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BY BRICEMARSTERS

Sandra Yagi: Life, death, and le petit mort

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Sandra Yagi's art is equal parts offensive, macabre, beautiful, playful, and profound. That's pretty perfect, if you ask us. She set aside time to discuss her work.

SCIENTIFIC INQUIRER: You picked up art later in life than a lot of professional artists. How did that happen and how do you think it has affected your art and how you approach it?

SANDRA YAGI: Even though I was always drawing from the time I was 4 or 5 years old, my path to becoming an artist was indirect with some unexpected turns. My parents, who had been detained in relocation camps along with other Japanese-Americans during World War II, were very risk averse as a result of their experience. They strongly discouraged me from studying art, and insisted that I focus on something practical. Therefore, I obtained my MBA degree, and pursued a career in finance/commercial banking. I was inspired to return to art after meeting an older woman sculptor who advised me not to wait until I was too old and no longer had the energy for art-making. Shortly thereafter, I heard David Hockney say in an interview "I have never heard of an artist on his deathbed say 'Gee I wish I had been a vice president at Bank of America'." It almost seemed that he was directing that statement at me, as I worked at Bank of America. I realized that I needed to find a way to become a full-time artist. I cut my hours back at the bank and signed up for continuing education courses in drawing and painting. I devoted one day each work week plus the weekend to studio work, which helped me retain my sanity. I spent 20 years working both at a day job and at the studio, and gaining exhibition opportunities as time went on. I left my career in banking in 2008 to be a full-time artist.

SCINQ: How did science and art come together in your work?

SY: I've always loved science, especially biology. I love anatomical imagery – skulls, skeletons and musculature – as well as imagery of nature: animals of all types, sea life and microscopic lifeforms. I draw much inspiration from naturalists who illustrated their discoveries. My favorites are John James Audubon, Maria Sibylla Merian, and John Gould. I'm also inspired by the anatomists of the renaissance, such as Vesalius and DaVinci.

I use anatomy in symbolic ways – exploring, for instance, using it to portray the thin line between animal and human nature. A number of my works are "psychological" anatomy studies – cutaway skulls that depict a psychological or metaphorical anatomy instead of the literal organs and structures.

In another series, I've painted hybrid/mutant creatures of imaginary, exotic, unexplored realms, and they are done in a style that honors the old naturalists. Before the advent of photography, scientists and naturalists were required to be good at drawing, and their studies have become works of art in themselves. They were the first to really combine art and science.



SCINQ: Human beings are often on the receiving end of some abuse in a lot of your work. Can you explain that?

SY: Recently, I completed a series inspired by Hieronymous Bosch, and in these images I've portrayed humans being punished for greed, cruelty and environmental destruction. For example, I have a naked bullfighter being tormented by a bull, a pelican devouring a man with Malibu burning in the background, and a trophy hunter being displayed by creatures typically hunted by trophy hunters. It's my way of getting retribution for evils inflicted by humans. I'm also angry about the current political environment and how certain upper-class politicians seem to get away with unethical actions without any consequences. Several of the pieces portray such politicians in hell, as a fitting punishment for their actions.



SCINQ: Skulls and skeletons figure prominently in your images. Why? What do they symbolize?

SY: In many cases, the skeletons represent mortality. Modern society generally deters discussion of death and most people try to avoid the subject. It's important to realize that we are not immortal, I think it makes us appreciate life and make the most of our time in this plane of existence. In some of my paintings addressing environmental degradation, the skeleton represents the death of nature at the hands of humanity.



SCINQ: Your work is full of tensions. For example, the interplay between human and skeletal forms; life and death; the subservience of the carnal. Can you discuss them?

SY: In one series, I painted skeletons in sex positions. It was a play on the French term *Petit Mort*, little death (or the feeling of post orgasm likened to death), and also the contrast between death, symbolized by skeletons, and the act of sex, which is necessary for bringing in new life. Death in the overall scheme of the universe is natural and inevitable, but is also part of an ongoing cycle. I also did a series of BDSM figures with skeletons as the Dom player in the scene. The feeling I had at the time was that Death was the ultimate Dom in charge. This is not necessarily a negative thing, since death is part of the natural order of things, and can bring about positive change. Also, in BDSM, the Dom has to be caring to the sub, and there has to be an understanding between both parties before going through the scene. So we as humans just need to recognize Death and understand its role in life.

SCINQ: There is a distinct medieval representational feel to your images. Where did this come from?

SY: I am inspired by old masters, including the artists that worked on illuminated manuscripts. Their craftsmanship is incredible, and not easily replicated. I also am interested in the myths and bestiaries they illustrated in illuminated manuscripts. My current project is a series of small watercolor / acrylic paintings of iconic contemporary / modern movie monsters, illustrated in the style of medieval illuminated manuscripts. The monsters include many from science fiction and horror masterpieces, such as *Alien*, *Godzilla*, *American Werewolf in London*, *Jaws*, and *Pan's Labrynth*.

SCINQ: Your Conjoined Twins series is wonderful. It's grim, macabre, and playful at the same time (which makes it even more macabre). It evokes the *Danse Macabre* genre in the best way. What's the story behind both series?

SY: Many years ago, when I first saw a photo of the conjoined twin skeleton at the Mutter Museum, I was horrified but also fascinated, but then felt a great deal of sadness for the poor children who died so young, and with a serious congenital deformity. Questions went through my mind, such as, why does fate select those individuals to suffer? Why, through a twist of nature, must someone suffer so much? Then I wondered if I could portray them doing things that normal people can do. The first few skeletons were dancing twins, which focused on their intense coordination and connection as twins, and I translated this connection into dance moves. In my *Circus Twin* series, rather than being the subject of the freak show, the twins are star performers of incredible feats of acrobatics. In my latest series, the *Olympic Twins*, they are undertaking Olympic events, using superb strength and athletic prowess. The twins exhibit a "can do" attitude that exists within all of us.

