

The Four Horsemen

By Annie Cheng

Introduction

Within the world of fantasy is a sense of escapism, an attempt to flee the dark realities we aren't willing to face. Picturesque worlds are filled with beautiful people and amazing creatures. However, these worlds often reflect realities and philosophies from our own world. In several fantasy games, battles are fought between a championing race that is civilized and 'good,' versus the 'savage.' Our darkest thoughts can be transferred into these fantasy worlds, a reflection of our own flaws and closed-mindedness. Stereotypes run rampant despite a world that is meant to contain unique characters within never before seen situations.

However, there are also the fantasy works that actively seek to address the flaws in our own world. These are the stories that address the human condition or parallel real world conflicts that don't necessarily have an easy answer. This is common in classic examples of science fiction writers like Ray Bradbury. The Harry Potter series contains parallels to the aftermath of wars, racism, intolerance, ethnic cleansing, and even AIDS discrimination¹. *Good Omens*, a fantasy novel by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, is a parody of the Apocalyptic writings, showing that angels and demons aren't as different as we would think and the world doesn't fall evenly into what's 'good' and 'evil.' Tamora Pierce crafts coming-of-age stories of young women who deal with not only with swords and sorcery but also with sexism, warfare, and politics. In them we are able to connect to the characters and their situations, and at the same time experiencing something new. These kinds of fantasy works act like magic mirrors. They selectively reflect flaws, truths, and issues in reality. While often thought of as a method of escaping the harshness of real life, fantasy offers the opportunity to reanalyze ourselves in a new context. An unfamiliar world allows us to remain afar, but the humanity of the characters and parallel situations allows for connection and empathy.

With this in mind, I hope to use fantasy to represent the environmental challenges we currently face. I have re-imagined the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as characters within four digital paintings. My four digital illustrations exist in a fantasy realm, but the imagery contained reflect real landscapes and species facing or comprising of real environmental issues such as overconsumption, pollution, invasive species, and more. The Horsemen are not the skeletal figures often depicted in biblically inspired art, but much more human and relatable characters that are representative of our own flawed approach to our relationship with nature.

The Horsemen

Using the Four Horsemen as focus, I have created a series of digital paintings that deal with the issues I find the most compelling: conservation and the environment. My thesis project was initially inspired by my course in Conservation of Biological Diversity. In it I learned about four major causes of the loss of biodiversity as well as numerous other topics, including scientific methods and possible solutions to these problems. My professor especially liked to divide the threats to biodiversity into four categories he likened to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Habitat Loss, Invasive Species, Overconsumption, and Ecosystem Stress. The imagery of the Four Horsemen resonated with me and easily overlapped with the conservation

issues we learned about in class. The Four Horsemen are originally from the Book of Revelations, which details the events of the biblical Apocalypse. Together they are Conquest – the White Horseman, War – the Red Horseman, Famine – the Black Horseman, and Death – the Pale Horseman. Each was given a quarter of the earth to kill and destroy.ⁱⁱ

Albrecht Durer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*



The White Horseman is the embodiment of Conquest. Traditionally it often referred to the religious upheaval and conflicts that arose in Europe during the era of Albrecht Durer's Apocalypse woodcuts.ⁱⁱⁱ In the case of land development, especially urban sprawl, nature is dominated and controlled. The structures we abandon are slowly absorbed back into nature, but there are always scars; whatever species and resources are lost cannot be replaced. Whether unknowingly or not, our technology results in massive amounts of waste material that cannot decompose back into the earth. Pollution often comes back to haunt us, tainting our water, our food, and preventing the further use of resources and of land. My version of Conquest is a traveling alchemist, passionately seeking knowledge and new solutions. Her newest discovery, a gold mine of energy, is oil. Her mechanical steed draws out the oil from the ground, while the forest is razed and the land cleared to make room for her discovery. The oil is distilled in her traveling cart, fumes burned off with a gas flare. Deep ruts are filled with a toxic

sludge; the oil creates an orange discoloration along the edges. Conquest's cart is also filled with numerous vials and experiments. A collection of bird specimens hangs on the side of the cart, including a whooping crane, horned grebe, green winged teal, and northern pintail; these are but a few select species that have been threatened by the development of tar sands in Canada's boreal forests.^{iv} Conquest herself sits on the riverbank with a journal observing a vial of newly produced oil. A true alchemist, Conquest seeks to change her world into a better place. Unfortunately she is also ruthless in this desire and blind to the consequences of her progress.

