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*the emotional plague*

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by

Nicholas M. Raynolds

May 2020

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Mira Gerard, Committee Chair

Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay

Andrew Scott Ross

Keywords: oil painting, drawing, history painting, narrative painting, science fiction, surrealism, fantasy, mass psychosis, automatism, comics, cartoons, propaganda, social engineering, satire

ABSTRACT

*the emotional plague*

by

Nicholas M. Raynolds

The artist discusses his Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition “the emotional plague” held at the Reese Museum in Johnson City, Tennessee from March 2nd through March 27th, 2020 in which he examines a number of literary and invented narrative subjects influenced by science fiction, Surrealism and the current political climate in an attempt to reconcile the social and the personal through the creative act.

Largely improvisational in their conception, the paintings and drawings in this exhibition reflect ideas derived from writers, thinkers and artists including Wilhelm Reich, J.G. Ballard, W.S. Burroughs and Goya, all distilled through the uncertain territory of Raynolds’ personal, internal landscape. He utilizes an amalgam of characters, tropes, and stories as metaphorical expressions of social psychosis and decay.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In his book “The Mass Psychology of Fascism”, the medical doctor and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich describes the emotional plague as “. . . an endemic illness, like schizophrenia or cancer . . . (but) manifested in social life” (Reich 127) - a form of mass psychosis. He continues, “Epidemic outbreaks of the emotional plague become manifest in widespread and violent breakthroughs of sadism and criminality on a small and large scale.” (Reich 127) Reich points out the Catholic Inquisition of the Middle Ages and the international fascist movements of the twentieth century as examples of such epidemic outbreaks. In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, I adopt invented and fantastical characters as metaphorical expressions of social psychosis and decay. Largely improvisational in nature, these works are often the result of reflections on social and literary themes as distilled through the uncertain territory of my personal, internal landscape. Distinctly expressing the influence of Surrealist and science fiction narratives, this series of works is an attempt to reconcile the social and the personal through the creative act of painting. In an attempt to come to terms with the psychic blow of living in a post-truth Trumpian world, I find analogies in a number of author’s stories and themes in which such inherently unstable places are described as “zones”. Where the anarchist Hakim Bey describes a “Temporary Autonomous Zone” and William S. Burroughs in his collection of short stories “Interzone” depicts an ancient teratology cult in “Spare Ass Annie”, the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky illustrate a “Zone” in their Soviet era novel “Roadside Picnic”. In the 1971 novel, and Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film adaptation, “Stalker” (Tarkovsy), we are told of areas of a city left disturbed by inexplicable phenomenological events after an assumed alien visitation. The authorities declare these “Zones” restricted, and unauthorized entry illegal. A breed of outlaws known as “stalkers” break in to the forbidden and inhospitable territories to retrieve alien artifacts and technologies that are sold on the black market. This story has come to be a core inspiration and theme in the development of my works in this exhibition.

## CHAPTER 2

### NARRATIVE ABSTRACTION

When I arrived at grad school, I found myself producing multitudes of drawings. Though I came in as a painting major, I decided to put painting on hold for an indefinite period. I tried to keep these drawings, primarily pen and ink and pencil, technically simple and sought to work them up and complete them quickly. Through free association and stream of conscious strategies I produced everything from portraits, political cartoons, historical satire - nothing was out of bounds. I sought to recharge my work by drawing quickly and often recklessly with very little editing. The simplicity and immediacy of working in this way was refreshing and a great venue for venting and purging personal, sexual, social/historical/political and of course artistic frustrations. I liked that the bulk of the pieces were not meant to be turned into anything other than what they were; complete and finished for better or lame. Despite my presumption not to have them serve as preliminary studies, the drawings did provide inspiration to my later attempts of working in paint with such pieces as 'Roadside Picnic', (which will be discussed later in greater detail). Taking cues from history painting in its grandiosity and bold, sweeping statements, I thought I might overturn my habitual pre-planning of a painting with, as in my drawings, something more expressively immediate and improvisational. The narrative aspect of the tradition of history painting was also of interest to me; I wanted to tell stories with my pictures. But in avoiding preliminary studies, my process contrasted the literal modes of storytelling in this tradition of painting.

In the western canon, narrative or history painting stood at the apex of the tradition of fine art. At the transition from the 'classical' and 'modern' modes of painting we find works like the "Raft of the Medusa" (figure 1) by Théodore Géricault. An investigation into its creation reveals an intense preliminary study of the design and theme of the subject by the artist. His rigorous pre-emptive studies for the piece, are perhaps as well known to fans of Géricault as is the final painting. 'The Raft of the Medusa' situates itself in my imagination as one of the great accomplishments of painting.





