

Textus

By

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Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

Textus, my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, is a body of work in diverse media. Within it, *Spiral*, a sculptural piece, reflects my background in metalsmithing and jewelry design. There are also seven digital prints/drawings and a digital animation, which depart from my metal work. In *Textus* I employ words in text as metaphor for our inability to grasp the complexities of existence. We use text as a response to our existential predicament; it is as limited as our biology. I believe we are biologically driven to search for knowledge, yet our biology sets the limits of exploration.

I am at war with words. I don't trust them. Compelled to use them, these are the words I choose. These are the texts I create.

In "Textus" I employ words in text as metaphor for our inability to grasp the complexities of our human existence. We use text as a response to our existential predicament; it is as limited as our biology. We are not and never will be omniscient.

I embrace two fundamental concepts:

First, being human is to endlessly experience two contradictions: we are biologically driven to search for knowledge...to seek answers to all the "unknowns." Yet this same biology, which drives this quest, simultaneously sets the limits of our exploration, and thus our knowledge.

Second, what we empirically perceive as chaotic or ordered, rational or irrational, are alternating layers of the same complex "reality." Like continuous and infinitely changing fractals, they spiral endlessly deeper into themselves, and they spiral forever. What appears chaotic at one level may be patterned and orderly at the next and the next.

Thus, in *Textus* all is in motion. The seven drawings move ever deeper into layers within themselves. The centrally placed spiraling form rotates. Within the animation, barely visible book lice scurry in slow motion. All reflect my belief that nothing is static. Everything in existence, within us and without, moves continually, changes constantly.

Even when something appears still, it moves through time. Nothing is fixed. There are no absolutes.



Textus Gallery Overview

Words/text of introduction

In the mid-90's I experienced a debilitating illness that continued almost ten years. This profound experience led me to re-examine common beliefs that I had long held. I came to question the reliability of the human brain as the interpreter of reality. My quest to answer questions led to the study of neurophysiology, neuroplasticity, psychology, and systems of religious belief.

Following are theories by others which support my thesis work:

The brain creates the mind. Andrew Newberg, M.D. is an American neuroscientist who studies the roles of neurotransmitters in religious belief and activity. He writes in *Why God Won't Go Away* that mind understands the world through what he terms “cognitive operators.” Among these are the causal operator and the existential operator.

According to Newberg, the causal operator allows the mind to understand reality in terms of cause and effect. He posits that the causal operator makes us curious and compulsively drives us whether in science, philosophy, or religion “to explain the mysteries of the universe.”¹ In addition, the mind’s existential operator allows us to accept as real the information the brain receives from our senses.²

In *The Evolution of God*, the evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright suggests that humans understand very little about themselves, their world, and beyond. He theorizes that the human mind wasn’t designed to understand “the universe writ large” but rather was designed to be a social machine.³

The American writer and lecturer on comparative mythology and religion, Joseph Campbell offers that our biological limits serve as a safeguard or barrier against a “mass psychological disturbance” which might shatter our view of ourselves and our place in

¹ Andrew Newberg, M.D., Eugene D’Aguili, M.D., Ph.D., and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2001), 50.

² *Ibid.*, 51.

³ Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 473.

the universe.⁴ In other words, our intellectual limitations, which are based on our biological limitations, are a survival strategy.

Words/text on religion...

I believe we humans are trapped, bound to our world by forces we don't completely understand because they are beyond our comprehension. Most conjure a world beyond this physical one, something to soothe existential Angst. Thus, the concept of the divine has evolved to fill psychological needs.

For Newberg, there has always been a neurobiological need to escape the limitations of "self,"⁵ and once the inexplicable transition from hominoid to human was made, we began to tell myths to soothe our fears.

Both Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, theorized that archetypal ideas express the basic structural components of the mind. For Campbell, archetypes become myth, a recurring narrative, a story. For Jung, these archetypes are form and model. For both writers, story and form constantly repeat themselves as building blocks throughout the world's religions: virgin births, a world cleansed by floods, paradises lost, heroes reborn , etc.⁶

⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Joseph Campbell: Mythos*, Vol. 1, narrated by Susan Sarandon (1996, Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2007 dvd).

⁵ Newberg, 85

⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

Words/text on science...

In 1938 Albert Einstein said that scientific interpretation of the world may not be as reliable as we would like to believe. Observations made by the human brain/mind can never be completely objective because the brain can never escape its subjectivity.

Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world. In our endeavor to understand reality, we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears it ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison.

