

PINTADO, STEISHA I. M.F.A. *You Will Be With Me in Paradise*. (2023)
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This MFA thesis explores my personal experience of being born and raised in a fundamentalist religious cult, and the aftermath of leaving the cult. My practice is interdisciplinary, using drawing, painting, installation, and stop motion animation together to unfold a narrative of indoctrination and liberation. My work helps me confront the fact that I am an apostate, it helps me take back my power and my voice, and I want to use my voice to speak out against a system of oppression hiding in plain sight. I use this work to celebrate how I have forcefully taken the things that I had been denied since birth: an education, a career, a voice, a free life where two plus two always equals four.

YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE

by

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Approved by

Barbara Campbell Thomas
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DEDICATION

To my family. I hope one day they will see that this was all for them. And to the friends who became my family. Thank you for believing in me.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

My MFA thesis, *You Will Be With Me in Paradise*, is a group of mixed media work that explores my experience of being born and raised in a fundamentalist religious cult, and the aftermath of leaving the cult. I was taught that Armageddon could come at any moment, and only the true worshippers of Jehovah would survive and receive everlasting life on a Paradise Earth. My purpose in life was predetermined and designed around being a Jehovah's Witness. There was room for very little else. It was a life of isolation, guilt, and fear.

In this thesis, you will find paintings of Paradise, installations of both a Kingdom Hall and of Paradise, and animation work of my self-portrait character, the Goon, navigating these spaces. This body of work is a longing for the childhood nostalgia of these spaces, and for the people I left behind in those spaces. While my work is a definite criticism of an oppressive religious cult, I do not seek to mock its belief system or the spaces in which it operates, but rather to provide my own sincere interpretation of each. I believe in the freedom of religion, but unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, I also believe in the freedom to leave a religion without the fear of estrangement, harassment, and coercive control.

CHAPTER II: JEHOVAH'S CHOSEN PEOPLE

I was born and raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. As one of Jehovah's chosen people, I was taught that it is our sacred duty to preach the Kingdom news to all who will listen, so they will know that God's name is Jehovah and can have the opportunity to learn the Truth.¹ We knew that Armageddon could come at any moment, and only the true worshippers of Jehovah would survive and receive everlasting life on a Paradise Earth. We looked forward to the promise in Revelation 21:4, "[...] he will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be anymore. The former things have passed away."² If we remained faithful servants of Jehovah, then one day we could become perfect and live forever.

My purpose in life was predetermined and designed solely around being a Jehovah's Witness, and the expectations are quite high to be one of God's true followers. We were expected to read the Bible every day, read from the daily textbook, read the new magazine and book releases, study and prepare comments for the four meetings we attend at the Kingdom Hall each week, practice and rehearse our scripts for the theocratic ministry, go preaching, only associate with other Jehovah's Witnesses, and pray to Jehovah God several times every day.

We followed Jesus' commandment to preach the good news to all the nations, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of people of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy spirit, teaching them to observe all the things I have

¹ The Truth is one of several nicknames the Jehovah's Witnesses have given their religion. Other nicknames include the Organization and the Society.

² Unless otherwise stated, all Bible verses quoted are from the Jehovah's Witnesses' Bible: *The New World Translation of Holy Scriptures*.

commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19, 20) We received training each week in the Theocratic Ministry School on how to be effective public speakers, how to use illustrations, how to make persuasive arguments, and how to reason from the Holy Scriptures. This training prepared us for the field ministry, the activity that Jehovah’s Witnesses are most famous for, and it was our greatest purpose. All members of the congregation are Publishers of the Kingdom Ministry³, and as Publishers we were expected to preach a minimum of 10 hours a month to remain active in the congregation. Pioneers are volunteers who have committed to preaching 70 hours each month. We were taught that everyone’s goal should be to pioneer at some point in their life. Some of the most spiritual members of the congregation were ones who served as Pioneers for many years, and we were to endeavor to be like them by devoting our lives to the Kingdom Ministry.

We were to be no part of the world. School children were not allowed to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance and must leave the classroom when a birthday or holiday is being celebrated. Extracurricular activities were also forbidden because that would be spending time with bad association instead of worshiping Jehovah. So that meant absolutely no sports, no marching band, no plays, no prom, nothing. We were frequently reminded of the dangers of spending time with worldly⁴ people: “Do not be misled. Bad associations spoil useful habits.” (1 Cor. 15:33) Likewise, adults were only allowed to associate with colleagues while at the

³ The ‘Kingdom Ministry’ is a term used to describe the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ preaching activity. Another name commonly used to describe the preaching work is ‘field service.’

⁴ ‘Worldly’ is a term used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses to describe anyone, or anything, that is not a member of the group. It is essentially meant as a slur, pushing further the ‘us vs. them’ mentality. Worldly people are considered bad association, including relatives who are not Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Witnesses are required to keep contact with worldly people to a minimum.

workplace and must keep contact to a minimum. It was preferred that you work in a business run by your Christian⁵ brothers and sisters.

College and other forms of higher education were not allowed. The Governing Body⁶ has provided guidance on the pursuit of higher education in the *Watchtower*⁷ magazine explaining the dangers of higher education for Jehovah's people and reminding us to put Kingdom interests first, admonishing us: "How sad that some have fallen away from the faith as a result of succumbing to the demands on their time and energy or of getting entangled in unscriptural conduct at college!" (Parents) Likewise, serving in the military was not allowed, nor was voting or participating in any political conversation or activities. We were constantly reminded that we must remain no part of the world.

If you were caught committing any wrongdoing, then you would be punished. A judicial committee made up of your local congregation Elders⁸ would meet with you to investigate your sin. The Elders determined how serious your sin is, your level of repentance, and they decided the severity of your discipline. The gentler punishment would be a private reproof, your congregation privileges being revoked without any formal public announcement. The severe punishment was disfellowshipping, which is a practice of shunning or excommunication. If you were disfellowshipped, then the Elders determined that your sin was either too great, or you were not repentant enough, to return to the congregation. At the next congregation meeting, an Elder would get on the platform in front of the entire congregation and say, "So-and-so has been

⁵ In this context, Christian is defined specifically as other Jehovah's Witnesses. All other religions, including other Christian denominations, are considered false religion.

⁶ The Governing Body are the eight male leaders of the entire Jehovah's Witnesses organization.

⁷ *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom* is a Jehovah's Witness magazine published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania from 1879 through today.

