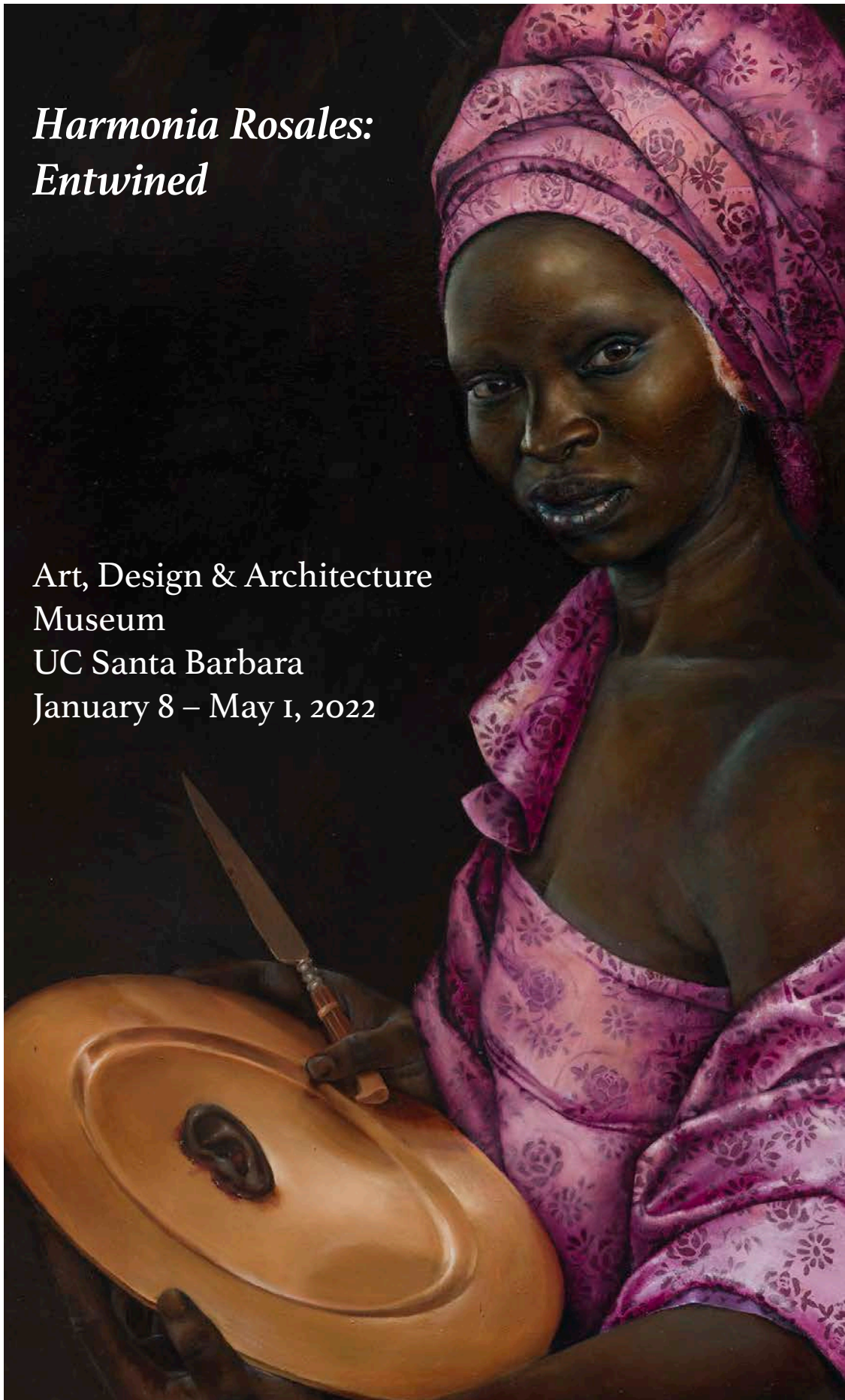


*Harmonia Rosales:
Entwined*

Art, Design & Architecture
Museum
UC Santa Barbara
January 8 – May 1, 2022



detail from *Migration of the Gods*



Harmonia Rosales: Entwined

Harmonia Rosales: Entwined celebrates the *orishas* (West African Yorùbá deities) and their extraordinary tales of desire and beauty, envy and betrayal, endurance and hope.

