

Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices

RENSEP  
Research  
Dossier I



The RENSEP  
Artist's Award

2024

RENSEP RESEARCH DOSSIER I: *THE RENSEP ARTIST'S AWARD*

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Cover image: *Glass Bramble* (2024), Natasha Viosna Moody

RENSEP RESEARCH DOSSIER I  
THE RENSEP ARTIST'S AWARD

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## The RENSEP Artist's Award – Introduction and Overview

Judith Noble

### **Abstract**

This article introduces the RENSEP Artist's Award and situates it within the wider resurgence of interest in esoteric and magical practices in contemporary art. It outlines the aims of the award, its emphasis on research through practice, and its role in supporting artist-practitioners working at the intersection of art and esotericism. Drawing on historical precedents from Surrealism to recent exhibitions, the article contextualises the renewed visibility of esoteric themes in art and highlights the importance of practice-based research. It also describes the structure of the award, the selection process, and the development of the inaugural project, Natasha Moody's *Ghostwood*. The article reflects on the significance of the award for RENSEP's broader mission and its potential to foster further collaboration between artists, scholars, and institutions.

### **Keywords**

Esotericism; contemporary art; research through practice; Surrealism; occulture; artist-practitioner; RENSEP; magic.

RENSEP's mission is to promote new research into esoteric practice and to foster partnerships between scholars, practitioners and institutions. The concept of the scholar practitioner within the study of the esoteric is central to RENSEP's research interests. Developing research through practice in the field of art is therefore a very rich area of exploration and study that presents intriguing opportunities and possibilities for RENSEP. Artists are practitioners; many in a double sense in that they are practitioners of both art and of the esoteric for whom making art and esoteric practice are one indivisible whole. Making art for such artists is of itself a magical or esoteric act. Many artists are also scholars whose practice is fundamentally informed by personal research; and such research is central to the creation of the work and its meanings.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the art world has experienced what could be termed a turn towards re-enchantment. As in other disciplines, current research and practice evince a profound concern with the esoteric, the occult and magical practice, and with what Wouter Hanegraaff has termed 'rejected knowledge' (Hanegraaff 2012). Major exhibitions foreground art made as part of its maker's esoteric and magical practice (see, for example, the 2022 Venice Biennale, entitled *The Milk of Dreams; Angels of Anarchy – Women Artists and Surrealism*, Manchester Art Gallery 2009–2010; and *The Dark Monarch*, Tate St Ives 2009–10. This last exhibition was the first major re-examination of art and magic in Britain). The beginnings of this re-appraisal can arguably be traced back to *The Spiritual in Art* (1987), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (and subsequently Chicago and The Hague) and the pioneering curatorial work of Maurice Tuchman, and retrospectives have examined the work of twentieth-century artists including, for example, Ithell Colquhoun, for whom the making of art was of itself and by its very nature an esoteric practice (*Ithell Colquhoun – Between Worlds*, Tate St Ives and Tate Britain, 2025). It is also notable that the work of women artists, long marginalised and excluded from the mainstream art world, has been central to this re-examination.

This preoccupation with the visionary, the occult and the magical follows a period in the second half of the twentieth century when art in the US and Europe was dominated by abstract formalism and a rigid materialism. This created a cultural and intellectual climate in which art expressing esoteric and spiritual concerns was excluded from a rigid critical orthodoxy, and was unlikely to be exhibited or funded by institutions; the esoteric and the magical effectively went "underground".

The notion of the artist/maker as magical practitioner is an undeniably ancient one that has existed in many cultures. From the earliest times people have made objects and images imbued with magical significance and power that still "speak" to us today. Numerous examples can be cited from different times and places (Breton 2024; Zamani, Noble, and Cox 2019).

The current concern with the magical and esoteric as forms of modern and contemporary art practice can be traced to the Surrealist movement, founded in 1924. In 1929 the philosopher and founding surrealist André Breton called for:

"...the profound, the veritable occultation of Surrealism..." (Breton 1969) and in the years that followed many artists associated with the movement developed a practice in which the esoteric and magical were central to the creation of the work (see, for example, the works of Max Ernst, Victor Brauner and Roberto Matta). This was especially true of women Surrealists, who used Surrealist methodologies to initiate forms of deep exploration of their own psyches that led not only to liberation from conventional gender roles but also to the development of remarkable bodies of magical work (including, amongst others: Ithell Colquhoun, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo,

Leonor Fini, Meret Oppenheim and Dorothea Tanning). By the mid-1940s artist filmmaker Maya Deren would define herself as an “artist-magician”:

“The artist is the magician who, by his perception of the powers and laws of the non-apparent, exercises them on the apparent. In the dimension of the real he creates the manifestation of the apparently non-real... but the phases of magic are two: he must not only discover the hidden, the obscure laws; he must be able to summon them into the realm of the real; he must be able to activate them in the real, and to make them manifest” (Deren, quoted in Clark, Hodson, and Neiman 1988, 143).

It was this exploration of magical practices, and in particular the notion of the inner, “visionary” journey expressed through art, that characterised the work of Leonora Carrington, Ithell Colquhoun, Remedios Varo and other Surrealist women, and which has provided inspiration for artists making work now. Surrealism, considered a critical outcast unworthy of serious consideration by scholars in the second half of the twentieth century, is currently undergoing a major critical and scholarly re-evaluation. It is in this renewed and positive context that the RENSEP Artist’s Award was established (Jenkins 2022; Sutcliffe 2021).

RENSEP’s objective in establishing an Artist’s Award was relatively straightforward: to provide a viable sum of money to enable an artist whose work had an esoteric dimension and/or who was an esoteric practitioner to engage in research through practice; that is, to produce new work that would not have been possible without RENSEP’s support. A sum of Euro 10,000 was made available for this purpose. Most awards and commissions currently available to artists from arts funding bodies are for the creation of very specific pieces of work within a context established by the funding body, or have numerous conditions attached that effectively predetermine or restrict the kind of work the artist can produce. RENSEP wanted its support to enable an artist to work free of any such institutional restrictions and to allow new creative thinking and ideas to emerge. It was also hoped that the selected artist would engage through debate and discussion with the wider cross-disciplinary community of researchers and scholars involved with RENSEP, and that this would enrich their practice and stimulate further research interest.

In order to strengthen the Award, RENSEP sought an institutional partner; a university engaged in specialist arts education and research through practice that would host the artist and provide access not only to production facilities that would increase the value of the Award, but also to a supportive, critical research community and opportunities for the artist to engage with students and researchers. Arts University Plymouth (UK) agreed to partner RENSEP and the University’s support became a major factor in the success of the project. Facilities available as part of the Award included a full range of digital production facilities at the University including 3D fabrication and printing, laser cutting and printing, wood and metalwork, ceramics, hot glass, printmaking, textiles, analogue and digital moving image and photography, animation and games creation. The project was coordinated and managed on RENSEP’s behalf by Professor Judith Noble, who until her retirement in 2023 had been Head of Academic Research at Arts University Plymouth and was able to liaise effectively between the partners. She also provided mentoring for the recipient of the Award.

### **How the Award worked**

The RENSEP Artist’s Award was launched in late summer 2023 through the RENSEP platform and other online methods, and at conferences and events. It immediately attracted a very large volume of publicity amongst artists and arts organisations. The Award was open to anyone anywhere in the

world, and the application criteria were deliberately broad in scope, in order to promote inclusivity and encourage a diversity of applications. Work in any medium was eligible, from traditional forms such as painting, printmaking and sculpture, through to installation, performance, sound, moving image, digital and games; there were as few restrictions as possible. The only stipulations were that there should be some form of esoteric dimension or practice within the work, and that there should be some form of meaningful engagement with Arts University Plymouth and its facilities, whether online or in person. It was expected that applicants would demonstrate a degree of self-reliance in relation to exhibiting and disseminating their work as it was not possible to guarantee exhibition opportunities within the scope of the Award. The definition of “esoteric” was deliberately left open to applicants to define, so as to encourage the widest possible range of practice. Applicants were asked to provide a plan for how they would use the Award, an indicative budget, details of how they might use the facilities at Arts University Plymouth, and up to ten examples of previous work in any media. The deadline for applications was in December 2023; the intention was to select the winner in January 2024 and for the Award to be used throughout 2024.

A series of online information sessions for applicants was held during the autumn of 2023. In all, a hundred and sixty-four artists attended these sessions, with participants from Europe, Africa, South and East Asia, Australasia and the Americas. For all but five participants in these sessions, this was their first contact with RENSEP. The response of participants to the idea of an award for artists making work with an esoteric dimension was overwhelmingly positive, with many participants expressing the feeling that it was long overdue. The key area of discussion at these sessions was the very open nature of the Award; many potential applicants found it difficult to believe that the funders were not defining the outcomes of the project or the nature of the work to be produced. It was also very clear from these meetings that the majority of artists involved did not choose to define themselves as working within specific and recognised areas of esoteric practice (for example, ritual magic, shamanism or witchcraft) but rather saw their esoteric practice as personal to them; something that resisted categorisation, and that developed in a reflexive manner through the making of their art. Many questions at these sessions focused on practical issues (what kinds of processes and technologies could be used, for example), but issues around definitions of esoteric practice and inclusivity were also raised.

A total of sixty-eight applications were ultimately received. The majority of these were of very high quality; many came from artists with established reputations, and all demonstrated a very thorough and in-depth approach to the project. In December 2023 an initial “longlist” for further consideration was prepared by Judith Noble and Associate Professor Dominic Shepherd (Arts University Bournemouth). A selection panel consisting of Associate Professor Tessel Bauduin (University of Amsterdam), Professor Stephen Felmingham (Arts University Plymouth), Judith Noble, Dominic Shepherd and Dr Bernd-Christian Otto (RENSEP) was convened in December and made a shortlist of six applications. Shortlisted applicants were asked to provide more detailed information and were interviewed online in January 2024. The selection panel was very impressed by the open and generous-spirited way in which all the shortlisted artists shared details of their practices and the personal and esoteric philosophies that underpinned them.

The selection panel reached its decision easily and unanimously. Although Natasha Moody was the least “known” of the applicants, her project, *Ghostwood*, had an impressive clarity and cogency, and its philosophical underpinning (which brought together esotericism and climate grief) fitted well with RENSEP’s own objectives. The panel was impressed by Natasha’s vision, by the scope of the work, by its roots in various layers and forms of esoteric practice, and by its contemporary

relevance. It was also clear that, as an emerging artist, Natasha's practice was at a very developmental stage, and that she would be ideally placed to derive maximum benefit from the opportunities presented by the Award; she would be able to explore her ideas and grow as a practitioner with financial resources at her disposal and within the supportive context provided by both RENSEP and Arts University Plymouth. It was particularly pleasing that Natasha wished to explore what were (for her) untried media and working methods, including hot glass and metal casting, which would in turn become practical expressions of the alchemical philosophies on which her thinking was based. Arts University Plymouth was ideally placed to provide access to these processes and support experimentation with them. Natasha's project proposal made it clear that she would also undertake a lively and continuing programme of personal research alongside her practical work that would allow the esoteric dimension to grow and develop throughout the project.

Natasha began work on *Ghostwood* in February 2024 and continued to work with RENSEP's support throughout 2024. During this period, she made a number of residential visits to Plymouth, working primarily with technical and academic staff in the metal and glass workshops and using other facilities. She also presented her work to students and undertook some teaching sessions for the University's Master's programmes, and this relationship with Arts University Plymouth has been sustained beyond the period of the Award. Natasha provided monthly reports for the RENSEP platform that summarised the progress of the project and the development of her research. In November 2024 she was invited to present her work as part of RENSEP's contribution to the conference on *The Aesthetics of Esoteric Practices: Materialities, Performances, Senses* organised by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice. In the autumn of 2024 she was able to exhibit work made through the Award at solo and group exhibitions in London. A further presentation of the work made through the Award took place at the Association for Art History's 2025 conference in York.

*Ghostwood* is a quest, both physical and psychic, for the lost forest that once covered much of what is now London. The work is both moving and visionary. It is profoundly intelligent and is informed by practices including witchcraft, folk magic, alchemy, herbal lore and spirit contact. It is a complex work, but its address to its audiences is simple and direct.

In this Research Dossier dedicated to the RENSEP Artist's Award, Natasha Moody outlines the development of her working practice over the period covered by the RENSEP Award, presents her report on her work for the Award, and offers her analysis of *Ghostwood*. Stephen Felmingham (Arts University Plymouth) examines how the project and the partnership with RENSEP enabled new thinking about the role of the specialist art school within the context of "deep mapping". Michelle Foot (University of Edinburgh) considers how the RENSEP Award enabled Natasha Moody's work to develop within a wider cultural context of current art practice that relates equally to esotericism, to magical practice and to ecofeminism.

For RENSEP, the Artist's Award has proved successful in a number of ways. Most importantly, it has enabled the creation of an original body of new work: a form of research through practice that has allowed the recipient of the Award to complete a key phase of development as a researcher, a practitioner and an emerging artist. The importance of this outcome is of great significance both to Natasha Moody and to RENSEP. The Award has created an important presence for RENSEP within research in visual art and has shown that it is possible to make a meaningful independent intervention in this field and has increased the involvement of researchers and practitioners in the arts with RENSEP. It is to be hoped that it might be possible for RENSEP to embark on further research partnerships within the field of art in future.

RENSEP would like to thank the staff and creative community of Arts University Plymouth for their support for this project, and also Dominic Shepherd and Tessel Bauduin, the independent members of the selection panel for the Award, who gave very generously of their time and expertise.

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## Occultural Inflections in Natasha Viosna Moody's Ecological Esoterica

Michelle Foot

### Abstract

This article examines the occultural dimensions of Natasha Viosna Moody's project *Becoming Ghostwood*, developed through the RENSEP Artist's Award. Focusing on selected works and performances, it analyses how Moody's practice engages with a range of esoteric, occult, and ecological frameworks, including alchemy, spiritualism, Theosophy, and folklore. Drawing on concepts such as occulture and seekership, the article situates Moody's work within broader cultural processes of re-enchantment and individualised spiritual exploration. It explores the role of ambivalence, syncretism, and material experimentation in shaping her artistic practice, particularly through the transformation of plant matter in glass and metal. The article also considers the ecological and mythopoetic dimensions of *Ghostwood*, emphasising the interplay between artistic practice, environmental concern, and esoteric imagination.

### Keywords

Occulture; esotericism; ecology; alchemy; spiritualism; contemporary art; seekership; Ghostwood.



## Introduction

Visioning the unseen, Natasha Viosna Moody invites her viewers into a realm where plants are conduits for ecological reflections and mystical encounters. Exploring the intersections of art, ecology and the esoteric, her project *Becoming Ghostwood* vividly demonstrates a practice where experimentation is generative, ambivalence is a creative method, and alchemical thinking is transformative.

Originally bearing the working title of ‘Ghosts of the Great North Wood: Alchemising Ecological Grief’, Moody set out to explore the forest as an alchemical vessel. Over the course of the Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices’ (RENSEP) Artist’s Award, the Great North Wood became *Ghostwood*. Reflecting on the project, Moody expressed that “grief was the seed of it all but not what the work became” (Moody, interview 2025). For her, grief encapsulated both a sense of personal loss and ecological disconnect that initiated her investigation into site-sensitive explorations of woodlands, but throughout the duration of the project the focus increasingly turned towards the transmutation of grief into renewal, and *Ghostwood* was summoned from the transformation of her creative practice.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on works from the formative and summative stages of the RENSEP award period, this essay considers the occultural inflections in Moody’s work. Alchemical experimentation, spiritualistic mediumship alongside botanical guidance, an appreciation for Theosophical thought-forms, ecospiritual feminism and supernatural facets of Polish folklore and mythology all surface in Moody’s ecological esoterica. What follows is an analysis of Moody’s art and practice alongside her role as an artist engaged with esotericism and the ecological imagination.

## Becoming an Occultural Artist

As an “occultural artist”, it is worthwhile first examining the meaning of such a title in order to better comprehend the esoteric and occult references in Moody’s work and to articulate their distinct nuances in enchanting *Ghostwood*. “Occulture” is part of a re-enchantment of society according to Christopher Partridge, in which a turning to the self and increased individualisation allows for spiritual speculation and engagement (Partridge 2004, 62–86). Partridge initially theorised “occulture” to account for the pervasive presence of occult currents in everyday consciousness. Occult thinking and practices have proliferated within mainstream culture and become entangled and embedded as a familiar part of our lifeworld. Occulture is a large pool of ideas and theories “feeding new spiritual springs; the soil in which new spiritualities are growing; the environment within which new methodologies and world-views are passed on to an occulturally curious generation” (Partridge 2006, 2). Partridge’s theory, therefore, proposes that the atmosphere of occulture,

“refers to the environment within which and the social processes by which particular meanings related, typically, to spiritual, esoteric and paranormal ideas emerge, are disseminated and become influential in societies and in the lives of individuals. Central to these processes is popular culture, in that it disseminates and remixes occultural ideas, thereby incubating new spores of occultural thought” (Partridge 2013, 116).

