The Devil in Fred Stonehouse: The Aesthetics of Evil After Evil

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The devil is not what he used to be. The mythic villain of the Christian tradition has become a cartoon version of his former terrifying self. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the visual arts. Fearsome images of the devil and his minions once adorned church walls, altars, and holy books. He was the very real incarnation of evil and his image was a lesson in the wages of sin. Today, however, when words like "sin" and "evil" have lost their theological if not cultural resonance, the arts have all but abandoned sincere representations of the devil, trading instead on his image as logo or slur. To image the devil after evil is to reimagine the very idea of evil. The artist Fred Stonehouse has accomplished precisely this.

In the year 447 the Council of Toledo set out the first official description of the devil. At the council the devil was described as "a large, black, monstrous apparition with horns on his head, cloven hoofs, or one cloven hoof—ass's ears, hair, claws, fiery eyes, terrible teeth, an immense phallus, and a sulphurous smell" (Hughes 104). Since then the devil has morphed into a caricature of this fierce beast of Christian mythology. More recently the devil has made appearances as the logo for Underwood Deviled Ham and as a regular character on South Park. The reason the devil has ceased to function in the cultural imaginary as the personification of evil is because evil itself has become something of a superstitious relic. As Peter Stanford observes in his book, *The Devil: A Biography*, "Greater knowledge, less dependency on the idea of a figure of evil, and more on the nega-

tive within each individual has brought a more precise delineation of the unknown, the darkness, the shadow" (284). Like darkness brought to light, evil has lost its frightful mystery.

The notion that evil is the willful product of an external cosmic agent bent on the pain, suffering, and misery of humanity has foundered as a viable theory of evil. Consequently, the devil too has lost much of his historical, theological, and cultural cache. Robert Muchembled argues that "[n]ot only has [the devil] ceased to exist as a terrifying external figure, he no longer even provokes a fear of the self, a dread of the inner demon…" (228). Two centuries of the demystification of evil have enfeebled the once mighty icon of incarnate malevolence.

If for nearly two millennia the image of the devil was the didactic embodiment of evil, what then does the devil look like after evil? This article addresses that question by turning to the work of contemporary artist Fred Stonehouse, who has been painting the devil for over three decades with an uncanny awareness of, and artistic reflection on, the tradition of representing the devil in the arts.

The following is composed of three sections. The first two form an argument regarding the place of the devil-as-villain in modern art, focusing briefly on the art historical trajectory of the image of the devil before attending to the work of contemporary artist Fred Stonehouse. The third section then turns to Stonehouse himself, offering an in depth interview with the artist about his work, his practice, and the place of the devil in his painting.

Section one presents the devil as the cosmic archetype for the nemesis-style villain. Here, I attend to how the devil has historically been imaged in the arts and, in anticipation of the work of Fred Stonehouse, the precarious place of that image in contemporary culture where the devil has become more cliché than cosmic villain. Section two turns to the artistry of Fred Stonehouse in a consideration of the figure of the devil in modern art. In this section I propose that Stonehouse offers a rare, sincere figuration of the devil after evil by transforming him from a villain into an icon of vulnerability. Section three is an interview with Stonehouse exploring the evolution of his art practice, the origins of his fascination with the devil, and how he understands this devious character in his work.

Section I: The Devil as Villain

The devil is the arch-villain of Western culture. A cross-fertilization of sources from Mesopotamia to Persia produced the most powerful personification of evil that the Western world has ever known. For millennia the devil has been the final source of devious plans, wicked deeds, and treachery of all sorts.

The word devil comes from the Greek word *diabolos*, meaning "one who throws something across one's path" (Pagels 39). The devil of the New Testament, *diabolos*, is himself a maturation of the Hebrew figure of the Satan, whose name is derived from the Hebrew root *śṭn*, meaning "one who opposes or obstructs." Thus, from his most ancient Semitic origins, the devil of Christian mythology bears villainy in his very name. He is the personification of evil, intent on obstructing the plans of the righteous.