⁸ Elders are the male leaders of the local congregation.

disfellowshipped. They are no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses." All members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including your immediate family, would no longer be allowed to talk to you. They were to treat you as if you didn't exist. We were frequently reminded that the practice of disfellowshipping is an act of love, it reminds the sinner of what they have lost, it motivates them to get back into good standing with the congregation, and most importantly disfellowshipping keeps the congregation clean and removes any reproach to Jehovah's name. A person can be disfellowshipped for a minimum of 6 months, but the punishment can last for years, and in some cases for decades, until the Elders can see that you are truly repentant.

When you are a Jehovah's Witness, there isn't room in your life for anything else. It requires constant work, and it will become your only identity, all other parts of your identity and sense of self will be stripped away. We were told to put on "the new personality" (Col. 3:10), to "watch how [we] walk" and watch how we talk "because the days are wicked." (Eph. 5:15-16) We were to take care not to stumble our fellow brothers and sisters and were reminded that our conduct is proof that we are Jehovah's chosen people. We were to do everything we could to be faithful servants of Jehovah so we could make it to Paradise.

CHAPTER III: AN EDUCATION

I began to wake up⁹ when I was in high school. When I was fifteen the Governing Body began to push hard against higher education, and that was my first spark. I began to think for myself. I knew that even though they said we could be disciplined if we went to college, I still desperately wanted to go and was scheming my way towards achieving that goal. It became my deepest and most powerful secret fantasy. I knew that it wasn't likely that I'd be allowed to go to college, but I knew of a few Jehovah's Witness kids who had pulled it off. Maybe I could be like one of them?

The second spark was when I read George Orwell's book *1984* in English class during my senior year of high school. I had never heard of the book before, so it was to my surprise that I found myself relating to the novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, who was also having his own inward, and eventually outward, rebellion. I began to see parallels in the book and my life with how we policed each other: we were expected to report back to the Elders if we witnessed someone committing wrongdoing, and you could also be disciplined if the Elders found out that you saw something but never reported it to them. I also saw parallels with how language is used as a means of control: words are repurposed to further create an 'us vs. them' mentality, to stop critical thinking, and reduce ideas to simple buzzwords and phrases (Hassan 54). From my own lived experience, I deeply understood Winston's fears of surveillance and the Thought Police. I began to realize that while my classmates were reading *1984* as a piece of fiction, they could not actually relate to the events taking place, but I was reading a book that almost described the

⁹ 'Waking up' is a term used by the ex-Jehovah's Witness community to describe when a person begins to realize that they are in a cult. This term is likely borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche's 1883 book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*: "And once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally."

conditions of my daily life. Even though it would be many years later until I was ready to admit it, *1984* gave me a defining word for my life as a Jehovah's Witness: totalitarian.

Even though I knew the Governing Body's stance on higher education, I still decided to get on the college preparatory track and take the SATs without seeking my father's permission. I was deeply invested in my dream to go to college. After I graduated from high school in 2006, I applied to and was accepted at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), a public university in a city thirty minutes away from my small town. However, I was met with great resistance from my father and wound up deferring my enrollment indefinitely. That following year was met with even more rebellion by my part, I was rebelling against my father and against the Jehovah's Witnesses. By the time summer 2007 rolled around, I was even more determined to go to college. To my father's dismay and with immense personal struggle, I again enrolled at UNCG in August 2007 at age 19, and I never looked back.

When I decided that I wanted to go to college, I already knew that I wanted to study animation. I had been obsessed with watching and learning about animation since my earliest childhood memories. When I wasn't at the Kingdom Hall, preaching, or in school, most of my childhood was spent in front of a television screen completely mesmerized by the animated image. These animated films and tv shows were my escape. Like most Jehovah's Witness parents, mine were very strict about what I was allowed to watch. Even though there is magic present in many of the Disney films I grew up with, my parents allowed me to watch many of these films and shows. They saw most of these cartoons as relatively innocent. I had already decided by the first grade that I wanted to be an animator when I grew up, and that career goal has never changed. While I longed to go to a renowned school like CalArts, I knew that this was not in my grasp. I chose UNCG for undergrad for its proximity to where I lived, its low cost as a

state school, and I knew that it had a reputable Fine Art program. Since UNCG did not have an animation program at that time, I decided that I would focus on drawing and painting figurative work as this seemed like the best foundation for someone who aspired to be a character animator.

While Painting was my official concentration in undergrad, I added a lot of electives to my coursework outside of drawing and painting, from design and video classes within the Art Department, to acting and puppetry classes in the Theater Department, and the only animation production class available at the time at UNCG, which was taught by the Media Studies Department. My goal with all these electives was to craft my own animation education, even if there wasn't a formal path available at my school. This exploration in my education outside of my concentration led me to using puppets as a medium for self-portraiture, which is still a part of my practice today.

Towards the final years of undergrad, I began making work with a grotesque self-portrait character that, in more recent years, I would name the Goon. The Goon is a grotesque, cartoon version of myself, and I have found that she helps me externalize certain intense internal feelings that I struggle to communicate. I kept drawing this self-portrait character repeatedly in my sketchbook, each time further abstracting her facial features. I drew her so often and her features became so recognizable, that I began to realize that she was no longer a random drawing. She was a character, and not just any character. She was me.

I graduated in May 2013 from UNCG with a BFA in Painting, and that June I had the opportunity to present my undergraduate research work as a paper at the Society for Animation Studies annual conference in 2013. I squeezed as much value as I could out of my undergraduate education, and I certainly exceeded the expectations of my younger self who had only dreamed of someday going to college.

CHAPTER IV: PAINTINGS OF PARADISE

In the years that followed undergrad, I took a big leap away from figuration and self-portraiture and began making abstracted landscapes. After a year of making these abstracted landscapes, I began to realize that they were paintings of Paradise, and this marked the first time that elements of my old Jehovah's Witness life were present in my work. These new paintings represented the lie of everlasting life on a Paradise Earth. The Paradise in these paintings is overgrown, dense and compacted, and doesn't allow the viewer's eyes a moment to rest. I want the viewer to be able to see the space of Paradise, but only see it through the foliage and not actually be able to enter the space. I don't want the viewer to enter this space because I know that this Paradise is a dangerous lie.

