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Somewhere in the Universe: Senior Thesis 2022

Mallory Nelson

2022

Visual Arts Department

My senior thesis, entitled *Somewhere in the Universe*, is an exploration of what makes a place believable, and how I as an artist can make something that doesn't exist feel like it could. However, one of my favorite parts about art is its ability to be interpreted in unique ways. I may have had a set of intentions and ideas when creating this project, but I also am open to the ways different people interpret this art.

The conceptual basis of my thesis is an attempt at worldbuilding. These worlds are based on various Greek and Roman Goddesses from the Hellenistic period and before. In each of these pieces, the primary goal is to explore facets of the natural world through abstracted landscapes. In this collection, I have incorporated imagery and elements taken directly from Hellenistic mythology and other religious and cultural systems of belief to explore the human understanding of the natural world around us. This thesis was inspired by my interest in mythology, and how people used goddesses to represent and explore the world around them. I have always been interested in the ways we understand and represent the world around us, and how those conceptual understandings change over time. Through this work, I hope to inspire the viewer to think about their interpretations of the world around them.

World Building is the foundation of many creative pursuits and can be done in writing, songs, movies, and visual still images. One of my favorite books series as a kid was *The Sisters Grimm* by Michael Buckley, one of the many reasons I loved this series was how it took familiar fairy tale characters and put them into a new setting. Buckley used traditional characters that I knew from a young age, and he gave them relationships and roles with which I could relate. His

ability to create these new stories, without losing the essence of the characters, is something I wanted to emulate in this project. In the same vein with this project, I wanted to take these goddesses, some of which are well known while others have faded into obscurity and deconstruct them into their basic parts. I used these basic parts to create something new.

The following several pages outline the pieces I made along with information about the goddesses that I used in creating them. All these goddesses date back to the Hellenistic period or earlier, and there are varying levels of information about all of them available today. I offer in this paper, the background for this art, a very simplified version of these goddesses. These are the building blocks I used in the creation of these worlds. This is not an exhaustive source for information about any of these goddesses, nor is the point of the work to present a completely historically accurate representation of these goddesses as they would have been known by the people who worshiped them. I, as the artist, have taken liberties and artistic license in creating these pieces to create the final product.

1.Vesta

Vesta is the goddess of the hearth, both in the ideas of home and community that come from the hearth and the fire within. (Wright) Peacocks were seen by the ancient Greeks as a symbol of immortality. (GAMM) They are the animal that most closely resembles the myth of the phoenix. I chose this imagery for this piece because of the immortality of the hearth, while members of our families may die the home we build doesn't, it changes and morphs and is maybe reborn, but the essence of home and family stay with us forever. In Ovid Fasti

