

ORDINANCE

presents

Radial Hum Skye Malu Baker



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breast in mouth, metaphorical

Olga Bennett

Orbs, aureolas, nipples. In garden sculptures, small water fountains, and even a discarded used-to-be-silvemow-dirty fitball, its rolling movement halted by the gutter. After I look at images of Baker’s studio where she is working on *Radial Hum*, my daily walk is suddenly deflected and turns into an unwitting search for breasts. It is a well-known phenomenon, a common aftereffect of keen research: ‘the more you notice it, the more you notice it’. (1) A kind of confirmation bias, perhaps.

And when I see unfinished *Turtle eggs all the way down (after Margaret Watkins)* that features a hand holding an egg, I am reminded of Baker’s attempt to recreate the carved stone Neolithic sphere that she encountered when travelling through Scotland. The stone she is barred from touching by museum glass continues to haunt her hand with the possibility of holding. Its perfect size and perfect weight, the unknown maker’s intent. (2) Here is what some of the



Neolithic spheres look like. Did you notice the breast-like nodules?

In *The Sun Does Not Move, Chapter 35, 2019*, artist R.H. Quaytman positioned a series of paintings of a stone breast (in her own words, it ‘looks more like the idea of a breast rather than a real one’) alongside more abstract circular forms and a polyurethane lump that protruded out of the



wall. (3) Quaytman’s precisely thought-out installations make the viewers cognizant of their movement through space, of the embodied nature of perception. As the silk-screened op-art and moire patterns in her works flicker and fluctuate, so does the meaning of the simple shapes that can be read into.

More recently, Quaytman made *Ones, Chapter 0.2, 2025* by spreading pigment with a glass muller to create a circular swirl with a darker aureola in the center. (4) The word *suggestive* here applies in all its meanings. What is just a circle and what is a breast, a fountain of life-giving substance? The eye reads its own desires into spheres and circles in order to indulge a set of fantasies: to hold, or to behold, or at the very least, to hold in one’s mind eye.

Another ancient rock, the Makapansgat Pebble, was found in a cave inhabited by hominids two and a half million years

ago in Africa. Not made by hands, but no less enigmatic than the spheres, it looks like it has eyes and a mouth, most likely carved by the water of a stream, and seemingly picked up for the enjoyment of our distant ancestors.



Declared by the Natural History Museum in London as ‘perhaps the most ancient art object in the world’, it caused Amelia Groom point out that an act of art (nearly always) starts with the ‘recognition that is actually a misrecognition: seeing a face where it isn’t, perceiving things as they aren’t.’ (5) Our perception, Groom continues, doesn’t just passively take in external stimulus, but also brings the ‘projective baggage’ of our memories and anticipations to everything – ‘it is always interpretative and imaginative’. (6) It is also apophenic – meaning we have a tendency to find the connections and patterns where there are none.

Art-making shares this impulse to uncover the previously overlooked (and to employ imaginative willful pattern recognition) with the practice of psychoanalysis. Baker tells me that she started her art practice and her ‘career’ as an analysand around the same time, but we agree that pinning the imagery in the artist’s works to the biographical or the familial feels limiting. Of course, with simple shapes like those of a breast or an egg, everyone brings their own intimate entanglements to the encounter: someone’s transition, someone’s mother’s lump that turns out benign, someone’s new lover.

The symbolism of breasts is inescapable, it spills out readily: it is the source. Of life, of sustenance. It’s implicated in the first encounter the child of a human or an animal will have. An egg and its brooder partake in a similar relationship of nurturing protection. A kind of chrysalis, a state of close attunement. But over the ideal of the ‘profound oneness of the mother child pair’ always lies the shadow of withdrawal. For psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, there is ‘a good breast and a bad breast’. Where there is life-giving nurture, there is always one that fails or withholds. (7) The sympathetic magic of fertility and the rebirth of spring echoes through Christian representations of the Madonna and Easter rituals. But it is never failproof, always an act of hope.

