

## **Asleep Within the Seed: A Ceramic Exploration of Death and Rebirth**

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### **Abstract**

The exhibition, *Asleep within The Seed*, celebrates and unites natural processes of growth, decay, and regeneration through sculptural ceramic work. Drawing influence from plant, animal, and human development, this research posits that the unity among all life resides in the protective, encompassing forms from which we are born: the womb, the seed, or the egg. Using such forms as symbols for the movement from one stage to the next and as a symbol for the process of living and dying, I have crafted a series of ceramic sculptures to be metaphorical forms for decay and rebirth. This exhibition aims to commemorate both the purity and imperfection of nature and to understand life and death as an endless, unified cycle.

### **1. Introduction**

Various cultures utilize etiological myths to commend the notion that the death of one stage often marks the birth of a new. In numerous ancient Egyptian, Indian, and Native American creation myths, living beings came to be through emerging from within the Earth, then returning to it in death to be born again into the spirit world.<sup>1</sup> Symbols of the womb, the seed, the egg, and the nest are repeatedly depicted as transformative forms where death and life create an endless cycle. In the realm of plant ecology, the seed is an oracle of potential growth; it is the major means of regeneration for the plant as it contains the embryo within its protective seed coat. For a seed to reach its full potential, it must go through a destructive phase in which its pod splits open to release the young seedling within. This natural process visibly conveys the notion that the end of one stage often marks the birth of a new. The legend of a long-lived bird, the Phoenix, is another symbol of decay and renewal. Nearing the end of its life, the Phoenix returns to its nest where it is ignited by the sun. A new bird then arises from the ashes of its predecessor, therefore, symbolizing rebirth. This story of renewal is reflected in the ceramic firing process, known as pit firing, in which I bury a selection of my clay sculptures in the ground to be fired, and then reveal the new ware once the ashes have cooled. Such studies strengthen the understanding that everything comes from and returns to Earth in a cycle that begins and ends in an encompassing, protective hollow. Decay is a necessary phase for the continuation of growth, and thus, is expressed through juxtaposing ceramic forms in a stage of decay with others that appear to be flourishing. *Asleep within The Seed* aims to find parallels among cycles of regeneration in plants, animals, and humans as a means to venerate the beauty of both fertility and barrenness.

## 2. Research and Methodology

Personal interests in natural objects pertaining to transformation processes, such as seedpods, beehives, cocoons, eggs and nests, inspired the research on cycles of growth and decay. Collecting these objects literally or through photography and drawing, led me to question how they came to be. I started asking myself what kind of life could have emerged from inside these intriguing forms. Such fascinations led to the work of German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, author of *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. During the late 1780's, he turned his attention toward the scientific study of the natural world and founded the field of *morphology*; a science aimed at discovering underlying unity in the vast diversity of plants and animals.<sup>2</sup> Through the study of transformative stages of plant development, Goethe came up with his law of metamorphosis: nature produces one part through another, creating a variety of forms through the modification of a single organ.<sup>3</sup> In his discussion of the fruit of the plant, Goethe states, "Here we are actually speaking of the capsules formed by nature to enclose the so-called covered seeds, or, more precisely, to develop a small or large number of seeds by fructification within these capsules."<sup>4</sup> As he points out, the seed holds the potential for the plant's succession into further stages of development; therefore, a protective shell encasing the seed is essential for supporting the fertility of a plant.

This exterior coating of the seed, scientifically called the *testa*, commonly referred to as the seedpod, is an essential component of *Asleep within The Seed*. Using a variety of seedpods as reference materials, their forms are drawn out as a map for the large ceramic sculpture. It is essential to the research to collect a range of seedpods, varying in color, form, and size, as a means to gain a deeper understanding of the embryonic stage of plant life (Figure 1). By enlarging the scale of various kinds of seedpods, these objects entice the viewer to look deep inside the voids and cavities that would normally go unseen in their smaller natural state. Through seeing such forms on a larger scale, these objects obtain symbolic value as protective, encompassing hollows that encase and eventually release life.

