

A Mythic Greek Island

PAINTINGS, POETRY, PROCESS AND POLITICS

BY JESSICA DAMEN



My husband, twenty-five intrepid voyagers and I stepped off our inflatable Kodiak onto an uneven landing, disembarking on the nearly abandoned island of Delos. The dry heat not yet overwhelming me, I gradually took in the vistas of fallen marble columns and statues, ancient dwellings and partially covered stone walkways stretching over this once strategically active Mediterranean port. As one of the most active archeological sites in Greece and a UNESCO heritage site, Delos now sees hundreds of visitors traipsing over its “graveyard” of religious monuments everyday. For thousands of years this unlikely spit of land was vibrant with commercial and religious activity. However, after the 1st century, due to changes in trade routes, it was abandoned and became no more than a pirate-marble poaching site. Even today, Delos’ only overnight living occupants are archeologists, hundreds of cats and wild poppies.

My interest in Delos stemmed from its reputation as the birthing refuge for the besieged goddess Leto. Reputed to be one of Zeus’ many hapless rape victims, Leto consequentially becomes an object of Hera’s, Zeus’ wife, hatred and revenge. Seeking revenge, Hera decrees that Leto must not be allowed to rest on any solid ground. To make matters worse, no other god or goddess will help Leto because Hera’s wrath is infamous.

Desperate, alone and despairing, Leto finally finds safety on this mythic free-floating and almost barren granite rock. She survives on wild berries and little water. After a labor and delivery from hell, Leto gives birth to Artemis, who—with the aplomb of a newborn goddess—immediately helps her mom deliver her twin brother, Apollo. From first blush, Artemis is a goddess like no other: clever, independent, huntress and protector.

The abandoned desert of contemporary Delos suggests an analogous climate to consider the frightening political landscape of women’s increasingly lost bodily autonomy and healthcare. The mythic stories of Leto and Leda (another beautiful recipient of Zeus’s unwanted attentions), undergird patriarchy’s long fascination and assumption that rape is to be quietly endured. The feminist progress of the latter half of the twentieth century began to reverse the lonely trauma of rape and unwanted children. Yet, with the stealth of a disguised swan, reactionary forces are at work methodically to undo that progress. →

BACKGROUND

Greek myths are preposterous narratives yet they speak truth about human nature. The screw-ups of “mortals” and “immortals” alike are simultaneously familiar and ridiculous to us. These brave and conflicted, duplicitous and honest, arrogant and jealous characters tell us ambiguous and psychologically complex stories nurturing my fertile imagination. →

Although not always evident to modern audiences, geography was vital background for oral stories. In these myths, the unique landscape of Greece's mountainous landmass encircled by azure waters and punctuated with countless rocky islands created connection and isolation, safety and danger.

One inhospitable island that once offered real and mythological sanctuary was Delos. Here resides a terrifying birth story—Leto's birth of Artemis and Apollo. ✧

"Leda and the Angry Swan," Oil on Canvas, 72"x102", 2003



My artistic journey to redirect visualizations of these rape myths began with Leda and the Angry Swan (above). Due to its large horizontal size the viewer's body is dwarfed by the swan's powerfully painted wings. Yet, the viewer is captivated by Leda's staring eye. Her gaze follows the viewer who can't escape her defiant soul. Although she is overpowered she is not subdued. Later, I changed the Leda series format from horizontal to the vertical position indicating Leda's liberation from Zeus' violation. During my own journey from 2003 to 2016 Leda psychologically evolves as a subject—from defiant victim, to revenger, to a dancer with fingertip heavenward as a hopeful sign of her transcendence (below).

Leto, is a goddess and mostly known as the mother of Apollo, the god of music, and Artemis, the goddess of the hunt.

In the Olympian scheme, the king of gods Zeus is the father of her twins, Apollo and Artemis. "Leto conceived them after her hidden beauty accidentally caught the eye of Zeus." (Translation: "It is all Leto's Fault! Her beauty made him do it!") Classical Greek myths record little else about Leto other than her rape and search for a safe place to give birth to the twins.

Leda's strength begins as defiance. The goddess Artemis inherits and personifies this defiance, justice and retribution. She is the original rebel girl, a subversive persona within Greece's ancient, patriarchal system. ✧



"Leda's Dance II," Ink and watercolor on paper, 30"x22", 2012



Top: 1824 sculpture of Leto with Apollo & Artemis by Francisco Pozzi, drapes the young huntress, Artemis on her mother's side, while Apollo stands straight, more frontal and dominant; Bottom: photo of the Temple of Leto by Bernard Gargnon, 2011, Wiki Commons.



"The Solace of Artemis" by Paula Meehan

I read that every polar bear alive has mitochondrial DNA
from a common mother, an Irish brown bear who once
roved out across the last ice age, and I am comforted.
It has been a long hot morning with the children of the machine,

their talk of memory, of buying it, of buying it cheap, but I,
memory keeper by trade, scan time coded in the golden hive mind
of eternity. I burn my books, I burn my whole archive:
a blaze that sears, synapses flaring cell to cell where

memory sleeps in the wax hexagonals of my doomed and melting comb.
I see him loping towards me across the vast ice field
to where I wait in the cave mouth, dreaming my cubs about the den,
my honied ones, smelling of snow and sweet oblivion.

