There's an Imagination Under the Bed!

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Artist Statement

For as long as I can remember I have found myself fascinated with imaginary monsters. I have spent a great deal of time dreaming up various creatures to occupy my closet or the space beneath my bed. As I imagine these monsters, their form is in a constant state of flux. However despite the creature's endless transformations, its essence remains the same. In this series of sculptures, I brought the monsters from my imagination into the physical world while capturing their transient nature. The use of plaster and hay allows for the sculptures to be gestural while the exposed chicken wire and steel suggests that the creatures are constructed and unnatural.

When I completed my sculptures for Art 583, I knew that I was in no way done making big monster sculptures. I greatly dissatisfied with my burlap covered sculptures and felt that I had spent far too much of 583 learning the technicalities of building a human sized sculpture. So almost without thinking, I set off to make another round of large monster sculptures for my Senior Comprehensive Project.

Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man),* 2000, Pigmented polyester resin on fiberglass, 81x 46.25x85.25,



http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag03/jul_aug03/mueck/mueck.shtml

I was still committed to making my sculptures life sized. I had successfully learned the basics of making a as large as a human or bigger and I wanted to take that knowledge and create some sculptures that satisfied a strong desire to bring these monsters into the my own space. Part of this desire stems from my belief that small monsters monsters are extremely common. Small monsters can be seen in toys, trinkets, and movie posters, although movie posters often ask the viewer to imagine the monster as being larger than life. Its rare to see a large imaginary creature, especially monsters rendered life sized and I wanted my sculptures to have this surprising spacial relation to the viewer. Ron Mueck, a sculptor who makes gigantic hyperrealistic human figures, once commented on the size of his work, " I never made life-size figures because it never seemed to be interesting. We meet life-size people

every day" (Mueck). The interest that comes from seeing something strange or out of the ordinary is a characteristic I felt would greatly add to my monster sculptures.



Nick van Woert, *Dipsticks (the Humans),* latex paint and toy, 2008, http://work.fourteensquarefeet.com/Dipsticks-The-Humans

For my Senior Project, one of my major goals was to have a far more developed concept behind my body of work. Focusing only on making large monsters had produced two visually interesting sculptures but I felt that my body of work should challenge both myself and the viewer on an intellectual level, rather than just an aesthetic one. Much of my time and

effort was spent struggling to find some kind of deeper meaning or reason in my need to make monster sculptures. I started off thinking of these creatures as characters in a larger fantasy and tried to think of ways to cue in the viewer to whatever narrative surrounded my monsters.

At this point in the semester I had just discovered the work of Nick van Woert. Van Woert is a contemporary sculptor who works primarily with distortions of the human form and reproductions of famous sculptures. I found myself particularly drawn to his Dipstick Men, which are toys dipped in latex paint until they became large abstract shapes. Only the feet of the toy remained unpainted. The inclusion of feet allowed van Woert's sculptures to retain a strong element of their humanity, despite the fact the sculptures were nothing but strange phallic shapes. The gesture of the figure was now read similarly to human body language and the result was a very expressive abstract sculpture. I found the simplicity of the shoes as a way to ground the sculptures as human to be very compelling.

I had mentioned in my proposal that I wanted to somehow ground my monsters in a fantasy as opposed to let them exist in the sterile gallery space. Seeing the shoes in van Woert got me interested in having my sculptures holding on to an object as a way to ground them in a specific fantasy. It seemed like it would be an extremely elegant way to give my monsters a context and a narrative without having to be extremely explicit and without having to take the emphasis off of the creatures. At this time I was still thinking of my sculptures as monsters who had been abandoned by the children who imagined them, so I decided to have my sculptures interact with toys.

The idea was for the sculptures to be exploring the toys and in the process of learning how to play. They had been created to be scary but at this point in their lives it was no longer necessary. This narrative offered a reason for the emotional complexity I wanted to give these

creatures. The only sculpture complete enough to interact with a toy at this point was my first one, *Dog.* The idea was for him to be exploring some kind of stuffed animal, or being scary at one. I wanted him to be holding the toy. When I placed a stuffed seal in his hand, he was far too aggressive. I am fairly confident that if *Dog* was a real creature, he would have promptly eaten that stuffed seal. When he was not holding anything, the sculpture seemed far more complex and seemed curious, scared, aggressive, and protective. When the toy was placed elsewhere around the sculpture, it read a variety of different ways but I felt that the toy was too much the focus of the piece. The other two were made with the intention of interacting with both toys but I decided not to use toys in the sculptures before the other two were finished enough to be paired with one.