These are the paintings that were the first works that I began to collage with fabric. My mother had given me over 30 years' worth of sewing supplies and fabrics, and as I sorted through the material to decide what to keep and what to donate, I realized the potential of her fabric as a material to collage into my paintings. Each piece of fabric holds its own special memory for me. My mother has largely been absent from my life since I was fourteen years old, and I've found that the fabric in my paintings gives me the closest physical connection I can have with her. The fabric she gave me was the same fabric that she had used to make dresses for me and my sister to wear to the Kingdom Hall. She would use bright colors and busy floral-patterned fabric that I used to find embarrassing, they were so Boricua.¹⁰ These were the colors that my abuelas used to decorate their homes: bright pinks, corals, yellows, turquoise and teals. When they lived in Puerto Rico they saw sand, the ocean, palm trees, and a rainforest in their

¹⁰ Puerto Rican.

daily lives. They lived in a place that many people would call a paradise in itself, but the Puerto Rican diaspora led them to lives of the harsh, gray concrete of New York City to follow an American dream.

It took a long time for me to understand that my mom and my abuelas dressed and decorated their homes was probably out of a longing they felt for their old lives in Puerto Rico. Now that I'm in my thirties, longing for my old life and my family, I'm using those same bright colors and busy patterned fabric to find my own comfort. The visual and conceptual call to the tropical florals of Puerto Rico in my work is also in dialogue with the paintings of Firelei Baez, an artist from the Dominican Republic whose work is about that same Caribbean diaspora, and it acknowledges the many parts of herself: her Caribbean self, her Black self, her American self, and her Latin American self (Tillet). As a Puerto Rican, I am the descendant of the Taíno (the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean), Spanish colonizers, enslaved Africans, and probably other ethnicities as well. The Taíno were the first to be colonized in the Americas, and as a result the Taíno were decimated. While Puerto Ricans have Taíno blood, the Taíno culture and language only survived in the smallest of fragments. The United States federal government does not even recognize an official Taíno tribe, according to the government we just don't exist anymore, so there are no protections for our people and culture. I am both an indigenous person and not an indigenous person, and as a Puerto Rican person who does not speak Spanish very well, who also grew up in the American South, I am not Puerto Rican enough in the eyes of other Puerto Ricans, I am not Black enough, nor am I White enough. I relate strongly to the works of Baez because I am all these things and none of these things at the same time.

From 2014-2019, I dug into these paintings as far as I could, but the content of the work was so hidden and obscured. Unless I explained the work, I knew that I was the only person who

understood what these paintings were about. I was still too scared to publicly discuss the works as an act against the Jehovah's Witnesses, as this action would make me an apostate, someone who can never be forgiven. To the Jehovah's Witnesses, an apostate is worse than a pedophile, a rapist, or a murderer. Those sins can be forgiven, but never that of an apostate. My fear left me stuck for a long time, but I soon realized that I had so little left to lose. By that time, I had already found myself going years between conversations with my immediate family. My relationship with them was already hanging on by a loose thread. I just needed help cutting that last tie. So I decided to go to grad school to figure out how to move the work, and myself, forward.

I returned to the School of Art at UNCG in August 2019 as an MFA student in their Studio Arts program. My first semester of grad school began with the death of a classmate, which hit me incredibly hard, and it made for a rocky and turbulent first semester. I had intended to jump right into animation and puppetry work when I began the MFA, as it had been quite a few years since I had last made an animation, but with the trauma I experienced in my first semester I found myself easing into more comfortable territory by making Paradise paintings and floral fabric collages. I was grasping for the familiar to steady myself so I could move forward.

Most of my mother's fabric has since been donated, so I no longer work specifically with her fabric collection. Now I carefully curate the fabric selection in my work, searching for familiar colors and patterns at local fabric shops and thrift stores that resembled the fabric that my mother used in the 1980s-1990s. I frequently use the fabric as a starting point to build the composition of my paintings. Once the foundation of fabric and paint is laid down, I add another layer of paint to obscure the original layer with the flat silhouetted forms peeking through from beneath. This idea comes from my fascination with the shadows cast by trees through windows,

and how those flat silhouetted shadows can still convey form. This fascination also comes from viewing paintings online by artist Rebekah Callaghan, who paints abstracted plant forms using blocks of bright saturated color and silhouetted shapes. My Paradise paintings are greatly influenced by her work. Sometimes I will add additional layers of fabric and paint in this process, going in and out between collaging and painting on the paper. The fabric goes in and out of the silhouettes, existing inside and outside of the figure ground relationship. This process is seen specifically in the *Can You See Nos. 1-10*¹¹ series of paintings in my thesis (see fig. 1), in which paint and fabric vibrate back and forth to create tension and form. The colors of this series of paintings are saturated with the background a bright sky blue, with greens, pinks, reds, yellows, dark blues, and blacks, coming from both paint and fabric, used to build these plant-like forms and patterns. I've recently realized that the flatness of my Paradise paintings is the same type of two-dimensional flatness in the very fabric floral patterns that I've collected. I like the idea that these paintings can be a continuous feedback loop: both the fabric and the paintings contain flowers and plants, the painting is collaged with the fabric, and the patterns in the fabric are themselves mimicked in the forms of the painting.

During my first two semesters in the MFA, whenever I worked in the studio, I played *The Wizard of Oz* or *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* in the background. Both films are near and dear to me, I remember being a little kid watching them over and over again with my sister. I realize that grasping for the familiar, for nostalgia, is a soothing tactic that I've used for most of my life, but even more so since I've left the Jehovah's Witnesses. As seen in *The Fruitage of the Spirit* (see fig. 2), the color in my work is largely influenced by the films of my childhood: they

¹¹ The title of this series of paintings comes from the Jehovah's Witness song "Life Without End - At Last!" from their 1984 songbook, *Sing Praises to Jehovah*. The first stanza of this song reads: "Can you see, With your mind's eye, Peoples dwelling together? Sorrow has passed. Peace at last! Life without tears and pain."

are bright, over-saturated like the Technicolor Munchkinland of *The Wizard of Oz* and have even a sickeningly sweet quality like the confections in *Willy Wonka*. Both films show characters leaving a gray humdrum world and being transported into other worlds full of wonder, beauty, and even terror. I see my own journey in those metaphors, I left the dark and cold life of a Jehovah's Witness to join the colorful world that I was taught to fear. That is what Paradise really means to me. Paradise isn't the lie that was packaged and sold to my parents. Paradise is the life we are living here and now.

I hold tightly to my childhood nostalgia, whether that is an object, a film, or a song. I even keep a storage unit with ten large tubs of toys from my childhood that I haven't been able to part with because, through their tactile nature, they give me access to long forgotten memories of my family. I see these toys as artifacts and evidence of a life once lived. I was once this child, who played with these toys, who wore this dress, who watched these movies, who used to have a family.

