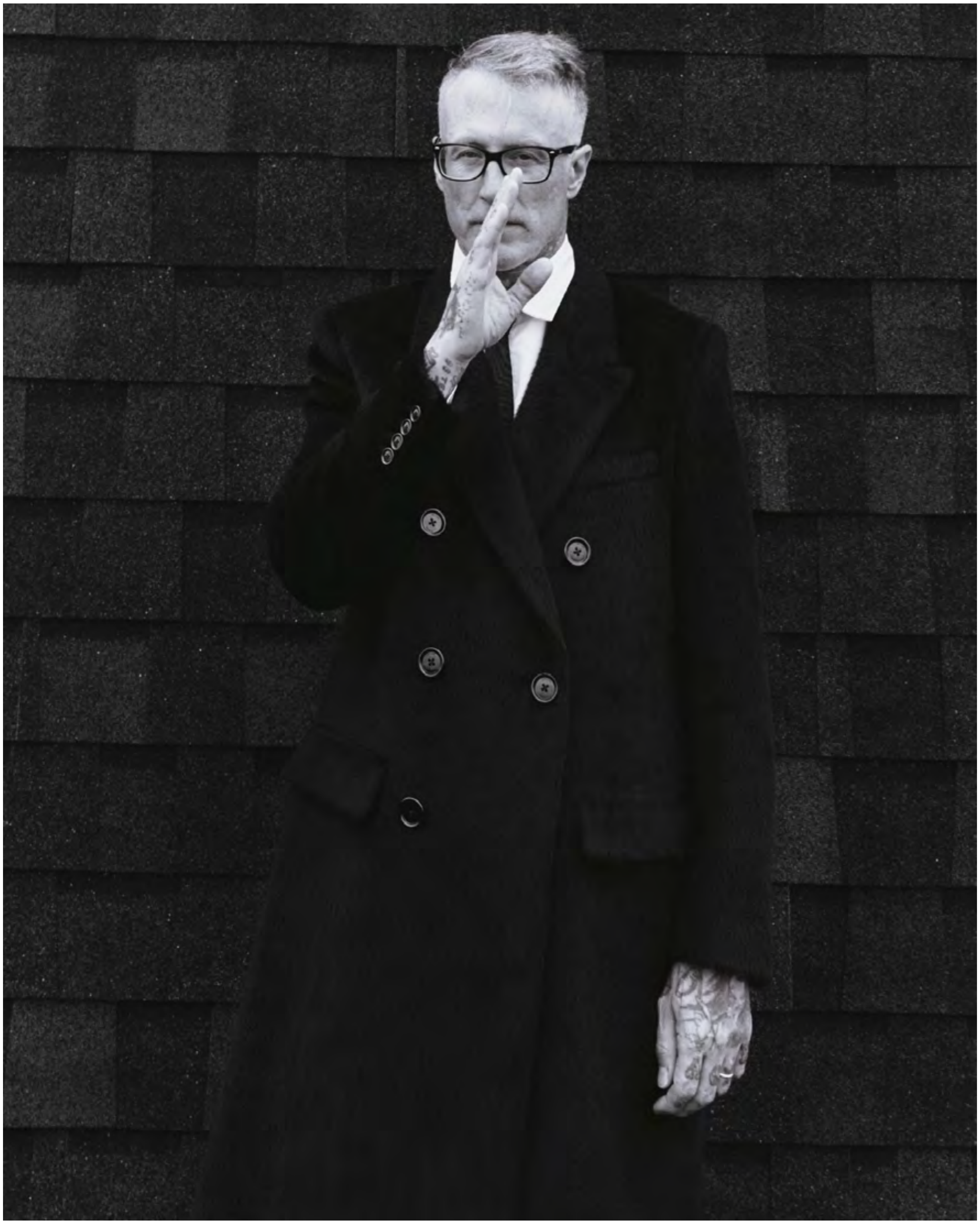
Daria Miricola, "A Kind Of Martyrdom," *NR Magazine,* April 15, 2025

