

Variations on Anxiety: Helixes

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“The man who has not given himself up to the pleasures of anguish, who has not savored in his mind the dangers of his own extinction nor relished such cruel and sweet annihilations, will never be cured of the obsession with death: He will be tormented by it, for he will have resisted it”¹

-E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*

The *Helixes* are my continued attempt to temper my anxiety via the exploration of life, death, and reproduction through the process of artistic creation. Each *Helixes* depicts the interaction between two figurative strands composed of biological and botanical forms. The strands show disjointed, fractured, human biology merged with natural textures of decay. The *Helixes* are the culmination of my artistic aesthetic and journey.

I have always struggled with anxiety and an overactive imagination. In my youth, I wanted to know everything about everything. Yet, most of my extracurricular knowledge came from the educational television channels and Science Fiction films. I saw *Jurassic Park* when I was four years old and from that point on I fervently drew and learned everything I could about dinosaurs. Eventually I would learn about the asteroid that led to the dinosaur’s demise. This knowledge was my realization that my life, all life, could be extinguished without warning and there would be nothing I could do to stop it. Asteroids, gamma-ray bursts, and the Yellowstone super volcano were all inevitable horrors in my mind. I would stay awake, wondering, panicking, about what I would do, what I could do.

Science fiction films and literature have been my greatest inspiration. The filmmakers, authors, and artists create and populate imagined worlds. They make the impossible, possible.

¹ Cioran, E. M. *A Short History of Decay*. New York: Viking Press, 1975. pp. 12.

They bring the non-existent into existence. They allow us to see things that could not be observed in everyday reality. The need to create something new, unusual, to make something unreal real is the reason for my choice of subject matter. The shapes and figures that come forth in my images are the constructed conglomerations and hybrids of my mind's subconscious catalogue of images from science fiction/horror films and video games.

The art of Hans Rudi Giger is a huge influence on my work. Giger's unique fusion of biological, mechanical and sexual imagery earned him the job of envisioning one of the most famous movie monsters, the titular creature from Ridley Scott's 1979 horror film, *Alien*. The film series was a major player in my upbringing and development as an artist. The alien design is a Freudian nightmare. Its various lifecycle stages seem to be a checklist of psychosexual horrors. The alien egg appears vaginal. A spider-like creature erupts from the egg and shoves a phallic proboscis down the throat of a male victim. The next stage of the creature is birthed from the victim's abdomen in an abject, bloody expulsion. The adult creature has a feminine build, yet its head is shaped like a massive phallus. The creature has a second set of jaws, which it uses to kill in a thrusting, penetrative manner. The chimeric and androgynous design of the creature is what makes it such an effective monster.

Another filmic inspiration is *John Carpenter's: The Thing* (1982). The creature in the film is a being that can perfectly replicate a person. Every cell of the creature can act on its own accord. In my favorite scene, a copied person's head tears itself from its body and sprouts spider-like legs and scurries away. The author Dylan Trigg describes the scene as horrific. Trigg writes, "This is the body as we find it in its ugly emergence, caught between states, as an interstitial corporeality where language lacks the means to organize materiality into a whole".² It is not an object or a subject. Trigg continues, "It is horrifying and horrific not because of its alien-ness,

² Trigg, Dylan. *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* (Alresford, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2014), pp. 170.

but because we are already at the scene of anxiety, caught up in that formless flesh which is not a passive backdrop against which real life takes place, but is precisely the site where life is composed and duplicated”³ The viewer has no choice but to be reminded of death, of their own frailty and mortality when confronted with a body in disarray, which is an idea that I utilize in my own work.

H.P. Lovecraft, a 20th Century horror fiction writer, describes a deformed monster in “The Outsider”:

I cannot even hint what it was like, for it was a compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable. It was the ghoulish shade of decay, antiquity, and desolation; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation; the awful baring of that which the earth should always hide. God knows it was not of this world—or no longer of this world—yet to my horror I saw in its eaten away and bone—revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape; and in its mouldy, disintegrating apparel an unspeakable quality that chilled me even more ⁴.

The abject image that Lovecraft creates causes a sense of repulsion yet the language he chooses to describe this horror is intricate and eloquent. His writing balances the ideas of repulsion and attraction that I seek in my own work. My drawings depict distorted, twisted, fractured bodies. The subject matter is unnatural and distressing. But through the way that I create my compositions and the way that I meticulously render the figures, the distressing scenes are balanced.