Figure 1. *The Raft of the Medusa*. 1819 Oil on Canvas by Theodore Gericault

Its colossal, overbearing scale, its fixation with the writhing human form contrasted and constrained by the stark geometry of the imperiled and derelict raft is one of the handful of epic pictures to maintain relevance over time. The high Romantic tragedy of abandonment, desolation and horror belying the unlikely decorum of the scene resonates despite the ironic deterioration of the actual object of the painting itself. It is one of the 19th century's boldest artistic statements that reflect current issues, yet Géricault adroitly, if not problematically, side-steps outright propaganda. In taking on the theme of the scandalous sinking of the French frigate *Medusa* that foundered off the coast of Senegal in 1816, the painter squarely placed himself at the center of political controversies that plagued the Bourbon Restoration. The story of the *Medusa*: its sinking the result of State nepotism and incompetence, its explicit class struggle in the abandonment of the survivors and the underlying injustices of the Empire's wealth based upon the African slave trade all served the needs of Géricault's ambitions. Hoping to secure an artistic coup, the painting's poor reception at the Paris Salon of 1819 was profoundly disappointing to the painter and was the last great piece he produced, save for his series of "Portraits of the Insane". The exploration of the instability of sanity implied by these portraits found precedence in 'The Raft of the Medusa'. One of the key problems of the composition that Géricault attempted to solve was how best to depict the rescue ship, the *Argus*. In the final

painting, it is but a distant speck on the horizon, barely visible to both the viewer and to the castaways on the raft. In researching the background of the event, Géricault befriended two of the sole survivors of the raft, Alexandre Corréard and Henri Savigny in which he heard numerous stories of the hallucinations experienced by the castaways. ‘Phrenetis calenture’ is “a frenetic delirium that spontaneously strikes mariners sailing exceedingly warm latitudes on extended voyages” (Alhadeff 54). In this context Géricault, implies a psychological gravitas in the men aboard the raft. And just as these figures spill out of the canvas into the viewer’s space, we too are compelled to question the stability of our own beliefs. Just as the prisoners of the raft “could hardly distinguish truth from fiction” (Alhadeff 56) under the fevered malady of Calenture, the Romantic vision expressed in ‘The Raft of the Medusa’ sought “free-floating paradigms, palimpsests of meaning that favor vicissitudes, transpositions and reversals” (Alhadeff 43); a fundamental challenge to the rational, ‘classical’ world view. In presupposing Modernism, the Romantics sought to upend the norms and traditions expressed by Neo-Classicism, this included challenging narrative themes.

By direct extension, the Modernist project sought to obfuscate narrative altogether. One of these strategies saw Modernist ‘pure abstract painting’ as presenting formal design elements as equal in value to representational subjects. Decoupled from any traditionally assumed function or story line, the object, including the human form, was reduced to a strictly utilitarian (artistically) device. This disruption of a rational, literary story line is what I refer to as ‘narrative abstraction’. By the mid twentieth century, inversions of narrative contrivances such as the multi-paneled frame of the comic book, began to lose its traditional purpose. Originally used as a filmic element to represent the passage of time, these frames came to operate as a design ingredient with expanded narrative possibilities. A number of my drawings such as those in the experimental comic “The Strident Optimist” play with these ideas. In “Rendition” (figure 2) for example, the frames serve more as a compositional pictorial element, their implication of time becoming negligible.



Figure 2. *Rendition*. 2018. Pen and ink and watercolor on paper, by Nicholas M. Raynolds

The collection of figures, creatures and plants are interacting but only vaguely interconnected. At first the upper three quarters of the page may seem the dream of the voluptuous figure or model, who seems to drift in a liquid, collaged atmosphere oblivious to the events around her. The bottom portion, a kind of addendum or predella to the scene above reveals upon closer inspection, three figures assaulting a fourth while off to the right skulks the shadowy figure of a cop or a spy. Beyond them in a desert landscape is a ‘black site’ - notorious U.S. incarceration facilities used for prisoners of the “extraordinary rendition” program set up by the CIA after 9/11. The idea of “rendition” in this picture then, conflates the act of drawing (rendering) with nefarious political tactics and policies.



Figure 3. *Verrat*. 2003. Oil on paper by Neo Rauch

German artist Neo Rauch conflates pop-pulp tropes with modernist painting's 'object-ness' in using the device of the comic book panel. In his painting "Verrat" (figure 3) for example, the objective and narrative picture planes have been separated by the device of an internal frame. As Donald Kuspit points out, "Verrat" "...is rich with narrative ambiguities and implications" (Kuspit). In viewing the 'picture within the picture' we pass through the border of word/text and paint/matter, represented by the cropped title on the left, and blobs of paint along the lower border. Like Max Ernst, Neo Rauch's works are activated in a kind of inverted-narrative, the paintings engage us in an absurd interaction in which the figurative is abstract and the abstract, representational. He seems to "...invent narratives, but he doesn't tell stories" (Saltz). Kuspit wonders whether Rauch is "... a true dialectician, 'living with live opposites', or is he indulging in nihilistic absurdity?" (Kuspit). In most of his works it is often difficult how to answer this, and I'm not so sure that the question would be one of interest to the painter, who

seems to have struck upon some new form of recombinant language; it is both and neither ..... sometimes. His are “. . . deeply personal works that possess a ‘poetic structure’ and a ‘secret that eludes superficial interpretation’ ” (Eisman 240), yet despite this, or perhaps as a result of it, they resonate inscrutably .



