars and in tribute built vast and elaborate architectural spaces to alter conscious thoughts and heighten understanding.

My direct experience with this altered consciousness pertains to a memory I have of my childhood. I remember the stillness in a darkened room in synagogue attending Friday night service— the start of the sabbath. An ancient tradition unfolding before my eyes. I watched the rabbi praying and waving her hands around the lit havdalah candle towards her— an effort to bring the light into her soul. In this silent moment, the light's mystery can be grasped— felt but never explained.

The power of light and space to alter our perception stems from the notion that they are the filters through which we see the world. We see only a fraction of light produced in the universe and our ability to perceive space is limited to human scale. We are not equipped to comprehend the vastness of space between the stars or the tight proximities natural to the quantum world.

Light not only has an effect on us, but we have an effect on light. This fact remains one of the great scientific mysteries in physics and philosophy. As discovered in the famous Double Slit Experiment, light behaves as a particle or a wave depending on whether or not it is “being observed.” It is as if light recognizes consciousness.

While the above ideas concerning light and space may not be explicitly present in every work I create, they are present in my subconscious, which guides my making. During creation, I pay equal attention to light and space, and their potential to create room for stillness, where form, phenomena, and perception can more easily dissolve into one another.

## **Water**

Water is special. It is often overlooked due to its abundance, but all life on this planet would die without it. Throughout human history, water like light and space, has taken on important scientific, spiritual, and philosophical roles. Scientifically, water is intriguing because it has a tremendous ability to absorb and be absorbed. Cellular life takes great advantage of this quality. Additionally, the amount of energy needed to alter the temperature of water is higher than almost every other known substance, which plays an important role in regulating earth's climate. Much of the heat energy produced by excess carbon in the atmosphere sinks into the oceans, which are helping to maintain equilibrium on our planet. (The American Geosciences Institute).

The spiritual and philosophical importance of water is clear as well. We are born from water, and submerged for nine months. Many traditions and ideas have been created through homage to water: Baptism or Mikveh, holy water and the principal of God as water in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The idea of water as sacred keys into a universal reverence ancient people had for water. Water was and always will be special. Yet, this notion seems to have been forgotten. Often polluted, clean water is falsely perceived as abundant and taken for granted. I use water in my work to pay tribute to its importance.

## **Elemental material**

The planet and everything on it is recycled *star stuff*: the material being of this universe, that which simply *is*.

Only Changing.

Material existence forms phenomena— a lens into universal being, history, and future.

## Chapter 6: The MFA Thesis Work

Coupled with the investigations present in the Intersect Series and Lighthouse, as well my explorations with light, space, water, elemental materials and form, I have created three new works for the 2019 MFA Thesis show: *Ante-chamber*, *M-EMET and Golevka*, and *The Space Between*. Each is detailed below and accompanied by their related poetic encounter.

### *M-emet and Golevka*



Fig. 9 - Isenberg, Monroe. Image of the installation of *M-emet and Golevka*. Pictured in the Art Gallery of The University of Maryland. 2019

The word *emet* is a Hebrew word that comprises of three Hebrew letters: Aleph, Mem, and Tav. In Jewish teaching, Aleph symbolizes the past, Mem symbolizes the present and is associated with pregnancy and water, and Tav symbolizes the future. Together— aleph, mem, and tav spell *emet* which means truth. (Milgram)

*M-emet and Golevka* is comprised of two sculptures. On the left sits a geometric, steel tapered wedge. Water from the Shenandoah Valley gently flows from the sculpture's widest edge to the narrowest point. The effect caused by the water squeezed into the point creates rushing, where the water's edges

flow faster than the center. The thin film of water produces a wave-like interference pattern that slowly drops down to the sculpture's point, cycling over and over again.

The fresh Shenandoah creek water is a subtle but important detail to the sculpture's material components. By using water from this ancient place, I am imbuing the sculpture with life-bringing Shenandoah essence. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the wedge will recycle the Shenandoah water, and the untreated steel in contact with the water will rust. The water will become impure and carry with it the rust it removes from the steel. The polluted water will be a direct result of my human interference, and key into how human creation directly affects the Earth's material resources. By the end of the exhibition, the water will no longer be able to support life.

To the right of the wedge is *Golevka*— a contemplating rock. This rock is actually a cast iron 3D scale model of a near-earth orbiting hunk of space *stuff*. Golevka's proximity to earth indicates that it may have been part of earth in the past or could become part of Earth in the future. Asteroids and other space debris were the beginnings of our existence. They brought water and other necessary elements to foster life on Earth. With the help of light from the sun, primordial life was able to use and take advantage of these astral materials. In placing these two forms together, I am approaching a deeper relationship between the history of life and Earth and the solar system.

Both the sculptures point inwards and activates a space between them. In placing the sculptures in this way, I have created a space for the viewer to participate in and become the third and completing component of the work.

### **Related Encounter**

Deep within Shenandoah National Forest at the bank of a stream, the truth can be felt, seen, smelled, and listened too. Entering into the *I and Thou*, I begin to see the brook as— *is*. It seems never ending. The bouncing light glitters off of the stream's surface. It never ceases, slowly eating away the rocky basin, which fades backwards towards the water's beginning. To imagine a droplet's journey— rain, melted snow, or a natural spring trickling down a slope becoming a stream, drawing veins, and replacing earth. Somehow, the water always finds its way home— to a river, lake, pond, puddle, or ocean

only to be evaporated and begin again. But our very birth was among the stars. Asteroids formed from exploding stars that carried precious frozen water and bombarded young earth billions of years ago. Molten earth off-gassed H<sub>2</sub>O and carbon among other compounds to form the atmosphere and oceans. This violent primordial past is hidden deep within our material existence.

