

## BODIES IN MOTION

by Marek Torčík

Before we learned to describe things, to cast a precise shape on them, there were myths. These volatile stories had no clearly defined form, lacked boundaries and, therefore, spoke to everyone indiscriminately.

But soon, we began to think of myths differently. They became something firmly set. Nowadays, we tell them in the hope that they will preserve something of our own past as if perhaps they contain fragments of things that came before us. We use them to justify the laws, the distribution of power, and the form that society assumes.

We have, therefore, learned to write myths down, to enshrine them in books and texts that are not to be touched.

As if, perhaps, what someone once described cannot be changed by anyone else.

Yet all stories and all myths are constantly in flux, taking on new forms as time passes. They don't live solitary lives, their form is conditioned by society, time and, above all, the one who narrates them, the one who decides what to withhold.

Once upon a time, however, people passed myths around fires, in whispers, almost like magic formulas. After all, even Socrates likens myths to incantations. Supposedly, they are words that are meant to protect us whenever there is danger looming.

What dangers do myths actually protect us from? One only has to flip through any book, glance at a random story, to see that the greatest threat has always been two intertwined things: love and ourselves.

But what to make of it?

According to most ancient philosophers, love is the mirroring of two kindred spirits. Plato, in his *Symposium*, tells the story of a time long ago when people walked the earth conjoined into one genderless being. The ancient gods feared this unity, for it contained much more than they could comprehend, and so they decided to split it into two incomplete beings. So one could say that a person experiencing love is really just searching for their lost half. Love is a means rather than an end in itself. It can mediate the things we all have in common. Like the desire to shed our bodies, to become part of something greater. That's why fear always arrives with it. For to love, according to the myths, is to dissolve, to let our former selves be transformed. "Love conquers all," writes Virgil, referring to this destructive force. But what is this force that can conquer even the god of war? And what kind of victory is it if nothing is left but one's own image?

## Never again will they be the same

“Matter can be neither created nor destroyed,” can be heard in a video installation by American artist John Sanborn called *V+M*. It is a variation on the love affair of the divine couple Venus and Mars, and the story of love itself. In it, Sanborn depicts human desire as a space that dissolves the boundaries between who we are and who other people are to us. His characters change over the course of twelve chapters, becoming inseparable. “I see me when I see you,” is uttered at one point, only to be immediately echoed by an opposing voice: “I see you when I see me.”

*V+M* is as much a story of destruction as it is of transformation. Of shame, of knowing how close love and fight are to each other.

In one of the earlier versions of the myth, recorded by the poet Ovid, it is said that when Venus’ husband Vulcan found out about the affair between the divine embodiments of love and chaos, the god crafted a delicate, almost invisible net, which he draped over the two naked lovers, thus trapping the pair in place and rendering them forever disgraced in the eyes of other gods and goddesses. Ancient myths are brimming with similar situations. The gods in them often suffer and experience shame far more than mortals. Perhaps, to understand them better, people have attributed their own suffering to gods in the stories, projecting their vices onto them. This is why the gods are full of resentment and hatred. But they only become dangerous when they fall in love.

Love, at least in myths and stories, seems as if it could not exist without danger. I could cite entire lists of tragic fates, feuding families, and destructive jealousies as proof. But it is rather a sad paradox that persists to this day. Often we perceive as romantic those love stories that face immense obstacles. In the end, even *V+M* admits that love itself is only “a prize to be won”.

The forbidden or outright prosecuted form of love is most clearly seen today in the context of queer identity. It has historically been difficult for LGBTQ+ couples to just “love in peace”, let alone want equal rights. *V+M* is also their story. While much has changed since the time of the gods, it still takes courage to love and live in a society that sees difference as a threat and that talks about tolerance instead of understanding. In a society that flaunts tradition only to keep other people from happiness because of its myths.

Sanborn is fascinated by traditional stories. They are the ones that help us to understand ourselves and also can confuse us in equal measure. For, like human life, myths never take just one shape.

In the author’s version of the *V+M* story, however, love in its many aspects does not take on a tragic form. What is important for it is the act of narration itself. In front of us, Sanborn unfolds the myth of three pairs of lovers. He creates not just one but several different versions of the story, with each viewer piecing the different sections together in their own way, giving the narrative back its freedom.

