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Audrey Howell

Scripps College

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THE BIOMORPHIC GROTESQUE IN MODERNIST AND CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

By
AUDREY HOWELL

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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PROFESSOR RANKAITIS
PROFESSOR YOSSIFOR

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Introduction

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.

-William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The image of a human body is a visual confirmation of our identity and a comfortable reminder of our self-awareness. We know how we work and what we are. However, destroying the integrity of that familiar source of visual definition can void this sense of surety and make us question what we assume about the body. What potential for transformation, corruption, or dissolution could our human bodies hold? If we did not know what we looked like, what possible forms could a body take? A hybrid of animal and human, or a conglomeration of parts about to reform into something new, perhaps. Literature and other media have explored the endless possibilities for envisioning bodies in other ways, and the above quote is one exquisite example. Shakespeare’s passage contemplates what happens to a lifeless body as it is taken apart and corrupted underwater, his imagery suggesting that the once-human flesh could be imagined reborn as some aquatic life form.

In my pre-teen years I discovered the exhilarating freedom of fantasy and science fiction. Surely there was nothing better than existing in a world where unknown, surprising creatures existed and one could perform amazing feats with abilities outside of what a real-life human could do. The regular human body is a fascinating system of intricate and mysterious parts, but I wanted to see it unmade and remodeled. That desire has stuck with me since then, and I have
found great satisfaction in looking at and creating art work that plays with this idea of the figure undergoing a change of some sort, and losing its integrity as the recognizable body we know.

In my research, I have found that countless other artists are fascinated with exactly the same thing, and some truly amazing pieces of art have been made that deal with this subject. The vocabulary of grotesque and biomorphic images is enormous and can strike some very intense chords for the viewer. What I did not fully grasp when I was younger was that imagery of the unmade body has the powerful ability to speak to larger issues of social and political struggle and violence, or to internal struggles, traumas, or desires. There are so many things that can be said by manipulating the body, and these messages are sent to the viewer on a very visceral level. Nothing could be more universal and important to us than our own physical existence, so exploring the ending or edges of that existence is a potent mix of exciting and unnerving. This paper will explore some of the many notable artists who have made work in this vein, and will culminate by touching on my own process.

Chapter 1 - History of the Grotesque and Biomorphic in the 20th Century

One way to introduce the concept of the grotesque is to look back at the origins of the term, which comes from the word “grotto.” The idea of the grotto is centuries old, and is often associated with a cave, a womb, or a mouth to another world (Connelly 1). This boundary space between what is known and unknown is both frightening and fascinating; as described by the art historian Frances Connelly, “Like a minotaur, a mermaid, or a cyborg, the grotesque is not quite one thing or the other, and this boundary creature roams the borderlands of all that is familiar and conventional” (Connelly 1). In other words, grotesque art functions by pulling the viewer into territory they are unaccustomed to, often in a way that intentionally disrupts what is culturally
considered normal. Furthermore, artist Loren Erdrich argues that this destruction of social and aesthetic boundaries forges “a direct connection between the realm of the monstrous and the visual language of the indefinite…. Thus by producing images that are independent of life’s widely accepted categorical divisions, artists may refuse the confinement and restraint that normally results from demarcations of difference” (Erdrich 44). In other words, grotesque imagery can be a strategy for the subversion of social categories that exclude marginalized individuals and limit the scope of self-identification. There is much overlap between this concept and that of the abject, which also disrupts systems of order and occupies an ambiguous liminal space, although the abject can additionally mean the use of base, abject materials in the creation of artwork (Abject Art 7). Both abject and grotesque art have been powerful vehicles for artists to express criticism, frustration, or protest against oppressive social norms throughout the twentieth century.

