

A Woman's Voice and Space – *Caryatids and Medusas*

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Nataša Prosenč Stearns is one of the rare Slovenian artists, who have devoted her work almost entirely to video art, upgrading it through films and photo-collage prints, and thus developing a distinct artistic language. Her works are intricately crafted in terms of both contents, as well as technical execution, and are deeply anchored in the realm of fine arts. According to herself, it is precisely the medium of moving images that enables her to express her thoughts, viewpoints, and aesthetic principles. Her works are not illustrative, or verbatim; they are multifaceted, originating from the world that surrounds her, and extending to a sphere that transcends the everyday human experience. These are also the principles she pursues in the complex work titled *Caryatids and Medusas*, created specifically for the UGM Studio exhibition space, and shown for the very first time.

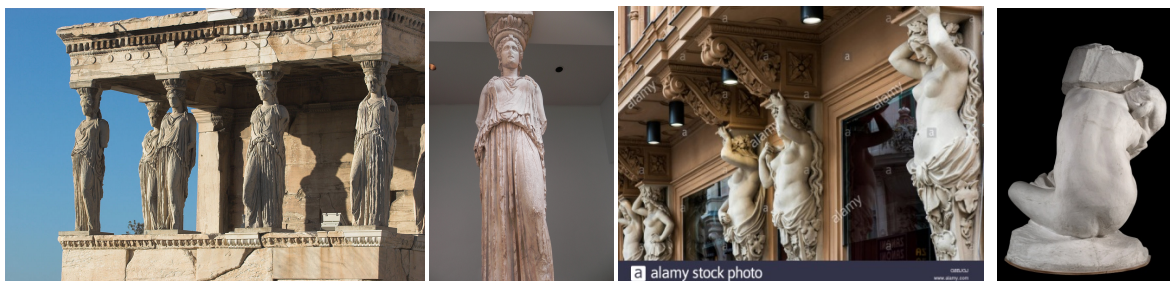
Caryatids and Medusas are built around the artist's recurring narrative starting point – the human body. Especially often, it is the female body that is at the focus of her creative work. To illustrate, let us mention that the body can appear as the emergence of a form, or, quite the contrary, of emotional impulses; moving from an abstract to an increasingly concrete meaning, and vice versa. While the above certainly applies to the present exhibition, this time, the female body is given a much more direct consideration in terms of a socially constructed space. Such a context is suggested by the artworks' titles, since "caryatids and medusas" are terms for female figures, which we can trace back through a long history of mythology, and therefore, interpretation. All of these either literary, or visual interpretations also reveal the position of women in history, i.e. the way they were regarded and considered by those occupying the leading social roles.

It would also appear that "caryatids and medusas" have always been present in the author's oeuvre, and now was just the moment when they came out as artworks in their own right. Caryatids can perhaps be anticipated already in her work *Column* (1997), and medusas in the video installation *Crossing* (2005), or even in *Night Spring* (2015), and *Subsurface* (2016). On the other hand, an immediate predecessor of the present work could also be the film *Mother for Dinner* (2012), which was created five years ago. In the plot the author formed a female alliance, who, while dining and discussing various subjects, also focus on the imperative of maintaining looks, and of "obsessing about an unattainable physical perfection, which clouds the essence of true beauty" (N. P. S.).

In the same work the artist articulates more clearly the link between her two places of residence and in turn, her two creative starting points. The European tradition can be seen as a source of meanings and burdens extending into a common, ancient awareness, but also into a rich world of art (for example, the significance of the Last Supper and its depiction). The American world, which appears in her work as a fresh, draughty, urban space, is shown in the California version as a world that places far too much attention on the external, i.e. also on the illusory, and on outward appearances.

So, who are the "caryatids and medusas"?

Nataša Prosenč Stearns has definitely explored who the "caryatids and medusas" of our history were. And in the long and unpredictable artistic creative process, the pieces of insight and information have also been reflected in her work, whether subconsciously, or quite wilfully. The mythological history, as well as the tradition of depicting caryatids and medusas in the arts is varied, and by no means unambiguous, which is why it cannot be presented in more detail on this occasion. I can only point out what seems as the most important: the pertinacity of the phenomenon, and the significance of visual modifications. The oldest traditions and depictions known today still retain a hint of an era, when the significance of women (and the cosmos) was perceived integrally. This was a time, when the attention of the community was carefully aimed at establishing a cosmological balance. It appears that the transitions involving changes in the conditions were especially important, since they represented the biggest danger of disrupting the balance. Yet death and birth, giving and taking, activity and stagnation, were once interpreted as interconnected elements of a whole. In time, this dynamics was reduced to an interchange of polar opposites, while in the last few millennia, these archetypal perceptions were transformed into a kind of battle between biological sexes. In a time, when some of the most recognizable depictions of "caryatids and medusas" as we know them today were defined, and their mythological origins were being written down, the opposition between sexes had already been fully constructed.



