

SUSANNA  
COFFEY

*Crimes of the Gods*

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in conjunction with:*

*Susanna Coffey  
Crimes of the Gods*

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FRONT COVER:

*Tenth Day*

1998, woodcut on rice paper, page size 12 x 12 inches

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THE IDEA FOR THIS EXHIBITION was formed in the fall of 2017. That autumn the voices of #MeToo rose up and reawakened memories of both my own past and of my fascination with a lyric composed some thousands of years ago. I heard myself in a chorus of young women and ancient Greek voices decrying these crimes of gender, committed in the name of patriarchal desire, as not normal or right.

*Crimes of the Gods* brings my recent paintings together with works created in the 1980's. The older painting and prints are illustrative of an ancient Greek narrative, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* while the recent pictures are self-portraits made from direct observation. I have always thought the two bodies of work to be very different both in form and content, but when I was able to see them side by side I realized that they were related.

Last September I had to move my early work out of storage and into the studio, not having seen the paintings or prints in over 25 years. When I saw them alongside the more recent self-portraits I felt the closing of a circle, a tale and its tellers. The portrait faces seemed to me to be watching, listening, whispering to past works. They showed me that both my artistic and worldly concerns were closely intertwined. And the work I thought I left behind has been carried forward picture by picture.

What is the provenience of these two bodies of work? Could it begin with Florence Hill, the second-grade teacher who brought a pomegranate to class? She told us a uniquely

gynocentric tale, one which showed me that although bad experiences cannot be undone, regeneration is possible. Certainly, a major influence was the beautiful translation by Apostolos Athanassakis of *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (published in 1979) and my desire to illustrate it. In it one hears about the criminal behavior of patriarchs; Zeus and his brother Hades (aka Host of Many Guest of None). Even the story's lesser gods aid and/or abet the misdeeds of their overlords. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? There are other *Homeric Hymns to the Olympians*, but Demeter's is the one that has little good to say about most of these gods. When in the 1980's I read Athanassakis' translation I was inspired by it and began a series of gestural large scale, illustrative paintings and woodcuts. For almost a decade I painted, printed and drew from this mythic world. But in 1990 my studio work abruptly changed focus onto the series of self-portraits that I am still involved with. I felt like a different artist. But now I see that many issues connected the two bodies of work. Although the portraits show only one protagonist, my aim in these small mask-like pictures has always been to tell a story that isn't mine alone. Brave mothers who strive to resurrect the assaulted, daughters caught in dark places, bold liars, witnesses who come forward or don't, prodigal daughters, foolish innocents, skeptics, kindly crones, and abstracted elementals. I have seen them all through the mirror of my portraits. Now I see that the tale told in *The Homeric Hymn* is more of an ongoing truth than a myth and that all of my art has been involved with its lessons.

OPPOSITE AND FOLLOWING PAGES:

*The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

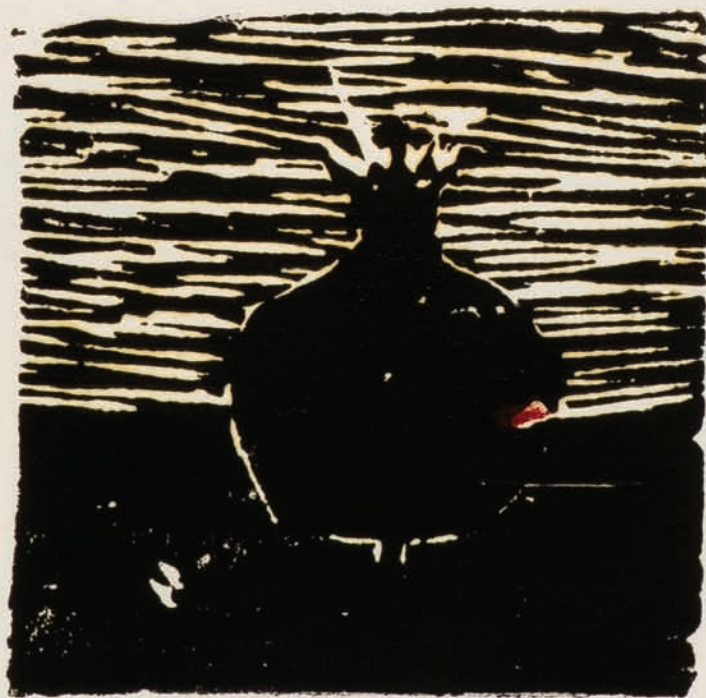
with woodcuts by Susanna Coffey

printed in an edition of 10 by Kallichoron Press, 1988

✦ THE HOMERIC HYMN ✦  
TO DEMETER

*Translated by*  
APOSTOLOS N. ATHANASSAKIS

*Woodcuts by*  
SUSANNA COFFEY



KALLICHORON PRESS ✦ 1988

❖ COLOPHON ❖

*The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, translated by Apostolos N. Athanassakis,  
with woodcuts by Susanna Coffey; Kallichoron Press, Chicago, 1988.  
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❖ THE ❖  
HOMERIC HYMN  
TO DEMETER