The first half of the twentieth century saw quite a bit of grotesque art in Europe in response to the horrors of World Wars I and II. German Dadaists such as Otto Dix and Hannah Höch are notable examples. They created paintings and collages that emphasize unnatural hybridity, sometimes as a way to counter the social value placed on racial purity and in other cases to bring attention to the brutality of war and the mutilation that soldiers faced (Connelly 113). In Dix’s 1920 painting The Skat Players, he shows three soldiers playing cards whose considerable wounds and missing limbs are filled in by strange mechanical contraptions, transforming them into unsettling cyborgs. In Austria, the abject was also being used as a tool for critique and subversion by the Viennese Actionists, whose shocking performances with gore and other gross bodily materials sought to disrupt the “culturally barren” and strictly ordered post-war society (Schmatz and Daniel 60).
The painter Georg Baselitz’s childhood was likewise framed by the aftermath of war and the splintering of order in Germany during its partition and occupation. He therefore embraced disorder, disruption, and “ugliness” in his work as an expression of the social and political disruptions he was surrounded by (Schiff 53). Paintings such as *Die Große Nacht im Eimer*, 1962-63, show aggressively grotesque renderings of the body made up of messy and ambiguous brush strokes and mismatched body parts meant to shock the viewer. Art historian Richard Schiff explains that by creating work like this, “Baselitz may have escaped the immediate conditions of societal destruction... with creation and imaginative fantasy in private life becoming the antidote for public disorder” (Schiff 54). Thus, grotesque imagery can not only call attention to the dysfunctions of society but provide some sense of release or escape in their creation.

The use of the grotesque and abject continued to be a way to fight against social oppression and injustice in the later decades of the twentieth century. The dismemberment of the body in particular became a metaphor for violent social battles over sexual identity, homophobia, reproductive rights, and gender inequality (Hall, Laqueur, and Posner 22). The visual image of limbs or fluids displaced from the body forces the viewer to undergo a visceral reaction; the lack of unity leads to a frightening loss of certainty in the vitality of the human figure, and an onset of anxiety about pain, illness, and mortality. This anxiety and fear can then stand in for all sorts of other causes of intense stress, such as sexual vulnerability, helplessness, and prejudiced social assaults. Feminist artists in the sixties and seventies wielded the abject against the gender bias that both the art world and society were steeped in. In Judy Chicago’s 1971 piece *Menstruation Bathroom*, a bin full of bloody tampons were displayed in an installation, forcing a bodily fluid normally hidden away to the front of the viewer’s consciousness. Hannah Wilke similarly called attention to the normally taboo form of the vagina by photographing herself with sculpted female
These pieces questioned the biases of the social hierarchy of body parts and the connotations and symbolism they held.

Another female artist of the 60’s and 70’s who made an important contribution to the dialogue of violence and sexual abuse is Ana Mendieta. In her 1972 series of performance-documenting photographs *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, she presses various body parts, including her face, breasts, and buttocks tightly against a pane of glass, forcing her flesh into new shapes like clay. It is a series of actions that is both amazing and uncomfortable; the distortion of the body is fascinating in its transformation into something almost abstract or unrecognizable, but there is a distressing undercurrent of violence (Baum 81). The constricting, jabbing, pinching, and squeezing that Mendieta must have undergone to re-form her features was likely somewhat painful, referencing the discomfort and danger of outward forces assaulting the body. Kelly Baum compares one of the shots of Mendieta’s face to a freeze-frame in the midst of an assault – it starts to look like the moment just after a blow was struck to her cheek (Baum 82). These images carry a potent message, forcing the viewer to experience distress and empathy. Baum asserts that “Despite (or because of) its grotesquerie, *Untitled* is one of the most sophisticated formal statements of Mendieta’s career” (Baum 81).

Inspired by the ideas and strong points of view of their forerunners, contemporary feminist artists have found powerful ways to use the abject to communicate as well. Painter Jenny Saville is known for her exaggerated, fleshy images of female bodies, including a few that are heavily influenced by Mendieta’s glass series, exploring flesh pressed and confined against invisible barriers. Others of Saville’s paintings show bodies combined to make hybrid patchworks of bodies and limbs, such as in her 1998-99 piece *Ruben’s Flap* and 1997 painting *Hybrid*. Both of these paintings allow the body to lose its sense of wholeness, and instead
become a grotesque cut-and-paste mound of flesh. Saville is concerned with ideas of cosmetic surgery, cutting into the body, and providing a critical perspective on male-generated ideals of female beauty (Saville 14-15).