The Erechtheion, 421–406 B. C., Athens; Caryatid from the Erechtheion, today property of the British Museum, London; Caryatids, Kohlmarkt, Vienna; Auguste Rodin, The Fallen Caryatid Carrying her Stone, 1881–1897

Around 2.500 years ago, caryatids were recognized as an important architectural element – a pillar supporting the architraves and lintels of the most treasured buildings of that time – the temple spaces. The most famous architecture with the most famous caryatids – the Erechtheion, 5th century B. C., still sees the woman as powerful. However, during the last few thousand years, the perception of female support to the cosmos has been increasingly replaced by interpretations, which emphasize her entrapment, burden, and constraint. It may sound somewhat paradoxically, but the "caryatid" functioning as a supporting pillar, as rigid as she appears, was actually firm, strong, and upright in herself. Indeed, she could not "move around" a lot in this function; we can only trace fashion trends, especially through their hair and clothing. And yet, not every kind of movement necessarily implies freedom: this is demonstrated through the change that occurred as her supporting function was abandoned, its only purpose now being that of decoration. Thus, in 19th century architecture, we can observe especially her pseudo-functional significance, whereby it is not irrelevant that her space was reduced also in the physical sense, as the "caryatid" moved from spatial dimensions into a purely linear one. During this time, the cosmological had become secular, up to the extent where she is carrying objects in her hands that can be bought in a shopping centre, i.e. inside the building, whose she activity promotes. One of the greatest heralds of modern sculpting, Auguste Rodin, portrayed a "caryatid" in a kneeling position in the very same period. In spite of his exceptional skill as a sculptor, the statue reflects his personal perception of women as a sentience of the era he belonged to. The 19th century can be interpreted as a time when the powerlessness of women in public space reached another one of its peaks. If we look for "caryatids" in our cities, we will be surprised to see how many are there, since they have inspired countless architects admiring antique ideals, as well as numerous other 20th century artists. While studying interpretations of caryatids, we should also pay attention to the aspect of respect for their power.



Medusa, Temple of Artemis, ca. 580 B. C., Archaeological Museum of Corfu; Phidias, Medusa Rondanini, 440 B. C., Glyptothek, Munich; Caravaggio, Head of Medusa, ca. 1996–98, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; Damien Hirst, Rihanna and Medusa, GQ Cover.

Just as the caryatids, the medusas, too, were changing through time. In summing up Medusa's fascinating story according to today's place of accumulated and shared knowledge, Google, we learn that in Greek mythology, Medusa was the mortal one of three Gorgon sisters, with living snakes in place of hair, who turned anyone gazing at her face into stone. With the help of various gods, she was beheaded by the Greek hero Perseus, who then stole her head as a trophy, however, Medusa's severed head did not lose its magical powers, and was used as a weapon against their enemies by both Perseus, and the goddess Athena. The complexity of the underlying story is evident already from this short summary. We should perhaps highlight only that the oldest depictions convey Medusa's power, whether in the form of ritual masks, or as a warrior or priestess; and refer mostly to fertility and a creature that has an important role in the cross section between life and death. In the period of two thousand years ago, depictions of Medusa's head were frequent. They were a kind of a protective amulet, driving away evil forces. They are found on graves, houses, pots, etc. (later even on warrior shields), where they convey everyday emotions, while folk versions testify much more to a sense of the archetypal. "Medusa" has long after served as a protector, and "caryatid" as a supporter of the firmament (the saying about a woman supporting three corners of a house has survived to this day).

