

**TITLE PAGE**

**THE ALCHEMY CODEX**

By

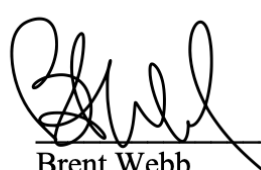
Adam Ferguson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

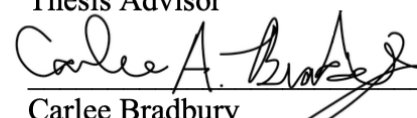
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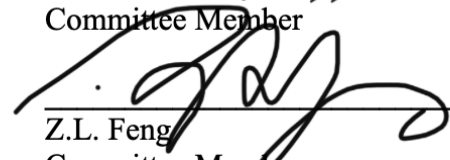
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## ABSTRACT

*Fire. Water. Earth. Air.* The traditional elements of Greek antiquity are commonplace within society today, existing with various forms of media, existing as spiritual components of various cultures, and as symbols. The four elements were widely believed for centuries to be the building blocks of the entire world, and countless philosophies and ideas emerged surrounding them. Though the theory of the four elements comprising all matter would eventually be proven to be entirely false, the cultural status of the four elements has withstood the test of time, becoming household representations in a wide array of cultures. These depictions have shaped and inspired my viewpoint of the four elements, and what they mean to me personally, allowing me to utilize the symbolism of the four elements for my current body of work. *The Alchemy Codex* is a series of eight large-scale figurative oil paintings, each interpreting one of the classical elements to create a narrative piece. Alchemy has played a significant role in the history of the four elements, being seen as the building blocks of alchemical creation, and in this universe the elemental beings are creations of alchemy. Each element is depicted in both a male variation and a female variation to signify the duality of the elements and their relationship in the elemental hierarchy I have created. The body of work is completed by utilizing classical painting techniques derived from academic painters from the nineteenth century, and draw visual inspiration from these paintings alongside a host of modern illustrators and concept artists. By comprehending and utilizing the historical importance and symbology of the four elements to create my own personal mythology, I have created a body of work that signifies the relevance of the four elements both within our society and to a personal degree.

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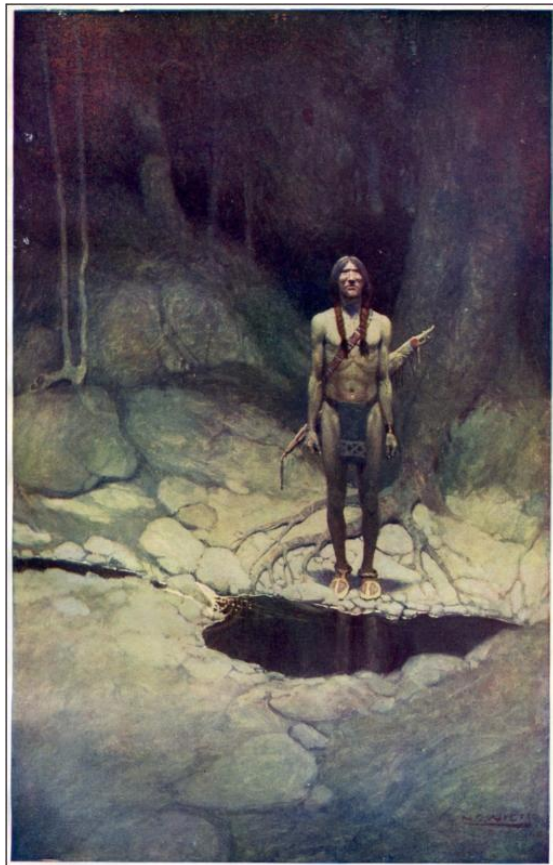
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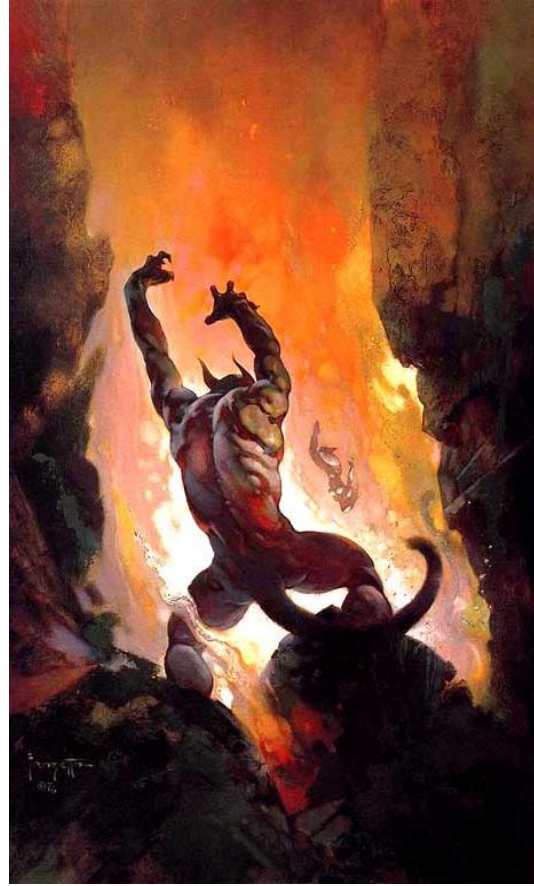
**Frank Frazetta**

*Fire Demon*

Oil on Canvas

1977

Originally published on  
the cover for 'Swords  
against Darkness' novel





## I. FIRE, WATER, EARTH, AND AIR: THE FOUR ELEMENTS

*The Alchemy Codex body of work represents a world where the four elements of Greek antiquity are foremost at the crux of the mythology—elemental beings in this imagined universe create and control the balance over these elements, and the world that is comprised by them. For this body of work, it was essential to understand both the value and linear history of the four elements, but also the role of the four elements in shaping spiritual, societal, and scientific ideals. Alchemy also forms the backbone of the entire body of work, and as such it was important to research the history of alchemy, its symbology, and its relationship to the four elements in order to appropriately incorporate it into The Alchemy Codex. This section showcases the history of the four elements, their alchemical roots, and their role in modern society and media today, and then details how those aspects have influenced The Alchemy Codex.*

### *The History of the Four Elements*

While the exact origin of the four elements is somewhat debated, the traditional depiction of the four elements has its roots in Greek philosophy. Greek philosopher Empedocles, around 440 BC, proposed that “the origins of the world could be traced back to the four elements: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire.” Empedocles believed these elements to be the primal elements of matter, and that all matter derived from them. Empedocles associated the elements with four deities—Fire with Zeus, Air with Juno, Earth with Aidoneus, and Water with Nestis—although Air and Earth are swapped in texts from Diogenes Laertius.<sup>1</sup> Athenagoras of Athens would later suggest that the four elements were not actual gods themselves, but actually components that had been

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1. Evangelia Panou et al., “On the Unity of the Elements of Nature in Empedocles,” *Bulgarian Astronomical Journal* 21 (2014): 2.

entirely separated from the gods. Empedocles likely just associated the gods with these elements, rather than believing the elements to be divine beings in their own right. Hierarchy was given to fire as well—both Empedocles, Aristotle, and later Plato would discuss the prime position of fire in the elemental hierarchy. Fire was “first of all divine as carrier of the divine energy, but on the other hand it forms the substrate of the changes of the cosmic system.”<sup>2</sup>

Empedocles also suggested that the four elements were not inert elements, but rather in constant flux and unity, existing under antagonistic powers referred to as “the Amity” and “the Strife.” According to Empedocles, these powers were the catalyst behind why the elements would merge with one another to create other matter—and that each had a significant role in this process. Amity was believed to cause the elements to unify, whereas Strife would try to disturb this unification. Empedocles believed that the four elements would derive from a state that is unable to be accessed by the senses, where the disharmony between the Amity and the Strife would cause the elements to emerge.

Empedocles also never explicitly called the elements “elements”—the term would later be used by Plato.<sup>3</sup> Plato would be the first to refer to these four concepts as “elements,” using a word that in the Greek language essentially translated to “the smallest division,” thereby imputing his belief that the elements comprised all things. Aristotle also would go on to define elements as “the most basic constituent of that thing.”<sup>4</sup>

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2. Panou, “On the Unity of the Elements of Nature in Empedocles,” 3-4.

