

The Legend of Ayon: A Sculptural Monomyth

by

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The Legend of Ayon is a sculptural representation of a hero's journey into a world of the unknown, then returning victorious after overcoming trials and tribulations. My research depicts my fascination with fantasies originating from ancient historical myths and combining them with modern mythology. I view the various forms of modern media, film being one example, as this era's mythologies. Ayon is a warrior pursuing a monster, who overcomes the trials of the wilderness and the unknown world and is guided towards a realization that community is stronger together than fractured. For me, these sculptural vessels, dragons, and objects have become a therapeutic process by using a variety of materials to fabricate a body of work that invokes a sense of permanence, structural integrity, and tranquility.

The Legend of Ayon: A Sculptural Monomyth

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by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	v
List of Plates	vi
Introduction.....	1
The Legend	2
Mythology.....	4
The Call to Adventure.....	7
Threshold	9
Mentor.....	11
The First Trial.....	14
Confluence of the Abyss	16
The Final Trial.....	19
The Warrior.....	22
Legend Apotheosis.....	25
Conclusion	27
Works Cited	28

List of Figures

Figure 1: Scene from Hayao Miyazaki's film <i>Kaze no Tani no Nausicaa</i> 1984	5
Figure 2: Journey 2012.....	6

List of Plates

Plate 1: <i>Thief</i>	8
Plate 2: <i>Vessel</i>	10
Plate 3: <i>Dragon</i>	11
Plate 4: <i>Dragon (detail shot)</i>	12
Plate 5: <i>Sword of the Iron Root Tree (with pedestal)</i>	14
Plate 6: <i>The Guide</i>	17
Plate 7: <i>Gorathel</i>	20
Plate 8: <i>Gorathel (detail shot)</i>	20
Plate 9: <i>Ayon</i>	24
Plate 10: <i>Legend Apotheosis 1</i>	25
Plate 11: <i>Legend Apotheosis 2</i>	25
Plate 12: <i>Legend Apotheosis 3</i>	26

Introduction

“By so naming things and describing them you are only inventing your own terms about them. And just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth.”

— Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography

Mythology is one of the oldest forms of storytelling and is rooted in the traditions of human emotion as well as the experiences of the individuals who tell them. These stories have influenced not only ancient cultures, but modern as well. My research depicts my fascination with fantasies originating from ancient historical myths and combining them with modern mythology. I view the various forms of modern media, film being one example, as this era’s mythologies. Using the elements and intrigue inspired by existing mythology, my artwork tells an adventurous narrative about a hero who travels to slay a dangerous beast and reacquire a magical amulet. The narrative is classically told in the structure of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, which is where most of my research stems from as well as other sources of fictional writing like the *Prose Edda*. By using steel banding, plaster gauze, and other various material to construct this body of work, my process has become therapeutic. Identity, movement, form, and color are the common themes in my artwork.

To better characterize the narrative of my artwork, I have written my own monomyth that parallels this series. In my studies, trying to find a correlation between my art and mythology began by asking key questions. What purpose does mythology serve within this body of work? Which myths and legends have influenced the overall narrative and aesthetic of the story this series is telling? How can a series of sculptures tell a story?

The Legend

In the land of Midrealm, there was a viridescent relic known as the amulet of life that connected and balanced the world within its influence. One day, a nightmarish serpent-like beast with onyx skin and multiple arms known as Gorathel stole the amulet of life from its holding place. The absence of the relic caused discord amongst the people and wildlife of the world. Many stood up against this powerful creature, but no weapon could pierce its skin. To quell the devastation, a warrior named Ayon, set out from his home to find a way to slay the monster. As he traveled, Ayon came across a container marked by Gorathel. Knowing that the evil beast delighted in imprisoning its foes, he opened the container. Out of the vessel a great dragon emerged in a torrent of wind and light. Freed from its shackles, the dragon thanked Ayon for his act of kindness and informed him that Gorathel seeks to overthrow all beings that watch over the balance of life. The dragon also spoke of a weakness that they had discovered before being sealed away by Gorathel. Its skin could only be pierced by the roots of the magical Iron Root Tree.

