Of Waistbands and Journeys

An Introduction

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Zero Issue

For me it starts with underwear. Underwear, a belt, and the realization that even after eight decades, thousands of comics, multiple film franchises, and millions of dollars spent on costumes, the Man of Steel still has not discovered the secret of waistbands in keeping up his briefs. Now it's not really underwear, and the belt is more for show than a way to keep anything up—the creators were actually referencing the costumes of circus strongmen, a point that Grant Morrison explained in his book *Supergods*.[1] However, what it symbolized for me was something bigger—that Superman is such a prevalent figure that we don't even question some of his more glaring quirks. And it got me thinking—if a bright-yellow belt and what looks like red undies go unnoticed, what other attributes about our heroes have we simply accepted without question?

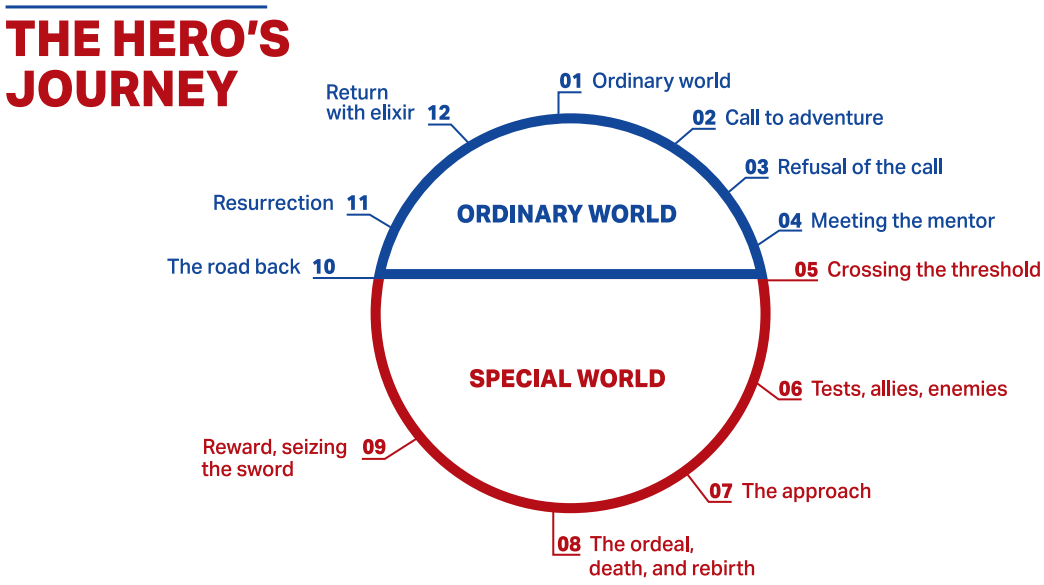
The societal perception of Superman and Wonder Woman is that they are the faultless defenders of truth, justice, and the American way. They are the better versions of ordinary Americans, instilled with values admired by the country at large. Americans need not fear any threat because the star-spangled crime fighters are always on the lookout. But they aren't always perfect. They don't always save the citizen in peril, their iron-clad moralities can vary from one issue to another. Superman has done things that are sexist, Wonder Woman has at times been racially insensitive. Over the course of eighty years, hundreds of writers guided the actions and adventures of these characters, responding to trends and norms in mass culture—which means sometimes these heroes did or said things that today we find cringeworthy.

In spite of this, they remain beloved characters with cult followings,

Jim Shaw, *The Issue of My Loins*, 2015. Installation. Courtesy the artist + Simon Lee Gallery, London + Hong Kong + Blum + Poe Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

track records of adapting to the times, and a history of standing up against powerful forces for what was right. They respond to critique and to the many calls to action society throws their way. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that artists—the other watchdogs of culture—continue gravitating toward these characters. And it is not just the niche, nerdy artists. It is art-world heavyweights like Laurie Anderson, Jim Shaw, Renée Cox, Pope.L, and Enrique Chagoya. These are prominent voices and art stars who use these characters because they understand the importance of these heroes. The works gathered for this show tell stories in parable—using the familiarity of the Amazon Princess and Man of Steel as gateways into difficult conversations about the present moment. To this end, the show breaks out thematically—grouping works together by focusing on salient messages and arranging these groupings into a compelling narrative that gradually breaks down and reexamines these two recognizable characters.

