

VOTIVES

SCULPTURES

NANCY AZARA





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Votives Sculptures / Nancy Azara

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To Darla Bjork,
friend, companion, and fellow traveler
over these many years.

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Women Artists,
early-'80s photograph

Introduction

This book presents my journey as an artist spanning over 50 years.

Because I love trees, I started as a wood-carver. As a child, I felt that they spoke to me and comforted me. I continue to feel this way. Much of what I understand about life has come from listening to my inner self during the creative process, and the day-to-day routine of living.

This process of making art is like opening a door for me. You unlock it and push at it and get a glimpse of what is on the other side.

I have taught art for about as long as I've been making it. As a young art student, I was an instructor at the Jewish Guild for the Blind. That experience taught me that we don't always "see" with our eyes, that there is a whole sensate quality to living that is generally ignored.

I began to appreciate that looking at and making art has magical properties and healing qualities inherent in it and that recognizing this as a culture enriches our life immensely.

Today, because the world is changing so rapidly, people seem more responsive to my ideas and to a dialogue. My choice of essayists offers an intergenerational overview, through the voices of three women whose perspectives and opinions I greatly admire. Patricia Watts, curator and founder of ecoartspace, brings her deep commitment to dialogue about art and the environment; Kay Turner, artist and scholar of feminist folk history, performer and lesbian-feminist advocate, brings exacting and insightful questions to our conversation; and Katie Cercone, performance artist and writer, brings a dynamic, youthful, feminist perspective.

This volume coincides with an exhibition of some of my larger works from 2010 to the present, showing at the Carter Burden Gallery in New York (April 28–May 25, 2022). It is also a reflection of a journey that, after half a century, is happily still ongoing.

—NANCY AZARA, 2022

Nancy Azara: Carving Out a Reverential Feminist Space

PATRICIA WATTS

FOR AN ARTIST to choose a medium that can be labeled as craft is a bold statement, especially for Nancy Azara, who has maintained a distinct and lyrical vision as a woman wood-carver for over fifty years, making wall works, standing sculptures, and altars. The artist's votives, or acts of gratitude and devotion, have been made for those she loves and admires, including trees. Modernist predecessors who forged a similar path include Ruth Asawa, who made looped wire hanging sculptures inspired by organic forms in nature, and Barbara Hepworth, who carved space and curves in wood mirroring the earth, sea, and rocks. Azara's work is similarly powerful in its synergistic collaboration with wood. Today, as forests are being cut down and destroyed at record speed—due to resource extraction and climate change resulting in extreme droughts, insect infestations, and wildfires—Azara's woodworks deserve a fresh look, as they were made by an artist who has lived in kinship with trees since she was a child.

Azara grew up in St. Bernadette's Parish in Brooklyn, New York. Her mother, Nancy, Nunzia in Italian, was a first-generation Italian American. The artist said her childhood experiences were confining as a female in the 1950s; her mother made it very clear that she hoped first for a boy. Like many Italians who immigrated to America, her family planted fruit trees in their yard, including apples, peaches, and figs. At bedtime, she would peer through a shade at the shadows of the leaves on the trees. Every year, Azara's grandfather would cut the fig tree to the trunk and tar the edges so it would survive the winter. This seemingly brutal, though protective, act would leave a lasting impression on her.

From her youth, Azara knew she wanted to make things, to be creative, though she wasn't sure in what medium. Following four years in Catholic high school, she attended Finch College from 1957 to 1959, a women's college on Manhattan's Upper East Side that emphasized art making and practical hands-on skills. She then studied stage design with Lester Polakov and from 1964 to 1967, she attended the Art Students League, where she

studied sculpture with John Hovannes, a wood- and stone carver. Azara took clay classes with him, though she felt he did not support women sculptors. Meanwhile, she soaked up Michelangelo's and Rodin's writings on her own.

After getting married, then pregnant, and finishing up her studies at the Art Students League, Azara carved *Birth Piece* (1967, fig. 1) from a felled maple tree trunk. The carving commemorated the birth of her daughter, “using the rich grain of the maple to simulate the energy of her birth and the crotch of the wood for the moment of her entrance, the crowning.”¹ This bulbous form was also a symbol of the artist giving birth to a medium that would take her on a lifelong journey of seeking out fallen trees, and gathering wood at construction sites—transforming nature into sacred spaces for spiritual contemplation.



FIGURE 1
Birth Piece, 1967, carved maple,
20 × 31 × 32"

Azara was not alone in repurposing wood during the 1960s. Sculptor Louise Nevelson was using wood from disassembled crates and furniture to construct sculptures and large-scale installations, inspired by her childhood as the daughter of a lumber dealer. Anne Truitt constructed wood pillars that she painted in minimalist colors to create a relationship between shape and color. Meanwhile, Italian artist Giuseppe Penone, who was associated with the Arte Povera movement, exhibited carved trees flat on the floor in 1969, drawing parallels between trees and human beings.

In the 1970s, Azara began work on a major piece, an enchanting carved wood floor installation titled *Widow's Tongues* (1974, fig. 2, p. 25), a name for the plant otherwise known as mother-in-law's tongue or snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*). The evergreen perennial can filter indoor air, removing toxins, and represented for the artist a simple folktale or remedy that connects plants or nonhumans with humans in beneficial ways. The work was included in an important feminist legacy exhibition thirty years later titled *How American*



FIGURE 2
Widow's Tongues

Women Artists Invented Post-Modernism, at Rutgers University. The show included Judy Chicago, Harmony Hammond, Rachel Rosenthal, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Semmel, Nancy Spero, May Stevens, June Wayne, and over a dozen other extraordinary women artists.²

In the same year that eco-feminist Betsy Damon did a series of performances as a multi-breasted goddess in New York City titled *7,000 Year Old Woman*, Azara carved and painted a multi-breasted wood sculpture



FIGURE 3
*About the Goddess Kali for
Pamela Oline*

titled *About the Goddess Kali for Pamela Oline* (1977, fig. 3, p. 26). The hyper-voluptuous, multi-wood standing sculpture was featured in the Great Goddess issue of *Heresies* two years later.³ Oline was a friend and mentor, a feminist therapist with whom Azara examined the death and destruction of Kali and the rebirth and renewal of self, which was the inspiration for Oline's therapy practice. The goddess sculpture bursting with Kali's divine female energies, the mother of all living beings, represented the changes about to happen in Azara's evolution as a young feminist.

In 1979, Azara cofounded the New York Feminist Art Institute (NYFAI) at 325 Spring Street on the outskirts of Soho; the institute later moved to Franklin Street in Tribeca. At NYFAI, she taught a workshop called "Consciousness Raising, Visual Diaries, Art Making". Azara recalled, "The institute



FIGURE 4
Goddess Wall

changed my artwork and brought me closer to my inner vision." Developed by six artists, including Schapiro, the courses examined gender, self, and identity issues. This experience taught them how to use art to "push through the patriarchy." The institute trained women in the arts "to explore whether there is indeed a particular way of seeing the world" unique to women.⁴

Some incredible women artists were guests of honor at NYFAI throughout the 1980s. The first was Nevelson. A few years later came Lenore Tawney, whose stark white studio with painted

gold columns suggestive of a chapel became visual inspiration for Azara's future work. Louise Bourgeois was also a guest of honor, as was Arlene Raven, who taught a class for NYFAI in feminist art history. These were all women whom Azara came to know as friends. Raven was cofounder of the LA Women's Building and wrote a poem for Azara titled *Listening to Trees*, first published in a catalog on the occasion of the artist's solo exhibition at the Tweed Museum of Art in Duluth, Minnesota in 1995 (p. 23).



