



A world of its own making

In a new book that took five years to make, John Hughes' re-tellings of Greek stories have also been re-imagined as more than 200 artworks by Marco Luccio.

It is a great privilege for writers to have their words translated into images. With *Tales from the Greek*—my collection of eight re-tellings of Greek myths and tragedies—there was a special requirement, however. If a collaboration was going to work, it was crucial the artist be able to find within their deepest self the spirit of ancient Greece: its blood and brutality, its tragedy and pathos, its clarity and excess, its beauty and its terror. From the first image Marco Luccio sent me, it was clear he was all of this and more.

In this book, which has taken us five years to put together, Luccio is not an illustrator, but a second storyteller. The distinction is crucial. The words, that is, tell one story. The images tell that story again, but by different means.

From the time they were but breath and utterance, the Greek myths and tragedies have been worked and re-worked into myriad new tellings, into a thousand different guises and new forms. Every time an audience hears them, they expect something new. The reason I wanted to work with an artist on this project was that we could enact another such re-working, not over the passage of centuries, but simultaneously, from word to image, and in the very same work.

I could choose an example of what I mean by this from almost any of the book's 400 pages. In the fifth story, *Lady Macbeth of Tamarama Bay*, the protagonist is an ageing



woman who has lost a child in childbirth ten years before the story begins, and though now past childbearing years, has been convinced by a fortune teller that she is to have a child. The story is complicated, but it brings her to a climactic situation where she finds an unattended baby in a room. She lifts it out of its cot to nurse. This is what the words say.

Now this is how the image tells the words. Luccio depicts her so that the cradle of her arms and hands is the focus of the etching. Those arms and hands have now become the centre of their own story. Together they distend like a pregnant belly. But how can that be? What the viewer also sees is that those arms are

already nursing a baby, and the baby's body looks very much like the woman's bulging stomach. A sleight-of-hand? A trick of the eye? A blurring quality of the ink, so that the eye is not sure exactly what it's seeing? Whatever the case, the image tells a story of a woman who has wanted to be pregnant her entire life, whose desire is so strong her body becomes an extension of that desire and gives birth to it, while still leaving her fantastic pregnancy intact. The words of the story present a paradox (how can something be both real and unreal at the same time?); the image makes this paradox flesh, the visual equivalent of a riddle. The image delivers something almost incoherent. It's as if we're overhearing a conversation between parts of the body gone adrift, and that which cannot be has become that which is. The words on their own cannot do this. And so, from the writer's point of view, the artist has done a most wonderful thing: the image has achieved something magical and allowed the words to do something words can't normally do.

(opposite)

Marco Luccio, *Freedom 1*, 2021, Drypoint on Velin Arches Paper, 29.5 x 20.5 cm, edition of 25.