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<sup>1</sup> There are several legacies of the cultural understanding of alchemising grief. Carl Jung’s writings on alchemy and grief are perhaps the most obvious; however tracing these is beyond the scope of this essay.

As far as occulture's role in the arts is concerned, it activates new patterns of thought and opens channels of creative engagement for artists who are receptive to occultic and esoteric thinking. There are no requirements for the artist to adhere or commit fully to these ideas, but instead seek out and engage relevant ideas, concepts, frameworks, narratives, symbols and/or motifs that aid making sense of the world. As Tessel Bauduin has pointed out, artists will draw on occultism for creative inspiration with their interests varying "from the briefest and most incidental references to a single source, on the one hand, to active membership of occult organisations and full commitment to occult beliefs on the other. Most artists occupied a position somewhere in between these two poles" (Bauduin 2015, 430). Even if artists are not fully convinced by all aspects of the ideas they encounter, some parts are particularly attractive and initiate a sense of agency, especially when people feel disempowered such as in the case of Moody's initial concerns about grief and ecological disconnect.

Ambivalence, then, has a role to play in the occultural artist's worldview. By scrutinising (and sometimes criticising) the origins of esoteric and occult ideas while appreciating and adopting concepts and notions, the experience of holding conflicting positions can be a catalyst for enhanced creativity. For example, appreciating thought-forms and appropriating these into the artist's personal visual grammar whilst being dubious about Theosophical doctrine. Such ambivalence can drive individuals to seek resolution and explore new perspectives and approaches, leading to innovative ideas and complex meaning-making in their artistic expression. Occulture facilitates the artist's ability to navigate their ambivalence to integrate multiple perspectives and enrich their work with nuance, harvesting and foraging concepts that carry meaning and agency. This in turn generates and augments new or altered ideas that become absorbed into the occulture of the time.

Situated alongside occulture is the artist as a seeker. Utilising Nina Kokkinen's conceptualisation of the seeker and seeking, we can better understand the spiritual agency in the artist's practice (Kokkinen 2021, 5). Aligning with occulture, seekers emphasise individuality and personal experience. Instead of committing themselves permanently to any orthodox religions, heterogeneous spiritualities or esoteric communities, seekers are dedicated to a search for spiritual truth and hidden knowledge. For this reason, the practices of seekers are often described as syncretic and relatively independent. During the seeking process they will mix and match different ideas and "eventually construct their own [heterodox] collage, consisting of elements from various esoteric or religious traditions and other cultural sources" (Kokkinen 2021, 10). Interestingly, such a collage seems to manifest in the assemblages of fragmentary elements in Moody's practice and performances as described below. Moody has previously stated of her practice,

"My approach is of a syncretic ecological esoterica, mirroring Lucy Rose Sollit's framework of the Synthetic Sacred that outlines the role of the artist as a navigator of thin places, those akin to the veil, where ideas and belief systems are cross fertilised and amalgamated to shine a light on contemporary experience" (Moody 2024).

According to Steven Sutcliffe, transpositions between different social or cultural fields are typical of seekership. Seeking does not "operate only within the 'religious' field, but may function within other fields in modern society" (Sutcliffe 2017, 42). Appropriately, this can include the creative arts as a field of expression for seekers, and in Moody's case, her seeking also extends to ecological

considerations. Seeking may be a playful act but on the other hand, seekers may also take their quest very seriously and emphasise their own disappointments, disillusionments and disenchantments, such as feelings of disconnect in an urban setting and anger at an anthropogenic climate crisis. Through esoteric themes in her practice, Moody seeks to realise the unseen entity of Ghostwood beyond the veil and reveal its presence in spectral form, and does so in recognition that Art is a felt and embodied gnosis.

Occultism and esotericism are closely associated with the idea of the hidden and that which can be revealed. As von Stuckrad has noted, esoteric discourses frequently make claims to higher knowledge or absolute wisdom, and to the means of making this knowledge available, and that it can be revealed in a specific manner (Von Stuckrad 2005, 88). The artist-seeker as the “sanctified self becomes the epistemic cornerstone of spiritual wisdom” (Kokkinen 2021, 11) and, I would add, has the capacity for revelation. In order to attain this knowledge, seekers often refer to their searching process as some kind of journey or path. This journey can take many forms, as noted by Kokkinen, “by either traversing different (religious/esoteric) movements and social groups or fathoming exotic geographical landscapes” (Kokkinen 2021, 16). In *Tales from Ghostwood*, the culmination of the RENSEP project, Moody journeys with plants as her botanical guides through a spectral woodland seeking out the revelations and knowledge contained within.

It is the coming together of occulture and seekership, while embracing the ambivalence innate to these concepts, that seems crucial to being an occultural artist.



**Figure 1.** Natasha Viosna Moody, *In Ruins Like These, Strange Glass Cries*, 2024. Leaded glass and microcrystalline wax, 45 x 30 x 25 cm. Permission courtesy of the artist.

It is possible to locate Moody’s occultural engagements. *In Ruins Like These, Strange Glass Cries* (2024) [Fig.1] demonstrates this vividly in its spiritualistic references. Moody is not a proponent of Spiritualism but the artwork clearly draws from séance motifs and narratives. In this comparison, parallels can be drawn between the white hands that hold a green bramble and ectoplasmic hands which allegedly materialise from the ether into tangible, corporeal forms during séances. The hands cast in wax by Moody recall experiments by psychical researchers who created plaster casts and wax moulds from alleged ectoplasmic materialisations in the pursuit of evidence deriving from spirit phenomena (Coleman 1994, 340–346). For example, the hand moulds [Fig.2] from the séances

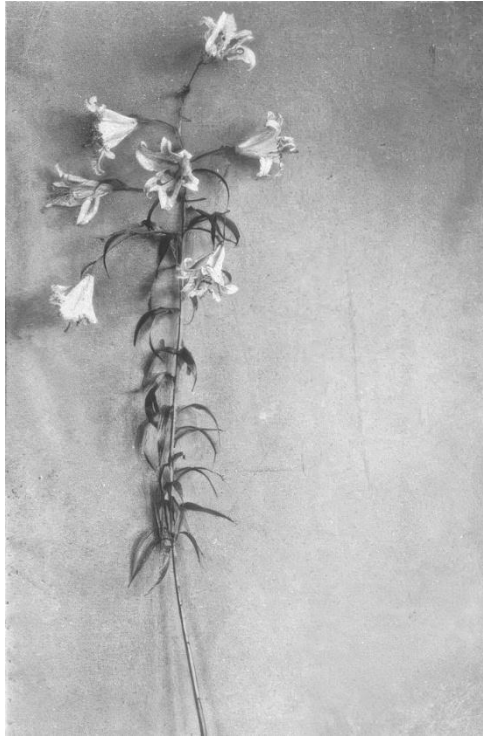
of Franek Kluski (1873–1943) made during a series of sittings in the 1920s, which were intended to be scrutinised during scientific investigations.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 2.** Cast made of materialised spirit hand from Franek Kluski’s séances, 1920. Image credit: Mary Evans Picture Library / Harry Price Library of Magical Literature, University of London.

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<sup>2</sup> “Franek Kluski” was the alias of Teofil Modrzejewski, a Polish physical medium who specialised in materialisation séances and whose career was controversial as he was frequently criticised for fraudulent practices, including the use of rubber gloves to fake the presence of spirit hands which provided the shape for the wax moulds (Barrington 1994, 347–351; Fontana 1998, 43–45).



**Figure 3.** Victorian séance apport of a plant. Reproduced from *Shadow Land, or, Light from the Other Side* (1897), 329.

While the hands can be seen as evocative of these ectoplasmic forms, their interpretation as spirit agents elucidates the presence of a glass bramble held between their fingertips. The hands present the bramble to the viewer, seemingly as an offering for contemplation. This too is reminiscent of a peculiar phenomenon known as “apports”. Apports are objects that would purportedly appear during the séance, usually a gift from spirits to members of the séance circle as another type of materialisation. Such apports frequently took the form of plant-matter including flowers, branches, leaves, and fruit [Fig.3].<sup>3</sup> Although some apports were thought to have longevity and persisted beyond the closing of the séance circle and its happenings, other apports would dissipate and disappear after a brief appearance. The glass form of the bramble, although substantial and solid, alludes to something that could be transient through its association with the perceived fragility of the material. If it were to shatter it would be gone in a given moment.

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<sup>3</sup> The materialising medium Elizabeth d’Esperance (1855-1919) was famous for her apports of flowers. See, for example, Chapter 13 ‘The Golden Lily’ in *Shadow Land, or, Light from the Other Side* (1897).

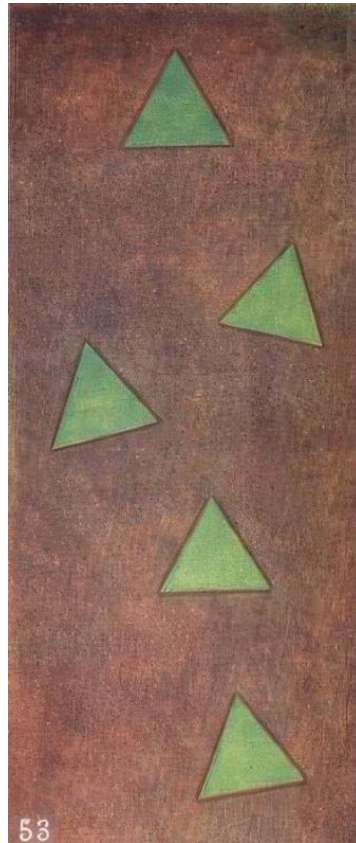


Figure 4. Example of a thought form from Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms* published in 1901.



Figure 5. Pamela Coleman Smith, *Ace of Wands*, 1909.

Although spiritualistic inflections can be identified in Moody's work, as I have outlined above, the presence of other occultural evocations emerge when Moody speaks about the bramble as a thought-form (Moody, interview 2025). A nod toward Theosophical *Thought-Forms* [Fig.4], the bramble takes on an altogether more abstracting quality if it should represent an emotion or experience, especially when its colouring interacts with light.<sup>4</sup> Titled *In Ruins Like These, Strange Glass Cries*, one can surmise the quality of the emotion it gives form to. The imagery also recalls the Ace of Wands in the Coleman Smith / Rider-Waite tarot deck, where a white hand emerges from a cloud to present a flowering wand or wooden stick [Fig.5]. These observations aside, it is worthwhile noting that being too explicit about identifying influences and pinning them to specific occultic sources or esoteric discourses is reductive, and over-rationalising in this way risks exorcising the numinosity that arises from the myriad inflections that find dialogue in Moody's practice. Progressing through diverse assemblages of esoteric and occult ideas and concepts – the “heterodox collage” – is important for the artist's individual interaction with occulture and the viewer's occultural appreciation of the artist's practice and work. The consequential ineffable esoteric qualities of Moody's art which shift through layers of occultural entanglements – remaining unfixed and mutable in response to her artistic seekership – are what make her work so compelling.

### **Glasswork and an Alchemical Paradigm**

The occultural artist is well-placed as a spiritual seeker for alchemical questing. “Alchemising” in the nascent project title and the use of glass as a chosen medium require further consideration here. Characteristic of alchemical praxis is heuristic experimentation and this generates a space for creativity, alteration and speculation.

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<sup>4</sup> Moody cites Annie Besant & Charles W. Leadbeater's Theosophical text *Thought-Forms* (1901) as an influence in her earlier work in Goldsmith's *The Journal of Art & Ecology* 1, 2022.



**Figure 6.** Natasha Viosna Moody, *Spirit Jars*, 2023. Permission courtesy of the artist.

During a woodland walk, Moody experienced dappled light through the tree canopy which rested on a growing bramble vine. It was this moment that affirmed her pursuit of glass and the effects of light in her work (Moody, interview 2025). Although glass had featured in Moody's work previously, for example the alchemically adjacent alembic vessels of *Spirit Jars* (2023) [Fig. 6], it was the experimentation of glass casting in kilns which more closely aligned with alchemy, both in terms of practice and symbolism as well as establishing a new mode of thinking. Moody began kiln-formed glass casting with foraged vegetation using the plant matter as primal matter in her *opus*. The moribund plant matter created the moulds within a cylinder into which plaster is poured and set.<sup>5</sup> The cylinder is then fired in the kiln and the plant matter incinerated, leaving only its impression and a hollow to be filled with glass. A second firing follows, hotter and longer with a slow cooling time as the glass sets. Finally, the plaster is submerged into water to dissolve it and reveal what was contained within. Moody described this process as “akin to alchemical ritual”, while casting was “a way of preserving presence in absence” (Moody 2024). At the same time, Moody experimented with brass casting and electroforming plant forms in a bath of copper sulphate. Transmuting and transforming plants into metal and plant forms into glass, Moody pursued an alchemical preservation of the organic forms through encasement and impressions.

While artists who make objects are inevitably preoccupied with the material thing, here the artist also uses alchemical processes as a contemplative method and science to experiment with

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<sup>5</sup> I call the plant matter “moribund” as it sits between life and death. Although cut or plucked during foraging, the plant may still retain some life in it at the time of casting.

their media and develop their spiritual-creative practice. Seeking to achieve numinous outcomes from these processes, a transition took place during Moody's continuing experiments: "I began to wonder whether there was scope for preserving the visual of transmutation when plant and glass come together" (Moody 2024). To that end, vegetation samples were placed between glass and then fired. The resulting tablets of glass trapped burnt plant matter as charcoal, ash and carbon dioxide – essence of body and essence of spirit – between vitreous veils. Through the suspension of matter, Moody's *Tablets* series [Fig.7] sits between what is tangible and non-tangible.

The alchemical symbolism of the experiments with glass is obvious. The *nigredo* stage is represented by the death of the plant matter. The *albedo* stage is represented by the whitening of the plant matter as exothermic chemical reactions in the kiln turn it to ash and purify it of its moribund state, revealing its spiritualised form betwixt and between the glass. This also imitates Paracelsian spagyria, where mineral components were extracted from ash of medicinal plants in alchemical processes of separation and purification in pursuit of their healing properties (Moody 2024). Finally, the *rubedo* stage is seen when the glass interacts with light projections, symbolising fire, and chiaroscuro images emerge as new entities at the end of the alchemical process.<sup>6</sup> Remnants of the plant and the texture of glass layers distort the refraction of light to manifest ghostly manifestations and revenants. The transfiguration of the plants into glass forms is their transcendence.



**Figure 7.** Natasha Viosna Moody, *Tablets* series, 2024. Permission courtesy of the artist. Image credit: Joanna Wierzbicka, all rights reserved.

(L) *Moon-White Water*, 47 x 40 x 0.7 cm, glass, mugwort sprigs, bramble shoots, St. John's wort flowers.

(M) *As Above, So Below*, 51 x 40.5 x 0.3 cm, glass, horsetail, mugwort, St. John's wort.

(R) *Calcination*, 55 x 40.5 x 0.6 cm, glass, incinerated herbs, horsetail, mugwort, St. John's wort, flame acanthus.

<sup>6</sup> There is also the possibility of four alchemical elements symbolised in the glass tablets and their use: earth (plant matter), fire (light), water ("waterlike shadows" according to Moody), and air (projection across space). The union of light and shadow in the final work of Moody's *opus* may also be likened to the conjunction of philosophic sulphur and philosophic mercury.

Arguably, the death of the plant is immortalised in the ash and its impression in glass given eternal life. I think this is symptomatic of a pattern of inversions that recur in Moody's work. Just as living plant matter gave way to spiritualised impressions in her glasswork, the Great North Wood – a forested entity historically once alive – gave way in her mind to a spectral Ghostwood. In both cases death is not absolute as the glasswork contains the afterlives of the plants, their spirit images perceptible inside and between the layers of glass, while vegetal descendants of the Great North Wood continue to grow in south London. Although the living pass away, the dead continue to survive.

Alchemical experimentation and orientating her practice towards working more intently with glass also enabled Moody to introduce the possibility of featuring more light in her work when she began using the glass tablets for light and shadow projections. This itself is reflective of the spiritual-symbolic alchemical quest for enlightenment. For Moody, alchemical thinking is an epistemological strategy for learning about her craft and her materials, and finding new means of creative expression and personal meaning-making.

### **Mythologising Ghostwood and Mediating the Tarmac Veil**

As noted above, Moody's practice is preoccupied with themes of preservation but her work also seeks to provide new stories as a means of recovery, reconnection and healing. Across human history, mythology and folklore have offered ways to make sense of the natural world but now, Moody muses, “we need *modern* myths and stories to help us understand and interact with the landscape” (Moody, interview 2025). This is a strategy that sympathises with ecofeminist Donna Haraway's sentiment that, “renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct”, and that “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for new and old connections” (Haraway 2015, 160–161). The idea of Ghostwood is mythologised not to dwell on a lost landscape but to enchant it into being and to revive connections with the natural (and supernatural) world.

