Magical Thinking, Ritual Practice, and Craft

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How magical thinking and ritual practice grounded my craft in the real world, and elevated my real world in to the magical plane.

Beginnings: Self-awareness, anxiety, and meditation

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is an evidence-based psychological practice, which can be used to identify and shift paradigms of thought. By turning my minds eye inward, this practice taught me the self-awareness that was my initial pathway to magical thinking. In CBT, the source of worry and panic is considered the result of unrealistic beliefs and distorted feelings about reality. I was taught that, in order to counter these skewed perceptions, assessment of ones consciousness was essential to the growth and acceptance of the self. What started as a simple journaling practice evolved over time to be an in depth assessment of reality and my place in it. (Burns 76-95, 144)

When my mindset concerning perceptions of reality began to change from passive to active, so did my mindset concerning a healthy studio practice. I had been making art purely as a form of escapism, and not as a form of personal growth. In retrospect, this had become an unhealthy relationship with my craft. As my belief structures changed, I began to use the meditative qualities of the intaglio process to work through emotional challenges and improve my outlook. This allowed me to better understand my subconscious and filter what were once chaotic thoughts.
Enter: Magical ideas

Much like the magical alchemy of occult history, psychotherapy rides the line between the scientific and the emotional realms. In fact, the intangible humanism of psychology is what makes it inherently magical. In no other “scientific” field is the presence of the illogical soul so profound and unquantifiable.

One of the main contemporary cognitive anti-anxiety skills is the identification and modification of self-defeating belief structures. This process includes the cost-benefit analysis of one’s reality, and challenges them to make an active change in it. (Burns, 108) This same type of malleable belief system, I later discovered, is the core idea behind a type of magical practice most commonly known as Chaos Magic. The Chaos Paradigm proposes that the aspiring magician must first “thoroughly decondition himself from the mesh of beliefs, attitudes, and fictions about self, society, and the world”. This deconditioning of bad beliefs allows one to open up their consensual reality and disconnect from “ego-fictions”. (Hine, 14)

Chaos magic aims to use practical exploration to alter perception and widen possibilities for change. In reality, becoming a magician is a relatively simple concept that is difficult to implement. In this skillset, belief is a tool that manifests itself. It claims that “Nothing is real, everything is permitted”, allowing for a malleable reality and understanding of one’s place in it. (Hine, 34)

The main tenants of active magical change are discipline, relaxation, attention, and transformation. When these 4 aspects of life are in harmony with one another, success comes naturally. Working actively to balance these areas of the
“BodyMind” is a crucial skill that helped me to overcome bad habits and self-defeating ideas. It can be argued that such techniques for bettering the self can be found in almost any field, and are universally effective against the negativities of the subconscious. (hine 14, 58-62)

**Gnosis and Magical Objects: intention within the creative process**

An ancient collection of magical meditations can be channeled in a personal way throughout the many stages of the intaglio process. Physiological Gnosis is a general term for the use of ones body to achieve harmony with the mind, and in Greek means “Higher Consciousness”. Much like a daydream, the Gnostic mindset falls somewhere between an altered state and passive cognition. It includes the willing of ones mindset toward a heightened sense of awareness within an alternative state of consciousness. In this mindset, intuition is highly increased and a creative flow state can be achieved.

Inhibitory states of Gnostic thought include “physically passive” actions, such as yoga and meditation. I consider extended periods of drawing, especially in connection with a tactile metal such as copper, to be an extremely intuitive form of automatic drawing. Moving more intentionally into this practice, I have found myself especially drawn to organic patterns and free flowing line. This biomorphic mix of the real and surreal becomes both an escapist and a grounding technique. In this deeply personal state, I have also found many magical connections to the skills taught to me in contemporary cognitive behavioral therapy. The use of a meditative state to process emotions and create active change in ones consciousness is simply a
type of high magic. In fact, the ultimate goal of high magic is for the magician to become healthier in his or her mind. “The magician evolves spiritually as he or she comes to a realization of how his or her thoughts create the world”. (Place, 17-19)(Hine 15-16)

