

Fantasy, Myth, Legend: Imagining the Past in Works on Paper since 1750

December 16, 2023 - June 2, 2024

History is not just a set of facts; it is also a collection of narratives passed down through time and across cultures. Infused with fantasy, these narratives often reflect the desires, fears, and values of the people who tell them. This exhibition explores how artists from different backgrounds and moments in time have engaged with Western European historical narratives from prehistory through the medieval era. Across these works, artists look to the past for different purposes, from the promotion of nationalist myths and gendered ideals to the critique of colonialism and related cultural prejudices. Viewers are invited to question the supposed mysticism of prehistoric monuments, the assumed universality of ancient Greek and Roman cultures, and the romanticism of medieval narratives and religious architecture. What accounts for the continued appeal of these fantasies, myths, and legends into our own time? And how can art help us to reimagine and remake these legacies in the future?

Curated by

Sarah Mirseyedi (SM), Andrew W. Mellon Fellow, Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; and Regina Noto (RN), Brown PhD 2026, History of Art and Architecture; with assistance from Gabrielle Patrone (GP), IFPDA / Mellon Summer Intern 2023

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Haskell Coffin
American, 1878–1941
Joan of Arc Saved France, 1918
Color lithograph on paper
Museum Collection **18.542**

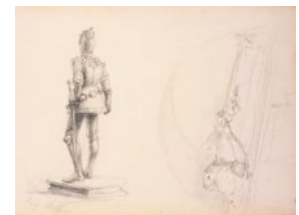
Haskell Coffin was known for his images of conventionally beautiful women. Here he not only depicts Joan of Arc as beautiful, but as the savior of France. Dressed in armor and raising her sword, this martyr from the 1400s encourages American women to save their country by investing in savings stamps during World War I.

In the early 1900s, Joan of Arc was a popular figure. She was canonized as a saint by the Roman Catholic church in 1920, just two years after this poster was made. Her story was used to exemplify religious piety, patriotic sacrifice, and femininity—even 500 years after she lived.

–RN



John Singer Sargent
American, 1856–1925
Peter Vischer's Sculpture of King Arthur and Phillipine Welser's Tomb in the Hofkirche, Innsbruck, Tyrol, ca. 1871
Pencil on paper
Gift of Miss Emily Sargent and Mrs. Francis Ormond **31.009**



This is a drawing an American artist made of a Renaissance-era German sculpture of a medieval British king. John Singer Sargent drew the statue of King Arthur in great detail, compared to the sketchier tomb on the right. One of many figures at the tomb of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (reigned 1508–1519), the sculpture validated the emperor's power by linking him to prestigious kings of the past.

A legendary king and a focus of medieval literary traditions, Arthur was a popular fantasy figure at the turn of the last century and remains so today.

–RN

Hubert Robert

French, 1733–1808

Antique Ruins with Figures, ca. 1765–1778

Pen and ink, brush and wash, watercolor, and white heightening over black chalk, on paper

Museum Appropriation Fund **38.152**



In this drawing, the French artist Hubert Robert combines Roman antiquities such as classical column fragments and sculptural friezes with a pyramidal structure more commonly associated with the monuments of ancient Egypt.

Archaeological discoveries of Greek and Roman antiquities starting in the 1700s began providing artists with new subject matter, as well as new relationships with history. Rather than base their understanding of the past solely on ancient texts, artists took inspiration from objects of the past. Robert and others engaged in fantastical reorderings of history, juxtaposing forms and monuments from different time periods and cultures.

–SM

Clifford Wright

1919–1999; b. in Washington State; worked in Denmark

Boy and Tiny Knight, ca. 1939–ca. 1957

Colored ink on paper

Anonymous gift **57.123**



In Clifford Wright's drawing, a knight emerges from the gloomy crosshatched background, looking more like a toy than an ideal soldier. The figure reminds us of the knights of children's adventure stories of the 1800s and 1900s—heroic but faceless and nameless, so the reader can insert themselves into the adventure, imagining themselves as brave and gallant. These tales can teach worthy values to young readers, but they may present narrow ways of being, tied to stereotypical masculinity and violence. This is perhaps suggested in this work's dark palette and scribbled ink.

