

Horror Show





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“I want something’s flesh!”

—WITHNAIL (Withnail & I)

The exasperated, guttural cry of unemployed actor Withnail (Richard E. Grant) in the 1987 film speaks volumes about our present engagement with the concept of horror. Uttered while having gone on holiday ‘by mistake’ and finding himself limited to a diet of boiled potatoes, Withnail’s cry—directed at the empty hills that surround his ramshackle hut—embodies the contemporary preoccupation with flesh, horror and spectacle once liberated from its specific context. For many of us living in the comfort of western society, horror appeals through its otherness, that is, it reaches into other realities we cannot experience to broaden the field of sensations open to us. As writer on horror theory David Peak points out, ‘Horror, as a genre, exists because the experience of fear, when removed from an environment of immediate survival, is considered by many to be pleasurable’.

Underscoring much contemporary thought on horror is the early twentieth century science fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft, who examined at length the cosmic finitude of humanity. He opens his book *Clusters & Nebulae* with the following passage:

A vast, sepulchral universe of unbroken midnight gloom and perpetual arctic frigidity, through which will roll dark, cold suns with their hordes of dead, frozen planets, on which will lie the dust of those unhappy mortals who will have perished as their dominant stars faded from their skies. Such is the depressing picture of a future too remote for calculation.

It is Lovecraft’s central thesis of a humanity fated to a slow dissolution that informs Dylan Trigg’s recent study, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*, in which it is claimed ‘the horror of the cosmos is essentially the horror of the body’. This ‘body horror’ calls into being a philosophy that accounts not only for human perception, but for the nonhuman realm; the *unhuman*. As Trigg writes:

...the new philosophy remains linked to a glorification of the world that persists long after humans have left the scene, both conceptually and empirically. What emerges is a philosophy at the end of the world, in which thinking gains its power by cultivating the ruins that outlive this end before then employing those ruins as ambassadors for a lost humanity.

According to Peak, horror arises from our human encounter with the *unknowable*. He states:

...it is fair to say that to be human is to be both imprisoned in our limited comprehension of the universe and ‘privileged’ with the burden of consciousness. Being human with an inescapable corporeal reality and simultaneously possessing consciousness, in and of itself, creates an inescapable state of horror.

Horror, we might then say, arises from our inability to reconcile imagination with reality; that which we know with that which we can’t.

Horror today extends well beyond its traditional modes of cinema and literature to infect the previously immune realm of fine art, with surprising

and startling results. Rarely do artists engaging with horror do so in a literal way, but instead extend conceptual thought on the subject to impregnate it within daily routines and phenomena. Horror becomes a matter for aesthetic recourse—blood the treacle-like medium, fear the brush with which it is applied, and the echo of screams the canvas upon which they paint. The effects extend beyond cheap thrills, probing and pricking the existential consciousness, planting seeds of doubt into the cosmos we inhabit. The artworks assembled here, rather than seeking to affirm or delight, pull the rug from under our feet to cast us into the void of uncertainty.

This selection of artworks has been compiled by the Ryan Sisters who, like the Brothers Grimm, become our guides through this veiled passage into the sinister and bizarre. The Ryans—Natalie and Pip—augment this selection with one of their own, *Lights Out*, a work that seemingly augurs their own roles as tour guides. In an oblique reference to the film *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty & the Beast*), 1946, we find a pair of disembodied arms clutching candlesticks—the arms severed at the elbows and mounted on trophy plaques—to propose that the field of horror itself has been caught, stuffed and mounted. We might imagine the arms and candlesticks having belonged to a spooky figure drifting down the hallway of a haunted house, but presented here as a fragment of flesh and bone the apparition is suspended inauspiciously between fiction and reality as a pertinent manifestation of David Peak's 'inescapable state of horror'.

The references to B-grade horror film effects continue in Danny Frommer's *Beetroot Head*, in which a life size human head carved from beetroot lies dumped in a foam Esky on the floor of the Gallery. Frommer explains, 'I thought beetroot when made to resemble body parts is scary, bloody, organic and it rots. I like how on closer inspection it becomes something mundane'. On first approach the head presents as an object of abject horror; a grisly, fleshy spectacle of oozing, porous substance. Over the course of its residency within the Gallery it becomes parched and bone dry. The piece deliberately takes on the appearance of having been expediently dumped, while also invoking the formal qualities associated with a white cube gallery through its white foam container.