Figure 4. *Flotilla*. 2018. Pen and ink on paper by Nicholas M. Raynolds

In another drawing of mine from around the same time as ‘Road Sage’, “Flotilla” (figure 4), I sought to remove these internal frames and compress the elements of the scene in which a company 11 of paranoids, neurotics, swindlers and various other transgressors run adrift in the shallows of an inky bog. A key feature of the scene is its shifts in scale and proportion with a more fluid integration of elements rather than being subdivided by panels. Whereas “Flotilla” was largely an adventure into uncertainty of theme, my pen and ink drawing, “Ship of Fools”

crystalized itself as an amalgam of nautical seafaring themes including ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Perhaps it was in this drawing that I began to work more overtly with literary themes and started thinking of myself as playing the role of a hypothetical film director.

## CHAPTER 3

### MEDIATED AUTOMATISM

In the early 20th century, the Surrealists developed the “automatic method”. Based on Sigmund Freud’s explorations into stream of conscience and free-association, and earlier works by artists such as “the Symbolists”, the Surrealists used the automatic technique in drawing, painting, collage, writing and numerous other artistic forms. Seeking a way of working that would challenge traditional subject matter and methodologies of painting, this ‘automatic method’ offered access to the raw, unfiltered unconscious workings of the artist’s mind. In my own pieces, I am inspired by this automatic technique and often try and begin a piece with a suspension of reason and planning striving to resist a judgement of subjects, elements and processes as long as I can. Despite this, I find myself continually curating the automatic experience. This is what I have termed ‘mediated automatism’. I recognize that there are certain habits of mind and hand that come to bear upon the work and accept these as signature expressions. The German Surrealist Max Ernst best exemplifies these ideas in seeking solutions for a new way of approaching figurative painting. In his piece “The Elephant Celebes” (figure 5), Ernst deftly balances a nearly recognizable objectivity with a deeply suggestive narrative. From a hole in the side of the imposing great sphere, an unsettling wormlike coil is extruded terminating in a rigid white ruff offering social status to a mercurial and undifferentiated elephant or bull’s head - its horns would be menacing if not for a certain lyrical quality. The creature’s eyes, vacant black dots, echo a scattering of small tight circles dispersed around the canvas; a hole, a distant green planet (or perhaps its a button attached to the surface of the picture instead), an eye peering from some conventional ‘modernist’ sculpture resting like a crown atop the central figure. The female form in the foreground part statue, part circus barker, part musician or dancer and temptress, balances a brittle spindle that spans the corners of her cardboard cutout neck - though its suggested purpose remains unclear. Perhaps it reflects the hollow, metallic tree constructed of



Figure 5. *The Elephant Celebes*.1921. Oil on canvas by Max Ernst

cylinders and tubes in front of which she stands. The ambiguity of the image generates a confounding agitation in that we seek out a narrative of sorts but are endlessly thwarted from discovering a resolution. The elements of the painting function as abstract components. Using recognizable elements like this and arranging them according to aesthetic terms instead of by linear, literary, narrative methods reiterates the idea of ‘narrative abstraction’. Two of my paintings that reflect the direct influence of Max Ernst are “Equestrian Portrait” (figure 6) and “Fire Starter” (figure 7).





Figure 6. *Equestrian Portrait*. 2020. Oil on panel by Nicholas M. Raynolds

These two figurative works were mined from my own automatic explorations having found resolution through an improvisational and interpretive working method. Though narrative in sensibility, they more accurately reflect an assemblage of arbitrary elements whose cumulative effect resembles or mimics an intentionality. In 'Equestrian Portrait', a rider in the garb and trappings of some fantastic aristocrat, sits astride a sturdy horse. Though rearing up, the poor creature instead of making a bold lunge, sits stolid and paralyzed, its front end an exotic bloody stump pumping gore like some visceral fountain. The glorious halo around the rider's head radiates despite his less than holy visage which is obscured by the malformed wrapping of bandages. His oversized hand gently washes itself in the horse's wound, while his impractically stilettoed boots stab forward in a menacing attitude echoing the shadowed member of his impassive steed.



Figure 7. *Fire Starter*. 2020 Oil on panel by Nicholas M. Raynolds

'Fire Starter' on the other hand, presents a strangely clad figure striding across the desolation of a once treed landscape. Turning slightly towards the viewer, the figure reveals a small golden orb in his right hand which reiterates the moon through the break in the clouds. From his knuckles sprout extra digits emitting a blast of flame and smoke. He seems to hoot or gasp at the sight, his head clad in an alien armor, its scarves twisting in the wind as though an appendage from the grotesquely jeweled sleeve of his left arm. These picture's precarious balancing act between intentionality and obscurity offer examples of my idea of a 'mediated automatism'.