FIGURE 5
Spirit House of the Mother

Azara taught at NYFAI until its closing in 1990, after a decade of teaching feminist aesthetics during an era of Wall Street materialism and consumerism. That same year she began carving *Goddess Wall* (1990, fig. 4, p. 30), her tallest work to date. Including ten planks with the center four rising almost to the ceiling, the work centers on a red flame or full moon form, with four hands reaching up one side. On the lower half, circular carvings with smaller circles inside rows are painted magenta with a shellacked finish, the color of dried blood. The piece was created for a group exhibition at Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza.

Her subsequent monumental work *Spirit House of the Mother* (1994, fig. 5, p. 32), functions as a sanctuary or chapel. The work was carved from Douglas fir with a gilded gold-leaf exterior; the interior was painted magenta over aluminum leafing, creating a lustrous pearlescent pink. Deep maroon spirals were carved into the floor. As Azara observed, "It is a place to honor the Divine Feminine, the nurturing mother in myself and in all of us."⁵ With its overt suggestions of a womb-like interior, this was her first enclosure which one could walk inside. Open to the ceiling, the installation projected an otherworldly glow. The work was inspired by a poem by Tawney, born in 1907, which she had written for Azara in the late 1980s and which served as inspiration for Azara's work at that time.



FIGURE 6
Tree Altar

What is my true nature?

I am the wind along the grass
I am the stream
I am the white clouds floating
 upon the blue sky
I am the ocean's roar
I am the cry of a bird
I am a waterfall
I am a tear
I am a river on my way
 to the sea.

LT



FIGURE 7
Circle with 7 Hands

That same year, Azara also carved *Tree Altar* (1994, fig. 6, p. 31) assembled from discarded wood beams collected in Tribeca from old factory buildings that were being renovated. Three tall planks stand side by side in a triptych, hinged together like an Italian Renaissance altar. Gold leaf radiates from inside the flanking panels. Standing in the center is an abandoned Christmas tree trunk leaning on a shellacked dark red relief carving of tree leaves. The work was featured on the cover of *CALYX*, a women's art and literature publication, and is an homage to the millions of trees cut down each year to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and possibly a nod to the irony in that gesture. What would Jesus say?⁶

of *CALYX*, a women's art and literature publication, and is an homage to the millions of trees cut down each year to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and possibly a nod to the irony in that gesture. What would Jesus say?⁶

In *Circle with 7 Hands* (1996, fig. 7, p. 41), viewers encountered carved wood planks hinged together with a shimmering gold leaf exterior. Wood inserts, waist-high, are placed between each plank, allowing a glowing red neon color to radiate from within. Inquisitive viewers who peered inside were rewarded



FIGURE 8 *Heart Wall*

with a view of a carved multi-breasted hardwood sculpture set atop a circular wood platform, with seven hands reaching toward the center. Each hand represents one of the seven chakras and the practice of placing your hand on your body to become grounded.

Azara assembled *Heart Wall* (1998, fig. 8, pp. 56–57) following a move to Woodstock in upstate New York. Large irregular golden planks lean against a wall, while two tall carved leaves painted magenta anchor several totems coated with aluminum leaf in the foreground. Spirals, hands, and hollowed niches are carved and painted on the approximately twenty standing sculptures. In a *New York Times* review by Holland Cotter of her ensuing exhibition at E. M. Donahue Gallery, he notes the relevance of her work since the 1980s, stating, “The results have rarely coincided with local fashion, though in the expanded international context of contemporary art her spiritually infused work looks increasingly at home.”⁷



FIGURE 9
Detail: *Hand Garden/Doctor's Wall*

A significant permanent commission by Azara was *Hand Garden/Doctor's Wall* (2004, fig. 9, p. 61), installed at the Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in Hamilton, New Jersey. The 28-foot-long wall installation honoring doctors' service is prominently located outside an operation room and down the hall from the emergency room. The work includes representations in greens and reds of the physicians' hands including those of her partner, Darla, also a doctor but in New York City, alongside spirals and carved tree branches painted pink. Here, Azara's hand motif takes on a more practical meaning while honoring the metaphysical in the context of Western medicine.

Maxi's Wall (2006, fig. 10, p. 63) and *Leaf Altar for Nunzia 1913–2004* (2007, fig. 11, p. 21) are two pieces that pay homage to family members using her carved tree forms as commemorative pillars. For Azara's granddaughter, the artist placed Maximiliana's hands-on multiple wood planks and stumps, sixteen pieces total, which lean on the wall in a spirited array of rich textures and colors.



FIGURE 10
Maxi's Wall

For a memorial to the artist's mother, Nunzia (1913–2004), five carved planks are perched on a wood table with four tree stumps underneath, amidst carved leaves painted misty white and crimson.



FIGURE 12
Dawn/Light

For *Dawn Light* (2009, fig. 12, p. 69), six boards side by side are carved and painted, white over aluminum leaf, with carved magenta leaves and attached branches. Two small stumps flank the sides. A spirit energy which appears like an arrow-head ascends at its apex, while various spirals, circles, and wavy markings express a range of energy fields. Could this be an altar for infrared light, radiant energy that helps cells regenerate or repair themselves? Sunrise, or dawn, is ideal for getting red and near-infrared light from the sun because UV is being blocked and scattered by the atmosphere.

Third Moon (2011, fig. 13, p. 71), a striking wall-mounted work, features fourteen logs, halved and carved with leaves, set atop ruddy aluminum leaf, almost like a bas-relief, giving the fallen trees a new life. A third-quarter moon has a spiritual meaning. One week after a full moon, when the sun illuminates the face of the moon directly, it's considered a period of activation and responsibility, intuition and understanding, of transitions related to the body, and letting go.



FIGURE 13
Third Moon

In *Reclining Hand* (2012, fig. 14, p. 75), viewers look down on a splintered chunk of wood felled by lightning in a forest near Byrdcliffe in Woodstock. Sitting just two feet from the ground, the wood body is painted white and lies on a cut wood plank on wooden legs. A carving of a deep red-colored hand placed inside a smaller carved piece of wood lies on top, as if it were sitting on the tree body's heart. This work was part of a larger exhibition titled *I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches*, displayed at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Brooklyn during Lent. Banners and scrolls made of photographic transfers on Mylar hung from the choir loft, while a tapering sculpture inset

with three carved red leaves stood before the altar, like a priest's vestments. Meanwhile, gilded tree branches were affixed to the cathedral's side aisles to represent the stations of the cross.⁸



FIGURE 14
Reclining Hand

For *Ghost Ship* (2016, fig. 15, p. 83), recently included in the ecoartspace exhibition and book titled *Embodied Forest*, white fallen limbs lie hinged in balance between a large squared-off stump and a steel post. Thin branches hang lifeless, lightly touching the floor. The work refers to the cycle of death that trees undergo due to changes in weather and human activity. As Azara moves into her elder years, she has become interested in the color white, which is associated with aging. For *Twins* (2016, fig. 16, p. 94), a single stump with its root system intact is painted white and cut in two, its halves placed side by side. The work reveals how one side of the tree can look quite different from the other, as the twins appear not to match.

Hand/Palm (2018, fig. 17, p. 95) includes three cut limbs hung on a wall and painted in a range of ruddy tones, including a red hand on the smaller centerpiece. The left limb is pink with aluminum leaf over red pigment on beechwood, while the right displays a shiny coating of shellac over deep red pigment. The work leaves the viewer with a sense of the bloody brutality, as well as the glorious rawness of life, its radiating life force a remembrance of the extremes from Azara's childhood during World War II.

