Temple of Familiars

Madeleine Grace Kelly
University of New Orleans, mad.g.kelly@gmail.com

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Temple of Familiars

A Thesis

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University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By

Madeleine Grace Kelly

B.A. University of San Francisco, 2010

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Abstract

My paintings, etchings, and installation explore encounters with mystery in the natural world, especially through the flora, fauna, light, and water of the swamps around the Atchafalaya Basin. My practice explores kinship, reverence, and awe as an antidote to estrangement from the spirit of the land. I am influenced by artists and scholars engaging with the places that they inhabit and that inhabit them with a reverence and mystery of approach. My work invites viewers to engage with the memory that the water carries of our interconnectedness, and to remember that we are not separate from the natural world.
Introduction

My work explores kinship, mystery, and reverence for the more-than-human world. Paintings and etchings emerge from intimate encounters with elements of nature that I inhabit and that inhabit me. I spend a lot of time in the swamps in and around the Atchafalaya Basin in South Louisiana, so the flora, fauna, light, and water I encounter there is especially present in my work. I spend many quiet hours paddling, and listening. My presence in the landscape and practice in my studio strengthen my relationship with the land in its beauty and fragility, as well as my sense of responsibility for an environment that is on the front lines of a rapidly changing climate.

My subjects include both the visible and invisible aspects of these intimate encounters, in waking life and in dreams, translated from direct observation and through the language of symbols. I collect living water everywhere I go, leaving something when I take something, and mix that water with paint to imbue my objects with the essence of time and place and the memory that the water carries. I paint the spirit of the land to reflect our interdependence and kinship.

Here in Bulbancha (colonially known as New Orleans), which translates to “the land where many languages are spoken,” my practice is to continue to deepen my receptivity to more-than-human languages and ways of being. I consider each painting a record of all that we stand to lose as the planet warms and the land vanishes. I hope to invite viewers into an awareness of a kinship with the land that may become an antidote to estrangement, from the earth and each other and ourselves. Through my work I hope
to approach the mutual flourishing that is possible when this kinship grows into stewardship and meaningful action.

As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “Attention generates wonder, which generates more attention and more joy. Paying attention to the more-than-human world doesn’t lead only to amazement, it leads also to acknowledgement of pain. Open and attentive, we see and feel equally the beauty and the wounds, the old growth and the clear cut, the mountain and the mine. Paying attention to suffering sharpens our ability to respond, to be responsible. This, too, is a gift, for when we fall in love with the living world, we cannot be bystanders to its destruction. Attention becomes intention, which coalesces itself into action.”

1 Kimmerer, Robin Wall, Returning the Gift, Minding Nature Volume 7 issue 2, May 2014
Indigenous Perspectives and Personal Process

My process centers presence in nature - steadfast attention that generates reverence, curiosity and care. It is important to me to engage with the land with respect and reciprocity, giving back for all that I receive. This is the way that I tend long and loving relationship with the life and systems of life that make up the biodiversity and cultural complexity of this place. My paintings are a way of tending, of giving form to what I have received, and of keeping a record. This tending is an instinct that is deeply human, and ancient (the oldest record of humans making paintings about their relationship to the natural world that we are aware of is over 45,000 years old). It is also an instinct that many of us are estranged from, as we are preoccupied with the perceived exceptionalism of our own species, and disconnected from the ways of our ancestors who lived closer to the land. I have benefited greatly from my direct experiences in wild places, and even more so from learning from indigenous artists and scholars, who’s lineages and cultures have not been severed or interrupted as my own have. Scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer articulate the indigenous perspective on the reciprocal relationship between humans and the land, and our responsibility to care for it, using the language of kinship and obligation. In Braiding Sweetgrass, she writes, “Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and an open heart. It can be a way of forming intimacy and respect with other species that is rivaled only by the observations of traditional knowledge holders. It can be a path to kinship.”

