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Sliding Into the Unknown

A Conversation with

Saint Clair
Cemin

BY CHRISTOPHER HART CHAMBERS



Above and detail: 2 exhibition views of "Oedipus," 2018.

Saint Clair Cemin's work ranges across numerous genres, all pervaded by his unique sensibility and spirit. From 40-foot-tall monuments in locations worldwide down to softball-size objects in stone, metal, wood, and synthetics, his sculptures delight, amuse, and mesmerize. Lyrical, whimsical, often humorous and sometimes plain weird, these works are made by his own hands using traditional methods and materials "because they are good." Though Cemin employs fabricators for oversize and labor-intensive tasks, he produces the originals, the "models," by himself.

The 20 bronzes featured in "Oedipus," his recent show at Paul Kasmin Gallery, turn to the figure and mythology, depicting highlights from Sophocles's play, *Oedipus Rex*, written around 430 BCE. Cemin's episodic narrative resembles a three-dimensional storyboard, the scenes realized in a number of styles mined from art history—classifying through Modernist—with the tragic characters even depicted as exaggerated cartoons.



Christopher Hart Chambers: *Your recent exhibition seemed to represent a shift in your thinking. It was divided into two distinct categories: narrative, figural works based on an ancient tale and wholly abstract works. Do you agree with those definitions, and what predicated the transition?*

Saint Clair Cemin: It was an experiment. A lot of my small works have had a narrative aspect, but they were always single pieces. This time, I wanted to do a quite simple narrative, like a series of scenes. I chose Oedipus because of the fantastic stories. Everybody knows the story (well, at least a lot of people know



Bottom left: *Logos*, 2017. Stainless steel, sculpture: 66.125 x 24.5 x 19.25 in.; with base: 105.5 x 36.25 x 24.375 in. Top left: *Ismene*, 2017. Stainless steel, 78.75 x 24.125 x 18.875 in. Above: *The Killing of Laius*, 2017. Bronze, 13.75 x 13.5 x 7.875 in.

I think there are reasons for art that belong to our psychological and spiritual inheritance. Why did art have to break with the styles of the 19th century and the beautiful things still being expressed in Impressionism and go on through Fauvism and Dadaism and other styles to create a totally different type of aesthetic? Because those are the means of our collective soul. Modernism came to exist because of a need in our collective soul. Mythology and art have a lot in common. They have to do with patterns, with our psychology, with our spiritual life, and we don't know how they operate. They are mysterious. They are not explainable. They can be explained in a thousand different ways.

CHC: *Do you think that your work has divided? It was very Surrealist before.*

SCC: No, I think it is very Surrealist still. I keep doing weird mixtures of different things. Am I branching into making more historical art? I don't think so. My work is not made of facts. I don't drive a car; I drive a sled sideways. I don't know where I'm going. If I were to slide straight, I would make a series of Genesis, then the Stations of the Cross—narrative on top of narrative. Then I would be in a car going straight, but I want to slide into a ravine.

CHC: *Are the stylized, abstracted works more improvisational?*

SCC: They are all completely improvised. I only have the theme, the gestures. For instance, in the case of Oedipus killing his father, the only thing I knew is that it is one man killing another. There are a thousand ways of doing that. The whole thing is created on the spot. I have to decide whether he's going to knife him, poison him, or make him watch TV until he is bored to death. But I decided he was going to crush his head with a baseball bat. I have no idea why. While I was working on it, I decided to make the head of Oedipus like a big baby. Perhaps I was thinking about the Freudian Oedipus.

CHC: *What are your feelings about the abstract?*

SCC: Everything is figurative. At one extreme, you have very recognizable things; at the other, you have things that are not recognizable.

Christopher Hart Chambers is a sculptor and painter based in New York City.



Sphinx, 2017. Bronze, 18 x 16 x 12 in.

it). The idea of Oedipus, the character Oedipus, was popularized by Freud, even though the mythological character has nothing to do with the Freudian Oedipus. I go back to the simplest things in the world. In this case, the premise was very simple—make a narrative, tell a story.

I told a story, but with each piece, a whole universe of things was happening as I was making it. There was improvisation. I was using different styles. It was a departure for me, a real adventure. I cannot make work that I know exactly what it's going to look like—planning ahead of time, for me, is more like design. The idea of making art is going into the unknown. In this case, I found a way to go into the unknown by developing a very simple premise. The execution, however, is very complicated. For instance, walking from here to Nevada is a very simple premise, but there is a lot of adventure between here and Nevada: there are seasons, there are the logistics of where you do the walking. The initial premise is super simple, but the execution is a whole world of adventure, which interests me a lot.

The other pieces in the show are not abstract. They are figurative, but very stylized. I wanted to complement the show with larger pieces that aren't so much to do with mythology as with the mythic, the mythological ground base of our culture. The first piece that I made was a large stainless steel parrot on top of a perch. For me, the parrot is a symbol of the Logos since it's an animal that talks.

CHC: *Could you explain that idea?*

SCC: Logos is the basis of our culture: it's talking, it's speech. In Greek, it means Word, which is also action. As the Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So, the Word brought the world into existence. It is a very magical concept, which I remade in the form of a parrot, a talking bird.

One of the characters in the story of Oedipus is Antigone. She was made famous in Sophocles's play. But Oedipus, the king of Thebes, has two daughters.

The other is Ismene. The only thing we know about her is her name. I made a sculpture of her, it's a monument to the sister. Every happy boy or happy girl has a sister—Ismene.

CHC: *You use the word "figurative" instead of "narrative."*

SCC: Figurative does not necessarily mean narrative.

When I make a sequence of figurative sculptures, that's a narrative.

CHC: *Could you do a narrative work in one episode?*

SCC: Yes, I could and I have. But, in this case, it has been brought to the ultimate consequence.

CHC: *Do you intend to go further in this direction, perhaps with Ulysses, or Don Quixote, or even the Bible?*

SCC: I wouldn't want to make Ulysses or Don Quixote. But there are certain scenes from the Bible that have been explored in the past and that I would do again. Actually, I did make one—Jacob and the angel.

CHC: *Why did that strike you?*

SCC: Because Jacob had a fight with the angel. Normally you imagine angels as helpful, but Jacob actually wrestles with one. I love that idea—I don't know why exactly, perhaps it's because I don't know why. The Annunciation is another great scene. The angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her, "You are going to be pregnant, even though you are a virgin." And she asked, "Who is going to be the father?" God.

Those stories work as mythology. It doesn't matter if they are true or not. To mix mythology and history is powerful. Take Hercules, for instance, one of the most important heroes. There is very strong evidence that he did exist. He was probably one of the early kings of Thebes. It's very important for the mythological story that he killed a number of animals and creatures during his labors and then went into a rage and ended up killing his own children; he spent the rest of his life with the horror of what he had done. All of those things are very important for art. Art is a story that we do not know what it is all about. It's important that you don't know, because it gets to parts of the unconscious, parts of the soul that are much more profound than what can be said.

You don't know why these things happened, why they had to be so tragic. There is a sense that they organize your psychological world in a certain way. They don't give a meaning to life, but they give a pattern. And those patterns may be a psychological technology that enables you to live. Why the tragedy? Laius, the king of Thebes and the father of Oedipus, committed a tremendous crime. He raped a boy. The boy's father curses him, all of his family, the city, and everything associated with him. Laius's son and his children's children are still paying for his crime. Why? It's not fair. What does Oedipus know about events before he was born? There is a reason such things belong to mythology.