

**Altered Anatomies**

by

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## **Abstract**

The dawning possibility of changing our physical forms through greater and greater levels of technological intervention confronts us with ancient philosophical questions, not just of who one is, but also of who one wants to be. These questions exist as overt interrogations and non-verbal desires. One avenue for the exploration of these desires has been the creation and manipulation of bodies beyond the human : altered anatomies. Such transhumans have been with us since ancient times and continue to proliferate today.

This thesis examines the work of the artist Bobby Campbell to explore those bodies and desires. The thesis begins with a brief look at the impulse to change one's form. This is followed by a discussion of particular contexts relevant to the artist's work. The major thesis work, a large-scale, multi-part painting of altered anatomies, is then critically examined. Finally, the epilogue reveals some of the inner monologue of the artist in undertaking such work.

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## Introduction

I paint bodies. The bodies I shape are bastards – pioneers and priests, thieves and tinkers, hotrodders and horse-riders. These painted alloys catalogue the living and the dead – spiders and tigers, bicycles and banjos, foxes and fires, high-rises and sports cars. My work recasts the overwhelming visual stimulus of postmodernity into a method for mixing and matching newly designed bodies.

The mythological world of my work draws on the Appalachian culture of Kentucky, which maintains deep roots in Irish music, customs, morals and myth tales. The figures in my work take their essence in part from this Appalachian / Irish fusion and thus resemble Daniel Boone or Diarmuid, Finn McCumhaill or Appalachian Jack. These origins in my images are not held sacred or pure, however. The contemporary artist inherits the freedom to take apart, mutate, blend, and otherwise change one's culture and context. In the Kentucky-Irish seedbed of my youth also grew the altered physiques of giant robots, insect warriors, holographic priests and atomic angels. These fantastic creations sprang from television, movies and comics, reflective of a modern culture gaining technological prowess without corresponding control. The figures in my work are simultaneously rough pioneer settlers and machined robotic archetypes.

I want to first suggest the body's centrality in an increasingly technocentric society, both as the source and site of our technological cravings and as an antidote to the disembodied state produced by technological mediation. I will also discuss a recent series of digital drawings which is most clearly focused on a discrete body. Following this delineation of what I term altered anatomies, I will zoom out to look at a variety of personal cultural contexts, including American comics, Japanese robots and Appalachian myth that emphasize bodies in states beyond the human. I will also describe two recent trips to China and Ireland that proposed new bodies to experience and examine. Finally, I will discuss my largest project to date, a large-scale painting which drew together many of the contexts and bodies I have experienced.

## Altered Anatomies

The power to change our very bodies is becoming increasingly accessible to the hands of the average person through plastic surgery, genetic engineering and computer imaging. These technologies place our bodies in flux. Our faces can be changed in ways both simple and radical : minor imperfections of the nose can be reworked through outpatient surgery or an entire face can be transplanted in the case of a dire need. We are bombarded with the results of these experiments through the faces of advertising and popular culture. Soon, we can speculate, this plasticity will extend to the body as a whole. Plastic surgery to lengthen legs or increase muscle mass is a daunting proposition compared to the relatively minor excavations required of a face. Yet, we can imagine a time soon when new body parts, or even body systems, are grown via cloning and stem cell technologies. These masses of tissue, muscle and bone would not be reserved for simply restorative procedures – market pressures would open up their use for aesthetic purposes. From this possibility for designer bodies, it's a short hop to imagine creatively altered bodies. It may be easy for one to turn down the possibility of transforming into a tall, broad-shouldered athlete or a lean, supple movie star; the picture becomes less clear when considering whether one could reject the ability to breathe underwater or to fly for short distances.

We are confronted with the very real question of whether we can maintain a consistent sense of the real in the teeth of these changes. Is one the same person with a different face or a different body? It seems like we can answer with an obvious "no" and an obvious "yes." The obvious "no" answer would point out how much our social interactions are influenced by our appearance. The color of our skin, the color of our hair, the size of our muscles, or lack of size of our fat influences our intersections with others in ways both obvious and subtle. We must still in all earnestness convince each other that minimal genetic differences should not produce maximal discord. The obvious "yes" answer (to this question of our consistency, whether our self can persist

through changes in our very structure) would point out that we face near constant change in this contemporary world. Our beliefs are at times surprisingly stable. The very idea of a self, despite the protestations of philosophers, is predicated on a conception of an abiding perspective and enduring beliefs.

Neither of these options, “yes” or “no”, interest me as much as the everyday, visceral and unsettling possibility of glancing at a window reflection and seeing someone else. I am increasingly convinced that our approach to the world, while well-reasoned and complex and necessarily learned, is based, deeply embedded even, in so many ways in our sense of our bodies - how big it is, what it can do, what it looks like, what it feels like. These are areas that language cannot fully touch - but I leave this topic momentarily by describing the buzzing vertigo I occasionally encounter when I see myself from an unusual vantage point such as a store security camera. Now, the handsome, square-jawed face I shave in the morning is a bobbing helium balloon of a noggin perched precariously atop a lean-at-best body.

