

Mythology Inspired By Fear and Curiosity

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Abstract

Humans actively seek to understand everything. When we confront something we do not immediately comprehend we become uncomfortable, even afraid. This is a constant aspect of life that mankind through the ages struggles with. While not everything can be solved, there are ways to cope with the fear of the unknown; through monsters.

Trying to solve the unknown, our imagination generates chaos. It creates extreme exaggerations to fill the void rather than bring it to rational order. It is the place where monsters are made, and our fear is placed instead on those monsters. However this does not solve the issue. Trying to cope with the intangible with something just as, does not reduce anxiety. In fact it makes it worse.

Through my art I explore the mythology of monsters inspired by fear and curiosity of the unknown. I seek to give that fear a true body as opposed to only a concept; to create a monster one can see. I work to visualize monsters, taking them of the dark void and giving them substance with idiosyncratic lines, chaotic symbols and implied shapes using a stream of consciousness drawing method. The result is a monster and viewer free to confront one another on the same plane.

This is not a new method. Stories, pictures and word of mouth have all been used to address the intangible and give it shape. Rather I am paying homage through my own methods and coming to terms with my fear through monsters. I want to create something that might help others so that both I and the viewer address this monstrous fear.

Introduction

My work deals with fear. It sounds blunt, and yet for me it speaks volumes about what I am trying to accomplish with my art. Only in recent years have I tried to consider what fear entails. With little choice, I pondered it through my own crippling fear: the Dark. I struggle with it constantly and while I have learned to deal with it, going outside at night, turning off a lamp or having my back to my open closet is extremely unpleasant. I feel I have found an answer to what fear is through that experience. The definition ironically is vague much like the dark I am afraid of. Fear is curiosity of the unknown.

Picture a doorway, and beyond that – pitch darkness. Perhaps you know what is beyond your bedroom or basement. The locale does not matter. All you can see at the moment is a black void. There is memory telling you otherwise, but that dark emptiness begs questions: Could something else be in there? When one tries to picture something they do not understand their imagination goes awry. This leads to fantastic, often monstrous subjects that move in to fill that unknown space. Monsters and their mythology inspired through fear, are the main focus in my work and I use them to define the unknown.

I draw monsters, giving them a tangible form that can be observed by the viewer. I add extensive details to each creature, drawing them life size to make their presence known. In contrast the space around them is left bare, and the monsters themselves are coming out of the edges, only just now in view. This is because I want the viewer to still be aware of the unknown, to understand that no matter how hard one tries there is still a lingering void from which the creature is realized. This is not to keep from addressing it, rather I want to ensure the fear and curiosity inspiring it is not dampened. Why seek to understand everything about the unknown if it is all laid bare?

Chapter 1: Just what are Monsters?

Monsters are and always have been my obsession. They are different from anything I can find in reality, and yet they are rooted in it through mankind's endeavor to understand what they cannot. Plenty of them increase my fear of the dark yet I find enjoyment in them. I actively seek monsters out. I find them in novels, movies and especially video games. Such monsters are already appropriated and changed by the artistic license of those who found them. When I find something I am unfamiliar with I research it, often by simply typing its name on the internet. From there I move on to the first sites then continue by checking their sources. From those sources I continue digging until I encounter what seems to me to be the most original form of the particular monster.

Information concerning monsters is the least diluted in encyclopedia or bestiaries that draw their information from the most direct source. Any further and I would have to go back in time and ask the original author. Further reading involves asking myself what drew me to begin with. If I stumble upon anything that sparks my interest I research further. I add these monsters to my mental "zoo," noting where I discovered them for future reference.

