

Anneke Stewart
Practice Based Research Methods - Proposal
Masters of Creative Practice 2020



Domain: Visual Arts - Photography and Installation

Project: To develop a collection of artworks that seek to invoke a feeling of divinity in my daily life.

Lead questions:

1. Is it possible to visually represent the serenity, peace, and insight obtained through meditation, and from connecting to nature, in two and three-dimensional artworks?
2. Is it possible to create artworks that incorporate natural New Zealand landscapes that do not assimilate or colonise cultural iconography and/or culturally sacred places?

Sub Questions:

1. What is the history of traditional Mandala art and how did it come to the West?
2. What modern artists, if any, incorporate Mandalas into their work?
3. Are there connections between traditional Maori, Polynesian, and Buddhist Mandala art?
4. What sort of natural environments/places do Māori consider to be sacred?

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Introduction:

“In all such qualities those places excel, in which there is a divine inspiration, and in which the gods have their appointed lots and are propitious to the dwellers in them.”

—*Plato* (Rykwert, 2013, p. 43).

My creative practice is based around theories of resonance. Previously I investigated if the body resonates in coordination with the grounding power of the earth. I was fascinated with what rhythm, oscillations, and musical vibrations would look like in space. I compared digital music to analogue music by way of cityscapes and mountain-scapes, mirroring them to create frequency patterns. Out of this grew the creation of photographic mandalas based on photographs arranged to create a kaleidoscopic portal like effect. This process also led me to explore what human frequency or energy could potentially look like if captured. Through these early bodies of work, I became entranced by the mandala, recognising them as a transcendental tool, as intended in Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

My Masters project is an extension of this practice. My project is to develop a collection of artworks with the potential to act as conduits to the divine in my daily life. There is a disconnection between most humans and the natural world, which could be why the planet is being unconsciously destroyed by the human race. I have a desire to explore whether it is possible to visually represent the serenity, peace, and insight obtained through meditation in two and three-dimensional artworks, and whether it is possible to create artworks that incorporate the New Zealand landscapes without assimilating or colonising cultural iconography and/or culturally sacred places or existing traditions that are sacred to Māori.

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Is it possible for me to create artworks that provoke and/or capture the deep spiritual connection that I feel I have with Mother Earth, our home?

As a Pakeha, my bloodlines lead back to Celtic, Norse, and Pagan traditions. Early Christianity rejected and took over Earth-based worship and celebrations, by appropriating and absorbing their rituals and times of worship into the Christian calendar. These ancient nature-based religious traditions suggested that all of nature is imbued with the spirit of the divine, and in this, these traditions are similar to Polynesian and Māori cultural beliefs. In a cosmological sense, we are all one, unified as we coexist on planet Earth. The Earth is our only home and host, it is our duty to protect her, I believe there is no more important job in this lifetime. Her natural resources and inhabitant creatures have been taken for granted and are at risk of being lost forever, many already have. It is my intention that my research project will respond to and be inspired by the magic of nature and the cosmos, aesthetically, and energetically, along with the ritual objects involved in ancient nature worship traditions.

Literature Review:

The history of traditional Mandala art cannot be referred to without citing the core of Buddhist teachings, whereby according to his Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, the world's foremost Buddhist leader, ecumenical understanding, kindness, compassion, a respect for the environment and above all peace are the foundation stones (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2002). The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha was born in Nepal around 560BC. It is believed that before his passing the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha created the first Mandala. The ritualistic process of

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this Mandala's creation and destruction is said to have played an integral part in Buddha's enlightenment. José Argüelles (1995) points out in his book on Mandala that "in Tibet, the Mandala has achieved its fullest and most complex development – both in artistic form and as a meditative ritual emphasising cosmic integration." (Argüelles, 1995, p.13).

