

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Demons in the Vegetable Garden: A Botanical History of the Mind

by

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A square frame with a double border. The inner square is slightly offset from the outer square, creating a 3D effect. The lines are thin and light brown.

Dedicated to the memory of Helen
Kruger, who taught me to look closely
and makeup my own mind.

Before Darwin and the microscope, reality was a product of our fears, desires, and fantasies. Before modern science, nature adhered to a taxonomy of good and evil. Herbs were keys to immortality, resurrection, conception, and warding off innumerable demons. So much as touching the wrong plant could turn you into a sheep or stop your heart. Good and evil were not always distinct, and then as now it is often the most poisonous plants that save lives. Though we have found little evidence of demons or sheep people, as science advances, the line between life and death seems more and more permeable. Like the witch doctors of our Neolithic ancestors, we continue to look for the plant or chemical that will extend life, bring back the dead, and keep us young forever. This series of paintings brings ancient superstition and modern science together through this history of herbal myth and medicine. The work presents a collective unconscious imagining built up over thousands of years.

The paintings construct narratives within real and imagined spaces. Their scenes mimic memories in their mixing of clarity and ambiguity, creating a psychological arena outside of any particular time. An energetic, gestural abstraction produces a sense of movement and change throughout the work. Light and dark compete to take over the image but ultimately work together as neither can exist without the other. Emotive color makes life spring from death only to fall back in again. Ambiguous symbols open the painting to the viewer's interpretation despite whatever history may have brought them together. The paintings are a meeting place between generations of human misconceptions, modern science, and the contemporary viewer's psyche.

History

Medicine began as an attempt to appease the gods that had decided to make the patient ill. The earliest humans relied on the rituals and potions of witch doctors for their treatment.¹ Every local plant was tested for potential powers. Those that proved effective were passed down to the next generation. In this way, lexicons of herbal medicine formed, built on semi-scientific discoveries and the changing remnants of past religions. The medical men of early civilizations like Sumer and Ancient Egypt recorded recipes for medicinal concoctions specific to different diseases, even diabetes, but the gods still played a crucial role in the healing process. In Ancient Greece, healers were often priests. A crucial influence on modern medicine rose out of this time period in the form of Hippocrates. His ideas about balancing the humors within the body would outlive him by thousands of years.

Galen was the first medical man of the west to use scientific experiments to determine the validity of various herbal treatments.² His work came right before the Medieval period, during which the church reclaimed its custody over medicine, this time under only one god. The focus shifted once again to prayer, but herbalism continued beyond the reach of church officials. Witches continued to use plants in concoctions sold to clients ranging from star-struck lovers to murderers. Their knowledge was a rich inheritance of centuries of folk medicine and superstition. Those who practiced herbalism relied largely on illustrations passed through the medical community to identify the plants

¹ Robert Greenspan, *Medicine: Perspectives in History and Art* (Alexandria, Virginia: Ponte Verde Press, 2004), 333.

² Reader's Digest, *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1986), 55.

that they used. Stylizations and inaccuracies could lead to poisoning by misidentification, and so art became a matter of life and death.

With the Renaissance, plant-based medicines were brought back into the mainstream. A physician known as Paracelsus turned medical attention to the value of the chemistry of medicine.³ All this time the books of herbal medicine of Europe grew to include illustrations and descriptions of hundreds of species with an incredible influx of new specimens due to the discovery of the New World at the end of the period. Their information was still not wholly scientific, though. Much of it relied on early pagan beliefs. In fact, a lot of remedies were as likely to kill you as save you. Many physicians doubted herbalism and preferred bloodletting and the use of metals like mercury. Between the Renaissance and modern times, medicine pitted traditional healers against academics and moderates against extremists. Often the most poisonous cures won the favor of both.

Along with this surge of interest in science came a golden age of art and, unsurprisingly, medical illustration. Laws and religious morals had prevented anyone from illustrating cadavers with any level of detail before this period.⁴ Artists like Leonardo Da Vinci were finally able to make intense studies of the human form, recording every line of muscle and tendon. A new precedent for the accuracy of medical illustration was set and continued to grow into the present day. This medical fascination struck painters outside of the profession as well. During the Baroque period, Rembrandt painted “The Anatomy lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp” (1632,) depicting a group of students observing the dissection

³ Robert Greenspan, *Medicine: Perspectives in History and Art* (Alexandria, Virginia: Ponteverde Press, 2004), 428.

⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

of a cadaver. It conveys a sense of the lifelessness of the man on the table that modern photos of the dead rarely achieve.

Between the 18th and 19th centuries, movements to return to studying the effects of plants and the specifics of dosage rekindled.⁵ Samuel Hahnemann founded homeopathy, and some doctors attempted to combine traditional cures with what they believed to be working in their contemporary medicine. Physicians like William Withering even went into the countryside to study folk healers and discover what useful knowledge they had been passing down to each other over the millennia. The development of anesthesia made more advanced surgery possible as evidenced in Thomas Eakins' "The Gross Clinic" (1875.) This bitingly realistic painting depicts an operation taking place in a dimly lit surgical theater. Though it is a grim scene, it is not the horror that it would have been before anesthesia. Despite these milestones, quack doctors continued to wreak havoc throughout the eighteen hundreds.

Modern inventions and discoveries such as X-rays and germ theory brought us to the quality of medicine that we currently enjoy.⁶ We discovered how to isolate the active chemicals from plants, and then how to make them ourselves without using a single leaf. This process has brought us such crucial drugs as morphine and penicillin. Meanwhile, medical illustration remains valid despite the growth of photography. Medicine has not left art, either. Paintings like Dana Schutz's "The Autopsy of Michael Jackson" (2005) reference historical, surgical paintings to bring the same sense of human fragility and the body as meat to contemporary issues. The ability of the human body to heal and rot will never lose

⁵ Reader's Digest, *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1986), 64.

⁶ Ibid, 70.

our interest. We continue to make many breakthroughs on our quest to live longer and healthier. Someday, though, we will reach our limits and have to face our fear of dying.



Narcissus poeticus, 36 x 84," oil on panel

Narcissus (Cyclical Nature)

The painting “Narcissus poeticus” depicts the story of a flower whose chemistry and mythology are evidence of the closeness of life and death. Bright summer colors melt into dark cool hues. They are over saturated, making them appear acidic to emulate the hallucinogenic and toxic properties of the narcissus flower. There is a continuous under layer of chaotic, gestural paint. It builds upon itself and defines some areas of the image and obliterates others as the energy of the natural world is constantly moving, creating and destroying indiscriminately. Other layers use chunky, fleshy strokes to describe the decay that we are constantly cycling in and out of. In contrast, some levels are merely outlined and left transparent. They are parts of the most impermanent things, but everything is really just another piece of that first, underlying layer.

The figures are all in a limbo, waiting for the cyclical change. The Tasmanian devils look red and raw. A cancerous disease is currently sweeping through the species, killing as it goes, but we are looking for a cure.⁷ Narcissus has been used against cancer for centuries, and modern science has proven that it is still of use to human populations.⁸ It was a symbol of life in Ancient Greece due to its association with Persephone, the goddess of spring. In this painting she offers a Tasmanian devil a flower while death waits to take her back home. In the same mythology, it is the plant that grew from the place in which its namesake

⁷ Julie Rehmeyer, “Fatal Cancer Threatens Tasmanian Devil Populations,” *Discover Magazine*, March 31, 2014, <http://discovermagazine.com/2014/may/13-the-immortal-devil> (accessed November 15, 2014).

⁸ Reader's Digest, *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1986), 158.

died.⁹ The narcissus is the rebirth of summer with the imminent markings of a coming winter.



Atropa belladonna, 48 x 60," oil on panel

⁹ Jeanne Rose, *Herbs & Things: Jeanne Rose's Herbal* (New York: Workman, 1972), 87.

Belladonna (To Die for Beauty)

Though in Greek mythology it is Narcissus that died for beauty, it is the poisonous belladonna that was once used cosmetically. Belladonna has a past of killing curious children and patients with reckless doctors. It was even favored by witches in the Middle Ages to make potions for assassins¹⁰. According to folk history, Ancient Assyrian women would drop its juice into their eyes to enlarge their pupils for a more doe-eyed look. This story is a possible source of the name “belladonna,” though it is also known as deadly nightshade. Today, optometrists use it for the same physiological effect so that they can observe the back of the eyeball for signs of disease. It plays a vital role in a number of other medications as well.

In the painting “Atropa belladonna” a horned farmer cuts the hair of a stunned young woman with a pair of sheep shears. He is the devil that people once believed tended belladonna in his garden. He is also acting as Atropos (atropa belladonna’s namesake) who cut the thread of life in Greek mythology.¹¹ The young woman before him is wearing a yellow dress symbolic of youth, but the color is muddied by the passage of time. The web of a black widow spider built on her dress evidences how stillly she has been lying there. Her pupils are enlarged from using the paralytic plant for beauty, but her age still shows in her wrinkled hand. Her hair is both gray and multicolored like water to represent the thread of life. The sheep in the distance carry these colors but also the red of the devil farmer,

¹⁰ Reader's Digest, *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1986), 96.

