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Playing with Your Fears: Grotesque and Horror Themes in Art

“And the most terrifying question of all may be just how much horror the human mind can stand and still maintain a wakeful, staring, unrelenting sanity”

-Stephen King, Pet Sematary

Horror and grotesque themes can be seen as a record player in your mind. A record player leaving unsettling images for you, reaching into your deepest darkest fears, insecurities, secret desires, playing tricks on your mind, and being left on repeat. From ancient through contemporary times, people have always been addicted to using fear to their advantage, especially when it comes to making others do something they want, changing the way they think, or serving as a warning. Some of the most common elements used in horror and grotesque themes include; fear of the dark, death, disfigurement, dismemberment, suspense/anticipation, fear of the unusual, and an environment where evil would lurk. We can define horror as the thematic use of terrifying images and ideas to elicit fear. Grotesque can be defined as the very strange, ugly, and meant to be unnatural. It is often used to make people feel disgusted and disturbed. Horror and grotesque themes have become important as they have evolved in different mediums such as art, literature, and film. They also allow us to understand the human mind, while providing perspective into the mental health and state of mind of the artists. Finally, horror and grotesque themes help us to see the light in the darkness as we learn to understand a complex and dark world. Inspired by the deeper meanings of horror and grotesque themes, I decided to

create a painting that shares some of the same elements as other horror and grotesque works have displayed.

In this paragraph I will show that grotesque themes have been present and progressed in art from ancient times through today. From ancient art, to literature, to modern adaptations, horror and grotesque themes have significantly evolved over time along with the meanings behind the works of art. Gargoyles are associated with medieval architecture, but “their functional purpose means they have been around far longer than this. They appear in architecture in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, as well as on Etruscan buildings. The oldest known gargoyle is 13,000 years old and located in modern day Turkey – it is in the form of a stone crocodile.” (Young, Sarah P) While gargoyles were used to serve the practical purpose as decorative water spouts, this isn’t the only reason why they were made. Gargoyles were purposefully put on the rooftops of churches as a way to ward off the evil spirits, but also to serve as a warning from the clergy. The clergy wanted to reinforce the idea that evil dwelt outside of the church, and were used to represent the horrors of hell to make people fear hell. Another way gargoyles served purpose was “to have been used as an aid in converting people who were following pagan religions. Many of them reference pagan traditions and folklore, particularly representations of anthropomorphized animals.” (Young, Sarah P) Interestingly, Churches used gargoyles to market to the Pagans. “Churches would also model gargoyles after the creatures worshipped by pagan tribes, thinking this would make their houses of worship appear more welcoming to them. Churches grew in number and influence as the pagan belief system and many of its images were absorbed into Christianity.” (Wells) A prime example comes thousands of years after the first gargoyle was sculpted. It comes in the form of a monster. January 1st of 1818, Mary Shelley wrote the first science fiction genre novel with horror and grotesque elements. This was her

novel *Frankenstein*, which was meant to serve as a warning that people should not be “playing God”, to bring awareness to unethical practices, and that for every action there is consequence and reaction. In Mary Shelley’s novel the character Dr. Victor Frankenstein is known as “a flawed, obsessed student, feverishly reads extensive tomes and refines his experiments. After he succeeds in his labors, Frankenstein rejects his creation: He is revulsed by the sight of the “monster,” whom he describes as hideous. This rejection of the monster leads to a cascade of calamities.” (Shafer, Audrey, and Warak) Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s monster was made up from other dismembered corpses, and when the monster faced rejection from his creator it made him grow cold and brutal while he went around looking for a soulmate. Additionally, over time horror and grotesque themes have developed into something bigger, something that allows people to feed off the adrenaline rush. Contemporary horror movies and shows provide them a more modern adaptation of horror and grotesque themes, such as those seen in the movie *IT*, based off of Stephen King’s best-selling novel. Stephen King’s character Pennywise the Dancing Clown is a killer clown that has haunted the town of Derry, Maine for many centuries, but only makes an appearance once every twenty-seven years. Pennywise is a “shape-shifter can transform into its victims’ worst nightmares, feeding on both their fear and their flesh. Its preferred target: little kids, whose vivid imaginations give it an extensive menu of terrors to choose from.” (Collins, Sean T) The entire focus of this modern adaptation focuses on the deeper meaning of growing up, facing, and conquering fears. What is important is that “King provides us with an insight into the realm of fear, or horror, and helps us understand our own fears.” (Martinović, Nera)

Often times, many artists dealt with mental illness that went undiagnosed at the time, yet they found art as an outlet to express themselves. Particularly Francisco de Goya, who is known

as “the most important Spanish artist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the course of his long career, Goya moved from jolly and lighthearted to deeply pessimistic and searching in his paintings, drawings, etchings, and frescoes.” (Voorhies, James) Francisco de Goya was known as an astounding artist that was the appointed painter of King Charles III.

Despite his prominent position, he struggled with his own mental and physical health. In addition to suffering from mental illness, Goya contracted lead-poisoning and became deaf. Losing his hearing was a major dark turning point in the artist’s life. During the last years of his life he moved to a place known as Quinta del Sordo, or Deaf Man’s Villa, which was located outside of Madrid. This is where Goya painted his fourteen black paintings, these were dark artworks that featured beast, fighting, war, and nightmare-like scenes. Interestingly enough “Goya never mentioned the paintings himself and never intended for anyone to see them.”

(Nerdwriter1) While it is unknown why Goya painted such grotesque images, we know he faced many difficult things in his lifetime. Goya was “scarred by war, scarred by illness. Perhaps this is why he began to paint nightmare scenes onto the walls of his home.” (Nerdwriter1) Goya’s most notably work was *Saturn Devouring His Son*, this piece was a very graphic mural that displays “the cannibal god on bended knees, engulfed in darkness; the mad haunted eyes and black-blooded mouth; the rending fingers, threaded with blood, and the ravaged figure in their grasp—a work of such indelible power, it seems to have existed before it was created, like some deep-rooted, banished memory, inescapable as nightmare.” (Morgan, Jay S) Perhaps this was Goya’s way to fight the fears he had.

Inspired by the darker, meaningful side of horror and grotesque themes I decided to make a painting. I used Gouache paint, and painted two figures. One of the figures is a young beautiful woman, looking at the viewer. The second figure is a monster standing in the mirror looking at

the viewer also. I took inspiration from *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, when making my monster but gave it a twist. Often times horror and grotesque artworks have several different meanings and interpretations behind them. To me, my piece is the same way. One might interpret this piece as not everyone is who they appear to be. Another way one could interpret this piece as beauty on the outside, but they have an ugly personality. Lastly, one could see this piece as someone who could appear to be fine and dandy on the outside, but inside they could be suffering and hurting. I am leaving the meaning behind my work up for the viewer to decide what they feel connects with this piece the most.

Horror and grotesque themes have held a significant impact on the art world. From early artworks to modern adaptations ranging in art, literature, and film, horror and grotesque themes have always been present in art. These themes have always served an important purpose from ancient times to modern times. While the horror and grotesque themes have evolved they remain important to different art mediums. They serve purpose as allowing us to understand the human mind, and provide perspective into the mental health of artists. Horror and grotesque themes help provide us with seeing a different perspective of things, such as seeing the good in the bad and bad in the good. We learn to understand a deeper meaning behind the darkness and mystery. It inspired me to look at things from a different perspective and create an artwork that shares some of the common elements found in horror and grotesque themes. Whether you watch horror movies, read spooky novels, or explore dark paintings, horror always has a way to emotionally connect to the viewer, provide a different perspective, and reach into their deepest, darkest fears.

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