



Book Review: Brad Kunkle's Search for Spirituality in Feminine Beauty

"She knows we watch her, this conscious goddess, as she heals bees, and holes the magic land. She hears us through the flights of birds, listens through her feathers"

Michael Pearce / MutualArt

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Brad Kunkle, *Alkemā*. Flesk

Painter Brad Kunkle has dedicated this beautiful book of gorgeous women wrapped in fragile metal leaf to the eternal feminine, to his friends and family, and to his gallerist Steve Diamant, but its title also ties it in homage to the eternal search for the universal balance of the male and female principles. There are no wordy essays by credentialed academics or postmodern prose-mongers to contextualize the work, because the sensual paintings speak for themselves as the sensual antithesis of conventional art. These are rebel paintings of ancient desire, of the simple and eternal bond between man and woman – they pursue no program and bang no political drum. Kunkle will preach you no preachings. His paintings touch the sacred heart of love.

In a few brief paragraphs of introduction, Kunkle comments on his exploration of the mystical feminine forces that emerge as preternatural inspiration. He sees the elements of his pursuit in the work of his predecessors, the Pre-Raphaelites, and in the mysterious esoterism of Hilma af Klint. If these seem odd bedfellows for the gilded harmonies of Kunkle's work, consider the deep Christian mysticism of the early brotherhood: John Everett Millais' Mary as the archetypal mother in *Christ in the House of his Parents*; John William Waterhouse's red-haired and love-lost *Lady of Shalott*; and the iconic lush-lipped beauties of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's later work, secular icons of the virgin with their sensual and erotic power over men. Consider the hermetic feminine faith of af Klint, the transcendent symbolist who joined her séance sisterhood so she could speak to guiding spirits who showed her how to adorn a Theosophist temple. Mystical faith guides Kunkle's hand – but his warm faith doesn't lie in the inked and icy sheets of biblical exegesis, or in the cold hierarchal condescension of church fathers, or in the whispered teachings of wheezy ghosts – his faith is in the ancient feminine force which he sees as the energy to bring equilibrium to a patriarchal world out of balance with nature.

Intuition guides him, and he sees this as the source of the otherworldly and elusive romance of his paintings. His intuition leads to magic,

contemporary life. The magic of craftsmanship casts a second spell. The gilded surfaces of the paintings shift and move under the nature and rhythm of light – an unchained and lively quality inevitably lost in the plates of this lovely book – and Kunkle's rich umbers glow, the sun of his fine and burnished gold warms every page. Kunkle is an excellent shaper of narrative – he knows the exquisite balance of telling just enough of a story to inspire desire, he knows the delicacy of clever composition, and he knows the subtle enchantment of a limited and consistent palette, and a gentle narrative binds all the paintings together as a consistent body of work.

CHECK AUCTION RESULTS BY BRAD KUNKLE



Brad Kunkle, *Candela*, 2011, Oil and Silver Leaf on Wood, 33 x 32

Kunkle has chosen *The Near, Far, and Leading* for the cover art, greeting his followers with the image of a beautiful and naked girl, her eyes inward-looking, her long dark hair garlanded in a nest of dry leaves, raised in her extended hand. Time waits for her, and bird forms morph from leaf shapes. On the flat silver sky, Japanese herons take solid form from line, and glowing fragments of gold appear among their umber feathers.

This twilight woman from the hazel wood fades through dawn's brightening air, and full of longing for unity, Kunkle follows her like Yeats' wandering Aengus through hollow lands and hilly lands, and walks with her among long dappled grass in landscapes of eternal autumn. He searches for her among sepia flowers, where she is a figure in a recurring dream, chaplet-crowned with golden blossom in her hair. Wind-blown fall scatters around her. The thrown shadows of swallows tell the story of their flights to and from solidity. A whirlwind of leaf wraps her in a warm cocoon, her pale and passive face, long-lashed, accepting the atoning torrent of eternal gold.

She is Persephone. She dies and is reborn, emerging from her home in Hades in a vortex of gold fingers in a spiraling sea with spring in her hair. With an empty earthen jug she crouches by the void, bringing life from the underworld. She is the seed-mother. She dips her hair into a placid lake, regenerating still water with her life. As a trinity of wading graces she binds the world together in a ritual of harmony, binding earth and air with a sweep of gold blown between three offering plates. The three rise again as a transfigured trinity in dark umbers and pale greys over gold. She is five-fold in the triptych *Ad Hoc Quod Iterum (To Be Again)*, where she gathers a white-dressed harvest in long stretched cloths, and swallows flit through the meadow gathering the golden crop.

