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The Truth About Your Monsters

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Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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The Truth About Your Monsters

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

The School of Art

by
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Abstract

The Truth About Your Monsters is an immersive and dialogical exhibition formatted as a walk-through storybook environment. Viewers are transported into a child's make believe world through hands-on stations. By building on the skeleton of an archetypal narrative, audience members are encouraged to tap into their own experience as they contribute imagery and action to the narrative. I call on audience members to discuss personal or universal fears by prompting them to draw images of monsters that represent their fear.

Monsters Under My Bed

As a child monsters terrified me. I would stay awake at night and imagine that I saw them hiding in the corners of my room, waiting for me to drop my guard. As I grew older the monsters turned into demons from the Bible and sensationalist tabloids. They would appear in my dreams, green-eyed and foreboding. When I was ten and learned about World War II, I became afraid of nuclear warfare. Every time an airplane flew over my head, I said a prayer to atone for my sins and protect my family. New fears arose in middle school as I worried I would not fit in with my peers. My monsters were always hiding in the corners of my mind.

Monsters have continued to be present throughout my life, though as I grow older they appear in new disguises. My fears have rarely been defeated in the present moment, but often I grow out of them. The subject of the exhibition centers thematically on fear whether personal or political. Most significantly, the exhibition focuses on facing that fear, so the viewer can come to learn it is not the terrifying monster that was presumed.

Nina

The Truth About Your Monsters is a dialogical, sculptural exhibition that stems from a story I wrote about a young woman named Nina. This story is written according to dreams, visions and fears I had during my childhood. For this reason, I have named the protagonist Nina, a name that is borrowed from the Slavic word *ninati*, meaning “dreamer” or “dream.” I wrote this story to be largely about a person who journeys through a dream world, and whose trials and tribulations also exist within that realm.

Nina lives in a castle in a magical kingdom, and is preparing for a wedding to a wealthy nobleman. In the weeks leading up to the wedding, things begin to trouble Nina. Most significantly her bedroom becomes haunted at night by apparitions of the monsters that live in the nearby Mount Oread. After countless sleepless nights she journeys to the cave where she must face the terrible monsters. As she approaches the threshold of the cave she prepares her bow and arrow ready to fight the monsters, but to her surprise as soon as she enters the cave a monster that is actually quite friendly greets her. The monster leads her around the cave and introduces her to many other not-so-scary monsters. Nina learns what she thought she feared was not so bad after all and that she can learn to trust her own instincts and be herself instead of living in fear.

When a person reads a book they project themselves into the literature as they empathize with the characters. Nina’s story provides the gallery visitors a premise with which they can empathize, and propels them into the story. It functions as the seed of the exhibition from which the rest of the experience unfolds. It is my intention with this work to provoke the telling of other people’s stories. Therefore, the particularities of the story and its outcome are less interesting to me than the stories developed from it.

Immersive Play Space

Prior to beginning this project, I engaged in a number of collaborative art projects with children where we built fantasy worlds. During these collaborative exercises I was interested in observing how children construct nonlinear stories through play. When a child plays make-believe they are imagining themselves immersed in a fantasy world while simultaneously inventing it. Midway through play a child might use the language “how about now...” to suggest a change in action. Through the exhibition *The Truth About Your Monsters*, I created a make believe environment for adults. The exhibition relates a visual narrative where the audience is both immersed in the story and helping to construct it at the same time. With this approach I argue that there is a difference between being within a constructed environment and being immersed within the idea. This work explores ways to invite audience members not only into the space but also into the conceptualization of the space. In other words, it invites them to explore their own creative unconscious through art making and imaginative play. With this exhibition it was my goal for the audience to engage in three phases: contemplating the setting, performing as a fantasy character, and contributing imagery to the story.

The Truth About Your Monsters creates an immersive storybook environment. The installation spans two rooms. When first entering the exhibition space, the audience sees shadows of monsters and a bed that represent the haunted bedroom of the main character. As the viewer walks into the second gallery space, they duck underneath a constructed arch representing the opening of the cave where Nina faces her monsters (Figure 1). As soon as they enter the second space they are greeted by large paper cutouts of monsters drawn by children and young teenagers. These are the monsters that live within the cave. To evoke a



Figure 1. Cave. Cassidy Creek. 2017. Photo by Brian Deppe.

change in tone between the spaces, the lighting within the second space is suddenly brighter, and the color pallet shifts from warm to cool. Large stalagmite forms are placed within the second room so the viewer walks about them as though they are meandering through the cave (Figure 2).