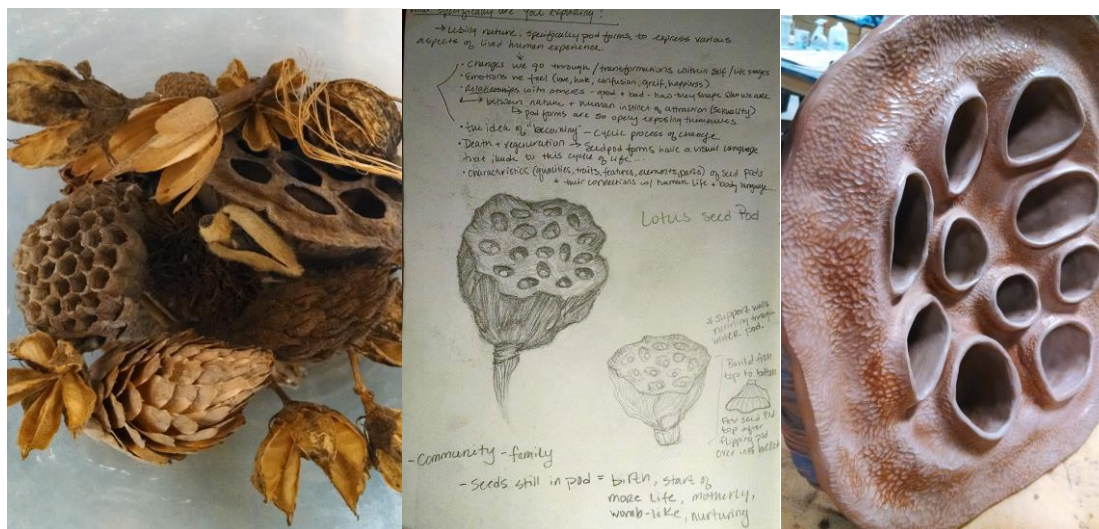


Figure 1. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014, (Process photos from left to right) Reference material, sketches, clay pod for *The Womb from which Golden Life Arises*, earthenware, terra sigillata.

Within this body of work, it is important for me to accentuate the protective quality of such seedpods as a means to visually relate them to the womb. The walls of each ceramic seed are built in a way to show volume and strength and to convey the idea that the seedpod literally acts as a womb for the young seedling within. Particularly, when a seed is fertilized, its walls thicken to form the seedpod, which varies in shape according to environment and genetics.<sup>5</sup> The seedpod holds considerable importance to the seed because it is often the only protective barrier between the embryo and the external environment. Such structures are incredibly essential to the organisms' growth progression, and are scientifically referred to as the *angiosperm*, meaning "seed borne in vessel."<sup>6</sup> As stated by plant conservation advocate Janet Marinelli, in her book *Plant*, "One reason that flowering plants were able to diversify so

dramatically and spread so rapidly during the Cretaceous and the Cenozoic, or modern, era was the evolution of new structures and tissues such as the carpel, a womblike vessel that encloses angiosperm seeds, and the endosperm, a placenta-like tissue that nourishes the young plant as it develops within the seed.”<sup>7</sup> From such findings, it is evident that the seedpod acts as a womb for the embryonic plant and supports regeneration of the plant species, while also enabling the plant to diversify and adapt to a range of environments.

Even in their dormant state, seeds are a symbol of potential and renewal of life. Air, water, fire, and animals all serve as vehicles for seed dispersion. These seeds can lay dormant for long periods of time until conditions are favorable for germination.<sup>8</sup> Affirmed by Henry David Thoreau, in his book *Faith in a Seed*, “Every year the seed of the pines is blowing thus from our pine woods and falling on all sorts of ground, favorable and unfavorable. When the circumstances are propitious, a forest of pines springs up, especially if the land to leeward is open or has been lately cleared, or plowed, or burned over.”<sup>9</sup> Thoreau commends the importance of seeds as the central element of the ecological succession of plant species. The potential for new life that the seed holds inside is momentous and is thus expressed within this body of work through crafting detailed renderings of assorted seedpods. Abstracting certain features of these objects yet keeping them largely representational challenges the viewer to make their own questions and connections: is that a seed, or a cavern of sorts, perhaps it’s an egg, or maybe a womb? This slight abstraction is important to my work because it helps draw parallels among all the protective, womblike forms in nature and to see them spaces where both growth and decay occur; as forms that unite life and death. Creating clay sculptures that reference such forms and putting them on display, therefore, preserves their purpose in nature and transforms them in to an object of metaphorical significance. (Figure 2.)



