

The Mad King's Caernival: World-Building as Artistic Practice

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Abstract

Often seen as fantasy, imaginary worlds have a profound connection to the real world. Indeed, it is the imagination that encompasses the religious, moral, and ontological worlds that define subjective experiences. Imaginary worlds, therefore, are just as potent, and, arguably, just as “real” as the real world, and are created through a process known as world-building. Many creators use these worlds as socio-political, religious, and philosophical thought experiments to describe specific world-views, which in turn uphold or challenge standing perceptions of the “real” world. In order to understand these differing conceptions of “world”, this body of research explores the creative act of world-building by constructing an imaginary world, *The Mad King’s Caernival*, through an innovative combination of both traditional and digital media. Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnivalesque, the world of the Caernival reveres the grotesque, and idealizes bodies that challenge hegemonic standards of “normal”. Thus, these Caernival bodies express and embody moral perspectives of right and wrong/good or bad that challenge normal, ontological conceptions of what a body is, does, and is supposed to be. In this way, the research project not only acts as a world-building exercise, it also critiques real world values and expectations about the human body.

Keywords: World-Building, Bodies, Bakhtin

1. Introduction: “Worlds” as Human Practice

What is a world? At a basic level, the term “world” lies upon a spectrum with two extremes: on one end is a strictly measurable, defined space; on the other is a subjective belief or perspective. When one considers the measurable world, one probably first thinks of a planet, namely Earth, with its landmasses, oceans, topography, weather patterns, peoples, etc. — quantifiable, statistical data that humans for the most part can experience physically and intellectually. These quantifiable, observable “facts” have evolved over time and are still in a state of flux as new knowledge changes the world and adds to it. The term used in this way could also mean another country or even a specific part of a city. It denotes a space that is internally consistent, has observable characteristics and is roughly predictable: India is another world to someone in the United States; Alaska is another world to Kansas; Chelsea is another world to the East End of London. What typifies the difference of worlds between these latter two boroughs of London is not only their respective place in space, but also the status and class of the residents who live there. Generally speaking, the worlds of the rich differ sharply than those of the poor. These worlds could be thought of as systemic worlds or those based on some kind of categorization that can still be measured statistically. Other quantifiable worlds in this vein include those of gender: masculine, feminine, transgender, etc.; and racial/ethnic/cultural worlds: a Mongol sees the world differently than a Brazilian and so forth. These notions, however quantifiable, start moving in the other direction of the world spectrum towards the intangible and even spiritual understandings of the term “world.” This other side

of the spectrum consists of ontological worlds or worlds of being: those of morals and values, mental states, or certain belief systems. These are subjective, cultural, and religious worldviews that define one's place and perspective. An Indonesian Muslim, it could be argued, sees the world differently than a German Atheist. Emotional states and mental conditions such as depression and schizophrenia and mind-altering drugs also work to create unique, subjective worldviews.

Worlds then cover a large breadth of human experience and define not only physical spaces but metaphysical ones as well. Although these different worlds are definable as entities unto themselves, they exist inextricably together as connected, symbiotic partners that influence each other in positive and negative ways. For example, Christian ideas based in Scripture about the natural world have both directly and indirectly affected attitudes of both environmental sustainability and degradation, depending on how the Bible has been interpreted. The Christian Word of God affects and effects changes in the physical world, which has had profound and long-lasting repercussions.

Furthermore, artists, writers, political theorists, and religious thinkers have all constructed imaginary worlds for millennia as a creative endeavor. These creations act as tools that either uphold standing conventions of the real world or critique the status quo. When the status quo is challenged, alternatives have been offered, sometimes as thought experiments that explore completely new and radical worlds that work to subvert longstanding conventions and entrenched cultural hegemony. Thomas More's *Utopia*, St. Augustine's *City of God*, and Plato's *The Republic* are but a few of these cultural, political and religious works.

Within this creative tradition, this research project aims to build a constructed imaginary world called the Caernival that examines and subverts ideas and practices about the human body from an American cultural standpoint. It critiques choices of beauty, efficiency, and morality that the artist's culture has normalized from the range of possible answers: why are certain bodies labeled ugly, useless, or pornographic and others not?

The body is an ideal vehicle to explore the world of the Caernival since bodies actually embody culture: what it eats, looks like, and communicates are indexical links to the society in which it lives. In this way, the Caernival is inscribed on, within, and through its bodies, and exploring this leads to fundamental understandings of this imagined world.

