

## IN THE BESTIARY OF OUR DAILY IMAGININGS...

*Let us pass now from the zoo of reality to the zoo of mythologies, to the zoo whose denizens are not lions but sphinxes and griffons and centaurs. The population of the this second zoo should exceed by far the population of the first, since a monster is no more than a combination of parts of real beings, and the possibilities of permutation border on the infinite (Jorge Luis Borges, Preface 1957, **The Book of Imaginary Beings**).*

If the words of Borges stand as a description of the condition of an imaginary world, how much more so do they reflect the psychology of our contemporary cultural state of consciousness? The folkloric and the fantastical are all around us whether we speak of the freely spawned fantasies of Harry Potter films, science fiction imaginings of Star Wars or Star Trek, or even the warped creatures of violence common to the genre of horror movies or video games over the last thirty years. It is clear that a continuous calendar of popular fantastical or imaginary creatures have become an integrated certainty of our every day cultural life. The conflation and appropriation of their human and animal parts, though it may not always have the subtlety of the great South American master's imaginative insight, has been fully grounded as a contemporary understanding of the creative and conflated use of the imagined 'part object'. These psychological perceptions have been argued as forming many of the pre-conditions for a new and contemporary post-narrative painterly practice. In this context Jacques Lacan's **objet petit a** (object little-a), as the causal principle of the unattainable object-desire in **autre** or 'otherness', is a commonly accepted idea of modern psycho-analysis and psychology. And, while fantasy was deemed by Lacan as an imagined projection, rooted in the separation and alienation brought about by the **objet petit a**, it remains on the side of reality rather than dream, and in consequence forms the foundation for a creative painter's imaginings. The painter's fantasies therefore exist and function at the very nexus of the psychologist's threefold core of reality (through the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real). As a result the role played by creative fantasy and the imaginary is fundamental to a developed sense of psychological health and creative development, "...The truth value of imagination relates not only to the past but also to the future: the forms of freedom and happiness which it invokes claim to deliver the historical *reality*. In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what *can be*, lies the critical function of phantasy." It is in this context of fantasy and creative metamorphosis that the paintings of Emmanuel Bornstein emerge and generate their meaning. But more than this the artist expands the idea into personally projected expressive narratives and interpretation that suggest themes of transgression and event.

References to past events and iconographic sources alongside future projections and imaginings are creatively fused together in the paintings of Bornstein. In his latest series of paintings presented under the title rubric *Waldbowling*, the expressive focus is placed upon component themes of transgression and play. The wide ranging issues of play are referred to in the paintings in a double sense, that is not just in the sense of the included animal-human figures that play their game of ten pin bowling in a putative woodland setting. But also in terms (inadvertently, perhaps) of an inferred word play, since 'woods' is a familiar historical name for the original bowls which were themselves wooden. This series of paintings has therefore something of a parodical sense of humour that is less evident in Bornstein's earlier black and white paintings of 2010/11, and which concentrated more explicitly on violence and transgression, influenced as they are by many Gothic literary and Goya-esque type sources. But to mention play or game playing as a subject in regards to painting is more than significant, since the notion of the artist-painter at play in the studio is a central trope of painting practice.

