Moments of Metanoia

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MOMENTS OF METANOIA

A Thesis
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Louisiana State University and
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘metanoia’ embodies a climactic moment on the precipice—an instance where one is confronted by the tremendous threshold between youth and maturation. Moments of Metanoia explores these experiences that create an overwhelming division between the way things were and the way things will be. They are the crystallizing moments of metamorphosis or the shattering moments of undoing. As evidenced by their thematic appearances in ancient mythology, these dramatic episodes of transformation have existed as a part of the human condition for millennia. By using Greek mythology to explore metanoia, the universality of the human experience is emphasized. Each piece in Moments of Metanoia hone in on a moment of metanoia as personified by a figure from ancient Greek mythology. The figures selected for the exhibition include Persephone, Clytia, Alecto, Endymion, Atlas, Mnemosyne, and Orpheus. Greek mythology has been a recurring theme in the tradition of art with most subjects of the myths appearing only in idealized form. In Moments of Metanoia, the selected mythological entities are approached differently. The work is visually inspired by fashion aesthetics, with source imagery for preliminary collage sketches deriving directly from fashion magazines. This enables traditional elements of Greek mythology to be recontextualized through a contemporary visual lexicon. Furthermore, focus is placed on constructing abstract forms that are approachable, and more intimate to bridge the divide between subject and viewer. Tactility is a prime vehicle for facilitating intimacy. Thus, each mythological figure becomes soft sculptures, at once sensuous and accessible, and viewers are encouraged to physically touch and feel the work in the exhibition. This allows each piece to inhabit a tangible reality through which shared experiences and rites of passages can be explored and contemplated. The pieces in Moments of Metanoia are reminders of the ties that bind us, proving we are all more alike than we are different
INTRODUCTION

At the core of my thesis, “Moments of Metanoia,” is the traditional myth, “The Rape of Persephone.” This body of work draws upon the immense gravity of Persephone’s transformative experience. Persephone acts as a proxy for myself. The show unfurls directly from Persephone’s specific moment of metanoia, that is, the monumental fragment of time in which her innocence is lost which sparks an inevitable coming of age for our young heroine.

As defined by Dictionary.com, metanoia is a “spiritual conversion or awakening” and a “fundamental change of character”. Metanoia embodies a climactic moment on the precipice, an instant where one finds oneself confronting a tremendous threshold between youth and maturation. This passage is marked by individual growth, awareness, self-elucidation. These are the moments that create an overwhelming division between the way things were and the way things will be. They are the crystallizing moments of metamorphosis or the shattering moments of undoing.

By using mythology and archetypal motifs to talk about coming of age and similar life-changing moments, I emphasize the universality of the human experience. As evidenced by their thematic appearances in ancient mythology, these dramatic episodes of transformation have existed as a part of the human condition for millennia. While the circumstances surrounding the metamorphic process often feel deeply personal and singularly isolating on an individual level, they aren’t quite that profoundly unique. Details in each of our particular dramas may vary, but it is rare that we have ever experienced a life-changing moment that hasn’t been experienced by many others before us. It is this duality between the universal and the highly subjective within these
metamorphic interludes that I find so captivating. Each piece in this body of work hones in on a moment of metanoia as personified by a figure from ancient Greek mythology, like Persephone, to emphasize the confluence of the universal and the personal.

In her classic text on mythology, Edith Hamilton refers to Persephone as the “maiden of the spring” (51). Simultaneously, the goddess is the Queen of the Dead. As a figure embodying both concepts, Persephone is the personification of rebirth and the natural cycle of life. Because of this, Persephone is imbued with floral symbols which have a longstanding tradition in many cultures for representing the ad infinitum progression of life and death. Further, floral and plant life imagery is common in Greek myths, with many goddesses having specific plants attached to their identities and stories. Flowers, in general, are also common signifiers of romance and sexuality, while specific blooms correlate with a broad range of human emotions and sentiments. The use of floral elements in the translation of Persephone’s myth is therefore multifaceted.

