

OMPHALOS

BY

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OMPHALOS

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Amy Lynn Lenharth

“Omphalos”

Abstract

Several years of research into technique and personal experience have resulted in the thesis exhibition called “Omphalos”. The central concept of the thesis is the axis mundi, the unseen connection between the underworld, the physical realm, and the heavens. The idea of the axis mundi is found in many cultures and illustrates not just a physical journey, but a psychological one. The installation is comprised of four main pieces, the central piece being the axis mundi. Ceramic is the main medium used and is supported by the addition of found architectural objects. There are many historical references used, both architectural and symbolic, in the attempt to translate my personal experiences into concrete form so that they may strike a universal chord in the viewer.

According to Greek myth, Zeus wanted to find the center of the world and sent out two eagles to fly in opposite directions until they met. This meeting place was called the 'omphalos' or navel, and was the sought after center of the earth. A stone was placed to mark this sacred navel of the earth and it was believed that this stone allowed direct communication with the gods. The omphalos marks our connection to the cosmos, the meeting place between the underworld and heavens, the center point or navel of the axis mundi.

The omphalos is the nexus of our lives. We travel this axis mundi constantly, each new moment a death and a rebirth. Old ideas and identities fade, while new realizations take hold. Even though we die and are reborn on many levels all the time, we fear the death of our physical bodies. We try to ignore this inevitable fate but it is always looming near our center, influencing our actions, always in the back of our minds. We constantly travel between the hells of our own making, our perceived separations; and the bliss of unity and awareness.

My art has revolved around these themes of death and change in recent years. Family members, friends and beloved pets have crossed to different realms, leaving me to face this inevitable truth. It cannot be ignored and it hovers on the edges of my awareness daily. Yet, in looking back over my life, I find that I have already died many times. The person I was years ago is gone; dreams eroded, plans gone awry. New ideas, new dreams, new relationships have evolved. Change has been constant, death and rebirth happening simultaneously. There has been great loss, but also many gifts and awakenings.

This installation reflects many of my very personal experiences, using universal archetypes along with influences from Hungarian architecture, medieval transi tombs, the bone chapels of Europe and the lyrics of Neil Young and Dan Fogelberg. Much of it is ceramic, my medium of choice. Parts of it are assembled from the discarded fragments of houses, representing places from my childhood; places that, like reliquaries hold memories.

My thesis exhibition reflects the many changes that have occurred in my life in recent years. I began my career in art at a later age than most. What began as a hobby became a passion and I returned to college to develop my technical skills and focus my concepts. During my time as an undergrad, I lost both of my parents, a cousin, two friends, and a couple of pets. Their passings had a profound impact and I made the choice to use these experiences in my artwork, hoping to touch a universal nerve with others who might view my work. For the past several years, I have worked with these same concepts, using different materials and trying to approach it in many ways. My thesis installation is a composite of those explorations, both in technique and influences.

The installation has four main parts. The parts are linked by common elements including salvaged architectural elements, bones and hawks. Hawks, and birds in general have represented the concept of the human spirit and a connection to the heavens for many cultures throughout human history and represent the journey along the *axismundi*.



Birth is represented by the Altar which is situated on the North end of the gallery. Old windows and stair treads were used to construct the piece. These worn and aged items contain their own history and stories. They come from old houses, which for me are really reliquaries. Buildings hold the memories and stories of the events that occurred within them. Often, in my dreams, I return to the places of my childhood, and while these places may not exist in reality any longer, they are always alive in my memories and contain the events of my childhood.

Within the altar there is a scene of a hand built ceramic female hawk near a nest constructed of ceramic bones that holding a golden egg. This scene is reminiscent of the Madonna/Child archetype that is common to many cultures and represents birth and the concept of nurturing. The nest is constructed of bones, linking the piece to other portions of the installation and reminding the viewer that birth and death are closely related. The egg is golden to indicate the potential that is contained in life.



The altar is topped with several spires constructed of ceramics parts. Old light fixtures were cast and used to create plaster molds from which to slip cast the ceramic parts. Slip casting allows me to make “ghosts” of the original object that can be repeated and combined in countless ways. The light fixtures are from an older period and connect the ceramic pieces to the architectural remnants of the altar and reliquary. Though they were originally interior objects, I like to use their forms to reference exterior architecture, specifically spires. These spires are influenced by Hungarian architecture. I was

fortunate to spend a month in Hungary at a ceramic studio during undergrad and fell in love with the Moorish inspired domes and spires of the Hungarian churches. This architectural influence has meandered in and out of my work since and has reemerged within these new slip cast spires.

The spires are heavily oxidized and assembled to be slightly crooked. They represent our aspirations in life and show the effects of time and change. We are constantly striving to move upward but the realities of life and our own fears can slowly erode those dreams. One of the spires continues down into the altar, hovering over the egg and the nest. This represents the upward movement of life. It begins as a pure white and transitions into the oxidized spire on top of the altar, echoing the passage of time and erosion.

The altar is flanked by two tall candle holders made from the same slip cast light fixtures and molds used in creating the spires. They hold ivory candles. These candles reference the traditional use seen in many cultures for ritual and symbolic reasons. Within the Christian tradition, candles have represented the Christ concept; the wax is the physical body of Christ and the flame is the light expanding outward into the world, conquering darkness. This context was important during my childhood upbringing as a Christian and the universality of the candle in ritual has remained during my adult transition into Buddhism.