She meets us with direct gaze in *History of Nature*, where she is striped and peacock-tailed, and crowned with a mop of curling hair and

shadows say, and we are spectators to a drama of paint and metal. She knows we watch her, this conscious goddess, as she heals bees, and holes the magic land. She hears us through the flights of birds, listens through her feathers. The swallows lift her in the swarming arms of their murmuration, an emergent energy rising above wetlands of mind.

Not everything is magic and nostalgia in her sensual world. She meets a trans-dimensional version of herself in *Present Future Past*, where a mirror reveals an alternate universe of the golden tornado, and presents a blonde-haired counter to her brunette self. The mirror is an entrance to another time and place, to another manifestation of her feminine power, but she seems grounded in her silver-sky and aspen home. A lost key is a clue to the secrets of her mind. In some of the paintings the grey girl is absent from the frame. *The Golden Corridor* diptych sees a close clearing of weathered birches, where scarlet sparrows scatter between the branches. Their silver bark is graffiti-scored and stripped from the bases of the trees where they meet the sandy forest floor. The painting is entrancing and mysterious – the blossomed girl is not present, but we feel her presence in the soul of the woods.

[SEE ALL AUCTION RESULTS BY BRAD KUNKLE](#)

She is Eros in several of the paintings; lying seductively in feathery flora beside the opening whirlpool of leaves in *Flouresce* with sensual lips parted for a kiss; and surrounded by delicate and tiny clusters of white flowers in *Pareidolia*; but on the infinite stage of this goddess imagery, sexuality is only one aspect of her eternal flame – to see only a vision of the flesh misses the whole. In *The Oak Tree* she is a silvered child, she is twinned in *Pollination*, and a child again in *Petra's World*, and this innocence is one aspect of her divinity. In Kunkle's paintings of the past five years she has met the moon, her astronomical analogue, which has symbolized the goddess for millennia. In the quietly beautiful *Saturn Return* she lies in crop-circle crushed long grass among moth-like clovers and white daisies, a diminutive moon beside her like a ball beside a tired player. The silvered moon is her nimbus in a series of iconic portraits of her as Flora, wrapped in wreaths of blossoms cut as absent spaces from monochrome sepias, but it becomes her object of ritual worship in a series of paintings among twisted trees. She is priestess now, casting the ritual circle of theurgic space, and she wears a dress decorated with the primal image of the snake, identifying her at the end as she was at the beginning, Ananke, unwrapped from the cosmic egg, and co-creator of the universe with her twin brother Chronos, time personified. She dies; reborn, she dies again. She radiates life, this goddess of the underworld.

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1. *Can you tell us a bit about yourself, both as a person and as an artist? Where did you grow up, and how did your interest in art develop? Do you remember the moment you realized you would spend your life as an artist?*

I'm from a small town in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania called Lehighton. I had a rich childhood as far as the outdoors was concerned but little in cultural exposure. I read sci-fi and fantasy novels and dreamed of becoming a book cover artist or having my own calendar like Boris Vallejo. After college I realized I had something deeper to offer than an art director's take on a dragon. I was raised Lutheran but left the church in my mind by age 12 and never attended after college. I was beginning to explore the hypocrisies and demonization of women within the Abrahamic religions, and this was what sparked my journey into that "deeper understanding" of the subjects I wanted to paint. The moment I realized I wanted to spend my life as an artist was not during my childhood — it was actually a very sober, adult moment. I was in an indie rock band called Aderbat in my twenties. I was nearing 30, and working on my first 8 or 10 paintings that I intended to show to the owner of Arcadia Contemporary. I needed gold leaf and had no money. I sold my bass guitar for \$700 and bought a box of gold. That was my moment of decision — letting go of lesser dreams to pursue greater ones.



"Switch" by Brad Kunkle, oil and silver leaf on panel, 16×16"

2. What was your artistic education like? Is there any institution or professor that you feel has made a significant impact upon your development as an artist?

