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Alchemy Series

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As medieval alchemists did not distinguish between psyche and matter, so too the artist, the images, and the materials of art are partners in the process of revealing. The artist shares her process of working with the archetypal images presented here.

Keywords: *art, alchemy, Jung, mixed-media, symbolism*

Strong feeling tone suffuses my artwork, whether landscape or symbolic abstraction. Although my landscapes focus ostensibly on the outer world, they serve as the departure point from which to explore mood and quality of place through the medium of pastel (see http://ellenquestel.com/ellenquestel.com/Selected_Landscapes.html). The subject matter of my Alchemy Series derives from the inner landscape (see http://ellenquestel.com/ellenquestel.com/Alchemy_Series.html). While a number of the images in the series may seem familiar or archetypal, most have in fact appeared to me over the years spontaneously and intuitively, originating in dreams or meditation. Only after a number of such experiences did I discover alchemy and Jung's (1967/1983, 1967/1983, 1963/1989) extensive studies on the subject. I was deeply affected by Jung's work: many of the alchemical images explored in his writing corresponded with the strange, and at times disturbing, images that I had encountered in my own psyche; and his approach to alchemy as metaphor for psychic transformation provided me with a conceptual framework in which to contain these experiences.

My interest in alchemy continued to grow over many years, and recently I decided to explore the subject in my artwork. Upon beginning the series, I knew only that I wanted to create visual images linked to broad archetypal themes running through the work of the medieval alchemists and later examined by Jung. My own process of exploration and experimentation was, as the alchemical tradition itself, nonlinear. I knew only that I felt immersed in some of the great alchemical themes: spirit in nature; microcosms; stages of differentiation and transformation in nature; and cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

As I began to work, I imagined jewel-like and precious objects in the spirit of medieval icons and miniatures. For this I needed to teach myself new

technical skills such as how to apply gold leaf to paper and then how to create a surface on the gold leaf that could receive other media such as pastel and gouache.

This exploration of materials and processes was lengthy and made me feel as though I were in my own alchemical laboratory. The resulting surfaces demanded that I work in an entirely new way and determined the outcomes in unexpected ways. I felt as if the materials themselves participated in equal partnership with my conscious intention, imparting to each image a mysterious quality suitable to the obscure and enigmatic nature of the alchemical texts.

There are twelve images in the Alchemy Series, rendered in various degrees of abstraction. Some of the images have been with me for years; others appeared as I contemplated certain alchemical ideas. The crow came first (Figure 1). I have had a longtime interest in and affinity for crows and they have appeared to me more than once in dreams. Additionally, in medieval alchemy the crow (or raven) and the crow's head (*caput corvi*) are synonymous with the *nigredo*, the beginning of the alchemical opus that is characterized by confusion, darkness, and chaos. (Medieval alchemists did not distinguish psyche and matter; the *nigredo* described both the chemicals in the retort and state of mind of the adept.) Jung (1963/1989) saw the *nigredo* as a profound metaphorical description of the first stage of the individuation process, equivalent of the dark night of the soul (see p. 508).

The image of the feather (Figure 2) appeared as I pondered transcendence and airiness, suggesting to me the alchemical operation of *separatio*, where spirit and matter are temporarily separated. As with the other images, the particular feather that emerged developed its unique shape as I worked. I found I was pleased that it came out tattered, as if having been through a difficult journey. This was, however, a later reflection, as were

Figure 1. "Alchemy 1," Gold leaf, gouache, and pastel, 9 x 7 ¾ in.

Figure 2. "Alchemy 8", Gold leaf, gouache, and pastel, 8 ¼ x 7 in.

associations to the evolution of birds from earthbound creatures, and associations to the crow itself. Even now, as I continue to reflect upon each image in the series, unexpected connections, feelings, and poetic associations continue to emerge; I hope these images provide a similar resonance for the viewer as well.

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About the Author

Ellen Questel, PhD, is a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist, academic psychologist, studio artist, and a specialist in visual imagery. Drawing from a cross-disciplinary background in art history, theoretical psychology, Jungian studies, and her work as psychotherapist and artist, she has led seminars on visual thinking, symbolic imagination, dream imagery, alchemy, and the perceptual basis of language and thought. She currently leads dream workshops in southern Vermont where she lives. In 2014, she presented her Alchemy Series at the Science, Art and the Sacred course at David Peat's Pari Center for New Learning in Italy. She works with pastel, mixed media, and printmaking (www.ellenquestel.com). Her art is shown regularly in juried exhibitions.

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