ALMINE RECH

Haley Josephs
PSYCHOPOMP

Sep 9 — Oct 16, 2021 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present PSYCHOPOMP, Haley Josephs' first solo exhibition with the gallery. The exhibition will be on view from September 9 until October 9, 2021, presenting works that have not been previously exhibited.

In existential transformation, the figure of the psychopomp has been theorized as a crucial guide, tasked with bringing incarnate souls to the afterlife. Initially chronicled in Ancient Greek folklore as the psychopompos (spirit, mind, unconscious; companion, escort, messenger), the concept has appeared in Western and Eastern religions in altered invocations.

American artist Haley Josephs' growing oeuvre has addressed the transformational stages of mortality and its emotional footprints. In PSYCHOPOMP, she continues this work, incorporating her own visions that emerge from her psyche, in opposition to an approach that models source material. Josephs' visions and revelations are engaged with a lineage of feminine discovery, in light of the glaring lacunae in authorial representations by women, for women.

In The Feminine in Fairy Tales (1972), Marie-Louise von Franz contends that women in modern life have sought to find images that can speak to their identity, seeking meaning amid gendered divisions that have pitted the masculine and the feminine against one another in perpetual tension. This task has been shrouded, according to von Franz, in "disorientation and deep uncertainty" for women. Citing the pioneering psychoanalyst Carl Jung, von Franz reminds the reader of a troubling lack of the feminine, having been predominantly placed in supporting rather than in central subject positions. Attributing this to normative, scriptural interpretations in Western religion, the lack of feminine figures has left a psychical wound. In her 1972 study, von Franz writes:

Fairy tales express the creative fantasies of the rural and less educated layers of the population. They have the great advantage of being naive (not "literary") and of having been worked out in collective groups, with the result that they contain purely archetypal material unobscured by personal problems. Until about the seventeenth century, it was the adult population that was interested in fairy tales. Their allocation to the nursery is a late development, which probably has to do with the rejection of the irrational, and development of the rational outlook, so that they came to be regarded as nonsense and old wives' tales and good enough for children. It is only today that we rediscover their immense psychological value.

Gendered realities and materialities historically reappear in mythologies, designating sensibilities attached to masculinity and femininity. In Josephs' work, her practice focuses on the feminine realm, emphasizing its contributions to the collective unconscious in the history of mythical symbolism as represented in visual, oral, and written cultures. In opposition to phallic, masculine representations, Josephs conveys the yonic, or the feminine potentialities: emotion, birth, motherhood, and sisterhood. Yonic imagery, or that which recalls vaginal aesthetics, frequently connects the figures' feet within the portrait's boundaries, demonstrating the feminine power of transformation. Its shape visually establishes its position as a sacred symbol in a transformative threshold.

Color is used as emotional evidence, embodying transitional movements and affect, reliant on Josephs' intuitive and sensory artistic methodology. "I think it's important that the colors and emotional tone of the painting invite the viewer in, uplifting them sensorially. Painting, for me, is a way for me to encourage my inner child to feel hope. Some of the subject matter can be hard for me to approach, and I tackle this by trying to uplift the characters, to set them free from the inward ties that bind them."

Solitude is a mode that features prominently in Josephs' work, a paean to the vocational isolation of artistic production in the mode of portraiture. Dualism is equally vital to Josephs' renderings of peaceful and generative solitude, echoing the spiritual and existential connection that Josephs shares with her late sister Sarah. Throughout Josephs' oeuvre, her color palettes center mercurial energies, signalling a liberatory potential for the human psyche's diverse, emotional atmospheres. The invariably female subjects of Josephs' portraits offer a reparative reading of female autonomy, while maintaining an affinity with elemental environments. Harmonies are symbolized through a synchronicity of human and non-human entities. Realism is interrupted, and welcomed, by the mythological and visionary symbols in Josephs' works.

Representations of such transformations are imperative to Josephs' works, both in previously exhibited paintings and drawings, as well as in her new suite of paintings in the Psychopomp series. In the painting "The Rising Setting Sun" (2021), the subject is suspended in the air, surrounded by orange and pink lights, which Josephs describes as "a literal transformation, as if one is falling and flying at the same time. The cycle of life is made clear, for it takes the sun's setting to rise again. She is her own guide, her own psychopomp."

Embedded in a genealogy of the mythical, Josephs' paintings propose an alchemy of relationality between human and non-human entities, a recurring motif in Josephs' oeuvre. On "Bliss!" (2021), Josephs contends that the figure of the dog in this painting functions "as a guide bearing witness to life and transformation, as a celebration of the onward transition to death, but also into another sense of self, as we know there are many ways to think of the death process."

The elemental settings of Josephs' works suggest vestigial traces of her upbringing in a number of geographies in the United States: the Pacific Northwest, the encounter of rivers and hills in Pittsburgh, the coastal plenitude of Massachusetts, and the transcendental Catskill Mountains. Following her graduate studies at Yale, Josephs moved to the Hudson Valley in upstate New York. This change of environment would be terrifically poignant in Josephs' personal and professional arc, where she increasingly felt more at ease as a figurative painter. In her post-graduate ennui, the rolling hills and Catskill Mountains became a guiding, if not psychopompic, presence for Josephs. In her alienation, the mountains underscored a prophetic reminder, that spirits of painters past had also witnessed and taken in these landscapes, once upon a time. "I imagined the spirits that inhabited them," Josephs reveals. "I thought of the Hudson River School painters, like Frederic Edwin Church and Thomas Cole, and I thought of the region's folklore, of Rip Van Winkle and Sleepy Hollow."

Violence, trauma, and their consequences are known to be particularly harmful to sensitive, artistic souls, motivating artists to deliberate upon alliances of tranquility and spiritual generativity. Amid the noise and chaos, where can one turn? Perhaps, as Josephs' work suggests, the ideal space is an exploration of one's inner world, the elemental medicine of mountains and folklore, a place where one can appreciate dreams and myth.

-Kristen Cochrane, writer and researcher