With Monsters

Leonard J. Reibstein
CUNY Hunter College

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With Monsters

by

Leonard Reibstein

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Thesis Sponsor:

5/21/2018  Drew Beattie
Date  Signature

5/21/2018  Thomas Weaver
Date  Signature of second Reader
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Part I: Intro

Painting about anger wasn't the plan. If you know my previous work or even know me, that might sound cheeky but just bear with me for a few pages. The thrust of my work, even from its earliest germination, has hewn towards both sensory and emotional feeling and the more primal and chaotic aspects thereof. That said, I feel as though I need to establish two contradictory caveats for a discussion of my work. First, my conception of feeling belongs to the romantic notion of emotion as a sublime and untamable force which resists critical analysis. To write about it from within would beg the question “how can one be objective about the most subjective of experiences?” Second, it is my conviction that an artist’s duty is to master the complexities of their subject through comprehensive observation, in this case requiring me to turn lived experience into a topic of research. The recipe for reconciliation between these two notions consists of nine parts rigor and one part faith. In other words, I will be presenting the things I have learned about how I deal with pain.
I don’t consider what I do to be something radically new but a continuation of a long-running project in painting. At the dawn of the 16th century, the Northern Renaissance painter Matthias Grunewald created the Isenheim Altarpiece. The crucifixion, which is the frontispiece of the altar, is certainly the most brutal image of this subject ever executed. In addition to the typically sadistic elements of this image (the nails affixing Christ to the cross, the crown of thorns, the dripping wound between the ribs) Grunewald has distorted both form and color to ramp up the emotional intensity of the painting. Jesus’ hands are contorted into twisted claws of rigor mortis and his skin is riddled with spines, protruding from bruised syphilitic pustules. The figure’s feet are twisted and folded like pretzel dough, the toes are doubled over on one another into a squirming mass. The overall impression is of flesh becoming almost as malleable as the oil medium used to paint it. Chromatically, the body of Christ is painted in a green more appropriate to flora than fauna. Its unnatural, sewage-like hue becomes all the more
apparent as its warmth contrasts with the cold blue-black of the night sky and is complemented by the bright reds of the attendant figure’s robes, Christ’s blood, and the lesions that polka dot his body.

Grunewald, with this painting, touches off three important currents in painting, which my work follows. First, I value his use of the body as a site to experience raw emotion. Second, I value his willingness to augment the iconic schema he deploys to better apply it to immediate lived experience. Third, I admire his use of distortion/abstraction to both attract and overpower the viewer. He is the first point on a line that stretches through the work of late Titian. In “The Flaying of Marsyas”, with its compressed frontal space and flickering light, Titian uses the tropes of this story to express a personal point of view about the pain of exposing oneself to artistic criticism. Romantic artists such as Turner and Goya ride related currents in “Hannibal Crossing the Alps” and “Saturn Devouring his Children” respectively. In the former, the storm becomes an almost abstract expressionist explosion of paint which the artist uses to smite the would-be conqueror (whom Simon Schama believes to be a stand-in for Napoleon1). In the latter, the artist uses a radically coarse application of impasto to highlight both the haggard body of Cronus and the mangled body on which he has been caught gnawing. In both of these works, the artist has appropriated and modified a myth to deal with a personal anxiety (the former Political, the latter existential). What makes the Goya painting (along with others from the Quinta del Sordo) more potent than the Turner is that Goya treats nature as an Other that is already, to a degree,

alien to a viewer. We live in a body and as such, when it is made less familiar, when it is distorted or disturbed, it has the power to unnerve the viewer at a profound and fundamental level.

These tendencies continue in the work of Edvard Munch. Though Munch does not employ the more fantastic imagery of earlier artists (exceptions include a crucifixion, his “Self Portrait in Hell”, “The Vampire”), his expressionist distortions make the real world seem more supernatural than the imagery of any fairy tale. The sky of “The Scream” is aflame with reds and yellows as emotion ripples through nature. For Munch, the substance of the visible world was subject to the feelings of those who live in it. Like the previous artists mentioned, the body is the primary space for this to occur. In “Puberty” the artist gives us a frontal view of a young female figure sitting on a bed. Her nude body is sculpted in thick marks of warm toned color. This sets up a contrast with the shadow which emanates from her body, which is hastily scumbled in thin swipes of cold blue-violet. The total effect of this contrast is one of radical spatial polarization. The shadow becomes an abyss, a hole in space. Its lumpen, suggestive shape hints at it being a projection of dark libidinous power. This is bolstered by the fact that the shadow emanates both from the figure’s crotch and from beneath the bed (where the monsters of our infantile imagination dwell). The real-world phenomenon of a shadow on a bedroom wall becomes a phantom phallic monster.

