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Forest, Shadow, and Individuation:
an exploration into the unconscious.

Word count: 2357 (excluding title page, list of figures, list of references)

List of Figures:

Figure 1: Michelle Stuart, *Sayreville Strata Quartet* (1976) [Earth on muslin-backed rag paper, each: 365.8 x 157.5 cm] Dia Art Foundation. Photograph: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Available at: <https://diaart.org/collection/collection/stuart-michelle-sayreville-strata-quartet-1976-2017-036-1-4/page/15> [accessed 01 May 2024]

Figure 2: Francis Bacon: *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) [Oil paint, each: 1162 x 960 x 80 mm] Tate collection. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bacon-three-studies-for-figures-at-the-base-of-a-crucifixion-n06171> (accessed 02 May 2025)

Figure 3: Francis Bacon. (1973). *Study from the Human Body (Man Turning on Light)*. [oil on canvas, 200.6 x 148.4 cm] Private collection. Available at: <https://www.francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/study-human-body-man-turning-light> [accessed 02 May 2025]

Figure 4: Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirits* (1971) [Gelatine silver prints, each: 36.8 x 37.5 cm] The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/52050> [Accessed 02 May 2025]

Forest, Shadow, and Individuation: an exploration into the unconscious.

This essay consists of the exploration of three key words, supported by artists, artworks, theories and philosophers, in order to ultimately form a possible question for independent inquiry and research. This essay explores the forest (a place of the unknown, and the unconscious) the shadow, (a repository of repressed emotions and desires) and Individuation, (the unified whole born of their integration). Artists like Michelle Stuart, Francis Bacon, and Adrian Piper look into these themes: Stuart's earth-stained scrolls mirroring the forest's sedimentary psyche, Bacon's twisted figures embodying the shadow's raw terror, and Piper's confrontational performances mirroring individuation as quest for wholeness. Together, they explore Jungian archetypes and theories of the unconscious.

Forest

"Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost."

(Alighieri, 1867)

The forest, with its obscurity and vastness, is a setting of the sublime, where looming trees and reaching branches can create an overwhelming sense of perceived endlessness; the perfect place to get lost. A forest is a place where our fears come

back to taunt us, where we can feel powerless and forgotten within a dark and immense setting of uncountable pathways. It is a place of the unknown, where we can catch glimpses of our own unconscious. Thus, approaching the forest as a symbol of the unknown, it can provide a spatial context within artworks, identifying links to theories of the unconscious. The woodland setting, with its isolation, entanglement, and shifting light, mirrors the disorientation and possibility of descending into the mind to retrieve lost or repressed parts of the self.

Michelle Stuart work directly engages with landscape - particularly forested and natural environments - not as literal representations, but as deeply psychological and symbolic spaces connected to memory, time, and inner experience. Therefore her work is an excellent example of the integration of connection to the forest, and to unconscious thought.



Figure 1: Michelle Stuart, *Sayreville Strata Quartet* (1976)

Michelle Stuart's *Sayreville Strata Quartet* (1976), reflects the descent into the unconscious, using the material of the forest floor (soil, clay, sediment) as both symbol and medium. *Sayreville Strata Quartet* is a work focusing on materiality, consists of four large paper scrolls rubbed with earth from an abandoned brick quarry in Sayreville, New Jersey. Through the technique of frottage, the paper "preserves the earth's visible colours, the native stains of its soil and minerals" (Casey, 2005), creating a tactile record of place. These dark reds and browns differ from similar tones seen in the works of both other artists, as well as Stuart's past works. The muted colours contrast their fabricated versions of paint and graphite, and offer a direct deposition of natural, earthy tones onto the page, allowing for them to perhaps be perceived to be more honest. Stuart doesn't depict the forest in a traditional sense; instead, she evokes the forest as an unconscious space by literally transferring its material essence onto paper. This gesture turns the earth into a mnemonic surface, bridging nature and mind, as these works "explore a physical connection to site and the product of memory" (Galerie Lelong, 2020).

Stuart's scrolls, with their dragged edges and vertical orientation, allow for connotations to tree trunks, where the absence of figurative representation aligns with Bachelard's exploration of intimate immensity, and the idea that forests are "veritable psychological transcendents". This is where the experience of a woodland encourages an "anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper' into a limitless world", since the physical act of wandering mirrors the exploration of unconscious depths (Bachelard, 2014). Further, the use of the process of layering, pressing, and rubbing, parallels digging through layers of the unconscious, suggesting that memory, identity, and transformation are imprinted within the natural world just as

much as within the human mind. The link between forest, Stuart's work, and the unconscious, is one that is rooted in organic accumulation, sedimentation, and the merging of self with landscape.