Hermeticists used inhibitory gnosis as a way of channeling Thoth while writing. They felt that the use of words was in itself a magical act, and that they came directly through them as a mediary. This form of automatic writing was believed so heavily, that the authors would often sign the works as Hermes or Thoth instead of as themselves. This magical idea is also directly related to the arts through the concept of Disegno Interno, or the spiritual and intellectual side of art-making. Described by Dalibor Vesely:

“disegno interno brings together imagination and intelligibility. It is the source of all artificial things, this is its speculative side... Disegno interno is a participation in the divine image impressed in us, it is an Idea, impressive and formative spirit of all things impressed in us, concetto of all concetti, form of all forms, Idea of all thoughts, through which all things are in our mind.” (Vesely, 314)

The inhibitory ability to make decisions without thinking extends to many solitary creative processes, particularly as one develops intuitive mastery over their craft. Keeping the hands busy on meditative tasks opens the consciousness, allowing for the free-flow processing of trauma and emotions. I believe this is a magical practice that almost every artist utilizes to some extent, whether they know it or not.
The other side of magical Gnosis is excitatory trance. This realm of magic includes repetitive physical actions that open one's mind to the cyclical nature of life. Classic examples of this practice include chanting, dance, and drumming to induce altered states of consciousness. The cycle of printing intaglio can be considered excitatory in that it is a physical, methodical, and droning process. After years of experience, a printmaker can often consider themselves to be on “autopilot” while pulling large editions. This open-minded gnosis that comes with the repetition of a skill over time is truly the growth of individual magical knowledge. (hine 15)

Accessing these gnostic mindsets is a crucial part of all magical practice, which is coupled with the integration of ritual, symbolism, and intention in the form of personalized routines. For example, objects considered by the magician to be powerful, and used for a specific purpose, can help activate a desired belief system. Classic categories of ritual objects exist, but most magicians actually use everyday items in place of these symbolic tools. The most well-known and misunderstood magical weapon is the Wand or staff. The Wand is used as the physical representation of the projection of one’s will, and represents the drive to begin a project. This mindset is most connected with the planning stages of ritual practice, or the sketches.

Similarly, the Dagger is considered to be the extension of the magician’s hand or finger. This tool can be used to draw magical sigils and symbols in order to activate the will, and is often substituted by chalk. In the intaglio process, I consider the scribe to act as a pseudo-dagger, which records intention through drawing. The belief structure of treating a tool as a magical object is as much about the respect for
craft as it is the projection of its magical power. The belief in its magic is what makes it inherently magical. (Hine 95-96)

Another magical tool is the Chalice, which is used as the “physical receptacle of transmission”. Classically this object may hold wine, which can be “charged” with magical power through ritual. In intaglio practice we can consider the prepared copper plate to act as the Chalice, as it is an empty vessel that is then filled with magical information. Finally, the Pentacle is symbolic of “the process of synthesis and is the object upon whereupon the results of one’s magical work are made manifest and understood.” In my practice, each final print is in itself a finished culmination of magical steps, making each its own Pentacle. (Hine 96-97)

In contemporary art, we often talk about the importance of the object. This idea is an ancient one, and it is hard to deny that objects, especially those that are handmade or well-used, have a memory and energy about them. I choose to believe that treating these objects as magical actually increases their magical power, which is then transformed into a feeling projected upon the viewer. Interestingly, those who are already open to the possibility of the unexplainable often report this “feeling” the most.

Other common ways of creating a ritual space are subtle, but key. Lighting candles, burning sage, setting out materials, and even cleaning the space beforehand can make a huge difference in creative energy. Activating all of the senses can be helpful as well, as smell and sound especially can help with recollection and connectivity.
**Ritual in repetition – printing, ceremony, and “firing” of Sigils**

Moving deeper in to intentional magic within my studio practice, Sigil Magic became an interesting and crucial way of expressing information and journaling in my own language. Much like simpler forms of magic, sigils are thought up, created, imbued with power, and “fired” in a linear fashion. (Hine 82)

The key to Sigil Magic is to first form a strong intent. The letters, ideas, and feelings of the expressed will are then inked to a “symbolic carrier”, or Sigil. This is a visual representation of the idea, which transforms it from language to image. Because the mind focuses on visual information in a more fluid manner, there is a more seamless connection with the subconscious.