Moody's work engages important ecological considerations and demonstrates how the artist has a role to play in recovery while navigating climate loss, the depletion of natural habitats, and the anthropogenic impact on the world. As Partridge noted, “the modern period has seen a regression rather than a progression of human understanding of the nature of reality [...] The ancients were in touch with nature, themselves, each other and the sacred. Contemporaries however suffer ‘estrangement’” (Partridge 2004, 77). Occulture has the potential to be a recuperating force, offering individuals a language of enchantment to overcome such a divorce. For Moody, the artist's challenge is to make the invisible visible. She takes the lost and hidden forest, both real historically and imagined, and forms the enchanted entity that emerges as Ghostwood.

A “shadow” or “ghost” wood, by definition, is not obvious in the landscape as a typical ancient woodland (Handley and Rotherham 2013, 29). It may have individual veteran trees that have survived centuries and ground flora associated with old growth forests, which might constitute remnants of London's Great North Wood. But Moody's Ghostwood is not a treescape, it is a spectral entity with a liminal status. And Moody is an artist who is haunted by this spectre.

As Nicholas Royle has noted in *The Uncanny*, “to be haunted, to be in the company of ghosts is not necessarily a cause for fear or panic. It is something to affirm: it is the very condition of thinking and feeling” (Royle 2003, 53). The experience of being haunted, whether by a literal or metaphorical

spirit, provides a unique kind of understanding or awareness. It is a way of perceiving something persistent or unresolved and grasping truths that might otherwise be hidden, rejected or overlooked. As sociologist Avery Gordon explains:

“The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge but as transformative recognition” (Gordon 2008, 8).

Moody therefore draws back the veil and holds it open to be haunted by Ghostwood.

The veil is a boundary of concrete and tarmac that squishes what is beneath it: a sediment of urban sprawl and humus. Ghostwood is chthonic, it exists beyond the tarmac veil. Dark and shadowy, its dependence on light to emerge into this world reveals its liminal status. To use Catherine Crowe’s turn of phrase, it is on the *nightside of nature* in the realm of the supernatural, encompassing phenomena beyond ordinary perception. It emerges in Moody’s mythology as the ecosublime, an “aesthetic moment prompt[ing] responsible engagements with natural spaces, and it recalls crucial links between human subject and nonhuman world” (Rozelle 2006, 1).

*Tales from Ghostwood* is an experimental performance lecture and conjuring in which the speculative mythology of Ghostwood is told alongside projections of the glass tablets containing the impressions of spiritualised plant matter. Through the channelling of light, shadow and spoken word, it reveals fragments of the enchanted landscape [Fig. 8]. Moody’s numinous evocations use the poetics of folklore, inspired in part by her Polish heritage, to encounter ten plants that act as vegetal guides through the veil and into Ghostwood.<sup>7</sup> Rhythmically spoken and lulling witnesses into an altered state of consciousness, we are invited to venture into the spectral woodland.

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<sup>7</sup> I witnessed the first rendition of Moody’s *Tales from Ghostwood* (approx. 20 minutes) as an artist’s activation during the ‘Art, Esotericism and the Ecological Imagination’ session at the Association for Art History annual conference at the University of York in April 2025. A subsequent May Day rendition was performed at the Barbican Centre, London.



**Figure 8.** Natasha Viosna Moody performing *Tales from Ghostwood*, 2025. Image credit: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

Visually, occultural resonances abound in the performance of this ecological esoterica. A darkened room is necessary for the light projection. Moody crouches over the projector under a veil of silvered ivy, tresses illuminated from underneath, and hunched in deep trance-like concentration you could be forgiven for imagining the artist as a kind of Baba Yaga brooding over a cauldron spell-casting. The dimming of the lights, as one would do at the start of a séance, alters the state of the

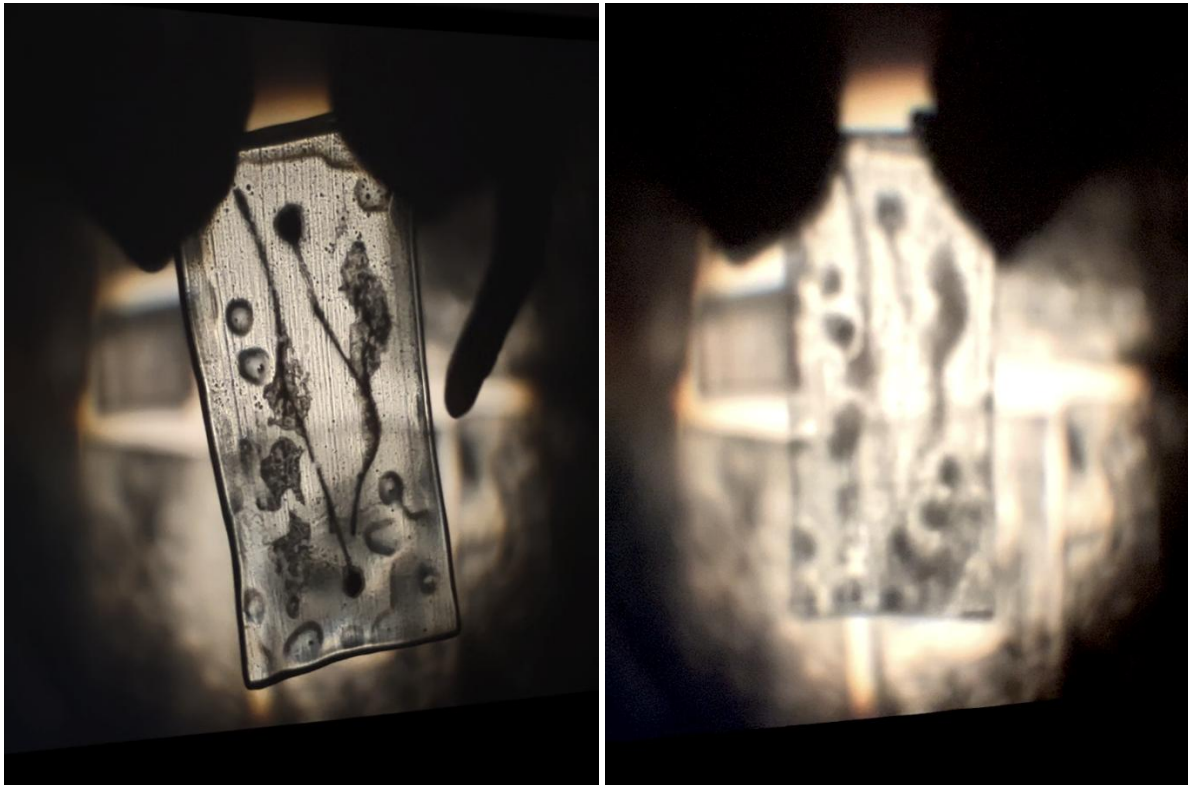
room and, arguably, the audience's receptivity to the numinous.<sup>8</sup> Spiritualistic references to mediumship continued in the use of a Medium overhead projector [Fig.9] and seemingly the recreation of séance conditions for the performance of this art piece.



**Figure 9.** Medium overhead light projector with silvered ivy. Image credit: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

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<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, this happening took place in the most mundane of lecture halls but the performance was transformative. Moody has previously noted that Alexi Lidov's concept of hierotopy has influenced how she thinks about her work sacralising space and ritualising performances. See Moody 2024.



**Figure 10.** Natasha Viosna Moody, *Tales from Ghostwood*, 2025. Experimental performance lecture and conjuring. Image credit: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

The use of light, so central here, gives life to the projected imagery and shows an appreciation for the Theosophical notion of the “living light of other worlds”.<sup>9</sup> Chiaroscuro images cast by the projections are visual manifestations of the borderland, simultaneously symbolising where two worlds meet; the material world and Ghostwood; human and other-than-human. Glass tablets are introduced and swapped as the narrative of the *Tale* traverses Ghostwood and each botanical guide is encountered. The projections continuously move in and out of focus [Fig.10], revealing and occulting the plant guides contained within the glass tablets. This contributes to an abstraction of layers, as overlapping fragments of glass tablets and transmuted plant matter form multiple projections at once to create an assemblage of another world. Such entanglements of layers, fragments and shadows seem to envisage kin-assemblage in Haraway’s call for “making kin”, proposing that we must intentionally form relationships and obligations with others, human and non-human, where all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and recognise the interconnectedness of all life to cultivate a sense of responsibility and care for diverse beings and entities. “Kin is an assembling sort of word”, Haraway notes, “Kin are unfamiliar, uncanny, haunting, active” (Haraway 2015, 162). Moody’s projection of these assemblages in her storytelling enacts a (re)union in response to feelings of disconnect and creates a refugium in light and shadow.

Reconnecting with the woodland and its flora manifests in the haptic and sensual nature of Moody’s handling of the glass tablets containing the spiritualised plant forms within. Although the focal point is undoubtedly meant to be the shadows of the glass tablets, her hands are projected too during the performance [Fig.11]. Strikingly, the kin-assemblage is an amalgamation with and

<sup>9</sup> Quote taken from the Foreword in Besant and Leadbeater’s *Thought-Forms*. This line gave the title to Moody’s first solo exhibition “The Living Light of Other Worlds” at Seagar Gallery, London, in October 2024.

assimilation of the artist. The artist is disembodied, undergoing a transfiguration through the projection of light and shadow resulting in extended embodiment. Here the pattern of inversion resurfaces again, *In Ruins Like These, Strange Glass Cries* takes on a new visual manifestation. Hands engaging spiritualised plant forms dematerialised into light and shadow. The earlier wax form is too tangible, too materialistic, to be truly successful. The projection of hands and plant-matter, however, are convincing evocations of ephemeral engagements. Spirit-matter fusions and ethereal physicality play out in the projected imagery. It is an *alchemical coniunctio* – the harmonious whole and new being: becoming one with Ghostwood.



**Figure 11.** Natasha Viosna Moody, *Tales from Ghostwood*, 2025. Experimental performance lecture and conjuring. Image credit: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

### **Botanical Guides**

The sacrality of nature is central to *Tales from Ghostwood* as it foregrounds the vegetal as a superior guiding force. Ivy delineates the boundaries of the woodland, Bramble acts as a portal forming

“gothic arches”, and Violet the watchful guardian of the underworld. From February to November, a period marked by lunations, Moody attuned to urban flora in a site-sensitive immersion, seeking out living fragments of the Ghostwood within its London bounds to become her botanical guides:

“Each month I investigate and speculate about each plant’s role within the landscape, ecologically as a bioindicator of the local environment, human activity and land use, as well as its sacred, healing and numinous associations. From these scientific and cultural points of reference I weave together fragments of poetry and explorative writing that aid my mapping out of South London’s Ghostwood” (Moody 2024).

The guiding qualities and symbolism of the flora are the agencies of plant life which feature in the *Tales from Ghostwood*. Their spiritualised forms in glass, now indigenous to Ghostwood, exercise the ability of ghosts to transcend the bounds of death and time to continue their haunting. The plants are the ghosts of Ghostwood and carry with them the intuition of its spectral landscape. Their existence as ghosts “permit[s] them to haunt the present and give authentic and accurate testimony about the forgotten or repressed past because they are firsthand witnesses” (Gordon 2008, 23). The plant guides represent the botanical ontologies of the occult biome, revealing the knowledge-scape of Ghostwood to Moody and collaborating as knowledge-markers and knowledge-givers in the assemblage and narrative of the tale.

Knowledge gained from botanical guides, knowledge discovered from alchemical experimentation, knowledge gleaned from occultural curiosity are the rewards for the artist-seeker finding and attuning with Ghostwood. The lost landscape of London’s Great North Wood has become Ghostwood, enchanted and alive in the imagination of the artist who parts the tarmac veil for us to witness.

### **Final Reflections**

I want to end here on a personal note. In November 2021 Storm Arwen swept across the country with over sixteen million trees falling in her wake. In rural Aberdeenshire, the woodland near my family home was transformed beyond recognition. In the immediate aftermath a palpable collective sense of loss spread across the region for familiar landscapes that were altered irreparably or destroyed, and I felt the same disconnect and severance Moody’s art first drew upon. With time the woodlands are recovering, the deadwood sustaining life and new growth rejuvenating and, in some cases, improving the natural habitat where dense monoculture plantations have given way to burgeoning diversity. Over time I have also come to understand that Arwen *became* the woodland, her power did not blow away into the abyss but settled into the landscape, fertilising it with her energy, imbuing it with her transformative power. Although the shape of the woodland that I loved was flattened, it has become enchanted by Arwen’s omnipresence – an invisible force that lingers in a now unseen forest – and I realised, as Moody’s practice strives to reveal, that we all have our ghostwoods.

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## Becoming Ghostwood

Natasha Viosna Moody

*Atop steep ridges that lie south of the river, a woodland grows, mostly lost, consumed by the city that was grown from its very branches. What remains is Ghostwood.*

### Abstract

This reflective text traces the development of *Becoming Ghostwood*, a site-sensitive project exploring the intersections of ecology, esotericism, and artistic practice. Emerging from sustained engagement with fragmented urban woodland in South East London, the project reimagines the Great North Wood as a spectral and mythic landscape. Combining fieldwork, material experimentation, writing, and performance, the work investigates processes of transformation, loss, and renewal. The text outlines key elements of the practice, including the use of plant matter as both material and guide, the development of a “magical consciousness,” and the role of mythmaking and storytelling as forms of knowledge production. It reflects on the emergence of *Ghostwood* as both a conceptual and experiential space, shaped by personal, ecological, and cultural narratives, and considers how artistic practice can engage with absence, memory, and more-than-human relations.

### Keywords

Ecology; esotericism; magical consciousness; site-sensitivity; myth-work; alchemy; urban woodland; Ghostwood.

## INTRODUCTION

*Becoming Ghostwood* is a site-sensitive project developed in 2024 with the generous support of the inaugural RENSEP Artist's Award, presented in partnership with Arts University Plymouth.

Originally titled *Ghosts of the Great North Wood: Alchemising Ecological Grief* and motivated by the question, "what might constitute an esoteric ecological art practice?", my research grew from a sustained and attentive relationship to specific areas of urban woodland in South East London. The Great North Wood is a semi-extant ancient woodland that survives fragmented in parks, train line cuttings and residential streets. Though its historical boundaries are contested, the memory of the wood lingers in place names like Forest Hill, Gypsy Hill and Norwood. I began to treat the fragmented woodland as a contemporary analogue of the enchanted forest, an alchemical vessel for change, mourning, and becoming. My aim was not to uncover where the forest definitely had and had not been; rather, the work was a practice of sensitising to the wood's more-than-physical manifestations and the spaces in between. I was working with patches after all. I began to refer to the site as Ghostwood, freeing it from the need to be great or whole and meeting the woods where they were.

Echoing the mutable and amorphous manifestations of Ghostwood, the outputs of this project have been wide-ranging and multidisciplinary. What was intended to simply become a project that produced new sculptures in glass and metal quickly mutated into an exploration of autofiction, magic, myth-work, speculative fieldwork, and performance.

Laced with looping narratives of loss, return and transmutation, the stories and objects that emerged from Ghostwood attempt to stitch together three distinct but interrelated strands of the project: Fieldwork, Objects, Writing.

The spectral woodland became a container for stories it may not previously have held, as I projected mythological entities from Poland as urban woodlands coalesced.

I spent 10 months of 2024 attuned to Ghostwood. This phase nurtured the development of a lateral, intuitive, and esoteric art practice which I would come to define via Greenwood as the development of a "magical consciousness" cultivated through site-sensitivity and somatic engagement (Greenwood 2021). Following the waxing and waning of the moon I allowed my research to be guided by a different plant each month. This structure resulted in a practice of re-mythologising the urban woodland flora, looking to them not only as bio-indicators and material witnesses to the changing site of Ghostwood but as mythic entities that agentially guided me through a journey of transformation deep in the forest.

The fieldwork involved walking, writing and gathering plant matter from the surviving patches of the Great North Wood and surrounding urban sprawl. This seemingly mundane practice was one I began to describe as a spilling out of myself and into another. I became porous, sensitive, to the traces of Ghostwood. The result of this fieldwork was the creation of my own mythic herbarium including written accounts and dried specimens which I then took back to the studio to work with.

The transformation of plant matter lies at the heart of my material practice. Equipped with dried bramble stems and pressed flowers gathered throughout Ghostwood, I arrived at Arts University Plymouth with the desire to transform plants into glass, later learning that plants growing in certain soils, especially by the sea, contain high levels of silica and can in fact be used in the production of glass. My vegetal guides followed me from wood to shore. You can read a landscape through its vegetation. The chemical make-up of the soil indicated through the presence of certain species. One reason we can attest to the "ancient"-ness of the Great North Wood is due to the presence of spring flowers such as English bluebells and wood anemones, my guides for the month of April.

The importance of writing became quickly apparent not only as a form of documenting experiences from working 'in the field' but as a method of conjuring. Stories and meaning emerge as I write; it is a

process of untangling layers of thoughts and sporadic references and then taking the time to stitch them back together. Sometimes it feels like an impossible task, potentially futile, like the sister who had to stitch shirts from nettles to break the curse put on her seven brothers, now swans. Just as she starts to sew the final sleeve onto the final shirt, the swans fly over. She has to throw them before they are ready if there is any chance for the spell to be broken (Maitland 2012, 169).