I won the "Mr. Artistic" trophy in high school _ I was doing a lot of drawing at home on my own. When I got to Kutztown University, my scope really expanded. I didn't even touch oil paint until I was around 20 years old. I had two painting professors that really taught me a lot, Lynn Krizan and George Sorrels. Sorrels was a student of a pupil of the great French Academic painter, William-Adolphe Bouguereau and so

his influence on me was greater. I was too naive at the time to record the name of Sorrels teacher, and am still haunted by the desire to know it. Sorrels painted in grisaille, and I always felt a connection to this aesthetic, so it was natural for me to pursue it later in life. I didn't go to grad school, and didn't paint for 8 years after college. I knew I could paint, but didn't know what to paint or how to separate myself visually from everyone else....so I joined a band and became a house painter. This led me to a job that required using copper leaf on walls. I had just returned from a trip to Paris, where I was stunned by the gilded ceilings of the Louvre more than the paintings, so I began to experiment with gold leaf. I was also painting pet portraits at this time, for extra income. Honestly, house painting and pet portraits always felt like my version of "grad school." It worked out for me, and was a lot cheaper.



3. Can you take us through your creative process, from start to finish? How do you begin a painting, and what are the steps you take to execute it?

I keep a notebook on symbols, feelings or social constructs that inspire me, sometimes an image appears in a flash and I'll use these notes or drawings to direct a photoshoot with models. I shoot a ton of reference photos, then go through them without a conscious plan using only my intuition. Once I select the best of photos, I'll manipulate and compose a "drawing" using photoshop. Then I loosely transfer it using a projector and use a brush directly to lay in the sketch with raw umber. I should point out that the panel I'm painting on has been prepped weeks in advance. I use pre-made wood panels and prime the surfaces with Gamblin Oil Ground. Two coats, sanded in between, then I wipe on a thin layer of raw umber and let that dry before I transfer the underpainting. While the rough transfer is still wet, I turn off the projector and go in to really move the paint and execute the drawing. Anyone who's used a projector to transfer knows that it's an approximation tool. Great for marking where things should be, but not at all a magical tracing tool. I let the drawing step dry, so that mentally, I know the drawing is correct and won't change as I enter the next phase, which is underpainting, or gilding. Each painting is different, so sometimes I put gold leaf down, seal it with shellac, then paint on top, or I'll finish a painting, then add gold or silver at the end. If the gilding comes last, I'll render the underpainting in raw umber, then add layers of grisaille, then gild. The landscapes and leaves are usually reductive painting with Q-tips or rags. My painting surfaces are very smooth, so this allows the wiping to be an efficient technique. The skin in my figures usually is 3 or 4 layers of various shades of gray. I have all of my grays pre-mixed and tubed. I also only use medium (Rublev Oleogel) when I'm painting hair. It allows me to pull the hair with long single strokes.

