

Cover Essay

The Artist as Serial Killer

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Writing an essay about a piece of art is a bit like investigating a murder scene. The artist leaves us clues as to their intent—hints of greater meaning that are necessarily covered with multiple layers of deception and trickery. As the artist produces each opus, these clues add together to form the theme of the artist’s life work, just as a serial killer lays out a pattern, knowingly or unwittingly, at the scenes of each of their crimes. These clues may be explicit: Picasso’s gradual breakdown of the face into a series of ab-

stract shapes; Rousseau’s juxtaposition of nature with modern life to reflect our primordial fear of nature and human origins, culminating in the magnificent *The Dream*—his last painting. They may be subtle and hidden; a challenge for the viewer to decipher, or a test of our intellectual capacity to identify what the artist has hidden for us.

So let us use our detective skills to interpret this issue’s cover art, and find out what Minas Halaj’s “Banker” is telling us about the artist’s motivation and goals. “Banker” portrays a financial worker from the Industrial Age, in a thick woolen suit, whose face is covered and consumed by a beautiful bouquet of chrysanthemums. Drawing parallels with Rene Magritte’s *The Great War* (*La Grande Guerre*) and other works, Halaj juxtaposes humanity with nature. But there is a subtle difference in texture and tone between Halaj and Magritte. Where Magritte works with smooth, velvety concrete and buffed-up bowler hats, Halaj builds painstakingly intricate, multi-layered, and complex collages. This depth, the dull brown and gray washed background, and the occasional spatter of red paint and black ink reminds me of the post-industrial decay that I would see so often in the North of England in the 1970s. Like the fireweed growing in a disused factory, the chrysanthemum in “Banker” dominates the topography, sprouting from its victim with vigor. The banker is clearly long-since deceased, degrading into the fragmented parchment—a former will or financial contract perhaps—and both symbols of a past era. Thus, Halaj plays on themes of life and death, happiness and mourning.

This issue of *EcoHealth* focuses on the economics of infectious disease, trade and pandemic risk. To us,

“Banker” reminds us of our relationship with nature, and the competition between our desire to push forwards as a species and dominate for economic gain, versus the need of biodiversity in the landscape around. Like the flower, bankers are a basic component in complex systems—in this case financial markets. They create value by connecting people in need of resources to those with excess, and promoting consumption and well-being across economic cycles. If they take on too much risk, they can destroy value and bring populations to the point of war and famine. While flowers symbolize happiness, they also create value,

as does all biodiversity, through providing ecosystem services within their complex relationships.

Viewed through our detective lens, Halaj’s painting has clear motive, a smoking gun and a trail of clues for us to follow. The cause of death is suffocation, the airways closed by the plants bulging tendrils. The crime is one of passion and revenge. The banker’s motive is greed—his head lying on a contract to log and grow crops on a patch of tropical forest in one of the colonies. And the murderer.....Well, dear colleagues, I leave that to you. Read on, and all shall eventually become clear.