



Morality Tales and Popular Myths

By Linda Brady Tesner

The Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a well known tale of divine justice. The saga begins in Genesis 18 and 19 as God warns Abraham that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are “utterly evil and...everything they do is wicked.”¹ Presumably, Sodom and Gomorrah are condemned at least partly because of the practice of male homosexuality (the term “sodomy,” of course, comes from this biblical reference), and God plans to completely destroy the two cities by raining “sulphur and fire from heaven.” (This Old Testament Armageddon is said to have created the Dead Sea, a place where no creature can live.)

Abraham’s nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom, but because of Lot’s righteousness, God spares him. In fact, God sends two angels to collect Lot and his family and escort them out of Sodom to safety. As further proof of Sodom’s iniquity, while the angels are at Lot’s home, Sodomites surround the house and shout to Lot, “Bring out those men (the angels) to us so we can rape them.” Lot’s curious reply: “Look here, I have two virgin daughters; let me bring them out to you, and you do with them as you like.” Luckily for Lot (and especially for his daughters), the angels blind the rabble so that they cannot find the door to Lot’s house to break it down.

Most of us remember the story as ending with Lot’s narrow escape from Sodom, along with his wife and two

daughters. The angels warn the family to “flee for your lives, and don’t look back.” When Lot’s wife (who remains nameless — along with Lot’s two daughters) hesitates and gazes back at her home, she is immediately turned into a pillar of salt for her indiscretion. But there is more to the story. In Genesis 19, Lot and his daughters end up hiding in a cave in the mountains. Because Lot has lost his wife, and the daughters have left their non-believing fiancés back in Sodom, the daughters come up with a scheme. They serve Lot wine and inebriate him so that each daughter can have sexual intercourse with him. Each becomes pregnant and bears a son. Lot’s sons/grandsons are Moab, the ancestor of the Moabites, and Benammi, the ancestor of the Ammonites, both tribes sworn enemies of Israel, God’s chosen people.

If this is a morality tale, its lesson is obscure at best.

This is the insanity of cultural myth that Gerry Snyder loves to explore and expose in his paintings. How, if one is a biblical literalist, can a story of retribution for the evils of “aberrant” sexual behavior (homosexuality) be reconciled with the Lord’s sparing of “godly” people who offer up their own children to be raped or who commit incest? “Stories like Lot and his daughters,” observes Snyder, “show the power of myth to embody larger social values no matter how unreasonable. Often these stories are irrational or problematic on a larger

level, but their shortcomings are overlooked because they sustain explicit cultural positions." The implication is that the average person is so gullible and attention-defective that the message-byte — God punishes evil — overrides discomfiting details that may render the myth meaningless.

Snyder does not jump to conclusions, however, and his work is decisively not about casting judgment. Rather, Snyder's paintings are about narrative and, more specifically, the role of painting in storytelling. Snyder's heroic *Lot et al.* series both examines the biblical story in detail and explores the role of painting to convey a story line. The series consists of four parts: *Film Trailer*, *Story Development*, *Main Feature*, and *Miniseries*. In all, the series comprises 160 paintings (12 in *Film Trailer*; 75 in *Story Development*, 10 in *Main Feature*, and 63 tiny works in *Miniseries*) and was developed out of almost as many initial drawings.

Filmmaking and television history are key references in Snyder's titles because of the way film and television can narrate the most disturbing story into a palatable and consumable event. Consider the Hollywood version of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Robert Aldrich's 1962 glamour-epic starring Stewart Granger, Pier Angeli, Stanley Baker, and Anouk Aimee. For that matter, one would not need to look further than most popular contemporary dramas to understand Snyder's detached fascination with the tendency found in pop culture to sanitize even the most horrific themes.

Snyder also invokes filmmaking processes in the format and structure of his paintings. The many works that are assembled into each part of *Lot et al.* are presented in grids, resembling the compartmentalized construct of a comic strip, or the cels of animated film. By incorporating multiple images within one painting, Snyder both builds the narrative and unifies disparate ideas. "Sequencing allows disjointed images

to be juxtaposed, creating a synthetic yet convincing naturalism," Snyder says. "I see film as the most significant medium for conveying myths to an audience weaned on populist content."

The figures that populate Snyder's narratives are hermaphroditic creatures that recall the Judaeo-Christian concept that woman was created from man — implying that, before the creation of Eve, Adam had the capacity to be both male and female. The natural extrapolation is that God's most perfect creation, the original human, was transgendered.

Snyder's little beings have no mouths; they often lack arms; thus, they have no ability to speak or, in effect, act for themselves. Benign and even tender, idiosyncratic spirits, they seem to be completely ridiculous yet trying to maintain a certain dignity. Their interspecies character suggests that their existence is an accident of creation, not a transgressive choice. In a way, they are less the protagonists of the paintings than vernacular symbols carrying forth the narratives without assigning any sort of value judgment to the figures. Occasionally, Snyder's paintings include cameo appearances by his pet pug, Buddy, who serves as a detached witness to the sequence of events.

