Drew University

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Using the Grotesque and Nostalgia to Explore Imbalanced Human-Animal Relationships

A Thesis in Studio Art

by Lydia Segal

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Abstract

I explore humanity's impact on and relationship with other animal species through my studio work using a variety of different mediums, including plaster, cheesecloth, oil paintings, and pastel drawings. I use different mediums to emphasize texture and detail, letting the work become either more realistic as an animal form or more evidently made by human hands. In doing so, the work enforces a stronger connection to human-animal relationships.

This relationship is further described using grotesque yet fantastical depictions of animals close to my home. These mechanized animals are metaphorical representations of how I imagine the future; as humanity grows, the lives of other living things— like those right outside our doors— are irreversibly altered. Death, decay, and suffering become commonplace in the fictional yet relatable world I create. The world is relatable through mankind's encroachment on what is natural; however, it holds fantastical elements through the grotesque animal figures being mauled by a mechanical disease.

My honors thesis is in studio art; therefore, this written section is based off of a series of work I created between 2019-2020 in several different media. In this paper, I will describe the themes within my work and how my ideas are derived from events occurring in the world at large with additional influences from historical and contemporary artists.

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I. Introduction

My studio practice is an exploration of imbalanced human-animal relationships. Working across different mediums, I have used my work as a way to delve into themes that relate to the state of the environment. I view humanity as a plague upon the natural world; our personal quest for growth through industrialization has led to the downfall of other animal species. By incorporating visceral, carnal, and ugly imagery, my work serves as a way to throw humanity from its pedestal. It is through my studio work that I force the viewer to take a form of accountability. We become helpless bystanders to the carnage and decay within my art, aware of the animals' suffering yet unable to do anything about it.

To speak to my perspective on humanity, I used the concepts of the grotesque and nostalgia. The grotesque is associated with disturbing, ugly imagery. I use this theme to upset the viewer and draw attention to certain areas of my art. Nostalgia is seen through my use of the stylistic genre, steampunk. Here, I demonstrate yearning and loss by connecting to the past. In this paper, I will further describe these themes using historical references and relevant artists to explore the thought process behind my studio practice.

I. Description of Studio Work

I divided my work into subgroups based on the medium and subject matter to transport the viewer into an alternative, yet eerily familiar, reality from multiple perspectives. With each series I create, we can peer into a window of this fantastical,

dystopian world. The majority of my work is also chimeric, a general term for any "grotesque, fantastical, or imaginary beast used in decoration" (Britannica). Chimeras are typically a combination of different animal parts; however, I am linking the term to my work as I combine mechanical and natural elements in each piece. The mechanized parts act as a disease coursing through the body of the animal. Through blood, suffering, and this imagined, mechanical disease, I define a pained relationship between humans and animals. Each series I made is connected to one another through these shared concepts and imagery, circling back to the same disturbing, carnal world.

Within my pastel drawings, for example, an animal appears either ill or in a state of pain as the focal point. I sought to incorporate my own imagination into the piece to elicit an evocative, visceral interpretation. I start by making each animal appear as we would normally see them in nature. By referencing photographs, the animals are able to closely resemble how we might see them in the wild. I then go back in and add grotesque, provocative features throughout the animal's body. Using bright red pastels for blood and monochromatic machinery, I highlight the severity of the animal's wounds. Gears and wires protrude unnaturally from each animal's skin, slowly killing it from the inside out. The work thus transitions from something mundane to something so grotesque it becomes disturbing to the viewer.

To build upon the mechanical-animal hybrids, I explored plaster as a medium. I found incorporating sculptures would allow the viewer to truly experience the world in which my art resides. The viewer is able to walk around the sculpture and relate to the

physicality of the work. The textures and facial expressions exist in the real world while simultaneously connecting to the fantastical realm of the pastel drawings.

To make each sculpture, I begin with a chicken wire frame that gets coated in plaster and paint. Holes are intentionally left throughout each piece to allow metallically-painted gears, wires, screws, and plates to be inserted. The animal sculptures are not perfectly designed; the plaster is visible in some parts and other areas have cracks in the paint. However, these imperfections are meant to be seen. The crudeness distorts the animal figure and emphasizes the handmade component of the work. The darker, textured bodies also draw attention to the shining, bloody gears infecting them.

To further develop a relationship to the real world while maintaining the grotesque atmosphere of my work, I created a series of animal skins (Figures 7-13) to hang on the wall. Each skin was created by molding cheesecloth into a vaguely familiar animal shape, then painting and nailing the skin to the wall. A fake blood mixture is applied randomly across the drying skin, as though it were freshly removed from a corpse. I found my skin series to be reminiscent of the way pelts are hung in a hunting residence. In this way, they are recognizable to the viewer, but still possess an unsettling atmosphere. I made seven different skins, varying each one's size and shape to express how every animal can be affected by the same plight—in this case, humanity. The skins also draw a connection to the plaster sculptures and pastel drawings. Each subject of my studio practice exists within the same fictional world, with the skins being pulled apart from the mechanized animals once they die from their injuries. The animal figures lose

their natural, living forms, becoming nothing more than a layer of skin hiding the mechanical disease underneath.