Figure 2. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. Ceramic seedpods for *Transitory Souls*. Burnished earthenware, white terra sigillata, electric fired.

Although every seed may not yield a mature plant, the process in which it decays plays an important role in the regeneration of life in other forms. As leaves, seedpods, stems, and other parts of plants fall to the ground, decomposers – bacteria, fungi, insects, and worms – come along to break down the material and return key ingredients, such as nitrates, to the soil, and carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.<sup>10</sup> According to *Campbell Essential Biology*, “Life, therefore, depends on the recycling of chemicals...Atoms present in the complex molecules of an organism at the time of its death are returned to the environment by the action of decomposers, replenishing the pool of inorganic nutrients that plants and other producers use to build new organic matter. In a sense, each living thing only borrows an ecosystem’s chemical elements, returning what is left in its body after it dies.”<sup>11</sup>

New plant growth depends on the recycling of decaying organic matter, and soil is the material that retains the nutrients released during decomposition. Since soil is a means for fertilization and decomposition, it holds metaphorical significance to both fertility and bareness. Thus, soil is used for displaying an assortment of the

sculptures of *Asleep within The Seed* during the exhibition. Imbedding various pod-like sculptures in soil provokes associations to both gardens and burials. Burying, or planting, the dead in the Earth has been a natural and efficient way to dispose of the body for centuries.<sup>12</sup> As stated in the chapter titled, “Sickness and Death,” in *The Book of Symbols*, “The idea of burial as a planting, however, alludes to the mysteries of descent and resurrection. The image evokes not only ultimate submersion in the body, but also the fertilizing humus of psychic depths and the dissolutions that release rich elements of transformation.”<sup>13</sup> A garden, on the other hand, contains soil that nourishes and cultivates life, and is therefore symbolic of fruitfulness and potential wholeness. Also stated in this source, “A garden begins the intimacy of a hand touching the earth, sifting and turning the soil, scattering seed or burying tubers, absently plucking one form of vegetation to give breathing space to another.”<sup>14</sup> The use of soil in the presentation of select sculptures strengthens the connection between death and rebirth; it is the element existing in burials and in gardens and is the means of fertilization and decomposition of organic matter (Figure 3).

