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As the ravens watch: exploring the oracle

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AS THE RAVENS WATCH:
EXPLORING THE ORACLE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Kathryn Lavender Hunter
B.F.A. Montana State University, 1999
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This Thesis work is dedicated to my Grandmother, Margie Miles Wright. She taught me the true meaning of craft.

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ABSTRACT

I believe in the process in which the artist never works alone but always in collaboration with the elements of chance. As an artist I live and work everyday collaborating with chance, from reading my cards to creating ethereal birds. As I sew pieces together, the thread becomes another element of the image by chance, stitches to lines, lines to pattern. Chance leads the birds to portraying their own personality as they are each created, one’s head tilts to the right while another sits tall with dignity. This work is about the connection to the subconscious, my connection to it through what I see, people I know, games I play, what I dream.

Through objects based on historical divination practices, I offer a chance for the viewer to journey inward to examine her own subconscious. This is not a declaration of the validity of these practices. “Can one explain the magic of life to someone who cannot perceive it in the smallest everyday things?” -Rosa Luxemborg. It is up to the viewer how these games of chance are interpreted in their own life. I search for truth. But truth to me is not constant. It moves like the phases of the moon, circling, waxing, and waning. Tomorrow may hold answers that are different than today’s. I believe that we know much more than our conscious brains reveal. By connecting to the subconscious we gain access to the depths within ourselves. May the birds guide us to the next level of awareness.
As the Ravens Watch: Exploring the Oracle

“Unless they know every law that controls mankind, that law they do not know may be the one whose existence they deny. Unless they have been in every portion of the universe, that portion they have not seen may contain the secret of the whole; and unless they know every power that constitutes life, that power they do not know may be the very one that marks the hand.”

-Cheiro (Cheiro 23)

No one knows what the future holds. As each minute passes and becomes the past, we live the future. We cannot grasp the reality of it until we experience it. We search for answers to things we cannot understand or comprehend. We have longed for the knowledge of tomorrow, perhaps to control what is uncontrollable, or perhaps to rationalize what we cannot clearly perceive. What leads me to this body of thesis work is my curiosity of the oracle, messengers of another dimension, and the magic of chance. In this exhibition, I am exploring how we connect to ourselves by creating and offering interpretations of divination and the oracular. I hope to lead the viewer in discovering more integral parts of their subconscious.

The oracle is something that gives divinely inspired messages or revelations (Merriam-Webster 519). The oracle is the teller of fortunes or the fortune itself. It tells our future through chance; our fate and destiny. It can lead us to the possibilities in life, some we are aware of and some we are not. Since the beginning of existence the human race has developed games of chance, rituals of hope, and modes of connections to our subconscious.

These systems are acts of divination that have been created to foresee our future. It is said that Napoleon carried a “mystic oracle” on his campaigns and that he consulted it before battles. It consisted of questions, a mode of consulting them, and symbols giving answers (Gibson 34). The earliest record of the tarot cards is said to be from the fourteenth century (Doane 20). The tarot is a deck of seventy-eight cards with images and symbols, that when dealt reveal the participant’s fate. Palmistry, the art of hand reading, is found in Vedic scripts and may have originated as far back as 2000 BC (Reid 12). These are just a few examples.

As an artist I have been inspired by the Surrealists and their efforts in connecting to the subconscious. They believed the subconscious was just as important as the conscious and through games and other exercises they attempted to make it “real.” This leads me to the study of divination. Through divination we connect to our subconscious and we connect to ourselves.
Believing or disbelieving does not matter. Divination is considered an act of intuitive perception (Merriam-Webster 227). The instance we turn the card or the wheel stops spinning, we see the symbols. Therefore we examine their validity in our world, how they fit in our existence. We choose the card or the number, the wheel stops on an image, the line moves across our hand like no other’s. All this is through chance. Whether we interpret a card or read a fortune from a fortune cookie, we connect to ourselves by reading it.

Few of the motions we make result from premeditated thought. They’re directed by the subconscious mind...The range of subconscious perception is far greater than that of the physical senses. All that a person has ever experienced or known is stored in his subconscious...As soon as the subconscious mind focuses its attention on obtaining specific information, the psychic senses respond with alacrity. They are able to acquire information inaccessible to physical senses. This information resides as a memory in the subconscious (Doane 24).

