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Monstrum: The Portentous Worlds of Linus Borgo

The body, in contemporary life, might present as a bundle of symptoms for a doctor to read. It may, in psychoanalytic contexts, offer a somatic map of psychic disturbances, a network of memory traces, or a surface upon which hidden secrets manifest. The body might offer a constellation of scars – for example, the two horizontal lines below the pectoral muscles that now have become commonplace in Euro-American life, indicate transgender top surgery and the crafting of new forms of embodiment. Collaborations between medicine, psychology and vernacular wisdoms have changed our understandings of embodiment rapidly and definitively. What was once a message from the divine, is now a conversation between parts of the assemblages of flesh we call bodies.

In Linus Borgo's stunning paintings, he reaches back for older, earlier, more wonder-filled understandings of bodies. The monstrous nature of strange embodiment serves less as a caution or a site for pathological projection and more as a sign of things to come. The original meaning of *monstrum*, after all, comes from the Latin *monstro* – to show and the word *moneo* – to warn. And a *monstrum*, for the Romans, was a sign from the gods indicating that a natural order has been disrupted. Modern interpretations of the meaning of the word *monstrum* assume that any time something unnatural emerges into the order of things, it means something bad, but this is not necessarily so. The disruptive potential of a *monstrum* could reveal unwelcome truths, or it could indicate the limits of conventional knowledge systems, or a *monstrum* could be a gateway to new understandings of the body altogether. The *monstrum* was hybrid. Hybridity of the monstrous and wondrous kind populates the worlds Borgo imagines, envisions and paints.

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A Borgo painting or sculpture often centers upon an extraordinary body, one that merges disability and transitivity and then locates that body in a world of unnatural beauty. His figures appear in urban settings like gods who have fallen to earth, or they emerge in the woods, like bodies that have taken root and become part of a new ecological order, or they manifest in a surgical theater where repair in one site has opened up a wound in another and a new moon peeks through the tear between this world and others.

Some of Borgo's characters have wings, others have fish tails, some have arms or parts of the arm missing, some are Christ-like while others commune with and merge with animal life. Borgo's people are angels and punks, they are gods and demons, they live in the half-light of dawn or dusk, they gaze into puddles not to see themselves but to know the trap of mimesis. Borgo's trans masculine bodies are monsters or divine portents and they themselves look for omens and messages from the gods in the entrails of fish, pigs or other creatures. Between all the humans, animals, vegetables and stuff in these paintings, there are currents of divination, semiotic systems of post-human ecology and new visions of life, liveliness, still life and after lives.

Borgo draws from renaissance and classical iconographies, but the world he paints is thoroughly contemporary. In *Haruspex* (2023) he offers a modern take on the Roman practice of examining the entrails of animals to look for omens. A trans man sits on the side of bathroom vanity, his back to the mirror or medicine cabinet, sewing up a pig foetus's carcass. Like some macabre take on the trans domesticity or the trans ordinary, the figure casually rests a toe on the side of the toilet. Behind him, we can see his back in the mirror but also a frontal view of another trans man. The whole scene is bathed in a green light that, as we will see, is a signature of Borgo's trans life paintings. What has this trans-magical figure, this shaman, seen in the entrails of the pig? His mouth turns up slightly in a half smile but he remains intent on the job at hand, putting the dissected pig back together. The figure's nakedness, the casual display of non-phallic genitalia and a masculinized chest, re-eroticizes and defamiliarizes all at once the human and its odd arrangements of flesh, signs and scars. This figure, with surgically gloved hands, furthermore, has been rummaging through the body of a small pig, and is now taking great pleasure in a reassembling the animal. The shared nakedness of the pig and the trans man creates visual continuity between them and the siting of the scene, in the bathroom, charts domestic theaters where blood, and shit and other bodily fluids appear and where self-examination in mirrors and in the nude take place.

The surgical procedure calls up other scenes of surgery in Borgo's work – specifically, this painting is in an interesting tension with *Autotomy in the Liminal Realm: Splitting Time With A Scalpel* (2021). This stunning painting offers a post-surgical scene of transcendence in which a body has been both saved and maimed and the bloody stump in the center of the canvas directs the gaze towards an anaesthetized trans body and appears like a bloody paintbrush, still gleaming with blood/pigment. Here in *Haruspex*, the scalpel has been replaced with a needle and while the scalpel had split time and opened up a portal in the earlier canvas, in this one, the needle moves in an out of the flesh and literally sutures the trans body to the animal body and locates both as monstrum, or signs of wonder.

