

The Medusa Touch

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Artist Mieke Marple tapped into the ancient myth of Medusa, updating the story for today's NFT marketplace. The results were empowering.

The cover and Figure 1 are two images from her Medusa Collection, a set of 2500 generative art NFTs. Figure 2 is from a site-specific art program curated by StandardVision for the Third Street Crossing in Los Angeles. Figure 3 is from a show at Vellum LA called "Artists Who Code: Generative Art NFTs by Women and Non-Binary Artists." In more ways than one, the whole project reframed the Medusa story for the current era, changing Marple's relationship to computer graphics.

SHOWING ROOTS

Originally from Silicon Valley, Marple came of age in Mountain View and Palo Alto, surrounded by engineers, techies, and game developers. When growing up, she did not know any professional artists. It just did not seem like a logical life plan.

Yet after moving to SoCal to attend UCLA for art school, she entered the world of fine arts and started to get attention for her work. After graduating, she then co-operated a gallery in Los Angeles, where she was baptized by fire into the artist-dealer-collector nexus, a stressful high-stakes world filled with dubious behavior.

"I was very naive and idealistic about the art world, and just how the art world works, and it was very disillusioning," Marple said. "I saw a lot of market manipulation amongst a very small group of collectors who are all, basically, using art as a financial vehicle. And then also, all these weird sexual dynamics between men with money and the gallerinas, or even artists, which exists in almost all fields, but just seems heightened in the art world."

Marple eventually became disenchanted with the brick-and-mortar gallery scene, where all institutions seemed to be fighting over the same 50 collectors and



FIGURE 1. An image from Marple's Medusa collection.

their tastes. Everybody was backstabbing everyone else. She did not get to work with any artists on the fringe. There was no sense of traditional community building. Nobody cared about improving the world's problems or the power of art to heal. It was time to make her escape.

After extricating herself from the gallery world, everybody involved suddenly did not want to talk to her anymore. She felt disposable, to say the least, so she temporarily moved back to Northern California and began creating more of her own art. In the process, she reconnected with the Medusa myth, that of a rape survivor who was turned into a monster. For Marple, it was empowering to reinterpret Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, while realizing many other people already saw themselves in the Medusa story.

Four large mixed media paintings of Medusa emerged from this process, but Marple could still only show them in a traditional gallery in San Francisco. There was no way to scale up the distribution in any



FIGURE 2. Art program curated by StandardVision for the third street crossing in Los Angeles.

kind of entrepreneurial fashion. She was looking for a logical way to merge mythology and female empowerment with economics and digital commerce.

Enter NFTs, generative art, and Photoshop—the perfect combo for bringing an old visual language into the modern world. Marple’s brother Adrian, who as a game developer, was already using generative

techniques for computer graphics, coded the procedures for the Medusa images using Python and some image processing libraries that would work with Photoshop files. Each image is a composite of randomly determined Photoshop layers based on distributions that the team came up with. Adrian just had to make sure the randomness was seeded based on the



FIGURE 3. Images from “Artists who code: Generative art NFTs by women and non-binary artists.”

Medusa's edition number so that any given iteration would not result in the same image.

At first, Marple sold a few NFTs of her paintings, participating in events with more famous artists that work in the NFT space, including Refik Anadol, (profiled in this space for *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications*' September/October 2020 issue). Even though she still had a gallery dealer brain and could see how people were lining up to purchase the work, she was not quite sure about the potential of NFTs, so for the next few months, she just sat back and observed the marketplace.

Then, Marple discovered World of Women, a community striving to increase diversity in the NFT space, since the overwhelming majority of artists in that space were men. For Marple, it was a game changer. She noticed that World of Women was a PFP collection and also discovered how the art was being used to build community, exactly what she was not able to do back in her days as a gallery operator in a cutthroat business. All of a sudden, she saw new ways to integrate previously untapped dimensions of herself. A lightning bolt went off. She had to join.

"When I was an art dealer at the height of my disillusionment, I couldn't see art as anything other than a commodity," she said. "I couldn't see its power to heal. I couldn't see its power to bring people together."

Now everything was different. Now, Marple could properly reframe the Medusa myth for the generative art landscape and even inspire others in the process.

"It was really awesome to step away and then make art, to have that experience with art, and now to have that, almost, idealism back again, where art does heal," she said. "Art does bring people together. I'm a believer again."

Which is not how most people talk about NFTs or computer graphics. Women's empowerment and healing are not part of the process.

THE RETURN

For many years, Marple felt disconnected from her techie roots in Silicon Valley because she wanted to be an artist instead. Now, mythologically speaking, she has made the journey, survived the ordeal, navigated the road back, and returned to her creative home in order to tell us what she learned along the way. Who needs Joseph Campbell? We have Medusa to thank.

"What's been interesting for me to realize is, even though I didn't code the thing myself and I'm not a trained engineer, I'm embracing this tech nerd that I didn't know I had, and that I'm actually just like my family," Marple said. "And accepting my roots and where I come from, basically, which I fought for so long."

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