

A painting depicting a man from behind, wearing a set of large, dark antlers. He is shirtless and wearing camouflage shorts, holding a rifle. He stands on a porch or balcony with a railing. In the foreground, several dogs are jumping or running excitedly. To the right, a woman with long hair and a blue headband is partially visible. The background shows a landscape with trees and a building under a blue sky.

Persistence:

*The Continuing Influence
of Classical Myths*

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August 30 – October 12, 2016

Acknowledgements by Heather Sincavage
Introduction by Stanley I Grand

Exhibition curated by Stanley I Grand

Cover: Harvey Dinnerstein, *Diana and Actaeon* (detail)



Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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Heather Sincavage
Director, Sordoni Art Gallery

We know the characters; we've heard the stories. Classical myths are timeless. In *Persistence: The Continuing Influence of Classical Myths*, artists have tackled the universal tales—some using traditional imagery and others a modern twist—but all find inspiration in Classical narratives.

First and foremost, I thank the artists who are sharing their work with the Sordoni Art Gallery. Thanks also to Denise Bibro (Denise Bibro Fine Art, Chelsea, New York City), Russ Gerard (Gurari Collections, Boston), Douglas Walla (Kent Fine Art, New York City), and Laura Craig (Laura Craig Galleries, Scranton, PA). Chris Dunlap of Arion Press granted the Sordoni Art Gallery permission to reproduce works by Wendy Artin that accompanied poems by Seamus Heaney in *Stone from Delphi*. I appreciate the generosity of several collectors for lending works to the exhibition including Christa Cornell, Andrea Fogle Plotkin and Douglas I. Plotkin, John Petrowsky, Robert J. Salm, and a number of individuals who wish to remain anonymous. Jon West-Bay, Curator, University of Maryland University College Collection and David Carbone, Executor, Estate of Joan and Alfred Russell also deserve our gratitude. Finally, I thank my colleagues Stanley I Grand for curating this exhibition and Paul Riggs, Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences, Wilkes University, for his ongoing support of the gallery.

I hope this exhibition encourages you to delve back into the Classical narratives. *Persistence: The Continuing Influence of Classical Myths* is the written word brought to life through the imagination of artists. Our heroes and heroines in the flesh, their story is still relevant after all these years.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Milet Andrejevic

Wendy Artin

Caren Canier

Thomas Cornell

Harvey Dinnerstein

Kathryn Freeman

Paul Georges

Brian Keeler

James Mesplé

Raoul Middleman

Don Perlis

Alfred Russell

Edward Schmidt

Herbert Simon

Kyle Staver

Audrey Ushenko

INTRODUCTION

Stanley I Grand

Curator

Relationships are protean: personal and public, contradictory and consistent, pure and impure, understood and not, fleeting and permanent. This exhibition is about relationships with ideas and objects, tradition and history, beliefs and myths; in short about ourselves within the Classical tradition, a tradition moribund to some, irrelevant to others, Eurocentric to critics, and yet still vital and inspirational. The Classical tradition is the underlying grid, now often unseen or ignored, of our civilization.

Not many years ago, the mark of an educated person in the West was familiarity with the Greek and Roman authors, poets, tragedians, historians, and philosophers. A youngster's schooling included Latin, and perhaps some Greek. The curriculum began with Caesar (*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*) before moving on to Virgil and Horace. One learned that "Classical," from the Latin "classicus," meant more than simply a past period or time; it designated the highest class of citizen dating back to Severus Tullius, the penultimate, legendary Roman king, and hence the best, the standard of superior quality.

But if all gilded gods have lead feet, so too is our understanding of the antique. The past is layered, incomplete, sketchy; it is a palimpsest, a brittle vellum covered with competing scribbles, entire patches scratched out, and ghostly texts emerging from the inks of time. We embrace, in John Boardman's phrase, the "archaeology of nostalgia," but then again he argues, so did the Greeks themselves.

Artists today return to the Classical myths for a variety of motives. Beginning in the 1950s numerous artists trained in the language of abstraction, returned to objective, representational painting. The vanguard style had become, or was shortly to become, the academic style. Today no single aesthetic predominates; no single artist dominates his or her time as did Picasso or Matisse for instance. Artists no longer feel compelled to eliminate that which is not unique to their art. Modernism's "less is more," became Post-Modernism's "less is a bore." Narrative, myth, and a vast lexicon of form again enrich contemporary art.

