

**Tiffany Besonen and LouAnn Shepard Muhm, Cedar Crest College,
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In 2010 at Concordia College in Minnesota, LouAnn Shepard Muhm and Tiffany Besonen attended a symposium called The Artist in Society that discussed Babylonian Incantation Bowls from the 6-8th Century AD. One of several kinds of amulets, or objects that protect one from evil or harm, the yellow, wide-mouthed, bisqueware vessels are commonly unearthed today in Iraq, a historic crossroads of religion. Syriac Christianity, Mandaism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and older Mesopotamian religions started here, and after the 7th century Islam joined the mix. A universal belief during this era was that sin, something you knowingly or unknowingly did wrong, was the cause illness; and that demons, either inherently malicious ones or ones sent by an angered deity, visited affliction for mysterious reasons. Incantation bowls were covered with Aramic, Mandaic or Syriac script that ran from the rim into the middle or from the center out to the rim. Near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers: prayers, incantations, laws and literacy overlapped and evolved together as social powers. 'Miracles' were distinguished from 'magic' mostly as an attempt to elevate one's religious practice over rival methods and beliefs; and yet, the script on incantation bowls evoked even older deities such as: Astarte, the goddess of fertility, sexuality and war, and Pazuzu, the king of the wind demons, or bearer of storms and drought. Commissioning incantation bowls was a thriving business, a form of insurance, and the bowls were buried upside down to capture evil spirits: at thresholds, in courtyards, at the four corners of a house or in the homes of the recently dead.

Like the Jewish practice of placing a mezuzah inscribed with a homeowner's name at the left side of a doorway, incantation bowls sought to control demons at the limit of a home, where public space transforms into private.

Reassurances: Incantation Bowls Reimagined, considers the ancient need to control illness, misfortune and other hazards as being contiguous with our modern one. In their collaboration, LouAnn and Tiffany reassert the fact that our collective fears are hot-wired to our human need to control circumstances. The incantation poet half of the collaboration, LouAnn, states, "I originally thought these poems would be about 'contemporary fears' (terrorism, chemicals, technology...), but what I finally came to is that human fears are and always have been the same three: fear of the unknown, fear of suffering and fear of isolation...That is one of the many revelations that came as the result of writing these poems."

Replicating Babylonian incantation bowls, Tiffany molds sewing pattern paper around exercise balls, and seals them with clear acrylic; and the resulting semi-transparent forms seem cryptically marked with typeface, arrows and selvage lines, recalling ancient cuneiform script. She transcribes LouAnn's poems in black paint marker working from the outside rim of the bowl towards the middle. At the center, where Babylonian demons were symbolically held captive, she paints hybrid fox or crow images in black tempera. In traditional folktales, foxes are characters of cunning and trickery and crows are associated with death and

bad luck; but for her, "Crows and foxes have become characters of these poems against fears, reassurances that our fears cannot win. In some cases the crow and fox are the fear itself. In others, they are us, empowered to overcome fears."

For Tiffany and LouAnn, Fox and Crow represent cancer, violence, poverty, ignorance, and loss of hope, or the fear of these horrors, and/or the empowered artists and viewers themselves. Their collaboration injects the Postmodern concern with absence, lack and emptiness into Babylonian personification and dualism. LouAnn's poem *This is a talisman against want* visualizes a lack of money, self-recriminations and jealousy as a multi-faceted demon, one that is boiled down into a single character, rendering it less powerful. *Twin Demons* calls two demons named *Known* and *Same*, embodiments of boredom and lack of courage, out on the carpet, prodding the poet to confess that she needs to embrace starting over again. Conversely, *Violence* transforms a shared state of destructive being into an object: a tool, a god, blood, then banishes it and condemns it to bury itself. *Litany* speaks in puns and with double meaning, seeking to distinguish cause from effect. The line "That our travel may reveal what is fulcrum, what is spoke," contrasts balancing with branching out from a center, but it also makes a pun on speech. And *O Body* conjures up the physical horrors of the flesh, only to beg that we be allowed to forget.

These mini-dramas diverge from, and then reincorporate the Babylonian dialectic of good verses evil. Even though cancer, violence, poverty, ignorance

and loss of hope (and any number of other evils one can think of) rule us now just as completely as they did the ancients: collective conceptualization of these terrors has changed. History provides the model for *Reassurances: Incantation Bowls, Reimagined* but our collaborators take the leap, devising new words and images to collar familiar demons.