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Review Of "Contemporary Art And Classical Myth" Edited By J. Hirsh And I. L. Wallace

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[Preview](#)

In Roy Lichtenstein's 1961 *Look Mickey*, the work the artist considered the origin and fountain of his pop oeuvre, Donald Duck stands on a fishing pier looking with gleeful anticipation into the water as he feels the pull of a huge fish at the end of his line. As he stares at what should be his own reflected image, but is instead the artist's signature amid the water's waves, Mickey Mouse stands behind with his hand over his mouth, holding in his laughter, as he—and we, the viewers—see that Donald has in fact caught *himself*; he cannot see that his fishing line has caught on the back of his jacket: "Look Mickey, I've Hooked a Big One!!" reads the caption at the painting's top left corner.

The underlying presence and transformation of the Narcissus myth in this painting is unmistakable, and Graham Bader's analysis (Chapter 7 "Lichtenstein's Narcissus") embodies this exciting volume's interest in bringing to light the potent—yet largely unexplored—relationship between classical mythology and contemporary art. Here, Bader explores how Lichtenstein's return to the primal scene of classical mythology aids the artist in defining a new genre, and how *Look Mickey* reenacts the Narcissus myth with Lacanian inflections. Classical antiquity in fact played an important role in Lichtenstein's work more generally (*Temple of Apollo*, 1964; *Laocoon*, 1988; *Galatea*, sculpture 1990) and marks a stage in the history of mythology when it is linked to post-Freudian cultural discourse.

Jennie Hirsh and Isabelle Loring Wallace have done a superb job in bringing together a rich collection of essays that not only uncovers the (perhaps surprising) role that classical mythology plays in a wide variety of contemporary art (here defined as 1960 to the present), but also shows us how contemporary art historians can fruitfully employ classical myths as part of their methods of interpretation. Classicists will find here an exemplary volume on the reception of Classical mythology in the history of art distinguished by the theoretical sophistication of the essays, the art-historical expertise of the authors, and the depth and far-reaching implications of the editors' introduction. As Hirsh and Wallace see it, the question of the relation between classical myth and the visual arts in general has not been adequately addressed, as art historians have not (with a few notable exceptions) progressed beyond the notion of art as an illustration of mythology; of artists as choosing mythological subjects because they are "good stories." What our editors propose instead, and what the essays in this volume exemplify, is that art, and in this case, contemporary art, "dynamically and historically" constitute mythology, "myth's elaboration, perversion, analysis." Painting, sculpture, and other artistic media enact, transform, and adapt myths. Because many contemporary artists are uniquely preoccupied with issues of representation, the idealized mirror image, the male and female gazes, and with art as libidinal sublimation, these artists have gravitated to the myths of Pygmalion, Narcissus, Orpheus, and

Medusa as early attempts to engage with these concepts. At the same time, art historians have aptly employed these myths as interpretive strategies, i.e. as ways of thinking through contemporary art.

Put in another way, Hirsh and Wallace embrace a notion of classical reception that rejects the superficiality of approaching the uses of mythology in the history of art as though they merely reflected a history of changing styles, and instead propose that complexities and deeper meanings in the myths themselves account for myth's continued relevance and formative role in art. This volume thus promises not only to illuminate contemporary art, but also to teach us something about the meaning of classical mythology. The reader will not be disappointed.

The book's three sections, framed by a prologue and epilogue that both fittingly push beyond the scope of the other chapters, offer one engaging essay after another. The first section, "Myth as Meaning," treats five artists whose works refer explicitly to mythology: Cy Twombly, Luciano Fabro, Yayoi Kusama, Bracha L. Ettinger, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The second section, "Myth as Medium," uncovers implicit mythological narratives in works by Roy Lichtenstein, Tracey Emin, Ghada Amer, Richard Drew and Wim Delvoye. The authors in the final section, "Myth as Method," link the conceptual preoccupations of artists as diverse as Duane Hanson, Bas Jan Ader, Vlatka Horvat, Francis Alÿs, and Bill Viola with classical mythical narratives of realism, repetition, and the underworld. The volume's masterful prologue by Lisa Saltzman proposes that Kara Walker's vaudevillian silhouettes of the antebellum South work in the same tradition that Pliny founded mythically in his tale of the birth of art and the Corinthian maiden. What for Pliny is art's foundational attempt to capture the material trace of a desired body, becomes in Walker's work art's invocation of historical trauma and absorption in issues of memory, loss, and distance from the real. The prologue by Joanna Frueh combines scholarly with personal reflection in a meditation on the myth of the Sphinx and the role it has played in her own work.