These considerations about new frontiers and old desires of the human body emerge through my painting and drawing work with altered anatomies. An altered anatomy is one that begins as a recognizable form, and bears the traces of such an origin, but transforms through shifting and changing into a body other or beyond its beginning. These beings spring, pour, jut and slink through spaces in the image. The space around the figure tends to an imbrication of figure-objects that overlap and rapidly slide to different scales and angles. Dynamic, even hard, shifts in composition, color and density are central to the works’ visual and emotional core. The paintings and drawings not only present multiple sides of what appear to be continuous objects and systems, but also constantly shift the scale and orientation of the elements within a composition.

My digital drawing series presents the body evolving from a discrete, though transformed entity, to a figure creeping out and

merging with its mutated milieu. In *TransSelroc* (fig. 1), the central figure clearly evokes the humanoid expectations of arm, head, torso, leg. These bodily patterns are doubled and shifted and rearranged, but the ground is a subtle mysterious fog of desaturated purple. The figure emerges from this smoke through slow gradations of color, from dense purple to an ember red. Small-scale sub-bodies, such as the light blue x-forms, provide a contrast to the solidity of large, concrete elements such as the crimson trunk emerging in the left foreground. These small marks create micro-figures that pull the dominant figure-form out into its surroundings while also suggesting worlds within worlds. Zooming in on such a set of marks might produce a new fractal experience – a new set of bodies will emerge into view, locked in their own drama.

In *TransBlacksnake* (fig. 3) the body, though central, is diminished. The segmented form (now half a figure) is a transparent outline, a diagram of a form. New dominant forms, such as the pink and blue field in the lower left or the dark desaturated blue leading up and to the right, segment the space itself, creating an origami universe within which faceted figures fold. Though forms jump by way of sharp contrast in color and saturation, these shapes resolve as neither humanoid nor more broadly figural – they become “figures” in an abstract play against the various ground planes. Now the whole surface is involved in a high-energy set of relationships, suggesting multiple spatial perspectives. Intersecting planes of both figure and ground create a fluctuation of those categories within the image itself. The bodies have mutated into an uneasy symbiosis with their surroundings.

These drawings incorporate hand-drawn inventions and riffs with the precision and scale-control of digital imaging. These improvisations flow from the body – they emerge as an acting out of desire. They detail an attraction to bodies and an urge to create on and with the body. In physical space, they exist as vectors and as such can be easily mutated in a modular fashion to produce endless combinations and permutations. They live their lives as



