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A Conversation with Susan Aaron-Taylor, August 2009

MARY MCNICHOLS

The Medieval alchemists, philosophers as much as pre-chemists, attempted to realize a spiritual as well as a metallic transmutation. As the alchemists, the goal of Susan Aaron-Taylor's work is wholeness, a balance between spirit and matter, female and male, individual and society. She has said of her work, "Making art grounds me. It's pure joy." Referring to one of her most recent series, *Soul Shards*, Aaron-Taylor has stated that it, "... chronicles the retrieval of these broken pieces of the Soul." At the heart of the intrinsically autobiographical work of this artist is a union of Jungian psychology, dream work, and alchemy.

Aaron-Taylor's work, comprised of various series, has spanned more than three decades. Consistent throughout this time has been the presence of imagery that unifies the world of nature with the world of humanity. Human forms often metamorphose into animal forms; found wood deftly combines with mixed media in an art evocative of the universal as well as the personal.

Susan Aaron-Taylor joined the Crafts Department of the College for Creative Studies in Detroit in 1973. She has served the school as Department Chair as well as in her present position as Professor of Crafts and Fiber Design Section Chair.

MARY MCNICHOLS (MM): Your work has developed through a number of series over the past few decades, for example, the *Deity*, *Tarot*, and *Alchemy* series, and now, the most recent work, *Dreamscapes* and *Soul Shards*. Although it has been done over many years, are there any themes common to all the work?

SUSAN AARON-TAYLOR (SAT): That's actually a timely question, Mary. In February, I gave a lecture to the Michigan Friends of Jung, which I called, "Creative Process and



Mary McNichols and Susan Aaron-Taylor in Susan's studio, January 2010. (Photograph: Jacques Rutzky, by permission.)

Spiral Journey.” In preparation for the lecture, I went through all my work, as well as all my sketchbooks/journals. That process itself was really something of a journey of self-discovery. I categorized all the work in terms of how my various interests overlaid each other, and in the lecture, I showed images from all of the series I’ve done over the past three decades.

So, yes, to address your question, there are themes that are common to all my work, and, as I regard my work as both narrative and autobiographical, these are themes that are applicable to my life as well as to my art. The overarching concept is “individuation,” which I define as a path to renewal that can only come about when some of the old ways of being are left behind. That means a conscious acceptance and assimilation of our Shadow side, by which Jung meant a composite of personal characteristics and potentialities that have been repressed and underdeveloped in our conscious lives. As Jung believed that unconscious self-sacrifice is merely an accident, not a moral act, sacrifice presupposes consciousness. I should also point out that there are both positive and negative aspects to the Shadow; in fact, Jung considered the Shadow to be the source of creativity.



From the *Soul Shard* series, 2002–2006. Wood, mixed media, 13" × 20" × 14". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission.)

The other themes that appear in my work are really part of the process to achieve individuation. For example, the theme of "Descent to the Underworld" signifies a plunge into the darkness, into a void or abyss. This is what St. John of the Cross called the "Dark Night of the Soul," in his sixteenth-century poem of the same name. Related to this is the theme of "Death," that is, the death of a small part of the ego—worn out parts of our psyche that must be discarded in order for a transformation to occur.

The theme of "Dismemberment" is another part of the psychic transformation process in which both desirable and undesirable parts of our psyche are disassembled in preparation for a new wholeness. This is followed by "Gestation/Incubation," which is a kind of inner inquiry that allows us to clear out the old and bring in the new, and by "Rememberment," a conscious process in which we face our own flaws and woundedness and then reassemble the various aspects of our personality. "Rebirth" symbolizes a return to the world after having integrated what we've learned with what we've always been; "Resurrection/Revelation" signifies a spiritual link to our higher self; and "Coniunctio," the final stage of alchemy, represents a new entity resulting from a union of opposites. And, because the journey to individuation is really a continuing one, the theme of "Descent to the Underworld" appears again.

As I said earlier, this cycle is applicable to both my life and my work. It describes what I consider to be an overlay of both my creative process and my being. Any piece that I make fits into this.