The work of ceramicist Jordan Wood calls to mind the shrunken heads found among Amazon tribes—severed and mounted on a pole for tribal or ceremonial purposes. Wood brings a seductive quality to her otherwise goulsh little crania; like Damian Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull they invoke longing and desire while memorialising death. Wood says 'Frailty of form is challenged through the process of making; the sunken

heads rest between composure and collapse as they emerge from the kiln'. They invoke a particular kind of horror that somehow becomes heightened even as we reassure ourselves with didactic information. They reaffirm George J. Sieg's assertion that:

Horror also maintains the fascinating quality of being self-renewing, for while awe and wonder may both collapse under sufficiently detached rational observation, Horror only seems to increase the more it is contemplated.

In the case of Jordan Wood's ceramic 'sunken' heads, this 'self-renewing' horror is perpetuated by a crisis of logic, in which reason is severed and a creeping sense of foreboding comes to the fore. The heads embody the horror of the Occult—of beliefs and customs outside our sphere of western understanding, and propose that everything we know is false and fallible.

Alternative systems of understanding seem also to guide Simon Pericich's approach to art-making, one that is similarly attuned toward a creeping sense of dread. Many of the artist's pieces are informed by self-portraiture, and specifically, with his own testing and constant reappraisal of his sense of 'self' cast within a field of art historical referents. Thus, we encounter a classical portrait bust on a pedestal, wherein the bust has been formed from wet clay and is suffocated by a garbage bag; the elevated pedestal on which it rests is made from plastic. Pericich describes this work, titled *I couldn't tell if you were having the time of your life or you were dead*, as 'an autobiographical response'. He says he wanted to investigate:

The thrill of seeing how far you can have 'fun' until it isn't fun anymore or seeing other folks do it. The self-sabotaging sexy stranded moment when it all falls apart and you're lying on the ground trying to figure out if you're laughing or whimpering.

The work simultaneously references classic masked monsters from horror films, bondage and classical sculpture. A second work, *Swallowed whole by wallowed swell*, confronts self-portraiture even more directly, by presenting a fractured pane of glass partially covered with reflective paint. Pericich describes the title, etched into the mirrored surface, as 'like a spell that needs to be discovered after encountering your own reflection. The mirrored surface acts like a doorway into a void of self-loathing ... the sheer existential terror of Self'. Notable here is the inclusion of 'pain' as one of the listed materials, as is

the parallel in shattered glass to Marcel Duchamp's iconoclastic *The Large Glass* (1915-23).

There are other references to the monsters of classic horror in works by Michael Vale and Joel Zika. In Vale's large scale painting *The Ice Cream Man* we encounter a waifish purveyor of sugary treats semi-submerged within a veiled field of viridian green trees. The figure wears a pointed orange hat and red stripy pants. His face is painted like a clown's with smudged red lipstick and he holds a hangman's noose in his left hand. Most alarming, however, is the glowing eyes like headlights, piercing the opaque gloom. The Ice Cream Man, caught in the apparent midst of perpetrating a murder, stands frozen with his eyes fixed on us. We involuntarily do likewise, caught in a deadlock punctuated by the imminent thrill of the unfolding drama. This is Nietzsche's famous line from *Beyond Good and Evil* become manifest: 'When you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you'.

Such sentiments ring true also for Zika, whose *Pig Farm Massacre* represents quite a different abyss—the void of taste. The digital image presents an opening into a light-filled space, however to access this space we must pass through a revolving windmill of butcher's cleavers, crested by the head of a bearded man with deranged red eyes. This is horror of the lowest common denominator brought to fine art of the highest; the disorientation created by this rift pitches us into a space where we don't know whether to laugh out loud or run screaming. The imagery is a direct homage to the video cover of *Slaughterhouse*—a low-grade horror film from the 1980s. The title was deemed too controversial in Germany, where it was marketed as *Pig Farm Massacre*. The cover presents 'Buddy', a clever-wielding bulk of a man, whose head reappears in Zika's work. Recalling his creation of the work Zika says:

I was thinking about going to the video store when I was a kid. There were a range of cases that I used to love checking out but never actually watched. Some of them had fake blood or different layers, I think one was the shape of a coffin. I remembered this one case where some sort of butcher was standing by an open doorway, I tracked down the movie and thought it would be cool to turn that memory into a kind of ride or horror / minigolf ride / facade.

