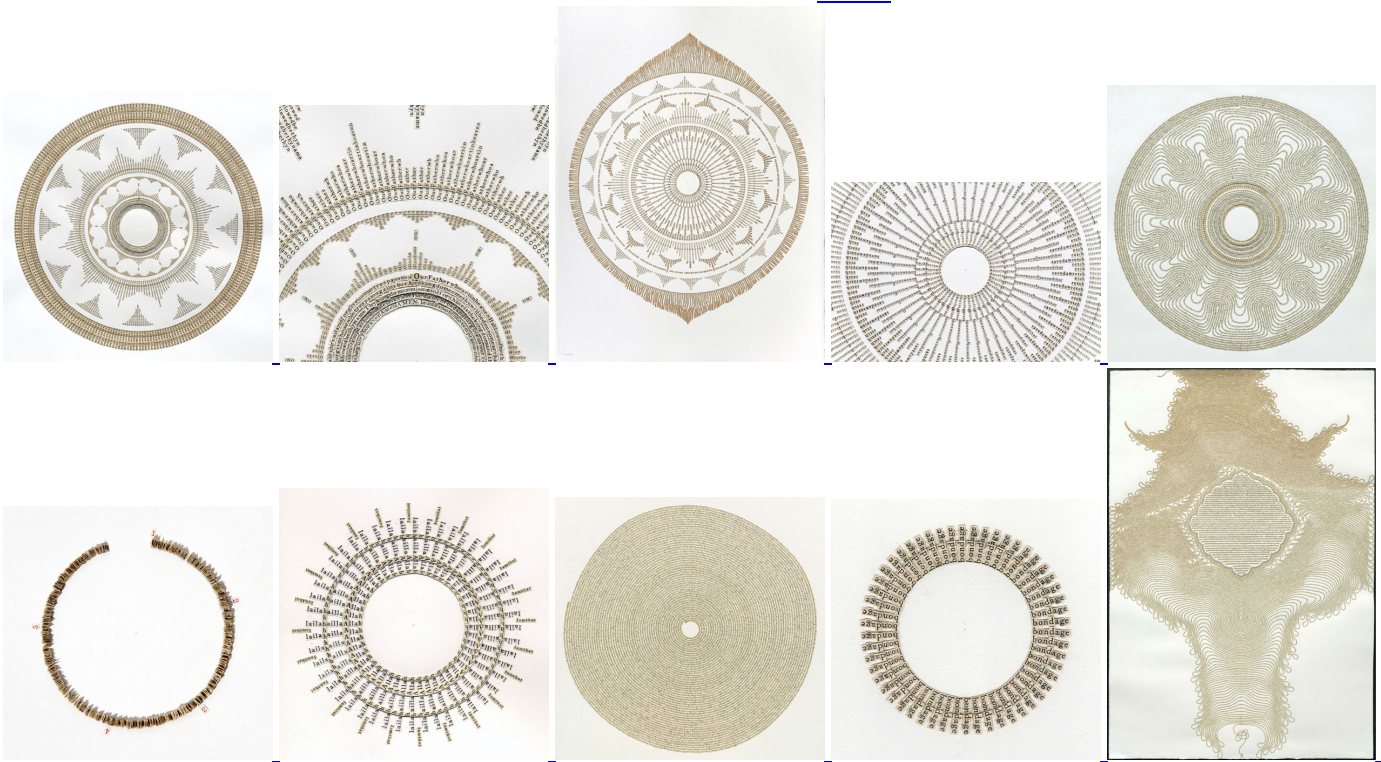
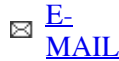


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Published 01/05/2014



Meg Hitchcock: interview

by KATE TIERNAN

Meg Hitchcock, a Brooklyn-based artist, celebrates the human need to reach outside ourselves, through sacred language honouring Christianity, Judaism and Islam with a cross-pollination of text from the Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an.

Dismantling the texts a letter at a time, she transforms them into intricate threads of text. The visual dissection of the word of God runs off the page and provokes us to question our own belief structure.

Hitchcock spoke about her work to Kate Tiernan from her studio in Brooklyn. The following is an excerpt from a longer conversation.

Kate Tiernan: The Bible is frequently used as the content for your work, and I was curious about your first experience of it growing up.

Meg Hitchcock: I was raised in a Methodist family in New England. It was pretty traditional – there was nothing extraordinary. When I got a little older, my dad became a born again Christian, pretty fundamentalist, so it really influenced me. I became a born again Christian when I was 12, out of fear, and continued on that path until I was 30. When I was 20, I moved to Southern California where there's a huge, very Republican, fundamentalist, born again Christian movement, including Calvary Chapel. And that's what I did in my 20s: for the most part, my whole social life was around the church.