## CHAPTER 4

### A REMOTE DEMIURGE

The overarching theme that unifies all of the pieces in this exhibition is the narrative woven from the hidden performative process of each picture's making in the studio; the final painting masking the *mis en scene* that directs each work. Based on an intuitive approach, the paper or canvas serves as a kind of portal. This divinatory approach of picture making is suggested by Neo Rauch's self-described method of working, when he states that "...these pictures grew .... out of the floor of my studio, as if it was a witch's circle, and were made without any particular preconceptions to limit what they might be" (Ayers). The inherent 'blindness' of the automatic technique and submission and acceptance of the artist to its results, implies an exploration and a journey, one that unfolds as the artist pursues completion of a piece. Like mapping a dream, I've had the distinct sensation of being an observer in the process, not so much inventing things so much as transcribing what I find there in the emergent world where the imagination meets art practice. In this drama the painter seeks out a narrator. They come in many personae and I have found them to be anything from "The Astronaut", "The Seafaring Naturalist", "The Alchemist", "The Gardener", "The Warrior" or "The Inventor" each conjuring up a slightly different scene according to the specific characteristics of the narrator. In some cases they function as a kind of hybrid sorcerer/scientist and sometimes even an authoritarian leader or social engineer. Like some remote demiurge playing out a metaphysical stage play, the painter grapples with an assortment of trials and replays the sins of his society as manifest through themselves; a kind of role play. In my painting "Roadside Picnic" (figure 8) I have attempted to apply both ideas of a mediated automatism and narrative abstraction. This is the first painting in the exhibition in which I began to recognize these devices in my work. The painting's inspiration began from an unresolved composition that I had been pondering for a number of years. I thought that this could be good material to start with, as it gave me something of a foundation, yet was open ended enough to allow for plenty of alterations and explorations. The final painting has very little in common with the initial source material and so in that respect reflects a positive outcome and evolution in my work.



Figure 8. *Roadside Picnic*. 2019. Oil on canvas by Nicholas M. Raynolds

Like Paula Rego's nursery rhymes, my final picture is ". . . a derivation, not a transcription . . ." (McEwan 75) of the Strugatsky Brother's novel. In fact the title "Roadside Picnic" had nothing to do with the original theme when the painting began but was discovered along the way. By extension, the final painting would seem to reflect very little on the Strugatsky novel by an objective reader and viewer; a repoussoir of monstrous characters of varying scale and demeanor are set off against a remote and desolate watery landscape. In the front right foreground an unusually large figure perhaps part ape or human child has an unsettling innocence about it. Nestled in its lap is a darkened female figure from whose mouth spews a fountain of water, perhaps the source of the deluge that laps upon the shore just barely visible in the right foreground. Spanning out across the canvas are a cacophony of tricksters, witches and creatures some demonic in tone, which arch up to the left leading to a large black whirling mass containing a cat's eye - a kind of blind spot. This strange, dark object echoes out across the landscape like so many alien incantations, leaving desolation and instability in their wake. This picture has come to represent for me a period in my artistic development in which I (re)opened my painting practice to more free associative strategies involving fantastic elements and invented

characters. I first heard of the book “Roadside Picnic” in Adam Curtis’ 2016 documentary film “Hypernormalization”(Curtis) in which Curtis examines the rise of Vladimir Putin and the new post cold war Russia. In discussing the regimes’ tactics at gaining control by seeding social uncertainty and chaos, Curtis likens the society Putin and his allies cultivated to “the Zone” in the Strugatsky novel. This powerful metaphor extended out to include the murky unhinged, gas lighting, post-truth world the United States found itself in, upon the election of Trump. These cataclysmic social events find analogy to entering an alien territory. To navigate the inherent instability and ambiguity of ‘the Zone’, requires a language of inversions, anachronisms and conflation. “Homo Algorithmicus; The Hackable Man” (figure 9) directly relates to “Roadside Picnic” in terms of both process and subject matter. In this case, I decided in the most general of terms that I wanted to do a large scale portrait. I radically changed my palette, excluding most colors that I usually use and shifted to one more chromatic of predominantly oranges, yellows, pinks and turquoises. I began by imagining a character study of someone who might occupy the same world as my “Roadside Picnic” piece. At a certain point I came to be disturbed by the character that was evolving, almost embarrassed by him, feeling it was too cartoonish and oddball. I decided to keep my discomfort and judgmentalism in check and allowed the piece to develop unhindered. It struck me as an interesting examination of my tastes and responses, one that might best be assessed by resisting the temptation of self-censorship. Why did this character strike me as so embarrassing? This uncomfortable and idiotic character, as I came to see him, is topped by a kind of biomorphic helmet or extension or parasite of some kind. All of those tentacles, those cables that manage us; 19 that we keep in tow as we hobble from obsession to obsession, bound in the wrappings and trappings of our luxurious bindings. The cables or worms anchor the character to an unseen ground and perhaps serve as a conduit to feed the parasitic growth which in turn engages our tragic comic hero like a sheath around a shrinking soul, parsed and disposable, fluctuating yet hopeful. What a horrible utensil he’s become - a conduit of machinations beyond our imaginings, blinded by over simplified desires - only dreams of lust and want. The ‘idiot’ hero is bandaged, perhaps mummified, perhaps wounded - either way bound and constrained. As an evolution from “HomoSovieticus” (the totalitarian Soviet Union’s socially engineered “New Man” of the last century - a conformist creature designed by The State



Figure 9. *Homo Algorithmicus; The Hackable Man*. 2019. Oil on canvas by Nicholas M. Raynolds

to fit the most utopian, derelict and flat of all worlds), “Homo-Algorithmicus” is a new and now derelict dream that has been dislocated and secured in its amorphousness by blindness and numbness, to be molded anew. Evolved from a homogeneous mono-topia to a bio/digital multi-topia and overwhelmed by a glut and guilt of possibilities. “Homo Algorithmicus” is our own epoch’s manufactured citizen/consumer/individual: trapped, groomed and controlled by our own desires.

