The Supernatural, the Beautiful, and the Halo

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Introduction

My thesis project is a revolving, evolving set of images and items that don’t all follow the rules that I made for them (it’s about haloes, it’s about history, it’s not about me) or that others made for them (it should be experimental, it should be unconventional, it should be innovative). My project was going to be about haloes, and it is, but it’s more than that now: it’s about found images, the faces of strangers, feelings of being watched and being avoided and being hated. It’s still about haloes, but it’s about giving personal meaning to things that are inherently anonymous, it’s about birthing things that are difficult to look at but even more difficult to look away from. It’s about translating thoughts and memories into images that make sense to me, and maybe only me. It was supposed to be about haloes, but it already broke that rule. It was supposed to be outside of my comfort zone and push boundaries but it broke that rule, too. The images that I make are images most people have seen before, images that can be found anywhere at any time, images that many of us have probably already seen several times today, in a magazine or advertisement or on social media. The objects that I make are things one might find in one’s basement without remembering how they came into one’s possession. This project, by the nature of it, was supposed to follow a lot of rules, many of which it broke. This project is a cluster, an amalgamation of things I created because I felt like I had to, not because anyone told me to, and in that way they are scattered, yet still intertwined. This project was supposed to be about haloes, and it still is—but to describe it more accurately, this project is about what I’m interested in, which I can distill into three categories: the supernatural, the beautiful, and the halo.
The Supernatural

My interest in the supernatural, or more generally in feelings of unease and discomfort that can be elicited from an image, certainly stems from an interest in the media that I and many of those in my generation consume, namely an interest in popular culture. In many cultures, significantly in the two cultures I know best, that of the US and that of Japan, the eerie and the supernatural have ties in history that emerge perhaps subconsciously in the media that is created and consumed.

The Western history of the horrific and the supernatural is full of imagery that still elicits a reaction of fear, often coupled with a bit of confused amusement. A poster of Hieronymus Bosch’s infamous triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, hangs over my bed in my dorm room, as it has for the past several years; I purchased it at a chain comic store in Boston, where I was told I was lucky to get the last one in stock, a testament to its popularity (Fig 1). The same image can be found on a pair of Artist Collection Dr. Martens boots, priced at upwards of $100, as well as on limited edition leather tote bags, cell phone cases, and so on. Suffice to say, the piece has been re-embraced as an honorary part of contemporary popular culture, an embrace that I have also bought into, and which can be attributed to the triptych’s enigmatic dark imagery. The painting is immaculately detailed, and despite its spot over my bed where I have glanced up at it from my desk too many times to count, I’m sure there are still details I haven’t noticed; the bird-headed creatures consuming human bodies, the man who is impaled by the strings of a harp, the crowd of people swarming out of a lake into what appears to be a large egg, and the hordes of mysterious nonexistent animals that crawl throughout the image, are just a few

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1 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 15th century, Oil on oak panels, 87x153in, 15th century.
examples of the Northern Renaissance idea of horror that has been inducted as a sect of current popular culture.

Fig 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*

The cryptic and eerie nature of Bosch’s magnum opus also surfaces in the work of his contemporaries; the intricate compositions of Jan van Eyck\(^3\) and Albrecht Dürer feature similar images of gory deaths, crumpled human corpses and otherworldly creatures from hell. Unsurprisingly, the mild obsession with horror also appears in historical art from Japan, such as the uncanny and sometimes comical illustrations of the Edo-period ghost story collection *Shokoku Hyakumonogatari*,\(^4\) and it has resurfaced in the surreal contemporary work of artists like Takano Aya and even the notorious Murakami Takashi, both of whom incorporate grotesque imagery and what might be described as body horror into their extraordinarily complex compositions. The draw of the supernatural, the horrific and the inexplicable proves an ever-potent source of interest in many corners of the world, one that has yet to be escaped.

