Steve Mendelson
The Song of Amergin

Robert T. Wright
Community Gallery of Art
College of Lake County
Song of Amergin

I am a stag: of seven tines,
I am a flood: across a plain,
I am a wind: on a deep lake,
I am a tear: the Sun lets fall,
I am a hawk: above the cliff,
I am a thorn: beneath the nail,
I am a wonder: among flowers,
I am a wizard: who but I

Sets the cool head aflame with smoke?

I am a spear: that roars for blood,
I am a salmon: in a pool,
I am a lure: from paradise,
I am a hill: where poets walk,
I am a boar: ruthless and red,
I am a breaker: threatening doom,
I am a tide: that drags to death,
I am an infant: who but I

Peeps from the unhewn dolmen arch?

I am the womb: of every holt,
I am the blaze: on every hill,
I am the queen: of every hive,
I am the shield: for every head,
I am the tomb: of every hope.
Steve Mendelson: The Song of Amergin

The twenty-eight pen and ink drawings by Steve Mendelson in this exhibition are being shown for the first time. They have been selected as representative of a larger series of fifty-seven works. Many of these works were influenced by the ancient Celtic poem, *The Song of Amergin*. However, more importantly, these awe-inspiring drawings were shaped by the artist's battle with the AIDS virus, which eventually took his life in 1995. AIDS has cut a swath through the last few decades leaving in its wake incomprehensible suffering, shattered dreams, lives cut short, and bitter tears. While its enormous toll on society may be documented in the media, this exhibition personalizes it by providing insight to its toll on one individual.

Mendelson's *The Song of Amergin* is a highly intellectual and visionary series of drawings on par with William Blake's illustrations for Dante's *The Inferno* or Hieronymous Bosch's nightmarish tableaus. The series descends into its own netherworld giving shape and form to physical and mental torment. However, each work is so sublimely rendered that the evident anguish is counter-balanced by grace, harmony, beauty, and a spiritual transcendence. As the series develops, so does the scope of the drawings. The focus changes from one particular subject to a shifting, morphing panorama of figures, animals, and architectural interiors. Mendelson's drawings, by delving so deeply into the psyche, strike a universal chord and touch upon the very nature of our humanity.

Steve Mendelson attended Highland Park High School where he graduated in 1978. He went on to earn his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1981. While in art school he completed a twenty-foot-long pen and ink mural based on the Seventh Symphony of Jean Sibelius, which now hangs in the Chamber Hall of the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland. Throughout the twelve years following his graduation, Mendelson had a very distinguished career as an illustrator. He served as a staff illustrator for the *Washington Post* from 1981 to 1986. During that time he took a year's absence from *The Post* to work on staff as an illustrator for a number of Scandinavian newspapers. Mendelson's sardonic wit was unleashed upon the top political leaders of the 1980s. Most took these caricatures in stride, but a few victims of his pen were incensed. Political humorist Art Buchwald loved Mendelson's irreverence so much that he had him illustrate four of his books. During the early 1990s, Mendelson authored and illustrated three delightful children's books, which displayed his superb use of color.

Mendelson's work as a commercial illustrator refined his drawing sensibilities and endowed him with a great command of visual images and symbolic references. His political illustrations poked fun at the world. The other side of Comedy is, of course, Tragedy. In Greek plays, Comedy was to amuse and distract one from life's problems. Tragedy, on the other hand, was to grapple with those very issues between life and death that are an integral part of the human condition. This series of drawings was Mendelson's way of coping with his own personal tragedy, the AIDS virus. So his art turned from the farcical stage of world politics to confront the devastatingly destructive nature of the disease. As a political illustrator his drawing was derived from the article it accompanied. The ancient Celtic poem, *The Song of Amergin*, became the text that he now illuminated, merging the mythic, universal themes of the poem with his own experiences. "The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites." Invoking the Muse involves a turning inward, transcending the boundaries of Self. Mendelson's muse, *The Song of Amergin*, sparked the connection from the literary to the visual.

