

**Gallery Guide**

# **The Sacred Feminine**

**Figurative Sculpture by  
Cydra Vaux**

**October 2nd through 27th, 2013**

Westmoreland Museum of American Art @rt 30  
4764 State Route 30  
Greensburg, PA 15601

Cydra Vaux @ [www.womansculpture.com](http://www.womansculpture.com)



In her own words,  
Cydra shares her thoughts on  
sculptures presented in this exhibition.



**Yoni** is the Sanskrit word for the vagina. Its counterpart is the lingam, interpreted by some as the phallus. It is also *the divine passage, womb or sacred temple*. The word covers a range of meanings, including: place of birth, source, origin, spring, fountain, place of rest, repository, receptacle, seat, abode, home, lair, nest, and stable.

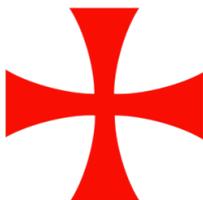
In Hinduism, the ancient Indian texts contain the word *yoni* in various contexts. In Hindu philosophy, according to Tantra, yoni is the origin of life. The yoni is also considered to be an abstract representation of Shakti and Devi, the creative force that moves through the entire universe. (Wikipedia)

# 1. *Mandorla Egg with Almond Cross Pattern and Woman*

Terra cotta, 2005

I started *Mandorla Egg with Almond Cross Pattern* in November of 2004 and finished it August 2005. There is a large slit running the length of the piece. Deep within this crevice I have placed a woman. Who is she? I don't really know. Perhaps she is the spirit of the yoni. Is she trapped in there waiting to come out? Is she hiding? Is she emerging, or retreating? Part of my mission as an artist is to make utopian art, art that provides hope and envisions solutions to our confusion and pain. In the descriptions by Brown, Walker and Jung, the cross, a predominately male symbol, is described. Yet, the area surrounding the cross is regarded as the background, or the negative space, which serves to highlight the positive subject: the cross. This relationship between the cross and the surrounding space can be seen as a metaphor to describe the relationship between men and woman.

Women have been cast as the background, the negative space, the invisible, the secondary, the discarded. Seeing the "invisible spaces" between the arms of the cross was an ah-ha experience for me. I had just finished Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* in March of 2004 and was sketching the Templars Cross in my art journal, when in a lighting flash, instead of seeing the cross, I saw nestled between the arms of the cross, four yonis!



Templars Cross

I was overjoyed to see how these two powerful symbols, the cross and the yonis, defined each other and were dependent upon each other to shape the others form.

Therefore, I have modified the Templars Cross, and have taken it in a different direction by highlighting the spaces between the arms of the cross: the yonis. Although my version of the cross is similar to the Templar's Cross, it is not one I have seen before. From here on in I will refer to this symbol as the Almond Cross, a name I have devised that acknowledges both the male and female forms.

“Mandorla means ‘almond,’ which was one of the more cryptic synonyms for this symbol, also known as vesica piscis, the Vessel of the Fish, and more simply as the yoni. Almonds are female-genital symbols and maternity charms from very ancient times. The virgin birth of the god Attis was conceived by a magic almond. Even the Israelites’ tabernacle made use of its fertility mana (Exodus 37:20), and Aaron’s rod produced almonds in token of a general power of fructification (Numbers 17:8).” (Walker, 1998, pg 10). The mandorla shape found in the the Almond Cross is repeated in the overall shape of the piece itself.