Investigations into play and its close association with childhood, with human socialisation and creativity, has long been an observed and studied phenomenon most notably by Nietzsche, who accorded to it the essence of a painterly artistic nature. Therefore it has been argued that the role of play functions as both a cultural and civilising force in modern society, and has become central to understanding historical and psychological theories of human development, "...in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture." The intended wit containing visual puns and word play in Bornstein's *Waldbowling* form painted material references, the bowling lanes of ten pin bowling are most often made of laminated wood, as were once the original ten pins made from bonded maple and thereafter lathed into their familiar shape. But beyond these simple material word-play allusions to the subject, lies a more serious intention on the part of the artist. In the three paintings explicitly entitled *Waldbowling I, II, III* (2012), the bowling lanes form either direct or analogous rail tracks that recede into the dark passages of the woods or forest beyond. In *Waldbowling II* the reference to train tracks is made explicit, since a wedge of humanity stands across the tracks where the ass-headed human figure is about to bowl and skittle them over like ten pins – the ancient communal country game of skittles (nine-pin bowling) is the probable but still debated origin of ten pin bowling. The half-human and half-animal beings, whether possessed of horses/asses heads or the heads of wolves/dogs serve an implicit allegorical function analogous to that of the bestiary. On the one hand while they might suggest the illustrative figures of a child's picture book, on the other with their aggressive bowling poses they evoke an emotionally unresolved sense of expressive ambivalence. In fact the three paintings in this series embody the paradoxical nature of transgression and play, ideas that are commonly intertwined within the context of childhood or adult game play and violence; this is evident in the familiar use of terms like the 'theatre of war' and war games. Clearly, the forest settings in the backgrounds of these *Waldbowling* paintings acknowledge a strong sense of the German folkloric tradition, and at the same time the roles played by bestial-human characters that commonly appear in folk and fairy tales. Similarly they point to and expose the complex symbolic influences of fairy tales on the development of childhood and modern psychology. The actual compositional structure of this series of paintings also points to art historical references and to conceptual aspects of rhetorical persuasion. For example the forest backgrounds of *Waldbowling I, II* and *III* have a complex play of mixed perspective that contradicts the simple recessive or monocular perspective of the bowling lanes. It might be seen to make an oblique reference to Uccello's famous perspective composition of trees in 'The Hunt in the Forest' (c.1470), and if so Bornstein would certainly have no problem in acknowledging it, since the artist is deeply embedded and familiar with the history of painting and frequently makes references to and draws upon the works of earlier masters. However, unlike the explicit geometric perspective construction of the Paolo Uccello painting, Bornstein has deliberately adopted the use of a rhetorical perspective, a perspective that is rhetorical because it persuades you of its recessive presence but denies any geometric or modular certainty of application. This has a further effect of creating a different type of abstruse theatrical space that both intentionally and emotionally destabilises the viewer and opens up a sense of tension within the paintings. Hence the greater subliminal interpretation of Bornstein's subject matter – which I will return in the wider context of this exhibition – seems highly personal to the artist and certain intuitive aspects of his family history.

The creative images of Classical fabulae (such as Ovid and Apuleius) and medieval bestiaries as sites of allegorical depictions of transgression have a long and well established history. However, in defining what aspect of bestiary allegory applies to Bornstein's animals and animal-headed human figures is what establishes their actual analogy. In medieval allegory these were broken down into four main areas, the first might be called the literal where an associated symbolic inference was immediately intended, the second was typological that inferred events from the past that are in some way linked to the present, the third was moral in that what was depicted implied an immediate sense of affect or contemporary meaning, and the fourth anagogical as something prophetic that will come in the future. Clearly the last is not an issue in

Bornstein's paintings, but the literal and typological are given some relevance by the artist. Similarly the bestiary tradition retained and extended (or changed) archaic and ancient classical sources. In the current catalogue of Bornstein's paintings we find untitled works that open up several forms of allegorical development. For example in an untitled triptych the right panel shows a dog-headed (Alsatian) human figure in what appear to be trouser fatigues and blue tee shirt. The figure is about to deliver a bowling ball somewhat reminiscent of our planetary globe in the direction of the centre panel, and eventually to the left panel which shows the ten pins quite literally scattered into the foreground picture space towards the viewer. The central panel contains a curved chasm-like space that continues into the left panel. Beyond in the main panel however a large group of crowded spectral figures appear behind a tree in the upper left background, while three National Socialist Wehrmacht soldiers stand like isolated introspective sentinels in the curved roadway that continues from the right hand panel into the centre panel and field of the painting. Thereafter the green-black intensity of the forest beyond creates a flattened screen of near impossible penetration. Behind the dog-head figure in the right-hand panel is another ass or horse-headed figure simply repeating the same pose of the ten pin bowl that is being delivered. It is evident therefore that though we unable to derive an extract or immediate narrative event, the composition of the work proposes in structuralist terms a form of fragmented pictorial narrative, where there are references to game playing, violence and a sombre sense of potential transgression that is to come. Structuralism is after all defined in terms of pre-supposed interrelations within a dominant structural system of cultural expression. But if allegory also supposes a device in which characters or events represent or symbolize ideas and concepts, the artist denies the viewer the easy comfort of an implicit reading. The element of menace and black humour is further heightened by the persistent use of the dominant black, green, and acerbic yellow passages of paint that continue throughout this group of paintings. When other colours are used they are only randomly applied to inanimate objects like the bowling balls and ten pins. The initial sense of the darkness and transgression is set up by the extended tone of the paintings. The use of these animal headed figures of a dog, wolf and/or ass has a long iconographic history and set of associations. The most famous ass-human is that of Lucius who accidentally transformed himself into an ass in Apuleius's 'The Golden Ass' (a text sometimes call 'Metamorphoses'), a figure-character that is usually seen as stubborn, priapic or self-deceiving. It returns in numerous creative settings such as the famous Aldine Press woodcuts in Francesco Colonna's 'Hypnerotomachia Poliphili' (1499). But to most people it is known through William Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', in the character of Nick Bottom, who was similarly transformed by the Fairy King Oberon into an ass-headed character with whom a spell-deceived Titania (Queen of the Fairies) is made to fall in love. Conceived and set centre of the woods the play (1590-96) deals with the primary themes of dream, the imaginary, farcical self-deception, and most importantly it also possesses a fragmented story within another story narrative structure. The use of animals as associated anthropocentric metaphors is common enough, but was in fact informed by historical physiognomic literature as it was interpreted and re-conceived. The study of physiognomy is also Classical in origin, and has been used and applied by many writers and artists in earlier centuries long before its use by Shakespeare.

