

GEORGIE HILL

Venus in the Shell

SEEDS SPILLING FROM THE SKY AND INTO THE SEA...

Initially there was Chaos, a living organism made of air and light. According to Greek and Roman mythologies two beings emerged from Chaos: Ouranos/Uranus, Father Sky, and Gaia or Mother Earth.¹ Ouranos' life-giving rain sought out Gaia's cracks and crevices so that streams, rivers and oceans formed and the ground produced plants and other living creatures. Ouranos and Gaia had many children together, however he was a remote and uncaring father who came to detest the act of creation. He attempted to prise open Gaia's body so that he might thrust his offspring into her deep clefts and chasms, causing such agony that she asked her son Cronus to end her suffering. Cronus did so by castrating Ouranos with a sickle made from diamonds mined from his mother's very depths.

This castration caused Ouranos to abandon his shape, becoming an amorphous atmosphere drifting in space. The blood-drops from his severed penis created Giants and Furies and from the sea-foam produced by his severed genitals emerged Aphrodite, goddess of desire. To the Romans Aphrodite was Venus, a yielding, watery female entity, one essential to the generation and balance of life. Venus emerges in the aftermath of violence, the flash of a diamond blade, a vengeful act of castration. Grievous harm enacted upon a celestial body caused divine genitalia to be severed, cut away until flesh and blood fall to the earth below. Like a shower of meteors, Ouranos' seed spills from the sky, ejaculate mixing with the saline solution of the sea, creating foam, a churning insemination producing a goddess of love, born in adult form.

VENUS IN THE SHELL

In the region of Campania, near Naples, at the site of the ancient city of Pompeii, on the Via dell'Abbondanza, a house was excavated between 1933 and 1935.² On the rear, southern wall of the peristyle or courtyard is a large fresco of Venus, thus the building is known as the House of Venus Marina or Venus in the Seashell. *Venus Marina* (c.70–79CE) shows Venus on a half shell with Cupid beside her and a nereid or sea nymph riding a dolphin. The fresco serves as a point of departure for an exhibition of new work by Tāmaki Makaurau-based painter Georgie Hill (b. 1979), in particular older photographic reproductions in which the contrast is high and the colours are saturated. Throughout the suite of watercolours on paper and acrylic on canvas, the shape of shells proliferates. The central feature in *Venus in the Shell* (4) (2022) is a pale pink, fanning scallop or cockle, its round frilled form echoes, repeats, rotates.

Whereas Sandro Botticelli's *Venus* (c.1485) in Florence's Uffizi Gallery depicts her arrival on land, beached upon the shore of Cyprus, blown by the winds Zephyr and Aura, the Pompeii fresco presages the goddess' arrival.³ This is Venus in transit, the horizontal emphasis heightens the directional feel as she travels from right to left across the picture plane and the wavy sea. Venus is a reclining figure, she lies within the immense shell, her legs are bent, as though kicking. One arm is elegantly outstretched, the other bears her weight, on one elbow. Her flesh is pale. The goddess has curled air, she wears golden jewellery, her limbs and torso are long and her waist is narrow. The shell acts as a vessel for transportation, Venus

1. "Ouranos." *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Myth*, Kenneth McLeish, Bloomsbury, 1st edition, 1996.
2. *House of Venus Marina (House of Venus in the Seashell) (II, 3, 3) – Peristyle, Rear (South) Wall*. Built over a previous house in the Imperial period (late 1st century BC – 1st century AD); damaged by bombing in 1943; restored in 1952. *ISTOR*, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15263353>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.
3. Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, c. 1485 (tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.5cm) The Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

is propelled through space, her billowing shawl acting as a sail. The nereid too attempts to catch the wind with his flag, as though this will aid their progress.

DREAD GODDESSES

Riding her shell, Venus is completely in command, stretched out, calm, travelling smoothly and steadily upon the surface of the sea, accompanied by Cupid, the nymph, a dolphin. What is to be gained by contemplating Venus? There are ideas of command and authority, divine power, the way in which the gods exert their influence: introducing a golden apple, causing changes in winds and currents to aid or thwart sailors, providing protection to those in danger by transforming them into deer, laurel or stone. Such influence might be gentle or it becomes intervention and interference, a more explicit force. Venus in her shell demonstrates control of climactic conditions, a favourable wind, a calm sea, the way in which the gods manipulate the weather to demonstrate their favour and wrath.

