

# **HEROIC PAINTING AND ITS CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION**

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A Thesis Presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

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by  
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**HEROIC PAINTING AND ITS CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a formal investigation of the theory and influences behind my body of work for the MFA thesis exhibition. It starts with an investigation into the mythological aspects of Renaissance and Baroque paintings as well as heroism in Greek and Roman arts followed by a review of the developments of heroism and mythology<sup>1</sup> in modern day mass media and popular culture. Through studying other contemporary artists who reference mythological constructs, I contextualize the theme of my painting, inspect the influences of my artistic approaches, and describe the formation of my body of work that represents a contemporary interpretation of the classical heroic painting tradition in western art history and culture.

Keywords: heroic painting; mythological painting; Renaissance painting; Baroque painting; contemporary heroes

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1 Contemporary mythology is a recently developed field that describes modern stories that are similar to traditional myths, such as those of the Greco-Roman world. For a brief overview of its history and modern day applications, see "Contemporary Mythology," Web.

## INTRODUCTION

Motivated by my love of the masterpieces of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, as well as the heroes in the modern day popular culture, my thesis project is to produce a body of paintings that represent the glory of traditional art form in a modern day setting with updated characters. My research has involved studying the underlying theme of heroism in the masterpieces and channeling their formats, style, and overall painting structure into my own paintings with contemporary interpretations. Each work is a 'master study' from a master artist of the past. By combining characters from mass media in pop culture such as comics, film, and video games with historical masterpieces, I discovered in them comparisons to the hero archetypes of the past. Such combination led me to create paintings that amalgamate historical masterworks with contemporary heroes such as Batman, Superman, and even the Dude<sup>2</sup>. The juxtapositions and fusions of the old and the new, the heroic and the anti-heroic, the reverent and the irreverent are meant to inform the way we look at our present-day "heroes" while reviving the traditions of western art, mythology, and spirituality in art.

This thesis is a formal investigation of the theory and influences behind my body of work in the MFA thesis exhibition. It examines the manner in which certain popular culture characters in my paintings – taken from comic books, film, and fantasy storytelling in general – are related to traditional mythos-spiritual forms. These elements touch on the contemporary spiritual expression of human

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<sup>2</sup> For a modern day hero who is the traditional antithesis of heroism, the Big Lebowski, i.e., the Dude, became a cult phenomena. See *The Big Lebowski*, DVD.

culture in the context of heroic painting. This thesis starts with an investigation into the mythological aspects of Renaissance and Baroque paintings as well as heroism in Greek and Roman arts, followed by examinations in the developments of heroism and mythology<sup>3</sup> in modern day mass media and popular culture. Through studying other contemporary artists who reference mythological constructs, I contextualize the theme of my painting, inspect the influences of my artistic approaches, and describe the formation of my body of work that represents a contemporary interpretation of the classical heroic painting tradition in western art history and culture.

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## CHAPTER

### 1 MYTHS AND MYTHICAL HEROES IN WESTERN ART

#### 1.1 The Development of Classical Myths in Western Civilization

“Myths originated at the dawn of civilization. They are the beginning of religious traditions and history, and a specific conception of the world.” (Impelluso 6). However, the manifestation of heroes and gods is transformed and translated through cultures, and passed down in different yet interconnected forms. Art historian Impelluso wrote:

*“Western culture inherited a combination of myths from the Greeks, whose fertile imagination had interpreted natural and spiritual events in an animistic .... way. Plato described mythos as a tale revolving around gods, divine beings, heroes . . .”* (Impelluso 6).

Indeed, Western culture has inherited the “combination of myths” and these myths have expanded with new characters over time. For example, Roman art was inspired by classical Greek mythology but added the mythology of their own time in their paintings and sculptures. Impelluso stated:

*“...Classical civilization kept its role as a model of the highest human values. Myths were revived in paintings and in the great Renaissance and Baroque frescoes that enliven the walls and ceilings of aristocratic residences”* (Impelluso 6).

Through art, classical myths have become a powerful influence on Western civilization, and they continue to influence our society today, as Impelluso pointed out: “The many legends that feature heroes, humans, gods, and demigods are deeply rooted in modern collective memory and continue to fascinate us” (Impelluso 6). Obviously, every human culture has reconstituted the tradition of heroic figures in its own way. Continuing this tendency, the Western world, reframes classical mythologies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through embedment in popular cultural entertainment such as comic books and cinema, classical myths have been handed down to later generations, and new types of heroes have stemmed from historical roots.

From my boyhood fascination with comic books, the legacy of myth became part of my understanding of the world. In the introduction to his book *Gods and Heroes in Art*, Lucia Impelluso identifies the usefulness of myths as characterized by the fact that “they describe a phenomena of nature and life by animating and personifying them through imagination” (Impelluso 6). Human beings have always engaged in this endeavor, and still do. In spite of the fact that, perhaps to most of us, modern myths and religious practices are not as affected as those of the Greco-Roman world, we continue to find insight from the stories that have been told again and again.

We have our own personifications of the mythological heroes and gods of the past in comic books, movies, and many other facets of contemporary culture, as Impelluso noted: “Handed down through oral tradition, myths through the centuries have been modified and expanded with changes and extensions,

becoming a valuable intellectual inheritance for a variety of societies” (Impelluso 6). Heroes such as Batman and Spider-man resonate with the average person; they are in fact human beings thrust into extraordinary circumstances and are therefore transformed.

As a visual artist, I am interested in the rich history of mythology as well as the myths in modern times. How do the myths of the past transform society and how do people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century live with mythological constructs? To answer these questions, we should consider how Renaissance art employed and transformed classical Greek mythology.

## **1.2 Emperors Portrayed with Mythical Power**

To properly understand Renaissance painting we must first consider the Greco-Roman context from which its conceptions of gods and heroes arose. The Classical Period was a powerful time in Greek sculpture that had a profound impact on societies to come. Sculpture in this period took a turn from more abstract interpretation of the myths to more realistic renderings using real people as models. For example, the statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton<sup>4</sup> were created to mark the history of the beginning of a democracy, and they were also the first public monuments to actual persons (Boardman). This idea of an individual monument was later taken by the Romans and transformed into a display of power for the emperors.

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<sup>4</sup> No Image available because these original statues are lost.

The robust marble statue of the former emperor of Rome, Claudius, [Figure 1] is a good example of this transformation. In this sculpture, a youthful god-like figure in a strong gaze stands tall at 8'4" high with laurel leaves adorning his head. He holds a staff in one arm and a laurel leaf in the other arm stretching out to the viewer, perhaps as an offering (Kleiner 109). Flowing cloth adorns his body in a majestic way, with an eagle at his feet. In Roman mythology, an eagle represents Jupiter (Kleiner 109)<sup>5</sup>. With all these attached symbols on his body, a human being is transformed into a god-like figure with heroic power.



Figure 1. Sculptor Unknown  
*Claudius in the guise of Jupiter*, from  
*Lanuvium*, 42-43 CE  
Marble, 100 inch in height  
Musei Vaticani  
ARTstor  
HMISSOURI\_122213138547

Born in 10 BCE to a royal bloodline, Claudius was not strong in his youth and never joined the army; instead, he stayed home and studied, taking on the life of a nobleman. However, when the Emperor Caligula was killed, Claudius

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<sup>5</sup> The eagle did not always have to be on the figure subject's feet. Jupiter or Jove was a Roman God and the equivalent to him in Greek mythology was Zeus. According to Sir James G. Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, p. 171, "... the Roman king personated no less a deity than Jupiter himself. For down to imperial times victorious generals celebrating a triumph, and magistrates presiding at the games in the Circus, wore the costume of Jupiter" ... which included "an ivory scepter topped with an eagle. . . For the eagle was the bird of Jove. . ."

was the only living man within the royal family so he had to assume leadership and portray himself as a mythical hero in order to capture the hearts of his people. According to Pennsylvania State University's Associate Professor of Classics, Ancient Mediterranean Studies and History, Garret Fagan (PSU's online contributor to their Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors) wrote, "He also displayed immediate understanding of the centrality of the military to his position and sought to create a military image for himself that his prior sheltered existence had denied him" (Fagan). Through military conquest, Claudius was able to present himself as a fighter. "Claudius himself took part in the campaign, arriving in the war zone with an entourage. After a parade to impress the natives, he returned to Rome to celebrate a triumph. His military credentials had been firmly established" (Fagan). Through his conquest, Claudius was able to project a heroic image of himself for his people.