–RN

George Heriot
British, 1759–1839
Druid's Temple at Park Place, Seat of General Conway, ca. 1816
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Anonymous gift **69.154.23**



In this delicate watercolor, a group stands at the center of a prehistoric stone circle. Much like Tacita Dean's *Floating Dolmen*, this work also depicts a megalithic monument divorced from its original place and time.

The stone circle known as Druid's Temple was originally built on the Isle of Jersey off the coast of France, where it remained buried for thousands of years. When it was unearthed in 1785 during a construction project, then governor of Jersey, General Conway, paid to have the stones transported to England and reconstructed on his private estate, where they still stand today on a hill overlooking the Thames Valley. British TV personality James Corden purchased the estate in 2020, making him the current owner of this prehistoric monument.

–SM

Félix Bracquemond

French, 1833–1914

Gargantua and His Mare at the Ford of Vede, 1869

From the series *Fifteen Etchings to Illustrate the Works of Rabelais*

(*Quinze eaux-fortes pour illustrer les oeuvres de Rabelais*)

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

Museum Membership Fund **70.103**



A knight in shining armor sits atop a white horse, surrounded by much smaller figures. The knight holds a fully grown tree—another clue that he and his horse are giants of legendary proportion.

This drawing is an illustration for François Rabelais's *Five Books of the Lives and Deeds of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, written in the 1500s. Rabelais's tales are parodies of medieval romances, and often include lewd or grotesque details in place of the morality and gallantry found in medieval literature. In this scene, Gargantua's horse aids him by drowning his enemies in a stream of urine.

–SM

Paul Gauci

British, active 1834–1866

Kingston Harbor, Jamaica, ca. 1839

Watercolor, white heightening, and pencil on paper

Anonymous Gift **70.118.38**



This ca. 1839 watercolor of Jamaica's Kingston Harbor was painted during a moment of significant political change. In 1838, after several decades of fierce rebellion by enslaved Caribbean and West African people in the British-ruled colony, slavery was abolished in Jamaica. The artist's focus in this image, however, is on the timelessness of the landscape and its inhabitants, rather than on any signs of recent events. By representing Kingston Harbor as a vast expanse of land, sparsely populated and with little sign of development, this painting works to justify the continuation of British colonial rule for audiences back in England, where it was published.

–SM

Guillermo Silva Santamaria
1921–2007; b. in Bogotá, Colombia; worked in Mexico, Spain, and India
Luchas Medioevales, from the portfolio *El Hombre Contra El Hombre*,
1960
Color etching, aquatint, and engraving on paper
Museum Collection **77.147.8**



In this print, colorful creatures wield swords and shields, engaging in a battle whose larger purpose remains unclear. Throughout the series, artist Guillermo Silva Santamaria explores the absurdity of warfare through a combination of fantastical design and innovative print processes. A painter and printmaker, Silva was widely known for his intaglio techniques, which produced deeply embossed and three-dimensional surfaces such as the one you see here. The intense pressure exerted on the paper by the printmaking press echoes the violence of hand-to-hand combat, a mode of warfare strongly associated with medieval warriors.

–SM

Ronald King
b. 1932 in São Paulo, Brazil; works in London
Geoffrey Chaucer, author
British; 1342/1343–1400
Circle Press, publisher
London; 1967–present
The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, 1978
Silkscreen on paper
Gift of Richard E. Horman **79.165**

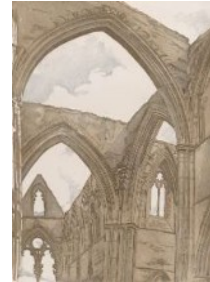


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This illustrated version of Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* was artist Ron King's first project with Circle Press, a firm established by King in 1967 and now a leading publisher of artists' books. For this work, King hand-cut paper stencils for each of the 15 screenprints illustrating a character in Chaucer's text. King's inspiration for the designs came from studying masks and medieval heraldry. Using bright colors and abstracted geometrical forms, he transforms the late-medieval text into a contemporary work of art.

