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LUMINOUS THRESHOLD

BY

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Thesis paper

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Abstract

Luminous Threshold is an interactive experience exploring the liminal transition between the viewer and ambiguous spaces. My thesis exhibition incorporates two paintings, one continuous pulsing light structure, two sound-activated light structures and a black cube that is perceived to be inserted through the gallery wall. The paintings and forms explore liminality within a two-dimensional space, while the light pieces create an ephemeral viewer- participation experience. Liminality, defined by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, is one of three stages in life an individual will go through. It is considered a *Rite of Passage* or *Threshold* and is the ambiguous transitional stage where anything can happen. I focus on the ambiguity and transition into the liminal state, drawing inspiration from Minimalist artists, the Light, and Space movement, and contemporary artists including Donald Judd, Robert Morris, James Turrell, Larry Bell, Olafur Eliasson, and Anish Kapoor. Similarly, I am interested in using alternative materials, technology, and manipulated spaces to create a unique experience for the viewer. Both light and silence have physiological and mental effects on the human mood, circadian rhythm, and vision. With the combined benefits of light and silence, *Luminous Threshold* brings awareness of our present liminal space.

Peggy Wen
Luminous Threshold

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Introduction

The word *Liminality* was first coined by French Ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep and half a century later elaborated upon by Victor Turner. Van Gennep first introduced this idea in 1909 in "The Rites of Passage" and defined *Liminality* as a coming of age or a rite of passage (Van Gennep, 8). It is a transitional state filled with ambiguity and contradictions and can apply to describing the shift from childhood to adulthood, from one culture to another, or from one place to another. Liminality can be directed towards any transition from one aspect to another. Van Gennep categorized this period into three ritualistic phases: The first stage is the Separation stage or the Pre-liminal. This is where the individual is separated from their original culture or society. The second stage is the Liminal; this is where the individual is transitioning into the ambivalent social zone, which can seem unclear and unstable. The last stage is the Reassimilation stage or the Postliminal; this is where the individual is reintroduced into a society where they find stability and become a "new" being (Victor Turner, 59).

This concept was later elaborated upon by British Cultural Anthropologist Victor Turner, who was particularly interested in the liminal and the reassimilation phase. For Turner, liminality is the abstract process of change and reconceptualization of the initial phases. In the text, "*Betwixt and Between: Liminal Period in the Rites of Passage*," Victor Turner describes liminality as a "stage of reflection and is a realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle the factors of existence (Betwixt and Between 53). While Van Gennep's application of liminality is structural, Victor Turner believes it is an anti-structural ritual. Structural rituals are considered the common patterns found in any culture and can be fixed depending on the traditions of a culture or society; on the other hand, Turner's anti-structural rituals theorize that the individual is not only within the ambivalent social zones but also liberated from any laws, social norms or traditions (Ratiani). The concept of

change and the ambiguity within the in-betweenness of time and space led me to my earlier painting and eventually to my thesis show. *Luminous Threshold* is an abstract experience of the liminal state through Victor Turner's definition. It uses contemplation and light to help us reflect on our current state of existence.

The Beginnings

My journey through liminality is an internal exploration of self and place. When I first moved to Montana, I painted mundane, ordinary household objects in still-life and interior settings. Representational painting requires a focus on technical and formal aspects such as color, depth, composition, and the illusion of space on a 2-dimensional surface.

My personal experience and feelings impacted my interpretation of liminality at the time. The first few months after moving here, I had a series of unfortunate events that led me to encounter moments of anxiety and depression. This led to my first complete series of large paintings titled "The Vast (E)scape." In this series, I tried to express the anxiety and social discomfort of being in a physical or cerebral place. The extreme shift from the urban city of New York to the vast openness of Montana removed the comfort and support I once had and exposed a vulnerable and lonelier side of myself. Patterns and illusions of depth were used to represent the vertigo sensation of feeling unanchored, and the use of furniture provided a visual and mental rest. Each painting became a progression of the next, slowly abandoning any reference to the subject matter, and finally evolved into the piece "Black and White Space" (fig.1).



Fig. 1 Black and White space, Oil on panel, 2018

However, I began to question if a painting was the best medium to express my ideas and if other ways could better provide the experience of liminality for the viewer. This frustration began a re-evaluation of my work, where I search to identify the necessary components of my concepts to create a clear and concise experience for the viewer. My reflections on the series raised essential questions: *What is necessary? Who else is doing this or thinking this way? Do I need color? Or what is color?* I became interested in reducing information, triggering the liminal experience for others through physical light and space.

