

**There Is Always
Someone Looking
through the
Window from
that Tower**

Daniel Falb

INHABITING PAINTING

Nina Zeljković's *Frozen Noises, in the Hollow Basins*¹

Jesus said, "If those who lead you (plur.) say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in heaven,' then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is inside of you. And it is outside of you. When you become acquainted with yourselves, then you will be recognized. And you will understand that it is you who are children of the living father. But if you do not become acquainted with yourselves, then you are in poverty, and it is you who are the poverty."

Gospel of Thomas, Saying 3 (trans. Layton)²

In her recent conceptual painting and video practice, Nina Zeljković investigates topics and constellations at the intersection between painting and embodiment. This is a field where painting is marked less by the logic of the gaze (or, more generally, principles of opticality) than by the proximity of a body. A distinctive and continuous undercurrent in the history of painting, this field ranges from the very beginnings – Neanderthal and early hand stencil cave paintings at sites such as the Cave of Maltravieso in Cáceres, Spain (Fig. 1) – to avant-garde action and performative painting in the 20th century, see for example Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–76) (Fig. 2). For *Frozen Noises, in the Hollow Basins*, Zeljković undertook new research into a particular facet of this field, located somewhere in the middle of these historical

extremes: on field trips that took her from Belgrade all the way through southern Turkey to the Syrian border and Mount Ararat, the artist looked at painting in the context of early Christian and Orthodox monastery and church architecture.

One figure that crops up recurrently in that context is that of the mountain or cave monastery, the earliest of which stem from the first centuries A.D., when Christians began experimenting with monastic life, even before it was popularized by figures like Anthony the Great (251–356) and Basil the Great (330–379). The rock churches and caves of Göreme in Cappadocia were among the sites she first visited. These architectures in themselves already posit the question of embodiment in multiple, acute ways. Cut (using just hammer and chisel) into the soft stone of Cappadocia's fairy chimney formations, they are visibly shaped by the human body: its size, strength and proportions. There is a deeply 'creaturely' feel about the morphology of these spaces, caves and dens – *they literally appear as traces of an animal digging itself into a mountain* (Fig. 3). At that, they contrast starkly with other types of sacral architecture which, more refined and constructed with heavier instruments, are already abstracted from the proportions of the individual body. They also mark a counterpoint to the religious beliefs of their past inhabitants who, after all, served a God in

whose likeness they believed they had been created – while through the nature of their habitations testifying above all to their terrestrial animality.

Crucially, the involuntary foregrounding of the body also extends to the use of painting in these built environments. The markings applied in tempera paint on walls and – manifestly at one human arm’s length – around windows and pigeonholes (the birds’ excrement has long been collected as fertilizer in Cappadocia, their eggs used for making the tempera) again testify first and foremost to the presence and proportions of the body doing the painting (Fig. 4). This is still true for the iconoclast paintings and patterns that start covering the walls and ceilings of cave monasteries and churches after around 800, when emperor Constantine V (741–75) banished icons from Christian worship in the East. Of course, they are also there for the eye (while preventing it from seeing an image), but they also, and more crucially, are close to the body – the religious body lives amongst them, leans on them, lies on them, touches them, wears them out through its touch (Fig. 5). Painting is quite literally being inhabited here.

Zeljković’s video work *Nave Nartex Navel*, combining visual materials from various sites along her research trip including the Cappadocia region, thus quite logically does not focus on *showing*

those paintings. Instead, it pursues a *reembodiment* of the monks who once lived amongst them. It does so, however, purely by capturing the view from their caves out into the ambient landscape: It represents their body not by depicting it, making it visible, just by presentifying its gaze (Fig. 6). Not what that gaze sees, *but that it was cast* is the point. *Nave Nartex Navel*, by way of its formal construction, can thus be seen as shifting the iconoclast ban from depicting Jesus and the saints to depicting the human body of some long-dead monks who painted iconoclast paintings. Now it is the body that ‘shall not be depicted’ as if *it* was the divine: a contemporary inversion of earlier religious doctrine.

Religious doctrine and theological argument (in their often confusing and contradictory diversity over space and time) are present in [Title] not only as regards issues of representation, however. As Zeljković’s research trip took her to sites of early Christian communities scattered across large parts of the former Byzantine Empire, communities that existed at different times and exhibited a whole range of early Christian life forms, it was also about making early Christianity tangible as a vibrant *social laboratory*, as a field of experimentation and contestation of how to live as a Christian (before and after Christianity became the state religion in 380, before and after the formation of the canon

of the New Testament, as a consequence of which texts like the *Gospel of Thomas* – see introductory epigraph – were deemed heretical and forced to disappear, etc.). This field included radical experiments with communism and poverty, equality and proto-feminism. One particularly poignant example present in *Nave Nartex Navel* is the former cave monastery of Pepuza, where the Christian church of Montanism flourished in the 2nd and subsequent centuries³ (Fig. 7). The role women played in the foundation of Montanism, and the religious roles they were able to take on – prophets, priests, bishops – point to the broader phenomenon of what religious historian Elaine Pagels called “the suppressed Gnostic feminism”.⁴ It, then, became the historical role of Eastern Orthodoxy to eradicate experimentations like these, or at least to push them out to the margins of the Empire, thus somewhat flattening the Christian landscape. The Montanists and their women priests, too, did not make it past the 6th century.