3. David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (SUNY Press, 2011), 68-71.

4. Timothy J. Crowley, “Aristotle’s ‘So-Called Elements,’” *Phronesis* 53, no. 3 (2008): 224.

The viewpoint of the Greeks and their theories on the elements would stand firm throughout the Medieval Renaissance and in western Europe during the Early Modern era, but would eventually be challenged in the seventeenth century. Johann Baptista van Helmont, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, and various others began challenging those notions with scientific experiments and demonstrations of chemistry.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Four Elements and Their Relationship to Spirituality*

While the crux of the history of the four elements and the writings surrounding them is mostly found in texts from Greek antiquity, countless other ancient cultures have depictions of the elements and their own methodologies of describing their meaning. Many cultures even still incorporate the four elements into their philosophies in modern society due to their symbology and ties to spiritualism.

Zarathustra, or Zoroaster, an ancient Persian philosopher, named earth, fire, water, and air as “essential for the survival of all living beings and therefore should be venerated and kept free from any contamination.” He believed all of the elements were sacred, and necessary in the daily living of all beings—from the drinking of water, to the breathing of air. Fire was held in a more divine nature—worshipped, in a way. The four elements in Zarathustra’s teachings had nothing to do with chemistry, but rather focused entirely on spirituality. Zarathustra’s viewpoint of the four elements would also greatly influence the Greek philosophies.<sup>6</sup>

Hinduism’s ties to the elements are through five elements rather than four and dictate that the entire realm of creation is composed of these five elements (earth, fire, water, air, and aether). The Vedas states that the human body, upon death, will dissolve into one of these five

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5. Fathi Habashi, “Zoroaster and the theory of four elements,” *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* (2000): 109.

6. Habashi, “Zoroaster and the theory of four elements,” 111.

elements, bringing about a form of balance and unity to the natural world. This viewpoint aligns the elements with the very fabric of existence in Hinduism.<sup>7</sup> Babylonian mythology states that the sea, the sky, the earth, and the wind are cosmic gods, adding a spiritual element to their view of the elements. Chinese philosophy holds a variation on the four elements, rather as fire, earth, metal, water, and wood, as the components of all life and are seen as constantly in flux, coexisting in a nebulous fashion. For example, if air combines with fire, it will give you anger or wrath. Their version of the elements also plays a large role in their concept of astrology and the composition of the universe itself.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Four Elements and Alchemy*

Alchemy was a branch of philosophy practiced throughout Europe, Africa, China, Asia, among other places. Its nomenclature derives from “the art of knowledge,” and it is often “characterized as divine, sacred, or mystic.”<sup>9</sup> Alchemy’s roots are exceedingly vast and are not prescribed to one culture or tradition. Humanity has been changing the chemical properties of objects since ancient times, even potentially going back to humanity’s first experience with cooking food or creating baked clay.<sup>10</sup> Evidence of copper smelting dates back to 3800 B.C.E, and tin and bronze would follow shortly after. These techniques would be recorded, and passed down throughout various cultures and ancestries, leading up to Greco-Roman times, when Greek

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7. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 78.

8. Macauley, 61.

9. Paul T. Keyser, “Alchemy in the Ancient World: From Science to Magic,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 15, no. 2 (1990): 353.

10. Arthur John Hopkins, “A Modern Theory of Alchemy,” *Isis* 7, no. 1 (1925): 58.

philosophy would establish the four-element theory. As previously discussed, Empedocles would spearhead this theory, determining all things to be created from fire, water, earth, and air. Plato and Aristotle's efforts would add onto this theory, determining "hot/cold" and "dry/wet" as opposites that would combine to produce the four elements. Theophrastus would then write a series of books that discussed recipes for preparing artificial stones.<sup>11</sup> Alchemical writings, even though they were not necessarily known as such at the time of their creation, would be found in Hellenistic Egypt, India, Islam, Asia, and Europe. All of these cultures were practicing methods of chemical transmutation, and though their processes and goals may have differed, the outcomes were often the same. While some alchemists sought more magical, mystical results such as youth, supernatural existence, or elixirs of health, others sought to discern scientific mysteries and learn more about the process of chemistry.

While the word "alchemy" itself may conjure up visions of a bearded wizard concocting experiments in a medieval laboratory in a tower, alchemy itself was actually very esteemed, and was a precursor to traditional chemistry and scientific study. As mentioned prior, the goal of alchemy was the process of transmutation—alchemists sought to purify materials, hoping to achieve perfection with them, or to attain something new through the process.<sup>12</sup> While the exact origin of alchemy as a tradition is debated, traditional alchemy was comprised of the four classical elements alongside sulphur and mercury, which illustrated combustion and metallic properties respectively.

*The Alchemy Codex* establishes alchemy as the crux of its entire mythology—the goal of these transformations through usage of the four elements is an entirely new being, an

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11. Keyser, "Alchemy in the Ancient World," 355-59.

12. Hopkins, "A Modern Theory of Alchemy," 58.

“Elemental,” who can control and command the element that they have merged with. The mystical, magical manner of alchemy is invoked by this spiritual being’s powers, their command over the element, and their otherworldly appearances. Understanding the goals of alchemy, its overarching history, and its overall relevance were integral in creating this body of work.

*The Four Elements in Modern Popular Culture*

The four elements would, of course, eventually fall out of favor in scientific terms. As science progressed, fire, water, earth, and air would be determined to be more akin to chemical compounds, admixtures, or created through the process of rapid oxidation. In some cases, as stated by David Macauley in *Elemental Philosophy*, the usage of the term “four elements” was even lambasted:

As Hegel puts it in *The Philosophy of Nature*, “The concept of the four elements, which has been commonplace since the time of Empedocles, has been rejected as puerile phantasy.” “No educated person,” he adds, “is now permitted, under any circumstances, to mention [it].”<sup>13</sup>

Despite falling out of favor as the building blocks of matter, the four elements still remain entirely relevant to popular culture today.<sup>14</sup> Fire, water, earth, and air are immediately recognizable as the four elements, and one often cannot be mentioned without the others directly following. Again, Macauley’s statements in *Elemental Philosophy* showcase just how easy the elements are for one to relate to: “...we can draw a lighted flame before our eyes, inspect dry earth in our hands, relish cool air in our noses and lungs, and appreciate the distinct textures or tastes of water with our tongues.”<sup>15</sup> Countless works of art, novels, television shows, movies,

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13. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 3.

14. Philip Ball, *The Elements: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

video games, card games, tabletop games, music, among other forms of media, have utilized the four elements and their symbolism in a multitude of ways.

One prominent example of the four elements in the media, and one that has played a significant role as an inspiration to my work, would be that of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, an animated television series created by Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko, and Aaron Ehasz that aired on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008.<sup>16</sup> In this series, the title character, the Avatar, has control over the four elements, and is able to utilize them through a method called “bending,” wherein the Avatar can move, reshape, alter, and control fire, water, earth, and air with ease. Other characters in the series are also able to bend elements, but they are limited to just one, whereas the Avatar can bend all four of them—his role in this universe is to keep harmony and balance between the elements—much like the Amity of Empedocles’ writings. *Avatar*’s showcase of a being in control of the four elements greatly influenced many of the narrative concepts in *The Alchemy Codex*.

Other fantasy works have utilized the four elements as well. Trading card series *Magic: The Gathering* utilizes the four elements to categorize cards, having five colors that correspond to elemental tradition. *Harry Potter*’s Hogwarts has its houses divided into four subcategories, each which align with a traditional element. The role-playing video game *Final Fantasy* showcases the four elements as the powerful, natural forces that exist within the universe. Even traditional colors draw association to the elements—blue often correlates with water, red with fire, green with earth, and white with air.

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15. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 4.

16. David Perlmutter, *The Encyclopedia of American Animated Television Shows* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018): 50-51.

