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## The Alchemical Vessel

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# THE ALCHEMICAL VESSEL

River Soma

BA, Hunter College, 2016

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

At the

University of Connecticut

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**APPROVAL SHEET**

Masters of Fine Arts Thesis

**The Alchemical Vessel**

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For T.F.S, Shon C. and Nugget. Our love will always be too big for words.

This work has been possible because of the beautiful, supportive friends in my life. Ray B., Tim G., Mary Mac, Cecilia F., Jaybird, Mike & John F., and Chad P., you fill my world with hope and joy. Thank you for always believing in me.

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*The goal of life is rapture. Art is the way we experience it. Art is the transforming experience.*

—Joseph Campbell

*This is me, and I have survived my birth by fire. My hair is knotted, and my cheeks are stained with the tears of lost innocence and bitter disdain. I am untying the knots that kept me tethered to a life I did not want, to names that I did not want to be called, and to the notion that a woman is an unchanging, steady touchstone for all who need her.*

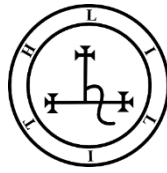
*My name is Lilith, and I am not a teaching tool. The forbidden fruit was seductive truth contained in fine apple skin and I have sucked every bit of succulent juice from that gift. I have looked into the snake's shiny scales and scried my future. I have been called every shameful name ever spit from the lips of a bully, and I have let those labels roll from my back like water on feathers.*

*My name is Inanna, and I am still alive. These are not the musings of a whimsical poetess. These are the hellish hymns I learned from the ancients, and I speak the Mother Tongue of the anguished feminine. I know the way down, but I've learned to love the feel of sunlight on my bare breasts.*

*My name is Persephone, and I will not be dragged into my depths; I go there willingly, wearing my protection totems and singing my own praises. I go there to lead others out, and I am the holy healer returned, righteous, and resurrected. I am the primal feminine dark, the unruined Maiden, and the Priestess of fertile ground.*

*Blessed be my infinite worth, and blessed be the Holy Wild.*

*"Prayer of the Underworld Goddess Returned," excerpt from *The Holy Wild: The Heathen Bible for the Untamed Woman*, Danielle Dulsky<sup>1</sup>*



When I think about the histories of these three goddesses—Lilith, Inanna, and Persephone—I resonate with their stories. Archetypally, they are strong women who rely on their instincts and their own connection to the divine, and who walk through the flames of hell willingly to bring wisdom back to their people. In many ways, this feels like a metaphor both for my life, and for the challenges of graduate school.

Of these three, Lilith in particular has become a symbol for me. Her story has wandered the earth for 4,000 years in the imaginations of writers, artists, and poets. Her dark origins lie in Babylonian demonology, but in the Middle Ages, her story reappears in Jewish mysticism as the first wife of Adam in the garden of Eden. Lilith and Adam are both formed from the clay of the earth as equals. However, in these stories, she is not treated as an equal, but is expected to be subservient to Adam. When her life in the garden becomes too restrictive and prevents her freedom, she utters the divine name, flies into the air, and flees into the darkness. Departure from the garden leads her through the desert to the sea, where she begins life anew and becomes the mother of the creatures and demons of the forest.

### **The Garden**

When I was small, I was surrounded by the natural world at our family home. The plants and animals seemed mystical, pure, and beautiful. I felt out of place in my family and found refuge in cats, the forest, and bodies of water. I collected specimens of special stones, shells, and deer bones that our dogs would leave in the yard, bringing them into my space to surround myself with their beauty and purity. These things held a truth that I could not find elsewhere in my life or in myself, a truth that I have now come to think of as “the holy wild.”

I think that, for the majority of my life, I’ve attempted to surround myself with beautiful things. I collect fine jewelry, art, religious statuary, and contemporary home furnishings as much as I am able. A line from the Beatles song, “Old Brown Shoe,” has always stuck in my memory, where George Harrison writes, “When I grow up I’ll be a singer, wearing rings on every finger.” That line enchanted me, conjuring up an image of all the fingers on my hands encircled with precious metals and stones. *This*, I thought, *this would be* everything. A type of nirvana. Something about it felt like armor to me—safe, complete, and powerful.

This obsession with surrounding myself with beauty ended up bleeding over into my artistic practice. From an early age, all of my artistic creations were the result of this desire to make something beautiful. I felt at that time that making beautiful or visually pleasing art was necessary, and that if I created beautiful things, only more beauty would come to me in my life. I feared that if I allowed myself to create or be surrounded by ugly, horrible, or grotesque things, it would call in more of those things into my life instead. My art is an extension of myself, and to create more beauty meant that perhaps I could make myself more beautiful, too. Like attracts like, after all.