¹¹ Robert Greenspan, *Medicine: Perspectives in History and Art* (Alexandria, Virginia: Ponteverde Press, 2004), 416.

because all things carry this potential for good and evil, life and death. In nature they are one in the same. Only we decide that a lamb means innocence and a bearded billy goat is the face of the destroyer.



"Mandragora officinarum," 60 x 48," oil on panel

Mandrake (Death for Life)

Users of the mandrake root were more than willing to make sacrifices for new life. “Mandragora officinarum” is a portrait of a mother and child that borrows elements of Renaissance paintings of Madonna and child but with some alterations. Like many of those earlier portraits, the mother is depicted with downcast eyes in a sweet, wholesome face as she cradles her infant. The eyes and hands are enlarged, though, exaggerating her maternal character and giving her an unorthodox physical strength. Her skin has been painted in layers of glaze to create a youthful, fleshy glow, but a thick mourning costume covers her. The baby in her arms is more of an anthropomorphic root than an infant. He is painted in the style of a scientific illustration as he suckles blood from her finger.

These motifs of earth and flesh are carried into the background and the story taking place there. The major color scheme revolves around warm earth tones like clay and blood with some pale, milky beige. The brushstrokes are runny and fleshy, because the mandrake plant was said to grow from the semen and blood of a hanged criminal.¹² The outlines of wings move behind the central figures. At first glance, they look like they may belong to angels, but two vulture heads are visible above the woman’s shoulders. Vultures are the storks of a world where death makes life possible.

The mandrake root was used in potions to induce pregnancy in the Middle Ages.¹³ It even made its way into an early version of the Bible in which Leah became pregnant by use of a mandrake root. During the Medieval period, people believed that hearing its cry when pulling it out of the ground would be fatal. To elude their own deaths, they tied sacrificial

¹² Reader's Digest, *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1986), 20.

¹³ Anthony S. Mercatante, *The Magic Garden: The Myth and Folklore of Flowers, Plants, Trees, and Herbs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 140.

dogs to the plants and trained them to pull up the roots instead. As outlandish as this cycle of events seems now, the idea of having to give a life to gain a life is not ridiculous. We know now that matter and energy have to be recycled in order for new things to grow. If everything suddenly stopped, if we never aged, if our loved ones never died, nothing new would ever grow again.



Punica Granatum, 66 x 48,"oil on panel

Pomegranate (Resurrection)

The pomegranate takes our search from fertility to resurrection. “*Punica granatum*” is a fork in the road between two different paths at an opening where the dead can reenter life. The left side opens up to a bright and surreally sunny outside. The right path is cold and dark, leading deep into the cave, but there is no wall between them. Persephone stands in the intersection in a wedding gown. She leans into the darker path, and the brushstrokes of her face melt into it. The extinct animals at her feet fade away in the darkness. They are all impermanent, moving between these spaces.

This imagery is a marriage of some of our earliest beliefs about the functions of plants and modern discoveries. The dog-like creatures are Tasmanian tigers, which went extinct in the 1930’s. Modern scientists have enough DNA to clone them. There is discussion of bringing their species back into existence after eighty years of them being completely absent from our world.¹⁴ This is a power that our early ancestors would have attributed only to gods and those that knew how to negotiate with them. The Ancient Greeks gave the pomegranate a role in the underworld from which these animals would have to be pulled. They believed that Persephone had to stay in the land of the dead one month for every pomegranate seed that she ate while there. Winter would come and all of the flowers would wither and die until her return. Today we are still trying to find ways to take things back from that place.

¹⁴ “Extinct Tasmanian Tiger Could Be Cloned,” *ABC News*, August 22, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=120013> (accessed December 1, 2014).