## **2. Which Church**

Terra cotta, 2008

*All fanatical, organized religion suppresses women with  
an endlessly creative and unfathomable myriad of  
atrocities.*

*It is the stuff of nightmares. It is the stuff of hell.*

*Suppression subtle and gross,*

*Suppression covert and overt,*

*Suppression conscious and unconscious.*

*Suppression insidious.*

*Suppression incessant.*

*Suppression systemic.*

*Yet...*

*How can you hide the moon?*

*How can you hold back the tides?*

*How can you crush the wind?*

*How can you cool the burning fires that smolder in the  
deep of the earth?*

*How can you tame Woman?*

-----Cydra Vaux—April 5, 2008

These words can be applied to any group of people who have been suppressed. Instead of the word woman, substitute: Dalits, Blacks, Jews, Lesbians, Gays....this list can go on and on. However, I am specifically addressing the struggles of women through this sculpture. Also, when I speak of fanatical, organized religion or the patriarchy that suppresses women I am not speaking

exclusively about men. Rather the patriarchy represents the cultural oppression of women by *both* men and women. I will go on to say that I believe that humanity can be seen as whole and when women are suppressed, the men in the culture are also greatly damaged. However, *Which Church* is addressing the pain felt by women, yet this is not to say that men are not in need of healing, and have not suffered brutally through rigid dogmatic structures. Further, the Son of God should be revealed in and honored. However, rigidly organized religion, and the patriarchy have distorted the balanced yin yang between men and women.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer sees only the front of *Which Church*, a building, and then as they walk around the piece they are surprised to see a witch at the back of the piece. Therefore, the front of the piece must be the church because this is the story I am telling: a history that tries to suppress the feminine, but cannot. And, this is how things often are. At first glance we are only shown the male aspects, and yet, on closer inspection we see the almost invisible fingerprints of women—everywhere, yes, everywhere.

Why is the witch pregnant? Why are so many of my figures pregnant? Rarely, do men depict pregnant women. Instead, men often depict women as sexual beings, or the virgin archetype. When a woman is pregnant she is no longer seen as an object of desire by other men who strive to perpetuate their own genetic line. A pregnant woman is already committed to a man, and is no longer as desirable, or accessible. I also use pregnancy as metaphor for life and unknown potential that is ready to burst forth into consciousness.

### **3. *Creation Story***

Terra cotta, 2008

The title of this piece envisions men and women working together to create order, beauty and life. It moves beyond the narrow confines of a dogmatic creation story, and instead presents our religious myths as a symbolic dialogue that inspires and comforts us, mirroring back to us our past, present and future dreams. I was very inspired by my brother's partner who labored to birth their son. My brother relayed mythic tales of her heroic efforts and how she spent many hours in hard labor to birth their dear little baby. Her birthing story is awe inspiring, it is profound.

I was aware that by working on *Which Church* and *Creation Story* simultaneously they helped to inform the other piece. In my studio I have two sculpture stands and I often work on two or more sculptures at the same time. I work on one until I am frustrated, or can't get the solutions I need, and then I work on the other piece. Or, I work on one piece for several days and leave the other covered for a few days. Then, when I return to the other piece days later I have fresher eyes. I think it is interesting how these two pieces are facets of the same constellation of ideas surrounding men and women working together to either make up an institution like the church, or to work together in creative pursuits like birthing children, the future, beauty and order.

Note: At the opening show at the JCC Society of Sculptors @ 75 Years, American Jewish Museum juried show; I received the Vivian Lehman Award for Portraiture

for *Creation Story*. The piece was also selected to be part of a self-guided tour to encourage patrons to answer questions and think deeper about my work.

#### **4. *Pope Joan of the Wind***

Terra cotta, 2005

From my art diary of July 7<sup>th</sup> 2004: “I woke up this morning with a vision of *Pope Joan of the Wind* in my mind’s eye. A wind is blowing her robes out, the winds of change, the winds of the holy spirits (not exclusively in the Christian tradition, but in a universal tradition). These are the wild sweet winds that come right before a storm when the air is crackling with excitement and the sky is a heavy steel blue. One feels so powerful, so alive. Yes, I remember that feeling as a child, right before a storm, standing out in our back yard, my arms stretched out to embrace the mystical.”

This piece finds its inspiration in many things including Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. Her jaw is slack; her robes are beautiful large billowing robes. This piece is about humility before power. She is choosing to step into the life force and embrace her place in the wide current of the powerful jet streams. She is not saying, “I am powerful.” She is saying: “I step outside of my house, into these wild winds to join my strength and purpose to theirs. They will infuse me with their mystery, magic and power, with the Beyond, with what is greater, The All. It is a cleansing wind one can’t control.”