A series of decaying bones was the final addition to my studio work (Figures 14-19). By sculpting bones like rib cages, femurs, and pelvises, I am showing the process of death that the mechanized animals go through. The creation process is similar to how I made my plaster animals. I referenced photographs of different bones to add an element of realism, then build a chicken wire frame to be plastered and painted. Each mummified bone is riddled with gears and wires, which I made from clay and metallic paints. My idea behind incorporating these gears was that it would suggest the machinery is what infected—and eventually killed—the animal. In this way, I am referencing human-animal relationships in the context of my other studio work. Humans, which appear as a mechanized disease in my work, are continuously taking from the natural environment, killing off other animals and their resources for personal gains. Each mechanical part is a virus spreading within the animal's body, eating it away from the inside. However, unlike the flesh and bones, the mechanical parts are unscathed throughout the decaying process. This aspect points to humanity's ability to grow and survive with few consequences, while the rest of the living world suffers.

My paper is divided based on the themes found within the different mediums of my studio practice. My studio work shares similarities to our own reality and is reminiscent of our future, but with a darker undertone. I contrast the beauty of animals in

their natural appearance with a crude, grotesque symbolism for how humans and their societal advancements are damaging every other living thing.

II. Grotesque

The grotesque is a metaphor for the environmental destruction we cause; it is an outlet for how I see the world progressing. While there is much debate on when the grotesque originated within art, I am using literature from the scholar, Geoffrey Harpham, to trace its historical background. Harpham follows the grotesque back to the Renaissance, explaining how the term worked its way into European art in the late fifteenth century after chimeric and grotesque Roman murals were unearthed from a series of cave excavations (Harpham. 461).

However, Harpham does not provide a specific definition for the term. Instead, he claims something is grotesque based on the "emotional complex" it creates (Harpham. 462). We can define this emotional complex through Adams et al.'s book, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Here, Adams et al. explains, "When we encounter the grotesque, we are caught off guard, we are surprised and shaken, we have a sense of being played with, taunted, judged. . . we are fascinated and attracted to its power while being threatened by it and compelled to repudiate it. . ." (2).

Adams et al. and Harpham agree that the grotesque is usually a combination or distortion of living things in such a way that the art feels strange and unnatural. Harpham proceeds to label the grotesque as, "a structure, the structure of estrangement. . . the

familiar and commonplace must be suddenly subverted or undermined by the uncanny or alien" (462). My studio practice fits well under Harpham's explanation by holding distorted or disturbed images of recognizable things but remains in a world of its own. Adams et al. similarly classifies grotesque as "a power *sui generis,* an embodiment of demonic or sublime forces" (3). Through that embodiment, the grotesque becomes a mixture of attraction and repulsion, something I sought to achieve within my own work. Both writers do not specifically address the definition of grotesque; rather, they express the myriad of emotions and common themes found within this genre.

The later artistic period of Spanish painter Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) is a strong example for how the grotesque was used in the past. Goya's work entered into a more disturbing, grotesque appearance after he survived an intense illness (which left him deaf) and lived through multiple disruptions of royal power (Voorhies). Goya's later work was a reflection of the chaos within each monarchy, becoming accounts of the "atrocities of war" that every new leader instigated (Voorhies**)**. His style continued to grow darker and more sinister with age, especially since the changes in royal power left Goya without commissions.

Goya spent some of his final years of life in his country house in Madrid, separated from political happenings. There he produced a series of 14 images, known as the *Black Paintings,* which were never commissioned nor sold by him. These paintings utilize the grotesque in a much darker way than his earlier works. His work became a metaphor for thinking about the larger historical events that occurred in his lifetime

through a series raw, uncensored images. The two paintings within this series that resonated the most with me were *Saturn Devouring his Son* (Figure 20) and *Two Old Men* (Figure 21).

Saturn Devouring his Son depicts Saturn as a large, old man with a look of crazy desperation in his eyes as he eats through the body of his son. The son's body is dripping with blood and missing its head as Saturn clutches the smaller form tightly in his hands. The top half of the son's body looks like nothing more than a large piece of meat; it is the bottom half that makes the form recognizable as human. The majority of the scene is in darker, muddy colors, except for Saturn's wide eyes and the son's red blood.

This painting remains unforgettable for the sheer animosity and disturbing nature it possesses. Saturn, a Roman god, is reduced to an uncontrollable madman, crouching in the dark as he rips off more and more of his own son's body. Goya left no clues about the meaning behind the piece. It could reference the constant change in monarchies throughout Goya's lifetime or his bleak outlook on life after the hardships both he and Spain as a whole endured throughout the 1800s.