Ideas concerning theatre, whether they are derived from Romance, Baroque or different aspects of the literary Gothic fascinate Emmanuel Bornstein. Another example is a painting depicting a group of animals and humans placed in the purlieu of a wood or forest at night. The sense of a imaginary 'danse macabre' is cast as a grotesque figure in a German military uniform dances with a caped and bare breasted female figure of death. A jack ass dances with a wolf-like human, masked military figures look on, and the same three National Socialist 'Nazi' Wehrmacht figures appear again on the right confronting the ghostly array of indeterminate spectral entities to the left. Are these the questioning ghosts of German history? Of this there can be little doubt since we find a painting with direct allusions to concentration camp towers, and where four asses have replaced the original four women or maidens who toss the puppet in a famous work by Goya called 'The Manikin'. It is taken therefore from Goya's famous tapestry cartoon painted

for the bedroom of the child Infante of Spain. Again we see the idea of an ambiguous child's game transferred into a commentary on transgression and violence. The sad humiliated puppet has all the attributes of a human being masked and disguised, and carries with it an intentional allegorical significance. Indeed, Goya abounds throughout many of the works in this group of paintings, and is always a continuous and freely admitted influence on Bornstein. The asses themselves also derive from Goya, who depicts the human-clothed jack ass in a famous aquatint entitled 'As far back as his grandfather' (1797-8) and shows a seated ass perusing a book showing the genealogical lineage of asses. The ass turns up as a doctor taking the pulse of a dying patient in the same series of eighty etching-aquatints called 'Los Caprichos' and entitled 'Of what ill will he die' (1799). The ass can be found in several other works within the same aquatint publication, nearly all of which are made reference to in Bornstein current paintings. The most famous of the Goya aquatints from the same series was 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters' (1797-8), but sadly as we know the works were all subsequently withdrawn after their publication by Goya due to the immediate threat of the Inquisition at the time. But it should also be remembered that Goya lived in a time when physiognomy studies and their extended obsessions were at their intellectual height, in the age of Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), and alongside numerous spurious pseudo-science systems such as 'reading bumps on the head' in phrenology which frequently drew upon various forms of deterministic human to animal analogies. In another painted woodland scene by Bornstein he shows human asses dressed in a business suit, another in a full length bathing outfit, others posing in the background beyond, and a literal ass with a conventional rear end mule kick directing us the circular bubble above (remarkably formed like the ten pin bowls). This references the famous tumbling figure from plate 30 'The Ravages of War', part of Goya's shocking etching-drypoint series called the 'Disasters of War' (created sometime between 1810-20, against the background of the Napoleonic invasion and Peninsular War, 1808-1814). The theme of war is also strikingly evident in another Bornstein triptych where in the panel on the left ass-headed National Socialist soldiers are shown mistreating a lumpen-shaped human (intentionally anonymous and without identity) as he is loaded on what we suppose is a concentration camp death train, the middle panel showing the skeleton of death riding his pale horse across a seeming mountains of ill-defined amorphous and anonymous dead. The more complex right panel shows the same Goya derived seated ass-headed figure again, and other ass-headed figures building a primitive gallows beyond, while a Nazi officer watches on from the right side centre ground. Again the setting is a wood or forest and two famous fleeing Munch-like nudes, one with a face showing a skeletal mask of death, are being ravished by monkeys. In iconography monkeys are commonly associated with lasciviousness and mischief, while the saturnine ass sits focusing his thoughts of a bubble that floats between his hand-adapted hooves in front of him. All the canvases of the triptych are intentionally painted in a toxic yellow and black. In the case of another painting we see ass and fox-headed figures, death on another white equine apparition who also appears to be ravishing a naked woman, his bony hand being placed between her knees prising them apart. The inference being, perhaps, an allusion death raping Europa, and as a result, it can be said that it carries forward the Classical and Renaissance subject matter into a completely different form of determinate expression. We can have little doubt that these paintings make direct reference to war, and particularly the Second World War where the holocaust experience is foregrounded. The fact that the artist has chosen to express such events through historical fabulae and/or bestiary reference expresses a particular turn of mind and progressive imagination. However, while the artist never speaks about his biography or family history, and though we know he was born in France, Bornstein (as his name suggests) has a German-Polish-Jewish ancestry that betokens a complex history of cultural assimilation and displacement. The paintings in this respect may form both the emotional creative nexus and running in parallel they bring a cathartic aspect into his life.