Another form of media that has impacted my work would be the music of bands Thrice and Mastodon—each band has created work that centers around the four elements. Thrice’s anthology, *The Alchemy Index*, is a collection of EPs that detail each element, with songs written trying to evoke the feeling of that particular element through song structure, atmosphere, lyrical content, and narrative writing. The name of their work, and the conceptual ideas behind it, directly influenced the work of *The Alchemy Codex*—the name being particularly crucial in determining what I wanted to name the collection of work. Thrice’s song “Night Diving” evokes a ghostly, vast ocean with its moody arrangement and slow build-up in terms of progression. This sort of mental conjuring of imagery directly influenced the imagery seen in *The Alchemy Codex*. Another band, Mastodon, which is a heavy metal band from Atlanta, Georgia, has written multiple albums, each with a conceptual theme centered around one of the elements—Remission (Fire), Leviathan (Water), Blood Mountain (Earth), Crack the Skye (Aether/Air). The multitude of these works of art showcase the sustained interest in the four elements, and how the symbology of the traditional four elements continues to influence, inspire, and generate a wide variety of creations.



## II. SYMBOLOGY OF THE FOUR ELEMENTS IN MY WORK

*Symbolism was an important factor in creating this body of work. Each of the four elements was thoroughly researched to understand the underpinnings of their symbology throughout various cultures and time periods. Though many of these perceptions of the same concept may vary and change over time, I have chosen a variety of these concepts to utilize in the narrative of *The Alchemy Codex*. The section that follows discusses these concepts, symbols, and ideas, and then showcases how this research plays a role in designing the visual language of the paintings.*

### *Narrative Concepts*

*The Alchemy Codex* presents an entirely imagined, fictional mythological realm wherein the balance of the four elements is kept unified by eight beings known as “Elementals.” The concept of an elemental being is not wholly unique or original—rather, the personification or portrayal of a human as an element has been seen throughout art history in the form of gnomes, undines, sylphs, and salamanders. These mythical beings became prevalent around the time of the European Renaissance, and were heavily featured in the works of Swiss physician Paracelsus. Paracelsus imagined the four alchemical elements to be prescribed to these beings—gnomes being the representations of the earth, undine with water, sylph with air, and salamander being fire. Paracelsus’ writings discuss the elementals as being known to move throughout the elements, as human beings do through air and space.<sup>17</sup> The elementals had pure power and control over these elements, and could assume their form at any point in time. They were known

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17. Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 38.

to only exist peacefully amongst their own element, and were “made of flesh and blood, ate and slept and procreated like humans do. But unlike mortals, they were long-lived, capable of superhuman speed and movement, and without immortal souls.” Despite the elementals lacking this “immortal soul,” they were nonetheless able to gain one by being wed to a human being. Elementals were also seen as “guardian or governing spirits.”<sup>18</sup> They were associated with power, with authority, and with spirituality.

Elemental beings are featured heavily in Victorian and Romantic art, literature, and media. Even after the concept of the four elements had long fallen to the wayside, the spirit of these elemental beings would remain both in art, literature, and other aspects of culture. Helena Blavatsky, foundress of Theosophy, stated that the spirits of the elementals continued to persist throughout mythology, poetry, tradition, and spirituality of all cultures: “...their names are legion – peris, devs, djins, sylvans, satyrs, fauns, elves, dwarfs, trolls, norns, nisses, kobolds, brownies, and many more.” The “benders” mentioned earlier from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* could be seen as extensions of these elemental ideas; the benders assume full control over an elemental, much as the beings Paracelsus writes about did. The Human Torch, from Marvel Comics, is another example of a human being personifying a particular element; in this case, fire. Common day Wiccan practices also seek to conjure elemental spirits, believing in these elementals’ existence.<sup>19</sup> Despite science’s distancing from these concepts, the spirit of the elemental continues to permeate throughout spirituality and through art, literature, television, games, and many other forms of popular media.

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18. Silver, 38-39.

19. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 2005).

The Elementals in *The Alchemy Codex* are chosen by an external force—known as the Aether—that chooses eight humans—four males and four females. These humans are chosen at any point in their adult life; age is not of concern, as becoming an Elemental grants ten thousand years of life. The Elementals, once chosen, merge with the purest form of one of the elements, gaining mastery of that element and control over its state of flux in the world. The Elementals provide unification of the elements, and act as the overseer of the planet, ensuring that the Elements remain ordered, unified, and balanced. These beings exist in a higher realm than that of the mortal world, and do so for the aforementioned ten thousand-year period, wherein they begin to fade and die, and new Elementals are chosen from the mortal realm to begin the cycle anew. *The Alchemy Codex* depicts the beginning of one of these new cycles, with all eight elemental beings being in the midst of their transformation into the element.

It was important for me to suggest in the lore of *The Alchemy Codex* that these beings are responsible for the control of the elemental powers they have been granted. One particular insight from history that influenced this was the suggestion of many ancient cultures that naturally occurring phenomenon were brought about by the gods, as stated by McCauley in *Elemental Philosophy*:

Early people often thought that gods governed natural phenomena and that the deities emerge from the natural world rather than vice-versa. For example, the Greeks associated thunder and lightning with Zeus, while storms and earthquakes are connected to Poseidon. Such a perspective suggests a recurring socialization of nature—an inveterate attempt to render it understandable and meaningful to the

community in human terms—even if it initially takes the form of a personification or anthropomorphism.<sup>20</sup>

This distinction was essential in representing the sheer power that these elemental beings are being granted in the lore of this body of work. The characters in this series are gaining the power to be in complete control of these natural phenomenon, much as early civilizations thought their gods were.

Each elemental being has been showcased in *The Alchemy Codex* as they transform into the element they have been chosen to represent. Each scene has been carefully crafted and designed in order to communicate the idea of transformation, and how this transformative process both psychologically and physically impacts the person who is changing. I will now cover each element, male and female, and discuss the symbolism behind the elements in each work, as well as the narrative that is covered in each piece, and the rationale behind the visual components I have chosen.

### ***On Earth***

Earth as an element can be viewed in a variety of manners—earth is often pictured more as rocks, dirt, sand, silt, and so on, and also as aspects of earth that imply growth or natural existence on the planet earth, such as leaves, grass, rocks, trees, and other natural substances. In Shamanism, the element of earth is known to protect, to nurture, and to be the well from which all life springs.<sup>21</sup> Earth is a powerful metaphor for life, and for sustenance. McCauley states this excellently in *Elemental Philosophy*, stating that “in many of its manifestations, earth is posited

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20. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 84-85.

21. Omar W. Rosales, “Elemental Shamanism: The Power of Fire, Earth, Water, and Air,” in *Llewellyn Worldwide* (Llewellyn Worldwide, Ltd., 2009).

as a creative matrix, material base, or generative mother for both human civilization and philosophical speculation.<sup>22</sup> The element of earth, and its personifications, are also often viewed as feminine in nature—Mother Nature, Mother Earth. Plato discusses the earth as a guardian, even referring in one way to the earth as “our nurse.”<sup>23</sup>

*The Alchemy Codex: Earth I – Consumed*

In this piece, I have depicted a male figure, seated against an oak tree that is slowly consuming his form. The branches slither around his arms and legs, both of which have also become encased in bark and are bereft of human flesh. The character in this scene is entirely forlorn, yet exhausted, collapsing into the element he is succumbing to, rather than antagonistically fighting against the transformation. The forest around him is lush, overgrown, and chaotic in nature. This is meant to provide a sense of claustrophobia, both for the viewer and for the figure in question—he is being entirely consumed by the forest, becoming one with the earth, and he has no choice in the matter.

With this piece, I drew inspiration from N.C. Wyeth’s *Painting of Native American* (see fig. 1). Wyeth’s illustrative handling of the forest forms make them feel very organic, and the way the tree’s roots begin branching out and consuming the rocks was something I sought to incorporate into *Consumed*. The branches in this piece are consuming the figure’s limbs, and I wanted to make them feel like they were organically creeping around the form, rather than a way that was entirely unrealistic. Wyeth’s handling of texture within his piece was also inspiring; again, I wanted to merge this stylistic, illustrative handling of the landscape with the more academic figurative painting, and Wyeth’s work was excellent in terms of reference.

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22. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 15-16.

23. Macauley, 159.

*The Alchemy Codex: Earth II – Bountiful*

In Earth II, a female figure is entrenched in a forest that feels magical, alive, and open—opposite to her male counterpart, the female earth elemental is content, somewhat joyous, even, to assume her role, and to become one with the earth. The landscape around her is bright, lush, and overflowing with foliage and life, showcasing her bountiful nature and further embodying the idea that her role in this transformation is one of compliance, and she assumes control over the transformation rather than the transformation controlling her. Empowered by the honor of being chosen as one of the Elementals, this figure embraces her role and the duty she assumes by doing so. This piece drew reference and inspiration from Sir Frederic Leighton’s piece *The Bath of Psyche* (see fig. 4) for its graceful pose; Leighton has employed a gesture that is almost dance-like, creating a sense of majesty and beauty to the figure. I wanted to employ a similar feeling in this piece—like in Leighton’s piece, the figure is elegant in her motions, implying her graceful nature and the power she feels being delivered by this transformative process.

