

Abstract

Nascent Myth

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DEPARTMENT OF TEXTILES

This is a written report of a creative thesis. The body of work presented in "Nascent Myth" evolved from personal exploration regarding myth and spirituality. Birds are used as the unifying element to present several aspects of mythology. I address mythology as our connection to the mysterious, and I will share my spiritual experiences partnered with the myths. A contemporary context is used to address the social implications that challenge our perception of myth.

NASCENT MYTH

A Report of Creative Thesis

Presented To

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Textiles

by

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DEDICATION

To my mother Marjorie for instilling in me a love for education and the arts.

To my husband Curtis for his unflagging patience and support.

To Ben and Catherine Billingsley for setting me on my way.

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INTRODUCTION

“The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.” – Albert Einstein

Regardless of our cultural origins, man has tried to make connections between the seen and unseen world. What is unseen can be perceived as spiritual and supernatural or simply the microscopic world of cells and molecules into which all things can be dissected. The realm of the unseen world is governed by myths that are passed down and allowed to evolve with each generation. The natural world inspires our need for wonder and engenders awe for the mysteries that take place every day. Man also has a strong desire to discover the concrete processes that replace these mysteries. I believe that myth has a special place alongside science for a holistic understanding of our world. We must consider the origin and purpose of the myth and allow it to evolve with the scientific knowledge gained.

One creature of nature that is prominent in myths throughout time and across nearly every culture is the bird. We have been enchanted observers of their physical beauty and song. We respect their ability to adapt to the most benign or extreme environment, and until the eighteenth century we remained fairly ignorant of the mystery of their migratory patterns. Our desire to interpret their behaviors reflects our wish to connect to nature and find order in the world. Due to our respect and wonder for them, we have applied many spiritual interpretations to birds and incorporated them into our myth and legend. This body of textiles attempts to bring together imagery related to spiritual, mythological and cultural aspects of birds.

My initial work “Constructing Eve” [Plate I] presents the creation myth most familiar to me. In Christian stories, God has created the first man from dust. The first woman is then created from his rib. My belief in the Darwinian evolution theory presented a challenge to this myth. As an avid birder, Darwin’s work with the Galapagos finch is a pivotal tool for my understanding of evolution. In Constructing Eve, the female form and finch are presented side by side just as I believe myth and science may coexist if myths evolve with our learning. The

subsequent series of quilts uses the bird as a lens to view various aspects of my relationship with myth and spirituality.

Bird lore has a broad scope in human history. We have integrated the bird into our understanding of all manner of experiences in our attempt to transcend the world around us. For my quilts, I am using the five major world climate zones (Polar, Cold, Temperate, Tropical and Dry) in order to offer a context for people throughout the world to connect with my body of work and their own beliefs. Each composition reflects the chosen climate through silkscreened motifs of living plants or fossils. One bird is then featured in each piece having been chosen to reflect an aspect of spirituality. All of the birds have a personal connection to me as my greatest spiritual experiences often involve observation and activities in nature. Thus, in these five works I will try to share the ideas of prophecy, transfiguration, sacrifice, redemption and death.



PLATE I: Constructing Eve, 49.5"x30"

PROCESS

“Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today?”

“It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today.”- (Conversation with Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell)

Four pieces in this series are whole cloth quilts on cotton sateen. In the fifth I use a sheet of handmade felt that has been painted to create a backdrop for the composition. I start each piece with white fabric and build up the image through multiple layers of silkscreened images. Using thickened dye, I am able to maintain layers of transparency through a sequence of printing and discharging different elements. The use of discharge paste in printing will remove color components from the most recent layer of imagery. Sodium alginate is used to make the paste, and a small amount of Thioxx is added as the discharge agent. Most of the motifs that I print are small and can be used in an interlocking format to fill in a stenciled shape. The final layer of imagery is silkscreened with textile pigments in a transparent base. These pigments cannot be removed like the layers of dye. After silkscreening the primary elements, a layer of machine and hand embroidery is used to bring out details and textures.

The final textiles are saturated with pattern and embellishment. The stitching helps to define foreground and background, and it also becomes very meditative for me. My artistic processes, especially weaving and stitching, have a strong ritual component similar to the ritual and communal act of making cloth in other cultures. Ritual acts, as with the sharing of myths, are important components for supporting religious beliefs and maintaining community. Textiles can record myths on their surfaces while binding the individuals through the process of making them. These are significant qualities that I consider as I build up the surface of each quilt.