This character, drifting through a brightly colored world, is harnessed by his symbiotic device. Through its inherent algorithms this simbiote is molded and controlled, monitored and hacked, thus “The Hackable Man”. In this dystopian fable, science fiction is no longer a fantasy narrative. The landscape echoes a certain vague apocalyptic sensibility to that of “Roadside Picnic”, but its more chromatic colors change our conception of it; perhaps attract us to the piece.

The small background characters are supposed to be related to the psyche of the larger main character but also suggest a hieratic perspective.



Figure 10. *The Oligarch's Garden*. 2019. Pen and ink and watercolor on paper by Nicholas M. Raynolds

This tension between attraction and repulsion was also employed in my watercolor painting “The Oligarch’s Garden” (figure 10). Reminiscent of the Victorian faerie painter Richard Dadd’s “The Fairie Feller’s Master Stroke”, the chromatic, warm palette of my piece draws the viewer in offering a display of fantastical characters which upon engaging them, disquieting interactions are revealed. In a darkened foreground a group of characters sit peering as though an audience, out across what appears to be a stage presenting a richly colored scene of monstrosities conspiring among a dense botanical landscape. Central to this scene is the fallen figure of a doll/puppet-man presenting the trappings of the typical politician. Delicately perched above him on its barbed and stick-like limbs, a recombinant character part insect, plant and cartoon spits into the bell of the flower that sprouts from the politician’s crotch. Beyond this mid ground stage, a geometry of comic book panels or monitors contrast with the organic forms of the copulating flora. Within these internal frames are figures of a larger scale and the implication of different times and places. In seeking to simultaneously attract and repel the viewer, the tension generates an intrigue.



Figure 11. *Shitstorm Genie*. 2018. Oil on linen by Christian Rex van Minnen

In this respect I find sympathy with the work of contemporary American painter Christian Rex van Minnen (figure 11) whose paintings emulate Dutch 17th century master genre painters in their vibrant luminosity and tangibility. Riffing on floral still life and portraiture themes he dazzles the viewer with an array of textures and colors - of wrinkled flesh marked with fading tattoos and fresh razor blade slits, lush hair adorning mutated and mutilated heads, jewel-like gummy candies, fabric, leaves, meats, organs and turds. His masterful paint technique belies an almost confessional sense of violence and perversity coalescing in a finely tuned tension of attraction and repulsion.



## CHAPTER 5

### PSYCHO-FAUNA

The territory outlined in these painting explorations, provide a landscape in which I discover and develop a number of recurring thematic characters that I call psycho-fauna. The explorer/artist finds these internal landscapes peopled with any number of inhabitants; characters that come in many guises and prove themselves to be somatically resilient. Through their eccentric talents of distortion, exaggeration and mutability their personae resembles that of the cartoon character. The imagination crafts worlds of geometries that intersect a strange breed of post-Jungian archetypes, figures that Neo Rauch has described in his own works as "...picture personnel..." (Russ) that come to serve the function of the painting. The malleability of these characters serve nicely as a vehicle by which to express a personal mythology in a contemporary context. Constructed out of the raw material and detritus of the mind and imagination - a kind of cache of collected and absorbed images and stories, like a dream, the painting synthesizes itself into the art work in often unexpected ways.

All of the characters in this exhibition are allegorical in their histrionics. Their inherent cartoonism allows a degree of absurdity and dark humor that helps lubricate the tone and narrative of each piece. All of these elements combined, reflect the painting as a living thing. By "...trying to give the entire painting.... an existence as a natural entity or an organism.... everything it needs to be viable - a functioning circulation system, a support structure that keeps it in balance in relation to gravity and so on.... the picture personnel automatically embrace these efforts, swing along with the compositional flow and they only rebel when it is necessary for dramaturgic reasons" (Ayers). "Galluserie" (figure 12) is my 21st century interpretation of the monkeys-parodying-humans genre called 'Singerie' in which apes mimic the behavior of their simian cousins. Gallus gallus domesticus is the scientific name for the domestic chicken, thus "Galluserie". It seems to me the chicken is a more appropriate analogy for the 21st century human. This satirical hybrid human/chicken began as a study in applying a character to a scenario and by extension of worldbuilding. With this strategy I was engaged in an approach



Figure 12. Galluserie. 2018. Mixed media on paper by Nicholas M. Raynolds

similar to how numerous science fiction authors and artists work; a world built to accommodate a specific character. “Plague Flowers” (figure 13) by contrast was the result of characters developed by ‘automatic’ drawings. In a number of my improvisational drawings, I noticed the recurring subject of a kind of abstract plant life. I consciously decided to develop these forms in the drawing of “Plague Flowers”. In that sense, the ‘automatic’ technique was clearly mediated. This drawing offered an insight into the pursuit of invention by applying different strategies to cultivate subjects. In this efflorescence, a story about these plants revealed itself to me. They were a kind of recombinant organism, an amalgam of plant and animal. Often possessing human-like genitals in order to procreate, they are the result of some genetically modified atrocity - Wilhelm Reich’s emotional plague meets Baudilaire’s Flowers of Evil (Baudilaire) - psychic mutations manifest. This malignant weed reflects a human future not of superior intellect, but rather brute survival. Not the mutation into some kind of super-computer but rather a brainless, over-sexed voracious weed whose sole purpose is proliferation.