Before abandoning painting entirely, I created a transitional series that sought to impact the viewer experience more directly while still using paint. Titled the "*Liminoid Experience*," this series explores the awareness of light and shadows and space in-between the paintings and the viewer. This installation included two large

paintings of white, blue, and black portals facing each other, with the gallery track lights creating a focused pool of light on the floor in the mid-space between the paintings. As the viewer stands in the light, these two larger artworks would physically place the viewer in the liminal space.



Fig. 2 Liminal space 1, oil on panel, wood 2019

Another piece in the series is "Liminal Space 1" (fig.2), included a rectangular structure protruding out of the painting is reminiscent of the linear borders depicted in the first painting, "Black and White Space" (fig.1). My first painting with a 3-dimensional element interfered with the physical distance between the viewer and

the artwork. Black and white colors are a common idiom that often refers to clearly defined and differentiated things. The grey structure—literally in the middle of black and white- is an invitation into the liminal in-between, and the color grey has the connotation of being neutral, peaceful, and soothing.

Finally, the 3-dimensional structure itself was all that was left. There is no longer the need for the painting, thus implying further minimalistic possibilities. Furthermore, the lack of reference to any subject matter allows the work to be inherently ambiguous, challenging the need for information on the transition between the physical space and the unknown beyond. These paintings were part of my thesis show because they allowed the viewer to see the progression of conceptualization and were a different way to depict the definition of liminality.

Historical and Contemporary Context

“There is no way to mock-up or simulate what I'm doing until I'm there. An exhibition for me is not a statement, but an experiment” -Robert Irwin

There are many artists out there from whom I draw inspiration and few whose works profoundly impacted me. I am interested in artists from the Minimalism movement, such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd; Artists in the Light and Space movement, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, as well as contemporary artists working with light and technology Olafur Eliasson and Anish Kapoor. These artists are using the advancement of technology to change our perception and experience of light within an altered space.

Minimalist artists emerged from the aftermath of Abstract Expressionist painters or Action painters. This transition happened in New York during the late 1950s and 60s where artists were actively rejecting the popular Abstract Expressionist. Without all

the unnecessary expression, the minimalist thought the work should be clear and without confusion, highlighting the industrial materials and sleek design (Brief history of Minimalism). Bauhaus architecture, arts widely influenced minimalists, and design, including characteristics of simple geometric forms, materials, precision, unexpressive, and non-referential. Their motto was "Make it pure and simple" (VanEeno, 7-12).



(fig.3) Robert Morris, Untitled L beams, stainless steel, 1965

creates a new level of engagement with the viewer in the space.

The Light and Space movement developed in California paralleled Minimalism during the early 1960s. These artists were interested in similar characteristics to Minimalism: hard edges, geometric aesthetics, and simplicity. Although they had similarities in material, they had distinctly different philosophies. One distinction is the emphasis on object versus experience. They rejected the concreteness of materials and objects and turned to transparent and translucent materials- polyester resin, plexiglass, plastics, refracted, and filtered lights, allowing new ephemeral experiences

Robert Morris, a vital member of the Minimalist movement, differentiated himself from others such as Donald Judd because he was interested in Minimalist sculpture as a "new form of embodied perception, engaging and involving the spectator, rather than a type of formally reductive abstraction" (fig.3) (Dupont). Morris's simplicity of design and arrangement, which

with sculpture and light (Baron and Baron). With experimental materials and emphasis on the experience, these artists can change our ordinary assumption of reality with our perceptual and sensory-motor apparatus, morphing what we see before our eyes (TheArtStory.com).

Other more contemporary artists I have been fascinated by are James Turrell, Anish Kapoor, Olafur Eliasson, and musician John Cage, who can curate and create experiences for the viewer through clean, minimal uses of light and space. In James Turrell's Ganzfeld series, he presents the viewer with a room flooded with light; this removes any visual depth or tactility for the viewer to grasp and confuses them by what they cannot see (fig.4). *Ganzfeld* is a German term describing the phenomenon of perception deprivation; This effect is the unification of our visual field, which forces the spectator to 'look' differently, as their bodies and eyes adjust to the light around them.



