# Allegories

Artist Statement by Devin Slattery

**Mankind has never lacked powerful images to lend magical aid against all the uncanny things that live in the depths of the psyche.**
*- C.G. Jung*[i]

I open with this quote as a reminder that humans have always created art. Since the beginning of our existence, we have been creative beings. Before we could communicate with language, we had images to express ourselves. This aspect of our species is an integral part of being human. With this in mind, I reflect on my own journey as a student of art. Creating art for me is a cathartic process. It allows for self-expression and release of emotions. However, I strive to make drawings that are not just self-serving. It is important to me to convey my thoughts and emotions to an audience; to share the knowledge that I acquire in a thoughtful and beautiful way. This requires an open mind to suggestion, criticism, and feedback. I continue to adjust the means for which I communicate, which is through drawing, in order to better convey my message. Each new drawing allows me this opportunity.

I enjoy producing drawings that are part of a series. I find that generally an idea that I have for my art cannot be expressed in a single drawing. By developing a series, the thought or idea can be fully examined, researched, and evolve into a broader concept. I see my thesis as being three parts, the three bodies of work that I have created while in graduate school. They are the *Tarot Series,* the *Astrological Series,* and *Allegory of the Moth.* When looking at the three series as one cohesive body of work, certain commonalities can be found. Through a discussion of what is shared within the larger context, a story of how the work evolved takes shape.

Without even examining any shared themes or concepts, there is an immediate visual solidarity: all of the drawings were created primarily with graphite on paper. It was important to me to create a "look" for my art and decided right away that would be with a pencil and paper. In the early work, I used cut-paper and very delicate applications of colored pencil as secondary media. While these may seem radically different processes than graphite on paper, the visual result was complimentary. Unless closely examined, these additions were almost imperceptible. The attention to detail, refined and meticulous application of graphite, and overall craft have all stayed consistent. I believe there is something profoundly beautiful in elegance, detail, order, and pattern and these are elements that I try to obtain in my work. When viewing an early piece with a more recent piece, the only significant difference in process is the elimination of secondary media and the introduction of powdered graphite applied with a brush. And even with these changes, the finished products are visually similar.

Another sustained visual component is the balance between rendered, realistic drawing and stylized design elements. In the *Tarot* and *Astrological* drawings, this was more obvious. Figures were drawn with absolute detail, creating an illusion of three-dimensional space, while the background was used to investigate flat graphic shapes. What united the two styles was the graphic line contour on the figure. Although the drawings in *Allegory of the Moth* are absent of the same background treatment, the graphic line continues. This line can be seen as a solid outline, thick-and-thin calligraphic outline, or one that disappears in the highlight areas and returns in shadow.

Besides visual commonalities, there is a major contextual cohesiveness: every drawing is focused on the human form (this of course excludes the small moth portraits, which I consider to be supplementary to the larger figurative work). At the beginning, I started with self-portraiture, as

seen in my *Tarot* series. Interested in self-discovery, the work in the series bordered on art therapy. I was investigating very personal themes and while it seemed relevant to me personally, I found it difficult to discuss the work or even exhibit it. It was like framing pages from a diary and hanging them in public. Although veiled in esoteric symbolism, there was a vulnerability to the work that I found created a barrier between my audience and I. My viewers responded to the skill and were intrigued by what the pieces meant, yet there was reluctance on my part to discuss them.

Wanting to continue with portraiture, I began my *Astrology* series. This body of work dealt with similar ideas and symbolism that I was using with my self-portraiture but with other people. My interest in Astrology and Tarot and their relevance to real-life observations fueled this project. Here, I could investigate personalities without revealing much, if anything, about myself. I enjoyed the challenge of really capturing the likeness of a person, not just physically, but through expression and symbolic devices. I drew only people I knew well, generally members of my family, in order to incorporate their characteristics in the piece.