Within the installation are stations where the audience is invited to interact. A sign dangling off of an old weathered trunk at the base of the bed indicates the first point of activation. On the sign the viewer is invited to gather supplies for their journey to the cave. Within the trunk are make-believe objects that a person may need for an adventure: costume clothes, hats for disguise, a bow and arrow, a cantina, etc. At the second point of

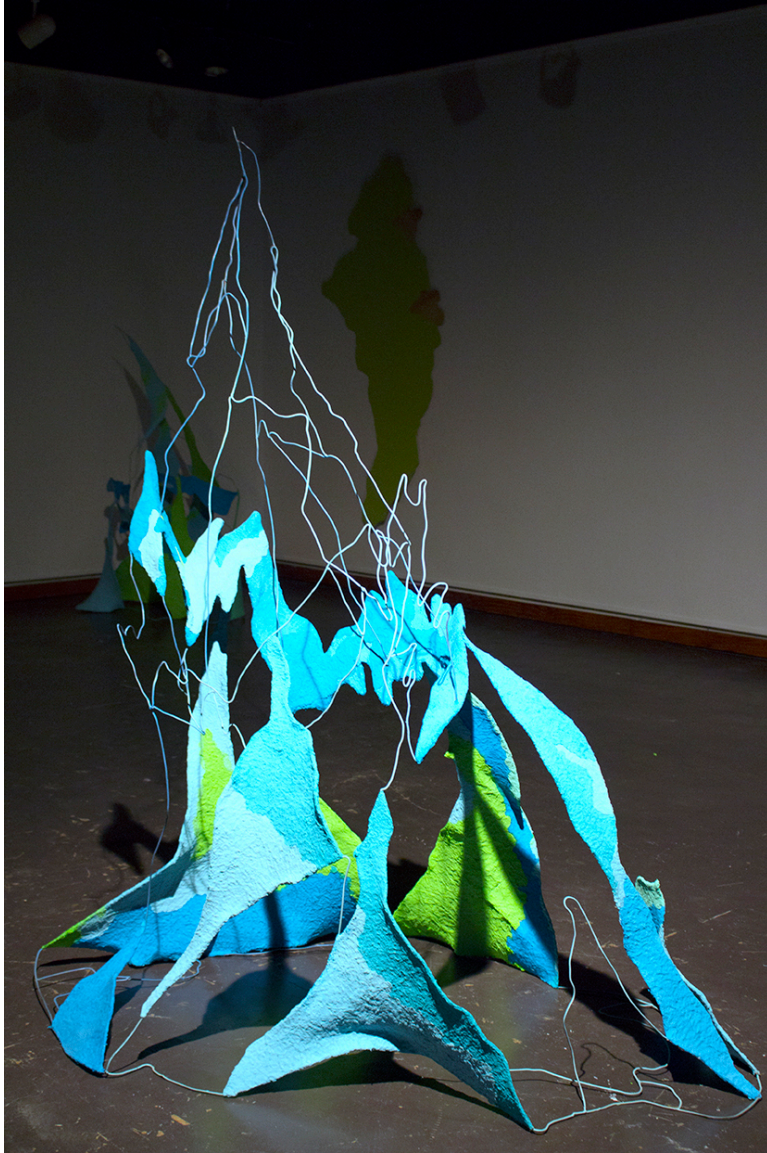


Figure 2. Stalagmite. Cassidy Creek. 2107. Photo by Ronni Bourgeois.

interaction is a table where the audience is asked to draw a picture of a monster that lives inside the constructed cave. The viewer is asked to reflect on their experience with fear by creating a monster, which functions as a metaphor for that fear. They are then asked to neutralize that fear by making the drawing of the monster not so scary. Inviting the

audience to engage in these imaginative ways allows them to slip into a more playful mindset, so that they are transported into the story.

Interactive Art

I define interactive art as artwork that encourages audience participation through a form of action. With this exhibition I challenged myself: if the audience is asked to be involved in the work, then how does the work change according to their contribution? There is a strong and growing tradition of 20th and 21st century artists who call for viewer engagement in their artwork. Allan Kaprow's happenings, as well as the Fluxus movement, were radical shifts in 1960s in the direction of participation-based art. Often as politically motivated critiques on the authoritative function of an exhibition, they set the precedent for generations to come. As this relatively new form of expression has evolved over the course of the past fifty years, it has transformed into a viable art medium. One example of a more recent interactive project is Janet Cardiff's *The Long Black Hair*,¹ created in 2004 for the New York Public Art Fund. Cardiff's project invites viewers on an audio tour of Central Park. Participants are given a kit of photos and a headset. Viewers are directed on a route, and throughout the route they are asked to take out various photos as the narrator reveals a story about the people in the photos. *The Long Black Hair* parallels this exhibition in how the narrative unfolds as the viewer walks, and at points along the way, the viewer is encouraged to take different actions. Although *The Truth About Your Monsters* is also narrative and participation based, I approach viewer interaction with a different objective. I seek to recognize the complexity of human experience and fold that complexity into the work by asking the viewer to contribute creatively. When we enter a space, we carry a worldview with us that will alter how we understand the work. Our unconscious association with an image or sensory experience causes the interpretation of a work to

¹ "Her Long Black Hair," *Public Art Fund*, accessed March 28, 2017, https://www.publicartfund.org/view/exhibitions/5688_her_long_black_hair.

differ for each individual. When the audience is asked to create a drawing that represents their fear, they tap into their own story. The content of the installation is altered according to the nuanced life experiences of the individuals that are engaging in the space. In this way, *The Truth about Your Monsters* can be considered not only interactive but also relational and dialogical. It emphasizes social interaction in the tradition of relational theory, but creates a circumstance for valuable conversation.