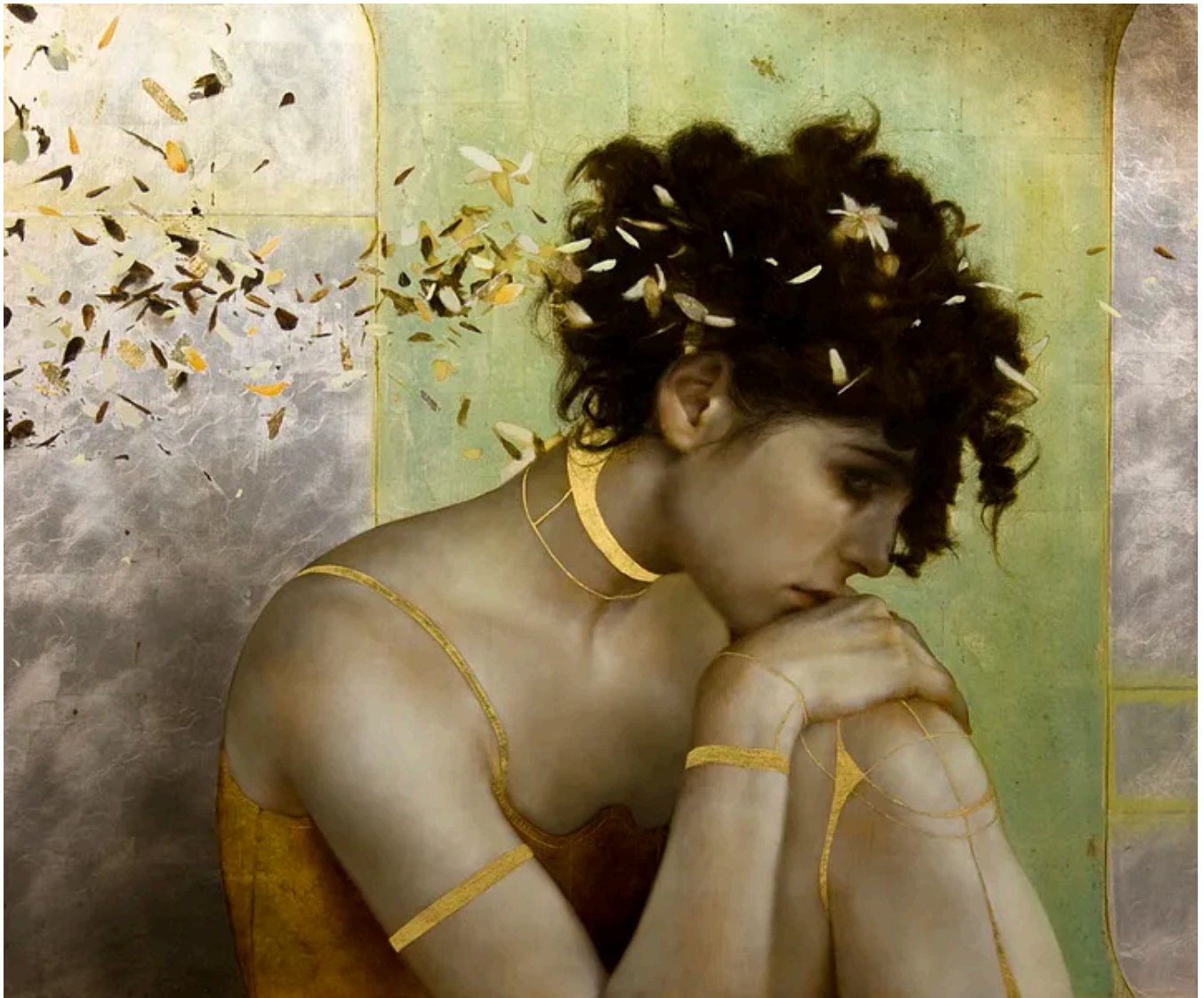


painting in progress, by Brad Kunkle

4. Is painting your full-time career, or do you have a day job? If the latter, how do you balance the two and make sure there's time for your art?

Painting has been my full-time career now for almost a decade. It's hard work and sometimes stressful but I could never work for someone again—I value my freedom too much. I encounter a lot of artists who have day jobs and they seem to feel inadequate as an artist because of that. I remember feeling that way too when I was a house painter and dreaming of having representation. I read this article in

NYTimes Magazine back in 2015 about artists that make their living with art vs. those who don't and the writer had this great quote that I may mess up a bit but basically he said "nobody cares how you pay your rent, your job is to show us something we didn't know we needed to see." I find that very inspiring.



"A Projection of Engagement" by Brad Kunkle, oil and metal leaf on panel

5. Looking back at your career as an artist, and the paths that brought you to the place you are right now, is there a decision that you are particularly proud of making, in hindsight? Conversely — is there anything you wish you had done differently?

I was once invited to visit Nelson Shanks at his home and studio. I was just starting to develop my style using a limited palette and gold leaf. I wasn't showing with anyone or represented by a gallery yet, so his advice was very precious to me. He

asked me why I was using gold leaf, instead of just using paint to make the areas look like gold. I didn't have a good answer...it just felt right to me....and I went home that night really wondering if I should continue to experiment with gold. A couple days went by and I decided that I needed to follow my truth, and even if it wasn't Nelson's, that was fine.

I've always been proud of that.

Anything I would have done differently? I've made some bad decisions but I'm not the kind of person that really has regrets...I think bad decisions are the best learning experiences, and a wiser artist is a better artist.