Nave Nartex Navel builds on Zeljković’s earlier research into the iconographic and architectural language of orthodox Christianity. Strikingly, her investigation of Byzantine architecture touches upon questions of painting and embodiment already discussed above. Here, however, the artist approaches these questions via

an entirely different route, namely by using *a 1:1 scale* in many of her paintings of architectures (Fig. 8). Like the stage actor who does not *look at* true-to-scale stage sets but *inhabits* them while playing, viewers find themselves among Zeljković's architectural paintings as if they were the real thing. Notice the resonance with 1970s architectural sculpture like Mary Miss's *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* (1977–78) (Fig. 9). Zeljković emphasises this gesture towards the embodied viewer by often making the architectural canvas literally enfold the viewer, extend around and above her. So large, it's hard to even create enough distance to see them as a whole, they again play with the theme of bodily proximity: As if, with the original building at dawn still emitting a summer day's heat, you *feel* that heat while standing close to the painted wall. Indeed, a 1:1 painting of a single flat wall is in a sense *not to be looked at* – it circumvents any logic of the gaze by bracketing issues of opticality associated with more properly representational modes of architecture depiction (central perspective). Instead, it opens the image to a more ontological discussion of its status, where Platonism famously regards the world itself as a series of images or copies that flow from one single model – an idea that reappears in the iconoclasm debate (below).

Zeljkoć not only references that debate by occasionally covering her architectural paintings in iconoclast patterns, applying the same tempera (as if painting on the actual wall) that was historically used in places like Göreme (Fig. 10). She also recognizes the painterly activities associated with the history of iconoclasm in its degrees of extremism, phases and revisions – the erasure/overpainting of painted walls, the erasure/overpainting again of that overpaintings – as an original scene of performative painting, where the overlaid and bruised painted surfaces document the presence and struggle of painting bodies over time much more than any particular pictorial content (Fig. 11). The church wall and ceiling are a studio, as it were, the place where the Carolee Schneemanns of all generations hang from the ceiling, painting. Zeljković references these movements by inviting other artists to enact painting performances or place temporary exhibitions on top of her own architecture paintings (Fig. 12).

The iconoclast impulse that haunted the Byzantine world in two waves in the 7th and 8th centuries (while cropping up also in other, e.g., earlier Christian contexts, but also much later radical Protestant ones) sprang from controversies around the nature of the icon. This is a discourse that, on yet a different level,

revolves around questions of embodiment. The icon is a depiction of Jesus and/or the saints, but iconoclasts like Constantine V argue that this depiction is necessarily inadequate, for while Jesus is, following Paul, an embodied (enfleshed, incarnated) image of God, the icon captures just his body. It cannot contain the infinitary that is the image of God within him (unlike, the iconoclasts think, the Cross or the Eucharist). It follows that “[i]f the icon is only venerated in what it shows, it is therefore its matter that is venerated. It is therefore an idol, and the iconophiles are idolaters.”⁵ For iconodules, on the other hand, it is precisely the notion of incarnation – Jesus himself *already being* a “natural image”⁶ – that provides a positive model of legitimacy for the icon. “For if God’s Word chose the visible and the flesh in order to distribute the salvation of the image by means of the image, it is up to us to take into account this choice of the flesh in order to render forever present and visible the memorial of our redemption [i.e., the icon]. Whoever rejects the Icon refuses to arise from the dead.”⁷

The Byzantine icon, then, addresses its viewers in their quality of essentially *not* just being body, flesh, matter. With that in mind, it is fitting that the icon is not cast in post-Renaissance linear perspective – which is the ‘ego shooter’ perspective of the body, ready to act in the here and now – but in so-called reverse

perspective. Here, the vanishing point is located not in the image plane but before it, in the viewer: where objects appear larger, not smaller, the further away they are (such that, e.g., a square can be viewed from three sides at once (Fig. 13)), all lines converge in the person standing in front of the image. Among the many interpretations of the reverse perspective – and Zeljković is part of an ongoing discourse aiming to reverse the notion of reverse perspective as archaic and deficient *vis-à-vis* linear perspective – one holds that this perspective flows not from the viewer's standpoint, but from that of the Lord himself within the image.⁸ This is the crucial 'reversal': "The icon *contemplates us*. In its turn, it becomes *God's gaze at the contemplator's flesh* [...]. The flesh transfigured by the icon transfigures the gaze turned upon it."⁹

Zeljković, in her contemporary painterly engagements with the Byzantine icon, comments on these 'transfigurations' with a gesture of this-worldliness. She *crops* the typical icon, cutting off anything of particular religious relevance, and retains nothing but a piece of mundane furniture present in many icons: *a table* (often, but not always, the table of the Last Supper) (Fig. 14). But what is a table? A dead piece of wood. Zeljković's gesture thus invokes the iconoclast conviction that the icon is just a lifeless picture made of material color on a dead piece of wood

(which, indeed, would also be the secular understanding of it). It is purely a thing from this world.

At the same time, this artistic move again shifts the focus from the relation of the individual to (a non-existent) God or its prophet to the social community. The table refers us back to the earlier motif of Christian communities as social laboratories.

Where redemption is not sought in an eschatological or afterlife scenario, it is social institutions that must redeem the body in its lifetime.

The ‘heretical’ *Gospel of Thomas*, a text banned and buried in the 4th century and excavated only in 1945, can already be read in that direction – recall the epigraph. God’s kingdom does not exist elsewhere, not in an otherworld: “[T]he kingdom is inside of you. And it is outside of you” – it is here or nowhere.