I begin to sing of lovely-haired Demeter, the goddess august,  
of her and her slender-ankled daughter whom Zeus,  
far-seeing and loud-thundering, gave to Aidoneus to abduct.  
Away from her mother of the golden sword and the splendid fruit  
she played with the full-bosomed daughters of Okeanos,  
gathering flowers, roses, crocuses, and beautiful violets  
all over a soft meadow; irises, too, and hyacinths she picked,  
and narcissus, which Gaia, pleasing the All-receiver  
made blossom there, by the will of Zeus, for a girl with a flower's beauty.  
A lure it was, wondrous and radiant, and a marvel to be seen  
by immortal gods and mortal men.  
A hundred stems of sweet-smelling blossoms  
grew from its roots. The wide sky above  
and the whole earth and the briny swell of the sea laughed.



She was dazzled and reached out with both hands at once  
to take the pretty bauble; Earth with its wide roads gaped  
and then over the Nysian field the lord and All-receiver,  
the many-named son of Kronos, sprang out upon her with his immortal horses.

Against her will he seized her and on his golden chariot  
carried her away as she wailed; and she raised a shrill cry,  
calling upon father Kronides, the highest and the best.

None of the immortals or of mortal men heard  
her voice, not even the olive-trees bearing splendid fruit.

Only the gentle-tempered daughter of Persaios,  
Hecate of the shining headband, heard from her cave,  
and lord Helios, the splendid son of Hyperion, heard  
the maiden calling father Kronides; he sat  
apart from the gods away in the temple of prayers,  
accepting beautiful sacrifices from mortal men.

By Zeus' counsels, his brother, the All-receiver  
and Ruler of Many, Kronos' son of many names,  
was carrying her away with his immortal horses, against her will.  
So while the goddess looked upon the earth and the starry sky  
and the swift-flowing sea teeming with fish  
and the rays of the sun and still hoped to see  
her loving mother and the races of gods immortal,  
hope charmed her great mind, despite her grief.

The peaks of the mountains and the depths of the sea resounded  
with her immortal voice, and her mighty mother heard her.

A sharp pain gripped her heart, and she tore  
the headband round her divine hair with her own hands.  
From both of her shoulders she cast down her dark veil  
and rushed like a bird over the nourishing land and sea,  
searching; but none of the gods or mortal men  
wanted to tell her the truth and none  
of the birds of omen came to her as truthful messenger.

For nine days then all over the earth mighty Deo  
roamed about with bright torches in her hands,  
and in her sorrow never tasted ambrosia





or nectar sweet to drink, and never bathed her skin.  
But when the tenth light-bringing Dawn came to her,  
Hekate carrying a light in her hands, met her,  
and with loud voice spoke to her and told her the news:  
"Mighty Demeter, bringer of seasons and splendid gifts,  
which of the heavenly gods or of mortal men  
seized Persephone and pierced with sorrow your dear heart?  
For I heard a voice but did not see with my eyes  
who it was; I am quickly telling you the whole truth."  
Thus spoke Hekate. And to her the daughter of lovely-haired Rhea  
answered not a word, but with her she sped away  
swiftly, holding the bright torches in her hands.  
They came to Helios, watcher of gods and men,  
and stood near his horses, and the illustrious goddess made a plea:  
"Helios, do have respect for me as a goddess, if I ever  
cheered your heart and soul by word or deed.  
Through the barren ether I heard the shrieking voice  
of my daughter famous for her beauty, a sweet flower at birth,  
as if she were being overcome by force, but I saw nothing.  
And since you do gaze down upon the whole earth  
and sea and cast your rays through the bright ether,  
tell me truly if you have seen anywhere  
what god or even mortal man in my absence  
seized by force my dear child and went away."  
Thus she spoke and Hyperionides gave her an answer:  
"Lady Demeter, daughter of lovely-haired Rhea,  
you shall know; for I greatly reverence and pity you  
in your grief for your slender-ankled child; no other immortal  
is to be blamed save cloud-gathering Zeus  
who gave her to Hades, his own brother, to become  
his buxom bride. He seized her with his horses  
carried her crying loud down to misty darkness.  
But, Goddess, stop your great wailing; you mustn't give  
yourself to grief so great and fruitless. Not an unseemly  
bridegroom among immortals is Aidoneus, Lord of Many,



