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The Morbid Aesthetic - Depicting an Array of Nation-Sanctioned Violence

Introduction

Contemporary American art has seen a surge in the use of morbid aesthetics, as artists and curators grapple with lengthy histories of violence against minority communities. Disturbing, unsettling visuals characterize the morbid aesthetic, often to convey themes of death and/or disease. Pieces that utilize morbid aesthetics vary in their emblematic techniques, with some being more explicit and graphic in their composition, while others opt for subtle, dark messaging (that often relies on existing context). Morbid aesthetics have become effective tools in providing an honest representation of enduring historical issues, including racism and homophobia. Minority groups have long faced brutal physical, emotional, social, and institutional consequences as a result of these prejudices. Artists work to defy prevailing attitudes and structures of power that attempt to erase these circumstances from the national consciousness, utilizing a “morbid aesthetic” to shed light on these horrors.

Four texts that exemplify the use of the morbid aesthetic include Fred Wilson’s *Cabinet Making 1820-1960* exhibited (from *Mining the Museum*), Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller’s *In Memory of Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, Ken Gonzales-Day’s *The Wonder Gaze* (from *Erased Lynching Series*), and Felix Gonzalez Torres’ *Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)*. These texts contain unpleasant visuals and/or subliminal messages about death that contribute to their morbid aesthetic. Namely, Wilson and Gonzales-Day’s exhibition pieces depict how the torture and killing of Black Americans served as a wicked form of entertainment for white communities, particularly during the post-Reconstruction eras. Both artists explore how this phenomenon contributes to the modern dehumanization of Black individuals. Warrick Fuller’s sculpture and González-Torres’ billboard similarly grapple with widely ignored losses of human life in minority communities. Both artists aimed to cement these events in history, ensuring that the individuals affected by lynchings or the AIDS crisis would not be forgotten. Collectively, all four pieces represent an artistic effort to bring attention to and redress violent, historical injustices against minority groups via the morbid aesthetic.

Cabinet Making 1820-1960 (Mining the Museum) - Fred Wilson



Installation view of Mining the Museum (Cabinetmaking 1820-1860)

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Fred Wilson is a Black American artist native to the Bronx, New York. After receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Purchase College, Wilson went on to establish himself in the contemporary art scene by curating art exhibitions from pre-existing pieces.

On April 24th, 1992, Fred Wilson produced an exhibit called “Mining the Museum” to highlight stored works collected by the Maryland Historical Society (MHS) pertaining to slavery and African American history. With *Mining the Museum*, Wilson intended on flipping and unsettling the white narrative / gaze that remained prominent throughout the institution, determining which artworks could be sanctioned for public view and which would remain hidden. Wilson utilized a combination of ordinary objects and artisanal pieces to convey issues pertaining to racism, white supremacy, and religion. Still, Wilson’s work left large gaps for individual interpretations, which he actively encouraged from visitors. One of these powerful pieces was entitled *Cabinet Making, 1820-1960*.

Cabinet Making 1820-1960 consists of four old, wooden dining chairs facing a whipping post on top of a platform. Each of the four handmade chairs were distinct, whether it be in terms of the time period they had been built in or the social class they pertained to. Each of the chairs noticeably represented a member of the clergy, bourgeois, aristocracy, or business-class depending on their level of intricacy. Furthermore, the whipping post's appearance resembles that of a cross. It was similarly made out of wood and featured leather bindings. All of these elements had never been publicly displayed by the MHS prior to Wilson's exhibition.

Wilson's inclusion of a slave whipping post in this piece contextualizes the rampant inequality that African Americans faced in view of the white gaze, represented by the collection of chairs. Whipping posts bound individuals in a helpless position—preventing any grand movements or gestures. Owners would often whip or torture their slaves with this tool, alongside cat-of-nine tails whips, as a cruel, heartless punishment for supposed wrongdoings. These whippings even occurred in public, where white crowds would gather as if for a show. Through this piece, Wilson conveys how these traumatic, harmful incidents merely served as a form of entertainment for these bystanders—causing the collection's morbid aesthetic to instantly be recognized by viewers. Thus, the placement of the chairs in front of the whipping post implies that regardless of white class standing, they still benefited tremendously from structures of privilege—at the direct expense of others. Wilson's choice to display dining room chairs—ordinary, leisurely objects—could serve as a message about the brutal normalization of racism towards African Americans. As Wilson notes, the MHS and other elite institutions contribute to this discrimination by gate-keeping certain portions of history from the public.