In my studio practice, I focus heavily on an intention for each new piece before beginning. This version of my will is usually solidified during the sketching phase, and meditated upon throughout the drawing process or creation of the sigil. This is the greatest opportunity for personal growth, and often illuminates unseen aspects of reality. Acceptance of past failures and creation of control over the present empowers the work with understanding.

At this point, gnostic meditation is the greatest tool for access to higher consciousness. Repetitive motions of the hand keep the body busy, while the mind works to reveal one’s perceptions of reality. The process of drawing moves ideas and emotions from the subconscious mind, through the conscious mind, and finally to the tactile. This relaxed yet focused state helps one to maintain objective criticism while assessing reality. Active trance techniques have been utilized to access similar thought patterns for centuries using dance, music, language, and art. After
meditating on and finishing a drawing, what is left is the physical manifestation of the time, place, and wisdom attained. It is now ready to be etched.

Once a magical Sigil is created, it can be activated or “fired” by many means of ceremony. In my practice, I consider this to be the definitive moment of etching the plate. By physically and chemically changing the copper, it creates a forever-altered record of time or a transmutation. This decisive moment brings each meditation to a permanent end, allowing symbolic closure to ideas processed. At this point in the magical process, it is most important to move on from these thoughts and continue to grow in the present. Dwelling on the magic often muddies the past intention. This process is great for cognitive awareness and mental well being, as it encourages the healthy assessment of reality.

After the first etch, the sigil matrix can continue to be altered again with new information before replicating itself permanently through print. The plate’s complex tactile memory is transcribed through the repetitive ritual of wiping and printing, creating a final image that is both a magical item and a permanent record of a time in my life. I believe that the act of selling and distributing prints creates an environment for “magical dispersal” in which these spiritually connected items form a web from which notoriety and intention grow. Much like planting seeds, the items bring positive energy to the collector’s home while also strengthening my magical network.
Symbolism and the creation of a personal visual language

I have come to look at all aspects of printmaking through the lens of magical ideas, including the treatment of my personal techniques as occulted secrets I choose to pass on. Much like alchemy, intaglio is part science and part intuition. A magical transmutation occurs not only chemically, but also psychologically through personal wisdom. In this section, I will consider how specific symbols and patterns helped me to cultivate a magically imbued visual language.

According to Hine, “The power of symbols is that they give access to strata of the Deep Mind with an immediacy and intensity that written or spoken language cannot. They bring in to awareness vast amounts of information which may be too abstract or complex to process semantically” (110). Through my research of symbols, I have found myself constructing my own motifs as well as adapting imagery from magical and religious systems. As certain imagery becomes a recurring theme in my work, I believe my understanding of it as well as its power and connection to my subconscious increases. (Jung, 41)

One consistent theme found in all magical ideologies is the concept of duality, which is often depicted as opposing forces such as good and evil, the feminine and masculine, or sun and moon. This correlation is often represented in my work, particularly when using predator and prey archetypes to identify my emotional state. Feelings of vulnerability and of power coexist, expanding appreciation for each aspect of life. Similarly, the idea of the androgynous figure or hermaphrodite is the combination of these opposing forces. In alchemical depictions, a transmutation is often shown as the merging of male and female into a single androgynous force.
This idea is something I have been using lately when combining anxiety-producing imagery such as teeth or eyes with calming ones such as plant life. This reinforces that everything needs juxtaposition with its opposite in order to be appreciated. (Monod, 215)

When considering specifically the two moons represented in many of my works, I am considering the duality of femininity. The moon being a feminine symbol is often seen as mysterious or dark, but splitting it in two depicts my personal feelings toward womanhood. Many times, my feminine side makes me feel incredibly powerful, nurturing, and wise. Other times, I feel oppressed or objectified by contemporary society. This is another way in which things are almost never appreciated or understood without their opposites.

When considering the symbolism of the Circle or the Ouroboros, which represents the cyclical nature of reality, I often find myself repeating past mistakes or re-learning old lessons. Although a snake devouring its own tail most often represents this never-ending idea, it originated in Egypt as the Shen symbol: a reed tied in a circle to represent the orbit of the sun, time, and eternity. (place 36) The circle is also tied to manmade mantras such as mandalas and city plans in a way that represents ultimate wholeness. (Jung, 266) I feel that this symbol has helped me to understand the patterns of human flaws, and continues to teach me the significance of cycles small and large. The fluid drawing of circular patterns creates an ideal connection between the macrocosm and microcosm.

