Fancy Monkeys: The Animal That Became a God

Jackson Wrede

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Preface

This graduate thesis serves to explain both the conceptual and formal aspects of my creation process. After a brief narrative introduction that defines my overarching impetus to paint in the first place and explains the context in which my work may convey meaning, I begin by providing the scholarly research and popular culture influences that inform the theoretical, historical, and critical backbone of my work. My intellectual scuffles with various contemporary philosophies, metanarratives, and societal paradigms remain largely undecided despite all my research as I have grown increasingly skeptical of embracing labels and -ism's to describe my own positions. For this reason, I strive to create art that operates within a more analytical and comparative framework rather than from a partisan or emotional stance. I then document the formal process of how I conduct my studio practice, including my decisions on what and how to paint. My artwork is not purposefully aimed at changing anyone or anything per se, but I do hope its jabbing essence provides food for thought and comic relief as we watch the consequential "cultural balloons" I hint at explode and deflate before our very eyes. Finally, I predict the direction of my future conceptual ambitions and describe how my work fits into our present culture and the grander scheme of art history.

Fancy Monkeys

If you are able to read this, the best evidence the scientific method affords us indicates that you evolved from an infinitesimal point of infinitely high temperature and density called a singularity some 13.8 billion years ago. In the following billions of years, the universe cooled sufficiently to allow the formation of subatomic particles, and later atoms, which now constitutes you and all other matter in the universe. Every time I confront the realization that we are literally chemical rearrangements of ancient stardust, I feel as if I should dunk my head in a bath of cheese or mustard as my brain starts baking into an existential pretzel. And as I begin this thesis

statement on the grandest possible scale and feign the guise of a deeply philosophical intellectual, do not be fooled—my real interests are far simpler. For me, the only fact that dwarfs the miracle of the universe I just described lies within the much more recent revelation that before that stardust became human, it was some sort of monkey—a stupid terrestrial hominid dragging its knuckles on two feet across a floating rock in space.

Fast forward millions of years and here we find ourselves sharing that same rock we now call the Earth. The civilizations Homo Sapiens have built on that rock in the last tens of thousands of years have developed in nearly incomprehensibly fascinating ways, particularly the civilization in which we live right now in my personal opinion. The observation that we did not just descend from primates, we are still literally primates, is at the core of my most recent work. I see my paintings at the crossroads of human evolution and popular culture, on one hand indulging in the passion and beauty of our finite human experience, but at the same time lifting the curtain on our shortcomings and exposing the ugly baggage we lug along with us as great apes.

To live in urbanized American society today means to live in the face of the constant bombardment of pop culture imagery that invites a selection of designated behaviors yet discourages entire sets of others. Long gone are the good ole days where our role in the family, community, and religion paved our path to self- discovery. Public intellectual and historian Yuval Noah Harari hypothesizes the most momentous social revolution to ever befall humankind occurred during the Enlightenment with the collapse of the family and local community and their replacement by the state and the market.² The gods our ancestors worshipped have been shouldered aside by new deities that commandeer our most ancient instincts—Twitter, twerking, Tik Tok—these are what society seems more interested in today.

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¹ Christopher Ryan, and Cacilda Jethá. Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships (HarperPerennial, 2012), 22

² Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 355.

My conceptual tone fluctuates between a simultaneous celebration and indictment of stereotypical performative identities. I center my pop paintings around what many audiences might consider glamorous or appealing subject matter, a deployment of alluring symbols even if they lead to our ultimate destruction as it did for the sailors who heard The Sirens' song in *The Odyssey*. I acknowledge and am often surprised to find how these images have gone into crafting my own character as they have been swirling around in my mind since childhood. As I grow, learn, and continue to gain sovereignty of my own mind, I question some of the attributes I have idolized and acquired while digging my heels into others. In the new contexts I have arranged the elements of my paintings, I tear down the curtain on the firing circuits of our brains and ponder if these electrically-charged organs confined to our skulls can elevate us above the baseness and carnal desires from which my problematic paintings are created. By implying the potential for violence, exaggerating differences among my imagery, and infusing my compositions with unanticipated and often Freudian sexual tension, I lampoon the very values our popular culture suggests we inherit. My work is an investigation of my own identity through many of the cultural icons I have both unconsciously and knowingly adopted.