I find the infant skeleton to be quite cute and adorable. The skull has large eye sockets and a natural smile, and large head in relation to body. Additionally, I love the juxtaposition of a congenital deformity with the concept of the ideal Olympian body. I enjoy the challenge of giving them a grace and movement, despite their deformity and the complication of them being connected and top heavy.



SCINQ: What influences your artistic worldview?

SY: Contemporary culture and world events feed into my worldview very heavily, though it gives me a great deal of sadness. I'm most concerned about the environment and the extinction of plants and animals. I question the viability of capitalism, and I feel it really needs to be drastically modified at the very least so that we don't have to rely on endless economic growth. Above all, I love science and nature, and though I am terrible at mathematics, I try to stay up to date on scientific discoveries. Art and science are two ways to explore the world, and they truly overlap.

SCINQ: What is next for you creatively?

SY: I'm pondering further exploration of bringing out the truths that are contained in mythology. The use of anatomical imagery combined with mythical subjects give the scenes a sense that there is real flesh and blood behind the mythical image. I've done some of this in the past, such as painting the minotaur as a flayed beast that is anatomically correct, to emphasize its mutant heritage.

For more information on **Sandra Yagi**, visit her [website](#). You can also do @sandra_yagi or her Facebook page.

IMAGE SOURCE: Sandra Yagi

Apr 19 Kloosterboer on *The Illusionists*

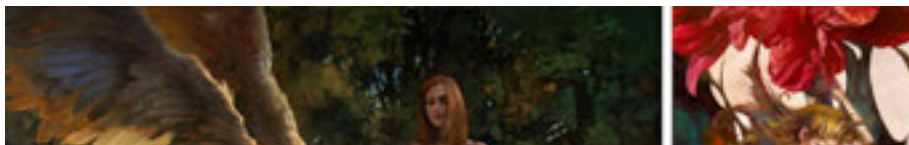
Kloosterboer on *The Illusionists*

The Representational Art Conference (<https://www.trac2019.org/>), a California Lutheran University Arts Initiative event organized by Michael Pearce, is a yearly international event focused on forward-looking representational art in the 21st century. This year's TRAC—held between March 31st through April 4th, 2019—took place at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Ventura Beach, California, gathering a large number of attendees hailing from North America and as far away as Europe, South America, Asia, and Oceania.



Vince Natale - *Falco Luciferus II & Dreameater*

Artists, writers, poets, philosophers, filmmakers, scientists, curators, and other creative minds gathered to exchange ideas, present papers, attend lectures, hold demonstrations, participate in panel discussions, socialize, forge friendships and alliances, and exchange ideas on all sorts of art-related subjects. This year's topic was *Imagination and 21st-Century Representational Art*. While TRAC provides an exciting platform for debate, it does not seek to establish a single monolithic aesthetic for representational art but instead tries to identify commonalities in an effort to understand the unique potentials of representational art, ideally shedding some light on possible future directions.





Left: Julie Bell - *If Wishes Were Horses* — Right: Boris Vallejo - *Amaryllis Embrace*

My experience at TRAC2018 held in the Netherlands last year—read my article [HERE](https://www.poetsandartists.com/magazine/2018/5/11/kloosterboer-on-trac-2018) (<https://www.poetsandartists.com/magazine/2018/5/11/kloosterboer-on-trac-2018>)—was so enriching that it impelled me to attend again. This year's conference far exceeded my expectations in both substance and overall vibe, and especially the keynote speakers—Michael Pearce, Tim Jenison, Corinna Wagner, Joseph Bravo, and Roger Dean—stood out for their riveting presentations. For anyone who mostly works in isolation and whose social interactions with other creatives usually limits itself to social media, spending time among fellow artists and thinkers is incredibly nourishing and energizing. Especially when the topics at hand are so interesting, challenging, and crucial.



F. Scott Hess - *The Dream of Art History*

There were many moments I wanted to physically split myself to be able to be at different locations simultaneously because choosing between concurrent presentations was incredibly hard as absolutely all topics fascinated me. TRAC2019's fastmoving [program](https://www.trac2019.org/program/) (<https://www.trac2019.org/program/>) also included an excursion to visit three exhibitions and a chalk festival, a delightful break from the abundance of thought-provoking lectures that left my mind pulsating with a wealth of information, ideas, and thinking points that will continue to percolate for a long time to come.





Richard MacDonald - *Blind Faith, Half Life & Aurora*

Our visit to the Studio Channel Islands to see the exhibition entitled *The Illusionists*, curated by Michael Pearce, was one of the highlights. In regards to the curatorial process and reasoning behind this extraordinary presentation of paintings and sculptures Michael Pearce wrote an insightful essay, entitled *Imaginative Realists—A New Age of American Art*, in which he presents a forward-looking aesthetic philosophy, linking High Art and Pop Culture rooted in sound historical perspective. Read his essay **HERE** (https://medium.com/@michaelpearce_17842/a-new-age-of-american-art-b7a5344df354).

Wandering through the exhibition I was enthralled at how the brilliant imaginings of these artists is expressed in electrifying visionary ingenuity. Each piece offers a plethora of visual riches that provokes the inner narrative of the viewer to come alive with a sense of fractional recognition, curiosity, and genuine awe. Yet the overall contents and subject matter are so diverse, one need not fear monotony—this exhibition encourages discovery of strange, whimsical subject matter and invites contemplation of one's subjective responses regarding the enigmatic, often paradoxical allure of each piece.



The attending Illusionists, from left to right: Guy Kinnear, Boris Vallejo, Julie Bell, Kenna Houtz, Pamela Wilson, Conor Walton, Michael Pearce (curator), Regina Jacobson, Roger Dean, and F. Scott Hess – Photo credit Lori A. Escalera.

The Illusionists shows a wonderful collection of paintings and sculptures in a genre we previously might have called Fantasy Art, a label which is now being discarded because of its associations with an unsophisticated taste in art. Far from being ingenuous, these artworks show the exquisite creative fusion between the meanderings of human fancy and skill-based execution. It was a treat to view this exhibition ahead of its inauguration, especially because nine of the 17 participating

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artists as well as the curator were present to give a small talk. Each artist briefly reviewed their artwork, describing the premise of their craft rooted in fictitious narratives, imaginary landscapes, the expression of existential trauma, environmental awareness, poignant satire, ethereal splendor, art history, and emblematic visions of the near and distant future.