Banks Violette



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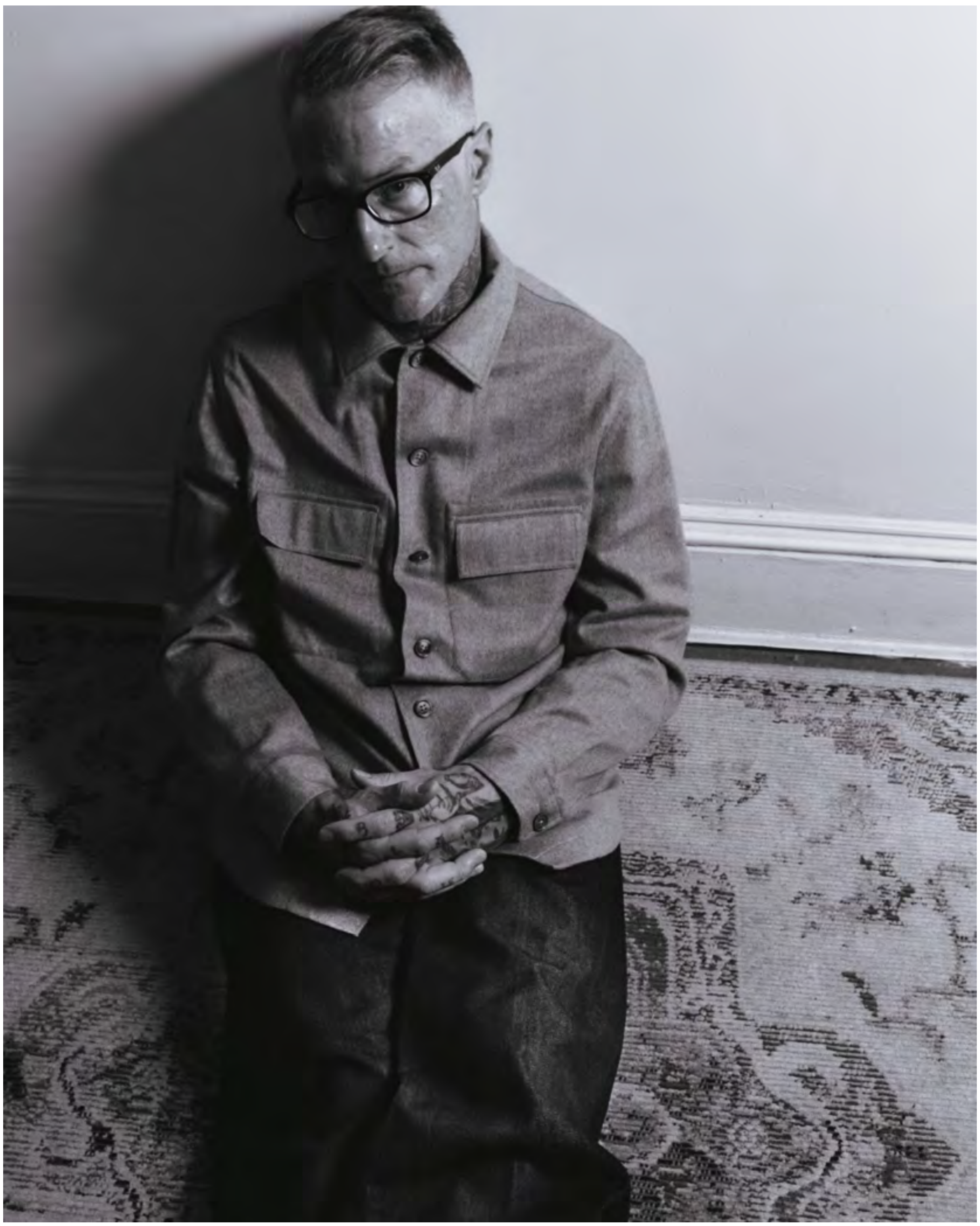
Words · Daria Miricola

A Kind Of Martyrdom

Banks Violette's world is one of collapse—landscapes eroding, subcultures dissolving, symbols drained of irony and filled with raw sincerity. Raised in Ithaca, a town haunted by its name, his work blurs devotion and destruction: suicide sites turned icons, death metal aesthetics treated with the reverence of illuminated manuscripts, American hardcore and true crime folded into the language of high art.