Other mythological characters in this body of work act as either further examples of archetypal moments of metanoia. The choice in figures was made based on resonance with the Persephone character and therefore, my personal experiences. Some alternatively serve as representations of fundamental traits that describe my own coming of age narrative. The latter subset are viewed as psychoanalytical archetypes of the unconscious mind, appearing to Persephone as if in a dream. They pose as the realities of her mind, whether she may know them consciously or not. Finally, we have the figure of Demeter, Persephone’s mother, who plays an unequivocal role in the development of the mythologem of the Rape of Persephone. Traditionally, the myth is just as much about Demeter as it is about Persephone. The daughter’s metanoia has distressing effect on
the mother for two main reasons. Demeter’s sorrow is most obviously caused by the pain associated with grief for our lost loved ones which is intensified by the nature of her relationship with Persephone and the exceptional bond between the mother/daughter pair. Less obviously, Demeter is struck by Persephone’s robbed innocence because she is forced to re-experience the passing of her youth through her daughter. Persephone’s fate is the fate of all women, endlessly perpetuated through all generations, both past and future.

To develop the imagery for each of these mythological entities, I rely on collage and fashion aesthetics. Most of the source imagery for my collages comes from fashion magazines through which I am able to recontextualize traditional Greek myths using a contemporary visual lexicon. The combination of seductive fractions—often recognizable as isolated body parts or as allusions to anatomy—to create an abstract whole acts as a metaphor for how we, as humans, develop. We arrive at who we are through the inculcation of environmental factors which include societal ideals for beauty and sexuality that are reinforced through cultural phenomena and media. Furthermore, the process of collaging reflects the development of our individual psyches as a process which is based on endless cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction. Collage, here, acts as a mirror which illuminates all of the fragmentary materials pieced together to create a complete entity.

The subjects of Greek mythology have been used continuously within the traditional cannon of art history, in which these subjects appear most often in their idealized form. However, Greek divinities and myths are often relatable, even in their idealness, which is why I have chosen to use them as a mechanism to explore my thesis. Greek myths, as allegories for inevitable rites of
passage and transformation, have the unique ability to tap into the human experience. I have chosen to envision these myths in a less ideal way, focusing on constructing abstract forms that are more approachable and tangible, more intimate and corporeal, and as a more contemporary vehicle through which to connect with viewers. Real, contemporary life lacks the hard edges of white marble in which classical and neoclassical interpretations of Greek mythological figures find their foundations. Instead of emphasizing the ideal aspects of the myths which divides the subject from the viewer, I use this iconography to create soft installations that, while abstract, are more sensuous and approachable. By using materials and fabrics that are easily recognizable and appeal to our sense of touch such as satin and tulle I evoke a more subjective and intimate relationship between the figure and the viewer. This allows each piece to inhabit a more tangible reality through which I can explore and discuss contemporary shared experiences and rites of passages, like the tragic loss of first love, which is embodied in Orpheus. His moment of metanoia irreversibly damages him, leaving him in an aftermath of doubt, apathy, and scar tissue. This is such a relatable experience, no matter the time nor the place.

The installations are meant to be contemplative, for one to view and examine and then reflect on. Memory is a powerful mental and emotional force and the moment of metanoia that is immortalized in each piece in this body of work should stir in viewers the memories of their own moments of metanoia, their own instants of revelatory transformation. By asking the audience to indulge in nostalgic reflection, I am able to forge an intimate understanding between us. We all have experienced an overwhelming coming of age, a tragic loss of innocence, an agonizing heartbeat. These moments of metanoia are the ties that bind us, proving we are all more alike than we are different.
PRIMORDIALITY: GREEK MYTHOLOGY AS THE ORIGINAL EXPRESSION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Moments of Metanoia explores traditional mythologems as they are expressed in Ancient Greek mythology. Defined as “a basic theme, as of revenge, self-sacrifice, or betrayal that is shared by cultures throughout the world” (dictionary.com), mythologems, by nature, have an essence of universality. Kerényi likens the concept of mythology to an art form with its own unique materiality that rooted in an “immemorial” quality that is “contained in tales about gods and god-like beings, heroic battles and journeys to the Underworld” (2). Many of these ancient myths may be familiar to us but this doesn’t negate the plasticity of the mythological materiality. Kerényi describes mythology as “something solid and yet mobile, substantial and yet not static, capable of transformation” (2). So, while Greek mythology has for a long time been represented in the tradition of art, its non-static nature affords these myths an enduring relevance in contemporary art. Citing Bronislaw Malinowsky, Kerényi notes that mythology “in its original form, is…a reality lived” as “an original, greater…reality through which the present life, fate, and work of mankind are governed” (5). Further, it “provides men on the one hand with motives for ritual and moral acts,” and “on the other with directions for their performance” (Kerényi 5). So, for Kerényi, what is most essential for a satisfactory contemporary reflection on ancient myth revolves around the greater, original reality. Thus, the driving query for contemporary studies in mythology is “what has mythology to do with origin or origins?” (Kerényi 2).