Figure 13. Plague Flowers. 2018. Pen and ink on paper by Nicholas M. Raynolds

## CHAPTER 6

### THE REIFICATION OF IMAGINATION

I worked to refine this technique of cultivating psycho-fauna, in my paintings. “Cleft” (figure 14) for example is as much a celebration of fantastic physiological invention as it is about the greater narrative of the essential porousness of impenetrable boundaries. I imagine this piece as a territorial struggle of the mythic/symbolic characters that arrange themselves in the foreground. This is a struggle not just between the characters and their various conditions, but between the landscape and the architecture as well. Yet the conflict is artificial in that each realm is intrinsic to the other. The characters seem to wrestle with a sinister, madness inducing anxiety. They are stymied by their own impairments, derangements and fantasies of power and self-delusion. The procession of clamoring gremlins, sprites and fiends like so many shiny psychic objects of fearful attraction leans in towards a gloriously infirm Astronaut King, the focus of the congregation’s attentions. Amniotic spacemen, mutilated superheroes, wicked priests, barbaric cartoons and vague animalisms are all congealed into amorphous mythologies seeking the lucid, the defined and the real. The horizontally striated composition: the burning landscape, the opulent alien temple and the crush of fiendish characters, is more or less centrally bisected down the middle of the composition. The landscape is severed. The smoke of the burning world demands we awake from the dream. The temple is cloven and the breached architecture lets in the amorphous smoke of the real world danger of the conflagration outside, from which the gaseous threats of the world seep into our dreams through the crevice, the breach, the cleft. The architecture’s decorative opulence is resilient despite the threat of destruction and seems to compliment the creatures of habit, distortion, distraction and conflation. The wall’s niches harbor the undifferentiated souls; thoughts one step removed from resolution. These degrees of accretion hint at the larger theme of the narrative behind the one within the picture; of the making tangible of a dream; of the reification of the imagination; the actualization of thoughts found in the imagination and the manifestation of the psycho-fauna of the narrator/artist. These niches also re-introduce the sequential art device of the ‘panel’, though in a less overt way. Seen



Figure 14. *Cleft*. 2019. Oil on canvas by Nicholas M. Raynolds

in this context, they serve to integrate another time frame or incident into the otherwise singular view of the painting/picture plane itself.

In my series of small paintings “Knots” (figure 15) I’ve perhaps come closest to expressing the idea of a mediated automatism. Having begun the pieces with washes of color and then scraping random shapes into this layer, I allowed my hand to develop forms in an improvisational way, striving to avoid recognizable objective subjects as much as possible. This stream of conscious way of working, reveals a random collection of references. Like so much “data exhaust” (Zuboff), this psychic detritus, these accretions, conglomerations and congealed yet half-formed thoughts and half-baked plans become the malformed dreams of the “sheer irrationality” and “inarticulate longing” (Taibi) of fantastic invention.



Figure 15. Knot #4. 2020. Oil on panel by Nicholas M. Raynolds

## CHAPTER 7

### A RESIDUAL CLASSICISM

The selection of portrait drawings serve not so much as studies but as companions to the paintings. Most were inspired by the busts of 17th century Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (figure 16) whose extreme facial expressions and posthumously titled works challenged decorum and ventured into new territories of emotional possibility. The portraits in my exhibition, both the drawings and the paintings, are profiles of possible inhabitants of the worlds presented in the larger works. They are also an inquiry into the personality of individuals as perceived through their visages. Layer upon degraded layer, the voyeur of one's own masks



Figure 16. A Strong Man. 1771-83. Tin-lead cast by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt



Figure 17. Moon Calf . 2020. Oil on canvas by Nicholas M. Reynolds

serve as another anatomical extension: from bone to nerve to psyche to soul, seeking and rejecting, adjusting and accepting the histrionics of the landscape of the face. How completely cumbersome simplicity can be. Which version of the self, is best refused in order to express acceptable traits to another? A colossus or a puny one? Where but in the face resounds the traction one has or lacks in one's life? Here, two large heads in heroic scale; two broken hearted creatures in majestic idiocy. Remarkably persistent, the fool again makes an appearance in the painting "Moon Calf" (figure 17). By definition a moon calf is "...a congenitally grossly deformed and mentally defective person; a foolish person; a person who spends time idly daydreaming". His enormous head proclaims self-negating statements in the form of comic book speech bubbles before a backdrop of vignettes of barely complete tales of adventure. Floating above him is a 'Knot' or some alien life form, perhaps this is the abortive, shapeless, fleshy mass





Figure 18. *Corona; Hail to the Thief*. 2020. Oil on canvas by Nicholas M. Raynolds

suggested by the title? The idiot is at once a scapegoat and recipient of ridicule but, as suggested in “The Fool” card in the Tarot (Waite), “He is a prince of the other world on his travels through this one. . .”. Another type of fool, this time an innocent or naive one appears in “Corona; Hail to the Thief” (figure 18).

