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"I would save you, but my boobs keep getting in the way": An Examination of my Art through the Lens of the Heroic Myth and Alternative Comics

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"I would save you, but my boobs keep getting in the way": An Examination of my Art through the Lens of the Heroic Myth and Alternative Comics

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Abstract

My artwork challenges the masculine, violent idea of the hero through utilizing the visual language of comic books, as well as autobiographical themes. In this examination of my work, I explore conceptual and visual precedents and relate them back to my own practice throughout. My essay establishes the idea of the contemporary American heroic myth by looking at Joseph Campbell, as well as more contemporary re-examinations and criticisms of his ideas, relating the modern myth to the superhero comic genre. Next, I explore the history of underground comics, specifically feminist autobiographical comics, and relate the works of artists such as Lee Marrs and Phoebe Gloeckner to my own. Finally, I examine my relationship to other contemporary fine artists whose work is in the same vein as mine, inspired by underground comics and thematically rooted in cultural critique, such as Raymond Pettibon and Chitra Ganesh. The goal of my essay is to establish that my usage of comics as a formal precedent, autobiography as a thematic precedent, and a pervasive sense of humor is the most effective way to challenge the harmful and exclusionary ideals continually perpetuated by the heroic myth.

"I would save you, but my boobs keep getting in the way": An Examination of my Art through the Lens of the Heroic Myth and Alternative Comics

Try to imagine what sort of person you imagine when you hear the word "hero". Theres a good chance, if you are an American, that what you imagined was a big, strong, muscular guy wearing spandex and beating up criminals. Batman, for example. Or maybe you imagined a war hero: coated in dust and grime, the archetypical image of a pleasant looking young man in a camouflage and a helmet, armed to the teeth. Heroes are, and have always been, a paragon of masculine virtues such as physical strength, emotional stoicism, and a paternalistic belittling of those less gifted and privileged. From war heroes of mythological times to the superhero we so regularly see on the silver screen these days, this masculine archetype of the hero is one of the most persistent myths perpetuated by our culture.

My artwork tackles how exclusionary and oppressive the archetype of a hero is through the lens of my own autobiographical experiences. Using the expressive, immediate, dynamic visual language of comic books, I relate my work both to America's most obvious way of perpetuating the stereotype of heroes, the superhero genre, and also to feminist underground comic book authors of the 70's and 80's, who provoked societal examination through their own autobiographical constructs. In this examination of my artwork, I will explore the conceptual, historical, and formal precedents of my work, from establishing what the heroic myth looks like in pop culture today, to briefly introducing underground comic books, to understanding how my artwork fits in with that of other contemporary artists in both form and origin. With my art, through the visual construction of my own characters, thought processes, and mental space, I demonstrate how the alluring, seductive heroic myth has failed me as I have tried to

pursue the ideals it perpetuates. This myth is oppressive to women in particular, and must be reconstructed in order to better suit a wider audience.

The first step to understanding the conceptual precedents of my work is to establish the attributes and definition of a "hero" as it exists in western society. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a good place to start, as although it was written in 1949, many of the ideas it establishes about the heroic journey still remain relevant to this day. Campbell argues that "the heroes, and the deeds of myth survive into modern times. In the absence of an effective general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognized, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dream" (22). He uses a variety of myths in order to argue that the narrative of the hero is a persistent part of the collective consciousness of everyone worldwide, borrowing from the ideas of Freud and Jung. So what is the fundamental commonality in the heroic myth, according to Campbell?

> "Many monsters remaining from primeval times still lurk in the outlying regions, and through malice or desperation these set themselves against the human community. They have to be cleared away. Furthermore, tyrants of human breed…arise, and are the cause of widespread misery. These have to be suppressed. The elementary deeds of the hero are those of the clearing of the field." (312)

In other words, the role of a hero is one fundamentally based in violence, with an "other", such as a monster or a tyrant, that they must "clear". Campbell's hero is also always male, with women playing either only a supplementary role, such as a helpful goddess, the "virgin mother" of the hero, or as an antagonist, such as a "temptress" (111).

