

Mythic mysteries at the Gallery

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What is warriorship for women? To create her new show *Ancient Battlegrounds: Quest for the Woman Warrior*, which opens at the Arts Council Gallery Nov. 3, artist Barbara Bickel set aside romantic images of breast-plated Amazons and cartoon Xenas and delved deep into personal, ancestral, mythic and archaeological history. What she found was characterized by one word: struggle.

"This whole show was about fighting myself," laughs Bickel. Fighting, that is, her own internalized mistrust of her creative ability, clearly misplaced in an artist with years of arts training and a solid body of work. Only by journeying deep into the shadowy places where she could confront and befriend her own fear and oppression could she finish the series at all. Too often, she feels, this is women's biggest battle.

Bickel is fascinated with embodiment: how do women's bodies contain and express warriorship? What are the memories, the knowing, from this life and from ancestral roots, held in our muscles and bones? Bickel drew on her own dreams and body memories, journeying to places peopled with figures from historical battles. She also researched warrior women

through history, and used patterns and figures drawn from their ancient cultures.

Plywood creates a strong, sinewy base for these richly-layered images of women's bodies, captured

ages of real women, with soft bellies and uneven breasts and muscular hands, given such reverence and respect.

When her own fears made work on the larger pieces in the series impossible, Bickel began creating smaller collages to keep going. These pieces place the warrior in story; they explore the journey, the quest for understanding and integration. Naked, the warrior woman moves through rich dream-like environments, encountering friend and foe: Eve, Salome, the hounds of hell, Joan of Arc, Darth Vader, John Wayne. And our heroine goes toe to toe with the biggest challenger: her own shadow self.

These are healing pieces: the warrior journeys into her own history and emerges integrated

and strengthened. The final pieces reflect this reclaimed balance. Each woman is twinned with her mirror image. Gold wires stretch like the strings of instruments. The feeling is playful, lyrical, celebratory.

Bickel sees warriorship as a struggle for balance between light and dark, fire and water, creation and destruction, our nurturing self and our shadow. *Ancient Battlegrounds* is her invitation to all women to undertake the difficult but rewarding journey to meet the fully-empowered warrior within.



in movements of resistance, struggle, pain and even surrender. The visual textures of the wood emerge through and dance with the curve of skin, the tension in muscle, the flow of movement. Bickel works with a variety of media: various textured and printed papers, charcoal dust, con-tes, photocopy transfers, accent textures of cedar duff, leaves, lace.

The result is soothing, fluid, and supportive of the viewer. At a time when women are trained to hate their bodies, it is enormously freeing to see im-