As I write this I am acutely aware how this is a metaphor for where I am with my work. Ever since my son and

husband went to New York, and I made the decision to commit to my artwork, I have been infused with tremendous energy and purpose. Eighty percent of life is showing up. I am showing up for my art in a big way these days!

## **5. *Ardhanariswara / Tennis Everyone!***

Terra cotta, 2008

On the front of the sculpture is the India figure of Ardhanarishwara, who was created to bridge the gap between the male and the female: Shiva gathered Gauri in his embrace and held her so closely that the two became one body, one heart, one soul. A single being, half male, half female: The Ardhanarishwara.

Some writers describing this image use the term hermaphrodite, but that is a physical description of a human being who has the sexual organs of both a male and a female. The Great Goddess/God cannot be understood in such physical terms. The Androgyne is a metaphor that has nothing to do with any form of ordinary human sexual activity, be it heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.... the ultimate goal of the spiritual quest is androgyne, a state of mind in which the finite consciousness of the individual and the realm of the infinite cosmos are realized as one. From the perspective of comparative world.

The writing underneath the figure of the Ardhanarishwara is a quote from the Bible, except I have substituted the

word Compassion for Christ. I wanted to move beyond to a more universal truth.

There is no Jew nor Greek.  
There is no Bond nor Free.  
There is no Male nor Female.  
You are all one in Compassion.

On the back is a woman with a tennis ball for a halo; she embodies the trickster archetype. Orbiting tennis balls reference the moon and its changing phases. The writing below reads:

Burning Her Bra?  
She Was Burning Her Tops!  
Goodbye Tan Lines, Hello Sunshine!  
Goodbye Male Gaze, Hello Carefree Days!

This piece creates a relationship between the spiritual (Ardhanarishwars) and the secular (Tennis player). To further highlight the permeable transmission of concept between these two states.

## **6. *Leaving Perdah and the Palace of Winds***

Terra cotta, 2009

Perusing a book of architecture from India, I came across the beautiful Hawa Mahal, or Palace of Winds, built in 1799 in Jaipur. The building is captivating and I longed to visit it. Yet reading about the palace, I discovered its disturbing history. On the façade are windows with lattice work that catch the wind and provide a breeze inside the palace. However, the underlying reason for the lattice was to enforce strict purdah, or face cover. The women of the harem could watch the world outside their prison without passersby seeing them.

The front of this piece shows the Palace of Winds; the reverse side finds a modern-day woman standing on a train platform surrounded by her luggage. She represents women who have been able to break free from horrific practices like purdah. On the surrounding walls are traditional tessellating tiles. Behind her is a wall clock that reads two o'clock and is a play on the word "to", as she is going "to" someplace. The circular form of the clock serves as a halo and speaks of divinity amidst the secular. On the tableau beneath, birds in flight echo her freedom.

While I was making this sculpture I was preparing to go to Brazil on a Fulbright Group Study Abroad. I was wrestling with feelings of responsibility to my husband and son and how although I love being a mom and wife, I was looking forward to this new adventure.

## **7. *De/Termination: Self-Portrait Speaking Life over Breast/Liver Cancer***

Terra cotta, 2010

*De/Termination* was born in a flurry of motion with me quickly chucking clay onto my sculpting stand. In these moments I imagine that “if I can just keep sculpting, I can keep death at arm’s length”. This piece is about me trying to stay alive, to create a fountain of life that rises above death. Seeing this sculpture my mom, Verna Robinson, commented: “All ends up in the bone yard, all ends up dry bones, what continues on after we are gone is what we have called forth.” She thought it looked as if the three large faces were speaking their legacies, and that the figures coming out of the mouths were the ideas that transcend death and live beyond the grave.

The three large faces represent different aspects of myself that help me fight cancer.

The first of the faces is a self-portrait with two putti angels tumbling from my lips that represent life, joy and all the dear sweetness that babies bring.