This thesis project will deal not only with the grotesque but also with biomorphic imagery. In some ways, these two ideas overlap heavily. Both of them transform the body into something less whole and less familiar. In the first half of the twentieth century, a great deal of scientific research was focused on understanding biological processes, the findings of which inspired many artists to use organic forms in their art (Arp, von Asten, and Strelow 7). Part of the fascination was that living things are always in a process of change, whether it be growth, decay, or metamorphosis, always existing between one state and another (Arp, von Asten, and Strelow 13). The organic forms of the human body were explored in conjunction with other natural and biological forms, often creating hybrids. Many Surrealist artists in particular played with the combination of unrelated bodily forms. The technique known as the “Exquisite Corpse” encouraged the juxtaposition of unrelated forms by different artists into a new composite body (Poling 32).

The idea of the composite, of joining side by side two things that do not logically appear together, is central to Surrealism (Poling 49). In some cases, the two forms being juxtaposed together were the inside and the outside of the body. These parts of the body are usually separated by an absolute barrier of the intact human form, but Surrealist painters like Hans Bellmer collapsed that boundary to create images where interior and exterior combine to form a new and impossible image of bodily space. In his own writings, Bellmer describes that “the structure is visibly transformed until it becomes the opposite of what it was at the outset” (Bellmer 13). These artworks touch back on the idea of the grotesque; the superimposition of that
which is supposed to be inside the body over what is usually outside recalls some of the anxiety of the dismembered figure.

Biomorphic forms also were of interest to Abstract Expressionist painters like Willem de Kooning, Norman Bluhm, and Lee Krasner. Krasner, for instance, studied many of the ideas of Impressionism and Cubism under her teacher Hans Hoffmann, but took ideas of disjoining, reassembling, and engagement with color and surface in a new, more biomorphic direction (Rose 22-29). Instead of the more geometrical forms of Cubism, Krasner learned to work in an organic rhythm, an endeavor that involved the natural movements of her own body (Rose 31). Hoffmann believed that “Everything rhythmically organic is true,” and emphasized a focus on the body’s gestures, which was aimed toward creating works that inspired a very physical reaction in the viewer, not just a mental one (Rose 31). Krasner was definitely influenced by this idea, and her gestural works eventually became very large scale, following the trends of fellow “action painters” like Jackson Pollock (Rose 31). Her large scale works sometimes reference the body through their skin or viscera-like color palette, and sometimes through the way the forms bulge and squeeze together like muscles. Some start to resemble interpenetrating bodies with ambiguous boundaries, inviting the viewer to look closer and track the shifting outlines of possible forms in the fully packed canvas. The large scale is important in allowing the viewer to relate and react physically to the work as well.

De Kooning, like Krasner, was heavily influenced by Cubism, but interested in branching out from it. Rather than performing a controlled rearranging of the human figure, which still retained some logical structure, many of his paintings became more and more uncontrolled, allowing natural, automatic gestures to shape them (Butler and Shimmel 155). He used techniques such as drawing figures with his eyes closed to allow his hand free reign to work
expressively without the interference of his preconceptions or perceptions (Butler and Shimmel 163). He was not focused on the image produced but on the physical process of creating it through inward concentration. Techniques like this one immersed him in his drawing to the point where he could let go of any distinction between figure and abstraction and focus on his own suspension in an open and unresolved state (Butler and Shimmel 163). The resulting drawings are amazingly free and remain almost unstable, switching between looking abstract and figural, the lines so physical and natural that they look like they may start to move.

Chapter 2 – Contemporary artists whose work explores the body in terms of hybridity, the grotesque and biomorphic abstraction

