Clio-The Youngest of the muses

Denise Wellenstein

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
Rochester Institute of Technology

Clio—The Youngest of the Muses

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

by
Denise Wellenstein

May 1998
Approvals

Chairperson: Patti Ambrogi

Date: SEPTEMBER 8, 1998

Associate Advisor: Elliott Rubenstein

Date: 9/10/98

Associate Advisor: Stephanie Maxwell

Date: 9/18/98

Associate Advisor: Margaret Wagner

Date: 9/18/98

MFA Coordinator: Angela Kelly

Date: 9/26/98

I, Denise Wellenstein, hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Signature

Date: 9/26/98
"To dance with one's own masterpiece represents the ultimate transference of creative energy, that narrow and frustrating barrier between life and art."

- Leonard Mendelsohn, *Toys in Literature*¹

INTRODUCTION

It was not until I recently looked back at the work I have made in the past few years that I realized the common threads running through my first graduate projects culminating in my thesis show entitled, "Clio—The Youngest of the Muses." My artistic process confronts the struggle to synthesize my different interests, my past experiences with the present, my intuition and imagination with logic and practicality, and ultimately my artistic self with all the other parts of my life.

My work is inspired by my interest in Greek myths. I am driven by the challenge to incorporate the history, significance, and magical qualities of these stories into my work. Whether someone sees myth as real or fantasy, literal or allegorical, psychological, scientific, or spiritual, myth occupies a place in most people’s minds. The fairy tales we hear as children are examples of stories whose significance sometimes evolve into the beliefs we adopt as adults to make sense of the world we live in. Contemporary culture has bred contemporary myths.

Technology, including video and computers, is also a form of magic in many people's lives. The way in which images are created and manipulated is often unseen (or behind-the-scene), and they are able to blur our understanding of reality. My work uses artistic illusions and technology to create a sense of wonder and to provoke the reconsideration of the role of myth and magic in our lives.

My desire to make the photograph come to life through movement has been a part of my creative process since I began working with photography. Naturally, this led me to experiment with animation, film, and video. Video projection, black light, and miniature motorized elements are part of the technological magic featured in my thesis project, *Clio—The Youngest of the Muses*.

In my thesis work, I deal primarily with the character of the Muse from Greek mythology. I choose to accept the idea of the Muse into my own psyche as a part of myself and to recreate a personal definition for the Muse that works to empower myself as an artist. In this manner, I choose to reverse the position of the Muse as a product of patriarchal objectification of women.

---

THE MUSE

In Greek mythology, there are nine Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne, or Memory, each of whom preside over a specific art or science. These Muses inspire\(^2\) artists and poets with their mother's memories so that the past is not forgotten.\(^3\) However, the more traditional concept of the Muse, emerging from the early Greek myths, is one of an ethereal female who gives inspiration and knowledge unconditionally to the male poet or artist. As the meaning of the word, Muse, changes with cultural influence, Memory, the mother of the Muses, is forgotten.\(^4\) The image of the Muse is personified as a female form used primarily by men for access to creativity.

In Modernist art practice, the Muse had been reinvented as a mortal woman who provides constant encouragement and inspiration for the artist; usually a male; most often her lover or husband. Since the Romantic era, no other artistic period has used the image of the Muse so heavily as the Surrealist movement. This movement includes artists such as Man Ray, Diego Rivera, Max Ernst, and Andre Breton.

Most of these men found the Muse outside themselves in real-life women: their lovers or friends who were artists themselves; Meret Oppenhiem, Leonora Carrington, and Frida Kahlo.

The Surrealists were very interested in accessing artistic inspiration. Since inspiration is often related to the feminine,\(^5\) the Surrealists sought to access this world through the feminine aspect, the anima of Jungian psychology, which can also be seen as a kind of Muse who conveys the female qualities associated with the *femme-enfant*.

Qualities valued by the male Surrealists in their Muses were beauty, innocence, and intuition. These qualities embody what they called the *femme-enfant*,\(^6\) or literally, woman-child. The *femme-enfant*, the immature woman, provided inspiration without the threat of...

---

\(^2\) To *inspire* meaning, literally, "to breathe into"


\(^4\) Originally, the Muse was a triad, the Triple Goddess of Goddess religions.


artistic competition. For if she were an immature woman, how could she produce mature works of art? The **femme-enfant** also embodied an insight and openness which was in tune with the subconscious, and the male Surrealists used her as a liaison between themselves and the magical, dreamy imagery of the subconscious world. These women occupied split roles, being both objectified women as Muse by the male artists and working artists in their own rights.

