



Manifestation

Biro on paper + Digital illustration
178mm x 145mm

IA1: INVESTIGATION – INQUIRY PHASE 1

How do artists manipulate elements of traditional religious or spiritual symbolism to depict divergent spiritual ideas?

SUMMARY

The focus of this task is to investigate the ways artists can depict spiritual identity with diverse approaches while implementing traditional spiritual symbolism. This investigation is in response to cultural / spiritual immersion in Brisbane city. I was inspired during this trip by memories and old recurring dreams to explore the notion of spirituality beyond the material world. Leah Fraser and Brian Robinson are two contemporary artists who utilise cultural, contemporary and cultural contexts to generate a response and convey their personal viewpoints.

[Georgia McKay](#)
Art as Knowledge

INTRODUCTION:

Art as knowledge frequently focuses on the interpretation of contemporary issues through a personal and cultural lens, thereby generating a personalised response. This investigation will explore the ways artists manipulate symbolism to visualise their divergent spiritual perspectives.

Artists manipulate visual symbolism to challenge existing ideas, opinions and the perception of identity. This investigation began when visiting the Saint Steven's Cathedral and the Brisbane cityscape. I reflected on the ways others express and engage in their spiritual identity. During the visit, old recurring dreams and memories of a departed family member resurfaced, raising the idea of a spiritual connection beyond the material world and religious worship, and more-so on the notion of creating my own new spiritual identity. I reflected on the ways spiritual identity is dictated by a strictly religious foundation and began to wonder how artists manipulate elements of traditional religious or spiritual symbolism to depict divergent spiritual ideas and generate a response.

Key artists who have guided this investigation are Leah Fraser and Brian Robinson, two contemporary artists who utilise a combination of religious and Indigenous symbolism to challenge the definition of religion. Fraser and Robinson express their divergent opinions on religion and its deeply rooted association with spiritual identity, utilising ironic symbolism to depict their ideas through an inter-twined contemporary, cultural and personal lens.

KEY ARTIST 1:

Leah Fraser is a Sydney-based artist whose work reflects elements of history and magic, creating a branch between the existent and imagination through ceramics and lyrically abstracted paintings. Fraser's pieces draw on folk mythology and a blend of philosophy and religion visualised in subjective dreamscapes (Arthouse Gallery, 2019). Fraser's exhibition *Odyssey and Oracle* (2014) delved into themes of magic, religion and culture, investigating the powerful influence of nature through a series of subjective lyrical portraits, incorporating complex detailed symbols of nature to communicate divergent spiritual ideas. Fraser's piece *A River made of Tears* (2014) is one of her numerous works comprised of complex nature symbolism and pattern work. Often utilising Australian flora and fauna, Fraser communicates her views on the bond between the spiritual and material world, conveying her beliefs in a cultural and personal context.

A River made of Tears incorporates pale, faded colours and distinct, cluttered patterns, depicting a dream-like image taken from a natural paradise. The expression of the man – the central focus – is one of contempt, and when paired with the muted colour palette, assists in constructing a dream-like aesthetic. The formal context of the painting relates the image to that of a dreamscape, a surreal environment pulled from beyond the modern material world, thereby experimenting with the notion of spiritual identity while simultaneously straying from traditional interpretations of religious engagement. The cultural context of the portrait draws heavily on native Australian nature, incorporating symbols such as the Brolga crane and agapanthus flowers. The brolga, being a nomadic bird species, suggests the implication of movement or changing ideas, while the agapanthus – a highly versatile plant – additionally implies change. Fraser's artwork could arguably represent spiritual identity in relation to nature and a connection to the Earth, evident in the man's literal embrace of the bird. Pictured submerged in a cluster of flora, the man is pursuing a spiritual journey and experiencing a change in perspective.

