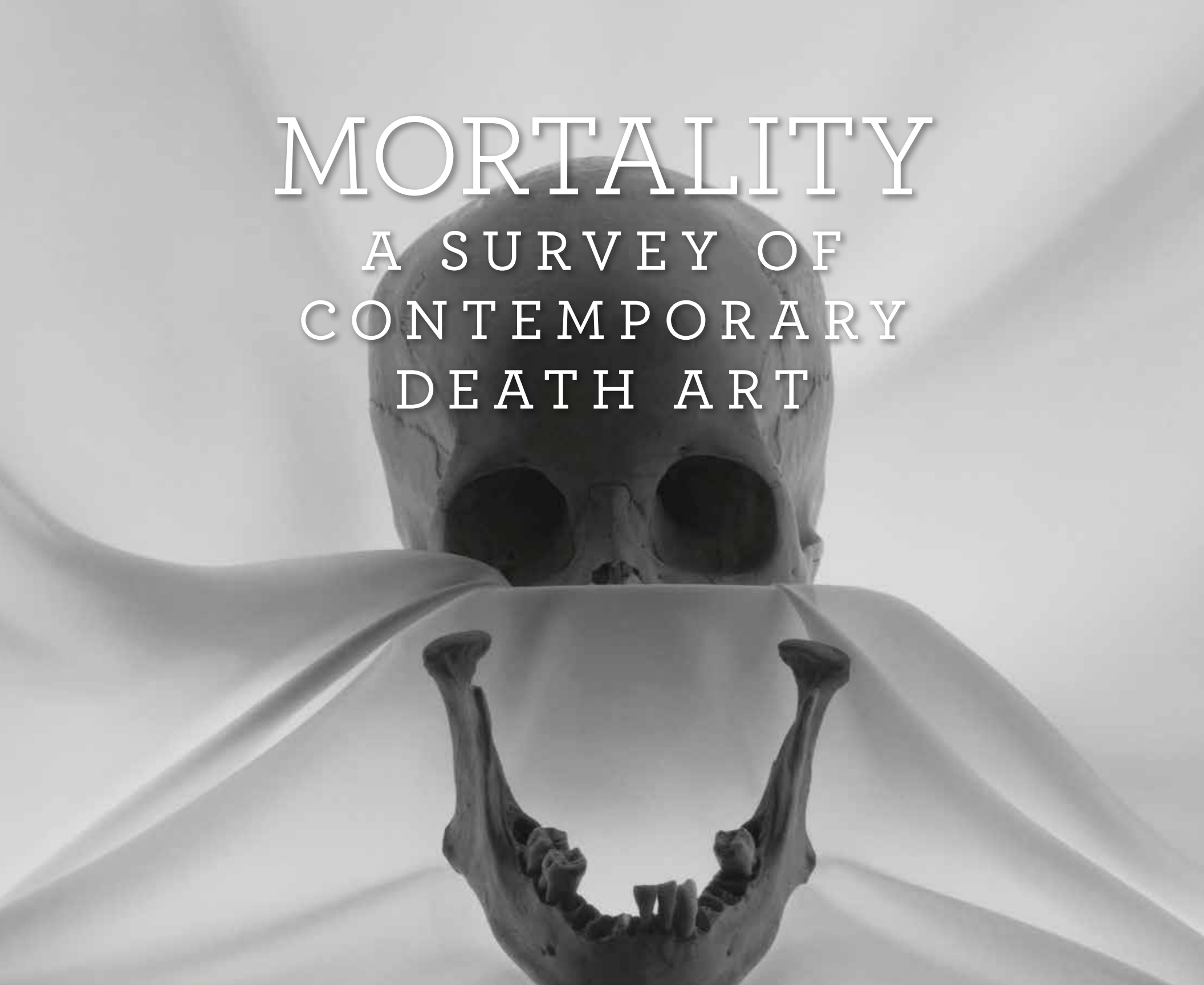


MORTALITY

A SURVEY OF
CONTEMPORARY
DEATH ART





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Curated by Donald Kuspit
Assisted by Robert Curcio



Death Mon Amour

Donald Kuspit, Curator

The skull is a symbol of death, not any old death, but the death “*within oneself*,” the death that is not only “the farthest extreme of destructiveness that we can conceive of,” but my very own death, the death that owns me the way I own my skull, the one and only genuine memento mori.¹ But, strangely enough, all skulls look more or less the same, seem impersonally identical—can I find my own skull in a pile of skulls, say in the catacombs of my unconscious? Freud said we can’t imagine our own death—it’s too great a narcissistic insult, a wound to self-esteem, impossible to heal—and, anyway, there’s no time in the unconscious, so no time to die, so why bother to search for our skull there. And yet so many artists have done so, as this exhibition shows, dream of the skull as though in search of their innermost selves. They picture the skull in all its profane glory—but then in many cultures it is sacred, “the vault of heaven,” “fashioned from the skull of the first man”—that would be Adam in our culture, his skull finding its final resting place at the foot of Christ’s cross—and as such a container of pure spirit, that is, the soul without and in no need of the body.²

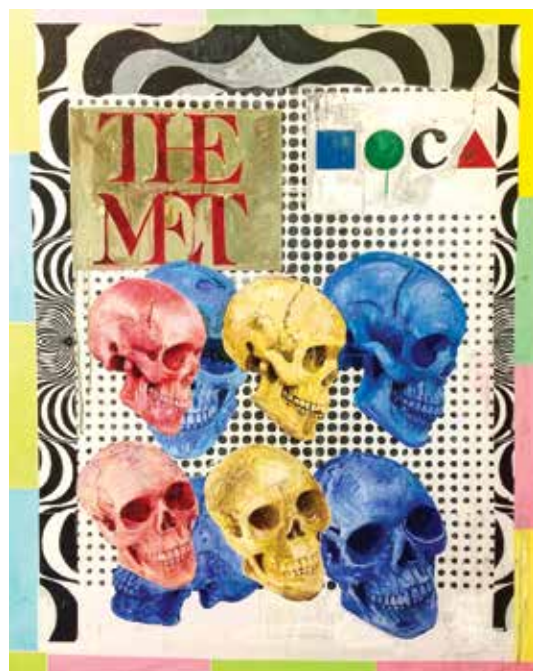
Thus, the ambivalence about the skull, the hatred of death that makes it at home in hell, the love of death that lifts it to heaven, like a sort of mysterious man in the radiant moon—for death is radiant with strange life in the portraits of it in the exhibition, especially in those of Lynn Stern.

The skull, however much it is a symbol of death, and however much it is nameless—any skull could be anybody else’s skull—is in an aesthetic class of its own, a sort of aesthetic thing in itself, for it epitomizes the aesthetic issue: reconciling opposites while conveying their irreconcilability—their inherent incompatibility. The skull is a peculiarly absurd—surreal—construction, a contradiction in terms that nonetheless makes dialectical sense: a compound of concave and convex forms, dark holes and luminous surfaces, vacuous space and impenetrable bone, inseparably together yet always at odds. The skull is the most durable part of our body—all but immortal, as the skulls that survive in Christian catacombs and Celtic shrines, and that continue to be found at prehistoric sites, suggests—but the body that it

was once part of has decayed, disappeared into oblivion, leaving it stranded in abstraction, strangely unnatural however natural, numinous however down to earth—oddly sublime even as it symbolizes our alienation from our self, for that is what the fear of death is.

Abstraction is peculiarly obscene, for it is hidden behind the scenic representation it supports. It is the aesthetic underpinning, often unconsciously experienced, of the consciously known pictured scene, inseparable from and immanent in it, the subliminal truth in the fictional fact. The skull, however undeniably real, is inherently abstract, and insofar as we defensively experience it as abstract—as Cézanne did, his skulls began the modernist trend to strip art of its “all too human” meaning, as its advocate Clement Greenberg said it had to do if it was to become “pure”—it becomes beside the point of death, suggesting a certain indifference to it, however much it signifies, embodies, epitomizes death, unavoidably. But the skull cannot escape its double meaning: it is two-faced, a singular aesthetic object composed of radically different parts and a commonplace

Opposite: Michael Netter, *Regeneration*, 2016. Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Noah Becker, *Museum Skulls*, 2018. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.

residue of death, an object hidden from sight until exposed to the light of day by death. The task of the artist is to juggle these two faces, sometimes emphasizing its abstract face, sometimes its real face, but never using one to deny the other, instead navigating the interface between them with aesthetic suaveness.

I chose the works in the exhibition because the skulls pictured in them read convincingly as pure abstractions—that is, they're aesthetically convincing—even as they convey the nihilistic meaning of death, for it brings with it the



Noah Becker, *Tune Out #2*, 2017. Acrylic on board, 42 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.

despair that announces the meaninglessness of life, that convinces us that we have lived in vain, as the skull's appearance in traditional Vanitas pictures implies. The contemporary works in the exhibition are Vanitas pictures; some of them, such as Noah Becker's *Museum Skulls* (2018), suggest that we make art in vain: the colorful skulls that proliferate beneath the sign of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art suggest that the works of art in it are so much dead matter—and that the skull is a much more interesting, not to say exciting work of art. Becker's painting is a sardonic masterpiece

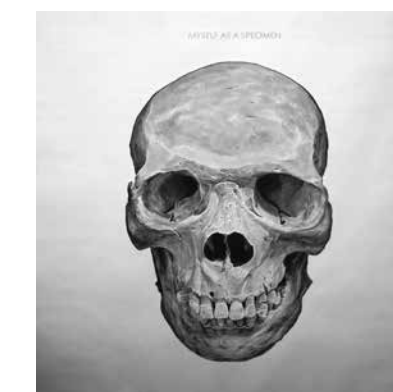
that suggests the futility of making art: we have seen many golden ages of art, but Becker's skulls suggests that it is all fool's gold.

In a different aesthetic vein, but with a similar nihilistic import, Lynn Stern's series of skulls, each an aesthetic masterpiece in its own right, suggests the meaninglessness of the self—the works with her death mask make the point explicitly. Her skull—sometimes human, sometimes animal—is a self-symbol that undermines the self by stripping it to the bestial bone and finally dissolving it in an aesthetic twilight zone, a fusion of light and shadow obscuring as much it reveals, a web of indeterminacy that nonetheless determines the skull's presence. Every last one of Stern's skulls is a self-portrait, and as such a self-analysis. At once aggressively in-your-face and seductively inviting, they reconcile the extremes of the death instinct and the life instinct, to allude to Freud's final formulation of the forces that inform our psyches, always simultaneously operational in a kind of compromise formation, to use the term he used to describe a dream—and Stern's skulls are informed by what he called dream work.