*On Water*

Water has been viewed throughout many cultures as transformative and as a symbol of renewal, as well as a symbol for life. Thales, who is believed to be the first Greek philosopher, stated that water was the synthesis of all life itself.<sup>24</sup> Water is viewed as something that can cleanse the body on both the inside and the outside, and therefore is seen as a symbol of purification. Water is often used to symbolize rebirth in a religious sense, seen in baptismal ceremonies or christenings. Water is necessary for life, and is often seen as precious—when water is scarce, during droughts, it is highly sought and valued, and throughout history water has

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24. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 43.

been the guide to building communities, finding civilization when lost (the “follow the river” adage), and for the purpose of exploration, trade, and expansion.

Water can also be destructive, all-consuming, or threatening—tsunamis, floods, and torrential rain from storms have all been natural disasters that have affected humanity throughout time. Many religions and mythologies also have myths and legends about floods; the story of Noah’s Ark from *The Holy Bible*<sup>25</sup> is one particular example of the destructive power of water, being used to cleanse away sin, evil, chaos, and destruction. The flood myth is also depicted in the epic of Gilgamesh, the Sumerian creation myth, and countless other traditions.

Another powerful motif of water is the essence of “flow,” as in rhythm or movement. Water, though possessing no property of movement in itself, is almost always constantly moving, rushing through rivers, streams, or moving like the tide in the ocean. The consistent, never-ending flow of water can represent the flow of life, or the flow of energy, or the flow of many other symbols. Water can also be viewed as somewhat formless; it is tasteless, has no color, and has no odor. As McCauley says, “it lacks form but becomes a matrix of form for other things, providing shape, contour, and texture to the landscape as well as more discrete objects.” Water can shape, and can take shape. Water comprises much of the human body, with a baby’s body being ninety percent fluid.<sup>26</sup> Water is even reflective, offering symbolism into reflected appearances.

*The Alchemy Codex: Water I – Marooned*

In this piece, the male figure is depicted alone, forsaken upon a shore wherein the rocks and debris around him give credence to a possible shipwreck. The sky is cold and gloomy, yet

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25. *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

26. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 44-45.

with a shimmer of warmth, the waves tumultuous, and the overall feeling is one of desolation. The water is slowly creeping up upon his skin, merging with his corporeal body in order to transform him into an elemental being. In his hand, he clutches a necklace, the one thing keeping him attached to physical world—is it a relic of his lost lover? Something he had kept with him amidst his time at sea? There is a hint of land out at sea to the left side of the image, also meant to provide a sense of mystery—where does that land go? What else is out there?

The sheer power of the sea is also a large component of this piece. The sea is a vast, uncontainable force of nature, and it is claiming this figure as a new elemental. I drew reference from *The Point of Griefswald* by Caspar David Friedrich (see fig. 5) for his portrayal of the ocean here—it seems mysterious, veiled in fog during the sunset. This sense of mystery was something I wanted to employ as well—the landscape in the background of my piece is similarly shrouded in fog, and though the colors are not similar to Friedrich’s work, I sought to employ his mastery of the sea’s depth and overwhelming distance with the blending of the sea and sky along the horizon line.

#### *The Alchemy Codex: Water II – Castaway*

A female figure washed ashore, laying upon the barren, cold sands of a beach reminiscent of a cold, European shoreline. Around her wrist is a sailor’s charm, giving the question—where did she come from? Was she lost at sea? Some sort of to-be mermaid? Her body lays mostly limp, with her hair mangled amidst the rocks, seaweed, and sand. With this piece, I intend to give the impression that while she might still be alive, this water elemental is not entirely one by choice. In this piece, I wanted to call reference to the concept of the Undine, or an elemental water spirit that was first derived by Paracelsus and his concept of elementals. The Undine was particularly popular to the Pre-Raphaelite circle and the Victorian people found the “blend of the



exotic and pious moving and edifying” as a symbol.<sup>27</sup> This conceptual idea of a water spirit was essential in my construction of this myth. This female figure is undergoing her transformation into the water elemental, and to contort the traditional lens of what an Undine can be—that is, a capricious character with a flair of romance—into a character that is rather solemn, lifeless, and lacking any external emotion.

The figure seen in *Castaway* also clutches a necklace bearing a seashell—something worn by the female figure in *Marooned*. The seashell is meant to represent the birth of life, and the creation of the elemental beings. One of the intentions with *Castaway* and *Marooned* was to draw connections between these two; are they forsaken lovers? Friends lost through time? They both lay upon barren, cold sands as the waves cascade over them—and though the spaces differ, there is a palpable connection between them.

### ***On Fire***

The concept of fire has been symbolized throughout history for its destructive nature, or even as destruction itself. Empedocles’ writings allude to the devastating nature of fire, and how it can quickly overwhelm and envelop.<sup>28</sup> However, others have brought forth different interpretations of fire; Heraclitus’ emphasized fire as a “transforming and generative energy,” and is associated with the perpetual motion and the concept of time,<sup>29</sup> and stated it was an “everliving [element], kindled in measures and in measures going out,” showcasing its symbolism as a perpetual, never-ending element.<sup>30</sup> Fire has also been seen as a gift; Prometheus,

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27. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 18-19.

28. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 37.

29. Stamatis Zografos, “On Fire,” in *Architecture and Fire: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Conservation* (London: UCL Press, 2019), 43.

30. Macauley, 36.

for example, brought fire to the world in Greek myth, which would allow humans to utilize its powers. Fire allows humans to cook food, to heat homes, and to provide light in order to see. Fire is essential in every aspect of everyday life, and though it can wreak havoc, it can also provide many essentials.

*The Alchemy Codex: Fire I – Ashen*

*Ashen* depicts an agonized, tortured figure aghast as the flames consume him. The focus of this piece is the marriage between the flames and the figure—though a landscape exists, faint in the background, the focus is not on the world-space, but the relationship between the figure and the element as the transformation begins. What is depicted of the landscape surrounding him is craggy, barren, and depressive in nature. The Empedoclean all-consuming nature of the fire evokes a sense of despair, an absolutely hopeless depiction of misery, fire dancing around the figure in a sort of ritualistic approach, as the figure falls helplessly into nothingness, his twisting body displaying an emotion of pure excruciation. *Ashen* ties into the idea of fire as a transformative energy, having the fire totally encompassing the form rather than slowly attaching itself to the figures' being.

Frank Frazetta's *Painting of a Demon* was hugely influential in this process as well. The coloring of the image was something I used as heavy inspiration, trying to create a coloring that felt as warm and all-encompassing as Frazetta's piece. I also utilized the fire to frame the figure, similarly to how Frazetta's background was non-descript, and more focused on the characterization of the demon. The haggard rocks that frame Frazetta's demon are also something that I wanted to utilize in my work—that is, the rocks being reminiscent of actual volcanic forms, but also a bit more fantastical in nature in order to typify this locale as one that is otherworldly.

*The Alchemy Codex: Fire II – Kindled*

The second piece of the fire element component of *The Alchemy Codex* depicts a female standing in a graceful, almost dance-like pose, twisting and contorting her hair as it merges with the erupting flames beneath her. The essential idea behind this piece was to show this elemental in harmonious balance with the figure—her graceful pose dictates her thoughts on the transformation—it is a conversion of subtle joy, one that this figure accepts willingly. The namesake of this piece, *Kindled*, is meant to evoke the kindling nature of fire—fire can be seen as destructive, but it can also be seen as a symbol of renewal, things that were unpleasant or disharmonious being wiped away to begin anew on a clean slate. This figure is being rekindled indeed, welcoming her transformation with open arms, and embracing the surreptitious yet colossal power that accompanies being chosen as an elemental.

