THESIS

**The Demised Human Form as a Source of Beauty and Horror
The Beauty of the Bones**

• The Significance of the Viewer's Emotional Response to Human Death and Decay •

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"...through death more knowledge can be gained meaning a greater appreciation of life"…
Emke Brazier, (2012).

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Abstract

As human beings we have powerful visceral responses, often described as horror, to the representations of the demise of the human body. When experienced through art, significant distinctions can be made toward how the work is perceived. Often pathos or humor are utilized by the artist to soften the emotional experience, or the work can be presented unemotionally in a straightforward scientific manner. Conversely, when bones and body tissue are presented, showing only the beauty of the forms and not the context, the emotional baggage of the viewer of the dead human body is lessened, while the innate curiosity with the imagery remains. The bones continue to call to us in morbid fascination.

I have, as have many artists, been fascinated with the concepts surrounding human death and decay. In the past, in order to lessen the horror, I have preferred to use scientific presentation, pathos and humor as my vehicles for presenting the images I produce. Recently I have chosen to move into the realm of abstraction for my work, showing only the nature of the forms, which has removed the drama from the subject matter. When the viewer is no longer confronted with the context of the demise of the representation of humanity, the horror is no longer existent, yet the fascination is still there.

My work has been and continues to be influenced by my interest in anthropology, and shaped by my interest in art history. Alongside art history, anthropology was one of my undergraduate majors, and the sub-discipline of archaeology was the one that interested me the most. I found it fascinating to learn about current and previous societies and non-western cultures that were so very different from my own. In learning of the differences between cultures, I also realized the many similarities shared by all human beings. Love, loss, fear, hunger, thirst and spirituality are all traits shared across all cultures regardless of geography, time or prosperity. (Nauert, n. pag.) Through my concurrent art history studies, I was fascinated to see how these themes played out through paint, ink, sculpture, intaglio, and engraving. The two seemingly disparate academic disciplines intertwined in my thoughts and I began to meld them together in my art.

Through the use of imagery of bones and bodies, inspired by archaeological finds, I strive to remove the horror associated with the evidence of death that is imposed on the viewer by our Western society. Rather it is my desire to strip away those notions, much as the flesh has been stripped from the bones, and show the inherent beauty of form and functionality that is displayed by the clean lines and simple yet complex geometry.

Early work

Our modern culture appears to be in denial of death, and prefers to ignore its reality, a concept which I have tried to address in my both early and current work. Other cultures around the world have embraced death as an experience of life.

In my earlier work, I often presented the demised body as though it were treated like a photograph of an archaeological discovery. (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Kebara, or KMH 2, a Neanderthal burial find, "Kebara Cave, a Middle Paleolithic Aurignacian and Mousterian Site", Online article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014
http://donsmaps.com/neanderthalskeletons.html

Sometimes I would present an image of a demised human burial or sacrifice in a matter-of-fact, almost scientific way, as shown in *Abrazos y Besos* and *Earth Angel*. *Earth Angel* uses the imagery of a bog body. These bodies are the remains of Bronze Age people in the British Isles and Scandinavia who are believed to have been sacrificed to appease gods or spirits. (Lobell, n. pag.) (see fig. 2) They were killed by cutting the throat or sometimes hanging and then placed as an offering into a bog or swamp. I wanted to show the peaceful appearance of the subject. Although he was killed in what strikes us today as a brutal manner, the figure appears to be sleeping. Wings framing the work are representative of being taken to another realm of peace and reward for the sacrifice. The image of the body is mirrored and the images centered in the frame to represent the mirrored parallels between the universality of death in Bronze Age Europe and modern day America. Edges of pure white wings surround the sleeping soul and embrace it in death. Symmetry grounds the composition in stability, while the shape made by the rope from which the man was hanged mimics the shape of the surrounding white wings. The man in my composition has become an angel, and transcends the demised creature that was buried in the bog so long ago. Rich browns and golds in the work are contrasted with the lightness and purity of the surrounding wings. This is all presented on a lightly textured fine art paper which, when permeated with the ink, has a richness that enhances that of the colors in the image. Its scale of 24" x 36" is large enough to make the viewer have to deal with the presence of the angelic wings in his peripheral vision when scrutinized at close range.
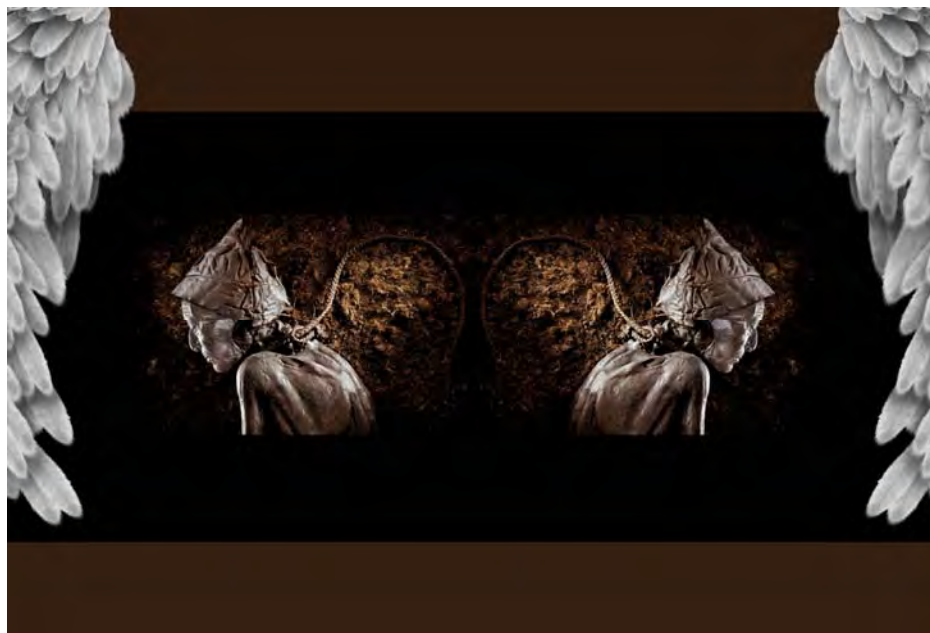

Fig. 2. Richard Strong, *Earth Angel,* 2011, 24"x 36" print on paper

Abrazos y Besos shows a matter-of-fact archaeological presentation along with Medieval sculpted bone imagery, presented as though they are documentary photographs. (see fig. 3) A monochromatic color scheme reinforces the spirit of this documentation, and the horrific nature of the open maw of the skeleton challenges the observer to deal with the actuality of the freshly uncovered macabre find. The image of Medieval carving in the center bolsters the strangeness of having to deal with this death, as does the mirror image symmetry of the presentation. This is presented on a finely textured art paper, almost smooth enough to be a page from a textbook, reinforced by its small scale of 8" x 20", small enough to be folded into a book. All of this forces the viewer to look upon this as a fact of life, however distasteful. This way of presentation is reminiscent of Bernard Picart's engravings of the Yaryuro Indians. (see fig. 4) While the Bronze Age Britons left bodies in the murky water, the Yaryuro would, when a member died, bury his or her body for some months and when the flesh had satisfactorily rotted, dig up the body and scrape it from the bone. The skeleton was then strung together using vines and hung in a hut in the center of the village, along with the rest of the ancestors. The 15th Century culture of the Yaryuro, or Pumé Indians, was illustrated in the 18th Century by Picart. Clearly the Yaryuro had no problem dealing with the concept of death, and treated it as an experience of daily life. Picart, in his illustrations, presents this concept as a scientific fact, and does not dwell on the horror of the Yaryuro custom.

