

"BUT MARY TREASURED UP ALL THESE THINGS,
PONDERING THEM IN HER HEART"

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Abstract

My work takes the form of a collection that explores how we create systems of understanding through objects. My work emphasizes the commonalities between art, science, and spirituality, and how they can be used in conjunction. Drawing on theories from anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake and theologian Karen Armstrong, I align my art practice to a spiritual practice. The objects I collect from my everyday life - including trash, natural objects, journal writing, and informal sketches - represent the bringing together of art and life. I incorporate sculpted works inspired by mythology, that represent my effort to come to terms with contemporary ideas about female identity and motherhood in a larger, cultural framework. Finally, I examine precedents for my work in pieces from Fluxus artists Ben Vautier and Nye Ffarabaz, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, and the work of contemporary artists Mark Dion and Tracey Emin.

I. Systems of Understanding

Over the last three years I have been searching for answers to the question "What is art for?". I have been driven to pinpoint what my art does for me as an artist, what it does in our culture, and what it does in a universal sense for the human species. One conclusion I have reached is that art can serve as a tool for understanding. This might come as a surprise in a society which generally looks to science for understanding, but theologian, Karen Armstrong, explains that in the ancient world two types of understanding were acknowledged: *mythos* and *logos*. *Logos*, or logic, was used to solve practical problems, but was powerless in the face of emotional suffering or existential questions about the nature of life. *Mythos* - religion, myth and ritual - picked up where logic left off in helping people work through psychological and philosophical problems (Armstrong, Kindle 75-80). Art represents one contemporary form of "mythical" or symbolic thinking. This symbolic understanding through art can relieve psychological distress, similar to the healing achieved through psychology or religious practice. My current work joins references to the systems of *mythos* and *logos* as an attempt to address my sometimes conflicting identities of artist and mother. I grapple with these identities through sculptural portrayals of female archetypes, inspired by mythology and literature, to convey an understanding of motherhood that, when looked at as a whole, defies conventional cultural paradigms for femininity.

I've borrowed the name of my thesis show from a passage of the Bible, "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (*Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Luke 2:19). This passage touches on two elements I have thought about on my journey through the MFA program. The first element is the nature of the art *object*. What is the importance, or lack thereof, of physical objects at all, be they works of art, scientific specimens,

memorabilia, photographs, religious relics, or trash? What do these objects tell us about reality? Why do we make them, collect them, *treasure* them, or dispose of them? Are they important in and of themselves, or only for what they can tell us and teach us, depending on how we fashion them, study them, or arrange them? My thesis work takes the form of a collection of artifacts, including ordinary objects I have collected in the course of my daily life, alongside sculptures inspired by ancient artifacts and mythology.

Secondly the quote references female identity and spirituality. Mary is the primary representation of the Divine Feminine in Christianity. She is also simultaneously a mother and a child, being both a mother and a virgin. In choosing this quote, I identify with the character of Mary, as a young woman and a mother trying to understand events in her own life. The choice of this title also intentionally places my work in a spiritual context. When I say the phrase to myself, "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart," I think of all of the epiphanies I've had, the sculptures and drawings I've made, the memorabilia I collect (or throw away) and how I want so desperately to hold onto all of these things, even knowing they will slip away.



Brand, Amy. Thesis Installation. May 2014. Gallery 224. University of the Arts. Philadelphia.

II. Bottles, Jars, and Boxes

In my quest to understand the "function" of art, I read scholar Ellen Dissanayake's book *What Is Art For?* in which she approaches the question from an anthropological and bio-behavioral standpoint. Looking at human beings as a species which evolved through the same forces of natural selection as any other, she asks how art-making came to be a universal human behavior. Ultimately she concludes that the arts - including literature, dance, theater, and music as well as visual art - evolved as components of ritual, bringing religion to life and making it pleasurable. Engaging in ritual unified early human communities and allowed them to pass on knowledge and group values, adaptations which promoted their survival. Art-making evolved and was selected for as a trait, because the incorporation of art into ritual encouraged the creation

of long, involved ceremonies which were more effective at creating solidarity and communicating knowledge than shorter, obligatory ones. The more aesthetically pleasing and dramatic rituals became, the more the participants enjoyed them, and the more effective they were as an adaptation for survival. Thus, early humans who engaged in art-making, and who appreciated the arts in the form of ritual, were more likely to survive, and humans evolved as an art-making species (Dissanayake 152).

Dissanayake sees remnants of the religious impulse in contemporary artworks which blur the line between the every-day and art. She writes, "To those who value it, capital-A art is a way of possessing sacredness and spirituality in a profane world; art in everything or everything-potentially-art is a way of imposing coherence (shape, integration) on selves and experiences that have fragmented," (192). I identify with this statement whole-heartedly. Because I use art as a way to integrate aspects of my life, I am constantly looking for ways to connect my art-making practice to my daily life. In my thesis work I have done so through materials, seeking opportunities to utilize everyday objects. A large portion of this work consists of simple things I have found and collected on a daily basis, displayed in repurposed bottles, jars, and boxes.

