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THE BODY IS A RELIQUARY

by

Lorraine Pamela McDonnell

A Thesis

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Abstract

The Body is a Reliquary employs sculpture, painting and ceramic to visually demonstrate how the body serves as a container for the psychic products created, stored and transformed over a lifetime. The work uses religious tropes and language to highlight the sacred nature of the psyche and the process by which trauma is alchemized into joy. The research is grounded in the theories developed by depth psychologist Carl Jung and the many post-Jungian analysts who have expanded on his original idea which is that the psyche speaks to us through symbol, story and myth. Materially, the sculpture, painting and ceramic pieces in *The Body is a Reliquary* use Jung's devices of symbol, story and myth to demonstrate how the psyche might appear if it were a visible entity. The conclusion of the work points to the synchronicities that occur when psyche collides with matter and negative experience is found to be redemptive.

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Introduction

My current work explores how the human body serves as a reliquary for the psychic products created, transformed and stored inside the physical body. The work does not follow a straight line. It begins at the site of the biological body and gets lost inside its metaphysical landscapes. The body that marked these pages with language is the same one that formed the artwork it dares to explain. Like the body, my work is dimensional with an outside and an inside where it can hold things. I locate these “things” within the metaphor of the relic as that which is held and the reliquary—that which holds.

The pieces that make up *The Body is a Reliquary* [TBIR] are formed from a bricolage of moments transformed into deep symbolism which then are placed into a physical space.¹ Conceptually, the work explores how the psyche uses symbols to create meaning from the lived experience. Materially, the work is multi-dimensional and employs a wide array of processes and mediums. The result of which, is an installation that performs a kind of “fractal-branching” leaving the audience to find a thing within a thing within another thing. The work includes painted one-off images from drawings that I refer to as glyphs, glazed ceramic figures called Psychoids and two hand-built wood sculptures with textile skins. The repetition of motifs and color unite the varying structures, ultimately fusing them into one body of work.

The following chapters address unique aspects of the individual pieces as they relate to each chapter theme. Some pieces will be addressed in multiple chapters but analyzed under the lens of different theories. The chapters are preceded by this introduction and followed by a conclusion wherein I remind myself that transmuting experiences into relics and building a place for them is a universal experience wherein I am not alone.

¹ (Nachmanovitch n.d., 86)

Chapter one discusses embodiment and why I chose reliquary as a metaphor to represent these ideas. Chapter two covers the relic, what it is and how I appropriate it to serve my interests in Jungian psychology. Chapter three addresses glyphic motifs and their implication that joy is a destination—a non-dual place that acknowledges the both/and nature of the psyche and the body. Further chapters will address the practice of improvisation, its benefits and its psychological effects (Ch. 4), the oneness hypothesis (Ch. 5) and a conclusion (Ch. 6). Each chapter will connect the work back to either the relic, the reliquary or both.

My interest in this work comes from a curiosity about the human psyche with its mysterious desire to communicate through symbol and story. Knowing that psyche cannot exist without the body “holding it in place” layers the work and sets it inside a formula that seems to be an infinitely self-referencing loop. There is a deep well of artists, writers, poets and mythological story tellers from which to draw insight when researching the psyche. This was perhaps one of the most fulfilling aspects to this work. To know that universal questions around human existence are shared and pondered by so many creatives makes me feel honored to have allowed this work into being. With that said, a large part of this writing included research that did not find its way directly into this essay. It was nevertheless pivotal in the understanding of the work and is therefore recognized in the bibliography.

Backstory

“Meaning” is a moving object and uncovering its existence has been a driving force for me since youth. Loneliness and chaos brought me to a search for meaning early in life as I struggled to make sense of my world. Growing up under the care of a working, single mother left my sibling and me neglected for more than a decade in early childhood. Beginning life with my mental health dangerously unattended created a snowball effect and I struggled with deep depression and self-harm well into my late twenties.

My life took another difficult turn in my forties after losing three immediate family members within a five-year period. Alongside these years of caregiving, hospice and grief, I worked with a spiritual director who mentored me in the practice of contemplative meditation. This “grief relief effort” led me to the work of Depth Psychologist Carl Jung, and the important role symbols play in assigning meaning to the experiences we have. After ten years of working to uncover my personal symbols, I came to the realization that I needed help. Stephen Nachmanovitch talks about the “*Imaginary Liberation Front*” where artists work on the self and material together, in an alchemy of sympathetic resonance.¹ It was from this front that I came to this program. I was raw and hungry for resonance.

I am providing a non-detailed background on these states of mental health now so that when I move into the chapter on joy, you can gain an understanding of how exciting it can be to find meaning through symbolism and mythology. The search for meaning I began so early in life was and always will be fueled by my hope that this life is meant for joy. It was and still is an elusive endeavor but one from which I have found assurance through creative work.

