

Esoteric Potentiality in Creating and Viewing Angel-themed Photographs

doi.org/10.30664/ar.161713



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)



This article explores esoteric potentiality—the perceived possibility of accessing the otherworldly—through a hermeneutic framework that integrates artist intent, the photographic image and audience reception. The Finnish artist Hanne Kiiveri shot her first angel-themed photograph after a waking dream involving her late sister. As part of the Whose Angels? project—an initiative that combines artistic practice with scholarly research—Kiiveri's staged angel-themed art photographs juxtaposing fantasy and reality, the mundane and the spiritual, were presented to diverse audiences as part of a touring and online exhibition. The verbal responses collected by scholars as research material are here analysed by heuristically employing Egil Asprem's (2016) distinction between kataphatic (concrete, affirmative) and apophatic (abstract, ineffable) modes of thinking to illustrate different strategies of engaging with the artwork. It will be argued that although Kiiveri's artistic practice is not explicitly "hermetic" or "mediumistic", she draws on popularised tropes and vernacularised themes derived especially from the kataphatic tradition of Western esotericism. This type of "occultural resourcing" is evident in the audience commentary as well. The analysis also raises broader ontological questions regarding photography and the photographic image: what can be pictured by photographing, and what can be seen through a photograph?

Introduction

The Finnish artist Hanne Kiiveri (b. 1975) took her first angel-themed photograph in 2017, inspired by a waking dream featuring her late sister. This transformative experience sparked her interest in alternative ways of viewing and interpreting the physical world. Kiiveri's approach to her subject matter is representational and adheres to the iconographic conventions of Christian art. Most of her angels are winged, identifiably female and portrayed in a natural setting. Kiiveri's digitally retouched photographs depict angelic apparitions and encounters in everyday life by staging, an artistic gesture that juxtaposes fantasy and reality, the mundane and the spiritual.

During 2024 and 2025, a compilation of Kiiveri's photographs were displayed to the public as part of the Whose Angels? project at various venues in Helsinki as well as in the project's own virtual gallery. Audience responses to the images were collected by scholars for research purposes through informal interviews and focus group workshops to examine how the public engaged with the artwork and what kind of reactions it evoked. In this article, we examine the *esoteric potentiality* of Kiiveri's photographic

work by focusing on the interplay between the artist's creative practice and the commentary provided by viewers. By esoteric potentiality, we refer to forms of visual expression that need not be explicitly or unequivocally defined as "esoteric"—as is often the case with "hermetic" or "mediumistic" art—but that nonetheless symbolise, materialise and even evoke spiritual or otherworldly realities through subtle yet effective means, thus encouraging epistemic positioning. Drawing on the concept of *occulture* developed by the scholar of religion and popular culture Christopher Partridge (2013) as well as the scholar of art and religion Nina Kokkinen (2013), we argue that esoteric themes and currents circulate within popular culture not only as aestheticised motifs, but also as cultural tools (Swidler 1986; Utriainen 2023) that enable interpretation and articulate meaning.

Art and visual imaginaries hold a central place in esotericism. Its key concepts and approaches have strongly influenced modern art both in Finland and elsewhere (see e.g. Lahelma 2018; Kokkinen and Nylund 2020; Kokkinen 2023). In their own idiosyncratic manner, individual artists have gained inspiration and drawn upon the long history and continuing tradition of esoteric themes and subject matter. One example of this that is relevant in the present context is angels, especially as visualised by women artists. In the first half of the twentieth century, these celestial figures became a recurring motif in the work of several Finnish modernists—some at the fringes of esoteric practice and others deeply engaged with it. Angels appear in the art of Venny Soldan-Brofeldt (1863–1945), Ester Helenius (1875–1955) and Ina Colliander (1905–1985) among others.

Many of the aforementioned angelic figures¹ allude to common esoteric tropes, such as the simultaneity and parallelism of sound, music and bodily movement—particularly dance (Lukkarinen 2020; Kokkinen 2023; Maltabarova 2024). While Colliander's angels—reflecting her Orthodox faith—align stylistically with Byzantine and Christian iconography, Helenius's angelic figures wear garments inspired by traditional Indian and Tibetan garb, revealing her metaphysically motivated interest in Eastern philosophies and religions (Kokkinen 2023, 118). These examples illustrate the diversity in occultual resourcing and the many ways in which artists have harnessed esoteric potentiality, encompassing the formalist appropriation of motifs and the expression of spiritual commitment.

As an imaging technology, photography has held a special place in occulture due to its perceived ability to capture and represent things that could otherwise remain unseen. In the framework of representation and interpretation the onto-epistemology of the photographic image is central: what can a photograph reveal or evoke, and what can be perceived within it? The photographic image has long been associated with evidentiality and veracity (Ball 2017). These properties were harnessed in spirit photography, which gained popularity in the late nineteenth century, to prove the existence of a parallel reality imperceptible to the naked eye (Apraxine and Schmit 2005, 13–14; Fineman 2012, 24–25). According

¹ *Angel, dance*, n.d. (A V 4919:78); *The Angel*, 1937 (A III 2483); *Earthly and Heavenly Circle Dance*, 1950 (C VI 2196) Ateneum/ Finnish National Gallery.

to the historian and theorist of photography André Rouillé (2005, 609), photography is a medium that oscillates between documentarity, expressivity and artistry: it is a trace of the physical world that conveys the point of view of the artist-photographer while also having the capability of creating new realities that surpass the aforementioned. Today, the use of digital cameras and image-editing software has altered our understanding of how photographs function and relate to the physical world.