During my first semester in the MFA, I made a sculptural work using a porcelain doll, entitled *Apostate Doll* (see fig. 3) that has been a pivotal piece for the work in my thesis. This piece is a standing porcelain doll wrapped in a black fabric with a pink floral pattern, the fabric is binding her together but also functions as a gown similar to regalia. Atop her head is a pink conical hat with pink pom-pom at the end, functioning as both a birthday party hat and a dunce cap, which is appropriate since the Jehovah's Witnesses do not allow their members to celebrate birthdays and they also participate in public punishment with their practice of disfellowshipping and shunning. The doll is wearing a pale green sash with a pale-yellow floral pattern, and in black ink reads the word "APOSTATE" across the sash. At her feet are two large fake red and pink floral blossoms. Her face has been painted with gray and black paint, darkening the

shadows of her eyes, nose, and mouth. This piece is the first work where I directly confronted the fact that I am an apostate. It was a measured and calculated risk, as I knew that this bold move would sever the last remaining fibers of my fractured relationship with my immediate family. The desire to come out as an apostate and speak out against the Jehovah's Witnesses with my artwork was one of the main reasons why I came to graduate school in the first place. This piece operates as a statement of both public punishment and of liberation, which is exactly what being an apostate feels like in real life.

Long ago I identified puppets and animation as media that my work needed to reside in, however, if I take a step back and look at this long history I have with my childhood toys, which also included a collection of porcelain dolls, the use of the porcelain dolls in my work makes a lot of sense. The *Apostate Doll* also reminds me of the traditional Puerto Rican bridal dolls. These dolls always had big poofy dresses, often a miniature replica of the bride's wedding gown. The doll sits with the bride and groom during the reception, and later is given to the bride's mother as a gift. There's actually very little information, and next to no images, on the Internet of the Puerto Rican bridal dolls, so I've included a digital copy from my personal collection of family photographs from a wedding of a distant cousin taken some time in the 1970s (see fig. 4). It is very likely that my mother would have been the photographer as she took most of our family photos. I remember seeing these bridal dolls at weddings when I was a child and have seen them in many family photographs. This family photograph illustrates just how closely my work is tied to memory and family.

CHAPTER V: THE GOON AND THE KINGDOM HALL

In December 2020, at age 33, I was diagnosed with mild Autism Spectrum Disorder. Everything in my life that never made sense suddenly had a very logical explanation. I always thought that I was a strange person because I grew up in a cult. While I'm sure that is also true, the autism diagnosis made more sense for who I am as a whole. It explains why I do the things I do, why I think the way I do, and why I behave and speak the way I do.

During the diagnosis process my doctor interviewed my mother, and through my doctor I learned that starting in very early childhood my only interests were coloring and watching my Disney animated films on VHS. This information provided me with an explanation for my special and obsessive relationship with animation. From childhood through my teenage years, I devoured any book I could get my hands on that discussed the animation process. I watched my VHS tapes and DVDS over and over again, memorizing the behind-the-scenes footage of the animation productions. It might not make sense for most people, but for me connecting with the medium of animation (whether by watching, reading about, or making animation) feels as though I am connecting with a dearest friend.

During my second year of the MFA, I began working with the Goon character again, with the intention of making a stop motion animated film. The Goon's appearance is heavily influenced by Lilo from the 2002 Disney animated film *Lilo & Stitch*. This was the last movie that my family watched together before my parents separated. The film is about an older sister who cares for her weird younger sister after the death of their parents. My parents had noted that the characters' behaviors, mannerisms, and interactions with each other were similar to mine and my sister's relationship. I was like Lilo and my sister was like Nani. These were also the first animated Disney characters that made me feel somewhat represented. While these characters

were Hawaiian and we are Puerto Rican, they still looked like us. Their skin was darker, their bodies curvier, and their noses broader. That broad nose became one of the Goon's most recognizable features. And after my parents separated, Lilo and Nani's story became parallel to mine. The Goon's appearance has also been in dialogue with the grotesque and queer characters in Gregory Jacobsen's paintings and in Greer Lankton's dolls. Over time, the Goon transformed from drawings on paper into plasticine clay puppets.

Only in recent years did I give the Goon her name. For many years I awkwardly referred to her as my 'self-portrait character.' I didn't feel comfortable giving her my own name, even though she was this little proxy of me being used in my drawings to reenact life. She began to remind me of the old series of 'How to' Goofy cartoons Disney produced in the 1940s, the shorts where Goofy learns how to fish, how to fly, how to be a sailor, how to dance. The narrator refers to the character as "the Goof." It just clicked one day when I realized how my character felt similar to how the character Goofy is used to demonstrate different aspects of life. The name 'the Goon' also felt appropriate because one of my favorite films since childhood is Richard Donner's classic 1985 film, *the Goonies*. Just to be certain that this was the right name for my self-portrait character, I looked up the definition of the word 'goon,' and found that it means a silly, foolish, or eccentric person. And that settled it for me. The Goon finally had her name.

I've always considered the Goon to be a silent, non-verbal character. It's not that she can't talk, she just chooses not to talk. I use the Goon to embody and express the feelings that I cannot communicate. I think the Goon represents my autistic, non-verbal self, and I am so grateful to have her. Making work with the Goon has helped me work through issues of sexual violence, body dysmorphia, and several forms of emotional abuse, particularly leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses. In recent years, I have found myself even being kinder to my

representation of the Goon. For so long she had been a grotesque cartoon version of myself. I think the kindness I have more recently given to her image shows a lot of the emotional healing that I have done over the last decade.

I have been very inspired by Allison Schulnik's 2014 stop motion short film, *Eager*, which shows a melancholy, otherworldly forest full of dramatic dancing clay puppets, which includes not only figurative puppets but also dancing flowers and plants. I really like how her use of the clay material is painterly, she allows for colors to mix and blend in the stop motion process rather than keeping each clay part a clean and distinct color. I wanted to make a film with the Goon as a clay stop motion character with the same messy painterly clay process, so I began making clay prototype puppets. Unfortunately, these were not very successful due to my lack of training on building DIY stop motion armatures and using stop motion rigs. I spent an entire year trying to figure out how to do this work, but I couldn't figure it out. However, I do not consider this year was wasted because I compare this time to the exploratory pre-production processes that are important for all animated films.

The summer before my third year of the MFA I decided to switch my choice of animation medium from stop motion to hand drawn animation. I am very confident in my ability to draw and already had access to an animation software called TVPaint, which is an application that creates a digital replication of the traditional hand drawn cel animation process. This decision was a compromise made to move forward with my work. I didn't feel like I had any more time to spare to try to figure out these technical skills on my own, so I decided to switch gears knowing that I can always return to stop motion animation later on. I have also always felt very strongly that the narratives in my work can be told with multiple media, whether that be through drawing,

painting, sculpture, animation, or installation. I use what is available to me, and I try to decide on which medium is best for the specific piece I'm making.

