James McNeill Mesplé
The Metamorphoses

College of Lake County
Community Gallery of Art
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“...would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts,...the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.”

Joseph Campbell

Myths have forever flourished in the fertile fantasies of the human imagination. In a world we can never fully understand, they have offered us explanations of things beyond our grasp. They have charmed us with tales of adventure and romance: brought beauty to our art, literature and music and held a mirror up to our vanities. They have taught us lessons about heroes and villains, savagery and splendor. And, they have reassured us of the constancy of our universe.

For nearly 2000 years, The Metamorphoses, written in 8 AD by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC-AD 17), has served as a kind of handbook of Greek and Roman mythology. Told with an earthy frankness that is often laced with an irreligious sense of humor, The Metamorphoses recounts, in a single unbroken narrative, each of the more than 50 stories that helped shape the Western World's Classical tradition. Among its verses, we encounter one extraordinary tale of transformation after another, beginning with the story of Creation, as Chaos changes into Order, and ending in the author’s own time, as the soul of Julius Caesar is turned into a star and set in the heavens.

The “shifting story of the world,” as Ovid called it, with all its eternal and miraculous changes, has provided a career-long source of inspiration for Chicago-based painter James McNeill Mesplé. In fact, each of the works in the artist’s current exhibition at the College of Lake County’s Community Gallery of Art is based on a story found in The Metamorphoses. To experience these enchanting paintings along with a choice selection of working drawings brings to life the formidable pantheon of Olympian gods and goddesses in all their blustering bravado, cupidity, narcissism and terrible rage.

Mesplé uses Ovid’s masterpiece as a sort of traveler’s guide to navigate through a capricious cosmos whose inhabitants are constantly changing form and substance. Here, we glimpse the elusive river nymph, Daphne, as she turns into a laurel tree to escape the amorous pursuit of Apollo, the god of sun and music (Apollo and Daphne, 2000). Here, too, we witness the unlucky hunter Actaeon, as he changes into a stag and is devoured by his own dogs, after having chanced upon the goddess Diana bathing in the nude (Actaeon and Diana, 2000). Opening onto these timeless dramas, the artist’s works are like “strange windows.”

Mesplé’s fascination with myth began at an early age. As a young boy, he spent summers in a small Missouri town with his grandfather, who was one-half Osage Indian. During these visits, he would listen attentively as his grandfather told wondrous tales from Native American folklore about people changing into plants and animals. Back in school, he began to see similarities between the stories his grandfather had told him and the myths of other cultures he was then learning about. It’s this universality of myth - its connections and resonance between diverse cultures distant in time and place - that still interests him most today.

Some of the myths Mesplé is drawn to in his work are familiar stories with morals attached. There is, for instance, the cautionary tale of Icarus, who ignores his father’s warnings and flies too close to the sun, only to plunge into the sea and drown when the wax in his wings melts (Icarus, 1989).
Others, such as Piccolo Amarillo (Procne, Philomela, Tereus and Ilys changed into birds) (1989), with its conspiracies of rape, revenge and murder, are as grisly and violent as any of today’s shockers. In this painting, Mesplé envisions the unfortunate foursome roosting on a vine wrapped around a pair of fettered musical instruments.

Music, not surprisingly, is the focus, in some form or another, of many of Mesplé’s best paintings. An accomplished woodwind musician (he was awarded a college scholarship in bassoon), the artist’s attraction is understandable. Flutes, oboes, Pan’s pipes and piccolos recur frequently throughout his work.

Music plays a part in two of the most impressive paintings on display here, The Nightingale (Chiron, the aged centaur teaching music to the young Achilles) (1999) and Pan and Syrinx (1999). In the former, the future ill-fated hero of the Trojan War learns to play the flute by listening to the song of a ruby-red bird perched on a tree limb over head. In the latter, the chaste woodland nymph, Syrinx, escapes Pan’s lustful advances by changing into marsh reeds, which make such a delicate sound when Pan’s disappointed sighs pass through them, that the goatish god of fields and forests cuts them into pieces and fashions his fabled musical pipes.

In these exceptional paintings, Mesplé closely follows traditional readings of the myths. In fact, if an ancient Greek or Roman were to find themselves in front of these works, it is perfectly conceivable that he or she would need no explanation as to what is going on in them. But, the painter isn’t always such a stickler for conventional readings. In fact, he often lets a bit of the contemporary world seep in and blend with his interpretations of Ovid’s ancient tales.

The Chicago skyline, for instance, appears on the distant horizon in many of the artist’s works, prompting viewers to do a double-take. To be sure, it’s a little unsettling, as well as a bit humorous to see Hercules and Prometheus in the company of the Three Graces with the John Hancock Building and Sears Tower in the distance (The Flame: Hercules, Prometheus and the

Three Graces, (1998). In Neptune Arriving (1998), a small panel painting, the ferris wheel at Navy Pier appears in the background, as the triton-wielding god of water disembarks from his vessel onto a Chicago beach.

