

Gothic Illumination

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To my Mother(s), Father(s), and Alex.

You kept me sane and helped me far more than I probably deserve. Thank You.

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Abstract

In this thesis I present my research on aspects of gothic style and darkness, often associated with the Middle Ages and Victorian Era, and how it informs my work. I will discuss imagery like rabbits, music notation, and floral symbols that I use in my work, which are drawn from fables and ephemera from these time periods. My materials, processes, and mediums all work together to reference these stories of personal growth and triumph through dark times. Inspired by this research, I make books and lithographic, intaglio and screen prints in the context of contemporary book and print artists whose work is also drawn from similar sources.

Introduction

Life is full of moments of struggle and dark situations. This written thesis and the work in my thesis exhibition explore the idea of finding light in the dark, of using the tools available to work through a challenging time.

I use imagery from the Middle Ages (500 – 1500 CE) and the Victorian Era (1837-1901 CE), both time periods that are associated with darkness, as noted by the moniker “The Dark Ages” and their association with the term “Gothic”. My research into these periods has shown me that they are not times of darkness and despair, but times of love and aspiration. In both periods, but especially the Middle Ages, people would use repetition as a way to contemplate a problem, physically and mentally working on it until they found an answer. Many fables and morality stories from these times, wherein an animal, that usually represents a specific trait, such as weakness, loyalty, cleverness, etc., story is used to teach people a lesson on how to act.

This paper outlines my research and how I use various printing processes, mediums, formats, and imagery to tell the narrative of finding something beautiful in darkness and working through that negativity towards a moment of personal growth.

Influences/ Research

My thesis work is heavily influenced by Medieval and Victorian art, specifically in the books, architecture, and music of these periods. I am drawn to these objects from the past because of my academic background in art history and conservation. There's a reverence bestowed to artwork that has survived the ravages of time, as evidenced by the entire field of study devoted to understanding and interpreting it.

In using this as inspiration for my work, I am exposed to stories that have been told across time and cultures. Those that I am most drawn to are fables, morality tales or legends that warn the reader against certain actions, or encourage a certain behavior. Fables were first recorded in Ancient Greece, but they've been written down and re-written for almost every generation since¹.

Fables

These stories appear in the Middle Ages as bestiaries, books that contain morality stories that feature anthropomorphized animals.² The margins of these pages are highly decorated with images of the animals featured, illustrating the moral lessons for the reader to follow. The animals represent specific personality traits or characteristics: lions are brave and royal, wolves are voracious predators who will

¹ Rourke, Lee. *A Brief History of Fables: From Aesop to Flash Fiction*. London: Hesperus, 2011. Print.

² Lizleafloor. "Bestiary, The Book of Beasts: Compendiums of Medieval Monsters and Moral Lessons." *Ancient Origins*. Ancient Origins, n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

attack anything and anyone for a meal, foxes are quick and sly, rabbits symbolize physical weakness and quick wit.³

These tropes continue in popular media today. One recent example is the children's movie *Zootopia*, wherein an anthropomorphized rabbit defies her size and everyone who tells her that she's too small and weak to become a cop. She teams up with a con-man fox to solve a major crime.⁴ In this movie, the underdog who overcomes limitations and doubts is a rabbit, outsmarting the much bigger and stronger animals around her. The Mayor of Zootopia is a lion, and the cunning and wily accomplice she picks up is a fox. Another example is *Bugs Bunny*, the beloved classic cartoon, wherein a rabbit is regularly hunted, but manages to outsmart his predator and escape his fate every single time. Fables have shaped the way we present narratives, giving us these stereotypes and tropes that are still used in American and international popular culture today. These stories often feature the rabbit protagonist as prey in the beginning, about to be eaten by a much bigger and stronger animal. But, through their wits and cunning, these rabbits trick their predators into either giving up or being eaten themselves.⁵

I am most drawn to the fables that focus on rabbits. In order to signify the story of personal growth, despite a seemingly bad situation, I base some of my work on the imagery from the margins that surround rabbit fables. In my search for imagery, I

³ "Animal Symbols: Aesop's Fables." *Animal Symbols and Meaning in Aesop's Fables*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁴ *Zootopia*. Dir. B. Howard and R. Moore. Perf. Ginnifer Goodwin and Jason Bateman. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁵ Abraham, Claude K. "Myth and Symbol: The Rabbit in Medieval France." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 60, no. 4, 1963, pp. 589–597

discovered unexpected drawings of rabbits that were carrying weapons and attacking people and other animals. These rabbits shoot bows and arrows; carry swords, joust, attack and skin people, and even lay siege to castles.⁶ These symbols of weakness and fragility were transformed into symbols strength, turning the tables for their benefit. They embody the themes in my work, telling the story in a succinct way of overcoming challenge. These medieval rabbits are unexpected, not something we see often in popular culture. I use this imagery to offer an element of discovery and revelation as the viewer examines the work more closely. Although fables don't directly speak of revelation or discovery, the armed rabbits I use do. They are intentionally subtle and therefore viewers often don't notice the weapons at first.