One might argue that Campbell's ideas are outdated, irrelevant, overreaching in terms of trying to cover all times and cultures, and hardly continue to apply to the construction of heroes in today's pop culture. While I agree that *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* is shallow in its attempt at understanding heroism as a "monomyth" across all cultures, it still functions as an important and relevant basis for the western hero. Lawrence & Jewett's "The Myth of the American Superhero", from 2000 applies Campbell's theories to contemporary pop culture and narrows down Campbell's theories as they apply to American heroes. The authors argue that the archetypical American hero "is a displaced person… fearless himself, feared by others, killing but cleansing the world of the things that 'need killing'…" placed into "innocent communities besieged by evil outsiders" (Lawrence & Jewett, 89). The authors focus in on the ideas supplied by Campbell, the idea that the hero is fundamentally a savior warrior who must destroy an "other", pointing to John Wayne, to Rambo, to Neo, to Batman, and to Duke Nukem as a few of the numerous codifiers of this centerpiece of American pop culture, While characters such as these are not problematic in the abstract, the hero is upheld as a paragon of virtue—that these myths "anticipate forms of the future as they determine and shape goals and ideals for both the individual and society"(11). The American version of this myth, the authors argue, is even more explicitly exclusionary and heteronormative than Campbell's: "females always looked troublesome to the American monomyth" and only serve as "desirable partners for the life-after-violence" or as "dangerous creatures… who are either to be avoided, mastered, or killed" (154). In order to frame my own art practices, I will define the American hero as violent,

heteronormative, masculine, and upheld as an ideal for both society as a whole and for individuals.

Conceptually, my artwork challenges this ideal as I have felt it influence my own life. The series *Beowulf and the Dragon* presents my own imagined version of the manly American hero (fig.1). "Beowulf" (inspired by, but not directly representing, the Germanic mythological hero of the same name) is a weathered, grizzled, over the top veteran type character with a cool beard and eyepatch. He represents a hero that has already accomplished his purpose, and seeks a way to end his glorious myth. In reality, as indicated by the narration of the smaller set of repeated images, he waits alone in his room for an indefinite period of time, worrying that his accomplishments were not enough in his glory days, haunted by betta fish that represent my own anxieties and losses. While he envisions himself as an active, violent figure, in reality, he is passive and even pitiful. My own personal worry that growth can only be defined in "victories" and successfully saving and protecting what I already have allows me to empathize with this manly hero who views himself the same way, due to the role of the hero in society.

Figure 1, *Beowulf Series*, Barrett Hollingsworth, 2016

Formally, my work resembles comic books, and was specifically inspired by feminist underground comic books. I use this formal connection for two reasons: first, to relate to the medium of comics as a whole, as they have historically engaged deeply with superheroes and heroism in general, and second, because my work conceptually follows in the footsteps of feminist authors of underground comic books from the 70's and 80's. Superheroes represent the powerful tie that comics as a medium have with the heroic myth. Since the origin of the superhero genre around the time of *Action Comics* in 1938, it has served as the most direct illustration of the violent, hyper masculine American hero. The genre rose to prominence in order to promote optimism, security, and nationalistic sentiments World War II, and narratives from the time present a clear, American hero and obvious, moustache twirling villains that must be suppressed (Bongco, 52).

