SHELF LIFE

by

Gregory Grimsby
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Art and Visual Technology

Committee:

_____ Director

_____

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_____ Director of the School of Art

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Date: _____ Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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Bachelors of Fine Arts
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If I have not been remiss, I have already thanked those who have sacrificed time, energy, or my nearness for this artistic endeavor to happen. My family, including my beautiful wife Rachel, and my two children: Annabelle and Benjamin, loaned their husband and father respectively to the toils of the painting studio. I left the games business to reclaim my life, to obtain balance between toil and play. Perhaps the need to immerse myself in creative activities is unquenchable. Earning an MFA, painting what I paint, and being the driven perfectionist that I am; is not conducive to balance. But as I write this, the end of this chapter draws near. It has been fulfilling. It has been good.

I want to thank the professors at George Mason who embraced what could have been an awkward scenario: professors teaching professors. I learned as much about being a teacher as I did about paint from these supportive souls. Lynne Constantine, Chawky Frenn, and Maria Katametou. I am blessed to have learned from you. Lastly, Paula Crawford, thank you for encouraging me and challenging me. Your presence in our halls is sorely missed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

SHELF LIFE

Gregory Grimsby, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Assocoate Professor Paula Craword

In the late 17th century, cabinets of curiosity reflected the birth of modern science, manifested in exotic collections of artifacts, specimens, and artworks. These precursors to modern museums juxtaposed natural science and religion, even fact and fiction. These cabinets reveled in the marvelous, the rare, and often the freakish. By aggregating all this content, visitors could experience a lifetime of amazing artifacts all at once. At the time, they must have been awe-inspiring.

Shelf Life, operates in a similar way. It is a series of oil paintings and drawings that curates a fascinating assemblage of things ranging from man-made antiquities to oddities of the animal kingdom. It is about amazing things and imagined beings. Some of the content depicted exists in our world, but some does not. When both are included together

uncertainly is sown. This leaves the viewer questioning, and, hopefully, engaged in a mystery to decipher the truth.

Objects have meaning and symbolism. Objects become signifiers for concepts. A butterfly represents spirituality. A skull represents death. Groupings of objects form relationships and evoke meaning. This is how the oil paintings in *Shelf Life* speak. Each painting depicts a collection of objects that tells stories.

Shelf Life is a series that sees the beauty lying at the intersection of art and science. There is the natural beauty of Ellensburg's agate with its swirls of blue and amber. There is the textural allure of old books filled with aged parchment and bound in heavy leather and bronze. Arthropods are painted in an infinite palette from the purest blues and fiery oranges, to iridescent greens. There is beauty found in old materials and old ways of making things. Mercury gasometers and the earliest lightbulbs, instruments of 19th century science, are beautiful sculptures of glass and bronze, yet still used for science. *Shelf Life* curates artifacts of nature and science together.

Shelf Life, is about truths, especially the "almost true" and ambiguous truths. It is about imagined beings and amazing things. It is about curiosity. It is about science and how science can be beautiful, but also ignorant, even unethical. Since little 't' truth is relative, a discussion of the lens of the viewer is needed. The work of entomologist/biologist Dr. Gabriel Fain offers an essential perspective on truth in science. His experiments show how authority biases our interpretation of truth.

This thesis is a field guide in the Audubon sense to the paintings and drawings in my graduate show of Spring 2017. Like a beautiful watercolor vivisection, we'll discuss in

detail the process used in my realistic paintings and drawings. The interplay of digital and traditional techniques, although not revelatory, solved many visual problems such as perspective and challenging *tromp l'oeil* compositions with no physical reference available. Out of this process was born a series of highly detailed paintings in the still-life mode and dozens of scientific illustrations done in ink.

CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS

I fondly recall my childhood love for dinosaurs. As a youth, I checked out every dinosaur book at the school library, some of them multiple times, committing them to memory like sacred texts. Oh, and I would draw. I believe I owe much of my love and skill for drawing today to my inexplicable need to recreate these fantastical beasts in smeary graphite renditions. Dinosaurs would be replaced by Star Wars, and Star Wars by Dungeons and Dragons as my obsession de jour. I don't know why I was compelled to draw, to commit the soul of these objects to paper. It was just there—the need to do it. It must be in my wiring somewhere, hiding in the spiraling double-helix, and passed down to my son who draws with the same abandon.

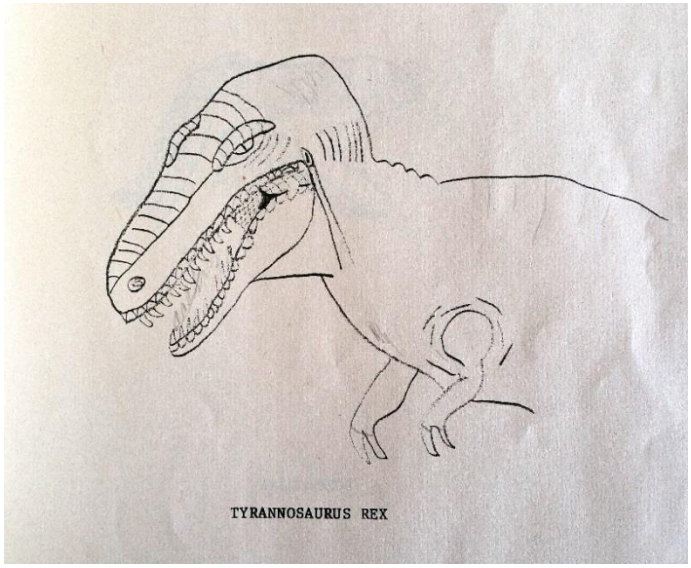

Figure 1 *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, Pencil and Ink on Paper, 6"x4", 1979

What elevates this artist origin story beyond blather, is that I've been blessed enough to earn a living dwelling in the land of beasts and hobbits. Aside from one scary close-call in a mind-numbing office job one desperate summer, I've worked as an artist for all my adult years. For a score of years, I have been a game artist or an art director for video games. In other words, I have been paid to create visuals for games. I live in a world where I don't have to plant crops, work in a coal mine, or toil my body and bones to dust. I provide a service. My work seeks to entertain others. This is called commercial art. Painting pleasing pixelated pictures pays the bills.

Rewinding back to 2011, I had the opportunity to teach 3D modeling at George Mason University. Although I had mentored young artists many years as an art director, teaching allowed me to open young, sponge-like minds and fill them with nuggets of gold. A yellow brick road had been laid down before me and I took it. I am a professor now—a Dumbledore of polygons.

All this backstory explains my artistic voice. I have always drawn realistically. I have always drawn things beyond blah ordinary life. I have always labored to do those two things better. There are many reasons why I sought my master's degree, but primarily I wanted to be a better teacher and better practitioner of art. This thesis will explain through my art and the thoughts behind them, how I believe my graduate experience has been a successful one.

I will not assume my journey through grad school was any less of a Mt Everest than usual. It was a ton of work. I have a day job (teaching those sponge-minded students). I am a father of two school-aged energy vampires (my children). My

mountain path was rough-hewn not because of life, but for artistic reasons. All my previous art was commercial art. As an MFA student, I needed to evolve my work, while still being true to who I was as an artist. Pushing myself and remaining malleable to the crafting taps-taps of my teachers was essential but not easy because I needed to change how I thought about art and how much thought went into my art. I am no fool. I shall not answer the question of art vs illustration here. However, feedback and critiques made me think. For example, I was told "Illustration only depicts. It's an easy read." I internalized that phrase. It was a way of challenging myself to do more than just render. Sometime I was more successful at this. I also heard the phrase "you might as well be a Sunday painter [if you just draw what pleases you and is easy]". I tucked that one away too. I was also asked to "challenge myself". Again, this was a gentle prod to do conceptually stronger work.

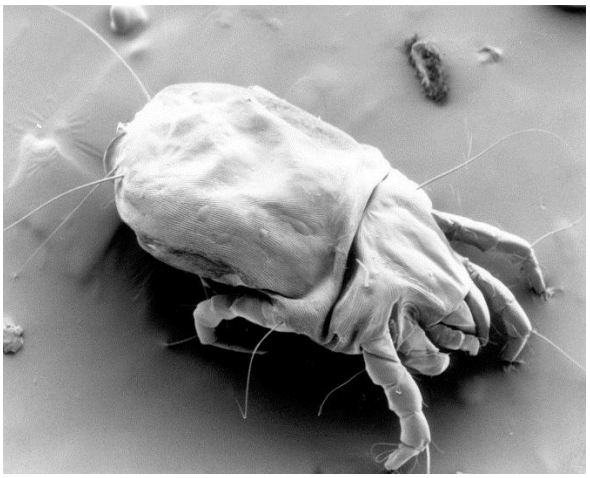

Figure 2 A SEM image of a dust mite[1].

[1] CSIRO (photographer), (2014, September 20). Female dust mite [digital image]. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35497118

My first year as a grad student I stumbled upon a series of SEM (scanning electron microscope) images like the one shown in

Figure 2. I was in awe of what nature creates. It felt like subject matter that would allow me to paint realistic and amazing worlds, while avoiding the label "fantasy art", or "sci-fi". My ink drawing, *Cerebral Mite (*

