

**Brooklyn. Saturday October 19, 2019 and we could not have chosen a more beautiful day to meet in the Catacombs at Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY - which is the site of Janine Antoni's most recent site specific work, "I am Fertile Ground". Bright blue skies on a gently chilly early autumn day; family of the deceased and local hipsters walked the landscaped paths or sat by ponds inhabited by waterfowl. This is the second time I have had the pleasure of interviewing Ms. Antoni for *Grrrh...*, the first time more than a decade ago.**

**With the help of a map (and a kind Cemetery employee), I made my way to the Catacombs.**

**Observing Ms. Antoni perform the gestures and attestations that comprise the performative aspect of this work was a meditative and spiritually moving experience. After observing each of the segments, we sat on a nearby step and spoke about the work, life, aging, death and fresh blueberries.**

Marsha Gordon – I have so many questions. Should we talk about the setting, the Catacombs at Greenwood Cemetery, or should we start with the words and gestures you chose and performed?

Janine Antoni – I've been working on this for two years but the inception of this piece happened way before. It was a happy marriage between things that I'd been thinking about and the cemetery as a context. The curator, Harry (Harry J. Weil), found me because I was on a panel, talking about death, how we might prepare ourselves to die, and what that looks like. He thought, "She's a good pairing for the cemetery," and that's how the two came together. But, as you know, the issues I'm concerned with here are the issues I'm always talking about.

MG – You're always talking about the body.

JA – Right. And the body dies so it's inevitable that I talk about death. Death, birth and everything in between. The older bodies in these works are my parents. The ear is my dad's and the hand is my mom's. I photographed them in bed. I put the gold on their body and I just let them do what they do and I captured that image.

MG – Gold leaf? Gold paint?

JA – Gold paint. So there's gold in the photograph. Then there's gold leaf on the surface of the photographs and the frames are also gilded.

MG – What does the gold mean?

JA – I came to all of this through the religious icon. I read that there is a belief that when you pray to the icon it's not just a representation of the deity you're praying to but that the saint or deity looks back at you through the image. It is a beautiful idea. The image as a porthole to the divine. Visually how they create that effect is that the gold leaf brings the background to the front so that the image can punch the surface and literally become a window. Isn't that exquisite?

MG – Do you think the icon is a facilitator for entering a deeper space or is it actually that space itself?

JA – Both. It's a question of whether you see form and content as inextricably tied. There is the illusion of going into the picture that facilitates the spiritual possibility of entering into that deeper space. The pictorial illusion can allow those that have faith to be in contact with the spiritual. Then the artwork can become more than the sum of its parts. Some people know this space and some don't.

MG – I'm trying to imagine getting into that spiritual space without the icon, but that's another topic.

JA – Well, no it's not another topic because the somatic dance practice that I do, which is in fact an ecstatic dance practice, has provided me another avenue for just that.

As I have honed my practice over the past ten years I have more readily discovered parts of myself that are unknown to me, whether we want to call them the unconscious or spirit, who's to say. But what I wanted to do was to look at those gestures through the icon and revere them and investigate them, for the gifts they've given me.

MG – Are you saying that through the dance you've learned that certain gestures expose, open, release something and those are the gestures that you've incorporated into this work?

JA – Yes, I've been collecting gestures for some time now. To ground these more unusual gestures within the idea of religious icons, I used a familiar Christian gesture: hands in prayer. The image of my mother's foot was inspired by the Buddha's foot. That iconography, which is often an imprint, is to remind us that he was a man who walked on the earth, who reached enlightenment, and so all of us can reach enlightenment. Often times when you see a reclining Buddha, he will have the mandala on the bottom of his foot. He is depicted reclining during his last illness right before he enters parinirvana.

MG – What does that represent?

JA – I would say that it's a map of the cosmos and a symbol of never-ending life. One could equate it with the unconscious or the spirit world. The integration of the other realms that the icon is trying to reach into. For me, to put the mandala on the buddha's foot is a way to unite spirit with matter.

MG – What got you involved with the ecstatic dance?

JA – I was just exploring what amazing things NY has to offer. I grew up in the Caribbean where dancing is part of everyday life. And when I came to the United States, I missed dancing as an everyday activity. When I found the 5Rhythms I felt like I had come home. Returning to my body and its expression. Since then I have danced three times a week, two hours at a time, for the past decade.

MG – And the man who did the dance event, is your teacher?

