

Art

Charlie Kirkham and Robert Walker at their exhibition



A NEW EXHIBITION RE-IMAGINES MYTHOLOGICAL NARRATIVES THROUGH A CONTEMPORARY LENS, WRITES **RUTH MILLINGTON**

NOT TO BE MYTH-ED!

DRAGONS and heroes, gods and goddesses, nymphs and princesses are all in an enchanting new joint exhibition, 'The Cost of Love,' by painters Charlie Kirkham and Robert Walker.

The show's title was inspired, says Walker, "by a recurring theme in classical mythology and ancient stories - that love or longing often comes at a tremendous cost".

Inspired by figures such as Narcissus, Apollo and Daphne, Adonis and Aphrodite, and Saint George and the Dragon, each work questions aspects of the human journey.

The two artists do not only focus on romantic love. Kirkham, who lives in the Midlands and works from Holyhead Studios, Coventry, has drawn from her personal experiences as the mother of a child with additional learning needs for oil paintings such as 'Meet Me at the Surface,' 2024.

Beneath an inky blue sky, illuminated by stars and a crescent moon, two dragons connect at the ocean's choppy surface. The artist has taken as her starting point the story of the splitting dragons from the apocryphal text The Book of Enoch, in which the creatures, separated to control their power, can now only meet at the water's edge.

Kirkham explains that this myth connected with her own desperate need to communicate with her son. "The painting comments on love and otherness; the pain of trying to



Charlie Kirkham's Meet Me at the Surface, 2024, and Robert Walker's For Icarus, 2026

connect when ocean and sky stand between understanding one another."

This deep feeling is cast across the expressive faces of the dragons, who appear as complex, fearsome and, at times, misunderstood characters across the wider series.

She has also worked from biblical and classical stories for works such as 'Guarding Hera's Orchard,' 2024, in which she has reimagined the Hesperides in flame-coloured, flowing dresses, accompanied by a golden dragon-serpent. Viewers are drawn into her dreamlike, surrealist worlds; pictured by night-time, they reflect her intuitive approach to painting symbols from both stories

and her subconscious.

Walker is also interested in the psychological readings of myths, including the human need for freedom.

'For Icarus,' 2026, pictures the tragic hero who was warned not to fly too high but, exhilarated by flight, ascended toward the sun which melted the wax of his feathered wings, causing him to fall into the sea below.

In Walker's poignant and tender retelling, for which he worked from photographs of life model Andrea Morani, a contemporary male admirer of Icarus can be seen tucking small yellow daisy-like blooms under each arm of his buttoned up



black coat. One solitary figure, framed by a blue shadow on the abstracted wall behind, carries the narrative of remembrance.

Walker incorporates small but significant moments into his beautifully realistic paintings where male leads are introspective, vulnerable and fallibly human.

In 'Adonis & Aphrodite,' 2026, he has focused on the mortal of extraordinary beauty who is fatally wounded after pursuing a wild boar against the warnings of the Goddess of Love. Walker emphasises the bare pink flesh of Adonis while hiding his wounds with a blood-red cloth, using vivid colour to powerful, symbolic effect.

Throughout his paintings, Walker questions "the human need and drive to exceed ourselves." He has commented on "the cost of love of art and being a painter", which he has experienced for himself.

This theme also surfaces in 'For The Love of Gala,' 2022, in which he has given space to Salvador Dali's muse, model, wife and manager who, as he says, "was not simply beloved but an architect of his world, grounding his eccentric genius while amplifying its theatre".

Reworking Dali's painting 'Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)', 1954, he has focused on the female figure who stands alone; Jesus has been

removed from the equation.

Dressed in a long, white robe, painted with exquisite folds and shadows, she tilts her head towards a dramatic light source. Appearing as a divine force of inspiration, goddess and even Christ-like, she has been elevated to immortal status in a show of mythological greats.

With an emphasis on their cast of characters, both Walker and Kirkham draw out the age-old themes of love, loss, despair and revenge in well-known myths with relevance today. "They are never-ending stories which survive so long because they touch on human and contemporary matters," says Walker. "They also mutate, evolving with each generation," points out Kirkham.

Both artists, who belong to an exciting new movement of neo-classical painting, prove the power of these ancient tales and their archetypal characters which have passed through time and place.

While we exist in an individualist culture, they carry a universality that connects people, and have been reinvented with fresh relevance here.

Myths also represent the power of human imagination, which both artists have in abundance.

■ **The Cost of Love, a joint exhibition by Charlie Kirkham and Robert Walker, runs from May 30 at Rugby Art Museum and Gallery. Open Tuesday to Saturday, check ragm.co.uk for more details.**

■ **Ruth Millington is a Birmingham-based art writer and historian**