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Twixt

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Abstract

This thesis discusses photographs exhibited at the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences Gallery at Rochester Institute of Technology from April 28 – May 10, 2003. In these photographs of desecrated landscapes at liminal times of day, the eerie light and vibrant colors of dusk and dawn enable me to create views of my personal world, a foreign and perilous place for some audiences, an intoxicating and disquieting environment for others. As the light gives way to darkness, the deepening shadows of the vegetation come alive as monstrous figures. Fears lurk in the darkness and become threatening creatures of the unknown. Times of transition in this 24-hour cycle are windows of opportunity for a shift of power between good and evil, and in this cycle the impending darkness becomes a warning signal to return to the predictable safety of a civilized structure.

Introduction: Theories and Methodology

My thesis is a series of apocalyptic landscapes, seemingly abandoned by human civilization, and left exposed for desecration by the worst Mother Nature can bring to bear. Photographed at liminal times of day and night, when the atmospheric colors are at their most intense and darkness looms above the horizon, the landscapes are at once inviting and terrifying. As the rich vibrant colors draw the viewer in, the impending darkness isolates them in a vast and inhospitable world. I intentionally avoided including any familiar human elements in these images. Instead, they are populated with a variety of fictional creatures that I constructed in the computer. The freakish beings were built from multiple animal and human models and assembled like a puzzle; their illogical anatomy mimics the familiar yet bizarre design of the landscapes.

Many experiences from my previous photographic life led me to create my thesis. The first was a documentary project in the Dominican Republic (D.R) after I graduated from college. I photographed for a non-profit organization called Global Links, which collected surplus medical supplies from U.S. hospitals, distributing them to medical centers and clinics in developing countries. My role was to document the need that existed for this organization and the positive effect it was having on the health care system and the communities. Arriving in the D.R. and embedding myself in these hospitals and rural clinics, I found myself overwhelmed with culture shock, completely unable to photograph. I spent days wandering the halls looking for an empty room or quiet corner in which to break down and just weep. Everything about my environment was completely unfamiliar – the landscape, the people, the food, the sounds. The experience of absolute and complete isolation from anything familiar transformed me into a person whom I did not recognize. I did not behave the same, talk the same or even think the

same way that I had prior to this experience. The only thing that seemed at all familiar was the

way the sky looked. The sunset had the same colors, and at night the stars looked just as they had at home.

After returning to the United States, I began working with silhouetted human shapes, making life casts of various body parts that abstracted the human form. I created an eight-foot by ten-foot grid, suspended ten feet off the ground, from which I hung strands of clear, faceted plastic beads spaced two inches apart. In this sea of beads, I hung the body casts in such a way that the complete human figure was rebuilt through the individual abstract parts. When lit, the end result appeared to be shattered human forms frozen in an icy space. I photographed the installation, to both record the construction and to further abstract the work itself.

During the first quarter at RIT, I continued exploring the concept of the broken figure. Instead of hanging them, however, I created a battlefield where the bodies were emerging from a partial burial in mounds of beads and broken mirrors. As the viewer followed a path through the field, confronted with bodies buried in ice-like graves and facing their own reflections in the broken mirrors, they were led up to a

projected image of collaged advertisements from magazines where women's bodies were objectified for the purpose of a marketing campaign.

My work with the abstraction of the body continued to evolve into the second term. I had an image in my head that I spent all term trying to make: in front of a black background, a naked body hung amid sashes of brightly colored fabric. I spent weeks "sketching" on film, building

the image bit by bit, photographing, then adding or changing something, then photographing again, then tweaking some more. I learned to embrace the practice of sketching, thus arriving at a better understanding of the process of art-making itself.
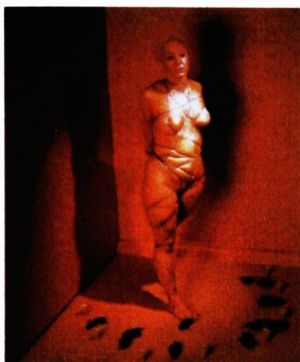
Simultaneously, I began to venture outside of the safe confines of the studio. I was drawn to the trees in Rochester, which look so different to me than trees anywhere else. Perhaps this was due, in part, to the harshness of the Rochester environment and winter. The trees have an emotive, tortured quality, most evident and powerful in the winter months after they have dropped all their leaves. Like long, gnarled, boney fingers, the branches reach out from the trunk and claw at the steely gray Rochester sky. As I watched these repeated gestures being performed in tree after tree, they spoke to me, resonated with the unspoken emotions within myself. I photographed them, making black-and-white "portraits" of individual trees or their interacting gestures. Concurrently, I was discovering old family photographs. I saw myself in moments throughout my childhood being "childlike", an aspect of a time of my life that I do not remember the same way the photographs illustrate. This discusses the conflict between a photographic memory and a mental memory. If I were to make a picture of my childhood from my mental memory, it would look much more like the gestures of the Rochester trees. However, the existing photographic memory of my childhood gives a very different account. I felt that I needed to bring the two versions of my past together in one image. I scanned and enlarged the family photographs, then traced them as line art onto rice paper. I then coated the line drawings with liquid emulsion, and contact printed the tree portraits on top of the drawings. I worked to integrate the lines of the drawings into the lines created by the

gesture of the tree branches. I created reflective panels in front of which each print hung, each panel with its own individual light source that could be independently controlled. In the end, the suspended prints took on a leaf-like quality, floating and moving as people walked by, with a very translucent and organic feel.

