

Morph

“I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities”

– Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, line 1 & 2

In Ovid's epic poem *Metamorphosis* Daphne, the mythological nymph of Arcadia, becomes a universal symbol of imperial power through victory. But not her own. Her total transformation into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's advances, causes her to lose her sense of self and her autonomy. She is henceforth paraded as a symbol of Apollo's victory and the name 'Daphne' is never mentioned in the poem again.

The exhibition *Morph* investigates the ambiguous and changeable nature of power. It considers our perception of power over, or in relation to the other, whether it be another person, an animal or plant or the environment as a whole and how this can suddenly be overturned, depending on random and unstable circumstances. It also questions traditional translations of gender expectations in terms of power monopolization - usually accepted as the powerful male against the weak female. Transformations or metamorphoses, especially as they are viewed through mythology, are used as metaphors for power thus lost or gained.

Transformation is an essential theme in folklore and religious material. In mythology, power could instantly be enhanced or destroyed when a person was transformed into a mixed or pure animal form (theriomorphic transformation) or vegetable form (phytomorphic transformation). Change often involved a transition period in which boundaries were broken and chaos ruled, only to be overcome as order was restored. The theriomorphic form in itself could also be associated with a manifestation of chaos - something which does not fit into the natural order of things similar to a taboo, for example monsters in demonic traditions. But, the opposite in some cases was also supposed to be true: that of new life obtained by breaking through acceptable bounds and the abolition of the order of the old for example transformations in creation myths or transformations of self for the purpose of transcendence.

In contemporary times and with the rise of environmentalism we have a more sympathetic view about transmutation as depicted in popular culture. We 'worship' fictional super heroes in possession of animal-like powers or empathise with hybrids when allowed to be audience to their private inner turmoil.

Yet, little more than a century ago, women especially, if not reconciled to the role of mother and housewife, were surprisingly often viewed as a "predatory beast" in the form of the "femme fatale". Examples of titles of literary works by Baudelaire during that time, in which females were the main characters, give us clear examples: "The metamorphoses of the vampire", "The dancing serpent" and "The flowers of evil", to name a few.

Gender expectations are still rigid today in many instances, allowing for little allowance for strength in women or weakness in males.

Morph consists of a collection of figurative pastel and charcoal drawings, relief printing and mixed media artworks depicting vulnerable male nudes and women portraits and nudes. The exhibition also includes a series of plant and animal drawings and abstract 'de-constructed' artworks.

The portrait drawings are mostly depictions of Daphne, an example of a tragic and weak figure whose transformation can only be viewed as something which gave her transgressor an even stronger hold or power over her.

Yet, the strength of women, more than their weaknesses is celebrated in this exhibition:

The iris flower as a symbol for women's strength was a popular design feature during the Art Nouveau period - the same period in which ideas of woman as a femme fatale abounded. A sensual and dangerous looking plant, similar to Georgia O'Keeffe's closely cropped paintings of flowers, which were accepted by the art public of her day to be depictions of female genitalia – a view which she, by the way, strongly rejected throughout her whole life.

The iris flower is named after the mythological goddess Iris, a messenger goddess who used her rainbow and golden wings for communication between different mythological gods or as a vehicle for communication between humans (especially women) and the heavenly spheres. Similarly, pigeons, birds or any winged creature, were viewed as vehicles for messages or spiritual communication.

Eve, here depicted with a skeleton of a serpent (or devil in animal form) in her hair, was the personification of the first femme fatale (according to many).

A large portrait of a woman holding an AK-47 rifle and surrounded by floral motifs and palm fronds, is imagery often used in contemporary African art and is fast becoming a classical symbol of the strong nurturer who can defend herself, her family and her natural environment. She represents the actual situation in which many African and middle Eastern women find themselves today. The image was adapted from a media photograph of an Afghan girl who shot and killed six Taliban members who killed her parents, thereby saving herself and her younger brother from kidnapping. This is a real life example of the weak female drastically transformed in her re-possession of power.

A part of the exhibition is also devoted to the fragile male.

Male as fragile, not because of any feminist propensities on the part of the artist, but rather because of an acknowledgement, in empathy, of his weaknesses.

To view the cosmos lashing out its capricious onslaughts against male and female alike and in the same measure, is to acknowledge the human condition in its totality.

Male nudes are here often depicted sharing the picture plane with twisted pieces of draperies or cloth resembling bed sheets, often knotted. This may represent an evil presence in the form of a nightmare or an intruder or something that will tie and bond. In mythology, men were equally harassed by enemies or over-zealous lovers and often faced the penalty of being abducted, raped or transformed into an animal- or plant form.

A series of de-constructed artworks represent that in-between state of chaos and consequential transformation. Artworks were taken apart or destroyed and re-assembled as a metaphor for birth, new life, complete change and a new order.

In the wonderful and mysterious world of nature, animals can hide from predators or predators can lure their prey, by pretending to be what they are not, by “transforming” themselves into something attractive, disgusting, invisible or even something resembling a different species. When an animal can utilise this ability successfully, or otherwise, recognize the deception in time (when on the receiving end), it may mean the difference between life and death in the animal kingdom.

We don't have the ability to transform ourselves physically to evade and survive invasion or assault or to readjust ourselves to a changing world. But we may attempt -if we dare- to subtly adapt or completely transform our spirit, which is waiting for us in that inner most and untouchable anteroom - our sacrosanctum.

There is hope for us, to survive and to be resilient and creative, in the face of peril and external change.