There is one motif that appears in every work. It is an illustration of a stylized seed in cross section. The central stem connects to a pouch of seeds on either side and there are branch-like stems inside each pod that hold a number of leaf shaped seeds. The overall image

is meant to convey both seed and “ tree of life” ideas. It was the first illustration developed after “Constructing Eve” when I began to examine the connections I have to myths and science.

“Nascent Myth: Birth of souls” [Plate II] is a piece that was created in response to reflections on creation myths. The quilt expresses an ancient story from Zoroastrian mythology, which I discovered to be very similar to my own musings on our beginnings. Written around the seventh century, the Zoroastrian myth describes the *senmurv*, a half-bird half-dog creature. He is seated upon a tree from which all species of plants are grown. By scattering the dry seed from within the tree, new plants are generated as “that seed meets water and it is rained back to earth”. [Harper 1961, 95] In my personal story, which "Nascent Myth" represents, the bird gives life to not only plants but our souls as well. My seed motif is used throughout the piece as appliquéd elements swirling around a primeval flightless bird. Although my bird does not resemble the *senmurv*, it shares some of the same mythological powers of creation.



PLATE II: Nascent Myth; Birth of Souls, 61"x 41"

POLAR: SNOW GOOSE: *Transfiguration*

For the past three winters I have traveled to the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge to observe the winter migration of tundra swans and snow geese. Thousands of birds settle in dense mile-long groups on the surface of the frigid waters. Surrounding farmlands offer grains for winter feeding before they return to the tundra breeding areas in the Arctic. I am humbled by nature's perfect design that enables them to endure the journey after a few weeks in our harsh winter temperatures.

A flock of geese overhead can appear to be heading straight into the sun. Ancient lore even had the birds spending the winter on the moon! A bird can soar towards the "heavens" where many gods, spirits and ancestors dwell. It has been believed that man has reached a higher level of consciousness if the soul ascends to this realm. Before migration was fully understood a bird could disappear to another world or become an entirely different species. One example comes from the writings of Aristotle. They show that he observed the annual disappearance of the redstart. This would follow with the arrival of the robin during the winter in Greece, so he concluded that one bird transformed itself into the other. Our ancient connections to birds and animals allowed for mythological gods that were half human. There have been benevolent angels and monstrous hybrid creatures that retain the qualities of the various species. Just by obtaining wings a human has the grace and speed of flight, enabling him to reach the gods or spirits in the heavens. Different cultures have worshipped bird headed gods or believed their ancestors to be descended from animal spirits. The ability to metamorphose between bird and human brings us nearer to immortality.

"Arctic Migration" [Plate III] evolved into a diptych with the neck and head of the primary bird in the left section. The body is composed of barnacle like images, which alludes to early lore about the birth of barnacle geese. In ancient animal tales, the barnacle goose is born in a tree near the shore. After sprouting like fruit on the tree it drops into the water where it continues to develop. It was also suggested that the birds grew from barnacles themselves because they mimicked the colors of these shells yet their breeding behavior was never observed. [Lankester 1915, 118] My colors include the grays and creams of these shells. Blue-green waters of the summer tundra pools surround the head with silkscreened diatoms and stitched

fossil cycads. An underlying texture of corn, their North Carolina winter diet, is submerged in the water. The transition into the larger section is made with a wing raised in flight. Turned sideways, it becomes a landscape of arctic willow leaves, one of the few arctic plants that creep low on the ground. Branches of sargassum sit on top of the surface to suggest a bone structure for the wing. Nestled in the crook of the wing is another bird head. Looking closely you can see the stitching is blended into the image of a face along the beak and forehead of the main bird. They are intertwined as one mythical goddess.



Detail

PLATE III: Arctic Migration, 26" x 63"

COLD: OWL: *Prophecy*

A common frustration when birding is to hear your target yet to remain unable to locate it. Seeking a nocturnal creature like the owl means an additional layer of difficulty and mystery. Because their eyes are 40% larger than normal, it may be their glowing eyes that are seen before the rest of the bird materializes. To know that you are fully observed by another creature while its presence eludes you generates a tremendous sense of vulnerability. Biblical stories of demons and purgatory have colored my nighttime with foreboding. In the supernatural realm our actions are observed and judged at all times. Mythical spirits can see and choose whether to act and we are subjected to their benevolence or punishment.