There are countless artists today whose work continues to explore the realm of the grotesque, and the boundary between the body and ambiguity and contamination. This long-lasting popularity is not surprising, since monstrous, impure mixtures of human and other have long been a fascinating subject for analysis and expression. In Freudian theory, for instance, frightening hybrid dream figures are thought to represent repressed desires and contradictory impulses (Hybrids: International Contemporary Paniting 12). Science fiction and fantasy media also have allowed readers to imagine strange amalgamations that enhance the human body with otherworldly or inhuman elements, often as a way to play out a fantasy of being immortal and powerful to deal with fears of death and failure (Hybrids 24). This chapter will focus on several artists whose work is especially illustrative of themes such as impurity, hybridity, bodily presence and decomposition. Each artist has a completely different approach to thinking about and representing the body in her work, and together they provide a rich array of new ways to consider flesh, awareness, and physicality.
Inka Essenhigh is a contemporary painter whose work is full of contradictions and unusual combinations. The figures in her pieces are familiarly human in their fleshy color and squishy, saggy relationship with gravity and their surroundings. However, they are also ridiculous, strange, and unsettlingly inorganic in their manifestations of forms and extremities. Her figures often sport no heads, their flesh instead transitioning into stringy, rope-like forms, or mechanical looking cylinders or rings, as in her 1999 piece Goody. Art historian and critic David Ryan describes her unique figures as evocative both of a feeling of gothic horror like that of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and also of futuristic cyborgs and mutated humans fused with technology (Hybrids 11). The way that Essenhigh presents these odd cyber-mixes is in a charmingly cartoonish way, with bright colors, crisp outlines, and a noticeable touch of humor. Their strange and unresolvable inhuman attributes, however, counterbalance that cartoonish simplicity with a healthy dose of doubt and obliterate any recognizable narrative or identity. Commentary on pieces she exhibited at the Tate Liverpool brought up the fact that they “seem to deal with a gradual loss of self and certainty in confronting the future” and the technological advances it will bring (Hybrids 23). This future has the potential to bring about immense changes to our understanding of our bodies through cloning, surgery, and genetic modification. Our definition of the “natural” and “human” will likely be bent in all sorts of new directions.

Another artist who deals with hybridity and mutation in a unique and powerful way is Wangechi Mutu. Her work both in sculpture and mixed media collage present staggering images of women who are at once abject and beautiful, animal and human, mythical and unbearably real. She uses collage to patch together female bodies whose skin is an impossible texture, often like mottled stone or animal skin, and whose limbs end in compilations of collaged machine imagery. In her two-piece series Double Fuse from 2003, she sets up two figures as near-mirror images of
each other, the facial expressions being the only noticeable difference. One has a more neutral
expression and the other sticks her tongue out jokingly, almost obscenely. Their limbs look like
they are reptilian, the skin green and scaly with talon-like claws tipping one hand and wheels and
wires making up the other hand and forearm. Long, shaggy hair grows oddly from their
shoulders, while their heads are adorned instead with strange spiky designs. While all these
elements drive the imagination of the viewer away from natural humanity, the eyes and lips are
unmistakably human, although exaggerated in size.

Mutu’s collaged figures grow directly out of her own experience, both as an African
woman and as an anthropologist. She examines human relationships with the forces of nature
and other living organisms, while also unwaveringly undermining the norms of typical
representations of women of color that oversimplify them into stereotypes. The exaggerated
features, full lips, and dark eyes bring up questions of beauty, physical difference, and typified
African features (Belisle 60). Her figures seem to humorously hint at different mythical
archetype fantasies of the female, as curator Josee Belisle points out, including “pin-up, warrior,
science-fiction heroine, oversexed, overexposed, nude, in a position of power or palpable
vulnerability” (Belisle 60). However, Mutu imbues her female figures with an otherness beyond
any usual mainstream fantasy, mutating them to an extreme that is powerfully provocative, both
unsettling and beautiful. The mottled, visceral, extremely textured skin can start to suggest
disease, mutilation, injury, and abuse. It can be read as a thin transparent membrane that shows
the inner organs and barely retains any bodily unity. This suggestion of decomposition, weakness
and abuse of the body is accompanied, however, by the bestial, animal power and strength Mutu
fills her women with. They inhabit the roles both of the monster and the victim, menacing,
invincible, cut up, and beautiful. These contradictory elements vibrating together are what give
her images such power and lasting impact, her figures constantly in a state of metamorphosis as
the viewer oscillates between the many ways of looking at, interpreting, and thinking about
them.