2 Kimmerer, Robin Wall, Braiding Sweetgrass, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN 2013
Traditional knowledge holders who are remembering this awareness of and connection to the land exist across all cultures, and this remembering is accessible to all of us. My work is also informed by an investigation into my own Irish ancestry and the earth-based wisdom found in my lineage and in Irish and Celtic culture and sensibility. The late John O’donahue, an Irish priest, poet, and philosopher, wrote extensively about Celtic spirituality and his observances of the mystery and beauty of the natural world, especially in the landscape of his origin in the Burren region of Western Ireland. His writings often explore how paying attention to the outer landscape of our world cultivates a richer inner landscape. His poetic language when speaking about the ritual of encounter, the mystery of approach, and heartfelt work resonate deeply with my practice. It is helpful to connect my relationship with the more-than-human world with my ancestral lineage, land, and culture. He writes: “What you encounter, recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach. Many of the ancient cultures practiced careful rituals of approach. An encounter of depth and spirit was preceded by careful preparation. When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us. When we walk on the earth with reverence, beauty will decide to trust us. The rushed heart and arrogant mind lack the gentleness and patience to enter that embrace.”3 This speaks to the same thread of reciprocity and kinship that Kimmerer refers to in her work. It is an essential part of my practice to meet the natural world with this kind of humility and reverence of approach.

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Natalie Diaz, a Mojave American poet, presents a visceral exploration of the intimate connection between the land and the body through language in her collection of poetry, *Postcolonial Love Poem*. She describes a perspective of the land as a living entity with its own spirit, that is not separate from the body. In her poem, *The First Water is the Body*⁴, she writes,

“Aha Makov is the true name of our given people, given to us by our Creator who loosed the river from the earth and built it into our living bodies,

Translated into English, *Aha Makov* means *the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land."

“When Mojaves say the word for tears, we return to our word for *river*, as if our river were flowing from our eyes. *A great weeping* is how you might translate it. Or a *river of grief.*”

“We carry the river, its body of water, in our body.”

“Tony Morrison writes, *All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.* Back to the body of earth, of flesh, back to the mouth, the throat, back to the womb, back to the heart, to its blood, back to our grief, back back back.

Will we remember from where we’ve come? The water.

And once remembered, will we return to that first water, and in doing so return to ourselves, to each other?

Do you think the water will forget what we have done, what we continue to do?”

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In my work I am especially interested in the long memory and interconnectedness of the waters of the world and of the body. As part of my practice I collect water from rivers, streams, lakes, oceans, tears, thunderstorms, bayous, puddles, and waterfalls. I leave offerings in the spirit of reciprocity, like a natural object, or a prayer or song. I like to return to the same bodies of water on different days throughout the year, or different times of day. Each bottle of water carries the long memory of itself and the memory of that place and time of my encounter with it. This practice inspires my curiosity: What medicine is there in the memory of the river? In the ocean? In the tears or the Sunday morning thunderstorm or the black waters of the bayou? How do we administer this medicine to ourselves and each other and the land that holds us, as an antidote to estrangement? My collection of these bottles make up the installation, *Will We Remember From Where We Come?* (Fig.1-3). They are arranged in a non-linear pattern that wraps around the corner of the room and undulates like the path of a river.

I am inspired by the American artist Susan Hiller, who has been collecting Holy Water from sacred sites across the world for over 40 years, displaying her samples in glass bottles within antique medicine cabinets in an homage to German artist Joseph Beuys (Fig. 1). She is interested in pilgrimage to sacred sites, especially the holy wells around Great Britain, and has expanded her practice to be more participatory. “A Brahmin in India told me many years ago, ‘All water is Ganges water’, and therefore sacred,” says Hiller. “With this in mind I would like to suggest trying the experience of being a pilgrim, instead of a tourist, by journeying somewhere to collect a special water sample.”

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work explores this idea that all waters are connected and carry collective memory and healing power. I can imagine my water collection project continuing to evolve over my lifetime, and involving more people and all the living bodies of water that they consider to be sacred.

Fig. 1: Susan Hiller: First Aid: Homage to Joseph Beuys, 1969–2017, 13 vintage felt-lined wooden first aid boxes, 86 vintage bottles, water from holy wells and sacred streams, and vintage medical supplies

Fig. 2: Detail, Will We Remember from Where We Come, Bayou Beneath Willow

Fig. 3: Detail, Will We Remember from Where We Come, Winter Solstice, Atlantic Ocean Spume November, Lake Pontchartrain, Crevasse 22

Fig 4. Detail, Will We Remember from Where We Come, Light Rain, Thick Mist
I often begin a painting by selecting a bottle from this collection of water. Sometimes the painting represents more literally that physical place where I collected the water, and its relationship to the light and the land around it. For example, my painting *The Spider* (Fig. 5), was painted with water collected from the base of that central tree in the Michel Canal off Lake Verret, in addition to nearby swamp waters from an area I call “The Cypress Cathedral.” The piece explores the hypnotic quality of the surface of the water, covered as it is by duckweed in June, interacting with light filtering through the canopy.

