The Haunted Lotus: Application of the Phenomenological Method in Apprehending an Exhibition's Religious Aspects

LynFay Shapiro

Introduction

Taking a phenomenological approach to Khadim Ali's *The Haunted Lotus* exhibition reveals that the religious dimensions of the exhibition are twofold: firstly, the gallery experience presents itself as a liminal space where one comes face to face with the transcendent 'Other', and secondly, where the informed viewer's consciousness is directed to adopt religious understandings of the artwork.[1] This article will argue that the phenomenological method has something to offer us where the analysis of artworks and galleries are concerned. Its unique focus on the subjective experience brings to light what has often been overlooked in more conventional art criticism. In some ways, phenomenology is uniquely qualified for the task set before us. A modified 'empirical phenomenology' will be applied to the researcher's own experiences of the *Lotus* exhibition,

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LynFay Shapiro is undertaking joint Honours in Studies in Religion and Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney.

[1] Khadim Ali's exhibition was selected quite arbitrarily. An internet search for nearby art exhibitions or events was conducted in April 2014, turning up results from the Art Gallery of NSW website and *The Haunted Lotus* exhibition. Very little time was spent on this website, as the methodology would have been compromised if too much research had been done before the first viewing. After checking opening hours and prices the researcher stopped searching for exhibitions. Any art event, exhibition or performance would have been appropriate as the point of the research undertaken was to see if a phenomenological approach would reveal religious aspects in an exhibition. That said, results would undoubtedly vary from case to case.

followed by a summary of the foundational data it uncovered.[2] This data reveals the two tiers of religious identification noted above, and the study concludes with an acknowledgement of its limitations.

What is Phenomenology and why is it Appropriate Here?

The principle disposition of phenomenology lies in its attempt to disclose experiences as they are presented to consciousness.[3] That is, a phenomenologist studies consciousness as it is subjectively experienced.[4] Preliminary to any phenomenological application is the suspension of judgment as to what is true or real, or objective in nature.[5] This is known as phenomenological *epoché* or 'bracketing'. The goal of bracketing is to peel away interpretations and reveal only the experience, in and of itself. The technique was developed by philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and the discipline itself was advanced by his contemporary Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), alongside other notable scholars such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), all of whom made slight adjustments, but continued to emphasise the pivotal importance of lived experience.

In the study and analysis of art, the phenomenological method can be particularly revealing for several reasons. Firstly, like phenomenology, art asks us to focus on the subjective experience.[6] It relates to us on a personal, intimate level. What we experience includes our categorisations, interpretations and judgments, but with a self-reflexive awareness seldom seen elsewhere. Art snaps us out of our natural attitude; that is, the superficial manner in which we usually apprehend things.[7] It asks us to stop

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[2] Limiting the study to only one artwork would have been to butcher and horribly misrepresent how art functions. The exhibition as a whole must be considered in this study, because the exhibition as a whole is what was experienced at the Art Gallery.

[3] J. V. Spickard, 'Phenomenology', in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011), p. 333.

[4] R. Bernasconi, 'The Good and the Beautiful', in *Phenomenology in Practice and Theory*, ed. William S. Hamrick (Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), p. 179.

[5] V. Anttonen, 'Sacred', in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, eds Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 273.

[6] E. Husserl, 'Pure Phenomenology', in *The Phenomenology Reader*, eds Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 126.

[7] Spickard, 'Phenomenology', p. 52.

and consider what, and how, we actually perceive.[8] This heightened awareness is, in fact, what Husserl's bracketing aims for. That this first step in the phenomenological method occurs quite naturally in these situations indicates the methodology's compatibility with the subject.

What gives art the ability to suspend the natural attitude is its inability to fit neatly into our understanding of objects as 'means to an end'. Merleau-Ponty emphasises that we experience our world in terms of "I can" rather than "I think", because our consciousness is always an embodied consciousness.[9] The body is not an object of reflection, but a tool with which we act on the world. We relate to the world in a very utilitarian sense, but art does not have a practical use.[10] The second we appropriate a use for art it ceases to be art. For example, if you were to use an artwork to hit someone, the artwork would be experienced as a battering tool and not an artwork. Because of this, art rebuffs attempts at straightforward unreflective interpretation. We introduce new intentionalities to deal with art, because we can't 'do' anything with it.[11] These new intentionalities modify our experience and take us away from the natural attitude.