However the other two came extremely close to getting their very own toy, as the toy narrative was not something I finally abandoned until I was putting the plaster on the latter two sculptures. *Mountain* was designed to be holding a toy truck, which given his size and build, seemed to fit. I always *Spider* imagined holding an inflated brown paper bag. The idea being that he was about to sneak up behind one of the others and surprise them. However while I was placing plaster on these sculptures, my interest and thoughts never dealt with any of these narrative elements. The aspects of the sculptures I found myself focusing on were creating a simultaneous sense of coming into existence and decay. I wanted to the decayed areas to expose the sculpture's inner construction while the more gestural areas were designed to imply a shifting anatomy and give the sculpture the vitality to make it seem like a living breathing creature.

The idea of monsters being abandoned for months or years stemmed largely from my own reflection on the nature of monsters and my need to make them, but in hindsight these reflections were heavily influenced by the artist Kristen Morgin and the psychology research I

was doing at the time. When I was thinking about my monsters, most of my thoughts dealt with the monster under the bed trope and how as I grew older my belief in monsters faded. Presently I do not believe in these creatures but they have left a lasting impression on me, as is evident my compulsion to create them. This mental imprint led me to think of monster as beings were abandoned by their creator, no longer allowed to inhabit the closet because they are no longer believed in.

Kristen Morgin, *Wrecked Spyder,* wood wire and unfired clay, 2010, 82x46x41,



http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2010-interview-with-kristen-morgin/2160

The sculptor Kristen Morgin's work gave my mind a strong shove towards thinking about abandonment and how I should portray it in my monsters. Morgin's work consists of inanimate objects made out of unfired clay around a support structure. These objects look decayed and decrepit, to the point that the sculptures look like they would fall apart if one were to touch them. Often times, she invents new objects to create in this decrepit state. Her cars each containing the curves and shapes common to automobiles from the 1940s, but each one is unique rather than being a clay model of a specific car. Morgin described her sculptures as, "honorary monuments" (Wagley), making her sculptures objects designed to

commemorate a past which never truly existed. These fictional, decrepit objects capture a sense of yearning for a time long since past while giving the viewer a sense of pity for how uncared for the object seems to be. Ironically, the tenderness of Morgin's constructions is what makes them so moving.

Of all the artists I looked at this semester, Morgin's influence is the most pronounced. I fell in love with the meticulous way she crafted decay and how beautiful the results were. I was already beginning to think of my creatures as being decayed and broken but it was not until seeing her work that I seriously considered portraying my creatures as decomposing or broken in some way. After seeing her work, I made the decision to leave the substrate of my sculptures exposed in certain areas. Initially when I was putting plaster on to the chicken-wire I sculpted my figure with the idea that the more raw material would be the areas where the form was beginning to break down. This ultimately was not the case, as the gestural materials had so much movement and vitality that the sculptures seemed to be growing and forming out of those patches. The exposed armature eventually did suggest a kind of decay but in a very different way than I originally intended.

While looking at Morgin's work I was also researching the psychology of children as it related to imaginary monsters. The majority of these feelings were related to how children cope with fear and the a child's ability to differentiate something imaginary from something real. The studies generally focused on imaginary beings in conjunction with developing emotional states in children, however some of thse dealt with imagination and fear.

