

HAMMER PROJECTS

Mary Reid Kelley

May 23–September 27, 2015

Emily Gonzalez-Jarrett

The ancient Greeks believed that the gods punished mortals for their hubris, an excessive pride that offended the deities, who were capricious and wrathful, extending their vengeance through innocent generations. Family was fate, and fate determined suffering. Neither could be changed by a mere mortal. The artist Mary Reid Kelley's trilogy of videos on the myth of the Minotaur, made in collaboration with Patrick Kelley, frames the difference between the ancient concept of fate and the contemporary belief that suffering is generally the result of one's own bad choices. Reid Kelley's lyrical scripts and slapstick action highlight the absurd and tragic dimensions of the Minotaur's family story. Her stylized backdrops and costumes place the story in ancient Greece, but the artist's blending of contemporary references moves it closer to home. The hapless Minotaur could stand in for any misfit, and her supporting constellation of family and gods satirizes both divine power and the contemporary cult of self-determination.

Traditional storytellers have focused on the hero Theseus and his quest to conquer the Minotaur, thereby freeing the people of Athens of their tributary obligations and defeating King Minos, but Reid Kelley's trilogy centers on the women in the myth: Queen Pasiphae and her daughters Ariadne and the Minotaur (who is male in the traditional telling of the myth). The artist plays every character in these videos before a green screen, and Patrick Kelley composites the characters together over animated scenery based on Reid Kelley's drawings. She finds or makes all of the costumes and props, creating a very distinctive aesthetic for each video. Reid Kelley was trained as a painter, and her black-and-white videos have a drawing-like quality. They recall illustrations and cartoons, methods of conveying experiences before the advent of the photograph. The worlds presented in these videos through scenery, characters, and dialogue are carefully crafted and complete.

Reid Kelley sets up her version of the myth in *Priapus Agonistes* (2013), in which athletes from rival churches play indoor volleyball to determine the annual sacrifice to the Minotaur, a cow-woman hybrid who lives in the labyrinth beneath the gym. She is the product of the union between her mother, Queen Pasiphae, and a bull. In the traditional version of the myth the god Poseidon placed a curse on Pasiphae to punish Minos for not



sacrificing the beautiful bull to him, but in Reid Kelly's female-centered retelling, the offended deity is Venus. The goddess of love and beauty punished the queen in part out of jealousy and in part out of displeasure with her conceited attitude. Priapus, the Greek demigod of fertility, worshipped by fishermen and farmers, replaces Theseus as the hero who will face the monster. Reid Kelley's Priapus is a man-fish hybrid, which makes him an unconventional hero, but like many heroes, he is self-assured and egotistical, confident that he will thwart the perceived villain.

But it's your joy, not mine, that matters now.
Express it freely! Wanton praise endows
My limbs with fearsome strength, which I'll need
To kill the Minotaur!



In response to Priapus's plan to kill the beast, Pasiphae cries for the child that she bore, showing not remorse for her offenses but guilt and sympathy for the Minotaur. She is too painfully aware that her offspring will continue to pay for her perceived indiscretions.

In Reid Kelley's interpretation of the myth, the Minotaur is a creature to be pitied, not a vicious monster. She continues to become lost in the hallways of the labyrinth even though it is the only home she has ever known. Her life is one of isolation. She sees the human sacrifices as visitors sent to her for company and play but inevitably kills and eats them and then finds herself alone again. She knows of her royal family but is not allowed to live with them in the palace for reasons she does not understand. She cannot read the prisoners' graffiti defaming the royal family. The Minotaur deludes herself that she is exceptional, not the evidence of her mother's curse-driven transgressions against humanity. By the end of the first video, this illusion begins to crack as the Minotaur faces her desperate loneliness.