\(^3\) Jan van Eyck and Hubert van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, 15th century, 15th century.
\(^4\) Jibunsha and Henshūbu, 江戸諸国百物語: 諸国怪談奇談集成 (東京: 人文社, 2005).
Outside of the niche art world and in the more general popular culture, an interest in the supernatural can also be seen in the rising popularity of the horror genre in film and fashion; it is in the mass consumption of shows like *Stranger Things*\(^5\) with its faceless monsters and *Black Mirror*\(^6\) with its psychological horror, it is in the 2018 Fall/Winter Gucci fashion show\(^7\) with its ghastly beheaded and dragon-cradling models (Fig 2 and 3), it is in the popular Instagram users like MLMA (MeLoveMeAlot)\(^8\) and Mimi Choi\(^9\) who paint their faces distorted, Photoshop themselves into beautiful demons. Cultural concepts of the terrifying and inherent human fears have been a rich source of near-sadistic artistic inspiration for what must be centuries, but which is emerging now stronger than ever.

For the past several years, while trying to make art I’ve felt the desire to do what I can describe only as disconcert others to the best of my ability; during my first year introductory

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\(^5\) Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer, “Stranger Things” (Jackson, Georgia: Netflix, n.d.).
\(^6\) Charlie Brooker, “Black Mirror” (United Kingdom, n.d.).
\(^7\) Gucci Fall Winter 2018 Fashion Show - YouTube, accessed May 24, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xc-ZgpKBDI.
drawing class I created a 12-foot-tall shadowed silhouette with at least 20 eyes that I discreetly hung in a corner of the studio room, at the end of a wall that received little light, hoping someone would see it from their peripheral vision before anything else. My second year, still obsessed with these human-esque shapes, I made several 6-foot-tall versions of them out of wooden board, painted them dark and strung them up in a forest on campus, and endeavor that was the result of an urge to entice a reaction, even if I never saw that reaction (Fig 4). The simple thought that someone might catch a glimpse of a larger-than-human shadowy figure in the woods, perhaps from a car window, lined up so nicely with what I felt I wanted to do with my art that I simply had to do it.

![Fig 4. Figures that I placed in the woods in 2015.](image)

My senior project has no shadowed figures, no large sculptural work, but I feel that I’ve still been channeling that indescribable desire. Not unlike the desire to inspire, or educate, or preach through art, the desire to instill fear likely has a common root in the aspiration to alter the way a viewer thinks, even if just slightly, even if only for a second, which I think many, if not all of those who create work can relate to. To that end, I have endeavored throughout the year to
create images that, among other things, disrupt the viewer. In some that goal comes across more clearly than others—a figure with no face can hardly be described without some element of fear. However, in other images that goal is more discrete, indiscernible, and perhaps it doesn’t get across to many, or most; perhaps it comes across as a depth of emotion, a peculiar but persistent glancing away from the viewer, or maybe a concentration of thought. No matter the interpretation, I strive to make images that hint at a disturbance, a feeling that something is off. If not an imminent sense of disconnect, then maybe just a shadow of it: just the silhouette of dread in the distance, unnoticed by some, anticipated by others.

**The Beautiful**

I think defining beauty is futile, and I’m not interested in that. I’m interested in what we, people here in the west, and arguably people in many parts of the world, see as beautiful: it’s easy to demonize it. It’s easy to look in disgust at what we’ve done, what other people have done, how a single concept of beauty became so warped that it has dominated all others, how it changes the way we act, sometimes inspires us, and in fact sometimes kills us. It’s easy to hate it all. And I participate in that too, of course. But there’s something else: can’t we all recognize it when we see it? Can’t we all say, that’s beauty, when we see it? Regardless of what the rest of the world says, regardless of how it might contradict our own desire not to participate in harmful social views, rather than “that’s not true beauty”, isn’t it more like “that is beauty, but not all of beauty”? What I’m saying is, there exists a concept of what is thought of as beauty, and it has its issues, but despite the issues, is it not still beauty?

That being said, I’m interested in the beauty that one comes into contact with when engaging with media. When I, like many others, open up a social media app, it’s what I’m
confronted with. My issues with the social repercussions of the mass consumption and production of this “beauty” aside, I can’t deny it: the images are beautiful. Images of strangers: women, almost always women, almost never smiling, almost always looking anywhere but at the viewer. I know none of them and they mean nothing to me, or anyone, maybe not even the person who posted them: they are images of people but they are people reduced to images. Viewers absorb these images of beautiful people, beautiful strangers, and when I see them I see an opportunity to incorporate them into an image, an image that tells a story. A story that has nothing to do with this beautiful stranger, of course, but a story I can tell through them. They are nameless, storyless faces upon which I can project what I want—strangers that I can deify.