The storage containers themselves are significant, chosen for their ready availability and connection to daily life. I saved and sought out empty containers - cardboard boxes, bottles, and jars - that would normally be thrown away, to repurpose as art. These containers are recognizable, but most have been altered slightly to unify them visually and indicate a shift in context, and an elevation from a pragmatic, physical function to a spiritual one. I think of this process as "making special", a term which Dissanayake uses to indicate a commonality linking all types of art-making the world over. The boxes have been coated in plaster, which hardens and preserves them while erasing company logos. The bottles and jars have been painstakingly

stripped of their original labels, their lids covered with paint, wax, or sculpture. Erasing signs of commercialism removes the bottles and boxes from their economic functionality, and readies them for their spiritual purpose. On a few jars the word "Hearts" and phrase "Artichoke Hearts" have been left legible, indicating that the jars have been repurposed, going from storing food to storing contents which relate to the symbolic human heart.

Despite alterations, the jars and bottles can be matched to their original purposes - storing beverages, food, and pills. These "past lives" carry symbolic import. Water and wine hold spiritual significance in Christianity, relating to baptism, rebirth, and communion - miraculous transformations from ordinary to sacred. Alcohol in general refers to the practice of "self-medicating" as well as the use of consciousness-altering substances for ritual in many cultures. Nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist William James theorized that the popularity of alcohol is due to its "mystical" power. He writes:

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. To the poor and unlettered it stands in the place of symphony concerts and of literature ..." (James, *Kindle* loc. 5282)

In this passage James links alcohol to a spiritual state of mind, to developing a sense of community between individuals, and to high art. Perhaps because of our Puritan roots and history of Prohibition in America, the enjoyment of alcohol carries with it a suggestion of the taboo or dangerous, but James eloquently highlights the nobler pleasures of drunkenness. Pill bottles on the other hand represent a more mainstream approach to healing. Food jars suggest the idea of nourishment.

Two Fluxus pieces which also repurpose ordinary bottles, resonate with my thesis work: *Rx: Stress Formula* by Nye Ffarrabas (formerly Bici Forbes Hendricks), and *God* by Ben Vautier. I see these pieces as examples of what Dissanayake called, "a way of possessing sacredness and spirituality in a profane world," a way of merging art and life in order to create spiritual "coherence" (192). Vautier's piece takes the form of an empty wine bottle with a handwritten label reading "God". In *Stress Formula*, Ffarrabas has altered an ordinary prescription bottle, giving instructions to "Take one capsule every four hours, for laughs." Each clear gelatin capsule inside contains a folded photocopy with a typewritten text - presumably a joke. Looking at these pieces together, I see a variety of methods for coping with psychological pain: religion, medicine, alcohol, laughter, and art.

In researching the Fluxus movement, I saw many links between it and Dissanayake's philosophical questions regarding the meaning of contemporary art. Fluxus works can often be interpreted as philosophical meditations made manifest. In looking at *God* and *Rx: Stress Formula* I start to get at two important answers to the question, "What is art for?" in relation to my work: 1) Art can be a tool for philosophical understanding, and 2) art can be used for healing psychological distress. In another time, or for another individual, these functions would be filled by religion. For me, these functions are fulfilled through my art practice.

III. Collecting

The objects that I place inside the containers in my work are linked by their impermanence or transience, and by their connections to my daily life. Collecting represents the desire to hold onto things which might otherwise be lost and to preserve things which would

otherwise decay. Many of the collected items are physically delicate - scraps of paper, orange peels, dried seed pods, and crumbling leaves. Other objects like bottle caps, broken glass, and rusty washers were trash, found on the ground while collecting natural items, or saved after someone in my household finished a beverage. They are "impermanent" in the sense that they would normally be thrown away. Though they are made of durable materials such as plastic, metal, or glass, they are transient, passing quickly through our lives, afterwards existing as evidence of our activities. Written messages include fleeting thoughts, epiphanies I feared forgetting, and song lyrics heard on the radio which seemed to reveal a hidden truth. To-do lists, grocery lists, notes to myself, and doodles join the collection of mundane detritus and ephemera which represent fleeting moments in time.

Many of these collected objects are related to my children, or an idea about childhood as a universal concept. There is a plastic "witch finger" from a children's Halloween party my family attended. There are scraps of cloth from the kids' out-grown or stained clothing, and paper scraps generated from my three year-old's art projects. There are also the random findings which children in general love to collect from the ground - such as string, washers, lost coins, and shards of colored glass. I collect many of these items on play excursions with my kids, often enlisting their help. I collect with a sense of my own childhood fascination for odd and beautiful objects, particularly from nature.

Every parent saves keepsakes of their children's milestones. Collecting objects for my work is related to that common parental practice, but extends beyond it. For my work, I collect items which, ultimately relate to preserving this moment in *my* life, understanding what motherhood means to me, as I try to integrate my experience into a cohesive, meaningful whole.

Collected items function as evidence to help me understand how the pieces of my life and identity fit together.

The desire to collect and preserve impermanent things relates to a fear of loss that I associate with parenthood. New parents feel intense joy, but also immense fear of losing their child. A newborn's body is delicate and vulnerable; parents experience their own vulnerability through the baby's, the delicacy of life itself in the baby's fragile limbs. For nine months the mother and child are literally one. For me, that bond was so intense that it continued to feel like oneness in the following months. After giving birth, I perpetually carried my fussy newborn against my body and breastfed him every few hours, day or night. Three years later, when I was beginning to wean my second child while registering my son for pre-school, it hit me that the parental experience of loss wasn't just present in a fear of a child's death, but also in the natural stages of their growth. With every new milestone my children reach, I feel pride, but also pain. Every step my son takes, he takes away from me; every inch my daughter grows, she grows up, up, and away¹.