(fig.4) James Turrell, Ganzfeld Series, 2013

One particularly influential piece was John Cage's 4'33. This is Cage's notorious

"Silent" composition, where a pianist opened the lid of the piano, sat in silence, closed the lid, and repeated this multiple times for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, then proceeded to walk off the stage. At the time, the silence was compelling because it was an uncommon expectation when listening to music. This can provoke feelings such as boredom, wishing it to be over, or questioning if there is something more interesting somewhere else. Cage appreciated new sounds and materials, and instruments in his compositions. In 1946, John Cage met Indian musician and singer Gita Sarabhai, who inspired Cage's great works (Marvelly). She believed, "The purpose of music is to quiet and sober the mind, making it susceptible to divine influences."

In the premiere of John Cage's 4'33, he said

"They missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third, the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out".

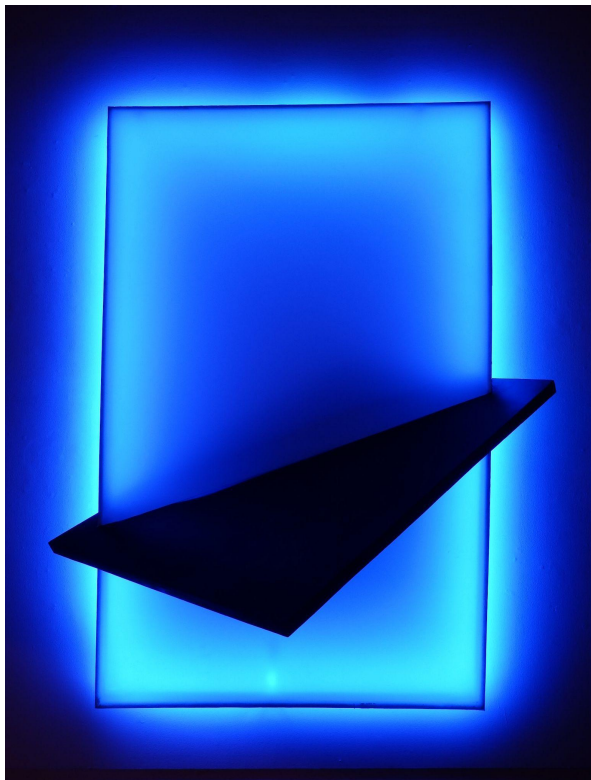
The "silence" is filled with music created by the audience, which ultimately becomes the composition. *Silence* is a contradictory notion, which is not possible with the experience of an audience. This would mean there are no stimuli for the audience to respond to, nothing to see or comprehend (Sontag 6-8).

The Installation/Exhibition

My thesis show, *Luminous Threshold*, charts the progression of my thought process throughout graduate school and my exploration with different materials. In the gallery, the viewer encounters a hallway with two paintings and two black structures, and around the corner is a dark room with three light pieces. Several of these light pieces are sound activated, radiating a glow of colored light. The longer

the viewer is quiet, the more intense and bright the light becomes. This show strives to allow the viewer to experience the in-betweenness and ambiguity defined in liminality, by allowing them to separate from their surroundings, and meditate on their current state.

Untitled (fig.5) is a 4ft by 7ft tall rectangular structure mirroring the common construction of a painting, with the exception that it has industrial frosted tint film adhered to the front border rather than canvas. The black 3 dimensional structure which bisects the rectangle is similar to the protruding borders on the painting “Liminal Space 1” (fig.2), which invites the viewer to look deeper into the distinctive darker core within the a rectangular panel. Behind the stretcher, is a thin trail of LED light, programmed to work with hidden sound sensors.



