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# Liminal

William R. Moody

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# LIMINAL

by

WILLIAM R. MOODY

Under the Direction of Christina West

## ABSTRACT

My porcelain sculptural work explores the passage from life to death in the form of boat imagery. Many cultures and belief systems have water and boat references in their mythoi surrounding the passage of the soul or spirit to the afterlife. I combine many disparate boat elements into each piece in order to allude to an archetypal form. The black and white tones refer to mourning rituals of various cultures as well as the traditional practice of scrimshaw, in which sailors once made carvings on whale bone or walrus tusks and then inked the lines. My boats are intended as metaphors for passage into the afterlife and symbols of human commonality. They hold their place in both the physical and the spiritual realms.

INDEX WORDS: Boats, Water, Religion, Afterlife, Porcelain

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WILLIAM R. MOODY

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2013

LIMINAL

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this to Michelle Reid Moody, my wife, whose tireless patience and support keeps me going. I also dedicate this to my sons, Myles and Connan. I cannot thank you all enough for your love and support.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 WATER .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3 BOATS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4 CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>



**LIST OF FIGURES**

Fig. 1 Replica of Noah’s Ark built by Dutch contractor Johan Huibers .....	4
Fig. 2 Oseberg Ship, Viking Ship Museum Oslo Norway .....	6
Fig. 3 Solar Barque, Cheops (Kufu) c. 2500 BC .....	7
Fig. 4 18 <sup>th</sup> Dynasty Egyptian Boat, from the tomb of Tutankhamun .....	7
Fig. 5 Barque 5, Porcelain 19”X 14”, Randall Moody .....	10
Fig. 6 Installation View, Dimensions Variable, Randall Moody.....	11
Fig. 7 “Big, Red, Round”, Mixed Media, 27" diameter, Randall Moody .....	12
Fig. 8 "Dark Barque 1", Porcelain, Wood, Copper and Steel, 20”x 20”, Randall Moody .....	12

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Growing up along the Gulf Coast of Florida I was always aware of the important part that boats and water played in the life of people. The purchase and upkeep of a boat for many of my neighbors provided a way of earning a living and providing for not only themselves and their families but for the community as well. This is true for many, especially coastal, communities and societies across the globe. Having always felt this close attachment to water I chose to reference it subtly in my early works. Boats did not play as important of a role in my early, more functional work but in my mind they were always implied.

In 1977 my family and I visited New Orleans to view the King Tutankhamen exhibit. I was 12 years old. The items that interested me the most were a gold dagger of incomparable craftsmanship and a few small boat models. One of the boats was carved from alabaster and inlaid with gold, lapis and other stones as well as colored pigment. The boat had ibex heads fore and aft and sat upon a casket made of the same material. In the center was a small shrine guarded by two figures, one standing and one kneeling. This boat made such an impression on me that I drew it in the margins of my notebooks for months afterward. The care taken in creating the alabaster boat helped me to understand that there were people in the world who held their religion and beliefs with the same esteem and reverence as the Christians I was in contact with on a daily basis. It also was the impetus for me to read and learn about religions other than my own. This was the seed to my work.

Growing up in a family of mechanics, electricians and carpenters, as well as the influence of my grandmother's quilting, gave me an appreciation for the craftsmanship that went

into the making of the Egyptian alabaster boat. The craftsmanship I saw my family members put into their jobs whether it be working on a car engine, making a swing for my grandparents porch or quilts and homemade clothing informs my work today.

Many years later as my evolution as an artist continued, I noted that, as with the relationship between water, boats and life, there was also a shared relationship between water, boats and death in a large number of societies and religions from various regions of the world. This piqued my interest. It seemed odd to me that so many seemingly disparate cultures would share this same commonality with water being the beginning of life and as a vehicle for passage to the afterlife.

