

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers

College of Art

Spring 5-5-2017

"Collaborating with Chance"

Alyse Gellis

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa>



Part of the [Ceramic Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gellis, Alyse, "Collaborating with Chance" (2017). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 31.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/31>

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

“Collaborating with Chance”

Alyse Gellis

Studio Art: Sculpture Concentration

Washington University in St. Louis

5 May 2017

Abstract

Have you ever felt a desire to get lost on a journey much larger than yourself or experience the thrill of the unknown? Think about a time you intentionally swam further out in a lake or the sea than you have before, or drove down a road without knowing where it would take you, or wandered around a new city without a map. Think about how you made the decision to push those boundaries. Remember how taking that risk in pursuit of an unknown made you feel, because it is that thrill that drives my artistic practice. Through my thesis journey, I explore alchemical transmutations, encyclopedias as universal knowledge, and the kiln firing process. *Alchemical transmutations* reference the literal definition of alchemy, which is a transmutation from one thing to another. *Encyclopedias* act as a metaphor for universal knowledge, as they are not specific to a subject or discipline. The *kiln firing process* involves “collaborating with chance” and allowing the kiln her own artistic license in my artwork. These elements combine to create an alchemical transmutation from a written language of encyclopedias to a visual language of natural processes and landscapes, and a transmutation from paper to ceramic and glass. In this essay, I describe a personal journey of exploration, experimentation, and how my art practice correlates to my way of life.

Taking Risks and Getting Lost: A Journey

My mother told me a story last winter of a trip she took to Jackson Hole when she was my age. She stayed at a small hotel on the edge of a vast lake where you could fish and travel around in boats. The lake was so big that the park rangers marked off a specific area for visitors to enjoy. The area was a substantial part of the lake, but my mom noticed that not many people ventured far in toward the outer edges, and a few days into her trip she asked one of the rangers about the boundary line. He told her that a river current flowed through that part of the lake, and if you rowed across the outer boundary to row towards the mountains on the other side, you would not be able to return. The only way to get back would be to allow the current take you to the mountains and you would have to find your way back around the lake by foot, or hopefully someone would realize what happened and search for you. My mother thought about this for a few days, and on her last day before returning home, she got up early in the morning and rowed out to the boundary line. The water was like glass – her oars created the only disturbance she could see on the safe side of the lake. She contemplated the mountains and their reflection in the water before her until she noticed an almost invisible current beneath the black lake water on the opposite side of the boundary. She wanted to know what it was like, to float on the edge of being lost, to hover over a point of no return. My mom told me that in that moment, she experienced the sublime.

When I heard this story, I recognized that same longing within myself: A desire to get lost on a journey much larger than myself and to experience the thrill of the unknown, and the danger and risks that come with that thrill. In the Middle Ages, alchemists gained more from the process of discovery than the actual success of their experiments by immersing themselves in their personal journey. In my work, I allow myself to take risks and to let the unknown take

over. I find value in getting lost in this journey of creation and discovery, and taking each result as a new opportunity to get lost in the process all over again.

Introduction to Alchemy

Alchemy refers to a medieval science which aimed to transmute metals into gold and create the 'elixir of life,' a substance which heals illnesses and creates indefinite immortality. However, in simpler terms, alchemy can be defined in *Merriam-Webster* as an inexplicable or mysterious transmutation.

The alchemical process of turning metal into gold is generally said to have four stages: melanosis (blackening), leukosis (whitening), xanthosis (yellowing) and iosis (reddening). These processes represent the breaking down of the metal into its basic chemical parts, (Jung, 229-230). Each part of the process corresponds to a different goal of alchemy, which could be the creation of the philosopher's stone (containing the elixir of life) or the transmutation of metal to silver or gold. Ultimately, the alchemists wished to explore the mystery of matter and transmutation, and through this exploration they would discover something about their own unconscious or psyche, (Jung, 260).