Much of my artwork centers around trying to understand my own shifting identity as a mother and an artist, roles which don't always fit together comfortably. My collection includes examples of these attempts: journal entries, self-affirmations, and New Year's Resolutions. In collecting them and placing them in bottles I have literally made them "messages in bottles" to myself.

¹ This realization coincided with the sculpture *Mother Sow: Our Lady of Sorrow*, discussed later.

The act of collecting evidence of the mother-child relationship in art has a precedent in Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79. For this piece, Mary Kelly collected objects which tell the story of the first six years of her son's life, and in the words of the artist's website "her own sense of loss". Many of the objects in Kelly's piece are counterparts to the objects of my own collection, including her own journal writing, her son's early mark-making and writing attempts, and items which would have otherwise been trash. Kelly's presentation of these objects speaks to a relationship with the scientific gathering of data. In several pieces, her son's early writing, the artist's own hand-written journals, and typed journals were presented on stone tablets mimicking the Rosetta Stone. Her inclusion of her son's dirty diaper liners, along with notations on his eating, drinking, urination, and defecation, reminds me of the objects I have "rescued" from the trash, including hair and used band-aids. In another piece, Kelly records her own anxieties about balancing her roles as artist and mother underneath a print of her son's hand. The analysis and emotional turmoil of her own roles as artist and mother brings to mind the content of my own work.

I see Kelly's work, as well as my own, as part of the dialogue of feminist art in that they question assumptions about the value of women's contributions to society, and the complexity of their experiences. When Kelly rephrases the work of parenting into the language of science, she re-contextualizes the traditional work of a mother or housewife. What are typically viewed as banal and mindless tasks - changing diapers, tracking feeding schedules - are given new weight by their scientific presentation. When Kelly undertook her *Post-Partum* work, the women's movement was in its early days; we assume that our society has come a long way in the forty years since. Yet becoming a mother has shown me how ingrained many traditional assumptions and prejudices are regarding the archetypical female role of "mother", both in myself and others.

While our culture celebrates the wonders of the maternal experience, the view of what that experience should look like is very narrow. It leaves little to no room for a woman to experience doubt, discontent, self-interest, ambition, sexuality, or any number of other human emotions. The relationship between motherhood and the professional world remains tense, as evidenced by heated contemporary debates over corporate and government policies regarding maternity and family leave, breastfeeding, childcare, etc. Correspondingly, within the art world, the word "motherhood" tends to make eyes glaze with expectations of trite, saccharine work. By addressing my personal experience of motherhood from an honest, less conventional perspective, my intention is to contribute to rewriting the cultural paradigm of motherhood.

IV. Creating Order

In my work, the act of collecting is a reaction to the psychological struggles of becoming a mother. I fear the loss of my children, grieve the loss of their infancy and childhood as they grow up, and grieve the passing of my own childhood and independence. Recognizing the ephemeral quality of passing through life's stages, I collect the fragile evidence of the moment, trying to hold onto each as I acknowledge and cope with the difficulties of transformation. The process of making art from struggle, pain, and fear is a healing one. Finally, displaying my collection represents the desire to reach an understanding of my experiences and my new identity. In displaying these disparate items I am forced to organize them. In the process of organizing and displaying I make sense of myself and the world, by creating a personal system of understanding the objects in a new context, and reassigning them meaning which brings a sense of psychological well-being.

The objects of my collection are displayed in the following ways: 1) Spell / Specimen Jars, 2) Treasure Boxes, 3) Pillow Bags. Each jar, box, or "pillow" contains items from at least two categories of my collection, representing the different facets of my life. By mixing or integrating these physical elements, I am symbolically integrating these spheres. What I think of as the basic "elements" of the collection consist of the following categories: 1) Natural Objects, 2) Trash, 3) Children's Objects, 4) My Personal Objects, and 5) Created Objects. Below, I'll give a description of each category, including its significance to my project.

1) Natural Objects: Natural objects are at the heart of my collection and are included in almost every jar, box, and bag. This category includes nuts, seeds, pods, leaves, rocks, sticks, and flowers found near my home. I select them for the curiosity and wonder they inspire, a fascination which reminds me of childhood and inspires me as an artist. These elements are collected during my daily activities with my children. By collecting these objects with my children, I can integrate my work as a mother with my work as an artist, bringing my mother self and artist self together. The process of collecting them outside and taking them inside has a healing and energizing effect on me. It brings me in touch with nature, and the sense of wellness that it brings with it.

2) Trash: I began collecting these items during hunts for natural objects. While searching the ground for interesting nuts, seeds, and rocks, my children and I also noticed all sorts of man-made objects - pieces of litter which were often disgusting, yet somehow also enthralling. I obsessively picked up tiny shards of colored glass, fascinated by the combination of beauty and danger. Other objects held mystery. What were they, and how had they come to be abandoned in a field, vacant lot, or patch of woods? Litter tells the story of how we interact with nature on a daily basis, not as a romanticized notion, but in reality. Litter is also the evidence we leave

behind that tells our story to others, maybe a few days or months from now, maybe a few centuries from now.

