

ABSTRACT

ART FROM THE ABYSS

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Director: Scott Eagle

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This document is written in support of the thesis exhibition, *Art from the Abyss*, which represents and supports the idea of art-making as a catharsis. Through these works, negative emotions are identified, named, and given an image. Frightening emotional issues become visual caricatures, placed within a non-threatening context, where they can be understood. Understanding creates tolerance, and lessens fear and distrust. The metaphorical abyss is not just a repository for potential evil, but an important source of positive, creative energy.





ART FROM THE ABYSS

A Report of Creative Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Painting

By

Timothy Paul French

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ART AND THE ABYSS

ART FROM THE ABYSS

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## DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad, for your love and support, without which none of this would be possible.

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## ART FROM THE ABYSS

My thesis exhibition, *Art from the Abyss* is a reflection of my quest to recognize the truth behind the veil of civility. I seek to unmask what is presented outwardly, and reveal humanity. Through my work, I choose to examine a world where people, myself included, are flawed. Everyone at some point possesses a degree of benevolence, however benevolence is not an issue that requires attention. It is malevolence that requires examination. Once it is recognized we are left with a choice, to further the behavior or try to understand the consequences of the action or conduct and change it, but first it must be recognized. Philosophically this is what binds the work of this thesis together.

The paintings and drawings in the exhibition are the result of a process aimed at keeping anxiety at bay, while trying to realize its source. Far from being exclusive, this method can be used by anyone, and not only those with artistic skills. Art is social; therefore it is an expression of the human condition. Anxiety is a very real and frightening human condition, and through this body of work I have responded positively to this negative emotion. For me, art has to be more than a celebration of formal triumphs or clever concepts; it must include the process in its entirety, or it does become exclusive.

The exhibition title *Art from the Abyss* refers to the process of making the body of work. I have metaphorically brought from below some of the dark or negative aspects of my personality. The exposed or revealed aspects are given an image and a title to give identity to human emotions such as irrational fears, rage, and aggression. Giving these emotions an identity disarms them, allowing for a less anxious approach to dealing with my demons rationally and constructively. I use the word demon as a representation of an irrational response to anxiety. The method used in creating these pieces can be explained as a threshold ritual, which is an

excessive, even irrational concern for detail and repetitive motifs. I have always claimed my art is a catharsis and indeed art making for me relieves emotional tensions; the physical repetitive marks of my drawings, and the obviously over populated compositions are evidence of my compulsion for this activity. The obsessive need to repeat this process has become the method that has in turn helped create my style. The works of my thesis represent an expenditure of energy in a very controlled way, and the end result leaves an atmosphere of unresolved tension within the composition.

The techniques employed in the works are traditional oil painting and drawing methods that have been used successfully for centuries. The drawings are rendered in varying values with graphite. The oil paintings combine drawing, under painting, direct painting and glazing techniques. I have combined these



Figure 1 Rene Magritte

techniques with an obsessive method to create imagery that could easily be perceived as, and has been referred to as surrealistic. Surrealist's paintings have influenced the visual style of my work to some degree. For many years I took a great interest in the paintings of the the visionary, dream-like imagery of Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali. At one point I was referring to my work as "*Surrealism*" yet disregarded the fact that I did not really understand exactly what the term meant. It was not until I finally grasped their philosophy that I realized that there are certain aspects of *Surrealism* that apply to what I am producing now. For Example, the Surrealist's desire to confront the