Rouillé (2005, 610–13) adds that the ontology and epistemology of photography intersect with the question of distance in time and place: whereas the perceived truthfulness of a photograph relies on its immediacy and proximity to the physical world, more fabulous and fanciful photographic images are able to draw the viewer closer to distant or fictitious temporalities and spatialities. The photograph is simultaneously here and there, then and now, real and fictitious. In his essay on Pedro Meyer's pioneering photographic works—which combine the truthfulness of documentary photography with the creative possibilities of image editing software to produce magical realities where angels and demons, saints and ancestors appear in everyday life Mexican settings—artist and critic Joan Fontcuberta coins the concept of the *vrai-faux* photographic image, whose inherent ambiguity fosters both uncertainty and invention (Fontcuberta 1995, 13). Digitality has not only affected the treatment of subject matter in photography, but it also has redefined the materiality of image processing and production (Rouillé 2005, 615–17; Vuorinen 2021).

Our analysis in what follows focuses on one aspect of the rich tradition of

esotericism, namely the notions of *kataphatic* and *apophatic* modes of imagination in relation to the otherworld as discussed by the scholar of esotericism and religion Egil Asprem (2016). We use these concepts as heuristic lenses in the analysis of the esoteric and occultural resources used by the artist to visualise, and by the audience to interpret, the subject matter of Kiiveri's art. Kataphatic can be described as “positive” theology and mysticism as it cultivates sensorially rich imagination that approaches the transcendent in an affirmative manner. As argued by Asprem (2016, 7), “kataphatic practice works actively with mental and physical imagery, words, music and emotion, engaging the sensorium in order to inspire a touch of divinity”. He adds that the opposite mode to kataphatic is apophatic theology, sometimes called *via negativa*. It works on the premise that the divine is not conceivable through human senses, and it is thus best approached via negations and abstract concepts.

Asprem (2016, 7–8) contends that kataphatic mysticism has been especially important and valued in Catholicism, and particularly in popular piety, whereas Protestants especially from upper social classes have favoured the more ascetic apophatic practices. For the present purpose, it is relevant that sensuous kataphatic imagination also holds a place in popular mystical devotion, where Christian and esoteric sensibilities intertwine. One example of this is the imagination around angels, and especially the popular figure of the guardian angel in female form, which combines vivid kataphatic imagination, vernacular piety and feminised sentimentality (Brown 2001, 58–79; Jones and Snell 2021). In our analysis, we do not treat kataphatic and

apophasic as mutually exclusive categorical absolutes; artistic intent, photographic imagery and viewer commentary can encompass both.

Aims, materials and method

The aim of this article is to explore how kathaphatic and apophasic thinking strategies manifest within the “hermeneutic triangle” formed by Kiiveri’s artistic intent, her photographic works and their viewer reception. By approaching the “esoteric potentiality” of Kiiveri’s art from these interrelated perspectives, we are interested in probing the possibilities and limitations of approaching otherworldly realms by means of creating and viewing angel-themed photographs. Rather than categorising Kiiveri’s work as unequivocally esoteric, we argue that her angel-themed photographs instigate occultural meaning-making in nuanced and varied ways. In this context, visual themes and subject matter that draw upon, reference or evoke discourses and practices associable with esotericism thus function as culturally enriched interpretative tools, which encourage both the artist and the viewership to position themselves in relation to the otherworldly, and to reflect on the esoteric as elicited and suggested by the photographic image.

This study presents preliminary results from a project whose objective has been to create a research design in which Kiiveri’s angel-themed photographs and their audience reception are used to explore and develop new methodologies for combining scholarly research and artistic work. The analysis is based on artist interviews and discussions, a selection of exemplary artworks and a dataset compiled of viewer comments. The ethnographic material was

collected from approximately 400 individuals as part of a touring exhibition and online gallery presenting a varying selection of 34 colour photographs. The exhibition was held at six different venues, three affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, two run by the City of Helsinki and one commercial art gallery.

A series of workshops were organised both within and outside the exhibitions to facilitate the participation of people from different backgrounds, including, for instance, university students, non-native Finnish language learners, senior citizens, neurodivergent individuals and Thai Buddhists. In all instances, the responses were elicited by asking audience members to share their thoughts on the pictures, whether they found some pictures particularly thought-provoking, and what kinds of beliefs they held about angels in general. Participation in the study was also possible through a completed survey. The anonymised comments were manually recorded by the project’s researchers and thematically encoded alongside the survey responses by using the ATLAS.ti software program (*Whose Angels?* dataset, 2024–2025, hereafter abbreviated as “WAD”).

The artist’s approach to esotericism and photography

The following excerpts of Kiiveri’s life story—and their connection to the theme of esoteric potentiality—are drawn from two interviews conducted in 2024 and 2025. The first interview focuses on her biographical background, career path and her relationship with religion and spirituality. The second centres on Kiiveri’s artistic practice and photographic style. Kiiveri received her formal artistic training in the

late 1990s and early 2000s. She specialised in analog photography but later transitioned independently to digital photography. (Kiiveri, interview II)

Kiiveri recalls that during her youth and student years, she was quite critical of religion, to the extent of identifying as an atheist. Rather than expressing any particular interest in religion or spirituality, for a long time she was more intrigued by supernatural themes in popular culture—vampires, for example. Kiiveri notes that a general reserve towards spiritual matters characterised the ethos of Finnish art circles at the turn of the millennium. (Kiiveri, interview I)

Kiiveri is not a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, nor does she belong to any other religious group. She recounts how, after returning to Finland following several years abroad, she read a book—recommended by a friend—written by Irish angel-seer, the best-selling author and mystic Lorna Byrne (b. 1953). Out of curiosity, she decided to follow the advice given in the book: to remain open-minded and listen to the promptings of one's inner voice, which, according to Byrne, is a manifestation of one's guardian angel. Encouraged by this, Kiiveri began seeking employment in her own field, and the effort paid off more quickly than expected. Surprisingly, she was offered a part-time job as an art teacher while randomly visiting the church of a notably liberal Lutheran congregation in Helsinki. This episode reflects the beginnings of Kiiveri's growing curiosity about and interest in angels, which years later led to the *Whose Angels?* project in collaboration with the scholar of religion Terhi Utriainen. (Kiiveri, interview I)

Since 2017, the figure of an angel has featured in Kiiveri's photographic work.

