



INTERVIEW WITH

Art Making, Energy Healing and the Magic of the Universe: *Rhonda Wheatley*

By Christina Nafziger



Ritual Arrangement for Opening Manifesting Portals, 2022
"Relic," Arts + Public Life, University of Chicago, installation view

To say that Rhonda Wheatley's artistic practice is interdisciplinary is an understatement. The breadth of her work is as expansive as her connection with the universe, reaching as far as the energy she puts out into the world. Wheatley creates sculptural work, installations, paintings, performances and more, all through the lens of an energy healer. Her sculptures are often in the shape of human hands with organic forms sprouting from the skin. Do these hands heal? Do they cast spells? Do they contain magic? Yes, to all of the above. The same goes for her mixed media installations, which conjure intimacy and magic with each object. The artist's healing work, which includes tarot readings and Reiki, naturally informs and transforms her art making. Using materials such as crystals, cactus wood and vintage objects, Wheatley's art channels ritual and relic—artifacts that are both universal and all her own. Multidisciplinary and multitiered, Wheatley's work offers beauty and healing, as the artist has learned to follow her heart in every endeavor in life. In this intimate interview, Wheatley shares with us how she brings her authentic self into her work, the symbolism present in her artwork, and how trusting her soul-level purpose has allowed her to become the artist and healer she is today.

What initially compelled you to begin creating art? Did you study art in school?

A soul-level sense of purpose is what compelled me to begin creating art. That's the quick and simple answer. The longer answer starts with the story my parents told me of how they once found me finger painting in their bed atop their beautiful duvet, in a soaking wet diaper. I found my passion pretty early! I made art throughout my childhood—I even temporarily taught my fifth-grade art class when our art teacher quit—and was an active artist in my teens. However, I had absolutely NO interest in studying art in college or pursuing an art career. As a high school junior, I felt that art was just a part of who I was and I felt that was enough. (To be fair, I wasn't sure what major or career path I DID want to pursue.)

I eventually decided on English Literature in college, soon after earned an MA in writing, then landed a full-time writing/account exec. job with a small graphic design firm and freelanced as a writer on the side. All the while, I continued making art. But a few years into that design firm job, I asked myself for the first time,



“What if I started making art professionally?” I struggled to answer that question and nearly said “no,” because I knew just making my 2D paintings wouldn’t be fulfilling enough for me in the long term. But I realized that “just making 2D paintings” was my first step; it was where I was at the time. Why was I trying to jump into the future? Taking that first step and every step after it is how I’d evolve into that fulfilled future me.

Trauma Healer, 2017
Mixed Media

I believe that soul-level sense of purpose not only drove me to start making art professionally, [but] also [is] how I knew, before I even started my art career that, I’d someday have much more to offer beyond those 2D paintings. Because I trusted that soul-level purpose and took the first step, I eventually landed here—connecting with people through my interactive performances, wellness workshops, installations, sculpture, text-based works and more. And yes, I am that fulfilled future me!

Your gorgeous sculptures are rich with symbolism. Can you talk about the types of symbols/iconographies that are in your work and what they mean to you?

Oh yes! I think of the elements in my sculptures and installations as ingredients, but instead of adding flavors to a dish, they bring a magical purpose to each work of art. I like to use natural materials like fossils, which bring the energy of thousands of years to a piece; cactus wood, which symbolizes endurance; and crystals, which amplify energy.

I love using pink striped barnacle clusters not only because they’re striking, but also because they symbolize “sticking to” something. As part of its life cycle, a barnacle attaches itself to an object or another living being, and there it remains attached for life while being protected by its shell. So, barnacle clusters in a sculpture like the “Power and Energy Amplifier” bring the magic of sticking to the changes that we make in our lives while being protected.

I also use driftwood in my work because I’m intrigued by the idea that trees may stand in one place for hundreds of years only to break down into smaller pieces and venture out on an entirely new journey of movement through water, where they are reshaped by rocky bumps and waves, just as we are shaped by our experiences.

A lot of vintage items show up in my work, such as TV antennas, which in my energy grid installations not only receive but also send signals; clock radios, which reference the ability to shift through frequencies and vibrations, as well as time; and vintage apothecary bottles, which carry years worth of wellness intentions.



Empath Protector, 2017
Mixed Media

You work in several diverse mediums, including sculpture, performance, collage and more. Do you have a primary medium? Do these practices feed into one another?