Relational Aesthetics

My intent to involve the audience in the work falls under the umbrella concept of relational aesthetics. Relational Aesthetics is a term coined by philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud that considers the viewer as central to the work and focuses attention on the encounter between the work and the viewer. He defines relational art as “an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertions of an autonomous and private symbolic space.”²

Relational works present a set of problems for evaluation. Predominantly these works require that the nature of the exchange be evaluated. In Claire Bishop's *Antagonism and Relational Art* she critiques an early exhibition of Rirkrit Tiravanija, where he served dinner to gallery attendants. The intention of the work was to create a convivial and conversational space. Accounts of the conversations there were pleasant, but seemed to be centered on the insular and banal topics related to the New York Art scene.³ In this scenario Tiravanija provided the space for the conversation, but did not provoke meaningful conversation. With this example I would like to draw a distinction between a work that is relational and one that is dialogical. Although a dialogical work can be considered relational, only relational works that succeed in setting the terms for a meaningful exchange can be considered dialogical.

Grant Kester explains dialogical art in *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art*⁴ through a discussion of Suzanne Lacy's work *The Roof is on Fire*. In

² Nicolas Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, (London: White Chapel: MIT Press, 2006), 160.

³ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (2004): 67.

⁴ Grant Kester, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art," ed. Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung, in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (Blackwell, 2005).

1994 Lacy organized a conversation in Oakland California on the roof of a parking garage. The conversation involved Oakland Police and young people of color from the Oakland area. In the conversations the teenagers addressed their concerns about racial profiling, and presented their identity as different than how they were stereotyped. Likewise the empathy formed in the conversations between the teenagers and police allowed for the teenagers to see the officers as people rather than antagonists. Exchanges such as this do not alter society on a large scale, however they provide a context outside of the normal realm of day-to-day interaction. The transformation happens in the individual and in the relationship established between the people in the conversation.

The Truth About Your Monsters is a dialogical work because the situation constructed sets the conditions for a valuable and transformative conversation. When the viewers are provided the prompt to draw a monster that represents a fear, they delve into an introspective consideration of something profoundly personal. It is not often an adult is asked to express their fears in a public setting. If they choose to share, they expose their vulnerability. Ultimately their willingness to be vulnerable brings the person an inner strength they wouldn't have before. Group therapy functions in a similar way, when a person verbalizes a problem they would normally bury, the problem begins to lose it power.

Previous Projects

The interest in visual narratives and dialogical strategies at the center of my thesis research, developed from two years spent exploring collaborative art making and storytelling with young people. The point of departure for this exploration was discovered while teaching a children's art class. In between assignments, I drew small and simple abstract pen drawings on a large sheet of paper and asked different students to help me finish the composition. Their reaction was fascinating; the children responded to the lines and shapes in my pen work as they added their part. The abstract shapes turned into components of figures, objects and landscapes of their imagined world. We also voice recorded their descriptions of the work, and in doing so I learned of the brilliant and complex nonlinear narratives that accompanied each drawing. This interaction offered me a window into the uninhibited creative landscape of children's minds. In my many years of making abstract sculptures I had forgotten the very thing that I loved about art: it brings into material existence the infinite fantasies of the mind. I began to recall a paranormal realm I visited for many years of my life.

I name these exercises collaborative because the difference between what I offer to the drawing and what the child offers is key to what makes the idea complete. I view pure collaboration to be when collaborating parties each bring their divergent talents to the composition to create a unified whole. Take for example an improvisational jazz ensemble: each instrumentalist in the ensemble offers the unique voice of their instrument as well as their stylistic approach to the ultimate experience of the work. Similarly, the child and I each have different perspectives we bring to the work as well as different drawing styles that complement one another. The second reason this method is collaborative is because

both parties are educated from the engagement. I learn of inspiring stories and drawings, and as I consult the child for assistance, they are encouraged by their creative value. In addition, they learn the expressive language of line drawing.

When we first began these activities, I noticed a fascinating change in the children. When approached as a creative equal, their investment in the work increased. The child's attention span improved as well, some even took the drawings home to continue working on them. I first made use of this child-centered approach when working with a disengaged child. This child did not wish to participate in any of the art projects. After some time of providing him instructions, I finally asked him to help me finish a drawing. Prior to asking this question he was not interested in art at all, however he responded to my question affirmatively telling me he was "good at helping." He not only contributed to the drawing we did together but also became willing to work on other art projects. These rewarding experiences inspired ideas for future projects.