The veil that covers many of her skulls adds to their strange seductiveness. They threaten us with mystery, like the veils that Salome and Eve before her, as the seductive aesthetics of her portraits of skulls—many of them animal and lusty—suggest? Indeed, taken together they form a dance of death, even as they also suggest the blind leading the blind—for the skull is sightless, however far-seeing its empty eye sockets seem—to death. Death is not always an ugly old man with a scythe but sometimes a beautiful woman, as in Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orpheus* and Bob Fosse's film *All That Jazz*, 1979. Stern's skulls, seductive and intimidating at the same time, are an unconscious self-portrait of her as a dangerously inviting femme fatale. They also make it clear that nothing concentrates the mind so much as the thought of death. Totally concentrated on death, she alchemically transforms pulverized light and nuanced shadow into aesthetic gold. She has mastered the aesthetics of the skull, her aesthetic insight into it a memorable triumph of high art over death anxiety.



Clockwise, from top left: Lynn Stern, *Spectator #14-94a*, 2014-2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 32 x 43 in. Ed. 1/6. Courtesy of the artist; Lynn Stern, *Spectator #14-65*, 2014-2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 32 x 29 in. Ed. 1/6. Courtesy of the artist; Trevor Guthrie, *Myself as a Specimen*, 2009. Charcoal, graphite on paper, 55 x 57 in. unframed. Private Collection.

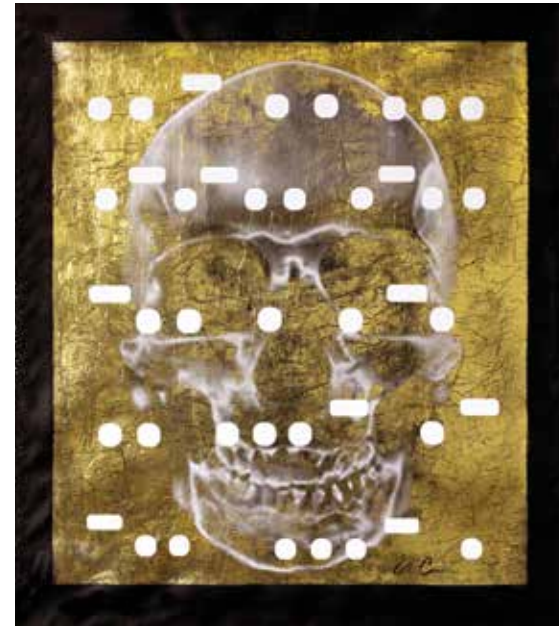


However ironically self-referential the skull is, as Trevor Guthrie's *Myself as a Specimen* (2009) makes clear, the skull can also serve a socially critical purpose, as Becker's *Tune Out No. 2*, (2017) makes clear. A small, wavy,

oddly flimsy American flag is topped by a huge golden skull, the gold suggesting the wealth of the United States, as well as the fact that the wealth is the "by-product" of the many deadly wars of conquest carried out by

the military-industrial machine that President Eisenhower warned Americans about, just as the wealth of the Spanish Kingdom was the “by-product” of the murderous wars of the Spanish conquistadors. Becker’s enlightening work—certainly a luminous golden skull enlightens us about the high cost as well as profitability that death can bring with it—is rich with contradictory allusions. Spread on heavenly gold foil, like the Madonna on a cloth of honor, the ghostly skull in Bill Claps’ *It’s All Derivative, The Skull I* (2013) becomes an angel of death, and with that another bizarre contradiction in terms. Death may promise heaven, but the skull looks like hell. Are the rows of white dots and dashes that cover the surface of the work an undecipherable Morse coded message from the fantasized Beyond? A similar skull is also in-your-face—defiantly confrontational—and seems to be sending a similar coded message—different, as the different ordering of the lines of white dots and dashes suggests—but the skull is now golden, the ground black, the blackness infiltrating the luminous gold but not overwhelming it. It is a similarly heavenly skull, but it is not a wraith, and however golden, it still reeks of black death.

In their different artistic ways, Stern, Becker, Guthrie, and Claps fearlessly face death, transforming the skull into an oddly, if ironically, sublime thing-in-itself. But in the still life sculpture of Chris Jones the aesthetically uncompromised skull—the skull not treated as or transformed into a work of art, that is, an aesthetic phenomenon, not to say a phenomenal aesthetic experience (which is what Stern’s skulls afford)—stares out at us with ruthless hatred. Its rotten teeth have rotted the fruit around it, bitten into them so that their empty core is exposed. The world is in a state of ruin, as the architecture—a sort of Potemkin’s Village of fragmentary buildings (a classical façade and steeple among them)—piled up and mixed with the fruit suggests. It is a masterpiece of controlled chaos—structured destruction. The skull in Jinsu Han’s *Dream Fiend 5C* (2009)—a gleaming white skull with a black megaphone in its mouth sitting in a child’s toy wagon—is even more horrific and vicious. Like the masthead on the prow of a ship, the nightmarish skull leads the way on the dangerous journey of life that begins in childhood, death already immanent in life, implicit in the helplessness of the child, the skull a child’s toy that presages the adult’s death. Han’s rotting



From top: Bill Claps, *It’s All Derivative, The Skull I*, 2013. Mixed media with gold foil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist.; Jinsu Han, *Dream Fiend 5C*, 2009. Plastic model, steel, wood, epoxy resin, ABS plastic, copper, silver cup, speaker, radio receiver, motor, feather, steel wheel and chalk powder, 30.7 x 25.6 x 19.6 in. Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery.

skeletal figure, its skull alone intact, unmarred by decay, shows death in all its perversely upright majesty. Corpses are laid out for burial, but death always stands with sculptural uprightness, dignified as it announces the final indignity. Han takes the devilish skeleton in Hans Baldung Grien’s *Death and the Maiden* (1517) to a new horrific extreme.

But Hans’ Death has not come for a maiden; he stands there, alert and aloof, facing all of us, for he has come for everyone. He is not Paul Pretzer’s lonely skeleton, facing the colorful painting of a flourishing flower that defiantly holds its own against it—for it is neither male nor female, but an empty shell of a human being that could be one or the other—but quietly stands alone in our space, its silence and aloneness death’s final statement. Like Baldung Grien’s lustful Death, Sonia Stark’s *Three Female Skulls, With Lipstick Smear* (2020), are libiduously alive, as the passionately red “discharge” around them implies, reminding us that orgasm has been called “the little death.” More to the existential point, the three female skulls allude, with mischievous whimsy, to the Three Fates, all female goddesses, who assign individual destinies at birth, Clotho

(the Spinner), Lachesis (the Alloter), and Atropos (the Inflexible). In other words, they are the Mothers of Being. They re-appear as the Three Witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*—they eventually lead him to his death. Faust descends to the terrifying realm of the Mothers in the second part of Goethe’s drama. They are also the Three Marys who witness Christ’s death—one was his mother. The three Earth Mothers—Rhea, Demeter, and Proserpina—are still another incarnation of them. All symbolize woman’s inherent power over life and death.

Her skulls remind us that death is perverse, not to say a monster of iniquity, as the ferocious face of Mikkelsen’s *Skull #3* (2018) suggests. Its huge black abyss-like eye sockets are ready to swallow up the viewer who looks into them, meets their blank stare with his own. The homestead precariously perched on it, seems like an irritating bad joke played on it, a nuisance it is ready to shake off. But perhaps most of it all it seems like a joke played on life, as Michael Netter’s comic skulls and bones suggest, a defensive kitschification of death that nonetheless acknowledges that it is everywhere, like the colorful skulls and bones that cover the surface of Netter’s works, turning

them to an amusing all-over painting. But there is really no defense against death—it is not exactly comic, however much it ridicules life.



Sonia Stark, *Three Female Skulls, With Lipstick Smear*, 2020. Oil and pastel on arches paper, 26 x 19 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Donald Baechler, *Skull*, 2009. Acrylic and fabric collage on canvas, 24 x 24 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.

Left: Frodo Mikkelsen, *Untitled (Skull #3)*, 2018. Silver-plated mixed media, 9.6 x 5.9 x 7.9 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Donald Baechler's singular black skull, confronting us from the luminous white of the canvas, staring at us with inevitable invincibility, conveys death's traumatic impact with insistent focused power. Reducing the skull to an all-but-abstract signifier—quintessentializing its form so it becomes an aesthetic thing-in-itself, a sort of metaphysical monadic object—while reminding us of its morbid meaning by ironically turning its white surface black (as death proverbially is)—Baechler's skull conveys our

ambivalence about death. We deny it by treating it as an impersonal pure form, but Baechler reminds us that it is also impure matter. It is worth noting that Cézanne began the modernist denial of the existential and symbolic meaning of the skull by treating it as no more than another form, just as he began the modernist denial of the existential and symbolic meaning of the apple by treating it as no more than another form. Thus, the sweet fruit of life and the bitter fruit of death lost their "all too

human" import, as Clement Greenberg said they had to, in the name of "pure art." It was the end of Vanitas painting, but Baechler's austere abstract skulls—hypermodernized yet existentially confrontational—show there is no escape from tragic vanity, in art and life. Looking at them, we see our inner vanity as though through a glass darkly.

Where Baechler's skulls confront us full-face, as though forcing death upon us, David



Robert Zeller, *The Conversation*, 2019. Oil on linen, 28 x 42 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Ligare's skull appears in profile, as though discreetly present, however boldly lit it is, and however clearly triumphant it is over the growth, its green slowly withering to yellow, in the vase it rests on. A polaroid photograph of a deceased person rests against the vase; Ligare's still life—the skull stills life, and its face is still and inexpressive (whatever expression we read into it) compared to the mobile, expressive face in the photographic memento mori—is clearly an homage to a dead friend. Ligare's

work has a Poussinesque resonance, in the exquisiteness of its handling, and because it alludes, however indirectly, to Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* paintings. Ligare's aesthetic mastery of death is matched only by Stern's. Ingeniously, Ligare invites us to compare his handmade painting with the machine-made photograph, a modern version of the Renaissance *paragone*. It also invites us to compare sculpture—the skull—and painting. Where they were regarded as irreconcilable in the



Frank Lind, *Vanitas*, 2017. Oil on panel, 20 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Renaissance, and where Leonardo argued that painting was superior to sculpture—he probably would have thought it was also superior to photography—Ligare accords them equal aesthetic value by including them in the same work, all the more so because his painting has photographic precision and clarity and his polaroid photograph has a subtle painterly texture, reminding us of the fact that a polaroid photograph contains its own chemical process of development.



Michael Zansky, *Three Studies for Marathon*, 2006-2017. Oil and acrylic on carved plywood, 26 x 21 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.

