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IN THE NAME OF

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Quote	5
In The Name Of	6
Maturity test	7-8
Introduction	9-11
The installations technicalities	12-13
Composition	14-16
1. Lowest level	17-19
2. Mid-level	20-24
3. Highest level	25-30
Conclusion	31-32
Quote	33
Bibliography	34-36
Image credits	36

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Abstract

This thesis project explores the intersections of contemporary art and societal tensions through a large-scale, three-tiered altar installation titled *In The Name Of*. Drawing from religious symbolism and contemporary socio-political discourse, the work challenges notions of power, identity, gender, and digital influence. By reconstructing the traditional Catholic altar structure, the installation serves as both a visual and conceptual framework, that interrogates modern societal issues, and the evolving discourse on representation and ideology. By merging personal narrative with broader societal critique, *In The Name Of* act as a vessel for collective introspection. It urges audiences to confront the pervasive influence of media, the commodification of cultural and religious symbols, and the ongoing struggle between representation and reality.

"We are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind"

—Edward Bernays



In The Name Of

Installation

2025

wood, soil, barbed wire, bullet shells,
vestments, old technology, paint, sex doll,
tree branches, cell phone, rope.

Summary

This thesis project explores the intersection of art, society, and contemporary culture through a three-level altar installation that challenges notions of power, sexuality, and representation. Each level of the work draws from distinct themes, offering the viewer a layered narrative that reflects the complexities of modern human experience.

The first level, grounded on the concept of Hell, represents the most physical and immediate aspects of survival and existence. It introduces the idea of power as a driving force that shapes our societies and directs political action.¹ This level sets the foundation for the viewer to contemplate the way we are bound by socio-political structures and war.²

The second level, associated with 'Earth' or 'Limbo', in the biblical sense, serves as a bridge between the earthly and the spiritual, exploring the tensions, conflicts, and moral dilemmas that arise from our interactions with contemporary society. It navigates themes of symbol transformation, ideological entanglements, and the constant desires of external societal pressures to fit in a group.³ This middle section focuses on the trials we endure in the pursuit of higher ideals and the sacrificial side of group mentality.⁴

The third and highest level, representing 'Heaven', shifts focus to the complex dynamics of sexuality, gender, and representation. It investigates the double standards imposed on the female bodies and the contradictions that arises in modern cultures, especially in the relation to empowerment, objectification, and societal judgement.⁵ Through the use of provocative symbols, this section addresses historical and contemporary attitudes toward femininity, sexual expression, and identity, inviting viewers to question long-standing social narratives and perceptions.⁶

¹ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

² Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

³ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

⁴ Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

⁵ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁶ Mulvey, Laura. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18.

The installation culminates in a critical reflection on the relationship between humanity, symbols, as well as how digital technologies shape our understanding of self and others.⁷ In this paper, the work anticipates further exploration of the thesis themes, taking in consideration the future emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and augmented reality that can, and will deepen the engagement between the audience and art work⁸

In summary, this thesis project uses the medium of installation to navigate key societal issues, blending symbolic objects with a thoughtful composition to prompt reflection on power, sexuality, and the ways in which we perceive and project identity in the modern age. Through this thesis project, I aim to challenge viewers' preconceptions and offer a dynamic narrative that captures the nuances of contemporary human experience.

⁷ Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁸ Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.



Daniel Palpa - In The Name Of, 2025

Introduction

The aim of my master's thesis project is to explore the intersection between contemporary art and societal tensions through the lens of a large-scale altar installation.⁹ In this paper I will explain the main features and ideas of the artwork *In the name of*. In doing so, I will explore and reveal, as best as I can explain the origins of my inspiration and purpose, the intricate behavioural practice of my artistic expression. Within this behavioural plane, the themes, aim, and personal statement will be present. The conceptual building blocks will elaborate the decisions made in the selection of the material, historic references, and visual composition.

⁹ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002.

By invoking the traditional religious concept of the three-tiered altar—representing Hell, Earth, and Heaven—I reinterpret and reframe this structure to engage with critical, modern-day issues surrounding media, social behaviour, gender politics, and social structure symbols.¹⁰ The Installation is not merely a religious reference; it is a multi-layered, symbolic framework that uses the language of art to address the complexities of the digital age, the hyperconnectivity of social media, and the evolving discourse on identity, sexuality, and representation.¹¹ This text which is part of the thesis project, invites viewers to navigate and reflect upon the installation's three levels, each of which embodies distinct but interconnected themes drawn from our collective social reality. The structure of the installation, rooted in religious altar conventions, serves as a metaphor for exploring these contemporary concerns, each level builds upon the last, constructing a progression of societal struggle, technological chaos, and ideological paradox. The installation, in this way, becomes both an altar and a background, offering both intellectual and emotional engagement for the viewers.

