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Introduction//How Deep Is Your Goth? Gothic Art in the Contemporary

'Gothic' is a borrowed term in contemporary art, applied liberally to artworks centring on death, deviance, the erotic macabre, psychologically charged sites, disembodied voices and fragmented bodies. A paradigmatic example is provided by Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*, room-sized installations such as *Passage Dangereux* (1997) or *Red Room (Child)* and *Red Room (Parents)* (both 1994). In these dimly lit, inaccessible spaces, phantom bodies, loaded objects and body fragments populate a forbidden world steeped with the artist's memories of an unhappy childhood centring on her overbearing father. 'Each Cell deals with fear',[1] the artist has claimed; particularly the *Red Rooms*, with their blood-red colour and title lifted (accidentally?) straight out of *The Shining* (1980), are Gothic on many levels. Like a Gothic novelist, the artist sets the scene in an unfamiliar and frightening place; the ghost of young Bourgeois occupies the *Cells* like the virginal female trespasser of so many Gothic novels, from Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Bourgeois' *Cells* moreover enact what literary critic Anne Williams considers the core of the Gothic narrative: 'Gothic plots are family plots; Gothic romance is family romance'.[2] A ghastly family secret is similarly the subject of Paul McCarthy's disturbing, mechanized sculpture *Cultural Gothic* (1992), in which a father obligingly passes on to his son the technique (delight?) of zoophilia; *Cultural Gothic* is aptly titled in so far as it performs another standard Gothic theme, i.e., the revelation of an unspeakable family 'curse' by a curious innocent (a plot device present already in Horace Walpole's seminal *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* [1764]). Along similar lines, artist Charles Ray's *Family Romance* (1993) is a sculpture of a father, mother, young son and toddler daughter all monstrously reaching exactly the same height. With its dwarfed father figure, *Family Romance* can be read as embodying a crisis in the diminishing role of fatherhood, a theme also central to Gothic literature and exemplified in Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797). Because Gothic literature foregrounded the symbolic rather than biological role of paternity, it has been credited with pre-empting concepts later formalized in Lacanian psychoanalysis as the Law-of-the-Father, itself a notion applied to the unfolding history of modern art.

A recent generation of artists often present a more literal and deliberate updating of the Gothic, witnessed in Banks Violette's sculptural installations exploring a suburban, tabloid Goffick; David Altmejd's werewolves and glitter Goth; and Swiss artist Olaf Breuning's monsters, psychopaths and aliens. The photographs of Dutch artist Inez van Lamsweerde's semi-human fantasy figures have been likened to contemporary Frankensteins, of the robotic super-model variety. German artist Gregor Schneider's labyrinthine architectural installations cross the Gothic love for haunted houses and uncharted dungeons with a film noir scene-of-the-crime. Many of British artist Tacita Dean's works explore the faded ruins of history – the abandoned Palast der Republik in East Berlin (*Palast*, 2004); a disintegrating modern masterpiece, the Casa Serralves in Porto (*Boots*, 2003); or the shipwrecked boat of the doomed yachtsman Donald Crowhurst (*Teignmouth Electron*, 1999), in a kind of narrative-heavy, modernist Gothic.

Like the original literature, Gothic contemporary art is principally Anglo-Saxon, with a sprinkling of excellent examples from continental Europe as well; however there is also a Latin American, arguably Catholic strain which looks closely at rituals of death, from Mexican artist Teresa Margolles' explorations of the morgues of Mexico City, to Colombian Doris Salcedo's evocative, tomb-like sculptures. Andres Serrano, an American photo-based artist of Afro-Cuban/Honduran origins, is well-known for his large-scale, painterly colour photographs of corpses, the *Morgue* series (1992–). Historically, the precedents stretch from Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) to Edvard Munch (1863–1944) to Francis Bacon (1909–92). Whilst all the artists listed here traffick in Gothic themes – among them death, transgression, patriarchy, ruins, ghosts and the supernatural – it is important to bear in mind that the vast majority of these would never define themselves as 'Gothic' per se. A small group of the artists here knowingly root their work in Gothic sources (Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Banks Violette); but by far the majority in this collection in no way actively claim such a lineage. Even the most Gothic artist here (my vote would have to go to the incomparable, death-obsessed Damien Hirst, who even purchased his very own 'Strawberry Hill', the neo-Gothic Toddington Hall, to house his macabre collection) produces some works which are not Gothic. In the end, 'Gothic' in contemporary art is necessarily a partial term which serves mostly to identify a peculiar, dark sensitivity shared by the artist and the observer who has chosen to respond to the work in this manner.