The artists in this exhibition have worked in a tradition interpreted by millennia of predecessors. Some do so with irony, others in a search for sincerity, personal identity, or Mark Rothko's "tragic and timeless" themes. Some employ caricature, others a refined Beaux Arts style. The "heroism of modern life" so exalted by Baudelaire and other 19th-century thinkers, which in many ways supplanted the Classical and Biblical stories and myths, has in time seemed wanting, even tawdry and shallow. Among the riches of the Classical tradition, artists again find inspiration, order, and permanence. The vineyard is not barren and artists continue to harvest its riches.



MILET ANDREJEVIC

Apollo and Daphne, undated
pen & ink and wash, 7 × 10½
Private Collection

In ancient times, simple shepherds, living healthy lives at peace with nature and each other, inhabited the isolated, bucolic region in the Peloponnesus known as Arcadia. During the reign of Augustus, the great Roman poet Virgil wrote his "Eclogues," in praise of rural life set in an Arcadia that resembles closely his birth-land in Northern Italy. Poussin's famous painting *Et in Arcadia Ego*, 1637 (Louvre, Paris), with its ambiguous title carved on a tomb conjures up a moment of lost innocence when shepherds suddenly understand that Death walks among them.

Milet Andrejevic frequently painted scenes set in a new Arcadia: New York City's Central Park. In this work, two figures, behind them a third, bring to mind William Butler Yeats's lines: "On all the tragic scene they stare./One asks for mournful melodies;/Accomplished fingers begin to play." (*Lapis Lazuli*). The balloon, soon to pop, symbolizes transience: a memento mori. Head resting on hand in a classic melancholy pose, a modern-day Apollo stares at Daphne, who had fled his attentions by exchanging flesh for rough bark and green leaves. A favorite tale from Ovid, this has inspired artists for generations.



WENDY ARTIN

Laocoön, 2012
 watercolor on paper, 18¹/₈ × 15
 Collection of John Petrowsky, Boston
 Used with permission of Arion Press, San Francisco

The Laocoön is believed to be a marble copy of a lost bronze Hellenistic sculptural group consisting of the priest Laocoön flanked by his two sons attacked by twin giant serpents. Classical writers differ on why he was punished and by whom. According to Virgil, Athena (Minerva) punished Laocoön for warning the Trojans that the Greek gift of a wooden horse will be their downfall. (*Aeneid* 2.256-289).

Here the extreme emotionalism, pain, and agony contrast with the calm serenity of High Classical sculpture. The marble, dating from c. 40 BCE was discovered in a vineyard beyond the walls of Rome in 1506. Michelangelo was among those who visited the site during the excavation. Now in the Vatican Museums, the work was tremendously influential on both Renaissance and especially Baroque art.



CAREN CANIER

Ulysses, 2008
 mixed media/oil on panel, 40 × 60
 Courtesy of the Artist

Caren Canier's artwork is a serial narrative that highlights incidents from Odysseus's (Ulysses) prolonged homecoming after the Trojan War. She quotes numerous Classical and Renaissance sources to tell the story. From the top left, we see Athena Promachos (Archaeological Museum, Naples) about to cast a mighty spear, and Odysseus bound to the mast of his ship while the Sirens sing their beguiling and destructive song (the referenced red-figure Krater is in the British Museum, London). Further incidents include a scene from a black-figure kylix (drinking cup) of men turned into animals by Circe (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); the blinding of Polyphemus (from the Scylla group, Sperlonga, Italy); the men's escape from the Cyclops's cave by clinging to the bellies of sheep (Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe); Odysseus killing the suitors (State Museum, Berlin); and Francesco Primaticcio's reunion of *Odysseus and Penelope*, 1563 (Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio). The large center section showing faithful Penelope weaving references Pinturicchio's fresco *Penelope and Suitors*, 1509 (National Gallery, London). Penelope would not entertain the suitors's proposals until her weaving was completed. Every night she undid her day's work. Other incidents depicted include Odysseus's ship (Sperlonga) and a sculpture of Odysseus disguised as an old man (Louvre, Paris), both lower left. Superimposed as it were is a young man with a straw boater hat from James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which chronicles Leopold Bloom's adventures in Dublin on June 16, 1904.