For her, this choice stemmed from deeply personal motivation. Several years after the tragic death of her sister, Kiiveri recounts experiencing a waking dream in which she saw both her sister and her father. In the vision, she saw her father “pass to the other side” and “fly in the air in a translucent form”—she was soon to learn that her father had died exactly at that moment. Appearing “strikingly serene and beautiful”, her sister assured her “that she must let go, for everything is well here [on the other side]”. In addition to being colourful and comforting, Kiiveri remembers the waking dream as both funny and surreal. The vivid visual and narrative memory of this experience stayed with Kiiveri for years, processing in her “subconscious”, and eventually inspired her to create her first angel-themed photograph, depicting her sister accompanied by a guardian angel at the moment of death. (Kiiveri, interview I)

Kiiveri describes her approach to angels, religion, spirituality and esotericism as open-minded. She recounts having searched books by several mystic and esoteric authors but repeatedly cites Lorna Byrne as her most important source of inspiration; Byrne's books vividly detail her engagement with angels and her impressions of people transitioning to the afterlife. As other examples, Kiiveri mentions the beauty of *The Annunciation* (c. 1440–1445) by Fra Angelico (1395–1455), as well as Hugo Simberg (1873–1917), a well-known Finnish artist whose œuvre's connection to esotericism has been thoroughly discussed in scholarly research (see e.g. Stewen 1989; Kokkinen 2019).

Kiiveri's appreciation for Simberg's work, featuring down-to-earth and even

mischievous little angels, manifests in her pastiches of Simberg's best-known motifs, *The Garden of Death* (1896) and *The Wounded Angel* (1903), which she reimagined in an outdoor setting, using live models and relevant props. Kiiveri's approach to *tableau vivant*-like staging has been influenced by her admiration for artists such as Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) and Pierre et Gilles (b. 1950; b. 1953), both renowned for their whimsical portraiture that, in addition to their deliberate use of art historical and religious references, engage conceptually with questions regarding identity, gender and sexuality. (Kiiveri, interviews I and II)

Looking at Kiiveri's photography from a formalist perspective, its painterly qualities stand out. In addition to compositional balance, these include image softness and high colour saturation, achieved through Photoshop—often referred to as the “digital darkroom” (Lister 1995, 15, 17). On the one hand, the artist's use of digital editing techniques is relatively subtle, as she rarely makes drastic alterations such as clear subtractions or additions to the original image. On the other hand, Kiiveri's retouching can be quite pronounced and therefore easily perceptible. For Kiiveri, the painterliness of her photographs is a conscious stylistic strategy that also has a gestural dimension, as she refers to the corporeal process of retouching with a digital stylus as a form of painting. The physical and mental intensity of photographic sessions feature in one of Kiiveri's accounts, where she describes unexpectedly falling into a trance during a Whose Angels? project photoshoot. The incident was triggered by the mesmerising drumming of a shamanic healer posing as a model. (Kiiveri, interview II.)

Kiiveri presents her works as large-format inkjet prints on thin birch plywood—a choice she justifies both ethically and aesthetically, as the manufacturer commits to planting one tree per printing commission (Kiiveri, interviews I and II). The natural patterns in the grainy plywood surface give the prints a particularly vivid finish, at times even reminiscent of brushstrokes. This visual element enhances the painterly qualities of the artist's prints, which led many participants in our study to either second-guess the technique applied in the works, or even mistake the photographs for paintings: “Do you think it's a painting?—Yes, isn't it?—They're all photographs.—Oh, okay! They're all beautiful.” (WAD)

Recurrent themes in Kiiveri's life story suggest that for her, other realities may exist parallel to our own and that they can be accessed through dreams and artistic intuition. She also emphasises the importance of listening to one's “inner voice” for guidance along life's path. The angelic figures in her works should not be understood as purely Christian in inspiration, but rather as broadly spiritual in meaning. By aligning herself personally and professionally with spiritual mediators such as Lorna Byrne, as well as artists past and present, Kiiveri recreates her own visions and interpretations of celestial beings—most often taking the form of guardian angels with a twist—with the camera lens and editing software. Her photographs, which closely resemble paintings in both appearance and subject matter, relate narratives and construct moods. Even if Kiiveri does not characterise her art as directly or explicitly esoteric in a hermetic or mediumistic sense, she clearly channels its kataphatic

expressions in her way of engaging with occulture and resourcing esoterica.

Image analysis

The photographs chosen to exemplify Kiiveri's work—*Wicca and Her Guardian* (2021), *Angelic Encouragement* (2021) and *Guardian of Nature* (2022)—were among the most frequently commented-on works in our study. The pictures were presented to the audience without titles. The first two works involve eclectic amalgamations of esoteric worldviews—namely neo-pagan witchcraft and spiritualist mediumship—embodied in angelic figures that align with pictorial conventions of Christian art. The kataphatic elements in these works are both visual and narrative in nature; they crystallise in the iconography and in the back-stories of the photographs, which were developed collaboratively with the models featured in them. The third image includes several visually ambiguous elements that invite diverging readings. It is interpretatively more open-ended and thus serves as fertile ground for apophatic reflection.

To avoid deterministic interpretations of our research material, we highlight the diversity of alternative readings offered by our audiences in response to Kiiveri's art. Although some participants eagerly centred their interpretations on esoteric themes, not all did; overall, the responses varied from appreciative to dismissive, both in their assessment of the aesthetic qualities of the artworks and in their engagement with the spiritual or religious imagery.

Wicca and Her Guardian

From a biographical perspective, *Wicca and Her Guardian* reflects both Kiiveri's personal fascination with otherworldly matters

and her artistic practice, which is rooted in a narrative and illustrative approach to photography. As Kiiveri's interest in angels deepened after moving to Finland and reading the book by Lorna Byrne, she began reading widely on the subject. A friend tipped her off to a recently published book by Terhi Utriainen, entitled *Enkeleitä työpöydällä—Arjen ja lumon etnografiaa* (2017) (*Angels on my Desk: Ethnography on Everyday Enchantments*) (Kiiveri, interview I). The volume discusses Utriainen's extensive fieldwork among Finnish women engaged in spiritual angel practices during the early 2010s.

