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## Journeys: The Interpretation of Modern Myth Through Art

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**JOURNEYS:  
THE INTERPRETATION OF MODERN MYTH  
THROUGH ART**

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**Abstract:**

*"Journeys" primarily investigates the interpretation of one form of expression to another; i.e., the visual interpretation of myth through art in terms of the contemporary individual's psychological voyage. The basis for this study comes from the writings of noted scholar Joseph Campbell and others who place myth in the position of the inward, not the outward journey in the quest for human discovery. As Bill Moyers so eloquently states in The Power of Myth, "myths are the stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story..." This research project is realized in its final form as a body of creative work for exhibition purposes. It is of significance to note that for artists, the exhibition of creative research parallels the publication of written research in other fields. The project is an outgrowth of my past work and as a logical extension of that work, this investigation demonstrates a relevance to art in a historical context, as well as an exploration of contemporary artistic and intellectual activity.*

*Karen Dick and Marilyn Nelson*

**Historical Overview**

Myth has a long history of interpretation in art, serving as a vehicle for the conveyance of information. According to Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, one of humankind's greatest feats, the ability to abstract, to make images and symbols, finds its origins in prehistoric cave dwellings, where Paleolithic man was able to fix in place the world of his experience. It is widely speculated that the cave paintings could have functioned in a mythical manner possessing magical meanings for their creators. Since that time, myth has appeared in many forms of art throughout history, yet it is usually seen in the context of the literal; i.e., the ancient adventures of mythological creatures and personae with allegorical references to mankind's journey in the external sense.

As man and technology have evolved, so has myth. Science has disproved many of the literal places and figures of the ancient stories, but the function of myth remains no less important. As written in *The Intellectual Adventures of Ancient Man*, H. and H.A. Frankfort note that the imagery of myth "is nothing less than a carefully chosen cloak for abstract thought. The imagery is inseparable from the thought. It represents the form in which the experience has become conscious."

The impact of myth on man has probably been most fully explored by Joseph Campbell who spent a lifetime investigating the commonality of theme in world myths and their resonance in the search for human consciousness. In fact, the

journey of the hero in myth reflects the journey of every man. As Campbell states in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,

“not the animal world, not the plant world, not the miracle of the spheres, but man himself is now the crucial mystery.”

The inner world of the psyche and the unconscious, especially the nature of dreams, was explored in the early 20th century by the Surrealist art movement. Surrealism, however, was founded in the basis of composing without any preconceived subject or structure. The element of chance, randomness, and coincidence became the basis for intensive study by the Surrealists. Although myth as a theme was more widely investigated by artists from the early ages through the 19th century, the subject is not relegated to works of the past. Contemporary artists of significance, notably Anselm Kiefer, are intermingling the mythological with the real to explain or interpret the nature of the modern world. Kiefer, who is described by art critic Robert Hughes as “the best painter of his generation on either side of the Atlantic,” often uses mythic events as signposts to present his views of physical and human events. My research seeks to creatively explore my concept of modern myth—the adventure of the individual into the unconscious and how that journey parallels that of the ancient tales. For proponents of myth like Campbell, myth serves in the role to reveal a deeper reality and allows man to experience that reality.

### Background

My research into the journey of the individual began in 1998 with a multi-part series, *Passage:Reflection*. This project explored the issues of the transformation of the written word to a visual statement. Text, in the form of poetry, functioned as the basis for the series. The poem was written during a transitional passage of my life, and while self-realization was the motivation for writing, the search for self became the catalyst for artistic expression. The primary question investigated was how could a written work be visually stated without losing the identity or the meaning of the words? The objective of the artistic work was not to illustrate the text but to restate the written word in the form of a visual vocabulary, retaining the emotional and psychological sense associated with the poetry.

The project resulted in a 10 print exhibition series. Each piece of artwork dealt with a particular passage of the poem. (See Addendum 1). The prints were digitally printed and related formally and conceptually through development and technical production. Traditional photography and digital processes were employed to integrate image and text into a “visual language,” designed to reflect the complex layering of the psychological beings that we all remain.