It must be made right here.

The table stands for that task.

It is the only tool of redemption at hand.

It is depicted in the artist’s paintings at a 1:1 scale (Fig. 15), which again makes them virtually stand in for the real thing, inviting the body to use and collectively inhabit them rather than just look at them.

The table needs to be put to work. –

But isn’t there more to it?

Does the tabletop, depicted from above, still really resemble a Byzantine icon at all? Yes, the icon does often contain elements in vertical perspective, but always in combination with frontal views.

Where Zeljković's painted tables become vertical-only and flat *tabletops* (Fig. 16, 17), do they not incline towards the figure of the *desktop*?

For is it not that the question of the social community is posed here precisely at a time when our bodies are being 'transfigured' by our personalities and socialities moving online? In which the digital both challenges our ideas about embodiment and poses novel challenges for togetherness and the maintenance of the public sphere? Where it becomes increasingly unclear what the "proximity of a body" even means, and what its significance would be in creating redemptive social institutions for people who are deeply entangled but will never have sat down at the same table?

At any rate:

The morphing of the body – of what it means to be a body, an embodiment – is not over, and hence its constellation with painting is likely to continue to evolve as well.

¹ Publiziert in: Eva Birkenstock (Hg.), *Reisestipendien 2021 (Neue Kunst in Hamburg e.V.)*, Hamburg: Textem 2021. Purchase at <https://www.textem-verlag.de/textem/kunst/487>

² Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

³ Peter Lampe, "Frühes Christentum: Zwischen Ekstase und Askese", *Der Spiegel*, 3 July 2010, <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/fruehes-christentum-zwischen-ekstase-und-askese-a-700728.html>. [accessed 15 June 2021]

⁴ Elaine H. Pagels, 'The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism', *The New York Review of Books*, 22 Nov. 1979, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1979/11/22/the-suppressed-gnostic-feminism/>. [accessed 15 June 2021]

⁵ Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Cultural Memory in the Present series (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 74.

⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁷ Ibid., 82f.

⁸ Clemena Antonova, "On the Problem of 'Reverse Perspective': Definitions East and West," *Leonardo* 43, no. 5 (October 2010): 464–69, https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_00039. [accessed 24 June 2021]

⁹ Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 90.

