

# **Phaedra : Explorations in the Abstract**

**Max Dingle**



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**Shoalhaven City Arts Centre**

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## Artist Statement

Jean Racine's 1676 play *Phédre* based on Greek myth tells, via psychological insights and poetry, the story of the Athenian queen who falls in love with her stepson. Her obsessive, autoerotic suffering goes, via deep seams of emotional truth, into the dark recesses of the heart and the psyche of people attempting to deny a natural life-force such as sexuality or emotional release, and it all ends in suicide, death and tragedy.

Wassily Kandinsky, in his 1910 treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, proposed that the shapes and colours in abstract art could give "observers capable of feeling them, emotions subtle beyond words" and these would have an improving effect on "suicide, murder, violence, low and unworthy thoughts, hate, hostility, egotism, envy" and other evils.

Greek myths influenced the early thinking of the American abstract expressionists including Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman & Mark Rothko\*. Gottlieb in paintings such as the 1948 *Threads of Theseus* and the *Labyrinth* series of the 1950's presents the emotional and psychological experience of World War II evoking the archaic symbol of the labyrinth as a passage from one world to the next or a descent into the underworld. In his writings Rothko noted his sense of a spiritual and emotional kinship with earlier art and myth and that myths are eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas.

In producing these abstract paintings and sculptures I had the various versions of the Phaedra myth, from the Euripides play *Hippolytus* through Racine's play *Phédre* to Robert Graves book of Greek myths, at the back of my mind. At the same time giving a slight, but cautious, nod in the direction of Kandinsky, particularly his abstract paintings from the 1920's, and in using psychological insights to inform images expressed in paint and steel.

All of the above provided a mindset or a framework, in an effort to give the works enough in common to hang together in an exhibition. However each work was produced as a, and hopefully will, standalone without any need to reference other works, Greek mythology or historical art practice.

At a fundamental level my art is ultimately influenced by a number of other factors, these include the art of others that I have been exposed to, especially the artists whose works are on the walls of my house, the art I live with every day. By the landscape and environment I live in, the bush and garden at my south coast home.

Max Dingle  
October 2010

- Stephen Polcari *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* Cambridge



## Phaedra – A Myth

There are various versions of this myth and while, as a teenager, I had read Mary Renault's novels *The King must die* and *The Bull from the Sea*, and more recently, as previously mentioned, the plays *Hippolytus* by Euripides and *Phédre* by Racine and the Greek myths by Robert Graves, the following is my version, which may not accord with any other version in particular.

Theseus, the son of the god, Poseidon and a mortal woman, Aethra, was also the adopted son and heir to the King of Athens.

As a young man, while on a visit to the kingdom of the Amazons, Theseus kidnapped their Queen, Hippolyta, and claimed her as his bride, subsequently a son, Hippolytus, was born. However the marriage did not last.

Athens was obliged to send seven youths and seven maidens to the King of Minos to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, who lived at the centre of a labyrinth. Theseus volunteered to rid his father's kingdom of this annual obligation and travelling as one of the sacrifices voyaged to Minos, his ship sailed under a black sail which would be exchanged for a white sail on a successful return to Athens after tracking and killing the Minotaur in the labyrinth. The King of Minos's daughter, Ariadne, took him to the entry and assisted him in finding his way through the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur. He returned to Athens taking Ariadne and her sister Phaedra with him. However the gods informed him that Ariadne was already the bride of the god Dionysus and at the port of Naxos, while Ariadne was sleeping, Theseus abandoned her. Ariadne, deserted and alone, very unhappy with the prospect of a return to her marriage to Dionysus, hung herself.

On returning to Athens, Theseus forgot to change over the black sail to white and his father, the King, on seeing the black sail, assumed Theseus had been killed and in despair threw himself from the battlements. Thus Theseus became King of Athens and Phaedra his second wife.

Phaedra fell in love with and developed a sexual obsession for Theseus's son Hippolytus. Many were her words in trying to seduce him, but to no avail. Finally, after Hippolytus announced his love of a young woman, Arine, Phaedra, in a fury, tore her garments and said she would accuse Hippolytus of rape if he did not abandon his young love for hers. Again Hippolytus refused and the fateful letter was sent to Theseus.

Theseus' reaction was to call on his father, the God, Poseidon, to avenge this outrage and destroy Hippolytus and deem that none shall sing of Hippolytus from that day.

A raging storm approached, torrential rain fell and huge waves rolled ashore washing up a monster from the deep.

Hippolytus sallied forth to battle the monster but his horses were so terrified they crashed the chariot and dragged him, entangled in the reins, into the sea; their path traced by the rocks bright with his blood.

When the news reached the palace, Phaedra horrified and in deep remorse for her action, swallowed a poisonous draft and in her final moments confessed to Theseus.

A cult grew up around Hippolytus in the temple of Aphrodite and young women seeking true love made offerings of locks of their hair.