One study I found particularly fascinating was a study that addressed the different coping mechanisms that children and adults had for alleviating fear caused by both fictional and real terrors. The study found that around age seven, nearly every child began to use, "reality affirmation strategies (e.g., reminding oneself of what is real vs. not real)" (Sayfan and

Laguttuta 1756). From that point, children use the strategies more frequently and re-imagine the nature of the terror to be positive less and less often. I found this study both fascinating and unsurprising. As kids grow up they inevitably learn to distinguish what is real and what is not but I was surprised to see this develop at a specific age. It reduced belief in imaginary horrors to an almost biological phenomenon rather than a product of a child needing to invent something as a way to understand and cope with the world. It made the whole experience seem like a less personal experience, because kids all go through it at around the same time. As for my narrative it allowed for the sculptures to each speak to the same kind of fear, rather than trying to each be scary in a different way to fit children who are different ages. I thought at this time of each monster belonging to a different fictional child. As for the narrative I was trying to develop for my sculptures, it meant that each of them were abandoned at around the same point in their child's life. Even if it was not something I knew how to convey visually, it felt important to the narrative that the creatures were all linked this way.

While this tale of abandonment was something very compelling to me, just before turning in my artist statement I decided that this particular story was not evident in the work I produced. Despite being a driving force behind many of the decisions I made involving the pieces this semester, the narrative seemed forced. The abandonment idea required that I be fairly detached from my sculptures as beings and this was not the case. If I were to be showing the monster that was under my own bed as a child, the emotional connection to that creature would drastically change how I treated the subject matter. I am certain that I would still be afraid of the my monster while at the same time feel guilty for having so callously abandoned it. Neither of these emotional states accurately described how I felt towards my creatures. What I felt instead an incredible fondness and a strong connection with each one.

This sense that these monsters belonged exclusively to me was influenced by my

research in to the history of monsters. The history of monsters is directly related to the creation of myth. Avishai Margalit claims that myths are created through a process of miscommunication that separates the actual story or creature from the mythological one. In his paper he used the example of a unicorn, focusing on how it is plausible that the unicorn and the rhinoceros are the same animal. Through various retellings and revisions, the actual creature became far removed from the descriptions of the unicorn and the two end up as entirely separate different creatures. The unicorn becomes inseparable from the myths surrounding it and in that way transcends reality. Margalit notes this saying that, "if archaeologists or geologists were to discover evidence sufficient for the complete reconstruction of the beast satisfying all the descriptions of unicorns available in legends, that would not constitute discovery of a unicorn," (314). The same can be said of monsters or any mythical creature, as Jean Stien points out in his article outlining the evolution of the Chupacabra. This means that by making monster sculptures, I am presenting my own personal interpretation of the monster under the bed myth. Even though these creatures can be understood as monsters, they only truly fit my own definition of an imaginary childhood monster. I felt that I should take responsibility for these creatures, rather than pass them off to imaginary children to support a narrative.

The other reason I eventually decided that my sculptures did not fit with the abandonment story was that the things I found most exciting about the pieces had little or no bearing on these creatures being displaced or abandoned. I was drawn to the moments where the plaster had set while dripping off the creature and to the areas where the smooth, fleshy areas gave way to the more gestural sections where the hay was visible just beneath the plaster. In short, the things that came from the physical characteristics of the sculpture itself.

From the earliest days of the semester I was set on using plaster as the materials for my monsters. Back in art 583, I had been very unhappy with the way the burlap looked and went in search of something that could create a more diverse surface. My initial experiments were with plaster and burlap but I was not particularly fond of the way the material worked. The surface was more diverse but there was an evenness to it that I did not care for. I eventually decided on using plaster and straw after looking at Nicola Hicks, a sculptor who uses plaster and straw as her medium.



Nicola Hicks, *Banker II*, Bronze, 2009, 78.8 x 36.8 x 63,

http://www.artnet.com/artwork/426147325/3277395/nicola-hicks-banker-ii.html

The surfaces Hicks creates with plaster and straw are extremely diverse and allows her sculptures to have a raw and gestural quality without sacrificing the clarity of her forms. The majority of her work deals with animal imagery, with a large portion of her work consisting

of figures that have both human and animal features. These hybrid figures were the ones that most interested me due to the figure's relationship to my own work.

