

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

MFA in Visual Arts Theses

Lesley University College of Art and Design
(LA+D)

Summer 6-2023

Both Human and Holy: A Veneration of Personhood Through Mythic Means

Abigail Porter

abigailporterarts@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/mfa_visual_theses



Part of the [Classics Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Porter, Abigail, "Both Human and Holy: A Veneration of Personhood Through Mythic Means" (2023). *MFA in Visual Arts Theses*. 19.

https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/mfa_visual_theses/19

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Lesley University College of Art and Design (LA+D) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in MFA in Visual Arts Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Both Human and Holy:

A Veneration of Personhood Through Mythic Means

Abigail Porter

Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

Lesley University College of Art and Design

Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

June 2023

Abstract

Mythology acts as a reflection of humanity, a connection of personhood and storytelling that spans through history. This essay covers how the ideas of myth, personhood, archetype, and portraiture remain central to my work. The nature of mythology is innately human in all aspects, centering on ideas being both fictitious and truthful - which allows the ideas of the dualistic aspects between the personhood and mythos with the figures worked with. My work is about people; I elevate the figure into mythic while using those myths to discuss the aspects of identity. My work leans heavily upon my own fixation of the face and fascination with mythology, exploring the way those two interact and allowing the exploration of these concepts.

Introduction

Within mythology resides a reflection of humanity and art which I tap into for my work. By using these stories, I articulate differing aspects of identity, broadly working within ideas of archetype and stereotype, which while seemingly at odds often play into one another in interesting ways. By nature humanity is more than we appear; there are multitudes which sit within identity and personhood, differing aspects of the same person - I attempt to scratch into that idea of humanity. I observe a person and, by using the information I already know and what is observed in each painting session, translate them into the story. These people become the heads of myth, finding themselves as monsters, gods and heroes.

I incorporate varied elements to render these sometimes incongruous ideas - including the reuse of models, mask-like quality, and the mythological motifs. The sheer abundance of my work predisposes it towards a salon style display, allowing it to interact and overwhelm in ways it cannot when placed alone. This project acts as an exploration

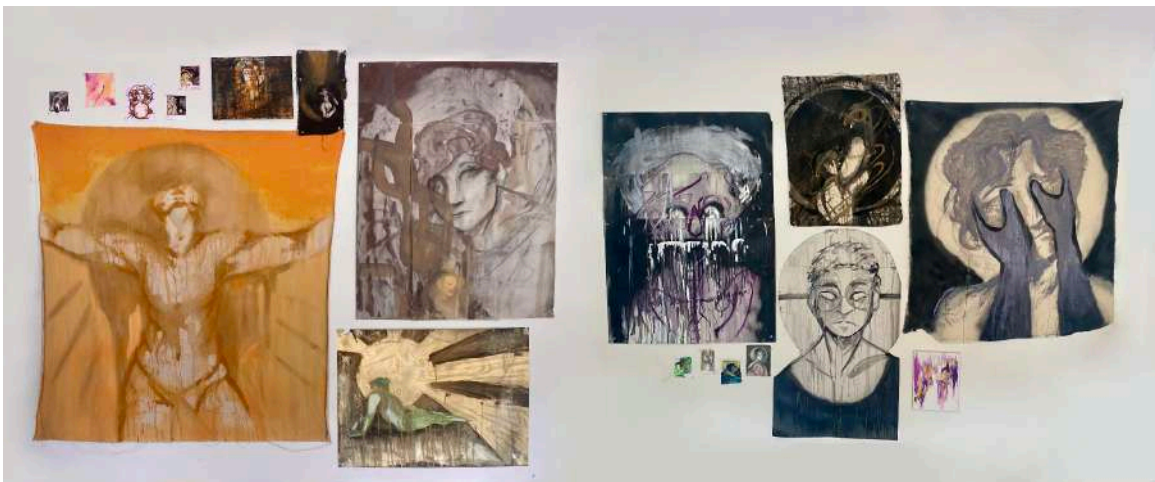


Fig. 1: Abigail Porter, Salon Style Display - Paintings, 2023

of my own fascination and fixation on both the figure and mythology, and how those two interact within the ideas of personhood.

I delve into problems of portraiture, identity, archetype, and mythology, allowing all of these aspects to interplay and illustrate the consistent thread of individuality through humanity and mythology. I expand upon how myth allows these ideas to be built upon and related to people within contemporary times.

