

Jesse Mockrin's Dissident Details

Nor, surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original: he had no intention of copying it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel Cervantes.

Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard Author of the *Quixote*”

I

In the famous story by Borges, Pierre Menard is the author who sets out, three hundred years after the event, to rewrite the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes “while continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard.” Though arriving at precisely the same words used by Cervantes, Menard’s project is in Borges’ view an altogether richer endeavor. Where Cervantes wrote naturally and spontaneously in his own language, Menard has to meticulously reconstruct that now archaic language from a wholly external starting point (Menard’s native language is French). What is more, Menard cannot unmake or blot out his awareness of the multitude of events, “each freighted with the most complex history,” that supervene between the twentieth-century author and his precursor, events that over time have come to fundamentally alter the meaning of the original, making Menard’s *Don Quixote* into a palimpsest so densely layered that only traces of the original—“feint, but not indecipherable”—now shine through.¹

Jesse Mockrin is like that. As with Pierre Menard, her work involves a primary renunciation of authorship, a commitment to re-making over making. Since 2017, her work has consisted entirely of re-creations of historic paintings from the Renaissance and the Baroque. In a sense, this extends into painting a strategy developed in the previous generation, notably in photography: Sherrie Levine’s series *After Walker Evans*, Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* and *Historical Portraits*, Jeff Wall’s reworking of the legacy of history painting, and the entire career of Yasumasa Morimura. With one significant point of difference: those artists reworked their precursors by taking on particular works in their entirety. This is something Jesse Mockrin never undertakes, consistently preferring to work with areas excerpted or excised from the total image—with, as they say, ‘fragments.’

Yet in the context of Jesse Mockrin’s work, the word and the idea of the fragment can be misleading. The fragment is always understood as subordinate to the totality from which it derives: it is a synecdoche, a part standing for the whole. In this case, the more accurate term would be the ‘detail’. Details have a certain independence, they are superfluous to the main

¹ “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 88-95.

design, they digress. In the classical theory of painting, the detail's natural home is down in the lower genres, in still life and flower painting, where the work of the painter is limited to mechanically transcribing the particularities of objects. Joshua Reynolds was perfectly clear on this point: "The whole of beauty consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above singular forms, local customs, details of every kind."² 'Insignificant' details have no place in a work of art where every aspect contributes to its global meaning. They introduce a swerve, a meander, a detour.

Which is exactly why Freud, for one, paid the closest attention to the insignificant details in his patients' accounts of their dreams. Why were their stories always so filled with the trivialities of everyday life? "I want to give a supper, but having nothing at home except smoked salmon... I next tried to telephone to some caterers, but the telephone is out of order... Thus I must resign my wish to give a supper."³ Drawn from "the sensory residues of the day," from the mere refuse of consciousness, dreams were composed of a mass of insignificant details from waking life that collectively made no sense. Freud's intuition was that the banality of the dream's events was strategic—"ideas which originally had only a *weak* charge of intensity take over the charge from ideas which were originally *intensely* cathected."⁴ What he termed 'displacement' was a tactic devised by the unconscious to evade censorship, "a camouflage allowing the repressed contents to surface."⁵

Jesse Mockrin's 'fragments' are details of this kind, sites capable of revealing conflicts and contradictions that the official meanings of paintings have had to repress. The crucial element here is the frame. Looking at her drawings, you might wonder why it is that her scenes are never borderless, are never 'vignettes,' and why in every drawing the rectangular frame is so emphatically stated as to constitute a kind of hallmark. The frame performs an inaugural violence: it cuts into the original painting in ways that completely disrupt its compositional order. At the same time, the frame has a more enabling and reparative function, to ward off the influence of the source, to enclose and protect the detail from being reabsorbed back into its origin. (One sign of this is that it can be difficult, sometimes almost impossible, to recognize the source image from which the detail is taken, even when the latter is familiar or canonical).

If making the cut into the source image is the opening move in Jesse Mockrin's work, the reduction it enacts is immediately reversed in the next step, which is one of expansion and amplification. The artist's preferred format is the diptych, and on occasion, the triptych. The principle of juxtaposition or montage transforms the whole relation between the source image, the detail, and the viewer. If only one image by the artist were to appear before the viewer, attention would focus on just two terms, the original and the copy. The new work would be

² Joshua Reynolds, in *Seven Discourses on Art* (1778; London: Methuen Scholar Press, 1971), Discourse III.

³ Freud discusses the dream of the abandoned supper party in *The Interpretations of Dreams* (1900), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 4: 142.

⁴ *Standard Edition*, 4: 177.

⁵ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 82. Schor's insight into the detail as a site of resistance to patriarchal authority is especially valuable in the context of Jesse Mockrin's work. See also Mieke Bal, "Dispersing the Gaze: Vermeer Story," in Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G. and B. International, 2001), 65-92.

understood in terms of originality and appropriation, the past versus the present, in what would essentially amount to a struggle over the question, who *owns* the image? The moment a second or a third image is introduced, attention shifts to the dynamic interaction *between* images; the subject of the painting is foregrounded, the questions of originality or ownership recede, and the viewer now assumes an active and critical role, as the one for whom the juxtaposition is made, the plane of consistency on which the images meet, enjoining the viewer to compare, to mediate, to reflect.