As I moved forward with my graduate studies, I continued to integrate collaborations with young people into my practice. Raised by an art educator, I knew the intrinsic value of art to young people. Most importantly, the arts and humanities offer children who think divergently the opportunity for intellectual growth. The importance of art is evident to many, however funding for art education in public schools is falling nationally, as it is usually the first to be cut from school budgets. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, federal funding for elementary and secondary education fell 9.72 billion dollars between 2010 and 2015.⁵ The US Census states in 2014 Louisiana

⁵ "Federal Funds for Education and Related Programs from 1970 to 2015 (in billion U.S. dollars)," *NCES*, accessed May 12, 2017, <https://www-statista-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/statistics/184069/federal-funds-for-education-and-research/>.

education expenditure as a percent of all state and local spending was 25.93%, which is less than the national average.⁶ In addition to an overall drop in funding, federal funding for the national Arts in Education program fell 14.5 million dollars between 2010 and 2013.⁷ Understanding the need for local young people to have more chances to encounter art and art making, I developed a plan for a long term in-school collaborative ceramic project. I was paired with Park Elementary in Baton Rouge, because prior to 2015 the school did not have arts programming. A new initiative to be an art-focused school allowed Park Elementary the chance to work with a community artist. In conjunction with the administrators and teachers we transformed the classroom into a ceramics studio. For 11 weeks, I visited the class and offered demonstrations on ceramics techniques. Ultimately, we envisioned a world building project where each student invented and fabricated a country in a make believe land. The children made the landscape, architecture and characters of their imaginary places. We had many in-depth discussions about the invented countries and the children presented them to each other at the end of the project.

It was important to this project that the administrators, teachers, and students contributed to the ideation and execution of the project. Many community-engaged or social practice projects fail because the artist-facilitator does not allow the participating

⁶ "Education Expenditure as Percent of all State and Local Government Expenditure in the United States in 2014, by State," *CQPress*, accessed May 12, 2017, <https://www-statista-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/statistics/306680/us-education-expenditure-as-percent-of-government-expenditures/>.

⁷ "Federal funding of the Arts in Education program in the United States from 2002 to 2013 (in million U.S. dollars)*," *Americans for the Arts*, accessed May 12, 2017, <https://www-statista-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/statistics/192428/federal-funding-of-the-arts-in-education-program-since-2002/>.

community to contribute to the ideation. In such instances, the project becomes about the artist facilitator more than it does the people involved, and difficult questions of authorship emerge.

The Park Elementary project I considered to be social practice work where collaborative nature of the project was maintained from beginning to end. I offered the school a chance to work with a new medium, and helped bring the project to fruition in a final installation. The school offered me a chance to work alongside young people and observe how they develop non linear stories through art making. I enjoyed seeing how a small group of boys in the classroom sat together and negotiated a superhero world, each inventing their own hero, villain and hideaway. When they announced they were collaborating, they began to weave a larger story together, negotiations became rules, and rules brought about interpersonal politics. These behaviors called to mind make believe play from my childhood, and I remembered how intricate the stories were and how authentic the alternative realities became. Each day on the playground there came another episode in the “pioneer” or “mermaid” soap opera.

As the project evolved, I asked myself: Could there be a project where I, as an artist as well as those I work with, become fully saturated into an imagined space the way I used to on the playground? I also wondered what specifically about my skills as a sculptor do I bring to the school based interactions. I envisioned an immersive space full of large-scale fantasy objects that invites imaginary play and art making through integrated stations. This was where the idea for *The Truth About Your Monsters* began.

Symbolism, Motifs, and Visual Strategy

Embedded within every story is a set of archetypal images, characters, settings and scenarios. For example, the “wise sage” is character that appears in countless mythologies throughout history. Similar stories have been told recurrently since the dawn of human communication, but as Joseph Campbell explains in the opening of *Hero with a Thousand Faces* “... it will always be the one shape shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find...”⁸ Depending on who is telling the story, the literary elements may change to emphasize the values and perspective of the teller. The story is a reflection of the culture and times from which the story is told. It is a story’s tendency toward variation that interests me, and guided my choices as I began composing the overarching story behind *The Truth About Your Monsters*. When a person is asked to draw a monster, they reveal their variation of the monster archetype. Those attending the exhibition can see how the monster archetype is dynamic. Other parts of the story are predetermined and remain unchanged throughout the exhibition. Those images set the premise for the heroine’s journey, and carry the viewer through the story space.