Fig. I - **TransSelroc** | Digital Drawing | Dimensions Variable | 2005





Fig. 2 - **TransSkunk** | Digital Drawing | Dimensions Variable | 2005



Fig. 3 - **TransBlacksnake** | Digital Drawing | Dimensions Variable | 2005

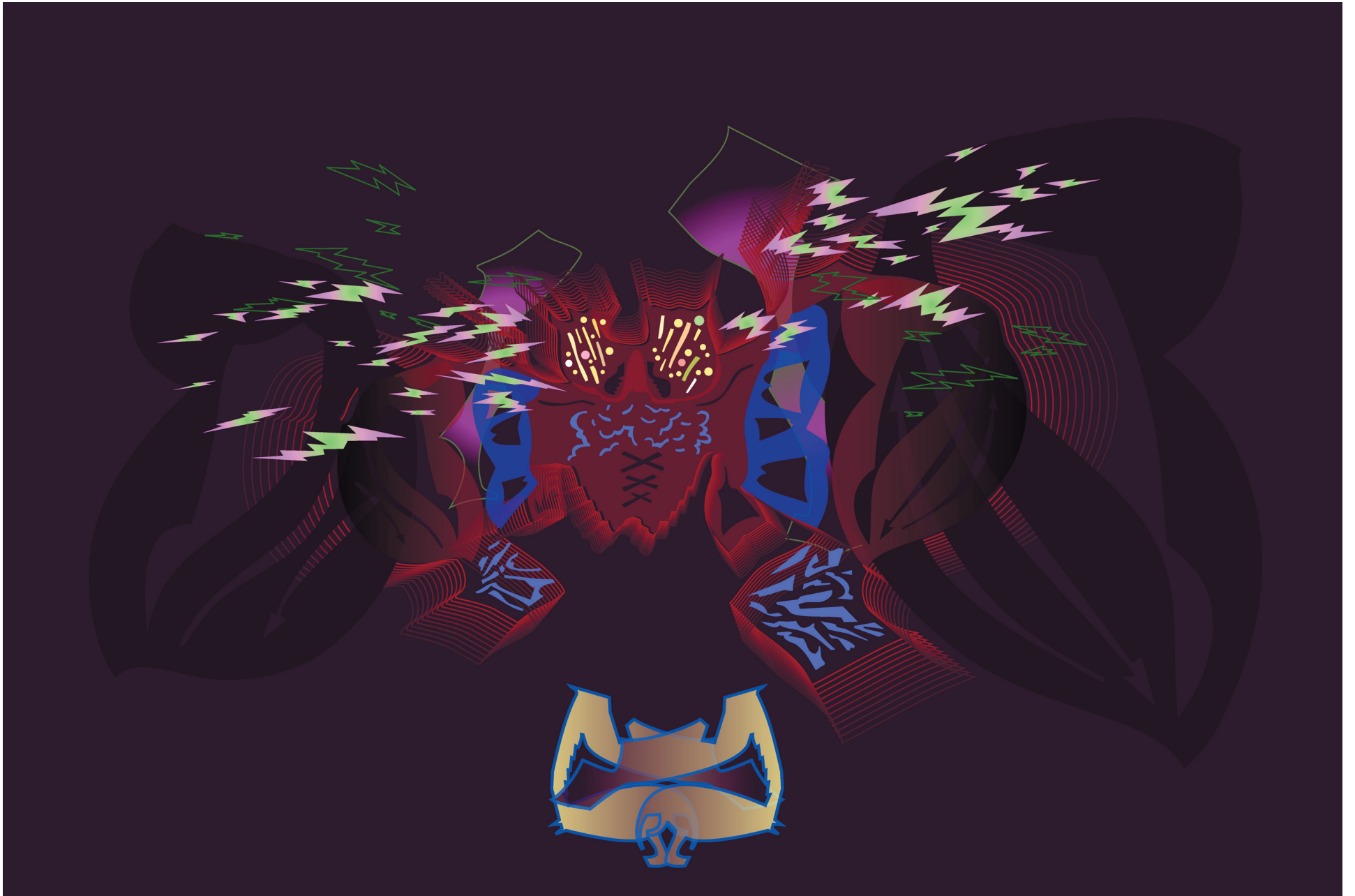


Fig. 4 - **TransBat** | Digital Drawing | Dimensions Variable | 2005



Fig. 5 - **TransOwl** | Digital Drawing | Dimensions Variable | 2005

structured electrons and light in a computer's hard disk and on its screen. Their chameleonic nature as digital images allows them to be repurposed in a range of modes from a cell phone screen to a printed "mural" on the side of a building to a laser-cut jointed toy.

These bodies were, in fact, originally developed as schematics for a jointed kinetic toy (figs. 6-12) that could be played with by visitors to a gallery. I was disappointed with the disembodied results of my previous interactive work as a professional designer creating animations and simulations for job training. Clicking on a button on a computer screen provided an incomplete connection to the body's potential for input. Borrowing a simple mechanical antique toy form, I created new bodies suspended in space, ready to spring to life with the simple, though nuanced, squeeze of its frame. The human hand of the participant produces the spark of motion in the body of the figure. Multiple joints allow for infinite variations of movement with each swing. The bodies themselves are asymmetrical and irregular, projecting out into their surroundings.

## **Anatomy of a Context**

Art provides an invaluable vantage point to view the larger culture in which an image is made. I want to discuss a few shared connections between cultural sources and contexts that influence my work. These contexts are linked by a panoply of bodies in various transformed and mutated states.

### **Comics**

American superhero comics formed some of my earliest visual vocabulary. The distorted, outsized, elongated bodies of transhumans steeped in dynamic struggles fired my imagination. What was intended as a cheap means to literacy instead provoked visual learning about color and form, bodies and space. The exaggerated form of a superhero, the grotesque muscles, lanky legs, or other fantastic appendages and protrusions, created an energized web of

shapes and contrasts to spark my early forays into drawing. These matrices of organic and geometric form remain in my work still.

Comics have found a deft reader in Michael Chabon. Chabon advances the thesis that the characters in comics reflect their origins in the American Jewish diaspora in the prewar period. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, he parallels the American superhero, created by men such as Jerry Siegel (Superman) or Stan Lieberman (Spider-man), with the mythical golem of the Abrahamic religions. The golem is a traditional clay giant imbued with life by a rabbi and charged with protecting the community from those who would do it harm. The famous golem of Prague figures prominently in the fictional text of Chabon's book, slumbering in a Prague apartment unable to protect the city's Jewish inhabitants from the Nazis. In real life, the four-color golems of the American comic world enthusiastically pounded actual and metaphoric Nazis, from Hitler to the Red Skull, with zeal. Their creators, Chabon implies, were only allowed to work in the indiscriminate publishing world of dime novels and nickel comics. This world became shaped by their unique experiences and history.<sup>1</sup>

Comic characters reflect altered anatomies enticing to outsiders of all kinds. Superheroes prowl the fantastic dark cities of the imagination. The Gotham City of Batman or the New York of Spider-man (fig. 13) is teeming with malignant creatures above and below. Batman and Spider-man jump, swing and crawl across this cityscape with near-impunity – they possess the power of their symbolic creatures. Spiders and bats are totemic as urban survivors and downtown dwellers, due to their adaptation to the harshness of a city landscape. They hang on and survive. It's not for nothing that super-bodies would strike a chord in the psyche of the American immigrant or outsider – these bodies overcome mundane limits and thrive against overwhelming odds.

