

Daisy Consciousness

ELISE ADIBI

The daisy opens its petals at dawn to greet the sun. There is an unspoken bond connecting flower and star. Opening its petals at sunrise and closing them at sunset, the daisy appears first to awaken and then to sleep. This daily waking up is something shared by daisies and humans. Consciousness is often described as a state of wakefulness. The daisy is in the *Asteraceae* family, from the word *aster* which means star in Latin. The word daisy comes from two words in Old English, originally “day’s eye,” and was abbreviated over time into its current form. Like other heliotropic plants the daisy tracks the sun’s movement as it travels from east to west in the sky. In the words of Emily Dickinson, “the daisy follows soft the sun.”¹ The daisy looks simultaneously eye-like and sun-like with its central yellow disk and white petals, resembling both human eyelashes and rays of light from the sun.

The daisy with its ability to look directly at the sun, possesses a power of sight we humans do not. If we stare into the sun, our eyes will burn from the radiation. The light that we do see with our naked eyes is only the visible part of the electromagnetic spectrum emanating from the sun. We cannot see the microwaves, infrared, ultraviolet, x-rays or gamma rays all contained in the light we receive from the sun.

It may be the daisy’s ability to look directly at the sun that made it the chosen flower for an oracle. The daisy oracle ritual is performed by plucking the flower petal by petal, asking alternately, does X love me, or love me not. The last pluck reveals the answer. The daisy oracle dates to the Middle Ages in Europe and persists today primarily as a child’s game, more superstition than genuine prophecy.

Throughout their evolution humans have been developing relationships with oracles to seek answers to unknown questions and desires for future outcomes. The oracle can see into the future, glimpsing a dimension beyond human sight and consciousness. One of the best-known oracles is the Oracle of Delphi in Ancient Greece, Delphi was ruled by the god Apollo, who was (among other things) the god of the sun. The daisy oracle and the Delphic one share this solar connection. At Delphi there was a priestess who acted as a medium and channeled the prophecies from Apollo into the human dimension. The priestess was a bridge between the human realm and the realm of the gods. The daisy oracle, unlike its Delphic counterpart, is available to everyone: the flower is the channel.

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The idea of *Daisy Consciousness* began with a street name. Several years ago, I moved to Southern California from the East Coast, and I rented a studio on Daisy Avenue in Pasadena in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. Having worked with plants and essential plant oils in my paintings and installations for many years, landing on Daisy Ave felt auspicious. My relationship with plant oils originated about a decade ago when I experienced rain in Los Angeles for the first time. Because of the arid climate, and the infrequent precipitation, the smells plants and trees emit don't typically have much throw, but after it rains in LA the earth lets out a big exhale. Scents long pent up are released into the air and come in invisibly. Loam, leaf, herb, and blossom, all liberated from their physical bodies blend into a desert petrichor. Borrowing a line from Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory*, "the air is raining messages... a chorus of living wood sings...Listen."² In my case... Smell. Cedar, eucalyptus, lavender, and rosemary entered my mind and woke me up. Once the rain stopped, I still wanted to stay connected to the feeling of freshness, so I purchased my first plant oils: cedar, eucalyptus, rosemary, lavender, neroli, lemon and orange. A few months later, I was back East making paintings and the thought popped into my mind: why not add plant oils to my painting? I had already been using my urine to make oxidation paintings, so it wasn't much of a stretch. Years later I would piece it together that the *oil* in oil painting is in fact plant oil. Oil painting originated by mixing linseed (flax) oil with pigment, replacing egg as a binding medium.

What happened when I poured the plant oil into the oil paint was a complete surprise, a revelation even. It was like watching a photograph develop on white paper in a chemical bath, the image made from the plant oils emerges from the painted ground, mysteriously forming itself into a plant-like form. Once poured, the plant oils etch into the paint, channeling, branching, stemming. The images the plant oils make look like root systems or the hyphae of fungi. The plant oils flow as if they *know* where they are going, just as slime molds can find their way in a maze, or plants grow towards the light.

The two essential oils I have used for these paintings are lemon and neroli. The lemon oil is made by pressing the peels of the fruit. The neroli oil is made by steam distilling a large quantity of blossoms from the bitter orange tree. Since both oils are from citrus plants, both contain hydrocarbon limonene, which is a solvent. The limonene may be the most active chemical agent in forming the image. The other active agent may be light.

In his seminal book *Plant-Thinking*, the philosopher Michael Marder distinguishes between plant memory and human memory. He describes a "*general tendency of vegetal beings to store imageless and non-representational material memories in their cells, and to retain a trace of the remembered thing itself... Whereas humans remember whatever has phenomenally appeared in the light, plants keep the memory of light itself.*"³ Could this be what is happening in the plant oil paintings, namely that there is light stored in the plant matter? In photosynthesis plants absorb sunlight and transform it into chemical energy. Watching the plant oils draw themselves is like watching lines of light guided by an unseen hand, they have a will of their own.