The second characteristic that makes phenomenology suitable to the study of art is the way art privileges experience over interpretation. It is impossible to fully describe an artwork to someone who has not seen it for themselves.[12] The experience is irreducible in a way that not many other experiences are. There are no words, no communicable representations a person can give, that allow an art experience to be properly packaged and related. The visual medium *shows*, rather than says.[13] This total dependence on visual experience can be summed up in one example: imagine trying to

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[8] E. Marion, 'The Phenomenology of Art: the Site of the Work of Art, the Place of the Collection', *Museum International*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2007), p. 62.
[9] J. Freistadt, 'Understanding Others' Experience: Phenomenology and/beyond Violence', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology,* vol. 3, no. 2 (2011), p. 12.
[10] H. Arendt, 'Labor, Work, Action', in *The Phenomenology Reader*, eds Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 370.
[11] Relevant here is the idea of 'intentionality', whereby the subject actively perceives an object. This means that consciousness is already directed. Consciousness is always consciousness 'of something'.
[12] J. Cox*, An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 113.
[13] P. Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 5.

describe the colour red to a person who has been blind since birth.[14] Again, the nature of art displays an unforced affinity with phenomenology as it shares in the glorification of subjective experience.

Finally, an artwork requires an audience. Without a responder, there is no artistic experience. Artworks are capable of generating meaning through their interaction with consciousness, or the lived-body.[15] Because the audience is potentially limitless, the capacity for meaning, and new meaning, is infinite. Artworks then, in their very being, require interaction with consciousness and are in fact incomplete without it.[16] Because of this, the subjective experience of the viewer is of paramount importance where art is concerned, further associating it with phenomenology. For these reasons, phenomenology is deemed an apt methodology for the study of artistic experience. It is even more appropriate given the focus on religious themes – religion being that other notoriously unquantifiable, subjective field where some aspects are deemed impossibly shrouded in murky depths, and thus dismissed as elements not available for academic scrutiny. Phenomenology is well equipped to shed light on both these fields.

How has Phenomenology been Applied Here?

Within the field of Religious Studies, Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart are the usual suspects where the phenomenological method is concerned. However, their approaches are not as clear cut or practically applicable as James V. Spickard's phenomenological method. Spickard gets his inspiration from two psychologists, Amedeo and Barbro Giorgi, and terms it 'Empirical Phenomenology' to differentiate it from other variants.[17] The steps are as follows:

> 1. Find and interview informants who have shared a particular experience;
> 2. Help your informants bracket their experience, leaving aside what they (or you) think was 'really' happening;
> 3. Compare and analyse these accounts to identify the basic structures of the experience;
> 4. Redescribe and summarise the experience, boiled down to these basic structures.[18]

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[14] Z. Adams, 'Seeing is Knowing', *The Review of Metaphysics,* vol. 66, no. 4 (2012), p. 62.
[15] J. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), p. 25.
[16] G. Biswas, *Art as Dialogue* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 1995), p. 12.
[17] Spickard, 'Phenomenology', p. 336.
[18] Spickard, 'Phenomenology', p. 338.

This forms the solid foundation of the phenomenological method. Once the basic structure of experience is apprehended, further interpretations, connections and themes (such as religious themes) can be sought.

However, there are some obvious problems with the application of Spickard's method to the case study of Khadim Ali's exhibition. Spickard asks that his researchers have approximately thirteen years of relevant fieldwork driving their analyses, which is something of a luxury and not a point any researcher commences from.[19] Further, finding and interviewing a sizeable quantity of informants can be both costly and time-intensive, and therefore less desirable. Thus, the planning stage reveals some obstacles to the proper application of the method: no informants, no proper background for the work, and as a result nowhere near the 'ideal' number of experiential cases Spickard envisioned for comparison.