Taxus baccata, 72 x 48," oil on panel

Yew (Immortality)

As we look deeper into the oceans, molecules, and forests of this planet, we find more and more ways to defy death. The yew tree has been a symbol of both immortality and mourning for centuries, because new trees can spring from broken branches pushed into the soil. On the flipside, they also represent death and sorrow as they were commonly planted in cemeteries to prevent grave robbers from unearthing the dead.¹⁵ Yew trees bend into a caged tunnel in “*Taxus baccata*,” trapping the deceased between the earth and an eerie sky. These figures rise out of the trees and drag themselves through the air, leaving traces of their movements behind them. The forest is dark and cold, but warmly glowing jellyfish float around the people like fireflies

The people do not interact, because they are completely consumed by their own deaths. The bones of the male figure in the foreground are becoming the twigs and broken branches of the yew tree. Parts of him glow and others dissolve as he resists giving in to death. The little girl next to him is illuminated by the jellyfish in her hands, absorbed in its presence. Behind them, a girl screams as she rises out of the trees, the light of her hands dragging around her. The parts of their bodies that the jellyfish touch are articulated back into life but never to a full human existence. These are *Turritopsis dohrnii* jellyfish. They are considered to be immortal due to their ability to degenerate back to a polyp state when they are injured or stressed.¹⁶ They can then continue to grow up all over again, potentially continuing through this cycle infinitely.

¹⁵ Anthony S. Mercatante, *The Magic Garden: The Myth and Folklore of Flowers, Plants, Trees, and Herbs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 70.

¹⁶ Ker Than, ““Immortal” Jellyfish Swarm World's Oceans.” *National Geographic*, January 29, 2009, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/01/090130-immortal-jellyfish-swarm.html> (accessed February 27, 2015).

This kind of endless youth is advertised by every face cream on TV, every multivitamin, every new exercise device. They are all selling quick fixes to a better life, but a better life is not a longer one or one without change. We cannot keep looking for these cheats and ignoring all the war and pollution in the meantime. The trash and grenades below the jellyfish are a reminder of the world that modern society often glosses over, so we can keep our focus on that search for beauty. All of the face cream that has ever existed will not give us that youthful look of joy, if we let the world fall apart around us.



"Digitalis purpurea, 48 x 66," oil on panel

Foxglove (Reversals)

While some of us look for new ways to kill and others for new ways to save, some remedies from the eighteenth century remain potent. In 1775 William Withering discovered the purple foxglove in a successful folk-healer's bag of herbs.¹⁷ With time, scientists discovered that this success was due to the chemical digitalis within the leaves of the foxglove. This chemical can save the life of a person experiencing heart failure or stop the heart of a healthy person forever. It was known in Withering's time as "the herb that can raise the dead and kill the living." "Digitalis purpurea" (2015) explores that reversal.

The painting is a moment in time in which most elements continue to change, but one is still and constant. It is an instant full of potential energy in which the pendulum could equally swing towards life or death. The lines of the walls converge at a bright, still fox. She is caught at the moment before she will dive like she is after a rodent in the snow. Despite the stillness in the room, a breeze stretches the candle flames out long. One is already blown out, signifying the fragility of life. The human figures are all rendered in choppy, gestural paint strokes, as they are impermanent in comparison to the force of the fox. The surgeons around it are cold in purple and blue, dead in comparison to their near-death patient. They are oblivious to the fox floating before them. The pulpy incision in the reclining figure's chest is the opening to a dark hole over which the fox hovers. Flowers of the same fleshy material rise and melt around them. The fox is the force of growth and decay that dictates change. It is the only stillness in a room.

¹⁷ Reader's Digest, *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1986), 66.

Concluding Remarks

These pieces unite images that have been developing since medicine began in a contemporary context. They mix the emotive expressionism of current artists like Francis Bacon into more traditional compositions with the drama and mythology of Renaissance paintings. Each painting brings history into the present but confuses its parts into a new interpretation to draw correlations between fact and myth. I am interested in mixing painting and biology like Terry Winters, but I do not care about scientific truth. My work is about our perceptions of truth, not about absolute reality. Like contemporary painters Soey Milk and Kent Williams, it juxtaposes figures with seemingly unrelated imagery to create psychological events. Idiosyncratic symbolism creates narratives that can be read in a variety of ways similar to the work of Erik Thor Sandberg. I have given each painting the Latin name of its plant to uphold this ambiguity while still leaving clues. My subject matter spans thousands of years, but ultimately, my work is firmly planted in contemporary art.

From the start, we have been fabricating our own reality through which to see the world. We have always needed explanations for the constancy of change. We made gods and demons, but now they have relinquished most of their power to chemicals and evolution. Whether it is with spells, plants, or pills, we are always looking for ways around that one unchangeable thing, death. We tried to force nature into categories of good and evil but nature knows nothing of these. We made them up, and thus what kills you can also save you, and in your dying something new can grow.

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