

Canopic Jars: The Afterlife of Matter; a work in progress.

Writer: Dr Anna Walker - Artist: Genie Poretzky-Lee.

After a trip to Egypt in 2012, artist, Genie Poretzky-Lee began a series of Canopic Jar sculptures (2012-2019). The glass jars, in various sizes and shapes, usually used for storage in the kitchen, became containers for an experimental process of growth and transformation. Similar to aquariums or terrariums, she filled each one with a substance and a catalyst. For example, in Canopic Jar #3 Hatching (2012- 2019), soil and a ceramic egg were the main contents and the condensation on the inside of the sealed glass jar, the catalyst.

#1

The original Egyptian canopic jars housed the internal organs of the dead and were made out of porcelain, ceramic or carved out of wood or stone. Mummification involved the evisceration of most of the body's organs, after which the viscera were preserved by packing them in natron (a mineral used for dehydration). Then, the lungs, the stomach, the intestines and the liver, were each placed in a separate jar. Seen as the seat of the soul, the heart was left in the body and later weighed against the feather of truth by the god of death and embalming, Anubis. (Rosalie, 1999: 199).

Mummification was performed by three people, the scribe, the cutter and the embalmer. The scribe supervised the cutting, the first incision into the flank of the body. The cutter carried out the evisceration. An untouchable, he was regarded as unclean due to his direct contact with the body and the potential contamination of the evil spirits associated with death. The embalmer, however, was highly respected by the community. A skilled professional with strong religious and/or medical associations, he was responsible for wrapping the body in bandages and, as he carried out his duties, he often adorned himself with a jackal headed mask to impersonate Anubis (Rosalie, 1999: 355).

#2

Made of glass, Genie's Canopic Jars are repositories, not for the internal organs of mummification but similarly for the preservation of the decay of life through to death and on. Each Canopic Jar has its own internal system. Some jars contain the dark humus with all of its colour and texture, where the moisture from condensation leads to the fermentation required for regrowth. Held deep within the darkness, decay is finely balanced with the potential for something new—the sprouting of life. In Canopic Jar #1 (Humus), what was once a jar full of soil has over time developed into a complex interplay of moss and lichen. Fine shoots of plant material sprout upwards alongside the dead root of something that once existed. The compost of decay becomes the foundation for resurgence and transformation. The external glass casing, unchanged, provides support for a whole eco-system to take shape, a system that continues to change with the passing of time.

There is a slowness to this work. Each Canopic Jar, still in progress, continues to transform. Seven years on and the sculptures have grown, died and grown again. Occasionally Genie will add water, move them into the sunlight on her windowsill, or closer to or away from the radiator. Sometimes, she documents their changes but that's not the purpose of the sculptures, they do not exist as a document of change. They just exist. Genie does not watch and wait, rather, she hovers in the background, happening upon them unexpectedly, living alongside them, allowing them to do or be whatever their form decides. These objects do not demand her time as a plant would, or a terrarium, they do not require pruning or weeding, they do not ask her to maintain or keep them alive. They exist not for her but in their own network of management and containment.



This concept of existence, of living alongside such self-contained ‘life’ forms establishes a mode of cohabiting. Encased in the glass jar, each eco-system develops relatively immune to the comings and goings that surround it. Cross contamination, though present, is almost accidental. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes: ‘Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option (2015: 27)’ true of people, and culture, it is also so with plants, for ‘staying alive—for every species—requires liveable collaborations (28).’ And so too Genie provides a liveable space for something to emerge.

Engaged with the process of alchemy, the artist is very much aware that patience, experimentation and magic all contribute to this transformation—the measure of which is often unknown until after the fact. The Canopic Jars presented here are those that have displayed, over the 7-years, a measurable change, one that we can say has a past and is now different, transformed. There are those Canopic Jars where the contents have disintegrated into dust, the glass container holding the fragments of their fragile materiality together. Indeed, in every scenario, there is randomness and an uncertainty

that anything will grow, but nevertheless change it will, whether it’s into the decay of total deterioration, or into the visceral and revelatory germination of those examples here.

#3

In Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation (2003), Deleuze explores the body without organs: ‘Beyond the organism, but also at the limit of the lived body, there lies what Artaud discovered and named: the body without organs’ (33). For Deleuze, this is what remains when you take everything away. ‘What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole’ (2013: 176). He describes the body without organs as a means to transcend the restriction of social rules, etiquette and morals, a wave of sensation that traces the levels or thresholds according to its vibrational intensity.

Sensation is not qualitative and qualified, but has only an intensive reality, which no longer determines with itself representative elements, but allotropic variations. (Deleuze, 2003: 32).

It is a means of resistance, a process by which one



struggles to attain a state of pure pre-subjectivity that consequently is liberated from imposed psychological and social constructs.

In Artaud's words:

When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom (1947).

