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Sacred steps

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SACRED STEPS

by

Melissa Airy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Bradley Dicharry
To all the pilgrims who have paved the road before me, to my fellow pilgrims who walked beside me, and to all the future pilgrims who are yet to journey, go with love.
ABSTRACT

The action and tradition of pilgrimage in any faith, is the accumulation of many small steps over a great distance leading to a sacred destination. Pilgrimage is a way of letting the outward journey of our bodies enrich and enable the inner journeys of our hearts and minds.

Roman Catholics undertake the pilgrimage to Rome in order to be close to the center of their faith. Millions flock to Lourdes, France to experience healing through touching the holy water where the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette. Others walk on foot across the ancient 800 km sacred route across Spain called the Camino de Santiago following in the footsteps of St. James. Regardless of the destination, pilgrims move within the geography of faith, along a path scattered with traces of holiness, in places where God’s grace has been shown abundantly to bring conversions of holiness.

My work is a visual representation of my personal experiences as a sojourner to these three sacred landscapes in an attempt to understand the profound sense of purpose and awakening that I encountered along the way.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

A critical aspect of pilgrimage lies in being a pilgrim. I have traveled throughout the world on religious journeys to sacred destinations in search of understanding who and why people take on extreme expeditions of faith. Pilgrimage is an ancient religious ritual which millions of people have undertaken as an ultimate act of homage and repentance. Today, modern pilgrims continue to experience the same hardships and pains along with the joys and sense of accomplishment. The paths taken to visit these sacred sites are often physically and emotionally demanding but are fueled by one’s personal belief in a greater power. The act of walking in the footsteps of pilgrims who have traveled before, pave the way for personal transformation to occur. I use performance art, installation, video and audio to document and translate my personal experiences on pilgrimage into immersive works of art that are accessible to the secular world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BODY, MIND AND SOUL</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNITY</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PARADOX</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. *Surrender Of A Yes*, video performance documentation, 2019 .................. 5

Figure 2. *Surrender Of A Yes* (installation view), video performance documentation, 2019..... 6

Figure 3. *A Journey in Three Phases*, 8’ x 8’, video, wood, fabric, 2018 .......................... 10

Figure 4. *A Journey in Three Phases*, video stills, 2018 ..................................................11

Figure 5. *Dear Pilgrim, Thank You*, 9” x 14” x 3”, concrete, resin, ink on paper, 2018........ 15

Figure 6. *Dear Pilgrim, Thank You* (installation view), concrete, resin, paper, 2018 ........ 16

Figure 7. *A Conversation About...* (installation view), 9” x 12” x 3”, Audio, headphones, wood, metal hook, brass plaque, 2019 ............................................................... 17

Figure 8. *A Conversation About...* (installation view), 9” x 12” x 3”, Audio, headphones, wood, metal hook, brass plaque, 2019 ............................................................... 18

Figure 9. *A Conversation About...*, 9” x 12” x 3”, Audio, headphones, wood, metal hook, brass plaque, 2019 .................................................................................. 19

Figure 10. *I Know My Own and My Own Know Me*, video still, 2019 ............................. 22

Figure 11. *Very Truly I Tell You*, video still, 2019 ............................................................. 23

Figure 12. *Intersection of Truth*, video still, 2019 .............................................................. 24
INTRODUCTION

In 2016 I embarked on my first pilgrimage, walking the Camino de Santiago, across the country of Spain. I had very little background knowledge as to what pilgrimage was and the long history that it held. I did not know why I wanted to go, but knew I needed to follow the calling. For thirty-five days I walked with nothing but the backpack on my shoulders on the open trail in front of me. Over the course of the 800 kilometers walked, I found a sense of joy, purpose, love, and awakening that I did not know was possible. Upon returning home, I decided I needed to dive deep into my art as a way to understand the journey and the changes it brought into my life.

In 2018, I decided to undertake a two-month journey to three various pilgrimage locations as research to better understand pilgrimage. I wanted to know what made these locations so sacred, who were the people that traveled great distances to visit these sites, and why they would undertake the journey. I first spent a week in Rome, Italy, home of the Catholic Church. I visited the Vatican and St. Peter’s Basilica, climbed the Sacred Scala on my knees and witnessed works of art by scholars who have come before me.

Second, I traveled to Lourdes, France where the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette. Millions of people travel to Lourdes each year in order to touch the spring of water that appeared during Mary’s visit in hopes that it will bring physical or emotional healing. I touched the stone walls of the sacred grotto. I was submerged in the healing baths, and I partook in the candlelight Marian procession.