Although the genre has changed and developed greatly over time, the ways in which it presents a heroic narrative rife with machismo remains persistent, and is best examined by looking at the ways women are represented. According to *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, "women in general have been relegated to minor roles in superhero texts, and presented in ways that give priority to men and the idea of adventure… women provide motivation for the men's great deeds." Although arguably an antiquated example, the aforementioned first issue of *Action Comics* is important to study as an example of women's treatment in comics due to the undeniably important precedent Superman is in the superhero genre. On the very second page, a blonde, attractive, tied up woman in a tight dress is carried like an object by superman (fig. 2). She is initially given no name,

speaks no words, and serves only as motivation for his actions. Within a few pages, in the same issue, another tied up, prone woman about to be beaten by her husband, again given no name, is the motivator for Superman's second act of righteous violence. Some women serve as protagonists in these narratives, but they are, for the most part, "conceived by men, drawn mostly by men, and targeted for male adolescents", resulting in the same "aggressive, face smashing behaviors of their male predecessors" with an innate acceptance of the same "machismo code of violence" as their male counterparts (111). In other words, heroines such as Wonder Woman are largely the same as male heroes, but with the added benefit to their male target audience of being appealing to the male gaze.

Figure 2, *Action Comics* issue #1, Joe Shuster, 1939

My work *Bergentrückung* is an example of one of my works that pokes fun at the role of a woman as a "plot device" in the typical call to action in the heroic narrative (fig.3). The works are framed as my dream, indicated by my sleeping face depicted in the first image and hints of reality within the alarm clock and coffee table. In the second image in the sequence, my idea of a stereotypical damsel in distress—attractive, feminine, and utterly passive—is threatened by a massive spider, but remains completely cool and calm, as she is genre-savvy enough to know that the hero will save him. The fact that women superheroes are made indistinguishable from men in their actions is also presented in this work: with close reading, the viewer would be able to discern that the main hero, the "Bergentrückung", is, in fact, me, a woman, within my dreams.
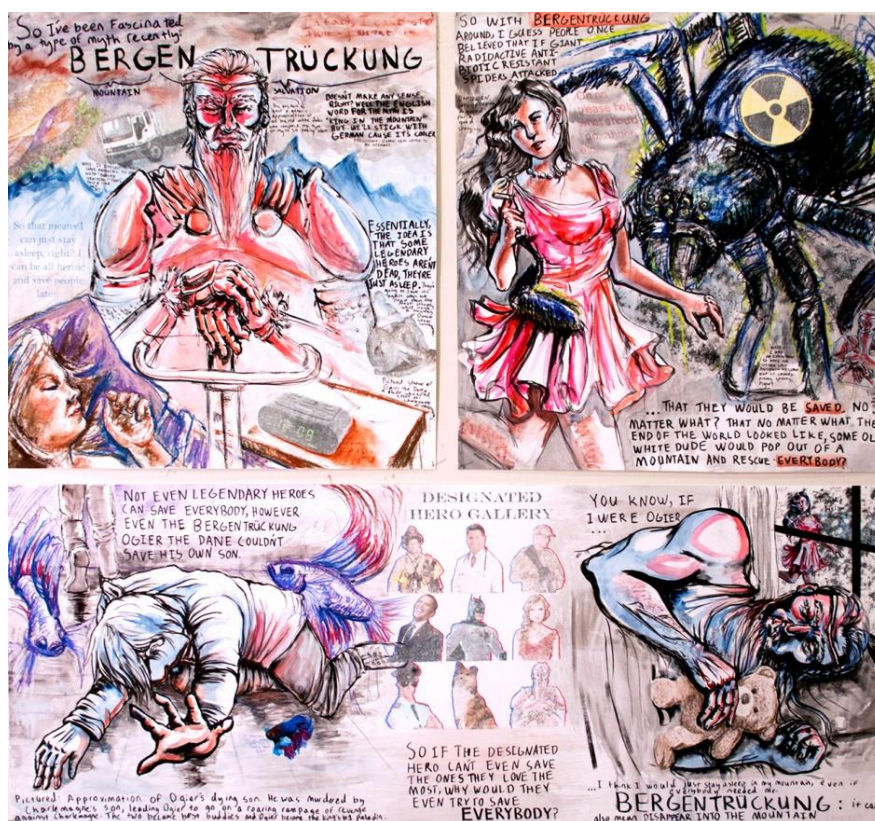