¹ (Nachmanovitch n.d., 184)

Chapter One: Spaces, Reliquaries and Church

In archetypal lore there is the idea that if one prepares a special psychic place, then the being, the creative force, the soul source, will hear of it, sense its way to it, and inhabit that place.
Clarissa Pinkola Estes¹

My creative practice and my spiritual practice have always been enmeshed. It's difficult to see where one ends and the other begins. Looking back, I can see how this has always been the case for me. As a child, much of my playtime was spent alone in my bedroom talking to disembodied forces. Was it God, angels, guides, the universe, the cosmos, ancestors? Yes. And it felt like church. I would rearrange my bedroom furniture constantly, an act which I now understand was a way to create a corrective experience from my complicated childhood. My bedroom was my very first reliquary. My first "go" at curating objects in space in an effort to find meaning. My instinctual desires to do, to be the cause, to explore, to arrange things, evolved into deeper passions later in life.² As an adult, the concept of the reliquary has become more complicated, but it mimics the (spiritual) practice I was performing in my bedroom all those years ago.

When I speak of spiritual practice, I speak of meaning-making—a psychological term used to describe the process of how people "retain, reaffirm, revise, or replace elements of their orienting system to develop more nuanced, complex and useful systems."³ Agnes Martin once said "You're the only one that can discover for you the meaning of anything...how it makes you feel. You have to investigate what goes through your mind."⁴ My creative practice is just this type of investigation and it is enabled entirely by my body. The things I discover are hidden in it.

¹ (Estés 1992, 313)

² (Nachmanovitch n.d., 166)

³ (Gillies, Neimeyer and Milman 2014, 207)

⁴ (Martin 2002, 3)

In his 1999 book *The feeling of what happens*, Antonio Damasio states that the “biological body is the site of emotions and feelings, without which [it] would either seize to exist, or else fail, miserably, at its attempts to pursue its own physical and social well-being.”⁵ As I grew older and could feel my emotions and experiences accumulating, the metaphor of the reliquary naturally moved from my bedroom to my body.

In this work, I frequently use religious terminology outside the context of religion. The work is religious in the sense that it “believes in a power or powers” but it does not claim to have even the slightest definitive knowledge of who those powers might be. When I use the term *soul*, I am pointing to what archetypal psychologist James Hillman describes as a psychopomp—“a symbol that bridges distinct territories such as inner and outer, conscious and unconscious, material and spiritual, the known and the unknown. The psychopomp is situated in the middle and yet remains connected to both sides of polarity.”⁶ The psychopomp--or the trickster--or the soul is the non-dual entity that curates the experiences of our embodiment.

Soul is a mysterious thing. It can’t be found in Gray’s Anatomy, yet it competes for space inside my skin and alongside my bones. In *Lighthouse*, 2023, (Figure 1) a monumental skeleton in the shape of a lantern is covered in translucent muslin skin. This skin is marred with psychological imprints that are illuminated from within by a somatic light source. Marion Woodman walks us through this complicated convergence of light and matter in her book *Conscious Femininity*. She explains that where we find “light in matter” we are witnessing “embodied light...the wisdom of the body.”⁷ In TBIR, *Lighthouse* is a reliquary for our wisdom, and it serves as a navigational signifier grounding us in the here and now. By way of its title, the

⁵ (Damasio 1999, 164) (Martin 2002)

⁶ (Hillman 1975, xvi)

⁷ (Woodman 1993, 62)

piece implies the existence of a lightkeeper whose sole job is to maintain the light and guide the wayfarer safely back to land. The lightkeeper is comfortable with solitude, embodies mental and spiritual strength and lives in between two worlds—the lightkeeper is a psychopomp.

In the mid-1990s, artist Christian Boltanski explored the reliquary as a spiritual container, using concepts similar to those in *Lighthouse*. Boltanski does not embellish his container like the Christian reliquaries from centuries ago. He is not being literal but is staying in the metaphorical realm of the reliquary simply as a container for the sacred. As such, both works form simple boxes constructed from wood, with Boltanski using screen to skin his container contrasted with the muslin fabric found on *Lighthouse*. Similar to *Lighthouse*, *Reliquaire*, 1996, (Figure 2) hosts a florescent light inside the box that illuminates the heads over which the light is placed. In both pieces, the light functions as a signifier of the spiritual.