This connection to storytelling is critical to this show. After all, these heroes first existed as characters in serial comic books with ever-unfolding adventures. Since Superman and Wonder Woman were born of comics, we wanted to pay homage to the characteristics of the print medium in this publication. To do this we broke the catalog into individual issues. The acknowledgements, director's foreword, and this introduction comprise the first section, our "Zero Issue." This title nods to the backstory issue in comics, often written later to set the stage before the adventure actually begins. The other four issues in this box set, numbered 1–4, follow the thematic progression of the exhibition. Each issue consists of reproductions of the works in that section, accompanied by a hundred-word blurb from the corresponding living



artists who answered the question "Why Superman/Wonder Woman" by email. In each issue, an essay from a contributing scholar dives more deeply into a particular aspect of that section's theme.

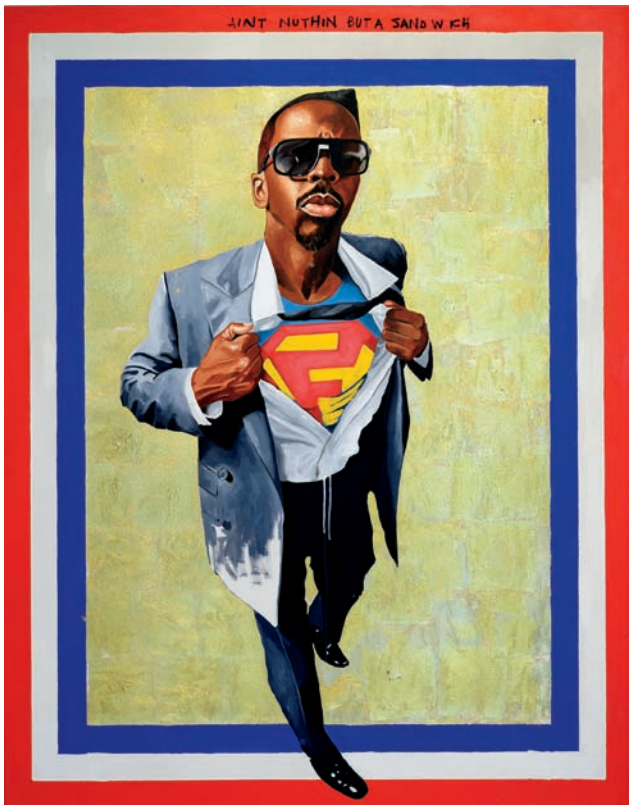
The numeric progression of the issues is not just used for the sake of simplicity. It also references the narrative structure fundamental to the Superman and Wonder Woman comics: Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey." This same story framework has been the backbone of most hero stories for millennia, leading to what the literary scholar Campbell calls "the hero of a thousand faces" and the idea that all heroes complete a similar adventure. As illustrated in the hero's journey graphic, a hero starts in the ordinary world, but answers the call to enter the "special world" where he goes on an adventure, ultimately leading him back—after a series of tests and challenges—to where he started.[2] However, the adventure always leaves the hero changed, returning with newfound wisdom—what Campbell calls "the elixir."[3] With *Men of Steel, Women of Wonder*, we wanted to create a similar experience as people walk through the space. Here the adventure is an exploration of these beloved heroes. As visitors progress through the galleries or read through the issues, they descend deeper and deeper into this journey of breaking down and reexamining the heroes we've all known for years. The result of this adventure is a new, slightly changed perspective on Superman and Wonder Woman, guided by the artists in the show.

Graphic of the hero's journey by Anna Vernon.

Issue 1: The Heroes We Know

The journey starts in the ordinary world with "The Heroes We Know." Upon first encountering this show we wanted people to realize that these are familiar characters and known points of entry. Greeted by iconic works like *Superman* and *Wonder Woman* by Mel Ramos, visitors first encounter the characters presented in patriotic garb with the perfectly toned muscles and expertly coiffed hair we've come to expect. The section also includes photographs by Siri Kaur showing impersonators dressed in cheap costumes; Fahamu Pecou's self-portrait nod to his art-world hero through a visual quotation of Barkley Hendricks's 1969 self-portrait, *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People—Bobby Seale)*; and a Katherine Bradford painting that speaks to how iconic Superman's boots and cape are in popular culture.