Growing up in the Episcopal church, I had come to love the idea of the ornate ceremony, a space of sanctuary and communion with the divine. While Christianity did not remain my faith, I have pursued independent and academic religious studies from the time I was a teenager, searching for a truth that resonated with me. In 2002, I began studying ritual magick, mysticism, and the occult. In 2005, I created my first religious artwork using mixed media, paint, and sculptural materials. I was curious about exploring the themes of alchemy, spell-craft, and the occult in my work, but unsure how to integrate them into the context of a contemporary art practice.

Upon entering the MFA program at UConn, I was still very much in this mindset of focusing on beauty. I was, quite frankly, terrified to make artwork that was in the realm of the “dark” or “ugly.” As a person who lives with depression and PTSD, I realize now that I was creating in this manner in an effort to fix my mind on positive things with a glossy surface, and to keep the darker thoughts from wandering in. It was definitely a defense mechanism, and one that I had become quite good at and quite accustomed to using as an excuse to avoid certain aspects of my psyche.

During my first year at UConn, I began experimenting with watercolor and drawings (Plate 1) along with a floor installation in my studio. The drawings felt like eggs to me, or something churning, changing, and waiting to be born. During my first semester, large sections of my uneven painted studio floor had been scraped away to expose wound-like and fleshy colors on cement beneath (Plate 2). The marks were beautiful, but also felt like old wounds that the space had endured and still kept. I created an installation with spice trails of ginger, mustard, paprika, and turmeric to surround these wounds and heal them with the spices’ medicinal properties. It was the first time I intentionally brought alchemical practices from my studies in the occult into my work.

I continued in this vein throughout the semester, creating a ritual stop-motion animation and a triple goddess deity statuary and related deity forms from assembled slip cast ceramics (Plate 3). My lust for beauty and religion was evident, but lacked depth and research potential.

*Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular.*

- Carl Jung<sup>2</sup>

### **The Desert**

At the end of my first year as an MFA candidate with UConn, I was confronted head-on with all of my greatest fears in the form of the passing of two close friends and having personal setbacks in the MFA program. These conditions unleashed past trauma with a vengeance, and it was no longer possible to avoid my inner demons in my life or in my work. At some point, I realized that I was no longer looking for beauty; instead, I was just looking for truth.

I began creating ceramic heads in clay that were smashed and scraped, punctured and torn, with shallow pits for eyes and half-formed features (Plate 4). They were inspired by the grotesque body and some kind of thick, black goo that was living in my psyche and needed a way out. They became a place that allowed me to express my frustrations and pain around subjects like mental health, sex, transformation, and death (Plate 5). While this ceramic work was a figurative ground for the themes I now work with, it would also become a literal ground as the origin of all my work in the following year.

During my second year at UConn, I found myself in a period of mourning and uncertainty, yet I counteracted it with a great deal of experimentation. I worked more with the material floor installations that I had begun creating in the year prior, using salt, spices, bee pollen, and charcoal, and began to create mandala-like forms (Plate 6). I continued in ceramics but gravitated toward large vessel structures, testing the limits of my hand-building abilities. I thought of them as funerary vessels and based them structurally on ancient Egyptian ritual pottery.

Again, toward the end of my second year, I found my head forms not quite working and my vessels missing the mark for my research. It was an intense struggle and I was in the midst of it. I had some successes, but not yet a solid body of work that fully satisfied me or expressed the sentiments that I pursued like some kind of mystic white whale. I felt a sense of urgency rising to come to a conclusion in the interior and exterior processes I had been dealing with.

It was a difficult time, wrestling with uncertainty and seeking a proper outlet for my larger body of work. What I learned during that time is that my artistic process is not linear, and that is ok. It has been more like sets of false stairs that, half the time, lead you nowhere—like that scene at the end of the movie *Labyrinth*, in some kind of M. C. Escher room of stairs. David Bowie is there singing to you, so you know there is a God or a divine muse, but the stairs seem to keep you in a type of limbo. In times like those, it is really up to personal gumption and inner knowledge to move you through that place. I also learned not to consider myself bound to any particular medium in the arts. While I have a sculpture concentration at UConn, in the past ten years I have created works in ceramics, photography, video, drawing, painting, and printmaking.

Over the summer between my second and third year, I pursued my interest in the alchemical vessel and worked on wheel-thrown bowls and crucibles (Plate 7). They emerged with pools of melted glass, like brewing cauldrons, and plates of entrails. I could feel that I was close to my goal, but the clay and the vessel alone could not get me there.