–SM

Philip Pearlstein
1924–2022; b. in Pittsburgh; worked in New York
Multi-Editions Press, publisher
Tampa, Florida
Tintern Abbey, from the portfolio *Ruins and Landscapes*, 1979
Sugar-life aquatint with roulette work, on paper
Gift of Arthur I. Rabb **80.276.5**



In Pearlstein's print, Tintern Abbey's arches pierce the sky. Located in Wales near the English border, Tintern Abbey was founded in the 1100s by Cistercian monks. It was abandoned in the 1500s, during the Reformation.

After the abbey fell into ruin, it began its second life as a place of inspiration for artists, novelists, and poets. In its crumbling state, some of the reality of the abbey's original religious use disappeared, allowing for more fantastical associations with the building's architecture and the medieval time period.

–RN

James McBey
Scottish, 1883–1959
Night in Ely Cathedral, 1915
Etching on paper
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers **84.198.680**



The term *gothic* can conjure darkness, ghostly figures, and looming architecture—all of which are evident in this print. Here, the darkness of night in a Gothic cathedral creates rich shadows punctuated by pinpricks of light. Following the gaze of the tiny person on the left, we are led to Ely Cathedral's Octagon Tower, where McBey has indicated the slightest hint of a pointed stained-glass window high above.

–RN

Edward Lear

English, 1812–1888

Athwart the Place of Tombs, Kleissoura, Albania, for Morte d'Arthur by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ca. 1850–1888

Pen and ink, wash, and pencil on paper

Anonymous gift **84.203.2**



Edward Lear was an artist and author, and an illustrator of his friend Alfred Tennyson's poems. This drawing portrays King Arthur's death in the *Idylls of the King*, a series of 12 Arthurian poems Tennyson published between 1859 and 1885. These poems were metaphors for Victorian society, and presented the medieval king Arthur as the ideal gentleman.

In this work, Lear drew the dramatic mountains of Albania instead of the English countryside. His choice to place huddled figures and ghostly tombs within this striking landscape shows the Romantic era's interest in sensationalizing the myth of King Arthur.

–RN

Linda Connor (RISD BFA 1967, Photography)
b. 1944 in New York; works in San Francisco
Dots and Hands, Fourteen Window Ruin, Bluff, Utah, 1987
Gold-chloride-toned gelatin silver print on printing-out paper
Gift of Aaron Siskind **1990.108.1**



The dots and handprints depicted here were painted by Ancestral Puebloan people near present-day Navajo Nation territory in Utah. They date from the 1100s, the same time period that that saw the construction of many cathedrals and religious structures across Europe, including Tintern Abbey, seen in the print on the right. A non-Indigenous photographer, Linda Connor describes how her familiarity with this different but contemporaneous cultural context—that of medieval Europe—informed her contemplation of this site: “I love knowing that the cathedral at Chartres . . . and many of the finest rock art panels in the Southwest were all made during the 12th century. They are all infused with a spirit which is still apparent and resonating today.”

–SM

George Benjamin Luks
American, 1867–1933
St. Patrick's Cathedral, 1923–1924
Watercolor and gouache over charcoal on paper
Anonymous gift **1992.001.91**

This painting captures the towering neo-Gothic spires of New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Luks was a member of the Ashcan School of American painting, which emphasized realism and daily life. Here he paints the white marble as pale purple, making it stand out against the dark background—almost a reverse of the McBey print to the right. The play of light and shadow, seen in both these works from the early 1900s, is also a hallmark of the Gothic period (spanning the mid-1100s into the 1500s) and its revival (beginning in the mid-1700s). Luks paints the faithful as a mass of tiny dots on the church steps, insignificant compared to the building. Like other Gothic and neo-Gothic cathedrals, St. Patrick's attempts to evoke religious awe through its enormous scale.

–RN



Alison Saar
b. 1956 in Los Angeles; works in Los Angeles
Ulysses, 1994
Color woodcut on paper
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund **1995.016**

Depicted with light skin and dressed in a black suit, the central figure in this print hangs upside down by his feet. Two Black faces, one male and one female, stare down at him from above. Saar's choice of title makes reference to Ulysses, the hero of Homer's ancient Greek epic the *Odyssey*. At one point in the story, Ulysses asks to be tied to the front of his ship as it passes by an island inhabited by the Sirens, the mythological creatures whose singing could cause sailors to crash into the rocky shoreline. Saar here places this ancient story about desire, temptation, and restraint alongside what also appear to be suggestions of racial difference or racialized violence.