Moreover, like Socrates, Sanborn understands myths as incantations. This is why he intersperses the image with music and dance, and why some of the lovers' sentences sound almost defiant, such as when we hear that "the pain we embrace becomes joy" or when, in the form of red curtains, the world as "[a] wave recedes and [as a] wave rises". It is no coincidence that the original Greek term for incantation is *epadein*, which literally means *to heal by magical phrases*.

Myths are not just ordinary stories, myths heal, they offer hope, they show the way out.

Most of all, *V+M* is a celebration of defiance and a path to liberation. In the end, even gender plays only a shifting, secondary role in the story. The audience encounters it as something highly unreliable. For nothing is so simple that it has only two possible interpretations. Even gender is not fixed; everything is fluid and each character hides a part of the other. As evidence, Sanborn projects an image of a person with a vertically split face on the central of the three panels. In turns, the viewer sees the female part, then the male part. Everything changes, everything holds an infinite number of possibilities. In the end, it is the very essence of human desire – to become someone else for a while. To show that "a body in motion will stay in motion".

## Deities have lived among us for ages

*V+M* is not just an attempt to understand this hidden essence of human desire. Like most of Sanborn's work, it is also about the narrative itself. It's about the messages we convey to ourselves and to other people through it. It's about how much our own limits and inner contradictions impact stories.

Who are we in relationship to ourselves? And who are we to others? What do we draw strength from? Why stay in motion at all? *V+M* may only pose questions but Sanborn's other exhibited work, *Mythic Status*, offers answers to some of them.

While the story of Venus and Mars presents a tale of gods and goddesses with human characteristics, the four portraits of deities and queer heroes and heroines called *Mythic Status* do the exact opposite. "There's no real difference between mortals and gods," Jiz Lee as Apollo utters in the very first one. Lee thereby demonstrates the terrifying power of narrative. The ability to free us from our own shackles.

This is also why Sanborn cast queer performers in the roles, allowing them to interweave their personal stories with the legendary and myth-shrouded exploits of their characters. Deities have lived among us for ages, as if to say, deities are us. The narratives of the four heroes and heroines blur the lines between the divine and the human. In their place, new kinds of beings emerge before us, laying before the audience a set of contradictory myths; myths that are topical and correspond to the world around us.

For example, while Apollo's physical attractiveness refers to the sun god's confident pride, the warrior Atalanta, played by Adi Lockhart, denounces the same power. For her, love is a one-sided, unbalanced battle. She herself prefers to abandon it for

a much fairer hunt. Another counterpoint to Apollo's self-assuredness is provided by Jasmine McKay, who embodies the goddess of the night, Nyx. Her desire for darkness implies a need for self-discovery, for "only in the shadows can people find themselves". The diversity of the characters is rounded off by Ramses Rodstein's portrayal of Hercules. When the hero one day makes a simple decision and asks those around him to address him as a man and respect his choice, he shows that it is in the love of oneself, in the courage that such acceptance requires, that we can find the greatest strength. "It was the day I became Hercules," the hero affirms. In Hercules' attitude, as in the different approaches of others, there is a quiet and persistent strength. One that challenges the world to accept what lies within the human heart, and at the same time challenges itself to do so.

I remember that before, when I was still a child, the characters of the old myths were a kind of meaningless, alien riddle to me. Myth only makes sense if we can relate to it. I knew there was something human about myths, why would we name entire constellations after their characters otherwise? But none of them matched who I felt I was. The selection of ancient tales in the textbooks carefully concealed any mention of sexuality or gender transformation.

It was only over time that I began to discover the hidden truth. No stories, even those of gods and divine beings, live solitary lives. Just as we see ourselves mirrored in them, they inscribe themselves in us. I still remember how surprised I was that even a seemingly insignificant part of the human body bears the name of a warrior who is remembered by the world for his love of another man. Suddenly, all I had to do was touch my own heel and I was a little closer to myself again.

In fact, it is natural that whenever we feel alone, we tend to look for a reflection of our world in the worlds of others. But if we find nothing there, if we still doubt ourselves because of this emptiness, all we have to do is learn to tell the fables, myths, and incantations. This is, after all, what John Sanborn shows in his series of portraits *Mythic Status*. Telling myths is always telling one's own story at the same time.

Such a story can sometimes be found in a similar way to looking at the night sky for long enough. They are there even if we are unaware of them. What, at first, appears as a black void is actually sprinkled with stars. They've always been there, we just haven't seen them yet, no one has told us about them. Sometimes, I imagine people's lives like those stars. We're bodies in motion across a boundless night sky. All that remains is to tell others about us.