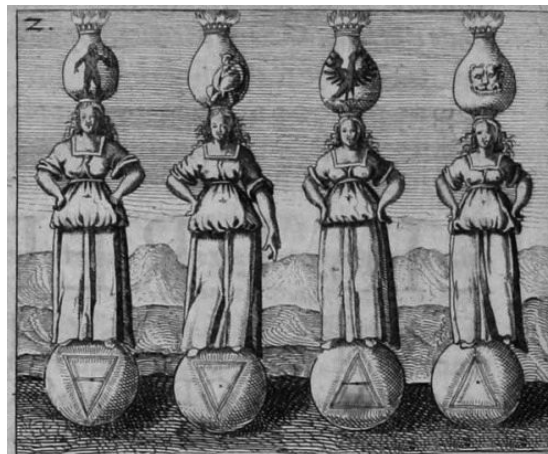


Fig 1. The four stages of the alchemical process. – Mylius, *Philosophia reformatata* (1622)

A transmutation is a change or alteration in form, appearance, or nature. In my work, the written language in the encyclopedias are transmuted into a visual language of natural processes and landscapes. In some ways, the written language of the world is brought back to the earth and matter it originated from. While I may not aim to turn metals into gold, I am exploring the mystery of matter and natural processes, similarly to the medieval alchemists.

Contemporary/Historical Art Influences

When I began to research alchemy, the first artist I came across was Anselm Kiefer. I previously admired Kiefer's work, and aesthetically, our work has similarities. His work references alchemy, focusing on the material transformations and even the materials used in alchemical processes. He "claimed to be doing the same as the alchemists who had tried to accelerate the natural processes of the transformation of matter: 'I simply accelerate the transformation which is already inherent in things,'" (Arasse, 237). Kiefer uses the concepts of alchemy to explain the process of transformation in his own work. Similarly, I use the alchemical transmutation process to describe the transformation of book to ceramic, or written to visual language in my own work. However, while Kiefer will often use lead to represent some of his physical transformations, I do not explicitly reference the materials of alchemy.

In addition to his interest in alchemical transformations, Kiefer directly references alchemical terms or objects in his titles of paintings, showing that his interest in alchemy is closely tied into the interests of the medieval alchemists. However, "Kiefer's concern was not to 'illustrate' alchemical processes; alchemy interests him in so far as it provides a concept of creative activity which echoes his view of his own artistic practice in several basic ways," (Arasse, 235). Rather, he feels his artistic process is closely tied to the creative process of

alchemy. While much of ceramics and the kiln process includes chemical and elemental transformations, my artistic process is not closely tied to the alchemical creative process. My goal is to achieve a full transmutation through natural transformation, but I allow the unknown and chance to have artistic license in my work instead of following a chemical order of transformations.



Fig 2. Anselm Kiefer, The Language of the Birds, 2013, lead, metal, wood, plaster.

Additionally, Yves Klein's use of symbolism in his work parallels the ideas of medieval alchemists. He paints with gold to represent the stars and blue to represent the depth of the sky, using color to reference nature and the Earth. His symbolism relates to the intellectual process of the alchemists as well, claiming that a "pictorial sensibility" can be purified over time by an "alchemists/artist" and developed in a viewer to recognize when an object can be considered art. Klein describes a sensitivity to art as essential to understanding his work, and to gain this sensitivity, one must also work towards developing this "pictorial sensibility," (Karmel).

He references the language of alchemists, which is defined entirely by codes and symbols meant to confuse a non-practitioner. Like Kiefer, Klein references specific symbols and the intellectual process of alchemy, without using it as a main theme in his work.

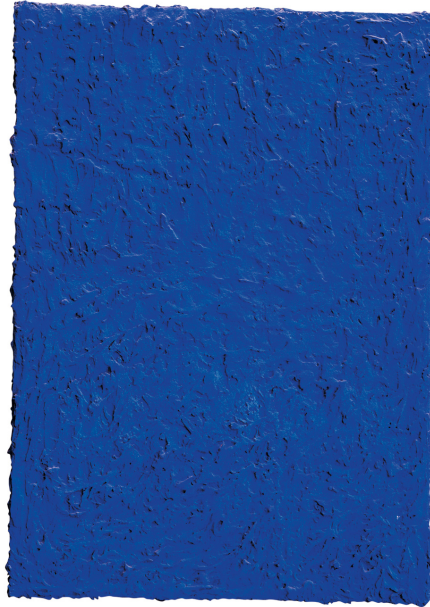


Fig 3. Yves Klein, *Untitled Blue Monochrome*, 1955, dry pigment and synthetic resin on gauze on panel.

