

People & Places

Museum explores scare tactics



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DeCordova mounts an exhibition on monsters and myth

By Judith Gaines
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LINCOLN — If Halloween seemed a bit unfulfilling this year — too many anthrax scares causing too few trick-or-treaters to come knocking at the door — there's a satisfying gang of ghouls and hobgoblins hanging out at the DeCordova Museum just now.

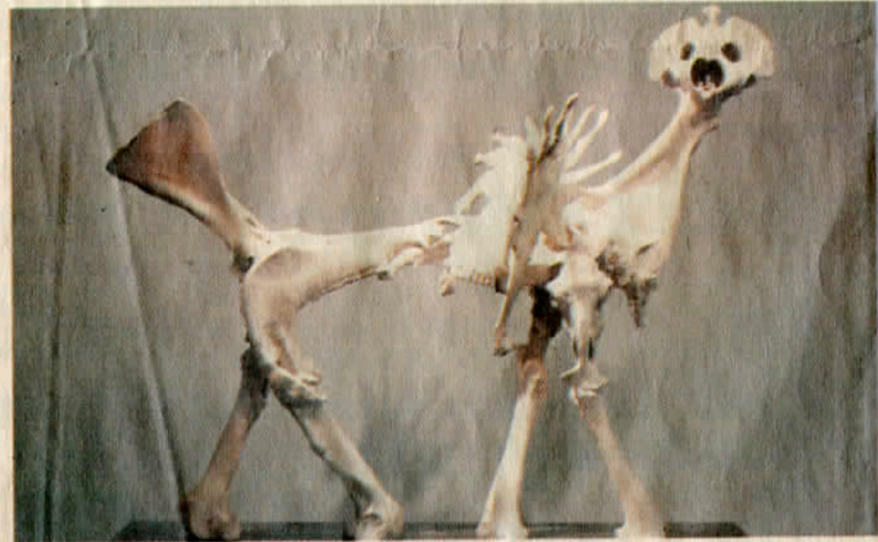
They remind the viewer that symbols and metaphors of terror, both imaginary and real, have been ubiquitous for ages, and still are — not just in warfare and film but in religion, folklore, fairy tales, satire, science fiction, cartography, heraldry, astrology, architectural ornamentation, carnivals, cartoons, and a forerunner of the modern museum, the cabinet of curiosities.

Some — like the Chinese dragon and Quetzalcoatl, the Mexican feathered serpent — have even been icons of national identity. In fact, writes curator Nick Capasso in the catalog for the DeCordova show, "Many of the foundational texts of Western liberal arts education — the Hebrew Bible, 'Gilgamesh,' 'The Odyssey,' the 'Metamorphoses' (Ovid and Kafka), 'Beowulf,' 'The Inferno' are chock-full of monsters."

The exhibit reveals that although these demons often draw their power from anxiety, they nonetheless are also able to illuminate sources of ambivalence, confusion, and wonderment, to amuse, to educate, and to heal, even as they freak us out.

"Terrors and Wonders: Monsters in Contemporary Art," on display through Jan. 6, was organized long before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. But it is both a broad, brainy rumination and a playful look at what it means to be a monster these days.

The exhibit explores the capacity of art to express terror about technology, body image, gender issues, shifting personal and cultural identities, the paranormal, disease, aging, even childhood. With 125 different monsters created by 33 artists, there's a little bit of almost everything here. But what often emerges is the



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humor in fear.

Pat Keck's "Seated Giantess," at once zany and familiar, "not only conjures up the colossi of fairyland, but also the creepier aspects of the carnival, puppetry, automata, and robots," writes Capasso. About 8 feet tall, this giant appears less awesome or frightening than spunky, and mildly bewildered by her supernatural size.

In Stacy Latt Savage's "Sisters," a set of sculptures made of china, six bald female heads chat from atop their own enormous spinal columns. Posed in a conversation circle with all their vertebrae exposed, they look something like upright and thoughtful, segmented worms.

Nearby, Joseph Wheelwright's "Griffin," made from actual bones, prances grandly, in high humor, while the artist's "Seated Angel," constructed from things like a cat's upper mandible, looks out playfully from deep within its bones. These creatures laugh at us as the artist laughs at himself.

"During the several years I built and carved bones, I smelled like meat and was dizzy from dental acrylic," Wheelwright writes in the show's catalog. "Almost nobody bought them."

Many of the figures are hybrids, crossing boundaries between what's animal, what's vegetable, and what's human. William Parker's "Green Man" series shows, among other things, the vegetative side of a kind of macho fierceness. Aida Laleian's hand-painted porcelains merge photos of her own face and torso with the limbs of various creatures, exploring, for example, the

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JENNIFER UHRHANE
Curatorial fellow
at the DeCordova Museum
in Lincoln

bovine and fishy aspects of femininity. Christopher Sharp's half-man, half-deer sculpture, "Intellect and Instinct," re-creates an ancient shamanic image. But his version also places an amusing door knocker over the stag-man's

genitals. It seems to ask: Anybody want to open this door?

And Richard Rosenblum's "Manscape" pokes fun at every sci-fi monster that ever rose from the deep. It looks much more like a mass of muck from a murky swamp than a man.

As it happens, some of the items in this show are not funny at all — not unless you believe that nature has a perverse sense of humor that sometimes mocks the least fortunate among us. In a series of arresting photos, Rosamond Purcell documents actual 19th-century cases of

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disease and deformity that she found in medical museums: a Cyclops child with no nose and one eye, who lived for just a few hours; a cast of the ballooned and rock-like skull of a man with Paget's (lion-headed) disease; a baby's skeleton showing extreme hydrocephaly, its enlarged head looking like an odd but compelling flower.

Capasso and other staff began working on the exhibit about a year and a half ago, when they realized that monsters "kept popping up in every form of art and in every age. They're a powerful physical embodiment of fears and anxieties," said Jennifer Uhrhane,

the curatorial fellow at the DeCordova. That the show opened Sept. 14, just after the terrorist attacks, was purely coincidental — but fortunate, in a way, she says.

"It's easy to get caught up in superficial issues when you think about monsters. But since the attacks, people have been turning inward and trying to deal with their fears," Uhrhane said. "Monsters help identify what it is that really scares us."

Describing the importance of monsters, Capasso said: "They are part and parcel of our condition, our imagination, our spirituality, our arts, and they won't go away — ever. We need them too much."