



Psychological spaces [slide]  
by Dawn M Ahlert

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Montana State University  
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Abstract:  
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of

Master of Fine Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

April 2000

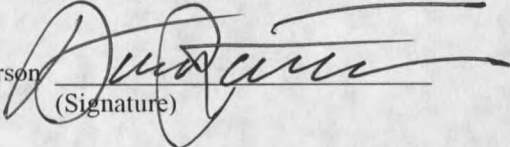
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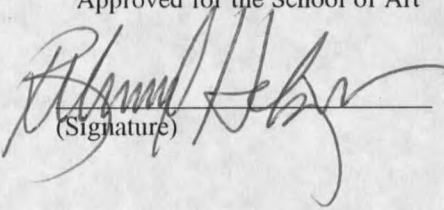
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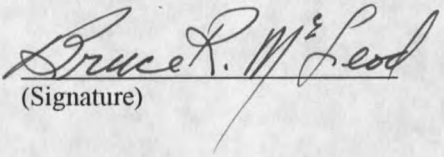
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Dawn M. Ahlert

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

Harold Schlotzhauer, Chairperson  4-10-00  
(Signature) Date

Approved for the School of Art  
Richard Helzer, Director  13 APRIL 2000  
(Signature) Date

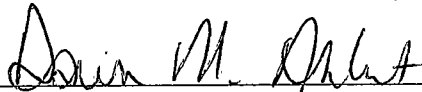
Approved for the College of Graduate Studies  
Dr. Bruce McLeod, Graduate Dean  4-13-00  
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Emotional content is central to my work. I would like my pieces to be “read”; to appear as illusionary windows into altered realities. My paintings are about the pain of isolation and confinement, whether it be physically or psychologically imposed. I aim to utilize a means of expression to transcend the individual and spark the imagination of everyone; to perhaps tap into the collective unconscious.

The language of alchemy can be used in describing my images. Alchemy has a condensed system of symbols common to dreams, poetry, and the visual arts. Psychologists such as C.G. Jung have found a connection between dream images and alchemy. In medieval times, practitioners of alchemy believed that they might be able to transform the base metals into precious metals through technique and imagination. Philosophically, this system was inspired by the hope of solving one of the mysteries of life; the relationship between good and evil and how the base aspects of life are transformed into the noble.

The 1500 years in which alchemy was practiced led to an elaborate list of metaphors. The three worlds in which one can exist in alchemy consist of the black *nigredo*, the white *albedo*, and the red *rubedo*. These states are symbolic for our psychological and spiritual experience. We can relate each alchemical image to our own experiences, both inward and outward. In this common psychological ground, whether in dream or in imagination, we might also find insights that challenge or amplify our inner experience or understanding.

The world of the *nigredo* is of particular interest to me. This is where my images exist. According to the standards of alchemy, the initial phase of every process begins here in the black world where transformation can take place. However, before a form can change, it must first rot, decay, and be reduced to the rubble of disconnected parts in which the creative power can be released and freed. The individualization process takes place in the *nigredo*, for in the dark of the soul we confront the shadow within. One must completely experience this state in order to move to the next level of the *albedo*, the world of reflections and then on to the *rubedo*, the world of light, where full realization occurs.

Reading the descriptions of the basement in French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's book about the house, The Poetic of Space, I immediately saw the connection between his images and ideas of the alchemical world of the *nigredo*. Bachelard calls the cellar the "dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces." The basement is described as having "heavy" air and often there is a dense body of murky water. Black, stagnant, perfectly smooth, there is no sign of life; no spring, no source. The qualities of the *nigredo* world are included in Bachelard's basement images, a dark place where no natural light penetrates, a wasteland.

With the help of Bachelard's descriptions, the basement has become my metaphor for the *nigredo*. Instead of using Italian painter Giorgio De Chirico's plazas or American painter Edward Hopper's urban scenes to speak of alienation and loneliness, I have chosen to use the basement. I have followed the lead of both painters in seeking to create my

interpretation of psychological spaces.