The main inspiration for the environment in Conquest's painting is the Canadian oil sands region. Oil sand production involves completely stripping the land to reach the tar sands beneath. These sands must then be processed and refined, consuming a large amount of water and leaving behind tailing ponds. Not only are habitats lost from the strip mining, but stray birds also accidentally land in the tailing ponds and are often die.^{iv} There have also been cases where the tailing ponds have not been properly sealed and leakages occur. The toxic materials leak into the water supply and endanger both people and animals.^v The ExxonMobil Pegasus Pipeline, which carries the unrefined oil(bitumen) from the region to a refinery, recently had its own leakage in Arkansas.^{vi} Conquest's steed is meant to resemble a pumpjack mechanism, a common sight in oil rich regions of the US. The head of the pumpjack is called a horsehead, which spurred the decision to convert it into a mechanical horse.



Oil Sands Mining

Photograph by Peter Essick



War: The Red Horseman



Kudzu

Photography by Galen Parks Smith

The Red Horseman, War, is a reflection of the spread of invasive species. At first it was unintentional, a direct result of our desire to explore and spread across the land and sea. Yet just as Christianity attempted to spread “good” at the cost of freedom and bloodshed, the spread of invasive species decimated ecosystems and resulted in the loss of countless species and resources. At times invasive species have been purposefully released in an attempt to control the damage from other invasive species. Without the careful experimentation and planning there have been times where these species were even more destructive than the previous ones. In my painting, the Red Horseman is a crusader fighting his way through a rich and dense forest, carving a path with his sword. With each cut invasive species like kudzu and sumac sprout and cover his path, choking the original forest and creating a thorny impenetrable barrier. His steed, an invasive red deer, tramples a path with the Horseman, who is clad in red-stained white armor. War was once a White Knight, filled with dreams of spreading good intentions. He has a desire to grow, explore, and find new things in the world. Unfortunately, he is also stubborn, prideful, and ignorant of the result of his actions. There is no easy return on the path he carves, just as there is none for the ecosystems ravaged by invasive species.

Most of the trees in the forest are based off of St. Helena’s Gumwood, a tree that grows on the island of St. Helena. Overgrazing and harvesting have contributed the most to its decline, but in 1991, the invasive jacaranda bug threatened it with extinction. The ladybird *Hyperaspis pantherina* had to be introduced to control it.^{vii} In the foreground I’ve included a Bois Dentelle tree. There are only two specimens of this tree left on its home island of

Mauritius. The cloud forest ecosystem it's found in is threatened by invasive species such as guava. In the painting some of its branches have been sliced by War's sword.^{viii} From the wounds kudzu begins to sprout. Kudzu is an incredibly fast spreading invasive species that is difficult to control. It is known to completely cover a landscape, including any trees, cars, or buildings in its way.^{ix} The invasive species have been colored red to make their domination more evident. The kudzu has completely enclosed the forest path in the background. The crest on War's shield is the mute swan. Originally from Europe, the mute swan now competes with native Michigan species such as the trumpeter swan. The feathers in his helmet are also mute swan feathers.^x



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Famine: The Black Horseman

Famine, the Black Horseman, is the overconsumption of our natural resources. Famine has historically also referred to inflation and was representative of inequalities in food distribution, as well as traditional famines that resulted from poor farming practices and weather.^{xi} Overfishing has resulted in the decline of fish populations, and larger fish are becoming much more scarce. As fishing boats snatched up all the larger fish, preventing them from breeding, the average size of the fish population began to decline as well.^{xii} Meanwhile, overworking or overgrazing the land without allowing for rest and replenishment drains the nutrients and can result in desertification and the loss of plant and animal life. Deforestation

destroys the homes of countless organisms and eliminates the precious ecosystem services such as flood prevention, soil erosion prevention, and climate regulation.^{xiii} In the painting, the last tree is silhouetted by the sun. The Black Horseman looks back at the encroaching sand on his way to cut down the last tree. Famine is dressed in an airy desert cloak, as sandstorms follow where he goes. His 'steed,' the oxen, carries the fish and lumber he has harvested. Meanwhile the land has been stripped of trees and a fishing net lies abandoned in the sand of the dried riverbank. The water has receded but the fish stocks have already been long depleted. Famine has no sense of control and will continue to reap the benefits of an environment until there is nothing left but desert. On the yoke of his steed is a harness that doubles as a set of scales, the symbol of Famine in Revelation.^{xiv}