The statue mentioned above, a grand figure that stood taller than its viewer, was conceivably part of the projection of that indomitable power. This sculpted heroic image induced fear into the public and aristocracy alike. According to Fagan the senate originally wanted to overthrow Claudius, but couldn't succeed because of all the armed men (the guard of the senate) were backing Claudius as emperor. The affectation of power had given way to practical defenses. Perhaps, the attributes of the statue express a certain level of power that instilled fear and obedience to the people around.



Another heroic statue, *Augustus of Primaporta*, [Figure 2] stands as a prime example of a commanding presence of an emperor. In full military dress, something seen as heroic even in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the statute represents a stout general pointing ahead in victory. His chest plate depicts scenes of a victorious Roman army over the Parthians; the image of the hero has become a narrative of triumph. These scenes, according to the Vatican Museum's website, were a form of "propaganda" used by the Emperor Tiberius for the people to remember the important role his father had in the Empire (Vatican).

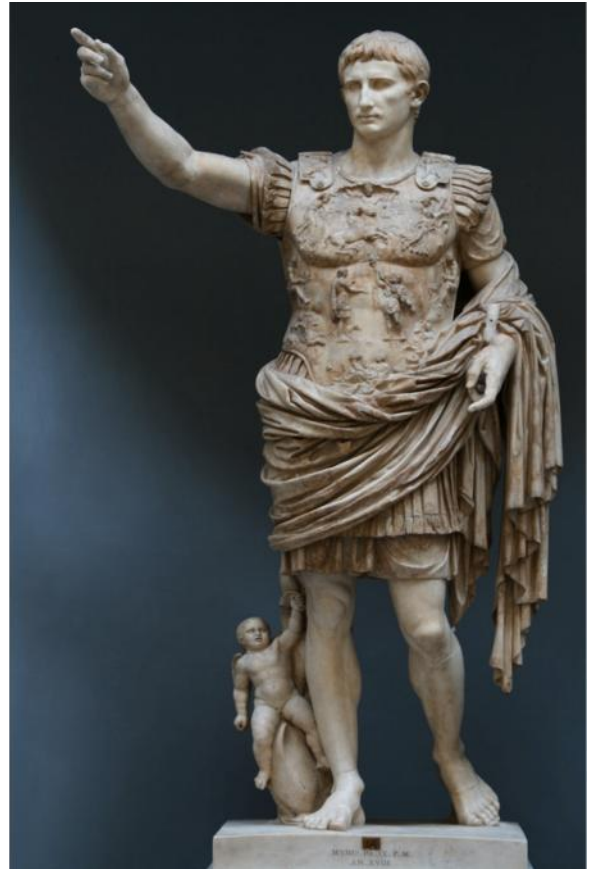


Figure 2. Roman *Augustus as Imperator* (Augustus of Primaporta), early 1st century CE copy of a bronze original of ca. 20 BCE  
Sculpture, 6' 8"  
Museo Chiaramonti  
ARTstor  
SCALA\_ARCHIVES\_10310840643

From these samples, one can see that the grand depictions of the power and exploits of the emperors were combined with iconography of religion and that of straight myth. This may be the true beginning of the hero tradition where the dogmatic strength of religion found effective power in the deeply ingrained ideas of mythological structures. So we find Claudius represented as a mythological god with an eagle at his feet, which was a symbol of Jupiter (Kleiner 109). In

Roman mythology, Jupiter is the supreme god. He was the god of “sun and moonlight, wind, rain, storms, thunder and lightning, sowing, creative forces and the boundary stones of field. As Rome developed into a city of commerce and military force, Jupiter evolved into a protector of the city and state of Rome.”<sup>6</sup> His temple was located on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, the center of Ancient Roman life. “By the time Rome had become an appearance of power, Jupiter had become assimilated to the Greek Zeus, and had taken on much of his glory” (Perowne 7).

“The representation of emperors during their lifetimes with the trappings of Jupiter seems to have begun under Caligula. The purpose of such statues was not merely to flatter the emperor but to suggest that he ruled the earth as Jupiter ruled the sky, a recurrent theme in Latin literature as well as in Roman art” (Kleiner 109). Apparently, through religious iconography, the emperors were able to present themselves as mythical heroes with god-like abilities.

### **1.3 Nudity as a Divine Attribute for Heroic Figures**

Obviously, religion played an important role in the development of the mysticism of the statue. Through divine attributes, a mortal man is raised up to a deity and immortalized. But what specific elements give the statue the appearance of power? We have seen that the trappings of religion icons and military might hold answers to the projections of authority of the emperor. Moreover, the body itself, either nude or partially clothed, is also a very important

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<sup>5</sup> For a synopsis of Jupiter's role in Greek mythology, see Calgary Coin & Antique Gallery's website entitled Ancient Roman Mythology--Jupiter.

indicator. Hallett speaks about the relationship between the nude and divinity in his chapter 'Nudity and Divine Symbols:'

*"In the past it has been widely assumed that in Roman portraiture nudity has — of itself — divine connotations: that a nude, or partly nude statue somehow makes a specific claim of divine status for the individual so represented... When nude or partly nude figures occur in this genre, they are immediately identifiable as gods... (Hallett 224)."*

Hallett goes on to discuss the "divine attributes" of nude statues of emperors noting that the "eagle, aegis and thunderbolt" were good examples of the symbols used for divine power (Hallett 216). So it seems that even without added propaganda, deification was achieved through the nude, idealized, heroic, and divine body.

An idealized athlete emanated power with a strong physique cut from pure white marble, while the sculpture's surface shone from the looming figure. Power symbols such as the eagle at Claudius side and the divine state of undress, half-dress or full military regalia — all come together to create a fully crafted persona. What would a hero be without them?

It seems that this idea was set in Greek tradition when portraying the heroes of Greek mythology. Greek heroes were traditionally represented in this guise, therefore when a Roman was representing himself in "naked wearing only a chlamys and carrying weapons or hunting gear" he saw himself stepping back into that tradition of the "world of heroes" (Hallett 216).

## 1.4 The Key Elements that Create a Hero with Mythical Power

In discussing heroic qualities, one must not forget Joseph Campbell's important study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In this book, Campbell introduces important points in the heroic adventure or keys that create a hero. Apparently, these keys will lead the reader down the same or a similar path in all hero stories, and there are stages that all would-be heroes have to go through in order to become heroic.

Let's take a look at Campbell's study on the life and adventure of Claudius: "The mythological hero, setting forth from his common day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure" (Campbell 132). Here we can relate with Claudius, who spent much of his time indoors and secluded in his youth. "The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive in the kingdom of the dark (brother battle) or be slain by the opponent and descend in death" (Campbell 133). Campbell relates with a brother 'key,' in which he has to reconcile with his brother figure. Claudius was tormented and poked fun of by Caligula, the former emperor. "Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward" (Campbell 133). Claudius became the Emperor of Rome. "His recognition by the father-creator (father atonement) can be seen as his turning point. The senate recognized him as Emperor and he thereby attained apotheosis.

We spoke of this divinity earlier in the elements of the statue's deification through the powerful imagery of a perfect physique enhanced by the sculptor's artful staging. "Intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being" (Campbell 133). Claudius eventually changed greatly from his youth, from secluded and quiet to a strong adult emperor. "The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection." Claudius conquered part of Briton and returned home with a victory parade. "At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (he is resurrected). The boon that he brings restores the world" (Campbell 133). The Emperor Claudius has definitely created many aspects of the heroism in the statue for himself, which fits closely to Campbell's key elements of heroes.