Within the first room of the exhibition is a bed and a trunk filled with costumes and objects. It is simple, old-fashioned, and covered with an old handmade quilt (Figure 3). The staging of these objects represents the bedroom of the main character of my fable, Nina. The bed is commonplace and not grand or ornate, suggesting that Nina might be any child who through make-believe transforms their house into a fantasy world. It was important that the first objects encountered within the exhibition space are readymade. The viewer understands that space as reality; it is not until later, when they embark on the journey that

⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 1.



Figure 3. At Home. Cassidy Creek. 2017. Photo by Brian Deppe.

they are transported into a magical realm represented by transition to the fabricated landscape in the second room. The bedroom setting is based on popular films from my childhood, such as the *Wizard of Oz* and *Peter Pan*. Within the bedroom the character is safe from the chaos of the world, but pressures from the outside world force the heroine on her journey to another dimension. When Dorothy is at home in Kansas, the setting is plain, and shot in black and white. After the tornado whisks her away to Oz, the mise-en-scene drastically changes: large fabricated flowers and whimsical thatched roofs are set against the painted backdrop of Munchkinland. Most importantly the film transitions from black and white to color. Similar to the *Wizard of Oz*, within the second half of my exhibition

space I employ bright colors, and towering, intricate, whimsical shapes. The bright colors and exaggerated shapes create a magical environment.

The only elements of magic or the unknown in the bedroom scene of *The Truth About Your Monsters* are the monster apparitions, represented as a video projection of animated shadow puppets on the wall. The projections are set at drastic angles to suggest a sense of unease. The extreme angles and use of shadow reference the visual style of German Expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu*. The shadow symbolizes a trace of understanding. We may see a shadow but not have a full understanding of the object's size or appearance in full light. When our imagination takes over a shadow can easily be perceived as something more fearsome than it is. It was important within the bedroom space that the object casting the shadow is not made apparent to the viewer so that they are left only to imagine it as the menacing beast they see.

In a similar illustration, the *Allegory of the Cave* from Plato's *Republic* suggests our understanding of reality is limited to the information we are able to perceive.⁹ In this allegory, prisoners are chained facing the wall of a cave. Behind them is a bridge with puppeteers holding objects, behind the puppeteers is a fire that casts shadows of the puppets onto the cave wall. The prisoners can only see the shadows, and not the puppets or puppeteers, they know the shadows to be reality without the full understanding of the thing that makes the shadows. If all one can see is a shadow that is all they know.¹⁰ If the shadows are images of what Nina may fear, then it follows that she will not conquer her

⁹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, ed. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, inc, 1992), 186-189.

¹⁰ Plato, 187.

fear until she takes the steps to understand it. The shadow images also connect to Carl Jung's psychoanalytical concept of the shadow aspects, or the dark side of our unconscious personality.¹¹ Jungian shadows appear in dreams and nightmares, just as the monsters visit Nina as she sleeps.

At the foot of the bed is a trunk. Before embarking on the journey, Nina must gather from the trunk the things that she needs for the journey. A sign hanging off the old trunk states "Adventure Box: please return items after your journey." Clothing dangles over the edge of the trunk and adventure toys are scattered on the floor as they might be in a child's messy room. The untidiness of the space is meant to welcome viewers, and prevent them from feeling as though the things in the space are precious art objects that cannot be handled. The props available for use were designed as bricolage constructions made from household materials. Sticks are wrapped together with twine to make swords; arrows are constructed from pipe cleaners and tape, and set within a cardboard quiver. These objects were constructed with the materials and methodology a child might use when constructing a make believe toy. This material language is non-precious, non-hierarchical and departs from the highbrow 'do not touch' sentiment often found within a gallery space. For the maker such materials provide an ease and fluidity of construction that allows for greater experimentation. For the audience the unpretentious quality of the objects eliminates a distinction between skilled artist and unskilled art consumer. This helps reduce inhibition later when they are asked to make art in the space.

¹¹ Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig, eds., introduction to *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature* (New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1991), 4.

When viewers are invited to rummage through the trunk, they are given permission to step into the story. As person dons a costume for a carnival event, they are allowed to embody the character of the costume. The line between reality and fantasy begins to blur as they move toward the threshold of the cave.

The viewer transitions into the dream space when they cross the threshold of the cave. Joseph Campbell explains the significance of the archetypal journey into the unknown in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* "The regions for the unknown (desert, jungle, deep sea, alien land etc). are fields for the projection of unconscious content."¹² As the viewer enters the cave they are confronted by monsters, which are guarding the cave. It is only after crossing this threshold into the unknown that the character will grow. In several mythological tales, threatening creatures guard the threshold between places. In the Buddhist tale of Prince Five-weapons, the prince must confront an ogre before entering the forest. The prince must find strength within to pass the monster.¹³ In this story, the monsters protect the magical cave. The viewer must confront these monsters in order to conquer their fear. The surprising event is that when the monsters are finally confronted, the viewer learns that the monsters are enlarged children's drawings of monsters, and they are not so scary after all (Figure4).