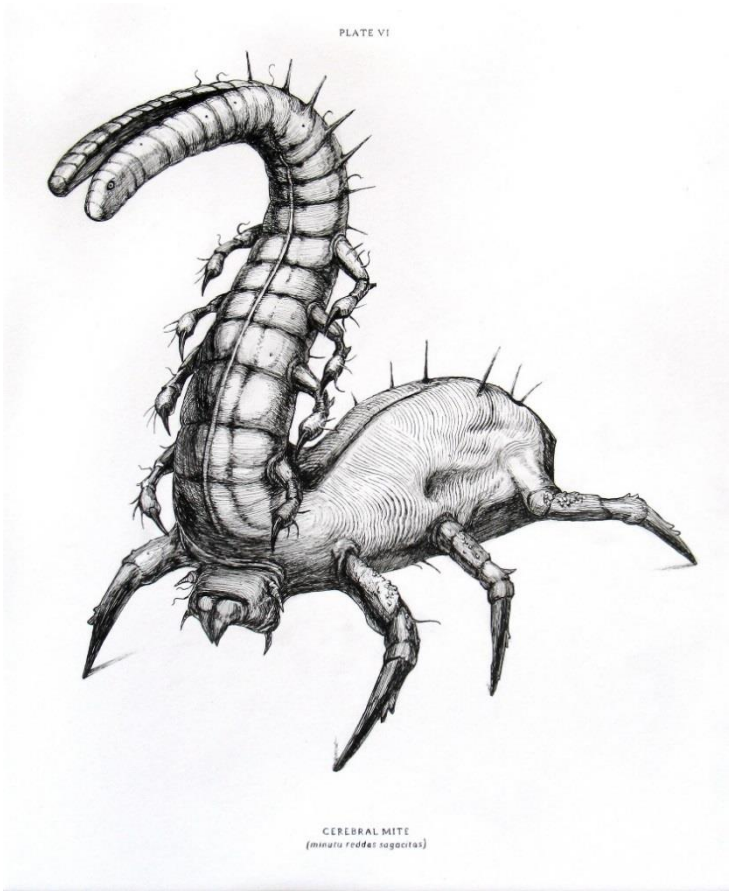

Figure 3*)*, was the first I produced based on the inspiration of the dust mite and it would later become a series. There were several important choices I made. I choose to work in the mode of 19th century scientific illustrations. I wanted the piece to look like a plate from a science journal. The image is labeled in Copperpoint font which looks like an engraving font. The scientific name of the creature is given, although it is of course

fake. The image is also given a plate number. These elements seek to emulate a scientific illustration. By adopting a rendering style associated with science, it makes the drawing look authentic. The viewer questions if the creature is real. That was a space I wanted to be in. I would continue to produce work that left the viewer uncertain and curious. I feel that the uncertain viewer is an engaged viewer. A viewer puzzling out your work is taking a journey at your beckoning. It was one way I would elevate my work beyond just depiction and give it more meaning. Additionally, compare this with my dinosaur drawing from the age of seven, and you can see how science and art have remained an important intersection for me.

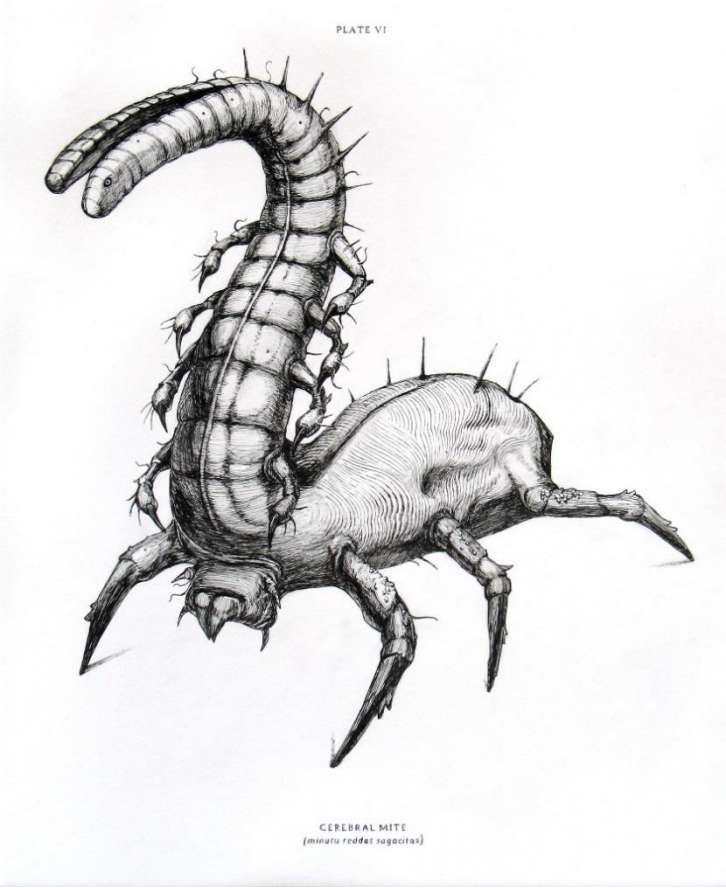

Figure 3 *Cerebral Mite*, Micron ink pen on bristol board, 14"x17", 2013.

In my thesis exhibit, the following description accompanied *Cerebral Mite*:

"CEREBRAL MITE

(minutu reddas sagacitas)

The cerebral mite is a newly discovered, microscopic member of the Dermatophagoides family. Cerebral mites are parasitic creatures that live inside human brains, feeding from the synaptic energy of the host's pre-frontal cortex. These psychic leeches, like freshwater leeches, are harmless in typical cases, with populations of several hundred mites within a single host causing minimal side effects, but in extreme

cases, and for reasons unknown, the population can balloon and the functioning of the prefrontal cortex is compromised, causing hosts to demonstrate increased antisocial and/or violent behavior. Treatment for typical cases of cerebral mite infection is not required as populations usually die out on their own within 4 to 8 weeks and the host may show no symptoms other than increased irritability or difficulty in concentrating. Acute cases are treated with anti-inflammatory drugs and meditation as prolonged mental rest and meditation effectively starve the mites of synaptic energy. Since acute infestations are more prevalent in intellectually active people, it is commonly called "nerds disease". There is growing evidence that suggests regular meditation, or other respite for the mind, such as watching reality television, can reduce the likelihood of infection. Most estimates indicate 35-40% of Americans have had a cerebral mite infection within the past year, with those numbers rising rapidly. There is a great deal of disagreement about the long-term prognosis of this disease and the impact it may have in the future."

The text appears scientific and authentic, but it becomes clear that something false and playful is occurring. Subtle feigning of truths, or bending of reality is an important theme to me. It leaves the viewer uncertain. What parts of my work are real? Is the viewer being fooled? Even when the falsehood is apparent, there is a bit of humor or commentary. The cerebral mite was the seed for many of the ideas sown throughout my work.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BUG SERIES

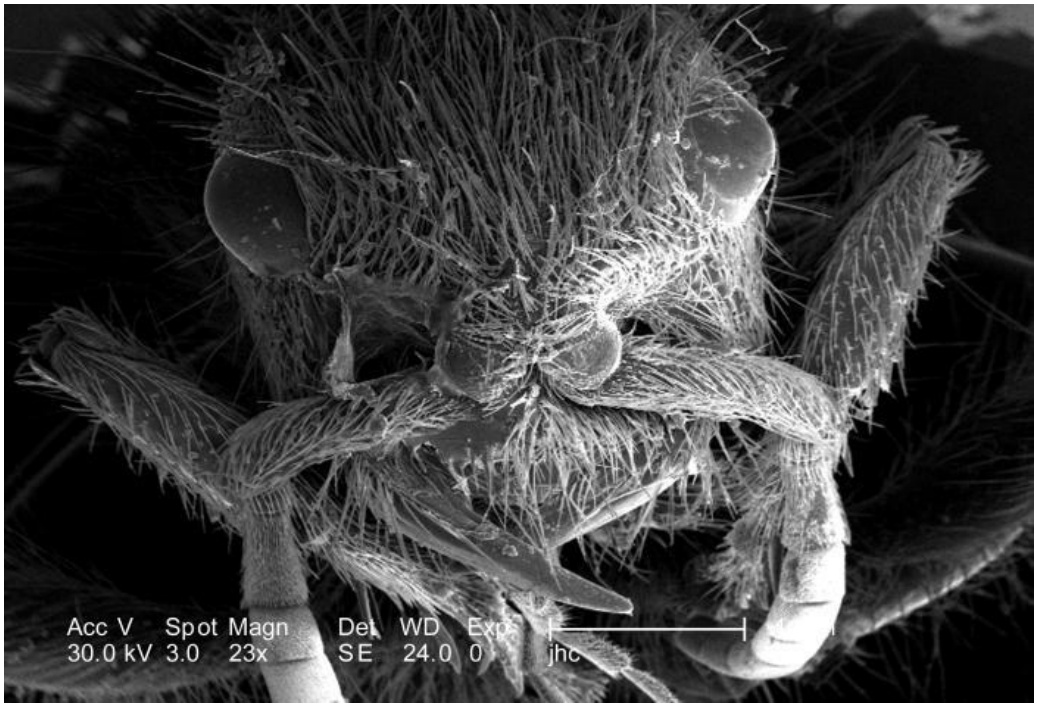

Figure 4 Ant head at x23 magnification[2]

Highly magnified images like Figure 4 fascinate me much like dinosaurs did when I was young. Small, pesky bugs transform into larger than life beasts. Exoskeletons

[2] Carr, Janice (Photographer). (2011, January 27) Velvet_ant_head_anterior-SEM_photo.jpg [digital image]. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Velvet_ant_head_anterior_--_SEM_photo.jpg

become thorny armor. Tiny legs become spiked scythes. Bugs become monstrous, even alien. I was in awe of what nature designs just beyond what we can perceive. I felt there was value in exploring the microscopic world and using it as content for my work. Even to the jaded, modern viewer with access to billions of images on the internet, the language of magnified creatures could tell a new story. I scoured thousands of SEM and macrophotography images looking for anatomical forms that were visually interesting. Like the mythical chimera, I borrowed aspects from many animals.

Inspired by SEM images of dust mites and water bears, I followed up the cerebral mite with a series of paintings featuring microscopic bugs. The painting *Hidden Worlds*

Figure 5), juxtaposes real creatures with imaginary ones in a landscape inspired by highly magnified spores and common surfaces. In this work, I wanted to create a world that borrows from the wondrous design of nature. Since SEM imagery is new, it can still surprise the modern viewer. This content provided a palette of unusual and curious things to create my own worlds from. I could paint realistically while having creative leeway. If all I did was paint microbes, I believed the work would simply illustrate, and do little else. In this series, I was working out how to transition from commercial art to meaningful art. Conceptually the work needed more, so I choose to deliberately merge real and imaginary creatures. The viewer is not allowed any easy read of the work. They must think about what they accept to be real. For the curious, the creature in Figure 6 is imaginary, the rest are real. This painting began my exploration into juxtapositions of real and imaginary things.

Because I get to invent the narrative, my paintings are suggestive and ambiguous. Are the painted figures fighting? Mating? Contemplating lunch? The viewer decides. They have agency to interpret my work. So, the compositions and the interactions of the figures are left intentionally ambiguous.

Figure 5 ***Hidden Worlds*****, Oil on canvas, 40"x 16", 2013.**

Figure 6 ***Hidden Worlds*** **(detail). Imaginary creature.**

Figure 7 *A Chance encounter*, Oil on Canvas, 30”x40”, 2014.

Figure 8 *Loss*, Oil on Linen, 36”x24”, 2014.

Figure 9 Untitled, Oil on Linen, 24”x48”, 2015.