To overcome these obstacles, one primary modification had to be made. Instead of comparing multiple descriptions of the same experience, as expressed by informants, this article will compare the researcher's own experiences with those already described by phenomenologists expressing similar experiences. Instead of collecting primary material, this article will make use of secondary data and correlate with those. The many sources of primary data prescribed by Spickard are substituted for two sources of primary data and a variety of phenomenological secondary data.

These two instances of primary data originated as follows. The first exposure to the exhibition occurred with very little knowledge of what the exhibition was about. The second experience came a week later, after research of the exhibition had been conducted. In an attempt to capture the experience as it played out, a voice recorder was used during the visit and recollections were written down immediately afterwards. The aim was to make these experiences as different as possible, to reduce the risk of erroneously identifying a fluke or accident as a core element of the experience. It is important to note that this exhibition was approached with very little idea of what religious aspects might be made apparent through subjective experiences; having pre-conceived notions of what could be found would have compromised the methodology in that it ignores the second step in Spickard's application process.

[19] Spickard, 'Phenomenology', p. 339.

What Data has been Gathered?

For the sake of brevity, the entirety of these two experiences is not recounted here. Instead, an abridged version will be presented to the reader.[20] There were obvious differences between these experiences; I lost my way the first time, for example. Further, the first experience revealed a greater focus on individual artworks and their details, contents and formal structure, while the second experience focused more on the overall ambience of the exhibition and the links that could be drawn spatially between the works and the responder. However, there was also consistency between these experiences and this is what Spickard's phenomenology aims to highlight. The account below represents what was shared by both experiences.

> I entered the gallery from the street – the sounds of traffic gradually fade as you get to the escalators at the back. The sound of my own body moving becomes louder, partly because there is less noise inside and partly because the floor is very hard and my shoes made clacking noises. Then I go down the first escalator – I descend.

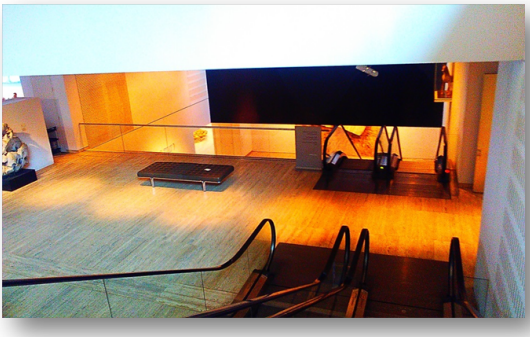

Figure 1: Art Gallery of New South Wales, escalators down to 'Khadim Ali: The Haunted Lotus', 2014 [photo taken by author]

> I do not move the way I normally do because I am not in fact moving my body at all – the world just shifts around me. The natural light from the windows on the first floor disappear behind me. Suddenly the light is of a different quality. The café is on the second floor – a different kind of activity happening there – a different level of activity, slower and

[20] As transcripts cannot be provided here, excerpts will be used as examples where necessary.

more peaceable as customers drink coffee and waiters meander around the tables. Above looms a huge deep black painting hung over the next escalator, which I stare into as I am pulled lower – it seems to loom up as I descend. Then I have reached my floor, and there is very little sound at all. I cannot hear the cars on the street. There are less people too, and those people who are around move slowly as though walking through something thicker than air. They murmur to each other, and the sounds seem muted. I go behind the wall and suddenly it is dark – there is very little light, even artificial light, and the grey blue walls seem to absorb it as soon as it hits. It takes a few seconds to adjust. It feels colder. As I walk into the exhibition space, I feel suddenly enclosed, as though I am in a cave or a dark tent, or under blankets. It is empty, but for the artworks on the wall and in the centre. My focus shifts to the artworks and I lose track of time. The figures stand in stark contrast to their plain white backgrounds. They are demons, but not very scary ones. They do not look out at me, or at each other, or at any particular object – instead they seem to just look past each other. Always down and away. Their postures are self-enclosed, and I think perhaps they have experienced recent trauma, hurt or suffering because they look like distressed humans. The gaudy gold bangles on their arms and around their necks are beautiful and opulent, but also remind me of slave chains. They are rotund, like middle aged men, and I can see even the hairs on their grey arms.

