

MICHAEL SPAFFORD

MYTHIC THEMES

January 30 - March 15, 1987

**Western Gallery
Art Department**

Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington 98225
(206) 676-3661

Monday through Friday:
10 A.M. through 4 P.M.

Saturday: 12 Noon until 4 P.M.

**The Whatcom Museum
of History and Art**

121 Prospect Street
Bellingham, Washington 98225
(206) 676-6981

Tuesday through Sunday,
12 Noon until 5 P.M.



Perseus and Medusa
Oil on Canvas
(Cantilevered diptych)
1971, 93" x 44"

Courtesy Francine Seders Gallery



THE MYTHIC THEMES OF MICHAEL SPAFFORD

Introduction

An exhibition of paintings, drawings, and woodcuts by Seattle artist Michael Spafford opens Saturday, January 31, 1987. The exhibition, entitled *The Mythic Themes of Michael Spafford*, is being presented by Western Gallery and the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, co-curated by Thomas Johnston and George Thomas. The collaborative effort between the two exhibiting institutions provides a unique opportunity to view major works from several of the series of mythological subjects that have provided inspiration for the artist. This exhibition presents current as well as earlier works from these series, giving the viewer insights into the development of visual ideas and the working method of the artist. Western Gallery will exhibit paintings and woodcuts from the Labors of Hercules series and Europa and the Bull, which range in date from 1970 to 1986. The Whatcom Museum will exhibit works from the themes of Leda and the Swan, Perseus and Medusa, the Chimera series, and the Mexican myth of Coatlicue. This exhibition is supported in part by grants from the Washington State Arts Commission and the Western Foundation.

The following essays discuss ways to view and appreciate Spafford's works. *Mythic Themes of Michael Spafford* is by Patricia Failing. Ms. Failing is a Visiting Lecturer in Contemporary Art at the University of Washington and Contributing Editor for *ARTnews*. *Looking at Spafford's Work* is by Thomas Johnston and George Thomas. Mr. Johnston is Professor of Art and Director, Western Gallery, Western Washington University. Mr. Thomas is the Director of the Whatcom Museum.



Mythic Themes

of Michael Spafford

by Patricia Failing

Some 26 years ago Michael Spafford marked an important juncture in his career when "the difference between making pictures and making paintings became clear to me." This distinction is presupposed in cycles of images drawn from classical mythology that have dominated Spafford's oeuvre since 1961. Rather than picturing the stories, Spafford paints the compulsions, erotic fantasies and antagonisms that secure the enduring content of mythical epics. To depict the immanent meanings of these archaic tales, he developed a visual format poised between the figurative and the abstract, between Dionysian expressionism and Apollonian rationality. These contrary systems of rendering are played off one against the other in a series of compositions until grand themes and narrative details are collapsed into elemental silhouettes. Formally re-enacting the conflicts and transformations that animate classical legends, Spafford creates mythography by linking the actions of his heroes and heroines with the process of visual realization itself.


Although clear distinctions often cannot be made between various types of myth, such as creation myths, myths of time and eternity, birth and renewal, providence and destiny, Spafford tends to favor myths of celestial gods and half-mortal, half-divine beings who inspire both admiration and perverse empathy. Hercules, for example, was fathered by Zeus, who lay with his mortal mother, Alcmene, after assuming the form of her husband. Consumed by jealousy, Zeus' wife Hera schemed to

destroy the issue of this infidelic union by imposing madness and a cunning rival on the half-divine offspring. Aided by Hera's whisperings, Hercules' rival, Eurystheus, conceived the infamous twelve labors Spafford represents. These heroic efforts and dramatic deeds can be read on a deeper level as a series of potentially exquisite gratifications for Hera's jealous sadism, which Hercules successfully, and unknowingly, denies her.

Perseus, too, was the issue of Zeus and a mortal woman. A challenge from a jealous king secretly in love with his mother launched Perseus' encounter with the she-monster, Medusa. In Spafford's interpretation Medusa's decapitated head, tongue and snake-tresses are transformed into phallic attributes of the hero, forming a locus of generative force from which Pegasus, a symbol of artistic inspiration, triumphantly springs forth.

Zeus in the form of an animal also impregnated mortal women in the legends of the rape of Europa and Leda and the swan. Spafford's depictions make explicit the implied ecstasy of a union between a transcendent creative force and a cognizant physical being. These legends, in which creation is consummated in a passionate encounter between the extraordinary and the mundane, suggest intimate analogies between procreation and the genesis of art.

