

visual arts

Heroic measures

Helen Gerritzen explores the transformation impluse at SNAP

TRACHEA AND THE HERO, AND OTHER SUCH STORIES...

By Helen Gerritzen, Through Oct 7, Opening Reception Thu, Sept 7, SNAP Gallery (10309-97 St.), Info: 423-1492 or snap@snapartists.com

IT ENDS BADLY, AS MOST ANCIENT Greek romantic excursions tend to.

Apollo (god of light, poetry, the lute, and all-around homecoming king of the Olympic pantheon) quarrels with Eros (the busybody little cherub in charge of planting that kick in the loins you get when you really want to kiss someone).

In retaliation, the little imp fires a lust-tipped arrow into him just as Apollo glimpses the lovely nymph Daphne, daughter of the river god (and unfortunately-monikered) Peneus and committed virgin.

Apollo pursues her regardless, and she runs. He gives chase—Greek gods not being the kind to take no for an answer—and at the moment he is about to overcome her, Daphne pleads with daddy to save her. Doing what any good father would do, he turns her into a laurel tree.

Apollo, overcome with grief and regret and generally being melodramatic, adopts her leaves as his arboreal insignia, using wreaths of them

to crown poet laureates (note that the title derives from the tree species), winning sports folk, and conquering heroes just like him.

It hardly seems fair, does it? To turn a guy down and end up as his leafy mascot, name and identity supplanted with his. A rather twisted honour.

"I don't like to know too much about a story, because it impedes symbolism."

HELEN GERRITZEN

"I like the idea of working with transformations," observes Helen Gerritzen. "I think that's why I'm drawn to printmaking, because it's kind of a magical process."

Aside from the physically transformative acts that occur in practices such as printmaking, art itself is based on the transformation of an

idea into a personal expression of meaning that can be read in a wider cultural context.

Gerritzen confesses to having a collector's compulsion, and she squirrels away fragments of the real world as well as images and fictional and non-fictional knowledge.

"I love to work with symbols. I salvage things and use found forms a lot," she notes. "I don't like to know too much about a story, because it impedes symbolism. I originally knew the story of Daphne through books as a child—Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I was re-reading it and was just struck by the passage where she turns into a tree—that moment where she draws her last breath as a human. I'm not a scholar. I just use the story as inspiration. My work tends to be about male/female roles and relationships. I wanted to illustrate the transformation but present it in contemporary work."

Classical mythology is endemic as a subject in pre-modern art, and Daphne's tale has been tackled in paintings, etchings, drawings, and sculpture by artists like John Singer Sargent and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The latter's life-sized marble creation, sculpted during the Enlightenment, captures the same moment that obsesses Gerritzen.

However, Gerritzen has pared down the narrative and worked with it as a series of evocative ciphers that question the story's heroic acts. How heroic is it to abandon your physical body, or induce another to do so?

Gerritzen found her symbolic stand-ins for the un-lovers via serendipitous observation. "I teach at the U of A, and we had a drawing class with cadavers, and I noticed the trachea looks like a branch." A windy day walk near Mill Creek Ravine provided her with her "trachea," and the branch stands in for Daphne's body in the work. Gerritzen claims that the representation of her counterpart, Apollo, was for her a given.

"Antlers are such a strong story symbol—very universal."

Aesthetically, the duo works gorgeously, suggesting that each is the other's shadow. Gerritzen exploits this quality, invoking actual shadow in some of the prints and keeping a slight eerie green from accidental plate oxidation as the only colour throughout.

The show demonstrates the transformation of the concept as she worked through it, beginning with collage-type prints on a smaller



THEY'RE NOT HORNS
Try on the "antler helmet" at SNAP. You might like it.

scale, moving through large photographic prints that isolate the ciphers (including architectural elements that suggest lungs), and building to massive prints that powerfully evoke the hunter and the hunted.

She ends with a piece that hints at a new stream of work—an empty unicorn enclosure from a medieval tapestry.

"My hope is that people will want to walk into the enclosure. That they will want to put the helmet [antlers] on."

Gerritzen concludes, "In the end, the scale was important, so that the viewer has a personal relationship with the work."

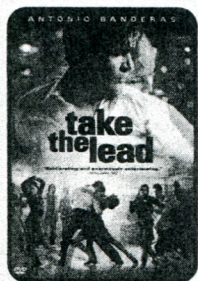
MARY CHRISTA O'KEEFE

SKETCHES

■ The Strathcona Art Society has founded a new permanent artist-run centre. **The Loft Gallery** in Sherwood Park is in the AJ Ottewill Arts Centre (590 Broadmoor Blvd.) and features frequent rotations of artists' work. The gallery is open Saturdays from 10 am to 5 pm. Info at 449-4443.

■ Illustrator **Bob Proctor's** latest comic book, *It's the Bad Guys #4* was given a coming out party this past Sunday at Happy Harbor Comics. View his work at www.bobproctor.com.

■ New blood at **Latitude 53** as executive director Todd Jones and the rest of the Latitude-ites welcome **Paul Smith** as new program officer. Smith is a talented U of A grad and artist who will be a great asset to the gallery. (MCO)



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