### **The Sea**

*The unconscious is not just evil by nature, it is also the source of the highest good: not only dark but also light, not only bestial, semihuman, and demonic but superhuman, spiritual, and, in the classical sense of the word, "divine."*  
- Carl Jung<sup>3</sup>

I was beginning my third and final year in the MFA program, and I knew that I needed to pull together a strong body of sculptural work. I also knew that the clay coil-built vessel was my starting point. Around my studio lay a dozen or so abandoned clay heads and sculptures, all of them vessels of one kind or another. Thinking about a series of small, found object assemblage figures I had once seen in the work of artist Rick Bartow, I began pairing materials with selected vessels. At first, I altered the forms only with spray foam, but quickly learned that the foam's mercurial nature required some other foundational structure to achieve the size and height I was looking for. I began adding found wood to the ceramic vessels, creating a skeleton or armature that emerged from the form to support additional materials.

My studio floor became the stage for a flurry of activity, as I assembled creatures that arose from the combinations of abandoned ceramics, rotten and worn wood fragments, plastics, spray foam, and acrylic paint. I turned the vessels front to back, adding and subtracting, until a sort of living essence appeared. I spoke to my forms, asking what they needed, and they seemed to direct me in the additions of their legs, arms, and embellishments.

The amalgamation of these ingredients and methods of working was fun and freeing. I was not taking it too seriously because I was letting the work come alive rather than trying to plan too deeply. I actively coaxed the uncontrolled moments and elements of chance with spray foam and spray paint, invoking a playful sense of risk-taking. This process released me from the time constraints and fragility of the kiln, and it was incredibly liberating. Construction and color were immediate, and one small flaw was not an inevitable demise. The once-rejected ceramic remnants of my shadow-self became a plentiful harvest of materials from which to build my castle.

## **Influences**

Rick Bartow

I think that if you are a person who has experienced trauma or death in your life, it can be easy to find yourself immersed in darkness or depression, where it really becomes up to you to claw your way out. Someone who did this well was Rick Bartow, a painter and sculptor I discovered while I was living in Portland, Oregon. Rick was a Native American, veteran, musician, and a prolific artist who worked through his own traumas with his art. His sculptures in wood and ceramics have been a longtime and primary influence in my work. (Plate 8)

Lynda Benglis

With this image of Lynda Benglis's "Foam Painting I" (Plate 9), I want to mention the value of looking. I am always looking at the work of different artists, but I also try to investigate the histories of those I love. This piece was part of my original motivation to start using expanding foam in my sculptures. It is an early work, small in size, but the way it twists together here to create a writhing mass, I thought resembled clay coils and intestines. The directness and speed of Lynda's process has always enticed me, and I continually reference her work for inspiration.

Kiki Smith

This second image is of Kiki Smith's "Sirens and Harpies," (Plate 10) which was also a pivotal piece for me. It started giving me ideas about bringing sculptures to life as little characters, self-portraits, or archetypes from my own psyche. As much as my work may have a serious or even sinister tone, for me it has an equal amount of play and humor. These are qualities that I greatly admire in Kiki's work.

## Process

*I don't know exactly where ideas come from, but when I'm working well ideas just appear. I've heard other people say similar things - so it's one of the ways I know there's help and guidance out there. It's just a matter of our figuring out how to receive the ideas or information that are waiting to be heard.*

- Jim Henson<sup>4</sup>

Often when I create work its true origins are not fully known to me. It has been common that I initially find it difficult to talk about or even explain the work within the first six months of its creation. Reflection and time typically are the keys that reveal a deeper understanding of what is being communicated. Something that may have been an expression from deep in my unconscious, when it arrives, is a collaboration between my body and an ineffable truth. I feel that perhaps the creative act is the place when this truth can be most fully expressed and heard.

The epistemologically untapped domain of the real, this *alethic truth*, for me is accessed through creation and is itself a creative force. As I form these hybrid creatures and elevate them to the status of sculptural deity, I do so from a place of heart knowledge rather than my reasoning mind. My current body of work in many ways speaks about the physical body and the human condition. It implies a life with imperfections, struggle and a highly visceral experience. This life experience, when felt through body and heart, created a direct connection to the study of my alethic truth. This concept in my work then becomes a metaphor for the body as vessel and the form through which truth is cultivated and manifested.