**Connecting the Subconscious to the Conscious**

There she was again with her heart in her hands, bleeding the warm liquid of her life force. It reminded her of the last time and the time before that. Just when she thought she had put it together, sewn the gaps closed, it was back in her hands. Is it smaller this time? she asked herself, small and precious like the cherished objects she keeps on the shelf that she dusts every Saturday. And then it reminds her of the time waiting in the clinic lobby, her legs sticking to the plastic of the chair. There the seams of her heart came apart easily and wide. The soul center, that’s what it was, the container of the soul, the reliquary of muscles and arteries of life, the center of energy to be worshiped like the icons at the altars. But somehow it was the heart of transformations, the source of rebirth. It is the source of all knowledge. She heard once of people that would sacrifice a goat by cutting out its heart, in which they divided up in a way to read the future of their village. But she doesn’t have the time to sew it all back together. And perhaps she isn’t ready for the knowledge of the future, she may have already lived it.
My grandmother was a passionate woman who walked through life positively, her head up with grace. She was dealt a hand of obstacles and struggles, and joys. She was the matriarch, the goddess, who reigned over our lives without dictatorship or monarchy. She did not choose her role, but accepted it. Only through pain did I see her fragility. In her emotional being, her sensitivities, and her passions, I see myself. I was cut from her cloth, to become another form of her self. She overcame much and her smile touched all our souls.

She becomes an image, an icon, quilted into fabric. Her heart, her soul, is exposed, held together with the healing of the sewn stitch. The source of all knowledge drips into her hands. The dog is her guardian, guarding her through this path. Since we cannot physically see it, I visualize the subconscious as two dimensional. The two dimensionality of the subconscious is flat like the part of ourselves we cannot materialize. Thread has been stitched in patterns over and over holding together the fabric of our inner selves, like the memories and experiences carving out the design of our being. The birds above her and in her psyche whisper messages of the future to come, though she is the past of herself. As her life force drips between her fingers it is drawn to connect to her material form. I see the conscious as three dimensional. The three dimensionality of the conscious is in the round like the part of ourselves we can touch, a reference to her physical life. Like divination connects us to ourselves, her blood connects her to herself.

No one truly knows what the subconscious looks like. The Surrealists in the early to the mid-20th century explored materializing the subconscious, a more reality, a higher reality. Automatic writing, the painting of dreams and the expansion of reality were methods these artists used to connect to themselves and to that unknown to them. Frida Kahlo’s painting, The Two Fridas, shows us a physical manifestation of her emotions, her emotions in terms of symbols, here the connecting of bleeding hearts. Penelope Rosemont explains that “surrealism indicates a higher, open, and dynamic consciousness, from which no aspect of the real is rejected. Far from being a form of irrationalist escapism, surrealism is an immeasurably expanded awareness” (Rosemont xxxiii). The surreal is the whole of the mind. It is the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious. It is all imagination, an expansion of the realization of life. My grandmother’s image on cloth becomes a symbol of her subconscious and by connecting to her three dimensional form, it is the visual expansion of that connection to the conscious world.
The Raven as Oracle

Once I was at a crossroads in my life and there were three ravens that sat on a wire outside my window. Every time I walked outside they spoke to me. I tried not to listen but they yelled until I heard. I started talking to them. Their heads would move and turn in recognition of my words. This interaction continued for several days and left me puzzled. I know now that they were bringing me a message. They were oracles carrying the answers that I was unable to see. They brought messages of rebirth, of re-creation, of reincarnation, of emergence and reemergence, and of the validity of my path. I no longer ignore the speaking of the birds.

Messengers

The oracular is about discovering. The oracle is a prophecy, a revelation, an augury, an answer. The raven and crow are the oracles. They are “angelic messengers, givers of omens, possessors of occult secrets, as well as soul-carriers” (Walker 1983 101). The raven is the “sun
god’s companion, as supernatural creator, and she is valued for her wisdom” (Biedermann 280).

Birds symbolize the power that helps people to speak reflectively and leads them to think out many things in advance before they take action. Just as birds are lifted up into the air by the Feathers and can remain wherever they wish the soul in the body is elevated by thought and spreads its wings everywhere. -St. Hildegard of Bingen (Biedermann 39).