In *Allegory of the Moth*, the figure remained yet the content about one specific person was changed. The drawings in this series were not literally self-portraits or even drawings of people I knew, but instead I used models. I add the word "literally" because I would be lying if I said these works weren't in some way autobiographical. In some more than others, the models were stand-ins for my own image. But the women in these drawings are more than just me. They transcend one specific personality and become "every woman." Since I did not know the models personally, the figure became a symbol. These archetypes dismissed the need for extraneous background information, borders, or other elements once needed to tell the story.

Which brings me to the thread that connects everything I have done: every drawing is allegorical. From the very beginning I was trying to tell a story through symbolism. It started as a story about myself, discovering the chapters as each new drawing was created. It related to the story of the tarot, following a journey of the archetypal fool into enlightenment. The *Astrological* portraits were telling stories about people I knew and my further investigation of tarot and astrology. With the *Moth* drawings, the stories became more complex because the ties to an individual were severed.

Because of the story and the layers of symbolism, my drawings are more than visual compositions. Each one is full of hidden meaning. Half of my creative process does not involve drawing at all as I am continually conducting research. The areas of research, although manifested differently in the three series, have been consistently about the psychology of the unconscious, Tarot, astrology, and mythological archetypes. As will be discussed in detail later, my research on moths inspired a whole body of work. As I assimilate these ideas, a concept for a drawing emerges. I love to read and learn and perhaps my desire to create narrative work is derived from my love of books and research.

My most recent body of work, *Allegory of the Moth*, is perhaps the most significant part of my thesis. I feel like everything that I created before this work was leading up to it. While not exactly a moth, the moth *symbol* first appeared in one of my self-portraits, *Queen of Swords* (Image 1), when I drew a monarch butterfly in the top center of the composition. I selected this particular butterfly initially due to its name. I wanted to include a symbol for a strong female character without drawing another figure, therefore "monarch" translated to queen or mother. This drawing was about my own relationship with my mother and the process of becoming an adult woman.

The woman in the drawing is cutting her hair, a metaphor for severing ties with girlhood. Yet the monarch butterfly stays near and watches over; they share the space and are still connected.

My process at the time of this drawing was reverse of how I work now. I was choosing elements intuitively and then researching afterwards to find out what everything meant. With my interest in the unconscious part of the mind, this process was intriguing to me. The symbols I was choosing often had very interesting results when read together within the composition. The more I learned and studied the more I started making decisions beforehand about what symbols to choose.

Thus, the butterfly lead me on a path to research moths. The initial appeal was the actual act of drawing the butterfly. I could hone in on fine details such as the miniscule hairs covering its body and the microscopic features of its face. The fragile nature of a butterfly's delicate wings required me to have complete control of every mark and shift in value or texture. And the process of creating near perfect symmetry engaged the intellectual part of my brain.

After reading more about butterfly symbolism I was really intrigued about the complex symbolism relating to the moth. Moths are often seen as the ugly stepsisters to butterflies. Classified with butterflies in the order Lepidoptera, moths are less studied and less desirable than their colorful, daytime counterparts even though moth species greatly outnumber the amount of butterfly species. Moths are usually thought of as pests and destructive. They are misunderstood and dismissed as irritating bugs. And yet there are people, entomologists and non-scientists alike, who are drawn to moths much as the moth is drawn to the flame. I consider myself one of these people. Now, moths appear over and over in my drawings; they permeate from the background space in hazy swarms, land on the bodies of beautiful women, and exist in their own portraits.

The drawings in *Allegory of the Moth* are illustrations of different moth behavior within a symbolic context. The moths are to some extent metaphysical beings. They exist between reality and dream. They are emotional beings that are part of the woman's psyche. The women are not only platforms for the moths but they also serve as the body for the soul. Some of the figures interact with the moths, as we see a woman aiding a moth out of her mouth, others do not react to the moth's presence as they alight on their bodies, drink their tears, or hover around their heads.