The installation's lowest level represents Hell—a metaphor for the tumultuous undercurrent of today's world. It reflects the darkest aspects of our technological society: violence, environmental destruction, and its manifestations—draws direct parallels to the crises such as war and environmental degradation.¹² The installation's intention is to evoke the reality of human suffering, destruction, and misinformation which, like Hell itself, exists beneath the surface but shapes the foundation of our everyday experiences.

The second level serves as a playful representation of Earth, a chaotic Limbo between physical existence and the digital meta-world. In this level, the installation focuses on the distortions and ideological battlegrounds fostered by social media platforms.¹³ Old and new technologies are placed alongside figures dressed in the traditional capirote vestments, typically associated with Spanish Catholic traditions, but here they are reimagined in rainbow colours. This juxtaposition aims to provoke reflection on how digital spaces have co-opted and commodified cultural symbols, a technique used by almost any new social, military, ideological, or national movement. The rainbow, commonly tied to

¹⁰ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Vol. I: Consumption*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

¹¹ Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

¹² Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

¹³ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

LGBTQ+ movements, and the capirotes, now associated to the Ku Klux Klan's appropriation of this imagery, illustrate how social movement, while initially progressive in intention, can be hijacked or radicalized in the echo chambers of digital platforms and beyond.¹⁴

The third level of the work represents Heaven and possesses questions about holiness, sexuality, and societal judgement. Central to this level is a sex doll, elevated like a saint in religious iconography, yet surrounded by symbols and contradictions of repression and violence—ropes, branches, and the burning-at-the-stake imagery. This provocation juxtaposition invites viewers to consider the cultural and historical contradictions surrounding the representation of the female body. In particular, the installation explores the Madonna-whore dichotomy and how these binary perceptions continue to influence contemporary views of female sexuality.¹⁵

Through this altar installation, I aim to address a range of pressing contemporary issues, from environmental military destruction and digital misinformation to gender politics and commodification of cultural symbols. The religious imagery serves as a familiar structure through which I can re-examine these topics, offering viewers a space for reflection on the often chaotic, contradictory context, this work invites a deeper conversation about the ways in which we navigate our interconnected physical and digital worlds. The installation challenges viewers not just to react, but to analyse the broader implications of their response, reflecting on the role of art in confronting the complexities of the 21st-century life.¹⁶

¹⁴ Castells, Manuel. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

¹⁵ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

¹⁶ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso, 2012.

The installation's technicalities

The installation stands at a height of 4,5 meters, designed to accommodate a multi-layered concept with clear structural and practical considerations. The framework is built using a combination of wood and metal to ensure stability, and support for the weight of various materials across the three levels. The wooden components provide a strong base and internal structure, with metal parts reinforcing the installation at key load-bearing points. These materials were selected for their ability to hold the installation's weight and maintain balance while being relatively easy to work with during the construction process.

Mobility is a feature of the installation achieved by attaching caster wheels to the base of the structure. The wheels are lockable, allowing for a secure positioning once the installation is in place but enabling flexibility during setup, transport, and adjustment. The wheels are heavy-duty, designed to support the structure's full weight, including the objects placed on each level. The mobility function ensures that the installation can be moved without compromising its' integrity, making it adaptable for different exhibition spaces.

The first level has soil spread across portions of the level, acting as both a stabilizing element, and a contrasting texture. The contours of the first level are secured with a combination of industrial adhesive and plastic mesh to ensure it remains fixed in place while providing the desired aesthetic effect. The broken tiles are made of clay, and they are attached with silicone to the floor of the platform. The barbed wire is unravelled spontaneously and attached to the five metal tubes sticking out the five corners of the first level platform.

The second level of the installation primarily features outdated and discarded technological components. These include keyboards, old cables, obsolete tablets, and other electronics. The placement of these materials is intentionally arranged in a chaotic yet structured manner to highlight the accumulation and disposal of outdated technology. The devices are either attached directly to the wooden framework using screws, bolts, and industrial adhesive or loosely placed to give an appearance of clutter.

The top level of the installation features more intricate and delicate elements, including a sex doll, textile, a cell phone, tree branches, and rope. This level required particular attention to stability, as the height and focal placement of the sex doll created potential balance issues. The doll is mounted on a wooden platform with bolts and a metal support, ensuring that it remains securely in position. To achieve the desired visual effect, the doll's pose is fixed, with its legs supported by the surrounding structure. The fabric is

attached using small hooks and needles at strategic points, ensuring it holds its shape while allowing movement for the aesthetic purposes. Additionally, a cell phone is placed in the doll's hand without any extra attachment, only the dolls hand grip was enough.

By carefully selecting and arranging materials, the installation achieves the necessary physical support while allowing the visual and conceptual elements to take centre stage. The technical precision and adaptability ensure that the piece functions both as a solid structure and a dynamic work that can be displayed.



