



Daughter, Sister, Mother, Monster
Xu Yang
28 November 2024 - 25 January 2025

"Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorise us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated"

- Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (2004)

Berntson Bhattacharjee is proud to present Xu Yang's inaugural solo show in London, *Daughter, Sister, Mother, Monster*. The exhibition is a unique exploration of the Greek myth of Medusa, reinterpreting her as a symbol of female resilience and beauty. Through painting, performance and film, the Medusa tale acts as a metaphor for Xu Yang to explore her identity as a Chinese woman as well as wider societal topics in today's world, such as gender and race issues. The tale is told through a theatrical lens, creating a surreal setting that references Rococo, Chinese Opera and Greek tragedy.

The Medusa myth that is commonly known conjures images of a grotesque monster being slain by Perseus. She is a necessary challenge he must overcome, and despite being arguably the most recognisable monster in mythology, very little is known about her. Throughout art history Medusa has been depicted unfavourably, but Xu Yang's Medusa is gentle, kind and strong. The youngest and most beautiful of three sisters, Medusa's life was one of harmony until she was viciously assaulted by Poseidon in the Temple of Athena. Insulted by this desecration of her sacred space, Athena punished not Poseidon but Medusa and transformed her from a symbol of beauty and innocence into a monstrous figure with snakes for hair and a deadly gaze - isolated, hunted, and feared by men. While being killed by Perseus in her sleep, she gave birth to two children; Pegasus and Chrysaor. The title of the exhibition reminds us that Medusa is more than just a side note in Perseus' so-called heroic adventure, and brings this ancient myth into the present day, allowing us to relate to her in ways we might not have before.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors will be met by a towering hand painted screen, referencing Chinese room dividers and Chinoiserie, creating a stage backdrop. Beyond the screen, the ground floor gallery will display a new series of paintings which tell Medusa's story. The video installation in the downstairs gallery creates an immersive, uncomfortable experience for the viewer. Close up images of Medusa are projected from four angles, forcing the viewer to finally meet her deathly gaze and be confronted by her story.

Xu Yang approaches the canvas like a stage, taking on the role of Medusa. The performative nature of drag—where artifice meets authenticity—becomes a platform for critiquing and reimagining the ways in which gender and power intersect, ultimately challenging the viewer to reconsider the boundaries of gaze and representation within contemporary visual culture. Xu Yang's reinterpretation of Medusa, from a figure of fear to one of strength and autonomy, parallels her own journey of self-discovery and defiance against societal norms.

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In this body of work, both Medusa herself and the setting Xu Yang has created in order to explore her story, remind viewers of culture and the interesting yet sometimes problematic connections that have been formed throughout history. The history of Chinese porcelain is commented on; the appropriation of this art form by first the Japanese and then Europeans, and also its connection to class both in China and the west. Xu Yang's portrayal of porcelain projects its beauty, strength and fragility onto Medusa, and shows how her story can transcend time and culture. Art History and the male gaze is also being examined through direct references to Old Master paintings. The composition of Xu Yang's monumental *Absolutely Forever and Always (After Rubens)* recalls Ruben's *The Three Graces* (1630-5), where three women lovingly hold each other. While Ruben's work depicts the nude women as soft and passive, Xu's sisters are determined, physically strong and ready for battle. The sister on the left hand side represents the West through her Rococo style dress, the sister on the right represents China through her porcelain skin and Qing dynasty headdress, while Medusa is unmistakable in the middle due to her hair. The painting is a perfect example of how Xu Yang is creating a dialogue between the past and present and East and West, using her own experiences to explore complex themes of identity and culture. The work carries an empowering, optimistic outlook, inviting the viewer into Xu Yang's world—a space where cultures unite and freedom of expression is celebrated.

About the artist

Xu Yang (b. 1996, Shandong) lives and works in London, UK. She studied Fine Art Painting at Wimbledon College of Arts (UAL) 2015-18, and graduated with an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art in 2020.

Recent solo exhibitions include "Imagine Yourself a Warrior", Mou Projects, Hong Kong (2023); "Therefore I am", Dio Horia, Athens (2022); "100 Carat Diamond", Barbican Arts Group Trust, London (2020). Duo exhibitions include "Tomorrow will be the Most Beautiful Day of Your Life" with Victoria Cantons, Studio West, London (2021). Recent group exhibitions include "Supercrowds/ Supercommunity", Tank Shanghai, Shanghai (2024); "Beyond the Looking Glass", galerie lange + pult, Zürich (2024); "The Arcadian Dream", Spurs Gallery, Beijing (2024); "NEW NOW", Guts gallery (2024); "Last Tango Fundraising Auction", Last Tango Kunstverein Zurich (Last Tango Art Association Zurich), Zurich (2023); "Touch-A-Touch-A- Touch-A-Touch Me", Berntson Bhattacharjee Gallery, London (2023); "It's my party". Guts gallery. London (2023); "Machines of Desire", Simon Lee gallery, London (2022); "Eat, Drink, Man, Women", 180 Strand, London (2022); "A Couple of...", Hive Art Centre, Beijing (2021); Photo London, Kovet.Art (2021); "Redirecting", Tree Museum, Beijing (2021); "London Grads Now", Saatchi Gallery, London (2020); "Beacon", Josh Lilley, London (2020).

Institutional exhibitions include "The Cult of Beauty", Wellcome Collection, London (2023). She was recently awarded a commission by Tate Collective for LGBTQIA+ history month (2023). Yang was the winner of the Barbican Arts Group Trust ArtWorks Open (2019), and she was shortlisted for the Contemporary Young Artist Prize (2020).

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