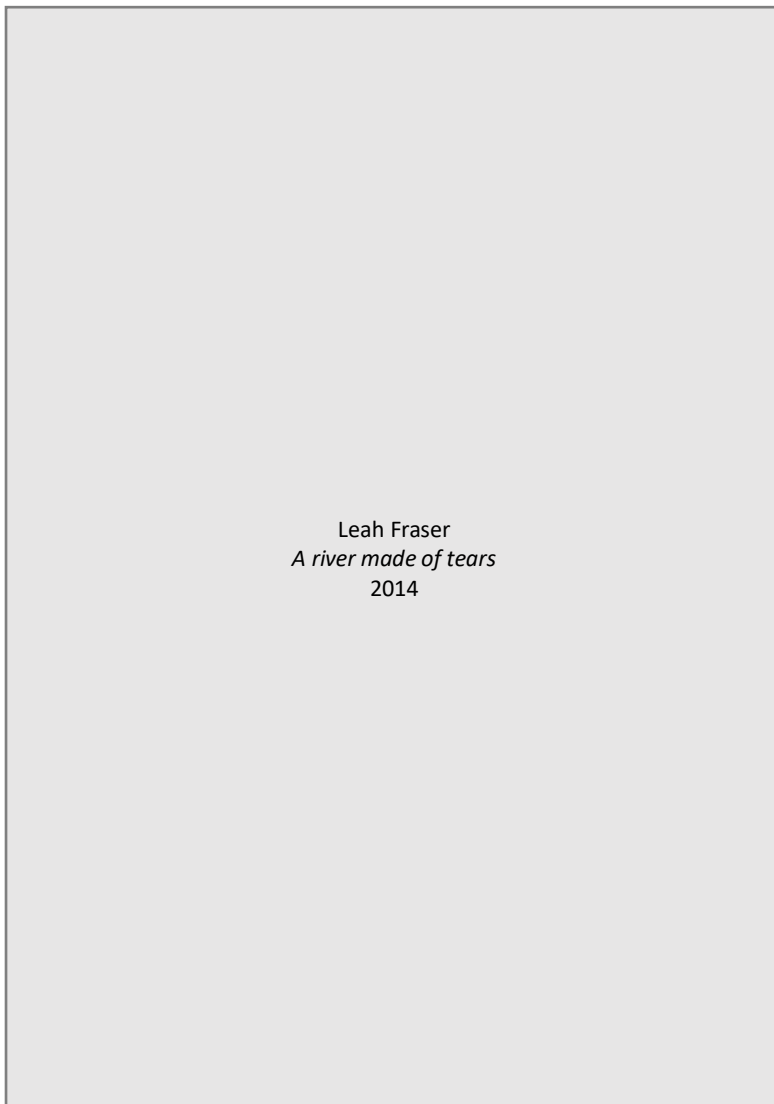
Fraser's work will influence my future experiments through the elements of portraiture, pattern work and intense composition, in addition to the ambiguous abstracted symbolism.

Leah Fraser

A river made of tears (2014)

Acrylic on polyester canvas

122cm x 87cm



KEY ARTIST 2: Brian Robinson

Brian Robinson is a contemporary, Torres Strait Islander artist whose work consists of painting, printmaking and sculpture installations, each combining the illusions of the natural and manmade. Robinson's work often comments on a selection of both cultural and contemporary concepts, depicting his response in the form of traditional religious symbolism and imagery in the form of references to famous religious paintings. His work will influence my future experimentation through the use of repetitive patterns and lines, in addition to abstracted portraiture and misplaced objects.