Kiiveri was particularly moved by an account claiming that, in a previous life, contemporary women involved in angel spirituality had been executed as witches during the Middle Ages (see Utriainen 2017, 77–78). The anecdote not only exemplifies the historical marginalisation of women's spiritual and religious agency, but also underscores the corrective potential associated with the idea of reincarnation. To realise the image, Kiiveri recruited a Wiccan acquaintance, who, along with a co-religionist, posed as a model in the photograph. At the collaborators' initiative, the Mallusjoki rocks—a site considered sacred by Finnish Wiccans—were chosen as the location for the photoshoot (Kiiveri, interview I). Kiiveri's emancipatory attitude inspired her to symbolically address the historical injustice of misogynistic witch hunts through her photography: she sought to create an image depicting a contemporary witch accompanied by her guardian angel. In this way, Kiiveri's reparative intention became a kataphatic gesture—a feminist reimagining of religious history expressed in representative form.



Figure 1. Hanne Kiiveri, *Wicca and Her Guardian I*, 2022. Inkjet print on birch plywood, 100 x 70 cm. Image courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

Participants in the Whose Angels? study had mixed reactions to the image's inter-religious and trans-cultural elements. While some viewers saw the work positively, describing it as a "wonderful combination of angels and indigenous religiosity" and as an image of sameness and unity that resonated with their metaphysical understanding of the universe, others elaborated on their perennialist reading of the angelic figure from a different perspective: for them, angels are spiritual entities that transcend all religious boundaries. They regarded the conventional depiction of these celestial beings as humanlike, winged figures in white dress as arbitrary. In their view, true angels should be understood through a more apophatic lens—as unpersonified emanations of otherworldly

light and energy: "Angels come in a variety of forms and vibrations... One cannot make sense of them all." (WAD)

On the other hand, some participants expressed reservations about the "New Age syncretism" suggested by the picture, underlining the profound incompatibility of shamanism and Christianity. This kind of critique stemmed from both standpoints: for some, the visual content of the photograph was far too pagan for their liking, while for others it was problematic from an indigenous perspective because it alluded to the hegemony of Christianity over other traditions and worldviews: "A shamanic angel! To me it seems a bit far-fetched. Angels don't really feature in Finnish folklore. Perhaps this is some kind of Christian hodgepodge. Such a strange mishmash." (WAD)

The scene in the photograph is set at dusk, with a darkening forest landscape serving as the backdrop. Hazy clouds drift across the blue sky, catching the last rays of sunlight. The witches chose to pose nude, settling on a rock covered with soft green moss to establish a direct and immediate corporeal connection with the surroundings. The photograph evokes both a physical and spiritual proximity to nature, as well as the sacredness of the forest—elements that were noted by several respondents in our study. Some viewers, however, perceived the overall atmosphere of the image as eerie, threatening or intimidating: “I find this a bit scary. I think I even might want to turn my head away. All that nakedness and those dark colors!” (WAD)

While the red-haired model on the left poses as a winged angelic figure, the seated woman with long dark dreadlocks and colourful tattoos holds a ceremonial drum and drumstick. This type of instrument was traditionally used by the shamans of Arctic peoples to enter trance states, in order to contact the spirit world, and to perform divination and healing rituals. In Finnish neo-pagan practice, drums are also used to connect with past generations as well as nature (Hultkrantz 1991; Karhu 2023; Fonneland and Äikäs 2023, 17–21).

While some commentators failed to recognise the instrument altogether, most respondents reacted to the presence of the drum by associating it with sound and song. For them, the image represented the transcendent bodily acts of calling and listening that bridge the visible and invisible worlds. Through these aural associations, the picture engages with a central theme in the aesthetics of esotericism: the idea of music as the highest art form, due

to its immaterial and abstract nature, and its metaphysical interconnections with the visual arts. Inspired by esoteric literature, Finnish painters in the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to harness the otherworldly force of sound and music by visualising it allegorically in their works (Lukkarinen 2020, 79–83). For example, esoteric thinker Rudolf Steiner—well-known in Finland and renowned for his philosophy of art—taught that music connects directly to the human soul. According to him, the physical, spiritual and cosmic realms converge in the body as sound resonates and reverberates through it (Steiner 1906).

The photograph shows no direct physical contact between the two models. The angelic figure, positioned behind the drummer, is kneeling with flexed arms and open hands. The manual gesture is ambiguous: the angel appears to be either reaching out to grasp or gently caress the witch. The title of the photograph invites a reading of the pose as a gesture of protection and blessing. The witch seems partially unaware of the angel’s presence behind her. Several viewers responded to the composition, the dynamic between the figures and their surroundings, by noting the physical intimacy and spiritual proximity both to nature and to each other, as well as the unsettling nudity and overt femininity in the image. Some participants interpreted the angel as a spirit guide or the witch’s higher self. Others, however, found the photograph either incomprehensible or an inauthentic portrayal of angelic presence. (WAD)

There is a distinguishable evenly soft finish to the angel’s skin and a fuzzy texturisation of the wings, which gradually fade

into the background. These visual effects, achieved through photographic editing software, contribute to the vision-like atmosphere of the image and enhance the ethereal quality of the figure. Some participants in the study noted these alterations, suggesting the image had either been Photoshopped or generated using artificial intelligence. For some viewers, the digital enhancements contributed to what they perceived as the image's unauthentic or corrupted quality: "In my opinion, [the photograph] has been digitally altered to the point that I get uncanny AI vibes from it. It definitely doesn't mimic nature." (WAD)

A closer reading of the audience's responses suggests that when the blending of truth and fabrication in a photographic image is subtle or ambiguous, it can be more unsettling than a clearly manipulated image that is easily recognised as a fantastic creation of the artist's imagination. The perceived authenticity of the digital photograph also raises questions of authorship: is the image the product of human creativity or the result of algorithmic processing?