Nevertheless, it is evident that Goya was not afraid to use the grotesque within his art. While not all of his pieces depict a bloody, manic scene like *Saturn Devouring his Son*, Goya is still able to create an unsettling atmosphere within his work. One example of this would be *Two Old Men*. In this piece, an old man stands in the center, leaning heavily on a cane as another figure appears to be shouting in the man's ear. This second figure has more of a reddish tone and longer, pointed ears compared to the old man,

making it look more demonic than human. It is as though one can almost feel the hot breath exhaling from the demon and into the old man's exposed ears. Both figures' eyes are dark holes, mimicking the color of the background and color palette. The blackness of the eyes also makes the old man hold a blank expression, as though he is the puppet of the demonic figure grasping to his back.

Two Old Men does not use blood and death to appear grotesque. Instead, its subtle details— like the redness of the second figure and the blank expression of the old man— make the work feel disturbing. Like *Saturn Devouring his Son*, there is no additional information given towards the context of this piece. It may represent another god (Chronos, the god of time) like in *Saturn Devouring his Son*. The painting could also symbolize the darker emotions Goya feels looming over him after his wartime past, like the demonic figure does to the old man. The grotesque quality of the painting comes about partially because of the lack of information. The viewer is disturbed by the image and unable to identify exactly what is happening. As a result, we are forced to closely examine the body language and facial expressions of the figures, placing ourselves as the centralized old man and feeling the demonic figure behind our back.

My work seeks to elicit a similar emotional response found in Goya's late work. I use the grotesque in my studio practice to represent the dismal state of human-animal relationships. This reflects on Goya's grotesque paintings as a metaphor for the way he personally perceived the state of the world. Like Goya, my work becomes so grotesque, it moves toward the disturbingly abject. Hal Foster explores notions of the abject and the

disruption of the pleasing image in his text *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. He describes the term anti-aesthetic as "the sign not of a modern nihilism. . . but rather of a critique which de-structures the order of representations in order to re-inscribe them" (Foster. xv). In other words, an anti-aesthetic pushes against traditional ideas and what is considered more acceptable for that artistic era. Like Foster explains, my work leans towards the anti-aesthetic; it goes against typical animal portraiture and representational art, becoming abject and different. It pushes against beauty by engaging an ugly, gory aesthetic.

In (Figure 1) *Carnal Unraveling*, for example, a nearly life-sized bear looms over the viewer, mouth wide-open and roaring. His fur appears soft and almost tangible until it is interrupted by a massive gash up the bear's stomach. Gears, screws, wires, and bolts fall out of the stomach in a bloody mess. The background is removed, displaying only a mixture of greens and browns to hint at the outdoor surroundings and avoid distracting from the animal. It is in no way attractive; rather, the ugliness provokes and involves the viewer in the bear's brutal realm. The power and strength of the bear are stripped away, becoming a sad, traumatic image of its life flowing out amongst the human-made machinery.

The viewer is meant to be drawn in yet startled by the harshness of the scene. The blood and open wounds of the animal figures bring about curiosity on how the incident occurred alongside a repulsion for how gruesome it all is. I am trying to catch the viewer "off guard" from the very beginning through the shocking nature of each piece. The

gear-like guts spilling out of the dying animals is both unsettling and strange. As a viewer within the work, you are meant to reject your own role. You, as a human being, are bearing witness to a gruesome sight yet are unable to change anything. You become a helpless bystander who must look at what has become of this world because of mankind.

I created the two series, *Skins* (Figures 7-13) and *Open Graveyard* (Figures 14-19), as alternative methods for exploring the grotesque. In *Skins,* graphic representations of ambiguous animal skins are nailed to the wall. Unlike the sculptures and drawings, the animal skins could exist within our own world. It is this naturalism that makes the skins possess an additional level of gore. They are nailed in place, as though they are being left out to dry after being freshly removed from the animal itself. It is this recognition of a familiar process that I am using to ground the viewer into a world that has remnants of a modern society, but one that went too far in its development.

The skins make the imaginary world more believable and hold a closer connection to the real world. As a result, the impact made from the grotesque scenes becomes emphasized again. While the sculptures and paintings include some bloody features, they still maintain a romantic or imaginary aspect. With the skins, the romantic element is eliminated, leaving behind a thin coat that we recognize as vaguely animalistic.

To branch *Skins* with the other subgroups of my work, I made the *Open Graveyard Series* (Figures 14-19). Here, bones remain covered in blood and mummified tissue, emphasizing both the gore element and the grotesque theme of my work. The

viewer is unable to empathize with the helplessness of the damaged animal figure; rather, the bones become memorials for the lives that were lost. I spread out the bones within a wooded setting to further give the impression of degrading headstones, laid out based on where each animal succumbed to its wounds. Some of the bones hang from tree limbs by bright blue wires whereas others lay rotting on the ground, covered in varying degrees of machinery.