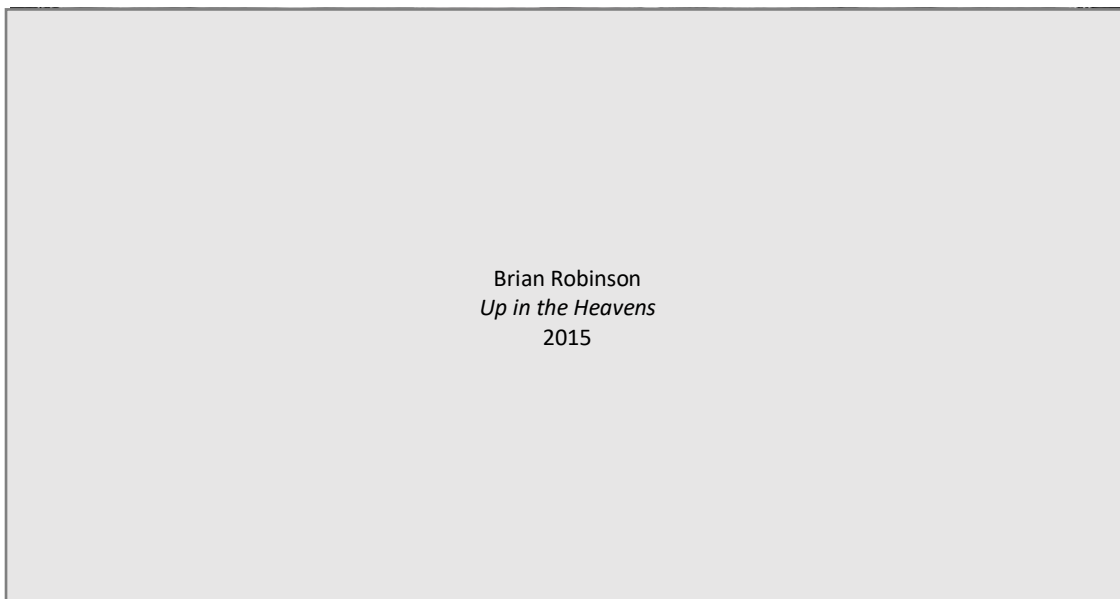
Robinson's artwork *Up in the Heavens* (2015) combines installation and print to represent the passing of law, culture and religion from Torres Strait spirits to the people of the contemporary world, juxtaposing Renaissance art and pop culture icons. This installation references Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, depicting the painting in stark black and white, juxtaposing the traditional painting with misplaced pop culture symbols. The artwork is displayed on a black canvas, utilising white lines to create an inverted effect. Misplaced objects scattered across the horizontal line provide the viewer with complex details to observe, with their obscure nature prompting individual interpretation. The combination of traditional religious symbolism and modernised pop culture icons could suggest change or the transition from existent to the emerging, utilising contemporary symbols to convey a cultural meaning.

Brian Robinson's work, therefore, portrays divergent spiritual ideas through reference to traditional religious symbolism. Through the incorporation of both contemporary and cultural contexts, Brian Robinson has utilised abstracted imagery to depict his personal spiritual beliefs. Seeing his work has challenged me to consider the symbolism I plan to use in my final piece, encouraging me to adapt a more intense style of composition and, similarly to Fraser, create a surreal dreamscape.

Brian Robinson

Up in the Heavens (2015)

