



Tea with...

Brad Kunkle





In June your highly anticipated solo exhibition entitled "alkēmē " or "Alchemy" will open at the Arcadia Contemporary Gallery. Can you explain the origin of this title? What kind of themes should we expect to see in your new paintings?

As I dove into my work more and more it led me to the concept of magical thinking. Almost all of us do this. If you are religious or superstitious, you believe that **there are invisible forces that you can manipulate to affect your life.**

This led me into the history of **witchcraft**, which has roots in my hometown area of Pennsylvania (hex signs and powwow). This took me into the world of alchemy and it was there, that I realized I was reading things that were tied back into magical thinking.

We are currently experiencing strange, difficult and unexpected times: your exhibition has in fact been postponed and all of us in the world have been forced to stop and stay at home. Artists often spend many hours locked in their studio, but having to do it forcibly with the anxiety of what is happening in the world is not the same thing. How are you facing this situation?

My fiancé and I are fortunate enough to have artist friends that have a large property in upstate New York. We saw the writing on the wall and left Brooklyn

in early March. I finished my show here in the woods. It gave me the opportunity to really detach and focus on these paintings. I had put over a year into this show, with just a month or so left to finish the works. Solo show bring enough anxiety and then a pandemic on top of that --- I don't think these paintings would have turned into what they are if I would have finished them in the city. **I feel it's my duty, as an artist, to lift people out of their everyday experience - to give them**

hope and see the world through its magical lens.

I kept reminding myself of that as I worked through the last few months. It gave me even more purpose during these unsettling times.



*"The Navigator"
Oil and gold leaf on
paper, 16 x 12 in*

You are a master in the art of gilding. You have taken this technique to new levels never seen in contemporary art, creating works of extraordinary beauty, enriched by exciting light effects given by the gold and silver leaves that have become an ever-present imprint of your works. How did you learn this technique? Can you tell us something about your creative process, how do you create one of your paintings from the starting idea to the final result?

My use of gold and silver is self-taught. Before I was a full-time artist, I was a house painter and was asked to do a job that required copper-gilded walls. **It was all serendipitous because I had just returned from a trip to the Louvre where I was so inspired by the gilded ceilings that I wanted to start experimenting with gold leaf in my art.** This was before social media was big - and I couldn't find anyone to teach me or mentor me. So I read, and made mistakes and experimented. I decided to use silver in the skies because it just felt right. I hadn't seen it done before so I was really excited to try it. This was before Instagram, but Facebook was pretty popular and I purposefully didn't consume information or imagery over the 8 or 9 months that I was experimenting and forming this style. I didn't know if anyone else was using gold or silver in the way that I was - and I knew that I didn't want to derail my excitement if I saw someone else doing it. **There is creative benefit to shutting the world out, and I don't think a lot of young artists understand this.**

My creative process has become more and more like alchemy. I do something physical and then let that inform what the next idea is about the painting. Then I take the next physical action, then meditate on that result before I make the next creative decision, and so forth. For example, in **Unconquered Sun**, I had no idea what was going to happen in the landscape in front of the figure until months after the figure was there. I stared at an empty landscape until the idea came to place the sun mask in the ground. I wasn't sure I would gild it until I painted it in, and then a week later decided it needed to be gold.

In 2017 you realized a project that we would call truly extraordinary: you created works for the title sequence of a Netflix series, "Anne With An E", based on the novels of Anne of Green Gables by Lucy Maud Montgomery, whose three seasons have been an absolute success. It is fantastic that a contemporary painter becomes part of popular culture with projects that are out of the ordinary but

extraordinarily in step with the times. Tell us how this project was born and what experiences you had.