Even with original sourcing and a description of the creature, there are holes. The descriptions are not abbreviated nor has anything intentionally been left out. What you are looking for simply is not in this iteration. To explain, the chimera is described as a combination of a lion, a goat and snake. The lion composes most of the body along with the head of the goat, and the snake as the last head is on tail.¹

¹ Hassig, Debra. *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*. (UN: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Consider that the goat is often replaced by an eagle and the snake with a dragon.² The lion is also only most of the body, nothing says the other parts do not crop up here and there. The goat's head has been depicted on a shoulder of the beast and even next to the lion's head. In other cases it has been forgone altogether, instead adding goat-like characteristics to the body, perhaps switching the eyes of the lion, adding horns or replacing the hind legged paws with hooves. The point I am making is that the source has been reinterpreted countless times. Many details are explained while others simply do not exist, yet.

Everyone who seeks out a monster whether they are filmmakers, story tellers, game designers or other artists will create their own interpretations further adding to an already vast mythology. *The Chimera of Arezzo* is one example, a bronze cast crafted by the Etruscans depicting the monster I described earlier. This is an old iteration of an even older story where the beast was killed by Bellerophon, the son of Poseidon.³

The creature is reared up as if ready to lash out while the goat head lulls to the side, a wound on its neck from Bellerophon's spear. Expressing its form, curled and plated metal is used to mimic the mane, a line of small spikes or frills running along the spine from the goat's neck to the base of the tail. It seems slight, but these choices are what make this rendition of the chimera unique. It is the Etruscans vision of the chimera.

² Rose, Carol. *Giants, Monsters & Dragons: An encyclopedia of Folklore, Legend, and Myth*. (London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2000).

³ Cartwright, Mark. "Chimera of Arezzo." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, January 13, 2017. Accessed April 6, 2017. <http://www.ancient.eu/article/1006/>



Figure 1: *Chimera of Arezzo*, bronze cast reproduction, 31 x 50 3/4 in, 400 bce

Like the Etruscans and others who appropriate monsters, I seek out the source, and after learning what I wish to know I express what I have found through my art. Here I proceed to draw my own version of the creature. I am appropriating the monsters and changing them to suit my needs. It is just another version, but it is mine to depict as I see fit. I do however try to respect the original source due to my obsession with them.

For many monsters, I add to their mix. I do not mean I stick a badger's head onto an already complicated chimera. Besides fantastic creatures I also use real animals. The gaping eel is an aquatic creature that lives near the bottom of the ocean. This means that until deep sea diving was possible this animal was virtually unheard of. Perhaps it never had the opportunity to inspire mythology. This is a creature with bioluminescent spots, tiny eyes, and an immense mouth that one never sees until it opens its retracted jaws; in short – a true, living Monster. I take such creatures and enhance them adding detail and enhancing what already makes them monstrous. Further attributes such as a flowing mane along the eel's neck and belly, a small beard of tendrils or a horn on the nose are appropriated from other forms of deep sea life used to attract prey. These alterations add further horrific elements to what is already a monstrous creature. The eel in order to feed itself is already enticing, using its unique parts to attract prey.

While I have no wish to devour the viewer, both the eel and I seek to inspire curiosity. I consider such factors through Monster Theory.

First off I must stress that Monster theory⁴ is not a study of monsters. This initially was a turnoff for me since monsters are what I enjoy most. So then what is it?

Monster theory as outlined by Jeffery Cohen is the study of what a monster can be. This study is a collection of questions on a single subject: What is a monster? What can be considered a monster? What makes a monster? Cohen describes a monster as a concept rather than a physical entity. To him, government, politics and business are just as monstrous as dragons or giants. A country's government could be this bloated beast, an ugly, greedy creature that feeds off those who reside under it with no concern for reciprocation. On the other end of the spectrum could be a guardian, a protective giant who will respond violently when its charge is threatened. Monster Theory can be applied to anything, not just what Cohen addresses. Animals, tools, even natural environments can be given a monstrous twist under the right light.

While the concept is indeed intriguing, Cohen's and my approach to dealing with monsters is different. He deals with the metaphor of a monster, or what a monster can be. I meanwhile give monsters an actual form and shape. I want to show, not just think. That said I do see value in what Monster Theory addresses. I choose to juxtapose myself from this, and take something like the gaping eel and further enhance its already monstrous visage. I value Monster Theory but take it an extra step. Talking about something monstrous is fantastic and I want to consider what influences inspire monsters. However I want to *see* those monsters. I think about them enough as is when the lights are out.