*Phaedra* 2007 oiled steel 80 x 27 x 130 cm



*The Black Sail* 2009 painted steel 80 x 48 x 80 cm



*Wave 2009* painted steel 67 x 40 x 38 cm



*Chariot 2010 painted steel 50 x 32 x 38*



*Arine 2010 painted steel 65 x 27 x 57.5 cm*



*Ariadne in Naxos* 2010 stone and painted steel 66 x 29 x 40 cm



*Reaction 2010* painted steel 43 x 28 x 33 cm



*The Torn Garment* 2009 acrylic on canvas 150 x 150 cm



*Theseus* 2010 acrylic on canvas 165 x 120 cm



*The Bright Rocks* 2009 acrylic on canvas 50 x 60 cm



*Labyrinth* 2009 acrylic on linen 133 x 166 cm



*many were her words* 2009 acrylic on canvas 120 x 165 cm



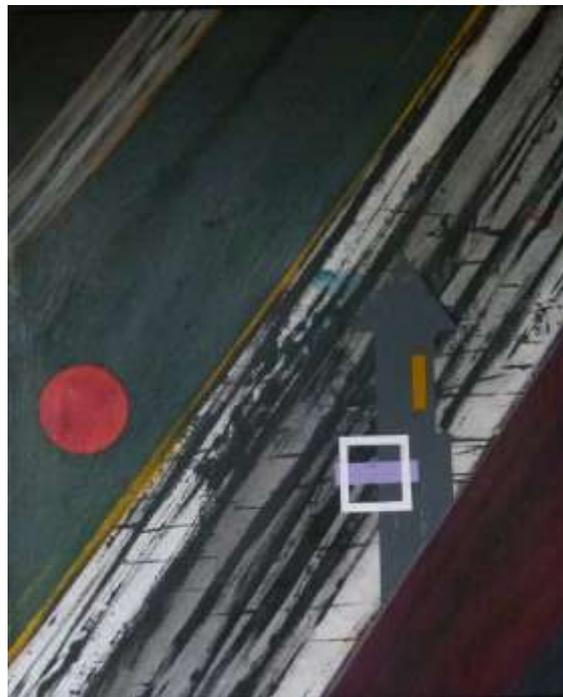
*The Approaching Storm* 2009 acrylic on canvas 150 x 100 cm



*Obsession* 2009 acrylic on canvas 50 x 60 cm



*Letter to Theseus* 2009 acrylic on canvas 150 x 100 cm



*the rain shall fall* 2010 acrylic on canvas 50 x 60 cm



*Call to Poseidon 2009 acrylic on canvas 150 x 100 cm*



*The Entry 2010 acrylic on canvas 50 x 60 cm*



*Hippolytus* 2009 acrylic on canvas & board 92 x 68 cm



*Labyrinth II* 2009 acrylic on canvas 50 x 76 cm



*Approaching Storm II* 2009 acrylic on canvas 120 x 82 cm



*Torn Garment II* 2010 acrylic on canvas 120 x 82 cm



*The Temple* 2008 acrylic on canvas 100 x 150 cm

## Phaedra. Explorations in the Abstract

**Artist's Name:** Max Dingle (b. 1945 Maryborough Qld )

### Education

1971 – 1972 Nowra TAFE  
1973 – 1974 National Art School (NAS)  
1977 - Sculpture Centre, The Rocks  
1981 - 1983 Screen Printing – Sydney Technical College  
2004 - Welding – Meadowbank TAFE  
2007 - Art Welding – National Art School  
2009 - Art Welding – National Art School

### Exhibitions

1973 NAS Annual Exhibition  
1974 NAS Graduation Exhibition  
1974 Woollahra Art Gallery (group - sculpture)  
1975 Various art /craft galleries around Sydney (group - ceramics)  
1976 University of NSW (solo - sculpture)  
University of NSW (group – sculpture & ceramics)  
University Co-op Bookshop (solo - sculpture)  
Ms Murphy's Paddington Gallery (group - sculpture)  
Various art / craft galleries (group - ceramics)  
St Albans Studio (solo – ceramics & sculpture)  
1977 - 83 St Alban's Studio (various - solo and group ceramics and sculpture)  
1981 Balmain Art Gallery (group – sculpture)  
1983 Sydney Building Information Centre Gallery (solo - screenprint)  
2009 Defiance Gallery "Sculpture 2009" (group)  
Arts in the Valley Garden Sculpture (group)  
Passion Café Gallery "1980's Revisited" ( solo - screenprint & collage)  
Defiance Gallery "You Little Beauty!" (group - sculpture)  
2010 Studio exhibition – "See Change Festival" (screenprint & collage)  
Defiance Gallery ""Defiant Little Devils" (group - sculpture)  
2011 Shoalhaven City Arts Centre "Phaedra" (solo – painting & sculpture)

### Collections

Shoalhaven Regional Gallery Collection

Various private collections

Sydney, NSW South Coast, Melbourne, Adelaide, Queensland.

### Awards

2010 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Miniature Sculpture Exhibition Catalyst Award  
Defiance Gallery



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