Azara's use of richly colored tempera paints made with egg yolk, natural pigments, and handmade gesso combined with her use of 22-carat gold and aluminum leaf, to achieve opalescent variations of pinks and blues, expresses her desire to fuse light with form and color. During the Renaissance, gold leaf adorned altarpieces and represented the spiritual, rather than the physical presence of material wealth. Continuing this age-old tradition of gilding, her application of this magical substance onto a fallen tree or discarded wood plank expresses a kind of *wabi-sabi*, an honoring of life's transience.



FIGURE 15
Ghost Ship

The embrace of this aesthetic of natural forms with all their roughness and imperfection stands in direct contrast to the masculine genre of Minimalism, which favored more finished surfaces and an industrial aesthetic. Perhaps for this reason, women artists who have worked in craft-based media have often had their work labeled as ornamental. This extends to the Pattern and Decoration movement, which was popular in the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s and included artists who gleaned motifs, color schemes, and materials from the



FIGURE 16
Twins 2016

decorative arts, with whom Azara shares affinity. More recently, this view has shifted, especially with increased recognition of artists such as Sheila Hicks, who incorporated distinctive colors, natural materials, and personal narratives in her sculptural textiles. In addition, exhibitions reexamining the work of women artists from 1960 through the

1980s are beginning to weave together a narrative of ecological feminism. A recent example was *Passages: Rites & Ritual*, a solo exhibition of early works by Betsy Damon, curated by Monika Fabijanska at La MaMa Galleria in New York City in the fall of 2021.⁹

Numerous artists have been influenced by the aesthetics and rituals of Catholicism, including Frida Kahlo, Josef Albers, and Andy Warhol. Likewise, Azara has borrowed from her religious upbringing to communicate a reverence for the sacred through her experiences with nature and as a woman. To imbue hand-carved found limbs with a colorful luminousness expresses a reverence for the preciousness of life and symbolizes the sacredness of trees.



FIGURE 17
Hand/Palm

Conflating natural form and religious iconography, Azara's aesthetic language is at once universal, highly personal, and deeply resonant. Gleaning from the simplicity of nature's gifts, she creates experiential encounters for her viewers while expressing her feminist ethos through symbols of creativity, wishes, and prayers—or votives. Through her work, she illuminates a deep sense of what connects us all, our inescapable awareness that we are nature.



FIGURE 11

Leaf Altar for Nunzia 1913–2004, 2007, carved and painted wood with aluminum leaf, 7' 8" × 5' 5" × 17"

What is my true nature?

I am the wind along the grass

I am the stream

I am the white clouds floating
upon the blue sky

I am the ocean's roar

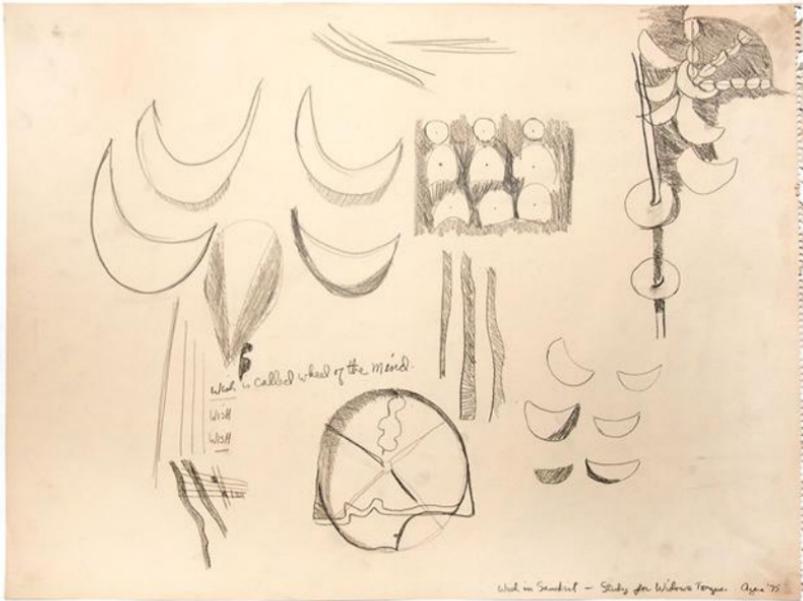
I am the cry of a bird

I am a waterfall

I am a tear

I am a river on my way
to the sea

LT





Widow's Tongues, 1974, 19 assembled pieces of carved, oiled, and partially painted oak, birch, pine, walnut, ash, and sycamore, 8 × 9 × 6'

















Spirit House of the Mother, 1994, carved and painted wood with gold leaf, 11 × 6 × 7' | 33

Listening to Trees

ARLENE RAVEN

Nancy Azara's
wall assemblages
and freestanding sculptures
of the past 25 years
are made mostly
of the trunks and limbs
of trees.

The artist,
following Druidish forebears
occupied by the hallowed nature
of the arboreal,
finds her spirit
with the magicians, sorcerers,
and soothsayers
of old,
in the oldest of perennial passions—
for radix, sapling, pod, and hull.

Azara's Catholic childhood
conjured meditations
on the Saints and their Father
which, contrarily, brought her to
the Goddess and her Progeny.

Today,
as a double millennium
looms,
Azara's path
from faith in rooted earth
to the transcendental flowering



of the Feminine Divine
is the timely row
to hoe.

A wood artist worships
the enduring oak
as having always been
a priori
a form of sculpture
as well as a symbol
for the planet Earth.

The carving of wood
to build
interbreeds the reaping and sowing
of the husbandwoman, forester, and artisan.

Nineteenth-century American tree celebrants
like the transcendentalist poets
and the Hudson River School painters
believed that humans
are as stuck in the ground
as we are likely to rise
in identical heights
to the heavens.

A contemporary Conceptualist
proposed planting 7,000 oaks
as an artwork for an international exposition.
He saw his insemination of the Mother
as an extension of the possibilities
of sculpture.

Azara hopes for the holy.
Trees, after all,
once marked

every sacred spot.
Goddess Offering is a fertile field,
consecrated ground stained ruby as if with
pomegranate seeds,
shimmering under a platinum moon.

Azara

strips, chips, incises,
chars, scrapes, and chisels
timber torsos and extremities;
paints their parts
with primary pigments
in classical oil and egg tempera
and lays gold or silver leaf
on lumber slabs, over coconut shells,
around branches and lead sheets—
among the myriad treasures she finds
on the international roads she travels.

New properties in Azara's oeuvre
are often introduced in the form of "seeds"
that can grow in substance
within a cycle of moisture, warmth,
and breath.

Veiled Goddess's coconut shell
and brambles from Big Sur, California,
are framed on the left and right
by old dowels stained two shades of gray.
These discarded and retrieved sticks
are the outer limits of taking the veil
and punctuation
for its flowing interior forms.

The shamanistic struggle toward totality
is forged in and seen through
veiled moments of ephemerality.

In function and placement,
the walls of the freestanding *Spirit House*
shelter a carved floor of nascent spirals
you can walk around.

Inside,
three pearlescent panels
are engraved with signs of the honeycomb.
These vivid aural surroundings
call up the golden spiral
beneath the shell
of the shrouded deity.

The Goddess's rainbow veil,
woven into Azara's way
as well as into her work,
layers the future
and deepens the secrets of the spirit
under cover
of the colors of terrestrial appearances.