Most of these women underwent a trying transitory period during which they integrated themselves as artists, women, and sources of their own inspiration. Through their self-portraits and art depicting their bodies, they integrated their inner (that of the personal and the psyche or subconscious) and outer (that of the physical, the persona, the self that others are welcome to see) realities, which have historically tended to be kept separated within our culture.

Frida Kahlo was one of the female artists of this period whose work depicts this transformation through the exploration of the her body. She suffered from polio during childhood, and when she was sixteen, she was in a bus accident that left her permanently and painfully injured. After this accident, she began making art. Her art, which addresses her physical condition, was her journey toward insight, reclaiming the physical or outward self to gain access to the inner or subconscious reality.

In Kahlo’s painting, *Henry Ford Hospital*, she depicted her miscarriage and inability to have children. Surrounding her, bleeding in a hospital bed, is the fetus she lost, the broken pelvis which caused the miscarriage, a machine (perhaps referring to the bus accident), an orchid given to her by Rivera, and a snail’s shell symbolizing the slow process of the miscarriage. Kahlo used concrete, physical symbols to express what was she was experiencing on the inside. Through the integration of two very related selves, Kahlo and other women Surrealists came to accept both their physical selves (external) and psychic selves (internal) as valid realities.

---


Through the practice of feminism, women are gaining a sense of confidence needed to identify and reject some of the limiting stereotypes under which they have been classified. The women Surrealists tended to reject the label of Surrealist for themselves. Frida Kahlo said that even though she was thought of as a Surrealist, she wasn’t — "I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." Whitney Chadwick suggests better descriptions of these women artists as "Magic Realists" or "Neo-Romantics." When Leonora Carrington, an artist working within the Surrealist realm, was asked about women's role as Muse for the Surrealist artists, her response was, "Bullshit." Poet Susan Griffin calls the idea of the male-defined Muse “a cop-out,” and contemporary poet, feminist, and critic, Adrienne Rich describes it as "uninteresting." However, in completely rejecting the limiting stereotype of the male-defined Muse, women risk losing, along with it, the chance to reclaim or reinvent the concept of the original Muse as source of their own creative inspiration.

Poets such as May Sarton, Emily Dickinson, and Denise Levertov have written about the Muse as source of their creative power. Some feminist critics tend to conclude that these women, in writing about or to their muses are actually writing about or to themselves. The last stanza from "The Muse as Medusa" is one example of women writing about the Muse as self:

I turn your face around! It is my face.
That frozen rage is what I must explore—
Oh secret, self enclosed, and ravage place!
this is the gift I thank Medusa for.
I turn your face around! It is my face.

11 Chadwick, 66.
13 Chadwick, 23.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
"For we think back through our mothers if we are women."
Virginia Woolf\textsuperscript{18}

Recall the intense grief suffered by Demet at the loss of her daughter, Persephone, to the Underworld. Woman’s detachment from her creativity is similar to the mother-daughter separation depicted in this Greek myth. Woman has been detached from her Memory, her mother,\textsuperscript{19} the source of all inspiration and creation. At some point during childhood, mothers and daughters intuitively break their bond between each other. This is necessary so that the daughter becomes independent and able to live “successfully” in this society.\textsuperscript{20} However, this break of ties with the mother results in the daughter feeling alienated, which may cause her to search for the lost mother for the rest of her life.\textsuperscript{21} Women are conditioned to deny the true self and are encouraged and rewarded to play roles that are expected in this society (though not necessarily true to the self). Self-acceptance and self-realization are often difficult processes of transformation for women.\textsuperscript{22} Adrienne Rich refers to these difficulties as “birth pains” which accompany the births of our inner selves.\textsuperscript{23}

For the women Surrealists especially, the conflict of this transformation involved temporary psychosis, “madness” or acute depression. Gloria Orenstein has renamed these “breakdowns” as “breakthroughs” to a truer sense of self-acceptance.\textsuperscript{24} Meret Oppenheim, probably the most independent woman artist of the Surrealist era, who was a long time friend, lover, and model of Man Ray, survived an 18 year psychological and artistic crisis,\textsuperscript{25} which began when she was 24, soon after the fame of one of her pieces, Object, known as Dejeuner en fourure in 1936. She saw this piece as one of her more insignificant works.\textsuperscript{26} Oppenheim was so thoroughly associated with this piece by outside forces, and it was

\textsuperscript{18}Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, (San Diego New York London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 76.