When I started the *Moth* series, I made a shift in technique: the introduction of powdered graphite and the elimination of any other medium. I was still using pencils but I wanted a secondary technique of applying the graphite that would be gentle and delicate. Not wanting to completely loose the graphic quality to my work, I looked to ancient Japanese art and studied the fluid brushstrokes. By applying the graphite with a soft brush instead of a hard pencil, I could emulate this style and make it my own. Often, the brushstrokes in my drawings end up lost after the rendering is complete, but I challenged myself to let some of these preliminary marks remain.

Like the moths that so fascinated me, powdered graphite reminded me of their dusty wings. If you have ever touched a moth's wing, the powder comes off on your fingertips. Powdered graphite behaves in a similar way. Unlike a pencil mark, the powder rests on the paper's surface. It can be blown away or rubbed into the paper's fibers. A brushstroke of graphite will leave evidence that it was there but it doesn't incise the paper. It is ephemeral.

The symbolism attributed to the moth is a many-layered manifestation derived from science, mythology, art, literature, philosophy and my own observations. The most curious behavior of the moth is perhaps its attraction to light. Although countless scientific studies have occurred, no solid explanation has been concluded upon. In modern times we commonly see

moths flying around streetlights at night or hovering near a window of a well-lit room. Their mannerism is remarkably strange; they move about in unpredictable ways, frantically beating their wings in a tireless fashion.

In literature and poetry, the analogy "like a moth to the flame" is used time and time again. Before electric light, it was not uncommon to witness a moth fly right into a candle's flame and self-immolate. Thus, the metaphor is one of tragic desire, to have an insatiable longing for something, especially one that is self-destructive or results in a merely a moment of pleasure. At some point in most everyone's life, we have this experience. We are often attracted to people or situations that are simply no good and yet dismiss all logic and follow our emotions. In his poem, *The Lesson of the Moth,* Don Marquis explores this theme and from the point of view of a moth he wrote, "it is better to be a part of beauty/ for one instant and then cease to/ exist than to exist forever/ and never be a part of beauty."[ii]

In a totally different way, light is very significant in a moth's life because most moths are nocturnal. Symbolically, this connects the moth with the unconscious. Moths are active while the rest of us are dreaming. They exist in the world of darkness, which is the world of mystery and the unknown.

Because light has always played an integral part of my compositions, this was interesting for me to contemplate. When lighting the figure for my reference photos, I would always wash out one side with bright light. Initially, this was an aesthetic decision. It created very dramatic lights and shadows, a high-contrast value structure, and it easily allowed me to give a graphic quality to a face. One half could be defined by an outline and then value would gradually describe the face as it went into shadow. When I think about a moth and the importance of light in its life, I find this

treatment of the figure to be very symbolic especially in reference to the poem. The idea is that the light is a way of experiencing beauty and that beauty is ever fleeting. My drawings are moments captured in time. A second later, the light could shift, the feeling lost, and the memory changed.

As I started the drawings for *Allegory of the Moth*, I began with a woman looking over her left shoulder and directly into the light in *Let them cry for you* (Image 2). The right side of her body, the shadow side, is where we find the moths. They slowly crawl on her towards the light and gather in a smoky swarm behind her. Rather than thinking about the light as a flame that would burn her up, the light symbolized hope and inspiration. It is the light of awakening. Earlier I described the moths as being metaphysical and in this drawing they are indeed that. The moths represent emotions and the figurative baggage we carry with us in life. She is on the path to enlightenment and can "see the light" for the first time. Her emotional moths join her on the journey yet stay in the shadows, or the past. They are a part of her but no longer obstruct her vision.

The moths in the drawing are Death's Head Hawk-moths and I chose them specifically for a couple of reasons. The foremost reason being the unique markings on the moth's back that resembles a skull and cross-bones. Because of this mark, these moths have a notorious reputation. They are thought to be bad omens or warnings of death. This helped support the idea that these moths are the negativity in her life and past. They are the reason for change and the cause for her to turn away from the shadows.

