

Last Confessions of a Dying Star

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Today's entry was written by [Mark Sprinkle](#). Mark Sprinkle is Senior Web Editor and Senior Fellow of Arts and Humanities for The BioLogos Foundation. Mark is a phi beta kappa graduate of Georgetown University with majors in painting and American Studies. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the College of William and Mary, where he studied the sociology of culture and wrote his dissertation on the ideology of contemporary art markets, focusing on the ways artworks come to embody complex relationships in household environments. He worked as a Research Associate at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and for the 15 year prior to joining the BioLogos team, has been an independent artist and frame-maker. Mark writes and speaks on the role of creative practices in cultural mediation and renewal, especially in the area of science and Christian faith. Mark and his wife Beth have home-schooled their three boys, and are active in the local home-school community in Richmond, Virginia.



Last Confessions of a Dying Star, 2011, Chromogenic Print. 30 x30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm). Edition of 7, 2 APs. ©Lia Chavez.

Though they continue to delight and even astonish us, images of galaxies, nebulae and exploding stars have also begun to seem somewhat routine. This state of affairs is partly due to the success of such astronomical platforms as the Hubble Space Telescope in producing so many thousands of beautiful pictures of the heavens, and it is partly due to the sheer number of other images against which they must compete in the super-saturated visual culture of the contemporary West. But a more subtle problem is that we have grown accustomed to the idea that we know what we are looking at when we see a photograph—that a picture, a “snapshot,” gives us access to a “moment of truth” about the thing pictured. Even the most skeptical and sophisticated viewers who have trained themselves to look for evidence of computer fakery and the like can fall into the underlying trap of thinking that images show us what is real about things by momentarily stopping processes and “capturing” light.

Artist Lia Chavez, by contrast, uses that very “stop action” nature of photography to do the opposite of stopping action, instead coaxing light to reveal the way motion, time, and change are the very stuff of material and spiritual relationships, and how relationships are at the heart of matter. Her work “Last Confessions of a Dying Star,” pictured above, is not an image of a distant supernova, after all, but the intimate record of expressive human movement and communication. Here is Chavez’s description of her work, from her artist’s statement:

“Both personal and philosophical, my process has developed over a lifetime of residing at the intersection of painting, ritualistic dance, and photography. I do not use any digital manipulation to achieve these results . . . Each photographic image is the result of a built-up choreographic exercise in which I direct both light and the movement of my model-

dancer...I have developed various light brushes which assist in its specific, controlled application...[and] apply hundreds of subtle, feathery layers of light to the figure as a painter would apply an almost-imperceptible glaze. Individually, a single layer of light would not be visible to the camera, but the accumulation of many layers creates a composite effect.

While directing the application of light, I improvisationally choreograph my model's movement through a continuum of time - a temporal mode made possible by the durational technology of open shutter photography. The result of this process is a two-dimensional sculpted form which is a composite of many actions over a duration of time, all taking place within a single frame negative. In sum, my craft is focused on maintaining the integrity of a process driven by ever-imperfect attempts to harness the elegant wildness and uncompromising honesty of light. ”

Whether looking into the recesses of space or at Chavez's photography, it is critical that we remember that light is not just a medium, or merely a trace, but the very substance of interactions that are both beautiful and wrenchingly powerful. The lovely shapes and colors we see in the heavens are glimpses of tremendous and primal forces at work bending, twisting, compressing and releasing both matter and energy together. Similarly, what we see as ephemeral beauty in the artist's work is actually a materialization of profoundly physical actions and relationships, including ones of intimacy, commitment, and sacrifice: Lia's model, who she thinks of as her "second self," was so willingly exhausted by the process of creating "Last Confessions of a Dying Star" that she all but collapsed at the end of the session. So while in both cases we imagine we are seeing an "object" in space, the subject made visible in the work is not so much a thing, but the materiality of change, the process of becoming, the playing out of relationships between subjects and objects.

Because of this, we should note that the image-making processes of peering into the heavens through telescopes and at the human figure and self through Chavez's lens paradoxically obscure the connections between time and light even while they seek to make them known. In both, the "still image" requires that both time and distance be compressed. As Chavez says, "the photograph... is wired to fail as a trustworthy depiction of the Real, just as the analytic intellect fails" to adequately address "the universal haunting of the intuition that the body goes beyond itself." Because both the subjective and objective come up against the "limitations of [human] perception to direct [our] attention into what lies beyond it," Chavez identifies the recognition of these limitations (part and parcel of "the kinetic enmeshment of the material self and the immaterial self") as the experience of Mystery: "This failure is key, for cultivating an awareness of the intellect's deficiency in grappling with Mystery ironically is the very practice which invites in new ways of deciphering it. One could say that inhabiting this uncomfortable region of unknowing - becoming a child over and over and over again - is one of the essential utilities of art." One could and ought also say the same of science, and most profoundly of faith.

There is more than a superficial similarity between Chavez's photography of the human body and more-familiar representations of celestial objects and processes; there is also a relational and spiritual symmetry between these sets of images: both point us towards a better understanding of God's ongoing engagement with the Creation and with us, His creatures. Chavez's intimate and caring (but difficult) work with and through her model—both directing and revealing her movements, but also allowing, *inviting* her to be herself and live into her own expressive freedom—mirrors God's personal engagement with and immanence in the material world, whether in the form of stars and galaxies, of men and women, or—most poignantly—through the person of Christ.

Put another way, Chavez's photograph is not only a testament to and revelation of her manipulation of light and the human form in motion, but also of the way personal interactions and relationships are profoundly real even while seeming ephemeral and immeasurable. Though we do not directly see Chavez' own body in this image, her experience of dance as an "operating system for [her] visual thinking" is the prerequisite for what she asks of her model, and the image could not exist without her presence in the room guiding, responding, illuminating—having 'been there herself' in the dance as well as behind the camera. In Chavez's work as in the Creation, the image is an extension of creator and a marker of intimacy, not distance.

Because she, herself, bears the (relational) image of God, Chavez lives in the unifying tension of being both process and thing, matter and spirit, maker and made, giving that tension visible form through her art. Though her body, like the bodies of us all, remains the site of an elusive mystery of identity, it can also be "a dimly twinkling signifier of the beyond - a sort of crumpled map of the heavens," and the sign of the continuing presence of the Creator not just in the physical world of stars and planets, but in our human communities, as well. Remembering Chavez's emphasis on movement and relationship even in "still images," may we, too, have the humility to admit the limits of our perceptions and knowledge, but the boldness to confess a Lord who made Himself a Way, and not a thing.

Lia Chavez was born in Ithaca, New York and now lives and works in New York City. Recent exhibitions of her vibrant, large-scale photographs, videos, and performances include **Hillman + Chavez** at Affirmation Arts in New York (2008) and SCAD Atlanta (2010), and group shows **Detournement Venise, Parallel Worlds** at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009 TINA B. - The Prague Contemporary Art Festival, the 2009 Armory Show VIP program, **Nightcomers** at the 10th Istanbul Biennial, and **Shot and Go: A Vision of Today's International Photography** at the 52nd Venice Biennale. Following a graduate fellowship in gender theory and visual cultures at Oxford University, she did her postgraduate studies at Goldsmiths College in London, where she earned her MA in Photography and a second masters in Art. Lia has given lectures on her artwork at various institutions including Goldsmiths College, SCAD Atlanta, UCD Clinton Institute Dublin, and Oxford University, and regularly hosts artist salons in New York. Images of and writings about the rest of the series "A Thousand Rainbows" and her other work are available on her [website](#).