JA – Peter Fodera is one of my teachers. I asked him to work with me because he understands the art side as well. He's an art conservator and a 5Rhythms teacher. It was an extraordinary experience to have a hundred people dancing in the cemetery. He also lead a movement meditation workshop entitled "Bones."

MG -- By doing the gestures repeatedly as the show is up, do you feel you're diving deeper?

JA – I am glad that you saw all eleven performers and then experienced me doing all the gestures alone. Performing every weekend unannounced has been an amazing way to continue the process of embodying the gestures and the sentiment behind both the movement and the text. I am giving myself license to invent and have the gestures morph and change. I am playing with the emphasis of the words and what different meanings I can eke out for myself. They've stopped being so mantralike and they, especially the gestures, are becoming more fluid. They are more expressive now. It's a special opportunity for me to just spend the day doing it and being with the works and with the audience. I am sure you saw that there are a variety of responses. And what's amazing about being at Greenwood is that it has very diverse audiences. There are the art people who are making the trek here. Then there are just some people who don't even know the show is happening and are just walking around the cemetery and wander into the catacombs and are surprised.

MG – How do you keep your focus when people are in and out and talking?

JA – I feel very protected in those rooms. I feel like there's a veil between me and the audience, so I can really sink in to myself and the experience of the vault that I'm in. That's why I asked you to interrupt me, because I was afraid I wouldn't even notice you had arrived.

MG – I felt terrible doing that.

JA – There was a guy today who felt the need to interrupt me and wanted to talk about St. Patrick's Cathedral and how there are all these pieces along the side and that I absolutely have to go because they are completely connected to my work. So that was sweet. Then a guy today, I've never seen this before – he didn't go into the gilded niche to meditate. He went into one of the rooms. And he meditated for a really, really long time. I kept going to do my gesture there and he'd still be in there so I'd go to a different room.

MG – Are the Catacombs always open? Might this guy meditate there regularly?

JA – No, it's just open for my show and other programming like concerts. But this is certainly the first time they've shown artwork in there.

MG – It's really great that they're keeping the cemetery alive. There are so many young people here.

JA – Yes, other cultures don't separate the dead from life in the way that this country does. I think it is important to face our impermanence.

MG – In terms of the words you're speaking, tell me how you chose them.

JA – So, if you believe that memory is held in the body.

MG – Oh, I believe that.

JA – And that we can unlock it by moving our bodies, then we could be very direct about what we want to plant into our bodies. There are ways to shift one's thinking towards the positive. For example, there is a Buddhist meditation practice called Metta - that translates as "loving-kindness" - and then there are contemporary self help practices like affirmations. I thought if I could couple those mantras, affirmations, whatever you want to call them...intentions is maybe the best word...with the movement, I could more deeply embody those ideas. So, I started to look at affirmations that are prevalent in the culture, and they're pretty corny.

MG – Give me an example.

JA - "I accept change into my life." "I forgive others."

MG – They're simple.

JA – They're simple but they're cliché because they encapsulate our basic needs. They get to the point. I didn't want them to have that flavor nor did I want them to feel like poetry. I was looking for language which expanded on and anchored the sentiment within the gestures. The making of the works and the phrases came together. From now on I would like to continue to make these phrases as I am making my objects. It has been such an interesting way for me to come closer to my intentions for the work.

MG – So as you work on new pieces you'd want to create new gestures?

JA – Not even gestures. Just four phrases that somehow rub up against the meanings I am working with...Maybe we should go through the lines so I can explain each piece to you.

MG – Good.



Janine Antoni, *I speak up*, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, 21x18 1/8 x 2 3/8 inches (53.34 x 46.04 x 6.03 cm) Commissioned by The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Lühring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*"In my softness, I touch my purpose. In my throat, my words sharpen. I look to the light. I wait to be heard."*

JA - "In my softness I touch my purpose." So, this piece touches on the notion of freedom of speech. How does one know what truly matters to oneself? Not something one thinks should matter but something one feels matters. And it is in our soft tissue that we find our feelings. It is vulnerable to own those feelings and to act from that understanding. "In my throat, my words sharpen." Here I place the action into the throat, rather than into the brain. The sharpness has to do with articulating oneself. That's all we can ask of ourselves: to, from our core, speak our truth. And then, because of the image and the gothic arch and this idea of looking on high, I have to add, "I look to the light" It has different references for all of us. Praying to God. The light within us. I imagine myself to be a plant when I say it. Even if we have to say the words that are sharp and hard to hear, hopefully we say them for the good, for the light. But you can't really make anyone hear you. You can only be at peace that you have articulated yourself truly and clearly. Then you have to wait. And that's hard. So I get pissed off every time I say, "I wait to be heard."