I move very close to look at their wings – like angel wings, but they don't seem out of place. They appear to be drawn on with lead pencil, and they fade into the background at the tops. Angel wings on a demon, coupled with their human expressions and postures, makes me think that these are not supposed to represent demons at all. What next grabs my attention is the use of metallic gold paint in some of these artworks. It is spread above or behind the demons in block oval shapes. It reminds me of the extravagances of much religious architecture – gold everywhere. And on top of it, or sometimes just floating around the demons, is some kind of Arabic writing. It looks a bit like Chinese as well. It seems like an incantation or chant – sometimes written in red, sometimes in gold, sometimes in black. Behind some of the demons, almost hidden so I did not notice it at all, is a statue of Buddha with its eyes closed and covered in a netting of geometric, overlapping lines. The demons are always directly over the Buddha – superimposed so you can barely see the statue. But rather than wanting the demon to move away so the Buddha can be seen, I instead felt that the demons and the Buddha were the same thing – linked in some way. In fact all the artworks seem linked because all the demons are physically the same, and seem to share the same upset.

Figure 2: 'Untitled' by Khadim Ali, exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2014 [photo taken by the author]

So I go over each work in detail, moving around them and noticing the colours here, or the faces there, or the frames or the size. Making little connections in my head. Trying to dig out some 'deeper meaning'. But then I notice how loud my shoes are on the hard floor again, and then I notice my feet hurt from standing so long. And I want to sit down. How long have I been down here? Not sure. A long time though. Suddenly I am looking around and noticing some kind of attendant watching me, and I can vaguely hear people outside the exhibition space talking.

Figure 3: 'Khadim Ali: the Haunted Lotus' exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2014 [photo taken by the author]

> I decide it is time to leave – I step out from behind the walls and everything is blinding – these walls are white and the space is open. The light seems to come from everywhere at once. But still the sound is distant – that changes as I go up the escalators. I turn to watch the deep black painting recede. I can hear the café again, and then after that I can see natural light from a large glass window on the ground floor. And then I'm up top again, and I can see lots of people in the main corridor, and hear people asking attendants questions, and I can hear traffic outside. I can see the sky and the gardens across the road. I am struggling to pull myself up out of that exhibition though, and although everything is suddenly much closer, it is not quite my speed yet. It is not until I am outside the gallery itself and crossing streets (and being hit with a slap of cold air and absolutely blinding brightness on this grey day) that I manage to force myself back into the world. My brain works double-time for a while to catch up with reality. And then I am musing again about the exhibition, but settled. And the experience is over.[21]

What was common in both experiences of the exhibition, and also evident in the explanations of art experiences that this primary data was compared with, was the feeling of being 'out of time' whilst in the gallery, and then re-entering the mainstream only after departure. The alertness of the responder, or subject, was heightened in contrast to the mundane level consciousness normally operates on. Also shared was the identification of demons and wings as supernatural, the recognition of suffering and

[21] This constructed recount answers to Spickard's 3rd and 4th steps of Empirical Phenomenology.

humanity within the demonic figures, the presence of 'magical' writing and the use of Buddha statues. These themes direct the consciousness to apply religious interpretations to the works. All these aspects can be construed as religious, as illustrated below.

Tier 1: The Religious Experience of Something 'Other'

The shared characteristics of experiencing *The Haunted Lotus* exhibition lend themselves to the conclusion that the experience in-and-of-itself, as a whole, has a religious character. Carol Duncan draws on the notion of ritual to explain that when people enter liminal spaces, in this case the exhibition, a state of exaltation is accessible via the active experiencing of artworks.[22] The monumental construction of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, with its classical Greek façade, reflects its social significance much like those great temples and churches constructed at the height of religious fervour. It is this staging, and the aesthetic appreciation of art - the focus on colours, shapes and textures - that creates a transforming and spiritual process. Arguably, in entering an art gallery the same kind of heightened intentionality is evoked as that which is demanded in churches and religious services, resulting in the above described alertness to surroundings and a feeling of being 'out of time.'