Mythology

Mythology, by definition, is set of stories or beliefs about a particular person, institution, or situation, especially when exaggerated or fictitious (“Mythology”, def. 1.a.). While a bit of a dry definition, it provides an easy jumping off point to our discussion. Mythology by nature ties into humanity’s need to explain and create; though it must be said that much of the myth we have now are melded together folk stories that are not in their original forms¹. As it is, this creates an interesting parallel between

¹ Much of mythology is thought to be originally orally told, but the recorded versions we have are translations and compilations: for example the Poetic and Prose Edda, which provide much of what we know about Norse Mythology, were minstrel poems before they were translated and put to page - though it must be said that they are not, strictly, a primary source. Even the date of these works is widely debated, as firm conclusions are difficult to reach, but that we do know is that the works were assembled in the 13th century, long after they’d been actively told (Hopkins). Additionally, because of the differing, conquering powers and cultures overlapping and devouring much of themselves, there is an unknown number of mythologies that have been lost and/or overwritten. Much of what we do know were rewritten by Christian historians that often wrote their own beliefs into the works, as happened within the Poetic and Prose Eddas. There is also the problem of translations: Emily Wilson recently became the first woman to fully translate the Odyssey and found much of where the work felt with women was mistranslated - i.e. calling women sluts or bitches rather than using the adjective ‘hounded’ or ‘dog-faced’ which were closer - used to indict a correlation between Helen, her situation and the animal; this difference is thought to be based off misogyny (Wilson, 43-44). My work acts as an extension of these oral traditions, a repetition of the mythic patchwork. The written versions of these oral poems melded together with versions of older folkloric tales, all combined and repeated as the poets tell the story, differing on the basis of who spoke. I function similarly to such a poet, bringing these figures forward and allowing the work to tell these stories in their melded repetition, a modern continuation of the oral traditions.

humanity and mythology - humans shift and change and their myths follow behind them in the same way, evolving alongside humanity with people, in turn, continuing to decontextualize and reconfigure these stories.

Humanity and mythology are interchangeably shaped by one another. Humans, of course, created mythologies, but their fluidity and evolving nature has shaped and been shaped by each generation. Throughout history, we have taken these stories and melded them into a reflection of the times we live in; to illustrate, the musical *Hadestown* retreads the story of Orpheus and Eurydice while simultaneously spinning a parable about industrialization and unity of the working class, both of which are widely discussed within contemporary times. While *Hadestown* is deliberately and obviously political, it does so through the lens of the ancient tales, adding the weight of the mythicized figures we're familiar with.

This reworking of myth is something I am intimately familiar with in my own practice, though I do so through the lens of painting rather than theater. The invocation of substance is gifted through mythology, references to known works can bestow familiarity to the work. The myth provides a starting point in that flash of recognition, “[the viewer] would have been charmed by the title, the attraction of the myth, and the wealth of associations it brings to mind” (Hirsh and Wallace, 73). We know these stories and names, we associate the art automatically with what we know, to call something Icarus is to bring in the discussion of hubris. By giving us that context, the artist provides an initial introduction to the work, an invitation to sit and understand the work to a fuller extent, a starting point to observe through.

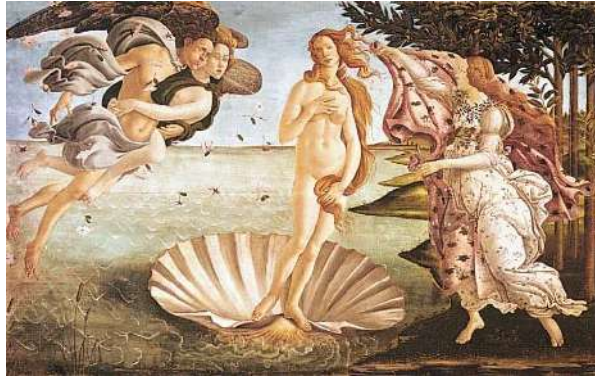


Fig. 2: Sandro Botticelli. *Birth of Venus* - Painting.
109.6 in x 67.9 in. 1485

Within art, the practice of invoking these figures and stories is familiar and classically weighted. Mythology would likely never be as widespread or discussed without the continual artistic focus on these stories. The two are intertwined to an overwhelming result, to where the historic nature of art would not be the same without these stories. The prominent place of myth within art, especially Greco-Roman myth², falls in line with the Euro-centric, western focus of much of art history. Historians were fascinated with the statues and motifs of the Roman and Greek empires; look only to the reverence we hold the marble statues with, as an immaculate study of the realistic,

² Of course, there is a multitude of reasons behind the focus on Greco-Roman myth: the western focus of our society as a whole, the Greco-Roman inspiration that multiple western cultures draw inspiration from (a great many of which claim to be direct inheritors of the Roman Empire), and the overwhelming colonization that both the Roman and British Empires afterward expanded. Roman culture would secretive the mythos by absorbing the cultures of the conquered, using the conquered place's folklore to expand their own legends and equating foreign gods to their own familiar ones. The repetition of classical works centering on myth also contribute to their widespread nature, such as *the Odyssey*, *Illiad*, *the Epic of Gilgamesh* and more.

unblemished human figures³. An artist elevates themselves in the art world when using mythos - it brings the work into the historic context of mythic works. For example, Botticelli used mythic interpretation to cement his place in art cannon. *The Birth of Venus* (Fig. 2) is arguably Botticelli's most famous work and pertains completely to mythic interpretations⁴. Throughout the many artistic movements, mythology has remained a steadfast inspiration. Cy Twombly, for instance, worked within Greek Mythology, including a ten part series focused completely on the story of Homer's *Illiad*, titled *Fifty Days at Illiam* (1978) (Fig. 3). In these works, there is no clear narrative, symbols or



Fig. 3: Cy Twombly, *Fifty Days in Illiam* (*Heroes of the Illiam* (left) and *Heroes of the Achaens* (right)

³ The irony here being that these marble statues were never meant to remain purely white. “The idea ancients disdained bright color ‘is the most common misconception about Western aesthetics in the history of Western art... a lie we all hold dear’” (Abbe qtd. Talbot [end second paragraph]. Pigment and gold have long been found on the surface of the statues, but for a long time, historians ignored it in favor of the high held belief in the pure, unblemished marble. This could be considered another way of reimagining the mythic figures we are given, choosing our new aesthetics rather than the historic evidence that goes against them.