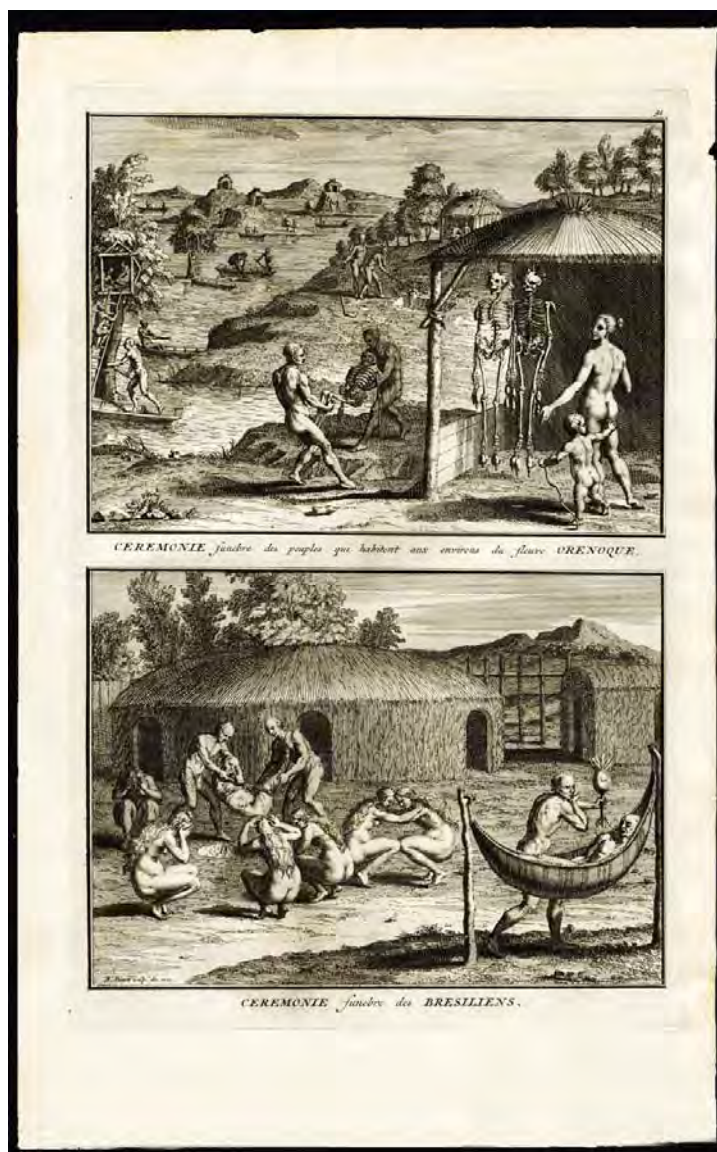Fig. 3. Richard Strong, *Abrazos y Besos,* 2011, 8" x 20", print on paper

Fig. 4. Bernard Picart, "Funeral Ceremony of the People Who Live Near the River Orenque, Funeral Ceremony of the Brazilians", Collection of Richard Strong, from *Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the New World*, Vol. I, London: William Jackson for Claude Du Bosc, 1733, 14" x 9" Engraving

Often I would do the same, in a matter-of-fact way, but sometimes with humor, sometimes with a religious or political statement, sometimes both. One of the ways I used humor was in the juxtaposition of disparate and completely unrelated subject matter. In *Neanderthals Find Jesus and are Saved*, I combined the mirrored skeleton of a Neanderthal with a crucifixion by 17th Century Spanish painter Francisco de Zubarán. (see fig. 5) Skeletons appear to be grinning maniacally in the foreground while the sublimely elegant and heartbreaking portrayal of a man's suffering is displayed

in the background. The humor is not in the suffering or the imagery of the Christ, rather the humor is in the concept held by many that the introduction of a person to Jesus will magically cause him to be saved from eternal damnation, gaining entrance into their god's kingdom of heaven, and that the Neanderthals just missed the opportunity.

Fig. 5. Richard Strong, *The Neanderthals Find Jesus and are Saved,* 2011, 7" x 7", print on paper

Another work in which I used humor was *Las Momias Jovenes Visitan a Los Claustros*, using images of accidental mummies from the museum *Las Momias* in Guanajuato, Mexico. (see fig. 6) It is a small scale work. 3" x 20", meant to be so to reinforce the tininess of its subjects. While a family of mummified children may not seem very jocular, when presented as though members of Hal Roach's *Our Gang*, a certain morbid humor emerges. While I realized that they were clad for burial it appeared to me as if they were dressed for a family outing. I placed them in a cloister and mirrored the image to give the impression of a larger brood and to make the viewer have to deal with the same grim image again when scanning the faces of the dead children. The gloom of the color palate emphasizes the melancholy of the concept of the loss of these very young innocents, struck down before their time. By placing them in a Medieval cloister, I invoke the reverence for their condition inferred by the church architecture. Although digitally overpainted and composited, it appears to be a photograph on photographic paper, bolstering its appearance of a ghastly reality. The imagery infers that they are very dead, yet they sit up and pose for the viewer as though very alive.

Fig. 6. Richard Strong, *Las Momias Jóvenes Visitan a los Claustros,* 2011, 3½" x 11", print on paper

It remains difficult for many to look upon these images, and in response to this reticence of the viewer to deal with demised remains, much of my current work does not show the "horror" of the bones and other tissues, but only their form. (see fig. 7) I derive these images of bones, mummies, and grave goods found in archaeological digs and discoveries from photographs of the site. There is a poignancy in the remainders of these demised persons which hints at the unknown story of the spirit that previously possessed these physical trappings. The presentation of these human parts invokes a humanity in the viewer that other subject matter cannot.
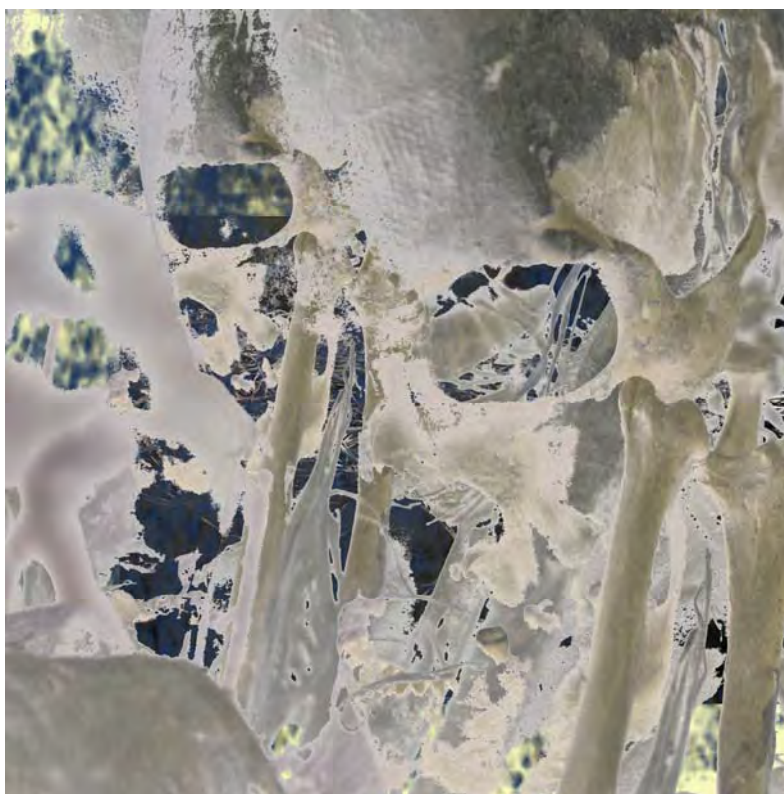

Fig. 7. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #1,* 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

Death in the History of Western Art

Medieval artists, like Hans Holbein the Younger, used imagery of skeletons and skulls as symbols of impending doom which often served as harbingers of death and destruction. (Hall, 293) Artists shifted their emphasis from early Christianity's assertion of the triumph of everlasting life over the fleetingness of death to the oppression of life by death as the Black Plague (at its peak from 1346 to 1353) swept through Europe and wiped out half of the population. (Eyewitness, n. pag.) Holbein used dancing skeletons and images of the grim reaper in his woodcuts to underscore the fleeting time humans had on the earth. Skeletons were seen cavorting with or without a mortal in the compositions. There was no escape from Death which was coming to get everyone.

In Holbein's *The Gentleman - Danse Macabre,* the human figure can be seen fending off the specter of Death with a sword. (see fig. 8) Death has a firm grip on the man and is tugging the man's tunic, pulling him deeper into Death's embrace. While the victor of this particular struggle remains unclear, it is inevitable that sooner or later, Death will prevail, as it always does. The nature of the woodcut medium stylizes the nature of the line that forms the image, patterning the forms of the clouds, sky, and earth. This enhances and focuses the forms of the gentleman and skeleton, which are the central subjects of the work. An hourglass rests on a bier, obviously meant for the gentleman, illustrating the ultimate result of his struggle with Death. The implied movement of the gentleman's sword and the tugging by the skeleton provides an excitement in their portended movement.

Fig. 8. The Dance of Death, Hans Holbein the Younger, "The Gentleman, from The *Danse Macabre* Suite, 1538", 6½" x 4-11/16" Woodcut, eBook, Web. 12 Sept. 2014 http://www.sacred-texts.com/jbh2yr/21790-h.htm

By the time of the Renaissance, the symbolism of bones to represent death was being used less and less and the images of death were intended to represent the demise of actual persons rather than represent the abstract notion of death. Images of Christ were the favored subject of the day. The Church was the prime patron of the arts, and religious themes were common in depictions of death and remains in the Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo eras. (Britannica, n. pag.)

