

ALIGHT AND ARISE

By

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To my grandmother, Dorothea "Omi" Gallowitsch Schimik
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Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Chair: Nan Smith

Major: Art

The 20th Century was a period of extensive human mapping of both exterior and interior terrain. Science labored to record the observable cosmos: from the Earth's surface, depths and atmosphere down to the sub-atomic particles of quantum physics and broadly out to the farthest perceptible galaxies and stars. If we accept the basic principle of Integral Theory, which states that the universe is composed of holons, nested wholes each simultaneously a part of another whole; we can begin to conceive of our location. Where are we, relative to the largest known and the smallest known entities? What time is it for humanity, within the context of deep time?

Equally important to the cosmographical mapping of the objective external environment is the charting of human consciousness. Individual awareness grows through a series of stages, transcending and including the understanding from each preceding stage. Similarly, collective culture proceeds through developmental stages; technology and infrastructure facilitate flow and connection that accelerates the development, moving from foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and on to informational. Paired with the recognition of the process of evolution and the fact that

complexity is increasing through time, humanity now has the data to assimilate and generate a revised and revitalized metanarrative¹.

Alight and Arise, two large-scale ceramic sculptures, spatially display a representation of deep time through layered and accumulated material. From the Big Bang onward, form has settled out into space. The clay has been sculpted to suggest black, meteoric rock, glittering with precious materials. The sculptures appear as hybridized polyforms: part cloud, tooth, mountain, iceberg, muffin, stalagmite, and geologic sample. Holons are suggested through a scale relationship between minute glittering bits of rock-like slag functioning as mineral atomic earth, and small sterling silver stars imbedded in the landscape at the top of the form.

The dark clay surface sets up the ground to contrast with two different horizontal layers of metallic ghost imagery: one of human infrastructure and the other of sacred architecture. These recognizable images of human presence are located near the tops of the forms above the majority of layered material to suggest their recent development within the context of deep time. Humanity's efforts to transcend and arise with collective consciousness are illustrated by images of vertical building: utility towers and industrial infrastructure of the existential worldview appear next to a layer of globally diverse sacred architecture. As a sculptor, I want viewers to have a bodily experience of form that expresses a sense of descending and ascending from a central convergence point.

¹ Jean-François Lyotard's terminology; used in a critique of the enlightenment paradigm in his work *The Postmodern Condition*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Where are we relative to the largest known and the smallest known entities? What time is it for humanity within the context of deep time? *Alight and Arise* engages with the intersection of the deep historical time of our 13-billion-year-old universe and the contemporary predicament of humanity within that context. My sculptures spatially describe the dual forces of matter descending into space within a still-expanding universe and of life and humanity striving to evolve, ascend, and build ever upward within that space. The architectural imagery depicted on the sculptures serves as a metaphor for collective consciousness and its motion toward transcendence of the preceding level.

CHAPTER 2 DEEP TIME: FORM ALIGHTS

Integral Theory and Holons

Reality is composed neither of things nor processes, neither wholes nor parts, but whole/parts, or holons – all the way up, all the way down.

Ken Wilber, from *A Brief History of Everything*, (18)

Arthur Koestler generated the term *holon* in response to his recognition that wholes or parts do not exist in an absolute sense. Rather, any whole can be broken down into constituent parts, again and again, (cells comprised of molecules, atoms, quarks) and each understood whole also nested inside of an even larger whole (Earth, Solar System, Milky Way Galaxy, Local Super Cluster).

Currently an extraordinary amount of scientifically mapped information is available regarding the known universe at the quantum scale, the cosmic scale, and everything in between. The investigative process continues, yet the evidence and data are now so overwhelming that most scientists agree as to the age of the Earth, the age of the universe, and the fact that the universe is expanding.

Integral theorist Ken Wilber points out that holons *emerge*, favoring greater and greater complexity overall (“Brief” 21-22). Life on our own planet has emerged and evolved through time to become exquisitely sophisticated and interdependent. All higher life forms are completely reliant on the health and integrity of the lower holons. At the foundation, the existence of humanity relies upon the captured sunlight energy contained within plants. This celestial energy is consumed directly as plant food or as a source of the nutrients that sustain the animals in our diets. The plants’ health has a fundamental dependence on access to sustained sunlight energy in addition to the viability of the organisms and microorganisms that reconstitute the soil in which the

plants are grown. Further complicating the system, many plants require pollinators for fertilization in the form of insects, butterflies, bats and birds. Continued existence of plants then depends on the health and integrity of the habitat, expanding outward to include all the sustenance needs of the pollinators.