Daria Miricola Today, I'd like to discuss the very beginnings of your practice and some of your early shows and inspirations. But to kick off, I would like to talk a bit about your hometown Ithaca, I guess its name is inspired by the Greek Ithaca, the motherland of Odysseus.

Banks Violette Ithaca is on the southern end of one of the Finger Lakes, a glacial valley that is a sort of dead center in New York State. There are these big gorges, these big ravines that have been essentially hacked in the earth. The bedrock is made out of shale and slate, almost like compressed mud. So the landscape looks sort of rotting out, and it's decaying. The best word to describe it is entropic. Coming to its name, there are a lot of towns in New York State that are named after Greco-Roman, classical cities. There's a Rome, there's a Syracuse, and there's Ithaca. I'm sure that a lot of people who live in this area have no fucking clue that there's a connection to something beyond, and it's a sign of how bad American education is. Despite this, we also have a huge Ivy League university.



Daria Miricola Today, I'd like to discuss the very beginnings of your practice and some of your early shows and inspirations. But to kick off, I would like to talk a bit about your hometown Ithaca, I guess its name is inspired by the Greek Ithaca, the motherland of Odysseus.

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DM Recently, I was intrigued by a story about a scientist from Cornell University, the Ivy League university you just mentioned. His name was G. S. Moler, and apparently, he did one of the earliest movie experiments to date, featuring a moving skeleton. This immediately reminded me of the presence of skeletons, and skeleton-like shapes within your work. But I should add that my curiosity about Ithaca was also fostered by an incredibly fascinating early painting series you did, titled Ithaca Suicide Drawings (2004).

BV When I was growing up there were a lot of people committing suicide in this town. So those drawings represent suicide spots that are really fundamental features of the landscape here, like the holes in the ground and ravines, that became sites for recurring suicides. There is an inescapably aesthetic component to sites that become associated with suicide, you know?

DM There is a profound connection between the aesthetic dimension of a place and suicide. And this, let's say, aesthetic of suicide, can equally characterize natural and urban landscapes.

BV Well, this is an oddball piece of trivia but, apparently, the railings on the side of the Golden Gate Bridge are lower than you would find in any other bridge because the engineer who designed it was a little bit shorter than average. He scaled parts of the Golden Gate Bridge to his height, which allows it to be a little bit more accessible for somebody who wants to commit suicide.

DM So coming back to Ithaca and to your formation years. I found out that your grandmother was an illustrator, so I wonder if her work has somehow influenced your imagination and sensibility while growing up.

BV She was extraordinary. I only had the opportunity to meet her a couple of times but for sure her influence was seminal. She raised my mom as a single mother living in North Carolina. She worked as an illustrator and she made it a functional occupation at a time and in a place where it wasn't a really practical thing. She was one of the first sort of King Features Syndicate-published cartoon artists who are in all the Sunday papers in the US and she also illustrated books like Wizard of Oz and things like that. But she also, with my grandfather, wrote a couple of children's books for my mom that they never published. These illustrations really are the sweetest thing possible and they stem from a tragic history that I don't have access to—these are the only records of that—but they are just utterly sweet and lovely. So, yeah, that's pretty significant.

DM This reminds me of something pretty recurring in your practice—the idea of recasting, especially through charming and attractive plastic qualities, something that actually has to do with the realm of the horrific, or the evil. And since the very beginning, this modus operandi has been considered a very precise iconography that owns a lot of specific music subcultures.

