

In Search of the Real: Spirituality, Philosophy, Harmony

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Marsha Kennedy's work in the mid 1990s took on a spiritual tonality, influenced by a personal search for spiritual growth, and resulting in beautifully sorrowful works that are infused with visual

poetry and symbolism. Kennedy began investigating eastern spiritual philosophies, theosophy, cultural myths and ancient alchemy to discover spiritual meaning, not to embrace a spiritual practice, but to find philosophical insight and wisdom in the real, authentic experience of a knowing body, the creativity of nature and a sense of place, all essential for human fulfillment, a sustainable earth and a post-industrial future.ⁱ Two bodies of work that resulted during this time are *Phantom Limbs* (1994) and *Nostos Algos* (1994).

The series *Phantom Limbs* offers poetic and visual analogies between human and plant biology, presenting unique fusions of plant and human forms. Elegant images of lung airways, arteries and a nervous system represent plant or tree roots, a heart mimics a sprouting tree nut, and an inner ear alludes to a curled fern leaf. Presented as an installation, this body of work pairs wall-mounted, layered images (paintings with overlaid etched drawings on glass) with granite floor markers etched with words. The central painted image of each wall-mounted piece is surrounded by "living" grounds, similar to those in *The Wailings of Windswept Soil* series, but these grounds also include organic fragments from plant and animal life, like seeds and a snail shell, embedded within the soil and wax compounds. The etched words on the granite markers - *Sourness, Sweetness, Bitterness, Heat, Love, Sound* and *Body*, which serve as titles, refer to the seven qualities or concepts of reality, conceived of by Renaissance philosopher, Jacob Boehme. Associating them with specific tastes, emotions and even planets, "Boehme saw these 'qualities' as agents of change in the cosmic order" to, not only make sense of his world, but allow creation to evolve to a new state of redeemed harmony.ⁱⁱⁱ

Boehme related scientific principles of alchemy and astrology to theology and philosophy as an attempt to harmonize old systems of knowledge and belief with new discoveries. His philosophies have seen renewed interest by researchers over the last thirty years, including physicist, Basarab Nicolescu, who re-examined Boehme's writings in his book, *Science and the Meaning of Evolution: The Cosmology of Jacob Boehme* (1991), contributing to Kennedy's own research at that time. Nicolescu shared Boehme's

positioning of a unified reality, drawing "links between the ideas of reality in quantum physics and the ideas of great religious traditions of the past."^{iv} This harmony of spiritual and scientific fields at once would, also, appeal to Kennedy, who in this work not only emphasizes the interconnectedness of life by fusing philosophy, biology and theosophy, but challenges dualistic thinking established by Western schools of thought, dating back to Plato, positing mind versus body, culture versus nature, and spirit versus matter. Referring to the vivid sensation that a lost limb is still present in the body, the title *Phantom Limbs* alludes to a sense of loss, perhaps a lost connection to a true nature that is innately known in the body.

Nostos Algos presents seven glass birdhouses on tall glass pedestals, housing eggs and the remains of a bird – tiny bones, a skull, wings and feet. The seven birdhouses directly connect to the seven elements or qualities of *Phantom Limbs*, being exhibited relationally to face each other in dialogue, as the artist intended in her inaugural presentation of these works at the Rosemont Art Gallery (now Art Gallery of Regina) in 1995. The title of the installation is derived from Greek, *Nostos* meaning 'a return', and *Algos*, meaning 'to feel pain'. These words combined become the present-day word, *nostalgia*, whose meaning not only refers to a yearning for home, but a wistful or excessive sentimentality to return to some past period or irrecoverable condition. The development of this series was inspired by Kennedy's, then two-year old, son and his first experience with death on encountering a dead bird that laid motionless in the parking lot near their apartment in Regina. He expressed concern for the bird, saying, "The poor little bird, now he can't fly home."^v In these transparent glass structures, Kennedy created an elegiac, symbolic home for the bird, housing its life cycle from egg to remains. Kennedy explains, "The transparent glass houses held the idea of a spiritual home, representing the immaterial, and the bird pulled apart, de-materializing, represented the soul. The work, itself, held personal questions and uncertainties about loss, mortality and the concerns for the future of our earthly home."^{vi}

Both of these bodies of work reflects Kennedy's sincere belief in the interconnectedness of all life, lamenting the impact of humankind on the earth and yearning for a connection to the natural world that has been lost.

ⁱCharlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature and Place in a Hypermodern World* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1997), p. 2.

ⁱⁱRyan Arnott, *Phantom Limbs* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 1994), exhibition catalogue.

ⁱⁱⁱLucinda Martin, « Jacob Boehme's Aurora », online in *Aries – Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16, p. 244; https://www.academia.edu/27625834/jacob_Boehmes_Aurora, accessed August 23, 2020, book review.

^{iv}Ryan Arnott, *Phantom Limbs* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 1994), exhibition catalogue.

^vMarsha Kennedy, Personal interview, May 19, 2020.