In the following section, a closer look will be taken at Campbell's traits of the hero in mythology. This engagement will provide us links between past notions of heroism, and give us insight on the contemporary mythological hero.

## **2 CAMPBELL'S HERO TRAITS AND POPULAR CULTURE CULTS**

### **2.1 Campbell's Hero Traits**

When starting to think about Heroes, one cannot look past the American mythologist Joseph Campbell.<sup>7</sup> A brief passage from Campbell's introduction to

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<sup>7</sup> Campbell's *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* presents an archetypal type of hero that is found in world mythologies. This book, originally published in 1949, explores the theory that important myths around the world all share similar key elements. See Campbell.

his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* gives a brief summary of his ideas on heroism:

*“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”* (Campbell 23)

Campbell goes on to speak about heroes and their coinciding journeys, relating to strong classical literature such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Campbell 22-23). Furthermore, his seminal work in mythology does point to some important concepts that can help us define elements of heroism in Roman statuary, which can easily be found in a cursory overview of ancient statues. Consider Campbell's key elements (Campbell 131-132):

1) There is a call to adventure. The Emperor (or heroic figure) is called upon to make conquest to further enhance the state or to protect the empire. More often than not this is a military conquest, and the figure must be presented with all the trappings of empire and power. In the statue of *Augustus* [Figure 2], the dramatic gesture of the emperor can enhance this militaristic adventure. The authority of the hero is seen clearly in his hand, pointing off into the distance. His level head and keen eye gaze forward, perceiving things to come.

2) There is a departure, an initiation, and a return from victory. The hero must be forced to leave home for an important task of some kind. This task shall be dangerous, which forces the hero to undergo great tribulations. The heroic

figure takes way, and goes on his journey. With this adventure, there will be a victory and a return home.

3) There are religion and divine symbols. Such as the laurel leaves and

eagle on the statue of Claudius [Figure 1].

All these elements can be seen in the monument known as Trajan's column [Figure 3 and 4], which is topped with a sculpture of the Roman emperor, Trajan Traianus (56-117CE). This column commemorates Trajan's success in battle through a band of beautifully carved reliefs winding around the column (Trajan's Column). The sculpture relief depicted the stories that the emperor was called to war, thus he departed, was



Figure 3. Trajan's Column was erected in 113 CE in honor of emperor Trajan. Located at the Trajan Forum, the column commemorates his victories in Dacia (now Romania).

victorious and returned home to glory. These heroic images were forceful and coercive, and could instill powerful authority to those who lived around him. As Campbell points out, these expertly combined elements



Figure 4. A close-up detail of the sculpture relief on the Trajan Columns, Marble, 113 CE, Rome.

were used as a part of an overarching sociopolitical strategy to produce a powerful influence over the population of Rome. Perhaps, their strength derived from the unity of societal investment and these stories predominated the thoughts and experiences of the Romans. They are symbolic objects, a glorious part of the ancient city, and contribute to the stories of heroes that continue to fill all of our hearts today. Trajan's Column is now still seen as one of the most important sites for the Italian citizens and a popular tourist spot for Rome visitors.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2 Contemporary Mythology in the Star Wars Saga

In our age, film stars take on this heroic statuesque. A good example is how Star Wars creator George Lucas inspires us with such war stories from his sagas, which are filled with mythologized heroes such as Luke Skywalker [Figure 5] and Darth Vader [Figure 6]. These modern day characters take on certain aspects resembling that of ancient Roman statues. Costumes enhance idealized bodies, while conquests, legends, myths, adventure and victories are all found within modern fictional characters as Campbell's hero traits described. Actually, Lucas deliberately applied Campbell's theory in the making of his hit series Star Wars (Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth).



Figure 5. The Character Luke Skywalker, played by Mark Hamill, from George Lucas' *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Film, 2004

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<sup>8</sup> *Trajan's Column*, an ancient monument, is still seen as an important view of the city for tourists visiting Rome, <http://www.aviewoncities.com/rome/trajanscolumn.htm>





Figure 6. An invisible Bob Anderson played the first Darth Vader voiced by the better known James Earl Jones. Audiences never saw the man behind the costume.

Luke Skywalker, the main star of Lucas' series, is a young boy who is called out (a call to adventure) to space to discover the secrets of the force and win victory in a space war (there is a departure, a battle, and a return with victory). Throughout this adventure, Luke must take on many challenges and learn

about himself. This is a close fit for Campbell's model.

Throughout this research, I took the mythology of Star Wars and compared it to the classical literature from Ovid. It is clear to me that Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* had a great influence on Western art and literature. It is the classical source of 250 Greek and Roman myths that artists such as Peter Paul Rubens and Velazquez used extensively for source material in their artwork. As one can see, Rubens' paintings were populated with scenes from stories of the Greek and Roman myths, and he simply expanded and created his own mythological universe with updated characters based on the mythical heroes that existed centuries before him. It is obvious that contemporary artists, such as Lucas, are playing with this archetypal heroism in their works as well, and many other artists in Hollywood are also expanding the heroic stories in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2.3 Dudeism as a Popular Culture Cult

The archetypal hero takes on a different direction in the character of the Dude from another hit movie, *The Big Lebowski*<sup>9</sup>. This fantastic cult hit from the 90s has also been interpreted in light of spiritual notions. Fans of this cult classic would be familiar with the Dude – the main character played by Jeff Bridges – and his obsession with the sport of bowling [Figure 7]. The film, written, directed, and produced by the Coen Brothers, created a hidden culture in America and across the



Figure 7. The Dude played by Jeff Bridges from *The Big Lebowski*, Film written and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1998

globe: a new cult organization called Dudeism. An excerpt from its official website [www.dudeism.com](http://www.dudeism.com) states:

*“While Dudeism in its official form has been organized as a (cult) only recently, it has existed down through the ages in one form or another. Probably the earliest form of Dudeism was the original form of Chinese Taoism, before it went all weird with magic tricks and body fluids. The originator of Taoism, Lao Tzu, basically said “smoke ‘em if you got ‘em” and “mellow out, man” although he said this in ancient Chinese so something may have been lost in the translation.”*

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<sup>9</sup> For a movie that endured a great deal of initial criticism and lackluster reviews to become a cult favorite, see *The Big Lebowski*, DVD, 1998.

Ben Walters from the *Guardian* talks specifically about the cult following in his article entitled “Dudeism, the Faith that Abides in The Big Lebowski,” “In the decade since the Coen brothers' film made its underwhelming debut, Jeff Bridges' amiably flaky dropout character has become the focus of an unusually devout generation” (Ben Walters). Walters also points out that there are several academic articles published on the film, one in particular entitled “F\*\*\* It, Let's Go Bowling” which describes bowling origins in Kegelspiel, a German game where the pins were a symbol of evil and the ball was a symbol of right. The film plays on these narratives, the narrator himself describing this “dude” as some kind of hero (Comentale).

According to Oliver Benjamin, the founder of the Church of the Latter-Day Dude, the cult following has attracted more than 100,000 members. Walters compares the character of the Dude to that of the Savior — “Hair, beard, sandals, bathrobe, generally chilled attitude.” Walter compares Dudeism to Taoism, Zen Buddhism, American Transcendentalism and Humanism. Really more of a gag than a gauge for morality, the laid-back movement has produced four books. One entitled *Duderonomy*, that expounds on the Dude's tenets, which seem to revolve around their mantra, “Just take it easy, man.” These “tenets” are basically silly, i.e., “1. Thou shalt always use fresh creamer when preparing the sacramental beverage . . . 2. Ideally half-and-half shall be used in preparing the sacramental beverage. Failing this, milk, and under the most dire of circumstances, non-dairy creamer (Dudeism.com).”