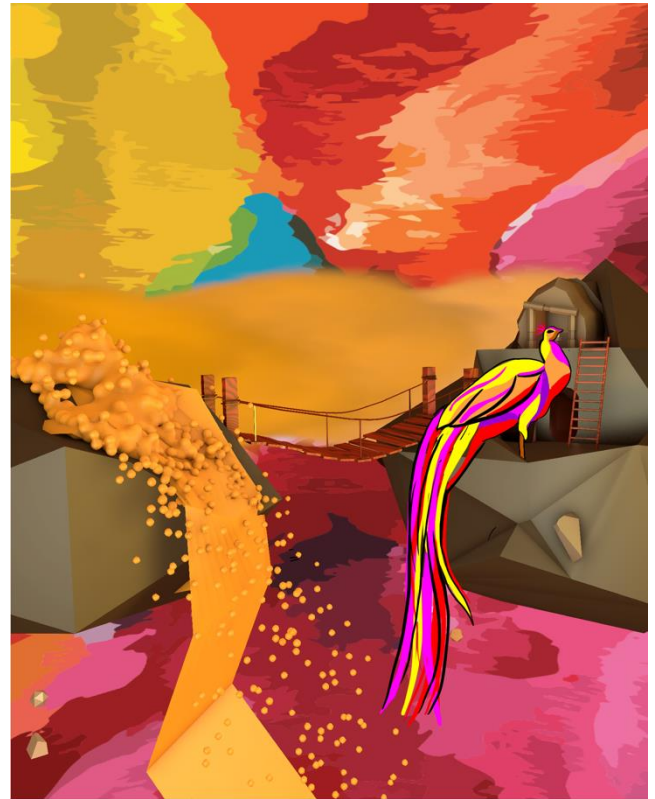


Figure 1- Vesta Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2021

6, Vesta is attributed to the earth, she “is the same as the Earth; under both of them is a perpetual fire; the earth and the hearth are symbols of the home.” (Frazer) This description of the hearth is not just within a home but within our communities. In this piece I focused on the idea of Vesta’s eternal flame, she, and those who served her in her temple were responsible for keeping a flame lit in Rome. Because of this connection and imagery, I created a world where fire, in the form of lava, is all around and I focused on using warm colors to reflect the warmth of a hearth. One of the main features of this piece is a temple on the highest point of the left rock, this temple is the home of an eternal flame, a reference to the followers of Vesta—called Vestals—who ensured an eternal flame was kept lit in Ancient Rome (Wildfang). Outside of this temple rests a peacock who stands guard over this temple, while both in coloring and formation mirrors the flowing lava across from it. This represents the hearth within each of us, the parts of ourselves that yearn to

belong. This piece was particularly influential in determining the format of these pieces and the materials I would eventually use to create them, and through exploring this world in a variety of mediums I came to understand the workflow that was best for me in this project.

2. Nyx

Nyx is the Goddess of darkness; she is Greek in origin. She is a primordial Goddess, standing at the very beginning of the universe in Greek mythology. Her name translates to night, she is often depicted with wings, and is said to be so powerful that even Zeus stood in awe of her (Guthrie). In this piece, I took inspiration from the depictions of Nyx with wings. I also thought about the different types of darkness, how we as humans feel different ways about darkness depending on where we are and what else might be around us. I

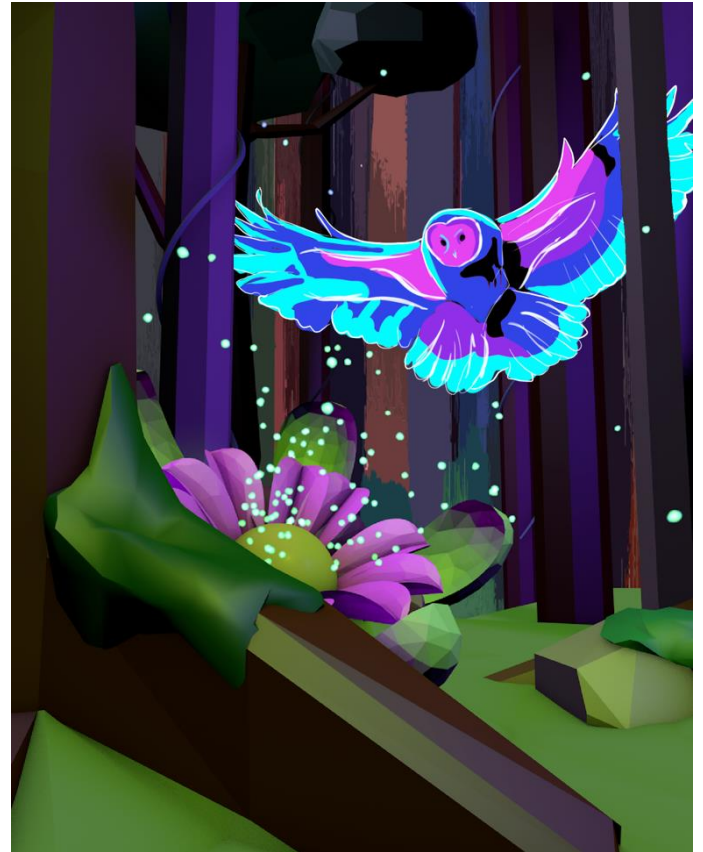


Figure 2- Nyx Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2021



Figure 3-Nyx goddess of the night, Athenian red-figure pyxis lid fragment C4th B.C., Ashmolean Museum

created a bright and luminous creature; this planet is dark as it is shrouded in the leaves of tall trees, but the darkness found here is not inherently dangerous or scary but rather an opportunity to relax and rest. This piece speaks to the curiosity of night, and the endless possibilities of what it might hold, much more like watching a movie with friends in an empty movie theater at 1 am than

watching a scary movie by yourself right before bed. It's for that reason that I filled this scene with flora. The shade of this planet is a byproduct of life being successful, not caused by anything nefarious or artificial.

