

**Studies on Themes and Motifs
in Literature**

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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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**Rewriting Texts
Remaking Images**

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by
Leslie Boldt, Corrado Federici,
and Ernesto Virgulti



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21.

Unspeakable Anatomies

Catherine Heard

One of the primary themes in my work as an artist has been the depiction of monstrous bodies, based on the history of science and medicine. Certain works I have made, although they depict mutated bodies, have different roots and address other concerns. For example *Sleep*, 2002 (Figure 21.1), is a sculptural installation that was shaped by millennial apocalypticism and by the 9/11 disaster, which occurred between the early developmental stages of the work and its execution. The sculptures in the installation express anxiety about the body's integrity and—by extension—the integrity of societal structures.

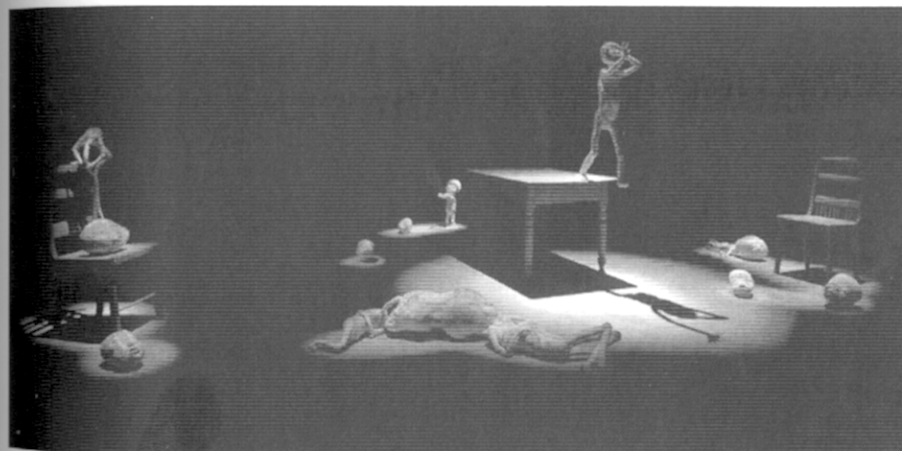


Figure 21.1 Catherine Heard. *Sleep*, 2002. Mixed media installation (fabric and ink over armatures, found objects). Installation at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

After completing the work, I became aware of similar concerns about the collapse of coherent structures manifested in the works of other contemporary sculptors. I hypothesize that a novel genre of sculpture is emerging, in which body forms are depicted on the verge of syntactic collapse. In this essay, I discuss the apocalyptic body as it appears in the hyperreal sculptures of John Isaacs and Evan Penny. Note, however, that the apocalyptic body can be expressed in any sculptural style or material. My decision to restrict my

discussion to the works of two sculptors working within a specific genre is aimed at delineating my hypothesis as succinctly as possible, by providing an in-depth discussion of a few works that embody its key aspects.

The word apocalypse is derived from the Greek word meaning to uncover or disclose. In relation to the body, this definition evokes death and anatomical dissection. Yet, what the apocalypse ultimately threatens to expose is antithetical to the orderly method of the anatomist who reveals structures that reassure us of the body's normality. Even when they are corrupted by disease, the body's normal structures remain explicable. While good, old-fashioned, end of time millennialism promises a reassuring final accounting of good and evil and a utopian future that supersedes the chaos of revelation, postmodern readings of the apocalypse are convoluted and contradictory.

The sublime aspect of the apocalypse arises formless and undefined, akin to an unmappable abyss or invisible black hole. We do not know what shape the apocalypse will take: whether it is past, or yet to come. Its looming absence is characterized by a sense of endless deferral, akin to Blanchot's disaster,

When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no time or future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment (1).

We seemingly live at the edge of the apocalypse; it is imminent, yet in abeyance. It so far exceeds our ability to imagine it, that, if it were already upon us—and it may well be—we would have no way of knowing. We would be unable to read the signs. In his introduction to *Twentieth Century Apocalypse: Forecasts and Aftermaths*, James Berger proposes the possibility that we already inhabit a post apocalyptic age,

In representations after the second World War, the apocalypse became a matter of retrospection. It had already happened. The world was a ruin, a remnant. More destruction could occur, but it could only be more of the same. Nothing more could be revealed. All subsequent, post-apocalyptic destruction would be absolutely without meaning, mere representation.

