

**BEAUTIFUL/
DECAY**

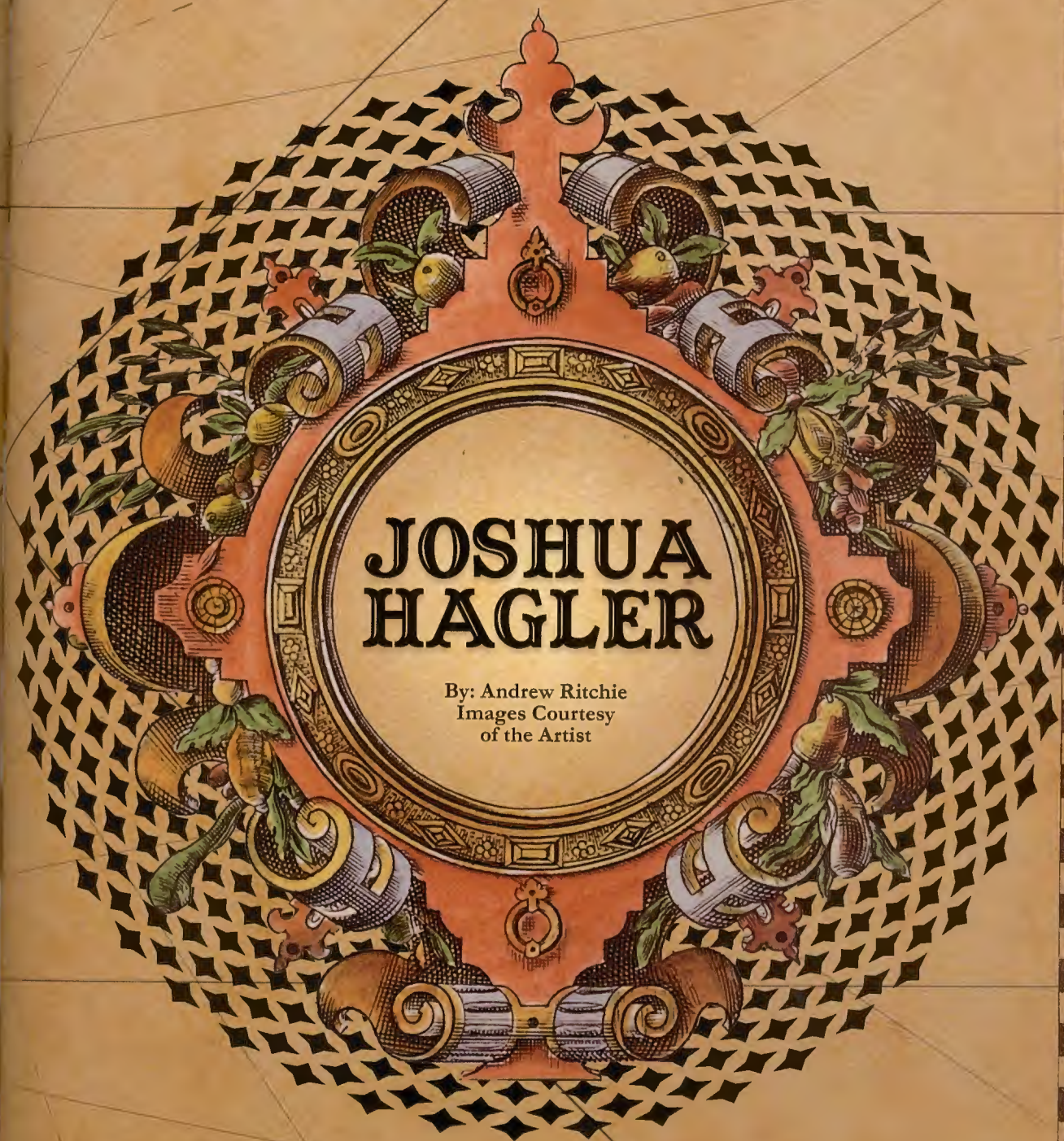


PSYCHONAUTS



JOSHUA HAGLER

By: Andrew Ritchie
Images Courtesy
of the Artist



" Though this be madness, yet there is method in it. "

—Shakespeare

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To Joshua Hagler, mythmaking is that method. A myth can be anything—from religion to reason—any frame we create to blunt the infinite eruption of shark teeth in our little mouth of madness. If society frames our hermetically sealed panic room, consider the wilds outside an endless game of Frogger—only without lane lines or any forward orientation. Hagler (aka Hags/Uncle O'Hagsy/Sweetheart) sees madness as an innate part of nature, rather than an eccentric malady. This intelligent spin on life has tailored his opinions of the more extreme interpretations of "reality." His viewpoint on American religion is admirably nonpartisan, even though he was indoctrinated into the confounding clutch of evangelical Christianity. In a sense, he's more comfortable pulling the threads than destroying the sweater. In his words:

I wouldn't say that I'm trying to combat religion. I owe everything to religion. I'm highly uncomfortable with it, but as long as human behavior exists, so too will religious behavior. Much better to sink into the experience and see where it takes you. You know how G'mork aligns himself with the Nothing in The Neverending Story? I'm like that, except I have bigger fangs. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about.