When collecting my materials for mixed media work, it becomes a game of trust. I trust that my environment will provide me with the objects that I need and am open to its gifts. I've been working on this skill from an early age. In the late nineties, I read a book called *The Celestine Prophecy*<sup>5</sup> by James Redfield, a fictional tale in which the main character goes on an adventure, trying to understand a series of nine spiritual insights from an ancient manuscript in Peru. It is a narrative about a spiritual awakening as the character goes through a transitional period in his life. My big takeaway from the story was an awareness of an inner guiding voice—it emerged for the main character and I also found it in myself. The story encouraged the practice of noticing which objects, things, and people a person is attracted to and which ones are attracted to them. It explicated this as seeing the things you're attracted to as a literal visual phenomenon, a practice which can be cultivated in everyday life. In the book's description of the visual experience, the character could see a certain "brightness," shininess, or aura within certain objects, people, or directions that would lead them forward in the narrative.

Wondering if I could also experience life in this way, I began looking for the highlighted items and signposts in my own environment. I started looking for the illuminated edges around things when given a choice between two or more objects or decisions. Typically, when I asked myself to make the comparison between the choices, one would inevitably be “shiny” in my mind’s eye and have a brighter and more alluring quality. It began to feel like an inner knowing and a sort of game that I would play with myself. Eventually, consulting my inner knowing became so ingrained and habitual that I began to recognize and trust it with little questioning. Over the years it has even evolved to feeling the physical sensations in my body of an attraction or draw from something, like an invisible, pulling force; or even a direct mental command when seeing an object (“You need that!”). There are references to such guiding forces throughout literature, where it is called the “Higher Self,” “Genius,” or “HGA” (Holy Guardian Angel). While I did not come to call it by these names until much later, I have been cultivating my relationship with it for over twenty years.

As a scavenger of artistic materials, I now follow this intuitive sense almost blindly. I will see a particular chunk of wood, form of plastic, or scrap of rusted metal in the street, and if it needs to come into my life it practically vibrates with a siren song of potential. Usually having no idea why and without any clear end result in mind, I retrieve the object whenever possible and bring it into my studio. In creating my current body of work, I also used this method to build my forms, allowing the materials to be attracted to and talk with one another. In an effort to facilitate the conversation, I verbally begin speaking to the piece, asking it questions, such as “What do you want?” and “What do you need?” I then work from the response, emerging as inspired directives that come into my mind’s eye.

In speaking to the piece as part of its formation, I’m having a conversation with my intuition, my unconscious or “true self” as Jung would say, but I am also willing manifestation through my breath. This is a recognized practice in many religious and spiritual rituals, when the orator takes on the role of the divine creator and utters prayer, song, chant, or rhyme as a creative force by which to activate a desired outcome. In Hebrew, it is referred to as the *ruach*, which translates to “spirit,” “breath,” and “wind,” and is the breath of life bestowed by God.

## Materials

### Clay

Ceramics, as an artistic medium, are a telling representation of culture, humanity, and its ties to the natural world. Clay itself is a living, breathing material with an over 20,000-year-old history of being molded by human hands for both secular and sacred purposes. More than a dozen cultural mythologies from around the globe speak of creation stories where the divine forms humans from clay, often breathing into them, giving them life. In 2017, the scientific community began to echo these creation myths by discovering that clay possesses the essential requirements for incubating the building blocks of life and that clay “might have been the birthplace of life on Earth.”<sup>6</sup> With these characteristics in mind, I use clay as a metaphor for life, body, and earth, and sculpturally as the alchemical vessel by which we refine ourselves.

To begin, I find a center and wrap the coil around itself to form a base, spiraling outward. The spiral is one of the most basic, simple, and natural symbols of the creative aspect of the unconscious, associated with the healing process. Jung said about the spiral that, “The spiral in psychology means that when you make a spiral you always come over the same point where you have been before, but never really the same; it is above or below, inside, outside, so it means growth.”<sup>7</sup> In each piece, the spiraling circle then becomes a cylinder, a container, and a vessel, as its walls are raised with the same cyclical coil. This vessel is then both a physical and psychological metaphor of a house for the soul.

All of my sculpture begins with clay as the *prima materia*. It symbolizes the primitive, formless base of all matter, which I form into coils as I set the stage for the alchemical process. In this process, the clay symbolically becomes the *anima mercuria*, the mercury of the philosophers, the life-blood of every living thing.

### Wood

Foraging is my primary strategy for collecting wood, from dumps to discarded pieces found on the side of the road. Much of what was collected for my current body of work was locally sourced from around the UConn campus. Collecting found materials from my environment has become an important part of my artistic process, allowing me to further distill and understand the symbols and archetypes from the collective unconscious within the context of the work and contemporary society.

