

Our Own Personal Hero's Journey

Ian C. Cooper

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Committee:
Ann Gale
Helen O'Toole
Zhi Lin
David Brody
Ryan Weatherly
Philip Govedare

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Ian Cooper

University of Washington

Abstract

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

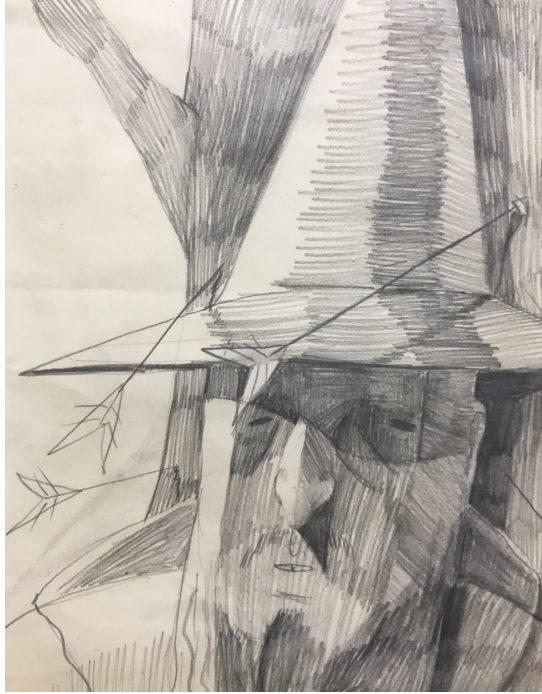
Ann Gale

Painting Department

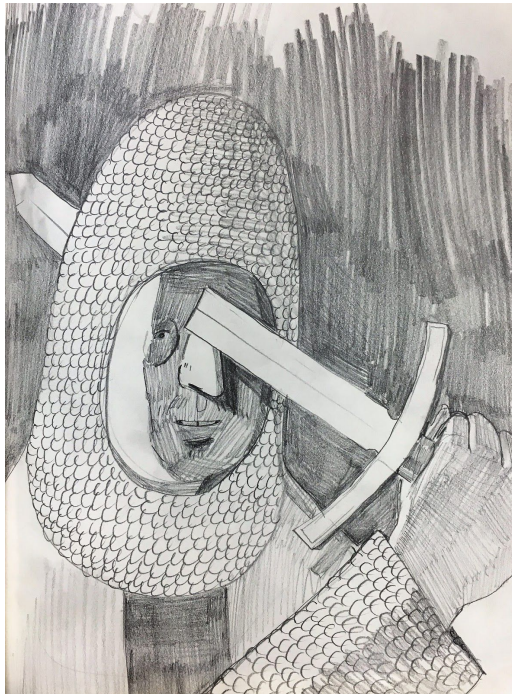
Young men often view themselves under the scope of a “Hero’s Journey” due to various forms of entertainment equating a “hero” with the traditionally masculine. Using drawing, painting, and printmaking I was able to explore the auto-biographical and social implications of hero complexes through compositions creating light humor along with titles hinting at the implications of the imagery. As well looking into traditional fantasy myths (i.e. King Arthur) and fantasy entertainment (Video games, movies, role playing games) as a mode of satiating the desire to become a hero. Believing oneself to be a hero can create a feeling of being only a force of good on the world without understanding the potential of discomfort one can cause when treating yourself as such. The desire to become a hero can become a source of anxiety for young men, creating feelings as though they are not living up to the standards for a heroic male. Viewing oneself as a hero can have both positive and negative impact on a person, most want to be liked and remembered but it is important to remember the people around you in that pursuit.



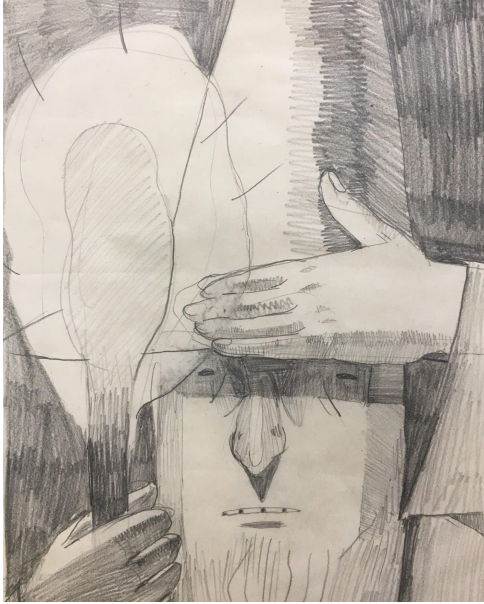
(fig 1.) *They're Coming for Me* ,Cyanotype, 2018



