Personal Gods

Designing Gods & Creatures

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In the beginning, there was only parking chaos. The car would circle endlessly, searching for a spot to call its own. The driver would get frustrated and angry, taking their aggression out on other drivers and passengers. This only made the problem worse. One day, the driver and her young daughter had had enough. They were tired of circling the block and of getting nowhere. Tired of having to settle for a bad spot and paying an extravagant parking fee. So, they wondered, is there truly nobody out there that could help them, "perhaps we must ask the gods?" they thought. And they proceeded to chant "parking god, parking god, please find us a parking spot". Then one day as they made their way into the city, they were blessed with the most magnificent parking spot of all. At the steps of the building, in a free parking zone they exited the car and looked at each other in bewilderment. "Thank the heavens" they said "the parking god must have heard our prayer"

Over the next decade the parking god became an ally and friend to the mother and daughter duo. They continued to believe in her holiness and spread the word of her benevolence to others. However, most people just laughed or dismissed they're story as a funny little tale. Despite the strange looks, to this day, the mother daughter duo still chant to the parking god. They say that even after more than a decade her generosity never wavers.

CHAPTER I.

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Introduction

Dear readers, believers and skeptics alike. Please grab yourself a fresh cup of tea and allow me to share with you a story.

As you might have guessed, the driver in this tale is my mother and her daughter is me. Yes, the Parking God is my personal god. It's hard for me to determine exactly when her creation took place. Just as it is impossible to know whether my mother and I truly "created" her and manifested her into existence. Or on the other hand, if she had always been there just waiting for someone to call upon her. It's dreamlike to look back at one's childhood and examine things that seemed so normal at the time. And then the feeling of suddenly waking up to find out that in reality it was quite bizarre. When I decided to base my research on this idea of personal gods and creatures I immediately knew the best and most rewarding thing I could do was not only look at my own beliefs but talk to others and start a conversation about this somehow overlooked topic.

I want to be clear that my goal for this project is not to try and understand how and why people believe in gods. I'm not attempting to answer the unanswerable or find some deep meaningful truth about belief and humanity. That is a very heavy and overworked subject matter as it is and I am no historian, theologist or anthropologist. I am a designer and a maker. Therefore, the role that I wish to play in this project is that of collector of stories and designer of creatures..

Having laid out my intentions, let me explain the processes I have in mind in order to achieve these goals. These processes can be divided into three phases:

~   The first phase is dedicated to *finding and gathering* stories. Is it presumptuous of me to want to liken myself to the great gatherers of tales like Asbjørnsen og Moe or the Brothers Grimm? How amazing would it be to be able to create an anthology or a book solely made up of people's personal gods and creatures!

~   The second phase will be the weeks spent working on this paper, a phase dedicated to **research and reflection**. Although this essay will mainly be my first hand account of accumulating stories and my accompanying thoughts. I still believe it is important to have a basic knowledge of the many subjects my project touches upon, such as belief systems, religions and lore.

~   The third phase will be spent working with more familiar territory, ***visually creating and physically making***. However don't be fooled, although this is the part of the project I am most looking forward to I do believe it will also be the toughest. I don't know about you but creating a pantheon made up of personal gods, that I then bring to life via costume and puppetry doesn't sound like an easy endeavor. Sometimes I wonder what I have gotten myself into.

One of my main motivations in choosing this topic came from the work I made last year. I started moving away from the traditional costume design world that I had been so immersed in for the last decade. And moved towards a more creature based, non-humanoid creative practice. I wondered what a good starting point for this would be. Even though I am no historian or anthropologist, I have always been interested in those fields and I knew I wanted to work with folklore and legend. I was hesitant, however, to go into a culture and take an already well established icon and reinterpret it or analyze it in a different or modern context. I was searching for something closer to home and something more unique.

Fig. 1

Last year I had already explored my own heritage through creatures of myth and legend, but still felt a bit disconnected to the topic. I wanted to make sure this project was something I could identify with and feel passionate enough about to build a whole universe and narrative around.

CHAPTER II.

