



Nikola Wojewoda, Salvia, From *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants Series*, 2019, Stoneware, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

GARDEN OF THE GODS

A journey into the unconscious

For many, a beautiful garden of various types of plants—vegetables, flowers, berries—corresponds to the definition of a garden for the gods. The explosion of colours during the summer months brings happiness and joy to gardeners and visitors alike and the lush displays and abundant crops emphasize the beauty and power of the natural world. The garden feeds the body and soul: some plants are edible; a few have medicinal properties; while others like cannabis, now legal in Canada, have well known psychoactive effects.

But cannabis is not the only such plant. Many others do have hallucinogenic characteristics, a quality often hidden behind their beauty. In *Garden of the Gods*, Nikola Wojewoda takes us on a botanical journey into the world of powerful hallucinogens through a series of decorative plates. The history of decorative plates goes back a few hundred years. In the 16th century, Chinese porcelain was collected by royal and aristocratic families. Italian majolica from the same period was decorated in an attempt to imitate the sought-after porcelain. Local historical legends, commemorative events and religious stories are among the subjects that made their way onto the plate surface. With time, these also became of interest to collectors of antiques who chose to hang these precious plates on the wall. Eventually, manufacturers recognized the potential of a collectors' market and started to industrially produce commemorative plates.

Nikola Wojewoda sees her plates akin to a canvas to paint on; they are made to hang on the wall and be admired, to be reflected upon. They illustrate her research into the natural world in discrete series, including one on hallucinogenic plants. This particular series, *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants*, started after she read about Russian and Norwegian exiles to Siberia in the 19th century. She was fascinated by their descriptions about and reactions to the rituals of Northern people and their culture—she needed to know more.



Nikola Wojewoda, Datura innoxia, From *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants Series*, 2019, Stoneware, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

Her research led to the writings of Mircea Eliade, a Romanian historian of religions. In his book *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* he demonstrates that shamanistic practice is not a result of mental illness but is “at once, mysticism, magic, and ‘religion’ in the broadest sense of the term.” His study on religio-cultural shamanism practices, some dating back to prehistoric times, highlights the use of hallucinogenic plants and fungi to reach a trance state, not so different from what is known as ecstasy in Christian religion. Wojewoda writes that “His appreciation and respect was inspiring... What was most interesting to me were the methods used to induce this state (including plants, but not only)—and mostly what was happening inside the brain. I was drawn to the notion that a Shaman, and hallucinogenic plants, play a vital role in the healing of trauma, for an individual and for their societies.”² She states that “these prehistoric experiences have shaped religious and philosophical thought, and the understanding of our complex human nature.”³ Her research expanded to include the plants' chemistry and their wide cultural uses, that varied from one society to another. Many have a common goal: the need to reach otherworldly places, to meet some gods, to access the unconscious.

BELOW: Datura innoxia (detail), From *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants Series*, 2019, Stoneware, glazes. Collection of the Artist.



In some cases, this is made possible with hallucinogenic plants where the right dosage would allow one to hallucinate in a form of waking dream, known as hypnagogia.⁴ These hallucinations are informed by the emotional state and the cultural background of the person who experiences them. The psychoactive properties of the plant have the ability to transport the mind into altered states of consciousness, where transformative encounters with some godly figures may provide insights into the nature of reality and the self. Based on her research, Wojewoda made eleven plates illustrating as many hallucinogenic plants of which most, if not all, are familiar to contemporary gardeners.

These illustrations are not without recalling another tradition, the botanical illustrations of the 17th and 18th centuries. The history of plant illustration for scientific communication and identification is even much older than this, going back to the recognition of some specimen's medicinal properties. However, it is towards the end of the Renaissance that botanical painting became a true art form, combining accuracy and beauty – "Painting that satisfies both the spirit as well as the mind."⁵ Maria Sibylla Merian's (1647-1717) illustrations from the mid 17th century is a beautiful example of scientific observation and great artistry. So many women followed in her footsteps that by the mid-18th century "the gendering of flower painting as a feminine accomplishment was well established."⁶ The arrival of Dutch bulbs on the European market allowed decorative flowering plants to rapidly become popular and encouraged the development of flower gardens of all sizes. With specimens near by, women could easily engage in what was to become in 18th century England a Polite art. The art of botanical painting has continued to flourish, and recently we have witnessed a revival of the practice, mostly in watercolour guilds and associations.

The eleven plates that constitute *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants* invite us to consider their use in various cultures, but also warn us of their hallucinogenic properties. To complement this series of plates, Nikola Wojewoda created a series of six paper collage portraits of gods, some virtuous, some not, that may have been met in a hallucinogenic trance. She also presents another series of decorative plates inspired by garden flowers and insects. Her work reminds us that the natural beauties of garden, often considered as an accessible paradise space for many, may contain powerful ingredients to take us on a different journey to the Garden of the Gods.

Denis Longchamps, PhD
Executive Director and Curator

¹Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, (1951 - Princeton University Press, Revised Edition, 2004): xvii-xxvii.

²Email exchange between the artist and the author.

³Ibid.

⁴Hypnagoia is the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep.

