



INVOKING MYTHIC WOMEN PROJECT

Project directed by Barbara Furbush, reported by Kate Mulligan

I have been creating body prints of my own for decades. I weave my passions with printmaking into everyday life by encouraging anyone and everyone to participate in the creative process. My artwork invites viewers to become participants, inspiring a sense of mystery, and a stirring of our inner psychological workings. What is important to me is the emotional effect, the ease of participation, and the joy of immediacy, reminiscent of the prehistoric handprints on cave walls, echoing the same life-affirming "I am here."

The *Mythic Women* project didn't start out as mythic at all, but by the end, it had inspired my friend, Leberta, a local opera singer to say "I now want to produce body prints that align more appropriately with the mystic/mythic quality of the songs I perform, to reinforce my performance with all my creative tools, not just my voice."

How did we travel from the simple body prints to Leberta's declaration? In July 2016, the *Mythic Women* project launched with this invitation:

I am beginning a new art installation and invite you to join in creating this work!

The *Mythic Women* project inspires you to think about the ladies of intrigue or influence in your lives. Muse about those potent beings—mythic or fabled (fictitious or historic)—or familiar (personal experiences). Then think about a typical pose to portray that inspirational figure. With guidance, the participants make body prints on large paper

and are encouraged to elaborate on the image.... These life-sized prints will be combined along a gallery wall as a consolidated work, along with the *FaceBook* pages in an exhibition in November.

Enthusiastically, Maryly Snow held a working session at Snow Studios in Oakland, with three other colleagues. It was there that I decided to use a 40" wide plastic film plate as the most efficient way to ink a large surface.

Afterwards, Maryly traveled to Monterey to redo the *Mythic Woman Ina Coolbrith*. This time, she was able to maintain a greater control over the stance, which demonstrated Ina's reading of her poetry, and with that greater sense of the process, she planned out her moves for a second *Mythic Woman Esther Williams*.

Not all participants were printmakers, but several other California Society of Printmakers members participated: Pamela Takigawa was Athena with her owl signifying her wisdom. Nora Partido ignited by her Dragon Lady, enjoyed fanning the flames of her alter ego as she worked. Sue Howe, after a lively dinner conversation, decided to ride off on a camel with Queen of the Desert, Gertrude Bell, an accomplished archaeologist. Michelle Wilson was awed by a Black American female, Bree Newsome, who climbed the flagpole at the South Carolina Statehouse to take down the Confederate flag in 2015 and Robynn Smith, artistic mentor to many, chose her mother for the richness and wonder of her days.

There was an enlightening first step towards the full body print process: the *FaceBook* project. (Having our faces pressed firmly onto card stock, covering an inked plate.)



Our individual learning curves spiraled together as we worked; laughter erupted amid discussing the possibilities of utilizing kitchen implements, gauze curtains, and fingernails as possible new tools. Along with *Mythic Women* sessions came legendary stories, personal revelations, and dinner parties where we exchanged not only our newfound identities, but shared our thoughts on the art of the pose, and approaches we imagined we would need to take for a successful print.

As I worked with women one at a time, I found there was shyness about the nudity, but in that graceful moment at least, came an acceptance, a curiosity of how it would look, then surprise. These figures are so abstracted, yet convey a message through their stance, the variations of pressure, and the choice of emphasis with line. For one woman in transition, the session was cathartic. One spoke of seeing her imprint as a revelation ritual; it assisted her exploration of her own identity coming to terms with her body image. Regardless, all of the participating women, in that moment, put themselves in a purposeful frame of mind and moved forward with the directions and task at hand—they became professional models.

The processes used to create this tribute were primitive. Finding the materials that could be used life size and portable was my first task. For the test prints a 4' x 2' mahogany ply board was inked standing against the wall. Knowing that a 4' x 8' board would be too heavy to maneuver easily between wall and floor, I experimented with a sheet of .005 ml plastic film taped to the wall as the plate. It was only inked to about 38" wide to mitigate an

offset or migration to undesired surfaces. I continued the entire series using it. With wear, it did wrinkle and stretch, lending a primitive characteristic to the prints.

I started with Graphic Chemical black and ink extender, which needed to be very loose to avoid sticking when lifting the print. This dried too quickly when working with such a large size, so I switched to Akua Black and transparent inks. The ink on the inking slab and the matrix was continually renewed without cleaning up between sessions during the three and a half month active period. Because Akua does not dry quickly, time and waste were spared, but moving the large scale works was problematic.