## **2 WATER**

Water can and often does serve as a method of change in the soul or spirit of people. The Christian baptismal ritual marks the person as a believer with a “new” or clean soul. It also serves as an act of cleansing and a public testimony of obedience to God. Jesus refers to the gift of eternal life as “living water” in John 4:10. Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

In the Haitian Voudou religion they hold the belief that after a person’s death his soul stays near the body for seven days. Following this period a priest ritually severs the connection so that the body may live in the “dark waters” for a year and a day. After this the deceased’s relatives raise the spirit and the spirit is fed, clothed and treated as a divinity. In addition there

are said to be twenty-one nations of spirits called “Iwa-yo” which live under the sea. (Danticat, 2011)

Hindu culture also holds water as an important aspect to its belief. Though Hinduism encompasses many different beliefs, all variations of Hindu religion hold water as sacred. Most Hindu holy sites are located on or near water. Places where water converges with water carry more significance especially if there is a site where three rivers converge. The Ganges is believed to flow from the toe of Vishnu and is spread to the world through the hair of Shiva. Water is seen as an equalizer where all of the impure have their pollutions washed away if only for a short time. Hindu holy places and funeral grounds are almost always located near water.

(Bowker, 1997) As with Hindu belief, in Christianity and Islam water is central to cleansing and purification. This is most likely due to the Christian proclivity to assimilate aspects of other religions into its own as well as Islam being influenced by Judaism and Christianity. This emphasis on water as a vehicle for purification can be seen in Muslim mosques as well. Two of the three ablutions involve the use of water with the exception being made only when no water is available, though every Mosque has running water available for *wudu* or the minor ablution.

(Abrams, 2001)

As most every society has water bound to its religion it also share stories of a great flood. These ties between water and ritual purification can also be connected to the flood myths in the sense that most all floods served to wash away the wicked from the Earth. In Greek myth Zeus sent a great flood to destroy the men of the Bronze Age due to their exceeding wickedness. Deucalion, Prometheus’ son, and his family survived by building a boat and loading it with animals and seed. The Roman version has Jupiter destroying the people of the

earth for the same reason. Jupiter's first thought was to use fire but he feared that it would set heaven itself afire and chose water instead. Jupiter spared Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha due to their piety. (Peabody)

In Scandinavian lore three gods, Oden, Vili and Ve fought and killed a great ice giant. The water from his wounds drowned most of the other giants, which represent evil, with the exception of Bergelmir and his family who escaped in a boat made from a hollowed tree. The dead giant, Ymir's body became the earth and his blood the oceans. (Snorri, 1964)

The Masai of east Africa tell of a world that was heavily populated, but similar to stories from other cultures the people were sinful and not mindful of God. Although they were sinful they did not murder, until at last a man named Nambija hit another named Suage on the head. Due to this, God decided to destroy mankind, except a man named Tumbainot who found grace in His eyes. God commanded Tumbainot to build an ark of wood and enter it with his two wives, six sons and their wives, and some of animals of every sort. When they were all aboard and provisioned, God caused a great long rain which caused a flood, and all other men and beasts drowned. (Clarke, 1993) Could these stories have their basis in one source? Two scientific theories support the idea of a great flood. One theory states that a massive flood happened around the Black Sea as ice melted during the end of the last ice age. Another theory suggests that massive flooding was caused by a comet striking the earth near Madagascar. Though there is evidence to support both theories there is no consensus between researchers. The particulars of how the flood happened are less important to me than the common mythologies that support the event.

This flood story is echoed not only in cultures from Europe and Africa but also in various forms from Central Asia, Northern Mongolia, Eastern Siberia, Central India, Burma, China and Southeast Asia, the Malay Peninsula, Philippines, Borneo, Australia and the Americas. In the vast majority of these stories those chosen by their gods were saved by building or finding refuge in a boat.