This is where my process becomes relevant: I spend a lot of time on social media, maybe less than some others, but still more than I think I should; a lot of what I see is faces. Images of beautiful women, beautiful clothes, beautiful lighting. Images that are strange to me in how personal and yet impersonal they are—because they are portraits, after all, but severed from their names, paces, dates and lives. I began collecting these images, saving them on social media sites, namely Instagram, for later perusing.

I can force myself to think of an image to paint, but it likely won’t mean anything. The most interesting images that I create are the ones I make for myself, the ones that are translations of a thought, a phrase I can’t get out of my head, an experience I can’t forget, a problem, a feeling. For example, the phrase “what will become of me?” in my mind looks like someone with holes missing in their head and their torso, looking at you, the question in their eyes like they haven’t asked it yet (Fig 6). But that image, of course, was also influenced by my knowledge of haloes: the manderlas that appear behind the Buddha in 11th century Japanese frescoes, one

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10 *Amida Buddha on a Cloud, the Central Panel of the Aminda Triptych*, 11th century, Colors on silk, 11th century.
disk behind the head and one behind the body (Fig 5). These images, “translations”, don’t exist in a vacuum: they are descriptions in a language where the words are symbols that mean something to me. And in that way, they are always evolving, new images always being created—I don’t think “what will become of me?” looked like anything in particular until I knew what Japanese Buddhist frescoes looked like.

After translating the thought, feeling, or experience into a generalized idea of the image’s composition, it comes to the point that I need real humans to fill the gaps of “someone”. My goals when making an image are two-fold: to translate the thought, which only requires the contents of the image (i.e. the pose, the type of halo, the general tone), but also to create some effect on the viewer, which requires the presence of a real and unique human face, for which I need a reference photo. Additionally, at the most base level, faces are simply what I like to paint: the distribution of colors over the skin, the contrast of the eyes; faces are what I like to paint and to distort. In order to find a reference photo, I turn to social media; I look at my archives of beautiful strangers and select the ones that fit the glance, fit the expression, fit the mood, the lighting, the color palette I have in mind. Of course, all of these things can be altered, but the
overall feeling has to match my mental image. In the end, the images I make usually aren’t recognizable as the person they began as; in fact, I regularly post my paintings on the same social media sites where I found my source images, and I have yet to experience someone recognizing the individual I’ve painted. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that I alter my images; I remove and add eyes, I give and take hands and fingers, I change hair colors, styles, and lengths, I steal away parts of these strangers and give them new parts. Most importantly, I give them haloes, or the lack thereof. I make them into translations, and in doing so, I give them new stories, new meanings, I representationally give them sainthood. They are hardly the same people they began as, so it’s no wonder they end up unrecognizable (Fig 7 and 8).

Fig 7. Process of making *The Attachment*

Fig 8. Process of making *The Diamond*
I think there’s something poignant about warping beauty. More than changing their identity, I often distort these images of strangers; they are still beautiful, of course, but what does beauty become when it appears in the form of a woman with dead pupil-less eyes, a woman with 19 eyes, a woman with a cut-out hole in her forehead, a woman with no face at all? I still think they’re beautiful, and maybe that’s not even a question to most people. But I think they are elevated, their narratives convoluted, and it becomes impossible to think of them as simply “beautiful people”. No, one can’t ignore 19 eyes very easily. To consider something still beautiful while also falling so deep into the uncanny valley is an interesting set of mental gymnastics, an intersection of the supernatural and the beautiful that sits in the back of my mind, drives me to make these images. Indeed, I wouldn’t be interested in the beautiful if I wasn’t interested in corrupting it.