One of the earliest tales of the devil-as-villain appears in the Book of Job where the Satan figure intentionally inflicts suffering and torment on Job to test the extent of his faith in God. Here, Satan is the title of a member of God's court and thus a position filled by an emissary, an angel, of God with the prescribed function of "opposing or obstructing" the faithful. Over time, however, as Satan evolved from a job description into the singular figure of *diabolos* who tempts Jesus in the desert, the devil became the very model of villainy.

Between the 12th and 14th centuries, "villain" simply described someone who lived outside the walls of the *bourg* and was thus an inhabitant of the *ville*, an unfortified country house or estate. In medieval France a *villain* was one who worked the land in the tradition of the serf, but unlike those who lived in more remote outlying areas, villains were proximal to the *bourg*. However, just as the emerging European aristocracy of the 15th century pejoratively redefined the *bourgeoisie* as tasteless and greedy middlings, a century earlier, that same *bourgeoisie* had already redefined the villain as someone with a depraved mind and ignoble instincts. In a ploy for social position, the villain was transformed from one who lived near, but outside, the city-walls into anyone with devious or malicious intentions. Conceived of as such, the devil, whose very name denotes an intent to thwart the otherwise noble plans of God and humanity, is a villain on a cosmic scale; he is indeed the arch-villain *par excellence* threatening civil culture from outside the city walls.

The notion of the devil as cosmic villain, as a wanton source of destruction, temptation, torture, and punishment was first and most powerfully conveyed through the visual arts. There are three reasons for this. First, during the first one thousand years of Christendom, and Western civilization generally, the majority of the population was illiterate. The moral teachings of Christianity were therefore presented visually, with an emphasis on clearly displaying the terrifying wages of sin and the horrific monsters that would inflict them. It is, after all, one thing to *describe* the tortures of hell and something else altogether to see them graphically displayed on church walls and altars.

Second, the literary sources for the Western notion of the devil are scarce and obscure at best prior to the 10th century when tales of the wicked temptations of

the desert fathers began to be widely circulated. The Hebrew Bible, from the Book of Job to passing references to Lucifer in the Book of Isaiah, is ambiguous at best concerning the devil's place in the cosmic balance of good and evil. And while the New Testament more clearly defined the character of the devil, positioning him contra God and the good, he remained, as Pagels points out, something of a stand-in for the assorted enemies of Christianity—from the Pharisees to the Roman Empire (Pagels 3-34 and 63-88). Of course, with the tale of Faust, Dante's *Inferno* in the 14th century, and, later, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, literary sources would eventually become the greatest well-source for conceptualizing the devil. Though even here the figure of the devil is most evocatively rendered through the power of visual language, a testament to the potency of the visual.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, if God, Jesus, Mary, and the Saints were aligned with the spirit, then as their enemy the devil was aligned with the body, its senses, and the blunt material world where humanity had its temporary dwelling. In the late 4th and early 5th centuries, St. Augustine further bound the devil to this world by locating human sin (and sexual desire in particular) in the devil's original perversion of the will. Following Augustine's influential theological lead, the Christian church, and Western culture in general, further cultivated this dualism whereby only the spirit was good and all things of this world—things of the flesh—were evil and under the sway of the devil. From the temptations of lust to the fires of hell, to know and fear the devil was to experience him with the body and its senses. Consequently, the devil and his dominion were conceived of and passed on aesthetically.

For instance, as early as the year 850 we see Saint Anthony tormented by rough-hewn, animal-headed demons perched atop an apocalyptic beast as engraved on the Moone High Cross in Kildare, Ireland. A capital on the Basilique Sainte Madeleine in Vèzelay, France from the early 11th century features Saint Anthony surrounded and dragged about by ferocious winged creatures with the bodies and faces of men with flaming hair, talons, and tails. Meanwhile, the Beatus manuscripts from the 10th century, the Caedmon Poems from the 11th century, the Liber Floridus manuscripts from the 12th century, and numerous others, imagine the devil as a monstrous hybrid of beast and man intent on punishing the wicked and tempting the faithful. To *conceive* of the devil was, above all, to *perceive* him in all his terrifying glory.

However, beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries and especially over the past 250 years, the devil has fallen on hard times, going from fearful Prince of Darkness to children's Halloween costume. Commenting on the image of the devil at the turn of the 20th century, the psychologist Henry Murray powerfully averred, "it seemed that Satan was no more than a vestigial image, a broken-spirited relic

of a perished past, a ludicrous ham actor with no greater part to play in man's imagination than the vermiform appendix in his gut" (51). Over one hundred years later, in the first quarter of the 21st century, Murray's observation remains apropos as the very notion of a personified onto-theological force of evil has all but vanished from the cultural imagination.

In his book, *The Death of Satan*, Andrew Delbanco writes that "[w]hen American culture began, this devil was an incandescent presence in most people's lives, a symbol and explanation for both the cruelties one received and those perpetrated upon others. But by the 1700s he was already losing his grip on the imagination—a process that has continued ever since…" (4).

The reasons for the devil's fall from wicked glory range from the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution to the birth of psychoanalysis and cross-cultural familiarity afforded by globalization. Over time the devil internalized as evil was transformed into psychopathology or explained away by science and natural agents. Never before has the arch-villain of humanity been so culturally bankrupt. Today the image of the devil lingers only as logo, cartoon, or cliché, rarely intended to evoke a sincere sense of dread or to connote the wickedness of the Evil One; this, despite the fact that for centuries the figure of the devil was one of the most potent symbols in art history's visual repertoire.

Section II: The Devil in Fred Stonehouse

What then does the devil look like in modern art today? Can sincere representations of the devil even exist in modern art? In short, what does the devil look like after evil? The following takes up these questions through an exploration of the work of Fred Stonehouse. Stonehouse uniquely inverts this ancient figure of transcendent, villainous evil by transforming the devil into a paragon of mundane human fallibility. Borrowing and stealing from art history and pop culture, the devil in Fred Stonehouse is a character transformed from villain to vulnerability.

Stonehouse has been painting the devil for more than thirty years. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Stonehouse is an internationally recognized painter and professor of drawing and painting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His work has been featured in exhibitions from New York to Berlin and purchased by the likes of Sheryl Crow and Madonna. His painting combines the powerful intimacy of Frida Kahlo with the quirky charm of folk art to create a visual world defined by the dream logic of magical realism.

Despite international acclaim Stonehouse's work retains the edge of outsider art, flirting with religious imagery in the blunt style of Mexican retablos but with subject matter more akin to the religious fancy of Hieronymus Bosch. Yet a com-

plex personal mythology in the tradition of William Blake or Odilon Redon belies the seeming simplicity of what has been called his "awkward but emphatic draftsmanship" (Wiens 33).

Throughout his large body of work, Stonehouse has succeeded in creating a visual world populated by a menagerie of recurring characters including bearded men, animal-man hybrids, bats, cats, deer, bears, and devils. Often a word or phrase is splashed across these assorted scenes of strange creatures in their strange lands. The text, emblazoned like a banner, printed like an antique advertisement, or scrawled like an afterthought, stands in an uneasy relationship with its paired image, rarely narrating yet always oddly apposite for the scene. In the 2010 painting *Lies*, for example, the phrase "Paying for a past of lies" rolls across an image of a weeping red devil clinging to the back of a naked man-child in a marsh. This devil, and the many others that appear throughout Stonehouse's work, is a personal totem to human frailty.

Stonehouse grew up in a Catholic household in the upper Midwest where the devil was both the embodiment of mythic evil and a banal advertisement on the supermarket shelves. It was this dual inheritance, the devil as mythic signifier and as pop culture kitsch, that informed Stonehouse's appropriation of the devil in his work. In this, Stonehouse presents an artistic transformation of the devil from medieval cosmic villain to icon of modern vulnerability.

One of the earliest images of the devil appears in a mosaic in the Basilica San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy dating from the early 6th century. Here the devil stands over the goats as they are separated from the sheep before being led into the eternal fires of hell.[1] This early image demonstrates the didactic role that devil imagery played for most of Western art history, a role that is no longer possible. As such, Stonehouse plunders the remains of this visual tradition, transforming it from moralizing visual theology into private aesthetic confessional.