⁴ Within the hierarchies of painting, mythological painting is classified under History painting, which was seen as the top of said hierarchy. It also allowed the elite to have plausible deniability when observing carnal imagery, moral metaphors and nudity. Venus is one of the most commonly depicted figures in art history and is often invoked in relation to nudity, sex and love. It is common to cite Venus in depictions of lovers; purposefully used to be enticing, Venus acts as a multifaceted depiction of the female body, as beauty and commodity. It also often allowed the artists to place the effects of lust and other ‘sinful’ thoughts on the woman, as Venus was seen as a temptress. To quote, John Berger, “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you have depicted for your own pleasure.”

figures, instead a sense of momentum propels viewer forwards, names giving a flash of reference and an illustration of the feelings surrounding the Illiad through simplistic line and harsh scribbling. Botticelli and Twombly provide clear, differing examples in the ways myth can be used in art, but both give clear indications of how using these familiar stories can gift the artworks with more familiar and inherent meaning through those references.

While these two examples deal primarily in classical mythologies, my work shifts into a contemporary school of thought - I.e. focusing primarily on the individuals within the stories rather than the mythic morals and historic reflections. Placing such a focus on the humanistic aspects of myth is a largely contemporary concept; most contemporary storytelling focuses primarily on character driven ideals - largely focusing on the various aspects of personal identity and the internal lives of the characters beyond overall themes. While classical myth has the weight of history behind it, especially Greco-Roman myth, I feel that focusing on the human perspective revitalizes these well-trod myths. This is helped as well by the use of differing mythos - I look to incorporate a wide range of mythologies after much research⁵ and ensuring that the mythologies are not closed

⁵ Research is often an unseen aspect to my work - I look into the various mythologies, the beliefs, the figures within them and how the mythologies were depicted throughout history. It can take quite a bit to read and understand the mythologies but I do my best to do so. I see it as something of respect for the cultures I'm using for my own purposes, the least I can do is understand what I'm using. My works include much of this research if you are familiar with the mythologies or figures, but they are not needed for the works to be understood or viewed, acting more as extra context and interpretation if you see them.

practices⁶. The multitude of mythologies allow the works to interact and connect in intensely interesting ways, creating new stories within the ways they interact.

Mythic figures lend themselves to those I paint. This comes, first and foremost, from titling conventions, i.e. naming each painting after the figure in myth, but also from the ways the works are done, the symbols, and motifs interwoven within. *Cassandra* (Fig. 4) refers to the figure within Greek myth, who was gifted with prophecy but cursed to never be believed, alongside various assaults and insults. The story of Cassandra is classical tragedy, even before the Homeric poems in which her kidnapping and subsequent murder is depicted. Familiar elements of personhood, a begging to be believed, disregard, and being punished for a man's feeling all play into her story and I attempt to incorporate those while the painting this figure, the models of which acts as a reflection for Cassandra story⁷. Details of the story can be found within the work, a covered mouth, skeletal line-work, halo motifs, and color choices. It does not



Figure 4: Abigail Porter. *Cassandra* - Painting, 72 x 24 in. March 2022

⁶ Closed practices are generally living religions and mythologies, but not all mythologies are dead ones - Hindi mythology for example. There is an important aspect of research to my work that is not always seen and within that I ensure not to tread into cultures where I'm not wanted. I want to use the mythologies I research in a way that is respectful to the cultures that believed these stories, as humanity in all its forms deserves respect.

⁷ While I do not feel comfortable fully explaining the relations between my model and Cassandra, I do feel it is important to explain that there is connection. I try to find various ways in which the stories of myth and the parts of my model's identity and life story interact in order for there to be a reason and meaning behind placing them as these figures. The abstraction and mask-like quality for my work allows there to be a certain amount of vulnerability and expose for my models, allowing their stories to be told without fully connected to themselves. This is best illustrated in relation to the story of Cassandra, as certain points can be drawn from the context, but the figure is still shrouded enough that the knowledge isn't translucent.

literally translate the myth into illustration; rather I borrow elements to find an understanding to the story and the figure. I would rather interpret and reconstruct the figure, providing it room to breathe and articulate the story in its own way.

Similar ideas of interpretation go into my painting *Daphnis* (Fig. 5). The figure of Daphnis is a smaller player within folkloric Greek stories, though funnily enough he also gains the gift of prophecy within his story - through that isn't the focal point. In the story, Daphnis is loved by a nymph, who says that should he ever love another, he shall be blinded. As is the way with mythology, he does eventually fall in love and is subsequently blinded⁸. This is where I find the focus in the painting, that interconnection between love and violence so central to humanity.