The focus of my project is the array of images of people that I’ve made, but it wouldn’t be complete without its counterparts, the collection of tiny eyes, tiny containers, the relics and reliquaries which I’ve made. The “beauty” I see in these objects is not unlike what I see in my paintings—the images come from the same source, social media, and they are warped in a similar way. My relics, they are based off of beautiful eyes painted with expensive makeup and glorified on the Internet, which I replicate as drawings, and glue haphazardly into cheap metal pendants that I’ve bought from Etsy. My relics are eyes embroidered by hand onto the wrong kind of fabric, they are fake flowers and Polaroid photos jammed faux-poetically into $1 glass containers. They mean so little to anyone but me. My relics are kitschy in my favorite way, they are kitschy in the way that my paintings are: they are easy, they are simple and flat, they are taken out of context and warped and deformed, and yet one can’t deny that they are still something pleasing to look at (Fig 9 and 10). It is the desire to look away but the inability to.
The Halo

My interest in haloes undeniably arises from an interest in religious themes and religious art; some of my greatest inspirations are the surreal haloes that interrupt otherwise realistic paintings during the Renaissance period—the floating gold disks of Masaccio’s *Tribute Money*,¹¹ the now-black haloes of Giotto’s *Last Supper*,¹² the excruciatingly detailed halo behind the Virgin Mary in Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*¹³ (Fig 11)—along with similarly extravagant haloes that appear in the Heian period of Japan—the hundreds of red-and-gold mandorlas in Byoudo-in’s *Womb Mandala*,¹⁴ the carefully carved, gilded halo rings on Jocho’s wooden Bosatsu statues.¹⁵ The larger-than-life frescoes and murals of temples and churches, the holy items crafted and preserved so carefully for reasons that can’t be explained by any logic besides devotion, have served as inspiration as I’ve gone about completing this project. However, to talk about religion is to enter muddy waters, muddied by the current climate that is so polarized

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¹³ van Eyck and van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*.
¹⁴ *Womb Mandala*, 9th century, Heian period, Ink on silk, 9th century, Heian period.
between rejection and obsession with religion. But even the current art and popular culture that rejects religion often still prefers to use it, to warp it in some way, to incorporate it, as if there is an inability to let go.

![Section of Jan van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece](image)

I’ve never been a religious person, but have always been surrounded by religious art. There was a time that I attended church regularly, and by “church” I mean in a second-floor office complex in Miami that was rented out by my best friend’s parents, but I saw that time spent reading the Bible and listening to sermon as necessary compensation for the time that I would get to spend rollerblading with my friends afterwards. My well-disguised disinterest ensured that little of what I learned was actually retained, and today I remember practically none of it, with the exception of the rollerblading, of course. In that office-church there was no religious art, just words and prayers; but then again, it wasn’t a traditional church setting, though I would have appreciated something to look at while not paying attention.

Despite my faux-attendance of church, I managed to encounter a comparatively large amount of religious art throughout my childhood and especially from high school and onward, when I began genuinely to study art history. It might just be my experience, but one can’t quite
escape art inspired by religion; not only in museums, but in many households, in most thrift stores, and in several mall kiosks, you can’t avoid a small shrine here or there, a resin Jesus statue or a keychain Buddha. There’s a certain ability of religious objects and images to, besides the general purpose of reminding their owner of some belief system, inspire a feeling. Whether it be fear, joy, or anything in between, the change in mindset, the interruption of thought, is there. In full-fledged artworks—the statues, frescoes, triptychs—that feeling is exemplified, and the work often exists to elicit an amplified sensation, a more extreme emotion. The Ghent Altarpiece with its 12 panels unfolded over a place of devotion deepened the spirituality being experienced there, and the Womb Mandala at Byoudo-in incited tranquility, transporting the viewer to paradise.

While these works were certainly made for their respective worshippers, the inexplicable evocation of emotion, a sense of the surreal, the disconnection of other thoughts, all of the intended effects still retain their potency in much of that surviving work. To followers and passive viewers alike, many religious works still exercise their power. I think it has something to do with imagery that strays from reality—extra limbs, glowing body parts, and the like. In particular, I think it often has something to do with haloes. The concept of some form of circle, sphere, disc, or ring—always circular, to perfection—emanating from a being, evokes a sense of something being beyond comprehension, not able to be understood, sometimes with fear, sometimes with wonder, sometimes with just a raise of eyebrows.