What happens when Jesse Mockrin transcribes a classical subject? Here, it is important to recognize the way the medium itself—the *act* of painting—shapes the outcome. In other situations—in a court of law, in literary quotation, and in photographic reproduction—the citation is *detached* (deciding, before the trial, what will count as admissible evidence), *literal* (quotation must not alter the exact wording of the text), and *instantaneous* (reproductions of artworks are created in a fraction of a second). By contrast, oil painting is a slow medium, and especially in Jesse Mockrin’s work, with its careful blending of the colors (no blocks or areas of single color, no ‘patches’), its avoidance of abrupt transitions, its overall smoothness of effect. The slowness of the medium, with its even momentum, without ‘peaks’ or bravura displays, works to prevent any kind of jumping to conclusions. Repainting is a discipline of restraint: fidelity to the original rules out the possibilities of caricature, parody, exaggeration, and expressive distortion. The final image, built over spans of attention measured in hours and days, cannot be attained all at once or ahead of time: there are no shortcuts. The advantage of this slow unfolding is the ample room it provides for reflection on the original work, for ‘negative capability,’⁶ and the kind of attention that psychoanalysis used to claim, wrongly, as uniquely its own.⁷ The claim made was that the analyst was never fully absorbed by the contents of his patients’ speech, some part of awareness was held in reserve, ‘hovering’ somewhere above, attending to the way the words flowed or stumbled, and where an emotional charge entered in, or was warded off. In a process over which the source image presides from start to finish, it is the ongoing work of the brush, stroke by stroke, that decides what in the original can or cannot be assimilated, what can be supported by the painter’s own outlook and experience, and when that support has to be withdrawn.

⁶ ‘Negative capability’ is a phrase used by John Keats to describe the ability to stay open to experiences that do not fit into an intellectual system. “I mean negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” *The Letters of John Keats*, edited by H.E. Rollin, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), I: 193-94.

⁷ “The technique... is a very simple one. It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly-suspended attention’ in the face of all one hears... [The analyst] should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind.” Sigmund Freud, “Recommendations to physicians practicing psychoanalysis,” *Standard Edition*, 12: 119-20.

II

Overmastered (see below, Fig. 3) takes as its subject the legendary combat between Hercules and Antaeus. In contemporary visual culture, Hercules is typically portrayed as an action hero of limitless strength, along the lines of Marvel movies with their cast of characters possessed of superhuman powers. Antiquity's understanding of Hercules was rather more complicated. He was a demigod, the offspring of Zeus and his mortal mother Alcmene, and while this gave him the advantage of exceptional strength, his dual and hybrid nature turned out to be remarkably unstable. Though many classical representations present him as an adult man of glorious beauty, others depict him as a drunken reveler barely able to stand. The twelve Labors for which he was famous were in fact a form of penance for murdering, in a fit of madness, his wife and children. In each of the Labors, the opponent that Hercules had to overcome was never an Achilles or an Ajax, never *noble*, but instead a monstrous animal threatening mankind—the Nemean Lion, the Lernean Hydra, the Erymanthian Boar, the Stymphalian Birds, and so on. It is as though while part of Hercules' nature rose above the human level, another part fell below it, and it was this bestial component that gave him special insight into the nature of the monstrous beasts he confronted and how he might defeat them, like a poacher turned gamekeeper.

Among the opponents was the Libyan giant Antaeus, who was then marauding and terrorizing the kingdom. A demigod like himself, Antaeus was invincible as long as he remained in contact with his divine parent, the Earth (Gaia). Knowing of this vulnerability, Hercules defeated him not by throwing him to the ground but by lifting him into the air and crushing him to death. It is essentially a story of Hercules' superior masculinity: the flaw that weakened Antaeus and ensured his defeat was his overdependence on the maternal bond.

In other fables, it is Hercules' own masculinity that is volatile and unstable, veering between too much and too little, between phallic excess (the club he wields, the animal hides that cover him) and phallic deficit or insufficiency.⁸ For killing the Argonaut prince Iphitos in another fit of insanity, the gods had him sold as a slave to the Lydian queen Omphale, in whose court he was obliged for a year to cross-dress as a woman and sit among the female slaves, spinning—a situation that classical authors were not slow to mine for its comic potential.

In the post-Classical world, as the pagan legends were adapted and assimilated to the Christian faith, the fables of Hercules were rewritten as allegories of the struggle of the soul to attain virtue, and the instability of Hercules' nature and behavior turned into the moral image of Hercules 'at the crossroads' between vice and virtue. In the commentary by the Church father Fulgentius, the combat of Hercules and Antaeus represented virtue's victory over *Voluptas*, Lust.⁹ The idea of the 'psychomache' or interior struggle of the soul continued well into the

⁸ See Nicole Loraux, "Herakles: the Super-male and the Feminine," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World*, edited by David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 21-52.

⁹ For Fulgentius' reworking of the combat of Hercules and Antaeus as an allegory of the soul's struggle against *Voluptas*, see *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, edited by Leslie George Whithead (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1971), 2:4.

Renaissance. In a letter from 1477, the Neoplatonist scholar Marsilio Ficino wrote that “reason within us is called Hercules: he destroys Antaeus, which is to say that he destroys the monstrous images of fantasy, when he lifts Antaeus up from the Earth, that is, when he removes himself from the senses and from physical images.”¹⁰ But over time, as Florence grew into a great city, the psychomachegave way to a different discourse, that of civic virtue and obligation. In an early work by the Florentine humanist Cristoforo Landino, Lorenzo de’Medici praises Hercules as a great benefactor of the city, since “he served all men, he destroyed horrendous wild beasts, vanquished pernicious and savage monsters...and restored justice and liberty to many peoples.”¹¹ In visual art, the Medicis’ embrace of Hercules as an emblem of good governance reached a high point when, around 1470, three large paintings by the Pollaiuolo brothers depicting Hercules’ defeat of the Hydra, the Nemean Lion and Antaeus were installed in the Sala Grande of the new Medici palace.¹²