Caravaggio blatantly displays the severed head of John the Baptist in his painting *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist.* (see fig. 9) Salome averts her gaze as if in an attempt to distance herself from the grisly souvenir while a wizened figure peers gleefully over her shoulder at the bloody platter while a young man grasps John the Baptist's hair. Jagged strips of flesh hang from the dismembered head, whose eyes are closed in death, but whose mouth remains grimly open. The obviously Baroque lighting and composition enhance the horrific scene. Caravaggio makes no attempt to hide the horror of the scene, preferring to show its startlingly realistic gruesomeness.

Fig. 9. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, "Salome Receives the Head of John the Baptist", Collection of the National Gallery, London, 1607-10, 36" x 42", Oil on Canvas, Online article, 01 Sept., 2014 http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio-salome-receives-the-head-of-john-the-baptist

Little of Caravaggio's morbid drama is exhibited in either my previous or current work. While my previous work was illustrative as was his *Salome,* it was not meant to shock. I preferred to not show the violence of the scene, but the physical outcome of the remains in a less sinisterly illustrative manner. In my current work, as in *Esqueleto #2,* I strive to minimize the horror that is the demised form as much as can be possible, concentrating on the delicacy and elegance of the bones and soft parts. (see fig. 10) It is the shape, form and apparent three-dimensionality of the imagery that is important to me, not the shock factor as was presented by Caravaggio and others. By keeping the focus of the imagery on the characteristics of the parts, the horror is relieved.

Fig. 10. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #2,* 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

In addition to the depictions of the demised Christ and other martyrs, bones and skeletons were often found in sketches of artists like Leonardo da Vinci as more and more artists were turning to anatomy and the autopsy of human corpses to gain a better understanding of the human body and its

composition. (see fig. 11) This enabled the artists to depict a realistic and believable human form in their art. (Klein, 161) Skeletons became a framework or substructure for the support of muscles, ligaments and skin. They were displayed in a very matter of fact and academic manner.
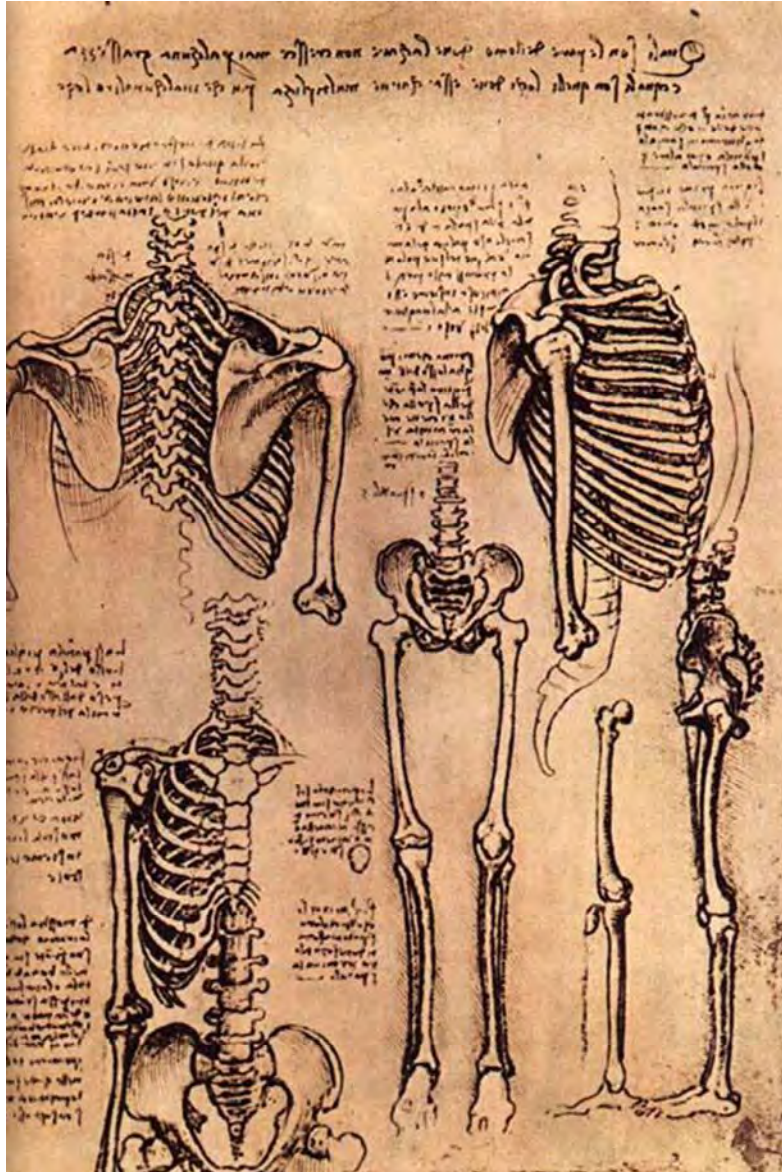

Fig. 11. Leonardo da Vinci, "The Skeleton, a drawing from his personal notebooks" c. 1510-11, Online article, Web. 05 Nov. 2014
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2292206/The-startling-accuracy-Leonardo-da-Vincis-anatomical-sketches-revealed-comparison-modern-medical-scans.html

Some of my early work provided a scientific representation of the image of the bones, presented in a matter of fact way, almost in a documentary form. Two of my earlier works, *Oryx Encounter an Australopithecine* and *Richard III,* show this presentation style composition. (see figs. 12 & 13) In *Oryx* there is depiction of a small herd of oryx at the top of the composition and the bones of the Australopithecine Lucy at the bottom. The oryx look upon the bones of the Australopithecine in

wonder, having no understanding of the significance of the find. *Richard III* has a drawn and painted abstract pattern at the top and the recently discovered bones of Richard III at the bottom of the print. In both cases, the bones are laid out as if members of archaeological academe were expected to soon analyze and research the skeletons, conveniently presented resting on a flat surface.

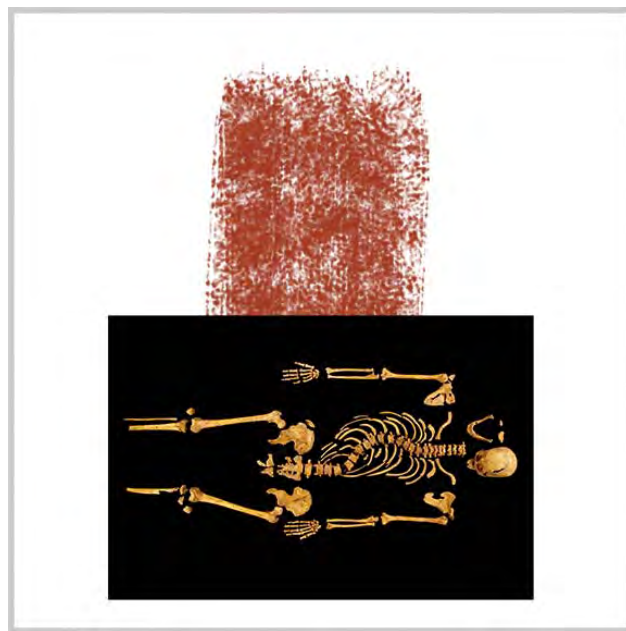Fig. 12. Richard Strong, *Oryx Encounter an Australopithecine,* 2010, 4" x 4", print on paper

Fig. 13. Richard Strong, *Richard III,* 2013, 30" x 30", print on paper

There is nothing sensational or unpleasant about these presentations. Much like Leonardo's drawings, they are simply depictions of fact. I wanted to show the actuality of skeletons that have had all of the connective tissue removed, yet nothing about these works is meant to shock. In *Oryx,* the warm sepia monochrome color scheme reiterates the orderly manner of the presentation. The three dimensionality of the landscape behind the animals contrasts significantly with the two dimensionality of the layout of the bones, reinforcing their importance in the composition. In *Richard III,* the abstract shape of the russet-colored painting serves the same function, forcing the viewer's eye to the presentation of the bones, arranged anatomically on a single plane, not three dimensionally like a medical skeleton.

My more recent work utilizes these concepts of the documentary presentation, but takes a less literal view, removing the "horror" from the viewer's initial response. My new *Esqueleto* suite challenges the viewer to identify the subject matter. It is initially unclear that the subject matter might be bones. They are juxtaposed, enlarged, cropped and shrunk in such a way that it can take careful scrutiny to see the subject. *Esqueleto #9* can be construed to be a geologic detail, *Esqueleto #8* a weather phenomenon. (see figs. 14 & 15) The clarity and recognizable presentation has been replaced with abstract forms in the composition. Any shock value has been completely eliminated from the subject matter. Bones have ceased to be objects of horror or distaste and have become uncertain shapes filling a canvas. Gerhard Richter said of abstract forms " …Abstract pictures are fictive models, because they make visible a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can postulate." (Gerhard Richter, n. pag) In presenting these bones and soft tissue as abstract forms, I am asserting their existence as anatomical structure, their value as esthetic form, and their value as the stuff that makes up the human form. By hinting at the forms abstractly rather than being absolutely literal in their presentation, I am able to give the viewer a choice as to whether he is horrified by the subject matter or he is able to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the offering.