Even without an immediate religious context, the halo as an icon, an iconography, has its roots in otherwise secular art, and a strong presence in much of popular culture. The most direct example of this, and incidentally the first Google hit on the word “halo”, would be the Halo
video game series, about which I know very little.\textsuperscript{16} Despite my lack of firsthand video game experience, I find it telling that this wildly popular game bases its story on Bible verses, oddly religious extraterrestrial societies, and content that hints at religion just enough to create an effect in the viewer. In addition to the video game side of popular culture, one prominent root of my inspiration, given that much of my source imagery comes from social media, is the ever-evolving borderline-performance-art nature of high fashion shows. I’ve taken inspiration from the Jean Paul Gaultier Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2007 collection,\textsuperscript{17} with its haunting billowy figures and extravagant, ethereal haloes, as well as from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2018 show,\textsuperscript{18} featuring models nonchalantly cradling their own severed heads and women with three eyes, among other almost pseudo-religious themes that somehow ring just as unsettling as they do desirable. There is an attraction to the inexplicable, the otherworldly, the religious—even when, or perhaps especially when, the actual religion is stripped from it.

In history, the halo is said to have originated in many places at once, and the definition of what might be a “halo” becomes blurred; ancient Egyptian art featured red or gold spheres hovering above the heads of deities as far back as 3000BCE, while the first halo “as we know it” appeared around the head of the Greek sun God Helios around 400BCE, and haloes appeared in Buddhist art as early as the first century AD.\textsuperscript{19} The halo endured a tumultuous journey in Christian art, first appearing on the head of Jesus in the 4th century, only to evolve from a gilded floating disk to a modest hair-thin ring by the 1400s, which we now see today on the heads of

\textsuperscript{17}Jean Paul Gaultier Haute Couture Spring Summer 2007 - YouTube, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HweekwrZlXQ.
\textsuperscript{18}Gucci Fall Winter 2018 Fashion Show - YouTube.
angels on drug store greeting cards. In Asia, the halo takes many forms: a series of colored rings behind the Buddha’s head in 7th century Chinese and Japanese frescoes, a double aureole in the 10th century, one gold disk behind the head and one behind the body, evolving with every new regime and government-approved artistic style.

The halo has a complicated history and goes by many names—the nimbus, aura, aureole, glory, corona. In its iterations, what seems to matter less is the exact visual object; whether it comes as a disk, a sphere, a ray of light, or a cloud, it seems that the concept of it has more weight than the thing itself. I’m sure Haute Couture and Microsoft video game studios have little interest in religious propagandizing, and it’s likely that the audience for such media isn’t looking for piety in them either, but the presence of those religious hints retain enough hold over viewers that they are useful completely outside of religious contexts. Similarly, throughout my project I’ve adapted not only historically accurate haloes into my work, but have substituted fabrics, made-up circular designs (Fig 12), diagrams of the sun (Fig 13), astronomical phenomena, and other unrelated objects for haloes—and have found that they read the same way. Even with its religious connotations removed, the halo is recognizable, we want to recognize the halo, see it where it may or may not be, the halo is burned into our collective consciousness. The spots in one’s vision after looking at the sun, an abbreviated gesture indicating the head of a holy figure, a ring of ice around the moon, the halo is where we want it to be.

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21 Amida Paradise Mural at Horyuji, 711, 711.
22 Amida Buddha on a Cloud, the Central Panel of the Aminda Triptych.
Perhaps as a testament to its power, one cannot escape the halo in popular culture or in art. Much of my inspiration comes from artists, many of whom I’ve encountered on social media, making them part of the cycle of image-sharing and stranger-viewing, artists who inexplicably deal with the religious, and often with the halo itself, in their otherwise secular or even decidedly anti-organized-religion art. Canadian artist Elly Smallwood\(^23\) and her fleshy, almost gory images feature half-gilded, skin-like haloes; Australian printmaker Neva Hosking\(^24\) weaves barely-discernible floating circles into her images, like haloes of reflected light; the terrifying, arguably eye-haloes dominate the images made by painter Emilio Villalba.\(^25\) All part of the cycle of creation and consumption on social media, we are informed by and continue to inform others of the same imagery that has proved influential throughout history. Even outside of social media, the ominous red halo appears in Munch’s *Madonna*\(^26\) (Fig 14), golden rays of light emanate from

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the heads of Kerry James Marshall’s poignant portrait paintings\textsuperscript{27} (Fig 15), and even Jenny Holzer’s circular LED light pieces\textsuperscript{28} can be called haloes in the same way we call a ring of light-reflecting ice around the moon a halo. The halo has persisted over time and space, and my usage of it in my project is only an extension of a universal ongoing, inexplicable desire to use that symbol as a tool of visual language; the halo can be seen anywhere, found anywhere.

