



Leo. 2007. Modeled and cast earthenware, Liquin oil medium and pigments, clear acrylic laquer. 24 x 45.5 x 45.5 cm.

Jack Thompson The Well of Myth

Article by Glen R. Brown

MONSTERS OF FEARSOME HYBRIDITY; WEIRD INCARNATIONS of the seasons, of natural forces and of the phases of life; heroes of superhuman strength or cleverness whose altruism more often than not proves the means of their undoing; omnipotent beings who toy with humanity from on high with regal indifference to its fate: the protagonists of myth have been a tonic to the artistic imagination for

thousands of years. It is surely no coincidence that among the earliest known figures in clay – diminutive sculptures excavated at Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic – is a steatopygous “Venus” with likely connections to the widespread prehistoric cult of the earth goddess. The long and curious procession of dragons, sphinxes, gorgons, maize deities, feathered serpents, winged deer, gods of war, guardians of the

underworld and other supernatural beings that weaves its way through the subsequent history of work in clay reflects the links that pottery and ceramic sculpture have long possessed to the inquisitiveness and inventiveness of the human mind. Embedded in the mythical imagery of ancient ceramics is an early record of the will to make tangible the mysteries of the universe.

In most parts of the world considerable time has passed since the creatures of myth roamed ceramics in this capacity. In the West, the ancient gods gradually withdrew to the shadows under the advance of Christianity, reappearing centuries later not as credible beings but rather as symbols of a lost epoch in which natural humanity bared itself ingenuously through its cultural production. With the renaissance of classicism, myths no longer gave meaning to the universe but came instead to represent timeless constants, especially those of morality, that lay obscured beneath the particulars of human behavior. In the modern period, though empiricism largely displaced philosophy, ancient mythology continued to serve as a key to universal responses of the mind to the most fundamental experiences of life. Pioneers of psychology such as Carl Jung discerned in myth the traces of psychical predilection, and artists from the Surrealists to Jean Dubuffet, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Alan Davie explored what they felt to be deep connections between mythic imagery and persistent drives in the human constitution.

For sculptor Jack Thompson, the fantastic imagery of the epic poem *The Odyssey*, encountered for the first time while he was still in high school, provided the spark for a lifelong passion for mythology. As an undergraduate major in psychology in the 1960s, he pored over Jung's intriguing arguments for a collective unconscious and found credibility in the assertion that archetypes have exerted a clandestine influence over the content of art and myth across the centuries and around the world. Consequently, his research interests have included everything from the Egyptian Book of the Dead to the Mayan Popol Vuh, and he has traveled the globe in search of symbols that might indicate, through their curious parallels, a shared origin in the recesses of the human mind. For Thompson, ensconced within the stuff of myth lies powerful evidence that humanity possesses a common psychological core and therefore a basis for deeply meaningful communication, despite the bewildering disparities that exist on the surface between cultures.

In the late 1960s Thompson made the decision to pursue his studies of myth not as a psychologist or anthropologist but rather as an artist. At California State University Northridge he explored ceramic art under the guidance of Howard Tollefson and Bill Hardesty. Discovering that he possessed an innate

talent for working in clay, he continued his education in 1971 at the San Francisco Art Institute under the tutelage of Richard Shaw, whose provocative painted-ceramic couch and armchair he had encountered at the 1969 exhibition "Objects: USA." The heady excitement and non-conformist spirit of exploration pervading ceramic work on the West Coast at the time left its indelible stamp on Thompson's vision of clay. Shaw proved to be a major inspiration, and Thompson also recalls the influence of fellow student Karen Breschi, who "was over at the next table painting all of her stuff." Later, while earning his MFA at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia under Rudy Staffel's supervision, Thompson explored other paths, but by the 1980s he had renewed his commitment to post-fire painting, finishing virtually all of his work with acrylics finely applied through an airbrush.