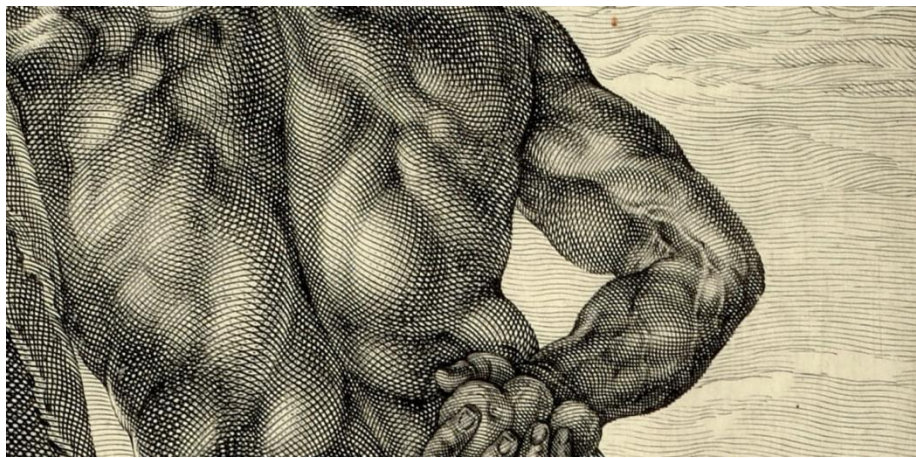


Fig. 1 Hendrick Goltzius, *Farnese Hercules* (detail)
Engraving, ca. 1592, dated 1617; New York, Metropolitan Museum

Yet alongside these official, high minded appropriations of the Hercules legend by humanist scholars and the political elite there emerged a growing taste and private market for Hercules imagery of a different kind, especially in engravings produced at low cost and in multiple editions, by artists like Giovanni Antonio di Brescia, Marcantonio Raimondi, and Hendrick Goltzius (Fig. 1). The sheer number of prints that survive suggest that the combat of Hercules and Antaeus was a number one best seller—though by this time the allegorical framework had largely disappeared, and the appeal of the scene was rather the pretext it provided for the representation of two naked and muscular bodies in physical, intimate contact. The prints were

¹⁰Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Turin: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1959), Vol. I, Part 2, 775, quoted in Patricia Simons, “Hercules in Italian Renaissance Art: Masculine Labor and Homoerotic Libido,” *Art History*, 31: 632-64.

¹¹ Cristoforo Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulenses* (1472), edited by Peter Lohe (Florence: Sansoni 1989).

¹² On the Medicis’ embrace of Hercules as an emblem of authority, see Kurt W. Forster, “Metaphors of Rule: Political Ideology and History in the Portraits of Cosimo I de’ Medici,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 15 (1971): 65-104; Alison Wright, “The Myth of Hercules,” in Gian Carlo Garfagnini, *Lorenzo il Magnifico e il suo Mondo* (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 323-339; and by the same author, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers: The Arts of Florence and Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

images that could be openly displayed or privately enjoyed, inviting close inspection and admiration for the skill with which every bodily detail was rendered with anatomical precision through the newly perfected technology of engraving. Hercules' defeat of Antaeus may have been a subject that could be deployed didactically by those who ruled, but it was also a subject that could excite the erotic fantasy of artists and viewers alike. Unofficial, *sub rosa* currents of desire begin to flow across the heaving, intertwined figures, a sensual engagement with the scene that becomes particularly intense with Michelangelo. In his drawing of the *Labors of Hercules* from around 1530, it is impossible to know which of the magnificently writhing bodies belongs to Hercules and which to Antaeus, or who will emerge from the struggle as the victor (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Labors of Hercules*
(left, the Nemean Lion; center, Hercules and Antaeus; right, the Lernean Hydra)
Ink on paper, c. 1530; London, Royal Collection Trust

Not that Michelangelo's version came to replace the dominant interpretation of the Hercules and Antaeus narrative. A sketch only, not a finished composition, executed in the relatively private medium of drawing rather than fresco or oil painting, what it chiefly reveals is the diversity of subject positions that the Hercules and Antaeus subject could accommodate among its audience. To female spectators it offered a rare opportunity to invert the prevailing hierarchy of the gaze, and to take the male body as a source of visual pleasure. The narrative also allowed Hercules to be thought of as a model for women to emulate. To the great humanist thinker, Isotta Nogarola, the Labors of Hercules provided a measure of the heights that women could achieve on their own: "Did not the Amazons build a state without men? For they were so strongly endowed with

virtù and with remarkable military skill that to Hercules and Theseus it seemed impossible to bring the force of the Amazons under their rule.”¹³

Is it this psychic capaciousness, this openness to an array of different desires, that explains the endurance of the Hercules myth, from antiquity to the present? In the Western imagination, it seems, Hercules is always there, chained or unchained, with or without his classical moniker, projected across an array of distinctly modern media, from the superheroes of the Marvel universe in movies, books and video games, to the way the Clash of Titans persists in the arenas of popular culture, in wrestling, boxing, *Lucha libre*, and cage fighting. When the mixed crowd of men and women roars with excitement as they watch Hulk Hogan versus Andre the Giant, who knows how many kinds of desire are in play?