The bug series was challenging technically to paint. They were large and detailed paintings averaging three to four feet long. The scenes were drawn from imagination, but I still wanted to convince via detail that these things could be real. The perspective and lighting needed to work. Although I received feedback that the bug series was "fascinating" and "well-painted", the specter of "Pixar" and sci-fi was mentioned in critique. The series was conceptually thin but it does indicate the journey my work took. I chose to exclude these paintings from my thesis show because my later work went in a different, conceptually stronger direction.

CHAPTER THREE: DR GABRIEL FAIN

It was the fall of 2015 at GMU. A few dozen art faculty were gathered for graduate critique. Each grad student eagerly (nervously) gave a short presentation introducing their artwork as a prologue to formal discussion. My presentation began, much like this thesis, by discussing my interests in science, SEM images, and bugs. I advanced through a series of images (see Figure 11 through Figure 16) of my latest ink drawings of imaginary arthropods and gave their backstories. These creatures were discovered in the late 1800's by the entomologist Dr. Gabriel Fain. In the footsteps of Robert Hooke, Dr. Fain rendered detailed depictions of the creatures he discovered. Hooke's most famous work, *Micrography*, was a masterpiece of scientific illustration filled with drawings of fleas, lice, and the magnified cell-structure of cork and other matter.

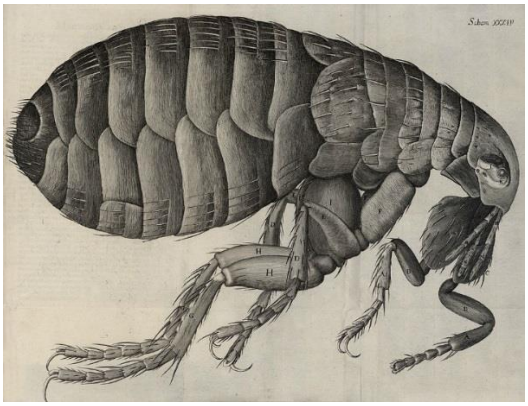

Figure 10 Illustration of a flea from Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*[3]

After I presented the drawings, a faculty member asked who Dr. Fain was. I had the pleasure of revealing that Dr. Gabriel Fain was not real. He did not discover the hair eating louse when studying his own hair follicles. He did not discover the helix beetle in a Peruvian rainforest. I explained that Dr. Fain was my conception, devised to give authority and believability to my drawings. He obfuscates the truthfulness of my bugs. In the words of Gerald Massey, "They must find it difficult, those who have taken authority as truth, rather than truth as authority." By authoring a fictitious authority, credibility is given to my drawings even as we are confronted with questionable backstory. The hair-eating louse causes male pattern baldness? That can't be true! But Dr. Fain discovered this. He is a doctor. He is an authority figure. Surely this hair-devouring bug must be real! The uncertainty of the faculty member exemplifies how I want viewers to engage with my art. I want them wallowing in ambiguity, piqued by a narrative of questionable truths.

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[3] Hooke, Robert. (1664). *Schema XXXIV*, etching [digital image]. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Micrographia#/media/File:HookeFlea01.jpg

As fictive art, my drawings use a fictitious persona to make the viewer question what is truth. I am not the first artist to don a faux personality for this reason. Beauvais Lyons, a professor of art at the University of Tennessee, created several personas including Reverend James Randolph Denton and the aptly named Everitt Ormsby Hokes, as founders and artists who produced a series of lithographs depicting the biodiversity of God's creation. These characters supply narrative to Lyons' work as part of the hoax. Joan Fontcuberta's persona, Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen, is used in a very similar way as I use Dr. Fain. These characters are part of a backstory created to fool the viewer.

Harvard art historian, Lambert-Beatty, formalized and defined the term 'parafiction' as the production of fictions meant to be read as fact. She explains in "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility": Fiction or fictiveness has emerged as an important category in recent art. But, like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact…parafiction is a deception. …allowing viewers to be caught in a "gotcha" moment of having been fooled,

to wonder uncomfortably about the status of the claims the exhibit made.[4]" Most of the pieces in my thesis show use fictive elements to sow uncertainty in the viewer.

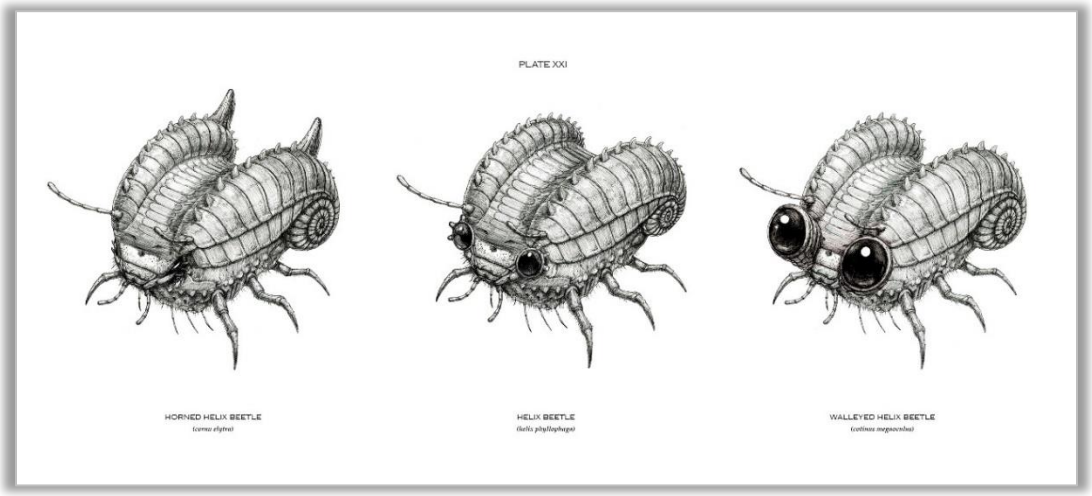

Figure 11 *Helix Beetle*, digital print of ink on bristol, 24"x12", 2014

4 Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. (2009). Make-Believe:Parafiction and Plausibility. *October*, 1(129), 51-84. Retrieved from URL http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/octo.2009.129.1.51

