

# BEAUTIFUL BIZARRE

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# BRAD KUNKLE

## CHASING LIGHT

[bradkunkle.com/](http://bradkunkle.com/) // interview by Jennifer Rizzo





"THE WOMEN SYMBOLISE INTUITION, POTENTIAL, TRUTH, INDEPENDANCE AND MAGICAL THINKING"

Born in rural Pennsylvania, USA, Brad Kunkle spent his formative years surrounded by nature, which vastly shaped him as an individual and later on, as an artist. Inspired by the beauty found there as well as ideas of intuition, truth and magical thinking, the artist depicts hyperreal figures in semi-abstracted landscapes, bathed in gold and silver leaf. His works seem to both reflect as well as capture light, a masterful display of utilising technique as well as letting chance play its role with the materials. Working with a minimal palette reminiscent of the monochromatic grisailles of early European masters, Brad's work has a haunting, mysterious quality.

Influences from the Pre-Raphaelites are readily apparent in the artists depiction of nature and the human figure as well as in his compositions. Gracefully toeing

the line between hyperrealism and abstraction, Brad's work has a mystical, romantic, otherworldly quality. You can almost hear the quiet whisper of golden leaves dancing across the canvas. These beautiful and sensitive works are rich with symbolism waiting to be interpreted.

Focusing on light in both the literal and metaphorical senses, Brad's own personal life trajectory mimics that of the messages he hopes are found in his works - to follow our inner instinct, and carve out our own paths which is honest with our true selves. In other words, to find our own light.

WHERE DOES YOUR FANTASTICAL AND INVENTIVE VISION OF THIS WORLD SPRING FROM? HOW DO YOU DEVELOP YOUR NARRATIVES?

I grew up in Lehigh, Pennsylvania, which funnily enough is where the abstract expressionist Franz Kline attended high school back in the 20's. I was surrounded by dense forests and large patches of wide open farmland. Being able to look out over those open areas and imagine what was waiting on the other side of the treeline in the distance I think was a big part of piquing my curiosity and imagination. My hometown area was full of hiking trails



opposite page, left  
*Maybe It's All Just a Myth*, 2019  
Oil and silver leaf on wood, 24" x 18"

opposite page, right  
*Trinity*, 2010  
Oil, gold and silver on linen, 72" x 36"

left  
*Unseen*, 2015  
Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen panel, 31" x 15"

top right  
*High Moon Orchid Priestess Facing SW*, 2018  
Oil on wood, 20" x 16"

bottom right  
*High Moon Orchid Priestess Facing North*, 2018  
Oil on wood, 20" x 16"



and swimming holes and my extended family had a farm and another 40 acres of woods we would play in. The changing of the seasons, too, was a big part of my point of view. Every year we would see these golden leaves overtake the forests, then turn to a rich brown, then, nothing.

YOUR WORK IS FULL OF SYMBOLISM AND RECURRING ELEMENTS SUCH AS CIRCLES, BIRDS, AND LEAVES WHICH SEEM TO MOVE IN FLUID PATTERNS ACROSS THE SURFACE. WHAT DO THESE ELEMENTS REPRESENT FOR YOU?

The leaves are a symbol for "nature itself" and "one's own nature". The idea of them swirling around, leading someone down a path, or embracing a figure is a metaphor for following your own intuition and embracing your own nature. A call to shed the dogmas that have been taught to us about the ways we "should" be or feel. I'm basically a seeker of truth, whatever "truth" is, it should be allowed to guide us without persecution or fear of being silenced (as long as your truth is not harmful to or imposing on others). The circle is an ancient symbol that represents fulfillment. I think on a subconscious level it's inspiring to see. My birds do not have eyes. The birds are a symbol of "listening" to your inner voice, your intuition. Birds





**opposite page**  
*Guardenian*, 2016  
 Oil and silver leaf on linen, 40" x 30"

**top left**  
*High Moon Orchid Priestess Facing West*, 2018  
 Oil on wood, 20" x 16"

**bottom left**  
*High Moon Orchid Priestess Facing NE*, 2018  
 Oil on wood, 20" x 16"

**right**  
*Ornithology*, 2013  
 Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen, 40" x 30"



have a "sixth sense" that researchers are still trying to completely understand. One study showed how a seafaring bird living on the cliffs of the UK was flown across the Atlantic Ocean in a plane, released in the US, and it flew straight back to its nest.