Mark Gleason - *Luna & Arguing Still*

Guy Kinnear (<http://www.guykinnear.com>) says, “What I really love about Imaginative Realism in general, and with this show in particular, is its balance between rigorous skill, profound concepts, and popular appeal. The general audience has felt alienated from the art gallery for over a century now, but Imaginative Realism speaks again in a language that is familiar and wonderful, that is: full-of-wonder. For those who would soak in the images longer, they will be rewarded with the experience of a carefully crafted reimagining of life as lived. I believe this is signaling a new and more sanguine direction for the Art World, and for the world in general. We want visions of our present and future that affirm a resilient hope.”

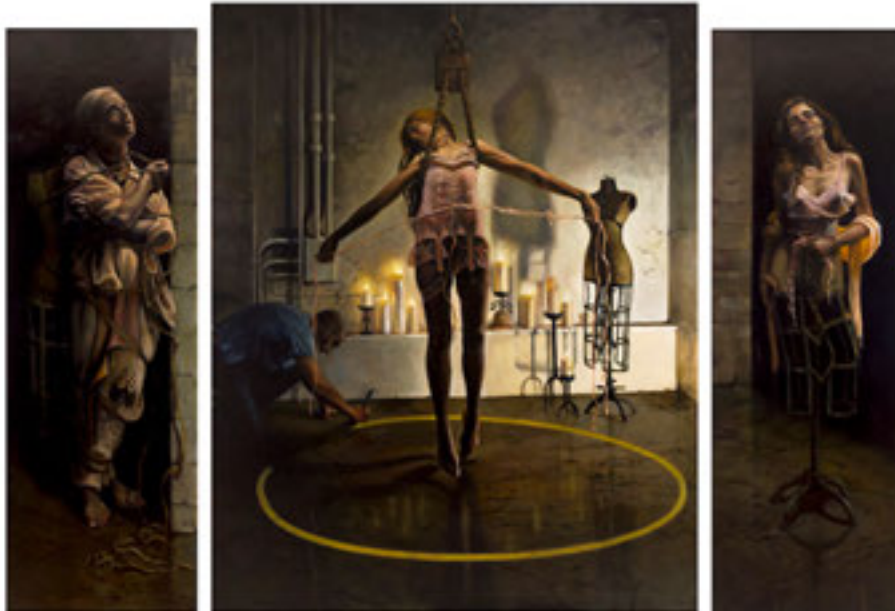
About his own work, Kinnear adds, “This is why I work with these child crafted creatures. They are Pinocchio and Frankenstein's Wretch playfully groping for reconnection. They are trying to find earth, love and hope after their long exile. I want to address environmental and existential brokenness in the world, but come at it with the fresh eyes of wonder, leaving open the possibility of a promising expectation of what could come next.”



Guy Kinnear - *Hanging, Torch & Maryfaith*

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Reflecting back on the main theme discussed at TRAC, [Regina Jacobson](http://reginajacobson.com/) (<http://reginajacobson.com/>) says, “Imaginative Realism, being an oxymoron in terms, describes the ambiguity that comes into play in this exciting genre of fine art. While at first glance the imagery seems to tell a realistic world narrative, as we linger with the piece and allow ourselves to slow to the stillness of a two-dimensional canvas or sculpture, we discover what we thought was realistic is neither completely familiar nor even possible. While Realism purely aims at the portrayal of things we can perceive, Imaginative Realism dances more toward the sides of reality, dipping in and out from what we think of as real, practical and natural, into the fanciful, mythical and curious. By creating artworks with one foot in each of these worlds, the viewer is invited, through imagery they find familiar and comfortable, into a place where their own imagination can be released to discover the extraordinary. But beware, though this world may appear charming, beautiful, even divine, there are also shadows.”



Regina Jacobson - *Cult of Beauty, Altar Piece*, triptych

Some of the work in this exhibition isn't without controversy, such as [Conor Walton](https://www.conorwalton.com/) (<https://www.conorwalton.com/>)'s painting entitled *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. Walton says, “The idea for this painting came from a Facebook discussion about who might paint President Trump's official portrait. Some of America's best portrait painters were part of this conversation, but it appeared none of them would touch the job: the words 'career suicide' were mentioned. It struck me as an opportunity lost. I started thinking about how I'd like to paint Trump, and the old Frank Frazetta image of 'Conan the Barbarian' came to mind as a template.

My idea was to paint Trump as he really might like to be painted, in the low-brow vernacular of American fantasy art (which in its primitive machismo is a good fit for his outlook and that of many of his followers) and to do it so shockingly well that—ludicrous as this muscle-bound Trump in a hairy loincloth standing on a heap of skulls, being hailed with fascist salutes, might be—it still might look authentic. The aim is also to 'dance along the cultural faultline' and produce a painting which invites differing and to some extent opposite interpretations depending on which side of the political divide it is viewed from. In this case, one is presented with Trump either as 'hero-savior' or 'barbarian-destroyer.'

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When Michael Pearce asked me to contribute to the exhibition, and explained the theme and crossover from fantasy art, with 'Conan' artist Boris Vallejo involved, I told him of my idea and he approved. Since the exhibition dates fitted, we decided to put it out on April 1st, claiming it to be President Trump's official portrait. This got quite a reaction: most viewers realized it was satire, and it was enjoyed on both sides of the political divide, but a surprising number (on both sides) took it seriously. The ensuing commentary was something of an education for all involved, as people came to terms with what I was doing. There was some hostility too, but I think the strength of the response speaks to the continuing relevance of painting, and the audience's appetite for complex art that reflects contemporary concerns, that is in the largest sense political."