The Afro-Cuban tales are here entwined with those from ancient Greek mythology whose gods, goddesses, and heroes are every bit as contradictory and capricious as the *orishas* can be.

The exhibition unveils stunning new work by the LA-based, Afro-Cuban artist. It also presents the evolution of Rosales's art from paintings that explicitly engage with Greek mythology, to those where the associations are more subtle. Her art both embraces the Greek myths and supplants them, creating a sumptuous new Renaissance visuality that foregrounds the power and beauty of Black and Latinx figures.

Orisha worship in Cuba was established by enslaved people abducted from West Africa who were forced to practice their religion covertly. It is estimated that almost a million people from Yorùbá ethnic groups were captured and brought to Cuba in the nineteenth century. The exhibition invites us to reflect upon the atrocity of the transatlantic slave trade—in which over 12.5 million enslaved people survived the “Middle Passage” to the Americas—and its legacy in the racism of today.

By insisting on connections between humans and deities—across time and space, across thousands of years of storytelling—Rosales reveals to us, in the most exquisite ways, the transforming power, the *ashé*, that is present in art and in myth-making.



The artist

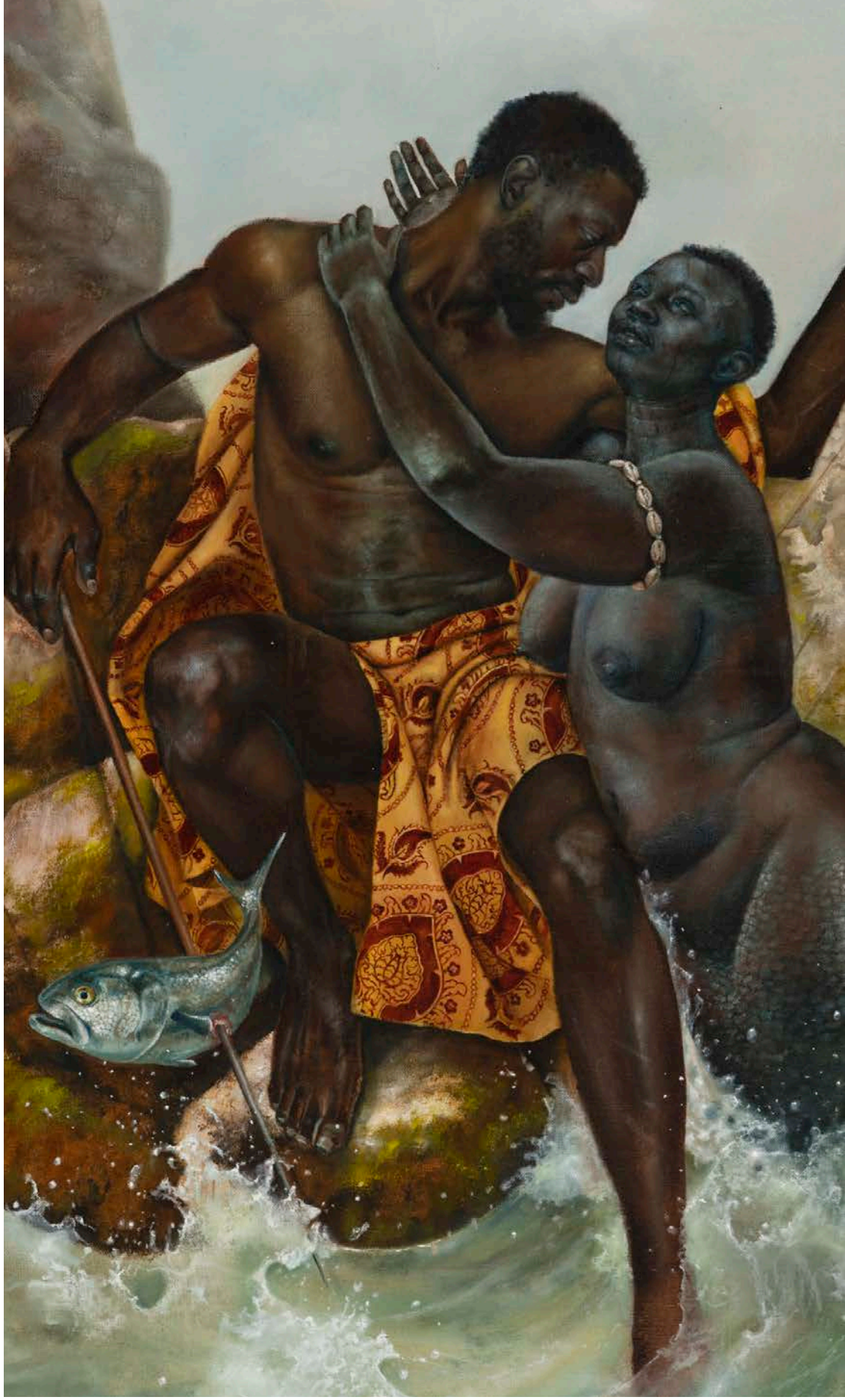
By Polyxeni Trikoulis

Born in Chicago to a father from Havana, Cuba and a Jewish Jamaican mother from Los Angeles, Harmonia Rosales grew up painting and learning at her artist mother's feet. Her mother illustrated books of well-known stories and fairy tales with images that centered Black people and characters; her influence on Rosales's work is clear. Rosales's paternal grandmother taught her to embrace her Afro-Cuban heritage and the Lucumí practices and beliefs which feature so heavily in her paintings. It is perhaps a surprise to learn that Rosales has had no formal art training; her passion and curiosity have driven her to study Renaissance techniques and develop her artistic style.