**THAT STUDY ABOUT THE SEA BIRD SOUNDS ABSOLUTELY FASCINATING, IT CERTAINLY HAS A VERY HIGH SENSE OF INTUITION. DO YOU THINK HUMANS POSSESS A SIMILAR ABILITY, TO BE AS IN TUNE WITH OURSELVES AND OUR ENVIRONMENT? IS THIS SOMETHING WE INTUITIVELY HAVE AND LOSE, OR PERHAPS SOMETHING WE ARE SEARCHING FOR?**

I do. But I think it's different. Last I read, the science for the birds is starting to point towards some sort of "built in compass" that responds to the Earth's magnetic fields. But this basic phenomena is similar to the abilities we have. We have cues of our own

to let us know something is off, threatening, like the hairs standing up on your neck. This is adrenaline rushing through your body. Just from experience, I think we have deeper understandings of ourselves but we don't really know how to listen properly. Remember the last time you said to yourself, "I KNEW that was going to happen!"? Sure, maybe it was a good guess, but I think it was most likely your intuition, and you didn't listen.

I read about another fascinating account of a military study done by the CIA during Vietnam, in which the best trackers from the Native American community lost their "sixth sense" for tracking once the military shaved their heads. It's true. Look up "Long hair and intuition: Native Americans and the US Military."

**GOLD AND SILVER LEAF IS A MAJOR COMPONENT IN YOUR WORK. WHAT**



"I PAINT THE FEMININE INTO A WORLD WHERE SHE IS ON A JOURNEY TO BE THE ABSOLUTE, MOST SELF AWARE & ENLIGHTENED BEING - THE DIVINE FEMININE"



INITIALLY DREW YOU TO THE MATERIAL, AND WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE WHEN WORKING WITH IT?

I was in the Louvre back in 2007. I realised I had spent most of my time staring up at the gilded ceilings. Even when I got to the Mona Lisa, the crowd was so big - I didn't care - I went back to studying the ceilings and how the sculptural elements so beautifully merged and contrasted with the gold.

Challenges. The wind and time always have a different plan for your gold than you do. I work indoors and use transfer leaf (the gold is attached to a piece of wax paper) but there often seems to be some mysterious breeze that finds its way in.



And timing out when to lay the gold or silver onto the adhesive is always tricky. I loosely follow the directions on the can, because I want to have the adhesive still malleable to manipulate the edges of where the gold and paint meet. I love it though. I love embracing the unpredictability of it.

THE SKIN ON YOUR FIGURES HAVE, PALE, DEWY TRANSLUCENCY - YOUR WORK CAPTURES AND REFLECTS LIGHT SO BEAUTIFULLY. CAN YOU TELL ME A BIT ABOUT YOUR PROCESS AND HOW YOU ACHIEVE THIS?

Thank you. I always start with an underpainting of raw umber and ivory black. Once that's dry, I build up the skin tones in thin layers. The grays are my own pre-mixed and tubed colours. They are quite warm when you see them on the palette but once they are thinly layered they become cooler. It's quite a battle to be honest, to keep the warm and cool in harmony, but I love the results.

THE WOMEN IN YOUR PAINTINGS APPEAR TO BE DELICATE YET STRONG, A BEAUTIFULLY ROMANTICISED VERSION OF HUMANS. YOUR PAINTINGS CAPTURE THEM IN A MOMENT OF SEEMINGLY QUIET TRANQUILITY, THERE IS A FEELING

opposite page, left  
*Arach*, 2015  
Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen panel, 30" x 40"

opposite page, right  
*In Search of Ordinary Things*, 2019  
Oil, gold leaf, and shellac on paper, 28" x 18"

left  
*If You Only Knew*, 2019  
Oil, gold leaf on linen mounted aluminum, 24" x 24"

right  
*Pareidolia*, 2016  
Oil and silver leaf on wood, 16" x 20"

AS IF THE VIEWER IS WITNESSING AN INTIMATELY SPECIAL MOMENT. WHO ARE THE WOMEN YOU PAINT, AND WHY DO YOU CHOOSE TO FOCUS ON THEM AS YOUR SUBJECTS?

They are women I know, including my fiancé, although I never think of them as portraits. They embody more than a single identity. Among other things, they symbolise intuition, potential, truth, independence, and magical thinking. We have a history of paintings and literature showing women as the one dimensional object of beauty or as the dangerous "femme fatale". I want to reappropriate these familiar archetypes.



I paint the feminine into a world where she is on a journey to be the absolute, most self-aware and enlightened being – The Divine Feminine. She inspires the potential in all of us to follow our own truth and be of nature itself. In my early twenties I almost went down a path that I thought was my own, but realised it was what others wanted for me. This realisation led me down a path of self-discovery and looking back I'm so grateful I made those hard decisions to correct my direction. It's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about the idea of "listening to yourself" and following your intuition. If you'd like to investigate further, Joseph Campbell, Tom Robbins, and *The Athena Doctrine*, are a few of the authors/books that I find my philosophies aligned with on these topics, including the feminine. We need more feminine energy in the world, the balance is definitely off.

YOU MENTION THAT YOU HAD A MOMENT OF REALISATION THAT YOU KNEW YOU HAD TO GO DOWN YOUR OWN, UNCHARTED PATH. COULD YOU TELL US A LITTLE MORE ABOUT WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO THIS CROSSROADS?