--Albert Einstein⁷

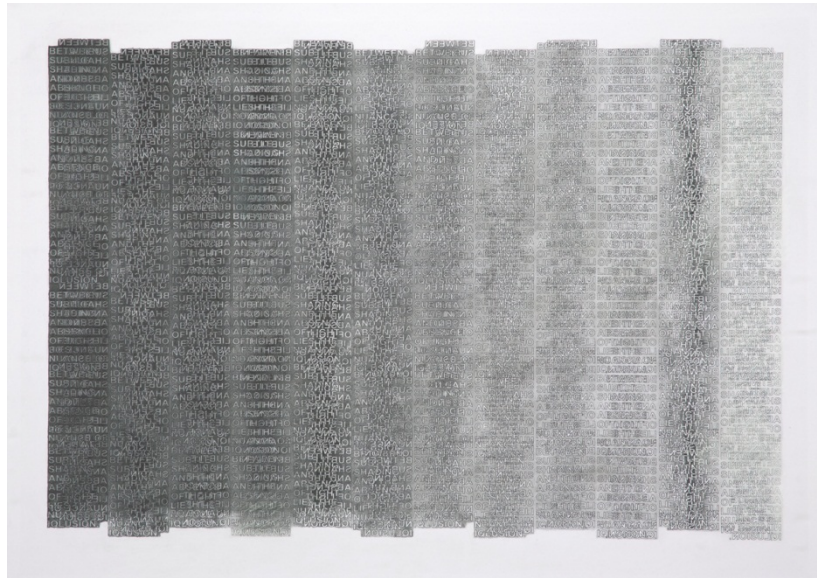
Brian Greene, the theoretical physicist who popularized String Theory in his book *The Elegant Universe*, believes we may never be able to fully understand the universe.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁸ PBS Online, "A Conversation with Brian Greene," *Nova: The Elegant Universe*, www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/physics/conversation-with-brian-greene.html (accessed 3 April 2012).

Mathematics points to such concepts as multiverses, and the theory that what we think we know may be only a small part of a much greater whole, a whole that is inaccessible to us.

Quagmire I



Quagmire I, the first of the digital print/drawings, translates text from the first section of *Kryptos*, a sculpture by Jim Sanborn. Sanborn’s work uses a code known as Quagmire. The translation reads, “Between subtle shading and the absence of light lies the nuance of illusion.”⁹ These words run back and forth across the paper and are shaded from dark to light. Not solely used for the name of a code, quagmire means a predicament, and in *Textus*, it refers to the human predicament.

⁹ Gary Phillips II, “Kryptos,” Realm of Twelve, www.realmoftwelve.net/archive/speculation/k1solution.html (accessed 3 April 2012).

Beyond the Words



Beyond the Words is comprised of hundreds of tiny barcodes, which form a grid across the paper. The barcodes are transformed into an intricate pattern by multiple layers of ink, graphite, and chalk. Their pattern is broken by a central portal, highlighted by two golden streaks extending from top to bottom. The portal invites the viewer to extend his/her mind beyond what he/she observes.

And the Layer Beneath That Layer



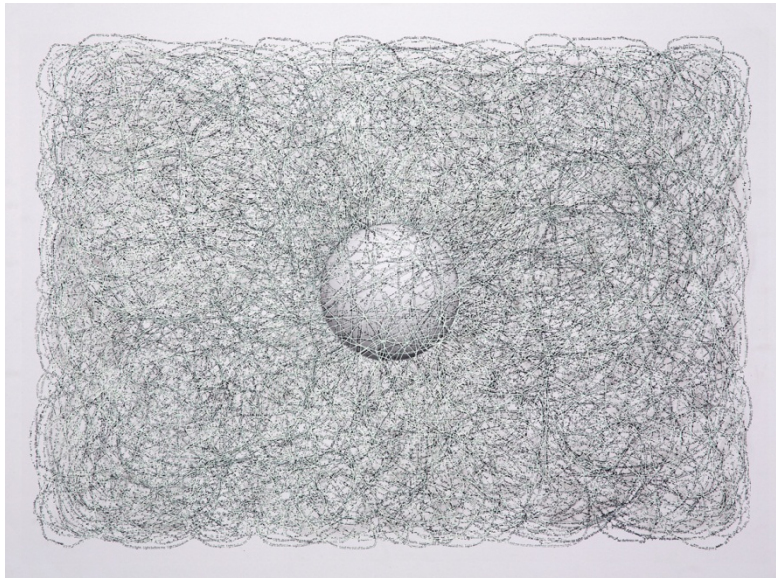
In this triptych, adjacent edges are illuminated by golden tones. Words converted to computer code are printed on the bottom paper. Rice paper covers it and is cut to selectively reveal the code beneath. “And the Layer Beneath That Layer” is handwritten on the rice paper between the lines of code, filling all the spaces. I believe our quest is like forever peeling an onion with no center. Each layer reveals, and there are endless layers beneath.