Although the themes in contemporary Gothic art are grounded in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature, they are today combined unselfconsciously with, among other things, medievalism, Romanticism, skull imagery, science fiction, Victoriana and punk-derived Gothick subcultures – all without concern for the contradictions and anachronisms therein. Such imprecision in no way damages the term, but in fact contributes to making it so evocative and resilient, enriching the discussion around artists as different as Andy Warhol, Janet Cardiff, Paul Pfeiffer and Raymond Pettibon. Lost in this twenty-first-century usage of the term is the Ruskinian equivalence of 'Gothic'

with 'non-classical', or the elongated stone figures and soaring cathedrals of the Middle Ages (notwithstanding contemporary British sculptor Roger Hiorns' *Copper Sulphate Chartres and Copper Sulphate Notre Dame* [1997], models of these medieval churches with their towers and flying buttresses frosted with cerulean crystals). Much less does it concern 'the Goths', nomadic tribesmen from Germany and the Baltics who terrified Europe in the fifth century; these earlier definitions are almost meaningless in contemporary art. Instead, recent artists blur together anything from Goya's blood-soaked *caprichos* to mid-1990s Goth fashion with the founding themes generated in the early literature.

In sum, 'Gothic' in contemporary art is more atmospheric than neatly defined. Generally anti-intellectual and unscientific, the Gothic can spill easily into related terminology, particularly the uncanny but also the grotesque, the abject and horror – yet 'Gothic' retains its unique, evocative power. The Gothic is a studied, adopted stance, whereas the uncanny is more an accident of the unconscious. If the uncanny is Freudian, then the Gothic is Lacanian. Unlike the grotesque, the Gothic is aesthetic and seductive. Whilst reliant on the human figure, the Gothic can also be manifested in the landscape genre; the grotesque, though sometimes architectural, is almost exclusively figurative. And the art history behind the grotesque stretches as far back as the Roman Emperor Nero; the Gothic's lineage reaches at furthest to the mid-eighteenth century (notwithstanding its eroticized fictionalization of the Middle Ages). Unlike the abject, the Gothic is cultured, sensual and affected. The abject is neglected, the Gothic refined; the abject is filthy, the Gothic merely cobwebbed and dusty. And not all horror is Gothic; for example many slasher films are not. Horror must be to some degree stagey and symbolic in order also to qualify as Gothic. Whilst the Gothic delights in trauma and terror, it asks for more than just straight, uncomplicated gore. Along with 'horror' but unlike the other terms listed above, it is regularly applied to popular culture, in particular to fashion (sweeping, body-conscious, shroud-like black gowns by Thierry Mugler; skull-inspired jewellery by Simon Costin), music (often cousins to heavy metal, e.g., Alice Cooper, Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson, Cradle of Filth, Sisters of Mercy), and a strain of recent television serials (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Six Feet Under, CSI, Desperate Housewives, The League of Gentlemen*), all attesting to the Gothic's remarkable ability to update itself perpetually according to current tastes, politics and fears.

Always present in the Gothic is this: two things that should have remained apart – for example, madness and science; the living and the dead; technology and the human body; the pagan and the Christian; innocence and corruption; the suburban and the rural – are brought together, with terrifying consequences. The Gothic often involves the unravelling of a hideous mystery. Its characters are

secretive; their sins disclosed slowly and suspensefully, with relish. For this reason *American Gothic* (1930) is such an effective title for Grant Wood's austere portrait of that stiff Midwestern couple. Only the title masterfully suggests something sinister is afoot; it is nowhere in sight, existing possibly behind the clean white porch but, like Dorian Gray's sins, mostly in the viewer's mind.