These drawings were collected from local educators over the course of several months. I sent out requests to teachers and parents in the Baton Rouge community and beyond, explaining the story *Of The Truth About Your Monsters* with a prompt requesting the young artists to draw two monster images. The first monster drawing was to be scary

¹² Campbell,65.

¹³ Campbell, 69-73.



Figure 4. Friends. Drawings by 7elements Students, St. Louis King of France After Care Students, and Griffin C. Photo by Ronni Bourgeois.

and the second one not-so-scary. It was up to the child to determine what both scary and not-so-scary monsters look like to them. These images were then photographed and emailed to me. From the submissions, I selected a number of drawings that I enlarged and placed within the space. The monsters I chose to enlarge had facial expressions that clearly conveyed an emotion other than fear. As the viewer walks around the stalagmites they encounter these various monster drawings. I sent two variations of the prompt to teachers, one for younger children and another for 10- 15 year olds. With the younger students, the prompt centers on a discussion of overcoming fear. For the older students I discussed

monsters as metaphor for larger fears and I encouraged them to draw a monster that represents a fear. Fear is a topic that is not talked about so openly with people, and it often stems from a place of uncertainty. Baton Rouge has seen a tumultuous past year between instances of police brutality, officer shootings, and a devastating flood. A rise of news stories in the recent past about bullying and acts of hateful expression indicates our nation, as a whole, seems to be struggling with prejudices of all kinds. Today, be it prejudice surrounding race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, politics, or xenophobia there is an observable fear of the “other” pervading our culture. Although these prompts were not a specific discussion on any of these topics, this phenomenon of increased collective fear is a source of inspiration and relevance for this project.

The goals of my approach to collecting these images were twofold: to witness the varying interpretations of the prompt, to allow the young artists to see their work enlarged and displayed in a gallery space. From my previous research conducting classroom based collaborative art projects, I asked myself “what can I offer as an artist that is unique from what the students could normally achieve on their own, or in an art classroom?” My answer was to enlarge their drawings, and create a large-scale environment that contextualizes their images within a fairy tale. In doing so, it is my hope that my half of the exchange is a reciprocation of the student contributions, and the artworks enhance each other. The images are displayed with due credit, students were asked to write their first name on their drawings so they could be thanked for their contribution. A panel in the space lists contributing students and educators.

The final destination within the cave is a table of drawing utensils and paper. The table floats just above the floor about six inches (Figure 5). The low rise of the table

requires the audience to sit on the floor to use the table, putting them at a child's level. A written prompt on the table explains the events that unfold for Nina and calls upon the viewer to create a drawing of a monster that represents a fear they may have. But like the children's drawings, they are encouraged to neutralize their fears by making these monsters friendly. "When Nina arrived at the cave she learned the monsters aren't so scary after all! Think of a fear and think of a monster that represents that fear. Now draw that monster so it's not so scary!" This alcove is modeled after hands on children's museum exhibition designs such as *Kalediscope* in Kansas City, a children's art making and educational museum that integrates the art-making stations in the exhibition. The art-making table in the cave is merged with the space, though it is a functional object its edges curve around in an organic fashion as though it were a table that would belong in a fantasy world cave.



Figure 5. Drawing table and stalagmites. 2017. Photo by Brian Deppe.

Future Plans

My intention with *Truth About Your Monsters* is to create a visually compelling environment and provide opportunities for engagement. Several elements of the work exist whether people become involved or not. Thomas Hirschhorn explains his philosophy about the function of his work:

I do not want to invite or obligate viewers to become interactive with what I do; I do not want to activate the public. I want to give of myself, to engage myself to such a degree that viewers confronted with the work can take part and become involved, but not as actors¹⁴

Thomas Hirschhorn creates public installations as tributes to philosophers he admires. Using materials that are accessible and non-hierarchical such as cardboard and spray paint he constructs temporary public libraries and lecture spaces.¹⁵ The presentation of *The Truth About Your Monsters* is similar to Hirschhorn: some viewers activated the points of exchange. Others chose to admire the sculptural elements and drawings presented and refrain from providing their contribution. The engagements in the space were more authentic because the engagement was willful not obligated. As I progress with my work in the future, I wish to create more scenarios similar to those made by Hirschhorn: scenarios that do not seek out a specific group with whom to engage, but the participants happen upon the work naturally. As I am still interested with working with children, I will choose locations that families might frequent such as art fairs, parks, etc. Adults or children may join in the work, but the quality of the work will draw the particular audience.

¹⁴ Hirschhorn, interview with Okwui Enwezor, in Thomas Hirschhorn: Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), 27, quoted in Claire Bishop "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October, no. 110 (2004): 74.

¹⁵ Bishop, 75.

