Myths and realities

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MYTHS AND REALITIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

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BFA, University of Central Arkansas, 2006
August 2011
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ABSTRACT

My work explores the manifold personalities and roles of contemporary women, through depicting different female figures from western mythology. The mythic women in my paintings each have their own personalities, stories and roles to play, which are often conflicting in nature. By having my model act as a mythological character and by replacing the scenes from mythology with a contemporary setting, my paintings emphasize the universal and timeless essence of women. Each painting also utilizes the symbolic use of color to intensify the sensory experience of the viewer. The mythic figures I rendered are Proserpine, Venus, Psyche, Penelope, Artemis, and Athena. The first three were painted on large canvases in oil; the rest were created as monotypes on paper. To address the duality and complexity of human nature, I painted two different images for each character. Two different scenes were extracted from Greek mythology for oil paintings. For monotypes, the same image was altered into two different versions.
MYTHS AND REALITIES

Introduction

We often hear people describe others with one word; “Liz is cool,” “Michael is a jerk,” “Heather is mean.” Snob, lazy, uptight, weird, funny, weak, cheap, strong, etc., the list goes on. When a person is described with such a word, particularly with one that has an extreme meaning, “bitch” or “idiot,” for example, it seems that the person is denied any of the other qualities, especially the opposite trait, which she/he may have. This labeling should be considered with skepticism. I believe that these qualities are based on the emotions that are innately programmed in all human beings; we are all capable of accessing all the traits mentioned above.

Understanding the universal nature of human beings could help us not only understand ourselves but also helps us experience empathy for others. Empathy is a crucial ability for bringing harmony to society. By rendering figures with different emotions, I communicate such ideas to the viewers through my work. If the viewers can relate themselves to the figures in my work, it will help them see that everyone feels the same emotions; that everyone goes through the same thing.

In this series “Myths and Realities,” I focused on female characters in Greek and Roman mythology because of their diverse personalities. With these characters as the subject matter, my work explores manifold personalities and roles of contemporary women to address the timelessness of human nature. The mythic women in my paintings each have their own personalities, stories and roles to play, which are often conflicting in nature. By having my model act as a mythological character and by replacing the scenes from mythology with a contemporary setting, my paintings emphasize the universal and unchanging essence of human beings. Each painting also utilizes the symbolic use of color and paint application to
intensify the sensory experience of the viewer.

**Collective Unconscious**

Carl. G. Jung’s theory on the collective unconscious and archetypes assumes that we all have two kinds of unconscious. One is called the personal unconscious, which is gained through the environment and individual experiences. The other is the collective unconscious, which is innate to all human beings, and which consists of numerous archetypes. Jung states that if the individual can face these archetypes properly through the symbolic images in dreams, they will have a great influence on his/her personality and life. He describes this deeper layer of unconscious as the following:

The unconscious is the psyche that reaches down from the daylight of mentally and morally lucid consciousness into the nervous system that for ages has been known as the “sympathetic.”… It maintains the balance of life and, through the mysterious paths of sympathetic excitation, not only gives us the knowledge of the innermost life of other beings but also has an inner effect upon them. In this sense it is an extremely collective system, the operative basis of all *participation mystique*. The cerebrospinal function experiences everything as an outside, whereas the sympathetic system experiences everything as an inside.¹

This collective unconscious and the primitive universal emotions are intertwined with one another as they are both embedded in all of us since the time we were formed inside of our mothers’ body. He also states that:

The collective unconscious is anything but an encapsulated personal system; it is sheer objectivity, as wide as the world and open to all the world. There I am the object of every subject, in complete reversal of my ordinary consciousness, … There I am utterly one with the world, so much a part of it that I forget all too easily who I really am.” Lost in oneself” is a good way of describing this state. But this self is the world, if only a consciousness could see it. That is why we must know who we are.²

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Recognizing the unconscious leads to understanding the internal essence of the other, in Jung’s word, “the world.” I’m certain that realizing and understanding the collective unconscious can be a starting point for us to identifying with each other.

