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Metamorphosis: An Exploration of Transformation in Artmaking

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METAMORPHOSIS:
AN EXPLORATION OF TRANSFORMATION IN ARTMAKING

SCARLET SEVITS

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College
At Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for graduation with
UNIVERSITY HONORS 2021

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Research Question

My project begins with wanting to know how the art making process relates to the process of metamorphosis and the extent to which this process can achieve realism. For my creative project, I chose subject matter that relates to this question. My subject matter comes from the female mythological figures of Ovid's epic poem *Metamorphoses* and I deal specifically with the narratives that describe the transformation of the human body. I also chose a methodology that relates to my question. The acts of painting and writing can be explored as processes of transformation. On the one hand, painting involves the ambition to transform the substance of paint itself into a visual description of material, whether it is flesh or the bark of a tree. Lyrical poetry attempts to express personal experience and can be read as the transformation of emotional experience into organized language. Both processes of metamorphosis attempt to convince the viewer or reader of reality: the reality of a living figure or the emotional response to an experience. The creation of paintings and poetry allows me to take part in these processes through the parallel narratives of mythology and to explore this relationship between form and subject.

Methodology: Project Overview

To explore this question of art achieving metamorphosis and a perception of reality, I created three oil paintings of female mythological figures from *Metamorphoses* that undergo a transformation. Each of the paintings are 34 by 40 inches and done on stretched canvas and fitted with custom built frames. The second component of my project is three accompanying

lyric poems that act as expressions of the emotional or psychological experience that is the transformation.

My method for conducting my research was first and foremost to engage in the physical practice of art making, which include painting and writing. Actually taking part in creation is the only way to begin to understand it as a process. My research and engagement with the history of the relationship between art, literature, and realism informed stylistic and technical choices in my art making.

Methodology: Justification

For the paintings, I chose to work in oil paints on stretched canvas. The application of oil paint to a canvas has its place in the canon of art history. This format recalls works of the Renaissance and Italian Baroque that also deal with Classical imagery, that is, imagery relating to ancient Greece and Rome. Classicism has always been grounded in the desire to describe the human body and painting has historically had the goal of imitating the natural world. By simply referencing the format and medium of these works of the past, my desire is to insert my works into a dialogue with these historical goals of painting.

For the poetry, I decided to create lyric poetry without meter or specific structure to best express the emotional experience of the painted figures. My writing has slightly more of a focus on language and imagery than on obvious narrative to allow readers the space to bring their own narrative experiences to the poem. I chose this format of poetry rather than creating an epic poem in the style of Ovid, because I believe my style of choice does a better job of suggesting emotional realism rather than sensory realism.

Methodology: Interdisciplinary

I approached the exploration of transformation and the effect of realism from two different directions: that of painting and that of poetry. This is because I defined my goal of realism in a way that required more than one discipline of art making to sufficiently achieve it. As outlined in my research question, my goal was to create painted figures that look as if they could exist in the real world and to illustrate the emotional experiences of these figures. I believe that most people, myself included, react differently to different mediums of expression, like writing and art. Complex experiences, like that of transforming from one state into another, need more than one mode of expression to be relatable and to have a better chance of creating an immersive experience for a viewer. For me, the process of painting was better equipped to create a sensory experience, to evoke the presence of an imaginary figure. The process of writing was more suited to expressing emotion. By combining the disciplines of visual art and writing, I could explore transformation and realism more thoroughly and make my work applicable to a wider audience.

Conclusions

As the artist at work in my project, I believe that I did have the unique experience of watching something inert transform and take on its own kind of reality. The goals of my artmaking involved immersion, which I think I achieved. In painting my mythological figures, I formed relationships with the paintings, and I wanted to spend time with them. I had the challenge of defining their reality by trying to visualize how their impossible bodies would look, how their flesh would transition to different materials. I had to define how they would exist in an

imaginary space. In these ways, I had to do my best to create the reality for these figures just so that they would be visually successful.

In terms of the poetry, I had to place myself in the head of the figures to define through language what the experience or reaction to a physical transformation would be. With both the painting and poetry, I was immersed in the reality of these characters. These experiences of their realities were necessary just to create the works, so for me, the work resulted in fully realized figures that have a life on canvas and the page.

Through this project my understanding of my own art making process evolved, and I developed my own language of realism and imagery. I observed the formation of relationships between viewers of my work, and I can only hope that my work evoked some kind of real presence or experience even if it could not create it entirely. I know from discussions that different viewers interpreted the works differently and brought some of their own experiences and reality to the viewing.

Project Strengths

I think one of the strengths of this project is that writing and painting are not viewed in isolation of each other. Rather, I used both disciplines together but in different ways to explore one goal more thoroughly. I think in the practice and education of the arts, more could be done to fill the gaps between different disciplines. Visual art, writing, theatre, and music are taught in isolation of each other, but they are rarely consumed separately, and most artists have more than one discipline that they turn to for expression. It is important to acknowledge the different

expressive qualities of writing and painting, but I think more immersive artwork can be created when these disciplines are applied together and considered in the same way.

Project Limitations

For my project, I chose very specific parameters for how I would explore the ideas of metamorphosis and realism. These parameters are evident in my choice of subject matter, painting style, and writing style. It is important to note that throughout the history of art and literature, realism is defined in many different ways and the achievement of realism has had many different goals. What I define as realism as in this specific project is not universal. Just because I as the artist experienced a level of reality in my work doesn't mean that a viewer or reader will. Engagement with art in any form relies on what the viewer brings to the experience. Because of this, the only results of this project that I can ever be certain of is the impact that it had on me as an artist.



Arethusa

You, the pulp of a mango,
golden muscle under taut skin.

Just one more.

You, a cloud of beaded lace.
You're melting.

