

## Myths and Symbols in Contemporary Art

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### ABSTRACT

*The myths that depict how anything has come into existence and that always relate to creation tell us the origin of 'things.' Mythologies can be defined as the documents that hide the knowledge and ideas which were generated deep in history. Campbell suggests that mythological narrations have visible and invisible aspects and that it is necessary to reveal the invisible rather than the visible aspect. This finding is valid for symbols too. Symbols are the pictorial forms of mythologies and there are close ties between mythologies and symbols.*

*The language and 'persons' of the unconscious are the symbols whereby our dreams contact us. Therefore, researching people and their symbols indeed means researching the mankind's relation with his own unconscious.*

*Symbol-based narration has been adopted from the past to present by many artists as it embodies a sort of knowledge with codes and selected as a method for the generation of artworks. The tales and myths, which are still subject to the artworks of today, have moved beyond the depiction of stories and "personalized" especially in recent years, and have been transformed through the generation of a new wave that is based on a special narration and expression whereby the artist creates his own myth and mythologizes his world.*

**Keywords:** myth, symbol, art

*"I believe that history takes place of mythology and has the same function in today's societies, but in undocumented societies, the purpose of the mythology is to ensure that future holds to today and past, insofar as possible."*

**C. Levi Strauss**

According to Joseph Campbell, who is one of the most important names in the field of mythology, human being cannot maintain his/her life without the formation of a general mythic heritage. The richness of a human life forms in line with the depth and richness of his/her native mythology, not with his/her rational thoughts. Accordingly, we can say that it is not possible to understand the history or the culture of one community without myths. Myth is stated as the signs and symbols which explains old-line beliefs and passes them down. Mythological fictions, which involve topics such as genesis of the universe, the stealing of fire, gods punishing people, the rising of the first family, traditions and social institutions, are holly phraseologies for transmitting the cumulative knowledge of mankind and belief systems which carry vital meanings for human beings. According to a saying of Cevat Şakir, stone and vase residuals help archeologists reconstruct the truth, and legends are useful for today's mythologists in the same way.

Mythologies and myths constitute the oral history of the undocumented societies. Myths told today are the ancient discourse of the first ancestors of these societies. The story of humankind is explored using the symbolic paintings and myths which remain from ancient

people. Such signs or myths are not only facts that belong to the communities of ancient eras. When we look at the native legends or old Greek myths, we can see that the symbols of which these myths represent are still important and valid. According to mythological logic, any fact and everything in the nature has a similar, whether visible or not. Mythologies have tended to narrate every fact and every formation by using these similarities and matching images.

### **Symbolic Expressions, Epic Descriptions**

The most important contribution of Jung to physiological thinking is the endlessly comprehensive and rich ‘unconsciousness’ notion of which he sees as the basic part of the individual life and as real as the conscious, thinking world of ego – not a hiding place of suppressed desires like the “subconscious” notion of Freud. Language and ‘people’ of unconsciousness are the symbols with which our dreams make contact with us. So, exploring human beings and their symbols actually means to explore the relationship of a human being with his/her unconsciousness.

According to philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who expresses the importance of symbolic form notion and builds his philosophy on this, the art is identified as a symbolic language. For him, symbols are made of images. The mind takes the symbols and makes them functional (Arat 1997:6).

We can say that the reason for using symbols is their ability to represent the thing/object to which they point in all its aspects. Symbols which are used for objectifying abstract ideas, strange thoughts, and creatures can be a painting, shape, number, color, event, object, or a living creature. The symbols, being “Visualization of the permanent in the temporal through the temporal, becoming half transparent” (Çetindağ 2009: 263) are generally used for expressing the deep and complicated realities, and for emphasizing the realities which are desired to be told in a stronger way.



*Horses and the head of a bull, Lascaux Cave, 15000 BC.*

The history of art is the history of its producers. Even the cave paintings are the first artworks of mankind; they do not have a primitive side. Most of these paintings consist of animals. The fact that they are drawn very frequently shows that they are not related only to hunting objects but that secret meaning is assigned to these animals and that they become a cult. Ultimately, these images were brought together in order to create symbolic tales of certain mythological stories due to the meaningful relations between them. The attitude of uniting that is personal and universal is the fundamental way of mythological discourse.