What follows is a reflective text that traces the key themes and practices that emerged over the course of the project. The piece is punctuated by images of the sites I encountered and documentation of the material processes developed over the course of the year.<sup>1</sup> Following the portfolio is an excerpt of the script for the performance *Tales from Ghostwood* that emerged as an amalgam of writing and the experimental glass work that produced *Tablets*.



**Figure 1 (top).** Sydenham Hill Woods, summer 2024. **Figure 2.** Puszcza Bydgoska, summer 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> All images are by the artist unless otherwise indicated; image credits and rights belong to the artist.

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES & ACTIVATIONS OF OTHER TIMES

The beginning of my work with Ghostwood can be traced back to 2019, strangely not in South London but in a Polish *las* (forest). In September of that year, I began collecting plant matter from amongst the pines, it was the first time I'd been in Poland for mushroom season and the forest sang under the weight of waterlogged moss. Mist hung low as we walked back to the car from the crematorium. The priest had delivered a radically secular service for the passing of my maternal grandfather, the engineer. Behind him hung a painting of a doorway, a portal, an ashen vortex that held us in our mourning. In the woods I gathered fallen leaves, pine needles and other cast-off ephemera that I pressed between the pages of books and brought home with me to London.

This practice of preservation became an obsession that has stayed with me since. I gathered, dried, pressed plant matter between small panels of glass held together by the plastic border of a 35mm photographic slide. The practice evolved from a simple act of archiving to the creation of complex miniature collages made by cutting and layering petals and other plant parts before sealing them between the sides. Echoes of this process are present in the work I developed at AUP, as is the grief that spurred their making. What began as grief for a personal loss began to encompass the layered losses of species, seasons, stories, home.

Once upon a time I believed the forest that lies to the north of Bydgoszcz to be ancient. It was the landscape in which I learnt the stories of enchanted huts, speaking trees and impossible tasks. Where we'd walked my grandfather's dog and swam in pine-lined lakes. It was after his passing that I learnt the *las* was a plantation, just over a hundred years old, and managed as a pine monoculture after the Second World War. I had witnessed the felling throughout my whole childhood but had never seen it for what it was. How could I have? The forest always grew back. The thickets of immature woodland were places into which I projected glimpses of Baba Yaga's chicken legged hut, the flutter of a red cloak.

The following year I learnt of the Great North Wood. What I had thought were simply parks and pockets of green turned out to be remnants of an ancient woodland. The Polish forest, which had seemed timeless, was a modern industry. The London parks, which had seemed mundane, were filled with hauntings of the growth of the city.

Re-mythologising the histories of these places became the seed for Ghostwood. I began to project what I imagined of the Polish *las* into the English urban woodland. I watched as giant pines grew to tower over three-storey houses, Mokosz stalking south between them, retreating from the lights of the city into the depths of the wood.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past six years I have worked with Ghostwood, even before I had learnt of its name. Between 2021 and 2022 I participated in the first cohort of the MA Art and Ecology at Goldsmith's University of London, which allowed me to explore the Great North Wood through the lens of an ecological art practice, one that brought up questions of what it meant to be indigenous to land and quite simply, "what makes home?" The root word of ecology is *oikos*, Greek for household. The study of the networks and systems of home. In the spring of 2020, having recently moved back to London after living in Scotland for five years, I was confronted by a mutant skyline, growing far bigger than I'd ever imagined and studded with fallen red stars, burning bright even in daylight. I watched from the shelter of Ghostwood, turned my back and focused on the site underfoot.

Winning the RENSEP Artist's Award in January 2024 has accelerated my practice in countless ways: from financial support that allowed me to fund the staging of my debut solo exhibition, rent a studio and buy materials, to mentorship from Judith Noble, connection to a network of researchers specialising in the

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<sup>2</sup> Mokosz: a deity from Slavic Mythology comparable to Gaia or Mother Earth.

study of esotericism, the invitation to share my practice at the Aesthetics of Esoteric Practices conference in Venice and the opportunity to make use of the outstanding facilities at Arts University Plymouth where I was supported by technical tutors to realise artworks I had long desired to conjure. The award allowed me to take a leap to define myself as an artist who works at the intersection of art, ecology and esotericism. Though these words can be fluid in their meanings, the magic I engaged with over the course of the project was one that shines a light on the world as a sensuous, animate and agential place. *Becoming Ghostwood* used magic and myth-work as framing devices that seek to challenge extractive ways of encountering the forest, positioning them as rejected or obscured forms of knowledge production in times defined by trouble born out of the myth of linear progress, human exceptionalism and the desire for exponential economic growth. Since being actively supported by RENSEP and AUP to speak openly about magic and its relationship to art and ecology I have met other co-conspirators who believe that magic, myth-work and ritual need not be dismissed as archaic or irrelevant.

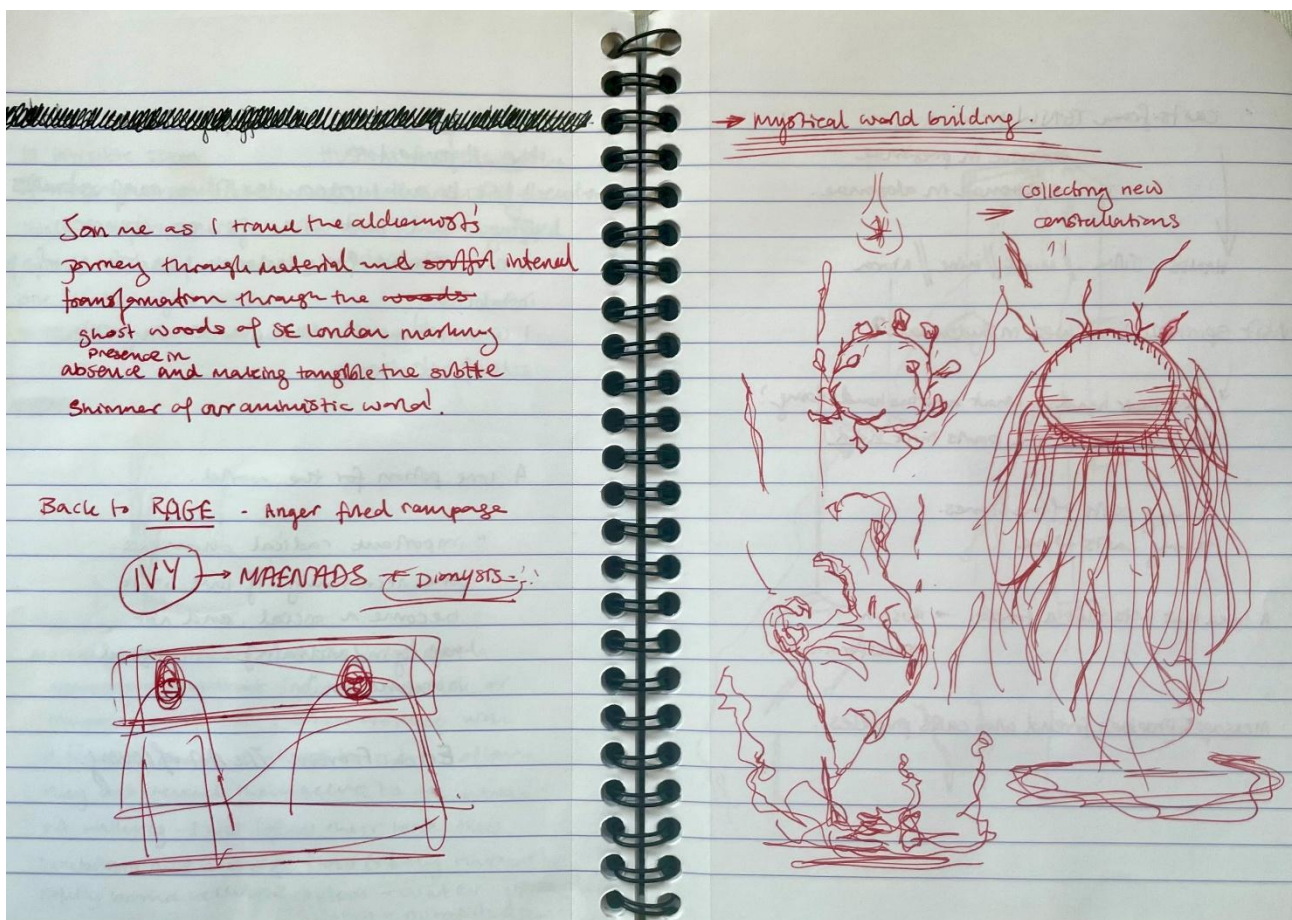


Figure 3. Sketchbook pages, spring 2024.



Figure 4. Puszcza Bydgoska, autumn 2021.

## BEATING THE BOUNDS

Two months into the project, in late March of 2024, I climbed to the top of Telegraph Hill to watch the full moon set. It was 5 a.m. I stood on what I understood to be the northernmost hill of the Great North Wood. As the moon sank behind the skyline, I felt my fixation on mapping the wood's exact historical boundaries dissolve. I listened, attuned. A new name rose with the sun. Ghostwood, a site of temporal and geographic ambivalence.

The joy of Ghostwood lies in its freedom from the shackles of categorisation, taxonomy and metrics that detract from experiencing this ambiguous terrain in its fluid borderless state. This renaming marked a significant shift in the project: from researching a lost woodland to co-creating a spectral-layered landscape of experience, memory, and myth. The Great North Wood was never a single bounded entity, but a loose, sprawling patchwork of oak-dominated woodland stretching from Deptford to Croydon. Today its remnants survive in sites like Dulwich Wood, Sydenham Hill, One Tree Hill and Norwood, their names echoing a time before enclosure and urban expansion fractured the forest. Topographical histories are held in place names: Sydenham, meadow in the bend of the river; Norwood, the wood that lies to the north of Croydon.

Scholar C. J. Schüler recounts the layered social history of the woodland in his 2021 book, *The Wood that Built London: A Human History of the Great North Wood*. The book takes on the task of piecing together obscure local histories with historical records. In chapter 2 “Surveys, Ships and Statutes 1485–1600” Schüler narrates the historic custom of “beating the bounds” that would involve the cleric and other prominent members of the community walking the periphery of their parish, creating a mutual understanding of their land before the widespread use of detailed maps. Important sites and markers in the landscape such as prominent trees or stones would be physically and spiritually marked by prayer (Schüler 2021, 42).

To beat the bounds of Ghostwood is not to fix it in place, but to stay in motion and honour its slipperiness. Like the surrounding city, it defies neat categorisation and resists logic. Fragments of the physical wood survived attempts at erasure and enclosure since Roman times, significant carving of the woods took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to the enclosure of common land and urban expansion. Throughout my research, I encountered competing narratives on the geographical extent of the historic wood. By the Friends of Nunhead Cemetery I was told the site was never part of the Great North Wood, whereas the London Wildlife Trust declares the Victorian cemetery as an existing fragment, even if the trees are secondary woodland.<sup>3</sup> Schüler warns that urban woodlands like the surviving fragments of the Great North Wood are “a dwindling and irreplaceable resource”, quoting Baba Dioum, he reminds us that, “In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught” (Schüler 2021, 245). The newest addition to the “official” map of the remnants of the ancient woodland is Garthorne Nature Reserve. In 2020 the local community won the fight to preserve part of the “green corridor” that runs parallel to the train line that was originally carved through the wood as a canal to ferry timber to the river.

In this uncertainty of its boundaries, I anchor myself with Anna Tsing's concept of the ‘patch’. A term she uses to describe dispersed, marginal ecologies that are held together through encounter rather than homogeneity (Tsing 2016, 4). She identifies ‘the patch’ as a counter-linear approach to considering what may exist (read: survive) in capitalist ruins. Like a river continually carving new undulations into earth, I think of Ghostwood as creating its own oxbows, patches that remain close to its edges and alert me to its

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<sup>3</sup> Secondary woodlands are those that have developed on land that was previously cleared of trees, usually through natural regeneration processes after a period of being non-wooded.

presence. I am not so much concerned with the truth of which parts were and were not woodland, I do not feel the need to be sucked into continuing the romantic notions of the greatness of the wood. From my perspective the fragments are not ruins, but active sites of becoming.

*Becoming Ghostwood* is not a restoration project. It is a conjuring. A spell cast over South East London's ridges and railway lines, where time slips and myths take root. Its borders are elastic. The woodland behind the 25-year-old stone circle in Hilly Fields, Nunhead Cemetery, Telegraph Hill, none are officially documented as part of the original expanse of the Great North Wood, yet in my own mapping of the landscape I identify them as "magical markers" that help me navigate Ghostwood's depths.



**Figure 5.** Moon set from Telegraph Hill, winter 2024.





**Figure 6-9.** Crying breath at Hilly Fields stone circle, winter 2023.

## MAGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS & SITE SENSITIVITY

To attune to a site is not simply to observe it, name its species, or track its historical boundaries; it requires steady presence and a practice of becoming-with or corresponding with it (Ingold 2020, 13). In Ghostwood this process involved walking, listening, responding, and letting the site speak-back. My motivation was not planned intervention but a devotional practice of return. A walking-with, feeling-with, field-working practice that demanded presence over certainty.

This mode of working emerged initially from reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's work on reciprocity and relational ecology in *Gathering Moss* (2003) and later expanded through Susan Greenwood's notion of magical consciousness, a way of perceiving the world that foregrounds emotion, intuition, and affective association. Greenwood writes that magical consciousness "works" by inviting us into relationship with the world as participants within a web of mutual influence rather than detached observers (Greenwood 2021).

My understanding of magical consciousness encompasses a shift from an extractive gaze to a deeply felt sense of co-presence. In *Becoming Ghostwood* this manifested as devoting myself to being led by a different plant each lunar cycle as guide through its fragments. The nature of my guides changed with the seasons, shifting from evergreen ivy and bramble to transient blues of spring and brights of summer before dimming back to bark. The plants served not only as bio-indicators of ancient woodland but collaborators in the unfurling of my own mythic narrative driven by noticing and metaphorical resonance.

Rather than describing this work as site-specific I follow Taru Elfing and Lotta Petronella in practicing "site-sensitivity", a mode of working with site that requires devotional, un-disciplinary and long-term engagement with specific landscapes. To be site-sensitive is to ask: Whose guidance do we seek when interacting with a landscape? What does it mean to work towards ecological restoration? For me it has been to enter Ghostwood without fixed intention and allow the site to reveal itself to me instead. Gently, I have asked: What do I not yet know? What wants to emerge?

Working with Ghostwood became not a search for origins but a practice of being and becoming-with. An important part of the magical work I engaged with was letting go of the allure of origin and authenticity of the wood and equally the doctrines of any specific esoteric belief systems and practice. I deviated, following my own paths, seeking presence in absence and a sense of connection between fragmented geographies, temporalities and histories. The Great North Wood is a Victorian name given to the already fragmented site. A name born out of a time that celebrated the romanticism of the wilds. A "somewhere" man could conquer. Its common name is as much of a fiction as my Ghostwood which I favour for its grounding in the nuances of the material and spectral site.

I do not use magic as a form of escapism, but an expanded form of consciousness. Its practice requires a light touch and for the practitioner to allow feeling to be method. It holds space for ambivalence, metaphor and for truths to lie outside of data and logic. Anthropologist Tim Ingold describes the role of the artist as making metaphorical truths 'viscerally present ... so we can experience them in their immediacy' (Ingold 2020, 15). This is what I try to do through both writing and my material practice. Developing a magical consciousness with Ghostwood has meant being confronted with the state of not-knowing that seeps into the creative process itself. It is a slow, somatic and emotional form of research that allowed for a story to emerge as I let myself spill deeper into the woods.



Figure 10. Gathering, Dulwich woods, summer 2024.



Figure 11. Sydenham Folly, autumn 2024.

### **WRITING AS REPAIR – The stitching of fragments and fictioning the self**

Throughout the project I produced a series of monthly updates that served as moments of reflection and spaces to gather research, observations and moments of encounter with my vegetal guides.

Each entry was composed of field notes, fragments of poetry and photographs that documented my encounters over 10 months with Ivy, Bramble, Bluebell and Wood Anemone, Violets, Linden and St John's Wort, Fire Weed and Horsetail, Mugwort, Mullein, Birch and finally Pine. The rhythm of the emergent narrative follows the energy of seasons and chronicles my own initiation into Ghostwood. Both writing and site became witnesses to my own moments of undoing and rebuilding of self through practice. There were moments of disillusionment. In the resulting narrative script I tell a story of being pulled into an underworld by the soporific lull of the bluebell, a flower long associated with enchanted sleep and forced suspension. I felt out of sync. As spring bloomed I fell into a personal winter where the project lay dormant.

Writing became not just a mode of documentation but a tool for orientation within Ghostwood, for conjuring connections across time, memory and desire. The updates provided a fertile ground for new forms of expression to evolve. Most notably, *Tales from Ghostwood*, an experimental performance lecture, the script for which follows this text.