The Church of the Latter Day Dude is basically light hearted as when during a car commercial featuring Dudeism, Benjamin mentions that he has studied yoga and Buddhism in India and Thailand. However, he felt that none took in a “worldview that actually meshed with modern times.” Using the *Big Lebowski* as a springboard for the levity underlying their lighthearted interpretation of ancient truths embodied in the Tao religion’s *Tao Te Ching*, a group of their leaders came up with the *Tao Dude Ching* which keeps the intent of Taoism without the discipline.

Another book entitled *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture* by B.J. Oropeza links specifics between the contemporary mythological universe of superheroes and modern day spirituality. Using an illustrative image of Superman flying down from a church ceiling, Oropeza, compares the character of Superman to Christ:

*“The 1978 Superman movie portrayed Superman as a Christ or Messiah-like figure. He descended from heaven and came to earth as a child, like Jesus. He was sent by a heavenly father. He looked human, but he was so much more than human. He was the perfect man and yet godlike in his powers. Superman is not Christ, but some of the same aspects that draw humankind to Jesus have also made Superman an enduring figure in popular culture (Oropeza 30).”*

Oropeza goes on to review another comic book character, Captain Marvel, and pointed out how Marvel is harnessing powers of “ancient heroes from Greco-Roman mythology and the Bible” (Oropeza 33). For the comic book aficionado

who grew up looking to Captain Marvel to save the world from alien threats, to rescue the perishing, and render revenge for the ravaged, the trend as touted by Campbell to let the archetypal heroes of comic books become today's 'Greek gods and goddesses,' makes perfect sense.

It is through these popular culture figures that we are gaining access to the same type of heroism that the Grecian-Roman had. Skintight costumes of our superheroes such as Superman, Batman and Spider-Man represent masculine bodies similar to those of Roman statues. Comic stories reveal amazing stories of fantasylands and far out adventure — conquest, love, battle, and victory, which excite us today just as it excited the Romans in the past. These are the elements I wish to explore in my paintings. Before my paintings are presented, let's look at some contemporary artists who are using this notion of heroic subject matter.

### **3 CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO MYTHOLOGICAL PAINTING**

#### **3.1 Wiley's Work that Promotes Freedom for African Americans**

As an African American painter, Kehinde Wiley uses his art to promote freedom for the African American culture. His paintings present African Americans posed in the scenes from historical masterpieces. He let his friends choose from historical paintings to find ways that they wanted to be depicted. For example, one of Wiley's paintings is the popular musician 'Ice Cube' seated on the throne on the horse after a famous painting of Napoleon seated on the throne by Ingres [Figure 8]. His theme reflects a new time period where racial

bounds of white men dominating important historical events and scenes in paintings are in the past.

Apparently, Wiley loves historical paintings and tries to find connections between the old and the new, the white and the black, the dignified and the ordinary. For example, in one

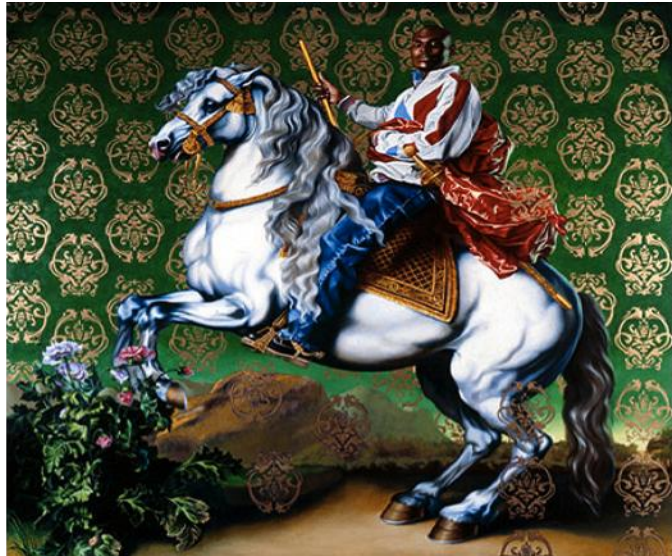


Figure 8. Kehinde Wiley  
*Prince Tommaso Francesco of Savoy-Carignano, 2006*  
Oil on canvas  
Image provided by the artist

of his works, gold chains worn by an African American represent dress and armor with gold jewelry worn by a French nobleman in a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting. Through these symbols, Wiley conveys the idea of African Americans as free from slavery and oppression and rising to the high society in modern times.

In an interview by the magazine *Juxtapoz*, Wiley discussed his approach: “It’s painting — about the history of painting. Great Britain has its own tradition of military portraiture and society portraiture that says ‘this guy’s the shit,’ and it’s evolved into these amazing but perverse vocabularies. So what am I doing? Am I embracing them? Criticizing them? Is it satire? Or is it something more emotionally honest where you’ve fallen in love with the history and pictures. It’s kind of all of that” (Garfield 52). My painting resonates with Wiley’s attitude and approach to the rich history of heroic painting tradition.

### 3.2 Forkan's Painting that Glorifies the Dude

Another painter, Joe Forkan, also deals with similar issues in art as Wiley does. He has fallen in love with the film of *The Big Lebowski* so much so that he has dedicated over 3 years to create more than 20 life-size paintings inspired by the movie. The Frank M. Doyle Arts Pavilion at Orange Coast College devoted an article on their website, *Time of Art*, to Forkan's work quoting the artist's explanation of his work:

*"I found myself moved by paintings that depicted grand story arcs, compressing into singular image a multitude of thoughts, ideas and emotions . . . When looking at narrative art from the Baroque era in particular, I am often more interested in the internal complexities of the images than the specifics of the story represented. The human interactions and conflicts, the formal qualities and modes of depiction give the paintings great breadth and depth and can continue to engage the viewer's interest over time (Times of Art)."*

I share these feelings strongly with him. The complex image is what I believe moves the strongest feelings. But how can what seems to be just some half-wit cult movie create images that have these types of strong narratives? He continues:

*"... By combining narratives, themes and titles from well-known works of western art with scenes from the film, and ideas and approaches from contemporary art, I found a rich repository of images that informed, overlapped and contradicted each other; ideas to alter, splice together,*

*reconfigure, and run back through the language of painting*” (Times of Art, Web).

Forkan’s paintings, taken from scenes of the film, are given titles that reference religion and paintings from Renaissance era. Through this context, he allows his paintings to pinpoint these classical references of spirituality and heroism throughout, in somewhat contradicting sources. For example, *The*

*Baptism of Christ*

[Figure 9], a painting taken from a scene in the movie where the Dude is being bullied in his bathtub, becomes a metaphor and no longer simply

a snippet from the



Figure 9. Joe Forkan  
*Baptism of Christ*, 2011  
Oil on canvas  
Image used with the permission of the artist

film. The painting makes us think differently about the situation and naturally compares the Dude to a spiritual figure.

In biblical art, the unshaven and men with long hair are depicted as men of God. By today's standards, such men are often seen as unsavory type. The Dude is playing these opposing forces against each other, and allowing his role and character to become an abnormal hero of sorts. The Dude is definitely not the traditional type of hero. This anti-heroism found in the character of the Dude sets the scene for a whimsical look at traditional hero painting.



## 4 CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS TO HEROIC PAINTING

### 4.1 The Development of My Interests in Heroes

My interest in heroes such as the Dude stems from my childhood. My cousin had a great influence on me during my grade school years in Springfield, Missouri. He and I were very similar in appearance; we shared blonde hair and blue eyes. I looked up to him in many ways and mirrored his behavior. I wore the clothes that he wore and combed my hair like his. It seemed to me that he was an older version of myself.

Beyond the superficial similarities of looks and habits, we also shared a love of comics and he encouraged that passion in me. His comic book collection was huge and seemed to grow by the day. He consistently spent whole paychecks at the local comic book shop. At first, only his closet was full, but eventually his room was overflowing with a truly massive collection.