In the gallery space, sitting on lines above us, they watch. The transparent fabric they are made of gives them the quality of being ethereal and still. They wait for the moment to reveal the answer. The birds symbolize the unconscious, as communicators to another world of ourselves. Their intention is to create a feeling of being watched, we are not alone. They provide another energy source in the room, transcendental and supernal. In other areas they are in the cards and they are statuesque, cold and ceramic sitting in a line, with their knowledge deep in their bellies. Offering numbers, like the “take-a-number” stands at places where we stand in line, the birds physically give information to the viewer. Perhaps they will tell us who we are.

The Hand as Oracle

Fortune Hands and Hand Prints         Fortune Hands

“Anatomically, the hands are so important that a greater proportion of the brain is dedicated to them than to any other part of the body” (Reid 10). The art of hand reading is mentioned in the Bible. Aristotle wrote about it in 350 BC. The hand is a vehicle for communication between our inner and outer reality. Our hands are carved in a map of lines that reveal, internally, what type of person we are. Physically we use them to touch, to manipulate, and to interact and communicate.
The hand heals. It creates. It comforts. It gives. It harms and it also repairs.

The lines on the left hand are thought to indicate our natural character while the right hand shows the experiences, training, the effects of our surroundings (Cheiro 77). My left hand reveals signs of vitality. I present three prints, layered with information about who I am. The lines on my palm and the writing on the image become personal reflections of myself. My life line reveals my love of home and tradition (Fiel 5). My head line says I have many interests, my forces often scattered (Fiel 6). I have a determination of purpose and I may rush blindly into danger (Cheiro 87). My heart line says that I am passionate (Fiel 7). This line gives a calm but deeper nature in matters of love (Cheiro 99). I also have a triangle marking the center of my hand which denotes preservation from financial ruin (Fiel 10). I will hope this is always accurate. On examining this information, I believe these things are true of myself. I have to examine myself, reaching inward to match the results. The hand becomes an oracle, revealing my own character. In addition, there are small hands coming out from the wall, offerings of knowledge, handing the viewer messages or fortunes like an oracle.

The Wheel as Chance

We live our lives through chance in everything we do, from the chance meeting of the people in our lives to winning the lottery. Games are forms of chance that we learn early. The Wheel of Fortuna references the “fate wheel,” the magic wheel of time, the reincarnation wheel, and the roulette wheel. Fortuna is the Goddess who turns the karmic wheel of fate. She became
“patroness of gamblers when her fate wheel was secularized as the carnival Wheel of Fortune” (Walker 1983 321). The wheel can be spun and through chance it stops on a section. Instead of giving the spinner an exact fate after the wheel has stopped, it offers more information about the images in each section. The viewer is invited into each space, each of which holds messages of how we live our lives, from breathing air from smokestacks to thinking with our heart. Opening each box, discovering hidden information, references the act of going deeper into ourselves. Here the subconscious is symbolized by closed boxes that we have to open to discover.

**The Doll Offering Chance**

The doll is a fetish, telling fortunes. Dolls have been used in worship, in magic, in play, and in education. “Their vocabulary eloquently expresses the traditions of mankind” (Fox 50). They are personified spirits “governing rain, the sun, the crops, the animals” (Walker 1988 261). “Personifying...offers another venue of loving, of imagining things in personal form so that we can find access to them with our hearts...personifying emotionalizes” (Turner 114). In the form of beautiful ladies and tantalizers, they become games, offering messages of the future- the double message of our society- offering what is “beautiful” and what our world will become. One doll is a topsy turvy doll. One way, her skirt is printed with regular fortunes from fortune cookies. Flip
her around and her skirt is printed with what looks like the same fortunes as the other side. However, the fortunes here have been altered. They now are messages of war and declarations of violence. In this doll, the chance becomes a choice. The viewer has a choice from which side to choose his or her fortune and which fortune to choose. The other doll is a fortune telling doll. Her skirt is made up of tarot cards. The cards are in a random order and the viewer can ask a question to themselves and then choose a card. Read like a tarot card, the card will give the answer. Interpretations of the cards are provided with the piece. The dolls offer us fortunes we choose by chance.