Meditation

As part of my studies into revelation, I explore meditation, a process very personal and unique to each person who practices. Some use meditation to find solutions to problems in their lives; some use it to relax, some to find enlightenment. The Middle Ages widely viewed mediation as a form of prayer.⁷ The methods that lead an individual to a meditative state, specifically repetition, lead a person closer to God. Elements of this appear in medieval music, architecture, and decoration. Some medieval music relies heavily on repetition, built on taking one passage and drawing it out, having the different voice or instrument parts repeat certain patterns as the song proceeds.

⁶ "Why Are There Violent Rabbits In The Margins Of Medieval Manuscripts?" *Jon Kaneko-James*. N.p., 31 Aug. 2015. Web.

⁷ *Christian spirituality: an introduction* by Alister E. McGrath 1999 [ISBN 978-0-631-21281-2](#) pages 84-87

Pérotin is widely believed to have composed for the Notre Dame Cathedral in the 12th century. Using Gregorian chant as a foundation, he augmented the time values and durations of the original chant while superimposing florid, rhythmically ornate polyphonic structures over this foundation. He broke the music into four voices, echoing the four vertical layers of the cathedral's architecture⁸. Just as the cathedral is built out of stone, Pérotin builds his own version out of voices. He took well-known and traditional music that had been around for centuries and updated it. I believe that his use of reception not only references the architecture of Notre Dame de Paris, but is also an example of using repetition as a form of prayer or meditation.

The idea of the revelation is present in another major medieval invention: the labyrinth. A labyrinth, often mistaken for a maze, is instead a flat geometrical shape with a single path that leads from the edge to the center, winding around and filling the entire shape⁹. The user walks in with an idea or problem and they follow the path to the center and back out. As they go along, the user contemplates this issue. By bringing the mind and the body together to work through the labyrinth, the inner mind is free to seek answers. This mediation and contemplation tool is found embedded in floors, made large enough to physically walk through, while also illustrated in the margins of medieval books, barely large enough to trace with a finger. The Middle Ages, commonly referred to as the Dark Ages, may not have been

⁸ Dictionaries, Grove, Stanley Sadie, and George Grove. *Dictionary of music and musicians*. London: Washington, D.C., 1980. Print. "Perotin"

⁹ Jean Villette, "Labyrinthe de la Cathedrale de Chartres." From *Monde Medieval et Societe Chartraine* (Paris, Picard, 1997), 132.

“dark” at all, but instead a time period of individuals seeking happiness, understanding, and illumination.

Gothic

The art of the Middle Ages is often referred to as “gothic”, named after the Goths, the people who lived in modern day France and Germany who originated the aesthetic style, characterized by great cathedrals with tall, pointed arches, manuscripts with gilded pages, and paintings with religious themes and rare pigments.¹⁰ The term “gothic,” however, also has an alternate connotation in modern culture, one that implies gloom and terror. Another period that tends to be characterized by this definition of gothic is the Victorian Era, referring to the time period of the reign of queen Victoria in England (1837-1901).¹¹ Some of the most well-known aspects of Victorian culture focus on customs surrounding death: countless stories about death and dying, using the hair of deceased individuals to make wreaths and jewelry, posing dead bodies for photographs, connecting bells to coffins and graves in case of misdiagnosed death.

In identifying general themes associated with the Victorian period, I discovered stories of love, the creation of the romance and fetish novels. The Victorians employed calling cards to ask someone out on a date¹² and secret

¹⁰ Vasari, G. *The Lives of the Artists*. Translated with an introduction and notes by J.C. and P. Bondanella. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Oxford World's Classics), 1991, pp. 117 & 527

¹¹ John Wolfe (1997). *Religion in Victorian Britain: Culture and empire. Volume V*. Manchester University Press. pp. 129–30.

¹² "Victorian Calling Cards." *Victorian Calling Cards*. N.p., n.d. Web.

languages to communicate with loved ones in secret¹³. They belonged to a culture that idolized love, not death, and desired to hold onto their loved ones for as long as possible. What initially could appear as eerie and macabre was a celebration of life.