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Gathering Stories

Call me naive if you must, but I believed that by being in Scandinavia (which has a rich connection to its folkloric roots) and going to an art school (where creativity thrives) that getting stories of people's personal gods or creatures would be a pretty simple feat. Oh boy was I mistaken. I searched high and low for these stories. I mentioned my project to everyone I met, friends, family, acquaintances and people in passing. I posted on social media, hungup posters around the schoc ies, and still I got very few takers.

When I had the opportunity to tell people about my project I was met with a wide range of reactions. Most were positive in the sense that they thought it was an interesting topic to investigate, but they had nothing to

people responded somewhat defensively saying things like "I'm not crazy of course I don't believe in spirits or imaginary gods".

DO YOU HAVE PERSONAL GODS ?

SPIRIT CREATURES THAT FOLLOW YOU AROUND ?

ELVES THAT HIDE YOUR STUFF AROUND THE HOUSE ?

PERHAPS YOU PRAY TO THE METRO GOD TO GET TO WORK ON TIME ?

OR YOU CURSE THE GOD OF POINTY COFFEE TABLE CORNERS, WHERE YOU KEEP HURTING YOUR LEG ?

IF YOU DO, I WOULD LOVE TO TALK WITH YOU! I AM COLLECTING THESE TYPES OF STORIES FOR MY MASTER PROJECT. ALSO, I WILL MAKE YOU COOKIES.

CONTACT ME HERE:

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97016977

Fig. 2

I attempted to explain that when I use the word *believe* it's not to say you wholeheartedly believe without a doubt. Like most things in this world nothing is black or white, belief is a huge spectrum. And of course, there are a myriad of ways people choose to define their beliefs. As humans, our need for categorizing and labeling run's deep and there are therefore many theories and charts to consult if you are having an existential religious crisis. For example, on The Dawkins Scale I probably land around between a 5 or 6. I say that I believe in the Parking God, but what does that really mean? My 21st century, science-centric, rational mind tells me there is no heavenly being watching above me and guiding me to the perfect parking spot. But my creative, inquisitive and hopeful self really, *really* wants to believe she is real, because who can actually know for sure?

The Dawkins Scale

1. Strong Theist:
I do not question the existence of God, I know he exists.

2. De-facto Theist:
I cannot know for certain, but I strongly believe in God

3. Weak Theist:
I am very uncertain, but I am included to believe in God

4. Pure Agnostic:
God's existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable

5. Weak Atheist:
I do not know whether God exists, but I'm inclined to be skeptical

6. De-facto Atheist:
I cannot know for certain, but I think God is very improbable

7. Strong Atheist:
I'm 100% sure that there is no God

I wonder if our modern day technology and comfort has driven us away from these types of beliefs. We don't need to be praying to the god of rain because we know how to calculate its arrival. Not only calculate it, but we can estimate its amount, its direction and its exact start time. Has all this stunted our creative minds?

Or perhaps we have become sort of "phobic" to the word belief as our deepest associations to it are religious. In my search for this question I came upon Augustin Fuentes' novel "Why We Believe". He puts it quite simply "Let me be absolutely clear: the human capacity for belief is not only about religion" it deals with the nuance between "the having of faith—*the specific content of belief*—from the capacity to have faith, which arises from our core ability to believe" (Fuentes, 2019). However, I couldn't help but wonder, what if religion did have a role to play? I thought about my own upbringing and how perhaps it had allowed me to indulge in the ideas of personal gods and creatures.

Did being raised religious or non religious have an effect on someone's likelihood to have a personal god? So far, all the stories I had managed to gather were from people who grew up non-religious. Maybe this made sense? Did not having a god to believe in from a young age give people the drive to create a belief system of their own? Or was my data completely skewed because I tended to surround myself with non religious people to begin with. As a starting point to this question I decided to take a deep dive into my own background.

I grew up non-religious, well technically I grew up a member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Some might consider it a religion, others consider it more of a community or fellowship. In short, It's a group of like minded people who gather around the idea of a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" (Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d.). If Omnism had a religion it would be UU. It's the idea that there is truth to be found in all religions, but no one religion holds all the truth. Every sunday morning there would be talks in the sanctuary about what it meant to be a good neighbor or a productive member of society etc… and for the children there was Religious Education (RE) where you would gather with your friends and learn about the many different religions around the world.