As referred to in the Ancient History Encyclopaedia "The word mandala is a Sanskrit term that means circle or discoid object. A mandala can be defined in two ways: externally as a schematic visual representation of the universe and internally as a guide for several psychophysical practices that take place in many Asian traditions, including meditation." (Violatti, 2013, pp. 1). The Mandala has appeared in human cultural practices for millennia, in rituals, art forms, and constructions. As referred to by the Dalai Lama, the basic properties consist of a centre, symmetry, and cardinal points (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2002). The term is applied to any form of a geometric structure and symbol that represents cosmic energy in the physical world. The appearance of the Mandala reminds the viewer of serenity and sanctity in the universe and the energy inside of him or her (Sadiksha, 2018). The traditional sand mandala was first brought to the west by the monk Losang Samten, at the request of the Samaya Foundation in New York. Losang Samten lived and studied for over 20 years in the Namgyal Monastery of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, moving to the United States in 1988 to produce the first sand Mandala for public viewing in the USA. This was also one of the first mandala produced for public viewing in the world not for Buddhist ceremonial ritual alone (Samten, 2020, pp. 1)(Olinsky, 2019, pp. 3).

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To entirely understand the depth of traditional Buddhist Mandala one must be immersed in Buddhism not only as a form of dedicated practice but also as a teaching of great existential and historical value. It would follow that this kind of immersion would also be required to fully comprehend the Māori and Polynesian cultures. The creation and subsequent destruction of the traditional Buddhist mandala are performed in conjunction with prayer, meditation, and centuries-old tradition to honour the deities and teachings sacred to that of Buddhist teachings. For the purposes of this research project, I intend to draw upon my own spiritual practices of Vipassana meditation and Reiki energy healing, which both align with traditional Buddhist beliefs. As outlined in *The Art of Living* (1987), “Vipassanā means “insight” in the ancient Pāli language of India. “It is the essence of the teaching of Buddha, the actual experience of the truths of which he spoke. The Buddha himself attained that experience by the practice of meditation.” (Hart, 1987, p.6).

The traditional Reiki story began in the 1800s with Mikao Usui in Japan, a traditional Buddhist monk (Lubeck, Petter & Rand 2001, p. 13). Reiki is a touch-based healing system that incorporates calligraphic symbols. The spiritual as well as internal visual insight into the human energy system I have gained through these practices, together with traditional Buddhist mandala, have composed my understanding of the wheel of Dharma, of life, and impermanence. It is this cyclic symbolic matrix of eternal life force energy as it evolves through space and time, that I have spent my 25-year art practice trying to translate into visual forms, and intend to incorporate aspects of this concept into this research project.

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Research into artists working with the mandala as a visual format has mainly led to artists who utilise the mandala decoratively in painting or drawing. These include Dennis Wojtkiewicz, who amongst other nature-based subjects, paints hyper-realistic paintings of flowers and cross-sections of fruit. His works beautifully capture the mandalas of nature and prove that mandalas do commonly exist in natural forms (Wojtkiewicz, 2020). Stephen Meakin is a prolific professional mandala artist, whose works are decorative examples of the utilisation of sacred geometry mandala in a new Western tradition. His work evokes a sense of reverence and connection with nature (Meakin, 2020). José Argüelles is also a notable mandala artist, as well as an expert on sacred geometric and mandala art, and published the *Mandala* (1995) book co-written by his wife Miriam in 1995 (Argüelles, 1995). A notable person of interest in terms of the use of mandalas in a Western historical capacity is Carl Jung (1875-1961). Jung was a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist who founded analytic psychology. Jung's use of mandalas in psychoanalytic therapy influenced the development of fields like art therapy. He didn't just have his patients draw mandala – he did so as well. His *Red Book* (2009) contains a collection of mandala and other artworks (Colls, 2009). He is considered one of the first Westerners to appropriate mandala as an art form.

Artists who utilise the mandala or a kaleidoscopic type format in photography include Allison Trentelman, a fine art photographer living in Maine, USA. Her art practice focuses on natural landscapes and wildlife, with some of her work depicting circular photographic mandala. These mandala works are very delicate and soothing to look at (Trentelman, 2020). Justin Bernhardt, an abstract painter and photographer based in Southwest Michigan USA has created a collection of nature-based mandala stating that “visually, this type of symmetry can

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intensify nature's complexity, its presence, and its apparent sentience." (Bernhardt, 2020, pp.1).

