

## **Reverse Tarot: A Representation of Extreme Negative Thinking**

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### **Abstract**

Individuals with self-loathing mentalities trap themselves in a vicious cycle of self-fulfilled prophecies that inhibit their ability to see their world rationally. Because someone with distorted logic will only see what they want; if what they want to see is their own devastation, then they will find a way to confirm it for themselves. This series of graphite drawings visually explores the extent to which these people forcibly infer negative connotations to support a belief of their own self-deprecation. Using tarot cards as a vehicle for this idea, the artist takes the original cards' meanings and distorts the information to an extreme caricature skewed towards the macabre. Research on the topic presented in this paper explores why this phenomenon occurs, and by extension what allows it to cycle into itself. The resulting artwork presents this pitfall of pessimism by being intentionally ignorant of each individual piece of the tarot cards' favorable outlooks. Throughout the series, a transition is communicated of this phenomenon, growing more extreme and twisted as a portrayal of this diseased thinking swallows the individual's sense of logic and reality, and shows the cynic's twisted interpretation of what fate they pull themselves toward. Influences are taken from contemporary Polish painter Zdzislaw Beksinski for his surrealist representations of figures and their environment and Austrian painter Gustav Klimt for his use of patterning and metal leaf.

**Keywords: Reverse Tarot, Self-Loathing, Negative**

### **1. Structure**

A strong emphasis is placed on the research of fortune telling and divination of the tarot cards as the framework for the concept. Tarot decks are a divinatory tool used to answer a specific question, whether it regard relationships, the future, or a personal analysis. There are many different varieties of the tarot. The most popular and commonly used deck for fortune telling, however, is the Rider-Waite tarot, which was created in 1910.<sup>1</sup> In any deck there are 78 cards split into two groups: the Minor Arcana—similar and numerically identical to the typical four-suit deck of playing cards – and the 22 Major Arcana, or trump cards. Each card in the Major Arcana is assigned its own name and number. For the Rider-Waite deck, they are in order: The Fool, The Magician, The High Priestess, The Empress, The Emperor, The Hierophant, The Lovers, The Chariot, Strength, The Hermit, Wheel of Fortune, Justice, The Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, The Devil, The Tower, The Star, The Moon, The Sun, Judgment and The World. For any card in any tarot deck, if it is laid in a spread in the reverse position so the image is viewed upside down, the meanings and connotations of the cards are meant to be magnified to an extreme.<sup>2</sup> The pieces from this series capture what is more in line with that extreme level than what is played right-side up. The Minor Arcana cards work in the same way, though instead of having individual names, they follow the playing card format of four suits, each going from Ace to King. In the Rider-Waite deck, the suits are coins, cups, wands and swords. The meanings of each card can change dramatically in the context of the spread. On the negative side, the meanings vary from minor disappointment to utter devastation.

Tarot cards are used as the layout for these drawings because of their ability to work off of other people's perceptions via the Forer Effect. This phenomenon is when individuals attempt to take a vague generalization about the human condition and apply it to themselves in a specific facet of their lives. Included Forer's original experimental survey were statements such as "You have a great need for other people to like and admire you" and "Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic."<sup>3</sup> When given to individuals, the most common response was to see the questions as specifically meant for them, despite being statements that were given to every participant. A tarot spread is, however, ultimately open to interpretation of the reader, which is why fortune-tellers generally do not read their own fortunes to avoid their own biases.