Within the painting, I attempted to illustrate the dichotomy that the myth so clearly articulates, having the figure with their face held, but two thumbs over the eyes, poised to gouge them out. I paint the figure far more delicately than the background or the hands, wanting both to feel heavier than the figure themselves, the oddity of the ill-defined details of the hands would denote the



Fig. 5: Abigail Porter. *Daphnis* - Painting.
40 x 34 in. October 2022

⁸ This feels an appropriate place to state I am well aware that not everyone is as familiar with myth as I am, nor do I expect the viewer to know every figure I reference (Daphnis being a wonderful example of this as, while he comes from the largely known Greco-Roman mythos, he is an exceedingly small figure). However, I hope to use the figures in a way that connote meaning - that these figures act as interpretations of an archetype, conveying feeling rather than meaning and the person more than the myth. Of course, should a person be familiar with the myth or further research, there is even more to be found within the works and more meaning to be gleaned. I do not, however, feel it necessary to work for every viewer to have the knowledge I do.

deferential nature within these two ideals.

While displaying my work, I tend to place them in a salon style so they may interact. I often think of my paintings as a Greek Chorus, non-individualized figures who discuss the dramatic action as a collective voice. “The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be [an] integral part of the whole and share in the action” (Aristotle, “Poetics” 18(D)). While not fully identifiable, the chorus is integral to that world of the plays - the figures are interchangeable yes, but they each have a part to play. My work functions in a chorus while together. The pieces bounce and play off of one another, creating a conversation between the different figures of myth, the friends who sit for my work and the differing bits of identity hidden in my paintings.

Over the course of my time in graduate school, I’ve done over four hundred complete works, a full pantheon if you will⁹, all figures of myth, all complimenting and juxtaposing one another. When I show the work, I do so in the salon style¹⁰, packing the wall space with much work as can fit - the overwhelming amount of work seen creates a mythic ambiance and interaction through the differing styles.

⁹ To continue in relation to abundance, I believe that much of my work and by extension the amount of my work, is the result of a compliance towards repetition. Whether it be the repeating factors of my models or the repeating stories, the works have overlapping, repeating factors - the lack of eyes, the stylization of the face, the halo motifs, identifying with aspects of identity and archetype at the same time. This could be lend much to the very nature of the mythic stories I work with, which by their nature are repeated and reworked and repeated again - it follows that my paintings would do the same. To borrow the words of John Steinbeck: “So many scholars have spent so much time trying to establish whether [King] Arthur existed at all that they lost track of the single truth, that he exists over and over.”

¹⁰ I’ve found, as a rule, that my works do not function nearly as well without one another. They respond to one another, they speak, but without one another it’s as though witnessing half of the conversation, the last pieces hanging out to dry. The works are varying sizes, varying levels, varying manifestations, varying colors and names. This all provides a level of theatrics that plays into the concepts I work within. It almost appears as a shrine, an overwhelming chorus sounding to the audience.

Archetype and Identity

Carl Jung discussed a theory of collective unconsciousness - i.e. the part of the mind containing memories/impulses of which the person is unaware. According to Jung, the collective unconscious is what contained archetype; the varieties of human experience fully coded into our genetics and inherited through generations, Jung's theories were largely used in works such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*¹¹ which provides the basis for a large amount of our media in contemporary times¹²: Disney, for example, uses the format for a majority of their works. Additionally, it gives us the twelve archetypes: the innocent, the everyman, the hero, the outlaw, the explorer, the creator, the ruler, the magician, the lover, the caregiver, the jester and the sage¹³. "In the course of ontogenic development, the individual consciousness of the thinking person must go through the same archetypal stages that determine the development of the

¹¹ It should be said that Campbell does not seem to understand his mono-myth and the 'hero's journey' does not exist in a vacuum; he generalizes and stereotypes at will, plucking aspects of myth and Freudian theory where they support his ideas and abandoning everything else. Common traits, story beats and archetypal characters are interesting of course, but the variations and differences cannot and should not be ignored. In Campbell's work, everything is summed into the understanding of perennial philosophy and these forms of globalism/universalism tends to denote or ignore the individualized aspects that come from both storytelling and humanity on the whole. Generalizing the individual aspects of anything, I believe, tends to spoil the whole - there is more interest and understanding to be found outside of such generalization.

¹² It should be said that this does not only relate to contemporary times - the ideas of archetype and the concept of a mono-myth or mythos being interconnected go as far back as storytelling can be remembered. Folk tales by nature are incredibly formulaic and rely on the audience's understanding of their archetypes: princess, evil witch, good witch, etc. in order for the work to be understood. Folk tales rely heavily on archetype that much of the figures within them go unnamed, instead titled by their archetypes, the Front Prince for example. Overall, the ideas of archetype and a mono-mythic storyline are not modern, but rather just another continuation of traditional storytelling.