Fig. 5: *The Spider, 2023, Acrylic and water from the Michel Canal and the Cypress Cathedral*
Sometimes the water imbues a less directly related subject with a certain spirit. For example, the imagery in *Desire* (Fig. 6) shows a deer resting in an open field at night, with a fire burning in the distance. The painting doesn’t visually represent water, but I mixed the paint with my own tears to create this emotional landscape. There is a resonance of life and memory and interconnectedness then, with my own body and the bodies of the water, woven into each work. My hope is that in this resonance there can be recognition and remembering; that the water and the art object becomes a functional bridge between the spiritual and material, the visible and invisible, the Self and Other. I am drawing from a long legacy of artists exploring personal devotion and communication between different and connected worlds.

Fig. 6: *Desire*, 2024, Acrylic and tears on panel
Sublime and the Spirit

“By giving the commonplace a high meaning, the ordinary a mysterious aspect, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite an aura of infinity, I romanticize it.” - Novalis

Perhaps the most influential historical movement in this regard for me were the German Romantic painters (late eighteenth and early nineteenth century), who sought the sublime and the spiritual through the contemplation of nature. Artists and intellectuals in Germany at this time were responding to the shifting of social values toward materialism and the failures and destruction of industrialization. Their innovation in landscape painting was the idealization of a nature that was beautiful but also intense and stirring, with the capacity to profoundly move the viewer in an emotional sense. They were interested in forging links between the material and the spiritual, and directing viewers toward an experience of the natural world that was enigmatic, poetic, and otherworldly.

The “Father of German Romanticism,” Caspar David Friedrich, was especially interested in the romantic depiction of man’s solitary experience of the wilderness, and in investing landscapes with devotional significance and mystery. He advised the painter to, “close the bodily eye so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring the light of day that which you have seen in the darkness so that it may react upon others from the outside inwards.”\(^6\) Though this reflection is esoteric, his practice was also grounded in a conscientious study of and presence in nature.

His painting, *Morning Mist in the Mountains* (Fig. 7), perfectly illustrates Freidrich’s view of nature as a place of majestic refuge, its immersive scale and use of light invoking the spiritual awe that was previously only achieved with more overtly religious symbolism. He says of his work,

“When a landscape is covered in fog, it appears larger, more sublime, and heightens the strength of the imagination and excites expectation, rather like a veiled woman. The eye and fantasy feel themselves more attracted to the hazy distance than to that which lies near and distant before us.”

Like Friedrich, I often gravitate towards forms and lighting effects that become spiritual metaphors. In *Wanderer in a Sea of Fog* (Fig. 8) I render a misty morning on Lake Verret, with fog partially obscuring a stand of cypress trees in open water. The way the light is reflected on the surface of the water, and the mist obscuring any boundary or horizon line, evokes the boundlessness of nature and things unseen or unknown.

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Fig. 7: Caspar David Friedrich, *Morning Mist in the Mountains*, 1808, Oil on Canvas
Collections of Schloss Heidecksburg

Fig. 8: *Wanderer in a Sea of Fog*, 2023, Acrylic and Water from Lake Verret
Symbolism

“Art is a harmony parallel to that of nature.” - Paul Cezanne

Symbolism, emerging in the late nineteenth century, represents an outgrowth of Romanticism. The symbolists shared the goal of representing an idea, emotion, or aura of spirituality, often related to direct experience with the natural world. However, their execution is even less naturalistic, demonstrating principles like emotional intensity, distortion of forms, dreamlike imagery, and vibrantly expressive atmospheres. Nicole Myers describes the Symbolists as such: “They felt that the symbolic value or meaning of a work of art stemmed from the re-creation of emotional experiences in the viewer through color, line, and composition. In painting, Symbolism represents a synthesis of form and feeling, of reality and the artist’s inner subjectivity.”

I draw from the legacy of the Symbolists in my work especially in my paintings of animals. Painters like Ferdinand Hodler and his contemporaries accentuated expressive effects of color and brushwork, and the dance between harmony and discord in composition. Paintings of this moment acquired “an aura of spirituality through stylization, suggesting a visionary or trance-like attitude, or at least a very intense daydream, on the part of the creator.” Hodler in particular also writes extensively of his relationship with nature as a painter, and is quoted in his speech, Mision de l’artiste, saying, “The artist's mission is to give shape to what is eternal in nature, to reveal its inherent beauty; he shows us work according to the size of his own experience, of his

In my own paintings of nature, I am also aiming to draw out the eternal, dreamlike, spiritual dimension of my own experience with a particular living being.