Daniel Palpa - In The Name Of, 2025

Composition

The first concept of the composition of the installation *In the name of* in the master of fine arts degree show is the overall form—the 'broad strokes', of the installation that anchors the viewer immediately, whether they acknowledge it or not. This aspect sets the 'mood' of the larger narrative that encapsulates all the smaller details and shifting themes inside the installation. I found the simple, yet diverse, explanation of the levels of an altar intriguing and enlightening when I first read about the various ways altars can be interpreted across different religions.¹⁷ In some cases the altar only had one level, but there were three, four and seven levels in some of the examples. Many explanations link these structures to older religious practices, with many of them tied to Indian religions. Nevertheless, altars

¹⁷ Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.

function as architectural devices to both physically and aesthetically highlight, or literally elevate, something to holiness or greater importance within the space.

In this particular work, I chose a three-level altar. This type of altar had the possibility to easily, if not bluntly, frame a worldview in a traditional religious way. It refers to the popular Catholic belief of a worldview comprising Hell, Earth, and Heaven. Here lies a personal connection: my own childhood experiences, having spent the first eight years of my life in South-America, specifically Peru.¹⁸ I chose the three-level altar because it's the one I have been seeing most of my life. The second personal reason for choosing the three-level altar was the belief of commemorating deceased family members and relatives, especially in Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*)—a Catholic celebration yet serious religious practice in South and Central America.¹⁹ The recent death of our family matriarch forced me to face my own, now almost forgotten traditional beliefs, of participating in this celebration of the dead, and brought about the idea of memory, existing, and the symbolic presence of a person. The installation has this personal first spark in the conceptualization of the main form, or platform, but very quickly it is followed by bigger questions, the personal gets buried by an overflowing of combined symbols and narrative elements. It was a very natural process, I could say that it might be part of my 'style', if I ever really had one, and at the same time, the idea of a work existing in a vacuum sound unnatural to me. The death of our family matriarch, and the representation of a loved one, the presence of war in the media, and the festive commemoration of past beloved ones, transforming symbols and words for political and economic power, and transforming religious traditions for observing secular contemporary issues. These thoughts, wrapped in feelings of sorrow and grief, opened my perspective to a more collective worldview.

In the installation, the three-levels which traditionally represent Hell, Earth, and heaven (from bottom to top), retain the same symbolic meaning. However, the interpretation is left to the spectator, as they ultimately construct their own meaning towards the work. There is no reason to indicate separately that the lowest level represents hell and the highest represents heaven. Our deep-rooted connection to religion, spiritual beliefs, and hierarchical social structures throughout the human history has already established much of this interpretation for us. One can instinctively understand that the object placed at the top symbolizes something of greater importance, something we

¹⁸ Arguedas, José María. *Yawar Fiesta*. Translated by Frances Horning Barraclough. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.

¹⁹ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*. Translated by Lysander Kemp. New York: Grove Press, 1961.

aspire toward—it is elevated, much like religious artifacts are raised high in churches to symbolize their significance. If we have to put it in a more approachable way of seeing it, the height of the work draws attention to the work and that elevation accentuates presence and importance. Taking this in mind, the spiritual, religious, elements that come out in the work are used for a socio-political commentary, but this doesn't mean that the original meaning is left completely untouched, it is embedded in the framing device that has an undertone that rings through the more visible elements that touch upon the contemporary questions. My aim was to not define spiritual and secular, it was to show that both can exist simultaneously.

The three-levels of the work had other functions than to be merely an existing religious platform for a sculptural composition. It has the now extensively acknowledged three act structure of storytelling embedded in, but it is not the main frame to recognize the levels, it is mainly an acknowledgment of what it's not immediately visible.²⁰ The physical division of the installation into three levels by height immediately provides the spectator with a visual cue to divide the work into three distinct sections. The size and form had the possibility of giving space for interpretation, and this was where the question of 'where does it start?' surfaced from public feedback after the work was presented for the first time. How to read a work that has three horizontal levels that rise vertically in a three-dimensional circular form?²¹ At the core of this altar composition, the aim is to deliver a unified idea, not to dwell on any individual level. This means that while there are different narratives playing at the same time, the work is designed to culminate in a singular, impactful experience in the viewer's mind. By packing multiple layers of information and meaning in one vessel—the installation—the work becomes an amalgamation of a shared collective sensation or feeling. The challenge of creating such a piece lies in the careful curation of what the vessel will carry: what to show and what to omit.

²⁰ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.

²¹ Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.



Daniel Palpa - In The Name Of, 2025

Lowest level

When reading the work from bottom to top, the viewer encounters the most 'realistic' part of the installation. Here, the narrative begins with a representation of a possible war zone. Barbed wire, bullet shells, broken ground, dirt, are the props of the indication of a military conflict at play. This staging of objects in the first level is connected to the ongoing mass mediated war news. There was an intent to put more military objects in the first level, but after trying it out, the platforms lowest level felt too cartoonish, almost like a window of a high-end shop. And it took away the desire to take a closer look and examine the scene of the aftermath of war. The final version, with all its mishaps, had a more realistic look, a stripped-down representation of a piece of land that has being affected by war.