The production of these different texts over the course of the project echoes Simon O'Sullivan's descriptions of writing and myth-work as "magickal technology" (O'Sullivan 2024, 88). In his 2024 text *From Magic and Myth-Work to Care and Repair*, he describes the practice of writing, and fictioning, as one that "speaks back". It cuts into space and time, producing rifts from which other realities may emerge. The process is a mutual method of becoming for both story and writer. A correspondence with the intangible and a production of echoes. Or so it has functioned for me. Ariana Reines speaks of poetry as "a deeply strange art" of stitching fragments together (Reines 2024). This myth-work transcends the page and manifests as experience within Ghostwood. A practice by which the fragments were not made static or whole, but held in their mutable fluid state, conjuring a cut through which the spectral might be seen and a remade self emerge. As I participated deeper with myth-work it began to transcend the page and manifested as moments of synchronicity within Ghostwood. A significant example of this occurred in September when I followed Mullein as my guide.

I had long desired to make a performance work in which I would walk through the remnants of the Great North Wood as the Slavic goddess Mokosz, cloaked in metal-cast ivy leaves. It was an idea born from memories of reading a book of Slavic mythology with my mother. For years, we remembered reading about Mokosz's cloak of leaves but when I returned to those books during the project, I couldn't find the passage. I felt estranged from Mokosz and the work refused to take form. After several months, I surrendered my vision of casting the leaves in metal and I began drying and painting ivy leaves with silver acrylic ink. This action affirmed the creative impulse, and in that moment my own story shifted. I realised I had been trying to cloak the wrong goddess.

When I returned to the text, the missing pages were found under the name Dziewanna, Goddess of the wilds, daughter of Mokosz, unruly and aligned with the moon. The synchronicities multiplied. As I began researching her, my browser filled with images of mullein, the tall, yellow-flowered plant that had been hovering at the edges of my attention since June. She became my guide for September. That month I travelled from London to Plymouth and Cornwall, then Poland, and in each place, mullein appeared. One September evening I was walking through the pine plantation in Bydgoszcz. As the sun began to set and a dim orange glow from between thin trunks signalled it was time to return home, I felt a call from deeper in the woods and followed it a little further. At an intersection of paths, glowing in the fading light, stood Dziewanna. A yellow topped beacon, affirming that I was exactly where I needed to be.

In this light, myth-work became a speculative methodology, a way to correspond with vegetal life, spectral presence, and familial memory without fixing their meanings. It allowed me to stay with the unknowable and evolve alongside the conjuring of Ghostwood. I experienced the work “speaking back”, to quote O’Sullivan, when the cloak I could not make became a portal (O’Sullivan 2024, 18). What I thought was a failure of practice was actually a shifting of narrative and direct experience of myth-making akin to my experience of material practice as a form of alchemical transformation.



**Figure 12.** St. John’s Wort, Walthamstow, summer 2024.

### **TRANSMUTING: Material Techniques and Alchemical Processes**

In working with Ghostwood I am in constant communion with absence. As discussed in the previous section, writing provided a space within which to encounter its manifestations from between its patches. My material practice is equally important in my attempt to translate the experience of Ghostwood into a series of magical objects that serve as portals through which audiences themselves can encounter the site.

The award offered access to the outstanding facilities and tutorage at Arts University Plymouth where I arrived with a 30 cm bramble stem that had been drying in my studio for a few months. For years, since beginning to work with the Great North Wood, I had been wanting to cast a bramble in acrid green glass. Manifestations of this desire can be seen in small tests I managed in glass fusing in the ceramics kiln at Goldsmiths where I did my Master's in Art and Ecology. I was told the firing schedule wouldn't work for what I wanted to do, but a malfunction in the kiln, likely caused by abnormally hot weather in June 2022, when I saw roses singed under the heat of 42 degree sun, caused the kilns to short-circuit in the middle of a firing. This meant the work inside cooled slowly over the course of a few days and allowed my tiny fused bottle-glass samples to emerge uncracked, much to the dismay of the potters whose ceramics didn't survive the fault.

With access to the facilities at Arts University Plymouth, I developed new skills in glass casting and electroforming. Working with plant matter gleaned during my fieldwork, I deviated from the traditional process of investment casting. Also known as "lost-wax casting" this technique typically involves creating a wax model, which is then encased in a shell of plaster to form a mould. Once the plaster cures, the mould, placed upturned in the kiln, is fired for a first time. During this firing the wax is lost from the mould resulting in a cavity that can be described as a physical negative of the original object. Before the second firing the cavity and reservoir are filled with glass billets and set to fire again. Once removed from the mould, this process results in an exact replica of the original object.

My process substituted real plant matter in place of the wax models. Physical fragments of Ghostwood became themselves the sacrificial objects that are required in investment casting.

This adaptation required negotiation with the limitations of the materials and process. While plant matter behaves differently from wax my main concern was collecting the ash that would gather at the base of the kiln during the initial firing, the burnout. Thinking back to my research into the chemical make-up of different plants I began to wonder what would happen if I trapped other specimens from my experimental herbarium between sheets of glass, like I had with *Slides* between 2019 and 2020, and then subjected them to firing. As the kiln reached temperature, the plant matter was simultaneously trapped and incinerated. In some cases, all that remained was a delicate, ashen imprint, ghostly traces of petals and leaf veins, even the smallest imprints were visible. Sometimes the tablets would emerge bulged as the edges of the glass would fuse before the plants could fully burn. Within these bubbles tiny fragments of partially combusted bramble persisted as charcoal, catching the light with an iridescent blue shimmer, and echoing the work of the colliers back in North Wood. These unexpected colourations and residues became central to the works, transforming each panel into a record of combustion and containment. Collectively these works are named *Tablets*. These thin, wall-mounted sculptures bear witness to the transmutation of plants into ash. This unpredictable process offered me an entirely new direction in my practice, one that could only have come through the space, time, and resources afforded by the award and residency at AUP.

In both the casting experiments and kiln-formed *Tablets*, glass became a crucible in which vegetal matter was not only memorialised but chemically altered. As a substance it is neither wholly liquid nor solid, born of sand and fire, resistant yet fragile. This in-betweenness of the material echoes the qualities of Ghostwood itself. The process of fusing plant matter between panes of glass by submitting them to high

heat was not only experimental but alchemical in method. The calcination of the offerings gathered in the field was not simply records of combustion but active surfaces of transmutation. This was further illuminated when I installed the *Tablets* in *The Living Light of Other Worlds*, at Seager Gallery in October 2024. To display the glass I constructed a hanging system that used brackets and nails to suspend *Tablets* 10 cm from the wall. The works were lit with spotlights which played with the textures and opacity of the glass in ways the eye could not see otherwise. The supporting wall was flooded with an intermingling of light and shadow, a static that looked as much like the surface of a lake as it did a print of happenings in the deep cosmos.

Working with glass, I came to see my role less as a maker in the traditional sense and more as a mediator or an alchemist. I facilitated encounters between materials, environments, and unseen forces. Working with fragile materials like dried plants and glass required a surrender to processes. As within the practice of alchemy, the transformation of physical matter is not the only result nor is its success guaranteed. Throughout the project and all its overlapping elements, some practices failed, cracked or fused incompletely, poems left in voice memos or paragraphs axed from publication. Others shimmered with a life force that confirmed I was creating and becoming-with Ghostwood.

Ultimately, these works do not aim to preserve plants as specimens or to represent Ghostwood as a fixed idea. Rather, they act as thresholds and portals through which viewers might encounter the ecological, emotional and metaphysical entanglements I experienced in the woods. The *Tablets* are not explanations but invitations into the language of trace, residue and shimmer. They echo alchemy not in its imagery, but in its ethic – a belief that material and spirit are not separate, and that transformation of self, matter, and relation can emerge through attunement, a kind of magical consciousness cultivated in sustained and reciprocal encounter rather than fantasy.



**Figure 13.** Copper Daffodil, Arts University Plymouth, spring 2024.



**Figure 14.** Mokosz cloak construction, autumn 2024.



Figure 15. Tablet unfired, Arts University Plymouth, summer 2024.



**Figure 16.** Tablet fired, Arts University Plymouth, summer 2024.

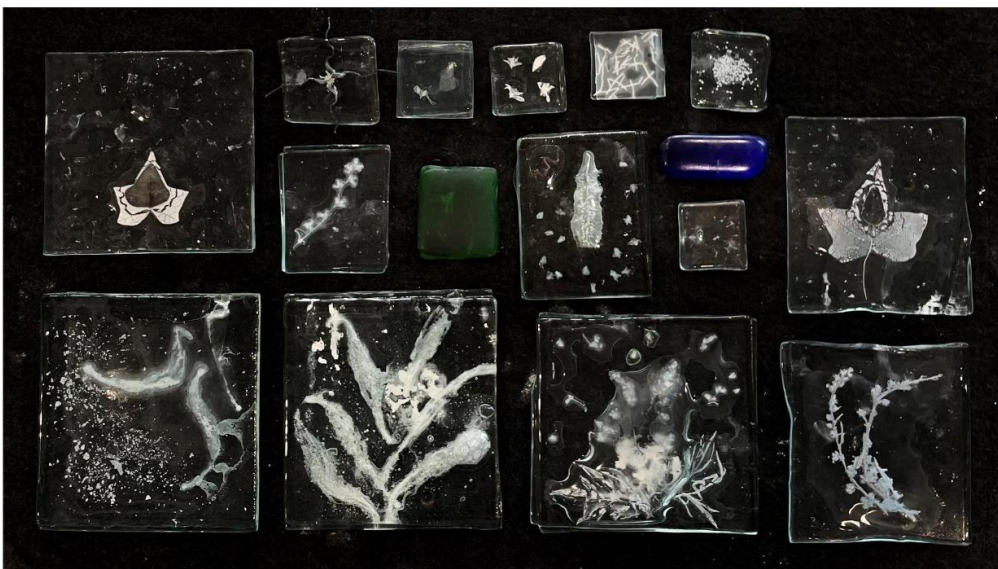


Figure 17 & 18. Tablets unfired & fired, Arts University Plymouth, summer 2024.



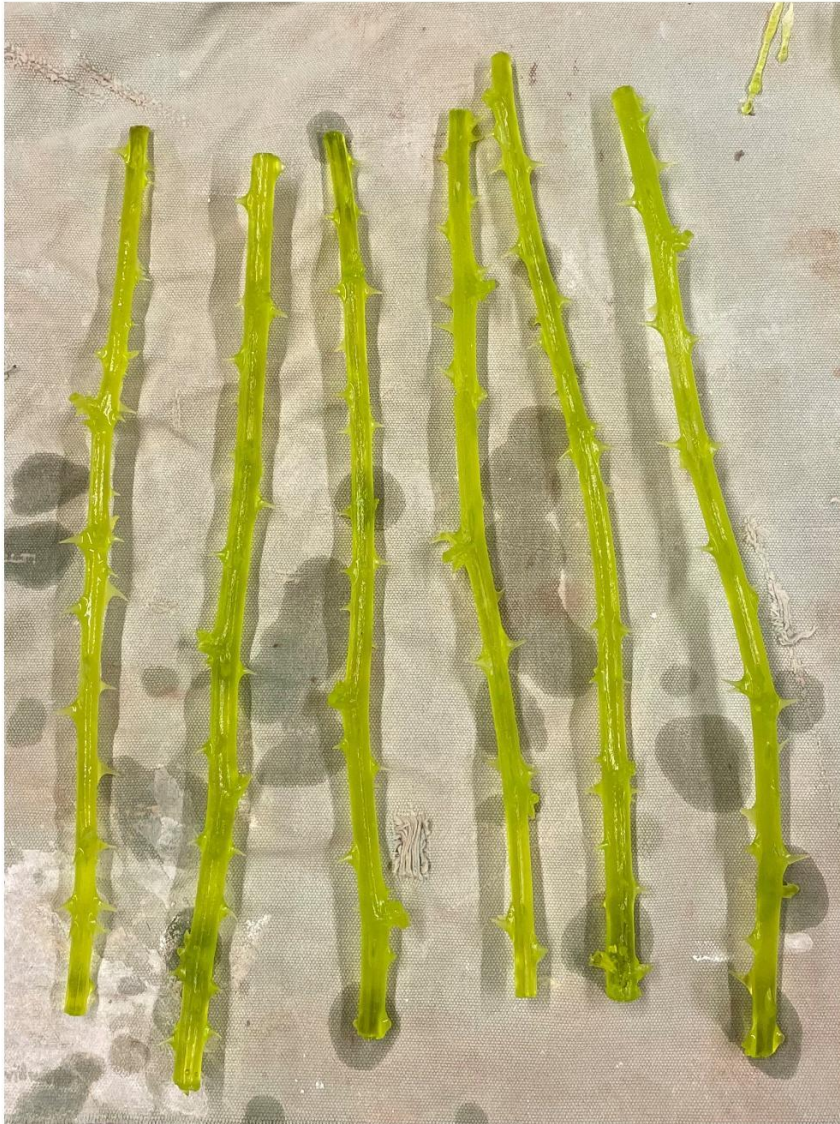
**Figure 19.** Tablet detail, iridescent charcoal bramble, Arts University Plymouth, summer 2024.



**Figure 20.** Preparing bramble for investment casting in glass, Arts University Plymouth, spring 2024.



**Figure 21.** Preparing the leaded glass used for casting brambles, Arts University Plymouth, spring 2024.  
**Figure 22.** Plaster moulds undergoing the 'burnout' firing, Arts University Plymouth, spring 2024.



**Figure 23.** Glass brambles released from plaster mould, Arts University Plymouth, spring 2024.

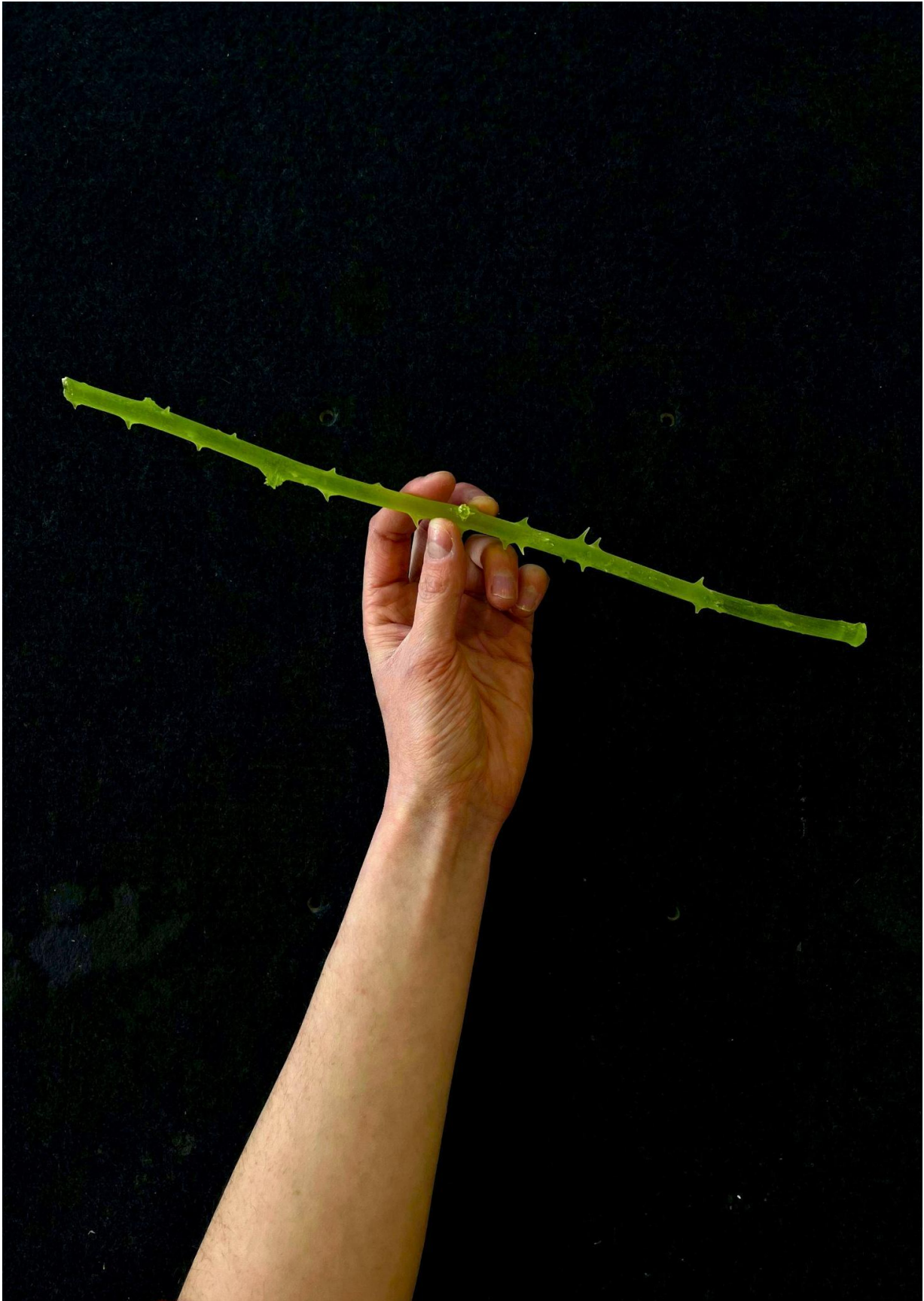


Figure 24. Glass bramble, artist's studio, summer 2024.