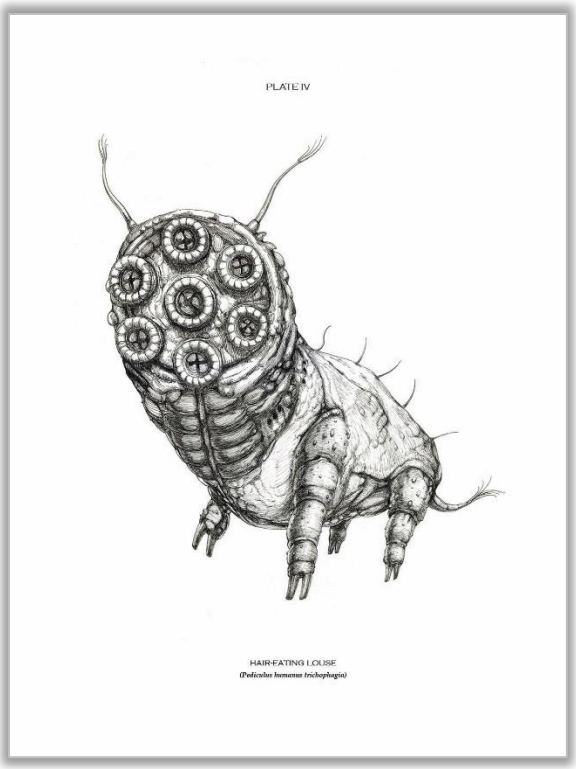

Figure 12 *Hair Eating Louse*, digital print of ink on bristol, 9”x12”, 2014

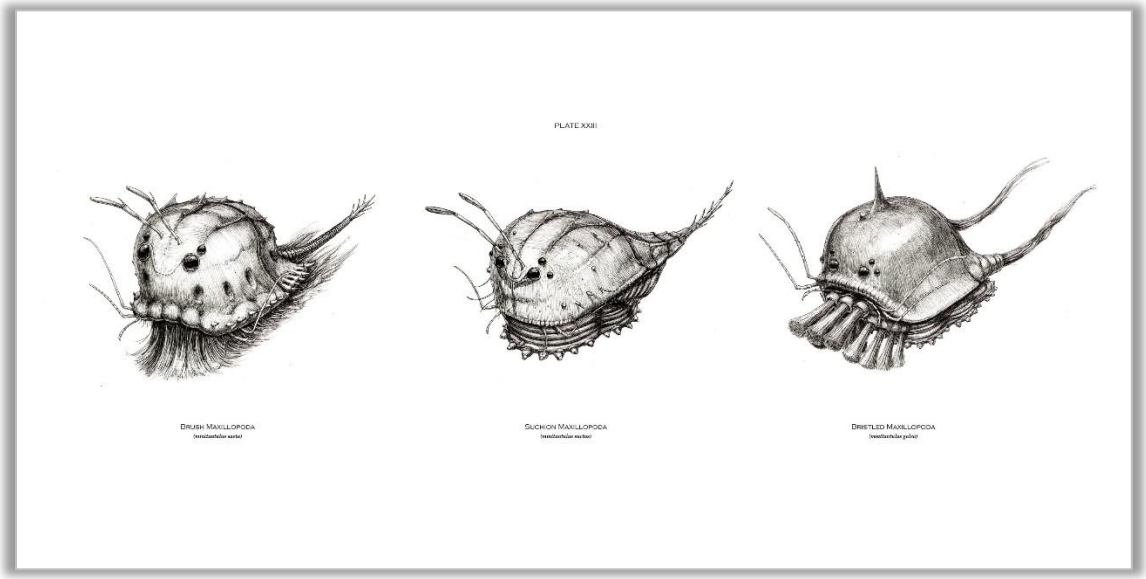

Figure 13 *Maxillopoda*, digital print of ink on bristol, 24”x12”, 2014

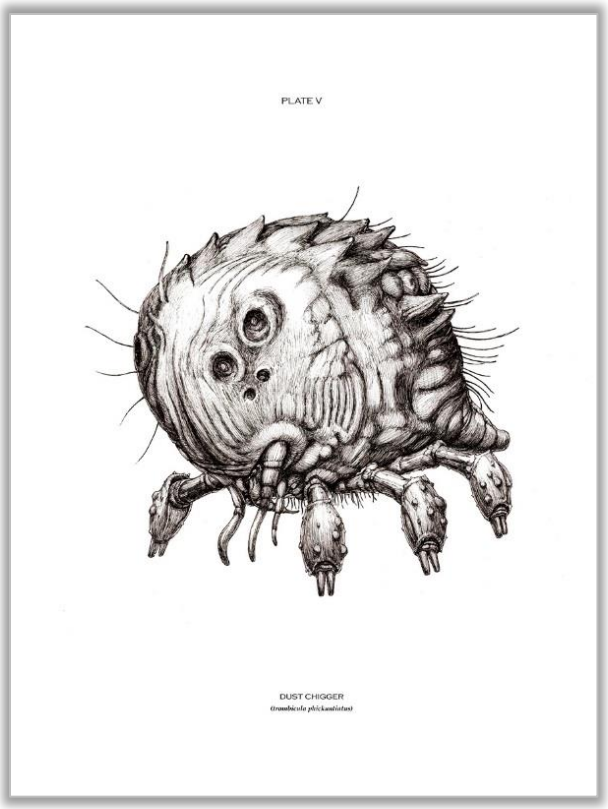

Figure 14 *Dust Chigger*, digital print of ink on bristol, 9”x12”, 2014

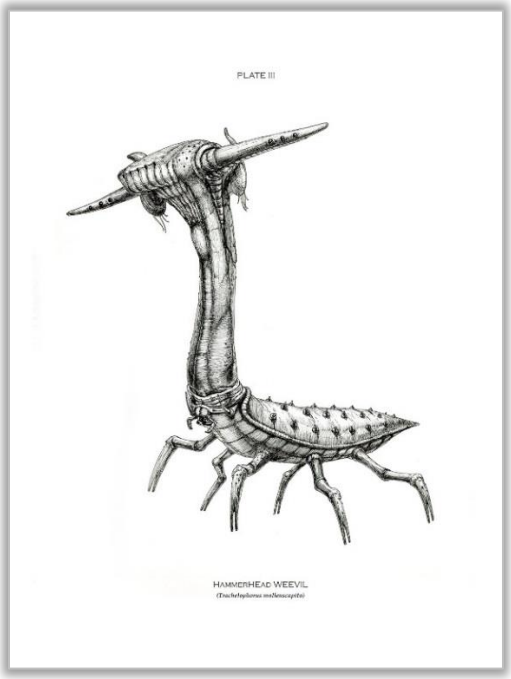

Figure 15 *Hammerhead Weevil*, digital print of ink on bristol, 24”x12”, 2014

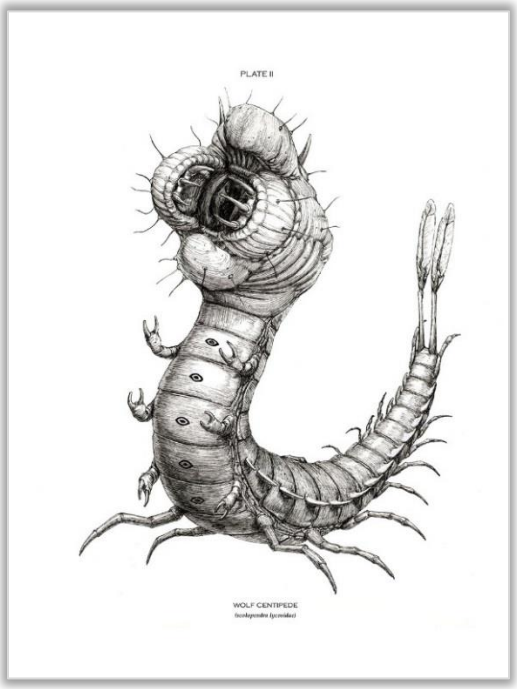

Figure 16 ***Wolf Centipede*****, digital print of ink on bristol, 24”x12”, 2015**

Section One: Modern Micrographia

To enhance the fictiveness of my bug illustrations, I needed a way to present them in my thesis exhibition as the work of Dr. Gabriel Fain. I wanted visitors questioning if these creatures were real. To that end, I created a fictitious scientific volume called, *Modern Micrographia,* authored by Gabriel Fain. I presented the series in my show as a selection of drawings from that volume. I installed a wall graphic at the exhibit entrance (Figure 17) to introduce the work and set up the narrative. Here is the text from that wall graphic:

This exhibition features a selection of the original etchings found in Modern Micrographia.

Originally published in 1942, Modern Micrographia is an illustrated volume of entomological research authored by Gabriel Fain. The book contains Fain's depictions of a host of creatures he discovered. Fain studied the arthropods and microbes under the first electron microscope available in the late 1930's, which allowed him to render highly magnified and detailed representations.

Since the publication of Modern Micrographia, many of Fain's observations concerning the behaviors and physiology of these creatures have been challenged or proven altogether incorrect.

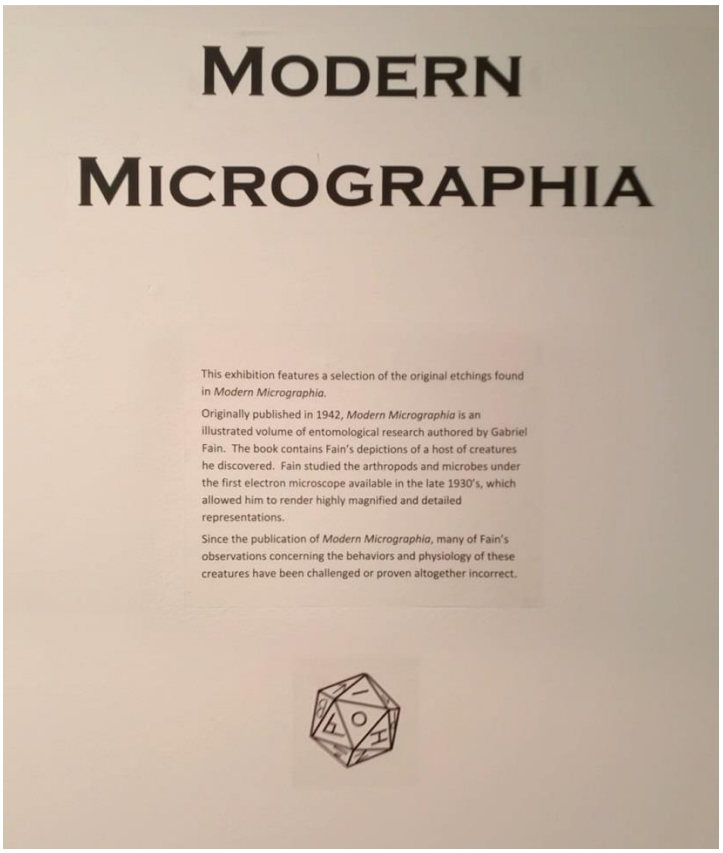

Figure 17 Shelf Life exhibit photo of Modern Micrographia graphic.

The show catalog I created for the exhibit was designed to reinforce the idea that *Shelf Life* was two shows in one. The show catalog is split into two halves, one half for the paintings and the other half for the catalog for *Modern Micrographia*. The pages of *Modern Micrographia* are flipped, so the reader has to turn the booklet over, revealing that the booklet has two covers. The second cover (Figure 18) is designed to introduce *Modern Micrographia*. Doing this design work with the booklet allowed it to support the fiction, while still performing the needed role of cataloging the work.

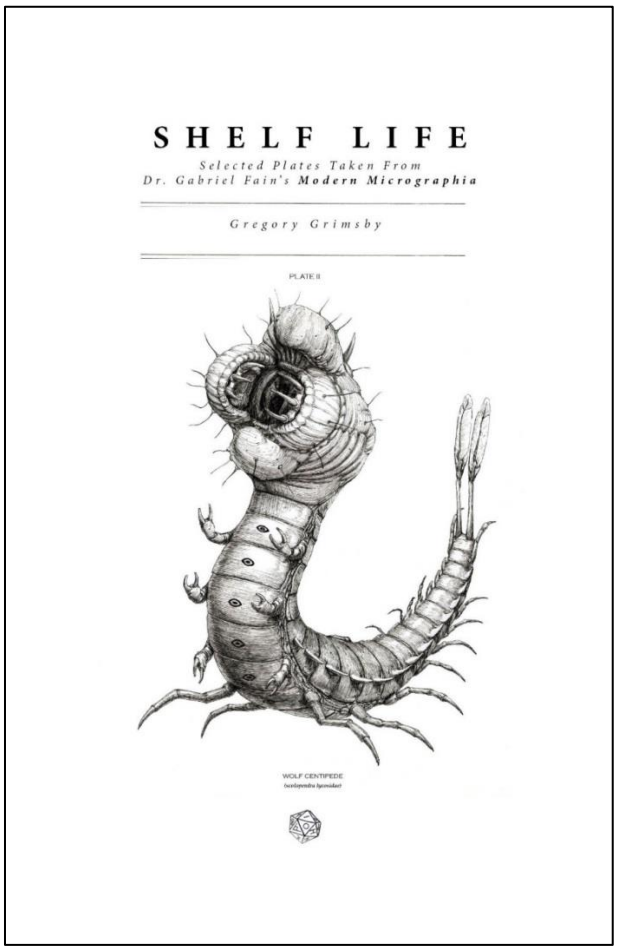

Figure 18 Exhibition catalog back cover.

Section Two : Various Arthropoda

I continued to research arthropods over the course of two years, building a folio of over a thousand inspiring images. As I gathered, I did hundreds of sketches of imaginary bugs. I learned about carapaces and mandibles, taxonomy and scientific naming. If bugs were my palette, I needed to know how that paint worked.

It was important that my bugs seem real, and to accomplish that I had to research how they were built. By learning nature's structural rules for "designing" bugs, I could work in that space convincingly. This research will go unrecognized by most viewers but I could not do the pieces without it.

With so many sketches, I found that the 12"x19" micron-pen drawings I was producing were slowing down my ability to pursue all the creatures I was imagining. I needed to work faster. Many scientific illustrations show a series of bugs in a single image. By adopting this format, I could work smaller and faster. I produced a series of images with many creatures on a single page (see Figure 19- Figure 21). All the visual choices, from the labeling to the font, sought to feel like an authentic, vintage illustration. Even the scientific naming adds authenticity, and hopefully, interest. In these faux plates, I mix real bugs with my imaginary ones. This leaves the viewer questioning truth even as they marvel at biodiversity's wondrous menagerie.