This project was just so much fun. I had just watched **Stranger Things** on Netflix and was so impressed with the opening titles that I googled "who made the titles for Stranger Things ." This company I had never heard of before popped up: **Imaginary Forces**. A week later, I got an email from Imaginary Forces. I was so stunned. Nothing to do with my google search. **Alan Williams**, who directed the titles for **Anne with an E**, was still in the process of trying to win the project for Imaginary Forces. He had been a fan of my work for years and as soon as the Anne with an E project presented itself, he thought that my art would be perfect for his vision of the sequence. So I said, yes. Alan and his team made the pitch to the producers, and we got the job. It was serendipitous.and that's magical thinking ;)

*Study for "The Warden"
Oil and gold leaf on paper, 12 x 9 in*





"Laevus Oculum Florae" , Oil on linen on wood, 14 x 11 in



"Semblance", Oil on linen on wood, 14 x 11 in



*“Mother (Unicon)”
Oil on linen on wood, 9 x 12 in*

You are one of those rare artists who draws inspiration from personal experience to create his works. In 2015 you had lost your dog, Shadow, for more than a month, finding her wandering through the streets of NYC. It must have been a terrible experience, for you and for her, which luckily ended in the best way. This event inspired you a huge diptych that contains many metaphors and symbols related to this experience. But you didn't stop here, you also created FindShadow, a community-led organization that has helped many other families find their missing dogs with the help of technology. How important is it for you that a contemporary artist is active in social contexts like this?

I think that the truly influential leaders of social activism are the ones that have experienced the hardship they are fighting. It's important for all of us to support causes, yes. But for me, as an artist - I don't think I would have ever gotten behind Shadow (now officially just called Shadow) just because I love dogs. My influence on that problem would not have been as great either without my story to inspire. So, as an artist... we only have so much energy to create...

**Next page:
“The Warden”**

Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen on wood, 30 x 40 in

And I personally try to always create from a genuine place and be socially active in contexts that I have personal experiences.

You made your first solo show in 2010, always at the Arcadia Gallery, where you are still proudly represented, and today you count a path dotted with important experiences and magnificent successes, but in the career of an artist it isn't all sunshine and roses, especially in its start. Can you tell us your beginnings? When did you decide that you would pursue the difficult but exciting path of the Artist and what was your personal path in reaching it? What advice would you feel to give to an emerging artist from your experience?

I didn't paint for 8 years after graduating from college with a degree in fine art. I knew I could paint well, but I didn't know what to paint, and I didn't have a style that was personally to me. I decided I needed life experience.

Experience and perspective are two of the most important tools for any artist. I joined an indie rock band and became a house painter.

In the back of my mind, I always thought, I'll pick painting back up. I wanted to have my first solo show in NYC by the time I turned 30.

House painting led to me meeting some wealthy friends who commissioned me to paint their dogs, which led to more dog portraits, which led to that job to gild copper walls.

You see? It's all connected. At that same time, **I was approaching 30, and had just met the owner of Arcadia Gallery.** Life seemed to be presenting me with the dots, and all I had left to do was the hard work.

I sold my bass guitar to buy a \$700 box of gold leaf. I lived with a friend so I didn't have high overhead, and I just painted for 8 months. **14 hours days of painting and dreaming. But I had a plan.**

I knew I wanted to finish 8 paintings, and then take them to Arcadia. Planning and hard work are still two of the most important things in my career.

I took those paintings to Arcadia, and they sold the first one within two weeks. **My career took off soon after that, but there was a lot of hours of hard work that led up to that moment, and there are long hours of hard work that have allowed me the privilege of still being a full-time artist today.**

Young artists should have a plan and work hard. Today more than every, it's easy to be noticed if you are making great work. Make short term goals that lead to the big "dream". Be a smart business person and a creative force. Once you start selling work, save up a "safety net" in the bank. Once you have a nice little bit of money to allow you to feel secure, THEN quit your day job or move out of your parent's house and pursue selling your work full-time. Not every path is the same. **Follow your own intuition and walk your own path.**

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"Genetic Drift"
Oil and gold leaf on wood, 18 x 14 in



"Where Winds May Follow"
Oil, gold and silver leaf on wood, 24 x 18 in





"Blue Levitation No.2"
Oil and silver leaf on wood, 20 x 16 in



"Wanderer In Blue"
Oil and silver leaf on wood, 20 x 16 in



"Coronation (The Swan)"
Oil, gold and silver leaf on wood, 24 x 18 in



"Unconquered Sun"
Oil, gold and silver leaf on wood, 24 x 18 in



"Tith"
Oil, gold and silver leaf on wood, 24 x 18 in



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"Umbra"
Oil and silver leaf on wood, 18 x 14 in