The Gothic is anti-bourgeois and rejects such values as hard work, family, good cheer and common sense. Despite the sadist's and the vampire's exquisite manners, or the middle-class upbringing of the teenagers populating American suburban horror films, the Gothic refuses the norms of bourgeois behaviour. Clarity and wholesomeness are by definition distant from the Gothic. It is anti-capitalist, furnished with un-bought heirlooms, and utterly antithetical to the packaging and the bright lights of the shopping mall. It defies capitalism's laws of real estate; spectacular, unrefurbished properties remain for centuries in the hands of unemployed vampires; castles spread tentacularly via dungeons and secret passageways; disused replicants occupy highly desirable, cavernous warehouse spaces. The Gothic tends towards the dramatic, art-directed and excessive. The cinematic *mise en scènes* of Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson are Gothic in part owing to their eerie overtones, but also – importantly – because of their polish and high production values. Similarly, Rachel Whiteread's monumental *House* is Gothic; her small-scale water bottles probably are not. (Her plaster-cast mattresses, borderline.)

The Gothic is escapist, retreating into distant landscapes, lost eras and outlandish personal appearance. It celebrates depression as a kind of desirable, living death. This inclination to transcend the ordinary, cultivate the anti-social and experiment with the sexual unknown makes Gothic a perfect haven for adolescence. It is no accident that artists such as Jake and Dinos Chapman, Sue de Beer and Richard Hawkins indulge in teenage culture and behaviour; or that American horror film has an entire teen-flick sub-genre; or that the protagonist of *American Psycho* flaunts his youth and exhibits an arrested personality. The Gothic is regressive, even juvenile.

Nevertheless, the Gothic can be as elaborate as Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle, or as subtle as Louise Bourgeois' sophisticated, surrealist intertwining of sculptural form, autobiography and personal symbols. Contemporary women artists whose work can be described as Gothic often update the genre's nasty tendency of reducing bodies to pieces (Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman), whilst others follow the Gothic tradition of retelling complex events through the symbolic use of evocative, narrative-laden imagery (Teresa Margolles, Catherine Sullivan – or Stan Douglas and Douglas Gordon, for that matter). Other women artists re-enact the Gothic novel's intrepid female heroine, boldly exploring forbidden landscapes (Janet Cardiff, Tacita Dean, Jane and Louise Wilson). They force their

chosen sites to give up their secrets not unlike Isabella travelling the hidden passages of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, or Clarice Starling seeking out the serial killer's suburban lair in *The Silence of the Lambs*. The performance of still other Gothic stock characters recurs elsewhere among contemporary artists: Mark Dion as 'the mad scientist'; Jonathan Meese as the vampiresque, Poe-like figure concocting tales under the effects of inebriation; Mike Nelson and Gregor Schneider as architects of unwelcoming labyrinths. Jeff Wall stages his own elaborate macabre scenarios, phantom of the opera-like, and Dan Graham builds modernist ruins and follies.

In any case, unlike post-1960s art historical terms such as 'performance art' or 'post-minimalist', the appellation 'Gothic' in art can only ever provide an incomplete picture of an artistic practice. And, just as not all the artists actually apply the term 'Gothic' to their work, likewise not all the anthologized critics literally refer to the Gothic in analysing the art – although some do, among them Jeff Wall on Dan Graham; Nancy Spector on Douglas Gordon; Hal Foster on Robert Gober; and Jonathan Jones on Smithson, Matta-Clark, et al. Many critics discuss Gothic themes without necessarily citing the Gothic per se, i.e., Amelia Jones on the Law-of-the-Father in Paul McCarthy; Andrew O'Hagan on the ghosts occupying Gregor Schneider's inhospitable places. Specialists will note that there is little in this art-oriented anthology drawn from the vast body of Gothic literary theory and film theory; I have only chosen select examples pertinent to the issues which overlap into contemporary art debates, such as post-colonialism (Gayatri Spivak on the latent imperialism in *Frankenstein* and other Gothic classics); Otherness (Kobena Mercer on how Michael Jackson borrows from the Gothic to portray his own multi-layered cross-identities, between white/black, male/female, innocent/decadent); and gender (Carol Clover on the recurring use in horror film of a stock female character, the Final Girl, to sustain the narrative).