The thing to know about that image is that it's not my hand, it's my daughter's. Historically, women have been taught not to speak up. My mother was a real peacekeeper. She rarely spoke her mind. It is particularly true of her generation. I have been given much more of a voice than her and I can already see that my daughter is speaking her mind more freely than I am. We still have a long way to go though, because women have been silenced for so long.

MG – Yes, I think a lot about women who never got to speak their minds nor live their dreams. It's heartbreaking.

JA – It is heartbreaking. How do we make space for the voices that haven't been heard? And how do we make space for the voices inside ourselves that haven't been heard?

MG – Do you feel you are doing what you have to do?

JA – There's always more to do, right? There's always more sides of yourself that you don't even know are there. Sides you've repressed. I'm discovering those sides as I age.

MG – Do you think maybe the dance is helping you access those sides.

JA – Undoubtedly. I guess my question for you - for me - is: Do we need to set apart the time to go into the body in order to access these unresolved parts of ourselves? The goal is to access these things in the moment so that there's nothing to release because it's all coming through all the time.

MG – Don't you feel that's enlightenment.

JA – I do.

MG – Let's talk through another one of the gestures.



Janine Antoni, *I am tool and substance*, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Overall dimensions: 15 1/2 x 33 x 1 1/2 inches (39.37 x 83.82 x 3.81 cm) Commissioned by The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Lühring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Ralph Smith

*"I am tool and substance. I apply force, I rotate. I give way and transform, offering myself."*

JA – So this artwork explores the creative process. "I am tool and substance." This is at the core of my work. The body is my tool and my material. "I apply force. I rotate." The gesture enacts the mortar and pestle. One always finds destruction in creation, If one digs in, and allows everything to fall apart or unfurl new possibilities arise. [JA rotates one fist in the other palm] And then, "I give way and transform." Surrender is not always about giving up; it can also be about giving way. It is in that act that we allow ourselves to be transformed.

continued from page 2

Janine Antoni **I am Fertile Ground**

“Offering self” is about the fact that offering the work is really about offering the self. When I say those words I think of all I have been through emotionally and physically to give birth to the object I am offering.

MG – I feel like you offer yourself a lot in your work. This is physically demanding work.

JA –By offering myself I realize that I am not alone.



Janine Antoni, *I am fertile ground*, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf. Installation view of *I am fertile ground* in the Catacombs at The Green - Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (September – November 2019) © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*“The earth supports me. The earth holds me. The earth receives me. I am fertile ground.”*

Let's keep going through the artworks. “I am fertile ground” was the first affirmation that came to me and it's what gave the show its title. The verbal intention is, “The earth supports me. The earth holds me. The earth receives me. I am fertile ground.” So, the phrases take me deeper and deeper and deeper into the earth, and then the last line is a resurrection of sorts.

Were you here for the teas? Did you see the film?

MG – I did not.

JA – I've been making teas from the trees at Greenwood. I love the idea that the roots are hugging the coffins and by drinking the tea, we are ingesting the landscape and maybe even the bodies buried here.

MG – The molecules and the energy.

JA – Some cultures believe that the spirit is actually in the ground – not in the sky – and it comes up through the feet into the body during ritual dance.

MG – And this is from?

JA – It is not a surprise that most matriarchal religions have this belief. The affirmation for “I am fertile ground” is really about acknowledging and repairing our connection to the earth. It ends with the fact that we will eventually become earth and ground.

MG – I like the idea of the body returning to the earth after death.

JA – Amy Cunningham is the death educator, here at Greenwood. They do a lot of different practices here. As you walk around the cemetery you can see the styles of memorializing from the many cultures that make up New York. They just did a talk about making the body into compost.

MG – That is kinda intense. I was thinking of more like a slow dissolve.



Janine Antoni, *I touch your listening*, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Installation view of *I am fertile ground* in the Catacombs at The Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (September – November 2019) © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*“I reach out with my touch. Your words spiral in. I touch your listening. We spiral in to each other.”*

I mentioned before that you'll notice that there are older bodies in the works. In “I touch your listening” you might notice that the ear and the hand become an infinity sign. I was so moved by the discovery of that, given that they are so old and have been together so long. My mom has dementia. My dad has had many small strokes that have affected his ability to find his words. It seems as they get older, their form of communication has shifted to touch. They are always curled in to each other. It's very beautiful. I took this picture of them in bed. I put the gold on my dad's ear, I took the photo and then cleaned it off. My dad slept through the whole thing.

