

Espace Sculpture

ART ACTUEL PRATIQUES ET PERSPECTIVES
espace

Rebecca Burke *In search of Medusa*

Linda Rae Dornan

Number 41, Fall 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9742ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Dornan, L. R. (1997). Rebecca Burke: *In search of Medusa*. *Espace Sculpture*, (41), 40–42.

Tous droits réservés © Le Centre de diffusion 3D, 1997

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

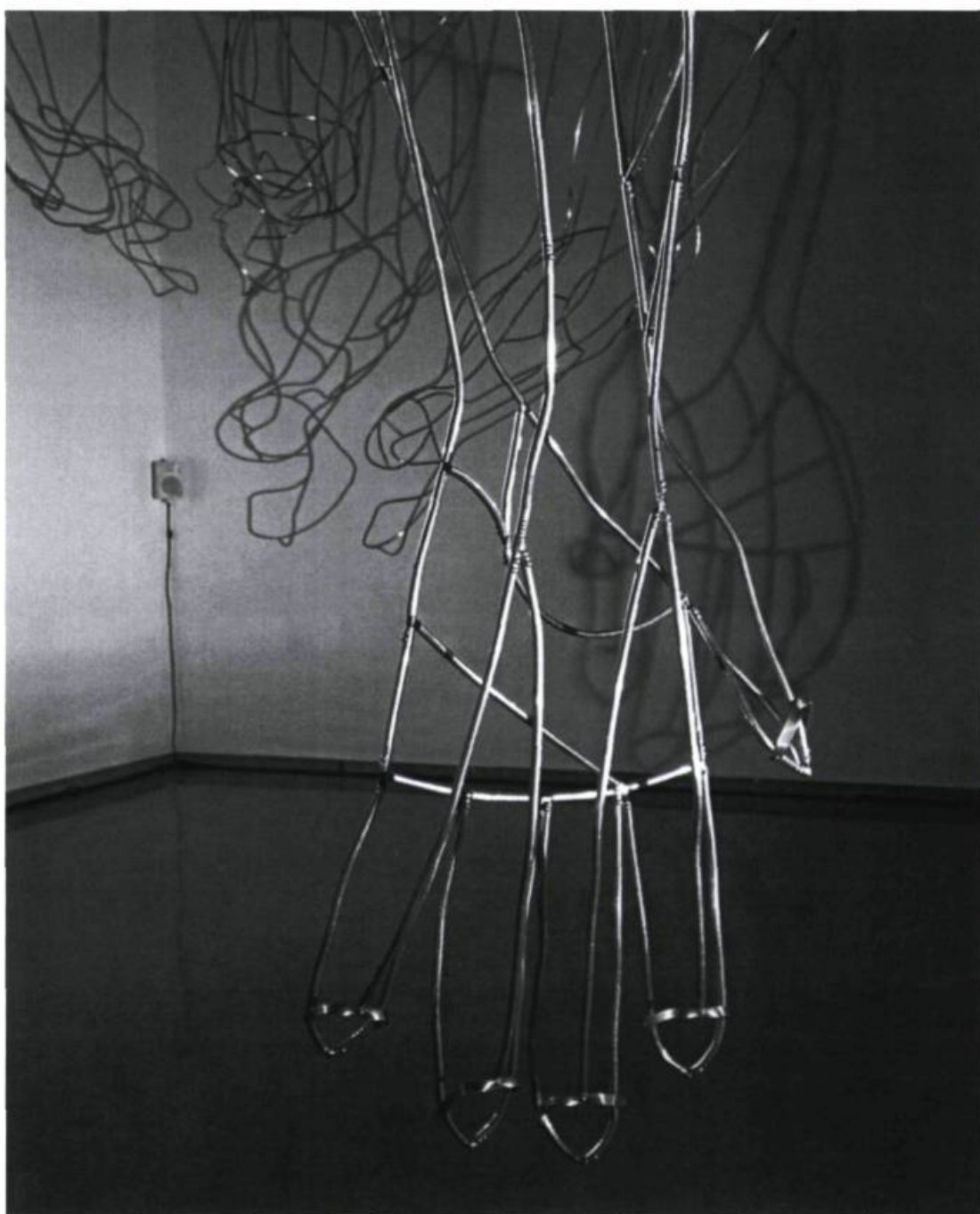
Rebecca Burke In Search of Medusa

Linda Rae Dornan

The most well known story about Medusa is the Greek myth where she is a snaky-haired monster whose glance turns men to stone and where her head is cut off by Perseus. Each element of the story is a masterpiece of human psychology, simply told, yet revealing as much about the original storytellers as about the participants. In *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Medusa is described as "the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons, representing 'female wisdom'." And further, "A female face surrounded by serpent-hair was an ancient, widely recognized symbol of divine female wisdom, and equally of the 'wise blood' that supposedly gave women their divine powers." The ancient Greeks were a patriarchal society glorifying the male form and imposing their values on conquered peoples. It is not surprising that if Medusa was a powerful figure, the Greeks would demonize her.

At the beginning of the exhibition catalogue text, Sheila Butler examines Freud's interpretation of Perseus as he vanquishes Medusa as fear of castration because of the sight of the "castrated" female body. If true, the vanquishing has never fully succeeded because here we are again, over two thousand years later, looking at Medusa and wondering who Perseus was. As Rebecca Burke, the artist, has rejuvenated her, she is transfixing. She is enormously powerful, transgressing the Greek myth through size (853.44 cm long), life (she still has her head) and beauty.