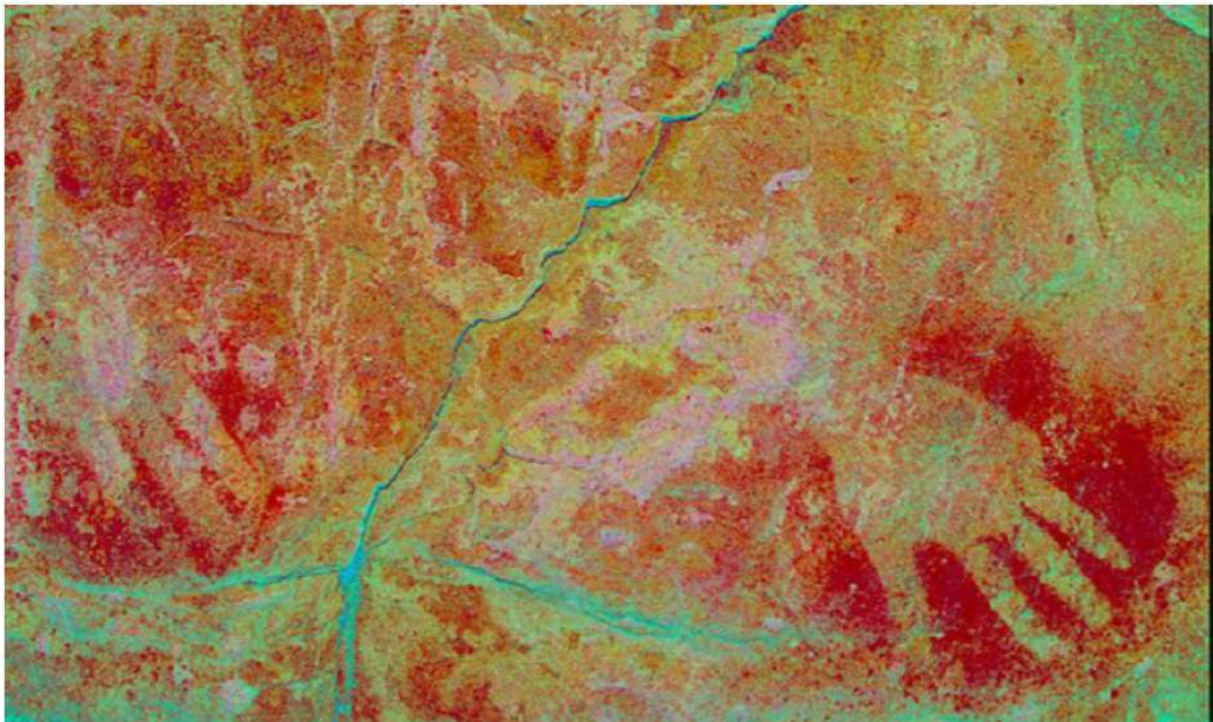


Fig. 1

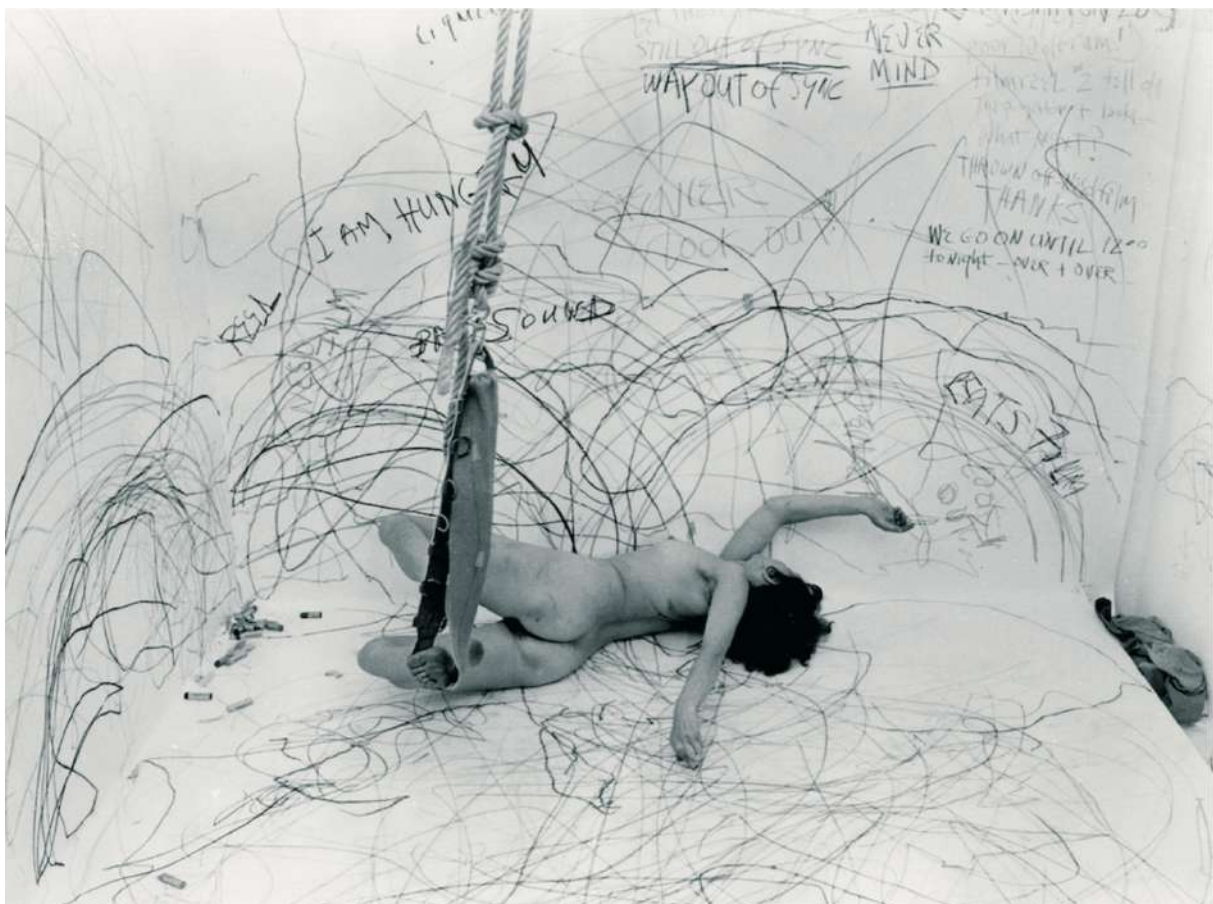


Fig. 2