In *Mr. Scratch At The Gate*, Stonehouse reimagines an illumination of the mouth of hell from the *Hours of Catherine de Cléves*, originally composed in 1440. In the original, the hell-mouth is depicted as a great gaping feline maw, with beastly devils carting the damned in wheelbarrows into the red innermost mouth of hell. In Stonehouse's version, the hellish feline mouth is transformed into a fleshy open wound, pocked with weeping eyes. Inside this red chasm, sharp teeth protect another, more realistic, weeping eye. Meanwhile, atop the hell-mouth there is a keyhole and a crown, signaling that this is not a place of punishment, but rather like a diary, it is a place of frightening privacy.

Entering into Stonehouse's work through this hell-mouth (an aesthetic diary of sorts), the devil we find is a complex and complicated figure. In *Crier* from 2008, featured on the cover of the present volume, a solitary black devil's head floats

Fig. 1 - Fred Stonehouse, *Lies* (2010)

before the red background of an antique book cover. The devil bears the traditional goat ears and horns inherited from Pan and his mouth is open in a cry, exposing two rows of tiny teeth as great tear drops stream from bright green eyes. The devil's head is decapitated, torn from his body, in the manner of a beheaded saint as he weeps shiny bulbous tears reminiscent of one of Rogier van der Weyden's weeping Marys. The connotation is one of sorrow and martyrdom, realigning the devil with the oppressed and transforming him from a figure of punishment and fear into a character of sympathy. Stonehouse thus asks us to consider the devil as victim, not villain, and to see our own weakness in his weeping.

This is the iconic face of the devil in Stonehouse's work. Charred black by the fires of hell, or bright red like a Halloween costume, the devil is cowed by his own inadequacy. The hooves and horns of the satyr appear out of place with their connotations of strength and machismo, and yet also vaguely appropriate in the often stunted and misshapen way they are rendered.

In *Devil's Eyes*, a two-headed man-child floats naked, hip-deep in a hazy marsh surrounded by fleshy umbilical-like tentacles that wind in and out of the painting. The head on the left, the devil's head, is burnt black with blue eyes and bright red lips. The head on the right is fleshy pink, as is the body, and wears a ponderous and distant gaze. The two heads are not separate however. Rather, they merge to form one giant head with a tarnished golden crown perched atop their shared worried brows. Pale yellow light radiates from behind this awkward double-head which is itself unattached to the body, appearing instead like a mask sitting atop a sad little body with an oversized and exposed heart in the center of its too-big chest. Two daggers pierce the heart while over each shoulder translucent dragonfly wings sprout from the boy's back. The entire scene has a misty, dream-like quality as though this were only the surface of much deeper waters.

There is a long art historical tradition of representing the devil with multiple faces, one of the most famous examples being Taddeo di Bartolo's monstrous devil in the Duomo at San Gimignano, Italy, painted between 1393 and 1413. Here the devil sits on a throne of the damned, clutching their naked bodies in his talons and consuming them with three hungry faces, while a fourth face emerges from his crotch to likewise consume the wicked. In this classic image, the devil is the great horned beast of Christian mythology with bat-like wings and skin blackened by the fires of hell where he reigns as emperor of the damned.

Stonehouse appropriates this tradition of the winged, multifaced king-devil but reimagines it as an icon of interiority. In *Devil's Eyes*, Stonehouse achieves this through an intriguing reversal by creating a mask of the interior devil as exterior self. In so doing, he takes what is inside, the devil as both other than and the same as the self, and places it, like the crown it wears, atop the face we show to the world. Thus the everyday, external self is hidden behind the true interior self, thereby transforming the villain into vulnerability by exposing the truth that the devil's other face is our own. Meanwhile, leathery black batwings are transformed into brittle dragonfly wings and the devil's sacred heart, our own heart, is skewered by our own two hands.

For Stonehouse the figure of the devil is part comedy, part tragedy. The comedy of the devil is his iconic status as a figure of great power, and that this is his comedy is also his tragedy. And so it is that the devil is self-portraiture. The image of the devil is a rendering of the self at its most tragically human, which is simultaneously its greatest achievement. In an untitled work from 1988 for example, two lumpy devil horns sprout from the crown of an over-tired father's head as he holds his swaddled child with one hand and reaches into a toilet with the other. Overhead a haloed saint holds a banner reading "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," which is the opening line of Dante's *Inferno* and translates as

Fig. 2 - Fred Stonehouse, *Mr. Scratch at the Gate*

"In the middle of the road of my life." Here, then, the devil is man stumbling midway through the road of life not with mighty horns and violent acts, but with humble nubs and mundane deeds, reaching into a toilet.