⁴ Cohen, Jeffery Jerome, "Monster Theory" (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).



Figure 2: Thomas Bowman, *Foodie*, detail, Ink on paper, 46 x 52 in, 2017

Chapter 2: My Influences

When I began exploring art I started by emulating other artists. I made recreations of artwork I found in books, specifically pen on paper in order to study contrast, line and shape. My introduction to drawing is farther back than I can remember. But I know that I was handed a ballpoint pen which was the closest tool in reach at the time. Through sheer stubbornness I used pens only relenting to a felt tip after entering college. It is not that I cannot use other mediums. There is just something about a stark, clean line over white paper that motivates me to express myself.

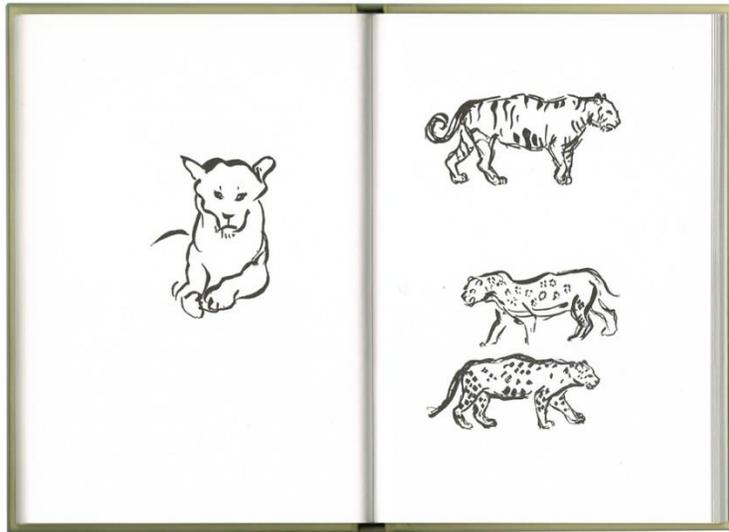


Figure 3: Alexander Calder, *Animal Sketches*, 1925 - 26. Ink, 11 x 8 1/2 in
(Scanned from *Animal Sketches* book authored by the artist.)⁵

Chronologically my first major influence were the drawings of Alexander Calder. Calder is known best for his metal mobiles and stabiles during the mid to late 20th century. He created immense metal structures that curl and bend around themselves. Calder also made a small circus where all the performers and animals are formed from twisted metal wires.⁶ While I recognized these works later, my introduction to Calder's work was not metal, it was on paper. I found a

⁵ Calder, A. *Animal Sketches* (New York: Dover Publications. 1973).

⁶ Lipman, Jean. *Calder's Universe* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976, 1989), 6-8, 64-78, 84-89.

small book, *Animal Sketches* by Alexander Calder my first year in college in a far corner of a library's annex. As the title implied the contents are a number of simplified ink brush drawings of various animals. Because I liked animals and they were very well drawn my first impulse was to imitate Calder. I chose subjects of my own, most of them straight from my head as opposed to in front of me and proceeded to draw. Ironically the outcome from this went in a completely unforeseen direction.

Without thinking I had gone beyond implying the essential shape of the animal. I went further, mapping every detail I could see. With no brush I instead drew out stroke-like shapes, filling them in to compensate. I quickly found the process extremely gratifying. There was something about obsessively mapping out every detail that satisfied me greatly. This along with the response I received bolstered me to go further. I was invested in what I developed and did not want to drop it.

It was not until after I am told that there was no comparison between my work and Calder's that I noticed the vast differences. I was not imitating Calder; I changed it to conform with an obsessive urge of recording shapes and filling spaces. This was a boon, adapting what I took from Calder rather than simply imitating him. Calder's drawings were my launching point to developing my own personal aesthetic.