In other works, the chiseled Statue of Liberty-like figure of Zeus’s steadfast, albeit, vengeful wife stands beside a television set, (Hera Changing Channels, (1997-98). Daedalus’s head-strong son soars above the nuclear reactors at Three Mile Island, (Icarus). And, in

Bacchus Changing Grapes to Wine, 1998
Egg tempera and oil
Pygmalian and Galatea (1989), the sculptor who creates a statue of a woman so beautiful he falls in love with it, is not Pygmalian, but the artist himself. By introducing his own image and such contemporary icons as a television, skyscraper and nuclear power plant into his work, Mesplé integrates myth and the modern world, mingling the supernaturalism of the one with the everyday concerns of the other.

Mesplé’s often curious-looking images with their sometimes intentionally awkward drawing and unreal color; his penchant for story-telling; his deliberate disregard for continuities between time and place and his rather impish sense of humor, have encouraged some critics and curators to group the artist’s work with those practicing a so-called naive style. But, Mesplé’s work is anything but naive.

As a young college student in Missouri, he was taught for a brief time by the American Regionalist painter, Thomas Hart Benton. After moving to Chicago, he studied painting with Karl Wirsum, a member of the Chicago Imagists. In turn, he has taught painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Northwestern University, the Francis W. Parker School and Oxbow, a prestigious artist’s center in Michigan.

Mesplé’s painting technique, a combination of tempera and oil glaze that first was introduced to him through Benton’s work, is itself a very sophisticated process. Blending egg yolk with water and crushed pigments extracted from stone and earth, he mixes his own tempera paint using a process that dates back to the Middle Ages. It’s a technique perfectly suited to achieving the smooth finish, high-keyed color and high degree of detail that characterize his work.

To prepare for a painting, Mesplé coats his canvas or wood panel with gesso, a glue solution with whiting added, that can be sanded to a smooth, ivory-like, but highly absorbent surface. He then begins by laying-in a black chalk or charcoal drawing, which he fixes with a thin coat of diluted egg yolk. Next, he applies a tempera under-painting, often using colors that are complimentary to those he intends for the finished painting - red under green, for instance, or orange under blue.

Mesplé builds the richness and depth of his color with a series of transparent oil glazes. When light hits the surface of one of his finished paintings, the brilliant white gesso foundation reflects it back through layers of glassy luminous glazing. This produces the vivid jewel-like color for which his paintings are so justly admired.

But, Mesplé is not only a fastidious technician, he is also an exceptional colorist, which is especially evident in a work like Blue Oboe (Apollo changing bamboo into oboe reeds) (1999). Rendered in cool closely-valued shades of gray-violet, blue and green, this idyllic landscape is warmed just-so by a loosely-brushed path of sienna and ocher that runs through it. Here, a dramatic sky, with a distant sliver of red hinting at an erupting volcano, billows with portentous clouds, while an incredible variety of delicately painted plants and flowers blooms in exquisite detail along the painting’s bottom edge.

Just as Ovid was more prophetic than boastful when he remarked that The Metamorphoses would be around “as long as poetry speaks truth on earth,” so too, will the images Mesplé has drawn from Ovid’s lines endure. For, as Joseph Campbell has suggested, within each myth - each “shape shifting, yet marvelously constant story, we find a challenging persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.” This is what Mesplé packs into each remarkable painting.

Garrett Holg writes on art for ARTnews magazine and the Chicago Sun-Times.
Hera Changing Channels, 1998-99, Egg tempera and oil
Pan and Syrinx, 1999, Egg tempera and oil
The Nightingale (Chiron, the aged centaur, teaching music to the young Achilles), 1999, Egg tempera and oil
Icarus and Daedalus, 1988-93, Egg tempera and oil
The Flame (Hercules, Prometheus, and the Three Graces), 1998-99
Egg tempera and oil
James McNeill Mesplé

Education:
The University of Missouri, Northeastern Illinois State University, and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Selected Solo Exhibitions:
2000 College of Lake County, Grayslake, IL - Metamorphoses
1999 Union League Club, Chicago - Paintings
1998 University of St. Francis, Joliet, IL - Paintings
1990 Objects Gallery, Chicago, Día de los Muertos
1989 Hokin/Kaufman Gallery, Chicago - New Myths
1984 Objects Gallery, Chicago - Mythic Sculptures and Paintings
1983 Body Politic Gallery, Chicago - Devils, Angels and Paintings