My work third term began with exploring body transformation in terms of the grotesque, a connection I will be addressing in Chapter Two. I attended a presentation of Patrick Nagatani's work where he had painted rooms various colors and photographed in those rooms, reflecting and reacting to the symbolic meaning and influence of the color. I found this concept very compelling, but rather than using the color of the environment as a provocative tool, I wanted to use it to blend the figure into the environment. I brought in props of votive candles and cut flowers, creating scenes of ritualized torture as I wrapped wire grotesquely around my own nude figure and coated myself in body paint to match the surrounding walls.

In the beginning of this series, I was adamant that *I* be featured somewhere in each of the pictures. I made my debut in the work as the Victim, Martyr or Sacrificial Virgin. As I (the artist) began to feel more strongly empowered about the work, I (the subject) began to transform into Savior. I stripped myself of the bright orange body paint and grew a set fairy wings and long golden hair, and set out to save the fallen innocents (portrayed by bright-eyed plastic dolls mummified in medical gauze) from the flames of Hell, or in this case, a couple hundred votive candles. As the work evolved, however, I began to understand that *I* was in the pictures, regardless of whether or not my body was.

With the conclusion of this project, I wanted to revisit the work that I had been doing with the trees. The seasons had changed, and instead of using black-and-white film, I photographed the trees in color at dusk and dawn, to draw on both the blooming color in the landscape and the color in the atmosphere at those times of day. I played around with digitally inserting the props from the previous project into the landscapes. This resulted in looking technically artificial and conceptually weak, so I quickly abandoned this idea.

I continued to transform myself into a fairy in the studio, though now without the

accompaniment of any props. I was interested in the way the fairy wings had the appearance of leaves or petals, my arms like branches and my torso and legs like a trunk. I realized it had been this human, gestural quality of the trees that attracted my eye to photograph them in the first place. I loved the way layering the fairy bodies into the trees created an ethereal texture that enhanced the existing natural landscape, but did not hijack it.

The downside of returning to the fairies, however, was that they were loaded symbols. They alluded to, at worst, kitschy childhood "fairy tales", and at best, naughty Victorian fairy paintings. But they were not either of those things. There was no apparent allegory in these images. The fairies were not characterized and cast into an dreamlike scenario as they sometimes were by the Victorians[1], or given any "biological" statistics such as land of origin, habitat, color or behavioral characteristics as they often were in childhood lore[2]. They were simply digitally woven into the

fabric of the tree for aesthetic and emotive purposes. The dark sky and murky blue water converged mysteriously with no apparent horizon line, and formed a melancholy background for

the gnarled fingers of the downward drooping branches on the solitary tree. The lightness of the fairy wings kept the dark tone of this image from collapsing in on itself, allowing space for the sad emotive quality without the overall feeling becoming too overwhelming.

Unsure of how to deal with this issue, I decided to give the fairies a break, and continued photographing the landscapes themselves only at liminal times of the day. One late afternoon in the fall, a friend of mine and I went out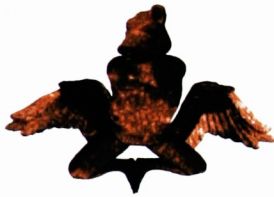 to photograph together in Mendon Ponds Park, a very thick and swampy area not far from Rochester. We hiked and made images for awhile, and as the evening approached we were still pretty deep in the woods. As I waited for him to finish his final twenty-minute exposure, I realized that it had become almost completely dark. I had only been in this area once before, and as we tried to make our way out of the swamp, we found ourselves in a clearing where the surrounding brush was so dense that we could not find the trailhead leading back to the car. We had no food and had not eaten in hours, were pretty much out of water, and had no flashlight. At this point, I was becoming increasingly agitated and uncomfortable with the impending situation. I transformed from a calm and mellow person to a snippy and angry one in a heartbeat once I thought that we would be stuck in the woods all night. After a few false starts down trails that led nowhere, we finally found the right path, and eventually made it back to "civilization" safely.

As I reflected on that experience, I endlessly psychoanalyzed myself in attempts to understand what had provoked such a wave of panic and transformation. Being a very visual person and losing my sight by the fall of darkness was losing one of the keenest senses that I possess. I lost my ability to understand my surroundings, and thereby any chance of controlling

the particular situation. With the lack of sight also came the lack of a sense of reality, which opened the floodgates for my imagination to take hold. The woods are wild, after all, and who knows what sorts of nasty creatures are lurking out there, just prowling around, looking for a tasty human dinner.