Themes of transgression and history permeate through all of Emmanuel Bornstein paintings, and he has admitted a direct engagement with German history, violence and dream, the hypnagogic

and hypnopompic as well as other peripheral states of consciousness that also fascinate him. Hence as he has previously stated the studio experience of daydreaming and peripatetic walking are central to his creative daily life. It is in this context that his insights into the fantastical emerges, Borges imaginary beings come into play, Lacan's projected imaginary (as separated and alienated as the psychologist claims them to be) come into focus, and in so doing manifest themselves through a newly painted reality. Let us be clear Bornstein does not produce 'dream paintings', far from it, but consciously transforms them into his own self-imagined desiderata, the word meaning quite literally 'desired things'. Hence its close and personal relationship to the libidinal economy of desire emerges, and there has always been within his work an artistic awareness of the daily isolation and the necessary psychopathology of the studio. It is on the basis of this state of withdrawn reverie that strong expressive feelings invariably emerge within what has been familiarly called the erotics of painting. This sensuous approach was just as evident in his untitled black and white paintings of 2010/11, though these it must be said they dealt more directly with issues of nightmare, frenetic violence, and the possibilities of its transference to the waking state – the old nineteenth century argument that madness is a dream awake. But through all these paintings there are directly extracted references and general appropriations from great art historical masters like Caravaggio's 'Flagellation of Christ'(c. 1607) and 'Crucifixion of St Peter' (1600), Rubens 'Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus' (1617-18), and yet more obtuse references to Rembrandt and Velasquez and the *vivre un cauchemar* of Fuseli. And, of course at the same time for Bornstein the ubiquitous and never ending influence of Goya. The many references to the Baroque in these black and white 2010/11 paintings is immediately self-evident, since the seventeenth century was an age of continual wars and violence that were commonly depicted as allegories by painters at that time. To speak of the literary in any conventional sense as regards Bornstein's paintings is extremely dangerous, it might better be stated that his works address forms of non-linear or fragmented fiction. They represent non-specific events but work through a structuralist use of allegorical inference, an intentional paradox since the structuralist and post-structuralist intertextual paradigms claimed to have deconstructed and removed the relevance of allegory. But intertextual allusion and inference are crucial to understanding Bornstein paintings, which means what is presented to the viewer must be assembled and interpreted as a personal response to the paintings. However, whereas allegory in the historical past was often used as a form of didactic moral instruction (a reinforcement of prevailing authoritarian or institutional points of view) this was never implicit to its use since the role of symbolic signification is as powerful and meaningful as it ever was. Bornstein's paintings open up the expressive symbolic order to new forms of free interpretation. I began with a reference to Borges famous 'Book of Imaginary Beings', where he lists entries of many of the fantastic beasts that humans have imagined over long period of history. The age of free imagining must continue because it is our most fundamental human quality of creative resistance to the pre-determinations of the world and our eventual death that will become. It is essentially as Marcuse observed, the 'refusal to forget what *can be*' and what 'can be' remains open to the possibility of an infinite variety of permutations.

