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KNOWING TOGETHER WITH AN OTHER

by

JESS SELF

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

All people change as we develop. They embody a variety of roles at different stages of life. Carl Jung refers to these roles as Archetypes. Folklore, mythology, and Chakra Systems explore and illustrate Archetypes making them easily relatable. In *Knowing Together With an Other*, I represent some of the Archetypes I have embodied during my own life. My sculptures depict stereotyped versions of femininity: the seductress, the lover, the mother, and the martyr, they are influenced by Western visual culture, folklore and personal experience. To create the figures, I combine a life cast of my body with different materials such as foam, wool, wax, wood and textiles, each material embedding a different aura in its assigned figure. Doll and puppet joints allow the figures to assume a variety of poses and to show a sense of control. These figures encourage personal reflection on our phases of life and personal growth.

INDEX WORDS: Archetype, Sculpture, Textiles, Felt, Figurative, Body, Female, Folklore,
Western culture, Art, Consciousness, Wild women, Chakra, Spirituality, Enlightenment,
Jung

KNOWING TOGETHER WITH AN OTHER

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JESS SELF

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MFA

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2021

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2021

KNOWING TOGETHER WITH AN OTHER

by

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DEDICATION

I am so thankful for the support and encouragement of my family and friends. Mom, Logan, Paul, Dave, Abigale, Erin, Donnae, Ariel, Lara and Chris. I am so grateful for my loved ones for standing by my side through the tears, late nights and long hours. I could have never gotten through the past three years without my fellow sculptresses and now lifelong friends Kylie and Christina. The emergency tequila shots, decompression brunches and hand holding through panic attacks will never be forgotten, I love you big time. Thank you to my other classmates who taught, encouraged and challenged me along the way. Albert, Andrew, Diane, Drew, Hanna, Jamaal, Kourtney, Maddie, Melissa, Nathalia, and Soude. And thank you Miley for your free therapy and anxiety-reducing hugs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Making art has always been a form of therapy for me. I started crafting with my grandmother around age seven; she taught me to knit, sew, crochet, and weave. Every summer, we would work on a new project together. Even then, I remember finding solace in making. As I grew up, I strayed from traditional craft projects and didn't make art again until college, when I became intensely inspired by the Michael Gondry film *Science of Sleep*.¹ The film is about a man, Stephane, who is unable to distinguish the difference between real life and dreams. Because the dream sequences are rendered in cardboard, cellophane, and felt, viewers can easily discern sleeping life from waking life. This inability to discern dreams from reality causes trouble for him as he begins to fall in love with his creative, craft-focused neighbor, Stephanie. He says: "She Makes things with her hands, it's as if her synapses were connected directly to her fingers."



Figure 1. Science of Sleep, Lauri Faggioni, 2006

¹ Michael Gondry, *La Science Des Rêves*, 2006, Film.

After seeing the soft, fabric, animated objects in *Science of Sleep*, I was transported back to the skills I learned from my grandmother. I was interested in how you could make anything soft and comforting just by making it out of fabric. Confident that I could make similarly crafted items I set out to make some for all of my friends: plush phones, typewriters, and aliens. I wanted to share my talent and give them a remembrance of me. After rekindling these skills, I sought out new crafting methods. Midway through college, I attended a wet felting demonstration. Instead of making my objects and creatures with premade sheets of felt, I now knew how to make my own. This discovery led me to research further and stumble upon needle felting. With no hesitation I taught myself the basics and started making dolls and animals to sell at craft fairs.



Figure 2. Jess Self, Robot Monster, Felt, 2009



Figure 3. Jess Self, Icelandic creatures, 2016

Needle felting, I learned, is a multi-step process: first, I roll up wool like a sleeping bag, then by stabbing it with a barbed needle, I force the fibers to lock together. With each needle poke, the wool becomes denser, which allows for more detail to be added. This time-consuming, tedious and repetitive process is meditative; as I work, I fall into a trance-like state and disconnect from the outside world. The process allows me to tune into my racing thoughts, work through issues, reflect on my actions, or play out scenarios that keep me from acting irrationally later. In this creative flow, my mind is directly connected to my hands just like Stephanie in *Science of Sleep*. According to neurologist Frank Wilson, “Through continuous repetitive

activity, the hand possesses the understanding which causes a transformation of materials and allows expression to emerge.”²

Wool is similar to clay in that I can add to it and subtract from it freely. I can bend and mold it with a felting needle. It can appear hard, tricking the viewer into questioning the medium: at first glance, a piece of wool may appear to be made of stone or even paper creating more potential for the material. As I gained skill with needle felting, I graduated from making random organic shapes into creating more bodily forms, finally landing at figurative sculpture. I found that figurative sculpture could connect me with viewers and help me directly address the human experience.

Needle felting wool yields a robust but soft structure that’s both warm and neutral in color, a surface upon which a viewer can project a personal narrative or emotional response. From the beginning, I wanted to create work that made the viewer’s heart ache. Textiles and fiber carry a connotation of comfort and familiarity that helps draw people into my work and makes it easy to connect with; I build on that relatability by spotlighting common human insecurities. I give voice to topics that are isolating or embarrassing to talk about, such as body image, abuse, and psychological discomfort. Bringing these issues out of the shadows can benefit viewers struggling with similar problems; helping them feel understood and seen can propel them on their journey to closure and acceptance.

² Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998)

2. MAKING AS HEALING

My work has helped me process traumatic events I experienced as a child and assisted my personal growth and self-image. The mind-body connection created by making manifests whatever I am thinking and feeling in the work. In an interview with Louise Bourgeois' assistant, Jerry Gorovoy says "she always started with a feeling, not with a concept."³ My work begins in a similar way. The material, the act of making, and the meditative work-state dance together, bringing out parts of me I may be repressing. Maggie Shannon, in her book *Crafting Calm*, observes, "The practice of craft is a path to self-awareness and spiritual growth. With peace and calm, we can connect with the highest and best of who we are, and with our concept of the divine craft is a vehicle into that state."⁴ After exploring many forms of treatment for issues associated with trauma, I have found that making things with my hands is the most successful method for me.

Between 2013-2014, my work developed and took on more organic and abstract forms. For example, the folded patterns on the surface of *Untitled 1* represent the psychological chaos and confusion caused by traumatic experiences. Repetitive craters in *Untitled 2* illustrate the impact of trauma that compromises the integrity of "thick skin."

³ "Sewing up the Past," *The Economist*, September 22, 2010, <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2010/09/22/sewing-up-the-past>.