Comparing these experiences to those described and analysed by others who have taken a phenomenological stance lends credence to the hypothesis that an art experience is a religious experience. Where the religious experience reaches its height is when the subject is in front of the artworks themselves and directing intentionality towards it. That is, the subject is totally engaged when examining the demons, the gold, the unintelligible script, the wings and so forth, and in doing so being 'blind' or 'unconscious' as it were, to the passing of time or the fact that the attendant was watching. It is this concentrated point of immersion that permeates the character of the whole experience.

Several academics have pursued the basic relations between directed consciousness and art. Paul Crowther suggests that the visual arts have what he calls 'modal plasticity', that is, they can represent more than

[22] C. Duncan, 'The Art Museum as Ritual', in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (Milton Park: Routledge, 2005), p. 85.

reality; anything is possible through them.[23] The visual arts, he says, suspend our natural attitude. For Crowther, art is a more stable mode of imagination, and, because of this stability, it can be shared. He argues that although there are many multi-layered meanings present in art, all meanings are, in theory, publically accessible in a way that the imagination is not. The viewer apprehends art as both unbounded and limited. It is this intriguing nature that encourages a new intentionality that "quickens the self."[24] Art critic Charles Baudelaire explains it as "movements of existence when time and space take on an extra depth, and the feeling of existence is immensely amplified."[25] Baudelaire felt that modernity was characterised by an ephemeral experience of life, and that only art could draw a person out of that experience and into something deeper.[26] John Dewey supports this critique, complaining that our modern zeal for action, for speed and for forward movement leaves many people feeling hurried. This means that our experiences are incredibly shallow; we do not have the time to really experience anything before a new experience encroaches.[27] What is truly an *experience* in Dewey's mind is what he calls heightened vitality that "signifies active and alert communion with the world."[28]

Goutam Biswas's analysis of art as experience supports the 'out of time' characteristic noticed in both visits to the exhibition. He emphasises that artworks are apprehended within a 'secular' time-space continuum, but at the same time operate at a 'transcendent' time-space level.[29] This apprehension causes a discontinuity with our disenchanted, empirical world. Biswas adds that this transcendence of mundane time-space is possible primarily due to the inexhaustible content of an artwork. The endless possibilities for meaning generation give the person experiencing art a window to infinity.[30] In entering the Art Gallery of New South Wales and going through the process of descending, of losing natural light, of

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[23] P. Crowther, *The Phenomenology of Modern Art: Exploding Deleuze, Illuminating Style* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), p. 41.
[24] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 18.
[25] As quoted by R. Cardinal in *Figures of Reality: A Perspective on the Poetic Imagination* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 129.
[26] C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (London: Phaidon, 1964), p. 13.
[27] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 45.
[28] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 19.
[29] Biswas, *Art as Dialogue*, p. 9.
[30] Biswas, *Art as Dialogue*, p. 15.

losing sound, of leaving the normal state of affairs behind, the conscious subject is being primed for a shift in the level of conscious experience. At this stage the apprehension of art renews the mundane and presents it as transcendental – we learn to know objects in a new way.[31] Thus the art gallery, for Biswas, is a place of enchantment and magic.

Ludwig Feuerbach submits that religion has something to do with the notion of unlimitedness, or infinity.[32] Consider also that Martin Buber suggests religion is derived from the recognition of two kinds of relationships with our environment. One is the 'I-It' relationship, in which we perceive the objects around us in terms of their usefulness, and the other is the 'I-Thou' relationship, which is when something 'Other' breaks through our normal structures and confronts us in a way we had not intended.[33] Buber suggests that our experience of religion is based around the 'I-Thou' relationship. From these accounts, and what Crowther, Baudrillard, Dewey and Biswas have already contributed, we can conceive of the religious experience as that which shifts us away from our normal state of consciousness, and forces our intentionality in such a way that considerations of impossible or infinite dimensions occur.

The religious experience of Khadim Ali's exhibition was that the responder was coaxed out of a rather lazy directing of consciousness into a heightened state of being, which felt like something 'other' and something 'more' than the day-to-day, prompting the responder to consider the world around them in new ways. The unlimited potentiality of the artworks provided the responder with a sense of eternity or infinity. Thus, art is that phenomenological call back to experience which makes the ordinary extraordinary. The mundane becomes transcendental. This is the religiousness of experiencing art.