As introduced in the first chapter, 'A Thematic Framework', the Gothic remains indebted to an expansive group of broadly related themes invented by Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, et al., in the early fiction writing (alongside their many incarnations on the screen). These themes – with subsequent variants and sub-genres – are distilled in Anne Williams' *Art of Darkness: A Poetic of Gothic*, while Mark Edmundson revisits them in contemporary mainstream American culture, from Oprah to US Christian fundamentalism. Some of these (often overlapping) themes form the basis for five chapters of the book, beginning with the most essential: death, excess and terror (chapter 3, 'Modern Gothic'). This is followed by chapter 4, 'The Creature: Alien Beings and Alien Bodies' (monsters, skeletons, mutants, and the Other); chapter 5, 'Transgressing Females and the Name-of-the-Father' (a family curse or secret, often brought to light by an intrepid young woman, attesting to Gothic's early awareness of paternity's metaphorical function, interpreted by some as an *avant la lettre* dramatization of Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the Name-of-the-Father); chapter 6, 'The Uncanny: Doubles and Other Ghosts' (split personality, the unconscious, the body in pieces, the return of a ghostly past, and hallucination); and chapter 7, 'Castles, Ruins and Labyrinths' (haunted, hidden or dark places, both symbolic and real). Other Gothic themes also surface in contemporary art, among them persecution and paranoia (for example, in the work of Janet Cardiff); defiance and retribution in the face of Christian morality (Robert Gober); the loss of innocence and squandering of youth (Sue de Beer); a taste for death, ritual and bloodshed (Damien Hirst); and sexual perversions which run to necrophilia, rape, incest and blood-lust (Jake and Dinos Chapman). A significant sub-theme is the mismanagement of technology, which ends up serving death rather than life – a recurrent plot line from *Frankenstein* to *Blade Runner* to *The Blair Witch Project*, in recent art explored by artists as different as Mark Dion and Paul Pfeiffer.

Each of these five chapters begins with the philosophers and theorists who, usually without referencing the Gothic specifically, have intellectually shaped the framework behind recurring Gothic themes: Jean Baudrillard on the incorporation of such phenomena as AIDS, computer viruses, drugs and terrorism in updating our ideas of Evil; Michel Foucault on the relationships between power, body and soul; Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of it; Sigmund Freud's seminal definition of 'the Uncanny' (which, like the Gothic, is best expressed through literary example, e.g., E.T.A Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'); and Julia Kristeva's equally defining work, *Powers of Horror*, which examines primarily abjection and defilement as signals of outsider status. These excerpts are followed in each chapter by noted cultural theory texts, some of which analyse in depth the very essence of Gothic. These include Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows*, on the insistent symbolic use of skin in Gothic imagery, from deathly pale Dracula to Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's fundamental *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, which examines the interlocking, formulaic nature of literary Gothic conventions, for example the use of the veil gradually to unmask the central mystery – as well as to barely conceal Gothic's perpetual erotic subtext. Alongside these are critics who examine such central concepts as the uncanny (Mike Kelley); vampirism (Slavoj Zizek); and ruins (Douglas Crimp). Accompanying the analytical texts are examples of the fiction writers who have updated the genre, among them Bret Easton Ellis, William Gibson, Anne Rice, Stephen King, Patrick McGrath and Umberto Eco.