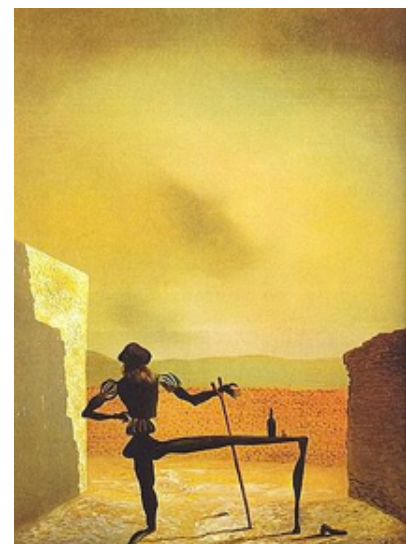


Figure 2 Salvador Dali

irrational is at the core of my own work. However, unlike the Surrealist, I desire to examine, understand and positively integrate the rational and irrational. My goal is to bring to consciousness negative traits in order to disarm them by recognition. This desire alone contradicts the Surrealists dedication to a revolution of pure thought. “Pure thought” is an idea opposed to rational thought. According to the surrealist’s spokesperson, André Breton, rational thought is dictated by culture, social morality or political influence, and is responsible for repressing pure human expression. The Surrealists were interested in achieving a pure state of mind by any means that could reach past the perceived limits of rational thought. The Surrealists used stark



Figure 3 Basil Woverton

juxtapositions of unrelated objects gathered together in a place foreign to them all, and they experimented with dream imagery as well as utilizing elements of chance. All of these experiments were designed to bypass conscious thought and allow an entry into the subconscious. Like the Surrealists, I want to confront the irrational; however my mission is to understand the conflict that arises from the confrontation of cultural values and irrational thoughts, before they become irrational actions.

In addition to my interest in the Surrealists, I have had a long time fascination with underground comic books. I found Basil Woverton’s work in *E.C. Comics Mad Magazine*, and

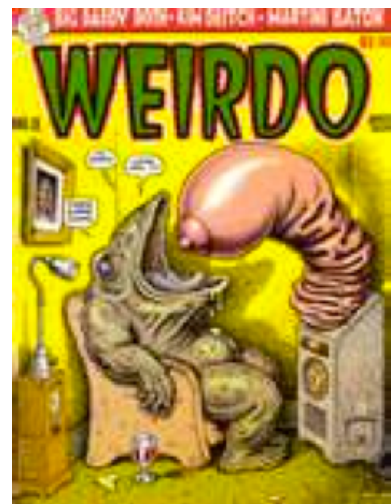


Figure 4 Robert Crumb

Robert Crumb’s work in *Weirdo Comix*, to be interesting, because the drawings were beautiful depictions of the grotesque, and depraved. I copied both artists’ styles for a few years practicing

their techniques to improve my drawing skills. These early influences are evident in the works of my thesis exhibit.

After completing a military tour of duty in Italy in 1986, I enrolled at *The Atlanta College of Art* where I received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1990. It was the experience of viewing European art while stationed in Italy, which convinced me to attend art school.

In my post baccalaureate years, I continued to draw and paint as time allowed. I worked in seclusion for eighteen years, and rarely exhibited my efforts until 1998 when I discovered

*Juxtapoz Magazine*, and *Lowbrow Art*. In 1994 Robert Williams and his supporters launched a new magazine, *Juxtapoz*. In the first editorial he wrote, “One factor of culture that has been excluded from the art world is the cartoon, yet cartoon imagery is the most powerful form of graphics in the Twentieth Century. With this magazine this wrong will be righted. We intend to create a publication that will stimulate investigation, activate imagination and (dare I use the term?)



Figure 5 Robert Williams

entertain the animal hunger in all of us. In the graphic tradition of *E.C. Comic Books*, psychedelic rock posters, side show freak banners, and *Zap Comix*, here is *Juxtapoz*, a magazine that tends to stay below everyone’s dignity.”

*Lowbrow* has evolved and was adopted by many young artists and quickly became commercialized, cute, decorative, or politically correct. It has become an influencing cultural force in design, fashion, film, advertising, television and music for twenty years and is still growing and changing. It is the present incarnation, called *Pop Surrealism* that resembles the works in this thesis exhibit. For me, *Pop Surrealism* is more inclusive than the Lowbrow

paintings of Robert William's early work. I consider these early works as being adolescent male fantasies.