To help Ayon in his journey, the dragon showed him where he would find such a tree. With this knowledge passed to him, Ayon continued his journey until he found what the dragon had spoken of. A large tree with magical bark more durable than any other material he had come across. He dug underneath the tree and found a piece of root that it had shed. Ayon took the piece back to the dragon, who with its own breath of flames, helped forge the root into a sword that could fell any monster that would plague Midrealm.

With the sword now at his side, Ayon set out once more to find and confront the nightmarish monster. Knowing that it was being hunted, Gorathel cast a dark spell and summoned a dense forest of poisonous brambles between itself and the warrior. However, Ayon

knew that walking around the forest would allow the Nightmare more time to escape, so he forced his way under the dark canopy. The further he traveled, the wearier he became, and soon the young warrior was lost.

When all hope seemed lost, Ayon saw a vibrantly colored spirit in the shape of a stag beast through the jagged branches. Being the caretaker of Midrealm and unable to face Gorathel on its own, the great spirit was sympathetic to Ayon's quest. So, it guided Ayon through the poisonous forest and prevented him from straying down dangerous paths. When they emerged from the wilderness, the spirit bestowed an enchanted citrine gemstone upon Ayon's newly forged sword. The enchantment gave the weapon unparalleled balance to always find its mark when swung.

Continuing his path, Ayon finally caught up to and chased Gorathel into a decaying valley covered in its dark magic. The monster brandished the amulet of life, fusing with it and gaining regenerative capabilities in defense against the young warrior. However, this did not sway Ayon in his efforts to face the beast. As he swung the sword, it cut through Gorathel's armored skin as if it were cloth. The wounds would slowly heal themselves, but Ayon would not let up as the battle raged on. In a desperate attempt to destroy the young warrior, Gorathel recklessly threw itself at Ayon with all its talons and fangs bared. Finally seeing an opening in the monster's chest, Ayon thrust the sword into its heart, letting the magic guide the blade to its mark. Within a moment, Gorathel fell to the ground and was no more. Ayon was then able to retrieve the amulet of life from the corpse of the monster and return it to its rightful place.

With Gorathel killed, there was no more use for the sword. Its purpose was fulfilled, and Ayon returned the sword to the dragon, who made an altar for it to rest upon and remain. With his journey complete, Ayon returned home with Midrealm at peace once more.

Mythology

Drawing inspiration from my references to most mythology, the fictional narrative is written down in the style of a short story. This story will also be illustrated in my thesis exhibition in the format of a hand scroll. With the myth written down, the viewer can better establish the setting that this series of figures and objects reside in. This fictitious world is a realm of fantastical creatures of good and evil that serve individual purposes of helping or opposing the path of the protagonist.

In Campbell's books *The Hero's Journey* and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he discusses the patterns used in mythological stories. His research follows the consistencies within myths where a character leaves the familiar world, survives many trials and tribulations, and finally overcomes the journey that has altered who they are for the better. Campbell made the argument that the Hero's Journey is not only relevant to characters in mythological stories, but to all individuals man and woman alike. In Dr Julie Willans' paper *The Hero's Journey as a metaphor for personal transformation*, her research suggests that the twelve-step structure of the Hero's Journey is significantly applicable to the therapeutic process. She states, "In their replication of the trials and tribulations that we experience as part of understanding what it is to be human, fairy-tales, classics, myths and legends can give meaning to our lives." The stories, myths, legends, and fables, as farfetched as they can be, are often relatable to the audience. They have a limitless potential to impart influential experiences. Campbell also considers that the characters within the story should not be taken as fact, but as metaphors, and the underlying meanings can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Modern mythology is often depicted as fantasy seen through the mediums of fictional writing, films, television shows, and videogames. Animated films have been commonly used for

this, as they have seemingly endless possibilities to portray symbolism. A good example of this would be Hayao Miyazaki's 1984 film *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaa*, also translated for western audiences as *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. The setting of the film takes place in a fictional dystopian world that has been desolate for a thousand years following a near extinction event brought on by massive advanced mechanical robots known as Giant Warriors. The film was inspired by the Minamata disaster which happened in 1932, where a petrochemical factory dumped heavy metals, which included mercury, into the Kyushu Bay.