–SM



Gerardo Suter

b. 1957 in Bueno Aires, Argentina; works in Mexico City

Paul Taylor (RISD MFA 1986, Printmaking; former RISD faculty), printer

Renaissance Press, publisher

Ashuelot, New Hampshire; 1986–present

Pages of Days (Tonalamatl), 1991

Photogravure on paper

Gift of Paul Taylor **1999.75**



The title of this work, *Tonalamatl*, refers to an Aztec calendar used before Spanish colonization. These 260-day calendars were separated into 20 trecena (groups of 13 days) and illustrated with depictions of the gods. In this work, photographer Gerardo Suter pays homage to this Indigenous system of organization by placing 20 Aztec symbols around a central male figure. The man's pose, however, comes not from Aztec iconography, but from Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, created about the same time as European colonization of the Americas. Suter's carefully staged image explores collective memory, and how intellectual and cultural traditions of the prequest past intermingle with colonialist legacies.

–SM

Paul Woodroffe

British, 1875–1945

He stood still in wonder and delight, ca. 1900

Published in *Nursery Tales Told to the Children* by Amy Steedman, 1906

Watercolor and gouache over graphite, on illustration board

Gift of Roger and Gayle Mandle **2008.95.9**



A book illustrator and a stained-glass designer, Paul Woodroffe here captures the romantic, heteronormative, and patriarchal ideal of the imagined medieval couple: the weak, pale woman and the man in armor who has come to save her. This work likely depicts the story of Sleeping Beauty, which originated in the 1300s. Woodroffe's interpretation, with its stylized roses and elongated figures, points to his interest in Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts movement.

–RN

Pat Steir

b. 1938 in Newark, New Jersey; works in New York

The Burial Mound at Stonehenge, 1973

Graphite, ink, and watercolor on paper

Purchased in honor of Hope Alswang, Director of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 2005–2009; accessioned by the 2009–2010 Fine Arts Committee; Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund **2009.83**



In this drawing, scribbled marks are reminiscent of lines of text, and an ethereal landscape is suggested by pink and gray washes. The resulting work hovers between representation and abstraction, history and the eternal present. For artist Pat Steir, the act of drawing comes down to the basic desire for communication—an impulse shared by both ancient and contemporary peoples. Though the title of this work mentions the prehistoric stone structure of Stonehenge, Steir doesn't offer a representation of that site, but rather an exploration of the shared origins of artistic creation across time.

–SM

Roy Lichtenstein

1923–1997; b. and worked in New York

Rouen Cathedral, 1969

Lithograph on paper

Bequest of Richard Brown Baker **2009.92.162**



This 1969 print illustrates how artists play off of their predecessors. Roy Lichtenstein is best known for his Pop Art comic-book subjects, but this work focuses on Rouen Cathedral, taking inspiration not just from the French building but also from Claude Monet's depictions of it. The church, built in a series of styles between the 11th and 19th century, was painted in the early 1890s by Monet, who showcased how light reflected off of its deeply carved facade—an aspect that also inspired Lichtenstein. Both Monet and Lichtenstein were interested in optical illusion, but by choosing the cathedral as their subject, they each also underlined the continued relevance of historic art.

–RN

Steve Mendelson (RISD BFA 1981, Illustration)
1958–1995; b. in Highland Park, Illinois; worked in the US
#30, 1990
From the series *The Song of Amergin*
Pen and ink on paper
Gift of Kenneth and Carol Mendelson 2010.97.31



Artist and illustrator Steve Mendelson embarked on a monumental body of work during a period of illness, completing nearly 60 intricate drawings prior to his passing from AIDS-related complications in 1995. Named for one of the earliest known works of ancient Celtic poetry, *Song of Amergin*, these drawings reference a range of historical signifiers, from Gothic arches to Celtic knot patterns and medieval armor. The works present a fantasy world where private struggle takes on the aura of legendary battles between good and evil.