Isabel Samaras, a California based artist has no problem with the label *Pop Surrealism*, or *Lowbrow*. "The great thing about Lowbrow is that it's always seemed to be very inclusive: anyone can play. There's openness to a large swath of styles and backgrounds that's positively exhilarating. I



Figure 6 Isabel Samaras

think this has to do with the willingness of *Juxtapoz Magazine* to cover a wide range of art. It also feels like there's a good dollop of humor in a lot of the work." <sup>1</sup>

The works in this thesis exhibit could easily fit into this recent incarnation of *Surrealism*, because there are certain artists operating within the broader movement that create similar works.

The artists Chris Mars, Laurie Lipton, Mark Ryden, H.R. Giger, and many others are addressing anxiety, subconscious fears, or social injustices in a similar form and content as demonstrated in my work. Chris Mars addresses dehumanizing social labels, and mental illness, his monstrous subjects begging for tolerance with



Figure 7 Chris Mars

their direct stares. Mars is inspired by his brother's mental illness, his intentions are to detail psychosis and create a sense of contemplation, empathy and forgiveness. Chris Mars work is presently my most influential source of inspiration.

Mark Ryden's paintings feature an obsession with childhood stories come to life, complete with bizarre encounters by little girls with mysterious symbols. Ryden's works suggest an underlying tension created by juxtaposing objects associated with innocence with bizarre symbols borrowed from *Freemasons*. My works in the thesis exhibit



Figure 8 Mark Ryden

possesses a visual kinship with these artists as well as a shared desire of understanding the irrational and dangerous aspects of humanity. For me, understanding can only be accomplished by first recognizing and identifying what is at the source of anxiety and malevolent feelings.



## ART FROM THE ABYSS

### THESIS WORKS

I have chosen to discuss the first five pieces from my thesis exhibit because they best represent in form and content my intentions.



PLATE I: My Bad, 12" x 18"



This painting of Satan, or the Devil, represents arrogance and insincerity. The title *My Bad* is a popular American colloquialism intended as an insincere apology or courtesy. It is a way of admitting a mistake without saying “I am sorry.”

The Devil in this work is a manifestation of the idea of superiority. This caricature is composed to resemble a phallus; not to represent virility or fertility, but to suggest a sexist, racist, male dominated idealism. The Devil is depicted as walking on stilts because he wishes to ascend to a position of power. The heads without bodies represent those that do his work. Having no body to take action themselves, they influence others to carry out the Devil’s lust for dominance; they are the talking heads that cause anxiety and uncertainty with their words. This painting of the Devil does not refer to a supernatural being, but rather the dark aspects of human personality. Ideas of superiority lead directly to arrogant and insincere behavior. In this painting the Devil is confronted, and his response is “*My Bad.*”



PLATE II: Birth of a Bad Idea, 8" x 14"

The painting titled, *Birth of a Bad Idea*, depicts a four-eyed human head giving birth through its skull to another head. This work represents a reaction to anger. The four eyes represent the four points of a compass, because anger propagates outward affecting others, while isolating those possessed by this emotion. The quills that pierce the multi-eyed face are a representation of the physical reaction of anger, and its dulling of nerve endings in preparation for physical conflict.

Anger, from my experience, can be a dangerous emotion and must be understood as a natural reaction to injustice or threats of danger. It is when anger becomes an overreaction to every frustration that it affects others, and isolates the individual from social contact.

The image of a Japanese Hornet is used to illustrate the defensive attitude of the angry person. The hornet is easily provoked to attack, and releases a hormone that incites other hornets to attack. The birth of one bad idea gives birth to others and my goal is to recognize this potentially dangerous emotion as natural, but in conflict with cultural values.