Fig. 3

I must say we weren't the most devout church goers, there were times we went almost every week and then months would pass until we found ourselves there again. However this freedom of religion and belief that was instilled in me at a young age definitely created in me this curiosity of the "Divine". Since the world around me wasn't necessarily religious or agnostic or atheist and it was encouraged to stick to your personal principles and beliefs, I grew up with this sense that anything might be possible.

CHAPTER III.

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The Tales

Although my attempts at finding stories was proving to be mostly unfruitful, every now and then I would meet someone who had a story to tell me. The first story I gathered was thanks to a chance encounter. I arrived at my desk one afternoon to find Christophe, an exchange student from last year sitting at a desk nearby. It felt normal to see him there, but strange at the same time. Because as far as I knew he had gone back home to Estonia in June last year and hadn't planned on coming back to visit. So as I had been doing for the last couple weeks I gave him my project spiel and to my delight he told me he would love to talk to me about his personal gods! This is his tale.

The Angelic Beings

Christophe didn't come from a religious family, but rather a family that was well read and interested in religion. He was also raised by his grandmother who had strong superstitions and was said to be somewhat clairvoyant. So at a young age when Christophe's mother mentioned to him the "Angelic Beings" he didn't think much of it. These unnamed Beings his mother told him were there to help him in times of need. If he ever felt sad or needed something he could turn to them for aid and comfort.

So throughout his childhood Christophe would think of these Beings as friends and ask them to keep his family safe and of course, as most young children do, he would also ask them for sweets and pocket money. Sometimes he says it actually worked! He imagined them as two greenish pink floating sparkling orbs with threads, similar to the lights and stripes you get in your eyes when you stare too long at the sun. However, as most childhood fantasies do, the Angelic Beings slowly faded from his everyday life and have now become a distant memory.

Fig. 4

It was an interesting experience talking to someone for the first time about something so long forgotten and personal. He likened it to a bit of a therapy session, which was not my intention, but I supposed it meant he felt he was in a safe space. I understood the unease he might have felt during the conversation as it was the same kind of apprehensiveness I had the first couple of times I spoke to people about the Parking God. Not only this but he mentioned several times that this was something he had never really discussed with someone. Nor was it something he ever thought someone would ask him about. It was a memory from so long ago

and buried so far back it took a while for him to even remember the details. And of course, there were also things he couldn't answer. For example, when I posed the question "What did you call them or what were they named?" he was stumped. He has never really thought of what they were called. His mother had referred to them as something along the lines of angelic beings, creatures or spirits and therefore that was the closest name he could attach to them. But he himself had never named them or even thought of the possibility of naming them. However, despite the lack of name, he did have clear imagery attached to them. He told me it was never just one "being" and it was never three. It was most commonly two or perhaps there could have been more that he was unaware of. He laughed when he told me how he visualized them, saying he probably got eye damage from staring too long at the sun.

The second story I collected was from Zarina in the graphic design program. She slipped it into conversation very casually that she had a cloud friend as a child, but dismissed it by saying it probably wasn't the type of story I was looking for. As she said this a huge smile came across my face and I told her it was exactly the type of story that I was after! Here is Zarina's story.

The Cloud Friend

Zarina's cloud creature first appeared to her when she was a small child. Whenever she was feeling down she would look up at the sky and see a puffy cloud smiling down at her. Over the years she would continue to turn to her unnamed cloud friend for comfort. She would send it a little prayer every now and then to make sure

She would send it a little prayer every now and then to make sure good things would come to her and her loved ones. As well as smaller wishes like helping her pass a difficult test at school. As she grew older and her need for her cloud friend got less and less frequent, something interesting started to happen. The clear cut image that she had of her cloud friend started to evolve. From a puffy white smiley faced cloud to a faceless abstract blob and eventually into nothingness. Nowadays Zarina never calls to her childhood friend, but she still remembers it with fondness and love.

