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Ritual and Digital Craftsmanship: Imprudent Practices

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Recommended Citation

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Mik Patrik McDonnell

“Ritual and Digital Craftsmanship: Impudent Practices”

May 5, 2023

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

Abstract:

This essay explores the role of traditional and digital craftsmanship in my art practice as it relates to provocative imagery. I tackle the question of how my practice is influenced by my audience. My process and products both aim to agitate the ascetic individual. The argument opens on a poetic, personal note, before defining craft/craftsmanship and its social reception according to scholarship. I outline the intended audience for my work being those akin to my mother: christian, middle-aged, and leaning conservative. Because I employ devotional, virtuosic craftsmanship I argue my work is effective at provoking dialogue with these persons who would otherwise write off or refuse to engage with my artworks. I also explore the relationship of digital craftsmanship to tactile craft, both requiring significant devotion to technical skills. My work presented in the essay is set against an emerging cannon of contemporary queer and feminist artists using subversive content within their art to spark dialogues of gender, sex, spirituality, abjection, and more.

GENESIS

In the beginning, my mother made me, shaped my eyes and tongue in her own image, a godly woman. It was all touch and gold. One of my first memories was a dream of my baptism, swallowed by murky darkness then showered in stained-glass light.

But even golden boys grow up. We wax vulgar and crude.

We learn to see without our mother's eyes and speak against her holy books. There is a wetness and heat under those verses I have learned to embrace. I have refused the shame she accepts. I have joined in the pornographic parade of men and become its naked herald with wooden horns. I sing siren songs, melodies to disguise my grating embrace.

I am transfixed to her unwavering devotion. The rituals she gave to me and those I have claimed in spite of her faith. She is who I sing for.

My muse of disdain and adoration.

For her, a sweet syrup. I wrap my dissent in layers of artistic obsession, socially accepted, universally praised. The labors she has always glorified as God's gifts given to me, begotten not made. In the labor of craft, my devotion to my dissent is irrefutable.

Craftsmanship is the alibi to my heresy, my spoonful of sugar. Thank God she has always had a sweet tooth.

VIRTUOSITY & CRAFT

“Craft” is a world tossed around quite regularly in spaces we dedicate to art. The work can be subjectively judged but what is the *craft* of the object saying? Does it

undermine or obscure the concepts the work brings to light or is it an engaging factor leading us towards deeper meaning? It is an associative game. Does the object or work look mass produced? Does it look hand-made? Does it feel like the work of a master or a novice? Neither is necessarily superior. But what do we even mean when we say “craft”?

In Sue Rowley’s introduction to her anthology, “Craft & Contemporary Theory” she outlines craft as a practice, as a compilation of technical knowledge which is testified in performance (Rowley xvi). She goes on to describe the phenomenon of virtuosity of craft and its perception. The virtuoso performance is a marvel, divine and mysterious to those untrained “mortal vehicles.” While the master craftspractitioner response is, “not one of enchantment, but of a yearning sense of awe and, of loss,” (Rowley xiv). Rowley then gets into the key debates and concepts within contemporary craft theory, including the tension between tradition and innovation, the politics of skill and authenticity, and the relationship between craft and technology.

With rapidly emerging technologies changing the ways we produce craft objects, mainly digital fabrication, this means the skill sets required are changing fundamentally and becoming further specialized. These specializations enable craftsmanship to become ever more mysterious as the general public is not privy to the hybridized means of production.

With the untrained far outnumbering the masters, the typical viewer is most likely inclined to experience these works with a sense of awe, or profound respect. I say this because this feeling is an essential quality to the concepts and aims of my recent work.

AWE & DISSENT

The obsessive and intricate qualities that craftsmanship, as I will also refer to as craft, bestows on the art object demands a level of respect or at the very least a sense of wonder from the viewer. This respect for the craft when coupled with unsavory subject matter results in a complicated state, where the art is both revered and rejected.

The initial state of wonderment produces a lengthened looking period and a deal of respect for the craft practitioner and the crafted object. When seeing the marble statues of antiquity our breath is taken away, we stop and stare, and wonder “who?” and “why?” and, most definitely, “how?” When entering a building of architectural brilliance, we can't help but admire the feats of technology and design that created such a brilliant, coordinated effort. We have even labeled such awe-inspiring works “the wonders of the world.” The ritually interactive quality of architecture and in some art objects dually extends the time for contemplating the various physical and conceptual aspects of the object. This respect and extended period of interaction allows for a deeper meaning to be wrought from the ideas the work presents.