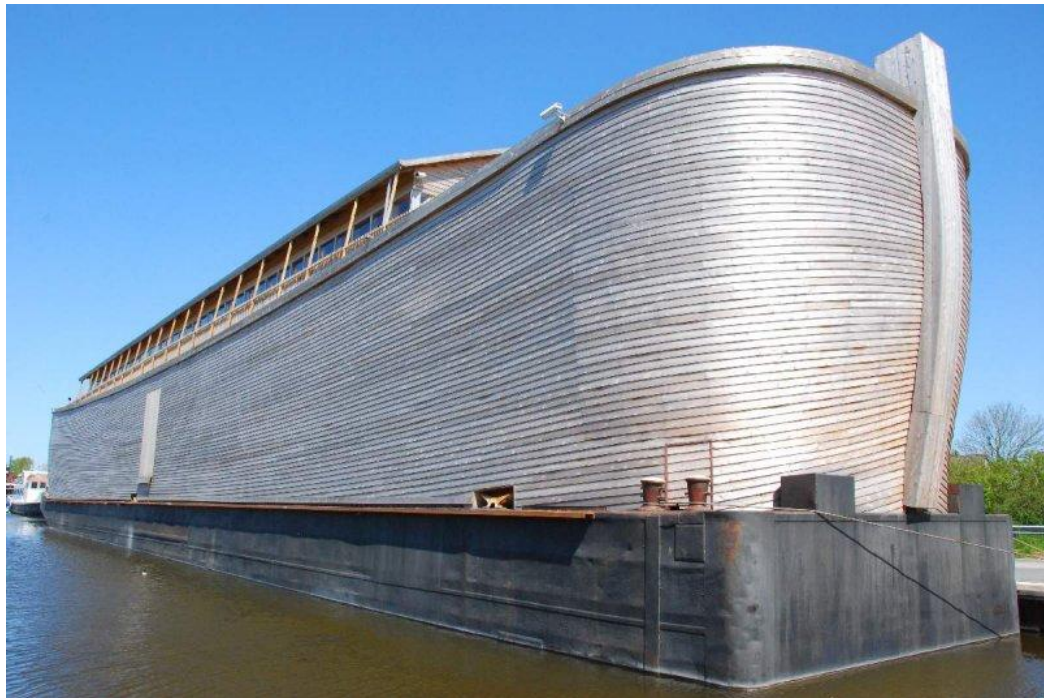


Figure 1 Replica of Noah's Ark by Dutch contractor Johan Huibers

Floods are not only attached to purification of the world from sin but also attached to the end of the world. For instance, according to Nordic legend, at the last battle or Ragnarok the ship Naglfar, piloted by the giant Hrym will become free and launched upon a tidal wave. This ship is said to be made of the nails of dead men. (Snorri, 1964) It was custom to cut the fingernails and toenails of the dead so that the building of the ship will take longer and thus postpone Ragnarok or "doom of the gods". So here we have not only water as a method of purifica-

tion but also a ship or boat bringing the instruments of destruction of the gods from another plane.

### 3 BOATS

Boats can be seen as transportation from life to death while not holding a place in either plane. In this sense they are liminal vessels or vessels of a liminal state. In folklore and mythology it is commonly a being that is the agent rather than the object. I chose to use the boats as an analogue to the beings. By doing this I have given the boats a certain amount of autonomy. Probably the most well known to us in the West is the story of Charon or the ferryman who transports souls of the newly dead across the rivers that divided the worlds of the living and the dead, Styx and Acheron. Charon's character, a psychopomp or a conductor of souls to the after-life, has an analogue in other cultures as well. For instance, in Egyptian culture Ra was thought to traverse the sky during the day in a boat and cross the underworld at night in another boat called Masaket. Later, as the myth developed, it was thought that Masaket was controlled by another god named Aken, later Cherti. It is thought that the Greek character of Charon can be traced back to Cherti.

Funerary boats can be found in Nordic cultures as well as Egyptian. In the Nordic culture as well as Germanic and Baltic traditions the "Stone Ship" or ship setting was of monumental proportion. Most date from the late Bronze Age or around 1000 to 500 BC. The largest being the Jelling Stone Ship in Jelling, Denmark at approximately 1,161 feet long. (Skoglund, 2008) While these "ships" were not sea faring in any sense, they are considered ships nonetheless. The possible purpose of these ships was to provision the deceased with everything they had in

life but also to provide a conveyance to Hel. Later this would evolve into the Viking burial tradition of burying the deceased in his or, in some cases such as the Oseberg Ship, her longboat along with significant possessions.