I was 21, had just graduated college and quickly got engaged to a girl I met there. We had a downpayment on a townhouse and I just started working as an illustrator/toy designer. Nothing felt right though. I was unhappy and pretty much every cell in my body was saying "this is not you". I felt like I was living out someone else's life. I realised that I was following the steps of "what you do when you grow up in a small town in Pennsylvania." You graduate from college, get married, get a job, buy a house, have kids, and live close to where you grew up. I was 21 and didn't even know who I really was and what I wanted out of life! How could I know what kind of partner would be a good match for me? It's easy to follow the formula handed to us by example. It's much harder to search for a solution that you've never seen before, because it's your solution not everyone else's. I think it's a persistent problem in much of our society. We don't encourage independence and self-







**left**  
*Triumph Of The Moon*, 2019  
 Oil and silver leaf on wood, 24" x 18"

**opposite page, top left**  
*Saturn Return*, 2017  
 Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen panel, 44" x 26"

**opposite page, bottom left**  
*Algorithms*, 2016  
 Oil and silver leaf on linen, 24" x 24"

**opposite page, right**  
*Pollination*, 2016  
 Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen, 24" x 36"



discovery enough in early adulthood. The more we know ourselves, the better our chances will be of living more fulfilling lives.

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR UPCOMING EXHIBITION AT ARCADIA CONTEMPORARY IN APRIL 2020. WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON RIGHT NOW AND WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE EXHIBITION?**

This will be my 5th solo exhibition with Arcadia. I have been researching the history of witchcraft, so that will be interesting. The moon is playing a pretty large role. You can expect some mythological influence and maybe less figures. Maybe even some male figures. I really don't know. I'm painting it as we speak, and I only plan so much. The rest is left to my intuition.

**YOUR WORK ALREADY SEEMS TO CARRY ELEMENTS OF THE MYSTICAL SO RESEARCHING WITCHCRAFT SEEMS LIKE A VERY NATURAL EVOLUTION. WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT? ALSO, HAVE YOU PAINTED MALE FIGURES IN THE PAST?**

I recently discovered a personal connection to witchcraft where I grew up in Pennsylvania. I grew up in the land of hex signs on barns, which my parents always said were just decoration. Turns out they were originally painted as spells to bring rain or good harvest, and the more the artist focused on the desired outcome while painting, the stronger the spell would be cast into the sign. Of course I immediately thought of the correlation to my own practice on canvas. Our area was settled by German immigrants. Early on in my research, my friend sent

me an article from an 18th century gazette near our hometown. Many accused of being witches were women, but the most notorious witch in our area was a man. He was casting spells in the name of the Trinity, the Christian Trinity. This kind of blew my mind. I was always taught that magic and witches were the antithesis of Christianity.

So my research continued, and I asked my 90 year old grandfather if he remembered anyone being accused of being a witch in our town when he was a kid. He said yes, and that witch was a man. This spell-casting was called *powwow*. It's mostly a kind of healing magic with a combination of prayer and natural remedies, things like rubbing potatoes on warts. Even my family was practicing *powwow* to banish hiccups, but they didn't know it. It was perpetuated as 'an old wives tale.' I still do it to this day and it works. Drink a glass of water while holding your breath and count to

seven. Magic! All of this has led me back to my fascination with our belief in invisible worlds and magical thinking, so I'm not sure how evident witchcraft (per se) will be in the work, but we'll see. I have painted men in the past – two men in the garden of Eden in a painting called *Separation of Church and Fate* and in a few other works.

**YOU'RE ALSO WORKING WITH FLESK PUBLICATIONS ON THE RELEASE OF YOUR FIRST BOOK, SCHEDULED TO BE RELEASED IN THE SUMMER OF 2020. CAN YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT THIS PROJECT?**

Yes, I can't wait to see this come to life! I've known John Fleske for almost a decade and we've always wanted to do a project together. I have so much respect for how he runs his publishing company. We've been working on this for quite some time, at a slow pace. We plan to put out a very high-end coffee table book of my work. We hope that the book alone feels like an art

object. It will be a dream come true to have the past decade of my work in a book to share with everyone.

**EARLIER YOU STATED THAT WE NEED MORE FEMININE ENERGY IN THE WORLD. WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP LEVEL OUT THE BALANCE OF ENERGY?**

Putting more women in leadership positions and closing the gap on gender-pay is obvious. What everyone can do is understand and practice just some of the feminine qualities and attributes that truly make the world a better place. Everyone can be more intuitive, nurturing, and empathetic. Everyone can be more imaginative and sincere. Everyone can be more connected to themselves and the natural world.

**EXHIBITIONS:**

GROUP - January 2020: LA Art Show with Arcadia Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA, USA

SOLO - April 2020  
 Arcadia Contemporary, Pasadena, CA, USA

