



# Endless Enigma: Eight Centuries of Fantastic Art

by Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve

“The reader’s hesitation is therefore the first condition of the fantastic.”

—Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 1970

## Part 1

The pages of my worn copy of Todorov’s *The Fantastic* (1970) are stuck together, like the uncut pages of my grandmother’s 19th century Balzac collection—each page must be separated by hand as I read because my late bunny Mrabet treated the edges as a morsel to carve into with his sharp little teeth. There is something satisfying and right about re-reading one of the greats of Russian Formalism on the topic of the fantastic, accompanied by the rivulets of my bunny’s desire.



Lisa Yuskavage, Left: *Transference Portrait of My Shrink in Her Starched Nightgown with My Face and Her Hair*, 1995. Right: *Rorschach Blot*, 1995. © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy David Zwirner.

## Part 2

What exactly is the fantastic since it travels deep into history in both literature and visual art? Like Paul Schrader’s famous definition of film noir,<sup>1</sup> it is less a genre than a deep structure of mood and tone. Todorov’s definition of the fantastic suggests a liquid presence of mind where “the real is confronted by the inexplicable.” It is also a subset of “ambiguous vision”—a state of perception experienced by the reader and viewer which is brought about by the literary or visual style of the work. In the fantastic, the reader/viewer is placed in a state of suspension—a perpetual hesitation—between belief and disbelief.

Such a moment of hesitation is even more pronounced in visual art, as the precise Euclidian realism of Dalí, de Chirico, or Piranisi for that matter, is what is so unsettling. Walking through *Endless Enigma* one’s mood bounces between eye-tearing ecstasy, expulsive hilarity, aesthetic delirium, pain, and, ultimately, the sensation of *oh how we have forgotten to marvel, to experience wonder, wrought from giddy shock and astonishment*. What I mean is, when we do experience astonishment, it is mostly in the form of rage rather than whimsy. In this sense, although it is from the 15th century, no artwork reflects the present like the limestone gargoyles one meets in the first room. The root of the word “fantastic” is from the Greek word *phantastikos*, which means “able to create mental images”—and surely this gargoyles is the mental image of our time. There he sits and lingers in your mind after you leave, a lumpy head of limestone pulling at its mouth in disbelieving anguish.

### Part 3

The collaboration between Zwirner Gallery and curator Nicholas Hall is a reprisal of Alfred Barr's landmark exhibition and catalogue, *Fantastic Art: Dada and Surrealism* presented at MoMA in 1936. <sup>2</sup> Barr's genius and to some, blunder, was to situate these brazen revolutionary movements within the context of five centuries of fantastic art. Surrealism and Dada are as enduring in the 21st century as any movement of the 20th century, especially the former, whose modes of psychological dissociation, alternate realities dressed up as actual places, mixed with irrepressible desire, dreams, and the fortuitous revelations of chance continue to offer moments of radical disorientation. And when paired here with lives and subjectivities of monsters, wholesale renunciations of rationality, leaps into the unconscious, the supernatural, temptation, wonder, and horror over eight centuries—the result is, well, fantastic.



Tiziano Vecelli, known as Titian, *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*, 1560-1570. Private Collection. Courtesy Nicholas Hall and David Zwirner.

Following Todorov, what makes it so powerful is how the viewer is submerged in the fantastic as a mode of subjectivity via the chance associations each person's mind makes as he, she, or they travel through the show. While the curation is extraordinary, part of what makes it so is the range of connections there are to be made, not just in the intelligence and juxtapositions of each room, but overall, as one leaves the exhibition. Walking down 20th street with the mental image of Victor Hugo, Lisa Yuskavage, an anonymous 15<sup>th</sup> century stone cutter, Titian, Kerry James Marshall, Salvatore Rosa, Gustave Dore, James Ensor and so many others across eight centuries dancing a mad jig in one's head. Or the way Piranisi's *Carceri d'invenzione (Imaginary Prisons)*, 1749/1761, nightmarish vision of a labyrinthine prison feels today more like a realistic depiction than some hyperbolic imagination. It is why the exhibition both refuses and enlivens the notion of historical context—in a pawky move, each artwork is presented without title, only the artist's name (if available), date of birth and death. In this way, we experience every one of the works for their visual intensity separate from any possible meaning embedded in the title. (Of course, there is a complete checklist available at the desk but I suggest going through once before consulting it.)

### Part 4

From the moment you enter the gallery, you are put into a trance. Directly across the room in the main gallery, a 72 1/4 × 67 7/8 × 1 5/8 inch version of the central panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* made in 1515 by a contemporary follower of Hieronymus Bosch draws one to it like a siren. (Bosch worked on his from 1503-1515.) Never having seen the original, I can't compare the two nor do I want to, nor will you. Spend an hour just taking in the endless enigma of the brush's exquisite precision as it paints oddities one can now see up close—and indulge in the capture of details with your iphone—such as: a crowd of naked white male bodies, some standing erect, others balancing on their hands in headstands, formed in a close circle, holding—with hands and feet—a perfectly round and rotund strawberry textured



Contemporary follower of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1515. Private collection.

bird body marked with what looks like a mirrored design, its long chicken legs akimbo. Atop the bird's head is an upside down headless figure, arms and legs popping from a reddish what? A black bunny rests on the long thin beak of the bird. As one's eye travels down the beak, another white naked man with his back to the viewer holds the end of the beak. He appears to be leading this "event" (as opposed to creature) somewhere. And this is but a single small detail of one painting. Upstairs one finds more paintings from the studio of Bosch teeming with images like a house made out of the bum of a man whose red, anguished head pops out the other end pierced with arrows. Courtesy Nicholas Hall and David Zwirner.