Although at one time he utilised the full spectrum of color in pursuit of naturalism, Thompson has since 2000 largely restricted himself to a subdued and, contemplative palette dominated by a slightly lustrous metallic gray. Imparting to his sculptures the impression of cast iron or darkly patinated bronze, the paint that he favors is composed of powdered graphite mixed with a clear oil-based medium that dries more rapidly than linseed oil. Other colors in his recent work – gold, copper, metallic green and blue – were initially added using bronze powders, but when these became unavailable he found an adequate substitute in powdered mica. The paints are applied directly to the fired clay, beginning with a wash that soaks into the porous material. Likening this first application to monochrome underpainting in the work of the Old Masters, he adds touches of burnt umber or black to the recessions to bring out the three dimensionality of the forms. Ultimately, these accents are hidden under several uniform layers of pigment. When dry, the surface is burnished to raise the luster.

The forms on which Thompson paints are fashioned from earthenware, generally a paper-clay body that can be difficult to carve but is particularly amenable to repairs. Although most parts of the finished composition are cast in molds, he prefers to sculpt the models in clay rather than to work in plaster. Having accumulated a substantial archive of molds over the years, he generally combines new forms with parts that may have been used for very different purposes in previous sculptures. This practice contributes to the pronounced effect of pastiche, a quality that Thompson often deliberately cultivates in his sculptures by combining imagery associated with disparate mythologies within a single composition. Engaging in what he describes facetiously as "Frankenstein surgery," he frequently joins a head from one mold to a torso that has been cast in another, achieving a weird sense of the composite that accen-

Leo. 2007. Modelled and cast earthenware, Liquin oil medium and pigments, clear acrylic laquer. 24 x 45.5 x 45.5 cm.

tuates the mental hybridisation from which such creatures originally sprang in the ancient world.

Like the sculpted elements that recur throughout Thompson's work, certain symbols have resurfaced in many of his compositions. One of the most prominent of these is the open boat, a softly contoured crescent form that conjures Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Norse metaphors for passage from life to death and the mysteries beyond. The 2000 sculpture *Transmigration* is exemplary. Cradled within the curves of the vessel like a sleeping infant nestled in a mother's arms, the body of a deceased woman implicitly drifts toward a dark horizon upon which the imperceptible gaze of a vigilant heron – her companion and guardian spirit – is somberly fixed. The silent corpse, originally more clearly demarcated, was softened beneath several layers of slip, which Thompson applied in order to hint at the beginnings of slow decomposition and assimilation into the welcoming body of the earth. The composition as a whole seems a universal image of peacefulness and acceptance of the final journey on which all must eventually embark.

A similar air of mysterious restfulness envelops a later composition, *Animus Conveyance* (2002), in which the solemn heron reappears and the upward arc of the boat is echoed by the sweep of a stylized crocodile's neck and tail. The figure of a reclining female, in this case living rather than dead, embraces the heron between her thighs in an erotically sugges-

tive manner as her mouth and the heron's beak are connected by means of a ribbon-like tongue. Inspired visually by the traditional raven and oyster-catcher rattles carved by the Tlingit people of the Northwest Coast of North America, the sculpture draws its content from Jung's description of what he termed the animus: the inner masculine imprint in the unconscious of a woman. Counterpart to the anima in a man, the animus is described as a distillation of ancestral experiences of the opposite sex. In Thompson's sculpture the heron/animus, with its phallic neck and probing tongue, charges the work with the libidinal tensions that so often underlie mythology.

These tensions, as well as the strange, totemic sym-





Aquarius. 2005. Modeled and cast earthenware, Liquin oil medium and pigments, clear acrylic laquer.
58 x 34 x 34 cm.

pathies between human and animal, have carried over into Thompson's current work: a series reflecting on the Babylonian celestial system of the zodiac and its descent through the astronomy of ancient Greece and the mysticism of the Middle Ages. While he places no credence in the divinatory aspects of the zodiac, he finds in its imagery a rich projection of the mind's unconscious inventiveness onto the mysteries of the heavens. Each sculpture in his current series is devoted to a different station of the celestial ellipse and the figure that traditionally represents it, but in creating his composite creatures Thompson has borrowed liberally from diverse systems of myth. The zodiac is, in other words, only a starting point for a process of comparative mythology that involves an eclectic appropriation of symbols. Removed from their respective historical and cultural contexts and situated together in new configurations, these symbols suggest to Thompson a continuity originating within the unconscious.