Following his path, I mowed neighbors' yards and started spending my hard earned money on my own collection. *Spider-Man*, *Superman*, *Batman*, and almost any other hero excited my young imagination. I would waste hours of class time drawing pictures of Spider-man swinging from his web on my notebooks. I had collectibles everywhere: posters in my room, figurines on my shelves, and – of course – my comics in the closet. The books were particularly special to me and I took good care of them.

In spite of my determination to delve deeply into the worlds my comics contained, the real world called and I had to grow up. First high school and then

college took up my time. My prized collection of comics was boxed and placed in the closet, forgotten.

Undergraduate school introduced me to academic drawing and painting. I caught on to the lessons fast, but there was deeper knowledge to be gained. My professor, Stan Sante, encouraged my budding talent and taught me many poetic things about how to see and how to think about seeing. I didn't know at the time, but I was, in a way, participating in a revival of a grand tradition in art, something about which Professor Sante was very passionate. In class he talked to us extensively about 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings and great masters such as Caravaggio, Velázquez [Figure 10], and Rubens. As Professor Sante guided me through my first real studio practice, I thought about the connections between the master studies I was assigned and my former childhood heroes from the comics (Schmidt).<sup>10</sup> The idea that contemporary superheroes and the traditions to which they referred could be connected to high Renaissance painting stayed with me. As I moved into graduate school, I began to contemplate a more fully realized exploration of these ideas. This time I wouldn't



Figure 10. Diego Velázquez  
*Mars*, 1639  
Oil on canvas, 181 x 99 cm  
Museo del Prado  
ARTstor  
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10 For an excellent overview of how heroes from the past can be matched with hero types from modern day comics, see Rob Schmidt of Blue Corn Comics compare Hercules with Superman, Wonder-Woman with the Amazons, etc. (Schmidt).

stop with mere studies of masterworks; I would try to understand and develop the connections by creating new paintings that took from the history of comics and superheroes as they did from my heroes of painting. Though it took me a while, eventually I made my way to the first painting of the series, *Batman after Velázquez* [Figure 20].

Stemming from these ideas, a body of work has been created with the spirit of heroism. The following sections will go on to detail each of these paintings.

## 4.2 The Guitar Hero

*Apollo and Daphne*, a Italian Renaissance painting by Dosso Dossi [Figure 11], struck my eye the first time I saw it. This painting was inspired by the story of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Apollo is singing his love for Daphne. My painting, *The Guitar Hero* [Figure 12], is based off Dossi's work. In *The Age of Fable*, Thomas Bulfinch discussed the Greek god of Apollo:

*"Apollo and Daphne is a story from ancient Greek mythology. The curse of Apollo, the god of the sun and music, was brought onto him when he insulted the young Eros (a.k.a. Cupid) for playing with bow and arrows. Apollo was a great warrior and said to him, "What have you to do with warlike weapons, saucy boy? Leave them for hands worthy of them. Behold the conquest I have won by means of them over the vast serpent who stretched his poisonous body over acres of the plain! Be content with*

*your torch, child, and kindle up your flames, as you call them, where you will, but presume not to meddle with my weapons" (Bullfinch 6).*

What ends up happening is that Apollo is shot with Cupid's love arrow, and he falls desperately in love with Daphne. However, Daphne got shot with a leaded arrow that filled her with hatred for Apollo. So he chased her around, but she would run away from his attempts to persuade her romantically. Apollo,

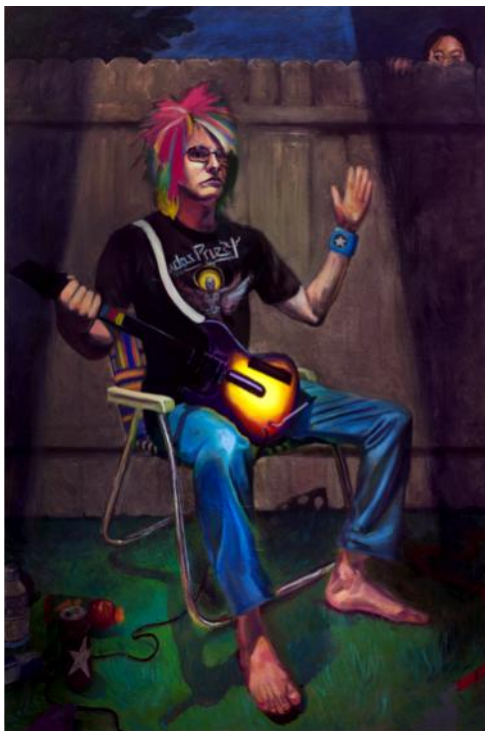


Figure 12. Jake Johnson  
*The Guitar Hero*, 2011-2012  
Oil on canvas glued on board, 78" x 48"  
Collection of the artist

as the god  
of music,

sparked my interest from today's popular video game - Guitar Hero. As I sit and play my game in my back yard, the neighbor girl peaks beyond the fence to listen, so I captured this scene in my Guitar Hero painting.

The expression of music through the composition has been an interesting idea to me. Manet's flute player painting, *The Fifer*, is a good example of artwork trying to



Figure 11. Dosso Dossi  
*Apollo and Daphne*, 1525  
Oil on canvas, 191 x 116 cm  
Galleria Borghese  
ARTstor  
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capture music [Figure 13]. The ability for the image to suggest to the viewer a sound has intrigued me since my undergraduate professor Stanton Sante gave lectures on the subject. "Think about what we see, and how we can infer other senses through our visual field," he would say. "Think about that smell of coffee in the morning, how might you paint that sense of taste/smell? What about a musician's music? What would that look like?" I attempted to resolve these questions in my painting.

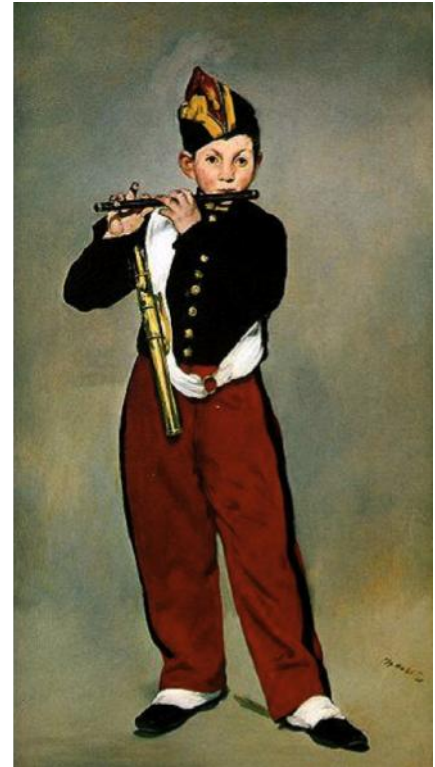


Figure 13. Edouard Manet  
*The Fifer*, 1866  
Oil on canvas, 161 x 97 cm  
Musee d'Orsay  
ARTstor  
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### 4.3 Spider-Man and the Spider Wonder

A painting of Hercules by Guido Reni leads way to a few more ideas for my work. Reni was a 16th century mythological painter in Bologna (Chisholm). His Hercules versus the Hydra [Figure 14] was what I felt to be one of the most idealized images for my work: The hero who is basked in bright light with fabric flowing behind him, swings the club with his muscular physique and slays the monster. In studying the hero and villain in Reni's painting, I was thinking about the relationships between modern heroes and these from the classical examples. Flowing fabrics, muscular builds and other surprising similarities have popped up.



I was fascinated by the idea that the characters of Spider-man and Doctor Octopus could be used to replace such characters as Hercules and the Hydra in this scene. Spider-man with his supernatural strength and Doctor Octopus with his tentacle become an appealing comparison between these characters.