Yes, while it can be a constant source of frustration for progressive thinkers, religion is also extremely compelling for its primacy and mystery; more specifically, the mystery of why people need mystery. A recent painting by Hagler, "Gnosis," adopts the Greek-rooted word meaning "the knowledge of spiritual mysteries"¹. Visually, Gnosis resembles mitosis:

it's a fusion and Rorschach-splitting of elements. Some are recognizable, such as butterfly wings, a water droplet splash, and a (cyborg?) figure's head. Some can only be described by the weight of the paint: alternately slumping, hefty, and sharp. The remaining information requires an incisive interpretation describing the duality of the brain and of the mind, as well as our own distorted reflections and interpretation of the world we inhabit.

It's a world where bees get drunk off old fruit, dogs draw dizzying sidewalk circles just to sniff each other's asses, and elephants get sad. In paint, Hagler renders it in with virtuoso inventiveness, his strokes striking canvas with a smashing sludge of gravity, or the finesse of a stretched-bubblegum lacework, usually anchored to a dominant blotch. The tone vibrates between light and dark with a frequency that makes his body of work ambiguous and reveals Hagler's quest as one of questions, not answers. His paintings are exuberant for their physical handling, if not for the subject matter. The wet-on-wet process of oil he employs is game for wild flights of spontaneous reworking—or potential kitchen-sink ugly browns—but he swims through the mix without churning the silted bottom, even while mimicking a Photoshop blur tool. In tackling the grim and the absurd in this way, he's standing on the backs of Bacon and Bosch and screwing in a light bulb.

The bulb becomes a blossom as Hagler screws in/screws up the traditional media distinctions between the electronic and the alchemical. His 2010 work "The Mind Recedes the Blood is Wise the Soundless Mouth is Open" applies a

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head—Maya-modeled by Hagler and printed on canvas—to another canvas to mix and mingle with his mellifluous oil. Another recent piece—a serial work—“Transfiguration of O” is essentially a morphing animation, broken into frames (and I’m sure that the F-word didn’t elude him in the composition of it). The always-shrinking head, again computer-modeled, moves toward total degradation and eventual subsumption by a candy plastic toy-melt, which completely marries his 3D work to his 2D. Ironically, it’s some of his most painterly work, and it’s not a painting.

To execute the paint/print pieces, Hagler dishes that “it’s just a matter of repositioning and relighting the model in Maya and then sending it to the printers. As I have them printed on canvas, I can choose to paint directly on the canvas that comes back to me from the printer, or I can cut it out and collage it onto a larger canvas. “The Mind Recedes...” was the first piece I made by collaging the print onto the larger canvas.”

Hagler’s Evangelist series directly reifies and remixes the recent Christian subculture with four paint-on-print-on-canvas sandwiches. These portrait busts are hit with raking light, and are cold but detailed as they cast distant asance glances. The faces, illusively modeled but physically flat, show digital distortions and warps, each evangelist a bad transmission of his true self. The bodies, only shown down to the sternum, take on degrees of information on par with Arcimboldo allegories. They begin to resemble Hagler’s junkyard landscapes (such as “Return to the Temple”) more than any human corpus. The four figures are closely linked to the artist’s past and present. As Hagler explains:

They include my evangelical Christian father; a famous cartoonist whose comics and animation I used to learn how to draw and with whom I would later in life I would become friends; a homeless friend who has developed a complex prediction about major events the year 2012; and a former neighbor who, in 2007, suffering from emotional trauma, started a fire which destroyed our mutual apartment building.

More than religious icons, then, these works relate to the externalizing of personality. Most artists ultimately invert their often internal wellsprings of information to communicate to an audience—there’s a little evangelism in all of us. So what of Hagler? He rightly points out that evangelism is just the spreading of news. It’s usually spreading the word of something good (i.e. eternal salvation or how much you saved by switching to Geico), But as Hagler notes, sometimes it can be...more ambiguous:

I’m dealing more with how evangelism works, or how malleable our ideas of reality are when we want to shape it to support a particular belief structure. It’s this abstract process that I’m interested in, more so than a political or social agenda about evangelism as a religious movement.