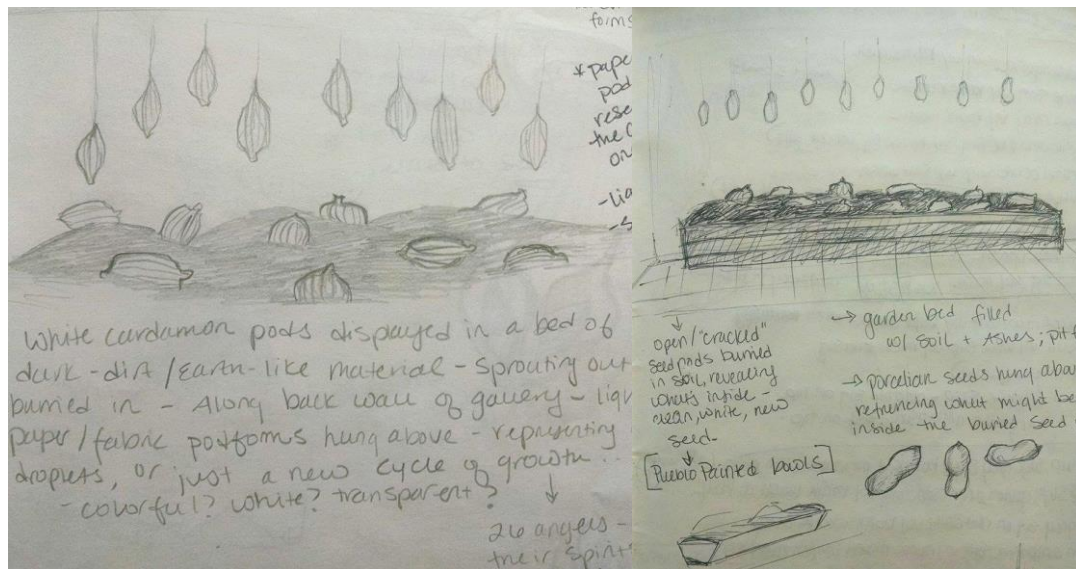


Figure 3. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. Drawings for gallery display of *Transitory Souls*. Ceramic seedpods shown buried in a bed of soil on the gallery floor with their interior seeds floating above.

Similar to the purpose of seed coats, the protective encasing of animal eggs, such as birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and insects, carry symbolic meaning of regeneration and rebirth. Storing the nutrients and the developing embryo within, eggs are literally sources of life and fertility. Once hatched, however, they signify the end of one stage and the start of another. The egg holds significance to numerous Eastern and Western religious customs and beliefs. On Easter, for instance, eggs are decorated and displayed as a symbol of Resurrection, the transformation from death into life, and as a symbol of springtime renewal of vegetation.<sup>15</sup> In Russian Orthodox Christian traditions, many people gather at cemeteries to remember the dead as they scatter eggshells around the graves of their relatives.<sup>16</sup> In the ancient world, the Vedic universal egg represents perfection, the beginning and the end.<sup>17</sup> “The Indian image of a cosmic egg goes back to the Vedas. *Brahmanda*, the egg of Brahma the Creator, contains the phenomenal world. *Hiranyagarbha* is the golden womb, germ or embryo, luminous incubator.”<sup>18</sup> Symbols of a cosmic egg also exist in ancient Egyptian creation myths where the universe is hatched from a golden egg, and often laid by a birdlike deity (Figure 4). In the creation of ceramic egg forms for this exhibition, a combination of gold leaf and gold paint is used as a surface finish to relate to cosmic eggs, and therefore, instill the symbolic meaning of renewal (Figure 5).



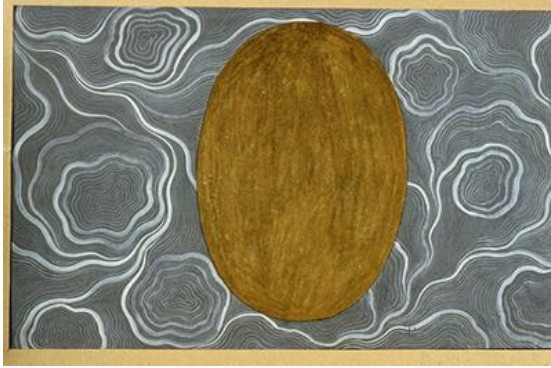


Figure 4. *The Golden Egg*, from *Bhagavata-Purana* manuscript, Paint on paper, 1730 C.E.



Figure 5. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. *The Womb from which Golden Life Arises*. Earthenware, terra sigillata, oxides, acrylic, gold leaf, glaze.

Several ancient etiological myths point to the Earth as the primary womb and tomb of life, in which living beings emerge from and return to at death. Such legends are central to the making of *Asleep within The Seed*, as they provide evidence to the observation that life begins and ends in an encompassing, protective hollow. The Earth sustains life and regeneration yet also takes in that which is dormant, dead, and decaying. The ancient Pueblo world-view claims that the first humans came to be by emerging through the Earth's surface.<sup>19</sup> Several of the Pueblo cultures, such as the Anasazi, Hopi, Zuni, and the Mimbres, maintained a spiritual obligation to the act of emergence through rituals, performances, objects, and in the creation of their living spaces.<sup>20</sup> In the original architectural form of the Anasazi people, known as a pit house, a hole in the floor exists as a symbol of the hole of emergence from the underworld.<sup>21</sup> The Mimbres people honored the ancient act of emergence through the making of pottery. Painted hemispheric bowls with a pierced hole in the center were ceremonially placed on the heads of the deceased. The hole in these bowls are purposefully placed to signify the act of emergence through the Earth and to act as a passage way into the spirit world after death.<sup>21</sup> The Mimbres people honored the ancient act of emergence through the making of pottery. Painted hemispheric bowls with a pierced hole in the center were ceremonially placed on the heads of the deceased. The hole in these bowls are purposefully placed to signify the act of emergence through the Earth and to act as a passage way into the spirit world after death. A handful of sculptures in this exhibition have openings in which new life is released in the form of a seed or an egg, relating to the ancient act of emergence from the womb of Earth. Representations of emergence from the human womb are symbolically embodied in these sculptures as small ceramic seeds that peak out from inside the encased pod (Figure 7).