Ten species of owls reside in the cold biome. Much of the land is covered with the boreal forest, which forms broad bands of spruce, aspen and birch across North America and Eurasia. The name boreal comes from "Boreas", the Greek god of the north wind. Owls were sacred to the Greeks and Romans, yet they were nonetheless considered messengers of death. Their nocturnal habits and silent movement marked them as unclean. Because perceived as a powerful creature, the sight or sound from an owl could be cause to begin ritual acts in order to counter the ensuing prediction. Concoctions using the eyes, talons, blood or eggs have been documented in eastern and western lore. The suspicion given to an owl may come from our fear for things that share human qualities, yet are not human. [Armstrong 1958, 113] We may see wisdom or doom in an owl's penetrating gaze.

I create a forest setting in "Boreal Light" [Plate IV] with an abstract illustration of a pinecone in cross section along with layers of stitched lichen and branches. One of the first silkscreened layers comes from the cross section of a palm. Because of my readings about the evolution of the forest I wanted to include the ancient plants that once dominated the land. This vegetation surrounds a pair of large eyes. Like the evil eye of Mediterranean culture, the image can be at once ominous or able to ward off evil. The saturation in this work suggests a well camouflaged bird in his habitat. My palette was influenced by colors of the sunrise including pale grays and violets under the green and gold.



PLATE IV: Boreal Light, 35" x 38.5"



PLATE V: Boreal Light, detail

TEMPERATE: WREN: *Sacrifice*

"The wren, the wren the king of all birds

St. Stephen's Day was caught in the furze

Although he is little, his honor is great

I pray you, good landlady, give us a treat!" (Lawrence, 80)