\textsuperscript{19}Feminist Counseling in Action, Counseling in Action, (Sage Publishing).

\textsuperscript{20}Sara Bonnett Stein, Girls and Boys: The Limits of Nonsexist Childrearing, (New York: Charles Schribner’s Sons, 1983) 116.

\textsuperscript{21}Feminist Counseling in Action, Counseling in Action, (Sage Publishing).

\textsuperscript{22}Adrienne Rich, cited in DeShazer, 137.

\textsuperscript{23}DeShazer, 137.


\textsuperscript{26}Ibid. 64.
taken so seriously (and promoted heavily by the male Surrealists as a true Surrealist work of art) that Oppenheim felt limited in becoming known as the artist she truly was.

During this period of mental despondency, Oppenheim worked with a Jungian analyst. She studied the Jungian theories of archetypes, the integration of the separated selves, and the world of the subconscious and dreams. Suddenly, at the age of 42, she began to paint again, starting the most artistically productive time in her life. Oppenheim, during her years of mental crisis, was preparing for her "breakthrough" to her true self as a woman and as an artist.

Though the idea of the Muse was popularized by the male Surrealists, they were wrong about looking outside themselves toward the Other for inspiration. Ultimately, the Muse became more powerful in the lives and art of the women who, especially after their relationships with their male counterparts ended, developed self-reliance rather than looking toward the men in their lives for sustenance. Hence, the realization of the Muse within.

As women artists continue to hold the Muse as a source of energy originating in the creation of existence as well as living within the cores of themselves, it will be easier to heal woman's fragmented relationships with the self, the mother, and other women. Women can begin to mend this break within themselves through learning and deconstructing myth, even if it is based upon patriarchal ideas. By learning myth, women will gain the power of self-knowledge. By knowing the origin of her existence, which is a creation of Memory, she lives within the feminine, determining her own destiny and creating a valuable reality. "[By] knowing the myth, one knows the 'origin' of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will." Woman, in revising myths according to her own experience, will move herself from the role of artistic object toward the role of active creator. "By invoking a potent female Muse, the modern woman poet relates her creativity to complex and original mythic structures." This revision of history is, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "an act of survival" for women.

27 Ibid. 65.
28 Chadwick, 183.
30 DeShazer, 44.
31 Ibid.
32 Adrienne Rich, cited in DeShazer, 137.
The preservation and documentation of these women’s works and lives provide other women with a group of role models who were pioneers in the reemergence of women’s creative power before they had the support of women’s liberation. By ultimately integrating the split between the self and the image of the self which they believed to be desired by men,33 they moved from being object, or Muse, for male artists of the Surrealist movement toward a realization of the whole self, often resulting in fruitful periods of artistic production later in their lives.

My strong interest in the mind and the role of the subconscious in art34 began my journey to also find the Muse within. This interest is also what drew me to the dream-like imagery of the Surrealist movement. The Surrealists were interested in making a connection between two disparate worlds, the outer and the inner (the conscious and the subconscious world) and creating a new reality, the surreal, a combination of the two.35

I was especially drawn to the women who made their art at this time. I felt a kinship to these artists and was concerned that these artists, as well as myself, were limited by the splitting of the self into different roles. Research suggests that these women had similar intentions as I have to bring together the inside and outside selves and to function as a full human being.

33Chadwick, 183.
34My minor study in undergraduate school was psychology and counseling.
VIDEO

Video is a medium which allows me to explore my interest in extreme or dual personalities by acting out different personae that I perceive in others as well as in myself. In my first video, To My Mother, My Muse, My Memory, I play three characters who struggle to find their identities as three separate individuals, which is futile in their case, since each is only one fragment of the whole individual. Various physical and mental illnesses represent each character’s alienation. They must find their relationship with one another through Memory or Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, the origin of their existence.\(^\text{36}\)

These characters represent women I have encountered who have had common emotional and physical difficulties at different stages of their lives. For example, the young woman is self-destructive, the mother does not feel herself worthy of help and feels unable to provide for her children, and the old woman has Alzheimer’s disease. Though they begin as characters from ancient mythologies, I give them present concerns and personalities.