**Color Psychology**

The movie *The King’s Speech* tells the story of King George VI of Great Britain, who had a great fear for public speaking due to his stammering. The main subject of this movie was the unexpected friendship formed between the king and his speech therapist and how the king conquered his fear. The movie opens with the scene, in which the king, trying to give a speech, stands paralyzed with fright in front of the crowd of people. This scene was rendered with predominantly cool colors, such as blue-gray and blue-green, and black. The atmosphere is cold, and together with the tensed expression on the king’s face, the scene evoked a miserable feeling. In contrast, in the last scene of the movie, the king and his family are surrounded by warm colors with flooding light, such as red and gold, after the king overcomes his fear and delivers a speech successfully.

Of course, *The King’s Speech* is not the first movie to use this device. I assume that most of the movies ever created in color probably utilize this method to some degree. The sad scenes are expressed with cool and muted colors; happiness is suggested with bright or pastel colors with mainly warm temperature. The nostalgic scenes are depicted with hues with decreased saturation. In fact, this type of use of color already existed in late nineteenth century, long before these movies were made. In 1884, Joris Karl Huysmans wrote a novel *A Rebours* (English title: *Against Nature*), which prompted the symbolism movement in France. In this novel, Huysmans effectively uses the metaphor and connotations, enriched with the symbolic use of color, to evoke certain feelings in the readers. The intent of the Symbolism
movement was to express the idea in perceptible form. The color played an important role in
the movement because people react to color psychologically.

The table below (Fig.1) shows the general reaction of the people in the U.S. to color.³ This
table was inserted in Color Psychology and Color Therapy: A Factual Study of the
Influence of Color on Human Life, written by Faber Birren, who is known for his study and
writings on color. In his book, Birren explains that, although there may be a little variance in
individuals depending on their background, there are some general psychological reactions to
color.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>General appearance</th>
<th>Mental associations</th>
<th>Direct associations</th>
<th>Objective impressions</th>
<th>Subjective impressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Brilliant, intense, opaque, dry</td>
<td>Hot, fire, heat, blood</td>
<td>Danger, Christmas, Fourth of July, St. Valentine’s, Mother’s Day, flag</td>
<td>Passionate, exciting, fervid, active</td>
<td>Intensity, rage, rapacity, fierceness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Bright, luminous, glowing</td>
<td>Warm, metallic, autumnal</td>
<td>Halloween, Thanksgiving</td>
<td>Jovial, lively, energetic, forceful</td>
<td>Hilarity, exuberance, satiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Sunny, incandescent, radiant</td>
<td>Sunlight</td>
<td>Caution</td>
<td>Cheerful, inspiring, vital, celestial</td>
<td>High spirit, health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Clear, moist</td>
<td>Cool, nature, water</td>
<td>Clear, St. Patrick’s Day</td>
<td>Quieting, refreshing, peaceful, nascent</td>
<td>Fatality, disease, terror, guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Transparent, wet</td>
<td>Cold, sky, water, ice</td>
<td>Service, flag</td>
<td>Subduing, melancholy, contemplative, sober</td>
<td>Gloom, fearfulness, furtiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Deep, soft, atmospheric</td>
<td>Dark, mist, darkness, shadow</td>
<td>Mourning, Easter</td>
<td>Dignified, pompous, mournful, mystic</td>
<td>Loneliness, desperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Spatial—light</td>
<td>Cool, snow</td>
<td>Cleanliness, Mother’s Day, flag</td>
<td>Pure, clean, frank, youthful</td>
<td>Brightness of spirit, normality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Spatial—darkness</td>
<td>Neutral, night, emptiness</td>
<td>Mourning</td>
<td>Funereal, ominous, deadly, depressing</td>
<td>Negation of spirit, death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Modern American Color Associations

Mainly, the colors of the spectrum are associated with two moods: red and its analogous hues
express the warm, active and exciting qualities, and blue, violet and green have the passive

³ Faber Birren, Color Psychology and Color Therapy: A Factual Study of the Influence of
and calming properties. He also states that:

Man finds in the hues of the spectrum emotional analogies with sounds, shapes and forms, odors, tastes. Color expressions work their way into language, symbolism, tradition, and superstition. The reason is probably that the sensation of color is of a primitive order. Reaction to it, appreciation of it, requires little effort of intellect or imagination. Color conveys moods which attach themselves quite automatically to human feeling. It is part and parcel with the psychic make-up of human beings.

Color relates to all the senses we possess. For this reason, I put such importance on the colors in my work. In this series of paintings and monotypes, the colors were selected to suit the story and the emotion, which I wish to express through each character I portrayed.