Tier 2: The Religious Interpretation of Artistic Representation

It is not only the experience itself which can be construed as religious. The second level at which Khadim Ali's exhibition presents religious dimensions is where the informed viewer's consciousness is directed to adopt religious understandings of the artworks. Heidegger first pointed out

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[31] Biswas, *Art as Dialogue*, p. 33.
[32] J. D. Bettis, *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion* (Norwich: SCM-Canterbury Press Ltd, 1969), p. 113.
[33] Bettis, *Phenomenology of Religion*, p. 220.

the importance of context. Adding to Husserl's concepts of directed intentionality, Heidegger reminded us that consciousness is always situated in a pre-existing world.[34] This means that experiences are always constituted by their contexts and histories. For example, when one picks up a hammer, one does not experience it as a wooden rod with a heavy metal top, one experiences the tool 'hammer'; this identification happens alongside perception rather than after it. Biswas also identifies the importance of context, highlighting that when knowledge of the past is integrated into a phenomenon it adds to the experience.[35] Looking to the significance of context in the phenomenology of art, Crowther notes that the experience relies on the unique way that each responder relates the artwork's features to other known artistic features, the themes to other themes, and the values to other values.

The more links the responder can make between the art and his or her pre-existing world, the more fully 'disclosed' the art is.[36] The pre-existing world, like art, has some individual and some communal aspects. Something of our pre-existing worlds is purely our own, but much of it is shared within our culture or society. For example, even on the first, unprepared visit the responder could understand that the figures were demons, that they had angel wings, and that there were Buddha statues in the background.[37] This sort of general knowledge means that other aspects of the artworks that might have been apprehended as mundane are more likely to be understood in a religious light. For example, the script running across some artworks is experienced as, "something magical."[38]

On the second visit the propensity to experience the artworks as religious is heightened as a result of the responder's new awareness of relevant histories and contexts. For example, one artwork consisted of two tapestries side by side, depicting demon heads suspended on a burnt yellow background. During the first visit, the responder acknowledged the circular shape of the yellow, but did not apprehend it as religious. However during

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[34] Spickard, 'Phenomenology', p. 335.
[35] Biswas, *Art as Dialogue*, p. 28.
[36] Crowther, *The Phenomenology of Modern Art*, p. 2.
[37] Remember that phenomenology has no interest in discussing the truth or reality of such representations, only how they appear to consciousness.
[38] This quote drawn from the author's transcript of the first visit to 'The Haunted Lotus', which in context states: 'Writing in bright red and gold – background and foreground at the same time. Can't understand the writing. Something magical… that's the vibe I got from it.'

the second visit, as a result of knowing more of the relevant history and context, the responder thought about how the demons were representative of the demonised Hazara people, and how their figures were taken from a Persian mythology where the story ends with the hero dead and the demons still alive. Considering the long-term suffering of this ethnic group at the hands of groups like Al Qaeda, the ongoing existence of the Hazara in Afghanistan is deemed significant. The responder thus understands the circular yellow background as a halo, and conceives of the entire artwork as "almost like an immortality thing, or a baptism of fire - or trial by suffering, or rebirth. Something to do with living though, surviving, and doing more than 'mere living'."[39]

Even in the first visit, the responder knows that the demons represent the Hazara. There is an artist's statement on one wall of the exhibition that explains this. The postures and expressions of the demons are thus easily linked to the experiences of torture, murder, discrimination and genocide that the Hazara are said to face. The responder states in the first visit that these are "very introverted demons. I thought of it like they'd been traumatised in the past, like having been physically abused and then reintroduced to the person who had abused them. And so that sort of position you would imagine, sort of like curled up inwards, facing inwards, very protective of their body."[40] Consequently after reading the blurb the