Instead of providing us clear answers proven by traditional wisdom, our pluralistic world of limitless screens and pop supersaturation offers its people with so many prescriptions of identity that they seem to have surrendered their own. In a world with this proliferation of expression, "authentic" identity and our fundamental nature has forfeited to a tsunami of cultural constructionism. My paintings expose this phenomenon by unmasking specific cultural obsessions and their influence in constructing how we interpret the contemporary individual.

Despite the "advanced" civilization and the infinite social pressures invariably instructing us how "to be," the primal nature and evolutionary roots of these cultural obsessions—violence, status, sex, power—may not always be conscious but seem to be a recurring constant in our collective imagination.

Drawing on sources from film, television, gaming, street art, comic books, music, sports, consumer advertising, a plethora of art historical references, and other media, my painted collages and pop-symbolist illustrations send viewers swimming through a brine of familiar imagery. These disparate images evoke a childish nostalgia and are recontextualized to create controversial atmospheres that speak in an ideological voice riding the line between condemnation and glorification. Rich chroma, recognizable characters, and densely articulated surfaces clash with their more troublesome surroundings than the playful compositions might suggest. By incorporating a nervous humor juxtaposing innocence and disturbance into the narratives on display, I seek to raise the question if a simple-minded primate can exercise the free will necessary to escape the influences of these constant images and messages when we are awash in models that conform so strongly to certain ideas. If not, perhaps my paintings are mere depictions of what a century of mass consumerism, popular culture, and unstoppable market forces have done to replace artistic memory and the human spirit. It is easy to forget in the monotony and excitement of everyday life what we really are, but I remember. My paintings are here to remind you that we are nothing more than a bunch of fancy monkeys.

Masculinity and Sexuality

A crisis of identity that popular culture is constantly revisiting and has recently become especially fixated on are the notions of gender and sex. This issue is particularly interesting to me as an artist investigating human nature. Author Matt Ridley suggests it is impossible to understand human nature without understanding how it evolved, and it is impossible to understand how it evolved if we do not understand the strategy by which it evolved—sexuality.³ Many cultural commentators agree on this topic as a battleground in The Culture War raging

³ Matt Ridley, The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003, New York), 4.

through this second decade of the 21st century. My 2020 painting *The March of Tribalism* illuminates the trend of similar hot-button issues dividing the populace by repurposing the famous illustration *The March of Progress* in the context of The Beatle's *Abbey Road* album cover. The reconfigured composition harkens back to another time of political and social turmoil in the late 60s and illustrates how despite our technological superiority in comparison to former generations, so many contemporary, "smart" phone-wielding humans have still become entrenched in these tribal ways of thinking. The dissent that has emerged from gender & sex controversies have spilled into the political realm and have resulted in an explosion of intense partisanship among the American people that is augmented by social media and a decaying trust in the news cycle, science, metanarratives, and objective truth. Last year former sex researcher Dr. Debra Soh satirically claimed that "keyboards are the new pitchforks" as screen warriors across the globe salivate at the chance to fight ideological battles that have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. My perspective on modern gender & sex arguments is evident in the recurring theme of masculinity throughout my work and comes from a position of genuine inquiry as a young man living in this wild society I have inherited.

The Western world has long-abided by rigid gender constructs of masculinity and femininity, and these associations have persevered through the power of persistent cultural forces that magnify and escalate ancient, evolutionary differences between the sexes. It would seem to me that someone who wholly denies a social constructionist model as it relates to gender is missing the bigger picture, but those who refute basic biological facts do not have the full scoop either. My research has been influenced by writers and thinkers who may vehemently disagree with each other on this topic, and for this reason I believe the portrayal of this theme in my work can be characterized by a model that acknowledges both nature *and* nurture. Ridley argues these