A major cornerstone of this research deals with mental disorder and depression, and how this chemical dysfunction alters an individual's perception of his/herself and their surrounding environment. The focus of this series revolves around the psychological effect of a number of phenomena, including negative fortune-telling, confirmation bias and the aforementioned Forer Effect. These, combined with the cycle of depression, are the driving forces behind a downward spiral presented in the series. Though depression is not completely synonymous with cynicism, a major facet of it is a pessimistic outlook in certain character traits,<sup>4</sup> which is touched on more in this body of work than the variety of pessimists who perceive their specific misfortune as caused by an extrinsic factor. Not having optimism can make it difficult for anyone with this mindset to achieve happiness. Because self-cynicism is the source of the commonly diagnosed self-destructive thoughts that coincide with depression, this objectivity unfortunately does not coincide with an individual's opinion of himself or herself, and finding any evidence to reinforce their opinion can be inferred as truth in a depressed individual. It is the artist's belief that, because human beings are so hungry for understanding themselves and the world around them, they will seek out some way to prove their opinions to be true. This attempt to prove themselves right can be done to the degree where contrary factual information will be selectively ignored in favor of less valid data in what's called confirmation bias; from Shelley Taylor and Jonathan Brown's research in *Illusion and Well-being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health*: "Information processing is full of incomplete data gathering, shortcut errors and biases ... prior expectations and self-serving interpretations weigh heavily into the social judgment process."<sup>5</sup>

When a source of information open to interpretation is introduced, then, it will be used by people adamant about being correct to prove their point. Thus, if those facing depression are prone to cynical thoughts, and they are still subject to confirmation bias, they will inevitably seek out some way of manifesting these thoughts into something that validates their reasoning.

What results is called Cognitive Distortion, where a person convinces himself/herself that untrue information is true. If the distortion leans towards self-hatred, validation of these thoughts feeds back into a depressive cycle, perpetuating this phenomenon so long as the individuals who are suffering have an outlet to continue actualizing their self-perceptions. This is similar to the phenomenon in which a depressed individual tends to be socially rejected more often than those who have more normal mental health.<sup>6</sup> These facets of psychology relate to the concept of this body of work because, in seeking out answers, a person may ignore the rules of thumb surrounding tarot reading (such as abstaining from reading one's own fortune) to confirm their suspicions via personal bias<sup>7</sup>. The more this happens, the more warped a depressed person's worldview may become until it resembles only a fraction of what it used to be. Personal accounts show that depression, left untreated, grows worse over time.<sup>8</sup> In this cycle, the negative thoughts associated with the disease are caused by a response to psychologically/emotionally hurtful stimuli and result in actions that end up bringing the person back to the negative thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

"I am a bad person" → feel like a bad person → behave in a sad, pessimistic/gloomy way → be avoided by others, reaffirming concept of being a bad person. → more extreme thought: "I am a terrible person..."

Tarot cards are used to metaphorically stand in for the outside stimuli in this fashion:

"I am a bad person" → feel like a bad person → read a tarot spread → only draw bad interpretations from each card → interpret these as fact, reaffirming concept of being a bad person → more extreme thought: "I am a terrible person..."

The collection of cards in the series is representative of this — with only elements of it tying back to the original counterpart; overall, each work is much more strongly focused on possible misfortunate results. If someone

reading their own spread only pulled what they thought to be bad fortunes from what they read, it would multiply their sense of doom. Tragically, in such a case, a spread that could previously be seen as a good sign would never be seen as such.

When in a spread, a tarot card is read according to how it appears in relation to the cards placed before and after it. If theoretically used in a spread, these cards are meant to have a similar effect—but imply less positive interpretations under most if not any circumstance—as if those readings are the only thing a depressed individual would see. These pieces are vague in representation of specific individuals. It is not about one person; these cards are meant to be a simulation of anyone—audience or hypothetical. When tarot cards are read by fortune-tellers, they are laid out in special arrangements from the deck called “spreads.” The interpretation of each card, in this case, is dependent upon how it placed in the spread in relation to the other cards. The way the cards are shuffled, it is equally likely for the card to be pulled from the deck and placed in the spread in an upright or reversed position. A very common example is a “Celtic Cross” spread, as shown below (figure 1).<sup>10</sup>

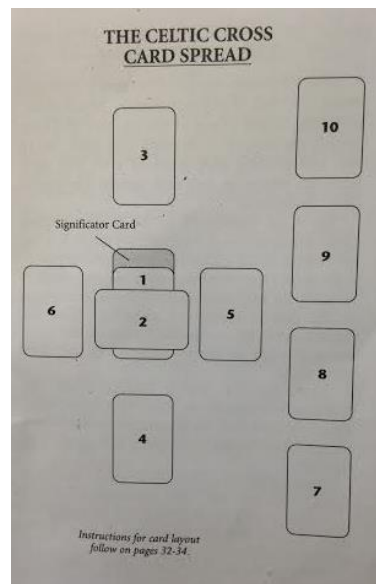


Figure 1. The Celtic Cross Spread.