**Figure 25.** Projection on gallery window seen from the street, Seager gallery, Deptford, autumn 2024.

## EMERGING FROM THE WOODS

The outward life of this project has unfolded through a series of exhibitions, performances, and presentations. Each marked a step in the work's emergence beyond the woods and into new spaces of encounter and dialogue. *Ostara*, a group exhibition in St Leonards-on-Sea curated by Fran Painter-Flemming (April 2024), offered a fitting seasonal beginning to the exhibition of pieces from *Becoming Ghostwood*. It was here that *In ruins like these strange grass cries* first reached an audience.

*The Living Light of Other Worlds* at Seager Gallery, London (October 2024), my debut solo show, carried a deeper narrative of return. The gallery is located in Deptford, the historic wood's most northern reach, where oak from North Wood supplied the Naval Dockyard from 1513 and bark was stripped and sent to local tanneries. Where I had held a studio during my master's and visited the Creekside Discovery Centre as a child. To show in Deptford felt like a homecoming and part of the myth-work that this project has produced.<sup>4</sup>

In curating the show, I wanted to create a space that echoed the themes of the project, transforming the gallery into a space of suspension and alchemical laboratory. The work presented was a mix of pieces from *Ghostwood* and work that pre-dates the project. On entering the space the viewer was greeted by *In ruins like these strange grass cries*, wax casts of my mother's hand and mine holding the first glass bramble cast between them. The space then split in two. To the left there was a strange whirring that came from MEDIUM, my overhead projector and mechanical collaborator, that was incorporated into the sculptural installation *Chemia*. The projector sat at the base of a metal plinth adorned with laboratory apparatus from which hung fragments from my studio: bluebells cast in brass, a copper daffodil, pieces of amber given to me by a distant uncle at a funeral in Poland. The projector displayed steel wire woven into the beginnings of the cloak for Dziejanna and a selection of *Slides* that I had re-printed whilst in Plymouth, which were displayed on a nearby wall. The projector was pointed at the large frosted gallery window and created a portal that strengthened throughout the private view as the sun went down and evening fell over Deptford.

Two experimental sculptures flanked the installation. Each born of a different mode of preservation, both referencing my maternal lineage and Polish heritage. The first is titled *The Raving Ones* and serves as a prototype for the yet unrealised metal cloak for Dziejanna. Three chains of silvered ivy leaves hang against a curtain of blue velvet. Amongst the leaves painted with acrylic ink were a handful of silver-leafed leaves that caught the light in a more living way. I look forward to casting the whole cloak in metal another time. The second is titled *Mother Threads* and was a collaborative piece made with my mum. Together we threaded drying rowan berries onto red thread and suspended it from a naturally orange two-metre-long bramble I had found discarded by the railway bridge that had once been the canal used to ferry oak from North Wood to Deptford. This constellation was suspended against the same blue fabric.

The rest of the show featured new work in glass and photographic prints. *Rubus* was installed high up on an irregular, protruding corner of the gallery and easily overlooked. It is a bramble cast using an experimental glass made using seaweed as a flux, rather than the reliable acid green leaded glass that I used for my other casts. On the adjacent wall were a series of photographic prints titled *Ph(y)toforms*. Images created in the photographic darkroom processing my collection of *SLIDES* through a colour

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<sup>4</sup> Even the invitation to show at Seager felt tied into the story. From March I rented a studio in East London. The journey there required squeezing myself between unhappy commuters and travelling into the city for 40 minutes. This period coincided with a personal winter - a moment where nothing seemed to flow despite spring slowly blooming behind the train windows. In mid-May I saw an advert for a studio in Forest Hill, in the very centre of *Ghostwood*, I called immediately and moved into my miniature space in June. Two days into making it in the new studio I received an invitation to exhibit at Seager. Irina, the gallerist, had remembered my work about the Great North Wood from my MA and wanted to program a show to coincide with the annual Deptford X Arts Festival. The myth made itself.

enlarger. The resulting images are “negatives” of the miniature collages that survive encased in 35mm photographic slides. What look like miniature landscapes as petals take on a cosmic quality when transformed in the darkroom.

The second room was dedicated to new work in glass. I exhibited seven small tablets, each named after the plant that was encased, and three large tablets, titled: *Calcination* (glass, horsetail, mugwort, St. John’s wort, flame acanthus), *As Above, So Below* (glass, horsetail, mugwort, St. John’s wort) and *Moon-White Water* (mugwort sprigs, bramble shoots, St John’s wort flowers) each approximately 50 x 40 cm.

The final piece was a photograph titled *Eternal Dew*. It was the oldest piece in the show, created at the very beginning of 2022 and documents a moment of change in my practice. The image is a still life. One of grassland plants hanging from phantom threads, red in colour and fixed to something out of frame. The plants glisten in the photograph as though wet. They had each been coated in resin, a material I was drawn to for its luminous quality but discarded due to its toxic and polluting nature. This piece felt important to include in the mapping and myth-work of the exhibition as it marks a moment where I realised I wanted to work with glass.

Visitors to the exhibition would encounter the projection from *Chemia* on the street outside the gallery, the work calling in an audience as I had been called to the woods. This site-responsive composition was the inspiration for the performance lecture *Tales from Ghostwood* that was first performed at the Art History Association’s 25th Annual Conference as part of the workshop *Activations in Art, Esotericism and The Ecological Imagination* that accompanied the session ‘Art, Esotericism and the Ecological Imagination’ co-convened by Dr Michelle Foot and myself, and was later included in the Barbican’s spring programme, *Concrete Garden: May Day*. *Tales from Ghostwood* draws together my work in writing, glass and performance. Using *Tablets* as lecture slides, I enter into the story of my encounter with Ghostwood following the structure of the 10 vegetal guides.

The project has reached audiences further afield. In November I travelled to Venice for the *Aesthetics of Esoteric Practices* symposium hosted at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. Moving slowly by train, grounded in earth and rail, I witnessed birch and pine flicker behind the glass. Venice offered a stark contrast to Ghostwood’s wooded landscape but mirrored its nature as a site made up of patches. I found myself in another spectral city floating atop precarious watery futures.

On returning to Ghostwood, my myth-work continued, whilst writing this text, I supported my parents in moving out of our family home that lies within the boundaries of the woods. I have attempted to conjure through writing the vast scope of *Becoming Ghostwood* by tracing key moments that reveal themselves to me when I reflect on the project. It is ever evolving. Like the cast objects retrieved from wax and flame, or the monthly updates shaped by lunation and leaf-fall, this text emerges as documentation and spell-work, a means of closing the portal and letting the woods recede, if only for a moment.



**Figure 26.** Artist holding Tablet, Seager Gallery, autumn 2024. Image credit, Louis Caro.

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## Deep Mapping the Art School: Creative Education and the Spirit of Place

Stephen Felmingham

*The houses are all gone under the sea.  
The dancers are all gone under the hill.*  
(T.S. Eliot 2001: 16)

### Abstract

This article reflects on the relationship between artistic education, place, and esoteric practice through the context of the RENSEP Artist's Award residency at Arts University Plymouth. Drawing on the concept of deep mapping, it explores the historical, cultural, and spiritual layers of the site surrounding the art school, tracing its transformation from woodland and religious space to urban environment. The article situates Natasha Moody's *Ghostwood* project within this layered landscape and considers how artistic practice can engage with the "spirit of place" (*genius loci*). Through references to psycho-geography, cultural history, and ecological thought, it examines how creative education can respond to the material and spectral dimensions of place. The text argues that the art school can function as a site of encounter between past and present, material and intangible, fostering practices attentive to memory, environment, and esoteric knowledge.

### Keywords

Deep mapping; art education; genius loci; psycho-geography; place; esotericism; ecology; Ghostwood.

Artist Natasha V. Moody won the Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices (RENSEP) Artist's Award in January 2024 with her project, 'Ghosts of the Great North Wood: Alchemising Ecological Grief, subsequently entitled *Ghostwood*. Awarded in partnership with Arts University Plymouth, the RENSEP Artist's Award aims to foster new research at the intersection of artistic and esoteric practices. Natasha, chosen by a panel with specialist art and curatorial expertise representing both RENSEP and Arts University Plymouth, received funding as well as becoming a Creative Associate of Arts University Plymouth, giving access to production facilities, equipment, support and mentoring to create work with the University.

Her project interrogates the intersection of art, ecology and the esoteric and examines the role of esoteric practice in the face of anthropocentric poly-crisis. Natasha uses alchemy as a lens to consider our human relationship to the natural world, exploring the archetypal forest as alchemical space and the practice of conjuring ghosts of lost landscapes. Working in an unfamiliar city and our art school environment, she produced some extraordinary works through the meeting of her sensibility, the workshop resources and technical mentoring – a singular image from her work shows her holding aloft her green glass bramble in an almost triumphant gesture, signalling the difficulty in its making, but also a drawing forth like an Arthurian sword from the complex layering of its thematics.

An artist residency is a complex space to work in for any practitioner, and in Natasha's case this is further complicated by her relationship to the natural world and a sensitive response to what we may term here 'deep place'. Her original concept – to draw out from the urban landscape the echoes, griefs and shadows of ancient forest, existing in latent form in strata beneath the city – has led me to questions about the place of the art school which has been the context of her residency: its influence not only in her work but also in the community that is the Arts University. My question has been prompted by Natasha's practice but also moved more widely to interrogate the presence of the Arts University in its location in the city, to draw some inferences more generally about the development of art schools and creativity within a spirit of place (or *genius loci*). To tell this story, I want to bring to bear the concept of *deep mapping*, to weave together elements of social, geographical and historical material to form what we may call an intuitive history. As cultural geographer Karen Till says of the act of deep mapping:

“...one seeks to follow the multiple spatial-temporal pathways of the thing and see what happens when material and spectral traces (remnants, clues, imprints, routines, *Spuren*, silences) are tracked; when (and where) the matter, places, and human and non-human lives that went into the making of the thing are recognized; and when the peoples, institutions, places, and environments that have in some way been affected by its presence in the world are respected” (Till 2010: 3).

Deep mapping draws its historical antecedents from the practice of psycho-geography, the study of how geographical environments, particularly urban spaces, affect people's emotions and behaviour. It involves exploring the relationship between place and the human psyche, often through practices like aimless wandering (*dérive*) and re-imagining familiar surroundings. Essentially a process of forming an understanding of how the built environment shapes our thoughts, feelings, and actions, Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International movement in the 1950s, coined the term *psycho-geography* to mean: “The study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and

behaviour of individuals” (Debord 1981:1). Later this practice entered the work of seminal cultural practitioners including Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Patrick Keiller and W. G. Sebald. It is this weaving of social, historical and vernacular sources that characterises deep mapping and arguably provides a basis to discuss the relationship of creative education to its place, taking as its exemplar Plymouth in South West England.

Walking the pavements of the area around the Arts University, loosely bounded by Friary Court, Ebrington St and Charles Cross, is to experience those anonymous edges of a city where residential districts start to give way to the beginnings of light industry, here characterised by furniture shops, tyre garages, student halls and the Friary Mill retail park – with glimpses through low-rise blocks and rooflines of the white yacht masts and grey water of the harbour below. Walking back towards the city centre the ruined church of Charles Cross emerges from the centre of the relentless arterial traffic on the roundabout. Surrounded on its island by meadow grasses and mature trees (from time to time populated by clouds of noisy green parrots) the roofless and windowless ruin, burnt out by incendiary bombs in the Plymouth Blitz of 1941, sits inaccessibly in memoriam for the civilian deaths in the city, while framed by the explosive post-modern architectural extravaganza of the Drake Circus shopping mall. For our purposes, however, this fragment of rurality is an indication of some of the qualities of the land that once existed here, an echo of the ancient forest still given space to thrive in that curious non-place of the roundabout island, the road camber built up around it so the church and land appear sunken. In some function of ecological grief, the trees at some states of light and in the evenings conjure up a country churchyard, and this is the first strand of the spirit of place that makes up the locality of the art school.

Until the tenth century, Plymouth was characterised by a well-wooded landscape with extensive areas of deciduous and coniferous woodland on the slopes of the valleys, particularly around the rivers Plym and Tamar. The valleys were steep-sided and V-shaped, formed by the rivers and their tributaries with many smaller woodlands, copses, and hedgerow trees. It is notable in terms of Natasha’s workshops with our postgraduate students that attuned them to the emergent plant life of the city, that the echoes of the ancient forest are more than imaginary. The area within half a mile of the University and including its site formed a plateau, at the foot of Tothill (*tot* being Saxon for ‘beacon’) running east to west, forming a natural broad level plain before the land fell away to the south and the natural harbour. Originally referred to as Sudtone (South Farm) in the Domesday Book of 1086, the area that would become Plymouth began as farmland on a small peninsula at the mouth of the River Plym, later to become Sutton Harbour.

By 1296, a Carmelite Priory was established on this level site, by now outside of the city wall. The Carmelite order traces its roots to hermits who lived on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land (now Northern Israel) in the 12th and 13th centuries (contemporaneous with the Plymouth friary) as the Carmelites spread across Europe via the Crusades and became one of the four great mendicant orders – primarily Catholic religious orders that have vowed for their male members a lifestyle of poverty, travelling and living in urban areas for purposes of preaching, evangelisation and ministry. At this point in the 13th century these Carmelites of the Ancient Observance made the first church that would be established here. The church was substantial, around 170 ft in length, with the cloister garth of 72 feet square and a tower at the west end surmounted by a tall spire. A pond lay along the east side, and at the west end of the church was the main gatehouse, set in the precinct wall. The vision here is of a thriving friary, with gardens, pasture and grounds stretching across the land north of the city wall including what is now Charles Cross. In topographical maps of the fifteenth century

the rounded tower with its spire and the cloister buildings appear as distinct landmarks at the head of Sutton Harbour. The Plymouth White Friars remained here for two and a half centuries until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538, when the population had dwindled to only five friars still in orders. The history of Plymouth as a city is characterised by the development and later entire sweeping away of layers of significant history, either by war, demolition or neglect. The Friary, once a dominating presence to the north of the city wall, was left to the common fate of many following the Dissolution, when many monastic buildings were destroyed, dismantled, or repurposed. Its uses are not recorded in the three hundred years to the advent of the railways, when in 1878, as part of the Victorian boom in railway building, Friary Station was opened to serve the London and South Western Railway – entirely levelling the site under track and station buildings.

However, before we arrive at this point in the 19th century, there is more of a case to be made for the area around the art school as a resonant place for creativity as we walk back up towards Charles Cross roundabout. The Friary church was likely still in ruinous existence at the point in the mid-seventeenth century when Charles Church was conceived. Born out of religious and political tensions, King Charles I granted permission for its construction in 1641 amidst a backdrop of theological disputes between the Anglican Church and the Puritan community of Plymouth. The plot of land first sited close to Sutton Pool was unsuitable as the extended parish boundaries would make it less accessible, so a second plot of an acre was found, just west of the Friary lands and given to the church by one William Warren, who received both a burial plot and a seat inside the church (it is notable that the Warren family name is key part of the American origin story, with one Richard Warren one of the passengers on the pilgrim ship and a signatory of the Mayflower Compact) It was well located for the houses of the parish and had its connection to the spiritual context of the Friary grounds. This new church was to serve as a spiritual beacon, dividing the old parish of St Andrew's and symbolising the city's growth and diversity. Building commenced swiftly but was interrupted by the English Civil War, during which Plymouth sided with the Parliamentarians. The incomplete church even served as a stable during the siege of the city and in early maps the church is represented as roofless and without its spire, a cipher of what was to come later in its twentieth-century history, what land artist Robert Smithson might call a "ruin in reverse" (Smithson 1967:49). Despite these challenges, construction resumed after the war, and by 1657, the church was finally completed. Its Gothic style, characterised by a west tower and a striking spire, made it a prominent landmark in Plymouth, replacing the Friary as the spiritual focus north of the city wall. The church, its grounds and burial plots form the ecclesiastical context for the streets and squares that developed around it over the subsequent three hundred years, before the devastation of the twentieth century.

Placemaking is often shaped by cultural practices that connect our social lives to both the past and the future. When we care for places, we begin to recognise how traces of the past, what might be called "ghosts," continue to influence our lives and environments. Thinkers like Michel de Certeau, Luce Girard, and Pierre Mayol suggest that all places are, in a sense, "haunted by these lingering presences" (de Certeau 1998: 143). It is also the case that, as Donna Haraway suggests, the world is not simply raw material for human use. She argues that the world itself has agency – it actively participates in shaping how we understand and engage with it in the idea of a "power-charged social relation of conversation" (Haraway 1991: 198). For our purposes an important node of agency lies fifty yards from the current campus, a deep connection to an art school buried deep beneath the tarmac of the Charles Cross roundabout, now used by forty thousand cars a day.