⁴ Debra Soh, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths About Sex and Identity in our Society (New York: Threshold Editions, 2020).*

views are not necessarily incompatible, explaining in his controversial 1993 book *The Red Queen* that human nature is a product of culture, but culture is also a product of human nature, and both are products of evolution.⁵ This does not mean he chalks every explanation up to "It's all in our genes." Rather, he vigorously challenges the notion that anything psychological is purely genetic, while equally challenging the assumption that anything universally human is untainted by genes. "Culture" does not have to be the way it is, yet some underlying universals of human nature seem to keep popping up as a result of bigger-picture, non-discriminating evolutionary pressures with which I am most interested. My critique of those who prescribe to only one of these supposedly conflicting forces is evident in how I ramp gender differences up to a boiling point in my paintings as they are perpetuated in society, particularly surrounding masculinity.

My conceptual process often begins by selecting various archetypes of familiar and expected models of manhood that will pit themselves against each other in competition, much as they have been for most of actual human history. Author Michael Kimmel theorizes that three ideals of masculinity have persevered in our culture since America's founding—what he describes as the Genteel Patriarch, the Heroic Artisan, and the Self-Made Man.⁶ Each of these models of manhood had unique characteristics that set him apart and would put him in opposition with other classes of men in competing for societal influence. Kimmel theorizes in most of his literature the predominant emotion navigating the behavior of men is fear—mainly the subliminal fear of losing the control of society they have historically exerted over others.⁷ Kimmel's hypothesis suggests he prescribes to the Postmodern notion that power is at the center of how human interactions manifest themselves in the cultural landscape. He observes that power is

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⁵ Matt Ridley, The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003, New York). 6.

⁶ Michael Kimmel, Manhood in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2019).

beginning to change hands in contemporary times, particularly for cisgender white men.

Kimmel argues this insecurity born of fear is the determining force in how masculinity is enacted, which could explain one reason for the aggressiveness and physical dominance men have traditionally performed. My early graduate portfolio fixated on several hypermasculine icons to assert this point visually, with paintings that feature overcompensating, borderline "caricatures" whose identities are tied to violence such as Dirty Harry and Rocky Balboa. I have used other figures in paintings such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jordan as competing simulacra of nearly unattainable standards by which other men are judged. In my 2019 painting "YEE-HAAWW!!!!," I alluded to Damien Hirst's formaldehyde-suspended shark as a surrogate to exemplify this insecure, predatory, masculine spirit that I point to as the culprit for our constantly increasingly cultural sensitivity to "toxic masculinity."

This line of reasoning succeeds in identifying some important sociopsychological factors that influence how modern masculinity has come to be understood. There are many writers who agree with Kimmel in this context such as Feminist author, Cordelia Fine. In her books *Testosterone Rex* and *Delusions of Gender*, she offers similar cultural constructionist arguments to Kimmel but leaves the door open to various natural and environmental factors that account for differences in how an individual's gender and sexuality materialize, not necessarily perpetuating this Darwinian cycle of constantly competing and ferociously fearmongering manhood. Debra Soh points out that not long ago, biological explanations were crowbarred into stigmas that suggested women were bad at math and belonged in the kitchen. A female's only value centered on her bearing children and supporting her husband to succeed. Soh argues that luckily our conceptions of gender have improved in the last century, but biology remains stigmatized, unable

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⁸ Cordelia Fine, Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society and Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference

to shake its former reputation as an inherently sexist and antiquated field of study. As someone interested in what is actual going on with human gender/sexuality and cautious of publicly advancing any particular agenda, the Postmodern general distrust of objective truth via scientific reasoning that Soh disavows strikes me as problematic.

This is an easy claim to make in a paper where I do not have to respond to counterarguments directly, but despite the inequalities and misfortunes bad science has caused in human history, I cannot contemplate a substitute method that would improve human beings' standing in the world better than scientific rationality. A biological, evolution-derived understanding of manhood that acknowledges elements such testosterone's effect on the human body is equally interesting to me and serves as the perfect artistic antipode to project against the more socially palatable notion of the tabula rasa. One of the most revelatory exercises someone can perform in the mind is to observe the human race as any other animal species, which is exactly what we are. My paintings exalt the immensely complex and exciting characters and images that species has created, but with a bitter flavor of realistic, critical self-awareness.