The first sculpture in Thompson's zodiac series arose fortuitously. Over the summer of 2004, while temporarily free from his duties as a professor at the Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia, he struggled with a sculpture that would eventually take the form of a bicephalous winged dog. When his wife observed that he had inadvertently created an image of Gemini, he began enthusiastically planning a series of sculptures representing the entire set of ancient astrological signs. Inspiration for the figures proved to be diverse. *Aquarius* (2005), for example, drew heavily upon Ingres' famous 1856 painting *The Source*, which Thompson had recently seen at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. *Leo* (2007) was spawned from the impression of a pair of colossal sphinxes flanking the entrance to the Museum of Archaeology in Madrid: sculptures that Thompson had not seen for thirty years though they had obviously imprinted themselves upon his memory.

The process of designing his zodiacal symbols has been for Thompson a research project involving as much the history of mythology as that of art. In preparing to execute the sculpture *Capricorn* (2005), for example, he was fascinated to learn of the connection between this goat-headed figure and the ancient god Aegipan, one of the cloven-hoofed Panes who transformed into a hybrid of fish and goat to elude the stormy monster Typhoeus. In Thompson's sculpture, the head of a goat rests atop the shoulders of a nude female torso half

submerged in a pool of metallic blue while a huge fish tail, each scale of which was carefully carved into the paper-clay, rises like a stout palm to shade the unsettling fusion of woman and beast.

Perhaps the most eclectic of Thompson's zodiacal images has been *Libra* (2007), a weirdly lithe but pregnant canine-headed figure perched precariously atop the thickly coiled body of a serpent. Although the astrological symbol for Libra is merely a set of scales, Thompson immediately connected the sign to the Egyptian jackal-headed god Anubis, who is represented in the Book of the Dead as weighing a soul against the feather of Maat. The gravid body of the figure in Thompson's sculpture has a more capricious origin. After he had commenced work on the piece, one of his student assistants mentioned Vermeer's seventeenth-century painting *Woman Holding a Balance* in which a conspicuously pregnant young woman grips a small set of scales. Always attuned to the erotic and procreational undercurrents of myth, Thompson seized on this image of fecundity and fate and combined it with a phallic serpent and the grasping of a breast, a gesture half maternal and half lascivious that he had seen portrayed in the ancient terracotta goddesses of Çatalhöyük during a visit to the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations in Ankara, Turkey.

Clearly, there is nothing rigorously scientific about Thompson's comparative mythology. He is, after all, an artist rather than an anthropologist. Though an avid proponent of Jungian theory, he does not lay claim to having constructed elaborate psychological disquisitions in clay. His purpose is not to demonstrate methodically the unconscious origins of the symbols in myth but rather to tap into hidden sources of emotion and to evoke from the viewer the experience of mingled mystery and familiarity. Like the Surrealists, he is convinced of the influence that unconscious material exerts over our conception of the world, and he has employed his art as a means of establishing such a conviction in the minds of his audience. One senses, however, that he has also, and perhaps more importantly, utilised his sculptures as a medium for sustaining his own wonder at the curious consistency that obtains between the symbols and myths of so many cultures separated by the barriers of geography and time. That art can be a vehicle for the wondrous is an idea that has largely dissipated in the cynical ambiance of the contemporary art world. Its endorsement with such obvious conviction and dedication has no doubt proved for many to be the most moving aspect of Thompson's unusual work.

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Libra. 2007. Modeled and cast earthenware, metal scales, Liquin oil medium and pigments, clear acrylic laquer. 58.5 x 15.5 x 20.5 cm.