Terrier, 2008. Shell, handmade felt, bones, 24" × 15" × 13". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission.)

MM: I'm aware that there have been other significant themes in your work: shamanism, the goddess, as well as an interest in the art of different cultures—prehistoric, Cycladic, Oceanic, African, Inuit, for example. All these diverse interests, as well as what you've just described, seem to be related, in terms of their having a common spiritual thread.

SAT: Yes, they do overlap and, as you say, an emphasis on spirituality—maybe defined as shamanic healing—is intrinsic to them all. Again, my preparation for the lecture for the Michigan Friends of Jung might be useful in explaining this. In the lecture, I showed a diagram I had drawn in one of my sketchbooks. I actually began drawing these diagrams, or "pie charts," in about 1993. In the chart I showed in my lecture, various processes were arranged in a circle—the harvest cycle, the creative process, shamanic healing (the kind of process I described earlier, in which we must descend into the underworld as preparation for rebirth and resurrection.) This kind of



Pug, 2006. Wood, handmade felt, agate, 9" × 11" × 15". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission.)



Dog and Child, 2006. Wood, handmade felt, kozo, ocean jasper, 8" × 15" × 4". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission)

graphic, visual arrangement of these various processes emphasizes their interconnect-
edness. As an analogy, you might think of the process of a seed germinating. Just as the
seed descends into the earth and morphs in order to create new life, during the creative
process the artist (in terms of the Tarot, the "Fool," which connotes innocence and



Feral Child, 2008. Handmade felt, bones, 29" × 29" × 26". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission.)

wonder) must become like an empty vessel for a higher power in order to be transformed. By the way, in Tarot, “Death” symbolizes change and transition.

MM: So much of your work derives from Jungian psychology and dream imagery. You’ve stated that you keep a journal next to your bed so that you can record your dreams on awakening to, as you say, “. . . seek the non-linear fragile, ephemeral gifts from the inner dream world” (unpublished artist statement 2009, 1). Would you please elaborate on the importance of dreams in your work?

SAT: At the heart of my work—and, arguably, the recent work in the *Dreamscapes* and *Soul Shards* series in particular—is a marriage of psychology, dream work, and alchemy. I’ve been fascinated by my dreams since childhood; in fact, I have early memories of discussions with my mother about what they might mean. Dreams come



Mending, 2009. Wood, handmade felt, ocean jasper, 9" × 10" × 10". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission.)

to tell you something you don't know. Dream imagery is really a language to be interpreted via symbols in dreams. As I've gotten older, I've become more sophisticated in my approach to dream analysis. Three decades ago, I began studying the work of Jung and his paradigm for analyzing dreams.

MM: You've indicated to me the importance of research for your work. Which specific sources do you use to analyze your dreams?

SAT: There are a number of symbol dictionaries and encyclopedias that are very important to me. The symbol dictionary that I utilize the most is *Elevsier's Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, by Ad de Vries. I love doing research. Actually, researching is part of the ritual of my creative process. I use many books while working on any one

series. For example, when I was doing images in the *Deity* series in the 1990s, I studied both Greek and Roman mythology—male as well as female deities—and their meaning as archetypes. Other sources that are significant for me include *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, by Erich Neumann; *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women*, by Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D.; *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, by Mircea Eliade; *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*, by Edward F. Edinger; and *Conscious Femininity: Interviews with Marion Woodman*, by Marion Woodman.

MM: I understand that your creative process involves both linear and nonlinear elements. You've referred to, ". . . a polarity of inner/outer . . . right-brain/left-brain" (unpublished artist statement, 2009, 1) in your work, and certainly, your involvement with research could be considered a part of the linear aspect of your creative process. Would you please expand on this process?