Figure 1: Scene from Hayao Miyazaki's film *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaa* 1984

Videogames have also served as artistic mediums that have influenced my artwork, such as *Journey* (figure 2) which was released in 2012. In the game, the player controls a cloaked figure that walks across a vast desert while collecting floating pieces of fabric that eventually allow the player to jump through the air to solve platforming puzzles. *Journey* has subtle hints of

metaphor regarding the concept of spirituality and scientific processes involving evolutionary theory. The game is ultimately a modern mythological story that follows Campbell's story structure as each level is named after a stage in the Hero's Journey.



Figure 2: *Journey* (2012)

The Call to Adventure

The first sculpture in this series is aptly titled *Thief* (plate 1). I was experimenting with a new material at the time by using repurposed banding straps to make woven forms. When establishing the setting of the story I had to focus on what defined the ordinary world within the myth. The ordinary world is what the protagonist is familiar with and what they would see as worth fighting for. The name Midrealm was inspired by Tolkien's fictional world of Middle-earth, which came from the Old English word *middangeard* and the Old Norse word *Midgard*. Following the establishment of the ordinary world there is a symbolic central object or relic that is stolen. This act of thievery disrupts the status quo and plunges the ordinary world into disorder. Many myths and legends revolve around a macguffin, which is an object, figure, or event that triggers a call to adventure. In Homer's poem the *Iliad*, Paris steals away Helen, which leads to the beginning of the Trojan war. In Norse mythology, Loki tricks Hödr into killing Baldur, and this act of trickery was the presage to Ragnarök. In my story, the Amulet of Life is stolen from its resting place by a monster, which sets up the cause for the hero Ayon to make the journey to retrieve it.



Plate 1: *Thief*, 9" x 23" x 24", steel and wax, 2021

The piece *Thief* consists of a hand representing the intrusive presence of Gorathel, ripping the amulet out of a ruptured container. The steel exterior was left in its original color of black with rusted spots collecting on the metal. This gives the structure a sense that there has been a significant passage of time since the amulet was placed within the container. The hand is also painted black to match the description of Gorathel having onyx skin. For this sculpture I made a mold of my hand in alginate and cast it in wax. With the inclusion of the hand, it creates the visual sensation of a forceful gesture. To contrast the exterior color tones, the interior was painted gold to signify great value.

Threshold

After the call to adventure, the hero is faced with their first confluence. Whether to remain in the ordinary world or to take the plunge into the unknown. Within my story the threshold is epitomized by a physical vessel in the shape of a large vase or urn that Ayon comes across towards the beginning of his journey. To him, this vessel is foreign as it exudes an aura of Gorathel's magic. However, it is evident to Ayon that the vessel is holding something captive inside. When he reaches out to touch the vessel a confluence is decided upon, and this is the point of no return. *Vessel* (plate 2) is a woven sculpture of steel banding straps that represents the call within the legend's narrative. The conceptual story behind this container being open is that it has been emptied of its contents when the protagonist touched it. The inspiration behind this sculpture comes from the Arabic fairytales of Djinn held within magic lamps, as told in *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah (One Thousand and One Nights* in the English translation). The refusal of the call is a pivotal moment for the protagonist as it represents what they fear the most. In Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 film *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, a young girl named Chihiro travels with her parents to a new town and comes across a tunnel preceded by a red gate. Chihiro is faced with the choice of staying in the car on her own or walking through the tunnel with her parents, which inevitably leads to a mystical world of the gods and spirits.