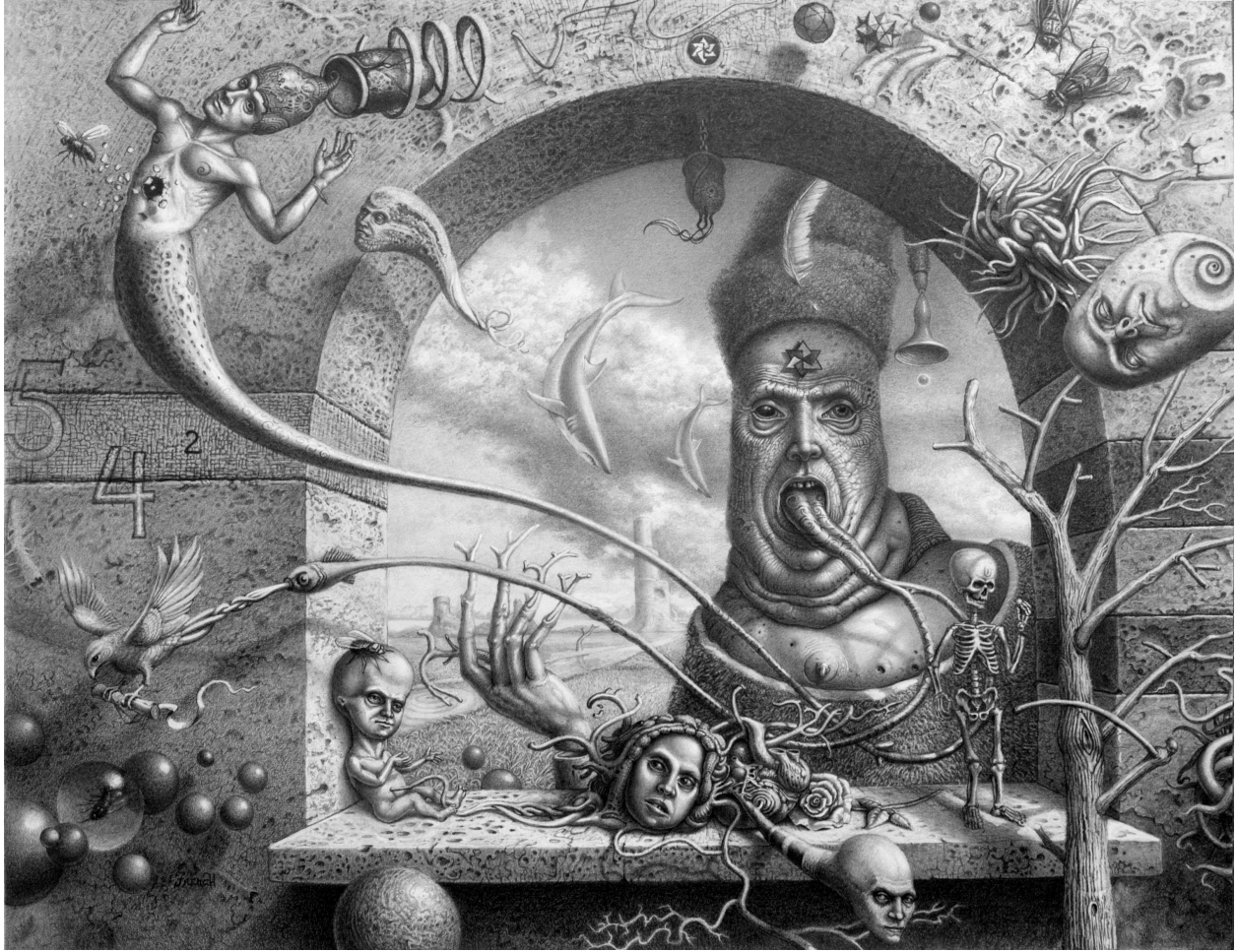


PLATE III: *Something Beyond*, 35" x 28"

The drawing titled *Something Beyond* represents an imaginary portal between waking life and the subconscious dream state of sleep. The drawing is not one dream captured, but a compilation of personal dream imagery brought together to form one image. There is no indication of which side of the portal represents waking life; this is because I see both as two parts of one consciousness. The portal represents sleep through which the dreamer's subconscious thoughts and desires emerge into consciousness.