This opening section functions as an introduction to the show to come, but it's grounded very much in the world of the familiar and the everyday. We call our moms wonder women; send our kids to school with Superman lunch boxes; and weirdly all know about kryptonite, even when identifying a real stone like amethyst might be a struggle. The mythologies of Superman and Wonder Woman are woven into our social fabric, and this first section identifies some of the ways artists explore those connections in their work. To this end, the catalog features an essay written by the comic scholar Bart Beaty, whose past work examines the ways the art and comic worlds collide and occasionally overlap. His essay delves into how these characters function as symbols, analyzing how certain iterations of the heroes became the prevailing versions referenced throughout popular culture.



↑ Barkley Hendricks, *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved any Black People—Bobby Seale)*, 1969. Oil, acrylic, and aluminum leaf on canvas. Collection of Liz and Eric Lefkofsky.

← Fahamu Pecou, *Nunna My Heros: After Barkley Hendicks' 'Icon for My Man Superman,' 1969*, 2011. Acrylic, gold leaf, and oil stick on canvas, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Gift of Marjorie and Michael Levine.

Aiden Lassell Ripley, *Industries of Holyoke*, 1935. Oil on plywood panel. The Westmoreland Museum of American Art; Bequest of Richard M. Scaife (2015.88).

Issue 2: Origin Stories

From the familiarity of the first section, we invite visitors to answer the call of adventure and enter the special world—one in which they reexamine the heroes they thought they knew. In "Origin Stories" we don't recount Superman's escape from Krypton and adolescence in Kansas or relay how Wonder Woman left a utopian island of women to accompany General Steve Trevor back to the United States. Instead, we wanted to challenge guests to reassess why these characters even came into existence by placing both into their respective cultural contexts. In both cases these were heroes born of crisis. The debut of Superman occurred during the height of the Great Depression in 1938. At that time, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal created opportunities for American men to go back to work helping rebuild America through able-bodied action. The New Deal also funded artists to create murals and prints, often featuring muscular, broad-chested men. When viewers look at a mural study like *Industries of Holyoke* or a print like *Men of Steel* by Samuel L. Margolies, they start to understand how the herculean abilities of Superman could easily emerge as the superheroic extension of New Deal values. Wrap all of those sentiments in a tight-fitting blue suit, underwear, and a chunky belt similar to that worn by the circus

strongman in the Courier Lithography Company's print, and suddenly the world's first superhero is born.

Wonder Woman burst onto the scene three years later, in December of 1941, the same month the United States joined World War II. From the very outset, Diana Prince was a member of the US military, working by day as a secretary but stepping away to fight hand-to-hand against Nazis as Wonder Woman. As women filled vacant factory jobs, these American "Rosies" found a champion in Wonder Woman, doing the superheroine equivalent of supporting the war effort. As with Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* (featured in the show holding a riveting gun while wearing lipstick and painted nails), Wonder Woman was powerful, but was also expected to remain beautiful and feminine. Her

Courier Lithography Company, *John Robinson's $25,000 Challenge Feature – Louis Cyr, strongest man on earth, lifts 4300 lbs.*, 1898. Chromolithograph. *Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.*

↑ Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter,* 1943. Oil on canvas. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. 2007.178

→ Gil Elvgren, *Jill Needs Jack*, 1950. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Louis K. and Susan P. Meisel.

creator, William Moulton Marston, based her in part on pin-up girls like those of Earl Moran or Gil Elvgren. He believed that a woman's sexuality was one of her strongest sources of power—a belief that Wonder Woman continues to tussle with today.

To drive these origin stories home, this section culminates with the only two comics in the exhibition: the first cover appearances of both characters, *Action Comics* #1 and *Sensation Comics* #1. The catalog essay for this section, written by art historian and visual culture scholar Erika Doss, explores the real-world origins of these characters in detail. Her essay navigates the current obsession with superheroes and traces that thread back into history while providing in-depth analysis of artwork from the section.