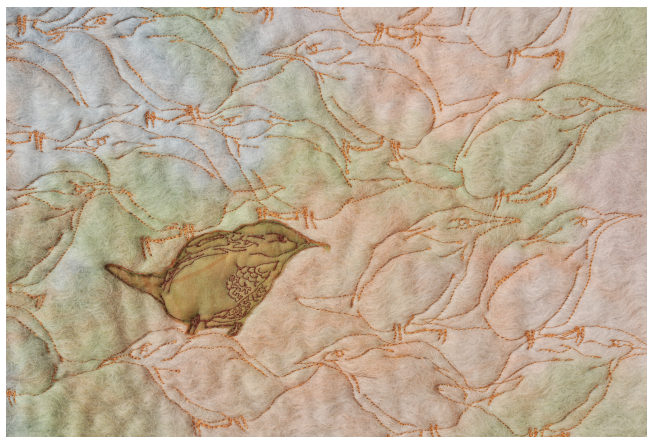
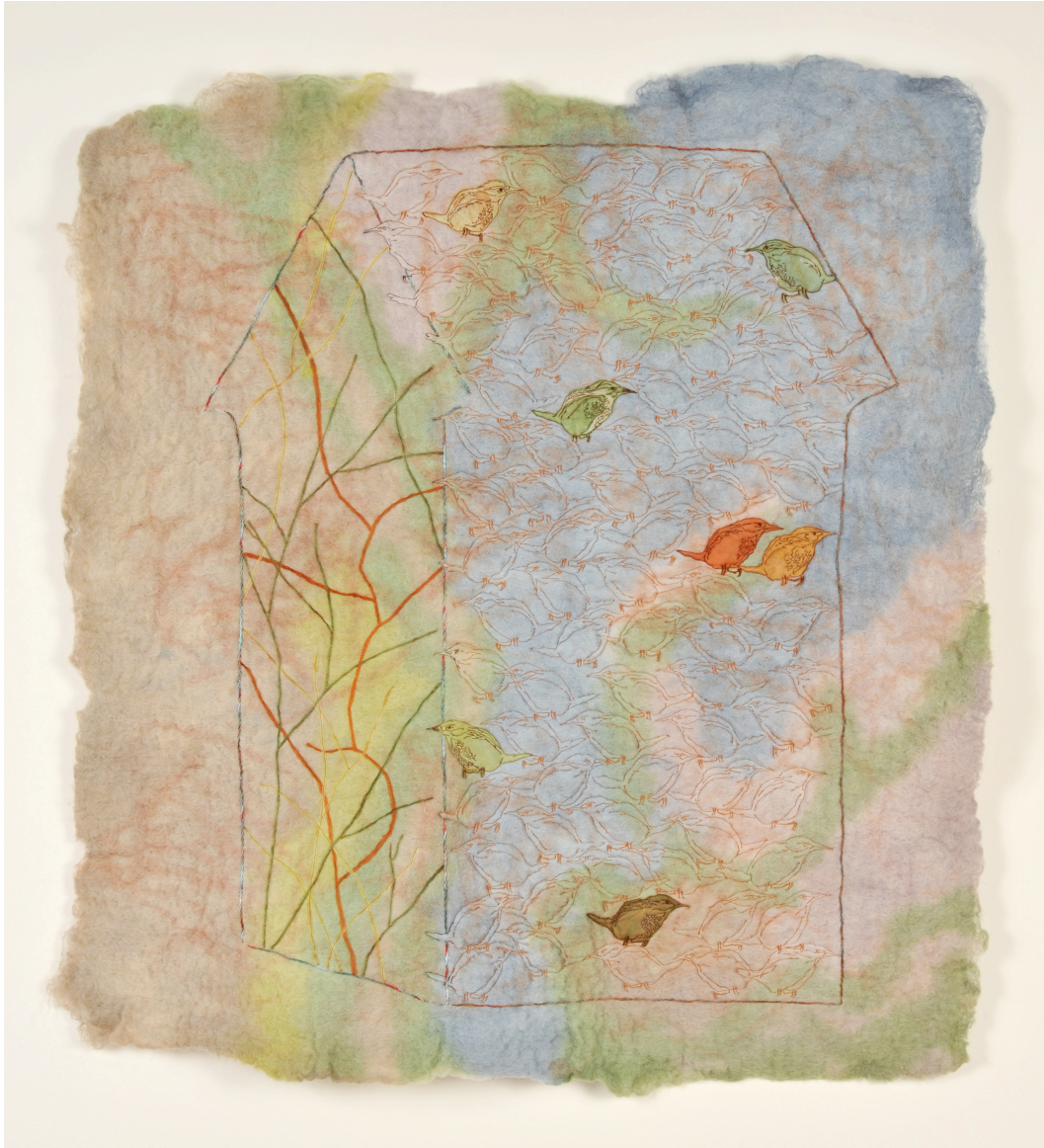
As humans have established settlements, we have made our environment welcoming to certain birds and animals. Today the wren is a familiar backyard visitor because it has followed our cultivation of the land. [Armstrong 1958, 190] It is a small bird with a strong voice. Its size and lively behavior have made it part of many stories within the bird kingdom. He is sometimes called the king of the birds, having tricked the eagle in a race to the top of the sky. [Lawrence 1997, 27] Because of this praise, his fate among the stories of men has been less fortunate.

The hunting of the wren is a European ritual that has survived until recent times. It is a Pre-Christian ceremony that can be traced to Celtic tribes who at one time hunted the wren on the day their king was ritually sacrificed. Capturing the bird was symbolic of the king so it allowed the ritual killing to reach outlying regions of the kingdom. During the 1700's, it became associated with the story of St. Stephen whose escape from his persecutors was ruined when the song of the wren awoke the guards. The wren was therefore condemned to be captured from the bushes on the day after Christmas, stoned to death and paraded through town.

After my undergraduate studies, I lived in this part of the world doing voluntary service. My work with the Camphill Rudolph Steiner Schools introduced me to a rural lifestyle. I was connected to our food production through the garden and dairy. We also harvested wool for spinning and weaving from a small flock of sheep in the community. The organization is run under the teachings of Anthroposophy, which by its own definition is a spiritual science. Anthroposophy holds science, art and religion in equal measure; its teachings permeated all of our activities. Our respect for our community and for nature required no sacrifice as it did for

our ancestors. Sacrifice could be a unifying, cleansing and renewing ritual. The wren hunt would sanctify the king and simply return the bird to the earth for the next generation.