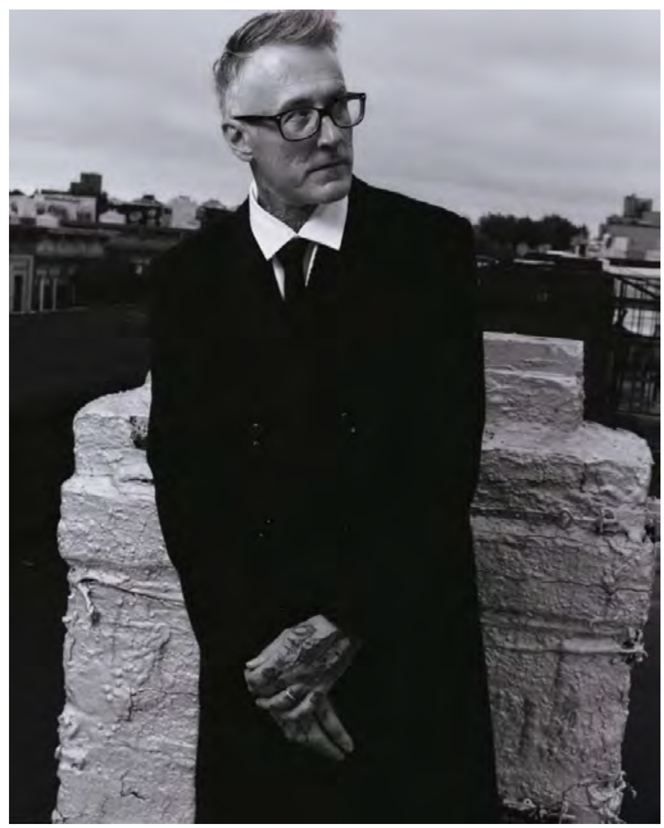
BV While growing up, my friends and I were in bands and were heavily tattooed at a time when it was not a normal thing, so the subcultures I was associated with at that time— American hardcore, punk rock, metal, and much more—still inform the image selection I use. You were mentioning an oddball figure from Cornell University who had this history of doing animations. There was another academic, Harold Craft, who published this little sort of sine wave in his PhD thesis in 1970. This image was then used by Peter Saville for the cover of the Joy Division's Unknown Pleasures. So the intent behind using that particular iconography is from that kind of background, that kind of personal history, that relationship to both subcultures and seemingly marginal activities. As a 51-year-old man, it still informs everything I do and the way I look at the world.

DM This perpetual lingering of your personal background within your work draws me to a recent conversation you had with curator Neville Wakefield. In it, you mentioned that there was a particular moment, between the end of the 90s and the beginning of the new millennium, where there was a certain fixation within the art scene with the notions of purity versus the one of impurity.

BV So for me, a more accurate way of describing a pure vs. impure kind of relationship to something would be sincere vs. insincere. After the Pictures Generation and the 80s criticality with their ironic relationship to mass culture, many artists started ironically referencing popular culture, pulling it into a different context, with this kind of critical distance. For me, there's something very off-putting and alienating about that. So formatively, on one hand, you have Richard Prince and his use of American outlaw biker culture imagery, and, on the other hand, you have Stephen Parrino's use of American outlaw biker imagery, which is informed by a sincere, loving relationship to that. It's a hugely important distinction. And as well, I had a sincere relationship to the history that I reference. I was interested in appropriating my own history and pulling it into a different context sincerely, without treating it ironically, without that critical distance. I still am very interested in sincerity.

DM And sincerity, I suppose, can be expressed in many ways, I'm thinking for instance to your most ambitious, labor-intensive installations, like the church's skeleton you presented at the Whitney Biennial in 2004—you always have fabricated everything on your own and this studio practice is a crucial component to understand your poetic. There is something inherently ritual within this approach because, in a certain perspective, which is opposite to the one of pop art, of the picture generation, and of appropriation art that you just mentioned, you are setting zero distance between you and your work, so a viewer can really feel that there is this sense of devotion, almost a sodality between you and your own work.

BV You know, when you're talking about minimalism or pop art, or any dominant post-war contemporary art-making strains, they all revolve around a couple of polls like seriality, repetition, and mechanical production. The church specifically, has a lot to do with that. What happens if you take a form and you repeat it again and again and again? It collapses. So that was in a literal sense like taking the conventional skeleton of post-war art making—in a broad sense—and just allowing it to do exactly that. Repeat itself again and again. But it was more than an art conversation, it also had a resonance to real-world things like the human devotional relationship to music and culture, and how it can blur the line between something that is a fact and a fiction, to the point where, by repeating a gesture, humans can enact something potentially horrific, and they can dissolve and disappear within this kind of fiction.



