Heroínas

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Comisario
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Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza
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MUSEO THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA

55 Nancy Floyd

A1C Ashley-Ann Cady con un rifle de cerrojo M24 Remington 700, Moody Air Force Base, Valdosta, Georgia, 2006

C-print, 88,9 x 88,9 cm
Nancy Floyd

That synthesis of features of both genders was also applied to the iconography of Joan. In one of the earliest extant images of her – an anonymous illustration from *The Champion of Women* by Martin Le Franc – the Maid is armed with a lance and shield, her torso and legs covered in armour and her hair loose [fig. 5]. In the first monument to Joan of Arc, raised around 1502 on the Pont d'Orléans, she is depicted in armour with her hair flowing to her waist as she kneels with Charles VII before an image of the Virgin Mary and Christ Crucified; likewise, in a painting from Rubens's workshop [cat. 36], she is portrayed in a cuirass and with red hair. In his last picture, Dante Gabriel Rossetti also depicted her with red hair [cat. 37].

Joan's fabulous hair in these images (which contradict documents stating that she wore her hair short) appears to have been an invention to make up for the masculine hardness of the cuirass. But that same cuirass is not exactly devoid of ambiguity. As Marina Warner pointed out in her book on Joan of Arc, armour can be a metaphor for virginity; on the Albrecht altar (painted before 1440, but still perhaps in Joan's lifetime) the Virgin Mary appears in her advocacy as the *turris davidica* in full armour, although also with a skirt (and blonde hair cascading down her back).

The story of Joan of Arc took the image of the *virgin warrior* beyond the borders of France. Drawing their inspiration from the mediaeval French epic, the new Italian poets Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso revamped the figure of the warrior maiden. Boiardo and Ariosto turned to Marphisa and Bradamante, while in *Jerusalem Delivered* Tasso created the characters of Clorinda and Erminia. Delacroix painted a scene in which the latter, dressed in armour, comes upon an old shepherd and his family, who are alarmed but she reassures them [cat. 38], saying they have nothing to fear. The virgin warrior reconciles aggressive force and pastoral meekness (according to Christine de Pizan, Joan of Arc was also a *simple bergière* – a shepherdess).

Tasso's other warrior, Clorinda, is featured in a canvas by Domenico Tintoretto [cat. 39]. Tancred falls in love with Clorinda, who is fighting on the other side. During a nighttime battle he mortally wounds her, recognising her only when it is too late – but she converts to Christianity before she dies. Tintoretto painted the moment when Tancred brings water in his helmet to baptise her. The story takes us back once again to the Amazons and the Classical story of their queen Penthesilea, killed by Achilles, who falls in love with her at the sublime moment. In the Classical iconography of this scene, the Greek hero cradles the dying Amazon in his arms. A present-day version of the same scene combining tragic love and religious piety can be seen in Marina Abramovic's *Virgin Warrior/Warrior Virgin* performance [cat. 40], which took place in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in December 2004.

Stories of virgin warriors often involve the exchanging of gender roles. A unique case is that of Rembrandt's *Pallas Athena* [cat. 43], which belonged to the Hermitage before being purchased by the tycoon Calouste Gulbenkian. In the first, hand-written Hermitage catalogue of the late-18th century, the painting was recorded as a *Pallas* but in the contemporary inventory of the Baudouin collection, from which the painting had come, it was described as a "Portrait of Alexander in Pallas' Armour" (and in later literature as "Mars", "Portrait of Titus" and "Young Warrior"). All of which gives rise to a curious dilemma. If the Rembrandt was a depiction of the goddess Pallas in armour, then this would be a conventional (so to speak) case of transvestism. However, if the subject were Alexander dressed in Pallas' armour, it would be a case of dual transvestism.

In the revealing photographs from her *Undergarments and Armor* series [cat. 44], Tanya Marcuse raises the question of fetishist similarities between armour and the old-fashioned corset – structures that encase the flesh and subject it to prescribed gender roles; instruments of torture to glorify the power or beauty of the body. Physical perfection as a form of Kafkaesque metamorphosis that turns its victims into beetles.

The return of the Amazons

The catalogue of the Impressionist group's fifth exhibition in 1880 listed a painting by Edgar Degas entitled *Petites filles spartaites provoquant des garçons* [cat. 45] and dated 1860, twenty years earlier. However, the picture was not actually exhibited, possibly because the painter was not completely satisfied with it, despite the fact that he had reworked it recently, eliminating some archaeological details and giving the adolescents a more contemporary look. As Degas himself explained, the painting was inspired by a passage from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* describing the masculine-style education given to young Spartan girls. Lycurgus appears in the background with a group of Spartan matrons.

In all likelihood the young Degas painted *Spartan Girls Challenging Boys* to settle scores with the French Neo-Classical tradition. Richard Brettell has described it as a parody of David's *The Oath of the Horatii* [fig. 6], in which a clearly-defined compositional division separates the oath takers from the group of women bewailing their fate. However, with Degas the roles are inverted and it is the girls who take the active, aggressive part. Degas's own description of the painting reached us through Daniel Halévy: "It is the young Spartan girls challenging the young boys to a fight." Norma Broude has provided the testimony of another friend of Degas's, the Italian critic Diego Martelli, who summed things up in this way: "The young Spartan

girls who incited the boys to take part in the race which decided, as was the law of that people, their submission." Martelli's words suggest that the race might have been a prenuptial test not very different from Atalanta's. In a somewhat riskier interpretation, Carol Salus surmised that Degas wished to depict the courtship rituals of young Spartans.