The other motive to choose the Death's Head-moth is because they emit a shrill cry when they are frightened. This characteristic inspired the title of the drawing *Let them cry for you*. The title suggests that because these creatures are literally capable of crying, the woman in the drawing no longer needs to. They free her from her sorrows.

As I continued to research the mystery of moths and light, I was intrigued by one scientist's theory. Since moths' main predators are diurnal, finding a hiding spot during the day is crucial to their survival. Light triggers in moths an urgency to hide. Biomedical Engineer Henry Hsiao wrote in his essay, *Flight Paths of Night-Flying Moths to Light,* that because of a moth's natural instinct to hide during the day, "moths fly towards the dark areas of the sky and are thus inclined to circle ambient objects in the Mach band region."[iii] The Mach band occurs when there is an isolated light source in darkness. It is a sliver of darkness that interrupts the gradation of light to dark and is actually darker than the darkness around it. Therefore when the moth finds itself near a streetlight, for instance, they become confused and seek out that dark area of illusionary safety.

In *Luminary* (Image 3), the woman actually becomes the light source in a darkened space. Since a Mach band is hardly perceptible to the human eye, I exaggerated its presence in my drawing. The reference for the white marks that interrupt the dark background were long-exposure photographs of moths flying around streetlights. What you are seeing is the trails of reflected light as the moths open and close their wings in flight. The streaks take on the appearance of vertebras or plant-like forms. Visually, the space becomes confusing and full of conflict. In the center of the chaos is the luminary, the stillness in a whirlwind of motion. She holds her arms to herself as if concentrating deeply on keeping still. Her closed eyes are a symbol for self-reflection or looking within one's self.

Perhaps the most powerful symbolic metaphor assigned to the moth, comes from its metamorphosis. As a caterpillar, the creature spends its days living among the earth, eating constantly and often from a single plant. It then spins a delicate cocoon around itself and disintegrates into primordial goo. Once it emerges, it is a creature of the air. Many moths don't

even have mouths and therefore cannot eat. So in its adult form, it is completely unlike the creature from which it was. John O'Donohue, Irish poet and philosopher, compares this transformation to our own life and death experience. We are of this world when we are alive and after death we are still near the earth, and can visit, but never return to our former state.[iv] There are indigenous cultures that further this idea in a superstitious belief. It is said that if a large moth is found in your bedroom, you must not kill it but instead aid it outside for it is the spirit of a loved one coming back to visit. The moth is akin to the spirit world.

Although not directly expressed in just one drawing, *Our Lady of the Moths* (Image 4) and *The World* (Image 5) most clearly exemplify the spiritual aspect of the moth. Surrounded by a halo of flying moths of varied species, the figure in *Our Lady of the Moths* takes on a Virgin Mary or pagan Earth Mother role. She represents the connection between this world and the realm of spirit. She has an ethereal beauty and an expression of peace and serenity. I think of her as protecting the moths as if all creatures, big and small, had some sort of deity in nature. This character is repeated in the drawing *The World*. Here we see her sweeping up a swarm of moths in a great black veil. In Greek mythology, she would be called Nyx, the goddess of night. Nyx was often depicted flying above the earth with a veil full of stars trailing behind her representing the night sky. The title *The World* comes from the tarot card with the same name. The card features a dancing woman, twisted in a veil, connecting the heavens and the earth with one hand reaching up and the other extending down.

Besides the research already discussed, there have been many artists that have influenced my work both visually and conceptually. Art nouveau artist Alphonse Mucha has been a long-time favorite of mine. I am perpetually inspired by how he combines the female figure with flowers,

graphic elements and organic shapes to create beautifully articulated compositions. While researching moths, I discovered the work of Joseph Scheer and the Starn Twins, who both use moth imagery in their works but executed in very different ways. It was interesting for me to find artists that shared my passion for moths and be able to read about their concepts. The Starn Twins especially inspired me with their attentiveness to the tactile qualities of the moth and their regard for symbolism. I adore the work of contemporary artists Sylvia Ji and Audrey Kawasaki, who both are female artists painting the female figure. Their art nouveau inspired work shares my aesthetic for graphic, curvy lines and stylized figures. I am continually inspired by the vast array of artistic styles used for tarot cards, books, and scientific illustration. Finally, I must give credit to the thousands of photographs of moths available on the Internet for me to use as reference.

