

ROGUE GROWTHS

LAURA VINNEDGE

“What is the measure of progress? . . . We can measure it in the rate of species extinction. We can measure it in pollution, in the toxicity of the world. Those things, like power and speed, are perfectly measurable.” Wendell Berry: “The Myth of Progress”

In “The Myth of Progress” Berry laments the displacement of long-term vision tempered by wisdom and patience, for the short-term benefits of gratification and profit. Quick-fix solutions frequently generate new problems that increasingly result in unnatural modifications of our natural interior and exterior environments. Often, the uncritical embrace of scientific and technological advancements that make our lives easier is countered by the consumption of chemically modified food products, the over-use of pharmaceuticals, and the impact of negative corporate externalities and agricultural by-products that pollute our air, water, land, and infiltrate our bodies.

The in-progress ***Eutrophication, Suffocation, and Run-Off*** paintings, initiated and modified respectively, during my Ohio Arts Council summer residency at Fine Arts Work Space in Provincetown, Massachusetts, explore the problematic nature of the chemically-induced rogue growths of cyanobacteria, or blue-green alga blooms and its impact on the hydro-flora of Lake Erie. By the 1960’s Lake Erie had become extremely polluted by industrial waste and agricultural runoff that dramatically increased the phosphorous and nitrogen levels, contributing to eutrophication – a process that contributes to the growth of capacious alga blooms. This exponential growth of alga still contributes to the depletion of oxygen levels, clogging fish gills and blocking sunlight, and has a **suffocating effect** on many of the lake’s natural flora and fauna. In alignment with the theme of the paintings, I will continue to modify them both chemically and visually, upon my return to Ohio.

CHEMICAL WARFARE

The ***Chemical Warfare*** paintings explore the cellular mutations of our bodies triggered by cancer’s rogue growth. Abstracted biological micro interiors combine with infusions of festering bumps and dots that envelope and penetrate, at once representing chemical permeations, spreading biological growths, and invading molecular forms or patterned modulations that shift the forms from their organic state to a more artificial realm. These figurative transformations represent the unnatural modifications of our natural interior environment.

SYNECDOCHE – PART FOR THE WHOLE

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These oil on panel and paper paintings are from a body of work executed after a trip to the shrine of the miraculous healing sands at *El Santuario de Chimayo* in New Mexico, and the adult-entertainment *mecca* of Las Vegas, Nevada. The trip was motivated by my desire to experience two extreme aspects of American culture, and to cull symbolic imagery from each in order to merge them into single images that provoke yet another, separate concern. This process serves my interest in synecdoche (parts representing the whole) and promotes the involvement of the viewer in the decoding or “read” of the resulting image juxtapositions.

The disparate atmospheres generated by the humble religious shrine at Chimayo, and the ostentatious excess of the pay-to-play center of Las Vegas were startling. The intimacy of Chimayo conjured a feeling of quiet hope for relief from basic, mostly physical afflictions. The walls of the shrine’s chapel are hidden by layers of haunting relics of the cast-off remnants of medical maladies. Body part symbols abound on the pervasive *milagro* (miracle) crosses which are covered with arms, legs, eyes, livers . . . In Las Vegas, I was overwhelmed by the loud, enthusiastic embrace of gambling and risk – a general promotion of waste and indulgent mass-consumption - an atmosphere in which everyone seems to have nothing (or everything?) to lose.

Although not intending to reference these specific locales in my work, the impact of the powerful visual currency of the pervasive *milagros*, with their implied focus on a specific, immediate physical need, is reflected by my employment of body parts – a departure from my usual depiction of the external figure. I combine the body parts with images of gambling accoutrements such as dice, and actual playing cards (seen through the letters and thin paint, and emphasized with thick, impasto silhouettes), to represent the zealous engagement in chance celebrated in Las Vegas.

