6-4-2018

Altar to Uncertainty

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ALTAR TO UNCERTAINTY

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 Department of Art

by
Kelly Stombaugh
B.F.A., Indiana University, 2014
August 2018
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ABSTRACT

I have always been in awe of great storytellers. Like an alchemist, the masterful storyteller can take the most mundane of tales and transmute it into an enrapturing experience. The best of these, however, are the stories which seem very otherworldly but, in the end, can reveal deep and relatable truths to the listener.

For this exhibition, “Altar to Uncertainty,” I have undertaken the creation of a single book and story which surrounds and visually extends itself through printed etchings upon the walls to tell a transformative tale of redemption through trauma, hopelessness and loss. My intention with this work is to create an empowering, immersive experience where the viewer can contemplate their own personal hardships and find comfort and strength in the shared struggle to overcome these more difficult times in life.
INTRODUCTION

I’ve long since come to realize that verbal storytelling is not one of my strengths, as much as I would love for it to be, so I have continued to rely upon my ability to draw and create imagery to illustrate the stories of others. As a kid I was surrounded by examples of hand-rendered visual storytelling. I illustrated moments from folk tales and creatures from Greek mythology, recreated the artwork from my favorite comic books and movie scenes. Most of these images were from lighthearted origins like cartoons and book illuminations, but I could always find myself under the ever-watchful eye of a somber Greek Orthodox icon painting which I would learn to craft as an adult.

All of these influences had tales to tell and lessons to teach in their own way, and I learned to read them well, but it wouldn’t be until the inception of this thesis work that I would endeavor to express a story of my own through printed etchings. As in the traditions of icon painting, every step of the process in this work functioned as a symbolic and meditative act to produce an illustrated book of images that are honest and imbued with the strength to transmute painful and scarring experiences into a material with the potential to affect edifying self-transformation.
MINERVA’S PASSAGE

Minerva is a seemingly unremarkable girl. Extremely small for her age, “Minnie” is wrapped in a protective cocoon-like existence by her parents who worry for the safety of this small child in a world full of chaos, danger and darkness. Believing herself to be as weak and incapable as everyone around her perceives her to be, she couldn’t feel more alienated from the goddess of wisdom and warfare she has been named after.

In a house situated near a forest where she is forbidden to go, Minerva watches from her room as a group of goat kids run free and play outside. From a distance, one of the kids notices Minerva alone in her dark room and comes over to invite her to join him and the others. He introduces himself as Bardou and helps her climb out of her window to freedom. They become fast friends and run off towards the trees to meet the other kids. She could not be happier and loses herself in this new experience with her strange, new playmates.

Suddenly, all the kids flee into the trees and she finds herself alone at the edge of the forest from which an enormous, prowling wolf demon has emerged. Hulking and covered with fur and a multitude of unsettlingly strange eyes, he approaches her with his tongue lolling from his mouth. Having never learned to defend herself and paralyzed by fear, Minerva can do nothing but be devoured by this beast. Within the wolf, she allows herself to sink into an endless and dark abyss swirling with malevolent eyes.

Days, months, and possibly even years have passed before Minerva begins to slip into the shadow of death. As she resigns herself to this end, she hears a voice whisper her name and she wakes to see a great, glowing owl-like spirit cradling her. The being imparts to her a secret and she rises up, emboldened. Reinvigorated with the determination to fight for her life, Minerva starts to tear at the flesh of the wolf and eats her way through the wolf. In a frenzy, she devours
every scrap until there is no wolf left. She rises from this event scarred and traumatized, but alive, and is greeted by a familiar and friendly face.

Bardou, now also taller and older, sits with Minerva as they talk about their lives apart from one another and she investigates the dark and eye-like scarification on her arms. The reunion, however, is bittersweet and the pain of all the lost time between them sets in. A murky cloud of sadness looms over them and they are flooded by a slow wave of despair. Minerva fights her way out using her newfound strength from defeating the wolf and eats the depression and the tree, where she and Bardou reunited, to absorb their power. She rises, again transformed, wearing the crown of the depression’s shadow-form and appears with the height and strength of the tree. She goes in search of Bardou having lost him in the chaos and she discovers his lifeless body. She mourns his death and despite her growing strength, she becomes uncertain of her own ability to endure.