According to art historian James Elkins in his book, What Painting Is, all visual artists are alchemists. German artist Anselm Kiefer's paintings illustrate how the act of painting is a form of alchemy. Kiefer transforms base materials, spinning images from straw. He has inspired me with his surface treatments.

The process that I enlist to create my paintings is used to enhance the viewer's understanding of the *nigredo*. The aggressive marks and scrapes help to illustrate feelings of control that an individual wishes in their life. The splatters and drips show the contradictory feeling of loss of power, qualities of the black world. The limited palette, especially the 'black and blue' brings to mind the sensations of being bruised, depressed, helpless, and isolated in a colorless world of darkness. The 'blue transit' is symbolic of the movement towards the *albedo*. Blue is between black and white and the *nigredo* and the *albedo*.

I juxtapose the textured and shiny surfaces in order to enhance the viewers' awareness of the actual surface of the painting from the illusionary image. This ability of being able to differentiate between illusion and reality is necessary for one to advance through the *nigredo*. The architectural inflexibility of the spaces, occasionally skewed out of perspective, helps create a sense of uneasiness. This reflects the discomfort of an individual experiencing the psychological state of the *nigredo*. The presence of a way to escape, window or staircase, gives the viewer hope for transcendence.

It is necessary to fully experience the *nigredo* to bring about a balance within the personality and a better adaptation to society. My paintings communicate my own experience with the black world and seek to show this reality to others. In creating these images I am able to let go of painful experiences. My wish in sharing my paintings with others is to call attention to this often neglected state of the *nigredo*. I would like to have my audience identify with these images and in turn be able to grow.



## LIST OF SLIDES

1. *Corner Chamber*, 2000  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic on canvas, 72"x96"
2. *Inner Cell*, 2000  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic on canvas, 72"x96"
3. *Beyond the Wall*, 2000  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic on canvas, 72"x144"
4. *Secret Hub*, 2000  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic on canvas, 72"x144"
5. *Watery Keep*, 2000  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic on canvas, 72"x72"
6. *Ardent Watch*, 2000  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic on canvas, 30"x96"
7. *Exterior View #2*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"
8. *Exterior View #3*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"
9. *Exterior View #4*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"
10. *Exterior View #5*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"
11. *Exterior View #6*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x32"
12. *Exterior View #7*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"
13. *Exterior View #8*, 2000  
mixed media, 34"x36"
14. *Exterior View #9*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"

15. *Exterior View #10*, 2000  
mixed media, 47"x36"
16. *Exterior View #11*, 2000  
mixed media, 55"x36"
17. *Installation #1*
18. *Installation #2*
19. *Installation #3*
20. *Installation #4*

1 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Corner Chamber  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic  
on canvas 72"x96" 2000  
TOP

2 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Inner Cell  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic  
on canvas 72"x96" 2000  
TOP

3 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Beyond the Wall  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic  
on canvas 72"x144" 2000  
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Dawn M. Ahlert  
Secret Hub  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic  
on canvas 72"x144" 2000  
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5 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Watery Keep  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic  
on canvas 72"x72" 2000  
TOP

6 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Ardent Watch  
oil, charcoal, & encaustic  
on canvas 30"x96" 2000  
TOP

7 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Exterior View #2  
mixed media  
55"x36" 2000  
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8 Dawn M. Ahlert  
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Exterior View #4  
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Exterior View #5  
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mixed media  
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Exterior View #10  
mixed media  
47"x36" 2000  
TOP

16 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Exterior View #11  
mixed media  
55"x36" 2000  
TOP

17 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Installation #1  
MFA Thesis Exhibition  
Copeland Gallery, MT 2000  
TOP

18 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Installation #2  
MFA Thesis Exhibition  
Copeland Gallery, MT 2000  
TOP

19 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Installation #3  
MFA Thesis Exhibition  
Copeland Gallery, MT 2000  
TOP

20 Dawn M. Ahlert  
Installation #4  
MFA Thesis Exhibition  
Copeland Gallery, MT 2000  
TOP