Another contemporary artist whose work is difficult to resolve even after much
observation is Cecily Brown. In a way that is very different to Wangechi Mutu, Brown’s figural
paintings slip away from any easy reading or conclusion. She accomplishes this by allowing the
paint to take on the representation of the body in a loose and unfixed way, embodying flesh
without depicting it specifically. She has a strong background in realistically figural work, but
has more recently delved into the borderland between figure and abstraction (Cook and Meyer
9). Curators Veit Gorner and Benno Tempel applaud the way she holds the viewer in an
extended state of looking: “Spending time with the paintings opens up more and more new
possibilities to condense the layers of paint into figurations, only to lose them in the next
moment. A rediscovery of slowness” (Cook and Meyer 9). The bodies in Cecily Brown’s work
are always in an oscillating state, then, between coming together into something recognizable
and figural and dissolving back into the canvas to be reinterpreted as another form.

Her paintings are furthermore very bodily in the way she applies the paint to the canvas.
In each brush stroke, the presence of Brown’s own body is evident. In some paintings, in fact,
when the colors she uses start to veer away from flesh tones, the paint’s primary role seems to
shift from depicting the body to translating its experience. For example, in paintings like
Thriller, 2008-2009, the brush strokes serve to “relocate the physical in sensory perception,
without fixing it pictorially,” explains Kathrin Meyer (Cook and Meyer 74). In other words,
Cecily Brown’s own awareness and perceptions become a physical experience that is recorded
through her motions, reactions, and interactions with her painting. Thus, the body is depicted not by the shapes created but by the gestures in the paint and the consciousness behind them.

This is somewhat similar to the approach of another contemporary painter, Maria Lassnig. She has developed a unique and fascinating painting method that approaches the body from the inside out. Like Cecily Brown, her paintings express her own physical experience, but Lassnig takes it one step farther in the direction of “ritual and meditation” (Body Awareness Painting 12). Her process is a slow one, each line produced in a state of deep concentration with an intense focus on the psychological sensations she feels. She explains, “I confront the canvas as if naked, devoid of intention, devoid of a plan… the only real things are the feelings unfolding within the shell that is my body: psychological sensations, a feeling of pressure when sitting or lying, feeling of tension and spatial expansion – aspects that are difficult to put on to canvas” (Body Awareness Painting 12). Her relationship with her own sensations and with the canvas brings up many astounding and insightful questions and images. The challenge of attaching color to physical sensations is one she masterfully accepts, along with visually expressing the shape, texture, and boundaries of sensations. These are very abstract decisions to make, made even more difficult by the fact Lassnig does not rely on any memory of external remembered images of herself. “One has to switch off memory in order to perceive a pure awareness of the body,” Lassnig explains (Body Awareness Painting 14). Many of her paintings are done lying down next to her canvas, closing her eyes to facilitate the internal process of focusing and translating what she feels into paint (Body Awareness Painting 12).

The visual results that she creates from this process are truly unlike any other figures. Her colors reflect emotion and sensation rather than life, giving her figures a fantastical and unusual skin palette. Bypassing traditions of self-portraiture completely, Lassnig’s images are not
realistic or idealized and sometimes do not even look like living things. Her self-portraits are often titled as things like *Self as a Bottle* or *Self-Portrait as a Monster*, perhaps pointing out what they ended up looking like, or perhaps just renouncing any claim to figurative representation (Body Awareness Painting 26-30). The images sometimes still suggest human limbs and features in the forms they contain, but the viewer is free to imagine any deformed or unusual creature instead. What might it be like existing as a bottle, or an elephant, or a light bulb? Or the viewer could look at the pieces as a record of physical sensation and explore what reactions, emotions, or visceral impact such shapes and colors inspire. Her paintings have a wealth of dialogue to bring to the viewer, and her deliberate and meditative process provides an entirely new way of thinking about the body.

Elizabeth Murray is one more artist whose work is bodily in an unusual way. Like several of Lassnig’s works, her pieces are not recognizably figural, but explore in depth the relationships between shapes and colors. Some look like inanimate objects, and others nod to text – the comma shape is a recurring theme – but often her images look very much like internal organs or some other very bodily idea (Storr 55). Some splashes of paint look like bodily fluids resulting from some violence or trauma, and some arrangements of shapes like the microscopic penetration of conception. *Beam*, from 1982, has been compared to an image of an embryo or amoeba above a birth canal, a beam of light reaching in from outside, a sort of “description of insemination… weirdly funny and dark, as if one were peering into the irradiated innards of Olive Oyl or Betty Boop” (Storr 55). Her paintings do recall cartoons and graphic simplicity through their use of solid color and very deliberate outlines. The resulting biomorphic combinations of shapes have a quality that is both organic and unnatural, letting the viewer simultaneously see a scene of the body and a purely synthetic abstract work.
Chapter 3 – My work this fall