The introduction of science fiction monster movies was a significant milestone in my life. The creatures were always the scariest at the beginning of the film. They would stay in the shadows, picking off the humans one by one until our protagonist was alone. Towards the end of the film, the directors would finally reveal their creatures in all of their glory. As they became

³ Trigg. *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*. pp. 70.

⁴ Lovecraft, H.P. *Necronomicon* (London, Gollancz 2008), pp. 145.

visible, they lost some of their mystery. They could be understood, and defeated. I loved these moments in the movies. The monster was no longer scary, but “cool.” I would go home from the theater and draw every last detail of the monster that I could remember, or better yet, I would pause the VHS tape and attempt to reproduce every claw, tooth, and scale I could see through the tracking lines. Eventually drawing became the way that I dealt with my anxieties. The monsters, the devastations, the horrors, were no longer able to torment me. By drawing these anguishes, I felt control. I could bring my own monsters into existence and at the same time just erase them away.

In science fiction horror films and literature, our fears are manifested as monsters. Mathias Clasen describes one of the theories to which I am drawn. He equates watching monster horror films and “chase play”. Young humans, like other mammals, participate instinctively in chase play. This form of play helps the participant’s predator-detection and evasion skills. Playing in this way aids in the future survival of the mammal as now it has had some experience in detecting and evading a pursuing threat.⁵ When a person watches monster movies, they pay attention to the dangerous elements of the monster to understand its behavior. The monster becomes a kind of “supernormal stimulus, a hypertrophied variation on chase play: It is a technology that enlists all manner of monstrous agents to tap into an adaptive motivational system for learning about danger to calibrate our responses to danger”.⁶ The general consensus is that the horror movie provides a world that is more dangerous than the one we inhabit. Watching horror films provides the viewer all of the benefits of learning about threat and how one would react to the situation without the risk of actual harm.⁷ In my work, I create my own monsters to give a physical, visual form to my own fears and anxieties. In this way I can understand them

⁵ Clasen, Mathias. “Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories.” *Review of General Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2012): 222-29. Accessed March 29, 2016.

⁶ Clasen. “Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories.” Pp. 227.

⁷ Clasen. “Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories.” Pp. 227.

and control them. Through my studio practice, I give my fears and anxieties form—a form that I can manipulate and control.

In the summer of 2015, I was awarded a spot in the Golden Apple artist residency in the Down East area of Maine. All of my basic needs were met: food, water, shelter, studio space and time to work on my art was plentiful. The seventh night of the two-week residency, I awoke in confusion. It was hard to breathe. My chest ached. I sat up to stretch my torso and expand my chest to take in more air. I became light headed. I stood up out of bed, and rushed to the bathroom, where I relieved myself and then seemingly, immediately sweated all remaining fluid from my body. I stumbled back into my bedroom out of the bathroom. My chest was tight, and I felt as if I was going to pass out. I focused on my breathing. Through sheer force of will, I remained conscious. I knew I had to reach a fellow artist in one of the cabins. In my panic, I was convinced that if I lost consciousness outside of my cabin, exposed to the elements, I would surely freeze to death. I genuinely thought to myself, that this is what it feels like to die. It was going to happen, 20 feet from someone I barely knew, but who was my only hope. I was hours away from my wife, and unable to call her. And I knew that the nearest emergency room was nearly 40 minutes away. I took a few more breaths and rushed over to the nearest cabin, and urged my new friend to “make sure I don’t die.”

After a forty-minute car ride, we made it to the emergency room. Five hours of waiting and tests and waiting and more tests, the medical team could not definitively tell me what was wrong with me. Aside from my symptoms, there was nothing apparently wrong. So they sent me away with pain-killers and that was that. I went back to the residency unsure if this attack would happen again, and if next time would be the end of me. Through this experience, I realized that my body could turn on me with no warning. The body is this complex machine that I did not understand and that could suddenly break down. I was at once terrified at the realization and

thrilled. I could use this experience to influence my work. For a long time, my work has sought to explore the conflict and struggle against forces beyond my control and understanding. But with this new, terrifying experience, I have an actual feeling and medical bills to legitimize it.