I continued creating these landscapes, but the ideas that I had stumbled upon out in the swamp that dark evening lingered with me. I went back into the studio, but instead of photographing myself as a fairy, I photographed myself nude in as many strange and contorted positions as my body was capable of forming. I then found a number of small models of various animals and photographed them as well. In the computer, I began to morph parts of my body into parts of other animal bodies, creating my own species of creatures. They were intended to be derived from existing creatures, but not look like anything anyone had ever seen before. This was the same effect I was trying to achieve with the digital modifications on the landscapes. I then worked to digitally integrate my creatures into the dark and ominous landscapes, populating this somewhat familiar world with bizarre creatures that were based on my human form, making a safe world for me, but frightening and potentially perilous for others.

In this thesis, the first chapter discusses my personal experience of creating these landscapes, and how this affects the way the photographs evolve into apocalyptic imagery. I then address the work in a broader spectrum, looking at two different theories of the sublime, and how my imagery was influenced by these ideas. Finally, I explore how my work was compositionally influenced and visually draws upon the work of artists from the American Sublime school of landscape painting, such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt.

Following that discussion, in the second chapter I explore the evolution of the creatures in the context of theories of the Other, the abject, and the grotesque. I investigate the role that the creatures play in my work, the role they take in the context of my past work, and how they compared to creatures and monsters in the work of other artists.

Twixt, or betwixt, indicates an in-between position, not being fully one thing or place or another. The images that I created in this body of work present such a situation: the places were neither of this world nor of a fully fantastical place. They were photographic documents of real places, yet they bare no resemblance to them. In the same way, the creatures are derived from models of real animals, though the creatures that roam these twixt landscapes are not recognizable as any animal found in existence today. By creating a world in this space between realities, I intended to create a tension in the viewer, an experience that would leave them not horrified outright, but subtly unsettled.

Chapter 1: Landscape and the Sublime

My connection to the landscape is spiritual as well as visual. The process of forcing myself out of the comfortable surroundings of my "civilized" abode and into the unknown territory of Nature is not an easy one. It does not seem to matter how many times I do it, it is always something I need to talk myself into. And it is not because I do not want to go out into the fields or woods or beaches, though that is sometimes what it feels like. It is just fear. And it does not matter how much I think back to the outings prior, how successful the resulting images were, and how wonderful it felt to be out there, it is still hard. It is just so much easier to stay home, or stay in the car and look at Nature from afar. Opening the door and stepping out into the unknown is the ultimate leap of faith. It is the repetitive process of learning to trust myself, to trust my intuition and all the experiences that I have had before. But it is still hard. My will and determination forces me to do it, though, and I do. And as I stand, exposed to the elements, navigating and negotiating trails, shrubs, wind, and quickly changing lighting and weather conditions, I feel more alive than at any other moment. I feel connected to something larger than just the constructed society of my everyday life. In a way, I am giving myself over to the natural forces, traveling back in time to a place much more primal and alive than the sterilized existence that we have created for ourselves today.

The keenest example of my spiritual experience with the landscape was during my time spent photographing in the desert of Joshua Tree National Park. I drove along the park road, after the sun had set and the last lingering hints of light had disappeared. There were no significant sources of artificial light for miles, and the darkness was so utterly complete that I could not distinguish the sky from the mountains from the expanses of flat land all around me. The sole light came from the headlights of my car, which illuminated only the pavement directly in front

of me, and the dry, clawing shrubs that reached like outstretched fingers into the beam of the

headlights from the sides of the road. I was absolutely terrified. It was my first experience in a

desert, completely alone in this foreign environment.

Unable to see any of my surroundings, I had no idea of

what might possibly be out there waiting for me, just

beyond the safety bubble of car. As I continued to drive

on, the road slowly began to curve around to the left, and

I found myself in a valley with two towering mountains on either side, and faint lights flickered

on the new-found horizon far off in the distance. The words "and as I walked through the valley

of the shadow of death" came into mind, and I suddenly was overcome with the sense that I was

in the presence of Death itself, borne out of the dark side of Mother Nature. Everything around

me appeared to be dead – the dry, cracked earth, the tumbleweeds, the scorched brush, the wind-

ravaged mountains.

This experience stayed with me as I explored the landscape over the next several days

and began making images of this new territory. The resultant photographs were full of

transformed landscapes that took on an otherworldly appearance. The sky was filled with

swirling, oddly colored clouds, impregnated with darkness that threw off all sense of time. The

ground appeared too barren to be capable of sustaining life. The plant life became transfigured,

and took on monstrously threatening characteristics.