Conor Walton - *Novus Ordo Seclorum*

Joseph Bravo (<http://www.josephbravo.com/>) summarizes this exhibition most charismatically, saying, "*The Illusionists* exhibit is striking for its diversity in examining the parameters of Imaginative Realism. From psychological allegory in the works of Regina Jacobson to the surreal floating avatars of Guy Kinnear, from the art historical fantasia of F. Scott Hess to the beautiful xenospheres of Roger Dean, from the wunderkabinet creations of Sandra Yagi to the domestic futurism of Bryan Larson, from the lyrical elegance of Richard MacDonald's acrobatic sculptures to Conor Walton's ambiguous political satire, from Pamela Wilson's menaced Steam Punk carnival figures to Boris Vallejo's ominous fairy, from Julie Bell's pastoral Pegasus to Mark Gleason's psychically charged Mythical Realism, from Brad Kunkle's Nouveau-Raphaelite mysticism to Vince Natale's xenomorphic taxonomy, from Kenna Houtz' confined harlequin to reckoning the sinister landscape of Mark Poole's *Mal Ojo Bruja* each of these artists invokes the simulacra to give palpability to the ambiguous."



Pamela Wilson - *Unquiet & Dazzling Dark*

Bravo adds, “Each work carries within it an internal logic that imparts an enigma. No two artists have the same imaginative priorities and Imaginative Realism seems to give license to the idiosyncratic impulse regardless of style, technique or narrative direction. What these artworks deny the audience is easily derived resolutions, as key elements of the context are left just out of range of the viewer’s perception. The works defy self-evident interpretations and are neither kitsch nor transparently predictable. Hence, the viewer is left to complete the narrative with their own imagination, to project as much as derive, to query the semiotic while deciphering meaning and actively engage the artworks as a speculative exercise or resign themselves to the cognitive dissonance of inherent ambiguity.

Whether allegorical or mythological, psychological or philosophical, political or hypothetical, each piece carries both an overt and a subtextual meaning that is implied more than blatantly stated. It is this conspicuous sense of inescapable nuance that commands viewer engagement and provides an enduring intrigue that keeps the viewer’s attention. That this is done with ostentatious virtuosity places these artworks beyond the standard Postmodern fare and imparts a gravity that gives them more credulity than mere glib paradox. There is an authenticity to these artworks that reflects the integrity of the artists who created them and allows us a glimpse into the uniquely mysterious worlds of their creative imaginations.”



Sandra Yagi - *Metamorphosis & The Release*

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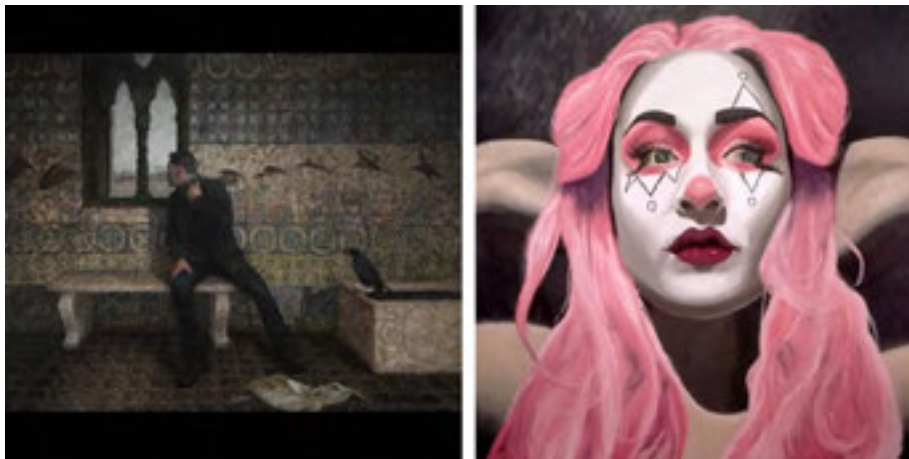
In a recent **radio interview** (<https://www.kclu.org/post/work-artist-behind-100-million-album-covers-display-south-coast-exhibition?>) on KCLU, **Roger Dean** (<https://www.rogerdean.com/>) speaks about art, saying, “For me, art at core has to have several things; it has to have an intent, it has to have skill and craftsmanship—it is not about skill and craftsmanship but you can’t have great art without great craftsmanship. And art has to communicate. This doesn’t mean everybody has to like it, but it has to communicate.”



Roger Dean - *Birdsongs*

Asking the curator for a comment, **Michael Pearce** (<http://www.gildedraven.com/>) succinctly states, “It’s a great time to be a representational artist.”

I couldn’t agree more! In addition, I’ll add that now is also a great time to be a skilled artist, i.e., one who takes pride in their craft, understands their chosen medium, cultivates their abilities, favors quality over quantity, and seeks to express profound subject matter that nourishes both the eye and the mind. These are the artists who create eloquent, articulate artwork that may well lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and maybe even our future. If you’re one of the increasing multitudes of art lovers who hunker for stirring, thought-provoking artworks, allow yourself to be impressed and delighted by *The Illusionists!*



Left: Kathiucia Dias - *A Murder of Crows* — Right: Kenna Houtz - *Confinement*

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Practical Information

The Illusionists

curated by **Michael Pearce**

March 30th through May 18th, 2019

Studio Channel Islands

2222 E. Ventura Boulevard, Camarillo, CA 93010
50 miles north of LA on Hwy 101

Ventura County's Studio Channel Islands is open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays.

<http://studiochannelislands.org/> (<http://studiochannelislands.org/>)

The exhibition catalog will soon become available for online purchase, please check back for the link.


Cover image: Roger Dean - *Green Parrot Island* (detail)


Participating Artists


Boris Vallejo	Julie Bell	Pamela Wilson
Brad Kunkle	Kathiucia Dias	Regina Jacobson
Bryan Larsen	Kenna Houtz	Richard MacDonald
Conor Walton	Mark Gleason	Roger Dean
F. Scott Hess	Mark Poole	Sandra Yagi
Guy Kinnear		Vince Natale


Written by **Lorena Kloosterboer** (<http://www.art-lorena.com/>), realist artist & author © Antwerp, April 2019


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THE CULTURAL

MAGAZINE

Note: machine translated from Spanish.