Alchemy, the art of transmutation,
transfigures corporeal matter
into "spiritual gold"—
the price of salvation,
coins of longevity,
and cost of immortality.

In the process
of unforeseeable transformation
we find ourselves
returned to an early labile state
in which feelings, thoughts, and actions
may not yet have taken fixed forms.

The artist's intercourse with her materials
marks off



a meeting of one, two, and all
whose unspoken discourse
will otherwise remain unheard and unseen;
makes marks
at single sites
in the immense territory
of the place without words.

All material things
in Azara's physical configurations
are made of the same essential matter.
Differences in shape, color, and weight
can be stripped away
to reveal any object's vital flesh and blood.

The clear crimson red
of remembered revolutions
burns through
the paint and paper
of Azara's collages.

Seventh Shadow,
a scarlet sore spot,
ignites the internal crucible
that yields up
a cruciferous brutal beauty.

Offering with Eye
holds a whole history of the bloodshot.
The All-Seeing Eye,
once possessed solely in the sight of Maat,
Goddess of truth and judgment,
riveted the eyes of the later kingdoms
on the evil visioned in all female
glances.
Cowrie shells are still worn
around the necks of the masters

to charm against the evil eye.
To avoid spoiling and soiling with
their eye-to-eye siren gaze,
women, marked down, were to lower their own lids.

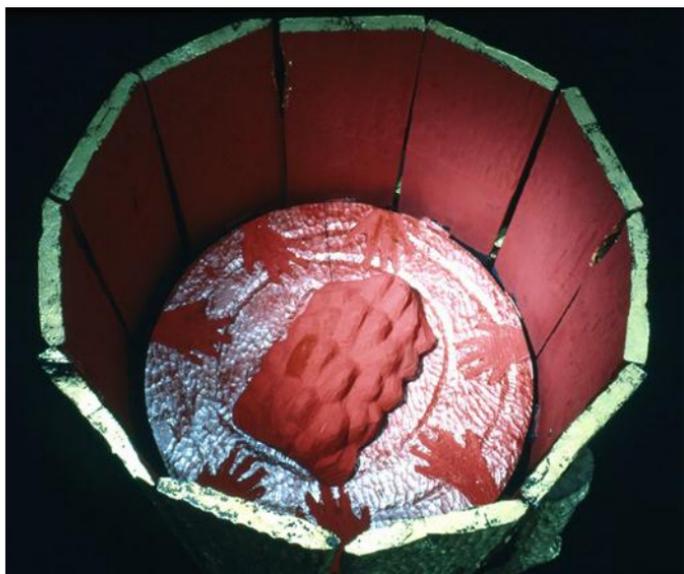
Azara's understanding
of the kinship between woman and god
through nature
is demonstrated when she articulates
the relationship between the human being
as a miniature universe
and that larger universe
pictured as an identical greater being.

Tree Altar

is a sure corollary
for the body.
Like the earliest altars,
its structure is modeled on
the maternal hearth,
the Earth's regenerative womb,
and the belly of a living woman.

Azara smears blood-colors
on the outside of the tree altar.
Christ crucified is summoned here.
Not a female Christ
bearing a coequal crucifix,
Azara's risen ascendant is herself the cross.

January 1994, New York City
(written for the artist)





Circle with 7 Hands, 1996, carved and painted wood with gold leaf, height: 60", diameter: 40"













Guardians of the Heart Circle, 1980, assembled, carved and painted bleached oak, black locust, and pine; height: 7', diameter: 3' | 47

Generations of Wood and Women:

Nancy Azara in Conversation with Kay Turner

I've admired Nancy Azara's work for over 40 years. This interview took place on several days in February and March 2022. Although the conversation has been edited down, what remains here can be pictured as a series of windows, each one opening onto a particular view of Nancy's art and life.

KT: *I'd like to begin by asking you a "first memory" question. Tell us an early memory that stands out as an awakening moment for your art practice.*

NA: I'd say the most astounding memory for me, which continues all through my life, is the idea of the trees and the darkness of the trees in the rain, the darkness of the trees as the sun goes down, the brightness of the trees as the sun comes out. The way trees move during storms frightens me a lot, those big wild country storms. They make sound, a crackling sound, which really is quite amazing.

Growing up in Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, there was a row of wild cherry trees that separated our house from the one next door. I believe they are called chokecherry. The birds loved them. There were always many, many birds singing and chatting and fighting with each other in this row of trees. My grandfather had landscaped it like an Italian garden. There were rosebushes in circles. I guess it was quasi-Italian. The people that weren't Italian who lived on the avenue, they had a different kind of garden. They had flowers I had never seen before and never saw again until I was an adult.

Also, as a child, I first began to notice wood in furniture, and began to understand that the furniture had been trees. My father liked to "work with his hands" and watching him, I observed the transformation of the material that happened in the making.

KT: *How did you start wood carving? This is a rarity for women. Most carvers are men, and even in the feminist art movement there have been few carvers.*

NA: I worked in clay in art school and watched the wood-carvers work there. After I left art school, I decided to try wood carving. There were a lot of carvers at the Art Students League. In the mid-1960s they were carving very conservative figures—beautifully carved, very skilled, and not of interest to me. I wanted to do work like the German Expressionists, with color and rough surfaces and a postwar angst. I had fallen in love with German sculptors such as Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, Ernst Kirchner.

As a woman wood-carver, over the years I was often dismissed or treated like an oddity. People would be surprised and men in particular would offer technical advice as they looked at the work more. My work seemed in need of some screws or I needed a level or it needed to be planed.

KT: *You also have a history of making costumes for the theater. How did that influence your mature work? I can certainly see the dramatic impulse in some of your installations.*

NA: In my early 20s, I attended a class in the New York theater district, costume design with Lester Polakov, who was a respected designer. There, I learned about the combination of color and light and form on a stage to create a stage presence, which is the transition from the darkness of the theater to the moment the stage lights go on and illuminate the performers. I still light my sculptures in this theatrical manner. I also think I've been influenced by the shapes and tones of light in Roman Catholic church settings. I enjoy the thrill and excitement of creating a stage setup for viewers with the installations of my work. If the viewer is engaged, it helps spark an inner experience, and hopefully a new awareness.

KT: *Tell us more about your love of wood, how you find wood to work on, what types of wood.*

NA: The woods I've worked with over the years have been an inspiration to me. I always feel the history of the tree and its wood in the logs, and I enter a dialogue with them, in a nonverbal way. The wood is often Douglas fir, either old or new. I would find a lot of discarded old wood

in my old NoHo neighborhood. Factory lofts were being renovated for people to live in and I would take the battered old logs from the street and carve into them. They would transform once I cut into their surface, restoring the life force of the tree. I think that maybe this activity is like restoring a sense of female personhood from the spirit of the tree to myself to share with others.

When I moved to Tribeca in 1990 there were more renovations. The discarded wood beams were often very old, filled with nails, and very heavy, but they had a wonderful presence. The newer wood came from a lumberyard and was mostly Western ponderosa pine. *Maxi's Wall* (2006, fig. 1, p. 63) is a fine example of this mix of generations of wood and women. Little girl Maximiliana with her grandmother who is pondering the mystery of generations in the experience of life.



FIGURE 1
Nancy Azara and
Maximiliana Olivas McEwen,
opening reception: *Maxi's Wall*,
A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 2008

At my Woodstock, New York home, where I converted an 1820s Northern European-style barn to my studio, I regularly find recently deceased trees. This one tree had been split apart by lightning and become a shell; I carved a hand on a fragment of its bark *Reclining Hand* (2012, p. 75). And *Hand/Palm* (2018, p. 95) uses a section from a rotted-out beech tree. The tree is dead but its life force remains inside the log, held intact by its bark cover. I've also begun working with ancient vines given to me by friends, which I gessoed and then painted silvery white.