"The Golden Corridor" by Brad Kunkle, oil and gold leaf on linen panels, 64×82"



BEINART GALLERY

FINE ART & CURIOSITIES

Interview with Brad Kunkle

🕒 Posted on January 24, 2015



"The Gilded Wilderness" (2012) - Oil, gold & silver leaf.

These days it's a cherry on top when a conceptual artist has impeccable technical skills, and is able to play with various painting tools to alter the viewer's state of mind. Artist [Brad Kunkle](#) has this ability. There is quite a lot going on beneath the surface in each of his luscious paintings. He purposely uses a limited palette and overcast light source to flatten his imagery. It's a trick painters use - both colour and light are elements in painting, which can be used to create the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface. Yet his works depict a wonderfully rich depth and motion. His use of contrast, gesture and composition guide the viewer's eye and emotion. **BEINART GALLERY** his impossible landscapes. The subjects of his works, almost exclusively female, lure their viewers in with their gaze and idealistic beauty. His use



every place.

"When I gild a sky in a painting, the reflected light on the leaf is a direct connection to the passing of time of light in the viewer's reality." —Brad Kunkle



"The Belonging" (2014) Oil, gold and silver leaf.

Samantha Levin: Can you define "Realism" for the purposes of this interview? I think there are many different perceptions of it. When I think of Realism, I think of Eakins. Others think of artwork that looks like an unretouched photo. What's your take?

Brad Kunkle: Realism to me is any form of painting that allows the viewer to easily identify the subject, excluding abstracted or heavily expressed forms... and the subject is rooted in reality. (Because we can't put Dali's work into realism, even though we can easily identify the subjects). I think of realism as including everyone from [John Singer Sargent](#) to [Ingres](#).



"Magnetic Fields" (2014) - Oil, gold & silver leaf & "Tidal" (2014) - Oil & gold leaf.

SL: So, would you consider yourself a bit of a realist, or is there too much concept and emotion ingrained in your work?

BK: I think of myself as more of a symbolist or surrealist. There is more concept than meets the eye in most of my work. Realism doesn't excite me enough to want to be a realist... but i guess some of my work appears simple enough to be considered realism.

SL: I would hope that your work wouldn't appear simple to anyone. There is simply too much content in each of your paintings; not only imagery, but also emotion and idea. Am I correct in understanding that you found the rigorous art training you had at Kutztown to be constrictive? This echoes the sentiments of many artists. Do you feel like you could have avoided this training or are you thankful you went through it?

BK: Actually I didn't really find it constrictive... my advanced painting professor, [George Sorrels](#), didn't even require us to show up for class... only for the critiques. I'm grateful for that training... the core and fundamental classes are important... it's all about learning techniques but then being able to, at some point, step away from the rigorous art training, and unlearn all the things that you don't connect with as an artist.



“Islands” (2012) - Oil & gold leaf

SL: Light seems to be very meaningful in your paintings. Would you consider it to be a major subject or one of the basic underlying tools that brings out the figures and other objects you’ve depicted?

BK: Well, light indicates a passing of time... and I like the idea of keeping the light source vague because it lends itself to giving the paintings a sense of timelessness. Imagine yourself in a thick fog filled day... the fog lights up from almost everywhere... it’s very surreal and disorienting. When I gild a sky in a painting, the reflected light on the leaf is a direct connection to the passing of time of light in the viewer's reality... not the light that is defined by brush on the figure. This is best seen when natural light is coming through windows in a space where the painting may be hanging.

SL: You use photos as reference for your paintings. Have you ever shared your photos publicly? Is photography a medium you enjoy being creative with?

BK: I don’t really share them publicly. I don’t think they are particularly good... which is why I’m a painter... I just try to capture the light and form well on the skin... the rest is not that important. I usually make up the rest of the paintings from my imagination. I love being creative with my photos in photoshop. This is where I do a lot of very rough and silly looking mock compositions and “drawings” if you can call them that.



“The Near, Far and Leading” (2014) - Oil, gold & silver leaf & “Trinity” (2010) - Oil, gold & silver leaf

SL: Can you give me some background on what inspired you to create the installation "The Belonging?"