Although derived from different cultures, the Chimera and the Aztec earth-goddess Coatlicue may be grouped as dark sisters of Medusa,



janiform counterparts to the submissive Leda and Europa. Like Medusa, the attribute of Coatlicue is a cluster of serpents, which function as phallic allies in bloody confrontations with both male and female adversaries. The Chimera, a monster in league with the Harpies, also possessed a powerful serpentine tail growing from her lion-headed body. To encounter these horrific she-creatures is thus to encounter beings who are both male and female, like the primordial humans Plato describes in his Symposium. "Human nature was once quite other than now," Plato has Aristophanes explain. "Originally there were three sexes . . . besides the male and female there existed a third sex which had an equal share in the other two . . . Then Zeus allowed himself to be persuaded to cut these beings in two, as one divides pears to cook them . . . When all nature was divided this way, to each human being came the longing for his own other half, and the two halves embraced and entwined their bodies and desired to grow together again."

In Freud's mind the natural regressive longing conveyed in Plato's text represents a death wish, the forces of Thanatos, from which these legendary female monsters also draw their strength. One of Spafford's compositions which juxtaposes the Chimera with the image of Pegasus, however, suggests a triumph over Thanatos through art. The mythical Chimera was ultimately conquered by Corinth's most valiant hero, Bellerophon, who soared above the monster mounted on Pegasus, the force

of poetic inspiration that sprang from Medusa's blood, and extinguished the Chimera's vomit of fire.

In rendering these epical forces and conflicts, Spafford's approach to form is reminiscent of certain types of archaic architectures in which mythical concepts are represented as physical structures. The shape of the pillar, for example, represents a visible connection between heaven and earth, between procreation and immortality. Spafford's paintings and prints record his effort to translate and condense mythical subtexts into a series of similarly expressive shapes. Framed by blocks and patterns of light and dark, these architectonic silhouettes are sometimes subsumed by painterly chaos; in other compositions their force is sufficient to literally heave them out of the picture. Each of these works is self-sufficient, but the formal process of opposition and variation evident only in a series of images is even more essential to the meaning of Spafford's oeuvre than references to literary texts. By virtue of its unprecedented range, this exhibition represents an historic opportunity to gauge the full dimension of Spafford's accomplishments.

Looking at

Spafford's Work

by Thomas Johnston

and George Thomas

At first only fellow artists, then sequentially curators, critics and collectors have grown to regard Michael Spafford's interpretations of Greek and other myths as the production of a major American artist. Twenty years after first exhibitions of myth-based work at Francine Seders Gallery, he still explores the age-old myths. His visual language has developed to a point where the execution looks effortless, line and shape interact with traces of color, forming bold, broad areas of richly textured paint. Spafford has explored flatness for several years while at the same time investigating the expressive quality of color. In the process of searching for the final form, Spafford creates many levels, both within the physicality of the paint and within the symbolism of the subject matter. Sometimes coaxed gently, at other times wrenched aggressively, these images have been brought to the surface, presenting the viewer with an intense emotional experience. They are strong visual images, executed on a large scale, for the most part, in a bold graphic style. The confidence with which these surfaces are manipulated and the active gestural style of painting may well correspond to the energy and the emotion of the depicted subject.

This exhibition includes some twenty-five large scale paintings, paintings that take various forms: on paper, on canvas, as diptychs and polyptychs, with collaged elements and "outcut" shapes, with fragments hanging from cantilevered sections projecting in front of the picture plane. The exhibition also presents a large selection of the


woodcuts he has produced with regularity over the years. In this selection we can see how the development of the ideas has been explored in various media. Spafford is



Twelve Labors of Hercules #12, Death
Woodcut, 1979, 20" x 16"
Courtesy Francine Seders Gallery

more concerned with the rapid development of ideas than with technique-oriented presentations; he is concerned with formal elements on the page or canvas, and their relationship to the thematic content.

One of the changes that has occurred with Spafford's paintings is a gradual flattening of the basic shapes he uses. Not only has he moved away from modelling of the surface to suggest roundness (#5, Europa, 1970), he also tends to use frontal or profile views of



rendered images as compared to earlier three-quarter views. In most of the recent work there is an absence of any reference to spatial perspective or horizon line. Spafford's interest in flat form and pattern can be seen in his repeated use of similar shapes. The Chimera's tail, the swan's neck, Medusa's hair, and the serpents of Coatlicue are all the same curvilinear and active compositional element. A similar example is the use of parallel lines as seen in several of the Perseus and Medusa works and the "Twelve Labors of Hercules" series. In his use of repeated elements Spafford is trying to develop an understanding of the possibilities of his basic shapes and their relationships. His use of black and white or contrasting colors shows a

further experimentation with figure/ground, positive/negative relationships. In some examples he reverses this relationship to further emphasize the interaction of the abstract compositional qualities of the works.

Western Gallery and the Whatcom Museum of History and Art are pleased to present this exhibition of strong visual beauty by one of the north west's leading painters. Michael Spafford is represented by Francine Seders Gallery in Seattle, where his work has been exhibited regularly since the early 1960s. He is a Professor of Art at the University of Washington.

