A New Book Project for Mary Heebner
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By Charles Donelan

POETIC POTS: “Geography is fate,” proclaims artist and poet Mary Heebner in “notes from below,” part two of her new project called Unearthed. It’s a conclusion that Heebner has come to the hard way, through years of study, travel, art making, and spiritual questing. Rooted in her experiences camping in the mountains of Patagonia on the border between Chile and Argentina, Unearthed combines Heebner’s skill as a printmaker with her painting. Its style will be familiar to those acquainted with her gorgeous and profound artist’s book of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, but there’s also a new dimension. Offered as a limited edition of 20 in a beautifully handcrafted case, the two artist’s books Heebner has made out of her paintings, prints, and sketches of messen (indigenous Mapuche amphorae and ceremonial vessels) include her original writing, as well as her art. Instead of adapting the words of a great poet, as Heebner has done memorably not only with Shakespeare but also with the work of Pablo Neruda, she is now writing, as well, and doing so in a way that is both impressive and touching. For instance, there’s a timeless thrill to the opening, which says that “the earth is a vessel containing
everything, even that which is only dreamed or unbuilt.” The text for the smaller volume, “notes from below,” reflects a lifetime of interest in the deep time of archaeology. For Heebner, the entire project came together through the philosophical interest she found in ancient pots she handled as a visitor to Puerto Natales, Last Hope Fjord, Patagonia. Describing their significance, she elaborated an understanding of human growth as a complex process of balancing inner forces with context, and nature with nurture. Heebner told me that the subject of vessels mattered to her because she wanted to communicate “the sense that you’re formed from the inside out and from the outside in.” “I imagine it as a kind of pressure—just like what a potter does with her hands—two forces blending from the inside and the outside simultaneously to force something up,” she explained.

Heebner embodies what is possible for artists who dedicate themselves to perfecting the balance of inner and outer pressures that she portrays. Her work bridges the perceived gap between intuition and scholarship, and in so doing has grown to occupy a place alongside the visionary company of composite artists like William Blake, from whom she has clearly learned so much. Her advice to young artists on how to approach their careers I found salutary: “Finding your voice is hard work. It takes time. One of the things that we are so disjointed about now is the sense of time. Students are not always aware that there is an arc to an artist’s development, and that they will experience different levels of proficiency at different stages in their careers. They expect it all to happen at once, and that’s not how it works. You can have a marketing plan, but that’s not the same thing as making a mark.” For more information about Unearthed, visit maryheebner.com.