The forceful categorization of beings as complex as humans into rigid categories of identity can spiral into a dishonest and dangerous practice. While there is certainly room for improvement, the pluralistic world we occupy today permits an increasingly widening range of behaviors an individual can acceptably demonstrate, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. In nearly all philosophical dilemmas, logic leads me to defend the position that prioritizes individual liberty and supports people's freedom to express themselves in any way that does not infringe on the rights of others.

For example, men today feel far less pressure to provide or protect than they would have

⁹ Debra Soh, The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths About Sex and Identity in our Society (New York: Threshold Editions, 2020), 18.

had to throughout the entirety of human history up until the last few decades. At face value this may sound like a beneficial consequence of progress, but Kay S. Hymowitz harshly criticizes this exact phenomena in her book, *Manning Up*. She points to the decline of the nuclear family, delayed adulthood, and an increasingly female-friendly economy as catalysts for the feminization of traditional masculinity, trends she argues open the door for many new opportunities but leave America's young men feeling gradually more disenfranchised and without purpose. Other female researchers have brought this transformation to light as well, such as Christina Hoff Sommers in her controversial book, *The War Against Boys*, which condemns how nonchalantly and inaccurately the phrase "toxic masculinity" can be used as a label to villainize half the global population. As a young, white heterosexual man navigating these choppy waters, I appreciate the multitude of perspectives on these issues as they help me arrive at a more nuanced understanding both of myself and the society I inhabit.

Adolescence, Cartoons, and Celebrity

Another important aspect of my work is the use of imagery from childhood and celebrated tropes with which even the youngest members of our society are familiar. This tool allows me to demonstrate that these societal pressures do not begin when we become adults and are fully aware of the systems in which we reside. Rather, these influences have encroached on our personalities ever since we first acquired a cultural consciousness and theory of mind, and they have never left. Human beings throughout history have felt similar influences as children, but from obligations to a family, local community, or religious structure in most cases. As inherently social beings, never in human history have we faced the comparisons we must make

¹⁰ Kay S. Hymowitz, *Manning Up* (Basic Books, 2012).

¹¹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Our Young Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015).

¹² Harari, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.

today to a popular culture. Our indoctrination of social media platforms like Instagram, where 3.5 billion new "likes" are clocked up every day, demonstrate visual culture's supremacy in a world where screens dominate our minds. This pattern of constantly curating a public image while grappling with lived reality exerts enormous pressure on society's adolescents and has charged younger generations with an angst that was evidenced in the breakthrough 2020 docudrama *The Social Dilemma*. When I pump my compositions full of seemingly innocent imagery from popular culture, a nervous examination of our youth's exposure to such influences erupts.

Another strength of referencing adolescent themes is its basis in cartoon imagery, which is one of my favorite mechanisms to convey a formal dynamism in visual art. I have always been fascinated with the potential for line as an eye-manipulating device. With a few quick scratches of a pencil, cartoons and the mark-making of comics are able to translate more action than most other modes of expression. In Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, he makes the profound hypothesis that because of the minimal detail cartoons employ, they become vacuums into which our identities and awareness are pulled, empty shells we inhabit that enable us to travel in another realm. Cartoons take us to an extreme and exciting place we did not know existed. This sentiment echoes the tenants of the Modernist movement in painting's potential to create its own reality instead of merely regurgitating in two dimensions the often-lackluster three-dimensional experience we normally observe. Painting, today more than ever, has the ability to separate us from the boring world in which we live and transport us instead to a new arena that is only bound by the limits of the canvas— one not subjected to our regular laws of gravity, light, or color. Every element that constitutes a painting is subject to the artist's discretion, and with the proper skillset and resources any idea can materialize into that new reality.

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¹³ Kit Smith, "50 Incredible Instagram Statistics You Need to Know" Brandwatch

¹⁴ Scott McCloud, The Invisible Art Understanding Comics (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 1994).