Lastly, I again returned to walk the Camino de Santiago. I walked on the 800 kilometer trail across Spain leading to the tomb of the Apostle of St. James. I wanted another chance to experience the transformation I felt two years prior. I also hoped to witness the transformation that occurred in those that traveled beside me. Finally, I wanted to find a way to use my art as a
form of documentation of the experience in order to share the transformative aspects of pilgrimage with a wider audience back home.
YES

The first stage in anyone’s personal pilgrimage is the whisper that turns into a resounding yes. Those who discern whether or not to journey on pilgrimage listen for the internal call which invites them to take part. Often the first idea to embark on such a journey seems like a far-fetched dream. That dream becomes overlooked until it comes back demanding more attention from the future pilgrim. There is not always logic or reason behind making such a decision, but the pull to journey becomes unavoidable. Saying yes to such an experience is equally thrilling and terrifying because the first step has already been taken into the unknown.

My experience saying yes to pilgrimage is not much different than many others who have walked before me and those who will continue to walk after me. Once I had first learned of the Camino de Santiago, I knew I needed to walk on the sacred path. I found a great sense of peace in knowing I needed to experience the pilgrimage in search for its power. Yet, if felt like my entire outward world was telling me not to go. I questioned the time commitment, the financial burden, the safety, the cleanliness of facilities, the scarcity of food, the absence of comforts from home, the lack of experience traveling alone and the list goes on and on. I felt the tension within myself trying to make the most well-informed decision, yet at the end of the day knew none of those reasons even mattered. The peace I felt in saying yes, felt much greater than any of my many small “what ifs?”

Through The Surrender of A Yes, I am personifying the inward tension that I have felt while discerning to go on pilgrimage. The Surrender of A Yes is video documentation of a performance in which two figure wearing black are connected to a rope, attached at each of their waists. The two figures walk away from one another pulling against the rope and creating a great tension. While each figure tries to move away from one another, each is preventing any progress
or movement. The force and physical restraint become anti-productive, only requiring more physical assertion without any gain. After a prolonged period of this tension, both figures turn inward and embrace one another with arms wrapped around each other’s body. The tension of the rope immediately drops and the focus becomes the union and peace between the two. The performance continues in this cyclical structure as the figures again walk away from one another creating the tension once more.

The final installation of *The Surrender of A Yes* consisted of a life-sized projection of the video documentation within the gallery walls. As the natural light within the gallery changed throughout the day, the video would become more or less opaque, leaving the video to feel delicate and ephemeral all while provoking a sense of rawness. As viewers would walk in and out of the space, their shadows would interrupt the black and white moving imagery, momentarily breaking the tension. This natural alteration of space highlighted the inward mental confrontation juxtaposed in an outward environment full of reality.
Figure 1: *Surrender Of A Yes*, video performance documentation, 2019.
Figure 2: *Surrender Of A Yes* (installation view), video performance documentation, 2019.
BODY, MIND AND SOUL

The most traveled of all the paths to Santiago de Compostela is the Camino Frances, starting from the small village of St. Jean Pied de Port, France. The entirety of this particular pilgrimage path is 800 kilometers in length and takes the average person thirty plus days to walk from beginning to end. The physical trail stretches the entire distance of Spain, running from east to west, ending near the Atlantic Ocean. The evolution of landscape throughout the country undeniably effects those who walk amongst it. In the beginning, pilgrims are tasked with the challenge of crossing the Pyrenees Mountains and traversing great elevation changes. During this first week of the journey, the fatigue and pains of one’s body becomes the sole focus of the pilgrim’s attention. Constant care is taken to mend blisters and alleviate muscle and joint pains in order to continue walking day after day. The pilgrim is living entirely in the present and working to take one step at a time on the path ahead.

After the first week on pilgrimage, one’s body starts to adapt to the constant walking, and strain of the weight of the backpack hung from the pilgrim’s shoulders. The traveler no longer is only able to think about the physical journey, but starts to go inward to recognize the journey of the mind. During this middle phase of the pilgrimage, the landscape changes into dry, sprawling and flat fields that continue as far as the eye can see. The absence or void of visual and physical stimuli, allows pilgrims to become more internal and intentional. The vast physical space correlates with the depth of our human minds. Pilgrims often replay moments from their past, attempting to gain a new sense of understanding as to how those experiences have shaped them into the person they are today.

The last third of the Camino Frances again ascends into the mountains. However, this time, the body is already accustomed to the physical challenges, and the mind has found a place
of peace. Instead of facing the physical challenge ahead of them, pilgrims often start to look forward to whatever is to come after completing the pilgrimage. By this point of the immersive journey, pilgrims have experienced often unexplainable changes within themselves. The challenge becomes knowing how to reenter the chaos of life back home all while holding on to the lessons they learned while traveling the sacred path. This last phase is equal parts grieving the pilgrimage coming to an end while also being a celebration of the journey completed.