I would argue that Melissa Miller, an American painter who is best known for what *Art in America* called "raucous allegorical paintings," is somewhat of a contemporary symbolist. She engages with symbolist themes of atmospheric myth and emotional intensity with technical virtuosity and formal rigor. I relate to Melissa Miller’s enthusiasm for the act of painting and am inspired by her massive, painterly compositions that are at once completely original and steeped in tradition. Her paintings take us into a mysterious, sometimes violent world of animals, using animal metaphor to illustrate human mythologies and shared experiences. I am reflective about how much movement and action is in her animal paintings, creating aliveness and drama. I’m also influenced by her expressive, varied brushwork, immediacy of gesture, idiosyncratic color, and sense of light and pattern. Miller’s paintings of familiar animals converging in unexpected ways (See Fig. 9,10) have had an impact on my own work. Her influence is most visible in my painting, “Facing the River” (Fig. 11), in which two water buffalo calves on a South Louisiana farm invoked for me the myth of the Irish Goddess of Cows and of the River Boyne, Boánn. It’s said that the varying colors of her cows represented different phases of the moon, in this case a lunar eclipse being the inspiration. It was

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painted with water collected from a thunderstorm on the night of the eclipse, coinciding with Beltane, the Gaelic May Day Festival.

Fig. 9: Melissa Miller, *Group*, 1998, Oil on Linen

Fig. 10: Melissa Miller, *Deer Dance*, 1984, Oil on Linen

Fig. 11: *Facing the River*, 2023, Acrylic and water from a Beltane thunderstorm and lunar eclipse on canvas
Another contemporary influence engaging with symbolism is British multidisciplinary artist Billy Childish, in particular his emotive, otherworldly paintings about nature. His recent exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York, titled *Spirit Guides and Other Guardians Joining Heaven and Earth*, feels especially relevant. The dream-like quality of each painting and its plant and animal subjects invite me into the kind of encounter with the spirit of the land that I am trying to interpret through my own work. There is recognition of a wolf (Fig. 12) or a landscape (Fig. 13) for example, but also an enigmatic quality in the palette and brushwork and composition that opens the door to a mystical experience. Lehmann Maupin wrote about the body of work: “The title reflects tenets of Childish’s philosophy towards life—that it is a spiritual journey focused on joining heaven and earth—as well as his feelings about painting, which he believes should always aim to connect the spiritual and the material. Childish feels that creative expression, as well as the beauty of nature, allow for connection to the divine, and each painting in *Spirit Guides and Other Guardians Joining Heaven and Earth* offers a glimpse into his worldview.”

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Fig. 12: Billie Childish, *White Wolf*, Oil and charcoal on linen, 2019

Fig. 13: Billie Childish, *Trees and Sky*, Oil and charcoal on linen, 2019
The Gulf South

Compared to earlier work, my recent paintings have become more engaged with specificity in terms of the aspects of the natural world I am depicting, namely Southeast Louisiana and the swamps around the Atchafalaya Basin in particular. This honing in on a sense of place has strengthened my relationship to the land and to my work. In “Geography as Generosity,” Robert Macfarlane talks about how the rendering of landscapes with particular nuance and specificity strengthens connection to each place and counteracts the indifference and estrangement that can emerge from namelessness and abstraction. He says of Barry Lopez’s photography: “Having such language available to us is vital because it encourages the kinds of allegiance and intimacy with one’s places that might also go by the name of love, and out of which might arise care, grace, and good sense.” A keynote of Barry’s body of work concerns the need to speak with precision about the places you inhabit and that inhabit you. McFarland contends that to be able to visually describe and denote the elements of your home place in your work is not to practice a possessive form of naming, but rather to, “sharpen perception—and to begin to honor the immense complexities, human and more-than-human, of a given landscape and its communities. Good place-language, well used, opens onto mystery, grows knowledge, and summons wonder.”

I am influenced by regional artists like John Alexander and Walter Anderson, two painters separated by a generation who are from and of this place. They both demonstrate a deep devotion to the specific natural phenomena of the Gulf South and hold the door open for mystery and wonder through their unique interpretations of the landscape.