DM These perpetual rebounds between cultural production and murders or suicide were also treated very in-depth through a few collective art shows at the beginning of the 2000s. I'm thinking in particular of an exhibition you curated in 2001 titled "Dear Dead Person," whose title referenced a book by Benjamin Weissman. The whole show seemed to provide an archetypical reading, or psychogeography of American violent crimes, from teen sex addicts to religious fanatics, to create the portrayal of a collective, national psychosis. I think my generation could relate so much to an exhibition like this because we are also quite deeply interested in such themes: We watch Netflix series about Jeffrey Dahmer in bed to go to sleep and listen to Sword and Scale in the morning while we do our skincare routine. I guess my question would then be—if violent crimes can act as a mirror of the generations that commit them, which are the ones that you think better define your own?

BV I remember there was this huge hysteria and paranoia about heavy metal music, punk rock, gangsta rap, or whatever. There were Senate hearings about "how this was going to destroy our children." This happened for the preceding generation as well. Every generation experiences this, because the culture that they produce is antagonistic by necessity. So when I was growing up, there were members of heavy metal band who dragged a female classmate into a eucalyptus grove in Arroyo Grande and they stabbed her to death, or this kid who committed suicide, theoretically, because of Judas Priest subliminal suicide messages, that's a famous example.. Clearly heavy metal seemed like the bane of your children.. It's a tale as old as time. In the 19th fucking century Goethe wrote an epistolary novel called "The Sorrows of Young Werther" which was held up as responsible for creating a series of copycat suicides, because people found it such an influential text that I think it was eventually banned. So just the same way, when I was a kid, if you listened to Judas Priest you were going to commit suicide and in the 19th century you would have committed suicide if you read Goethe. There's always that kind of threat implied by one generation's cultural output.

DM And speaking about the opposite movement, namely when there's something so shocking and disturbing about certain crimes that they enter the cultural realm and gain cult status, it was always in that year that artists' work started encapsulating a certain morbid or violent imagery and language, for example with the artist using pictures and details of crime scenes, reporting sentences from murder news, or even adopting a drawing style that evoked the ones of the vignettes used to chronicle trials or to identify serial killers. One of the artists you included in "Dear Dead Person" is called Marlene McCarty, I'm not sure whether she's still active today or not however, she did an amazing drawing series with a strong forensic inspiration, depicting very attractive young girls with huge wounds on their bodies. The drawings were accompanied by a cold, objective description of how they were murdered.

BV She's still around, as far as I know. But the fact that we're not talking a lot about Marlene McCarty today is a crime in proof that the art world is a fucking terrible place because she did an amazing rock-solid corpus of work. It is way ahead of its time. I'm happy that you looked into her work and you liked it because she's amazing.

DM Likewise. And you know, it is always worthy researching into this milieu of very underground group shows happening across the 90s and the 2000s in the US, because it allows younger generations to discover so many, almost forgotten, incredible artists, that in those years were exhibiting next to the more successful ones that later became highly recognized—names in the art world are written in pencil. However, the other two very peculiar shows you took part in that I wanted to ask you about are Transnational Monster League (2001) and another one curated by Bob Nickas that was dedicated to the Melvins and their cult fandom among artists.

BV "Transnational Monster League" was cast around two centerpieces, two artworks I really wanted to show together. One was a Stephen Parrino painting that was just fucking mind-boggling, incredibly beautiful. And another one was a video by an artist, operating at that time under the name Matthew Greene, where he dressed up as a witch in a Los Angeles garage. He had crappy makeup on that was falling off, and was playing a guitar just slowly over and over and over. It was an amazing video.


DM And Stephen Parrino was featured too in the other show I mentioned about the Melvins. This show captured my attention for the same reason why I was curious about those art practices borrowing from murderous or deadly languages and aesthetics. It is something that your generation has kind of initiated and mine has continued. I'm referring to the idea of creating fine art pieces that employ the very visual codes and poetics of fan art, a peculiar aesthetic realm that nuances a sense of romantic sublime, a religious devotion, and the cheesiest consumer culture. And this artist-fan attitude is, like you said before, a warmer approach radically opposed to more detached, critical attitudes towards pop or celebrity culture. A fan is forever. And so this Melvins show was really about artists-fans of the band paying homage to its iconic visual legacy, picking fav albums, and producing a lot of graphic art. Your generation was also pioneering this kind of interest in graphic design as a fine art medium to express higher conceptual values. A narration that in those same years was becoming central for the development of the history of streetwear: Legendary, at times controversial brands like Fuct sedimented precisely in that period.