The Sublime in the Landscape

In writings from early centuries B.C., the apocalypse was a common genre of biblical

literature, where divine secrets and final judgments were passed on to the mortal world through

the narrative structure of the text. The descriptive passages illustrated fantastical environments

full of visions and animal imagery influenced from mythological and symbolic beliefs[3]. While I use the term apocalyptic frequently throughout this paper to describe the subject of my work, I have deviated from this literal definition. My intention was to transcribe the otherworldly, visionary tone of these writings into my imagery, while leaving behind any suggestions of divine judgments or literary narrative structure. The images are meant to convey the sense that a greater power, either natural or divine, has inflicted its will over the world, thus leaving it transformed and alien to those who might have once found it familiar. The experience of witnessing such dramatic metamorphosis is, in its essence, the sublime.

The philosopher Edmund Burke was one of the foremost writers and thinkers of the sublime in the 1700s, and his fundamental ideas have shaped discourse on this subject for centuries. He contrasts the idea of the sublime with the idea of beauty, and sets up associations with each. Beauty, he says, is pleasure, while the sublime is pain. Though they seem opposed to one another, they are actually two distinct and independent experiences. One can experience pleasure without the removal of pain, and one can experience pain without the removal of pleasure. Likewise, the sublime and the beautiful are separate ideas. Anything that causes pain, either mental or physical, is the originator of the sublime experience. Pure terror, eminent bodily danger, and inflicted torments are all causes of the sublime. The beautiful, on the other hand, lacks this intensity, this power. A beautiful sunset may be emotionally moving, but its inability to cause the sense of fear that a swirling cyclone would cause is the distinct difference. The sublime may have elements of the beautiful within it, but the beautiful is never sublime[4].

My experience out in the landscape creating these images always conjures up the sense of the sublime, and it is this essence that I worked to transcribe into the images. This was not something that I could consciously do while I was out in the elements. When I returned home with the images and scanned them into the computer, however, I could pull this essence out of

the composition through post-visualization. The finished images are not literal documents—they are illustrations of the way I felt there, my sense of awe of the environment, my heightened sense of mortality, and in many ways, my direct and personal experience with the sublime:

> No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear*. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous… To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds, which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings.[5]

I intentionally made the quality of light in my images complicated and obscure. The effulgence of the color palette creates a sense of light, but when the viewer explores the imagery more closely, they discover the depth of the obscurity through the dark tonality.

> There is another way, however, to look at the sublime as it is represented in my images:

> However, the sublime does not describe the moment of the arrival of danger, but rather the permanent withdrawal, or deferral, of this danger. Exposed to the terror of annihilation and death, the self is nevertheless able to rejoice in its survival, in having escaped what seemed to be inevitable perdition and being able to reassert its security and integrity. In fact, the awaited danger can never actually arrive: to stay with the bounds of the experience of the sublime, it has to be constantly deferred, striking what might seem like a secret pact with the self that participates in this theater of terror and darkness on the unspoken assumption that its safety is always already assured.[6]

The invented world of my landscapes was indeed unsettling, but at the same time it assured

permanent deferral of any real threat through the very fact that it was representing a world other than the one that any viewer could ever experience. I am showing them what this world is like, but they do not ever have to experience it for themselves. They can live, quite safely and comfortably, vicariously through me. This is clearly not a new idea. The historian Bryan Jay Wolf interpreted Thomas Cole's paintings in much the same way when he wrote, "Behind the terror and

exhilaration of Cole's paintings, the viewer encounters a moment of psychological reversal when an oppressive burden is lifted and the soul receives an influx of power, which it experiences in an ecstasy of liberation and release."[7]

However, the design of my landscapes is intended to draw the viewer into the subject. The rich, vibrant colors entice and lure them with a superficial sense of beauty. Once they engage, the impending darkness starts to chip away at the beauty, revealing an underlying presence of something more sinister, more threatening. The obscurity of the details in the landscape and the creatures are allied to the sensibility of a Burkean sublime, something more akin to my personal experience while out making the original photograph.

> Though Burke did not specifically link the sublime with landscape, a close follower, Hugh Blair, in Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), made the connection clear: 'What are the scenes in nature that elevate the mind in the highest degree, and produce the sublimest sensation? Not the gray landscape, the flowery field, or the flourishing city, but the hoary mountain, solitary lake; the aged forest, and the torrent falling over the rock'... Probably the most prolific British painter of mountains, Turner staged dramas of men pitted against the elements... The spectacle of the tiny shepards leading their flock to cover from the fast approaching storm is only an anecdotal incident in *Chamonix*, ca. 1809. The real drama lies in the steep incline of the rugged mountainside, the precarious viewpoint and the forbidding storm that envelopes the view. Nature, in its raw and primal state, is the source of terror in this picture.[8]

I have replaced the anecdotal elements of Turner's scene with fantastical ones in my own. Do the

shepard and his flock add to the sense of terror? Only as much as we can put ourselves in their perilous position, and feel what it must be like to have that storm bearing down on us. But what if the shepard and his flock were fictitious creatures? We would no longer personally relate to them, for we have no frame of reference for which to do so. Therefore, we would be paradoxically comforted, as if to say, "It's OK. This isn't happening in the *real* world"!

