

Helena McGrath

Telling

My mother comes from Finland where bears still live in the wild. In the past the bear was worshipped as a deity who originated in the stars. We seem to have a duality of feeling about bears. We are powerfully drawn to them, while at the same time being terrified of them. In my work bears often represent nature, to which we have a similar ambivalence.

For me, the story of Callisto tells us something about violence against nature. A rape results in a child who is stolen from his mother and, as an adult, comes perilously close to killing her. That speaks to me about our own alienation from and destruction of nature, the thing that nurtures us. It is also a story about transformations. Callisto is a woman whose body is transformed three times – in pregnancy, into a bear and finally into a constellation of stars, literally a heavenly body. I have used myself as a model for Callisto in these paintings. What began as a practical necessity (I did not have access to a model) became a way to bring the story closer. A re-telling of an ancient Greek myth could seem remote and academic but by introducing the intimacy, and also the banality of my own experience, I have made it into a kind of auto-fiction. I hope that this brings some immediacy to the work, even at the risk of exhibitionism.

Baucis and Philemon, and Daphne are paintings based on two other Greek myths in which people are transformed. An elderly couple who unwittingly welcome Gods into their home are rewarded by being changed into a pair of entwined trees that can never be parted. Daphne escapes the unwelcome advances of Apollo by being transformed into a laurel tree. For me, both stories suggest that to become fully a part of nature is to find sanctuary and solace.

Daphne

Daphne was a tree spirit and the daughter of river god, Peneus. She became the unwilling object of another god, Apollo’s erotic obsession. He pursued her relentlessly until, exhausted, she called on her father to help her. He responded by turning her into a laurel tree, thereby saving her from Apollo's unwelcome advances.

Baucis and Philemon

Baucis and Philemon were an elderly and devoted married couple. When the gods, Zeus and Hermes, visited their town disguised as peasants, no one else welcomed them into their home. Though they were poor, Baucis and Philemon offered their unknown guests their best food and wine. Their hospitality was rewarded when the gods granted their wish never to be parted, not even in death. They died together and were transformed into a pair of entwined trees, an oak and a linden.

The Myth of Callisto

In Greek mythology Callisto is a nymph (that is, one of many “inferior female divinities”) who is a follower of Artemis. This select group of women (let us imagine them as a wild swimming group), have rejected relationships with men. However, Callisto unwittingly attracts the attention of Zeus, who rapes her, leaving her pregnant with his child. When her pregnancy is revealed to Artemis, Callisto is shunned by her female friends. Alone in the forest, she gives birth to a son, Arcas. Hearing of Zeus’ infidelity, his wife Hera goes in search of Callisto. She takes revenge on her supposed rival by turning her into a bear and stealing her child away. For fifteen years Callisto roams the forest. One day Arcas, now a young man, is out hunting when he comes across a bear. Not recognising her as his mother, he goes to shoot her. In that moment guilty Zeus takes pity on Callisto and saves her from death by transforming her into the constellation Ursa Major, the Great Bear. He then transforms Arcas into Ursa Minor, so that mother and son are re-united.

List of Works

1.

Daphen, 2021

Water based tempera and charcoal on paper
2.

Baucis and Philemon 1 2022

Water based tempera, chalk and charcoal on paper
3.

Baucis and Philemon 2 2023

Water based tempera on paper
4.

Callisto, 2024

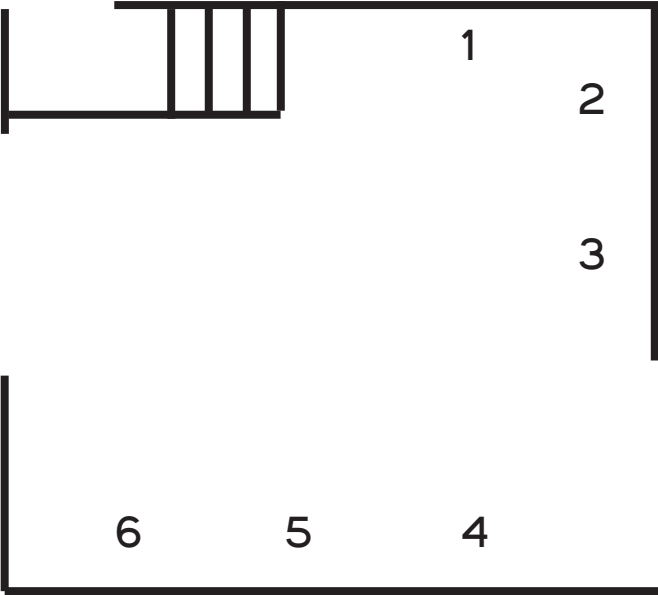
Oil, charcoal, chalk and paper collage on canvas
5.

Hera, 2024

Oil and paper collage on canvas
6.

Arcas, 2024

Oil, chalk and paper collage on canvas



Biography

Helena Mcgrath (b.1968, London, UK) studied BA English Literature and Art History at Cambridge University (1987-90) and MA Fine Art at University of Hertfordshire (2015-17). She worked as a Script Editor and Producer of TV drama for fifteen years (1990 – 2005) before becoming an artist. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer in Fine Art at UH. Group exhibitions include: The Ruth Borchard Self-Portrait Prize (online) (June – Dec 2023), Correspondence 01, Broadway Gallery Letchworth, (Aug 2021), Figurative Art Now, Mall Galleries (online) (July – Sept 2021), The Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize, Trinity Buoy Wharf, (UK Tour) (2020/21). Solo exhibitions include: Aidinmaa (Motherland), Viewpoint Gallery, University of Hertfordshire (2019), Helena McGrath: Paintings, Pavilion Gallery, Chenies Manor (2018). Helena's self portrait was purchased by the Ruth Borchard New Generation Collection in 2011.