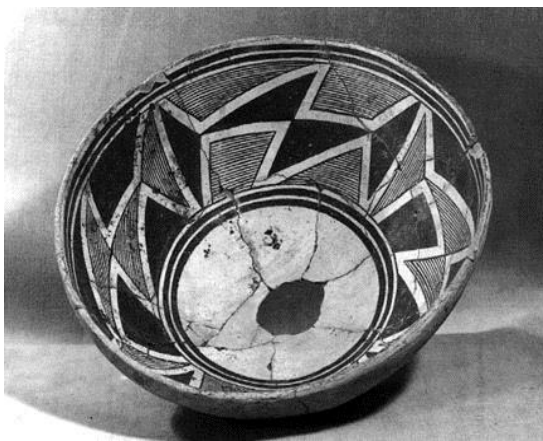


Figure 6. *Mimbres Burial Bowl*, ca. A.D. 1000-1150. School of American Research Collections in the Museum of New Mexico. Photograph by Arthur Taylor.



Figure 7. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. Ceramic pods for *Emergence and Decay*. Unglazed, unfired earthenware.

The nest is also seen as a symbolic womb for the first stage of avian life, as it holds the eggs for incubating, hatching, and rearing the young.<sup>22</sup> In collecting objects from nature that convey decay and rebirth in their form,

abandoned birds' nests have been of interest. Displaying the nests with porcelain eggs inside gives new life to the uninhabited nests, which unveils their metaphorical significance to decay and renewal. This display also references the story of the mythological Phoenix, specifically the Egyptian legend in which the new bird is born from an egg of myrrh.



Figure 8. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. *Rising of the Phoenix: Spirit of Rebirth*. Abandoned bird nest, porcelain eggs.

The legend of the mythological Phoenix is significant to *Asleep within The Seed*, as it symbolizes death and rebirth. The myth varies from European, Greek, Central American, Egyptian, and Asian cultures, but the basic storyline is similar. The Phoenix, as the tale goes, was unique among birds, with brilliant feathers, an elegant tail, and a long life span of five hundred years.<sup>23</sup> When its life neared the end, the bird returned to the place it had lived, built itself a nest upon which it deposited itself and set on fire.<sup>24</sup> From the ashes a young Phoenix arose that had obtained life from the ashes of its predecessor, therefore, symbolizing rebirth and renewal.<sup>25</sup>

The story of the Phoenix relates to the ceramic firing process known as pit firing. In this process, a hole is dug in the ground, ceramic objects are placed into the pit, covered with combustible materials: wood chips, sawdust, leaves, grass trimmings, sticks, logs, papers, and other organic matter. For color, I used red iron oxide, copper carbonate and salt, and then set it all on fire to burn for a few hours. Once the embers have cooled, the newly fired ware is revealed the next day. This firing process also alludes to burials, as the ceramic pots are "planted" into a deep hole in the ground and covered with organic materials. In a ritualistic manner, a selection of the ceramic pod sculptures for this exhibition are buried in the ground and fired in the pit. As they emerged from the embers, a new life is given to them from the ashes of Earth.



Figure 5. Jennifer O'Connell. Pit Firing on September 26, 2014.



Figure 6. Jennifer O'Connell. 2014. Ceramic seedpods for *Transitory Souls*. Pit Fired earthenware, terra sigillata.