Original article at <http://thecultural.es/2017/03/27/sandra-yagi/>

San Francisco artist Sandra Yagi, through her paintings seeks to examine the human psyche, the macabre and the influence of nature and science. His interest focuses on the intersection between science and art, using topics of anatomy, genetic manipulation, evolution and medical rarities as tools in the creation of intricate paintings of small and medium size.

In his works we find the representation of strange worlds where the flesh is malleable, the skeleton of the twins joined at birth play, the flayed apes invade the historical canons of Western art and the small, delicate and genetically hybrid creatures generate curiosity and symbolize moral enigmas .

First of all, tell us how Sandra Yagi was satisfied. How were those first contacts with art?

When I was a girl, I was always drawing. My mother still has books in which she wrote drawings on the blank inner covers, including her book of Buddhist prayers. My mother is very creative and I inherited her sensibilities and artistic abilities. In addition, I have always had a great love for nature and science. I had a small telescope to look at the moon, a microscope to look at protozoa in the pond water and other small wonders. My uncle encouraged my love of nature and science.

My father and I often discussed our future education and career plans. My parents, who had been imprisoned in relocation camps along with other Japanese Americans during World War II, thought it was very risky as a result of their experience. They strongly discouraged me from studying art and insisted that I focus on something practical. I was always drawing as a child, but my father's claim was: "artists are starved"; so I took his advice and followed a career in finance / commercial banking, even though I loved art and science.

I returned to my inspiration and my art after meeting an older sculptor woman who advised me not to wait until I was old and no longer had the energy necessary for the creation of art. At that time I had not paid much attention to the finite nature of life. I came to the conclusion that if my life ended at that time, I would regret not having pursued art. I also realized that I was trying to be someone I was not, and that I needed to find a way to become a fulltime artist. I cut my hours back to the bank and signed up for continuing education courses in drawing and painting.

I left corporate life in 2008, having been trapped in that world for 27 years has fueled some of the anguish that permeates my art. Recently I made a painting of a skull with a trapped fox being tormented by ravens. This is often how I felt at work ready to gnaw my leg to get out of the cruel steel trap of my work. I never really fit in with the corporate culture.

My work began very traditional, including still lifes and landscapes in watercolor. I got bored with that and over time I went back to exploring the topics that I love, incorporating anatomy, skeletons and animals, symbols and metaphors of human nature.

How do you find the artistic cultural environment in your city? Is it as liberal, open and modern as it is projected abroad?

It's an extraordinary place for a creative person. However, much of the artistic community has been displaced as technology companies in Silicon Valley have moved, and the influx of technology workers caused an increase in apartment rentals and land property prices. There are still many artists who remain on fire and, although a number of galleries have moved, there are still some gallerists there.

We also have art museums and decent art schools. The best aspect of San Francisco is that I do not feel that there is social pressure to settle with the middle classes of America. As a friend of mine said: "it is a ghetto for the different".

How do you see the situation of women in the art world, and more now with Trump?

With Trump attacking freedom of the press and his support for the culture of rape, it is more important than ever for women to make art, to express their point of view and to promote positive social change. In fact all artists need to express and document what it is to live in this turbulent time. Art also encourages free thinking and can be a catalyst for social justice and change.

How would you define your art?

My work is best described as a realistic representation of scenes that are from the imagination. The imagery is an exploration of the blurred line between humanity and our animal nature. I do not think that my work fits perfectly in the popsurrealist genre, I paint in a more realistic and classic way than the painting style that is often found in the previous category. Pop surrealism has in its ancestry the classic genre of comics and also has elements of anime, and none of these areas has influenced my work. However, like pop surrealism, my work has a subtle dark humor.

Your work is very closely linked to research. How does that "obsession" arise because of genetic manipulation or oddities?

I have described mutants and hybrids in numerous works that start with a painting I did in 2002 about genetic engineering and how it could be misused. Initially I was interested in portraying the perversion of nature by artificial breeding, hybridization and the misuse of science to satisfy our own purposes. A real life example is the brightness in dark cats that developed by inserting a

jellyfish gene into a cat embryo. Everything for our fun! I also distrust the genetic engineering made by agribusiness giants to increase their profitability (I fear that they will compromise the safety of human beings and the environment in their pursuit of profits and global monopolization).

Some hybrids have been very beneficial. Our ancestors, for example, crossed horses with donkeys and developed mules, which are firm and hardworking domestic animals. Other hybrids have no meaning and are true perversions, the ligre (cross between tiger and lion), for example, is too big and cumbersome to survive in nature. I think this kind of experimentation is cruel. No creature, hybrid or not, was damaged in the making of my paintings!

My questioning of genetic engineering, as well as my interest in evolution, prompted me to ask myself: "What would happen if ...?"; questions about the final result of evolution. For example: "Why do most creatures only have four members? What if our common ancestor had six?" This line of thinking has led me to create imaginary hybrid creatures based on alternative paths of evolution.

If there is a great protagonist in your works are the skeletons What do they represent for you?

Skeletons have a powerful symbolic meaning in all societies and cultures. I use them as a symbol of extinction of animal species at the hands of humanity, as well as a symbol of mortality. I also believe that bones are structurally beautiful.

Your work drinks a lot of surrealism. How much personal dream load is there in them?

My dreams have become very boring and mundane since I've started painting and drawing daily, I used to have strange dreams when I was stuck in my corporate work. Maybe it's because my mind now has a creative outlet and does not require night dreams to express themselves.

The different hybridizations respond to an aesthetic appeal or is there a discourse behind them?

My main reason is aesthetics, I think that these hybrid creatures based on combinations of colors and the aesthetics of the form itself is enough, but I also consider them as creatures that would adapt to their environment. Sometimes I combine creatures as a play on words, for example, I painted a "rhinobeetle" like a beetle with a rhino head.

