

Maddy Inez Leeser: Of Pith and Balm

30 Orchard St, Gallery 2 ▪ Nov 26, 2022 - Jan 7, 2023



Stinging Nettle flowers are delicate and small, but entwined in a sharp thistle that is irritating to the skin. They are anti-inflammatory, clean the blood, and applied topically, they relieve pain. Dandelions make a good snack for a tortoise and cleanse the liver. They are also representative of the celestial bodies: the yellow flower sun, the puffball moon, and floating star seeds. Wild Sorrel clears congested nasal passages and lungs. It supports the breath and tastes sour. All of these plants grow wild in Southern California, are considered invasive plants, and are mostly culled and discarded.

In *Of Pith and Balm*, Maddy Inez Leeser seeks to create a space for these plants, so frequently eradicated or harmfully harvested, to be observed for their healing significance and beauty. The eradication of these plants is usually done in the name of purification, to make space for construction or monocultural farm practices. In the US in the late stages of capitalism, this idea of eradication for purification is directly linked to the practice of colonization. There is no respect for the intricacies and biological diversity of our land and gardens, and the organization of the natural is often not in the best interest of the community. Our land becomes sick, our people become sick, and the medicine is unavailable. Leeser explores themes of medicine and healing in a time where wellness has been politicized and commodified.

The works we see in *Of Pith and Balm* are all plants Leeser would encounter in the backyard of her childhood home, but that the artist now sees as hope for health for those deemed unworthy of care by the American healthcare system. Here, the dandelion and the nettle are transformed from nostalgic fauna of youth into abundant agency for the discarded. The methods by which these plants are harvested and treated to release their medicinal properties are mimicked by their careful rendering in ceramic. One carefully harvests stinging nettles wearing gloves to avoid their microscopic stinging hairs before preparing them as a tea.

Pip, *Germ*, *Stone* and *Burr* are all seedlings of the dandelion, sorrel, and stinging nettle. Vessels of the delicate seedlings are thoughtful reminders of what these plants contain, and that their place in a symbiotic ecosystem is contingent upon their thoughtful harvest. The functioning vessels occupy a space at the center of form and utility. Each seedling is imbued with promise. Medicinal properties are messages from the Earth, oracles in nature. One such oracle emerges in *It Billows Through Veils*. This vessel mimics the Ghost Orchid personified. It is a rare flower found in the forests of Florida or Cuba that the artist here imagines controlled by a mythical alien spirit inspired by Nalo Hopkinson's *Sister Mine*. Of this being, Leeser writes:

"Bound to its duty by a force unknown,

perhaps its trickery, a playful seriousness in mortal matters.

Perhaps knowing what lies between life and death, space and time, it has found a loyalty to the beings who bury their toes in soil."

—Toniann Fernandez