¹³ I do need to state for prosperity's sake that Jung believed that you are born into one of these archetypes and are unable to change it. This was a firm belief of his and I think most can understand how it is a flawed train of thought. Jung was a big believer in predisposition and his archetypes align with this, and align with common character types within stories. To say they work perfectly within real life is to simply be wrong. Of course, Jung's theories and work largely build off his personal beliefs and things we now know to be pseudoscience, but there is worth to be found within his work.

consciousness of humanity as a whole” (Neumann, 1998). On the psychoanalytical basis, individual personality plays immediately into the archetype you fall into - Jung believed the assimilation of archetype and individual “consists in becoming a separate being and, as we understand by personality our deepest, last and incomparable uniqueness, to become our own self” (Jung, 2002). While the ideas of personal identity may seem antithetical to the aspects of archetype I work with, the two are not strictly opposites. In fact, since my work largely deals with taking a person and dissolving them into both a figure of mythic understanding and differing aspects of self-simultaneously, the dissection and qualifying of personhood that resides within the discussion of archetype slides nicely into how I formulate my works.

Archetype generalizes by nature; by definition, archetype is a very typical example of a person or thing (“Archetype”, def. 1). Identity, on the other hand, is individual - the fact of being who or what a person or thing is (“Identity”, def. 1). In many ways, my work is both - every work is a singular figure, both in relation to the model and relation to the myth, but the figure is also a placeholder to the story of said work, working within general and genre. The balance of these two ideas exists within each painting, though it will tilt in either direction as the works demand. If one were to look at my work, they might find certain faces becoming familiar (for example, the same figure is in the paintings in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) - as there are five models I work with¹⁴, the work does not focus entirely on their identities. Even if the viewer is to recognize the

¹⁴ There are about five models who have the patience to sit for me, the majority of which I’ve work with long enough that I can draw their faces from memory. There is an intimacy that comes from only painting the close companions of your life and shifting them into something more. My work focuses largely on people, but it does feel important to emphasize that these are people I know and care for, as that adds a charge to the works that I believe work of strangers don’t include.

person, it would be difficult to identify them beyond the stylizations of the paintings. In this way, I disguise the person to an extent, unraveling them until their threads can be woven back into a less literal representation. There is a loss of identity within this process, as the person is dissolved into base components, sketching and twisting them into abstract and stylized forms¹⁵. This is of course helped by using my primary medium, watercolor, which plays into this idea of dissolving and reforming through the varying levels of washes and drips implemented. I do add other mediums, but watercolor has remained a steadfast ingredient to all my works. Watercolor provides a certain amount of chaos and spontaneity which plays well into the aspects of mythology. The process of my work relies heavily on aspects of impulsivity, the aspects do not always fall clearly in line with the meanings and ideas behind my work.

From this stylization is born the archetypes I work within, the figures I hang the meaning on. While Jung does lay out his twelve archetypes, the archetypes I work within are the mythic figures I use, placing them as stand-ins for the aspects of identity, story and meaning. For example, *Fire-*



Fig. 6: Abigail Porter, *Fire-Bringer* - Painting, 32 in. x 44 in. January 2023

¹⁵ I feel it is important to explain a bit of my process here, for reference: my models will sit for me initially and I sketch them, during which I decide on color palettes, myths to attach to the paintings and general atmosphere, though this is apt to change once I'm into the work. From these sketches I move to the substrate and re-sketch the figure out there, obstructing and stylizing them further. There I begin working within paints and other materials, dissolving and playing with the figure intuitively as the painting moves further and eventually ends. Arriving at the end of a painting isn't always clear, as where it ends tends to be reliant on feeling more than anything else. Much of my work is done off instinct and intuitive movement, but the disappearing of the figure is a reliable choice.

Bringer (Fig. 6) acts as the archetypal figure of the fire-bringer, a figure which appears in most mythologies, deeply rooted and diverse in presentations, but often associated with the gift of wisdom and advancements of humans as a species. Some examples of fire-bringers include Prometheus, Rainbow Crow, Grandmother Spider, Coyote and Maui. Those who bring fire tend to be punished for their help of humanity, but that is not always the case. Using this figure within work does a lot in the way of implication for meaning, doing much of the heavy lifting in terms of connotation for those familiar with the concept. Of course, within the majority of my work, the archetypal figure is a specific mythic figure rather than a category of myth, but they still reside as archetypal figures representing their various stories and implications within the meanings of the work.

To repeat a previous analogy, Icarus is an archetypal stand-in for a discussion of



Fig. 7: Chris Burden, *Icarus*, April 13, 1973 -
Performance, April 1973

hubris, to reference Icarus is to give an immediate concept to the work - as it is in Chris Burden's performance work, *Icarus*, April 13, 1973 (Fig. 7). While the performance piece does not illustrate Icarus clearly, it does bring the discussion that is consistent around the

mythic figure, of hubris and continually ignored warnings of dangers¹⁶. Burden's work consisted of himself, naked, laid under two plains of glass with gasoline spilled overtop; during the performance, the gas was set alight and he stood, shattering the glass and spreading the fire. Burden meant to use this piece to shock an audience desensitized by the Vietnam War. Of course, this piece used the story of the myth to build its own narrative and meaning, but at the center of the discussion is the archetypal figure of Icarus. "The evens may be anecdotic ... but the mythic form gives them a concentrated meaning and universal impact" (Hirsh and Wallace, 61).