BV It's funny that you mentioned Erik Brunetti as I just did a radio session thing for Fuct. Anyway, absolutely. We mentioned Steven Parrino, Marlene McCarty, my musical influences and heroes..the way I relate with these artists and their work is less close to that of a "proper" art viewer than it is to how a fan relates to who he admires. I understand art in that way—it is part of the music I listen to, of what I wear in the morning, and of what's on my body and all that kind of stuff. Going back to something I was trying to articulate a little bit earlier, I think this is exactly that sort of difference between the sincere and the insincere. You can tell when somebody doesn't have a relationship to the culture that they're referencing when they're doing it just as an ironic kind of quotation of something that doesn't have anything to do with their life. I think that there's a hugely important distinction between an ironic quotation and a sincere reflection on something, which is, as you said, something very religious. You know, one of the reasons why all the things I reference have kind of a true crime dimension is because pretty much every religion revolves around martyrdoms to a certain point. You know what I mean? The true crime resonance within my work is because there's an almost inevitable level of devotion within it, a kind of martyrdom.

DM Yes! And you also extended this analysis to movies and cinema in certain cases. A very cool case study is this pretty crazy show called "Screams" 2004 where you participated. Every artist was picking a movie to base their work on. And then all the artists and their works were assigned to a writer. The title you chose was Martin (1977), a horror movie about this 70s narco-vampire creature.

BV Martin is a George Romero movie, one of my favorite movies of all time. It's about this kid in Pittsburgh. For the entire movie, you cannot tell whether he's really a vampire or he's just a sick kid who totally believes he's a vampire, just because everybody else kind of believes he's a vampire. The whole thing's super weird, it revolves around a central question: what happens if you lose yourself in fictions and narratives you have built yourself? And it's both a great and a fucking clumsy and bad movie because a lot of the footage was lost for it. But when you watch it, you're aware throughout that if somebody found the missing five minutes, this would be the greatest movie ever made, super good.

DM Even in Romero's most legendary movie, The Night of the Living Dead (1968) the horror genre becomes a container for a crazy fine, exquisitely allegoric cultural critique. Because there was this idea of the zombie's figure being used to address the human condition under capitalism. Some scenes were even set in a mall in Pennsylvania. And so there is this kind of never-ending circle where real horrors inspire songs, movies, and novels, which in turn are mimicked to the point that they inspire real crimes because people lose themself in the fiction.

BV And also, you know, there's something really interesting that brings me back to your very first question. George Romero is from Pittsburgh, and both of those movies are set in Pittsburgh. He uses the backdrop of his personal history for his work, especially for "Night of the Living Dead." You know this is a movie that was played in cheap theaters. It was a schlocky horror film, and, at the same time, it's one of the only movies from that era that talked about how fucked up American domestic politics was. You know the actor who played Ben, the black character, who's the central figure in the movie and ends up dying in the end. And so wow, this movie was really actually talking about civil rights and how fucked up America actually is on a fundamental level, and he was employing a vehicle that allows that conversation to reach not just a rarefied audience, but a bunch of kids you know, stumbling in for, like a midnight matinee to get scared and accidentally receive an incredibly progressive political message.

DM There is something sublime within this subliminal level of communicating.

BV There's something kind of fascinating about the correspondence between sublime and subliminal. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of the music and culture that I was involved with as a teenager, was looked at as a threat, like it had subliminal messaging. All these things were coded to communicate something vile, evil, and anti-statist, which is interesting, and sublime by itself. It is similar to the Burkean concept of terror because the sublime is awe and majesty, it is terrifying. You know, romanticism seems like such a benign term when you use it, except when you start thinking that Caspar David Friedrich was talking about this sort of spiritual connection with his landscape and, oh shit. That's pretty close to blood and soil ideology ideas where, like, there is an ugliness to get skipped over somehow in our conversation about these things, I'm interested in the conversation with the ugliness included. I'm not interested in a casual subcultural or aesthetic definition for a moment in time but in the fully expansive notion of romantic or sublime. I'm absolutely interested in that.

Credits

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