Alongside my halo-focused figurative paintings are a series of smaller, more difficult to explain objects. My collection of tiny colored pencil-drawn eyes and my containers of gilded teeth, fake flowers, and Polaroid photos are what I can only describe as relics and reliquaries. Again, as with the halo, I’m not so much interested in their specific religious designations as I am in the general sense of their importance. The religion is important, of course, but it says something when an object can be removed from its religion and still revered. My eye pendants began as commodities—specifically made to be purchased, specifically online, specifically by the same people who provide me with the source images I rely on for the eyes themselves, and

\textsuperscript{27} Kerry James Marshall, \textit{The Land That Time Forgot}, n.d., n.d.
by extension the rest of my work. But as I created them, and perhaps I knew it even earlier, it became clear that the reason I wanted to make these objects couldn’t be so different from the inexplicable desire that compelled me to focus so intently on haloes, on deifying strangers.

The eyes are cheap. I am dedicated to the cheapness; I buy empty pendants online, I use inexpensive paper and my father’s old colored pencils from the 1980s. I use these things that are at my disposal, not unlike the materials I paint with and the threads I embroider with, in order to make an image that has more importance than it originally did. Importance is relative, of course, but there’s something undeniable about putting a drawn eye in a fancy fake-gilded oval and putting a price tag on it. In the same way that there’s something undeniable about painting strangers with religious iconographies and hanging them up on a wall like they mean something. I’ve had people mistake the figures I paint for Madonna (the singer rather than the religious figure, tragically), Angelina Jolie, and the like. It makes sense: they look important, so they must be.

The eyes look important, and maybe they are, in some way. Maybe the act of spending time creating them, going out of my way to decorate them and embellish them makes them important, just by the nature of it. And that process, of course, is not too different from what it takes to make a relic. A tooth, a bone, an otherwise crude piece of human flesh past its expiration date—but gilded, put in a reliquary decorated with precious stones, placed on a pedestal, prayed to, revered. The object itself has an arguable—and regularly argued—degree of importance, but the shrine built around it is unquestionable. The decoration and time spent, the dedication, proves the importance, maybe not of the object, but of the act. The relic is just a byproduct of a decidedly important ritual, from the painstaking process of gilding to the careful drawing of a human eye smaller than an inch wide.
Important or not, some things are not made to last forever. Eyes are weak tissue, they are the first to go; bones and teeth, however will remain. With the passing of time it’s impossible to know what will become of a relic, but the fact that it lasted past its expiration point already is sometimes good enough. I think there’s something to be said about leaving things behind, making your own relics; to put something fragile in an even more fragile container, ink inside paper inside glass, and to will it to survive—frankly, it’s something I’ve never experienced before. My eye pendants are commodities, they are meant to come and go, and in that way I have to not care what happens to them after the transaction; does the eye get ripped out, scribbled on top of, reduced to pulp by the rain? I can’t know, and it won’t help to wonder, but they’re made in such a way that they’re supposed to last. Paper inside metal, sealed on top. But my reliquaries are different; they are fragile, simultaneously built to last and to break (Fig 16 and 17). They are part of no transaction—in fact, hardly anyone knows they even exist. I am putting them in the ground, as one of my final acts before I leave this place, and so I have to offer them up to the world without hoping for anything. Whether a crane digs into the soil and they are crushed, turned to trash that they might as well be, or found by someone, or simply forgotten and ruined over time, it has to not matter. And yet, one simply can’t make a reliquary and also cease to care about it. The act of making, after all, is what makes it important.
There’s no easy way to sum up this project, no way to tie it together nicely, with its different moving parts and oddly shaped parts and parts that don’t make sense. What I can say is that it has to do with non-religious religion, it has to do with giving stories and statuses to strangers and abandoned objects, it has to do with the unsettling and with induced feelings of dread; in short, it has to do with the supernatural, the beautiful, and the halo.
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