Overmastered (Fig. 4) consists of details taken from three separate paintings on the subject of Hercules and Antaeus: by the Genoese Baroque painter Gregorio De Ferrari (1695, lower panel); by Louis-Charles-Auguste Couder, from a ceiling decoration in the Louvre (1819, central panel); and by François-André Vincent, a contemporary of Jacques-Louis David (1772, upper panel). Comparing the painting with its source images (see Figs. 3 and 4), it becomes clear that what cannot be assimilated or internalized is the hyperbolic image of masculine power, the testosterone bragging. What makes the hypermasculine unusable is the fundamental misogyny that it assumes. By placing the greatest possible distance between male and female bodies, the Hercules myth institutes a kind of gender apartheid, conjuring an all-male enclosure from which the traces of feminine existence, including the dependence on maternal support that Antaeus represents, have been removed. The masculine *superbia* embodied in the figure of Hercules lies beyond this painter’s empathetic range, and in the process of transcription, the gnarled and knotty muscularity that features prominently in all three source images now disappears. The viewer of *Overmastered* would be hard put to recognize the figure of Hercules anywhere.

Shifting the whole image several notches away from the hypermasculine end of the gender spectrum, *Overmastered* is able to contact the latent eroticism that seems always to be lurking beneath the surface of Hercules’ and Antaeus’ combat—the hidden current of desire that surfaces, for example, in the drawing by Michelangelo. In most images of Hercules and Antaeus, this aspect is blocked by the imperative to present the heroic body as an integral whole, an individual subject bearing a proper name. There are reasons to suspect that this considerably lowers the level of erotic tension in the scene. I am thinking here of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s complaint about Freud, that in Freud’s dream analyses, everything becomes a personification (of the mother, the father, etc.), like characters in a play.¹⁴ Whereas to Deleuze and Guattari it was obvious that unconscious fantasy is not about persons but part-objects and erogenous zones, and that desire’s essential movement was travel from one zone to another, and another, until the excitement generated reaches a maximum point of tension, and the fantasy ends in discharge. By breaking the unitary object into three sections, *Overmastered* bypasses the inhibiting effects of personification, allowing the energy of desire to flow freely across the

¹³Isotta Nogarola, quoted in Cristelle L. Baskins, *Cassone Paintings, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Psychoanalysis and Familialism,” in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983), 51-138.

sensate flesh, even in the central panel to plunge into anal eroticism, in a kind of orgiastic abandon that no longer knows or minds what part belongs where, or to whom.



Fig. 3 Reconstruction of the source details in Jesse Mockrin, *Overmastered*, 2021