### **Japanese Pop Culture**

From my youth also sprang the immense insectile robots and giant samurai protectors of Japanese pop culture. Although anime and



Fig. 6 - **Transpinner : Bat** | Mixed Media | 15" x 7" x 7" | 2005



Fig. 7 - **Transpinner : Blacksnake** | Mixed Media | 15" x 7" x 7" | 2005



Fig. 8 - **Transpinner : Owl** | Mixed Media | 15" x 7" x 7" | 2005



Fig. 9 - **Transpinner : Selroc II** | Mixed Media | 15" x 7" x 7" | 2005



Fig. 10 - **Transpinner : Rooster** | Mixed Media |  
15" x 7" x 7" | 2005



Fig. 11 - **Transpinner : Selroc I** | Mixed Media |  
15" x 7" x 7" | 2005





Fig. 12 - **Transpinner : Skunk** | Mixed Media  
| 15" x 7" x 7" | 2005

manga are commonplace in our popular culture now, in the 1970s and 80s America was anxiously examining Japanese society. The slowly collapsing industrial economy, whose effects I felt firsthand, prompted a xenophobic suspicion of Japanese imports. American society convulsed with mistrust bubbling over into violence, fearing the economic inroads Japanese automobiles and machinery were making against American products. In the midst of this technological competition came Japanese pop culture robots, such as *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*, a *sentai* anime, and *Transformers*, a cartoon about transforming robots. Again these dynamic anatomies created vital, visual connections in my brain.

These pop culture contexts have been amply explored by contemporary artists, as evidenced by a 2005 show at the Japan Society in New York. In her exhibition essay for the show 'Little Boy', Julie Rauer makes the case that these pop culture creatures reflect the torn and scarred flesh created by the cataclysmic atomic attacks of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The essay, *Persistence of a Genetic Scar: Japanese Anime, Manga, and Otaku Culture Fill an Open National Wound*, parallels the bubbled, cracked and rent flesh of pop culture monsters like Godzilla to the images captured by war photographer Yosuke Yamahata in his book *Nagasaki Journey*. These scars become cultural and psychic for Rauer and are reopened and rewounded with each strange monster and robot that issues forth from Japanese anime and manga cultures. In a glittering passage, Rauer deftly positions the altered anatomy beside its origin:

“Genesis of reptilian skin forged by the breath of annihilation, melted claws leaking paralyzing toxins from vestigial arms, flesh rendered from a cinerous jaw which leapt from its skull as a gleaming cage of fangs, scorched bodies reassembled from indiscriminate parts by the blind surgery of war, soft powder that once was thousands, raised as a phoenix of fragmented humanity to haunt the living for generations.

Twenty-two years after the mass obliteration of souls, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and three days later on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, monstrous deformities persisted in the Japanese psyche—tragically splintered by defeat, subjugation, humiliation, and inconceivable horrors—unable to command a return to a unified

monolithic persona, the ordered cerebral imperative and societal dignity of pre-nuclear innocence.”<sup>2</sup>

The robot (fig. 16), in some distinction to the *kaiju* or monster,<sup>3</sup> embodies a more directly human will. The robot in Japanese popular culture is an extended human, sometimes appearing as a human-size suit of armor and at other times as a skyscraper-scale behemoth controlled by video game inputs, such as a joystick.

“‘Mazinger Z’ says Go [Nagai, the character’s creator], ‘comes from the Japanese word *majin*, or genie. The basic concept was of a machine ... that when human will is transferred to it, becomes even more powerful than a human.’ ... [Mazinger Z] evoked some very Japanese images, of samurai and insects, that have become a trademark of the genre.”<sup>4</sup>

“There remained one element to finalize the giant warrior robot genre – *henshin*, or transformation, a popular ingredient in Japanese fantasy. In Japanese myths, foxes, even cats, transform into beautiful women, and ninja warriors often transform into other entities to foil their enemies. ... Ever since Yusha Raideen (‘Brave Raideen’) in 1975 changed into a fighter plane called ‘God Bird,’ animated giant warrior robot characters have been folding, combining, and disassembling in increasingly complex and ridiculous patterns, into cars, robot lions, fighter planes, and trucks, with the toy companies struggling valiantly to keep up and reproduce them in three dimensions.”<sup>5</sup>

The faceted forms of robots create multiple perspectives at once, not unlike the technology-driven works of the Cubists or the Futurists. The meeting of flat surfaces gives the mind and eyes occasion to imagine being perpendicular (and thus shifting in its orientation) to each of the varied surfaces of the form. The precise, folded contours of a robot or series of robots in an anime or manga may also owe a debt to traditional Japanese figurative representation with its constant play between dimensional, though stylized human anatomy, and completely flattened and abstracted geometric clothing forms.