The sculpture itself is constructed of aluminum tubing bolted together into a three-dimensional, twenty-eight foot long armature suspended from the ceiling. You walk toward her, then underneath her, looking up through her body, a skeleton of linear fullness. She has the most spectacular breasts, nip-



Rebecca Burke, *In Search of Medusa*, 1995. Hand detail.

ples, belly and thighs; she is a mature woman of ancient grand power. With hands each three feet long, her pose is reaching down to the earth as she kicks through the sky, flying above the viewers. There is a tangled weave of her shadows on the floor and she is glorious. Burke has replaced the fear-inspiring bodiless head of the classical Greek myth with an admirably strong, welcoming, albeit unnerving presence. The mythical Medusa is animated once again and liberated from the patriarchal story and, wondrously, she speaks.

Her voice is a sound work by musician/composer Janet Hammock. Hammock is a Professor of Music at Mount Allison University who regularly performs on the piano throughout Canada, the United States and Belgium. She has created a complex composition using handmade invented musical instruments and human voices, layered and acoustically manipulated. The sound is created, to quote Hammock, to "illuminate... (the) visual manifestation of Medusa, but as well, to extend her physical boundaries, both without and within." It effectively creates the senses, moods and stages of a woman's inner life during an eighty-minute period and is a powerfully sensual soundwork. As the viewer moves around the gallery space, he or she can hear different sounds broadcast from four speakers situated on the four walls generating a multi-layered, personal language. Together, the sculpture and the sound work form a whole woman of epic dimensions, one who has never disappeared from the popular imagination but who has, here, been reborn. Can she be read and understood as other than a terrifying monster after centuries of bad advertising?