Shadow

"The shadow is the inferior being in ourselves, the one who wants to do all the things that we do not allow ourselves to do, who is everything that we are not"

(Fordham, 1968)

The shadow is a Jungian theory that represents the unconscious, and repressed parts of ourselves - instincts, desires, and weaknesses - that we deny or ignore. It is the embodiment of emotions that are incompatible with social standards, as well as our subjective ideal reality. All that we are ashamed of and do not wish to acknowledge within ourselves, or have others acknowledge within us, we see within our shadow. Yet the shadow is more than just a personal unconscious; it also has what can be described as "a collective phenomenon" (Fordham, 1968). This collective shadow often manifests as archetypal figures such as devils, demons, witches, or monsters, which are symbolic embodiments of the fears and disowned traits that we share as a society. These shadows of the collective unconscious can include: systemic violence, gender inequality, discrimination, corporate greed and war. The shadow is a moral and psychological darkness that every individual must carry with them, and a darkness that is present in humanity as a collective, it is a darkness that cannot be run away from.

Artists who engage with dark, grotesque, or taboo imagery often reveal their own shadows, and so also invite the audience to confront theirs. This is clear within Francis Bacon's work, where "Seeing a work by Francis Bacon Hurts. It causes pain", and his gruesome and graphic depictions allow for "the intensity of the experience itself to preclude reflection upon one's emotional state" (Alphen, 1992) . This emotional intensity within Bacon's artworks force a confrontation with themes of suffering, mortality, and existential dread. Rather than offering a definitive narrative, clarity or sense of emotional resolution, Bacon's paintings trap the viewer in a state of uncomfortable intensity.



Figure 2: Francis Bacon: *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944)

Francis Bacon's distorted, raw depictions of the human form reveal fear, inner turmoil, and primal instincts, acting as vivid expressions of the Jungian shadow. This is clear within Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944),

where the contorted figures and raw emotional tone externalize inner chaos and the repressed desires. This triptych is a visceral embodiment of the Shadow archetype; where grotesque, semi-human figures writhe in contorted agony, stripped of any idealized form. These creatures are manifestations of the repressed, where pain, violence, humiliation take centre stage on the canvas. The stark, vivid red backgrounds and aggressive brushwork enhance the raw exposure of Bacon's inner world, confronting the viewers with the aspects of themselves that they most fear or deny (the shadow). These are not clearly-presented human forms but rather beings "controlled by chthonic urges and base instincts, the Dionysian Calibans of human existence rather than the Apollonian Ariel's" (Hubbard, 2007) Bacon aimed to convey a presence that captures the instinctual and uncomfortable aspects of human experience. Further, Bacon's figures exist in an ambiguous state where their contorted poses might express either agony or ecstasy, suffering or release. This ambiguity reflects the complex nature of the theory of the shadow, and its content, which defies simple moral categorization.

The Shadow is also more literally portrayed by Bacon within *Study from the Human Body (Man Turning on Light)* (1973) where a solitary, nude figure is reaching toward a light switch, with both the cast shadow and the light bulb depicted to the left of the figure. Further, the body of the figure is fragmented, as is the room in which the figure stands, perpetuating a sense of uncertainty and discomfort.



Figure 3: Francis Bacon. (1973). *Study from the Human Body (Man Turning on Light)*

Within *Study from the Human Body (Man Turning on Light)*, Bacon paints an ambiguous, fractured space, where the figure seems both isolated and exposed. This mirrors the psychological tension of facing one's own hidden drives or suppressed emotions. Bacon's treatment of light and shadow underscores the tension between exposure and concealment, presenting a lack of logic and clarity, where the shadow becomes a metaphor for the unconscious, repressed aspects of the human mind. The diagonal placement of the body, the lack distinction between an interior and exterior, and thus the presentation of an uncertain sense of entering or leaving a room, all evoke the Jungian process of encountering and integrating the

shadow. This work depicts an almost liminal space where “the shadow cast by the figure, the relationship of shadow, figure and visible lighting is incoherent” (Zweite, 2006).