⁴ Maggie Shannon, *Crafting Calm: Projects and Practices for Creativity and Contemplation* (Berkeley: Viva Editions, 2013), 3



*Figure 4. Jess Self, *Untitled 1 (back)*, Needle-Felted Wool, 2014*



*Figure 5. Jess Self, *Untitled 1*, Needle-Felted Wool, 2014*



Figure 6. Jess Self, Untitled 3 (back), Needle-Felted Wool, 2014



*Figure 7. Jess Self, *Untitled 3*, Needle-Felted Wool, 2014*

During my first year of graduate school, my work delved into a specific trauma—a wound that reemerged and demanded processing and healing. In the summer of 2018, I revisited the house where I had been sexually abused as a child. It was the first time I had been there in over 20 years. Shortly after that trip, my father passed away, and I found myself at the same house once again. After these experiences, I obsessively created work about that place, over and over again in a variety of different media, always with the hope for healing and peace.

In the pieces *Portal Ave* and *Just Another Tuesday*, I replaced the figures' heads with the house where my abuse took place. I manipulated the houses' texture and positioning as well as the figures' body language to achieve a composition that best expressed my emotional state. Each piece represents a different life stage and my corresponding level of competence to deal with this trauma. The houses in these two sculptures are created from memory; they are impressions rather than exact replicas.

Another piece, entitled *You Can't See Me This Way*, also deals with processing complex emotions. The figure is camouflaged, seeming to melt into bedsheets. This reference to beds is important on two levels: first, it alludes to the fact that bed is where I do a lot of emotional processing. Second, the bed as a site also plays an important role in my adolescence: from my teens through my early 20s, I bounced back and forth between pushing men away and being sexually casual. This pendulum-like behavior resulted in heightened social anxiety in my later 20s, when I could not get out of bed for days at a time. Other times, bed provided no comfort at all, as I tossed and turned, unable to sleep in the place where my abuse had occurred.



Figure 8. Jess Self, Portal Ave, Needle Felted Wool, Felt, Tyvek, 2018



Figure 9. Jess Self, Just Another Tuesday, Needle-Felted Wool, Tyvek, Fabric, 2018



Figure 10. Jess Self, You Can't See Me This Way, Mixed Textiles, Bedsheets, 2019

Contemporary multi-disciplinary artist Kiki Smith, once said in an interview, “I think that lots of times [my work] it’s healing—it’s trying to mend, it’s mending-stitching people up... Myself, I’m trying to sew myself up...”⁵ This quote resonates deeply with me. Making work that so exposed my personal experiences made me feel very vulnerable and unstable at first. I was very insecure about sharing my work’s meaning and could not talk about the work without crying. Through the feedback I received, it became apparent that people were connecting with the work in their own ways; even if they didn’t know my story, the work evoked some emotion.

⁵ Kiki Smith, “An Interview with Kiki Smith by Robin Winters, New York City, Summer 1990,” *Kiki Smith* (The Hague: SDU Publishers, 1990), 140.

People projected their own stories onto the work and created their own narratives. The work was not just helping me. It was stirring emotion and triggering viewers, as well (see Appendix 1).

Around the time I was making these pieces, I found an old letter from my grandmother, in which she asserted that I was breaking up our family by speaking out about my experience. In the letter, she attempted to explain away my abuse, claiming that “there are two sides to every story.” My grandmother was in the next room when I was molested. Although I told her what happened directly after, she and my father’s family denied that the abuse ever occurred. I was a young child; how could I remember? “Her mother is crazy; she must have brainwashed her,” they claimed. When I was 16, my grandmother finally, after several appeals, convinced me to return to her house. She wanted me to see her new craft room and used it to guilt me into visiting: “Oh Jessica, how it breaks my heart that you can’t enjoy my craft room and make me haul our projects back and forth since you won’t come to my home.”

One summer, I finally consented to go, but as I packed my suitcase, I panicked, climbed out of the window, and ran away. The aforementioned letter was my grandmother’s response to my flight. “Your fear is an unnecessary fear... everyone has different perspectives on situations... everyone suffers from traumatic experiences; it is how we react that matters.” She never addressed the abuse directly, only passive-aggressively scolded me and glossed over what had occurred. Her words, carefully typed out and full of blame, have stayed with me.

I was ready to move on from the years of pain, disappointment, and heartbreak. I built one final textile house, this time large enough to wear. I also created a skin out of the same materials. Before assembling my finished sculpture, I incorporated these pieces in a video performance. The video, entitled *Double Sided*, begins with me wearing the house and skin. I

remove the coverings aggressively and as quickly as I can. It is intense, emotional, and symbolic of the trauma I experienced in that house. Once I have completely shed the skin, I am liberated and forever free of its psychological grip.

My sculpture, *Two Sides to Every Story*, and its accompanying video performance were included in an installation; here, I transcribed the most searing parts of my grandmothers' letter onto the gallery wall. This installation felt like the end of a chapter, a truth which was confirmed a few months later when I confronted my family and spoke about what I had endured. I omitted nothing and shared every uncomfortable detail. *Two Sides* freed me emotionally, enough to finally open myself up to my family. The abuse, never talked about directly, had caused so much disconnection and pain. But as Julia Cameron wisely observes in *The Artist's Way*, "Art opens the closets, airs out the cellars and attics. But before a wound can heal, it must be seen, the artist's act of exposing the wound to air and light, is often reacted to with shaming."⁶ Of course, this information was difficult for my family to hear, but to my surprise they responded with amazing support and warmth. The dark cloud that had been looming over us finally dissipated. All they needed to understand my reality was to hear my story, straight from me.

⁶ Julia Cameron, *The Artists Way* (New York: Putnam, 1992), 68



Figure 11. Jess Self, Two Sides To Every Story, Foam, Acrylic Paint, Epoxy, Mixed Textiles, Steel, Tyvek, 2019



Figure 12. Jess Self, Two Sides to Every Story Performance (still), 2019



Figure 13. Jess Self, *More Upstairs Exhibition Wall View*, 2019

I am drawn to the work of Louise Bourgeois because she also used her work to heal emotional and psychological wounds. Her biographer Robert Storr, say that “Bourgeois suffered terrible damage as a result of the stress she experienced in the sexually immature years of her childhood and early adolescence. The obsessional return to those traumatic times and the hope-against-hope that the damage can be undone or patched has been the driving force behind everything she has made.”⁷

⁷ Robert Storr, “Survey,” in Louise Bourgeois (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003), 40.

Louise Bourgeois found closure through her practice, too. Referring to her later work, Bourgeois' biographers observe: "We no longer see the helpless child sexually traumatized and powerless. Her spider sculptures, with their coquettish seductiveness, are the expression of a maturing woman learning the power of her biology, while the sculptural works made from her old clothing—the high style of previous eras—explore yet more kinds of self-portraiture."⁸

Bourgeois also inspires me with her mastery of multiple mediums. She was not afraid to use any material and sometimes would remake a sculpture multiple times, using different techniques in each piece. Bourgeois also explored the human form in both literal and abstract ways.

