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Gutted: Stem to Stern

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DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART

BY

ZACHARY BATH

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2020
CATALOG

One-Person Exhibition

BY

Zachary Bath

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between December 2018 and April 2020. It was to be presented in an exhibition from April 12th through April 18th, 2020 in the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, Jack Arends Hall, Northern Illinois University - DeKalb, Illinois. This exhibition was cancelled due to COVID-19 and moved to virtual exhibition through the NIU School of Visual Art.
List of Works

1. *Anthropogenica*, Woodcut print, 80” x 30”, December 2018
2. *Minotauros*, Woodcut print, 80” x 48”, March 2020
3. *Funeral Inversion*, Woodcut print, 80” x 37”, April 2020
4. *Malleus Maleficarum*, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
5. *R-Complex Crystallization*, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
6. *Sungazers*, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
7. *Towering Obsidian*, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
8. *Plaguedancers*, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 44”, April 2020
10. *Deposition of a Soothsayer*, Mokulito print, 42” x 34”, March 2020
Gutted: Stem to Stern

I see my work as fitting a niche of contemporary art and printmaking by combining traditionalist processes with expressive imagery and mark making that convey emotional content alongside the conceptual. Woodcut for me is so reactive and immediate that I feel I can constantly respond to contemporary struggles, simultaneously bound to historical and mythological references. I see myself as another possible agitator, slanted towards ushering in a new era of expressionist and figurative works, which can transition from an adoption of the vanguard to a complete rejection. There is a niche of countercultural, revolutionary, nihilistic critique of the normative culture that my work truly addresses and molds to.

In the contemporary sphere of figurative works, what stands out to me as the primary concern is a crucial, universal dialogue through the imagery, by means of a relative attachment to the human form as a vessel of metaphor and criticism. Universality of expression through interpretation of the figure becomes a codified language which permeates the experience of human consciousness, and throughout history this principle has been the backbone cultural symbolism and metaphysical allegory. Personally, I seek to evoke criticism of normative cultural praxis through my figurative imagery, particularly in realms that deal with aberrant and treacherous modes of the psyche. Pillars of self and societal destruction through ego, violence and fanaticism underlie the framework of my imagery and concepts, though individually each piece is imbued with it’s own corporeality and ambition.

As an artist, my professional practice is my livelihood, and in every sense is actually a blessing and privilege to be in a position to be a maker and a creative, however I find within my own process an extra opportunity to undergo an introspective transmutation. Every time I begin to approach a new piece, series, or body of work, I must search within myself to evaluate my
own experiences and biases to refine exactly what direction of dialogue I would like to create between myself and my audience. So often I find a small sliver of inspiration or observe something in my day to day that sticks in the back of my mind and grows. With that initial spark I then press myself to research both imagery and writings to narrow in on a specific set of symbols and concepts then I must impose upon my composition. This process has also taught me to expect aspects to change or completely transform into something else entirely, and within those changes is where I find the most success. In addition to this conceptual meditation I feel that the physical process of sketching, to layout, and into carving and printing, the image grows in complexity, as I often start with only a charcoal or ink and brush drawing, which tend to act more as a skeletal system upon which new passages and details emerge. As a studio practice I find this point in the process to be the most risky and unknown in terms of developing the image, but also the most important to my mental state going into the work and where the real improvisation and innovation can begin. When things become too rigid I too start to become inflexible, however when I am forced to act and problem solve I feel the most sense of self discovery and empowerment. Above all I want to be able to transfer that energy to the viewer. Conclusively, I resolve to impress upon my audience this line of duality, a balance of concept and process, science and magic, virtue and villainy, and it is within these grey areas that we truly find out what lies within ourselves and each other. I always strive to keep my mind completely open and if nothing more I want to inspire or perhaps provoke an openness to that which normally shys from the light.