The second colossal head is a Hindu goddess with a dancing Indian woman issuing from her mouth. The Indian woman, her tongue sticking out like Kali’s, has a non-emotional quality like some of the women in my other works who are focused goddesses that rule their worlds.

The third large bust is a Tiki God of war; a horse bursts from his open jaw speaking to beauty, power, the raw

energy of life, and is the male counterpart to the Indian woman.

Between the heads are three motifs: a curvilinear and symmetrical pattern speaks to order over chaos; a second area suggests life giving water; the third section images fire, vines, and floral elements that reference energy and life. It is not important that these things are realistically represented, as much as what they evoke: feelings of motion, life, wind, water.

Death is represented by six skeletons at the base of the sculpture.

## **8. *Triquetra***

Terra cotta, 2004

Barbara G. Walker (1998) describes the triquetra as “an ancient symbol of the female trinity, being composed of three yonic vesicas interlaced so as to form the continuous “gateless” type of design, always regarded as protective. Naturally, this symbol was exploited by Christian mystics as a sign of the male trinity, however inappropriate its basic shaping was to such interpretation.” (p. 42)

It is criminal that the triquetra has been reassigned to an exclusively male god-head. My purpose with this sculpture is to reinstate the triquetra as a female symbol by placing yonic forms next to female forms to highlight their similar structure. As with other pieces the head of the woman references the clitoris, consciousness and identity.

*Walker, Barbara G. (1998) The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects. New York: Harper Collins.*

## **9. *My Nurse and I and Frida Kahlo***

Terra cotta, 2012

This piece is in response to Frida Kahlo's *My Nurse and I*. Art critic Hayden Herrera gives a thorough review of Frida's piece which is worth reading.

When I was two years old our family spent two summers in Alaska in an area so remote our food was brought in by pontoon plane. Mindful of the Alaska brown bears in the area the men carried guns. Mom didn't carry a rifle; she knew that if a bear wasn't killed with the first shot she would just enrage it. During our two summers none of the men encountered a bear, but Mom and I did. Walking along a path through the woods Mom had baskets of laundry balanced on each hip; I was sitting on her shoulders. As we rounded a bend in the path an 800 pound bear was in front of us, just two feet away. I began to squeal with joy "Goggie, goggie!" My Mom says she can still remember looking into the face of that bear as it turned, went to the side of the trail and looked at us. Mom just continued on down the path. If she had wanted to she could have reached out and touched the bear's fur, it was so close. Mom is not sure why the bear didn't attack. Perhaps the bear didn't know what to make of the two-headed creature with massive basket hips and a second head at the very top of the creature babbling

away. Mom said the bear was watching me as we passed; she thinks the bear might have sensed that I was a child.

I am not going to anthropomorphize the bear, nature is nature and when bears are hungry they eat. Yet, I like to think my meeting the bear was a moment of sublime awe and wonder that I have cradled in my depths these many years. Bears have always been symbols of fierce mothers that protect their young. Right now, with my illness, the wagons are circled, and Mother Ursula has come to protect her young.

I have always been drawn to Frida Kahlo because of her colorful imagery, and her unique vision that was not filtered through anyone else's lens. She made the art that made sense to her and it was honest and defiant. I have never regarded myself as anything but healthy. During the past few months I have had to accept that cancer is considered a disability, and that I now have a disability. And, so, Frida Kahlo's own health issues draw me closer to her for comfort and guidance on how to emotionally navigate a chronic illness.

On the front of the piece Frida stands with her arms in a cradle, mimicking the bear's arms with the implication that Frida also holds me in her arms like a child. The bear claw-like necklace around her neck also links her to the bear. The soft folds of fabric and bunches of flowers add comfort and life to the tableau. Her arms wrap around herself as if she is comforting and holding her own body; she is a mother to herself. At other times, it seems as if she is in pain and is holding herself to make the pain abate.