Figure 3, *Bergentrückung*, Barrett Hollingsworth, 2015

While superhero comics turn outwards, reflecting the interests and desires of consumers through common narratives and archetypes, underground comic books of the 70's and 80's, particularly feminist comix, turn inwards, drawing upon autobiographical narrative and personal experience in order to make a statement. Feminist comix originated from the feminist underground press and women's liberation newspapers of the time. In 1970, Trina Robbins, cofounder of Wimmen's Comix, cofounded It Ain't Me Babe, the very first comic book produced completely by women. According to her, it was near impossible for women to break into comix collectives. Decrying works such as Robert Crumb's Zap Comix as a "boy's club", Robbins claims that underground comix were "friends producing friends. They were all buddies, they didn't let [women] in" (Chute, 34). The goals of each feminist comix publication were widely varied, but maintained a political purpose: allow women's voices to break into the world of comics. Not only did these comics serve as a reaction against the male dominated world of self- publication, they also were a reaction against the fine arts. Many of these comic artists, such as Aline- Kominsky Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, and Alison Bechdel, attended school for fine arts, but were put off by the deeply male and impersonal fields of abstract expressionism and minimalism that were prevalent at their time (17).

The appeal of these "comix" (spelled at the time with an "x" to differentiate them from their mainstream counterparts) as my formal precedents is within in their history and their potency to depict autobiography and inner thought. To understand why the works of artists such as Gloeckner and Bechdel were so successful in this regard, I will first establish what makes comics effective as a medium. The two defining

characteristics of comics are an integration of text and image, and a number of discrete images, or panels, that imply sequence and the passage of time. The fact that comics inherently indicate the passage of time makes them suitable for a narrative, which autobiographies are usually structured into. The combination of language and pictures, or events and diegetic spaces, resembles the way in which people construct memory: the images are presented as the "true" events, and the words represent "contemporary understanding and narration imposed on past occurrences" (El Refaie, 28). The potency in comics in establishing narrative and mood lies in their flexibility: "visible language has the potential to be quite elaborate in appearance, forcing recognition of pictorial and material qualities that can be freighted with meaning… conversely, images can be simplified and codified to function as language" (Hatfield, 132). An example of these qualities applied to comics is Lee Marrs's *All In a Day's Work*, from the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix* in 1972 (fig.4). As an aspect of design, the text integrates seamlessly with the images, curving around the figures and complementing their layout. There are moments where drawing functions more as abstract language or symbol, such as at the beginning where the woman points to the simple drawings of women on the board, and moments where text functions as image, such as the exclamation of "I can't stand it! I quit!" on the second page, which is seemingly thrust out of the author's body.
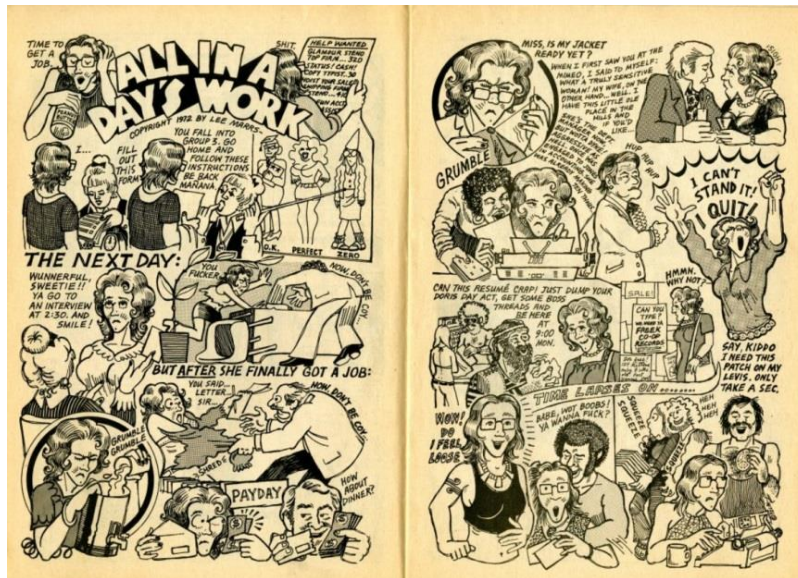
Figure 4, "All in a Day's Work", Lee Marrs