your own brother from the same seed; to his share fell  
honor when in the beginning a triple division was made,  
and he dwells among those over whom his lot made him lord.”  
With these words, he called upon his horses, and at his command  
speedily, like long-winged birds, they drew the swift chariot,  
as a pain more awful and savage reached Demeter’s soul.  
Afterwards, angered with Kronion, lord of black clouds,  
she withdrew from the assembly of the gods and from lofty Olympos  
and went through the cities of men and the wealth of their labors  
tearing at her fair form a long time; no man  
or deep-girded woman looking at her knew who she was  
before she reached the house of prudent Keleos,  
who then was lord of Eleusis, a town rich in sacrifices.  
Grieving in her dear heart, she sat near the road,  
at Parthenion, the well from which the citizens drew water,  
in the shade of a bushy olive-tree which grew above it.  
She looked like an old woman born a long time ago  
and barred from childbearing and the gifts of wreath-loving Aphrodite,  
even as are nurses for the children of law-tending  
kings and keepers of storerooms in their bustling mansions.  
The daughters of Keleos Eleusinides saw her  
as they were coming to fetch easily-drawn water  
in copper vessels to their father’s dear halls,  
four of them in their maidenly bloom, like goddesses,  
Kallidike, Kleisidike and Demo the lovely,  
and Kallithoe, who was eldest of them all.  
They did not know who she was; it is hard for mortals to see divinity.  
Standing near they addressed her with winged words:  
“Old woman, whence and from what older generation do you come?  
Why have you wandered away from the city and not approached  
a house; there in the shadowy halls live  
women of your age and even younger ones  
who will treat you kindly in both word and deed.”  
After these words, the mighty goddess answered:  
“Dear children, whoever of ladylike women you are,

I greet you and will explain; indeed it is fitting  
to tell you the truth, since you are asking.  
Dos is the name which my mighty mother gave me.  
And now from Crete on the broad back of the sea  
I came unwillingly; marauding men by brute force  
carried me off against my will, and later  
they landed their swift ship at Thorikos, where the women  
came out in a body and the men themselves  
prepared a meal by the stern-cables of the ship.  
But my heart had no desire for the evening's sweet meal;  
I eluded them and, rushing through the black land,  
I fled my reckless masters, so that they might not enjoy  
the benefit of my price, since, like thieves, they carried me across the sea.  
So I have wandered to this place and know not at all  
what land this is and what men live in it.  
But may all who dwell in the Olympian halls  
grant you men to wed and children to bear  
as your parents wish; and now have mercy on me, maidens  
and, dear children, kindly let me go to someone's house,  
a man's and a woman's, to work for them  
in such tasks as befit a woman past her prime.  
I shall be a good nurse to a new-born child,  
holding him in my arms; I shall take care of the house,  
and make the master's bed in the innermost part  
of the well-built chamber and mind his wife's work."  
So said the goddess, and forthwith Kallidike, still a pure virgin  
and the most beautiful of Keleos' daughters, replied:  
"Good mother, men must take the gifts of the gods  
even when they bring them pain, since gods are truly much stronger.  
I shall advise you clearly and give you the names  
of the men who have great power and honor in this place;  
these are leaders of the people who defend the towers  
of the city by their counsels and straight judgements.  
They are Triptolemos, shrewd in counsel, and Diokles,  
Polyxeinos and Eumolpos, untainted by blame,



Dolichos and our manly father,  
and everyone has a wife managing his mansion.  
No woman there, when she first looks upon you,  
will dishonor your appearance and remove you from the mansion,  
but each will receive you, for indeed you look like a goddess.  
If you wish, wait here for us to go to the mansion  
of our father and tell our deep-girded mother, Metaneira  
all these things from beginning to end, hoping that  
she will bid you come to our mansion and not search for another's.  
A growing son is being reared in the well-built mansion,  
born late in her life, much wished for and welcome.  
If you should bring him up to reach puberty,  
some tender woman seeing you could easily  
be envious; such rewards for rearing him she'll give you."  
So she spoke, and the goddess nodded her head in assent,  
and they proudly carried their shining vessels filled with water.  
Swiftly they reached their father's great mansion and quickly told  
their mother what they had seen and heard. And she commanded them  
to go forthwith and invite her to come for copious wages.  
And they, as deer or heifers in the season of spring,  
sated in their hearts with pasture frisk over a meadow,  
held up the folds of their lovely robes  
and darted along the hollow wagon-road, as their flowing hair  
tossed about their shoulders, like the flowers of the crocus.  
They met the glorious goddess near the road where  
they had left her before; and then they led her to their father's  
house. And the goddess walked behind them, brooding  
in her dear heart, with her head covered, while a dark  
cloak swirled about her tender feet.  
Soon they reached the house of Zeus-cherished Keleos  
and through the portico they went where their lady mother  
sat by a pillar, which supported a close-fitted roof,  
holding a child, a young blossom, on her lap; they ran  
near her, and the goddess stepped on the threshold and touched  
the roof with her head and filled the doorway with divine radiance.