When I am making these paintings, I am having a *conversation* with the plant oils. The word conversation originally meant "the place where one lives or dwells" also "general course of actions or habits, manner of conducting oneself in the world," both senses now obsolete. To have a conversation is connected to living in the world and being a part of it. It reminds me of the legendary conversation between the architect Louis I. Kahn and a brick, which goes as follows: You say to brick, "What do you want, brick." Brick says to you, "I like an arch."⁴ If I apply Kahn's dialogic structure to the plant oils, it goes something like this: I say, "What do you want essence of plant?" The plant oil responds, "I like the image of a plant." There is something in the plant oils that wants to become itself, something immanent in the matter—a vital energy that wills its self-expression. The conversation between Kahn, the master architect, and his material, brick represents an archetypal relationship between human creativity and matter. Conversing with matter is not limited to bricks or plant oils; we are all conversing with matter all the time, and it is not just us humans who are doing the conversing.

Plant communication and the idea of plant consciousness has been a hot topic in recent years. The scientific community has empirically established that plants communicate with one another. The claim that communication is a sign of intelligence is, however, more controversial within the scientific community, and is often dismissed as anthropomorphic. Plants communicate by sending messages via air and ground. Through the air they transmit volatile chemicals, often fragrant to humans. Among their other functions, these "infochemicals" warn other plants of invasive organisms. These warnings trigger defensive responses in the receiving plants. Plants also emit

scents to attract pollinators, enticing insects to spread their seeds. Through their roots in the ground, plants send electrical and biochemical signals to other plants warning of infestation. These warning signals are transported to other plants by underground mycorrhizal fungi networks.

Along with having a conversation with a brick, Lou Kahn had metaphysical ideas about light, "All material in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, & this crumbled mass called material casts a shadow and the shadow belongs to the Light... So Light is really the source of all being."⁵ The idea of everything in the natural world being spent light makes sense if you think about how light is embodied on earth. Plants receive the light and transform it into energy that becomes matter. This plant matter is the source of almost everything in the material world that we have created. Plants are at the base of the food chain and the primary source of food; they are the wood that we build our houses from, the fossil fuel we burn, the clothes we wear, and even the oil paintings we make. Thus, in a very concrete sense, all material is spent light. Plants materialize the sun's radiation into what we consume and create with. To be more accurate, all material is in the process of *spending* light, since the matter that is pure spent light would no longer exist. We are spending light with each breath.

The images made by the plant oils are a collaboration between my human consciousness and plant consciousness. I make a series of decisions prior to pouring the plant oils which influence the process. I prepare the canvas, I select the pigments and plants oils, I choose the location on the floor for the pour, and I pick the time of day or night to do it. All these decisions influence the flow of paint. However, the materials are so volatile and sensitive—so alive that it is impossible for me to control how the painting will turn out. In fact, the paintings almost never turn out the way I think they might. Unlike Jackson Pollock, the abstract expressionist painter known best for his "drip" paintings, who proclaimed, "I can control the flow of paint: there is no accident,"⁶ I make no such claims. Once I pour the plant oils into the pigments, it takes every effort to restrain myself and just watch. I cannot try to influence the oil's movement; my interference ruins the process. I am reminded of a line from Sol Le Witt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, "if the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the pieces, he compromises the result... the artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from the

idea to the completion."⁷ Not only can I not control how the paint will flow, I cannot control whether the painting will become a work of art or not. Not all paintings do. The ones that do have a life of their own. I am part of the process. The paintings that don't become works of art are still part of the process. Each painting is an experience that forms my consciousness. Each pour becomes part of the next painting sort of like how every day lived becomes part of the next day.

The process is like life; we make plans, but we cannot control how they will turn out. We cannot see the future. Living requires us to trust and to take risks, like making a painting, or falling in love. As I watch the plant oils make their own image, I am mesmerized, transfixed. I wonder does my consciousness affect the process? That deepest of mysteries: does thought influence matter? As I watch, I am to such an extent one with the process, I become part of it. However much I want and desire each painting to be a work of art, I cannot will it to be so. I can only be part of the process, part of mystery.

What brings the work of art into being may be like insemination. Not every act of sexual intercourse will lead to a new life. The word *insemination* comes from the Latin literally meaning to *cast a seed*. Plucking the daisy apart petal by petal, the flower is dismembered but its seeds are spread. Some seeds will take root and with the help of the sun grow to become new daisies.

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The daisy oracle dates to medieval folklore but survives as a modern myth too. In 1892 Harry Dacre wrote a song about falling in love with a daisy called *Daisy Bell*. In his composition Dacre used the structure of the daisy oracle asking, *Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do*. The Daisy in Dacre's song is personified into a woman. No longer a plant, Daisy has become a *flower in his heart*. There was allegedly a real woman who inspired *Daisy Bell*, her name was Frances Evelyn Greville, the Countess of Warwick, who went by the nickname of Daisy. This accounts for the Daisy in the name but where did Dacre get Bell? Possibly because the Latin name for the daisy is *Bellis Perennis*. Or maybe because of all the words in the song that rhyme with bell: tell, well, *belle*.

