

MYTHMAKER by JANET CULBERTSON

We are in need of heroes. Today, more than ever, the cry for remarkable women and men who lead their lives from character and compassion, is persistent and loud. But what road maps do women in particular have to lead such a life?



When I began drawing this series which I called *Mythmaker* in

1974–75, I was on a personal search about my life choices. I was angered to find how, not only women, but our natural environment were both relegated to a second class status. That propelled me to search for a way to depict women in a more heroic light and to portray a more truthful view of our threatened environment rather than the idealized depiction of the last century.

My drawings are based on what I did not find in the Joseph Campbell book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: the woman as hero and protagonist. I was frustrated to find that mythology, religion, fairy tales, and novels, throughout history, with a few exceptions, depicted the hero as male, with the female standing by holding his cape, stirring the cauldron or offering encouragement from the sidelines. Often women were depicted as the evil witch, jealous stepmother, or helpless victim. I decided to draw my own hero who chose to experience the mythic journey, the quest, had her own unique experiences, and returned with her boon or enlightenment.

I adapted Campbell's "monomyth" by depicting the three stages of the journey, namely "The Departure" (4 drawings), "Trials and Initiations" (9 drawings), and "The Return" (7 drawings). I used an imploded ink technique with charcoal on rag paper to create an illusion of spacelessness- as if the background were pressing forward like folds of flesh. The rock-like texture creates an illusion that appears to be made up of holes. Holes are everywhere, small, large, recurring as balloon-like, womb-like, offering an outlet to a new space or new place.

My personal apotheosis or point of realization was to embrace the earth and all of its creatures, to fully connect with nature and try to depict the necessity of its protection. I realized my commitment wouldn't suit every woman. In *The Pen, the Needle or the Sword*, I suggest that these divergent routes might be in the creative arts, the domestic life, or the competitive life of the athlete or professional. In *Inbound*, the tiny heroine clings by a thread to her discoveries as she brings them to earth. In *Beginning*, the woman grows into a large image (60 x 40 inches) realizing her strength, both absorbing and giving to the earth as she embraces it. The last drawing in this series, *Transcendence* is of the woman as with all life, being absorbed into the earth. Drawing this series focused and confirmed my direction in art.

After exhibiting *Mythmaker* in many venues including the Lerner-Heller gallery in New York City, I wanted to become more active in pointing out ecological issues and problems. Our group of women including Lucy Lippard, Phyllis Janto, Michelle Stuart, and Ellen Lanyon, and others, created an issue of *Heresies* magazine, called "Earthkeeping-Earthshaking," dedicated to Rachel Carson, ecologist and author of *The Silent Spring* in 1962, and Karen Silkwood, the whistleblower who lost her life exposing the pollution caused by the chemical company where she worked. My contribution was an article titled "Ecotage" about sabotage done to expose polluters.

With few exceptions, Rachel Carson being one, I felt that the aspect of woman as the nurturer of the earth, woman the ecologist, or woman as the true mother of nature had been neglected. Today many more women writers, painters, and activists advocate the protection of the earth and its inhabitants as part of the eco-feminism movement.

Since drawing *Mythmaker*, I have depicted aspects of the destruction of our natural world such as, genetic tampering (especially when it involves cruelty to animals), worldwide pollution, over-population, and resource depletion. Although these problems continue to escalate, I feel a work of art can make a difference, and can stir awareness while providing beauty. After all, the very act of making art is an affirmation of life.