Diagram taken from the booklet included with the Rider-Waite tarot deck.<sup>11</sup>

In this diagram, the card placed in position 1 is representative of the present, or current state of mind for the recipient of the reading. Position 2 stands for the challenge presented to the individual. In this spread, the card is the obstacle, which the following cards discuss. Position 3 refers to the events leading up to the challenge, and position 4 the future: the predicted results of the challenge. Position 5 is representative of the person’s goals, while the 6<sup>th</sup> position presents the subconscious underlying motives and feelings. From these, the cards on the right (7 – 10) talk about the information given. Advice (7), external influences beyond one’s control (8), hopes and fears (9) and the ultimate outcome of all this, and if or how the challenge will resolve based on the person’s current path of actions (10). Oftentimes, there is a “significator card” in a reading of a variety of spreads (in the Celtic Cross, it is underneath card one). In tarot readings, the word relates to the cards used to “signify,” or represent, the person for whom the reading is being done. The overt or surrounding cards are then interpreted as it relates to it.<sup>12</sup> For this series as a whole, The Fool card is the significator; it is the trump card, number zero: the beginning, the innocent left to the mercy of this series’ pessimism. Choosing this card is symbolic in name for the concept, as well as in-line with the idea of the person perceiving himself or herself as “the Fool.” Not the Emperor, or Empress, or King of Cups or Page of Wands: it is something without prestige and without a desirable title and without any connotation of potential accomplishment.

## 2. Method & Format

Each card is drawn using graphite pencil on Bristol paper, the final version ranging from 7 x 11.5 inches to

approximately 3.5 feet across and 5 feet tall. Every piece that has one is given the title at the bottom of the frame of reference (all of the major arcana, the ace cards and page through king of each suit in the minor arcana), and its appropriately assigned numeral for its place within the deck. The cards of the Minor Arcana are occasionally smaller, but the pieces are never smaller than 16 x 24 inches—roughly the size of twenty-five or more of the original tarot cards put together. All of the pieces in this series portray the individual cards as larger than the actual playing-card size to demonstrate how out of control and unrealistic the depressed person's view of the cards can grow, eventually to extreme sizes. Many cards are presented together as a single composition, with one card visually feeding into another. In this, different cards share the same compositional pieces within their own frame of reference in a composite. Though meant to emulate the idea of a tarot spread, the intention is to show the images as fused to the other cards as opposed to being laid atop of, or next to, each other.



Figure 2. Pamela Coleman Smith,  
*The High Priestess card*, 1910,  
2.75 x 4.7 inches.

<https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3520347><sup>13</sup>



Figure 3. Max Killion  
*The High Priestess card*, 2015,  
pastel on paper, 16 x 24 inches.

This side-by-side comparison (figures 2 and 3 above) shows an example of the original card versus the altered version of the series. Many of the symbols within the original are present in the revised card, but arranged in different ways to give off more of a biased impression. While there are occasionally references to the original cards, it is not necessarily adhered to, especially in pieces created later in the series. Each image created for the series is not taken from pre-existing cards; they are original pieces of work meant to communicate the altered state of mind. These pieces are not meant to be considered functional tarot cards because of the intentional bias in them.

There are a number of motifs present within the work representative of different things. In the suit for pentacles/coins, for example, reptiles (particularly dragons) are common subjects because of their mythological association to greed and hoarding. The architecture that appears in many pieces are tall, rigid, inorganic and complex structures. Manmade architecture in general is something that is difficult to tear down and, upon collapse, destroys the area that surrounds it. In this series, buildings—mostly from Gothic to Baroque exteriors—are a motif for stress and mental paralysis. Despite its connotative association with luxury in decorative arts or spirituality in religious work, gold and metal leaf is applied selectively to pieces as an extension of declining mental coherence. Instead of being evenly applied in clean shapes or patterns, like its typical use, it is applied more sporadically, with pieces brushed away to give it a visually broken presence. Cloth is a more animated symbol used in the relevant pieces. Typically, they are presented as wrapping or wrapped around the figure, pulling or pushing at the form. This personification is used to represent restraint: doubt, and holding back from one's maximum potential appear in many different cards. Eyes are occasionally drawn out on them to play with the concept of it as a blindfold, with the eye being a pseudo-vision that references back to confirmation bias.



