Catalogue essay accompanying the Susie MacMurray *Hinterland* exhibition

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**Gender, Conflict and the Weight of Mythology**

I find myself writing this piece on International Women’s Day 2016¹, a rather serendipitous occurrence, given that Susie MacMurray’s new works draw on feminist critiques of the gendered nature of mythological storytelling and conflict. In her new exhibition *Hinterland*, MacMurray presents her striking new works, which beguile us with their exquisite splendour and materiality but then make us question our beliefs. A hinterland is a remote place on the borders of a town, an area lying beyond what is visible or known. MacMurray exploits this intangibility, which lies beyond our knowledge and experience. The sense of beyond, something we can’t quite reach, opens a space which MacMurray utilises for an exploration of ideas around the nature of conflict and female identity - and the relationship between the two. MacMurray doesn’t give us answers but opens up a hinterland for our thoughts.

MacMurray’s major new sculptures *Medusa* 2014 and *Pandora* 2016, are titled after significant female figures from Greek mythology and these works question perceived notions of gender, punishment, conflict and loss. MacMurray asks us to reappraise our views of female figures who have been maligned throughout cultural history. Furthermore she takes these individual stories and challenges us to reflect on the gendered dimensions of global conflict – the continued use of rape as a weapon of war and the disproportionate impact of conflict and displacement upon women and their children. Should Medusa and Pandora now be judged as heroines?

Traditionally Medusa has been feared, an evil Gorgon from Greek mythology who turned people who gazed upon her to stone. Such was her power that, even after her beheading by Perseus, her head, with writhing snakes in place of hair, still had the force to petrify onlookers. Furthermore her name is often associated with female rage and the embodiment of evil. She has inspired art throughout history including feted paintings by Caravaggio and Rubens, notable sculpture by Cellini and Canova and continues to appear in visual culture today in music, advertising, fashion and film. MacMurray, however, in her sculpture *Medusa* 2014, challenges these negative interpretations and instead celebrates her power, beauty and strength. MacMurray’s work is part of an ongoing feminist enquiry and a redefining of the Medusa myth by Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber*, Margaret Atwood in *Cat’s Eye*, Sylvia Plath in *Medusa* and Iris Murdoch in *A Severed Head* to name a few. Like these authors, poets and theorists, MacMurray is reclaiming Medusa as an emblem of emancipation, explaining “I am exploring the possibility of her as a victim, unfairly branded as a monster, who is reclaiming power for herself.”²

“You only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing”  Hélène Cixous³

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1 8 March 2016

2 Susie MacMurray, email to Natasha Howes, 8/3/16

Medusa is a sign of powerful womanhood. She was exquisitely beautiful with luxuriant hair before being raped by the sea god Poseidon in Athena’s temple. She was turned into a ‘monster’ by Athena, a punishment for being raped, despite being the victim of this violent crime. Perseus, after employing Medusa’s severed head for his own protection, then gave it to Athena, who wore it at the centre of her shield. It became the first heraldic symbol, transforming Medusa’s image into a positive emblem, repelling evil just as it embodied evil. As academics Marjorie Garber and Nancy J Vickers assert “terror is used to drive out terror, so that the former stupefying image is turned back upon one’s enemies.” Furthermore to gaze upon Medusa was to lose your life. This is a powerful message about the male gaze on women. It gives power back to women, a weapon against objectification by men. Gillian M. E. Alban goes further arguing “Herself a victim, Medusa, through her gaze, avenges her own rape and decapitation by controlling her objects, while also embracing the needy with her mantle of power as apotropaic or deflective evil eye or icon.” This ability to ward off evil demonstrates the forceful power of the female gaze. Crucially MacMurray does not allow us to see Medusa’s head – her body is beheaded but the sinuous snake coils emerge from her base, immediately identify her. This has the effect of universalising the story and allows the viewer to focus not on the specifics of this Gorgon, but on the continuing fear of female power throughout the ages.