THOMAS CORNELL

The Birth of Nature and Death of War, 2011
oil on canvas, 40 × 54
Courtesy of Christa Cornell

The late Thomas Cornell thought and wrote deeply on the subjects of ecology, justice, community, and peace. Often he turned to Classical myths celebrating the birth of Dionysos, whom he equated with nature, and the death of Narcissus, which symbolized the overcoming of the ego, a prerequisite to creating a loving community and the end of war.

In this work and its two accompanying studies, Cornell contrasts ideals. At left is a verdant landscape with goats and robins in which a couple present newborn Nature to view. In mythology goats often represent fertility and nurturing; recall that goats fed milk to the infant Zeus on Mt. Ida. The arrival of robins, of course, is a harbinger of spring. The central group recalls Poussin's *The Infant Bacchus Entrusted to the Nymphs of Nysa; The Death of Echo and Narcissus*, 1657 (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA), which Cornell knew and admired greatly. (Indeed the study with the male figure frontal, more closely resembles Poussin's Hermes in the Cambridge painting.) The infant, with upraised arm in blessing, recalls numerous paintings of baby Jesus as well. To the right lies a desolate landscape with scavenging crows, buildings ablaze, smoke ascending, and helmeted Ares (Mars), the god of war, impaled. Although reversed, Cornell's Ares directly quotes Poussin's *Flora*, 1631 (Dresden). Cornell was greatly influenced by Poussin's mythological paintings and his stoic moralism.



HARVEY DINNERSTEIN

Diana and Actaeon, 1990
pastel on canvas, 72 × 55
Courtesy of the Artist

Grandson of Cadmus founder of Thebes, Actaeon had spent the morning hunting with his mates. When satiated with success, he had ordered the nets retrieved and stored for the morrow. Accompanied by his hounds, he wandered through the woods, coming at last to a grotto before which sat a still pool with mossy banks, fed by a pure stream. Chaste Diana favored this spot from time to time, and was bathing with her nymphs when Actaeon happened upon the scene.

There are sights no eyes should see, and Diana nude is one. Enraged at this transgression, the goddess splashed water on the hapless Actaeon. Antlers sprung from his forehead, his hands became hoofs, his clothes and skin turned to hairy pelt. Now a stag, he watched uneasily as his hounds approached, and soon felt their fangs tearing his flesh while his friends cheer on the blood-crazed pack and shout for missing Actaeon to join in their support.