This tendency to let the mind co-opt observed phenomena, in service of expressionism, continues in the late work of Philip Guston. For Guston, painting was a world mirroring emotion where quotidian conflict could inflate to the scale of mythic apocalypse and thus reflect the all-consuming sense
of subjective experience. He increases this sensibility by frequently creating a slippage between opposites. There are no "no's" in Guston's world just "yes, buts...". This is most frequently achieved through color and paint application. In his work of the early 1970s, his cadmium pinks that describe caucasian flesh become sky, earth, walls and void. This is an endodermic and epidermic world contoured in blood red, acting as metaphor for a psyche laid bare. Binaries such as body/landscape, abstract/figurative, high/low, and inside/outside are shown not as alternatives but as mutually coexisting aspects of a complicated world/being. Using the techniques he had perfected as a gestural painter, Guston returns the large format canvas of abstract expressionism to its roots in altar painting and romantic spectacle. His paintings of this period are apocalypses in which man’s inhumanity to man (as epitomized by his Klansmen) gives way to the indifference of the universe. The world is consumed by fire (as in "Pit") and water (his “Deluge” series), but as in many cultures, the end of the world is always prelude to the beginning of a new one. Even as the flood waters consume the world, the artist slaves
away with his tools, growing in size until he paints not the landscape’s image but the landscape itself (as in “The Line”).

Guston became an important jumping off point for an entire generation of painters who admired his determination to destroy and rebuild painting from the ground up and his constant proposition that opposites can and must be reconciled. Artists like Cecily Brown, Sue Williams, and Amy Sillman used this framework to combine abstract painting and cartoons into images that talk about sex, sexuality, and gender. While the work of these artists can be seen as subverting a program of painting that has historically been perceived as male gendered, the subversion is actually two-fold.

Painting, circa 1990, was the “medium non grata” at best. The direct and progressive message of the pictures generation cast the neo-Expressionists as the epitome of art-world excess. The socially conscious video and installation art that dominated the 1993 Whitney Biennial can be seen as the successor of these aesthetics. To paint was to dosomething old white guys used to do. Williams, Brown, and Sillman’s art proposed an alternative to this perceived binary: art could have its sensuous, painterly cake and eat it (in good socio-Political conscience) too. Jutta Koether, whom I consider to be of the same ilk, described her choice to start painting as squatting and she saw her painting as a transgression on an empty space, one that she could make her own.
“I never looked at painting as some masterful thing one would want to reinstall, but instead as a platform, a potential, an island, a lifeboat, a discipline to negotiate life … A performance. An attempt at something impossible, a reinvention of painting through painting. I wanted to make wanted to make it a temporary site, which I took literally.”  

Thus painting became a subversive act, a punk gesture, one middle finger pointed at the problematics of painting’s history and another pointed at its contemporary critics.

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Part III: Me

This is where I join the line I’m describing. I come from an upper middle class suburb called Brookline. The Massachusetts state motto is “Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem” (this translates to “she seeks with the sword a quiet peace under liberty”) but the unofficial motto is “it is what it is”. New Englanders are a pragmatic, plain spoken people; to whom there is no higher crime than pretension. Neo-brutalist buildings of poured concrete echo and amplify a culture derived from puritanism. For me this was hell, so I found solace in other worlds. From early childhood, I was captivated by myth. In myth nothing “is what it is”, objects and actions are laden with symbolic meaning and plural identity. What is dead can come back to life; what is animal can become vegetable or mineral; and that which hurts makes you better instead of just making you hurt. I loved the illustrations in my picture books about Theseus and the Minotaur, The Odyssey, and the story of Osiris while I initially resisted the all-text pages. To push me to read more, my stepfather bought me a (reprint) copy of Uncanny X-Men #1, and it changed my life. As a chubby kid, I was intensely self-conscious about my body and the other school kids made me feel like a freak. The X-Men, were a group of mutant adventurers, feared and hated for their genetic gifts. They inspired me to embrace my outsider status. Being a freak could also mean you were special, apart from the pack. It might not have had such an effect on me without the stunning art
of Jack Kirby. Kirby’s embrace of the flatness of the page contrasted and complemented his powerful compositions of kinetic figures in dynamic, perspectival space. I began to draw because I wanted to do what he and his successors on the X-Men did, most notably Marc Sylvestri, Frank Miller, and Barry Windsor Smith.

