

THE TREE OF LIFE, 2013

EXHIBITION ESSAY

THE TREE OF LIFE: WORKS BY PHILIPPE FRIEDBERGER, FRANÇOISE GILOT AND ANDREA ZEMEL. MAY 8 - JUNE 7, 2013, ILIAD NEW YORK

Excerpt from essay by Adam Brown

The luminous and allegorical works of Andrea Zemel imagine the play of the world in terms of the stories we choose to tell about ourselves. Drawn to the timeless quality of material so evidently made by hand, her works turn exclusively to the medium of mosaic as a method for creating visual narrative. Evocative of the tradition of illuminated manuscript, they are at once symbolic and decorative, with great concern for craft as a vehicle for content. In Zemel's contemporary mythologies a shared heritage is cultural currency, and the image of the "Tree" as the arena of the world becomes a recurrent touchstone in Zemel's narratives. As a cosmology, the tale of the "Tree of Life" has its many settings - from the Sumerian Gilgamesh, to the Hesperides of the Greeks, the Norse Yggdrasil, and the Genesis narrative. However, despite its variety, what remains incarnate in each is a resident cast of characters, and perhaps the most conspicuous of all - its attendant guardian. For her, the Ouroboros, the serpent that swallows its own tail, is the sign denoting both "self-reference" and the "continuum of time". Likewise, wherever motion and movement emerge as a background in her stirring vortices of glass tessera, there she makes reference to the numinous presence; to the onlooker, the observer, the watcher. It is here that Zemel points to that ever-present and pervasive mystery: the spectacle of life requires an audience.

PARTICLES AND WAVES, 2012

EXHIBITION CATALOG

PARTICLES + WAVES: TWELVE ARTISTS AND THE QUANTUM WORLD

MAY 3 - JULY 27, ILIAD NEW YORK

Excerpt from essay by Adam Brown

"The luminous and allegorical works of Andrea Zemel imagine the play of world in terms of the tales which we choose to tell about ourselves. Drawn to "the timeless quality of a material that is so evidently made by hand", her current body of work, "turns exclusively to the medium of mosaic as a method for creating visual narrative". Through molding by hand, the firing of clay, and the cutting of tessera in archaic fashion, her symbolic landscapes "unearth metaphors that emerge from a deep interest in those foundational tales that reflect the sense of who we are and where we come from." Fascinated with making the invisible visible, *Face of the Waters* is a literal homage to the wave. In her words, "emanation, movement, feeling, thought; I create imagery that attempts to reveal what is hidden beneath the ground, whirling in the air, or churning in the sea, suggesting a suffusive presence underlying phenomena that captivates and intoxicates the senses..." Zemel's work shows concern for what now has come to be called the numinous. The term was coined by Walter F. Otto in his revolutionary and landmark work "The Idea of the Holy" in 1917. Derived from the classical Latin *numen*, a term which pertains to the notion of fate and divine providence, the numinous is that which

refers to and implies a “feeling of awe in the presence of deity”. What is numinous is brimming with nuance, it is an overflowing of quality, a suffusing presence with an intimate personal dimension; to experience the numinous is to feel as if one is “in communion with a wholly other.” For archaic man, it was the awe-inspiring mystery. It was the *mysterium tremendum*. That ineffable power or quality of being which can reside in a thing - a force, that when confronted by its presence can both attract and compel, or provoke equally fear and trembling in its encounter. What is numinous evokes an image from the dawn of our experience as beings, and from the morning-time of man’s youth in antiquity.

As stark contrast to our post-modern existence, the idea of the numinous lives. It hides behind doors where it can startle us, it is couched in-between lines where it intrigues us, or is disguised in plain sight as to deceive us. But for most, what is numinous dwells nowadays as a category - as a position where its been placed; as a footnote in the annals of human experience. The word *pleroma* is a gnostic term, a relic from the intertestamental period, it means fullness in Greek, signifying the totality of the divine principles and powers. In her *Pleroma*, Zemel resurrects the unnoticed in the image of a rose, the thorn, and the busy bee. The swirling ground of reflective glass bears witness to the presence of the invisible spectator; the onlooking eye of the conscious mind."