Frank Lind's *Vanitas* (2017) and Robert Zeller's *The Conversation* (2019) are modern versions of the traditional Death and the Maiden theme, but their Death is a skull, not a skeleton. The contradiction between a small tabletop skull and a large standing female figure—seemingly untroubled by the presence of death however conscious of it—makes for a more emotionally subtle relation between them than in Baldung Grien's treatment of their relationship. More grotesque, animated, expressive, and unsettling than any of the other skulls in the exhibition—they all look passive in comparison, as their often-fixed expressions confirm—Michael

Zansky's angrily grimacing skulls sit upon an animal-like body, as the monkey tail on one of the figures suggests. The skull head is stuck on the body the way the head of a guillotined person is stuck on a pike. In one work, two skull heads, on the same small stick—held by a hand that emerges from a torso—confront us with grimacing smiles. It is a sort of Janus-headed figure, although the two heads do not face in opposite directions but confront us with their difference, however oddly similar. The double-headed eagle is a symbol of empire, suggesting that Zansky's double-skulled figure is a symbol of the empire of death—the

largest empire there is. One of the skulls has a heavenly blue blotch on its face, the other an earth brown smear, suggesting a bipolar personality. In another work, one weird skull—all the skulls are grotesquely distorted, insidiously crazy—holds a paintbrush (with a stream of paint shooting into the sky like an ejaculate) between its teeth, suggesting that the figure is a symbol of the artist himself. He is performing for the public, taking risks by jumping from building to building, sometimes high stepping, sometimes about to step off the earth. One can call these works surrealist, but they are more fantastical than any "classic" surrealist work,

and more original and authentic, for they are not grounded on a preconceived and clichéd conception of the unconscious, but emerge from an exploratory experience of its troubling depths. They convey suffering—Zansky's figure is self-conflicted, unresolvedly at odds with itself, unlike Dalí's figures, for example, *The Great Masturbator* (1929), comfortably at odds with itself, indeed, self-satisfied. Zansky's angry, tortured Death is an unprecedented *invenzione*, to use a Renaissance term of praise, and his paintings a confession worthy of Augustine's and Rousseau's, indeed, any sinner against the self, more pointedly, anyone at odds with himself. Especially anyone who thinks that art is a cure for suffering, has healing power, indeed, that a self-portrait—especially one that portrays oneself as death, that shows the death instinct tormenting oneself, twisting the self the way Laocoön was twisted to death by a great serpent—can relieve one from suffering by exposing it in an aesthetic catharsis.

Diane Thodos' extravagantly distorted, grotesquely magnified, uncannily alive skulls take us back to Expressionism with a vengeance, restoring it to the credibility it lost when it

became a familiar cliché, a standard mode of modern art making. Simultaneously abstract and figurative expressionistic, Thodos' *Skulls* show the creative potential—generative originality—in death. The in-your-face grandeur of their faces, all but overwhelming us and insinuating themselves into our faces, forcing themselves upon us like a nightmare from which we cannot awaken, that scream at us with the fury of unrelieved pain, are unprecedented in art history, like Zansky's uncanny figures. They have the unfamiliarity of the unexpected—a sign of radical creativity—however nominally rooted they are in familiar styles. They take styles that have been reified into clichés, indicating their decadence, and show that they are unexpectedly fertile with aesthetic and expressive possibilities, so unusual when actualized by their artfulness that their works become unclassifiable, truly unique.



Diane Thodos, *Skull*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 52 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Abstract painting is dead, as Conor Walton's *Lego Mondrian* (2019)—a representational painting—makes clear: propped up by a sinister skull, a Mondrian painting is reduced to a trivial game, its simple geometry, at best a



From top: Conor Walton, *It's the End of the World as We Know It*, 2006. Oil on linen, 12 x 24 in. Private Collection.; *Monkey Painting*, 2013. Oil on linen, 16 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.; *Lego Mondrian*, 2019. Oil on linen, 10 x 14 in. Courtesy of John Kelley.

clever construction of Lego blocks. Indeed, representation has triumphed over it by representing it—reducing it to a simulacrum of itself—dare one say simulated art? The gray monkey skull in *Monkey Painting* (2013) rests on a painter's colorful palette, suggesting that painting is monkey business—the painter a monkey, a throwback on the evolutionary scale, as the book *From Ape to Adam* ironically implies. Walton's *It's The End of the World As We Know It* (2006) goes beyond this self-deprecating irony: death is universal, as the crumbled globe suggests, and time is running out, as the traditional hourglass suggests—has run out, as the fact that there is no sand in the upper chamber of the hourglass suggests. Death has triumphed in every realm of human endeavor, as the pile of books, each with death in its title—including my own *The End of Art*—suggests. The skull mounted on the pile makes the point decisively. Walton breathes unconventional new life into the conventional

Vanitas allegory of death, using the old still life props—books, hourglass, a globe, rotting fruit (the monkey's bananas)—to new melancholy effect. His works tell a timeless truth with art historical sophistication and subtle craft, showing that it is still possible to represent the inevitable with aesthetic guile.

But, as Chris Klein's *Phantom of the Opera: Mask of the Red Death* (2019), suggests, the skull—death—may finally be an illusion, a hollow mask worn in a lurid carnival, a masquerade mocking life, confirming that death is unthinkable, as Freud suggests, however much the skull may signify it. But there are other signifiers, such as a bleak landscape and an empty room, all of which have imaginative appeal, but miss the meaning of death: the meaninglessness of life. That is, the emptiness of life is signified by the hollowness of the skull, and emphasized by the illusion that the skull is alive. Clearly, Klein's phantom skull, with its oddly exaggerated grimace—it seems more foolish than macabre—is not the rotting skull of the dead court jester Yorick exhumed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The skull is a stage prop in virtually every work in the exhibition, confirming their theatricality, and as



Chris Klein, *Phantom of the Opera: Mask of the Red Death*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.

such a reminder of the vanity of art (as well as life)—the vanity that went into the making of the works. It is a necessary vanity, for without vanity there is no creativity, which alone is the alternative to death, especially the melancholy that is a form of death, the melancholy built into contemplation of the skull, the consistent attention that artists in the exhibition

give it, as though to penetrate to its core. The skull is the pivot around which all the objects revolve, giving them their fatal meaning. There is no sun in the works in the exhibition, only the skull, as cratered and luminous as the moon. It shines with a brilliance that confirms the artists' brilliance.

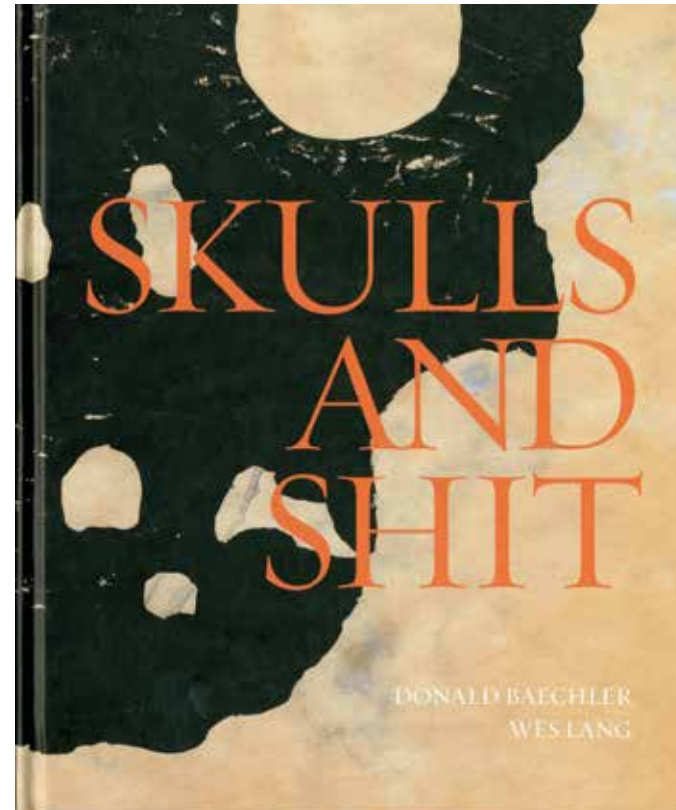
Notes

- ¹ Joan Riviere, "Hate, Greed and Aggression," in *Love, Hate and Reparation* (New York and London: Norton, 1964), 13.
- ² Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols* (London and New York: Penguin, 1996), 888.

DONALD BAECHLER

Skulls first began to enter my work in the mid 1980s, lifted from source material including medieval engravings, toilet stall graffiti, and nineteenth century sailor's tattoos. They entered an expanding vocabulary of images that included my own drawings, found imagery of all kinds, and drawings made by others at my request.

My work in general has flirted with but never truly engaged narrative, and I have never had much interest in the symbolic load that images of skulls have carried throughout art history and in popular culture; I used to say that a skull was like a lightbulb, they were all the same yet they were all different. For the most part a skull was basically something to paint. And, as it happens, I've recently begun to make paintings of lightbulbs.



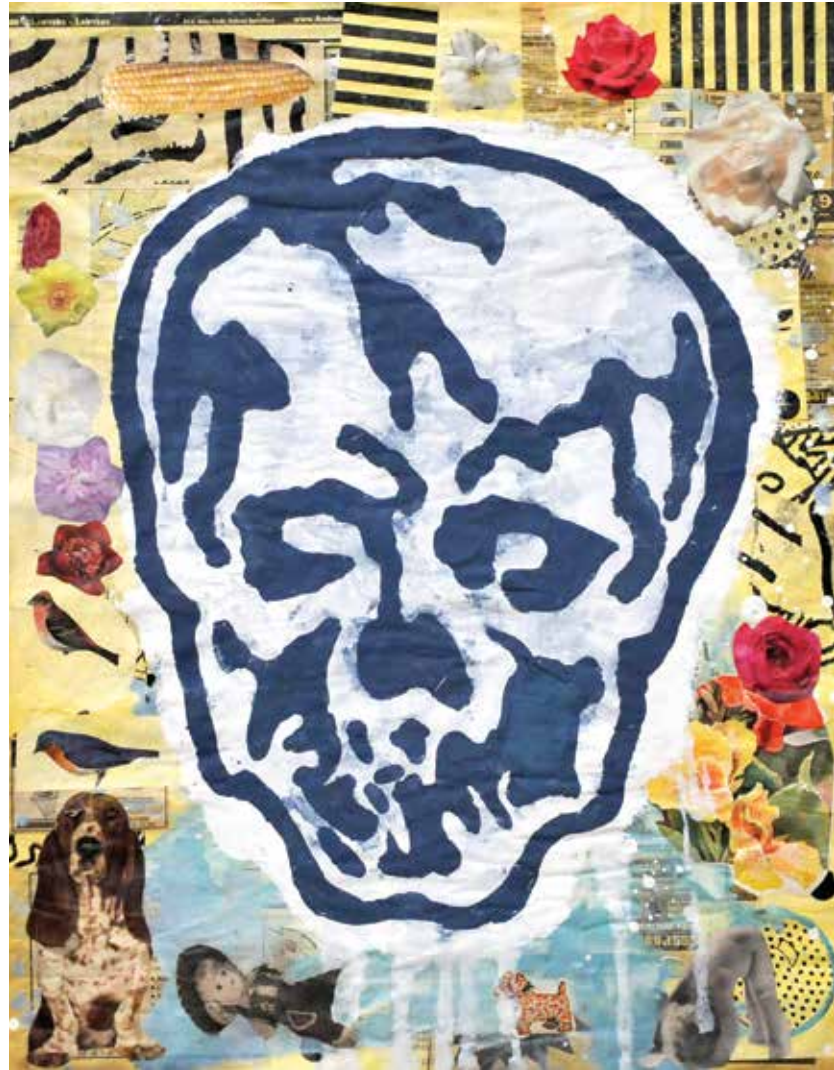
Donald Baechler and Wes Lang, *Skulls & Shit*, 2010. 103 page color publication, 11 1/4 x 9 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artists.



