

Queer Mysteries, 1993

Acrylic back-painted on acrylic sheets, 28 panels total
Collection of the artist

This mural is loosely based on the Pompeian original. Here there are two overlapping narratives, a lesbian sci-fi version that reads left to right and a gay Edwardian horror version that reads right to left. Characters have changed in gender and activity from the original, but each version has the same number of figures posed similarly to the originals in Pompeii. Both versions overlap, and include the gaps of the room in the Villa where the doorway and windows exist. This new version is larger than the original because our 20th Century life-size contrasts with the smaller average height in the early Roman Empire.

The location of the corners in **Queer Mysteries** differs from the original as well, to conform to the available space and shape of differing exhibition spaces. The single panel that forms a doorway is both the first panel of the installation and the final panel of the Edwardian story. In an ideal configuration, this panel and its sci-fi equivalent (the Earthling woman in alien garb) would form a double doorway. This would show the two final figures as an introduction, and the mural would surround the viewer who closes the doors.

What is the meaning of these **Queer Mysteries**? The Dionysian original is incomplete, with portions missing. There is disagreement among art historians, anthropologists and other professionals as to both the meanings of the whole and the importance of particular symbols and actions. The Jungian interpretation allowed the artist to use a single character as protagonist, making for a more effortless reading of the narratives as they overlap.

This setup also allowed the artist free play with particulars of the original narrative, to add new meanings and mysteries, and to deal with both personal obsessions and comment on our world at the Second Millennium. Like the original, these are representations of initiation rituals that occur universally, from puberty rites and fraternity hazings to weddings and religious conversions. They are all ceremonies of belonging.

While the original documents a ceremony for the entrance of women into a religious cult in a society that repressed and controlled social and political outlets for women, **Queer Mysteries** comically poses specific rituals for coming out as a member of the gay community (as if it was possible), while simultaneously poking fun at the 20th Century corruption of the psychic value of myth and ritual into such vicarious forms as comics and B grade film in our secular culture. Lesbians are cold but sexy aliens, and gay men cavort as sex-crazed cannibals, mad scientists and blasé gentry, a commentary on the nightmare fantasies of homophobes everywhere.

In its larger-than-life scale, loud colors, and untouched-by-human hands appearance, it is finally a monumental work for the gay community and a message to the straight world. It rises above the senseless tragedy of the AIDS epidemic and its dark representations of pain, grief and loss, and laughs at the ugliness of bigotry, ignorance and intolerance. The stifling limitations of good taste and gay assimilationism are both made objects of derision in this mural, finally reminding us that we all live in a world that is, for all of us, truly *queer*.

The Mural from The Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, circa 88 AD

Artist unknown

Fresco, in situ

The Villa of the Mysteries, like other buildings from Pompeii and a neighboring town, Herculaneum, survived the major eruption of Vesuvius by being buried in ash. The mural was left almost entirely intact, and unlike many other paintings and sculpture from the excavations that began in the 18th Century (and that continue today) were left on site instead of being carted off to the Naples Museum. The Villa, being outside the walls of Pompeii, was not unearthed until the 1920s, and for many years was only shown to grown men, women and children being thought by the Catholic Church as unfit to see such a risqué series of ceremonies. Fortunately for women and children, the Mural is now available for all to see (at a price).

Much is unknown about the detailed symbology of the Mural, mainly due to the secret nature of the Dionysian Mystery Cult. This cult has left no written documents that survived ancient times, probably due to the fact that the religion was suppressed by the Roman Empire because of its violent and sexual rituals, and because it was run by women. The cult served partially as a social outlet for Roman women, and gave them an outlet for their social and political (and perhaps sexual) impulses. Roman women at the time were expected to act more like servants to their husbands, and single women were not much better off than slaves or prostitutes.

To make matters more confusing, art historians all manage to disagree with each other as to the finer points of symbolism when discussing the mural, and so these fine points are usually glossed over to provide the interpreter with a chance to put his own theories in the spotlight. During research for the mural, David Dashiell came across a text written by a student of Carl Jung, which instead of providing a typical art-historical analysis, concentrates instead on the universal aspects of the ceremony, and attempts to prove that the mural shows the progress of a single initiate as she is transformed from outsider to finally become the wise house matron, overseeing the ceremony for the transformation of new initiates.

This version of the narrative begins by showing the initiate, dressed in street clothing as she first arrives at the ceremony, where she is greeted by a child playing a pan-pipe and a woman, about to read a sacred text. After this scene, the initiate is shown stripped down, carrying a bowl of items (presumably the ingredients of a hallucinogenic potion) to a group of women busily preparing the potion. The next scene becomes more poetic in its representations, as the god Silenius (god of Sleep) plays a lyre while watching two she-goats being breast-fed by a pair of women satyrs.

This scene is actually a symbolic representation of the ingestion of the secret elixir by initiates, probably intending to show both the innocence of the initiate and the benevolence of the ceremonies' leaders. At the very end of this first wall the initiate is shown in terror, attempting to run from the scenes in which she is to witness the mysteries.

The next scene is more complex, showing Silenius and the two satyrs again, with Silenius looking back at the frightened woman with annoyance, while he performs a symbolic action with his young satyrs. This act consists basically of Silenius holding up a water jug for one of the satyrs to peer into, where it acts as a mirror. The satyr, expecting to see his own reflections, instead is confronted by a devilish mask being held aloft by the other satyr.

Next to this ensemble sits the enthroned Dionysus, entranced by his lover Ariadne. Although we cannot see her face, we assume that the glances she gives him are equally loving. Also blocked from our view are the expressions and actions of two women who must be witnessing the kneeling initiate who is attempting to uncover the sacred phallus, presumably the great secret of the cult. The initiate has lost one of her shoes, which sits beneath the throne of Dionysus and Ariadne. Next to this initiate is the winged figure of Eos, who simultaneously turns away from the still-drugged initiate uncovering the sacred phallus, and prepares to beat her into submission in the following scene.

Here the initiate comes out of her trance held by an assistant and watched over by a woman with a staff topped by Acanthus leaves, symbolizing the sacred nature of this action. In front of her the newly initiated woman dances in joy, with hand cymbals, celebrating her successful passage through the ceremony.

Following a break in the narrative caused by the insertion of the first of two windows, is a scene showing the newly initiated woman at her toilet as she dresses for her return to the outside world. She is accompanied by an assistant (perhaps the old mistress of the house) and two cherubs, one holding up a mirror, and one simply standing and admiring her.

Following the break of the second set of windows, the isolated figure of the initiate as the new house mother or matron, smiles wisely as she either reminisces about the ceremony she once went through, or perhaps observes the action of a new initiation enfolding before her. Her isolated portrait, next to the entrance of the room, acts both as an invitation to the ceremony and the end of the narrative.

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universal meanings of the initiation ritual and allowed a reading in which a single initiate (the blondes, both male and female) could be effortlessly read as particular characters advancing through the narrative. This setup also allowed the artist free play with particulars of the original narrative, to add new meanings and mysteries, and to deal with both personal obsessions and comment on our world at the Second Millennium. Like the original, these are representations of initiation rituals that occur universally, from puberty rites and fraternity haziness to weddings and religious conversions. They are all ceremonies of belonging.

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