In my later life, I've also turned my attention to leaves. The new show, *Votives*, will have a few black leaves in it as well. They are oil pastel black leaves on Mylar, and to me, they're about the darkness of the unknown, what's ahead of me. I think I'm trying to grapple with my own death.

KT: *I'm sure you use some tools that are unfamiliar to most people. Can you describe your tool kit for the reader?*

NA: I carve my work with gouges and chisels and mallets—one light, one heavier. The chisels are about one inch wide. Even for large pieces, I

use narrow chisels. I have more control that way. Then the surface is always either painted or left untouched after the chisel and I have done our work.

KT: *I'd love to hear you talk more about your work process and the lively relationship you create between image making and wood carving.*

NA: The process of my art making begins with thinking and thinking some more. There is a language of shapes—some are easy, like a “jacket shape.” Others may invoke an idea or a sentiment, but this is still mysterious to me, like working every day to translate an unknown language and make it speak for me. I wait for the shape to come to me. I communicate with the wood as well; I start there. Or I have an idea, and I begin with that. *Jacket from the Silk Road*, (2012, p. 72–73) for example, has a centerpiece which is a pattern from a thousand years ago. The people in the graves were buried wearing this same jacket, which is still popular today.

KT: *The goddess has been an important source of inspiration for you. You are part of a movement within feminism and feminist art that is trying to promote the Divine Feminine.*

NA: My use of the goddess is as a metaphor for women's self-esteem. When you are brought up as a woman to believe that the most important people in your life are men—your father, brother, husband, your political official, and your God—then you have a self-esteem issue. You can't have a feeling of the limitlessness that is the means for reaching out to greatness. Elena Ferrante writes of the myth of woman, woman as an “imposter,” of being who she should be, rather than herself.

I vividly remember the wonderful large parties of nonconforming women in the 1970s. They were thrilling because we were looking, feeling, and dressing as ourselves. We were owning our own power there, and while a little uncomfortable, it felt great. Nowadays, women are painting themselves as the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Buddha, even the Holy Spirit. This is a sea change. Women in the feminist spirituality art movement took great liberties with these sacrosanct figures and made them our own.

KT: *If your feminist art practice was both goddess-centered and political, can you tell us more about this intersection? You've said that the New York Feminist Art Institute (NYFAI) was organized around certain feminist goals. How were they manifested in works, events, workshops and so on?*

NA: NYFAI was an experiment, a work in progress. We were so new, and



FIGURE 2
NYFAI founders, 1978. From left: Miriam Schapiro, Carol Stronghilos, Nancy Azara, Irene Peslikis, Lucille Lessane (Selena Whitefeather not present)

New York City was not an easy place to start an alternative space. Six of us—Miriam Schapiro, Carol Stronghilos, Irene Peslikis, Lucille Lessane and Selena Whitefeather (fig. 2)—wanted to found a feminist art school to examine the question, Did women make a different kind of art? Women's art? At the time, women were mocked, criticized, and belittled for their art—men ruled the art world.

At NYFAI we believed in offering an eclectic learning experience ... We held workshops and classes, traditional ones like painting, drawing, filmmaking. We also offered poetry classes and held readings with poets Jewelle Gomez and Ntozake Shange, among others. A very popular critical thinking workshop was taught by Judith Chiti.

We had prominent guests teaching each semester. Artists such as Faith Ringgold, who held a mask-making workshop. Elaine de Kooning taught a collage workshop one Saturday. Arlene Raven gave a

workshop called “Feminism and Art,” a series of four lectures, including one on the self as other in the arts, as women and minorities. Many of us on the faculty took the workshops alongside the regular students (fig. 3).



FIGURE 3
See with Three Eyes, NYFAI flyer designed by Irene Peslikas, 1979

There was a NYFAI circle. The sweet formation of a circle. We made an ancient circle—gathering in a circle. Being a part of NYFAI, my circle of women artist

friends expanded out of New York to the West Coast, to the Midwest and

later out of the country. I taught a NYFAI workshop called “Consciousness Raising, Visual Diaries, Art Making.” We did consciousness raising and drew images in our books while the women were speaking. It was exhilarating and productive. We felt unconstrained and we were surprised by the ability to express ourselves. And forms which had been erased because they didn’t fit into the categories of acceptable subject matter came on the page.

KT: *Tell us more about your circle of friendships with other artists over the years.*

NA: Many of my artist friends have been engaged in a spiritual practice. My close friend Ann Pachner also works in wood, and her work is very spiritual and has a purity to it, like white light emanating from both within and without. It is very different from mine but I’d say that we are searching for the same thing. Darla Bjork and I (fig. 4) have been together for 44 years and often discuss our art making and share ideas. Darla was also a member of the NYFAI board and helped support the school.



FIGURE 4
Nancy Azara and Darla Bjork wearing Pussyhats, Women’s March, 2017

I was also the close friend of artist Lenore Tawney, who died at the age of 100 in 2007, and was devoted to her spiritual mentor, a female guru in the Siddha Yoga tradition. I have several young women friends too. They are more outspoken than I am. I marvel at their ability to openly discuss themselves in the light of #MeToo. They proclaim their personal dreams and aspirations, expecting to achieve them.

KT: *You have shown great concern over the past 15 years or so in assuring intergenerational connections between young and old women artists. You even started an intergenerational artist group in New York.*

NA: Yes, in 2007, I started a series of intergenerational dialogues called “(RE)PRESENT: Feminism(s) and Art.” Emily Harris, Katie Cercone, (three generations) and I co-organized these discussions and still do.

Meeting topics include the politics of power, spirituality, the creative process, the personal as political, mentors, and collaboration. Our meetings are based on NYFAI's nonhierarchical structure utilizing roundtable meetings styled on '70s feminist consciousness-raising circles. The meetings foster a broad dialogue across generations of artists interested in contemporary feminist concerns. Meetings alternate between A.I.R. Gallery, SOHO20 Gallery, and sometimes Ceres Gallery and are scheduled every three months.

My idea for the series began because a young artist asked me one day, "Why do older women artists hate us so much? It's not our fault that we have galleries and receive fellowships and grants." It was clear to me that we needed a dialogue, a way to bridge this gap, to listen to each other. They must have their own issues too, I thought. These meetings gave us an opportunity to understand ourselves and each other in a new light, much the way NYFAI exemplified this almost twenty years earlier.

KT: *I've loved your installations over the years, the way you bring nature and natural forces inside. You have an almost theatrical touch. How do you think about your installation works? Have rituals accompanied these environments?*

NA: The installations have their foundation in my early theater background. I think that I'm setting the stage for the viewer to immerse herself in the experience of the sculpture. In a sense, my work does present a "stage" for a ritual, much as in India, where the statues are fed, or in places where the Christian Catholic saints are dressed and properly groomed for their ceremonial feast days. I have read many books on the goddess in different historical periods and have visited prehistoric tombs in Malta and seen the little Sicilian votive goddesses, which are incredible ceramic pieces made for each individual woman. They are portraits of the supplicants presented to the proper goddess, and each one has its own unique personality.