Quaytman is careful to point out that the real breast is rarely a sphere defying gravity. It’s oval, even though it doesn’t hold an egg within it. But Baker shows us the reverse is true: a carton for jewel-like dappled quail eggs – turned downside up – turns out to contain a breast. Or, rather,

three. Or six.

Sustenance cycles brings to mind Louise Bourgeois’s



Nature Study (1996) and, simultaneously, one of the machinic Deep Dream-generated images, the one that stares back at you with multitude of puppy eyes from a



spaghetti bowl. (The misreading of visual stimuli is one trait of perception that engineers have successfully passed on to algorithmic creativity.) Breasts, eyes, eggs by the half dozen.

It’s not the first time Baker has used the defiant gesture of flipping something upside down to generate a possible misrecognition. In the painting *Untitled (the panacea for the world) (2024)*, exhibited in *A R T H* at TCB, a purple flowering plant floats, inverted, in the landscape above the sloping hills. Its roots – now a tree. But what does any of it mean?

Psychoanalyst and poet Nuar Alsadir writes that the experience of ‘being moved’ is often registered intuitively in the body (8). It is perceived by most of us, but we rarely understand it as meaningful, or value it as communication. It is often destroyed by our attempts to transfer it into the conscious register. Into the sentences that make explicit sense. Alsadir quotes Susan Sontag who writes: poetry, art, film give us direct ‘access to feeling’ and free us from ‘the itch to interpret’, if we let them. (9) However, this ability to feel ‘alive’, to circumvent our rational but superfluous thoughts, Alsadir then describes as having a ‘metaphorical breast in [your] mouth’, and I get distracted, lose her train of thought. (10)

Sontag argues that interpretation can impoverish and deplete the world by setting up a ‘shadow world of “meanings.”’ (11) Yet, as with almost everything, it will depend on how you approach it. From my experience at the School of Dreams – a kind of collective dream interpretation course led by poet Manisha Anjali – I walked away not with a definitive truth that I divulged from my encounters with the unconscious, but with memories of our dwelling in the expansive shared field of the symbolic possibilities of our dreams. The currawong calls that I heard while walking home after our sessions, the persimmon trees and the strangers’ cats I passed weren’t any less inscrutable, yet, in those twilight hours, the whole world came queerly *alive* with meaning.

Notes

1. Amelia Groom ‘What might this be?’ <https://ameliagroom.com/whatmight-this-be/>
2. Skye Malu Baker, *PAST – CONTINUOUS*, Honours Research Paper, 2020.
3. ‘A Book of Her Own: R. H. Quaytman’s Visual Historiography – A Conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska’ <https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2019/25-present-history/a-book-of-her-own>
4. R. H. Quaytman, *Ones, Chapter 0.2, 2025*, checklist with notes. Miguel Abreu Gallery, 2025.
- 5, 6. Amelia Groom ‘What might this be?’ <https://ameliagroom.com/what-might-this-be/>
7. *The Book of Symbols. Reflections on Archetypal Images*. Taschen, 2010. 8, 9, 10. Nuar Alsadir, *Animal Joy*, Fitzcarraldo, 2022.
11. Susan Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’ in *Against Interpretation*. Penguin, 2013.
12. Hito Steyerl ‘A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis)Recognition’ in *e-flux journal* #72, 2016.

Images

Plain sphere, plus full set of stone polyhedral spheres. ca. Late-neolithic period. In Lippard, Lucy R. *Overlay: contemporary art and the art of prehistory*, 83. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

R. H. Quaytman *The Sun Does Not Move, Chapter 35*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2019, Installing at the Muzeum Sztuki.

The Makapansgat cobble, South Africa, carried to a cave and deposited almost 3 million years ago. Robert G. Bednarik - Pleistocene Palaeoart of Africa, Arts 2013, 2(1), 6–34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts2010006>

Louise Bourgeois *Nature Study*, biscuit porcelain, 71.8 × 41.3 × 30.5 cm.

Mary-Ann Russon, “Google DeepDream robot: 10 weirdest images produced by AI ‘inceptionism’ and users online,” International Business Times, July 6, 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/google-deepdream-robot-10weirdest-images-produced-by-ai-inceptionism-users-online-1509518>