Chapter 2 does not follow the theory-fiction-art/interpretation format of chapters 3–7. Examining specifically the Gothic's manifestations in contemporary

art, it moves from Mike Kelley's post-industrial, late twentieth-century 'Urban Gothic'; to Christoph Grünenberg's sweeping, interdisciplinary catalogue and exhibition, 'Gothic' (1996), a post-human, predominantly figurative Gothic; to post-9/11, escapist American Gothic which peaked around the 2004 Whitney Biennial; and finally to a homelier relationship with death and the supernatural in such 2006 exhibitions as 'Blur of the Otherworldly'[3] and 'Dark'.[4] These are a select sampling of contemporary art exhibitions of a Gothic nature; also worth citing are Jose Luis Brea's 'The Last Days' (1992),[5] examining the image of death in the age of AIDS; 'Apocalypse', curated by Norman Rosenthal (2000),[6] subtitled 'Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art' and which, like 'Regarding Beauty' (1999),[7] attests to a Gothic-like aestheticization of death in late twentieth-century art. The roster of Gothic-inspired exhibitions would also recall 'In the darkest hour there may be Light: The Murderme Collection' (Damien Hirst, 2006–7, which includes Sarah Lucas' terribly Gothic neon coffin, *New Religion [blue]*, 1999);[8] 'Le Voyage Interieur', with its psychedelic, decadent slant (2005–6);[9] 'All the Pretty Corpses' (2005);[10] 'Belladonna' (1997)[11] and innumerable lesser-known exhibitions with suitably dark titles like 'The Gothic Unconscious', 'Scream', 'Playing Among Ruins', 'American Gothic', 'Darkness Visible' and 'Morbid Curiosity'. Alongside these have been popular, well-received historical surveys in a similar vein, among them 'Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination' (Tate Britain, London, 2006) and 'The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult' (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2005), as well as curator Robert Storr's parallel investigation into the contemporary grotesque.[12]

Why Gothic, why now? My sense is that there is among a recent generation of twenty-first-century artists a deliberate turning away from the canons of contemporary art established in the 1960s, which culminated in the late conceptualism of the 1990s. Terms such as 'Gothic' – or, say, 'psychedelia', or even 'beauty' – are refreshingly extraneous to that canon, which has been solidly institutionalized in both the academy and the commercial art system. After Clement Greenberg, in 1947, described Jackson Pollock's paintings of the mid-1940s as 'Gothic' and in the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe,[13] the term fell more or less into disuse for new art until the 1980s, in the wake of deconstructivist literary theory as well as the emergence of cyber-Goth subculture. Having bowed out of contemporary art history for some thirty years only enhances the association of the Gothic as a haven for outsiders – despite its current embrace by the art world – beyond the conventions of history and society; thus it suits a historically independent strand of subjective, highly idiosyncratic art, often labour-intensive and stylized, as informed by popular culture as it is by art history, from pre- to postmodern. Perhaps Ruskin's Gothic/non-classical pairing in some ways remains valid, with 'classical' broadly replaced by all that is newly conservative in art as in politics and society at large. Gothic remains non-, anti- and counter- by definition, always asserting that the conventional values of life and enlightenment are actually less instructive than darkness and death. The Gothic returns, in sum, as an enduring term particularly serviceable in periods of crisis – today as it did in the late eighteenth century, as an escape valve for the political, artistic and technological crises underway.

1 Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and Interviews 1923–1997*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist (London: Violette Editions, 1998) 205.

2 Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 22–3; reprinted in this volume, 26–8.

3 Curated by Mark Alice Durant and Jane D. Marsching (Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland).

4 Curated by Jan Grosfeld and Rein Wolfs (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam).

5 Pabellón de España, Seville.

6 Royal Academy of Art, London.

7 Curated by Neil Benezra and Olga M. Viso, Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

8 Serpentine Gallery, London.

9 Curated by Alex Farquharson and Alexis Vaillant, Espace EDF Electra, Paris.

10 Curated by Hamza Walker, The Renaissance Society, Chicago.

11 Curated by Kate Bush and Emma Dexter, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

12 The fifth Site Santa Fe International Biennial Exhibition, 2004.

13 Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose 1945–49*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 166.