

Images from Michael Petry's *Gifts of Apollo* (top) and *At the Foot of the Gods* (bottom)

art selection and comment by [Aaron Rosen](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



What happens to old gods? As fantasy writers from Neil Gaiman to George R. R. Martin have surmised, they don't fade easily, even when the cultures that invented and worshiped them die off or move on. For the past decade, artist Michael Petry

has been busy fashioning ritual objects and relics that explore the fates of ancient deities from Apollo to Loki alongside contemporary faith traditions.

In his installation *At the Foot of the Gods*, Petry cast the toes of contemporary cultural figures in bronze, evoking the countless appendages broken off ancient Greek and Roman statuary. He created the molds for these toes by swaddling each subject's foot in silicone. His models, such as actor Stephen Fry, recall an intimate, ceremonial quality to the experience. Indeed, the process calls to mind the ritual washing of feet on Maundy Thursday. Petry then arranged dozens of these little sculptures on the floor of a Dutch convent, like offerings left in a sanctuary or pebbles collected on a beach. The assembled digits are at once precious and mundane, indicators of presence as well as absence.

In another series, *Gifts of Apollo*, Petry imagines what happens when God or gods reach down to us, bestowing signs of favor. Apollo is a canny choice. Along with meaning many different things to ancient Greeks and Romans, he became a model for early Christians as they sought to visualize Christ. Here Petry seems to offer himself in service to the Divine, crafting and delivering resplendent objects to humanity on the god's behalf. The glittering sculptures become sacred objects in the vein of Christian *acheiropoieta*: icons made without hands, pure impressions of divine presence. The indeterminate, allusive quality of these pieces underscores their otherworldly origin. Some suggest mysterious fruits, others the bones of uncertain beasts, even fragments of meteors from outer space. They sit naturally and proportionally in the palm of one's hand, as if ready to reenact some forgotten ritual. Apollo may have passed on, but the search for traces of the sacred is immortal.