

ECSTASY

and

ESCAPE

at the

Swan Song

MOTEL

I am convinced that in any creativity there exists
[an] element of revolt. — LEONOR FINI

A Spell For Overthrowing

POETRY | VENESSA M. FUENTES

When the January night sky blinks clear, tossing
moonburn across each branch and rooftop
and storefront, you will know the right time has come
for you to leave small things behind. It starts becoming clear
how they have exhausted the shelter of your peace, outworn their welcome
in your changing body. These things—the scout's sword
the rose's thorn—will wither and lose their bite by the time you
step foot on the street, towards the endless cornfields
on the edge of town. This is how
your revolt begins and every part of you
stills itself
for creativity, for transfiguration

Now that you can focus on yourself, check into the motel room
Lock and security chain the door. Next, empty your coat pockets of the
beads, crow feather, and hazelnut seed
you've collected and kept close
for an altar.

Show Notes

Companion to the exhibition
*Ecstasy And Escape At
The Swan Song Motel*
by the artist
Meg Lionel Murphy

January 19
through April 7
2024

MOWA | DTN,
The Museum Of
Wisconsin Art's
satellite location inside
Saint Kate - The Arts Hotel

Artwork is available through
Portrait Society Gallery
in Milwaukee, WI

Baby blue beads, a shield of protection
The pink ones bring tenderness to
regenerate and nourish your clarity. But the yellow beads
with their chipped-tooth grins
are hot to the touch, imbued
with pearls of colostrum and decidual cells

Strung together and
bookended by black feather and velvet-green seed, shining
in the center of your altar, a beaded bracelet like this
can trace and welcome you back to the
HOW DARE YOU
in yourself. Say it out loud once you find it, feel yourself grow
giant-sized each next time you sing.
Sing and overthrow wandering armies of peepholes
insults and secret cheat codes. Sing and let your brokenness surprise
you as it
knits you new bones, brighter blood
No more locks, goodbye chains

You are no longer the little you
the separate you
the small you
the doormat you
You are monstrous
You move galactical

Venessa M. Fuentes

December 2023

Revolt



A Monstrous Size

As a girl, all fairytales ended with a marriage. But as an adult, marriage was the most dangerous thing I ever did to myself. Picasso said women are either doormats or goddesses. My work plots the path of the doormat to the goddess.

The exhibition *Ecstasy And Escape At The Swan Song Motel* explores the passage back and forth between pain and healing. In the world of my paintings, bodies magically grow into giants. Once taken, held tight, held down, punched, and kicked, women and femmes morph into impenetrable fortresses. But memories of violence—symbolized by tiny armies of soldiers at their feet—threaten to take them back to where they started.

Within this series of paintings, the story starts at the Swan Song Motel. The first place a person might flee violence is to a motel. I have. Those borrowed rooms are gateways. They are portals to transformation, fantasy, disappearance, and denial.

I try to paint the moment when leaving an old life behind is possible.

What happens when the motel door closes? She might fall to the motel's mint-tiled bathroom floor in despair. But as she takes in the motel's glorious decay, hope might grow from the tip of her skull through her hair, eyes, mouth, tongue, teeth, and nostrils, trickling over her neck, breast, side, and limbs.

She would feel it in her joints, fat, and two hands.

She would start to grow.



You are no longer the
little you
the separate you
the small you
the doormat you
You are monstrous
You move galactical

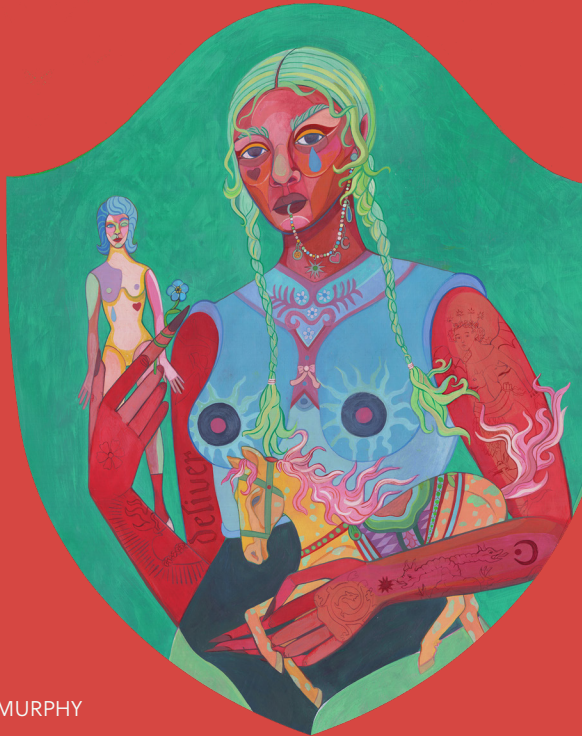


Bad

Until recently, feminine, therapeutic, and narrative painting was considered decorative, unserious, and lowbrow. Bad art. But aren't all figure painters playing with dolls? Aren't all interior paintings doll houses?