ANDREA ZEMEL: PATHOS, HUBRIS & ZOË

A TWENTY YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

PATHOS, HUBRIS & ZOE

Adam Brown

Pathos, Hubris, & Zoë examines the notion of civilization, discontent, and self-realization through both an analytic and poetic lens, drawing from a catalogue of narrative imagery spanning twenty years. Like the title of the show, the comprehensive body of work is presented as inter-related whole, portions that configure to form a connective unity. As an allegory, the title is suggestive of nothing less than the soul's decent into the underworld followed by an ascent into the light.

Pathos, Hubris, & Zoë is presented within the framework and rubric of a Hellenistic world-view. Theirs' was a perspective in many ways much like our own. It acknowledged the preeminence of reason, and placed the patterns of everyday life squarely within a concrete world governed by cause, effect, and mortality. Likewise, theirs' was a world wholly circumscribed by a boundless, deathless realm; side by side, but forever in juxtaposition.

For Zemel, pathos and hubris pertain to life's drama as a repetition of history. Terms that come down to us through the Greek stage, they describe a reciprocal interaction between actor and audience. Pathos pertains to the spectacle of human suffering and its predictable response from the crowd. Hubris, like an overplayed hand, refers to an excess of pride or arrogance that invites retribution. Like

two poles in a reflexive system of contraction and expansion, their interplay defines the fate of both the tragic hero and sacrificial victim in ancient drama.

Rising in contrast to fixed immutable law stands *zoë*, a subtle and ambiguous term denoting the unbounded, uncontainable, and overflowing nature of the life force. Here Zemel's work seeks harmonious balance by reaching for transcendent truths rooted deep within the frustration of the human condition. The capacity to overcome cyclic nature through metamorphosis is part of the Greek religious ideal encapsulated in *zoë*. As a formula it was integral to Greek thought from Dionysian cult, to Platonic notions of transmigration of the soul, to the Gnostic movements of the intertestamental period.

By encompassing every drama and individual history like an unbroken string of pearls, *zoë* stands in contrast to both to cyclic time, and to the twins, pathos and hubris. Each are joined, yet each are distinct in the Greek cosmos. One yet separate. In *zoë*, the idea of eternity comes closest to Buddhist ontology of mind.

In the iconography of the Bronze Age Mediterranean world, a symbol for *zoë* was the bee.

THE RETROSPECTIVE

Zemel's provocative narratives and flare for metaphor have always pushed at the boundary between contemporary and historical myth making. The vernacular of her early work of the mid-1990s is very much influenced by the language of psychoanalytic theory. This period reflects a fiercely introspective

and politically incisive phase of the artist's career where her critique of contemporary society is equally a leveling invective directed towards the excesses of self. The urban landscape becomes at once her mirror and her prism, and modernity a façade behind which lurks a rigid social architecture of neo-tribalism fueled by the angst driven engine of unassimilated bodily impulses. Many of these early narratives employ a "Promethean dialectic", where the development and emergence of contemporary society is profoundly marked by a perpetual cycle of worthy attempts requited by unanticipated outcomes. Included in the exhibition are pieces from her irony-laden series of block prints entitled *Myth of Progress* which harp on the notion of American manifest destiny in an increasingly rapacious and disposable world. Also included from the same period is an installation of 20 hand colored etchings from her burlesque and expressionist *Ask Twenty Questions* folio.

The work of the late 1990's see a marked shift in tone and the transitional period is characterized by Zemel's concerted exposure to Buddhism, Jewish mysticism, and the Hermetic traditions of late antiquity - evoking yet another dimension to the character and style of the work. The language of Tantra and alchemy, being and emptiness, emanation and relativity, become a new grammar cohabiting side by side with the more familiar territory of depth psychology.