While my work widely uses these archetypes and mythic figures, the center of my work revolves and rests upon the figures I paint. There is an amount of obstruction and obliteration within the stylization of my figures, but I believe this allows an amount of protection to my subjects; an invitation for the figure to be vulnerable and reveal these different aspects of the self that may remain hidden for a majority of their lives. While these figures have come to be certain archetypes of their own throughout my work, they are still truly people. People are endlessly fascinating for a multitude of reasons and part of that is the archetypal humanity, to try and define humans as a whole is like trying to catch water between your fingers. You'll never be able to get it right. You can't define

¹⁶ The story of Icarus is a test of hubris, but one I think people often misinterpret. Of course, the myth synonymously linked with the warning of flying too close to the sun - a warning I think Burden played into with his discussion of politics in Vietnam wartimes, but Icarus was also warned against flying too close to the sea for fear of water loosening the wax on his feathers. I think the secondary idea plays into a lot of Burden's works as a whole as, if nothing else, Burden could never be accused of flying too low and playing hit safe - the man was shot in the arm for his work after all (Shoot (1971) in which a friend shot him in the arm with a rifle).

Often in our society, the discussion centers on Icarus's first warning, due to the nature of sociopolitical structures, but while the nature of Icarus is to act as cautionary tale, when referenced in art it is often placed as something more of an inevitable tragedy. While Burden's work is meant more to shock and gain attention for the political leanings he had, i.e. the violence and pointlessness of the Vietnam war, I feel that the inclusion of Icarus provides a further layer of tragedy into his discussion - creating a feeling of inevitable doom to the analysis.

humanity as a whole because humanity isn't a whole. A human isn't even a whole, but rather a collective, made up of memories and morals and so much more - within my work, I attempt to dig in and illustrate those various aspects.

The fixation of focus on the figure and more precisely the face provides a continual thread through my work - while the works are familiar cast of figures, the faces reworked to the point of memorization, the exploration of the figures never reaches an end. While this plays into both the aspects of repetition and the understanding of abundance, the conceptual aspects of the repeated figures provide the basis for the understanding of identity and the multitude of selves within the work. At the heart of human experience is the overly complex and often confusing concept of self and identity, a concept which can be mined and explored to an infinite degree. In my works, I illustrate and use my figures, repeating the motifs and muses in order to delve into the multitude of self and the interest that comes from all these various aspects, pulling both archetype and identity to show these figures in the various stories.

Portraiture

While all these ideas of personhood, archetype and identity are central to my works, I have always struggled to call the works portraits - instead I tend towards identifying them as figurative works. Some of this comes from the etymology of the word 'portrait': which comes from the latin 'portrayer' which translates to 'to drag out, reveal, expose' and is often referring to a singular person. "The very fact of the portrait's allusion

to an individual human being, actually existing outside the work, defines the function of the artwork in the world and consists the cause of its coming into being. This vital relationship between the portrait and its object of representation directly reflects the social dimension of human life as a field of action among persons, with its own repertoire of signals and messages” (Brilliant, 8). While I do paint people, I paint them rather as a collective: they are the figure, the myth, the story and the feelings all wrapped into one.

Portraiture in all its forms has long since been a staple of the art world; humanity is always drawn to depictions of themselves and the urge to leave mark of their own. Portraiture and figural works are defined as graphic and detail depictions of a person, but they often deal in themes and meanings beyond that definition.



Fig. 8: Harmonia Rosales,
The Birth of Oshun - Painting,
55 x 67 in. 2018



Fig. 9: Harmonia Rosales, *Winter* -
Painting,
24 x 24 in. 2018

Harmonia Rosales is a contemporary example of portraiture that expands the discussion of who is represented and the idea of a multitude of selves. Rosales works within similar aspects of mythology and identity as myself, but she focuses highly on the underrepresented people of color in high art and reimagining classical paintings and

motifs with a person of color and African culture at the center: *The Birth of Oshun* (Fig. 8) rather than *The Birth of Venus* for example. However, she works from pure imagination rather than a certain model (Fig. 9), “I don’t want to just be a work for somebody, to do somebody’s portrait. I want to do this because I don’t see this” (Rosales qtd. Kusch). Her ideas of complete creation in relation to what can only be classified as portraiture is incredibly interesting and how she weaves this into classical motifs of mythological figures, with the inclusion of multitude of references towards classical paintings and African culture truly elevates and brings forth the discussion on why these bodies and stories were not included in the first place. The portraits Rosales paints are beautiful, but I find the facts does not use a model to be most interesting - after all, no one can deny these are portrait, but in the same vein as my own discomfort with the classification, these aren’t paintings of a singular person. Technically, they’re not paintings of real people, that makes them truly fascinating in the discussions of what portraiture truly is¹⁷.

