

"Mythologies Louisianaises : Le fête de quémande"

48" x 84", acrylic on unstretched canvas, Herb Roe © 2017

My work focuses on the relevance in the modern world of traditional communal and community building activities centered around music making, food preparation and feasting, and society organizing social events. I explore the contemporary employment of practices with ancient roots as a means of defining oneself and ones community boundaries within the often chaotic modern world. Often organized, promoted, and celebrated via social media platforms, these events are a modern coalescence of tribal human identities using millennia old strategies for human interaction.



"Le fête de quémande" (The begging party), 48" x 84", in progress acrylic on unstretched canvas. Herb Roe © 2017

Theme

With my piece for the *Mythologies Louisianaises* project, titled "*Le fête de quémande*" (The Begging Party), I wanted to explore some of the frequently seen costumes at the *courir de mardi gras* (fat tuesday run) performed by the Cajuns of south central Louisiana. Many of the characters the costumes are based upon have deep roots in Old World mythology and folklore and often survive in modern Louisiana only as character costumes at the *courir*. The antiquity of the tradition of animal masking is evidenced by some of mankind's oldest artworks, the 15,000 year old painting of "The Sorcerer" in the Cave of the Trois-Frères in Ariège, France. Others, such as "*le homme sauvage*", have roots as ancient as mankind's first written stories (the wild man Enkidu in the "Epic

of Gilgamesh", c. 2000 BCE). I saw exploring this theme as a way of showing the continuity of the carnival festivities with their ancient roots; from the most recent origins in Medieval France in events like "*La fête des fous*" (the Feast of Fools), and the even older festivities of Gaul and Rome such as the Lupercalia, Saturnalia, and Kalends.

Working method

The system I use helps me to build detailed compositions on my canvas before the application of color, a technique heavily based in western classical realist traditions. I add drama and focus to my pieces with layering of light and color, built up through multiple layers of impasto and glazing, underpinned by detailed underdrawings and tonal value studies before color is applied to the canvas. This technique allows me to determine the subject, composition, and mood for a piece at its inception; and then to focus on achieving that effectively through the use of light and color without the distractions of rearranging my compositions in subsequent layers.

Composition

In deciding how to approach the composition I looked to both Roman bas-reliefs and Medieval manuscript art and adopted a horizontal plane with a shallow depth of field in my depiction of a procession of revelers. I also looked at the work of Renaissance artists such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who depicted similar pre-Lenten festivities of the mid 1500s in the southern Netherlands in works such as his 1559 painting "*Der Kampf zwischen Karneval und Fastenzeit*" (The Fight Between Carnival and Lent).



The Sarcophago Mattei depicting the mythic foundations of the Lupercalia Festival, Roman, 220 CE

For the background setting I chose an iconic scene of fog shrouded live oak trees draped in Spanish moss. This works twofold in its symbolism; in that it both invokes the myth of Louisiana itself in the popular consciousness as a spooky land of voodoo, ghosts, and rougarous and symbolically shows the time depth of the courir in the misty ancient past. Coloristically it invokes the three colors traditionally associated with the Mardi Gras season; being painted primarily in shades of green, purple and gold to represent respectively Faith, Justice, and Power. It also references popular Cajun artist George Rodrigue who explored similar themes with his silhouetted black oak trees and Cajuns series of paintings in the 1970s and his later *rougarou* inspired Blue Dog works.

Characters

1. *Le Capitaine* : The titular head of the courir troop. He goes mounted on horseback and is typically dressed in a cloak of one or more of the symbolic Mardi Gras colors. He carries a white flag for signaling and directing the unruly participants. In my posing of the character I was inspired by European equestrian depictions from illuminated manuscripts and wood block engravings from the Middle Ages; such as Durers famous "*Ritter, Tod und Teufel*" ("Knight, Death and the Devil").



Knight, Death and the Devil



Men crossdressing as women



Depictions of witches as old women



2. *La Vielle Femme* (old woman or crone) : Cross dressing is a time honored tradition at carnival and it's predecessor celebrations; with descriptions of men disguising themselves as women during feast days coming both from Medieval and ancient Roman times. The "*vielle femme*" is also a stock character in folklore; variously seen as an old hag, crone, or witch, and giving us such characters as both the wicked stepmother and the fairy godmother. The word "crone" itself entered the English language during the Middle Ages, derived from the Anglo-French word "*carogne*", an insulting term for a old woman. It originated from an older Old North French word "*charogne*" or "*caroigne*", literally meaning "carrion".

3. *Le homme sauvage* (wild man) : A mythical figure defined by his "wildness" and alienation from and rejection of the civilized world and thought to be based on Roman era stories of Silvanus and other woodland dieties. The figure was often depicted in Medieval Europe as hirsute or draped in shaggy greenery. The character itself can be hard to pin down; thought variously to be possibly an echo in oral history of the first farming societies contact with late period hunter gatherers or distorted descriptions of apes or other real creatures. The greenery aspect suggests some melding with the figure of the pagan Green Man of the ancient Celtic world. The *Strohbar* (straw bear) associated with German carnival processions at Shrovetide and Candlemas may be a survival of this aspect of the character.