Or maybe, in some unconscious way, I was extrapolating on authors Wilton and Barringer's rational for leaving all human presence out of Frederic Edwin Church's painting *Twilight in the Wilderness, 1860*:

> Church no longer believed that man in his fallen state (even the providentially blessed Americans) could inhabit this garden of Eden without destroying it. Such was the anxiety of the times that the essence of America could be found only in an area with no Americans, either indigenous people or settlers... the land is impassable; access is barred by vegetation and fallen tree trunks. Nature follows its own cycles of death and renewal, without reference to human needs.[9]

One hundred and forty-three years later, man (of Church's description) has not just fallen, but become victim to his own psyche, coming back to roam the world in a freakish and permanently disfigured state, as represented by my creatures.

Composition, Influence and American Landscape Painting

In the technical design of the landscapes, I unconsciously followed the pattern set by the

great masters of the American Sublime landscape painting, such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt. Though I used a camera, film and a computer and they used paint, there are many structural and conceptual similarities that I see in their work that clearly influenced mine.

> *Mountain Sunrise, Catskill* probably does not represent an identifiable location, but rather a composite of elements observed in the field. Although such elements as the dramatic contrasts of light and dark and the gnarled trees derive clearly from the work of Salvator Rosa, Cole initiated the new form of dialogue between foreground, middle-ground and distant vista which gives these works their peculiar aesthetic force.[10]

In my images, I integrated Cole's visual elements, including awe-inspiring light, swirling cloud formations in the skies, and infinite sharpness of detail throughout the entire image. By utilizing long exposures times and the deepest possible depth of field, I transform my photographs into an

approximation of a painterly aesthetic with an endless depth of field. In Cole's paintings, the details of the foreground are obscured by the quality of light, not through the lack of "focus". He creates highlights on the foreground elements by casting warm tones of light on ragged cliffs and gnarled dwarfed trees. He creates the fundamental sense of the sublime in his work by receding this warm, illuminating light into deep, dramatic and obscuring shadows.

Whereas my foreground and sense of light are derived from Cole, my middle-ground and background owe much more to the examples set by Church. Though often there are mountains populating his horizon lines, whereas I have very distant trees, he leads the viewer's eye from reflected light in the middle-ground up into the bursts of light and color in the sky, playing off the minutely detailed cloud formations. I found this same method very effective for creating a balance between the sense of light, reflected on the vegetation on the ground, and the sense of dark, which pushes its way in from the outer edges of the frame, contrasting in the cloud formations that swirl in the bright and richly colored skies.

The interpretation of my work as apocalyptic is something that is also read in the works of these masters, and in particular, in Bierstadt's painting *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley, 1868*. This was not a standard aesthetic practice for him as it is for me, but

this particular example stands out so profoundly that I must include it.

> The composition of this picture is almost identical to that of another Yosemite view of this year (no.92), but Bierstadt transforms it into an apocalyptic vision quite unlike any of his other views of the valley… The benign glow of the sunsets in Bierstadt's preceding Yosemite subjects is replaced by a brooding darkness that largely obscures the rocks, and the light is projected forward into the valley by means of reflections from water and from ragged clouds which sweep low across the faces of the precipices like menacing birds.[11]

Again, the sense of the apocalyptic sublime stems, in Bierstadt's work as in mine, from the darkness obscuring the details which are clearly evident, though impossible to clearly see, in the

foreground and middle-ground. In this particular example, it is the preponderance of darkness in his imagery that makes it stand out from the rest, and even my most technically proficient ink jet prints cannot even come close to representing the same tonal range that he was able to create with paint.

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[1] Lambourne, Lionel, <u>Victorian Painting</u> (London, England: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999) 190.

[2] Borges, Jorges Luis, <u>The Books of Imaginary Beings</u> (New York: Dutton, 1969).

[3] Columbia University. "Apocalypse." <u>Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition</u>. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. http://www.bartleby.com/65/ap/apocalyp.html (28 October, 2003).

[4] Burke, Edmund, <u>A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful</u>, Ed. David Womersley, (London, England: Penguin Books, 1998) 86, 157.

[5] Burke, 101.

[6] Zylinska, Joanna, <u>On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime</u>, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2001) 18.

[7] Barringer, Tim, Stephen Deuchar, and Andrew Wilton, <u>American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880</u>, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) 74.

[8] Ketner, Joseph D and Michael J Tammenga, <u>The Beautiful, The Sublime and The Picturesque</u>, (St. Louis, MO: Washington University Gallery of Art, 1984) 24.

[9] Barringer, 129-130.

[10] Barringer, 73.

[11] Barringer, 238.