(fig.5) Untitled, Mixed Media, wood, acrylic, 2021

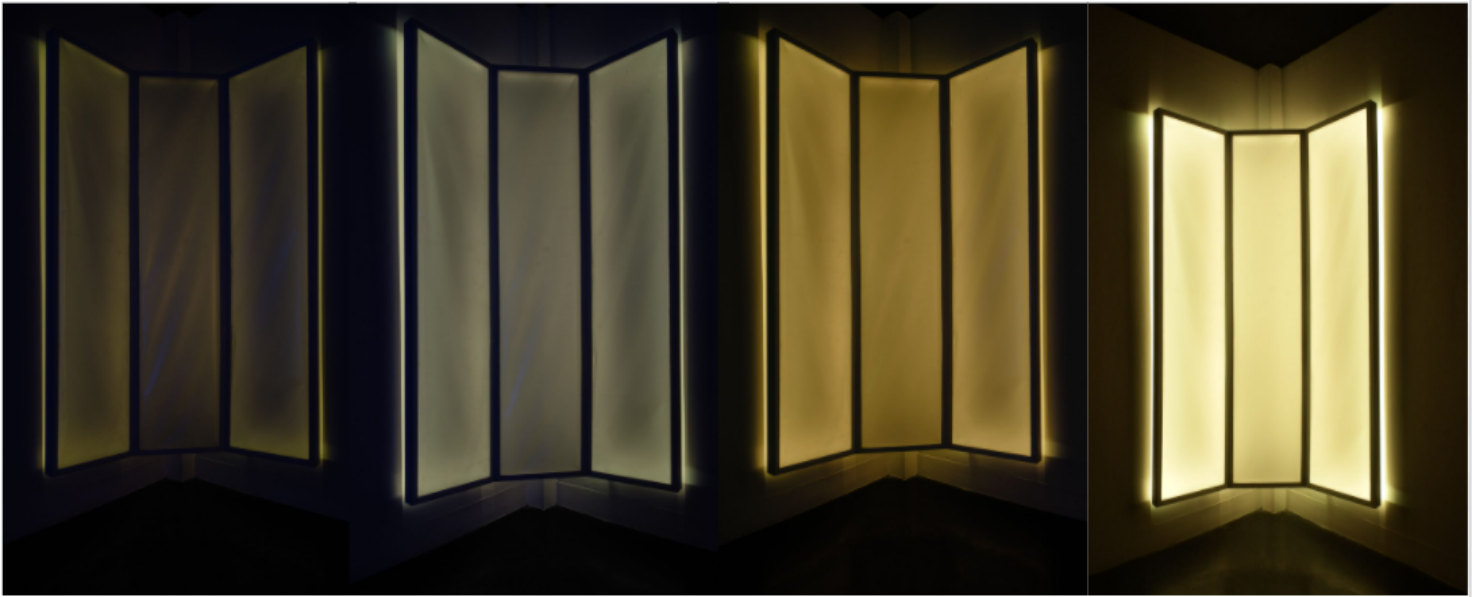
“*In Betweenness*” (fig.6) speaks to the literal and metaphoric space within the gallery. This piece is similarly built larger, and is in constant dialogue with “*Untitled*” (fig.5). The large black structure wraps around the gallery wall, and attaches to the light-activated rectangular stretcher in front. It engages the viewers as they walk through the hallway, and into the dark larger gallery space (Fig. 8). When the viewer sits between the two pieces, their silence flood them with first blue then green light from different directions.



(fig.6) In-betweenness, mixed media, wood, acrylic,2021

The last light piece “*Deep Breathe*” (fig.7) is the only light piece without a sound sensor, and runs continuously on a yellow pulsation loop. This three panel piece was inspired by bay windows in my apartment. One morning after a peaceful hike, I had a cup of coffee, and reflected on a question I frequently ask myself, “what do I want this experience to be?” Looking out the window with no answer and nothing on my mind, that was the experience I have been searching for. While “*DeepBreathe*” is an abstraction of bay windows, and the yellow light echoes the beaming sunlight, the experience simulates a peaceful morning hike. It is placed on the corner of the gallery in order to disperse the light. It is either the first or last one

seen entering and exiting the gallery. The goal is to have the viewer breathe along with the pulsation of the light, and feel rejuvenated, much like the first light of day,



(Fig.7)Deep Breathe, mixed media, wood, Acrylic, 2021

or last light of evening. This piece did not concern the liminal phase. It is not unclear, or vague, but rather structural, keeping a pattern within, referencing the aftermath of the liminal. “Deep Breathe” allowed the viewer to have a consistent, ground experience while the other pieces might have been difficult to grasp.

Additionally, in the exhibition, there is a three-dimensional cube embedded in the wall, “Black Cube” (fig.8). A large portion of the cube is seen once you enter the gallery, and a small remnant is visible on the backside of the wall, creating an illusion of a cube penetrating the solid wall. This structure originated as my simple commentary on the “White Cube”, a common term used to describe the modern

gallery setting as written in *The Ideology of the Gallery Space* by Brian O'Doherty. Doherty described the gallery space as a "cell"; the outside world must come in, the windows sealed off, the walls are painted white, and the only light source is in the ceiling (Doherty). In "Black Cube" the gallery walls appear less solid and impenetrable, questioning the reality of the physical space, and opening up the potential for ambiguity. The gallery becomes part of the art, not just the container where we view the artwork.