### The Concept and Form

As a student of art history, I have been interested for some time in the study of myth in art. My exploration into the inner self in my previous project in conjunction with a historical concern led me to the current investigation. The concept of interpretation plays a defining role in several aspects of this project. For Joseph Campbell, myth can function as a type of guidepost for the individual in the interpretation of his own life experience. “Anybody going on a journey, inward or outward, to find values, will be on a journey that has been described many times in the myths of mankind...” My objective is not to illustrate stories, but to translate the psychological sense of the inward journey. A point of investigation is how to visually interpret ancient mythology in terms of my own emotional response and my concept of the modern individual’s experience. The journey is not the ancient’s trek to an unknown land but the individual’s quest into the unknown part of his mind.

An approach utilizing painting, photography, and digital imaging is employed. Conceptually, all three mediums have significance to this project. Painting is the oldest of the three—present since the cave dwellers’ time. It might be considered the “original” form of abstraction since it was the method in which Paleolithic man represented his place in the world. Artistically, it is also the most “direct from the hand” of the three working methods used. The historical context of painting is relevant to the exploration of myth of all ages, and the directness of its application is important to my interpretation.

Photography provides a working visual vocabulary. The photograph has the unique ability to reference our experience of the world in a direct manner. In the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition catalogue, *Thinking Print*, it is noted that photography possesses that special ability to create narrative subject matter, suiting the desire to reconnect art and life. Photography is an especially powerful medium for communicating meaning or emotion, and on a conceptual level, photography is the referencing medium for modern man.

The use of digital imaging in concert with painting and photography is especially important. The digital process allows for the creation of imagery often not possible in other mediums. The computer is rapidly changing the face of art, and it has certainly become a standard working tool for artists. My work often involves the transformation of the recognizable into the abstract. For this project, such transformation is analogous to the journey of the individual from the external to the internal world. The computer also allows for the integration of language into art. The language selected has relevance to ancient myths whose themes relate to the contemporary individual, thus reinforcing the parallels of the past to the present.

## Technical Development

My approach to the technical development of "*Journeys*" remains multi-disciplinary as with my previous work; however the conceptualization of my ideas dictates that I expand my thinking into new areas within the digital imaging field. As a digital artist I am rather non-traditional because I use the computer in an interpretive manner. The majority of artists working in this format are interested in creating special effects, thus allowing the computer and its unique capabilities to become less of a means and more of an end. I view the computer simply as another available tool, much like a pencil, pen, or paintbrush.

In my earlier series, the final production pieces are photographically based, and although highly transformed, the work retains a strong sense of the photographic image. (See Addendum 1). Because of my objective to integrate painting into the digital process, I have challenged myself to develop the images in "*Journeys*" in a painterly manner. By expanding my earlier techniques to include direct photographic scans of such subject matter as my hands, I can translate the work to a new form. An unusual juxtaposition of imagery occurs through this method. The "real" three-dimensional object, a hand, loses its identity as an actual entity to become a symbolic image through electronic means.

The image is actually "built" in the computer rather than transforming an existing one, which is very similar to constructing a painting on a canvas. The colors are all mixed in the computer instead of selecting standardized hues from a software program, and each piece has been digitally painted and drawn upon to create the final image. When text is used, it is layered into the piece as an element of composition while retaining its identity for meaning. Once the image is constructed, traditional painting or drawing techniques may be added as the final application, resulting in a mixed-media piece of art.

The final works measuring 25" x 25" are printed on fine art canvas specific to this process. One of the most significant developments in digital art is the relatively recent introduction of archival inks which are employed throughout this work. When digital imaging processes are presented for exhibition, it is essential to maintain image color and stability through the use of fine art archival products developed for long-life application. Long-life products, although expensive, have rapidly expanded the exhibition potential for digitally produced work.

## Project Significance

"*Journeys*" has many areas of significance for me personally and professionally. The project is the culmination of a SILO *Undergraduate Research Fellowship*, which was initiated outside of course work. The research is fully realized in a body of creative work for exhibition, which is one of the principal avenues available to the professional development of an artist, as

the public display of visual work is equivalent to the publication of an author's written work in other fields.