There are many dream images in this drawing, but I do not know with certainty what they represent individually, however, as a compilation the work represents anxiety associated with unfounded anger, fear and unrealized desires. I have combined these elements to give them an identity and an image that can be examined. The drawing expresses my desire to turn toward anxiety where I may discover important and positive self knowledge.

Using dreams as a path to the subconscious is a Surrealist technique, however, unlike the *Surrealist*, I wish to positively integrate what I recover from the subconscious into rational consciousness. It is not enough to reveal pure thought free of cultural values, because our values are what protect us from dangerous infantile impulses. It is here that I part from *Surrealism* because I embrace positive values, and the *Surrealists* sought to operate beyond any values, as they believed them to be a hindrance in the exploration of the subconscious.





PLATE IV: *Awaken*, 14" x 14"

This work titled *Awaken* represents the awakening of a creative pathway to the expansion of consciousness. The metaphor of the abyss is more than a repository of infantile impulses, or a hiding place for unacceptable thoughts, it is also a source of potent creative energy. This painting

depicts the awakening eye of consciousness that is centered in an egg within rebirth of spirit and wisdom. The star that is woven into the nest represents the human being transformed from a creature of self-absorption into one of insight and hope.





PLATE V: Go Devil, 40" Round

This painting titled *Go Devil* represents a clearing away of obstacles. The title is an oil drilling term for an iron dart that is dropped down an obstructed oil well to detonate an explosive charge that clears the obstruction. The work's title is appropriate because the painting represents



an important turning point in the direction of my life. Fifteen years ago my ability to productively pursue life and art was obstructed by alcoholism and unwise decisions. Addiction to alcohol affected every thought and emotion by distorting my sense of priority and responsibility. The company I kept reflected my lack of self-esteem. With my spirit nearly consumed, I experienced what can only be described as a moment of clarity.

I was praying for an end to the addiction that had left me at such a useless and dangerous impasse; I had nothing to offer in exchange for life. At that moment it became clear that my life had reached a cross-road, and the choice was obvious. I stopped drinking alcohol and began the process of clearing away all enabling influences from my life.

The painting depicts the life changing moment when a negative path is destroyed in exchange for a wiser direction. The figure depicted in the painting represents a destroyer of obstacles; his abdomen is exposed, representing fortitude and transparent intentions or honesty. The destroyer's mouth issues serpents, representing intellectual power, healing, self-renewal and positive change. The truth and creative energy are signified by the depiction of the heart and vagina. There are two fish attached to the side of the destroyer that are a reflection of insights brought forth from the subconscious. The number twenty-five on the destroyer's abdomen represents authority, and the black nightingale in the cage illustrates the suppression of temptation.

The combination of these personal images creates a narrative that suggests an explosive change that clears obstacles, allowing a flow of creative energy to rise up from the metaphorical abyss. For me, this piece is a homage to the catalyst of positive change.



PLATE VI: Freudian Overkill, 14" x 14"





PLATE VII: By the Root, 18" x 10" Oval





PLATE VIII: Impact Prophets, 14" X 17"





PLATE IX: Location is Everything, 6" x 8"





PLATE X: Paradigm Shift, 12" x 15"





PLATE XI: Anima Mutatis Mutandis, 13" x 11"





PLATE XII: Hubris, 15" x 13"





PLATE XIII: Badacidcatnippers, 12" x 15"



PLATE XIV: Flame is Mercy, 12" x 15"



PLATE XV: The Old God Returns, 12" x 15"