BK: Years ago I was at the Park Avenue Armory in NYC to see an Ann Hamilton exhibition called [The Event of A Thread](#). While I was waiting in line to get in, I was looking at these massive 19th century oil paintings hanging in the lobby and was just unmoved. Then I entered the Hamilton exhibition, which had these giant swings that people could swing on... and they were attached by cords to giant sheets of white cloth hanging down from the ceiling. People were laying down under the white cloth, which quietly swayed like white waves... while kids and adults all waited to get their turn on a swing... so they could help make the waves and feel like a kid again. It was more complicated than this... but safe to say that by the time I left, I felt like there was so much more that I could be doing to affect the viewer's experience than just painting. I also saw a [Bill Viola](#) retrospective in the early 2000's that has always stuck with me... and James Turrell is possibly my favourite living artist. None of these artists are painters... and I've been deeply impacted and inspired by them.



05:59

SL: Are you referring to the Bill Viola retrospective that took place at the Whitney? I remember that blowing my mind. It was incredibly immersive and powerful.

BK: Yes! It was at the Whitney... and it had the same effect on me. I hadn't even really started painting when I saw this. I was just a student learning fundamentals.

SL: What challenges did you encounter when making the installation? Was it difficult to move away from the comfort of the two-dimensional canvas?

BK: Well, I had to teach myself Final Cut Pro... and learn how to really be a bit of a filmmaker. I didn't want to source any of this out to other people because I really didn't know how it was exactly going to manifest in the end. The entire process, from filming the model, to editing, to figuring out if the projector could line up perfectly to the canvas and how bright it would be.... all of this informed the end result. I love working like this. I know where I want to go, but I only have general idea of how I'm going to get there. Making the map is more exciting than following the roads... and on that note... it was becoming difficult to stay within the comfort of the two-dimensional canvas... which is why I did this project.



"Halfway" (2012) - Oil, gold & silver leaf & "Cocoon" (2012) - Oil & gold leaf

SL: Is there a story that the work is telling or is it not so linear?

BK: It's less of a story and more of a visualisation of a mythology. [Mythologist] [Joseph Campbell](#) talked about something he called "detribalisation". It's the idea that we could spend our whole lives being exactly what's expected of us from the society or religion we are born into... or we could truly find our own identity, without these dogmas and expectations that have been dictated to us by other people, by listening to our own truth and intuition and nature.

SL: Is it accurate to say that you're detribalising yourself by stretching into this new medium?

BK: Ha... well, I suppose that's true. I never thought of that... but yes.



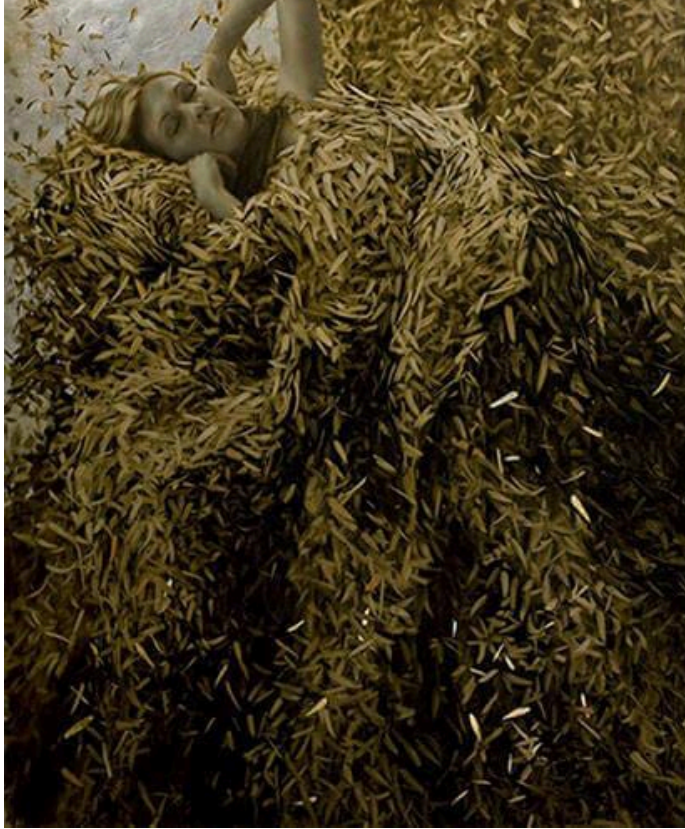
“Seer” (2012) - Oil & gold leaf

SL: The music in the installation is very spiritual and seems to be based on Indian harmonic drone. What was your interest in this kind of music?