When the subject matter presented is subversive or downright heretical to the viewer, they then must contend with their own cognitive dissonance. The viewer is capable of willful ignorance however, the subversive material is at the very least implicitly absorbed. While experiencing reverence or awe for the creation, they simultaneously experience repulsion or confusion. The respect or awe for the object and maker is coupled with a critique of their ideas/concepts they have chosen to express and complicates the mental digestion processes. In this way, craft is a means for expressing dissenting ideas.

ANTI-ASCETICISM

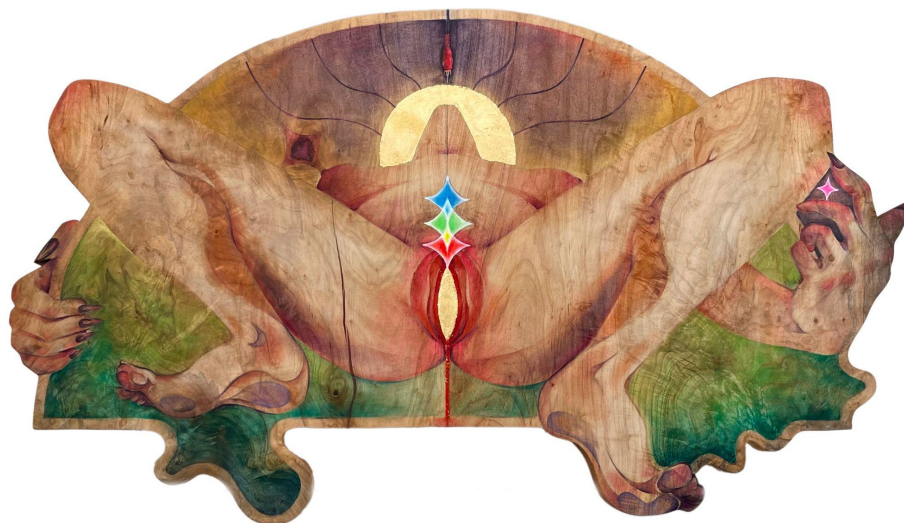


Fig.1. Mik Patrik, *Border Altar to the Head and the Hole* (2022), oil, resin, and gold leaf, on silver maple.

However, as artists of the 21st century, it can feel as though we have already pushed every envelope and seen every distressing sight. What I deem an act of “dissent” doesn’t necessarily rile us all in the same way. We are not all so secure in our relationship to explicit images.

My mother on several occasions throughout my adolescence tried to dissuade me from art school on the lone idea that I would need to draw naked bodies. She didn’t try to hide her disgust. I guess she harbored some deep fear that the prospect might change me, excite me. She always seemed to fear sexuality. On one occasion she found a drawing I had made. It was of two boys kissing and had spurred from a time in my life when I didn’t have words for my desires. But there was a part of me that wanted her to be met by the reality of things. Maybe my desire to disrupt her fantasy was why I left it out on my desk. The image was undeniably transgressive and led into a lengthy

discussion on spiritual alignment and values. That was my first time using “explicit images” to start a dialogue on sex and spirituality.

So, when I draw pussies and dicks and brand myself as a licentious heretic, it's not because I am thinking of the impact it will have on the art world alone. It's about the impact it will have on women like my mother, middle-aged, Christian women who I might make abhorred and awe-inspired, and perhaps curious.

The sexually explicit and contentious nature of reproducing genitalia and the subjects of biological conception, conceptually and representationally, are meant to agitate the ascetic, puritan worldview that shuns these bodies as shameful and sinful. I bring into question how we visually police the bodies and sexual modes we consider marginal or unacceptable. The almost-alien, humanoid forms are meant to discomfort, to be radically excessive and resoundingly disruptive. However the paradigms of sex and gender deeply complicate the reception of these bodies.

In Barbara Creed's book, “The Monstrous-Feminine,” she approaches various concepts associated with the female body in film and analyzes their use as instruments of horror. She posits the womb as an abject subject, a subject of disgust, ridicule and horror. To Creed the womb can be culturally received as horrific because of its inherent mutable qualities, crossing barriers of inside/outside, human/animal, and clean/dirty. In this way the female body becomes “a central source of abjection” due to its reproductive capabilities while maleness is used to signify integrity and fixed form (Creed 49).