Chapter 2: Creatures and the Abject

The eye is the most courageous organ because, in a sense,
It must always face itself. It lies in its moist socket,
The pot of seeing, and never says that what it sees in dream
Is less than what it sees. Image and imagination,
Those eyes indivisible.
In the deep of my eye, I see
To the edge of self (all those translucent pronouns)
And beyond into the dark quarter of the circle.[12]

Monsters are universal, and stories about them have been around as long as there have been humans to invent stories about them. They are most commonly seen in popular culture in children's stories, such as <u>Where the Wild Things Are</u>, one of my favorite childhood stories. In his book <u>Monsters, Evil Beasts, Mythical Beasts and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors</u>, David Gilmore explains that, "the human mind needs monsters; we need some kind of image that we can place all of our fears and our terrors and our anxieties on and make it come to life and then deal with it."[13] As I was out tromping through the woods at night, scared out of my wits, I *knew* intellectually that the chance of my getting eaten by a big, hairy beast with dripping fangs and outstretched claws was highly unlikely. This did not change the fact that I was scared. There was no way that I was going to be able to talk myself out of my fear right at that moment. Those irrational fears were too far embedded in my unconscious, and being present in a place where these fantastical beasts *might* be living triggered my imagination to take these fears and run with them.

I am certainly not the first person to bring bizarre and hybrid creatures into their work, and many have chosen the same pairing of monstrous creatures and apocalyptic imagery. Many artists from a variety of schools and traditions have used beasts, monsters and creatures of all sorts in their work, including Hieronymus Bosch, Goya, Benjamin West, and Remedios Varo. If their creatures and monsters are dissected, they even appear to be constituted from the same array of parts that my creatures are—part animal, part human.

Both Goya and Varo also invented hybrid creatures capable of flight. Goya created a curious figure with bat-wing ears and taloned feet. Varo showed a woodland creature, her *Personage*, with a woman's body, insect wings, rabbit ears, and antelope horns, running lightly through a forest as though about to lift off the ground. Both their creatures seem disturbingly human, despite their animal parts.[14]

Why "disturbingly" human? What is it about these hybrid beings that lead them to be disturbing? If we see more of ourselves in something foreign, is it not easier for us to understand and accept it? Gilmore explains that while we (visual artists) continue to imbue our creatures with human characteristics, they are the traits that we love about our own human nature. These fictional species become a depository for everything we fear and loath about ourselves. "Because the monster is that part of us which is disdained, which is repulsive, which is criminal, which is thrown out, but it's a part of us and so we identify with that and we pity it, I think, because it's a little bit of all of us."[15] Animals themselves are not capable of the complex set of emotions that humans are. If they chase down and attack a human (which, admittedly, happens rarely), it is because they are hungry or feel threatened, not because they hate us. When we create our monsters, however, we think of them as we would a human archenemy, one that hates us with every ounce of their being, and makes it their mission to hunt us down and destroy us.

Unlike the creatures conjured up by these other artists, mine are not the focal point of the work, and they do not function as moral, ethical, or religious statements. For me, the creatures are there solely to enhance the disturbing and frightening qualities that were already present in the landscape itself. They are signals to the viewer that they have entered a wholly unfamiliar and inhospitable world. In the end, however, the creatures did not stand up to their role as I had hoped they would. They became too well integrated into the landscapes, so one would easily miss them if they did not know that they were there. And once they were discerned, they fell subject to the same criticism that other makers-of-creatures, including Benjamin West, have:

"Galt's and Carey's praises of West's *Death* are so close to being hyperbolical that they seem to conceal some disquietude, some fear that West's gigantic monster might be found not frightening but ridiculous."[16] This became a problem. After much work and evolution of the creatures, I came to acknowledge that they were silly, though silly with an edge of the disturbing. They were weird and odd, but no matter what I did, the general consensus was that they were not particularly frightening.

Abjection and The Grotesque

The creatures evolved out of a realization that the natural world, during liminal times of day and night, is a terrifying place. During daylight hours when I am able to see, my sense of security and connection to these places is intense. As the light begins to fade and everything becomes obscured, my sense of control disappears and is replaced by paralyzing fear. I needed a way to reclaim these places, regardless of the time of day. By recreating these terrifying creatures of my imagination with my own body parts, I would no longer need to be afraid of them, because they would not be unknown, they would be me. By compositing the creatures from dissected parts of my body, however, I am inherently rejecting certain pieces of myself for others. By leaving obvious human elements in the creatures, I am suggesting the broken, dissected whole. This is the essence of abjection. In abjection, the lines between the self and Other become blurred, and in this place of turmoil and confusion, the Other takes over and wields control over the Self.

> Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object... It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjections but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-betweens, the ambiguous, the composite. The phobic has no other object than the abject. But that word, "fear" – a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess – no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with non-existence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness,

a burden both repellant and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.[17]

My creatures are abject in that they are the ultimate confrontation with the Other. "The Other transcends the self in a way that it disturbs the self's selfhood because it presents the self with a self over whom they have no control."[18] They did not just come out of my new-found fear of beasts and animals that lurk in the darkness of night. That fear became personified within me as another identity, and it manifest itself in the imagery as the creatures. The Other is not the creatures. The Other is the fear, and the creatures are the embodiment of the fear. They are unapproachable to those who have no frame of reference with which to understand them, and yet they are intimate to me, constituted from my very being. "I am Other. This is not to say that one has ceased to be a self; rather, it is to recognize the implicit within selfhood—the Otherness of selfhood. The self is not comfortable as Other, for in its Otherness it *is* what it *is not*. Its own Otherness prevents the self from satisfaction within itself."[19]

It has been a consistent theme in my work to break apart the human figure and put it back together again. I did it first in the cast body parts in the bead installation, then again in the hanging body image, and yet again in the ritualistic painted body work that preceded the fairy images. Over and over I victimize my physical self through my work. There is a cathartic experience in working out psychic demons through the creative process. It allows room for *unconscious* ideas to be expressed, rather than repressed. When the artist identifies with and understands the work, he or she comes face to face with their shadow side, the dark side that the *conscious* mind does not acknowledge.

It [the abject] is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones.[20]

In the aesthetic of the abject, through the creation of my creatures, I became my own willing and fascinated victim. I destroyed my own body to create a repulsive and disfigured fictional being, an unconscious expression of my internal image of the self. By creating space for the Other as alter ego, I saw myself in the mirror of the Other, which manifested in expression as loathing for the body, and a need to physically dismember it. "The paradox of Otherness as the defining moment of selfhood presents an ontology that is constantly involved in the concrete relationships of the world. It is not an ontology based on deep personal and individualistic reflection, but rather one that erupts from a notion of the self as one who meets the Other in a tenuous and at times volatile relationship."[21]

Early on in my investigation of the abject, I looked at the work of Cindy Sherman. As a viewer, I was immediately pulled into her images despite their horrific subject, especially the work with the doll parts and disfigured masks from the mid-to-late 1990s. As art objects, I saw them as texturally beautiful, with invigorating colors and fascinating lighting. The subject matter was repulsive, but Sherman beautified it in a way that did not inoculate the horror, but intensified their abject nature by making them gorgeous.

> Sherman's strategy, one of abrupt defamiliarization, precipitates a visceral as well as psychic response in viewers which does not accommodate passive, desirous contemplation. As her imagery becomes increasingly monstrous, it challenges and subverts dominant conceptions as "woman as nature" (therefore as exterior to culture); as in horror films, Sherman's terrorizing photographs sever the identificatory bonds between the viewer and the image. After a point, the spectator turns away, ultimately "punished for his/her voyeuristic desires". Sherman's imagery enacts a sadomasochistic dialect, drawing upon, in order to thwart, pervasive desires and fantasies of women.[22]

This was an element that I was trying to work into the creatures, and more broadly, into the landscapes. By including sexualized human body parts in the creatures, I wanted to seduce the viewers into looking, and then repulse them with the complete creature. Similarly, with the landscapes I wanted to draw the viewer in with the luscious, intoxicating colors, and then alienate them with the darkness, the barren and hostile environment, and freakish inhabitants.

The abject is a concept more commonly associated with literature, psychology, film (especially horror films), and linguistics. When the abject is discussed in terms of art, it is commonly associated with the grotesque. The grotesque is depicted in visual artwork as "a style of painting, sculpture, and ornamentation in which natural forms and monstrous figures are intertwined in bizarre or fanciful combinations."[23] This sums up my creatures exactly. The grotesque is a combination of elements that creates a whole that can no longer be classified or categorized as something that already exists. It is in-between "this" and "that", for which there is no specific language to describe.

It is liminal; just as the landscapes themselves exist in a place in-between, so too do the creatures. Throughout the evolution of the creatures, I was always adamant that it was not important that the construction of the creatures made "sense". "The grotesque is a marvelous hybrid: it celebrates the body, but it also expresses psychic currents underneath the surface of the unconscious. Finally, unlike homogenizing, unifying reason, it seeks out contradiction; in fact, it undermines rational thought by requiring the rational mind to grapple with the puzzle of contradiction while the irrational takes the reins."[24] I wanted the entirety of their existence to seem impossible, a contradiction in terms. While their freakish nature in my landscapes was an expression of the abject within myself as the artist, the creatures were representative of the grotesque in terms of art itself.

[12] Macdonald, Cynthia, (W)holes, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) 7.

[13] Gilmore, David, "Interview: David Gilmore on his new book 'Monsters, Evil Beasts, Mythical Beasts and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors'", National Public Radio, (October 27, 2002) 1.

[14] Kaplan, Janet, Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys, (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988) 202.

[15] Gilmore, 2.

[16] Paley, Morton D, The Apocalyptic Sublime, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986) 27.

[17] Oliver, Kelly, ed, The Portable Kristeva, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997) 232-234.

[18] Macri, Anthony L, "The Otherness of Selfhood: Levinus and Existential Inquiry," December 2002. www.anthonymacri.com (25 Sept. 2003) 5.

[19] Macri, 5.

[20] Oliver, 236.

[21] Macri, 7-8.

[22] Taylor, Simon, "The Phobic Object", Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art, (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993) 62.

