

Molly Wood: The Poison Garden



November 13, 2021 – February 6, 2022





Molly Wood, *Queen Anne's Lace, 3997 (Daucus Carota)*, 2017
Dye sublimation on aluminum, 40 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

Plants are nature's alchemists, expert at transforming water, soil, and sunlight into an array of precious substances, many of them beyond the ability of human beings to conceive, much less manufacture. ... From plants come chemical compounds that nourish and heal and poison and delight the senses, others that rouse and put to sleep and intoxicate, and a few with the astounding power to alter consciousness—even to plant dreams in the brains of awake humans.¹

Michael Pollan

For Des Moines fine art photographer Molly Wood, photographing botanicals is personal; poisonous plants

and the beautiful flowers they produce are metaphors for the cycles of life, aging, death, rebirth, and the conundrums and complexities of intimate human relationships. Although she haunts local flower farmers and has been known to forage when necessary, Wood grows many of the plants she photographs in her own garden: is she a gardener, a photographer, a sorceress, or all three?

Beginning with her early interest in poppies, Wood explores the intertwined history of art and the history of botanicals. Captivated by Northern Renaissance still life paintings and the magical play of morning light streaming into her studio windows, the artist puzzles over the folklore and fact of the beautiful flowers in front of her



Molly Wood, *Spoonful of Woody Nightshade, 1367 (Solanum Dulcamara)*, 2016
Dye sublimation on aluminum, 40 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

lens. The treacherous and magical tendrils of poisonous plants have long captured the creative imagination. As the artist muses: plants and relationships can be both beautiful and toxic, innocent and poisonous. Wood's sumptuous photographs are certainly seductive, fecund with beauty and ancient secrets. In her exquisite image *Spoonful of Nightshade, 1367 (Solanum Dulcamara)*, 2016, Wood offers her viewers young green berries and purple petals with protruding yellow stamens on an ornately Victorian silver spoon. A relative of deadly nightshade—see the similarities in the purple flowers in *Deadly Nightshade, 7441 (Atropa Belladonna)*, 2019—woody nightshade is less poisonous but still capable, in large dosages, of causing paralysis of the central nervous



Molly Wood, *Deadly Nightshade, 7441 (Atropa Belladonna)*, 2019
Archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 11 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

system, slowing the heart and respiration, confusing one's finer sensibilities, and in those susceptible, eventually causing an unpleasant death accompanied by convulsions. Conversely, in its healing capacity, woody nightshade can also be used as a remedy for chronic rheumatism, jaundice, asthma, and whooping cough.²

A wizard with words, Wood often references 16th-century grimoires. With a deceptively simple translation from the French language, a grimoire is a grammar book; the 16th-century grimoires, however, were handbooks compiling magic and providing instructions for casting spells, orchestrating rituals including sacrifices, finding treasure and true love, evoking and controlling spirits,



Molly Wood, *Vanitas with Poppies, 9732 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2018
Archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 30 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

conjuring curses, creating magic circles, and recognizing one's "familiar." What sets grimoires apart from other handbooks of mystery and magic is that the term is usually applied to texts that claim the magical knowledge of King Solomon as their source and are derivative of Hebrew mystical lore.³ Grimoires were popular texts well into the 19th century and are still consulted for their ancient secrets of magical practices from the helpful to the malicious. Often grimoires, with their beautiful cursive handwriting, are themselves believed to have intrinsic supernatural properties.⁴

According to Wood, grimoires were often used by medieval women healers to share their homeopathic