What has really shifted modern society away from the mythological experience is, according to Kerényi, science and technology. We now have clear explanations backed by scientific research for most natural phenomena—explanations which were not available to those living in ancient times. Centuries ago mythology was the science that gave reason for the way of the world.
Because of the replacement of mythology with science, we “have lost our immediate feeling for
the great realities of the spirit” (Kerényi 1). In spite of this, mythology can still resonate with the
spiritual and personal origin stories of modern-day individuals. Our curiosity to know where we
came from and how we became who we are, in other words, our spiritual origins, is embedded in
our nature. The search for these origins, as Kerényi purports, should be at the heart of all creative
pursuits. He asserts that artists can only be “true creators” through the “extent that they draw
their strength from and build on that source whence the mythologies have their ultimate ground
and origin” (22). In essence, mythology is the primordial artistic expression of the human
condition and, as such, should always remain as the nucleus of creation. This primordiality is the
foundation for my choice to employ Greek mythology as subject matter in “Moments of
Metanoia.” Contextualizing each piece as a figure or proponent rooted in these ancient myths
forms a connective tissue between the formal aspects of the work and the subjective experience
of the viewer. The mythological context is found in the titles of each piece and in the attachment
of, most often, floral symbolic devices (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: Detail of *The Marriage of Persephone* (Floral Symbols)
MYTHOLOGICAL MOMENTS OF METANOIA

Figure 2: The Marriage of Persephone

The Marriage of Persephone

Persephone is the young goddess of spring and beloved daughter of Demeter. The goddess, often referred to as Kore (maiden), was robbed of her innocence while picking flowers in a field. Struck by the unfamiliar and intoxicating fragrance of the Narcissus flower, Persephone reached for the bloom that had so enchanted her. At that precise moment, the earth cracked open and the King of the Underworld, Hades, emerged from the fissure in his grand chariot. He snatched the maiden goddess, whisking her off to his chthonic palace. Her violent abduction simultaneously became her crowning moment in a mythological paradox. When Hades took Persephone as his bride he made her the Queen of the Dead. The metaphoric qualities of the myth allude to the tragic death of youthful beauty and innocence which coincides directly with the birth of
womanhood and sexuality in a form at once traumatizing and triumphant. Kerényi surmises simply the fate of Persephone as “a creature destined to a flower-like existence” in which her fate means “death in fulfillment and dominion in death” (108-109). Death, here, is an unavoidable rite of passage signifying the transition from youth and the naïve bliss of childhood to the perilous landscape of adolescence, where sex and romantic desires infiltrate the spaces innocence used to inhabit. But it is necessary for her to fulfill her fate—her higher purpose—in a drama which is comparable to the fate of all women. It is a parable synonymous with the universal feminine coming of age.

I personally identify with Persephone on many levels, two of them being my position as a woman and a daughter. My mother and I are very close and I understand there must be an immense weight attached to the feeling of living life with her heart exposed as mothers of children do. To live life’s lessons through your children must be as potentially excruciating as it is potentially rewarding.