Floriography

This can be seen in Floriography or flower language. In this cipher, each breed of flower stands for a specific word. Additionally, the color of the flower could alter the meaning. For example, a red rose means love, but a yellow rose means friendship. Victorians would send one another bouquets and walk around with small, carefully chosen bunches of flowers attached to their outfits to send a message to their loved one. Dictionaries and pamphlets were written to translate the meaning of each flower.¹⁴ This served not only to conceal messages from prying eyes, but also to ensure commitment from a loved one. Thus, Victorians created and deciphered bouquets to communicate their true feelings, often of love.

¹³ Laufer, Geraldine Adamich (1993). *Tussie-Mussies: the Victorian Art of Expressing Yourself in the Language of Flowers*. Workman Publishing.

¹⁴ Laufer, Geraldine Adamich (1993). *Tussie-Mussies: the Victorian Art of Expressing Yourself in the Language of Flowers*. Workman Publishing.

Process/ Medium

I make my work on paper, a medium that has been entrusted to hold mankind's stories for centuries. It's fragile, easily ripped or burnt; yet pieces have survived centuries. It is a medium that holds information, which can pass ideas from one person to another. I use this to make my books and prints in order to respect this history and make the narrative aspect of my work clearer to my viewer. When using paper, how the pieces interact with one another have a great impact on the meaning of a piece. When I want to tell a single story across multiple pages, I use a book format to indicate a flow or narrative connecting the works.

When adding imagery to my paper, I use processes that allow me to repeat images. Repetition speaks to my subject matter and is a conceptual element to my work. I work with hand printing processes such as lithography, etching, and screen-printing, which allow me the most creative control I can have over my work.

Fables

For example, I use a variety of paper and print processes in my *Fables* series. Named so due to the fact that they are inspired by specific fables, each piece shows a rabbit with an enclosed weapon. The background image is a blown-up archival pigment print of an intaglio design. For each piece, the background image is turned different ways and the rabbits are given their own unique place in the pattern, ensuring that the individual pieces are unique while still matching the others in the series. The frame is the same across the series, hand-cast in black paper pulp.



Figure 1 *Fables*. Caitlin Farthing, 2017

The background is done in intaglio because working on a copper plate utilizes the potential for swirling patterns and marbling that other types of plates don't produce. This technique also requires repetitive motion, particularly when wiping excess ink off the plate before it can be printed. This activity references the repetition discussed above. The flocking is a reference to the Victorian aesthetic, as the process was originally created to imitate velvet on surfaces such as wallpaper, which the Victorians were very fond of using to decorate their homes. Another important aspect of the Victorian aesthetic was the placement of framed images on their walls, particularly photos of family members or mementos of those who had passed. In a Victorian household, frames would traditionally be a bright gold or a sumptuous wood, forming intricate swirls or covered in floral decorations. The frame used in this series is a cast of a real frame, an oval. However, rather than being gold or wood, it is cast in black paper pulp. As mentioned earlier, I interpret paper as a vehicle for telling

a story, so I wanted these pieces that speak specifically about fables to exist within the same medium that I encountered them. Using these frames I am able to visually unify the pieces in the series together

Statarius

In conjunction with the *Fables* series is *Statarius*; a long, thin piece featuring a blind deboss at the top.

