



CAMMIE
STAROS:
UNEARTHING
THE SKY

11.01.23–
3.02.24

Reilly Gallery
Smith Center
for the Arts



Figlina aquaticum, 2021. Ceramic, acrylic, wood, laminate, de-chlorinated water, aquatic filtration system, programmed grow light, aquarium soil, lace rock, quartz-veined basalt, aquatic plants (Dwarf Lily, Eusteralis Stellata, Ludwigia Repens)
18 x 30 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles



[Cover] *Siren (Rousseau)*, 2015. Ceramic, brass
22 x 14 x 10 inches
Courtesy Private Collection

Unearthing the Sky presents work by Los Angeles-based artist Cammie Staros made over the last decade. Staros creates sculptures and installations that mine Classical antiquities and the contexts we view them. Through a combination of ancient techniques, contemporary sensibility, and museological display, her work folds the past in on itself to critically reveal semiotic systems developed and reinforced through Western Art History. Greek antiquities are frequently the visual anchor and conceptual point of departure for Staros's deconstruction and reanimation of visual language; the sculptures question and make visible strategies in which history is often conveyed within controlled settings like encyclopedic museums and collections. These display methods have historically cropped, edited, held, and captured cultural artifacts, often erasing their former context, and limiting their intention. Through her practice, Staros reimagines the potential of an object by confusing the possibility of utility while indulging in anthropomorphic details.

The figure is often alluded to within the sculptures—painted eyes turn a cup into a face while an upside-down vessel becomes a head or a body. Staros's addition of new materials to her ceramics, like stone, wood, neon, and metal, generates a nuanced, hybrid visual language, celebrated throughout *Unearthing the Sky*.

Cammie Staros: *Unearthing the Sky*

For Staros, ancient relics offer an important opportunity to ask what these objects might tell us about humanity's past and ask us to reflect on the future. Many artifacts are found underwater by archaeologists who have excavated watery sites for centuries. The doubled ceramic forms submerged in *Figlinum aquaticum*, 2021, reference ornate Greek wine cups; however, the potential function is disrupted and instead becomes a habitat for the live plants and fish that call the vitrine home.

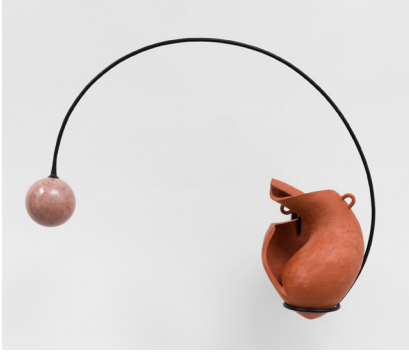
Staros modeled the self-illuminated display case to those found in the Greek wings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum, both of which host exceptional collections and feature a certain caliber of display. Surrounding the ceramics, fish swim between stones, green grasses, and water lilies, accustomed to sharing this habitat. The artist's display tactics transform the pristine vitrine



My Soliloquy to Your Chorus, 2017. Ceramic,
brass, maple, paint
56 x 16 x 15 inches
Courtesy Private Collection



Old Ocean, 2018. Walnut, neon
18 x 17 x 58 inches
Courtesy Áva Berlin



Testa conchea, 2022. Ceramic,
powder-coated steel, marble
29 x 23 x 12 inches
Courtesy Private Collection

into a generative aquarium, amplifying a contrast between the preciousness of artifact and the precarity of water and living systems. *Figlinum aquaticum* highlights the danger of our global climate crisis and the existential threat of flooding and drought and presents new strategies for living. The ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway often writes about the necessity for multispecies kinship as a strategy to work towards “earthly survival.”¹ *Figlinum aquaticum* offers a model of coexistence, weaving together the natural and human-made worlds.

Staros often incorporates materials and shapes that allude to change and transformation; organic and inorganic. *Testa conchea*, 2022, resembles both a vase and a conch shell, as if in the process of shapeshifting. The polished pink marble orb that appears to balance the sculpture signals a more recent incorporation of marble and other stone materials into the artist’s practice. For Staros, marble is a perfect geological and human relic of the marking of time. Staros states, “I wanted to work in stone because they are records of a geologic moment as well as architectural ruins of civilizations.” In ancient Athens, marble was widely used in the construction of monuments as well as civic centers like temples or government buildings. Marble is both precious and practical; its longevity is persistent, and its origin story began on the ocean floor.

Old Ocean, 2018, introduces Staros’s incorporation of neon into her art practice. Held out as if an offering on carved walnut arms, the coiled neon appears as a snake, a rope, a glowing lasso. The fragmented body is rooted in history but is seductively present. Using the neon as a drawing tool, Staros finds ways to carve out new dimensions in her work. Originally a medium employed for advertising and shop-front signs, neon became a tool for drawing and painting in the 1960s. Artists including Dan Flavin and Joseph Kosuth used neon to experiment and blur the distinction between “high and low” art forms. Ethereal and atmospheric, as well as commercial and kitsch, neon draws on the physical space it illuminates.

The body is conjured most clearly in *My Soliloquy to Your Chorus*, 2017, which brings together the materials of ceramic, brass, and maple into human-scale. Creating parallels between ancient civilizations and our own, Staros alludes to forms of bondage, sadomasochism, and other contemporary forms of fetish to highlight the violence of societies past and present. The brass rings become

¹ Donna Haraway: *Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, directed by Fabrizio Terranova. Icarus Films, 2016.



How Neat the Fold of Time, 2017. Ceramic, brass
30 x 13.5 x 13.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles



The Weight of Medusa's Head, 2017. Ceramic, steel
69 x 28 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles

evocative of body piercings, and the form of the sculpture suggests a tight leather encasing, reminiscent of artist Nancy Grossman's stitched leather head sculptures of the late 70s and early 80s. Staros is interested in artifacts that aestheticized violence in ancient armor, a time when violence pervaded ancient Greece's social, political, and cultural landscapes. She asks how we might identify and grapple with equally pervasive representations of aestheticized violence today.