In *Reliquaire*, the light serves as a halo above photographs, in *Lighthouse* its cast comes from a mysterious, inner glow. Understood within the religious context of reliquaries, Boltanski's reliquaries suggest that the objects held within are sacred remnants from the lives of those depicted.⁸

And again, to the lightkeeper or more symbolically, the light as a psychopomp, we see abstract concepts existing inside of abstract concepts. The thing within a thing. The light exists inside the lighthouse, so the relic resides inside the reliquary as sacred form. We can see how in matter “light is an invitation to happiness, when it’s done right, is a kind of holiness, palpable and redemptive.”⁹

⁸ (DeRoo 2009)

⁹ (Oliver 1992)

Chapter Two: The Relics of Redemption

*So here are some stories...
some observations, some map fragments,
some little pieces of pine pitch for fastening feathers
to trees to show the way, and some flattened
underbrush to guide the way back to ... the
underground world, our psychic home.
Clarissa Pinkola Estés¹*

Finding our psychic home is like trying to catch air in our hands. We can cup them together tightly or we can let them hang loose—either way the air remains pressed into our palms. A charted path does not exist. Few guideposts point the way. Once there, little material evidence exists to prove our arrival. It is in the souls who try to catch air in their hands that relics collect and seek their redemption from the pain that birthed them into being.

Chances are that when we think of holding something in our hands, we are not thinking about the airiness of the psyche, but instead are imagining material objects. The work comprising TBIR expands on the idea of *the object* to include not just the tangible but also the vague debris floating about our psyche. An object could be a wood carving like the one found in, *Psychoid, detail, 2022* (figure 3) or it could be the anger left over after a fight or traumatic event. These objects become symbolic relics when “somehow in the alchemy of things, as human hands and minds work on the world, the ordinary transmutes into the extraordinary, the imperfect is made perfect, and what was once expendable becomes a protected and cherished object.”² Through alchemy, the object is elevated to the sacred.

In *Psyche Rides the Vehicle of Individuation, 2022* (figure 4), Psyche’s vehicle is built entirely from relics—the holy end-pieces of her experiences. In a literal sense, the end-pieces are

¹ (Estés 1992, 19)

² (Yiengpruksawan 2001, 397)

strips from an old painting torn and repurposed into new work. They stack atop each other, tapering as they ascend to build a ziggurat-shaped vehicle. The ziggurat is a motif that frequently reappears in the work. It originated in the form of a glyph and grew in both scale and importance as the work evolved. It is seen in *Psyche Rides the Vehicle of Individuation*, but it also appears in *Psychic Debris* (figure 6) and again as the foundation of *Lighthouse*. The ziggurat elevates and tapers as it approaches a metaphysical higher ground. From a mystical perspective, Psyche sits inside the experiences she has transformed and allows them to propel her towards her full potential. C.G. Jung names this movement “the psychological process of individuation.”³

Post-Jungian analyst, Judy Isaak names the process of individuation as the place where we transmute our suffering into relics. She writes:

If our suffering is redeemable, [we] will be called to the work of responding to and creating an identity through our aloneness and our deepest sense of self—which might prove to be the greatest distance we ever travel to find understanding and acceptance. I am encouraged to believe, in the way of Christian mysticism, that “those who listen carefully enter into an ever-expanding understanding of what is.”⁴

Artist Louise Bourgeois spent over three decades in psychoanalysis working towards her own individuation. Her life’s work investigates the very ideas addressed in Isaak’s encouragement. *Spider (Cell)*, 1997 (figure 5) pulls multiple psychological concepts into one piece. Visually, it implies the presence of a reliquary through the use of space. With panels of steel fencing, Bourgeois forms a container within which she carefully places items of vital importance: fragments of family tapestries, jars, needles and locket. These objects, whose sacred status may only be known to Bourgeois, were of enough value that she took care to “hold” them in their own reliquary. Conceptually, Bourgeois is exploring her experience with her

³ (Gotthilf 2021, 144)

⁴ (Isaac 2007, 47)

mother through the protective posture of the spider, the symbolism of tapestry and the “doing and undoing” of the cell.

Spider (Cell) shares an additional, uncanny connection to *Psyche rides the Vehicle of Individuation* in its critique by Deborah Wye, who curated Bourgeois’ first retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1982. Wye describes the Cells as a ‘vehicle’ for Bourgeois to ‘isolate her thoughts and emotions and grapple with them.’⁵ Both pieces rest on the cornerstone of Jung’s theory that our subconscious speaks to us through symbol, image and archetypes and that these visual relics appear to us in our art as mythological stories.⁶

In the beginning of this chapter, I spoke on the difficult journey we embark upon to reach our psychic home and the collection of relics amassed along the way. Visual artist Kiki Smith examines these relics as if they were a model. Similar to a relic as a representation of experience, models allow us to assess meaning. Smith seems to be saying that our psychic home is a collection made from the trio of journey, arrival and meaning:

Making art is a way to externalize or synthesize your experience or consciousness. We do this to be able to look at it like a model so we can ask ourselves “is it like that?”, “does it feel like that?”, “is that an accurate assessment?” or “is that something that can hold you?” It is like you are meandering around a garden, you’re not trying to get anywhere as an artist, you’re just circumnavigating the landscape, in a wandering way, that you might not arrive anywhere in particular or you might get lost along the way, like anything can happen.