Donald Baechler, *Skull & Crossbones*, 2009. Acrylic and fabric collage on canvas, 24 x 24 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.



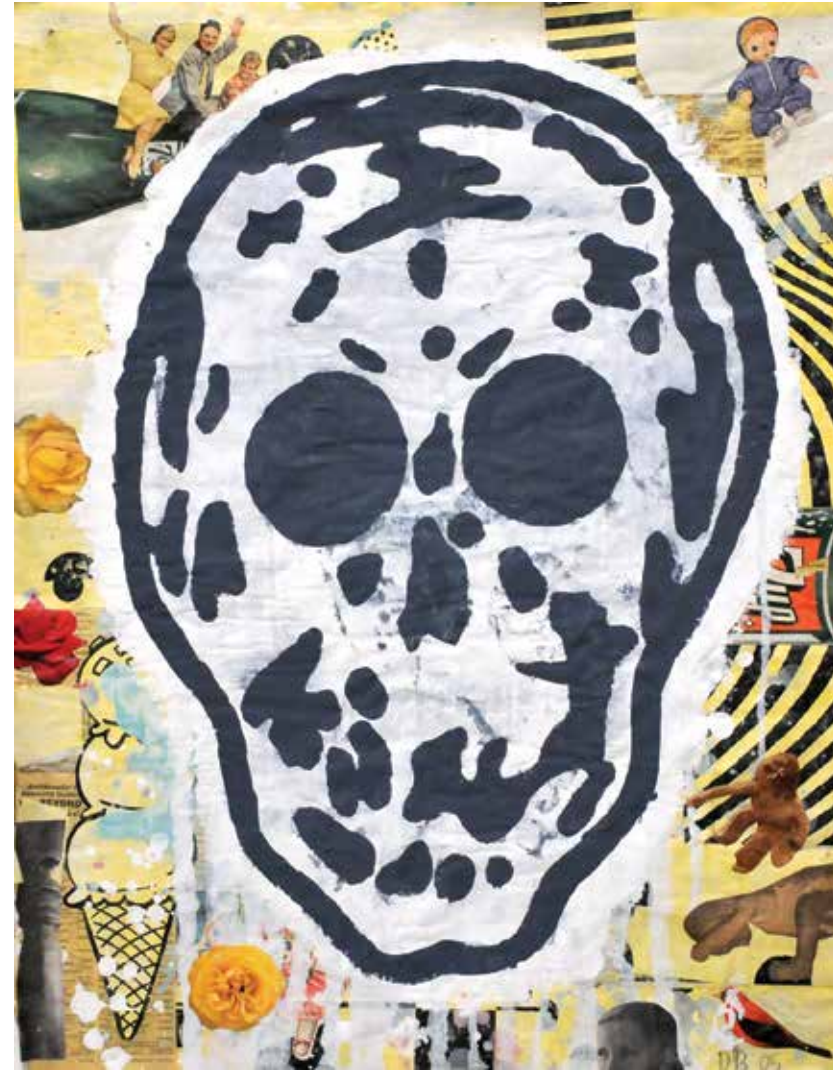
Donald Baechler, *Skull*, 2009. Acrylic and fabric collage on canvas, 24 x 24 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.



Donald Baechler, *Skull (Yellow #7)*, 2005. Gouache, vinyl paint and paper collage on paper, 27 x 21 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.



Donald Baechler, *Skull (Yellow #6)*, 2005. Gouache, vinyl paint and paper collage on paper, 27 x 21 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.



Donald Baechler, *Skull (Yellow #5)*, 2005. Gouache, vinyl paint and paper collage on paper, 27 x 21 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.



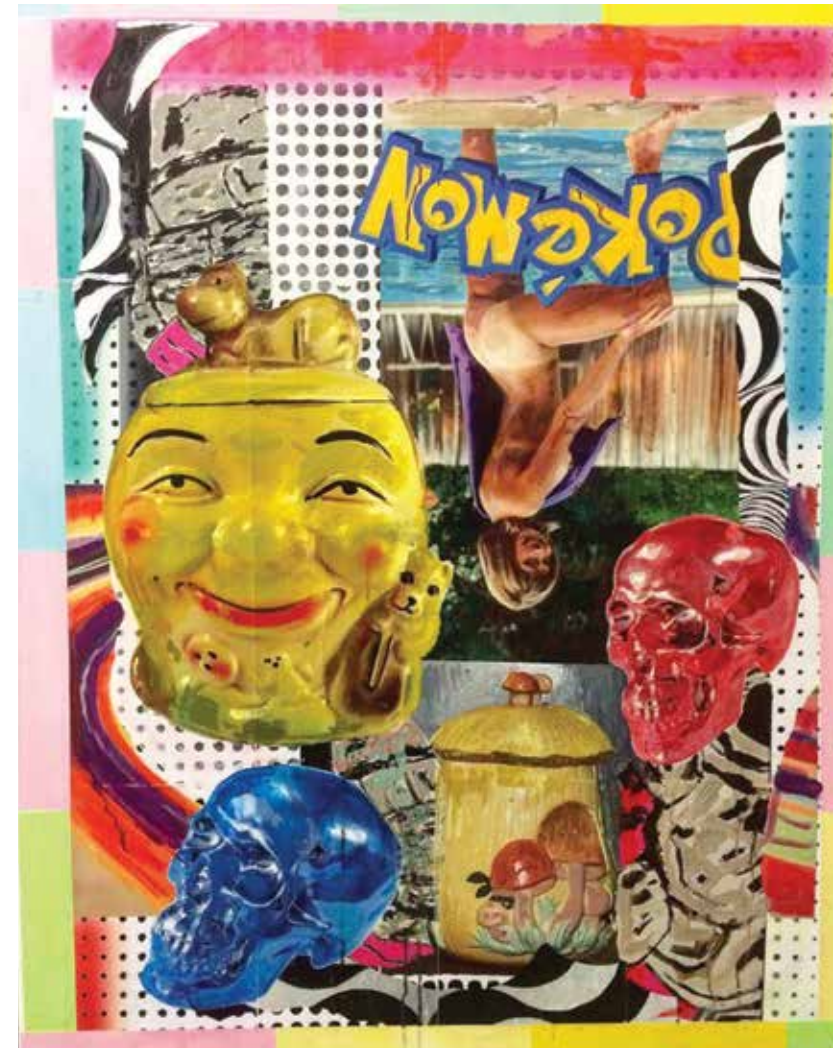
Donald Baechler, *Skull (Yellow #4)*, 2005. Gouache, vinyl paint and paper collage on paper, 27 x 21 in. Courtesy of Donald Baechler Studio.

NOAH BECKER

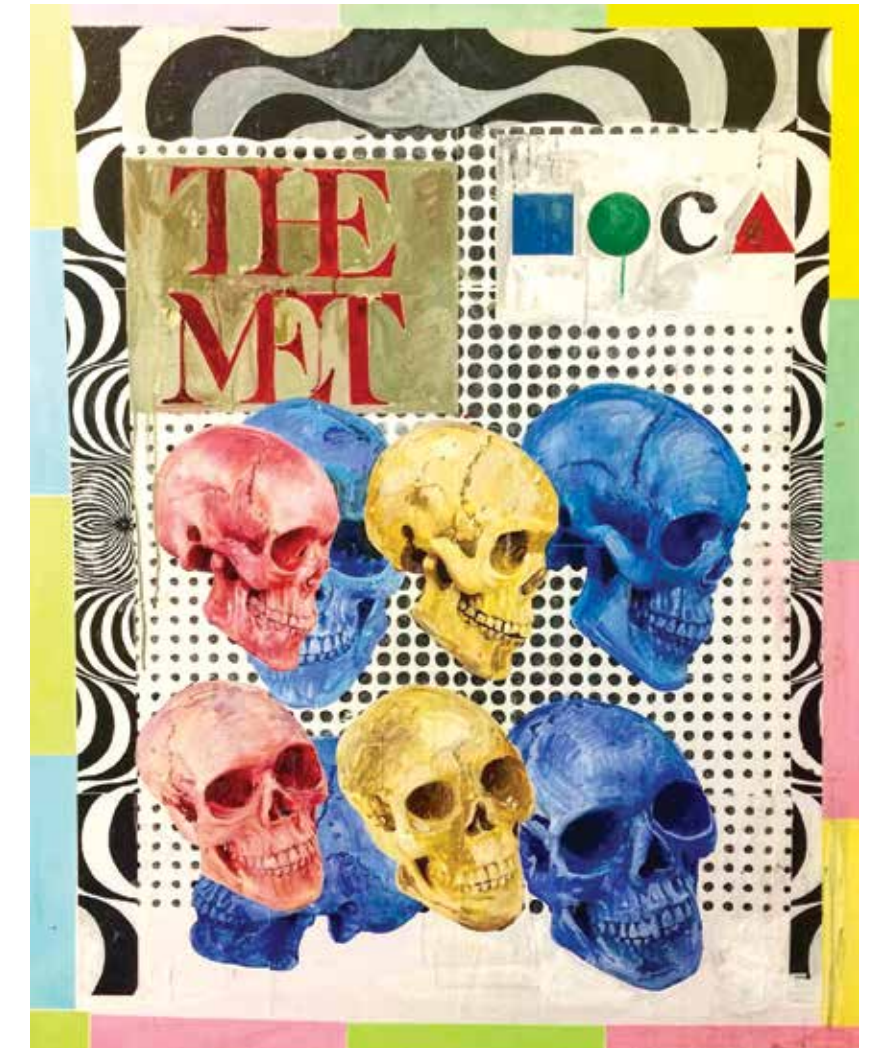
My paintings are somewhat planned out but also connect with a certain kind of image or symbol as the main idea—skulls, figures, animals and landscapes are interesting to me. Setting the stage for the elements in a painting, then populating the scene is another mode of thinking I use. Many painters are drawn to the center of the canvas as a starting point. One gets a certain amount of energy to push a certain idea and once that push is over you are left with an unfinished painting. How a painter solves this puzzle will ultimately expose their level of artistry or show them to be a genius—which is less common. Making a painting is a psychological involvement and a series of events leading to the final image. You start a painting then run out of energy—after resting, you work on the same painting again. Faced with the problem of how to finish the “leftover space” from the first session, you improvise. Frank Stella told me he thought the Abstract Expressionists got “lost in the corners” of their paintings. Since receiving this advice, how I start or finish my paintings is extremely important to me.