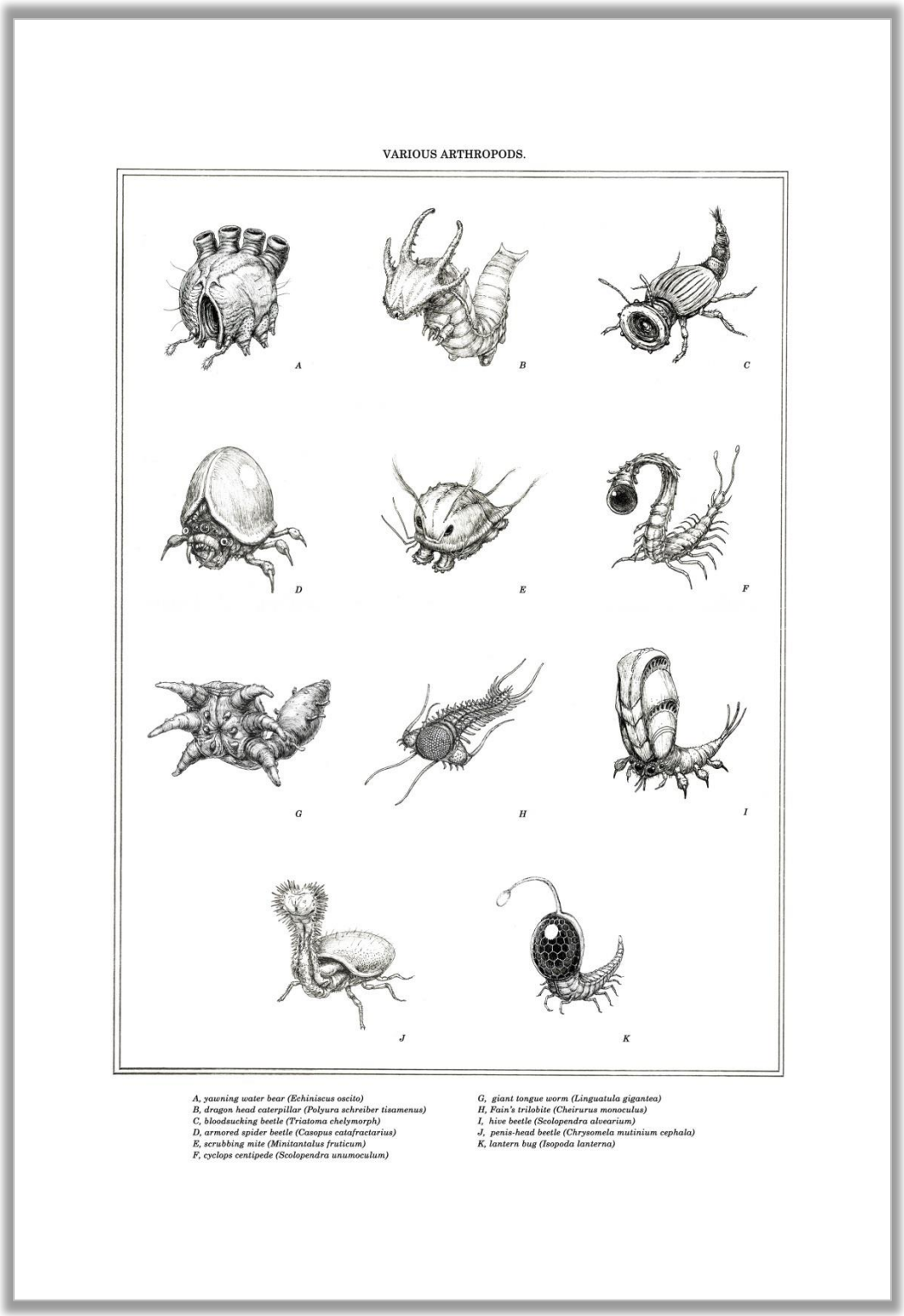

Figure 19 ***Various Arthropods I*****, digital print of Micron pen on bristol, 9”x12”, 2015.**

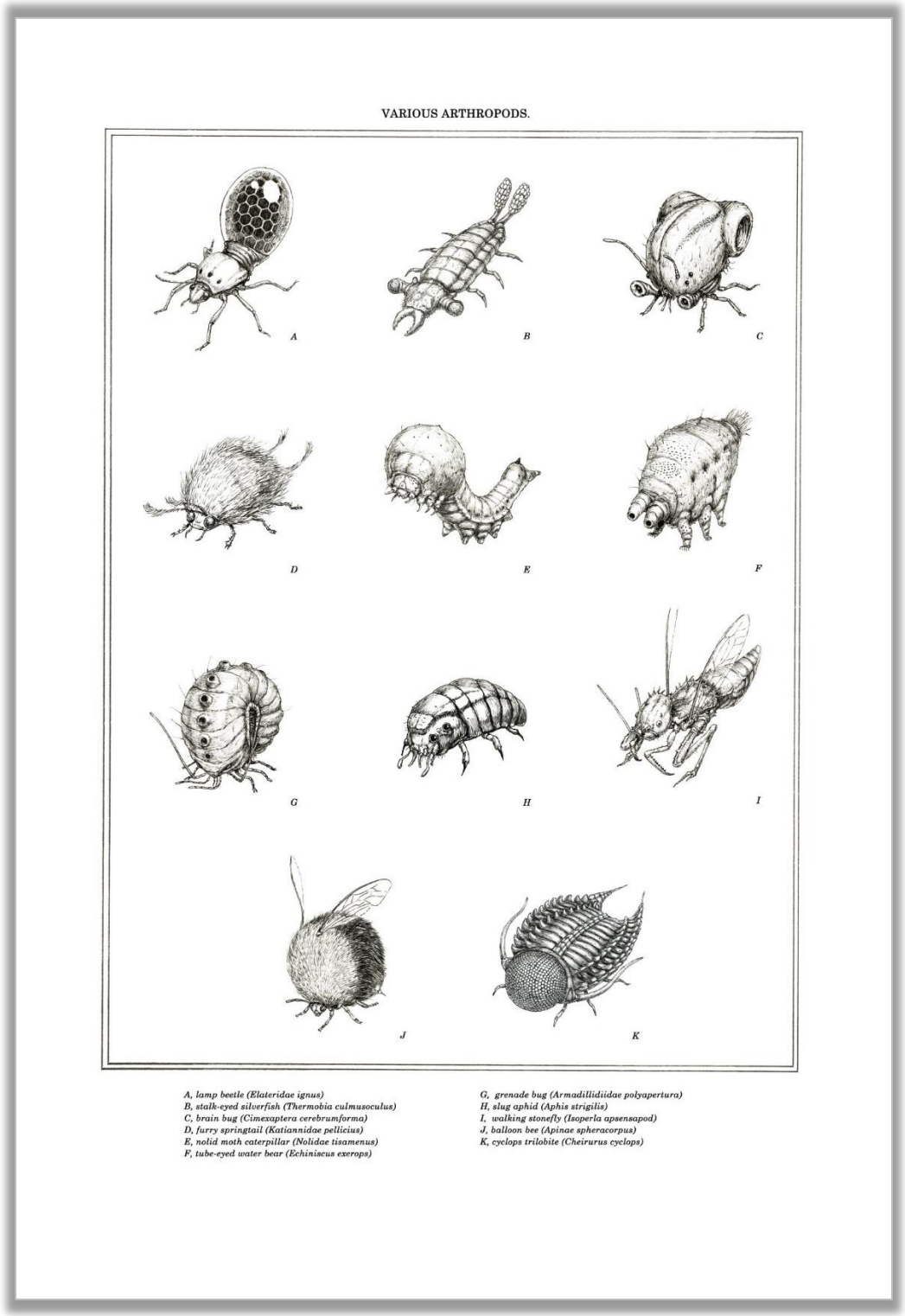

Figure 20 ***Various Arthropods II*****, digital print of Micron pen on bristol, 9”x12”, 2015.**

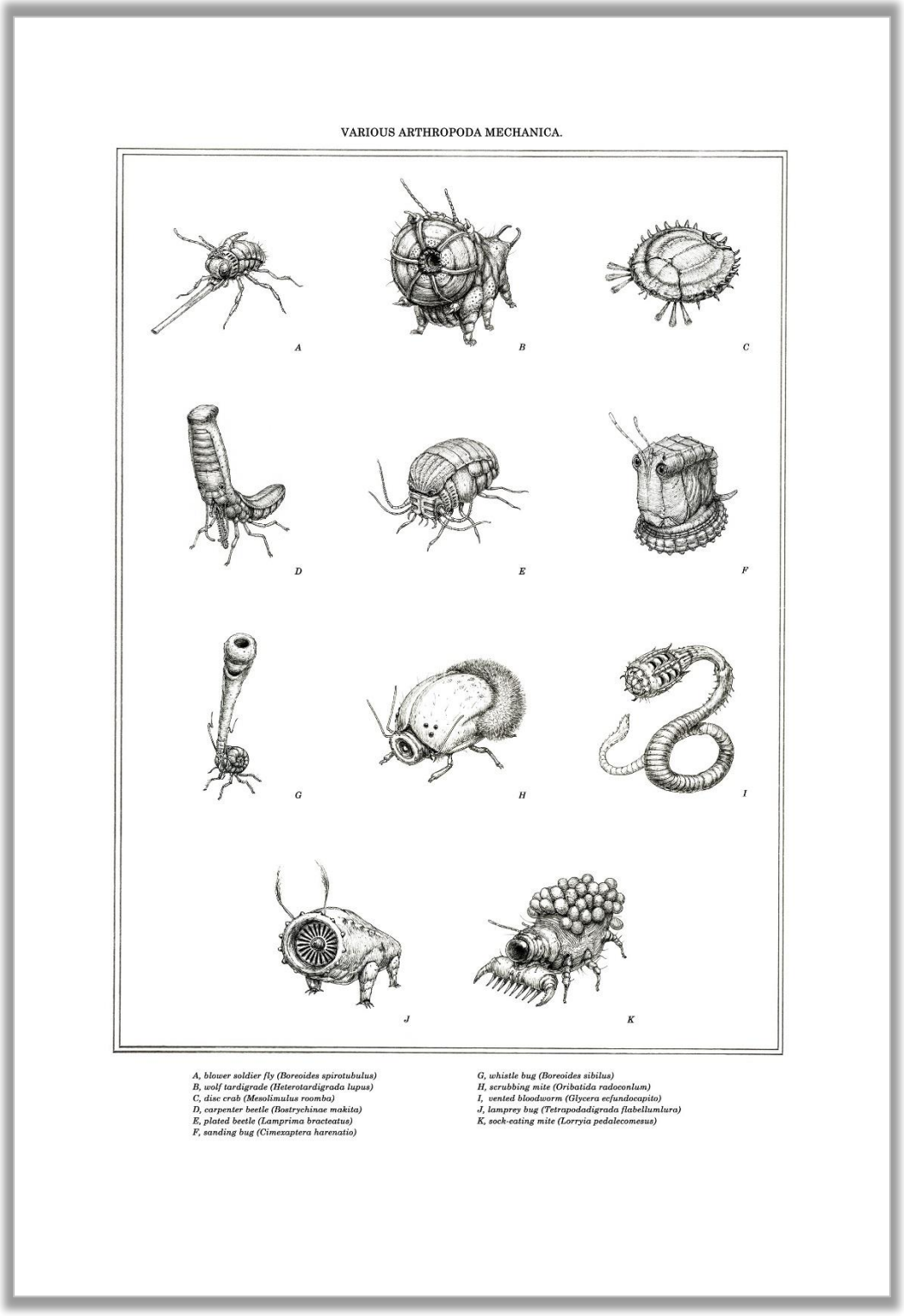

Figure 21 ***Various Arthropods Mechanica*****, digital print of Micron pen on bristol, 9”x12”, 2015.**

CHAPTER FOUR: CYBORGS

Figure 22 *Toolbox*, Oil on Linen, 24"x18", 2015.

