

Natalia González Martín

A change (would do you good)

13 May – 25 June 2022

Interview by Charlie Mills and Riccardo Pillon

Charlie Mills: First of all, let's start with the title of the exhibition, which is borrowed from a song title of Sheryl Crow's 1996 eponymous album. What is it about that song that has been the cause for inspiration or response through your exhibition? Why the fascination with change?

Natalia González Martín: The problem when you start reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is that you start seeing the world through the lenses of transformation, it's a bit like having to use crutches and how that makes you more aware of other people in crutches. It feels so unavoidable, 'Change network providers!', 'Swap sugar for healthier options', 'Change your morning routine'... it's quite incessant.

Using Crow's title for the exhibition is a way of shedding light on the universality of the subject. It could have also been *Change by Tears for Fears* or *Todo Cambia* by Mercedes Sosa. It feels easier to approach a complex idea through popular culture and more relatable references. I am drawn to that synthesis of seemingly different ideas to create new things. Like with the title, the paintings are born out of merging stock imagery from the internet, pictures from my camera roll and historical paintings, without making a distinction between the sources.

CM: Very quickly with these new paintings, as with your practice more generally, one sees the use of symbols and allegory at work. For this exhibition you have drawn from Ovid's legendary narrative poem, *Metamorphoses*, to explore the shifting relationship of transformation, change and mythology. What do you find so interesting about mythology as a metaphor for change and what first drew you to this book?

NGM: A myth is basically a long idiom, a way of communicating something without directly talking about it. I see the myth as the greatest avoidance tool. I am interested in art that's capable of doing this – implicitness rather than explicitness. Myths are suggestive, they hint at what you want to hear but powerfully, because their ambiguity makes them easy to project into.

Ovid might initially seem like he is simply re-telling classic mythological stories, but what he is doing (or the way I see it) is using myths to help understand humanity and our tendencies. He is creating his own catalogue raisonné of the different personality types and what he likes and dislikes about them.

Riccardo Pillon: In ancient times, the figure of the storyteller was extremely important in society, not only to communicate fantastical tales but also to transmit lessons, traditions and morals. Would you consider your role as a painter and the message behind the exhibition related to this?

NGM: Painting, and visual art in general, as a medium to tell stories has the advantage of universality – we can look at something created millennia ago and relate to it on some level,

even if only physically – we will obviously apply new meaning to those objects but the object itself (if we are lucky) remains intact. The problem with language-based knowledge is language itself, which is in constant change.

Permanency does not depend on the artist; we can paint hundreds of images and speak thousands of words, but it is not up to us to say what will remain with the receiver. What I mean is that communication is not the role of the artist but of the piece and that's a completely arbitrary selection.

RP: Amongst the 15 books and over 250 poems that compose the Metamorphoses, how did you select the myths you wanted to translate into paintings? Was there a specific element that helped you make the final decision?

NGM: I was mainly focused on the first 10 books which move from the creation of the world up to the Trojan war, wherein the book turns a bit more epic and less fantastical.

Those first 10 books are unsurprisingly the ones that have been transcribed into painting more often throughout history: Ovid was giving such clear instructions on how to visually represent them; it almost feels like a paint by numbers exercise.

RP: Throughout this series of works, iconographic elements such as flowers, fruits, jewellery, and embroideries all connect the various paintings. What are their roles and how do you like to play with iconography in your practice?

NGM: I find it impossible to avoid using the same references over and over – I see my practice as an expanded exploration of a handful of concepts which is why similar images and symbols will reappear throughout the works. It helps me get more familiar with those images (both technically and sentimentally).

When working in a series, most works are painted simultaneously, and they will share some elements with one another – it's genetics. A family of paintings that were all born under the same conditions will share the same traits, inclinations, and errors.

RP: Another important element that defines the narrative in this exhibition is the sky. From dawn to sunset to the darkest night, every hour of the day is represented in the exhibition, recreating the constant cycle of change that makes up a day. Do you want to talk about this particular choice and why it was important to you?