The Works
The mythic figures I rendered are Proserpine, Venus, Psyche, Penelope, Artemis, and Athena. The first three were painted on large canvases in oil; the rest were created as monotypes on paper. To address the duality and complexity of human nature, I painted two different images for each character. For the characters in oil painting, two different scenes were extracted from Greek mythology. For the monotypes, I altered the same image into two different versions.

The process for the paintings started from selecting a model for each character. This was heavily influenced by my own perception of beauty and interpretation of aura about these people. Once the model was selected, I informed her of this project in detail, explaining the myth story and the character she will adopt in the photo session. This step was necessary for me to gain her full understanding of the project and my intention as well as to learn her own perspective on the project as a contemporary woman. During the photo session, there were many ideas and suggestions exchanged between us. “If I were her, I would do it like this.” We both would become intensely involved in role-playing. This power of empathy once again made me sure of the universal and timeless quality of human beings.

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4 Birren, Color Psychology and Color Therapy, 141.
5 Birren, Color Psychology and Color Therapy, 162.
Proserpine

Proserpine was abducted by Hades to the Underworld, which she later becomes queen of. I focused on the victimization and the powerlessness she must have felt at the moment of the crime and the long period she had to suffer before she came to terms with the situation. In *Proserpine I* (Fig. 2), she is weak and submissive, which is expressed by her posture and the loose rendering of her unfocused eyes. The claustrophobic composition with the diagonal division of space, as well as the crushing quality of the intense red and green juxtaposed side by side, suggests the tension of the scene.

Strong and “in-control” Proserpine is depicted in *Proserpine II* (Fig. 3). Although not entirely comfortable (probably because belonging to the Underworld is not her nature), she accepted being a queen of hell as her fate. It is suggested by the rigid expression on her face and her straight posture. She makes decisions and supervises the punishment of the sinners in the darkness of the Underworld while she clutches her dress. The dark background and the bars peaking through the gloomy air indicate her hidden sorrow and despair in her captivity.

The pomegranate was used as a signifying device for Proserpine and her story. In the first painting, it is a freshly red yet violated fruit, of which its gooey substance gushes out from the scar. One complete pomegranate in dull brown, the color of the age spots on one’s hand, which implies the passing of the time, sits in the foreground in the second painting. It continues to watch Proserpine after causing her captivity.
I appropriated some photos from Victoria’s Secret catalogue for the composition of *Venus I* (Fig. 4). The role of those so-called “Supermodels” is similar to that of Venus’ in idealized beauty and sexuality in men’s eyes. The painting is mainly composed of many different shades of white, which simulate the morning light and air, to suggest the image of purity. However, the languorous way, in which she leans against the sink, as well as the pink petals of the flower, which imitate the female organ, invites the viewer to the aspect of Venus as a sexual being. The harmonious use of the pastel shades of pink, orange, and blue brings this picture a peaceful mood.

The purity and cleanness of Venus is contrasted to the self-mutilating one in *Venus II* (Fig. 5). The later stories in Greek myth tell the incidents of the jealous, “ugly-on-the-inside” Venus whose anger causes pain for others. In this painting, she releases her psychological pain by replacing it with physical one. “Cutting” is becoming a common problem among contemporary young women who suffer from psychological issues. *Venus II* is painted in cool colors with muted intensity except for the red robe, on which she sits. The cool red, created by mixing sienna and alizarin crimson, expresses her anger that is surrounded by the cold and quiet despair. The composition of *Venus II* is based on several paintings and drawings made by Edvard Munch, on the theme of jealousy. In these works, the main
character always sits in the foreground with an agonized look on his face with a man and a
woman embracing each other in the background.

I used a rose as the symbol for Venus because the rose has been believed to denote
love and sexuality in western culture just as Venus has. The large, beautiful pink rose blooms
and stares back at Venus confidently in the first painting while small roses are printed on the
robe, in the color of blood, in the second painting.

Psyche

Figure 6: *Psyche I*

Figure 7: *Psyche II*

In ancient Greek, the word for “butterfly” was “psyche,” which also meant “soul” and
“mind.” Therefore, the image of the butterfly also came to symbolize the human mind. In my
Psyche paintings, it appears as a moth resting on a man’s shoulder in the first one, and as a
butterfly tattoo on Psyche’s arm in the second, signifying the main emotion of each scene.