*On Air*

Air has its connections with a number of symbols, one of the foremost being purity and spirituality. The air is congruent with the heavens, the skies, the limitless boundaries that are unbeknownst to man. The air, and the sky, have fascinated man since the dawn of time, those looking up to it for answers, pondering the limitless boundaries above. Air is also often associated with breath, or with the force of life itself. McCauley says that “over the course of our lives, we will take in on average 650 million breaths.”<sup>31</sup> It is astounding to think about how essential air is to everything in existence; air allows for breath, it causes water to evaporate, it facilitates chemical reactions—the list goes on and on. While Chinese tradition does not have air as a classical element, it has qi, which is more akin to “life force,” closest in conceptualization and imagery. Air is, essentially, the life force of humans. We also feel the air around us when we

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31. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 26.

step outside: the rush of cold air upon our face during a winter day, the coolness of a breeze during a heated summer road trip.

Air is also the subject of countless myths and legends, as its ever-present existence above us throughout history has caused vast amounts of speculation as to what exactly could be up there. The sky was believed in Egypt to be a “great iron lid.” Greeks believed the entire pantheon of gods littered the skies. The sky was even “thought to pour forth from the navel of a man with a thousand eyes and heads” in India.<sup>32</sup>

*The Alchemy Codex: Air I – Descent*

With the Air pieces of this series, I wanted to showcase a sense of duality—one of the elementals who is falling through the skies, aimless and hopeless as they merge with the air around them. The main goal of both pieces was to showcase the figure intimately, with the air around them being mostly a large void of clouds and color, rather than having many other tangible objects in the foreground. The figure in *Descent* is alone, shielding his face away from the transcendent light that surrounds him. The space around the figure is filled with ethereal clouds, bright, heavenly in nature, and filled with a warm, glowing light. The space around him seems to be uplifting and warm, which begs the question—why the hesitance, why the shielding of the face? Should not this place that evokes such a comforting, ethereal ambiance be something to welcome? Or is the undercurrent more sinister? *Descent* begs these questions of the viewer, because the world of *The Alchemy Codex* is not entirely wrought with joy and desire—the transformation into an elemental being is one of majesty, certainly—but also accompanies the loss of self, the abandonment of earthly attachments, and the isolation of boundless time. *Descent* embodies these substantial questions.

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32. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 28.

*The Alchemy Codex: Air II – Ascent*

The duality of the series is displayed here, where *Ascent* contrasts from *Descent* in its pictorial representation of the figures. The figure here, the female, is depicted ascending through the cloudscape, joyous and at peace with her transformation. Rather than shielding her face from the light, she twists her body with glee towards the light. Similarly to *Descent*, *Ascent* showcases the figure alone amidst the clouds, focusing on the relationship between element and figure. The clouds in this piece are moodier, evoking a mystical, morose sky of purples and greys, rather than the warm oranges, yellows, and blues of *Descent*. This contrast also signifies the duality of the pieces—the joyous figure is surrounded by a void of more sinister, magical clouds, whereas the figure who seems less content with their transformation seems to be in some sort of heavenly plane.

### III. MY WORK AND ITS PROCESS

*The Alchemy Codex body of work was created through a detailed process, following in the footsteps of Solomon J. Solomon and the many masters that existed prior to him writing his book on painting. Researching and understanding this process was essential in the creation of these paintings, and was the result of determining the best rationale for what I wanted to do with my artwork, and the best way to employ that rationale. This section details the exact process utilized, the research done to reinforce these decisions, and the goal of each work overall.*

#### *Creation of The Alchemy Codex*

The pieces are created through a detailed underpainting process, that is mostly based on Solomon J. Solomon's book *The Practice of Oil Painting and Drawing*. Each piece in *The Alchemy Codex* underwent extensive pre-planning and sketching in order to determine the correct composition and the arrangement of elements. I planned each composition by doing multiple thumbnail drawings and gesture drawings of my reference.

During this process, I begin by creating a detailed sketch on the using either charcoal or colored pencil. This methodology was directly taken from Solomon's writings:

Make all corrections while you can in the charcoal stage. Charcoal offers little resistance to a brush, and none whatever to bread. It is reckless in the extreme to put down paint with obvious errors in construction or drawing. Never fear! There will be perplexities enough to contend with, in every case; and much correcting in paint is fatal to lucidity.<sup>33</sup>

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33. Solomon J. Solomon, *The Practice of Oil Painting and Drawing* (Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 107.

Using these tools to sketch out my initial drawing allowed for flexibility and workability of the sketch and did not interfere with the forthcoming layers that would be placed over top of the sketch. During the sketching stage, the canvas is left blank without any primer in order to keep its texture.<sup>34</sup> After the sketch is finalized and complete, I begin creating the line-art by going over the sketch with a thin lining brush and a mixture of solvent and burnt umber paint. This thinned mixture allows the paint to dry quickly, and this step allows the drawing to stand out and be more “permanent,” in that the next few steps will not easily be rubbed away like it would if the sketch was still just a graphite or charcoal drawing.

After this step has dried entirely, I add a wash to the entire canvas, covering the entirety of the painting in a thin, medium-enhanced layer of umber. The mixture is comprised of turpentine and gamsol. Without allowing for any drying time, I begin rubbing out highlights to create form by using a washcloth, a rag, and other assorted materials to achieve the desired form modeling. This stage allows me to create value and to guide the final vision by having the painting essentially “worked out” in terms of lights and darks. Again, this follows Solomon’s teachings—he advises one to “make the best of restricted materials” and to “think only of the main planes, painting in... their middle tones.”<sup>35</sup>

After this stage has dried completely, I begin the next step by oiling the painting out, using linseed oil to revitalize the surface of the painting. I then use a grisaille underpainting—entirely monochrome in black and white—to further reinforce darks and lights and add detail. During this step, I use a variety of brushes, though I stick mainly to Leighton brushes, as they are

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34. Solomon, 71.

35. Solomon, *The Practice of Oil Painting and Drawing*, 107.

versatile and allow for finer details without having to switch to a smaller brush.<sup>36</sup> Again, detailing the entirety of the piece in black and white allows me to focus on the value, the contrast, and the details without distressing over color at this stage.

The next step involves glazing in color through layering. This step is one of the most crucial steps of the entire process—the coloring of the piece dictates the atmosphere, the feeling, the tone, and the overall unity of the work. This step involves precise measuring of medium ratios and color mixtures. In order to achieve the color mixtures that I desired, I spent some time working on several quick color studies and master copies in order to discern the kinds of color relationships and mixtures that were being employed in these old master works. These studies, though smaller than the actual finalized pieces, and directly painted with color rather than the comprehensive underpainting process, were fundamental to the development of the work.

One goal of *The Alchemy Codex* was to utilize a palette that was not entirely the same in every piece, but that was reminiscent or shared various colors in order to create an overall feeling of harmony and balance. My adherence to this academic process meant utilizing a palette as similar to the old masters as I possibly could. For these paintings, I attempted to align the palette to the one specified in Solomon's writings, with a few alterations. For these pieces, I used Yellow Ochre, Rose Madder, Indian Red, Cobalt Blue, Phthalo Blue, Raw Umber, Burnt Umber, Burnt Sienna, Ivory Black, Vermilion Red, Naples Yellow, and Titanium White. The only variation from Solomon's palette here is that of the whites, as Flake White is toxic, and I have substituted it with Titanium White, and adding in Phthalo Blue and Burnt Sienna. Solomon's writings advise using fresh colors each day that you paint, save for a few of the reds and black,

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36. Solomon, 73-74.



which can remain for a few days.<sup>37</sup> I observed this process as closely as I could by managing my palette and using less paint on the palette than I had in the past. During the coloring stage, I would glaze and scumble in colors, taking care not to distort or cover details from the underpainting stage, and rather just enhance them with a variety of hues. This process kept the carefully wrought and detailed construction from the underpainting and initial drawing while also allowing me to explore tonal relationships and color harmony. Solomon states that “the one great advantage of monochrome is, that one may play with the warm glazes over the dry preparation until the desired general hue is obtained; and in case of failure, the glazes can be removed, whilst the preparation is left intact for a more favorable opportunity,<sup>38</sup>” and I found this to be outstandingly true, as being able to focus my attention solely to each stage of this process rather than worrying about color, value, construction, composition, and any other factors that come alongside the act of painting helped me gain clarity of the overall work.