The colors of "The Wren Hunt" [Plate V] are suggestive of sand and sky. They are painted and printed onto the sheet of handmade felt using Procion MX dyes with specific chemical assistants. First, the sheet of felt is soaked in an acid solution containing citric acid crystals and synthrapol. The dye is then applied using sodium alginate print paste with the addition of metaphos and sodium bisulfite. After creating the image, the wool is wrapped in plastic and left overnight to cure. The first rinsing will remove excess soap and dye, and then the wool must be soaked in an ammonia solution for three to five minutes. The final step is to neutralize the wool by rinsing it in a vinegar solution. I considered the wool as an appropriate backdrop because of its connection to the region. I also regarded the texture of the wool as a way to suggest the tangled branches of "the furze" where the wren would be hiding. In some towns the ceremonial bird was placed inside a festive wooden box designed like a house. For my piece I have elongated the house shape to suggest a human scale. Small wrens have been stitched inside the house silhouette. The same bird is repeated one after another suggesting the many individuals that have been a part of this ritual. The wren is not abstracted as with the owl and the goose, but only a few of the birds are given more substance in the composition. Using layers of chiffon, these select birds come to life. They suggest the birds that managed to escape the wren boys and stay hidden in the gorse bushes. It is a quiet composition as a strong contrast to the festive dress and antics performed on hunting days of the past.



Detail

PLATE VI: The Wren Hunt, 41" x 37"

TROPICAL: MUNIA: *Merit*

Climbing temples in Thailand has been a breathtaking experience. With each step there are often paintings, tiled mosaics or sculpture to contemplate. Colors were intense and plentiful, especially golds and reds made brilliant in the tropical light. Some temples housed a row of enormous bells that could be struck in order to offer a voice to a silent prayer. It was the kind of experience that was spiritual for me. I considered the placement of each tile or stone laid over two hundred years ago and all of the gods they were meant to honor.

During the climb I found myself dwelling on the memory of small caged birds that were outside the temple grounds. For a small amount of money a bird can be purchased and released as an act of merit. Merit can be earned by deed or thought and will carry from this life into the next. The idea of releasing birds can be traced to the story of a novice who unknowingly saved his life through compassionate acts (towards birds and fish) and by giving generous, unselfish offerings to the monks. Our desire to appease or make an act of redemption takes many forms. Myths may convince us that by performing a deed in this world we can change something within our character, our past or our future.

My tropical piece, "Release: Reward: Reveal" [Plate VI] addresses this practice of merit making. The birds that are released must be captured from the wild. Although the munia is one of the most common birds, it is possible to find more endangered species in this predicament. The birds are released into a foreign environment where survival may be challenging. Moreover, the sheer number of people participating in this business practice is a concern for the balance between man and nature. The merit earned by each individual must be weighed against the overall impact of the recent interpretation of this myth.

Small caged birds have been stitched inside the stupa at the center of my quilt. In front of this shrine is a smaller temple. I modified my seed to appear like a "tree of life" image and stitched it inside of this temple. Just like the munia, it is also a caged object, trapped behind a piece of organza. Shibori, a stitched resist technique with a long history in Asia, was used to suggest the framework of the cage. The caged seed is dwarfed by the larger stupa, yet the warm red dye used for the organza draws the attention of the viewer. For the larger temple I used my

silkscreened motifs to mold the image. Patterns in this temple feature leaves, seeds and a composite bird. It is a grouse like bird with the enormous curled horns of an antelope. This illustration comes from my own creation myth, as I was imagining the possible stages of development in different bird species. Composite creatures were a part of my research into myths that led me to the Zoroastrian tale of the *senmurv*. Although I was thinking in unrealistic evolutionary terms, the creature could still embody the best strengths and temperament of bird and mammal. Half-bird and half-human gods often appeared among the statuary and paintings in Thailand. The visual presence of mythical beings and buddhas was like a steady undercurrent during my travels. It was a striking difference from our judicious use of imagery in this country where so many religions must coexist.

The silkscreened colors are mostly golds and oranges in keeping with the warmth of the tropics. Several of the motifs are printed in long rows in the upper half of the collage. Using my screens in this manner reminded me of the many tiles and mosaics in the Thai temples. A canopy of leaves is used to frame the image. Hopefully this will transport the temples to a place away from the crowded, commercial cities that have grown up around them.