Furthermore, the rape of Persephone is relatable to me in its violent conquering of her loss of youth. Persephone’s abductor (Hades) and her annual return to the Underworld draw parallels to my lived experience which is marked by an emotionally abusive antagonist and permeated by an omnipresence at the psychological level. The moment of metanoia, the instant in which I was able to detach myself from this relationship was dramatic and painful and resulted in a period of metaphoric darkness but the transformative experience of it was positively life affirming.
Atlas, The Enduring

Atlas was a Titan and responsible for bearing the crushing weight of the heavens upon his shoulders, assigned to him by the greatest god, Zeus. Atlas is a symbol for strength and fortitude; his name means “the enduring”. Atlas is a special example of the use of a mythological entity as a representation to describe a theme in my own coming of age narrative. To allude to this, the piece “9,529 Cuts” is attached to the form of the heavens. I made this piece as an intimate ritualistic release in which each mark, or cut, represents one day in my life spanning from my day of birth to the day I reached the capacity for enduring emotional violence inflicted upon me by my brother. All of the 9,529 marks were completed in one sitting, taking roughly 14 hours to complete. The process was really rewarding, acting as a tribute to the human spirit’s ability to endure, like Atlas, the heavy burden of adversity (see Figure 3).
Figure 3: Atlas, The Enduring
The Anxiety of Orpheus

Orpheus, as the son of the Muse Calliope, was a legacy of Mnemosyne. Through his lineage Orpheus, though a mortal man, had the powerful gift of eloquence and was a genius, endowed with a powerful ability to charm divine beings and mortal souls alike with his words and his music. Hamilton fully captures the depth of Orpheus’s bewitching charm:

Orpheus had no rival…anywhere except [in] the gods alone. There was no limit to his power when he played and sang. No one and nothing could resist him….Everything animate and inanimate followed him. He moved the rocks on the hillside and turned the course of rivers. (108)

Orpheus fell in love with Eurydice, and though the details of the courtship aren’t well described in mythology, Hamilton imagines the seduction of Eurydice was likely easy for the man as “no maiden he wanted could have resisted the power of his song” (108). Tragically, the romance was short-lived and Eurydice met an untimely and ridiculous unfortunate ending at the pair’s wedding feast. Orpheus resolved to reverse the fate of his lover by calling upon his brilliant talent and charisma to persuade Hades and Persephone to allow Eurydice a second chance at life. So moving was the “spell of his voice” that his song “Drew iron tears down [Hades’] cheek” (Hamilton 109). Persephone graciously agreed to allow Eurydice to follow Orpheus back to the land of the living, though she warned him that he must not look back at his wife until the both of them had cleared the precipice dividing the realms. The pair arrived at the boundary, and as Orpheus crossed over he was overcome by an anxious desire to gaze upon Eurydice’s face. He looked back, but it was too soon; Eurydice had not cleared the threshold yet. Consequently, she vanished, this time with no possibility of redemption. Losing the love of his life for a second time hardened Orpheus’s heart to love and companionship forever. The devastation was irrevocably scarring. He was bitter and lived a tragic life in isolation until he died horrifically at the hands of the Maenads (the frenzied women devoted to Dionysus). The tragedy of Orpheus
cautions us to not squander second chances by looking back and is a poetic tale of lost love and its shattering effects.

To illustrate this myth in *The Anxiety of Orpheus* (Figure 4), I created a fabric collage that would emphasize the rapid forward motion of a figure. The directional movement of the bottom elements of the fabric collage contrast with the top half where the figure is bending backwards, reaching desperately for what might be behind it. The form is permanently frozen in that specific moment of Orpheus’s metanoia.
Figure 4: The Anxiety of Orpheus
Endymion was a beautiful shepherd king whom the moon goddess Selene fell in love with. Myths vary, but it is said that Zeus offered Endymion his choice in destinies. Endymion chose to forego death to keep his youth in eternal slumber. Perhaps Endymion wished to join Selene in immortality so that they may be together endlessly. Perhaps his choice stemmed from his own anxious vanity and a wish to preserve his youthful loveliness at all costs. No matter his reasoning, Endymion spent the rest of his immortal life peacefully asleep in a cave, where Selene visited him every night, to shower him with her love. Somehow, Selene, without express consent, and Endymion, who lived in infinite unconsciousness, together produced fifty daughters. They were the Menai, the goddesses of the months. The fantastical family that Selene and Endymion created together alludes to the inescapable march of time. Selene, as the embodiment of the moon, only exists at night and Endymion only exists in a state of slumber. Their daughters, however, do not share their parents’ existential restrictions and therefore represent the ceaseless passage of time which endures through day and night, in wakefulness and rest, and even in life and death.