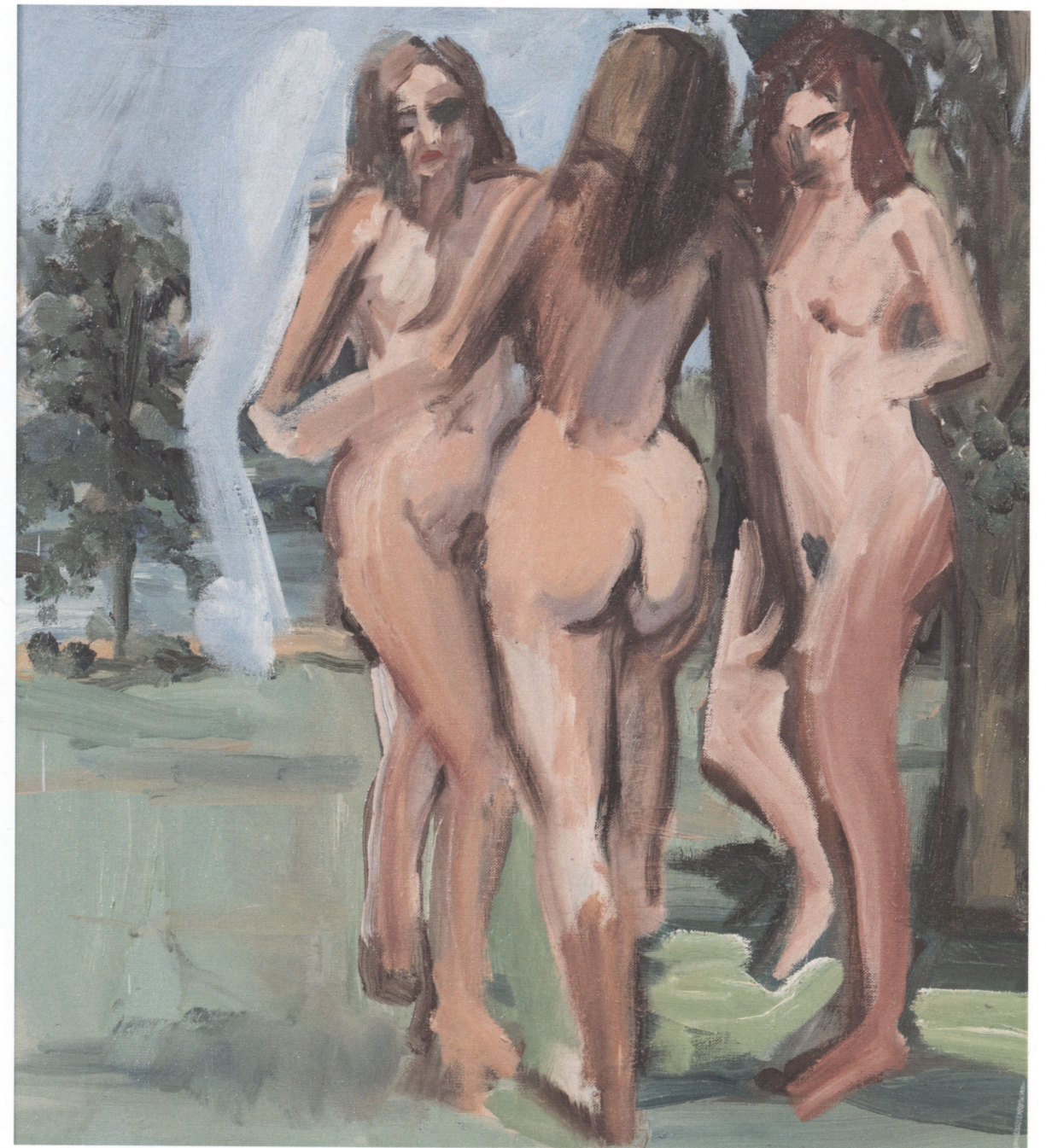


KATHRYN FREEMAN

Eos and Lampos, 2013
oil on panel, 24 × 30
Courtesy of the Artist

Homer memorably describes Eos as “rosy-fingered Dawn.” Her chariot, drawn by a team of shining white horses, Lampos and Phaethon, heralds the coming of her brother Helios, the sun, who in turn is followed by their sister Selene, goddess of the moon. Eos’s lovers were many and included both Ares (Mars, the god of war) and many mortals such as Orion, Cephalus, and Tithonus whose son Memnon she bore. When Achilles killed Memnon in single combat at Troy, Eos’s grief was immense and her tears return each morning as dewy reminders of her slain son.

Here Eos, having shed her flower patterned saffron robe, spends a quiet moment with Lampos.



PAUL GEORGES

Three Graces, 1966
oil on canvas, 18 × 20
Private Collection

Companions to Apollo, the Graces have been a popular subject in art from Classical times forward. Pausanias, the first century Roman author of a travel guide to Greece and its wonders, noted: “Who it was who first represented the Graces naked, whether in sculpture or in painting, I could not discover,” but that is how they have most typically been depicted.

Classical texts differ on their number, parentage, and even names. Most commentators, however, follow Hesiod’s *Theogony* which lists three, names their father as Zeus and identifies them as Aglaea (“Splendor”), Euphrosyne (“Mirth”), and Thalia (“Good Cheer”).

There are many ways to group three figures gracefully, but Georges follows the traditional arrangement of the end figures frontal and the center seen from the back, a tradition that goes back to a fresco in Pompeii, a Hellenistic sculpture now in the Louvre, and examples from the Renaissance by Botticelli and Raphael.



BRIAN KEELER

Interior Graces, 2009
oil on canvas, 26 × 30
Courtesy of Laura Craig Galleries, Scranton, PA

Brian Keeler's *Graces* differ from many typical handlings of the subject. Set in an empty room, and dressed in contemporary jeans, his women nonetheless recall Botticelli's well-known group from the *Primavera*, c. 1482 (Uffizi, Florence). But whereas Botticelli's raised hands and linked arms have a sinuous flow, Keeler's have a rigid geometry that echoes that of the room, which receives equal billing with the figures, who also appear older and more mature than the canonical, maidenly *Graces*. The sunlight streaming in from the open window and falling on the floor and wall reminds one of Edward Hopper's use of light in interiors to both illuminate and create abstract pattern.

