



# Celia Eberle's Aesthetic Soothsaying

An artist's practice is steeped in raw materials from the natural world.

Celia Eberle is in the business of world-building. She envisions our reality populated by gods and monsters, filled with latent energies of magic and ritual. Her art mines historic icons, cabinets of curiosity, and the natural world—producing works that appear to possess a past while uniquely speaking to the context in which they were created.

Eberle's output is driven by ideas that determine the medium in which they are produced. She finds formal similarity between natural objects and both personal and global symbolologies. She sources the required raw materials from all over the world, often through online retailers and sometimes right around her home in Ennis, south of Dallas. Her practice is global in nature—mimicking historical trade routes—sourcing such esoteric objects as bone, teeth, diamonds, and marble. She mimics the *Wunderkammer*, assembling precious objects from around the globe, then elevating them via alteration and presentation. She has made combs from turtle shells, towers from bone, and elephants from alabaster.

Each piece is a totem—evoking both foreign and familiar mythologies. Eberle's *Neptune* merges the classic omnipresent image of Christ on the cross with that of the regal merman Neptune. Rendered in driftwood, the sculpture wears a crown of coral reminiscent of a crown of thorns.

Simultaneously the sculpture references the Feejee mermaid displayed by legendary showman P.T. Barnum at his American Museum in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This famed hoax, widely believed to be real at the time of its presentation, was fashioned by fusing the mummified remains of a monkey and fish. What is striking about the piece is that it appears to be a historical object. Eberle's technique implies the passage of time and use through smooth edges and delicate detail. *Neptune's* glossy and jewel-like surface is similar to that of monuments and ritual objects that have been altered from the caress of countless adoring hands. This appearance of authenticity and evocation of wonder stems throughout her wide-ranging oeuvre.

In Eberle's work, time is collapsed. References to Medieval aesthetics come along with those from the late 1800s and early 1900s. The artist adopts iconography that has withstood the test of time. Eberle asserts, "Our most elemental needs and desires are the same as when we first became sentient enough to write history, to create explanatory myths. For this reason, certain images and ideas consistently appeal to us, and certain behaviors remain constant." Her primary source of inspiration, nature, predates humanity and was the subject matter for the earliest works of art ever discovered.

In *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, pit-fired raku clay bats circle the gallery. Unique individual sculptures are brought together to form a colony of bats frozen in mid-flight. In *The Dead of Night*, bone-carved moths similarly flock. These works suggest alchemy as raw material is transformed into animated creatures in flight. Eberle capitalizes upon the inherent aesthetic qualities of the components that she uses—employing simplicity of form and gesture to make materials sing.



This interest in the natural world is manifest in her floral arrangements sculpted from bone and lapis lazuli. These sculptures are *memento mori*—a reminder of the fleeting nature of life. The reference is twofold as Eberle's blooms are forever captured at their peak beauty and are produced from the skeletal remnants of a once-living thing.

Eberle similarly captures the symbolism of flowers in a series of paintings made with blood on watercolor paper. Literally giving her lifeblood for her art, each bloom speaks volumes. Charged with loaded titles as *Heartfelt*, *Loss*, *Obsession*, and *Love*, these works evoke floriography, the language of flowers, an art form popularized during the Victorian era. These paintings bring to light a vein that runs throughout the artist's work—the troubled relationship between man and nature. As Eberle states, "We have always used and abused nature to the extent that we could, and we have always been afraid that she will fail or turn on us, because she does. We forget that we are nature too." Her message seems especially prescient as hurricanes, earthquakes, and wild fires devastate communities universally.

Inspired by global, environmental, social, and political malaise, Eberle's forthcoming undertaking will be a dance party for the end of the world. Imbued with dark humor and foreboding, she is assembling many works from the breadth of her career to set the stage, even composing an electronic soundtrack for the apocalypse, sampling holy music such as a Gregorian chant. As empires fall, new ones rise in their wake, co-opting their predecessor's visual language. The artist's oeuvre explores the cyclical nature of human aesthetic legacy. Eberle here posits herself as the last in a long line to repurpose historic tradition. If the end is truly nigh, the artist hopes we will greet it together, euphoric and sweaty, arms entwined. **P**

BY JUSTINE LUDWIG  
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Clockwise from left: Celia Eberle, *Heartfelt*, 2014, blood on watercolor paper, 20 x 16 in.; *Lost*, 2014, blood on watercolor paper, 20 x 16 in.; *Love*, 2014, blood on watercolor paper, 20 x 16 in.; *Obsession*, 2014, blood on watercolor paper, 20 x 16 in.; Celia Eberle, *The Dead of Night* (detail), 2017, bone, dimensions variable; Celia Eberle, *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (detail), 2016, pit-fired raku clay, brass, glass, dimensions variable. Opposite: Celia Eberle, *Neptune*, 2016, driftwood, coral, 37 x 26 x 7.5 in.