After experiencing this sense of transformation, myself, I became fascinated by the cyclical nature of this process leading to personal growth. I came to realize that I have gone through such processes of challenges and growth many times throughout my life but rarely have I taken the time to acknowledge the significance of life’s journey like I did while walking the Camino. I created *A Journey in Three Phases* in a meditative video documentation representing the three physical landscapes I encountered on pilgrimage ultimately referencing the mental and physical journey that accompanied the way.

*A Journey in Three Phases* is a video installation in which three televisions sit in a triangular formation, facing outward, atop a wooden altar-like platform. At the base of the wooden altar form, are three kneelers colored by red velvet, inspired by interior spaces of Catholic churches. Each screen displays a video of a various landscape: cut wood, grass, and rocks. Seen within each landscape image are the legs of a figure, walking across the screen. As the figure’s legs exit one screen, they move seamlessly into the next, walking from one landscape into the next. The viewer can either choose to walk around the installation to keep pace with the figure, or they can remain stationary and wait for the figure to loop around back into the landscape in front of them. This choice on how to experience the work, mimics two
important components of pilgrimage. First, it highlights the intentionality in moving throughout space, while also mirroring the inward stillness sought after on pilgrimage.
Figure 3. *A Journey in Three Phases*, 8’ x 8’, video, wood, fabric, 2018.
Figure 4. *A Journey in Three Phases*, video stills, 2018.
COMMUNITY

While standing inside of St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, I was mesmerized by the grandiose scale of the physical building itself. However, what I remember more vividly was being in awe at the thousands of people around me who all traveled great distances to be in this same holy building. Every day, this experience of being filled with entirely new pilgrims repeats. I quickly realized my fascination with this place was not the building at all, but rather the people who made up the space. Although I did not know any of these people surrounding me, I felt a bond in knowing I was somehow connected to something much bigger than me.

Similarly, while sitting in a wooden pew in front of the holy grotto in Lourdes, France, I watched as people lined up to walk and touch the trickling water falling from the rock wall. I found myself amongst children, elderly being pushed in wheel chairs, and everyone in between. Each person approached the holy site with the same humble nature and no words were spoken to differentiate our place of origin. Instead, we bonded as a community of people who all moved through the same space, touching the same water, and hoping for a transformation to occur.

Experiencing these two examples of community on pilgrimages, prepared me for the greatest sense of belonging I encountered while walking the Camino de Santiago. As I walked day after day, I would be surrounded by people who were all walking to the same destination as me. We would spend hours a day walking, and passing the time by talking and sharing stories. Some people I walked with for only an afternoon, while others I spent several weeks traveling beside. Each and every person I met, touched my heart in a profound way, teaching me something about myself while being vulnerable with strangers. Regardless of the time I spent with each person, I was never fully able to express my gratitude for what I learned from each of my fellow pilgrims. Upon returning home to the United States after my pilgrimages were
complete, I felt like I needed to find a way to bring closure to the many relationships I had formed.

I created a series of thank you notes entitled, *Dear Pilgrim, Thank You.* I identified forty different people I had met while on my forty-day pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago. I hand wrote a note to each pilgrim, thanking them for what they had taught me or the way they impacted my life. Each note begins with ‘Dear Pilgrim,’ followed by my message, and signed with the words ‘Go Forth With Love.’ Based upon the writing, I can identify exactly who each note is written for, however with the generalized salutation, the words become universal and applicable to many people. Each thank you note, is inset into a concrete block and filled with resin. The final remnant weighs thirty pounds, representing the weight of my words of gratitude.

The series of forty concrete sculptures, have been displayed in multiple formats. First, they became part of a performance series in which I held the weight of each block within my arms. The sculpture felt alive within my arms, as if the memory of that person was alive within me. The action of carrying the weight was my way of honoring and spending intentional time memorializing each person. Second, the stone blocks lived in a sculptural installation during my MA thesis exhibition “Sacred Steps.” During this installation, the blocks were standing upright, back to back with one another forming an arched line. These rows of blocks acted as a guiding path leading viewers throughout the space. Further, in order to read the thank you notes, viewers were required to kneel or sit on the ground to have access to the words. This action of kneeling or lowering oneself to the ground suggests an action of giving respect or paying homage.

