Cruelty: Aesthetics, Narrative, and Invented Worlds

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Cruelty: Aesthetics, Narrative, and Invented Worlds

by

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An act of cruelty is not the same as the representation of cruelty. An artist can produce physical pain, but representing and reproducing the mental state of pain or cruelty is a complicated and nuanced undertaking. The less an image is mediated by the artist, the closer it feels to bodily pain. For example, I can recognize the bodily injury of war journalism photography in a more immediate way than I might feel when viewing a painting. But a painting can seduce a viewer into a scene using beauty, narrative, and humor, only to slowly reveal itself as a painting about suffering. This gradual unraveling allows space for psychic anguish to flourish. To be seduced into distress feels both exciting and cruel, and to be excited by another’s suffering can lead one down a path of shame. Cruelty and shame have played important roles in my life while growing up in the religious South, and painting provides a means of dismantling and exploring what it means to reproduce the feelings of simultaneous pleasure and pain.

**Cruelty and Aesthetics**

Saturated color, soft rendering, and dramatic light help guide a viewer into my paintings depicting pain. In the painting *Sunbathe* (fig. 1), twinkles of bright color fade in and out through leaves and branches surrounding a youthful body mid repose in a forest clearing. The softly painted brush is interrupted by shards of underpainting in colors that are so bright and artificial that they resist reconciliation with one another. The disruption in harmony between the background and foreground colors prevent the scene from feeling pleasurable or stable. The figure in the foreground starts to seem more like a dead body decaying in its dumping ground, buried underneath a surreal
weave of strangely saturated sky and brush. The head is a grim indicator, rendered as a reddish, orange skull with ticks of pink and bright green. The aesthetically pleasing coloring of the body, first seductive and pleasurable, now feels at odds with the grotesque imagery. The significance of the skull is unclear: is it a child’s mask? Or perhaps the face of a character living in an invented world? Or more darkly, maybe it is only the result of a weirdly uneven decay rate, leaving the skull exposed. The little puffed up body is either that of a healthy pubescent girl, or a freshly dead body filling with the first gasses of rot. The leafy glen begins to feel as if it is closing in on a death scene, and the Sublime takes root as the beauty of nature gives way to something more sinister.

The role of beauty in Sunbathe directly relates to the function of light, color, and movement in Artemisia Gentileschi’s Judith Slaying Holofernes (fig. 2). The overall painting itself is masterful, but the most aesthetically captivating moment is the black-rust blood splooge bursting and dribbling from the neck of Holofernes. Gentileschi is not rendering blood with paint, she’s making the paint itself bleed, and it is too exciting to look away. The cinematic lighting and detail rendered in both Judith’s face and the blood spray keeps our eye moving back and forth between these two areas of the painting. The blood ejects in streams that follow Judith’s line of vision almost exactly, as if they are speaking directly to one another. A neck wound in real life would be a horrific sight, yes, but this is not about a neck wound; it is a symbolic slit crafted by the hand of two females. The beauty of the image provides a viewing safety net; Gentileschi seduces us into exploring and enjoying another’s pain.
As the daughter of Southern, conservative parents, I am drawn to working with imagery that challenges my family’s traditional ideas of what art should, or more specifically, should not depict. Like Gentileschi, I want to create images that seduce a viewer into slowing exploring a moment of pain or discomfort. Aesthetics become something of a lubricant or manipulation that convinces a resistant viewer, perhaps my family, to keep looking.

Cruelty and Narrative

Open ended narrative and innuendo enhance the destabilized, sinister tone of the paintings. Deliberately minimizing the information given slows the unfolding of the image and forces the viewer to participate in the completion of the story. Painter Michael Borremans utilizes the same “missing information” suspense in his work, creating images that suggest a myriad of potential narratives. Many of the paintings appear to be from a past era (both a reinforcement and rupture in their connection to time), though the exact timeline and connection to the present is never quite clear. The images vacillate between the quietly serious and the loudly ridiculous. The painting Marvel (fig. 3) is a prime example: at a glance, it could be a simple portrait, but Borremans has very intentionally forked the narrative with a flatly painted, clownish bow at the subject’s neck. The suspense operates in a somewhat different way: deciphering the artist’s intentions behind the weird bow are perhaps more mysterious than the narrative of the image itself. Borremans is acknowledging the conceit of the image by breaking the illusion, causing a viewer to flip flop between a sense of knowing and
questioning. Borremans arouses the feeling of constantly rounding a corner without knowing what is on the other side.

