

FRANK SCHWAIGER MYTHOLOGIES

my·thol·o·gy (*n*) \mi-ˈlthä-lə-jē\ *plural*

my·thol·o·gies

Etymology: French or Late Latin; French *mythologie*, from Late Latin *mythologia* interpretation of myths, from Greek, legend, myth, from *mythologeîn* to relate myths, from *mythos* + *logos* speech

Date: 1603

1: an allegorical narrative **2:** a body of myths; as **a:** the myths dealing with the gods, demigods, and legendary heroes of a particular people **b:** mythos **3:** a branch of knowledge that deals with myth **4:** a popular belief or assumption that has grown up around someone or something (source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Roland Barthes' collection of essays, *Mythologies*, published in 1957, asks the question "What is a myth, today?" and examines the tendency of contemporary societies and cultures to create myths. Adopting the same title for his exhibit, Frank Schwaiger explores similar themes of semiology and the function of myths within society in his series of painted steel pieces.

According to Barthes, myth creation occurs when the sign itself (born when a word, meaning, and sound come together) is used as the signifier, or representation, in order to add new meaning to an object, which is signified. This new meaning, Barthes argues, is hardly arbitrary; rather, it is carefully molded to perpetuate an idea of society that adheres to existing ideologies of the ruling class and its media. Claude Lévi-Strauss' observation that myths—while seemingly fantastic and unpredictable—are surprisingly similar across cultures, supports Barthes' assertion that they serve a specific social function. Lévi-Strauss explains that universal laws govern myth making, and as a result, produce similar myths within different cultures; specifically, "mythical thought always

progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution." Therefore, myths consists of elements that contradict each other, and other elements that resolve those oppositions.



As Schwaiger creates his own myth in "Mythologies," the influence and engagement of Barthes' and Lévi-Strauss' ideas on his work is abundantly clear. Schwaiger employs Barthes' semiotics by imparting specific meanings to otherwise ambiguous shapes and unidentifiable figures through his titles, as seen in *Karma*. Here, the black arching candle-like shapes acquire new significance when attached to the title, which draws attention to its balanced forms through notions of karmic justice. Moreover, Schwaiger's works inform the titles through their pairing with specific objects; in this case, the multi-directional form of Schwaiger's sculpture draws out notions of karma as being similarly unbound to a particular outcome.

Schwaiger further develops his myth through obvious oppositions within the pieces, as well as throughout the entire exhibition. The sharp black metal forms give a dangerous sense of foreboding and are often overtly

sexualized, while many of the subjects are quite innocuous and innocent, such as *Dove*, *Iris Garden*, and *Willow*. Schwaiger sets up a larger opposition within the collection that is related to power and authority. With titles that denote kings, queens, warriors, guardians, sorceresses, warlocks, dragons, and nature, Schwaiger's pieces confront the viewer with the question of which sources of



authority, if any, are legitimate: human, biblical, mystical, heavenly, and/or natural. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of physically real, sometimes aggressive, forms with more abstract titles (related to power and mythology) forces viewers to consider the reality and potential existence of

myths, including the very myth Schwaiger constructs within the exhibition.

In his blend of myths, ranging from biblical to secular, eastern to western, human to spiritual and metaphysical, and ancient to modern, Schwaiger's meta-analysis of myths transforms into a new collective, universal myth that holds the potential to reveal or perpetuate the ideologies of human culture and roles of power and authority within all societies. The bold pieces implicate the viewer in the resolution of the exhibit's inherent oppositions and in the ultimate interpretation of Schwaiger's myth, which raises questions about what we accept as truth, as well as power and authority that are validated and predicated on myths. Thus, Schwaiger not only creates his own myth that uncovers how other myths have functioned within human nature, but also challenges viewers to resist the tendency of allowing socially constructed notions and narratives to become "naturalized"—as Barthes wrote—and to be taken unquestioningly as truth.

—Dina Ioffe

Dina Ioffe is a writer, and currently studying Art History. This essay is one in a series of the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:

Guardian, 2007. Steel with powdered paint pigment, 116 x 71 x 48 inches, Edition of 3

Galapagos, 2007. Steel with powdered paint pigment, 16-3/4 x 13-1/2 x 13-1/2 inches, Edition of 3

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

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