Responses

People responded positively overall to the calls for engagement. What was notable was how the responses changed depending on the staging of the items in the space. The props in the trunk that suggested a function seemed to invite performance in a way that piqued people's interest. When a viewer engaged with an object, the function of the selected object determined their interaction with the exhibition. The object became a starting point for a scene. As a person held binoculars to their eye, they then chose to point the binoculars at a focal point in the room. The object's function implies action, whether the viewer engaged the function is less interesting to me than how the implied action became involved in the individual's personal narrative about the evening.

In a conversation with a friend who visited the show, she explained which objects she was drawn to. "Because of some difficulties in my life right now I was attracted to the objects that I could use for protection. I chose a slingshot with a little bag of rocks tied to it, even though I didn't actually use it, it made me feel safe." It was a hope with this exhibition that through set of scenarios, people's stories would begin to overlap. This individual did not dive fully into an imagined world, their life burdens presented distraction. Although this person did not "play make believe" at the exhibition I find poetry in how a fake slingshot brought comfort to their circumstance. Her story is now woven into the work in a way that is personal to her.

The clothing in the trunk did not evoke action, but invited the viewer to embody or create a character. Several reception attendants chose an article of clothing to wear (Figure 6). I suspect the clothing they chose indicates how they wished to present themselves. The appearance they presented was an outward hyperbole of an inner personality. Clothing



Figure 6. A young woman carefully selecting clothing from the trunk. 2017.
Photo by Meg Guidroz.

functions as a second skin both practically and as chance for a person to carefully select identity. For example when I dress for the welding studio my disposition becomes work oriented and more serious. The clothing serves as protection, but it also allows me a chance to alter my state of mind. It was less common for those wearing the costumes to “make believe” as it was for those who used the adventure props. People did, however, alter their behavior from “normal gallery attendant” to “play actor” for snapshots (Figure 7). I witnessed people take on tough or silly poses for the camera. Adults are usually more uncomfortable pretending, but understand pretending for a camera to be socially acceptable. Susan Sontag explains in *Inside Plato's Cave* the snapshot allows people to construct an artificial reality. “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of a space in which they are



Figure 7. Snapshot from *The Truth About Your Monsters*. 2017.
Photo Megan Williams.

insecure.”¹⁶ When taking snapshots, the people in the space were pretending like they were pretending. At least they understood what they were supposed to pretend to do: pretend.

The least inhibited individual at the exhibition was my four-year-old niece. While adults were oscillating between treating the space as a play space and a gallery, she was comfortable utilizing the space as it was designed. She returned to the chest frequently throughout the evening choosing different disguises and props. The box was at her level

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin Books, 1973), 9.

physically, and the presentation of the items was a language that she understood to invite use. Although this exhibition was intended for an adult audience to recall a child fantasy world, her enthusiasm encourages my plans to develop future exhibitions for children specifically.

The gallery visitors became most invested in the exhibition at the drawing station. Contributors experienced the exhibition's pinnacle moment of catharsis when they drew images representing their experience with fear. The sign at the drawing station read "Think of a fear, think of a monster that represents that fear, now draw that monster so its not so scary." This statement differs from the workshop questions in that there is only one monster to create, one that is not meant to be scary. People's interpretations of the prompt varied; some made their monsters benign or silly, while others made scary monsters. Although the sign was intended to guide artists to contribute lighter images to ease their concerns, the act of drawing an image of a terrifying thing also makes the fear seem manageable. This response called to mind a fear-obliterating tactic my mother employed during my childhood. When my mother suspected I had an unspeakable fear, she asked me to draw a picture of it so it would go away.

As people sat around the low set table composing their drawings, they chatted about each other's fears. Huddled on the floor, the illustrators were distinct from the visitors standing in the space (Figure 8). The table not only set people at a child's level, but also provided a separate and safer space for dialogue. I recall many family gatherings where adults bustled about overwhelmingly; meanwhile, as I played on the floor with my cousins, we found safety in each other. Between drawing about their fear, and subtle chatter, a trust exchange began. In some conversations people laughed at their idiosyncratic minor



Figure 8. People drawing monsters that depict their fears at the drawing station. 2017. Photo by Ronni Bourgeois.

paranoias: one man drew an outer space monster because he was scared of the vast expanse. However, others chose topics of deeply personal distress. When I asked a woman about her drawing of a turtle, she told me how she lost her house in the 2016 flood. She is afraid of being homeless, so she drew a turtle with a portable shell for a home. Another person told me about her drawing. “I have always been afraid that a monster would come take away the important people in my life. After reading the prompt I decided to draw a picture of a monster that instead comes to take away people that shouldn’t be in my life.” To represent the second monster she drew him carrying a satchel of black hearts (Figure 9).