Fig. 5

As I expected, from how my first conversation with Christophe went, Zarina hadn't thought or talked to anyone about her cloud friend before. She seemed a little embarrassed while telling me the story, giggling nervously throughout and saying that she probably sounded crazy. I reassured her that I did not think she sounded crazy and that I and many other people had similar beliefs as chil-

dren. When it came to details about her friend she had very descriptive visual language by which to describe it but yet again, no name.

In my search for personal gods and creatures I did record another very similar story from one of my childhood friends back home. For the sake of time however, in this essay I will not go into full detail about Galina's story. But it is important to note three things. Her personal god was one she had as a small child, she didn't have a specific name for it, but she knew that it was visually represented as a "Sunny Bunny" and it was a kind spirit that had her back and on whom she could call upon in times of need.

It's fascinating how all these stories can be so unique yet at the same time share very major similarities. This brings to mind how different cultures managed to have similar beliefs despite being from opposite parts of the world. For example, mythical creatures like dragons that exist in mythologies around the globe. Each culture attaches its own meaning and symbolism to the dragon but at its core it's a dragon nonetheless. Some beliefs, like certain types of mythical creatures, just seem to "transcend cultural boundaries" (Cherry, 1995). Here are a few of the similarities between these three stories that I gathered. All these gods or beings were created in childhood, at young ages. Then proceeded to slowly disappear from the person's thoughts as they grew older. This of course is not hard to understand, as it is common for children to have imaginary friends, boundless creativity and not yet have developed the skepticism we have as adults. Another interesting factor in common is that all their beings were nameless. Perhaps this is be-

cause the visual representations of their beings were so strong and the faith in them was so personal that there was no need to identify them in such a way.

Last but not least, each visual representation of the children's beings was somehow related to the sky. Christophe imagined his beings as light from the sun. Zarina's friend was a cloud in the sky and Galina's god was a sun bunny. Was this an instinctive human reaction, that things inexplicable and greater than us must live above, in the sky? Or was it perhaps a visual that had been subconsciously incorporated into their imagination from the overwhelm-

the holy.

During the same group conversation where I had learned about Galinas Sun Bunny, another one of my childhood friends Margaret mentioned that she didn't have any personal gods but that she just had Sock Goblins like everyone else. Immediately we all turned to her with confused looks and asked "what are Sock Goblins?". None of us had ever heard of such creatures and she was equally as confused by our lack of sock goblins.

Sock Goblins

Margaret was shocked to learn that not everyone had sock goblins in their home. "If you don't have sock goblins where do all your missing socks go?" It's the only explanation she chooses to believe in, she says. The legend goes that they crawl into your machine right after your clothes have been dried. When they smell so irre-

sistibly good and are still deliciously warm. And they steal a sock or two at a time, so as to not arouse too much suspicion. The reason for their crime you ask? Well, it's to help them build and maintain their little den like homes and nests. Where do they live? No one knows.. What Margaret does know for sure is that they keep coming back for more.
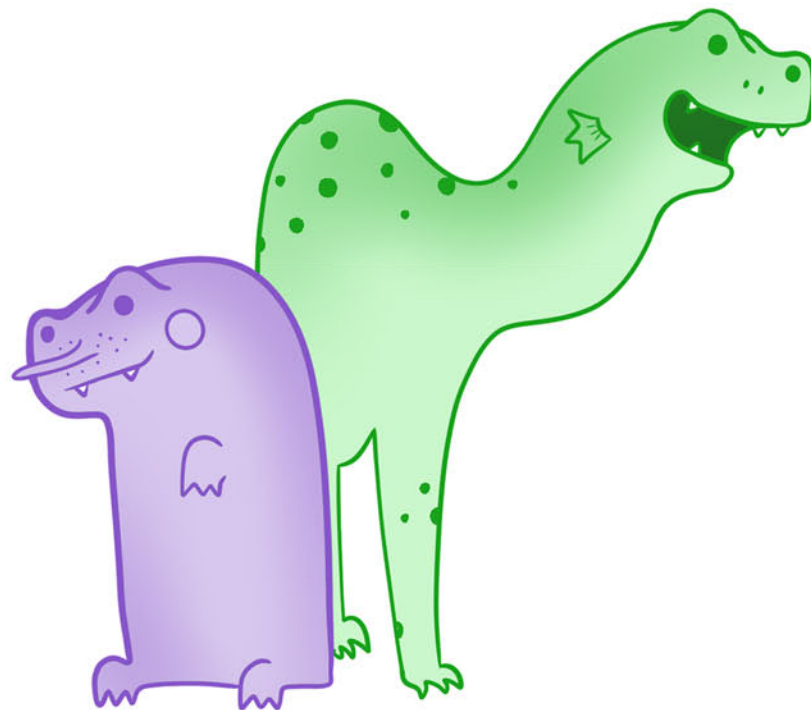