We may never know exactly what the painter's premise was, or whether the Spartan girls' challenge was an invitation to a fight or a race or whether or not the painting has connotations of courtship. In any event, the painting raises the question of women's emancipation with an unequivocally modern air. Degas's unfair reputation as a misogynist was refuted by Norma Broude some time ago. Suffice it to say that at around the same time as his scene of the Spartan girls, Degas painted two other scenes featuring strong women: *Semiramis Building Babylon* and *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* [fig. 7]. Through an abundance of data, Norma Broude has shown that the painting of the Spartan girls reflected a social phenomenon which Degas could not have been unaware of: the growing feminist activism in France in the 1870s, which culminated with the first ever international feminist congress – the International Congress of Women's Rights of 1878.

With Degas's Spartan girls, the female warrior returned to late-19th century painting, though now free of her armour, half-naked and closer to the Amazons of the ancients. The return of the Amazons is even more explicit in the work of the German artist Franz von Stuck [cats. 48–50], who made it the subject of his "archaeological" fantasies. Stuck's Amazons appear to be fighting centaurs, who, like them, are wild creatures, borderline human beings. Despite the great differences between Degas and Stuck, in this particular case both keep at an ironic distance with respect to the myth and seem to reflect an awareness that there is something of the pastiche in any imitation of ancient art.

The Amazonomachies of our time swing between the violence of Stuck and the sporting spirit of Degas. The former Vorticist William Roberts entered the Royal Academy in 1966 with a Pop update of this academic theme [cat. 46]. A further turn of the screw along Pop Art lines, Hilary Harkness's *Gallic Beauties of Yesteryear* (2001) [cat. 47] suggests an ironic post-feminist view. Degas's *Spartan Girls Challenging Boys* evoked a certain adolescent barbarism which reappeared in a more intensified form in the work of the Russian AES+F Group [cat. 51]. In their *Mad Max*-style, post-nuclear landscapes, gangs of youths fight a free-for-all war in which gender roles are fading. The black teenage girl who threatens the white boy reminds us that in the Amazons' battles, Queen Hippolyta was sometimes seen holding, like Judith, the severed head of a man.

Contemporary Amazons prefer to be good-humoured: like Rineke Dijkstra's female Israeli soldiers [cat. 56] who do not carry weapons. More disturbing is the smile on the face of Nancy Floyd's armed female soldier [cat. 55], taken from her documentary series *She's Got a Gun*, which includes interviews with the women in the photographs – an Iraq war veteran, a markswoman only eleven years of age, a police chief, and a disabled woman prepared to kill to defend herself. They are images which question the notion of women as instinctively peaceful; as Nancy Floyd observes, an armed woman suggests other possibilities.

The challenge of the Amazons reappears with a number of contemporary artists from different generations who share an affinity with the world of performance and an acid sense of irony vis-à-vis patriarchal stereotypes. In the last decade, Eleanor Antin, the influential 1960s' pioneer, has reinvented herself with a series of photographic tableaux consisting of pastiches of mythological paintings with a witty and exquisite sense of humour. In her version of the *Judgement of Paris (After Rubens)* [cat. 57], each of the three goddesses embodies a stereotype: Hera is the typical 1950s housewife, Aphrodite a vamp, and Athena a kind of battle-hardened Lara Croft. Helen, who was not in Rubens's original painting, sits on the sidelines, looking out at the spectator.

Mona Hatoum, a Briton of Palestinian-Lebanese origin, has often used her body to explore situations of violence, incarceration and vigilance linked to the war in the Near East. In *Over My Dead Body* (1988) [cat. 58], the head of the artist is a battlefield invaded by the (Lilliputian) troops of the patriarchal order. Giant versions of the female body invert power relationships. In recent pieces, Hatoum has returned to toy soldiers to refer to the concept of endless war, while Cristina Lucas exposes the other side of male heroism with freedom itself descending to earth and falling prey to its own followers [cat. 59].

Jamaican-born Renee Cox uses her body as the raw material for turning racial and gender stereotypes upside down. Her famous *Yo Mama's Last Supper* was a "remake" of Leonardo's *Supper* in which a nude Cox took Jesus's place at the table and surrounded herself with black apostles (except Judas, who was white). For her first solo exhibition in New York in 1998, Cox invented a superheroine called Raje, as embodied by the artist herself in a colourful, tight-fitting African pride uniform [cat. 59]. In her series of photographs, Raje is always on stand-by to save the world from machismo and racism.

A more Classical rhetoric takes to the stage in Marina Abramovic's *The Hero II* [cat. 60]. In an ambiguous tribute not without irony the artist takes the place of her own father, a general in Tito's army, who rode a white horse during the war. In the original video, artist