

RHONDA WHEATLEY

THERE ARE UNIVERSES...



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

November 9, 2023–February 16, 2024

THERE ARE UNIVERSES...

There Are Universes. . . is created on the premise that humans can only perceive .0035% of the light/energy spectrum, a concept that intrigues Wheatley as both an artist and energy healer. Her practice not only investigates this notion but asserts that there is vastly more to reality than what we can sense physically. The exhibition, through a combination of visual artworks, interactive installations, workshops, and hybrid performances, excavates how we might tap into that other 99.9965% of reality, even if only for a glimpse of its potential. Each of these immersive experiences encourages us to employ our imagination and suggests that we possess senses beyond the physical realm, which can aid us in transcending the limitations of the 0.0035%. We may find ourselves connecting with subterranean realms where crystals flourish, where tree roots and mushroom mycelia establish intricate communication networks, or even attuning ourselves to the earth's rhythmic heartbeat deep below.

RHONDA WHEATLEY

Rhonda Wheatley is a multidisciplinary artist and energy worker/healer who explores consciousness expansion, healing, and transformation via works that are grounded in the speculative and metaphysical. She creates collage paintings, sculptures, installations, text works, soundscapes, spaces, workshops, and interactive performances.

Wheatley's sculptures and installations are attuned to the combined energies and symbolism of their materials—vintage electronics, crystals, and organic and natural materials, including fossils, cicadas, barnacle clusters, moss, and shed snakeskin. For instance, barnacles, which attach to objects or other lifeforms for the duration of their lives, serve as a “glue” that enhances one's ability to adhere to intended life changes. Clock radios reference time manipulation and frequency—moving through states of consciousness—while antennas and crystals amplify intention and intuitive signals.

Wheatley's interactive events create bridges between audiences and her work, from hands-on workshops that delve into journaling, intuition, affirmation writing, and confronting self-doubt to guided meditations, collective and one-on-one intuitive card readings, and her “Energy Prescriptions,” performances, in which she offers intuitive advice one-on-one in response to participants' queries. Ultimately, Wheatley is interested in tapping into the unseen realms to expand possibilities and to help others cultivate self-awareness, authenticity, and radical self-acceptance.

Rhonda Wheatley is a Chicago-based multidisciplinary artist, energy worker, and educator whose installations and interactive projects are grounded in the speculative and metaphysical. Her recent projects include solo shows at Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) and Aurora Public Art and group shows at spaces such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA), the Lubeznik Center for the Arts, DePaul Art Museum, Buffalo AKG Art Museum, and Art League of Houston. She has also performed as part of the MCA's In Progress series, at Gallery 400, the Terrain Biennial, 6018North, and more. As part of her practice, Wheatley seeks to cultivate healing and personal transformation via the workshops she's facilitated with Creative Capital, The University of Chicago, Threewalls, Ox-Bow School of Art, Indiana University, and Chicago Artists Coalition (CAC), to name a few. Additionally, she teaches at HPAC and has taught contemporary art at Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis. Wheatley is a 2023 Jackman Goldwasser Radicle Resident at HPAC, a Loghaven Fellow, and a recipient of CAC's inaugural Coney Family Award and the 3Arts 'Make a Wave' Grant. She earned an MA from DePaul University and a BA from Loyola University, Chicago.

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Empath Protector, 2017, vintage mannequin hand, acrylic paint, fluorite octahedron crystals, wooden beads, 5" x 4" x 9"



Energy Grid for Activating Sweetness in Life [DETAIL], 2019, vintage perfume bottles filled with acrylic paint dyed water, living plants, vintage apothecary bottles, dried flowers, and crystals, 18" x 24"



Energy Grid for Grounding into One's Intuition, 2020, vintage TV antennas, preserved polypore mushrooms, vintage decanter and coffee pots, preserved plants, crystal clusters, fossilized coral, artificial plants, 21" x 24" x 30"



Get Woke to Self Series, 2018, vintage coffee pot, vintage teapot, vintage decanter, resin, moss, crystals, fossils, porcupine quills, sea urchin shells, 4" x 9," 4" x 10," and 10.5" x 6"



Power and Energy Amplifier, 2015, vintage mannequin hand, acrylic paint, barnacle cluster, cholla cactus wood, titanium quartz crystal points, 8 "x 4" x 9"



Trauma Healer, 2017, vintage mannequin hand, acrylic paint, snakeskin, fishbones, seashells, wooden beads, 10" x 4" x 5"



Untitled, 2019, collage, hand-cut vellum and acrylic on canvas, 24" x 20"

INTERVIEW WITH RHONDA WHEATLEY

Conducted by Rachel Manlubatan

Rachel Manlubatan: What first interested you in connecting your art with the speculative, metaphysical, and spiritual? Can you speak on what resources you utilize to inform yourself on such topics?