In summing up art interpretations from the past two thousand years, when artists were mostly inspired by the abundance of extraordinary events from Medusa's life, these interpretations can also reveal the nature of male-female interpersonal relationships. It is by no means irrelevant, whether artists perceive individual acts as seduction or rape, as a hero's victory or a murder, as punishment or revenge, as a righteous exile or the inability to understand what's different. On one hand, Medusa is an example of one of man's most violent triumphs over the woman's principle and body, while on the other, it also offers something entirely different, an individual settling of scores between a person and their environment. Medusa was depicted by many exceptional artists because of the extraordinary events associated with her; and their works rarely leave a viewer unaffected. Therefore, "medusa" is also a phenomenon, which has, apart from the formal and aesthetic implications, extended further into the subconscious, or, in Freudian terms, she points to an irreconcilable conflict between the conscious self (ego), the instincts (id), and the 'imposed' norms and values (superego). Take, for example, the remarkable Cellini, who turned even the most violent of acts – when Perseus victoriously holds up Medusa's severed head just after the murder – into a homoerotic ode praising the beauty ideal of the male body (1545–1554, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence). Whereas the hot-tempered Caravaggio, a connoisseur of the dark sides of life, used his painting depiction of Medusa's head on a wooden shield to create a fantastic

psychological portrait, one of the most staggering depictions of deadly horror. It seems as though in this sense the looks of the victims, which Medusa saw on countless occasions, are linked to Medusa's ultimate gaze and to the scream of realizing she was defeated. In a highly individualized manner, both these cases relate sex to death, i.e. the dualities of alive – dead, and active – passive, which coincide well with the archetypal as disclosed by Medusa.

A leap to the present: after thousands of years of listening only to the male creative voice, we can now finally hear the female as well. Nataša Prošenc Stearns offers a starting point by posing that revenge is no longer a solution, which at least in the Western culture, with its awareness of the importance of equal opportunities for both genders, is a sensible answer to a senseless opposition. In a time when 'change is the only constant', as the author herself has asserted, it would appear that she joins together that which *can* be joined, in a humanist spirit. The repetition of the caryatid's fixed position creates the sense that the artist's "caryatids" agree to the significance of their static and cyclical condition. She even positions them in such a way, that they connect again the sky and the earth, confirming their role in cosmological integrity. It is interesting to see how the projected collages of various female silhouettes extend the significance of a single body into several dimensions, like a metaphor for a common women's story; an entire history, which unfolds before us.

Caravaggio's "scream" was created, according to the experts, as a consequence of the painter's interest in the acoustics of numerous works of art. Even if the observer did not hear the sound, he knew how to invoke the scream within himself. In the context of women's history it is important that the female voice be heard publicly: in the artist's work, this refers to the personal voice of each and every Medusa. However, this voice is no longer a scream, it is a personal tone formed by an independent, free breath of their lungs. Perhaps at this point the artist comes closer to the lost mystical masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci, in which Medusa is seen blowing up the air. And in Stearns' work this air, if we listen closely, already becomes wind, which appears as Medusa's ally, or even as emanating from her. Nataša Prošenc Stearns capitalizes on Medusa's image, her intense look, her accentuated mouth, and her abounding, living hair, but her "medusas" are portraits of actual women, which attract our attention due to the intensity of the image and its presence. They reveal to us the metropolitan image of the artist's Los Angeles. However, this is also the limit, to which the artist allows a peek into intimacy. What these "medusas" have gone through, we do not know. It is interesting to see that the images, the same as with "caryatids", are linked closely to each other, communicating with their looks, their voice, their hair, and forming a whole when joined together. Thus the traditional, potentially fatal female peculiarities remain symbols of their power, but the whole, despite of their activity, now becomes inclusive.

Let us conclude by saying that everything is not as simple as it appears. As always, Nataša Prosenc Stearns brilliantly turns around this linear narrative, and connects polarities in a variety of ways. If it seemed that "caryatid" addresses the outwardly, i.e. the appearance of women in society, while "medusa" refers to woman's inner personal drama, the artist also points out the fact that such a complex issue cannot be interpreted in a single way, which is why she broadens the manner of reading both these phenomena. As a matter of fact, we should be asking ourselves how society clenches the modern woman's body – are these media-imposed images? Where are the origins of the inner strength of a woman, or even of the Feminine as such? What ritual should we perform, and to what depths must we descend, to get closer to Her?

Last but not least, it is the very set-up of the exhibition that directs us towards the process and to the awareness of our own body. As our look captures the installation of Medusa at the entrance, we then leave the dynamic exhibition space linked to the street in the centre of our city, descending to an almost air-tight, square-shaped basement floor. We enter into moving images and sound. There, in the unknown, we are given the opportunity to feel how our bodies connect to a dimension, which is beyond the personal, and which stretches into a vast, greater expanse.

And what do men feel and think about this? ... How do the artist's "caryatids" address the Atlantes in men? Is he ready for an integrated society?

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