Zika's grisly spectacle finds a kind of antithesis in Kotoe Ishii's lulling video work *In a Whisper*. The effect, however, is no less chilling. In the work Ishii places us within a tunnel moving towards a light. The obvious referent here is of death and of a spirit ascending to

heaven—but it could just as equally translate into a passage toward life itself. When it becomes clear we will never reach the end of the tunnel, feelings of containment, claustrophobia and nausea begin to set in. Ishii produced the work following a return visit to Japan after twelve years in Australia. She says:

I was overwhelmed by tunnels for some reason. Running towards one light seemed so poetic. Suddenly in the tunnel, the world is cut out and the noise takes me too, as if I'm inside the stomach and listening to myself talking outside. It is like fragments of death, then towards living. Ingestion then to excretion.

If Ishii presents ideas associated with containment and perpetual stasis, then Paula Mahoney liberates us with release. Hers is a horror tinged with loss and melancholy, and a longing for a loved one never to be replaced. The pain of loss is a horror familiar to many. In her series of images *Dis/Appear*, Mahoney responded to the loss of her own father. Mahoney says the works 'explore the way in which art can address the metaphysical presence of death in life, and how that presence is greatly amplified in moments of loss'. Using performative photography, the artist dressed backwards in her deceased father's suit, striving to form 'an imagined embrace with my father'. As in the present work *Free Falling No.6*, Mahoney uses her falling or twisting body in an attempt to represent the hysteria of grief.

Working in (or opening) a similar vein to Mahoney, Neale Stratford explores his own grief and limitations through self-reflective photography. In *The Pit* we find a female archaeologist exhuming (or possibly reintering) the bodiless head of the artist, oblivious to the rapid approach of a muscle-bound shirtless monster. The scene is given a rotational blur to make us feel dizzy or nauseous. The 'pit' therefore becomes one of psychological dimensions; much less an unfolding of actual events it pitches us into the dark spaces that occupy Stratford's cranium. The monsters that on the outside are safely fictional, here, become menacingly real. Using action figures or dolls within his photography, Stratford poses scenarios—often drawn from art historical or cinematic currents—to recalibrate the world through his mindset, which is informed by his affliction with Asperger's Syndrome. He says:

As a child I often played alone and from this early age I became fascinated with action figures and dolls. It was part of my 'autism'

that I found comfort by playing with these toys where I could control the relationships between the figures—relationships that I found difficult to have in real life.

The obsessive and poetical drawings of Adam Boyd carry with them a similarly psychological dimension. In *Rebus Coin*—‘rebus’ being a pictorial device used to represent words—we find the capacity of words to describe the torrent of imagery to be quite inadequate. Here, simply, is a tour-de-force of stream of consciousness drawing, of sketching, note-taking, imagining, playing and of carefully resolving the particles of matter that swoop and dive through the artist’s consciousness. Like a form of lucid dreaming, Boyd guides us through a dense and labyrinthine wonderland of skulls, beasts and body parts that make sense only in their cosmological whole. Here we find the meanderings of the artist’s imagination leading us to destinations both startlingly beautiful and horrific—a landscape of the mind, or, as James Gleeson would have put it, a ‘psycho-scape’, where an interior reality presides over the exterior.