KT: *Who is the audience for your work? How does the public respond?*

NA: The audience for my work is the general public. I'm always surprised as

to who the work appeals to, or doesn't. Young women in particular are struck by it, engaged with it. The general public is a preferred audience for me, because they don't look for art-world rules and are generally more open to the feelings and ideas that art engages—especially when they see it regularly and it becomes a friend.

I prefer settings like a hospital, church, or lobby, because they're locations that people frequent. In *Hand Garden* (2004, p. 61), at the Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in Hamilton, New Jersey, I honor the doctors' hands—a metaphor for the doctors' healing—and carved them as if they were pressed into the tree. The mural is on two walls between the OR and the ER. As patients are wheeled by, doctors are moving through, as are the patients' family members, and they encounter it. I was not permitted to identify which hand belonged to which doctor because I was told they would fight over the placement.

My piece *Heart Wall* (2000, p. 56–57) was exhibited in the lobby of a Madison Avenue office building. During the show's run, occupants of the building would tell me that the piece brought a kind of warmth to the impersonal quality of the building.

And for Saint Ann's Church in Brooklyn, New York during their Lenten events, they invited me to exhibit sculptures engaging the idea of death and redemption.

KT: You and I both have a connection to crows, and you know I much appreciate your visual engagement with this highly intelligent, deeply symbolic bird. So let me end this dialogue with a magical question by asking how the crow came to you?

NA: The crow collages grew out of a near-death experience, when I wasn't sure that I would survive. And the crows kept coming onto the surface of the paper. I was fascinated! What message did they want to tell me and could they take me beyond? And then only silence, nothing but silence.





Heart Wall, 2000, carved and painted wood with gold and silver leaf and encaustic, 6 × 24 × 3' | 57









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COMMISSIONED BY ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON HOSPITAL, HAMILTON, NJ



Maxi's Wall, 2006, carved and painted wood with gold, silver and palladium leaf and encaustic, 10 × 12 × 3'





Hickory and Hand, 2004, carved and painted wood with gold leaf, 3 panels, overall: 60 × 36 × 1"





Crossed, 2009, carved and painted wood with aluminum leaf and encaustic, 60 × 22½ × 3" | 67





Down/Light, 2009, carved and painted wood with aluminum leaf and encaustic, 10 × 6 × 2' | 69









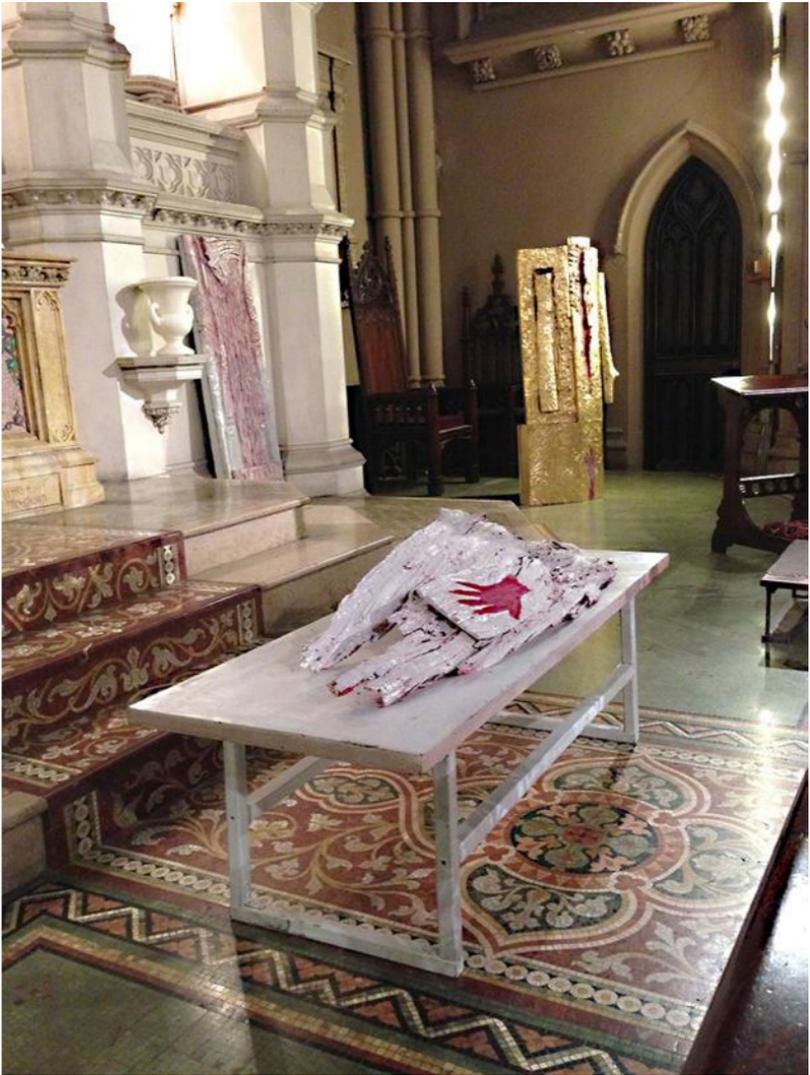








Four Gold Feathers: From the Eagle, 2013, carved and painted wood with aluminum leaf and encaustic, 8' x 23" x 5" | 77















Nancy Azara: A Female Language of Divinity, Empathy, and Loss

KATIE CERCONE

PERHAPS CHARACTERISTIC of her Italian upbringing, Nancy Azara's artwork can be quite flashy—her sculptural forms never failing to gleam (usually with gold). Surveying her collection of large-scale structures and installations like *Spirit House of the Mother* (1994, p. 33) reveals towering enclosures and elevated altars to uncompromising female divinity. Whether taking the form of monumental structures of rough-hewn painted wood, often carved by hand and overlaid with brilliant gold leaf, or works on paper, Azara's artistic output is simply teeming with life.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Azara in her spacious second studio upstate. Outside it was early fall; inside Azara's studio was frosty white—dotted with handprinted sculptural trees, cast alive with a silvery sheen. The atmosphere was spectral and otherworldly. Her latest sculptural works and small collage drawings about death were made during what felt like a year marred by incessant grief.

Scavenging fallen tree branches from the street and dressing them ornately with paint and carved symbolism, Azara's signature visual grammar resonates clearly in her latest woodworks. Having made a stunning departure from her usual jewel-tone palette to icy, opalescent white, it's as if she's reaching the higher octave of a voice which has become uniquely her own. Yet while the frosty shrouded white surely evokes feelings of absence, death, or loss, the painted tree limbs still emphatically possess an energy and life force all their own.



FIGURE 1
Ghost Ship

With names like *Ghost Ship* (2016, fig. 1, p. 83), *High Chair* (2019, fig. 2, p. 105), *Child's Chair* (2019, p. 102), and *Young Tree* (1994), the freestanding white sculptures swathed in subtle opalescent swirls felt more delicate

and withered than her earlier explorations with wood. References to early childhood in a series about death recall how in most of the non-Western world, death equates with rebirth, and the coming of a child is an ancestor returned. Healthy rituals of grieving along with healthy rituals of birthing have long been buried deep by institutionalized fear of the feminine associations with death, nature, and chaos. Like the snake biting its own tail, Azara's work offers a fluid continuity with the birth-life-death-rebirth cycle sacred to Goddess-worshipping cultures the world over.

Over the years, Azara's sculptural wood forms have loomed large as walls and towering totems, often monuments to loved ones. Her adoption of tree limbs as a surrogate self is a motif that appears again and again in the work. Yet it also signifies the collective voice of the feminine reemerging after years of censorship, oppression, and violence. As a child, the yearly trimming and wrapping of fig trees was hard for Azara to bear. Her father said, "It's for their own good." She recalls, "Wildness wasn't allowed, especially as girls." When painted and carved, the pieces of a dead tree become veritably reanimated; Azara frames it as a collaboration with the tree.