Rosales's work became especially well-known with *The Creation of God* in 2017. This painting, depicting God as a Black woman, pushes viewers to consider whom art historical traditions empower and whom they do not. Her paintings have been featured in group and solo exhibitions including "Miss Education" at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art (MoCADA, 2020), "Femme Touch" at the Andy Warhol Museum (2020), and her first monographic show, "Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony," at the Simard Bilodeau Contemporary in 2017.

Rosales is one of several artists (including Sanford Biggers, Kara Walker, the late Romare Bearden) whose work challenges racial and social hierarchies through melding ancient Greek mythology and Black history. *Harmonia Rosales: Entwined* continues her work of Black empowerment, conversation, and self-discovery.

detail from *Yemaya Meets Erinle*



The *patakís* of the *orishas*

By Helen Morales

Ka maa worisa

Let us keep looking to the orisha

-- Yorùbá saying

Patakís are stories told by practitioners of the Yorùbá-derived religion Lucumí or *regla ocha*, also known as Santería. The *patakís* tell of the births and lives of the *orishas*: spirits sent by the Supreme Creator, Olodumare, to help humanity.

Each *orisha* rules over one or more aspects of the world and of human existence. For example, Oshosi, the archer, is the *orisha* of the hunt, and of anyone who flees from injustice. Yemaya is the *orisha* of motherhood, and queen of the sea.

The *patakís* are transmitted orally; they are handed down from generation to generation. This makes them mutable; each teller of the *patakís* can give the myths their own stamp. When a diviner (a religious specialist) speaks to a worshipper, it is believed that the *orishas* are speaking through them.

Rosales paints *orishas* with gold 'halos' around their heads. This alludes to the Catholic saints with whom the *orishas* became associated, but more directly represents the *orishas*' auras—their souls or their energy.

detail from *Migration of the Gods*



The Middle Passage

By Helen Morales

The worship of the *orishas* survived the brutal trafficking of millions of Yorùbá people from West Africa (the southwestern part of present-day Nigeria) to the Americas via the Atlantic slave trade route known as the Middle Passage. Approximately 750,000 Yorùbá people were enslaved and taken to Cuba, where they became known as the Lucumí. The Cubans forced the Lucumí to be baptized into the Catholic Church.