In my hand drawn animated work, I started with a loose storyboard and animatic that followed the narrative of a poem I wrote addressed to my mother. This poem is written in the language of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and it is about the life we lived, all the of the rules we had to follow all for the hope of gaining everlasting life on a Paradise Earth, and how I found my own Paradise and true knowledge outside of the construct of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Paradise is here and now.

You Will Be With Me in Paradise

Mami, you left me
with no understanding of the world.
You said the world is bad,
why would I want to understand what is bad?
You taught me the difference between what was pagan
and what was righteous,
to watch how I walk
and watch how I talk,
to be a good theocratic servant in the kingdom ministry,
to always obey,
and never question.

The end is coming.

No one knows the day nor the hour.

I must be prepared for the end of this system of things

so I won't be destroyed with the wicked,

so I can be in the Great Crowd

and receive everlasting life on a Paradise Earth.

So I can be perfect

with you.

You wanted me to pioneer,

to be like you,

to wash my hands of any blood guilt

by preaching Jehovah's word.

This is the only thing in life that matters.

The scene of this world is changing.

What could I ever bring into Paradise from a wicked world?

Christ died on a stake

to right the sins of Adam and Eve

giving into Satan's temptation

and eating of the forbidden fruit.

His ransom sacrifice will

restore the Earth to Paradise.

You told me in order to get there,
to survive Armageddon,
I had to make the truth my own.
So I did, Mami.
I sought after truth,
I sought after knowledge.
Not knowledge that leads to everlasting life
but knowledge that leads to a free life.
I tasted the forbidden fruit
from the tree of knowledge
of good and bad.
Its taste was so sweet,
so pure and good.
I kept eating it.
I am still eating it.

I wish to share the good news with you, Mami.
This world is not bad.
This world is the land of milk and honey.
Paradise is here.
Paradise is freedom.
Paradise is choice.
Paradise is now.

With an animatic and audio recording prepared, I began the long process of the hand drawn animation. The film followed the Goon in her journey as a Jehovah's Witness to her finding a different Paradise, one that reframes the Paradise that was promised to a space that is otherworldly like Oz. In that Paradise I gave her a bear as a companion and guide in this new space she has found herself in. The Bear is a reference to the Baloo character in Disney's 1967 film *the Jungle Book*, a character I always associated with my father. While the Bear character does not actually represent my father, I think my choice in using a bear as her animal companion is closely related to that sentimentality. The two characters dance together in a Paradise of their own making, evoking the same kind of performative and theatrical aspects that I so admire in Marcel Dzama's drawings, paintings, and shadowboxes. I'd like to think that the Goon in this version of my film understands the lie of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Paradise and she is celebrating her newly liberated life.

I was working on different scenes and plugging them into my animatic, replacing the storyboard imagery with actual animated footage. I had made at least a thousand drawings in this animation process when I had the unfortunate experience of injuring my hand and wrist. I was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome and tennis elbow, both common and painful repetitive use injuries. Due to this injury and diagnosis, I was instructed by my doctor and occupational therapist to stop drawing and give my hand a long break to heal. This was incredibly distressing news. I had been working on this version of the film for eight months and was on target to finish it by my thesis defense in April 2022. I had to request a thesis extension so I could allow my hand to rest and heal.

As the months began to pass and the healing process was so slow, I realized that I would not be able to continue drawing my film. It might take an entire year for my hand and wrist to heal, and I did not have that kind of time left to complete my thesis. So from May through July of 2022, I took a stop motion animation course at Aardman Academy, a new unaccredited education program run by Aardman Animation Studios in Bristol, England. This program taught me everything that I was struggling to teach myself in 2021. We had professional armatures and rigging, so no more of the DIY aluminum wire armatures that I was struggling to learn how to build, and in this 12-week course we quickly learned about the principles of animation, methods, tips and tricks, had demonstrations, and also question and answer sessions with established stop motion animators. During my time in this program, I was able to finally construct a successful stop motion puppet of the Goon. I decided to make the Goon with needle felted wool instead of clay due to concerns with the amount of time it would take to work with the plasticine clay material between shots. Clay is malleable in the stop motion animation process and lots of time is spent getting the puppet back 'on model.' I knew I didn't have time to devote to continuously keeping my character on model, so I chose needle felted wool as an alternative. With my new skills and my constructed puppet, I decided that I would need to go back to my original plan of making a stop motion film for my thesis since I could not draw for prolonged periods of time.

Over the course of the summer and into the start of the Fall 2022 semester, I learned how to sew using a sewing machine (a goal of mine since childhood but had never achieved until now) and I designed and sewed little floral dresses for the Goon to wear in my film. I purchased a second armature and rigging set and went to work building my stop motion puppet of the Bear. I constructed a wooden set and made a new Paradise painting (see fig. 5) for the backdrop for my new film. Once the set and the two puppets were completed (see fig. 6), I had to look at the time

I had left in the semester before my November thesis defense. I determined that I did not have time to reshoot my animated film as I had originally planned. I also felt strongly that my hand drawn animation footage would not work together in the same film as the stop motion footage. So I made another compromise in an effort to keep moving forward: I decided to still use segments of the hand drawn animation footage as standalone pieces, much like how a series of small paintings work together to create a narrative; that I would create a shorter stop motion piece of a dance sequence with the Goon and the Bear in Paradise; and that I would use the audio recording of my poem as a sound piece for a different installation.

I sourced ballet footage on YouTube from various performances as reference footage for the Goon and Bear's dance and I got right to animating. It was absolutely thrilling to see them in motion! Animation as a practice can be long, arduous, and a bit boring, but all of that is worth it for the gratification of seeing your work move and come to life. The dance sequence includes duet footage as well as solo footage of the Goon and the Bear each doing their respective dances. In this stop motion piece, entitled *I'd Like to Teach*, the Goon and the Bear are dancing on a black stage with a painting of Paradise as the backdrop. I chose ballet as the dance because it was something that I always wanted to learn as a child. When my older sister was little, she was allowed to take a dance class and I never got that opportunity. Everyone in my family, except for me, is gifted with the ability to dance. I saw and took the opportunity to participate in dancing through my puppets.