The bones serve as an additional link between the skins and the mechanized animal figures. Referring back to Harpham's literature on the grotesque, "The grotesque must begin with, or contain within it, certain aesthetic conventions which readers feel are representative of reality as he knows it" (Harpham. 3). This series takes place within the same world as the rest of my studio work, acting as a strange representation of death. The familiarity of seeing skeletal remains allow the viewer to connect to the piece. Yet the mechanical parts and odd proportions place each bone in a fictional world, close to but still separate from our own. As the animals from *Carnal Unraveling* and *Desperation Amidst Decay* die off and their bones and machinery are left behind, the skins are peeled off and hung for all to see (Figures 7-13). They remain both as a progression from the living animal sculptures and drawings as well as in an even more abysmal future in which the living forms are completely taken away.

Like Adams et al. and Harpham stated, my own art holds an unnatural fascination. It is chimeric through its combination of the living and the inanimate; however, it is the bloody, marred component that allows the work to feel truly grotesque.

As blood drips off of the metallic gears festering within the bodies of brutalized animals, the viewer is transported to an alien place, one that is both sublime and horrific. The realism of the animals and how they interact with their surroundings attracts the viewer initially. It is the blood and unnaturally metallic machinery that shift the bodies of work into a sublimely grotesque setting.

III. Nostalgia in Steampunk

Within most of my studio work, there is an element of steampunk. The term, "steampunk," originated from the late 1980s to describe "nineteenth-century-inspired technofantasies—darkly atmospheric novels of a time that never was. . ." (Taddeo & Miller. xv). However, the culture of steampunk dates as far back as the 19th century when people believed Victorian-style inventions could surpass modern technology (Mark). This genre typically appears in the form of whimsical, robotic forms often powered by steam or engines. The steampunk aesthetic also holds an element of nostalgia as it hints at an alternate reality once believed to be the future of technological advancements.

Steampunk encourages an unconventional yet creative process through its desire to "reimagine both the past and the future, often through a neo-Victorian lens" (Taddeo & Miller. ix). Unlike modern technology, steampunk represents a reality that never existed; thus, there are unlimited possibilities for how technology can be designed and interpreted. My work explores the realm of this technological fantasy. The viewer is yearning for an

over-romanticized past as I engage in the notion of nostalgia within a purely imaginary concept. My objective with steampunk is to tell a narrative about how industrialization started a downward spiral for the state of the environment. I also explore different interpretations of this form of machinery through an open-ended dialogue with the viewer.

In (Figure 4) *Wounded Walk,* for example, a dog stands mid-stride with gaping holes throughout its body. The holes are blackened and bloodied. However, within each marred gap of the dog's body is a conglomeration of steampunk-like machinery. The mechanical parts are spilling out of the dog's wounds, a visible infection that is killing the animal slowly over time. The dog is simultaneously repulsive yet uncomfortably hard to look away from in its gory state. As Taddeo and Miller state, "While the diversity of steampunk's formats, characters, and inventions is breathtaking, taken together, all of them work to place steampunk—with its collision of past and future and its dissonance of form and function—squarely in the visual foreground as a commentary on the relationship between human and machine" (xvii). Just as these authors explained, my practice creates a dialogue between the manmade and the natural, as well as the nostalgic atmosphere associated with steampunk's historical referencing.

IV. Dualities: Human/Animal & Manmade/Natural

Most of my work centers on chimeric animal forms to demonstrate human-animal relationships. The inspiration for these animal forms as a subject was also derived from

John Berger's essay, *Why Look at Animals?* Here, Berger outlines what distinguishes humanity from animals while maintaining that we are still one and the same in many aspects. He emphasizes how our early dependence on animal species has shifted towards a yearning for connection and understanding. Berger explains this concept, stating, "But always its [animals] lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man" (6). It is the mystery behind animal thought and the separation between our species and theirs that draws us towards them. Our lives and animal lives run parallel to one another with shared experiences and interactions, but with a distinct separation through one another's level of understanding (Berger. 6).

Berger continues to explore the side-by-side path animal lives take with our own. While humanity has risen above animals to some extent through industrialization and technological advancements, we still long for the natural wildness that animals possess. However, our yearning for mutual understanding and connection has only led to a decline in the exoticism of the animal kingdom. Berger elaborates on this, claiming, "As we became more industrialized, developing machines to replace the roles of animals, animals became, 'emptied of experience and secrets,' and this new invented 'innocence' begins to provoke in man a kind of nostalgia. For the first time, animals are placed in a receding past" (12).

My studio practice consistently connects to animal figures or body parts because of the innate longing humanity has toward the other animal species. We try to distinguish ourselves from animals, yet we continue to rely on animals to this day, be it for

companionship, work, or even to enforce our connection to the natural world. We sympathize with animals and are fascinated by their lives because we have yet to truly understand them.

Falter, by Bill McKibben, offered additional insight on the dualities between humans and animals. McKibben connects humanity with destruction, explaining, "It seems to me that what I care most about is preserving a world that bears some resemblance to the past—a world with some ice at the top and bottom and the odd coral reef in between, a world where people are connected to the past and future (and to one another) instead of turned into obsolete software" (McKibben. Chapter 19). McKibben identifies technology, or human advancements, as a key factor in what is driving mankind away from preserving nature.