Specifically, the Caernival project uses oppositional discourse to examine what are considered normal, ideal and moral bodies. By flipping conventional norms and by expressing the dysfunctional and ugly as normal and ideal in this imaginary world, this project leads to a critical examination of cultural norms as choices instead of hegemonic standards that are never refuted. It asks the viewer to consider the opposite of what is generally considered normal and ideal, to evaluate their own conceptions of beauty and ugliness, right and wrong, and to better understand normalization and how this process excludes and disempowers. The imagery included in this body of work is polemic and graphic, matching the level of subversion necessary to speak to cultural norms that are deeply embedded. Contemporary and historical conceptions of sexuality, bodily aesthetics and Christian morality, which has constructed ideas and treatments of the body for two millennia, are critiqued through the use of Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and use of the grotesque.

The Caernival and its ideas about bodies will be discussed below, but first, a brief introduction to imaginary worlds and why they are created, especially as a creative process and endeavor — a process known as world-building.

2. World-building as Creative Activity

World-building is the process of creating an imaginary world, one that can be constructed in a variety of media to differing levels of completeness. In many contexts these worlds typically act as backdrops or settings to a main storyline or set of narratives that unfold through the constructed world. Stories are commonly how one experiences the different places, characters, and values of an imaginary world; however, a narrative is not essential to the existence of a world. Moreover, the more detailed, consistent and complete the world seems, the more real or immersive the story can be for the viewer/reader/participant. A world-builder can choose to create a singular culture, a complex of various cultural systems, a more global, planetary world system, or a conglomerate of planet-worlds, galaxies, or universes. If desired, a world's geography, ecology, flora, fauna, and even its own physics can be invented. Authors create histories, mythologies, political systems, economies, and so forth for these worlds, which offer contexts for how the world is organized and how it behaves.

World-building often begins at an early age and continues into adulthood. Children often create simulated environments to explore and play within, pretending as though these spaces are their own or other worlds. As the child grows older, this sense of play is transferred to smaller physical spaces that are representations of larger imaginary ones; these include board games, action figures, and LEGO play sets. World-building is so common in children that psychology has dubbed the term *paracosm* to define these imagined worlds. This activity has been extensively researched and documented and is believed to be an indicator of creative giftedness². Imaginary world construction

and play is not only relegated to children, however; very often adults continue this trend of exploring worlds through novels, television, video games and film. As Media Studies and world-building scholar Mark Wolf states, “[f]or many, the desire for imaginary worlds does not change over time, only the manner in which those worlds are constructed and experienced.”³

It has been suggested that the activity of world-building is an innate, human activity; one that serves an evolutionary function. Wolf quotes Norman Holland from his book *Literature and the Brain*, who in turn summarizes the work of psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides about the human act of world-building. He quotes their points at length:

1. The ability to simulate situations (to imagine them without acting on them) has great value for humans both in survival and reproduction. This ability to simulate seems to occur innately in the human species. We evolved the “association cortices” in our large frontal lobes for just this purpose.
2. All cultures create fictional, imagined worlds. We humans find these imagined worlds intrinsically interesting.
[...]
4. Humans have evolved special cognitive systems that enable us to participate in these fictional worlds. We can, in short, pretend and deceive and imagine, having mental states about mental states.
5. We can separate these fictional worlds from our real-life experiences.⁴

An important consideration in world-building is the purpose of a world. These constructed realms most commonly serve as background and context for advancing a narrative; however, they are also used as vehicles of commentary, critique, satire, or as spaces in which to explore ideals or beliefs. Wolf states that worlds have been used “for satirical purposes (like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*), for the purpose of scientific speculation (like A.K. Dewdney's *Planiverse*), or for thought experiments of a philosophical nature (like those of Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*), or a political or social nature (like Thomas More's *Utopia*).⁵

Constructed worlds offer a space in which thoughts, ideals, and values can all be tested and played out as creative simulations. Indeed, these imaginary worlds have been used as socio-political, religious, and philosophical thought experiments that can detail the benefits or pitfalls of a certain worldview, without having to actually create it in reality. Some world-building projects for various reasons become so fundamental that they become an inspirational component of doctrinal truth or orthodoxy. A landmark example, St. Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God Against the Pagans* — one of his most important works detailing the mystical City of God's ultimate triumph over the earthly City of Man — has been cited as fundamental to Western thought. To illustrate this point, International Development Studies professor Deepak Lal contends:

