

"In the cathedral the wind and the trees sang a vesper song. And I prayed for quite a time long little prayers and long prayers for the goodness of us all."

— from *Opal Whiteley's diary*¹

"The word [cathedral] is derived from the Greek *kathedra* through the Latin *cathedra*, throne, elevated seat. In early ecclesiastical literature it always conveyed the idea of authority."

— From *The Catholic Encyclopedia*²

Opal Whiteley (1897-1992) was an amateur naturalist and a poet. As a child she lived in a rural logging community near Cottage Grove, Oregon. Between the ages of 6 and 7 years old she wrote a diary, which was published in 1920 as "The Story of Opal."³ The diary focuses on her uniquely religious relationship with nature. Opal became a celebrity when the diary was first published, and it is after that point that her story changes course. In brief, Opal led an eccentric life, traveled widely, wrote, was accused of fraud, questioned her parentage, struggled to write, and ended up destitute, delusional, and institutionalized for schizophrenia.⁴ Today, several biographies exist that explore the fascinating details of her life, but few are as compelling a read as her own childhood diary.

The most riveting parts of the diary are the scenes in which she slips into the space of the visionary. These liminal experiences, which are simultaneously mystical, imaginative, and hallucinatory experiences, are grounded in the body, the mind, and in everyday nature. The winds speak to hear, the creeks sing, and the trees comfort her. The "cathedrals" are locations in nature that Opal routinely revisits in the text, places where she plays, prays, and performs makeshift rituals. These places become sacred sites. For Opal, it was not that these spots were aesthetically superior, rare, or magical in and of themselves, but that they held the potential to be what she needed them to be, on creative, emotional, and spiritual levels.

Opal's world was in a constant state of becoming: she was not separate from *the natural world*; rather she was utterly embodied in it, defined in sensual, energetic relation to the living things around her. This is an experience that she and I share. Art critic Dave Hickey has described this as the phenomenon of the "soft self," the haunting experience that many creative people have of a dissolution of the self into the natural world: a feeling sometimes awesome, and oftentimes overwhelming.⁵ This dissolution is both a loss of self and a commingling or a loosening of the self's boundaries with that which is considered "nature."

These paintings are an attempt to convey this feeling; the subject being sites in my neighborhood that resemble the places Opal called "cathedrals" in her diary. I have named the paintings after her sites and visions. These are our cathedrals: our transitory, imaginary, roofless sanctuaries, these humble sites that offer up the possibility of one's own *seat of religious authority*, one's own "cathedra."

— Hayley Barker

Read the entire essay on <http://opalwhiteley.wordpress.com/>

¹ Whiteley, Opal. "The Diary of Opal Whiteley." *Intersect Digital Library*. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://intersect.uoregon.edu/opal/default.html>>.

² Boudinhan, Auguste. "Cathedral." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. 27 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03438a.htm>>.

³ Whiteley, Opal Stanley, and Benjamin Hoff. *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow: the Mystical Nature Diary of Opal Whiteley: with a Biography and an Afterword*. New York: Penguin, 1995. Print.

⁴ Beck, K. K. *Opal: a Life of Enchantment, Mystery, and Madness*. New York: Viking, 2003. Print.

⁵ Hickey, Dave. "Burchfield's Highway." *Heat Waves in a Swamp: the Paintings of Charles Burchfield*. By Robert Gober. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2009. 41. Print.

COVER
Hayley Barker
The Sun Shines Yellow (Dazzlement)
2011
Oil on canvas
48.5 x 36.5 inches

INTERIOR
Hayley Barker
Friends
2011
Oil on canvas
62.5 x 40.5 inches



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