After the coloring stage is completed, the last step of the process remains: finalizing the smaller details, working out any small kinks, and stepping back from the piece, allowing it time to breathe, and then reevaluating it at a later point, careful to notice any mistakes or issues that may have revealed themselves. Each piece took a substantial amount of time, being relatively large paintings that necessitated this meticulous procedure to come to fruition, and though the work could at times feel arduous or exhaustive, it became clear to me that by the completion of each elemental piece, this process was indeed best suited to my personal prerogative.

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37. Solomon, *The Practice of Oil Painting and Drawing*, 77.

38. Solomon, *The Practice of Oil Painting and Drawing*, 119.

#### IV. THE ROLE OF GENDER

*The figures within The Alchemy Codex are represented by male and female depictions of these fantastical, elemental beings. The choice to showcase the four elements through both a male and female representation was an intentional decision, meant to showcase the duality of the four elements in this universe, and the fluid, ever-flowing nature of the elemental powers at hand in this world. Though the male/female dichotomy was intentional, and meant to reference figurative work created specifically in the nineteenth century, the series is not meant to employ or empower any particular viewpoint or narrative, but rather just use the male and female figures as tools to showcase the sublime power of the elements. The following section details the research done to reinforce the ideas behind this decision, the potential oppositional viewpoints that I may face as a result, and my understanding of how future work can improve upon these concepts and grow from the choices made in this body of work.*

##### *Live Modeling, Photography, and Situational Decisions*

The pieces in this series utilize the male and female figure—referenced from life—through a combination of photography and live modeling. The initial idea for *The Alchemy Codex* was to have eight different models for each piece, each a completely different and unique person, in order to differentiate the figures. This idea was cut short, unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic hitting during essentially the beginning of this stage—luckily, one painting was able to be done with a unique model, but the rest of the paintings were referenced from both myself and my significant other. Though these circumstances hampered my primary objective, I was nonetheless able to persist through, knowing that live modeling would only be possible from home. That being said, live modeling was used to get the basic sketch/pose down, and then

photography was used to capture the pose for later reference. In some instances, I would utilize live modeling for the painting stages as well, but when utilizing one's self as a model, it becomes necessary to employ a photograph as needed for reference.

These works are drawn and painted as much from life as possible. Photographs were then taken of the chosen models as well for later painting sessions. Given the nature of the pandemic, I was limited to using myself and my significant other as the models for the images, as well as various images from the internet that were used for reference purposes. This inherently dictates their nature as being paintings that are not very diverse in color or body type—which is something I recognize and aim to improve and change in future works when hopefully I can have easier access to models. The role of the figure and how to create works that are inclusive to all is an important concept to me, and this series has given me insight into that and how to offer a more balanced series of images in the future.

As previously stated, the elements in my work are represented each by a male and a female figure. Each elemental depiction is unique, but unified through composition, color, and style. Each element being personified by both genders creates a male/female dichotomy without allowing for any fluidity in depiction of gender, which is an element of the work that is not meant to be restrictive. I do not intend for the works to impose a limited scope of gender, but rather have focused on the male/female dichotomy as an homage to the depictions of figures in the nineteenth century. This is, in nature, referring to an antiquated construct, one that does not adhere to modern standards.

The choice to showcase each figure completely or mostly nude was a deliberate choice to showcase each figure at their most intimate, barren state. These figures within *The Alchemy Codex* are being transformed into transcendent, elemental beings—leaving behind their humanly

form and becoming something else entirely. The transformation between human and element is essential to me, and as such the figures are depicted either without coverings or with something scant. This is, of course, similar to the practices employed by academic life drawing, wherein figures are drawn mostly nude or slightly covered, and this factor is something that is intentional—again, these works are meant to hearken back to the nineteenth century academic paintings that inspired them.

### *Investigations and Insight from Art History*

Much of *The Alchemy Codex*'s influence derives from styles/schools of artists such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the French Academic painters, the Neoclassical painters, and the Hudson River Valley school of painters. One issue that I found during my studies of these works was the lack of female representation in the works I was studying—though the female was front in center in many of the artistic works by these masters, there were not many female masters who had drawn or painted these subjects to the degree that artists like Alma-Tadema, Leighton, or Draper had. This begged the question of how the work alluded to was predominantly from a white male viewpoint, and how that had particularly influenced *The Alchemy Codex*. Was the male gaze something that I had unintentionally aligned myself with? This was not something that was intentional from the onset of the series, yet the allusions could most certainly be made due to the source material and the artists behind the work I had studied. Though this issue was something that I could not inherently change due to this source material being what it is, it was still important to me to judiciously dissect the way that this viewpoint could be skewed, and the connotations that could arise given the association with this imagery. Recognizing the dichotomy at play, and determining how my work fit into this lens—and,

therefore, how to potentially break free of that viewpoint—became an important way of evaluating the work.

Linda Nochlin’s work “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists” offered an exquisite glimpse into this unfortunate reality: that though there had been female artists during the time periods that each of the aforementioned influential artists existed, none had particularly risen to notoriety, nor imposed their own stamp upon the history—this to the fault of the institutions in place, and the surrounding culture that was pervasive throughout society at the time. I drew a parallel to the academic drawings that I had been referencing during this as well—the predominant practice of the time was for male artists to draw nude figures, and the vast majority of these nude figures would usually be female. Female artists lacked access to this same sort of resource. This factor hearkened back to the variety of schools and subsets of artists that I had called upon in reference—most of these groups of artists, again, were male.<sup>39</sup>

The goal of *The Alchemy Codex* was to showcase both the male and the female equally, each representing one of the traditional four elements, displayed as the central figure in the work. Neither gender was meant to be espoused, and the focus on the characters is meant to be reduced by the overwhelming power and majesty of the landscapes wherein these otherworldly elements exist. As mentioned previously, the pieces lack any true sense of color diversity in regards to the figures present in the work due to a variety of issues imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The unfortunate restrictions brought about by this situation limited the model selection to essentially only myself and my significant other. These limitations, paired with the liaison to the male gaze, offered the realization that this body of work could potentially seem narrow in scope and

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39. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (2018), 145-178.

fostering limiting ideals that were not intentional from the onset. The initial intent in regards to modeling was to choose eight separate, unique models and to paint them from life, which would have offered a much broader spectrum of diversity in the figures. Ensuring that my work is not imposing a particular narrow viewpoint, however, is important to me, and will be something that I examine critically during the process of future figurative work. Determining the rationale for using each figure and whom I choose to represent in my artworks will also be something I consider going forward.

## V. HISTORICAL REFERENCES AND INSPIRATIONAL SOURCES

### *Sources and Inspiration*

The figurative work on display in *The Alchemy Codex* utilizes and is inspired primarily by imagery from the nineteenth century era of painting. Painters such as Solomon J. Solomon, Herbert James Draper, Sir Frederic Leighton, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, William Adolphe Bougeureau, and John William Waterhouse were integral to the process of understanding how to narratively construct a mythological scene with a degree of naturalism while also keeping a more fantastical, otherworldly atmosphere to the work. One particular aspect of *The Alchemy Codex* is its allusion to this nineteenth century painting style. The use of such a dated imagery was entirely intentional, and was meant to both challenge the notion of contemporaneity and reflect upon it.

Linda Nochlin discusses her viewpoint on the contemporary very poignantly:

The very concept of contemporaneity is a complex one .... One might, as the great mid-Nineteenth Century historian, Hippolyte Taine, implied, be perfectly justified in saying that the admonition to be of one's times was unnecessary, since artists and writers, whether they would or not, were inevitably condemned to being contemporary, unable to escape those dominating determinants which Taine had divided into milieu, race and moment. Thus the works of such strivers after eternal verity as Ingres, Bouguereau or Baudry seem inevitably Nineteenth Century...<sup>40</sup>

It is unavoidable that the usage of figures inspired from the nineteenth century tradition of academic painting will with no doubt conjure the notion of antiquated imagery and ideals. Rather than try and provide rationale as to how I can contemporize the work,

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40. Mark Walker, *Bouguereau at Work* (Art Renewal Center, 2002), 5.

however, I feel that it is important for me to embrace these similarities to the work that inspired them. These figures are meant to allude to and evoke the stylistic imagery of Bouguereau, of Leighton, of Solomon, in order to call back to these pieces and their stylization, while contemporizing them with the more modern depiction of the fantasy landscapes that encompass them.