The *Helixes* are comprised of five large-scale charcoal drawings on gessoed canvas. I work primarily in charcoal because of its immediacy and malleability. The images I create are spontaneous yet meticulous. With charcoal, I am able to cover great areas and refine the smallest details. Charcoal provides me the means to create a full value scale and has potential for high contrast as evident in the *Helixes*. Charcoal affords me a level of control that I desperately wish I had in other areas of my life. I work at a large scale as it is conducive to my process of full-body movement in the planning process and the large scale of the piece cannot help but confront and invade the viewer's space. At this scale, the drawings can be viewed from afar as abstract black and white drawings. But, upon closer examination, the drawings reveal themselves to be something more. I initially work with a large chunk of compressed charcoal and approach the large sheet of paper, gessoed felt-back vinyl, or in case of the *Helixes*, gessoed canvas as the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists approached their canvases. The process of Andre Mason's automatic drawing and the work of fellow Wyoming-native Jackson Pollock are similar to how I describe my initial process of compositional planning. I take some inspiration from the Surrealists and their fascination with the unconscious, dreams, and psychoanalysis. The work that these artists created was spontaneous and subconsciously influenced. Each new line or splatter was a reaction to the previous. In a similar way, I form the compositional skeletons of my own work.

I begin with a process of automatism, where I attack the white canvas with large sweeping strokes of the charcoal. The dark lines quickly and spontaneously crisscross into massive and increasingly congested intersections. At that point I take my rag and blur lines into

solid shapes that begin to populate the picture plane. When I have an understanding and map of how each strand of the *Helix* will move through the picture plane, I am free to spontaneously and meticulously give form to the shape of each strand with my improvised anatomy and texturing. From there I work in both additive and subtractive methods to bring solid shapes, textures, and figures out of the chaos. The rich, satiny darks and the full value range that I can create, is a sensual experience. My use of the drawing medium is the primary way to create the sense of attraction I need to counter the repulsion evident in the subject matter of my images.

My drawings represent something that does not exist in this reality. My creations, organisms and monsters appear as if they could exist, as if I were drawing their twisted forms from observation. My drawings are intentionally mimetic. I want to render, model and detail my drawings as if I am actually drawing from observation. I want to bring them out of my mind and give them enough information that the viewer can bestow them life. In his introduction to *The Florentine Painters*, Bernhard Borenson wrote:

Psychology has ascertained that sight alone gives us no accurate sense of the third dimension...although it remains true that everytime our eyes recognize reality, we are, as a matter of fact, giving tactile values to retinal impressions... [The drawer's] first business, therefore, is to rouse the tactile sense, for I must have the illusion of being able to touch a figure...before I shall take it for granted as real, and let it affect me lastingly. It follows that the essential in the art of painting—as distinguished from the art of colouring—is somehow to stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that a picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our tactile imagination...And it is only when we can take for granted the existence of the object painted that it can begin to give us pleasure that is genuinely artistic, as separated from the interest we feel in symbols.⁸

By rendering the organism as thoroughly as I can, the viewer can believe these images to be representational and appreciate them beyond being mere two-dimensional marks on a canvas.

⁸ Borenson, Bernhard. *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*. (New York and London: 1896) pp. 3- 7.

The countless monster movies that I have watched have provided me with a mental catalogue of shapes, forms, and textures into which I can tap when my own monsters demand. I have also come to realize that the creators of these creatures took their inspiration from nature. So must I. As a Wyoming native, the environment that I was exposed to must also have influenced my creations. Scale in Wyoming is pushed to extremes. Areas of the high plains stretch uninterrupted flat desert for miles before mountains that jut into the sky. Being so close to nature, I could mentally absorb all of the textures and forms evident. The unusual rock formations of Vedauwoo and Devil's Tower and the alien landscape of Yellowstone's geysers, hot springs, and mud pots are prime inspiration for artistic reference. In the wilds of Wyoming, nature, and the cycles of life are seemingly more apparent. On a drive to the nearest town, which could be over 100 miles, you would see more wildlife than other vehicles. With that kind of isolation, you become more aware of your surroundings. A herd of antelopes graze 100 yards from the highway as you casually switch lanes to avoid hitting the road kill corpse of a whitetail deer in the middle of the road. As you pass, the ravens descend upon the carcass to continue their feast. Driving downtown it was not uncommon to see deer and elk being skinned and gutted in someone's driveway. The *Helixes* reference the natural forms of biology; viscera, DNA, veins, neurons. The thick twisting branches recall the boughs of old trees, vines, and gnarled root systems.