3. Gaia

Gaia is the mother goddess; in Greek mythology, she represents earth itself. I wanted to explore the magic in what the earth has to offer us, from the water we drink and the food we eat, the beauty we see all around us is all provided by Gaia. In this piece, I wanted to think about all that the earth provides for life, human or otherwise. I used a butterfly and a bee in this piece because, as pollinators, they are critical to the survival of life on this planet. I wanted to explore the beauty of nature keeping it in line with how



Figure 4- Gaia Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

we know it on our planet. In the modern world, nature is often overlooked. The many creatures that contribute to our lives as we know them are easily forgotten. From the pollinators who pollinate the food we eat, the animals that become the food we eat, to even the fungi and bacteria that break our bodies down after our time on earth ends. These relationships are the beauty of our world but are also so easy to forget. From this piece, I hope that audience members take a moment to think about the earth and its beauty. Too often we overlook the complex and beautiful

relationships that allow for us to exist, and for our lives as we know them to function. Especially as our world exists in a constant rotation of change, it's important to take a moment to appreciate all that we have in the here and now. I hope this piece inspires people to smell the roses and appreciate their place in the world.

4. Proserpina

Proserpina, known by her Greek name Persephone, is the Queen of the Underworld. She is also the daughter of Ceres—also known as Demeter—the goddess of spring responsible for the harvest. Proserpina's best-known story is of her abduction by Pluto. This story is the explanation for seasons in the mythos. Proserpina spends half the year with Pluto which we experience as winter. The other half with her mother—summer. (Weever) Unlike modern interpretations, these pieces overall tend to lack agency on the part of Proserpina.

Proserpina's lack of agency is reflected in her characterizations and depictions throughout history since they are heavily focused on her relationships with others. Proserpina represents the balance of the world. She exists as a dichotomy, daughter to the goddess of spring, and wife to the God of the Underworld. I wanted to explore the duality of Proserpina. I wanted to focus on how she exists both in the overworld



Figure 5- Proserpina Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022



Figure 6-Rape of Proserpina by Gian Lorenzo Bernini 1621-1622, Galleria Borghese, Rome

and in the underworld. A common quote used among modern practitioners of Occult and esoteric traditions is, "As above, so below." Which refers to the idea that what you do on earth is in some way mirrored or reflected in the spiritual plane. (Miller) In this piece, I used contrasting colors for the interior of the cave versus the exterior to invoke the feeling of a distinction between these spaces beyond the interior and exterior. The world of Proserpina is about how each of us interprets ourselves and the world around us differently. It's about the duality of both the world and the individual as we write our unique stories with our lives.

5. Apate

Apate is the daughter of Nyx. She is known as a goddess of deceit (Atsma). The work of Alisa Sikelianos-Carter inspired me during this part of the project. Specifically, her Look at me (Illustrates spells) series which are created on black paper using different black glitters and pigments. From Sikelianos-Carter's work, I was interested in how even though all the materials she uses for these pieces are the same color, the image is still readable. Despite that, a significant number of details, however



Figure 7- Look at Me #3, Alisa Sikelianos-Carter, 2020



Figure 8- Apate Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

abstract, still shine through. The world called Apate is about the things that we do not see and the things that become invisible as we become accustomed to their existence. Initially, I wanted to use the chameleon as the center of this piece, as they are known for their excellent camouflage and ability to blend into any scenario. However, as I explored this piece, I found the octopus to be a better representation. In one story featuring Apate, Hera is looking for Apate and calls her “the crafty one.” (Atsma) Octopi are best for their ingenuity in morphing their environment to disguise themselves. Apate is about those moments that you

spend searching for the ketchup in the fridge--even though it's right in front of your face--or when you misplace your glasses while they sit on top of your head. Apaté is about deception, but not in a scary or mean-spirited way, it's about the things that fade from everyday experiences.

