



## Ajay Kurian at White Flag Projects

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*Who. are. you. Lord? You  
Are!  
a!  
Killer!!!!  
Hallelujah!*

*—Transcribed excerpt of Nina Simone's Medley: My Sweet Lord/Today is a Killer from the exhibition catalogue*

*Ajay Kurian: The Childhood of Jesus at White Flag Projects* simultaneously attracted and repelled. Composed of eleven separately titled works that came together in an immersive—almost shrine-like—installation, the exhibition was beguiling on a purely aesthetic level. Upon closer examination, the titles hinted at a deeper exploration of liminal states: between sleep and wakefulness, heaven and earth, life and death, childhood and lost innocence.

A post-apocalyptic scene dominated the center of the gallery, where a skeletal metal form with glowing blue eyes mounted a distorted human figure shrouded in blankets in a large bed (God's Wisdom). Placed around the bed were three broken gold-plated ostrich eggs filled with resin that dripped down thin pedestals and pooled on the floor (Leibig Chalice 1, 2, and 3). In a velvet-lined shadowbox on the back wall, gold-painted sand dollars spilled from a fleshy curl of translucent rubber suspended from a steel branch (Poor Orans). Five purple plexiglass Jacob's ladders hung from the ceiling, clattering disconcertingly downward every few minutes. In the back corner a heavy metal chain lay coiled in a dark basin of water (Hypnagogia). Clusters of crushed spent votive candles littered the floor throughout the gallery.

The transitional spaces these works inhabit are disconcerting and difficult to map. As well as being a traditional folk toy, Jacob's ladder is the point of connection between heaven and earth dreamed of in Genesis 28. The reflective surfaces of the moving panels recall such mystical visions, while the larger form evokes child's play. Viewed through a lens of Christian tradition, Hypnagogia could be read as a form of baptismal font, but the title references yet another transitional moment: the state between wakefulness and sleep that is sometimes accompanied by lucid dreaming, hallucinations, or paralysis. The use of this term as a title provides a helpful interpretive hook for the exhibition as a whole, indicating both its exploration of dreams and visions and its resistance to clearly defined boundaries.

Another recurring theme in the exhibition was the deconstructed human body. The skin-like rubber in Poor Orans, the distorted figures in God's Wisdom, the umbilical chain in Hypnagogia, and the womb-like eggs in the Leibig Chalice series all evoked body parts fractured both physically and metaphorically. This doubled fracturing was particularly evident in Leibig Chalice 1, 2, and 3. As well as being the German word for abdomen, Leib is used to refer to the subjective body (Leib Christi is German for "Body of Christ"). Thus, each gilded, broken Leibig Chalice can be seen simultaneously as womb and communion chalice: body of Mary spilling the blood of Christ.

Beneath the lush, savage surfaces, *The Childhood of Jesus* provoked—and rewarded—close looking and careful thinking. At first a puzzling juxtaposition of objects, the pieces in the exhibition worked together to investigate the sometimes uncomfortable points of connection between Christian ritual, faith, fantasy, and the fragile human body.