I researched the myths of Artemis after reading Paula Meehan's poem, "The Solace of Artemis."

The poem begins gently in the first three lines. Meehan reminds me of evolution's continuance, the extinct Irish brown bear's DNA continues in today's polar bears. Her verse also transports me to a place of familiarity. I identify with the mother observing her children during a sweltering summer's day. The children hold devices excitedly chatting about "memory" when suddenly the poet, "memory keeper by trade," reminds the reader that we are connected to something more infinite than "cloud" memory. The brown bear evolves into the polar bear and memory becomes "scan time coded in the golden hive mind / of eternity." Beginning with comfort, the poem's mood changes abruptly. Now, I sense futility and anger. This is where, for me, Artemis comes onto the scene.

Artemis offers solace through her mythic and empowering stories. Her persona defies gender norms; she wears a man's short tunic and demands respect for her virginal body choice. She aims her huntress bow to protect pregnant women and children; she cleverly dispatches the witless and arrogant Actaeon after he violates her privacy. In short, she is the feminine archetype for this perilous time when both human rights and human existence is threatened.

For me oil painting is a process of slowly building up and scraping down. The poem acts as a springboard. I dive into its phrases, feeling currents of its moods, some so deep and profound that I need to kick myself to the surface. Artemis brings me up for air. Huntress and comforter she protects herself and pregnant women. She dispatches fools.

Once this uncovering oil painting process is completed my feelings are focused. Then I am ready to do ink brush painting. Here, all is in the moment. I make no hesitation. With the integration of everything I've learned from reading and feeling, I breathe. Hand, body and breath are one. If the strokes are alive, I keep the painting. ✧

[Order Paula Meehan's 2023 poetry collection, *The Solace of Artemis*, online or at your local bookstore.](#)



Above: "Honied Oblivion," ink, watercolor on Hsuan paper, 52"x28", 2021;

Left: "Artemis Rising," oil on linen, 81"x12", 2020, (in private collection)

Both paintings inspired by Meehan's poem, "The Solace Of Artemis."



To say that Delos' landscape is hard, dry and rugged, is an understatement. Its inhospitable landscape is a metaphor for the terrifying experience when a birthing mother is isolated. Hera's cruelty denied Leto any security in childbirth. While Leto and Leda's stories persist, it seems so does Hera's.

Attacks against pregnant women have been on overdrive since Roe was overturned by the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization in 2022. In fact, a Pandora's box of unintended consequences has opened since then leaving pregnant women as isolated and vulnerable as ever. So-called "right to life" State legislators' "trigger laws" (aptly named because they target medical professionals and anyone helping with therapeutic abortions) have made rural areas of their states "maternity care deserts." Doctors specializing in high risk pregnancies are fleeing states such as Idaho, Oklahoma and Tennessee. In Oklahoma specifically, where more than half of the state's counties are now considered maternity care deserts. Three-quarters of obstetrician-gynecologists who responded to a recent survey said they were either planning to leave, considering leaving or would leave if they could. In Tennessee, one-third of its counties are considered maternity care deserts.

More Reading:

[World Population Review \(Maternal Mortality by State\)](#)

[Wikipedia \(Countries by Maternal Mortality\)](#)

[NY Times: As Abortion Laws Drive Obstetricians From Red States, Maternity Care Suffers](#)

[Washington Post: "Maternal Mortality Climbs Dramatically During Pandemic"](#)

[Some Good News: CA has reduced its MMR to an average of 7 per 100K](#)

One specialist, Dr. Leilah Zahedi-Spung, a maternal-fetal specialist, decided to move from Tennessee to Colorado not long after the Dobbs ruling. She grew up in the South and felt guilty about leaving, saying, "The majority of patients who came to me had highly wanted, highly desired pregnancies." She continues "They had names, they had baby showers[...] I told them something awful about their pregnancy that made sure they were never going to take home that child – or that they would be sacrificing their lives to do that. I sent everybody out of state. I was unwilling to put myself at risk." During these reactionary times, Leto's mythic horror is a present day reality for too many American women living in **Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia**—all states with near total abortion bans.

Tragically, but not surprisingly, the US' highest maternal mortality rates per 100k births are also in those self-proclaimed "right to life" states: **Arkansas (40.4), Kentucky (39.7), Alabama (36.2), Tennessee (34.6), Louisiana (31.8) and Mississippi (30.2)**.

So why do we refer to the above as "right to life" states? Instead, call them what they are: maternal barren lands, inhospitable to pregnant women who are abandoned to zealotry and forced to seek safety elsewhere. As America takes on the story of Delos, Leto and Leda's tragic myths persist. ✧

Maternal mortality rates per 100k births from other first world, industrialized nations.

Canada: 11	Hungary: 15
Denmark: 4.7	Norway: 1.7
France: 7.9	Poland: 2
Germany: 4.4	Spain: 3.4
United Kingdom: 9.8	Sweden: 7.4

The entire United States from '20-'21 went from 23.8 to 32.9 deaths per 100,000 live births with the burden of death disproportionately borne by communities of color, according to a report released by US health officials. The maternal mortality rate in the United States is nearly three times higher than that of France, the country with the next highest rate.