In the Renaissance, Neo-Platonic thinkers saw the *Graces* as representing the acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating.



JAMES MESPLÉ

Hera Changing Channels, 1999
oil & egg tempera on panel, 29 × 26
Collection of Robert J. Salm, Chicago, IL

Sister and wife of Zeus, goddess of the heavens, and staunch defender of legitimacy, Hera (Juno) was the patron of marriage, fidelity, virgins, kings, dynasties, and fertility. She is the antithesis of Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love. Hera suffered long from the dalliances of her consort Zeus for whom adultery was “a sport and a pastime,” to borrow James Salter’s memorable phrase.

The painting seems to be a variant on the *Hercules at the Crossroads* theme: that is it’s about choices and change. We see Hera dressed in royal purple—her mask recalls the superhero Green Lantern—wearing a necklace inscribed “We see what we are” in contra-distinction to the television’s “We are what we see.” Red roses, Aphrodite’s attribute, surround Hera. Her giant hand, adapted from that of the Colossus of Constantine in Rome, points perhaps to the road of virtue and fidelity, a choice contemplated by the self-portrait and the lonely road painting beneath. Through the archway is a view of Chicago’s skyline and lakefront, Mesplé’s home city.



RAOUL MIDDLEMAN

Andromeda, 1988
oil on canvas, 82 × 82
University of Maryland University College Collection

Born of a union between Zeus and Danaë, Perseus—one of the greatest Classical heroes before his descendent Hercules—was famous for beheading of the Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turned men to stone and, further, his rescue of Andromeda chained to an ocean rock guarded by the sea monster Cetus.

Raoul Middleman's *Andromeda*, in bordello attire, looks away from her rescuer Perseus, whose magical accessories include winged sandals lent by Hermes (Mercury), an outlandish Hades's Cap of Invisibility, a diamond-bladed harpe sword from Zeus, and a polished shield, courtesy of Athena (Minerva) that features Middleman's own face as Medusa. Middleman's agitated, expressionistic style heightens the drama and turns the scene into a frolicking Mardi Gras tableau.



DON PERLIS

Electra, c. 2002-03
oil on canvas, 61¼ × 80
Courtesy of Denise Bibro Fine Art, Chelsea, NYC

King Agamemnon's victorious return from Troy ended ingloriously when his wife Clytemnestra and her paramour Aegisthus murdered him in his bath. Consumed by hatred toward her mother for this nefarious deed, Electra sought revenge. When Orestes, her brother, returned to Mycenae after years abroad, she encouraged him to kill their mother. Here Electra stands immobile, like a Greek Kore, on the palace steps while helmeted Orestes, his sword bloodied, prepares to deliver the coup de grâce. Pylades, Orestes's friend and companion, assists.

The tragedy presents a moral conundrum between the obligation to avenge a parent's murder and the prohibition against matricide. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides each wrote dramas featuring Electra and the consequences of this act.



ALFRED RUSSELL

The Fall of Phaëthon, 1970
oil on canvas, 52 × 40
Estate of Joan and Alfred Russell

Rash the promise, rash the ask, tragic at the end. Affirming his parentage of Phaëthon, Phoebus Apollo promised to grant the youth whatever wish he desired. Foolishly Phaëthon sought the reigns of the Sun god's golden chariot and the right to guide the fierce, winged steeds through the heavens for a day. In vain Apollo begged his son to seek another wish, but in the end, the god, having sworn by the waters of the river Styx, allowed fate to run its course.

Without Apollo's customary weight, the chariot, like a ship unballasted, pitched right, then left. The horses bolted in all directions. Sweeping down too close to earth, the sun's heat scorched the land, dried up the rivers. Finally Jove interceded, his thunderbolt hurled striking Phaëthon who falls from the sky.

Ovid quotes a line from his epitaph: "Great was his daring, which none may disparage."