When a work of contemporary art bears a title from classical mythology without any straightforward representational or iconographic relation to the work, what are we to make of this use of mythology? The essays in Section One address this question, at least indirectly, as they all consider examples of this kind. Classicists may be particularly interested in Craig Staff's essay on Cy Twombly. Twombly's *Proteus* (1984) conveys the same emotional intensity and inscrutability as many of Twombly works with mythological titles and/or ancient names scratched on the surface (e.g. *Apollo* (1975) *Venus* (1975) *Bacchus* (1981), *Libation of Priapus* (1982). Roland Barthes would view Twombly's "Mediterranean effect" as imposed on materials with no connection to it, but Staff's essay develops a view of Twombly's *Proteus* where the painting's mythological and material dimensions work in unison to enact (rather than to represent) notions of becoming and metamorphosis central, Staff argues, to Twombly's view of the Greeks. *Proteus*, moreover, rewrites the Proteus myth by denying the elusive Proteus any final form. Viewed in this way, Twombly's painting, it seems to me, does its own work of mythologizing; it *is* part of the mythological tradition. The only thing that I would have liked to see more of in this essay is fuller background on Twombly's connection to the Classics – for example, on the importance to him of the modernist poets and their uses of Greek and Latin poetry, and a consideration of the particular range of mythological material in Twombly's oeuvre as a whole.

As Twombly rewrites the myth of Proteus, so other contemporary artists revise the myth of Orpheus in order to question its gender dynamics of male domination and its preoccupation with transgressive looking. Orpheus's gaze destroys Eurydice (for Blanchot, for example, Orpheus enacts the artist's controlling gaze). Marissa Vigneault's essay on Bracha L. Ettinger's mixed media *Eurydice* series (begun in 1992) shows us how one artist tries to rework this dynamic by giving the viewer access to a non-punishing, Eurydicean gaze and a fluid connection to Eurydice's subjectivity. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's minimalist installation, "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus Twice*) 1991 also explores gender and subjectivity by invoking a mythical dimension. Jennie Hirsh's admirably lucid and learned treatment of Gonzalez-Torres's complex work unpacks the way that the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus work in this piece to allow spectators both to "see as men and be seen as women" thereby undercutting the traditional gender split and the separation between subject and object.

Contemporary works of art without explicit mythological subjects can nonetheless play out mythological narratives as part of their meaning. Understanding these implicit narratives can do nothing short of illuminate the inscrutable. Besides Bader's exemplary piece on Lichtenstein which I discussed briefly earlier, I find particularly engaging Sharon Sliwinski's essay "Icarus returned: The Falling Man and the Survival of Antiquity" on Richard's Drew's 9/11 photograph. The photograph, which was published in the *New York Times* and many other newspapers on September 12, 2001, inflicts instant trauma on the viewer; it is in most ways simply unseeable. It becomes comprehensible, if no less traumatic, when put in the context of images of the myth of Icarus in the spirit of the German art historian Aby Warburg's *Nachleben der Antike*.

Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* project is not so much unseeable as deeply unlovable. And yet, a machine designed to complete the human digestive cycle from beginning to end, is not designed, one might imagine, to be loved. Or is it? Isabelle Loring Wallace deftly analyzes Delvoye's various versions of this project as the fulfillment of a fantasy of purification, of radical detachment of the subject from the more abject aspects of being human. Wallace uncovers a crucial pattern found in the myths of Medusa, Pygmalion, and Narcissus: all three domesticate the (Lacanian) Real – the unseeable. Medusa cannot be looked at; Pygmalion cannot bear real women; Narcissus prefers his immaterial image to himself. Each myth offers art a means of protection from the Real – Medusa becomes part of Athena's shield; Pygmalion crafts his Galatea, and Narcissus falls in love with his idealized image. Delvoye's *Cloaca* connects in surprisingly particular ways to these myths, and most generally, repeats the same gesture of idealization/purification. So too, I would suggest, mythological analysis domesticates the *Cloaca* project itself.

"Each civilization has a notion of hell. . . .", so begins Sophie-Isabelle Dufour's essay on Bill Viola, "Video Art in the House of Hades." Viola's 2007 three-screen video installation *Ocean without a Shore*, temporarily placed in a fifteenth century Venetian church, enacts a kind of Odyssean nekuia, with human shadows gradually emerging from the dead and taking on some characteristic of the living, just as the shades of the *Odyssey* do when they drink blood. Separated from the living by a wall of water, Viola's ghosts invoke the power of mimesis, of images and their connection to the sacred. Most interestingly, perhaps, they take us away from Christianity (subverting their religious context) and back to the pagan notion of the dead as disturbing spectral presences.

I have not had the chance to discuss every essay in this volume, but taken as a whole, they teach us much about contemporary art and about classical mythology. What we learn about contemporary art is the extent to which it engages with, rewrites, and moves forward the traditions of classical mythology, either directly or indirectly. What we learn about classical mythology is the degree to which it prefigures concepts that are central to contemporary theory like art as libidinal sublimation, trauma, the male gaze, and the relation of the individual to the idealized mirror image. Along the way, we are illuminated about how to interpret some fascinating and difficult works of contemporary art. Classicists might also find themselves inspired to use myth as method in interpreting other ancient and modern texts of all sorts, as we broaden our understanding of the theoretical preoccupations of the Greeks and Romans.