What artists are part of your creative universe?

I love so many periods and styles of painting that have influenced my work ... In the Renaissance Bosch, Titian, Van Eyck; the first anatomical illustrators, such as Vesalius and Albinus. Newer teachers such as Dali, Teraoka and Walton Ford; and also artists who were naturalists like Audubon, John Gould and Maria Sibylla Merian inspire me. I am attracted to realistic art, as well as fantastic art.



Sandra Yagi's Strange Creatures, Skeletons Explore Our Nature

by Andy Smith

Posted on December 5, 2016

San Francisco-based painter Sandra Yagi explores our relationship with nature, the human condition, the fragility our bodies, and broader scientific concepts in her fantastical oil paintings. Some more lighthearted scenes show deformed creatures dancing and frolicking, garnering their own grace; skulls peeled back to reveal wildlife hint at our animalistic nature. At play are explorations of genetics and evolution.

Yagi explains the influences on her art in a statement: "Science, zoology, human folly and an obsessive curiosity for the macabre provide the fuel for my subject matter," Yagi says. "My work is inspired by the natural sciences as well as by the traditional drawing and painting techniques of the old masters, including anatomical studies by artists such as Andreas Vesalius and Bernhard Siegfried Albinus."

The artist worked for 25 years in the financial industry before tackling a full-time career in the arts. Since her art has been shown in galleries like beinArt in Australia, Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago, Bash Fine Art in Las Vegas, and several other spots. Her work is found in the collections of prominent art collectors and figures like Ben Stiller, Axl Rose, and director Lee Unkrich.

CLIVE BARKER and SANDRA YAGI



Clive Barker, "Untitled"

January 12 - February 19, 2011 at [Bert Green Fine Arts](#), Downtown Los Angeles
 by Ray Zone

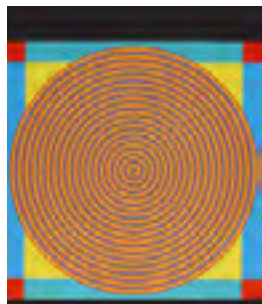
There is a fine if harrowing fit in pairing the paintings of Clive Barker and Sandra Yagi together in one show. Both of these painters, through different approaches, strip the mortal coil of its flesh and tear the physical world asunder.



Sandra Yagi, "Dancing with the Stars #2," 2010, oil on panel, 7 3/4 x 7 3/4".

Sandra Yagi's take is a forensic approach, coolly satirical, yet no less disquieting. Her paintings seem to break down into three separate subgenres. The first group displays skinless simians in a pastoral world, quietly rendered and presented with a blank-faced neutrality poised on a divide between parody and iconoclasm. Her painting titled "Anatomical Chimp #3" is a good example of this group.

The second group of Yagi's paintings are satirical and more obviously traditional. Skeletons, finely painted, are seen to cavort in a variety of human endeavors. A pair of them are depicted in a terpsichorean gambol with a small oil on panel titled "Dancing with the Stars #2." With this series we revisit the classic Everyman morality tales and the "Dance of Death" of the Middle Ages. These paintings are an insistent reminder, amidst our joys and frivolities, of our own mortality.



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Sandra Yagi, "Dom and Sub on Leash," 2009, oil on panel, 16 x 12".

The third group of Yagi's paintings combine S&M or "fetish" motifs, incorporating spanking and bondage, with skeletons. In this series, as with an oil on panel titled "Dom and Sub on Leash," skeletons in black leather apply the lash to a submissive male. It's interesting that, with these pairings, it is always the skeleton that is the dominant party. This is a perverse, and somewhat humorous elaboration of the classic morality tale.



Clive Barker, "Untitled," oil on canvas, 30 x 30".

Barker's large oil paintings are afire with his handiwork. Paint comes alive on his canvases in a chromatic clash of blazing primaries. The otherworldly beings he emblazons to life seem to shout with a force of ecstasy or agony. Barker is a novelist as well as a film director and producer of epic fantasy and horror stories. He has repeatedly stated that his paintings are integral to his literary and motion picture endeavors. It's easy to see why. The paintings in the current show were created over the last decade and could have come from a casting call in another world. Or an audition in hell.

Take a smaller untitled canvas, 30" x 30," for example. It depicts a black man screaming, crying or singing. He stands out against a background of soft pastels. His open mouth is a scarlet pit in his black head and body. His body gleams with sweaty highlights. The histrionics of the pose contrast to the measured paint handling.

The five by four foot painting titled "Magma," this time with freely applied paint depicts a skeletal jester or alien calmly squatting

on a flowing bed of hot lava. The being regards us with great equanimity, so as to imply a normal state of affairs despite being perched amidst an inferno of windblown flame.

Ichabod Crane seems to live in a black and white painting of a gaunt figure holding a cane as he is surrounded by whirling blackbirds, as if they are a part of him. God only knows how many of these supernal characters live in Barker's mind. These demigods exit that teeming world and enter ours because Barker's forceful paint brush provides them with life on canvas.



Clive Barker, "Untitled," oil on canvas, 60 x 48".

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Pinturas sobre los peligros de la modificación genética



Uno de los óleos de Yagi, que ilustra al humano todavía unido a su pasado de primate (© Sandra Yagi) Ampliar

- Sandra Yagi se acerca a "la frontera entre la humanidad y la naturaleza animal".
- La parte más oscura del ser humano y sus impulsos incontrolables son los temas preferidos por la artista, que auna ciencia y arte.
- Su técnica, similar a la de los maestros clásicos como Tiziano y Caravaggio, se basa en la superposición de capas de óleo y acrílico.

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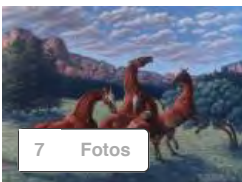
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Anatomía e instintos primarios

Diomedes devorado por sus caballos es una interpretación del mito que protagoniza el hombre que, según la mitología griega, reinaba en Bistonia y poseía cuatro caballos **que habían acostumbrado a comer carne humana** para que terminaran con los forasteros. El cruel soberano terminó siendo alimento de sus propios monstruos. "Es una imagen del humano torciendo la naturaleza para un mal fin y provocando su propia destrucción", explica la autora del cuadro.

