

Nadine Norman: Bodily Passages

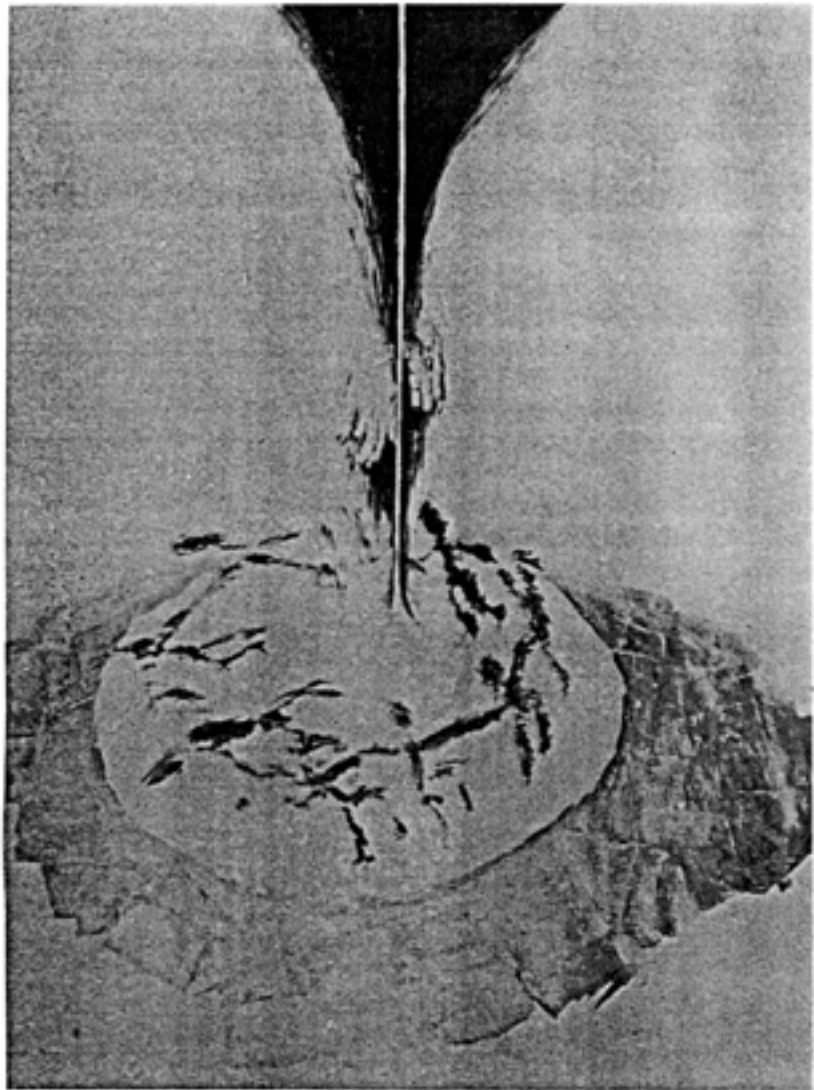
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Charcoal and gold leaf are the materials chosen by Nadine Norman to create a mythological depiction of the primal energies that continually fuel the terrestrial dance of life. Her thirteen recent works on paper that comprise the exhibition depict forces in motion, either whirling in centrifugal fashion, or cutting vertical paths along the picture plane. Recurrent motifs, such as a mechanical egg beater image, or a wheel form, translate the effects of these forces to convey the artist's own metaphysic.

The egg beater image (in an untitled work) is a spoked wheel made of wires or vines that seem to be rotating above seven whirling mounds, each of which supports a vertical rod. The seven rods sport skull-like heads, and arm-like tendrils that twine up and around the wires or vines above. These images have all been drawn in charcoal, and rest upon a circular gold base made from torn gold leaf collaged onto the paper.

Norman refers to alchemy in her artist's statement that accompanies the show: "The limited colours relate to an alchemical transformation of charcoal to gold." For the alchemist, gold represented solar light and divine intelligence. Therefore, the circular gold base in *Untitled* could be read as a sea of divinity that gives rise to all creation. The vines, and their product, wine, traditionally symbolize youth and eternal life, and the image of the wheel, wholeness. Since the wheel is above the rods, it could also have connotations of the sun – supporter of all life on earth. *Untitled*, then, suggests that human beings are like the rod-attached creatures, striv-

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■ Nadine Norman, *The Circle Dance*, 1991, charcoal and gold leaf on paper.

ing for fulfillment and vitality from an upper source as they whirl below in an earthly realm.

The image of the wheel occurs in more than half of the drawings here. In *The Circle Dance*, it is transformed into a ring of dancing figures, surrounded by a circular sea of gold leaf. In the centre is a black funnel, pierced through the middle by a white linear shape that splays out at its base like flowing water. Within the black funnel, hands reach down and figures rise up. To me, the imagery of this work reads as divine forces from above fusing with earthly creative powers to sustain the dance of humanity.

The phoenix comes into play in the drawing *Transcendence*, sitting atop

an hourglass of gold leaf, down through the centre of which flow tendrils that terminate in roots. Eternally renewing itself, the phoenix sends its vitality down into the soil. On either side of the phoenix are black wings drawn in charcoal. The white "negative" spaces between the wings and the bird take the form of human feet, with ankles extending up into space. Once again, humanity seems to be in the process of being uplifted.

Norman has selected both her range of images and her media carefully in these large-format works. The richness of the gold leaf contrasts well with the rough charcoal. The drawings are not pretty; they are strong.

—Margie Kelk