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Vadis Turner Delves into Stories of Mythological, Historical and Literary Female Outcasts | Widewalls

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Female outcasts from various canons dance to the beat of Matisse in *She Drank Gold*, the latest solo show by Nashville-based mixed media artist Vadis Turner, on view through August 12th at Abroms-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

One sculpture inspired by Diane de Poiter, mistress to King Henry II, cackles with abandon when you walk around or through her. Across the room, the mythical sorceress Circe crackles with fiery anger, her loose metallic crusts fluttering under the air conditioning. Half of the show's ten textile abstractions are wall-mounted — the rest stand and dance and fight on their own feet. All but one are made from curtains affixed atop steel armatures and then coated in resin, metal leaf, driveway gravel, acrylic paint and more. *Conduit* (2021), the exhibition's earliest work and the only one in the show not centered around a narrative character, is also the only artwork made of bed sheets, imprinted with the years of dreams and nightmares played out upon them.

A suite of wall-mounted "hysterical grids" opens *She Drank Gold*, from Pluto's moon Charon to the trickster goddess Pandora, before Turner's forms, which she considered windows or portals, start to jump off the wall with agency. This whole series is three years in the making, elaborating on her interest in strong-arming donated domestic materials (both decorative and practical) to tell different stories than they were intended to. Until "they bite back," Turner added amidst the moody space, kept dark with blackout appliques over its glass doors to highlight the dramatic spotlights on her energetic forms. *"These materials really have the potential to speak in a lot of ways — what I'm interested in is helping them speak in ways they're not supposed to,"* Turner explained. *"They disassociate from any traditional gender roles they may or may not embody."*



Left: Vadis Turner - Conduit, 2021. Bedsheets, rebar, copper leaf, cement, acrylic, resin and thread
Right: Vadis Turner - Hagar, 2023. Mineral wool, copper leaf, gold leaf, acrylic, resin and steel

Gold as Medicine

As a show, *She Drank Gold* takes its title from the ancient practice of drinking gold for eternal youth — which, it turns out, will kill a person, though only after stealing their sanity. Religious paintings across history exemplify humanity's long-standing fascination with the practical and aesthetic properties of gold — the more gold a work itself or its characters features, for instance, the higher their standing, usually. No wonder we once thought drinking it could make magic too.

The human quest for youth is, unfortunately, traditionally associated with women. Hysteria, too, from the 'wandering uterus; condition of Ancient Egypt up through 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association at last removed hysteria from their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. *She Drank Gold* marks the debut of Turner's "hysterical grids." Though her work has historically explored "*the expressive possibilities of the grid,*" Turner noted, "*now these figures are in this hysterical dance.*" A small informational background on Matisse's [The Dance](#) (1910) at the show illustrates how this work informed the exhibition, down to its arrangement.



Left: Vadis Turner - *Diane*, 2023. Reclaimed curtains, ribbon, acrylic, resin and thread / **Right:** Vadis Turner - *Window Figure, Circe*, 2021. Curtains, copper leaf, gravel, resin, acrylic and steel

Working Alchemy

Turner's will wrestles reciprocally with her materials in the studio once she's coaxed them into a life of their own. Together, collaboratively, she and the works arrive at abstract forms embodying narratives from varying myths. Circe towers balefully over Scylla, a river nymph also from Greek mythology whom she's just turned into a sea monster — because Circe's crush Glaucus loved Scylla. Sometimes the truth these materials tell isn't always pretty, women sometimes even train hysteria on each other. Hey, if you want a worthy opponent. Scylla appears to slither above and below the water's surface, giving aquatic, grotesque allure. Turner likens Hagar — the first person to cry in the Bible once she's cast into the wilderness a second time — to a bruised star, a beat-up sunset. The two colliding planes of Hagar's magenta and lilac form symbolize the home and the hearth. Here, Turner sculpted non-toxic insulation, which looks like bread or meat chunks, turning the typically invisible material into the positive space of a real museum artwork.

Turner has subtly coordinated the materials throughout *She Drank Gold* with their corresponding narratives. Sound counts, courtesy of her collaboration with Nashville-based producer Emery Dobyns. Copper provides material vigor — it's the metal most conductive to electricity. Ribbon, meanwhile, graces *Diane* alone. Turner learned that when historians recovered de Pointier's grave, her hair was still in her skull, a telltale sign of gold intoxication. That's a nice bow, Turner said, but despite their beauty, "*these grids are sagging and twitchy.*"

"I think there's a lot more content in the loose ends than having some fucking perfect, polished look or life or

work or form. I want things to be a little unresolved." Messes abound in these outcast chronicles, cases of responsibility and victimization coalescing in simultaneous stories.

"At this stage of my work — as a middle-aged woman, mid-career artist living in the middle of America — I want to say as much as I can with as little as possible and have the confidence to say that this is enough," Turner noted. She's editing her work down more and more to access its essential truths. *"What's told can be very lean, very simple, even though it comes from a lot."*



Left: Vadis Turner - Pandora, 2022. Reclaimed curtains, resin, silver leaf and steel / **Right:** Vadis Turner - Window Figure, Scylla, 2022. Curtains, gravel, resin, acrylic and steel

More than a Vessel

Turner studied in Boston and spent 15 years living in New York City — she's only just settled down in Nashville, for reasons not totally within her control. She's on a hot streak in Alabama, on the heels of another well-received solo show at the Huntsville Museum of Art this year. There are obvious benefits to setting up shop in a global art center like New York, but making this work in red states like Tennessee and Alabama, both places where abortions are banned, for starters, feels like bringing the mission directly to a critical nerve center. *"It's better for me to be here because I'm in conversation with the behavioral expectations for female-identifying experience,"* Of course, Nashville and Birmingham are both islands of blue — Civil Rights started here. What's more, AEIVA is an interesting example of a museum breaking the mold under artist-turned-curator John Fields, who's helped build the institution since it started in 2014.

Hysteria arises not only from sheer sensation itself but from the anguish of feeling unheard. By reanimating and,

in some case, giving voice to these forlorn outcasts, *She Drank Gold* doesn't just honor their archetypal import — the exhibition allows them a chance to heal us all by raging, dancing, and laughing, flourishing in America's greatest historical crucible for change.

Featured image: Installation view, *She Drank Gold*. All images by Vittoria Benzine.