In a similar capacity, the mutability of the transgender body becomes abject due to its permeation across barriers of presentation and socio-sexual performance. However agency too comes from abjection. There is a great deal of self-assurance one

can gain in monstrosity, in that refusal to conform and instead embracing your fugitive body. The emphasis of difference can become an empowerment. By making work representing these varied, abject bodies we can begin a dialogue surrounding their use and public reception.

Who we might refer to as “feminist” artists from the late nineteenth century to the present have a prominent history of using explicit representations of the body to encourage a critical engagement with the ideas surrounding that body. In Julia Skelly’s book, aptly named, *Radical Decadence*, she argues these feminists’ explicit representations are contributing to, “dialogues about gender, pleasure, societal norms, and art in new and transgressive ways intended to engender change, whether for individual viewers or in the larger art world,” (Skelly).



Fig. 2. Wangechi Mutu, *In Two Canoe* (2022), bronze. Installed outside the Storm King Art Center.

Many contemporary artists continue to make work highlighting bodily transgression. The plant-like, alien bodies in Wangechi Mutu’s work (Fig. 2.) are in a kind of metamorphosis with their environment. Between their legs, fluid flows between

them inciting a connection to the female body and a correspondence between their alien bodies. Their near-humanoid forms seamlessly merge with the vessel and the forest around them despite their bronze stasis. Their canoe infers a journey is taking place, caught in a moment of mutability and transition across borders. Mutu's rendering of these bodies is both mythical and monstrous, as if these are characters from a folktale or another planet. They make the viewer reflect on the relationship of the human body as it relates to the environment, sex, and movement.



Fig. 3. Kiki Smith, *Untitled* (1990), beeswax and microcrystalline wax figures on metal stands.

Kiki Smith's abject subjects (Fig. 3.), hang limp and vulnerable, naked and dripping. These bodies appear almost dead, yet grotesquely oozing with the milky fluids of life. The built-up layers of wax suggest an inner, life-like anatomy. The continual dripping makes Smith's bodies appear to lack agency over their bodily functions and by extension themselves. While their human form and gesture may encourage a tragic kind of empathy, they also appear humiliated and consequently repellant. In *Untitled*, Smith

opens up a dialogue on the nature of human form and function as it relates to sex, vulnerability, shame, and abjection.



Fig. 4. Mik Patrik, *Horned Eve* (2023), silicone. Five casts on a pedestal for installation.

The “adult” quality impressed upon the bodies in my practice, is often expressed in sensual, oil-wet wood (Fig. 1) or in erotic, rubbery bodies made to interact with or even to playfully arouse the participant (Fig. 4). The bodies at the heart of my work are sexually explicit and complicate the sacred mother-child depictions mythologized in ubiquitous Christian artworks and popular culture. The children I depict are neither pure nor human. The mother body is often abstracted and erotically empowered, obfuscating delineations of sex, conception, and birth processes.

RITUAL CRAFT

My practice employs obsessive craftsmanship in the making of subversive, socially transgressive bodies. I take great pleasure in pushing back against the ideals of the religion I was raised in. The process is self-indulgent. The labor poured into each

piece feels like a sinful devotion. I make erotic bodies to normalize their presence and contest the puritanical rejections of these forms. My objects typically have a performative component of ritual/repetitive interactivity (in the process of making and of use) and their titles often end in an imperative verb calling out to the viewer to engage (Fig. 5., 10., and 11.). I tend to romanticize yonic, flowing forms and glamourize the ritual and power of conception. At the end of the day, subversive content coupled with the respect garnered through craft is my ritual means for dissent, to provoke dialogues about purity, pleasure and social norms in novel and sometimes humorous ways.

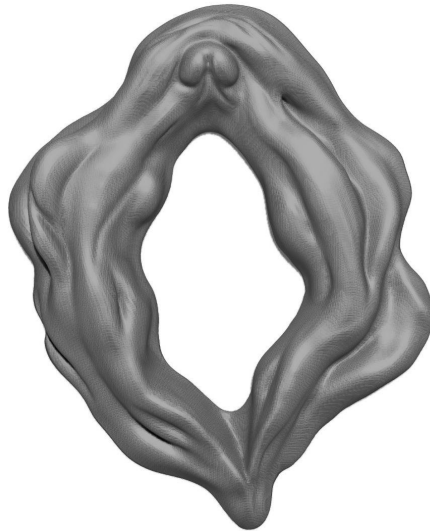


Fig. 5. Mik Patrik, *The Immaculate Angel Bitch Blood Child (birth me!)* (2023), digital rendering.