The amount of research and thought put into each drawing easily lends itself to lengthy explanations. The real joy is when a viewer takes interest in an individual drawing and my role shifts from artist to storyteller. Conversely, I have had people tell me the stories they see when viewing my work. It validates me as an illustrator when I hear a translation of my visual language. The drawings in this exhibit investigate beauty, narrative, and symbolism, as they relate to the natural world and the human form. I thrive on the process of creating detailed, emotive drawings. It is my hope that my art not only serves as a form of self-expression but also creates a connection with my viewer.

Image 1. *Queen of Swords*

Image 2. *Let them cry for you*

Image 3. *Luminary*

Image 4. *Our Lady of the Moths*

Image 5. *The World*

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[ii] Don Marquis. *archy and mehitabel.* 1927.

[iii] Hsiao, HS. *"Flight Paths of Night-Flying Moths to Light." Journal of Insect Physiology*, Vol. 19:1971-76, 1973.

[iv] O'Donohue, John. *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace.* New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004.

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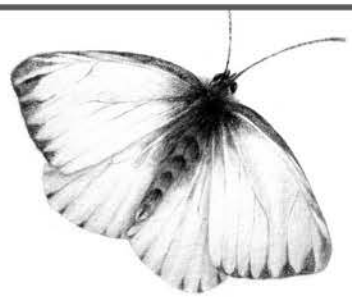
# Devin K. Slattery

*Image List*



1. *Our Lady of the Moths*
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 28.5" x 22.5"
   **date:** 2009

2. *Pandora*
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 14" x 17"
   **date:** 2009

3. *Pandora* (detail)
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 14" x 17"
   **date:** 2009

4. *Let them cry for you*
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 24" x 19"
   **date:** 2009

5. *They wanted the salt, not the sorrow*
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 28.5" x 22.5"
   **date:** 2009

6. *They wanted the salt, not the sorrow* (detail)
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 28.5" x 22.5"
   **date:** 2009

7. *Inconsolable underwing*
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 28.5" x 22.5"
   **date:** 2009

8. *Inconsolable underwing* (detail)
   **media:** graphite on paper
   **size:** 28.5" x 22.5"
   **date:** 2009

9. *Fortitude (Leo)*
   **media:** graphite, colored pencil and cut paper on paper
   **size:** 24" x 19"
   **date:** 2008

10. *Solitude (Virgo)*
    **media:** graphite, colored pencil and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 24" x 19"
    **date:** 2008

11. *Transformation (Scorpio)*
    **media:** graphite, colored pencil and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 24" x 19"
    **date:** 2008

12. *Transformation (Scorpio)* (detail)
    **media:** graphite, colored pencil and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 24" x 19"
    **date:** 2008

13. *Intuition (Pisces)*
    **media:** graphite, colored pencil and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 24" x 19"
    **date:** 2008

14. *Two of Cups*
    **media:** graphite and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 17" x 14"
    **date:** 2007

15. *Three of Swords*
    **media:** graphite, dried flower, and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 17" x 14"
    **date:** 2007

16. *Wheel of Fortune*
    **media:** graphite and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 17" x 14"
    **date:** 2007

17. *The High Priestess*
    **media:** graphite and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 17" x 14"
    **date:** 2008

18. *The Hierophant*
    **media:** graphite, lace and cut paper on paper
    **size:** 17" x 14"
    **date:** 2008