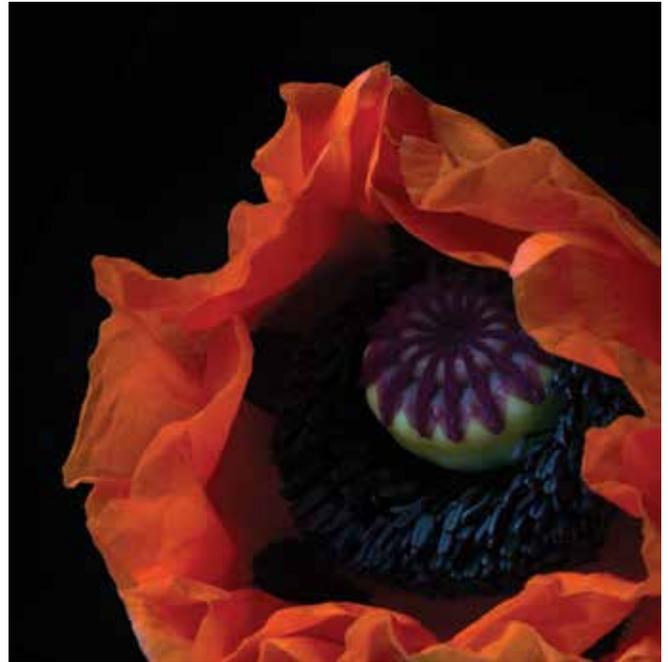
botanical knowledge. Without the grimoires, more of women's shared knowledge would have been erased from the canon, dismissed as "women's work"—which indeed it was. In medieval times, women were the caretakers and therefore the healers—their kitchens were their laboratories. From their homes, women were unlicensed doctors; they were nurses, midwives, and pharmacists. Women cultivated healing herbs and exchanged the secrets of their medicinal uses with each other because they were barred from public practice. Although revered by rural communities who had scant access to doctors or medical facilities, women who knew the secret properties of plants were called charlatans, witches, and worse by the authorities and were often persecuted and all-too-often



Molly Wood, *Poppy Pods, 7603 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2019
Dye sublimation on aluminum, 40 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

silenced for their alchemical knowledge. Wood's image *Vanitas with Poppies, 9732 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2018, subtly links grimoires and their secret recipes with the beauty of poppy flowers just past their full glory displayed in a blue and white porcelain vase. This is an example of transferware, a type of ceramic popular in Victorian households and is highly collectible today.

Wood's on-going fascination with poppies connects her across the centuries with Hecate, a Greek goddess whose origins are shrouded in mystery, but who was equally prone to good and evil deeds; she was the goddess of magic and the underworld as well as a benevolent protector of hearth, home, and herbalism. Hecate had a sacred garden at her



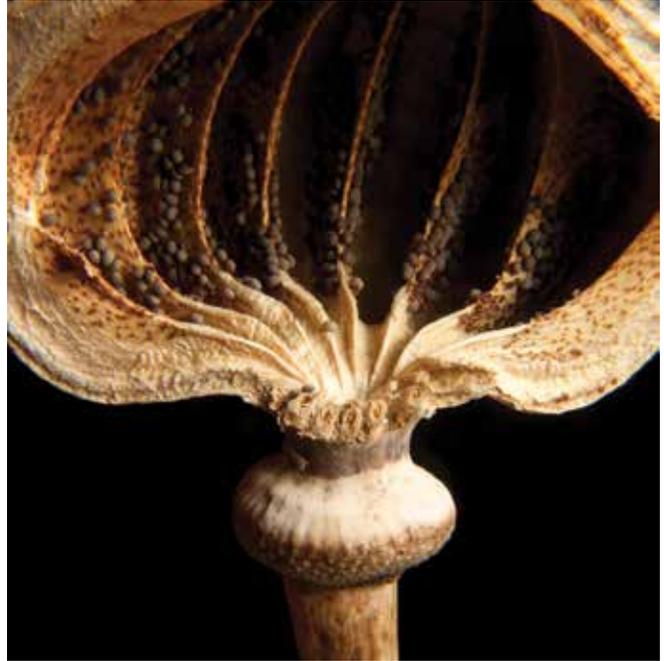
Molly Wood, *Poppy, 9990 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2020
Dye sublimation on aluminum, 40 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

temple in Colchis (modern-day Georgia) that contained her herbs, poisons, and sacred trees.⁵