This research incorporates the various areas of my study as an artist with a multiple media approach. As a Bachelor of Fine Arts major with a concentration in graphic design and painting, I have challenged myself to use the tools normally associated with these mediums in very non-traditional manners. My objective in doing so is to create work that is unique unto itself. In other words, the works do not have an obvious digitally imaged appearance. In fact, a measure of success for me can be measured in the form of a question. If the viewer questions the medium as to print or painting, then I have achieved my goal of establishing the process of digital imaging as a means and not an end.

My choice of subject matter for this research offers contemporary significance. We now live in an artistic environment where pure visual content is integrated with personal, emotional, intellectual, and social content. We are in the Postmodern era where the impulse has shifted from strictly style toward the direction of meaning. As curator Deborah Wye observes in *Thinking Print*, the new art world generation will be "using the word 'strategy' as opposed to 'style' to describe an artist's approach. Strategy implies a complex fabric of thinking and planning." New questions in art include not only "what does the work look like," but "what does it mean?"

Our exploding world of technology provides an appropriate backdrop to the individual's search for internal meaning, and this adventure is and always has been worthy of artistic investigation. To create a body of work through the most technologically advanced methods, while attempting to connect us to the most basic mysteries of human experience, provides a rich field for exploration. This research is designed to challenge my thinking in all of these areas; to create art with visual and emotive content; and to develop work that reflects a personal and universal appeal. Hopefully, this work serves as a testament to my personal as well as creative journey.

It seems to me that the only way in which an artist can make his work durable and great is by seeking to arrive at the most direct expression of something actually felt by himself as a part of his own, and so a part of all human experience.

Edward Carpenter  
*Angel's Wings*

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**Examples from the series: "Journeys: The Interpretation of Modern Myth Through Art"**

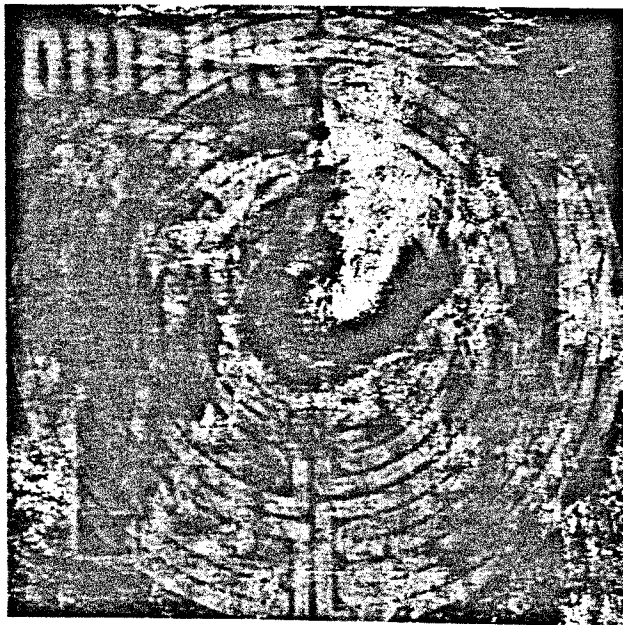
25" x 25" Digital Images on Canvas



*Subtle Reality*

The place or, medium of realization is neither mind nor matter, but that intermediate realm of subtle reality which can only be adequately expressed by the symbol. The symbol is neither abstract nor concrete, neither rational nor irrational, neither real nor unreal.