Artaud's act of writing and drawing were a ritualistic gesture, an alchemical process, and his materials carried symbolic and theurgic meanings (Szulakowska, 2011: 47). As Derrida writes about Artaud's process:

[...]these kinds of amulet also have a curative function, counteracting an unhealthy power that the psychic wields over the physical. Like their offensive powers, their defensive powers are evident, suffused with the energy of their fabrication, the violence of their intentions, their devastating effects. (Derrida & Thevenin, 1998: 17)



I am with these thoughts as I contemplate Genie's influences—the Egyptian Canopic Jars. The body in the process of mummification, now devoid of its internal organs (but for the heart) has been reduced to the eviscerated emptiness of death, no longer imbued with the pulsations of life it is stripped of its function as a living organism. It is the role of the cutter I am most interested in, the being who makes the first slice into the dead body, untouchable through the contamination of the spirits that live on, with him and in him, despite the lifelessness of their host. He, like Artaud, is the one polluted or defiled in collaboration with the dead, carrying their ghosts, their memories, the shadow of death deep within him.

I take Canopic Jar # 2, Desert Rose, nervously into my hand. A Jericho root hanging upside down in cloudy liquid sloshes back and forth. What was once cleanly defined as a root in water in 2012, is now a murky corruption of rot and oxidised copper turning blue, all submerged in an extra-terrestrial hue of potential. I open the lid. Its smell draws me to the entangled threads of decomposing roots, decay and erosion. The fetid watery scent is both repellent and familiar. A memory of



rotting leaves in urban gutters, rain sodden earth turning to mulch, the compost heap at the back of the garden. All of this and more is contained in this Canopic Jar. The Rose of Jericho is also called the Resurrection Plant due to its ability to survive curled up and dry like tumbleweed only to unfurl at the slightest hint of moisture. One cannot escape the irony, for here is the Desert Rose, suspended upside down in liquid, wrapped in copper wire, rotting.

It is believed the Rose of Jericho will bring prosperity if five coins are added to the water that is used to make it unfurl, and I wonder if this water sodden root has now lost its magical powers. In the practice of Santeria, the plant is associated with the spirit of thunder and lightning. For Christians the plant is the opening of the womb of Mary, and the death and resurrection of Christ. So, what does it mean to remove this plant from its natural arid habitat and thrust it into such an unfamiliar environment? Can it, will it adapt?

Professor Jill Farrant, a leader in the field of plant responses to water deficit stress, is researching the



Rose of Jericho in the hope of delivering drought-resistant crops that could help the millions of people suffering from hunger (Reuters, March 2017). For Genie, this root is about death, gifted by a friend from Jordan who not long after died of cancer. I am not sure whether the plant in its current reversed condition is an attempt to go back, to reverse time. I am also not sure whether it is dead, alive or in hibernation waiting for the heat of the sun. Which brings me back to the body without organs, stripped down to the bare essentials who do we become? Thrust into alien environments how do we adapt, survive? These are important questions for consideration at this time of rupture and chaos.

#4

Oxidation is an alchemical process, the apparent change of an atom in a free element, molecule or ion. Copper's element Cu is derived from the Latin 'cuprum' which translated means 'metal of Cyprus', where copper was mined in Roman Times (8 BC). Oxidation is due to copper's exposure to air, water, especially salt-water, heat and acidic compounds. It turns the copper a verdigris colour.



But what is interesting about copper oxidation is that the green-blue patina prevents further oxygen exposure and corrosion by solidly adhering to the metal's surface. It is a protective layer to prevent the total breaking down of the element.

Copper has an ancient history; the Copper Age lies somewhere between 9000 - 3500 BC. It was the metal used when strength and durability were required. For the Egyptians copper represented eternal life and in their system of hieroglyphs it is represented as the ankh symbol. 'The Canopic Jar #4 Captured Scent', is comprised of an antique Egyptian perfume bottle, copper wire and water. It now exists as a magical array of lines and dashes layered on to the sides of the container, surrounding a suspended object—the perfume bottle. The innards of this Canopic Jar are a sub-aqueous world of alchemical processes, an intricate network where everything is in balance. Like the collaborative agreement between fungus and algae or cyanobacteria that produces lichen, this is a partnership between place and time, the contamination of the ancient history of Egypt and its geographical location, transmuting in liquid on a



windowsill in London.

Genie is the alchemist, weaving the copper wire into the jar, encasing the past into a glass container. They are inert specimens that shouldn't change but do when placed into this specific environment. Here, a chemical reaction is activated, transformation takes place and the objects become something else, and as they do a new narrative is created. As in the artist's other Canopic Jars, this process takes time—years in fact. In Canopic Jar #4 Captured Scent, the perfume of the past is now diffused with the colours of strength and durability, the scent that once was, is now an entangled matrix of blue-green filaments.