The natural environment of coastal Louisiana was an early and persistent inspiration for Alexander's work, which often depicts crowded groups of the area's birds and foliage in scenes that feel vaguely ominous and emotionally charged. In *The Twilight Zone* (Fig. 14) he depicts various waterfowl one would encounter in this region (ibis, herons) in a barren tree against a dark foreboding sky. It's in one way a bucolic nature scene but in another way inviting us to consider the present degradation and looming destruction of the environment that we face here. It's familiar but stirring and otherworldly, in a way that resonates with my own work.

Walter Anderson was born in New Orleans and spent much of his life as a resident of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where he sought communion with nature. In his later years, a small, undisturbed barrier island called Horn Island became his refuge and main source of inspiration. He would paddle there in a rowboat from Ocean Springs and live in primitive conditions while portraying the plants, animals, light, and lushness around him in vibrant watercolors in his log books. An example can be seen in his painting *Horn Island at Sunset* (Fig. 15), painted in 1960 in his signature whimsical, colorful, emotive style. (Years later, John Alexander would visit Horn Island, also chasing this shared
muse). Anderson’s works serve as records of the flora and fauna of the region during a time when the Mississippi Gulf Coast was largely undeveloped. Though the conditions surrounding my own practice are less than primitive, I often think of these excursions when I paddle my canoe through the swamps of the basin making my own painted studies of what I find in those last vestiges of wildness. I appreciate Anderson’s reverent approach to the natural world, which was one of immersion and total presence. As the Walter Anderson Museum describes, “Anderson viewed his art not simply as a product through which he might earn acclaim or fortune, but as a process for grasping, if only for a moment, the bounty of creation – whether it was the ascent of the tern, the brilliance of aster, the silhouette of the alligator, or the magic hour at sunset. He became attuned to the ways of animals; rather than objectify them, he referred to them as his ‘familiars.’”

When we are grounded in our sense of place we can not help but notice the complexities and idiosyncratic beauties of the everyday we find there. We are part of an ecosystem and in a relationship that is reciprocal, with mutual respect and care at the foundation. John O’donahue writes in his book, Beauty, The Invisible Embrace: “Is it not possible that a place could have huge affection for those who dwell there? Perhaps your place loves having you there. It misses you when you are away and in its secret way rejoices when you return. Could it be possible that a landscape might have a deep friendship with you? That it could sense your presence and feel the care you extend towards it?” My work is centered around the belief that our places, and the living land

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14 Walter Anderson Museum of Art, Who We Are, https://www.walterandersonmuseum.org/who-we-are
and water we encounter, do feel the care and presence we extend towards it, and that mutual healing, transformation, and flourishing is possible when we remember that we are not separate from the natural world.

Fig. 14: John Alexander, The Twilight Zone, 2018, Oil on canvas

Fig. 15: Walter Inglis Anderson, Horn Island at Sunset, 1960, Oil on board
Conclusion

My work is ultimately an exploration of my relationship with the land and the waters that I inhabit and that inhabit me. My research has led me into a deeper understanding of this relationship through an exploration of indigenous perspectives around kinship and responsibility for the land, as well earth-based wisdom and practices from my own lineage. I have been influenced by historical and contemporary artists who are responding to their direct experiences and encounters with the more-than-human-world in a reverential way. I am also making a record of a place that is vanishing faster than any other land mass in the world. Like the Romantics before me, an important foundation of my work is that it is a reaction to the failures of society and the values of a dominant culture. In contemporary terms I am reacting to the horrors of the unchecked extractive industry in our region and a collective disregard for the health of the planet that is warming seas, strengthening storms, eroding the coastline, and destroying precious, sentient ecosystems and the cultures and ways of life that rely on them. I am reacting to the devastation that is resulting from our estrangement from the spirit of the land. I am practicing relational work with the landscape, in an intentional shift toward indigenous values and perspective, that tell us we are not separate from the land. I am inviting viewers to engage with the memory that the water carries of our interconnectedness, so that they might follow those threads toward their own practice of kinship with the earth in some way.
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The author was born in Philadelphia, PA and has been based in New Orleans since 2013. She obtained her Bachelors of Arts from the University of San Francisco in 2010. Kelly has shown work locally at the Good Children Gallery, the Bywater Art Lofts Gallery, and the Fletcher Hall Gallery at the University of Lafayette. Her work has been featured in the *New Orleans Arts Rag* and *Antenna Signals Magazine*. She is the recipient of the 2024 Homer L. Hitt Society Art Award, and is the 2024 King Range National Conservation Area Artist-in-Residence. She joined the University of New Orleans’ fine arts graduate program in the fall of 2021 to further her art practice and teach at the university level.