It would take me too far afield to go into this in detail, but the importance of St. Augustine's "City of God" must be noted. Throughout the last millennium the West has been haunted by its cosmology. From the Enlightenment to Marxism to Freudianism to Eco-fundamentalism, Augustine's vision of the Heavenly City has had a tenacious hold on the Western mind.⁶

There are other advantages to using a constructed world or culture in lieu of one that exists in reality. Wolf states that imaginary cultures undermine the connotations that one may have in relation to Primary World (a world-building term for the world in which we live) cultures. For instance, instead of setting a work in 19th-century Victorian England, an author may choose to create a completely fabricated one that escapes any historic or cultural realities. Starting fresh can get behind and underneath these connotations to something deeper, yet still retain a level of familiarity. Wolf explains:

The use of fictional cultures allows an author to comment on existing cultures by contrast, and create hypothetical situations without the limitations and connotations that would come with the use of an existing culture. At the same time, fictional cultures are often modeled after real cultures, using different combinations of their traits that an audience might find familiar, but in new configurations, some which play with stereotypes and audience expectations in interesting ways.⁷

This tenet explains the reason why a totally fabricated world is used instead of a culture or world within the Primary World. Additionally, it is almost necessary, unless it is the intent of the author, to include these “traits that an audience might find familiar”, since they give the audience some form of context, allowing them to sympathize with the culture. If the world is so alien that a human cannot relate, then it is harder for the audience to keep interest in the world. This is also true within the Caernival. Although this world is, as a whole, alien, fantastic and constructed, the human body is the body of its inhabitants, and even though these bodies have the ability to exist and perform in ways that may seem alien or even impossible, it is relatable because the bodies portrayed are human (or at least humanoid).

World-building is an innate human activity which offers a way to construct imaginary realities that can entertain, illustrate worldviews, create simulations and eventually make an impact on the Primary World. Often worlds are

created that subvert the norms of culture, which can threaten strong hegemonic forces to the point of being profoundly revolutionary in nature. The next section gives a brief discussion on the normalizing process, its negative repercussions, and how world-building can provide solutions to these problems.

3. World-Building and Normalcy

From a Western cultural perspective, there exists values of normal, normalcy, and the average that drives the societal perception of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable; what is taboo and what is not. To have a *normal* or an *average* is to say that there exists an abnormal by definition, that there are outliers that do not meet the specs of normal and are considered undesirable. In terms of the body this could mean “aberrations” of height, weight, or skin color; conditions of disability and dismemberment; and a host of other traits that are statistically not average.

Disability studies scholar Lennard J. Davis contends “that the constellation of words describing this concept “normal”, “normalcy”, “normality” “norm”, “average”, “abnormal” - all entered European languages rather late in human history. The word “normal” [...] only enters the English language around 1840.”⁸ Furthermore, he states that our ideas of normal come from the science of statistics, and, surprisingly, eugenics, since both were used by governments and social-minded citizens alike to study and categorize populations. Ultimately, the science of statistics created standardized ideas of average or normal conditions. These averages were then used as a measure of what is deemed desirable and what is not. It conclusively created an abnormal status and a very real and tangible sense of the undesirable. Davis states that eugenicists wanted to eradicate deafness, blindness, madness, poverty, and a slew of other unwanted traits in the gene pool by removing them from society completely, all based on statistics and these ideas of the average. In this way, these statistical analyses could be seen as works of world-building. The scientific evidence collected around these notions of the norm formed worldviews, which, in turn, created real world effects including, but not limited to: sterilization, imprisonment, and mass murder.

Furthermore, normality and the ideal as expressed and dictated by cultural norms leads to the separation of those who do not meet these standards and who are categorically disenfranchised. Instead of celebrating their difference, abnormal bodies are culturally shamed into feeling dissatisfied with their “condition”. These bodies are silenced and the culture as a whole suffers due to their invisibility. This stratification of bodies from ideal to abnormal lends itself to power structures designed to benefit those seen as beautiful and ideal, and to limit and disempower those seen as incapable, ugly or even monstrous.