I am especially fascinated by Bourgeois' ability to use her own memories and feelings to create content and illustrate concepts. For example, Bourgeois grew up around textiles in her parents' restoration workshop and used to draw in missing sections of tapestries. This early association gave her a strong affinity to textiles. Early in her artistic career, she resisted her past, connecting textiles with domestication and reading it as a stereotypically female craft. But because she embraced her upbringing as subject matter it was not possible to fight her inherent connection to fabric. Through sewing she attempted to affect psychological repair: "I always had the fear of being separated and abandoned. The sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole."⁹

⁸ Allan Schwartzman, "Focus," in *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003), 103.

⁹ "Exhibitions — Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works - Louise Bourgeois | Hauser & Wirth," accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/3595-louise-bourgeois-the-fabric-works>.

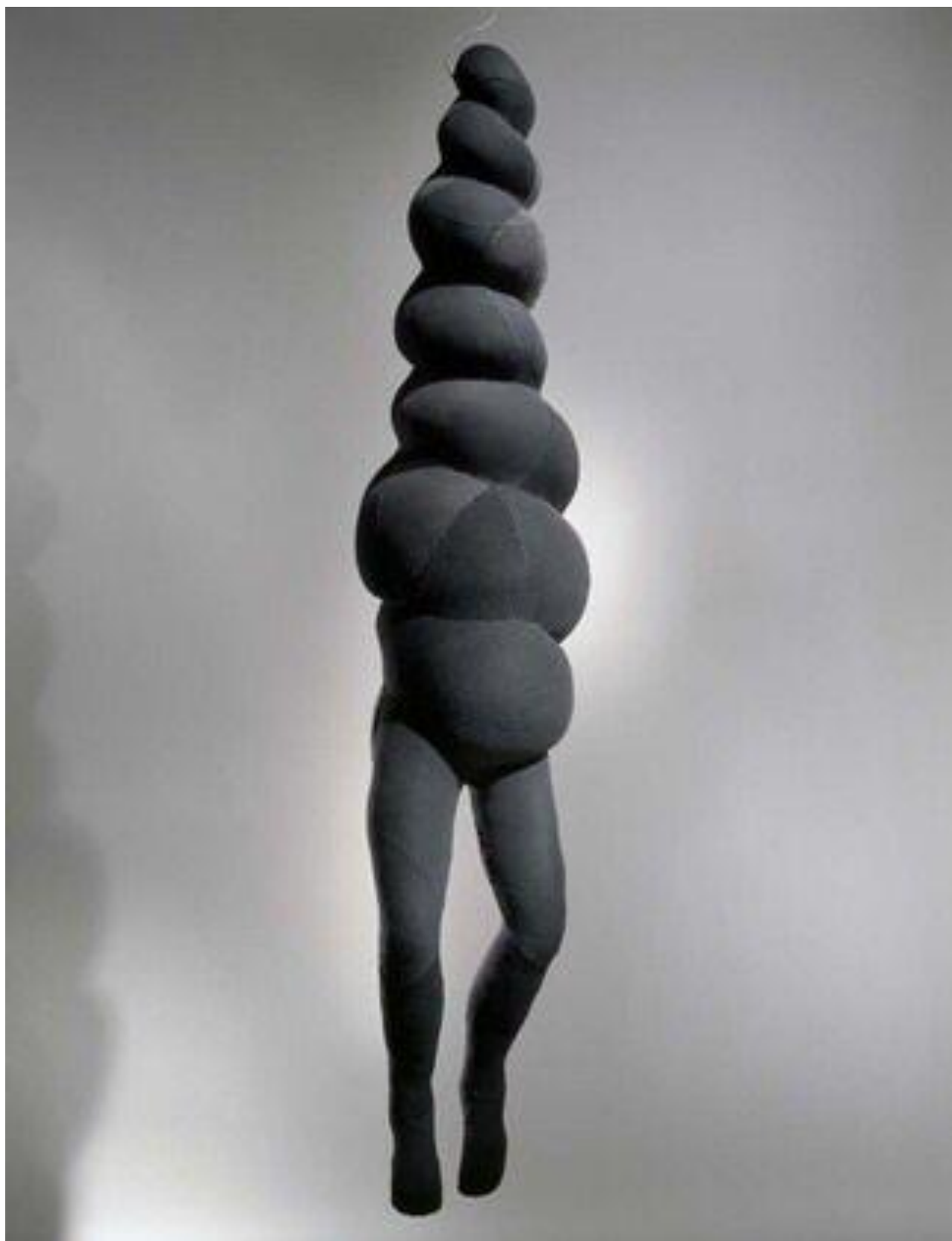


Figure 14. Louise Bourgeois, Spiral Woman, 2003



Figure 15. Left: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (The Last Climb)*, 2008, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Image: Christopher Burke. © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by Copydan. Right: Louise Bourgeois, *CELL XXVI*, 2003 (detail), Collection Gemeentemuseum Den

Healing has been a consistent thread throughout the trajectory of my creative practice. My interest in the mind-body connection and skin has also persisted. Skin, with its incredibly efficient healing properties, is a third theme in my work. Specifically, I'm interested in how we use skin as a metaphor for our emotional and psychological state. Sayings such as "uncomfortable in my skin," and being "thick-skinned" (emotionally tough) or "thin-skinned" (emotionally fragile) illustrate my point. I am interested in how trauma and experiences force us to endure; we survive and evolve by growing new armor to protect ourselves. I illustrate this idea in the sculpture *Julienne*. In this work, a needle-felted female figure made of fresh, clean wool, stands amidst layers of hot glue, mixed textiles, and latex that slough off in layers.



Figure 16. Jess Self, *Julienne*, Needle-Felted Wool, Hot Glue, Mixed Textiles, Latex, 2019

Another piece that continuing the theme of skin, *Rebuilding*, uses the metaphor of skin to represent shedding a past of pain, resentment, and fear. The needle felted figure in this work is once again pure white and plush but is covered in thin snakelike skin made using thread and free-motion stitching. The figure removes her grey, crisp, lace-like skin and is left with an uncontaminated, unblemished soft body, as if she has been scrubbed clean.



Figure 17. Jess Self, Rebuilding, Needle-Felted Wool, Sewing Machine Thread, 2019

These pieces, made in the first two years of my graduate studies, stand as markers of a traumatic past that no longer has a stranglehold on my psyche. Making these sculptures helped me process my emotions and heal. By the end of my second year, I was ready to take on new ideas and new questions. I started with work that processed trauma, moved on to reflecting on growth from that trauma and now in *Knowing Together With An Other* I review how my experiences have affected all aspects and stages of my life and are mirrored in the Archetypes I have embodied along the way.