However, the Lucumí continued to worship *orishas* by identifying them with Catholic saints. For example, Shango, the *orisha* of thunder and lightning, fire, water, and social justice, became identified with Santa Barbara who was also associated with those powers in Cuba. Publicly worshipping Santa Barbara gave the Lucumí a covert means of also worshipping Shango.

Not all *orishas* survived in Cuba. Rosales often features a large snake in her paintings. The snake is Osumare, the rainbow serpent, and the *orisha* who gave the signal that the creation of the world by the supreme power, Olodumare, had been completed. The worship of Osumare was not transplanted to Cuba, although this deity is still recognized in Brazil.

Yemaya (associated with Our Lady of Regla), who rules over salt water, is credited with saving the Yorùbá who did survive the Middle Passage. Her mythological experiences of rape, forced pregnancy, and caring for others' children resonated with enslaved Lucumí women in particular, and her *patakís* became a repository for the untold and silenced histories of Afro-Cuban women.

The painting *Migration of the Gods* (2021) imagines the *orishas* themselves as captives on the Middle Passage and *Still We Rise* (2021) connects the horrors of that trafficking with a continued history of oppression and resilience. Maya Angelou's words ring out: 'Still, like dust, I rise' and Harmonia Rosales's art responds, 'Yes, still we rise'.

detail from *The Birth of Oshun*



The ancient Greek myths

By Helen Morales

(HM) You've got a less adversarial stance to the Greek myths than one might think. Am I right that you're not so much displacing the Greek myths as drawing people in through their familiarity with them?

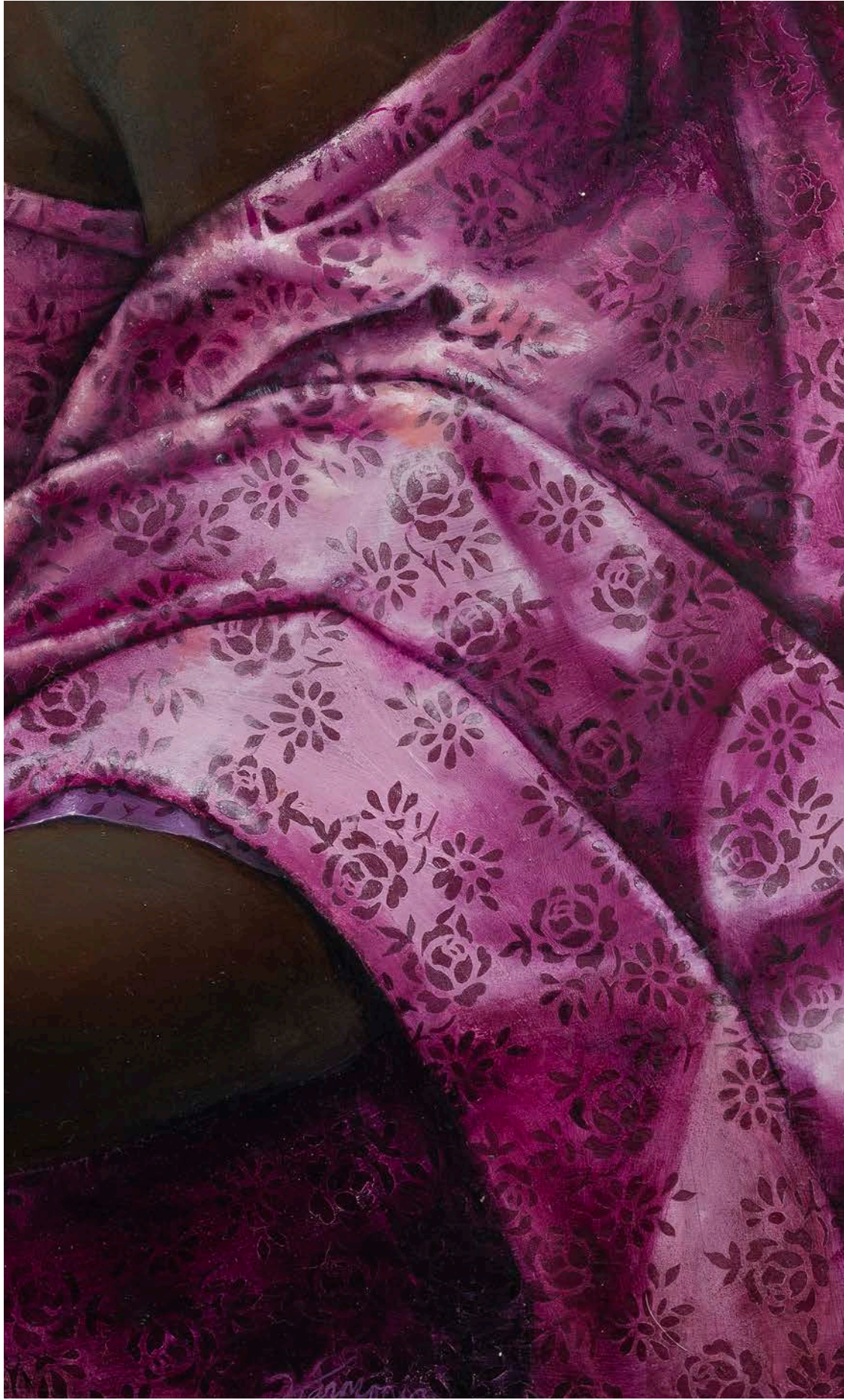
(HR): Exactly. They are what I learned in school. I was obsessed with Greek mythology, and the gods, and I just loved it. So I want people to fall in love with it too.