If we take her term “model” literally, we can identify these investigative questions in her sculptural piece *Red-Caps*, 1999 (figure 6) where she applied paper skin to a plywood skeleton to form six life-size bodies. In a critique of the work, former MOMA curator Wendy Weitman, observes Smith exploring the body as a container for urges. She sees Smith highlighting conflicts

⁵ (Wye 2017, 39)

⁶ (Jung, *The Red Book: Liver Novus*, A Readers Edition n.d., 47)

that exist together inside our psyche and notes that we are both “wolf and child, predator and prey.”⁷

I was asking similar questions in *Psychoid*, 2022 (figure 7), with the added component of a relic nestled into the heart space of the sculpture. By definition, the term *psychoid* is a metaphysical concept that “refers to the unreachable, unknowable parts of us.”⁸ An important aspect of this sculpture is that there is a convergence of two separate entities: the experience/relic with matter/reliquary. Jung noticed that when matter collided with psyche, meaningful synchronicities took place. In an attempt to define these phenomena, he redefined the term *psychoid* to be one of a descriptive nature (i.e., as adjective rather than noun). R. Brooke clarifies Jung’s explanation by stating that the psychoid archetype is “an attempt to found psychological life within the materiality of the body and the body within the materiality of the world in a way that is not reductionistic but that sees the body... as fundamentally, however rudimentarily, psychological”⁹

So, the work in *The Body is a Reliquary* with its relics and its psychoids serves as an intersection where matter directly collides with psyche. The result of this collision, entirely choreographed by the psychopomp, is a numinous, connective experience which Jungian Analyst Isler Gotthilf describes as the place where “for a moment in time, our outside and our inner experience come together and... we experience the oneness of the world.”¹⁰

⁷ (Weitman 2003, 38)

⁸ (Saban 2021, 2)

⁹ (Brooke 2015, 84)

¹⁰ (Gotthilf 2021, 26)

Chapter Three: Tricksterian Joy

*So, in the performance, as in our lives,
our personal stories, which began as experiences
both oppressive and depressive, end with
joy and a strong sense of self.
Clarissa Pinkola Estés*

This work is not interested in breaking apart the relics of trauma. Instead, the paintings and sculptures are inspiration for what exists beyond these experiences. Rather than locating inside of “what happened” or “the sadness of it all” the work arches around these experiences forming an aura of tender regard. This aura also sets a boundary similar to the one Agnes Martin references when explaining her spiritual practice: “I believe in living above the line. Above the line is happiness and love, you know. Below the line is all sadness and destruction and unhappiness. And I don’t go down below the line for anything.”¹

During my second semester, my studio began to populate with drawings of hybrid beings--separate at first then soon integrating in a collective performance. Together, the imagery mirrored the design of ancient hieroglyphic images. It presented as a language insistent on living “above the line.” The individual glyphs imply an unaffected nature about embodiment and seem to exist inside a dance performance. The soul resonance that came from encountering these images led me to carefully catalogue each glyph. What resulted was a digital library containing over one hundred glyphs that became the main motifs for rest of the work (Figure 8).

The design of the motifs is childlike in that they resemble. They are flat and lack dimension. In this way they announce their full service to symbolism and “bend towards

¹ (Martin 2002)

simplification—they are clear, unique and exclusive of the non-essential.”² This simplicity builds a childlike place where analyst Marion Woodman believes:

Our inner child has to be disciplined in order to release its tremendous spiritual powers. If we identify with its childish side, we say “I was always a victim. I will always be a victim and it’s all my parents’ fault.” On the other hand, if we identify with the *childlike* part we say “my parents were the victims of a culture, as were their parents and their parents. I will not be a victim. I will take responsibility for my own life. I will live creatively. I will live in the *now*.” To be *childlike* is to be spontaneous, able to live in the moment, concentrated, imaginative, creative. Most of us have forgotten how to play, forgotten the joy of creativity. Without joy, we find ourselves running away from pain. Without creativity, we run away from emptiness. The faster we run, the more severe the addictions, we cannot face our own nothingness. Nothingness is the ultimate anguish of childish people who live their lives as who they are *not* rather than who they *are*.³

The Glyphs are tricksterian psychopomps that transform traumatic experiences into symbols we can work with in a childlike way. In explaining the symbols and forms that take place in her work, artist Kiki Smith suggests that they are “fantastic opportunities” to play with different methods and she implies that forms and objects are relics in that they cause the psyche to sense things as a reliquary.⁴ These symbols and forms are constantly being created from our experience by “trickster rascallions of multiple dimensions... sometimes bringing comic relief during times of sorrow or sometimes bringing joyous artistic expression through antics.”⁵ So it is in this way that the glyph motif works in the sculptures and paintings individually, and in the installation as whole. They are *rascallion reminders* that there is a kinetic activity happening above, below and within the work. They exist to surprise us, confound us and help us become whole.