According to the philosopher Walter Benjamin serial image reproduction technologies, such as photography, tend to dilute the uniqueness and permanence—or the so-called "aura"—of the entities represented through them. Historically the originality of objects, such as works of art, stems from their sacralisation via their ritualisation (Benjamin 1992, 5–6). From this perspective Kiiveri's performative act of retouching her images, as a painter would, serves to highlight their unearthly aesthetic singularity. For some commentators, the digital enhancement of the photographs added to the visual impact and expressivity

of the images, which was seen as a stylistic choice adding to the artistry of her work. (WAD)

Angelic Encouragement

A woman in a blue blouse, her long blond hair swirling in motion, gazes intently at a grey-haired man seen from behind. His white robe and wings identify him as a celestial figure. A partially visible frame in the upper left corner suggests that the pair stands at a threshold—perhaps a doorway or window—emphasising a liminal or transitional moment. Both figures raise their hands in a mirrored gesture, their palms touching. The angel wears a ring; the woman, a pendant set with a gemstone. The composition evokes an angelic apparition, focusing on the woman's emotional and spiritual response to the encounter.

The two models are a Finnish married couple, the wife a professional medium and the husband similarly engaged in esoterica. Kiiveri met them through a mutual contact (Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen, field notes, Helsinki, March 19, 2025; hereafter abbreviated as "ONFN"). The picture reimagines an actual vision experienced by the medium, in which an angel appeared as a pillar of light—a moment she found spiritually affirming yet physically overwhelming, causing her to stagger. Kiiveri translates this rather apophatic—amorphous and ineffable—moment into a more kataphatic interpretation, visually coded in alignment with traditional Christian angel imagery.

Of over a hundred viewer comments on this specific work, approximately one fifth focused on interpretations concerning the afterlife. The photograph was primarily read in two alternative ways: either

the male figure is a psychopomp—an angel of death arriving to accompany the medium at the moment of her passing—or he represents the angelic soul of the medium's deceased husband, now returning for a visit. The interpretative ambiguity of the image led some participants to consider whether both figures might represent angels or the departed, one rendered more symbolically than the other. Other viewers reflected on their own preconceptions about the relationships between heavenly beings and mortals. In a few cases, the scene was read allegorically—as a transfiguration occurring in the act of confronting one's mirror image: "Well, this is interesting.—Is it a window or a mirror? At first, I thought the woman was looking at her reflection—in a mirror that tells a different story. But now I see it's window glass." (WAD.) From this perspective, the image evokes themes of transcendence, liminality and reciprocity between self and other, male and female, human and non-human, terrestrial and celestial.

In her account of the photoshoot, Kiiveri states that the picture was taken at a cottage in southern Finland (ONFN). A shoreline partially covered by pine trees is visible in the background. Several viewers noted that the setting evokes an idealised Finnish landscape—offering a panoramic view that includes both water and coniferous forest. Three respondents compared the scene to the work of Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937), a painter whose landscapes are emblematic of Finnish national romanticism. The perceived "Finnishness" of the image is further accentuated by its predominantly white and blue colour palette, reminiscent of the national flag. One participant also interpreted the hue of the medium's



Figure 2. Hanne Kiiveri, *Angelic Encouragement*, 2024. Inkjet print on birch plywood, 60 x 100 cm. Image courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

attire as a reference to Christian iconography, specifically Marian blue. (WAD)

Many participants in our study focused on deciphering the role of the female figure in the image. Some viewers drew attention to the gendered composition of the scene, concluding that because the male figure is clearly presented as an angel, the female must therefore represent the devil. This interpretation was supported by the medium's facial expression, which some perceived as evil or malicious. However, such a reading was also criticised as problematic and unfair to women. One participant

argued that the visual composition reflected stereotypical gender constructs embedded in and reinforced by certain worldviews:

In Christianity, angels are typically male. As you can see, womanly shamanism is on the other side. The female figure stands for a different tradition here. The picture represents Lévi-Straussian binary opposites: the man is inside, denoting culture and order; the woman is outside, denoting nature [and chaos]. (WAD)

Although the identity of the female figure was not disclosed to viewers, several speculated that she must be a spiritual or religious expert. She was variously labelled as a “New Age weirdo” and, more appreciatively, as a kindred spirit—“definitely a witch or a medium”. This impression was shaped by her dramatic makeup, crystal charm pendant and confident, unflinching demeanour in the face of a supernatural presence. One commentator highlighted the authenticity of her “obvious mediumship” in contrast to what was perceived as the factitiously staged nature of the angelic figure. (WAD.) When the two figures were interpreted as spiritual equals, the intensity of the encounter became viewed in positive terms, as a moment of joy and excitement:

At first I thought that they were both angels. But now I realise that one of them is a human being who is receiving such energy from the angel that her hair is standing on end. It makes you feel like she’s receiving a blessing, power of the Holy Spirit, from what they share. (WAD)

The subject matter in Kiiveri’s work, the mediumistic encounter, has an intriguing historical parallel. In their overview of the relationship between early photography and the occult, the art historian Pierre Apraxine and filmmaker Sophie Schmit (2005, 15–16) introduce a threefold typology of images defined by their ontological premise: photographs of spirits, fluids and mediums. All three categories sought to document invisible or evanescent entities, energies and events by using modern imaging technologies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some photographers specialised in the visual documentation of séances and spirit mediums in action, whether for promotional or investigative purposes. Auditory and tactile stimuli experienced during these séances—typically conducted in complete darkness or dim lighting—were interpreted by spiritualists as evidence of the physical presence of the departed.

For example, photographs taken by the German physician and psychical researcher Albert Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929) captured the ectoplasmic materialisations and luminous apparitions produced by the French medium Eva C. (Eva Carrière, 1886–1943) while in a state of trance. Eva C. became known for her “perverse and neurotic” séances, in which she often appeared in partial or complete undress. While spiritualists viewed such photographs as validation of their truth claims, critics interpreted them as evidence of theatrical fraud and deception (Fischer 2005, 177–78). According to the art historian Mia Fineman (2012, 24–27), early occult photography not only sparked some of the first extensive public debates about the authenticity and reliability of the photographic image but also contributed to the rise of art

photography—one that embraced fantastical imagery instead of striving to depict objective reality.