Noah Becker, *Tune Out #2*, 2017. Acrylic on board, 42 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Noah Becker, *Skulls and Cookie Jars*, 2018. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Noah Becker, *Museum Skulls*, 2018. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.

PAUL BRAINARD

This painting is a combination of hard-edged abstraction of a landscape, advertising, and memento mori that is a response to how an individual's daily life mingles with the unreality of the internet. Bright colors and shapes act as an eye-catching distraction from individual mortality. Even in death, the hooded skeletal figure is drawn to the sexuality of the female figure. The off hours text is the font of the MTA subway in NYC. I was trying to combine many different elements in a collage like manner that would represent our collective fractured schizophrenic existence.

After the death of both of my parents in 2017, I created quite a few works that dealt with various sign posts along the way. Compositionally, the image of James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano registers as a roadside billboard. The image of the skull from the Misfits logo is a reference that I have always worked with. My Mother and I were huge fans of the Sopranos and George Romero films. As I get older, I am more horrified by how fast it is all going and how soon it will all be over. This drawing is a snapshot of that debacle.



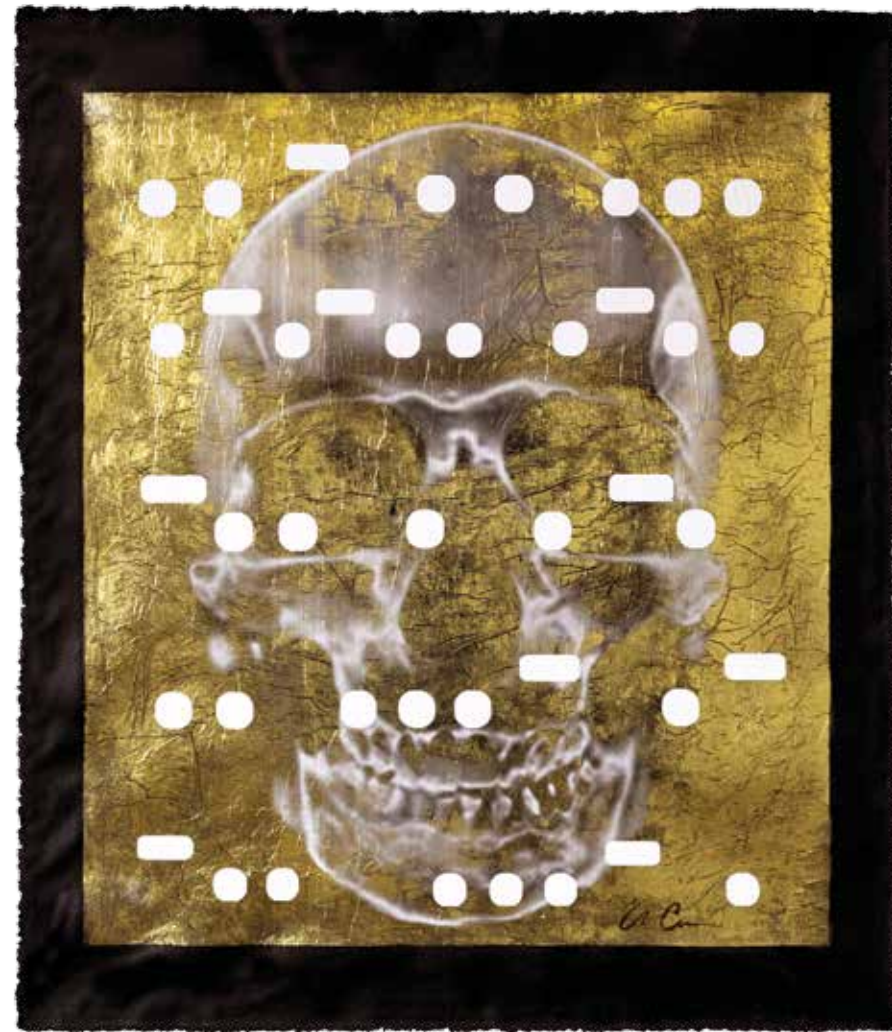
Paul Brainard, *5th Sunday Boner*, 2018. Graphite on paper, 22 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.
Opposite: Paul Brainard, *Cyborg Space*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 26 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



BILL CLAPS

Claps' skull artworks are from his "It's All Derivative" series, where he comments on the practice of appropriation and veneration in the art world by combining borrowed imagery from the past with the visual language of Morse code. Claps chose skull images as they have been one of the most repeated images throughout art history and remind him of the limited time that he has to create. All the works in the series have "It's All Derivative" written on them in Morse.

Claps applies gold foil to the surface of the works, using a unique technique he developed, creating his own signature version of these iconic images. According to the artist, "Nothing we do is totally original—it's all derivative on one level or another, and we need to pay homage to those who have influenced us."



Bill Claps, *It's All Derivative, The Skull I*, 2013. Mixed media with gold foil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Bill Claps, *It's All Derivative, The Skull, Negative*, 2014. Mixed media with gold foil on canvas, 15 x 16 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist.

DANIELLE FRANKENTHAL

Is mortality death itself, or the awareness of death?

The religio-spiritual point of view is that life and death are a continuum; the tree is one of its symbols.

My painting is necessarily ambiguous. Is it the “tree of life” or “tree of the knowledge of good and evil?” The first is a source of immortality; the second the source of man’s separation from the godhead and exile into mortality.

In Christian mythology, the tree of life prefigures the cross on which Jesus both loses his earthly life and gains celestial immortality.

Great trees outlive the mortals around them. They reach from the depths to the sky. Our consciousness of our mortality can crush us or bring us to the light, which Buddha found under the Bodhi tree.



Danielle Frankenthal, *Tree of Life*, 2019. Acrylic paint on acrylic resin panels, 48 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist.

JOHN GRANDE

The Residue of Time was part of a larger body of work based on postings that line construction sites around Manhattan. These decaying advertisements are like skeletal remains—a residue of a past life. The deterioration of the postings throughout New York City streets show the life and times of a city left behind by years of tearing down, graffiti, scrapping, and reposting, creating transient narratives between themselves and the multitude of passersby. These modern-day cave paintings create their own language and history unique to the constant turnaround of life and death in the city.



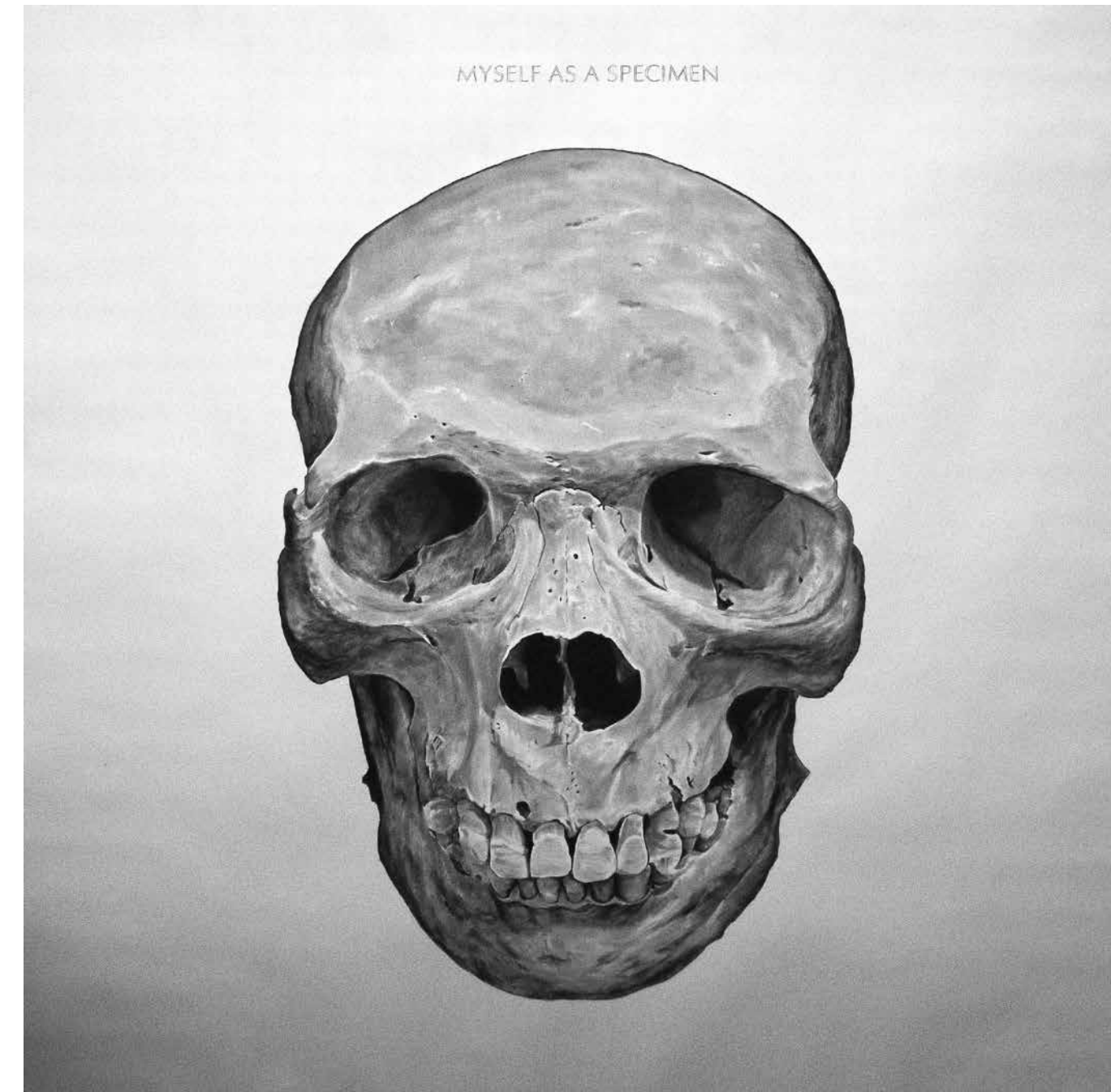
John Grande, *The Residue of Time*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.

TREVOR GUTHRIE

With a variety of sources, and sometimes with only the title as clue to the intent, I enjoy revealing obscure art historical references as well as other cloaked meanings in my work. I am at a point in life where the nuanced grey tones of life's mysteries are revealing themselves—however, that I might be more aware of them does not in any way mean that I understand them. For the artist, it is a matter of intent and skill to transcribe these mysteries in a way that is interesting.