In her article, "On the Tedium of The Good," Samantha Vice begins by observing the commonplace assumption that "being good commands from us not emotional intensity and extraordinary action, but the conventional pieties of bourgeois mentality. In contrast, villains make more interesting protagonists. Their actions and inner lives seem more complex…" (460). Counter to this, the villainous devil in art history has traditionally been a one-dimensional character. He was pure villain precisely because his motives were unambiguous and his role was obvious: he was the source of all evil, punisher of the wicked, and was to be feared by the faithful. The reason for this flat persona was the devil's presumed lack of interiority. The devil did not introspect, reflect on his decisions, question his intentions, debate the consequences of his actions, sympathize with his victims, or harbor regrets. The devil lacked all of those interior states that define the fragility of the human experience, which, as Vice points out, makes the modern

villain appear compelling.

This generically flat image of the devil was viable so long as he functioned as the culturally accepted source of evil in the world. When, after the Middle Ages and especially following the Enlightenment, the nature and source of evil became more ambivalent, the devil ceased to function as the sole repository and icon of evil. And inasmuch as his image remained part of the cultural currency, the devil became more complex and gained a new interiority. Consider, for example, François de Ligny's 1882 image, after Gustave Doré, of the devil in repose on a cliff reflecting on his wickedness, his rebellion against God now recast as an act of shadowy courage.

What Stonehouse discloses then is the final movement in this transformation of the image of the devil after evil. No longer the monstrous villain of the Middle Ages, nor even the ponderous rebel of Romanticism, the devil in Fred Stonehouse is an icon of our own mundane human vulnerability. As the threat of demonic evil has shrunk into the cultural recesses and the new ideal has become productivity, efficiency, and the algorithmic perfection of a digital culture, Stonehouse reveals that in the 21st century the greatest evil and our deepest fear, our villain, is our own fallible humanity. The devil has always been that part of ourselves that we most fear: our wrath, our lust, our hate. But what the devil in Fred Stonehouse shows us is that, today, what we fear most is the very fallibility that makes us most human and most vulnerable.

Section III: An Interview with Fred Stonehouse

The following phone-interview took place in the spring of 2012. Fred was in his studio at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I thank him for taking time out of his day for this insightful chat.

Sage Elwell: As you know, this edition of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is about villains and I've written an essay exploring the figure of the devil in your work, where I suggest that you've transformed the image of the devil from cosmic villain into an icon of human vulnerability—which is quite a reversal.

So I'm interested in the devil in your work, but I also want to talk more generally about your own artistic development and practice as a way to situate, to contextualize, this narrower focus on the devil. So, with that in mind, to start at the beginning: when did you first begin painting?

Fred Stonehouse: I didn't start painting until I was a teenager but I was drawing from a very early age. I was surrounded by people who drew: my grandmoth

Fig. 3 - Fred Stonehouse, *Devil's Eyes* (2010)

er, my grandfather, my mother, my father. But I would say that my earliest art impulses were probably before I was even in kindergarten.

I remember shopping with my mom at this pre-Kmart place called Spartan Atlantic in Milwaukee. I was really young, so young that my shorts didn't have pockets—I don't know how old that is. We were walking through the store and there was a bin full of these small hand-painted dinosaurs, and there was this little Stegosaurus. I just remember being struck by its visuality—it's individuality. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was like a little jewel.

I picked it up and asked my mom if I could have it. She said something like, "Don't be stupid, put that down," and walked away. But I knew that I had to have it. I also knew I didn't have any money and I think I sort of knew that stealing was wrong, but without any place to put it—I didn't have pockets or anything—I just stuck it in my mouth and ran off after my mom.