As Minerva grieves the loss of her friend Bardou, he appears to her as a spirit shade and shows her his palm where leaves are sprouting. Two flowers bloom from his hand and open to reveal his eyes as they materialize in the center of each blossom. He offers them to Minerva as a final parting gift and as she reluctantly accepts and consumes them, her eyes morph into his and the apparition of Bardou dissipates.

This last trial of overcoming the loss of her friend is the final stage Minerva has to pass through and she begins to transfigure into an enlightened and powerful being that she recognizes from the bowels of the wolf. In the end, as though it were a dream, she is her tiny self again, but there is now an aura of dynamism around her; an intimation of the power within.
ALTAR TO UNCERTAINTY

Before I embarked on this journey with Minerva much of my work was inspired by environmental concerns and preservation of things lost. I focused on ouroboric cycles and explored theories on death, rebirth and the possibility of an afterlife using the native Louisiana plant and animal imagery around me. While these ideas are consistently important to me, they were somehow too deliberate and distant from my core as an individual. My approach to making these works was similar to how an illustrator approaches creating a scientific illustration. There was little room for what was personally concerning to me in these specimens. I wanted these works to tell a story, but these prints had become so taxidermized, and every intended symbolic element displayed, that their lively potential had been exhausted.

Printmaking is historically a graphic art form and often the image preceded the purpose for me. At the beginning of my third and final year as an MFA candidate I started looking into the works of female surrealists like Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo and the contexts in which they were created. Many of the issues they faced as female artists are still creating obstacles for contemporary women artists. The level of inequality between the sexes coupled with the amount of social restrictions historically placed on women, particularly in western culture, has always been a source of ire for me that I had not found a way to transmute into something productive until this particular body of work. I owe much of the credit for navigating this to the female artists who have gone before me.

Kiki Smith has also been a particular inspiration to me while creating this work. Her rich, narrative prints and raw, yet beautiful and delicate expression of the female experience have always captured my imagination.¹ As a printmaker and a female artist, I could identify with her

imagery as well as some of her methods of artmaking. I found an even more contemporary
source of kinship with the work and worldview of artist Alessandra Maria. Her gilded drawings
of venerated female figures communicate to me a familiar fascination with mystical-religious
iconography as well as an interest in using them to elevate the human experience to a reverent
level. In an interview she once stated,

I want to create a sense of agency and power outside of the typical power-structures women occupy, where they’d be seen primarily through a sexual lens (whether whore, mother, or Madonna); icons where their humanity feels more weighty and real than anything else… While I’m personally not Catholic, I feel these images need to exist as a different portrayal of female power in the world.²

I felt this same desire to use the traditional methods and symbolism of Orthodox iconography to uplifting the story of Minerva and give her experience a “weightiness.”

The creation of this book became increasingly necessary for me, and I felt for others as well. I had already decided to make this book to sort through painful past experiences of my own, but in the course of this last year another friend had committed suicide, this was the most recent in what has almost been a recurring pattern of friends ending their own lives. This body of work became especially key in culminating the excessive sense of loss I and those close to me have felt when facing the sudden absence of a companion (Figure 1). What may have been Minerva overcoming her own self-doubt at the end of this story abruptly needed to become a way to cope with loss, a hardship nearly everyone can relate to.

Figure 1. Kelly Stombaugh. XVI. Intaglio etching on handmade cotton paper. 20.5” x 30.5”. 2018.
DIKHOTOMIA: ORDER

The nexus of this work lies in an Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy. Being the understanding of a dichotomy of Greek origin, I want to make the distinction between the original intention of the word and how it is commonly interpreted in modern English. Many will think of a dichotomy as simply being between two sharply contrasting or polarized opposites, but the Greek definition of *dikhotomia* makes clear that it is a “cutting in half” splitting/division of something that was once whole.

This body of work should not be distilled down to a simple story of good versus evil or even chaos versus order. The two function differently but were once one-in-the-same and can be yet again through a sort of rationalization. It is important to define the roles of these characters so first are the clear agents of order. Specifically, these are Minerva and Bardou and, to a much lesser extent, Minerva’s parents.