Rhonda Wheatley: I would say that I have always felt that life can be magical, and my interests in and passion for the speculative, metaphysical, and spiritual have always been at the core of who I am. So bringing these elements into my art practice in a more direct way (I was only hinting at these topics previously) was about making my art more authentic to who I am. I've been journaling since childhood, giving intuitive readings since college, started collecting and working with crystals 18 years ago, and was first trained in several energy healing modalities 14 years ago. My history of first-hand personal experiences and contemplation is my primary resource for my art practice, including physical visual art work, concepts, workshops and performances. For instance, I used my decades of self-healing work as an avid journaler to develop journaling courses while also displaying installations of my journal entries in exhibitions and reading from journals in performances.

To take a step back, during the first 10 years of my art practice I considered my interests in the metaphysical to be largely separate from my art practice, back when I was making solely collage and acrylic based paintings. But at a certain point, I was no longer fulfilled by just making paintings. I needed to bring more of my truest self into the work. I'm a healer. An energy worker. I needed to engage directly with people through my art practice. I erased that separation between the energy-worker-self and the artist-self. I brought my metaphysical interests to the forefront, started using my own self-healing practices to facilitate visual work, interactive installations, performances and workshops that would really

make a positive difference in people's lives.

RM: How do you derive symbolism within vintage electronics, natural matter, and other items? What is your planning process like when you create sculptures and installations based around these materials?

RW: In deriving symbolism from the elements I use in my assemblage sculptures and installations, I draw connections between the properties of the object and the metaphysical purpose of the sculpture or installation. I treat each object, or the components comprising each object, as an ingredient that contributes to the energy of the whole piece. The symbolism is a form of energy and fuel. For instance, sometimes when we talk about our own energy, we talk about what "frequency" we're on. What we're tuned into, and I connect that symbolically with radios which uses frequency to 'tune in' to different stations. I talk about transcending time, i.e., seeing into the future or the past, and clocks are a direct metaphor for movement through time. And I love using vintage objects because they've been deemed obsolete while yet they've been AROUND for a long time and carry decades of energy. I imagine I'm repurposing all that energy into the purpose and functioning of the work. That's the same reason why I love using fossils—they carry hundreds or thousands of years' worth of energy, and I consider that accumulation of energy to be a sort of fuel that gives the objects and installations power. I use barnacle clusters in pieces about personal transformation because in the lifespan of a barnacle, they will at some point stick to an object or another lifeform and remain stuck there for life. One of our challenges when we want to make changes in our lives is that it can be tough to stick to that change. Thus, barnacle clusters bring the energy of adhering to one's intentions. I like to be playful in using my imagination as I collect the objects that I

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use in my installations.

As for my planning process, for most installations I only plan which items to bring with me when I install, and when I arrive to a space to install the work, I make decisions meditatively and in the moment, working with the shelves and pedestals available, typically bringing much more than I need to give myself a range of possibilities to play. I rarely do as much planning as I did for 'There Are Universes . . .' at glass curtain gallery!

RM: What led you to use long-form titles for your pieces? What other media do you use to enhance your artwork?

RW: Well, similar to my response to the previous question about what interested me in connecting the speculative, metaphysical and spiritual to my art, I am a writer--my background is in writing (I never went to art school but always thrived in making art). I earned an MA in Writing and was a freelance writer and editor, mostly in business, doing everything from PR and business-to-business communications to technical writing, destination/tourism writing and more. I love the written word. It was only natural that I'd want to bring writing into my work, to help play up the science-fiction/speculative elements, and beyond explaining my work as one does with an artist statement. I wanted the writing to be an integral part of the art. I consider my long-form titles (which I also refer to as 'accompanying texts,') a way to make a sculpture or installation more interactive, posing questions, whether serious or playful, or providing instructions for engaging with the work metaphysically, through meditation, imagination or writing, for instance. I remember observing a gallery visitor's facial expression change while reading my first ever accompanying text. First, he checked out the sculpture, one of my 'Hybrid Devices' which

consisted of two stacked vintage radios, a reel-to-reel tape recorder, fossilized coral and a vintage TV antenna. His face looked a little curious and perplexed. Then he read the accompanying text, which was about recording over the DNA to erase painful ancestral memories, and he cracked this smile and nodded his head to himself, which I read as, "Yeah, I get it, I dig it!" That show happened to be at glass curtain gallery back in late 2016—'Silos,' a traveling group exhibition curated by Jeffreen Hayes.