I was at the time looking at another contemporary artist, John Jacobsmeyer, who is also using these comic characters



Figure 14. Guido Reni  
*Hercules Killing the Hydra of Lerna*, 1620-1621  
Oil on canvas  
Musée du Louvre, Paris, France  
ARTstor  
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in his  
fine



Figure 15. Jake Johnson  
*Spider-man and Doctor Octopus (after Reni)*, 2010  
Oil on birch, 18" x 12"  
Collection of the artist

artwork. One work that intrigues me particularly is a painting of the Hulk [Figure 16]. In Jacobsmeyer's scene the big green guy behind the Hulk, is the landscape of New York. One of the most interesting signifier that all of these paintings had in common was the fact that they were always placed in a landscape that indicates the time period, usually with flowing fabric and plants around. These were symbols, so here in my scene,

Spider-man is the reference for Hercules, and New York in the background is the reference for the new landscape where the modern day battle takes place.

After finishing *Spider-man* and *Doctor Octopus* (after Reni) [Figure 15], I realized that it did not function the way I originally wanted since the size of the composition is too closely related



Figure 16 John Jacobsmeier  
*Superhero Lonely*, 2004-2006  
Oil on canvas  
Image used with the permission of the artist



Figure 17. Jake Johnson  
*The Spider-Wonder Versus the 7 Headed Hydra*, 2011  
Oil on canvas, 68" x 54"  
Collection of the artist

to comic books. I needed something more real, and I wanted to propel this scene into something that was more relevant to life. So I thought of a more localized setting where the battle could take place and could also connect to my other pieces. I also wanted to make the characters more real and present my heroes as an average person. So I sketched up another composition with my own character

– *The Spider-Wonder Versus the Hydra* [Figure 17]. The Spider-Wonder now references Spider-man and the Hercules. However, this character is quite different from the original source characters, in fact, it is the opposite, an anti-heroic figure. In face, an in-direct approach is taken in this painting as Spider-Man is referenced on his t-shirt. A drawing pinned to the wall of Doctor Octopus suggests a relationship to the vacuum cleaner, which is also a reference to the mythological creature of the hydra.

#### 4.4 The Drunken Superman

Of all the painters who painted mythological scenes, I perceive Peter Paul Rubens among the top. He was a supreme Baroque master working in the same period as Velazquez in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Baroque style reflected on movement, energy, and color to provoke sensuality. His subject matter was mostly mythological and often times he would even go as far to show the darker side of the heroes presented (Vlieghe). I felt it is obvious



Figure 18. Peter Paul Rubens  
*Drunk Hercules Led by a Nymph and Satyr*, 1612-1614  
Oil on canvas  
Gemäldegalerie (Dresden, Germany)  
ARTstor  
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that his painting, *Drunken Hercules Led by a Nymph and Satyr* [Figure 18], showed this anti-heroic side.

Explained in Wechsler's *Gods and Goddesses in Art and Legend*: "In the figure of Hercules, or Heracles, as he was known to the Greeks, we have truly a subject suited for the making of myths. Above all else, he was a symbol of strength and fearlessness. By most standards, he was certainly no ideal hero, for he was not overly bright, he was sensitive only on occasion, and he had an uncontrollable temper. Along with his good deeds, he caused much evil in the course of his life. (Wechsler)"

The heroic figure of Hercules is a fantastic subject for evil deeds — as a hero by day, an evildoer by night, or so it seems, I felt that this type of character could be a highlight in my work, i.e., a hero who does not always do the right thing. Far from perfect, he almost becomes anti-heroic in this setting. In comparing heroes I thought of Superman. Who would be a better character to run through the mud? Superman, aka Clark Kent, is your picture-perfect superhero — always there to save the day and to do the right thing. Even Superman has a

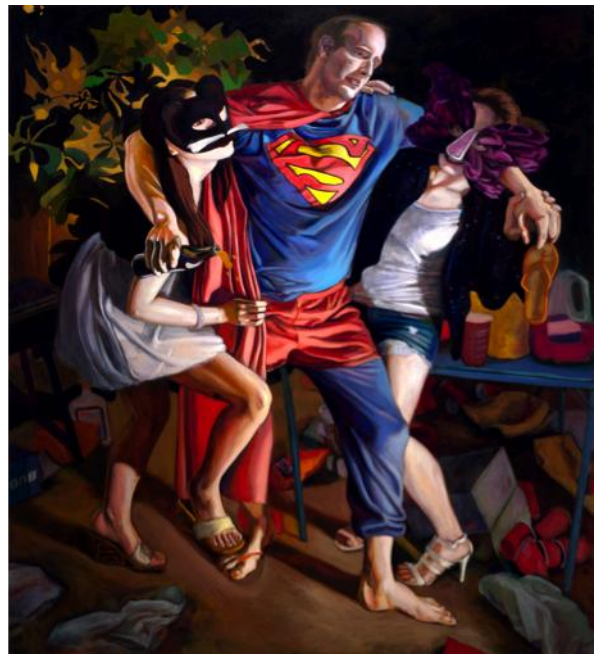


Figure 19. Jake Johnson  
*The Drunken Superman*, 2012  
Oil on canvas, 72" x 66"  
Collection of the artist

bad day, and I wanted to represent that in my last painting in the series, *The Drunken Superman* [Figure 19].

Although the characters share similar supernatural powers, Superman is almost the complete opposite of Hercules. The origin of both characters exhibit similarities and contrasts: Hercules was the son of a God, and Superman is from a different planet. Both are bestowed with superhuman strength, and both are required to fight monsters and save the planet. Yet it seemed that Superman was always an extremely good hero. I felt that Superman's character could use a transformation similar to how Rubens presented the character in Hercules. Other Renaissance artists such as Reni presented the Hero saving the day and slaying the monster, but Ruben's interpretation was to capture the other side of the hero, the darker side. Modeled after Ruben, in my painting, I also want to capture the darker side of the Superman character.

#### **4.5 Batman After Velazquez**

Considered not only Spain's greatest painter, but also one of the greatest artists of all time, Diego Velasquez was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish court painter who worked for the King Phillip IV during the Baroque period.

Diego Rodriguez de Silva Velasquez was born in Seville, Spain. At a young age, his art teacher, Francisco Pacheco, had high hopes for him and allowed him to marry his daughter. After getting married at the age of 19, Velazquez moved to Madrid. There he was presented with the opportunity for

employment at the royal court, and was later given the chance of painting a portrait of King Philip IV. The King enjoyed the painter's work and became one of his major patrons (Velázquez or Velásquez, Diego).<sup>11</sup>

Velazquez's work has been an inspiration for painters to come after him, including other famous artists such as Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, and Salvador Dali. Although his painting is over 400 years old, it influenced me as well.<sup>12</sup> A postcard of his painting, *Mars* [Figure 20], was posted in the art studio at my university. Much time was spent discovering the hidden truths behind this masterpiece. The postcard always hung there, speaking to me silently as those dark eyes stared at me behind the mask. This is Velazquez it spoke, one of the greatest artists of all time. "OK," I said knowingly, "that doesn't look that hard, I can do that, what if that were batman?" Well, what started off as a joke escalated into a life-sized master study.



Figure 20. Diego Velázquez  
*Mars*, 1639  
Oil on canvas, 181 x 99 cm  
Museo del Prado  
ARTstor  
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In the work, an intimate scene presents us with a costumed man resting on the edge of a bed. He wears on his chest a symbol for a hero of our time, although an adult playing dress-up in the solitude of his own bedroom reveals the

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12 See Dale Brown's online summary of *The World of Velázquez: 1599–1660* for more information.

opposite of the traditional idea of hero. He becomes a loser, or even an antiheroic figure. This painting reveals a childhood fantasy that ends in a sad (adult) reality.