*Ante-chamber*

Fig. 10 - Isenberg, Monroe. Image of *Ante-chamber*. Pictured in the Art Gallery of The University of Maryland. 2019

*Ante-chamber* emanates conflicting feelings: more elegant and organic than *Lighthouse*, but also heavy, large, and looming. The black patinated and deeply purple-iridescent bomb-like form hovers over a pile of my dog's ash. The form references a spiritual vessel and was inspired by an old and symmetrical stone I found in the Great Smokey Mountains that was polished by a river's erosive force. It is a work of remembrance for my beloved dog who left this world at the age of three and a tribute to the passing of my

oldest Jewish relative, who's funeral took place one day after the mass shooting of the L'Simcha congregation in Pittsburgh in October, 2018.

Since the work is a reaction to the death of my family members and extended Jewish congregation, the ideas and feelings in the work pertain to before and after death. It is for this reason that the work continues to perplex me as I am unable to understand the contradictory ontology of life and death. However, my questions around this contradiction are conveyed through the formal elements of the work, where the weight and light play an important role in how the sculpture guides disagreeing feeling. The work is sad and heavy, but there is a mysterious redemptive life to the sculpture that I fail to accurately describe.

I have again placed two forms together to create a space between. Each form points towards one another creating tension that responds to the conversation between the spirit-like bomb form, light, and grey ash.

### **Poetry and Prayer Related**

In Judaism, it is a mitzvah to balance a stone on the gravesites of the deceased. Flowers wilt and die, the love we have for the deceased does not. Jewish teaching recognizes the meaning and difference between these different materials and time scales. We place a stone on the grave to remember the eternal love we have for the dead, the beauty of their existence as a stone among stones, and to remind us of the weight they had in our life. Eventually, natural forces will erode the stone and make grains of sand. These are free to blow away like ash in the wind.

From a Mourners Kaddish prayer service—

*"It is from God that we come:*

*And it is to God that we return.*

*Our few years on earth are a prologue to the drama which continues beyond time.*

*For this our Sages taught:*

*Life is an ante-chamber to the palace of eternity."*

*The Space Between*



Fig. 11 - Isenberg, Monroe. Image of *The Space Between*. Pictured in the Art Gallery of The University of Maryland. 2019

Housed between two facades, *The Space Between* phenomenon recedes into the darkness. It is created by housing two opposite slightly curved forms together— the planes reacting and curving along one another creates a space that seemingly dissipates into nothingness. Viewed from straight on, the outer edge of the sculpture appears to inhabit the same visual plane as its center and makes the three-dimensional sculpture appear two-dimensional. In placing a concave and convex curve together, I have made visual a phenomenon that results from the negative space between two objects.

*The Space Between* is a physical interpretation of the *I and Thou*, where two objects dissolve into one another and form a non material relationship. They simultaneously act as individual forms and as a complete whole. The viewer is free to see both these modes of existence and may oscillate between seeing the formal, more sculptural elements and also the non-material, phenomenological aspects of the work. This understanding results from how one moves around the sculpture. From side on, only a large ordinary white wall can be seen. From a three-quarters viewpoint, and as the viewer moves closer to the middle, a

darkened slit can be seen permeating the center of the two walls. Only when viewed on center does the phenomenon take precedent over the objective elements in the sculpture. For this reason the viewer's relationship to the sculpture and its phenomenon are in constant flux and change depending on the angle the work is perceived.

### **Related Encounter**

White mist - so thick the horizon has disappeared - covers the Pacific Ocean. Man-made surface crafts fade into the white veil. The thick blanket of fog brings with it a heavy and silent haze. Tiny droplets of water floating in the air bring a loss of perspective, or maybe just a new one. Losing the sense of sight is jarring and throws vision into chaos. I look into the white abyss, deeper and deeper, until the horizon is just on the edge of my perception. It appears and disappears and appears again. Mystery unveils itself from the white space caught between two massive forms: what should be the ocean and what should be the sky. Yet the ocean and sky at this distance do not exist— only the faint line created from a gentle kiss between two abstract spaces. When does one become the other?

## Chapter 7: Reflection and Future Directions

In the beginning of my pre-MFA practice in sculpture, I was concerned with making, craft, balance, tension, and pushing material limits as a basis for form and content. Working in this way, I began to understand the importance of making, and how craft can affect an artwork's ability to speak for itself and stand apart from the artist. As I have progressed through my MFA, I have come to understand that making is a way of thinking, solving problems, and intuiting questions. My artwork simply results from creative action with intention (that is intuitive, accidental, subconscious, or conscious). The content in my work stems from an interaction between this iterative making process, poetic phenomenological experience of the world, and scientific and philosophical inquiry. More recently, through my research in art theory, philosophy, and contemplative practice, I have rediscovered Jewish mysticism. This was an important but unmentioned aspect that was integral in my Jewish upbringing. Investigations in Kabbalah and science have brought me to a more mysterious understanding of the world, where the infinite complexities of our universe are more visible and confusing, but their truth and being can be felt and glimpsed during unexpected short-lived poetic moments with the world's being.

Inspired by these glimpsed mysterious encounters, my work is an effort to create places for discovery and space for contemplation. I have worked through an iterative making process to illuminate the unseen and give recognition to the intricately connected 'mundane' *Things* that foster life: space, light, elemental material, and water. This praxis in gratitude begins an investigation into the real impact these materials and their associated forms have on our mind, body, and spirit. My future work will continue to counterpoint human centricity and dive deeper into the ontological and phenomenological aspects of basic elements and materials, the mystery that resides there, and the connections discovered between them and us.

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