Figure 4. Max Killion. *The Page of Wands*. colored pencil. 10.5in x 6.3inches. 2015.

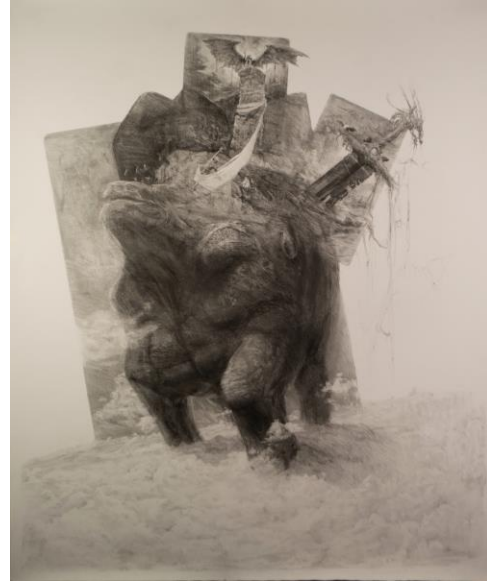


Figure 5. Max Killion. *Devil, Judgement and Ace of Swords cards*. graphite. 50 x 40 inches. 2015.

The figure on the left (figure 4) depicts an earlier card, with the right (figure 5) achieving several months after further development of the concept. Earlier use of colorful media was abandoned in favor of more workable and monochromatic graphite in order to better present more detail. Though helpful in guiding the viewer's emotions, the extra level of complexity conveyed through color prevented the pieces from achieving a more detailed, professional level of craftsmanship and quality. The dramatic escalation of image size—with dimensions being one or two feet to well over 3 or 4 feet—is more suitable to the in-person presentation of the work. At this scale, objects intended to be portrayed as exceptionally large (the main part within figure 5) give the impression of this better, based on how large it is in proportion to the referential view of anyone standing in front of it. Figure 4, at left, was also intended to be shown as quite large; however, due to its small format, the attempt to imply a large-scale is restricted to proportional cues within a very small area. At a larger overall size, it is more possible to give a different impression from both close up and far away in a gallery setting. Though the trump and face cards of a typical deck include a title at the bottom (ex: left), the more recent cards in my series exclude that detail for aesthetic purposes.

Returning to the previous smaller sizes but retaining the more current motifs, a series of smaller-scale sketches incorporating silver leaf have been completed. Within the series itself, these pieces allow a more expansive demonstration of the idea itself without being overly concerned with creating fully rendered works. Figure 6 is an example of one of these drawings, whereas the use of line and placement of rendered forms is used more to describe confirmation bias than to create a completed looking image. Here, too, the silver leaf is applied roughly and/or in faded, broken patterning.

The idea of conglomeration is present both in the theme of individual cards as well as the presentation of several larger projects. Though inspired by the way in which tarot cards are laid out in a spread for fortune-telling, the cards are visually presented as feeding into each other. When this occurs, the objects in each individual piece blend into the other as a transition. As a result, each card is able to stand alone, but shares space within the frame of reference with another. Though less common, the presence of conglomeration is present in individual cards, such as the two of wands. The decision to communicate this within the parameters in the concept deals with the processing of information. Dealing with how information processed is compartmentalized and form a series of connections, different bits of information being mashed together, literally become visual mash-ups of objects to deal with how it relates to a living, thinking being. Some cards, such as the wheel of fortune, may include entire cards within its frame of reference. Having one card so fused together with another that it is completely absorbed inside the format presents the most extreme visualization of this nuance. Instead of keeping to the traditional dimensions of artwork, the compositions of each piece are crafted to emulate the extra-tall size of a tarot card. This presents its own challenges to overcome; nontraditional proportions for artwork can cause the viewer's eye to travel in a different way according to a stronger emphasis on verticality or horizontality.