(fig. 8) Black Cube, wood, foam, acrylic, 2021

Light and Color

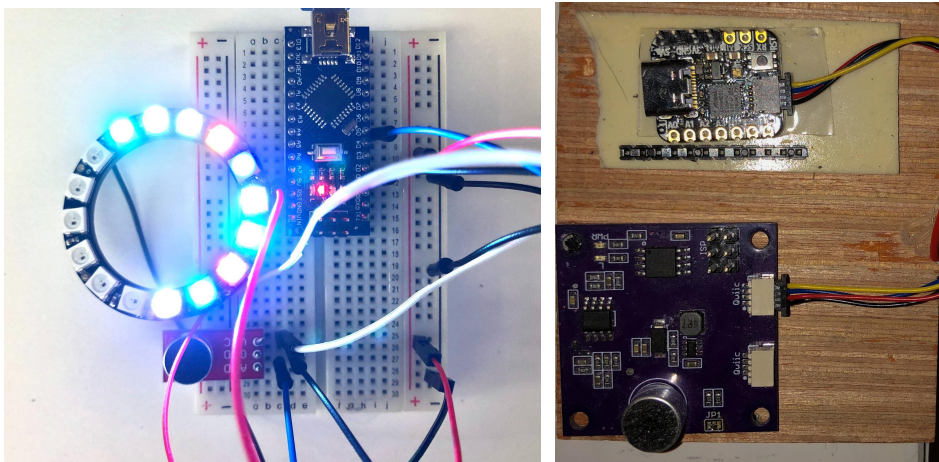
Light and color are major components of the show. We need light to see, to absorb information and even nutrients. Light can be spiritual, powerful, energizing, and essential to any human being, which is proven to profoundly affect the human mood, circadian rhythm, vision, cognition, and even learning. Studies have shown that brightness of light, directionality, color, and timing can affect the viewer (Mott 2).

Humans have two systems of light receptors. The first system is the classical visual system responsible for image formation, while the second system is for non-image-forming, which detects environmental irradiance, allowing many of our fundamental functions (Daneault V, Dumont M, Massé É, Vandewalle G, Carrier J).

Different wavelengths of light are different colors within the spectrum and affect the body in different ways, such as blood pressure, biorhythms, and brain activity. The use of light in my work enhances the meditation process, rewarding the viewer with more light the longer they wait. The different colors of lights in the exhibition can provide different emotional responses. Colors Symbolism is how we associate colors to objects, and color-related emotions are dependent on one's personal experience with a particular color (Naz and Epps 31-33). Maud Harleman study from the Institution of Technology, Stockholm, on the emotional impact of color, showed that the associations of color on our emotions vary widely. Some observers felt weak and negative emotions like disgust in a room filled with green colors, while others felt acceptance. Hues of blue seem to be appreciated, and the highest remarks were associated with warmer colors, such as reds (Harleman 223-226). Blue is the initial dominant color for two of the light pieces in the gallery because it is commonly associated with calmness, serenity, and tranquility. Many companies use blue in their logo or marketing, such as Samsung or Ford, because our brains perceive it as a non-threatening color and stable, while red logos represent passion or intensity such as Red Bull or even Red Cross. Green logos such as Green Giant, or whole foods, are often seen as optimistic, fresh, lucky, and often associated with nature. Black and white, which are also very prevalent in the exhibition, are seen as mysterious, powerful, or full of depth, while white is pure and full of light (Rikard). In the end, color can associate many different emotions and experiences depending on the viewer. These colors are chosen based on my positive personal association with blue, green, and yellow and what I could accomplish with the technology available.

Technology and Process

Technology has always been fascinating as a medium to me, and it was important to incorporate it into my work. First, it was necessary to learn how to code, which can be as challenging to learn as any new language, and then applying it to the process of painting. During my research, I started practicing with small rudimentary DIY projects to understand the hardware, connections, and tools (fig.10). With many months of research, broken hardware devices, and troubleshooting, we were able to finalize the hardware, condense the wires, and figure out ways to conceal everything to achieve a clean, sparse and minimal presentation. This project would not have been possible without the generous help from a local technology expert, Stephen Arwin.