3. MAKING AS SPIRITUAL

Spirituality is on a spectrum. It can take the form of prayers, meditation, visualizations, and ceremonies. It is also the journey of finding ourselves and our place in the universe, an energy that gives us meaning and direction. Spirituality helps us feel rooted and connected, both to other people and to something larger than ourselves.

Contemporary spiritual art has an effect in the world. It changes minds, broadens understanding, and transforms lives. It is the embodiment of the artists' spiritual experience and it means to evoke the same in us. Such works are dynamic agents of the spiritual: they provide a sense of plenitude, a healing place of respite, allow us to see anew as if for the first time and celebrate our uniqueness and difference as well as our common humanity.¹⁰

Making art can be a spiritual act performed through several processes. Repetitive and rhythmic gestures form a devotional, meditative ritual.¹¹ The act of creation focuses the artist and unifies the mind, body, and spirit. As creator, the artist gives life to objects, thereby transforming them as well. For the artist, this process is so rewarding that it takes them on a never-ending journey.

My journey has led me to find my place in the universe as a maker who produces but is not limited to building sculptures. My art helps me heal, grow, and improve myself; it also connects me with other people by communicating my story. By sharing my story through art, I can evoke emotions in the viewer, perhaps causing a shift in mood that ripples outward and alters

¹⁰ Leesa Fanning, *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 63

¹¹ *Ibid*, 140.

someone's mindset for the rest of their day, or beyond. In the exhibition catalog for *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*, curator Leesa Fanning echoes my own thoughts:

The contemporary art world is full of artists engaging in spiritual art-making practices. Marina Abramović has numerous projects that are inspired by the spiritual. She explores spiritual practices both alone and with viewers through performance. *Artist Portrait with a Candle* (from the series “*With Eyes Closed I See Happiness*”) captures her in a moment of peace during meditation.

Abramović strives “to make a performance where there would be nothing between me and the viewer: Just direct transmission of energy.”¹²

I also seek to inject energy into my work that viewers will be able to perceive and receive.

¹² Ibid. 67.



Figure 18. Marina Abramović, Artist Portrait with a Candle (from the series With Eyes Closed I See Happiness)

In her book *Crafting Calm*, minister, spiritual director, and author Maggie Oman Shannon writes about craft as a method for attaining spiritual growth. We gain something from making, but our energy also flows into the work. She says, “With peace and calm, we are able to

connect with the highest and best of who we are and with our concept of the divine craft is a vehicle into that state.¹³

I consciously approach my studio practice with ritual and ceremony. Even basic tasks and actions are included. For example, before I begin a day's work session, I have what I call "jellyfish time," wherein I float around my studio cleaning, organizing, and pacing. This is a very necessary part of my practice because it gets my mind and body acclimated to the creative space. It is the time when my personal life and my creative ideas merge. The ritual, commitment, energy and meditative aspects that go into my art making solidify my stance as a spiritual maker.

4 CONNECTING THROUGH ARCHETYPES AND FOLKLORE

Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung developed highly-detailed theories about archetypes. He defines archetypes as patterns of behavior that are found in the collective unconscious.¹⁴ He believed that within our subconscious minds, there is a layer that does not come from our personal experience, but rather from but universally-held wisdom; in other words, a psychological substrate we all share. Archetypes are a projection of humanity's collective thoughts and emotions and they are frequently associated with myths and fairytales.¹⁵ In *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, Jung establishes what archetypes are. They are, he says, part of our "psychic system of a collective, universal and, impersonal nature which is

¹³ Maggie Shannon, *Crafting Calm: Projects and Practices for Creativity and Contemplation* (Berkeley: Viva Editions, 2013), 3.

¹⁴ Pamela Jaye Smith, *Inner Drives: How to Write and Create Characters Using the Eight Classic Centers of Motivatiojn* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 10.

¹⁵ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C Hull, 2nd ed., vol. 9, Bollingen Series, XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). 5

identical in all individuals” and that an archetype “consists of pre-existent forms... which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.”¹⁶

Because archetypes emerged from core human experiences, they contain both positive and negative human characteristics.¹⁷ You could describe a woman as a wife, seductress, crone, coward, guru, mother, or martyr. These are all examples of archetypes. The most familiar archetypes are commonly seen in fairytale characters such as the princess (martyr), the witch (crone), and the hero. Other archetypes have percolated through Western civilization from Greek mythology, such as the gods and goddesses of love, war, and healing. “Myths are the stories we tell ourselves to explain the world around us and within us.”¹⁸ Archetypes are universally recognizable characterizations; everyone can relate to archetypes in some way or another, and we all embody various (sometimes multiple) archetypes during each phase of life. “They provide us with models of what we are and what we hope to become.”¹⁹ Because archetypes are so easy to connect with, I often include them in my studio practice. I use a character or characteristic as a base to build. Many of my figures’ poses reference Renaissance paintings of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. Known as Aphrodite to the ancient Greeks, her archetype represents womanly sensuality, sexuality, love and beauty²⁰.

¹⁶ Ibid, 43.

¹⁷ Ambika Wauters, *Chakras and Their Archetypes: Uniting Energy Awareness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossing Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁸ Pamela Jaye Smith, *Inner Drives: How to Write and Create Characters Using the Eight Classic Centers of Motivatiojn* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 11.

¹⁹ Ambika Wauters, *Chakras and Their Archetypes: Uniting Energy Awareness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossing Press, 1997), 9.

²⁰ Jean Bakula, “Aphrodite: Archetype of Love and Beauty,” Owlcation - Education, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Aphrodite-Greek-Goddess-of-Love-and-Beauty>.

I also worked with folklore and mythology during residencies in Iceland and Norway. I spent the summers of 2015 and 2016 in Blönduós, Iceland, at the Icelandic Textile Center and the summer of 2018 at Austmarka in Norway. In each place, I talked with local people about their culture, its myths, legends and craft practices and found their folkloric belief systems to be useful to my thinking about human connection and spirituality. I liked the idea of pulling possible truths out of these mysterious and imaginary fictions. The original authors of these stories was clearly inspired by real people's lives and experiences.

The lovely Icelandic landscape and copious amounts of wool at my disposal were not the only things that led me to apply for the ITC residency; I was also intrigued by a statistic I'd read somewhere that 60% of Icelanders believe in the existence of fairies, trolls, and elves—creatures that have captivated me since childhood. When I was little, my mom and I would build fairy houses together and leave milk and cookies out for the magical inhabitants of our newly-built residences. There's an interesting similarity between how we talk about fairies and how we talk about people with psychological disorders. Fairies, for example, only show themselves to people who believe in them or they trust—this condition could apply equally to someone with anxiety or paranoia. Many people dismiss fairies as non-existent, just as society often dismisses or renders invisible schizophrenics and others with disorders. Fairies also share some of humankind's idiosyncrasies: they are known to steal like kleptomaniacs, they act paranoid, they don't like to be watched, and they play humorous tricks.