I give preference to wood that is aged and rotten or worn down by its experiences in some way. Such wood contains a history of its once-lived life that will become part of the greater piece in its completion. It contains the knowledge of birth, life, and decay in its biocycle. It has a life born of this earth and the natural world, and thus a direct association with the holy wild (Plate 11).

## Foam

Spray foam is the animator, the intruder, the unnatural agitator in the work. It is toxic, foaming, and volatile. For me, it is the expression of the animus, the masculine nature of the psyche. The growth of the expanding foam when applied creates an undulating and writhing pile of snake-like coils that seem fully of the body, both visceral and intestinal (Plate 12). In this way, the addition of the foam and synthetic substances to the earthen wood and clay begins to speak of balance through opposing forces or polarities and the integration of the layered aspects of the psyche.



## Psychology and Carl G. Jung

My experience in creating artwork is that it often feels channeled through me, or like a conversation with something bigger and more eternal than my conscious mind. I am inspired by psychology and the writings of Carl G. Jung on this topic, when he writes:

*Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purpose through him. As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is "man" in a higher sense— he is "collective man"— one who carries and shapes the unconscious, psychic forms of mankind."*<sup>8</sup>

The collective unconscious belongs to a tribe, a nation, a race, and humanity. There is human baggage, unconscious baggage that we carry with us, but that we can only appreciate through its archetypal aspects. Jung deduces this position both from his experience of artistic creation and from the idea that archetypes are natural organs of the collective unconscious. The real

creator, then, is not the conscious mind of the artist but the unconscious, which has access to the collective knowledge of humankind.

Sigmund Freud's discovery was that we have this unconscious mind, which has as much effect on us as our conscious mind—perhaps more—and that we need to learn how to work with it in order to integrate it. Jung took these ideas further by separating the mind into the conscious, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. He theorized that the personal unconscious consists for the most part of complexes, but the content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of archetypes.

In *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung writes that “Archetype is an explanatory paraphrase of the platonic eidos. For our purposes, this term is apposite and helpful, because it tells us that so far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned, we’re dealing with archaic, or I would say more primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times.”<sup>9</sup> Plato’s concept of *eidos* recognizes that there are primordial shapes, or ideas, that exist in the mind. They are archetypes, and while immaterial themselves, they provide the shape or form of what is to be manifested.

Jung’s problem was that the archetypes cannot be seen directly because they are buried in the collective unconscious. One only become aware of them by projection, and their subsequent reflection back to us in manifested form. He sought in alchemy a prototype for psychology. To him, alchemy was not so much a fools’ quest for the technique of transmuting lead into gold as it was a metaphor. Ignoring entirely all discussion of alembic chemical processes with base motivations, he retold the story of alchemy as myth. It was an allegory for the gradual process of individuation and the crystallization of the inner self out of the previously fragmented portions of the unconscious psyche. As such, to him, alchemy was not really chemistry at all, but rather a description of psychotherapy in action.

In 1928, he began to collect books on European alchemy, which from the sixteenth century onwards had been illustrated with the most extraordinary pictures and diagrams. These peculiar drawings did not so much amplify or explain the obscure text, as they added a further layer of mystification to what was already a subject written in code. What made people draw these paintings? What made them construct these diagrams to talk about what was, in essence, just chemistry? Jung observed that the alchemical texts used symbolic figures representing the anima and animus. He quickly realized that the figure of the anima is frequently seen in alchemical texts, where she often represents the principle of mercury, which is said to give the soul animation in the material world.

*Anima mercuria* is the mercury of the philosophers, the life-blood of every living thing. Everything in creation is symbolized by this anima that brings life. We see this archetype represented as a Mother Goddess figure, or as represented in the last card of the major arcana of the tarot, "The World." In studying the symbolism of mercury, Jung gives us another definition, saying that "in alchemical writings, the word *mercurius* is used with a very wide range of meanings, to denote not only the chemical element mercury or quicksilver, Mercury, (Hermes) the god, and mercury the planet, but also and primarily the secret "transforming substance", which is at the same time "spirit" indwelling in all living creatures."<sup>10</sup>

According to Jung, the female psyche has a corresponding figure, which he called the animus. Just as the anima represents the feminine part of a male psyche, the animus represents the masculine part of the female psyche. Jung saw the animus as the essence of masculinity, personified as boldness, courage, strength, power, and protection. He found that in alchemy, such a figure was often depicted as spirit, heat, or sulfur, whereas where anima was used, it was depicted as cool, watery, and mercurial.