6. Furrina

Furrina is a very old goddess in Roman mythology. Because of this, her origins, and aspects of her being have been lost to time (Took). She is often referred to as the goddess of springs. I took inspiration from the colors of water and the creatures within. This piece is both a nod to water, something we use every day in numerous ways, and the things that live within, but it's also about movement. About progress, the creation of cities, and the constant human desire to move forward in one way or another. The center of this piece is a city, with skyscrapers under a

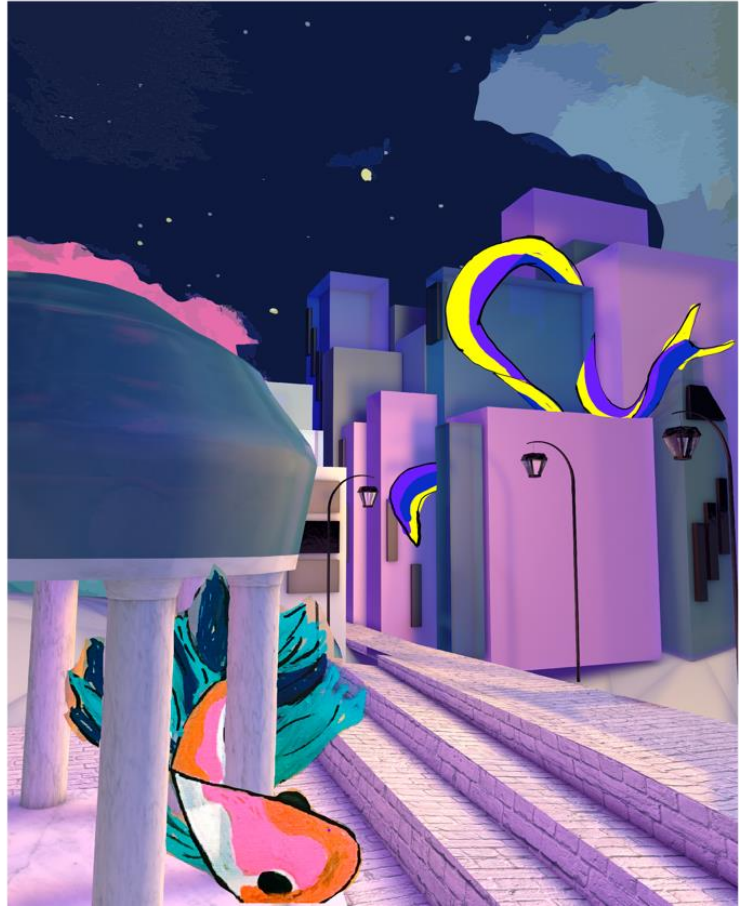


Figure 9- Furrina Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

blue night sky. This city includes a building reminiscent of a temple or shrine. Because despite how civilizations move on and change, they still hold onto our past and traditions. In this piece I tried to work on making more drastic changes when adding paint to the print, I played around with covering areas of the print and doing stylized line drawings on top. I liked how this interjected a human element into the piece. This piece was largely influential to the progress of

this whole project and is where I first started to use elements of flora and fauna in the final painting step.

7. Bellona

Bellona is the counterpart to Mars; she is a goddess of war. Bellona is most often depicted with a helmet and shield. Usually, she brandishes some sort of weapon like a sword, or bloody whip (James). The depictions of Bellona do not come from Rome but rather the civilizations that followed it. (James) In one particularly famous depiction of her by painter Rembrandt, she is depicted with a shield decorated with the head of medusa (Rembrandt). I wanted to create a landscape that had been affected by war,



Figure 10- Bellona Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

where buildings were crumbling, but I did not want to focus on the conflict itself but more so on the moments following. Like when a tree lands on a forgotten shed and plants begin to consume it, bringing new life to a forgotten place. This piece is about the moment just before reconstruction starts when everything has fallen and there's a lot to be done. On this planet, there's also a hope that what is constructed from the rubble is better than what was there before. I chose a scorpion to accompany this landscape for a similar reason. During the planning for this

piece, I thought about the Aesop fable about a frog and a scorpion. The moral of it is that people cannot help but hurt the people around them, in this piece the scorpion represents the effort we can take each day to do better for ourselves and the people around us every day.