Awe, reverence and pale fear seized the mother;  
and she yielded her seat to the goddess and asked her to sit.  
But Demeter, the bringer of seasons and splendid gifts,  
did not want to sit on the lustrous seat;  
she kept silence and cast down her beautiful eyes  
until Iambe, knowing her duties, placed in front of her  
a well-fitted seat and over it she threw a white fleece.  
Demeter sat on it and with her hands she held in front of her a veil,  
remaining on the seat for long, speechless and brooding,  
doing nothing and speaking to nobody.  
And without laughing or tasting food and drink  
she sat pining with longing for her deep-girded daughter  
until Iambe, knowing her duties, with her jokes  
and many jests induced the pure and mighty one  
to smile and laugh and have a gracious temper.  
At later times, too, Iambe was able to please her moods.  
Metaneira now filled a cup with red wine and gave it  
to her, but she refused it; it was not right for her, she said,  
to drink red wine. She asked them to give her a drink  
of barley-meal and water mixed with tender pennyroyal.  
She mixed the drink and gave it to the goddess, as she had asked,  
and mighty Deo accepted it, complying with holy custom.  
Then among them fair-girded Metaneira started speaking.  
"I salute you, lady, because I think you were born to noble  
and not to lowly parents. Modesty and grace show  
in your eyes, as if you were the child of law-giving kings.  
But man must take the gifts of gods even when they are  
grieved by them, for on their neck there is a yoke.  
And now since you have come here, what is mine will be yours.  
Nurture this child of mine, whom unhopd for and late-born  
the gods have granted me, in answer to my many prayers.  
If you should bring him up to reach the age of puberty,  
some tender woman seeing you could easily  
be envious; such rewards for rearing him I will give you."  
Fair-wreathed Demeter addressed her in turn:

"I salute you too, lady; may the gods grant you good things. I will gladly accept the child as you ask me. I will nurture him and I don't think that for his nurse's foolishness either a spell or the Undercutter will harm him.

I know a remedy far mightier than the tree-felling creature, and for harmful bewitching I know a noble antidote."

With these words she received him to her fragrant bosom and immortal arms, and the mother rejoiced in her heart.

Thus the fine son of prudent Keleos, Demophoön, to whom fair-girded Metaneira gave birth, was nurtured by her in the palace; and he grew up like a god, not eating food or nursing at his mother's breast.

As if he were the child of a god, Demeter annointed him with ambrosia, holding him to her bosom and breathing on him sweetly.

At night she hid him like a firebrand in the blazing fire, secretly from his dear parents. To them it was a miracle how he blossomed forth and looked like the gods.

And she would have made him ageless and immortal, if fair-girded Metaniera, thinking foolish thoughts and keeping watch by night from her fragrant chamber, had not seen her; she raised a cry, striking her thighs in fear for her child, and blindness entered her mind, and weeping she spoke winged words:

"Demophoön, my child, this stranger hides you in a great fire, bringing me grief and painful care."

Thus she spoke wailing, and the splendid goddess heard her.

The shafts of terrible anger shot through Demeter, the fair-wreathed, who then with her immortal hands took from the blazing fire and placed on the ground the dear child born in the queen's mansion, and at the same time addressed fair-girded Metaniera:

"Men are too foolish to know ahead of time the measure of good and evil which is yet to come.

You too were greatly blinded by your foolishness. The relentless water of the Styx by which gods swear



be my witness: immortal and ageless forever  
would I have made your son and granted him everlasting honor;  
but now it is not possible for him to escape the fate of death.

Yet honor everlasting shall be his because  
he climbed on my knees and slept in my arms.  
But in due time as the years revolve for him,  
the sons of the Eleusinians will join in war  
and dreadful battle against each other forever.

I am Demeter the honored, the greatest  
benefit and joy to undying gods and to mortals.

But come now, let all the people build me  
a great temple and beneath it an altar under the steep walls  
of the city, above Kallichoron, on the rising hill.

I myself shall introduce the rites so that later  
you may propitiate my mind by their right performance."  
With these words the goddess changed her size and form  
and sloughed off old age, as beauty was wafted about her.