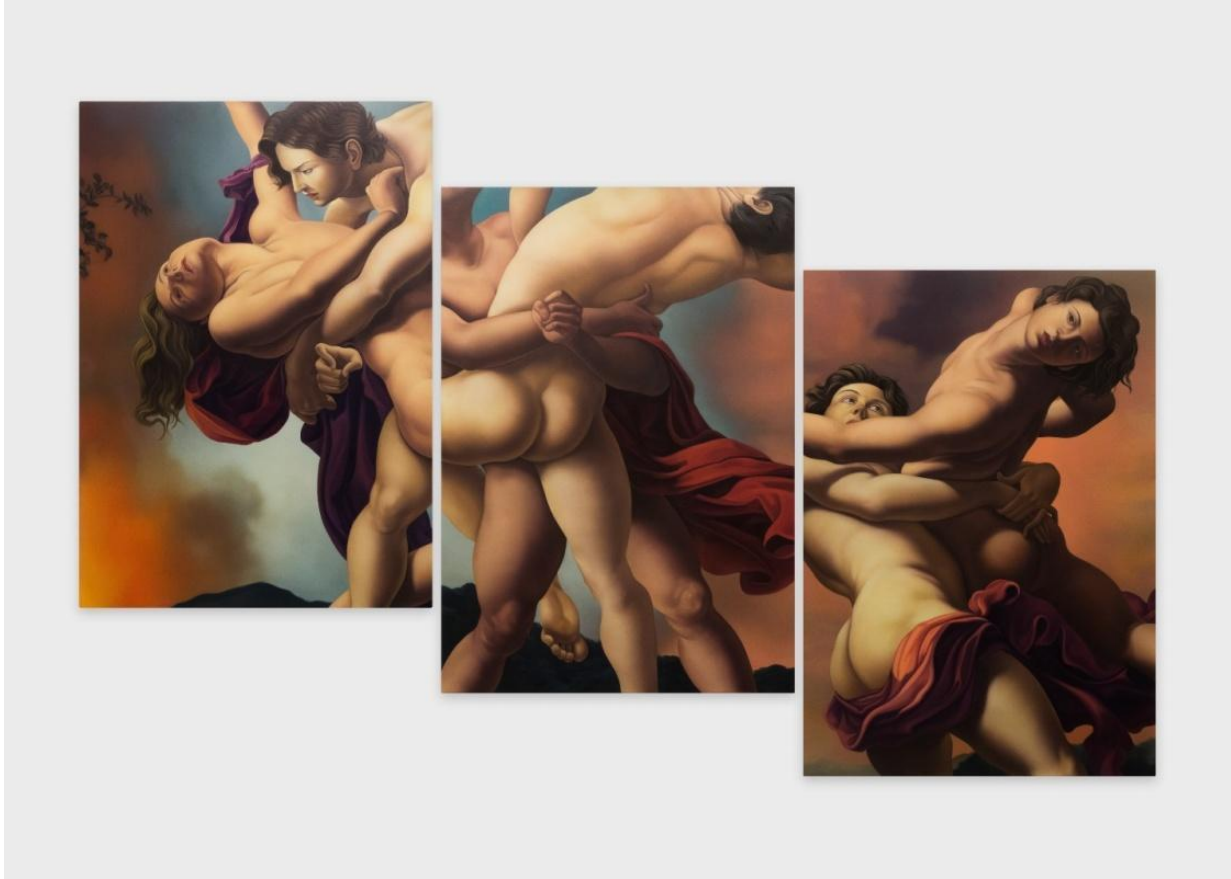


Fig. 4 Jesse Mockrin, *Overmastered*, 2021

A question: In this shift away from the hypermasculine, are the figures of Hercules and Antaeus ‘feminized?’ Up to a point, this is surely what is happening: brutish faces acquire delicate features, Antaeus’ hair grows long, physical forms become rounded and smooth. Yet it may be more accurate to see the gender of *Overmastered*’s figures as under-determined, undecidable, non-binary. What has *not* been made to vanish is the aggression present in the idea of *capture*. In the lower panel, where Antaeus seems to be gasping for air now that the contact with the Earth is broken, his body arches backward in recoil, as though looking for a way to escape the grip of Hercules rather than go on fighting—a movement more suggestive of abduction than of combat. Meanwhile, in the upper panel, the backward fall of Antaeus’ head suggests a swoon rather than a tap-out, and the thuggish grab that appears in the source image by François-André Vincent becomes the ‘amorous embrace’ of the zealous lover seen in so many of the scenarios of sexual aggression that emerge in the Baroque—in Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne*, in Poussin’s *Abduction of the Sabine Women*, in countless images of Lucretia, and in the many *Abductions* of Peter Paul Rubens—the *Abduction of Proserpina*, *Europa*, the *Daughters of Leucippus*. From deep within the fantasy of Hercules and Antaeus surfaces, unexpectedly or not, the threat and trauma of rape.

To open up consciousness to the classical painting of Europe is a dangerous enterprise. It means entering hazardous, often demonic terrain, populated by monsters of the imagination, and

sustained by values that can be the opposite of one's own beliefs (who was it who said of the Louvre that "the very walls reek of blood"?) I sometimes think of Jesse Mockrin as like a journalist reporting from a war zone. You begin to understand how the slow reflectiveness of her technique may be a needed stabilizing force to counter the surrounding psychic turbulence. What happens, then, when this artist encounters Saint Sebastian?

III

During the reign of Diocletian (284-308 AD), Sebastian was a captain in the Praetorian Guard, the elite military corps that surrounded and protected the Emperor. His public support of Christianity resulted in many conversions, and he continued to proselytize even when the Emperor asked him to stop. As punishment, Diocletian ordered that he be shot with arrows. Left for dead, he miraculously survived the execution, and was nursed back to health by a virtuous widow, Irene, in her home. For continuing to preach the Gospel, Sebastian was arrested a second time and clubbed to death by the Emperor's henchmen, who threw the body into the Roman sewer, the Cloaca Maxima. Fortunately, the body was recovered and buried in the catacombs, near the first church built in his name. By the time of Jacobus de Voragine's compendium of the lives of the Saints, the *Golden Legend* (1259-1266), it was widely believed that his relics possessed miraculous healing powers against the plagues that periodically ravaged the Italian cities, and it is as the protector of the plague's victims that Saint Sebastian enters visual art, at first in tandem with the protective figure of the Virgin Mary, but increasingly as a single figure, high up and alone, proudly withstanding the arrows that pierced his flesh.¹⁵

In the course of its long development the figure of Saint Sebastian changed several times, an evolution best understood in terms of eras. In the first, 'heroic' age he appears in the form established in painting by Perugino, Botticelli, Mantegna, Antonella da Messina, Guido Reni, Rubens and a host of other artists: youthful and clean-shaven, of athletic rather than muscular build, inwardly unscathed by the arrows that pierce his body but cannot break his spirit. His posture is resolutely upright, his head is never bowed. To those who prayed for his intercession in times of plague, the Saint's wounds were believed to correspond to the sores seen on the bodies of the plague-stricken: the Saint attracted the plague-arrows but grounded them harmlessly in his own flesh, as it were deflecting the contagion and neutralizing its threat.

During the second era—the Counter-Reformation and its aftermath—Saint Sebastian was put through an unexpected transformation, nothing less than the overthrow of the Saint's heroic image. The Roman Catholic reformers at the Council of Trent pointed to the errors found in the prevailing devotional images of the Church, and provided advice on how to produce emotionally compelling and inspiring work of arts. To reformer and polemicists like Federico Borromeo and

¹⁵ In the altarpiece by Piero della Francesca in Borgo San Sepolcro (1445), Saint Sebastian stands next to the central panel, where a magnified figure of the Virgin extends her cape to shelter and protect a group of supplicants kneeling below. Concerning the impact of the plague on visual art, see Millard Miess, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955).

Giovan Andrea Gilio, it was obvious that to the leading artists of the age (think of Rubens, or Domenico Cerrini, or Guido Reni) the subject of Sebastian had become an excuse to take pleasure in the idealized male nude, completely forgetting the reality and suffering of martyrdom. While some viewers might admire Sebastian's invulnerability, his apparent indifference to the pain the arrows must have caused him, the reformers' argument was that images of this kind could never move their audience to feel compassion or even sympathy: what was missing was the element of pathos. Jesse Mockrin's own response is a composite image, *Nightfall* (Fig. 5): the source on the left is the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* by Rubens and, on the right, by a follower of Domenico Cerrini. But the muscular and sensual body to which Rubens and Cerrini were so devoted substantially disappears—the cropping of the source images is so extreme as to amount to a kind of slashing of the pictorial surface, and the upright figure of the Saint now tilts to one side, as though about to fall over. The artist seems no more willing to go on endorsing the heroic image of Saint Sebastian than the Church reformers.