My identification with the weird and the different coincided with the awakening of my love of music. My earliest memories of music are my father playing the Beatles in the car. A love of distorted guitar-based music was the foundation of my musical taste. As I began to explore music, I gravitated towards angst, heaviness and obscurity. When I saw that one of the X-Men was on the cover of a new record by a band called Entombed, I was intrigued. I tried to buy the album on a trip to Tower Records. When my father told me “you don’t want that”, of course, I had to have it. This was my first exposure to Death Metal and to underground music. The vocals roared, the instruments sounded like power tools. After a song and a half, I pushed pause on my CD player. I didn’t stop because I didn’t like the music, but because I felt a wave of transgressive feeling crash over me. Why did this music make me feel like I was breaking a law? And why did that feel so good? I had taken my first steps into the world of extreme music and its ethics/aesthetics would become an integral part of my artistic identity. Over the next few years I began to take note of band logos on the patches and pins of punk rockers when I would ride the bus and the train. I began going to punk and hardcore shows with my friends. At first, I felt I had found the rebel underground: a culture that scorned consumerism and conformity. Over the course of a few years, I realized that I was just conforming to a different code. I realized that I thought differently from the weekend warriors that I hung out with, and that they still perceived the world in the grey-scale of New England pragmatism. When I set off for college, I left my Doc Martin boots behind and decided that I would no longer define myself through some pre-packaged sub
cultural identity, but would be defined by my own actions.

I flip-flopped through majors, studying acting, then psychology, then literature and creative writing. My love of comic books had never diminished though. I was drawing in the margins of my notes, on my tests, filling sketchbook after sketchbook. When it came time to declare an official major, I decided I would be a cartoonist and doubled in creative writing and studio art. One day, my writing advisor told me the department didn’t want me. He then posed a simple question: “all of your stories are about painting and sex, so why don’t you just paint and have sex?” Thank goodness he was so blunt. I threw myself into the study of painting and drawing. I was very lucky, in that I began studying art at Bard College right when Nicole Eisenman showed up and just before Amy Sillman left. Both encouraged me to use my love of comics and Heavy Metal in my art. In 2004 I took a trip into the city with my girlfriend and I saw Dana Schutz’s show, “Panic”. The high-key color and slap dash application of paint awed me but seemed somehow familiar. I bought the catalogue and saw additional works of hers that referenced alternative rockers PJ Harvey and The Breeders. I made the connection between the bright and playful quality of Schutz’s paintings and the sonic qualities of alternative rock. I asked myself, “if she can paint the way this music feels, why couldn’t I do the same?” What followed was a series of abstract paintings that I presented as my senior thesis show; “Noise”.

After I graduated, I moved to New York City and painted at night while working clerical and art handling jobs during the day. I began to notice a geographical division between the kinds of shows I was seeing. In the big galleries of Chelsea, I saw the kind of painting that I was drawn to stylistically. On the other side of the river, in Brooklyn, the hipster galleries where my friends were beginning to exhibit, showcased a kind of high-irony neo-minimalism. Both left me cold. While I enjoyed the pretty painting I was seeing in Manhattan, it felt devoid of serious subject matter and it’s beauty was often high gloss to
the point of sterility. In Williamsburg, none of the art seemed able to get over how clever its own crappiness was. I retreated into a study of mythology while I tightened my painting chops. I read the work of Joseph Campbell and wondered why the hero myth that had become so popular in Hollywood films of the time (Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy, the Harry Potter series, etc.) seemed absent from contemporary art. It was around this time that I began to pay more attention to Black Metal music.

Black Metal is less a set of specific sonic parameters than of a few general aesthetics. Put simply, music can be called Black Metal if it is simultaneously raw, epic, and dark. In Black Metal lyrics, ancient myth connects the listener to nature, the occult, and/or the remote parts of the mind. Meanwhile the violent execution of the music, and its rotten production, touch the primal urges of the listener. It quickens the blood, and straightens the hair on the back of your neck. The result of this simultaneous mind-body assault is a surge of empowerment and a sense of universal connection. There is a super presence through annihilation. I wanted this in my painting. My mission was to reconnect the viewers with the most fundamental parts of themselves. I felt that this would cause them to go so deep down inside, that they would find the infinite beneath the bottom.