In the second video, *Swinburne's Pasiphae* (2014), Reid Kelley broke with her practice of writing the scripts for her videos and instead used a recently rediscovered manuscript by the Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. The narrative takes place during the time when the inventor Daedalus is preparing the hollow cow that Pasiphae will use to seduce the bull. It

is believed that the manuscript remained unpublished during Swinburne's lifetime because the subject of bestiality would have been one step too far for the already controversial author. To heighten Pasiphae's desperation for the bull, as described in Swinburne's manuscript, Reid Kelley shows the queen surrounded by alcohol and pill bottles while Daedalus works. Her longing for the bull is an appetite that cannot be satiated, and so she turns to other substances as a distraction. Daedalus, as Swinburne's embodiment of "art for art's sake," is unconcerned with the morality of Pasiphae's desires. He becomes sympathetic to her longing, but the great inventor is more interested in the challenge and in congratulating himself for overcoming obstacles. He does not judge whether the queen should pursue this course of action; he simply enables her because he can.

After Daedalus presents the queen with his apparatus and shows her how to use it, Swinburne includes a speech for Pasiphae's nurse lamenting the tragically tormented life that the queen has ahead. In Reid Kelley's video, the nurse is heard in a voiceover as the audience returns to the Minotaur, picking up where the first video ended. She runs around the labyrinth, alone and weak. She curls into a ball and sobs as the nurse describes how Pasiphae's yearning is keeping her up at night and making her sick. In this way, the tragic fates of Pasiphae and the Minotaur are intertwined and matched. The Minotaur gazes at the stars and imagines her mother's face, reaching out to the emptiness. She longs for a mother who has abandoned her.

The final video in the trilogy, *The Thong of Dionysus* (2015), begins from the god of wine's point of view. He surveys the wretched humans depicted on his vessels and comments on their fates, as the Greek gods were believed to be constantly judging mortals and shaping their futures. Here Dionysus is a stand-in for the artist, shaping stories and watching them unfold. He chastises Priapus for his egotistical ambition, his belief that he can control his own fate, and his plans to save the world. Dionysus advocates letting go of these illusions and enjoying life while one is living. Priapus wanders the labyrinth and finally finds the Minotaur's dead body lying on the ground. He falls in love with her, not realizing that she has died of loneliness. He sees only that she is a hybrid creature like himself and so imagines a likeness of character and desires. Like Narcissus, he falls in love with his reflection and dies for it. Weak and malnourished from his time in the labyrinth, Priapus collapses next to the Minotaur, proving Dionysus's point that as a mortal he will only die for all his efforts: "Spend all your time like a mime in a box, / acting smart in a carton, showing off in your coffin!"

Dionysus takes pity on Ariadne, the legitimate daughter of Pasiphae and Minos and half-sister of the Minotaur. She appears in the first and second videos but is a silent player throughout. She is portrayed as helplessly floating through life. Her mother is an addict and has brought shame on her family. Her sister has been secluded her entire life, and a hero has been dispatched to

kill her. Ariadne's life is filled with hopelessness, and she does not have "raisins" to continue. Dionysus marries Ariadne and then passes out, leaving his maenads to encourage her to accept her "Disco Tent" as a place to live and dance, rejecting the terrible fate and emotional burden of her family.

Like many artists, Mary Reid Kelley takes familiar stories and carefully crafts them for her own purposes. Her characters and settings are highly stylized and serve as visual cues for viewers, allowing them to share her insights. Her Priapus is not a dashing hero, but his Justin Bieber hair and swagger make up for his lack of classic chiseled features. Pasiphae takes the form of a Bo Derek-like beauty in a swimsuit and braided hair and is overtly proud of her sexuality. Reid Kelley's Venus has the head of a dog, but Botticelli's Venus appears when she looks in the mirror. The Minotaur has a bag over her head as evidence of the embarrassment that she causes her family. Ariadne looks like a line drawing from a Greek vase and is the most one-dimensional of the characters. The cartoonish quality of the visuals, combined with Reid Kelley's animated gestures and gift for puns, makes for highly enjoyable viewing experiences, but there is an underlying critique that goes along with comedy. Audiences laugh at the incongruent situations, reality heightened to absurdity. Comedians point to that which does not make sense in the world. Reid Kelley has a gift for making these absurdities subtle, blurring the lines between heroes and monsters and questioning the way that individuals are judged.