World-building is a tool that can be used to counteract these tendencies. Imagined worlds where abnormality is seen as normal or ideal, as in the case of the Caernival, can subvert these hegemonic forces of cultural norms and reenvision other ways of being in the Primary World. Imagined realities like the Caernival realize and critique the oppression of normalization, illuminate the benefits of inclusive difference and offer alternatives to the status quo. They have been and could be used as powerful tools for social change and the widening of human experience.

4. Bakhtin’s Medieval Carnival and the Grotesque

The imaginary world of the Caernival is informed by ideological and philosophical underpinnings in fields ranging from the visual arts, music, fantasy literature and film, to studies in anthropology, mythology, religious studies and political science. However, some of the most fundamental traits that exist within the Caernival’s inner framework are derived from ideas developed by Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, including his thoughts and research about the medieval carnival and his philosophies of the grotesque.

In his book, *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin discusses the pivotal role that the carnival festival played in the life of medieval European cultures. It was (and still is, although according to Bakhtin, in a reduced form) a festive time that had roots in antiquity; a time set apart from the regular lives of the people and marked by, among other things, humor and the laughter of the people — all part of the culture of folk carnival humor. Carnival festivities included pageants and processions, parodies, feasts, certain linguistic cues and banter, open fairs and other amusements including fools, clowns, giants, dwarves, monsters and trained animals. This “comic folk aspect” and carnival atmosphere also reigned alongside official and formal rituals such as Church feasts, tournaments, initiations of knights and other civil and social ceremonies, where these more serious events were mimicked and mocked. However, medieval carnivals proper stood apart as separate events of their own, and this fact is significant to medieval society as Bakhtin explains:

[T]hey were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relation; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year.⁹

Furthermore, Bakhtin contends that this “second world”, because of its laughter, sensuous nature and elements of play, began to look like forms of art and artistic expression, yet more so “belong[s] to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped to a certain pattern of play.”¹⁰

This “second life” also suspended hierarchical caste and official precedence that was very prevalent in European medieval culture. During carnival, those who were usually separated by family, rank, class, age or profession were able to have free and familiar contact with each other, resulting in a renewal of human relations that was palpably felt among participants. This sense of play and dynamism is very characteristic of carnival time, and is indicative of an overall sentiment that was opposed to any kind of dogma, pretension or official and static immutability. It resisted anything that was seen as completed and finished, as this was a time of ever-changing play and renewal.

Importantly, as the carnival developed as a festive form and way of life, a certain logic developed in its images. Bakhtin explains:

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the “inside out” . . . of the “turnabout,” of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings, and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a “world inside out.”¹¹

This internal logic of the carnival is the very same that the imagined world of the Caernival has adopted as a way to structure itself in relation to the Primary World. Like the medieval carnival, which is a “second world” to the regular world of officialdom, the Caernival engages and communicates to the viewer in the Primary World by using this same kind of medieval carnival oppositional discourse. It uses a set of known, shared variables — the normal or ideal human body — which is then allegorically turned inside out/upside down, parodied, profaned and inverted.

Secondly, Bakhtin’s ideas of the grotesque have also fundamentally defined the Caernival and how it views its bodies in particular. The grotesque as an aesthetic in images can be traced to the fanciful forms found in antiquity, namely the ancient, pre-classic Greeks and Romans. These playful images of humans, plants and animals seem to grow in and out as if giving birth to each other; they are interconnected; the defined borders of realistic presentation are nonexistent; the ever-growing, ever-changing movement of beingness, of life and death, is expressed in these forms.

To Bakhtin, these grotesque forms and what they represent underpin a deep awareness of existence that has developed since antiquity, and which was most fully realized during the medieval and Renaissance eras of Europe. It is crucial in understanding the culture of folk humor, of laughter, and of all the medieval carnival forms in general. The fluidity of the grotesque ornament illustrates the cycles of nature, of man’s reproductive cycle (conception, birth, growth, death), of time. It expresses the fluidity of all existence. The grotesque is an aesthetic that directly opposes the classical notion of completeness, of the “ready-made”, of smooth and static beautiful bodies that never undergo any kind of transformation or growth/death. The grotesque body is one that engenders transformation itself; one that is constantly undergoing a metamorphosis; a body that is in a constant state of becoming; a state which is, arguably, more in line with lived, phenomenological experience versus the classical notion which could be labeled as idealization.