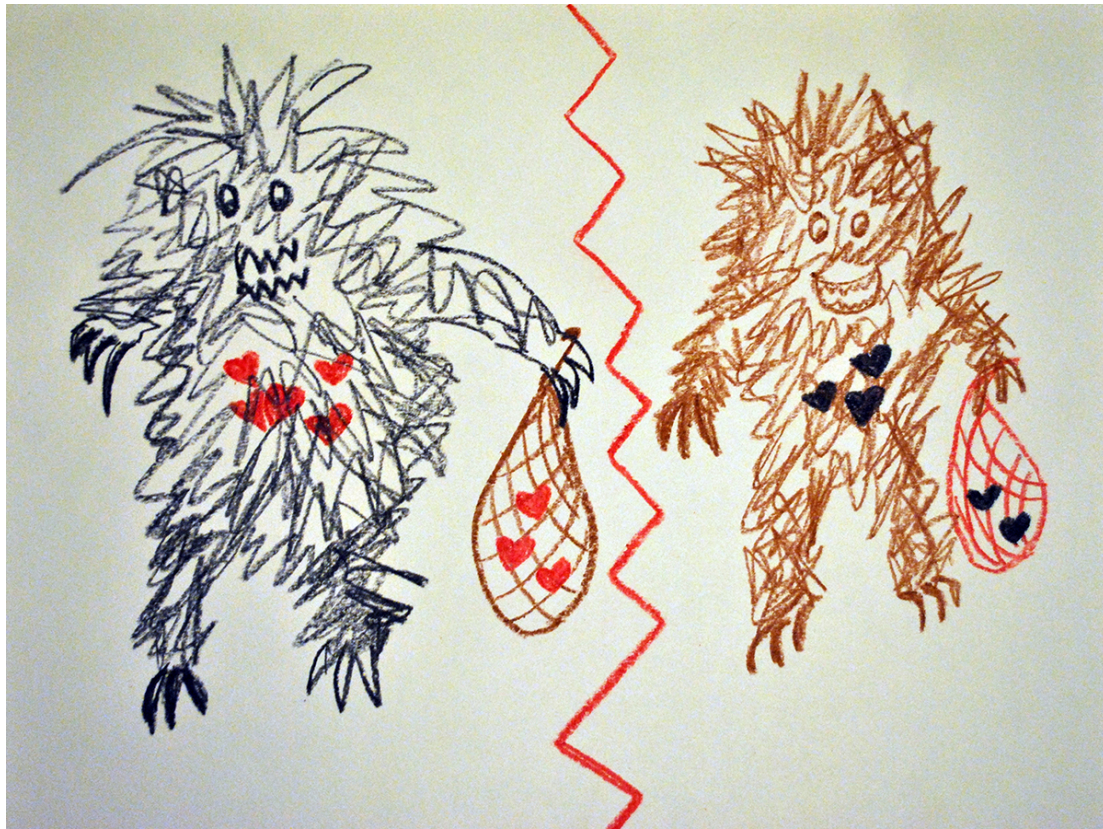


Figure 9. Image of Monster stealing red and black hearts, 2017. Photo by Cassidy Creek.

Throughout the evening different people gathered around the table, as time progressed the corner of the room above the table became decorated with the many images of their monsters. Student loan debt, Donald Trump, and “F-” were some monsters that filled the walls (Figure 10). Other monsters were less indicative of their meaning but captivating in their rendering (Figure 11). The audience’s feat of drawing the monsters parallels the action of the story’s protagonist. She had to find within herself the bravery to confront her demons. Audience members too had to overcome hesitations and look within to address their troubles. The act of drawing allowed a phase of removal. The drawn image was an entity separate from them, which made it easier to address challenging personal topics.



Figure 11. Monster drawings made by exhibition visitors. 2017. Photo by Brian Deppe.

Conclusion

Through the playful tone of the exhibition and an exciting adventure narrative, I established an ethos of a child's world. Since, in this instance, my primary audience is an adult audience, I created interactive stations, which allowed people to access an imaginative space that they may not do so as frequently as they did during their youth. The intention of this exhibition is to communicate a narrative while allowing the audience to contribute stories to it. Less significant was it that the audience understood the specific events in the master narrative than they understood the overall tone to be playful, and allowed that tone to guide their action. Through the monster metaphor, I summoned viewers to reflect on their own experience, it is my hope that they left the space with a new self-awareness about their own monsters, and the levity of the exhibition allowed them to consider their fears less daunting.

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Vitae

Cassidy Creek earned her BFA in Sculpture from the University of Kansas in 2010. From 2011- 2013 she served as a resident artist and community educator at Red Star Studios in Kansas City. Creek's sculptural work is dynamic and experimental marrying the immediacy of material with complex structural systems. During her time in the Master of Fine Arts program at Louisiana State University, she developed and implemented The Living Story Project, an educational and collaborative art-making project with Park Elementary in Baton Rouge. Her current work utilizes engagement through art as a means to explore social relationships and people's storied backgrounds.