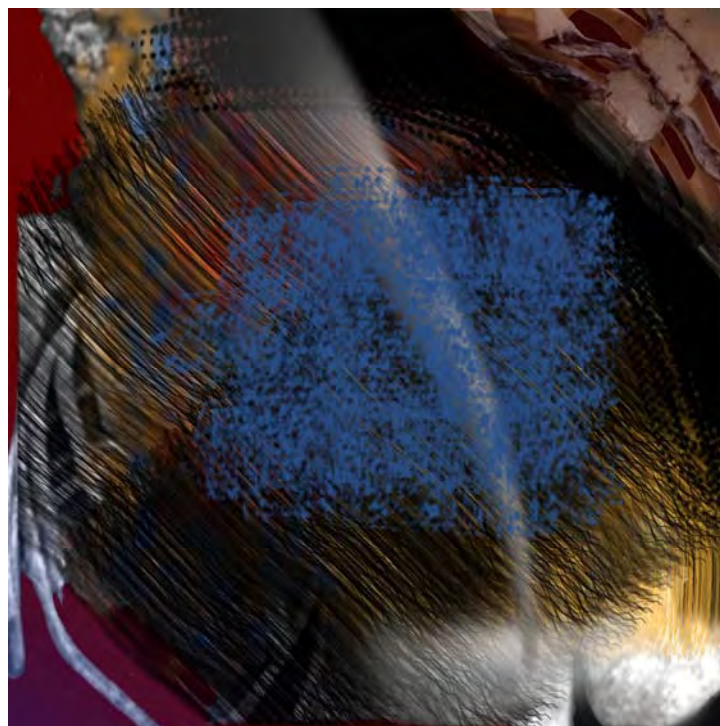Fig. 14. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #9,* 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

Fig. 15. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #8,* 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

While some artists have continued the theme of death, decay, and bones since the Enlightenment, the presentation of bones and tissue more fully fell out of favor during the late 18th and 19th centuries, showing the immediacy of the act of or the anticipation of death instead. One was more likely to encounter lush vivacious works like Delacroix' *Death of Sardanapalus* (see fig. 16) or the swooning nostalgia of the Pre-Raphaelites than anything involving bones or skeletons. (Oxford Online, n. pag.) In this very large painting, roughly twelve by sixteen feet, Delacroix peppers the composition with scenes of death and horror. Sardanapalus' minions kill his concubines and horses while he watches amusedly. The composition itself is disjointed and disconcerting, making the viewer even more ill at ease in seeing the death and destruction of the scene, a device which I have used in my *Esqueleto #11* mentioned below. (see fig. 21)

Fig. 16. Eugene Delacroix, "Death of Sardanapalus", Collection of the Louvre, Paris, 1607-10, 12'-10"-" x 16'-3¼", Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 15 Sept. 2014 http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/death-sardanapalus

Painters of the Neoclassical period often illustrated events that resulted in death as subject matter. Jacques-Louis David famously captured the murder of Jean Paul Marat by Charlotte Corday in a non-sensational manner (1793). (see fig. 17) If not for the presence of a small wound and a smattering of blood, the viewer may almost believe that Marat simply nodded off while catching up on his correspondence. The knife which killed Marat is not shown where Corday had left it impaled in Marat's chest, but beside the bathtub. (Neo-Classicism, n. pag.) The size of the work is conservative, being approximately five feet by four feet. The colors are muted, understating the drama of the scene, while conversely the lighting highlights the subject and the writing so important in the composition "Given that I am unhappy, I have a right to your help".

Fig. 17. Jacques-Louis David, "Death of Marat", Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, 1793, 5'-5"-" x 4'-2", Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 15 Sept. 2014
http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/fr/la-collection/jacques-louis-david-marat-assassine?letter=d&artist=david-jacques-louis-1

Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* was all about the horror. (See fig. 18) Of monumental scale, 16'-1" x 23'-6", the work reinforces the drama of the scene, the background figures being life size, the foreground figures nearly double life-size. The grouping of the gesticulating participants points to the only hope evident in the composition, that of an African man frantically waving to a passing ship that proceeds without seeing them. Living and dead are piled together indiscriminately in a chaotic jumble. An old man in the foreground holds the corpse of his son. People who are dead or in the throes of dying can be seen slipping over the edge of the raft while the obviously still living prop one another up and reach toward an unseen situation that obviously brings them delirious hope.

Fig. 18. Jean Louis Théodore Géricault "La Balsa de la Medusa", Collection of the Louvre, Paris, 1818, 16'-1" x 23'-6¼", Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 15 Sept. 2014 http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/raft-medusa

There are no bones and no visible lacerations. There is no putrescent flesh or suppurating wounds. There is only the sense of rot and decay depicted by the greenish tinge that Gericault has chosen to give the work. The *Raft of the Medusa* is an example of the ability for horror and atrocity to be conveyed without the use of traditional devices like bones or blood.

Of modest size, 37" by 53", in Marianne Stokes' *Death and the Maiden,* Death is "neither a decaying corpse (n)or a skeleton", but is represented by the symbol of a winged woman dressed in black. (see fig. 19) The Angel of Death seems to reach out her wing to comfort the young woman as she prepares to take her in death. Here the artist chooses to represent Death not with the horror of death, but with the intellectual concept of death. (Jeunne, n. pag.) The color scheme is intentionally disconcerting, with a sickly green background which covers the face and wings of Death as in a pall. As the viewer's eye progresses to the maiden about to be taken, the colors become brighter and more friendly. The color of her face is healthy and alive. Her blanket is a cheery red-orange color and the color of the furnishings in her bedroom warm and inviting. Stokes has made it clear from her palate that death is not a cheery thing, yet she seems to leave some hope that Death will leave this time without taking her prey with her.

Fig. 19. Marianne Stokes "Death and the Maiden", Collection of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1900, 37" x 53, Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014
http://www.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/joconde_fr?ACTION=CHERCHER&FIELD_1=AUTR&VALUE_1=STOKES%20Marianne&DOM=All&REL_SPECIFIC=1&IMAGE_ONLY=CHECKED

In one of my earlier works, I expanded this concept of the benign nature of death to the point that the viewer is unable to positively identify the subject as a bringer of death. *Dark Angel* shows the Angel of Death in repose. (see fig. 20) Here I have chosen to depict Death as a female, as did Stokes, rather than as a male as is traditionally done. The figure which I have painted of her is taken from a 4th Century B.C.E. Hellenistic Greek marble of *Hermaphroditus*. While I have chosen not to show the male organs, those familiar with the sculpture will know that on the side not seen they are there and that Death burdens both sexes. Death is relaxed in slumber with her wings loosely unfurled. She appears as any other individual in need of rest. Surrounded by the cosmos, the vast responsibility of Death is conveyed in a non-threatening manner as she floats in her safe niche somewhere in the heaven of Judaeo-Christian mythology. Entangled in her robes and ensconced in her niche, she is just as much a captive of her role as are those whom she visits. The central placement of Death in the composition confirms her importance to the viewer and the dissonant color scheme provides a disconcerting feel that imparts unease, yet the only real hint that this figure might be dangerous is the foreboding blackness of the wings.

Fig. 20. Richard Strong, *Dark Angel,* 2011, 24" x 36", print on paper

Esqueleto #11 is another depiction of the Angel of Death in a benign manner. (see fig. 21) While *Dark Angel* shows a human figure, *Esqueleto #11* shows instead wings atop a scarified surface. It is not until the viewer looks more closely that it becomes evident that the surface is not damaged, rather the discoloration comes from many bones arranged in a haphazard manner. The number of bones is so great that it is difficult to recognize the shapes as such. Once again, death is not the enemy. It has no nefarious or callous agenda. It is simply a matter of fact. The form of bones is allowed to shine through and display the shapes for the marvels that they are. The color scheme is disconcerting, bright complimentary accents wounding the icy monochrome background. A pair of common brown bird's wings is the only thing in the composition to imply that the Angel of Death has arrived. The wings are partially buried in the detritus of the disjointed and distressing composition that may or may not be bones. The warmth of the brown wings contrasts with the coldness of the background and accents, implying that there may be some final comfort in the visitation of Death.