(fig 2.) *They Got me Friends (Study)* Graphite on Paper, 2018



(fig 3) *Proud Boys (study)* Graphite on Paper, 2018

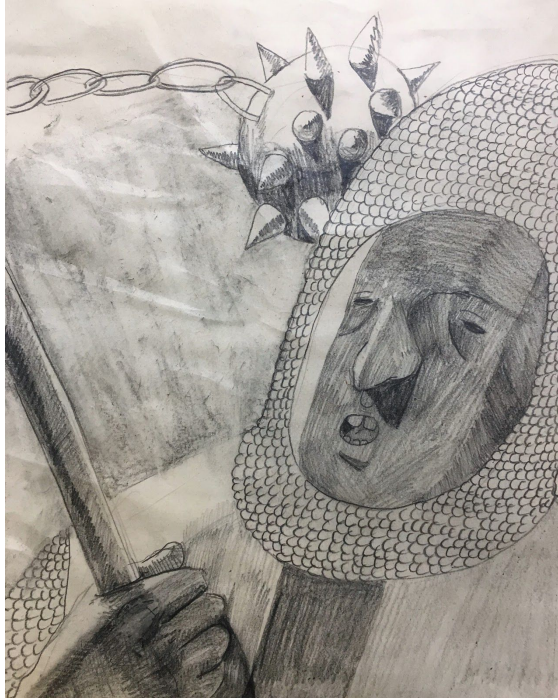


(fig 4.) *Blinded (Study)* Graphite on Paper, 2018

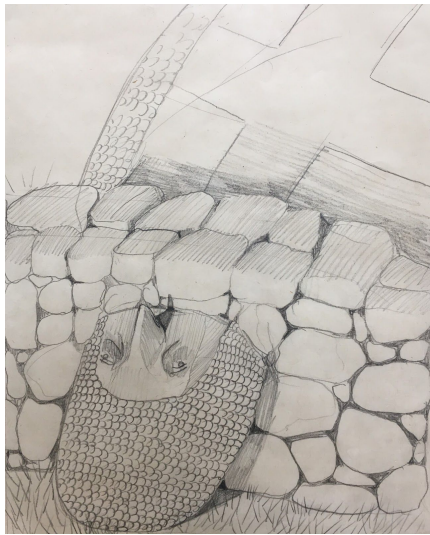


(fig.5) *Modern Myrrdin* Acrylic on Canvas,

2018



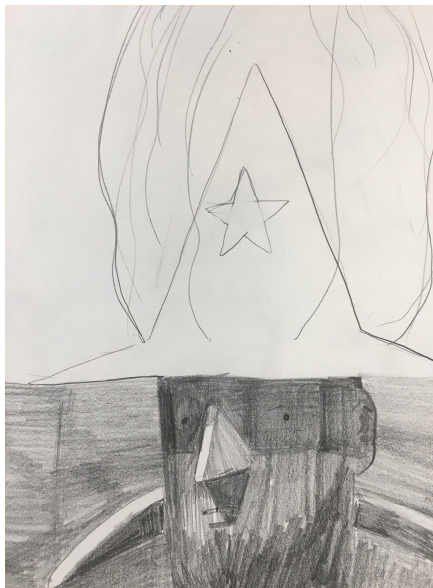
(fig 6.) *BONK (Study)* Graphite on Paper, 2018



(fig 7) *Pebble Wall (study)* Graphite on Paper, 2018



(fig 8.) *Deflection* (study) Graphite on Paper, 2018



(fig 9.) *Immolation* (Study) Graphite on paper, 2018



(fig.10) *Wisdom*, Cyanotype, 2018

The Hero's Journey is something we see through the lens of entertainment, but it is also a scope in which men tend to view themselves. As a younger boy I saw endless images within entertainment of people like me (white men) becoming a hero, something that conditioned me to strive for the same. My work looks into the connections of the masculine alongside a perceived hero's journey in contemporary men. The humor and anxiety surrounding these ideas have become a major focal point of the drawings, paintings, and prints. I have used my thesis to technically and conceptually explore these ideas with visual and literary influence, and develop my methodology and artistic processes into the body of work that explores these ideas through narrative drawings, paintings and prints.