The English poet Robert Graves says in his book *The White Goddess* that "... the Song of Amergin, an ancient Celtic calendar-alphabet, [is] found in several purposely garbled Irish and Welsh variants, which briefly summarizes the prime poetic myth." *The Song of Amergin* begins with thirteen statements from God, which are followed by six questions. The Celtic calendar was composed of thirteen months and the thirteen statements are associated with each of the months. According to Graves, the *Song of Amergin* was never used as we know an alphabet today, but rather as coded symbols classifying things in a cosmological order.
It is unusual for works so highly charged with symbolic content to be designated simply by numbers and not more descriptive titles. Perhaps a title can be construed to be a segue for the viewer to pass from a verbal mode of thinking into the non-verbal, visual world where art resides. Mendelson was so deeply focused on this intuitive realm, the imagery was flowing forth from the point of his pen so rapidly, that he merely numbered the works. Had he had the opportunity to exhibit these drawings, he might have considered titles to further communicate to his audience.

Technically, Mendelson's drawings have an over-all dark tonality which is unusual for pen and ink because of the time consuming process of cross-hatching. This technique consists of a series of tightly spaced lines superimposed over other sets of lines, thus building up dark tones. Albrecht Durer's engravings are composed in such a manner and Mendelson is no less capable than that Old Master. Mendelson's drawing #13 seems directly related to Durer's woodcut, The Four Horsemen which personified Death, Famine, Pestilence and War. While there are four horsemen represented, upon closer examination one discovers that it is the same figure repeated four times. On the back of the drawing he made notes regarding works by the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. The knight on horseback (perhaps Death?) is echoed four times with each repetition fading into the darkness. There is the same brooding melancholy to the drawing that is often associated with Sibelius' music.

On the back of drawing #5 the artist had jotted down: Next 21 directly from the poem "Song of Amergin" reconstructed by Robert Graves in the 'White Goddess.' The poem and Graves' interpretation of it seem to have been a powerful catalyst for the artist. Initially, he appears to respond directly to the poem, though this quickly evolves into something more loosely based. Drawing #5, depicting a deer with prominent antlers (or tines), is clearly associated with the first line of the source: "I am a stag: of seven tines." In the Celtic calendar, trees are used as highly charged symbols. The line regarding the stag of seven tines is associated with the birch, which was thought to have a revitalizing, protective effect. The next drawing, #6, has a figure with arms outstretched being engulfed in a churning, breaking wave. The torrent of water is beautifully rendered, as is the pathos of the figure. This image may refer to the line "I am a breaker: threatening doom." This image certainly must have reflected the artist's feelings at that time.

Dr. Dale Pesman, an anthropologist, was a close personal friend of Mendelson's who often visited the artist throughout his illness. Pesman, a fine artist in her own right, had long conversations with Mendelson regarding the formal qualities of his work. She wrote: "The first nine or ten drawings are a painful exposition. In a way I see the whole series as a search for another form, for some mercy, for a break from the staring focused-ness of these first works. As the series progresses, the one layer of centrally focused images begins to appear to have another layer behind it. Shapes can become objects or spaces, objects can become outlines and negative space, holes and negative spaces can become objects."
The layering of images that Dale Pesman refers to can be seen in drawing #26. The drawing depicts a palatial Baroque interior. The solid and static appearance of the architecture is juxtaposed against ephemeral figures and turbulent water. A hooded mourner standing before a doorway is repeated transparently in a procession. Meanwhile, a twisted torso, parallel to a beam of light, is being pulled up and out of the picture plane. The artist plays with the space by repeating the same nude torso just beyond the open doorway. However, this time the figure is in the same position but depicted from a different angle. The effect is to rearrange the laws of space and time to allow for dual vantage points of the same object simultaneously. This work is the last in the series to be directly based on the Celtic poem. The momentum was such that each succeeding drawing proceeded uncharted on the internal pathway the poem had initiated.

