

The Knight's Tale



RDS Gallery
Dunedin, New Zealand

Responding to the World's Transmutations: The Art of Marie Strauss

By Alistair Fox

An essay on the occasion of the exhibition

The Knight's Tale – “Joy after Woe, and Woe after Gladness”

New drawings, etchings, ceramics, and sculptures

by Marie Strauss

1–31 August 2019

RDS Gallery, Dunedin

Responding to the World's Transmutations: The Art of Marie Strauss

The works in Marie Strauss's new exhibition were prompted as a reaction to the Christchurch mosque massacre on March 15 2019, when a sociopath, inspired by international white supremacist hate groups, killed 51 Muslims as they worshipped at Friday Prayer. Strauss felt moved by her horror that such an event could occur in a country like New Zealand to give expression not only to her own feelings, but also to the sense of collective trauma experienced by all New Zealanders, and many others around the world.

Her new works, in four different forms, reflect inspirations that reach back into the late Middle Ages. The title of the exhibition and those of many of the individual pieces are drawn from the tale told by the Knight at the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), which recounts the tragic rivalry between two friends that leads to

the destruction of their friendship. The content of the pieces, and the manner in which it is presented, owes much to the painted hellscapes and apocalyptic visions of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). On the other hand, Strauss's images also evoke memories of South Africa, her country of origin. Taken together, the co-presence of historical and contemporary allusions impart a rare universality to these works, suggestive of a comment on the human condition itself.

The Mixed-Media Works on Paper

The three painted mixed-media works in the show depict animated, jubilant monkeys, carrying severed heads on stakes, riding bulls amidst a frenzy of carnage. These images arouse associations that invest them with a great deal of symbolic resonance. There is an obvious contrast between the two animals involved: the bull is solid and grounded, a symbol of power and brute force, while the monkey is light and aerial, associated with agility, unpredictability, and

capriciousness. **[FIG 01]** **[FIG 02]** Together, they suggest a diabolical conjunction of two destructive forces that have been let loose on the world. The monkeys also assume a role that recalls the demons in Bosch's paintings that torment the souls in Hell. Significantly, on occasions they wear the emblems of social institutions – a crown and a bishop's mitre – suggesting the role of politics and the state in the disasters being depicted. **[FIG 02]**

The manner in which these painted drawings is presented is as important as their content. As in a painting by Bosch, they are packed full of figures deployed in a vertical arrangement, but against a background of colours of an unusual intensity. Not only are these colours expressive of powerful, perturbed emotions, but they also suggest the fires of Hell and the violence of the Apocalypse. In one of the drawings, the sense of danger and dread is reinforced by the presence of spotted hyenas with their tongues lolling in anticipation of prey, and a vulture anticipating the aftermath of battle. **[FIG 03]**

The method Strauss adopts contributes to the effectiveness of these phantasmatic expressions of potential disaster. She creates her effect by producing an etching, pasting imagery cut from the original etching on a sheet of paper, and then by drawing around and over the collage with different media. The use of mixed-media thus both enhances and obscures the drawing, underlining the pervasive feeling of chaos depicted in the work. Furthermore, the use of colour and the technique and dripping/running paint supports the concept of bloodiness and mess.

Altogether, these powerful works comments on the state of our world, a world that has not changed, that is always at war, and that is defined by senseless, barbaric acts, which are endlessly repeated – confirming the philosophical conclusion voiced by Theseus at the end of *The Knight's Tale*, that the world is in a state of constant mutability, in which joy will follow woe, and woe will follow gladness.



Joy after Woe (Marie Strauss, 2019, mixed media, 550mm x 770mm)

Other Forms

All the other art forms represented in the exhibition pick up the themes and motifs of the mixed-media collages, but in ways that exploit the potential of the particular form adopted to express aspects of the overarching vision that the artist wishes to emphasize.