Synthetic polymer paint, timber, screws, PVC plastic, Lino



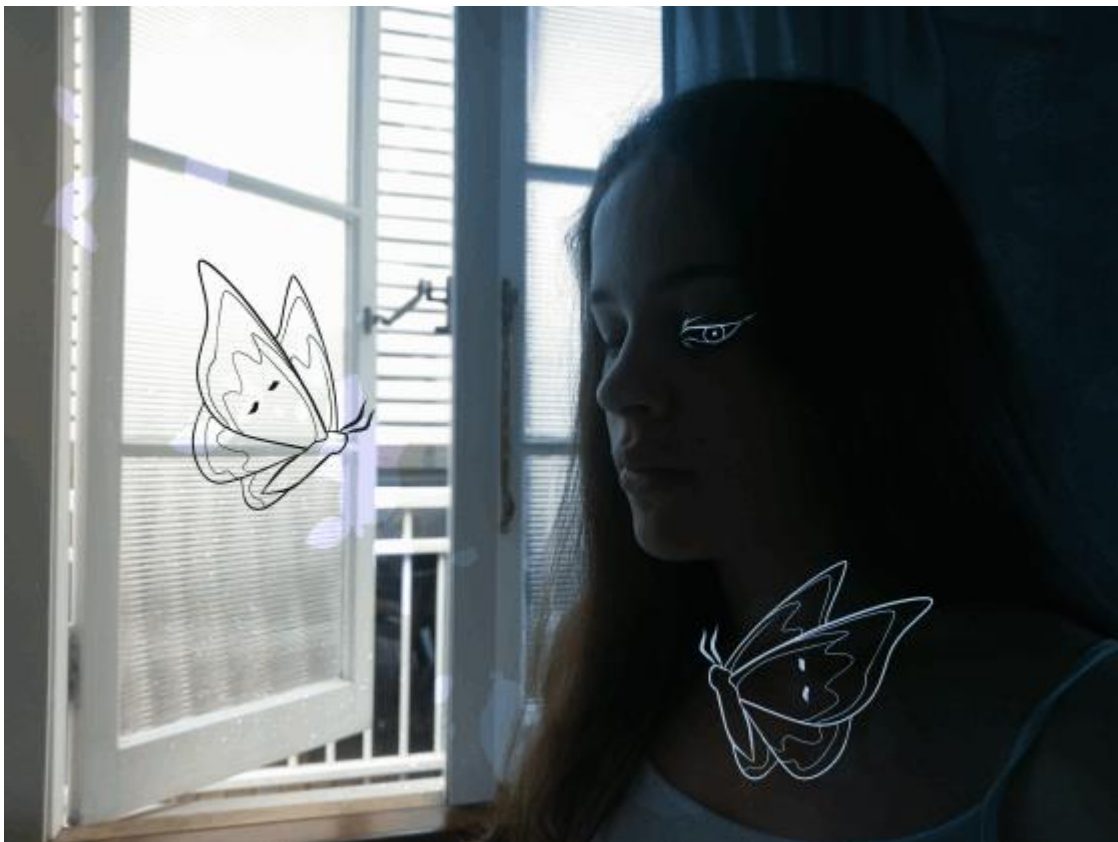
EXPERIMENT 1

Tether, my experimental response to Leah Fraser's *A River Made from Tears* (2014), incorporates similar elements of portraiture and abstracted symbolism. *Tether* combines a personal, formal and cultural context to depict the action of experimenting with spirituality beyond the material world. This piece was created with a combination of photography and animation, resembling Fraser's use of portraiture to convey a personalised lens, creating a moving image and thereby emphasising certain details. *Tether* is a name which suggests constriction or attachment to something, a name contradicted by the imagery of breaking through the spirit world and combining fantasy with reality. The sombre lighting is juxtaposed with the stark white symbols, emphasising movement and creating the effect of a visual hallucination, thereby supporting the interaction of reality with imagination. The moth is a symbol of faith, psychic abilities and clairvoyance, so when depicted in a decaying state, the meaning shifts, suggesting the deterioration of faith and surrendering the future to chance, a symbol I have utilised. The closed photographed eye and moving overlay depicts venturing beyond the material world, searching deeper than obvious surroundings or 'searching with closed eyes'. When combined, *Tether* depicts the depth of spirituality beyond obvious examination the vast ways it can venture away from faith.

Tether (2019)

Photography + Digital animation

3000 pixels x 4000 pixels



Experimental Response

Personal context:

- Investigating away from tradition.
- Finding spiritual experiences in my surroundings.
- Combining the real and the imaginary.
- "otherworldly": seeking beyond the material world.

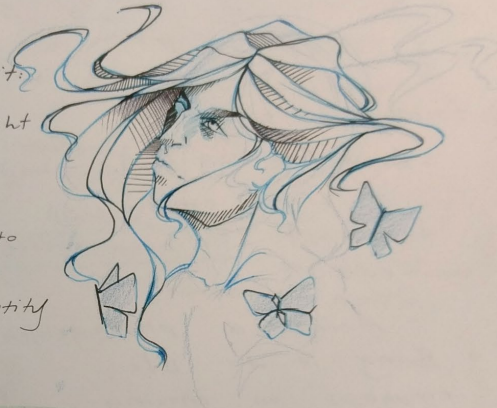
Formal Context:

Greyscale portrait:

- Colour highlight in eyes and butterflies.