When I was making solely 2D collage paintings, I viewed my art as completely separate from my other passions, and I was exposing only a small and somewhat artificial version of myself in my work. The real change that occurred when I transitioned from solely 2D works to sculpture, installation, performance, etc. is that I started to bring my fuller, more authentic self into my work. Thus, I like to think of my primary medium as my “fuller, authentic self.” I used to consider my long-time interests in creative writing, vintage and antique collectibles, crystals, plants and tarot cards/readings completely separate from my art. But now they’re central to my practice.

I also put my compassion and vulnerability out there—I’ve displayed pages from my old diaries on gallery walls, performed readings from my journals, and shared life stories and my own self-healing practices in the workshops I facilitate alongside my exhibitions. By highlighting my vulnerabilities I’m feeding into my interactive performances because the more vulnerable I am, the more participants are willing to open up to share their stories and receive healing. And I have seen people shed tears during my guided meditations, get excited about breakthroughs during workshop writing exercises, and become radiantly hopeful and uplifted during my intuitive card readings.

I’m currently in the earliest stages of pulling yet another medium into my art practice, drawing on my musical past—I played flute and taught myself piano as a child—to create consciousness-altering soundscapes for meditations and other interactive work. It’ll be exciting to see how sound feeds into my other work.

Get Woke to Self Series,
2018
Mixed Media



Energy Grid for Grounding into One's Intuition and Authentic Self, 2020
 "The Long Dream," Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago installation view

Can you talk about your work as an energy healer? What led you on this path? How does this work influence your art making?

I had numerous experiences as a child, teen and young adult in which medical doctors either ignored me, ridiculed me or did not have answers to my fortunately not-too-serious medical problems. Learning early on that I'd have to solve many of my own medical issues empowered me and led me on the path of energy healing, as well as herbalism, sound healing and other modes of natural healing. I also always wished I could take away people's pain when they were hurting and would dream that I was healing people. So, when I discovered Reiki, I signed up for a reputable level 1 class immediately. I also learned other modalities, including Jin Shin Jyutsu, Huna, aura healing, and New Paradigm MDT, of which I'm a 13-Degree Master. I practice energy healing on myself and offer healings to close friends and family, as well as participants in some of my group and one-on-one interactive art events.

Because of the really cool and spontaneous healings I have witnessed and experienced first-hand, I am more comfortable making art that stretches my imagination and unleashes my limitless thinking. I'm more willing to play around in the realms of the so-called impossible. I've also directly used energy healing in my work. For instance, the "Transmutation Chest" is an interactive work that invites people to write down something they wish to release from their lives and to rip it up and toss it into a wood and brass box. As the instructions explain, I collect all the torn-up intentions at the end of the exhibition and send healing energy to each person who wishes to receive it, to help facilitate the release. (Note that some forms of energy healing can be sent remotely or in-person).

What keeps you going as an artist? Where do you find that creative drive?

There are several things that keep me going as an artist:

1. Listening to my heart: Following your heart can be daunting because your heart will send you on missions that do not make sense! That's because the heart is tapped into magic, which doesn't follow logic. Every time, though, the results of my heart's guidance far exceed that of my intellect, and my heart always sends me someplace I actually WANT to be.

2. Unleashing my inner child: Playfulness, lightheartedness and fun, as opposed to seriousness and sternness, help me bring out unexpected creative ideas. One of my favorite sculptures, the "Power and Energy Amplifier," came about because I said to myself, "Now let me get into the mindset of a three-year-old me!"

3. Teaching: My art career opened the door to teaching two- to four-year-olds, middle schoolers, teens, adults, professional development for working artists and senior citizens. And I do not have a favorite group—I love them all. My students' diversity requires a versatility, which in turn keeps me agile in my thinking when it comes to my own art.

4. Taking breaks: I give myself a lot of breathing space and rest from making art. I do not have to be making things all the time. Long periods of rest between projects helps me replenish my creative reserves. Further, I may spend long periods of time focused on something other than art, but unbeknownst to me that "something" will deeply inform and fuel my next creative idea. This is what happens when I follow my heart instead of telling myself what I "should" be doing.

How can those interested in engaging with your work do so?

Instagram, @rhonda_wheatley, is where I'll be sharing all of my events and exhibitions, including monthly online workshops with Threewalls, where I am a Culture of Care Collaborator; online and in-person courses with Hyde Park Art Center, where I teach; a solo exhibition coming toward the end of 2023; intuitive card readings; a revamp of my website; and more! ♦

Energy Grid for Activating Sweetness in Life, 2019
 Petty Biennial, Installation view, "Petty Biennial," Glass Curtain Gallery



Power and Energy Amplifier, 2015
 Mixed Media