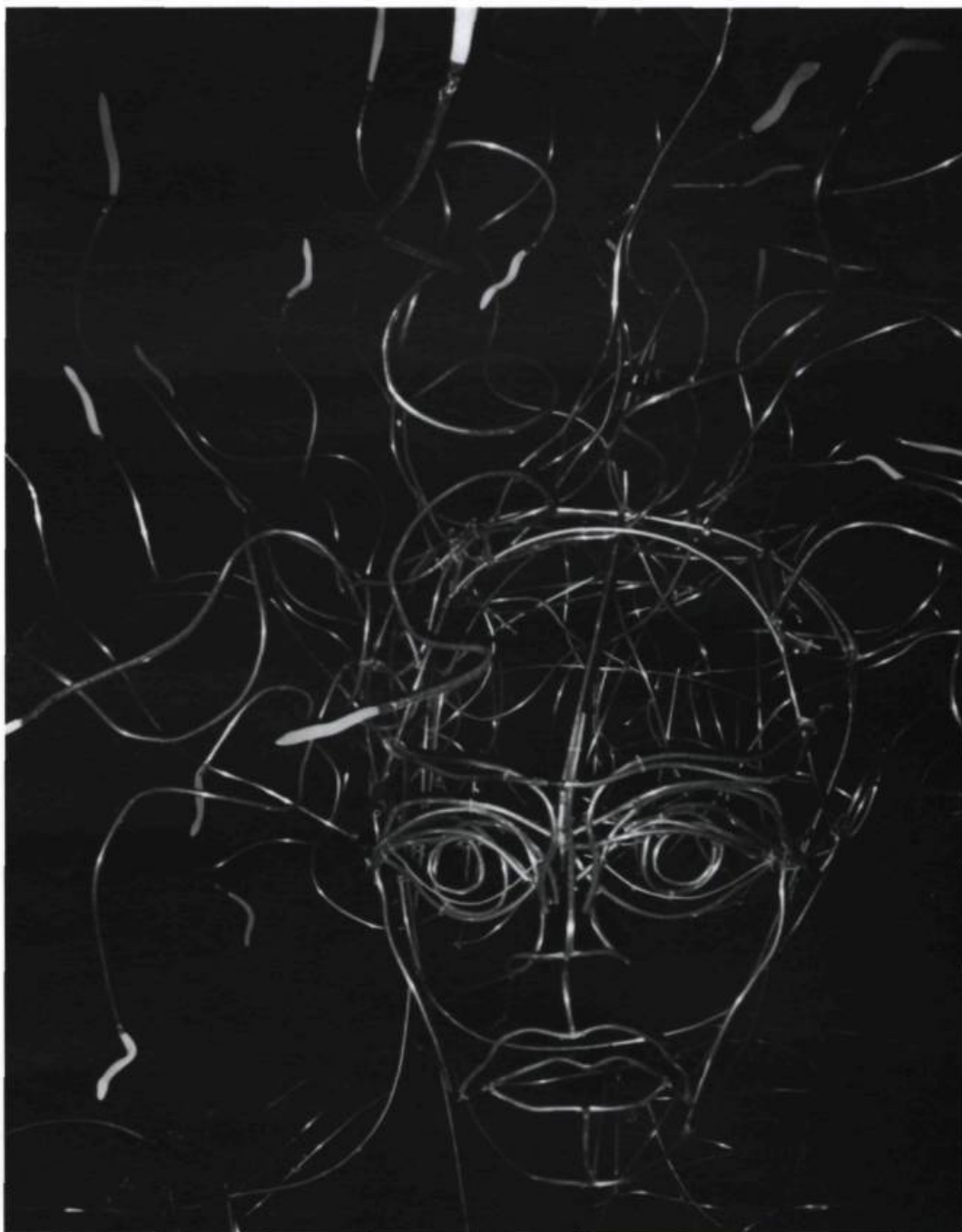
So how did Burke arrive at this sculptural work? Burke is an artist and full-time professor in the Fine Arts Department at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. She is predominantly a painter who occasionally moves into the sculptural realm when her subject matter so demands. Her subject matter in the past ten years has been increasingly concerned with discussing women's issues in our society and culture, always referencing her imagery to the human body.

In an earlier work, *Bodybuilders*, done between 1983 and 1985, she questioned our definitions of the masculine and the feminine, often from a humorous, albeit satirical point of view. These were colourfully muscular men and women, painted on plywood cutouts as well as on canvas. Each was depicted posing as if in a weightlifting competition with large bulging muscles. Researched from var-

ious muscle magazines, none of the males were beautiful in the classical sense and none looked vulnerable despite their being almost nude, not as much as a woman dressed only in a bikini bathing suit would be vulnerable. Writing about the work, Burke says, "In no other activity does one see the boundaries of masculinity so overtly allied to physical form alone." The intention of *Bodybuilders* was to parody our contemporary notions of what is appropriate human form and behaviour and to ridicule those notions.

