

*Femmy Otten & Chantal Powell*

# Heart Spell

*20 – 13 September, 2024  
6 Percy Street, London*

## **The Treasured Alchemy of Heart Spells** **Amy Hale**

A spell is an artful act of magic born from desire for change. The most excellently delivered spells are undertaken in three parts: the expression of a clear vision, enchantment with breath, ardor, and movement, and finally the release of the spell into the winds. These Heart Spells from Chantal Powell and Femmy Otten offer a thoughtful collection of images about the embrace of one's inner fire fuelling the quest for renewal and regeneration. They also offer a glimpse into the messy and awkward business of growth and emergence, capturing those strange phases where we are not one thing or another, followed by the tentative moments of new beginnings.

Dutch-based artist Femmy Otten's wider oeuvre elevates the intimate. Frequently Otten focuses tightly on a single body part, a hand, a breast, a face, a vulva, making it alien by removing from its wider context, yet also suggesting it stands for something greater, taking on symbolic weight.

Otten is interested in the mythic, the iconic, and motherhood, and her work references the transformative power associated with the divine feminine. Chantal Powell explores the symbolism of alchemical processes through a variety of media; sculpture, painting, and textiles. She is inspired by Jungian philosophies which drive the psyche toward integration. Powell crafts her alchemical furnaces known as athanors out of the bodies of goddesses and strange creatures, beautiful machines to fire the refinement of the soul, out of which emerge flowers, snakes, eggs, slippery growing things, containers of vitality and motion. Yet integration is necessarily a challenging and often painful process, forcing us through stages of darkness and confusion on the journey to becoming something new. The spells of the heart are those which drive us toward healing and restoration, unification with the divine, discovering it within ourselves, or perhaps mirrored in another.

The wider narrative of the show woven by these two wonderfully complementary artists, explores themes of transformation occurring at both the scale of the personal and the embodied but also mirrored in the cosmic, encompassing sex, sacrifice, death and rebirth. There is certainly an underlying focus on woman's generative power, with images of goddesses, grain, childbirth and the promise contained in the egg. Otten and Powell are both interested in the physical spaces of gestation, and we see here the parallel of the womb and the athanor and the alembic, the instruments which ignite and contain the alchemical process, simultaneously tough and delicate.

Yet despite the recurring themes of growth and force, there is also a certain fragility in the pallets and in the lines. The tones here are muted and earthy, browns and greens, with the occasional cheerful interruption of pink. The mood of this show is remarkably subtle and tempered, occasionally quirky, encouraging the viewer to pause and reflect on the moments that comprise a journey. There are uncertain visions and liminal shapes, capturing the stages when, like embryos, bodies and states of being are still undefined. As such, Heart Spells frequently highlights disembodied parts. We are invited to focus on singular features, out of context, apart from the whole, as elements are recontextualized into new stories.

For instance, in Otten's pieces in this collection vulvas are portals, featured as both isolated and symbolic and also deeply human. In contrast to the frightening stance of the Sheela na Gig, warding church windows from evil spirits with her gaping vulva, Otten's vulvas are elegant, restrained and almost suggestive of an initiatory experience. The vulva in the center of "Rainbow Circle III" resembles a small leaf, and appears almost as an emblem. Conversely, "Untitled (Zonder Titel)" combines abjection with awe, with the crowning head of a newborn emerging during an underwater birth veiled by water and blood, partially concealing what is perhaps the world's most widely experienced divine mystery. Perhaps mediating these images is the "Vulva and The Eye", which feels like an odd doorway to another dimension, tucked into a corner, suggesting its own sense of intelligence and knowing.

A number of pieces capture the strange liminality of the transitory state. There is a sense of unknowing what the outcome of this evolution might be. Some of Powell's pieces nod to the monstrous feminine yet do not entirely surrender to it, showing bodies in indeterminate states of hybridity, fused with plants and serpents. This journey is one that twists deeply inward before resolving outward into manifestation. "Two Kinds of Chance" and "Self" feature spirals and serpents, suggesting encounters with shadowy self-knowledge. However, a "God Might Be" and a "Brooding Hen" are more explicitly unnerving in their rather amorphous indeterminacy, as is Otten's untitled marble sculpture, depicting a very peculiar birth. Yet otherness in this space is also a source of wonder.

Some of these hybrids feel less atavistic and more expansive in their unboundedness. "I am Born for Love" shows breasts, feet, hands, leaves in a joyous starburst. "Divided Body" is part plant part flesh, in a wheel of motion. "Trees Like Seraphim" expresses the greater intelligence of the plant world, and "A Thousand Selves" whimsically celebrates the possibilities of our own multitudes.

The new state is vulnerable, and reintegration requires nurturance and care. Otten's "Motherhood" is a diverse circle of breasts, beautiful, and comforting. These echo the multibreasted Diana of Ephesus seen here in Powell's light and lovely watercolour, "She Journeyed as a Snake". The Diana athanor is a recurring motif in Powell's alchemical furnaces, inspired by her study of renaissance manuscripts, indicating a refinement of the soul that is hard, yet silently supported. "A Sense of Body" expresses the exploratory first steps of the new journey, imagining sweet plants finding their feet. In the only clear portrait in this collection, Otten's untitled woman looks directly and resolutely at the viewer, her cheeks lined by tendrils, and feathery tongue like markings, perhaps from tears, an initiatory process, or both. We may not know her story, but her eyes tell us that she is changed and unbreakable.

*Femmy Otten (b. 1981)*

*Lives and works in The Hague, Netherlands.*

*Femmy Otten takes inspiration from historical traditions of image-making and idolatry, both from Dutch and European traditions, as well as those found across Asia, influenced by her earlier travels. Archetypal forms can be identified in her sculptures, paintings and reliefs; however, her works also function as self-portraits, reflecting on life, love, motherhood and sexuality.*

*Chantal Powell (b. 1977)*

*Lives and works in West Dorset, UK.*

*The work of British artist Chantal Powell is made in response to her personal journey into understanding the symbolic language of the unconscious. A PhD in psychology and an ongoing study of Jungian theory and alchemical symbolism inform her practice.*