Plate 2: *Vessel*, 3' x 2' x 2', steel, 2021

Mentor

Out of the vessel appears a massive dragon that thanks Ayon by helping him in his journey. The dragon in my myth serves the role of a mentor figure, as Ayon is struggling to find a weakness to Gorathel. When he frees the dragon, it solves the issue by providing Ayon with a new goal, to find the object that can harm Gorathel. For the piece I titled *Dragon* (plate 3), I made the choice to splice together common characteristics of familiar dragons. This dragon is more serpentine like in Chinese and Japanese culture, while it has two front limbs typical of the Old Norse depictions of a lindwyrn. The scales along the body of the dragon are designed to look like feathers, making the creature appear less cold blooded and reptilian. For my materials, I used round steel bars for the structure and steel banding strap for the details and skin. The process of making the individual scales to cover the body became a form of therapy for myself. The repetitive movements, the folding of the metal, and the anticipation of creating a form I was familiar with stimulated my productiveness.



Plate 3: *Dragon*, 8' x 4' x 15', steel, 2022



Plate 4: *Dragon (detail shot)*, 8' x 4' x 15', steel, 2022

While incorporating this figure in the legend, I began asking an important question. Why a dragon? This question kept resurfacing until I began researching the origins and cultural significance of these mythological creature that had fascinated me since I was a child. The dragon has been a popular trope in mythological stories since ancient times. The first things to note are that dragons are differently defined, and that is what makes them so unique. After looking into the etymology of the name Dragon, which comes from the Greek word *dracon* meaning “one who stares”, it became evident that they are not localized to one region or mythos. Two of the earliest mythical dragons in human history are known as Tiamat and Abzu from Mesopotamian mythology. While these two examples are not described as the familiar dragons by modern standards, they have still been classified as such. Most European dragons were depicted as cautionary metaphors for paganism and were often seen as demonic. Norse dragons like Jörmungandr and Fafnir are the quintessential style of dragons that are more often seen in modern cinematic settings. However, in countries such as China and Japan, dragons are aligned as good or even divine. These dragons are usually supporters of the hero rather than the focus. Going back to the initial question of why, there are many different opinions on what they are and why a dragon is included in a story. Tolkien believed that dragons had to be essential to both the machinery and the ideas of the story. The fact that a dragon is so loosely defined is what allows so many other things to be seen as dragons. They are defined by their lack of definition, and that gives them limitless potential in their own settings. They are never irrelevant in the stories they are in, and they are always powerful. Dragons represent the full spectrum of what you can do in a fantasy world, and that is what makes them the staple of the genre.

The First Trial

With the unknown world open to him, Ayon is presented with a task of creating a weapon that can kill the monster, Gorathel. With the directions from the dragon mentor, Ayon is able to find the location of materials needed to craft the magical *Sword of the Iron Root Tree* (plate 4). The sword I made represents the first trial Ayon overcomes. It was important that the sword have a legendary aesthetic of a classical longsword. I started by carving the blade, handguard, handle, and pommel of the sword in a soft pine wood. After completing that process, I cast the blade in iron so that the material fit the narrative of the sword's namesake. I wanted Ayon's sword to capture the elements of other legendary swords, which led me to researching the history and myths of sword smithing.



Plate 5: *Sword of the Iron Root Tree* (with pedestal), 40" x 36" x 15.5", iron and steel, 2023

Sword smithing was highly regarded as a craft throughout history. This was made evident in historical records dating as far back as the eighth century, when the two most well-known metal smiths from the Rhine region, Ingelri and Ulfberht, would produce such fine blades that they inscribed their names upon them. Nearly every culture has a story of a hero or deity that wields a suitable weapon against a powerful foe. In my narrative, a sword is the epitome of such a weapon. I took inspiration from several well-known legends that depicted powerful swords in them. In Arthurian legend, Excalibur is the sword used by Arthur Pendragon to fight off the Anglo-Saxons. Excalibur had many different interpretations of what powers it had. The consistent aspects were that it protected its wielder from harm, had a razor edge, and even glowed with angelic brilliance. In the *Volsunga Saga*, the Icelandic hero Sigurd uses the sword Gramr to slay the treasure hording dragon Fafnir. The sword Durendal was wielded by the Frankish legendary hero Roland. It was said, in the *Song of Roland*, that several Christian artifacts were infused into the sword to give it powers to cut through stone. In this modern era of technology, the concept of a sword still inspires awe within people.