Sigmar Polke referenced alchemical processes and transmutations in his work as well, drawing on specific chemical and material transformations to achieve affects in his paintings. In his piece for the 2007 Venice Biennale, *The Axis of Time*, he used violet pigments to create a transformation to gold. He says, “once I apply the violet pigments with a brush, the surface will become gold. As the light reflects it, it will change color,” (Vogel). In the work, there is a physical and visual transformation occurring as the violet becomes gold. Polke worked with a similar transformation process to alchemists, but his process was rooted in scientific methods and his concepts drawn from philosophy, all which created layers of metaphors in his paintings.



Fig 4. Sigmar Polke, *The Axis of Time*, 2007, crystalized violet pigment, fabric, lacquer, canvas.

In my own work, I do not reference alchemists' materials or symbols. Instead, their exploration into natural and chemical transformations, and the pursuit and immersion of oneself into a personal journey are main themes in my work and artistic process.

Pursuing a Personal Legend

In *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, a Personal Legend refers to the purpose of any individual's life, and the universe conspires to help any individual achieve their Personal Legend through various omens. These omens can manifest as intuitive thoughts, or physical objects or beings in the natural world. When I was growing up, I listened to this book on tape multiple times and it colored the way I understood the world. I grew up believing that everything happens for a reason and by trusting my intuition, I followed the omens that would lead me to discover and achieve my own Personal Legend.

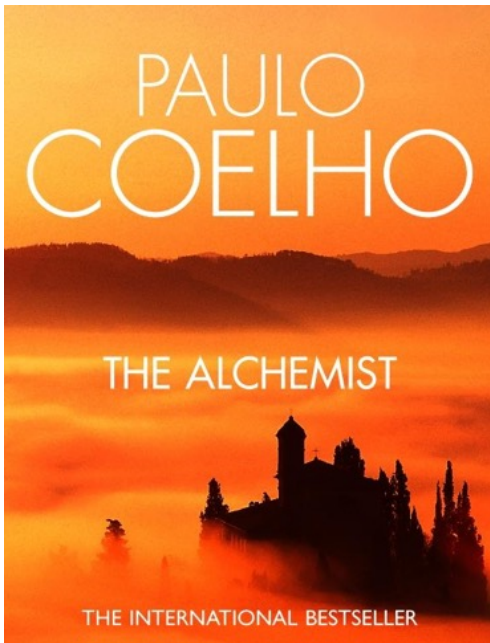


Fig 5. Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, 1988.

As I grew older, these beliefs stayed with me, but I understood that they were meant to help lead me through my life and decisions. My Personal Legend could take a variety of forms and could change as I grew and developed and began to understand who I was as an individual. Living a Personal Legend is a choice and a commitment to yourself – a commitment to the journey and not just the goal. These ideals inform everything I do, and they especially manifest in my art process and my artwork.

In the book, multiple characters discuss the “universal language” or the “language of the world,” which refers to the history of everything that has already happened, and its physical presence in the earth. This presence can be sensed and read by anyone who pays attention. Towards the end of his journey “the boy was beginning to understand that intuition is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it’s all written there. ‘*Maktub*,’” (Coelho, 77). *Maktub* is an Arabic word that translates to “it is written.” While *Maktub* is used to describe events that seem to be omens sent by a God in the book, the principle of *Maktub*

encourages me to accept the unknown or unexpected. I can trust that my intuition understands the language of the world and will lead me in the direction I want to go. It is as if my intuitive decisions aren't just based off my gut feelings and previous knowledge, but are backed by the knowledge of the world and its previously written history.



Fig 6 & 7. Alyse Gellis, *XVII – XXIII (Education – Metabolism)*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, Encyclopedia Britannica.

In Dario Robleto's "Every Record, Everywhere, Is Playing Our Song," he discusses how vinyl as a material originated, relating it back to alchemical processes and the creation of petroleum from decaying ancient microorganisms beneath our soil. He says, "One of the by-products of petroleum is vinyl. With the introduction of the vinyl record, we created a beautiful metaphor about the fleetingness of human time and life without ever realizing it. Every time a new groove is cut into a vinyl record, we are literally carving our history, our hopes and dreams of today, onto the chest of life of the distant past." Similarly to Coelho, Robleto understands the physical history of objects and the way they can speak the knowledge of the world. In this passage, he describes the vinyl record as a remnant of our history. This physical, decaying past is transmuted into something that we can listen to – a new history being written using a physical remnant of the past.

