

ARUSHA
GALLERY

*Chthonic powers,
floral minds*

Aliya Say

The word CHTHONIA (χθόνια) symbolises the divine earth, the terrestrial and the subterranean, personified most emblematically by the Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility, the grain mother Demeter. In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias, a Greek traveller and geographer of the second century AD, describes an eponymous summer festival celebrated annually in Hermione in honour of Demeter:

They form a procession, headed by the priests and magistrates of the year, who are followed by men and women. Even for children it is customary to pay homage to the goddess by joining the procession. They wear white garments, and on their heads they have chaplets of flowers, which they call κοσμοσάνδαλοι.¹

Pausanias suggests that the mysteriously named κοσμοσάνδαλοι, cosmic sandals, is *hyacinthus*, today known as larkspur, whose blooms indeed resemble an elegant female slipper. The flower's central petals are shaped like the Greek 'ai ai', alas, alas – the plant thus symbolises the mourning over the premature death of young prince Hyacinthus. The flower's original Greek name, however, stops me in my tracks: surely 'cosmic sandals' ought to have some deeper consciousness-expanding connotations than the shoe-like morphology alone? Could Pausanias have mistaken the flower for another species, say aconite or henbane, whose hallucinogenic, potentially deadly properties could indeed induce the cosmic travel to worlds far and beyond? Over the next couple days, I make a pilgrimage to the British Library, hoping to find mind-altering traces of the mysterious purple-blue blooms, hidden somewhere in the dusty manuscripts and digital archives of this grand temple of the Western's civilisation's written records.



Upon studying a combination of translated Greek texts and their 19th-21st century interpretations, my curiosity remains unquenched: κοσμοσάνδαλοι appears as innocent as the ancient geographer has first proposed. Nevertheless, I am not too far off in my inquires. In the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, larkspur makes appearance at a crucial moment of the tragedy: Persephone and her companion nymphs are gathering rose, crocus, violet, iris, and lily in a springtime

¹ Pausanias, *Periegesis Hellados (Description of Greece)*, c. AD 143–176.

meadow, and it is when reaching out for larkspur blossoms that the young goddess gets abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld. The purple blooms serve as a premonition, indicating a dark and mysterious journey that Persephone is about to undertake: the journey to the world of the dead.

She [Persephone] was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out with both hands to take hold of the pretty plaything [larkspur]. And the earth, full of roads leading every which way, opened up under her

– Homeric Hymn to Demeter, transl. Gregory Nagy

Desperate, Demeter embarks on a search for her missing daughter; yet the earth mother is so distressed that she stops her usual nurturing of the natural world and the harvests, causing the withering of the grain and the suffering of the common people. On the ninth day of her agony, Demeter arrives to Eleusis disguised as a mortal: the town welcomes her warmly, and it is near Eleusis that the mother and the daughter are finally reunited. In reward for the town's hospitality, the goddess reveals her true identity and shares the secret rites – that came to be known as the Eleusinian Mysteries.



Rhiannon Salisbury, *Instant Osmosis*, 2022
Acrylic on cotton stretched canvas, 100 x 80 x 4.2 cm

For two thousand years, Eleusinian Mysteries remained one of the most important, and most secretive, rites of the ancient Greece, providing emotional healing, nurturing the connection with the earth-Gaia, and spurring the spiritual enlightenment of its devotees. The rites included a ritual bath in the sea, three days of fasting, and completion of the central ceremony that involved the ingestion of a specially prepared drink *kykeon* in celebration of the Chthonian goddess. These acts completed the initiation, and the initiate was promised benefits of some kind in the afterlife. Women, slaves, non-citizens were all welcome, and the only rule was to keep the rapturous ceremony that took place within the temple a strict secret, with death punishment for non-compliance.

The story of Demeter and Persephone's grief-stricken separation and subsequent joyful reunion thus served as a catalyst for performing ecstatic rituals intended to evoke an ineffable experience and send initiates on a blissful and delirious journey, one that provided mystical communion with the chthonic divinities, connecting soul and body, life and death, earth and the underworld.

Κοσμοσάνδαλοι, after all, delivered on its cosmic promise.

Dying before you die

If you die before you die, you won't die when you die.

– Greek saying, Saint Paul's Monastery, Mt. Athos

Aside from larkspur, with its mythical if not directly psychotropic identification with journeying, the cult of Demeter is linked with pretty much all entheogenic plants known to have use in the magical practices from Antiquity till the present day: mandrake, belladonna, datura, henbane, poppy. The latter, in particular, was associated with fertility and abundance, and consequently, with our earth goddess. We often find Demeter portrayed with opium poppies and sheaves of wheat and barley, while Persephone is sometimes depicted rising from the underworld accompanied by a motif of poppy heads and lily leaves.²



While the composition of kykeon, a sacred drink served at the Eleusinian rites, remains a mystery, some of the more adventurous researchers across history, archaeochemistry and paleo-botany are gradually starting to uncover its secret recipe. This new research shows that the drink may have been spiked with ergot, a hallucinogenic fungus that affects rye and barley, alongside other mind-altering herbs.³ Incidentally, purple, the colour of ergot fungus *Claviceps purpurea*, is identified with Demeter, as well as with her son, the ecstatic god Dionysus, as seen in numerous frescoes and mosaics across the Mediterranean. Kykeon enabled the initiates of the Mysteries ecstatic decent into the underworld where Persephone would meet them, providing access to a totally different state of awareness, a world of utter paradox – and psychedelic fungus, itself a largely subterranean creature, may have been the key ingredient.