It was in this state of becoming that the work prodded me into a 3D relationship with the glyphs. I began to shape them in space through ceramics. In the same way that the God of

² (Reeves 2017)

³ (Woodman 1993, 49)

⁴ (Smith, *In a Wandering Way* 2021)

⁵ (Williams 2012, intro)

Christianity created Adam out of dust from the earth, the glyphs became living, dimensional beings when I formed them in clay. Hand building allowed me to connect with them slowly and on a personal level. They were no longer flat, low dimension symbols. They were fully formed beings in space with individual characteristics (Figure 9). The ceramic pieces bring their mythological hybridity into space to illustrate the idea of a unified consciousness experiencing itself inside a body of matter. This experiential concept was being embraced as far back as 1940 when Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said that “we are nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself.”⁶

In returning to the work of Kiki Smith, I found parallels in how the use of ceramic can imbibe characters with life so that as creators we may explore their subtlety and individuality.⁷ Just as my psychoid ceramic figures were inspired by their 2D glyph counterparts, Smiths terracotta figures (figure 10) were inspired by the painted characters in Pietro Longhi’s paintings. In both cases the investigation had to move beyond the two-dimensional suggestion of the object into the realm of a tangible, hand-held relic. Slowly and carefully forming the glyphs into space placed them into the *corrective experience* of doing, causing, exploring, and arranging that I discussed in Chapter One.⁸

⁶ (Chardin n.d., 154)

⁷ (Engberg 2006, 78)

⁸ (Nachmanovitch n.d., 166)

Chapter Four: Improvisation

*It is play, not properness, that is the central artery,
the core, the brain stem of creative life.
The impulse to play is an instinct.
No play, no creative life.
Be good, no creative life.
Sit still, no creative life.
Speak, think, act only demurely, little creative juice.
Clarissa Pinkola Estés¹*

As in jazz, each piece in this body of work developed through on-the-spot decisions. Improvisation allowed my unconscious to turn ambiguous insights into engaging, relatable objects. It neutralized my tendency for order and opened the door to a chaotic primordial force. Over the course of the program, I was obedient to the call-and-response process. Looking back, I can identify the moment in my studio when the work became The Work. What followed for the remainder of my research and studio time was a trust in momentum, (sometimes painfully slow) and submitting to uncertainty (Am I actually making anything?).

This defining moment of The Work came as a flash of impulse. I was sitting, staring at a wall pinned full of drawings that I had been working on for several months. Exhausted from looking at them in that state for several weeks, my psyche whispered “first the yield, then the activation.” I pulled an 8-foot-long sheet of white paper from a roll and placed it over the wall of drawings. In one line, not lifting my pencil from the surface, I traced the drawings in a quick gestural move (Figure 11). I was inside the “metaphor of the thin place” where there exists an opportunity to see the unseen. In describing this “place”, Timothy J. Joyce writes that to be there “is to perceive that time and place do not separate us from what we ordinarily do not see and sense. The ancient Celts believed that the other world is always close to us and becomes apparent

¹ (Estés 1992, 245)

in the ‘thin times’ and ‘thin places’ in which the veil that usually obscured them was lifted.”² I knew something supernatural was happening even though the act took only a few short minutes. It was pure improvisation.

The call to improvisation and play is a characteristic move of the psychopomp. In its tricksterian way, the Psychopomp lures us into “magical acts of creation that are analogous to pulling a large amount of rabbit from a small amount of hat. As in the greatest known form of magic, organic growth and evolution, the output is greater than the input.”³ The small five-minute act of tracing drawings on the wall led to the previously mentioned catalogue of motifs. I was given so much gain from this one short experience but uncovering what to do with it set me back down into the deep practice of play. Playing as an adult requires a re-committing oneself hourly to fighting off the demons of progress. They relentlessly heckled my impulsive experimentation and tried to run me offstage.

As Clarissa Pinkola Estes mentions in the opening quote, to sit still, be good and not play is to not create. I pressed on. When the call was for destruction, I responded with little resistance as I tore, cut and disassembled every new painting. Accepting strange outcomes and unfinished work became an integral part of my studio practice. During this time of destruction, the work remained hidden and resisted being pinned down, but in the end, two pieces, *Psyche Rides the Vehicle of Individuation* and *Lighthouse*, were completed from the debris of this process.