Installation art that alludes to the mandala as a circular form includes the works of Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, namely *The Weather Project*; a monumental large scale sun-like installation installed at the Tate Museum in London (2003 and 2020). Eliasson also utilises the use of sculptural kaleidoscopic type formations in some of his other works, for example, *One-Way Colour Tunnel* (2007), and *Your Spiral View* (2002). A lot of Eliasson's sculptural and installation works also incorporate sacred geometry (Eliasson, 2020). Andy Goldsworthy has been known to allude to mandala-like formations in some of his land art installations, as does Richard Long, who works in the same genre. Another notable outdoor installation artist who invokes sacred geometry and the mandala in his work is Simon Beck, a former engineer who has turned his attention to snow art, creating massive geometric designs in fields of snow (BBC News, 2020). An aspect of outdoor installation which I hope to include in my aesthetic is the use of artificial light, and/or mirrored sculptures. An artist of interest is Nicolas Rivals whose work *The End Result//La Linea Roja* (2016) is of particular importance in terms of my potential methodologies. In this work, he utilises long exposures of artificial light in natural environments at night (Rivals, 2015). Similar to this is the work of Barry Underwood who also incorporates artificial light in staged landscapes (Lynch, 2014). An artwork that aligns with the vision I have of how my sculptural works could potentially manifest is that of Ketan Jawdekar, namely his art installation to celebrate the 18th anniversary of Elle Décor India (Archisearch, 2020). Similar to this work is *Mirroring The Ocean Waves* by Phillip K. Smith III (Mróz, 2017), as are the seemingly floating Monopoly-like mirror houses designed by photographer and

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creative director Autumn De Wilde, and *Babel Tower* by Shirin Abedinirad. Lastly, I find the works of Richard Lippold particularly interesting in their technical application as well as subject matter.

I hope to involve aspects of the installation techniques and methodologies similar to the works of the above mentioned creative beings. I believe the mirroring of landscapes and natural forms through my photographic mandala technique highlights the organic shapes that prevail in such environments. My reasoning for wishing to incorporate the inspired methodologies of these artists into my work in conjunction with the mandala is to build on and expand the nature of my established art practice, perhaps having the mandala inform the shapes and aesthetics in the physical artworks. By placing sculptures and/or light installations into natural environments, there may be the potential to capture photographically moments of intrigue brought about by juxtaposition, and by curiously drawing attention to the austerity of the spaces these potential objects and/or installations could occupy. In essence a cyclic art working process of reflection, contemplation and evolution, whether they be finished outcomes or part of the art working journey.

In researching connections between traditional Māori, Pacific Island, and Buddhist Mandala art, one can draw the conclusion that there are aesthetic similarities in some of their symbols and motifs. However, I was unable to find texts other than cosmological and linguistic ones that drew a connection between these ancient civilisations, namely the recent study *Decoding Māori Cosmology: The Ancient Origins of New Zealand's Indigenous Culture* (Scranton, 2018). Similar connections were observed in a book called *Structure and Cognition*

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in Art (Washburn, 1983). The constellations as well as the sun and the moon feature highly as divine forces in most traditional Buddhist and Pacific indigenous art. This symbolic representation is consistent for most early and ancient civilisations, with the worship and documentation of the stars being linked to the worship of their gods and deities. Early Māori were exceptional astronomers, with their new year marked by the appearance of the Matariki star cluster, also known as the Pleiades. An Australian Aboriginal researcher referred to the Pleiades star cluster as follows: “Revered and worshipped by many diverse peoples, cultures, and civilisations, this small cluster of stars has had an enormous influence on the human psyche and on our collective unconscious.” (Munya, 2004). The Māori astronomical knowledge is referred to as tātai arorangi. Māori, Aboriginal, and Polynesian peoples used the stars to calculate the seasons and time, as did many of their Asian counterparts (Waikato, 2016). Parallels in the cosmological symbology in Māori, Aboriginal, Polynesian and Buddhist mandala art is an area I would like to investigate further. Potentially new aesthetic knowledge could be developed by drawing upon these correlations and hereby linking my practice with the context of the Pacific and its indigenous traditions without utilising or appropriating their symbols.