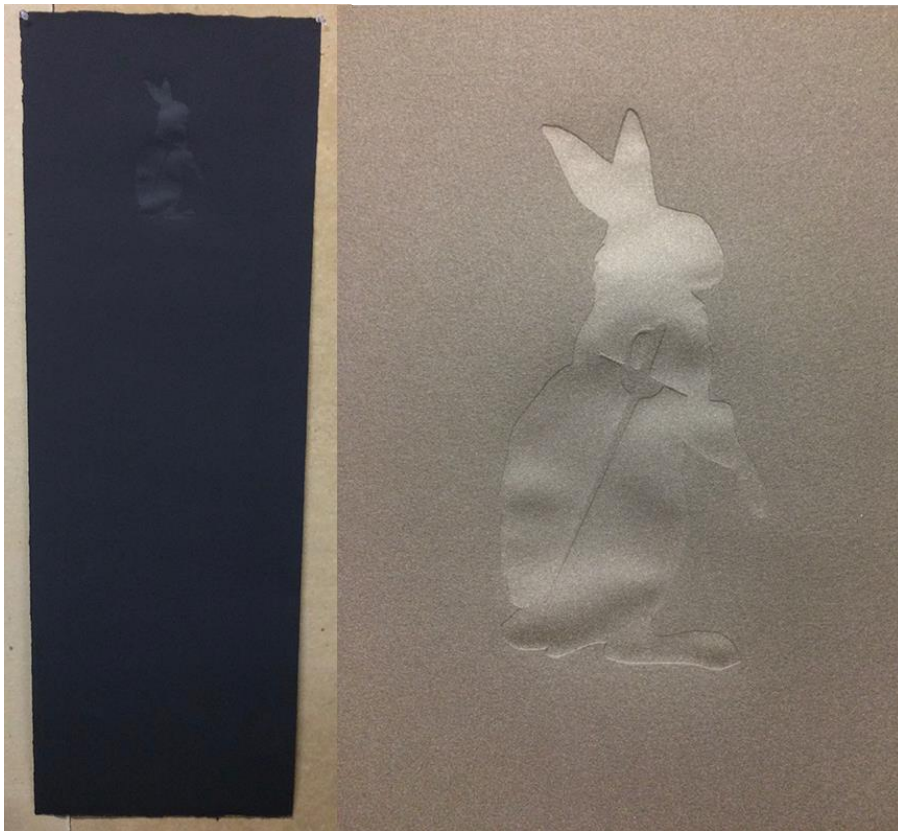


Figure 2 *Statarius*. Caitlin Farthing, 2017

This piece also features a rabbit with an internalized weapon. However, this rabbit is upright, standing tall with a long, thin rapier inside. This is in contrast to the rabbits in *Fables*, all of whom are tucked away in their respective places, hunched over and almost cowering. The deboss is also in contrast to *Fables*: instead of standing out from the page with flocking, this rabbit is deeply embedded in her surroundings,

standing atop them as though she has conquered them. While *Fables* discussed individual stories, the fear the protagonists felt, and the internalized strength they used to get by, *Statarius* discusses the moment of triumph at the end of every rabbit fable, when the animal that should have been prey stands tall to live another day.

Viderunt Omnes

In another work, *Viderunt Omnes*, I use repetition inspired by Notre Dame cathedral and the music of Pérotin.



Figure 3 *Viderunt Omnes*. Caitlin Farthing, 2017

In this book, I incorporate the very repetitive nature of both Pérotin's compositions and the architecture of the interior of Notre Dame. To reference this repetition, I use another hand printing process called a Xerox transfer on photolithography. I use the photolithography to get a crisp, clean flat of a single color, with the shapes of the music notes eliminated so that the paper shows through. However, before I print the page, I put down a Xerox printout of a graphic of the interior of Notre Dame, and run it through the press. This leaves an imprint of the graphic in the lithographic flat,

essentially giving me two images together on one plate that I can then print. Because I run the press twice for each print, this process is very repetitive. In this book, I also use gold leafing, a reference to the gold illumination found in the pages of medieval manuscripts.

Floriography

My other book, *Floriography* combines Victorian flower language with a medieval labyrinth. In this piece, each page features a swirling, tangled design of a specific flower. Emerging from the design is a vine of the flower in the shape of that piece of the labyrinth, though I have taken that shape and stretched it out across the spread, connecting each step together. As the reader flips through the pages, they're led along the labyrinth and in turn my emotional journey.



Figure 4 *Floriography*. Caitlin Farthing, 2017

To make the labyrinth piece appear as if it is emerging from the twisted, intertwined background, I print several layers. The first is a Xerox print. The lightweight hemp paper that I use doesn't completely absorb the toner leaving the image to appear to sit atop of the page. This paper also softens the digital print, making the image appear out of focus and far away. On top of that I print a silkscreen layer. Silk-screening does not push the ink into the paper like printing processes that use a press do, so it has an effect unique to the other layers. Silkscreen also allows for a very crisp, clean, graphic image. Layered on top of the Xerox, this creates a sense of depth. The book is bound in a dos-a-dos style, where the second half is separated from the first and placed next to it in the binding. The viewer reads the first half traditionally, then the second half from back to front. This is a reference to the way labyrinths are used: the user is meant to follow the path to the center and then turn around and follow it back out to the edge. Like using a labyrinth, the book can be approached in various ways depending on the interests of the viewer/user.

Fragmens

In conjunction with this book is *Fragmens*, a large-scale diptych made in a similar way. This print isolates the same path piece from the entering and exiting of a labyrinth and puts them side-by-side, showing a flower that represents a negative emotion that I often experience when I first begin walking a labyrinth next to a flower that represents a flower of a positive emotion that I often experience while walking out of a labyrinth.