Selected Group Exhibitions:
2000 Printworks Gallery, Chicago, - The Exquisite Corpse
1999 Illinois State Museum, Springfield, IL - Spiritual Passports
1999 Klein Art Works, Chicago - Collecting: Not Just Famous Pictures
1999 Cows on Parade, Chicago - Classic Cow
1999 University of Illinois at Springfield - Millennial Myths Group
1998 College of Lake County, Grayslake, IL - Visions, Dreams and Prophecies
1997 Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso, IN - The Prodigal Son
1996 Wood Street Gallery, Chicago - Pandora's Dilemma, or the Human Condition
1995 Krannert Art Museum, Champaign-Urbana, IL - New Acquisitions
1995 Struve Gallery, Chicago - Spiritual Inquiries
1990 State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago - Death
1988 Queens Museum, Flushing NY - Classical Myth and Imagery in Contemporary Art

Selected Publications and Reviews:
          College of Lake County, Grayslake, IL, 1998. Catalogue
Garrett Holg. Living with Art - June and Francis Spiezer in Love with Eccentricity.
Lu Bro. Figure and Form. Dubuque: Brown and Benchmark, 1992. Pp 97-99
          Fig. 5.40. "Paulette as Venus X-Raying the Trojan Horse,"

Selected Media:
Bruce Duffie, WNIB Radio, Chicago. Chicago Moosicians, interview with
          J. Mesplé, Sept. 28, 1999, 10 PM

Selected Collections
Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
Chicago Historical Society
Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, IL.
Illinois State Museum, Springfield, IL
Rockford Art Museum, Rockford, IL, The June and Francis Spiezer Collection.
Joan Arenberg, Highland Park, IL
Darryl Hanna, Hollywood, CA
Alice Ryerson Hayes, Chicago, IL
Myron and Cecille Shure, Highland Park, IL

Exhibition Checklist
All dimensions are in inches.

1. *Actaeon and Diana*, 2000; Egg tempera and oil, 22 x 22
2. *Apollo and Daphne*, 1999-00; Egg tempera and oil, 22 x 22
3. *Apollo and Daphne*, 1999; Pencil, chalk on paper, 15 ½ x 13 ½
4. *Arachne and Pallas Athene* (diptych), 2000; Egg tempera and oil, 75 x 72
5. *Arachne*, 1999; Pencil, chalk on paper, 8 x 10
7. *Bacchus Changing Grapes to Wine*, 1998; Egg tempera and oil, 29 x 18
8. *Blue Oboe (Apollo changing bamboo into oboe reeds)*, 1999; Egg tempera and oil, 28 ½ x 36
9. *Cygns Changed into a Swan*, 1998; Egg tempera and oil, 12 ¾ x 11 ¾
10. *Echoes from Pompeii* (self portrait with Ed, Cupid and Pan), 1999; Egg tempera and oil, 20 x 16
12. *Hera Changing Channels*, 1998-99; Egg tempera and oil, 29 x 26
13. *Icarus and Daedalus*, 1988-93; Egg tempera and oil, 52 x 48
14. *Neptune Arriving*, 1998; Egg tempera and oil, 11 ¾ x 11 ¾
15. *The Nightingale (Chiron, the aged centaur, teaching music to the young Achilles)*, 1999; Egg tempera and oil, 37 x 29
16. *Orpheus and Eurydice*, 1999; Egg tempera and oil, 26 x 33 ¼
17. *Pan and Syrinx*, 1999; Egg tempera and oil, 29 ½ x 24
18. *Pan and Syrinx*, 1999; Pencil, chalk on paper, 13 ¼ x 11 ¼
20. *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1989-99; Egg tempera and oil, 79 x 36
21. *Galatea's Jewel*, 1991; Silver and gem stones, lost-wax cast, 2 ½ x 2 ½
22. *Galatea's Jewel*, Pencil, watercolor on paper, 9 x 9
23. *Venus (listening to Cupid)*, 1998; Egg tempera and oil, 42 x 42
24. *Venus in the Window*, 1998; Egg tempera and oil, 11 ¾ x 12 ¼
25. *Europa*, 1999; Pencil, chalk on paper, 8 x 10
26. *Io - Classic Cow*, 1999; Sketch/paper with photograph, 8 x 10
27. *King Midas*, 1999; Pencil, chalk, gold leaf on paper, 8 x 10
28. *Medusa*, 1999; Pencil, chalk on paper, 5 x 5
29. *The Minotaur and Theseus*, 1999; Pencil, chalk on paper, 16 x 12
30. *Prometheus*, 1999; Watercolor on paper, 18 x 14
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February 25 - March 26, 2000

Gallery hours:
Mon-Fri 8:00 am-9:00 pm
Sat 9:00 am-4:30 pm
Sun 1:00-5:00 pm
For information: 847-543-2240
E-mail: sjones@clc.cc.il.us

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