Aesthetically looking at Māori art in particular, a notable source of historical inspiration for me was the *Te Maori Te hokinga mai: The Return Home*, an exhibition at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch, March 15 - May 17, in 1987, which I attended at the age of ten. A concise book and catalogue were created from this exhibition. On observation of the taonga in this special collection, a number of similarities can be drawn between mandala, Polynesian, and Māori motifs. All utilise symmetry and often mirrored patterns.

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“Titiro ki muri kia whakatika ā mua, Look to the past to proceed to the future.” This is an opening introduction statement in a recently published catalogue of Ngāti Parou carving; *A Whakapapa of Tradition* (Ellis, 2016, p.9). The author goes on to explain how the purposes of Māori art and architecture changed dramatically in the years of early European settlement. “ideas such as tikanga (tradition), tapu (sacredness) and mana (power, authority) become embedded within the new architectural forms, while established rituals were repurposed into new architectural forms.” The same publication features a waka taua carved in the tauihu form; two takairangi spirals with a figure in between. The carving shows a strong connection to the circular forms in Polynesian Tapa and mandala forms, as well as embodying symmetry as a major compositional feature (Ellis, 2016, p.44). Both the transformation of the purpose of the architectural structures and the looking to the past and in order to evolve into the future are important concepts I see playing a part in my research project.

In an academic paper on *Polynesian Tapa Culture*, scholar Crestantia Koya Vaka’uta explores the art of Tapa motif and symbolism and how Tapa imagery embodies the symmetry in natural forms namely Polynesian flora (Vaka’uta, 2017, pp. 238-288). There is a strong aesthetic correlation between some Buddhist mandala, Polynesian, and Māori motifs in regards to depicting flora formations that I would like to draw upon in my research. (Paama-Pengelly, 2010, pp. 19-23).

My work will focus on specific locations in Aotearoa, and as such, I may be able to learn about spiritually potent locations from studying Māori traditions. As a general observation, the Māori recognise significant landmarks such as rivers and mountains as their sacred

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places. These places are often linked to Māori mythology, their gods, and their whakapapa. Whilst I was studying my degree at Ara 20 years ago I researched the cultural and historical significance of the Castle Hill area which is considered by the Waitaha and Ngāi Tahu Māori tribes to be the birthplace of the gods. With the prospect of looking at Māori sacred places in connection to my own work, I recognise that there are protocols to follow if I wish to incorporate these places into my work. I, therefore, think this aspect of my research requires a careful, well-guided approach. In an article in the Heritage of New Zealand periodical, Oteauheke, the rocky mountain that overlooks Akaroa Harbour was announced to be Wahi Tapu, meaning it has been officially registered with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust to retain its Māori identity as a sacred place where the gods dwell (Philip, 2010). Wāhi Tapu registration is an important process for Māori to protect their sacred and historical sites. I have no intension to utilise these spaces for this project unless I have been specifically invited to do so through the correct cultural channels. My wish is to incorporate the majestic beauty of the New Zealand landscape into my aesthetic with the intention of capturing its inherent power, but this must be done correctly. Therefore, in looking at naturally austere and sacred places in New Zealand the works of Barry Brailsford are a significant resource. I have also sought to interview one of his co-collaborators for the *Whispers of the Waitaha*; Makere Ruka Te Korako (Makere Ruka Te Korako, 2006).

Methodologies:

Initially I intend to:

- Look at/research ritual objects, and natural formations that speak to me.
- Research, explore, and take photographs of potential installation environments.

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- Expand knowledge of my family tree, find more connections. Roots are what hold us to the ground.
 - Find a unifying message and focus the above points on this.