Myths as symbols have built new phraseologies and occasionally reached a meaning close to surrealism. Reflections of myth has turned into a phenomenon that belongs to today's human being by developing a way of thinking based on metaphors and alteration of daily life through fictionalizing, and has been seen in every field of art.

As an impressive example of phraseology of individual tale, French born artist Louise Bourgeois stands out. Her method is to present the story of her past, which she defines as 'my childhood which is painful, frightful but never lose its magic' (Bernedac 2008:124), with masterly chosen symbolic objects. While she does this, the artist who objectifies the images from her past internalizes these objects. Giant spider represents many things to her, such as fertility, femininity, fear, patience, friendship, etc. and her mother in particular. The spider, in which she sees herself through being a mother, is a brave, protective worker who patiently fixes her web besides being wild.



Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1997, Installation View, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne

Bourgeois, who concentrate on textile-based materials in her recent years as a result of old age, deals with women-oriented works. Little pink women figures have been illustrated as big breasted and hippe, symbolizing motherhood and fertility. This approach recalls Venus illustrations which are older than 20.000 BC. There are quite similarities with the Willendorf Venus, which we can call the most important one. The symbolized form of fertility, fruitfulness, and motherhood is in the foreground in both of them.



Louise Bourgeois, *Woman*, 2000



*Venus of Willendorf*, 22000 BC.

American artist Kiki Smith addresses the relationship between body and mind, and approaches from different perspectives the human anatomy (particular her own body), and is one of the artists who uses symbolic items. Smith also wants to reveal the psychological images of the body. While exercising this, she reveals the fundamental closeness between 'victim' and 'hunt/bait' over wolf and women representations (Rush-Dannat 2002:80).

Kiki Smith, who presents 'epic' tales in her works said "Women do not spare their identities from their self-identities as a body" in one of her interviews<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the work of Smith can be considered as the expressions of 'womanly' sensibility. Smith, who deals deeply with beauty and decoration topics, has combined glass, paper, wax, fabric, and lace, thought of as part of womanly handicrafts, with 'masculine' materials like bronze and tin. Her subjects generally come from stories she has created, and her subjective world where there are lace sheets, human bodies, glass stars, and especially, animals.

The animal figures which we confront in plastic arts carry a mostly symbolic expression. Clarissa P. Estes, who concentrates on the wild woman archetype, argues that women and wolves share a certain spiritual character. According to her, wolves and women are close relatives in terms of resistance and power they have; both have strong intuitions and live a very intense relation with their children, husbands and packs. But both have been hunted constantly and wrongfully identified as vicious. According to Estes, because of this, the shattering of wolves and women by the ones who misunderstand them resembles each other (Estes, 2011: 16). 'Wolf' and 'girl' images are the subjects which we frequently confront. Images of the dark side of the tails, primitive fears and psychological traumas are the areas into which Smith steps, for example, wolf and girl figures remembered from 'Little Red Riding Hood' confront us in these works. But here, the wolf and the girl have melded, and the basic resemblance between hunter and hunted has been revealed.

"Fairy tales, myths and stories provides understanding which sharpens our vision in order to distinguish to choose the pathway that wild nature left behind" (Etes, 2011 19).



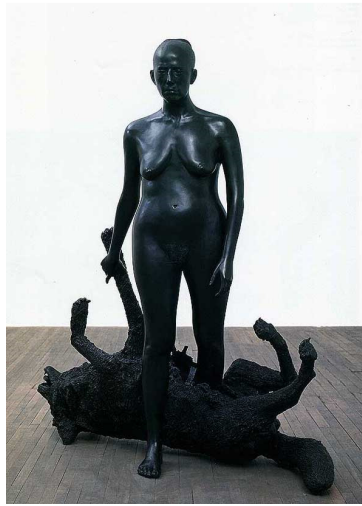
Kiki Smith, *Birth*, 2002. Lithograph, edition 4 of 28. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund, 2003.<sup>17</sup>

'Birth', which is one of the latest works of Smith's 'Little Red Riding Hood' series and takes three years to complete, represents the swallowing of Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother by the wolf, then emerging from it stomach with more violent interpretation. Blood comes out of wolf's mouth which lies backwards on the ground. This interpretation



means salvation and rebirth, and engages with the descriptions in the Bible and the symbolism of Mother Mary.