I began to notice items in my home as I went to throw them in the trash, which resonated with the litter I had previously collected outdoors. Soon I was collecting bits of trash either because they fit with the litter I already had, they were associated with my children, or they fascinated me on a sensory level. Caps, particularly bottle caps, but other types as well, seem to hold a universal appeal as collectibles for children and adults, and were readily available. Orange and tangerine peels I saved because their color and scent appealed to me, and as they aged they took on a pleasantly dry, hard texture. Other items were repellent, but also somehow fascinating - from an abundant collection of dryer lint, to hair pulled from my hairbrush, to a used band-aid.

Noticing and collecting these trash items, beautiful or disgusting, helped me integrate all aspects of my life into my work. In the same way that archaeologists excavate middens, ancient trash heaps, to learn about the daily life of past civilizations, the trash from my home and my small corner of the world, tells the story of my life.

3) Children's Items: As I realized that the objects of my collection were already ones connected to my children, or memories of my own childhood, I began to consciously collect items associated with children. The small plastic toys and trinkets that are often given away at birthday parties were perfect collectables, as they delight children for a few minutes and are then forgotten or broken. I also collected trash related to my kids, from broken toys, to scraps of paper left over from their many art activities, to locks of hair left on the floor after my son's haircut. I have included a sampling of their many drawings and artistic creations as well.

4) My Personal Objects: As I rescued items from the garbage can, I also began to collect the personal detritus which accumulated at the bottom of my purse or on my dresser. Some items, like hairpins, hair-bands, and solitary earrings, represent my identity as an individual, separate from my children. Other items represent a fleeting moment in time - such as a to-do list, a grocery list, a quick reminder note to myself. An interesting business card I picked up on a rare solitary excursion to a coffee shop represents a special day, precious because I had time to myself to spend as I wished.

5) Created Objects: These items include both written and visual materials. Written elements are journal entries, my own poetry, sudden epiphanies, resolutions or instructions to myself, self-affirmations and quotations jotted down from meaningful lyrics heard on the radio. Visual examples include doodles, small sketches, and paper snowflakes that I have made in stolen moments of time, alongside my children, or in the evening. Again, collecting all of these items represents holding onto a particular moment in time - in this case my own thoughts in a moment of inspiration or reflection.

Making the small visual pieces provides a daily spiritual practice, a way to relax and meditate. Working on them centers, refreshes, and heals me, and becomes a commentary on the healing property of spirituality which I find in making. I have also made small ceramic "pills" to include in some of the Spell / Specimen Jars. Many of the written elements share this same idea of healing, particularly the journal entries, resolutions, and self-affirmations.

This category also includes drawings I made while my children were drawing, and are left unfinished or scribbled on, and drawings I made at their request for them to play with. These specimens are interesting because they represent my conjoining identities as artist and mother.

Their used-ness, as well as the unplanned juxtaposition of my children's scribbled ideas with my own imagery, make them unique - part art object, part artifact of an activity, an interaction, and a relationship.

Finally, my thesis work includes my ceramic sculptures, and other three-dimensional works. In a sense, these too are collected artifacts. They represent my attempts to synthesize thoughts and emotions about my experiences, and connect my identity as a woman, mother, and artist to universal experiences and archetypes. I will address in a later section how their form and process differ from the rest of the collection.

To display the elements of my collection, I combine them using the following storage containers to make three distinct types of pieces: Jars or bottles made of transparent plastic or glass, cardboard boxes overlaid with white plaster, and clear plastic bags.



Example of Scientific Display Case



Brand, Amy. *Untitled (Treasure Box)*. 2014. Artist's collection.

The arrangement of objects in the boxes visually alludes to scientific display cases. The objects are spread out so that each one may be examined individually, and yet an association is suggested. In the arrangement of these objects I look for connections between elements from

different categories of my collection. In this case I have chosen natural objects which resonate visually with a drawing. Both the natural objects and the quick sketch are artifacts of daily life. My box arrangement is more personal and informal than a scientific display case. The box itself is clearly simple and hand-made. It references a child's collection, kept in a cardboard box under the bed. Yet the white plaster treatment I give to the simple, shallow cardboard box lends it a bit of formality, as does the careful, somewhat sparse arrangement of the objects. The boxes are obviously handmade because of their rough craftsmanship, tied to the everyday because they are made from repurposed cardboard boxes, but also separated out and given special treatment, again "made special".



Brand, Amy. *Babyfood Spell Jars*. 2014. Artist's collection.

The collected transparent jars and bottles at first glance reference specimens in a scientific collection. Upon closer inspection, however, one sees that they combine various elements instead of separating them out. The above picture shows baby food jars which hold natural objects, children's objects, collected trash, and created objects. Because several "ingredients" are combined in each jar the reading goes from "specimen" to "spell" jar. By

combining elements of my life in art I bring them into harmony in my own mind. This act is symbolic, but it has an air of ritual intent about it which brings to mind prayer, or religious magic as practiced by modern Wiccans and neo-pagans.