The merging of images inspired by two such distinct environments results in generating new questions and concerns. In the *Hoyle’s Rules: Yes, No, Maybe triptych*, various views of hearts and arteries are set within a framework of dice to suggest questions of the universal gambles and risks of love, and perhaps in a more socio-political perspective, to question who has the right to love and be loved. The large uterus and penis combined with gender-specific stereotypes in the *Transcendence diptych* question gender distinctions in general. Chemical laden fish cover stomachs and digestive tracts (also over playing cards) in *Waste Management*. And the cards and dice supporting the eye, tongue and ear in the *Party Politics: Loyal, Patriotic, Citizen (See No Evil, Speak No Evil and Hear No Evil)* triptych question the risk of turning away from information – an action I find particularly troubling in today’s political climate.

Gargantuan: (No Fear), twelve oil, collage, and tea cup hooks on panel paintings, was inspired by a favorite passage in the preface of Francois Rabelais' 1543 Gargantua and Pantagruel:

"While that good man Grandgousier was drinking and joking with the others he heard the horrible cry made by his son as he entered the world and bawled out for 'Drink! Drink! Drink!' Whereupon he said 'Que Grand tu as' – What a big one you've got."

The son, hence named Gargantuan, went on to become a king noted for his enormous physical and intellectual appetites. The book contains numerous colorful and descriptive passages of joyful banquets of revelry and excess, and festivities of uproarious merriment. And though I read the book, perhaps fifteen years ago, the memory of that particular passage describing the naming of Gargantuan has resurfaced time and time again.

The term gargantuan is commonly used to describe something that is of immense size or volume; colossal and monumental. I employ the term and the spirit of Gargantuan in my work, combined with small repeated images from contemporary American pop culture, and large monumental figures in excessively striding, striving and flexing poses to symbolically represent the obsessive and addictive quest to have or be the most – the quest for the est – biggest, fastest, prettiest, strongest, thinnest, richest, toughest . . . – typical to 20/21st century American consumer culture. I philosophically contrast this quest with another favorite passage, a quote, unfortunately, from an unknown source: "A wealthy person is one who knows they have enough," when I question why this seemingly typical state of constant dissatisfaction and perpetual quest for more is so pervasive. Is it self-imposed; a subversive plot, market driven . . .? Or is it simply part of the human condition – an inherent drive toward perfection, beauty and truth; a compelling search for physical and/or spiritual transcendence?

Note that the second verb/adverb combinations in most titles can be linked to become adjectives that might suggest the futility of such "pissing" contests. (This work was inspired by proto-renaissance painting viewed throughout Italy and was supported by a grant for travel to the medieval and proto-renaissance collections at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Tool Worship imagery reflects my exploration of the converging characteristics of belief systems based on facts (physics, biology, industrial progress . . .) and those base on faith (religion, superstitions, political ideologies . . .). Generated by disparate motivations, the systems seem at first to contrast, rather than parallel one another. Upon closer examination the purposes they serve, and the condition for their acceptance and maintenance underscore their similarities.

The existence of the concept of *facts* is dependent on *faith* in the ever increasing sophistication of our tools and their ability to record, measure, calculate, delineate, and define. All belief systems (spiritual and ideologies/methods or organization and control) operate on the same premise: the suspension, whether on a grand or nominal level, of logic, reason, and the innate human need to inquire. Although our manufactured tools stoke our egos with continuously displaced revelations, can we really understand the size of the universe, the appropriateness of medically induce biological or sociological determinations, the magnitude of a googolplex, the order of chaos, the minutia of matter, energy, and life, the hierarchies and predicted benefits of social and political contracts? In spite of all the calculations and drawn conclusions, the bits of information used to ascertain solutions and impose order remain, in many ways, as abstract as the presence of an omniscient being or the persuasive draw of a luck number.

Regardless of the varying aspirations of their origins or the durability, belief systems based on facts and those based on faith are similarly aligned in that they offer essentially the same benefits. They provide comfort, security, self-significance, and most importantly, a sense of power, control, and destiny.