From her fragrant veils a lovely smell  
emanated, and from the immortal skin of the goddess a light  
shone afar, as her blond hair streamed down over her shoulders,  
and the sturdy mansion was filled with radiance as if from lightning.  
Out she went through the mansion. The queen staggered,  
and she remained speechless for a long time, forgetting  
to pick her growing child up from the floor.

His sisters heard his pitiful voice,  
and they ran from their well-spread beds; and then one  
took up the child in her arms and held him to her bosom.

Another revived the fire and yet a third rushed  
with her tender feet to rouse her mother from her fragrant chamber.

They gathered round the squirming child, bathed him  
and fondled him, but his heart was not soothed,  
for surely lesser nurses and governesses held him now.

All night they propitiated the glorious goddess  
quaking with fear, and as soon as dawn appeared  
They told the truth to Keleos, whose power reached far,

as the fair-wreathed goddess Demeter had ordered them.

He then called to assembly the people of every district  
and bade them build an opulent temple to lovely-haired Demeter  
and make an altar on the rising hill.

And they listened to his speech and obeying forthwith  
they built it as he ordered; and the temple took shape according to divine decree.

Now when they finished the temple and refrained from labor,  
each man went to his home, but blond Demeter,  
sitting there apart from all the blessed ones,  
kept on wasting with longing for her deep-girded daughter.

Onto the much-nourishing earth she brought a year  
most dreadful and harsh for men; no seed  
in the earth sprouted, for fair-wreathed Demeter concealed it.

In vain the oxen drew many curved plows over the fields,  
and in vain did much white barley fall into the ground.  
And she would have destroyed the whole race of mortal men  
with painful famine and would have deprived  
the Olympians of the glorious honor of gifts and sacrifices,  
if Zeus had not perceived this and pondered in his mind.

First he sent golden-winged Iris to invite  
the lovely-haired Demeter of the fair form.

He spoke to her and she obeyed Zeus, the son of Kronos and lord  
of dark clouds, and ran swiftly mid-way between earth and heaven.

She reached the town of Eleusis rich in sacrifices,  
found the dark-veiled Demeter in the temple  
and spoke, uttering winged words to her:

"Demeter, Zeus the father, whose wisdom never wanes,  
invites you to come among the tribes of the immortal gods.  
But come and let not the word of Zeus be unaccomplished."  
Thus she spoke begging her, but her mind was not persuaded.

So then again the father sent forth all the blessed  
immortal gods. They ran to her, and each in his turn  
summoned her and gave her many beautiful gifts  
and whatever honors she might want to choose among the immortals.  
But no one could persuade the mind and thought

of the angry goddess who stubbornly spurned their offers.  
She said she would never set foot on fragrant Olympos  
and never allow the grain in the earth to sprout forth  
before seeing with her eyes her fair-faced daughter.  
So when loud-thundering, far-seeing Zeus heard this,  
he sent Argeiphontes of the golden wand to Erebos.  
His mission was to win Hades over with gentle words,  
and bring Persephone out of misty darkness  
to light and among the gods, so that her mother  
might see her with her eyes and desist from anger.  
Hermes did not disobey and, leaving his Olympian seat,  
with eager speed plunged into the depths of the earth.  
He found the lord inside his dwelling,  
sitting on his bed with his revered spouse; she was  
in many ways reluctant and missed her mother, who far  
from the works of the blessed gods was devising a plan.  
Mighty Argeiphontes stood near and addressed him:  
"Hades, dark-haired lord of those who have perished,  
Zeus the father bids you bring noble Persephone  
out of Erebos and among the gods, so that her mother,  
seeing her with her eyes, may desist from anger  
and dreadful wrath against the gods; because she is contemplating  
a great scheme to destroy the feeble races of earth-born men,  
hiding the seed under the earth and abolishing the honors  
of the immortals. Her anger is dreadful, and she does not mingle  
with the gods, but apart from them in a fragrant temple  
she sits, dwelling in the rocky town of Eleusis."  
Thus he spoke, and Aidoneus, lord of the nether world,  
with smiling brows obeyed the behests of Zeus the king  
and speedily gave his command to prudent-minded Persephone:  
"Persephone, go to your dark-robed mother,  
with a gentle spirit and temper in your breast,  
and in no way be more dispirited than the other gods.  
I shall not be an unfitting husband among the immortals,  
as I am father Zeus' own brother. When you are here





you shall be mistress of everything which lives and moves;  
your honors among the immortals shall be the greatest,  
and those who wrong you shall always be punished,  
if they do not propitiate your spirit with sacrifices,  
performing sacred rites and making due offerings."