Wiccans and neo-pagans use magic in a variety of ways, and are often misunderstood and maligned for doing so. However, a magic ritual which includes simple actions - such as lighting candles and walking around a circle - while verbally stating a desired outcome, seems not very different from prayer, an act in which believers ask God for desired outcomes. There is also a parallel with the popular practice of "visualizing" or using mental imagery to achieve one's goals, espoused by many psychologists . The primary difference between some types of magic², prayer, and visualization, seems to be the use of physical objects. I see this as the distinction between art and philosophy, as in the example of the Fluxus works mentioned previously. Because I make my jars by combining "ingredients" which represent integrating different aspects of my life, I think of them as "spell" jars. "Specimen jars" implies a singular focus, and a scientific approach, whereas my "spell jars," imply a spiritual intention and the bringing together of multiple roles in order to create a peaceful, unified self.

My "pillows" are collected, pliable elements in clear, sealed plastic bags stuffed full enough to create a pillow-like effect. Ingredients are interchangeable with those collected in other forms, and include pine-needles, dryer lint, paper scraps, and hair. Placing individual objects into sealed plastic bags references an orderly form of categorization. By thinking of the forms as pillows, I reference the world of sleep, dreams, and the unconscious. On top of the collected items, some "pillows" display a visual element - a drawing or cut-paper work which

² I say "some types of magic" because neo-pagans are an eclectic bunch, and practice many types of magic. Some magic takes the form of simply visualizing or focusing intention (Adler 276-280 KndI Loc.).

references magical or mythological imagery. Here I link everyday objects, the evidence of daily life, with art-making, a process connected to a mythical, dreamlike mode of understanding.

Below, right: Brand, Amy. *Pillow*. 2012. Two pages from discarded book, thread, acrylic paint. Artist's collection.

Below, right: Brand, Amy. *Pillow*. Work in progress. 2014. Re-sealable plastic bag, pen on paper, dryer lint. Artist's collection.

Below, left: Brand, Amy. *Pillows*. Works in progress. 2014. Re-sealable plastic bags, various contents. Artist's collection.



The "pillows" in the form of plastic bags filled with collected material and drawings, are the descendants of earlier paper works that I made in the fall semester of 2012. I included some of these earlier works, which consist of journal writing and drawing on repurposed book pages, stitched together and stuffed to create pillow like forms, in my collection. These earlier works brought together ideas about the unconscious and everyday experience in art, as do the more recent pillow bags. The journaling on the earlier pillows relates to daily experiences of motherhood, again tying them to more recent works. I include these earlier works, to give the

collection a sense of temporal depth. The collection as a whole ultimately represents my experience in the MFA program, including work from throughout my time in the program.

Finally, I have organized my collection on functional storage shelves. Doing so emphasizes the "functionality" of the displayed objects that form a system of understanding that contributes to my emotional and spiritual well-being. I have organized each set of shelves according to one theme within the overall piece; in the example below the theme is spirituality and healing. Each shelving system has five levels, with items grouped together on one level having the closest relationship to one another. Few labels are provided, so that viewers participate in the process of puzzling out the underlying themes of organization, and have the freedom to reach their own conclusions. For some viewers the system of display may call to mind an archive or the storage room of a museum. For others it may conjure an alchemist's workshop or witch's pantry. One set of references is to a system of *logos*, the other a system of *mythos*. My intent is to explore where these systems, the logical and the mythical, intersect - how they are similar to one another, how they can be used in conjunction, and how together they create a fuller understanding of the world.



Brand, Amy. *Healing the Spirit*. May 2014. Thesis Installation. Gallery 224. University of the Arts. Philadelphia.

V. Ceramic Sculpture

The final major component of my thesis work are figurative ceramic sculptures depicting animals and mythical hybrid creatures. They are displayed alongside the jars, bottles, boxes, and bags of detritus cataloged above, and stand on an equal footing to them in this context as artifacts. Whereas the ordinary objects I have collected are the raw, physical evidence of my life, the sculptures represent attempts to synthesize experiences and emotions to arrive at a deeper understanding.

In sculpting these pieces, I synthesize animal, human, and mythical forms to create new representations of female archetypes that resonate as universal and symbolic rather than as individual portraiture. The archetypes I portray are inspired by my own experience, and represent aspects of my identity where I feel some sense of conflict. These major figures are conceived of as spiritual guides, a personal pantheon of "little goddesses" who represent feminine archetypes of motherhood.

Whereas the everyday objects I collect are direct evidence of my daily life, and reference logical categorization and understanding of my experience and identity, the ceramic sculptures represent a mythical form of understanding. In creating them, I sift through symbolic imagery associated with universal archetypes, and in doing so, contemplate how my individual experience relates to the experiences of others. The purpose of these works is to reach beyond my day to day existence. The primary figures I have created for that purpose are a Sow, Cat, and Succubus. A male Jackal figure, a childlike Mouse, Birds, and Mermaids appear as supporting characters and symbols.

The Sow represents the archetype of the Good Mother who is wholly devoted to her children. I have depicted her in two terra-cotta sculptures, as an anthropomorphized figure, sitting upright, and holding a piglet against her six-breasted torso. In the first sculpture, *Happy Sow*, she wears a smile on her face, as she cradles her baby. The piglet is sculpted separately, and placed into the curve of her arms. The *Happy Sow* is content and smiling, the ideal of devoted motherhood.



