

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

*Astrophile*

by

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“I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.”

- Sarah Williams

Over the past several months I have been exploring the concept of personal protection. Security comes in many different forms, and everyone has their own beliefs or systems regarding their personal wellbeing. There is no limit to the imagination of humans when it comes to finding something to use as a talisman of protection. Personally, the stars have always been a source of comfort; they guard against the small hurts and invasive thoughts that usually come at night.

Many ancient structures, such as Mayan pyramids and Stonehenge, are results of the very human need to understand the Sun, moon, stars, and planets. In fact, “NASA continues to pay close attention to the Sun today through ground and satellite based observatories, still seeking to understand this star as a dominant influence on our lives”.<sup>1</sup> Many ancient civilizations worshiped the Sun, as they had no guarantee that it would rise every morning. As the human species evolves and advances, we sometimes forget that the Sun rising could be described as a miracle.

My family and I love camping, and go as often as possible. I always feel safe when we are camping together. There is something peaceful about sleeping under the stars next to the people who you care for the most. My happiest memories are of these times; spending days at a time outside relaxes and centers me; being inside a tent under

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<sup>1</sup> Dunbar, Brian. "Exploring the Sun Through Ancient Civilizations." NASA. March 16, 2005. Accessed May 01, 2016. [http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/solarsystem/sun\\_earthday.html#.VydnUpMrKt8](http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/solarsystem/sun_earthday.html#.VydnUpMrKt8).

the stars is my sacred space. I love watching the sky before going to sleep, and waking up with the sun always feels special. I wanted to create a space that combines the peaceful feeling in a tent, the protection of the stars, and the joy of being close to people you care about.

Having viewers be able to experience this piece as a collective is important to this installation. The camaraderie felt while camping with a group of people is an integral part of the peace and protection I associate with camping. I want viewers to feel safe and relaxed when interacting with this piece.

Humans have always been fascinated by the universe we live in. Storytelling has been incredibly important to societies for entertainment and for sharing memories. Most cultures have constellations that act both as a reminder of these stories and as a way to make the heavens seem a little less vast and empty. These stories span a breadth of time in the overarching human experience, as do the stars that make up the constellations. “Not all starlight is the same age. Some of it is millions or even billions of years apart even though it hits your eye at the same time. So the night sky isn’t a single moment in the universe but rather a patchwork of time billions of years in breadth”.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporarily, most people visit planetariums to hear about the stories that past cultures have written in the stars. In my hometown in the Adirondack Mountains, there is an environmental education center which runs a planetarium program called “StarLab.” There, you are shown the major Algonquin and Iroquois constellations and are told the accompanying stories. The memory of being in that interactive space, sitting on a

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<sup>2</sup> Patenaude, Matt. Comment on "A Patchwork of Time." March 08, 2015. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://blog.mattpatenaude.com/a-patchwork-of-time/>.

cushion on the floor surrounded by friends, and staring up in awe at the projected images is just as evocative today, and it is this that inspired me to build my own interactive planetarium. I wanted to create a space where people can enjoy watching the transition from day to night to day with friends and strangers. It is my hope that the experience will have a little bit of that magic that brings people together.

This project has been about exploring the cosmos through glass and light. I wanted to create an interactive piece that emulated the light from the sun striking the earth, following the night, dawn, day, twilight cycle. I wanted to pay tribute to the Sun, and let people enjoy the beautiful transitions of sunlight that happens so slowly it often go unnoticed.

The Basilique Notre-Dame de Montréal in Québec was also a major inspiration for this piece. In a stairwell in the back of the basilica, there is a huge stained glass window that has always reminded me of sunlight, and the transition from day to night. The window looks nothing like any other in the cathedral. The panels are made of thick, rough chunks of glass, arranged in a twisting pattern. Though it looks almost unrefined when compared to the smooth, delicate windows that fill the rest of the basilica, when the sun strikes the side of the cathedral, the window completely fills the hallway it resides in. Walking through the saturated light that this window projects has always been a spiritual experience for me.