Fig. 13 - **Spider-Man**, by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, from "Amazing Spider-Man" no. 34, published by Marvel Comics.



Fig. 14 - **Astro Boy**, by Osamu Tezuka

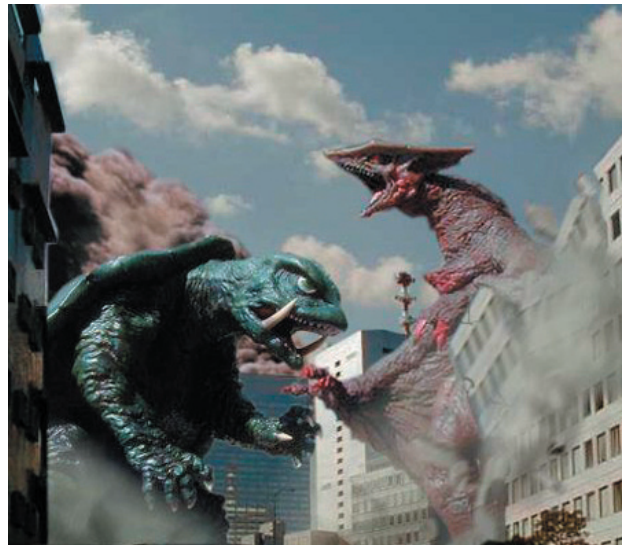


Fig. 15 - **Gamera**, by Daiei Motion Picture Company



Fig. 16 - **Mazinger-Z**, by Go Nagai

## **Kentucky**

Both comics and pop culture science fiction cartoons influenced my visual vocabulary. The landscape and language of my home have affected my work as well. The stories of Kentucky are linked to the raw, coarse terrain from which they came. Kentucky stories are stories of making do, inventing solutions when materials were hard at hand. These stories are often patterned around a ne'er-do-well trickster like Appalachian Jack. Dark, even fatalistic humor, flows through these stories as Jack makes one mistake after another and has to trick and barter with others to straighten everything out again. These figures, Appalachian Jack, my great uncle Hertie or Daniel Boone, become larger than life and enter into mythology for their adventures beyond the range of normal human life.

Hertie was a legendary body, a long, lean Kentucky hard-drinker straight from a ballad. Hertie figures prominently in a short story from one of Kentucky's great writers - Jesse Stuart.<sup>6</sup> In the story, Hertie and a friend picked up two young girls in a Model T truck. They offered to take them to an evening church service. At the climax of the story Hertie discovered that his passengers have boyfriends, admirers who were not pleased with the new competition. Hertie was unconcerned about the girls' previous entanglements, or the social trespass he committed. He did however wish to avoid the knives of the betrayed. The jealous suitors attempted to trap him inside of a church, which was subsequently burned in the melee. The Hertie of fiction escapes into the night, bowing out like Puck. The Hertie of my memory rarely returned to his hometown.

Stuart's story is apocryphal. Hertie certainly was capable of exploits that pass into myth. When I was a child, I would go and visit Hertie and his wife Ruth on occasion in their tiny trailer. Hertie would smoke and tell stories about horses he owned or had seen. One story from that time is still told in our family. Hertie and Ruth discovered there was no bread for toast one morning. Hertie went out to pick up bread while Ruth began frying up some eggs. Three weeks passed. Hertie was neither seen nor heard from.

Perhaps he was visiting racetracks in New Orleans or a girlfriend in D.C. We don't and will likely never know. When he returned one morning, he had a loaf of bread in hand. As he walked in, he said simply "I got the bread." Ruth, ever unflappable, replied "Your breakfast is in the freezer."

In both these stories Hertie strides outside normal social concern. He traveled his own path largely unburdened of the niceties and strictures of ordinary society. Daniel Boone presents another Appalachian figure who passed beyond ordinary communities. Boone was mythologized during his lifetime as a hardy, trailblazing adventurer who subdued the West and tamed the wilderness for future settlers. In his book, *Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon*, John Filson, a schoolteacher and land speculator made Boone simultaneously a bold Indian fighter and contemplative frontier philosopher. Filson's Boone could rapidly transition from coolly dispatching an Indian scout to waxing poetic on the grand beauty of nature.<sup>7</sup> Boone's body and exploits made him a new, unique figure in the colonial frontier. To his neighbors in the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina he presented a liminal figure neither native nor European. Boone adopted the practical dress of indigenous people and appeared somewhat unkempt from his "long hunts." These trips left his wife Rebecca to manage the family and farm for six months or longer while he engaged in traveling and hunting.

