THE LANDSCAPE OF THE GODS

Michael Petry 2020
Our belief (or disbelief) in the Gods is of no importance to them, for we are mortal, whereas they are divine.

But times change and tables turn. It is no longer the Gods who are indifferent to our belief in them, but rather we who are indifferent to their belief in us. Their hold over us has been broken and their powers have failed, even to the point that some now believe it was we who created the Gods, rather than they who created us.

When the Gods fell, so did their heavens and their hells. We no longer hope or fear for what comes after this life. Death has lost its sting. Ironically, this means each mortal has become divine. During his or her life, the universe exists. Upon their death, the universe ends.

Of course, many mortals still believe in the Gods. And even those who don’t believe still remember the stories of the Gods, of heaven and hell, of life after death.

I have begun a visual investigation into these concepts; a visual investigation into the names of the heavens and the hells; a visual investigation into the landscapes of the Gods.
The abodes of the Gods are synonymous with all that is beautiful: heaven; paradise; nirvana.

Sometimes, mortals could enter those abodes after death if they met the entry criteria. Different abodes had different criteria – you must be the offspring of a god; your heart must weigh less than a feather; you must have died in battle; you must be a member of a chosen tribe. As well as entry conditions, there were also entry prohibitions – you must not wear mixed fibres; you must not shave; you must not eat beans.

The names of these abodes are part of our cultural inheritance which is every bit as powerful as our genetic inheritance. Names which evoke wonder, beauty and awe. The English word 'heaven' can mean both the abode of the Gods, and the firmament in which the sun, the moon and the stars are embedded.

The ancients named those heavenly bodies after their Gods and their heroes – planets and constellations which would appear at night and remind mortals of the heavenly lands above. Initially, mortals looked to the heavens as an act of worship. But gradually, they observed patterns above which correlated to requirements below – seasonal patterns which taught them when to sow and when to reap, and physical patterns which taught them where to sail and where to march. Finally, their observations of the heavens taught them to be inventive, to chip stone, smelt metal, plough earth, and conquer time and space. And so the Gods were overthrown.

But despite our rebellion, our everyday language remembers the hallowed names of the Gods: of Tuesday and Wednesday; of May and June; of goodbye and god bless. And, of course, good heavens.

The names of those 'good heavens' continue to exert a strange power over us. Names provoke thoughts, and thoughts provoke actions. Different names in different places, to be sure. Different names in Europe, in China, in India. But always and everywhere names of power and mystery.

These new works – acrylic on canvas - are like the God Janus whose two faces looked in opposite directions, just as his namesake month (January) looked to the past and the future. Like Janus, these works have two faces – one which addresses a word, and another which addresses the memories and beliefs the word evokes.
The ancient Greeks believed in Elysium – a blessed place at the end of the world, where exceptional mortals would enjoy life after death. Elysium, the Isle of the Blessed, welcomed the righteous to its evergreen fields and cerulean skies.

Most other mortals who died went to Hades, passing there over the river Styx through whose powers they forgot and were forgotten. Hades was not a place of torture, but a place of oblivion, of non-life.

Meanwhile the Gods surveyed their creation from Mount Olympus.
ELYSIUM
The ancient Chinese believed in Tian (天). Tian had overlapping functions and identities: a place above the sky; the source of good action; and the supreme God.

Before the Chinese Revolution Tian and the worship of heaven was part of the every day, for Emperors as well as the peasants who worked in the fields. The Chinese had a notion of heaven, earth and a form of underworld where demons and ghosts dwelled.

Over time, The Lord on High (similar to Zeus, the most powerful Greek God) became synonymous with the character for Tian, but heaven itself was seen as a many layered realm.
Muslims believe in Jannah – the final abode of the righteous, whose literal meaning is ‘garden’, being a reference to the Garden of Eden. There are eight doors to Jannah, including being punctual in prayer; taking part in Jihad; and giving to charity. The highest layer of Jannah is Firdaus, where Allah resides.

By contrast, the unrighteous are cast into Jahannam – a place of blazing fire.
Buddhists believe that the highest state of grace a human can reach is Nirvana, a place of nothingness, of stillness, of the void. Nirvana is perfect peace of mind with the cosmos. Similar notions of it exist in Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism.

Nirvana can be translated as a quenching of fire, a quenching of the desires which cause a human to be reborn. Only when the fires of desire are quenched can a human become at peace with themselves and the universe.
NIRVANA
Hindus believe that Vishnu is the Lord of Vaikuntha – the Lord of the highest heaven where he abides with his consort, Lakshmi, and those humans who have found enlightenment (moksha).

Most humans are not enlightened, but are doomed to suffer a continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth.
The Landscape of the Gods is of course not complete without those who inhabit that terrain. As part of this series of work I have also made libations to the Gods in the form of conceptual word portraits.

These paintings are intended as offerings to the Gods who are named. They are function as portable shrines – ways of remembering the names of the Gods, and in so remembering, of rekindling their memory and power.
Apollo is the God of the arts, music, mathematics, knowledge and reason. He is believed to harness Helios (the sun God) to his chariot each day and propel him across the sky. Apollo values beauty above all.
Eros is the God of love. He is depicted as a handsome youth with large gold feathered wings. He fires deadly arrows which can cause anyone – mortal or divine – to fall in love. Love, like arrows, can wound and cause pain and chaos.
EROS
Hera is the God of marriage, childbirth and the family. She is the sister and wife of Zeus, ruling Mount Olympus as Queen of all the Gods. Hera is jealous of Zeus’ other lovers (male and female) and her wrath is harsh be you a God or human.
Helios is the radiant God of the sun. He brings light and enlightenment and is seen as the God that brings life to the earth. Helios is said to be all-seeing and no human nor God escapes his gaze.
Selene is the sister of Helios for she is the Goddess that is the moon. Her silver light falls down on lovers who worship and make offerings to Eros under the cover of night. It is said that once a month all women libate to her.
Europa gives her name to the continent where she was brought on the back of Zeus in the shape of a white bull. Her abduction and rape stands as a warning to those who would do it damage.
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