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Helen Gerritzen is an instructor of printmaking and drawing, and coordinates the Drawing program for the Department of Art & Design at the University of Alberta. Her work has been exhibited in Canada, the U.S. and internationally.

Gilbert A. Bouchard is an Edmonton-based freelance journalist, cultural correspondent, broadcaster and poet. He is the Visual Arts Reporter for the *Edmonton Journal* and a general arts correspondent for CBC Radio Edmonton's Radioactive afternoon drive show.

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April 5 to 28, 2007

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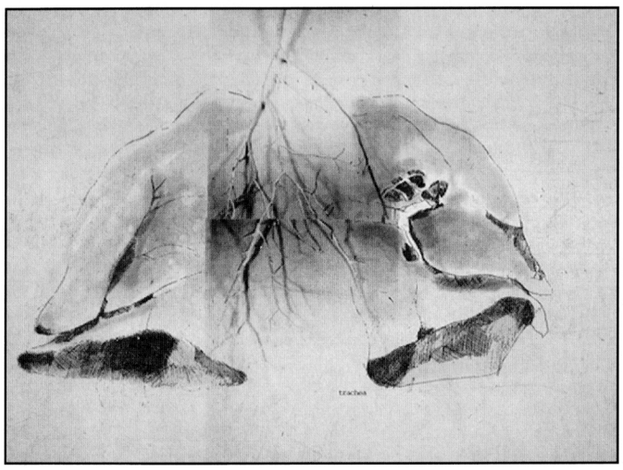
Helen Gerritzen

trachea and the hero, and other such stories...



Helen Gerritzen, *trachea* (detail), digital print, etching, spit bite, type, 11" x 14", 2005

Open Studio Gallery
401 Richmond Street W. Suite 104
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5V 3A8
TEL/FAX 416.504.8238
office@openstudio.on.ca
www.openstudio.on.ca

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Helen Gerritzen

trachea and the hero, and other such stories...

by Gilbert A. Bouchard

The myth-story [...] is both polysemous like a poetic text, in its multiple layers of meaning; and, unlike a poem, not fixed in a definitive form. It always contains variants, many versions available to the storyteller, from which he selects according to the circumstances of the audience or his own preferences, and which he can strike out, add to, or change as he likes.

– Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Universe, The Gods, And Men*

It's no surprise that Edmonton-based artist Helen Gerritzen should settle in on the ancient Greek myth of Daphne as the central inspiration for her print-based show *trachea and the hero, and other such stories...* given the artist's longtime fascination with dualities and pairings of all literary and visual sorts.

One of those highly polysemous tales that Jean-Pierre Vernant refers to in his seminal *The Universe, The Gods, And Men*, Daphne's story (in a nutshell: a beautiful nymph when pursued by Apollo prays to Gaea for aid and is promptly transformed into a laurel tree) is decidedly open at both narrative ends, boasting layer after layer of polar tale-telling extremes.

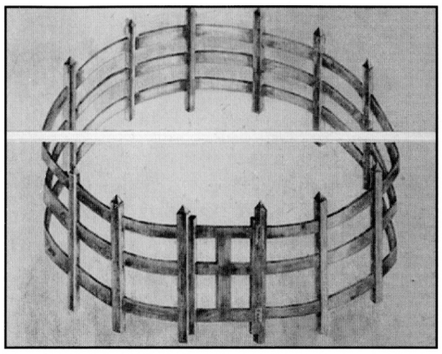
For starters, you have the always wild-eyed and violent love of Apollo spurring the story along. It's balanced oddly enough by the forever taken-for-granted and oddly bloody back story of Daphne and her sister nymphs reacting to the desires of Leucippus, Daphne's mortal stalker-lover, a sad-sack type who tragically sets out to disguise himself as a nymph to be near the skittish but desirable beauty.

As often happens in these tales, Leucippus betrays his gender/intentions/bad-spying skills while bathing. Also typical of ancient Greek tales, the nymphs respond to Leucippus' accidental unveiling by tearing him to pieces, and in the process ushering a centuries-long discourse on the nature and price of knowledge, power and corporeal realities in complicated interplay.

Gerritzen's large-scale prints reduce Daphne's tale to a visual meditation on two archetypal objects (a found-object bare tree branch and an old pair of antlers), overt yet subtle avatars of the underlying tensions embedded in this layered tale of frustrated desires all around.

Looking at the prosaic tree branch in its particularly poetic transformation into visual trope in Gerritzen's show – such a powerfully grounded and almost painfully physical object – can help remind us of the ironically huge stretch the poor nymph Daphne exercised as she traversed the neighboring states of minor, although ethereal, goddesses of nature (the idea of the wild) to a minor part of nature itself (a prosaic expression of the wild).

Narratively it's both a ridiculous transformation representing the ultimate overreaction, yet it's also the most perfect and elegant literary incarnation of the vast space found in the semiotic shift between one who expresses nature and the expression of nature itself.



Helen Gerritzen, *hortus conclusus (from The Hunt of the Unicorn as Lover)* (detail), etching, spit bite, type, 72" x 48" (2 panels), 2005

In turn, Gerritzen's visual narrative choices, her own unique artistic spin, aim to encourage the viewer to ask themselves what is more important: knowledge or physical experience, embodied by a series of images set in the mental turmoil Daphne must have found herself in as she transformed (embodied in part by other images in the show based on drawings taken of a plastic, medical-school-teaching-aid trachea, standing in for the centuries-long reverberation of this mythic nymph's last (im)mortal screams).

By dipping down into this endlessly deep pool of older-than-old myth-stories fixated on transformation (and transmission, given these tales are fruits of an age-old progression of generation-to-generation breath as asserted by Vernant), Gerritzen forces the hand of the viewer as she encourages explorations of the tiny-yet-cosmically-huge gap between states of being.

Contemplating the metaphysics of the theme as well as the blurring of media, the artist undertakes so seamlessly in the mediated print format, the viewer can't help but extrapolate all kinds of necessary gaps built into our inherently complicated excursions into the world.

No matter how dedicated we may be to eschewing the mental to directly engage the physical, we still need to translate all raw physical input indirectly into our brains via ethereal and abstracted firings of (in turn) irritatingly mechanistic nerves and neurons as we cross the existentially lonely straits of the mind-body gap.

Ultimately the full elegance of Gerritzen's work is its ability to stay focused on the power of interpretive openness incarnated by metaphysically intriguing moments of transformation and emotional/physical turmoil.

While this work handily forces the issues of mind-body gap and the contradictions written into the tension between knowledge and experience, it does so in a way that is deeply satisfying and oddly reassuring on aesthetic and metaphysical levels.

Like Apollo, we are bound to be frustrated in our attempt to grasp; but like Daphne, we can be at least momentarily satisfied by a fleeting breath of comprehension, as transitory as it may be.