Started as a series of small hand colored etchings, the labors of *Herculina* carry Zemel's work through the millennia marking the shift from her life as artist and teacher in Philadelphia to the world of art and business in Manhattan. Integration, transformation, and re-invention mark the struggles of her heroine, just as grace, poise, and style will define Zemel's delicate balancing act between debutante and studio artist.

In 2005 she went on to collaborate with the Lower East Side Print Shop to produce *Herculina* as a series of large editioned color screen prints in the style of the comic book heroine, adding yet more

chapters to the saga. With her last labor entitled *Herculina Contemplates Growing Wings* (p.xx), Zemel's world shifts again, this time towards the sublime.

BEEHIVE BRAIN

Beehive Brain began as an expression of the artist's infatuation with mosaic, revisiting the processes and materials of the collaborative work she did with the public art program she initiated at the University of Pennsylvania teaching there in the mid 1990's. Her welded steel and ceramic sculpture series of that same period entitled *Cages* had previously introduced mosaic elements into her repertoire, but it was not until her most recent body of work that we see the extent of her skill with the medium.

While reacquainting herself with epic poetry and the narratives of Greek theatre, Zemel encountered the early writings of philosopher Ken Wilber. Wilber put forward a theory for the emergence of contemporary forms of society by envisioning its unfolding in a series of discrete yet permeable stages. Much as Melanie Klein had proposed a developmental theory of early childhood, Wilber took a developmental maturational approach to early forms of culture while speculating on the procession of early civilization from hunter-gatherer through city-state. Inspired by these homologous points of view, Zemel began to construct her own methodology in a new body of work, and sought in the arcane narratives of ancient mythology her own statement about the contemporary world. What emerged was a perspective consistent with psychoanalytic theory, which came to view social evolution as the interplay of group mind upon the nascent ego of the developing individual.

Zemel would discover that her new dialectic was similar to the structure of dialogue occurring between chorus and actor on the tragic stage. Like the classical playwrights of old, Zemel probed the remote origins of modern society through archaic motif in her conviction that society cannot progress without a simultaneous and critical re-evaluation of its own past. In time, a formulaic rhythm and pattern emerged. The design had a distinctive architecture and pantheon, and was populated by a cast of continually reappearing and interconnected characters along with their familiar stories and familiar circumstances. As such, *Beehive Brain* was born.

In this vein, elements of the *Beehive Brain* series are presented much in the style of an elegant algorithm or periodic table. Like a short hand or cipher, or a “music of the spheres”, it portrays a schema both rigid and supple - as old as time, as fresh as the moment. *Homunculus* (p.xx), the first of the *Beehive Brain* images, is presented as seed or template. A beckoning mass of nerves and gray matter poised to receive, is yet without context. Differentiation is a mere suggestion; potential no more than a mathematical possibility. Imperative is implied by a bee in the brain. Similarly, *Hexad* (p.xx) is a plexus of six typologies suspended in a sanguine and visceral crimson glass medium. The cast of characters that form the primordial grouping are drawn from myth and cult. The suggestion of selection and determinism is evoked by the structure of the hexagonal cell, the inference of blood as the connective medium of life defines lineage as both biological and cultural inheritance.

Conceived in parallel with *Beehive Brain*, *Writing on the Wall* looks to the tradition of oracular prophecy in the language of epic poem, blurring the boundary between sculpture, painting, and literature. Like the commemorative stele erected at ancient crossroads, their function is to remind, and their directive or cautionary tales were fashioned to inform or aid the wayward traveler. In the tradition of Illuminated manuscript, they are at once symbolic and decorative with great concern for craft as a vehicle for

content. Richly textured and timeless in feel, the verses are rooted in the past but portend to the present or future. Using material and techniques evocative of the ancient world, the imagery remains profoundly relevant to our time.