The South end of the gallery contains the Reliquary. The reliquary, like the altar is composed of old windows and architectural fragments visually linking the two pieces. Within the reliquary is a desiccated skeleton of an actual hawk. This skeleton has a remarkable Christ-like pose. Its wings are spread outward and contain faded fragments of the feathers and its legs and claws are crossed, resembling images of Christ crucified. The reliquary is topped with a hand built porcelain hawk with cast bronze feet; a bird in it's prime. The medieval transi tombs of Europe influenced this piece. Transi tombs were popular during the 14th century and the time of the Black Plague. The lower level of the tomb would have a stone carving of a body or skeleton being eaten by worms and snakes, showing the inevitability of death. The upper half of the tomb would have a carving of the person as they were ideally in life, sometimes posed in a favorite activity or simply reposing in sleep. The purpose of this juxtapose is reflected in the words of the memento mori "What you are, I once was; what I am, you shall be"; reminding the viewer of the physical cycles of life and inevitability of death.



Fronting the reliquary are old stair treads lined with tea lights. Tea lights are used in many churches as offerings or prayers. They represent the ancient concept of burnt offerings given to the gods. Flanking the reliquary are hanging candle holders. The candle holders have chains lined with ceramic bone pieces, influenced by the bone chapels in Europe. It was popular in Europe after the time of the plagues to use the many accumulated skeletons to decorate the interiors of churches. The bone decorations reminded the worshippers of their inevitable transition into death.





The center wall of the gallery holds an installation of vessels called Hell: Separation/Fragmentation. This piece is composed of bowl shaped vessels that have been thrown on the pottery wheel. I began my ceramic career as a functional potter but then transitioned into sculpture. The wall installation represents that transition and the pots transform from vessels to sculpture by their placement on a vertical wall instead of a horizontal table.

Each vessel has its bottom broken out. This is a reference to the Mimbres pottery of the Anasazi Native Americans of New Mexico. Vessels were made to be put into graves and the deceased would have a pot with a broken bottom placed over their face which allowed the spirit of the deceased to exit. Vessels, in general are common inclusions at gravesites of many ancient cultures, allowing the deceased to carry essential items such as food into the next world.

The wall piece is colorful. Three glazes were used on the stoneware body and represent the three major points on the axis mundi. Copper red represents the underworld

and fire. Orange green signifies the earthly realm and blue, the heavens and sky. These colors were taken from the rose windows of the European cathedrals and tie the piece into the church like atmosphere of the Altar and Reliquary pieces. The vibrant color of the piece reflects the energy emitted by fear and hell, in contrast to the serenity and peace of the Axis Mundi column in the center of the gallery.

The vessels are graduated in height and diameter and arranged in concentric circles, creating a vortex that pulls the viewer in. The individuality of each vessel and its separation from the other vessels indicates the true meaning of hell: separation from others and from the life force of the universe. The vessels are spaced uniformly and precisely indicating psychological conformity and control, another form of hell. Each vessel contains a bone or architectural fragment representing the fragmentation of the person and the person's dreams when fear causes one to descend into hell.





The Axis Mundi column dominates the center of the gallery. A larger version of the smaller spires on the altar, it was influenced by Brancusi's Endless Column. The stack of slip cast porcelain pieces disappears into the ceiling of the gallery indicating the concept of transformation and ascendance. The piece is anchored with the rusted metal hub of a car tire. Joseph Campbell, in his discussions of world myth, refers to the center of the axis mundi as the "hub of the wheel of earth". The lower portion of my axis mundi is stained with oxides representing the physicality of the earthly plane. As the axis mundi ascends, the pieces transition into pure white showing the purity of the heavens and the entry into spirit. Slip cast, pure white hawk feathers litter the ground around the hub and the lower level segments of the axis. The hawk has ascended and transformed from the physical into spirit, leaving markers on the upward path for others to follow.



A synchronistic event marked the making of this piece. A last album by Dan Fogelberg was released post-humously and I listened to it for the first time a week after making the axis mundi. The album ends with the cover of an old Neil Young song from 1970 entitled 'Birds'. The lyrics capture the concept of the piece.

When you see me
Fly away without you
Shadow on the things you know
Feathers fall around you
And show you the way to go
It's over, it's over.

Another song, written by Dan Fogelberg and released in 1981 but not widely aired contains the entire concept of the installation. I have listened to this song for years and only realized the connection after installing my work in the gallery. Following is one verse of the song which sums up my thesis:

And balanced on the precipice
The moment must reveal
Naked in the face of time
Our race within the wheel
As we hang beneath the heavens
And we hover over hell
Our hearts become the instruments
We learn to play so well.

So wealthy the spirit
That knows its own flight.
Stealthy the hunter who
Slays his own fright.
Blessed the traveler
Who journeys the length
Of the Light.

Light and shadow. Heaven and hell. Birth and death. These dichotomies dominate our existence. We constantly travel these extremes while trying to maintain a balance in the middle. Making this installation involved the difficult task of trying to reduce abstract concepts into concrete (or ceramic) form. Manipulating materials and cobbling together architectural elements were factors I could anticipate and control. One area that I had not visualized or anticipated was the lighting of the gallery. In another moment of synchronicity, the light created shadows that reinforced the concepts of the installation. The axis mundi had spoke type shadows radiating from its hub. The vessels on the wall piece had elongated shadows that mimicked feathers and wings. The hanging bone chandeliers created small bird type shadows on the wall behind the reliquary. The concrete became enhanced by the ephemeral.