When we checked out and got in the car my mother was talking to me and I was just sitting there quietly because I've got this Stegosaurus in my mouth. At some point she noticed and asked me what I had in my mouth. Well I didn't say anything, so she reached in my mouth and pulled out this tiny dinosaur. She was mad and screamed at me, telling me how wrong it is to steal, and marched me

back into the store and made me give it back.

Later I recognized that this was sort of my first artistic impulse. Just recognizing that this was something special; it was this pure identification with an image.

SE: Do you remember when you first started acting on that impulse to create your own images?

FS: It was probably that same year or shortly after. Well, it was really more an act of defacement. But I didn't see it that way.

I grew up in a house with no books but my grandmother had this really nice leather bound set of encyclopedias that I just loved. They were beautiful. But there was one in particular, the "S" volume. The coverlet had this image of the planet Saturn plummeting into the sea. It was half submerged in water and I just thought it was an incredible, magical image. I would stare and stare at it.

One day I was at my grandmother's coloring at the kitchen table. When she left the room I ran into the living room where the encyclopedias were and pulled out the "S" volume. I'd brought my favorite teal crayon and had this overwhelmingly powerful impulse to color on that image as a way of somehow appropriating, possessing, or owning it. So I was coloring on that picture of Saturn when my father walked into the room. Well then, I think I blacked out because I was beaten unconscious.

But from a very early age I was intrigued by the resonant quality of images in the world and how I responded to them.

SE: So you've been drawing and painting, or defacing, your entire life. How would you say your process evolved as you became more serious about your work?

FS: Clearly as you do this more and more you develop a sort of self-awareness. I tell my students that as you become aware of art history and you begin to see other artists and what kind of art is being made in the world, you construct this idea of what kind of artist you'd like to be. For me it was probably after about 15 years that I realized that I was the kind of artist that I was. That this was the artist that I was going to be. But early on I had this idea that I was going to be some kind of sophisticated, cool, geometric abstractionist—the SoHo artist dressed all in black living in a minimalist cube. But instead I paint these sort of Jugheaded devils, and weird critters. Dipshits basically.

Initially I thought, "Wow, what happened?" But I just became what I was. Artists often have some crazy ideal that's unattainable. But then there is the truth of who you are. There are certain inevitabilities that come along with following your nose and developing your own line of investigation. And that's something you can't escape from. There is the truth of who you are and where you come from and there comes a time when you can't not be that person anymore.

SE: After working as an independent artist for over 25 years, you recently joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Has teaching other aspiring artists changed how you approach your own work?

FS: Well, I'm fortunate enough to teach at a research university so they're pretty good about allowing for studio time. I have a really nice studio right on campus and I usually get there very early in the morning. I'm able to work on campus uninterrupted for about four hours every day before the general craziness of the teaching-day starts.

I suppose it's made me more efficient in the studio. When I'm there I'm really working. In the past when I was just a working artist and had a studio in Milwaukee I would take a three-hour lunch. I would get there in the morning and work for a bit, then maybe go down to the coffee shop and shoot the shit with the barista. And there's a tattoo shop down the block that a friend of mine runs, so I'd go there, have lunch, maybe have a beer sometime in the afternoon, then come back to the studio and finish my day. I used to do that daily—a two or three-hour lunch was no big deal.

Clearly I don't do that anymore. And so even though I probably don't have as much free time, my productivity certainly has not dropped. If anything, although I have additional responsibilities and time constraints, I would say I'm probably even more productive now.

SE: Do you feel that being in an educational environment, being a teacher, has changed your work?

FS: I came to teaching pretty late in life so I don't think it's going to change me too much. It has however made me question all of my assumptions on a regular basis. Good artists question their assumptions regularly, but usually organically. Usually the only thing *forcing* you to do so is an upcoming exhibition. As you start to prepare for an exhibition, you begin to think, "Holy cow—do I look like an idiot? What am I doing? Does this make sense? Does this body of work hold together? What am I really pursuing here?"

But because I'm dealing with students every day, and I'm dealing with their practice and the way that they look at their work, I see my own work through a different filter. So I am constantly questioning all of the assumptions that a regular working artist takes into the studio with them every day. And I found that when I question my assumptions I discovered that, right or wrong, I can't change the artist that I am. I am who I am at this point.