Pottery-making was first a woman's domain, clay vessels of the earliest potters were seen as representations of woman's cosmic womb that contains, protects, nourishes, gives gifts, and gives birth.<sup>26</sup> The potter's art is referred to

as ‘magically elemental’ in *The Book of Symbols*, and described as such: “The vessels contained...what is vital and sacred: sacrificial blood, and ritual offerings, ornamental flowers, seeds for sowing, harvest grains, fruits, herbs and spices, food and feast, water for drinking and ablution.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the clay forms in this exhibition are also symbolic of a cosmic womb that contains and protects that which it bears. Creating hollow forms out of clay and imbedding smaller clay seeds within connects this long lasting tradition of sacred storage to the role that the womb and seedpod play in protecting and nourishing the developing embryo within.

I creating a unique clay body, I have crafted ceramic sculptures that have an inherent connection to the earth in their material make-up as well as in their form. A mixture of various clay bodies such as Ball Clay, Red Art, and Hawthorne Bond, in combination with grog, a ground-up refractory material that gives the clay structure, a red-brown earthenware clay body is made. Using this clay to make coils and slabs as building units, these sculptures are made into large womblike forms in which smaller clay seeds or eggs rest inside. Some pieces, however, are empty to venerate the beauty of such protective structures, and to suggest that the process of decay has begun (Figure 7). In nature, no two forms are exactly alike yet their origin is still recognizable; therefore, each piece in this series is unique. Through the buildup of texture by carving, smoothing, and layering glaze, paint, stains, and *terra sigillata*, a refined clay slip meaning ‘sealed earth,’ variety is achieved.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 7. Jennifer O’Connell, 2014. *Bones*. Earthenware, colored terra sigillata, glaze.

### 3. Influences.

The process of making unfolds organically, often times evolving from the original plan. Artists offering inspiration through their improvisational ways of creating include Alice Ballard, Karl Blossfeldt, and Paulus Berensohn. Ballard and Blossfeldt offer inspiration through the way they take small objects from nature and enlarge them, creating a sense of intimacy and wonder. Each of these artists are keen observers of their surroundings, and therefore, have united the human experience with nature’s cycles, rhythms, and patterns through their art. When looking at their work, a sense of wholeness and veneration is felt at the sheer delicacy of their creations.

Ceramic artist, Alice Ballard, makes ceramic pod-like sculptures are nearly perfect representations of the natural form. The sculptures in *Asleep within The Seed*, on the other hand, are a bit looser of an interpretation (Figure 9). She is of significant inspiration to my work specifically because of the time I spent watching her demonstrations as a visiting artist at UNCA two years ago. She revealed to me the importance of working diligently on multiple pieces at once. Since the clay goes through a range of stages when drying, it is important to be patient yet productive. For instance, while one piece may be ready to carve, another may be ready to built up, and so, having more than once sculpture to work on at one time allows this thorough process to move relatively quickly.

What I find most interesting about her work is her source material; she creates her pieces simply based off of the objects she collects from nature, such as seedpods, sticks, and leaves. She is simply making her work to gain a deeper connection to the natural world around her, therefore, inviting the viewer to look closely and notice the intricacies of nature.<sup>29</sup> Her Zen-like connection to nature is extremely prominent in her work. I identify with her specifically in her statement, “My art is a reflection of my relationship with natural forms. It is often the metamorphosis of Nature's forms, as they change from season to season, that attracts me to that universal world in which differing life forms share similar qualities.”<sup>30</sup> Her organic earthenware forms range from closed containers,



pinch pots, platters, pods, teapots, totems, and other vessels, creating a smoothed finished surface using terra sigillata (Figure 8). Her work encouraged me to continue to be inspired by my surroundings.



Figure 8. Alice Ballard, Leaf with Small Magnolia Pod, Large Magnolia Pod, 2004, white earthenware, white terra sigillata (photo by Luis Quiles, 2007).



Figure 9. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. Ceramic seedpods for *Transitory Souls*. Earthenware, white terra sigillata, electric fired.