My Batman painting [Figure 21] is based off *Mars*, a painting by Velázquez. In his painting, Velázquez reveals a sense of humor in the painting as the famous war god is portrayed here not as a strong warrior (as his armor is stripped from him on the floor) but as a weaker, more vulnerable person. Here Mars is not a fighter, but a lover as this is a scene borrowed from Greek mythology where the warrior god has been caught in romance with the love



Figure 21. Jake Johnson  
*Batman after Velázquez*, 2011  
Oil on canvas glued on birch, 73" x 38"  
Collection of the artist

goddess Venus. Rumors state that this painting was also a portrait of King Phillip IV, who was known to be the flirtatious type with the ladies. One of the strongest themes in Velázquez's painting that made his works different from artists before him was that of banal humanity — the mythological god was represented as an average person. In essence, Velázquez takes a god from above and brings him down, making him human as he stripped his armor to the floor. In my Batman painting, I attempt to meet Velázquez in the middle, by rising

him from below — from a pile of comic books on the floor to become a human being.

In my attempt to create the ultimate of master studies, this picture is reconstructed to the exact dimensions of the 400-year-old painting. A decade of study of academic painting, drawing, and composition brought me to this point. Materials and techniques were studied and reproduced to the best of my abilities. For example, single colors are applied in multiple layers, allowing a translucent mixing to create the depth of value. Color patterns are reversed and objects are replaced within the composition with metaphorical updates. A helmet, which hides Mar's face in shadow, is replaced with a mask. The costume becomes one with the figure as it is painted with the same veracity of the flesh.

My work is a continuation of the tradition of heroic painting, to glorify in its academic roots, to participate in its history but also to contemporize it with a hero of our time. I make light of this tradition by reconstructing a theatrical setting by which my childhood hero can come to life. Batman, whom I define as a derivate from Mars, was the mythological God of War. He is also known as the Dark Knight. He strikes fear into his victims and wages war against evildoers. I pair him (Batman) with his ancient mythological equivalent (Mars) to better understand the cultural significance of these hero types throughout ancient time and the present. I test my hand against the old masters to rediscover what has been 'lost'. This brings a new light, both literally and metaphorically, to our comic book characters – the heroes of our time.

## 4.6 The Triumph of The Dude

*The Drunkards*, also known as the *Triumph of Bacchus* [Figure 22], was a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting done by Velázquez for King Phillip. The painting depicts the Greek god Bacchus, the god of wine, bestowing wine upon eight men. I incorporate this theme in my painting, *The Triumph of the Dude* [Figure 23], after Velazquez's work and also incorporate a modern day hero of sorts.



Figure 22. Diego Velázquez  
*Triumph of Bacchus (The Drunkers)*, 1629  
Oil on canvas, 165 x 225 cm  
Museo del Prado  
ARTstor  
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Thomas Taylor (1758-1835), the English Platonist

who was the first to translate Aristotle and Plato into English, wrote about Bacchus in his *Oracles and Mysteries* (Taylor).<sup>13</sup> He portrayed Bacchus as having been bullied (actually tortured) by the gods, but who survived to abide with a lot of help from his friends, i.e., other gods. This is an extremely simplified generalization of Taylor's very scholarly study but one can see how it does indeed make Bacchus an archetype of his contemporary – the Dude from the Cohen Brother's film *The Big Lebowski*.

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13 For a closer look of how Taylor's works are being promoted by the Prometheus Trust via the web and print, see the *Oracles and Mysteries, On the Mysteries of Bacchus* referred to in Works Cited under (Taylor) for the link to his the Prometheus Trust website.



My art professor agreed to pose as the Dude for my painting and I also portrayed myself as someone to receive blessings from my professor (or the Dude). Since I am an artist, I am presented with the traditional painter's palette alongside the symbols and artifacts that represent the Lebowski such as a bowling ball, a cream carton, and the rug. These items also coincide with similar items in Velazquez's Bacchus painting, creating elements that play from the original. The rug really brought the room and the composition



Figure 23. Jake Johnson  
*The Triumph of The Dude*, 2011-2012  
Oil on canvas, 68" x 43"  
Collection of the artist

together which refer to the recurring joke of “the rug really tied the room together” in *The Big Lebowski* movie.

*The Triumph of the Dude* presents us with some sort of “back-yard” cult that is humorous in a glorifying way. An extract from Eltan Kensky’s article in the American popular culture journal explains the heroic qualities of the Dude: “While Bunny’s supposed kidnapping makes the Dude an immediate, physical savior, the film contains two other prospective saviors or, more accurately, types for Jesus. (Kensky)” Kensky finds another ‘savior’ in the character of Jesus Quintana (from the film), a “comical.... (and) flamboyant bowler.” The character is a bowler with nimble grace and strong bowling skills. “When the Dude incredulously uses the exclamation, ‘Jesus,’ in response to Quintana, Quintana

counters with 'you said it, man' making the connection with Christ explicit (Kensky).”

In my painting, the way the paint is handled on the Dude’s robe is in a similar fashion to how Velazquez treated the flesh of Bacchus. The characters in my work create a striking comparison between the Dude who is not very heroic compared to the mythical God of Wine. Still, the painting combines inspirations from Velazquez and the Cohen Brothers. The scene that Velazquez gives us in his painting of Bacchus represents a mythological scene – the wine-god bestows upon the peasants his love, and the workers embrace the strong drink to get a temporary release from their hard work. Bacchus was the kind of hero in myth who wasn't really a good role-model.<sup>14</sup> He was a hero who went about giving wine and making his followers drunk. He didn't really save the day; he was the god of intoxication. He wasn't your typical god flying in the chariot slaying the monster.

Nevertheless, I found the Cohen Brothers character of 'the Dude' to be in direct relation with this type of “hero”. By taking the original scene by Velazquez, narrowing it down to a certain character, inversing the composition and updating the environment, I gained the historical ground needed to present this character in a relevant yet amusing way. There's a theory about composition that the perfect painting should work in inverse. For me, the Velazquez painting proved that theory to be true. Because of the original image by Velazquez, the idea of a

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14 The Spanish national art museum located in Madrid which houses the Velazquez speaks about Bacchus in art. L. Cirlot (org.), *Museo del Prado II*, Col. «Museos del Mundo», Volume 7, Espasa, 2007. ISBN 978-84-674-3810-9, pp. 20-21



mythological hero, imparting some type of god-like characteristic, transcends to the Dude in my painting.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Apparently, motivated by a love for art history, culture and theatricality in great art from the Renaissance and Baroque periods, I strive to address the notion of 'dying art forms,' reclaiming technique and knowledge of the past for new exploration in the present. My goal is to prove that heroic painting tradition has not been exhausted, but entering new realms, and my painting is a continuation of that tradition. I attempt to glorify its academic roots, to participate in its history, but more importantly, to contemporize this tradition with heroes of our time. I make light of these traditions by reconstructing a theatrical setting by which my childhood heroes can come to life, I test my hand against the old masters to rediscover what has been 'lost'. I hope that my effort brings a new light, both literally and metaphorically, to both the heroes of our time and the great tradition of heroic painting.

As a painter studying the masterpieces from the art history, I understand in my heart the fundamental need to express spirituality through painting. I feel connected to those Renaissance and Baroque artists by studying their paintings and develop my paintings from the inspiration of their masterworks. I felt that my heroes of today should be given the same kind of emotion that was expressed through our past heroes, so that the heroic tradition can live on. To achieve this emotion, I believe, technical study of the masterwork and knowledge of western

art were essential. By using the masters' work as a platform, I made this study of master painting relevant for today through the use of new heroes. I believe in the exceptional craft of past works and want such craftsmanship to be used in art making today. I want my work to convey the idea that classical western painting traditions from the Renaissance and Baroque aren't a dying art form.<sup>15</sup> I want my work to express a past glory as a present thing and painting of this nature can keep expanding.