Then I will continue by:

- Expand on the desire to capture the synergy of natural patterns and forms through the mandala process.
 - Digital manipulation whilst maintaining traditional compositional and lighting components of photographic capabilities.
- Carefully explore and investigate places considered to be environments that hold intense grounding or spiritual power.
 - Connect with individuals who are willing to help guide this knowledge.
 - An in-depth investigation into the protocol of New Zealand's native peoples, which is especially essential as a Pakeha woman.
- Background research and field trips to explore potential wilderness landscapes for the sculptural works to sit within.
 - Research into who holds deeds over those lands and whether permissions from councils or farmers are required.
 - Acquisition of planning permissions.
- A competent investigation into how my conceptual works can be integrated into natural landscapes without interfering with the environments they sit with.
- Experiment with different mediums and media, and methods of sculptural installation
 - Research into the appropriate materials for indoor installation and sculptural works.

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- Research and make Marquette's small and large, some utilising site-specific characteristics of certain locations.
- Research into the appropriate materials for outdoor installation and transportation into the wilderness.
- Exploring means of sculptural construction that will withstand the elements.
The larger sculptures will potentially need to be modular in order to be packed down and reconstructed.
- Research processes utilising welded steel or aluminium, with reflective Perspex construction.
- Ecological methods: Research into and inclusion of earth-friendly practices and methods wherever possible.
- Extensive photographic research into the potential installation spaces prior to installation, and documentation during the construction processes as well as the capture of final installations.
 - Observe how the natural light performs in these areas.
 - What times of day are best.
 - What time of the year.
- Research into spaces and places that would allow, and be accessible for public viewing.
- Communication and reflection with tutors, peers in the fields of photography, installation, and sculptural techniques.
- Find potential city-based exhibition spaces.

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- Interviews – Cultural referees: People I can call upon if I going to places that are of spiritual or cultural significance.
 - Ani O’Neill. Ani was one of my tutors at Elam. She is one of the core members of a group of artists of Pasifika descent who has brought contemporary Pacific art to national prominence and international acceptance.
 - Rosanna Raymond. Performance artist and poet. Rosanna is an Honorary Research Associate at the Department of Anthropology and Institute of Archaeology at University College London.
 - Makere Ruka Te Korako. Co-author of *Songs of the Waitaha* and *Whispers of the Waitaha* (Makere Ruka Te Korako, 2006).
 - Tina Wilson. Director of Māori Business at NZTE.
 - A Ngāi Tahu referee. Yet to be sourced.
- Health and safety and logistics
 - Field tests to investigate the spaces.
 - What sort of vehicle will be required to access the space?
 - How will the sculptures need to be fixed in their location?
 - What are the health and safety requirements for access and installation?

Summary:

Land art is a practice of semi-permanent, and sometimes permanent art installations that look to highlight the already existing beauty of our planet. The land art artists I have been inspired by have created artworks that draw attention to this. These methodologies and processes may help conceptualise potential installation artwork outcomes if my practice