The Roman deity provides a starting place for thinking about the visual and literary portrayal of goddesses, as well as feminine archetypes. Upon Hill's studio wall is *Circe* (1991) a small oil painting by expatriate artist Alexis Hunter (1948–2014). Hunter rendered Circe's head and neck upon a mid-blue background surrounded by cloud, mist, smoke. Four birds encircle her, like the Venus in Pompeii she wears a golden head-piece, has a strong brow, straight nose and blonde curls. As pointed out by US-based Classicist Suzanne Saïd, Circe together with Calypso are "dread goddesses" in *The Odyssey*, Homer's great epic from the eighth or seventh century BCE.⁴ Both Circe and Calypso are characterised by their physical beauty, particularly their hair, their occupations are close to those of mortal women at the time. When they first appear in the epic they are engaged in weaving and they take care of men by giving them baths, providing them with clothes, food and animals for sacrifice. Characterized by their cunning, they exert a power over men. The sorceress Circe dwells in a wooded, island domain, using deadly arts and *pharmakon* to enchant men, making them forget their homeland and turning them into beasts.

THE LOGIC OF FEMALE POLLUTION

Let us return to the water, Venus as yielding, watery, generative and balancing, hovering in her shell, above the sea. Psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that in the Hispanic Southwest there is a

concept of *Rio Abajo Rio*, the river under the river, nourishing everything we make, a creative force that "flows over the terrain of our psyches looking for the natural hollows, the *arroyos*, the channels that exist in us."⁵ For more than 17 years Hill has been working with the watery medium of watercolour and its attendant operations of application, touching, brushing, flow, seeping, bleeding, mixing, staining, lifting, stopping, wetness and evaporation. Ever inventive she also employs unique techniques, both additive and subtractive: arrangement, re-arrangement, collage, cutting, incising and flaying.

Paint as *pharmakon*, poison or cure, a medium for sorcery, rivers beneath rivers. Hill's artworks, her watercolours and her new works in acrylic are troubling and unbound, in this sense they hark back to ancient Greek attitudes and treatment of the female as described by Canadian writer and classicist Anne Carson, what she refers to as "the logic of female pollution."⁶ According to this, women are constituted from and defined by water and wetness, that which is not bound. As Hippokrates states: "The female flourishes more in an environment of water, from things cold and wet and soft, whether food or drink or activities. The male flourishes more in an environment of fire, from dry, hot foods and mode of life."⁷ The problem with being watery is that one has a tendency to leak.

As Carson points out, for the ancient Greeks there was a "a deep and abiding mistrust of "the wet" in virtue of its ability to transform and deform."⁸ Emotion is also regarded by ancient authors as "an endangering wetness," a "liquid or liquifying substance that pours into a person and dissolves him." There were specific beliefs about pollution as well as a code of conduct governing *miasmata* or defilements, "the female body, the female psyche, the female social life and the female moral life are penetrable, porous, mutable and subject to defilement all the time." This concept anticipates what social anthropologist Mary Douglas described as "a particular class of dangers which are not powers vested in humans but which can be released by human action."⁹ Women are therefore, considered "pollutable, polluted and polluting in several ways at once." According to this logic, women are formless, "without firm control of personal boundaries," as "psychological entities" they are "unstable compounds of deceit and danger, prone to leakage." What is watercolour painting if not a process of controlled leakage?

"Civilisation is a function of boundaries" writes Carson. The ancient Greeks were

4. Suzanne Saïd, *Homer and the Odyssey*. Translated by Ruth Webb. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 260, 172.
5. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1995, 328, 322.
6. Anne Carson, "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenon of Female Pollution" in *Men in the Off Hours*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. 132.
7. Hippokrates quoted in Carson, *ibid*.
8. Carson, 135.
9. Douglas quoted in Carson, 143.

extremely sensitive to transgression and “to the crucial importance of boundaries, both personal and extrapersonal, as guarantors of human order.” Women were regarded as lacking in control of their own boundaries, with a special gift and ability to confound their own limits, this evoked fear and the necessary measures of controlling action from the rest of society. There is an anxiety about boundaries that are physical, moral and concerning hygiene:¹⁰

*In myth, woman’s boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concern for them unreliable. Deformation attends her, She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity.*¹¹

The tendril of a curl of hair could become a snake on the head of the Gorgon, Medusa. Hill’s watercolour *Venus in the Shell* (3) (2022) can be read as long, flowing, golden, multi-coloured tresses, radiating outwards from a central point or crown. By invoking the goddess Venus, Hill engages with what Carson calls “a mysterious, polluted species of ancient womanhood.” For the Greeks, she “plays havoc with boundaries and defies the rules that keep matter in its place.”¹² In retrospect, I enjoy the fact that this essay begins with Ouranos, a leaky god, one who loses control of his body, castrated, inseminating uncontrollably, he loses his very form, seeds spilling into the sea...