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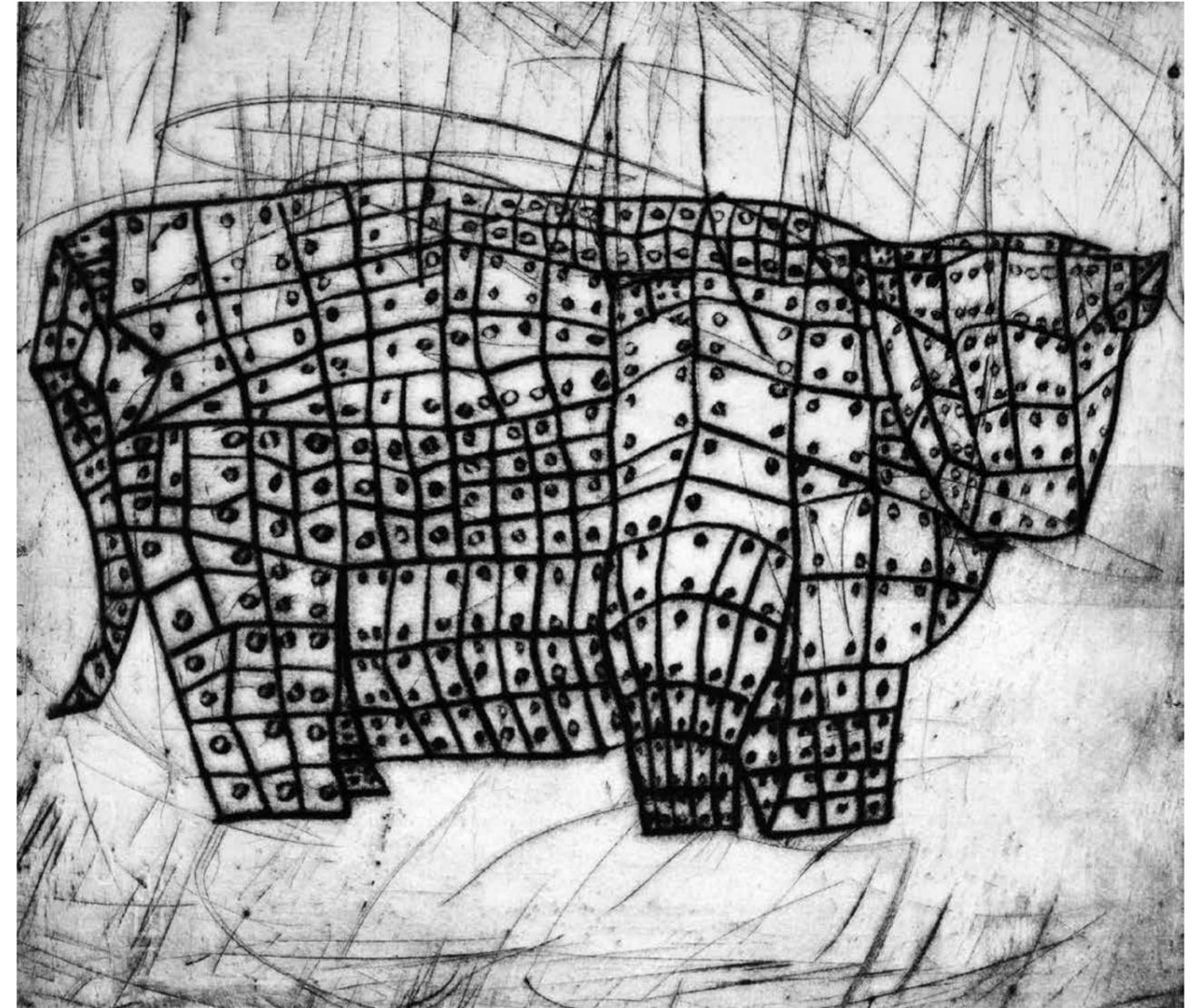


(left)
Marco Luccio, *Mother and Child*,
 2021, Drypoint and Ink on Velin Arches
 Paper, 89 x 60 cm, Unique State.

(below)
Marco Luccio, *The Feather*,
 2021, Drypoint on BFK Rives White Paper,
 17 x 15.5 cm, edition of 25.

(bottom)
Marco Luccio, *The Ride 1*,
 2021, Charcoal on Velin Arches Paper,
 44.5 x 75 cm.

(opposite)
Marco Luccio, *The Wooden Cow*,
 2021, Drypoint on Velin Arches Paper,
 30 x 29 cm, edition of 25.



Drawing knows more than the eye. It knows more than the hand. How often have we heard it said that drawing is an aid to seeing? We draw to see an object better, to 'see our seeing'. Because, to paraphrase E.M. Forster, how can we know what we see until we see what we draw? If drawing is an aid to knowing, does it not follow that we draw to conjure not only what we see, but also what we don't? Logic makes polar opposites of the two, but isn't the truth more likely to be the field produced by these poles? That if the unseen is to be found at all, it will be found only through the seen. And if such a field is to be found anywhere in the visual arts, it is to abstraction that we must turn.

Take the image that spills across two pages at the centre of the book. It depicts a key moment in the story of Antigone. In my re-telling, the story is told like a film running in reverse (so that effects become

causes and causes effects), in order to explore what it means for a family to live under a curse where everything they do has already been determined, the future as fixed as the past. The words at this moment of the story describe Antigone and her uncle Creon, first riding away from the apotheosis of Antigone's father Oedipus at Colonus, then riding back to witness the reversal of that event. Another paradox. But the words are shackled by the inescapable sequentiality of narrative they wish to undermine. The image has no such limitation. It shows the riders of the future and the riders of the past crossing each other, as if time is passing itself. But it does this in a blur; an abstraction. We see not a fixed scene, but a process, a miracle: two things happening at once!

This is the most powerful instance of how word and image can come together. The image would make little sense without

the words, and yet, not only does it render the words and give body to what is, until it exists, merely an idea, it goes beyond the words into a world of its own making, a world of which the words become but its shadow. The artist is an explorer now in a land he has half-created. He starts with the words, then leaves them behind. For the creature he is tracking is the unknown, the words but its traces. And the lines he leaves to mark his way are the veil of the invisible, the folds of a body just risen and left in the bedclothes, still warm. Folds of the words; folds of the unknown.

John Hughes is the author of eight books, the most recent of which is *The Dogs* (2021). *Tales from the Greek* is his second collaboration with Marco Luccio, after their highly successful *The Garden of Sorrows* in 2013.

