



MALCOLM RAINS

chance unfolds



The Artist's Studio, Toronto, 2019

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CHANCE UNFOLDS

The Classical Series by Malcolm Rains

By Meghan O'Callaghan

Confronting the *Classical Series* by Canadian artist, Malcolm Rains, the seemingly simple contrast between his white paper constructions and their black backgrounds, invokes a belief in a clear understanding. Rains himself fuels our imagination by titling his paintings with names based on places, deities and figures rooted in antiquity, a pseudo-homage to ancient Rome and Greece. We, the imperiled viewer, are sent on a quest whose outcome we cannot predict. Like *Icaria, 2018* (fig.9), the titles imply that we can find a correlation between the winged shape of his painted folded form and the myth of Icarus, soaring too close to the sun. As we are caught scouring his images for that connection, Rains is successful; we have become active viewers in search for the key to his enduring enigmas. This latest evolution of Rains' *Classical Series* strives for maximum impact: his crumpled white forms are brighter, the planes of the folded figures radiate out from their impossibly dark void.

However, these works are not what they appear to be or mean. Their background is not, in fact, black, but a multiplicity of colours - burnt umber, thalo blue - layers that add depth when viewed. These paintings are meant to subvert the very classical canons of beauty that their titles suggest. Exercises in playful irony, Rains decides to name his creations only after he has completed the work. A consummate example, *Leto, 2018* (fig.8) encourages our innate ability to find recognition in form. The Leto from Greek mythology was remembered for her dramatic labour and birth of the gods, Apollo and Artemis, fathered by Zeus. In the same way that myth has been shown to offer an allegorical instruction on how to shape one's world view, we can become convinced of our view and perception of Rains' Leto. The organic billowing line reveals a personified pregnant form. The irony employed here is not as simple as that found in literary traditions - not only saying one thing to mean another - but, rather wittily, Rains is pitting multiple meanings against one another.

In reviewing this collection, one question kept circling around in my mind. From where does Rains' intent to overturn the classical ideals of beauty emanate? Before his explorations in painting, Rains was a student of architecture attending the University of Detroit and Toronto from 1967 to 1970. The late 1960s was a radical time in art and architecture as the postmodern philosophy and aesthetic took root. Postmodern architecture was a clear rejection of the Modernist dictum 'form follows function'. Exemplified by contemporary architects like Frank Gehry, this movement was meant to celebrate organic beauty while still challenging the classical aesthetics of harmony and balance. In discussion about his architectural studies, Malcolm Rains reflects on his training and the continued institutional idealization of Roman and Greek architecture, epitomized as the ideal form. Rains' work here stands as a contestation to that belief. Instead of relying on the artificial symmetry of Euclidean geometry, Rains allows himself to embrace randomness and chance. The organic asymmetry of the horizontal figure in *Pylos, 2018* (fig.1), peaks and crescendos unpredictably, in a fashion not unlike Gehry's façade for the Art Gallery of Ontario in Rains' hometown of Toronto.

Rains' reliance on chance and his architectural training coalesce in the construction of his paintings. Before picking up a brush, Rains creates tens of paper models. Using a repetitive gesture, the paper is crushed against his body or hand, each repetition, or experiment, yields unexpected forms. The importance of accident in Rains' corpus should not be overlooked. After graduating from OCAD in 1974, the artist's early experiments in the 1980s with sculpture used a similar methodology. Taking square blocks of plaster, he would plunge a chisel into the half dried surface, creating an "X". He repeated this gesture over and over, forging accident or chance as the surrounding plaster would fissure and break as his chisel was removed. This self-described

"attempt to discipline the randomness" would set the foundation for Rains' painting practice and more specifically *The Classical Series*.

Sirens no.1, 2018 (fig.10) draws your eye to the left; the bold arrhythmic contour, two blackened mountain peaks are gently carved from the negative space between the two paper structures. Embodying this "disciplined randomness", the painting celebrates the happy accidents of Rains' crinkled models. The zigzagging line that cuts across the planes of white in the top left corner suggest a natural depth, almost like the crags and crystallization of a glacier. Our sense of the artist's hand, his control and discipline, enters with the chosen perspective of the paper model. This perspective is heightened when Rains includes two paper figures, the black void between them finds its own shapes and presence expressing the artist's ability to mold his compositions adroitly. At his studio earlier this year, Rains touched on this aspect of his paintings, stating "the emptiness plays an important part in the *Classical Series*, in order to give equal billing to the form, the negative space is its own kind of character, you can't have one without the other, form and emptiness." Returning again to *Sirens No.1*, the irregular polygonal structure of the void between the folded figures, creates a sense of tension, separation and thus beauty to the composition.

Rains' ironic reference to classical beauty in *The Three Graces* (fig. 5) evocatively recalls, not only Botticelli's own rendition of the subject, but the complex drapery of the Louvre's *Nike of Samothrace*. The delicacy of Rains' three - folded and cylindrical - figures highlights their weightless movement, an accidental similarity to the translucent folds of marble hanging over this winged Hellenistic sculpture. Is Rains' taunting us as we now know that the paper models were crafted by accident? The risk in his use of irony is that his intentions will be misunderstood. The potential reward is that Rains' playful subversion of Greek thought will open the viewer to a critical reception of his work and guiding philosophy, one centered around the Chinese understanding of painting and art making.

