

Mel Day - Painting Cathedral Rock

ARTIST STATEMENT

To force the fundamental invisibility of exterior things till the very invisibility itself becomes a thing" —Oppenheim, Lois. The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000.

I began *Painting Cathedral Rock* in 2016 as part of an artist residency at Sedona Arts Center, alongside dozens of poets and performers from across the US. At that time, I was deep in a body of work inspired by *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th-century monk's radical proposition that connection to the divine comes through experiential presence, self-forgetting, and a negation of mental concepts and words.

I began a devotional practice and studio ritual while I was there. I read the text daily and followed its meditative instructions. I also worked on painting a copy of "The Cloud of Unknowing's" book cover as faithfully as I could and attempted to practice the meditation instructions at the nearby Gretchen Warren Interfaith Chapel. At the Chapel, a large window—the shape of a movie screen, positioned exactly where an altar would be—frames Cathedral Rock directly. Sacred Indigenous site, tourist "vortex" destination, cinematic spectacle: I found myself visually and ethically consternated by the colliding references and realities. Trying to sit inside that instability rather than resolve it, a performance emerged.

The piece was initially created in three ritualistic parts: In part one, I wash and clean the chapel window. In part two, I paint the window entirely with a mix of the red earth from the surrounding landscape, both concealing and revealing the landscape, and dimming the light within the chapel. In part three, I wash off the mud paint, which slowly drips, blurs, and ambiguously merges with the landscape.

After the 2016 election, I couldn't finish the video of this performance. The third section, a cleansing, felt wrong—too redemptive, too easy. I set the project aside for nearly a decade though continued to paint "Cloud of Unknowing" covers, which have grown into a small series. Following an impulse to return to the film in 2025, I understood that the unresolved middle *is* the work, a window framing what we are entitled or allowed to look at, what we are responsible to in our looking, what is already encoded there—white supremacy, colonialism, erasure, unsettled histories, precarious lands.

My spiritual "unknowing" had opened, slowly, into a reckoning with other kinds of unknowing, with heightened awareness of my own white blind spots, complicit in that history. And then: the accelerating assault on public lands, Indigenous sovereignty, and the question of who the land is even for—what counts as public, who decides, whose access, whose sacred. The final edit removed the cleansing section entirely. Some of my projects surprise me with their duration. Perhaps *Painting Cathedral Rock* will call me back in another ten years.