Knobby trees transmogrify into organs of the physical body, intestines, or the pulse of dancing nerves. Azara explains how carving within the body of the tree is like scripture on an interior scroll, a secret writing, informed perhaps by her study of Eastern and Western calligraphy. Many of us understand the tree as *axis mundi*, symbol of an earth/sky continuum and a link to shamanism and animist religions of the ancient, precolonial world.

Certainly, within the matrifocal earth-based societies of prehistory, trees were celebrated and revered. Whereas Azara's earlier works in gold leaf drew on the qualities we associate with gold (opulence, royalty, sin, sunlight), these latest trunks and tendrils exude silver and white to express wisdom and the moon, recalling how organic matter tends to appear more luminous in the moonlight, as well as the association between the moon and feminine energy evidenced in many cultures.

As A. T. Mann delineates in his book *The Sacred Language of Trees*, across the world ancient indigenous societies shared a holy reverence for trees. In the



FIGURE 2
High Chair

Hindu cosmology, based on tree worship in India tracing as far back as the fourth millennium BCE, the tree indicates the state of the universe—what is created, sustained, or destroyed through the dynamic energy of Shakti, or the manifest Goddess power of the universe. The cosmic world tree of Hinduism symbolizes the power of vegetation, universal life, potency, and immortality. The Hindu culture of tree worship reflects the way in which trees, like female humans, are very much considered an embodiment of the Goddess—the spirit animating the physical world of nature affecting fertility and growth. If Azara’s ritual dressing and shaping of wood is a physical manifestation of her sensuous relationship to nature, her study of folklore and proto-patriarchal tradition has only magnified the cultural biases today’s female artists face.

In Azara’s *Gold Coat with Red Triangle* (2002, p. 58), we begin to see a synergy materializing around Azara’s wide range of spiritual influences and interests. With its carved, triumphant wall of red and gold, the work invokes Etruscan death masks, female-focused spiritual practice, ritual burial sites and their treasures. Throughout her body of work, we see the artist interjecting “female loss” into the often overly materialistic, fallow dialogue here in the West. The artist’s homemade egg tempera paint is custom mixed to preserve the otherworldly, painted facades of her pieces for centuries. Her frequent use of red connotes women’s moon blood as well as the circulation of blood which transports and expels vital substances from the body. The artist notes that in Chinese culture red represents luck and good fortune. In India, a regular female-led “Festival of Red” celebrates menstruation and women’s Shakti power in the traditionally matrifocal state of Kerala. In fact, Azara in 2001 was awarded a Chikraniketan Fellowship for artists in the Kerala region. Giving voice to issues which have remained all-too-often absent from the public sphere, Azara’s work encapsulates how today’s increasing openness and honesty on the part of women is defining the new generation.

Having noted that the artist’s Italian American ethnicity, interest in Eastern mysticism, and rebellion against compulsory heterosexuality all inform her work, let me now divulge that I too share an Italian American, feminist, spiritual, and queer orientation. Azara was one of the first artists I connected with as a naive young feminist radical stepping foot in big bad New York. Back then I sensed that Azara was as horrified by my unapologetic use of my body as I was by her use of the word *goddess*. It was only a matter of time

before I would deep dive into the primordial religion of the Great Mother. Nowadays, I'm the freaky art historian alienating young generations of wired cyber feminists with my odes to the ecstatic roots of mother worship. It was through Azara's colleague Kay Turner, an iconoclastic folklore expert also featured in this book, that I began to lift the veil of much of my earlier understanding of women's spiritual practices. Turner's book *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* completely reframed my personal sense of my grandmother's worship of the Catholic Virgin Mary to view it as an act of self-preservation, resistance, and centering of female divinity amidst the oppressive mind control of midcentury American Catholicism.

Needless to say, over the years I have deepened my relationship to Azara's work and others reclaiming the language and forms of the Goddess, understanding its power spiral by spiral. Azara and I have been in shows together, have broken bread together, and co-facilitated an intergenerational feminist dialogue for many years at the historic women's collective SOHO20. With an exhibition history in New York City spanning several decades, Azara continues to generate provocative works in many mediums.

The *Crow and Sandal* (2019, fig. 3, p. 101) collage series, Azara's latest series of works on paper, created in the wake of a recent near-death experience, overtly embraces the journey of mortality. Amidst the range of symbolism and hand flourishes of these small collages emerges the crone aspect of the triple Goddess like never before. Flying into unknown wildernesses and jet-black nights, the crow serves as a symbolic messenger between worlds. Within the Hindu pantheon, crows represent spirituality. Rendered carefully through a range of hyper-tactile techniques including rubbing, cutting, pasting, and scraping, each page is marred by smears and residues of imperfect human touch. The curious black winged ones strewn across the page are in flux, misshapen or obscured in places. Even then, they are ribboned with hints of gold and a translucence achieved by layers of parchment paper. Meanwhile, her use of sandal forms also harks back to Hinduism, and the feet and footprint of the guru. In this series about near-death, the sandal implies



FIGURE 3
Crow and Sandal 7

the spiritual promise of reincarnation—an attempt to examine and suspend the artist’s presence in time and space.

After over two years of pandemic sorrows and triumphs, it feels essential to comb through our Western refusal to face death and make sense of the great forces of disarray, dissolution, and disenchantment that have taken hold across the globe. Azara compares our current COVID-19 crisis to the Black Plague of the Middle Ages which birthed the Renaissance. During a period in which large portions of the population died of plague, the middle and lower classes rose up to revolt against the rich, a gesture we feel echoed today in America with the rise of Black Lives Matter. Masks were also worn during such earlier plagues, often fashioned with big beaks that could be stuffed with healing herbs. Enter Azara’s mercurial crow figures. Beaked, wings askance, standing or upside down, Azara’s crows serve as messengers of the crossroads, a type of metaphysical self-portrait. For Azara, the lesson learned from the messenger crow is one of survival and letting go. At the same time, the creature is a harbinger of an alternate reality, perhaps a portal to the other side.

Despite her many accomplishments, awards, and accolades, Azara admits that, similar to the way in which her family would not or could not fully see her for who she was, art-world-wise she always harbored the feeling of being invisible amongst the invisible. As a female-identifying artist over sixty, she is hardly an exception. In his 2000 *New York Times* review of her installation *Heart Wall*, critic Holland Cotter wrote that the works “make vulnerability seem like a considered choice.” The feminist scholar in me reads within that colloquial play of words a subtext that speaks deeply to Azara’s—and other female and nonwhite artists’—feelings of invisibility.

During our interview, I asked Azara what has changed over the years. She recounted how, given the mirror of her spiritual process with art, she no longer seeks the recognition and validation she once craved. What’s more, she feels that it is her art in fact that has cleared out the psychic debris. Just as she has poured so much of her vital life-force energy into her sculptures, they give back. Like nature itself, they offer an implicit organic reciprocity. “You receive wisdom from the piece; you see in a larger broader context,” she observes. If the tree sculptures’ frosty hinterland speaks to bones, ancestors,

burial treasures, and renewal, her collages, strewn with symbolism and flourishes of the hand, speak more directly to death. “Up until around age sixty, life had a feeling of endlessness to it, even though it doesn’t,” Azara reflects.