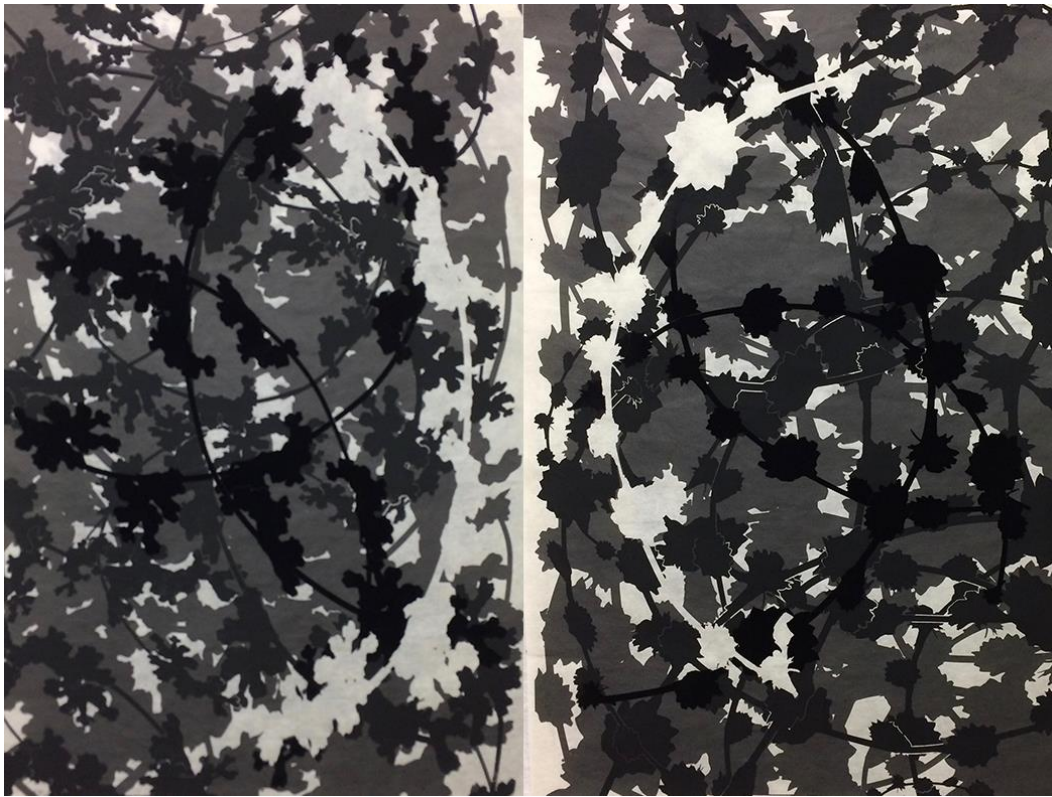


Figure 5 *Fragmens*. Caitlin Farthing, 2017

In the book *Floriography*, the path of the labyrinth is stretched out, each piece connected to the last, winding through the swirling floral imagery. In *Fragmens*, the path pieces are separated out on their own, retaining their original shape and not connected to anything else. Rather than experiencing the labyrinth as a whole, following the winding path through the book, this piece selects two parallel moments and presents them together.

The diptych is printed much in the same way the book is: there is a base digital layer underneath a silkscreen print. In addition, there is a flocked layer printed on top to create a greater sense of depth. Similar to the *Fables* series, this flocking is a reference to the Victorian aesthetic. With the sharp, graphic silkscreen caught between two soft, slight fuzzy layers, the floral imagery becomes much harder to

navigate, seeming to come in and out of focus, which is aimed to draw the viewer in and push them back at the same time.

Context

Medieval

I am drawn to medieval bestiaries, collections of morality tales that feature animals akin to modern day fables. A work that encapsulates the spirit of these bestiaries while modernizing them is *A Swarm, A Flock, A Host: A Compendium of Creatures*, by Bill Watterston and Mark Doty. Through the telling of a story, Mark Doty's poem discusses the many kinds of animals found in bestiaries and the symbolism associated with each beast. This poem is accompanied by a series of interleaved prints by Darren Watterson, which show groups of animals in varying states of interaction.



Figure 6: *A Swarm, A Flock, A Host: A Compendium of Creatures*. Dan Watterston and Mark Doty, 2013

In this work, the bestiary is one narrative, bringing all the stories and all the animals together to be appreciated side by side. I am inspired when the animals I find in bestiaries and their stories relate to something that has happened in my life, particularly the stories about rabbits.