Finally, when I was 30, I was able to say to my therapist: "I'm not longer a Christian." Then I started looking at some of the books that I had always thought were evil, such as the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, all these sacred texts from the east. They were incredibly beautiful.

I'm not a theologian by any means, but it's really in my heart that I experience this knowledge; the sensation that God is something, but that no one knows what God is. There is no one answer and every path is legitimate, including the Christian path. I weave them in and out of each other conceptually – that's pretty much the point behind my work, in that God is found speaking poetically in the threads, not in the overall picture or the overall tapestry.

KT: How did your early years influence the way you saw religion?

MH: Very biased and intense, very fundamentalist – which means a lot of things, but to me it's: "I'm right and they're wrong." Like the fundamentalist Muslims, the jihadists – even though I find it reprehensible, I understand how they believe they are right and everybody else is wrong. They believe they are saving people's souls. I know how they feel because I have been there, on the inside of it, and it's very hard to get out of that belief system once you're in it.

KT: Is the work, in a sense, a search for truth, dissecting the word and searching through the text seeking to discover a truth within it?

MH: Not so much within the texts, but within myself, it's definitely a personal journey that I conduct through my art, and I did when I was a painter, too. But this is a little more specific, because it is language, and language is more specific

than paint. But, yes, the conclusion I've come to is that, basically, all these religions are related back to oneself. If you pick any religious path and take it to its logical conclusion you are going to end up right back with yourself, and you realise that everything you are searching for, you are. But that's a long path. The journey is everything.

KT: What is the journey for you in making the work?

MH: Sometimes it's really agonising and pretty dull: it's just the same thing over and over, but where I get my jollies is in varying it. Sometimes I'll do pieces that are very geometric and plotted out. Other times, I just start and wind the text around, or I pile the text up so you can't read it. I have to keep finding new ways to put the text down.

KT: Is there something meditative about the process?

MH: Sometimes if you meditate it can be blissful; other times it can be agonising, hell. Sometimes it is neither. Most of the time it's neither. I do have my moments of bliss; they are way too far apart.

KT: How do you experience bliss?

MH: I don't experience bliss very often, but when I do, it's a sort of inflammation of the soul; an immense love that operates independently of me, and overrides any obstacles I may have put in its path.

KT: Obsession: The Book of Revelation that you wove on to the walls of the Famous Accountants Gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, how did that work differ?

MH: I cut the letters from the Qur'an. It was 22 chapters, so that was really tedious, but I loved the way it turned out. But if I were ever to do that again, it would be with a lot of assistance!

KT: How important to you is the labour and the craft, the amount of time that goes into a piece – do you identify and differentiate the works by the quantity of time?

MH: It's funny, the first question people ask me is: "How long did that take?" Usually, for the big ones, two to three months, but those aren't necessarily my best pieces although they are my most laboured ones. Ten Hell Marys took me a few weeks and is one of my favourite pieces. I'm not attached to the time element.

KT: The combination of design, typography and layout in your work seems a central element balanced against the very physical, laboured craft and time?

MH: The composition is really important to me: it's what makes or breaks the piece. I think that's equally as important as the process. The material I'm using is sacred texts that a lot of people have gone to and touched with their hopes and dreams – pouring out their hearts and souls or seeking answers in these texts – and now I'm just cutting them up, as the word of God. I feel that has a huge contribution to what makes the work special. It carries a certain energy with it. I guess I'm a magical thinker.

KT: It's also very scientific thinking, as it has been proven that objects carry and contain sounds for decades. In a sense, the books have absorbed the prayers that have been spoken over them.

MH: People whose hearts are broken and who have turned to the book for consolation while their hearts are bleeding and their fingers are touching the pages.

KT: What do you consider the word of God?

MH: Anyone who claims they are a prophet of God, I believe they are. I mean, I do and I don't.

KT: Have you ever used your own books?

MH: I have this special Bible, which was my grandmother's, which is in tiny type, and I'm saving it for something special. Nothing is sacred as far as me cutting it up is concerned. I'm even thinking about cutting up my grandmother's diaries, which are sacred to me. I'm not sure. I have a ton of journals, which I was thinking of turning into a sacred text. When I was a little girl, I read Nancy Drew mysteries over and over. I might do something with them.

KT: Do you feel the work is sacrificial in any way?