I am loath to describe my work in terms like photorealism. Up close, the drawing is often a symphony of mistakes that orders itself from a certain viewing distance. Using nature as stage, I will insert a single figure or object into my scenes which function less as autobiography and more as avatars for folk in the industrialized west who are suffering from electronic isolation, despair and deteriorating real-life social skills. Ironically, all these sicknesses of the soul were born out of apps which were supposed to bring humanity closer.

Given my limited pedagogy, my attempts at wit while illustrating the ironic, weird and sad comedy of the human experience occasionally highlighting history that repeats itself. A few pieces have even been slightly prophetic—or at least in the mode of “coincidence is inevitable.”



Trevor Guthrie, *Myself as a Specimen*, 2009. Charcoal, graphite on paper, 55 x 57 in. unframed. Private Collection.

JINSU HAN

For the past twenty years, Han has been inventing mechanized sculptures that are part Dada, part Steampunk. Each autonomous machine is programmed and designed to fulfill Han's single-minded goal: they endlessly play out the inescapable nature of change through their repetitive movement. Han believes, as Heraclitus did, that change is fundamental in the universe: All is Flux, Nothing is Stationary. Han's kinetic curiosities are little feats of engineering—exposed custom-cut brass bones and vein-like wires fused with everyday castaway junk, spare parts of old toys and antiques give his machines a crude, low-tech, incongruous attitude. The looped processes in some of his kinetic sculptures produce generative art. For example, a series of air-compression machines blow dyed bubbles relentlessly against a barren wall. Eventually an abstract painting appears. Here, time is the essential medium. In another assembly-line setup, brush-wielding robotic appendages continuously spread paint around a canvas. The action of painting is executed unemotionally according to the kinematics of their rigid systems.



Jinsu Han, *Dream Fiend 5C*, 2009. Plastic model, steel, wood, epoxy resin, ABS plastic, copper, silver cup, speaker, radio receiver, motor, feather, steel wheel and chalk powder, 30.7 x 25.6 x 19.6 in. Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery.

CHRIS JONES

British sculptor Chris Jones creates sculptures composed of fragmented images from magazines and used books that are beautiful, frightening, and exquisitely detailed: a macabre headless horse, a nineteenth century stagecoach, a disheveled TV. Jones' work mimics the way in which we assimilate and process the world using our own personal histories and memories as a base to develop new connections. Jones has called on his own memories (through an art historical lens) and the viewers are in turn prompted to call upon their past to create their own personal stories as they relate to these wondrous pieces. Jones' work reminds that everything around us comes with a deeply embedded history and a multitude of stories to tell—that is, if we pay close enough attention.

Opposite: Chris Jones, *The Trader*, 2016. Book and magazine images, board, and polymer varnish, 34 x 23 x 22 in. Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery.



CHRIS KLEIN

We've been obsessed with tales of love and mortality long before Thespis. Whether Euripides or Shakespeare, it is stories of death that bring out our most powerful emotions.

I've worked in theatre for almost 30 years. I paint sets, stages for actors to tread upon, and skies for them to die beneath. But I love the costumes they wear, helping transform them into the characters they play. These are what I love to paint.

I remove the actors, thus leaving the costumes to speak. They evoke memories of a great performance, the different actors who have worn them, different stages, different times. They have a beauty of their own, but they say so much more.

I am privileged to have permission to paint the costumes from *The Phantom of the Opera*. From Gaston Leroux's original story to Andrew Lloyd Webber's spectacular musical, the story is all about love and death.

This painting, *Mask of the Red Death* depicts the costume worn by Erik (the Phantom) during the Masquerade scene. Appropriately, he is dressed as the "Red Death," from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death."

The real tragedy is that the amazing designer, Maria Bjornson died at the peak of her career at just 53. This is my personal homage to an incredible woman.



Chris Klein, *Phantom of the Opera: Mask of the Red Death*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.

DAVID LIGARE

When I first began my project of making history-inspired narrative paintings, I decided that, in addition to figures and landscapes, I would make still-life paintings that were more than formal arrangements of attractive objects. My *Still Life with Skull and Polaroid* (1983) was a traditional *momento mori* or contemplation of mortality. The skull, the withering laurel wreath and the Roman tear vial are all traditional elements but the nature of the sunlight and, of course, the photograph identifies the work as contemporary. I had not seen a photograph used in this context before but having looked at old photographs of people who were once beautiful made me feel, as I'm sure others have, the sharpness of the passage of time.

Opposite: David Ligare, *Still Life with Skull and Polaroid*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in. Collection of the artist.



FRANK LIND

Above the noise and confusion of twenty-first century life, I have carved out a painter's existence in my Downtown Brooklyn studio. By using "old master" techniques of careful composing, analysis of formal relationships, underpainting and glazing, I attempt not to copy bygone traditions but to use painterly tools in an effort to make my art come alive.

The painting *Vanitas* draws on a Netherlandish genre juxtaposing the good things in life with mortality, often indicated by a human skull. These paintings presented a kind of visual warning that lest we become too entranced with the trappings of this world, the skull awaits. At the same time, they celebrated corporeal existence with lush colors and succulent painting.

In this particular presentation, a picture housed in a small wall cabinet, I reference a strategy of "private pictures" wherein a patron/collector might provide some modesty for works of daunting, i.e. sexual, content. These works were often only opened on special occasions for special viewers. However, in this case, an unadorned wooden cupboard reveals its secrets to anyone willing to open its doors.



Frank Lind, *Vanitas*, 2017. Oil on panel, 20 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

FRODO MIKKELSEN

Ever since childhood, Frodo Mikkelsen has been interested in skulls—pirate flags, animal skulls, and more. In the 2000s, the skull motif began to appear in his art, and a few years later it took off! The skulls should be seen as a form around which the sculpture is created. A sense of humor permeates all of his art. In the silver sculptures you can see the circle of life... something dies, something grows!

After a few trips to Mexico, Mikkelsen was inspired by Día de Muertos and the colors quickly became part of his art. Old colored plastic items, old toys, commercials and comics, just to name a few—the list of his inspiration is endless. Remember! No matter how hard you have had it through life, we all smile in death!



Frodo Mikkelsen, *Untitled (Skull #3)*, 2018. Silver-plated mixed media, 9.6 x 5.9 x 7.9 in. Courtesy of the artist.



BOBBIE MOLINE-KRAMER

“All That Remains” is a series of 11 wood panels, (4 are shown), when arranged form a tree; a visual story of my ancestors, of my family and ultimately of my place on our family tree. A family tree due to illness and death is not really connected anymore, and has begun to disintegrate, to form into a new pattern. As a child, I was taught that family is everything, and so it is. I wanted to belong, to fit in, to be a part of the whole even as the whole began to fragment into individual units, even as we each went in different directions.

Using birds as a stand-in for my family members made perfect sense to me. Birds are recognized nearly universally and have symbolized throughout history both the human soul and the struggle to break free, to break the constraints. And doing the work on wooden panels carried the metaphor one step further.



Bobbie Moline-Kramer, *All That Remains* (4 of 11 panels), 2010. Oil, graphite, gesso and wood burning on wood, 10 x 10 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.

MICHAEL NETTER

A head is a house. It is where a person's mind and storyline live. In art for millennia, skulls have represented mortality and death—a permanently empty house.

In *Regeneration*, skulls, in a chaotic, heavenly blue sky, appear in a context that's frequently seen in art history: living, dying, and going to the afterlife. *Remains* is a neatly organized collection of skeleton pieces discovered by archaeologists asking, "whose remains and what happened?" In both pieces there is a sense of celebration suggesting that both life and painting don't stop at the edge of the canvas.

I work with ordinary materials: stencils and spray paint on cardboard to give an immediate hands-on effect. Cardboard is used because it is easy to carve and expose multiple layers and stenciled image on top of stenciled image, all suggesting the passing of time.



Michael Netter, *Regeneration*, 2016. Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Michael Netter, *Remains*, 2000. Mixed media on corrugated cardboard, 18 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist.

STEPHEN NEWTON

For me, art is something you are compelled to do from an inner necessity, rather than something you just choose to do. Look at World War I poetry: forged and crystallized in a crucible of stress and fear. Or psychotic artists who generate such strange and compelling art without any preconception or apparent objective. Or children's art.

An English critic described my painting as a “psycho-conceptual project.” Indeed, many years ago, I did complete a doctorate in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Sheffield in England on the creative process. On balance though, I would much rather have won an MC like many of those World War I poets.