As far as I can see, there is nothing accidental about the fact that the cult associated with earth, fertility, and verdant abundance is the very same cult that involved the widespread ingestion of entheogenic substances – plants and mushrooms that induce a mystical sense of wholeness, oneness,

² E.J. Carod-Artal, 'Psychoactive plants in ancient Greece,' *Neurosciences and History*, 2013; 1 (1): 28-38

³ Brian C. Muraresku, *Immortality Key, The: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name* (St. Martin's Press, 2020).

and unity with the natural world and its cycles of growth, decay, death, and transformation. For centuries, humans across cultures and religions performed regular rituals that promoted this deep sense of cosmic unity, while shamans, prophets, and healers played a key role in mending the traumas, both personal and collective, and maintaining the sense of connectedness with the more than human world.



So essential were the sacred rites at Eleusis that ‘the life of the Greeks would become *abiotos* – unlivable – if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries.’⁴ These mysteries were what held the whole human race together, and in their absence, life was to become unthinkable.

With the rise of Christianity in the Roman empire, Eleusinian Mysteries were persecuted and eventually banned by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 392 AD. Centuries later, in our current age of the global ecocide and the epidemic death cult of the capitalist system, Life does become increasingly *unthinkable* – unavailable to think with. The myths and divinities of our story, then, are not imaginary: they are the tormented roots of our Western civilization; they are where our very culture comes from. As philosopher of mystical tradition Peter Kingsley writes: ‘Slowly, gradually, they have been misunderstood. And, as a part of that process, we have misunderstood ourselves... And, as a result, Western civilization may soon be nothing but an experiment that failed.’⁵

The political, ecological, feminist, and spiritual reclamation of life and restoration of Gaia is a project that necessarily stretches across nonhuman timelines and deadlines – yet, it has never been more desperately urgent than today. This reclamation is no longer a longing for a lost connection, but a demand – a demand for immediate revolution.

⁴ Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁵ Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2003).

The revolution will be floral

The cry of 'Flower Power' echoes through the land. We shall not wilt. Let a thousand flowers bloom.

– Abbie Hoffman, May 1967

'Flower power' was a slogan widely used in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a symbol of passive resistance and nonviolence and rooted in the opposition movement to the Vietnam War. The expression was coined by American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in 1965 as a means to transform war protests into peaceful affirmative spectacles. While the term acquired certain derogatory 'hippie' connotations in the reactionary climate of the following decades, one mark of its significance, I would argue, is the attempted subversion of 'flower' as a sign of fragility and powerlessness – and particularly as a symbol of submissive femininity. In Western literature and cultural imagination, women are often identified with flowers: signalling their docility and vulnerability, piety and purity (a.k.a. the closely guarded virginity). In this language of human-floral damsels that culminated in the Victorian period, flower stands as a metonym for woman, in all her beauty and all her frailty, with the pleasing aesthetic effect redeeming the apparent deficiency of her being, one which is but a lesser version of Man. As scholar Beverly Seaton notes, 'Flowers, in fact, were seen as the most suitable aspect of nature to represent women, or to interact with them, reflecting as they do certain stereotypical qualities of the female being: smallest of stature, fragility of mind and body, and impermanence of beauty.'⁶

Despite these centuries-old patriarchal personifications, flowers, and plants more broadly, are anything but inert, neither frail nor powerless. It is with those who know and respect their hidden potential, that they share keenly their magical powers: acting as a potent tool for healing wounds and mending souls, for journeying across time-space and for dreaming of other worlds, for dying and resurrecting. Traditionally in the west, magical herbalism has been guarded by women: from priestesses of Ancient Greece to female mystics, witches and midwives of the Middle Ages and the early modern period. This verdant knowledge has been gradually erased, marginalised, and burned down, along with the practitioners who performed their mystical and healing rituals against the decrees and persecution of the church fathers. Their fragrant floral knowledge did not disappear altogether though – its roots went deep underground, in the subterranean domain of Persephone, from where we are starting to gradually uncover and bring it back to light today, through reclamation of botanical knowledge – and through art.

⁶ Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 17.



Rhiannon Salisbury, *Thorn Apple Jimsonweed*, 2022
Acrylic and oil on, cotton stretched canvas, 130 x 100 x 3.5 cm

The Greater Mysteries at Eleusis was celebrated annually in the month of Boedromion (September–October) – the very same time that Rhiannon Salisbury’s exhibition ‘Chthonia’ opens to public. May this celebration of art open paths for looking closely and attentively, for journeying and connecting, for reclaiming the vegetal and the feminist power seeping through the cracks in earth and through the cracks in paint alike. We often think the greatest possible achievement is to come up with everything ourselves, to be inventive and creative, to put our stamp on the world – artistic or otherwise. But there are those who consider that the greatest achievement is to listen, to bring into the world what no one else is able to hear, sense, and see. Into the humdrum of the ordinary existence artists like Rhiannon can bring something extraordinary and magical: not the kind of magic that might provide a short-lived sensorial escape from the tedium of existence, but a totally different kind, far more mysterious and infinitely more real.

– Aliya Say, 2022

Aliya Say is an art writer, strategist and researcher based in London. She is writing her PhD on botanical abstraction in the work of twentieth-century artist-mystics, and the parallels between vegetal ontology and mystical states.

Chthonia
Rhiannon Salisbury
31st August – 2nd October 2022
Arusha Gallery
Edinburgh
0131 557 1412 | info@arushagallery.com