SAT: Of course. As you know, most of my work originates from my dreams and from Jungian psychology. Jung defined archetypes as primal patterns of human behavior that reside in both the individual psyche and in the collective unconscious. Archetypes are psychic imprints, inborn patterns of experience. The five basic archetypes are the Self, the Shadow, the Anima, the Animus, and the Persona. While there are virtually innumerable archetypes, a few recurring images are the Hero, the Great Mother, the Wise Old Man, and the Trickster. If a particular archetype surfaces in my dreams, I will question its importance in my everyday life. Then, I thoroughly research the archetype, including all the symbols and characters in the dream on both a personal and universal level. Out of this process, the concept for the piece is born. At this point, I leave my study and go directly into my studio to, perhaps, rummage through my woodpile to find further inspiration in materials. I might, for example, start carving a piece of wood as it "tells" me how to form it.

Let me give you a specific example pertaining to my *Tarot* series (and, by the way, Jung believed that the characters in the Tarot cards were archetypical.) Part of the ritual for the *Tarot* series was doing a layout of the Tarot cards. If the last card, the outcome card, was from the Major Arcana (the first twenty-two cards of the Tarot deck), I researched the archetype to see how it related to events in my life at that point, how the archetype was manifested in me. Then, I did a piece related to that particular card. So yes, my creative process does involve both linear and nonlinear elements. And, making art grounds me; it's pure joy.

MM: So many other artists—Paul Klee, for example, comes to mind—have referred to the roles of the conscious and subconscious, respectively, in making their art. I think that it's part of the writing process as well.

Earlier, you made reference to alchemy. How does alchemy figure into your art?

SAT: My discovery of Jung's book, *Psychology and Alchemy*, was a revelation. Jung theorized that the entire alchemical procedure is paralleled by the psychological process of individuation. So, as you can see from our earlier conversation about individuation, because alchemy *is* the individuation process, it is central to the thematic content of my work.

The alchemists were philosophers as well as pre-chemists. Not only did they want to discover a way to turn base metals into gold, but also they wanted to turn darkness into light. That's why Jung studied the alchemists. He saw the correlation between transforming base metals into a precious substance and the possibility of realizing a new, spiritual life, a life of wholeness formed from unifying opposites, a "Coniunctio."

As I said, alchemy has had a profound influence on my life and work. I fell in love with the mystical, symbol-laden illustrations of the alchemists, and spent hours pouring over the drawings and texts on the beaches of Lake Huron. At first, it seemed as if I'd been caught in a labyrinth—these texts didn't lend themselves to linear understanding; they only made sense when I let my intuition reign. But gradually I started to make sense of them. And, much as the "pie charts" we discussed earlier helped me to clarify how my various interests fit together, my rendering a chart in my sketchbook derived from my study of Marion Woodman's work helped me to understand how Jung's concept of "soul" is intrinsic to the creative process. I always distribute this chart to my students when discussing art, symbol, and metaphor.

MM: You've alluded during our discussion to several rituals related to your creative process and have, in fact, stated that "My work is a ritual" (artist's address to students in her studio, March 26, 2009). Would you please describe some of your other rituals and how they inform your art?

SAT: We've already talked about the importance to me of recording my dreams and of researching various archetypes and symbols in preparation for making a piece. There are other rituals that are significant for me as well, some very simple, such as preparing my studio—getting my tools ready for use, cleaning them for the next day, and putting them away. I frequently begin my art-making process by clearing my studio with sage. As you know, transcendental meditation has been a part of my life for many years, as have been yoga and my morning prayers.

I've also adapted a ritual, and I've given this, on occasion, as an assignment to my students as well. I will make a work and give it to a higher power, either by destroying it (that is, symbolically "sacrificing" it), burying it, burning it, or hiding it in some way. What's important here—and this is the most difficult thing—is not "owning" it, never showing it to anyone, but rather giving the work back to a higher power, as an element of gratitude for the gift of creativity. Making art is, after all, between the artist and the divine. When I'm working in the studio, in a sense, I have no ego; the spirit is moving through me. But, when this "flow" is broken, the ego pops back

into my body. Sacrificing a work to the divine is, for me, a means to try to continue the flow.

MM: Interestingly, tribal Africans often bury a particularly important ritual mask after its use in a religious ceremony. And much of what you've described reminds me of some of the practices of Constantin Brancusi, who, as you know, was an intrinsically spiritual artist. Brancusi would often meditate prior to picking up a tool and thought that the difficulty was not so much in making the art, but in spiritually preparing to make it. He believed that those who were closest to God would really "see" his art.