The works of Phoebe Gloeckner serve as an important formal and conceptual precedent for my own artwork. In *A Child's Life*, she details her childhood, and more specifically, the abuse she was subject to throughout her childhood, through a number of different styles and narratives. Her narratives are often broken up by those with made up "characters" that are relevant to her own stories. Sometimes, these characters don't even look like her. For example, "Magda meets the Little Men in the Woods" presents a fairytale- like narrative starring "Magda", a story inserted in the more "true" detailing of Gloeckner's own relationship woes (fig.5). Initially, before my artwork was specifically about how the heroic myth influenced my self- perception throughout my own life, it was more generally an autobiography. The trilogy *I Couldn't Protect My…* functions as autobiography in the same way as Gloeckner's "Magda meets the little men in the woods" (fig. 6). The spaces they create are fantastical, unrealistic, but are still true to my mental space at the time, and thus function as a form of autobiography. While these

function almost in the opposite way of Gloeckner's works, making a big, melodramatic deal out of small events (losing an umbrella, a fish dying, watching a chocolate bunny melting on YouTube), rather than vice versa, both my works and hers demonstrate how comics offer a unique way to insert scenes of unreality and mental space as authentic truth in a greater narrative.

Figure 5, "Magda Meets the Little Men in the Woods", Phoebe Gloeckner
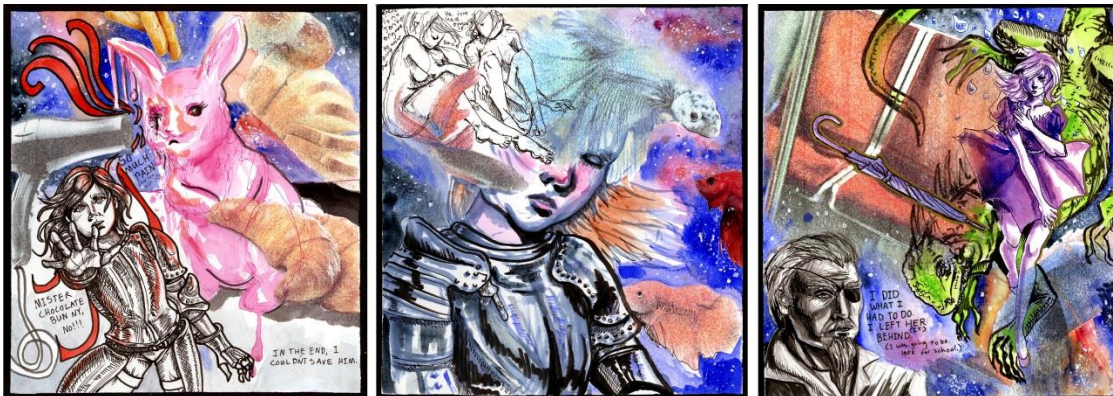

Figure 6, *I Couldn't Protect My…* series, Barrett Hollingsworth, 2015

Underground comics, and comics in general, have had a profound impact on the world of fine arts. Not only are comic book artists such as Chris Ware and Robert Crumb regularly exhibited in the halls of museums these days, the "cultural gatekeepers" between that which is high-brow and "just" entertainment, but many fine artists are influenced by the language of comic books as well (Beaty, 192). I find that my work relates to many of these artists not just on a formal level, but also a conceptual level, as