Confluence of the Abyss

The next stage of Ayon's journey leads him into a dark forest that he soon becomes lost in. While frantically attempting to find his way out, a spirit in the shape of a stag beast reveals itself to Ayon. The sculpture *The Guide* (plate 5) is symbolic of the point in the journey when the hero has reached what is known as the abyss. This is the point when Ayon goes through a transitional period. Joseph Campbell says, "This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that that passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation." and also says "here, instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again." When he is led out of the forest, Ayon realizes that he is not alone in his quest. While making the *The Guide* I wanted the sculpture to feel different from the rest of my artwork. Most of my sculptures have the outward appearance of being made of harsher more metallic material. *The Guide* is a spectral being that does not, necessarily, have a corporeal form. By this basis I made the structure out of mesh and tie wire, then covered the exterior in plaster gauze. The creature stands upon a rock in a pose that resembles a majestic beast. Lastly, I painted the sculpture with vibrant turquoise for the base and contrasted it with orange and yellow designs that intermingle together.



Plate 6: *The Guide*, 52" x 18" x 47", mesh wire and plaster gauze, 2021

The main influence for *The Guide* stemmed from the imagery in Hayao Miyazaki's 1997 film *Mononoke Hime* (Princess Mononoke). The Great Forest Spirit was ultimately the inspiration behind this sculpture. The Great Forest Spirit comes to the main protagonist in an hour of need. It took on the form of a large stag, and at night it would transform into a giant, colorful, translucent beast that flew through the sky. However, to avoid giving in to my bias for one of my favorite films, I also researched alternative sources of deer and stag imagery in mythology. I found that a great deal of Celtic spirituality revolved around the inclusion of stags in their iconography. It was symbolic of the deity Cernunnos, also known as "The Horned One."

The Final Trial

A story is only as good as its villain. That phrase has always rung true for me whenever I would read a book or watch a film that involved the forces of good and evil clashing. In order to make a suitable monster for the hero to fight, the stakes needed to be raised. I built up the image of this horrifying monster that defies logic, so the representation needed to live up to that expectation. During fabrication, I was exploring an increasing new interest in a tabletop game called dungeons & dragons, which inspired me to come up with the name for this monster. I titled the sculpture *Gorathel* (plate 6). The juxtaposition of these two figures is magnified by the fact that they are the only two classically named beings in the legend. To contrast the hero, Gorathel is described as having onyx skin with multiple arms. The aesthetic goal is to manifest as many unnerving sensations as possible. The form is grotesque and deformed, with a distended body that slumps to the ground. Its mouth is long and gaping with rows of sharp teeth. The eyes are swollen and vacuous, like an insect. The skin is oily and tar-like, to give off an air of uncleanliness. I made the structure out of round steel bars, and then added mesh wire over it to support the skin. The sculpture is made of three pieces to make transportation easier. For the skin, I covered the surface with spray foam to create the effect of bulbous protrusions appearing all along the body. I painted the body a satin black to give it a shine, while sections are colored light blue and purple to add contrast.