## **10. Self Portrait with Totem to Protect Life and Ward off Cancer**

Terra cotta, 2011

Since December of 2009 I have been trying to recover from the ongoing trauma of cancer. I have experienced a lot of strain and shock to my body and life. In response, I am trying to carve out a space of safety for myself.

Although this sculpture draws from different cultural and religious sources, its foundation is the totem pole found in the North West region. My family is from Washington, so I grew up with this Native American iconography during the sacred time of childhood, when the experiences from that period carried more power for me than those of my adult years. If I had not been exposed to this art in my youth I don't think it would be as meaningful to me now

The boat at the top evokes the crescent moon traditionally found on goddesses' headdresses, and Viking ships from my Scandinavian heritage. The three equal armed crosses speak to balance between heaven and earth and are figural stand-ins for my husband, son and myself. The boat and three figurative crosses allude to Max Beckman's *Departure*. Like Beckman's family who is transported by boat on a beautiful blue sea away from atrocities, may our family sail away from the atrocity of cancer.

The front of the totem speaks to fierce forces that ward off malevolence. Safely tucked in, I peek out from the belly of totem spirits that dispel death. The tradition of using grotesque beings to evict evil is found in countless traditions. The woman references India's Kali and her powerful arms carry our boat to safety. The Tiki gods I

saw growing up on the West Coast speaks to the secular that is imbued with the divine by a child's mind. Snake-like arms offer protection, as do her breasts in the shape of sharp beaked birds.

The back of the totem pictures regenerative spirits. The woman's vine and leaf arms hold the promise of growth. Although my abdomen is swollen with ascites, hers is bursting with a swirling sun that heals with light. Her breasts herald songs of life. Flowing from her yoni is life giving water, or blood and riding this wave is a figure in the wheel of life, or swastika position.

The similarities between the sculpture's front and back highlight the relationship between nurturing and aggression and how these two seemingly opposite states can grow out of, meld into, and support each other. In most cultures people are discouraged from expressing anger. Here, fury is claimed as a positive force that unites with life to offer protection. As I continue my battle with cancer, I claim the gifts of these two services.

**11. *Drawing Strength from Art and Ancestors***  
*(Self Portrait with Sun Totem Women with Singing Breasts, and Primal-Child-Animals)*  
Terra cotta, 2012

My belly is swollen hard like a drum with cancer, bowel, ascites fluid and the effects of chemotherapy. The bandage on my abdomen covers a drain tube that drains the excess fluid from my abdomen. I am tired, too tired to stand, and I don't need to. I rest into the comforting

traditions of art, of ancestors, of customs that sustain, transcend and heal.

My left hand draws energy from the totem and its benevolent spirits; my right hand channels this energy into my being, into my heart.

The totem is a woman with a round sun face; her headdress radiates sunshine. Her face is kind, yet she is fiercely maternal and ready to do battle. Songs burst from her breasts. She wears her heart on her body for all to see. Her belly, unlike my own distended abdomen, is flowing with life giving water. Her womb births a fish, a traditional female symbol. The sacred animals ringing the bottom of the totem are similar to the animals from *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendack. My mom says the animals embody the primal child; she is right.

Ever since this past Friday I have been in a dream time, or an art/creative space. Going to an art show and seeing my mentor and the other members from the Society of Sculptors made me feel connected and reaffirmed me as an artist in a deep way. I just love to lay in bed at night, or driving along in the car and think about my sculptures, and a little thought about them will come to me, and this is so comforting and I feel alive and creative and energized at these times. These are things that belong to me alone. They are in my control and they bring me great pleasure and satisfaction that is deep.