If I look at my work overtime, even if I think that there have been these moments of radical change, I still see these two basic practices: there is the more fully-rounded painting and then there is my drawing practice, which can range from the more fully-developed to being very primitive, very folk art, and very

Fig. 4 - Fred Stonehouse, *Untitled* (1988)

comic book-inflected. But in either case I am my primary audience. First and foremost I have to entertain myself.

SE: As you matured as an artist, did you ever feel like you weren't achieving that? Did you have moments when you felt like you weren't being authentic to yourself or your vision and needed to change direction in style or subject matter?

FS: Yeah, definitely. I lived in fear of this when I was younger. I was afraid that my moves were incredibly dumb. In much the same way that I did as a child, I would be obsessed by certain images that I couldn't escape from. For example, I've been using the devil image in my work for a long time. But early on, I felt like claiming that territory, the devil, was just so stupid. I just thought, "What a dumb thing. This just is not cool." Not that it was offensive to anybody but how do you take something that's essentially become a cliché in the modern world and make something meaningful out of it? But like I tell my students now, if you're really engaged in something that's really, really out there and you're fearful of it

and you feel like a dope and don't totally grasp all of the ramifications of it and you don't have complete control over what that this means—that's the place to be. The worst art is safe and boring.

SE: You mentioned the image of the devil. The devil has been a constant presence in your work, going back to some of your earliest pieces. How, or why, did the devil become a defining aesthetic—and conceptual—image for you?

FS: Well when I was a kid we had this Children's Catholic Picture Bible and one of the illustrations was of Christ's temptation in the desert. It showed Jesus on this cliff overlooking a valley in the desert and it tells the story of the devil offering all the kingdoms of the earth to Jesus. Jesus is there, just looking very Jesus-y: all clean and white and blonde with his eyes rolled back in his head as the devil is tempting him. But the devil is clearly a black dude. Not burnt black by the fires of hell or anything, but a guy of African descent with Jheri-curled hair and a little soul-patch. Completely politically incorrect and offensive, and in the later edition they actually removed that image.

Well as a kid, more than anything, that image of the devil represented a kind of rebellion that was very appealing. Here was a character that was different from everyone else in the book. And it didn't hurt that he was completely ripped; he was jacked. He had a six-pack and hooves instead of legs and these enormous wicked looking batwings.

And in the neighborhood where I grew up, which was very much a blue-collar, working-class kind of place, being tough was important. You could get your ass kicked on a daily basis if you didn't stand up for yourself. So in that context, this guy, this bad-ass devil figure, clearly seemed like the better model. Not only was he anti-authority and everything that I viewed negatively: priests and nuns, these people who were scolding me, hitting me with rulers and whatnot on a daily basis. He was also tough enough to make it in a neighborhood like mine. And in a real pinch he could just fly away because he had wings.

He represented escape and general bad-assery. Strength, toughness, and cool—as opposed to the other, sort of fey, male figures in the book. So the image of the devil was very cool and desirable to a young kid growing up in my particular circumstances. I remember thinking, "I want to be that guy. Forget the rest of them." And maybe even then as a young artist I recognized something of the outsider in me. Already I felt disconnected and it just seemed I had more in common with this guy.

But I never associated it with evil. None of that ever seemed evil to me. It was always just reflective of basic human ambition or some primitive survival instinct. And so it was more out of empathy with this character than ever embracing anything remotely like evil. I mean, I knew what the devil represented in that

Catholic tradition, but I never understood him like that. He just never seemed outright evil to me.

SE: That's interesting, because looking at your work now, the devil clearly is not that macho figure. It is a very different, much humbler, character.

FS: Absolutely. The devil character in my work has become much more complex. That image from the Catholic Children's Picture Bible resonated with me because of my particular set of circumstances at that time. He was invulnerable and I was feeling very vulnerable myself, and feeling like an outsider. That is what appealed to me. So, as I grew, and as I matured as an artist, the image of the devil resonated with me precisely because I recognized just how vulnerable I was.