When creating the painting *Snowy Forest* (fig. 4), I chose to implicate the viewer in a violent narrative. There are three states of reality in the image that the viewer must resolve: a representational snowy forest scene, a cottoncandy underpainting that breaks through the illusion of the setting, and a set of legs hanging from the top edge of the canvas. Each element's relation to one another overlaps, but never with a seamless transition. The natural setting is interrupted by multiple tears in the representational fabric, revealing a bright and surreal underpainting. Like Borremans’ bow, the slashes disrupt the illusion of the wintry forest world; the viewer is never grounded in representation or abstraction, but must float between those worlds without finding a foothold. The pair of legs hovering at the top of the picture plane occupy a third world, a place that relates to both the represented and abstract, but belongs to neither. It is intentionally unclear if the legs belong to a person sitting in a tree, hanging from branch, or exist in another dimension separate from the landscape. That said, the most tempting read is to see them as belonging to a person who was hanged in a dark, lonely wood. The viewer is brought to the edge of that ominous outcome, but she has to be the person to go the rest of the way, connecting with, or perhaps becoming the perpetrator of violence. In this sense, these paintings are for a specific audience: they are made for all of the prim and proper women and girls I grew up with in North and South Carolina, playing the transparent and tired roles of the perfect hostess, wife, and mother. We are all compelled by the disgusting, grisly, and abject, despite how nicely everything
appears on the surface. I find a subversive, dark pleasure in creating a situation that might make a viewer confront her own pleasure and shame. These works are not about victimhood or vulnerability; they are about pulling the darkest, basest instincts from one’s imagination and forcing her to say it aloud.

Invented Worlds

Narrative and storytelling also provide a platform for me to explore invented and dreamlike worlds. In these places, the figures are rendered in caricature and often wear hoods or masks. Like beauty, the humor of the cartoon both softens and complicates the grim narratives unfolding in the image. In the painting Ghost (fig. 5), a skull-faced ghoul pulls a running escapee back into a cave with other prisoners. The cave is surrounded by the skulls of past victims, and the beings inside huddle together in fear. As the escaped figure is caught, the ghost pulls away at the costume or skin, revealing a texture akin to the dermis. The face stretches into a skull with large oval, smiley face eye sockets. The painting flips back and forth between sadistic and silly, resisting a stable emotional tone. I am interested in creating a language of symbols and characters that let me tap into my subconscious and explore the experience of simultaneous fear and pleasure. Like the female Surrealists of the 1920s-40s, I am utilizing personal symbology to visualize my own psyche.¹ The cartoonish figures, strange humor, and fear tie the painting to a sense of childhood. Like the juxtaposition of realistic rendering