While working on the idea of this installation, I tried to understand my own relationship to the military conflict of Ukraine-Russia and the Israel-Palestine war, the most

represented wars of this time.²² The more I delved into the news, independent journalism, and internet blogs, the more I felt connected to events and tragedies. I kept doing this consecutively for months, and eventually, I broke down. Insomnia had sneaked upon me, and to get out of this I started to objectively observe my behaviour to uncover the root cause of my insomnia. I quickly realized that I had split my concept of reality, and that there were emotional and psychological spill overs from one of the realities.²³ In a sense, I would call this the emotional inspiration to create this part of the installation. The lowest level in a 3-level altar, as mentioned before represents Hell. The narrative in this installation starts with war, Hell, and ends up in another version of Hell. The reason for this is the cyclical nature of the struggle for power that can become obvious when one reads the history of humanity. But the more technical reason, if not mundane, is our behaviour that springs from the awareness of a military conflict. The war is virtually 'present' locally in the popular perception because of mass media and social media outlets, but not in a so-called physical reality. There were no bombing or armed fights in the streets of Helsinki, but we carry the reaction of the wars afar in our minds, if I may generalize my perception in to everyone momentarily. The reason why war, the lowest level is the most 'realistic' of them all, and why the narrative begins and ends there, is because that is a reality somewhere, and that reality is the closest we get to a representation of 'Hell', in the biblical term. War is real, therefore 'Hell' is real, and those who are not there, in 'Hell', live in a time in history where you can stop by and visit 'Hell' as a digital tourist through your phone or computer. ²⁴And since our digital reality is infested by war, we go about shopping escapist experiences but always keeping in mind that there is war somewhere, and that it hasn't stop. This is supposed to hint to the inevitable consequence of realities mixing and influencing each other without our control, a chaotic outlook.

The last element of the lowest level is in the shape of the platform, a pentagon. The decision to make it in to a pentagon shape came from the historical and popular significance in the power and representation of the Pentagon building, the department of defence of the United States of America.²⁵ The headquarter of the Department of Defence is in the shape of a pentagon, and it is a symbol of the military power of the U.S

²² Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

²³ Chouliaraki, Lillie. *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

²⁴ Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso Books, 2009.

²⁵ Der Derian, James. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2009.

recognized globally. The reach of the U.S military presence is known around the world and the decisions taken in the Pentagon affect the lives of millions of people globally. The most devastating decisions can be seen as sentences of death and collateral damage. While investigating the language used by military representatives in public appearances, I found that the term 'collateral damage' reduces our understanding of the act of killing, it abstracts and softens the word so it can be handled pragmatically, it distances us from death and gives military operations, a cleaner look²⁶. I make this point to elaborate the shape of the lower-level platform, not to criticize U.S policy, or the pentagon itself. Other countries have departments of defences, yet they are not recognizable in the same extent. The decision to choose the U.S building is its symbolic value in popular culture and explaining the term 'collateral damage' is necessary to draw attention to the different parts of a military decision.²⁷ It is not just about the effects of war, but the structures and bureaucracy that leads to war. The clash of the Pentagon shape with the symbolic props of war—barbwire, bullet shells, broken ground, and dirt—are brought together, almost mashed together in to one stereotypical form.²⁸ I wanted to physically bring the decision-making of war and the effects of those decision closer to each other.

²⁶ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

²⁷ Dower, John W. *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9-11, Iraq*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.

²⁸ Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso, 1989.



Daniel Palpa - In The Name Of, 2025

Mid-level

The second level of the installation revolves around the symbolic representation of our current view of Western life, the issues brought by technological advancement, acceleration of social problems on digital communication platforms, ideology, misinformation, ignorance of history, and click bait outrage culture. This level, in the religious altar context, represents 'Earth', the plane of the living, and in some cases, Limbo, the place in between. I have to clarify now, that since I am using a religious idea as a background for dealing with contemporary questions, there are some theological aspects that help me, personally, explain and conceptualize ideas that require more than just academic terms or scientific deduction. Just as researchers borrow terms from other branches of study, I find it more accurate to explore theological ideas and use them as a framing device for questions related to art and artistic research.²⁹ I think that my artistic expression is closer to the spiritual and theological field than to the formal and applied sciences, although I don't think that this branches of science should be excluded, they have a different influence in my artistic research.