The bug drawings were communicating what I wanted, but after wearing high-powered reading glasses for countless hours and drawing millions of cross-hatching lines, blindness was setting in. The glasses allowed me to do highly detailed work because I was drawing "zoomed in". While producing the scientific illustration series, I also explored some ideas via oil painting. My painting compositions would take quite a turn

from the action scenes of my previous work. Why? Because I realized that transporting my hybrid imaginings into our world could be more meaningful.

In Figure 22, two creatures are sitting on a table and in front of a toolbox. The bugs now invade our reality and the viewer can puzzle over why they are there and what they are. The composition is presented as a still-life. In this format, the bugs are objectified as they become objects amongst other objects, but the bugs also look machine-like. They are designed to blend organic and inorganic elements. The red bug is designed after a hand drill. The blue bug is inspired by a small motor. As unions of bug and machine they become cyborgs. This theme is present in the ink drawing: *Various Arthopoda Mechanica* (Figure 19). All the bugs are biomechanical fusions. This idea was intriguing because I could see rhythms and shared forms between the organic and inorganic. They echo each other. As they do this, there is slippage between reality and fantasy, the organic and the inorganic which, makes for interesting visuals.

Figure 23 M*echanical Reproduction*, Oil on linen, 24”x24”. 2016.

A pivotal piece of my graduate career, was *Mechanical Reproduction*, shown in Figure 23. In it I embraced the still life composition as a tool for communicating my ideas. The still life format pushed me technically as an artist. I could no longer hide deficiencies in rendering skill behind organic fantasy gobbledygook. In my early

paintings of organic landscapes, I could shorthand and shortcut as my skills required. In my still lifes, I needed to produce convincing surfaces. There was nowhere for me to hide. As we'll discuss later, this challenge would force me to evolve my process. Perhaps most importantly, the still life allowed me to be conceptually rigorous. I could depict real world objects and juxtapose my imaginary ones against them. Objects have meaning. They are symbols. They relate to each other and to us. In *Mechanical Reproduction*, the radio, microphone bug, and Tosca poster symbolize mechanical reproduction in the Walter Benjamin use of the phrase. In the age of mass media are we cyborgs consuming mass produced content? Does this consumption devalue original art and aura? The microphone bug is a cyborg, but are we also cyborgs with our cell phones and fit-bits? *Mechanical reproduction* was formative because I realized objects have the power of evocation. The vacuum tubes and old radio cabinets I researched seduced me with their vintage materials and hand-made construction. If painted with virtuosity, viewers could marvel at the illusion, the depth, and the surfaces. But beyond craft, these objects, if thoughtfully curated, could mean more and say more than "I'm a radio" or "I'm a skull". They are signs, but they also can suggest relationships and convey narrative.

Figure 24 Detail from M*echanical Reproduction*.

In Figure 24, the fleming diode is a sign for a vacuum tube, but in relationship to the bug microphone depicted, it animates into a creature with a bulbous head and spindly legs. I want my work to have this slippage, this shifting interpretation. All the work that followed this piece would use objects to respond against modernity and intrigue the viewer with object relationships.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LABORATORY

Following *Mechanical Reproduction,* I continued using the still life format and exploring themes in science. I was drawn to early laboratory equipment of the Victorian era. This period lies at the dawn of modern science and biology, yet we were still naïve about so much. Lab gear at the time was technologically crude, but visually beautiful. The blown glass, brass fittings, and wooden bases are so foreign to contemporary eyes. These vintage objects allow us to escape the world of plastics and appreciate the beauty that we have lost.

Figure 25 ***Deconstruction*****, 24″x 24″, Oil on linen, 2015.**

In *Deconstruction,* a table of laboratory apparatus and containers performs Victorian alchemy on the human body. The materials contained in the jars represent in proportion the elements that constitute the human body such as carbon, water, and calcium. The centerpiece is a nitrogen extractor which provides this needed gas in the human stew. A print of the Vitruvian Man hangs on the wall gazing upon his own body deconstructed into lifeless substances. Lastly, a butterfly rests upon a beaker as a symbol of spirit. The viewer can decide how much more we are than just assembled dust.

Formally, I use *trompe l'œil* effects such as the jar breaking the plane of the table as well as dandling hoses to add depth and compositional interest. This piece continues to include

torturously difficult renderings of detailed glassware and rectilinear forms. The meticulous content of my paintings continued to push my skills and require more time to produce.

Figure 26 *Fain Experiment #97*, Oil on Linen, 30"x40", 2016.

Fain's Experiment #97 marked the return of my work to the lens of Dr. Fain. In this piece, an array of alchemical apparatus surrounds a strange caterpillar-like creature. Two probes attached to a medical induction coil point down on the creature. In the late 1700's, Luigi Galvani used electric jolts to trigger spasms in dead frog specimens. Influenced by the idea of bioelectricity, Mary Shelley would later write, "Perhaps a

corpse would be reanimated….galvanism had given token of such things." The 1800's would see a lot of quack medicine along with more productive electrotherapy. *Fain's Experiment #97* depicts Dr. Fain's exploration into reanimating dead tissue. More generally, it comments on how science seeks knowledge, symbolized by the books, but oftentimes that knowledge is gained through questionable, immoral activity. Reflecting on our current world and the future world, we can imagine the ignorance of yesterday is how the future world will view us. We cannot escape the relativism of human knowledge. Dr. Fain thought himself a rather clever fellow, but we may see him as a torturer.

The last painting done for my thesis exhibit, *Operant Conditioning (*Figure 27*),* uses the motif of the science experiment to explore themes relating to modern game design. It is the painting that speaks most directly to my passion as a game designer. In *Operant Conditioning,* a Skinner Box contains a rat being trained to respond to positive stimuli (food and lights) and negative stimuli (shock). Although modern game designers do not think of games as Skinner boxes, games do use these methods of luring and retaining players. Games give out rewards such as power, points, or access to new and better things.

Other signs of game design are included in the painting as well. The five-layered pyramid represents Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy is a way of explaining human drive and fulfillment. Our most basic need is survival, so the base of the pyramid represents physiological needs such as food, water, and air. As we travel up the pyramid we move beyond the basics and seek to feel fulfilled, loved, and successful. Maslow's

theory, much like the Skinner box, is not formulaically applied, yet its ideas are influential.

Figure 27 ***Operant Conditioning*****, Oil on Linen, 24”x 18”, 2017.**

In the background hangs a print of the original patent diagram for the Landlord’s Game, dated 1904. We know this game now as Monopoly. On the table rests a 1952, first-edition copy of *An Introduction to the Theory of Games* by J. C. C. McKinsley. It is considered the first book on game theory even though it never aimed to be so.

I consider this painting to be the most contemporary depiction of Dr Fain's research, as he died in 1945. Given the fact that McKinsley's book was written after Fain had supposedly died, you can see how I am being fairly loose with the timeline at this point. Dr Fain's gaze and interests increasingly reflected my own. This occurred because I became more aware as an artist that he was my alter-ego, not just a made up authority figure.

CHAPTER SIX: THE CABINETS

Figure 28 ***Fain's Collection #4*****, Oil on Linen. 24"x30", 2016.**

Section One : Vintage Objects

In the late 17th century, cabinets of curiosity curated amazing collections of objects together. The internet provides a proxy of this experience, albeit a poor one, to the modern viewer. Pinterest collections and top ten lists of "unbelievable things" entice at the click of a button. The availability of the extraordinary via the internet makes the modern person a jaded consumer of content. We are hard to impress. We have seen so much. Regardless, I began a series of paintings that aggregated interesting and meaningful objects together in *Trompe l'œil* depictions of cabinets of curiosity. In these I share my love for the marvelous, the rare, and often the freakish.

In *Fain's Collection #4 (*Figure 28) I've painted a collection of very un-modern objects arrayed in a wooden display case. It's a group of artifacts that I curated through the lens of my Victorian alter-ego, Dr. Gabriel Fain. The gasometer and early lightbulb would be proud additions to his collections as cutting-edge technology. The trilobite and amber inclusions mark the explosion of fossil discoveries in the late 1800's. Other objects round out this collection of amazing specimens from the natural sciences. These objects are curated as a response against the sterility of modern materials and manufacture. So, there are no plastic, stainless steel, or mass-produced items. The only reflection of modernity in the painting is the self-portrait seen in the witch's ball. Even as the cabinet represents Dr. Fain's vintage collection, my likeness replaces his and I dopplegang his gaze.

Section Two : The Victorian Lens

The Victorian era marked the birth of our modern world. There are similarities in Victorian life to our modern experience, yet so much development and growth was yet to

happen. Technology, philosophy, and socio-political beliefs advanced rapidly and synergistically. A key enabler of this enlightenment was improvements to optical technologies. William Röntgen discovered the X-ray. Edward Muybridge pioneered motion photography. Ernst Abbes improved the compound microscope. Jean Bernard Léon Foucault's improvements to the telescope would later reveal the Andromeda galaxy. Previously hidden worlds of knowledge were laid bare and accelerated our understanding of our world. It was an amazing time of discovery, yet as technologies advanced, our understanding was incomplete. The dangers of x-ray imaging were not fully acknowledged until the mid-1900s. Dinosaur skeletons were discovered, and assembled incorrectly. Even as the electron was discovered in 1897, a debate raged over the age of the earth with dates ranging wildly between 20 to 400 million years old. If our modern understanding is a 1000-piece puzzle, then in the late 1800's we had only a few dozen pieces, with major chunks of missing knowledge. With so few pieces, misassumptions abounded.

Figure 29 Fain's Cabinet #8: Cornua, Oil on Linen, 24"x30", 2016.

