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Taxidermy of Thought

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Taxidermy of Thought

By

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B.S., Illinois State University 1997

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Art

With a Major in Sculpture

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University Park, IL 60466

Abstract

Sculpture is how I bring to life the dark corners of my mind. There have always been images of creatures, geology, and botanical life swirling around my head. Images that often include spires of exoskeleton, creeping tendrils searching for sustenance, or something that moves in an unnatural way. After years of envisioning and automatically sketching out these "things" it is beginning to get a bit crowded in there. It was time to excise this world in my mind and bring it into existence through my hands.

Using many different materials, including plaster, wire, paper mache, epoxy, urethane resins, many different kinds paint and stains, I have constructed these "objects." Each one is meant to be left to its' observer to decide where it belongs or what it is. I want my "things" available to inhabit everyone's dark corners, able to fill that creepy void that everyone shies away from. I feel my work has a similar relationship to that of an entomologist. They can find the beauty in an insect, while the rest of the world will recoil in disgust.

I have been inspired by many sources. For as long as I can remember I have been interested in monsters. I can remember watching Godzilla and The Creature from the Black Lagoon as a small child and being absolutely mesmerized. From then on the interest has only grown, to include more horror and sci-fi films, books, comics and art. I have spent much of the last twenty-five years building and

painting figure models based on said material. The works of many fine artists have been influences as well, including and not limited to Calder, Hunt, Geiger, Giacometti. The natural world is also an influence. If you look hard enough you will see the insects, plants and sea life at the core of every sculpture. Table of

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Sculpture is how I bring to life the dark corners of my mind. There have always been images of creatures, geology, and botanical life swirling around my head. Images that often include spires of exoskeleton, creeping tendrils searching for sustenance, or something that moves in an unnatural way. After years of envisioning and automatically sketching out these "things" it is beginning to get a bit crowded in there. It was time to excise this world in my mind and bring it into existence through my hands.

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Calder, Hunt, Geiger, Giacometti. The natural world is also an influence. If you look hard enough you will see the insects, plants and sea life at the core of every sculpture.

Taxidermy of Thought refers to the process of taking the images that are in my head and bringing them into a state of preserved existence through sculpture. These sculptures always begin as drawings in my sketchbook; it acts almost as a field guide to my brain. In the same way an entomologist or botanist would keep sketches of insects, plants or other notes of habitat and environment. When I see an object in my mind I try and sketch it down as quickly as possible, it isn't until after it is down on paper that I try and determine what it is. It could turn out to be a living creature or perhaps a rock formation. Just getting these objects drawn on paper isn't enough. This is why I have worked my way toward sculpture, for something to truly exist in this world to be more than just an idea; it has to physically be there. You have to look at it from all sides, be able to touch it. Something like a painting can never cross that barrier for me, it will always just be a painting. That doesn't mean I don't appreciate a painting, it is just not the way I can get my ideas out. I feel creating these three-dimensional objects helps excise them from my brain. Once it has been created and is there to be seen, felt and considered, it is no longer mine; it is no longer a nagging thought. This object now belongs to the world and has a life of its own.

The root of these "thoughts" or "images" are the sum of all my influences, film, music, literature, comic books, and of course art. I am trying to take these influences and abstract them into objects or sculpture, that when viewed they can be taken in many different ways by different viewers. Each piece has its dark little place in my mind but I want these objects to find their way into the viewers own dark places of their mind; what they are afraid of, what creeps them out and what they can connect them back to from their own experiences. I want viewers to be able to see different influences in each object, whether it be the choice of colors that harkens back to the natural world or the structure of it that might remind someone of a deep sea creature or a carnivorous plant of some deep lost jungle. I also want viewers to be able to imagine their own world, function or place that my objects might inhabit or do. Where is the fun in saying exactly what it is? I need to let people decide for themselves on what everything is. I do know what I was thinking when I made each piece, what influences were combined to come up with this new abstracted creature or structure. To give viewers and readers a better understanding of how my work is "born," I will deconstruct a few of my objects. First I must explain some of the "rules" I follow when creating my objects and explain exactly some of the most important influences.

I don't like faces. People are able to relate to, or better understand something with a face. We know where something's looking, how it's feeling and whether or not we should be afraid of it, if it has a face. I attended a talk many years back with one of the people who worked on the film *Alien*. During that talk

he said basically the same thing. H.R. Giger and the design team intentionally designed the xenomorph without eyes to de-humanize it, make it feel absolutely alien to us (Fig1). The creatures on this planet that people tend to find creepy or disturbing are those typically without faces, for example, worms, jellyfish, clams and leeches (Fig2-3).