In addition to bringing my metaphysical interests and writing into my work, with this solo exhibition at glass curtain gallery, 'There Are Universes . . .', I also took a risk and created my first soundscapes for the show. I do have a background in music, having both taught myself to play piano by ear as a child and played flute in school bands. However, you could describe my current musical abilities as VERY rusty. Over the course of the past year as I prepared for this exhibition, in addition to planning and creating all the physical work, I also started reviving my musical sensibilities and taught myself a few new tricks. I had used chimes and tuning forks in performances and guided meditations in workshops and other events as part of my art practice, but for the two soundscapes I created for "There Are Universes . . ." I went a bit further. I played around with all kinds of sounds in Apple's Garage Band app and my MicroKorg keyboard, and recorded myself playing physical instruments like a Tibetan singing bowl, my flute, chimes, a rain stick and an ocean drum, and combined these recordings with several layers of electronic sounds and nature sounds (like cicada sounds), and while some sounds didn't make the cut (like my flute playing, which I ended up dropping from the final piece!), I ended up with my first soundscapes and included them in both the meditation room and the grounding installation in the

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exhibition. I plan to do a lot more with sound in the future!

RM: How do audiences typically react to the interactive elements of your exhibitions? What do you hope viewers take away from your workshops, guided meditations, tarot readings, and general artist talks?

RW: I think it's easiest to talk about how audiences have engaged with my 'Transmutation Chest' installation, which I exhibited at Gallery 400 at UIC in 2017 and in a solo show at Aurora Public Art in Aurora, Illinois in 2018. The 'Transmutation Chest' consisted of a found rustic reddish brown stained wooden chest with brass accents that sat with the top propped open with crystals and pieces of dried sage in the bottom. Beside it were my hand-written instructions in a space with tables, seating, and paper for journaling and participating in the 'Transmutation Chest' activity. The accompanying text invited visitors to write down one or more things/ circumstances that they wished to release from their lives, and to either fold it up or rip it up and place it in the chest, and to do a sort of visualization ritual to communicate to their subconscious that they were indeed ready to let go. The text also informed them that periodically throughout the exhibition and at the end I would be doing energy work to help each participant in the releasing process. Due to the fact that the chest was always overflowing with folded and ripped papers, I'd say people participated enthusiastically. I also used the chest in workshops held at both galleries, and all participants seemed to approach the activity seriously, taking the time to thoroughly think through and write out their intentions in detail.

Whenever I have group events where we come together and talk about things that a lot of us don't tend to talk about, like self-doubt and

our fears, one thing people soon realize is that they are not alone in dealing with these challenges. Often when someone's dealing with imposter syndrome or the frustration of negative self-concepts, it can feel like they're the only one plagued with self-doubt because nearly everyone else appears to have it all figured out. Well, in my workshops we clear that up first thing when I ask if there's anyone who never deals with self-doubt and NO ONE ever raises their hand. So, I establish that self-doubt is something we ALL deal with, no matter how 'together' we appear to be, which then creates a sense of relief so we can begin discussing healthy ways to confront self-doubt and taking action.

Through the writing exercises, discussions, guided meditations, and other activities in my workshops, I love seeing participants beaming because they've had breakthroughs and realizations, because they have a little bit more clarity, or they feel more centered in their power. Intuitive readings can be quite healing, and I've seen people appear slightly taller as their posture straightens up or they appear more radiant after a reading, having shed a grayness that surrounded their energy beforehand; I've seen others' faces and shoulders lighten up as they'd appear to have dropped a heavy burden after some readings. Whether it's a one-on-one reading or a group event, participants often shed some limitation in their thinking that may have caused stagnation or creative blockages—or the perception of stagnation when in fact their consciousness and bodies are simply demanding REST. I always hope the people who engage with my work and events come away with the intention of being more gentle with themselves while holding themselves accountable. I hope they take away practices they can turn to when needed for grounding and healing when they feel challenged or defeated. And most of all, I hope people

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leave my events with a greater sense of self-acceptance and a strengthened belief in their possibilities.

RM: How do your varying techniques and practices help you understand the human role within our universe? How does your artistic practice help expand your imagination? Do you feel it aids you in understanding the metaphysical?

RW: When I was a very small child—maybe a toddler—I remember having some very advanced thoughts. Like, I knew the universe had ‘secrets’ and I wanted to figure them out. And I knew that was part of my purpose. I wasn’t even tall enough to reach the cookie jar on the kitchen counter, but I knew I wanted to understand these mysteries that I was supposedly too young to even be contemplating! I used to think it was possible for me to figure it all out with enough research and study. But the older I got, with all the exploring and all the books I’d read and courses I’d take, I realized that I couldn’t be certain about much of anything. I started to feel like the old philosophers who said they didn’t know anything. I started to become comfortable with the uncertainty, with having lots of questions and considering the possibilities and the ‘maybies’ that I’d perhaps never have definitive, 100% true answers to. I long ago stopped expecting definitive answers—I’m just evolving my questions about the multitudes of possibilities. My art work is a way for me to play around in this space of uncertainty and my ever evolving questions about the metaphysical, and I love it when others come along for the ride and share where they are in their journey.



THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series and graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: colum.edu/deps

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Glass Curtain Gallery: 1104 S Wabash Ave, First Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

Gallery Hours: Monday–Friday 9 a.m.–5 p.m.