Fig. 6

Now, at this point in the process I still have two more gods and one more creature to discuss in this paper. I wish I could go into further detail about each story and create a little more magic around each god. Unfortunently, there is just so much to explain, disscus and analyze that I have no choice but to pick up the pace.

Traffic Light Gnomes

I collected another story about small creatures from Ben, an American student in the printing department. Ben told me that as a child he used to believe there were small gnomes or elves who lived in traffic lights. Each color of the traffic light had its own personal gnome whose job it was to sit in the light and spend the day turning it off and on.

Photography Gods

Marc from Tasmania, was a friend of a friend who had heard of my quest and was keen on talking to me about his personal god. He told me that he was a professional photographer and that a lot of his shoots took place outdoors. Because of this he was constantly relying on the weather. Eventually he developed a ritual, before each shoot he would say a little prayer to the photography gods. He said he believed there were two photography gods, one was the God of Light and the other was the God of Chance.

Skateboard God

Eli grew up riding skateboards and he and his friends would occasionally ask the skateboard god to help them land a new trick or to make sure they didn't break any bones. For the most part the skateboard god listened to their prayers. However, every now and then the god would demand a sacrifice. They took this to mean that whenever someone fell and scraped their knee it was a sacrifice of the flesh to the skateboard god.

During my search for gods and creatures I came upon certain things that I had not even considered. These were all the different ways in which people have "personal spirits". For example, the most common first connection people would make to my topic was to ghosts. I had several people tell me about ghostly experiences they'd had. Other then ghosts, someone mentioned imaginary friends and someone else brought up the subject of mental health demons. There is so much to unpack about this topic that if I were to go around and collect everyone's gods, creatures, ghosts, demons and imaginary friends etc… this paper would be 100+ pages. So although the stories intrigued me, I decided to stick to my original realm of gods and creatures. These conversations, although not directly related to my topic, were significant in my eventual categorization of the gathered stories.

Looking back at the pantheon of gods and spirits I've collected it is clear they all fall into distinctive categories. The categories I have chosen to divide them into are:

~ The *traditional and benevolent* god-like spirits like those of Christophe, Zarina and Galina.
~ The *unconventional or niche* gods like my parking god, Marc's photography gods and Eli's skateboard god.
~ The *folkloric creatures* like Margarets sock goblins and Ben's stop light gnomes.
~ The *miscellaneous* category for the stories like those of the ghosts and demons I listened to but were a bit on the outer edges of my topic.

CHAPTER IV.

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Designing Gods & Creatures

As I continue to gather stories I am simultaneously starting the process of phase three: trying to visually interpret peoples gods and creatures. Throughout this project I occasionally get the feeling of being an intruder. Although everybody has given me their consent in using their stories I feel a sense of responsibility in expressing and visually creating the beliefs of others.

This feeling must stem from the fact that I have my own personal god. And that although I have been able to start sketching and have ideas for the other gods I am seemingly incapable of visually creating my own. Since I have never had to describe her appearance before or even thought of her appearance prior to this, it's complicated territory. The Parking God is something that my mother and I developed when I was in my early teens. She was something that

to get good parking spots that I started to contemplate her existence. And at that point she was more of an abstract concept than an actual physical thing I could visualize. I wonder if there is a part of me that doesn't actually want to develop her appearance. A part of me that wants to keep her mysterious. That perhaps seeing her in real life will get rid of some of her magic and mystique. I guess I worry that the people I interviewed might feel the same way.