Berger draws the reader's attention to the apocalyptic tone that has emerged in poststructuralist theory, with its emphasis on "shattering, rupture and the sublime" (390–92). Manifested in language—for example, Derrida's terms "trace, erasure, différance, and dissemination"—these concepts bring uncertainty to the fore and undermine stability. They reveal language as a mem-

brane that is permeable and fragile, subject to rents that can be re-sewn into new forms that are potentially mask-like, deceptive, and hybrid. Similarly, the body within postmodernism is reduced to a wraith or an osmotic sack. Mutable and insolid, the body is penetrable and vulnerable to infection.

The corruption of the body's boundaries and its dissolution into formlessness is a nightmarish possibility. The most common metaphor for this descent into chaos is of a cancerous growth replacing normal structures with rapidly proliferating cells, but even a rash on the skin is a breach of boundary that reveals the permeability of the body's apparent solidity. We comprehend the universality of this anxiety when we observe young children who are deeply disturbed by any disruption of the skin's surface and demand that any wound or mark—no matter how small—be hidden from their view with a Band-Aid. In Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian novel, *Never Let Me Go*, this fear is magnified when his classmates convince Tommy that the small cut on his elbow could "unzip" his skin, and he anxiously contrives to hold his arm rigidly outstretched to prevent this catastrophe. Simultaneously fascinating and horrifying, the disruption of surface reveals the abyss concealed within all living bodies. The abyss can be conceptualized as Johanna Zylynska's feminine sublime, which undermines positivistic Enlightenment values of the masculine sublime, substituting them with the potential of an uncontrolled encounter with overflowing excess or an abysmal lack (12). Bodily events suggesting permeability, flux, and dissolution are reminders of the ultimate dissolution of the body that occurs after death.

One of the phenomena that led me to hypothesize an apocalyptic anatomy was the difficulty of describing certain works of art by John Isaacs and Evan Penny. Normally, when describing sculptures of the body, we rely on descriptions of anatomy and gesture markers—for example, "a muscular man with his arms extended triumphantly." Apocalyptic anatomies are unspeakable in two senses—they depict abject forms that appear to be in imminent danger of collapsing into disordered matter and they exceed the normal descriptive terms used to evoke images of sculptural works.

Sculptures of the apocalyptic body have emerged in parallel with second-generation hyperreal sculptural work. They are significantly different from both first generation hyperreal sculptures and other hyperreal sculptures created during the same time period. The first-generation hyperrealist sculptures of Duane Hanson and John De Andrea are unsettling in their excessive inscription of detail. These works function like photorealist paintings or the figures of the wax museum and, although the works also hold secondary social messages or references to art history—for example, Hanson's monumentalization of the invisible figures in society, or De Andrea's reference to Pygmalion in his 1960 sculpture, *The Artist and His Model*—the primary appreciation of the works were related to the viewer's wonder at their veri-

similitude. Indeed, if they were to come to life, these sculptures would enter our living world seamlessly and be absorbed without a ripple.

Second-generation hyperrealist sculptors have expanded their practices beyond mimicry of form, incorporating additional concerns reflecting post-modern aesthetics and criticism. For example, Ron Mueck heightens the psychological impact of the work by manipulating scale, emphasizing the figure's vulnerability through diminished scale, as in *Dead Dad* (1996); or increasing the viewer's discomfort with pathetic emotion by increasing the body's scale, as in *Ghost* (1998) and *Big Man* (2000). Evan Penny similarly manipulated scale in his early works in the late 1970s through the 1990s; and, in recent works, distorts form to recreate in three dimensions the visual effects of photography and Photoshop technology, as in *Aerial* (2005) and *Panagiota* (2007). These works are formal and theoretical explorations, which evoke Baudrillard's writings on the simulacrum. Works by other artists in this second generation group address other social, political, and aesthetic issues. For example, Patricia Piccinini's hybrid human and animal forms activate our fears of genetic manipulation and the blurring boundaries of what it is to be human and Takashi Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998) incarnates the fantasy of the highly sexualized, attenuated teenage body within Japanese manga. These works reflect the anxieties of our age, fracturing reality through extreme distortions, but are not apocalyptic in that they do not exceed descriptive language and categories.