Though the trajectory moves toward greater complexity, the emergence of holons is neither constant nor stable. Dinosaurs had similar environmental requirements as humans, yet these forms dissolved and gave rise to other entities. The formal development and progression of all holons is not fixed; dinosaurs and other extinct animals have not reemerged on our planet. Likewise, humans may continue to upset the ecological balance of the Earth through climate change and habitat destruction, to the extent that life on the planet is reduced back down to more simple holons. These primary holons may again give rise, but to something else. Stars and planets are also born and then die. Stars, following the Great Radiance², have been in the process of forming and reforming, slowly creating more diverse materials over the 13-billion-year history of the universe. Despite the death and dissolution of many holons, the overall pattern of the cosmos is one of emergence of greater and greater complexity.

Cosmology: the Alchemy of Star Fusion

Stars begin with the combustion of hydrogen, the simplest element in the universe, atomic number one with one proton. Through nuclear fusion inside the star, heavier and more complex elements are generated, growing in atomic number and mass, finally maxing out at iron, atomic number 26. These substances are literally being born within the burning hearts of stars. Among these are key elements: the

²Barlow's terminology for the Big Bang; emphasis is on light rather than a bomb-like explosion.

carbon necessary for the formation of life, and the silicon needed for the formation of all silicate rocks and minerals of Earth's crust. Elements beyond iron are not created by the heat and power within the combusting star. Instead, these heavier and more massive elements are generated by the phenomenal power of the supernova explosion. When a crucial balance is upset within the fusing layers of elements in the star, this explosion causes the star to collapse in on its core. Massive stars are layered like an onion, burning hydrogen at the exterior, then carbon, oxygen, silicon: forging more complex elements deeper within each layer. At the end of the line is iron. When it ceases to fuse and combust, a shock wave generates a massive explosion with more intensity than of all energy expended by our sun during its entire lifetime (Tolstikhin 77). The death of the concentrated star-form is the birth of glowing stardust that contains elements with an even higher complexity of structure. Herein is the origin of copper, platinum, gold, and all other elements beyond iron. Each element in our bodies was born in the heart of a star or generated in the spectacular radiant explosion that occurred at the time of its death. Elements beyond iron, at number 26 on the periodic table (with 26 protons) are much less common in the universe.

Despite the vast scale and immense complexity of the universe, all of its substance and form settles out into just over one hundred chemical elements, mapped in the Periodic Table. Together, they form the current manifestation of our solar system and Earth; and create the foundation for life, consciousness and human culture.

Integral Theory: the Four Quadrant System

Maps are essential in order to grasp our spatial location within broader contexts. The Periodic Table of the Elements is a recent navigational tool, pieced together in the last two centuries, the data a continuance of the probing questions of alchemists. This

mapping system has been crucial to humanity's understanding of the physical universe at a scale beneath the tangible. Exterior mapping of the tiniest atoms to the most massive stars can only represent a partial reality. A principal aim of Integral Theory is to assimilate and find congruence between the interior and exterior of holons. Integral Theory creates an integrated map used to navigate the external and internal space of holons in an evolving and living universe. The Four Quadrant System is the beginning of a comprehensive map that strives to assimilate hard science with a "spectrum of consciousness" comprising less concrete data, from psychology to mysticism ("Integral Life" 10).

Ascension of Individual Human Consciousness and Collective Human Culture

Consciousness exists in a spectrum that is also holonic in structure. Wilber points out that each holon has both an exterior that is mappable by objective science, and an interior that is knowable through interpretation and contemplation ("Brief" 68 - 69). We can easily objectively measure the development of a human child: in inches, in quantity of food consumed, in tasks performed. The developing complexity of a child's subjective space, or interior consciousness, similarly transforms: but we must interpret these depths through engagement in inter-subjective space. An individual begins life with a narcissistic and egocentric capacity. In time, the individual's consciousness expands to include more and more within its identity. It moves from single self, to self and family, to self and tribe; then to awareness of self and region, self and nation. An increased awareness can possibly move onward to self and all of humanity, self and all living beings; ultimately even to non-dual awareness where there is no longer a divide between self-identity and the entire universe ("Brief" 129).