(fig.10) An earlier version of the Tech piece, and a simplified version.

Part of the installation consisted of three LED works of art pieces controlled by microcomputers. Two of the three pieces are attached to sound sensors that contain an analog data converter. The lights are programmed to turn on incrementally, getting brighter the more the gallery is quiet and then disappearing when noise increases around it. The sensor collects the data from the sound level from its surroundings and transfers it over to the microcomputer, which then tells

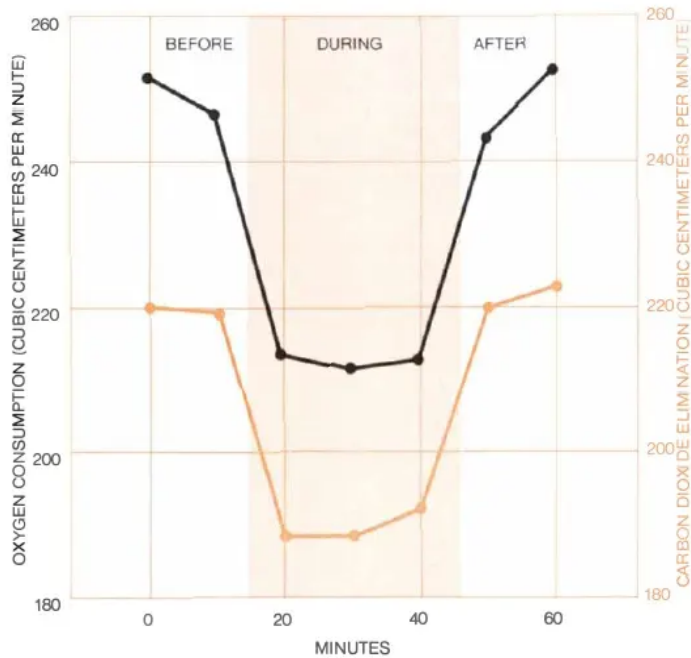
the LEDs what to do and how to behave. The sound sensors used, Zio Loudness Sensor by Qwiic, have a range of 0-1023, or a dynamic range of 0 to 60 decibels. The sensors are manually adjustable, with a static threshold of around 430 out of 1023. If the noise levels reach higher than 430, the lights will dim and brighten when it is below 430. This effect is on a continuous loop until the power is off. They are set on a separate sound threshold creating a dual progression of light. When the surrounding is quiet, both the pieces illuminate and ultimately generate a flood of green light throughout the gallery.

Silence and Meditation

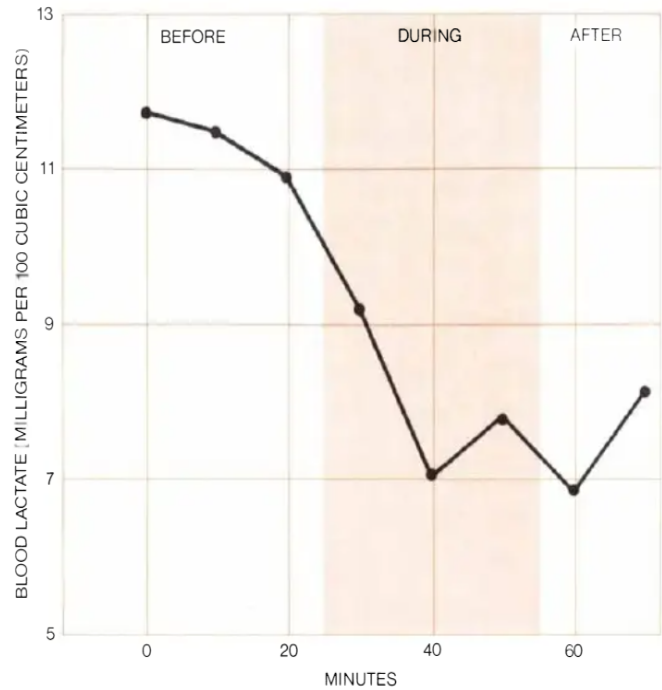
Most of my morning, I take long contemplative and meditative walks in the woods to exercise my dog and clear my mind and prepare for the day ahead. For me this provides respite from contemporary society, where we are bombarded with external noise like social media, news, gossip. In the book titled *Silent in The Age of Noise* by Erling Kagge, Erling finds solace and clarity on his expeditions to Antarctica. In his research, there was very little to nothing around him in the frigid weather of Antarctica, and all he could do was survive the cold and meditate with his thoughts. Erling says, “silence is about rediscovering, through pause, the things that bring us joy” (Kagge 75). My walks are not as extreme, but similar to Erling’s expeditions, with quiet meditation and self-awareness of my surroundings.