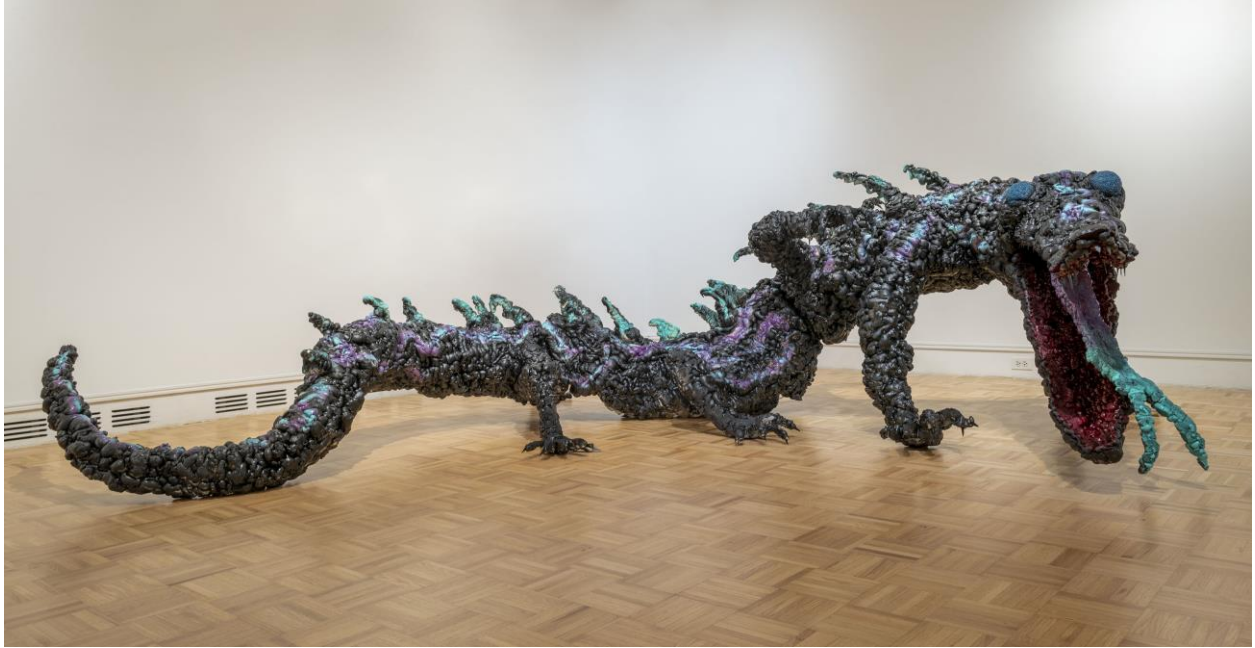


Plate 7: *Gorathel*, 50" x 6' x 16', steel, mesh wire, and spray foam, 2023



Plate 8: *Gorathel* (detail shot), 50" x 6' x 16', steel, mesh wire, and spray foam, 2023

Gorathel loudly expresses elements of eldritch horror. Eldritch being the term for weird and sinister, the term fit exceedingly well with how the sculpture came out. My inspiration behind this piece came from a few sources in fiction. Grendel, from the epic poem *Beowulf*, is a prime example of a strange, terrifying monster clashing with the protagonist. In Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, Smaug the dragon is also a greedy being that hoards treasure and terrorizes the land. The unknown is terrifying; however, I came to the realization that people are just as often afraid of what they are familiar with. If the viewer is presented with a creature that has no familiar attributes, there is no guarantee that they would fear it.

The Warrior

There is something poetic about a person preparing for the trials ahead, charging toward the opposition head-on, all while clad in a suit of armor that seems to naturally exude a sense of heroism, intimidation, and invincibility. The crafting of arms and armor has been a practice that has predated historical records. The earliest records of armorers known to civilization were in myths and legends. A few prime examples would be Hephaistos of the Greek pantheon according to Homeric accounts around the 5th century BC, Wieland of Germanic mythology as far back as 575 AD, and the Dverggar (dwarves) of Norse legend as recorded in the *Prose Edda* dating back to 1200 AD. With the practice of armor smithing going back so far, the craft has seen a great deal of success and changes throughout history. Medieval and early modern Europe had the largest number of regions that consolidated this practice, such as Paris, London, and Nuremberg. The main connection that these regions have in common is their access to abundant waterways, which encouraged the trade of required resources for smithing, as well as attracting more craftsmen who would specialize in silver and goldsmithing.