During my time in Iceland, I became close friends with Brynja, the local energy worker and massage therapist. I asked Brynja if she believed in fairies, and she responded, "Of course, I draw my healing energy from them. I visit a troll every day when I walk my dog. He lives just in that field over there." Throughout my three-month residency and my subsequent visit the

following summer, I spent a lot of time with Brynja. She took me to all of her favorite places where the invisible people's energy was the strongest.

My art-making during this time approached the folklore I was learning in two ways. First, I made a five-foot-tall figure of a troll stomping a house and about to eat a baby. In the other piece, I collected wool found on my hikes. I naturally dyed some pieces, organized them to look like lichen and stone, and then felted this material over a life cast of myself. Once the wool was dry and could hold its form, I lugged it to the top of the mountain and placed it in a spot where it blended in with its surroundings to represent the "Invisible People." I left the figure there to break down and return to its original state. Before I came back to the US, I visited with Brynja for the last time and gave her my giant troll, since I could not bring it back with me. She gratefully accepted my gift and, in return, gave me a painting she had made: "I have something for you as well," she said, "I painted this picture of you with the Invisible People before I met you." This experience was so magical, it motivated me to continue reading about the invisible, powerful and spiritual forces.



Figure 19. Jess Self, Troll with Baby and House, Needle-Felted Wool, Paper, 2014



Figure 20. Jess Self, Invisible, Wet-Felted Wool, 2014



Figure 21. Brynja Birgisdóttir, *Jess with Invisible Pairs*, Acrylic Paint, 2012

At my residency in Austmarka, Norway, I learned a lot about the Finnish Forest's mystical occurrences as well as traditional handicrafts woven out of birch bark. Woven birch shoes and bags an important aspect of Austmarka history and culture. I was also reading Norse mythology and learning about Valkyrie warrior women. I bundled all of this new information into my own woven birch pieces: I harvested bark and used it to make armor, applying the birch weaving methods I had studied. My figural choices are often based on female archetypes or folkloric and heroic women, but in Austmarka I found inspiration in a live person: my residency host was an abrasive yet ethereal woman, short and curvy, with a unique pointy nose and

extremely long grey and black hair. To capture her essence, I merged the warrior archetype with the crone.



Figure 22. Jess Self, *Birch Armor I*, Birch Bark, 2018



Figure 23. Jess Self, Birch Armor I(detail), Birch Bark, 2018



Figure 24. Jess Self, Birch Armor 2, Birch Bark, 2018



Figure 25. Jess Self, Birch Armor 3, Birch Bark, 2018

5. ARCHETYPES THROUGH CHAKRAS

Carl Jung uses the Eastern Tantric Chakra Systems as an example of archetypes of transformation. He says, “they are not personalities, but are typical situations, places, ways and means that symbolize the kind of transformation in questions... their nature is their manifold meaning, their almost limitless wealth of reference which makes any unilateral formulation impossible.”²¹ In other words, the chakra system is an archetypal depiction of individual maturation through seven distinct stages.²² Chakras are visualized as running vertically from the base of spine to crown of the head. Energy is supposed to flow through the body but problems within any area can block the flow of energy, like how a minor fender-bender can jam up an entire highway at rush hour. Each chakra represents different relationships, events, ideas and thoughts and carries suggestions about how to advance toward enlightenment. Chakras influence our actions and reactions. “The chakras relate to archetypes in that both represent a measure of our emotional states, and both tell a story of our happiness, health, well-being and ability to love.”²³

²¹ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C Hull, 2nd ed., vol. 9, Bollingen Series, XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 38.

²² Caroline Myss, *Anatomy of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Power and Healing* (New York: Harmony Books, 1996). 68.

²³ Ambika Wauters, *Chakras and Their Archetypes: Uniting Energy Awareness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossing Press, 1997), 7.

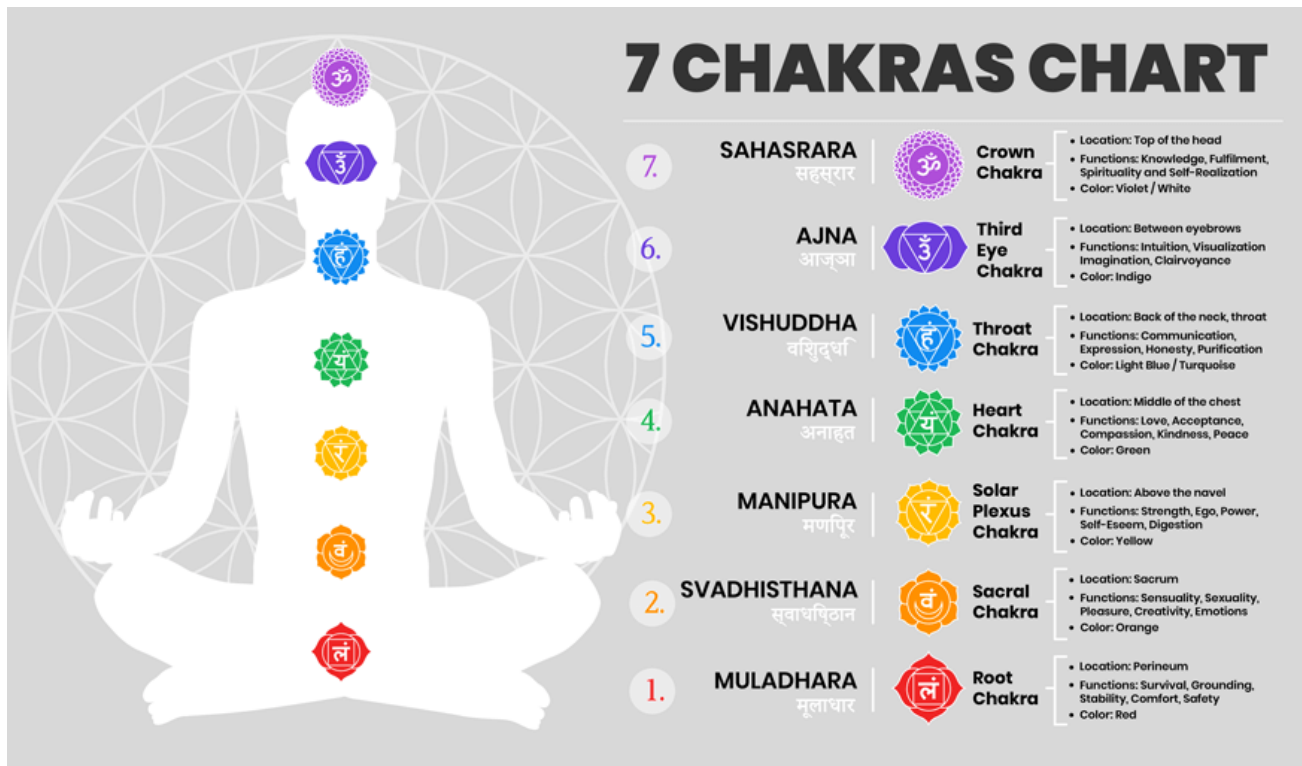


Figure 26. Chakra System for Beginners

While archetypes symbolize life phases, chakras symbolize emotional states and allow us to visualize how events, traumas, and relationships manifest in the body. Chakras are not a new concept. They are a common feature of many belief systems across many cultures, though they are sometimes called different names. Chakras are often compared to and associated with the 7 Christian Sacraments and the 10 sefirot known as the Tree of Life of the Kabbalah. Other systems of analysis are the Meyers-Briggs and Enneagrams, both of which use versions of archetypes, which can be seen as personifications of the Centers of Motivation.²⁴ Carl Jung