Jung hoped to translate these ideas into modern parlance, and thereby use his study of alchemy to enrich his parallel study of psychology. He could see that there was some kind of parallel between this medieval craft of alchemy and the system of psychology he was developing. Many of the sequences of symbols used by the alchemists seemed to Jung to indicate an unconscious projection of the psychic life, the process of individuation, into the alchemical experiments.

Jung said in *The Structure of the Psyche* that "it is the function of consciousness, not only to recognize and assimilate the external world through the gateway of the senses but to translate into visible reality the world within us"<sup>11</sup>.

Jung believed that the psyche was a self-regulating system, much like the body. It strives for growth and seeks to maintain balance between opposing qualities. By psyche I refer to Jung's definition of "the totality of all psychic process, conscious as well as unconscious"<sup>12</sup>.

Clearly my own psyche is intervening in the work as it participates in the role of creator. I think my desire to create in general is part of the conscious and unconscious mind working together to bring to the surface parts of my psyche that require examination, for a kind of equilibrium.

In my creative process, I am attempting to look beyond the self/ego or the conscious mind to access the instincts and symbol sets of the my personal and collective unconscious. In this way I'm summoning unconscious actions and imagery from my history and that of the collective

mind. I see this coming through in my preference of base materials of clay and wood, a desire for a hand-built primitive esthetic, scavenging to obtain materials, my consistent return to the symbols of the spiral and the vessel, the desire to merge opposing materials (natural/manmade) and the instinct to create anthropomorphic forms from otherwise abstract assemblages.

My conscious mind plays a role in the totality of the work as metaphorical architect in the sculptural construction project. It designs space for the unconscious or primordial mind to enter and become conscious through the making process. My consciousness makes the formal decisions based on memories, education, influences and culture, while supporting the whims of its unconscious counterpart by allowing it to move through freely and without judgement.

### **The Alchemical Vessel**

As a student of the hermetic tradition, I recognize that alchemical work takes place on many different levels—the physical work with substances and the interior work of the soul, as well as the spiritual and planetary/cosmic aspects of alchemy. These different facets of the work interpenetrate and overlap each other. If a person is to make any progress in alchemy, she must pursue the different facets concurrently, paralleling interior development with experience of the outer work. The universal symbol representing all these different facets of this work is that of the alchemical vessel.

The tradition of interior development in alchemy is pursued by mirroring the transformations and processes of alchemy within our soul. As with any esoteric practice, this internalizing of alchemical operations can produce disturbing patterns in the powerful psychic energies that are evoked through inner work, unless we find some means of containing these energies. In the tradition of ritual ceremonial magick, the ritual leader usually uses an opening and closing ritual that acts as a structure to contain and safely dissipate the energies raised through their work. In inner work with alchemical processes, the symbol of the alchemical vessel is an invaluable means for containing the interior energies and allowing them to unfold within us in a controlled and positive manner. The alchemical vessel can therefore be seen as a protective interior symbol, just like the circle of the ceremonial magician. (Plate 13)

There are many different types of vessels depicted in the alchemical literature and emblematic engravings. Poetic descriptions in the texts cover a seeming multiplicity of symbolic imagery of retorts, pelicans, water baths, alembics, stills, etc. However, in regards to the interior work, I find that all of these different physical apparatuses reduce down to three archetypal forms, which we call the “crucible, the retort, and the still.”<sup>13</sup> In my sculptural work, I attempt to

mirror this alchemical process of individuation through use of a physical ceramic vessel as a container to bring about a form that is in direct conversation with my unconscious. This process first began to manifest itself materially in my psyche and work as I created wheel-thrown crucibles over the summer break.

A crucible is an open vessel—a dish, mortar, or cauldron, open to the outside world yet capable of containing material. Substances and energy patterns can be put into the crucible and be acted upon by some agent, and some part of this substance can also be drawn off or removed, enacting a kind of purification. This is often pictured as taking place through the application of heat. The open vessel also forces substances from the universal collective unconscious to enter in. Importantly, the inner operations undertaken in this type of vessel rely on the fact that it is open—the transformation can occur because certain energies (or impurities) are allowed to escape, or dissipate. When the crucible is internalized, one can picture a vessel within our being which is open, allowing impurities or unwanted aspects of the work to evaporate and dissipate away.