I tend to craft obsessively, devotionally, and often use labor-intensive mediums such as wood where mistakes are hypervisible. The repetitive milling, sawing, and sanding required of a woodworker is ritualistic and sensually reminiscent of the care which one attends to a living being. The objects I craft feel as though they are my sacred children from a womb of my hands.

I am in the process of etching a mirror to hold the image of a strange, alien fetus and constructing a vulvic frame to house it (Fig. 5.). Underneath the frame there will be

a basin made of steel and wood akin to a stoup used for holy water in a church. The practice and technical knowledge required to gain the skills to fabricate this dramatized vanity, is rather obsessive and self-indulgent. The process behind much of my work is a ritual performance of hedonistic worship.

My process requires the skills of handworking attributed to traditional modes of craftsmanship as well as a digital skill set developed in tandem. I sculpt in 3D-modeling programs for most of my projects, having learned through hands-on experience over many years. I also define the parameters of 3D prints and CNC routers. The fabricated object must then be treated with oils, primers, or paints to achieve a suitable surface texture that disguises or heightens its materiality and manner of production. Sometimes my labor veils the machine's systematic, robotic marks and other times the marks stay to denote robotic intervention. My process is in constant transgression of the boundary between virtual and physical space. My rituals of craft are defiant towards conservative notions of purity and tradition.

DIGITAL CRAFT

We judge traditional crafts practitioners and those of the contemporary era quite differently. In traditional crafts we think of an affinity for material and an intimate relationship with a set of passed-down skills for working that material. (Adamson 34). For many, the digital realm strips a work of the aura we expect and revere within the art object. Risatti in his book, "A Theory of Craft" discusses the way machining has changed the ways we perceive craftsmanship.

"[...]before industrial technology the ability to bring something into being—whether an image, sculpture, or a functional object—was a kind of

wondrous act because the ability of the hand to wrest a realm of culture from the material realm of nature was limited and limiting; this gave the hand and the handmade special metaphorical qualities[...]that the power of the machine undermines (perhaps even destroys) by its unlimited scale of production and its overwhelming power to master material” (Risatti 194).

Risatti essentially believes the unscalable power of machines limits the metaphorical qualities we apply to the handmade. For many of us, having grown up in a post-industrial world has radically shifted our relationship to the handmade craft object and those of machined, mass-production. We have an irreverent attitude towards the machine because its power to rend material feels beyond the scope of human production. It feels false and inhuman. But perhaps these machines are not so incomprehensible in scale. New things can be overwhelming before they begin to feel natural, and humans have a historic tendency for adaptability. Perhaps developing our skills alongside machines is a step towards something super human.

I've always danced with the digital world. I grew up hacking Pokemon ROMS on Gameboy emulators and making pixelated drawings in MS Paint. In the aughts, access to digital technology for makers was scarce and harshly judged. (For many, economic barriers are still undeniable hurdles.) I remember scathing criticisms of digital artists that did their work in computer programs or on tablets. I couldn't possibly understand the skill and craftsmanship required of an individual to manipulate those programs to their whim. Not until I stepped into that world would I understand the rigor required to reprogram one's senses for computers instead of canvas.

Many computer assisted drawing and modeling programs lack the tangible quality of traditional media. They require a significant resolve to command the machine's output, to make it produce work with a resemblance of physical production

we have come to expect. To make it even more difficult they have a tendency to update their interfaces and features rapidly, so learning these technologies can feel endless and foreign, even to the digital native. However, these programs are made by humans and often implement transferable commands and interface structures that can build on previous knowledge, given practice and patience.

I can't entirely immerse myself in the digital realm because it lacks the aura and accomplishment I feel producing tangible work. However, digital fabrication changed my life forever. With access to software like Adobe Suite, Autodesk, and Pixelogic, and machines such as CNCs and 3D printers my idea of what being an artist entails is ever-expanding. I don't need to be a hyper focused painter or a computer-ridden graphic designer. I can let my interests wander, and spend my time devoted to doing what I want, learning bits of skill sets that make me an amalgam powerhouse. I can now combine my developing digital skills with those of my hand, and feel this to be a refreshing and reiterative way of working.

The back and forth between the program and the product produces a dialogue between the machine and the hand and shares many processes associated with traditional crafts. In her essay on digital craft, Awilda Rodriguez Carrion, examines the mutual relationship digital craft has to physical fabrication processes.