19. *Queen of Swords*
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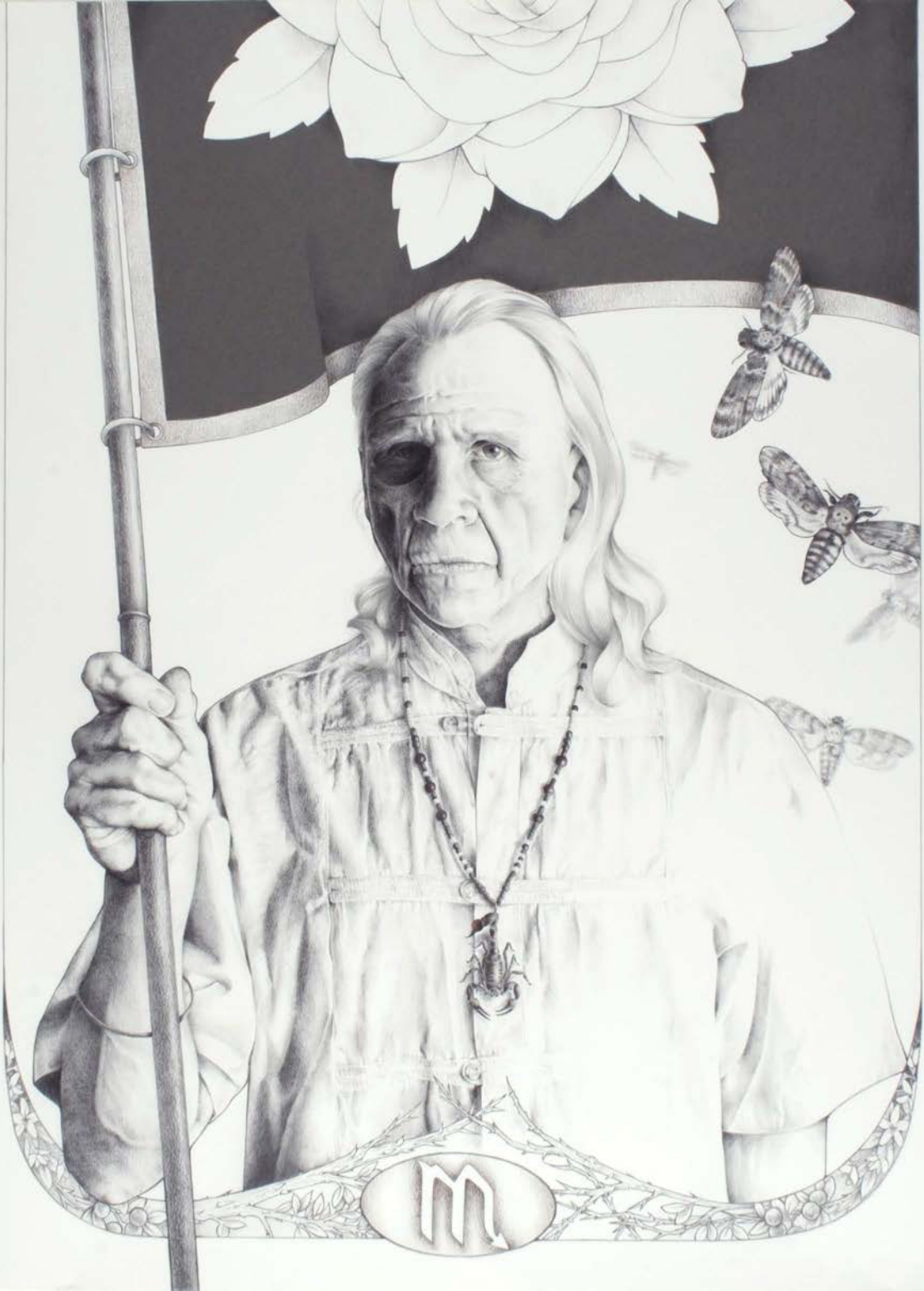