Even in the first chapter, McKibben offers a bleak interpretation of the world. He states, "In fact, there are half as many wild animals on the planet as there were in 1970, an awesome and mostly unnoticed silencing" (McKibben. Chapter 1). Throughout this book, McKibben addresses numerous environmental problems, from air pollution to deforestation. However, McKibben maintains the concept that humans are the cause of these issues, inflicting harm on not just their own species, but the species that live and breathe around them.

McKibben's narrative suggests there is a balance between our species and others. I connected with this notion in particular because I could directly see how our personal gain as a species results in a loss for other living creatures. To grow as a population, we

require more space, resources, and energy. Many of my works include mechanical elements, such as gears, screws, wires, plates, and nails imbedded into an animal form, creating a chimeric animal merging two different worlds together. The use of machinery inside an injured animal explores how human society's progress is negatively impacting animal species.

My pastel drawings, such as (Figure 2) *Painful Peeling*, look into this chimeric combination. I made a spotted salamander in the foreground, surrounded by a collection of the same mechanical parts found inside each animal figure. The colors of the background remain naturalistic, but it is riddled with the monochromatic machinery. The salamander is given vivid yellow spots and a purple-blue skin tone, but its skin then peels away throughout its body, revealing an infection of machinery inside.

Unlike *Carnal Unraveling*, *Painful Peeling* represents an animal disassociated from power; instead, a salamander is seen as harmless. The non-predatory animals such as a salamander or chipmunk (Figure 3) within this series bring out just as much, if not more, of a helpless and grotesque expression as a towering bear (Figure 1). When we see something as innocuous as a chipmunk or salamander being slaughtered, the unfairness of the situation is empathized with even more.

The contrast between the machine and the natural world is evident in *Painful Peeling*, along with Figures 1-6. The spread of the gears within the animal bodies metaphorically connect to the rapid spread of humanity. As the gears fester and extend across the animals, eating away at their bodies, humans continue to take from the natural

resources necessary for the lives of other living things. I utilize machinery, or unnatural materials, within a natural form to emphasize the way humans live. We create massive structures out of complex materials that starkly contrast with the green, organic forests we invade. I saw this imbalanced relationship and chose dystopic, chimeric representations as a means of leveling where humans stand. The mechanical components embedded into the animals symbolize how the manmade world lives within the natural world.

The sculptures add another dimension to the combination of manmade and animal by representing an animal through a clearly handmade form. Their materials and burlap textures are revealed to the viewer, despite their disguise as a living creature. As a result, the chimeric, sculpted animals have a crude, finished product that plays off of their injured state. (Figure 5) *Pedestal of Pity* specifically speaks to this crude, damaged notion as it sits pathetically at the bottom of a tree, unable to fly or even stand by itself. Its golden beak and recognizable figure as a bird of prey initially give off the impression of freedom and power. However, its position on an underwhelming clump of roots in the shadow of a large tree make the bird feel pitiful. The fierce, wild attributes of this animal have been reduced and reimagined into broken representations of what it once symbolized. Here, the chimeric form damages the typical attributes associated with this animal. Its ravaged body and intriguing mechanical components draw attention to how this bird was reduced to such a pitiful state.

(Figure 6) *Desperation Amidst Decay* represents this pathetic atmosphere in a different light. In this scene, the mother mountain lion lays on her side, injured and unable to stand. Surrounding her are two cubs, playing with the parts pouring out of their mother and unaware by the infliction of their guardian. The mother looks up towards the viewer with pleading eyes as she remains trapped in this scene of despair. Wols (1913-1951), the early 20th century German painter who pioneered lyrical abstraction, expressed the powerlessness of this family through his explanation of humanity's selfishness, stating, "Man sees all things in terms of man's own interest. This is why he does not understand things in themselves. He is useless to nature. He makes use of it and is unable to be of the slightest use to her" (Siegel, *Worlds with Us*). Like Wols, we, as viewers of *Desperation Amidst Decay,* are incapable of doing anything to remedy the tragic situation of the mother. The infection of gears leaves her immobile and damaged, with two cubs unable to fend for themselves. And as we enter the room and bear witness to this, we can do nothing but observe. We see how these animals suffer due to their infectious, chimeric attributes. The visible disease on their bodies draw in the viewer and suggest human involvement was the cause of natural destruction.

The contemporary Australian artist Patricia Piccinini serves as a reference for using chimeric combinations in a grotesque manner. Piccinini's work focuses on sculptures that combine human and animal features into one being, resulting in a chimera-like creation. Her sculptures exist in an alternate world, reminiscent of our own, that demonstrate the relationships between humans and nature, the artificial and the natural, and the viewer and the artwork (Piccinini). Her studio practice questions, "if it is

so hard to figure out where one thing starts and another ends, can we really continue to believe in the barriers that separate us?" (Piccinini).