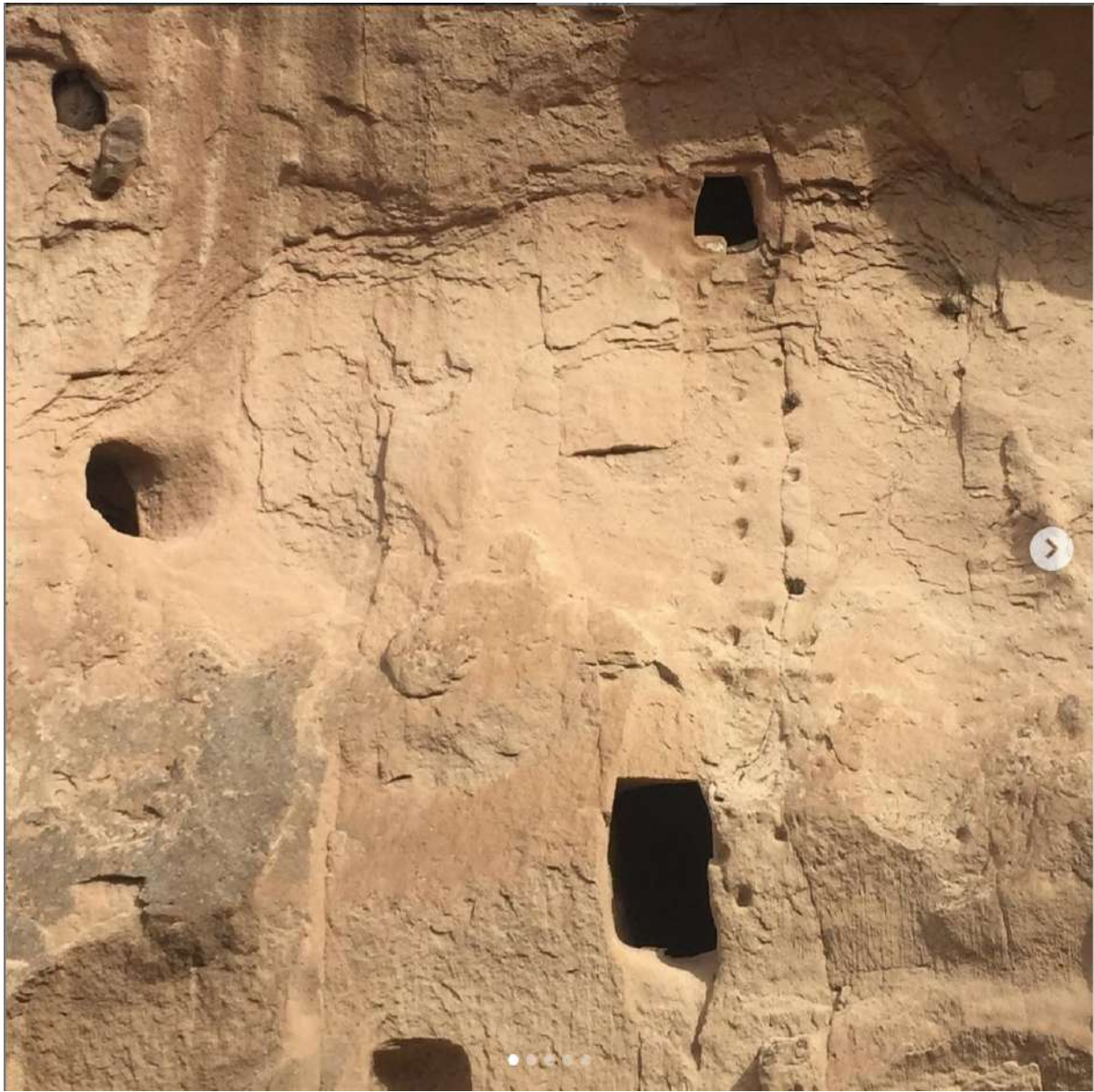


Fig. 3

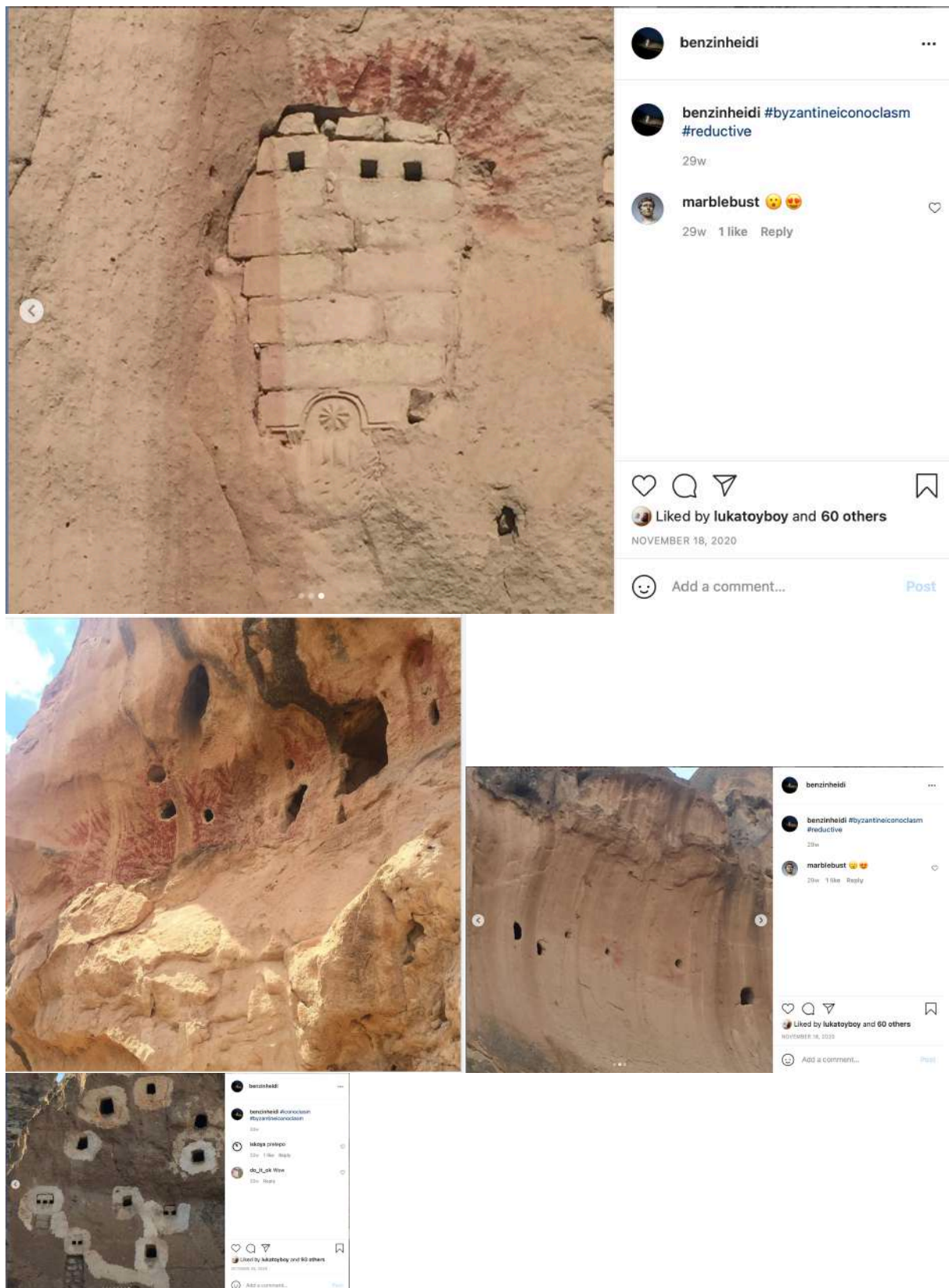


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