Bakhtin describes the grotesque body at length:

It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on . . . various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, child-birth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body. . . ¹²

This element of growth and an ever changing nature is important within these ideas of the grotesque, as it corresponds to the idea of the people as a whole being immortal; that, indeed, these ideas of the body relate to the people as a whole, not to individuals, not to the egoistic, capitalist body of today, but to the ancestral body that is continually growing. It is a utopian, optimistic vision of growth that will never cease; a forward-looking hope of all the people into a future that will never end.

The next section will discuss how and why these fundamental principles were selected to define the world of the Caernival, and how they have informed the works that are included in this research project.

5. The World of the Caernival

The world that will be constructed as the basis of this research project is called the Caernival. Years of work have already been invested in creating the foundations of this imaginary world, and so this research will actually be adding to an already existing body of work.

Instead of relying on fantasy cliché and old tropes, the Caernival is a unique environment and worldview based on grotesque realism, ideas of normalcy, madness and the political and religious systems of the Western world. The sense of a world is achieved by using motifs, themes and images that move across the body of work, which are not necessarily specific to one individual piece or another, but are representative of both the body of work and the world in general. Much like a symphony is composed of basic building blocks, or motifs, to build larger and more complex passages and themes, the Caernival utilizes and builds upon basic motifs that are used not only in one work, but across works, to generate a sense of a collective, internally consistent world and worldview. For instance, the use of deep, black backgrounds, halos, flower bouquets and banderoles all contribute to the Caernival's unique character, and ultimately leads to the development of a certain visual aesthetic or visual language. These repetitive motifs add meaning and value to the mythos being created and conceptually tie the works together as a whole.

In the world-building tradition, histories, mythologies, characters, as well as philosophical, moral and religious ideas can be created, instilled or experimented with. At the heart of the Caernival is a character known as the Mad King (fig. 7), around whom this world revolves and from whom the world originates. He is indeed, the *raison d'être* for this world's existence. It is also populated by what is known as the People, basically what could be termed the King's Subjects or the Folk: those who serve the King or who populate and exist in the world itself. This evokes ideas and images of feudal lords and kingships, the castles and courts of medieval Europe, the merchant class, bandits and the peasantry. The world of the Caernival starts with these tropes yet takes them in another direction. In this world, as opposed to the historical power structures of medieval Europe, king and subject lie along a spectrum of variance: the People are seen as holy and all-powerful yet are subjects to the king; the Mad King is seen as a sublime force in this world, all-powerful, yet also servant to the People. Political life in the Caernival, like gender and the flesh of bodies in this world, is fluid.

This project centers around a worldview about bodies — how bodies in the Caernival are seen, understood, and used, which in turn become visual allegories or metaphors that allude to bodies in the Primary World. These images and concepts examine ideas of the normal and abnormal body, the individual and communal body, religious bodies and sexuality, and the visual and conceptual language of the grotesque as laid out by Bakhtin. How these visual allegories are constructed is important: the Caernival takes normal, conventional ideas and beliefs of the Primary World and then inverts or transforms them, as in the medieval carnival, so as to examine, subvert, reenvision or reevaluate them. To Primary World eyes, these results could be seen as metaphorical or allegorical, or could be seen as illogical, disgusting or even horrific. “Carnivalizing” these Primary World norms usually means emphasizing Primary World abnormalities — as in depicting obesity as beautiful or dismemberment as ideal. The act of carnivalizing in the Caernival points to and evaluates disenfranchised cultural notions such as the abjection of dismembered bodies, the ugliness of obesity or the repression of sexuality.

For example, the work *The Body of the People is Broken, Cut, Dismembered, Obese, Grotesque, and Holy* (fig. 10) is a set of multiple, smaller portraits of these types of bodies, all of which are seen as normal or even ideal in this world. Every body that exists in the Caernival has undergone some kind of transformative process, which results in bodies that are ripped apart and then reassembled, similar to a Frankenstein, patchwork effect. In other words, all bodies have experienced some kind of (what the Primary World would call) trauma. This inversion points to notions of the abled and disabled body and what that means; to cultural notions of what is beautiful and ugly, vulgar and perverse. Unlike the disempowerment that comes with abnormality in the Primary World, Caernival bodies are seen as normal, ideal, and ultimately holy.