Confronted with the differences between Calder's and my work I sought something more comparable while still retaining what I created. Instead of finding it myself someone found it for me, claiming that this artist reminded them of me. Albrecht Durer is an artist during the time of the German Renaissance. Durer's work consists of various paintings of animals and portraits, even himself. By far his most recognized works are numerous woodblock prints he carved around the late 15th to 16th century. Those that brought him highest acclaim throughout Europe

during that time are a series of fifteen prints called the *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, or *Apocalypse with Pictures*. The series depicts scenes written in the bible of the end of the world such as the riding of *The four Horseman of the Apocalypse*.



Figure 4: Albrecht Durer, *The Four Horsemen, of The Apocalypse*, Woodcut, 15 1/4 x 11 in, 1498

Throughout all of these prints is an attention for detail that was as, or even more, obsessive than my own. There is clearly an immense amount of consideration that goes into these carvings, a process I admire as something I am trying to do myself. It is exciting to study his marks and see how Durer crosshatches to depict curvature, giving depth to his subjects as he carves out intricate details throughout.

There are some obvious differences between our work. Durer of course prints with ink where as I draw directly on paper. How we handle line differs as well. I experimented here and there with crosshatching however I struggled to make it work with the same effect. I decided to instead convey texture and value with curving my lines over space and thickening them over other shapes to imply depth and distance.

The most significant difference between us is our negative space. I leave the negative space alone, focusing on the main subject and allowing it to emerge from the edges. Durer meanwhile fills most of the space available. He shows a scene whereas I show a glimpse. In that regard I consider a comparable artist to be Martin Schongauer. Schongauer was renowned for his printmaking. His work was detailed and engaging much like Durer's, but there was more negative space.



Figure 5: Martin Schongauer, *Saint Anthony Tortured by Demons*, Engraving, 11 13/16 x 8 9/16 in, ca. 1470 - 75

All of the focus was brought onto the main subject. While I see a correlation between my work and Schongauer's and admire it, there is something about Durer and his carvings that engage me more.

Durer's carvings really spoke to me not just as an artist, but as something familiar. I felt I understood the train of thought behind the work. However there is one print that is most striking. I always come back to it in my work and its impact on me has never dulled. It is *The Rhinoceros*.



Figure 6: Albrecht Durer, *The Rhinoceros*, woodcut, sheet (trimmed to image): 9 ¼ x 11 ¾ in, 1515

That rhinoceros still influences me, and is a perfect example of monster theory. The attention to detail, the creativity, every single mark and the shape and curvature of the subject works together fluidly to give this beast form and substance. I especially love how there are parts to it that are not typical of the genuine article. This rhinoceros has scaled legs, a small spiraled horn on its back and designs in its armored hide that reminds me of leopard spotted fur or stretched leather. There is one fact about the print in particular however that strikes a chord, though I only learned about it later.

Durer had in fact never seen a rhinoceros. When he made that print he only worked from a written study of what one looked like. This information was gathered from an Indian rhinoceros, gifted to the governor of Portuguese India by the sultan of Cambay in 1514. It was studied in Portugal and many letters were sent across Europe with written details of the beast. Later the rhinoceros drowned after the ship transporting it wrecked during a storm,⁷ but not before numerous depictions were made, including the woodblock print by Durer.

Durer manages to design a rhinoceros that is incredibly close to the real thing. Such a feat requires an extremely vivid imagination. Even though it is not perfectly accurate, that fact does not detract from it. Durer's rhinoceros is not just any rhino, it is *his*. There is no other like it, and yet anyone that looks at it recognizes instantly what it is. It is the rhinoceros according to Albrecht Durer.

⁷ Norfolk, Lawrence. *The Pope's Rhinoceros*. (London: Vintage Publishing, 1997).