It's important to point out an observation I made early on in the process. The most detailed gods or creatures were the ones created by children. Those whose stories originated during childhood were able to give me, in much greater detail, the visual representations of their gods. While on the other hand the gods and creatures that people had acquired in adulthood were always visually unspecific or non-existent. My interpretation of this is that as a child you might actually "see" or imagine what your god looks like. While as an adult, perhaps less importance is placed on what the god might look like and more importance is placed on the concept and the feeling a personal god might provide you with. As an adult a personal god is more an abstract being or emotion and less of a companion or friend.

It will be an exciting challenge trying to design a god that already has a specific visual identity. I want to be respectful of the details provided to me, but at the same time I must be able to fill in the gaps with my own interpretation. On the other hand, an equally difficult challenge awaits me when it comes time to design the gods for which I was given zero details about. How do I do them justice and represent their story with no visual indication whatsoever?

As an entry point into the design process I decided to create initial simple sketches of what the gods might look like. I started with the stories in which I was provided great detail. I tried not to think too much about aesthetics or my personal style but rather just work off of what I was given. Later on, I will have to decide if I interpret each god in a very different visual style or I create a cohesive red thread throughout the costumes/puppets.

After I had started sketches for the other gods I decided it might be a good idea to give my god, the Parking God a try. However, as previously mentioned, I struggled a lot while doing this and in the end, was back at square one. That's when I realized there are other things that make up and surround gods. Like religious iconography and symbols. Maybe a way to wrap my head around the visual identity of the Parking God was to imagine her as a symbol rather than a creature, at least for the time being. This brainstorming session led to the development of her emblem. A "halo" of sorts, represented as a parking meter. That is when, while I was attempting to turn a parking meter into a religious symbol, I realized the absolutely surreal and ridiculous nature of my subject matter. I just had to laugh at the whole situation.
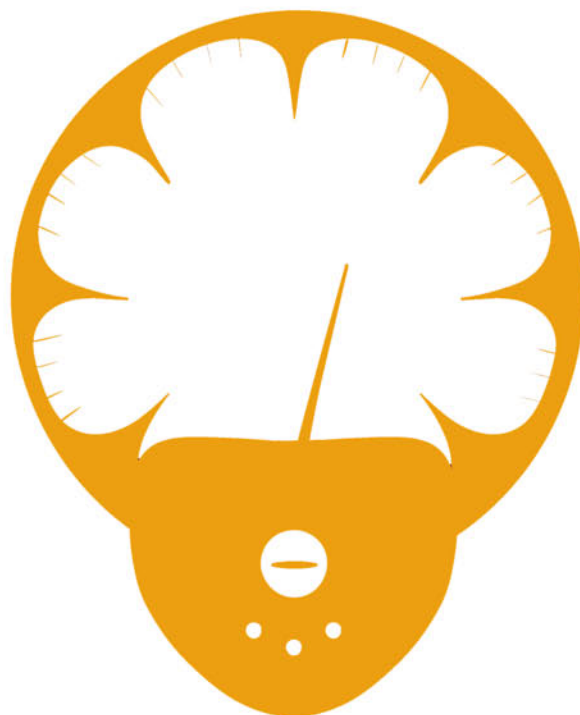

Fig. 7

My first venture into the physical making of these gods was to start creating an archive of animal-like skins and textures. None of the stories I had gathered thus far depicted their gods or creatures as humanlike. Having gone through this process before it was im-

ples and see what I could realistically create. If not I would get all these ideas in my head and feel lost when the time came to make them and it wouldn't be possible.

I started this process by looking at regular animal skins for inspiration and looking at them from a zoomed in perspective. I wanted to create textures and shapes that felt familiar but at the same time weren't linkable to a specific animal.