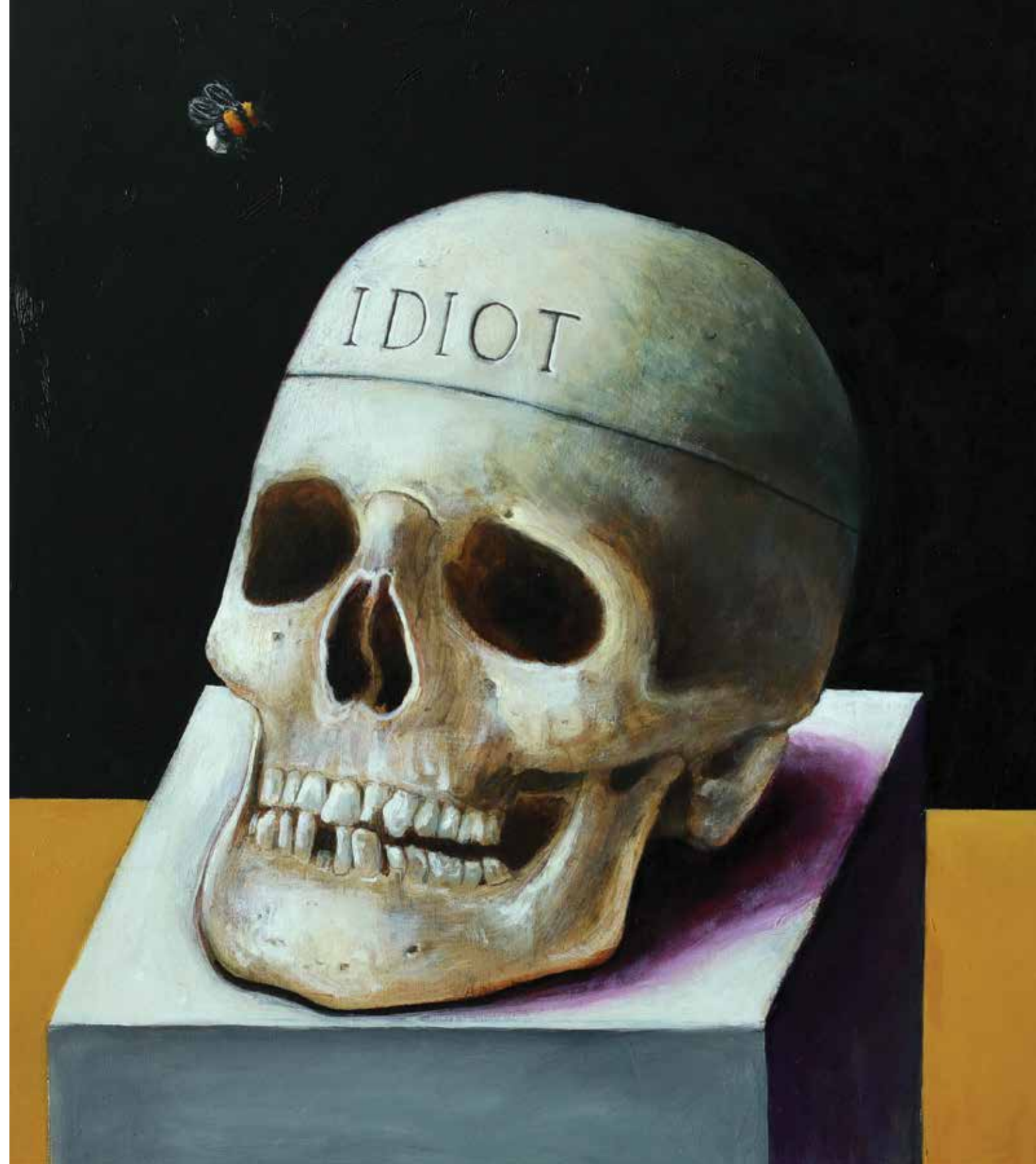


Stephen Newton, *The Wake*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 26 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

PAUL PRETZER

Paul Pretzer creates a multiplicity of strange hybrid beings and chimera, which he endows with attributes, borrowed from the world of consumer goods or completely invented, frequently eluding a clear interpretation. The scenes often prompt memories of influential stories of the “Suppenkasper” from the German children’s book *Struwwelpeter* or Wilhelm Busch’s pious Helene. Small instances of carelessness can lead to terrible consequences. But in Pretzer’s pictures we are not confronted with dark disciplinary measures, but rather with black humor. The absurd, bad luck, great misfortune, and failure of large and small projects simply happens. In these pictures, there are no clearly identifiable instigators of fate or unfairness. The only thing that the artist gives his protagonists on their Sisyphus path is empathy, which enables his lost creatures to look for support in ritualized poses to come completely near to us. Culprits or rogues seem to suffer just as much from the effects of the misdeed as the seemingly identifiable victim.

Pretzer avails himself adroitly of his talent for composition, form, and light. When first looking at his paintings, one is tempted to fall back on pleasant comfort of an apparently easily accessible painting of figurative certainties. Pretzer places himself self-confidently in the tradition of board picture paintings. He makes use of the best ones, quotes them skillfully and questions with the introduction of tragicomedy, the grotesque, and slapstick in a very contemporary fashion the conventions of seriousness in the treatment of art.



Paul Pretzer, *Dead Idiot*,
2019. Oil on wood, 17.1 x 15 in.
Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery.

SIGRID SARDA

Lothario's Vanity explores the intersections of sex, death, and mortality. Both figures are depicted as a vanitas, illustrating the follies of their own making. He is the object of desire, she obsessing over that desire. He in his haughtiness, she in her limerence. Crystals connect the two of them, giving each the potential to overcome their absurdity.

The choice of materials is no accident. Wax has a paradoxical nature. It is fragile yet durable, reminiscent of the human condition. Historically it has been a medium employed to immortalize one's existence as the effigy, creating figures that at once defy yet accept death. Crystals symbolize manifested transcendence. Opals are associated with passion, eroticism, and desire. Bones are incorporated, creating reliquaries and talismans.

Lothario's Vanity represents the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Each mini-death we experience, whether emotionally/psychically or both gives us the potential for growth and not rest in our vanity.



Opposite: Sigrid Sarda, *Lothario's Vanity*, 2014-2018. Wax, human hair, cotton, bone, gold leaf, crystals, opals, 21 x 31 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

SONIA STARK

As artists we need and desire the isolation of the studio in order to explore our individual paths, but there comes a time when the artist has to absorb and be present in the world. Without the flow between the two areas, there is the danger that the work will become narcissistic and repetitious. The artist has to look outside the studio to observe life off the canvas, to see the landscape, to see the individuals around us, those we interact with every day, on the subway, in the grocery, our families. Seeing and observing who they are has brought me to portraiture. With the freedom of the abstraction, delving into oneself for an image is exciting, the portrait forces me to look outside myself and experience the other.

Sonia Stark, *Three Female Skulls, With Lipstick Smear*, 2020. Oil and pastel on arches paper, 26 x 19 in.
Courtesy of the artist.



LYNN STERN

My intention in the eight skull series was to treat the skull as a psychological force rather than a fixed symbol of death; to help achieve this I portrayed it abstractly.

By blurring, veiling, distorting, cropping, partially obscuring, and creating ambiguity in figure/ground relationships, I de-literalized what was in front of the lens, making the image less physically descriptive and more inward looking. The scrim of translucent white or black cloth used in all the images further diffuses the indirect natural light, creating a kind of inner glow while also increasing the sense of spatial ambiguity. Additionally, I emphasized the skulls' eye sockets or other orifices: circular forms that are sometimes filled with light, sometimes dark, and often juxtaposed with ambiguous black circular forms that suggest both oneness and the emptiness of an abyss.

Although I am a photographer, I think like a painter in that my concerns are largely formal: to create tension, plasticity, texture, and a feeling of inner movement or vibration such that the image feels charged. Above all, I value the forms seen in my images not only for their outer aspects, but, more importantly, as the expression of something *felt* but not seen.



Clockwise, from top left: Lynn Stern, *Doppelgänger #13-43a*, 2013–2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 20 x 28 in. Ed. 1/6.; *Doppelgänger #14-74a*, 2014. Archival inkjet pigment print, 20 x 28 in. Ed. 1/6.; *Doppelgänger #13-59*, 2013–2014. Archival inkjet pigment print, 21 x 28 in. Ed. 1/6.; *Doppelgänger #13-50a*, 2013–2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 21 x 28 in. Ed. 1/6. All courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *Spectator #14-94a*, 2014–2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 32 x 43 in. Ed. 1/6. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *Spectator #14-65*, 2014–2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 32 x 29 in. Ed. 1/6. Courtesy of the artist.



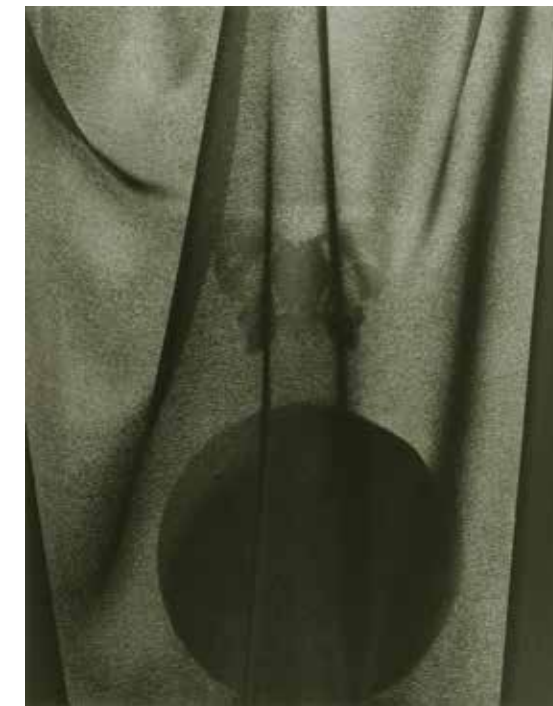
Lynn Stern, *Spectator #14-70*, 2014–2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 32 x 34.5 in. Ed. 1/6. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *Full Circle #04-42*, 2004–2009. Archival inkjet pigment print, 46 x 32 in. Ed. 1/12. Courtesy of the artist.



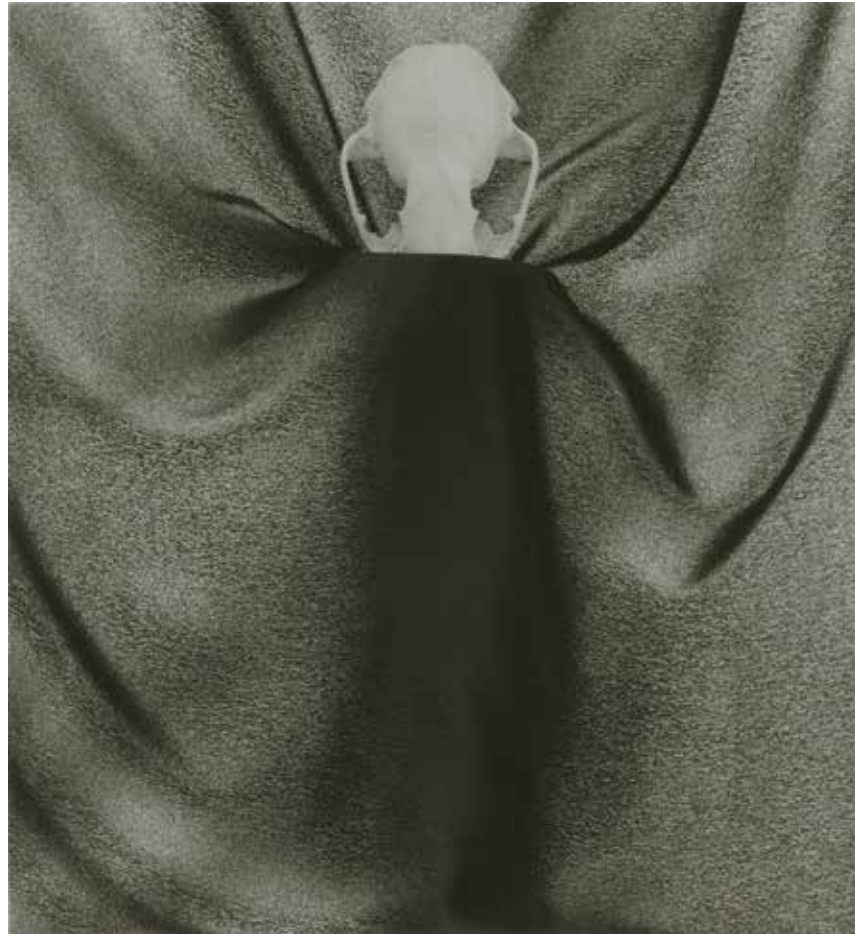
From top: Lynn Stern, *Full Circle #05-59c*, 2005–2009. Archival inkjet pigment print, 34 x 46 in. Ed. 1/12.; *Full Circle #06-44*, 2006–2009. Archival inkjet pigment print, 34 x 41 in. Ed. 1/12. Both courtesy of the artist.