Figure 6. Max Killion. *5 of Coins #2*.  
graphite, silver leaf. 2016.

The process of creating the images is methodical and intensive on research and preparation out of necessity for making a fantastical image. Because these works are imaginative realism, they cannot be copied directly from life nor can they reside in the comfort of total abstraction. Even with the ease of finding images on the internet, searching for a single reference that works exactly for any piece – fair use or not – is astronomically rare. Because the goal is to emphasize the extreme and unfavorable possibilities, more attention is given to the reversed or upside down set of interpretations, though most any card can be pessimistic in any orientation. Once there is an adequate idea of what to portray, as many as a dozen preliminary thumbnail drawings are created to work through the best possible ways to communicate the idea. This includes notes, studies of other compositions and palettes, brainstorming exercises and, if necessary, further research. Otherwise the following step is to gather references – roughly thirty to fifty – including other pieces of artwork, images of life, value structures, three-dimensional objects, if possible, and photographs taken specifically for the project. Using the references and initial thumbnail, a more refined thumbnail is created to tweak composition, positions and whatever else is necessary. When no further experimentation or editing is needed, a larger mock-up line sketch and value study is created to cement finer details and more closely apply structure from the references. If the preliminary drawing is acceptable, all previous steps are added to the reference library, and the sketch is transferred onto a sheet of Bristol for the final steps of development. Because a majority of the references are copyright protected, they serve more as guidelines to understand the patterns of behavior in lighting and physics. The collage-like nature of the pieces also result in a final composition far removed from the source images. It is not uncommon for there to be changes to the composition while rendering the final piece, especially when the patterning is added to the work.

### 3. Influences

Much inspiration for each card is taken from life experiences and photographs from sources in magazines and online. The psychological elements of depression and worsening of untreated psychoses is frequently incorporated to the conceptual aspects of the artwork. Though it is not commonplace for the average person to encounter the subject matter of this self-loathing psychological issue at such an extreme level, those for whom it does affect can experience it to a devastating end. Art Deco, Nouveau, as well as patterning techniques by various contemporary artists were used to inform the process used in the series.

Gustav Klimt's oil and metal leaf paintings of his golden phase demonstrate an inspirational use of abstract

patterning on rendered, more realistic forms. His use of these patterns—as both a decorative background and a texture dressing and interacting with the form—communicates the emotions of the figure visually, in a way that very strongly informs its use in the series. The use of gold and metal leaf in works is reminiscent of religious pieces and older editions of tarot deck, such as the card in figure 8. Klimt’s intention of the medium, however, differs from its common decorative or religious iconographic uses; he uses his own connotations to portray the denotative sense of decadence.<sup>14</sup> This idea is reflected in the pieces for the series, with silver leaf being applied to provide content beyond a simple decorative element to speak about the subject matter itself.



Figure 7. Gustav Klimt. **Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I.**  
oil, gold leaf. 1907.

<http://www.neuegalerie.org/collection/Austrian/Fine%20Arts?page=1#3554><sup>15</sup>



Figure 8. Bonifacio Bembo. **Queen of Swords.**  
paint and metal leaf. 15th century.

<http://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/the-queen-of-swords><sup>16</sup>

The Polish painter Zdzislaw Beksinski's surrealist distopia paintings have an unsettling nature to them that is somewhat mirrored in this series, though his pieces are more nightmarish and abstract in content, there is a creepiness to them. He is looked at for these traits, and to further understand how best to establish a motif throughout a body of work in a way that sets up and clearly communicates symbols in its own world. His work perfectly demonstrated the type of feelings I wish to communicate in this series: not just to visually communicate, but to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. The artist's body of work is immense; ranging from oil paintings to quick sketches and photography, the formal motifs of his aesthetic reveal themselves through years and years of work. He demonstrates an immense breadth and understanding of the disparity of fantasy and reality in semi-representational surrealism. The selective use of detail and edge quality in many of these pieces largely inspired the use of these elements in this series as a metaphor for confirmation bias.