Also, the cultural norm of sexual repression, a legacy of Christian puritanism and Victorian values, is alluded to in the piece *Plough*, which is an image of a 10' erect penis sprouting from a natural collage of flower bouquets — an overtly sexual image of a sexual organ that is mostly censored in popular culture; an image or public display of which (erect seen as almost dangerous) deemed as vulgar or even illegal. This cultural norm of censorship about the male body points to American sexual repression, ideas of pornography, and the shame and guilt surrounding sexuality from a Western cultural perspective. The panoramic size of the piece makes the content polemic and confrontational by design to force the viewer to examine their own attitudes and cultural beliefs about the body (the male body in

particular). The idea behind *Plough* begs further examination: why do and/or why should cultures repress parts of the body?

Titling is also a way in which the Caernival subverts and critically examines conventional norms. The Western cultural ideal of rampant, capitalist individualism is addressed in the piece, *For as the Body is One, and Hath Many Members, and All the Members of That One Body, Being Many, are One Body, so also are We*. In this work, bodies are tightly woven together in a fabric of flesh. Some embrace while others sleep; all carried along in a current of limbs, heads and torsos. Bodies are seen not as individuals, but as the “One Body”. Note that the title is a direct quote from 1 Corinthians 12:12, which is the biblical passage that describes the one body of the Christian Church as formed by its members and Christ together. Differing members make up the One Body yet are seen together as a whole. Instead of lone individuals, separate and unconnected, the Caernival’s bodies flow into and out of each other as a tapestry; the one body of all the people as a whole is in direct contrast to ideas of individualistic singularity. There is also a smaller series within the larger body of work called *Communion* that portrays couples having sex and/or feasting on one another. These Christian ideological appropriations are significant in that Christianity has dictated the moral foundation of the Western world’s thoughts, beliefs and actions about the body for almost 2 millennia. To contradict these traditions and to critically examine them in their opposite forms (or in inverted, skewed ways), illuminates the ideas themselves and problematizes their inner logic, leading to possible alternatives or even completely new ways of thinking. This medieval carnival reasoning sheds light on why norms are what they are, realizations which probe behind the curtains of hegemony.

6. Aesthetic Sources

This body of work includes a diverse set of aesthetic sources and genres. Some sources have visual and conceptual ideas that are related to the Caernival, however, some are appropriated only for their aesthetic, visual value.

The world of the Caernival is represented in black and white since the medium utilized was designed to reflect a traditional print or charcoal/graphite drawing. These traditional media have a historicity, an aesthetic lineage that has subjective impressions of being “old”, “antiquated”, or “a relic of the past”. This effect can be utilized for its world-building value, to help represent something that does not exist in the Primary World — something that exists in another time or place.

In terms of the Caernival’s black and white world, Gustave Dore’s etchings in his many series, but his *Divine Comedy* (fig. 1) in particular, have been invaluable in terms of posing, composition, use of light/shadow and mood. His use of bodies are also of interest, especially in the *Inferno* series, where they are typically portrayed as a group, writhing, flesh on flesh and naked — visual values and cues that are fundamental in the Caernival.

For some of the works, the visual genre of the mandala will serve as a means of rendering and/or representing the world-building process and the world of the Caernival. The mandala was chosen based on its Hindu and Buddhist religious significance as a visual representation of the universe and as a reflection of a particular worldview, one that elicits and invokes a state of mind or orientation. As Deepak Chopra explains in his foreword to Romio Shrestha’s *Celestial Gallery: Mandalas and Meditations*, mandalas are:

[V]isual representations of mantras, or sacred sounds. According to ancient Vedic literature, the whole universe is an expression of pure consciousness, which vibrates first as sound and then, ultimately, as form...Mandalas are visual expressions of vibratory patterns that structure the material world...By identifying with the intricately rendered worlds within a mandala and the primal source at its center, we can enlarge our experience of the universe in which we dwell.¹³

Chopra’s words about “rendered worlds” and the universe are important here, as he is expressing the understanding and belief that mandalas are worlds that contain worlds, that they are expressions of the universe. In this way mandalas can be seen as a kind of map, or cultural artifact one can use for the purposes of orientation and understanding. Mandalas reflect spiritual truths that invite meditation; this same system of images is appropriated to illustrate the truths of the Caernival. The mandala was also chosen for its depth and breadth of detail and complexity since it typically incorporates an intricate set of symbols, metaphor, and other necessary information, all within a finite space, which is perfect for visually expressing the world-building process and an entry point into the world of the Caernival.