Fig. 21. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #11*, 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

The Modern and Contemporary Periods

American artists from the United States and European artists took a somewhat different approach. Francis Bacon embraced the notion of the shock factor. In the movie *Psycho,* Alfred Hitchcock terrified us with the horror of a psychotic murderer, not by showing the gore of the violence of the scene, but by showing only the aftermath, the blood draining from the tub. Years before Alfred Hitchcock gave us this iconic "blood circling the drain" scene, (see fig. 22) Bacon was exploring the use of oblique reference to depict a violent or graphic scene. (Deleuze, 60) In his later work *Blood on the Floor,* he hones this concept to an even sharper edge, leaving the viewer wondering what transpired. (see fig. 23)
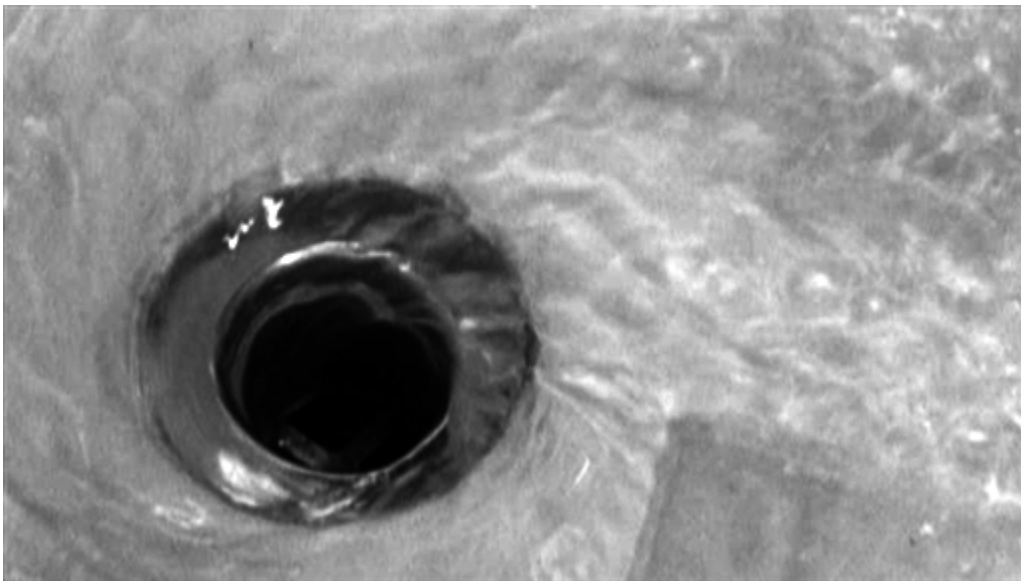

Fig. 22. Alfred Hitchcock "Blood Circling the Drain", Still from the Movie "Psycho", 1960, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014 http://niels85.wordpress.com/2013/06/12/the-alfred-hitchcock-marathon-part-5-psycho-1960/
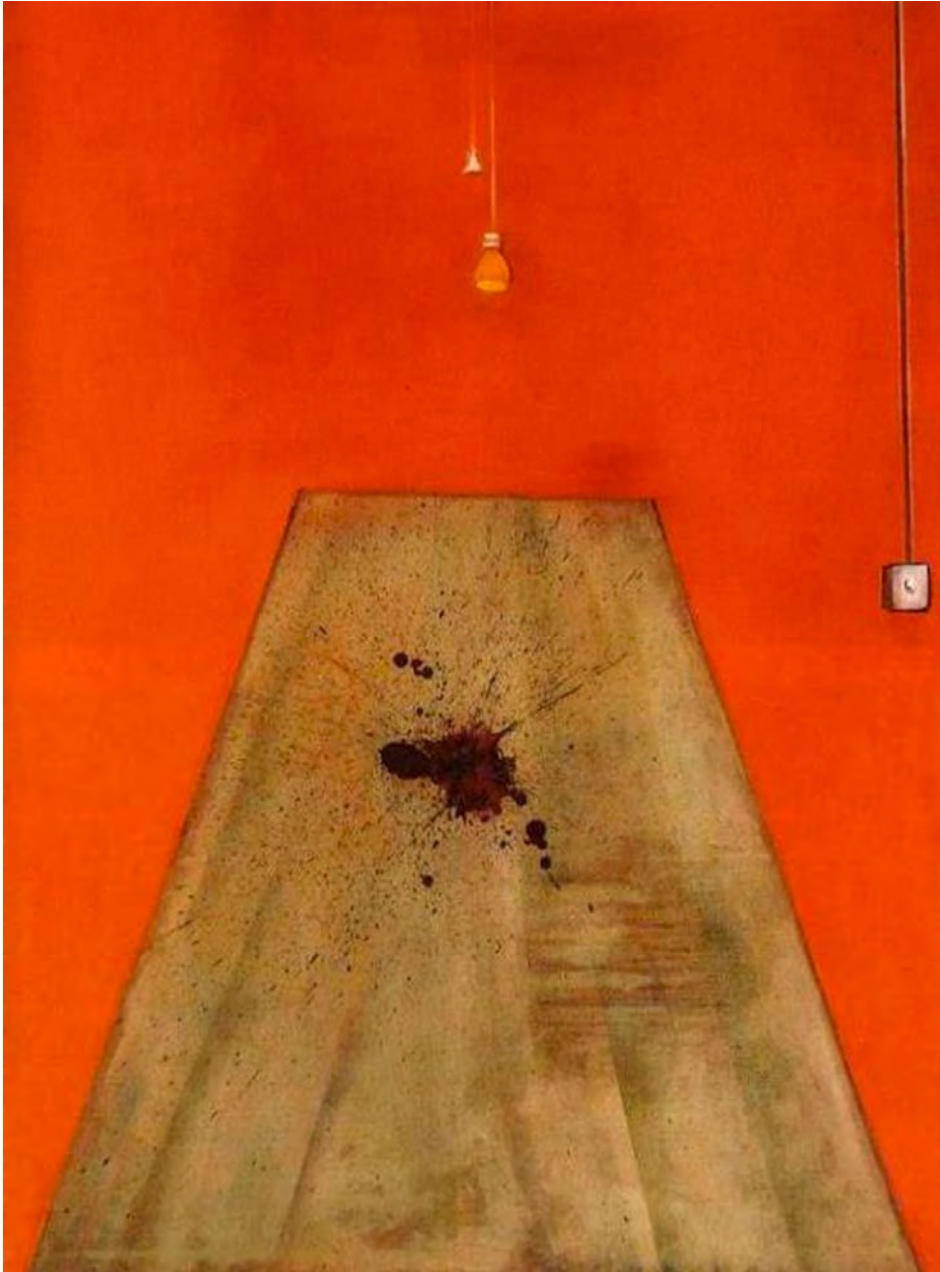
Fig. 23. Francis Bacon, "Blood on the Floor", Estate of Francis Bacon collection, 1986, 6'-6" x 4'-10", Oil and pastel on canvas, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014 http://www.francis-bacon.com/paintings/?c=85-92

Much like a Greek Chorus was used to describe acts that occurred offstage, Bacon only shows the aftermath of an event. One is never quite sure what exactly took a chomp out of a figure or why there is a bloody shadow on the floor. The viewer has no idea what is causing the subject to scream in abject terror, we just know that something is. Bacon was fond of the quote "The reek of human blood smiles out at me." from *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. (Deleuze, 62)

Bacon was fascinated with the concept of the damaged human form, and played with the imagery in many of his works. His inspiration for the hint of gore was no secret and he once said "If you see someone lying in the sun on the pavement in a great pool of blood, the sight of it, blood on asphalt, is very invigorating and galvanizing. Whenever I've seen car accidents - all those corpses lying by the road - the first impression was one of shocking beauty, something extreme, well before it occurred to me to do something about it." (Dine, n. pag.)

Bacon's imagery often utilized the open mouth, which he painted in some detail. Gilles Deleuze states that in Bacon's work "the entire body escapes through the screaming mouth" (Deluze, p.28). This scream is germane in Bacon's imagery, and Bacon strives to "paint the scream more than the horror…" (Deluze, p.1).

Bacon almost invariably encloses the space in his paintings. One can usually find a geometric representation of an open box, implying a room or enclosed space, sometimes represented in dark line, but more often represented in planes of varying color. There are no landscapes with infinite spaces in Bacons' work. The eye is always stopped by some plane or shape. Bacon is a colorist and painterly in his style. The texture of his brushstrokes is germane to the nature of his work. Generally, Bacon's palate is slightly garish, but muted just enough that one is not aware of it at first. Often he uses just enough of the arrant accents to catch the attention of the viewer, allowing his subject to emerge violently from the muted backgrounds. When he does not use aggressive color to establish his space, he often uses the device of the oval shape to define the location where his figures stand. Ovals and hard edge geometric forms are important in Bacon's work, and they define not only the space but the scale in which his distorted figures populate.

Bacon's figures are almost always central in the composition, and are invariably distorted in some manner or another. The way he uses this distortion is unsettling and implies an unease that is present to disturb the viewer whether the iconic Bacon screaming maw is there or not. The shadows which ground the figure appear to be organic themselves and often a gory extension of the figure which they mimic.