The environment in the Black Horseman's painting is based on the myth of Easter Island, where a man cut down the last tree standing, despite knowing it was the very last one.^{xv} The tree depicted is loosely based on the toromiro tree of Easter Island. The last wild specimen was cut down in 1960, much like in the myth.^{xvi} The statues are a reference to the stone monoliths of Easter Island, but take the shape of gorilla heads instead. This was an allusion to the image of severed gorilla heads, a byproduct of the bushmeat crisis.^{xvii} In some communities fishing in local waters by first world fishing fleets have decimated fish stocks, forcing inhabitants to seek other sources of protein, including endangered species, in the forest. The statues are posed like the saying about the Three Wise Monkeys, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Ignorance, apathy, and a desire for the status quo allow for overexploitation to continue.



Lastly Death, the Pale Horseman, consists of the chain reaction of our actions. It is global warming and the loss of genetic diversity; both are much slower processes of destruction. Death encompasses the reaction of nature to rising temperatures, which melt ice caps and flood low-lying areas. The extinction of a weakened inbred population due to disease or the calamity of an unusually strong storm are also a part of Death. Death seeks balance, following nature's rules after human interference. She is depicted as a witch, riding upon a dragon. Witches were often treated as scapegoats in the Middle Ages for natural disasters such as drought or severe storms. Dragons in Western mythology tend to be violent beasts, but in Eastern mythology they are the revered controllers of weather. Death summons a tendril of tornado in the middle of an oceanscape.

To the left are several coral reefs and a rocky shore and to the right are fragmenting ice sheets. Lightning and clouds snake down her arm in a double helix. Death is calm, collected, indiscriminate, but also merciless. She is slow and steady, and when left to grow in power for too long, unstoppable.

For Death's painting I was inspired by photographs of supercells and thunderheads as examples of violent weather and disaster. The coral reefs and melting ice sheets represent two sides of global warming. Acidification and the warming oceans have caused mass coral bleaching events, where the coral become stressed and die, leaving behind white skeletal masses. Meanwhile the melting ice sheets cause oceans to rise and the territory of arctic species dwindles.



Photograph by Mitch Dobrowner

Process

When I first started IP I thought I would make a series of dioramas. However I found myself making very little progress on the hands-on work. The rough digital paintings I had done were much more engaging to work on. Digital illustration is the medium with which I have the most experience. There's also something ethereal about digital paintings and how they exist as intangible data.

First I established backgrounds, origins, and connections for the four horsemen and determined their major themes. Working with the fantasy theme I started to develop their characters around fantasy archetypes. Conquest was an alchemist, War a knight, Famine a

merchant, and Death a witch. These are roles brought up in fantasy role-playing games, where players can pick and chose a character to assume as their avatar. I wanted the Four Horsemen to also function as avatars. It was important that the Horsemen become people because the roles they play are the roles we fulfill in life. This also contributed to my depiction of the Horsemen as different ethnicities. There is a tendency in Western fantasy work to underrepresent the diversity in our world. I saw this as an opportunity to subvert the lack of representation, while at the same time emphasize that protecting the environment is a global responsibility.