In *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*, Tina Pippin describes the apocalyptic body as one that is monstrous in its fluid and unrestrained sexuality and in its gothic mingling of fear and desire. As in Hieronymus Bosch's depictions of the Garden of Earthly Delights, and William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—in which, the "Devil's account is, that the Messiah fell, and formed a Heaven of what he stole from the Abyss"—the fiction of the apocalypse has a celebratory aspect wherein an ultimate bacchanal releases the body from the stricture of form (Blake 30). It becomes what Elana Gomel, in *The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body*, describes as the entropic body, which lacks the systems of predictability and declines into disorder (416).

In John Isaac's work, disorder is expressed in a variety of ways. While some of the works appear at first glance to refer to codified threats to the body, such as dismemberment, these works are revealed to have shifting, layered readings that confound straightforward interpretation. The dismembered body in *A Necessary Change of Heart* (2000) is juxtaposed against a film loop of a tropical beach. Isaacs has described this early work as "a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge [...] an analogy between the historical development of anatomy and the colonial history of Europe." A similar structure is manifested in *Are you Still Mad at Me* (2001). In the artist's

words, these juxtaposed images represent, "[...] two opposing romantic visual clichés, one horrific in its nature, the other utopian" (Isaacs).

Arguably, neither of these works fully realizes the criteria for an apocalyptic body, yet they resonate with Elana Gomel's observation of the incongruity between the pleasure of narrating the apocalyptic fiction of the body's destruction and its "ultimate object [...] the crystalline New Jerusalem, and image of purity so absolute that it denies the organic messiness of life" (2). More importantly, they prefigure works of Isaacs that incarnate apocalyptic bodies.

The notion of the abyss remains central to a discussion of the apocalyptic body. Pippin likens the abyss to Kristeva's abject, "the place where meaning collapses" (Pippin 67; Kristeva 2). What does a collapse of meaning signify in relation to the human body? Meaning in the body is situated primarily in structures, both visible and invisible. When structure collapses, meaning collapses, the body becomes other—no longer recognizable or comprehensible. The title of John Isaacs' *Matrix of Amnesia* (1998) suggests the body's forgetting of its own structure and boundaries; a process of melding into its surroundings is threatened. The image suggests a loss of inhibitions, the loss of the framework of the skeleton, and the collapse into shapelessness, paralleled to the loss of the framework of morals and inhibitions. This work does not refer to any codified threat to the body, but manifests unnamed—and potentially unnamable—fears of the dissolution of the body's boundaries. It is plausible in its accurate rendition of flesh, yet it simultaneously represents an impossible form.

Certain titles of Isaac's work suggest an apocalyptic overtone—for example, *Bad Miracle (Self-Portrait)*, 2002). In this work the body takes on the nightmare proportions of the morbidly obese. It is only, however, primarily the title that identifies the work as an apocalyptic vision. In his later work, Isaacs depicts bodies that suffer from a structural collapse of meaning and defy the logical approaches of the anatomist and forensic scientist. In *I Can't Help the Way I feel* (2003)—created one year after *Bad Miracle* and five years after *The Matrix of Amnesia*—the collapse of meaning is complete. The anatomy is no longer predictable and does not conform to the orderly structures of the medical textbook; and apocalyptic bodies become manifest. Another work from the same period, *The Unseen Structure* (2002), suggests that the anatomist's cut has the potential to reveal an inverse abyss that overwhelms the logic of space and obliterates rational form. This work reminds us of the connection Kristeva draws between the abject and the sublime wherein, "The time of abjection is double, a time of oblivion and veiled thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation breaks forth" (9).