Another rule I try to work by is "make sure it's odd." This simply means if there are appendages or legs or anything that can quickly be counted, they should be an odd number. The life on planet Earth likes to work in even numbers; two legs, four legs, two wings, two eyes, eight tentacles, and so on. We as humans are used to seeing things with even numbers coming at us, we know how to react to them. The idea of tripedal movement is completely foreign to us. There is nothing on this planet that walks around on three legs, so immediately if we see something that does, it looks alien, or not quite right on a subconscious level. This is one of the reasons why H.G. Wells in his 1898 novel *War of the Worlds*, chose to make the Martian invading machines giant walking "Tripods." These Tripods have inspired generations of science fiction writers, filmmakers and video game producers and have woven their way into many a modern creation (Fig4).

Take the video game *Half Life 2*, a major player in the images floating around my head and also a direct descendant of *War of the Worlds*. In *Half Life 2* you are confronted by it's own version of the giant alien tripod called the Striders (Fig5) and their smaller cousins the Hunters (Fig6). These biomechanical

machines act as terminators of uncooperative humans. *Half Life 2* isn't alone in the gaming world with use of tripods, *Crysis*, *Unreal Tournament III* also have their own versions.

Although there are some life forms that do have odd numbered appendages. Some Echinoderms (starfish) (Fig7) for example, have five arms. Most people don't find starfish to be frightening; they take the shape of something we are familiar with. But, if those same starfish got up and walked around really fast on those same five legs, I don't think people would look at them in the same light. While even numbers tend to be the majority, they will almost always look too planned when it comes to art.

Form, color and texture also play a very important part of my work. I am trying to create things that look like they might have existed at one point whether they are botanical, geological, animal or a combination of all three, so I take my inspiration from the life around me. I like to use forms that give a sense of growing or moving. One could find stalagmites in my work, growing upwards to a spindly termination. Or the feeling of a mass of tentacles moving about trying to find its' prey. I like the "appendages" of my sculptures to have insectoid or a tentacle feel to them. Viewers tend to know how those types of things work; they have seen a crab walk or an octopus crawl. These types of appendages help convey how this thing might move or work and help to ground it in a natural world.

I apply the same thought process to my color and texture choices. I want the textures of my sculptures to help imply what it might do. If it's a tentacle then it should be smooth and slimy looking. If it is meant to look as if perhaps it grew on the sea floor then a rough almost coral like texture might be appropriate. Nothing should look purposeful; creating those random textures looking textures is the key. Color is treated in the same way. I want my colors to look as if they serve a purpose to the piece. From organic Pinks and Reds, oily Blacks and Browns, to colors that suggest the natural processes of rusting and erosion, it should all hint at the natural world, albeit perhaps an alien one.

Finally my last rule, in my mind every object should have a history or a biology. I need to feel as if all of these are representations of things that were alive or formed through some sort of natural process. I feel I need to justify how it moves, how it might try to eat you, how it grew on the surface of some inhospitable land, did it die and after eons this is the result. All my objects belong to a greater echo system, each playing a part. Even though that echo system is completely a matter of thought, they all need some grounding in reality and this process helps guide the creation of each piece.

As I mentioned before the inspiration for these sculptures comes from many places. One of the most important is H.P. Lovecraft (Fig8). Lovecraft is a cult author of sorts; most of his short stories were published in pulp magazines of

the 1920's and 30's. He created an entire world that was loosely linked between his stories. This world he created consisted of aliens, creatures and places that existed millennia before our own and running parallel to our own in the hidden dark corners of the world. What really inspires me about his work is his manner of describing these things. He leaves them purposely vague, letting the reader fill in the horrific things in their own mind. In other words, what really creeps them out or what people find scary in their own lives will always make it into what they think these things Lovecraft wrote about look like.

For example, take this passage, "What people thought they saw were organic shapes not quite like any they had ever seen before. Naturally, there were many human bodies washed along by the streams in that tragic period; but those who described these strange shapes felt quite sure that they were not human, despite some superficial resemblances in size and general outline. Nor, said the witnesses, could they have been any kind of animal known to Vermont. They were pinkish things about five feet long; with crustaceous bodies bearing vast pairs of dorsal fins or membranous wings and several sets of articulated limbs, and with a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae, where a head would ordinarily be." (Lovecraft, *The Whisperer in Darkness*, 1931) While I'm sure Lovecraft, much like myself and my objects, had a definite idea in his head what these creatures looked like, a description like that could lead to many different interpretations from different people, which is the point.