The origin of this work comes from my childhood fixation with video games and role-playing games that put me in the shoes of the hero. I coped with anxiety that made me feel like an outsider to the standard social structures of primary school. I viewed myself as a hero, but did not see my "Hero's Journey" playing out in my daily life, so acting as a fictional hero became an immediate way to cope. These games were frequently within the medieval high fantasy genre that has been a core influence on the imagery of the works, portraying largely stereotypical medieval fantasy characters, specifically knights and wizards. It was important for me to use these characters as an element of humor in my work, stereotypical archetypes and content that operated as a means of critique and a means of coping. In my thesis work, I use these characters -- wizards, knights, etc -- as comical ways of considering difficult subjects, such as masculinity.

The largest influence in this idea of using comedy to essentially understand tragedy, and therefore a foundational influence on my work, has been the comedy writer, Dan Harmon. His

television shows, like *Community*, explored and character stereotypes created not only by archetypes but by societal expectations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and education level. His manipulation of stereotypes became a driving force behind how I explored concepts in my work. Beyond his more formal television media he creates a weekly podcast called Harmontown. This podcast operates as partial diary, partial town-hall forum for Harmon and his coworkers to discuss their lives, events, and thoughts. They frequently play *Dungeons and Dragons*, the most famous high fantasy tabletop roleplaying game that has played a large role in my own life. Their work with the game becomes an exploration in creating “the hero” one would want to be, along with improvising comedy to joke about their characters or the surrounding scenarios. It weaves in and out of the real world and their personal connections with each other and back into the fantasy world their imaginations, along with the listeners are occupying. Watching these satirized sessions helped me consider my own development of a fictionalized version of myself, and offered perspective on how others did the same. The majority of the characters in my thesis work are physically and conceptually based upon this fictionalized “hero” version of myself.

Through Harmon’s podcast and recent visit to the University of Washington’s campus for a public talk on writing and character development, I was introduced to the writings of Joseph Campbell. Campbell is the author of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the book which established the modern understanding of the “Hero’s Journey” archetypes. Campbell's influence on Harmon is visible in his formal writing in television, through to his informal character building in *Dungeons and Dragons*. The biggest impact Dan Harmon has had upon my thesis work has been his public apology and explanation for his inappropriate behavior towards a former employee. Harmon had been called out on social media by a former writer on his show,

Community, about how his attraction to her negatively impacted her. He was attracted to her, and because he had power over her, created an uncomfortable work dynamic for everyone. He used his platform to apologize, to discuss the issue honestly, and most importantly, to he discussed his view of himself. Harmon talks about the uncomfortable and damaging pressure he put on his employee, his refusal to listen when approached about his behavior, and how he viewed himself as the archetypal “Hero” in his own story, and therefore could not accept that he was viewed as antagonistic towards others. Harmon held onto this view even when faced with accusations of antagonistic behavior, because maintaining that “hero” status allowed him to continue unbidden; he admits, “[The critic is] the one who’s actually seeing things through that [antagonistic] lens. And so I let myself keep doing it. And it’s not as if this person didn’t repeatedly communicate to me the idea that what I was doing was divesting her of a recourse to integrity. I just didn’t hear it. And because it didn’t profit me to hear it, and this was, after all, happening to me, right?”

(Harmontown) Harmon’s commitment to viewing himself as the hero, reiterated throughout his professional career and personal ramblings on the Harmontown stage, completely changed my understanding of how people perceive themselves as heroes and how masculinity can skew one’s perception of themselves and the role they play amongst others. I was personally struck by his honesty, and wanted to find a way to communicate similarly through my imagery.

I started looking for a similar honesty in a fine art context. One of the very few artists I’ve felt a true empathetic honesty is Yoshitomo Nara. His work has helped me explore my own work in ways I avoided previously. His work, being very childlike and open in their nature, made me look at the importance of my own past and how it affects the present of my art. His work has socio-political critique, anxiety and personal exploration wrapped up in childlike characters in

various compositions. A documentary following him and his work for a major show called *Traveling with Yoshitomo Nara* sheds light onto his process and how he approaches these drawings and paintings. He talks as though the characters and images are a part of him, as if the drawings just appear through a stream-of-consciousness working method. They are seemingly quick and packed with personal emotion and thought. Pulling from his childhood imbued with isolation the works become something incredibly deep and honest that are able to affect multiple generations of people.