City history describes the original Plymouth School of Art opening in 1856 in Princess Square, further to the south under what is now the modernist City Council House. Named after a visit by Princess Victoria, who later became Queen Victoria, the School of Art was opened in this civic centre, alongside other government departments, such as the Ministry of Pensions, the Plymouth Athenaeum and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries designed by architect John Foulston. Behind its impressive facade the School had special rooms devoted to antiques, life and still life as well as painting in oil and watercolours, carving, modelling in clay and other technical arts initiated by the Science and Art department, South Kensington, London. Described then as one of the finest and most complete devoted to art work in the western counties, the new art school embraced the architectural potential to be found in the synthesis of the functional requirement for the provision of plentiful light and air, with the desire for an appropriate formal expression for a new kind of public building (supported by local rates), properly fit for its place in the civic heart of the city. However, it was not to last – within 35 years it was already destined to move to the Victorian Jubilee Memorial Science, Art and Technical School further to the east in Paradise Road, Devonport. What is significant to this exploration of place is the re-purposing of the old Primitive Methodist Chapel in Ebrington St, marked on the 1873–88 ordnance survey map as ‘School of Art’. It is likely that this building, in the curtilage of the Charles Church, was used until the move to Devonport in 1892 thus representing the connection to the current location of the Arts University across the street.

Well-documented elsewhere is the devastating impact of the Plymouth Blitz during the Second World War. Plymouth was described by poet André Savignon in 1941 as a “town that was wasting away in reddish trails of smoke, only a few citizens wandered: the others were still in hiding; or lay, all distress ended, under the ruins” (Gill 1993: 261) with Charles Church destroyed by incendiaries on the nights of 20–21 March 1941, returning once more to its roofless state. After the war, the area surrounding the church, including the Primitive Methodist Chapel, was cleared for the new Abercrombie plan, a bold, post-World War II reconstruction plan created by Sir Patrick Abercrombie and James Paton Watson in 1943. The plan tightly wrapped the main easterly route into the city around the church and graveyard while levelling the small streets and buildings towards a vision of building the new postwar Britain.

Cultural economist Marilena Vecco has written on the “threefold movement of the spirit of place” referring us to a framework for understanding how the spirit of a place (*genius loci*) is engaged with and transformed. It involves interpretation, creativity, and resilience. She expresses the spirit of place as:

“the intangible quality of a material place, perceived both physically and spiritually. It reveals itself through visible, tangible and perceivable non-material features... *genius loci* is a signifier of a process that is happening and cannot be intentionally created” (Vecco 2020: 225).

Her framework suggests that a deeper understanding of a place, its history, and its unique characteristics can spark creative responses and actions that strengthen the place’s identity and promote its well-being. Interpreting place involves actively understanding its history, culture, and unique characteristics while recognising its intangible qualities. Inspired by interpretation, creativity involves generating new ideas, designs, or actions that respond to the spirit of the place. The final stage focuses on building the capacity of the place to withstand change and maintain its unique character. This can involve protecting natural and cultural heritage, promoting social well-

being, and fostering a sense of belonging. This threefold process is not linear but rather a dynamic cycle, where interpretation leads to creativity, which in turn contributes to resilience, and this resilience further informs future interpretations. This approach emphasises the interconnectedness of the tangible and intangible aspects of a place and highlights the importance of human agency in shaping its future.

If we understand places as thresholds – spaces where the living can connect with the voices, memories, and legacies of those who came before – then caring for a place also means making room for its spectral traces. Philosopher Edward Casey calls these lingering elements the “unresolved remainders of memory” (Casey 2000: 266), experiences and emotions that lie outside of our conscious awareness and are not fully captured by official narratives or memorials. These remainders shape the social reality of a place. They create emotional and symbolic layers that deepen how people feel connected to where they live. Thus, caring for place involves an ethical relationship with the spectral. It means acknowledging that past presences still inhabit our world in meaningful ways, even if they exist just beyond the edges of everyday life.

For Natasha Moody this means “sensing lost knowledge, digging for the lost within and learning to trust my intuition” (Moody 2024: 2). For the Arts University, this involves a profound connection with caring, kindness and authenticity as an essential function of its creative education, on a site which, as we have seen, is underwritten by its spirituality, trauma and intangible heritage. The art students are working in what Lucy Rose Sollit calls a ‘thin place’, a liminal site in the landscape or moment where it is possible to walk in the physical and the spiritual worlds simultaneously, while often producing work deeply connected to creative expressions of hope for an ethical, sustainable future in the context of environmental breakdown. Sollit expresses this well in her framework of the Synthetic Sacred:

“The role of artists is to take us to thin places. To shine light on contemporary experience and explore the meaning and implications of the past and futures enfolded within it. If done with purpose (not just performatively), art can be a site of sacred encounters that are grounded in the mystery and uncertainty of the synthetic present. These encounters can enable us to feel fear in a safe way and hopefully reconfigure the fear into a new understanding, bringing clarity, catharsis, and hope” (Moody 2024: 2).

This exercise in deep mapping, seeking to encompass over a thousand years of human occupation of the site of the art school, is also, in strict terms, an essaying, that is derived from the French *essai* – a trial, attempt, or essay – which in turn derives from the Latin *exagium*, or weighing. As Iain Biggs puts it, “deep mapping appears...as a lived, experimental essaying of ‘place’ that simultaneously ‘essays’ and ‘assays’ it. It does so through imaginative juxtaposition and interweaving of distinct aesthetic approaches and documentary perspectives” (Biggs 2010: 1). Inevitably limited in its scope, this essaying of the occupation of the place of the art school has sought to begin the process of deep mapping, opening lines of enquiry for arts education more generally but also to give context to Natasha Moody’s remarkable body of work, as art students and artists continue to work and research in this resonant place.

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## **Ghosts of the Great Northwood: An Interview with Artist Natasha V. Moody**

Natasha V. Moody, in conversation with Judith Noble (Arts University Plymouth), Bernd-Christian Otto (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) and Andrea Centore (Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices)

### **Abstract**

The following interview between Natasha V. Moody, Judith Noble, Bernd-Christian Otto and Andrea Centore took place on January 30, 2025 via Zoom and was transcribed with the support of the Center for Advanced Studies 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg.

The conversation centres on Moody's completion of the first RENSEP Artist's Award and focuses on her project *Ghosts of the Great Northwood: Alchemising Ecological Grief*. Exploring the intersections of artistic practice, esotericism, ecology, and contemporary understandings of the more-than-human world, the interview addresses artistic processes of material transformation, encounters with landscapes and plants, experiences of inspiration and agency, and the role of attention, imagination, and embodied participation in artistic and esoteric practice.

The discussion further considers broader questions concerning artistic research, mediumship, ecological awareness, and the status of artworks as potentially efficacious or enchanted objects. In doing so, it offers a rare first-person account of how a contemporary artist conceptualizes the relationship between artistic creation, magical practice, and encounters with non-human agencies. Beyond documenting the outcomes of the RENSEP Artist's Award, the interview contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of esoteric practices in contemporary art and the methodological significance of practitioner perspectives for the study of lived esotericism.

### **Keywords**

Esoteric practices; contemporary art; artist-practitioner; ecological grief; materiality; mediumship; more-than-human; contemporary esotericism.

**Judith Noble**

My name is Judith Noble, Professor of Film and the Occult Arts, University of Plymouth, UK. It's my great pleasure to introduce artist Natasha Moody, the recipient of the first RENSEP Artist's Award.

Natasha, you received this award in January 2024. Perhaps you could outline for us a little about how that process came about and how the award has worked for you.

**Natasha Moody**

Absolutely.

The project I applied to the award with was called *Ghosts of the Great Northwood: Alchemising Ecological Grief*. It investigates the layered realms of art, ecology, and esotericism.

I had a specific focus on an urbanised woodland in southeast London, which used to be known as the Great North Wood. I looked at this space as a kind of archetypal forest or cultural container—almost as a proxy for an alchemical vessel.

This urban site became a mythological and fantastical site of transformation, magic, horror, and healing. All of this revolves around investigating, through both artistic and esoteric practice, how we can navigate times of ecological change and ecological crisis.

**Judith Noble**

OK. So you began the work at the beginning of 2024? And I think in terms of the work produced, you began to use new processes and media that you were able to introduce into the work that you hadn't had the opportunity to work with before.

**Natasha Moody**

Yeah.

**Judith Noble**

How did that happen?

**Natasha Moody**

I was investigating casting as an artistic method of exploring what a lost landscape might be. I used glass and metal as materials to transform plant matter and other items found in the landscape into art objects.

Each month, I followed a different plant as a guide through the Great North Wood. This was structured as a series, with each plant corresponding to a different lunation. I examined the symbolism of each plant—not only referencing existing meanings but also creating my own mythologies around them.

A particularly exciting aspect of this ten-month process was participating in two material and production residencies at Arts University Plymouth. These allowed me to put my ideas of transformation into actual material practice.

In March, I went to Arts University Plymouth and began learning electroforming and glass casting—specifically kiln-form casting. I used a technique similar to lost-wax casting, but instead of wax, I

worked with bramble stems and plant matter. I took real objects from the natural world and transformed them into glass or metal artworks.

I returned in September to continue exploring glass as a material and its connection to transformation in alchemy. This second residency resulted in the creation of a new series of artworks that I've titled Tablets that I intend to develop into a series of oracle cards that will guide viewers through another telling of my experience conjuring from The Great North Wood. The production of this new body of work culminated in my debut solo exhibition titled *The Living Light of Other Worlds* at SEAGER Gallery in Deptford in October 2024. Additionally, I presented my work at the Aesthetics of Esoteric Practices Conference at the Senior Foundation and spoke to MA Art History and Culture students about the development of my project.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

What kind of students? Where was that?

**Natasha Moody**

MA Art History at Edinburgh University.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Edinburgh, OK.

**Natasha Moody**

Yes. They have a course called Art and Occultism in the Long Nineteenth Century.

I was invited as an artist to provide a perspective on how the influence of occulture in the Long 19th Century might extend into the present—what it means for art history and time slips to still be relevant, and why it's important for students to study esoteric practices from that period in relation to contemporary contexts.

**Judith Noble**

Both art and esoteric practices change the practitioner. Could you say something about how this award period and the process of creating new work, both as art and research, have affected your development as an artist and an esoteric practitioner?

**Natasha Moody**

It's definitely been a year of initiation—exploring what it means to be both an artist and a practitioner of esoteric practices. It's such a vast discipline, and it has been very interesting to situate myself within both historical and contemporary practice.

At the beginning of the project, I would have been very adamant that esoteric and artistic practice are one and the same. However, as the year has progressed and I have devoted myself to being more intentional—both in practising and in questioning what an esoteric practice might be within the context of my work—I've realized that, for me, esoteric practice is one of encounter and attention. That, in turn, informs how I process and approach making artworks through artistic and material practice.

When engaging in esoteric practice, it often feels like slipping into another world. From the outside, it may look as though I am simply walking familiar streets, following a habitual route. But in reality, it is much more than that—it is a search for expanded ideas of knowledge, truth, and wisdom within the urban natural world and the surviving remnants of the ancient woodland I have been exploring over the past year.

As I walk these familiar routes, I allow my attention to expand beyond myself. I begin noticing patterns, recognizing other beings—mainly plants—and naming and greeting them. I observe the interactions between the vegetal world and the man-made landscape. I let myself merge with my surroundings, listening to what might be called the truths of an entangled existence. Humans are not separate, exceptional beings standing apart from the rest of the world; we are part of a deeply interconnected ecological network.

These acts of attention—of allowing oneself to dissolve into one’s surroundings—are crucial. They cultivate care and presence at a time when we are collectively experiencing mass extinction, climate change, and extreme weather events across the globe. These environmental crises, in turn, impact the political and economic structures of our world.

### **Judith Noble**

So if we focus a little on the interaction between art and esoteric practice—this award comes at a time when the esoteric, the magical, and the non-anthropocentric, the more-than-human, have become central themes in contemporary art practice.

For example, this very week marks the opening of the first retrospective of the work of Ithell Colquhoun—undoubtedly one of the greatest occultists and artists of the 20th century, for whom art and esoteric practice were indivisible. I also think of filmmaker Maya Deren, who defined herself as an “artist magician.” In 1944, she wrote that the role of the artist magician is to travel into the other world, to have encounters beyond the everyday, beyond common understanding, and then to return and make those experiences intelligible to others.

This has become a major focus in contemporary art. It also raises interesting questions for researchers of esoteric practice, who are used to analyzing and defining how such practices work in order to make them comprehensible. I wonder if we could explore those ideas further.

### **Judith Noble**

For instance, in my own work, I might describe what I do as encounters with otherworldly beings. By putting myself in a trance state—through journeying in a particular, deeply resonant landscape—contact happens. And that contact is undoubtedly external.

I wonder if we could focus on that a little and discuss how, if you can, this encounter with the entangled roots of the woodland and the beings beyond the human in the landscape actually works. How do you experience and facilitate that process?

**Natasha Moody**

I think it's interesting. For me, there's less focus on turning inward as a route to that encounter. It's not about closing everything off and looking inside to connect. Rather, it's a practice of expanding my awareness and attention—to both the natural and human world around me—finding that slip space in an expanded state of attention.

So, for me, this is very much a process of attuning to my surroundings, especially when I'm out in this landscape that both does and doesn't exist. Imagination also plays a really important part in that, leading me into a space of world-building and speculative history or future-making as well.

I think there are almost parallels here with the history of Western esotericism. There have been many points where there is a kind of confusion between what is a true source and what is an imagined one—what is actually medieval versus what was thought to be an original truth coming down from God. That interplay—between looking at what does exist in the history of a space, weaving my own interpretations into it, incorporating folklore, and embodying that space—is what really allows me to slip into that other realm, where I can receive information from this entangled world and network that lies beyond.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Can I ask something?

**Judith Noble**

Go ahead.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

I try to put myself in your shoes, and I realize I don't have a complete picture. Would you say this is a different state of mind you can switch into?

There are two ways of walking the street: one is habitual, as you said, but then there's a conscious effort to open up awareness. Is this a deliberate switch? Is it a capacity you've always had, maybe even as a child? Does it feel like a tangible shift in your state of mind? Or is it accompanied by specific practices—like breathing or focusing? You mentioned focus and attention multiple times, so I wonder what actually happens in that moment.

You also used the words imagination, history, and information. These seem like distinct aspects of your process. Do you receive information from a plant, for example? Do you get into contact with your surroundings in a way that provides information? Is this like what Judith described—communication with the more-than-human world?

I also assume you do research—studying plants, places, and history—so there's a cognitive aspect as well. I'd like to disentangle these elements to better understand what's really happening. Does that make sense?

**Natasha Moody**

Yes, there's a lot to unpack there.

To start with your question about state of mind—when I’m walking through what I’ve begun calling *Ghostwood*, it feels like I’m not just walking in the history of the Great North Wood, but slipping into a place where that history becomes more palpable. This happens through human markers in the landscape as well as the presence of plants that have existed there for centuries.

For instance, in Sydenham Hill Woods, the largest remaining patch of the Great North Wood, there are still English bluebells and wood anemones growing. Their presence signals that the underground ecological network has remained intact for long enough to categorize the area as ancient woodland. Observing these aspects of the landscape allows me to engage with it imaginatively—thinking of time as less linear, as layered and accessible through an altered state of perception.

As for whether this is something I’ve always experienced—I do think I’ve always been predisposed to this way of interacting with the world, particularly with the more-than-human elements of it. I’ve been enchanted by the ridges that run from Deptford down to Croydon, which form the Great Northwood, since I was small.

But over the past year, through the practice of writing about and following a different plant each month, I’ve started to understand that this ability to slip into another place can be cultivated. It’s not just a given. That said, I don’t necessarily have strict rituals or incantations to enter that state—it’s more fluid. It’s not like pressing a button; it’s something my body leads me into, a kind of surrender that allows me to explore layered histories and slip spaces between the human and more-than-human worlds.

### **Judith Noble**

If I could come in at that point—I find what you just said very interesting. I think my own magical practice began many, many years ago when I wanted to critique the idea, inherited from patriarchal monotheistic religions, that the mind and the body are two completely separate entities. The notion that we think with one, feel with the other, and never the twain shall meet has all sorts of implications—particularly for women practicing magic, since their bodies, within patriarchy, have been defined in a completely different way.

I guess that thinking about healing the split between the mind and the body, and using what we might call a unified mind-body—a single being—to approach the esoteric and magical, might be one of the approaches you’re talking about here. We can’t say these aspects of it are done with the mind and these aspects with the body. It seems to me that in what you describe, you are using the unity of both to approach what has traditionally been called the Otherworld, the spirit world, or the realm where the more-than-human operates. Would you say that’s accurate?

### **Natasha Moody**

Definitely. And I really like what you’re saying about healing a split, because I think that’s exactly what I’m interested in through a combined esoteric-ecological practice. It’s about remedying the split that we have imposed on ourselves for hundreds of years—human exceptionalism, the divide between nature and culture, the feminine and the masculine, the irrational and the rational.

Approaching all of these binaries with the understanding that not everything is linear—indeed, that very little is—makes much more sense to me as someone who doesn't think in straight lines. The idea that we wouldn't just divide things down the middle resonates with me. Healing this split between the mind and body, as well as between the human and the more-than-human world, is key. It's about understanding that we are part of the more-than-human world, even if that's a strange thing to say.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

What I find interesting—if I may reinterpret this—is that you seem to have quite porous boundaries. While some people may need practices or rituals to open up to the more-than-human, you seem to make that switch very easily. You hardly need effort to shift your perspective.

