

# The Right Creature

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington  
2023

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
Art + Art History + Design

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Abstract

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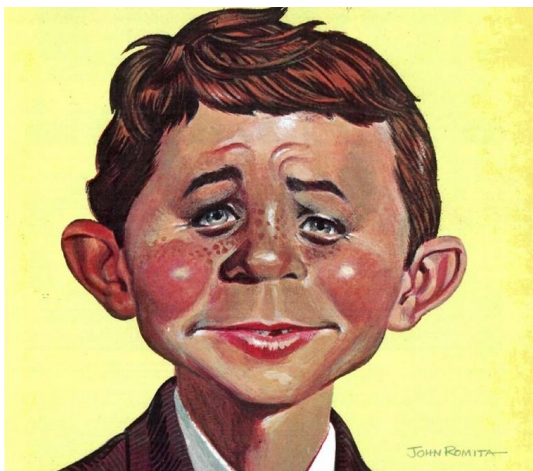
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This thesis is a written accompaniment to a series of 5 paintings that were created in partial fulfillment for my degree of Master of Fine Arts. The paintings depict a fictional creature in the midst of an episode of self-defeat. This writing serves as a historical record of the formal steps taken in drawing that lead to the creation of this creature, who serves as a stand in for myself in his world. I discuss the cultural use of the monster as a receptacle for the unknown, cartoon as a filter for the unsettling and image as a container that gives materiality to the intangible. I review criticism around the aesthetic category of “cute” and analyze the function of the archetypical “cute monster”. The writing ends with a personal anecdote about the role drawing has played in my life in keeping idle hands at bay and compulsion as an over-arching theme of the work.

## The Right Creature

The paintings presented in my thesis are about the way paint is applied to a surface, drawing, mark attached to form, mark detached *from* form, evidence of the hand, material, color, mimesis, subjectiveness... They are about cherry bombs, long black finger nails, hands, daisies, explosions, a blue creature, clouds, blue skies, a grassy hillside... They are about myth-making, abstraction, illustration, absurdity, human behavior, cuteness, narrativity, a *lack* of narrativity, cartoon as filter, the human body, symbols, art history, idle hands, the cultural function of monsters, image as container... They are about my own neuroticisms, fears, and self-defeating behaviors. They are about an intrinsic agreement between a depiction of hands engaged in destruction and material evidence of my hands engaged in creation.

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I grew up fascinated with the many faces of Alfred E Neumann. I used to scour through this online database called “Doug Gilford’s Mad Cover Site” and draw copies of his face obsessively. I liked him because he seemed to represent something juvenile and almost anti-social, but I also pitied him. While he held authority in my mind as MAD’s poster boy, it always seemed like behind his aloofness he had an awareness and sadness about being the perpetual butt of the joke. It

amazes me that I felt with certainty that these things were somehow embodied in the structure of his face...

While there was this early engagement with drawing, I didn't start pursuing art academically until I was 23. I was initially interested in drawing the human figure from observation and that kept me engaged for a fair amount of time. I wanted to "pay my dues", to pass through the gauntlet of academic painting and drawing. At some point, I internalized the pressure that I *should* be painting the figure from observation and it wore on me. I had always had an interest in drawn depictions of humans but the magic that I found in Alfred E Neumann's visage got lost in the rote nature of academically relearning how to draw as an adult. My only entry point into drawing and painting was laden with a set of standards and rules that I was tired of abiding by.

Upon starting my MFA, I began on a personal campaign against anything that was in my way of simply drawing: observation, specific subject matter, narrative, anatomical correctness... I just wanted to materialize what was coming to me and quickly. The figure always had a way of emerging but it was becoming less human. I was developing a vocabulary and a strategy for figuration that was responsible for this thesis coming into being. The blue, cavernous eyed character that my thesis revolves around, a creature I've come to know as a stand in for the "Dana Blume" of his world, was borne out of this campaign.



Top: "Hard Thinker", Ink and acrylic on paper, 30" x 54" 2022  
Bottom: Sketchbook pages

*There was this anxious creature. He was blue, so blue you could just fall through his silhouette. His head, which also happened to be the torso from which his limbs protruded, was shaped liked an egg. Or a boulder. He had huge cavernous eye sockets with no promise of eyes inside. His arms were long and dangly, his hands bony and adorned with long black nails. He comes across a daisy. He has never seen a flower and he picks it up from out of the earth in which it resides. He is immediately consumed by a fear of losing it. He feels doomed to misplace it. In an attempt to end his anguish and go back to a time before he was consumed with this fear, he decides he will destroy the flower with cherry bombs. After a nuclear blast set off by the detonation of the cherry bombs, the flowers multiply. The creature is covered in the daisies, painfully reminded of the loss he created for himself. This attack against the flower was played out by his hands. They execute, they conceal, and they express shame.*

The initial impetus to depict a creature engaged in an episode of self-sabotage was to create a cautionary tale that could be manipulated materially. I wanted to test a theory that if an image could act as a container for a difficult feeling, I could change my relationship with that feeling through the physicality of materializing it. I could flip these images upside down, I could scrape the paint off of them, I could paint over them, I could hold them in my hands. The image would be there as a memento. I suppose at its very core, the meaning of this work is ultimately embodied in its materiality. I have no real way of knowing what other people see when they engage with these paintings, but I am fairly certain that this narrative thread is overshadowed by how explicit my enthusiasm for moving paint around is. With that said, I am excited and invested in the

idea of using narrativity, a term I can't help but associate with the grandiose structures of history painting, to depict such a pathetic dilemma.