## 12. *The Holy Act of Cleansing*

Terra cotta, 2009

Excerpt from my Diary, June 2008: “I had a dream I climbed into a window in a church. My fingers gripped the deeply grooved, bevel-carved stones that formed a boarder around the church’s window. The soft, dove grey stones of the windows were smooth, cool, and formed a series of curved surfaces that made it easy to grip. Once inside, I proceeded up a short flight of steps, and reached the top floor of the church. Turning to the left, I entered a bathroom that belonged only to me. The room was spacious, and the defused light lent it a calm, peaceful, clean, private, spiritual and airy feeling. A plant flourished on a marble counter top. There was artwork, but the only piece I can remember was the bust of a man that looked similar to the face in the statue of *Laocoön and His Sons*, but the face was not in as much pain. The “toilet” in the room was like a large raised white porcelain basin with a bidet that reminded me of a baptismal font or washbasin. I was also sad; because this would be the last time I would get to use this bathroom. What does this dream mean? I have this horrid fear of death ever since my diagnosis of cancer in 2001. On the other side of this piece are gothic windows that reference the spirituality of a church and below them are public toilets, like the ones found in Rome.

I made this piece in 2008 before I was diagnosed with liver cancer. In retrospect this piece adds an even deeper appreciation of the body’s ability to rid itself of urine waste. I wonder if my body knew in 2008 that my liver was sick. At this time I had a blood test that showed

a slight elevation. My doctor reassured me that the discrepancy was caused by the medication I was taking. The doctor was wrong, very wrong.

**13. *Institutions Support Yet Suffocate;  
Transcendent Art Restores*  
(with double self portrait)  
Terra cotta, 2013**

Diary Entry: My dreams woke me up in the middle of the night and I was full of emotion thinking about this piece. I have been remembering *Woman Closet* from Judy Chicago's *Woman House*, and Louise Bourgeois' *Femme Maison*. I feel claustrophobic: hospital stays, endless doctor appointments, not being able to leave Pittsburgh to go on vacation because of my health, the drain in my abdomen keeps me from even swimming. This piece is about being trapped by institutions and buildings I am responsible to; yet at the same time these structures and institutions help to support me.

The front of the piece is a self-portrait. I am vulnerable in my nudity, helpless against the encroaching architecture, the look on my face is a fighting face of defiance, not giving in, not being a victim.

On the back of piece I am the sculptor resting on the ground after making a tableau of some of the images I saw in India. My sculpting tools lie on the ground next to

me. Sometimes I like to imagine I could have been one of the sculptors who carved the magnificent, fantastical figures from Khajuraho or Mamallapuram.

The figures on the back function like dreams and memories which are “viewed through a glass darkly.” The viewer is invited to look through the three triangles created by my body to see the back of the piece reflected in the mirror. The buildings on the sculpture are claustrophobic and without windows. However, I have used my own body to create windows and a breathing space. The three triangular windows, act as a metaphor for viewing my interior and subconscious world (the triangle is a common female symbol).

#### **14. *Self Portrait with Wolf***

*(based on a dream)*

Terra cotta, 2013

In October 2011 I had a dream I was with a group of people and wild animals; we were walking and running through hills in a wild far off land. The people in the group ran ahead of me and I couldn't catch up to them. I was afraid to be with the wild animals; I had a whistle on my neck and I was blowing it to call for help, but it wasn't loud enough. As I was running, one of the dark wolves came up behind me, and I stopped running to face it. I wasn't too afraid, and regardless, I knew I couldn't outrun it. The wolf then pulled back the fur around its head to reveal the face of a young man. He was upset and said that he would never be acknowledged or valued. My heart went out to him and I said “Yes, you are right you

will never be valued by this culture”. I knew that our society values the civilized, and not the wild-free-primitive. Then, I took the wolf in my arms and we embraced in a deep kiss and I was crying with the relief of our understanding and the pain I felt for him.

### **15. *Self Portrait with China Chow***

*(based on dress by Yves Saint Laurent from the book *Wise Women* by Joyce Tenneson)*

Terra cotta, 2012

There is a beautiful photograph in Joyce Tenneson’s book *Wise Women* of China Chow and her mother. China is wearing a dress by Yves Saint Laurent that reveals the form of her body including her nipples and naval. The dress is exquisite and I wish I had one that was custom made for me. However, as a mastectomy survivor my dress would challenge our ideas of beauty, sexuality and wholeness.