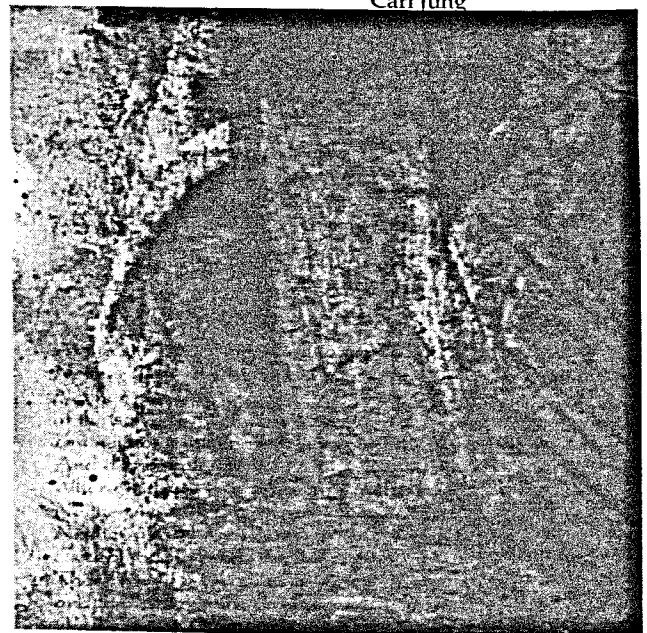
Carl Jung



*The Labyrinth*

...we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

Joseph Campbell

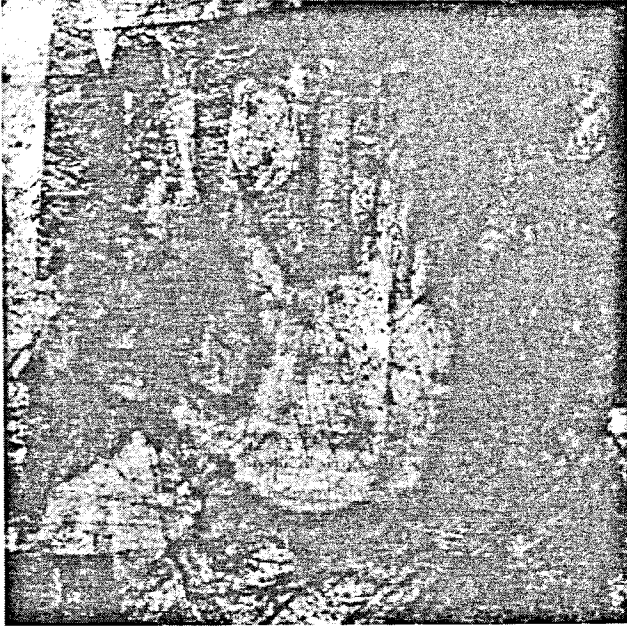


*The Still Point*

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement.

And do not call it fixity, Where the past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

T.S. Eliot



*The Story-Teller*

The depths of the human soul are also "Primordial Times"...For Myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless pattern, the religious formula to which life shapes itself, inasmuch as its characteristics are a reproduction of the Unconscious. There is no doubt about it, the moment when the story-teller acquires the mythical way of looking at things...that moment marks a beginning in his life.

Thomas Mann

#### Faculty Comments:

Ms. Dick's faculty mentor, Associate Professor Marilyn Nelson, made these comments about her project:

*The Interpretation of Modern Myth Through Art*, Karen's newest creative, a series of large scale digitally printed images, extends her work into the intellectual conceptualism of the modern myth, a subject of universal significance for the modern artist. Contemporary artists often strive to integrate pure visual information with emotional, intellectual and social content. Having researched ideas presented by Joseph Campbell and others relative to myths, and their parallels to the journey of modern man, she visually translates the psychological and emotional

sense of the inward journey. This creative quest for self-discovery, Karen believes, functions in both the individual and universal sense.

This research is significant for several reasons. 1) Its multi-disciplinary realization of concepts—juxtaposing and layering her photographs, typography, symbols and color selections and depicting personal as well as universal characteristics and concerns—is timely and important within the realm of contemporary art. 2) This research assumes a multi-disciplinary, non-traditional approach by incorporating photography, painting, and digital imaging. All three media have conceptual significance to the project. 3) The utilization of the computer as a working tool is significant in today's art world as digital images have become accepted as a valid form of art. Karen demonstrates an unusual use of this tool. Where most artists are interested in the effects produced by the computer, Karen is interested in discovering creative uses of software to realize her concepts, to juxtapose her photographs, typography, and color selections to depict expressive characteristics. 4) This sustained and concentrated effort producing high quality work is ambitious and unusual for an undergraduate art student.

In her paper, Karen's understanding of her creative concepts and the media employed for visualization of such concepts is defined in a clear, concise, and organized format. To translate the creative process into writing is a struggle for many artists, but Karen has a strong conceptual and visual reason for each symbol, image, texture, shape, and technique incorporated within her digital images. This understanding of the work does not inhibit the possibilities of spontaneous discoveries during the working process, but provides a knowledgeable background contributing to the ability to discuss the work. The mythological and historical basis, along with the contemporary applications of her work is also well defended.