There is also Jenny Saville’s paintings, which are highly detailed portraits that push into the grotesque - smears of pigment and scrapes of paint creating a visceral depiction of flesh. In Saville’s own words, “human perception of the body is so acute and knowledge that the smallest hint of a body can trigger recognition” (Saville qtd. Cooke). While her work can tinge towards the uncanny valley (Fig. 10), her work speaks clearly

¹⁷ To continue this discussion, I would like to bring up the AI tools that are beginning to circulate and be used to create a person from nothing, such as the website: thispersondoesnotexist.com. Artists have begun to use this to illustrate portraits and incorporate them into their work. It continues the question of what truly constitutes a portrait, after all if these people don’t exist, do works including them act as a portrait? Should AI tools like this be treated in the same ways a reference photos? The development of AI technology is truly pushing tools forward and adding to what artists have available to work with.

to the personhood of her subjects; her subjects are drawn from life and the work feels as though you too are sitting in their space. Saville said of the meanings of her work and painting in general: “Painting is my natural language. I feel in my own universe when I’m painting ... There’s been a drive ... to describe and to rationalize what it is you’re making and that is a death knell to painting. Painting doesn’t operate like that. It works on all irrational things” (Saville qtd. Cooke). This quote translates in Saville’s style of portraits - she

presents the person and lets the work speak for itself, and speak her portraits do, in their own incongruous ways.

In all my works the eyes are blank and missing, giving the portraits a mask-like appearance. Eyes are the windows of the soul and the key feature towards portraits, but the lack of eyes/the emptiness of the eyes draws attention. They give the work a sense of mystery and unknown meaning. It is similar to the work of Amedeo Modigliani, who left empty pools of color as the eyes (Fig. 11) and said of the practice: “When I know your soul, I will paint your



Fig. 10: Jenny Saville, *Atonement Studies: Central Panel (Rosetta)* - Painting, 6 x 6 ft. 2005-06



Fig. 11: Amedeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Paul Guillaume* - Painting, 31 x 21 in. 1916

eyes” (Modigliani qtd. Neri). Modigliani’s work is still incredibly expressive even without the eyes and you truly get a feel for his model while observing his works. I strive for a similar feeling within my paintings, to understand the person even without the eyes and to understand them even as the work serves as both the mask and figure.

The portrait acting as a mask interplays with the dissection of self and placing personhood into the myth being depicted, along with these ideas of multiple selves being depicted and embodied. It continues the ideas of multitudes being depicted within one painting, as though the figure can mix and match these depictions as masks when needed delving into the thought more, the fact that the same models are present throughout my work draws on this idea, leaning on the use of figures creating these different masks as they move about the paintings, almost as though it is a different world they exist within and these masks are how we can observe it. Additionally, returning to the idea of these works functioning as a chorus, the mask-like quality leans heavily onto this idea as masks were how the audience would recognize and understand the chorus. Similar to the chorus is the idea of the *Commedia Dell’arte*, an early form of professional theatre in which archetypal characters would be played and recognized by the costumes they wore, the most important item of which were their masks. It can be argued that the whole of my work functions as a painting form of the *Commedia Dell’arte*, drawing on the familiar tropes and understood archetypes that exist within mythology in order for the audience to read the works easily and recognize the implied meanings behind them, providing an invitation to investigate the works further, with each work acting as its own mask. In general, the mask-like quality invites that further inquiry as it provides a curiosity with

the lack of what is arguably the most distinguishable feature of the face, especially in relation to portraiture where the focus will always be on the face and its features.

This idea of empty eyes can best be seen within closer depictions of portraits, such as within *Sibyl* (Fig. 12), which while the eyes are blank they do give the impression of a weighted gaze and the figure's focus. The lack of eyes do not act as a detriment towards the portrait, but rather as an implication towards the meanings of the work. These blank eyes provide the basis for the portrait, but also the mask-like quality that comes with my portraiture works. Paintings stare back at the viewer, creating a system of dualistic observation. With certain paintings, *Sibyl* included, the weight of their gaze remains even when not being viewed and can be disquieting. The lack of eyes opens the discussion into the various ideas of identity, mythology, and masks that all are intertwined within the void of eyes.



Fig. 12: Abigail Porter, *Sibyl* - Painting, 24 x 42 in. 2023

Conclusion

While it might be tempting to focus on the mythological aspects of my work, the aspects of archetype, identity, and portraiture are as important and intertwined within the meaning - all details bind together to create cohesive works. While these concepts can seem at odds with one another, my work exists where they intersect. Mythology provides

a setting for discussions of archetype and personal identity. Portraiture provides a framework for everything to be depicted. If an aspect is missing, the work will no longer function.

While my work leans heavily upon my fixation on the face and fascination with mythology, it also speaks clearly to personhood in a multitude of forms - personal, archetypal, and mythic. I rely upon the abstraction and disruption of my figures, which in turn allows a certain amount of vulnerability and selfhood to be put on display, without which the work would be unable to function. My process leans heavily on intuitive decisions and impulsivity, letting the paint lead the work where it needs to go. By exploring these problems of portraiture, identity, archetype, and mythology, my work allows the consistent thread of personhood, humanity, and the collective portrait to be interpreted and understood.