Learning Through Risk Taking

With so many omens and signs from the language of the world conspiring to help you achieve your Personal Legend, it seems natural to stay on the path that's right for your goal. Is it not still important to stray from the path and question it? In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit argues, "The question then is how to get lost. Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery," (Solnit, 14). As my mother taught me with her story from Jackson Hole, I long to get lost in a journey and to take risks. In my art process, I prepare for these risks and expect the unexpected. I set parameters by preparing all the encyclopedias in the same way, covering them with enough paper clay and glaze so that hopefully they won't crumble into ash (this doesn't always succeed). I fire the same kiln at the same cone temperature every time. I calculate for the unforeseen, but add it into my own equation of chance. "Collaborating with chance" describes my method almost perfectly – we work symbiotically to create and plan for the unexpected, and I allow chance her own artistic license to surprise and delight me, or in some cases, create new obstacles for me to overcome, (Solnit, 5).

I am on a journey with the kiln, the paper clay, and the encyclopedias. Chance plays her own role in this journey, enabling me to toe the line of losing control over my own work. Every time I fire something I'm committed to the resulting alchemical transmutation as the final product. The works are always in process and always changing as I display and re-display them, which is why often the process is more important to me than the final product. Of course, the final product is still important, because to go on a journey or achieve a goal, there must be something to work towards. However, I often learn more and gain more from the process of

making than from the result, and I come up with new ideas and new ways to work while living through my process. I can make work because the act of creating is as important as the creation itself.



Fig 8 & 9. Alyse Gellis, *XX – XXII (Geomorphic – Life)*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, glass, steel, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Paper and Porcelain

When I first heard of paper clay, it was described to me as a material that could coat any object and turn it into feather light porcelain. I was wandering around the mountains in Santa Fe with my Dad and a friend, and came across a wooden bush that looked as if termites had eaten out the core of its branches. As I wandered on, I saw more and more of the same bush with the same porous branches. My Dad's friend told me they were a type of cactus called challo. The pores usually contained small flowers where the cactus flowers would bloom, and the hollow inside allowed the cactus to stay hydrated in the New Mexico heat. The challo skeleton was so beautiful that I kept some half-broken branches for myself and immediately knew that I would preserve them by transforming them into porcelain. In this moment, I saw the challo branch as an omen that began the journey of my thesis work.

Paper clay is a mixture of porcelain slip and paper pulp. Slip is a liquid form of clay that allows for coating of objects, and paper pulp is exactly what one would expect – paper soaked in water and vigorously mixed to form a pulp. Over time, the paper clay mixture grows bacteria and develops a sulfuric smell and a greyish color, which I have grown so accustomed to that I enjoy it. The paper clay functions as a coating for my encyclopedias, but also as a glue for the torn pages I maneuver back into its spine. I tear the pages to change the form of the book before it is fired in the kiln. My tearing process gives the books more volume and transforms them into an intermediate state where they are still encyclopedia, but begin to take the form of a sculpture before the transmutation takes place.



Fig 10. Alyse Gellis, *XX – XXII (Geomorphoc – Life) in-process*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Kiln Firing Process

The books are then coated in a transparent glaze, which allows the natural color of the paper pages to come through to the surface of each piece. After the glaze dries, they are arranged in the kiln in a way that allows for chance and unexpected forces in the kiln to take

over. The gas kiln is fired at cone 6 (~2198 °F), which takes three days in total. When I open the kiln on the third day after the piece has had time to cool off, I have no idea what to expect and each time it is a grand reveal. The mystery and excitement of the unknown in this moment is addictive and satisfying. There is a magic in creating something, and never fully understanding how it happened. On the other hand, there is also a logic in understanding how the kiln works and in the chemical processes that happen inside the kiln between the different ceramic materials. This logic creates a tension with my intuitive process and the element of the unknown in the kiln firing process. This tension manifests in the work, but becomes transmuted from logic and intuition, where logic represents the support I need to take risks and intuition correlates to the uncertainty of chance, to strength and fragility.