The objects and symbols in the second level that construct the narrative of this plane include old and new technology on the floor, capirote vestments in the popular representation of the rainbow colours, and the seven chakra symbols painted on the vestments. These elements interplay as a statement of the current situation of most of the

²⁹ Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture*. Edited by Robert C. Kimball. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

social media platforms. In their intent to create a digital social field, these platforms have fostered a new version of individualistic mass media, laying the groundwork for a hyper-connected ideological battleground.³⁰ Digital social media platforms give the users a canvas to express their personal lives, thoughts, and desires. The presence of war in mass media and social media have as their main information source the military procedures that come in a combination of mass media material and first-person amateur material. War is, and it becomes the raw material for its medias to get their products to the public.³¹ In the digital social media space, real-life events serve as a source of material, but these platforms also generate content indirectly by their users.³² This content often contains copies of real-life events, but in the pursuit of more views and engagement, information is twisted and, in the worst cases, completely taken out of context. The introduction of artificial intelligence has accelerated the creation of this hyper flow of diverse digital information, which reuses original visual or sound sources to the point where people have started turning back to books in search of the original material to confirm the authenticity of the 'fast food' type information provide by our personalized algorithms. This is the entry point of the second level of the installation. A sculptural interpretation of the chaotic situation of social media, it aims to evoke an emotional reaction to the physical world taking symbols from the digital meta world, and in doing so, punctuate a digital 'spill' with a thought-provoking message. Will the viewer react emotionally to the artwork's public presence, or will they attempt to analyse it and seek out more about the elements in the installation? Viewers were divided, as I anticipated, proving my intentions correct. Offended viewers focused on singular aspects of the installation, leaving other parts of the work unaddressed. This, I believe, revealed the hierarchy of personal identity and individual interest. Viewers who connected with the work —although some found certain aspects troublesome—adopted a more open attitude toward understanding the work as a whole.

The composition of the second level was rooted in attention seeking and reframing of existing cultural and pop-cultural symbols. Clashing the capirote vestments with the rainbow colours was the primary reframing device and the first element of the second level

³⁰ Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

³¹ Carruthers, Susan L. *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

³² Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

narrative.³³ Old and new technology, along with the chakra symbols, served as reinforcing turning points. Three key decisions were made to create the composition of the second level: capirote mannequins in a circular form around the third level support structure, positioning them in a standing posture, and concealing their hands.

The circular formation of the mannequins symbolized a circle, hinting at something continuous and repetitive, a cycle. Here, the cycle is represented by the capirote vestment, a symbol from a Spanish Catholic region that has a peculiar way of celebrating Easter—by wearing these hooded masks with robes. The vestments come in different colours. This indicates that the person wearing it belongs to a certain area and a historic tradition. Wearing the capirotes during Easter is a tradition over a hundred years old. The purpose of this vestment is to preserve the bearer’s anonymity, focusing attention on God rather than the individual repenting. In my installation, certain aspects of the vestments are preserved, while others are replaced by secular aspirations. The colours of the capirotes in the installation do not represent any real Spanish region; instead, they are derived from the popular representation of the rainbow colours. I made the decision here to elicit a reactionary response, knowing that the seven rainbow colours are closely associated with the LGBTQ+ movement. I anticipated that the viewers who automatically react to social symbols would condemn this part of the installation. The original LGBTQ flag had only six colours, but it has since evolved, adding new groups—along with new letters, colours and shapes—to the flag. This evolving symbol serves as a brief history lesson on the development of symbols in ideological movements.³⁴ The vestments in the seven rainbow colours symbolize a prediction of what might happen to well-meaning movements, given the historical connection and appropriation of the capirotes by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). My intention was not to oppose the LGBTQ+ movement, but to remind the viewer of the possibility that any ideological group can become extreme, incorporating elements of religious fervour.

The mannequins, arranged a circle, also form a barrier. What are they protecting? The viewer doesn’t know—it’s concealed behind them, but becomes apparent when viewing the third level elements. Early sketches positioned the mannequins in a circle, with all of them facing inward. This idea was quickly discarded, as the arrangement would have resembled a worship ceremony, which was not the intention. Instead of putting them on a

³³ West, Cornel. *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times: Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993.

³⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

dynamic position, such as crouching or laying down, the upright standing position felt more serious and imposing. With all of them in the same stance, it formed a more aesthetically symbolic replication. The sensation one might get from seeing a group of people standing firm and clustered suggests two things: fear, and preparation to act against that fear. It represents a tense moment before a climax, whether physical or social confrontation. In this work, I decided to not show their hands and give away too much information. The hands can indicate the persons internal conflict, especially in tense situations, such as arguments or physical altercations. I chose to not show the hands for this reason, aiming to convey uncertainty about the potential actions of the hooded figures. Once again, I introduce the element of concealment, or in theological terms, the 'occult' in its original Latin sense.