**Mark Gisbourne**  
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## **ENDNOTES**

The 1957 preface of *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, is translated and published as the *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, London and New York, 1969 (and subsequent editions)

For example forms of non-linear narrative storytelling and historical appropriation have become central to contemporary arts, see Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

“...its is always a question of the *objet á*, or rather a question of reducing it – which may, at a certain level, strike you as being rather mythical – to an *a* with which – this is true in the last resort – it is the painter as creator who sets up the dialogue.” Jacques Lacan ‘On the Gaze (What is a Picture), *The Four Fundamental Principles of Psycho-analysis*, London, (1979) 1994, pp. 105-122 (p.112)

Herbert Marcuse, ‘Beyond the Reality Principle’ *Eros and Civilisation*, London 1969, pp. 119-131 (p. 124)

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, ‘Tokens of Higher and Lower Culture’, *Human All Too Human: A Book of Free Spirits*, Eng., trans, R..J.Hollingdale, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986. “aph. 274. **A segment of our self as artistic object.** – It is a sign of superior culture consciously to retain certain phases of development which lesser men live through almost without thinking and then wipe them from the tablet of their soul, and to draft a faithful picture of it: for this is the higher species of the art of painting which only a few understand.” p. 129

Johan Huizinga, ‘Play and Contest as Civilising Functions’, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, Boston, The Beacon Press, 1950 (pp. 46-75) p. 46 (and subsequent editions) This text (first published in 1938) has played a crucial role in the foundation and subsequent formation of ‘play theory’. For a contemporary evaluation, see Brian Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2001; also see the republished and updated version of the sociologist and philosopher (homme de lettres) Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (1961), Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge and London, Cambridge University Press, 1995, also Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Human and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Maria Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, London and New York, W.W Norton & Co., 2004.

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York:, and London, Knopf, 1976.

Christopher Lloyd and Sallyann Kleibel, *Paolo Uccello’s ‘Hunt in the Forest’*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1981; recently updated by Catherine Whistler, *Paolo Uccello’s ‘Hunt in the Forest’*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 2010. Also, Jacques Darriulat, *Une Chasse et perspective*, Paris, 1998.

Rudolf Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols: The Collected Essays of Rudolf Wittkower*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1987.

Gilles Deleuze, "How Do We Recognise Structuralism?" *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Michael Taormina (ed.), Eng. trans., David Lapoujade, Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, pp. 170-192

Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, (The Strife of Love in a Dream)*, Eng. Trans., Jocelyn Godwin (the entire text), London, Thames and Hudson 1999 Published on the 500- anniversary of its original publication in Venice.

William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Peter Holland (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

For example human facial expressions and character assessments were commonly associated with particular animals and birds, and artists and art theorists created pattern books to show specific facial and bodily expressions associated with emotional states of mind and general character. The most famous is, perhaps, Charles Le Brun (1619-90), the court painter of Louis XIV 'LeRoi Soleil' who claimed he was the 'greatest French painter of all time', and whose system of facial expressions drew heavily upon the animal physiognomy of asses, cows, pigs, dogs and an enormous array of other animals, see *Charles Le Brun, L'Expression des Passions: autres conferences, correspondance*, Paris Edition Dédale Maisoneuve et Larose, 1994.

Francisco Jose De Goya, *Los Caprichos*, London, Dover Books, 1970 (and subsequent editions)

Johann Kaspar Lavater's multi-volume publication *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (1775-1778), was received enthusiastically across Europe, and particularly in France, Germany and Britain. See, Christoph Siegrist (ed.) Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe.: Eine Auswahl*, Stutthart Reclam Philipp Jun. Verlag, 1984. Henry Fuseli was a writer and painter who exemplified early Gothic literary and theatre scene painting, and was an important proponent of Romantic themes of dreams and nightmare, see Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, and Martin Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*. London, Tate Publishing, 2006

The Prints remained unpublished at the time of Goya's death in 1828, and only finally published in Madrid, by the Royal Academy of San Fernando in 1863, see Philip Hofer (intro.), *Francisco Jose De Goya, The Disaster of War*, London, Dover Books, 1968 (and subsequent editions).

Joseph Canning, Hartmut Lehmann, and Jay Winter, *Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern Times*, Farnham and London, Ashgate Publishing 2004. This publication initiates a comparative analysis and deals with the 14-, 17- and 20-centuries seen as centuries of mass violence.

Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1979.