Figure 2 Oseberg Ship, Viking Ship Muesum Oslo Norway

Egyptian burial rituals show much of the same reasoning. The deceased were going on a journey to the afterlife and would need not only a conveyance but all of the same things that they needed in life. In the instance of the tomb of King Tutankhamun, 35 boats of various types were found. They were of different functions ranging from fishing and cargo to transport. Some of the boats have cabins for sheltering the king/god and his officials. In the case of the funerary boat of Khufu the actual boat along with four others were buried in pits. These boats were probably not used directly in the burial of the king but were most likely used to ferry the king



during his reign. These large boats (143 feet long by 19.5 feet wide) were dismantled and placed into the pits which were then covered with limestone slabs.



Figure 3 Solar Barque, Cheops (Kufu) c. 2500 BC



Figure 4 Dynasty Egyptian Boat, from the tomb of Tutankhamun

Boats and boat models are not only for burial but as in the case of the “spirit vessels” of Southeast Asia also a method of ridding the living of negative or malevolent spirits. As in the case of the *kapal hantu* “evil spirit boats” of Malaysia, although the scale of the boats (one to two meters) may suggest models or toys they are vessels of magical significance to the culture. These boats are made during times of need such as illness or drought. The boats are made, loaded with rice, tobacco, eggs, suckling pig and other offerings. After this the evil spirits are invited aboard and the boat is launched upon the water carrying the spirits of misfortune away from the people. (Loewenstein, 1958) This practice is echoed in British North Borneo with a ceremony called *popoulik*, meaning “making to go home”. This ceremony is held only during times of epidemic and is to send the demons of illness back to the underworld.

As with funerary and spirit boats, I am creating my vessels as a means of addressing the transitional space between the living and the dead. I appropriate elements from the referenced cultures in the construction of the boats. These elements can be more obvious allusions such as the hull shapes which I have taken from Egyptian barques, the bow and stern elements that I referenced from Viking long boats to more subtle references such as textures reminiscent of African motifs and the scale of the spirit boats of Southeast Asia. I use clay as my medium for its ability to mimic most any other material and still retain its own identity. In my work I am using this quality to impart a familiar yet foreign sensibility to the boats. Clay also has the ability to survive for millennia as evidenced by the Venus of Dolni Vestonice which is thought to be the oldest ceramic object in the world at 26,000 years old. This inherent characteristic of clay allows the boats to be seen not only as objects that are present now but also as objects from a distant past. As with the Nordic and Egyptian use of funerary boats my boats also have references to commemoration. I use the inherent whiteness of the porcelain and keep my palette monochromatic to allude to the mourning colors of different cultures.

The unglazed or lightly glazed surface is reminiscent of bone and scrimshaw. Bone carving reaches back to prehistory and while scrimshaw is a relatively new art coming about during the time of whaling. This parallel between ancient bone carving and the more contemporary scrimshaw allows for both an archaic reading of the work as well as a more contemporary one and also is evocative of commemorative arts. This serves to link the distant with the more recent past as well as to link the maker to the object. Due to the history of the material and the typically functional use, ceramics is a deeply tactile art. By layering the boats with texture I invite the viewer to touch the works and feel the age and weathering of the piece.

The textures allude to the decay the hull of a ship endures on a long journey while others denote the passage of time and trips. Other textures hold the apocryphal prayers of dead and the blessings of the living. Most funerary or spirit boats were either monumental or humble in scale. This served to remove the objects from being confused with those for actual use. The scale of my work is important to me in that it allows the pieces to read as artifact and as something alien yet related to us.



Figure 5 "Barque 5", Porcelain 19"X 14", Randall Moody

#### 4 CONCLUSION

I explore through the metaphor of boats the commonalities and links to all of these beliefs held by so many disparate cultures. By appropriating aspects of boats of different cultures I am alluding to an archetype of a spirit boat which can transcend the threshold between one realm or state of being and the next. In tapping into this deep well of mythos and belief each viewer can bring or take his or her own interpretation of where we are coming from or where we are going. My goal is to gently bring to light the idea that we as humans have far more in common with each other than we have differences. These commonalities are ageless, come from our inherent humanity and will continue long after this stage of existence.



Figure 6 Installation View, Dimensions Variable, Randall Moody



Figure 7 "Big, Red, Round", Mixed Media, 27" diameter, Randall Moody



Figure 8 "Dark Barque 1", Porcelain, Wood, Copper and Steel, 20"x 20", Randall Moody

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