

Prometheus Unbound

By Thalia Vrachopoulos in John Jay College Gallery
Exhibition Catalogue, 1999

(Aeschylus, 525-456 B.C.)

This exhibition was conceived as a survey of key works from Despo Magoni's thirty-five year artistic career. As such, it provides a perspective on the artist that in one sense demonstrates the vastness of her range: from the inventive variety of materials that she has employed to the shifting subject matter and modes of expression that she has pursued, Magoni has attempted to reinvent herself many times over. Despite this fluidity, however, there is a thematic consistency to her work that is revealed when such a broad view is taken. Prometheus Unbound; Pandora Unleashed... alludes not only to the tyranny of oppression and its resultant suffering, but also carries a political relevance, even to contemporary democracies.

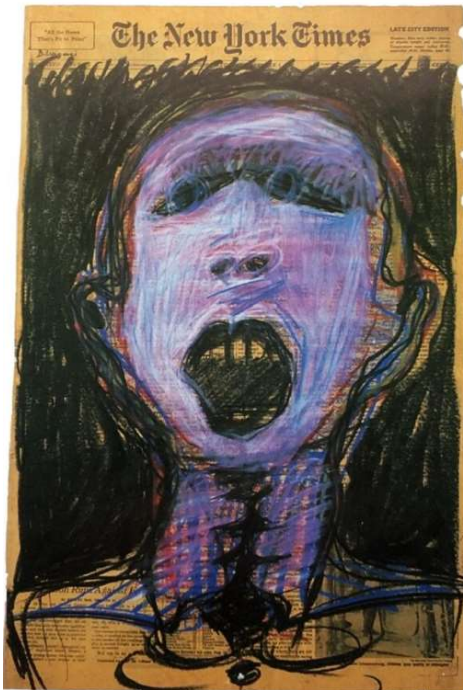
The Promethia was first conceived by Aeschylus as a trilogy advancing the position of Zeus (the equivalent of totalitarian posture) as a tyrant, thus malevolent, in Prometheus Bound. The story continued with the second play Prometheus Unbound in which Zeus, having had time in which to modify his views through wisdom, becomes more benevolent. Although it does not survive, the third book was meant to have been a comedic sequel. The traditional reading of Pandora is much like the one about hubris in which the offspring knowingly or unknowingly, like Oedipus destroys the parent. Although Pandora the female has given birth to humanity, her progeny through hubris tries to destroy her by advancing a negative narrative about her.

Prometheus Unbound; Pandora Unleashed is neither illustrating nor directly referencing the Promethia nor the Pandora myths, but rather is being used as a foil for sociopolitical and cultural ideas present in the work of the artist which remain even to this day timely issues. This frame of reference is especially suitable because of the male constructs of the gendered critical responses to Pandora as evil and Prometheus as savior of mankind. Through her work Magoni has reversed this long held position by portraying Pandora as creator. By focusing on the creative side of Pandora Magoni once more offers hope, without which no one can survive.

Due to Magoni's continuous involvement in painting the figure while thematically engaging in the social issues of her time, this exhibition focuses on facial expression as the cipher of empathy to the human condition. Ancient myth serves as a frame for images related to current problems and concerns. Prometheus and Pandora – unbound, unleashed, simultaneously for and against humanity – symbolize the genders only to be signified by both.

Nowhere have human feelings been better illustrated than by Greek myths which have found universal popularity through plays and literature from the antique period through the present. Myths speak to our collective unconscious and utilize

multivalent symbols and archetypes. According to Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell, symbols have universal cultural value. Additionally, Jung believed that the artist had the positive constructive role of presenting these symbols to people, bringing about understanding for the healing of the human psyche. This is one important goal of Magoni's imagery. By portraying the suffering young victims of apartheid in Johannesburg's Children, or the bleeding youngster in Cyprus: Days of Wrath, she hopes to elicit viewer empathy for the sake of mending the soul. Magoni taps into the universal through such specific events.



Johannesburg's Children, oil pastel on a NY Times page, 22 x 14 inches, 1977, Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, Rethymno, Greece



Cyprus: Days of Wrath #3, mixed media on paper, 25 x 18 inches, 1976, private collection, Greece

In light of this, Magoni overturns the traditional readings of Pandora as the destroyer of humankind rendering her into a sign of the artist herself, a creator. Repeatedly, Magoni's self-portrait appears as Pandora (Pandora Emeritus and Pandora's Box), who against the advice of the gods opens the box to loosen all manner of evil upon humanity, but who by saving hope is redeemed. The role of woman as keeper of fundamental truths about human nature is conveyed by Magoni in her images of the Sphinx. Moreover, in Scheherazade's Guises we are again shown the multiple role that a woman must uphold, like Pandora, Scheherazade puts herself directly in danger's way to ultimately offer hope of salvation to others. Through these archetypal females Magoni has reached beyond the traditional narrative of woman predicating humanity's downfall to a more benevolent and optimistic symbol. To give humanity a chance for survival Prometheus, who is said to represent forethought, stole the flame from Olympus and brought the wrath of Zeus onto himself. He was ordered by Zeus to be tied to a rock and have his liver eaten by vultures eternally. In Valor #7, Prometheus becomes a Vietnam veteran wounded in action defending a

country which under critical scrutiny does not uphold his actions. There are other reasons for Zeus' punishment of Prometheus; one is that he would not betray the secret of the child that was predicted to be born to Thetis, capable of destroying the god.

Prometheus the tragic hero is also in many ways Prometheus the Everyman, subject to forces-natural and political- over which he has almost no control. Taken in this context Magoni's Pawns figure this aspect of the human condition, the average citizen set alone against the void, the individual punished by authority. Rather than Zeus we are presented with a wall of faces, seemingly unthreatening, that hide an omnipotent control over the masses (Power Talk). The individual has become lost; the light that was given to humanity is often missing.

While the works in this exhibition are culled from different times and different series, the fundamental story of the human condition that they tell unites them. By both trafficking in gendered typologies and transcending them, Magoni establishes her own mythos—one both familiar and subversive. In her universe hope cannot dispel suffering but somehow the human struggle is not without hope. It is largely from this paradox, clothed in varying characters and narratives, that Magoni's work draws its strength.



Night After Night, acrylic on glassine paper, 98 x 70 inches, 1998