Greek myths are the wickedly exciting stories told by the ancient Greeks and Romans. They were originally part of the everyday religious practice of the ancient Greeks, but the stories persisted long after the religion was superseded by Christianity and have become part of our cultural heritage.

Classicism, the art and architecture inspired by the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, has long been associated with the elite. Any conversation about classicism necessarily involves questions of power and race. Renaissance art privileges scenes from the Greek myths, but does so in ways that typically idealize white bodies (much whiter and blonder than the ancient Greeks would have been). It is this tradition, and its exclusions, that Harmonia Rosales takes on in her paintings. The white western female ideal embodied in the goddess Venus as Botticelli imagines her in his *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485) is challenged in Rosales's *The Birth of Oshun* (2017), where the Afro-Cuban goddess with golden vitiligo redefines what is beautiful.

There is also a long history of Greek myths being used to speak truth to power, and Harmonia Rosales's engagements with Greek myth and Renaissance classicism are now a vibrant and politicized part of this tradition.

detail from *Oba and Her Ear*



Harmonia Rosales's artistic techniques

By Sophia Quach McCabe

In Rosales's skillful hands, Renaissance motifs and techniques gain new significance. She begins with Renaissance models, and then, with intention, shifts the narratives from ancient Greek or Christian to those of the African diaspora. An example is her re-envisioning of Sistine Chapel frescoes by Michelangelo in *The Creation Story* (2021), *The Migration of the Gods* (2021), and *Still We Rise* (2021).

Her representations of African gods and people are imbued with auras, their souls or energies, symbolized by the golden rays around the heads of the figures in *Migration of the Gods* and *Still We Rise*. Applied carefully, Rosales's delicate gilding presents not halos for the anointed, but rather the auras that exist in everyone. Rosales creates glowing skin by using thin oil glazes; her techniques follow those of Renaissance artists. Unlike these models, however, Rosales pays specific attention to the undertones of darker skin, bringing to light its dimensionality. The blue-black layering of colors of Yemaya's body in *The Creation Story*, or the ochre hue spread across the noses and cheeks of figures exemplifies such chromatic paint handling.