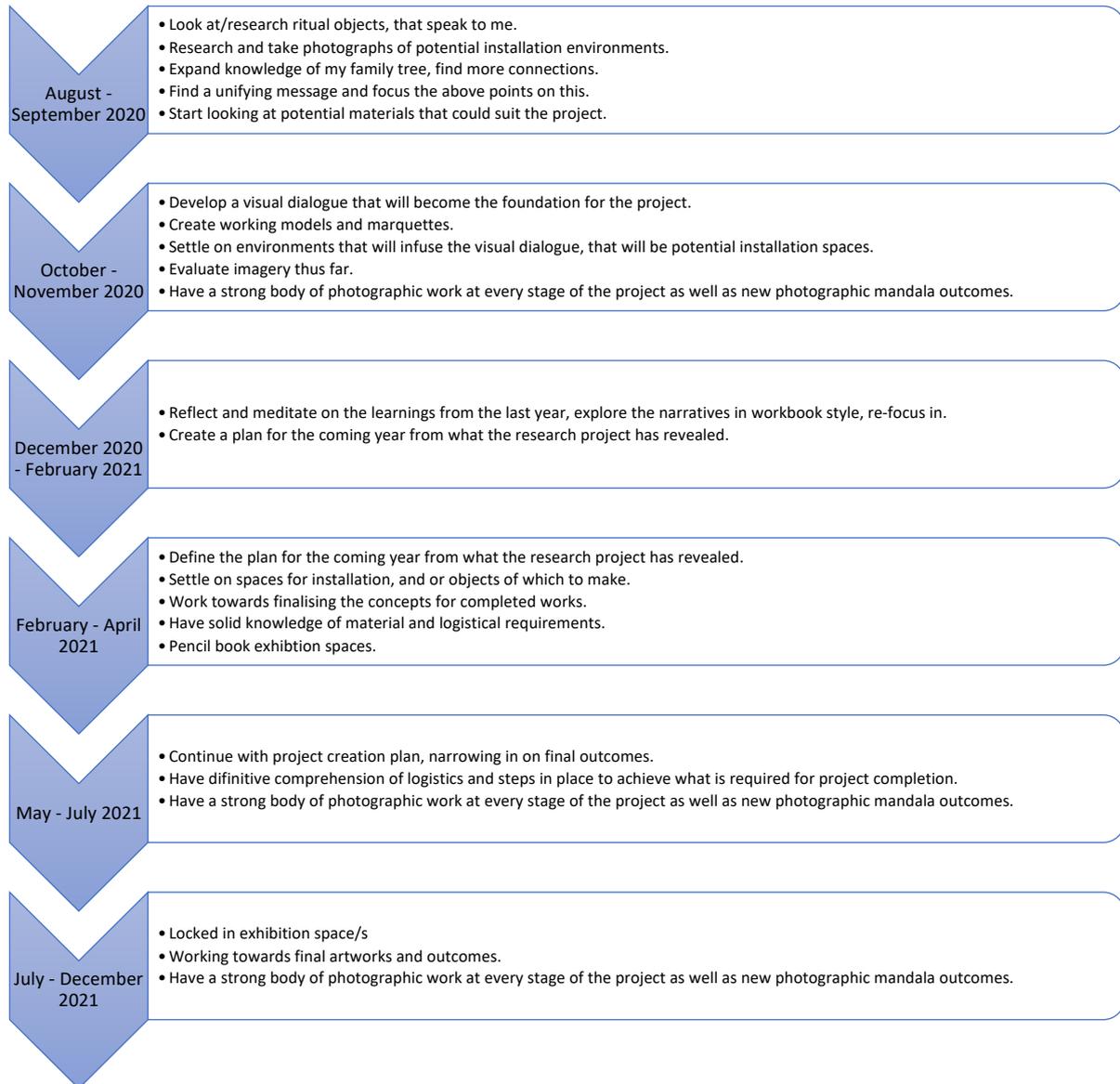
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evolves in this monumental artistic direction. The Buddhists of Tibet think that there is a possibility to access the divine through their mandala sand art. We know that natural wilderness environments can be considered divine. I would like to investigate if it possible to combine these components to create art pieces that suggest a connection to or portal to divinity. These artworks will be an extension of, and evolution of my existing art practice, exploring new and different visual possibilities as a means of communicating what is important to me, drawing on my current conceptual and practical art-making knowledge, the foundation stone for this new body of work. This learning will inform how I approach and engage in the object and image-making processes as well as the potential installations. The unifying element will be the motivation and intention behind it.

I have established that I have an existing connection to the divine and it is something that I treasure. In the creation of this new body of work I do not wish to reinvent the wheel of Dharma, I wish to enhance it by representing it in a current context, utilising modern technology and materials in symbiosis with natural materials and environments. When we are truly in step with nature we are grounded, peaceful, loving, open, and truthful. I wish to create conduits to access the divine in my daily life, whether they be objects, images or both. Moments of intrigue and wonderment. Moments of reflection and austerity. As an extension of my existing practice, this project is not about ownership, it is about connectedness.

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Timeline:



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