Fig. 5 Jesse Mockrin, *Nightfall*, 2022

In the new iconography that now takes over, Saint Sebastian is presented as broken, abject, inglorious, slumped forward or collapsed upon the ground, his extended arm bound to a tree trunk. Before, the Saint's upstanding posture was reinforced, along the vertical axis, by aligning it with a column or pedestal, but now the whole composition keels over, and stark diagonals cut across the surface, taking their cue from Sebastian's arm, tied to a tree. Sometimes it plunges headlong into the abyss. In a painting that can still shock viewers today (Fig. 6), Ludovico Carracci stripped away every shred of idealization, as Diocletian's thugs cast Sebastian's body out of its shroud and into the sea of ordure in the Cloaca Maxima—a scene that Jesse Mockrin revisits in *Outcast* (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6 Ludovico Carracci, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (detail)
Oil on canvas, 1612; Los Angeles, John Paul Getty Museum

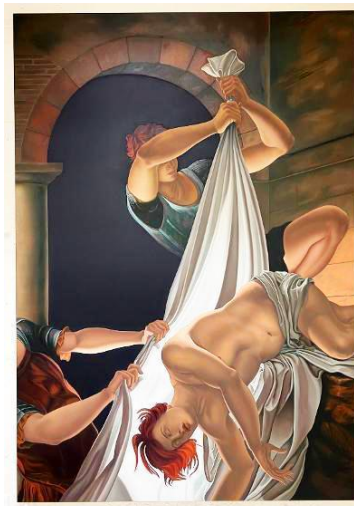


Fig. 7 Jesse Mockrin, *Outcast*, 2022

As for Sebastian's protection against the plague, all the heroic image could say to the plague victim was pray harder and hope for a miracle. To the Post-Tridentine reformers, this failed to recognize the Church's great mission to relieve suffering of the afflicted and its ministry to the poor and the afflicted. It is at this point that the figure of Saint Irene moves center stage. Though medical authorities urged people to flee as far away as possible from the infected urban centers, religious denominations urged the faithful to remain collectively in place and tend to the needs of the sick and dying. This is the service that Saint Irene performs. She never appears alone, friends and assistants always accompany her, a reflection of the first responders and sisters of charity at work in the real world.

The advent and growing prominence of Saint Irene changed everything. Up to this point, there had been nothing in the heroic narrative of Sebastian that addressed a female audience, no point of access through which women might imaginatively enter and participate in the scene. Now, with Sebastian's strength exhausted, women became the narrative's principal agents. Perhaps the most convincing expression of the reconstructed Sebastian subject is the wonderful *Saint Sebastian tended by Irene* (1625), by the Utrecht painter Hendrick ter Brugghen (Fig. 8).¹⁶ Resident for many years in Rome, he had lived through several cycles of the epidemics that had swept through the city between 1608 and 1614, and his treatment of the body of Saint Sebastian is informed by what he had seen. Sebastian's posture, with one arm raised and head dropping forward, draws attention to the swollen glands visible on the neck and armpit, certain indicators of the presence of disease. The bruised coloration along the raised arm and on the chest result from the subcutaneous bleeding that grew darker as death approached. With her right hand, Irene delicately pulls from his body the shaft of an arrow, a gesture that takes on its full significance when we remember that the disease was known to spread by contagion. Anything that had been in contact with the plague victim—clothes, bedding, pets, possessions—was regarded as a source of infection. In drawing the arrow from Sebastian's side, Irene is risking her life.



Fig. 8 Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Saint Sebastian tended by Irene*
Oil on canvas, 1625; Oberlin College, Allen Memorial Museum

¹⁶ On Hendrick ter Brugghen's painting, see the excellent article by Valerie Hedquist, "Ter Brugghen's *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 9: 2 (2017), 1-37.



Fig. 9 Jesse Mockrin, *Transfiguration*, 2022

In *Transfiguration* (Fig. 9), the panel on the left is a section from ter Brugghen's painting of Sebastian and Irene, answered on the right by the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* by the neoclassical painter, François-Xavier Fabre (1789). ter Brugghen's protagonists have all but disappeared: only a sliver of Sebastian's body remains, and Irene's presence is known only by proxy, through the disembodied hands of her assistants as they untie the cords binding Sebastian to the tree. It is a scene we only catch in glimpses, so to speak, rather than view directly, but we are given enough to feel that the same emotions present in the painting by ter Brugghen are present here, arrived at by other, less figurative means: through the landscape, the torn bark of trees, a branch sticking out like the shaft of an arrow, the sickly sky, the forlorn downward pull of the composition; and then a counterforce, new shoots emerging from branches that only seemed dead; the intricate, gratuitous energy of embroidered fabric; the soft movement of dappled light, the beginnings of recovery.

One effect of the epidemics that spread in waves across Europe in the 1600s was to reveal the extent of every society's debt to the indispensable work of sisters of charity, on both sides of the Protestant/Catholic divide. The prominence given to Saint Irene was a way of honoring those on the front lines in the battle against disease, the first responders of their age. ter Brugghen's homage to Saint Irene in Utrecht was matched, further south, by the work of the brilliant genre painter from Lorraine, the French follower of Caravaggio, Georges de la Tour.