Thus he spoke and wise Persephone rejoiced  
and swiftly sprang up for joy, but he himself  
gave her to eat a honey-sweet pomegranate seed,  
contriving secretly about her, so that she might not spend  
all her days again with dark-robed, revered Demeter.

Aidoneus, Ruler of Many, harnessed nearby  
the immortal horses up to the golden chariot.  
She mounted the chariot, and next to her the mighty Argeiphontes  
took the reins and the whip in his own hands  
and sped out of the halls, as the horses flew readily.

Soon they reached the end of the long path, and neither  
the sea nor the water of rivers nor the grassy glens  
and mountain-peaks checked the onrush of the immortal horses,  
but they went over all these, traversing the lofty air.

He drove them and then halted near the fragrant temple  
where fair-wreathed Demeter stayed. When she saw them,  
she rushed as a maenad does, along a shady woodland on the mountains.

Persephone on her part, when she saw the beautiful eyes  
of her mother, leaving chariot and horses, leaped down  
to run and, throwing her arms around her mother's neck, embraced her.

And as Demeter still held her dear child in her arms,  
her mind suspected trickery, and in awful fear she withdrew  
from fondling her and forthwith asked her a question:  
"Child, when you were below, did you perchance partake  
of food? Speak out, that we both may know.

If your answer is no, coming up from loathsome Hades,  
you shall dwell both with me and with father Kronion,  
lord of dark clouds, honored by all the immortals.  
Otherwise, you shall fly and go to the depths of the earth  
to dwell there a third of the seasons in the year,

spending two seasons with me and the other immortals.  
Whenever the earth blooms with every kind of sweet-smelling  
springflower, you shall come up again from misty darkness,  
a great wonder for gods and mortal men.  
With what trick did the mighty All-receiver deceive you?"

Facing her now, beautiful Persephone replied:  
"Surely, Mother, I shall tell you the whole truth.  
When Hermes, the helpful swift messenger, came  
from father Zeus and the other heavenly dwellers  
to fetch me from Erebos, so that seeing me with your eyes  
you might desist from your anger and dreadful wrath against the immortals,  
I myself sprang up for joy, but Aidoneus slyly placed  
in my hands a pomegranate seed, sweet as honey to eat.  
Against my will and by force he made me taste of it.  
How he abducted me through the shrewd scheming of Kronides,  
my father, and rode away carrying me to the depths of the earth  
I shall explain and rehearse every point as you are asking.

All of us maidens in a delightful meadow,  
Leukippe, Phaino, Electra, Ianthé,  
Melite, Iache, Rhodeia, Kallirhoe,  
Melobosis, Tyche, Okyrhoe with a face like a flower,  
Chryseis, Ianeira, Akaste, Admete,  
Rhodope, Plouto, lovely Kalypso,  
Styx, Ourania, charming Galaxaura,  
battle-stirring Pallas, and arrow-pouring Artemis,  
were playing and picking lovely flowers with our hands,  
mingling soft crocuses and irises with hyacinths  
and the flowers of the rose and lilies, a wonder to the eye,  
and the narcissus which the wide earth grows crocus-colored.  
So I myself was picking them with joy, but the earth beneath  
gave way and from it the mighty lord and All-receiver  
leaped out. He carried me under the earth in his golden chariot,  
though I resisted and shouted with shrill voice.  
I am telling you the whole truth, even though it grieves me."  
So then all day long, being one in spirit,



they warmed each other's hearts and minds in many ways  
with loving embraces, and an end to sorrow came for their hearts,  
as they took joy from each other and gave in return.

Hekate of the shining headband came near them  
and many times lovingly touched the daughter of pure Demeter.  
From then on this lady became her attendant and follower.

Far-seeing, loud-thundering Zeus sent them a messenger,  
Lovely-haired Rhea, to bring her dark-veiled mother  
among the races of the gods, promising to give her  
whatever honors she might choose among the immortal gods.  
With a nod of his head he promised that, as the year revolved,  
her daughter could spend one portion of it in the misty darkness  
and the other two with her mother and the other immortals.

He spoke and the goddess did not disobey the behests of Zeus.

Speedily she rushed down from the peaks of Olympus  
and came to Rharion, life-giving udder of the earth  
in the past, and then no longer life-giving but lying idle  
without a leaf. It was now hiding the white barley  
according to the plan of fair-ankled Demeter, but later  
the fields would be plumed with long ears of grain,  
as the spring waxed, and the rich furrows on the ground  
would teem with ears to be bound into sheaves by withies.

There she first landed from the unharvested ether.

Joyfully they beheld each other and rejoiced in their hearts;  
and Rhea of the shining headband addressed her thus:

"Come, child! Far-seeing, loud-thundering Zeus invites you  
to come among the races of the immortal gods and promises to give you  
whatever honors you wish among the immortal gods.