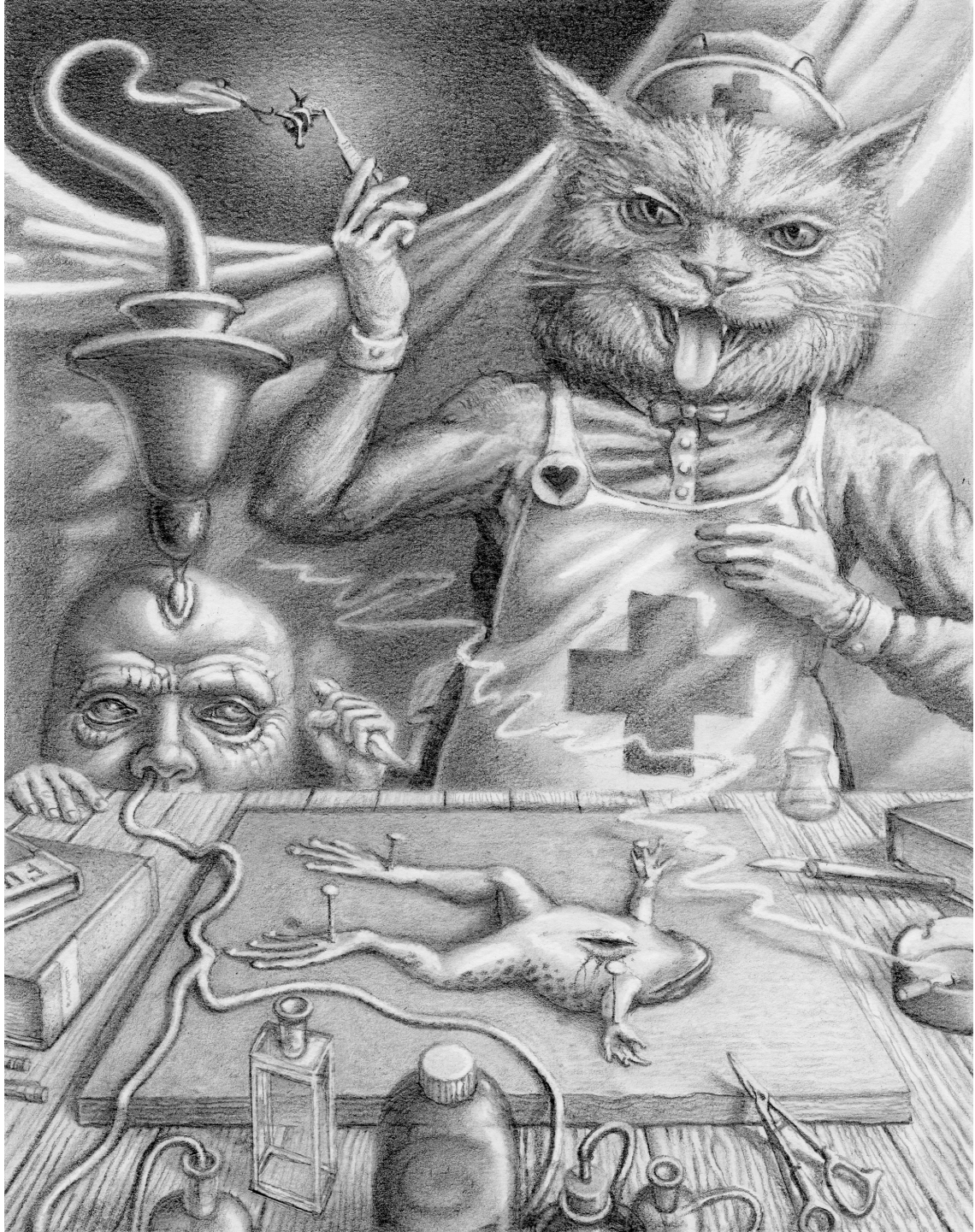


PLATE XVI: Medical Reasons, 12" x 15"



PLATE XVII: Sonnet of Unions, 12" x 15"