MH: The deconstructing of the text is essential to make something new, and I think the reason I haven't dissected my grandmother's Bible is that it's a really special book to me, so there is some pain involved. But I think that's good, the fact that it's going to be painful to do because I'll never have it again.

KT: Have you ever thought of introducing imagery into the work?

MH: I miss painting – I am a painter. I just didn't feel it was a medium communicating anything for me, but I'm going to be exploring an overlay with the text.

KT: When you moved to New York, did this mark a departure for you from painting; was it the pace of life and the environment that influenced the shift in your practice?

MH: I suspect it was the energy of the city and I just didn't feel that with paint I had that much to say. What I was feeling and what was coming through on the canvas was a total disconnect and that really bothered me.

KT: Are you looking to explore more current political themes in your work, such as the Guantánamo Bay piece – or do you see them as quite separate from the other scriptural works using the word of God taken from the Bible?

MH: I'm not someone who is super involved in politics. I listen to the news: I don't delve into it a lot, but I have my feelings about it and the different situations in the world. The fact that I'm cutting up the Qur'an inevitably brings me more into the political scene than I would prefer to go. But I'm not doing the piece such as Gitmo about the Guantánamo detainees to be political, I'm doing it because I have strong feelings about the situation there. I think it's really wrong, these men who have been imprisoned, so I'm doing a piece on that. I don't, therefore, think my work is political, but I do have some political pieces. It's just inevitable.

KT: How has this been received so far?

MH: So far so good, but this is New York City – it's very liberal. If I were to have a show in Texas, I'm not sure how that would go, or in the Middle East. I think I would consider not doing that. I am going to be showing my work at a fair in Houston.

KT: What were your thoughts at the time when the Florida pastor Terry Jones burned a copy of the Qur'an?

MH: He was an idiot: it was so ridiculous that he did that. What people don't understand is that it's not as if the Qur'an and the Bible are on an equal footing. Muslims think of the Qur'an in the way Christians think of Jesus and, for them, to do something so ridiculous and, worse, what's been done in Guantánamo to the Muslim men there is a complete abomination.

KT: How do you respond to reactions of horror that you are cutting up and re-authoring the word of God?

MH: I'm very respectful of a person's faith, and would never intentionally insult anyone. If my work is seen as an affront, it's only because that person hasn't heard the meaning behind the work. In short, I don't see it as a desecration, but a celebration of the word of God.

KT: Where would you see the Gitmo work exhibited?

MH: I'm going to be having a solo show in Washington DC in September, at a gallery called Randall Scott Projects. I don't imagine any politicians will go, but it would be good for it to be seen in a more political sense.

KT: The curving text demands that the audience would have to look in a very different way if they were to try to read it, and obviously the extraction of punctuation and grammar also makes it difficult to follow.

MH: They are not meant to be read. It is great if someone wants to read the first sentence or two, but I don't see anyone sticking with it. That's really not the point; there are other things that I figuratively weave in, sometimes my own thoughts or some erotica. If anyone's really trying to find it, they could. I think the idea of a sacred text extends beyond what we think of. Taking it to an extreme, everything is sacred. So by weaving in some erotica, it points beyond just the obvious sacred text.

KT: Do you see the Song of Solomon in the Bible as being an erotic text?

MH: I did do a passage from that. It was a pretty erotic passage or could be construed that way. I think I cut the letters from a book by Jung called *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Another one I'm doing is *The Story of O*, a 1950's S&M novel from France. I'm cutting the letters from there and turning it into a beautiful poem about the Virgin Mary.

KT: When people see your work, what sort of encounter do you want them to have or take from it?

MH: I really like them to be touched by it, to linger a little while. Ultimately, what I really would love to happen – I was so entrenched in a belief system and for me there was no other way except that way – is for people who have a belief system to be exposed to something else and consider that isn't the only way. I'm not trying to talk a Christian into not being a Christian because I think they should be a Christian, but for them to acknowledge that the Muslim path is a beautiful path or atheism is a beautiful path. For people to let go of the death grip on how they see the world, I think that's an amazing thing. If my work can contribute to that letting go process, then I would be really happy about that.

KT: How do you think the word of God is relevant today in New York?

MH: The word of God is relevant insofar as it offers hope to those who have none. There's a huge need for that in a large city such as New York. It's interesting to me that when you go to the outer boroughs, where the neighbourhoods get pretty rough, there is a sharp increase in two things: churches and liquor stores. One way or another, people need to connect with spirit. I believe what people really need is a deep connection with something larger than themselves. Some call that God, some call it consciousness, and some just call it humanity.