The characterization of Minerva is as an individual who is not expected to be a symbol of strength, unlike her namesake. As she overcomes each adversity we see her grow in size and change physically to reflect her growing experience and development in psyche. She will encounter several adversities including representations of sexual assault, depression, and loss resulting in a culmination that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Bardou is representative of a freedom that Minerva does not have, but also in a way he is the part of her that is a natural life; the sort of life she should be allowed to live and another small *dikhotomia*. Though I can identify, as a printmaker, with many of Kiki Smith’s printed works, a bronze she’d made titled “Tied to Her Nature” was particularly influential in the creation of this work and the relationship between Minerva and Bardou.\(^3\) Bardou and his pan-like

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appearance was one of the first elements I’d intended to play a part in this story, but it wasn’t until I came across this work that the nature of their connection became clear to me that it would be deeper than simply that of a friendship (Figure 2). The exhibition her sculpture appeared in incorporated her own “journey with nature” but Smith’s elegant way of tying together the girl and the goat, in an embrace that could be seen as sexual, rather spoke to me as being a uniform and logical integration.⁴

These two characters change in different ways over time, but their connection remains strong and, as the story progresses, one increasingly cannot have a continued presence in the world without the other just as human beings are not equipped to go through life without the help of one another (Figure 3).
At some point Minerva and Bardou become one and she changes to become a symbolic agent of order. Overcoming his loss, at the end of the story, by learning to assimilate a part of him into her own being is what allows him to live on within her and as a part of her new form.
(Figure 4). This takes shape through references to iconographic imagery of cherubim and seraphim, the highest orders of celestial beings under God in Orthodox iconography. Cherubim, meaning “effusion of wisdom” are said to be the closest to God, so this final transfiguration of Minerva into a being with six eye-covered wings was necessary to indicate her spiritual elevation and enlightenment (Figure 5). In the work, she is represented in large-format etchings and stands in opposition to a large, and terrifying wolf (Figure 6).
Figure 4. Kelly Stombaugh. XIX. Intaglio etching on handmade cotton paper. 20.5” x 30.5”. 2018.
Figure 5. Kelly Stombaugh. Transfiguration. Intaglio etching on gampi. 8’ x 4’. 2018.
Figure 6. Kelly Stombaugh. Lascivity. Intaglio etching on gampi. 6’ x 4.5’. 2018.
No one will argue that life is difficult and unpredictable. Everyone goes through a variety of experiences, both good and bad, mostly challenging in some way, often unique to each individual yet somehow relatable to many others. Often the most memorable are the negative and sometimes devastating events and these alter us in equally unforeseeable ways. Each person handles every challenge in their own manner, but most can agree that life is chaotic.

These are the variety of experiences Minerva has and they, like life, dictate where her journey will take her. I hesitate to place value judgements on these chaotic elements. While they are undoubtedly negative in nature, they are the catalysts behind Minerva’s transformation and what allows her to develop into a powerful, fully-functioning and self-aware individual. These agents of chaos are the wolf, depression, and loss.

The most influential of these are the wolf. His link to Minerva is initially reminiscent of “Little Red Riding Hood” as this little girl finds herself in the forest facing a “big, bad wolf” who threatens to eat her on her way to the safety of her grandmother’s house. In many of this story’s earliest iterations the grandmother almost always dies and little red riding hood barely escapes in a tale which seems designed to warn young women about the danger of strangers or wolves and going out alone. The wolf of this tale, however, is not a trickster archetype. He is the embodiment of lasciviousness, a roaming lust and hunger, and gives no warning before devouring her (Figure 7).
After the full story is read, the intended interpretation is an epic one bringing to mind Fenrir, the giant wolf of Norse myth, devouring the god Odin during *Ragnarök*. Minerva becomes a goddess, but despite having always had that power within her still finds herself eaten by the wolf. This most scarring experience for her, and for me, is representational of an assault on her body that is both sexual and violent. It is the first and most damaging event in her life. Returning to the dark and brutal origins of the “Little Red Riding Hood” fairy tale, she eats the wolf in an act of self-defense and out of madness and frustration she eats every scrap (Figure 8).
While depression and loss are challenging, they are less concrete and malevolent threats to her. Depression is a figure made of shadow and wearing a mask that has dual faces, reminiscent of Japanese *Joge-e* images. It is a creeping mass that resembles liquid, like a wave, while its masked visage is the distinguishing feature depicting the unidentifiable “face” of
depression (Figure 9). Depression features prominently in the work and is a significant catalyst for the manifestation of Minerva’s self-actualization.