I hope to create a sense of dread or unease in my work through the uncanny nature of the figures that I draw. I use the figure in my work to provide an entry point for the viewer into my drawings. I provide a protagonist with whom the viewer may connect and empathize. These forms serve as a blank slate, for the viewer to take the place of, for him or her to witness, to live, to suffer through the experience of the figure. The viewer becomes the subject of my drawings. I wish to show struggle against forces beyond our control or understanding; against destruction,

collapse, change, decay and death. These forces, be they natural, biological, or otherwise, threaten to damage and destroy the body.

My images exist in the realm of the abject. The themes of body horror and abjection are prevalent in my work. Julia Kristeva wrote about the abject in her 1982 work, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva describes the abject as the reaction, like horror or vomit, to the breakdown in meaning caused by the border between subject and object or self and other. The abject “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules”.⁹ Objects like spit, vomit, feces, and an open wound elicit the abject reaction. These objects threaten the boundaries of inside and outside the body. Kristeva describes the corpse as the ultimate abject. A corpse shows the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is essential for the creation of our identity and entrance into the symbolic order. When we see a corpse we are confronted with our own mortality. Kristeva writes, “The corpse, seen without god and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject”.¹⁰ Kristeva describes how the corpse demonstrates your inevitable death:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death- a flat encephalograph, for instance- I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being.¹¹

I use the ideas of abjection and abject forms to reference death and disorder. I depict my bodies in a state between life and death. Sections of the body remain untouched, attractive and recognizable. Yet these segments of health are counterbalanced by sections of decay and rot.

⁹ Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (New York, Columbia University Press 1982), pp. 4.

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 4.

¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 3.

Tight skin pulls away from its musculature and reveals internal anatomical systems or in some cases, unnatural, unexpected textures of wood rot. Veins protrude on the surface of bulbous, cancerous junctions of the form. These repulsive elements sit in equilibrium with the attractive elements of the materials and processes.

The *Helixes* add another facet to the themes that I have been exploring in my previous work. Life, death and to complete the cycle, these new works explore reproduction and sexuality. Jean-Luc Nancy writes in *The Pleasure in Drawing*, about an un-representable space of art. He writes, “These are not allegorical representations of the abstractions “death” and “sex” but representations of a dead person—a cadaver—and of the organs of sexual reproduction”.¹² Genital organs are present in each *Helix* just as each *Helix* depicts the suggestion of a corpse. Aristotle claims that humans take pleasure in being able to identify an object or image. I want to give the viewer hints of recognizable body parts or regions. I want them to experience the “Aha!” moment and the realization that this is a body. I draw the figure at life size to assist the viewer, to provide a relatable vessel for their imagination to inhabit. I want them to relate to the twisted form, to delight in its absurdity or reel in disgust at its destruction. Aristotle also says that humans also take pleasure in representations of things that, “repulse us, things like cadavers or hideous animals in particular”.¹³ The *Helixes* show the body in disarray, in distress, and decaying. But they also hint at a process of renewal, reproduction, and sexuality. Each *Helix* is composed of two strands. They are two participants in a sort of congress. They touch, grasp, glide, and osculate. The use of the blank negative space in the image is to emphasize this meeting. The negative space between the forms gives the figures room to move, to twist, and vibrate and shows tension and pleasure between the participants.

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy and Philip Armstrong. *The Pleasure in Drawing*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 74.

¹³ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Pleasure in Drawing*. pp. 74.

The *Helixes* represent the culmination of my artistic practice to this point. The underlying structure of each *Helix* references organic forms. Within these structures are the fragmented body with the amalgamation of my subconscious collection of monster movie imagery and natural textures. These forms are at once ambiguous and explicit. I hope to create imagery that is both repulsive and attractive. The *Helixes* are my latest attempt to temper my anxieties and (admittedly) irrational fears through my continuing artistic practice. Everyone is fearful of something, rational or not. You can see these fears manifest in the monsters that exist in the stories, myths, and artwork of nearly every culture on Earth.¹⁴ Monsters fulfill an instinctual need. They serve as a safe and somewhat detached way to understand and be able to manage the perils of life: the forces of nature, the threat of predatory animals, and the possible danger of human social interaction.¹⁵ The *Helixes* are the newest symbiotic life forms to have evolved from the primordial soup of monster movies, anxiety, and fistfuls of charcoal.

¹⁴ Clasen. "Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories."

¹⁵ Clasen. "Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories." pp.227.

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