Each painting within *Ecstasy and Escape* started by examining found objects: toys, trinkets, and furniture. I want viewers of this exhibition to feel as if they are playing in an imagined sanctuary I've built for them. The installation offers a doorway into greater immersion within my imagined land. When hung with the collection of objects, I hope the artwork jolts the viewer back and forth between child and adult — between “life-size” and “giant size,” between play and power, hope and loss.

Art



Her Wound

The figure's wound is her own, but as we witness it, we realize traces of her wound are in me and in you.

— Bracha L. Ettinger

I am not myself you see, it is hard to be oneself when you are so many different sizes in a day.

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice In Wonderland*

Not myself

Ecstasy

There is no linear path to healing. For many survivors of violence, every day will continue to offer a battle against a tiny army of memories and fears. Sometimes, those battles are small. Sometimes, they are epic. Even long after the traumatic moment has passed, the very idea of safety itself is the ultimate fantasy.

Many of us who have experienced violence relive our past traumas over and over again. Daniela Schiller, a neuroscientist at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, has found that trauma memories light up an entirely different part of the brain from other sad memories. Traumatic memories within brain scans illuminate the same area as introspection and daydreaming. To me, the fact that traumatic experience and daydreaming process similarly makes complete sense.

I believe that once you experience extreme violence, you no longer live in the present reality. My paintings hold space for the viewer to transport terrible memories into fantasy. The dreamland offers a place to imagine what true bodily autonomy might feel like.

Escape

Grief

There must be an appetite for grief.

How else explain this gnawing on memory until its bones are clean?

—Barbara Goldberg

The inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality is a hallmark of psychosis but I think healthy people trick themselves into believing daydreams all the time.

— Keziah Weir

Daydream

Swan Song

As sightings of the giants in battle grow, so do the myths surrounding them.

My paintings have begun to write the visual language for that mythology. Chains and charms hang from some of the frames of this show, like offerings of gothic friendship bracelets to new, imagined deities. The paintings are talismans of growth. They are prayers, spells, or desperate calls to a future self for strength.

I drew inspiration for these paintings from medieval religious practices, specifically Celtic protection charms or loricis. When cast, the spell grants divine protection. The name of the charm comes from Roman Soldier's armor, specifically the protective breastplate. Today, these prayers read like modern meditation scans. Called "Loricis", these medieval incantations, were used in battle between early Catholics and Celtic Pagans. I am fascinated by the historical evolution of spirituality myths and how opposing stories and imagery informed each other and evolved. Celtic traditions infused the catholicism of Ireland, and biblical stories drew from ancient Mesopotamian cultures in the Old Testament and Greco-Roman myths in the New. How do histories fold into each other and evolve into something else? What are we building upon the scaffolding of old gods?

This show was painted in the midst of a pregnancy, an ever leaking, oozing, beautiful mess. Childish, dainty drops of bodily fluids haunt the corners of almost every painting: puss, piss, blood, milk, mucus. They are symbols of transcendence, calling back to imagery throughout art history, where breast milk and blood were symbols of both the Virgin Mary's purity and evil of mysterious feminine Witches. In my paintings the symbolic drops are made beautiful, not vulgar.

I feel like a giant now, as my belly grows.

“Deliver my skull, hair-covered head, eyes, Mouth, tongue, teeth, and nostrils, neck, breast, side and limbs, joints, fat, and two hands...