I hope my paintings could contribute to the revival of traditional western painting. Through my artwork, I have achieved a humorous analogy of classical works of art that provides a history lesson through contemporized venues, which offers a revitalization of past romantics of the Baroque era and extends them into the present. I also hope that my work lays the groundwork for future development in contemporary figurative painting (and possibly comic or graphic art). In my work, I wanted to raise and challenge specific questions such as these – How can the theatrical paintings of the past come alive in today's characters? Can we raise our own myths up to the level that these painters of the past gave their myths? Can we still use the techniques set forth by the old masters to capture the experience of today? These are the challenges that I wanted to meet through my painting, and I hope that my work not only gives insight to possible answers to these questions but also give way to further inquiries in this field.

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<sup>15</sup> Other contemporary artists such as Myron Barnstone agree with me. Myron believes in good art today, and as a senior instructor, he has sought to create a knowledge of this past history of art in the contemporary society.

In summary, this thesis has covered a general history of mythological forms originated in western culture and has offered an explanation of the modern-day fascination with contemporary mythology. Through a study of Joseph Campbell's theory on hero and some insight into untraditional new 'cult' ideas, we find that our imagined heroes today are crossing mythos-spiritual boundaries into an area which some might call blasphemy. The research also delved into the minds of Baroque and contemporary artists and explored their use of mythological constructs in their work. All of these elements brought together produced a body of painting that is appreciative to the grand history of art, at the same time, respectful to the new forms of creativity.

Through this research, several elements have been introduced that would allow for further investigation. Firstly, I would hope more insight be given to the cult organizations, which have sprung up from contemporary fiction. Our society today is obviously still in need of heroes, although it can be questionable whether the Dude is a good role model. A religious scholar might be able to give some valuable insight into this phenomenon. Secondly, a strong and recurrent theme in my work is the importance of a solid understanding of craft, technique, and skill of the Renaissance and Baroque masters. Through my research and a number of contemporary artists who I have stumbled upon, the one impresses me the most is Myron Barnstone. Barnstone discusses with his students the poor quality of art in American school system, claiming that the nation is full of visually illiterate people.

Illiteracy is a big deal — imagine if one couldn't read, imagine if one couldn't see! The school system, which I have experienced firsthand from the elementary through college in the Midwest, lacks in the arts. My high-school art teacher, Mrs. Tracey Bruton, told me about her meetings where school administrators wanted to completely eliminate art classes. Even at the college level, the facilities are the poorest of the entire campus. Art faculty members are underpaid, without an appropriate system to teach, and some lack appropriate training because the resources simply haven't been available to them.

These problems extend beyond the classroom as students are discouraged by family and society in general from honing their artistic skills. As Patricia Cohen, a reporter for the *New York Times*, pointed out in a recent article, "Jobs are almost nonexistent, and those fortunate enough to get them are generally underpaid (Cohen)." A better understanding of drawing and painting techniques should be brought to the general public. The humanities is one of the most precious gems of our culture, it must be saved and developed if we are to continue to strive for what the good Lord meant us to be.

## **PAINTINGS & INSTALLATION VIEWS FROM THE MFA THESIS EXHIBITION**

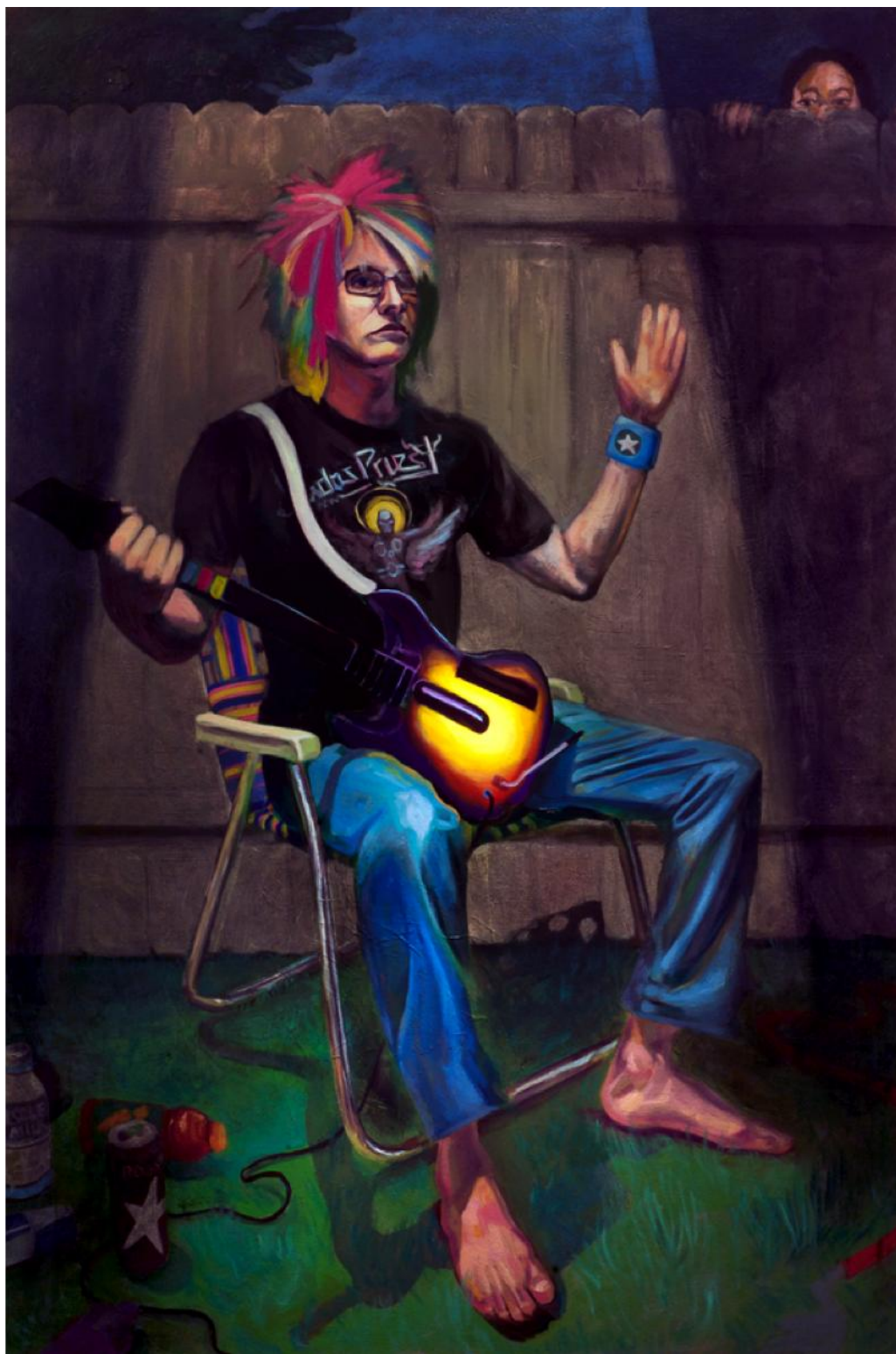


Figure 24. Jake Johnson  
*The Guitar Hero*, 2011-2012  
Oil on canvas glued on board, 78" x 48"  
Collection of the artist



Figure 25. Jake Johnson  
*Spider-man and Doctor Octopus (after Reni)*, 2010  
Oil on birch, 18" x 12"  
*Collection of the artist*





Figure 26. Jake Johnson  
*The Spider-Wonder Versus the 7-Headed Hydra*, 2011-2012  
Oil on canvas, 68" x 54"  
Collection of the artist





Figure 27. Jake Johnson  
*The Drunken Superman*, 2012  
Oil on canvas, 72" x 66"  
Collection of the artist



Figure 28. Jake Johnson  
*The Triumph of the Dude*, 2011-2012  
Oil on canvas, 68" x 43"  
Collection of the artist



Figure 29. Jake Johnson  
*Batman after Velázquez*, 2011  
Oil on canvas glued on birch, 73" x 38"  
Collection of the artist





Figure 30. Jake Johnson, MFA Thesis Exhibition Installation View I, 2012



Figure 31. Jake Johnson, MFA Thesis Exhibition Installation View II, 2012

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