

Title

Classicism and contemporary art

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About the author(s)

is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Georgia in Athens. She is the co-editor of two anthologies recently reprinted by Routledge: *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth* (2011) and *Contemporary Art About Architecture: A Strange Utility* (2013). She is also author of *Jasper Johns* (2014) and is currently completing on her second book on the artist.

Cover image: **Fig. 1** *Woman Laocoön*, by Maria Lassnig. 1976. Canvas, 193 by 127 cm. (Neue Galerie Graz, and Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz; © Maria Lassnig Foundation; Photograph N. Lackner / UMJ).

Classicism and contemporary art

by Isabelle Loring Wallace • 28.02.2019

Books about Classical antiquity tend to presuppose the importance of the period, often bolstering it by establishing a relationship between the Classical past and the present moment. This they may do unwittingly or as a matter of course, as a by-product of their attention to a particular topic, such as the poetry of Catullus or a new history of the Pyrrhic War. By contrast, the two books under review explicitly address the relationship between the Classical and contemporary in the visual arts, through which it is possible to see the impression of the past on the present.

The Classical Now accompanied an exhibition of the same name of 2018 at King's College, London, held in conjunction with the Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins, Vieux Village de Mougins, which brought together Classical and contemporary art. The publication combines a catalogue with a collection of interviews and essays that discuss the legacies of Classicism, with particular attention paid to institutions (starting with the two organisers) that have a long history of studying antiquity.

Flying too Close to the Sun: Myths in Art from Classical to the Contemporary, is narrower in focus – on art that engages with Classical myth **FIG.1** – but broader in its chronological scope. The lavishly illustrated volume is not restricted to Classical and contemporary examples; instead, it reminds us that every past was once the present by cataloguing a variety of objects from various epochs (including the present day), organised in relation to the myths to which they refer. Hence, one chapter includes works by Rubens, Titian, Richard Hamilton, Hannah Höch, François Boucher, Artemisia Gentileschi, Tracy Emin and Vadim Zakharov (the Russian representative to the 2013 Biennale) among others. These varied artists are united by their engagement with myths in which sex and violence are provocatively entangled: Venus and Adonis, the Rape of Europa, Zeus and Danaë, and Zeus and Ganymede. Here, as in every chapter, colour illustrations are accompanied by text that summarises the plot of the myths and identifies aspects that seem particularly important to the work of art at hand.



Fig. 1 *Woman Laocoön*, by Maria Lassnig. 1976. Canvas, 193 by 127 cm. (Neue Galerie Graz, and Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz; © Maria Lassnig Foundation; Photograph N. Lackner / UMJ).

It is a strength of the volume that although little knowledge is assumed about either art or myth, the writing is sophisticated, as are many of the ideas presented in James Cahill's introductory essay. To wit, the author insists on the discursive, dialogical nature of myth – the fact that myths are stories that anticipate and echo each other, in other words, that they are in conversation. It is a further credit to this book that it includes examples of contemporary art that break with the idea of illustration, engaging myth in ways that are overtly theoretical and self-reflexive, such as

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's minimalist installation of two, door-shaped mirrors *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991). For if myth is a well-mined storehouse of sensational, readymade narratives, it is also, as Cahill reminds us, a way of seeing that lends form and significance to abstract ideas about vision, mortality and love.



Fig. 2 Still from *Walk with Contrapposto*, by Bruce Nauman. 1968. Video, 60 mins. (Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York).

Focused on the interchange between Classical and contemporary works, *The Classical Now* is prismatic in approach, tackling essential questions across a wide assortment of topics, such as: what was the Classical? What is the Classical now? And what is the ultimate significance of such queries? That these questions are discussed by multiple authors in seven essays and artists' interviews ensures that the opinions advanced are diverse and differently inflected. Indeed, the essays include a wide range of subjects, including Winckelmann's early modern theories of the Classical, smartly reassessed by Elizabeth Prettejohn and Charles Martindale; the history and legacy of contrapposto **FIG.2**, tracked brilliantly by Whitney Davis; a provocative discussion of 'Liquid Antiquity' by Brooke Holmes; and Cahill's learned discussion of the self-reflexive dimension of mythological monsters as they appear in the works of Jean Cocteau, Damien Hirst and the video artists Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley **FIG.3**. Together, these and three other essays demonstrate that the Classical is neither fixed nor past but instead the cumulative effect of reiteration, an ever-shifting reflection of the present that harkens back to a distant, if elusive past. As the same time, the works of art considered in these volumes, as further illuminated by interviews included in *The Classical Now* with Hirst, Kelley and Kelley, Marc Quinn, Edward Allington, Léo Caillard, Alex Isreal **FIG.4** and Rachel Whiteread, bears

out another radical idea: that the Classical is less a time period or culture than a medium whose forms, narratives and styles can be used to manifest facets of the present that remain either at large or buried deeply within. It is in this light that we might perhaps understand the ominous tenor of a title that warns against 'flying too close to the sun'. For the closer one comes to the Classical, the more one risks its dissolution and, simultaneously, one's own resignation about the Classical's unbridgeable remove. These two books, which call attention to this danger, nevertheless succeed in illuminating and delighting. By holding readers just below the melting point of hubris, they stop short just before the ruinous fulfilment of narcissistic desire.



Fig. 3 *Minotaur with Skull*, by Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley. 2015. Lightbox photograph, dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artists and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London).



Fig. 4 *Self-Portrait (Wetsuit)*, by Alex Israel. 2016. Acrylic on aluminium, 140 by 61 by 45.7 cm. (Private collection; © Alex Israel; photograph Zarko Vijatovic).

About these books



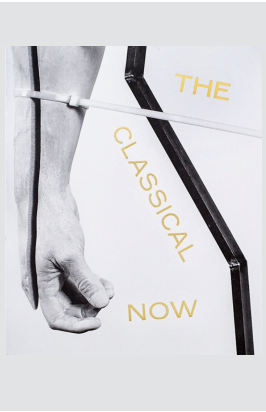
Flying too Close to the Sun: Myths in Art from Classical to Contemporary

By James Cahill

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