Personally, it is always a challenge for me to relinquish control over something I am creating. I try to confront this challenge often, and I find the results are often immensely satisfying. Many of the pieces I have created this semester therefore incorporate an element of chance, whether it be through drawing blind or letting physics and gravity manipulate paint in ways that I cannot. In my drawings, I aim to involve my own body’s natural movements, a technique I very much admire in the work of some of the artists I’ve mentioned. In my series Double Grip, I experimented with double-handed drawing, which I found I liked very much (Figure 1). I am very interested in engaging with the imperfect symmetry of the body, and allowing the unequal strength and coordination of my two arms to become physically visible was very interesting and rewarding. My series of drawings in charcoal were done with loose quick strokes with my eyes closed, moving both hands simultaneously. I later embellished the structure I had created through this process, allowing it to dictate where I added more shading and texture.

Another series of work I created surrendered almost completely to chance. In the painting series Wet March, I had no control over the direction the paint moved once I had poured it onto the paper (Figures 2 and 3). My influence was only over the colors, which I chose to refer to the body, and the paint’s interaction with the very edge of the paper, which I raised up to avoid spilling paint on the floor. I watched as the paint slowly but inexorably marched in whatever direction the imperceptible tilt of the floor suggested, ultimately creating tentacle or arm-like appendages that grew longer whenever I looked away and then back again. It truly felt like the paint was a living creature, sneakily growing and morphing when my back was turned. While this process was taking place, the textures and patches of color formed by the paint achieved a very bodily and organic quality as well.
The paintings I ultimately think were most successful in embodying both the element of chance I was hoping to include, while also achieving the physical bodily presence I wanted the viewer to be confronted with are the three in my Pulp series (Figures 4-6). These canvases are the size of my own body, and therefore relate to the viewer in a very physical way. I used the surrealist technique of decalcomania to produce chance networks of texture mimicking the systems of the body. I used modeling paste and gel medium to thicken the paint and allow these textures to become three-dimensional and even more physical. On top of this, I allowed very wet paint to spread and pool in the texture that had been created, forming connecting pathways and random gradients that fade into the background flesh tone. The overall effect, I believe, is that these viscera-like parts are only loosely held together by a slight sense of bodily unity, allowing them to feel as if they could be decomposing or in the process of being reformed into something else. What is more, there are no indications of a boundary separating the inside and outside, resulting in a mess of tissues that could be interpreted as inner parts or outer parts, or even a mix of the two. There is also nothing that specifies these forms as human rather than animal or anything else – I avoided the suggestion of human limbs to allow the viewer the chance to imagine whatever creature or amalgamation of organic parts they fancy.

Conclusion

The artists discussed here represent some truly unique explorers of what exists on the edges of visual humanity. My own imagination runs wild when I look at the works created by each one, picturing bodies that are impossible and extraordinary. Researching these artists’ practices and methodologies has furthermore completely redefined my understanding of how an artist can physically relate to their work. It is also fascinating to look to the future and imagine how our conception of the human body will further change with technologies and science that
give us more knowledge and ability to bypass our normal human constraints. Will our lifespan grow so long that we will start to decompose before we die? Will we have the technology to do some of the things fantasy literature has dreamed up?
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Figure 1: *Double Grip 1 and 2*, A. Howell, Charcoal, 24 in. x 36 in. each
Figure 2: *Wet March 1*, A. Howell, Acrylic on mixed media board, 36 in. x 48 in.

Details:
Figure 3: *Wet March* 2, A. Howell, Acrylic on mixed media board, 36 in. x 48 in.
Figure 4: *Pulp1*, A. Howell, Acrylic on canvas, 60 in. x 36 in.

Details:
Figure 5: *Pulp 2*, A. Howell, Acrylic on canvas, 60 in. x 36 in.
Figure 6: *Pulp 3*, A. Howell, Acrylic on canvas, 60 in. x 36 in.

Details:
Works Cited