If Boyd presents us with the interior of the cave, Linsey Gosper offers up two possible points of entry. *The Mouth of Hell* comprises two photographic images (stained with red wine), one depicting a gardenesque aperture augmented with overgrown ivy, the other a screaming mouth. It is the mouth that demands our immediate attention—containing teeth and lips blackened with a substance we might take to be blood, it presents as the vampirical cry of bloodlust. But is this triumph or pain? Paired with the cave we imagine the site of these events, a possible repository of human remains, torn apart by the attendant she-devil. Gosper professes to an interest in ‘the parallels of the art and science of alchemy and magick to darkroom practice’. She investigates themes of ‘feminine identity, sexuality and the Occult; the body and landscape as a site of ritual’. Such aspects of her practice come to the fore in the present diptych, where an unsettling yet empowering aura of female energy electrifies the senses.

Michael Meneghetti supplies what might be considered the male counterpoint to Gosper’s goddess of gore. In his performance piece *Profondo Ferro* Meneghetti calls forth the spirits of our collective ancestors—the Neanderthals who roamed the planet, killing for food, and *being* killed for the food of predators. Our hero’s acting out, however, comes with caveats: the loincloth-wearing artist is roped to a tree and locked in a set of stocks—his head and hands caught in the trappings of a civilized world. As Meneghetti says:

Humans carry a deep fear of being preyed upon from thousands of years of violent battles with frightening predators and other threats to survival. *Profondo Ferro* is a live performance invoking the demons that haunt us from the not too distant past.

While the stage is the inner-city streets of Fitzroy, Meneghetti’s closest colleagues are the cavepeople who occupied the site millions of years ago, rather than the aficionados of cultural cool who populate the neighbourhood today. His *Profondo Ferro* is a dislocation of time and space, reminding us that the demons of our past may yet haunt us in an unknown future.

Horror Show posits many more questions than it answers. In assembling this diverse line-up, the Ryan Sisters uphold and ratify our fetish for ‘flesh’. They quantify the complex and multi-dimensional nature of a genre that refuses to be tied down, to be one thing or another. Horror, like an organic growth, moves according to an independent will. Its pulse is part of our molecular fabric, receding and re-emerging as circumstances demand it. We can never hope to fully understand horror, but in feeling through its causes and effects, we might catch a fleeting glimpse of the humanity that inhabits us all.

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Quotes from artists taken from email correspondence, August to October 2015

Adam Boyd
Danny Frommer
Linsey Gosper
Kotoe Ishii
Paula Mahoney
Michael Meneghetti
Simon Pericich
The Ryan Sisters
Neale Stratford
Jordan Wood
Michael Vale
Joel Zika

Curated by
The Ryan Sisters

Images

Cover/ Paula Mahoney *Free Falling No.6* 2014, archival pigment print (edition of 10), 70 x 46cm **1/** Linsey Gosper *The Mouth of Hell* 2015, unique fibre-based gelatin silver handprints, stained with red wine, i) 40.6 x 50.8cm; ii) 20.3 x 25.4cm **2/** Simon Pericich *I couldn't tell if you were having the time of your life or you were dead* 2013, wet clay, garbage bag, leather belts, plastic, 120 x 40 x 45cm **3/** Simon Pericich *Swallowed whole by wallowed swell* 2015, mirror spraypaint™ glass, pain, 120 x 80cm **4/** Danny Frommer *Beetroot Head* 2015, beetroot, plastic bags, polystyrene Esky, dimensions variable **5/** Adam Boyd *Rebus Coin* 2015, pencil on paper, 242 x 121cm **6/** Joel Zika *Pig Farm Massacre* 2014, Lambda photographic print, 120 x 60cm **7/** Michael Meneghetti *Profundo Ferro* 2015, documentation of performance work **8/** Jordan Wood *Sunken Heads* 2014-15, ceramic, dimensions variable **9/** Neale Stratford *The Pit* 2015, archival pigment print, 150 x 100cm **10/** Michael Vale *The Ice Cream Man* 2015, oil on linen, 122 x 152cm **11/** The Ryan Sisters (Natalie & Pip Ryan) *Lights Out* 2015, wax, steel, candelabra, wood, fabric, electric candles, dimensions variable **12/** Kotoe Ishii *In a Whisper* 2014, single channel colour video, 2.16 minutes

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Gippsland Art Gallery

Port of Sale Business Centre
64-66 Foster Street
Sale Victoria 3850
T +61 3 5142 3500



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