“The critical and closely interrelated conversion from digital data to the physical artifact is not a linear sequence, but a process that flows and informs in a bidirectional manner.[...]a dialogue between analog designs (physical models) and digital complex geometries. Digitizing a physical model to translate physical information into digital design data allows for forms that may have been created using other digital tools, such a laser cutter, to be re-manipulated or refined by direct hand manipulation. This interaction creates a closed loop between hand, technology, and machine...” (Carrion 382).

In the iterative process of digital rendering and physical modeling, physical and digital models become reciprocal thus allowing the hand to inform the machine and vice versa. Carrion goes on to outline how aspects of digitally-based fabrication share many of the same processes as traditionally respected crafts.

“...Another evidence of craft is the iterative process of creating molds and castings and the multiple revisions thereafter that are informed by physical prototypes from which components are subsequently made. This process is not any different than traditional creative endeavors such as pottery and sculpture,” (Carrion 382).

The use of digital technology in fabrication is developing new ways to work with machines and our hands and making new use of old ways. Digital fabrication will continue to shape and be shaped by the many human hands taking on these emerging tech-heavy crafts. Because it has been made more accessible to use digital fabrication technology, more amateurs are pursuing this kind of work. Material and tool limitations are constantly evolving allowing us into realms of making previously cordoned off to specialists and masters (Carrion 382).

One such person who engages with digital fabrication in his craft is queer artist Adam Parker Smith, most renowned for his eccentric resin sculpture in the forms of various helium balloons. Sometimes these plastic bodies are explicitly bound in shibari (a form of Japanese rope bondage) or pierced by nails (Fig. 6. and 7.)



Fig. 6. (left) Adam Parker Smith, Instagram post, "Rock Hard in a Funky Place," 27 Dec. 2020.

Fig. 7. (right) Adam Parker Smith, Instagram Post "Transfixed", 21 July 2021.

Their ostensible constraints and flimsy materiality makes them appear non-threatening and adds to a rather tongue-in-cheek, subversive flair.

More recently, Smith has been producing large scale marble statues depicting the characters of ancient, pagan mythologies, typical of ancient greek and roman marbles. He is rendering the same bodies we see in museums across the world with a compacted, contemporary twist. His process, he has revealed, relies on digitally modeling and then using a CNC to rough out the forms of these monumental sculptures. This process has allowed him into the medium of marble with the touch of a master, despite his recent beginnings.



Fig. 8. (left) Adam Parker Smith, Instagram post, “Perseus and Medusa about to smooch!❤️,” digital rendering, 15 March, 2023.

Fig. 9. (right) Adam Parker Smith, Instagram post, “Ganymedes with Jupiter’s Eagle,” marble, 3 Sep. 2022.

While some might be quick to call this a “cheat” or be uncomfortable by his quick uptake of a process/material seldom used today, who are we to discount his efforts behind the screens? While traditional craftsmanship evokes awe in the unskilled, and the master is more critical, digital fabrication has a tendency to reverse this relationship. The skilled can begin to appreciate the composite skill set that the average joe scoffs at. Our disdain for the mass-produced garbage wrought from these technologies at industrial scales has spoiled any respect for their use (Risatti). The digital artist-craftspractitioner deserves more respect, despite our crummy connotations associated with these technologies.

Like Smith, I see more artists engaging with digital fabrication as a process within their work, especially as these processes become more accessible to the public. The digital craftsman is a new breed. Fewer emerging artists are untouched by the influence of digital fabrication and our cultural sense of disrespect for the digital is in

flux. It should be. We can't keep denying the intangible and often invisible work done by digital makers.



Fig. 10. Mik Patrik, *My Empty Womb (rock me!)* (2023), silver maple, walnut.

I was only able to create *My Empty Womb (rock me!)* (Fig. 10.) thanks to advancements in digital fabrication married with hand tools. The concept behind this piece is an extension of my obsession for craft and conception. My womb consists of pixels and power tools.

MYTHS & MONSTERS

The child of a practice I have come to term with over the course of the last four years is a mutt, both a digitally fabricated and hand-made kind of a bastard. It has digital horns and handmade halos.

He is assembled with steel bones, and grows her own feathered wings.