and artificial coloring in the painting *Sunbathe*, I use cartoonish drawing to mix feelings of childhood and innocence with the cruel realities (fear, shame, and death) that we experience in adulthood. The combination of children’s symbols and adult themes connects me to the work of Surrealist Dorothea Tanning. In Tanning’s *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (A Little Night Music) (fig. 6), we see two prepubescent girls standing in a hallway, each absorbed in her own revelry. One girl leans against a doorway, eyes closed, perhaps day dreaming. Her dress is pulled halfway down, revealing her undeveloped breasts. Her head is gently tilted back, alluding to something sexual, perhaps an early experience with a developing fantasy world that could accompany the start of puberty. Another girl stands close by with her back to the viewer. Her hair floats upwards, as if in water. A massive sunflower lays in the hallway in front of her and stretches its thick and curvy vines toward her body, suggesting phalluses creeping towards her groin, though not quite touching or penetrating. Perhaps this second figure is the visualization of an erotic fantasy happening in the mind of the dreaming girl. A few of the petals from the fully bloomed flower, another symbol of both femininity and the developing sexual body, are missing. One is grasped tightly in the hand of the dreamer, and seems to be the only direct connection between the two girls. Neither figure is performing sexually for a viewer, but rather experiencing something internal that we can infer, but never quite know. The innuendo, suspense, and missing information in the image ask us to complete the dream. The narrative can be read as symbolic of Tanning’s own experiences and calls upon a viewer to reflect on his or her own early sexuality. The combination of youth and sexuality is uncomfortable, especially when we
are guided into recalling our own development. There is also a playfulness in Tanning’s mixture of youthful imagery and adult emotions that feels uncomfortable. This kind of dark humor is also a connection between my work and that of Surrealism, specifically Surrealist photography. Artists like Lee Miller photographed “the unexpected in the everyday world,” pausing on the dreamlike nature of what might be encountered by chance. In Miller’s photographs, there is always something strangely ridiculous that breaks the potential for horror. In *Untitled (Severed Breast from Radical Mastectomy)* (fig. 7), Miller photographs a friend’s amputated breast tissue, a lumpy and bloody mess capped with a sliver of flesh, on a clean dinner plate surrounded by silverware and set atop a prim placemat. At first glance, the black and white meat looks like a wedge of blueberry cobbler. Artist Lola Alvarez Bravo’s photograph *Mutilado* (fig. 8) provides a wonderful counterpoint to Miller’s *Untitled (Severed Breast from Radical Mastectomy)*. Rather than depicting a dead body in imagined circumstances, Bravo photographs a decapitated and limbless statue, reposing (or dumped?) in some casual brush. The *Mutilado* body does not deny its fiction, but rather depends on it. If this were a real mutilated body, we could never situate the image within the context of art; our imaginations would be capped with the smack of too much reality. Similarly, Miller’s fleshy breast mound could only live as art as long as it is plated. The breast laying on a surgical table would be medical, but on a dining table, it is sardonic. Unlike the guffaws

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of slapstick, the humor here is more about ramping up the volume on the everyday up so high that it becomes ridiculous.

The connection between my work and that of Miller and Alvarez Bravo is found in the vacillation between the everyday explicit and the denial of rational explanation. The images come close to being plausible, but resist revealing their story. For the Surrealist photographers, the plausibility or truthfulness arrives in the package of the photograph itself, which convinces the viewer that, yes, that moment did exist in reality at some point in time. That said, the events and manipulations leading up to that image are never told or readable. In my paintings Snowy Forest (fig. 4) and Sunbathe (fig. 1), something similar is at work. The action of the image is frozen like a photograph, hinting that whatever happened to bring us to the point of the scene (a suggested murder) has already occurred outside of the image frame. The scenes are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, quietly plausible and dreamily ludicrous.

In my paintings, I want to create invented worlds that evoke feelings of dreamy instability and pleasure mixed with fear and shame. Highly saturated color palettes and cinematic light help guide my viewer into a scene and keep her appreciating the making of a painting despite the fact that she is looking at a potential murder scene. The events surrounding the scene are open ended; the innuendo suggests an unseen perpetrator, a role I identify with. The victim, or body parts of victims, are mere byproduct of the painting. Along with aesthetics, symbology, and childlike rendering, I also mediate the depiction of pain and cruelty. Like the Surrealists, I do not look for an external source for
my invented worlds. Rather, I internalize the “muse”\(^3\), and pull from my own memories, dreams, and subconscious mind. In this sense, I count myself as a viewer deciphering the unknowns of my subconscious and find that my interpretation of the work helps me understand my influences and feelings only after they have already been laid out in paint. I am delving into my desire to elicit psychic pain in a viewer, who I often think of as either a family member or another Southern female who would likely be disapproving of such dark imagery. That said, these paintings extend far beyond family history.

Sardonic and grim imagery touches on something I believe is vital to the human imagination. We all enjoy the creepiness of the unknown, especially when it is focused on doom and death. Fantasy worlds are not resolved escapes for me. Rather, they provide a context and space in which I can spend time exploring my own psychological questions.

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Fig. 1 Sarah Slappey, *Sunbathe*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in.
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Bibliography


Installation Images

Installation image, 2016
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Sarah Slappey, *Picnic*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in.
Sarah Slappey, [Untitled], 2016, Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.
Sarah Slappey, *Snowy Forest*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.
Sarah Slappey, *Sunbathe*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in.
Sarah Slappey, [Untitled], 2016, Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.