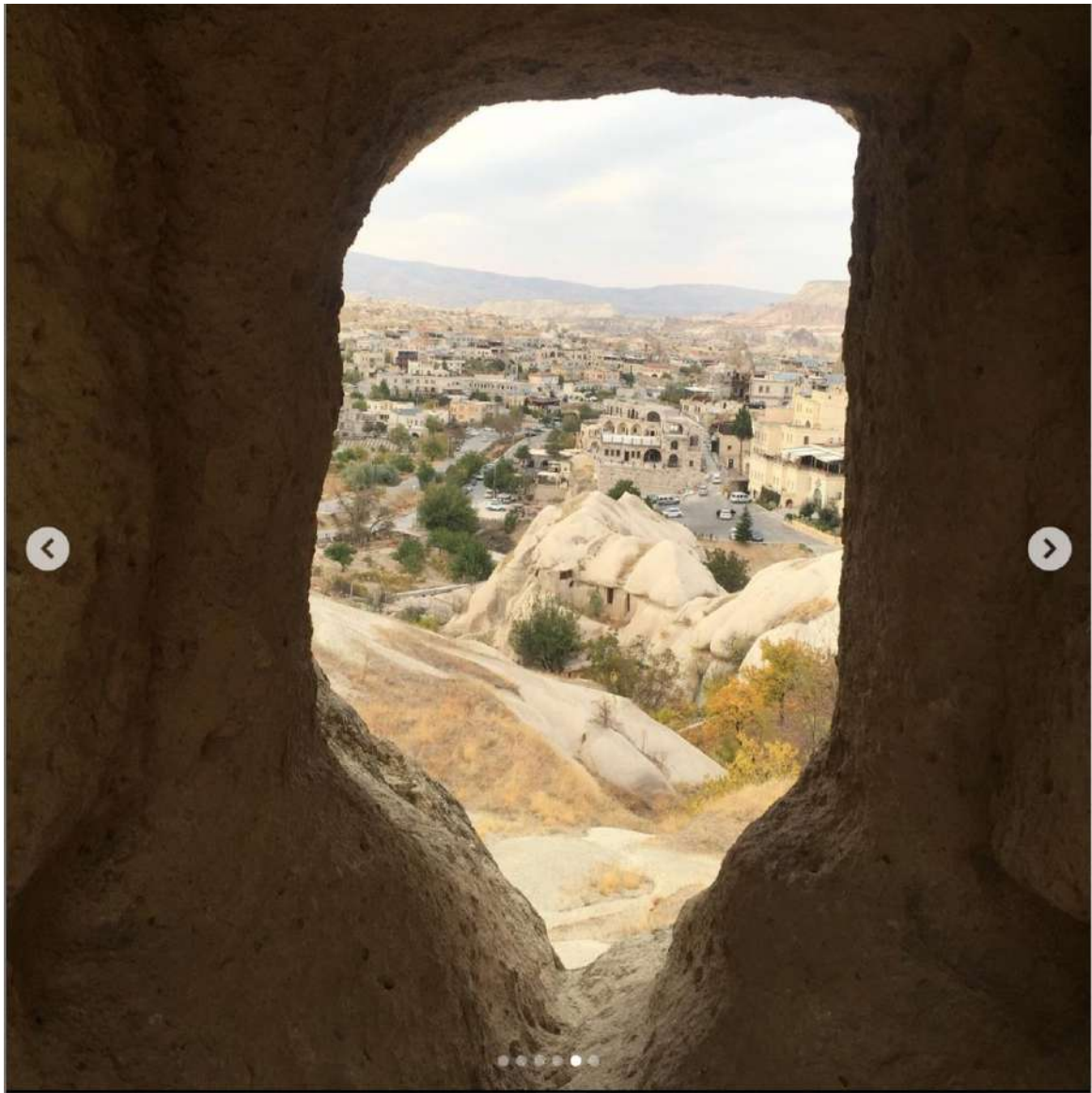
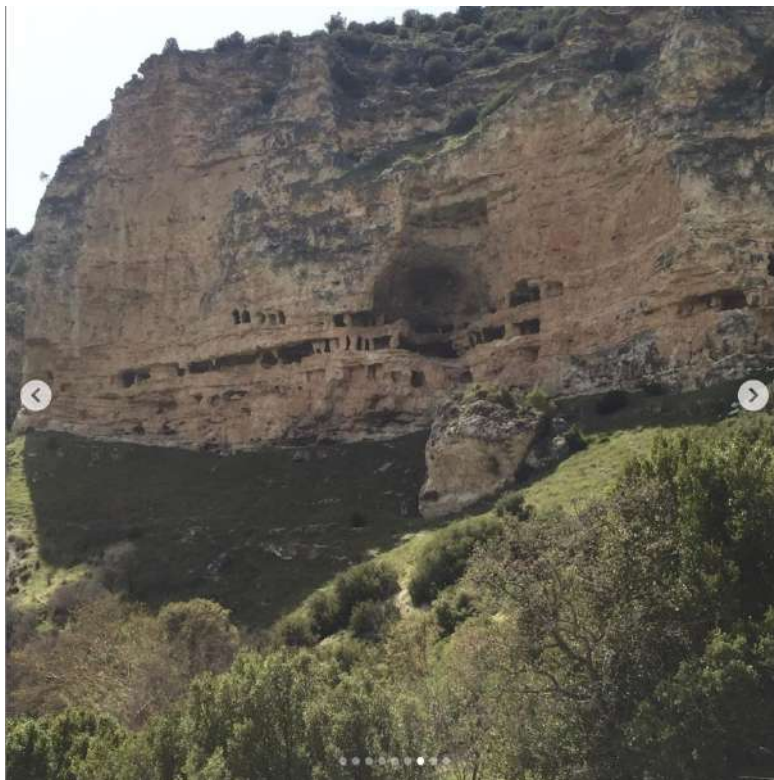


