

David Cateforis, essay for the exhibition “Dylan Mortimer: *Illuminate*,” Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas, October 25, 2013 – June 15, 2014. Originally published as a wall text in the gallery.

Images of the artworks and the installation follow the essay. Photographs by E.G. Schempf, courtesy Dylan Mortimer and Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

Dylan Mortimer: *Illuminate*

The title of Dylan Mortimer’s installation, *Illuminate*, may be understood as a direction to the visitor, who must interact with the artworks to bring them to life with light. The gallery walls bear three large, simply designed abstract compositions – one blue, one gold, one silver – in circular or partially circular formats, their surfaces studded with Christmas lights (and, in one case, frosted white globe bulbs). By approaching any of the three works closely, the visitor will trip a motion sensor that activates the lights. Steadily glowing at first, the Christmas lights will soon begin randomly switching off and on, creating a delightful blinking effect. The visitor may then back up and enjoy this captivating Las Vegas-style spectacle, or – the urge seems almost irresistible – turn around and ask a friend to take his or her photo against the visually enchanting backdrop he or she has activated. After sixty seconds, the lights will go dark again.

While Mortimer’s installation may be enjoyed simply for its solicitation of visitor interaction and the undeniable visual pleasure it provides, the artist also invites recognition of deeper meaning by identifying the three artworks as haloes. Throughout the history of art and in many major world religions, including those of pagan Greece and Rome as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, holy persons have been represented with haloes, sometimes surrounding the entire body – the effect that Mortimer creates through his large wall-mounted works that encircle the visitor with light.

Though Mortimer acknowledges the ubiquity of the halo in religious art globally, he connects his works specifically to Christianity through their titles – *Poor in Spirit*, *Those Who Mourn*, and *The Meek* – drawn from the first three Beatitudes (the eight declarations of blessedness made by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount): “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:3-5).

This invocation of Christianity comes as no surprise to those familiar with Mortimer’s background and previous work. The son of a minister in the United Church of Christ, Mortimer is himself an ordained pastor who for several years led the small nondenominational Rivercity Community Church in Kansas City, Missouri. He is also a committed and widely exhibited professional artist, with degrees from the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA, 2002) and the School of Visual Arts, New York (MFA, 2006). Mortimer has consistently used his art to explore his Christian beliefs, often in a humorous and/or deliberately

provocative fashion, seeking to prompt dialogue about a subject typically avoided or treated cynically in the mainstream contemporary art world.

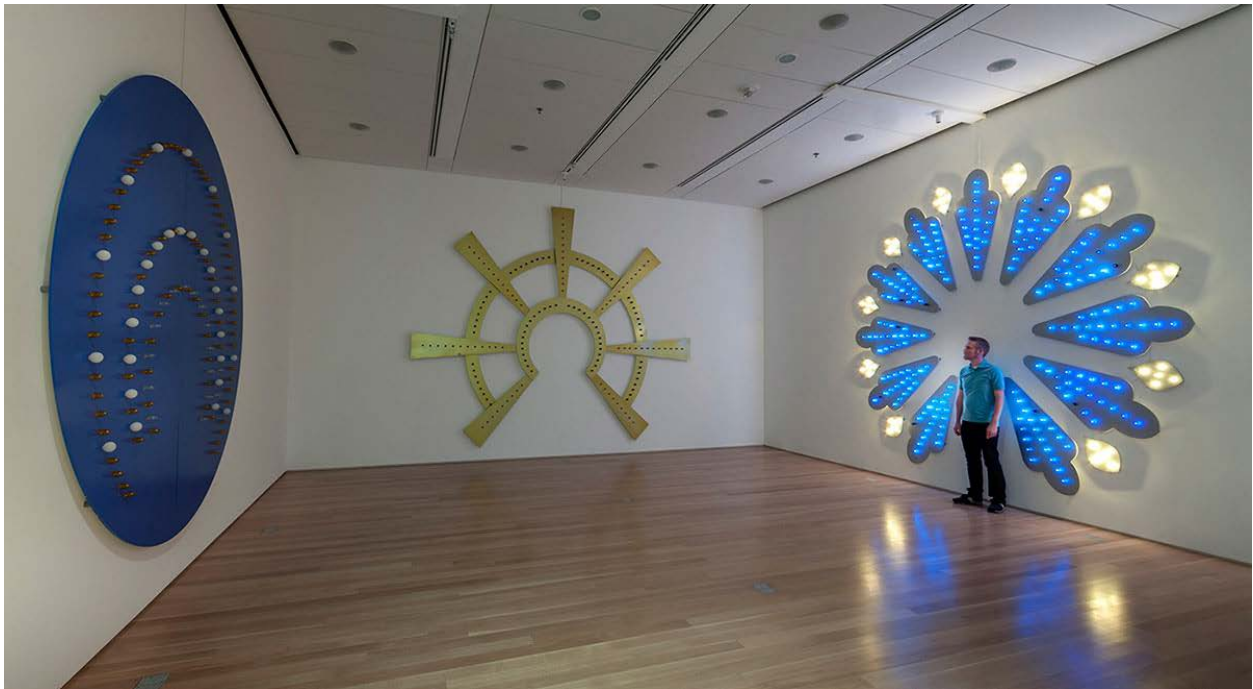
A recurrent feature of Mortimer's work has been his use of the visual and textual conventions of public signage, as exemplified in his well-known *Prayer Booths* (2003), which were temporarily installed in outdoor locations in several American cities, including Kansas City and New York. These modified pedestal phone booths, equipped with kneelers and appropriate signage (the word "Prayer" and a drawing of praying hands), invited actual use by passersby while sparking debates about the appropriateness of their public placement. Equally provocative was a more recent series of works, exhibited in 2008 under the title *Ble\$\$ed*, in which Mortimer translated Biblical statements of faith into the vulgar street language of hip hop (his favorite style of music), and presented these texts in the form of rhinestone-studded "bling" jewelry and large glitter-encrusted signs glowing with Christmas lights.

Like the signs of the *Ble\$\$ed* series, Mortimer's works in *Illuminate* are visually bold and flashy, yet they bear no text and so can be appreciated in purely aesthetic terms. Like the *Prayer Booths*, these new works invite interaction, but of a different sort: rather than kneeling to pray, the visitor is invited simply to stand and bask in the glow of color and light. The visitor inclined to understand this experience in religious terms might wonder whether or he or she actually deserves a halo, and whether it is seemly to display it in this way. For Mortimer, the answer is to be found in Jesus's words from the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. . . let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5: 14, 16) Without in any way preaching, Mortimer's installation invites us to contemplate this Christian message, and reflect on the possibility that even after the artworks go dim and we leave the gallery, we retain the potential – indeed, the power – to illuminate the world around us.

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Installation view, "Dylan Mortimer: *Illuminate.*" Left to right: *Poor in Spirit*, *The Meek*, and *Those Who Mourn*, all 2013.







Dylan Mortimer, *Poor in Spirit*, 2013, PVC, lights, motion sensor, 96 x 96 x 5 in.



Dylan Mortimer, *The Meek*, 2013, PVC, lights, motion sensor, 103 x 103 x 5 in.