

Cecilia Hillstrom Gallery:

Reflections on *New Neo Classics*
by Richard Müller

I visited Katja Larsson last month in her East London studio to discuss *New Neo Classics*. As Larsson walks me through the pieces in the show, the conversation moves from casting techniques, representations of Julius Caesar, and the cultural significance of baseball hats in North America. Throughout these topics, a scene from the 2001 Hollywood film *A Knight's Tale* keeps returning to my thoughts. Mirroring our conversation, *A Knight's Tale* relishes in its own bizarre anachronisms that float between the chivalry of medieval England and the pop culture of millennial North America. Within the scene a blacksmith named Kate, played by Laura Fraser, forges a new set of armour for the protagonist William, played by Heath Ledger. Kate, who has discovered a new method to produce steel that is 'thinner, smaller, but just as strong' is seen emblazoning the breastplate with two "swooshes" identical to the logo of the US shoe company Nike.

We are repeatedly reminded throughout *A Knight's Tale* that we are watching an ahistorical pastiche. The actors inhabit characters that are unfettered imaginings of 14th century life that never release their awareness of the 20th century. The Nike swoosh, etched over the heart of Heath Ledger's character, becomes a type of actor in its own right. The logo joins the cast of actors as a figure that plays out its own anachronist mythologies. Through the unabashed revisionism of Hollywood cinema the swoosh mythologises the Greek god Nike in the medieval future, while also embedding American consumerism into narratives of the past.

Such manufactured mythologies are however, not a recent development. Symbols, stories and characters have been cast as vehicles for such strategic imaginings throughout history. Virgil's epic poem *Aeneid*, dating from around 29 to 19 BCE, was written under the commission of Augustus Caesar during a period of particular political instability. The poem chronicles the fabled journeys of the Trojan Aeneas from the battle of Troy to the founding of Rome. Virgil casts Aeneas, a figure who had previously existed in Greek mythology, as the central role in a founding myth so as to justify the authority of Augustus and his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. Furthermore, the *Aeneid* was vital in cementing the national mythology of Rome as a continuation of the purported "order" and "supremacy" of the previous Athenian Empire.

After departing Larsson's studio, I bicycled westward into the city. Along my journey I watch as the concrete and brick pitched roofs of industrial London give way to the granite and marble columns of Central London. Within the Neo-Classical and Palladian structures of this London I'm reminded how the architectural and aesthetic language of these mythologies have been cast as actors to support the power, violence, and identity of other more contemporary empires. Our modern world is saturated with objects, structures and characters that continue to draw power from the promise of a manufactured past. The political buildings of the United States are styled in the image of Classical democratic infrastructure. The US Navy has named over a dozen warships after Greek mythological figures. Mark Zuckerberg has his hair cut the same as Julius Caesar. A modern emperor in a hoodie.

It is here, in this saturated landscape of identities tied to imaginings of the past, that Larsson's work digs into. *New Neo Classics* draws us to look at the way mythologies are employed and presented in the quotidian objects and language of contemporary life. The ubiquitous image of the baseball cap upscaled in bronze echoes the materiality of an antique helmet, inscribed with phrases that seem hopeful to imbue their strength to its wearer. Larsson enables us to consider the language that adorns the everyday as a type of ward that gain magical properties by drawing from constructed imaginings of a mythological past. Evidencing a desire to amplify the self and society through a hodgepodge of affirmations and threats. Some sculptures do so loudly, *I'm The Queen* declares its authority in bold embossed embroidery. *Kings of Our Destiny* is quieter, its message coyly hidden amongst the crocodile skin textures and pharaonic imagery.

The two sculptures *Eva-Jane Willis As Julius Caesar* and *James Barnes As Julius Caesar* enforce how such desire manifests as a performance of past. The pieces play with ideas of casting: as a material process, and an act of selecting an actor for a role. The figures wear modern clothing and modern brands, however the laurels, gorgon head, and meandros pattern of Fred Perry and Versace seek to find strength in the past. A marketing campaign that travels as allegory through time and material. The works of *New Neo Classics* carry marks not carved by the passage of time, but by the ricochet between meaning across history.

In the end of the scene in *A Knight's Tale* a character asks Kate the blacksmith what the Nike Swooshes etched onto the armour mean, she replies simply 'the marks of my trade'.

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