EDWARD SCHMIDT

Seduction of Callisto, 2016
oil on canvas, 45 × 62
Courtesy of the Artist

Jove (Jupiter, Zeus) was not a constant god. His lust unbounded, Jove often resorted to subterfuge and deception to satisfy his desires. Like a trickster, he would assume different guises: a swan to Leda, a bull to Europa, gold coins to Danaë. The beautiful nymph Callisto presented a different challenge. A follower of Diana, Callisto had sworn to preserve her virginity and had maintained her vow until Jove appeared in the form of Diana herself. Subsequently as Diana and her nymphs bathed, Callisto's growing belly revealed her secret. Enraged, the goddess banished the nymph, who gave birth to a son Arcas. Seeking revenge for her husband's dalliance, Juno (Hera) transformed Callisto into a bear forced to roam the woods. One day while hunting, Arcas, now a man, encountered his mother, and was poised to slay her with his spear when Jove intervened. Mother and son were raised to the heavens, where they remain as Ursa Major and Minor.



HERBERT SIMON

Atlas Shrunk, 1995-96
 bronze, 21¼ × 9 × 10¾
 Courtesy of the Artist

To the victor go the spoils. To the vanquished not much. In the great Titanomachy (in Greek “-machy” simply means “battle”), the younger gods, Zeus and his siblings, fought and defeated an older generation of deities, the Titans led by Cronos. This epic struggle between parents and offspring, new and old conventions, progress and the status quo ante still resonates today. The Olympians—as the younger gods were called having taken up residence on Mt. Olympus—punished those Titans whom they did not dispatch. Atlas was condemned to shoulder the heavenly spheres for eternity (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 517-520). Alternate representations in art show Atlas supporting the earth, as in Herbert Simon’s sculpture. Simon also playfully references Ayn Rand’s famous novel *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957.



KYLE STAVER

Europa and the Flying Fish, 2011
 oil on canvas, 68 × 54
 Courtesy of Kent Fine Art and the Artist

Daughter of Agenor and sister of the hero Cadmus, the legendary founder of Thebes, Europa and her friends were frolicking among the herds, when she spotted a pure alabaster white bull. Unbeknownst to her, Zeus had assumed the bovine form as part of his plan to seduce or rape her—the distinction in Greek mythology often blurred: the failure of the former typically resulted in the latter. In Kyle Staver’s painting Europa has climbed onto the beast’s back, and Zeus, taking advantage, has headed out to sea from the Phoenician shores. Now distressed, Europa flings her arms skyward, and calls out, but her pleas go unanswered. Arriving in Crete, Zeus impregnated Europa, who gave birth to King Minos, the eponymous founder of Minoan civilization. Staver’s almost cartoonish figures provide a subtle ironic commentary on the subject of the maiden in distress. Ovid retells the myth in the *Metamorphoses*.



AUDREY USHENKO

Whether on Ida's Shady Brow, 2011

oil on linen, 60 × 48

Courtesy of Denise Bibro Fine Art, Chelsea, NYC

The English visionary poet and artist William Blake begins *To the Muses* with this line that Audrey Ushenko has quoted as the title of her painting: Blake was lamenting the Muses's abandonment of poetry and evokes a lyre, Apollo's instrument: "The languid strings do scarcely move! / The sound is forc'd, the notes are few!" The nine Muses (some Classical authors claim but three) were patronesses of the arts, history, poetry, et cetera. They were the daughters of Mnemosyne (Memory) and Zeus, who as an infant was secreted in a cave on Mt. Ida in order to escape the murderous impulses of his father Cronos. Or perhaps it's the other Mt. Ida Blake is referencing.

Ushenko has surrounded her painter with a whirling circle of contemporary figures recalling Classical prototypes. A snaky haired Medusa checks out her image in a mirror held by a modern, well-coiffed Venus de Milo. Further on a Sphinx, in profile, gazes on the scene while a woman looks up savoring his words of wisdom, or contemplating the solution to the famous riddle. Above them is that Icarus of the melted wings tumbling from the sky? Directly above the painter's painting is a self-portrait dressed in white and flailing. Bacchus the god of wine, with grapes spilling from his hair, seems to be enjoying himself. As if all this activity is not enough, there's a cacophony of pattern. Ushenko seems to be saying that amidst all the chaos, there's quiet and peace to be found in the act of painting.



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