

SLEEK

ART

Faye Wei Wei on Why Mythology Is a Millennial Concept

The Slade Art School graduate creates shapeshifting creatures and constructs mythical nirvanas

All Artwork by Faye Wei Wei
Photography by Ollie Murphy



According to Faye Wei Wei, mythology is actually a millennial concept. Usually featuring snakes, thorns and young couples, her paintings are loaded with symbolic modern day motifs, questionable heroes, gender tropes and an appreciation of the surreal. This could be due to her upbringing in West London, where every Saturday morning her father took her on a treasure hunt through Portobello market.

“We would wake up at 5am and go together,” she reminisces. “I adored wandering around all the stalls looking at all the beautiful jewels and shining chandeliers, old wooden carved figures, tables made with inlaid wood, antique glass that I couldn’t believe could have survived – something so fragile and brittle living through time.”

Childhood is a recurrent theme in the Slade graduate’s art, present in both her fragile brushstrokes and her paintings’ surreal compositions. “Me and my little brother would gather leaves from the hedges that lined the houses of the street where we grew up,” says the 24 year old. “We would place them in a basket and pretend to dry them out as if making Chinese tea.” These childhood activities have influenced the artist’s oil paintings. “Boy with Snake” (2016), for instance, portrays a boy in green, enveloped by a snake while hovering above a bull and surrounded by golden leaves. In “Lion Paw” (2014) two naked boys sporting erections rise in the air, followed by a string of flowers.

The concept of performativity – defined by British philosopher John L. Austin as the potential of speech and communication to realise an action interested the artist from a very young age. “We would build dens and pretend to survive in the forests,” she says.

“My mother would give us a lamb shank each to gnaw on as if we were hunter-gatherers.” The theatrical aspects of her compositions also stem from her interest in Noh, a regimented and traditional form of Japanese drama commonly incorporating masks, costumes, music and dance.

“When we were young, we also had a midnight listening club where we discovered how magical the radio is – we would then listen very intensely to the classical music and write down what we thought the music was describing, how each note would point to a very specific emotion, melodic, melancholic.” These experiences have led Wei Wei to paint figures, all of which are in fact versions of herself in different guises and wearing different masks.



Her huge canvases also play a storytelling role: the bigger they are, the more complex her narratives. “I love the way you have to make your body sweep across in an arch, whereas small paintings are a much slower intimate experience, shifting and pulling the paint around till it forms the glint of an eye,” she says. Wei Wei’s preference for canvases that have the same dimensions as the span of her own body allows for a kind of a bodily warmth and intimacy that’s become her aesthetic trademark – a calling card which in 2016 earned her the Cass Art Painting Prize for final year Slade graduates.

In April 2017, Wei Wei staged “Anemones and Lovers” at London’s Cob Gallery, her first solo exhibition. Fittingly, earlier this year she was part of a display with sculptor Zoe Paul in one of the most mythically-rich places on Earth: Athens. Held at Hot Wheels Projects, the show was entitled “Marzanna, Yours Again”, a reference to the eponymous Baltic and Slavic goddess whose toy-like effigies have historically

been drowned at the end of winter in these regions to mark the beginning of spring. Alongside Paul’s objects fashioned from wood, metal and stone, Wei Wei presented images featuring little girls’ dolls in eerily cutesy clothes evoking the aforementioned ritual figures. For Wei Wei, this theatricality isn’t just for art’s sake. As with her work in general it’s part of a wider comment on modern culture – and that’s what makes it so compelling.