Because they lack stable markers of anatomical form and gesture, apocalyptic bodies are impossible to describe adequately. Even when certain

works, such as Evan Penny's *L. Faux, CMYK* (2005), are shown to the viewer in the form of photographs, their phenomenological effect on the viewer's body, such as the struggle of the eyes to focus and to render the sculpture intelligible, remains inconceivable except through direct experience. It is impossible to relate this sculpture effectively to someone who has not experienced the work viscerally. John Isaacs achieves the same effect by exhibiting his sculptures in darkened environments where part of the illumination is provided in the form of video projections and light reflected off of disco balls. The flickering lights destabilize the static forms and allude to cellular processes, pulsing blood, and other visceral movements—in effect, creating the illusion of disintegrating form or living corpses.

The presence of the apocalyptic body within the architecture of the museum is a destabilizing point of rupture. It transforms the supposedly neutral white cube into a site-specific installation space that evokes the hospital, morgue, or laboratory. Recalling that architecture references human form not only through its scale and proportion but also through metaphoric relationships, the presence of the apocalyptic body within the museum corrupts the utopian ideals of modernist architecture. It draws our attention to the transience and fragility of the modernist project and sets the stage for an apocalyptic collapse of meaning that threatens all seemingly stable structures.

John Isaacs' *Is More than This More than This* (2000) exemplifies the connection among the apocalyptic body, architecture, and the collapse of meaning. It depicts a corpulent male figure, captured at the moment of transformation from flesh to architecture, or—the key to the work being its ambiguity—from architecture to flesh. One leg is cracked concrete, and the back of the figure, partially hollowed, is a craggy cliff. Rocks tenuously support high modernist buildings composed of horizontal planes of glass, light wood, and white surfaces. Swimming pools and palm trees nestle into the scraggy outcroppings. On closer inspection, the buildings resemble poorly kept hotels, their once gleaming and hopeful facades now water-stained and decaying. The expression on the fat man's face is difficult to read. He has raised his eyebrows and opened his pale blue eyes as widely as possible; his chin is drawn back, creating folds of flesh in his neck; his mouth is tight below his plump cheeks. He might be smirking or he may be unintentionally expressing the effort of holding the body tense to avoid the cracking collapse of concrete and rock that is inevitable if weight is shifted even an ounce from one leg to the other. The man's legs are slightly spread and his feet firmly rooted; his fists are loosely clasped at his sides. He looks as if he could hold this pose for a very long time, or could be distracted, move, and send the whole into tumbling oblivion. In the museum, this work functions as a reminder of the entropic principle that destabilizes all seemingly reliable systems.

The point of stasis before the collapse of structure into chaos is a moment of extreme tension. Although implicated by his physiological and emotional response to the works, the viewer is helpless to intervene, unable to shore up meaning in such a way as to prevent the disaster. Unlike Benjamin's Angel of History—who was blown toward the future facing backward and thus was doomed to see the rubble of all man's catastrophic history unceasingly accumulating at his feet—we are poised facing forward at the brink of an uncertain future, sensing, but not seeing, the impending catastrophe of the end of history (Benjamin 257). The apocalyptic body is our communal body; we hold our breath against its atoms being reconfigured by chaotic forces beyond our control.

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Niloufar Amri
1366 Birchcliff Drive
Oakville, ON L6M 2A2
Niloufar.amri@gmail.com
(905) 616-6553

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To Whom It May Concern:

I was a Visual Art's undergrad student at Brock University from 2005-2010. I met Catherine Heard in my third year, and instantly my thoughts on what classifies good art changed.

Catherine helped me challenge my pre-set notions of what *is* and *can be* art within the walls of academia. Through her experience and success, it became evident to me and other students that we can step away from the Renaissance era and still maintain a successful career as a contemporary artist.

Furthermore, her strength in the art field and passionate persona helped me develop a new and more prosperous attitude towards the art field. In my undergrad studies, I did not see any other studio lecturer investing near as much effort and passion towards their teachings as Catherine did. Catherine is without a doubt an amazing teacher who pours her heart into the classroom with an open mind.

I am happy to provide further information if required.

Sciencierly,



Niloufar Amri.