Now in my work the devil is almost emblematic of the entire range of human psychology and all of our hang-ups. I really see it as the archetype of being human. If you look at the history of how the devil evolved, it's clearly about human nature. That's what's bad about him. The devil represents our humanity, our human nature, our tendency to indulge in things that are all-too human. It's a very grounded, very earthbound image as opposed to being of the spirit. Sex, power, control, ambition, rebellion. All of those things. They're just very human.

SE: So how do you see the devil in your work within the context of Western art history generally, given the role the devil has traditionally placed in the arts?

FS: If you think of Northern Renaissance painting, which has been a huge influence on my work, and medieval art, and manuscript illustration, the devil played a huge role. And much later, outsider artists and folk artists, many of whom often have strange visionary religious experiences and commonly represent demons and the devil in their work—they feel very comfortable with that and I've been very inspired by that work as well. When it comes to art history I've always gravitated to this embrace of magic generally and the worldview that it represented. That way of understanding human nature and the world through a lens of magic with the possibility of enchantment. Magic and myth is just more interesting.

SE: *Mr. Scratch At The Gate* immediately comes to mind here, where you're clearly referencing the mouth of hell from an illuminated manuscript from the 15th century.

FS: Yeah that hell-mouth image is something that really appealed to me. But it's not an image I've used a lot. I haven't used it much because it is so identifiable. In that particular work I tried to personalize it but I still feel like that's an image I've yet to really conquer. Like you said, I took the image from a manuscript painting, but for me, I feel like it needs to be on a monumental scale. I think that shift would work. If that image could be 8 feet across, then I could ex-

plore the universe inside the mouth. I think that would be better for me. It would take it further away from the original. I suppose I want my sources to be evident at some level, but I want them to have run enough through my own personal filter that it's still clearly mine somehow.

SE: A lot of your work features this kind of religious imagery generally. Not just the devil.

FS: Yeah, there are priests, saints, and angles. The whole bit. I remember being 16 years old and really doing the research that Catholic school does not necessarily cover. While you're fed Church doctrine and biblical readings on a daily basis, the fact is, about 90% of the Bible is left out. So I set about reading the Bible from beginning to end. And I remember, as a young artist already drawn to surrealism generally, reading Revelation and thinking, "Wow! This stuff is a trip." And at the time I was sort of going through my own experimentation with drugs and alcohol. So to me this was clearly some kind of visionary experience. This guy [St. John] was clearly taking some kind of mushrooms or something.

So he becomes a character, as a reference point, for his ability to tap into the other side of the veil. The other side that people like me always suspect is there. That crawling feeling on the back of your neck when something's not quite right. That's where that's coming from, and St. John seemed to have a mainline right into that sort of vision. So he comes in a lot as someone who has seen the apocalypse, the end of the world, hell, and the devil.

SE: That figure of the devil also shows up in your work as something like a costume, whether it's a Krampus suit or just a mask.

FS: Yeah, for me it's something you can take on as a persona. That's another way that I've used it. Sometimes you'll have this small puny little body with this giant devil's head like a mask. It's clearly a persona put on the way you would a carnival mask. And when you have it on you're entitled to act a certain way that you wouldn't normally. It allows you to act with a certain kind of licentiousness or lewdness—all of those things that we secretly crave but don't act on. Well, with that mask, with the devil, you have that excuse. It's the classic "the devil made me do it." You can blame it on this character.

SE: There's also more than a hint of self-portraiture in those masked characters.

FS: Definitely. For me, the devil is the character most clearly associated with self-portraiture. That devil character really is sort of an archetype for me. He is the symbol for human nature, the self, and myself in particular. The foibles and shortfalls that we all have; all the ways that we are not ideally spiritual. And that's why I think the character is so profound. It's all about our spiritual failings. All of the things that are manifest in our humanity are captured in that character. That's

why he's not this dominant strong figure in my work. That's why he's not that character from the Children's Catholic Picture Bible. At best he's peculiarly demonic. He's more this bumbling, injured dope. He's just very human.

SE: And I think maybe that should be the last word. The devil is just very human. Fred, thanks so much for your time. It was great talking with you.

FS: It was my pleasure. Thanks Sage.

Notes

[1] There is debate over whether or not this is in fact the devil. See Link 1996, 109-111.

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