The paintings resulting from this fixation were black and white cartoons exploiting the aesthetic idiosyncrasies of black metal performers. I had been seduced by the visual culture of my subject matter and drifted away from the synesthetic transmutation of music into painting; which had been my mission in the first place. Over the next five years, I approached my mission in a simultaneously metaphorical and literal fashion. Imagining the self as a body, I treated figure as landscape with the notion that this would smash the inside/outside barrier. As I reintroduced color into my imagery, the paint began to carry more of the representational weight. Instead of just looking like a body, I wanted it to feel bodily as well. During this time I showed my work at English Kills Gallery in Bushwick. Whether in sculpture,
performance, video or painting, all of the English Kills artists shared a fixation with the body. I felt I had
something of a community, in terms of content, if not subject. It was with this work that I applied to
Hunter. The gallery closed and I went to grad school, in search of a deeper understanding.
Part IV: Me

Over the last few years, I’ve noticed a wave forming in painting. The paintings I admired from the last decade were inspired by Philip Guston’s declaration of a year zero in his painting after following the currents of 20th century art. These painters, in turn, went back to a sort of abstractish expressionism in form while taking a radical detour in content. Recently, painters of my generation have gone back further yet. In the work of Loie Hollowell, Elizabeth Glaesner, and Todd Bienvenu there is a callback to a pre-Greenbergian, American modernism. Hollowell’s canvases, for example, evoke both the glowing colors of Charles Birchfield and the vaginal forms of Georgia O’Keeffe. Glaessner’s paintings bring to mind the pre-abstract works of Mark Rothko, with their menagerie of strange chimeras in quasi-pictographic form (though Rothko’s violent imagery has been substituted for sex). Bienvenu’s work recalls the blunt force, frontal expressionism of Marsden

image 17  
image 18  
image 19  
image 20
Hartley (if Hartley had access to the naughtier parts of the internet). That these artists (among others) have chosen this part of art history seems relevant to me. It was at this point that American Modernism came closest to a spiritual mystical sensibility. After this period America pursued a path towards French and German prototypes for Modernism. This led ultimately to formalism, conceptual art, Post-Modernism and now. Had American art gone left instead of right, might we have produced a spiritually awakened art?

The spiritual in American painting extends past the stylistic. Mythological imagery crops up in both the animations and paintings of Allison Schulnik. The almost over-use of impasto in her canvases
speaks to a Pygmalion-like desire to bring her figures into the real world. Kyle Staver’s work turned from the personal to the mythological as well, positing that those themes are as relevant now as when they were originally written. I’d argue that America has never needed a lesson, in what it means to be human, more than it does now.

I wake up every day wondering if this will be when the bomb finally goes off, when the government is overthrown, when civil war will erupt. The America of the Trump era is bitterly divided along political lines. As I drink my morning coffee, I think about the little girl that my wife and I just had. She might grow up in a world dominated and destroyed by angry men. This feeds an anger of my own, an anger that has been nurtured for all of my thirty-five years by body dysmorphia, career failure, sexual frustration, the fear of death, and contempt for the rampant erosion of our democracy. I’ve wanted to make something beautiful to celebrate the new chapter of my life and the beginning of my daughter’s, but for the past year, I’ve been too damn mad. It is my hope that by journeying inward with these paintings, towards the fire, I can understand my anger. I will load my canvases with all the seductive beauty I can muster, to lure viewers into a close-quarters confrontation with a visual manifestation of these feelings. If I can transform my pain into visual pleasure, then maybe they will better deal with their own. That is the function of all myth, to reconcile the irreconcilable.
In my most recent paintings I address the effects of toxic masculinity through the deployment of mythological space-making. by allowing the personal to reach the level of the mythic, I create a sympathetic image, art that operates on the homeopathic principle (treat like with like). In Maggie Nelson’s “The Art of Cruelty”, she discusses the paintings of Francis Bacon and their relationship to the history of their most infamous subject matter: the crucifixion. In discussing the painter’s crucified figures, she writes “there is no attempt to shock us into feeling the enormity of the sacrifice, there is no sacrifice...they are animals on their way down, as are we”. She contrasts this with a discussion of the traditional representation of the subject; “in Christianity, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus alchemize an otherwise brutal situation of meat into a scene of divine redemption. Not just for Christ, but also for us if we become his followers.” She contrasts this with Simone Weil when she writes: “the false god changes suffering into violence, the true god changes violence into suffering.” The duress and pain that my figures endure is not redemptive. Their hurt is a reiteration of our own, just restaged and outsized, like an echo under a high roof. They do not promise redemption, but assure that pain is our shared situation as human animals.

In “D Minor”, I present a figure in the foreground of a volcanic landscape. The figure’s form is defined by cross-hatched daubs of, dark brown, gray, and white. Through the breaks in the brushwork and a large hole in the figure’s chest, a pale yellow wash glows forth. The effect is of a smoldering ember in human shape. The glow of this charred creature stands in contrast to the warm, oranges of the magma flow and the sky. If the viewer treats the figure as a surrogate, then the message is that “you burn, and the world burns too”. On the one hand there is no implication of cause and effect; figure and landscape burn independently of one another. On the other hand, a comparison between figure and space establishes an anti-hierarchy. The glowing hole, at the figure’s center, rhymes with the glowing break in the smoke. By placing these two phenomena on the same level, the visual rhyme establishes parity between person and place, as well as between inside and outside. The personal is thus elevated to the universal. Returning to Nelson/Weil, the pain does not transcend the profane by ascending into divine suffering but instead stays pain. The Mythic here is not in the proposition of solutions to life’s cruelty, but

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the dissolution of binaries.