Furthermore, Chopra states that “when you meditate on a mandala, you journey inward from the material world into the quantum domain and, finally, into the virtual world of pure potentiality.”¹⁴ Although he is referencing methods of meditation and enlightenment, he is also illustrating a world, one of imagination, a similar space that the Caernival represents and reflects.

More specifically, the mandala tradition of Thangka painting is used as source material, especially with *The Wedding*

in the Belly of the Mad King. (fig. 1) A Thangka is a Tibetan Buddhist painting usually on silk or cotton that depicts a Buddhist deity, mandala, or other religious theme. The Wheel of Life, a Thangka theme visually symbolizing the cyclic nature of existence (fig. 1), was appropriated for *The Wedding* (fig. 8). The Buddhist themes of the Wheel of Life is transformed into a belly full of intestines and bodies, held from without by a monstrous figure of the Mad King. The idea of the mandala as a visual teaching tool, is appropriated here as both *The Wedding* and *Generations* were constructed with this same use in mind. These mandalas include lessons or processes and are meant to be instructive.



Figure 1: Example of Thangka painting, *Wheel of Life* (<http://www.garudaexpress.com/NepaCrafts/images/Thangka%20Paintings/080211A/257.Wheel-of-life.jpg>) in comparison to *The Wedding in the Belly of the Mad King*.

Also of interest has been medieval and Renaissance art, especially religious works that include fantastic thematics and works that portray the “common man” or “folk”. For example, Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych is valued for its portrayals of the body in various forms, settings, use of landscape, fantasy, scope and scale. It is also of interest in its moral scope: how each panel is devoted to different moral states or conditions.

Furthermore, religious art tropes are used symbolically throughout this body of research, relying on their historic connotations and meanings to be understood within the Caernival's context. The halo, understood as signifying holiness in medieval and Renaissance Christian religious art, as well as Russian Orthodox iconography in particular, is also used in the Caernival to represent sanctity, yet the meanings are reversed in pure carnivalesque fashion. Jesus, the Apostles, angels and saints are all holy members of Christian belief, often seen in visual representations with halos to denote their holiness. In the Caernival, the “common people” are rendered with halos to depict the belief that the “commoners” are sanctified, venerable and holy.

7. Process and Methodology

In terms of visualizing and rendering this world, a unique and experimental medium has been developed, which entails both analog (traditional) and digital processes. First, the use of oil-based clay allows the freedom to construct, at least in general form, anything needed to include in the visual work. Since the goal is to create an imaginary world, full of beings, objects and landscapes that do not exist in the Primary World, this ability is crucial.

Moreover, the clay material also happens to exude a fleshy or skin-like texture, which is perfect for the body as subject matter. The clay sculptures of the bodies are constructed into rough, sketchy forms that showcase these grotesque features. In this way, the medium itself actually speaks to the concept of the world.

After constructing a form in clay, this sculpture is then scanned into a computer using a flatbed digital scanner. (fig. 2) The 3-dimensional piece is now converted into a 2-dimensional image, which can then be manipulated as needed in Photoshop. This digitizing aspect utilizes the power of digital workflows to build upon and enhance the analog process.

Once the sculpture is digitized, subtle and dramatic changes are made to the digitized image of the clay form in Photoshop. As stated, the clay sculptures are usually general forms, and with Photoshop, superficial lighting and tone changes can be manipulated.

Apart from this, and one of the most innovative aspects of this method, is the overlaying of photographs to the image of the clay, thereby giving it new textures, faces, details or any number of other changes limited only by imagination or the process itself. The resulting image is one that incorporates elements of both the clay as well as the digital photograph (if used). If a photograph is used, a sculpture is made that resembles the photo, or a photo is found that matches the clay form. In this way, the images are easier to combine and if successful, the textures of the clay will reinforce the elements of the photo and vice versa, creating something new and unique from two seemingly disparate images. Since the two images almost never line up perfectly, Photoshop is used to stretch and contort the two images together. This way of working molds and shapes photography much like a sculptor would, bending and stretching the image digitally, and adds photographic detail to a 3-D sculpted object.



Figure 2: Basic clay sculptural form scanned using flatbed scanner. (left) Photograph to be overlaid on clay sculpture.