Fig. 11. Mik Patrik, *The Immaculate Angel Bitch Blood Child (birth me!)* (2023), sycamore, mirrored glass, and felt. Installed in Des Lee Gallery for Dove In the Bunker, BFA Senior Thesis Show, April 21, 2023.

My piece, *The Immaculate Angel Bitch Blood Child (birth me!)*, highlights traditional and contemporary craft processes, as well as explicit representation of fantastical, subversive bodies. In my work, I devote myself not only to knowing machine language but the body language we so strongly associate with the traditional craftspractitioner. The figural and abstract forms of the frame and the body within the mirror (Fig. 11), are subverting the cultural myth of immaculate conception and the production of a child that is humanoid, yet “other”. I have been obsessed with the logic behind Jesus’s birth since I was young, having been raised on Christian mythology. The child in my mirror is similarly fantastical, but less human, more given to an alien/demon form. The child as it resides within the mirrored “womb” surface is an alien presence. It is an “other”, abject, and foreign body inhabiting a space that implicates the viewer’s presence.



Fig.12. Mik Patrik, *Mother* (2023), oil on canvas. Installed in Des Lee Gallery for Dove in the Bunker, BFA Senior Thesis Show, April 21, 2023.

The alien baby and its womb-space feels like the central figure in my developing mythography. It is the unseen or abstracted subject within much of my work (Fig.1, 4, 10, 11, and 12). I am particularly fascinated by the connection between the bearer and the unborn. As someone who does not have a womb and will never produce a biological child the whole idea feels otherworldly and fantastic. However the reality of things isn't so romantic. My image of a monstrous presence residing within the body (Fig. 11.) feels timely in the wake of so much political upheaval. With women, female-bodied persons, and trans folx losing many rights to bodily autonomy the mere image of a monstrous, inhuman body is particularly loaded. The figures I represent aren't just rifts on spiritual myths.

REVELATIONS

I make this art to provoke. Since I was young, I have always been a provocative, dissenting voice. Now, through my devotion to craftsmanship, I let my process and

product speak with a transgressive tongue. Craft is a seductress, drawing the viewer in with its beauty and wonderment only to be swept into a sinful reality. The process of the making itself (ritual and digital), its reception, and the subject matter, can all be platforms for dissent.

This year's work has helped me name those who I hope to provoke. I have come to terms with the fact that my practice is shaped in contest with the views and spiritual alignments of my mother. My works are prayers for erotically empowered bodies, and alternative spiritualities. My works are pleas for hybrid craftsmanship. My works critique a religiosity that permeates my culture. As I have been told, my art isn't for storefronts or street facing windows. We don't yet live in a world that is ready for it. But perhaps one day it will be, and I cannot help but wonder what else these crafts will be able to advocate for in the world to come.

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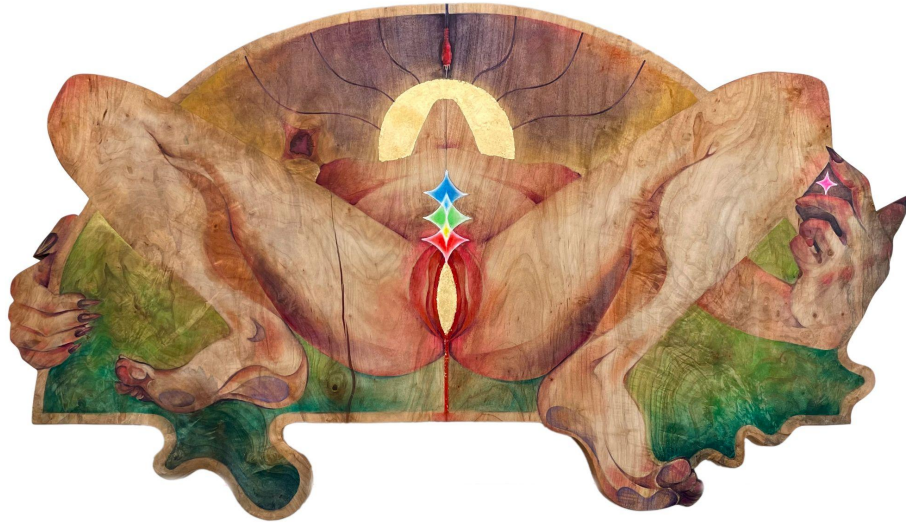


Fig. 1. Mik Patrik, *Border Altar to the Head and the Hole* (2022), silver maple, oil, acrylic, resin, gold leaf, 22 in. x 40 in.