Maggie Nelson’s writing has been crucial to my recent work. By placing the personal on the same plane as the theoretical, she crushes assumed norms around artistic and private life as they relate to Identity. Nowhere is this more true for me, than in her 2015 book, *The Argonauts*. A major theme throughout the book is the notion of the “sodomitic mother”; a person who maintains sexual agency and libidinous power while taking on the role of parent/caregiver. It is a protest against the notion that a mom must give up their self-hood to have kids. While she writes her arguments elegantly, she wields her personal life like a sledgehammer. She writes “I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphorics, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking”\(^5\). The candidness of this statement and its crass phrasing disrupt our expectations of academic formalism and reassert that a human being wrote what we are now reading. By reasserting her body, she reasserts all bodies, and connects us to our ever-elusive humanity. It is my hope that I can use my personal life to similar effect.

My Ideal for painting is the Venus fly-trap. I seduce my viewers with an idiosyncratic use of color and lush surfaces. Once the viewer is stuck in the honey pot of my painting, they are drawn to narratives culled from my personal life which appear as violent spectacle. “Timed release” is key here, as I am striving to present an immersive experience. Easy legibility would allow the viewer to apprehend the content before making any investment in it. The difficulty of reading the picture, combined with the allure of the surface, forces the viewer to make a commitment to the picture; to get into it. This controls the duration of the viewing experience and makes the order of perception the key factor in determining what

the viewer understands. Once they have begun to apprehend the nature of the imagery, the painting’s materiality shifts its signification. The paint in its multi-varied textures becomes a surrogate for the body instead of just a descriptive tool for portraying it. This doubles the notion of embodiment; as the viewer is in the body of the painting, they are reminded of being in their own body viewing it.

Now that we are in the painting, what are we in there with? The short answer: boy problems. In 2018, it is impossible to look at the news without seeing instance after instance of men behaving horribly. The “#Metoo” movement has exposed the rampant sexual misconduct that power has enabled and kept secret, in the fields of entertainment, business, and politics. Every week, there is another mass shooting; as often as not in a school. Presiding over the whole mess; the 45th president emboldens a vocal minority of the despicable, through hate speech and cyber bullying. Why do they do it? I don’t believe American men are fundamentally evil, but I do believe the corruption in bad men runs deep. Thinking back on my own experiences growing up, I recall the pressure to conform to an ideal of manliness: strong, callous, and cool. In a recent op-ed for the New York Times, Michael Ian Black writes that

"Men feel isolated, confused and conflicted about their natures. Many feel that the very qualities that used to define them - their strength, aggression and competitiveness - are no longer wanted or needed; many others never felt strong or aggressive or competitive to begin with. We don’t know how to be, and we’re terrified."\(^6\)

Black goes on to describe the harassment he faced when trying to discuss this on twitter. he concludes from this experience, that “the man who wishes to preserve his fully masculine self has only two choices: withdrawal or rage.” Rage helps no one. Perhaps going inward Isn’t the worst Idea; not to brood, but with open eyes. These paintings represent such an act of introspection and ask the viewer to do the same. If you can look at what is in me, then you can look at what is in you. The ugly, the awful, the weird, the wrong: these things belong to all of us. They are the essence of our dragons and I don’t offer a sword, I’m just telling a story.

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Image List for Thesis Show Images

1. “Taker”, 2018, oil on canvas, 15 x 15
2. “No U”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
3. “Courting the Divine”, 2018, oil on canvas, 24 x 20
4. “Outless”, 2018, oil on canvas, 24 x 20
5. “Lifespan”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
6. “Naming”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
7. “Satanizer”, 2018, oil on canvas, 15 x 15
9. “BF”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
10. “Warpaint”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
11. “Pred”, 2017, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
12. “Moan”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
13. “Refusal to Die”, 2017, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
14. “Panzer Division”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
15. “(Roma)”, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16
17. “After”, 2018, oil on canvas, 24 x 20
Thesis Images & Installation Photos

1 “Taker”
2 “No U”
3 “Courting the Divine”
4 “Outless”
5 “Lifespan”
6 “Naming”
7 “Satanizer”
8 “The Price of Fire”
9 “BF”