Espace Sculpture

Rebecca Burke

*In search of Medusa*

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The most well known story about Medusa is the Greek myth where she is a snaky-haired monster whose glance turns men to stone and where her head is cut off by Perseus. Each element of the story is a masterpiece of human psychology, simply told, yet revealing as much about the original storytellers as about the participants. In The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, Medusa is described as "the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons, representing "female wisdom". And further, "A female face surrounded by serpent-hair was an ancient, widely recognized symbol of divine female wisdom, and equally of the "wise blood" that supposedly gave women their divine powers." The ancient Greeks were a patriarchal society glorifying the male form and imposing their values on conquered peoples. It is not surprising that if Medusa was a powerful figure, the Greeks would demonize her.

At the beginning of the exhibition catalogue text, Sheila Butler examines Freud's interpretation of Perseus as he vanquishes Medusa as fear of castration because of the sight of the "castrated" female body. If true, the vanquishing has never fully succeeded because here we are again, over two thousand years later, looking at Medusa and wondering who Perseus was. As Rebecca Burke, the artist, has rejuvenated her, she is transfixing. She is enormously powerful, transgressing the Greek myth through size (853,44 cm long), life (she still has her head) and beauty.

The sculpture itself is constructed of aluminum tubing bolted together into a three-dimensional, twenty-eight foot long armature suspended from the ceiling. You walk toward her, then underneath her, looking up through her body, a skeleton of linear fullness. She has the most spectacular breasts, nip-
pies, belly and thighs; she is a mature woman of ancient grand power. With hands each three feet long, her pose is reaching down to the earth as she kicks through the sky, flying above the viewers. There is a tangled weave of her shadows on the floor and she is glorious. Burke has replaced the fear-inspiring bodiless head of the classical Greek myth with an admirably strong, welcoming, albeit unnerving presence. The mythical Medusa is animated once again and liberated from the patriarchal story and, wondrously, she speaks.

Her voice is a sound work by musician/composer Janet Hammock. Hammock is a Professor of Music at Mount Allison University who regularly performs on the piano throughout Canada, the United States and Belgium. She has created a complex composition using handmade invented musical instruments and human voices, layered and acoustically manipulated. The sound is created, to quote Hammock, to "illuminate... (the) visual manifestation of Medusa, but as well, to extend her physical boundaries, both without and within." It effectively creates the senses, moods and stages of a woman's inner life during an eighty-minute period and is a powerfully sensual soundwork. As the viewer moves around the gallery space, he or she can hear different sounds broadcast from four speakers situated on the four walls generating a multi-layered, personal language. Together, the sculpture and the sound work form a whole woman of epic dimensions, one who has never disappeared from the popular imagination but who has, here, been reborn. Can she be read and understood as other than a terrifying monster after centuries of bad advertising?

So how did Burke arrive at this sculptural work? Burke is an artist and full-time professor in the Fine Arts Department at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. She is predominantly a painter who occasionally moves into the sculptural realm when her subject matter so demands. Her subject matter in the past ten years has been increasingly concerned with discussing women's issues in our society and culture, always referencing her imagery to the human body.

In an earlier work, Bodybuilders, done between 1983 and 1985, she questioned our definitions of the masculine and the feminine, often from a humorous, albeit satirical point of view. These were colourfully muscular men and women, painted on plywood cutouts as well as on canvas. Each was depicted posing as if in a weightlifting competition with large bulging muscles. Researched from var-

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In 1986, Burke was awarded a major commission for a large scale kinetic sculpture at the Canada Pavilion at Expo '86 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The work, called Clouds in Heaven, was made of canvas sketched on high-density styrofoam, juxtaposed in space and colourfully painted with Greek gods, literally "flying" amongst the clouds. Suspended just below the ceiling of the pavilion, the gods had idealized muscular torsos, all in some gesture of activity. Looking at colour photos of the circular torsos, all in some gesture of generally "flying" amongst the clouds. Colourfully painted with Greek gods, lit­

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In Search of Medusa was first exhibited at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, then 55 Mercer Street in New York City, and finally at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Prince Edward Island. I have seen it in the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and the Owens Art Gallery. In both spaces, the viewers were confronted with an enormous shiny silver woman looking down into their eyes. Her hair curled out wildly in every direction, each end having a small clay snake made from terra cotta or white clay. This Medusa resembles the Medusa of one's dreams, sparkling like a celestial constellation; an all-powerful woman who isn't ashamed of her strength or her power. So, what is the meaning of claiming and of re-writing the myth?

Other artists, to quote the Toronto painter Rae Johnson, have reclaimed Medusa to unleash the "ancient repressed fear of women's knowledge". In 1993, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan created a performance art work called Mary Medusa where the lady is happily living in Winnipeg. In the myth, the mirror was of utmost importance, for by looking indi­rectly at Medusa, Perseus only saw a reflection, not the woman, and was therefore able to protect himself and to kill the "monster". In Burke's re-­incarnation of Medusa, we look directly into her eyes, in fact we see her whole being and we are attracted much more than repelled. So Medusa as Woman is resuscitated as a positive force. Her story is told by seeing her physique, her head, and listening to her voice.

Rewriting/recuperating history and myth continues to be an important task within feminist scholarship. Recognition and inclusion of women excluded from the predominantly male-centred history enriches our understanding of our collective history, female and male. This Medusa arouses our curiosity about the ancient Greek myth, questioning its negative viewpoint towards what must have been a very strong woman. But take it one step further and Burke's Medusa is more than a rewrite. It is a joyous representation of womanhood, of being human. It is where you look directly into the face of yourself and instead of seeing a monster reflected back, you see a whole person, one whose strength can release either gender from their stereo­types.

In Search of Medusa succeeds for several reasons. It is aesthetically pleasing to the eye, sparkling above our heads like a heavenly constellation; the sculpture's body lines are round, full and strong. When you walk into the gallery space and see Medusa reborn there is a certain vicarious thrill in experiencing a larger-than-life representation of an ancient mythical figure. Most importantly Burke has reclaimed Medusa's (Woman's) body by reattaching her head, or inversely, by giving her head a body. The sound and the sculpture produce a multi-faceted image of a whole woman not a limiting portrayal of the social decapitations of Women as virgin, mother or whore. So, yes, to answer my original question, Medusa can once again be identified with the various meanings attributed to her, positive and negative, and ultimately remain full of the paradoxes of humanity.

It seems to me that the enormity of the sculpture would have made it next to impossible to construct a fully fleshed out figure and so we have the skeleton-looking Medusa. She demands recognition yet remains almost a linear drawing in space, a celestial body, a metaphorical All-Woman of heaven and earth, physically present yet not of our flesh. Within the development of Burke's sculptural work, this is the most fully three-dimensional work yet. Because of its tubing construction, it has a gentle feel to it, not heavy or overworked. As a sculptural presence it has taken on its own life, separate from the artist, achieving a clarity of purpose and a popular reception. Few artworks are able to ignite in the viewer's imagination such evocative immediacy of contact the way that Burke's Medusa does.

scale of Expo '86, acting as uplifting imagery. What I noted was the artist's use of "barbaric, hedonistic" gods instead of the monotheistic beliefs of the major world religions being interpreted. This was imagery where myth and imagination were being acclaimed, foregrounding the artist's research and creation of Medusa.