With a nod of his head he promised you that, as the year revolves,  
your daughter could spend one portion of it in the misty darkness  
and the other two with you and the other immortals.

With a nod of his head he said it would thus be brought to pass.

But obey me, my child! Come and do not nurse  
unrelenting anger against Kronion, lord of dark clouds;  
Soon make the life-giving seed grow for men."

THE



Thus she spoke and fair-wreathed Demeter did not disobey,  
but swiftly made the seed sprout out of the fertile fields.  
The whole broad earth teemed with leaves and flowers;  
and she went to the kings who administer the laws,  
Triptolemos and Diokles, smiter of horses, and mighty Eumolpos  
and Keleos, leader of the people, and showed them the  
celebration of holy rites, and explained to all,  
to Triptolemos, to Polyxeinos and also to Diokles,  
the awful mysteries not to be transgressed, violated  
or divulged, because the tongue is restrained by reverence for the gods.  
Whoever on this earth has seen these is blessed,  
but he who has no part in the holy rites has  
another lot as he wastes away in dank darkness.  
After the splendid Demeter had counseled the kings in everything,  
she and her daughter went to Olympus for the company of the other gods  
There they dwell beside Zeus who delights in thunder,  
commanding awe and reverence; thrice blessed is he  
of men on this earth whom they gladly love.  
Soon to his great house they send as guest  
Ploutos, who brings wealth to mortal men.  
But come now, you who dwell in the fragrant town of Eleusis,  
sea-girt Paros and rocky Antron,  
mighty mistress Deo, bringer of seasons and splendid gifts,  
both you and your daughter, beauteous Persephone,  
for my song kindly grant me possessions pleasing the heart,  
and I shall remember you and another song, too.







*Host of Many*

1989, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



*Rharian Plain*

1988, oil on canvas, 72 x 100 inches

# Demeter and Persephone

Kia Penso

If fate is everything that can happen, the *Hymn to Demeter* shows us an array of possible women's fates. Women's fate, women's subjectivity, and women's agency are at the center of each of these scenes.

Young girls are picking flowers in a meadow when the lord of the underworld comes surging up out of the earth to snatch Persephone away as she reaches for a flower that was placed there as a lure.

By the time Demeter finds out from Helios what happened to her daughter, the narrator has said three times that Zeus, god of justice, had promised Persephone in marriage to Hades.

What kind of justice is this? God of the clouds indeed!

Demeter is already angry; but when Helios tells her what an eligible "marriage" this abduction is, her anger becomes, well, Titanic. It seems to take all the gods by surprise; apparently they all took Zeus's view of the matter, that the girl Persephone was disposable, "available." It had never occurred to any of them that Demeter's consent was to be asked for.

The power of consent is an absolute; it isn't reducible to tradable advantages; it isn't something to justify or explain. For Demeter to countenance the presumption is, in effect, to give away not only her daughter but more importantly, all her own power of consent and refusal. It's impossible to keep company with the other gods on those terms.

And then, she is so angry! It makes all of them a little nervous.

She leaves to wander the earth, in grief and rage, neglecting the duties by which she keeps life on earth fertile and flourishing. Her anger launches a slow-burning cataclysm that threatens the gods themselves.

She makes her way, disguised as a childless old woman, an out-of-work household manager, to the town of Eleusis, which is dedicated to the cult of Demeter, site of the Eleusinian mysteries.

She waits near the well, and the four daughters of Keleus, bringing copper vessels to fetch water, find her

there; she tells them a made-up story about herself; she was abducted by human traffickers, and managed to escape, (we may assume) because she wasn't valuable enough for them to bother pursuing her. The girls run home to give news of the stranger and then they come back to fetch her.

Her hosts offer her wine, but wine isn't what she wants. She wants the drink made of barley-meal and water, so that is fetched for her. She's given what she wants, not what they think she should have.

The generosity that rules in Keleus's house is related to the most essential characteristic of living nature: the prodigality of forms and strategies that are an expression of the energy of each living thing ("Energy is eternal delight"—William Blake). Demeter's power over agriculture is related to our 21st century idea of sustainability, except our idea is so small and cheap—just an afterthought to the plunder—compared to what Demeter represents. She represents a far more rich and powerful idea of sustainability. It holds the flourishing of all life as the end of all husbandry, of all labor, of all art, and of all connection. It honors the living creature's delight in its own generative, transformative energies and potential. Everything is more beautiful than it needs to be.

Demeter is this life-sustaining and life-generating ethical principle, toward which hospitality, kindness, beauty, generosity of spirit, converge. When it is denied, the world begins to starve.