MacMurray created her Medusa from copper chain mail. In some ways it is a response to her garment sculptures like A Mixture of Frailties 2004 (constructed from 14,000 rubber gloves turned inside out) and is a conscious move away from softer materials previously employed. Here MacMurray plays with the language of heroic sculpture - bronze, monumental, immovable and phallic - but she subverts this on her own terms. The sinuous chain mail was produced by a group of women, creating it by hand, piece by piece, over many months. This labour intensive work occurred in the privacy of the studio, a supportive and nurturing environment for the young female assistants who were being taught a new skill, as generations of women throughout history have passed down expertise before. Unlike the garment sculptures, Medusa is not a carapace, a protective covering for a female body. Here the chain mail cannot be taken off the body, it is the body. Medusa, whilst a significant weight, is not as rigid as a bronze cast and the serpentine coils demonstrate the malleability of the material. MacMurray chose copper as a material to reflect Medusa’s pre-snake glorious red hair and to reference the story that the corals of the Red Sea were formed from Medusa’s blood when Perseus laid down her severed head beside the shore. One of copper’s properties is that it will blacken over time, an allusion to the transience of beauty and the tarnishing of a reputation. Medusa was raped and therefore, in the eyes of some, tarnished and spoiled, becoming ‘damaged goods’.

Another maligned female figure from Greek mythology, Pandora, gives her name to MacMurray’s newest sculpture. 2650 clear cast resin bullets are seamlessly encased horizontally in front of a lightbox. Aggressively gleaming out of a darkened space, Pandora 2016 attracts you towards her sharp, phallic points. This sculpture, the size and shape of a doorway, disarms with its inherent tension – the beauty and attraction of light diffused through clear bullets and the intrinsic violence of .50 Browning bullets made for sniper rifles and machine guns. Resembling a bed of nails, when up-

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right it alludes to a firing squad. However the threat of mortality is hollow as the crystalline bullets will shatter if dropped on a hard surface.

The myth of Pandora is complex – she was the first human woman created by the gods. Her name means 'all gifts' after each god bestowed upon her particular attributes, including curiosity from Hera. She was also given a storage jar as a dowry, later in a 16th century mistranslation it became a box, which she was forbidden from opening by her husband Epimetheus. Curiosity got the better of her and upon opening it, she released all the evils in the world including greed, vanity, slander, envy and disease. The only item left inside was hope.

The myth first appears in the Greek poet Hesiod’s poem the *Theogony* (8th–7th centuries BC), but Pandora is not named. Hesiod describes how ‘wonder seized them’ when the gods first set eyes upon her and how she was "sheer guile, not to be withstood by men." Hesiod elaborates (590–93):

> From her is the race of women and female kind:  
> of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who  
> live amongst mortal men to their great trouble,  
> no helpmates in hateful poverty, but only in wealth.  

Pandora, like Eve, was created by male god(s). Pandora was conceived as a punishment for Prometheus’s theft of the secret of fire. Also, like Eve, Pandora transgressed a divine law. But according to Hesiod, she was doomed before she even started life. These misogynistic narratives imply that curiosity is a feminine weakness. Pandora was set up to fail. Which of us would be able to resist opening something we were told not to, especially when it was given to us as a gift? Classicist, Jane Harrison argues, that Hesiod’s story of Pandora transforms her from a life-giving Goddess (as seen in earlier texts) to a weak human female responsible for all of death and destruction in the world. This shift maps onto the transformation in Ancient Greek society from matriarchy to patriarchy. MacMurray interprets Hesiod’s version, which has taken root throughout the centuries, as a masculine narrative to castrate the frightening uncontrollable power of femininity. The doorway represents Pandora’s box - it is seductive and alluring but it is also a threshold into the unknown and invites us to question whether we should trust what is beyond? To cross the threshold, do you need courage, wisdom or foolish hope? Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

*Pandora*, like *Medusa*, allows MacMurray to continue to explore the dichotomies that have been a central theme in her previous works: life/death, male/female, chaos/order, hard/soft, inside/outside, transience/permanence, danger/safety, finite/infinite, protection/entrapment, vulnerability/resilience. MacMurray’s work demonstrates how opposing qualities can be present at the same time – both in art and in the human condition.