Left: Brand, Amy.
Happy Sow. 2013.
Terra-cotta. Approx.
6.5 x 3.5 x 4.5 in.,
Artist's Collection.

Right: Brand, Amy.
Our Lady of Sorrow, Mother Sow. 2013.
Terra-cotta. Approx.
12 x 6 x 8 in., Artist's
Collection.

In the second, and larger of the two terra-cotta sculptures, *Our Lady of Sorrow, Mother Sow* the piglet is permanently attached, sculpted as one unified piece with the mother. The tear rolling down the sow's cheek indicates the poignant side of motherhood that comes with such strong attachment to one's child. She embodies the pain a parent feels as a child grows up and becomes more independent. There is also a self-sacrificial element to her character, a weariness from giving so much of herself that she risks losing her own identity and sense of self-worth apart from her children.

The figure of *Our Lady of Sorrow, Mother Sow* is intended to function as a spiritual icon, expressing the Divine Feminine in the role of Mother. In giving the figure many breasts I consciously emulated many-breasted Hindu goddess images. The rounded body of the sculpture and unfinished terra-cotta surface mimics such ancient fertility figures as *The Venus of Willendorf*. In positioning the piglet on her chest, I referenced depictions of the Madonna holding the infant Jesus. The title of the piece was also chosen to reference the Virgin Mary



Brand, Amy. *Succubus, Jackal, and Pup*. 2014. Terra-cotta. Artist's collection.

The Succubus represents the archetype of the Bad Mother. She is grouped as a family unit with her consort, an aggressively sexual male Jackal, and offspring, a male jackal Pup. Two characteristics set the Bad Mother apart from the Good Mother: she is independent, detached from her off-spring, and she is sexual. While motherhood is in fact dependent upon sexuality, culturally our idea of motherhood is chaste. In myth, a succubus is a vampire-like, female demon who seduces men in order to feed on their sexual energy, and is often associated with goats and snakes. My *Succubus* can be identified by her goat-like horns, long serpent-like neck, and a

cascading braid, ending in a snake's head, but her traditional role as sexual predator is contradicted by the white strings of "milk" spurting from her breasts. I have positioned her next to a Jackal character, representing her male consort. In this piece, the Jackal's head is positioned on top of a large phallus, indicating aggressive male sexuality. The male Jackal character is repeated as a puppy, suckling from the breast of the succubus. The Jackal-headed phallus represents our society's cultural paradigm in which men are seen as sexual predators, and women as prey. However, this paradigm is challenged by his pairing with the *Succubus*. The portrayal of the jackal pup, which repeats the phallus motif in his tail, also challenges a simplistic view of males as predators. Similarly, the Succubus's traditional role as sexual predator is contradicted by the male pup, who feeds on her, rather than the reverse. In my sculpture, the succubus uses her breasts to nurture her young, rather than seduce. This trio functions to unsettle our assumptions, to raise questions, but not necessarily to answer them.



Brand, Amy. *Roaring Goddess*. (Work in progress) 2014. Terra-cotta.

As I developed my pantheon of "goddesses" I wanted to add a strong predator animal to balance the Sow as an image of femininity, and chose cats because of their frequent association with women. Bastet and Sekhmet from the ancient Egyptian pantheon inspired me to reference

both domestic and wild cats. In ancient Egypt, Bastet, a goddess of the home and hearth, was depicted as an elegant domestic cat. Sekhmet, a warrior goddess, was depicted as a lion-headed woman.

The cat-woman figure of my pantheon is a pregnant mother. In *Roaring Goddess*, the character has the head of Bastet, a poised and elegant domestic cat, with earrings in its ears. She reclines with the weight of her upper body resting on her elbows so that her head is lifted regally, her gaze calmly meeting that of the viewer over the large swell of her pregnant belly. Her knees are in the air and her legs spread, as if she is about to give birth, but instead of revealing an emerging baby's head, her genitals have become the face of a roaring wild cat. The refined head represents the socially conditioned face of femininity, while the genitals suggest that the untamed side of femininity possesses a potentially threatening power. This power is linked to the power to create new life, but it resides within the woman herself. Motherhood reveals a strength and ferocity which exists in the woman, independent of her baby or conventional societal roles. The Cat deity's pregnancy is ultimately symbolic, representing the strength within all women, not just mothers. Her pregnancy emphasizes her identity and power as a *woman*, a power to create which is not limited to giving birth. Pregnancy here symbolizes the creative act of conceiving and giving birth to an idea or a work of art.

The Mouse figure represents wonder and innocence in the form of a female child. She wears a dress recalling an idealized Victorian era, and emphasizes the character's youth and femininity. The character feels familiar, as if she comes from a Beatrix Potter illustration. Her sweetness and her association with a bygone, more "innocent" era, function to evoke nostalgia for childhood. This figure mythologizes childhood and embodies the idea of holding onto a bit of childhood wonder in adulthood. Ultimately, the act of collecting and the making of childlike

"treasure boxes" belong to this spirit, as much as they do to a mother's fear of loss, or to a scientist's wish to understand physical evidence.



Brand, Amy. *Maid Mouse II*. 2013.
Terra-cotta, wire, Magic Sculpt.
Approx. 8.5 x 4 x 3.5 in., Artist's
Collection.