²⁴ Pamela Jaye Smith, *Inner Drives: How to Write and Create Characters Using the Eight Classic Centers of Motivation* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005). 10

theorized a similar system that detailed the layers of consciousness. “Moods and states of being are dependent to a great deal upon the influence of hormones secreted by the endocrine glands which are influenced by the Centers of Motivation of the etheric body, which in turn are motivated by self, consciously or unconsciously.”²⁵

Focusing on a particular chakra or set of chakras helps us visualize how our relationships affect one another, similar to a mind map or tree chart. Imagine a ray of energy traveling from your feet to your head. Each chakra is like a gate. If the gate is closed, it blocks the energy from moving upward, creating problems in the areas above it. These centers of energy make up the anatomy of the spirit.

In 2019 I began studying the chakra system and energy work on my own. I noticed that I was being triggered by someone in a very negative way. This problem consumed my attention; I needed to know how to stop obsessing about my issues with this person and to let my anger go. I found the concept of the chakra system to be very helpful in making sense of my position. This person was triggering me because I was associating their behavior with someone from my past. My pain from that relationship was resurfacing and associating itself with my new enemy and intensifying my distaste. I needed to pinpoint which chakra was affected and find the source of the negative energy that was blocking me from being happy.

The sexual trauma I experienced during childhood is one example of how chakras manifest in real life. My experience, connected to my family (Root Chakra) and sexuality (Sacral Chakra), was negatively affecting my intimate and romantic relationships (Sacral and Heart

²⁵ Pamela Jaye Smith, *Inner Drives: How to Write and Create Characters Using the Eight Classic Centers of Motivatiojn* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 8.

Chakras) with men in my teens and twenties. During that period in my life, I swung between acting recklessly and being severely guarded. When a trauma occurs, a block occurs in its corresponding chakra. In my case, I couldn't have healthy romantic relationships until I healed from this trauma, thereby removing the chakric block

6. THESIS WORK

After completing the series of works about my grandparents' house and achieving closure by talking to my family openly about my trauma, I started to wonder what my next body of work should be. I felt blocked. My sister-in-law, a deep believer in chakra energy work and alternative healing, insisted that I needed to cleanse my womb, because "that is where your creativity comes from." This statement confused me at first, but after some research, I learned that the womb is an energy center (Sacral Chakra) that is a source of both life and desire. This chakra affects how you relate to the world around you and establish self-worth; it even serves as a psychological storage locker where we hold onto past problems. Perhaps most significantly, the womb is where relationships are reassessed, and where pain is stored that results from sexual trauma. In order to cleanse my womb, I had to visualize, in a meditative state, severing the ties to my trauma. I had to let it all go. This was my first foray into spirituality, mysticism, and alternative medicine.

After this experience, it was clear that I needed to make work about chakras and their ability to help me. Hopefully, people who view my work can see the mind-body connection, and learn about this way of thinking. We can better understand one another and create an empathetic bond. A quote from Louise Bourgeois summarizes my feelings perfectly:

Oh yes, our body is being influenced by our life. And yet our body is more than the sum of its parts. We are, after all, more than the sum of our experiences. We are as

malleable as wax... We are sensitive to the souvenirs of what has happened before and apprehensive to what is going to happen after. Consequently, everything is energy.... I represent the sexual encounter from the point of view of the woman. She won't let it go.²⁶



Figure 27. Louise Bourgeois, Topiary, 1998, Fabric and steel

²⁶ Louise Bourgeois, Interview with Paulo Herkenhoff, in *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Phaidon, 2003), 18.

Knowing Together with An Other is an exhibition that explores how my diverse set of influences intersect and pave the way for a broadened understanding of life and being. The exhibition is comprised of seven figurative sculptures made from foam, mixed textiles, wood, wool and steel. Each piece has a few characteristics in common with its companions. First, the figures are all made from life casts of my body so that I can represent some of the archetypes or roles I have embodied throughout my life. Many of the figures employ puppet and doll joints to make them posable, but I am also exploiting puppets' broader cultural connotations. Puppets represent characters and play roles in a performance, just as archetypes are roles we play in our lives. The figures' poses draw from archetypes, folklore, mythology, and Western visual culture. The puppet joints and poses together form a dual reference, to taking control of one's life (not being a puppet) and taking ownership of the archetypes inherent in each stage of life.

My relationship to the figure isn't as close to sculptural history as it is to dolls and puppets. When you start making figures, you're in a sense making effigies or you're making bodies. You're making, physically, bodies that spirits enter or occupy or that have their own soul, presence, and physical space.²⁷

²⁷ Kiki Smith "interviewed by Claudia Gould," in Linda Shearer and Claudia Gould, eds., *Kiki Smith*, exh. Cat. Williams College Museum of Modern Art, Williamstown: Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1992, 67, quoted in *Chronology* 2005, 64.



Figure 28. Kiki Smith, Walking Puppet, 2008

If a puppet master controls the puppet and determines their movements, then a puppet with no strings is taking control of their own life, going on their unique journey, and embracing freedom. Their decisions are theirs alone. With these life cast “puppets,” I encourage the viewer to appreciate the human body’s intricacy and to acknowledge the conscious and unconscious choices we make.” Unlike puppets, whose movements are pure, humans vitiate their actions with doubt. These stirrings of consciousness, impulse and will, distract us from the task at hand.”²⁸

²⁸ Adam Geczy. 2016. *The Artificial Body in Fashion and Art : Marionettes, Models and Mannequins*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Because puppets are usually associated with movement, the figures in *Knowing Together with An Other* are static, unmoving, frozen in a moment in time.