Fig 11. Alyse Gellis, *XX – XXII (Geomorphic – Life) pre-kiln excavation*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Encyclopedias as Universal Knowledge

In these works, encyclopedias are a representation of universal knowledge. Encyclopedias reference everything that is known or can be learned in the world at any given time, but with the digital age they are becoming obsolete. It is wasteful to reprint so much information every year, when it can simply be updated online and the same information is a

click of a button away. Encyclopedias have become physical remnants of the knowledge of the world, contributing to the universal language described in *The Alchemist*, 'Maktub' it is written. The alchemical transmutation, from written language to visual language of natural processes and landscapes, preserves the knowledge within the encyclopedias by bringing it back to its natural origins. They are inherently ephemeral and constantly changing. In some works, slumped glass acts as another layer of protection. The glass layer is seemingly strong and provides a barrier to outside forces, but if it were to fall it would shatter in the same way as the ceramic sculptures.



Fig 12 & 13. Alyse Gellis, *XIV (Arctic – Biosphere)*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, glass, steel, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Steel Mounts

These works went through various phases of presentation, from display on the actual kiln shelves, to plexi-glass pedestals. I made the decision to build my own mounts because I wanted to allow each sculpture to take on a life of its own, and live at a height appropriate for close observation. These works are meant to be looked at closely and at eye-level. As you look closer, the mountains and ridges of the book pages are revealed. The steel pedestal gives height and weightlessness to the deconstructed books, while the steel mount in *XIV (Arctic –*

Biosphere) cradles the work, allowing the viewer to observe it floating in space, without interference from a white pedestal.

A Way of Life

Throughout the process of making this body of work, I've explained to the people I'm surrounded by on a day to day basis the conceptual ideas I illustrated above. Often, I find myself describing my general desires and wishes about navigating my way through the world, or repeating my research to my friends so they understand the type of person I aspire to be. I truly believe that the journey of an artist can be defined as a Personal Legend, a commitment to oneself. Pursuing a Personal Legend is a pledge to take risks, make tough decisions and follow your intuition. I started joking with a close friend that I was living my thesis, but as soon as I said it, we both knew it was true. My work and artistic process are intertwined with my way of life, symbiotically informing each other, and constantly growing, developing and changing.

Bibliography

"Alchemy." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 24 March 2017.

Arasse, Daniel. Anselm Kiefer. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001. Print.

Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. New York: HarperCollins, 2015. Print.

Jung, C. G. (Carl Gustav), 1875-1961, and R. F. C. (Richard Francis Carrington), 1913-1974

Hull. *Psychology and Alchemy*. Princeton, N.J.]: Princeton, N.J. : Princeton UP, 1968. Print.

Karmel, Pepe. "Yves Klein: Art and Alchemy." Editorial. *Art in America* 1 May 2010:

n. pag. *Art in America*. *Art in America Magazine*, 1 May 2010. Web. 01 May 2017.

Robleto, Dario. "Every Record, Everywhere, Is Playing Our Song Right Now." Dario Robleto. *The*

Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl, n.d. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005. Print.

Vogel, Carol. "The Alchemist's Moment: The Reclusive Mr. Polke." *The New York Times*. *The*

New York Times, 26 May 2007. Web. 01 May 2017.

List of Figures

Figure 1 – The four stages of the alchemical process. – Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622).

Carl Jung, *Psychology & Alchemy*, 1968.

Figure 2 – Anselm Kiefer, *The Language of the Birds*, 2013, lead, metal, wood, plaster.

Figure 3 – Yves Klein, *Untitled Blue Monochrome*, 1955, dry pigment and synthetic resin on gauze on panel.

Figure 4 – Sigmar Polke, *The Axis of Time*, 2007, crystalized violet pigment, fabric, lacquer, canvas.

Figure 5 – Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, 1988.

Figure 6 & 7 – Alyse Gellis, *XVII – XXIII (Education – Metabolism)*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Figure 8 & 9 – Alyse Gellis, *XX – XXII (Geomorphic – Life)*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, glass, steel, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Figure 10 – Alyse Gellis, *XX – XXII (Geomorphic – Life) in-process*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Figure 11– Alyse Gellis, *XX – XXII (Geomorphic – Life) pre-kiln excavation*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Figure 12 & 13 – Alyse Gellis, *XIV (Arctic – Biosphere)*, 2017, porcelain slip, paper pulp, glaze, glass, steel, Encyclopedia Britannica.