In my latest works, I have drifted from my typical collage aesthetic to a more popsurrealist atmosphere that uses symbolism to convey meaning. *The Doomscrolling Stinker* and *Cheesy Meathead* ramp up the formal visual diversity as art history, comics, and today's screen culture all become evident influences in how the pieces are understood. The former presents a stark, primitive color scheme in the background clashing against the realistic rendering of the foreground that is emblematic of our larger cultural signal loss. These works expose how the chains of our technological slavery grow increasingly heavy, and how our most basic human functions and tendencies have fallen prey to these depressing yet enticing pressures.

It's All About the Process

Now that the conceptual themes underlying my work have been thoroughly described, I will explain my personal relationship with painting and the technical aspects of my studio practice. As an artist, I am a one-trick pony. However, my trick encompasses most of the territory achievable within the limitations of painting as a medium. My first feelings of value and self-worth derived from a natural talent drawing pictures at a young age, and the confidence I developed within that skillset has made painting the medium where I can best unleash my ideas and control the outcome of how they are perceived. I became an artist more out visual paramountcy than I did as a rhetorical tool to share my vision of the world with an audience. Skilled craftsmanship, meaningful labor, and a resulting final product one could take pride in formulated my initial intoxication with art. My earliest memories from this time include John Singer Sargent putting me under hypnosis on a field trip to the Chicago Art Institute as his work has done to so many other painters, as well as becoming mesmerized by buttery brush strokes combining to create the illusion of former presidents at the National Portrait Gallery on a family vacation to Washington D.C. I found the dynamism of cartoons and anime TV shows were so

much more exciting to my young, impressionable mind than reality. In the present this has evolved into a full-on love affair with painting, and I'm committed to this relationship for life.

For this reason, every painting must start with an appealing, purely visual idea before I can make sense of injecting any meaning into it. While I am most attracted to traditional conceptions of aesthetics, my graduate education in particular has expanded my threshold of visual criteria to include a multi-faceted array of subject matter. I collect inspiration by screenshotting the multitude of images that will pass through my iPhone screen browsing the web on a given day, snapping pictures of stickers and graffiti in the bathrooms at bars and under bridges, and jotting down my thoughts in the precious Notes App. I frequently review these files and when the time comes to begin a new work, I am always able to find images there I want to revisit. Anything within the realm of mainstream popular culture has been within my typical wheelhouse, but lately I find increasing influence from countercultural and more organic influences such as the natural world and the figure that may reveal more about this strange human condition we all share.

Once I have identified a subject(s), I brainstorm visual methods to unite them with other references. For example, I deploy the statue of Venus of Milo and Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can in my 2019 painting Pussy on a Pedestal as both of these pieces independently appealed to me as attractive visual objects after visiting them in their respective museums. Despite their obvious differences, I imagined the common ground these pieces share in what they say concerning changing definitions of aesthetics as an interesting lens to illustrate the progression of art history. This tactic expanded on a similar method of composition design I found success with in my undergraduate painting, Hungry Like the Wolf, in which I contrast a traditional object of great artistic beauty, Michelangelo's statue of Adam, against the first sexual episode of so many 90s youths with my portrayal of Wendy Peffercorn. The physical arrangement of these elements in their respective compositions reveal the conceptual ideas I attempt to illuminate.

Once I have decided the chief objects or pop culture artifacts the painting will be based around, my concerns turn more logistic and I consider the scale of the final work. I generally find "the bigger the better" to be an accurate observation in the style of works that I create (and good advice), but my ambitions are frequently limited by a number of real-world factors. I arrange compositions as pencil sketches on paper in the same ratio to my intended final before committing to the construction phase. My drawings must convey an assured sense of placing within the confines of the canvas before moving on, and I will often complete two or three renditions of this step in the process.

My paintings begin as finished line drawings before the first paint is ever actually applied. For more representational, modeled subjects that must be in perfect proportion, I use a grid method to transfer the image from my computer screen to the canvas. Controlling the gridding ratios allows me to fit the subjects in the exact place where I need them in my compositions that are often arranged like collages. I will free-hand the more cartoonish and patterned "filler" imagery, often making adjustments as I furnish the gaps with these complementary subjects.