#### *Not-So-Modern Cues*

Another aspect that is pervasive across the body of work is its disconnect with contemporary life and modern society. *The Alchemy Codex* is meant to showcase a realm that is entirely separated from the one of the modern twenty-first century, and rather lead the viewer towards a fantasized plane of existence, wherein these characters form the crux of the world's mythology and religion. *The Alchemy Codex* takes cues from Bouguereau's work in this way—Mark Walker states that "...it is noteworthy that Bouguereau tried in every way to avoid signs of contemporary life, even in his choice of costume (a timeless 'peasant' dress), setting the scene in a never-never land of pure beauty."<sup>41</sup> While *The Alchemy Codex* does not intend to harken only to that idea of beauty, the "never-never land" aspect of the works was a huge influence: The pieces are intended to be completely estranged from the idea of the contemporary.

The backgrounds of these pieces are inspired both by these classical works as well as modern contemporary fantasy artists and illustrators. Fantasy painters such as Howard Lyon, Fenghua Zong, Andreas Rocha, and Peter Mohrbacher, and illustrators such as N.C. Wyeth, Dean Cornwell, Frank Frazetta, and Stan Lee all helped to inspire the framework of my landscape design and the coloring of various elements. For example, the ethereal clouds of *Air I – Descent* are inspired by the wild and mystical clouds of Petr Mohrbacher's fantasy art (see fig.

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41. Walker, *Bouguereau at Work*, 7.



1), which is a huge influence for me, in that it offers a broad range of possibilities, and that it inspires its own form of escapism—the idea of venturing into another realm, an imagined world, is a powerful tool to utilize in artwork. The viewer can be transported into these realms, and thereby influenced and engaged by the imagery and the narrative at hand.

*The Alchemy Codex*, in a sense, is a merging of realms, trying to incorporate the stylization of modern fantasy art and illustration with the figurative, academic stylization of nineteenth-century painting mentioned prior. While the landscapes seen in the works by Bouguereau, Leighton, Draper, and others are still at times very fantastical and ethereal, much of the imagery does not quite reach the otherworldly, foreign sense of reality that the work of these fantasy illustrators evokes for me—and thus I set about pulling these two realms into my own work. This amalgamation of ideals is one that is also similarly employed in the popular culture mentioned in chapter one of this writing. Media such as *Avatar*, *Magic: The Gathering*, and others all draw upon these ideas from the ancient world, and merge them together with their own depictions, their own narratives, and their own overall vision. This is, put simply, what I have done with my series as well, and how I intend for it to be viewed by the general audience of viewers—as a personalized spin on the four elements of antiquity, dated in terms of imagery and subject matter, but modernized through this blending of inspirations and ideas.

## VI. ESCAPISM, THE UNREAL, AND THE SUBLIME

*This series' imagery is inspired and empowered by the ideas seen in psychology and philosophy, these being the ideas of escapism and the sublime. Escapism is applied in these works through the usage of fantastical scenery and mythological imagery, contorting the worldview into one of a mystical, unreal place that one can step into, rather than a depiction of modern or historical society. The sublime, being a common and often controversial subject matter in art, also is employed heavily in these works, being at the synthesis of the design for the landscapes in each painting. Despite being vastly different in scope, both terms have offered a significant amount of influence on *The Alchemy Codex* and its narrative constructs. This section details what exactly escapism and the sublime entail, and how they are included within this body of work.*

### *Escapism and the Idea of Place*

The use of escapism, as mentioned prior, is a powerful and psychologically impactful methodology for creating narrative artwork. Escapism is defined by the Cambridge dictionary to be “a way of avoiding an unpleasant or boring life, especially by thinking, reading, etc. about more exciting but impossible activities.”<sup>42</sup> Escapism is a way of breaking away from the confines and constraints of everyday life, and assuming the role of someone or something else.

Escapism can be seen throughout all walks of life, as well; many come home to watch a television series or a movie about fictional or fantasized characters and situations, and they escape into these worlds for entertainment value. Binge watching, wherein a viewer spends hours upon hours at a time viewing a television series, has been viewed through a negative lens, and

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42. Cambridge Dictionary, “Escapism” definition.

seen as a form of escapism.<sup>43</sup> Many turn towards books as a form of escapism—reading about situations and stories that are leagues away from traditional reality. Even sporting events have been viewed through the lens of escapism, showcasing how fans can lose themselves in the game, or attach emotion and value to something that does not necessarily impact their life.

John Crowe Ransom, who was the founder of the Southern New Criticism School of literary criticism, asserted that there were three properties to those who were “escapist,” or sought escapism: illusionism, anesthetic, and pathological infantilism. The viewpoint on escapism as a whole has mostly always had negative connotations, and Ransom’s viewpoint highlights this.<sup>44</sup> Countless philosophers have pondered escapism and its positives and negatives—with many criticizing escapisms as something that affected life in an adverse way. Certainly, one wanting to leave their daily life for escape into somewhere imaginary could be viewed as something psychologically harmful. Works that embody the art of escapism do so by romanticizing the imaginary world, making it seem more alluring and inviting. This could, in some ways, be harmful, if the act of escaping becomes preferable to one’s daily life or interferes with it. Both the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, and the *International Classification of Diseases, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition, Revised* list mental health disorders related to escapism through the usage of video games, presenting issues such as how gamers lose track of the concept of time in many instances due to their engagement in the activity, interfering with real-life tasks.<sup>45</sup>

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43. E. Puiras, *et al.*, “Playing to Escape: Examining Escapism in Gamblers and Gamers,” *Journal of Gambling Issues* 46, no 1 (2020): 1-17.

44. Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 252.

However, escapism also has plenty of positive connotations as well. Interminable works of art have been created with the idea of “escaping into another world” at the forefront: J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series, for example, was paramount in establishing a mainstream view for escape into a fantasy realm. Tolkien himself was an advocate for escapism through literature:

[Tolkien] distinguishes between two kinds of escape. There is the illegitimate escape of the deserter who flees from his responsibility, and then there is the legitimate escape by which a prisoner flees from his prison. The deserter is like the romantic, while the fleeing prisoner is the one who is more curious about life than to just sit locked up in his cell. He wants to go on adventure and learn more about the world and return with his experiences and insights. In this sense, this kind of escapism is a heroic act.<sup>46</sup>

Tolkien’s viewpoint showcases escapism in a positive light—one of understanding, learning, and curiosity, rather than one wrought from the idea of escaping from some form of miserable day-to-day life. Escapism can be utilized as a way to garner new, fresh perspectives on our own world by considering the aspects of worlds imagined by others. It can also be utilized simply as something that is pure entertainment and reminiscent of those imaginative days of childhood. It can be used as motivation, to “escape one’s self,” in order to improve upon any negative aspects that may be hindering one’s life.<sup>47</sup> While it is natural for people to utilize escapism as a way to

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45. Puiras, *Playing to Escape*, 3.

46. Wolf, *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, 252.

47. Das Subudhi, “Digital Escapism,” *Horizon Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research* (2020).

explore other possibilities, and to entertain or enjoy themselves, escapism is something to enjoy in moderation, and avoid letting it negatively impact things in the real world.

All of these factors considered, fantasy worlds are, simply, just a product of human nature. They exist throughout all walks of life, and throughout the realms of history as well. No matter ones' viewpoint on the positives or negatives of escapism, the fact remains that these imagined worlds are important to human culture.

Imaginary worlds are rooted in the collective imagination of early religions and folklore. They also unfold through individual visions in literature and modern art and can be seen throughout folk tradition, legends and mythology, worlds of fantastic and magical realism, and any other fictional world.<sup>48</sup>

This showcases the importance of the idea of fantastical places throughout the annals of history, and it is this sort of importance that I brought into the world of *The Alchemy Codex*. The series is envisioned in a way that submerges the viewer into this mystical, mythological domain of elemental beings and fantastical powers.