Ghosting



Ghosting was first digitally printed with meaningless symbols created to resemble an ancient and unknown language. These symbols are crossed out, and handwriting appears between the lines of text. Everything is layered with ink, graphite, and chalk. One of the two nautilus shells appears to be the shadow of the other. Words and text obliterated, they offer in their place a physical object. Yet, what is real, the shell or its shadow?

Praying



Swirling around a shaded orb are the repetitive lines of a Hindu prayer, crossed out with white ink:

Go inside to greet the light.

Light before me.

Light behind me.

Light above me.

Light below me.

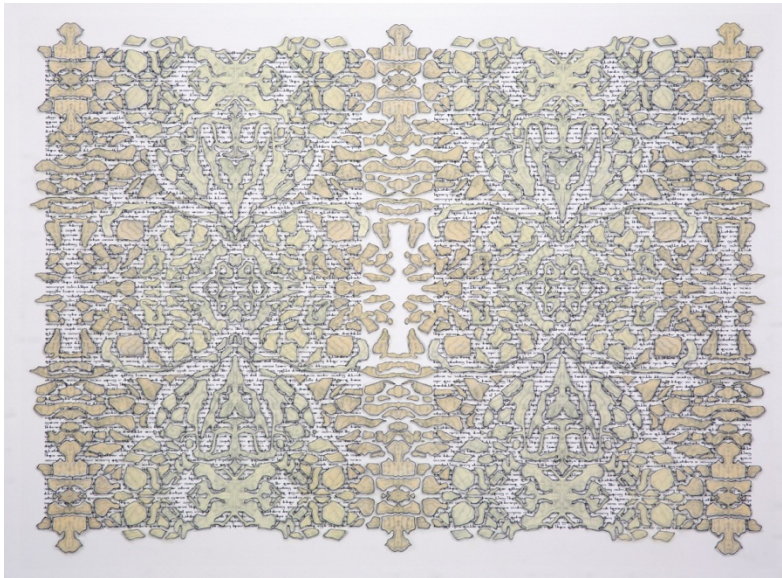
Know the secret of our hearts.

Lead me out of the darkness and give me light.

Though search for the divine is driven by human biology, I believe it is a naïve quest.

This is represented by striking out the words.

What We Leave Behind



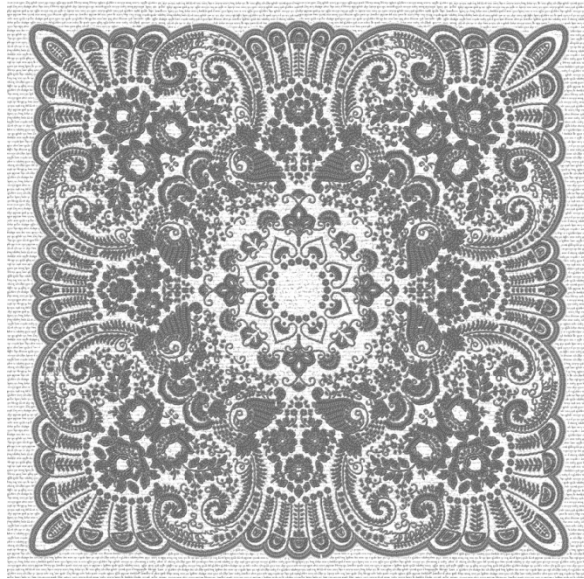
In this work organic shapes are colored by pastel in three shades of pale golden yellow. They are reminiscent of dried bones and cover the text beneath. The text looks like another strange and ancient language, whose meaning is indecipherable. When we pass from this life, we leave behind bones and text.

Quagmire II



The text of *Quagmire II* is itself coded in Quagmire. It is crossed out with white ink, and a large Iranian shrine lock is at its center. Metallic pencil illuminates the lock and is in turn cancelled out by streaks of pastel. A thorough understanding of existence is locked and is inaccessible to us.

Book Lice



In this animation book lice destroy the text as they scurry through a complex pattern of more book lice and maggots. Text is not only inadequate, it is fragile and decomposes.

Spiral





The centrally located sculpture, *Spiral*, rotates and deposits black sand on the words beneath. The text is made further incomprehensible by the steady and unending drag of swirling wires. It represents all we will never know due to its inaccessibility.

Last words/Last text

We live in the world our minds present to us through our senses. Yet humans are biologically driven to explore that which is just beyond the threshold of conscious perception. Our biological limitations allow us to create an inadequate and egocentric view of existence.

We will always be surrounded by exquisite mystery.

Trapped in Plato's cave, I am mesmerized by the shadows.

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