The myth of Boone's meeting Rebecca embodies the tall tales that enticed new immigrants to forge into the American interior and purchase speculators' lands. The story also follows an ancient pattern of desire for the power of transformation. In an 1833 biography of Boone, the story is told that Boone was practicing "fire-hunting", shining light into an animal's eyes to render it immobile. Boone froze a deer with his light, but could not bring himself to shoot it. Instead, he began to follow the doe as it alighted into the darkness. The trail took him to a remote cabin wherein he found three young women. The oldest, Rebecca, was describing for her younger sisters how she narrowly escaped a "panther" who chased her through the woods.<sup>8</sup> This story may borrow its par-

ticular form from the ancient Irish tale of Diarmuid and Grainne. Grainne was cursed to take the form of a deer and Diarmuid had to pursue her for seven years before they were reunited.<sup>9</sup>

The bodies from these Appalachian fables were mingling as I began a new series of drawing and painting work in 2003. *The Kentuckian* (fig. 17), and the *Dead Reckoning* series (figs. 18-20) mark the beginning of my process of forming and dismembering bodies. The three dominant forms of *The Kentuckian* are gripped in struggle, exchanging colors, forms and marks across their surfaces. The colors are more organic than the digital drawings presented earlier – the hues are less saturated and present a more narrow range of value. The forms maintain tension through hard shifts in scale. A large muted green form in the center terminates in a swirling mass of small red and white marks like the viscera of flesh splintered to bone. The pebbled grain of the hide-like space the bodies move in offers a continuous field to clearly differentiate the figures from the ground. These figures, like the digital drawings, present patterns that suggest humanoid organization. Those patterns, though familiar, are mutated – an arm-form swells and extends to become larger than a torso, or a leg-form is repeated multiple times in multiple colors.

The body forms of the *Dead Reckoning* series become more diffuse both through a reliance on line to structure their forms and through a more complex and elaborate environment. Architectural forms, such as the grey-black tree form in the center-right, take on the role of ashy figures. Ghostly webs of white contours coalesce into spectral birds and solitary striders. The repeating, grid-like networks of lines conjoin fleshy sacs in animal-robot hybrids. Lines bound shapes or describe space itself, curling tightly over the ground plane.

### **China**

Two recent international trips revealed new bodies with which to experiment. The first of these trips took me to Beijing, China for a five-week residency. While in Beijing I experienced bodies on dis-

play in a variety of stunning new forms. Street vendor snack carts overflowed with insect and animal anatomies displayed for dietary delight. Scorpions posed, claws akimbo, on skewers. Flesh in a rainbow of colors lay neatly arranged on trays, ready for roasting. Around these carts were stacked teetering piles of phoenix-form kites or tiger-shaped pillows. Even the skyscrapers sprouted and emerged on every wide street like the vigorous growth of a cultivated field. The city teemed with people, packed to bursting with an estimated population of 16 million.

At night, a bit removed from the pace of the city, I was drawn to televised Chinese Opera. The stylized costumes created new body vectors and architectures. A long, thin feather could extend a finger pointed in anger. Voluminous sleeves posed as wings or tentacles. Poses were struck and held creating a transhuman tableau. I had the good fortune of attending a live Chinese Opera in which a woman raises an army of women warriors to avenge her husband's death in battle. In person, the rapid acrobatics amplified the radical geometry of the performers' bodies.

When I returned, I began to work on a large-scale painting, *To Save the Crystal Warrior* (fig. 21). Over an 11-foot surface, I arrayed bodies that remained with me from my travels. These bodies entered into mythical strife in a cloudy, jewel-toned, yet weathered, terrain. This soft space, both cosmic and geologic, loomed forward and faded back to produce sweeping changes of depth. The large scale created tense juxtapositions between full fields of color and tiny detailed figurations. Swarms of knife forms emerge from in and around larger animal and mechanical figures. Long straight contours delineate spines, streaking from diamond comets. The colors shift and intensify as warm pinks, yellows and oranges give way to cruel reds and blacks or urban blues and purples.

The arrayed masses of bodies cantilever over a single doubled form. A ghostly sail of white and a sharp sash of black hint at the captivating central figure I had observed in the opera performance. This figure, frozen and mirrored mid-leap, is dwarfed by a



Fig. 17 - **The Kentuckian** | Oil on Panel | 15" x 49" | 2004



Fig. 18 - **Dead Reckoning I** | Mixed Media | 19" x 16" | 2003



Fig. 19 - **Dead Reckoning II** | Mixed Media | 19" x 16" | 2003





Fig. 20 - **Dead Reckoning III** | Mixed Media | 19" x 16" | 2003



Fig. 21 - **To Save The Crystal Warrior** | Oil on Paper on Panel | 35" x 133" | 2004



Fig. 22 - **To Save The Crystal Warrior I** | Oil on Paper on Panel | 35" x 43" | 2004



Fig. 23 - **To Save The Crystal Warrior II** | Oil on Paper on Panel | 35" x 42" | 2004



Fig. 24 - **To Save The Crystal Warrior III** | Oil on Paper on Panel | 35" x 48" | 2004

faceted embankment below and the large, angled, imposing forms on either side. The improvised insects, animals, tools and weapons imperil the isolated central figures. The space is one of jeweled wonder and veiled threat.