Piccinini's work emphasizes the grotesque through disturbing yet familiar, hyper-realistic figures. One example of this is her piece, *The Young Family* (Figure 22), which depicts a mother and her young, suckling pups, who are all human-dog hybrids. The mother's form is vaguely recognizable as human with normal hands and feet; on the other hand, the multiple sets of teats, long, floppy ears, and extended snout are more dog-like. The pups have a similar appearance, with bodies that remind us of both man's best friend and mankind itself. We can see the love and strong sense of family within this piece; however, we become aware of the ugliness that these mutant-like forms possess and are left with a confusing emotional complex.

Piccinini outlines the meaning behind *The Young Family* as a representation of genetic manipulation and what we, as a society, see as normal. She attempts to bridge the gap between our own species and the species of other living things through a genetically-modified chimera that holds animal and human traits at the same time. Piccinini is fascinated by biotechnology and how mankind has developed the ability to manipulate nature, for better or for worse. Here her work is centered on our impulse to see a disturbing, hairless chimera alongside the nurturing atmosphere of the scene. Even something that is not human can express love and empathy.

Another work by Piccinini, *Boot Flower* (Figure 23), appears to be covered in human skin and hair in an unrecognizable blob with a flowering top. The top looks like a

combination between genitalia and flower petals as it blooms out of a hairy mane. Rather than combine two animals, Piccinini brings together humans and plants, creating a grotesque yet intriguing sculpture that brings concerns with bioengineering to light. Piccinini questions our manipulation with life, molding multiple living things together until only pieces from each species are recognizable.

Both *Boot Flower* and *The Young Family* exist in the same realm of the disturbing and strange. The high level of realism and three-dimensionality allow the viewer to become more immersed in this world to the point of being unsure if these sculptures are made from flesh itself. We can see the connection between Piccinini's world and our own with disturbing clarity. Her form of grotesque chimeras is one of beauty; Piccinini highlights natural features within each living being she meshes together, creating something entirely new yet familiar.

Like Piccinini, I wanted to create a new reality that the viewer can relate to, while still acknowledging the disparity between something imaginary and something real. Rather than melding several different entities together as Piccinini's work demonstrates, in my work I want the machine and the animal to remain recognizable as separate concepts that are brought together through brutality. My objective is to speak to the destructive nature of humanity as the mechanical parts encroach upon the natural animal form.

V. Viewer's Perspective

Art historian Katy Siegel's viewpoint on human society offers an explanation for the how we, as a species, see ourselves within the world. Her essay, *Worlds With Us,* explains how humans struggle to identify with the world at large. In fact, Siegel points out that giving up on the "privileged viewpoint of the human" can feel "apocalyptic" (Siegel, *Worlds with Us*). In other words, we rely on the pedestal we place for ourselves. We want to be at the center; looking at ourselves as just another species removes the importance of being humans.

I utilize Siegel's writings as a way to develop the role of the viewer and myself within my studio practice. The gore within my work necessitates viewer involvement in some way. As a result, I chose to metaphorically express how humanity's development as a species—and lack of responsibility—damages other living things. We become observers who are focused on our own self interests.

Our personal image reflects on the way we treat the environment because we are unwilling to understand the world from an outsider's perspective. Siegel explains this phenomenon in her essay, stating, "Basic is the recognition that humans are neither on top of the world or outside it; they are *in* the world, and not as a special category (the subject). Humans are objects and entities among other objects and entities." Siegel explains that humans are simply another species within the world; however, she emphasizes that we are not a "special category," or "on top of the world."

John Dryzek asserts this worldview in his book, *Environmental Discourses*. Here, he underlines the Promethean theory and the theory of deep ecology. The Promethean

theory references back to Greek mythology when Prometheus stole fire from Zeus to increase human capabilities (52). People who believe in the Promethean theory thus have unlimited assurance in mankind's ability to overcome any problem, including environmental ones (52). People are typically more focused on individual success and short-term benefits, rather than looking towards preserving the environment we, as just another species, rely on. Dryzek places deep ecology at the opposite end of the spectrum, with its beliefs in "self-realization" and "biocentric equality." Deep ecologists value species, populations, and ecosystems as equal; no individual or individual species has more superiority than another.

Using both of these theories, my work takes into account the self-centered nature of humans who prefer to let problems solve themselves. The studio practice shifts the viewer's perspective into one of deep ecology as people are forced to look at what they have done, at the irreversible damage inflicted on other animals. They have to acknowledge the importance of other living things through the gory subject matter.

Viewing my studio work is a way of taking accountability, even if we cannot do anything to change the bloody scene happening in front of us. Our desire to expand our own population requires more food, water, and resources in general. Consequently, we are taking away from the same resources that other animals need. My grotesque interpretation of this concept expresses my perspective on the damage we cause in a way that involves viewer interaction.