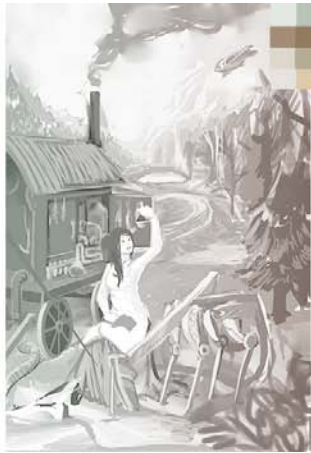


War: Thumbnail



Famine: Thumbnail

With the general groundwork in place I began roughing in monochromatic thumbnail sketches in Photoshop, trying to include the most important elements. I laid them out side by side to get an overall feel for the final work. After adjusting each composition to something satisfactory, I created new files for each Horseman and scaled up the thumbnail to fit the canvas. At this point the canvas was about half the size of my desired print of 32x48". I used a round brush with pressure sensitivity to start roughing-in a more detailed final composition. This meant I could control how heavy my marks were, much like in a real painting. I created a separate work layer on top of my initial thumbnail layer to work on. By keeping them separate I could refer back to the thumbnail whenever I wanted. Every so often I would duplicate the layer I was working on so I would have several in progress backups to refer back to. Once I had the details worked out in lights and darks I started to experiment with color on a separate layer. I could then set the color layer to overlay so that it tinged the painting with color while keeping the details in the lights and darks. If I wasn't satisfied with a color I could always alter it. After I found a satisfying palette I scaled the image up to its final size. From here on I switched to working on a Cintiq tablet on a PC, since the large file size caused a delay reaction between my own tablet and my laptop. I went in and painted in final details, making sure to cover up unnatural blurring from scaling up. I also utilized the smudge tool to blend between colors and create smoother gradients. Between each step I laid out the four compositions side by side to make sure they read as a single work.





Black Black Heart by Wenqing Yan



Guilty by Wenqing Yan

As I was developing my ideas, I was inspired by Wenqing Yan's environmental activism paintings. She has done a series of haunting digital paintings on similar environmental issues. Conceptually I drew inspiration from Zhao Renhui, who creates incredibly real but fictional narratives to draw attention to environmental issues. His fictional institution, Institute of Critical Zoologists, goes out on expeditions and returns with photographs, research, and specimens. They issue fictional reports and proposals such as a 'tiger farm' that would use tigers for medicinal use.



Zhao Renhui

Blind Long-Tailed Owl

Mucha's *Four Seasons* also inspired the layout of the Four Horsemen as a series of four paintings side by side. I also found David S. Hong's landscapes and Oer-Wout's photography to be a great inspiration for color and composition.



David S. Hong



David S. Hong



Oer-wout @ deviantart.com



The Seasons (1896) by Mucha

Conclusion

In my research on The Four Horsemen, I found that the popular imagery of the Four Horsemen during the late Medieval Ages and Early Renaissance became widespread through the development of printing technologies. Reproductions were easily made and thus the works of Albrecht Durer could reach a much wider audience.^{xviii} Similarly, Digital paintings are capable of reaching the worldwide audience on the web. Reproductions are instantaneous and even prints can be sold on the Internet, which can then reach even more people across the globe. However it is lost in a deluge of similar information that also competes for attention. Depending on whether it can differentiate itself, the work can either remain in faint obscurity or begin to spread via a chain reaction, picking up speed with each share.

I believe we need some elements of escapism in order to cope with reality. We can realize the number of injustices that occur every moment yet feel the inability to make a difference. We can be told the inevitability of our end if we don't start to change, yet continue to fall into the same bad habits because it's inconvenient to change and face the issues head on. But at what point do we confront these issues? How long until it's too late? I fell into this dilemma trying to conceptualize this project. I found myself avoiding the problem in stories and games. It was through fantasy I found my escape, and also where I found my answer. I took my problem of escapism and fantasy and used it as the central theme in my project. The Horsemen are meant to be reflections of our own actions. They are the avatars through which we move. We however are the ones in control, and we have the ability to change. The ideal and perfect world where we live in harmony with nature is a fantasy. We can choose to live under the delusions that it already exists or can never exist, or we can reshape that fantasy into something that can, perhaps in the far future, be true.

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iii Leahy, Cathy. The Four Horsemen: Apocalypse, Death And Disaster. Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2012. (p. 10)

iv St. Clair, Colleen. University of Alberta. Department of Biological Sciences. 2011 Annual Report of the Regional Bird Monitoring Program for the Oil Sands Region. 2011. Web. <http://ceaa.gc.ca/050/documents_staticpost/59540/82080/Appendix_E_-_Part_10.pdf>

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x Michigan. Department of Natural Resources. Mute Swan Facts. Web. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/MuteSwanFacts_final_366761_7.pdf.

xi (Leahy p. 11)

xii Primack, Richard. Conservation Biology. 4th Ed. Sunderland: Sinauer Associates, 2008. 104-108. Print.
xiii (Primack p. 26-27, 79-83)
xiv The Holy Bible, King James Version.
xv Lee, Georgia. "The Collapse of Easter Island's Culture." Sentinels In Stone. The Bradshaw Foundation. Web. 24 Apr 2013.
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xvi "Toromiro Tree." Kew Botanic Gardens. Web. 24 Apr 2013. <<http://www.kew.org/plants/islandplants/toromiro.html>>.
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xviii (Leahy p.4)

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