Snyder's creatures inhabit landscapes that are beautifully painted in a style reminiscent of 17th- and 18th-century French landscape painting. (Indeed, Snyder's use of wood panels for his paintings is a nod to the long history of academic painting.) Snyder is interested in the tension between figure and ground, the age-old dilemma of creating discourse between the figures of a history painting and the sumptuous landscape that surrounds them. Think of the works of 17th-century painters, like Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain, and Charles Le Brun. Or 18th-century artists, such as François Boucher, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, or Antoine Watteau.



Snyder knows that his landscapes are visually seductive — he enjoys the irony — but he also consciously paints his background as a way to hold one's interest long enough to engage the viewer in the narrative. It is a quirky combination, these delightfully cartoony and hapless figures playing out their fate in such bucolic surroundings. A critic writing about the 2002 Whitney Biennial, in which Snyder's early *Lot et al.* paintings appeared, derisively called Snyder's "Poussin-meets-Pooh paintings...an aesthetic of empty virtuosity."² Actually, he almost gets Snyder's point. "Empty virtuosity" is not the subject of Snyder's paintings; rather, any conflict between "goodness" and "wickedness" is a moot point. Snyder may paint works that visually recall old-time biblical paintings, but he is really dressing up the narrative, like many storytellers, to avoid the unsavory details.

Snyder's *Lot et al.* series began a few years ago in Paris, when he was researching 18th-century paintings in the Louvre. He discovered that the story of Lot and his daughters was a favorite theme in religious paintings, and that a wide range of artists of various eras had approached the subject. He eventually began to make small drawings on the theme, which, over time, spawned an entire series. Snyder's drawings are important precursors to his paintings. As a process, Snyder naturally uses his drawings as a way to work out the content and composition of his paintings. But the drawings themselves are fully realized works on paper, rendered in a style that reminds one of Old Master drawings. Snyder typically uses gouache and graphite, but he also draws in walnut ink, which lends an archaic glow to his graphic work.

Above: *Lot et al.: Miniseries*, 2003. Oil on museum board



Snyder is drawn to long-term projects as a means of fully exploring a concept. Another series he is currently working on narrates the history of America — as described by Hollywood movies starring John Wayne. His paintings *New World*, *Alamo*, and *John Wayne* reference films directed by John Ford, John Wayne, and Howard Hawks. *That'll Be the Day* is loosely based on the John Ford movie, *The Searchers* (1956), considered by some critics to be the quintessential American Western. In this prototypical plot development, the world watches "good men" (who are white) confront "bad men" (who are usually not white) and incidental women characters, who serve as plot points to move the narrative along. John Wayne plays an ex-Confederate searching for his beautiful young niece (Natalie Wood), who had been captured by Comanches after they massacred Wayne's family. Snyder's *That'll Be the Day* is named for the line that Wayne snarls repeatedly throughout the movie. The story of *The Searchers* may be no more believable than Lot and his daughters — and just as logically problematic — but it provides a present-day narrative that has also been inculcated into American cultural myth as tenaciously as any biblical tale.

The exhibition *Far From Here* also includes other series that examine obscure cultural references of interest to Snyder. *The Pepper LaBeija Story*, a series of six paintings, is about the life of the celebrated Harlem drag queen who was immortalized in the movie *Paris Is Burning* (1991). Snyder's *King of Cartoons* is based on the life of William Marshall, a talented Shakespearean actor who, late in his career, found ignominious fame as the King of Cartoons in Pee-Wee Herman's children's TV show, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. In these paintings, as in Snyder's entire body of work, no judgment is cast upon the character in his narrative. He simply presents the story, as if to celebrate the bizarreness of human existence, and allows

the viewer to further spin the myth as he or she desires.

Roland Barthes once wrote, "Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is, nor has been, a people without narrative."³ The truth of Barthes's dictum aside, the history of painting is littered with narratives that do not stand the test of time. Most present-day viewers have very little context for — or even interest in — narratives that commanded fascination in past centuries. Snyder knows this and paints anyway. In the end, it is enough behold a wonderful painting — and decide for oneself how far the story goes from here.

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Gerry Snyder is an artist who lives and works in New Mexico. His work has been exhibited nationally and was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. His work is in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Opposite: Study for *Sitcom*, 2002. Walnut ink on paper, 8 x 8 inches.

¹ The Living Bible, Genesis 18-19.

² Nate Chinen, Philadelphia *citypaper.net*, "The Greatest Show on Earth," April 4-10, 2002.

³ Roland Barthes, from *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, 1991, p. 251. (Hill and Wang, The Noonday Press, New York)