Interestingly, Kiiveri's photograph taps into the pictorial trope of the wild and imposing female medium—an image that felt familiar and recognisable to some viewers. At the same time, instead of representing otherworldliness through more unnatural referents such as inexplicable lights or ectoplasmic matter, Kiiveri chose to depict a calmly conventional angelic figure. This solution is notable, given that the image's backstory might have allowed for a more apophatically oriented whimsical visual interpretation of an encounter with the beyond.

Guardian of Nature

At first glance, the viewer's eye is drawn to a wooded landscape. A clear, bright sky breaks through the patchy green foliage that fills the background of the image. Along with the irregular network of dark, wide tree trunks and slender branches, visually the natural scene forms a semi-abstract composition. This impression is accentuated by the presence of translucent prismatic reflections scattered across the photograph, as if traces of light were dancing over its surface. A straight shoreline runs along the lower edge of the image, where a small female angelic figure is barely discernible at the bottom centre. This artwork exemplifies a strand in Kiiveri's photography that focuses less on narrative episodicity and more on the creation of visual ambiance and pictorial mood through light and colour. In her interview, the artist mentions her interest in the treatment of light as a key factor in her photographic practice (Kiiveri, interview II).

Compared to the other pieces analysed, this photograph—due to its pronounced painterly qualities—elicited viewer responses that centred more on aesthetic appreciation and emotional impact. Many participants commented on the natural beauty and calming serenity of the image. Following these initial impressions, viewers attempted to interpret the photograph in both literal and allegorical terms: some focused on identifying the shooting location by verbally itemising the landscape view in detail, while others perceived the image as a fantastic daydream, an illusory mirage or even a hallucinatory vision. (WAD.) These varying interpretations reflect the use of both kataphatic and apophatic thinking strategies—some relying more on the photograph's indexical qualities, others emphasising its symbolic dimensions.

A closer look at the mid-section of the photograph—shot by a pond in Oliwski Park, Gdańsk, Poland—reveals faint ripples that hint at the presence of water. For some viewers, this discovery served as a Barthesian *punctum*, a seemingly incidental detail in the photographic image that unexpectedly evokes meaning and steers interpretation, revealing the photograph to be a mirror image—a vision reflected (Barthes 1983, 26–27): “Where does this light come from? The camera lens? It's like the colours of a rainbow. Wait, was water [reflection] used here too? Or is it the Photoshop brush tool?” Not all participants in the study noticed or were made aware of the uncanny duplicate, but those who did often responded with visible or audible surprise upon the realisation. (WAD)

The material qualities of the print contribute to the multi-dimensional effect

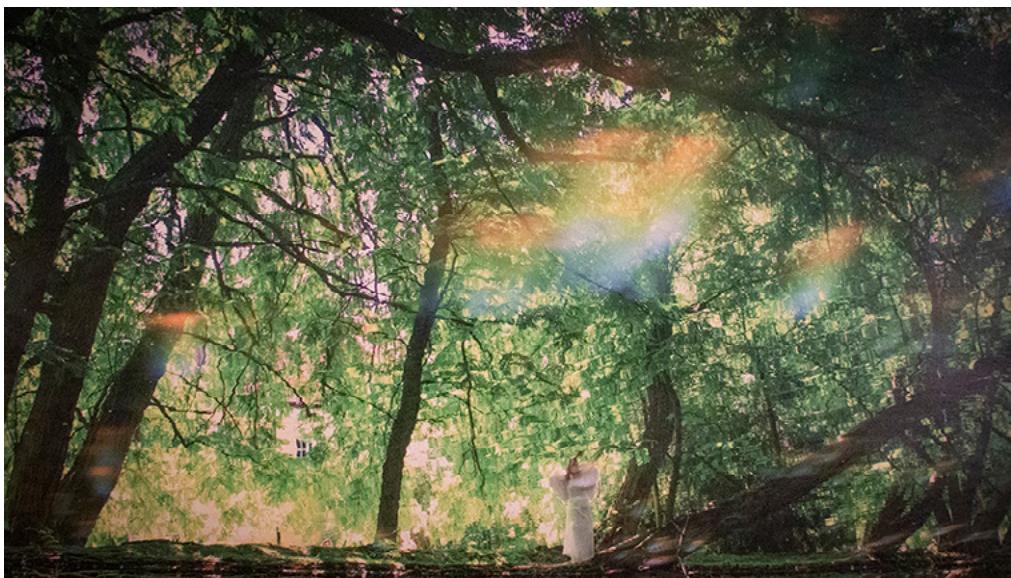


Figure 3. Hanne Kiiveri, *Guardian of Nature*, 2022. Inkjet print on birch plywood, 100 x 58 cm. Image courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

of the photograph, which emerges from the simultaneous layering of pictorial elements, including the landscape reflection, the curling water surface, the light spectra and the plywood grain. The image invites its perplexed viewer to question what they are actually seeing. In their assessment of the picture, one participant highlighted the contemplative nature of perception by paraphrasing the Bible: reflection itself gestures both toward the limitations of human understanding and the promise of eventual revelation: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV). (WAD.) The artist herself states that the use of water reflections in her work “brings something new to the picture [...] that I can’t completely control”, adding that, according to some folk beliefs, “the surface of water serves as a portal to other realms” (Kiiveri, interview I).