**The Cards as Chance**

The “cards you are dealt,” is an expression we still use. A deck of seventy-eight cards, the tarot is an ancient form of divination using symbols and familiar images to feed your intuition with recognition: The original playing cards. I acquired my first deck of tarot cards when I was twelve years old. My cousin was visiting and she showed me the magic of the cards. She insisted that she read her cards everyday and that I must do the same. I followed this regiment until I slowly lost the habit. But the cards have remained a fixture in my life, one I pick up from time to time, sometimes everyday, sometimes with many months in between.
“The tarot cards act as a means of directing the subconscious to acquire information” (Doane 25). They interest me, because through them I develop a better understanding of what is happening in the present or that which has passed. I am amazed at how often I will get a certain card over and over and then never seem to get it again. It makes me examine the meaning and how it fits or does not fit in my existence.

The cards are broken up into two parts, the Major Arcana and the Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana is the most important suit in the deck and the cards have profound archetypal meanings. It is made up of twenty-two cards with a corresponding number and image, for example, I is the Magician and XVI is the Tower. The Minor Arcana consists of four suits of fourteen cards, the Wands, the Pentacles, the Swords, and the Cups. These cards relate to the daily issues in our lives. I lay out a spread, a pattern of cards that each stand for a time- the past, present, near future, outcome. The pictures and symbols on the cards reach into myself bringing forth understanding.

I present the cards in a line, like a railing to steady us through life, and they are also set on a table ready for interaction. The screen printed characters in my life, they are from the past and in the future becoming symbols based on traditional tarot cards and who they are as individuals. My friend Gabriella becomes the image of XIV Temperance. The Temperance card is about self-modulation, taking care of physical and spiritual well-being. It recalls the matriarchal belief that the body should be honored (Renee 63). As a mother and an owner of a business dealing with health and longevity, Gabriella fits this card well. My grandmother becomes XXI The World. The World card references the balance between earth and heaven and the belief that it is possible to achieve heaven on Earth. It is a card of creative living and artistic inspiration (Renee 87). My grandmother kept my childhood in balance, encouraged my creativity, and inspired me to stay focused in the arts. She meant the world to me. The cards play a role in the causes and effects of those who observe them, connecting to the subconscious, extending my life into yours. The people I am connected with or have been connected with in the past become by chance, symbols that explore the cycles of life experience. Shuffle and turn the cards over to reveal your fate.
“Magic is in itself only a will, and this will is the great mystery of every miracle and every secret: it operates through the appetite of the being’s desire” - Leila Ferraz (Rosemont 344).

Like Remedios Varo, I believe in the “process in which the artist never works alone but always in collaboration with the elements of chance” (Kaplan 179). As an artist I live and work everyday collaborating with chance, from reading my cards to writing this paper to creating ethereal birds. As I sew pieces together the thread becomes another element of the image by chance, stitches to lines, lines to pattern. Chance leads the birds to portraying their own personality as they are each created, one’s head tilts to the right while another sits tall with dignity. This work is about the connection to the subconscious, my connection to it through what I see, people I know, games I play, what I dream. Through objects based on historical divination practices I offer a chance for the viewer to journey inward to examine her own inner reality. This is not a declaration of the validity of these practices. “Can one explain the magic of life to someone who cannot perceive it in the smallest everyday things?” -Rosa Luxemborg (Rosemont xxxii). It is up to the viewer how these games of chance are interpreted in his or her own life. I search for truth. But truth to me is not constant. It moves like the phases of the moon, circling, waxing, and waning. Tomorrow may hold answers that are different than today’s. I believe that we know much more than our conscious brains reveal. By connecting to the subconscious we gain access to the depths within ourselves. May the birds guide us to the next level of awareness.

Installation, “As the Ravens Watch”, Gallery shot
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Kathryn Lavender Hunter was born in Decatur, Alabama, on July 15, 1972. She is the daughter of Robert T. Hunter Jr. and Betty and Chuck Weaver. Kathryn graduated from Decatur High School in 1990. She spent the next almost ten years exploring the landscape of Yellowstone National Park and Montana. In 1999, Kathryn received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with an emphasis in printmaking, from Montana State University, in Bozeman, Montana. In the Fall of 2000, she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree at Louisiana State University, which will be awarded in the Fall of 2003.