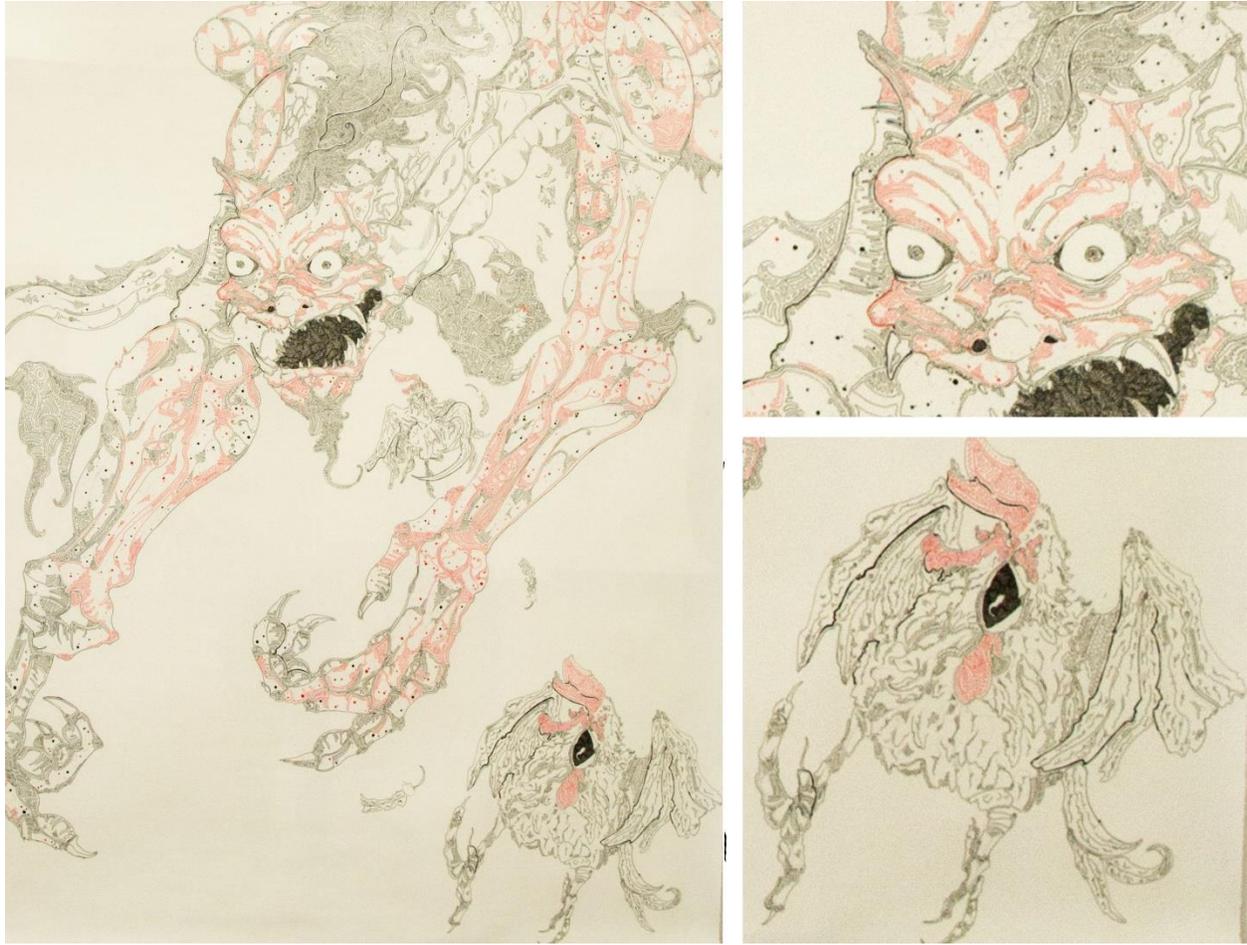


Figure 7: Thomas Bowman, *Henpecked*, detail. Pen on paper, 46 x 51 in, 2017 [digital image]
Main Image (left), Close-up (upper right), Rooster (lower right).

Just as Durer caught the essence of what a rhino is, I want to capture and convey the essence of the monsters I draw. It is a constantly changing process that adjusts with every piece I create to make my subjects recognizable from their source as both Durer and Calder have accomplished in their drawings. This can be difficult as some monsters are more obscure than others. However, as I said before monsters reference something in reality. They are not real and yet parts of them come from real subjects. The unknown draws from our imagination a collection of thoughts drawn from real life experience. If my monsters are real our fear would be justified and the unknown itself would not be so frightening. I want to explore what comes from the unknown, not prove it.