La artista estadounidense [Sandra Yagi](#) examina la psicología humana y **reflexiona sobre la naturaleza y la ciencia** en pinturas

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que elabora con exquisitos procedimientos clásicos. Los peligros de la modificación genética, la hibridación y el lado más primitivo del ser humano son temas recurrentes en sus obras.

Amante de los animales y de "los bichos de aspecto espeluznante" la artista considera **que la ciencia y el arte se complementan** y se apoyan: "El científico mira a la naturaleza con disciplina, probando hipótesis para obtener conocimiento. El artista puede fijarse en la naturaleza para mejorar su comprensión, más filosófica y subjetiva".

Hace un minucioso estudio de la anatomía, con músculos y estructuras óseas que elabora con acrílico y óleo. En sus obras hay por lo menos **cuatro capas de pintura** que superpone dejando que una se transparente sobre la otra, al modo en que [Tiziano](#) o [Caravaggio](#) dotaban de profundidad a sus cuadros.

La batalla por superar el lado salvaje

Sus creaciones más recientes se acercan a "la delgada frontera entre la humanidad y nuestra naturaleza animal". En el interior de su serie de detallados cráneos hay **reptiles copulando o chimpancés en actitud violenta**. Yagi crea una "anatomía metafórica" para referirse a la violencia, la guerra y la avaricia de los impulsos antepuestos a la racionalidad que hemos conseguido

desarrollar a lo largo de la historia.

La artista ve al ser humano inmerso siempre en la batalla por superar su lado salvaje, todavía forcejeando con su pasado de primate: **"Bajo nuestra fina piel humana está nuestra naturaleza animal**. Necesitamos reconocerla como parte de nosotros y superar los impulsos violentos primitivos".

Yagi ve al ser humano todavía forcejeando con su pasado de primate

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Please discuss your connections to the San Francisco Bay Area, and why you've chosen to live and work here after living in several locations including Colorado and southern California.

I was raised and educated in Denver, Colorado. I received an MBA in finance, and worked for various commercial finance companies, ending up at Bank of America. I accepted a position in Los Angeles with BofA to advance my career. At that time, my art was on the back burner. After 5 years in LA, a dear friend of mine in San Francisco was diagnosed with AIDS, so I asked for a transfer to SF to be closer to him. In retrospect, relocating to San Francisco was the best thing I ever did for my artistic life. Living here has a tremendous influence on my life because of the creative and cultural climate, plus the wider acceptance of nonconformity.

You are involved in several San Francisco art communities: ArtSpan, and where you work, an arts studio space collective on Bryant Street. How do you find working within or having an art space in these communities?

ArtSpan, which organizes SF Open Studios, has helped by introducing me to people who really understand the local art scene, as well as referring me to curators, leading ultimately to exhibition opportunities. ArtSpan has organized educational seminars covering topics that are very relevant to working artists. Participating in Open Studios has increased my exposure in the Bay Area. The artists at South Beach Artists Studios on Bryant Street, where I have my studio, are supportive friends. Artmaking is a solitary activity requiring a great deal of hard work, and it is good for one's mental health to leave the studio once in a while and have the camaraderie of artist friends. Likewise, I try to be supportive of my artist friends by attending their art openings, giving words of encouragement, and helping out with little things like photographing their artwork. After leaving the Bank, I made the commitment to increase my connection with other artists. For example, on a regular basis, I meet up with what is called the "Artists Roundtable." The group meets for coffee, view various art exhibits, sketch together, while sharing insights, inspirations and encouragement.

Please talk a little bit about why you think you have had more exposure in the southern California art market. Has it affected your career in any way to have a show in your city? You also have a show coming up in Berkeley in 2012. Do you see different responses to your art based upon location?

Gaining exposure in LA was serendipity: I met my gallerist, Bert Green, at an Open Studio event in San Francisco, before he opened his gallery in LA. Bert has developed a good audience for my work in LA, fueled by the entertainment industry with its mainstay of creative people who are more open to unusual work, have the buying power, and are often influential. It's been harder to get shown in San Francisco. I am hoping that the current show at the Incline Gallery as well as a recent show at ARC will help me gain local visibility. I see no difference in reaction to my work between LA or SF.

Your career background in banking is quite different than one typically imagined for an artist. Has it helped you in any way? You recently retired and have devoted yourself full-time to your art. Please discuss your background and what led up to that decision to become a full time painter.

When I was young, my father and I often battled over my future education and career plans. I was always making art when I was a kid, but his admonition was "artists starve." My family is very risk averse, and of course, that has rubbed off on me. So I took his advice and embraced a career in finance/commercial banking, even though I loved art and science. I was inspired to return to my art after meeting an older woman sculptor who advised me not to wait until I was too old and no longer had the needed energy for artmaking. Shortly thereafter, I saw an interview with David Hockney, who said "I have never heard of an artist on his deathbed say "Gee I wish I had been a vice president at Bank of America." I knew he was directing that statement at me! I realized that I was trying to be someone that I wasn't, and that I needed to find a way to become a full time artist. I cut my hours back at the bank and signed up for continuing education courses in drawing and painting; the extra day each week plus the weekend was devoted to studio work, which helped me retain my sanity. My background in business helped me to develop a practical, rational mind, and these skills are invaluable in running the business side of being an artist. Being trapped in the corporate world for 27 years feeds into some of the angst that seeps into my art.

San Francisco Art Beat Interview with artist Sandra Yagi

How would you typically describe your work to your audience? It seems to defy any typical modern genre classification. There are surrealist nuances of Hieronymus Bosch, and the draftsmanship of classic Dutch painting in your art. Some have placed it in pop-surrealism. Do you agree with that?