In my recontextualization of the myth, *Endymion Succumbing* (Figure 5), we find both Selene and Endymion. Selene, as represented by the moon-like printed circle is casting down a net of poppies, a traditional floral symbol for sleep. In abstract form, Endymion rests below the trail of poppies in a nest made of silky, seductive fabrics and pillow-like protrusions.
Figure 5: Endymion Succumbing
Clytia, *In Bloom*

Clytia embodies the dissolution of romantic love and the profound heartbreak resulting from witnessing someone you love progress into the future without you. To be alone after experiencing what Clytia had with Helios, who left her for another, is unbearable and she feels doomed to spend the rest of her life devoted to an unrequited love. In the myth, Clytia never stopped loving Helios and watched him transverse the sky as the sun every day until she completely wasted away. After her death she was transformed into the heliotrope, a flower which blooms to face the sun.

To create the piece *Clytia, In Bloom* (Figure 6), I chose to adapt Clytia’s transformation into a triumph. The piece is a wearable garment—a cape—comprised of dozens of printed heliotropes stitched together. Since capes are traditionally fastened around the neck and trail behind the wearer, the heliotrope cape serves as a metaphor for moving forward, beyond past heartbreaks and losses.
Figure 6: Clytia, In Bloom
MATERIAL LONGINGS: THE AESTHETICS OF COLLAGE

Collage as a process is essential to the development of my work and acts as the blueprint for each piece. The directness and physicality of cutting apart and splicing together fragmentary parts from fashion magazines appeals to me as a method of sketching much more than putting pencil to paper. The selection of source images is an intuitive process and stems primarily from a desire to handle and feel the fabrics and textures depicted in glossy magazine pages firsthand. In the foreword for “The Age of Collage”, Silke Krohn describes how the contemporary collage “can become a material study, a three-dimensional assemblage, or even an environment or performance” (4). In my creative process, the collage becomes all of these things at once. They are material studies that form the basis for larger material-driven objects; they become assemblages that blur the distinction between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects; they create an environment by shifting into abstract but tangible, objective and figurative forms that interact with the space around them; and they are a personal performance as a pseudo coping mechanism to transform my fantasy for physical contact into reality.

On a subconscious level, these collages are more than material studies; they are material longings. I use collage in a similar vein as the Surrealists who, Krohn notes, “wanted to give free rein to sexual fantasies” (7). By crafting forms through careful consideration of color and visual relationships, I develop illusory and suggestive figures. The combination of seductive fractions—often recognizable as isolated body parts or as allusions to anatomy—create an abstract whole that is at once sexual and grotesque without inherently being either. The collages are intended only to suggest forms that evoke attraction or repulsion. I often deliberately exclude images of actual body parts and flesh. The absence of human corporeality emphasizes the
vibration of innocence and lust that drives my compulsion to make collages, a compulsion founded upon a need for more than a purely visual sensory experience. For me, it’s about making what I can see become something that I can touch and feel. At the root of my process is a childlike yearning for ownership, for having something. At its most base level, my process spawns from a material attachment and a desire for acquisition. Collage is a vehicle for satisfying this desire. I don’t like being able to look and not touch. Tactility, thus, is a fundamental property of my work. As such, viewers are not only allowed to touch the art, but they are encouraged to touch it.