Chapter 3: Monsters Then and Now

How I draw my monsters is an evolutionary experience. The first step in this process remains the same and is the most important; it is the first impression.



Figure 8: Thomas Bowman, *Ding*, detail, Pen on paper, 46 x 52 in, 2017

Today when people of monsters they refer to the most recent examples; chiefly media, especially films and video games. These monsters are heavily stylized for the purpose entertainment. I enjoy most of the monsters that come from this, and I want the monsters I

discover and use to be entertaining as well. The monsters of today however differ greatly from the valid monsters of the past. When I say valid I do not mean better. Valid monsters are the originals, products of fear and curiosity from which monsters today are derived. For example, the troll⁸ is a concept produced in mass. It is a common grunt in most media, a creature to be killed at the end of a movie or in droves in games fueled by testosterone. They definitely hold onto the idea of what a troll is; an ugly, large beast with semi human characteristics that turns to stone in the light of the sun.⁹ The source mythology of trolls holds more than what is often used today. Trolls can range in size anywhere from a couple feet to a couple hundred. They eat most anything, often children. Trolls can have multiple limbs, especially heads, and can be furred, scaled, horned, have tails or all of the above.¹⁰ While the idea of fighting such a creature in a game sounds exciting, putting that into action was never the original intent.



Figure 9: Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit*, 2012, The trolls, Tom, Bert and Bill.¹¹

Far back in history monsters were not only a means of entertainment. They were considered very real and if one were not careful and broke some unspoken rule when dealing with them even as a concept, it was like risking death. Monsters were a warning not unlike the

⁸ Leeming, David. *From Olympus to Camelot: The World of European Mythology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹ Simon Mittman, Asa. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012).

¹⁰ Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. (US: University of California Press, 2009).

¹¹ Jackson, Peter. *The Hobbit*, Video file. Directed by Peter Jackson. Hollywood: Warner Bros. 2012.

bogeyman, to scare people and warn them to avoid such creatures. While that would be silly today because we know fact from fiction, the line between those two areas was vague back then. Everyone encounters that line at some point as a child. With facts we manage to mostly today move over into logic, barring some irrational fears like mine of the dark. Till then as children we cannot tell the difference. Without the right knowledge monsters are just as real and frightening for a child as it was for people of any age in early history.

In medieval Europe, the Catholic Church depicted countless drawings of the *Monsters from the East*. These creatures were sketched and described by clergy, and how they were depicted was unique. The sketches looked very casual as if the subject had taken up a pose, usually sitting, in front of a priest with pen and paper in hand drawn on the spot; a portrait sketch. In other cases maps of how the world was perceived often had small depictions of these beings at the map's edge, away from the clean terrain the Church deemed the center of their world. Humans perceived these creatures as real beings and the Church portrayed them openly. The intent was not to show something you can go find however. These creatures lived beyond the clean lands and they were to be avoided.

Some of these creatures simply look like deformed humans. They have just one large leg meant to provide shade, or they have their face on their chest completely forgoing the need for a head. Others are more extreme such as a cow that climbs trees with five limbs that transitioned to human arms and hands partway, or are human-bodied with a crane's long neck and beaked head. They are the unclean, lesser beings who ward the curious away from the map's edge and into the security of civilization.