In my second video, Dark Things, I portray two main personae, which may be interpreted literally as the voices of two sisters in a dialogue. In this video, I sit in front of a mirror and use candy as makeup and jewelry. The two voices carry on their dialogue over a soundtrack of me badly singing *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*. The voices are also mirrored in a shadow puppet\(^\text{37}\) play featuring the Muse and the Siren as rivaling sisters. The shared (but differently interpreted) memories they touch upon trigger significant emotions and reactions toward each other and about their own feelings of self worth. The internal dialogue is bookended by an adapted myth in which a Siren (traditionally known as seductresses of sailors to destruction) and a Muse are sisters addressing the indulgences and destruction of jealousies and insecurities, and their internalization of negative voices from the past which threaten to determine the future if not confronted. The shadow imagery plays upon the idea of the shadow archetype in Jungian psychology. The shadow is usually seen as the darker side of the psyche which is often projected onto people of the same sex.\(^\text{38}\)

---

\(^{36}\) Since nine sections seemed overwhelming for a quarterly project, I divided by three and came up with the three main goddesses in many mythologies—sometimes called the maiden, the mother and the crone.

\(^{37}\) I was encouraged by my video teacher at the time to look at Lotte Reininger animation films. Reninger was one of the very first women filmmakers/animators.

Both of these videos were first shown to my peers and faculty during graduate walkthroughs as an element of an installation of sorts. *To My Mother, My Muse, My Memory* played on a monitor alongside my *Muse Museum*. The *Muse Museum* (the word museum being derived from the word Muse) is a collection of artifacts, mostly props from my video. Each piece, representing the dormant potential of the Muse, is being protected for the time being under a lucite box illuminated from below. The potential and wishes of the object are etched onto the inside of the box.

The video *Dark Things* was projected onto a large, stretched sheet of white fabric meant to serve as a screen for a shadow theater (the projected video piece). Human-size shadow puppets of the Muse and the Siren lit from behind with colored lights decorate the side panels. In both of these cases, I worked to find a way to incorporate my video language with object-making.
Working on how to synthesize these two main forms of art-making for my thesis project, I created a piece called *The Interview* which involved a monitor on which played a video\(^3\) of a head shot of myself speaking in tongues and a life-size mannequin torso whose hands and face were molded from my own. She fit into a fortune teller’s booth. A video played underneath the booth and was seen through a clear lamp globe serving as the teller’s crystal ball. Ideally, I would have had the video projected onto the surface of the globe.

Video, projected onto or through my sculptures, would bring them to life or make them appear to be moving on their own. Therefore, video projection and animation seemed to be key in achieving synthesis between my videos and my sculptures.

During this time, I was inspired by Laurie Anderson’s *The Shrink*. The artist filmed herself telling a story while sitting in a chair. She then projected a loop of the moving image onto a plaster sculpture which was about a foot high. The result is an impressive illusion of a miniature person speaking to you from her chair.

I was also impressed with Gary Hill’s *Tall Ships*, in which ghostlike figures (video projections) walked toward the viewer. These projections began as faint spots of light and grew to be life-size as they walked out of the darkness toward the viewer.

Lastly, I was intrigued by Tony Oursler’s *Don’t Look At Me*. A video of a person’s face was projected onto the surface of a white, stuffed piece of material shaped like a human being. The “person” was trapped under a chair and constantly addressing the viewer to go away and stop looking. This was yet another video sculpture which created a sense of reality or “surreality” for the viewer. I was very interested in video projection’s quality of realistic feeling.

---

\(^3\) This video, unlike my other videos, could not stand alone as a separate piece.
THE THESIS PROJECT PROCESS

My intention was to push *The Interview* further for my thesis project so that the fortune teller would interact with the viewer by moving, speaking, and telling fortunes.

I constructed a miniature model of a mechanical fortuneteller in planning for the life-size one. I decided to work with the miniature creation. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart describes the miniature as "linked to the nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulative version of experience."\(^{40}\)

I have made and decorated doll houses since I was in grade school, so the miniature felt very familiar to me. I felt more in control, able to do most of the building on my own. Stewart also mentions, in discussing the meaning in dollhouses and miniatures:

"The major function of the enclosed space is always to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public property, between the space of the subject and the space of the social."\(^{41}\)

I built a theater box similar to the toy theaters from the nineteenth century which were miniature theaters "table-top size, in which plays [were] produced for the amusement of one's friends and family. The actors [were] tiny, brightly painted figures two or three inches high, cut out from paper and mounted on thin cardboard."\(^{42}\) The figures were controlled by wire attachments, pushed and pulled by the operators. I began to construct platforms for my own miniature theater, and build a world for my characters to play out my stories.