## 16. *Cancan Girls: Baubo and Demeter*

Terra cotta, 2008

Instead of narrating *Baubo and Demeter* in a traditional way, I have expressed their mood and the emotions they stir up in me when I hear their story. Traditionally, Baubo is rendered without a head, and her face superimposed upon her torso, giving voice to the body and circumnavigating the intellect. In Greek mythology Baubo is the trickster who shakes Demeter from her deep mourning with sacred obscene jokes. In addition to a high kicking boisterous dance, the title cancan refers to a woman's ability: Yes, We Can!

Baubo in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1996, p. 362-374): "There is an aspect of women's sexuality that in ancient times was called the sacred obscene, not in the way we use the word Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes with saucy eloquence about Demeter and obscene today, but meaning sexually wise in a witty sort of way. There were once Goddess cults that were in some part devoted to irreverent female sexuality. The rites were not derogatory, but were concerned with portraying parts of the unconscious that remain, yet today, mysterious and largely uncharted. The very idea of sexuality as sacred, and more specifically, obscenity as an aspect of sacred sexuality, is vital to the wildish nature. There were

Goddesses of obscenity in the ancient woman's cultures—so-called for their innocent yet wily lewdness...the importance of these old Goddesses of obscenity was demonstrated by their ability to loosen what was too tight, to lift gloom, to bring the body into a kind of humor that belongs not to the intellect but to the

body itself...The mischief and humor of the obscene Goddesses can cause a vital form of medicine to spread throughout the endocrine and neurological systems of the body.”

## **17. *Self Portrait with Horse and Skeleton***

Terra cotta, 2011

*Self-Portrait with Horse and Skeleton* finds me flanked by a horse (life) and a skeleton (death). I had a comforting dream in which a horse I were friends, we spoke with each other; the horse was a protector and guide for me.

In my studio I often work on two pieces simultaneously. I started *Self Portrait with Horse and Skeleton* along with *Self Portrait with Mirror Image of Death, with Church Window*. As I was working on these pieces I realized that they were in dialogue with each other. The first part of the narrative, illustrated by *Self-Portrait with Horse and Skeleton*, images me shunning death and choosing life. *Self Portrait with Mirror Image of Death, with Church Window* illustrates what happens when I reach the end of what I am actively able to do to help myself live. I surrender to the mystery of life and death, which is mediated by the transcendent power of the Divine: the church window.

## **18. *Self Portrait with Mirror Image of Death and Church Window***

Terra cotta, 2011

This sculpture highlights the relationship between life and death when they are touched by the divine. The window illustrates the metaphor that death and life can face each other, when they are infused by the light of the divine, represented by the window. Without the divine these two elements are at odds with each other. However, the divine offers a safe haven and a still point of mediation between these two opposites.

I am not at peace with death; I have not accepted death into my home; I desperately want to be among the living. Yet, my near-death brush with breast cancer metastasized to my liver forced me to go toe-to-toe with death, and at the height of my illness I was staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. In some of my sculptures I run from death, in others death wears a halo and is part of the universe's pantheon and cycle of life. In this sculpture I face death head on, not because I want to, or from some heroic stance, but because I have not been given a choice; I have been cornered like a wounded animal by death. I am powerless to death. It is the final big chill, the equalizer. Like a tsunami it doesn't care about the destruction it leaves in its wake. Death is not about life. Death is about death.

Although I cannot, I still strive, for my own sanity, to meet death on my terms. Because it has cornered me, I will try and face it with every weary shred of dignity I can muster. If I look it in the eye, can I make peace with it? No, I

doubt it, not at this stage of my life. But it is better for my own sanity to stand and face it in the eye. I have stopped running from death and there is a bit of freedom in that.

This piece, and the five preceding it, deal with breast cancer metastasized to my liver. There are over two dozen skeletons in these pieces that reference death. I am hoping this piece will be the end of this series on death. It has brought up emotions to sculpt death in such frank terms and to have made six sculptures in succession that deal with the tension between living and dying. A friend visiting my studio commented on how brave and courageous I was to sculpt these things; years ago I would have only heard empty praise. Now, her comment rings true, it did take courage to sculpt this. Yet, the other option would have been even harder, that of running away from and denying the presence of death.