they tap in the innate ability of comics to express and explore identity. Raymond Pettibon is an artist who works similarly to me. Coming directly from the culture of underground publications and punk culture, Pettibon reacts to – and challenges– the "rabid rhetoric of sexist masculinity, forms of psychological debasement and social deviance and violence in its prefabricated mass-cultural mediation" though his creations of overwhelming collections of drawings and wall paintings (Buchloh, 39). His installations formally resemble comics due to their inclusions of text interacting with image and discrete images that function as "panels" (fig. 7). Another important way his work relates to my own is the fact that he writes and paints on the walls, rather than limiting visual information to discrete squares of paper. In my thesis installation, I wrote on the walls for the visual purposes of guiding the viewer through the images and providing visual texture. Thematically, the words represent an extra-diegetic narrative, as well as a narrator, imposed on the works on paper, which represent discrete memories or fantasies. In order to create a mental or psychological space, like Pettibon does successfully and as I aim to do, there must be an implied narrator or organizing presence, which is facilitated by breaking the traditionally square format of comics and working on the walls.

Figure 7, No Title (Installation at CFA in berlin), Raymond Pettibon, 2008

Another artist who is directly inspired by comics and whose work relates to my own is Chitra Ganesh, an Indian-American artist who deals with the idea of femininity in mythology in simplified, comic like works such as *A Magician and Her Muse* (fig. 8). The use of collage elements, large scale, linear visual language, and contemporary reinterpretation of mythology found within her work relates directly to my own. While my work does not draw only from those who work in the same vein as me (the usage of animal motifs as autobiographical iconography was taken directly from Louise Bourgeois, for example), the sheer number of artists who use large scale works with visual and conceptual themes taken from alternative comics, such as Paul McCarthy, Petra Varl, and Trenton Doyle Hancock, situates my work directly within a group of people who use the language of comics in order to explore both cultural and individual identity.

Figure 8, *A Magician and her Muse,* Chitra Ganesh, 2011, 9.5 x 36 feet, wall paintings and mixed media collage

Like Pettibon, I view my own work not as discrete pieces, but as modular pieces of a larger space, which is why simply conforming to the small book format of comics would fail my vision. The imagery within each piece reflects this view, as I regularly return to the same characters over and over again, such as "Beowulf" and use the same iconography each time to denote certain concepts. For example, the constant betta fish denote my anxiety, as I went through a significant period of time of having nightmares about them after receiving one unexpectedly as a gift. I build up a number of images from a number of sources—from those that are "collective", such as the paper and google image search, to those that are private, such as my own characters, drawings, doodles, and sketches. All of these come together though collage, photo transfer, lithography, drawing, and painting to form the impression of a larger mental space, a period of time that is at once static and also as deep as my entire life (fig. 9). I use color both as a means of representing the simple colors of comics, but also to establish a general mood and atmosphere as feels correct in the moment to me. The guiding focus of my art is my own idea of what the heroic myth should look like; I take events from my own life and inflate them through the use of characters and made up additions to the realm of myth, demonstrating how hilarious and sad it is when I try to apply this masculine, ancient myth to my own life as a twenty-one year old woman.

Figure 9, Installation view of my own work, 2016

My work is not completely based on parody or deconstruction, but also on empathy and understanding. I have always consumed media about heroes and salvation, whether it is through comic books, video games, or movies, and I still feel a deep fondness for the optimistic escapist fantasies they offer. However, the myth of heroicism in America has always been a figure of dominance, hyper masculinity, and violence, and my mixture of conditioned admiration for, but also frustration with my own inability to understand these ideals has caused me real pain in my own life as I try to rationalize my own desires and failures to save and preserve that which is most important to me. This brings me to one of the most important elements in my work: my use of humor. Each individual work on paper, as well as the wall text surrounding it, is

completely filled with puns, absurdities, and mocking jokes, both at my own expense

and that of the heroes. Humor provides an opportunity both to deal with the real pain

and embarrassment I sometimes express in my work, but also to make the work more

relatable and accessible to viewers. Through this relatability, I hope to encourage

viewers to examine their own relationships to this problematic set of ideals expressed

throughout media in the form of heroes. In the words of Susan Douglas, feminist media

critic and writer, "while it's only a start, laughter– especially derisive laughter– may be

the most empowering act of all. This is part of the ongoing, never-ending project of

consciousness raising."

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