In *Fain Cabinet #8: Cornua* (Figure 29) I again use the cabinet of curiosity to gather meaningful objects and symbols. The dinosaur sculpture depicts a triceratops, the 3-horned dinosaur, but it shows how the dinosaur was envisioned in the late 1800's, with incorrect proportions and anatomy. The place where emerging information meets incomplete understanding continues to be a theme of interest in my work. It's a place where science was guessing, and it resulted in something more interesting and characterful. It's a place where intuition and creativity fill our knowledge gap.

Other objects in the cabinet would be of interest to a 19th century scientist. The dodo bird skeleton is a rare artifact as very few intact skeletons remain today. It and the triceratops both are extinct, yet the dodo bird was destroyed by man. I considered doing a painting centered on extinction, depicting animals lost to us due to man's reckless greed, but I decided to stay in the still-life mode for this series.

As for other objects in the cabinet, the rhinoceros beetle was painted both as an entomological oddity, but also for its beautiful color and forms. The round device in the upper left is the Antikethera Mechanism. This 2000-year-old artifact was an ancient computer of sorts, used to compute astronomical positions. I included it because of its scientific importance, but also for the lovely corroded patina.

The last painting in *Shelf Life* depicting Dr, Fain's collection is *Fain's Shelf of Curiosities* (Figure 30). I painted this after deciding upon my thesis title: *Shelf Life.* I wanted to paint a shelf used to display life. In this painting, all the creatures are imaginary, yet are depicted as real specimens, scientific names included. This painting allowed my ink drawings and paintings to reference each other more directly, as all of the

bugs are featured in both series. Other objects of scientific interest fill out the scene, including the Hooke microscope. It felt fitting to include this artifact since Robert Hooke's work influences many of the ideas in *Shelf Life*.

Figure 30 Fain's Shelf of Curiosities, Oil on Linen, 30"x24", 2017.

Also in this painting, I depict Dr. Gabriel Fain a second time as a shadowy reflection in the ornate mirror. As I insert Fain into the work, I am inserting myself. It is this subtle depiction of the doctor that inspired the full Sargent-style portrait I did later in the series.

Section Three: The Importance of Materials

Many considerations influence which objects I curate into my still-lifes. Symbolism was important. How objects related to the theme of the work was important. I also chose objects for aesthetic reasons. Textures, forms, materials, and colors all spoke to me when I made selections. In the Cornua cabinet I chose a translucent, purple ametrine because of the rich color and how compelling the transparent depths of the gem were to paint. It cannot be understated how important aesthetics were in my choices. I am not a scientist. I am an artist with interest in science. I wanted to paint a multitude of textures, like the Dutch still life artists, yet, instead of sumptuous fruit, shining porcelain, and wine-filled roemers, I lavish in bronze, blasted wood, bone, chitin, and corroded bronze. These are old materials with natural beauty.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ALTER EGO

As fictive art, my drawings use a fictitious persona to make the viewer question what is truth. When this series began in 2013, Fain was merely a guise. As my work progressed, I realized that Fain had evolved. He had become a non-modern lens through which I could view the world. I painted his experiments. I depicted his collections of curiosities. As the work progressed, I drew more connections between him and myself. Fain adopts my interests, fears, and struggles. He became my alter-ego. In my painting, *Dr Gabriel Fain*, Fain's portrait sits above the mantel with his funerary urn and keepsakes displayed before his eternal gaze, as in turn, I watch as well (Figure 31).

Figure 31 ***Dr. Gabriel Fain*****, Oil on Linen, 30”x 40”, 2017.**

I had intended this to be the last painting added to *Shelf Life*. It was the culmination of many ideas, most importantly, that the good doctor and I were the same person. It was the payoff after a good story, my thank you to the viewer for allowing themselves to question and allowing me to lie at them. The painting depicts a painting of Dr. Gabriel Fain sitting above a mantel. It felt appropriate in the still-life mode to paint the painting as an object, plus I was able to include many other objects in the scene to flesh out the story, like a camera zoomed out to show a bit more landscape. On the mantel sit many objects that relate to games. The child is playing knucklebones, a game that uses bones instead of dice. The tiled board is the playing board for the Royal Game of Ur, a 4500-year old Egyptian game. The specimen jar holds a hair-eating louse. A creature in the video game, *Half-Life*, inspired its design. So, these objects reflect my interests and Dr. Fain, with his Victorian garb and lush sideburns, stands in for me.

Conceptually there is an important point in the painting which could be overlooked. I have, via proxy, painted myself dead. The urn contains the ashes of Dr. Gabriel Fain. One day, when I am dead, this painting may rest over the mantel of my children or grandchildren, so this painting foreshadows that possibility. Additionally, it is ironic that a scientist who displays creatures in his collection should ultimately become a specimen on a shelf of someone else.

CHAPTER SEVEN: BIODIVERSITY

Figure 32 ***Bring Forth Creeping Things*** **Oil on Linen, 18”x24”, 2016.**

Darwin's *Origin of the Species* published in 1859 foreshadowed the debate of creationism vs evolution. It's a conflict that everyone must consider. You cannot ignore what you think or feel on the subject. As an educated Christian having Faith in the face of scientific knowledge is tough. Your heart and spirit want to believe one thing, while your mind says something else. It is a conflict that inspired my painting: *Bring Forth Creeping Things (*Figure 32*)*. At the most superficial level, it's a painting of a lot of cool, real bugs. It's a depiction of biodiversity. Biodiversity is a theme throughout my work because I am awed by nature. This painting depicts an inverted cross and a playing dice as conflicting symbols of intelligent design. Are we thoughtfully created or the act of millions of years of randomness? A serpentine vine winds down, perhaps choking the cross, choking faith. That represents conflict between science and faith, but I am thankful for how science has inspired me. I never imagined learning so much about science during my graduate studies. I researched medical science, biodiversity, SEM imaging, astronomy, entomology, paleontology, and other countless 'ologies'. Investigating science was inspirational. It blessed me with creative fuel. It gave me content and suggested connections.

Bring Forth Creeping Things is the most personal of my works in *Shelf Life*. The peach, a stand-in for the apple from the Garden of Eden, is being eaten by a swarm of Japanese beetles. When I was a child, there were peach trees in our yard. I loved to snack on the sweet fruit, but so did the bugs, and oh how I hated them for it. I would gather beetles by the hundreds and sentence them to death for eating my peaches. The playing dice in the corner is another reference to my love for game design. Dice are used in

games as randomizers, which can help a game be less skill-based. We all know the 6-sided dice, but gaming dice come in many different polyhedral forms. The 4-sided dice is shaped like a pyramid. This is depicted in my painting *Operant Conditioning*. The 8-sided dice is depicted in *Fain's Cabinet #8: Cornua*. The 12-sided dice is depicted in *Fain's Cabinet #4* as the Roman dodecahedron. Lastly, the icosahedron, or 20-sided dice, makes an appearance in *Fain's Shelf of Curiosities*.

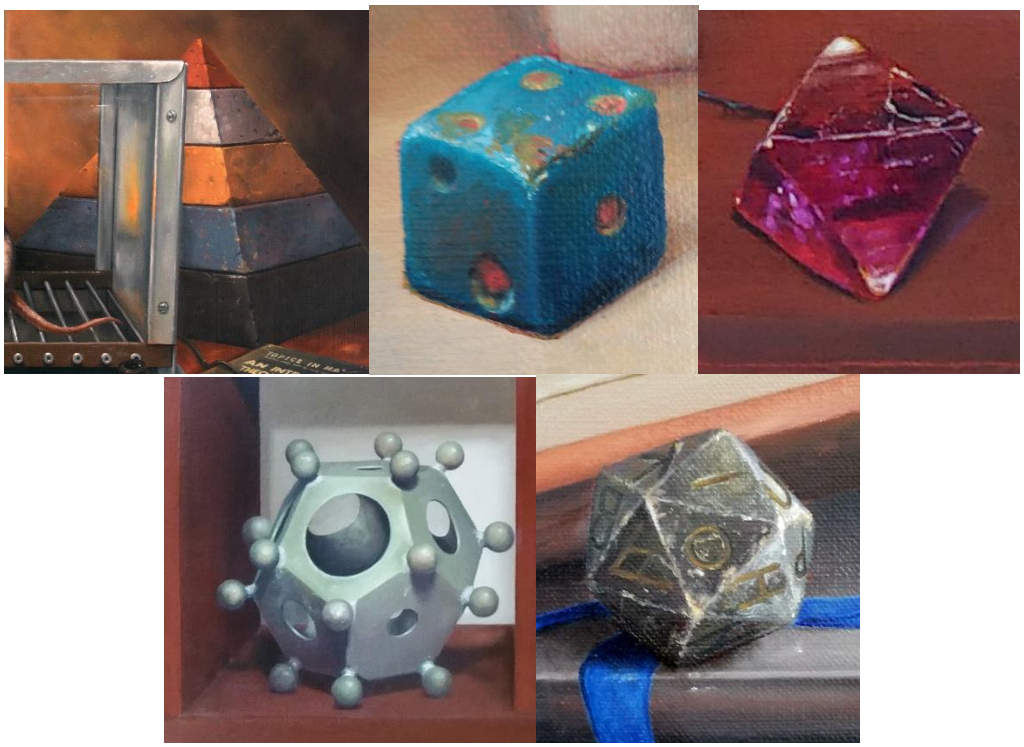

Figure 33 Dice depicted in *Shelf Life*.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PROCESS

When I began my graduate work in 2013, I had not oil painted since my undergraduate days, in the early 90's. As a graduate student, I needed to relearn a medium I never learned that well in the first place. The instruction I received as an undergraduate in painting did not teach how to paint. We just slammed paint on the canvas. Fortunately, I have always been a good drawer, and I painted digitally for many years as a game artist. So, the visual acuity was there, but I only had a moderate understanding of paint. I needed to learn how oil paint worked. I needed a process to take ideas and realize them in paint.

My process has two distinct stages: pre-production and production. Those are very game-designy terms for figuring out what to paint, then painting it. My process fits the kind of work I do. Artists must match their process to their work to be effective. Since my realistic paintings are detailed and carefully composed, my process maximizes the planning phase, so that once painting happens the big decisions have already been made. But what about the happy accidents? Where is the spontaneity? Isn't painting supposed to be expressive? The sketching phase is where I experience those artistic impulses. Two small pencil sketches (Figure 34) show the beginning of my visual exploration for my

painting *Fain's Experiment #97*. I knew I wanted to show a Frankenstein-esque experiment on a creature in Fain's laboratory. I knew I wanted this to look like an old master's still life, with rich shadows and chiaroscuro. I use pencil or ink sketches in this early exploratory phase because it is quick and therefore non-committal. If the composition is pleasing, I start digital sketches.