Figure 9. Kelly Stombaugh. XIII. Intaglio etching on handmade cotton paper. 41” x 30.5”. 2018.

Loss is less of a discernable adversary and can only be described as the absence of Bardou’s physical presence after death (Figure 10). Both of these are significant experiences and to handle them, she applies the only skills she knows to cope and ingests them.
Figure 10. Kelly Stombaugh. XVIII. Intaglio etching on handmade cotton paper. 20.5” x 30.5”. 2018.
ASSIMILATION

Many cultures across the world and throughout history have been known to practice different forms of cannibalism for a variety of reasons. For the purpose of this work, I’ve placed a focus on the process of cannibalizing enemies to gain their strength as a tribal war ritual, or “exocannibalism,” as well as the ceremonial “endocannibalism” where members of a community will eat their dead so that being can live on within their loved ones. However, neither of these terms suffice for the telling of this story, so borrowing from their history and utilizing Greek root words for “power” and “to eat,” I’ve coined the term “dynamiphagia” to describe Minerva’s eating of adversities to specifically absorb their essence or power.

Minerva is devoured and devours a variety of things which all become a part of her and are represented visually after each encounter. This becomes an important theme for me as an artist and is something we all do as visually stimulated animals. I visually devour the world around me, and as a result, have assimilated my own experiences and imagery into my identity. This process of meditating on and understanding new concepts as well as physically digesting things like food are what allows her to develop and change. In the case of the wolf and depression, her physical changes are a byproduct of her self-defense, but she deliberately accepts a part of Bardou in order for him to live on and be a part of who she then becomes (Figure 11). All of these things take place and continually alter her before we are reminded that one does not need to be a literal goddess to be confident in one’s own abilities (Figure 12).
Figure 11. Kelly Stombaugh. XIX. Intaglio etching on handmade cotton paper. 20.5” x 30.5”. 2018.
In the exhibition, the two large prints stand in opposition to one another with the case symbolizing the beginning and the end, the heart, of the story in the center (Figures 13, 14). Minerva depicted as a seraph-like figure in fiery hues directly confronting the wolf, a shadowy, cool figure who slinks off to the side. Though they feel polarized, the viewer is reminded that the
chaos and the order were once part of a primordial whole and will be again through the
connection of the eyes. Eyes play a major role in Greek culture and Orthodox iconography and
can mean many things both positive and negative. In these works they are very similar to one
another, but the wolf is covered in misshapen, corrupt and unsettling eyes while Minerva’s are
calming, sure, crisp and clean (Figures 5, 6). Their relationship is of a dual nature that is
ouroboric and mysterious, surrounded by a story that never really ends.

Figure 13. Kelly Stombaugh. Altar to Uncertainty gallery view (wolf). 2018.
METHODS OF CREATION

The materials I worked with on this project should be considered for a moment. As agents of order, they organized my thoughts and were co-conspirators in the genesis of the work. Often the materials and how they are employed can help to guide the project. Sometimes it is through their practical use, and at other points they serve a dual purpose, something more metaphysical, but all the materials served a very deliberate role in the birth of Altar to Uncertainty.

Printmaking as a medium has long been credited with giving artists and writers the ability to reproduce and disseminate their work. While this particular book does not lend itself to mass production, the spirit of using print as a communicative device is very present.

Looking at the practical use of these materials we can consider the longevity of the tradition of using the materials and the presence that these historically important materials evoke. The use of paper and copper plate etching was employed in this project because of their flexibility and functionality at delivering a message through print media. Usually, the product of printing an image from the surface of an etched copper plate is all that we see of copper’s role in the process. Considering this, I made a conscious decision to incorporate copper in a more unconventional way by including it in the cover of the book. As for the paper, I hand cast each sheet from cotton rag fiber. From a practical standpoint this allowed me to control the form and shape of the surface I would be using to depict my images. It is very important to me that I have a hand in the paper as well as the print. Ink has its own physicality and, besides what it can do for the paper in creating a print, I chose to include ink on the copper of the cover for the book. The tint and subtle relief of the ink aids me in bringing life to the etched images.
Having sufficiently discussed the practical aspects of the materials for my body of work, we can now delve into a more symbolic understanding of the choices of materials used in the work. The shape of the arch that is present in the copper plates, the hand cast paper and the overall shape of the book is not being attached to any particular religion but acts as a visual reminder of humanity making a connection with “the heavens.” Going back to icons, each page acts as a window through which the viewer can transport themselves into another realm.