Hicks' hybrid animals are comprised of numerous powerful human animal hybrids. Her monstrous hybrid sculptures are large, threatening, and powerful yet, despite their imposing nature the creatures often are somewhat tender and human. The tension between the human and animal aspects, both physically and in terms of how we understand the emotionality of the creatures, is what makes them so powerful. This emotional complexity was something I felt was very important to my work early in the semester. When talking about her human animal hybrid sculptures, Hicks noted, "the qualities we are deeply in touch with subconsciously may be totally out of touch within our conscious state" (Nicola Hicks: Biography), suggesting that within everyone are these animalistic, possibly monstrous qualities.

In addition to the tension present in her sculpture's forms, the material quality of Hicks' work allowed for moments in each of her pieces that is exciting on its own. Often times, these moments are between the clean areas of her sculptures and where the surface cracks to reveal a more raw section. She uses the unfinished areas to reference muscle fibers which gives her pieces a stronger sense of anatomy while adding motion and life to her sculptures. This also creates a sense of her sculptures being more active and alive beneath their statuesque exterior.

The wide variety of textures in her work was very exciting to me, and gave her sculptures a very expressive and raw nature. My drawings, which are the starting point for all of my monsters, often include lots of gestural areas used in combination with more clean and attended to areas. The plaster seemed like it would be a nearly ideal way for me to translate my drawings in to a three dimensional form.

My first study was a slightly enlarged version of one of my early maquttes. The study ended up being just over a foot tall, which I soon discovered was still small enough that it would not help me gain a better understanding of how the material would work on a large scale. The straw itself was far too long to be worked the same way that it would on a larger sculpture and when the straw was cut down it remained too rigid for any fine curves or detail work. The result was I shifted to making small plaster forearms and lower legs. These studies were able to give me a sense of how the material worked and how to get all the different surfaces I wanted. I did not realize until I actually started working large scale that the freedom to turn the object I was making was a luxury I would not have.

SCE Studios, *Shadow of the Colossus*, screen capture, 2005, http://www.ign.com/images/games/shadow-of-the-colossus-ps2-490849/1259522



Despite being enamored with Hicks mark-making and Morgin's portrayal of decay, the way I chose to treat the surface of my monsters was influenced more by the video game *Shadow of the Colossus* than either of those artists. In that game, the player fights sixteen ancient beasts that seem to have been dormant for a long stretch of time. The creatures often have furry areas and parts of their bodies made up of what seem to be fragments of

enormous stone buildings and other castle-esque features. All of the creatures are very different in terms of their anatomy, but through their unusual material composition all of them still feel like they are the same kind of creature. This was enhanced by the way the player interacted with these beasts. The dormant and ancient nature of the creatures is shown largely by the decay and broken nature of the castle bits on each creature. Despite of their age and the decrepit nature of their building aspects, the creatures still read as being extremely powerful.

This kind of decay was much closer to what I was trying to capture in my work. The crumbling areas and exposed structure of my sculptures was done to remind the viewer of the sculptures as objects and to suggest that the creatures are constantly breaking down and reforming, as they would if they were still in my imagination. The decrepit nature and numerous textures of the colossi was far closer to what I wanted to portray and how I eventually chose to portray this aspect of my work.

In my sculptures, I had little interest in creating multiple versions of the same creature but it was important to me for all the creatures to feel like they were of the same ilk. To do this I tired to use the various marks achievable with plaster in straw in the sam manner across all three sculptures. The different surfaces of the plaster fall into three broad categories of marks: rough gestural marks, smooth and clean areas, and exposed patches of chicken-wire. By using these same kind of marks in the same way on all of my sculptures I was able to create monsters that appeared to be in the same vein while not worrying that the three monsters had very few anatomical similarities. The mark making vocabulary was still being created while I was making the first of my sculptures. The first sculpture, *Dog,* was in many ways served as a testing platform for every process I tried. The result of this is a slight different mark-making vocabulary between my first sculpture and my latter ones. The strongest examples of this is

how much more carved back the first sculpture is and the saturation of his color.