After I created *Dear Pilgrim, Thank You,* I became aware that I was using my singular perspective, my personal words, to speak about the entirety of a journey that I did not experience
alone. I had previously been working to visually depict my experiences on pilgrimage, only to find that the sense of true purpose and awakening I found on the trail was being lost in the translation within my art. I so badly found myself wanting to return to the trail to have conversations again with fellow pilgrims as that was at the heart of my personal transformation. Instead, I decided to reframe my concept of what community means and look closer to home to have just as meaningful conversations with the people around me.

*A Conversation About*... is a series of audio recordings in which I had conversations with fellow pilgrims both past and future, speaking about various aspects of pilgrimage. I spoke with pilgrims who have yet to journey, those I traveled besides, and others I met for the first time back in Iowa. I found an abundance of pilgrims all willing to have intentional conversations simply filled with sharing our stories and newfound perspectives. The conversation topics included: the call, the challenges, the journey, the community, and the return. I found the unique bond of us both experiencing the same journey, allowed us to speak with truth that I that I struggled to find on my own. I let their words speak as they were, not trying to translate them into a visual work of art, but instead allowing viewers to listen in on portions of our conversations.

The audio recordings lived inside of a wooden box, with a small brass plaque labeling each conversation. Audience members were invited to put on a set of headphones to listen to fragments of conversations while being able to observe the rest of the moving imagery and sculptural work of the gallery. I found that the conversations gave small personal fragments of daily life on the Camino, making the experience more tangible to the outside viewer.
Figure 5. *Dear Pilgrim, Thank You*, 9” x 14” x 3”, concrete, resin, ink on paper, 2018.
Figure 6. *Dear Pilgrim, Thank You* (installation view), concrete, resin, paper, 2018.
Figure 7. *A Conversation About...*, 9” x 12” x 3”, Audio, headphones, wood, metal hook, brass plaque, 2019.
Figure 8. *A Conversation About...*, Audio, headphones, wood, metal hook, brass plaque, 2019.
Figure 9. *A Conversation About...*, Audio, headphones, wood, metal hook, brass plaque, 2019.
PARADOX

While I was traveling amongst the three various pilgrimage sites, I knew I wanted to collect moments of video footage that seemed extraordinarily filled with a sense of wonder. I set a prompt for myself to collect one-minute raw clips of objects, places, people or actions that left me in awe. There was no explanation as to why I captured the footage that I did, nor did I have any idea what was to come with these short videos. Upon returning home and reviewing the footage, I immediately started pairing videos together. I found an unspeakable connection between sets of moving imagery. What resulted was a juxtaposition of imagery that read as paradoxical.

*I Know My Own and My Own Know Me*, includes two videos taken from the grotto at Lourdes. In the center of the screen is a video of a line of people touching the spring of water trickling down the walls of the grotto. People can be seen wiping garments in the water and kissing the wall in an attempt to grasp and maintain any amount of the miraculous water. Seen behind this video clip is a green hill in which sheep are meandering and grazing the grass. The scale of the sheep are much larger than the video of the people in the grotto, drawing attention to the differentiation between the two landscapes. These two moments speak about the similarities between the sheep and the people. People flock from all over the world to this holy site, not so differently as sheep move together through a field.

*Very Truly I Tell You*, again includes two videos from Lourdes. In the background is an altar of candles that continue to flicker day and night. Visitors are invited to light a candle for their intentions and add their prayer into the collection of prayer candles that have been lit before them. In the center is placed a video of a water spicket dispensing water from the spring. Pilgrims are encouraged to collect water in a wide range of vessels to take back to
their home, as an extension of their pilgrimage. Although only subtle movement is seen, together the fire and water speak about the power of both natural elements.

Finally, *The Intersection of Truth* marks the beginning of my personal pilgrimage. Video documentation of a personal performance in which my hand traced over the rock wall of the holy grotto at Lourdes is juxtaposed on top of video documentation of pilgrims filing through to get a glimpse at St. James’ tomb in Santiago. On top of these two videos include the words “where the intersection takes place is where the TRUTH will be.” I had originally written this phrase in my journal on my very first day of pilgrimage and it didn’t fully make sense to me until I reread it on my very last day. This phrase summarizes my understanding of being a pilgrim who travels through this earthly world to connect with something much greater than me, something or someone that is the ultimate truth. *The Intersection of Truth*, visually depicts the very start and the end of my travels to various pilgrimage sites ultimately allowing the viewer to question and connect with the entirety of the journey in between.
Figure 10. *I Know My Own and My Own Know Me*, video still, 2019.
Figure 11. *Very Truly I Tell You*, video still, 2019.
Figure 12. *Intersection of Truth*, video still, 2019.