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TARRAWARRA
MUSEUM
OF ART

Sidney Nolan: Myth Rider

Heather B. Swann: Leda and the Swan

4 December 2021 – 6 March 2022

Curated by Anthony Fitzpatrick

November 8, 2021



Sidney Nolan, *Leda and Swan* 1960, polyvinyl acetate on composition board 121.5 x 121.5 cm
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***Sidney Nolan: Myth Rider* brings together more than 100 works by Sidney Nolan from the period 1955–1966, during which the artist grappled with the subject of the Trojan War, its parallels with the Gallipoli campaign, and its origins in the myth of Leda and the Swan.**

Throughout these interconnected series, Nolan employs his remarkable visual and mental acuity to meld classical allusions, literary sources, historical references, and his own personal response to war and its disastrous consequences, to convey a series of powerful insights into the broader mythic and universal dimensions of human conflict. Combining compelling subject matter and a highly inventive approach to a wide range of media, the rich array of works in this exhibition reveal Nolan's innate

understanding of and facility for mythopoesis—the making of myth—whereby past and present, ancient and modern, legend and history, are conflated and vividly reimagined.

Although previous exhibitions of Nolan's *Gallipoli* series have highlighted his references to classical sources, this will be the first exhibition to show these works in the context of the development of the artist's vision of the tragedy of warfare from his early works on Hydra (1955–56), through his *Leda and Swan* series (1958–60) and culminating in his large-scale interpretations of Greek mythology (1966).

Curator, Anthony Fitzpatrick explains the title of this exhibition is taken from *The Myth Rider*, 1958–59, one of Nolan's early major paintings from his Gallipoli series:

"This painting, together with a large selection of Nolan's works from the period 1955–1966, chart his decade long engagement with the epic subject of the Trojan War, its parallels with the Gallipoli campaign, and its origins in the myth of Leda and the Swan.

"What emerges from these three interconnected series is a deepening sense of the tragic which came to inform Nolan's vision of warfare as a predestined and overwhelming force that is beyond human control.

"For Nolan, myths, like poems, are 'forms of knowledge' and feats of the imagination by which the most contradictory, complex and challenging experiences and ideas can be expressed and realised—and this is what he sought to transmit through his art," Fitzpatrick said.

Victoria Lynn, Director, TarraWarra Museum of Art, says:

"*Sidney Nolan: Myth Rider* presents a new body of research on one of Australia's most renowned artists. Tackling the complex themes of war, trespass and violation, Nolan emerges as both a visionary artist and provocateur. The invitation to Heather B. Swann to respond to Greek mythology, signals the Museum's continued exploration of considering the works of modernist artists through a contemporary lens. *Heather B. Swann: Leda and the Swan* returns the gaze, as it were, from a distinctly feminist perspective," Ms Lynn said.

Heather B. Swann: Leda and the Swan is an exhibition of new sculptures and paintings by Hobart-based contemporary artist Heather B. Swann, who is renowned for her large-scale, meticulously crafted and highly expressive sculptural forms.

Swann's new installation at TarraWarra Museum of Art is an immersive, experiential work, woven out of her own contemporary reading of the myth of Leda and the Swan and emerging from artist residencies in Rome and Athens. The artist's close study of Graeco-Roman antiquities and emulation of the forms of classical figurative sculpture is embodied in her use of fragmentation, repetition and mismatched scale.

Commissioned by the TarraWarra Museum of Art to make an exhibition on the theme of Leda and the Swan, the artist visited Athens and made a close study of Archaic *korai*, the marble girls who stand straight and still and self-contained. Swann presents female resistance through words and objects that embody the idea of "Tooth and Nail" which speaks of Fight. The work maintains the artist's characteristic rich ambiguity, though with the clear injunction to 'always be on your guard, to fight tooth and nail and to look out for each other. Do not shut up; keep telling the story again and again, and look for change.'

Fitzpatrick says, "The dual presentation of these two bodies of work by Sidney Nolan and Heather B. Swann, created six decades apart, provides an opportunity to consider the mutability and adaptability of Greek mythology and its capacity to resonate across time. Like countless authors and artists before them, they have both reinvented these ancient stories— bearing witness to their endless metamorphic possibilities—to create art that is of its moment.

"In the late 1950s, Nolan's *Leda and Swan* paintings emerged as a response to the widespread bloodshed and trauma inflicted by decades of incessant warfare during his lifetime. Through his sustained engagement with the story of this violent transgression and his long consideration of human conflict, Nolan sought to convey the mythic origins of force, its historical constancy, and its contemporary immediacy. His understanding of the inevitability of war and its sorrow-filled aftermath, instilled in his paintings an overarching sense of the precarity of life.

"Developed over the past two years, Swann's immersive installation of sculptures, paintings and works on paper provides a space to reconsider the familiar narrative of the rape of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan and the fateful repercussions of this violation. Retelling the story three times, the artist poetically acknowledges the rich ambiguities inherent in this myth while hinting at modes of resisting the hubris and patriarchal worldview embedded within it. The stark beauty of her highly distilled and incredibly potent forms invites deep contemplation of the subject of force and consent," Mr Fitzpatrick said.

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Opening Hours: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am to 5pm. Open all public holidays except Christmas Day. Open 7 days a week from Boxing Day to Australia Day.

Heather B. Swann

Biography for *Leda and the Swan* 2021

Over almost 30 years of making and exhibiting, Heather B. Swann has accrued a reputation as an artist of obscurity, darkness, blackness.

Originally trained as a printmaker, the fundamental graphic contrasts of intaglio media have always shadowed her work: the burred line, the silhouette, the blot. She now works in Indian ink drawings and in varieties of sculpture, including a rich repertoire of performance tools. Her figures, beasts and uncanny constructions are carved, turned, wrought, cast, modelled and sewn, in polished, pigmented and patinated wood and iron and bronze, in sensual, lustrous leather and silk. Regardless of their materials, Swann's forms are forthrightly declared by their profiles: without compromise, without tonal excuses.

They come from the night, these images, from that place Borges called 'the interval of shadow dividing the two twilights'; from dreams and from insomnia. They take the form or suggest the contours not only of love-making, but also of nocturnal fears, of pillow-sorrow, sometimes of sheer, wretched, ceiling-staring 21st century despair.

Consistently drawing on the rich traditions of (mostly) European culture, on mythologies and iconographies from the ancient to the postmodern, on the delights and disturbances of museum art

and artefacts, Swann teases the viewer with strange, distorted echoes of the familiar, the half-remembered and the unknown. Nothing in her work is clear or singular or didactic or instrumental. The politics of her practice do not lie in the declaration of a singular position. Rather, the work offers itself as an enigmatic invitation, a prompt to think about the confounding mysteries of the human condition. Like poetry, as poetry, it employs pre-conscious, material-sensual signals to seduce us into receptiveness, into an openness through which we can forge our own meanings and responses.



Heather B. Swann, *Leda* 2021, plywood, paper, modelling clay, pigment, glue, marble dust 178 x 42 x 30 cm,
Photo: Peter Whyte Courtesy of the artist and STATION, Melbourne and Sydney

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