My mom's touch has become animal-like. It is like an animal looking for the comfort or warmth from another body. It's curious. The work is a meditation on listening and touch. I've always thought that the measure of our love is the quality of our listening. And one does not only listen with one's ears. So, the affirmation goes, “I reach out with my touch. Your words spiral in.” I like picturing how the ear captures and form sound as it enters the body. “I touch your listening.” Synesthesia has always been a fascination of mine. It gets beyond what is possible. “We spiral into each other” is the last line. It's a tender and loving way to move in to another person.

continued on page 4



Janine Antoni, My waters rest, 2019 Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Installation view of I am fertile ground in the Catacombs at The Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (September –November 2019) © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*“The water flows over me. The water reflects in me. I mirror the water. My waters rest.”*

Then there's my mother's hands in prayer. I take her swimming every day when I'm home and this image was taken in the pool. And you'll see, her legs are there under the water appearing like ghosts. I made this image because I wanted one work to be a recognizable gesture of spirituality. I ask myself, what is a prayer, especially outside of the traditional notion. We could say it's just giving oneself time to reflect inward. This notion brought me to the idea that I could use the bones of the hand to make an oval frame for a mirror. Oh I forgot to say – I was assuming you already knew – every frame is made out of the bones from the image you're looking at.

MG – I didn't know that.

JA – There are three things that are happening in all of the sculptural elements. The bones are cast, pressed, dragged and extruded. All are different variations on these processes and they all imitate classic frames that are familiar to us. They were developed to accentuate the gesture that is captured within.

MG – Where do you get these bones?

JA – Just plastic bones, like the skeletons that you'd find at the chiropractor or you might remember from science class. But they are cast from real bones. So they're a few times removed. In “I touch your listening” (that one of my parents with the ear and hand that's super ornate at the top) the three tiny bones you have in your ear are pressed repeatedly to make that floral pattern, which carries over on to the surface of the image. The gilded image is stamped with the shape of the same bones.

I guess I am putting bones into the catacombs.

MG – These catacombs don't have bones?

JA – They have bodies in each vault which belongs to the family whose name is inscribed at the top of many of the doors. But they are not like the famous catacombs in Paris, Portugal and the Czech Republic. I have always been fascinated and intrigued by how the bodies commingle to make those decorative patterns covering every surface.

Let's go back to the prayer as a reflection. “The water flows over me. The water reflects in me. I mirror the water. My waters rest.” I think of the water as a mirror but also as the unconscious.

MG – I was wondering if the water represented the creative force.

JA – The unconscious is a well of creativity waiting to take form. In The 5Rhythms dance practice, the last rhythm is stillness. Becoming still is a sure way of coming into contact with the unconscious. We find it in prayer and in meditation. At first our minds begin to torture us, but as we stay with it, the memories and repressed emotions float to the surface and untangle themselves. Eventually we can drop in to the still point. We are a culture that is never still and I suspect it is because we are scared of our feelings. I am fascinated with how stillness connects us to spirit. How stillness allows for a sensitivity that makes the world come alive and become interconnected. Creating an opening for spirit to enter.



Janine Anton, I conjure up, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Installation view of I am fertile ground in the Catacombs at The Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (September –November 2019) © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*“I am of the water. The water is in me. I stir the water. The water stirs me. We dissolve in the storm.”*

For many years now I have been exploring creatively with my mom. We were in the pool and I put the gold on her hand and snapped the image of her hands in prayer with my iPhone. When I got back to the studio I realized there was something powerful happening but the quality of the image was not at a very high level. So I bought myself a fancy camera and went back to retake the image. But because my mom doesn't have much short term memory, she couldn't really remember that I was even taking the photo. I couldn't get her back in that position again with those ghost-like legs. She was so fascinated with the gold on her hands that she was playing with it as it was coming off and floating on the surface of the water. I captured the image and it became “I conjure up.” It's such a visually confusing image because the sky is reflecting in the water like puffs of smoke. It takes a moment to figure out what you are looking at. It has come to capture chaos for me, which is also one of the rhythms in The 5Rhythms. Chaos is the flip side of stillness and has a similar effect. When you shake your body as hard as you can the unconscious begins to untangle as well. There is something very cathartic that happens--a kind of release of holding it all together. It also opens a space for creativity and expression. For some, a way to access spirit. One might say that my mother's dementia is creating chaos in her life, but I have noticed that there is a great

freedom and insight that comes when you are not burdened with your memories. She is utterly in the moment in a way that we can not access.