Since I had not done rigorous planning for the *I'd Like to Teach* stop motion piece as I had previously done with the hand drawn animated film, I was piecing the work together as I made it, which felt more like my painting process than the traditional pre-production animation workflow. That looseness was both emboldening and terrifying. I like having plans, especially

when it comes to animation, and this work was being made on the fly. In the traditional animation workflow, audio tracks are recorded before animation ever begins. At the very minimum, ‘scratch’ audio is completed and attached to the animatic for the animators to have something to work with in pre-production. Final animation doesn’t begin without the final audio track. Since I was making this stop motion piece on the fly, I did not have an audio track for this film when I began animating. I didn’t even select audio until I was three quarters complete with the animation, which was the point when I decided that I needed to make a rough cut of the footage all together with audio. I thought that I could use an instrumental song from the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ 1984 songbook *Sing Praises to Jehovah*, which is also known by the Witnesses as the Kingdom Melodies. I tried editing my footage using several different songs, and they just didn’t work with the footage at all. These instrumental songs are so somber and boring that I realized that I could not use them in the context of a dance sequence.

I remembered that in 2021 I rediscovered audio files online that were ripped from an unofficial/underground Jehovah’s Witness audio cassette that I used to have as a small child called *Katie’s Kingdom Songs*. The urban legend surrounding this audio cassette that I remember from my childhood was that a Jehovah’s Witness sister¹² was pregnant with her first child and recorded herself singing songs that she wrote for her unborn daughter, Katie, about worshiping Jehovah, and the legend has it that the sister miscarried and so she gave out the audio cassette to other Jehovah’s Witness families, which was then reproduced over and over again. Going down the rabbit hole of the internet, I found that other people remembered this audio cassette as well with the same background story. To the surprise of the forum users, people from across the

¹² Sister is being used in the context of brothers and sisters of a congregation, not sister in the familial relation sense.

United States remembered this audio cassette. This underground, unofficial Jehovah's Witness audio cassette had been duplicated throughout the late 80s and early 90s, and many Jehovah's Witnesses played it for their children. The audio quality is scratchy, showing that it was both homemade and had been duplicated many times over again. The singer's voice is unusually high pitched, something that I remember my sister finding very annoying even though I loved to play that tape over and over again. The songs are melodies from popular children's songs with new lyrics attached that are about serving Jehovah, one example is a song that reuses the *It's a Small World After All* tune.

I listened through the downloaded tracks and chose a song called *I'd Like To Teach* for my stop motion animation, which reuses the melody from The New Seekers' 1972 song *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*. I've transcribed the lyrics, but certain words are missing because they were unintelligible given the high pitch of the singer and the quality of the recording.

I'd Like To Teach

By an unknown musician from the "Katie's Kingdom Songs" audio cassette.

I'd like to teach the world the Truth,
and the happiness it brings.

Like people [...] and loving friends
with Jesus as our King!

I'd like to see the Earth all filled
with happy families.

And no more war
with [...]
and joy from sea to sea.

It's the real way.
Be courageous and say,
Live the Truth every day.
It's the real way.

I'd like to ride a lion's back
and stroke his golden mane.
Do cartwheels with the chimpanzees
along the grassy lane.

I'd like to see our loved ones dear,
who now are [...]
Grow stronger with each passing day
to waken and young in morn.

It's the real way.
Be courageous and say,
Live the Truth every day.
It's the real way.

Going back to the idea of compromise while making this work, I realized that this audio was perfect for the animation, but it also changed the narrative I had in mind. I had originally planned for this animation piece to be of the Goon and the Bear dancing after she left the Jehovah's Witnesses, but the animation paired with this audio changes the narrative to the time when she was still a Jehovah's Witness. Reflecting on the work now, I see that the media of my childhood (animation, puppetry, and dolls) are being used to show a state of mind that was from the time when I was a child. I feel fine with the change, as I see this work much like my paintings, you must be willing to adapt with where the work goes. This experience shows me the potential of being spontaneous with my animation work and treating it much like I would a painting. Going forward, I plan to play more with that spontaneity to see where it will take the work.

The animation plays on a tv screen that is surrounded by red curtains, giving it the appearance of a theater (see fig. 7). A short square platform is covered with light blue carpet, and atop it sits two burgundy chairs that are the same types of chairs that Kingdom Halls have used for decades. The chairs are surrounded by fake plants, another staple at Kingdom Halls, and are pointed towards the tv screen. Next to the screen is a wooden podium and microphone setup, and behind it a floral Bible scripture sign that quotes Luke 23:43, "You will be with me in Paradise." I chose the red curtain theater motif for this installation because I wanted to give my stop motion animation piece a theater setting as the puppets are performing on a stage in the animation; many Kingdom Halls decorate their platforms with curtains as backgrounds; and most importantly being a Jehovah's Witnesses is a performative experience in itself. You are always performing to make sure that everyone knows just how spiritual and righteous you are.

Given the short length of the animation piece, one minute and twenty-two seconds, and the annoying high pitch of the singer, I decided to install this work with two headphones, so the viewer has to sit in the chairs to listen to the audio with the animation. I felt that if I were to play the audio on speakers, it would become very annoying very quickly, alienating my viewers and detracting from the rest of my work in the gallery.

This installation is an effort to show my audience the space of the Kingdom Hall. Over the last fifteen years, one of my biggest frustrations has been how little people actually know about the Jehovah's Witnesses. Most people just know that Jehovah's Witnesses go preaching and knock on your doors, that they don't celebrate birthdays or Christmas, and they don't accept blood transfusions. It has always been difficult for me to express what this experience is like, and this installation, as well as the rest of the work in this thesis, is an effort to share this experience with an audience who would otherwise not be familiar. In this installation, the media of my childhood, specifically animation, puppetry, and dolls, is being used to show my state of mind from when I was a child, all within a representation of the religious space that occupied so much of my childhood.

The thesis also includes an installation entitled *The Literature Counter* (see fig. 8), which is a representation of a space within all Kingdom Hall where magazines, brochures, and books are ordered by and disbursed to the members of the congregation for their study and preaching materials. The literature counter is where many people in the congregation will socialize after the meetings and is often where you will find many of the Pioneers hanging out since they frequently need to replenish their preaching materials. In my installation, *The Literature Counter*, I have replicated an abstracted version of that space. There are shelves holding colorful Jehovah's Witness books, whose publication dates range from the 1970s to the early 2000s. On top of the

counter are analogue forms of media players: a small television, a small tape deck, and a small boombox, each attached to headphones. Next to these media players are little black bins filled with Jehovah's Witness VHS tapes, audio cassette tapes, tracts, brochures, and magazines. The saturated colors of the books have the same vibrance as my other works in the thesis, operating just like patches of color in a painting.

