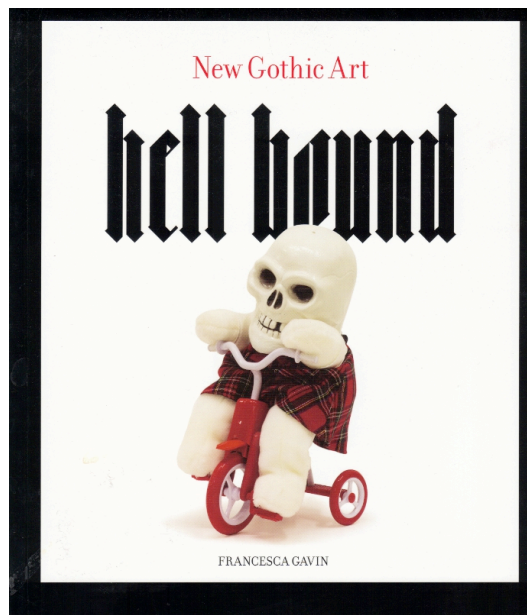


Hell Bound: New Gothic Art

Francesca Gavin, Laurence King Publishers, 2008



It all began with birds. James Aldridge's stylized paintings and graphic cut-out wall pieces reflect a childhood interest in natural history. 'My dad is a keen bird-watcher and I used to copy pictures from his bird books and try to get them right. When I was about nine or ten I got into rearing moths and butterflies with my brother, so I was copying images from entomology books.'

As he grew older this attraction to nature merged with an interest in heavy metal, which he sees as a major influence on the dark atmosphere in his work; it was the darkness not just of the music, but also of the imagery that surrounded it. 'In the last few years I have rediscovered this music and its more extreme, modern-day incarnation. It is really interesting how

something that is clichéd, dumb and anti-intellectual can produce such inspired, strange and radical new music. The atmosphere it creates is really important to my images and it is always playing while I work.'

His work explores the paradoxes around popular art forms and cultural prejudice. He aims to take overly familiar images and use them out of context so that they are reinvigorated with a different emotion or energy. I'm really interested in pictorial cliché. I'm trying to create an atmosphere in my work from these elements, by placing them in a different context. Some of the reactions to the work are really strange and I think they can give a very good indication about what people expect art to do.'

There is a sense of lost narrative in his work. Instead, Aldridge creates an atmospheric impression. 'I increasingly want to create a sense that something is happening but you aren't sure what it is. I'm also trying to add a sense of animation, introducing elements such as smoke that create a different space and sense of time.'

He uses silhouettes to depict animals, birds and plants. These are often dark crows and swamp-like landscapes, rather than overtly positive natural images. 'People are generally suspicious of crows. They suggest desolation and bleakness, and I like the contrast with the richer, more decorative elements of my work.' He has made other pieces with vultures, exploring why they are seen as more repulsive than other animals despite their essential role in the natural cycle. Aldridge sees the avian scavengers in his work as somehow placing the viewer in the position of a body dying on a battlefield. The viewer, and humanity itself, is in decay.

Skulls often litter his landscapes. 'The process of decay is part of the cycle of nature and is not necessarily something bad. A bird perching on a bone suggests something altogether more strange than the reality of a situation like that. The idea of decay is unnerving to us because it reminds us of our mortality.' Aldridge uses bones and skulls to suggest a human presence in the work, without having to depict individuals. 'The skull suggests something that has been. When I see a skull or skeleton I can't help thinking about the person it was. It was an individual who has

become an object.' Skulls are used symbolically to suggest something negative and mysterious.

Although he depicts nature, Aldridge is not naturalistic in his approach. Instead, the pieces are flat and stylized, with layers of block-like imagery. Alongside paintings, Aldridge creates large paper cut-out installations. Here, instead of adding lines, he eliminates space. The negative spaces around the shapes are removed to reveal an image, so the outcome is never completely known. 'I make them on panels that all fit together and are site specific. Because of their size and fragility, I never know how they are going to look until they are installed. I have to have a very clear mental picture of how the image is evolving.'

The contradiction between beauty and horror in nature is something Aldridge sees as key. It is what gives his dark imagery its impact. The artist is aware that we are surrounded by horror in the media every day. Art, for him, forces you to look at imagery that you want to avoid. 'It's a different thing to be confronted by a static piece of art that you have to engage with. You can't turn it off'. We may not want to confront gothic images in art, but reality is far more disturbing.