The pieces that ended up in the show came at a point when the frenetic energy was waning. The first piece that resisted destruction emerged during this time of calmness. It began as the idea of a self-portrait of both me and one of the ceramic glyphs. This painting was pivotal in that it took the motifs, theories and processes I had been toying with over the prior year and

² (Joyce 1998, 154)

³ (Nachmanovitch n.d., 86)

combined them into something new. It was like the metamorphic vision Nachmanovitch describes when our ordinary, daily “things” come alive before us:

A child’s imagination can see a twig as a man, a bridge or a telescope. This transmutation through creative vision is the actual, day-to-day realization of alchemy. In bricolage, we take the ordinary materials in our hands and turn them into new living matter—the “green gold” of the alchemists. The fulcrum of the transformation is mind-at-play, having nothing to gain and nothing to lose, working and playing around the limits and resistances of the tools we hold in our hands.⁴

The “green gold” that presented itself in the self-portrait points to the order that emerges out of chaos. Even though the visuals in *Self-Portrait*, 2022 (Figure 12) are chaotic, they rest together in an orderly fashion. It reminds me of the installation work by Sarah Sze. In her piece *The Uncountables (Encyclopedia)*, 2010, (figure 13), we see hundreds of objects covering many ranges in scale that exist together in an order. While the sculpture is a gathering of many parts it fuses as one piece in its containment and grounds itself in space by a grid system of boards and blue painter’s tape.

What puts the piece in such deep conversation with my work is not only how it embraces improvisation, but that it also intersects with the idea of unrelated and collected objects coming together to form a bricolage. When speaking of her work, Sze emphasizes the cruciality of improvisation. She “wants the work to be a sort of experience of something live--to have this feeling that you can see decisions happening on site the way you see a live sports event, the way you hear jazz. The spontaneous is where it is the most interesting for the artist and for the viewer.”⁵

Self-Portrait then, is a bricolage. It combines different paints (oil, acrylic and enamel) with different mediums (store bought and homemade). The use of two mediums with different

⁴ (Nachmanovitch n.d., 87)

⁵ (Sze 2012)

chemical and body makeups is evident in the varying sheens across the surface of the canvas. I allowed myself the opportunity to experiment. The surface is not perfect and in places it even appears messy and unfinished. All experiments were individual to the moment I was painting and allude to the psychic space I inhabited while working the paint. I was in an act of *opening* the previous 18 months of play into a singular piece.

Chapter Five: A Thing Within a Thing is a Whole Within a Whole

*... one shard of archetype can
carry the image of the whole.
Clarissa Pinkola Estés¹*

In the Franciscan periodical *Oneing*, Ilia Delio, a Georgetown University Science and Religion Fellow, investigates Quantum Physics and the science behind the interconnectedness of all that exists. She writes that “being is intrinsically relational and exists as unbroken wholeness. Each part is connected to every other part. At the quantum level, autonomy is a misnomer. Rather, the whole is the basic reality. We are, fundamentally, wholes within wholes.”² *Self-Portrait* was my first attempt to demonstrate the concept of the whole by fusing creative spontaneity and evolutionary process together into one piece. I later explored a whole within a whole by inserting a smaller sculpture inside a larger one in *Psychoid* and by adding the component of light inside the *Lighthouse*. This is where the individual pieces in the body of work seem to connect together to form something larger.

Stepping back in time to that magical moment when the work become The Work, I now understand why I couldn’t lift my pencil from the surface of the paper while tracing the glyphs. I was in the act of *oneing* dozens of individual drawings into a whole. The lines that connected each glyph together were conduits through which a unified psyche or consciousness could flow. While this living conduit is undetectable to the human eye, the painted skin of *Lighthouse* can model it so we may more easily imagine its reality. The ethos that drives my work is this care for connection. For without this care, I flirt with harming the whole. Creating reliquaries for my life and the lives of all things is my metaphysical responsibility.

¹ (Estés 1992, 355)

² (Ilia Delio 2013, 14)

Ceramicist Mary Caroline Richards found that even nature heeds the call to metaphysical responsibility. Like hands cupping air or hands centering a lump of clay on the wheel (figure 14), she noted how matter can gently hold. In her book *Centering*, she writes about it in detail:

One living form unfolds out of the previous one, as we can plainly see if we look carefully at any grass plant. It is not cause and effect, it is metamorphosis. The space the new stem comes out of is hollow. It is empty. The next form comes straight from source. [The image] of the sun raying out into all the vocabularies of our deeds [is] the way source works from center. That source contains both our memory of what has happened so far, and the empty space of our freedom. Like the grass, the hollow is part of the plant.³

Oneing is a concept that has profoundly affected how I approach the marriage of soul and matter. It is the reason why the reliquary resonates so deeply and why so much inquiry takes place in the psyche in an effort to not only comprehend it, but also to activate it responsibly in my own life.