[23] Pickett, Joseph P, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

[24] Bowers, Susan and Ronald Dotterer, eds, Sexuality, the Female Gaze, and the Arts: Women, the Arts, and Society, (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1992) 22.

Conclusion: Summary, Uniqueness and Rational, and the Future

This thesis discusses photographs of desecrated landscapes at liminal times of day, with eerie light and vibrant skies that enabled me to create otherworldly environments. As the light gives way to darkness, the deepening shadows of the vegetation come alive as monstrous figures and freakish, fictional creatures. This series of apocalyptic images was designed to impart an unsettled sensibility within the audience. I utilized a number of aesthetic and conceptual tools in order to accomplish this. First, I established a strong color palate that would catch the viewer's eye and immediately draw them in. Then, a contrasting sense of darkness, creeping in from the edges of the frame, set a subtle tone that offset the vibrancy of the colors. Choice of location was also key, as I photographed landscapes that had a particular look of desecration, decay or abandon. Another essential component to the success of this work was the scale. A topic of many discussions, I believe that the large size of the finished prints was one of the most important factors in making these images come to life (or death, as it may be). At the 30" by 40" scale, they are not just photographs but representations of this Otherworld that I was trying to make seem so real, and yet not.

Conceptually, I liked that the work could function with multiple interpretations. It could be just an oddly lit landscape photograph, and nothing more. It could go deeper, though, and draw in those viewers that allowed themselves to be drawn in, and then the subversive nature of the image could take hold. At that point, the questions start: Where is this place? Do I know where this is? Do I *want* to know where this is? What is going on here? This place is clearly inhabited, but what *are* those things?

This work is unique in the combination of medium, genres, and approach. The landscape as a photograph is nothing new, but the interpretation of the apocalyptic and sublime landscape in photography is not as common. This was much more popular in landscape paintings of bygone

eras, not contemporary photography. The approach was unique in that, unlike apocalyptic and sublime landscape painting, there was no moral, religious or ethical narrative underlying the work. The work is not illustrative. In terms of the digital nature of the images, I worked extremely hard, and was reasonably successful in most cases, at not making the work *look* digital. I wanted to utilize the digital tools the way a painter could use different paints, pigments, brushes and techniques. The computer was critical in order to transcend what I was not capable of doing with traditional photography. However, it was just as important to me that the images not look like digital images. They had to look like photographs when the work was all said and done, as this was an essential part of the work—asking the viewer to question whether or not what they were looking at was real. I did not want anyone to view the work and immediately know that they were digital prints, either from the print quality or the use (or over-use) of the digital tools.

So what next? Once this body of work was on the wall, it became painfully clear to me that the creatures within the landscapes were not working. The ideas that the creatures represented were already in the landscapes, the way in which the vegetation and the shadows played off one another made the bizarre plants come to life as creatures themselves. If anything, the "real" creatures diminished this effect. So, I needed to find a new home for my freakish creations. I am continuing to develop the landscapes as their own separate body of work, and I have been photographing more places all summer. I have found this difficult now that the trees are all full of leaves, but I have been scouting out any dead trees I can find while I wait for the living trees to lose their leaves and look dead. I have taken the creatures into a totally new direction. I printed a black-and-white version of the flying pig creature onto ink-jet transparency film, and used the glaring bright summer sun to scorch it into my bare torso. I laid out in an open field on a cloudless, 90-degree summer afternoon for an hour without sunscreen with the

transparency tapped to my stomach. After coming inside, my friend immediately helped me photograph the initial burn on 4x5 color chrome against a black background. We cropped the image just below the nipples and just above the hip bones in order to make the resulting image less of "naked woman picture" and to abstract the form of body. We photographed the burn again that night, and then once a day for the next week. Where the creature was placed, the skin remained white, and everything else transformed into constantly changing textures and shades of red and purple. The images are intended to be shown in a sequence, the idea being that as the skin begins to peel, it will tear away at the creature that has been burned into the body. Over time, as more and more of the skin peels away and the burn heals, the body will reclaim the area carved out by the creature. A loosely and less developed underlying concept here was the placement of the creature over the womb, suggesting the external representation of the internal, and my personal struggles with the concept of female reproduction and fertility.
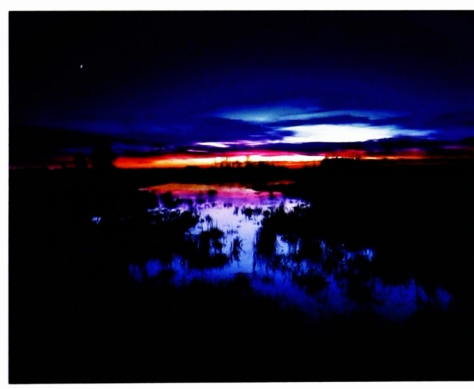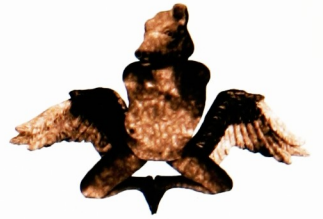
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