- Eyes: "window to the soul".

Highlight identity + emphasis.



Personal transformation



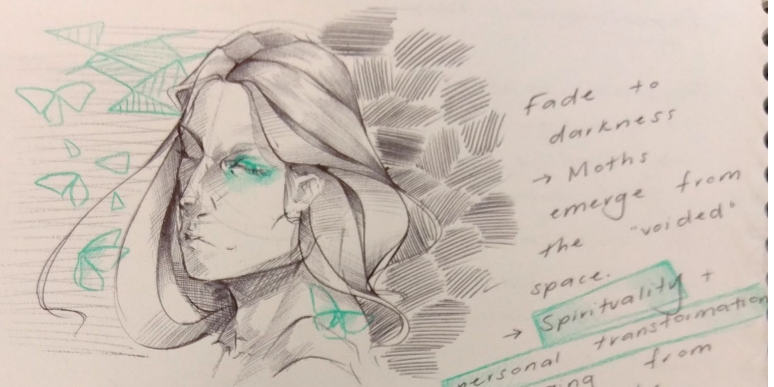
The moth:

- Psychic abilities
- Faith.

↓
Rebirth... of
spiritual pursuits.

↓
Moth - symbol of
faith

∴ Dying moth: loss of faith:



fade to
darkness
→ Moths
emerge from
the "voided"
space.

→ Spirituality +
personal transformation
emerging from
beyond the
material
world

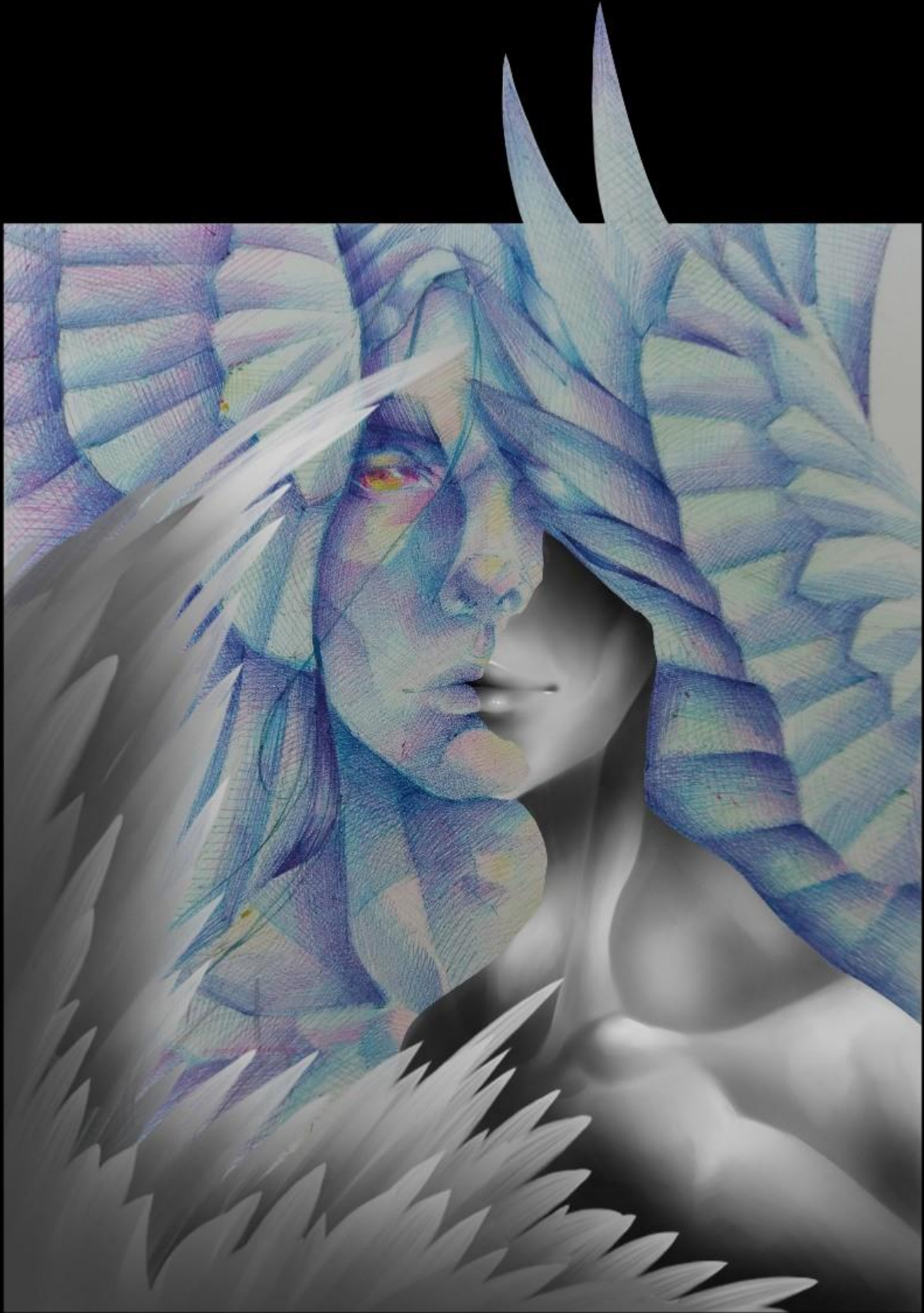
Formal Context:

- Greyscale + heavy shadows
→ Light emphasises facial features.
- Bright / coloured moths + blinking eye.
- Animated photograph:
→ Bring it to life,
emphasis on moving
details: moths, eye.



EXPERIMENT 2

Manifestation (Figure 1) is a combined digital and traditional portrait in response to Brian Robinson's *Up in the Heavens* (2015). This is a piece which informed my secondary response to the stimulus (Figure 2). *Manifestation*, similarly to Robinson's work, embodies the ways spiritual identity can manifest in vague and unexpected ways, utilising cultural, personal and formal contexts to generate a response. By combining traditional methods of art and the new, contemporary medium of digital illustration, the connection between traditional and contemporary evident in Robinson's artwork has been mimicked, depicting the changing opinions on spiritual identity with the progression of time, old to emerging. The cultural context relies on the wings, and due to their vague characteristics allows the bird species to be interpretive, allowing the viewer a diversity of interpretations depending on the bird they interpret. Personally, I depict the wings as being those of the crow, the antonym for the holy dove and therefore a symbol of defying religion. The imagery of surrounding the figure with wings visualises the manifestation and surrounding of one's self in diverse spiritual approaches.



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Focus: (Cultural Context)

How nature embodies cultural meaning + connection



Swarming bodiless wings - overwhelming heritage + surrounding ourselves in their cultural history.