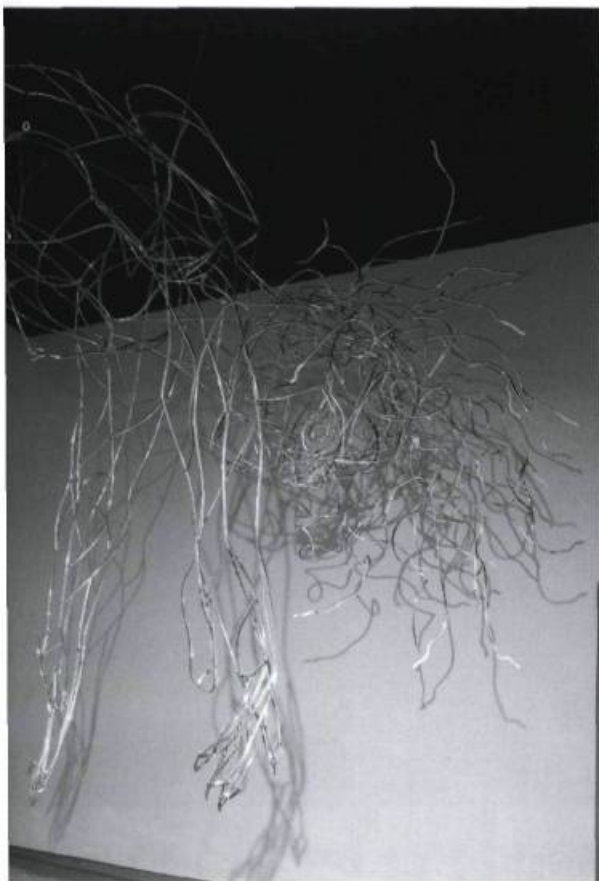
In the past decade Burke has also used the images of ancient mythological gods/goddesses and their symbolic meanings. In a painting from 1989, *The Water Carriers*, based on the Picasso

drawing *Study for Three Women at the Spring*, three monumental women were dressed in draped togas, like Greek or Roman goddesses. Burke's painting was 198,12 x 228,6 cm in size, greatly changing the smaller drawing's picturesque containment (21,5 x 27 cm). The women in Burke's painting became heroic, larger than life women, painted in vibrant colours, unlike the sombre tones Picasso used in his final painted version. I see Burke's painting as an attempt to rewrite and re-frame a famous male artist's depiction of women; an attempt to visually apply a feminist critique with a subversive approach; and a taking over of a "Master's" work, as Picasso himself often did by re-interpreting other artists' paintings.



Rebecca Burke, *In Search of Medusa*, 1995. Head detail.

In 1986, Burke was awarded a major commission for a large scale kinetic sculpture at the Canada Pavilion at Expo '86 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The work, called *Clouds in Heaven*, was made of canvas sketched on high-density styrofoam, juxtaposed in space and colourfully painted with Greek gods, literally "flying" amongst the clouds. Suspended just below the ceiling of the pavilion, the gods had idealized muscular torsos, all in some gesture of activity. Looking at colour photos of the work now, they appear to be symbols of heroic action paralleling the enormous



scale of Expo '86, acting as uplifting imagery. What I noted was the artist's use of "barbaric, hedonistic" gods instead of the monotheistic beliefs of the major world religions being interpreted. This was imagery where myth and imagination were being acclaimed, foregrounding the artist's research and creation of Medusa.

In Search of Medusa was first exhibited at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, then 55 Mercer Street in New York City, and finally at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Prince Edward Island. I have seen it in the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and the Owens Art Gallery. In both spaces, the

viewers were confronted with an enormous shiny silver woman looking down into their eyes. Her hair curled out wildly in every direction, each end having a small clay snake made from terra cotta or white clay. This Medusa resembles the Medusa of one's dreams, sparkling like a celestial constellation; an all-powerful woman who isn't ashamed of her strength or her power. So, what is the meaning of claiming and of re-writing the myth? Other artists, to quote the Toronto painter Rae Johnson, have reclaimed Medusa to unleash the "ancient repressed fear of women's knowledge". In 1993, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan created a performance art work called *Mary Medusa* where the lady is happily living in Winnipeg. In the myth, the mirror was of utmost importance, for by looking indirectly at Medusa, Perseus only saw a reflection, not the woman, and was therefore able to protect himself and to kill the "monster". In Burke's re-incarnation of Medusa, we look directly into her eyes, in fact we see her whole being and we are attracted much more than repelled. So Medusa as Woman is resuscitated as a positive force. Her story is told by seeing her physique, her head, and listening to her voice.