'Imagining a World Without Daisies', Oil on canvas, 60" x 72", 2023

Monsters and creatures have historically been used in literature and visual art in attempts to control the unknown. They give form and substance to abstract ideas,

fears, and societal issues. By externalizing the unknown and representing it through grotesque beasts, artists and writers have aimed to navigate the mysteries of the human experience, confront fears, and exercise a measure of control over the unfamiliar. As a receptacle for the unfamiliar, it is no surprise that depictions of monsters have been used to other, to dehumanize and highlight deviations from normative standards. Monsters almost always act to deflect something unsettling about humanity.

I believe cartoons function similarly in filtering the familiar and unfamiliar. In cartoons, violence never results in great bodily harm. By presenting violence in a fictional context, cartoons provide a controlled environment in which children can be introduced to the evident horrors of humanity in a way that will not completely traumatize them. While monsters can serve as a tangible embodiment for the unknown, cartoons take what is know about the unfortunate realities of humanity and filter them into easily digestible fables.



'Preemptive Strike', Oil on canvas, 60" x 72" 2023



'Doom Cloud', Oil on canvas, 60" x 72", 2023

In my paintings, I employ a cartoonish filter through which I pass challenging aspects of the human condition. In 'Doom Cloud', the idea of imminent destruction is materialized through a bubbly cumulus that began as a legible spelling of the word itself: Doom. The word can describe a general fear of ill fate, as possessed by the blue creature, but it ultimately describes an obsessive acknowledgment of mortality. The passing of an idea as troubling as doom through "cartoon" diminishes some of its psychological weight.



The initial desire to diminish something troubling by washing it through the aesthetic qualities we associate with cartoons was without a doubt inspired by Philip Guston's "hoods". He took a subject that induces so much terror and rendered

it in such a slapdash, cartoonish manner that it was diminished to a mere icon that could be inserted visually next to the banal. I don't think he took that icon lightly and I don't think he found anything associated with the KKK funny. I think he was using "cartoon" to look at things that he couldn't directly grapple with. I think the "hoods" were a receptacle for a true doom feeling regarding the social and political state of the world, if not a general state of doom about the nature of existence itself.

The connection between cuteness and monstrosity as seen in the archetypical "cute monster" finds its origins in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde*, Sianne Ngai establishes the formal properties associated with the aesthetic category of cute: smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, blobbiness; notably each of these qualities illicit a feeling of helplessness or pitifulness.<sup>1</sup> In *Cuteness*, Daniel Harris makes a connection between cuteness and the grotesque, in

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<sup>1</sup> Ngai, Sianne. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde." *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 811-47

that grotesqueness can often illicit a similar response as claimed by Ngai.<sup>2</sup> While the pretense that the blue creature's anatomical disfigurement inspires pity, it is his naivety and an expectation that he won't actually behave like a monster that lends itself to cuteness. In either case, he is not made cute by something he possess but by something he lacks. Cuteness is always contingent on the object of cuteness being somehow beneath us.

For our protagonist to remain an object of cuteness, he can look like a monster, but he can't actually *behave* like a monster. The moment he actually destroys, he no longer embodies the pitiful, endearing oafishness tethering him to cuteness. When he transgresses, he is no longer inferior to us on the hierarchy required by cuteness. In this way, cuteness functions as a red herring in these images. I created a scenario in which the pitifulness of the monster is front and center, only to be subverted by the fact that he is actually capable of acting destructively.

Part of the reason monsters have been used throughout history is our inability as people to digest how gross being human can feel. There is a shame involved in our need to externalize what we cannot understand about ourselves, what we fear about ourselves and what we fear about each other. While it has been used maliciously as a tool of suppression and deflection, this inability to cope with what we are, what we do, and what will happen to us in the future highlights a real helplessness about the human condition.

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, Daniel. "Cuteness." *Salmagundi*, no. 96 (1992): 177–86.



'In the Aftermath', Oil on canvas, 60" x 72", 2023

There is an odd connection between the fact that these images depict hands engaged in destruction and the constructive role drawing has played throughout my life in keeping idle hands at bay. My mother often recalls that drawing kept calm as a child. I would wake up in the morning rested but as the day progressed, this pressure inside me would build. I would get so anxious that I would chew on my fingers till they bled. Eventually, I would have to stop whatever I was doing and draw until the feeling subsided. I had to do it. As an adult, I find myself less attuned to how crucial it is for me to keep my hands moving. If I go long enough without making a mark, that same pressure builds but it disguises itself as many other things. When I was an adolescent, making didn't have an active role in my life and I attribute a lot of thoughtless, destructive behavior to that absence. I stole, I handled money, I poured liquor, I attacked, I held my face in shame...

These paintings and what they depict were discovered through compulsion. The reflective nature of this writing reminds me of the creature holding his face in shame after realizing what he has done. I've always had a hard time understanding my work and there is a shame involved in that. With that said, these works are a bit of a tribute to my younger self who was brave enough to believe that something could be held in an image, an idea I didn't need words for in order to believe. Despite fear clearly being a motivating force in these paintings, I am optimistic knowing that my younger self would really believe in what I am doing, the way he believed in the life of MAD's poster boy.



'Climb/Shaking My Head', Oil on canvas, 48" x 60", 2023

## Bibliography

Ngai, Sianne. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde." *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 811–47.

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