

MICHAEL ALLEN LOWE

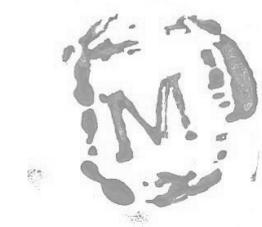


SYMPLEGMA

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ARTIST STATEMENT

MY CURRENT BODY OF WORK is a union of classical systems and a contemporary methodology. I utilize classical painting fragments as functioning components in a new imagined environment. I gather a variety of diverse imagery as an investigation into the more tantalizing aspects of painting in both subject and technique. In this way, my work simultaneously demonstrates a learned classical craft and any number of abstract painting styles. The resultant paintings become overlapping layers of imagery and narrative, with the goal of creating a masterful graffiti that speaks of the past, present, and future.

This work represents my continuing influences and fascination with eighteenth and early nineteenth century artists such as Henry Fuseli, William Blake, George Romney, and their contemporaries. Dynamic compositions, powerful narratives, and sensually drawn lines, are

indicative of all the great artists during this time. I found Fuseli's drawing *Symplegma*, c.1809-10, one of his more erotic, to be a perfect example of this, representing all of these traits. The drawing depicts a scene of choreographed nudes: three women, and a prostrate man. It is both illustratively titillating and masterfully academic, a contrast I utilize in my new body of work of the same title.

The word *symplegma*, from the Greek, is defined as a complex group, entangled, or intertwined. Many classical sculptures, paintings, and drawings of amorous wrestling couples, even groupings of an anomalous, bestial sort, have been affixed this label. Befittingly, this term is used to title the more erotic drawings and studies taken from the sketch-books of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Masters, including Fuseli and his circle. Given the blatant subject matter of these works, many

could be viewed as mildly pornographic if not for the overriding references to classical mythology and literature, which softens their vulgarity.

I have developed my work in this way, as an investigation into the language of painting and its rich history of storytelling. I reference a variety of amorous scenes depicting the follies of lust and love and contrast them with fragments of classical paintings that radically exaggerate and reinforce these narratives. The narratives of these works reference history, philosophy, mythology, allegory, psychology, and sexuality. Along with the variety of conceptual aspects, my works also contain a variety of painting techniques that pull the imagery across the centuries from the classical to the contemporary.

I am greatly inspired by the Flemish and French school masters Rubens, Van Dyke,

Watteau, Boucher, and Ingres, and I have learned a great deal from them through referencing fragments of their works. I find the technical ability of these artists to be inspiring, challenging, and a functional contrast to the linear narrative drawing that I include in my work. My intention is to provide the viewer a glimpse of what I believe painting really is, and where it can go. It will never cease to amaze me—the relevance of antiquity and yet, still the potential for originality. Painting with this in mind I am aware, and cannot forget, that I am treading on the shoulders of giants as I search for innovation. The conception of these paintings has been a wresting of entangled and opposing imagery, born into an exhibition of new works entitled *Symplegma*.

—M.A.L.

Illumination of the Drunkards

OIL ON CANVAS 48 X 33 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

The catalyst for this work was a preparatory study for the etching in Godefroy's *L'oeuvre Grave'de Adriaen van Ostade*, titled *The Letter (Les Haranguers)*, c.1667. The background characters represent a band of artists and rhetoricians who believed in love above all things. Lowe contrasts this imagery with a nude drunken bar maiden from Hendrick Terbrugghen's painting *Unequal Couple*, c.1623. Lowe's inclusion of the bar maiden, most likely a prostitute, is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the synonymous relationship between the terms *artist* and *drunkard*, a subject matter Lowe further personalizes by painting himself into the work as the central candle bearing figure. The right hand of the bar maiden is acknowledging the appearance of the artist. This work appears to be Lowe's caricature of the stereotypical romantic life of artists.