The members of this rich and blessed household treat the destitute old woman like a guest who has the little bit of divinity that we all have in us (the little bit is infinite, though). In this they are following the liberality of the goddess Demeter's rule over living things. When the visitor is given what she asks for, is that because of the cult? Is that the cult coming into being? If such scenes and tableaux are re-enacted as ritual performances, is that more or less real than any act motivated by this ethics of delight? It's all ambiguous; it can't be known for sure.

At last the gods agree to review this bad bargain. Persephone and her captor are summoned from the underworld. Mother and daughter are reunited and Demeter is very keen to know whether Persephone has eaten anything while underground. She has: a couple of pomegranate seeds. She has accepted hospitality, and that consent is enough to transform her from a captive to a guest (she's a goddess, she's not in danger of starving to death, this is about intention). Demeter can't undo Persephone's consent; she can't now violate the principle for which she went on that year-long strike. This story adds the idea of consent to the sum of human (and divine) knowledge; it grounds it in the most elemental sense of life, in what all living things have in common, the urge to enjoy their own will, energy, being, and declares it an irreducible, nonnegotiable absolute. The origin story is that one woman got angry enough to nearly bring down the whole shooting match and wouldn't be satisfied with anything but justice.

Reading the *Hymn to Demeter* this time I notice particularly how it compels the reader (the poet would have had listeners) to think visually, as if the act of conceptualizing the physical or visual is essential to getting the story, and yet what is "seen" is so simple and carefully selected: the light of attention pauses on scenes and objects and they sort of fill up with meaning, and there is a high art that makes them simple, uncluttered, iconic, and yet still somehow able to stand for the weight of existence, a convergence of the metaphoric and the actual.

The challenge is to not "illustrate" these conceptual exercises but to be possessed by them.

That's what Susanna Coffey's woodcuts look like to me, they look possessed by the emotional energies of this poem: the sum of all women's anger the way the hymn is a sum of all of women's fates, most of those fates still hidden in its shadows. I look at these images and feel like I don't need to see another nymph decorating a picturesque ruin with herself ever again. The energies at work in the story sizzle across the darkness in these woodcuts. All the meanings are loaded up in those simple things, and so there's an immanence in these ordinary objects: the cup, the pomegranate. As in the story, the image pauses the narrative, it pauses time.

For this task the costume shop and the knicknackereries won't do, because the poem is treating of elemental matters.

I can well believe that the Homeric Hymns fed Coffey's painting for nearly a decade; you can order the world with the *Hymn to Demeter*, and its ambiguities are so generative, so fertile of ideas you find yourself wanting to feed your own experience into them—and that is transformative too.

Maybe that's why her paintings from after that decade still seem to be informed by the experience of the Homeric Hymns—in the specificity of each self-portrait and the range of variation in the backgrounds that aren't really backgrounds. I mean, they may have begun as backgrounds but what is a background, anyway? More and more, the backgrounds look like being, imagined, with such prodigality as to imply infinite possibilities of relationship with the subject, and, consequently, of the subject's relationship to everything. I don't know if you can set out intending to do this. I think it accumulates, each one of the moments represented here being *the one*, like the eleventy-fourteen thousand pirouettes I did when I was studying dance. For each instance, a just balance, a just account of the relationship between the central thing and what is around it, is sought and is completely unique. Somehow that uniqueness can imply the possibility of everything.

It's not like "Stand here next to the potted plant," but you could get the potted plant in there because it feels as though you could get anything into the space around that central object: everything is already latent there, to be revealed in the act of painting.

I'm like the most traditional person in the world, and I am really interested in the genres! I like that connection to the past that the traditional genres provide. People are moving away from tradition and the weight of history, and I'd rather bear that weight and feel it. Even though everything has been done, it hasn't been done by me. And particularly for women artists, it is not a very long tradition. The culture in the United States is also not that old. So I don't want to throw it off; I want to get engaged with history, and fight with it, and compete with it.

(Susanna Coffey, in interview with Jennifer Samet, *Hyperallergic*, January 26, 2013)



*Ringers*  
2016, oil on panel, 15 x 12 inches



*Telling*

2018, oil on panel, 12 x 11 inches



*Before the Spring*  
2018, oil on panel, 12 x 11 inches



*Reluctant Bride*  
2018, oil on panel, 12 x 11 inches



*Ethereic*

2018, acrylic on rice paper, 12 x 12 inches



*Void of Course*  
2018, oil on panel, 15 x 12 inches



*Late Snow*

2012-15, acrylic on panel, 36 x 29 inches

BACK COVER:

*Video et Taceo (oh helios)*

2018, oil on panel, 12 x 11 inches

