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Black Hole Son

Attention all those who worship at the altar of twiggy, big-eyed, scraggly antiheroes: Tim Burton has come to town. Plus, four other misfit artists who mine their psyches for creepy material.

[By Jocelyn Miller](#)

OFTEN GHETTOIZED INTO the cobwebbed recesses of haunted houses, Tim Burton's triumphant oddities and alluring grotesqueries are now anointed by one of the world's elite cultural circles. Halloween's pumpkin glow may have barely drained from New York's autumnal complexion, but all things diabolical and dark will be resurrected beginning Nov. 22, as the auteur unveils over 700 never-before-seen storyboards, paintings, drawings, puppets, costumes, sculptures and ephemera at the Museum of Modern Art. It's a goth girl's dream (nightmare?) come true.

This exhibition of Burton's prolific, offscreen artistic output—organized by Assistant Curator of Film Ron Magliozzi, along with Curatorial Assistant Jenny He—is paired with a film series and has been segmented according to Burton's career chronology. Beginning with "Surviving Burbank," which centers on his adolescence in California, the exhibit continues with "Beautifying Burbank"—a clever nod to his fledgling career efforts animating Disney's saccharine cast of characters. It ends with "Beyond Burbank" by delving into the arrival of Burton's signature style—brightly colored stripes and swirls paired with dark makeup and shredded leather—which launched him on a meteoric trajectory and the now familiar collaborations with muses Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter (also his partner and mother of their children).

A series titled "The Lurid Beauty of Monsters" showcases films that were personally influential for Burton, alongside Burton's own early student efforts. Whether he likes it or not, this progression makes clear one of Burton's chief influences: Hollywood. Or rather, his constant struggle with it. Telling the story of Burton's exposure and eventual late-move to London, longtime friend and collaborator Glenn Shadix (who memorably played Otho in *Beetlejuice*) recounts Burton commenting that he liked England because "people don't look so good here." The filmmaker now makes his home in Great Britain, a welcome contrast to his native, perpetually golden Southern California. Of course, Burton wouldn't seem so "dark" if he didn't have the sunny rays to contrast his gloomy persona.

The curators see this exhibition as an extension of a commitment by MoMA to honor the work of the cinema's most important and influential artists such as Georges Melies, D.W. Griffith, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Roberto Rossellini, Ernie Gehr, Man Ray and Disney. They also recently curated an exhibit dedicated to Pixar.

When Magliozzi describes his own epiphany about how the show came to be, it's enough to make you forget that the exhibit is sponsored by SyFy and precedes the 2010 release of Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* by a few months.

"[It] came to me at an 11 a.m. screening of *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, on Sunday July 31, 2005, at the Kaufman Astoria Cinema in Queens," he explained. "Having seen *Corpse Bride* some months before, I was suddenly struck by the contrast between the Gothic design of one and the Pop Art design of the other, and thought, 'We should propose Tim Burton.'" According to Magliozzi, Burton proved incredibly collaborative and generous, giving them unlimited access to his archives.

Magliozzi is enthusiastic to add Burton to this canon of biggies, and to firmly contextualize Burton's work in an art historical tradition (particularly the Pop Surrealist one), seeing it as a "rare, virtually unique, opportunity to focus attention on a filmmaker who has created so much remarkable work that is appropriate for display in a gallery setting as well as on the screen... Both Burton and the crowd stand to benefit."

One of Burton's many fascinations is with the "exaggerated manipulation of the body. These are the body modifications so extreme and unusual—from Frankenweenie to Edward Scissorhands to Willy Wonka—they seem to lay bare the depths of his imagination. Art historically, they resonate with notables like Hans Bellmer, Rebecca Horn and even Orlan. Of course, his aesthetic also derives from the likes of Fritz Lang and Alfred Kubin. Unlike these artists, Burton is fortunate to be in a position to create things left of center with mainstream funding.

What makes Burton one of our most delectable talents, however, is his fearless denial of logic as well as his invention of fantastical dimensions that resonate with the masses while remaining unconventional. His extravagant fantasies are at once joyously naughty and deeply, personally tragic. His giddy perversity and prankster wit intersperse with jarring insight into an alienated introvert, who has no other choice but to dream into existence alternate worlds where loneliness and longing evaporate.

Burton's surreal landscapes are a macabre oasis for many fans with a palpable, coherent logic. "Tim Burton has often remarked that the things adults find frightening are often quite innocuous to children," said Jenny He.

But can Burton's non-filmic works stand alone? Are these drawings actually art? The question of whether we'd appreciate Burton's artistic output if the films didn't exist is valid, but Magliozzi quickly dismissed the concern: "It has been [MoMA's] aim to put the films in the context of the art rather than the other way around."

“Tim’s aesthetic comes from his art,” Shadix also insisted. “For him, everything exists visually before a project is started. Sometimes, I would come in and there would be storyboards on a clothesline across a big room.”

As Jenny He points out, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the delirious Johnny Depp/Wonka gurgles, “Candy doesn’t have to have a point. That’s why it’s candy.” She adds that Burton asserts there is a “lack of need for his audiences to intellectually dissect his films; they connect with the audience on an emotional level.” She attributes the fervency of Burton fans to an intimacy that results from this connection between filmmaker and audience. Burton makes his films so intensely personal that they can’t help but resonate with all of our own deeply rooted fears, insecurities and yearnings.

Now that Burton, the “ultimate outsider,” has gained entry into the pantheon of MoMA-approved artists, it seems time to look to those local artists who are busy at work shaping the next generation of uncompromising, conversation-starting misfits. These artists are unafraid to incorporate the dark, unpleasant or uncanny. After scouring galleries and museums, looking to see whose work profits from macabre or abject aesthetics, I identified which artists are fueled by psychological motivations similar to Burton’s own.