In the works of Smith, elements such as commitment, religion, iteration, and spirit of other culture and history stand out.



Kiki Smith, *Rapture*, 2001, Bronze, 67 1/4 x 62 x 26 1/2 inches. Edition of 3. Photo by Ellen Page Wilson. Courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York

Communicating with a wolf and again being born from her womb by sheltering her peltry... Smith's works represent the complicated, symbolic relations between human beings and animals.



Esra Sağlık, from the serie '*Selfportrait*', roses, 50 x 70 cm. 2008

Like mirror, one of the objects with which we have a strong symbolic value, is 'rose'. The rose, referencing many thing such as the face, beauty of the lover, blood of the nightingale, forms connotations and meanings. The rose, which has a cultural background dating back to old times, and not only in Sufism, but also in art and literature of the European Middle Ages, has been used as a strong symbol. According to Christian poets, Mother Mary carried the whole of heaven and earth in her womb, inside a single rounded rose (Goody 2010:228).

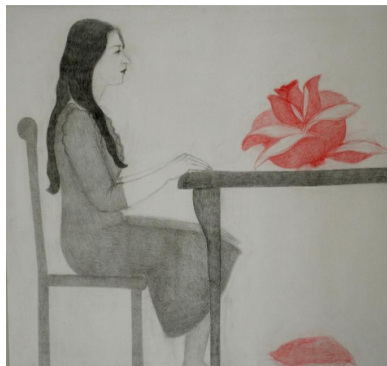
The rose, which is very intense by means of its significance, has been at stake in the portrayal of the inner world and emotions of a human being. The rose also represents the words wanting to be spelled; kindness, smell, and beauty. The work, 'The Mirror', has been formed by using these two objects, the mirror, and the rose, both strong in symbolism. Actually the mirror figured as the object which is referred. In this work, the mirror has been engaged with 'the rose' as the reflecting object; the viewer looking into the mirror and the mirror which is viewed, have both been stated with a poetic expression. In addition, the desired object, the viewer's image, is invisible and is instead illustrated by the absence of the affections, now emphasized by its 'absence'.



Esra Sağlık, from the serie 'Selfportrait', roses, 50 x 70 cm. 2008, (10th day)

On the one hand 'the mirror which fades day by day' stresses a change which occurs in itself as a reflector, whilst on the other, a change occurs in the subject reflected by the mirror, or in the subject who looks back at us reflecting the situation in which we see ourselves in front of the mirror.

The surface of the work is made of fresh roses; the framework is made of faded, seared roses. The reason for this illustration is to reveal the difference between the surface and framework of the mirror and to emphasize the surface. At the same time, the one which will fade day by day shows the stage of having the same texture as the framework, and the change during this process. The mirror, an object that reflects the one viewing it, in a way, becomes the one which is looked at; not the one which is looked from it. Conversely, the rose presents a view at which the looker cannot stop looking, therefore the mirror can be perceived as the worship of the viewer to himself/herself.



Esra Sağlık, *Dialogue*, drawing on canvas, 2010

In the work called 'Dialogue', a surreal environment has been created in order to emphasize the quite dramaturgy of the composition (an over-sized rose on the table, two dimensional reflections of the chair and the table, etc). Also the subject in the painting is in a silent 'dialogue' with the rose on the table. The painting has been illustrated one –to-one dimension in order to emphasize the expression which is both surreal and realistic.



Esra Sağlık, *Ah*, drawing on canvas, 2011

As Thomas Mann declares, the eye of the artist has a view that can see life like myth. This look is like a lens which is filtered with the individual and cultural memorial background. As a result of this, the reality that the artist deals with becomes the symbolic reflection of his/her reality and artistic reality.

The tales and myths which are subjected to art works today have been 'personalized' in recent years to go beyond the imaginary stories, and become altered with the formation of a new era based on subjective expression and manifestation of the artist who creates his/her myth and mythologized his/her world. Fairy tales and myths which belong to a collective mind have formed the individual mythologies and fairy tales by mixing them with our personal items.

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