The incantation is, "I am of the water. The water is in me. I stir the water. The water stirs me. We dissolve in the storm." When you don't know who is what and what is acting on who, after comes a total surrender that involves a dissolve. Maybe a dissolve of the ego or a giving in to oneness.

MG – Are you thinking about the surrender of our control in life?

JA – As we age we learn more and more that we have very little control. When we move with it we can navigate it, but if we fight or resist it, it only makes struggle and pain.

MG – And yet going on with our day to day. We have no control and yet we get up in the morning and we plan our day and don't just eat bonbons in bed. We do our practice of life.

JA – The trick is to be conscious enough to know that if we relinquish our tight hold on control there are so many gifts coming along the way that we can receive.

MG – Can you talk me through another affirmation?



Janine Antoni, I unfold, I infold, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Installed: 12 3/4 x 24 3/4 x 7/8 inches (32.39 x 62.87 x 2.22 cm) Flat: 12 3/4 x 28 1/4 x 7/8 inches (32.39 x 71.76 x 2.22 cm) Commissioned by The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY. © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*"I open into sky. I fold into myself. I open with light. Myself I touch. I open in grace. I am here."*

"I unfold, I infold" is inspired by the depiction of the Virgin Mary with open arms. I grew up Catholic. She was my female deity; my representation of what the ultimate woman would be. This is a beautiful gesture. It's giving. It's always present. Always forgiving and receptive. In the iconography it symbolizes the distribution of grace, grace from God. The thing about the Virgin Mary is that she's never given her body. She was immaculately conceived. She doesn't get to have sex. She doesn't even die, she ascends into heaven. So I wanted to give her body back to herself. The incantation is, "I open into sky. I fold into myself. I open with light. Myself I touch. I open in grace. I am here."

MG – So the ideal woman is untouched and not even much of a body?

JA – And just a vessel for giving. .



Janine Antoni, I open the gates, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Installation view of I am fertile ground in the Catacombs at The Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (September –November 2019) © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

"I open the gates" is an image of me pulling apart my ribs. The frame has been made by dragging two vertebrae along a very ornate guide that is meant to accentuate the gesture and shapes made by the body. At the top, casts of those two vertebrae remain. Behind the vertebrae that bisects the image and lays on top, the photograph has been cut in half and slightly spread apart, in the position it would take if the inside of the body was revealed.

I've always been touched by the sacred heart. We know the heart to be the symbolic center of feeling and emotion. I am interested in the power and vulnerability of exposing one's heart. The work takes that imagery of the sacred heart literally. It asks, What if we could actually spread apart our own ribs to expose our heart?

The words that I made to go along with this work express the desire for that opening as well as the fear. They are: "I hold myself. Behold myself. Withhold myself. With my holding I open to self."

"I hold myself" refers to self caring and re-mothering. In "behold myself," "behold" means to acknowledge. I would say its a stepping outside of self to acknowledge and see oneself. "Withhold myself" contains the question of whether withholding is an act of repression or an act of maturity. The final phrase is, "with my holding, I open to self." In the act of acknowledging those three ways of holding, I come to the place of opening to myself and to the emotions that are held in the physical. It is only then that we can begin to offer the love and compassion that the sacred heart symbolizes.

MG – And the one while you're on the ground?



Janine Antoni, *I lay myself down*, 2019, Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, Installation view of *I am fertile ground* in the Catacombs at The Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (September –November 2019) © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, Photo: Christopher Burke

*"I leave my imprint. I am imprinted. I nestle into the earth. I rest in peace."*

JA - So that's my mother's foot laying in bed. She has something called "sundowning". It is when your night and day is confused I always tease her and say, "Mom, get out of bed. What are you doing? Practicing to die? Get up. Let's do something" I think that's she's just so tired.

The phrases are, "I leave my imprint." how we make our mark on the world. "I am imprinted." The way life marks us. And then, "I nestle into the earth. I rest in peace." It's written everywhere in this cemetery. Every time I say it I try to surrender in peace and ruminate on how that peace comes from a life well lived. With my mom in bed, it's me who wants her to be up and active. Is that about my own fear of losing her? I wonder if this tiredness she feels is just a part of the process in which the body is succumbing to gravity. A coming closer to the earth.