The goal of this found object installation was to educate an audience who may not be very familiar with the Jehovah's Witnesses, to give them an opportunity to physically interact with the magazines, books, VHS and audio cassette tapes. In recent years the Governing Body sends letters to the local congregation Elders with instructions to discard publications older than a certain date. This is done to ensure that the congregation does not have access to 'old light,' which may even be seen as apostate since this material has been replaced with 'new light.'¹³ This piece is also another form of my apostate rebellion, as many ex-Jehovah's Witnesses on online forums have reported that active members can be labeled as an apostate if they choose to continue consuming the 'old light' publications.

Field Service is another work linking my childhood and the religious spaces it occupied (see fig. 9). It is a black and white rotoscoped animation piece showing two video pieces superimposed on each other playing on a constant loop. The background video is a performance of me wearing a modest knee length dress, with my preaching bag across my shoulders, while clutching my Bible and a brochure. In the background video, I come in from the left of the screen and walk down a sidewalk and at the center of the screen I turn left to walk down the path to a

¹³ The Jehovah's Witnesses refer to 'old light' as older teachings that have been replaced with 'new light,' or newer teachings. This allows the Governing Body to change and contradict older doctrine without being questioned.

house. The video in the foreground is of me knocking on the house's door, but my form has been erased via rotoscoping, which allows for the background video to be seen.

Making this piece felt markedly different from my other works in the thesis, as this piece required me to perform as a Jehovah's Witness. This performance felt uncomfortably natural, like riding a bike. I even packed the bag exactly like I used to: magazines in the back, Bible in the front right, and books in the front left. The way I walked and the way I knocked on the door was exactly how it was when I used to go preaching. The only thing that felt slightly off in this performance was the absence of a partner, as the Jehovah's Witnesses go preaching door-to-door in twos, however, I think an additional person in the piece would have been distracting from the narrative.

The look and feel of this piece was greatly influenced by Anna Malina's ongoing series of animated GIFs, *Spectrology*. These GIFs were made by altering and manipulating LaserJet prints of film still images taken from open-source video archives. She often tears the prints to superimpose two video shots and will also use colored pencils and paint to continue altering the prints. I had originally hoped to make *Field Service* using the same LaserJet print method, but given that I am still healing from my hand injury I chose to make this piece digitally, mimicking the visual effects of her process. I even added white tear lines on the edges of the erased rotoscoped image and added shadows on the background image to give it depth like two separate pieces of paper.

The Literature Counter and *Field Service* are additional efforts to show my audience more nuances of the life of a Jehovah's Witness and the space of the Kingdom Hall. The feedback I've received from fellow ex-Jehovah's Witnesses is that I "nailed it," in terms of both the look and feel of my representation of this space. There were six ex-Jehovah's Witnesses in

attendance at my MFA thesis show reception, including myself, on Friday, November 18th, 2022, as well as four people who have close family members who are Jehovah's Witnesses. This event was the first time that I got to see fellow ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, who I consider to be my primary audience, experiencing the work. Their facial expressions showed an instant recognition of the spaces and objects, and I observed them spending a lot of time especially with *The Field Service* and the *I'd Like to Teach* installations. They reported that seeing the chairs and all the books really had some of the biggest impact, as they remembered just how much time they spent sitting in those uncomfortable chairs and how much time they had to spend with those very books. One person told me that they could see the sincerity in my representation of these spaces, that I could have very easily used the work to make fun of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but instead chose to show my love and longing for a former life that I cannot, and will not, ever be a part of again.

CHAPTER VI: YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE

The Jehovah's Witnesses do not allow for any iconic imagery in their worship because they strictly adhere to the second of the Ten Commandments:

You must not make for yourself a carved image or a form like anything that is in the heavens above or that is on the earth underneath or that is in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them nor be induced to serve them, because I Jehovah your God am a God exacting exclusive devotion. (Ex. 20:4, 5)

Thus, I am left to utilize the accidental iconography of the Jehovah's Witnesses, which includes the cookie cutter Kingdom Halls and the physical objects that shape their interior spaces: the chairs, the microphones, the carpet, the platform, the magazines, the ultraconservative clothing, and the doublespeak in their loaded language. The other area of accidental iconography I am exploring in my work is the notion of Paradise, especially as I am questioning what Paradise even is.

You Will Be With Me in Paradise (see figs. 10 and 11) is an installation piece consisting of two 5'W x 6'L panels made of plastic boxwood and covered with elaborate plastic plants and flowers, and is now where the audio recording of my poem lives. This installation is my own plastic Paradise; I've turned the intangible lie of Paradise into something very tangible while still acknowledging its fiction. My choice of materials is again in dialogue with my mother's practice of arts and craft that she maintained when I was a little girl. On top of sewing my dresses to wear at the Kingdom Hall, she also made all sorts of artificial flower arrangements for our house and wedding bouquets for the sisters in our congregation. Our house was always saturated with these types of materials. These same artificial floral stems are the primary material in this installation, with an ornate mirror hung on one of the Paradise floral arrangements. The two panels are on

opposite walls, so the viewer can see themselves in Paradise when they look into the mirror. As a kid I always struggled with imagining myself in Paradise that was promised to us, and I didn't really need to use my own imagination since it was always depicted so vividly in the Jehovah's Witness's literature. The Jehovah's Witness life was always more real to me than the idea of Paradise.

My work is in heavy dialogue with the work of Anney Bounpraseuth, an Australian ex-Jehovah's Witness artist of Laotian heritage. She uses paint, fake flowers, floral patterned fabric, sewing and embroidery to create large scale images of Paradise, often referencing imagery directly from the Jehovah's Witnesses' literature. One painting of hers that stands out to me specifically is a painting of Paradise, with its composition directly referencing a specific Jehovah's Witness illustration and is interrupted with floral patterns; and in the center of the painting the artist depicts herself hugging her mother. This piece is entitled, *You Are With Me in Paradise*. The significance here is that the artist left the Jehovah's Witnesses in her 30s and her elderly mother eventually followed in her footsteps. What a difference those two words make: You **WILL** Be With Me in Paradise vs. You **ARE** With Me in Paradise. Within Bounpraseuth's work about this oppressive group, there is so much hope.