As in the creation of Eastern Orthodox icon painting tradition, each step and material has a symbolic part to play in the overall journey. The importance is placed on the process of creation rather than the finished product. That is the mindset with which I approach each stage of the printmaking process. The opportunity each of these stages presents is an opportunity for meditation on the work.

The copper plate is roughly cut into shape and polished to produce a smooth and shining surface free of blemishes. Though it is already beautiful as it is, this plate is intended for a specific image. This bright surface is then coated with dark, tar-like grounds that submerges the plate into darkness; a darkness from which the hand drawn image rises illuminated. For this plate to fulfill its purpose it must undergo the uncertain process of being submerged in a murky bath of etchant wherein many unexpected and unintended things can occur which might permanently scar the image. The result is revealed when it is returned to the light by the removal of the ground. The work oscillates between coarse and yielding phases before it reaches its final state of concealment as the plate is covered with ink before being polished in stages to slowly and carefully reveal a rendition of the image which the artist places under immense pressure to immortalize on paper.5

Putting each plate in this body of work through this procedure functioned as a metaphor for the development of Minerva’s story as she too is subjected to various trials and each time is revealed to us as a more well-defined version of herself. By keeping this in mind as I put each plate through this process, I am able to take this meditative journey with her and use this experiential opportunity for self-reflection. I am given the ability to strike balances between the order and chaos of both of these creative and chemical processes.

Just as printmaking as a whole plays a part in the conceptualization of the work, so too does each separate material. There is a correspondence between the idea of Minerva as a goddess of war and the armor-like quality of the book’s cover. Enclosed in its case, this story is protected from the outside world yet also serves to contain the battle that is fought within. The doorway of this book is the center and source of everything in this exhibition and is invisibly connected to every print in the room through that element of copper, which is vital to the existence of each print.

Copper, being as integral an element as it is in this artwork, demands to be accompanied by an equally strong and original substrate as the hand cast cotton paper it is impressed upon. I formed each sheet from a material that has been broken down to the smallest fibers before being reformed into a smooth, printable surface. Before this paper is printed upon, it is the emptiness before creation is impressed upon it and provides a tactile surface that is pure potential.

The thin, somewhat glossy gampi* paper, on which the large-format works are printed, contrasts the stoic and organized quality of the cotton arches. Its tissue paper-like characteristics allow these dominating forces to inhabit an ethereal space through the transparency of this paper.

* a very thin, but strong paper made from the fibers of a Japanese shrub
Gampi is incredibly responsive to the flow of air in the room, allowing these prints to come to life and reflect the movement and mood of the space.

Ink is the agent which unites the copper and paper together. It realizes the potential that the copper and paper have by themselves by imbuing the image with the abilities and substance for printing. By virtue of being liquid and somewhat formless the ink has limitless potential by itself, but by combining these three materials, order can be pulled from the chaos of inexistence, a primordial act.
CODEX AND CONCLUSIONS

Upon “completion” I’ve realized that this work finds its origins in many places: visual book-making, collections of prints, illustration, visual book-making. The codex itself took on the form of an installation as it called for transforming into an immersive experience and could no longer be bound. The pages, which now functioned more as windows into another plane, naturally found their place upon the walls. These images were originally intended to be accompanied by text, but what they became had contained so much power that to tie them down with prose would have weakened their ability to relate to viewers and their experiences. Minerva’s visual characteristics were kept simplified so that she could be related to by anyone and they could use this story to comprehend the magnitude of some of their own accomplishments.

This began as a very personal endeavor to fight through my own difficult experiences and find myself as an artist and individual and developed into something that could resonate with others and help them find peace and resolution to the challenges they’ve faced or are in the process of facing. The book and print formats both lend their communicative potential to this work and for that reason I can conclude that there is more to be explored and developed, for myself and others, and that this book project will necessarily be an ongoing one.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Kelly Stombaugh is from South Bend, Indiana where she cultivated a passion for the visual arts, dance, and coffee roasting. In 2014 she received her Bachelor of Fine Art in Printmaking from Indiana University in South Bend. She currently resides in Rolling Prairie, Indiana and is a candidate to receive her Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Louisiana State University in the summer of 2018.