Fig. 6



benzinheidi
Pepuza



benzinheidi church of Montanism
In the second century, a prophetic movement emerged out of Asia Minor that sent shockwaves through the Christian Church. Montanism, as the movement became known, emphasized both prophetic and female authority. These aspects of the movement were a threat to the male hierarchy of bishops, and in their efforts to combat threats to both episcopacy and patriarchy, Church leaders tied prophetic excesses to the usurpation of authority by women. Both Montanists and their opponents used New Testament literature and their own understandings of Church tradition to legitimize their claims. Church leaders were largely successful in neutralizing prophecy as a threat to episcopacy and patriarchy, but they



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Fig. 7



Fig. 8

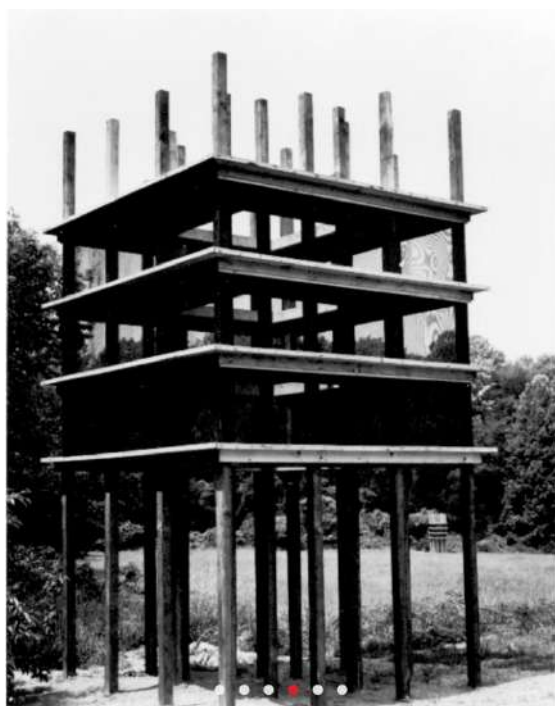


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

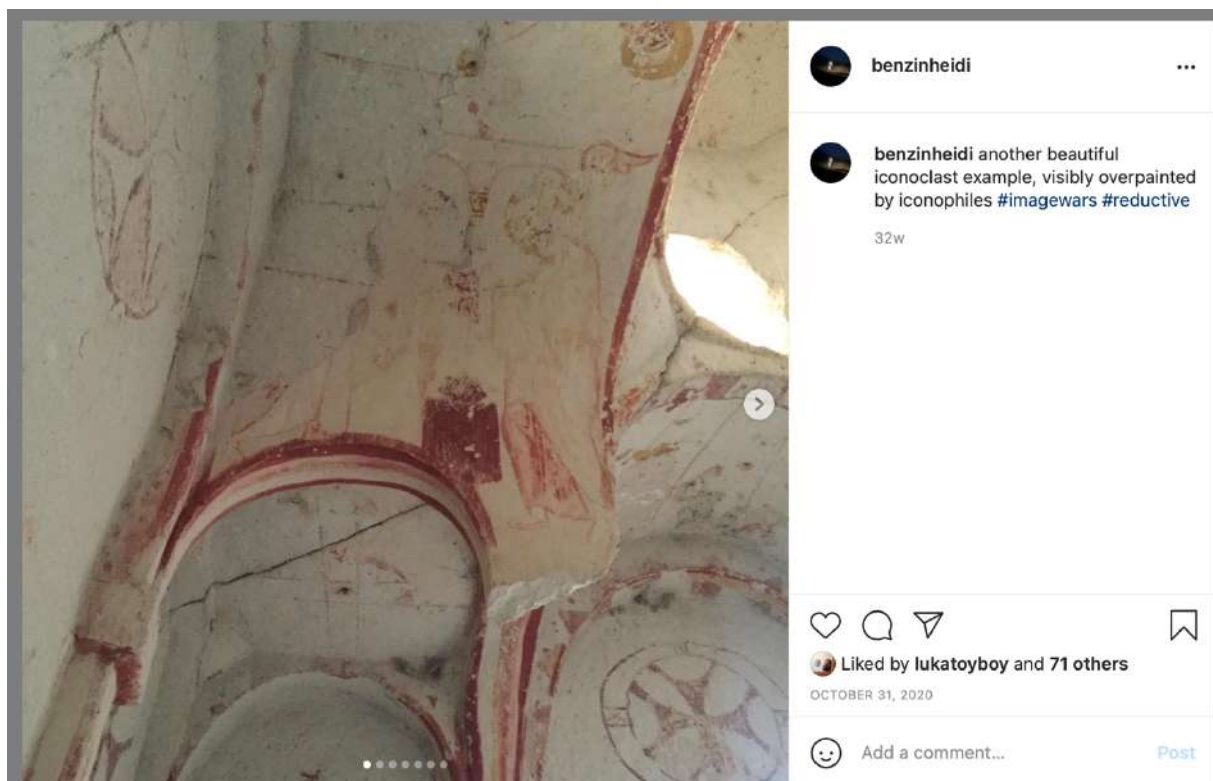


Fig. 11



Salon Saloon



I am not a divider, am I?
Hautleim, Grafit, Pastell,
Steinpulver, 2019

Fig. 12

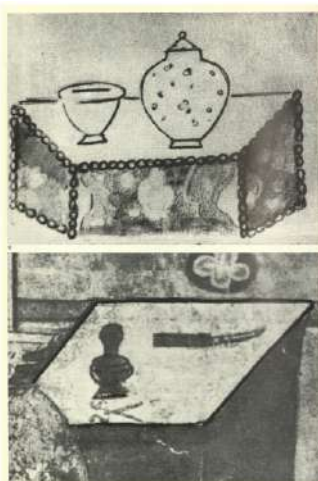


Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 1613

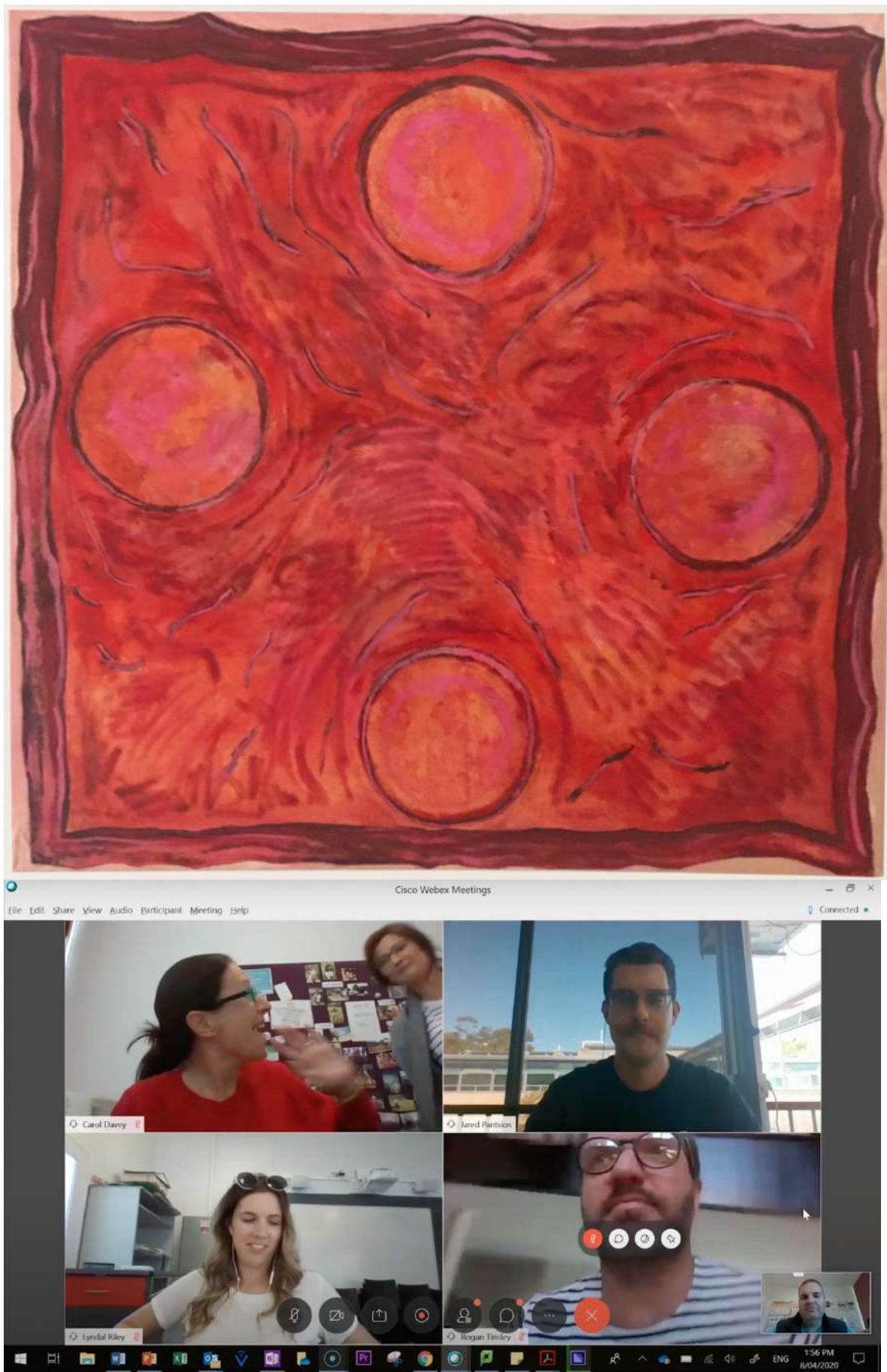


Fig. 17