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Mythology and Art: A review of Matt Messmer's Art Show Fall 2003

By Lauren Caryer

Sitting on the couch in his room in Gilpatrick, Matt Messmer leans back, sips his chai, and smiling asks me if I like his new Man Ray prints. I glance around the room, noticing the suit of armor, the Man Rays, the Magrittes, and all the other artists adorning the walls. Nodding appreciatively, I started the interview.

Matt Messmer, a sophomore studio art major and member of Ludus, was given a Young Scholars stipend to spend the summer at Denison working on an extensive studio project. The theme of his project was the Myth of Perseus, inspired primarily by Doctor Jacobsen's Classical Civilizations class on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The paintings and charcoal drawings (currently on display in the Cleveland Hall Gallery) do not tell the myth, instead "all of the paintings and drawings are representations of themes and ideas from the myth". Some of the primary themes found in this collection are the Hunter vs. the Hunted, the role of perception in myth and in life, and of course the traditional themes of the snakes of Medusa's hair and the mirror Perseus uses to ultimately defeat her.

However, after studying various 17th and 18th century visual retellings of the myth, Messmer has come up with his own, more cynical vision of the hero Perseus and his lady-love Andromeda. In a triptych, or set of three charcoal drawings, entitled *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Messmer explores the relationship between Perseus and the deadly Gorgon, Medusa. While Medusa looks like an innocent sleeping girl, Perseus is portrayed as an outlined, creeping, *Spy vs. Spy*-esque villain. Messmer wanted to instill a "cartoon-y element" in the character. "He's not a very heroic hero," explains Messmer. "He can fly and gets to

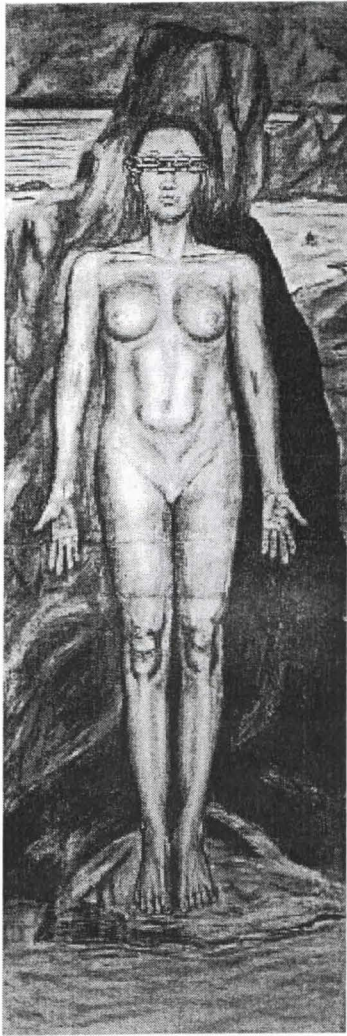
be invisible. I was kind of poking fun at his hero-ness."

Messmer revisits this theme in his two dominant works, *The Hunter...and...Becomes The Hunted*. Each picture is of a staring eye and are both oil painted onto highly reflective copper sheets, picking up on the reflection of Medusa in Perseus' mirror-like shield. The iris of each eye is left completely unpainted to allow the viewer to interact with the painting. "It's like they become part of the painting." When one looks into the eye, the viewer realizes that perception is key and that things are not always as they seem.

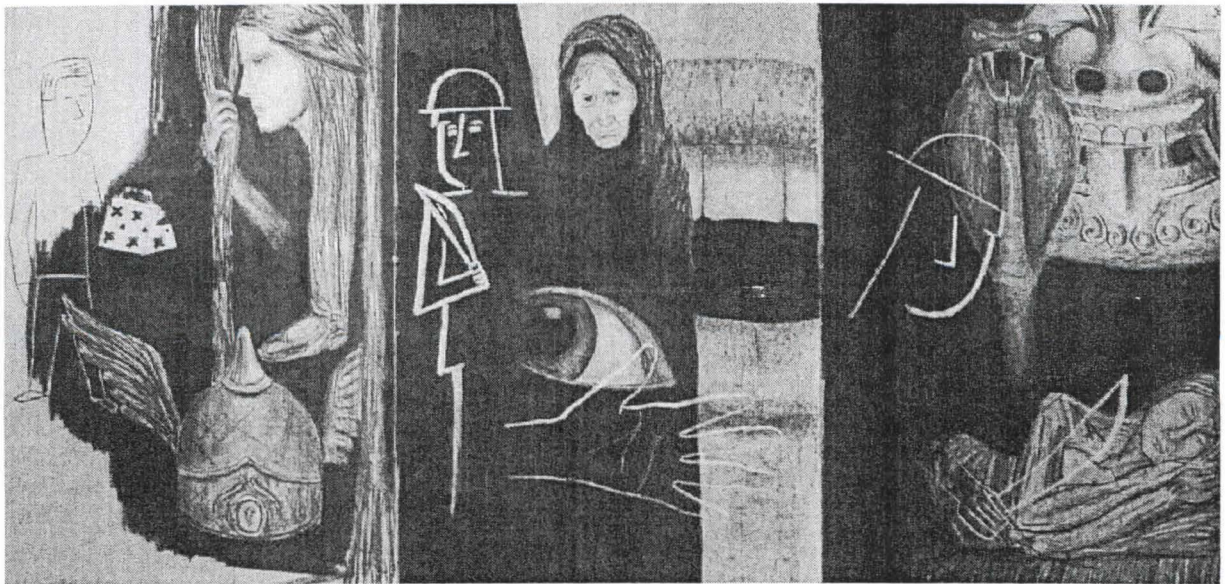
Messmer also extends the irony of the inverted themes to the character of Andromeda, a women sentenced to die because her beauty rivaled that of Venus. In the large charcoal on paper work, *Andromeda Chained To The Rock of Doom*, the nude woman (reminiscent of many of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits) stands against the rock, virtually unbound, save for a chain covering her eyes. Andromeda looks like a very strong female figure, bravely awaiting her fate, yet simultaneously unable to see her own ability to shape her destiny. Messmer comments: "A lot of people go through life without questioning their reality...it's just her mental perception that chains her."

The entire show of New Works by Matt Messmer is a commentary on the role perception plays in our metaphorical history and in turn the creation of our futures. Messmer does an excellent job of re-evaluating this deeply embedded cultural myth, metamorphosizing it into the possibility of experiencing alternate realities and variations we were once to blind to see.

Art from Matt Messmer's Show



Andromeda Chained to the Rock of Doom: Charcoal on Paper



Something Wicked This Way Comes: Charcoal on Paper