My chosen medium of woodcut functions in several different ways which I find beneficial to the content at hand, as well functioning on a personal level as I connect to the material and medium I have chosen to dedicate my current modality of work too. Firstly, there is a strong attraction for me to work in a bold, graphic nature, particularly in the depths of achromatism/monochromatism, and the woodcut medium became that vehicle for expression that I never knew I had been searching for. My first foray into a full on printmaking course revealed to me that untold numbers of works by artists who I admired were in fact prints, not paintings or drawings as I had ridiculously just presumed, as it seems that a number of professors early in my
education themselves either had no real concept of determining a print from a drawing or painting, or simply didn’t care too. Upon the unlocking of this secret print knowledge I began to see imagery in a completely new light and became obsessed with the process of woodcut in particular. I believe that I became as consumed by the labor and tactility of carving my matrix as I did with the printing and the final image. My family background is that of blue collar workers, particularly in construction and that upbringing in labor and building something with your own two hands always attracted me. Perhaps in some ironic way, locked into my psyche of always wanting to impress a father who seemed disinterested in art and culture, I was able to bridge a gap between art and labor through transforming the materials of construction, into the materials of art. This may extend to my use of contractor grade plywoods, as a more affordable but far more unpredictable substrate for carving as opposed to higher grade, softer woods. The plywood itself becomes a collaborator in my process, often having variation in hardness and grain, leading to issues of chipping or cracking that then in turn impacts the overall aggressiveness of the carving methods that I employ. There is a dialogue going between myself and the material that I find absolutely essential to my process as I am able to attack the block, but the block may strike back. In a way I would equate this as being something akin to ritual or meditation. The woodcut process offers so much opportunity for powerful, bold strokes of the gouges, which can then be complemented by delicate, highly refined strokes of the tool. This has been bolstered even more so by my investigation and adoption of the mokulito (“wood-litho”) process, which has allowed for further exploitation of materials, increased and diversified my approach to mark making and layering, and ultimately elevated the works into innovative new realms.

Through practical execution there is a meditation and self criticism that takes place during the conception and construction of each image, and by a process of filtration, contortion, and obfuscation of the normative dogmas through the lens of the self. Ultimately I seek to project these sensitivities and experiences back towards the collective in a provocation of the viewer to self reflect and share in the fervor of idiosyncrasy and hypocrisy. In a world where the predominant mindset is that of perpetuating industry, productivity, and domination of the land and its resources, I find importance for there to be a perspective that is mired in the antithesis to
such principles. The motivation is never to condemn or ridicule the steadfast determinism of
culture but to transform it through a renewal of universalism and aesthetic language.
Contemporary art is the pinnacle of the personal, and it seems impossible to separate the personal
from the political, and so to do I find it impossible to make art that is not entrenched in
revolutionary prospects. Through an examination and expulsion of the darkness, then may we be
able to cascade into the light.

Vivisection

The works contained within this thesis, Gutted: Stem to Stern, are the response to the
culmination of cultural fluxus and spiritual warfare, each marking a new shift in the decaying
modalities of this world caught between its past and future. Individually, each work may be
dissected by its own symbolic and metaphysical underpinnings coiled within the aesthetic
volatility, allowing the burden of awareness to transfer from the ethereal to the conscious. As
one work informs the next, and series of prints inform the larger collection, there is a life cycle
revolving around the inception of the imagery to crossing the threshold into the realm of the
tangible.

We must start at the beginning, Anthropogenica, “of man”, depicts the captive and
suffocating victim of human folly, bound to future dictated by those who came from the past.
The plastic bag shroud has come to mean a signifier of the artist within the work, a de facto mask
of self portraiture, the asphyxiated has become a martyr for the forgotten lost and dead. In
Minotauros, the shrouded figure is free from their bonds, dissected and posed in a gesture of
beastial worship. This work was born of investigation into possible connections between surreal
artist Man Ray and the unsolved Black Dahlia Murder of 1947. There appeared to be direct
references made to the artist by the killer, particularly the photograph Minotaur, and with later
artist responses created by both Man Ray and then later by Duchamp who made the killing the
central inspiration of his 25 year work Etan donnes. My print shares from elements of all of these
historic images. Where Anthropogenica binds the martyr, Minotauros commands the martyr, and
puppets him for aesthetic worship, and then the series of three is finalized with Funeral
Inversion. The martyr awaits the graves, shrouded and wrapped like a mummy, with only a raw
and cavernous chest exposed, placed in a coffin. This image operates in reference to the ancient burial rights of Egypt, interring the wayward spirit in mythology.