The symbols painted on the vestments represent the seven chakras. These were placed at the centre of the figures to convey three main ideas: first, the symbol, from an ideological perspective, becomes the 'centre' of that character or persons life, reflected by its position on the centre of the vestment (body); second, since the symbol is only on the vestment, it becomes something that can be worn, like a medieval *sigil*, and removed if necessary—something 'superficial'; third, it emphasizes the recycling and charging of symbols, as well as the practice of combining symbols for new purposes without consideration for their historical or value-based contradictions.³⁵ Here, the work requires time to reveal itself to the viewers. The meaning assigned to a symbol varies depending on the individual and their background. The chakra symbols are now widely recognized in the western sphere, primarily associated with yoga culture, enthusiasts of Indian culture, and the growing fascination with occult symbols in the Western popular culture.³⁶ This adds a layer to the chakra symbols on the vestments, allowing for multiple interpretations. The overarching interpretation, without isolating one part of the installation, is the idea of something—or someone—being marked by a force larger than the individual. In this act of being marked, the individual is elevated to a status capable of enforcing an idea or ideology and executing demands of that entity with the power to elevate. To gain some form of power from a symbol with spiritual significance in the minds of the individual, or from a legal system that governs our daily lives, manifesting in mundane actions like the red cross, or a luxury brand. The act of carrying a symbol that encapsulates an entire

³⁵ Singleton, Mark. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

³⁶ Brown, Candy Gunther. *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

system can serve as both an invitation to join and a warning to stay away, marking territory. In this case of the chakra symbols, this presence also acts as a social divider between good and bad. Needless to say, the speculative prediction regarding the future of our current social symbols in the second level of the installation emphasizes that the things we now consider sacred and profane will evolve and take forms we cannot yet imagined.³⁷

³⁷ D'Emilio, John. *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.



Daniel Palpa - In The Name Of, 2025

Highest level

The third level of the altar represents heaven, God, and something humanity strives to aspire, in accordance with altar conventions. The act of elevating something or someone to a status of holiness mirrors a macro social tendency of human behaviour. In this installation, the third level explores the theme of the Madonna-whore dichotomy, double standards in modern society, the 'witch hunt' mentality on social media, and post-feminist attitude in popular culture.³⁸ These themes are expressed through a ready-made object that opens a dialogue about the sex industry, the representation of the female body, its historical depiction from the Venus figurines to religious iconography, the composition of the female form, and the icon gaze in religious painting.³⁹ The objects in the third level include tree branches, hemp rope, textile, cell phone and a sex doll.

³⁸ Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

³⁹ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989.

Physically elevated to the top of the altar, the installation imposes an arrow-like or pyramid shape, pointing upward. The viewer's attention will naturally be drawn to the third level. This functions similarly to the traditional three-level altar composition. In this installation, the third level introduces a contradiction through aesthetic choices that create an tumultuous narrative. The first and previously mentioned aspect is the height of the level. This already conveys that this is the sacred part of the altar, marking the first step in creating the desired contradiction.

The social tendency to elevate someone or something, is reflected in this installation as a contemporary representation of the dilemmas of sexuality and gender inequality. Specifically, the societal tendency to judge what is considered sexual and what is not, and how much of it is deemed as inappropriate sexuality. More specifically, in the context of the installation, the nude sex doll plays a central role presenting this question. Nudity, even if it's represented in an object, prompts the viewer to reflect their own personal opinion of what is acceptable public behaviour. The fact that the sex doll has a female form rises the historical question of how the female body is represented. Since it is fabricated—specifically in China, it raises another question, one that invites speculation: is the sex doll the ultimate male sexual fantasy? There is also the question of the marketplace of this type of products, the systematic design of male desired female bodies, and the impact of these dolls in the cultural-societal consciousness. I suspect that, these realistic sex dolls are a continuation of the ancient Venus figurine. The key difference between them may be a technical one. You can physically engage in intercourse with the sex doll, whereas the Venus figurine, according to speculative interpretations by archaeologists and anthropologist, was an idol, goddess, religious figure representing fertility and symbolizing the idealized female body of that era.⁴⁰ This is where the narrative introduces the idea of the Madonna and the Whore, not as a separate, but as one—an idea that emerges in the details of the third level which I will expand upon next.⁴¹ The primary question I want the viewer or reader to take away is: 'could fertility and sexuality be separated in representation?'

Next, on the other aspects of the third level, specifically the surroundings. Now that I have established the presence of the sex doll, it's important to recognize other compositional elements that interact with it. Around the sex doll, there is a light blue textile

⁴⁰ McCoid, Catherine H., and LeRoy D. McDermott. 'Toward Decolonizing Gender: Female Vision in the Upper Paleolithic.' *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 2 (1996): 319-326.

⁴¹ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

that symbolizes sainthood, possibly referencing the Virgin Mary in this narrative. I use the word 'possibly' because the installation does not aim for historical accuracy or a direct finger-pointing critique. Traditionally, the blue vestment in paintings of the Virgin Mary and other saints symbolizes divinity, purity, and similar virtues. Here, the blue vestment is worn by a sex doll—an object often seen as dirty or filthy in popular opinion. More importantly it is the act of dropping this vestment down, removing the veil of divinity often associated with clothing, which represents the first layer of a social contract signalling between individuals.⁴² This striking symbol of dropping the veil may not be immediately obvious, but it helps convey an intention beyond simply displaying nudity or, as some may interpret, obscenity. It creates a dynamic mental movement in the narrative of double standards surrounding representation.