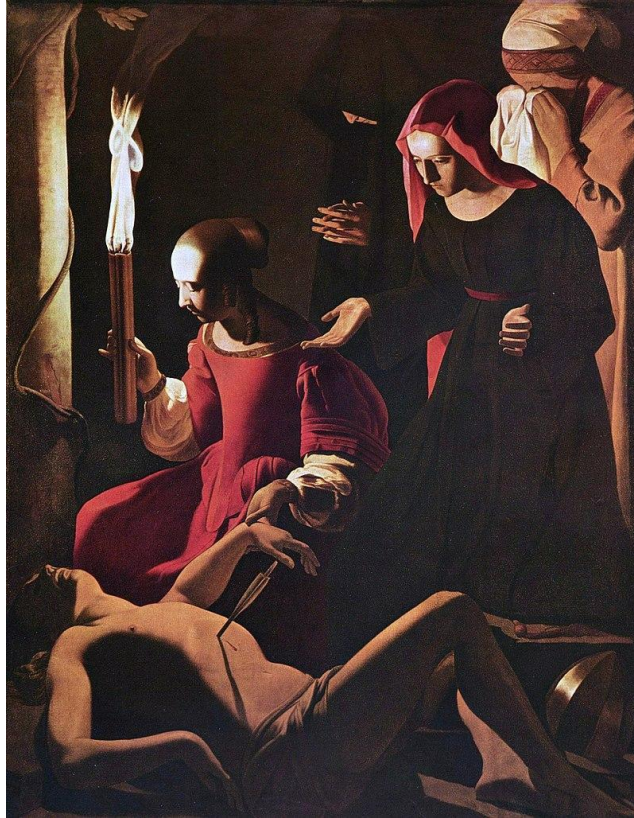


Fig. 10 Georges de la Tour, *Saint Sebastian tended by Saint Irene*
Oil on canvas c. 1634-1642; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

Until then, the light seen in painting had always come to it from the outside, from the world itself. What Caravaggio discovered was that this principle could be reversed: that painting could carry the source of light within itself, and project some of that light out into the world, like a lantern. In the dead of night, Irene and her assistants have made their way to the execution grounds to bury Sebastian's body (Fig. 10). La Tour depicts the moment when to their astonishment they find him still alive. Four women in all are present. The figure at the back, who has not yet seen the living Sebastian, covers her eyes in grief. To her right stands an almost invisible woman dressed in black, known only by her hands clasped in prayer. The principal figure is Irene, who holds out her hands in a gesture "that suggests a desire to lift and cradle Sebastian's prostrate body."¹⁷ To the front a younger woman kneels by Sebastian's side and, lightly holding his hand, detects his pulse.

¹⁷ Daria Judovitz, *Georges de la Tour and the Enigma of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 94.



Fig. 11 Jesse Mockrin, *The Magic Chamber*, 2021

The Magic Chamber (Fig. 11) distills the whole of the narrative into the play of the figures' hands, transcribed in the painter's own stylistic idiom, but otherwise the source images are left intact. The disruptive action of the frame is kept to a minimum. Even what may strike us as the feminization of Saint Sebastian had, in fact, been largely accomplished by La Tour himself (in his second treatment of the subject, now at the Kimbell Art Museum). It is an image with which the artist seems at peace.

IV

The third Sebastian era belongs to modernity, stretching from the late nineteenth century toward the present. Here a very rapid survey will have to suffice.¹⁸ It is in the late Victorian age that the special relation between Sebastian and gay men is fully established, in the lyrical appreciations of the Sebastians of Italian Renaissance painting by writers like Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and Charles Kingsley (in *Alton Locke*).¹⁹ In France, this is the Sebastian of Gustave

¹⁸ On the appreciation of Italian Renaissance painting as a veiled discourse on the erotic male body, see Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of Northern Carolina Press, 1990); Richard A. Kaye, "'Determined Raptures': St Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence," *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999), 269-303; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke: Poet and Tailor* (1870), edited by Elizabeth A. Cripps (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873); John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-1886).

Moreau, Alexis-François Rio, and Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*.²⁰ Let one passage stand here for many:

... the breadth and vastness of light and shade upon those manly limbs, so grand and yet so delicate, standing out against the background of lurid light, the helplessness of bound arms, the arrow quivering in the shrinking side, the upturned brow, the eyes in whose dark depths enthusiastic faith seemed conquering agony and shame, the passive lips...²¹

What made Sebastian so fascinating? Certainly the factors varied—Edward Carpenter's Sebastian would have hated the Sebastian of Walter Pater—but there is clearly a family resemblance. The traits include: a masculinity both feminized and erotically charged; a sensibility “torn between repentant yearning and the sentiment of rebellious sin;”²² eroticism steeped in pain; the feeling of an undisclosable sin that must be punished. Strangely enough, although by the early twentieth century Sebastian had become a gay icon, perhaps *the* gay icon, he is never seen engaging in sexual activity. Unlike Zeus and Ganymede, Hadrian and Antinous, or Achilles and Patroclus, Sebastian stands alone, against the world. What he represents is perhaps gay identity rather than gay desire.

In the current exhibition, male-to-male eroticism appears rather late in the sequence, in the group of works dealing with young men who, like Sebastian, submit to the punishment of being bound—though without the bravura display of masculinity of the first Sebastian era. Where the charismatic Sebastian of Renaissance painting stood his ground and remained defiant during punishment, these adolescent figures, with their undeveloped bodies and delicate features, are very different.

What this cluster of images—*Rapture (Night)*, *Rapture (Day)*, and *Submission*—sets out to examine, I think, is a particular formation of male-to-male desire, well established in antiquity as the romance between the *eromenoi*, ‘beardless youths,’ young men in their teens or early twenties, and the *erastes*, the mature, bearded warriors who after years of grueling military service return home and either marry, or take a male lover, or both.²³ In terms of power, the relation between the two was asymmetrical: the older male assumed the role of mentor or trainer, and the younger partner a position of obedience and service. An unusual aspect of the arrangement was that it was expected to change over time: the assumption was it that one day the junior partner would graduate from the position of erotic object to that of desiring subject.

