

ART REVIEW

A myth's modern update

Elliott Hundley's take on 'The Bacchae' is complex, multilayered

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Ours is an age of overstimulation, of sensory overload. That makes Los Angeles artist Elliott Hundley thoroughly au courant, even when interpreting a fifth-century B.C. tragedy.

His creations, whether freestanding assemblages or deeply colored,

layered collages mounted on a wall, are dense collisions of images and materials. You could spend several days sussing out all the imagery and verbiage in *The Lightning's Bride*.

The Nasher Sculpture Center is showing 12 of Hundley's interpretations, both wall-mounted and freestanding, of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Created in 2010 and 2011, the works have been organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in Columbus.

If your Euripides is a little rusty, a bit of background is in order.

Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, is the extramarital son of Zeus and the mortal Semele. Semele's relatives in Thebes refuse to believe her pregnancy is divine, and Zeus' wife, Hera, is furious at being betrayed.

Hera demands that Zeus appear to Semele as a thunderbolt, which kills the poor woman. Hermes saves the unborn child, who is sewn into Zeus' thigh until ready for birth.

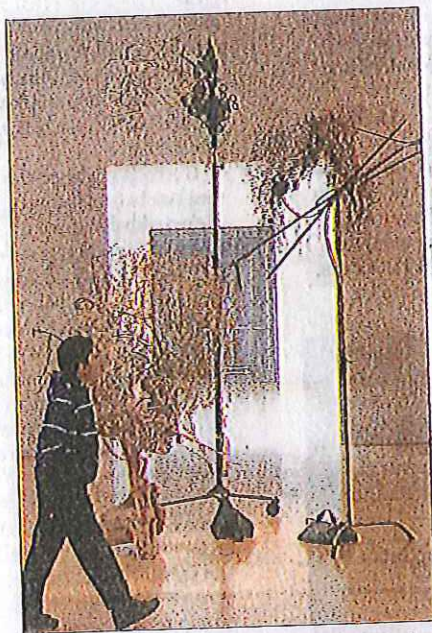
Spurned from Thebes, Dionysus gathers a cult of ecstatic female wor-

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Lara Soli/Staff Photographer

A detail of *Eyes That Run Like Leaping Fire*, part of "Elliott Hundley: The Bacchae" at the Nasher Sculpture Center



Lara Soli/Staff Photographer

Freestanding pieces are part of Hundley's exhibit, including these three works based on ancient thyruses.

'Bacchae'

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shippers, the Bacchantes. Even the mother and aunts of the Theban king Pentheus are lured, despite a royal ban on Dionysian worship.

Pentheus disguises himself as a woman and hides in a tree to observe the goings-on. The Bacchantes spy him, and under Dionysus' spell think he's a wild beast, pull him down and tear his body apart. Only after Pentheus' mother, Agave, delivers his head to his father does the spell wear off, and she realizes what she has done.

In the six linked panels of *The Lightning's Bride*, the dominant recurrent image is of Semele in various states of agony, with a hole blasted through her middle. Excerpts of the Euripides play are rendered in swirls of cut-out letters in wildly varied typefaces.

A dense assault of small, even tiny, imagery fairly explodes from

Plan your life

Through April 22 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. \$10; discounts for students, military, seniors; free for children 12 and younger; free admission for all first Saturday of each month. 214-242-5100. nashersculpturecenter.org.

the surface: photos of Hundley's family members enacting scenes from the play, tiny paper and plastic flowers (a Hundley signature) pinned to the surface, a Cézanne still-life, Henry Moore's *King and Queen*. A big blue magnifying glass, hung on metal rods, focuses on a couple dancing.

Freestanding assemblages are more abstract. Three of them are stylized thyruses, maces made of long fennel stalks capped with pine cones — for Agave and her sisters Ino and Autonoe. Agave used her thyrus to carry the dead Pentheus' head back to Cadmus.

Thyrus for Agave is a photographer's telescoping light stand, capped with a clutter of pottery shards, slices of steel beams, a crumpled hank of rusted sheet metal and (another Hundley signature) a nimbus of slender plastic straws pinned together. From this, long white strings hang to the ground. Does the nimbus represent hair, the string blood dripping down?

In the Nasher's lobby is *Her House Smouldering*, precariously leaning fragments of what looks like a ruined cinder-block wall. (It's actually plastic.) Supported by bamboo stalks, this is what's left of Pentheus' palace, after the spurned Dionysus destroys it with an earthquake and fire.

Hundley's densely layered and assembled creations, contrapuntally allusive, don't give up their secrets easily. But the sheer quirkiness of the compositions is arresting, as are the mixes of natural and manufactured elements and the surfaces busily layered with tiny details pinned on like dead butterflies. Never has Euripides seemed so of our time.