Issue 3: Glimpsing Humanity

Having established the origins of these characters, the exhibition then moves on to "Glimpsing Humanity." In this section we build on the idea that, in order to overcome the nation's hardships, America created its own mythology with Superman and Wonder Woman as its version of Zeus and Hera. Here we wanted guests to question how they could possibly connect to these fictional American gods who embody the best midcentury values of our nation and whose abilities so exponentially exceed those of an average human.

To do this, the section is broken into two halves. The first deals with the notion that these godlike characters are effectively all-powerful beings to be admired and possibly even feared. Valentin Popov deifies both characters in his icon paintings, while Jim Shaw inverts this point

Laurie Anderson, Laurie Anderson performing *O Superman*, 1982.

by casting Superman as Satan in scenes culled from William Blake's illustrations of *Paradise Lost*. Alternatively, Laurie Anderson removes the religious connection but preserves the power with her crossover music video / video work *O Superman*, which hauntingly casts the Man of Steel as a proxy for Soviet-era government power.

The second half of the section deals with the vulnerability of these heroes, inviting guests to consider what it means when artists remove certain abilities or highlight already-existing character flaws. Here the artist Mike Kelley prompts consideration of the internal struggle faced by Superman in *Superman Recites Selections from 'The Bell Jar' and Other Works by Sylvia Plath*, while Jason Bard Yarmosky presents his grandmother—who was living with Alzheimer's at the time—in a Wonder Woman costume, drawing attention to mental health, youthful beauty, and how society defines bravery. This second half of the section is also the focus of my catalog essay. In it I take a closer look at the value of finding the vulnerabilities in these characters and how artists prodding those perceived weaknesses actually make the heroes stronger.

Issue 4: Defender of Innocents

The final section of the show focuses on the jobs these characters were called to do. From the opening pages of their respective comics, they both existed to help defend the defenseless. Therefore, when designing the progression of this exhibition, we knew we wanted to dedicate the most space to examining this, the callings of Superman and Wonder Woman. In each of the section's groupings, viewers encounter artists either implicating Superman and Wonder Woman for their shortcomings or using them as champions for their causes.

The first grouping, "Comic Whitewash," takes its name from the Mel Casas painting featuring Superman alongside other white heroes, driving home the idea that these "defenders of all" are often merely perpetuating a white savior narrative—a longstanding trope in which people of color need to be saved by a white protector. The artists in this whole grouping address a lack of representation, noticeable through the dearth of heroes of color and from the fact that historically white superheroes have often saved other white characters. For some, racial injustice is the focus, but the artist still admires the hero, as is the case with Emma Amos, who paints herself in Wonder Woman attire but also carries an alter-ego T-shirt change that would disguise her as an objectified brown woman. Alternatively, Peter Williams creates The N-Word, a black hero with all of the powers of Superman, but one who is not given the same leeway to perform vigilante justice as his white counterpart.

Jason Bard Yarmosky, *Wintered Fields*, 2016. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

↑ Mel Casas, *Humanscape 70 (Comic Whitewash)*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas. Mel Casas Family Trust.

→ Peter Williams, *Duck Soup, a Comedy*, 2016. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

With works like those by Renée Cox, the previous grouping bleeds into one focused on gender norms and sexuality. While some would credit Wonder Woman as a symbol of feminist pride, others see her and Superman as straight, cisgender reinforcements of an existing binary patriarchal system. Addressing some of these concerns, this subsection features works by the artist collective the Waitresses, who latched onto Wonder Woman as a champion of their feminist fight around

Sarah Hill, *They Wonder,* 2015. *Public Communication: Performing Knowledge of the Body*. Suplex, BLUE orange Contemporary, Houston, Texas.

themes of work, money, sexual harassment, and stereotypes of women. Additionally, in this grouping there is a work by the artist Sarah Hill called *They Wonder*. This work nods to Dara Birnbaum's important 1978 *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (also included in this subsection) and features Hill spinning to the point of collapse, speaking to the exhaustive nature of constantly performing while navigating societal expectations as a transgender person.