Fig. 2. Wangechi Mutu, *In Two Canoe* (2022), bronze, 184 in. x 66 in. x 70 in.



Fig. 3. Kiki Smith, *Untitled* (1990), beeswax and microcrystalline wax figures on metal stands, 78 in. x 71.5 in. x 21.5 in.



Fig. 4. Mik Patrik, *Horned Eve* (2023), silicone, 8 in. x 5 in. (installation. 34 in. x 18 in. x 18 in.)

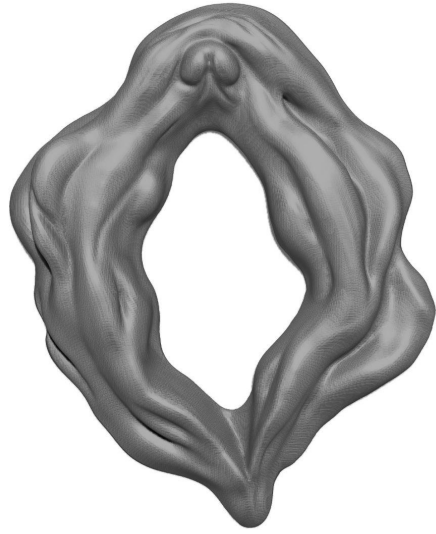


Fig. 5. Mik Patrik, *The Immaculate Angel Bitch Blood Child (birth me!)* (2023), digital rendering



Fig. 6. Adam Parker Smith, "Rock Hard in a Funky Place," resin, fiberglass, steel, chrome and cotton/poly, 23.5 in. x 19 in. x 8 in., Instagram. 27 Dec. 2020.



Fig. 7. Adam Parker Smith, “Transfixed,” resin, fiberglass, steel, chrome, 18 in. x 12.5 in. x 2.5 in. Instagram. 21 July, 2021.

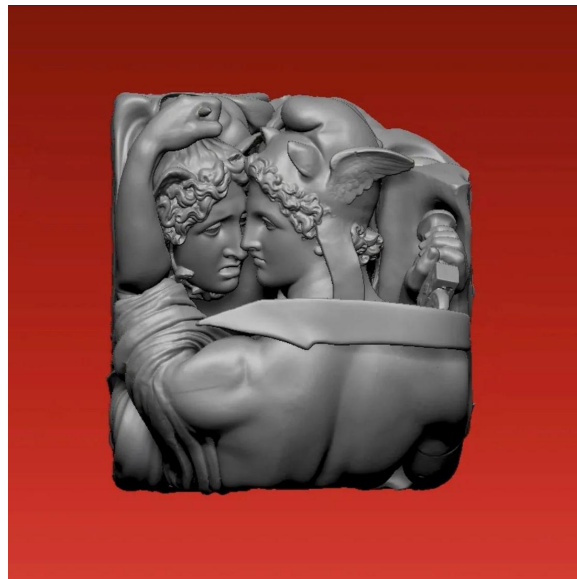


Fig. 8. Adam Parker Smith, “Perseus and Medusa about to smooch! ❤️”, digital rendering, Instagram. 15 March, 2023.



Fig. 9. Adam Parker Smith, "Ganymedes with Jupiter's Eagle," marble, 39.5 in. x 39.5 in. x 39.15 in., Instagram. 3 Sep. 2022.



Fig. 10. Mik Patrik, *My Empty Womb (rock me!)* (2023), silver maple, walnut, 30 in. x 16 in. x 26 in.



Fig. 11. Mik Patrik, *The Immaculate Angel Bitch Blood Child (birth me!)* (2023), sycamore, mirrored glass, wool felt, 59 in. x 48 in. x 4 in.

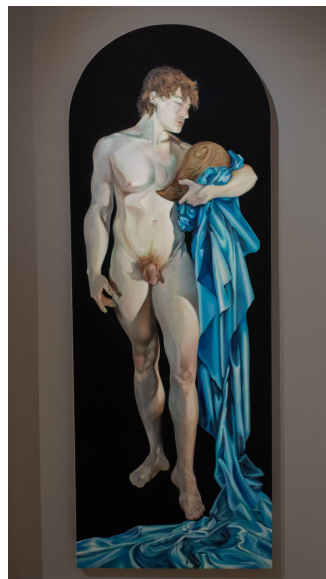


Fig.12. Mik Patrik, *Mother* (2023), oil on canvas, 96 in. x 36in.

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