Furthermore, the process of collage also acts as a metaphor for how we, as humans, develop. We arrive at who we are through the inculcation of environmental factors and exposure to certain societal ideals. This development is reflected in the collection and fusion of fragmentary materials and images inherent to collaging. Collage is a mirror for the evolution of our individual psyches which is based on endless cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction. Similarly, each of my artworks is a result of material fractions coalescing into a unified form. As Nathaniel Whitcomb surmises, collage “more closely mirrors reality than any other art form” because “To be alive is to construct, to selectively choose from an infinitum of objects and ideas, internalize, then reassemble into a new whole” (Kotmair 80).
THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING MOMENTS OF METANOIA: A BRIEF INQUIRY

The formal development of each piece in “Moments of Metanoia” begins with a highly selective consideration of color, implied lines/forms, texture, and materiality to collect fragments of source material from fashion magazines. Once a satisfactory quantity of magazine cut-outs have been extracted, I lay them out on a table and begin to bring pieces together intuitively based on the visual relationships created by the combination of the formal elements mentioned above (color, implied line/form, texture, materiality). The parts are adhered together to create the resulting collage when the composition feels suggestive of bodily forms or anatomical parts; indicates a gesture or movement; or evokes a level of either seduction or repulsion. Anywhere from five to fifteen collages, usually palm-sized in scale, are created at one time. The collages become the sketch or blueprint for the final form.

To illuminate the specific process for creating this body of work, let’s examine the studio practice employed to construct “The Rape of Persephone”. After a number of the small collaged compositions have been made, I start to sift through them, judging them based on the potential for translating the character’s transformation. For “The Rape of Persephone” I knew I wanted a more subtle color palette on the cooler spectrum with contrasting accent tone and a void-like focal point. This would elucidate the significance of the goddess’s absence from existence which is as essential to the thematic interpretation of the myth as her presence within it. The collage that would adequately project Persephone needed to feel laden with duality and contrast to insinuate the paradoxical nature of the feminine coming of age.
After a collage has been selected to act as the blueprint for the formal structure of the piece, the height and length measurements of the collage are multiplied to create new dimensions that are anywhere from 600-900% the scale of the original collage. The dimensions are measured on a roll of linoleum and the block is cut down, after which collage is translated in a relatively flattened, graphic style of drawing. The block is carved and subsequently printed on a range of materials, most often fabrics, to remain as true to the visual properties of the original collage.

Finally, the fabric prints are cut up and stitched together, reinforcing the endless loop of deconstruction-reconstruction in my process. I use a sculptural approach to fabric manipulation (i.e. gathering, puckering, stuffing, piecing, etc.) to construct an object/form that blurs the distinctions between two-dimensional image and three-dimensional sculpture. The result might best be described “soft installation”. In this term, “soft” indicates the primary use of fabric and fibrous materials and the purposeful lack of hard or structural ones (there are few exceptions to this, one being noticeable in the use of a wire to support Alecto’s wings). “Installation” is used to refer to the open-endedness of the relationship between each piece and the space it occupies— some are suspended in air, some are mounted on the wall, some may be free-standing, some may flow from floor to wall, etc. In each piece’s command (or, conversely, its subordination) to the gallery space combined with their human scale, the forms ultimately begin to exist as abstract hybrids of figure and object.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX: EXHIBITION IMAGES

Figure A.1: Image of Moments of Metanoia Exhibition (1)
Figure A.2: Image of Moments of Metanoia Exhibition (2)
Figure A.3: Image of Moments of Metanoia Exhibition (3)
Figure A.4: Mnemosyne: The Birth of the Muses
Figure A.5: Alecto's Fury
VITA

Mariah Pickett is a visual artist working with various media including printmaking, textiles, and soft sculpture. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Two-Dimensional Studies with a concentration in Printmaking from Bowling Green State University in 2014. In her studio practice, she foregoes the conventional method of sketching, preferring to create collages that act as the blueprints for each piece. Pickett often prints on an array of materials and fabrics which can be combined in multitudinous ways. Through this process, Pickett finds limitless opportunities to expand the tradition of printmaking. She often incorporates a range of sewing techniques and fabric manipulation to construct stuffed collages, wearable art, and soft installations. By creating pieces that are hard to label as either two- or three-dimensional, Pickett obscures the typical classifications of art media. Her work revolves around recontextualizing traditional symbolism and archetypes to reflect on the human condition in our current society by using a visual lexicon rooted in contemporary fashion and materialism. By using recognizable fabrics and referencing human anatomy in her work, Pickett hopes to create a more accessible and approachable experience for viewers.