Meditation can hold many psychological and physiological benefits and effects. Researchers in the 1950s and 60s studied the meditation practice of Yoga or Zen Meditation, which provided evidence that it can reduce one's metabolism rate. Examining monks in Japan, Y.sugi and L. Akutsu showed a decrease in oxygen intake and a 20 percent reduction in carbon dioxide output from the subjects (fig.9A) (Wallace and Benson). In addition, fig.9B shows the drastic decline of blood lactate

levels when participating in meditation. This research thus demonstrates that meditation reduces our metabolic rate, activating a calmer and more relaxed body.



EFFECT OF MEDITATION on the subjects' oxygen consumption (*black*) and carbon dioxide elimination (*color*) was recorded in 20 and 15 cases respectively. After the subjects were invited to meditate both rates decreased markedly (*colored area*). Consumption and elimination returned to the premeditation level soon after the subjects stopped meditating.



RAPID DECLINE in the concentration of blood lactate is apparent following the invitation to start meditating (*colored area*). Lactate is produced by anaerobic metabolism, mainly in muscle tissue. Its concentration normally falls in a subject at rest, but the rate of decline during meditation proved to be more than three times faster than the normal rate.

(fig.9A) Effects of Meditation, Decrease of Oxygen and Carbon Dioxide Level (Left)

(fig.9B) Blood Lactate levels (Right)

From another perspective, silence can be associated with religion or ritualistic events. In Buddhism, for example, some monks take the vow of silence to improve the awareness of the self, quieting of the mind, and avoiding Samsara. Samsara, which translates to "wandering on," is the cycle of rebirth, existence, and death and is to be avoided as it represents more suffering and pain in life (Bhikkhu). The goal for them to practice silence is to eventually reach Nirvana, the eternal state where Karma and Samsara do not exist. While one must be an avid practitioner of

meditation to obtain its long term or religious benefits, the temporary act of quiet contemplation is the first step. Both light and silence can change our body physiologically and mentally. Without light, we would not function as human beings, and meditation brings awareness and clarity to our bodies and minds.

Reflection for future research and presentation

There is always something more to learn and discover when it comes to new processes. I am excited about the direction and potential of the concept, and there are few aspects of the exhibition I would like to address. One aspect deals with the craftsmanship; the irregularity of some of the surfaces took away from the overall experience. The wrinkles and the sag of the tint film, which are visible when the lights are not on, break the illusion of the mystery inherent in the work. This can be solved with different sturdier materials, such as frosted plexiglass or acrylic. Another aspect I would like to expand on is that instead of using my current static threshold within the sound sensors, switch to a dynamic threshold system, where after a period of time, The sound threshold is automatically set on trends based on its historical collection of data.

Since the work is about the experience beyond my own, capturing the interaction and reaction of the viewer through video or recording would help refine the process and overall experience. Those who had the chance to see the exhibition were fascinated by the lights and the mystery behind the suspending structures, while others enjoyed the meditative process illuminating the work. A common reaction from viewers was that they could not understand what they were supposed to do, what it meant, and why the pieces were not working. Gathering more information from the viewer would allow me to further develop the concept of liminality and create a clear, more resolved interactive experience.

Conclusion

Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner describes liminality as a transitional state where it is filled ambiguity and contradictions. My journey from New York to Montana was a liminal period for me, defined by experiences of uncertainty. Working through a plethora of paintings and multiple series later, the process of reduction allowed me to express my concept in a minimalistic and concise way.

Luminous Threshold, highlights the ambiguity of the transition period, and brings awareness to our present liminal time. The ephemeral nature of light and silence contributes to the quality of liminality. This exhibition offers a quiet space where the viewer can separate themselves from the outside world, and bring calmness and transcendence to the chaos that is around us. Through trial and error, I will further experiment with new ideas, learn about new processes and materials in order to express the in-betweenness and uncertainty of the liminal phase.

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