Rosales's incredible textiles, floral patterns, gleaming metal and radiant jewelry possess a tactility that could only be produced with patience and an absorption of art history. "I love art history. I loved it so much," says Rosales. "My mother used to take me to the Art Institute [of Chicago]. I literally would look at these paintings, and not pay attention to the actual stories, but I'd come up with stories myself." From Oba's lilac dress decorated with flowers—each petal carved and painted with tiny brushstrokes by the artist—to Jeggua's golden silk wrap with intricate amber-colored blossoms and vines, and Olodumare's flowing white robe with a jacquard weave, Rosales reinvents the taffeta, silks, and tapestries of Renaissance Venetian paintings.

detail from *The Creation Story*



Harmonia Rosales's art and Black female empowerment

By Vilna Bashi

Harmonia Rosales's Western-art-inspired images center black women, a stance that invites controversy, even in 21st century North America. Critics charge blasphemy and cultural appropriation as Rosales elevates black women to the lofty heights that familiar white figures normally inhabit. Rosales transforms Leonardo da Vinci's universal white man into a black woman (*The Virtuous Woman*, 2017); reimagines Adam and the Christian God who made him as two black women (*The Creation of God*, 2017); depicts the goddess Oshun with vitiligo-mottled skin as Botticelli's Venus (*The Birth of Oshun*, 2017); paints a splendidly robed goddess of the ocean Yemaya holding baby Eve (*Our Lady of Regla*, 2019) as Mary with baby Jesus; and reimagines those ubiquitous white cherubs as chubby black albinos in paintings of the Ibeji twins.

Rosales centers black women of all shades, ages, and body types in her paintings. When asked why in interviews she sometimes fail to respond directly because she seeks no argument with those who care not to see, and she wants her work to represent harmony rather than conflict. Rosales draws attention to similarities among fables and deities in both black diasporic and Western ethos, reminding us that all humans need to be seen... as equals. Rosales's work summons its viewers to a dialogue, inviting them to query their assumptions, and imploring them to rethink the imagery seared into elite and white supremacist ethea.

Rosales remembers going to museums as a child and being aware that she did not see herself in works that were supposed to represent ideal beauty and splendor. Years later, when Rosales's daughter voiced similar concerns after museum visits, Rosales decided to paint those missing images.

detail from *Jeggua Meets Shango*



The enduring power of storytelling

By Helen Morales

‘Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that dignity.’

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,
“The Danger of a Single Story”