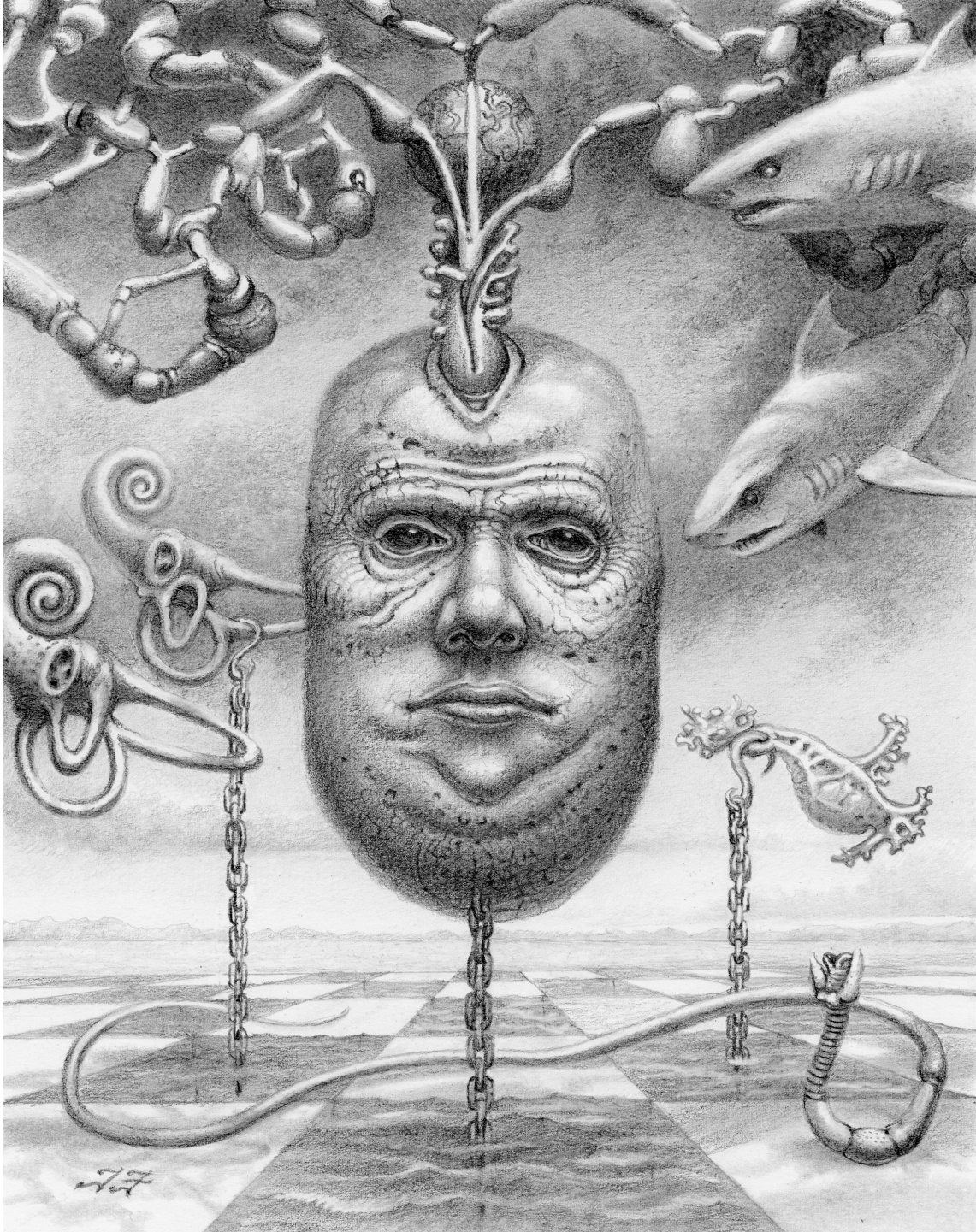


PLATE XVIII: Sonar, 12" x 15"





PLATE XIX: Impasse, 12" x 15"

## CONCLUSION

It is through art that I turn toward psychological and social issues to lessen their power. Through these works, negative emotions are identified, named, and given an image. By creating these thesis works, a transformation has taken place. Frightening emotional issues become visual caricatures within a non-threatening context, where they can be understood. Understanding creates tolerance, and lessens fear and distrust. The metaphorical abyss is not just repository for potential evil, but an important source of positive, creative energy.



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<sup>i</sup> (Jordan, Weirdo Deluxe 2005)

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