

Ann McCoy: *The Procession of the Invisible College*

By Hovey Brock



Ann McCoy, *The Invisible College*, bronze processional with projections, GRIDSPACE, Brooklyn. Photos Paulina Kim Joo

Ann McCoy is a passionate defender of the spiritual in art, particularly what Henry Corbin, in his treatise on the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi, called creative imagination, or, as Ibn Arabi would have put it, “seeing with the heart.” Once a staple of religious practice for building a more meaningful life, this realm of human activity, which includes the use of dreams, fantasies, visions, and active meditation, has fallen out of favor, certainly in our time when the answer to anything is a few keystrokes away. Jungian psychoanalysis has long held that modern society’s hyper-rational bent makes it susceptible to our worst unconscious impulses, e.g. the flagrantly irrational tribalism of our current political conversation. McCoy sees her art practice as a corrective to this collective blind spot. In fact, her installation *The Procession of the Invisible College*

amounts to a counter-proposal: an institution that would train us to see with our hearts as well as our eyes, to integrate what is going on inside of us with what is going on around us.

The installation has two elements. At the center of the room is a bronze sculpture mounted on a cabinet which McCoy calls a “processional.” It is a small horizontal bronze. Leading the procession are three horses stepping high. Following that is a cart that carries a stag in the front and an enormous crown, a symbol of consciousness, mounted on a model of the Invisible College, a Rosicrucian symbol taken from a 1618 engraving. Inside the Invisible College is an egg with a snake wrapped around it, an Orphic mystery symbol of psychic transformation. Bringing up the rear is another horse with a faun next to it, followed by a cylindrical furnace with two doors that reveal a fire inside, an alchemical symbol of continuous effort. Topping the furnace is another much smaller crown. The details of the processional are hard to see because the second element of the installation is a light show of images projected on the walls of the dark rectangular space surrounding the sculpture. Some of these images have a vaguely medieval feel. These come from McCoy’s exquisite drawings: a dark-skinned Madonna, an androgynous child in a lamp, a heart floating in a flask, a luminous baby. Other images refer to nature: a butterfly, stars, a salamander.

The installation has the feel of a dream, which is the point. McCoy studied for almost thirty years in Zürich under the direction of Carl Alfred Meier, a disciple of C. G. Jung and a scholar of creative imagination. Her work with Meier led her deep into the study of alchemy from the 15th through the 17th century. The 1618 engraving that gives the show its title accompanied one of the earliest Rosicrucian texts, *Speculum Sophericum Rhodostauroticum*, (“The Mirror of the Wisdom of the Rosy Cross”) by the pseudonymous Theophilus Schweighardt. The Rosicrucian idea of an “Invisible College” was a new spiritual order based on alchemical and Hermetic principles—no doubt an attractive proposition at the time of Schweighardt’s text, when the rampant sectarianism precipitated by the Reformation was tearing European societies

What can we moderns learn from the Rosicrucian movement? The easy answer would be, not much. The refusal to separate the spiritual from the phenomenal, typical of alchemy, is alien to our current way of thinking, even among the most conservative evangelical Christians. In her installation, McCoy is pleading the following: we need to pay as much attention to our dreams and imaginings, which are unconscious sources of knowledge and even spiritual transformation, as we do to our rational beliefs. Indeed, dreams are the substrate to all rational thought. Not paying attention to how these images impact us will leave us rudderless in navigating the meaning of our lives. This is particularly dangerous today because we live in a collective sea of images. In his book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, (2005) W. J. T. Mitchell proposes treating images as semi-sentient entities, with desires of their own, that come alive when we fully engage them.

McCoy takes this argument a step further by insisting on the Jungian idea that some images, which he called archetypes, are not just inventions, but have independent lives with an energetic capacity of their own. They are a part of nature, hence the juxtapositions in McCoy's light show of her drawings with photographs taken from nature. Treated with respect, these special images can, like food, energize and nourish us. Conversely, many of these images, if used in the wrong way, can poison us, e.g. the symbolic power of ethnic identity. Enter McCoy's Invisible College, a university for training us to discern with our hearts those images that sustain us and allow us to grow, and to reject those images that put us at the mercy of fear and division.