



## WE COULD BE HEROES, JUST FOR ONE DAY

Given the state of the world, I have been thinking about heroes – and heroines – and what constitutes the “heroic,” so I went searching for heroes and heroism in the Flatfiles at Kentler International Drawing Space. What I found were artists democratizing and celebrating heroes of all kinds – from the everyday to the mythic – and everything in between.<sup>1</sup>

“We could be heroes, just for one day,” David Bowie’s 1977 lyric<sup>2</sup> also democratizes the possibilities for heroism. We and our lovers, our friends and family, neighbors and caregivers who go the extra mile...all of us could be heroes, even if just for one day. Heroes without capes live alongside the superheroes who wear them; and alongside heroic gods, mythic beings, and the celebrities we idolize, too.

Heroes are in the ether now. In the Playbill for *Illinoise*, an evening-long music and dance work by Sufjan Stevens and Justin Peck currently on Broadway, Stevens handwrites his thoughts about the perilous nature of our time and his experience of loss. “It makes me want someone stronger to swoop in to save me from all of us. A man of steel, a man of heart.” Stevens, or his protagonist in *Illinoise*, is looking for a hero with heart. Maybe we all are.

This exhibition opens with the Statue of Liberty, a heroic beacon since 1886, standing with her

arm outstretched, holding a torch, embodying a concept of American liberty that seems all too fragile now. She stands tall and strong in New York Harbor off Red Hook, not far from the gallery. Florence Neal, artist and co-founder of Kentler, sees the Statue of Liberty every day from her home nearby. She’s been taking photographs, posting them on Instagram daily and making Japanese mokuhangas prints from these images for years, incorporating the text by Emma Lazarus. The statue’s posture, as seen in Neal’s prints, shows Lady Liberty in profile, with a leg jutting forward toward the future; it’s a regal, empowered, and heroic stance.

Where is our modern beacon? Who will show us the light today? Powerful beacons can be seen in Juan Carlos’s graphic black and white linocuts from the series *Las 7 Maravillas (The 7 Wonders)*. A spiraling tower – like Babel – rises from a seawall providing illumination to a boatload of sailors or soldiers who move through the choppy water to their unknown destination.

Some 22 years before the Statue of Liberty’s dedication, Abraham Lincoln wrote: “The world has never had a good definition of liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in need of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing.”<sup>3</sup> Lincoln was the hero of our union in his day. That union is being tested today in

our fractured nation. Our liberties are, too. We need a new hero, or many.

Those we admire can become heroes to us. In the obsessive wood engravings of John Jacobsmeier, he creates portraits of an array of cultural notables, from the author James Dickey to the filmmaker Terry Gilliam and art historian Rosalind Kraus. And we find the movie star Jane Russell’s lips and paper doll cutouts as the subject of Susan Newmark’s painterly and brooding collages. I question whether celebrities are our new heroes. They certainly have the power to be.

Heroes don’t need to be famous beyond the neighborhood. The show includes Carol Dragon’s photographic portraits of Sunny Balzano, now gone, a hero to his Red Hook neighborhood, and his truck – a kind of surrogate – which is still parked in front of his famous bar. Teri Slotkin’s *Mixed Doubles* photographs of neighborhood people can be seen in the View Files cabinet. They are part of the Red Hook Archives and were taken 30 years ago. Highlighted are images of the neighborhood’s unsung heroes, including artists who settled there and those now remembered for doing extraordinary things for others whether personally or professionally.

Our family, friends, and lovers can be heroes when they care for us, extraordinarily or not. In the obsessive drawings of Sepideh Salehi, the artist represents the names of her mother and brother in undulating Farsi script that, like an incantation, repeats and curls in on itself. In Aung Myint’s *Mother*



and *Child* series, the pair of figures is indicated in a singular gestural black line that moves across handmade paper in a calligraphic sweep.

During the pandemic, Robert Aitchison made gouaches and charcoal drawings of his friends who kept him company on Zoom. Eyes dart about and multiply on the page the way they might appear across a freeze-framed monitor. Lovers past and present can be our heroes. The artist Kiki Smith is depicted in an etching by Robert Sestok while his own image as *Nature Boy* is overlaid on Smith’s face as if she is dreaming of him or conjuring him in her mind.

Imaginary heroes need not be fully grounded in the natural world. Alexander Gorlizki’s fanciful figures gesture and perform in a patterned world calling to mind deities and royal princes found in Indian miniature drawings. Acts of respect and devotion like bowing and sun salutations become intricate patterns in the photographs of Karni Dorell. While an amorphous mass of grayness seems to indicate something “there” – a deity or essence – in Meredith Rosier’s drawing *Here*.

For traditional superheroes, turn to a series of drawings of diminutive Spider-Men and a cadre of superheroes by K. Saito, seated, standing, or flying through a sea of geometric shapes. And what about the powerful beings in Tomie Arai’s silkscreen *Messenger*, might they just save the day?

Superheroes typically enjoy extraordinary strength.



Here Jennifer Mack-Watkins heroically balances all the responsibilities of homemaking on her female subject’s back while in Miriam Schaefer’s collagraph *Phantom Armor* the artist celebrates the protection that the humble brassiere provides women as they prepare for the heroism of daily personal and political battles.

We can be the hero of our own story, too. “See what a life the gods have given us set round with pain and pleasure,” writes Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) as repeatedly quoted in Joan Snyder’s multi-colored etching and woodcut. “It is too strange for sorrow. It is too strange for joy.” Thoreau posits that “not until we are lost, in other words, not until we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Thoreau, the transcendentalist, and Snyder, the artist, explore the way humans orient themselves morally in a world both beautiful and painful. And now one that seems to have lost its bearing.

The balancing act in which we are currently engaged, supporting our multiple and sometimes conflicting worldviews, is eloquently illustrated in Richard Mock’s black and white linocut. Here an unseen figure slip-slides on a skateboard perched on top of a globe while their two hands hold a jumble of globes (or worlds) that balance precariously on top of one another, any one or all, poised to fall at any minute.

From what resources can one draw to make things better? What heroes can we summon? What heroism can we emulate? Which are the heroes in our lives who can help us find our way?

We can be heroes, just for one day, in the lives of family, friends, and those we care for.

And you and I can be heroes for one day this November, too. Vote!

My gratitude extends to Florence Neal for inviting me to curate this show at Kentler and to Sallie Mize for helping to organize everything. I thank Caitlin Henningsen who provided the idea for the title of the show, and Evan Kingsley, my superhero, thanks for everything.

–Dara Meyers-Kingsley

Dara Meyers-Kingsley is a curator and educator. She is currently a distinguished lecturer at Hunter College, where she also directs the Office of the Arts and the Muse Scholar Program, teaching and mentoring students and building bridges to NYC cultural institutions. Her exhibitions as an independent curator have been presented at the Brooklyn Museum and the New Museum in NYC, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and Chicago, and the Andy Warhol Museum and the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh.

Notes

1. I am using the word “hero” to also include “heroine,” as many definitions of the word “hero” classify a hero as “a person” regardless of gender.
2. “Heroes” was co-written with Brian Eno.
3. Abraham Lincoln as quoted in exhibition tombstone in the “This We Believe” exhibition at the 21c Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.
4. In *Thoreau on Man & Nature*, a compilation by Arthur G. Volkman (New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1960) from the writings of Henry D. Thoreau, found in the public domain in the Hunter College library, p. 15.