²⁰ Viz. the many Saint Sebastians painted and engraved by Gustave Moreau in the 1870s and 1880s. See also Alexis-François Rio, *De l'art chrétien* (Paris: Hachette, 1872); and the collaborative production of *Le Martyre de Sébastien* by Gabriele D'Annunzio, Leon Bakst, Claude Debussy and Ida Rubinstein (1911).

²¹ Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke: Poet and Tailor*, 70.

²² Lionel Johnson, quoted in Jerusha Hull McCormack, *John Gray, Poet, Dandy and Priest* (New York: Brandeis university Press, 1998), 123.

²³ On the nature of the romance within antiquity, see John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, edited by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 4, *The Care of the Self*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage books, 1990).

Despite its origins in antiquity, Freud found abundant evidence among his male patients that this configuration of masculinity persisted widely in the modern world, and proceeded to describe the relationship between the two partners in analytic terms. It was a bond in which the object of love was based in mutual idealization: for the older man, love of “what the subject once was,” and for the younger man, love of “what the subject will become in the future.”²⁴ He also observed that the attitude and behavior of the senior partner was maternal, protective, and that his wish was to love the younger partner “in the same way that his mother loved *him* when he was a child.”²⁵ In the context of gender politics, it is not without interest that in this particular mode of masculinity the figure of the mother is not repudiated or devalued, as is classically the case in male heterosexual development.

How does the bearded *erastes* appear to the young man who looks up to him? Surely rather like the cuirass-like chest in Jesse Mockrin’s *Exposed* (Fig. 12): godlike, built on an altogether different scale, and equipped with powers that he himself precisely lacks. How does the junior partner appear to the older man who takes him under his wing? Much, I suspect, like the adolescent boys who appear in Jesse Mockrin’s *Rapture (Night)* and *Rapture (Day)* (Figs. 13, 14): struggling, overwhelmed, and yearning for protection, affection, encouragement.



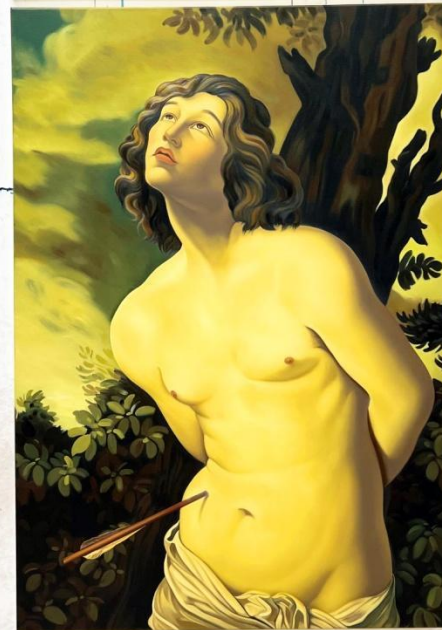
Fig. 12 Jesse Mockrin, *Exposed*, 2022

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism,” *Standard Edition*, 14: 90.

²⁵ “...they proceed from a narcissistic basis, and look for a young man who resembles themselves and whom *they* may love as their mother loved *them*.” Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, *Standard Edition*, 7:145.



Figs. 13, 14 Jesse Mockrin, *Rapture (Night)*, 2022



Rapture (Day), 2022

Why is it that Jesse Mockrin finds this relation to be of interest, interesting enough to become a subject for painting? Indeed, why are *any* of the various configurations of Saint Sebastian taken up so passionately in her work?

My comments here can be no more than preliminary. But it seems that Jesse Mockrin's fascination with Saint Sebastian confirms a kind of overlap between the social position and interests of women and of gay men. Consider, for example, the current of masochism that runs throughout the Sebastian narrative and imagery. Masochism in men runs counter to everything that masculinity is supposed to embody: power, assertiveness, winning the race. In the language of psychoanalysis, the masochist "is trying to free himself from the paternal universe and the constraints of the Law."²⁶ In masochism, the masculine subject abdicates the power that is his birthright; he is like a member of the fifth column, a class traitor hiding inside the patriarchy. In men, masochism is a pathology—yet in women, it corresponds to traits that are accepted, indeed are required, of the 'normal' female subject, a mechanism that eroticizes and naturalizes lack and subordination.²⁷ To put this another way: masochism is an element in the psychic life of men as well as women, but in men its antagonism to normative masculinity is perceived as a threat to patriarchal values and order.²⁸ Within feminism also, repudiation of the phallic order and hierarchy is an essential strategy, and we have seen its operation many times in Jesse Mockrin's work: in the rejection of the hypermasculine in *Overmastered*; in the reluctance to endorse the heroic imagery from the first Sebastian era; and in the focus on the ruination of the body of the Saint that takes place in the second Sebastian age (Ludovico Carracci, Hendrick ter Brugghen).

What is the nature of the elective affinity between certain women and the expression of desire among gay men? Is it simply a tactical alliance between different opponents of patriarchy? Or is it something deeper, more like a 'secondary identification,' in the sense that one minority group can feel close to, and identify with, another minority group? Why did George and Ira Gershwin, nice Jewish boys that they were, spend their time writing *Porgy and Bess*, rather than, say, *Fiddler on the Roof*? Because sometimes you can see the world more clearly through another's eyes, and they can see the world more clearly through yours.

Norman Bryson

²⁶ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (New York: Norton, 1984), 12.

²⁷ See in particular Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992),

²⁸ On masochism in women, see Freud's analysis of the dream "A Child is Being Beaten," *Standard Edition*, 17: 175-204.