

**ARTIST CHRISTOPHER MYERS CHALLENGES VIEWERS TO REFLECT
ON "THE WILDMAN FIGURE" IN LITERATURE AND ART IN NEW
INSTALLATION AT THE MEAD ART MUSEUM AT AMHERST COLLEGE**

(Amherst, MA—October 8, 2019)—This fall, the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College in Amherst, MA, will present a series of nine newly commissioned works by artist Christopher Myers, inspired by themes from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The exhibition is the fifth iteration of the Museum's *Rotherwas Project* series, which asks contemporary artists to reimagine a 17th century room through contemporary art installations. Formally titled *Rotherwas Project 5: Christopher Myers, The Red Plague Rid You for Learning Me Your Language*, the installation will be on view through March 15, 2020.

The historic room inside the Mead serves as Myers' starting point: the year 1611 gave birth to both the ornate, wood-paneled Rotherwas Room and *The Tempest*, with its unforgettable characters Caliban and his mirror image, Ariel. Drawing on this historical convergence—and the power of these two central characters—Myers has created contemporary metal-work sculptures, large-scale tapestries, and other works that transform the space while engaging with two key themes: the persistence of the "wildman" character in literature and arts from the 12th century to the present, and the ways in which the room, the play, and Myers' art all reflect on the complex history of globalization.

"Carved in the mantel about the Rotherwas Room's fireplace is the figure of a satyr, a mythical half-man, half-animal creature evoking a fearsome sense of energy," said Myers. "Although such figures have been common since ancient times, I was struck by its inclusion here. The Rotherwas Room speaks to Anglo-Saxon power and authority, at a time when the first wave of globalization was underway and Europeans were encountering new peoples and cultures, sometimes with openness, but often with fear. To me, the characters of Caliban and Ariel reflect that dichotomy and provide an excellent point from which to engage this topic, both in the past and the present."

On the room's walls, a series of six monumental tapestries, ranging in size from 9' x 6' to 9' x 10', depict contemporary reimaginings of characters from *The Tempest*. For example, in Myers' *Prospero*, he has colorfully rendered a hand-and-gun

emerging from the mouth of a reclining Prospero as a cascade of books fall around him. In *Ariel*, the small central character stands atop a stack of books, arms outstretched, as a universe in pain unfolds around him. With *Caliban*, we see the tortured sensibility of Caliban, the wildman enslaved by Prospero, as he struggles with his desire for freedom. In the entrance of the gallery is *The Boatswains Wreck*, a pirogue that once stood 18 feet tall but is fractured in two. It symbolizes both the failed, ill-fated journey that led to Prospero's stranding on the island, as well as the hope of being rescued from it.

Coming in early 2020 are two additional sculptures, currently in production. The first, *Ariel's Wings* (8'x8.5'x5'), features a set of stainless steel wings on an open steel base. Visitors will be able to imagine for themselves the experience of being *The Tempest's* winged spirit. In *Caliban's Hands Emerging From Earth* (6.8'x3'x3'), stainless steel versions of the slave's two hands appear to emerge from the ground, joined at the wrist, emanating the strength and power of this untamed figure.

The play's themes of far-flung travel, exploration, and conquest are embedded in the fabrication of Myers' art. To produce his quilts, Myers turned to a collective group of Egyptian weavers and quilt-makers he met at a souk in Luxor: he produced colorful drawings of his tapestry designs and sent them to Egypt. The collective then worked to create the right mix of fabrics to best represent Myers' vision, transforming the drawings into finished pieces. The two steel sculptures that will be added to the installation next year have a similar production lineage. Myers is working with a team of steel workers and welders in Lagos, Nigeria; they take his drawings and produce the sculptures from discarded oil drums that are reclaimed, cleaned, and cut up.

"Christopher Myers is a wonderfully multi-talented and multi-faceted artist, and his observation about the timing connection between our Rotherwas Room and *The Tempest* has led to an inventive engagement surrounding power, slavery, and race," said David E. Little, John Wieland 1958 director and chief curator of the Mead Art Museum. "Importantly, Myers illuminates how the deep historical fear of the 'other,' which undergirds racism, past and present, is there for us to see in Shakespeare's classic from more than five centuries ago. For our community, this is an important approach to identifying and creating platforms to discuss some of today's most challenging debates around representation, race, and immigration. While the central role for college art museums remains to preserve and learn from exemplary works of art, it is essential that we ensure that art remains relevant to—and a part of—the changes and debates taking place in our world."

The Mead Art Museum's Rotherwas Room has been a part of the Museum since it was constructed in 1949. The ornately carved walnut- and oak-paneled room was

originally built for Rotherwas Court, the estate of English knight Sir Roger Bodenham. In the context of the Mead's space, it makes a statement about the sense of Anglo-Saxon authority in the 17th century—and, as such, serves as an exceptional environment for the presentation of contemporary art, encouraging audiences to ask questions about how we perceive and interpret history and culture.

About Christopher Myers

Christopher Myers is an artist and writer who lives in New York. While he is widely acclaimed for his work with literature for young people, he is also an accomplished fine artist who has lectured and exhibited internationally.

One of Myers' animating questions as an artist is: "What does it mean to be an artist whose work is rooted in the experience of global cultural exchange?" More than the simple small-world, market-driven exchanges that mark some artists' practice, Myers is interested in the aesthetic bridges that have been built organically across cultures, classes, and geographies—and he has been creating work in those in-between spaces for years. His practice can be divided into two categories, work by his own hands and collaborations with artisans from around the globe, extending the conversation of cultural movement across continents and artistic milieus.

About the Mead Art Museum

Situated in the vibrant Five Colleges academic community of western Massachusetts, the Mead Art Museum serves as a laboratory for interdisciplinary research and innovative teaching involving original works of art. An accredited member of the American Alliance of Museums, the Mead participates in Museums10, a regional cultural collaboration.

The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. year-round, and until midnight on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday during the academic term. Admission to the museum is free and open to the public. For more information, including a searchable catalogue of the collection and a complete schedule of exhibitions and events, visit amherst.edu/mead or call (413) 542-2335.

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