PLATE VII: Release: Reward: Reveal, 52" x 34"

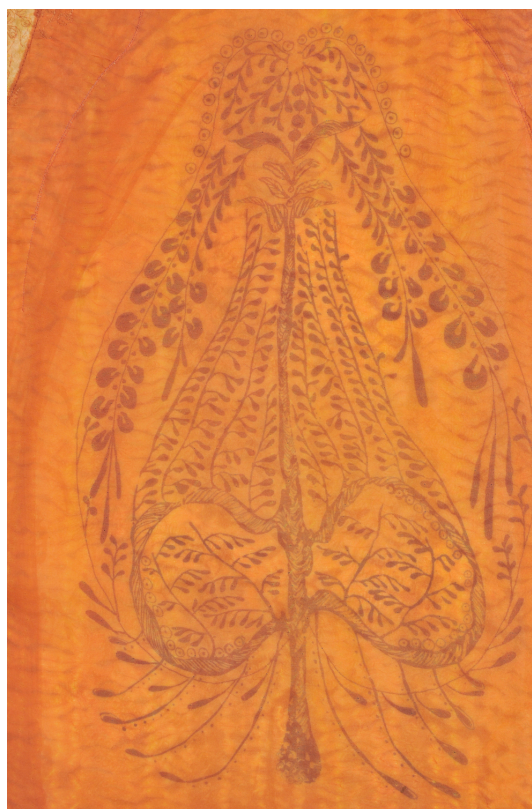


PLATE VIII: Release, detail

DRY: VULTURE: *Death*

The vulture's role in nature is part of the cycle that returns matter to the earth. In myth they have often been considered guardians of the mysteries of life and death. They are recognized as transforming the dead, serving as messengers between humans and the gods. Mut, the goddess of maternity, was a deity from Egyptian lore. Vultures were her sacred bird and in this culture they were responsible for easing childbirth. It may seem incongruous to pair the vulture's nature with birth, yet it is this aspect of mythology that allows us to merge the seen and unseen world. Instead of dwelling on the vulture's role in death and decay it is granted powers of communication in the mystical realm and it assists with new life. While the vulture is meant to eat the flesh of the dead, it may also carry the soul off to the heavens.

Turkey buzzards are a common sight soaring in the thermals overhead. They are a solitary species among North American vultures. When there is a gathering of birds, it is the black vulture that is seen with their wrinkled, featherless heads and solid black bodies. I regularly see small groups of three to five of these birds along the highway managing the casualties at our roadsides. However, this winter brought unusually cold temperatures to our southern states with which some plants and animals were unable to cope. My husband and I often make a winter pilgrimage to the Everglades National Park. In January, life in those typically mild waters suffered from temperatures between 30°F to 40° F. After several cold nights, the morning revealed dozens of fish in the shallow waters. Vultures gathered shoulder to shoulder along the boardwalk to feed at their leisure.

Observing the natural cycle of life and death is a powerful experience. I want to believe that there is a purpose behind such an aberration because of my spiritual connection to nature, yet I recognize that nature is not favoring one creature for another. When our ties to a physical body are broken we are left to sort out our beliefs regarding body and soul, and in earth and the afterlife. In one creature, the vulture, we can answer to the natural and spiritual world, hopefully finding comfort in those beliefs.

"Courier to Soil and Sky" [Plate VII] was my final piece of collage in the series. I did not want to set the vulture in the Everglades but rather in the arid land of the dry biome where life often appears to be so tenuous. I used layers of sketching in this piece to suggest dry,

cracked land. The network of lines comes from pencil and pen as well as from the sewing machine. My textile contains just a few silkscreened elements. A vulture silhouette composed of seed images that have been discharged from a stencil sits in the center of the piece. Several baobab trees stand just in front of the bird. They are an old world tree that stores many gallons of water, which can aid animals and humans. Sometimes called a tree of life, its silhouette is similar to my seed illustration. I created an overall sand pattern from a petrified tree fern. Lastly, a very enlarged image of a lithop is used to represent the sun, moon and stars. The vulture is said to transport these heavenly bodies through the sky.



PLATE IX: Courier to Soil and Sky, 40" x 39"

CONCLUSION

Each individual is born into a society with its own images and stories which offer a context for his place in the world. As an example, the Dogon of Mali maintain a close relationship between myth and society. At the center is the blacksmith who is responsible for recording history and retelling stories. Through masks and sculpture, he serves as a teacher to the whole community. In this series of quilts I have attempted the role of storyteller, crossing a mix of cultures and customs all unified by birds.

I would expect all of these myths to continue to evolve as we increase our knowledge of the natural world. Myths foster our imagination by allowing us to take the many things we do not understand and present them on human terms. Our creativity, spirituality and humanity are beautifully intertwined.

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