Another common and powerful symbol is the Axis Mundi, or the tree of life. This cosmic tree symbolizes the ultimate reservoir of life force that continually
regenerates the world. It is often said to rest upon the axis of the universe, connecting heaven, earth, and hell. (O'connell, 170) Its inter-dimensional qualities are associated with timelessness and mystery, and the fractal flow of branches carries wisdom much like the blood vessels in our bodies. The meditation of drawing these branching movements helps with grounding the spirit, and reminds one of the macrocosmic scale of interconnectedness.

Finally, the snake, serpent, or dragon is a highly present and misunderstood symbol of duality. Linked to eternity as both creators and destroyers of the world, they shed their skin and start anew, embodying the cycle of death. Associated with female energies, the organic twisting forms of the serpent have both healing and malicious connotations. The wisdom gained from the snake is seen as a gift in many cultures, but has the ability to override human morality. (O'connel, 186) In my work, the trickster snake often represents personal struggles with integrity, knowledge, and perceptions of the self.

Along with these appropriated symbols that have stuck with me, I have also developed a narrative symbolism through line work and pattern. Using narrative and symbols, along with these types of line-meditations creates hidden meaning within a fantastic landscape. Expanding upon personal symbols of anxiety, I like to focus on things I fear in order to attain power over fleeting insecurities. Just a few of these anxiety-fueled symbols are wasps, centipedes, skeletons, teeth, and eyes. Symbols of growth and positivity are often those of natural wonder, such as saplings, wise old trees, flowers, vines, and the general beauty of flora and fauna that surrounds us.
Biomorphic line meditations often fall away from distinct symbolism, and become instead a way of learning through hand movement. This tactile practice allows for a direct connection between the hand and subconscious, particularly through gnostic trance. First, small curves represent the organic flow of the hand and help to build up a larger connection to organic shapes of the earth. This type of drawing is peaceful, and often flows naturally when I feel content within myself. Scumbling marks, on the other hand, are usually quick, frenzied meditations that help with the realization, release, and moving past of frustration and resentment.

Interlocking lines, such as those found in wood grain, are a meditation specifically used in anti-anxiety situations. The organic and leggy movement of the hand forces the mind to slow down chaotic thoughts, and is a great way to process confusion, indecision, and fear. Opposing this, rigid shading through hatching marks are often used when I find myself in a highly logical and organized mindset. This proper and controlled mark helps to prioritize thoughts and open myself more to the left-brain capabilities.

There are also many symbols that are fleeting, and never drawn again. I usually find myself using hidden objects from daily life to connect to current emotions. This is a personal way of memorializing a time and place, as well as a way to trigger memories in the future. I often represent individuals, problems, or accomplishments as creatures or specific types of plants in order to obscure the direct thought. These can be benevolent spirits, dangerous predators, healing herbs, or venomous plants, all depending on my relation to life-events. Lucid dreaming also heavily affects these pop-up symbols in my work. Although I keep a dream
journal and analyze these thoughts heavily, this is often the only time in my practice where I do not fully understand what or why I am drawing.

Finally, a large part of my symbolism vocabulary comes from childhood memories: specifically representations of my mother’s garden. Many of the plants that my mother still nurtures are those that were once small, as I also once was. Her love and protection of these living beings reminds me of the maternal love and protection she has always placed over me. These are plants she has taught be about since I was young, and I have many cuttings of them growing in my studio space as a constant reminder. When working with this set of symbols, old plants often show the resilience and adaptability of the family unit, while insect infestations depict the underlying issues found in many domestic settings.

**Process as therapy and anchor to reality**

Having always been “lost in thought” or “a dreamer”, the physicality of process has kept me grounded in a way that nurtures my spirit. Intaglio requires discipline and routine, which doesn’t allow one to easily fall into depressive procrastination. Time-consuming magical process allows for a fantastical outlet, while encouraging emotional growth instead of escapism. These clunky craft meditations eventually lead to a more advanced flow state of craft as cognitive awareness. This ultra-focused stability allows for a structured and ritualistic work/life balance, which eventually promotes the creation of a self-aware and healthy individual. I look forward to a lifetime of mastery over my craft as well as my consciousness.
Bibliography