The whipping post's resemblance to a cross or crucifix adds a religious component to this piece. Crucifixes, commonly associated with the sacrificed figure of Jesus Christ, add another layer to the suffering that many slaves faced at the time due to deep-rooted racism. However, the notion that a cross would be witnessing this mass suffering could also serve as a criticism against white Christian practices and the forms of discrimination that have been historically perpetuated within the religion. Furthermore, by having visitors observe this installation from behind the line of chairs—as if they were also watching a horrific lashing occur—Wilson sheds light on the racial ignorance that continues to plague society. Complacency, as Wilson implies with his work, threatens to poison our world with repeated mistakes.

Wilson created a morbid aesthetic in this installation by hand-selecting pieces that would arouse general images of violence, pain, and distress for viewers, even while allowing them to operate from a position of further free interpretation. Viewers will have to contextualize Wilson's seemingly harsh contrast in items between dining chairs and a whipping post. Not only does this piece reflect on the pain endured by slaves, but it also pushes viewers into a bystander position to white power. Wilson forces visitors to re-evaluate the reality of American history and examine how racism remains embedded into the structure of modern society.

In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence
- Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller



Artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller was a Black American painter, sculptor, poet, and designer who facilitated the promotion of Afrocentric art in the early twentieth century. Warrick Fuller was considered a crown-jewel of New York City’s Harlem Renaissance. Her work was also displayed abroad in Paris, France for a considerable period of time. Attempting to raise awareness for Black liberation movements, Fuller consolidated some of the most brutal moments of African American history and captured themes of racial injustice through symbolic art.

In 1919, Fuller created *In Memory of Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*. The sculpture was made out of plaster, gilded in bronze, and encased in a glass structure. Warrick Fuller utilized an “impressionism style” technique to embody dimensional movement, achieved through the indentation of brush strokes that would interact with light exposure to illuminate the painted canyons. Currently, the sculpture is on display at the Danforth Art Museum in Framingham, Massachusetts. Fuller’s work is considered a feminist art piece for its depiction of Mary Turner, a Black woman who became the victim of a brutal lynching in Lowndes County, Georgia in 1918.

Turner, who was pregnant at the time, was lynched just days after publicly denouncing the lynching of her husband Hayes Turner, who had been accused of being involved in the killing

of a local white farmer. Mary Turner was subsequently ambushed by a white mob, hung by her feet, and smothered in gasoline before being burned to death. The mob used a sharp blade to cut open Mary Turner's lower abdomen, removing an eight-month-old fetus from her uterus and stomping on its head to murder it. Haynes and Mary Turner's killers never faced any repercussions for their unlawful manhunt and display of so-called "vigilante justice" that resulted in mutilated, brutalized bodies. Fuller subsequently created "In Memory of Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence" in order to raise civil awareness about the overwhelming amount of lynchings that Black Americans were unjustly suffering through. Fuller raises these concerns through subtle, symbolic features and techniques that contribute to a fundamentally morbid aesthetic.

Fuller sculpts Turner with her hands protectively cradling her flat abdomen, as she gazes down at a sea of flames engulfing her body, still adorning a slight grin. Hands etched into the fire below grasp at Turner's dress—a representation of the murderous mob. Fuller does not conform to Euro-centric standards with this artwork, nor does she victimize Mary Turner in vain. Though Turner's story clearly remains tragic, Fuller creates a unique perspective in this sculpture that somewhat alters the narrative at hand. For starters, Mary Turner is depicted standing instead of bound and hanging upside-down by her feet—a choice that restores her sense of control and dignity. Considering the sculpture's small, "lamp-sized" dimensions, Fuller symbolically positions the viewer as "God" or some higher being with the power to alter Mary Turner's fate. The interpretation of God's role in this sculpture remains paradoxical. Some may consider the higher being to be abhorrently complacent and torturous by not interfering in the homicide. Conversely, "God" could be considered merciful for releasing Mary Turner from the shackles of a pejorative society, hence her slight grin as the "Hades" of hellfire and nefarious beings fail to pull her down. Both morbid interpretations act as an inquiry into the white power structure that exemplifies divinity and superiority, relating Mary Turner to the Virgin Mary.