Once I developed a feel for how plaster and straw worked, I found working with the medium plaster to be extremely satisfying. The straw gave the plaster a linear quality which made the material feel very similar to drawing despite being three dimensional. Making sculptures that had the same feeling as my drawings was something I had hoped to do since the beginning of the previous semester, and the easy of the plaster brought this goal to the forefront of my mind while I was deciding how to put the plaster and straw on my sculpture. The individual marks I was making with the straw became the focus of my attention. I was strongly focused on how each mark would translate to an area that was decaying, gestural and lively, or smooth and fleshy. The interplay between these kind of marks was eventually where I found the aspect of the creatures that most interested me.

When I try to imagine something, I am unable to hold a completed, stable form in my mind. As I focus and sharpen one detail, the form shifts and morphs. Imagining something for me, is like sculpting in Silly Putty. While working with the plaster, I discovered that I could use gestural areas to make parts of the sculpture feel like it was emerging into the world while the areas with exposed chicken-wire and a more crumbly texture felt like they were shifting away from the original intended form. The amorphous quality of things in my imagination seemed to be something I could depict or at the very least hint at through the use of the plaster, which I found to be incredibly exciting. In time, conveying the transient nature of imaginary things became as important as the gesture of the creatures themselves.

During this process of crafting creatures that seemed to be simultaneously decomposing and reforming, I also found myself interested in the tension between the sculpture as a living, shifting creature and the sculpture as an object. I had recently read a couple of essays about aesthetics, including one by R. G. Collingwood where he stated, “A

tune is an imaginary thin. And the same applies to a poem or a painting or any other work of art" (Collingwood 287), meaning that the actual artwork, the thing that is represented and understood is constructed and exists only in the mind of the viewer. The physical object is nothing more than an artifact that helps the viewer construct the artwork inside their head. While I take some issue with the theory, the idea resonated with me on some level. I found myself trying to play with my sculpture as a creature and the sculpture as a physical object. By leaving holes in the plaster to show the chicken-wire and steel armature I could remind viewers that this monster was just an object. Something constructed, both in my mind and physically. The goal in doing this was to enhance the feeling of the creature being an imaginary monster.

While sculpting this set of monsters, I chose to rely more on instinct and gumption to achieve my goals than I did any meaningful planning or forethought. I would make a maquette for each sculpture but I wanted this only to serve as a starting point. Typically the main hold over from the maquette was the gesture of the creature. I wanted to design more of each monster's anatomy and characteristics while the sculpture was being worked in its actual scale. By doing so I could get a better sense for how the forms and gesture worked on the piece. Overall I found the process to be more enjoyable than I did trying to rigorously translate a maquette in to something twelve times its size.

This newer, looser, and unplanned process, which I came to think of as the "Evel Knievel" approach, was not without its drawbacks. During the welding process, I found myself approximating a lot of measurements, leaving myself room to shorten each metal segment as necessary. The idea was to tack the entire frame together in the way I wanted it, mark it and cut each piece to the fit together correctly then weld it back together. This never worked particularly well. Every single armature I made this semester was disassembled and put back

together at least once. The first attempt at my final armature was eventually scrapped as it was faster to just start over than it was to fix the flaws in the armature I had made. It also ended up with the gesture of some of the pieces being off slightly, and required a more creative use of chicken-wire and plaster to fix.

While this approach to the armature left much to be desired, the plaster and chicken-wire process benefitted greatly from having only a gesture of a creature. I found that not having a strong idea of what the creature should look like physically shifted the process of inventing anatomy to the final form. This worked extremely well in most places as whenever I felt the sculpture needed some kind of anatomy reference to pull the form together or to define an area I was able to make one there out of plaster.

As a whole, I feel like my sculptures were largely successful. The narrative I was pursuing for the majority of the semester was peeled back to reveal a number of tensions and relationships that are both visible in the work and interest me greatly. The most notable of these being the indefinable nature of something imaginary and sculptures of living things as objects that are static, yet still have their own sense of vitality. However I feel that the real success of my project was I successfully completing my quest to discover an aspect of what I was trying to do by making monster sculptures. Having spent so much of the semester toying with relationships that were not evident in my work, I was extremely concerned that even if I produced compelling works of art, I would have failed in my goal to give these monsters a clear meaning and purpose. By overcoming this challenge in understanding my own motivations for the work, I am able to say that I have gained a much deeper understanding of my own relationship to my imagination and how my creative process works.

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