The doll stands partly tied to a wooden plank, surrounded by tree branches. The image of 'burning at the stake' was the intended focus of this part of the composition. The initial idea was to place the doll plainly in the wooden plank without the branches. I felt that this initial idea wasn't theatrical enough. While it might not seem subtle, the tree branches give the impression of something rustic in nature, with an almost careless attitude towards the burning of 'someone' or something at the stake. In addition to its theatrical aspect to this element, I wanted to link it to the theme of sexuality within social media. On one hand, sexuality is naturally present in nearly all forms of self-promotion, while on the other hand too much sexuality, is socially frowned upon. Social media serves as the ideal platform for this contradiction to thrive. The hyper-sexualization of a digital content not only spreads quickly and easily, it also generates economic gain.⁴³ Here, I want to briefly question the notion of empowering. Not to question empowerment itself, but rather the contradiction of empowerment on social media platforms, and the reactions it provokes.⁴⁴ In the context of a 'witch hunt,' how can we really know if someone is a 'witch'? How do we distinguish genuine empowering from mere attention-seeking or self-promotion? The question is too complex to fully answer here, but I raise it in the context of my installation. The theatricality of burning someone at the stake, as connected to the sex doll, allowed me to explore the limits of representational social projection. My two fundamental questions here are: Are we burning the hyper sexual male fantasy, or are we burning a female figure who achieved to

⁴² Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.

⁴³ Attwood, Feona. 'Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture.' *Sexualities* 9, no. 1 (2006): 77-94.

⁴⁴ Gill, Rosalind. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

become a sexual male fantasy in pursuit for empowerment?⁴⁵ This, of course, introduces a contradictory question, if that is possible. The material reality is that the object displayed in the installation is built for one purpose: to serve as a sexual pleasing tool for a total male domination sexual act.

Regarding the position of the sex doll, there were two main decisions I made that emphasized the themes of sexuality, repression, and double standards. Similar to the blue clothe, a historic symbol of divinity, the positioning of the doll at the stake was arranged to resemble a classical depiction of a saint.⁴⁶ The doll's posture is slightly tilted, creating a sense of motion or the suggestion of a movement forward. The hips are carefully incline to one side, creating a pose reminiscent of a nude model, or a renaissance statue pose creating a movement. The hands are extended upward at a slight angle, with its palms gently turned toward the ceiling. All of these elements create a sense of an elevated saint. The position of the head, a decision that took me weeks to refine, was influence not only by their historical examples and their meanings but also a theological undertone in the placement of the sex dolls eyes.

The doll's body position strongly references the link between historical perceptions, which in this case contradicts the idea of a sex doll being an object of desire or aspiration. A clash between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. However, the doll's head, and the gaze provided me with another opportunity to explore the dialogue surrounding the reading of micro-expressions. The doll's head was tilted slightly downward. This was intended to give the impression of looking down at the viewer, a technique used in iconoclastic paintings and Christian sculpture.⁴⁷ it evokes a sense of someone looking down at you—perhaps judging or maybe with a sense of pity—like a calm entity watching over children lost in confusion. The eyes were positioned slightly downwards, enhancing a sense of sadness. The doll's gaze was directed towards the main staircases of the university, ensuring that as people ascended to the second floor, the presence of the sex doll would be captivating. The positioning of doll's head conveyed the serene, static presence of a saint, someone who has accepted their fate and is unafraid of being burned at the stake. In this moment before death, this serene pause before ceasing to exist, the veil falls, and the judgment by

⁴⁵ Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

⁴⁶ Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁴⁷ Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

social norms or by prejudice no longer applies. This of course is a story I made up in my mind while meditating the gaze of religious icons in the martyr context.⁴⁸ I created this composition on the third level to temporally summon a scene that cuts through the noise of social media, social judgment, personal beliefs, ideology and reality. I'm not sure if I succeeded, but I made an attempt, I tried.

The final details of the third level accentuated the themes previously mentioned. The phone in the sex dolls hand, a familiar symbol of our times, takes an almost mocking form within the installation. The phone is not only an object that instantly connects with the viewer, but it also introduced an element of absurdity. How could it be possible that someone would be burned at the stake with a cell phone on her hand? Is this person going to livestream her own burning to get more followers? Or is posting about it the final act before you die? I asked myself these questions and many more before deciding to include the cell phone, and the more I thought about it, the more serious it became. What began as an attempt to introduce 'comic relief', ended up becoming a statement about death. I wondered, is true death a physical one, or does it occur when we lose our digital identity, a digital death?⁴⁹ If the objects, descriptions, and representations of us remain after our physical death, then our presence endures. Just as rulers leave statues, coins, poems to immortalize themselves, I believe digital platforms offer us a space to preserve our presence. With this intention in mind, I chose to place the cell phone in the doll's hand. A brutal and vengeful act—not only to burn someone at the stake but also erase the imprint and memory of their existence.