The following subsection, *Aliens Among Us*, builds upon the idea that both characters are illegal immigrants. Wonder Woman comes to the United States from the island of Themyscira. Superman is literally

an alien—having escaped from another planet as it was exploding—also making him a refugee. Many artists, particularly Latinxs, have explored this element of the characters in light of current debates regarding immigration. Vincent Ramos gravitated toward the Wonder Woman portrayed by Lynda Carter, who millions idolized without knowing her Mexican American heritage. In *Barbed Wire, Chain Link, & the Lasso of Truth*, Ramos places the actress beyond a fence, alluding to the current border wall debate. Taking a different approach, Enrique Chagoya presents Superman pulling back a Pilgrim's costume to reveal his logo to an Aztec god in *Crossing I*. Chagoya reminds viewers that colonizers were also powerful illegal aliens, inviting a slightly different outlook on Superman's lonely alien narrative.

The final room places these characters on a global stage in a grouping called "American Ambassadors." The perspectives in this room come from international artists, immigrants, and native-born citizens, all of whom portray Superman and Wonder Woman as beacons of American ideals and expectations. The artists use these characters as American archetypes useful in the exploration of multiple layers of individual, cultural, and national identity—at times almost more like amalgamations of all of American culture as opposed to unique, stand-alone characters. The Iranian artist Siamak Filizadeh created a series relocating a classic Persian hero, Rostam, to present-day Tehran and casting him as a beefy quasi-Superman, surrounded by American kitsch. Aphrodite Désirée Navab was also born in Iran but fled as a child during the Islamic Revolution. She later created Super East/West Woman, a character who blurs Navab's own dual identity as Iranian American, boldly declaring her presence with her brilliant blue chador. Alternatively,

Roger Shimomura was born in Seattle to Japanese American parents and places himself in the work *American vs. American #2* as a stereotypical Asian character in martial arts robes punching out Superman. While the title reminds viewers that both are American, Shimomura pries at the perception around what values and features society associates with Americanness. The themes explored in this large, final grouping of works form the basis of art historian Andrianna Campbell's essay. Her text explores the inherent paradox associated with the democratic goals of Superman and Wonder Woman by analyzing artworks from the exhibition that delve into issues of tolerance, representation, and liberty.

Vincent Ramos, *Barbed Wire, Chain Link, & the Lasso of Truth*, 2016. Graphite and carbon on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

↑ Siamak Filizadeh, *The Soldiers of Evil Are Killed by Rostam II*, Rostam II Series, 2009. Edition 3/5. Digital print on canvas. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Purchased with funds provided by the Karl Loring Trust and Art of the Middle East.

→ Roger Shimomura, *American vs. American #2*, circa 2012. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Bonus Issue: The Return

But of course, ending with "Defender of Innocents" does not resolve the narrative in the way Joseph Campbell would propose finishing the Hero's Journey. A well-known trope of mainstream comics is their longevity. *Action Comics* featuring Superman just celebrated its one thousandth issue. If it resolved after every narrative arc with a return home for Superman, we wouldn't have decades of adventures.[4] Indeed, Brett M. Rogers identifies the comic genre as unique in that it never fully resolves itself in light of the hero's journey—typically stopping just short of "the return"—allowing for ongoing stories.[5] In the exhibition and catalog alike we cut the narrative off without a conclusion section as a deliberate reference to the comic medium. When visitors leave the "special world" of the galleries, however, *they* do complete the hero's journey. Back in the ordinary world where they started, they are now equipped with the knowledge gained on their journey. The next time they encounter references to Superman or Wonder Woman in their daily lives, they won't look at them quite the same way. They have the elixir and their perceptions are forever changed.

Dulce Pinzón, *Noe Reyes from Puebla works as a delivery person in Brooklyn, New York. He sends $500 a week.* 2005–2010. Archival c-print from analog image. Courtesy of the artist.

Notes

1 Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and A Sun God From Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012).

2 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949; Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).

3 Campbell.

4 Though his home planet of Krypton was destroyed, there are moments throughout the comics when Superman symbolically "returns" when he visits the shrunken capital city of Kandor (which he keeps in a bell jar in his Fortress of Solitude along with all of its inhabitants) or when he returns to Smallville, Kansas—his adopted home where he was raised by Jonathan and Martha Kent.

5 Brett M. Rogers, "Heroes UnLimited: The Theory of the Hero's Journey and the Limitation of the Superhero Myth," in *Classics and Comics*, ed. George Kovacs and C. W. Marshall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 79.