To view Wood's many images of poppies in their various states of growth and decay is to see the universe revealed in all its glory and terror. A common wildflower of many alluring varieties that grows around the world, poppies can be found thriving wild or in cultivated fields—both legal and illegal. Poppies are popular ornamental garden plants because they are fairly easy to grow, even for novice gardeners, as Wood claims she is. From the playful community of crowned *Poppy Pods, 7603 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2019, to the darkly lush and softly feathered interior of the blooming *Poppy, 9990 (Papaver*



Molly Wood, *Poppy, 150 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2019
Dye sublimation on aluminum, 40 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa



Molly Wood, *Poppy Pod, 942 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2016
Archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 30 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

Somniferum, 2020, to the glowing pure white tinted with just a hint of delicate yellow of the poisonous *Poppy, 150 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2019, to the dried, brown-veined pod of *Poppy Pod, 942 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2016, the mysteries of the poppy are revealed. The immature seed pods of opium poppies contain alkaloids used to make opium, codeine, morphine, and heroin. The mature seeds have a mild analgesic quality used to treat insomnia.

According to the Witchipedia,⁶ an online encyclopedia of witchcraft, “magick,” and the occult, poppies, in the Victorian book *Language of Flowers*, symbolized eternal sleep, courage, the passage of time, oblivion, and imagination. Red poppies symbolized consultation,

white meant time, scarlet poppies suggested fantastic extravagance, and yellow poppies symbolized success. Molly Wood grows and photographs both red and white poppies in her garden of photographic delights.

Wood has made several pilgrimages to the Alnwick Poison Garden, one of a series of formal gardens adjacent to Alnwick Castle in Northumberland, England. The Poison Garden showcases approximately “100 toxic, intoxicating, and narcotic plants.”⁷ As their website says, visitors are welcome only during guided tours and are strictly prohibited from smelling, touching, or tasting the garden plants. The artist tells a haunting story of feeling light-headed and disoriented for several hours



Molly Wood, *Henbane, 7294 (Hyocyamus Niger)*, 2019
Archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 11 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

after photographing Henbane plants from the garden. The delicate and innocent-looking *Henbane, 7294 (Hyocyamus Niger)*, 2019, is included in the exhibit as a remembrance of her trip. Head gardener Trevor Jones, whom Wood worked with during her sojourn in Great Britain, has a darkly amusing video about the nature of the plants in the poison garden on the Alnwick Garden website—worth a look for curious gardeners. Whether Molly Wood is a sorceress or not is an open-ended question; she certainly is a magician in the garden and creates sumptuous photographs that are stunningly simple and straightforwardly beautiful, but that undeniably seduce the viewer with intoxicating natural light that dances over the softly glowing flowers.

Mary Anne Redding
Exhibition Curator

¹ Pollan, Michael, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. New York: Random House, 2001, Introduction.

² Grieve, Mrs. M., *Botanical.com: A Modern Herbal*. Nightshade, Woody, <https://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/n/nighwo06.html>

³ Occult World: Grimoires, <https://occult-world.com/grimoires/>

⁴ Carrilho, Sylvia, and Benjamin Adamah, VAMzzz, Occult Blog (History & Documentation): Grimoires or instruction books on magic, <https://vamzzz.com/blog/grimoires/>

⁵ Otherworldly Oracle, <https://otherworldlyoracle.com/hecate-goddess/>

⁶ The Witchipedia: An Online Encyclopedia of witchcraft, magick, and the occult, <https://witchipedia.com/book-of-shadows/herblore/poppy/> and from Google books: https://www.google.com/books/edition/Language_of_Flowers/8MITAAAAQAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=poppy

⁷ The Alnwick Garden, The Gardeners Cottage, Greenwell Road, Alnwick, Northumberland, <https://www.alnwickgarden.com/the-garden/poison-garden/>



Molly Wood, *Datura, 5731 (Datura Innoxia)*, 2017
Archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 11 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Olson-Larsen Galleries, West Des Moines, Iowa

cover:
Molly Wood, *Poppy, 9984 (Papaver Somniferum)*, 2019
Archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 20 x 20 inches
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