NGM: I find day and night the most compelling visual representation of change and how it alters our perception and understanding of things. Every day we all undergo this massive change, but we still can't get quite used to it. It's like living in two different worlds.

Framing the exhibition within the idea of one day creates that feeling of an embedded story that is characteristic of the Metamorphoses. Nothing begins or ends; it all just takes a different form.

CM: Throughout the chapters of Metamorphoses, it is women who are regularly – if not exclusively – on the receiving end of the gods. They are hunted, objectified, abused, and transformed into beasts of all kinds. In turn, the figures in your paintings show us vulnerability through grazed knees, exposed scars, or tears. Are there parallels you wish to strike between these ancient myths and the contemporary experience of women?

NGM: I often depict women in these scenarios because it is the closest experience I have of the world. What I like about Ovid's female characters is that they embody a varied array of personalities, they are highly three-dimensional and ever-evolving and there isn't one set model for them, which allows the reader to be surprised and confronted by our own assumptions of women.

RP: To add to this point, it is interesting that, despite a predominant classic and idyllic aesthetic, at a closer look these women are painted with grey hair, stretch marks, wrinkles and moles, all elements which make them humanly real and relatable. Why was it important for you to include these details and reinforce a contrast between myth and reality?

NGM: These elements show change but also help them become more real; the figures stop being mythical as they are subjected to the same things as any of us.

RP: Is there a particular character from Metamorphoses that you feel particularly attached and connected to? And why?

NGM: I love the character of Ariadne, she is very arrogant which does not go well for her, her stubbornness doesn't allow her to change her views. A very flawed character is hard to empathise with but that's the genius of it, we do want her to be ok despite her flaws and by relating to her we are inadvertently accepting our own flaws.

CM: Never far from questions of mythology are those of religion — a fascination which has been close to your work for many years through your style, painterly references and symbolism. To what extent has religion played a part in your upbringing and life? And what relationship does your work have to it now?

NGM: Religion has always been a necessary tool to understand some of the hardest parts of life. It is undoubtedly a big part of human existence, and we crave it (in whichever shape it comes). I find religion, faith or belief in general a very important tool to navigate existence. On an artistic level I have always been drawn to the visual elements of religion, specifically Catholicism, as that's what I was brought up with, so many images have naturally leaked into my practice, almost unconsciously.

While reading the first chapters of Metamorphoses I had to check often to make sure I had the right book. The parallels with the Book of Genesis are too strong to ignore, reinforcing the idea that everything is connected.

CM: Particular to Ovid's collection of mythology is the irreverence its characters display toward the gods — something that is shared in your contemporary approach to the subject matter. There is a flattening between the sacred and the lowly that demonstrates that even those with power and status can be corruptible or flawed. To what extent do you see mythology as a means to critique or subvert established social narratives?

NGM: This is one of the aspects I enjoyed more about the book – gods and mortals are in the same realm, and the borders between their worlds are ineffective. The power the gods hold is only given to them by the mortals – I like this idea that power isn't intrinsic but fabricated.

CM: It is interesting to note here, that whilst some of your works are direct in their references, many leave the viewer with the agency to establish meaning and value in what they see. Do you enjoy the ambiguity inherent to your work and how do you think this adds to their effect?

NGM: Painting is a trick, and one should never give everything away, otherwise it loses its magic. I find this the hardest thing to achieve. Luckily, much like power, meaning is given by the receiver, so hopefully the viewer is generous enough to find their own hidden meanings in the work.

RP: The paintings are all titled with lines by Ovid they are inspired by. Considering the title of the exhibition, modern and ancient worlds coexist in this once again. Do you want to tell us why you made this decision?

NGM: Isolating some sentences can make them more digestible. I know this text has been translated numerous times so it can be understood in a contemporary setting. However, even a small part of the original meaning that resists translation has the power to be relatable many centuries after. THAT is magic.