Perspective fundamentally alters the interpretative notions behind this gut-wrenching sculpture. Consequently, the sculpture's morbid aesthetic further emerges through this reassignment and placement of power. Fuller expresses an unquestionable sense of urgency to protect African American life and youth with this sculpture, which calls upon a white power structure (that attacked Mary Turner without consequences) and/or those who believe in a higher being. By creating a parallel between Turner and the Virgin Mary in her sculpture, Fuller holds up a mirror to one of her target audiences in white Evangelical Christians. She exposes a sense of hypocrisy in their practicing of faith, as followers have historically diverted from the tolerant, compassionate attitudes that the religion encourages. Within this sculpture, Fuller conveys the depth of a painful, morbid reality that African Americans have faced and explores the historical erasure that allows it to continue. Fuller commits to subjecting the white gaze to an uncomfortable, distressing viewing experience to promote a larger awareness of these issues and save future Black generations.

“The Wonder Gaze” (*The Erased Lynching Series*) - Ken Gonzales-Day



The Wonder Gaze (St. James Park, CA. 1935), 2006-2017, Erased Lynching Series (print and installation)

Both created and curated by Ken Gonzales-Day, the *Erased Lynching Series* consists of sixty edited photographs depicting lynchings throughout early twentieth-century America. Many of Gonzales-Day’s original photographs were derived from lynching postcards, a twisted trend of mass-produced souvenirs that white observers purchased to commemorate these killings. Gonzales-Day began curating the series in 2002, utilizing Adobe Photoshop and additional editing software to remove hanging bodies and nooses from these images. He published an initial collection of fifteen photographs in Los Angeles in 2005. Since then, Gonzales-Day’s work has been featured across numerous exhibitions, including those at the American Art Museum & National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution and the Tamayo Museum.

Gonzales-Day’s *Erased Lynching Series* features one piece entitled “The Wonder Gaze”, blown up into a ten-by-twenty-five feet wallpaper. “The Wonder Gaze” initially went on display at the Generali Foundation in Vienna as part of their “Exile of the Imaginary: Politics, Aesthetics, Love” exhibit, and it was most recently included as part of the Luis De Jesus Los Angeles art gallery in early 2022. “The Wonder Gaze” pulls its source material from a 1935 black-and-white photograph of a lynching at St. James Park in California. Gonzales-Day’s catalog of work documents these California “Hang Trees”—which have largely been excluded from historical narratives of lynching—in an in-depth manner. A thin tree trunk protrudes out of an otherwise empty, pitch-black background, with its branches fading out towards the top of the shot. The image appears to be over-exposed, causing a few of the figures standing in front of the tree to appear almost ghastly—bathed in a blinding white light. The photograph’s composition is

bottom-heavy, with a large crowd of white individuals contained in its foreground. Most of the members of the crowd appear relaxed and well-dressed, donning fedoras and suit-jackets as they gaze up at the lynching tree. One duo—a man and a woman locking arms—appear to be casually strolling by the scene, enjoying the evening as a couple. Altogether, the crowd's elegant style of dress and evidently nonchalant demeanor create an unsettling paradox for modern viewers, based on their prior knowledge that a victim's mutilated body dangles just a few feet above the group. Such morbid conditions emphasize the inhumanity of these lynchings, a practice that thrived amidst lacking empathy and consideration from white communities.

Roughly 4,000 lynchings (“Lynching in America”) have been officially recorded in America, with the vast majority of them still having targeted Black Americans during the post-Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Jim Crow Laws dominated society at the time, having legalized segregation and re-energizing white supremacist ideologies. Disguised as a form of “vigilante justice”, Black Americans would often be lynched following unsubstantiated claims of criminal activity or wrongdoing. Law enforcement groups readily turned a blind eye to these proceedings, or even served as bystanders in some cases. Not only did these public displays of torture serve as a wicked form of entertainment for white locals, but they also strove to invoke fear and shame in nearby Black communities. Lynchings represent an attempt to relegate Black Americans to the position of “second-class citizens” by methods of unchecked physical violence.

Gonzales-Day mentioned that he didn't want to “re-victimize” lynching victims in his work by depicting their gruesome final states. Still, “The Wonder Gaze” takes on a noticeably morbid aesthetic considering its context and visual implications. Gonzales-Day manages to focus viewers' attention on the smiling, carefree crowd beneath the tree—which, alongside the noticeable “hole” of a dead, hanging body within the photograph, speaks to the casual yet violent racism that permeated communities at the time. Gonzales-Day weaponizes this unsettling reality, managing to turn the victim's absence into a significant presence that challenges complacent white viewers. Thus, Gonzales-Day's work does partially operate on the assumption of the white gaze, but in a deliberate and constructive manner, as he aims to make viewers feel uncomfortable and horrified at this reflection of monstrosity within their demographic. These lynchings, in Gonzales-Day's words, are “central to understanding the traumatic legacies of race and difference in America.” Gonzales-Day manages to effectively convey the horrific, brutal nature of lynchings with his work, but he also subtly shifts viewer focus towards a related, but still distinct tragedy—the constantly devalued, belittled, and ignored Black body. “The Wonder Gaze” derives a unique form of morbidity from this composition.

“Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)” - Felix González-Torres



“Untitled” (billboard of an empty bed) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1991, via The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Produced in 1991, Felix González-Torres’ “Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)” consists of a well-lit, minimalistic black and white photograph depicting an empty, unmade queen-sized bed with two pillows propped up at its head. Both pillows have noticeable impressions in them—which, along with the rumpled sheets and blanket at the foot of the bed, imply recent use and represent the now-absent couple who once slept there. The billboard was reproduced across twenty-four locations in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens—a common practice for González-Torres’ work. “Billboard of an Empty Bed” subverts the usual maximalistic designs of billboards, which aim to be eye-catching and direct in their messaging (with text, logos, etc.). González-Torres’ piece noticeably resembles Ikea advertisements—a company that had just broken into the U.S. market at the time—with its white sheets and minimalistic presentation. Consistent with his broader conceptual work and covert form of political commentary, González-Torres maintains a certain level of ambiguity with this piece, begging viewers to stop, observe, and slowly make sense of the work’s “simple” design. This, combined with a strategic choice to leave the work partially untitled, opened the doors for González-Torres’ controversial, queer-coded work to still be freely exhibited and canonized at a tumultuous time for LGBTQ+ Americans.

Though he did not resonate with the label of a “gay artist”, González-Torres remained open about his sexual orientation, with a majority of his artwork finding its roots in his experiences as a gay man at the time. González-Torres’ hometown of NYC became the epicenter of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s due to its extensive LGBTQ+ population. This era led to what the Guggenheim Museum described as a “problematic public scrutiny of private behavior.” Members of the LGBTQ+ community saw their sexuality become a point of extreme public controversy that fueled dangerous and flippant public sentiments regarding AIDS. Rather than organizing to combat its spread, public sentiments opted to simply degrade and blame gay individuals for the situation. Bedrooms transformed into an area of personal conflict and stifled freedom, due in part to public backlash, but also as a result of the novel, deadly threats that AIDS introduced for those participating in non-monogamous sexual intercourse. González-Torres’ depiction of this setting introduces a certain morbid aesthetic into his work based on this implication alone.

González-Torres released “Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)” during the same year in which his long-time partner Ross Laycock died from an AIDS-related illness. Thus, González-Torres also employs the technique of absence in this piece to provide a melancholic tribute to Laycock. González-Torres depicts a bed frozen in time, with the imprints of a past lover still noticeable, though they are no longer physically present. Some may interpret the bed’s unmade state as a result of their remaining partner being too distressed to remake it after a sudden, untimely passing. “Billboard of an Empty Bed” contains a monochromatic color-palette and an element of palpable, haunting stillness. These characteristics further transform González-Torres’ piece into a kind of morbid aesthetic, evoking the theme of “Memento Mori”—a reminder of not just the inevitability, but also the heightened risk of death that queer individuals soldiered through at this time. Queer individuals navigated this overwhelming, morbid truth despite the uncertain landscape at the time, with a lack of funding for AIDS research and rampant internalized / externalized displays of homophobia.

Through this billboard, González-Torres also manages to honor a category of human loss that was not met with requisite attention or sympathy at the time. Few Americans felt compelled to help the LGBTQ+ community amidst the AIDS crisis, as exemplified by President Reagan’s delayed acknowledgment of the incident. Many even implied that the devastating AIDS crisis would prove beneficial by eliminating this widely ostracized group. González-Torres serves to remind viewers of this cruel reality based on his absent lover, who may have been forgotten from history if not for his efforts. Still, despite the billboard’s darker implications, González-Torres subverts a heterosexual-exclusive narrative of love by sharing an ordinary, intimate scene in the context of queer relationships. This humanized LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships at a time in which they were afforded little humanity.

Overall, González-Torres' composition of "Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)" conveys universal notions of loss and loneliness that affected the LGBTQ+ community most profoundly at this time. He asks familiar, difficult questions that inevitably follow death and the newfound reality of facing an empty bed: *What comes next? How does one move on?* Yet González-Torres also introduces a concern specific to his community, with the looming question of: *Will I be next?* This combination of visual cues and context cements his work in the morbid aesthetic.

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