Be a helmet of safety to my head, to my crown covered with hair, to my forehead, eyes and triform brain, to snout, lip, face, and temple, to my chin, beard, eyebrows, ears, chaps, cheeks, septum, nostrils, pupils, irises, eyelids, and the like, to gums, breath, jaws, gullet, to my teeth, tongue, mouth, uvula, throat, larynx and epiglottis, cervix, to the core of my head and gristle, and to my neck may there be merciful protection. Be then a most protective breastplate for my limbs and innards, so that you drive back from me the unseen nails of the shafts that foul fiends fashion. Protect, with your powerful breastplate my shoulders with their shoulderblades and arms, protect my elbows, cups of the hand and hands, fists, palms, fingers with their nails. Protect my spine and ribs with their joints, back, ridge, and sinews with their bones; protect my skin and blood with kidneys, the area of the buttocks, nates with thighs. Protect my hams, calves, femurs, houghs and knees with knee-joints; protect my ankles with sins and heels, shanks, feet with their soles. Protect my toes growing together, with the tips of the toes and twice five nails; protect my breast, collarbone and small breast, nipples, stomach, and navel. Protect my belly, loins, and genitals, paunch and the vital parts of my heart; protect my three -cornered liver and groin, pouch, kidneys, intestine with its fold. Protect my tonsils, chest with lungs, veins, entrails, bile with its eruption, protect my flesh, loins with marrow, and spleen with twisting intestines. Protect my bladder, fat, and all the rows beyond number of connecting parts; protect my hair and the remaining members which I have perhaps omitted. Protect the whole of me with my five senses, together with the ten created orifices, so that from soles of feet to crown of head I shall not sicken in any organ inside or out. In case the life should be forced from my body by plague, fever, weakness or pain, until I grow old. So that leaving the flesh I may escape the depths, and be able to fly to the heights.

EXCERPT | THE LORICA OF GILDAS, 6TH CENTURY

Deliver Me





Taking cues from The Lactation of St. Bernard by the engraver Master JAM of Zwolle (ca. 1470-85).

SHOW NOTES | MEG LIONEL MURPHY



Many of the shields painted in this exhibition reclaim medieval magical amulets that protected against "hysteria" and the "wandering uterus"

I am painting over toxic patriarchal roots of the catholicism I grew up within. In an era where reality feels distant and distorted daily, I crave a secular (yet mystical) and feminist (yet intersectional) future that is equitable and just. There are so many battles before us right now. What are we fighting for? What futures are we writing and visualizing with the art in our time? What will we keep? What will we discard from our past?

The final stage in the cycle of *Ecstasy and Escape* finds giants' bodies broken apart into abstracted, floating parts. When the bodies fall into an arrangement of limbs, flowers, symbols, and armor, they become memorials to the transition of a doormat to a goddess. In a tiny, puny moment, the fantasy feels massive. It is galactic. It feels real.



I am stretched

“Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing.”

— Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*



“There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice — patched, retreaded and approved for the road.”

— Sylvia Plath

MOWA

Meg Lionel Murphy's *Ecstasy and Escape at the Swan Song Motel* is an exploration of personal growth and liberation from intimate partner violence. MOWA | DTN transforms into the “Swan Song Motel,” an origin point of an escape for women fleeing domestic abuse.

Murphy's work reflects the pain and trauma of her own experiences. Here, her giant female figures are warriors, armored and wielding swords. In control of their bodies and their lives, they protect themselves and each other. Gradually, they outgrow their refuge.

With a background in children's illustration, Murphy infuses her heavy themes with a note of playfulness reminiscent of the golden age of fairytales and illuminated manuscripts. Using a brilliant color palette, intricately detailed imagery, and subverted catholic symbolism, she turns the installation into an imaginative sanctuary—a realm of healing and hope. Her emotional narrative extends beyond the painted canvas to include real objects—furniture, toys, and trinkets. Ranging from intimate to colossal scale, the dynamic installation conjures lived memories that oscillate between childhood innocence and the lingering pains of adulthood.

Meg Lionel Murphy grew up in a family-owned motel in rural Wisconsin. She received degrees in Art, Art History, and English Literature from the University of Minnesota. After a decade in publishing, she now works as an artist from her studio in Door County, Wisconsin, which was originally built as a church in 1886. She is represented by The Portrait Society Gallery in Milwaukee.

This is Murphy's first solo museum show and holds particular significance as her last before motherhood—a swan song where themes of pregnancy delicately emerge amidst horror and the euphoria of escape.

Brianna Cole

Reading List

A Sample of the many, many texts that influenced the themes behind this body of work, including feminism, myth, mysticism, religious evolution, medieval art history, trauma, the representation of trauma in art, and domestic violence.

Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist — Lauren Elkin

Art in a Time of Atrocity — Brad Evans and Bracha L. Ettinger, New York Times

The Baby on the Fire Escape: Creativity, Motherhood, and the Mind-Baby Problem — Julie Phillips

Braiding Sweetgrass — Robin Wall Kimmerer

Breaking and Entering: New and Selected Poems — Barbara Goldberg

The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe — Matthew Gabriele, David M. Perry

Body Language: The Body in Medieval Art (Museum of Catharijneconvent) — Edited by Wendelien van Welie-Vink

Brain Study Suggests Traumatic Memories Are Processed as Present Experience — Ellen Barry, New York Times

The Celtic World — Jennifer Paxton, The Great Courses

Contradiction Days: An Artist on the Verge of Motherhood — JoAnna Novak

Death of an Artist: Ana Mendieta (podcast) — Helen Molesworth

Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions — David Stephen Calonne

Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysus — Ross S. Kraemer

Enchantment — Katharine May

Fall of the Pagans and the Origins of Medieval Christianity — Kenneth W. Harl, The Great Courses

Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto — Legacy Russell

Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas — David Brakke, The Great Courses

History of the Ancient World: A Global Perspective — Gregory S. Aldrete, The Great Courses

Leonor Fini: Mirrors of the Dark Sublime (podcast) — MJ Dorian

Life with Picasso — Francoise Gilot

Linea Nigra: An Essay on Pregnancy and Earthquakes Hardcover — Jazmina Barrera

Lewis In Wonderland Syndrome — Moheb Costandi

Madwomen in Social Justice Movements, Literatures, and Art — Edited by Jessica Lowell Mason and Nicole Crevar

Medieval Bodies: Life, Death and Art in the Middle Ages — Jack Hartnell

Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma — Claire Dederer

My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies — Resmaa Menakem

Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler — Mary Gabriel

On Violence and Violence Against Women — Jacqueline Rose

The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics — Elaine Pagels

Poetry as Spellcasting — Tamiko Beyer, Destiny Hemphill, and Lisbeth White

Politics and Power: The Art of Faith Ringold — Faith Ringgold, Michele Wallace, Kirsten Weiss

Psychic Wounds: On Art and Trauma — Edited by by Gavin Delahunty

Key Essays:

- Psychic Wounds — Gavin Delahunty
- Painting History: Painting Tragedy — Robert Storr
- Transcriptum: Memory Tracing IN/For/With the Other — Bracha L Ettinger
- Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze — Bracha L Ettinger
- Canova's Penitent Magdalene: On Trauma's Prehistory — Erica Naginski

Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath Kindle Edition — Heather L. Clark

Remedios Varo: Science Fictions — Caitlin Haskell and Tere Arcq

Sigils: Illustrated Guide to the Symbols of Spirit and Thought — MB Jackson

The Tarot of Leonora Carrington — Tere Arcq, Susan Aberth, Harold Gabriel Weisz

The Terror of History: Mystics, Heretics, and Witches in the Western Tradition — Teofilo F. Ruiz, The Great Courses

The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde — Audre Lorde

The Other Side: A Journey Into Women, Art and the Spirit World — Jennifer Higgie

The Very Secret Sex Lives of Medieval Women: An Inside Look at Women & Sex in Medieval Times — Rosalie Gilbert

The Waves — Virginia Woolf

Transformative Waters in Late-medieval Literature: From Aelred of Rievaulx to the Book of Margery Kempe — Hetta Elizabeth Howes

Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror — Judith Lewis Herman MD

Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice — Judith Lewis Herman MD

Venus and Aphrodite: A Biography of Desire — Bettany Hughes

Visions of Enchantment — Occultism, Magic, and Visual Culture — Edited by by Daniel Zaman and Judith Noble

Key Essays:

- Protection against Evil in Byzantium: Magical Amulets and Their Survival from Early to the Late Byzantine Period — Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie
- Fascinated by Fascination: Female Privacy and the Leipzig 'Love Magic' Panel — D. Lyle Dechant
- Leaking, Shrieking, and Venomous Bodies: European Witch Imagery in the 16th Century — Deana Petherbridge
- The Alchemical Androgyne: The Rewards and Pitfalls of a Feminist Approach — ME Warlick
- The magician, the Mermaid, and the Ouroboros: Franz Von Stuck and the Iconography of Alchemy — Nathan Timpanio
- The Devil's Livery: The Role of Nudity in the Depiction of Witchcraft, Wicca, and Satanism — Leo Ruickbie

Visual Aggression: Images of Martyrdom in Late Medieval Germany — Assaf Pinkus

Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers — Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English

Witchcraft : Taschen's Series on the Library of Esoterica — Edited by Jessica Hundley and Pam Grossman

A Single Woman Is a Witch: Battling to Save the Art Environment of Mary Nohl — Debra Brehmer

William Blake vs the World — John Higgs

The Wet Hex — Sun Yung Shin

Paintings are available through the
Portrait Society Gallery

207 E Buffalo St #526, Milwaukee, WI 53202
www.portraitsocietygallery.com



Meg Lionel Murphy and Portrait Society Gallery
will donate a portion of every painting sold
to the following organizations:

Sojourner Family Peace Center:

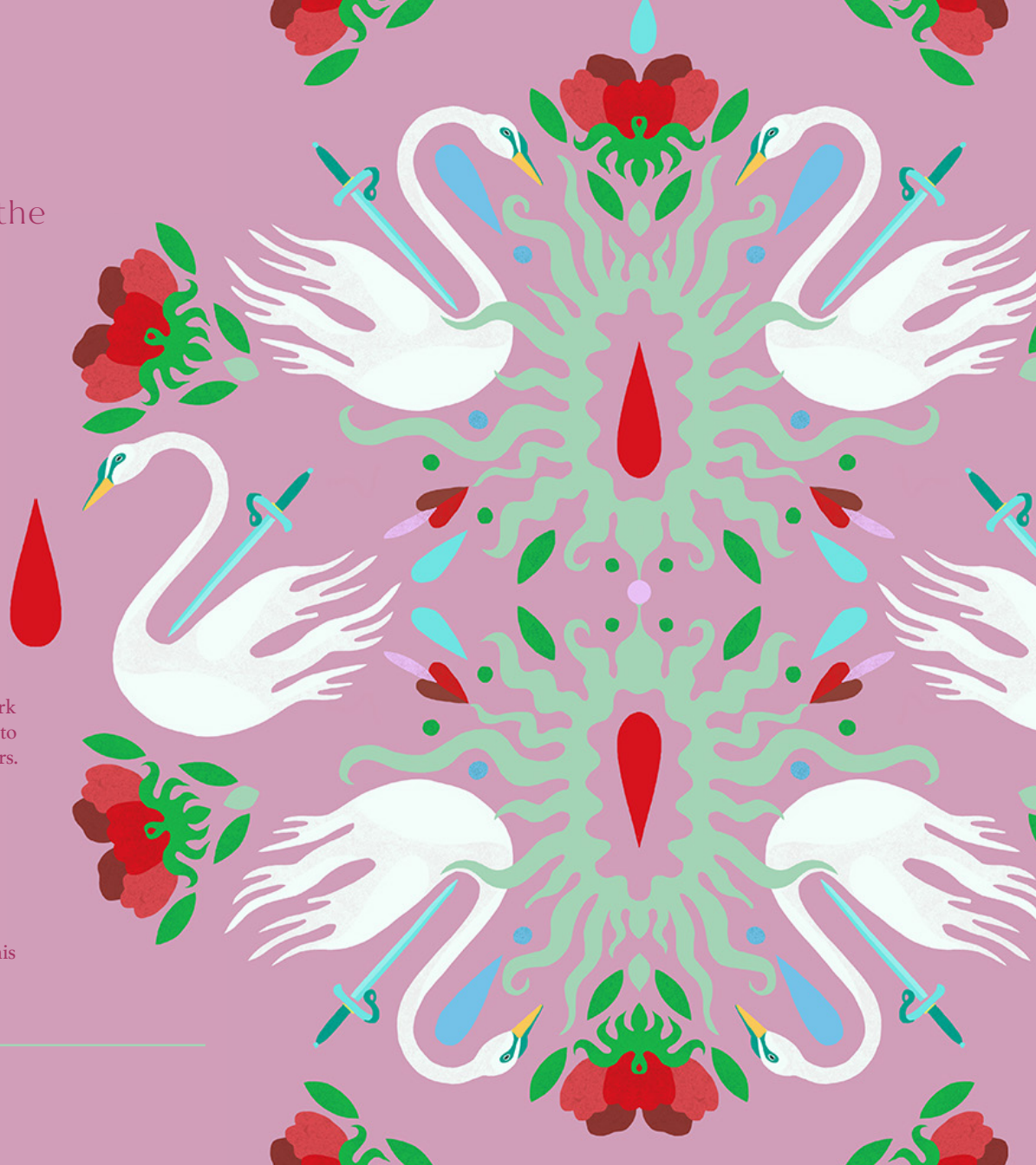
Wisconsin's largest nonprofit provider of domestic
violence prevention and intervention services. They work
to ensure the safety of victims of domestic violence and to
provide a pathway out of violence for victims and abusers.



Anera:

An international nonprofit providing shelter, medical
supplies, food, and psychological care to Palestinian
Refugees. With respect to the themes of pregnancy in this
exhibition, donations will be made in the name of the
50,000 pregnant people living in a war zone.

www.meglionelmurphy.com
[@meglionelmurphy](https://www.instagram.com/meglionelmurphy)





Meg Lionel Murphy

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