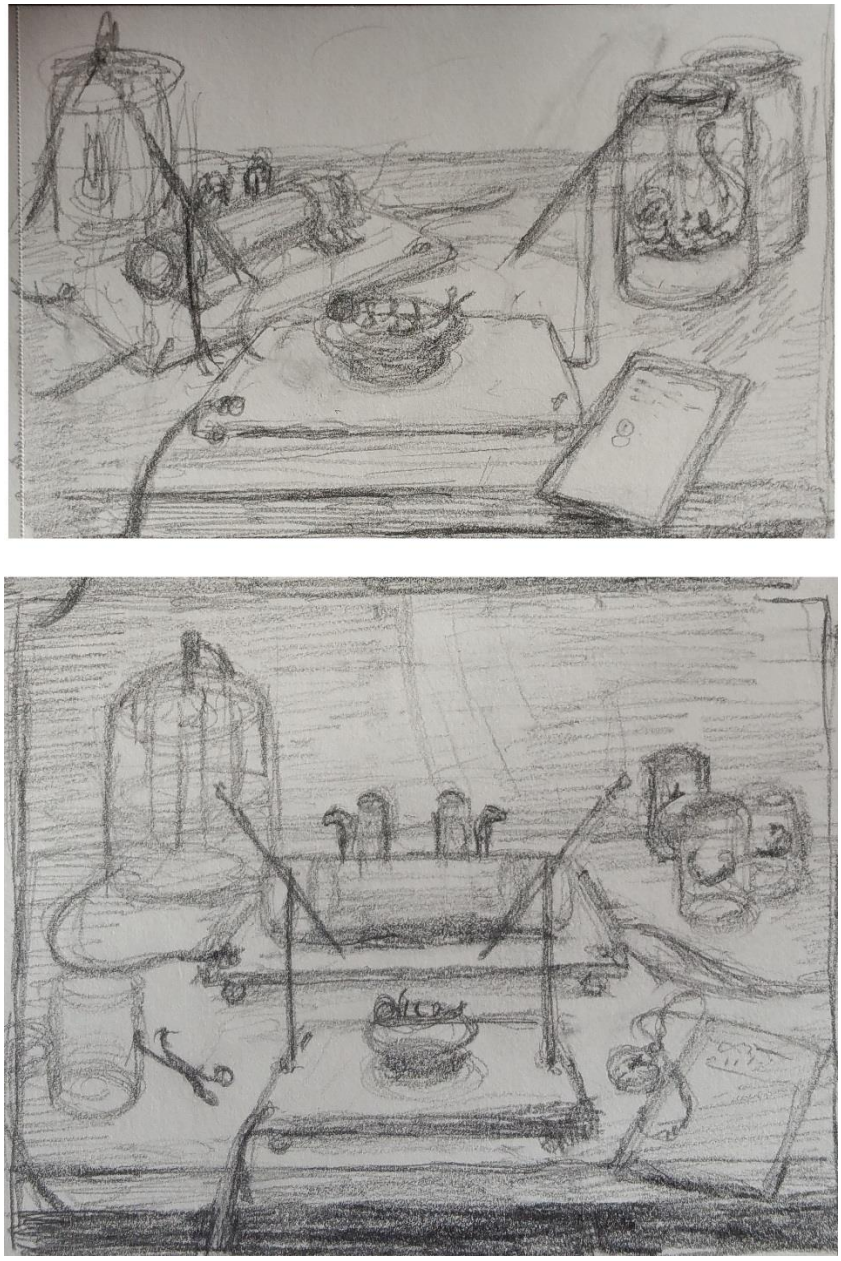

Figure 34 Exploratory sketches for *Fain's Experiment #97*. Pencil on paper.

A digital color rough done in Photoshop precedes all my paintings. The major aspects of a painting are resolved in the color study, leaving details to be added as I paint. My color roughs are very small, making them quick to produce and iterate on. Ideally very little of substance changes between the rough and the final painting because changes to an oil painting cost too much time. I fear surprises at the canvas. This may sound restrictive or stiff, but my process front-loads the creativity to where it is cheap and easy. I can then enjoy the process of painting without laboring over my decisions or gnashing my teeth when things go wrong.

Figure 35 Color rough for *Fain's Experiment #97*. 347x260 pixels. Digital.

Fain's Experiment #97 like all my paintings, was not painted from direct observation. I settled with secondary reference, a smattering of photos and drawings cobbled together like a CSI crime scene. I do not own an induction coil or a Costco-sized jug of carbon. The vast, ever-reaching arms of Google image search produced a few images of the coil, plus I had taken some from the American History Museum in Washington DC. This posed a rendering problem though. How do you paint realistically, in the mode of the Dutch still life, without real objects? The Dutch still life revels in materials, light, and form. To embrace those qualities and convey them with conviction, I needed to evolve my process. The seed for that comes from my background as a 3D modeler. I decided to create a 3D model of the composition (see Figure 36) to act as reference for the oil painting.

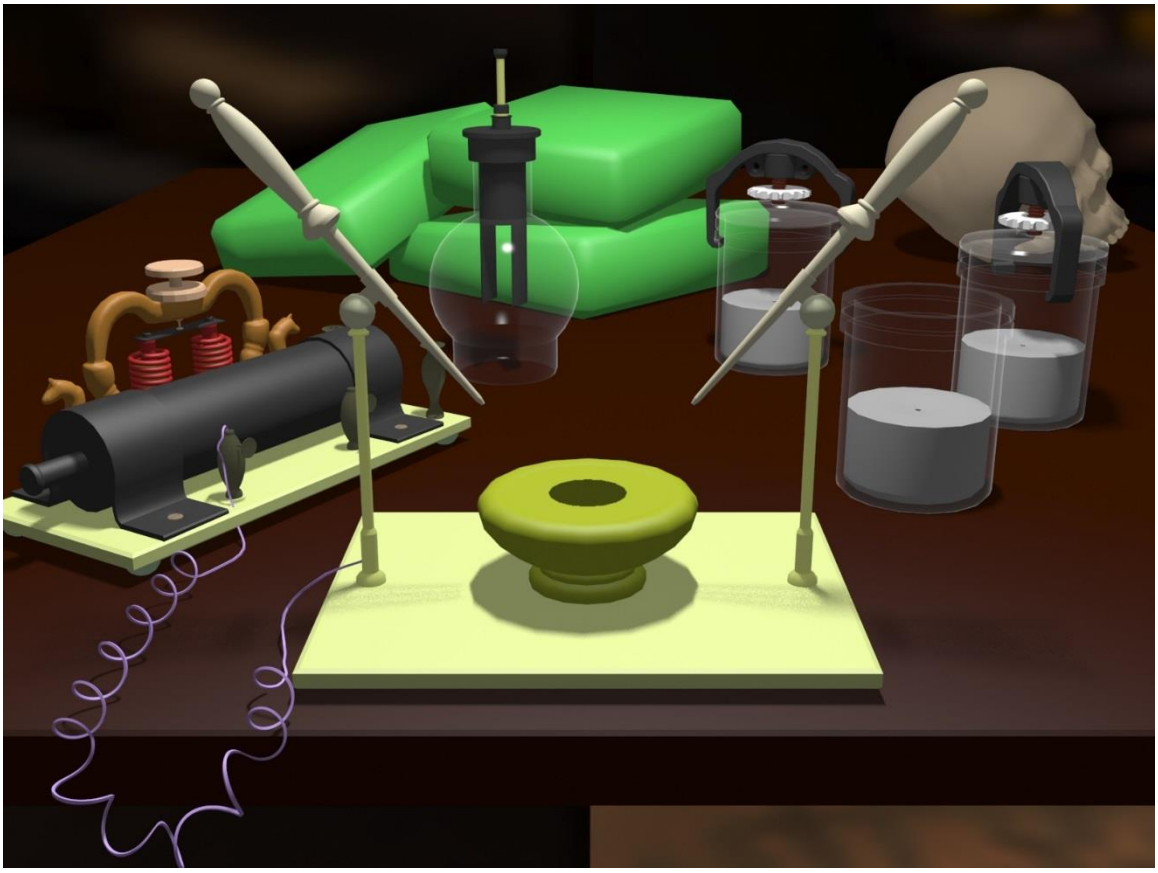

Figure 36 3D model reference for Fain Experiment #97.

The 3D model provides accurate perspective and suggests lighting. It allows me to take an object from a single photo or view, and realize it in 3D, where I can rotate it to any angle I need compositionally. The depth and physicality of the objects in *Fain's Experiment #97* (Figure 26) benefit from this process and this piece is far more convincing than my earlier work.

With all the pre-production done, I begin the painting by transferring the drawing to the canvas. Afterwards I tone the canvas with either burnt sienna or raw umber

depending upon how warm I want the undertones. *Fain's Experiment #97* was toned in raw umber to give it an old master's look.

Figure 37 A photo of an early stage of *Bring Forth Creeping Things.*

Toning the canvas eliminates the bright white canvas and allows me to paint thinly. Figure 37 shows an early stage of *Bring Forth Creeping Things*. In this image, the orange areas are the burnt sienna toning. The stone arch has been painted on top of the toned canvas. My paintings always work from back to front with objects layering on top of previous ones. The line drawing is still evident in the painting and acts as a guide to the subsequent paint layers. A digital print of the Photoshop color rough sits to the right of the canvas, guiding my efforts. I use direct painting techniques, finishing an object in one painting layer. No glazing or additional painting is done in later sessions,

although there are exceptions to this. When painting glass, the reflections and highlights are best glazed on after oiling out the area. I seldom do tonal corrections with glazing.

On my palette, I generally mix a mass tone color for an object, plus a lighter and darker halftone. Minor hue variations of the mass tone are often mixed on the palette. Starting with the mass tone, the paint is brushed on the canvas as thinly as needed to cover. The shadow values and highlights are blended into the mass tone with strokes and stumbling. An object must be completely dry before another can be painted on top of it. I used no medium to thin or alter the body of my paint, with the exception of Neo-Megilp medium which I usually add to loosen my titanium white, which tends to be too stiff out of the tube.

Variation in color transparency took me a few paintings to understand. Most blues are semi-transparent for example. Many other colors do not apply opaquely. Imagine trying to paint a wall in your house with a color that was not opaque? Every oil painting artist needs to understand paint transparency.

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BIOGRAPHY

Gregory Grimsby is a 1994 graduate of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA, where he earned a BFA in painting. He spent 16 years in the video game industry as an artist and art director before joining the faculty of GMU to teach Game Design.