The figures are also doll-like, which is yet another useful connotation. As Adam Geczy observes in his book, *The Artificial Body in Fashion and Art: Marionettes, Models and Mannequins*, “The doll, the body-other, plays the role of the *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* which is what stands in for what is missing (in ourselves).”²⁹ Therapists sometimes use dolls with young patients because a child can assign a familiar role to the doll, making it move and act like people in the child’s life. Even mannequins in store windows are stand-ins in for the shopper. The shopper can imagine themselves wearing the modeled clothes. Figurative sculpture also has this ability to relate to the viewer and help them imagine a scenario happening to them.

The title of my exhibition encompasses the idea of people creating empathetic connections by recognizing similarities to archetypes and reflecting on ourselves to heighten our self-awareness. The terms *conscious* and *conscience* derive from *con* or *cum*, meaning “with” or “together,” and *scire*, “to know” or “to see.”³⁰ Thus, the root meaning of both terms is “knowing with” or “seeing with” an unnamed other. In contrast, the word *science* which also derives from *scire*, simply means knowing, i.e., knowing without “withness.” So etymology indicates that the phenomena of consciousness and conscience are made up of two factors: knowing and “withness.” In other words, consciousness is not a solitary state; it is the experience of *Knowing Together with An Other*.³¹

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=nlebk&AN=1286632&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 54.

²⁹ Ibid, 3-4.

³⁰ Edinger, E.F. 1984, *The Creation of Consciousness*, Tronto: Inner City, p. 36.

³¹ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C Hull, 2nd ed., vol. 9, Bollingen Series, XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 42.

My first sculpture, *Witness*, highlights the second (sacral) chakra, which relates to the characteristics such as sexuality and lust. These qualities are also frequently ascribed to the feminine archetypes of mother and martyr. They also relate to “Madonna/whore” female stereotypes common in Western culture. The headless figure in this piece is made from a foam life cast of my own body. She reclines like the female nude depicted in Titian’s “Venus of Urbino,” a work which typifies the way Renaissance artists represented sexuality. I highlight the figure’s womb/sacral chakra area by protecting crispy heat-treated textiles behind a copper “cage,” which is braze welded and resembles armor. Copper represents both transmission and energy, but it also relates to the island of Cyprus, the birthplace of Aphrodite according to Greek mythology. The hardened textiles represent personal memories and experiences throughout the show.

I covered the figure’s surface with image-transferred clippings taken from journaled letter entries about my past romantic relationships going back to age thirteen. A thin layer of wax protects the text and serves as reminder of seduction and romance. *Witness* circles back to themes in my earlier work, like the bed as a site for processing trauma, the push-pull dynamic in my relationships with men, and the womb as a holding place for energy and past events.



Figure 29. Titian, Venus of Urbino, oil on canvas, 1534



Figure 30. Jess Self, *Witness*, 2021, 60x36x64 inches, journaled letters to men from 2001-2020, wax, metal, mixed textiles, wool

The second sculpture, *Twoness*, is a life-size needle-felted version of myself. Again, using the puppet joints, I have arranged the figure to mimic the pose of the goddess of love in Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, (fig) who emerges from the foam of the Cyprus Sea. Like the goddess in Botticelli's image, the figure is soft and pure. Her chest cavity (heart chakra) is highlighted, hollowed out, and filled with more heat-treated textiles, which represent flesh as well as experiences involving love and heartbreak. An anatomical heart carved from an alabaster stone rests at the figure's feet. This choice was inspired by the Wilhelm Hauff fairy tale "Heart of Stone." In this story, the main character, Peter, trades his beating heart for a stone one in

exchange for money. He begins to regret his choice when he realizes he can no longer feel emotions, love or empathy, so he goes on a quest to find his heart. The figure in *Twoness* appears soft and angelic, sweet and modest, but her surface does not match her insides, which are messy, tangled, and darkly colored. Is she trying to conceal her true self? *Twoness* is a doubled consciousness or perspective,³² or the state of being two things at once. Jung taught that the number two refers to opposites and consciousness is born out of the experience of opposites. This figure is learning how to negotiate the dual aspects of her personality.



Figure 31. Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, Tempura, 1485-1486

32.



Figure 32. Jess Self, *Twoness*, 2021, Wax, metal, mixed textiles, 60x36x64 inches

My third piece *Mother/Martyr* sits in a *Pieta* pose. However, instead of a mother figure holding a child, my piece features the two figures of the same size and shape. The mother figure has heat treated textiles embedded on the surface and is covered with multiple layers of wax, which leave a crater-like texture. The “child” figure is covered in cream felt that has been manipulated to create many different textures. Hand embroidered onto the felt are crispy and melted heat-treated textiles in a variety of pale, soft colors. The child lies in the mother figure’s lap, limp with loose doll joints. I associate these figures with the mother and victim archetypes (connected with the root chakra);³³ the mother nurtures and comforts, but the child/victim must learn from her experiences in order to grow, become stronger and help others. By valuing herself she can transcend the victim archetype and develop into the empress archetype. If she is unable to do this, the victim becomes the martyr, someone believes they are not worthy of happiness and has a life full of suffering and negativity.

³³ Ambika Wauters, *Chakras and Their Archetypes: Uniting Energy Awareness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossing Press, 1997), 29.