The following four artists all obsessively confront and manipulate socially unsanctioned imagery to delve into their own intensely personal, idiosyncratic worlds. Critics be damned.

Michael Caines: Queer Mutations

Like Burton, Brooklyn-based, Canadianborn artist Michael Caines sees his art as an outgrowth of an internal sense of isolation. “My aesthetics are rooted in fear and desire. The development of my sexual identity, my queerness, was a longing mixed with poison,” he explains. “It echoes my relationship to nature: I was plagued by allergies when I was a child. An extreme sensitivity to the boundary between the world and self is a peculiar treasure, as that boundary is crucially at play in art making.”

Caines has also made his isolated, interior landscape the site for his creative and artistic inspiration, making way for his wonderfully sensitive drawings and paintings of monsters, mutated animals and other abject creatures.

His work is far from gloomy, however, since Caines manages to add equal parts wit. His youthful sock monkey motif—rooted in American craft tradition and toys—juxtaposes the childlike with the adult in ways that make his work accessible to a broad spectrum. His improbably refined, detailed ink drawings boast linework so multi-filamented that it makes even the most unsavory critter beguiling.

Caines is currently applying his exquisite draughtsmanship to *The Book of Revelation*, a forthcoming edition from Mark Batty Publishers. His boyishly ornate work pairs well with apocalyptic literature, and will both illuminate and irreverently editorialize the

sacred text: A swarm of Rush Limbaugh's heads attached to insectile abdomens stand in for Plague and Pestilence, and Sarah Palin for the Whore of Babylon.

Katy Schimert: Veiny and Vulgar

Katy Schimert is not a stranger to being blessed with talents that span multiple media. In the same way that Burton carefully chooses a medium for its uniquely expressive qualities, Schimert works alternately in drawing, film, sculpture and installation. Her latest series of watercolors chart intricately-wrought topographies tracing the metamorphosis of man to monster, and all the varying stages and layers in between, using architectural physiognomies to explore how physical mutation can give way to other forms of transformation. Her alloy of sculpture, portraiture and sci-fi imagery boasts extensively layered washes that virtually bring her works into the third dimension, creating what she describes as "space for illusion." Her man-monster hybrids are also heavily invested in the psychological dimensions of change, borrowing consciously from Théodore Géricault's paintings of patients with psychiatric afflictions. Her murky watercolors mingle, layers bleeding into one another as if each work was an amalgam of bodily leakages. Cloudy tones reminiscent of bile and mucus are only interrupted by seepages of bright, primary color that delineate the veiny tributaries that uncannily rupture Schimert's fictive faces. In these works the artist explores her interests in the noir aesthetic, which finds reverberations in her smoky palette of bruised browns and blacks, as well as 19th-century horror novels and crime fiction.

Fay Ku: The Way of the Orifice

Gossamer fish skeletons with razor sharp points envelope or protrude from Fay Ku's diaphanous, deadly sirens in her new suite of works now on view at the Tenri Cultural Institute in the West Village as part of the exhibition *SHE: Feminine Visions by Taiwanese-American Artists*. While her faint ink paintings are remarkably delicate, they are far from dainty. Ku's works evidence a rabid, vigorous feminism that alternately objectifies women or transforms them into sinuous, chimerical beings. These latter figures refer to the just-completed mermaids series, each of which encases the lower half of sullen female figures in waxy, metallic scales that, according to her, make the woman's legs "unable to be parted and penetrated." These creatures are ferociously sexual and menacing, and are deeply rooted in the Freudian psycho-sexual.

For lack of traditional physiology, new orifices find their way into being as one mermaid claws directly into her own belly to extract and disperse roe, taking personal control over the circumstances of her fathoming and fertility. The highly stylized works executed in ink seem undeniably rooted in an Eastern artistic tradition, however, there are Western elements present. A recent technique involves the artist covering her images with an overlay of tiny, white circles. These little milky aureoles create an almost transparent, fishnet effect that is both coquettish and demure, like the transparent "coverings" favored by Western Renaissance painters like Louis Cranach the Elder.

The artist explains that, while she had “a completely Western education,” she does “consciously take from traditional Asian art and stories.” In her words, “I think of myself and my work as having two accents, both Chinese and American.”

Adam Helms: The Flaccid Clash



Adam Helms, *Untitled*, 2009

The charcoal portraits executed in sepulchral, Goth blacks and whites are evocative both for their visual content and for their conceptual engagement with political history and social movements. Adam Helms’ ethnographic and militaristic flavor draws from source materials that illustrate conflict in its cultural context— including media images, war films, political propaganda, heraldry, logos and other visual marginalia. This series illuminates the utter myopia of a Western worldview that eagerly strives to simplify a richly disparate world. His drawn portraits of radically different personas align themselves on aesthetic grounds, using the same tangled agglomerations of Rorschachian, charcoal blotches to describe a Chechen Rebel chieftain and an anonymous portrait of a woman wearing a bunny mask alongside a zombie and a black metal musician. This exercise of visually assimilating extremely divergent characters suggests something both familiar and distant. By imposing a homogeneous rhetoric, Helms makes these already strange figures stranger, highlighting the absurdity of their uniformity.

Helms studied at RISD and Yale and titled his most recent body of work after Joseph Conrad’s novel *Under Western Eyes*. The novel is about the disillusionment that accompanies the historical failure of revolutionary movements and ideals that prove to be inconsequential and flaccid. As Conrad’s protagonist struggles particularly with the inherent conflict between human nature and the varying religious ideologies at play in the world, Helms confronts a similar crisis of confusion amongst a seemingly paradoxical global system.