Another major influence of my work is Alexander Calder (Fig9), it might not be very visible but it is there. I have a documentary that I show my classes (American Masters Season 12 Episode 6, Alexander Calder, June 17, 1998) about him and there are few lines of dialogue in there that really hit home for me. They talk about how by the end of his life; he had created an entire world. An artist, like no other has that ability, to be able to create entire worlds simply by making things. There was also an art critic talking about his large stabiles, he was comparing them to dinosaurs or other creatures and said he didn't know if they were friend or foe. My thoughts instantly went to my drawings and my work. I knew I could make something that was closer to a creature or a dinosaur and still remain abstract enough to where people didn't quite know what to make of it. That was my jumping off point, I know I want to start small but; I also want to eventually make these objects large enough to rival Calder's stabiles. I was also impressed by Calder's attitude towards art. He never even referred to his sculptures as such, but rather called them objects. He said if he called them sculptures he would have to defend them as art, calling them objects allowed him to wash his hands of the debate and leave that up to other people to argue about. Not that I am not up for a spirited debate about art, but I really feel the debate tends to get in the way of letting things exist in their own space.

Calder isn't the only artist whose' work has touched my life in a profound way. The sculptures of both Hunt and Giacometti resonate with me. Giacometti's

sculptures (Fig10) have the ability to instill a feeling of creepiness or desperation like none other. Richard Hunt's sculpture's sense of balance and how they use space is always an inspiration. There are many two dimensional artists whose work I admire considerably. The fore mentioned H.R. Giger, Brom, Basil Gogos, and Bernie Wrightson, (Fig12-15) to not mention them here would be impossible.

Music also tends to creep its way into my art, not so much the music but the album artwork that accompanies it. I have to be honest here, I am one of those "Goth" kids, I like Goth and Industrial music. The album art that I was usually exposed to was of a fantastical and dark nature. This is intentional of course by the bands to set the mood for the album you were about to listen to. More specifically though, the art that adorns the covers of many of the Skinny Puppy's albums struck a chord with me. They were the albums I would stare at for hours trying to either perfectly reproduce them in drawings on paper or paintings on my leather jackets. The artwork Jim Cummings created for the album *Too Dark Park* (Fig16) was a huge inspiration to me. It featured a Blue space-like background with creatures very reminiscent of a Lovecraft story, floating around and interacting with each other. Imagine if you will, a very grotesque version of Miro's *Harlequin's Carnival* (Fig17). Every time I hear a song from that album, those creatures immediately come to the front of my mind. "Would this look good on a Skinny Puppy cover?" is what I secretly always ask myself when I am working on something.

Film and television are probably the most unavoidable influence in my work. Like I mentioned before, I have always been an avid fan of horror and sci-fi movies. I am a card-carrying member of the Star Wars generation, no sense in trying to hide it. In no particular order, the *Alien* series of films, *Star Wars*, The X-Files, Universal Studios classic horror, and Godzilla all spring to mind when having to try to nail down some of the most important.

The creatures and effects are the most intriguing aspect to me in film. The creature work in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (fig18) is still hands down a master class in creating creatures and alien life. *The Thing* is about an alien that can replicate any animal life form. The transformations that it has to go through to achieve this are nothing short of extraordinary. Body parts fall off and walk away and a man's stomach becomes a gaping maw of teeth. The sheer originality of what the special effects artists were able to create within that film made a lasting impression on my work.

With some of that background in place I am going to deconstruct a few of my objects. I want to begin with the V1ME-12 (Fig19) series, the tall slender, oily Black objects. The idea or inspiration behind the shape of these objects comes from a few different areas. I was messing around with drawing a sort of squid shape, but turned it vertically, with the tentacles flowing downward. Then my mind went to what I had seen in biology class of what a virus looks like (fig20) and how it also had this sort of vertical orientation with its' legs used as anchors.

It was then that I realized that this shape was very similar to a design used in a game I had just finished playing, called Mass Effect. In that game, the race known as the "Reapers" use a ship that lands very similar to a virus would stand, and they begin to destroy everything around them (Fig21). My first initial sketches combined these three things together.

As I began building them, I began to think of them being a sort of slow moving creature that only moved at night and in groups. They moved so slow in my mind that a human would never really notice it until it was too late. I also began to see them as more plant like, reminiscent of a Mangrove tree (Fig22) mixed with the knee of a Cypress tree (Fig23), and that they would grow vertically over time. The film *Day of the Triffids* (Fig24) came to mind as well. *Day of the Triffids* is story of an alien race of plants that invade earth slowly feasting upon the human population. I also made sure to stick to my "keep it odd rule," each one of them would have five legs. As for the color of these objects, I wanted to use a color that might camouflage them in the environment that they might move around in, a wooded area at night. So I went with an oily Black, it would help hide them among the shadows of the trees around them as they moved around searching for food.