The Mythic Themes of Michael Spafford will be on exhibit through March 15, 1987.



EXHIBIT LIST - *The Mythic Themes of Michael Spafford*

**Western Gallery:
Western
Washington
University**

1. *The Ten Labors of Hercules*, 1974
each piece approximately 60" x 63"
oil on paper.
2. *The Twelve Labors of Hercules*, 1979
26" x 20" each
woodcut.
3. *Twelve Labors*, 1975
27" x 39"
woodcut, from the Collection of
Robert C. Jones and Fay Jones.
4. *Apocalypse*, 1975
86-1/2" x 111-1/2"
mixed media on paper.
5. *Europa and the Bull*, 1970
90" x 84"
oil on canvas.
6. *Europa and the Bull #1*, 1986
40" x 30"
mixed media on paper.
7. *Europa and the Bull #6*, 1986
40" x 30"
mixed media on paper.
8. *Europa and the Bull*, 1986
20" x 26"
woodcut.
9. *Perseus and Medusa*, 1971
(cantilevered diptych)
93" x 44"
oil on canvas.
10. *Origin Myth - Black Pegasus From White
Headed Medusa*, 1985
94-5/8" x 56"
acrylic and collage on paper.
11. *Origin Myth - Gray Pegasus From Pink
Medusa*, 1985
93" x 70-1/4"
oil on acrylic on paper.
12. *Perseus With Severed Head of Medusa*,
1985
83" x 110"
oil on canvas.
13. *The Origin of Pegasus*, 1985
83" x 110"
oil on canvas.
14. *Perseus and Medusa #6*, 1984
62" x 52"
acrylic on paper.
15. *Perseus and Medusa Head*, 1971
51" x 30-1/2"
charcoal/mixed media drawing.
16. *Black Perseus and Profiled Head of
Medusa*, 1984
51-1/2" x 62"
acrylic on paper.
17. *Red and Gray Perseus and Medusa #11*,
1984
33" x 43"
oil on paper.
18. *Perseus and Monoprinted Head of
Medusa*, 1984
60" x 79-3/4"
oil, acrylic and collage on paper.
19. *Red and Green Perseus and Medusa #7*,
1984
30" x 40"
oil on paper.
20. *Perseus and Medusa*, 1984
30" x 40"
oil on paper.
21. *Leda and the Swan*, 1969
(cantilevered diptych)
85" x 51"
oil on canvas.
22. *Black and White Leda*, 1982
72" x 86"
oil on canvas.
23. *Leda and Black Swan*, 1981
75" x 87-1/2"
oil on canvas.
24. *Leda and the Swan*, 1977
(triptych)
61" x 59-1/2"
each oil on canvas.

**Whatcom Museum
of
History and Art**

25. *Chimera*, 1983
(diptych)
96" x 168"
oil & acrylic on canvas with wood
addition.
26. *Chimera and Bellerophon*, 1983
(diptych)
86" x 144"
oil and acrylic on canvas.
27. *Chimera Series #5*, 1982
25" x 38"
monoprint and oil on paper.
28. *Chimera Series #10*, 1982
32" x 51"
oil on paper.
29. *Chimera Series #14*, 1982
34-1/2 x 57"
charcoal and collage on paper.
30. *Chimera Series #19*, 1982
83" x 115"
mixed media on paper.
31. *Coatlucue*, 1980
72" x 48"
acrylic and graphite.
32. *Coatlucue*, 1979
72" x 48"
acrylic, charcoal and collage on paper.
33. *Coatlucue*, 1980
52" x 52"
acrylic on paper.
34. *Coatlucue #10*, 1979
48" x 48"
charcoal on paper.
35. *Coatlucue*, 1980
74-1/2" x 86"
oil on canvas.
36. *13 Ways of Looking At a Blackbird (based
upon
a poem of that title by Wallace Stev-
ens)*, 1986
26" x 20" each.
woodcuts.
37. *Apocalypse Series #1*, 1978
25-5/8" x 28"
woodcut.
38. *Apocalypse Series #2*, 1978
25-5/8" x 28"
woodcut.
39. *Apocalypse Series #3*, 1978
25-5/8" x 28"
woodcut.
40. *Leda and the Swan*, 1985
30" x 22"
woodcut.
41. *Coatlucue*, 1980
48" x 48"
woodcut.
42. *Chimera #3*, 1983
30" x 40"
altered woodcut.
43. *Perseus with Head of Medusa #1*, 1985
(diptych)
46-1/2" x 40" (image size)
woodcuts.
44. *Perseus Beheading Medusa #1*, 1985
60" x 24" (image size)
woodcut.

*All works appear courtesy of Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, unless otherwise noted.