–SM

Pablo Bronstein
b. 1997 in Argentina; works in London
Grande Pendule Coloniale, 2012
Pen and ink and watercolor on paper, in artist's frame
Richard Brown Baker Fund for Contemporary British Art 2012.54



Contrary to what its opulent frame suggests, this is a contemporary drawing. It depicts an imagined “colonial” pendulum clock from the 1700s, with the central clock face representing Paris. Various fruits are arranged above four other clocks, which display the time and main agricultural exports for France’s four major colonies: the Ivory Coast and Senegal (both on the west African coast), French Indochina (now Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and French Guiana (South America). The print’s whimsical details and playful colors reference equally extravagant objects made during the 1700s French Rococo period. Bronstein’s clock is a reminder that European wealth was supplemented by colonialism, and that the exploitation of non-European peoples and lands made such luxury possible.

–GP

Lindsay Starbuck
Works in London
Let's Get Medieval, from the portfolio *Occuprint*, 2012
Color screenprint on paper
Walter H. Kimball Fund 2012.70.1.13

This print uses negative connotations of the word medieval to indicate what the American political movement Occupy Wall Street hoped to do to greed in the early 2010s. Artist Lindsay Starbuck employed the image of a medieval monk, clad in a plain brown habit, to speak to religious ideals of poverty. The monk's speech bubble and his book, in Latin, state that "the love of money is the root of all evil."

The medieval period is commonly perceived as a time of both terrible punishments and pious poverty. Starbuck's print depends on the viewer's associations about the Middle Ages, and their willingness to apply those stereotypes to their vision of life today.

-RN



Andrea Chung

b. 1978 in Newark, New Jersey; works in San Diego

Robert Franklin, printer

1930–2012; b. in Long Island, New York; worked in Philadelphia

Kandice Fields, printer

UNSPOILED, UNCOMMON, UNPRETENTIOUS, from the portfolio *Thongs: Experience the Luxury Included*, 2010

Color offset lithograph with embossing on paper

Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania **2014.66.10.1**



In this series of prints, Andrea Chung unpacks the notions of history and time in tourism advertisements for Jamaican resorts. Chung recontextualizes this language by combining phrases in Jamaican Patois and found photographic imagery. She also uses blind embossing, or stamping without ink, to create a raised text or image that makes visible the local workforce supporting the tourism industry.

Chung explains, "By manipulating photographs and tourism imagery, I investigate how The Land has been sold through picturesque fantasy and fantastic copy. I ask the viewer to question the 'real,' the seen, and unseen in order to navigate these conflicting narratives."

–SM

Andrea Chung

b. 1978 in Newark, New Jersey; works in San Diego

Robert Franklin, printer

1930–2012; b. in Long Island, New York; worked in Philadelphia

Kandice Fields, printer

And fortunately, completely unchanged, from the portfolio *Thongs: Experience the Luxury Included*, 2010

Color offset lithograph with embossing on paper

Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania **2014.66.10.2**



Andrea Chung

b. 1978 in Newark, New Jersey; works in San Diego

Robert Franklin, printer

1930–2012; b. in Long Island, New York; worked in Philadelphia

Kandice Fields, printer

Mi love fi teach de foreigna dem fi chat yard style. But mi nah mek dem know how fi say "mi fi gallong back ah wuk" so nah bodda ask", from the portfolio *Thongs: Experience the Luxury Included*, 2010

Color offset lithograph with embossing on paper

Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania **2014.66.10.3**



Andrea Chung

b. 1978 in Newark, New Jersey; works in San Diego

Robert Franklin, printer

1930–2012; b. in Long Island, New York; worked in Philadelphia

Kandice Fields, printer

Here Sandals Has Created Our Newest Resort and Ultra-Luxurious Testament to Jamaica's Storied Past, As Well As A Stunning Tribute to the Glories of Europe, from the portfolio *Thongs: Experience the Luxury Included*, 2010

Color offset lithograph with embossing on paper

Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania **2014.66.10.4**



Andrea Chung

b. 1978 in Newark, New Jersey; works in San Diego

Robert Franklin, printer

1930–2012; b. in Long Island, New York; worked in Philadelphia

Kandice Fields, printer

STAY a week...or STAY a Lifetime, from the portfolio *Thongs: Experience the Luxury Included*, 2010