Influences on Borgo abound but perhaps in these new images and sculptures we can glimpse the work of Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, an eighteenth-century artist who made very distinctive still life paintings, some of which featured dissected animals. In one such painting, *The Ray* (1725), a gutted fish, a skate, hangs from a hook offering a gruesome contrast to the other objects around it: there are other fish, oysters, a scared kitten, a jug with a paint brush casually sitting in it, a butter knife and so on. Marcel Proust was drawn to the paintings of Chardin which, for him, called attention to the spectacular beauty of everyday disorder. Proust proposed that the still life, in the right hands, offers “some shining marvel, some mystery to reveal.” Chardin's painting of the dissected fish, writes Proust, presents the viewer with “a strange monster” that mediates between rough seas and calm kitchens, the zoo and the restaurant, interior architectures of the body and external surfaces that have been pried apart. Chardin, for Proust, investigates the mystery of the object and in so doing, he shows that “a pear is as living as a woman.”

That sense of shared liveliness animates Linus Borgo's work and creates a bond between the winged youths who pore over the guts of a fish or a pig and the objects that share space in his still life paintings, paintings that, like Chardin's, find the exciting and dynamic energies that can explode off the canvas when everyday objects become signs of a new system. One such painting foregrounds a plate of fish but places

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a roman statue of a one-armed god behind it, and then surrounds both with kitsch in the form of snow globes, beauty in the form of lilies, fruit, and pearls. Still life, here, is not just a tableau artfully arranged, it is, as Proust explains, an artist's attempt to capture the casual disorder and entropy of life itself. Things rot, they lose meaning, they give off gas, they scare kitten, things do things to other things and, in the process, they become monstrous, monstrum, signs of something coming and they make the human more ordinary but prod the viewer to aspire to the extraordinary and even, the unnatural. The still life is not the painting of things, it is animation through juxtaposition.

Borgo's earlier works, drawn from Renaissance painting, found trans bodies everywhere – in the street, the bodega, the hospital, the bedroom. These bodies offered themselves to be touched, held, known. In new work, the artist is transformed into a myriad of forms that are not quite human. In *I Sing the Body Electric*, the artist conducts electricity through his body as the woods glow in a phosphorescent light that could be the result of moon shine or radiation, a climate event or a lightning storm. This is a portrait of the young artist as Dr. Frankenstein *and* the monster, as a conductor of light and a disruptor of nature. We no longer know whether the scene takes place above ground or under water, in the woods or a jungle or a dream, The creatures that surround the body electric are a curious combination of woodland animals, sea creatures and wild beasts. When he sings the body electric, new assemblages of life light up the sky.

Picking up the green glow from both *Haruspex* and *I Sing the Body Electric*, another sea green work dispels the doubt about context. Where he previously conducted lightning in the woods, now the artist sits casually on a rock, smoking! He is a merman, a siren, a transgender Neptune, a gentler Poseidon. He is Triton, the tattooed love child of Neptune and Salacia, and like Triton he combines the body of a fish with the torso of a man. This trans Triton has come to us as a monstrum not a siren, he is not here to seduce us or to calm the seas. He is in fact presiding over, as the title of the painting tells us, the end of the world as we know it. It is not the end of the world per se, despite the indications of rising seas and animals out of place (the cat perches uneasily on a rock) and the portal opening up in the rocks in the background. But it is the end of the world *as we know it*. For the artist, the merman casually smoking and communing with the unnatural world, this is ok. It's the end of the world as we know it...and I feel fine.

Apocalypse is not a big bang or a mushroom cloud. It is the end of what you know and how you know it and the beginning of new arrangements of bodies, flesh, meaning and life. And now is the time to read the entrails of the animals, perhaps they will let us know what comes next, perhaps they will, like Linus Borgo's extraordinary paintings and sculptures, reveal rips and tears in the surface of life and pull the skin of things back to reveal the unseen forces that course through us all, shaping our monstrous futures.

- *Jack Halberstam*
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Image: Linus Borgo, *Haruspex*, 2023, 54" x 64" (137 x 162.5 cm)