The next object I would like to talk about is H3JF-02 (Fig25). H3JF-02 began as a thought about a walking jellyfish. I began with some sketches trying to work that out of my head. As the idea evolved, I started to mix in how an octopus'

tentacles shorten and lengthen as it crawls along the sea floor. As I was building this piece I wanted to keep the feeling that this thing might constantly be changing shape as it moves. I wanted to keep some negative spaces that allowed you to see through the creature, so the round part has a sort of amoebic feel; creating these brief moments of perhaps doubling back on it's self creating these gaps. When it came time decide on coloring this piece, I wanted to keep a very natural, octopus-esque pattern, but with an added gooey sense to it. I went back to my childhood and a film a used to watch constantly, *Godzilla vs. The Smog Monster*. The Smog Monster's actual name in the film is Hedorah (Fig26). Hedorah was completely made out of pollution and toxic waste. The creature's appearance consisted of sickly Greens, Browns, Yellows and Reds; I knew this is exactly what wanted for H3JF-02.

The final Piece I would like to discuss is CPHC-08 (Fig27). I wanted to base a few of my pieces on the idea of carnivorous plants (Fig28) and that was the jumping off idea of the sketches. I then began to think how would it trap its' prey and the solution of many long tendrils seemed the best. For the part of actually digesting its' prey, I wanted it to feel like it would be holding, let's say a person, in place with the tendrils, and the person's head would be brought into the domed area for feeding. A creature called a headcrab (Fig29) from the *Half Life* series of games heavily inspired the "dome" area. The headcrab is a parasitic creature that would attach itself to the top of a person's head living off the person and turning it basically into a clawed zombie.

CPHC-08 was the first wall piece I attempted as well. My goal of making my wall pieces is to try and achieve a trophy mount look. Like a big game hunter came back after a long and dangerous journey, mounted this creatures head on his or her wall. It also serves the purpose of how it might have grown in the wild, maybe off the side of a tree or a rock formation. It could however, leave the viewer with the impression that this might not be all of this horrible thing, if this looks like this, what could the rest of this thing possibly look like. This helps keep the viewers self-interpretation and imagination churning. The color choices were made to help identify the purposes of the areas. The body consists mostly of Greens and Browns to help hide it among other foliage. The tendrils are a glossy Black to give the appearance of perhaps a saliva type substance and creepy feel. The inside of the dome was treated with Pinks and Reds to give it a sense of organic body cavity.

At this point, I think I should explain the titles of my pieces. I must preface this by saying I am not a big fan of titles for my work. A specific title would destroy the experience I am trying to achieve of a viewer trying to put the pieces together for themselves and creating their own explanation of what each piece means to them. It would erase the Lovcraftian vagueness that I am after. Lovecraft himself just made up names for his creatures, like Shoggoth or Nyarlathotep. These are vague enough to let readers conjure their own ideas. So, for my pieces wanted to use a sort of labeling system that a natural history

museum might use to label specimens in their collections locked away in their basements.

For my system, I take a few letters from the names of the inspiration points for each piece, replace some of those letters with numbers according to "L33T" (L33T is an alternative alphabet for the English language that is used primarily on the internet), and then dash number is just the order in which it was made. For example, CPHC-08 is simply this Carnivorous Plant HeadCrab and it was the eighth sculpture I made in this body of work. With H3Jf-02, I took the "He" from Hedorah, following L33t, I replaced the "e" with "3" and then the JF is Jellyfish and it was the second sculpture in this body of work. This process allows me to easily remember what was going on in my head when I made them and a title that doesn't alter the experience of the viewer. It also has the appearance of complicated coding system that a museum might use.

In conclusion, I want Taxidermy of Thought to be journey through my mind. Each piece no matter how large or small plays a part in this ecosystem. This body of work is the sum of my experience so far. It is my intention that people will be able to take my objects and inject them into their own context, create their own world for them and enjoy them on any level that they choose to. They could make them horrible creatures or beautiful examples of what life from a place unknown to us, could be, whatever they decide is fine with me.

