

Katja Larsson

Aicon Contemporary, Manhattan

31 MARCH 2020, DANIEL GAUSS



Achilles II

Before there were gods there was magic. Folks could work directly with nature, perform rituals and nature would respond to their will. When magic failed often enough to engender doubt, the gods were discovered. It was now necessary to reach the spirits behind natural phenomena to get the things wanted from nature. With magic the practitioner felt empowered, as we do today with science. With gods you became dependent on their moods and had to find ways to wheedle them to your favor. In Ancient Greece the gods were anthropomorphized for easier engagement, thus possessing the same emotions as humans and, therefore, the capacity to be manipulated. The Greek gods were, basically, humans who lived forever and who had magical superpowers, but who were also emotionally compelled to care about people. The heroes were their darlings.

Katja Larsson looks at how Ancient Greek gods and heroes are sometimes used in the branding of tires, vehicle parts and other aspects of the auto/oil industry and the irony, hypocrisy and inadvertent meanings involved in this. When a contemporary tire company, for example, uses the name Achilles to promote its product, it wants people to equate their tires to the little bit they know about Achilles. Sure, Achilles was fast, the fastest guy ever (pre-steroid era). But Achilles was also a merciless killer and drama-queen who could not show self-restraint to save his life. He let his ego get in the way of winning the Trojan War and his dearest friend died due to his lack of self-awareness. He holed himself away on his ship wallowing in self-pity and revenge schemes, prolonging the war and adding to human misery. He was given the choice of a long life, took it, then threw it away in a fit of rage.

So Achilles might, inadvertently, be an appropriate brand icon due to the way the automobile tire industry has continually added to human misery through its own lack of restraint. We know what King Leopold II did to the indigenous people of the Congo to extract rubber for tires. We have seen the photos of piles of human hands chopped off of people who could not produce enough rubber for the Belgians. But few folks know the misery and hardship occurring now in Thailand, where most of the rubber for car tires is currently produced.

Vast forests have been cleared for the production of rubber trees. People, often Cambodians willing to work for less than Thailand's already low minimum wage, are paid slave wages to work twelve hours a day or more. The work conditions are dirty, tedious and exhausting and workers are regularly forced to spray the chemical herbicide paraquat (banned in Europe) around the trees without proper protection for themselves. Whole families of workers are exposed to the poison. Living conditions on the plantations are deplorable and workers and their families often go hungry.

In Cambodia the government has taken land away from farmers to create rubber tree plantations, attempting to force the farmers to then work for small sums on the land that used to belong to them. You can watch the Deutsche Welle documentary *Rubber Tires – A Dirty Business* (on YouTube) to fully understand the horrors of the contemporary tire industry. Sure Achilles was fast, but it was his lack of moderation, mirrored in the tire industry, which really lends a more truthful brand meaning to these tires.

Larsson uses classical materials and contemporary industrial forms. Her *Achilles II* is a stone tire which has been cracked into two pieces. Achilles had his heel and the tire industry, which has successfully covered up the abuses underlying their vast profits, has its heel as well – the industry must function through the brutal and inhumane exploitation of powerless workers. Just as the stone monuments to these empty heroes now lie in ruins, so too may this industry should enough people learn the truth.

Heracles was another flawed hero of Ancient Greece. Due to his unmatched strength, he would act impetuously, accidentally causing great harm, but then seek to do deeds of goodwill as acts of repentance. A tire company wants people to equate the strength of Heracles to their product. In reality, this strength often caused rampant suffering as does the tire industry. This piece is comprised of a pile of tires rising like a Doric column, but the column is crumbling, made of discarded, unrecycled, and mangled tires.

Aeolus, a god, gave Odysseus a bag containing every wind current except the wind current Odysseus needed to get home. His crew opened it expecting riches, unharnessing wild environmental conditions. The *Aeolus* tire has gently swirling grooves to approximate, ironically, the gentle, supportive wind Aeolus never gave to Odysseus. Larsson hangs the *Athena and Minerva* tires on the wall like shields, as these were not just the goddesses of wisdom but also of war. Oil and rubber, the industries behind the apparently benign family car, cannot be separated from aspects of colonial conquest and worldwide warfare.

These gods and heroes are still reminders in us, still resonate in us, and they are embraced by a rapacious industry to represent the desire we do not question but allow to goad us continually forward to get what we want for our own comfort: speed, ease, mobility, immediacy, freedom to go where we want to go when we want to do it. We feel this is our human right and we do not seek too hard to find evidence of how South East Asians may be suffering through our valued lifestyle. Yet, the Roman Empire, and its Greek-inspired pantheon, was shaken to its core by a new movement led by a carpenter's son with a simple message. That message led to the ruins of that pantheon, which you can see at the Met Museum if you make a left turn at the entrance. Is that message sufficient to confront and conquer these wanton gods obscured and hidden in apparently benign products? What will it take for us to live sustainably, without the maltreatment of the poor?

Katja Larsson's work was a part of the Armory Show 2020.

7
Shares

Email

Share

Tweet

Share

Pin



Daniel Gauss

Daniel Gauss is the Proletarian Art Snob. He is a graduate of The University of Wisconsin and Columbia University.

[Author profile](#)







1. Athena SP-7
2. Armory booth
3. Aeolus and Icarus
4. Aeolus and Icarus
5. Hercules II detail
6. Aeolus ADR35 detail

RELATED ARTICLES