8. Atropos

Atropos is the oldest of the three fates, the Moirai, as the eldest she cuts the string of mortal lives. She determines when and how we die (Ray). American Poet David Wagoner describes Atropos role in the lives of humans as:

And passed it over to Atropos, who, if it hadn't

Fallen apart already or thinned out

Of its own weight beyond the breaking point

Or frayed itself in two, would give it a snip, (Wagoner).

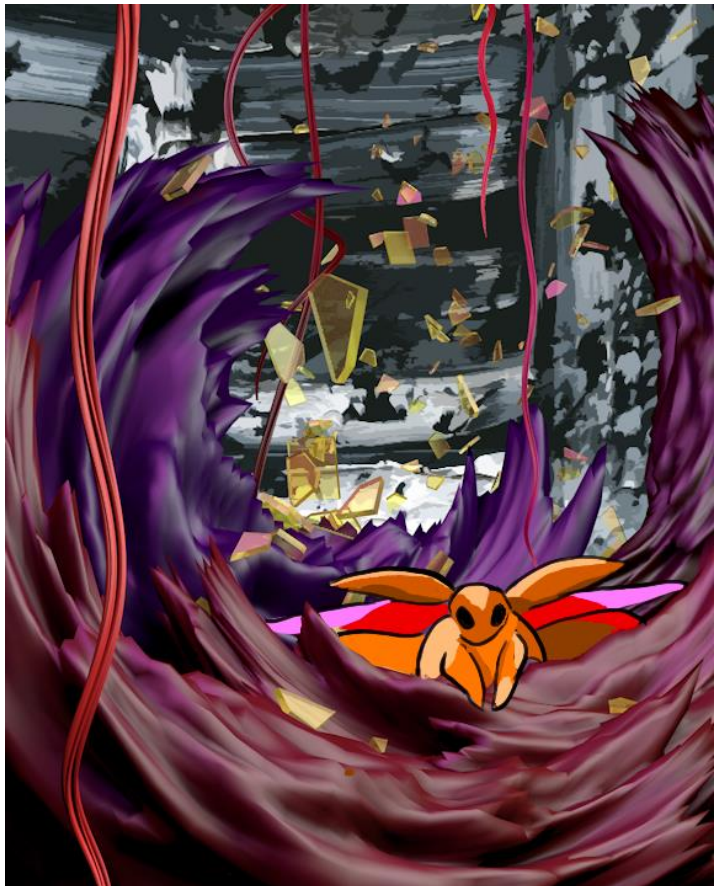


Figure 11- Atropos Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

The nebulous nature of life made me think of a landscape that seems impossible considering the rules of our planet, and the uncertainty of life from the lived experience made me want to make a

landscape that seemed precarious like it could move or fall apart any second. I paired this with a moth, first, because I knew any creature living here would need to be able to fly, and second, because of my fear of moths. Atropos, and the fates, are seen as intimidating because unlike a storm from Zeus that you can hide from in a shelter, there's no hiding or overcoming the fates and their powers. Everyone will die and very often we have no say in how or when. This piece centers on a nebulous and dark landscape as a reflection of the often-grim picture we paint of death, but this world is flexible. The landscape here is not set in stone, it is not rigid. This landscape, much like our lives, is ever-changing, this piece is a snapshot, one second on this planet. Also Like our lives, the very next second this planet could change forever.

9. Cardea

Cardea is the Roman goddess of the hinge. In this piece, I wanted to focus on what made an entrance, for this reason, I created an enclosed space. Ovid Fasti talks about Cardea's power as "to open what is shut; to shut what is open." (Cardea) For this piece, I focused on the in-between places, the transitional places between one place and another. The lion in this piece is a reference to the Chinese tradition of Imperial Guardian Lions, known in English as Foo Dogs. This was in my mind while working on this project



Figure 12- Cardea Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

because of the Union College Idol, a Foo Dog which was donated to union college at the end of the nineteenth century by an alum who was working in China, Reverend John Farnham. In a community discussion about this statue, there was a discussion about the cultural significance of foo dogs, they are used in Chinese culture as protectors and guardians of the spaces they stand outside of. (T.S.) This piece to me represents the hinges on my dorm room door, separating my space on campus from a busy hall filled with students rushing to and from class, stumbling home in the early hours of the morning, and sometimes my neighbor's cat running through the hall.