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[39] This quote from the written notes of the author's second visit to *The Haunted Lotus*, which reads: 'In the first visit, I didn't really like the smaller double tapestry - it's got an awfully bold burnt yellow background and just doesn't seem to quite fit with the rest of the exhibition. But this time I was thinking that perhaps the halo around those heads was something to do with ... ok, so I was bringing the context of the artist and his works, what he's said about them, into my interpretations. So he mentioned somewhere that the demons are actually the Hazara people (his people) and the way they've been dehumanised - and they're also throwbacks to a Persian mythology from this book - in this mythology, the demons are the enemy of a hero, whose name I cannot remember. But at the end, the hero dies and the demons live. So I was thinking, it's almost like an immortality thing, or a baptism of fire - or trial by suffering, or rebirth. Something to do with living though, surviving, and doing more than "mere living". Anyway, it seemed deeper to me.'

[40] This quote drawn from the author's transcript of the first visit, the relevant section of which states: 'Thinking about something you don't want to remember is the impression I got, while looking at the demons' faces. Very introverted demons. I thought of it like they'd been traumatised in the past, like having been physically abused and then reintroduced to the person who had abused them. And so that sort of position you would imagine, sort of like curled up inwards, facing inwards, very protective of their body. Demon is really quite isolated in that space. Though that said, they're often in pairs – so there'd be two demons in

responder remarks, "that sort of explains why the demons didn't look particularly scary and they looked more like, upset or traumatised."[41]

A link can be drawn here between the suffering depicted and the desire to alleviate such suffering where we find it. Khadim Ali's art bridges the gap between the Hazara people and the responder by demonstrating intense human suffering, which is something we can all relate to as a shared human condition. Ali is quoted as having described his work as "a silent artistic language" which speaks (or rather shows) the inexpressible.[42] We are drawn into a context that is not our own as we develop an affinity with the Hazara through the paintings and we learn to identify with this previously distant 'Other'. These representations prompt the viewer to reach out to the Hazaras through the artworks, to feel a kinship and connection; a shared Being. Whether this is achieved or not is surely a matter of degree, but what matters is that an attempt is made, and that it is evoked by the content of the artworks. The overt religious themes in the paintings help the viewer notice, within those mythological figures, a humanity that resonates in each of us, and that we wish to connect with. In this way, Ali's art includes us in his constructed mythology. We share with the Hazara their difficult past and identity.

Ali's art has been understood as an attempt to break through the communication barriers that exist in explaining the plight of the Hazara.[43] There is something religious about this interpretation too. Georges Bataille argues that religion is about society and the sacred, and that the sacred is primarily about communication.[44] Religious sentiments are, for Bataille,

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one frame. And they were very close to each other – overlapping. But still not clinging to each other, just very close and very self-contained. And not looking at each other either, they often, their gazes just sort of went past each other. It was very odd.'

[41] Or, more fully 'the synopsis thing explained that the demons represented the demonised Hazara people… that sort of explains why the demons didn't look particularly scary and they looked more like, upset or traumatised.' Taken from the author's transcript of the first visit to the gallery.

[42] Milani Gallery, *Khadim Ali*, last modified March 7 2013, at http://www.milanigallery.com.au/artist/khadim-ali?do=text. Accessed 25/09/2014.

[43] F. Marie, 'Confronting Misconstrued Histories: Creativity Strategies in the Hazara Struggle toward Identity and Healing', *Arizona Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies,* vol. 2, no. 1 (2013), p. 105.

[44] I am not arguing that Bataille was a phenomenologist, rather that some of his works display a phenomenologist's focus on experience and consciousness, and an unwillingness to look through the eyes of one discipline and thus one interpretation of an experience.

manifestations of a human need to communicate.[45] The responder's focus on the way that the demons "always looked past", rather than at each other would be interpreted by Bataille as an inability to communicate; a failure that is nonetheless being communicated vividly by Ali. It is our understanding of the relevant context – knowing that what Ali wishes to illuminate is something important and inexpressible - which ultimately prompts us towards a communion with the Hazara.[46] It is thus clear that the extension of the responder's pre-existing world expands the network of relations which can be drawn from the artwork, and allows for a more meaningful communication between subject and object. The religious experience of 'The Haunted Lotus' is therefore contingent on the artist's attempts to establish connections between himself, his artworks, the Hazara, the responder and their world.