The archetypal retort is a sealed flask. In this interior work, one can picture their inner vessel as entirely sealed off from both the outer world and the spiritual realm. When undertaking this exercise, one must have everything they need within the sphere of our inner retort, and for the duration of this work, they are entirely self-contained. A person must rely on inner change to take place within the components or forces they have within their being at that time. Now the work must occur to bring about a transformation in these inner patterns without relying on external forces. The retort is especially valuable for working towards the interior synthesis of polarities. Placing the polarized patterns of energy bound up, say, in some particular set of symbols, into the interior flask, sealing it up, and allow them to fully unfold, interpenetrate, and come to a new synthesis. The most common symbol of this in alchemical writings is the man and woman in a flask, uniting and giving birth to a child. Thus, the obvious forces to work with through this exercise are our masculine/feminine or opposing components.

The symbolism of the retort began to manifest itself in my work as I moved into the combination of the vessel and the spray foam. Uniting these material polar opposites, I seal off any openings in the ceramic vessel. When applied, the foam moves and expands around the ceramic and wood with little control and a mind of its own. I rely completely on intuition at this stage of making, leaning into the uncertainty even as the form emerges. (Plate 14) (Plate 15)

The final interior vessel to consider is that of the still. When trying to experience our inner world through this symbol, a person will have a sense of extracting an essence out of an interior process, purifying it and gathering it within our being. Here one can take some particular

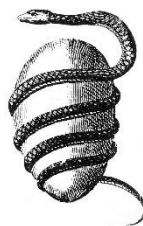
positive quality of our being, such as our creativity, or our sensitivity to others, and find some symbols that capture (or at least envelope) the essence of this quality. Then place these into our interior still and, in meditation, begin to allow these symbolic patterns to flow together. During some point of the inner work, one should sense an essence begin to rise out of this process, separating itself from the specific symbols and feelings connected with the quality. By encouraging this process, a person can have the inner experience of elevating this essence and allowing it to collect in the upper part of our being, where it then becomes a tincture to be used at will.

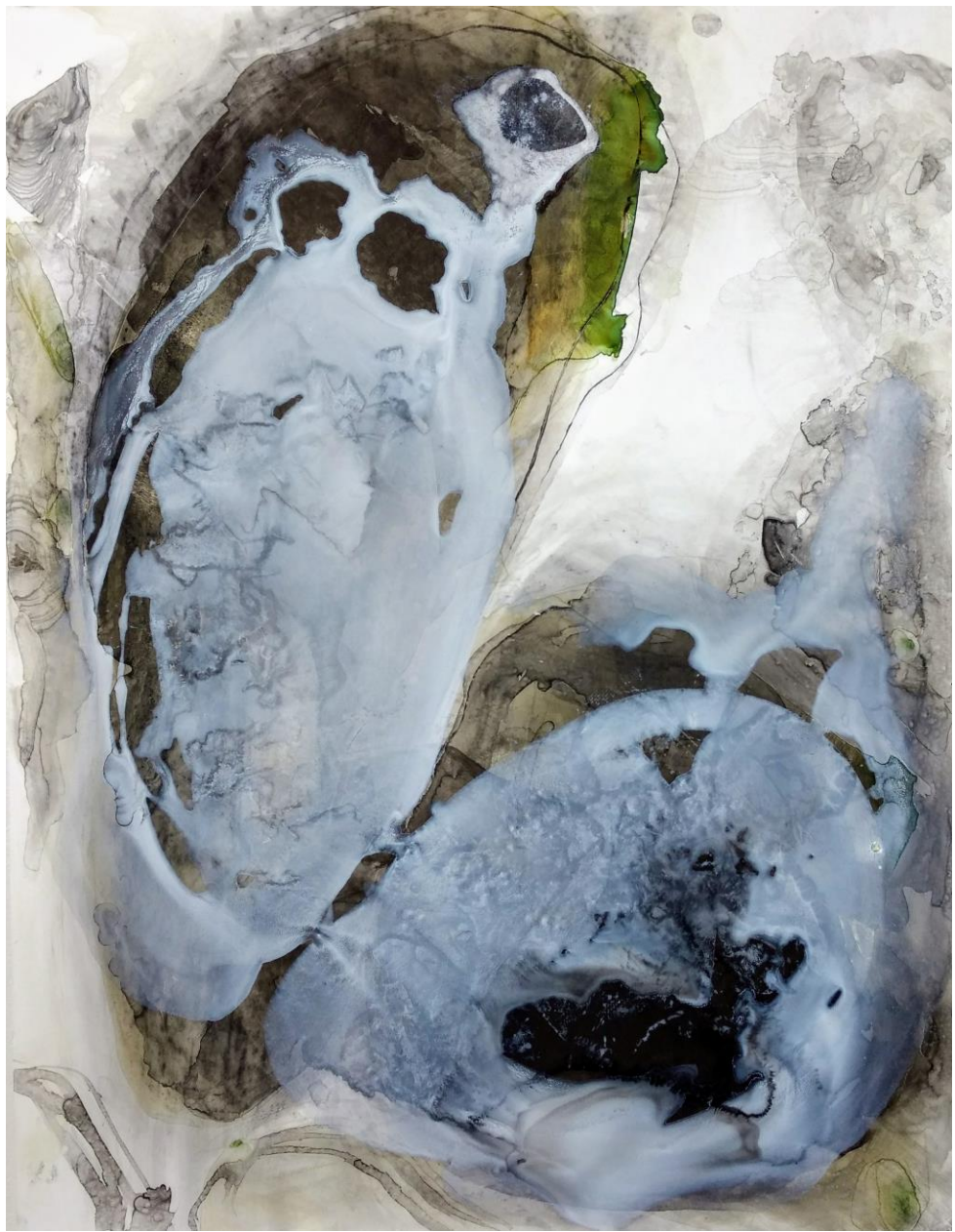
I relate this last alchemical vessel to the totality of my artistic practice. More specifically, the ability to pursue, cultivate, and distill the communication and guidance that arise from my unconscious mind. Moving through a variety of two- and three-dimensional media in the development of this work has allowed consistent archetypal symbols to emerge and establish clarity. Focusing even further in one area of mixed media sculpture during my final year resulted in a concentrated accumulation of symbolism specific to my practice, but also the full recognition of my practice as a ritualized psychological undertaking.

