

Myth and Deception

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It's easy to imagine how a constructed, partial understanding of the world may be mistaken for the totality of real, lived experience. Roland Barthes' analysis of myth stands as a warning about how ignoring complex personal and political context results in tidy narratives that serve to justify the privileging of one social group over another.¹ Myths thus underpin a hegemonic order within which institutions, celebrities, larger-than-life political figures, or 'artist-geniuses' emerge to perform and reproduce hierarchies of race, class, and gender. While the artists in *Impossible Expectations* may share some of the descriptors that link them as heirs to these myths, at the heart of this exhibition is a recognition of the widening fissures in old ideological constructions; openings that allow for more complex explanations, identities, and bodies to disrupt how we think about Western European culture. Angie Quick, Tara Lynn MacDougall, Jacob Irish and Julie Hall re-centre our current cultural moment in a complicated reality, in relationships, and in lived, embodied experiences.

Angie Quick's paintings reflect her extensive study of – and detachment from – the art historical canon. Energetic brushstrokes fragment and abstract a palette portraying white skin and richly-coloured fabric. Signs of 'good' painting – such as oil paint, stretched canvas, and perspective – question the legacy of Western European art history and Whiteness by linking them to a backdrop of environmental devastation. Of the paintings, Quick asks, "*What does a classical landscape mean in a natural world in crisis and how does the body find meaning without ingrained 'moral' narrative (the myth)?*" One answer lies in how she subverts the 'ingrained moral narrative' by pointing to the fallout. Decisive brushstrokes and disembodied limbs display an aggressive, perhaps subconscious response to the underbelly of a culture that continues to equate white flesh, luxurious fabrics and pastoral landscapes with truth and power. Indeed, for Quick, and particularly evident in *Beginning (again)*, and in the uranium-coloured, *Innocence*, the clusters of skin and fabric against muted green backgrounds are akin to a landfill situated within a threatened environment, implicating humans in the accumulating garbage.

In Tara MacDougall's audio work, *It's worth Repeating (So I did)*, a 40-minute loop plays back her voice over a speaker system as she talks about artistic practice. A lack of emotive expression is striking commentary on the female voice in public space. The surprising and intentional

¹ Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, 142.

artifice of the work lies in MacDougall's engagement with citation. These are not her words. Instead, the ongoing, two-year project is an audio catalogue of interview responses by countless female artists gathered from YouTube, the PBS series *Art 21*, *Brilliant Ideas*, as well as commencement addresses, and artist talks. The online platforms form part of the global framework by which artists today are mythologized and valued. Subtle inflections and pauses in MacDougall's voice disclose uncertainty and meaningful reflection on the part of the artists she so accurately quotes. There are moments in MacDougall's work where the language also hints at class, namely, important social cues that add texture to the Art World myth. Through soundwaves, repetition and feminist performance, MacDougall's endless array of artists' self-analysis unapologetically inserts femininity into a traditionally male-dominated space without visibly doing so; and simultaneously decentres the artist's ego with her carefully considered utterances that respect the words of each of the women she cites.

The subjectivities of contemporary working classes and the value of labour underpin the narrative of Jacob Irish and Julie Hall's interactive sculpture based on the Greek mythological creature, the Minotaur. In *The Miller and the Baker*, viewers activate the sculpture by inserting themselves into the Miller's hollow, fibreglass bull's head in order to push the life-sized stone mill. The scale and materiality of the work suggests spectacle and bravado, but only until one hears the audio recording playing inside the head. The Minotaur's voice discloses his uncertainties, worries, and doubts regarding the meaningless work he performs. This unexpected inclusion of affect unravels our perception of the mighty Minotaur. Another strategy to discredit the myth is revealed once the viewer operates the mill. The 'stone' is deceptively lightweight, made out of aluminum and fabricated in a metal shop. Strength and ambition is not required to move the stone. With this work, Hall and Irish draw particular attention to the precarious working conditions of artists despite idealised notions of the profession. Though they attempt to flatten and democratize class and gender hierarchies through participatory engagement, the Minotaur ultimately finds himself trapped in a futile circle while still believing in a Western notion of linear progress.

The Art World is a mirror to Western culture, scrubbed of the undesirable underbelly of oppression and repression. In *Impossible Expectations*, the artists grapple with the pressures of the professionalized art world, and their participation in reproducing an image of a culture that sustains hegemony while often disregarding lived experiences of oppression. Perhaps the most impossible expectation is that artists must take a critical stance and position themselves outside of the myth while remaining wholly dependent upon it.