Nara's methodology made me reconsider my own. I had frequently felt like I was overthinking my ideas and creating something stale or untrue to myself. I then began drawing, using these ideas of high fantasy, masculinity and hero complexes to push my subconscious to develop something more true to my experience. Using just pencil and lightly toned paper sketchbooks to develop a number of drawings putting knightly and wizard like characters in different situations. The media allowed for an immediacy similar to Nara's which let me tap into myself and the previous pressures of my childhood and my own hero complex. I also used print as a way to enhance my process, using both woodblock printmaking and cyanotype to be able to develop some sort of reproduction, seeing as though the work is heavily influenced by entertainment media and the reproduction through that. The paintings become something similar to the drawings, limiting the color palette so the imagery can become the focus of the piece. Painting has always been important to my process, although there could be argument for the work to mimic gaming culture through digital means, painting has always felt to be such a personal media it allows me to tap into my past with the subject matter. Each work develops

naturally using visual humor to relate to some sort of social context surrounding masculinity and the hero.

Each piece becomes a reaction to the ideas its composed of. With a series of cyanotypes, I explored a multitude of absurd predicaments the characters had gotten themselves into. In the piece *They're Coming For Me*, a rendered character is depicted cropped in the corner of the piece, screaming as three flimsy hardly rendered arrows coming towards him. In this dichotomy forms a play between a clearly false threat and a still anxious, screaming character. I became interested with chauvinism in contemporary news: the incessant shouting of misinformed men and “meninists” in reaction to people challenging any idea of their social identities was both humorous and likely something I felt when I was young. Again, these men want to view themselves as a hero, which classically are underdogs, so when someone suggests that they have an advantage in life it feels like an attack on their personal perceived narrative. Similarly to this, the piece *They Got Me Friends* becomes the step forward when the men feel hurt or demoralized. The character sits against a tree with arrows surrounding him, yet with no injury and nothing having actually hit him, to play up the drama connected to masculinity and one’s desire to feel victimized when someone perceives you as anything other than a hero or underdog.

In the piece *Proud Boys* I connect the active political group with the same title with a feeling of self destruction. The “Proud Boys” are a group self proclaimed “Fraternal Organization of Western Chauvinists” founded by the co-creator of Vice Entertainment Gavin McInnes. The group always seemed to be shooting themselves in the foot. They claim they “refuse to apologize for creating the modern world” as if they themselves had a hand in anything. As well, self proclaiming chauvinism doesn’t seem to be productive to self preservation in a

social sense. The piece is simple and purely playing on their weird desire to out themselves as bigoted: it is represented as a group of knightly characters, as the proud boys seem to view themselves as warriors for their cause. The piece *Blinded* plays on a similar idea. The composition is made up of the character creating a strong source of light and having to cover his own eyes because it is too bright. The wizard depicted is an archetype that is known to be excessively wise, and the cyanotype considers the play on people's desire to be a well-rounded hero that is both strong and wise while remaining thoughtless about their own actions.

Within the painting *Modern Myrddin* there's a wizard like character laying in a shallow hole in the forest, a pig behind him and trees surrounding him; to the left of the pig is a stump with a knife stuck into it. This was the earliest exploration of using high fantasy characters and narratives to discuss contemporary ideas. I looked at video and roleplaying game culture and its ties to classical high fantasy mythology, specifically Arthurian legends. Myrddin is the Welsh name for the character that eventually developed into Merlin. In the original myth, Myrddin loses his mind and flees to the woods, the point from which he experiences a "rebirth" and develops from that point into the contemporary image of Merlin. I thought of video games and roleplaying as a source of escapist rebirth for myself and others like me. As much as the work may joke about the mentalities surrounding these communities and masculinity in general, there is still an honest anxiety and need to find oneself successful in something; I use my thesis work to find the boundary between this honest anxiety and the bad habits formed by masculinity in an attempt to cope with it.

My thesis work has focused on the Hero's Journey and its effect on what people feel they are, how they view themselves, and who they want to become. People want to feel desired,

helpful, like they fought for something good, did something with themselves; people want to be heroes. My conceptual interest over the course of my thesis has been in this desire for heroism, and my work explores possible narratives in which the sadness, anxiety, and selfish behavior of the individual steers away from the archetype of “The Hero.” My influences, methods and the content discussed in the work help me explore how myself and others view themselves in their own Hero’s Journey.

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