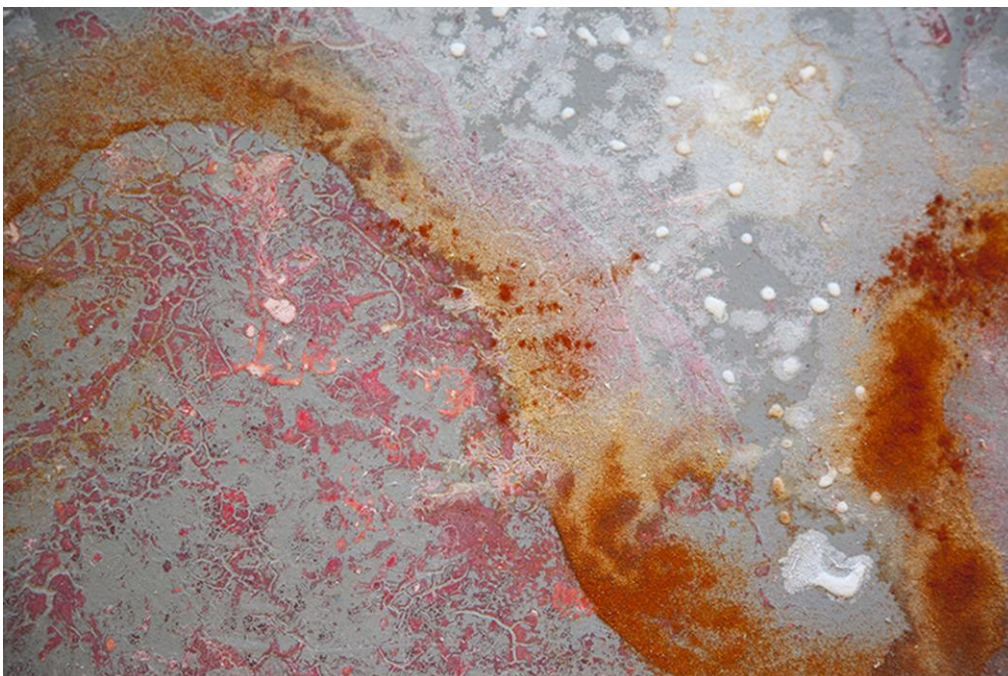
### **Conclusion**

As Lilith came to find her home in the chaos of the holy wild, so did I. Traveling into the unknown through the fire, I was able to release what was no longer useful to me and find my own natural rhythms. Acknowledging and allowing both the beautiful *and* the grotesque in my work has transformed my practice and opened up a new world of academic inquiry and self-understanding.

My work comes from a place of deep feeling on a bodily level. Amidst the decorative play, there is a sense of the primitive and primordial, and also a certain humanity and clumsiness through struggle. Finding a middle ground by harnessing the symbolism of the vessel is where it ultimately felt right. It created a place where I can incubate and integrate my primordial archetypes; a place where I can conjure the demons of my shadow self and crown them with pretty party hats. (Plate 16)































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