

| COCA PROFILE |

Artist duo finds beauty in beasts

By S. D. Green

Special to the Democrat

This time of year people engage the ghouls and beasts at Halloween events, where our fear of monsters and the unknown makes festive entertainment. MANDEM's art engages these creatures year-round, asking audiences to challenge their views of beauty and perspectives on societal norms.

Maize Arendsee and Moco Steinman-Arendsee work collectively as MANDEM (pronounced "Man-dum," and derived from a play on their initials, M and M), creating classically inspired macabre works in paint and digital media.

Their mixed-media artwork "Medusa in Her Sunday's Best" portrays a woman dressed in typical Sunday fashion, in front of a beautiful suburban home, with a string of pearls around her neck. In the artists' world, this woman also happens to be Medusa, the gorgon of Greek myth with a head brimming with snakes.

"It speaks to the original myth of Medusa where she is killed after being betrayed by her sister," said Maize. "In our piece, you see a version where Medusa's sister doesn't betray her. It asks the question, 'If as women we can survive and not betray each other, then how can we make a life?'"

The duo has created mixed-media paintings, book and album covers, installation art and now a 15-minute silent film to be screened at Fermentation Lounge on Oct. 18. And despite their penchant for featuring creatures typically perceived as monstrous or gro-



Maize Arendsee and Moco Steinman-Arendsee.

tesque, their fine art techniques and spellbinding narratives have won them honorable mentions at the annual *Creative Tallahassee* shows, plus exhibitions at Tallahassee City Hall Gallery this month and the LeMoyné Center for Visual Arts this January, as well as raves from fantasy game creators.

They recently completed artwork on the role-playing game "Pirates and Dragons," a project that exhibits their ability to see things from a distinct point of view.

"The reason we wanted to be involved in 'Pirates and Dragons' is that we got to put this ethical spin on the game play," Maize said.

The painting that became the cover for the game, "Nest of the Green Eyes," is currently on display at the City Hall exhibit, "The Back of Beyond."

"Dragons love gold and pirates love gold," Maize said. "But since everyone is going to identify with the pirates straight off, we wanted to give some humanity to the other side. So we came up with the concept that the dragons need the gold to protect their eggs."

This foregrounding of

monsters and other marginalized characters, bringing them out of the shadows to challenge the pre-judgments society places on outcasts, is central to MANDEM's gorgeous gothic steam punk and surreal dreamscapes they call "Myth Punk."

"What's important to our work is taking things that are monstrous and dangerous and making them beautiful," Moco said.

MANDEM's work is heavily informed by traditional European fairy tales, late 19th century German Expressionist film, as well as the Greco-Roman myths read widely in grade school.

"One of our most popular paintings, 'Marooned,' has elements reminiscent of Homer's epic poem 'The Odyssey,'" Maize said.

In fact, their mutual love of the literary classic "The Phantom of the Opera" was essential to their first meeting as middle schoolers.

"We were both on a website for Victorian fiction," Moco said. "I read a piece of 'Phantom' fan fiction that Maize wrote and I fell madly in love with her after reading her stories,"



Working on "Medusa" S. D. GREEN/SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

"Before we met in person, we wrote a novel together and got it published at a small press," Moco said. "It was called 'Locked in the Dark.'"

It was Moco's concept and Maize did most of the writing. This collaborative chemistry evolved into the work of MANDEM.

Growing up, Maize and her military family moved a lot, while Moco served as primary caregiver for her grandmother in Cleveland. When Moco's grandmother moved to an elder care facility, the artists were both briefly homeless; the situation was the catalyst for their arrival in Tallahassee.

"We adored this Tallahassee band called the Cruxshadows," Maize said. "All we had was Moco's grandmother's car. We'd follow the band when they were within driving distance. We started doing graphics

for a fan website for the band and they saw it and asked us to do their album art."

That's when they got serious about art.

"Our process always starts with what we call the 'napkin stage,'" Moco said.

Then the work goes through phases including taking a photo reference of locations and costumes and manipulating them digitally. The preliminary photography is an essential reference for bringing their dreamlike creations to life.

"We try to do stuff as photo-realistic as possible," Moco said. "Usually when people see fantastical kind of artwork like this, the thing that ruins the believability is when the lighting is not right."

Maize, who already has a master's in interdisciplinary humanities, is currently completing her master's in fine arts

IF YOU GO

What: Opening Reception for "The Back of Beyond": Artworks by Carrie Ann Baade, MANDEM & James Mazza, curated by the Council on Culture & Arts (COCA)
When: 6-7:30 p.m. Friday
Where: City Hall Gallery, 300 S. Adams St., 2nd floor
Cost: Free
Call: 224-2500 or visit www.cocanet.org/city-hall

at FSU. But school and art aren't her only concerns.

"We have a 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Kitsuko," Maize said. "Most of my painting time comes when she's asleep, or I'll set up her easel next to me and she will do her own paintings."

Kitsuko has bonded to her parents' art in the way many children her age bond with stuffed animals. When much of the artwork around the house was moved for the current exhibit, she became a little concerned.

"Kitsuko asked, 'Where are my friends?' We had to explain to her that they are going to be in an art show," Moco said.

Perhaps this is a testament to MANDEM's success at taking beasts and outsiders and showing their humanity. As Maize quoted: "There's a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, that's a major touchstone for our work, which includes the line: 'Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage.'"

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