My work is not surrealism as defined in the Surrealist Manifesto, because there are elements of rationality and reason embedded throughout. My work is best described as realistic rendering of scenes that are from the imagination. The imagery is an exploration of the blurred line between humanity and our animal nature. I love so many periods and styles of painting which have influenced my work: the Renaissance, Titian, Van Eyck, early anatomical illustrators, like Vesalius and Albinus, and more recent masters like Dali, Teraoka, Walton Ford. And yes, I LOVE Bosch. I don't believe that my work fits neatly in the pop-surrealism genre. I paint more realistically and classically than the painting style normally found in the category. Pop surrealism has in its ancestry the underground comics genre and also has elements of anime, and neither of these areas have influenced my work. However, like pop surrealism, my work has subtle dark humor.

Skeletons in your work seem to be a significant catalyst for much of the art's intention and message. They predominantly perform the main, but varied actions: whether dancing, cloning, morphing, performing sexual acts on living humans, or subject of still lifes and Memento Mori. Can you explain your interest in skeletons, and why skeletons tend to be your primary subject matter?

From an aesthetic perspective, I love the beauty of skeletons, whether they are animal or human. If you look carefully, there are no hard angles anywhere on a skeleton; instead, there are elegant and subtle curves. Skeletons, especially human skeletons, are the symbol of mortality. An image with a skeleton dancing or having sex is a wonderful contradiction; here you have a symbol of death partaking in an activity that is the essence of life. To create something that is supposedly dead and make it appear to be believably alive is a wonderful challenge.

I'm impressed with your ability to blend contemporary culture with classic themes. This is evident not only in your religion and mythology series, but indirectly in all your art. Is your idea behind this, "the more things change, the more they stay the same," or is it something different?

You hit the nail on the head. Human technology may advance, but great contemporary art is still concerned with age old issues such as mortality and the human condition. Ancient mythology, once you take out the weird monsters or unbelievable powers of the gods, is still about our human comedy: vanity, love, jealousy, greed, hatred, and war. Myths attempt to explain our relationship with nature, and who we are.

What have been the more memorable projects, either most exciting or greatest personal achievements, you have been involved in as an artist?

The most memorable project was the installation that I did for the Oakland Museum of California group show "Dia de los Muertos" several years ago. This involved a projected video of animated dancing skeletons and required 200 charcoal drawings. I had to teach myself how to do video editing using Final Cut Express, and this is an achievement because I'm not the most tech-savvy person.



Beetle Browed Skull

Barbie & Other Monstrosities

The Mattel mythology of Sandra Yagi

By [Ron Garmon](#)

For a town that prides itself on self-promotion, Los Angeles keeps many of its alluring treasures prudently hidden. For every publicized haul (like the Louise Bourgeois exhibition fast coming to a close at MOCA), there are dozens of crannies each glistening with its magpie's horde. Keeper of one such is Bert Green: genial, shaven-pated proprietor of an eponymous gallery on West 5th Street. His grin, Zarathustra-like, never falters, even while dealing with the numerous aggressive freaks comprising much of the walk-in trade on Gallery Row, one of whom was keeping him busy on a recent Thursday afternoon while an equally freakish critic took run of his place. In the back, past Jessica Cutaz (washed-out, hyper-realistic drawings of crumpled baggies and other detritus) and Doug Cox (blanched landscapes dotted with blank human outlines) lies a generous, cake-like wedge of something far wilder: Sandra Yagi's muster of harpies and sirens, sphinxes and gorgons glow on the walls, with monster and victim rendered in thick, painterly strokes laid on like sugar frosting. This fleshy sexiness is given one last gleeful twist once you realize these monsters out of Greek mythology are all Barbie dolls.

"In all of those, Barbie is mythological, and represents something which cannot be attained," Yagi explains, chatting pleasantly from her San Francisco studio, "She's an impossible woman-image and a tyranny." In *Siren Song Barbie*, human girls caper in the tide near the monstrous icon, part Bulfinch and part bullshit, courting the old, old calamity. "The girls are trying to be like Barbie, to swim to her like the sailors," Sandra says, adding almost unnecessarily, "I think Barbie is a very harmful myth."

Well, yes. The Mattel toy isn't exactly brave Ulysses, and part of what draws faces to Yagi's gnomish and hilarious art is her juxtaposition of the mythic and the banal, with the alluring abyss that is Barbie

containing both. "In all of these, Barbie has to look vapid," Yagi says. "I didn't change anything! That's how she looks, and I should know since now I own more Barbies than I ever have in my life. My sisters loved Barbie, but Mom gave me one as a kid and I hated her! Those eensy little feet and perfect boots! Have you ever seen the ethnic Barbie? Well, they have African-American Barbie and she has Caucasian features," Sandra kvetches sweetly. "Then they had Asian Barbie, and I don't look like her!"

While Barbie might represent an oppressively impossible ideal, there's a certain democratic leveling involved in Sandra's series *Petit Mort* (that's "little death," and a French euphemism for an orgasm), also hanging at Bert Green until February 28th. Each entry depicts two skeletons in a different sex position, with canvases titled *Missionary*, *Jackhammer* and *Doggie Style*.

"I just love skeletons!" she enthuses, gamine-cheery as Wednesday Addams. "I have a full-sized human skeleton replica I look at a lot. I like how bones look, and always look for excuses to do them. You can get a sense of expression even in a skull by tilting its head," chirps the painter, who a decade ago was a Bay Area bank employee who kept such ghoulish Mittyisms locked away in her own cranium. "It's all in the gesture."

Indeed, Yagi's bone-dancers are as expressive as calcium gets, lacking only the flesh she slathers in such eatable profusion on her Barbies and monsters. Even her reptiles glisten, scaled hides like mobile jewel cases as they slither around quartered human skulls. "I'm getting ready to do a few more skulls," Sandra says. "I want to do a confrontation between human and *Homo erectus* skulls – a series of that and probably more lizards. I like lizards."

Sandra Yagi's paintings hang at Bert Green Fine Art until Feb. 28. 102 W. 5th St., downtown L.A., (213) 624-6212. bgfa.us.

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