Please let me ask you a question about influences on you and your work. In addition to Jung, you number Robert Bly and Marion Woodman among your influences and mentors. What have you learned from them, and how has their wisdom inspired your art?

SAT: As you know, Robert Bly is an American poet, writer, storyteller, translator, and a leader of the men's movement. Robert totally expanded my parameters. I first attended his Great Mother and New Father Conference in 1988 (I now go every year, and attended the 35th annual conference in June of last year.) Through Robert, as well as many of the other great poets who have attended the conference, I learned how to listen and to understand poetry. He also gave me a better understanding of the masculine, how men are "wired" differently than women. As my son, Jay, was three-years-old at the time, this was important information, a revelation really, that helped my husband and me to raise him with more consciousness. I eventually was asked to become director of the art gallery at the conference. This position gave me the opportunity to help elevate the profile of the visual arts within the culture of a conference that had primarily been one of poets and poetry, thanks to Robert's strong influence.

Marion Woodman is the Jungian analyst whose book, *Interviews with Marion Woodman*, I alluded to earlier in our conversation. Marion has written a number of other wonderful books. Because of her publication, *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride: A Psychological Study*, I decided to attend my first Great Mother conference. Marion was a guest teacher at that conference, and I really wanted to hear her lecture. She taught me about loving the dark, earthy side of the feminine. Whereas much Jungian thought is linear, stressing the mind over the body, Marion taught me to integrate both body and mind. She often uses dance therapy (and frequently works with a dance therapist) and, through dance, movement, voice, and art, integrates Jungian symbols into the body. Marion's workshops are participatory, interpreting Jungian symbology through movement and dance. So the symbols are felt in the body.

MM: Both Robert Bly and Marion Woodman celebrate a sense of "wholeness," the integration of body and spirit, female and male—as do you. The feminist movement has exerted a considerable influence on both women and men of several

generations. Would you please discuss the various female and male archetypes that have appeared in your work?

SAT: Although I think of myself as a feminist, I don't consciously create what could be construed as a "feminist statement" in my work. That being said, because my work is intrinsically autobiographical, and because I am a woman, it is often about the "female." For example, when I began the *Deity* series, I was concerned with female deities and how they were manifested within me. I was exploring my female side. I might have researched Diana, the nature goddess of fertility and wild animals, or the Black Madonna, and then thought about how their characteristics and qualities related to me on a personal level, and, finally, how that played out symbolically on a universal level. I am always concerned that my work does not become so personal that it leaves the viewer out. I want people to connect to it.

But, ultimately, because my work is autobiographical, it's really about keeping my life in balance. And that's a continual quest. Jung thought that there is a continuum of polarities in one's life; the pendulum continually swings back and forth between opposites. You work on the masculine for a while and then on the feminine. So I did female deities when needed and male deities when needed in order to achieve balance.

MM: Yes, I remember your work when your son, Jay, was born. Human and animal, male and female, and sometimes androgynous symbols in your work of that period referred to your son, Jay; your husband, Harry; and yourself.

As a student at Cranbrook Academy of Art, you studied textiles with Gerhardt Knodel and sculpture with Michael Hall. Over the years, you've integrated both media into your various series, using materials such as found wood, kozo fiber, metal, and felt, and, in your most recent work, gemstones and minerals applied over a wooden or metal armature. Several writers have referred to the "wounds" and "lacerations" on the "skins" of the creatures in your various series. This reminds me of the surfaces of Alberto Giacometti's sculptures and their thematic content. Would you please comment on your intent?

SAT: I think that everyone is wounded to a degree; everyone has something in their lives to work on. Yes, many of my earlier pieces had wounds. But now, in the *Dreamscapes* and *Soul Shards* series, I think of the lacerations on the surface of the pieces more as a means by which the inner light can emerge, rather than as wounds, per se. The skins of these pieces function, really, as protective devices to allow the inner light out. As an example, in one of my most recent pieces from this year, *Calcinatio*, amethysts and raw emeralds protrude from the skin, suggesting a sense of inner wholeness.