Figure 9. Zdzislaw Beksinski. *Untitled*.  
Oil on hardboard. 199. 98.5cm x 132cm. 1993.

[http://beksinski.dmochowskiartgallery.net/galeria\\_karta.php?artist=62&picture=2283](http://beksinski.dmochowskiartgallery.net/galeria_karta.php?artist=62&picture=2283)<sup>17</sup>

Susan Gofstein is a contemporary artist whose series *Resonance* is an example of using visual art as a means by which to describe her physical pain. Her work establishes metaphors to represent personal experiences with chronic pain, arguing that it is something that defies verbal explanation. Language is not sufficient enough to describe her discomfort to others. The use of MRI scans as a surface both strengthens the aims of presenting her concept from the very origins. I take most inspiration from her work based on the balance of representational forms placed in surrealistic ways. Her use of scratching, rubbing, and manipulating the surface create effects that present an altered state of being – particularly in the pieces *Erasure* and *Both Creatures Died*. The rougher, more aggressive textures against important information is a type of surrealism used in my works.





Figure 10. Susan Gofsein. *Erasure*.  
oil on collage and MRI film.  
17 inches x14 inches. 2003.

[http://painexhibit.org/en/galleries/portraits-of-pain/ag01\\_gofstein/](http://painexhibit.org/en/galleries/portraits-of-pain/ag01_gofstein/)<sup>18</sup>

Artist Mark Collen created a piece titled *CPHII -- Trapped in Hell* as a response to frustration in being unable to accurately describe his chronic pain to his doctor. According to him, communicating his illness in this way was much more effective than ascribing it to “sharp” or “dull,” etc. While there is a distinction between physical and emotional pain, my work represents the mental discomfort in similar ways, because both are injuries that can and do have lasting effects on the individual. His work is cited in this research for being more literal in its presentation compared to Gofstein, and the juxtaposition of other materials protruding through figurative elements similar to several of the motifs present in my work.



Figure 11. Mark Collen *CPHII -- Trapped in Hell*,  
plaster with rebar, 13 inches x 5 inches x4 inches.

[http://painexhibit.org/en/galleries/isolation-and-imprisonment/ag04\\_collen/](http://painexhibit.org/en/galleries/isolation-and-imprisonment/ag04_collen/)<sup>19</sup>

The broken up, distorted or incomplete nature of many of the figures in these drawings is strongly influenced through Chris Landreth's style of 3D animation (figure 12). Specifically in his Academy Award winning short film *Ryan*, His visual metaphor of warped and broken figures to show a state of mind and mental health inspired the same idea throughout a number of more recent drawings in the series. His distorted figures both have areas of their body missing, as well as other objects interacting with the forms, in much the same way my figures have protrusions of dark gems, architecture and organic matter to communicate the self-loathing mentality. The artist even includes himself within the animation, indicating this aesthetic choice comes from an interpretation of his own state of mind. The artistic decisions made are attempts to put pain and illness into visual forms in the same way Mark Collen's work does, but on an internal, psychological level. The unique aspects of the work being a sequential, narrative piece of art (film) is the growth of distortion in real time as a character's emotion changes in response to conflict, pressure, etc. While my work does not have this direct, frame-by-frame progression, the variation in how warped the figures are per piece refers to this idea of something that grows in intensity.



Figure 12. Chris Landreth. *Ryan*. animation. 2005.

<http://www.canadiananimationresources.ca/2010/08/showcase-ryan-by-chris-landreth/><sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The Self-loathing mentality is a disease that snowballs out of control. It is present in some of the most common and most severe mental illnesses because it can begin with insecurity and fear. The problem is compounded and grows in severity with lack of treatment. Combined with the social stigma around mental illness, the personal nature. The problem can go unnoticed, as the mindset in itself creates the concept of not deserving treatment. Equally problematic is the outsider's response – with negative talk generally unfavorable in most social situations. It cannot be understated how heavy an impact this facet of self-perception can change a person – from outlook to actual life choices. When it is severe, seeking treatment can be necessary to be functionally healthy.

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