Rewriting/recuperating history and myth continues to be an important task within feminist scholarship. Recognition and inclusion of women excluded from the predominantly male-centred history enriches our understanding of our collective history, female and male. This Medusa arouses our curiosity about the ancient Greek myth, questioning its negative viewpoint towards what must have been a very strong woman. But take it one step further and Burke's Medusa is more than a rewrite. It is a joyous representation of womanhood, of being human. It is where you look directly into the face of yourself and instead of seeing a monster reflected back, you see a whole person, one whose strength can release either gender from their stereotypes.

In Search of Medusa succeeds for several reasons. It is aesthetically pleasing to the eye, sparkling above our heads like a heavenly constellation; the sculpture's body lines are round, full and strong. When you walk into the gallery space and see Medusa reborn there is a certain vicarious thrill in experiencing a larger-than-life representation of an ancient mythical figure. Most importantly Burke has reclaimed Medusa's (Woman's) body by reattaching her head, or inversely, by giving her head a

body. The sound and the sculpture produce a multi-faceted image of a whole woman not a limiting portrayal of the social decapitations of Woman as virgin, mother or whore. So, yes, to answer my original question, Medusa can once again be identified with the various meanings attributed to her, positive and negative, and ultimately remain full of the paradoxes of humanity.

It seems to me that the enormity of the sculpture would have made it next to impossible to construct a fully fleshed out figure and so we have the skeleton-looking Medusa. She demands recognition yet remains almost a linear drawing in space, a celestial body, a metaphorical All-Woman of heaven and earth, physically present yet not of our flesh. Within the development of Burke's sculptural oeuvre, this is the most fully three-dimensional work yet. Because of its tubing construction, it has a gentle feel to it, not heavy or overworked. As a sculptural presence it has taken on its own life, separate from the artist, achieving a clarity of purpose and a popular reception. Few artworks are able to ignite in the viewer's imagination such evocative immediacy of contact the way that Burke's Medusa does.

Rebecca Burke,
In Search of Medusa,
1995. Detail. 28 ft
long.

L'auteure commente l'œuvre de Rebecca Burke, *In Search of Medusa*, qui a été présentée dans différents lieux d'exposition au Canada et aux États-Unis. Représentant une figure importante de la mythologie grecque, l'artiste la réactualise en lui conférant une présence imposante, délestée cette fois de ses connotations négatives. Fabriquée en tubes d'aluminium, l'œuvre est fixée au plafond et se déploie en une structure ouverte d'environ neuf mètres, à l'intérieur et autour de laquelle le spectateur déambule. Méduse acquiert ainsi une autre vie, différente de celle transmise par l'Histoire. Sa voix renaît également, grâce à une trame sonore conçue par Janet Hammock, qui amplifie l'aura du personnage sculpté tout en nous amenant à reconsidérer l'image de monstre terrifiant qui nous est parvenue. La Méduse de Burke s'est transformée en une femme puissante qui assume pleinement sa force et son pouvoir...

Réécrire et réinterpréter l'histoire et la mythologie, dans une perspective féministe, continue d'être un geste important. Le fait de reconnaître et d'intégrer les femmes qui ont été exclues de l'histoire, de revoir les rôles qui leur ont été attribués, enrichit la compréhension que nous pouvons avoir de notre héritage collectif. La Méduse de Burke est plus qu'une simple réincarnation d'une figure antique : elle se donne à voir désormais comme femme, mais aussi comme personne, épanouie, heureuse.