When I produced my *Homage to Bacon* in which I took Bacon's *Study After Velasquez' Portrait of Pope Innocent X* and used Raphael's *Portrait of Pope Julius II* in its place, I did it as an inside joke to be enjoyed by those who know Bacon's works. (see figs. 24, 25, & 26) Slabs of bacon were added as demonic wings to mimic the humor of Deacon's photograph of Bacon with slabs of bacon. There is great tension in Bacon's works and in order to avoid being reductive I superimposed the screaming maw from Bacon's painting over the face of Raphael's Pope. Bacon insisted in showing us the aftermath of the horror, leaving us in the dark as to its cause. Is the Pope about to be murdered? Has he just seen the death of someone important to him? Is the death of Christ on the cross too much for him to bear? In my work, the tension of Bacon's horror is only broken by the humor of the obvious counterfeit.

Fig. 24. Richard Strong, *Homage to Francis Bacon,* 2011, 60" x 60", print on paper

Fig. 25. Right: Francis Bacon, "Study After Velasquez' Portrait of Pope Innocent X", (shown on the left), Private collection, 1953, 60¼" x 46½" Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014
http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/february/08/the-truth-behind-francis-bacons-screaming-popes/

Fig. 26. John Deakin, "Photograph of Francis Bacon with Slabs of Meat", Private collection, 1952, Size unknown (for Conde Nast Publications), Photograph on paper, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014
http://soko-barefoot.blogspot.com.es/2011/05/john-deakin.html
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/22/under-the-influence-john-deacon-soho-review

In one of my more realistic nods to Bacon, *Francis Bacon Encuentra su Esqueleto*, I have introduced some humor in relation to Bacon's more darkly dramatic *Study for a Portrait of John Edwards*. (see fig. 27) Bacon's portrait shows a bloated figure standing over a shadow which appears to be a gelatinous pool of bloody mucus. In my painting of it, a skeletal janitor surveys the puddle, while a mop and bucket stand at the ready to clean up the mess on the floor. The signature distorted organic form which is Bacon's figure is replaced by the skeleton, but the gore that is the shadow remains. The skeleton is viewed from nearly the same awkward angle as Bacon's fleshed figure, and peers the same direction. I mimic Bacon's geometry that defines the space and like Bacon is wont to do, stops the eye from venturing too far into the background. I replaced the painterly texture of Bacon's brushstroke with the fineness of ink on paper, yet I have retained the conduit and switching he often includes, replacing the light switch with a fire alarm pull for implied drama.

Fig. 27. Left Side: Richard Strong, *Francis Bacon Encuentra su Esqueleto*, 2014, 30"x 30", print on paper Right Side: Francis Bacon, "Study for Portrait of John Edwards", Private collection, 1986, 1987, Lithograph on Arches paper, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014
http://www.phillips.com/detail/FRANCIS-BACON/UK030114/71

In my newer work, I leave out the humor, as it is not necessary to invoke humor to relieve the tension of the horror of the demised parts if they are not obviously appalling elements of death and decay. Instead I focus on the beauty of the forms. In my *Esqueleto #3*, Inspired by Bacon's *Crucifixion*, I

show only the peripheral shapes of the demised parts, and while the fascination for the organic forms remains for the viewer, the horror is not thrown in the viewer's face. (see figs. 28 & 29)

Fig. 28. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #3*, 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

Fig. 29. Francis Bacon, "Crucifixion", Private collection, 1933, 24-3/8" x 19-1/8" Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 11 Nov. 2014 http://www.francis-bacon.com/paintings/?c=1929-47

The vocabulary of imagery which I have chosen to use in these new works is much less literal and therefore does not force the viewer to confront the horror of the subject, but still provides the innate fascination of the human sprit with the demised parts. This frees me as an artist to work on the visual shapes and patterns and refine their presentation on the canvas or paper rather than having to deal with the literal horror of the subject matter.

I have become enamored with Gerhard Richter's approach to abstraction, where he describes the appearance of figure or landscape as "rightness" (Gerhard Richter, n. pag.). I have found that when I treat an abstract shape as though it were an actual figure to be rendered, it achieves a life of its own and becomes part of the vocabulary of the work as though it were a realistic structure. The three dimensionality and depth that can be achieved utilizing this approach I am just beginning to understand, and it will clearly become a major part of my artistic effort in the future.

The additional element of surface texture that I have gleaned from studying Bacon's brushstrokes and Richter's "systematic smearing", discussed below, has made a great difference in the way I address the work, redeeming it from my tendency to be illustrative in my approach, and to understand better the potential of the media in which I am working, as I show in *Esqueleto #13*. (see fig. 30)
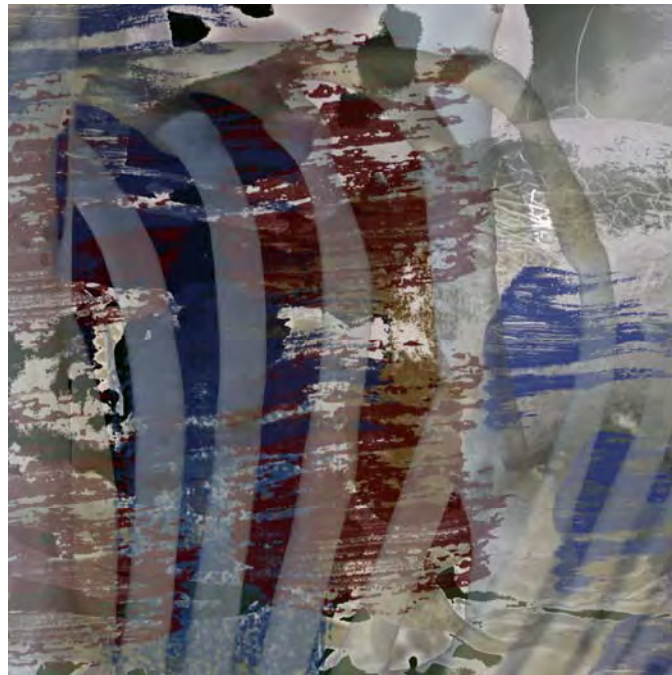

Fig. 30. Richard Strong, *Esqueleto #13,* 2014, 30" x 30", print on paper

Several of my works were inspired by Andy Warhol. Both *Las Momias en Colores Vivos* and *La Momia de Ophelia Frump con Margaritas* were truly nods to his style and composition. Soup cans and movie stars were replaced with Mexican and Peruvian mummies. (see figs. 31, 32, 33, & 34) Over the top garishness recreated some of the sensationalism caused by Warhol's use of the repetition of the mundane.

Fig. 31. Andy Warhol, "Three Marilyns", MOMA Collection, 1967, 3'-0" x 9'-0", Screenprint on paper, Online Article, Web. 20 Sep. 2014 http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/andy-warhol-gold-marilyn-monroe-1962
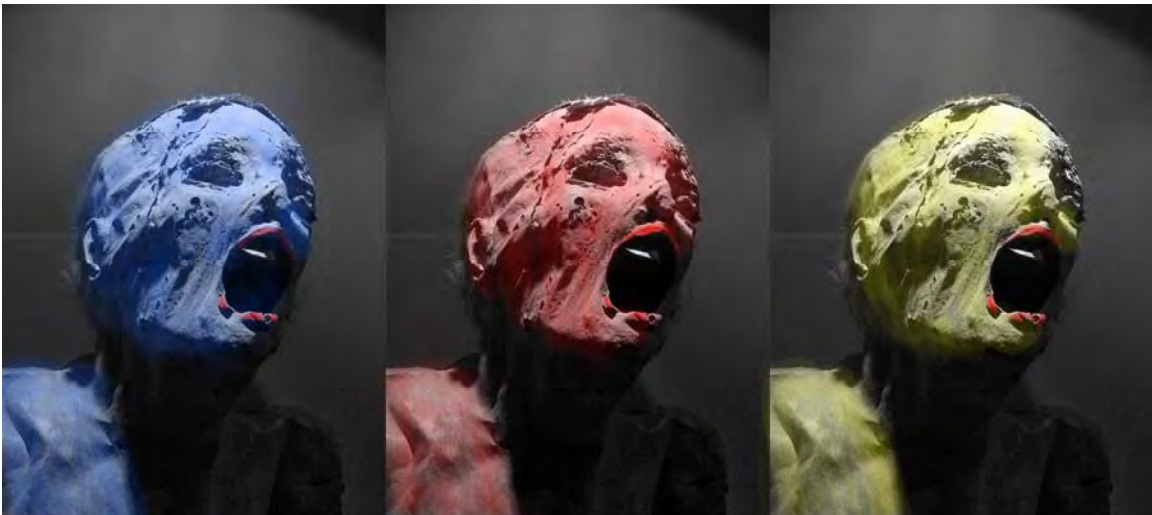