*Psyche I* (Fig. 6) tells the part of the story where she distrustfully tries to discover the
truth about Cupid. The oil lamp Psyche holds in her hand in the original story is replaced by
the man’s iPhone. By sneakily checking his cell phone, she is trying to see who he had been
talking to and texting. She is trying to see who he really is. The nocturnal moth and its
unflattering colored wings, as well as the gleaming blue light of the cell phone, which
partially light Psyche’s face, creates the eerie atmosphere, emphasizing the sinister quality of
deceitfulness.
While I composed *Psyche I* in predominantly muddy flesh color with bright cerulean blue in a small area to create the peculiar contrast, the triadic (secondary) color scheme (orange, violet, and green) were used to evoke the harmonious feeling of content in *Psyche II* (Fig.7). The first thing that came to my mind when I started composing this painting was the last scene from the movie *Amelie*. This romantic French movie was created in 2000 and became extremely popular among young women all over the world. It tells a story of a girl, who has a difficulty relating to other people but finds a soul mate at the end. She smiles satisfyingly while she embraces him when they are finally together. I imagined that Psyche must have felt the same kind of completeness when she was finally reunited with Cupid after overcoming many obstacles.

**Monotypes**

I felt a strong connection between the monotype process and the theme of duality and complexity of human nature. After printing the first image, I printed the second print (ghost) using the remaining ink on the plate. While I try to control everything on the plate for the first print, such as intensity of the colors, textures, mark making, and so on, I have no control over its ghost. How it comes out completely depends on the result of the first print. I was drawn to the monotype because of this “by-accident” nature. Human lives are full of uncertainty. One can plan how exactly his/her life should be, but anything could change the course of it. And this “anything” is deeply related to how much we know the others and ourselves: how well we can understand the collective unconscious.

For my monotypes, I took a different approach in composing two images for a character. Instead of extracting specific scenes from mythology, I turned my own interpretation and ideas associated with the characters into an image. By altering the visual elements on the second (ghost) prints by printing multiple layers and/or hand painting on top of it, I created two different images for each character. I used photos, which I downloaded off the Internet, as the reference. For *Guardian* (Fig.10) and *Prey* (Fig.11), these photos were
incorporated into my own photo. By selecting the photos shared in the public cyber space, I address the means of present culture to access collectivity.

**Penelope**

![Endurance](image1.png)  ![Emancipation](image2.png)

Penelope is known for her faithfulness in the marriage to her husband, Odysseus. She waited for his return from the war for twenty years. During that long period, she did not let any suitors persuade her to marry them although she felt the temptation at times. Her story is about chastity and patience.

In *Endurance* (Fig. 8), I visualized how Penelope must have felt during the twenty years in her husband’s absence, unsure and all alone. The picture is composed with all cool colors except for the hem of the wedding robe, which the figure wears. The cool brown, which frames most of the image, as well as the dark silhouette of the ancient Greek weaving loom and weavers, gives the impression of the heavy burden she had to endure for a long time. In *Emancipation* (Fig. 9), Penelope was finally released from the weight when Odysseus returned. In this work, I used mainly the analogous hues of yellow, such as yellow-
green, orange, and warm brown, to express the joyful mood.

Through these two monotypes, I also address the duality of the system of marriage. I often hear people say that marriage is a hard work. Why would marriage, seemingly a happy thing, have to be a hard work? Helen Fisher explains that the passion, which lovers feel for each other, usually fades after four years because human beings are biologically programmed to have multiple mating partners, not only one. The husband and/or the wife may end up having affairs and many marriages end in divorce. In Endurance, I suggest such a psychological “confinement” of marriage by layering a weaving loom over the figure, which imitates bars of the cage. However, after the “hard work,” the couple will achieve the comfort and companionship in the marriage, which we also innately need. The atmosphere of security is expressed in Emancipation by the orange shape, which surrounds the figure like warm sunlight.

Artemis

Figure 10: Guardian

Figure 11: Prey

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To compose the image for these monotypes, I set up a scene, in which a woman is serving
dinner to small animals. I modeled as Artemis myself with my beloved Boston terrier, Azuki,
with some of my stuffed toy animals surrounding us. I also incorporated pictures of squirrels
and a roasted pig, which I downloaded off the Internet. I am partial to this image because this
composition consists of a part of my personal life and a part of the lives of others, who posted
those photos on Internet.

