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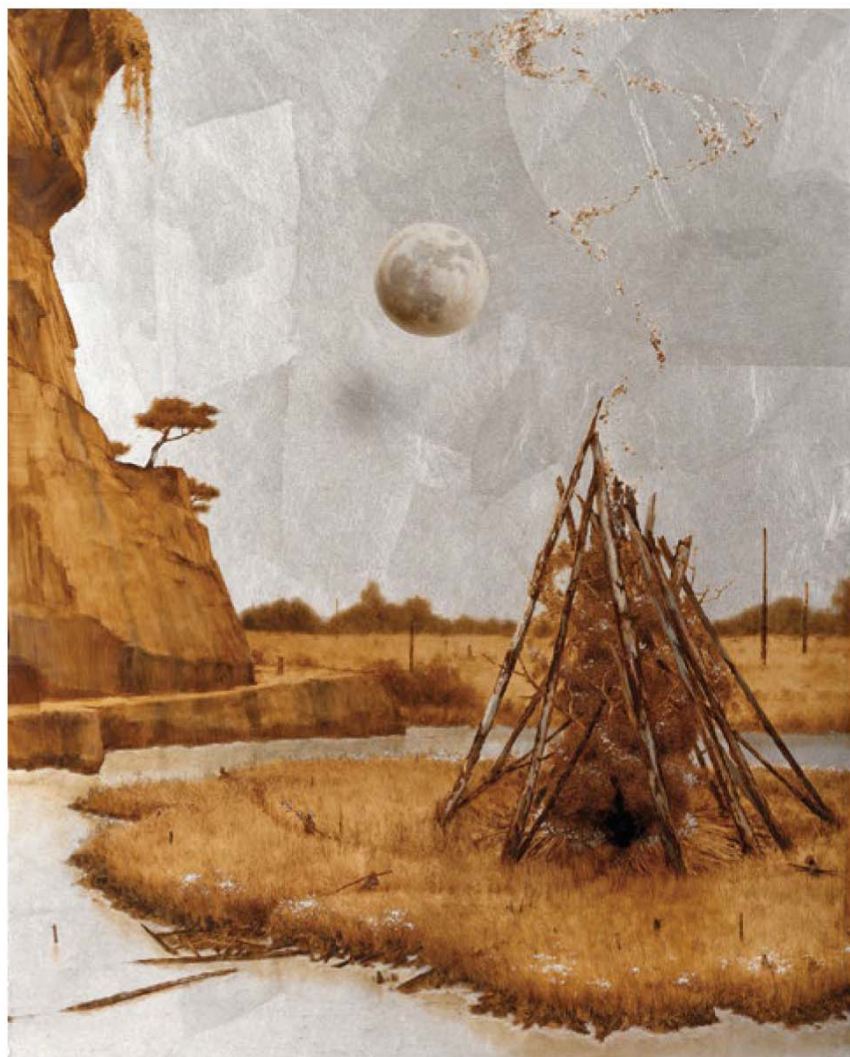




BRAD KUNKLE

# Conjuring the Feminine

By Meg Daly



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In Brad Kunkle's luscious mixed media work, *Palisade*, a river nymph entwined in leaves floats above a Chinese landscape painting. Interweaving mythologies, Kunkle makes a statement about the feminine divine as it exists in the natural world.

*Palisade* is the title piece in an upcoming solo show of Kunkle's recent work at Arcadia Contemporary. The exhibit opens December 9 and runs through December 31.

Born in 1978, Kunkle grew up in rural Pennsylvania. His family encouraged outdoor adventures and valuing nature and wildlife. As an adult, he sees the natural world as a means for people to connect more deeply with themselves. He wants his art to serve a similar purpose. "I hope that my paintings act as talismans to heal, to connect with

our inner nature and inspire self-reflection," he says.

In *Palisade*, tiny background figures cross a bridge high above a body of water. Kunkle says their passage symbolizes a change in consciousness or a rebirth. But he steers clear of any exact meaning. "I don't have all of the answers," he says. "And I prefer to keep it that way. The mystery of what's happening in my work is one of the things that keeps bringing me back to the easel."

Kunkle is passionate about what he calls feminine energies. He mentions characteristics such as being intuitive, loving, honest, generous, sincere, nurturing and understanding. "Think about how the world would be a better place, and we would be the best versions of ourselves if we all allowed these energies to guide our life choices."

1

*The Island*, oil and silver leaf on panel, 20 x 16"

2

*And So It Begins*, oil and gold leaf on panel, 33 x 16"

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*Palisade*, oil and gold leaf on panel, 20 x 16"





4

Seen through this lens, Kunkle's female figures are messengers between worlds. *Naushin* invites the viewer to see through a curtain of leaves into another dimension. *The Traveler* sets off on a journey through inner and outer landscapes, collecting leaves as she goes. *And So It Begins* suggests the emergence of a girl into womanhood, or a young woman discovering her feminine power.

Even when a female figure is absent,

the feminine is imbued in his work. For example, *The Island* shows a structure made of trees and branches, which Kunkle says is a temple to Mother Nature. The moon motif shows up in a number of his paintings; the moon has long been ascribed feminine attributes. For Kunkle, the moon also signifies human interconnectedness. "It's the one celestial body that connects us," he says. "I can be standing here on the planet, you can be far away, and we can

both look up and see the same moon at the same time."

Kunkle works with oil paint and gold and silver leaf to create a beautiful, layered dimensionality. He starts with a plan in mind, but he also allows each step of making the painting inform the next. "I let the painting direct me as I make it," he says.

He starts with an underpainting, often of a figure. Next steps include a thin layer of chalk powder over the figure to prevent





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*The Traveler*, oil, gold  
and silver leaf on panel;  
18 x 18"

5  
*Naushin*, oil, gold and  
silver leaf on panel;  
20 x 16"

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sticking of stray gold leaf that's about to be applied. He then paints glue where he wants the gold or silver leaf to be, paints the gold leaf on, and then shapes it with an X-Acto knife. Next the painting gets a layer of shellac, over which Kunkle can add oil paint.

"It's a process that I compare to the material practice of alchemy," Kunkle says. "The completion of each step informs what the next step will be."

Some paintings tell stories from his own life. He made *The Traveler* when his partner, Darla, was pregnant with their son. "I was thinking about her as a vessel for

this new life, which is symbolized by the basket and the leaves rising out," he says. The depiction on her dress of a Japanese village symbolizes the couple's desire to continue to explore the world together even as they travel on the path of parenthood.

Kunkle's art reflects his own journey away from traditional religion and belief systems toward a path that felt truer to him. He was raised Lutheran, followed a traditional path through college and got engaged early. But he said something didn't feel right. He broke off his engagement and started following his intuition.

"I stopped listening to the noise around me and really listened to myself," Kunkle says about that crucible time in his life. "It was the beginning of my own journey to connect with my inner nature. My limited palette and use of gold leaf has a similar story. It took a lot of ignoring what I thought I should be doing and focusing on listening to myself." ●

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