The rope, a key element of the third level, as a whole, had a fairly straightforward meaning: restraint. It wasn't intended to indicate an act of violence towards the doll, but I aimed to keep it gritty enough to suggest a possible violent undertone. The decision to tie the doll was linked to the 'burning at the stake' narrative, but a small adjustment added an extra layer of meaning and tension. There are two key details in the use of the rope as a symbol of restraint: the rope is loosening in some areas of the body, and it wraps around the doll's neck and mouth. To add movement and make it more dynamic in both form, and narrative, the ropes appear to be coming loose in certain areas. The idea behind it is one already mentioned before, the idea of serenity and the veil falling. The ropes are falling, but why? And why now, just as the moment of burning this individual approaches? Here, I

⁴⁸ Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York: Zone Books, 2011.

⁴⁹ Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

would like to briefly return to the theme of the holiness. In this work, holiness is not necessarily something we would traditionally aspire to, especially when the highest, the most elevated figure, is the sex doll. Yet, the sex doll, this fabricated representation of a hyper sexualize femininity designed for a male individual, is elevated to the highest position, and thus becomes the holly object. I deliberately left this part of the narrative open to interpretation. Is the doll being freed from the 'burning at the stake', or is the fire itself setting the individual to emancipate?

The viewer can see a rope tightly bound around the doll's neck, and also wrapped around her mouth, silencing any intent to speak. This was a straightforward decision, but here I aimed to highlight not just violence and restriction, but specifically a restriction of speech. Obstructing the mouth is a powerful symbol, and in this installation, it is applied to the sex doll, which is already on the verge to be burned at the stake. The inability to communicate, along with the act of oppression, is placed directly before the viewer. It can be interpreted as the inability to speak, or as feminine sexuality being silenced. Yet, when viewed as a whole, it is the contradiction that envelopes this detail. Amidst war news, ideological chaos on social media, and the double standards of social judgment, the symbol of oppression on the third level becomes just one of many cries of attention in the arena of social justice.



Daniel Palpa - In The Name Of, 2025

Conclusion

My thesis project has allowed me to create a multi-layered narrative that operates as a cohesive whole. The installation, structured into three levels representing 'Hell', 'Earth', and 'Heaven', functions both individually and as an interconnected unit. This composition mirrors the cyclical nature of human experiences, beliefs, and contradictions. The three distinct but complementary levels represent my response to the way societal norms of sexuality, power, and personal identity are constantly shifting. Each level carries its own meaning, yet, like a sonnet, the sum of these parts creates in me a single (un)harmonious composition.

The foundational 'Hell' level emphasizes the human need for survival and how power and technology play a role in shaping socio-political decisions like war. The 'Earth' level highlights the struggles, tensions, and societal conflicts we endure as we seek higher

ideals. Finally, the highest level, 'Heaven', reflects humanity's ongoing tension between sexual empowerment and objectification, and the contradictions therein.

Throughout this installation, my artistic practice has evolved by delving deeper into the human condition and our response to the modern challenges. While the themes of power, sexuality, and representation are central to my current work, I believe this exploration is far from complete. As technology continues to advance at an unprecedented rate, I envision future projects that will further integrate both digital and physical elements to question how we engage with ourselves and society through collective artistic expression. The sex doll, mobile phone, and other modern artifacts I have employed in the current work serve as reflections of how we project and receive identities through screens and devices. This exploration into the commodification of the body and the self has opened the door to a more complex narratives around digital identity and its impact on our physical reality.

I have learned from this process that my artistic expression thrives when it captures the contradictions, hypocrisies, and conflicts within society. By using ready-made objects, I have bridged the gap between contemporary art and deeply ingrained cultural narratives. My thesis project has taught me that the human gaze—whether through historical religious iconography, or modern-day social media—remains a potent tool of power, judgement, and desire.

Finally, my work in this thesis has revealed the importance of retrospection in my practice. Reflecting on the evolution of my themes and techniques, I have come to understand the need to ground future works in both personal and a broader social critique. I have also come to appreciate that artistic growth comes from taking risks and pushing the boundaries of conventional expression. By questioning the foundations of what is deemed 'sacred' and 'profane', I have created a space where the viewers confront uncomfortable truths. This space is where my future practice will thrive. My goal is to continue pushing artistic boundaries, further developing these ideas of technological, social, and personal conflict, while evolving with the tools available in the future. I will continue to reflect on the contradictions that define us, and aim to create work that resonates deeply with the complexities of the human experience.

*"I refuse to follow the rules where society tries to
control people with low self esteem."*

—Kanye West, Ye

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