The shadow within this painting can be read “as an extension of the body”, where the definition of “the body is co-determined by the shadow” (Alphen, 1992) Thus it can be acknowledged not as simply cast by the figure as a result of the light (especially due to the incoherent placement), but rather as a part of the figure’s reality: the shadow is no less real than the figure, as “the shadow is unavoidable and man is incomplete without it” (Fordham, 1968). This depicted acceptance of the shadow, and the weight of importance it is given within the painting, mirrors the necessity to acknowledge and accept one’s own unconscious shadow to gain a sense of wholeness, and in theory start the process of Individuation. Here, the gesture of turning on the light symbolizes the possibly daunting process of bringing repressed or unconscious material into conscious awareness.

Individuation

“the concept of individuation to describe the process by which we can fulfil our potential to become all that we can be”

(Schmidt, 2023).

Individuation refers to a process of personal growth that allows for an individual to accept their place within their subjective reality, in relation to the rest of existence. It is a description of a journey toward the self, involving the integration of archetypes

such as the shadow, to form a deeper connection with our own perceived existence. This deeper understanding of ourselves and of our separation from others, is one of the main signifiers of individuation. This can be looked at in relation to the Collective Unconscious, which is the Jungian concept referring to the symbols and archetypes understood and shared across humanity. This is as we cannot grow to our full potential, without the presence of an ego; a distinction between our own subconscious and the collective. Individuation allows for a deeper understanding of the self, and the unconscious, as well as an individual's relation to the rest of society.



Figure 4: Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirits* (1971)

Adrian Piper's work is an excellent exploration of self-confrontation and psychological interrogation, through the process of interacting with the conscious and unconscious to try and achieve a sense of wholeness. *Food for the spirits* was created by Piper during a period of intense isolation and personal inquiry. This work integrates existential introspection with conceptual art practices, mirroring the confrontation of the archetype of the shadow, and acknowledging the suppressed and unwanted parts of the self, allowing for a path to individuation.

This work was made almost as an effort of self-preservation, an anchoring to The Self, if you will. Piper made this collection whilst immersing herself within Immanuel Kant's abstract philosophy. The final photographs are that of Piper's self-observation; standing nude before a mirror, reciting passages from Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. Parts of this philosophy is an experience can be described quite liminal and also disorientating, where Kant theorises about the ability to make "empirical judgements" (Williams, 2017). He presents reason and aspects of the human mind to be more important than sensory experience. Thus Piper's documentation exposes the tension between the physical existence, and ideas around the complexities of the human mind. Piper later recounted that her immersion into this philosophy was so intense that it triggered a dissociative fear of "losing her faith in her own existence" (Huber, 2017) Her final collective work of *Food for the spirits* was thus a ritualization of repeated "self-confrontation", indicating "an effort to ground her understanding of Kantian transcendence in personal experience" (Piper, 2025), while also introducing an exploration of identity into her conceptual art. The low-resolution photographs capture grainy images of Piper in fragmented, vulnerable poses, that act as fragile anchors to Piper's physical self. Jung described the shadow "all that we are ashamed of, all that we do not want to know about ourselves" it is the repressed, often unconscious aspects of the self that the ego rejects (Fordham, 1968). Piper externalizes her interaction with the Shadow, engaging with her fear of losing herself, thus enacting the theory of Individuation.

The three key words considered above, are foundation in shaping the main research question for my independent inquiry: 'How do contemporary artists represent the unconscious as a site of inner conflict?'. The exploration into 'forest' initially opened

up a symbolic framework for exploring the unconscious as a liminal, hidden space, drawing on both myth and personal memory. Then, 'shadow' introduced the theme of psychological repression, fear, and moral duality. 'Individuation', as the process of integrating conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche, highlighted the tension and fragmentation that can occur within the mind. These ideas revealed the unconscious to be a place of conflict and self-confrontation, which directly led to the formation of the research question mentioned.

This investigation has also revealed several sub-questions and potential routes of inquiry, such as: 'How do artists visualize repressed aspects of the unconscious?', 'Can artistic practice itself serve as a method for confronting the unconscious?'. 'How do artists use archetypal imagery to visualize the unconscious?', and 'How do contemporary artists engage with the visual language of dreams and Surrealism to represent the unconscious mind?'. The concepts of the uncanny, fragmentation, dream logic, bias, repression and memory, will be considered for further investigation. To support this, I plan on exploring further the following art theories within my independent research: psychoanalytic theory (Freud and Jung), archetypal criticism, the uncanny (Freud), affect theory, feminist psychoanalysis (Julia Kristeva). These frameworks will allow for a detailed exploration into the unconscious and encourage a better understanding of inner psychological conflict, as established through visual culture.

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