Images

Fig1. Xenomorph from the Alien films



Fig2. Scale Worm



Fig3. Leech



Fig4 War of the Worlds Tripod



Fig5 Strider



Fig6 Hunter



Fig7 Echinoderm



Fig8 H.P. Lovecraft



Fig9 Calder Stable and Mobile



Fig10 Giacometti



Fig11 Richard Hunt

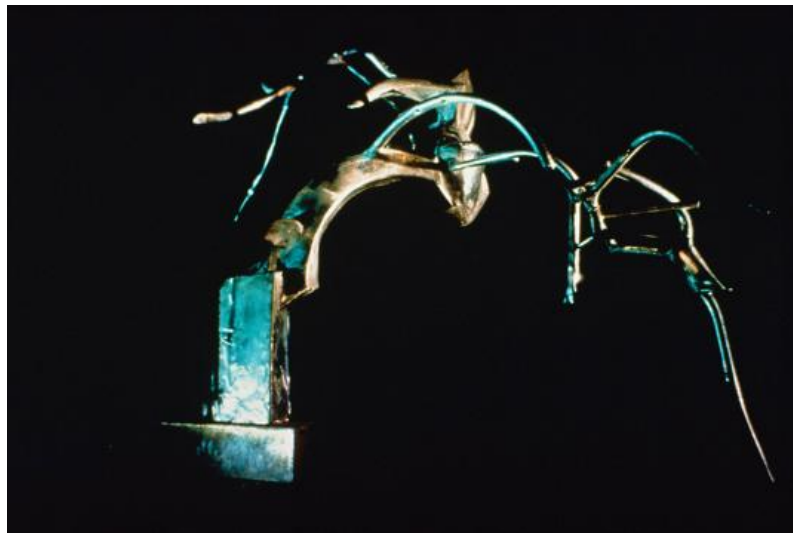


Fig12 H.R. Giger



Fig13 Brom



Fig14 Basil Gogos



Fig15 Wrightson



Fig16 Skinny Puppy, *Too Dark Park*

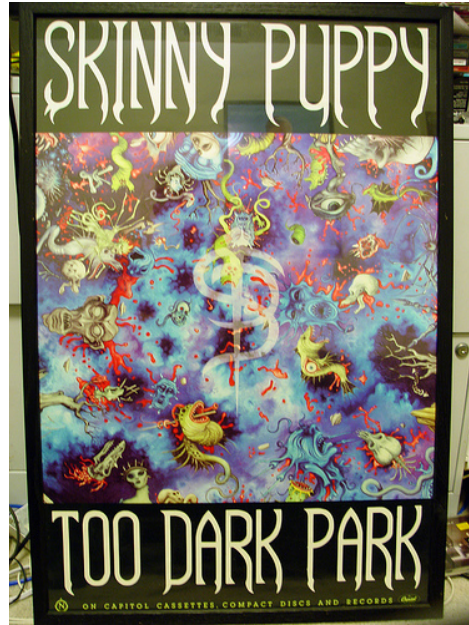


Fig17 Miro, *Harlequin's Carnival*



Fig18 *The Thing*



Fig19 V1ME-09



Fig20 Virus

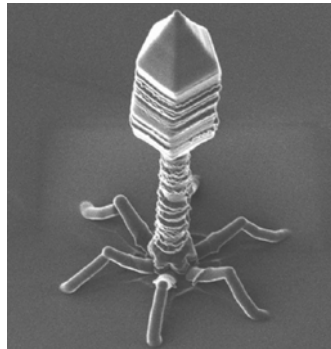


Fig21 *Mass Effect* Reaper ship



Fig22 Mangrove Tree



Fig23 Cypress Tree with knees



Fig24 *Day of the Triffids*



Fig25 H3JF-02



Fig26 Hedorah



Fig27 CPHC-08



Fig28 Carnivorous Plant



Fig29 Headcrab



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7. *Godzilla vs. The Smog Monster* Toho Company, 1971

Process

All of my pieces are created in a similar manner. They all begin as a wire and or wire mesh armature. For the larger pieces, the armature is sometimes filled with foam or paper for support. The armature is then covered with a few different materials depending on the size of the piece. The smaller pieces are covered in a material called Aves Apoxie Sculpt. This is a two part putty that when mixed together becomes rock hard. The larger pieces are for the most part covered in plaster gauze. For some of the pieces a paper mache was used and baked in place with a heat gun.

The next step is to apply the texture level of material if needed. I use Durham's Rock Hard Water Putty, which is a powder that you mix with water that cures into a very durable and light substance. I use this in various consistencies over the plaster or paper mache, to create the texture desired. For the smaller pieces I usually skip straight to painting them at this point. I then brush a two-part urethane resin over the work so far. This resin will seep into the material and when cured, it becomes an almost plastic like material. The resin can then be sanded and painted.

As for painting it really depends on the piece. I use a mixture of acrylics, oils, oil stains, metallic finishing paint and chemicals that will patina the metal. The actual painting is accomplished through the use of brushes, sea sponges, droppers and spray bottles.