⁵Shirley Sherwood and Martyn Rix, *Treasures of Botanical Art*, (Kew Publishing, Royal Botanic Garden, Kew: 2008): 12.

⁶Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, (New Haven and London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press: 2000): 203.



Nikola Wojewoda, *Convolvulus Tricolor*, From *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants* Series, 2019, Stoneware, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

Nikola Wojewoda

Nikola Wojewoda is a contemporary artist of Russian and Polish descent. She has worked and exhibited in a variety of mediums. In addition to ceramics, drawing, painting, and printmaking, she has shown sculptures in bronze, stone, plaster, clay, mixed media assemblage and installation. She's made experimental short films and has designed sets for dance and theatre. Her work is in private and corporate collections and has been written about in a variety of publications. She has received grants and awards in each discipline. In her current practice she is exploring working in clay and paper collage.

COVER ART: *Convolvulus Tricolor*, (Detail) From *The Herbarium of Hallucinogenic Plants* Series, 2019, Stoneware, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

Exhibition Runs
February to May, 2021



ISBN: 978-1-928022-25-1

The Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of:

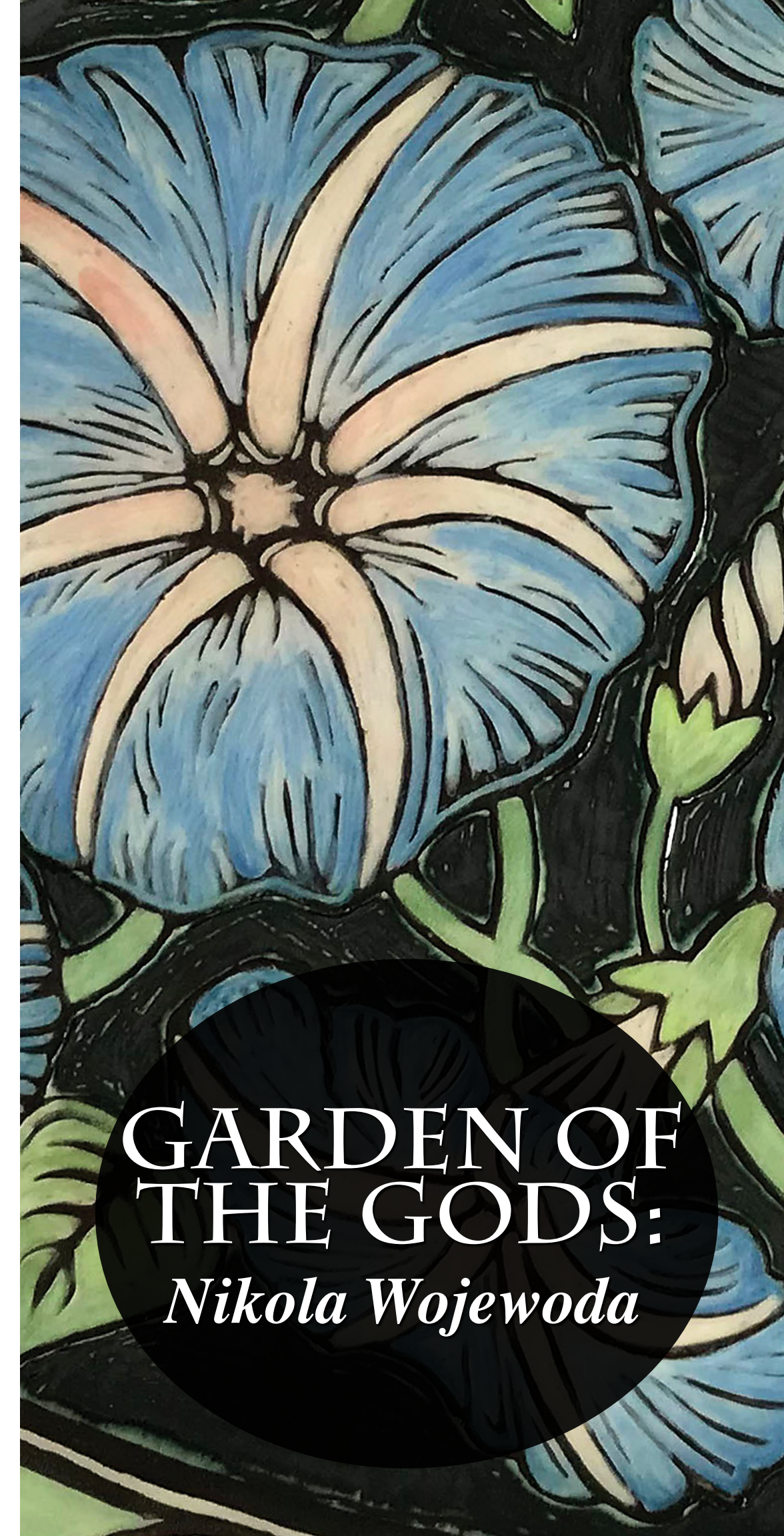


The Keith and Winifred Shantz Fund for the Arts



Canada Council for the Arts

Conseil des Arts du Canada



GARDEN OF
THE GODS:
Nikola Wojewoda