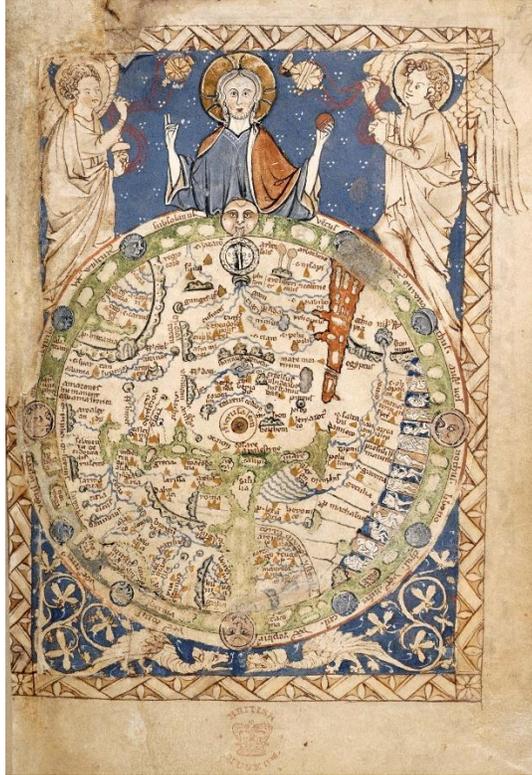


Figure 10: *The Psalter Map*, Manuscript, ca 1260's

The Psalter Map, a visual representation of what the Church claimed the world looked like, depicted the monsters from the east at the map's edge. Jerusalem is placed at the cleanest spot on the map's center. To venture out is to leave the protection of the Church and renders one at the mercy of the monsters living outside.¹² I would not have fit into that dynamic well.

Monsters intrigue me, and I always want to find more of them. Their overall strangeness is what I find the most engaging about them. I draw them with painstaking care to best represent them. The final product is the monster, large and imposing rather than a small portrait. This lets them confront the viewer on equal terms rather than be forced under scrutiny like a bug under glass. They are extremely interesting beings and they have much to share.

Monsters have stories which detail their habits and what they are capable of doing. Their existence is the product of curiosity and fear, but each creature serves its purpose differently.

¹² Harper, Tom. "What is a fantasy map?" *British Library*. Accessed April 6, 2017. <https://www.bl.uk/maps/articles/what-is-a-fantasy-map>

Some monsters are simply tricksters, creatures that enjoy toying with humans and watching them blunder into traps often of the monster's making or, even better, the human's own design.¹³ Others are beasts of huge proportions, gods and giants. Some are peaceful while many more are cruel man-eaters who steal away children in the night.¹⁴ Monsters are as diverse as the imagination.

The pieces that comprise my exhibition are four monsters I was interested in exploring. I chose to specific a format on each one that would enable the viewer to consider them as a grouping. This theme enables me to keep exploring more monsters adding them to the whole. However just as I stated that each creature serves their purpose differently, so too can my four pieces function alone individually. Monsters are inspiring, they ought to be addressed up close and personal, not just observed or looked at from far away like the Psalter map.

¹³ Alexander, Hartley Burr. *Native American Mythology*. (New York: Dover Publications, 2015).

¹⁴ Baxter, R. *Bestiaries and Their Users in the middle Ages*. (Courtauld Institute. London: Sutton Publishing, 1998).

Chapter 4: To that End

I try to address the unknown in my art, using monsters to give that vague concept form. However, I do not want everything laid bare, which would take away from the curiosity that naturally comes from dealing with something one does not understand. To that end I place my main subjects, off-center letting portions vanish into the margins. This effect it is meant to show that there is something going on beyond what is seen. The viewer is given a glimpse of what is coming out from the dark shadows, the mist of the unknown. The dark itself is a physical fear for me specifically, but the unknown can be anything that obscures one's sight and limits perception.

In the beginning I said that my work addresses mythology inspired through fear. With that said, my goal is not to scare people. I see fear as a type of curiosity, a desire to comprehend something that is otherwise vague and hard to explain. I deal with this lack of comprehension through my work and I invite others to do the same; to closely investigate the beasts I draw, to let the eye wander through myriad lines and shapes that I use to give the unknown substance. Whether the viewer chooses to confront that fear to satisfy their curiosity or retreat and observe from a safe distance is completely up to each one's constitution. It is a choice I make every time I pick up my pen.



Figure 11: Thomas Bowman, *Slick*, detail, Pen on paper, 46 x 42 in, 2017

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