³ (Richards n.d., 60)

Conclusion: Above the Line

*This is the test of our inner certainty ...
can two forces remain connected even if one or the
other is abominable and despicable?
can union continue even when seeds of
doubt are strenuously being planted?
Thus far the answer is yes.
Clarissa Pinkola Estés¹*

It is impossible for me to make art separate from personal narrative. My goal for this writing was to stay focused on relics as the aftermath of our experiences. For this reason, I refrained from telling any personal stories until now. I have saved this one story. It is recent and it shows my humanity, the humanity around me and the fragility of the connective conduit.

This story begins in the Spring of 2022. My sixteen-year-old son was the target of some particularly vicious rumors. I want to say that they started at school by immature teens doing what teens do but instead, they were generated outside of school by the adult parents of his peers. This particular group included people that I have been kind to and considered at the very least trusted acquaintances. It hurt me in a way that I have yet been able to put into words and I'm not sure that it's important that I try. What is important is that I exercise my metaphysical responsibility of transmuting the painful psychic object of hate into a relic. What can I do to transmute my feelings of spite into something beautiful and sacred?

First, I make work. If there is one resonant echo in the research, it has been to make work, stay inside creativity, dig like a dog to uncover meaning and then dig some more. Judy Isaaks reminds me that transmuting an object to a relic will be the "greatest distance I [will] ever travel." As I travel, I can "isolate my thoughts and emotions and grapple with them," like

¹ (Estés 1992, 462)

Louise Bourgeois. I can also choose to see the transmutation experience as a “fantastic opportunity” to ask questions in a wandering way like Kiki Smith... I can be *childlike* and NOT childish as Marion Woodman suggests. I can remember how to play like Nachmanovitch, or be a trickster rascalion with comedic antics like David Williams. In practicing all these transmutory actions, I can all along the way remember the wisdom of Agnes Martin and always “stay above the line.”

I had a very personal transmutory moment once the pieces were installed. Out of the womb of the studio, the work became independent, fully birthed into the physical realm. It gazed back at me with an authority located oceans ahead of me, evolved, ancient (Figure 15-18, *TBIR, Installation View*). I realized that I might always be walking behind my work, following it as if it is my Master and improving as needed. I understand that the creative product of my physical and psychic toil will always know more about itself than I might ever be able to intellectually grasp. It lives, breathes and works on the world with its own intelligence and power—turning the tables on the idea that the work ever belonged to the me in the first place.

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Appendix



Figure 1 Pam McDonnell, Lighthouse, 2023, wood, muslin, rabbit skin glue, oil paint, canvas, light, 8' x 2' x 2'



Figure 2 Christian Boltanski, Reliquaire, installation, 1996, metal mesh box containing photographs on tracing, clothes and neon, 88x30x90 cm



Figure 3 Pam McDonnell, Psychoid (detail), 2022, wood, wax, 60 x 6 x 24 in



Figure 4 Pam McDonnell, Psyche rides The Vehicle of Individuation, 2022, canvas, oil paint, glue, charcoal, 6 x 5



Figure 5 Louise Bourgeois, Spider (Cell), 1997, Steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold and bone, dimensions variable



Figure 6 Kiki Smith, Red Caps, 1999, Lithograph with Pencil additions on Mold-made T.H. Saunders paper mounted on plywood, 70" x 6.6" x 55 3/8"



Figure 7 Pam McDonnell, Psychoid, 2022, wood, glue, linen, oil paint, plaster, 60 x 6 x 24 in



Figure 8 Pam McDonnell, *Glyph Motif*, 2020, digital files



Figure 9 Pam McDonnell, Psychoids, 2022, ceramic, underglaze, glaze, dimensions variable



Figure 10 Kiki Smith, Installation view, Homespun Tales, 2005, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, terra-cotta cast in porcelain, dimensions variable

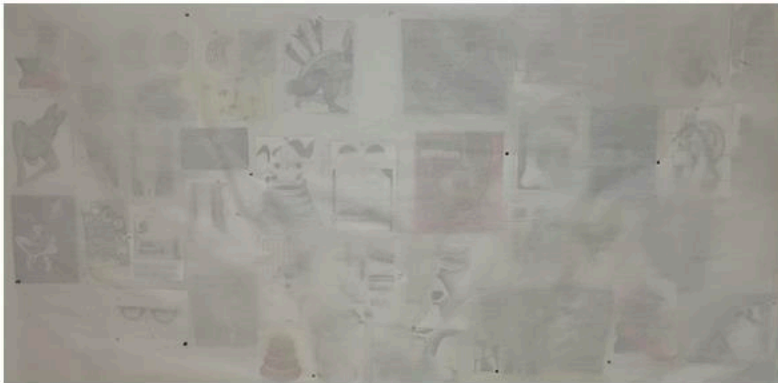


Figure 11 Pam McDonnell, process drawing, 2021, digital file



Figure 12 Pam McDonnell, Self-Portrait, 2022, oil on linen, 48" x 48"