Limitations of the Methodology and Study

There are some problems with the phenomenological method. Firstly, its focus on subjective experiences make the data gained from phenomenology more qualitative than quantitative (particularly given the small sample size of this study) and poses problems for the operationalization of variables. Spickard's 'empirical phenomenology' is about as close as it gets.[47] This makes cause-and-effect analysis difficult. Whilst not necessarily a damning shortfall, this does limit the usefulness of phenomenology. Secondly, bracketing is more of an ideal than an applicable tool.[48] The instruction to ignore or forget about all pre-existing notions, biases and individual preferences is very challenging to implement.[49] All the researcher can do is try, and be aware of their own limitations.

Thirdly, Spickard's methodology does not account for the difference between recounts of experiences and the experiences themselves. The method of communication is a filter to the experience in-and-of-itself. For example, subjects recounting their experience to the researcher may re-

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[45] M. Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 107.
[46] Marie, 'Confronting Misconstrued Histories', p. 106.
[47] J. Pringle, J. Drummond, E. McLafferty and C. Hendry, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: a Discussion and Critique', *Nurse Researcher,* vol. 18, no. 3 (2011), p. 22.
[48] A. Giorgi, 'Difficulties Encountered in the Application of the Phenomenological Method in the Social Sciences', *Analise Psicologica,* vol. 24, no. 3 (2006), p. 355.
[49] F. R. Struckmeyer and F. B. Struckmeyer, 'Phenomenology and Religion: Some Comments', *Religious Studies,* vol. 16, no. 3 (1980), p. 257.

create the events in an attempt to form a cohesive whole, or tell the researcher what they want to hear, instead of what the experience was. The researcher has to be aware of such problems. Finally, there is an issue with the application of phenomenology to this particular case study. If the study had documented the experiences of Hazara identifying subjects, it is likely that the religious elements mentioned above (particularly the second tier) would be more overt, especially when contrasted with a recount from this first-world, Western subject with a Christian background. Basically, the subjects' pre-existing world will hugely emphasise or mute how religious *The Haunted Lotus* exhibition feels. There are those common features that have been elucidated above, but perhaps this explanation is still missing some vital aspects. The study of a range of people with different backgrounds experiencing the same exhibition would probably be very enlightening.

Conclusion

That said, phenomenology's call back to experience is an important one. Joseph Bettis has this to say on the matter:

> Modern men have difficulty in grasping the primordial intuition of Being because science has produced a *maya*, an ignorance, which blinds them to the original perception….science arose as a window into Nature. Modern men have become enamoured with the window rather than with what is visible through it.[50]

Ultimately, the phenomenological method is useful, so long as any study that uses phenomenology goes beyond the attainment of descriptive data and is self-aware of the pitfalls. Successful applications of phenomenology search for elements of the subjective experience; in this case how, as we experience art, religious themes are made manifest to the consciousness. Tellingly, James Cox delineates two types of art: presentational, which brings the responder into the presence of an alternate reality, and representational, which offers the responder a story.[51] In a comparable manner the religious aspects of this exhibition are revealed to be experienced on what seems to be two levels; one is more intangible to the natural attitude – that experience of the exhibition as a liminal space where an infinite 'Other' is apprehended – and the other is more readily

[50] Bettis, *Phenomenology of Religion*, p. 87.
[51] Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, p. 114.

comprehended by our normal intentionality – that is, when representational aspects of exhibited art prompt religious interpretation.

The first is what Cox would classify presentational and the second is representational. This study has shown that the phenomenological method is appropriate and that a modification of Spickard's 'empirical phenomenology' is viable. The data and several comparisons with secondary sources suggest that the exhibition experience itself has a religious character, and that the pre-existing world and the representations depicted in *The Haunted Lotus* drive the responder towards religious interpretations. To consolidate and confirm the arguments presented here regarding the phenomenological method and religio-artistic experience, researchers should anticipate undertaking a similar study with a larger sample size. Perhaps the research presented here should be considered a pilot test case.