Color offset lithograph with embossing on paper

Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania **2014.66.10.5**



Andrea Chung

b. 1978 in Newark, New Jersey; works in San Diego

Robert Franklin, printer

1930–2012; b. in Long Island, New York; worked in Philadelphia

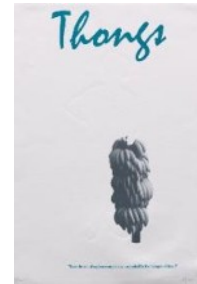
Kandice Fields, printer

“Ever dream of a place completely unspoiled by the ravages of time?”,

from the portfolio *Thongs: Experience the Luxury Included*, 2010

Color offset lithograph with embossing on paper

Gift of the artist **2022.18**



Amy Chan (RISD BFA 2000, Painting)

b. 1978 in Danbury, Connecticut; works in the US

Lower East Side Printshop, publisher

New York, 1968–present

Views of the Mid-Atlantic (After Jean Julien Deltil), 2005

Color screenprint on paper

Gift of Carroll and Sons, Boston **2015.95**



This piece takes inspiration from French designer Jean Julien Deltil's 19th-century wallpaper *Views of North America* and its idealized depictions of the Western American landscape. Amy Chan counters the “wild-beauty” seen in Deltil's design, instead commenting on how “homogenized and tame [the land] has become.” Chan's reimagined landscape considers the monotony of the modern world, using dull colors from contemporary wallpaper to depict prehistoric natural landmarks such as Niagara Falls and the Natural Bridge. She compares the glacial boulders found throughout New England and the mid-Atlantic to lawn ornaments “too large to move in the clearing of land.”

–GP

Tacita Dean

b. 1965 in Canterbury, UK; works in Berlin and Los Angeles
Floating Dolmen, from the series *Billboard for Edinburgh*, 2009
Offset lithograph and screenprint on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. Scott Burns **2015.135.3.5**



In this print, a massive rock floats in space, defying the heft and weight its size implies. To produce this effect, the artist Tacita Dean screenprinted semitranslucent white ink over a photographic image, isolating the stone from its surroundings.

This work is related to the artist's series on dolmens, the massive stone structures that mark the entrances of prehistoric burial sites throughout the UK. The continued presence of these stone monuments over thousands of years reminds us of the deep time of human existence and the limitations of written history. Dean's intervention asks us to consider the stone in a way that is nearly impossible to do most of the time—divorced from its position in the landscape and outside of time.

–SM

Pablo Bronstein,

b. 1977 in Argentina; works in London
Tea Urn Representing the Creation of the Primordial Gods, 2013
Hand-colored etching on paper
Gift of the artist **2018.24.4**



This etching of an elaborate tea urn is reminiscent of the extravagance of 1700s French Rococo design. Clouds encircle the vessel, supporting a small globe at the top. Here artist Pablo Bronstein satirizes the Western European desire to create grand statements in functional domestic objects. The title's use of the word *primordial* also places this depiction outside of historical time. Who are these gods the artist is referring to? Why evoke the beginning of time? Bronstein doesn't specify, leaving the interpretation up to the viewer.

–GP

Ruby Sky Stiler (RISD BFA 2001, Printmaking)
b. 1979 in Portland, Maine; works in New York
Shards, 2009

Six-color screenprint on prepared museum board, mounted on black foam board

Museum purchase with funds from an anonymous donor **2018.93.106**



This print by Ruby Sky Stiler presents what appear to be pieces of ancient Greek pottery, as if we are surveying the findings of an archaeological dig. The fragments are drawn in a style that emulates red- and black-figure Athenian vase painting—historical examples of which you can find on the museum’s fifth floor. From afar, Stiler’s designs exude the authority of ancient history, but this shifts as the viewer looks closer. Stiler explains, “You realize that they are essentially cartoons, made of contemporary art supplies, and are a mash up of centuries of images that span many different cultures. I hope that through this shift in perception the viewer can actively engage with the work through their changing relationship to it.”

–SM