That’s not to downplay the presence of Christian influence in his work. If it’s mentioned in the first sentence of his artist statement, it’s important:

Likely resulting from my formative indoctrination into a variety of American Christian communities, my compulsion to utilize religious content, upon which I develop both practice and subject, does not emerge from a coolly removed thesis, but rather from intense personal necessity.



OPPOSITE TOP

"A Fossilizing Towards, The Name Engorged by Capillarity" 2010
 Plastic toys, fire hose, copper, aluminum, wood, insulation foam.
 68" x 44" x 89"

OPPOSITE BOTTOM

"Love is a Fire" 2008-09
 Starched pioneer dress, LED lights, moths, glass rods, plexiglass,
 acrylic paint, wood. Dimensions variable.

ABOVE

"Following a final rescue attempt from the mausoleum of human insignifi-
 cance, reductio ad absurdum." 2009
 Oil on canvas. 23" x 20"

PREVIOUS PAGE

"The only hero for me is he with the singular task, the Fireman of Malta, who
 fights that constant condition, fire, and always loses, expects to lose, knows
 the inevitability of loss and yet elects to fight on knowing." 2009
 Oil on canvas. 48" x 60"





PREVIOUS PAGE
"Three Heads (after Bacon)" 2010
Pfaugler print. 11" x 8.5" each.



RIGHT
"The Mind Recedes the Blood is Wise the
Soundless Mouth is Open" 2010
Digital 3D model, oil on canvas. 78" x 110"





Nonreligious people are typically derided (or dreaded) as unfeeling, but there's real fire in Hagler's response to religion. His devotion to his work is, dare I say, monastic, as evidenced by his recent discoveries during his LKV residency in Trondheim, Norway:

There was an immediate disorientation that brought me into a deeply creative space. I eat and sleep much less. I pay little attention to the time of day. I feel very present with the work. I now understand how much I needed this, how much I was craving it.

So is he now a bona fide psychonaut? His response:

I wasn't familiar with the word psychonaut before you introduced the idea to me...I often feel like one, especially since I've been here in Norway, not so much while I'm dreaming, but while I'm doing whatever mundane thing that I'm doing. If I wanted to answer yes to your question, I'd have to conceive of reality as a kind of dream, which isn't such a stretch. One thing I've really struggled with over the past year or two is trying to remain present within an experience, rather than being stuck in this state where I feel as if I'm watching it unfold in front of me, without being able to have any control over my emotions or actions. This goes along with the existentialist idea of the Absurd I think, to see your own actions as mechanical, to know that your ability to freely choose does not negate your contingency.

In this metaphor where we refer to reality as a dream, you might imagine a wild place—beneath the dream, beneath your feet—as you pass through it—as an engine that creates

phenomena. It doesn't have meaning in of itself, or impose or acknowledge something like a moral order—positivity and negativity would be empty concepts in the wild place—and this perpetually colliding, innately violent kinetic disorder is too maddening to experience directly. We protect ourselves by constructing concepts, morality, labels, compartments and so on. This is how we remain sane. I'm not convinced that there is a big difference between sanity and insanity. We decide someone is insane once they become too socially burdensome. When we really probe into other people's personal beliefs, we find strange or irrational ideas, but we don't say this person is insane, ultimately because they haven't yet become a managerial liability. This kernel of kinetic disorder that lives in each of us is, in my opinion, the inability to impose healthy delusions over a perpetual uncertainty that we all live with. In the metaphor of the wild place beneath our feet, uncertainty is that wild place. Delusion is the order we impose over it to make ourselves healthy. Madness is a natural condition and some of us are more or less helpless to pull away from it.

Hagler investigates such blurry boundaries through the rawness of his pain—the hulking, thudding meat dropping into heaping collisions, often with the fleshy redness of wringing-out raw ground beef. The uncertainty Hagler uncovers is claustrophobic, screaming from interior scenes of vertically stacked people on staircases, in hallways, seemingly en pointe and uneasy in tight spaces. But “some of us are helpless to pull away from it,” as Hagler says. Does the artist come from a lineage of socially burdensome madmen? His Ancestor series in sepia and white seems to uncoil generations of existential angst and spill it, pinched and

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OPPOSIT
*The Juice
Oil on can



swirled, within the silhouettes of four family members.