Consciousness tends to evolve through time to become more expansive at both the individual and collective levels. Anthropologists have observed the relationship among techno-economic base, infrastructure, and the corresponding worldview of the culture. Just as the simple chemistry of the early universe gave rise to more complex elements, our collective human consciousness is also growing, shifting dynamically and increasing in complexity.

CHAPTER 3 THE CONTEMPORARY EFFORT TO ARISE

Ancient Sunlight

We're all made out of sunlight, and everything we depend on is fueled by sunlight. For hundreds of thousands of years we lived off of current local sunlight. Then we discovered ancient sunlight, buried in the ground, and began consuming it . . .

Thom Hartmann, from *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*, (84)

Hartmann and others recognize that life on Earth arises thanks to the energy from our local star, the sun. Humanity has ignited a powerful wave of global growth with the mass combustion of fossil fuels in the form of coal, oil, and gas. Along with this has come unprecedented environmental destruction on the global scale. As humanity's technological capabilities and infrastructure advance outward, Earth's global biodiversity steeply declines. Extensive resource extraction results in a deterioration of environmental quality. To humans, the Earth's age appears infinite yet the resources available are acutely limited. Within the landscape, in nearly all places on the planet, there exists evidence that humanity has harnessed natural resources. Mines, logging, mountaintop removal, utility towers, processing plants, transportation infrastructure, and satellites reflect technological advancements and global environmental decline.

Resource Extraction for Wealth Generation

Contemporary culture is characterized by ideology that supports the creation of wealth through the expansion and development of virgin lands and the extraction of the Earth's natural resources. In his book *ReWealth*, author Storm Cunningham calls for a massive correction of both our language and cultural logic to reflect the finitude of the material wealth of the Earth. Non-regenerative *source* materials, such as metals, fossil fuels, fossil aquifers, and fossil soil need to be distinguished from *resources*, such as

renewable forests and sustainable fisheries. Cunningham states: “While capitalism, socialism, and communism differ significantly on how wealth is *distributed*, and on how labor is managed, they all agree on how wealth is *created*. Each is a variation on a single theme, permutations of a single model: dewealth.” “It’s a pioneering, sprawl-based model, based on there always being fresh green fields over the horizon” (21). As we round the bend toward a more expanded worldview, humanity must recognize that our source materials and habitats are not only limited but currently in decline. Not only are there no longer fresh green fields over the horizon, but the global water is dirtier today than yesterday, fisheries are producing less than the decade before, and the ice shields at the Earth’s poles are reduced a bit more this year than last.

Mining of Source Materials and the Landscape

Visually, mines offer a window into the deeper history of the earth. It is possible to observe, sleeping beneath the surface, the layers of ancient sunlight once captured by extinct plants, compressed and concentrated into the form of glittering, sparkling, black coal. In other areas, where the Earth exposes some of the oldest rock, there are shimmering purplish-black ores of banded iron formation. These ores were formed in the time before the emergence of plants, when cyanobacteria instead collected and concentrated iron. It is the most common metallic element of the universe. Incredibly heavy and dense, remarkably iron is born from fusion inside stars. Additionally, there are locations on the surface of Earth where metals more evolved and rare than iron are mined from ancient impact craters. Foreign bodies collided with the Earth, displacing the nickel and other heavy metals beneath the Earth’s crust. These metals are born from the brief but intense energy and radiance of a supernova explosion (Tolstikhin 77-78). To visit a mine is to potentially be dazzled by beauty and mystery, while

simultaneously being horrified by the destruction of a landscape that once could support an ecosystem.

CHAPTER 4 INSTALLATION AESTHETICS

Materials and Form Language

The installation consists of two large-scale floor sculptures; each perched precariously atop delicate legs. Both large sculptures use the level space to feature an illusory reflection of a changing landscape horizon when viewed in the round. The installation is strongly suggestive of maps and earth forms but, upon examination, fine and exquisite details are revealed (Figures 4-1 and 4-2).