Les Animateurs

OIL ON CANVAS 42 X 56 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

This work is a reinterpretation of Fuseli's drawing *Symplegma (Erotic Scene with a Man and Three Women)*, c.1809–10. Lowe has held closely to some of Fuseli's original illustrative lines while obliterating others. The costume of a sitar playing musician from Watteau's *Gathering under a Portico*, and *The Music Lesson*, c.1718–19, has been used by Lowe to clothe the previously nude prostrate male figure in this ménage à trios. This scene has also been interwoven with an ensemble of voyeurs, *Comédiens Italiens (Italian Players)* from a drawing by Watteau, c.1717. Lowe has embellished this erotic tryst to the point of transforming it into an animated boudoir rumpus, mired by a gallant party.



Les Agents Provocateur

OIL ON CANVAS 54 X 40 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

This work is Lowe's response to a nineteenth century Fuseli drawing *Girl Combing Her Hair, Watched by a Young Man*, c.1810–20. Lowe exaggerates the voyeuristic tension within this original work by adding more figures and staging a much more titillating scene. The young girl combing her hair has been replaced with two figures from a different Fuseli drawing, *Two Lesbians Looking into a Mirror*, c.1810–20. Another agent has been added, a fleshed-out male figure in red period clothing from Antoine Watteau's *Gilles and Four other Characters*, c.1719. Lowe has juxtaposed the foreground figures to frame the narrative, having been careful not to eclipse the unfurling erotic scene.



Icarus and the Bathers

OIL ON CANVAS 42 X 54 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

Lowe's work reinvents Fuseli's drawing *The Fall of Icarus and Bathing Women*, c.1795. The mythical fall dramatized by Fuseli, has been further exaggerated by Lowe. Lowe's Icarus is a free copy after an etching of the same name by Hendrik Goltzius, c.1588. This anatomically proportioned figure contrasts the illustratively painted bathing women. The fleshed-out Indian page has been referenced from Anthony Van Dyck's *William Feilding 1st Earl of Denbigh*, c.1633-34. The young page, originally gesturing to a perched native bird, now directs the viewer's eye to the fall.



Feeding of the Phrygians

OIL ON CANVAS 54 X 42 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

This work was formulated around an unresolved painting of two female figures by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon titled *L'Abundance*, c.1812–20. Lowe has painted these central female figures encumbered by breastfeeding Phrygians, referenced from Van Dyck's *Drunken Silenus*, c.1620. The Phrygians, in turn, are being fed to the flesh-eating horses of Diomedes, originally portrayed attacking a nude Hercules in Fuseli's illustration, c.1800–05. The abundant produce and sustenance flowing from the cornucopia in Prud'hon's work have been replaced by Lowe with a ravenous horde of man and beast.



Company of Thieves

OIL ON CANVAS 48 X 64 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

Lowe's inspiration for this work, the subject of Fuseli's *The Thieves Punishment*, c.1772, and William Blake's *The Punishment of the Thieves*, c.1824–27, illustrate a scene from Dante's *Inferno* in which thieves are eternally consumed and transformed by serpents. Lowe's stylized free copy combines the original works in a harmonious splice between their overlapping compositions. The central figure, from George Romney's *A Boy, Called William Pitt*, c.1778, is portrayed as a costume of white sophisticated attire that personifies innocence. The juxtaposition of the imagery within this work intensifies the essence of its referenced parts in a dramatic contrast of anthropomorphic forms.



Europa

OIL ON CANVAS 70 1/4 x 80 1/2 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

The setting for Lowe's reinterpretation of this Greek myth comes from a mid-15th century drawing *A Mounted Knight with a Lance*, by Uccello, thought to be St George. Lowe's Europa is after a foreground nymph from François Boucher's *The Rape of Europa*, c.1733–34. Lowe has incorporated decorative art nouveau elements in this work including metallic gold paint and stylized flowers in the vein of Gustav Klimt. Lowe's work is a visual exploration into coexisting and contrasting mythological identities: the primal masculine and the sacred feminine.