BK: I’m unfamiliar with Indian harmonic drone... but [Matt Taylor](#) and I worked very hard to keep the music minimal and just “feel” right. I suppose whatever it was we felt... that note... is the same drone that is in Indian harmonics that feels spiritual.

SL: You’ve said that you greatly admire the work of artist James Turrell. His work is vastly different in style from your paintings. Besides the installation, has he influenced your work in any way?

BK: Well, his volcano project is my favourite piece. He’s influencing me by pushing me... pushing all of my work. Any artist that purchases an extinct volcano and builds a celestial observatory within it, that aligns with the moon every 18 years... that’s just incredibly brilliant and ambitious. And his intuition led him to the volcano. He was flying all over the country in a little plane, searching for this thing that he was looking for but wasn’t even quite sure what it was. If that’s not inspiring to every artist... to trust themselves... then I don’t know what is.



"Sixth Sleep" (2010) - Oil, gold & silver leaf & "True North" (2014) - Oil & gold leaf

SL: I have only seen his permanent work installed at PS-1 in Queens. While it never fails to inspire me, I feel like I have to see the ridiculously ambitious Roden Crater before I die. Any plans to make your way out there yourself?

BK: I've actually never been to the PS-1 installation... last I saw it was closed for restoration. Yes, Roden Crater is definitely on my bucket list. Sounds like for now, at least, it's an invite only situation. Maybe I need to hit the lottery so I can donate a large sum of money to Turrell so he can finish it... then I'd probably get invited.



“The Daughters of Mandelbrot” (2011) - Oil and gold leaf

SL: It's interesting that light also plays a significant role in the works of Turrell and Viola. Your work is visually vastly different from theirs, yet there's this connection. I suppose light could be said to dominate any form of visual art. Any comment on that?

BK: That's such a great observation. Yes. One of the reasons that I paint in a very limited palette, almost without colour... is the concept of truth. The true nature of an object or person or place. What I mean is, we can see a ball because there is light bouncing off of it. Remove the light, and it is gone. We don't see it because it is yellow. Remove or change the colour, and we still see the ball, because it is still reflecting light. Let's assume I'm colour blind, and we are both looking at the ball. We can argue all day over the colour of that ball, but we can both agree that it exists because we see the light on it.



“Mare Imbrium” (2012) - Oil, gold and silver leaf

SL: Light, more than color, defines form and depth for our eyes and brains.

BK: Every wavelength of light is perceived as a colour in the spectrum.... as a spectral colour. I’m talking about taking away ‘perception’ from the equation and leaving us with an elementary definition of light... like brightness and darkness. Colour happens in the brain, which is why we can all perceive it differently. I’m making an artistic and philosophical argument that we get a little closer to the “truth” of a subject if we take colour out of it. There is something so “truthful” and “timeless” about a black and white photograph. I don’t doubt it has something to do what we are talking about here. There is a whole physics debate to be had here because white light is a combination of wavelengths in the colour spectrum but I’m going a bit beyond science and speaking philosophically.



“The Gold Choker” (2010), “The Quickening” (2010) & “The Red Crown” (2012) - All oil, gold and silver leaf

SL: Tell me what projects or shows are coming up soon. Do you hope to create more multi-media installations?

BK: I'll have a painting in a group show at Jonathan Levine in August. The show is all about imaginative realism and I hear there will be about 35 artists participating. I've also been invited to be the teaching guest of honour at the IMC at Amherst College this year and there is talk of a university residency in California forming for the fall. I definitely plan to continue creating more multi-media pieces. I think I just hit the tip of the iceberg with The Belonging.

SL: Looking forward to the show and whatever new projects you dive into. Thanks for the interview, Brad!



"The History of Nature" (2014) - Oil, gold and silver leaf

This interview was written by [Samantha Levin](#) for the Beinart Collective in 2015.

Samantha Levin spends much of her time working as a digital curator, archivist and librarian preserving rare art- and design-related materials. Also an artist and curator, she works with Contemporary Grotesque and dark artists, curating and producing group and solo pop-up exhibitions. She currently lives and works from her Brooklyn studio with the ghost of her white marshmallow-shaped cat, Luna.

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