As the drawings progress toward the end of the series the scope and space dramatically increase. Drawing #55 is composed around an Egyptian winged sarcophagus motif, which is in flames on the top, right side. Throughout the composition is the image of a bird in flight, possibly a crow. The architectural elements of staircases create a feeling of ascension. There is a sense of crescendo to this drawing. The whole series had been building in its visual complexity, its dark tonality, and its pathos in an orchestral-like fashion. On one plane exists chaos and destruction, darkly and intricately rendered by Mendelson's pen. However, through the architectural spaces and some of the bird shapes we see a very different plane. Here, there is a tranquil view of water and sky lit in a serene atmosphere. Though he made a few more drawings after #55, it is in this piece that the series finds conclusion.

The Celtic poem *The Song of Amergin* served as the catalyst for Mendelson's collection of drawings. In just a few scant stanzas, the poem provided enough imagery for the artist to delve into a deep meditation on the physical and psychological forces affecting his life. Faced with a terminal illness, he matched the destructive forces of the AIDS virus with an astounding creative outpouring, shining a light into the dark recesses of his soul. There is indeed a sense of great loss at the passing of such a formidable artist. However, this series of drawings, created under conditions dire and extreme, is his gift to us all. Each masterful work deserves our deepest contemplation. Then, perhaps, we might come to understand, "I am a lure: from paradise, I am a hill: where poets walk."

Steven Jones, Art Gallery Curator
Assisted by Jane Ellefson

*This series to be dedicated on my part to two Extraordinary Forces that helped shape my life. To my soul's companion, my B. Tim Holless and to my minion, my teacher, ultimately my master, the crow.*

Written on the back of the last drawing by Steve Mendelson

#6, pen and ink, 14 x 11 1/8"
#13, pen and ink, 14 x 10 3/4"
#32, pen and ink, 12 3/8" x 15 3/8"
#32, pen and ink, $12\frac{3}{8}\" \times 15\frac{3}{8}\"$
#55, pen and ink, 16" x 14 1/2"
**STEVEN MENDELSON**

**CAREER HISTORY**

1991 to 1993

**Author and Illustrator**

*The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (1993)
Publisher: Dial Books, New York
*The Emperor’s New Clothes* (1992)
*Stupid Emilien* (1991)
Publisher: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, New York

**Illustrator**

American Medical Association (newsletter, monthly syndication)

1981 to 1986

**Staff Illustrator**

*Washington Post*

1981 to 1993

**Free-Lance Illustrator**


**Illustrator**

World Press package for UNICEF

**Muralist**

Eccentrics’ Hall of Fame, Chicago, Illinois (commissioned by Richard Melman of Lettuce Entertain You Company).

1982 to 1983

**Free-Lance Illustrator**

Took leave of absence from *The Post* to work on staff of the following papers: *Politiken*, Copenhagen, Denmark; *Dagbladet*, Oslo, Norway; *Expression*, Stockholm, Sweden; and *Helsingon Sanomat*, Helsinki, Finland. During this time his work was syndicated by *The Deutsche Press Agentur* in Hamburg, throughout Southern Europe, Latin America, India and Japan.

1984 to 1989

**Illustrator**

Books by Art Buchwald: *While Regan Slept, You Can Fool All the People All the Time*, *I Think I Don’t Remember*, and *Whose Rose Garden Is This Anyway?*

1982 to 1986

**Illustrator**


1986

**Instructor**

The Rhode Island School of Design.

**HONORS**

Listed in *Who’s Who of European Caricaturists*.

**EDUCATION**

1978 to 1981

Rhode Island School of Design
Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

While in school he completed a series based on the Seventh Symphony of Jean Sibelius, which now hangs in the Chamber Hall of The Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland.
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August 17 - September 30, 2001

Gallery hours:
Mon-Thu 8:00 am-9:00 pm
Fri.-Sat 9:00 am-4:30 pm
Sun 1:00-5:00 pm
Closed Aug. 18, 19, & Sept. 3
No evening hours Sept. 4

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