Experimenting on the smaller scale, with 4" and 8" brayers, then an assortment of squeegee-like implements, all proved inadequate. I had a 12" Chameleon roller; its light weight was a back-saver as I rolled down the entire length of the wall refreshing the ink on the matrix. Trying to roll any other direction was counterproductive.

Asian papers, being thinner, are more sensitive to this relatively light pressure process. The first experiments used 18" wide *shuji* paper, great for portraying the torso dramatically, but limiting to expanded gestures. Other papers used were 27" and 38" heavyweight mulberry as well as 44" *Asuka*. (Hiromi Papers, Los Angeles). A few prints were executed on 40" Graftex Clear-Lay plastic film with the intent of layering these images over some of the others on different substrates. Two prints are on 36" bond paper, to test the feasibility of commonly found materials. Rolls provided the flexibility to determine height of poses.

Each session began with a face print to provide an example of the process on a manageable scale. A 9" x 6" plate was inked, placed into a folded 8½" x 11" piece of cardstock, and a transparent cover sheet was placed on top to protect the face from ink. Initially I let participants just "go at it" just to see what their pattern of movement was and the clarity of the resulting print, then gave specific instruction when needed. The chosen face prints, where women identified their mythic being, evolved into an interactive type of page similar to Facebook profile pages. These pages were bound together in an accordion style book to provide guidance to the images on the gallery wall.

Next we moved on to the body printing stage. After a few sessions, I learned to have the women practice their poses first, both against a wall and on the floor to understand the logistics of their positions and see which worked best for them. Prints made against the wall tended to be easier to construct in pieces, although they were lighter and more delicate from less pressure. For those made on the floor, the orchestration of moving into the space without creating a lot of unwanted marks was a challenge.

Often, I would hand a participant a small brayer, instructing her to even out the ink left on the matrix after the last participant, thus a print lesson was taught surreptitiously, while I prepared the large roller to lay fresh ink down. Once the paper was laid in position, the actual imprinting happened very quickly. In some instances I drew around strategic parts of the pose—hands, heads—to give emphasis while the model was still in place. After hanging the new print ink side out to assess the image, some decided to enhance their images by adding tracings—a small piece of transparency was inked; laid on a select area, and marks made. Even the uninitiated began to wield a brayer edge as if born to create. One printmaker created a woodblock to be included with her character.

At the end of the session, more than one woman cried out in new appreciation, "This is hard work!"

About a third of the women were experienced printmakers, with half having some familiarity with the technique. One quarter of the women did not consider themselves artists and in supporting them, I continued to evolve as director of this project. In the end, all were excited to be part of it.

The preparation, introspection, and set-up for the actual prints took most of the time and energy invested; the prints themselves were a fleeting moment. I am happy to report that some participants decided to hold future sessions to explore the process further and to keep their newfound creativity engaged.



Artist Information

Barbara Furbush, through printmaking, investigates the psychological implications of the shadow-forms implied by bodyprint images. Her process invites us to participate and creates moments of deep self-reflection. The *Mythic Women* project bestowed license of empowerment to the women; who are each mythic in their own right. Her studio is in Pacific Grove, California

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Image Documentation

Gathering, initial proof, 2017, Hand prints, graphite transfer; photopolymer etching, 8" x 10"

Seducing Zeus, 2016, hand, ink transfer; face petro, gel with carborundum; 2 solar plates, 10" x 8"

Robynn Smith Honors Her Mother Who Fills Her Days With Richness and Wonder, 2016, body print, 38" x 60", Robynn Smith/ Barbara Furbush

Wallflowers, 1989, layered bodyprints

Mythic Women project participants:

Back row l to r: Helen MacKinlay, Lebertal Loral, Bonnie Tucker, Karen Hunting, Laura Williams, Melissa Pickford, Susan Howe, Ginny Crapo, Trudy Levy, Pamela Takigawa, Nora Partido, Gaye O'Shaughnessy, Barbara Furbush
Front row l to r: Sophia Zadubera, Cookie Henderson, Maryly Snow, Helen Ogden, Joan Jeffers McCleary, Margie Cohen, Note: implicit consent for MW photograph