## **Cydra Vaux's Feminist Art Statement**

A favorite photograph of mine shows Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro sitting on the steps in front of Womanhouse in 1971. At that time, I was too young to join one of the most profound feminist dialogues in my life. However, every time I go into my art studio, located off my kitchen, I am forwarding that revolution.

My earliest remembrance of using my art to further my sex's liberation came at the church of my youth, overseen by a distant white bearded god who neither desired a companion nor needed one to single-handily father the whole universe in his own image. Even at a young age I felt this inequity in my core. My response: to cut out the construction paper words "God loves you, pray to Her", and staple them to a bulletin board in the main entry of the church. My brazen words proclaimed their truth to the painted cinderblock hallway for the briefest period - before a pack of laughing boys tore it down.

My adult years find me continuing the work of that grade school girl, creating for myself the presence of the divine feminine. My work is often utopian, imagining a world where women and men validate each other, cultivating compassion and equality between the sexes. I need to imagine a world of transcendence and wholeness. To this end the hallmark of my work is symmetry, harmony, and beauty.

Because much of women's history has been absorbed into patriarchal frameworks, I create feminist sculptures that reclaim and revision women's symbols, history, and

mythology. The writing that accompanies my visual work is an integral part of the work, and not an afterthought. These written and visual components are a metaphor for a symbiotic relationship between the masculine and feminine. The written word (masculine, left brained) is married to the figurative image (feminine, right brained) to form a complete whole, or yin yang.

I am grateful to my beloved husband Carl, and my son Cavan for helping me to battle cancer and supporting my artwork, and my brother Gregson Vaux for encouraging me to study art. My sculptures are dedicated to my mom, Verna Sylvia Robinson, my role model and spiritual sister.

## Biography

**Cydra Vaux:** June 28, 1962 to July 13, 2013

Awards include the Vivian Lehman Award for Portraiture, 2010; *Art and Society: Brazil*, Fulbright Hays Group Project with the Andy Warhol Museum, 2009; Paul G. Benedum and Wimmer/Kamin Fellowship for figurative sculpture in India, 2005. Her work has been shown at the American Jewish Museum, Three Rivers Arts Festival, The Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, and numerous galleries in Pittsburgh.

Since 1998, Cydra has refined her focus on the female terra cotta figure. Her work is firmly rooted in traditional and feminist art history. Often, she works spontaneously from her subconscious and dreams, invoking surrealist traditions. She explores the relationships among archetypal images from different cultures, including the mandorla, swastika, heart and serpent. These symbols form an amalgam reflecting a modern feminist world view that unites dissimilar cultural traditions, religious traditions, and gender roles.

Cydra reimagines and reclaims the lives of historical and mythological women by reassigning meaning through a feminist lens. At times, the women in her sculptures project a reserved distance, a feeling of coolness that speaks to the veracity of their strength and self-containment. In this way the mother archetype is expanded to favor a more comprehensive view of woman.

Travels to India, Egypt, Brazil, and the Southwest also

inform her work. Through exposure to a myriad of religious, spiritual and humanist traditions, she explores tension and harmony between the secular and the divine. Making sculptures that are multi-sided, Cydra uses sculpture as a metaphor for multiple viewpoints. Seemingly fixed images morph among different vantage points. The three dimensional sculpture, with its unlimited number of views, becomes an allegory for mercurial thoughts and multi-faceted perspectives. This tension between seemingly opposite sides fits well with her exploration of the yin-yang as it is expressed through female/male, secular/divine, life/death, image/word.

Symmetry and beauty inform much of her work, holding out hope for utopian ideals. However, in recent work, Cydra explores her battle with breast cancer metastasized to her liver. This work is deeply personal, while having a universal reach. Death and the Divine are figures in her work, which struggle to resolve the irresolvable.