MM: So, this is a continuation of the theme of balance.

SAT: Yes.



Calcinatio, 2009. Handmade felt, amethysts, raw emerald, aluminum armature, 11" × 31" × 10". (Susan Aaron-Taylor, by permission.)

MM: And it does seem that, given the autobiographical nature of your work, the most recent pieces suggest the attainment of a greater degree of balance.

SAT: Perhaps. One must maintain consciousness of the need for balance in life—balance between work and play, the spiritual and the material. But I say “perhaps” because I also think it’s important to remember that balance is really a momentary phenomenon. It’s analogous to riding a bike. You have to pedal to keep your balance, or you’ll fall over. And you can only coast for a certain period of time; you have to keep going in your progression to achieve wholeness.

REFERENCED SERIES BY SUSAN AARON-TAYLOR

Deity series, 1989–1995. Wood, polymer, mixed media.

Tarot series, 1995–1998. Wood, polymer, mixed media.

Alchemy series, 1998–2001. Wood, mixed media.

Soul Shard series, 2002–2006. Wood, mixed media.

Dreamscape series, 2006–present. Wood, mixed media.

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from Wayne State University Press. Her most recent articles include “The Sculpture of the Creation Garden,” published in *Religion and the Arts*; “The Art of Janice Lincoln—Whispers in the Cave: Divine Darkness,” published in *Ashé: The Journal of Experimental Spirituality*; “Image as Autobiography: A Conversation with Gilda Snowden,” published in *The Journal of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit*; and “Journey to Renewal: A Pilgrimage to the Solanus Casey Center,” published in *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*. Correspondence: 10414 Vernon, Huntington Woods, MI 48070. E-mail: m@garden.us.

ABSTRACT

At the center of Susan Aaron-Taylor’s art is a union of Jungian psychology, dream work, and alchemy. Human forms metamorphose into animal and plant forms; the materials of nature—found wood, minerals, bones, gemstones—deftly combine with handmade felt, kozo fiber, metal, and felt in an art evocative of the universal as well as the personal. In this interview, Aaron-Taylor discusses the various themes—Jungian psychology, shamanism, ancient cultures, the goddess—central to her body of work, which has spanned more than three decades. The artist shares both the rituals and the creative process through which she seeks to achieve a sense of wholeness. Of her recent work, Aaron-Taylor has stated that it, “. . . chronicles the retrieval of these broken pieces of the Soul.”

KEY WORDS

Susan Aaron-Taylor; African art; alchemy; ancient cultures; anima; animus; archetypes; Robert Bly; Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Every Woman: A New Psychology of Women*; *Calcinatio*; collective unconscious; College for Creative Studies; Conference on the Great Mother and New Father; coniunctio; conscious femininity; *Conscious Femininity: Interviews with Marion Woodman*; Cranbrook Academy of Art; creative process; Cycladic art; Dark night of the Soul; Descent to the Underworld; Ad de Vries, *Eleusier’s Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*; dream imagery; dreams; Edward Edinger, *Anatomy of the Psych: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*; Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*; goddess; the Great Mother; the Hero; individuation; Jung; C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy*; Jungian psychology; Major Arcana; Marion Woodman, *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride: A Psychological Study*; Marion Woodman Michigan Friends of Jung; mythology; Eric Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*; Oceanic art; Persona; ritual; the Self; shadow; shamanism; spiral journey; tarot; transcendental meditation; the Trickster; Wise Old Man

ERRATA

Jung 4.1, p. 11, line 3 should read “public display.”

Jung 4.1, p. 31, line 25 should read “Email: barbaraholifield1@att.net.”

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FRONT AND BACK COVER IMAGES: Susan Aaron-Taylor, "Soul Shard 21," 2004. 18" x 5.5". Bark, raw flax, and ocean jasper. By permission of the artist. (www.susanaarontaylor.com) Photograph: Tim Thayer.