My work contains references to birds in several guises, which refer to several symbolic meanings. The freedom of a bird in flight suggests a leap of intuitive thinking, a kind of intellectual flight. A raven, a bird I frequently see in my backyard, often represents a magical omen or creature with special knowledge and intuition in literature. My large raven sculpture is an artist's totem welcoming creativity, vision, and insight. Raptors, a group of species in which the females out-size the males, appear to represent female aggression. Raptor-headed females also reference Sirens and Harpies, monstrous female-headed creatures of mythology, which tortured men or lead them to doom. On the other hand, the motif of a bird's nest represents domesticity, and conventional feminine or mothering behavior.

Mermaids are creatures of the sea that are often used as symbols of the human unconscious. As such, a mermaid should be a master of the unconscious, able to tame the monsters there and mine its depths for treasures of inspiration. My terra-cotta mermaid sports a

bird's head on a woman's shoulders. Despite having a fish tail instead of legs, her figure is "hippy" and pear shaped. I resisted sculpting her to conform to contemporary female beauty standards, because I wanted to avoid making her a figure of male fantasy, as mermaids are so often are depicted. Her bird's head represents insight, while her fish tail again indicates that she belongs to the domain of the unconscious and sensuality. Physically this mermaid is not idealized, but she represents a spiritual ideal of balance, creative insight, and independence.



Brand, Amy. *Birdmaid and Spell Jars*.
Terra-cotta and found objects. 2014.

In creating terra-cotta sculptures which embody archetypes of feminine identity, I looked to sculpture of earlier societies intended to convey religious meaning or serve a ritual function. In doing so, I see a relationship between my work and that of other contemporary feminist artists, like Judy Chicago. As studies for her mammoth *Dinner Party* installation, Chicago created a series of small ceramic goddess figures inspired by ancient fertility figurines such as the *Venus of Willendorf*. For my *Roaring Goddess* piece, I was influenced by the *Birthing Figure* sculpture

from the Dumbarton Oakes Collection, which has traditionally been identified as an ancient Aztec work³. By imitating the form of the *Venus of Willendorf*, Chicago hoped to harness the power of an ancient image of powerful womanhood to create and inform a modern view of powerful feminine identity. In my work, my intention is to harness the spiritual power of earlier goddess imagery, while making a comment on modern women's roles in society.

VI. The Scientific and the Spiritual

My current work has drawn comparisons to that of Mark Dion. I share with Dion an interest in collecting objects and using them to convey a system of knowledge. Dion says of his work, "I really identify with the mission of the museum, where you go to gain knowledge through things." I also find inspiration in museums for this reason, but while Dion's world-view is firmly scientific, mine seeks to draw connections between science and spirituality. Dion explores how our beliefs about science have changed through time, often using materials from by-gone eras, but ultimately, his interest is in scientific thought.

In my work, the collection and categorization of ordinary objects represents a scientific approach, yet simultaneously coexists with invented mythological imagery representing a spiritual world-view. Dion acknowledges parallels between a scientific world view and a religious one in speaking about his installations:

For myself and for a number of artists, science functions as our world view. Our relationship to science is very much like a Renaissance artist's relationship to theology. That's really what I see as the job of contemporary art, to function as a critical foil to dominant culture. (Art 21)

³ Scholars now believe that this piece was either modified in the 19th century to appeal to modern collectors, or fabricated at the time to resemble a pre-Columbian artifact ("Aztec 'Birthing Figure'").

The relationship between science - a system of thought which relies on *logos* - and systems of knowledge or belief which rely on *mythos*, is where my interests lie. The dominant world view today is a scientific one, which holds that religion and science are at odds, but my work takes the opposite point of view. It holds that there is a spiritual side to reality, that *mythos* is as valid a form of thinking as *logos*, and that the two points of view can work in tandem. For this reason, I juxtapose mythical imagery with detritus displayed in jars and boxes, like scientific artifacts. Though I collect items from my daily life as physical evidence, ultimately I display them according to symbolic rules. Pairing the collected "evidence" with sculptures influenced by mythology emphasizes the use of *mythos* as the dominant form of understanding. Both the sculpted and collected items represent forms of spiritual practice which help me to integrate aspects of my life into a coherent whole. To viewers, I hope to communicate my point of view that scientific and spiritual systems of understanding can overlap and coexist, and in doing so raise questions for the viewer about where meaning and the imagination connect.

While my work resonates visually with Dion's, I see more commonalities between my work and that of artist Tracey Emin, who uses both "ready-made" objects and intensively hand-rendered pieces to make highly personal and spiritual statements about her identity as a woman and an artist. Her work shares with mine the use of ordinary personal objects and trash, a female perspective which addresses taboo behavior for women in contemporary society, the use of journal-like text, and a central role for spirituality. Emin's first break-out piece, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-95*, often referred to simply as the *Tent*, uses several of these elements. The artist has taken an ordinary blue camping tent and painstakingly appliquéd a list of names on the interior. The piece is often interpreted as a list of people the artist had sex with, an idea which the title slyly encourages, but in fact refers to the literal act of sleeping in close proximity to

