

Cathy Leaycraft

Jennifer M. Dyer

Maryland Art Place Critics' Residency Program

Populated by women who are at once earthly beings and otherworldly goddesses, Cathy Leaycraft's photo- and color-photocopy collages tell of a life that continues cyclically, of the flux defining the female counterpart to the male-oriented experience of the world.

Leaycraft frequently depicts women in traditionally male roles and poses. She uses female nudity as a display of empowerment rather than subjugation. In her images, women are self-possessed figures whose actions, masked faces, and large scale denote an important figure or deity and glorify the roles of women.

"Tulip Shower," for instance, suggests the force of women in populating the earth; a woman gives birth to another woman in a shower of tulips that descend to a rocky earth. The moment of final contact as the offspring leaves the womb suggests a female reinterpretation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel.

Another work, "Emerging Tree Torch," shows a masked woman emerging from the ocean's depths, superhero emblem emblazoned on her chest, fire in hand. She is a female alternative to Prometheus, Leaycraft explains.

These images are not only surreal but almost unreal in their effect. Deep background space sets the photographic images in relief, giving the impression of a supernatural allegory. Layered color-photocopied photographs and hand-tinted photographs create a bizarre sense of depth. The exaggerated scale suggests a complex iconography, as well as relationships between figures and objects.

Leaycraft's message is strongly spiritual. The stories that her images tell are about women and proffer a different guiding force, different universal truths, from those that are accepted and expected in the current society. In Leaycraft's universe, women gave birth to humankind and populated Earth. Women brought fire and warmth from within themselves to the world. Women are at the heart of the cycle of energy transformation that is birth, death, and rebirth.

In an installation at McDonogh School, Leaycraft inverted her usual tactic of role reversal by depicting a god of beauty – a male in a traditionally female role. Unlike the submissive pose of the conventional Aphrodite, Leaycraft's athletic god sports sunglasses as he is poised on one knee. This oddly humorous work provokes us to

question the nature of “maleness” and “femaleness” in behavioral codes; we ask, where a woman’s nudity might seem acceptable, is the same true if we replace her with a man?

Leaycraft sends a powerful and important message to both men and women. Her work lends us insight into our own conditioning, as well as the limited range of acceptable male and female roles that we have established. The world Leaycraft depicts is one of endless growth and regeneration that does not limit the future to a recreation of the past. In her world, we find positive, and necessary, alternatives.