Sharron Antholt is a painter who uses simple scenes and objects in an attempt to gain clarity into our sense of self and our experience of time and space (Antholt, “Bibliography”). Antholt’s work has been greatly influenced by her time spent living in India and Nepal. She states that this time brought an underpinning to her work questioning if “By placing ourselves outside of known, familiar, territory is it possible to see ourselves more clearly or does this further distort our understanding of self?” (Antholt, “Bibliography”) Antholt holds honors from the Washington, D.C. Commission on the Arts and Artist Trust, a non-profit arts organization in Seattle. In addition she has received fellowship residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Sharron Antholt’s work has been featured all over the
DC Metropolitan area, including exhibits at the Corcoran and Franz Bader Galleries. Her paintings have also been shown overseas in New Dehli and Moscow.

Antholt’s 46”x 76” painting *Desire*, was finished in 1988, incorporating oil paint and charcoal on paper. The painting currently hangs on the first floor of the American University Museum among other thought-provoking works by acclaimed artists. Depicted in the painting is a Buddhist monk wrapped in an orange robe. The monk is opening a door that leads from a small dark room with wooden walls to the bright and ambiguous outdoors. The title of this painting adds a whole other element to the work, transforming the viewer’s perception of the door from just an exit to an entrance. Desire is our longing to know what could be waiting for us on the other side. It is also the question underlying much of Antholt’s work: could we be someone more if we were just somewhere else? Buddhist monks (bhikkus) practice religious asceticism, living alone or with other monks in a monastery. Bhikkus renounce all mainstream society and live their lives in prayer and contemplation (Ariyesako). The painting encapsulates the feeling of giving into a desire, and the thrill of the uncertainty associated with it as the monk steps out of his room of holy solitude into a hedonic world to find if this new environment will allow him to become something greater.

The painting is comprised of a wide range of hues starting from the lightest which is a bright white and finishing with the darkest, a dark brown which is accentuated by charcoal. What is interesting about the colors used in the picture, is the fact that they all stem from one color scale. The scale includes all shades of orange from its hue closest to white to its darkest, almost black. In addition to the colors used in the actual work, the border surrounding the image is painted using varying hues of yellow. The monochromatic scale further reinforces the simplicity of the monk’s room, as it dramatizes the darkness and lightness of the hues as they are
placed in the painting. The main focal point for instance, is the doorway where the door is fully white and illuminated, the brightest area in the picture. As they share the same space, the doorway is juxtaposed with the back side of the monk’s robe, visually the darkest part of the painting. Having these two objects occupy the same region of the painting in such dramatic hues opposite each other on the color scale, further contrasts the monk’s simple and modest being with what desire he may be succumbing to beyond the door.

When looking at the painting, one’s eye immediately gravitates towards the open door which is the only source of light in the picture. The light emanating from the door illuminates the front of the monk’s body and the wooden beam that seems to be holding up the roof. The light also pools behind the monk, on the floor and on the two walls that converge near the door. The brightness filling the space serves to state that the monk had been living in darkness before this door opened. This comparative “darkness” also encompasses his physical state of being in solitude in the dark room, in addition to the span of his mind, as he most likely knows little outside of his daily routine.

In the opposite corner, a trail of gray-white smoke wafts across the page, following the monk out of the room. The smoke occupies a significant portion of the image, beginning as a thick and opaque fog in the corner and slowly thinning into transparent puffs as it drifts closer to the door. The source of the smoke however, remains unclear. Through prayer and meditation, monks are taught to strive towards enlightenment by understanding why human beings are brought into this world, and breaking free the operations of the mind that keep us imprisoned in craving, suffering, and rebirth (Ariyesako). Enlightenment therefore is the ultimate form of clarity. However the ambiguity represented by the smoke may signify the lack of clarity the monk has attained while in the monastery. While the monastery was the place in which the
monk was supposed to gain a more vivid perspective on his life, its inability to offer clarity may have incited the desire to search for it elsewhere.

Behind the smoke lies the darkness of the far back wall that moves down the page and blends into the darkness of the shadows left by the wooden beam and the monk. Another shadow appears on the right wall, a charcoal-filled space vaguely taking the shape of a head and body wrapped in a robe. When giving into a desire, there is almost always something one leaves behind. By leading our lives down a different path to search for superiority, we often give up old habits and pieces of our old selves. Giving into this desire, the monk leaves his old self in the form of the dark shadow on the wall.

There are very few elements in this painting, emphasizing the minimalistic nature of the monk’s living space. The ascetic features of the room serve as a base point for the viewer to draw conclusions about the life the monk has lived up until this point, and allows for comparison regarding the life he may want to live in the future past the door. Apart from the wooden beam, the only objects on the floor are a pair of bamboo sticks and the monk’s feet. The sticks are positioned on top of each other, creating the shape of a cross, the stick on top not fully touching the ground. The monk’s feet mimics the weight distributed on the ground by the bamboo sticks: One foot is planted firmly on the ground while the other is half in the air, balancing on its toes as he has already taken a step into the doorway. The imbalance depicted in both the bamboo sticks and the monk’s feet further hints at the uncertainty the monk feels about both the monastery and the possibilities that lay beyond it. Everything is still “up in the air” until he puts his foot down and he is outside of the room, face to face with his desire.
When examined individually, the elements of this painting equate to a mundane scene of a monk exiting his modest room of prayer for a routine outing. However, when the picture is attached to the title *Desire*, the door becomes not only an exit, but an entrance. It becomes an entrance to the world outside the monk’s room, and outside his ascetic lifestyle. To emphasize the simplicity of the subject’s habitat, Antholt uses a monochromatic scale of color, allowing for the hues to be exaggerated in different regions of the painting to create drama. For example the door, because it is the main subject of the painting is colored a bright white, contrasting with the dark walls and the back of the monk’s robe. The light and shadows are also used to create a story within the painting as the light coming from the outside through the door illuminates and encapsulates the room, much as desire does an individual. In addition, the uncertainty associated with desire is depicted through the ambiguity of the smoke that floats across the painting, and the imbalance of weight distribution within the image. When looking at the position of the monk in the picture, we see by the placement of his feet, he is taking a step towards the outside world, towards relinquishing the uncertainty of the outcome the step will have, and towards finding if what lies beyond the doorframe will allow him to become something greater. Sharron Anholt’s painting *Desire* encompasses the thrill of uncertainty we feel when giving into a desire, plunging headfirst into a new experience, blind to what may be waiting for us on the other side.
Works Cited