(middle)(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/59/Man_profile_portrait_%285689483847%29.jpg)
Result after combining clay sculpture, photograph and other processing in Photoshop. (right)

Furthermore, this method creates a unique relationship between these two media resulting in a cross-disciplinary aesthetic comparable to painting, printmaking and/or drawing. The resulting look of this process is total grayscale - black and whites with no color. It has a printmaking quality to it, as well as a drawn, charcoal look. The grainy texture of this process helps convey a fleshy sensibility, perfect for the topic of the body.

Once these separate bodies are constructed, they are either used as portraits or composited together into a larger work, usually with other elements such as banderoles, flower bouquets or other objects to compile larger more complex compositions. Several of the works are panoramic in size and, when printed out using a large format printer, will result in upwards of 15' wide prints.

Working in a large-scale format speaks to the concept of world-building though the sheer amount of size and information included in the work. Larger sized works exemplify ideas of immersion, another world-building concept. Along with saturation, or the inclusion of copious amounts of information, immersion works to envelop the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual worlds of the viewer so that they feel they are within another world. The multitude of bodies and found objects that are included in each piece create complex relationships within and without their borders, relationships that speak to and tie the various pieces together. These pieces are separate but linked entities that are more meaningful when seen as a whole.

8. Conclusions

As with other world-building endeavors, the Caernival is a space of exploration, imagination and subversion. It is an imaginary space that can affirm, confront, and otherwise reevaluate the PrimaryWorld so that a deeper understanding can be reached. Pushing these limits of understanding enters into the realms of the allegorical and metaphorical, and

begins to send messages back to the viewer, testing their own ideas, convictions and beliefs about what bodies are supposed to be, how they are supposed to look, what a good body and a bad body is etc. There is a long tradition of allegorical world-building (*Gulliver's Travels*, *Divine Comedy*), and the Caernival aligns itself within this tradition.

To see a conventional norm in its true and complete opposite can be a jolting experience, especially if the norm is a deeply held value or virtue. It is the intent of Caernival in this series to challenge these boundaries of what normal is and to problematize these limits. These contentious borders and the unknowns that lie beyond are the worlds of madness and the insane, which the figure of the Mad King and the world of the Caernival as a whole characterize. Madness is intimately interwoven with the medieval carnival tradition, both offering new perspectives to social world norms. As medical historian Roy Porter contends:

The mad highlight the hypocrisies, double standards and sheer callous obliviousness of sane society. The writings of the mad challenge the discourse of the normal, challenge its right to be the objective mouthpiece of the times. The assumption that there exist definitive and unitary standards of truth and falsehood, reality and delusion, is put to the test... Mad people's writings often stake counter-claims, to shore up that sense of personhood and identity which they feel is eroded by society and psychiatry.¹⁵

It is the force of hegemony to create myopic, narrow-minded worldviews without critical examination — a dangerous condition — and it is those labeled “mad” who are the outsiders critically looking in. However, this process is not just about critique or the destruction of one hegemony for another. Ultimately, it is analogous to a process, however painful, of expansion, or an ever-widening understanding of what it means to be human.

Author and free-speech activist Salman Rushdie, in his lecture entitled “Public Events, Private Lives: Literature and Politics in the Modern World”, discussed the role of art in human experience, and, to help illustrate this, detailed a brief scene of Saul Bellow's novel *The Dean's December*. The main character, an American university dean named Albert Corde, is in Soviet-era Romania during a particularly bleak and cold winter. In this scene he hears a dog barking in the distance for quite some time. He comes to the conclusion that the dog is protesting “the limitations of dog experience”¹⁶ and pleads for the universe to open up a little more. Rushdie contends this is what great art attempts to do: widen the realms of experience. He continues:

It tries to open the universe. It tries to increase — depending on the genius of the artist — it tries to increase by some small or large measure, the sum total of what is possible for us to understand, to know, to see and therefore in the end, what it's possible for us to be. And in order to do that, it seems to me the artist can't do it by sitting safely in the middle ground. If you're going to push frontiers outwards, you actually have to go to the frontiers and push. You can't do that from the middle of the country. So it's risky business. You actually have to go to the edge and start pushing.¹⁷

The unknowns past the frontiers of the middle ground are one of the most exciting parts of the process of world-building. These borders of experience are embodied in the madness, carnival inversions, and grotesqueness of the Mad King and the Caernival. World-building as an artistic practice explores areas yet to be experienced, detailing the benefits and horrors of what a new world could and might offer.

9. References

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