Fig. 32. Richard Strong, *Las Momias en Colores Vivos,* 2011, 16" x 36", print on paper

Fig. 33. Andy Warhol, "Campbell's Soup Cans", Jordan D. Schnitzer Family Foundation Collection, 1962, Size unknown, Lithograph on paper, Online Article, Web. 18 Sep. 2014
http://jordanschnitzer.org/highlights-from-the-collections-of-jordan-d-schnitzer-and-his-family-foundation/

Fig. 34. Richard Strong, *La Momia de Ophelia Frump con Margaritas,* 2011, 13½" x 12", print on paper

In *Colores* and *Ophelia Frump* I use Warhol's repetitive device with even more outlandish subject matter. Warhol has been so completely accepted by both the art world and the general public that simply recreating repetitive images would not have been very creative at all. Instead I chose subjects that were in and of themselves shocking. Unwrapped mummified human remains are not what one usually expects to see hanging on a wall. By using garish colors, *Colores* transformed a possibly disturbing image into one from a children's Halloween coloring book. *Ophelia Frump* was titled after Morticia Addams' sister Ophelia who had daisies growing out of her head. Once again repetition allows for more familiarity with a subject. It becomes something of a game to see if there is a difference in the panes. Horror becomes diversion and unpalatable subject matter becomes much less horrific due to a playful treatment.

In the early 1960s Warhol was pushed into expanding into the subject of death by his friend, Henry Geldzahler. Warhol used headline photos from newspapers to make his suites. Automobile accidents, plane crashes, suicides and even tainted cans of tuna fish all became subjects for his works on death. (Kamholz, n. pag.) Warhol, unlike Bacon, chose to show the horror of the event, and not disguise or suppress it as Bacon or Hitchcock would do.

In *5 Deaths on Turquoise,* Warhol unflinchingly and unapologetically highlights the grisly scene of a car crash. (see fig. 35) By using newspaper photos, he forces the viewer to see exactly what occurred and was captured on film by photojournalists. There is no stylization of the event. The body of a dead woman is clearly visible trapped under the wreckage of the overturned vehicle. A man's body is with her in the car while another woman and man are seen beside the hood of the vehicle. With all of the blood covering the figures, it is not immediately clear if the second set of figures were among the passengers in the car or perhaps the cause of the accident. While the image does not show any bones, the horror of the event is clearly conveyed through the blood and composition. There is no doubt that something truly awful occurred.
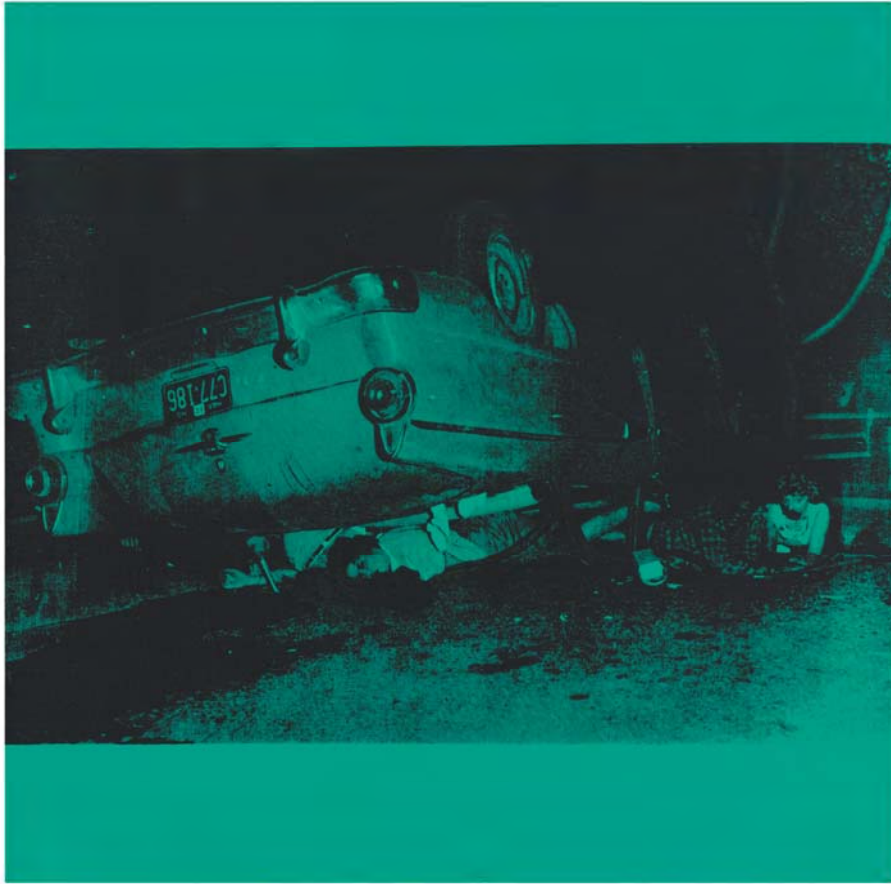
Fig. 35. Andy Warhol, "5 Deaths on Turquoise, from the Death and Disaster Series", Private collection, 1963, Size unknown, Screenprint and acrylic on canvas, Online Article, Web. 05 Sep. 2014 http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/21-days-of-andy-warhol/2013/10/21-days-of-andy-warhol.html

Joel Peter Witkin has famously created controversial works showing death and sexual deviance since the '70s and still continues today. (Urban, 16) Through the blatant display of bodies, bodies without heads and heads missing bodies, Witkin forces the viewer to pay attention to composition and shape and to set aside discomfort at the subject matter. (see figs. 36 & 37) He visually puts his viewer off balance by the staged matter of fact way he poses his gory subjects, as though they were sitting for a photographer for a school annual, or part of an innocent still life of flowers and fruit. His *Face of a Woman* is strikingly similar to Caravaggio's *Head of John the Baptist*. Both feature decapitations. However, despite the use of an actual human head, Witkin's work is gentler in nature. The skull has had the top removed and instead of being held up by the hair dripping blood onto a platter, flowers are daintily arranged inside of it and the head becomes an elaborately detailed vessel instead of a murder victim. The monkey in *Face* looks aside in a gesture quite like that of Salome. While

Salome seems to be averting her eyes in shame or as an attempt to distance herself from the act, the monkey is looking to the edge of the frame as if inviting an unseen figure to admire the woman's head. Both depict severed heads yet the painting appears to be much more horrific than the photograph.

Fig. 36. Joel Peter Witkin, "Man Without a Head", Collection of Gary Tatintsian Gallery, 1993, 11-5/8" x 14-7/8", Toned silver gelatin print on paper, Online Article, Web. 02 Sep. 2014 http://www.tatintsian.com/ru/artists/joel-peter-witkin/works

Fig. 37. Joel Peter Witkin, "Face of a Woman, Marseilles", Collection of Gary Fahey Klein Gallery, 2004, 22-1/8" x 32 ¾ ", Toned silver gelatin print on paper, Online Article, Web. 12 Nov. 2014 http://www.faheykleingallery.com/photographers/witkin/exhibition/heart_beats_dust/witkin_ex_heart_05.htm

My work has often pushed limits that might make the viewer squirm, as in my series on the accidental mummies in Museo de las Momias in Guanajuato, Mexico. The *Momias* series used a museum collection of human remains that were naturally mummified in the desert climate outside Guanajuato in central Mexico. I found the objects to be intriguing in their variations in shape, form and size. Infants are displayed alongside adults. Like Witkin's use of the non-traditional subject matter, I used the mummies to highlight their geometry and show that the usually distasteful can also be beautiful. Mirror imagery and compositions of three use traditional western balance for non-traditional works. (see figs. 38 & 39)
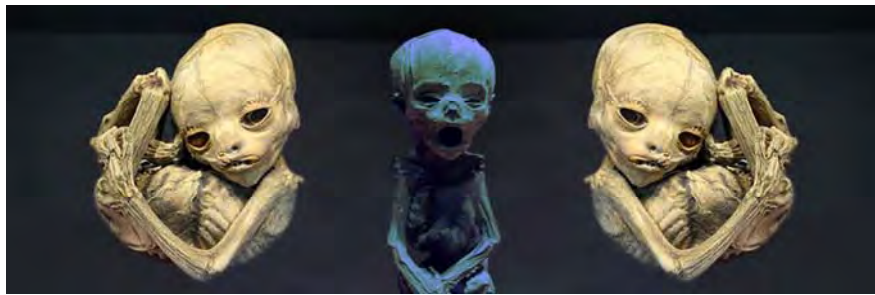

Fig. 38. Richard Strong, *Las Momias Mas Pequeños,* 2011, 2-5/8" x 8", print on paper

Fig. 39. Richard Strong, *Las Momias Sujetalibros,* 2011, 13" x 17", print on paper

Often, I have tried to break up the seriousness and horror of the bones with some levity and humor. *Emerging Artist* is something of a self-portrait. (see fig. 40) My undergraduate and previous post graduate studies revolved around graphic art and printmaking. Economic demands required that I set that aside and focus on providing for my young family. I was able to meet those demands though construction and development but I always felt burdened and shackled by the profession. *Emerging Artist* represents my sloughing the constraints of the construction business and once again picking up the tools of art. Blueprints fall away and paintbrushes take the place of quotes and bids. The paper flowers growing from the head and pelvis represent a sprouting and growth of creativity and ideas. Thus a medical skeleton wrapped in paper loses starkness and affront and becomes whimsical and symbolic of rebirth.