In the series of etchings, the sharp lines produced by the drypoint process, combined with a reduction in the number of colours to just a few highlights, creates an impression of starkness, even harshness, that correlates to the emotions these images are meant to evoke. Sometimes a single element is highlighted, as in *Bull One*; at other times the etching juxtaposes a number of motifs in a montage, as in *Folly*, and *Folly and Mask*. **[FIG 04]**

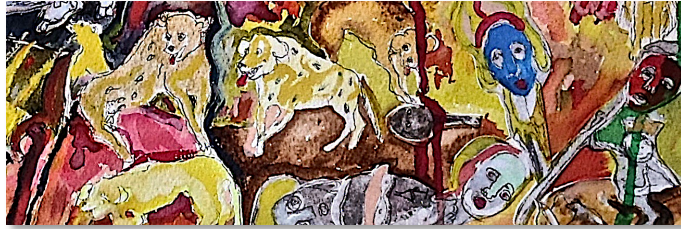
The same motifs appear on the coiled porcelain vases, which provide a white background serving as field that the artist

could draw “into and onto,” in much the same way as she would in a drypoint etching. For Strauss, the choice of this form had a philosophical as well as an aesthetic motivation:

“This method of creating the drawing becomes part of its concept, that of ‘writing on stone.’ I draw on a material that becomes stone, once high-fired. The images, permanent, and thus foreboding, comment on the senseless repetition of war. I underline the connection between violence and victory by creating a background (the pot) in the shape of a trophy.” **[FIG 05]**

With the title “After the Battle,” the ceramic sculptures in glazed porcelain, while retaining the bulls and monkeys motif, sound a different note. This time, the figures are black, which is the colour of mourning and grief. Moreover, the monkeys, which were exultant when they were creating mayhem in the collages and etchings, are no longer jubilant, but suffering various states of agony or dejection. The figure named

03



Detail from *Woe after Gladness* (Marie Strauss, 2019, mixed media, 550 x 700mm)

04



Folly (Marie Strauss, 2019, drypoint etching, 155mm x 205mm)

O5



Thus Rides This Conqueror (Marie Strauss, 2019, etched porcelain, 230mm x 160mm)

06



Theseus (Marie Strauss, 2019, glazed porcelain, 140mm x 200mm x 90mm)

07



After the Battle One (Marie Strauss, 2019, glazed porcelain, 140mm x 200mm)

Theseus has his head raised and thrown back in a howl, while even the bull has an expression that looks uncertain and perplexed. **[FIG 06]** In *After the Battle One* both the two figures on the bull and the bull itself have their heads hanging disconsolately. **[FIG 07]**

The figures in these sculptures are on a journey that is incomplete, and one involving a future that is as yet unknown. Rather than blazoning a victorious pageant as the etchings had done, these figurines seem more like funerary ornaments that archaeologists might find in prehistoric burial sites, which once again suggests the cyclical nature of the troubling events that Marie Strauss's art works so powerfully portray.

Art with this depth of complexity invites the viewer, like *Theseus* in *The Knight's Tale*, to reflect upon the nature of things, especially as far as the existence of threatening or fear-inducing events are concerned. Joy is depicted in these works – the joy of the monkeys as they exult in their success –

but joy is inevitably followed by sadness. Strauss has chosen as the subtitle for this exhibition the words with which *Theseus's* old father, *Aegeus*, describes the world's mutability as he tries to comfort his grieving son: "Joy after woe, and woe after gladness."

The presence of this phrase invites any viewer contemplating the works displayed under its banner to consider how the past might have contributed to the present, and how the present might relate to the future in terms of actions that could be taken to ensure that the horrific events in Christchurch might once again be followed by joy. In short, Strauss's art, by acknowledging the reality of tragedy, asks how our society how it can fulfill *Theseus's* injunction at the end of *The Knight's Tale* – that is, to make true joy out of sorrow – in Chaucer's words, "two sorrows, one perfect joy."

Alistair Fox

August 2019

Cover Image: Folly (Marie Strauss, 2019, drypoint etching, 155mm x 205mm, limited edition of four)

Direct quotations by Marie Strauss from conversations with the author, July 2019. All artwork by Marie Strauss.

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