X. Conclusion

Human expansion is invading animals' space and resources with little to no regard for the necessities these species require to survive. My studio work primarily focused on animals in the northeast United States as I have lived in that region my entire life. This connection enabled me to include a realistic quality to my art which contrasts to the imaginative process that the steampunk theme adds. I chose to incorporate steampunk for the false reality it creates; the machinery lives in a world outside of modern society yet is still vaguely familiar for its ties to Victorian-era styles. Through steampunk, I added an imaginary, fantastical element to the work, something that contrasted with the carnage seen in the majority of the pieces.

Drawing upon artists like Francisco de Goya and Patricia Piccinini, I was inspired to branch out of what is considered "safe" within the art world to portray a scene that oscillates between being hard to look away from and unsettling for the viewer. These two artists similarly demonstrated the ways in which the grotesque can be utilized to manifest something disturbing and unique. However, they represent only a small category of how this theme can be applied within art. Through further research into additional artists across history, I hope to gain a broader range for how to use grotesque within my own work.

The development of my studio work allowed me to experiment with different mediums based on what was more effective with the viewer. I can see the work progressing further into an installation-based approach to create an entire space for the

viewer to experience. Through an immersive installation, I would like to further explore the role humans play in the natural environment by pushing the boundaries of what is considered grotesque. I would be portraying the declining state of the surrounding space where each animal lives. I will continue to ask the viewer and myself how this world entered such a state of disrepair and if there is any way to repair it.

Images

(Figure 1) Lydia Segal, *Carnal Unraveling*, pastel, 70 x 105 in., 2020

(Figure 2) Lydia Segal, *Painful Peeling,* pastel, 24 x 36 in., 2020

(Figure 3) Lydia Segal, *Sufferings of Past and Present*, pastel, 24 x 36 in., 2020

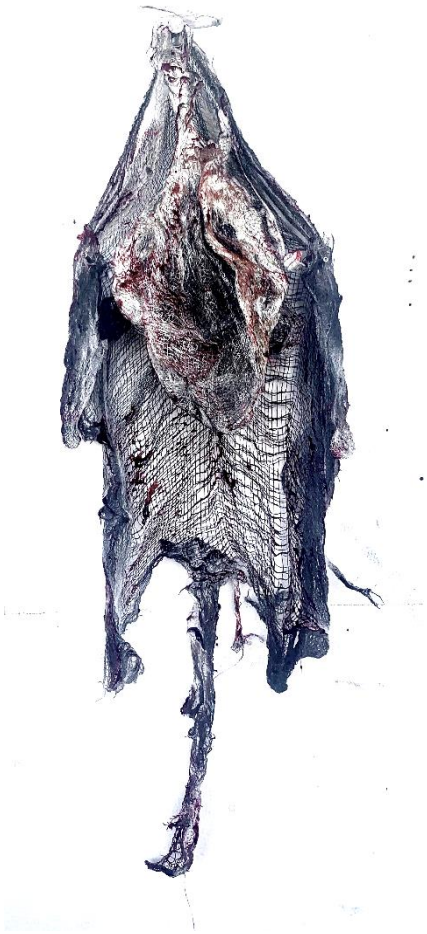
(Figure 4) Lydia Segal, *Wounded Walk*, 43 x 21.5 x 10 in., plaster and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 5) Lydia Segal, *Pedestal of Pity*, 24 x 16 x 6 in., plaster and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 6) Lydia Segal, *Desperation Amidst Decay*, 75 x 30 x 15 in., 34 x 17 x 10 in., 24 x 13 x 19 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020

(Figure 7) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 1*, 65 x 14.5 x 5 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 8) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 2*, 67 x 15 x 5 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019



(Figure 9) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 3*, 14.5 x 5.5 x 1.5 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 10) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 4*, 15 x 10 x 2 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 11) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 5*, 42 x 14 x 2 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 12) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 6*, 43 x 21 x 3 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 13) Lydia Segal, *Skin Series No. 7*, 31 x 24 x 4 in., cheesecloth, watercolor, and mixed media, 2019

(Figure 14) Lydia Segal, *Pelvic Ruins*, 38 x 25 x 8 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020