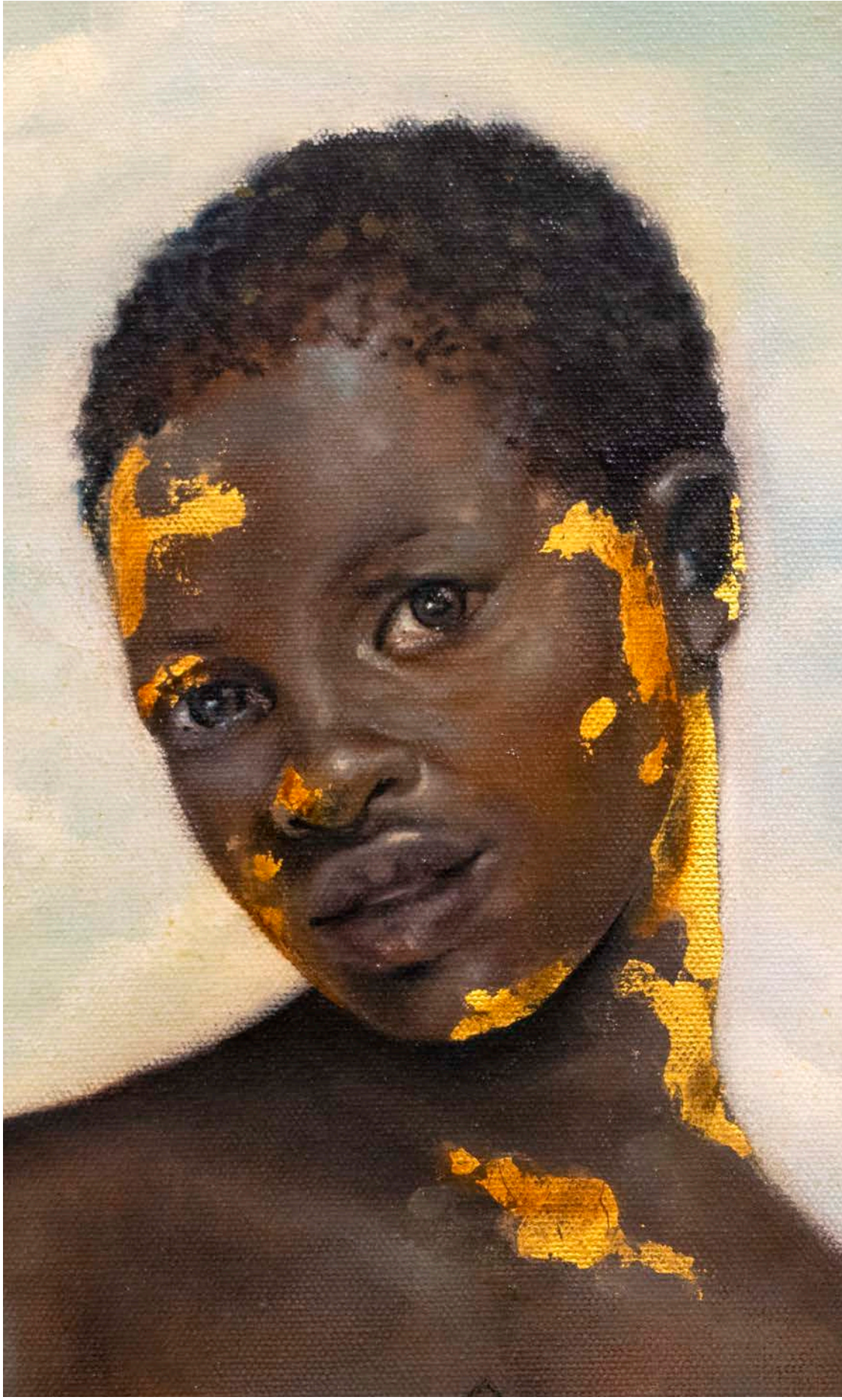
There are some striking similarities between the *patakís* and the Greek myths. The deities with the most power are Shango (Yorùbá) and Zeus (Greek); they are both widely feared, sexually predatory, and use thunder and lightning as their weapons. Oshun (Yorùbá) and Venus (the Roman name for the Greek Aphrodite) are both deities of love and desire.

Other similarities are more subtle. The *patakí* about Oshosi is echoed in the Greek myth of Oedipus; both involve the heroes unwittingly killing one of their parents. Both tales reveal the costs of seeking knowledge and justice. The *patakí* about Shango’s seduction (or rape, depending on how the tale is told) of Jeggua chimes with the Greek myth about Hades’ rape of Persephone. Jeggua and Persephone both end up taking dominion over death and its mysteries. The association between the two myths is strengthened by Rosales’s choice to portray Shango offering Jeggua a piece of fruit (here a fig, whereas Hades offered Persephone a pomegranate).

Greek myths often involve gender fluidity, with gods taking on the form of different genders. Some *orishas* are represented as androgynous and others, like Obatalá, Olodumare’s emissary on earth, are represented as female, male, or non-binary. Identifications between orisha and saint can cross gender lines as well as religious ones. Bold, brilliant, and queer.

Through entwining the Greek myths and the *patakís*, Harmonia Rosales invites us to reflect upon what unites as well as what divides us, and to embrace stories that empower and humanize.

detail from *The Birth of Oshun*



Harmonia Rosales: Entwined is organized by the AD&A Museum. The exhibition is curated in collaboration with the artist by Helen Morales, the Argyropoulos Professor of Hellenic Studies, with Sophia Quach McCabe, PhD and Polyxeni Trikoulis.

Generous support for the exhibition is provided by the Argyropoulos endowment in Hellenic Studies and the Departments of: Classics, Religious Studies, Black Studies, Chicana and Chicano Studies, History of Art and Architecture, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the Capps Center, the Center for Black Studies Research, the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, the Division of Humanities & Fine Arts, and the Society for Classical Studies' "Ancient Worlds, Modern Communities" initiative.

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Front: Detail from *Oba and Her Ear*, 2021. Oil on wood panel.

Back: Detail from *The Birth of Oshun*, 2017. Oil on Belgian linen.



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