How Neat the Fold of Time, 2017, also accesses the corporeal. With a textile-like motif that wraps the vessel, the pattern alternates between dress and column, while the brass rings puncture the pot like oversized septum rings or belly button piercings. The gendered dress pattern references the abstract decorative vocabulary found embellishing early Greek pottery and animates the vessel. There is a disparity in how gender roles have been depicted within ancient Greek pottery. Often, women's portrayals were relegated to domestic settings or engaged in rituals like mourning at funerals. Through Staros's ceramic sculptures, the artist considers the representations of desire, violence, and reimagining of gender codes.

The Weight of Medusa's Head, 2017, directly engages Greek mythology and gender through its title and hand-painted imagery. Medusa is the most famous of the monstrous female figures known as the Gorgons. Often depicted as a beautiful woman with a tangle of vicious snakes for hair, Medusa was the only Gorgon who was mortal. According to myth, she was slain by Perseus, the son of Zeus, who chopped off her head as she slept. Her severed head, which had the power to turn all who looked at it into stone, was given to Athena, the goddess of war, who placed it on her shield. Staros continues to explore her interest in female representation, borrowing from classical forms and translating depictions of women as femme fatales, muses, or mothers. Many feminists have written essays about Medusa's myth, the most famous being "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Hélène Cixous, where she argues that Medusa's decapitation at the hands of Perseus is a representation of men attempting to mute women and destroy their ability to use language.² Plunged into the ceramic head of Staros's sculpture is a long and rusted pipe. With this gesture, Staros explicitly references a pillaged Roman stone ruin of Medusa's head, which was repurposed as a column base in the Basilica of Cistern in Istanbul, where it resides today. The pipe alludes to both the oppressive column holding Medusa's head captive, as well as the watery function of a cistern.

2 Cixous, Helene, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1 (4): 875-93.



Siren (Rousseau), 2015. Ceramic, brass
22 x 14 x 10 inches
Courtesy Private Collection



Atropos, 2018. Ceramic
21 x 14 x 1 inches
Courtesy Private Collection

In 2018, Staros made a series of wall slab works named after Greek heroines and goddesses. *Atropos*, 2018, was one of three works referencing the Three Fates. The Fates were sisters who personified and presided over the cycle of life. Atropos was the eldest of the three and oversaw death. Staros's series draws on patterns of armor both real and imagined as depicted on ancient Greek urns, but with a contemporary twist. The wall pieces are quite modern in their simplified form and suggest the potential of a mask or an armored breastplate.

Staros often works in relation to these multiple histories, which are most clearly seen in *Siren (Rousseau)*, 2015. This work, while small in scale, is laden with powerful signs and symbols. The sculpture combines ceramics that reference the history of ancient Greek pottery with the historical display conventions of African masks. Further complicating the work is a reference to the French Post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau whose primitive stylization exoticized jungle scapes during an era shaped by French colonialism. Throughout her work, Staros finds ways to strategically subvert expectations, playfully repurpose meaning, and skillfully use materials that reflect a changing understanding of the 'visual linguistics' of an object.

Like the Cubists of the early 20th century who uniquely confronted the 'magic' of representing three-dimensional volume two-dimensionally, Staros also looks to mine conflicting and contradictory meanings that can be held within a single sculptural work. In Greek mythology, it is Persephone who is able to bridge the seemingly opposite worlds of Zeus, the God of the Sky, and Hades, the God of the Underworld. In Staros's work, a union of two realms continues, bringing a new and fresh understanding of our relationship to the world around us, showing us clearly that ideas, too, have persistence, a seasonality, a mortal 'earthiness' that can degrade, be buried and ultimately, arise once again.



ABOUT THE ARTIST—Cammie Staros (b. 1983, Nashville, TN; Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) received her BA from Brown University, Providence, in 2006 and her MFA from California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles, in 2011. Staros has had solo exhibitions at Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, CA; Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles, Lefebvre & Fils, Paris, and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. The artist was included in the Craft Contemporary's second clay biennial in Los Angeles. Staros' work is featured in *100 Sculptors of Tomorrow*, a survey of contemporary sculpture, authored by Kurt Beers and published by Thames & Hudson. She has also been featured in *Artforum*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *Autre Magazine*, and the *X-TRA* art journal. She has been the recipient of several residences, grants, and awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2020 and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant in 2023.

ABOUT PCG—Providence College Galleries [PCG] is committed entirely to museum-quality presentations of the art and artists of our time. PCG showcases contemporary art to advance Providence College's mission to cultivate "aesthetic appreciation, and understanding of the natural world, other cultures, and diverse traditions" while promoting "the common good and service of neighbors near and far."

PCG operates within two exhibition spaces, on a multi-platform website, across the College's campus, and within the public sphere throughout the city of Providence. PCG's activities include collecting and commissioning art, organizing exhibitions and public art displays, publishing texts, hosting artist residencies, presenting public programs and events, and advocating for local artists and art communities.

Unearthing the Sky is the artist's first institutional solo exhibition in New England. It is organized by former PCG Interim Director Curator Kate McNamara. Organizational assistance is provided by Nichole Speciale, Exhibitions & Collections Manager; Carol Stakenas, Director; and Elizabeth Corkery Communications & Design Associate. Additional production expertise is provided by Joseph Gulezian, Julian MacMillan, Ben Kaplan, Josh Rodriguez, Tom O'Brian, Steven Correia, Lewis Turley, all VRC student workers and the Physical Plant team.

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