IF SHE DIDN’T PAY ATTENTION TO
THE BOUNDARIES

Pompeii is not far from Naples, and for her Neapolitan quartet, novelist Elena Ferrante created a character who lives in perpetual fear of *dissolving boundaries*. In the final volume the reader is made privy to how this cycle of thought and belief unfolds, Lila Cerullo admits to her friend Lenù that “if she didn’t stay alert”

*if she didn’t pay attention to the boundaries, the waters would break through, a flood would rise, carrying everything off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fibre.*¹³

It is telling that for Lila, if boundaries dissolve, if they lose their integrity, everything will be awash in the elemental: water, blood and cancerous growth, in blue, red and yellow—for the primary colours are those used most commonly in Hill’s paintings. I would also argue that Hill’s very painting

practice is engaged in a project of wilfully dissolving boundaries and this makes her work challenging for viewers. For *Venus in the Shell* (7) (2022), Hill’s use of collage, her deft layering of a multitude of shapes creates complexity that is visually irreconcilable. The incised forms are painted in washes of red, blue and yellow and with lines in indigo and white. Combinations of curved edges and straight lines create an interplay of projection and recession, juxtapositions of shapes that never resolve or settle but appear unstable, ever-shifting and open, perpetually interrupted by additional forms, colours and patterns.

THE GIRL WITH HAIR YELLOWER
THAN A FLAME

Ferrante associates contagion with the colour yellow and Hill confesses that in the past she had never been very attracted to the colour. The vanadium yellow used in her paintings is very bright with an almost green tinge. One of the factors in Hill’s adoption of the colour was living in her grandparents’ house, its kitchen benchtop of Formica in bright, energising yellow. From there the new colour came into life and into Hill’s paintings. After all, what is red and blue without yellow? Venus and Circe both have golden hair. Whilst exiled in Sicily during the sixth century BCE, archaic Greek poet Sappho wrote about displacement, matter out of place and female boundaries, a core image is that of yellow hair, suitable for crowns and barely contained by a “brightcoloured headbinder.”¹⁴

SEA OF FIRE UNDER THE CRUST
OF THE EARTH

Whilst Ferrante’s protagonists Lenù and Lila are living in their native Naples, the 1980 Irpinia earthquake takes place and the narrator reflects that its infinite destruction “entered into our bones.”¹⁵ Heavily pregnant the two women sit out the aftershocks inside a parked car.

*Every so often I felt new small aftershocks, someone in a car shouted with terror. Now the stradone was empty. The infant moved in my belly like rolling waters, I touched Lila’s stomach, hers was moving, too. Everything was moving: the sea of fire under the crust of the earth, and the furnaces of the stars, and the planets, and the universes, and the light within the darkness and the silence in the cold.*¹⁶

As tectonic plates shift and move upon a mantle of hot, flowing rock, two infants float and stir in amniotic liquid, within the bodies of

10. Carson, 130–131.
11. 133.
12. 152.
13. Elena Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions. 2015. 343.
14. Sappho quoted in Carson, 144–145.
15. Ferrante, 322.
16. 349.

their mothers.¹⁷ In the Gulf of Naples, looming over the city, over Ferrante's two protagonists, over Venus in the Shell, is the immense volcano Vesuvius. When the sea of fire under the crust of the earth breached its boundaries, causing the eruption of 79 CE, it demonstrated utterly destructive, cataclysmic power. I find I cannot contemplate Pompeii or Venus in the Shell without feeling a deep disturbance and fear of that primordial, volcanic force. With a total disregard of boundaries, everything can be carried off in floods of larva, or earth-blood.

THE PAINTING TOLD ME WHAT TO DO

Two of Hill's acrylics are named for Vesuvius, volcanic energies surge throughout the exhibition. Whereas Venus is a watery goddess, her consorts Vulcan and Mars are hot, dry and fiery. Just outside the Old Folks Association Hall can be seen the large mound of Maungawhau. Hill herself lives close to Te Tātua a Riukiuta, and she is certain there are larva tubes running underneath her house, she senses them at night, whilst lying sleepless in bed she feels them running beneath her. I imagine a subterranean, circulatory system of lava tubes stretching throughout the city, like arteries and capillaries, conduits formed by flowing liquid fire.