In my research on textiles I came upon a story of traditional weavers in Indonesia. The Desa village weavers hold a great deal of significance in what it is they weave and the methods used.
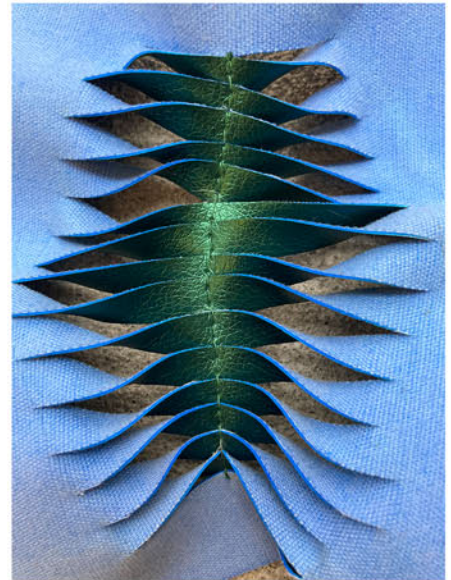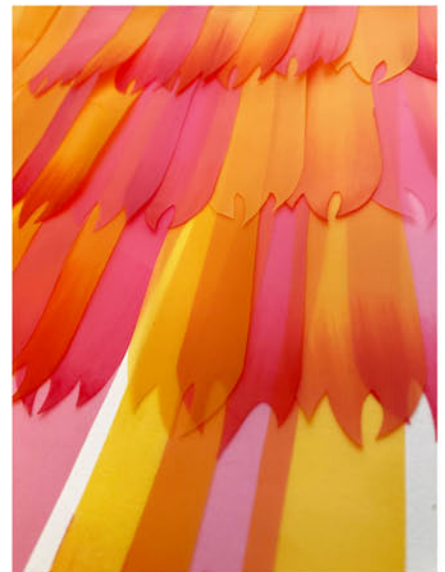

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

fIG. 10

The motifs normally relate to the local small gods of the area for example, one "cloth conveyed the plot of a mythical family's encounter with frog spirits". To the weavers the cloth is something sacred and it "is described anatomically, like a human being." If the weaving is particularly difficult to create or relates to one of the dangerous small gods the weaver will even leave food under the loom at night as a gift for the ancestral spirits (Ostling, 2018). Finding this account made me feel like my textile creation process had been so incredibly shallow. Of course, how could I compare my 4 month old project to centuries worth of traditional practice. But learning about all the amazing lore and rituals the Indonesian weavers put into their work was the fresh perspective I needed to change some things up.

CHAPTER IV.

Conclusion

In an attempt to take a step back and gain new insights on my work I decided to find a way of adding more depth and meaning to my process. I didn't feel it was right to move on to the next phase of the process until I had unlocked this deeper connection I was searching for. How could I let the personal gods know I was grateful for their stories? Then it hit me. I could build them an altar. The altar started off as a simple forgotten cabinet. However, over the last couple of weeks, I have painted it and slowly started adding gifts. Inside I have placed candy and money for Christophe's Angelic

Beings. A vial with leather for the skin sacrifice to Eli's Skateboard Gods. A toy traffic light for Ben's Traffic Light Gnomes. A sock for Margaret's Sock Goblins and the list goes on. I also asked each person to write a prayer to put in the altar.

Once it all starting taking shape I invited Zarina to come and take a moment out of her busy day to visit it. She sat in front of the altar as candles flickered nearby, and she delivered her handwritten prayer to her Cloud Friend. The experience was calming and reflective. If so many of my contributors weren't abroad, I would have invited them all to experience the same peaceful moment at the feet of the altar. I have yet to deliver my prayer to the Parking God, but once I do, I am hoping to find the connection I am searching for to be able to confidently move on to the next and most daunting phase: making the gods.

THE END

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Figure 1.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, April). *Third Culture Creature.* Wool, leather, glass beads, cotton thread, cotton muslin.

Figure 2 .
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, September). *Do You Have a Personal God?.* A3 print.

Figure 3.
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Figure 4.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, October). *Angelic Beings.* Digital art.

Figure 5.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, October). *Cloud Friend*. Digital art.

Figure 6.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, October). *Sock Goblin*. Digital art.

Figure 7.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, December). *Parking God Symbol*. Digital art.

Figure 8.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, October). *Textile Sample 3*. Faux leather, , nylon thread.

Figure 9.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, October). *Textile Sample 1*. Pvc, marker, nylon thread.

Figure 10.
Sophie S Cabrera. (2022, October). *Textile Sample 2*. Pvc, nylon thread.