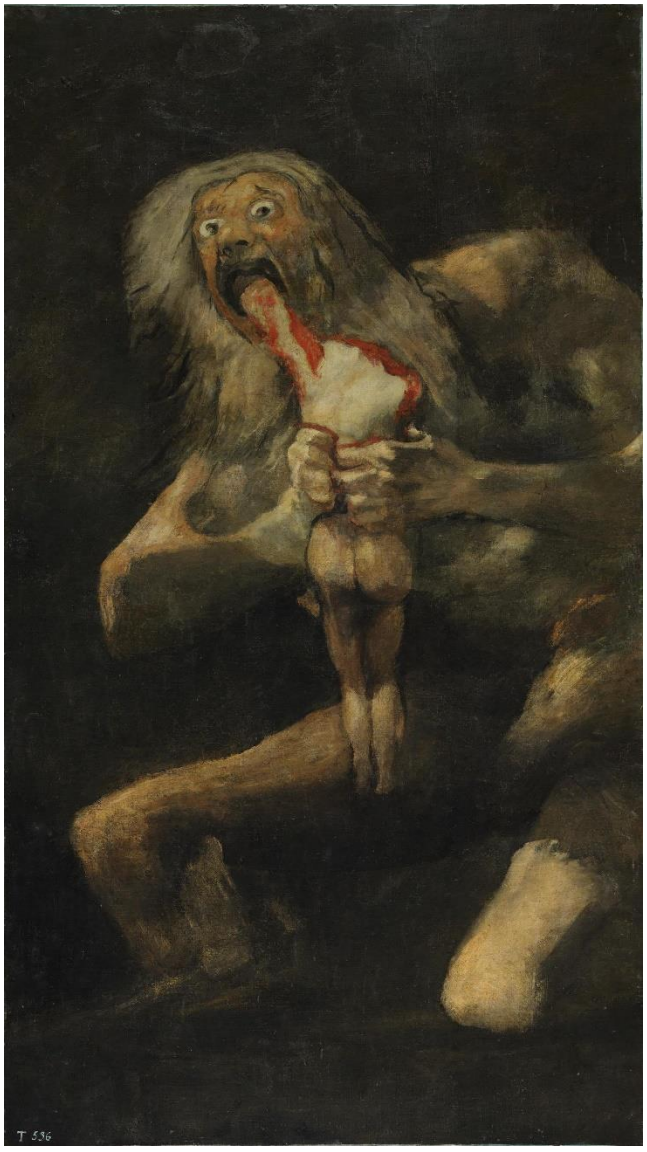
(Figure 15) Lydia Segal, *Dead End*, 46 x 7 6.5 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020

(Figure 16) Lydia Segal, *Disturbed Memories*, 31 x 6 x 4 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020

(Figure 17) Lydia Segal, *Ripped Away*, 25 x 5 x 3.5 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020

(Figure 18) Lydia Segal, *Discarded Claws*, 27 x 14 x 8 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020

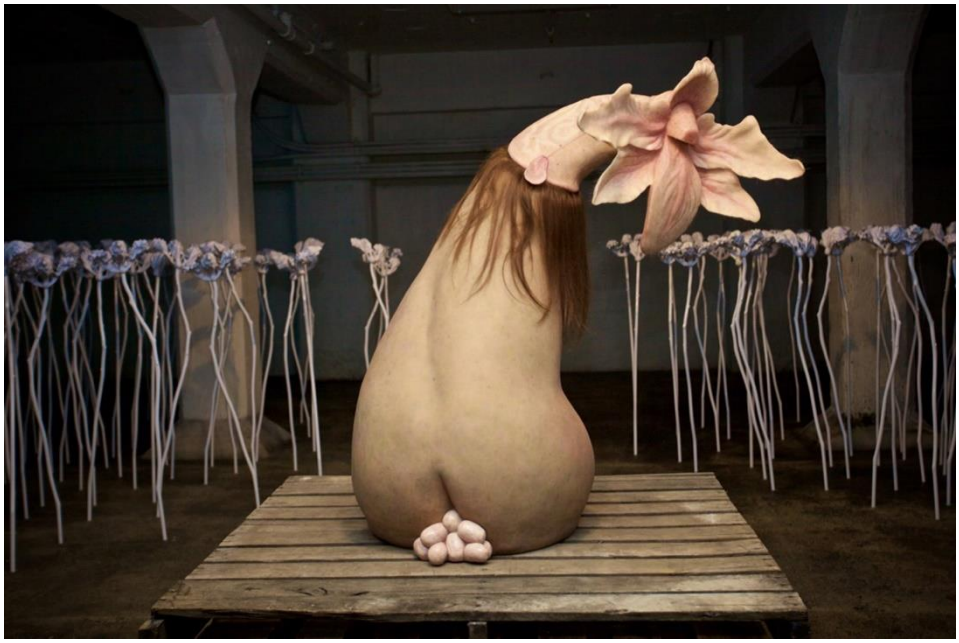
(Figure 19) Lydia Segal, *Aging and Forgotten,* 69 x 5 x 5.5 in., plaster and mixed media, 2020



(Figure 20) Francisco de Goya, *Saturn Devouring his Son,* 56 x 32 in., oil mural transferred to canvas, 1819-1823

(Figure 21) Francisco de Goya, *Two Old Men,* 57 x 26 in., oil mural transferred to canvas, 1819-1823

(Figure 22) Patricia Piccinini, *The Young Family*, 33 1/2 × 59 × 47 1/4 in., silicone, fiberglass, leather, human hair, and plywood, 2002



(Figure 23) Patricia Piccinini, *Boot Flower*, 40.5 x 393.7 x 236.2 in., silicone, fiberglass, and human hair, 2015

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