

An abstract painting featuring a white horse's head in profile, facing right. The horse has a vibrant red mane and a purple eye. The background is a deep purple. The painting is composed of visible brushstrokes, giving it a textured appearance.

Seven Paintings

2020–23

ANNE MADDEN

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A CAVE OF THE RIVEN HEART

Richard Kearney

The Charles B. Seelig professor in philosophy, Boston College

Gods becoming humans, animals, mountains, trees. Anne Madden's exhibition of seven paintings replays the seven days of creation in an explosion of colour and form. It enacts a metamorphosis in which each figure twists and turns towards its opposite, often across finely split screens. Mirror images. Twinned bodies. Brother and sister. Antigone and Polynices. Mutations between horse and human, elk and oak, swan and girl, earth and sky: Madden's multi-species imagination.

The paintings manifest a fierce life energy forged into chromatic shape. Seven decades of art distilled into seven incandescent tableaux – saturated with pigment and complementary colour: cool ultramarine blue vibrates with warm yellows and cadmium reds. We wander from primal scenes of animals at the dawn of Genesis (*Tree B.C.*) through classic motifs of mutation (Leda and the swan, Daphne and the tree, Ariadne freeing Theseus from the Minotaur) to contemporary landscapes of grief and grace. Nothing human, animal or divine is alien to Madden's art, as it winds through a labyrinth on the trail of a scarlet thread. The works interact in a play of gentle combustion, igniting a vitality of contrasts.

The diptychs can be viewed alternately as sacred comingling (coincidentia oppositorum) or as tragic sundering. There are epiphanies but also burials and violations. Mortal rupture and rapture go hand in glove. A tango between Eros and Thanatos. The paintings whirl us through a circle of standing stones as we swerve between the seven heavenly virtues and the seven deadly sins (Anne Madden was raised Catholic in Chile and Clare). We find ourselves poised between the Scylla of ancient myth and the Charybdis of modern calamity, held together by Madden's filigree thread.

The centerpiece of this iconostasis is the painting of Antigone and her brother. The image – a recurring theme in Madden's work since the eighties – shows the Hellenic siblings locked in an embrace where the fatal wound of Polynices bleeds into the womb of his sister – echoing the canonical pieta image of Mary and the crucified Jesus. This liminal icon has haunted Madden since the tragic death of her brother, Jeremy Madden-Simpson in 1984. The unspeakable grief ghosts her painting, recalling Beckett's phrase – so dear to both Madden siblings – 'silence is our mother tongue'.

Anne Madden's latest work emerges out of this non-spoken cleft of experience, where dream and myth encounter the cruelties of contemporary reality – the mute loss of loved ones, the death of an adolescent mother in a grotto devoted to the blessed Virgin, the bloodshed of Northern Ireland, the brutality of war and its aftermath. At once elegiac and panegyric, her seven icons invite entry through a door into the dark, a labyrinth of uncanny dyads, a cave of the riven heart from which new creatures constantly rise and glimmer into being.

Richard Kearney, 2022