another human being as an act of emotional intimacy. Along with lovers, Emin's "taxonomy" includes family members, friends, two aborted fetuses, and appliquéd alone on the center of the floor the words "WITH MYSELF, ALWAYS MYSELF, NEVER FORGETTING" (Brown 83). This phrase on the floor, as well as the blue dome of the tent, which recalls the ceiling of a chapel, indicates a spiritual meaning, a hypothesis which is supported by the greater body of Emin's work, as well as her own statements. Emin has said, "People think my work is about sex, but actually a lot of it is about faith..." (qtd. in Brown 50). At the same time, Emin clearly uses the controversial role of female sexuality in contemporary society to evoke a reaction in the title of the *Tent* piece, as she does with her other most -discussed work, *My Bed*. In *My Bed*, detritus from Emin's life, including empty vodka bottles, cigarette packages, bloody condoms, and a child's toy, surround her unmade bed. The bed appears as if the occupant has just risen from a bout of serious depression and self-destructive behavior. It speaks of intense psychological pain with the urgency of an artist making work driven by an inner need.

In the above examples of Emin's work I see a number of similarities with my own, but ultimately the spiritual nature and female perspective of her work are the most relevant. Emin's view of art as a spiritual process to make sense of one's life is expressed in the following text piece she presented in a 2002 group show of religious art:

In 1995, I took a trip down to Margate I wasn't Feeling Good - On the train I Found a cheap small blue camera. I spent my Last £5 on a slide Film, And walked along The sea wall, It was early Spring and the tide was amazingly high - I started to Snap away at The sea,

After a while, my black depression started to Leave me, And I started to understand just how beautiful, The world could be,

Alone - with no one, I still Felt I was part of Something - Something a million, Billion times bigger than me, but Something so incredible

Nature - And with This Feeling, I wrote in chalk, The words, I Need Art Like I need God. And looking up to sky - I Thought, what a great title For a show - From one

moment in my life - Of having nothing - I suddenly - knew that I had so much to do. (qtd. in Brown, 120).

In this piece, Emin describes how the act of making art brings psychological relief, gives her life meaning, and connects her to a spiritual reality. This message resonates with my feelings about the healing and spiritual nature of my own art practice, and the conclusions I reached in my exploration of the question "What is art for?". While Emin's drinking and sexual antics as a single woman may not appear to relate directly to the subject of motherhood which I address in my own art, we are both exploring the roles and limitations which society sets out for us as women, and how our personal feelings and experiences chafe against these proscribed boundaries.

VII. Conclusion

In her book *The Case For God*, theologian Karen Armstrong writes that in the past religion was looked at as a practice rather than a set of dogmatic beliefs one must subscribe to on faith (Introduction, Kindle loc. 101). In both Eastern and Western traditions followers embarked on a path of spiritual action - such as meditation, yoga, pilgrimage, chanting, or theological study - which revealed truths through personal experience (Armstrong 23). These spiritual practices strike me as similar to my practice of art-making, which heals me and helps me understand my life through the experience of *doing*. These two results are my personal answers to the question "What is art for?". Making art is a path of discovery and healing which brings meaning and order to my life, while helping me integrate my identities of mother and artist.

The psychological pains which art heals me of are, in their details, unique to my personal history, but in their collective substance completely ordinary, in that we all experience pains of

one kind and another - from traumas large and small, old and new, from the stress of daily life, from not living up to expectations - our own or others', real or imaginary. While many of my individual concerns - about gender, power, motherhood, and self-identity - inform the particulars of my work, I have tried to code my personal story enough to let viewers super-impose their own experiences, which may mirror or relate to my own, and come to a new understanding with me. It is that sense of coming to a common epiphany with others - the artist and every other person who recognizes themselves in the work - which I value when I connect to a work of art, music, or literature as a viewer, listener, or reader, and which I ideally hope to achieve in my own work. When a viewer connects to a work on that level, they are affected spiritually, by Dissanayake's definition, experiencing a moment of transcendent understanding, and connection to a larger community which relates to art's original function in ritual. On a more modest level, my work attempts to communicate a point of view which relates art to spirituality, and connects these forms of understanding to scientific understanding. Finally, by drawing on my personal experience, my work attempts to draw a complex portrait of motherhood, which enlarges the narrow paradigm typically portrayed.

VIII. Looking Forward

My work has been concerned for some time now with mythology and spirituality. My thesis show represents a break-through for me, in connecting mythological and spiritual themes to concrete evidence of daily life. At the same time, the acts of collecting and display have brought up the subject of scientific understanding, which I am interested in exploring in future

work. My thesis work has also been instrumental in helping me uncover and organize my many areas of interest, so that going forward I can approach these topics with greater specificity.

In upcoming projects, I'm interested in continuing to explore the idea of "understanding" through art, and where the worlds of *logos* and *mythos* intersect, but with a focus on the process of learning. In order to pursue my interest in art that is "functional" and accessible, I plan to develop a proposal for an Art and Change Grant from the Leeway Foundation, addressing the idea of "nourishing and nurturing" women and children, both literally and symbolically. While I see my career path eventually leading back to the classroom, I plan to spend the upcoming year continuing to develop as an artist and seriously pursuing opportunities to show my work. In addition to the Art and Change Grant, I plan to apply for the W.K. Rose Fellowship in the Creative Arts, open to alumni of Vassar College, under the age of thirty-six, pursuing careers in the fine arts.

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