I correspond with an ex-Jehovah's Witness artist named April Marten, whose work is conceptual, installation, and performance based. Her earlier works included sculptures using the Jehovah's Witnesses' Bible as collage material, and she had a piece featured in ArtForum, which was a marquee sign that read "You Can Live Forever." Marten's more recent work deals with more feminist issues, notably the *Frances Wasn't a Saint* series, which has roots in the terrible treatment that women experience within the Jehovah's Witness organization. I look forward to

continuing my dialogue with April and hope to one day be in touch with Anney, as they are both solidly a part of my artistic family tree.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

The work in my thesis questions the very nature of the Paradise I was promised when I was a Jehovah's Witness. As strange as it may sound, there are plenty of things to miss about being a Jehovah's Witness, and my understanding from the ex-Jehovah's Witness online community is that this is a common feeling, even for people who have been out of the cult for several decades. I made this body of work for myself and my own recovery, for people who have had these same experiences, and to also create a public awareness around these issues. This thesis is both the longing of an old life and a celebration of my own liberation, where I have the freedom and the power to think for myself.

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APPENDIX A: ARTWORK GALLERY



Figure 1. Install photo of *Can You See Nos. 1-10*, 12 x 12 inches each, Acrylic and fabric on paper, 2022



Figure 2. Detail photo of *The Fruitage of the Spirit*, 32 x 32 inches, Acrylic and fabric on paper, 2019



Figure 3. Install photo of *Apostate Doll*, 20 x 18 inches, Porcelain doll, fabric, paper, pom-pom, fake flowers, ink, and paint, 2019



Figure 4. Detail photo of a Puerto Rican Bridal doll, From the artist's personal collection of family photographs and photographer is likely the artist's mother, c. 1970



Figure 5. Detail photo of *Live for the Day*, 31 x 46 inches, Acrylic on paper, 2022



Figure 6. Install photo of *The Goon and The Bear puppets*, 12.5 x 7.5 inches and 14.5 x 8 inches, Needle felted wool, fabric, brass and steel armatures and rigging, 2022



Figure 7. Install photo of *I'd Like to Teach*, size variable, Stop motion animation, audio song from the “Katie’s Kingdom Songs” audio cassette, wood, fabric, paint, podium, microphone, microphone stand, curtains, faux plants, books, chairs, and carpet, 2022

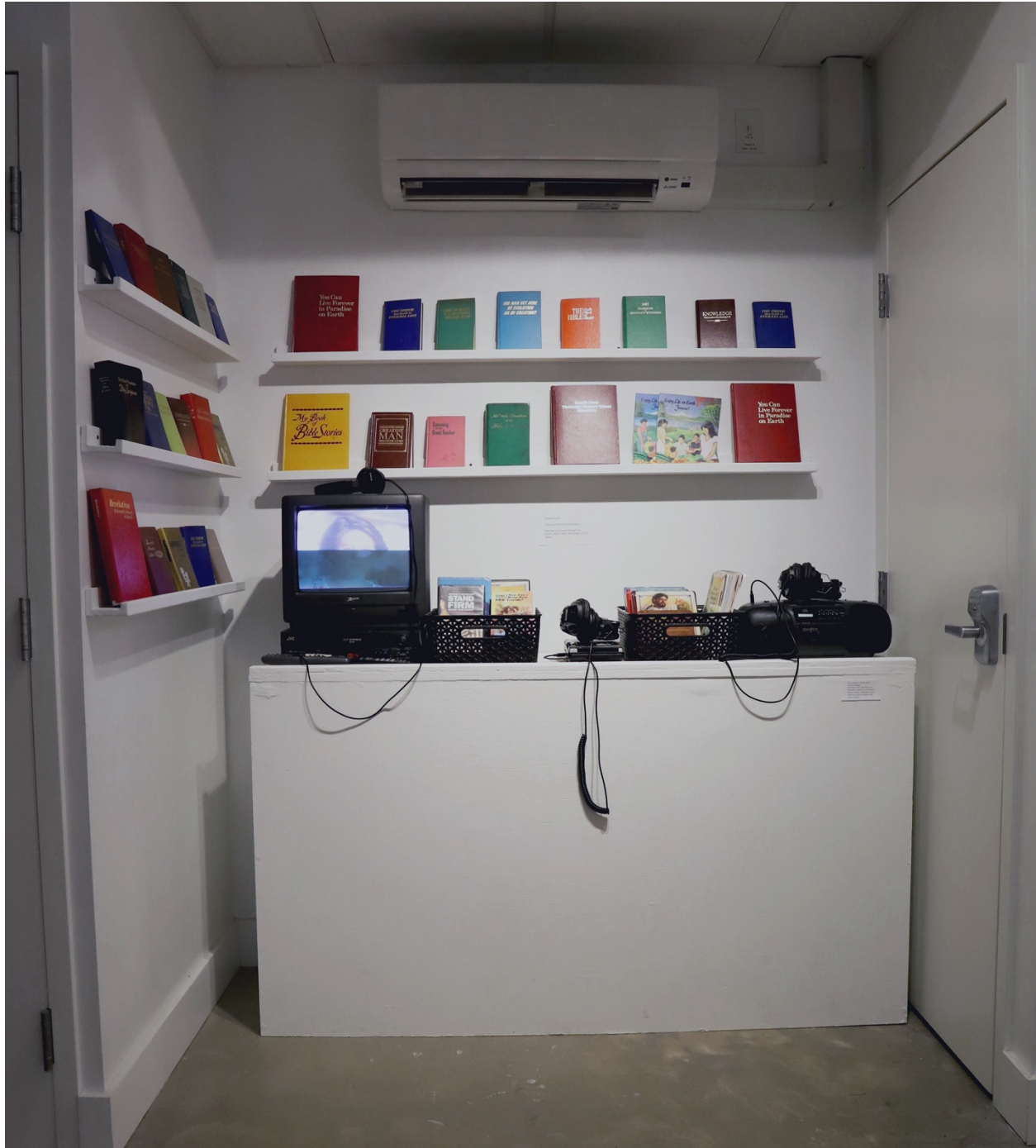


Figure 8. Install photo of *The Literature Counter*, size variable, Analogue television, VCR, audio cassette tape decks, headphones, and the artist's collection of Jehovah's Witness books, magazines, tracts, brochures, audio cassettes, and video cassettes, 2022



Figure 9. Detail still image of *Field Service*, size variable, Rotoscoped animation on a tv screen, 2022



Figure 10. Install photo of the left panel of *You Will Be With Me in Paradise*, 6 x 5 feet, Plastic plants, plastic floral stems, mirror, and audio poem, 2022



Figure 11. Install photo of the right panel of *You Will Be With Me in Paradise*, 6 x 5 feet, Plastic plants, plastic floral stems, mirror, and audio poem, 2022