Artemis is described as “the protectress of dewy youth”, who is also a hunter. It could
be said that she was cautious to preserve the young because she was a hunter. Either way,
hers stories show the contradicting nature of human beings, making her one of the interesting
characters in Greek mythology. The following insert is a good example to show both the
humane and cruel nature of Artemis:

Artemis was angry. One of her beloved wild creatures, a hare, had been slain by the
Greeks, together with her young, and the only way to calm the wind and ensure a safe
voyage to Troy was to appease her by sacrificing to her a royal maiden.

In these two monotypes, I visualized the parallels I found between Artemis and
myself. Guardian tells the aspect of us as a kind person who loves animals. The idea is
expressed through the warm, earth colors and the detailed depiction of kitchen items in the
background, which creates an inviting, homely feel. In contrast, the shocking mood is evoked
by the crushing quality of the complementary: the gleaming artificial hue of pink and green in
Prey. Prey suggests the innocent yet cruel aspect of people. The image of the roasted pig,
which is rendered grotesquely with implied colors and texture, attributes to my confliction of
being a meat-eater despite my love for animals.

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7 Edith Hamilton, Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes (New York: Warner Books,
Athena is said to be born from her farther, Zeus’ head, full-grown and fully armed. She is a strong, brave, smart warrior. Because my impression of her was already masculine, it was not difficult for me to overlap her image with that of transvestites. However, it is not only the appearance that is comparable between them. Just as Athena is strong and brave, I think that people who are openly gay or a cross-dresser are admirably brave and resilient.

What Jung calls “individuation” is the process, through which the individual integrates the unconscious into consciousness by means of dreams, active imagination or free association, for example, to become what he always was. In this process, people deal with the persona and the ego, which mask the unconscious, to move on to face the next stage and the next one after that. These stages are the archetypes: the shadow is the first, the wise old man is the second, then the anima/animus at last before he/she finally becomes the Self.

In our society where much is against how and who they want to be, transvestites and gays anticipate the hardship they must go through, yet they do not lie to themselves. I view

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them as warriors, who bravely and honestly confront their unconscious. How they reinvent
themselves as women (or men) with some absurdity as their weapon: it can be their peculiar
sense of humor or the ridiculous headgear they wear (Kermit the frog on a toilet in this image
for example), has the interesting tie to Athena’s birth.

Both images were first layered with the image of the figures and the background
using silkscreen. Then several monotype layers were printed. *Athena(s)* 1 (Fig. 12), which
was the first print, was then hand painted with etching ink and oil paint. *Athena(s)* 2 (Fig. 13)
was finished with the last layer of the bright red color. The split complementary color scheme
with red, yellow-green and violet was used to create the subtle harmony in *Athena(s)* 1. An
interesting focal point was also made with the flat shape of the frog. While I tried to convey
the feel of nostalgia in *Athena(s)* 1 through tinting the image with the thinned ink like the old
photographs, I employed the look of a political poster in *Athena(s)* 2 to communicate my
viewpoint on the discrimination against the gay community. It was achieved by the contrast
between the achromatic figures and the use of the unnatural bright color for the background.
CONCLUSION

The word “Greek mythology” seems to stand for something incredibly distant, something that has little to do with people in the present time. This misconception is easily resolved if we pay attention to how much we have in common with these ancient stories. The people of ancient Greek reflected their own image on Gods and Goddesses, whom they worshiped.

There are many parallels between the mythology and the present society because the nature of human beings has not changed. The essence of human beings is timeless and universal. The theories of Jung and color psychology as shown by Birren help us to see this clearly. Understanding the workings of the human psyche means understanding the inner side of people both individually and collectively, which leads us to have empathy for each other.

My paintings and monotypes in this series are inspired by such ideas, and they are also the vehicle to communicate the same inspiration to the viewers. Through the abundant symbolism I used, I hope that viewers will recognize a small part of themselves in my work.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Isoko Onodera was born in Iwate, Japan. Drawing people and making her own Manga comic was her after-school activity throughout her school years. She started her real art training when she enrolled University of Central Arkansas after she immigrated to the U.S. in 1997. Isoko earned her Bachelor of Fine Art in painting from the same school in 2006. She moved to Baton Rouge to attend Louisiana State University a year after her graduation. She is scheduled to obtain her Master of Fine Arts degree in studio art in August 2011.