Karl Blossfeldt was a photographer (1865-1932) who painstakingly reproduced plant portraits that magnified the beauty of his botanical subjects.<sup>31</sup> His subject matter of seedpods, leaves, buds, stems and twigs honor both the simplicity and complexity of nature (Figure 9). Blossfeldt's photographs reveal the tactile qualities and intricacies of nature, as he fuses together scientific observation, sculptural form, and surreal composition.<sup>32</sup> Finding inspiration in his subject matter, *Asleep within The Seed* is similarly made to appreciate the beauty that remains in nature. As stated by the artist himself, "New strength and stimulus for its healthy development can only be derived from Nature. And it is with this end in view that I have published this second volume – to arouse the Nature-sense, to demonstrate the wealth of beauty in Nature, to stimulate observation of our own plant world."<sup>33</sup> Although the photographic process differs greatly from ceramic sculpture, similarities are found among the interest in form and function of such natural specimens. The way his photographs act as timeframes that preserve a natural form, my sculptures similarly serve the purpose of preserving through crafting each piece based off of a specific stage that the seedpod is in (Figure 10).

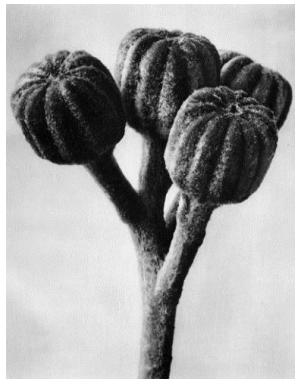


Figure 9. Karl Blossfeldt, *Senecio cineraria*. Dusty Miller. Flower-bud, enlarged 8.3 times.



Figure 10. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. Process image of *Rose of the west* (*Eucalyptus macrocarpa*). Earthenware.

Paulus Berensohn of western North Carolina describes himself as an "amateur visual artist, passionate deep ecologist and professional Fairy Godfather," and has been an inspiration to the building process of this body of work from the start.<sup>34</sup> Through his meditative processes of making, he teaches his students to find an experience within and to use the responsiveness of clay as a form of true expression. In his book, *Finding One's Way with Clay*, he states, "Each will have this deep link with the others, of origin. And the origin will be inscribed not only in the invisible fabric of spirit, but visibly in the inflexion of colored clays wedged into the ball to begin with. It is a human



ritual in its deep creative gesture of love and forming.”<sup>35</sup> Through slow, quiet, meditative forming, his pinch pots come to life. Influence is drawn from the organic qualities of his forms and in the healing, centering, and free-forming nature of his hand building process. From reading his book and meeting him at Penland School of Crafts in 2011, my method of making has become meditative and responsive to both the malleable qualities of the clay and to my own experiences.

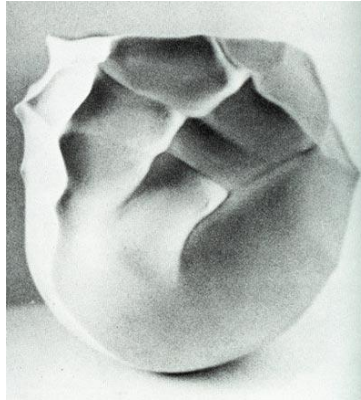


Figure 11. Paulus Berensohn, 1994-95, Moon Vessel. Earthenware bisque and sanded.

#### 4. Conclusion.

Womblike structures symbolize fertility and bareness, as they embody both the potential of life and the process of decay within their form. Referencing plant and animal development in combination with etiological myths, *Asleep within The Seed* unearths the origin from which symbolic power of such forms reside. Using such forms as symbols for the process of living and dying, my work allows me to contemplate my own experiences of decay and renewal. Working with clay in this way brings clarity and sense to my past, brings me peace in the moment, and sparks vision and inspiration for tomorrow.

This body of work serves as both a tool for contemplating nature's cycles, rhythms, and patterns, and as a vehicle for further exploration on understanding nature as a template for biological, psychological, and spiritual growth. Noticing that the human life span is rooted in the language of nature, this body of work embraces the beauty seen in both the purity and imperfections of nature's forms, and therefore venerates death and life as an endless, unified cycle. *Asleep within The Seed* highlights the interconnectedness of all life forms and encourages viewers to notice the many curious forms of nature surrounding them.



Figure 12. Jennifer O'Connell, 2014. *Trust*. Earthenware, mason stains, under-glazes, glaze.

## 5. Acknowledgements.

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## 6. Endnotes.

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