Works Cited

- Alexandrini, Emily. "Contemporary Exhibition Inspired by the Sacred – Alter – Leaves One Changed." *The Offing*, 7 Oct. 2022, <https://theoffingmag.com/art/contemporary-exhibition-inspired-by-the-sacred-alter-leaves-one-changed/>.
- Anguluan-Coger, Ethelyn, "Intergenerational Mythweaving and Cultural Identity" (2013). *Expressive Therapies Dissertations*. 45. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_dissertations/45 Download 100 DOWNLOADS Since May 30, 2017
PLUMX METRICS INCLUDED IN Art Therapy Commons, Indigenous Studies Commons SHARE
- BARTHES, Roland, and Annette LAVERS. *Mythologies*. Penguin, 2000.
- Bone, Sarah E, and Joel Christensen. "The Man behind the Myth: Should We Question the Hero's Journey?" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Los Angeles Review of Books, 12 Aug. 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-man-behind-the-myth-should-we-question-the-heros-journey/>.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2020.
- de, Caro, Frank. *Folklore Recycled : Old Traditions in New Contexts*, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lesley/detail.action?docID=4397120>.
- Deitch, Jeffrey, et al. *Unrealism: New Figurative Painting*. Rizzoli Electa, 2019.
- Editor, Production. "Painting to Empower: An Interview with Artist Harmonia Rosales by Aya Kusch." *MAYDAY*, 2 Mar. 2022, <https://maydaymagazine.com/painting-to-empower-an-interview-with-artist-harmonia-rosales-by-aya-kusch/>.

- Eliade, Mircea, and Willard R. Trask. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt, 1987.
- Fortenberry, Diane, and Rebecca Morrill. *Flying Too Close to the Sun: Myths in Art from Classical to Contemporary*. Phaidon, 2018.
- From Word to Canvas : Appropriations of Myth in Women's Aesthetic Production*, edited by V.G. Julie Rajan, and Sanja Bahun-Radunović, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lesley/detail.action?docID=1132989>.
- Herbert, Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd Edition.
- Homer, and Emily R. Wilson. *The Odyssey*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.
- Homer, et al. *The Illiad* .. Pub. by J. Johnston, & Sharpe & Hailes; Print., by S. Hamilton, 1810.
- Hopkins, Joseph S. "Edda to English: Translations of the Prose Edda." *Mimisbrunnr.info: Developments in Ancient Germanic Studies*, <https://www.mimisbrunnr.info/edda-to-english>.
- "How Can We Understand Myth in Art?" *New Minds Eye*, 3 Feb. 2016, <https://newmindseye.wordpress.com/how-can-we-understand-myth-in-art/>.
- "Jenny Saville: 'I Want to Be a Painter of Modern Life, and Modern Bodies'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 June 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/jun/09/jenny-saville-painter-modern-bodies>.
- Kapoor, M. (2021). *The Present-Day Medusa: Foregrounding L'écriture Feminism in the*

Contemporary Retellings of Mythology. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 44(1), 89-97. <https://ezproxy.flo.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/present-day-medusa-foregrounding-lecriture/docview/2596972151/se-2>

Ledbetter, Grace. Review of Contemporary Art and Classical Myth, Review of Contemporary Art and Classical Myth *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*.

Lemmi, Charles W. *The Classic Deities in Bacon: A Study in Mythological Symbolism*. Kessinger Pub., 2010.

The Modern Myth: Drawing Mythologies in Modern Times, March 10, August 30, 2010, Museum of Modern Art, Joseph Beuys, Paul Cézanne, Enrique Chagoya, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Willem de Kooning, Juan Downey, Max Ernst, Adolph Gottlieb, Arshile Gorky, Wifredo Lam, Matta, Ana Mendieta, Wangechi Mutu, Pablo Picasso, Richard Prince, Jackson Pollock, Odilon Redon, Mark Rothko, Jim Shaw, and Andy Warhol

Moore, Willard B. "The Intersection of Folk and Fine Art." *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 36, no. 1, Jan. 1999, pp. 71–82. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=hlh&AN=15675863&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Morgunov*, G., & Cherepanov, I. (2019). Process Of Archetypal Individuation Of Personality. In & D. K. Bataev (Ed.), *Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism*, vol 58. *European Proceedings of Social and*

Behavioural Sciences (pp. 2764-2771). Future Academy. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2019.03.02.322>

Neri, Daniela. "Mirror of the Soul: Eyes in Art: Barnebys Magazine." Barnebys.com, Barnebys, 10 Sept. 2021, <https://www.barnebys.com/blog/mirror-of-the-soul-eyes-in-art>.

P., Della Monica Lauren. *Bodies of Work - Contemporary Figurative Painting*. Schiffer Publishing, 2016.

Read, Bridget. "The Liberating, Radical Politics of Hadestown." *Vogue*, Vogue, 7 June 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/article/hadestown-radical-politics-labor-review>.

Reed, Christopher. *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Roots, Jaime W. "Making Mythology: The Role of Ancient Faith in Crafting a Unifying Narrative in Teutonic Mythology and Children's and Household Tales." *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2020, pp. 174–98. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26977707>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

Silverman, Kaja. *Flesh of My Flesh*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Talbot, Margaret. "The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture." *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker*, 22 Oct. 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture>. Tate. "Myths and Legends Coursework Guide." Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/student-resource/exam-help/myths-and-legends>.

Wallace, Isabelle Loring, and Jennie Hirsh. *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*.

Routledge, 2016.