This hinge preserves my little sanctuary from the activities that happen just feet away. And in that way, this piece represents the serenity you can find simply by closing the door.

10. Diana

Diana is the goddess of the hunt, often conflated with the Greek goddess Artemis. As with many things in the Hellenistic era, there is a substantial amount of shared culture between the Greeks and Romans. Lora Louise Hill in her discussion of Diana talks about her as a source of contradictions, and her descriptions are full of opposites. She is described both as a virgin and a goddess of childbirth, a hunter and protector of wild animals, having the capacity to harm and to heal. (Holland) Rembrandt created a painting entitled, *Diana Bathing with her*



Figure 13- Diana Digital Sketch, Mallory Nelson, 2022

Nymphs with Actaeon and Callisto. In this piece, there is a man in the left part of the shore who appears to be searching for someone, possibly the woman in the water. This piece reminds me of the game, hide and seek. For my interpretation of Diana, I created a rocky scene, a place where one could envision themselves playing hide and seek and enjoying nature. It's for this same

reason that I included two different types of creatures. While rams and birds do not have an adversarial relationship per se they do not often exist in the same ways nor fill the same niches in

their environments. In much the same way I perceive Diana as filling a multitude of roles within the same goddess. I also included a bow and quill filled with arrows in this piece as a more direct reference to Diana and her symbols.



Figure 14- *Diana Bathing with her Nymphs with Actaeon and Callisto*, Rembrandt Van Rjin, 1642, 168 cm X 93.5cm, Wasserburg Anholt, Anholt, Germany

The main technical goal of this work was to explore the connection between traditional and digital art techniques and to combine them in a way that made sense to me. I started with exploratory paintings focusing on the colors and main compositional elements I wanted to include in my depictions of these goddesses. At the same time in class, I was learning more about the 3D modeling program Cinema 4D. Eventually focusing on one piece, Vesta, I started a conversation between the painted versions and the modeled version. This conversation was repeated as I worked on different pieces, I worked simultaneously painting backgrounds and 3d modeling to create a cohesive vision of these planets. During this time, I experimented with different ways of combining digital and traditional media. Working from digital sketches into more finalized paintings, as well as the reverse. Through all these experiments I found a process that I both enjoyed and felt allowed me the ability to create what I wanted to. I started by

creating a 3D modeled landscape of my planets, pulling imagery and inspiration from my chosen goddesses, and exploring a sense of space and the story that lies within.

I then used acrylic paint on canvas board to create a background of these places, creating the far-off landscape, or sky in this way allowed me to bring in more organic elements to the pieces. Before bringing them into Cinema 4D as the background I brought them into Adobe Illustrator and Image traced them turning my brushstrokes and painted imagery into a vector graphic. The reason for this step was to create a more seamless transition from the background to the modeled elements and create a more uniform style in the pieces. When I was happy with the final digital piece, I used procreate to sketch on top of these images to plan out what the final images would look like. At this point, I printed the images onto matte canvas and stretched them. I then used 7mm posca pens to add the elements I had planned out digitally onto the stretched canvases.

While creating this collection of art pieces I learned a lot and was able to improve many skills. I was also able to create a body of work that I feel represents the artistic skills I gained during my time here at Union College. This work is about the goddesses worshiped in Ancient Greece and Rome and how I as an artist in the twenty-first century can relate and see them in my view of the world. This project is the culmination of my time at Union College, bringing both the knowledge and skills from the classes I took in my major as well as outside course work. I learned how to create a collection of art pieces that are all unique while containing an underlying connecting theme, as well as how to combine digital and traditional art techniques. This Senior

thesis, entitled Somewhere in the Universe, is a collection of artworks representative of my skills and interests at the end of my time at Union College.

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