\(^{41}\)Stewart, 68.

\(^{42}\)Suzanne Rahn, "Rediscovering the Toy Theater—with a Review of George Speight's 'The History of the English Toy Theater,'" in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 11 (October 1987): 113.
The area of about 10'x15' was converted into a dark enclosure so that no light except for the light coming from inside the theater would be visible. On the front of the theater box along the bottom, I installed push buttons which the viewer could use to activate the different electrical currents and move things inside the theater.

I videotaped myself telling the story and rear projected my image onto the surface of a tunnel. This looped tape of my storytelling played continuously as viewers came and pressed the buttons which animated the theater.

Viewers' responses to this project were a fascination for interactivity. People were most intrigued in their roles of pushing the buttons not knowing what it would trigger. “People have always wanted to animate and create in their own images the non-animate. Puppet shows and mechanical toys have long been popular.”

Stewart writes in _On Longing_, “The desire to animate is the desire not simply to know everything but also to experience everything simultaneously.”

---

43 My thesis was exhibited in a corner of the SPAS Gallery, RIT.

44 _Film Before Film (Was geschah wirklich zwischen den Bildern?)_ Directed by Werner Nekes. 83 min. Kino International Corporation, videocassette release of the 1985 German film. 1990. Videocassette.

45 Stewart, 57.
In my thesis project, I brought back the characters of the muses and their mother from my the work of my first year at RIT, this time centering on my story of one Muse, the youngest, Clio, the Muse of history. Again more the Muse is searching for her mother and for herself.

Clio’s story is a parable for women who are trying to reconnect their interior selves with their exterior selves. Often, in times of confusion or difficulty, we look outside ourselves for answers. Though Clio is the Muse of history, she does not connect with who she is or understand her purpose. She is alone in her world, the only Muse left who hasn’t been drained of her life energy. Through her history, she possesses the intuition she needs to save herself and her family. However, without Memory (her mother), she is partially misguided and comes near the same destruction as her sisters. To save herself from dying out, she begins to look for her mother from whom she has been long disconnected. Instead, she finds a fortune teller who can provide insight to the past and future. However, Clio is suspicious of the teller. She discovers that the fortuneteller is an outer shell disguised as a glowworm which has been draining the glow from her sisters and mother as well as separating them from Clio.

Looking for the mother or Memory is my metaphor for looking deeply inside the self to find wisdom. Clio is distracted from looking within when she encounters a fortune teller—someone who promises the illusion of wisdom. Like many, including her sisters, she is tempted by the shortcut to self-knowledge. The easier, more immediate answers often come from outside sources rather than from searching inward. As Clio looks into the crystal ball, she claims the power and knowledge of her fortune as her own rather than allowing it to be interpreted by another. Furthermore, Clio rejects the negative image she sees in the crystal ball, asserting her free will, which saves her family and herself.

Finding one’s Muse is similar to finding one’s self. Like Clio, we must see through many layers of illusions to find inner knowledge.
CONCLUSION

Woman's acceptance of her Muse within will provide not only access to the source of creative energy but will provide a sense of self-wholeness and a reclamation or connection with "ancient history" which has been lost to our consciousness for hundreds of years, lying rather dormant and often unrecognized within a collective subconscious and within the female archetypes which surround us in myth.

It is important for the evolution of feminism that women acknowledge the existence of the female power which remains within patriarchal myth. For women artists, acknowledging the original power of the Muse as source of feminine creativity is a powerful way for them to reconnect the conflicting aspects which occur within as they work as creators in a patriarchal society.

The writer May Sarton has been quoted as saying, "The Muse opens up a dialogue with oneself," This allows for the integration of the self, the inner and outer reality, the many and the whole, and the Muse and the artist.

---

46 DeShazer, p.70. Speaking of the Goddess in H.D.'s poems, the "matriarchal principal"

47 Orenstein, 53.

48 May Sarton cited in Inspiring Women, 113.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Nekes, Werner, director. Film Before Film (Was geschah wirklich zwischen den Bildern?) 1990. 83 min. Kino International Corporation, videocassette release of the 1985 German film. An encyclopedic look at the "prehistory" of cinema, covering shadow plays, peep shows, flip books, magic lanterns, lithopanes, panoramic scrolls, optical toys