This Eastern perspective, Rains explains, was always much more abstract at its core than the European

tradition. In the artist's own words "Chinese painting is not meant as a visual transcription; it is a symbolic transformation of what the artist experiences". In his reduction and abstraction of form, startlingly captured in *The Three Graces*, but seen throughout the classical paintings, Rains only depicts what he refers to as "the essence of what is there." Here, Rains is making reference to the Chinese painter and philosopher, Shih-T'ao (1642-1707), whose theoretical writings, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, ultimately extoll the power of the indignant single line and its uncontrived essence, revealing the personal emotions of the artist.

With this principle, Rains has begun experimenting with a series of paintings that unequivocally tangle with Shih-Tao's "Holistic brushstroke", offering his devotees an insight into the philosophical underpinning of much of his *oeuvre*. The suggestion that through less, the artist can say more is manifested by Shih-Tao in his discussion on the primal mark. "A single brushstroke can define even that which lies beyond the borders of the universe. An infinity of brushstrokes all begin with it and are completed by it. It all depends on the artist to take control." *Wu Wei Way* (fig. 11), an organic act of the artist's wrist, displays the first, and ironically final, confrontation with the primordial confusion of the blank canvas. That indignant line, with its textured rhythm and uncontrived splay, captures the immediacy and genesis of the artist's primal mark.

Can we the viewer even begin to imagine how the artist's hand will complete the following 10,000 brushstrokes that constitute a painting in the *Classical Series*? Unanswerable, it is a conceptual endeavour for the viewer to attempt. Titled the *Primordial Brushstroke Series*, these experiments in creative freedom offer another clue to the Classical Series as Rains has expressed his experience as an artist. In particular, that initial decision to imagine, to mark, to create. During our interview, I asked Rains why he left architecture to pursue art. His telling response was that: "only by declaring myself to be an artist, could I have the freedom to do whatever I wanted." Could each line and form that emerges from his paintings be such a declaration? Repeated 10,000 times, we are still contemplating the enigma that exists within every single brushstroke.



PYLOS, 2018 oil on linen, 42 x 68 in. / 107 x 173 cm



2

HERACLEA, 2019 oil on linen, 54 x 45 in. / 137 x 114 cm



RHODOS & HELIOS oil on linen, 54 x 45 in. / 137 x 114 cm









7

BYZANTIUM, 2017 oil on linen, 54 x 45 in. / 137 x 114 cm



8

LETO, 2018 oil on canvas, 54 x 45 in. / 137 x 114 cm







Malcolm Rains

1947 Born in Bristol, England
1955 Emigrated to Canada (Canadian Citizen)
1967-69 Studied Architecture at the University of Detroit
1969-70 Studied Architecture at the University of Toronto
1971-74 Attended and graduated the Ontario College of Art

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019 Odon Wagner Gallery, Toronto, ON
2016 Odon Wagner Gallery, Toronto, ON
2012 Galerie de Bellefeuille, Montreal, QC
2010 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, AB
2008 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
2007 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, ON
2005 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
2004 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
2001 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
2000 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
1998 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
1996 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
1994 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
1992 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, ON
1991 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, ON
1989 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, ON
1988 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, ON
1986 Oakville Gairloch Gallery, Oakville, ON
1985 Klonaridis Inc., Toronto, ON
1983 Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, ON
1981 Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, ON
McIntosh Gallery, London, ON (catalogue)
1979 Agnes Etherington Art Centre,
Kingston, ON (catalogue)
Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, ON

AWARDS

1986 Canada Council Arts Grant 'B'
1984 Canada Council Short-term Grant
1983 Canada Council Project Cost Grant
1982 Canada Council Arts Grant 'B'
1981 Canada Council Short-term Grant
1979 Canada Council Arts Grant 'B'
1978 Ontario Arts Council Grant
1978 Canada Council Short-term Grant
1977 Ontario Arts Council Grant

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014-15 Art Toronto, Odon Wagner Contemporary, Toronto, ON
2011 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
2006 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, AB
2003 McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
2002-04 Albuquerque Museum of Fine Arts, Albuquerque,
New Mexico
2001 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
2000 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
1999 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
1997 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON
1995 Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, ON
1994 The Koffler Gallery / The Koffler Centre of the Arts,
North York, ON
1993 The Power Plant, Toronto, ON
The Station Gallery, Whitby Arts Inc., Whitby, ON
1992 Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal, QC
McIntosh Gallery, London, ON, (catalogue)
1989 Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, BC (catalogue)
Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, ON
1985 Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, ON
1981 Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB (catalogue)
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON (catalogue)
1980 Glendon Gallery, York University, Toronto, ON
1979 Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto, ON (catalogue)
1978 Etobicoke Civic Centre Gallery, Etobicoke, ON
Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto, ON
Ontario College of Art, Toronto, ON
1973 Gallery Pascal, Toronto, ON

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, ON
Art Gallery of Algoma, Sault Ste. Marie, ON
Art Gallery of Guelph, ON
Art Gallery of Hamilton, ON
Art Gallery of Peterborough, ON
Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa, ON
Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade, Ottawa, ON
Hart House Gallery, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON
McIntosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
Oakville Centennial Gallery, ON
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON

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CREDITS

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