Some might call this the “magic of a hollow hand.” Some need structured practices and rituals; others have a natural capacity to open up—to see or hear spirits, or to communicate with plants.

So my question is still about the information aspect. You said you make the switch easily, opening up to an entangled landscape. But then you mentioned that you receive information from the plants themselves. How does that play out?

There are various possibilities: you might hear something, see something through an inner vision—passive imagination—or you might experience a direct, eidetic understanding, as if the plant communicates with your mind directly.

I'm curious about how this concretely manifests. In one of your reports, you also mentioned encountering other types of spirits—not just plant spirits, but possibly forest spirits or local spirits. How do these presences manifest in your personal experience?

**Natasha Moody**

I think the question of how I receive information—or what exactly that information is—is really interesting. A big part of becoming more intentional about this way of interacting with the world, with my surroundings, is reflecting on that very question.

This applies not just to my experiences in London, but also during my residencies in Plymouth, where I spent a lot of time just across the river in Cornwall. It's worth noting that Ithell Colquhoun also spent a great deal of time there. I had many magical encounters in that landscape as well.

Last year, I spent a lot of time in both an urban forest and by the sea—something quite unusual for me, as I've never really been drawn to the sea. I'm much more a person of the woods.

And I think what's been really interesting is that some of the information I've been receiving is obviously a mixture. How to explain it—I think I haven't necessarily been going into places with direct questions about what the land necessarily needs to say. I think that's something that's coming. But in the period that I've been working on this project and trying to make sense of what my esoteric practice is in relation to my upbringing, it has been more about understanding an internal landscape through the external landscape.

I'm not contradicting what I said earlier about my practice being one of flowing outwards, but the information I've been receiving has been much more about where I stand in that and how I can be—

again, a loaded term—but how I can be a medium between these two spaces. This project is far from over. I find moments where I read writing I did four years ago about the Great Northwood, and it has started to manifest in offshoots of this project. I see this looping between different parts of my thinking.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

The question was: how do you experience an information transfer within? Does it appear as a thought? Do you get goosebumps?

**Judith Noble**

Do they talk to you?

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Do you hear things? Plant language?

**Natasha Moody**

I think it's almost like receiving physical offerings, like gifts. There were moments when I was walking around Mount Edgecombe Country Park in Cornwall, just over the river from Plymouth, and I was thinking deeply about what it means to interact with the spirit world. I found a fairy-like object—it was a piece of elm, shaped almost like a stick with four wings. It felt like a token, a small gift from the landscape at that moment, as if to say, 'You're in the right place to be thinking about these encounters.' That felt like a very clear message, almost like something from a picture book.

But there are also more subtle moments—like when a specific plant calls out. There was one large tree growing on a raised part of land next to a path, and I felt drawn to it. I didn't know what I would be interacting with, but I had to go there. When I climbed up and explored the tree, I found these delicate skeletal leaves cradled in the branches. It felt like another confirmation, another moment of recognition.

Often, I internally speak to the plants—I say hello, I introduce myself. I engage in communion in a human way. And when I bring these found objects back into the workshop, they transform into magical or artistic objects—changeling objects. That's part of the information I receive.

It's been incredibly valuable to have the opportunity, through RENSEP and AUP, to take these experiences seriously—to think about them academically and genuinely, without shying away from the irrationality of magical or esoteric practice. When I first encountered esotericism at university, I struggled with this tension. But over the past year, I've cultivated these practices both in my spiritual and artistic work.

Moving forward, I see so much more opportunity to explore. My original questions remain: What can the land teach us about how it is changing? What does it mean for a city to be built over a forest? What does that forest still have to say? This is a long-term project, much longer than I initially anticipated. Perhaps I always knew it would take more than a year, but I now see this first year as a process of conditioning—of understanding my own porosity, and even of learning when to establish boundaries, rather than simply absorbing everything around me.

**Judith Noble**

One of the things that really draws me to this practice—one of the reasons I resonate with it so much—is that there is no preconceived outcome when you embark on it. This is in stark contrast to much of traditional Western magic, which, particularly since the Renaissance, has often been defined as ‘results magic.’

In that tradition, the practitioner has a clear objective, follows precise steps, and expects a specific outcome if they perform the ritual correctly. But what we’re talking about here is a completely different approach—one where the idea of a set outcome is absent. Am I reading that correctly?

**Natasha Moody**

I think that, again, it's not necessarily as simple as that. I think with the walking and exploring of *Ghostwood*, it is better when I go in without a desire for a specific outcome. But when I flip to the artistic practice and enter the studio, I do bring the gifts and objects from my wanderings, and I have a very concrete idea of what I want to make.

I knew, for instance, that I wanted to transform a bramble into a luminous green glass bramble, and I managed to make that happen—I was taught how to do that. I knew I wanted to take something as delicate as a bluebell and create a copy of it in brass, to see how that transformation played out. So, there is the creation of the object itself, which is a goal I set out to achieve.

But then there’s another part of the process—where artistic and esoteric practice begin to meld. This becomes especially relevant in exhibition and sharing. The objects and images I create exist beyond just being art pieces; they interact with each other, forming a space that I think of as suspended, existing outside of conventional art spaces. Even though these are exhibited in gallery settings, I infuse them with a different kind of intention.

I don’t just exhibit artworks—I want them to speak to each other, to cultivate a numinous space. I’ve described this approach before as hierotopic—the creation of a sacred space. The way different objects and elements are arranged, along with the participation of those who enter the space, influences how this numinous or sacred environment is activated.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Can I step in here? I have two separate questions.

One concerns the production of art. Many artists who are interpreted as esoteric artists—including some mentioned by Judith—describe forms of automatic drawing, writing, or channeled creation. Much of this kind of art is interpreted as a form of channelling, as if an external agency possesses the artist and produces the work, with the artist acting as a medium.

You referred to yourself as a medium earlier. So, when you produce something like the glass bramble—which is a highly technical process—when you’re in the studio in Plymouth, do you still feel that inspiration from the more-than-human world in those moments? Or is it a purely technical exercise?

You describe yourself as porous, so perhaps there's always something more happening in your experience, but I wonder how you frame this. Is the production of art itself an inspired process for you?

The second question concerns the exhibition. Other artists have described trying to imbue their exhibition spaces with a certain energy, or even to conjure a spirit into the space. We saw examples of this in Venice—artists who engage in actual conjuration practices before opening their exhibitions to the public.

I get the sense that this is not quite what you meant. But do you have a concrete practice in how you prepare an exhibition space? How would you frame your approach to these two steps—creating the art and creating the exhibition?

**Andrea Centore**

Yes, my question was also about agency, but you have already asked it, so it's okay.

**Dr. Bernd-Christian Otto**

Oh, okay, okay.

**Natasha Moody**

So in relation to external agency, I think for me it's not necessarily just possession, but more of a collaboration between myself and that external something. I don't think I become completely overtaken. Everything I've been talking about—the rest of my understanding—remains. I don't become just a vessel. Certain aspects of me may be more vessel-like in those moments, allowing me to channel, but not in an absolute way.

There are also parts of my art practice that are much more led by automatic means. Something that happens often when I'm walking is that I get swept up in the creation of poems or words. It's a kind of poetic practice that emerges naturally—almost as if I am using myself as a filter to listen to what the landscape is saying, how I am feeling, and what I am projecting onto it. That then comes out as written words, as poetry.

I also have a practice of automatic drawing, which is closely connected to my painting practice. This aspect of my work is still quite personal and not something I've made very public before, but it is becoming increasingly important as I step into the world as a practitioner of esoteric practices.

With the production of artworks, there is often a distinction between moments of inspiration—where it does feel like words or images are coming to me, or ideas for objects or installations arise—and the more technical aspects of making. Gathering plant matter that will eventually become an art object is one thing, but when I am actually working with materials, such as grinding glass, it's not safe to be in a full trance state. That doesn't mean the work isn't inspired by esoteric histories and traditions, but it requires a balance between that inspiration and material focus.

I've been deeply interested in the history of alchemy and what it means for something to be transformed—not just physically, but on a spiritual or soul level. These ideas play an important role in how I create objects. But as Judith mentioned earlier regarding Maya Deren's approach, I don't think

one has to be in an altered state all the time to create something of esoteric or artistic value. You move between these states—you come back and do something with the experience.

When exhibiting, I aim to cultivate a numinous space that conveys the essence of this process. I want to communicate how the production process relates to the gathering and slipping into these other realms at the beginning of the work.

**Andrea Centore**

I just want to ask one question here. You have talked a lot about quiet communions and encounters, but I also feel there is a magical dimension in your work. You are creating objects that are charged with specific experiences and plant materials—materials that are not just any plants, but gifts from spiritual entities or energies that you encounter. This reminds me of the creation of ritual implements, similar to those used in esoteric traditions.

Could you expand a bit on this magical dimension?

**Natasha Moody**

With the creation of ritual implements—I don't know. There have been moments where I approached this project with the intention to create ritual objects or instruments. At times, I've described the sculptures I make as physical spells or sculptural charms. I've looked at many artists and sculptors who work in this way, making charms or talismans.

But I'm not entirely sure that's exactly what my work is, or that this is my exact intention. When I look at alchemical traditions, they certainly inspire how I interact with materials and the gifts I use in my art objects. But I'm not someone who follows a strict, step-by-step esoteric method. In fact, adhering too closely to a predefined structure can sometimes derail me.

When thinking about alchemy as a basis for my artistic practice, it has led me to new approaches—for instance, using the ashes of incinerated brambles to create sculptural tablets. Even in naming them 'tablets,' I reference alchemical traditions. But I haven't progressed beyond the first step of incineration, because each new transformation leads me down an unexpected path. Instead of following the traditional process of multiple burnings, I allow the work to evolve in a way that feels right at that moment.

For me, this hasn't detracted from the esoteric nature of the work. I'm comfortable with having a syncretic, adaptive esoteric art practice that does not strictly adhere to any singular doctrine. My practice responds to the chaotic and layered nature of the world we are trying to make sense of.

**Andrea Centore**

Yes, I guess my question also stems from the way you describe exhibitions as esoteric practice. You are giving the audience an experience—you are having an impact on them. Do you also see the objects you create as being imbued with magical power? Do they have a specific effect or impact on the spectator?

**Judith Noble**

Yes, that was my question too.

**Andrea Centore**

And if that's the case, does it feel empowering to you?

**Natasha Moody**

This is something that is still developing for me, and I think it will continue to do so as I become more confident in these practices. As I become more explicit and grounded in them—when I fully know where I am speaking from—I think my understanding will deepen.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Natasha, do you sense power in the objects? Do you sense a certain energy or power in them?

**Judith Noble**

Do they have souls? Do they have their own spirit?

**Natasha Moody**

I think to make art, you have to imbue the things you create with a sense of soul and purpose. Because I make things in collaboration with what has given me the object I am transforming, these objects hold the power to cultivate and encourage a response from those who view them.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

This is a very intellectual reply. Do you sense the power? Yes or no?

**Natasha Moody**

I do. I do.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

I sense it when I see your objects. I can feel it.

**Judith Noble**

Yes, I think...

**Natasha Moody**

That's what I'm still working on—how to be both critical and immersed in it, how to be vulnerable with it. So, a confident yes that is the answer I want to give. But I am still working through how I can say that from a place where I fully understand it.

**Judith Noble**

If I can make an observation—I think the effectiveness of the work is evident in how people respond to it. Often, it's harder for the artist to recognize this than for the spectator experiencing the work. That may be part of the nature of artistic production.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

That's interesting.

**Judith Noble**

And whether or not the work is efficacious—how it works on the viewer.

**Natasha Moody**

That is the drive. That has always been my intention. If I ever created something that felt like the ultimate, complete work, then there wouldn't be much left to do afterward. I am constantly refining, seeking new elements that speak to me and can then speak to others.

I do get amazing responses to my work—people telling me they feel a kind of power. At an installation I did at Goldsmiths, someone told me they experienced a complete sense of vertigo upon entering the space. The installation had poppy seed heads suspended from red thread in an ellipse, throughout the space there was an audio piece in which I was chanting a distorted Polish fairy-tale lullaby layered with sounds from both urban and natural spaces. Those responses reinforce my belief that I imbue these artworks with power.

**Judith Noble**

Yes, I think artists don't always know this unless someone else tells them.

**Andrea Centore**

I'd like to ask an important question. You said, "I imbue these objects with power," but is it really only you doing that? Or do you feel an external agency at work—something from the spiritual world coming through the cracks, through the gifts that the plants give you?

**Natasha Moody**

Yes, it's that collaboration again. I mentioned it earlier. Recently, I have been working with the seven brambles I created in Plymouth, and I've been anointing them with the enchantress herb tincture that you gave me, Judith. I've been letting these different plant spirits interact with each other. That, in itself, feels like a form of spellwork—creating enchanted objects. The intention behind this process is for that energy to then speak to the next person who encounters the work.

But whether or not it affects people in the way I intended—that is something only they can answer.

**Judith Noble**

What will you do with these objects? Must they be cared for?

I often find that objects imbued with spirit—ones that are, in a way, spirits themselves—sometimes end up in museums. And when I encounter them there, they seem to call out for help, as if they have been abandoned.

So I wonder—what happens to the works once you have made them? How do you care for them?

**Natasha Moody**

I'm very intrigued by the idea of keeping these objects 'alive,' in a sense. So much of what interests me is this combination of past and future, lost or existing landscapes, and finding answers within them. My intention moving forward is to develop a practice of asking more explicit questions—now that I feel more grounded in my own abilities.

What I'd really like to do is create more glass artworks that can be used as divination tools. With the tablets, a project is emerging that will use different plants to create something akin to an oracle deck. These objects could then function as magical or ritual objects. I don't think they are quite there yet,

but that is the direction I am moving toward—blurring the boundary between what is considered a ritual object and what is considered an art object.

I'm also exploring how a divination tablet can be used in an art space to create a feeling of ritual and numinous encounter, outside of the place where the idea first came to me. However, I'm also interested in taking these objects back into their original landscape. That's something I've wanted to do for a while—especially with the transformed metallic ivy leaves and the cloak. This spring, I plan to take them back into the Great North Wood and see what happens when they are returned to their place of origin.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

I think that's a very fitting final thought!

**Natasha Moody**

Thank you.

**Judith Noble**

I think we covered some very interesting ground here.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Yes, I think it was a fascinating conversation. I believe it could be very interesting for other artists to read something like this—where someone opens up and makes the implicit explicit.

I don't know how many people speak openly about these topics, so I think this would be an important achievement—to encourage more artists to open up, explore these boundaries, and engage in these discussions.

**Natasha Moody**

Well, yes—I also wanted to share something. There was a moment in Cornwall, on Ithell Colquhoun's birthday, when I had this very distinct experience. It was my last day in Plymouth, and I walked out to look at Cornwall over the water. There was this cloud rolling over a hill into the river, and in that moment, I felt strongly that I was being guided by Ithell Colquhoun.

Even though I had been reading about her, it wasn't just an intellectual engagement—I felt I was interacting with her spirit at that moment. Later that day, on the train back to London, I saw that Amy Hale had posted an image saying, 'Happy birthday to Ithell Colquhoun.' It would have been her 19th birthday that day.

It was just this undeniable moment of connection—I was with her that morning. I really believe that when we study artists who have had these mediumistic practices and encounters with the spirit world, we can also commune with them.

I think that's really important. Judith, do you feel that as well?

**Judith Noble**

Definitely. And it's fascinating that Ithell Colquhoun serves that function for so many people. A few years ago, I edited a book about her, and one of the key contributions came from a group of artists

who deliberately made new work in Cornwall through encounters with her spirit. They called themselves Ancient Scent—it was a fascinating project.

Yes, I think many artists engage with spirits in this way. I personally do, but I am also fascinated by the way Ithell Colquhoun seems to move between worlds for so many people.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Interesting. One final question—when you go into nature, do you bring your mobile phone with you, or do you leave it at home?

**Natasha Moody**

It's in my pocket.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

OK.

**Natasha Moody**

Oh yeah.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

I would have thought that maybe...

**Natasha Moody**

I think I can abandon it, even though it's with me.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Oh, OK.

**Natasha Moody**

I'm in the city—I need to get home somehow.

**Andrea Centore**

The follow-up question is: is it turned on or off?

**Natasha Moody**

It will be on airplane mode.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

My assumption would be that...

**Judith Noble**

Mine's a camera, you know. I use it as a camera.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Yes, that's the problem, right?

**Judith Noble**

I don't think about it, though—it becomes like a part of my hand.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

Because my assumption would be that, even though it's a device that connects us, it also separates us from the environment, from our surroundings.

**Natasha Moody**

Well, that's the joy of the walk, isn't it? Even though you have it with you, you're not entirely in the space.

**Bernd-Christian Otto**

OK, dear friends and colleagues, thank you for the conversation.

**Judith Noble**

Great. Thank you.

**Andrea Centore**

Thank you very much, Natasha. It was a very insightful conversation.

**Judith Noble**

Thank you, everyone, for all the work that's gone into this. Thank you.





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