A grey, hollow eyed dreamer in orange face - a clownish mask, is crowned with a virus conflating it with the crown of the newly anointed president king: acquitted, lawless, shameless and dangerous. This follower, this tragic innocent, looks hopefully yet blindly to a distant baleful future with such vigor that he decapitates himself.

My painting “The Drowned Giant” (figure 19) is based on the J.G. Ballard short-story of the same title. In his story, Ballard chronicles the reaction of the inhabitants of a small beach side town, who wake up one morning to discover that a giant man has washed up on the beach. Part

allegory of the death of the classical gods in our modern age of technological capitalism, part surrealist necrotic fantasy, Ballard chronicles how the colossus is slowly dismembered by the town's inhabitants like a beached whale from an earlier age.



Figure 19. *The Drowned Giant*. 2020. Oil on canvas by Nicholas M. Raynolds

As their fascination with the creature eventually wanes, Ballard describes in disquieting detail the slow decay and mutilation of the thing, by now more human than god, more cadaver and resource than man. In my painting I imagine the giant as something of a classical greek sculpture in marble - a Theseus type. His gutted form is shattered like so much hollow artifice and is made flesh in the piles of offal spread about on the wet sand of the beach. I've tended to the painting of these organs with an attentiveness that I hope allows them to be misconstrued as food. Following the spilled guts from the beach to the large hollow of his ribcage, the viewer may recognize echoes of Heironymous Bosch's egg man from "The Garden of Earthly Delights" detail (figure 20).



Figure 20. detail of The Garden of Earthly Delights. 1490-50. Oil on oak panel by Heironymus Bosch

The creatures that have taken up residence in the giant's carcass stand around fires which cast shadows on the walls behind them as though in Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' (Plato). In embellishing my picture with classical iconographies I've considered this figure as analogous to the sculpture of "River God of the Nile" (figure 21) in the Vatican in Rome, and in so doing to the classical canon.

So, this picture then is the death of the father as water god - becoming the raw material of a new civilization. But the sacrifice of his individuality for the commons is at once absurd, tragic and terminal, in which he takes on the role of sustainer of life. Upon the dark sands wet with his blood at the edge of a desolate sea, stand towers of some futuristic city, the persistent silos of a new dark age.



Figure 21. *The Nile*. Date unknown. Marble artist unknown

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

Wilhelm Reich is historically considered a controversial and fringe personality yet his idea of the ‘emotional plague’ is nonetheless a compelling assessment of mass psychosis. One of the main themes of the exhibition is an attempt to come to terms with an unhinging of the world; the societal destabilization that occurred with the advent of the Trump era. Not wanting to produce merely propaganda, I found myself turning inward to investigate my own psychic responses. In attempting to navigate this internal territory, It struck me that what I was contending with was a fundamentally unstable environment analogous to many science fiction themes. Social satire expressed through cartoon characters and other such fantastical and flexible monstrosities seem a rich vehicle by which to explore societal psychic malaise. To the extent that their characters present psychological profiles in service of social satire, I find an affinity with the works of Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya.

Los Caprichos’, Goya’s famous series of prints whose most well-known plate, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” (figure 22), explores local Spanish folklore and superstitions at a time when Enlightenment ideas were beginning to appear in Spain. These ‘Brujeria’ or “...scenes of witchcraft - were very much a fixture of popular culture in late 18th century Spain. You didn’t have to believe in devils, but their presence on the horizon offered a certain frisson to the enlightened mind even if only as emblems of superstition you had transcended...” (Hughes). It seems to me that our modern cartoon character occupies a similar social space as did Goya’s witches and devils. From superhero movies and games, to the more banal variations of product packaging characters, they saturate our lives and penetrate our psyches to a surprising degree. “The reason why the totalitarian regimes can get so far toward realizing a fictitious, topsy-turvy world is that the outside nontotalitarian world, ....indulges also in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity just as much as the masses do in the face of the normal world” (Arendt). In presenting fantastical characters as metaphors of social psychosis and decay, and embracing narrative inventions influenced by science-fiction and Surrealism, I am attempting to reconcile the social and the personal through the creative impulse. This exhibition is at once a requiem for an older, imagined social stability and an attempt to navigate uncertainty and rediscover equilibrium in a new uncertain era.