Interestingly, the photograph offers yet another possibility for visual discovery and insight in the effort to locate otherworldly figures within it. Several participants failed to spot the small but recognisable anthropomorphic angel in the lower part of the picture, which led them to search for the celestial figure elsewhere. In these cases, the prismatic reflections—abstract shapes in rainbow colours visible in the photograph—were most often interpreted as angels. Several participants endorsed the idea of depicting angels in a non-representational manner as a way to challenge conventional portrayals and stereotypical conceptions: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the angel was just a mere reflection, a spectrum of light? Like a mirage that sometimes can be seen, and sometimes not.” (WAD)

In general, many viewers did not appreciate the artist’s straightforward portrayal of the angelic figure and would have preferred more enigmatic visualisations that

leave room for imagination and interpretation. For a few respondents, non-representationality served as an onto-epistemological reminder: true angels are formless and invisible, whereas archetypal depictions of angels are fictional constructs shaped by historical and cultural imaginaries. Individual participants referred to the reflections as “orbs”, explicitly linking Kiiveri’s imagery to the occultural tradition of making the invisible visible with the help of modern imaging technology. (WAD.) This viewer wording legitimises the esoteric potentiality of the photographic image. Here too the abstract light phenomenon is considered more referential to the otherworldly than the typical angelic figure.

Participants engaged with the visually ambiguous elements of the photograph in various ways: while some expressed overt appreciation for its non-representationality and indirect referentiality, others created meaningful interpretations by sharing personal memories or crafting stories that connected—either directly or loosely—to the image. Some participants even began identifying random animal shapes within the light spectra. A few commentators emphasised the role of personal will and intent in the act of perceiving angelic figures in the landscape: “They are there, if you want to see them.” For some, the image functioned like a chart-like visual aid for codifying and categorising otherworldly beings: “First of all, I love all this greenery. It’s so pagan! It’s hard to say whether that is a vernal spirit, a gnome or a forest sprite scattered into light, but it still brings me joy.” This quotation also highlights a recurring theme in the viewer commentary: the forest as an enchanted or sacred space imbued with deep personal significance. (WAD)

Concluding remarks

By using Kiiveri’s staged angel-themed art photographs as prompts to activate the viewers’ imagination, the exploratory methodology developed in the *Whose Angels?* project has sought to create an interpretative space that facilitates engagement with the artwork and its central theme on multiple levels. While at first glance, the viewers’ attention may be drawn to the artistic and aesthetic valuation of the images—reflecting upon the formal qualities and technical skills of the artist, for instance—through more sustained engagement other modes of response are activated, teasing out details, meanings and nuances that may not be immediately obvious.

In this article, we have used the concept of “esoteric potentiality” as a heuristic tool to explore some of the ways in which the artist has drawn inspiration from esoteric resources and how her viewers tap into prevalent occultural themes when engaging with her artwork. From this perspective, we use esoteric potentiality to describe how this popularised socio-cultural meaning system can serve as an epistemic toolbox, employed by individuals—both intentionally and unintentionally—for positioning themselves in relation to otherworldly matters.

The hermeneutic dynamic occurring between the artist’s intent, the photographic image and the viewer commentary brought about a myriad of themes relating to esoterica, some more precisely and self-consciously articulated than others. Among the issues touched upon were perennialism, witchcraft, shamanism, folklore, an animistic understanding of nature, the afterlife, supernatural encounters, mediumship, apparitions, as well as the existence

of parallel realms and otherworldly beings. Some commentators were also intrigued by the role of the artist as a mediator, as well as by the use of art as a means of communicating with the beyond. Overall, the aforementioned subjects are referents of a broader imaginary of vernacularised esoterica that serve as building elements for shaping one's worldview. Kiiveri herself, and her artworks, are also actors in this paradigm.

To better understand the conceptualisation strategies used to imagine otherworldly matters, we relied on Asprem's (2016) distinction between kataphatic and apophatic thinking. While the first term denotes concrete and sensuous modes of thought, the second one refers to abstract and ineffable ways of thinking. Although both strategies are used in esoteric contexts to create propositions on otherworldly matters, the kataphatic approach centres on extrinsic factors, while the apophatic approach focuses on the intrinsic. The representative qualities of Kiiveri's photographs offer a conceptually accessible and visually straightforward proposition of the angelic figure that elicited both kataphatic and apophatic responses among study participants. For many, the visual and narrative richness of the images offered a welcomed affordance to reflect on, while others clearly appreciated more ambiguous and open-ended ways of conceiving angels and the otherworld. The participant commentary oscillates between more tangible and more symbolic reflections on which features or qualities aligned with the viewers' own preconceptions of angels. Some respondents were even inclined to think the images could allude to ultimate truths even though they did not necessarily concur with the artist's visual propositions.

In addition to their representativity, the atmospheric qualities and aesthetic choices of Kiiveri's photographs enhance their approachability, stimulating participants' imagination. Had the imagery been stylistically more somber or the works more conceptual, it might have discouraged engagement—particularly in settings where viewers were not actively encouraged to articulate their impressions. For the study participants, Kiiveri's works served as a surface of visual reflection that elicited both personal memories and general knowledge on diverse subjects, including religion and spirituality—in some instances prompting them to eagerly point out perceived categorical omissions and distortions in the artist's works. In this way, Kiiveri's angel figures played into epistemic negotiations on knowledge rejection and control.

Kiiveri's photographic practice combines esoteric and emancipatory tendencies as she strives to picture liminal experiences and overcome hardship of particularly women. Rather than documenting otherworldly encounters in a literal sense, the *vrai-faux* elements in Kiiveri's staged images—juxtaposing photography and painting, the objective and the subjective, the analytical and the intuitive, the physical and the spiritual—illustrate a central tenet of esoteric potentiality: individuals actively (re)position themselves in relation to situations and conditions where parallel realms seem to intersect or intermix. For the contemporary viewer, the digitality of the photographic image offers yet another ontological layer in the interpretative process, compelling the viewer to assess what is "authentic" and "real", and what is "altered" or "illusory". ■

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Kone Foundation for making the Whose Angels? project possible.

Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen

holds a Ph.D. in art history and an M.Th. in the Study of Religions. His research focuses on the intersections of religion and worldview with visual culture and the built environment. He is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki and has a professional background in the museum and education sectors



Terhi Utriainen, Ph.D.

is Professor in the Study of Religions, Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki. She is the director of the Whose Angels? project, funded by the Kone Foundation (2023–26). Her research focuses especially on contemporary vernacular religion, religion and gender and ritual studies. Her recent publications include "Looking Back at an Interview with an Angel" (in *Messy Methods in Researching Religion*, edited by Linda Woodhead et al. Oxford University Press, 2025) and "Lived Religion Meets Secular Life: The Dynamics of Framing and the Subjunctive Power of Ritual" (*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2020). She is the co-editor of the special issue "Religion and Spirituality as Sites of Learning" (*Approaching Religion*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2024).



Alexandra Bergholm is University Lecturer in the Study of Religion at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Helsinki and has held visiting post-doctoral fellowships at University College, Cork, and the University of Edinburgh. She is the editor-in-chief

of the journal *Uskonnon tutkija*. Her research interests include early medieval religious cultures, death and commemoration, ritual studies and the materiality of religion. She is currently working as a senior researcher in the Whose Angels? project funded by the Kone Foundation.



References

Unpublished

Hanne Kiiveri, interview I by Terhi Utriainen, February 26, 2024, audio recording, Whose Angels? project archive.

Hanne Kiiveri, interview II by Terhi Utriainen and Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen, January 20, 2025, audio recording, Whose Angels? project archive.

Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen, field notes, Helsinki, March 19, 2025, text file, Whose Angels? project archive. (ONFN)

Whose Angels? dataset, 2024–2025, Compiled by Terhi Utriainen, Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen and Alexandra Bergholm. ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, v9.15.4-2025-04-15. Web. 2002–2025. (WAD)

Published

Apraxine, Pierre, and Sophie Schmit. 2005. "Photography and the Occult". In *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, edited by Clément Chéroux et al., 12–17. Yale University Press.

Asprem, Egil. 2016. "Esotericism and the Scholastic Imagination: The Origins of Esoteric Practice in Christian Kataphatic Spirituality". *Correspondences* 4: 3–34. <https://correspondencesjournal.com/15302-2/>.

Ball, Christopher. 2017. "Realisms and Indexicalities of Photographic Propositions." *Signs and Society* 5 (Qualia and Ontology: Language, Semiotics and Materiality), 154–77. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690032>.

Barthes, Roland. 1983. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard

Howard. Hill & Wang.

Benjamin, Walter. 1992 [1935]. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. Fontana Press.

Brown, Callum. 2001. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000*. Routledge.

Fineman, Mia. 2012. *Faking it: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fischer, Andreas. 2005. "The Reciprocal Adaptation of Optics and Phenomena: The Photographic Recording of Materializations". In *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, edited by Clément Chéroux et al., 171–216. Yale University Press.

Fonneland, Trude, and Tiina Äikäs. 2023. *Shamanic Materialities in Nordic Climates. Elements in New Religious Movements*. Cambridge University Press.

Fontcuberta, Joan. 1995. "Pedro Meyer: Truths, Fictions, and Reasonable Doubts." In *Truths and Fictions: A Journey from Documentary to Digital Photography*, 7–13. Aperture.

Hultkrantz, Åke. 1991. "The Drum in Shamanism: Some Reflections." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 14, 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67194>.

Jones, Rachael, and K. D. M. Snell. 2021. "Angels in English and Welsh Churchyard and Cemetery Memorials 1660–2020." *Family & Community History* 24 (2): 85–119.

Karhu, Helena. 2023. "Luonnon ja sydämen rytmässä: Etnografinen tutkimus shamaanirummun syntyn ja käyttöön liitetystä merkityksistä." *Elore* 31 (2): 5–29.

Kokkinen, Nina. 2013. "Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art." *ARIES* 13: 7–36.

Kokkinen, Nina. 2019. *Totuudenetsijät. Vuosisadanvaihteen okkulttuuri ja moderni henkisyys Akseli Gallen-Kallelan, Pekka Halosen ja Hugo Simbergin taiteessa*. Scripta Lingua Fennica Edita / Ser. C-Tom. 469. Ph.D. diss. Turun yliopiston julkaisuja.

Kokkinen, Nina and Lotta Nylund, editors. 2020. *Hengen aarteet: Esoteerisuus Suomen taidemaailmassa 1890–1950*. Parvs.

Kokkinen, Nina. 2023. "Reflecting 'Eastern Spirituality' and Esotericism in the Research-based Art Exhibition." *Tahiti* 2: 111–21.

Lahelma, Marja. 2018. "The Symbolist Aesthetic and the Impact of Occult and Esoteric Ideologies on Modern Art". *Approaching Religion* 8 (1): 31–47. <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.66685>.

Lister, Martin. 1995. "Introductory Essay", In *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, edited by Martin Lister, 1–26. Routledge.

Lukkarinen, Ville. 2020. "Pekka Halosen 'Soittotunnin jälkeen' ja musiikin sanaton kieli." In *Hengen aarteet: Esoteerisuus Suomen taidemaailmassa 1890–1950*, edited by Nina Kokkinen and Lotta Nylund, 76–83. Parvs.

Maltabarova, Makhabbad. 2024. "Esoteric Dance Practices of the Early Twentieth Century: Case Study of George Gurdjieff's Movements." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 10 (2): 595–618. <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-bja10092>.

Partridge, Christopher. 2013. "Occulture is Ordinary." In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kenneth Grankholm, 113–33. Equinox.

Rouillé, André. 2005. *La photographie: Entre document et art contemporain*. Gallimard.

Steiner, Rudolph. 1906. "The Occult Basis of Music", GA 283. Lecture translated by Charles Waterman. https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/OccMus_index.html.

Stewen, Riikka. 1989. *Hugo Simberg: Unien maalari*. Otava.

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 5 (2): 273–86.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2017. *Enkeleitä työpöydällä: Arjen ja lumon etnografiaa*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2023. "Katsomukset ja kulttuuriset työkalut modernin elämän palapellissä." *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae* 2: 120–139.

Vuorinen, Jane. 2021. "Soft Interventions: Collaborative Agencies Between Artists and Photography Editing Software." *Tahiti* 10 (4): 40–55. <https://doi.org/10.23995/tth.103180>.