From top: Lynn Stern, *Beyond Bones #06-60*, 2006–2010. Archival inkjet pigment print, 43 x 34 in. Ed. 1/12.; *Beyond Bones #06-64*, 2006–2010. Archival inkjet pigment print, 34 x 35 in. Ed. 1/12. Both courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *Beyond Bones #06-66*, 2006–2010. Archival inkjet pigment print, 46 x 28.5 in. Ed. 1/12. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *(W)holes #02-33a*, 2002–2008. Gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 in. Ed. 1/5. Courtesy of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *(W)holes #02-34a*, 2002–2008. Gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 in. Ed. 1/5. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *(W)holes #94-7a*, 1994–2008. Gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 in. Ed. 1/5. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *(W)holes #05-18b*, 2005–2008. Gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 in. Ed. 1/5. Courtesy of the artist.



Clockwise, from top left: Lynn Stern, *Animus #25R*, 1996–1998. Split-toned negative gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 in. 2/7 variants.; *Animus #41*, 1995–1998. Split-toned negative gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 in. 3/7 variants.; *Animus #5a*, 1995–1998. Split-toned negative gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 in. 3/7 variants. All courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Stern, *Animus #7*, 1995–1998. Split-toned negative gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 in. 3/7 variants. Courtesy of the artist.



From left: Lynn Stern, *Skull #28*, 1991. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. Ed. 4/8.; *Skull #10a*, 1991. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. Ed. 1/8.; *Skulls #9*, 1991. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. Ed. 2/8. All courtesy of the artist.



From left: Lynn Stern, *Dispossessions #8*, 1990–1992. Framed composite gelatin silver prints, 47 x 38 in. Ed. 2/4.; *Dispossessions #9*, 1990–1992. Framed composite gelatin silver prints, 47 x 38 in. Ed. 1/4.; *Dispossessions #5*, 1990–1992. Framed composite gelatin silver prints, 47 x 38 in. Ed. 1/4. All courtesy of the artist.

DIANE THODOS

The *Skull* series expresses my reaction to the traumas of the twenty-first century—from 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, destabilizing wars in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, the 2008 market collapse and depression, and the rise of neofascism. The series developed through a subconscious volition of its own based on two seminal influences. In 1984, I worked with Jackson Pollock's teacher Stanley William Hayter, learning surrealist-based experiments in automatism. These exercises combined potential of the Abstract Expressionist field with the discovery of uncovering subconscious imagery. In 1992, I was befriended by the art collectors Marcia and Granvil Specks, and became intimate with their internationally renowned collection of over 400 German Expressionist prints including the works of Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, and Otto Dix's 1924 etching cycle *Der Krieg [War]*. These works were forthright in their pathos, emotional courage, and expressive provocation, igniting a similar expressive freedom in my own art. The *Skull* series exudes an existential pessimism, which punctures the slick facade of contemporary consumerism and life. German Expressionist scholar Reinhold Heller wrote about the series in a 2009 exhibition. "[There remains] a persistent expressionist undercurrent refusing to die, that prioritizes the individuality of the artist, the artists' personal interaction and response to the experience of existence in society...For them the image and the means through which it is achieved retain, regain and are reinvested with the inescapable power of significant meaning..."



Diane Thodos, *Skull*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 52 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Diane Thodos, *Skull*, 2007. Oil on linen, 55 x 41 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Diane Thodos, *Weeping Skull*, 2007. Oil on linen, 55 x 41 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Diane Thodos, *Skull*, 2008. Oil on linen, 55 x 41 in. Courtesy of the artist.



CONOR WALTON

I am a figurative painter in the European tradition, exploring issues of truth, meaning and value. All my paintings are attempted answers to the three questions in the title of Gauguin's famous painting: "What are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?"

My aim is to paint pictures that obviously refer to contemporary life and beg for interpretation, but that (while political in the largest sense) are not reducible to propaganda. I want people of widely divergent views to be able to enjoy my work, yet be unsure whether their own opinions are being endorsed or mocked. Particularly in our age of increasing political polarization, this involves what I think of as "dancing along cultural fault-lines:" using fantasy, humour, playfulness, irony, the feigned craziness of the court jester, to articulate serious issues in a manner that is both challenging and mercurial, that allows and even encourages multiple interpretations.

My hope is that the intelligent viewer, aware that different interpretive possibilities cannot be removed, that the picture cannot be easily used as propaganda or disarmed and rendered innocuous, is led towards a more complex and nuanced negotiation with the image.



Conor Walton, *Lego Mondrian*, 2019. Oil on linen, 10 x 14 in. Courtesy of John Kelley.



Conor Walton, *It's the End of the World as We Know It*, 2006. Oil on linen, 12 x 24 in. Private Collection.
Next page: Conor Walton, *Monkey Painting*, 2013. Oil on linen, 16 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



MICHAEL ZANSKY

In *Three Studies for Marathon*, I depict the artist as a skeleton, an interpretation used numerous times throughout art history.

In the left panel, the skeleton's massive head and raised leg and twisted torso is anxiously warming up at the starting line.

In the middle panel, the skeleton appears at the half-way point. His split skull is both looking back to what came before, and forward towards what's to come.

The last panel finds him, with brush in mouth, bounding over endless walls.



Michael Zansky, *Three Studies for Marathon*, 2006-2017. Oil and acrylic on carved plywood, 26 x 21 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.

ROBERT ZELLER

The practices of painting and writing fiction are completely intertwined for me, rooted in Surrealism. The people and spaces I create are real enough on a technical level, but they serve symbolical purposes. They are akin to subconscious realizations that never quite culminate in full understanding.

A formative incident in my artistic practice took place in the woods of upstate New York in 2015. I was hiking up Overlook Mountain near Woodstock, when I came across an old, abandoned hotel near the midpoint of the trail to the summit. The Overlook Hotel lay in ruins, with crumbling walls emerging from amidst the trees in heavy morning fog. I knew right away that I would paint it. Over the next three years, the structure kept speaking to me about various characters that haunt its surrounding environs. Some are ghosts, while others are alive. One is a waiter.

I was inspired to write about them in the form of ten short stories. The stories came quickly, but the images are taking longer to craft and are non-linear, with layers of unresolved meaning. They are Surrealistic in that they are neither completely absurd, nor explicitly real, like dreams from the underworld.



Robert Zeller, *The Conversation*, 2019. Oil on linen, 28 x 42 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Zeller, *The Courtship*, 2019. Oil on linen, 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.

ANONYMOUS ARTIST

My interest in bones and skulls started when I was a kid making art. Early influences of Henry Moore and Irving Penn, and how they captured the striking beautiful simplicity of those organic forms. It was also the history of life contained in those bones and skulls, whether a chicken or human skull, whether a month old or millions of years old, those remains could tell a whole story. On the next block from me in the east village, NYC, was a fantastic jeweler. In his shop, he had a skull bracelet and key chain that were simple, elegant, and understated. Definitely not “in-your-face” goth rocker wear. These pieces caught my attention with their subtle presence, and I bought them right then. They have been a part of me for almost 30 years.

Over the past year, as Donald and I were organizing the exhibit, I was also taking care of my elderly parents. Then in the fall my dad passed away; unexpected, but not a surprise. As I think of my dad, I think of my story with him, his own story and the story of my dad and mom together—all the while twirling and touching my skull bracelet.

— Robert Curcio



Anonymous artist, *Skull Bracelet and Key Chain*, 1990. Sterling silver, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Robert Curcio. Photography by Sebastian Piras.



DONALD KUSPIT

Donald Kuspit is one of America's most distinguished art critics. In 1983, he received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism, given by the College Art Association. In 1993, he received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from Davidson College, in 1996 from the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design presented him with a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California. In 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. In 2008 he received the Tenth Annual Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Foundation. In 2013 he received the First Annual Award for Excellence in Cultural Criticism and Thought from the Gabarron Foundation. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim Foundation, and Asian Cultural Council, among other organizations.

Donald Kuspit is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Art History and Philosophy at the

State University of New York at Stony Brook, and was the A.D. White Professor at Large at Cornell University (1991-97). He is also Senior Critic at the New York Academy of Art. He has doctorates in philosophy (University of Frankfurt) and art history (University of Michigan), as well as degrees from Columbia University, Yale University, and Pennsylvania State University. He has also completed the course of study at the Psychoanalytic Institute of the New York University Medical Center.

He has written numerous articles, exhibition reviews, catalogue essays, lectured at many universities and art schools, curated many exhibitions, and edited several series for UMI Research Press and the Cambridge University Press. He was the editorial advisor for European Art 1900-50 and art criticism for the Encyclopedia Britannica (16th edition), and wrote the entry on art criticism for it. Among his books are *The Critic Is Artist: The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984); *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993; in German, Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1995); *The Dialectic of Decadence* (New York: Stux Press, 1993; reissued, New York: Allworth Press, 2000); *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988; reissued, New York: Da Capo Press, 1993); *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Post-Modern Art*

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; in Spanish, Madrid: Akal, 2002); *Idiosyncratic Identities: Artists at the End of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Psychostrategies of Avant-Garde Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000); *The End of Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004; in Chinese, University of Pejing Press; in Korean, University of Seoul Press; in Polish, Gdansk Museum of Art; in Spanish, Akal; in Turkish, Istanbul: Metis; in Italian; in Croatian); *A Critical History of Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Artnet, 2006, ebook; in Serbian, Belgrade: Art Press, 2011); *Psychodrama: Modern Art as Group Therapy* (London: Ziggurat Press, 2010). He has written monographs on individual artists, serves as a contributing editor for several art magazines, and published six books of poems: *Self-Refraction* (1983; visual accompaniment by Rudolf Baranik); *Apocalypse with Jewels in the Distance* (2000; visual accompaniment by Rosalind Schwartz); *On the Gathering Emptiness* (2004; visual accompaniment by Walter Feldman and Hans Breder); *The Gods and Other Beings* (2010); *Wondrous Beloved, Last Longings* (2017); *Disillusion* (2019).

ROBERT CURCIO

Robert Curcio is a curator, writer, and consultant to art fairs, galleries, collectors, and artists. He was co-founder and co-producer of the Scope Art Shows and has consulted with the art fairs Asia

Contemporary Art Show, CONTEXT, and Pinta Art Fair to name a few. Curcio has curated and/or managed over 25 exhibitions including *Go Figure*, *HEAD*, *The Great Nude Invitational*, *Walk-ins*

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Inside cover: Bobbie Moline-Kramer, *All That Remains*, 2010. Oil, graphite, gesso and wood burning on wood, 10 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Back cover: Conor Walton, *It's the End of the World as We Know It* (detail), 2006. Oil on linen, 12 x 24 in. Private Collection.



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