I can't catch your dissolving breath.

I will stream through your fingers.
I can breathe me.

Swallow me.

I will swallow you.



Mother Make Me

Mother, don't you know
the sun scorches soft
skin like mine with flaming
fingertips? I pray to the dark damp

earth. Mother, I pray for arms
that bend like bows, for lungs
to inhale the sunlight that sticks
to me: heavy honey sap

pools in my navel and trickles
down my thighs. I pray for deep
roots, for steel skin and velvet
petals for a crown. For veins to sprigs

to buds, branches sprouting
from pauldrons of bark, smooth
valleys of ribcage encased
in silver. To the knight with melted
sunlight on his eyelashes:

Take an axe to me.



A Prayer

I would rather have oil
slick, oil spill wings
rippled with violet and green
than bare arms smooth
like the inside of a clam

shell, nacre white. Seafoam
soft like clotted cream
lace may cling to feathers
but rolls off in droplets
because oil chokes

water. Pearls are more
precious but heavy
on my throat and I can burn
coal to keep me warm. Besides,
feathers are lighter than alabaster

and stitch a more beautiful cloak.

Annotated Bibliography

Auerbach, Erich, and Willard R. Trask. "Odysseus' Scar." *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature - New and Expanded Edition*. Revised ed., Princeton University Press, Princeton; Oxford, 2003, pp. 3–
23. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fgz26.4. Accessed 13 Jan. 2021.

This chapter compares the treatment of reality in Classical Homeric literature to Judaic literature. The author argues that Homeric poems place greater value in physical reality: they draw the reader into the described world by addressing the senses. In contrast, Biblical stories are concerned with reality in a different way, instead placing value in moral and psychological happenings. In my project, I hope to explore both of these applications of realism and I am interested in how perception of reality is affected when attention is paid to both the senses and the psychological remnants of experience. This book critiques a wide span of Western literature in its exploration of literary imitation of nature and demonstrates the authors depth of knowledge of this literary goal. Its reading requires an understanding of the subject of mimesis, literary theory, and language. It is most likely intended for scholars of Western literature.

Fortenberry, Diane, and Rebecca Morrill. *Flying Too Close to the Sun Myths in Art from Classical to Contemporary*. Phaidon, 2018.

In this book is a survey of artwork that takes inspiration from Greco-Roman mythology that spans from antiquity to the present. Works are organized according to themes and subject matter that represent basic human nature and struggles, and the variety of works demonstrates the persistence of these myths as vehicles through which to perceive existence. This survey is useful particularly in my artistic work because it provides me with a history of works that have also focused on the mythological theme of metamorphosis. With this, I am provided with a better understanding of how my exploration of this subject matter fits into centuries of dialogue. The span of works covered in this survey reveal the authors' dedication to and knowledge of mythical subjects and offers insight to students of Classicism and casual art viewers.

Nochlin, Linda. "From the Archives: The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law." *ARTnews.com*, ARTnews.com, 2 Sept. 2020, www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/the-realist-criminal-and-the-abstract-law-63236/.

In this essay, the author offers of a critique on the conflict in Modernist art between abstraction, which is praised as being pure, and realism, which is considered impure. Embedded in this conflict is also a conflict in the very function of art itself, that is whether art should be made to call attention to art, or if it should be made to be illusionistic. In the essay, the author provides a historical overview of movements and artistic values that have been associated with Realism in art history. The variety of styles that are historically included under Realism suggest to me the question of whether what is considered realist art can be visually defined at all. This critique of

realism and antirealism affirms to me that my question of achieving realism may not be so easily quantified; rather my project will be more so an exploration of what I identify as “real.” The author clearly demonstrates a knowledge of Realism and its social and artistic implications throughout art history and into the modern age. This essay is most likely aimed towards scholars of art theory and art history.

Sjåstad, Øystein. “Naturalist Paragone: Literature and Painting.” *Christian Krohg's Naturalism*. University of Washington Press, Seattle; London, 2017, pp. 111–119. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnbpw.12. Accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

This text comes from a study of Naturalist painter Christian Krohg, and I focused on the author’s discussion of literature and painting in terms of the artistic paragone. In the debate over which art form is superior, the author recounts the Naturalist artist’s opinion that painting has more influence over the senses, while literature can better represent human psychology. This argument reflects Erich Auerbach’s distinction between Homeric and Biblical literature, and it would seem that painting is better suited to Homeric realism, while poetry is more suited to Biblical realism. I intend to explore the strengths of each art forms in an effort to answer the question of whether or not reality and experience can be achieved through creative process. The author demonstrates a knowledge of Christian Krohg’s work and its relation to the larger world of Naturalism and the book is most likely intended for scholars of Krohg’s work, Naturalism, and the broader themes of Scandinavian art.

Solodow, Joseph B. “Art.” *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses*. University of North Carolina Press, 1988, pp. 203–232. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616490_solodow.10. Accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

The author presents to the reader of Ovid a study of the relationship between the formal qualities of *Metamorphoses* and its subject matter. This chapter describes the ways in which both metamorphosis and art result in form and share basic properties with each other. The language of Ovid in *Metamorphoses* suggests a relationship between metamorphosis and artistic creation and affirms that both are necessary for the perception of existence. Ovid’s language of metamorphosis is used to illustrate a relationship between artwork and clarity of perception: the transformed become clear images of themselves. This text is relevant to my creative work because it links the formal qualities of painting to my subject matter drawn from *Metamorphoses*. It also poses a relationship between my question of the perception of reality and experience, and the creation of art. The author presents a distinct understanding of Ovid’s writing by analyzing all parts of its structure and its relation to the larger worlds of language, mythology, and art. The reading requires an understanding of Ovid and his work and is most likely intended for scholars of Classical literature.