The sculptures are constructed to resemble a range of natural, geologic, and celestial forms. Each appears as a hybridized polyform: part cloud, stalactite, tooth, mountain, iceberg, canyon, rock, map, spire, muffin, and geologic sample. Sculpting the forms by tearing and building up layer upon layer of clay holds a similarity to actual geologic processes and encourages the viewer to consider the contemporary landscape. The sculptures are constructed primarily from clay with slag and stone inclusions that reference deep geology and alchemy. The clay itself is a vitreous black stoneware, high in manganese and iron. This composition corresponds to the more common materials found throughout the universe and our own Earth. These are the elements and metals created in the general processes of star fusion.

Small bands of metallic luster appear on the legs of the sculptures. These lusters are made from actual copper, platinum, and gold and reference the rare highly valued metals generated in the heat and power of the supernova explosion. Humanity has shown a willingness to tolerate a great deal of environmental devastation in the pursuit of these and other *source* materials. Visually, the metallic bands are all located in areas of the legs that are weak points. The solid metallic areas in the legs set up a

relationship with the bands of ghost imagery of human infrastructure on the tops of the sculptures to signify that everything humanity builds comes from a finite supply of precious materials found within the Earth ([Figures 4-3 and 4-4](#)).

Coal slag, a byproduct of our energy production, is included in certain areas within the clay wall. When fired, it bears a resemblance to stars glittering in the night sky through a subtle palette of metallic colors. This is a result of a diverse representation of metallic elements (both basic and advanced) from the periodic table that have been concentrated from the original plants into the coal. Even though this palette is much darker than actual stars, the coal slag does resemble the size and hue variation of stars viewed with the naked eye. The effect of this is to allude to the holonic structure in all things within our universe: the large in the small and the small in the large ([Figure 4-5 and 4-6](#)).

The dark, purplish-black of the clay surface and matte, black-glazed areas set up the background coloration of the sculpture. This ground contrasts with metallic ghost imagery and objects which appear on its surface in bright and rainbow luster to convey a certain ominous enchantment. Precisely detailed ghost images of industrial structures, showing resource extraction and transport, reference human presence. The images are scaled down relative to the total sculpture to signify the relatively short time humans have existed in space. Furthermore, the impermanence of humanity is signified by the use of two-dimensional images on the highly tactile, three-dimensional forms. These recognizable images reflect the powerful mechanism of collective human activity on the landscape. The ghost imagery is luminous and reflects the current state of humanity in the convergence point between earth and sky ([Figure 4-7](#)).

Spatial Dynamics

The majority of the sculpture's mass hovers 4 feet above the ground or floor plane. Each of the two works is elevated on three legs to a maximum height of 65 inches. This height allows viewers to have a bodily and spatial experience with the work, relating to the objects as equals rather than implements. It also offers the viewer close visual contact with the layers of detailed ghost imagery near the top of each sculpture. The majority of each sculpture is heavily textured up to a height of 58 inches. That textured area represents the portion of landscape that exists below ground and the portion that existed prior to the emergence of humanity. A bodily impression of being swimming or floating next to the work is created by spatially locating the convergence point at heart height for the average viewer (Figure 4-4).

Use of Line

Line is a key component of the sculptural design. Each sculpture was constructed with undulating organic lines layered throughout the form. Cosmic and geologic processes generate forms that exhibit an underlying geometry and pattern. This patterning nearly always reflects the collection of surface and compositional variety. The surfaces of the sculptures in *Alight and Arise* allude to a multitude of geologic and cosmic processes. The straight lines on the works found only in the ghost imagery reflect the purely geometric human-made tower forms for electric utility infrastructure and oil extraction. Located above this rational/existential layer are concrete examples of sacred architecture found around the globe. These human-built sacred towers are also overwhelmingly constructed with straight lines. Though the secular and sacred tower images are miniscule details relative to the sculptures at large, they function as an inversion of the tapered and pointed legs beneath the mass of

each form. Descending and settling out into space is matter and form, over the vast expanse of the deep time scale. Meanwhile human consciousness, a relatively recent development, strives to build its tiny towers ever upwards ([Figures 4-8, 4-9, 4-10, 4-11](#)).



Figure 4-1: *Alight and Arise* - installation view of both sculptures.