Publication of Karen's paper in *Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Journal of Undergraduate Research* is a logical extension of the recognition she has recently received. Karen's ability to articulate and defend her creative research won her two prestigious undergraduate awards during the last year. She received one of six university wide Undergraduate Excellence in Research Awards at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and a statewide SILO Advisory Council's Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF). These two research papers resulted in two bodies of digital prints reflecting concepts unique for each series of images. Finally, Karen has already demonstrated her ability to successfully formally propose and complete an extensive research paper and project.

**Donald Harrington**, Professor of Art History, had this to say about Ms. Dick's work:

Karen was ideally suited to undertake this work, not only because of her superior talents as painter, photographer and art historian, but also because of her deep interest in modern interpretations of myth. Mythology, which preoccupied artists from ancient times through the 19th Century, has been largely neglected by modern artists, although the great myths, particularly those having to do with the idea of a journey, have so much to say to any contemporary artist in search of a significant theme.

Karen Dick is not an art history major, but she has taken every possible course that I have offered in the subject over the past five years, and she has far surpassed her peers in each of those classes. Her grades in my classes have always been A-plus. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that in my forty years as an art history teacher, I have never known her equal, let alone anyone more devoted to the subject. Her independent research paper, dealing with pop artist Jasper Johns' treatment of the American flag, remains the single best paper ever submitted in art history at the University of Arkansas.

**Kristin Musgnug**, Associate Professor of Art, wrote about Ms. Dick's work as follows:

Karen is one of the most outstanding students in the Art Department, and her project is distinguished for its intellectual depth and artistic mastery. Not only is she gifted artistically, but the seriousness of her inquiry makes her a role model for other students. This is a project suitable for exhibition, which in the field of art, is the equivalent of publication.

The project is a thoughtful and sophisticated one which connects new technologies in art making with one of the oldest and most enduring expressions of human culture. Like many art media, computer graphics programs are relatively easy to learn but difficult to master. Karen draws on extensive experience with these media and her work is of professional quality.

Karen's investigations take her to the forefront of what is happening in art today, utilizing some of the many possibilities offered by electronic media. Use of the computer is transforming the art world, and I am excited and pleased to support the work of a student in this area. The field of contemporary art is increasingly dominated by artists who move freely among various media, not confining themselves to just one or two. Combining the media of painting and photography with digital imaging testifies to Karen's abilities to think creatively across the range of media.

I also strongly support Karen's ambitious choice of subject matter. The mythic journey of self-discovery

is a large subject to tackle, but it is also a richly resonant one, allowing for work which is both visually exciting and intellectually demanding. Karen is that rare art student with both artistic and intellectual

Departmental Chairman, **Michael Peven**, also praises Ms. Dick's efforts:

I've known Karen as a student in our Art Department for the last 3 years. While here, Karen has shown exceptional promise as an independently-minded artist with a strong commitment to the creation of meaningful works. Karen has also exhibited remarkable energy and enthusiasm in her pursuit of the B.F.A. degree, taking on numerous extramural projects for the department and others as adjunct to her regular course of studies. These are invariably rewarding and mutually benefit Karen with further professional types of experiences and the clients who receive superior quality artistic designs, posters, announcements and other works. Karen is exceptionally creative and intellectually robust, as manifested in the works that she produces.

Karen's proposal, articulating an project dealing with a body of creative works for exhibition purposes, describes her interest in the interpretation of myth through art and the relationships she hopes to draw between modern and ancient myths, which she defines as the adventure of the individual into the unconscious. Karen's work deals with both written text and visual language in order to translate the psychological and emotional sense of the inward journey she intends to illustrate. This project is tremendously interesting and challenging. Karen's desire and need to realize it through the combination of photography, painting and digital imaging technologies makes it not only a suitable and worthy venture into artistic expression, but one that simultaneously explores the myths of art making itself, thereby adding another intellectual dimension to her pursuit. Karen is an exceptional artist and student of art. This project is an exciting and valuable addition to the contemporary dialog in the field and one that is fully deserving of support

Addendum 1



*Fog Has Cut the Passage*  
From the series, *Passage:Reflection*  
Four Color Digital Image  
19" x 13"



*Deeper Into Nothingness*  
From the series, *Passage:Reflection*  
Four Color Digital Image  
19" x 13"