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8 Susie MacMurray, email to Natasha Howes, 10/3/16
A theme of offspring unites a number of MacMurray’s pieces starting with the earlier installation *Siblings* 2013, delicate wax pods on fish hooks. *Orphan* 2014 is a lone, stranded form made from black annealed wire with a bull’s nose ring. It makes its presence felt, the weight of its bulk beached on the gallery floor. Is it a casualty of war? *Hatchling* 2014 can be conceived as an offspring of *Medusa*, one of the snaking coils which has broken away and like *Orphan*, sits alone. Children are closely tied to the female experience and again MacMurray alludes to the power of womanhood through the ability to reproduce. Once away from their ‘mothers’, how do these offspring negotiate the world and survive?

These casualties and the violence inherent in the Medusa and Pandora myths relate to MacMurray’s body of work which explicitly addresses conflict. Since producing *Cloud* 2015, a monumental site specific installation in the Great Hall in Winchester which referenced the Hampshire Regiments who served in the First World War, MacMurray has continued to work with reclaimed barbed wire. Barbed wire was used extensively during the First World War to prevent movement on the battlefields and to cause catastrophic injury. MacMurray sourced her barbed wire from the British Army Barracks in Aldershot, Surrey, UK. It is about 40 years old and was used in the training of soldiers who went on to serve in Afghanistan, Kosovo and The Falklands. Working with currently serving soldiers, MacMurray unravelled, cut and removed the rust, having conversations with them about their experiences. Employed in her new work *Host* 2016 and set into Portland Stone, traditionally used in British memorials, the barbed wire resembles bouquets of brittle and dried out flowers. Their form was also influenced by photographs of wartime explosions. The seven elements laid out in rows resemble inverted stooks, sheaves of corn in a field or the neat rows of war graves. This elegant installation has a quiet power and poignancy, but unlike traditional memorials, is suggestive of the visceral injuries which soldiers still endure today. Like *Cloud*, it alludes to how conflict deeply impacts the lives of those left behind - the women, children and family members. MacMurray elucidates “the effects of conflict are like smoke, uncontainable. They don’t stay neatly behind geographic borders but seep into every life, and continue long after the arms are laid down through things like depression, night terrors, PTSD, bereavement and, very pertinent to today - the ripple effect of migration and refugees.”

*Host* seems to mourn all victims of conflict, both living and dead, civilian and military, and the destruction of their lives.

*Hold the Line* 2016 is a discrete wall mounted sculpture with upright lengths of barbed wire arranged in a linear fashion. The title alludes to military tactics, in which a line of troops was supposed to prevent an enemy breakthrough. Each piece of barbed wire stands in for a soldier, whose skeletal remains cast shadows on the back wall and conveys feelings of both sorrow and brave resolve. These works using barbed wire are not about a specific conflict, or a memorial, they are about the broader effect conflict has on people and the fragility of human existence.

Through all her works, it is apparent that MacMurray is fascinated by the personal and the political. She extrapolates individual narratives to make broader references to feminine identity and conflict. A culture of fear about women links to a culture of fear in contemporary geo politics, the fear of the other religions and the use of rape as a weapon of war. Both the myths of Medusa and Pandora are cautionary tales about the flawed nature of humanity and how this has contemporary relevance. The

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9 Susie MacMurray, email to Natasha Howes, 15/3/16
country in which the viewer of MacMurray’s work resides, their individual politics and how the news gets reported in the media may affect the reading of the work. MacMurray’s work is not an anti-war polemic, it is her attempt to understand the nature of conflict and how it affects humanity. She takes a long view of history, drawing parallels between past and present wars, and questions the cyclical nature of conflict and why leaders and governments don’t learn from past mistakes. MacMurray is interested in how society remembers and learns from history without sanitising the past. Events from ancient history and mythology can be as relevant today and in the future as they were then.

MacMurray’s new works are unified by their sense of weight. Unlike her previous sculptures and installations which can be characterised by a sense of fragility, weightlessness and temporality, the artworks in *Hinterland* are grounded and emphatically present. This work demonstrates MacMurray’s increasing confidence as a sculptor who is rightfully taking her place as one of the UK’s leading artists who combines intellectual rigour with a passion for materials and aesthetics. Her continued engagement with feminism has led her to develop her practice, challenging historic sexism and misogyny and celebrating the power of women.

Natasha Howes

Natasha Howes is Senior Curator at Manchester Art Gallery. She commissioned MacMurray’s first site specific work in a public gallery, *Flock 2004* at Manchester Art Gallery.