Figure 4-2: *Alight and Arise* - installation view two.



A



B

Figure 4-3: Detail of Legs. A) Both sculptures. B) Sculpture #1.



Figure 4-4: *Alight and Arise* - sculpture #1.



A



B

Figure 4-5: *Align and Arise*. A) Detail of coal slag. B) Sculpture #1 - detail showing scale relationship between coal slag and sterling silver stars.



Figure 4-6: Sculpture #2 - detail showing coal slag, silver stars, luster layers.



Figure 4-7: Metallic luster imagery – detail of power lines.



Figure 4-8: Detail of layering on sculpture #1.



Figure 4-9: Detail of luster layering on sculpture #1.



Figure 4-10: Metallic luster imagery – detail of temples.



Figure 4-11: Landscape layering effect between both sculptures.

CHAPTER 5 INFLUENCES

Artists

Edward Burtynsky

Contemporary Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky depicts landscapes that result from large-scale human disruption of the Earth. In the late 1990's, I experienced several of his photographs of the large mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario. These images depict brilliant orange rivers of nickel tailings, flowing through otherwise darkened landscapes due to chemical contamination near the Inco superstack, one of the tallest chimneys in the world. (Inco Superstack, 2010) Burtynsky's photographs reflect actual unaltered landscapes that largely go unseen by the general public. Their power comes from a combination of stunningly beautiful composition paired with the unsettling knowledge of one's personal involvement in the human economic systems that results in such extraordinarily vast destruction and change.

Camille Rose Garcia

Camille Rose Garcia is a contemporary American painter who creates works in Pop-Surrealist style. I developed an appreciation for several canvases from *Tragic Kingdom*, a solo exhibition of Garcia's work at the San Jose Museum of Art in 2007. In these works, Garcia selected a palette that was primarily black with areas of bright color and metallics in order to generate jarring landscapes juxtaposing the glittering innocence of Disney's candy-coated world with the unfortunate reality of environmental destruction. Of particular interest was Garcia's pairing of glittering beauty and darkness, with an underlying environmental emphasis.

Rick Parsons

The works of Rick Parsons, a contemporary American sculptor, who often uses clay, steel, and salt, have also been influential. Parsons constructs material and spatial systems employing a personal alchemy. The porous clay is used to absorb salt water, which in turn corrodes the steel that it is placed in contact with. The chemical change and alteration of materials is utilized to create spatial and tactile narratives focusing on environmental contamination. Of particular interest to me was the relational alchemy and interdependence between the materials in Parson's work.

Thailand

The landscape and culture of Thailand were also strongly influential in the aesthetics and content of *Alight and Arise*. Thailand is filled with temples that are intricate, meticulously constructed and covered with gold; however they exist surrounded by air that is absolutely filthy, hanging heavy with particulate pollution. I spent several months in Thailand in 2003 and was fascinated by this contrast of glitter and filth. The environmental disparity of the ancient tiled and gilded temples surrounded by a thriving, messy, and vibrantly alive contemporary culture was striking.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

My sculptures consider the mystery of where we are and where we are going within the context of deep time. The viewers have an experience that is understood in a physical and tactile sense. The sculptures in *Alight and Arise* function both bodily and spatially, to provide those experiences. The forms are designed to allow for a sense of elevated weight that is not entirely at rest, and to also provide a sense of ambiguity regarding the material and its origins. This, coupled with the subtly glittering metallic imagery accessed through motion, creates a space for viewers to shift contemplation between the contemporary landscape and the vast expanse of geologic and deep time.

My installation poses three pertinent questions: Where does form originate? What is truly of value to humanity? And can we move forward without ascending and descending simultaneously? My sculptures are an act of mapping contemporary and primordial landforms to suggest a broader cosmology.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristin Schimik earned a BFA in sculpture from Northern Michigan University. She has served two years as an Americorps volunteer, conducting watershed restoration and community revitalization in Northern California. Schimik has been an Artist-in-Residence at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts and the Holter Museum of Art in Montana, and at Umdang Ceramics of Thailand. Her work was recently exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts at Florida State University and at the Jingdezhen Contemporary International Ceramics Exhibition in China. Schimik earned her MFA from the University of Florida in 2010. For more information please visit <http://www.kristinschimik.com>