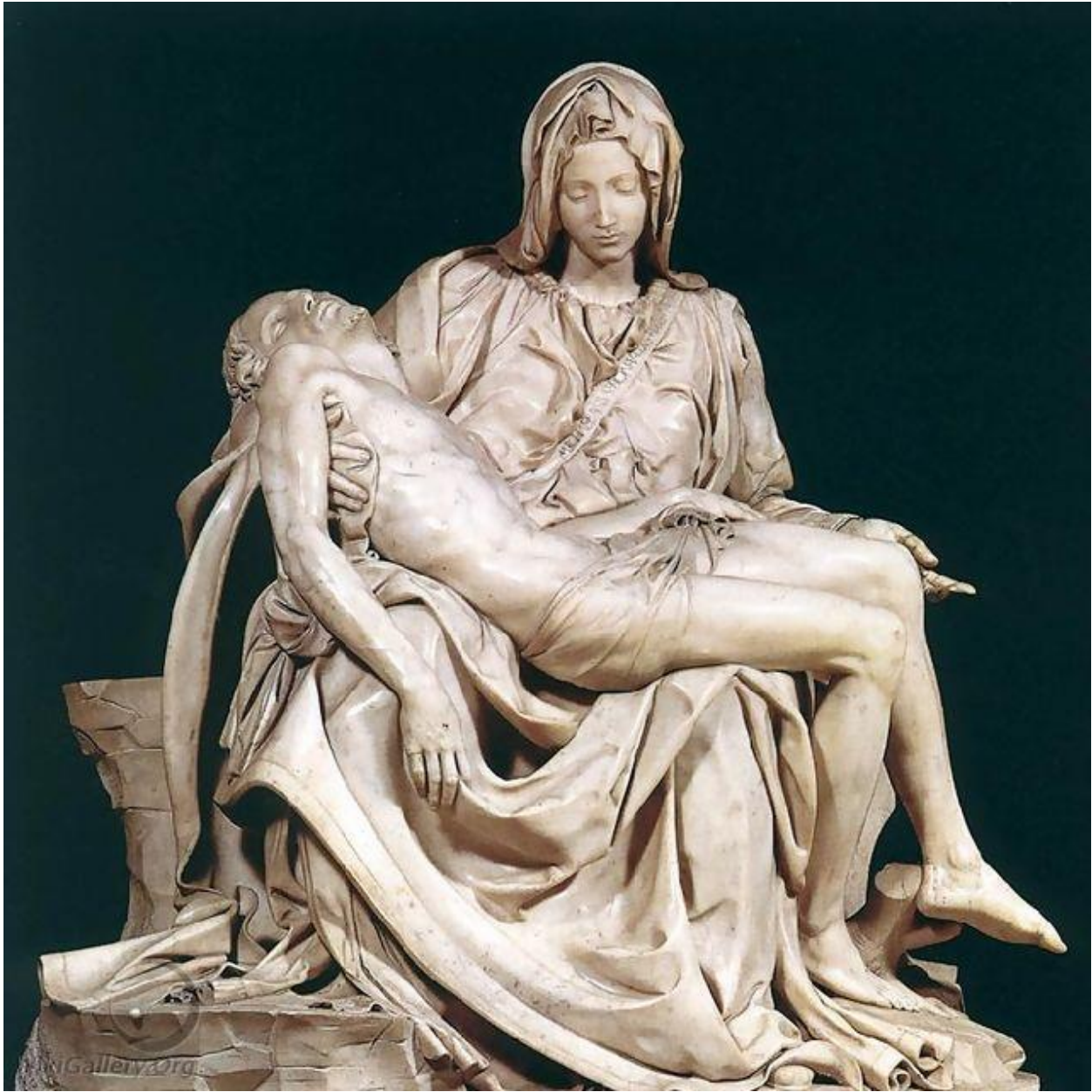


Figure 33. Michelangelo, *Pieta*, 1498, Marble, 68.5x 76.8inches



Figure 34. Jess Self, Mother/Martyr, 2021, Wax, metal, mixed textiles, 50x36x70 inches

Trauma often brings on feelings of anxiety, shame, and loss of confidence. The figure in *Sheepness* seems to be suffering from these negative emotions. She attempts to make herself small, to blend in with her surroundings so that she will not attract attention. This figure is covered with small rectangles of fabrics mostly of blue and purple. That layer was then sanded and covered with a thin layer cold wax for surfacing. Behind the figure hangs a very large loose and messy weaving with similar colors of the figure. This confuses the viewers and for a second the figure and the weaving blur together. She is partially camouflaged. The joints of this figure are covered in needle-felted cream wool. The cream color over the dark colors is a giveaway. She is unable to hide. The pose refers to the *Crouching Aphrodite*. She was one of the first female figures to be carved nude and in both this crouching pose and Pudica pose she is covering her genitalia. She is trying to hide and cover herself from the male gaze.



Figure 35. *Crouching Aphrodite*, 2nd Century AD, 25 x 13 7/8 x 19 3/8 in., Marble



Figure 36. Menophantos, *Aphrodite of Menophantos*, First century BCE, an Gregorio al Celio, Rome



Figure 37. Jess Self, Sheepness, 2021, wax, wool, mixed textiles, 50x30x64 inches

The Enervated Foilness of Daphne shows an exhausted figure sitting on the ground. She is based on the myth of Daphne and Apollo. The story goes that Daphne, ruthlessly being chased by Apollo, asks the gods for help in refusing Apollo's sexual advances.³⁴ The gods turn Daphne into a tree, concealing her from her predator. Finally, she is able to rest. Most sculptures that portray Daphne show her reaching skyward, beseeching the gods for help; her arms are depicted mid-transformation, turning into branches; her feet change to tree roots. I wanted my version of Daphne to express the exhaustion she felt after running for so long. I referenced trees by using sawdust to cover the figure's surface. Additionally, I used lavender, which has a curiously contradictory double-meaning: in some stories, lavender is used to attract men in and increase their passion, but in other stories, young girls carry lavender to ward off unwanted advances and evil spirits.³⁵

Including lavender in the Daphne figure's joints therefore also carries a double meaning: it could either be adding an extra layer of protection or it could be causing the figure's torment.

³⁴ "Myth of Apollo and Daphne - Greek Myths | Greeka," Greekacom, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.greeka.com/greece-myths/apollo-daphne/>.

³⁵ How To Expertly Make Your Own Homemade Perfume From Flowers says, "Lavender Folklore: The Tales Behind This Calming Purple Plant," *Icy Sedgwick* (blog), March 8, 2018, <https://www.icysedgwick.com/lavender-folklore/>.



Figure 38. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1622-1625, 96in, Marble



Figure 39. Jess, Enervated Foilness of Daphne, 2021, Saw dust, lavender, 32x43x32 inches

Wholeness is the most intricate and intensely wrought sculpture in the series. I began by braze welding a wire frame version of my body. Then, slowly and painstakingly wove a variety of cream-colored textiles together to create the figure's skin. I chose this color because of its connotation with purity, similar to the clothing worn by wise spiritual leaders or gurus. Each section of skin corresponds to one day of work. This figure that has experienced every mood, the ups and the downs, the tears and joy, embedded in each section of her woven skin. Carl Jung considered a person to be whole and capable of enlightenment when the conscious and the unconscious are connected, possible only when every chakra is unblocked. At the feet of this

figure is a pile of loose fabric not yet woven. She will always be a work in progress, questioning if wholeness or perfection is achievable.



Figure 40. Jess Self, *Wholeness*, 2019-2021, 24x24x50 inches, Metal, Mixed Textiles

7. CONCLUSION

The work for *Knowing Together With An Other* represents my spiritual and artistic growth; it is also a culmination of knowledge acquired during my graduate studies. In these pieces, I experimented with several new materials, demonstrating a new level of skill confidence and ambition I didn't have before entering the program. I am no longer satisfied in my needle-felting niche; I trust that I can employ a wide variety of contemporary craft methods to express my ideas in way that embraces both craft and fine art.

The ties between my personal story and references to folklore, mythology and western visual culture peeks out just enough to connect with, they recognize a pose or character, and it streamlines them to a familiarity or memory that bonds them with the work. Viewers are curious and engaged because of what they feel when they look at the work, emotions sometimes overpowers concept. Using the archetypes as starting points gives me endless subject matter and inspiration that will sustain me throughout my career. Creating seven figures was a very daunting task, but I was determined to meet my goal. All of the long hours and small details were worth it. I am so proud of how this body of work turned out.

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