In the space between cultural “validation” and “vulnerability” we find the heartfelt rubric that Azara continues to share, through her creative workshops and publication of her first book *Spirit Taking Form: Making a Spiritual Practice of Making Art* (2008). The ancient mystery and magic of the chakra system is brought to life in Azara’s brilliant *Heart Wall* (2000, p. 56–57). In this piece, we see pink in abundance, connoting the gateway of the heart center, the practice of empathy, and the quality of openness.

As Chögyam Trungpa writes in his 1973 book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, there is optimally a point in human evolution where we become empty of needs, of world hypocrisies and personal idiosyncrasies. “Shining in its brightness” we find “the energetic, living quality of openness, the living quality of surrender, the living quality of renunciation.”

Azara’s later sculptural forms reflect more of a sense of female self-discovery than an effort to claim a seat at the proverbial Father’s table. At the onset of the early-’70s feminist art movement, Azara recalls, women were trying to find a “women’s aesthetic.” While the artist still believes there is some basis of truth to this, she adds, “We don’t really know what a woman is; women have been so trained to defer to men—it will be a while before we really see a true feminist or women’s aesthetic.”

Call it empathy, vulnerability, or razor-sharp intuition, Azara often works from psychic imagery she has retrieved while doing chakra-oriented body work. She reads chakras and teaches chakra reading, which are increasingly accepted, if not trendy, amongst millennials. Chakra work felt like something Azara had to safeguard from the art world skeptics of the 1980s. Even as we discussed and later edited this essay, the artist’s sense of being *too much* for the general reader was deeply felt. As a writer, curator, artist, and renegade outsider of a younger generation, I offer, maybe it’s a question of them being not enough.

















Blue Cloud, 2019, carved and painted wood, encaustic, and steel base; 60 × 14 × 16" | 99













High Chair, 2019, carved, painted, and gilded wood, steel; 50 × 18 × 18" | 105

Nancy Azara – Biography

Nancy Azara is an artist and feminist educator best known for her large-scale wood sculptures and mixed-media collages. Azara developed, and continues to work in, a distinct style of sculpture—found wood, carved, ornamented, and mounted. Instinctive chip carving peels off an outer layer of wood, reaching for an essentialized raw experience of the body, of the limbs, exposing flesh and blood. This work explores life cycles, utilizing the metaphor of tree for personhood. Egg tempera, often in reds and pinks, and aluminum, palladium, and gold gilding recover these exposed layers, exploring folkloric stories of women’s roles, goddess imagery, ancient symbols, mystic spiritual traditions, and affirmation of female self.

Azara works from her studios in Tribeca and Woodstock, New York. Her scrolls/collages are composed of Mylar, paper, paint, and the occasional found wood object. Her densely layered art engages with memory, personal history, and the cyclical nature of time. She co-organizes quarterly inter-generational feminist dialogues, (RE)PRESENT, an outgrowth of NYFAI, the New York Feminist Art Institute, a school she cofounded in 1979. Here, she formalized automatic journal drawing for a workshop she taught called “Consciousness Raising, Visual Diaries, Art Making” as a way to access the unconscious. This method quickly became popular as a feminist consciousness-raising technique and was embraced in the nascent feminist art community in New York and by groups like Redstockings.

Azara holds annual workshops, teaches, and mentors other artists, sustaining a unique visual, experiential, and pedagogical artistic practice which remains informed by the body, nature, spirituality, and her experience as a woman.

She is the author of the 2008 book *Spirit Taking Form: Making a Spiritual Practice of Making Art* available through Red Wheel/Weiser.

For a complete exhibition history, please visit www.nancyazara.com.



Contributors

KATIE CERCONE Artist and yogi of over 20 years, Katie Cercone *Or Nah* hails from the blessed coast. A pioneer of hip-hop yoga committed to the contemporary sacred arts and the rise of the divine femme, Or Nah has led sacred arts rituals in venues throughout the US, UK, and Asia. Her work has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, Bronx Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, Dallas Contemporary, and Changjiang Museum of Contemporary Art China. Cercone is adjunct faculty at the School of Visual Arts, New York, where she teaches the course Gender Trouble.

KAY TURNER is an artist and scholar working across disciplines including performance, writing, music, folklore, and lesbian-feminist advocacy. Her books include *What a Witch: Before and After*, with Zini Lardieri (2021); *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, with Pauline Greenhill (2012), and *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (1999). Turner's most recent performance artworks examine the witch figure in folklore and history. She taught for nearly 20 years at New York University, and is a past president of the American Folklore Society.

PATRICIA WATTS is the founder of ecoartspace, an international platform for artists addressing environmental issues. She has curated over 30 exhibitions examining art and nature as well as solo shows on artists such as sculptor Ruth Asawa and ceramic artist Marguerite Wildenhain. Watts has published several monographs on underrecognized Bay Area artists, including Richard Bowman and Richard Faralla, and has written for *Artnet*, *art ltd.*, and *Artillery* magazines. She currently resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with her rescued Saluki, Roz.

EMILY M. HARRIS, PROJECT MANAGER is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist whose large-scale installations and intimate multimedia works fine-tune awareness. Focusing on volumes, invisible processes, and interconnection, Harris conducts her experiments within the parameters of drawing, pushing our notions of what a drawing can be and grounding her work in everyday perceptual experience. Harris received an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2013. She is a founder of the Institute for Cultural Activism International, and studio manages for artists in NYC.

GEORGE MELROD, EDITOR has written extensively for publications such as *Art & Antiques*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Sculpture*, *Los Angeles*, *Details* and *VOGUE*. In 1998, he moved from New York to Los Angeles, where he was the editor of *art ltd.* magazine, which covered contemporary art in California and the western US. He is known to be very fond of cats.

Notes

1. Nancy Azara, *Spirit Taking Form: Making A Spiritual Practice of Making Art*, (Boston: Red Wheel, 2002), 40.
2. *How American Women Artists Invented Post-Modernism*, an exhibition about the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s and its legacy, featured works by two dozen women artists. Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. December 31, 2005–January 26, 2006. Source: Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities online: <https://cwah.rutgers.edu/event/how-american-women-artists-invented-postmodernism-1970-1975/>
3. "The Great Goddess," special issue, *Heresies* 2, no. 5 (1978): 14, https://archive.org/details/heresies_05. Other artists and curators included in the issue were Kay Turner, Lucy Lippard, Donna Henes, Gloria Feman Orenstein, Louise Bourgeois, Gila Yelin Hirsch, Joan Jonas, Audrey Flack, and Carolee Schneemann. Material additionally sourced from author https://archive.org/details/heresies_05 ; and interview with Nancy Azara, February 11, 2022.
4. Nancy Azara, "The Flowering of the Fig Tree" Veteran Feminists of America, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.veteranfeministsofamerica.org/legacy/Nancy%20Azara%20Bio.htm>.
5. Azara, *Spirit Taking Form*, 21.
6. *Calyx* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1997–98).
7. Holland Carter, "Art in Review: Nancy Azara," *New York Times*, February 4, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/04/arts/art-in-review-nancy-azara.html>. *Heart Wall* was later sited at 340 Madison Avenue in the lobby for one year in 2009.
8. *I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches* at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Brooklyn, NY, 2015. See <https://www.stannholyltrinity.org/portfolio-item/nancy-azara-artist-talk/>.
9. *Passages: Rites & Ritual*, a solo exhibition of early works by Betsy Damon, curated by Monika Fabijanska at La MaMa Galleria in New York City in the fall of 2021. See <https://www.lamama.org/shows/betsy-damon-2021>.

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