Many bestiaries, while being focused on animals, include images of animals only in the margins of the pages. The majority of the page is devoted to the text, so the accompanying imagery is a visual supplement or commentary. Referred to as marginalia, these images were also a way for the person writing the manuscript to break up the tedium of writing page after page of text. In bestiaries especially, marginalia images are generally very silly and humorous, showing animals engaging in human-like activities. I am drawn to the marginalia, in part because of the humor, but also because these medieval European manuscripts are almost exclusively written in Latin. The drawings and images are the only thing on the page I can fully understand. I use these marginalia images in my work, isolating them from the text and bringing them into their own world.



Figure 7: *Marginalia-1*. Islam Aly, 2013

In *Maginalia-1*, Islam Aly isolates marginalia from Arabic manuscripts. In the manuscripts Aly draws from, marginalia consists of text-based commentary in unique shapes that wind along the page. The calligraphy and the way the words sit on the page create their own imagery.

In a similar approach to my own, the Polish painter Roch Urbaniak uses fables and stories that he has found and translates them into vibrant and colorful paintings. Urbaniak comments that: “I gather the stories and then try to make my own vision from them.”¹⁵ He takes stories that are common across multiple cultures and turns them into his own fantastical worlds. This is can be seen in his piece *Chessmaster*.



Figure 8: *Chessmaster*. Roch Urbaniak, 2012

In this piece, Urbaniak depicts a golden winged cat atop a chessboard, his version of a sphinx. He states: “There are 12 to 15 cultures in the world with stories about winged cats, winged lions, winged tigers. How is it possible that places so remote from each

¹⁵ McRary, Amy. *Polish Artist Tells 'fables' in Art*. Knoxville News Sentinel

other share this same vision?" He figured, "If winged cats were the subject of stories in many lands... they also could play chess." Fables seem ubiquitous in that the same stories appear over and over again across cultures that are spread far apart. My work, though similar in inspiration is considerably darker in tone than Urbaniak's, with more of a historical approach to my imagery.

The labyrinth, a geometric shape with a single winding path that leads the user to the center and then back out, is as well featured in many manuscripts. An artist well known for using labyrinths is Motoi Yamamoto. He builds large scale, incredibly intricate labyrinths out of salt.



Figure 9: *Making Mends*. Motoi Yamamoto, 2012

Yamamoto uses the labyrinth as a tool for meditation and healing, stating that viewers can use these "labyrinth installations as a tool for meditation and an opportunity to reach some final point in their own thoughts."¹⁶ He celebrates the labyrinth as a purifying and cleansing experience. I also use labyrinths in my work,

¹⁶ Hossenally, Rooksana. "Return to the Sea: Saltworks by Motoi Yamamoto." *Yatzer*. N.p., 13 Aug. 2015.

even using ones I have created for myself. However, I rarely show the labyrinth as a whole. I find the individual steps, the places where my hand naturally stops when drawing a labyrinth, the lines in between the turns to be more intriguing. I do also focus on the feeling a labyrinth provides, but I am more focused on the emotional journey of the individual steps throughout rather than the end result.

Victorian

To represent an emotional journey visually, I work with Victorian Flower language, where every breed of flower represents a specific emotion. Another artist who uses a Victorian art form in their work is Carson Fox with her *Filigree* series of sculptures.



Figure 10: *Hair Filigree #1*, Carson Fox

To quote the artist: “My series of ‘filigree’ sculpture was originally inspired by Victorian hair sculpture and jewelry. Historically, these objects were crafted out of

the hair of a deceased loved one and acted as a memento of the departed. My own sculptural works are elaborately crafted tapestries of delicate, hair-thin wire that bring to mind lace on a large scale. Often these objects are installed with the intent of allowing the object and shadow to act in concert, suggesting the ineffable qualities of both life and death.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Fox, Carson. "Filigree Statement." *Carson Fox*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Conclusion

The Middle Ages and the Victorian Era, widely remembered for being gothic and times of darkness, were truly times of love, light, and upward aspiration. Rabbits in fables, symbols of fragility and weakness in many cultures, often outwit, outrun, and survive being hunted by much bigger and stronger predators. People in the Middle Ages, many of whom never learned how to read, found answers to their problems by using repetition to meditate and contemplate on what was happening to them. My thesis work, and this paper, explored these ideas of working through and persevering, of that moment of personal growth when darkness is finally behind you.

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