Woodwose, The Taymouth Hours



Wild man heraldic device, Martin Schongauer



Wildman, Schembartbuch (maskbeardbooks)

4. *Le Sanglier* (wild boar) : A figure showing both the tradition of animal masking and the connection in many European areas of butchers and pigs with the pre-Lenten *carnaval* (to remove meat or a fairwell to flesh) festivities. In Pieter Bruegel the Elders 1559 painting "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent" one can see a large man serving as the Lord of Misrule. He is astride a beer barrel decorated with a pork chop attached to its front end and holding a large spit embellished with a pigs head. The knives on his belt show him to be a butcher, whose guild traditionally provided the meat for the carnival celebrations. In the Walloon French speaking Belgian city of Stavelot during the

Laetare de Stavelot, the "*Blancs Moussis*" (white clad, participants dressed in a mockery of monks with red phallic noses and white habits with pointed hoods) pelt onlookers with inflated pig bladders and otherwise entertain the crowd with various antics. In Germany the Shrovetide "*Schembart* (mask beard) *Carnival*" of Nuremberg was particularly tied to the butchers guild and featured participants in bearded masks carved of wood who celebrated with music and song, food and drink, and general mayhem as they lampooned politicians, persons of power, and the government. The *courir* similarly satirizes the aristocracy, clergy, and educated with its chosen headgear of tall pointed capuchons thought to mock the hennin of Medieval noble women, the bishops mitres, and the mortarboards of graduates. The pig also brings to mind the "*boucherie*" (communal butchering of a hog), another Cajun tradition sometimes paired with the Mardi Gras season. The Slavic versions of *carnaval* also pairs the season with their version of a *boucherie*.



Detail of a Carnival procession in "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent", Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1559

5. *Un paillasse* (straw mattress clown) : Derived from a French clown with straw stuffing poking from his clothes . The name comes from the term "*le paillasse*", a type of straw mattress. The character is also present in the *Commedia dell'arte*, most famously the Italian opera by Ruggero Leoncavallo, "*I pagliacci*". The *Commedia dell'arte* itself has its roots in the Venetian carnival celebrations of the 16th century.



Detail of mummers animal masking in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford

6. Animal masking : Wild boar, chicken, and raven costumes. The word "mask" appears in English in the 1530s, from Middle French *masque* meaning a "covering to hide or guard the face". This word is of uncertain origin, but it's ultimate roots may be from the Provençal *mascarar* "to black (the face)" or Occitan *mascara* "to blacken, darken," derived from *mask* "black," possibly a loanword from a pre-Indo-European language. Disguising oneself as a denizen of the animal world is still common not only at the *courir* but in Halloween, mummers traditions, and other similar events throughout Europe. Common animals include various bird species, farm animals, and woodland creatures. The tradition is attested to in Medieval manuscripts which often have small scenes of

peasants in animal and bird head masks singing, playing musical instruments, and dancing. To some extent the rougarou character also falls within this group. Many Medieval stories of werewolves see the protagonists using a wolves pelt or a belt made of wolf skin to magically change into their beast form, possibly a remnant of dark ages stories of the "úlfheðnar" (wolf hides), Viking warriors who dressed in the pelts of wolves to channel their ferocity in battle

7. *Le barbu* (the bearded man) : One of the popular masking traditions of Medieval Europe, along with cross dressing or animal masking, was to disguise oneself with a fake beard. Often this was made of some bit of animal pelt such as a deers tail. Modern courir adaptations are often paired with a large phallic nose, another symbol of the bawdiness of the day. The figure itself shares some similarities with the "wildman" in it's shaggy hirsuteness.



Various depictions of the Abbot of Unreason and "La fête des fous"

8. Bishop in mitre and vestments : A figure seen in various countries carnival traditions was the so-called Lord of Misrule, *Le Prince des Sots*, or the Abbot of Unreason, a figure with its roots in Medieval France. As part of the Kalends celebrations on January 1st a mock ecclesiastical court complete with a mock pope or bishop was chosen from the lowest ranks of the clergy. This symbolized the normal world had been turned upside down. The lower classes dressed up and poked fun at the upper classes, men dressed as women or as wild beasts, and satirical versions of ordinary life were acted out.

9. *Le Rougarou* : The Cajun French version of the "*loup garou*" or werewolf, a legendary creature in many Francophone communities. In French myth the beast is often connected to Lenten observances or lack thereof. One version of the origins of the curse is someone who has committed some transgression, such as foolishly broken their Lenten vows for seven years in a row. Some Cajun variations of the myth see the wolf or dog like beast hunting down and killing Catholics who do not follow the rules of Lent.



Der Werwolf von Ansbach



Werewolf pontifical- Paris 13th century



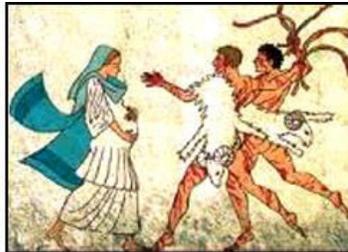
La Bête du Gévaudan

10. *Flagellants* : Flagellation (from a Latin word meaning "to whip") as a part of religious observances was a practice that has popped up frequently in European history. During the Feast of Lupercalia the presiding magistrates of ancient Rome would run through the streets carrying strips cut from the hide of a sacrificed goat to playfully flog woman. This was part of a fertility rite believed to make child bearing easier and to make the barren fertile. During the Catholic Middle Ages the practice of flagellation was at times both promoted or banned by various religious and civil authorities. In times of crisis, such as famine or plague years, the practice of flagellation would

spontaneously break out in the cities and other public spaces as a demonstration of piety or as a way of expiating sins. The "whipping" of the participants at the courir is a way for the capitaine and his lieutenants to keep the participants within the boundaries of the rules. Purposefully paradoxically, it is the duty of the "mardi gras" (not just the name of the day, the term is also used to describe its masked participants) to break as many of those rules as possible and sin as much as one can before the advent of Lent the following day. The whips themselves are made of plaited burlap and are several feet in length. While they do not break the skin and do not usually leave a "mark"; they do sting and create a loud and satisfying pop when making contact with a wayward *mardi gras*.



Procession of Medieval flagellants



Whipping at the Roman Lupercalia



Woodblock of flagellants



Original graphite sketch of premise



Background matte painting with compositional lines for figure placement



Models for the photoshoot.