The word *belle* means beautiful woman and would seem to be the more logical choice for a love song, but Dacre's song is not a typical love song, woven into its lyrics are a love that is

spiritual as well as romantic. Dacre immigrated to America from England in 1891 with his bicycle. Upon arrival he was asked to pay a customs tax on his bike. His friend tried to console him on this unexpected expense by saying it could have been worse—at least his bicycle was not a tandem which would have cost him twice as much—finding humor in the relentless logic of capitalism. This quip became the song's central metaphor: a bicycle built for two. Bicycles at the end of the 19th century were more affordable than cars, and thus available to the working class. The bicycle represented a new mobility and freedom to all the classes, rich and poor, and the tandem bicycle additionally represented new possibilities for partnership between the sexes. In photos from the period, the female is typically in the lead position and the man in the rear. In his song, Dacre gives Daisy the power to steer the bike, *You'll take the lead in each trip we take, & then if we don't do well; I'll permit you to use the brake, my beautiful Daisy Bell.*

Daisy Warwick was, in fact, a suffragette and an outspoken activist for women's equality. She was also a socialite known for her many lovers including Prince Edward who would later become King. In Dacre's song, love has the power to subvert the social order. In his proposal to Daisy, Dacre can't offer her a *stylish marriage*, as would be expected for a Countess. Nor can he *afford a carriage*, but he is confident that his financial hardship does not preclude the union, promising that Daisy would *look sweet upon the seat of a bicycle built for two*. Dacre's *Daisy Bell* with its embedded message of social equality and cooperation was wildly popular in its day. Dacre's song embodies the hope at the end of the 19th century that Promethean technological advancements would lead to spiritual transformation as well.

And *Daisy Bell* would go on to have a life of her own in the 20th century. Whatever the reason behind Dacre's choice of the name Bell for his song, he could never have imagined that in 1961, almost forty years after his death, his song would be reincarnated at Bell Labs in Murray Hill, NJ when Max Matthews programmed the first voice synthesization on an early IBM computer. Of all the possible songs Matthews could have chosen, why *Daisy Bell*? Given the climate of branding in the early '60s, most likely he chose the song because of the name's connection to Bell Labs. Perhaps it is also a tribute to Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone and founder of Bell Labs. It is hard for us to imagine just how revolutionary it was for a computer to sing, with digitalized voices so much a part of our everyday life now. The IBM computer singing *Daisy Bell* was the beginning of the digital age.

Matthews' historic computerized version is upbeat and cheery, preserving the optimism of Dacre's original. In 1963 the writer Arthur Clarke went to Bell Labs to hear the demonstration of *Daisy Bell*; he was so moved that he incorporated the song into the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's sci-fi classic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. By the release of the film in 1968, *Daisy Bell* had become a dark prophecy, sung by the dying computer known as HAL. The promise of technology had turned lethal. In the movie, the crew's trust in technology was so absolute, that HAL ran every system on the ship. Yet HAL had a fatal glitch in his programming which led him to murder the entire crew, except for one sole surviving astronaut named Dave. To save himself, Dave must dismantle HAL. During his dismemberment HAL is pleading with Dave to stop. *"Dave stop. Stop will you?"* HAL fears losing consciousness. *"I'm afraid Dave, my mind is going. I can feel it. There is no question about it."* As his "mind" goes, HAL regresses to his "infancy" when he was programmed by his instructor Mr. Langley who taught him the song. As HAL powers down, singing the Daisy chorus, his voice gradually slows down and distorts until he reaches his final words, *"Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do, I'm half crazy over the love of you."* We can feel HAL's fear, we can feel his disconnection and his half craziness. HAL's final plea is to Daisy, not Dave. He yearns for a connection to the flower and the sun.

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After a few years of making paintings on Daisy Avenue, I realized I was making yellow paintings. The shade of yellow was bright like sunshine. Up until then, I hadn't thought much about my street being named Daisy Avenue, but then I started wondering: was I channeling *Daisy Consciousness*? I hope some seeds will grow.

Notes

1. Dickinson, Emily, *The Daisy Follows Soft the Sun*, in The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, (New York: Back Bay Books, Little Brown and Company, 1960) p. 106
2. Powers, Richard, The Overstory A Novel, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018) pg. 3-4
3. Marder, Michael, Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) pg. 156
4. Kahn, Lou in Lobell, John, Between Silence and Light, Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn, (Boston: Shambhala, 2000) pg. 40
5. Op Cit, Pg 22
6. Namuth, Hans and Falkenberg, Paul, Jackson Pollock 51 (film), 1951
7. Le Witt, Sol, Sentences on Conceptual Art in Conceptual Art a Critical Anthology, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) pg. 106

First published in *The Philosophical Salon* 3.20.2023

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