### **Ireland**

A second, more recent trip, this time to Ireland, brought me into contact with the ancient Irish hero Cuchulainn. The stories of Cuchulainn date at least to their inclusion in *The Book of Leinster*, which was produced in the twelfth century.<sup>10</sup> Cuchulainn presents a striking example both of a dynamic figure, to the point of gruesome violence, and of a form capable of tremendous transformation. Cuchulainn, when enraged in battle, would literally reshape his own body to become greater in force than all of his opponents combined. Although the stories are quite old, the transformations mirror the sliding and turning permutations of a modern pop culture robot.

“Then his first transformation came upon Cuchulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognizable. His haunches shook about him like a tree in a current or a bulrush against a stream, every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams came to the front. The sinews of his calves came on the front of his shins and each huge, round knot of them was as big as a warrior’s fist. ... Then his face became a red hollow. He sucked one of his eyes into his head so that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out from the back of his skull on to the middle of his cheek. His mouth was twisted back fearsomely. ... His lungs and his liver fluttered in his mouth and throat. ... [a] stream of fiery flakes came into his mouth... ... His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence the gap in a hedge. ... The hero’s light rose from his forehead so that it was as long and as thick as a hero’s whetstone. As high, as thick, as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood which rose up from the very top of his head...”<sup>11</sup>

At this point Cuchulainn savaged the armies of Ireland. After routing their horses beneath his chariot wheel and beheading their soldiers ten at a time, Cuchulainn decided that he must show an alluring form to the maidens of Ireland. He undertook another markedly different transformation.

“Beautiful indeed was the youth who came thus to display his form to the hosts, Cu Chulainn mac Sualtaim. Three kinds of hair he had, dark next to the skin, blood-red in the middle and a crown of red-gold covering them. [The hair] fell back over his shoulders... a hundred bright crimson twists of red-gold red-flaming about his neck. A hundred strings with mixed carbuncles around his head. Four dimples in each of his two cheeks, a yellow dimple and a green, a blue dimple and a purple. Seven gems of brilliance of an eye in each of his royal eyes. Seven toes on each of his feet, seven fingers on each of his hands, with the grasp of a hawk’s claws and the grip of a hedgehog’s claws in the every separate one of them.”<sup>12</sup>

Although these words are hundreds of years old, they could easily describe the angry metamorphosis of the Incredible Hulk or the conversion of a Transformer. Cuchulainn’s first transformation is built for a similar purpose as well : waging war. Both transformations reflect a society in which dominant, charismatic figures held together constantly shifting alliances through force of will. Ancient Ireland had no pattern of stable, agrarian structure. Instead groups were brought together in loose alliances to manage livestock. Additional animals were secured through raids and warfare : Cuchulainn fights to regain the prized bull of Ulster.<sup>13</sup> Along the way bonds are forged and broken as Cuchulainn must negotiate with Maeve, weather the treacheries of his own Ulstermen and ultimately kill his dearest friend.

### **The Selroc Cycle**

Many of these contextual rivers, from Appalachia and Asia to raconteurs and robots, began to converge in the undertaking of my largest project, *The Selroc Cycle* (figs. 25-34). The work spans 27 feet and over a year of planning and creation. Many of the ten-

sions of earlier work, between figure and ground, small and large scale, the rough and carefully-produced surface came to a fruitful expression in this project. I began by producing my own large-scale sheets of paper from scratch. This weathered, natural-tone field became the landscape on which the work would unfold.

Each one of the nine panels creates its own visual unit while reaching out to panels around it. Color, form and mark create patterns that stretch over boundaries at times intact, and at other times with considerable mutation. A large blue form with white and orange details provides a sky ceiling that vaults over two early panels. Later, a peach nimbus of washed color deepens the space over three consecutive units. Geometric forms span panels but at times reverse their figure-ground orientation – a light trapezoid on a dark field changes to a receding diamond outline as it moves from one panel to the next.

As in many earlier works, elements come together to form figurations suggestive of a torso or appendage or head, but then dissolve in throngs of smaller figurative elements. These tiny accretions disperse into faceted universes within the cosmology of the painting. In the detail of fig. 28, from the third panel of the cycle, orange, pink and brown diagonals band together to suggest a limb, while the metaphoric and visual ground heaves into and out of clustered forms. Navy, olive and brown slabs undergird the figure while green and yellow marks flock off away and around the larger forms.

The large scale of the work creates a narrative in many ways. Initially, one tells a story about the path taken physically to see the work. Walking beside several yards of images enhances the awareness of time taken to experience the image. One has to move bodily from one place to the next to see the journey the image takes. Connections form between elements present at the “beginning” of an image and those at the “end.” Secondly, detailed abstract forms structured through figure and environment invite relationship building. One is free, as a viewer, to set two forms

against each other or to nurture one color with its mate. Finally, the development of forms and vocabulary from panel to panel marks the history of the work : a year passed between the beginning of the first panel and the completion of the last panel. This development, of the artist and of the dialogue between the artist and the image, leaves traces in the work as forms begin to assume a solidity and simplicity over time.