Hill is an admirer of 103 year old painter Sylvia Fein who lives in Martinez, California where she paints and cultivates an orchard of olive trees. In Fein's work *The Painting Told Me What To Do* (2012) four attenuated fires burn trees, before a night sky. Recalling Hill's watercolours, the flames glow, burning pale, delicate, yet ferocious. An eye is stretched taut into the shape of a kite, its edges sharp and pointed, caruncles and blood vessels are cadmium red in Fein's painting *Kite Eye (or Eye Kite)* (2006). Emanating from the kite-eye entity is wavery white light before a watery blue-green background. Mauve and turquoise tassels hang from the eye, or are they coloured spermatozoa attempting to penetrate its outer membrane? Hill references this work directly in her watercolour *Kite Eye (Venus in the Shell)* (2022). An all-seeing goddess eye is suspended, emanating and made up of clouds of colours, washy pink, cerulean, vanadium yellow, lines in indigo. Additionally Hill has made a series of incisions, carefully carving then flaying the paper, creating white, lightning-like lines that flash forth from the shape of the eye.

ALL LIVES, ALL DANCES AND ALL IS LOUD

In a process similar to watercolour painting, in making her acrylic works Hill lets the white of the primed canvas come through,

using it to a lightening effect. Dry brushing, she leaves areas without one colour, then partially fills this absence with another, so there is red within strokes of blue, as seen in the two hemispheres in *Venus in the Shell (11)* (2022) and *Venus in the Shell (10)* (2022). Hill has also brought her novel collage techniques to her acrylics, using canvas off-cuts from an art supplies shop, some trimmed down to size, some wonky and uneven, their edges foxed and undulating like the rim of sea-shells. For *Venus in the Shell (11)* and *(10)* Hill folds and pleats the canvas before painting upon it, as a result darker lines form in the creases where paint has gathered. Recalling Pompeii and the house on Via dell'Abbondanza, the process of making collages, of bringing fragments together is a way to enact a kind of excavation, gathering pieces, assembling a constructed picture of a time and place.

Rigorously painting with a dry brush, Hill makes repetitive marks. These traces are vibrational, resembling electrical currents, energy. There is an intensity to coloured strokes that have brushy edges, they seem to glow intensely when surrounded by white canvas outlines. Volcanic lightning can be seen in the upper panel of *Vesuvius (Venus in the Shell) (2)* (2022). All four acrylics bear lines of force, they are gestural, one can see where Hill has swiftly pushed the dry brush back and forth, all around. Hill follows her instinct, painting in a gestural, rhythmic way. There is a strong sense of physicality to the acrylics.

What exactly is the relationship between *Venus in the Shell* and Hill's paintings? There is a strong sense of return, of reaching backwards, pushing timespace aside... the pull of antiquity... employing what is rudimentary and fundamental like primary colours. There is the watery medium of watercolours, motifs of waves, seas, shells and scalloped forms. I recall the propulsion of Venus travelling through space, emanating authority. Venus is the goddess of desire and there is an exuberance to all of these works, an abundance, a sense of desire exceeding the boundaries of its container, compositionally the goddess' sex is at the centre of the fresco.

"Dance is as instinctive as sex" writes US based science fiction author Rachel Grace Pollack.¹⁸ According to Pollack there is the possibility of dancing grounds in at least one Palaeolithic cave in Grotte du Pèch-Mèrle near Cabrerets, France. Pollack writes of dance growing out of instinctual rhythms: "Through dance we experience our own bodies as alive, and we experience the life that flows rhythmically through all creation." There is much dancing in Hill's paintings, particularly

17. Hill's 2021 solo exhibition was titled *Prismatic Tectonics*.
18. Rachel Pollack *The Body of the Goddess; Sacred Wisdom in Myth, Landscape and Culture*. Houston: Element Books Ltd., 1997.148.

the acrylics. When first introducing the canvases to me she demonstrated her act of painting, showing a firm grip, an angled wrist, a swift movement of upper arm back and forth, hinging at the elbow. Dancing and moving her body is very important to her. As Pollack points out “Cells dance, electrons dance, galaxies dance in their spiral swirl.” She transcribes the Gabon lyric: “All lives, all dances and all is loud.” Perhaps there is something to the fact that the House of Venus in the Shell is located on the Via dell’Abbondanza, the way of abundance.

VICTORIA WYNNE-JONES

Published to coincide with the exhibition
Georgie Hill: Venus in the Shell
18 + 19 November 2022
Auckland Old Folks Association hall
8 Gundry Street,
Tāmaki Makaurau

ISBN 978-0-473-66062-8