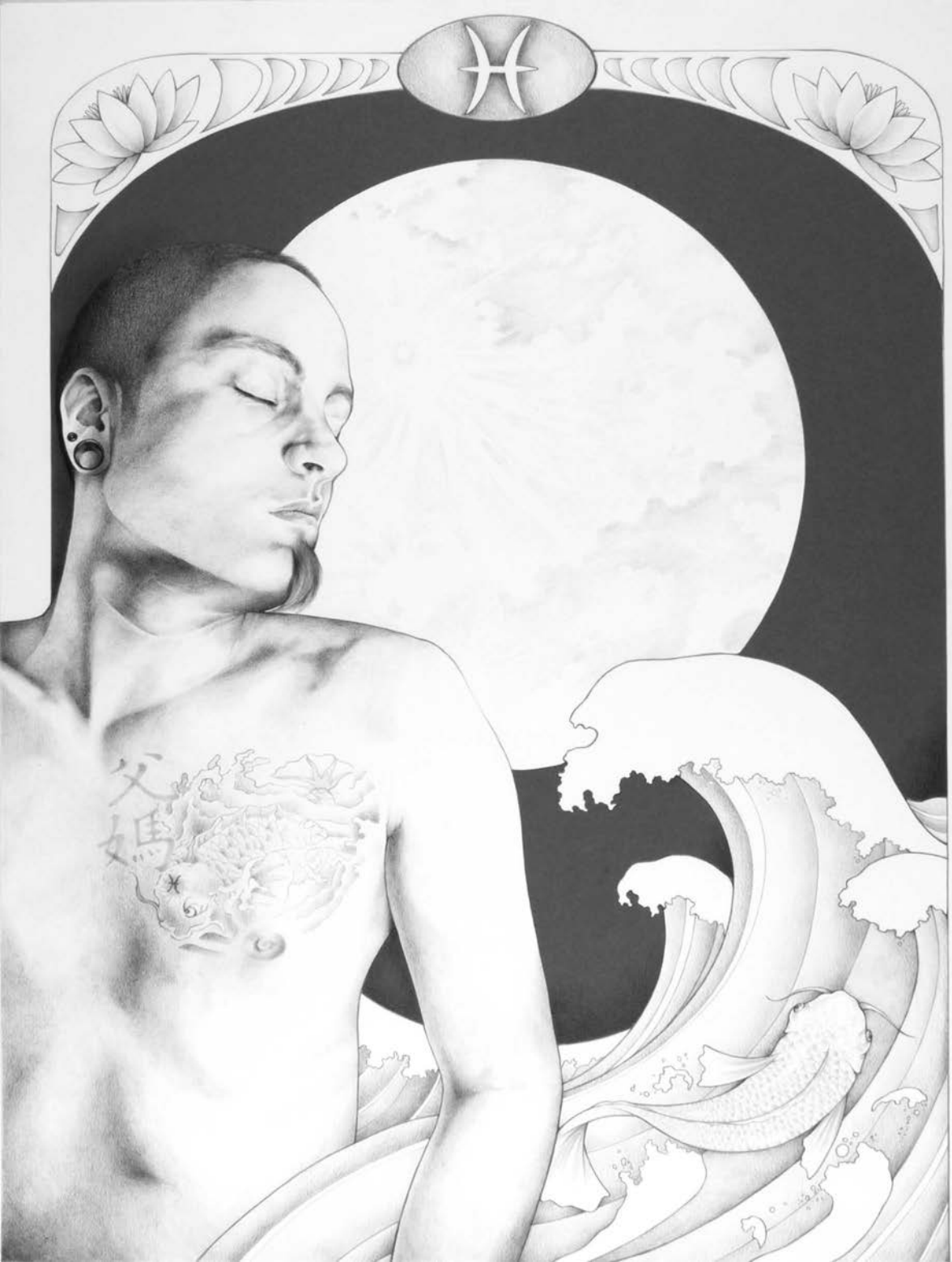
    **date:** 2008

20. *Queen of Swords* (detail)
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