Monument du Costume

OIL ON CANVAS 63 X 96 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

This work was inspired by a Jean Michel Moreau drawing, *La Déclaration de la Grossesse (Disclosure of Pregnancy)*, c.1775, an illustration for the *Suite d'estampes pour servir à l'Histoire des Moeurs et du Costume Des françois dans le XVIIIe Siècle (The Monument du Costume)*, originally published in 1775. Lowe has referenced several fragments of this drawing: the reticule and fire screen, the decorative table and chairs, and two of the figures who presumably represent the physician and grandmother-to-be. The physician's clothes have been fleshed-out in the manner of John Singer Sargent, resembling a costume of the artist's *Portrait of Carolus-Duran*, c.1879. Lowe has replaced the expectant mother with an embracing nude couple after Fuseli's *Adam and Eve*, c.1799. The backdrop for this scene echoes the hellish, surrealistic landscape drawing *The Temptation of St Anthony* by Jacques Callot, c.1617. Lowe has painted over Callot's cavernous landscape with an ethereal environment for this annunciation, allowing only the red dragon to remain.



Le Trou Perdu

OIL ON CANVAS 60 X 72 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

The title for this work, *Le Trou Perdu* (*The Lost Hole*), is comparable in slang with the vulgar *shit hole*, meaning a dirty and unpleasant place. This work is a reimagining of Fuseli's drawing, *The Death of Eriphyle*, c.1810, wherein the Greek mythological Furies are in pursuit of Eriphyle's murderous son. In a dramatic contrast of this imagery, Lowe has spliced a free copy of William Bouguereau's angelic *Sketch of a Young Woman* with a urinating female figure. Lowe's painting conveys an exaggerated delineation between the realm of the gods, represented by the pursuing Furies of conscience, and the mortal world, represented by nude figures taking refuge in an outhouse.



Dido in Cyprus

OIL ON CANVAS 71 X 71 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

This work began as a free copy of Hans von Marees's *Ancient Chariot with a Pair of Horses and Several Female Figures*, mid-19th century. Unlike the original drawing, Lowe has delivered a transparent view through the voluminous masses, revealing the anatomy of the work and previously hidden figurative elements such as the chariot and charioteer. Using live models, the original proportion, scaling, and foreshortening, problems have been corrected. Lowe references a nymph from Boucher's *Mercury Confiding Bacchus to the Nymphs*, c.1733, to portray Dido, and has incorporated decorative painting elements indicative of Gustav Klimt portraiture. Lowe's scene depicts Dido, Queen and founder of Carthage, upon her arrival in Cyprus, witnessing her soldiers being propositioned on the shore.



Milk Maids

OIL ON CANVAS 71 X 71 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

This work originated as a free copy of an erotic lithograph by Achille Deveria, from a private edition of *Don Juan* in the mid-19th century. In his work, Lowe has removed the male figure from the erotic ménage a trios, and replaced him with yet another female figure that is also attributable to Deveria, from an edition of the erotic novel *Gamiani (Two Nights of Excess)*, written by Alfred de Musset. All three figures are interacting with a Rubenesque study of a cow. The sprawling female bodies are set against a vibrant color field containing decorative forms indicative of Gustav Klimt portraiture. Lowe has orchestrated an amorous scene of intertwined figures that grossly exaggerates the intrigue and titillation historically associated with the occupations: maidservant, milkmaid, and wet nurse.



Night Owls

OIL ON CANVAS 72 X 92 3/4 INCHES

SYNOPSIS

The setting for this work is a boudoir scene from Jean-Honore Fragonard's drawing, *Les Jets d'eau*, c.1765-70, wherein nozzles have emerged from the floor spraying water, awaking sleeping nude female figures. Lowe exaggerates the imagery in this mildly erotic drawing by replacing the nozzles with phalluses, and adds figures from his own imagination. The fleshed-out children in Victorian dress are referenced from Antoine Watteau's painting *Country Amusements*, c.1720. Lowe's imagined ghostly apparitions, or owl bottomed ladies, amusingly illustrate the common colloquial term *night owls*.