This is what influenced the creation of a figure clad in armor that is reminiscent of historical Norse garb. The bulk of the armor pieces are made of steel banding straps normally used for industrial packaging that I have repurposed and woven into a mesh. The helmet, breast plate mail, bracers, gauntlets, and boots are hammer worked pieces of copper that I rivetted and tied together. The main portions of the armor are separate pieces and are form fitted to the manikin which is based off my body type. The figure stands in a contrapposto with their hand held out in front of them as if clutching onto the Amulet of Life. The Amulet of Life, as it is referred to in the narrative, will be grasped in the figure's outstretched hand. While researching this artform, I discovered that there is more to the function of armor than simply protecting an

individual from bodily harm. The armor can be both powerful and beautiful while telling a story that exhibits action. Using this artform in my work reinforces the symbolism behind the character of Ayon. He is not defined within the narrative by his facial features or his body type, but by his actions. The armor that Ayon wears expresses what he is prepared for in his journey. His alignment is visible within his pose that is further accentuated by the breast plate and other protective wear, while the helmet hides his face, adding an air of mystery. The role of armor is so potent that it has lasted through the ages. Today, it is still used as a tool to persuade others that an individual is powerful. Whether it is as functional protection, viewed in films, or made as costumes, everyone enjoys the sensation of feeling powerful whilst wearing their own brand of armor.



Plate 9: *Ayon*, 6' 2" x 31" x 37", steel, copper, mesh wire, plaster gauze, fabric, and leather, 2023

Legend Apotheosis

At the end of the journey, Ayon has completed what he set out to do. Gorathel is killed, the Amulet is returned to its rightful place, and the sword is retired to never be used again. The result is the culmination of Ayon's endeavors to restore peace. When the story comes full circle, the hero has returned to the ordinary world, transformed for the better. To finalize this series of sculptures, I made three hand scrolls that portray the legend in full. *Legend Apotheosis 1, 2, and 3* (plates 9, 10, 11) are the culmination of my work. Each scroll has four sections, in total equaling to twelve to be congruent with the steps of the hero's journey. I chose this format to give the viewer something easy, yet beautiful to absorb while following along with the narrative of the sculptural works.



Plate 10: *Legend Apotheosis 1*, 11.5" x 60", ink on paper, 2023

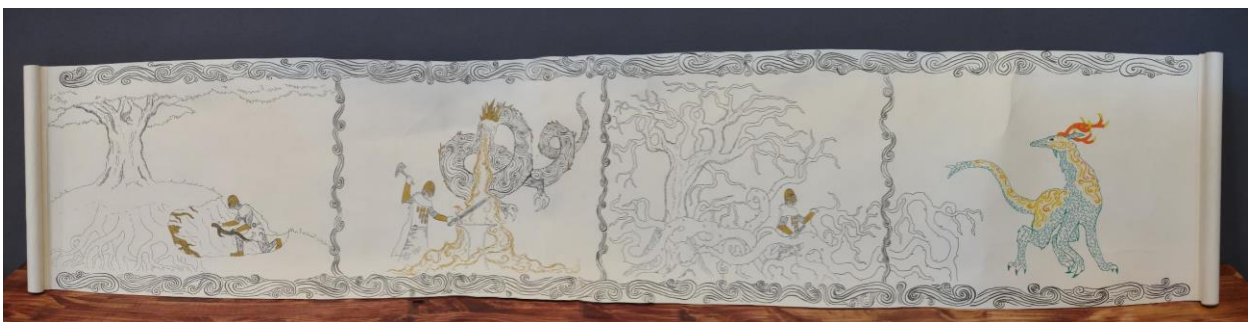


Plate 11: *Legend Apotheosis 2*, 11.5" x 60", ink on paper, 2023



Plate 12: *Legend Apotheosis 3*, 11.5" x 60", ink on paper, 2023

Conclusion

In retrospect of my research and artwork, I have recognized that mythology has influenced my creative expression. I have absorbed countless interpretations of legends and fairytales that have been ingrained within my understanding of storytelling. The purpose of mythology within this body of work is to help strengthen the personal transformation of the fictional character within it, as well as myself. In the process of creating my artwork I established a method of weaving repetitive patterns, which was therapeutic and helped me overcome several trials as well. Like Ayan, I found a community that accepted me and introduced me to new horizons. I have discovered that in addition to telling one story all together, individually these sculptures tell their own unique storyline of process and narrative. This monomyth has ended, but it is not the last one that I will tell.

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