The drawing stage is the most important step in my process. Erroneous painting can always be corrected with a new layer of color and a little patience, but hitting the rewind button on line-construction proves to be difficult. I sharpen several pencils in various colors with erasers and a ruler nearby that help assist how I sort through my increasing and intersecting layers of mark-making in the early stages. I then spray the composition with a workable fixative so the graphite does not muddy my initial layers of paint. This technique also allows me to apply a Turpenoid-diluted underpainting while still retaining the clean contours of my drawing and a sense of the construction that I just worked so long to achieve. From there I build up layers of paint, usually starting with cheap acrylics or earth-toned oils and working my way up to finer pigments and vibrant glazing layers mixed with my required medium, Liquin. I generally paint

dark-to-light in increasing layers of color intensity and detail, generally aspiring to echo the surface quality of the French Academic painters and their "licked" finish.

I have more recently experimented with several finishing techniques, including traditional varnishes and a variety of other textures such as glitter, diamond dust, spray paint, industrial coatings, and epoxy resin. These razzle-dazzle materials often suit the highly-consumerist themes I depict in paint—a way of promoting pop art into store-shelf eye candy while still retaining a fine art identity. I have grown to treat my paintings as more of a total sculptural object than just a flat image, and, and as I prepare to show work publicly, finishing touches and display elements become more important.

Conclusion

While this thesis stands as the explanation of my painting practice and underlying conceptual interests over the last several years, I hope if I were to write a new version from scratch a few more years from now that it would look drastically different. I may defend the ideas described in this paper today, but only an individual capable of extraordinary growth and intellectual courage can abandon their comfortable truths in the present and become convinced of more challenging ideas in the future. I acknowledge the evolution-heavy worldview outlined in this paper may not match the common and popular philosophies embraced by most practicing artists and critics, but only in honestly voicing my opinion and welcoming the consistent assessment of my own theories will I arrive at a fuller picture of the truth that speaks in an innovative and authentic way.

My hope is that my personal attitude of lifelong improvement mirrors the trajectory of our entire species. As biological slaves who must eat, drink, pee, poop, and sleep every day to stay alive, we are so focused on constantly answering the question of *how things are* instead of

asking the bigger question of how do we want things to be?—or even more profoundly still, what do we want to want in the first place? This question dwarfs the debates that currently preoccupy politicians, philosophers, scholars, and ordinary people, and how this generation answers it will dictate the kind of world the Homo Sapiens of the future share. To quote Harari a final time:

To satisfy both optimists and pessimists, we may conclude by saying that we are on the threshold of both heaven and hell, moving nervously between the gateway of the one and the anteroom of the other. History has still not decided where we will end up, and a string of coincidences might yet send us rolling in either direction.¹⁵

The culmination of my thesis is embodied by my work "Son on Man." This painting essentially is an illustration of the previous quote, acknowledging the progress and the astounding society we have built while simultaneously warning of the looming dangers that lurk in our immediate future. *Son of Man* is larger than any other painting I have completed because I believe its cultural significance is far greater than any other work I have made to date. My hope is that audiences gaze upon this work contemplating the origin of our species so that they can reflect and decide what they can do personally to make sure this species and the human experiment continues.

The only thing holding back an animal who has the power to ask whatever questions it wants appear to be the laws of physics themselves (at least in this universe). We should not take that blessing for granted. God isn't dead—there are 7 billion of Them. The Gods have only been here about 200,000 years. And Gods willing, they are just getting started.

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¹⁵ Harari, Sapiens, 375.

Plates



The March of Tribalism (2020) 30" x 30" oil on canvas 2020



The Peacemaker 48" x 60" oil, acrylic, and resin on canvas 2019



YEE-HAAWWW!!!!
36" x 48"
oil, acrylic, and spray paint on canvas
2019



King of Heart 60" x 48" oil, acrylic, and diamond dust on canvas 2019



The Doomscrolling Stinker 16" x 20" oil and resin on panel 2021



Cheesy Meathead 20" x 16" oil and resin on panel 2021



Pussy on a Pedestal 48" x 72" oil and resin on panel 2020



Hungry Like the Wolf 48" x 60" oil on canvas 2017



Son of Man 108" x 84" oil on canvas 2021

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