Figure 22. *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* by Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes

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CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION



*The Drowned Giant* Oil on Canvas, 60"x72", 2020



*Corona; Hail to the Thief* Oil on Canvas, 93"x75", 2020



*Cleft* Oil on Canvas, 59"x47" 2019



*Roadside Picnic* Oil on Canvas, 75"x93" 2019



*Moon Calf* Oil on Canvas, 93"x75", 2020



*Homo Algorithmicus: The Hackable Man* Oil on Canvas, 93"x75" 2019



*Knot #1* Oil on Panel, 12"x9", 2020



*Knot #2* Oil on Panel, 12"x9", 2020





*Knot #3* Oil on Panel, 12"x9", 2020



*Firestrarter* Oil on Panel, 12"x9", 2020



*Knot #4* Oil on Panel, 12"x9", 2020



*Equestrian Portrait* Oil on Panel, 12"x9", 2020



*Taste* Pencil on Paper, 11"x8.5", 2020



*A Man of Implacable Cheer* Pencil on Paper, 8.5"x7", 2020

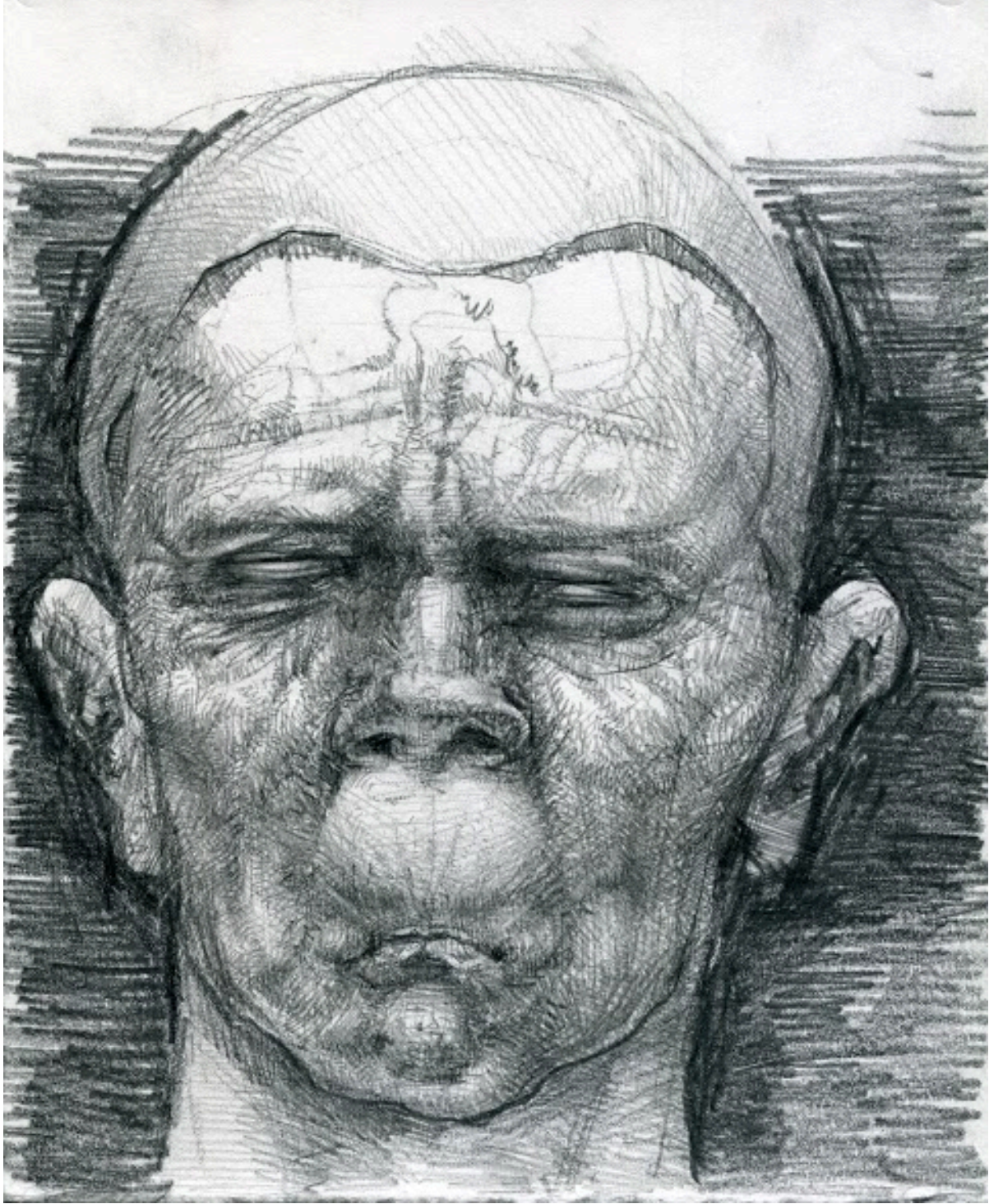


*A Scandalized Bamboozler* Pencil on Paper, 11x8.5, 2020



*A Man Convincing Himself of a Big Idea* Pencil on Paper, 11"x8.5", 2020





*A Man Mistaking Vinegar for Wine* Pencil on Paper, 8.5"x7", 2020



*The Scrutinizer* Pencil on Paper, 11"x8.5", 2020



Installation View of *the emotional plague*



Installation View of *the emotional plague*



Installation View of *the emotional plague*



Installation View of *the emotional plague*

VITA  
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Teacher, *The Portrait in Pencil; Principles, Process &  
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Solo Exhibition, "*the emotional plague*", Reece Museum,  
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Collective Research Gallery, Cincinnati OH, 2013  
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