#### *The Realm of the Sublime*

The body of work also incorporates utilization of the idea of the sublime to imply the overarching powerful, grand, and mythological nature of the imagery in the paintings. These images are depicting a story that, as per the narrative, is immensely important in the mythological world created: the creation of the elementals. As such, the landscapes within each individual painting are meant to evoke this philosophical ideal of the sublime. The sublime, according to Kant, is presented as “a state of mind elicited by the representation of boundlessness

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48. Wolf, *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, 257.

or the infinite.”<sup>49</sup> It is difficult to grasp the exact concept of the sublime, but my aim for *The Alchemy Codex* was to utilize this concept of the state of mind Kant speaks of. Kant states that people have a hard time actually, truly comprehending the sublime: “...the comprehension of a magnitude involves the more difficult task of grasping or judging it as a whole. Thus Kant asks whether comprehension is possible when we are looking at something massive like a pyramid.”<sup>50</sup>

[T]he sublime is, thus, indeed a limit experience, but not in the sense that it involves a transcendent, timeless experience of the absolute (or of the absolutely large or of “that which is large beyond any comparison”), but to the extent that it concerns a double experience of the limit of sensory perception: it is a feeling of the basic measure upon which all reflective judgments are based—the “horizon,” one could say, that accompanies any estimation of magnitudes—as well as a feeling of the limitations of the power of imagination to comprehend, that is, the maximum of simultaneously presentable magnitude in a single image.<sup>51</sup>

In these works, I aim to utilize Immanuel Kant’s categorization of the three aspects of the sublime: the noble, the splendid, and the terrifying, by altering and shifting the imagery to evoke these feelings.

The “noble” aspect of the sublime is represented thoroughly in my pieces *Air I – Descent*, *Fire II – Kindled*, and *Earth I – Overgrown*. The noble sublime is meant to engender respect, and

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49. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason; The Critique of Practical Reason, and Other Ethical Treatises; The Critique of Judgement* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1989).

50. Rudolf Makkreel, “Imagination and Temporality in Kant’s Theory of the Sublime,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1984): 305.

51. Bart Vandenabeele, “The Sublime in Art: Kant, the Mannerist, and the Matterist Sublime,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2015): 35.

to give the viewer a feeling of nobility through the majesty of the imagery presented. *Descent* does this through its usage of bright, powerful yellow colors that control the mood of the sky, meant to be heavenly and ethereal in nature. The clouds seem vast and endless—an escape into the void.

The “splendid” aspect is mainly showcased in *Air II – Ascent*, *Earth II – Bountiful*, and aspects of *Earth I – Overgrown*. *Ascent*’s warm, purplish hues and the cascading light is meant to call forth a sense of the splendid, to showcase to the viewer that this space is joyous and welcoming. *Bountiful*, similarly, showcases a rich, lush landscape brimming with life and foliage. The splendid is evoked by the landscape and the powerful forms showcased by the trees, the rocks, and the foliage. These aspects are also present in *Overgrown*, though not to the same degree of *Bountiful*. Both of these paintings utilize warmer colors in the foliage and greenery, focusing on making the space surrounding the figures feel inviting and rich with nature—all the while making the landscapes seem powerful and magisterial. These are implicitly places brimming with magnitudes of power, enriched by the magical essences that coalesce throughout the landscape that begins consuming the figure during this transformative process.

The “terrifying” aspect was one that I focused a majority of my time on, showcasing aspects of this modality of the sublime in my pieces *Fire I – Ashen*, *Water I – Castaway*, *Water II – Marooned*, and again, aspects of *Earth I – Overgrown*. *Ashen*’s sense of the sublime is elicited by the faint landscape behind the figure being almost entirely obscured by the flames surrounding him—the fire is here in its purest, awe-inspiring form, and it consumes the majority of the image, showcasing its terrifying and immeasurable power. *Castaway* showcases the vast ocean, in all of its grandeur and power, as it merges with the sky above, showcasing an endless viewpoint into the unknown. This vast, untamed body of water is overwhelming the character

slowly, but surely, and the water's power and presence is felt throughout. *Marooned*, in contrast, barely showcases the water or the ocean, but the pieces of the ocean that are seen are sweeping forward with power and might, again showcasing the strength of the forces of nature being exhibited upon these elemental beings.

Within *The Alchemy Codex*, there is also an emphasis on emotion and individualism, comparable to that which is so heavily focused upon in Romantic artwork and literature. With these parallels, I intended to emphasize the individuality of the characters within my personal mythology, and the evocative emotions depicted during their transformation.

One focus for *The Alchemy Codex* was giving each character a reaction to the transformation, and eliciting emotion through this. While some of the figures do not showcase their face or expression, being either shielded or turned away, others do—and though the kind of expression varied from piece-to-piece, the exhibited emotion was still a key focus throughout the work. For example, in *Castaway*, the figure is mostly limp, the expression on his face almost one as if though he is sleeping, but his body is contorted in a way that suggests he could have been wounded, or tempest-tossed by the ocean in some sort of shipwreck or disaster. In *Descent*, the figure is shielding his face from the light, but the hint of his face that is portrayed is a depiction of disdain, his frown indicating his displeasure with the transformation. Again, the emotion is elicited both through the expression of the face and the body's movements.

### **Conclusion**

The four elements of Greek antiquity—earth, fire, water, and air—are immediately recognizable and prevalent in our culture today. The symbolism of these elements is seen in a variety of ways: through print media, such as fictional books and comics, entertainment, such as television and movies, and an array of visual media. While these elements, once regarded as the



building blocks for our entire world, no longer have true relevance in the scientific community, the world has kept these archetypal elements alive in a wide variety of ways, which I have presented. The elements have long persisted through time, and likely will continue to do so, as the simplicity and coherence of earth, fire, water, and air as symbols is both easily digestible and integral to certain cultures.

As presented prior, *The Alchemy Codex* is a representation of these four elements, using eight large-scale oil paintings to depict an imagined mythology, one that is personal to me. The pieces give glimpses into this world and its narrative.

Through creating this body of work, I have learned an immense deal about the sensibilities of nineteenth century art and the methodical academic painting process, and have also gained a better understanding of a wide variety of art styles, movements, and their role in history. These factors have helped me to create this series with a gamut of knowledge and inspiration that better informs the fantastical world from which they derive. Moving forward, I hope to continue creating the realm in which these elementals exist, by potentially expanding the lore of the universe, creating paintings that detail further events in this universe—such as the elemental beings actually controlling their elements, in full and utter command of them—and also explore other ways to represent and catalogue the world-building that I am aiming to construct. The methodologies explored in Solomon’s treatises on painting, the significance of the four elements in history, and the creation of *The Alchemy Codex*’s world have all been vastly influential on my process and my work. *The Alchemy Codex* has been a defining moment in my artistic career, and I hope to continue pushing forward based off of the progress, the knowledge, and the solid foundation that has been built.

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## Appendix

### **Adam Ferguson**

*The Alchemy Codex: Earth I – Overgrown*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"



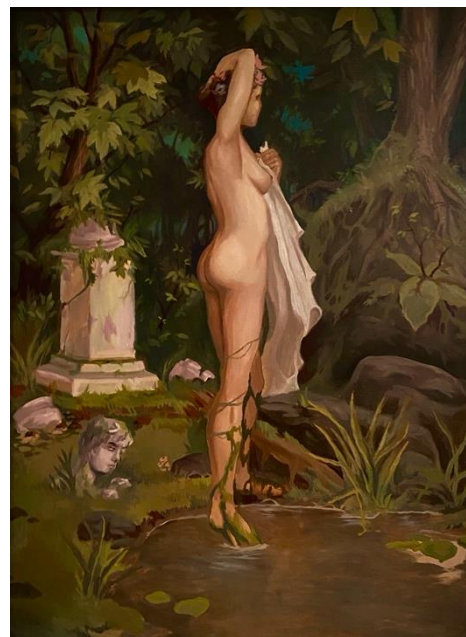
### **Adam Ferguson**

*The Alchemy Codex: Earth II – Bountiful*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"





**Adam Ferguson***The Alchemy Codex: Water I – Castaway*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"

**Adam Ferguson***The Alchemy Codex: Water II – Marooned*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"





**Adam Ferguson***The Alchemy Codex: Fire I – Ashen*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"

**Adam Ferguson***The Alchemy Codex: Fire II – Kindled*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"



**Adam Ferguson***The Alchemy Codex: Air I – Descent*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"

**Adam Ferguson***The Alchemy Codex: Air II – Ascent*

Oil on Canvas

2021

36" x 48"