Next in succession, the works *Malleus Maleficarum* and *R-Complex Crystallization* act as a tandem dyad, functioning as a binary of thought and history. *Malleus Maleficarum* is titled as such in direct reference to the 1486 Catholic treatise on witchcraft in Europe. The “Witches Hammer” text became the foundation for religious persecution, heavily favoring the directives of men over women. This print is made in defiance of the dogmatic inquisition which has fielded sexist and patriarchal oppression for millenia, binding the goddess the cross. Juxtapose this with *R-Complex Crystallization*, a mockery of toxic, over satiated, self centered masculinity, and the adoption of ‘New Age’ spiritualism through means of accessing gratification through surreptitious motives. There is reference to gluttony and aristocracy, a chasing of unattainable wealth and fame that permeates social media and popular culture, objectification of excess. Perhaps it is outdated to predicate works on a masculine/feminine dynamic, but I think it rather undercuts the ideas as they are mired in duality as an outdated worldview, just as all black and white distinctions become spoiled by misinformation and superstition.

Designed as triptych the next suite of prints entitled *Sungazers, Towering Obsidian*, and *Plaguedancers* depicts the writhing of classical inspired figures, multiplied and superimposed atop each other layers of statuary. The poses and gestures of the original figure studies were for each of the three prints depict scenes of ritualistic trance-like states from sources such as Japanese kabuki performers, shamanic ceremonies, and 80’s cult horror cinema. While each singular print functions as a monolith of arrested rapture, the triptych shares a unified environment in addition to their shared agony. As a whole they are transfixed in an exchange of piercing, unseen energy from above, expelling and absorbing the grim ether. Trapped in the dazzle of total celestial disintegration. However, the exact source and intention of the exchange is distant and ambiguous. The background motif of the setting/rising of a sun/moon removes another layer of certainty when approaching the work as a triptych. There is an ultimate
conclusion to all of the material which we chose to project and consume as communion with our existence.

The final pair of prints come as a fresh reaction to material and mark making combined with the application of very opaque and metallic pigments which begin to resist each other in the printing process. As a result of the pigment selection in the printing of these works, it actually influenced the final color choice on the rest of the mokulito printing for the works in this thesis exhibition. *Board Up The House* and *Deposition of a Soothsayer* as a pair, express shards of a narrative, cropped and designed as the conclusion to the body of work from the exhibition and nod at directions for the future. While *Board Up The House* is based on imagery that suggests something quite domestic or clinical, however the historical truth is actually mental health treatment in modern America, it underlies the true tone of potential harm. The consequence of such implication is then answered within *Deposition of a Soothsayer*, which suggests the burial of a potential divine or prophetic individual, thinly draped and limp, down into an abyss. Similarly this imagery is a result of historical examination, though this time of photographs from the First World War pertaining to the early studies of effects and treatment of ‘shell shock’ or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as it is known today. *Deposition of a Soothsayer* invokes the final penance of those who suffer at the hands of disparity and hostility.

‘*Gutted*’ has been a complete summation of my work and directions in theory, practice, and philosophy over the span of the past two years. The summation of executing these works is a cathartic and totalizing experience and with that so to do I choose to further seek the bloom within the void. May these works signify our transformative and tumultuous era existence, and revel in the glory of cacophony.

“And when he has spoken, they will pour themselves over him, led by the pacifier makers and the midwives, and bury him in their fingernails.”

- Peter Wessel Zappfe, *The Last Messiah*, 1933
*Anthropogenica*, Woodcut print, 80” x 30”, December 2018
Minotauros, Woodcut print, 80” x 48”, March 2020
Funeral Inversion, Woodcut print, 80” x 37”, April 2020
Malleus Maleficarum. Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48” , April 2020
R-Complex Crystallization, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
Sungazers, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
Towering Obsidian, Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 48”, April 2020
Plaguedancers. Woodcut & Mokulito print, 80” x 44”, April 2020
Board Up The House. Mokulito print, 36” x 36”, March 2020
Deposition of a Soothsayer, Mokulito print, 42” x 34”, March 202