*There many a bird of broadest pinion built
Secure her nest, the owl, the kite, and daw
Long-tongued, frequenter of the sandy shores.
A garden-vine luxuriant on all sides
Mantled the spacious cavern, cluster-hung
Profuse; four fountains of serenest lymph
Their sinuous course pursuing side by side,
Stray'd all around, and ev'ry where appear'd. . .*

The Odyssey of Homer (Book V. p.110)
Translated by Henry Fuseli



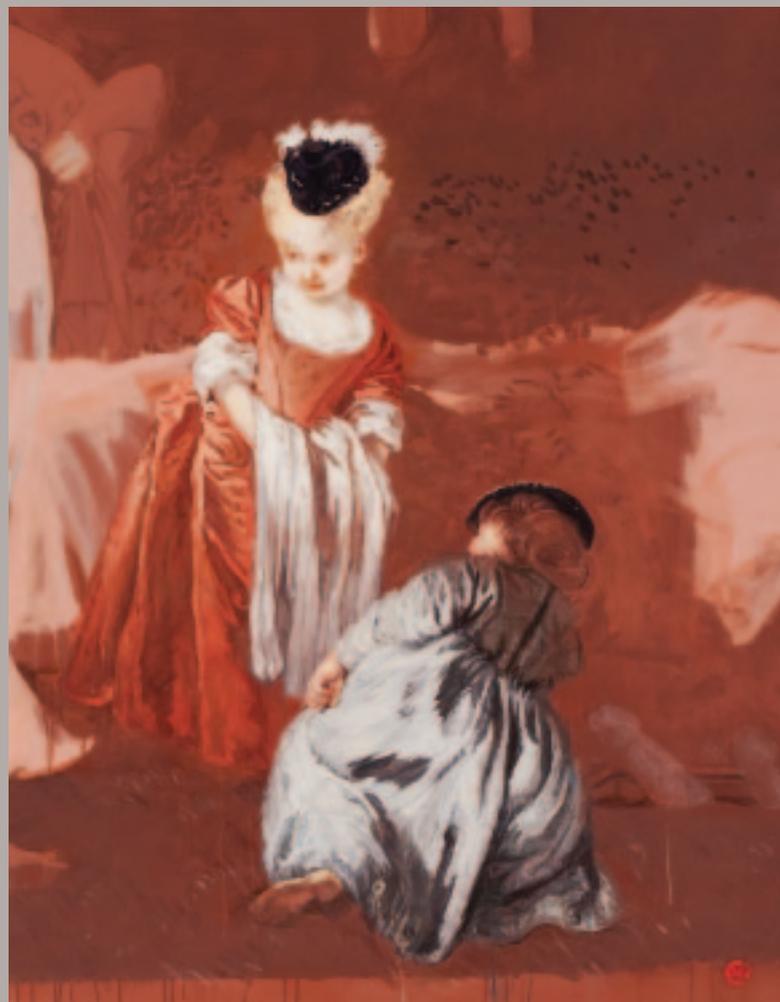


BIOGRAPHY

MICHAEL ALLEN LOWE was born November 6, 1979, in Hennepin County, Minnesota. Lowe holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Kansas City Art Institute. His paintings are collected internationally, most recently through the Wally Findlay Gallery (New York City, Palm Beach, and Barcelona). In addition to painting, Lowe is also an accomplished writer, and illustrator. Lowe's premiere solo exhibition *Lazarus* opened June 2008 in New York City. His exhibition *Symplegma* opened November 2011 at the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center, in Kansas City, Missouri. Lowe keeps his studio in the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts.

www.michaelallenlowe.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATHER RASMUSSEN AND BILL WRIGHT



Night Owls (DETAIL) OIL ON CANVAS 72 X 92 3/4 INCHES

FRONT COVER

Monument du Costume (DETAIL) OIL ON CANVAS 63 X 96 INCHES