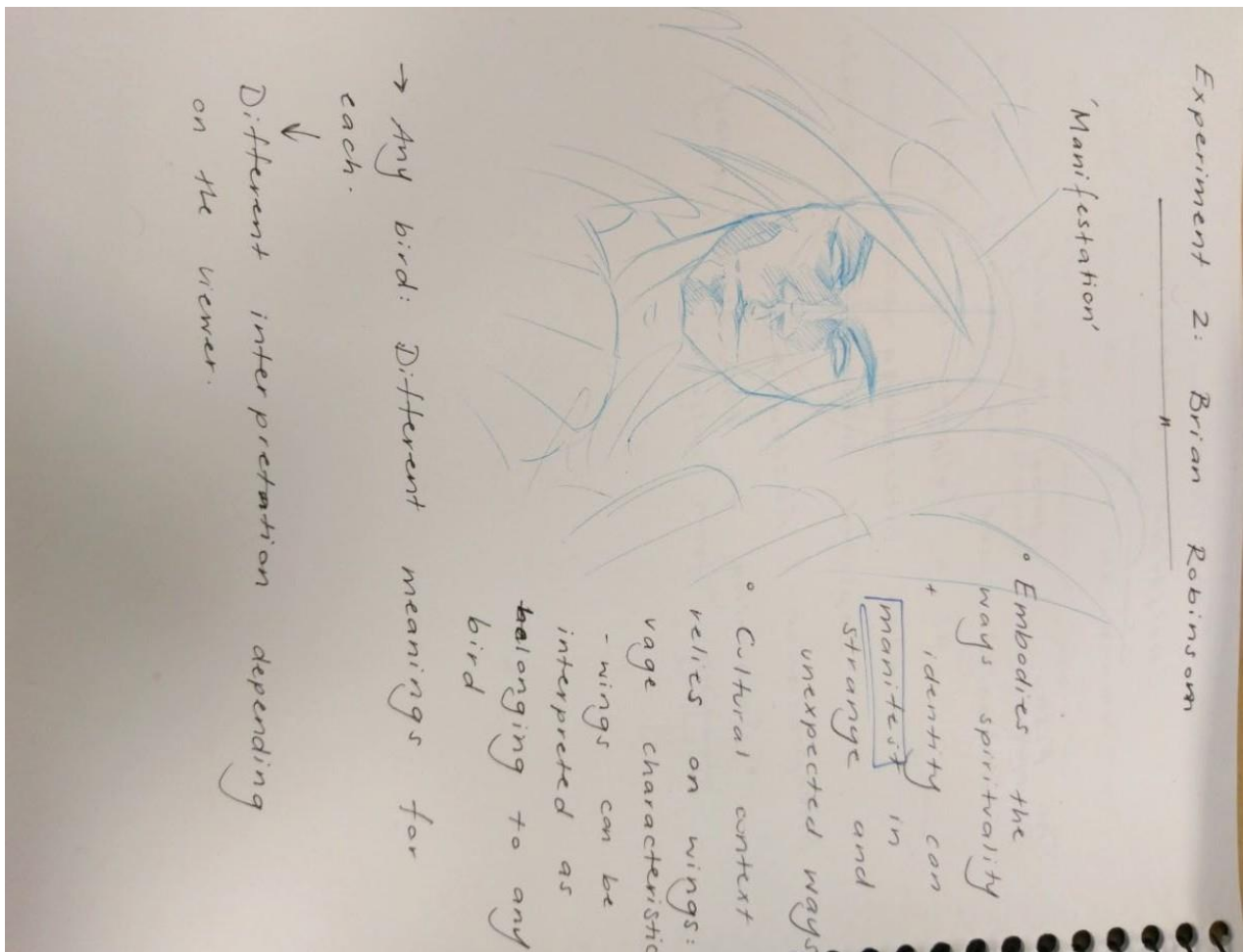
CS Monday



ALTERED | COMBINE
DIGITAL +
TRADITIONAL

Half traditional, half digital render





Conclusion

Leah Fraser and Brian Robinson are two contemporary artists who demonstrate how artists can manipulate traditional spiritual symbolism to depict divergent spiritual interpretations. They each incorporate themes of reality and imagination, and will influence my future works through their strong symbolism and complex dreamscape narratives.

FOCUS

The focus of my body of work will revolve around my own diverse interpretation and creation of spiritual identity and the ways it can be explored, including references from different cultures relevant to my cultural background, such as Old English and Polish folklore. My focus will rely on symbolism present in recurring dreams and memories of a departed loved one, occurrences which I have found bring me peace and a surreal sense of nostalgia. This will thereby incorporate the theme of the spirit world and an absence from the material world, straying from the traditional religious foundation that often controls one's spiritual freedom. Similarly to the key artists, my future work will incorporate line, portraiture and abstracted symbols to create meaning and generate a response. I plan to combine reality and fantasy, blurring the line between imagination and the material world.

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