My work has always been influenced by light, especially by the colored light cast onto floors and walls by stained glass windows. I have always wanted to capture light in some fashion, and my attempts have morphed from trying to literally catch it in my

hands to more tangibly catching light by taking photographs. Light and color are very important in my work. In previous work I have attempted to emulate that light projection without actually using leaded stained glass windows. The objects that created the colored light projection did not matter so much as the process of exploring an object's ability to facilitate abstraction through its interaction with light. The process of creating these objects lead to the creation of an environment that transformed the glass ornaments comprising the piece into a larger experience for the viewer. I am a process based artist, and therefore working with materials is the most important part of creating a work of art. This is one reason why I am so drawn to both glassblowing and photography, as both disciplines are very process-based and allow me to truly enjoy the creative process. The creation of stained glass objects became more and more fascinating, leading me to creating my final project using this method.

Olafur Eliasson's perception-altering installations have also greatly influenced my work. I find his ability to transform a space and manipulate our awareness of ourselves and reality fascinating, and I wanted to create my own installation that transports viewers into an ethereal, unreal place in the same way his installations do.

James Turrell is another artist who has greatly influenced this piece. In particular, *Meeting* (1986), one of Turrell's series of "skyspaces", impacted my installation and the way I think about the sky. *Meeting* is a site-specific installation that has been at MOMA since 1986, and is comprised of a rectangular hole cut out of the ceiling, with soft orange lights illuminating the walls.<sup>3</sup> The orange walls offset the blue of the sky, creating an

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<sup>3</sup> "MoMA PS1: Exhibitions: James Turrell: Meeting." MoMA PS1: Exhibitions: James Turrell: Meeting. Accessed May 07, 2016. <http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/170>.

intense color contrast that highlights the continuous change in hue which occurs throughout the day. The intention of this piece was to create a silent space of reflection, in which viewers can contemplate the meeting of the space they are in with the meeting of the space of the sky. *Meeting's* focus on creating a space for viewers to reflect on the color of the sky influenced and formed one of the main purposes behind my own installation.

The installation I have created is an abstracted story of the sun's journey throughout the day. It is a story told through glass and light, a tale about the seemingly improbable yet quotidian light spectacle we witness every day, but that is often ignored. I have built a half-geodesic dome and lined the interior with white muslin, which is the planetarium structure that the light is projected onto. The lining is soft and billowy, creating the illusion of being surrounded by cushions. It is meant to make the viewer feel safe within the space, imitating the delicate barrier of a camping tent and the feeling of protection they evoke. After stooping through an opening in the dome, the viewer is invited to stand around a wooden box in the center of the space, which contains a stained glass globe comprised of triangles affixed to a rod and crank with a spotlight underneath it. When it is lit from underneath, the globe projects the colors to emulate an abstracted version of the transition from day to twilight to night to dawn. Viewers are invited to turn the globe using the handle it is connected to, manipulating the projection. It is my hope that people reflect upon the projection, and become more aware of the spectacular phenomenon that occurs every day.

It is my hope that this installation will transport viewers to an unreal, ethereal space in which they feel safe. Uncertainty and fear of the dark greatly affect our outlook on life and the way we perceive the world we live in. The ability to find beauty in the world is instrumental in conquering and overpowering these sometimes overwhelming negative influences. The vibrancy of the colors that comprise the sky, when you take the time to notice them, can help drive away negative emotions and thoughts. The kaleidoscopic, abstracted interpretation of the sky that I have created will hopefully evoke the same calming, serene feelings in viewers that watching a sunset does.

*Astrophile* combines my interest in stained glass, the cosmos, and light, creating a magical immersive experience. I want to convey the joy I felt during these experiences, and the wonder and amazement I feel when I look at stained glass and the sky. This piece is also a reminder that uncertainty and darkness, though prevalent throughout the human experience, are only temporary. I want people to feel safe in this space, and remind them that while the night can be long, there is always comfort to be found in the stars.

## Bibliography

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