Likewise, in Medicine Bottle, the components of the glass bottle: water, copper wire, scarab and Egyptian blue beads, have a similar background story. In such a restricted space, the water has taken on a deeper blue hue. In Edwin D. Babbitt's *The Principles of Light and Colour* (1878), the colour blue is regarded as a powerful healer, cooling, electric, and the greatest antiseptic in the world (301), hence the object's title. Dark lines appear



etched into the liquid. The scarab and Egyptian beads appear as mysterious shapes floating or resting in the base of the bottle. Once again, we have alighted upon a magical watery underworld in miniature. The scarab or dung beetle, sacred to the Egyptians, was known for its rolled-up ball of dung, which held in its pincers represented the earth, and the beetle—the sun. Here we see philosophical and cosmological contamination, where the healing properties of the colour blue are alchemically engaged by both the artist and therefore the viewer.

For Genie, the transparent receptacles are containers of ‘possibilities,’ a biological celebration of life, a reflection of her internal space and rhythm. The ghosts of her past, from this lifetime and back through the ancestors, speak through each Canopic Jar. But as Derrida argues, in *Archive Fever*, A Freudian Impression (1998),

The afterlife of survival no longer means death and the return of the ghost, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation (“the



survival of the most triumphant vital elements of the past”)[78]’. (41)

Genie sees herself as the embalmer, the original alchemist, preserving life through a form of mummification. It is through this process the phantoms of Egypt whisper, permeating the work and validating her experience. The artist is both the witness and observer of the constant change between life, death and resurrection. An ongoing process, which signals a resistance to closure, as Deleuze writes ‘it’s organisms that die, not life’ (1995: 143). Throughout the whole process of making, the discoveries are spontaneous and unexpected, controlled only by the glass jar in which the elements are contained. Neither decorative nor functional they nevertheless occupy a place of inquiry, wonder and engagement. As Deleuze goes on to suggest: ‘Any work of art points a way through for life, finds a way through the cracks’ (ibid).



Anna Walker, PhD is an artist, writer and researcher working in multi-media. She was awarded an MA in Fine Art from Southampton University in 1998, and a certificate in Psychotherapy from CBPC, Cambridge, in 2010. An interest in the effects of trauma on the body, developed during her work as a psychotherapist, led her to a PhD in Arts and Media at Plymouth University, which she completed in May 2017.

Her arts-practice balances the auto-ethnographic with the critical, utilising personal experiences to facilitate a greater understanding of memory, trauma and its wider cultural implications. She has been exploring trauma in her multi-media work for many years, how the body responds to overwhelming traumatic and stressful situations and how it reorganises itself to cope with or manage the trauma. Current research focuses on intergenerational trauma, what gets carried down through the generations. She is a member of Transtechnology Research at Plymouth University, and currently writing a book on the work of artist: Genie Poretzky-Lee.

Genie Poretzky-Lee is an artist-maker. She works with a wide range of materials that reflect her constant and evolving dialogue with the environment, curiosity with nature, and her preoccupation with mysticism and alchemy. Genie's sculptures, interventions and paintings are an exploration of materials, surfaces, textures and the ebb and flow of time. Throughout her oeuvre there is a tendency towards pattern and repetition, founded in her training in the 1970s under weaver Wilmma Hollist -McKerlie. Within her artwork, she challenges the viewer's awareness of process, time and space. Her work is a shared, mutual exchange of experience, in which the quietude or reflection and silence permeate.

Genie was one of the founding members of 'Fibre Art' in the UK, alongside Professor Janis Jeffries and Marta Rogoyska, 1975-1978. And in 2001, she set up The Blue Lotus Foundation in London with poet Jay Ramsey (1954-2018), as a venue for art, poetry and workshops.

References:

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Images:

- 1: *Canopic Jar #1 Humus*, (2012- 2019) Glass jar, soil and plant matter.
Size - 22 cm X 10 cm wide
- 2: *Canopic Jar #2 Desert Rose* - (2012- 2019) Glass jar, copper wire, Jericho Root and water. 22 cm X 10 cm wide
- 3: *Winding Blue* (2012- 2019) Plastic tape, soil and money plant.
Size - 42cms X 8cms
- 4: *Canopic Jar #3 Hatching* (2012- 2019) Glass jar, ceramic egg, soil and plant matter.
22 cm X 10 cm wide
- 5: *Medicine Bottle* (2012- 2019) Glass bottle, water, copper wire, Scarab and Egyptian blue beads. Size 14cms X 7cms
- 6: *Canopic Jar #4 Captured Scent* (2012- 2019) Glass jar, perfume bottle, copper wire and water) 14cms X 8cms
- 7: *Canopic Jar #5 Stone* (2012- 2019) Glass jar, pebbles, stone and glass and copper wire. 14cms X 11cms