And yet, perched on a white pedestal near *The Garden of Earthly Delights* copy, sits a preposterous timepiece sculpture made of gilded bronze, silver, and paint by an anonymous sculptor from Augsburg (1590-1600), it seems straight from the imagination of a late Renaissance Matthew Barney, crossed with a circus act traveling through Dante's *Inferno*. (It is titled *Automation clock in the form of the Chariot of Bacchus*) Here is a round belly of a man with a clock in his stomach, a bowl of fruit on his chest, a bell on his head, holding a scepter of some sort which, when the clock struck the hour, once moved back and forth. This funny, fat man is carried on an elaborate four-wheeled

wagon drawn by elephants who are whipped by a cad of a devil—his scepter-trident held aloft, his expression demonic—as two satyrs playing panpipes sit contentedly on the elephants. Two bears standing upright are positioned on opposing sides of the cart, playing flutes. I guffawed when I saw it—as I did with many of the works—Salvador Dalí's *Landscape with Telephones on a Plate* (1939), even Giacometti's *Woman (Flat III)* (c. 1927-29) brought a chuckle in the context of so many strong, fatal, demonic, and just plain outrageous portrayals of women by artists from Lisa Yuskavage, Edvard Munch, Titian, and Salvatore Rosa's unforgettable *La Strega (The Witch)* (c. 1646).



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2000-2001. Willow, wood, beeswax, human hair, silver-plated cast brass, and pigment, 16 × 32 1/2 × 26 inches. The Rachofsky Collection. © Robert Gober, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

**Part 5**

As a work (which in a way it is), *Endless Engima* convulses the eye and mind. It challenges one's cognitive and art historical vision while recalibrating both. For instance, Odilon Redon's haunting figure in *L'Ange du Destin (The Angel of Destiny)* (c. 1900), or James Ensor's biting yet whimsical *Skeleton's Warming Themselves* (1889) placed nearby a small gray and white painting of a human skeleton walking casually down an urban street—absent of its left radius, ulna, and hand bones—painted, surprisingly, by Francis Alÿs (*London*, 2005), or the madly beautiful *Extensive coastal landscape with the calling of Saint Peter* by Herri met de Bles placed in the same room as Michaël Borremans' *Fire from the Sun* (2017) depiction of humanity crawling on all fours. With all of these works, worlds previously unknown come into view. Intellection is activated in the space of the marvelous and convulsive beauty Breton loved so much. The abstract fantastic bursts forth in Sigmar Polke's blast of black, purple, and everything related<sup>3</sup> hangs





near a huge mixed media assemblage on plywood head by

Wallace Putnam from 1936 (the piece was also in the original 1936 exhibition). As one looks at Kerry James

Marshall's study of dignity and violence, *Portrait of Nat Turner with the Head of His Master* (2011), it becomes evident that the hesitation between the real and the inconceivable is the very subject of his portrayal, for Turner is not a monster but a man. Decapitation is also the subject of another work exhibited in the same room. It is Titian's depiction of Herodias (I thought it was Salome) holding John

the Baptist's head in a bowl.<sup>4</sup> The energy, force, and moral clarity of the act is embodied in her posture—she holds the head in a bowl yet stands back from it in disgust; her head is turned to the side with an expression of both pride and satisfaction. No monster is she, but, like Nat Turner, an effective and

triumphant executioner. But it is her hands which drive the visual force of the image—they are ghost images; unfinished white blurs that grasp the sides of the bowl yet disappear against the solid bowl in unfinished hesitation. And yet, in the middle of the same room sits Robert Gober's *Untitled* (2000-2001), a creepy-uncanny concoction made of wood, willow, beeswax, and human hair with silver-plate cast. I could go on but instead...

JUST GO.

If there is anything negative to tag onto this review, it is that the exhibition is only up until October 27th. But those who are not in New York, or who miss the show, can look forward to the forthcoming fully illustrated catalogue published by David Zwirner Books which will include new essays by Dawn Ades, Olivier Berggruen, and J. Patrice Marandel. There is also the symposium with Nicholas Hall and Yuan Fang to be held at The Kitchen on October 27th.<sup>5</sup> RSVP to Sara Land +1 212 772 9100 sara@nicholashjhall.com. Hope to see you there.

## Notes

The original MoMA catalogue is available on the book shelves across from the reception desk, a gesture by the curator and gallery which is generous and smart. I recommend looking at it after one has gone through the exhibition once. To return with Barr's initial purpose in mind is as cognitively inspiring as is taking in the exhibition with one's 2018 mind in tow.

*Arcimi Boldi* (1984), a play on the name of the great Renaissance fantasist Giuseppe Arcimboldo (who is in the show). In the brochure which accompanies the *Engless Enigma*, Polke is described as having "experimented with different abstract techniques and unconventional, often chemically based materials, creating paintings whose compositions shift depending on the viewer's position."

For an extensive discussion of this painting and other works, see Nicholas Hall, *Nemesis: Titian's Fatal Woman*, 2018 accessed October 11, 2018 <http://www.nicholashjhall.com/attachment/en/58f7681b02a937e9492b12c5/Publication/5b884cf5f7c038a02900dc2c>

Participants will include Olivier Berggruen (independent art historian and curator), Till-Holger Borchert (Director of Musea Brugge, Bruges), David Freedberg (Pierre Matisse Professor of the History of Art and Director of The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University, New York), J. Patrice Marandel (independent art historian and curator), Richard Rand (Associate Director for Collections, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), Hannah Segrave (PhD candidate in Baroque Art History, University of Delaware, Newark), Luke Syson (Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Chairman of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), Oliver Tostmann (Susan Morse Hilles Curator of European Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut), and Anne Umland (The Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," 1972.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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