*The Selroc Cycle* tells its own visual story. The story is one of loss and struggle, joy and homecoming. A universe of bodies embrace, entice, endeavor and ensnare. These bodies have left the world of my imagining and beckon to the exploration of a new cosmos undiscovered.



Fig. 25 - **The Selroc Cycle** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 333" | 2006





Fig. 26 - **The Selroc Cycle I** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006



Fig. 27 - **The Selroc Cycle II** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006



Fig. 28 - **The Selroc Cycle III** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006



Fig. 29 - **The Selroc Cycle IV** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006



Fig. 30 - **The Selroc Cycle V** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006



Fig. 31 - **The Selroc Cycle VI** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22'' x 37'' | 2006



Fig. 32 - **The Selroc Cycle VII** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006



Fig. 33 - **The Selroc Cycle VIII** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006





Fig. 34 - **The Selroc Cycle IX** | Casein on Paper on Panel | 22" x 37" | 2006

## Epilogue

The beginnings of this text were formed in Boston's Logan International Airport waiting to return to Detroit. I awoke before dawn and huddled out into the cold and snow to be whisked to the airport. My body was dissected through security. I removed my shoes, wallet, cell phone, iPod, keys, hearing aid batteries, two jackets, laptop, and gadget case from my person and arrayed them in trays for screening. I strolled through the metal detector completely ungirded. After recovering these items, I put in my iPod and listened to The Pogues. The sun was shining because it was a clear blue sky. I had had plenty of water. I began to write. I pushed through my thoughts with clarity because *my body was ready*. That's one of art's many roles in the academy, to say "don't forget your body."

This does return me to a consideration of my work and art itself. My work does not flow so much from a meditation on culture or an epistemological rumination on embodiment (which I guess would look like "how do we know how we know who we are"). Nor does it truly derive from an exploration of picture plane principles, although that's important. Both of these processes do happen. But, the work really comes from desire itself : the want to want. Religions and philosophies preach the extinguishing of desire, but I wonder now if that isn't the extinguishment of the human. Perhaps that puritanical need to eliminate desire is a desire itself : the desire to live without life. I am torn between my wise mind, which tells me that the enlightened being should seek peace with the body, and my desiring mind, which grabs me and pulls me toward ever-dizzying heights of imagined and transformed anatomies.

Life is lived in bodies. The world of words and thoughts, while enticing, is not the same as the world of images and senses. The explained world, the contingent world, at times lights a dark passage to a concrete cell. The body world, even for its mundanity, its persistent, ignorant aches and itches, opens a limitless vista. Our controlling categorical tendencies can limit our senses : we hear pop songs instead of music, we taste candy instead of sweets, we

see brands instead of colors. My work springs from and cultivates an awareness of bodies. The paintings and drawings revel in the elasticity of the body, how it can bend, bolt and bash, and the facility of the body, how it can hark, heed and handle. The work delights not only in *how* the body is seen, but also in *that* it can see.

These creations, my works, are bodies alive.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Chabon, Michael. The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: a Novel. New York: Random House, 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> Rauer, Julie. "Little Boy: the Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture." Asianart.Com. 13 June 2005. 12 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/littleboy/intro.html>>.
- <sup>3</sup> *Kaiju* more literally translated is "strange beast" or "mysterious beast." More humanoid forms of opponents for characters like Ultraman or Kamen Rider are *kaijin*, meaning "mysterious person."
- <sup>4</sup> Schodt, Frederick L. Inside the Robot Kingdom: Japan, Mecha- tronics and the Coming Robotopia. 1st ed. Vol. I. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1988. 84.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 85.
- <sup>6</sup> Stuart, Jesse. "Hurdie's Night Out." The Best Loved Short Stories of Jesse Stuart. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982.
- <sup>7</sup> Filson, John. Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon, One of the Original Settlers At Kentucky; Containing the Wars with the Indians on the Ohio, From 1769, to the Year 1784, and the First Establishment and Progress of the Settlements on That River. Written by the Colonel. Wilmington, DE: James Adams, 1784.
- <sup>8</sup> Lofaro, Michael A. The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1978. 16.
- <sup>9</sup> There are transformation myths and tales of love sundered in most, if not all, cultures. The audience for tales of Boone's life was largely poor and recently arrived from the British Isles.
- <sup>10</sup> The narratives themselves, collectively known as the *Tain Bo Cualnge*, describe Cuchulainn as living at the time of Christ, so it's likely that these tales were told even farther back in history.
- <sup>11</sup> O'Rahilly, Cecile, ed. Tain Bo Cualnge From the Book of Leinster. Dublin, Ireland: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984. 201.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 204
- <sup>13</sup> The translation of *Tain Bo Cualnge* is "cattle raid of Cooley."