Figure 13 Sarah Sze, 2010, The Uncountables (Encyclopedia), installation, dimensions variable

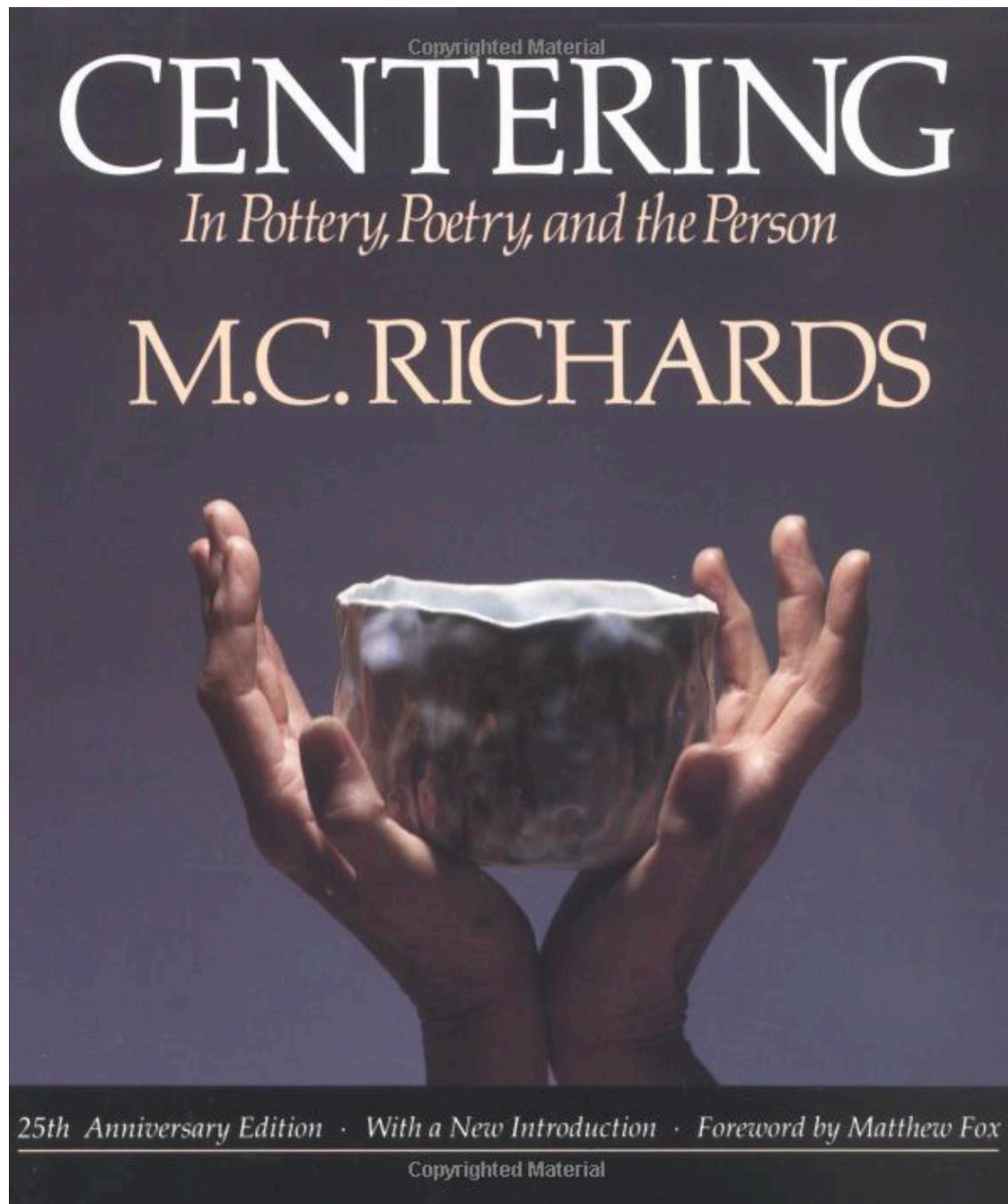


Figure 14 M.C. Richards, *Centering: in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*, Edited by Second. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, book cover, dimensions unknown



Figure 15 Pam McDonnell, 2023, The Body is a Reliquary (TBIR), installation view



Figure 16 Pam McDonnell, 2023, The Body is a Reliquary (TBIR), installation view



Figure 17 Pam McDonnell, 2023, The Body is a Reliquary (TBIR), installation view



Figure 18 Pam McDonnell, 2023, The Body is a Reliquary (TBIR), installation view