Closer to present (but equally anachronistic) is "Purity Ball," Hagler's painting/sculpture/installation from 2008-2009. Presumably, his family took part in this father-daughter ritual which, in the artist's hands, becomes a slithering, pink, butterfly-bedecked sensory salvo. When linked to "I am Ready to Believe," the corollary dog-collar-and-candle confection, the effect is doubled. So I had to ask: How was the Purity Ball?

Fantastic. I gave away my twelve-year-old daughter and got a seven-year-old in exchange. I think we all know who got the better end of that deal. The joke around the rectory is that you go for the ball, but you stay for the prize.

Pursuing heterodox positions is how Hagler keeps stirring the pot, rolling the stone, breaking the frame. Many of his works address the Big Power in all its current incarnations (religion and dynasty, but also speculative and capitalistic forces such as Big Oil). They're potent because he skirts trite, moralistic sanctimony—a far cry from pointed social realism. He fights the fossilizing of society by staring into it. Hagler attacks this literally with a Chapman-esque faucet of toys entitled "A

Fossilizing Towards, The Name Engorged by Capillarity." Like the best of his work, it's a uroboros, a mythology-in-progress about mythology in progress. It's unfortunate that Uncle O'Hagsy doesn't work in this vein more often, as he explains the reason being largely practical:

Sculpture is a pain in the ass. They are expensive to make and there is nowhere to put them when I'm done. They cost too much to ship. "A Fossilizing..." was recently one of ten finalists for this Italian thing called [the] Celeste Prize and [it] was to exhibit in New York. The problem was, they wouldn't pay for shipping, so I painfully withdrew from the competition. Now I am about to move to Italy and I have nowhere to put the thing. I am frantically searching for a home for it before I leave in February. It might end up being destroyed like "Love is a Fire." Help.

What a sobering return to reason. Even psychonauts need to touch pavement on occasion, it would seem. But to understand myth and reality as opposites would be to ignore Josh Hagler's work. I leave you with his parting shot:

I'm asking whether we can position myth and reality as diametric opposites. Myth perhaps is a collective concept

OPPOSITE

"The Juice from the Earth was called Oil, and The Chase Rises with It" 2010
Oil on canvas. 59" x 78"

BELOW

"Golgotha" 2008
Oil on canvas. 72" x 108"





ABOVE
"Evangelist 1" 2010
Digital 3D model, oil on canvas. 61.5" x 48"



ABOVE
"Evangelist 1" 2010
Digital 3D model, oil on canvas. 61.5" x 48"



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ABOVE
"The Cave" 20
Oil on canvas.

of heightened reality that we make over a period of time, and for that reason they contain a lot of what we regard as truth, with certain repeating themes that reflect something about our own lives. We can use various instruments to take measurements, we can regard something as knowledge once we've repeated the results of an experiment, we can do any number of things to attempt to objectively document some aspect of reality, but the results of these attempts aren't in of themselves meaningful. It requires someone to inject meaning into it, and that, perhaps, is the start of a myth. It's the end of objectivity, but not the end of truth; it just so happens that subjective truths tend to mean more to us. From that point, we depend on myth to understand reality. The myths of our own day go without names because we don't recognize them as myths.

Religion is abstract and complex. My view is that religion internalizes myth, relies on its narrative to bring meaning into the practice and belief structure of the religion. The myth can be front and center or integrated so deeply that the religion's followers aren't really conscious of it. Like current mythology-in-progress, the religions of our day also go without names

since they also aren't recognized as religions. This gives them the chance to incubate unnoticed until they gain a large enough following that they earn their names.

I don't think there is a rational life. That's a delusion we give ourselves to feel healthy. That doesn't mean we can't follow a logical progression within a particular framework, but the logic depends on the frame. Beyond the frame, the limitations become an immediate obstruction. We realize that to depend on reason alone we are literally incapable of making the easiest day-to-day decisions. We are forced to take a "leap to faith" as Kierkegaard put it. Faith, we realize is the simple acknowledgment of the limitations imposed by reason. Making art is an act of faith. There is no objectively good reason to make art; that's why people sound so goofy when they try to defend it.

All of my work depends on an internal logic structure, because I need some sense of direction when I'm making it. But very soon, each and every time, I make the choice to depart from it. If there is any redeeming quality about my work, it's in the places where I trade reason for intuition.



ABOVE
"The Cave" 2009
Oil on canvas. 18" x 26"

ABOVE
"Dog Upon the Leveret (The Succession of Hunger from Sorrow)" 2009
Oil on canvas. 48" x 96"