Fig. 40. Richard Strong, *Emerging Artist,* detail, 2014, life size, mixed media

Although very different in media, Damien Hirst is the contemporary artist who comes closest to my attitudes in the display and use of bones and bodies in the composition of his works, as can be seen in his *Mother and Child (Divided)*. (see fig. 41) Hirst displays his works sculpturally and as installations rather than the two dimensional ink on paper and overpainting methods which I have used, but his cavalier approach to any stigma associated with bones or preserved specimens is more scientific than sensational. (Rikki Sixx The First Look, n. pag.) By completely disregarding any potential discomfort on the part of the viewer, Hirst presents his subjects more like a display at the

Museum of Natural History than an art exhibit. This clever approach puts the viewer off balance, sets the viewer emotionally at ease, and allows the geometry, form and physical composition of his subject to shine through and truly be seen. (Rikki Sixx The First Look, n. pag.)

Fig. 41. Damien Hirst, "Mother and Child (Divided)", Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway, 1993, Life size, Mixed media, Online Article, Web. 02 Nov. 2014 http://www.damienhirst.com/mother-and-child-divided-1

My work has often unknowingly or subconsciously paralleled Damien Hirst's. There are similarities between his *St. Elmo's Fire* and my *Emerging Artist* (see figs. 42 & 43). The humor that persists in the exposition of the skeletal form maintains a certain amount of gaiety and frivolity. Perhaps for Hirst this humor is present to relieve the viewer of the horror. Hirst stated, "Sometimes I think you can create more of a kind of horror with empty water. A big empty tank of water is quite a frightening thing." (Damien, n. pag.)

Fig. 42. Quintin Lake, Damien Hirst portrait with his mixed media artwork "St Elmo's Fire", 2008. Photographed in his Chalford Studio, near Stoud, Gloucestershire, England, 2010, undetermined size, Photograph on paper, Online Article, Web. 10 Nov. 2014 http://quintinlake.photoshelter.com/gallery/Damien-Hirst-portrait-in-his-Studio-2010/G0000ioY_m.jSeOw/

Fig. 43. Left: Quintin Lake, Photograph of Damien Hirst's *St. Elmo's Fire*, 2008, taken in 2010, , Online Article, Web. 10 Nov. 2014. http://quintinlake.photoshelter.com/gallery/Damien-Hirst-portrait-in-his-Studio-2010/G0000ioY_m.jSeOw/ Right: Richard Strong, *Emerging Artist,* life size, mixed media, 2014

Gerhard Richter works in many styles, and likes to work in series of six, stating that the pictures "…learn from each other.", a technique which I have embraced, although not necessarily in that exact number. Many of his early works are pictorial in nature, and mimic earlier styles with a modern flourish. (see fig. 44). The progression of ideas allows the refinement of the forms and composition. His use of "systematic smearing" of what begins as hard edged forms brings the beauty of the imagery to the forefront and removes the superfluous subjectivity of the representations. (Gerhard Richter, n. pag.) (see fig. 45 – transitional use of smearing, and fig. 46) When applied to the less illustrative and more abstract, this concept of "systematic smearing" facilitates my new work by removing the details of the demised forms, revealing the beauty of the shapes and texture.

Fig. 44. Gerhard Richter "Skull with Candle", Collection of Neues Museum, Nuremberg, Germany, 1983, 39-3/4" x 59-1/16", Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 12 Nov. 2014 https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/skulls-55/skull-with-candle-6536

Fig. 45. Gerhard Richter "Still Life (Skull)", Collection of Gerhard Richter, 1983, 27-9/16" x 19-11/16", Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 12 Nov. 2014 https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/skulls-55/skull-abstract-6532/?&p=1&sp=32

Richter's *Abstraktes Bild* masterfully uses color, shape, and "systematic smearing" to depict three dimensions on an abstract two dimensional plane. (see fig. 46) Through careful placement, the reds and blues appear to push out at the viewer while the black in the center of the piece recedes into the nothingness of an abyss. It is only through the power of the lighter brighter colors that one is able to escape being pulled into a bottomless pit.

Fig. 46. , Gerhard Richter, "Abstraktes Bild (809-4)", Private collection, 1994, 98-3/8" x 78-3/4", Oil on Canvas, Online Article, Web. 12 Nov. 2014 https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/abstracts/abstracts-19901994-31/abstract-painting-8067 http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/13/gerhard-richter-painting-record-price

In 2002 Richter accepted a commission for a stained glass window replacing the plain glass window installed in the Gothic south transept of Cologne Cathedral after the original was destroyed in WWII. The window was supposed to commemorate martyrs of the Nazi regime. Richter, after struggling with the idea of representational forms which would evoke the horror of the events, chose instead to use the colors of the remaining traditional windows as a vocabulary. He called on the esthetics of the architectural environment rather than the emotional connotations of the representations of martyrs.

"He accepted the commission, but he couldn't make it work. He was playing around one day with a reproduction of one of his abstract paintings of coloured squares when he dropped a template of the window over the abstraction and thought, 'My God! That's it!' He told the cathedral staff that this was the only kind of window he could make. 'We talked about it again and again then finally they said - OK, we'll do it. It was brave of them.'" (Gayford, n. pag.) (see fig. 47)

Fig. 47. Gerhard Richter, "Tribute to Martyrs of the Nazi Regime", Stained glass window in the south transept of Cologne Cathedral, 2007, Stained Glass in 13th Century architecture, Online Article, Web. 12 Nov. 2014 http://artforum.com/diary/id=15783
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/magazine/09pixelated.html?ref=magazine&_r=0

Richter's abstract approach is germane to what I have done with my representations of skeletal and soft tissue forms. The less emotion, whether horror, pathos or humor, the more likely the forms are to be appreciated. The *Esqueletos* series has removed any reference for the viewer to immediately discern the subject matter. Shapes are for the most part abstract and the compositions rely on color and negative space to depict the intent of the work. As can be seen in my *Vidrieras Esqueleto,* bold colors come forward and darker ones fall to the background. (see fig. 48) Natural foramen in a pelvis become caves or canyons. Just as in Richter's abstractions in glass, horror is replaced with curiosity and the beauty of the forms is allowed to shine through.

Fig. 48. Richard Strong, *Vidrieras Esqueleto,* 2014, 25" x 25", print on paper

Conclusion

My work is a product of a combination of influences, from art historical to anthropological to philosophical. It exists within the legacy of those disciplines. I am of the opinion that our culture is in denial of the reality and ultimacy of death, and prefers to ignore and deny the physical product of death instead of embracing it as an experience of life.

The beauty of all parts of the human form can be appreciated, no matter how distasteful the concept of their demise might be, if carefully presented in terms of their delicacy, their elegance, grace, and symmetry. Our natural fascination with not only the external, but also the internal parts of our human architecture is difficult to deny and we are drawn to those parts when confronted with their imagery.

Like Witkin and Hirst, in an effort to bring the viewer's interest in death into the frame, my earlier work sometimes utilized devices to keep the viewer visually off balance until he was curious enough to feel a need to understand the work on a level deeper than only the morbid curiosity initially demanded by images of things that are merely dead and demised. At times I utilized repetition in the manner of Warhol to desensitize the viewer to subject matter that might initially be distasteful.

These devices served to disorient the viewer and an overall intellectual analysis of the work was necessary to regain equilibrium before the subject matter could be fully discerned. In this manner, I forced the viewer to look at the work in bits and pieces which ultimately coalesced into a complete image.

Like Richter, my more recent abstract work appears to have three dimensional depth on a two dimensional plane. Bacon showed that by reducing the forms to a more abstract rather than anecdotal scheme an artist is able to diminish the emotional reaction of the viewer and reduce the innate horror of the imagery while still retaining the fascination of the subject matter. Through careful device and contrivance, subjects like bones and skeletons which have come to be viewed as morbid or macabre are able to be divorced from the preconceived notions and the beauty and elegance of their forms are allowed to come center stage, and they are accepted. What was once off-putting becomes delightful and appreciated.

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