SELF HELP (I AM AFRAID OF THE UNIVERSE)

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I am afraid of love, sex, rejection, girls, failure, death, disease, baldness, hair, dirt, darkness, dampness, puddles, holes, hills, other people, tall people, girls, eye contact, laughter, giggles, hiccups, vomit, farts, shit, piss, ass, chapped lips, letting go, starting over, moving on, forgetting, being forgotten, getting lost, growing up, growing old, falling apart, losing my mind, just losing, slowing down, stopping, pausing, sleeping, and everything else that confronts me with the true nature of the universe. I am afraid of the universe.

I attribute these fears to my sheltered middle-class upbringing and the lack of any kind of rights of passage in my society or traumatic event in my personal life. A boy needs something to throw him out of domesticity and into the world of danger, responsibility, and consequence. Without that something, he may wind up feeling a little conflicted, like me. Supposedly I am an adult, but I couldn’t tell you how or when I became one.

In Myths to Live By, Joseph Campbell seems to be writing about my condition.

I have noticed (haven’t you) on television that when professors are asked questions they usually hum and haw and mmm and uh, until you have to ask yourself whether it is some kind of interior crisis they are experiencing, or just a loss of words for exquisite thoughts; whereas when a professional baseball or football player is asked even a pretty complicated question, he can usually answer it with ease and grace. He graduated from the womb when he was nineteen or so and the best player in the sandlot. But this other poor chap was held sitting under a canopy of professors until well into middle age, and even though he must now have acquired that degree, it came too late for him to ever to begin developing what used to be called self-confidence. He has the imprint of that professorial canopy in his IRMs forever and is still hoping that no one is going to be giving him bad marks for his answer.

The professor and I need to conquer our fears, graduate from the womb, and develop this thing called self-confidence before it’s too late. So I am using my art as self-help. My strategy is to reconcile the things I am most afraid of with the things I am most comfortable and familiar with, thus becoming comfortable with fear- so comfortable that I mock and laugh at it.
My self-help begins with materials that embody both the comforts of home and my fears of dejection and decay. These are found domestic objects such as pillows, mattresses, blankets, and articles of clothing. At one time, they were soft, clean, and fashionable items that provided warmth and protection (much like the womb), to people in safe, suburban, middle-class homes. When I find these items on the curb or in thrift stores, however, they are dejected, used up, torn, stained, faded, and sometimes smelly.

It’s nice to put our old stuff out on the curb in the morning and have it all disappear before we come home from work, but it also makes it easy for us to ignore and forget about the process of decay. This is already all too easy in a society like ours, which obsesses over youth and beauty and is relatively indifferent towards everything else. To keep the process of decay present in my mind, I resurrect domestic throwaways, the kinds of things we banish from sight after a few short years of intimacy and comfort. I am particularly attracted to soft materials because they suggest the human form in the way they fold, sag, and lose their oomph.

Using the human forms I recognize as a starting point, I transform my materials into archetypal monsters and large, grotesque body parts. It’s really not much of a transformation at all. I take a disgusting pile of trash and tear, bend, wrap, stretch, squeeze, glue, and paint it until it resembles an even more disgusting monster. Along the way I am compelled to embellish with eyeballs, saliva, genitals, armpit hair, toenails, and feces, but none of this contradicts the essential character of my materials.

I know the transformation is complete and successful when the materials create a convincing illusion from afar, but retain their identities up close. I think of this in terms of painting, the way a series of brushstrokes by Velasquez can read as reflective armor or as globs of paint depending on how far back the viewer stands. My viewer sees giant feet from a distance, and mattresses up close.

The illusion of giant feet or monsters seen from a distance gives my viewer an immediate sense of repulsion and fright. Usually this sort of thing is quickly dismissed as mere fantasy, because everyone knows that monsters and
giant feet are not real. But the mundane materials noticeable from up close give the work a sense of reality, and make the fantastical aspects more difficult to dismiss.

In addition to letting my materials show in the finished works, I let them sag, balance, bend, or strain naturally with the force of gravity. This takes the reality aspect and believability of the work one step further. In *Poodle*, for example, a fully “sculpted” dog is suspended mid-leap by a taught leash and the force of gravity. The choke collar squeezes the dog’s neck, literally choking it and causing the material in this area to bunch up like flesh. Because we are witnessing “real” pain, we are able to empathize with this dog in addition to feeling disgust and fear.

When I get out of the way of my materials and let them do what they do best, I like to think I am acting heroically. Joseph Campbell says this about heroism in his television series on PBS *The Power of Myth*.

> The hero is the one who comes to participate in life courageously and decently, in the way of nature, not in the way of personal rancor, disappointment, or revenge.

I interpret “the way of nature” as “the way of the material.” In the studio, I must remind myself that I am a participant with my materials. I am not in control. I am not master. It’s always a struggle for me to let go of my ego and find out what I already know—carpets are good for making tubes, pillows are good for poking, and mattresses bend like cartilage. These “discoveries” are surprisingly difficult to make, because my tendency is to make things much more sophisticated and complicated than they need to be. I want to show off my engineering, sculpting, and painting skills, even when they aren’t necessary. This is acting in the way of “personal rancor.” To act “in the way of nature” is to
collaborate with my materials, to acknowledge their innate qualities and use them to my advantage.

Often the monsters I create are involved in a struggle similar to mine in the studio. They, too, find it difficult to let go of their sense of control. They insist on being taken seriously and make fools of themselves in the process. This is the kind of character that brings forth laughter alternating with pity. In his autobiography *Clown*, Emmitt Kelley describes the tramp clown character he developed working in the circus, which has a similar effect.

I am a sad and ragged little guy who is very serious about everything he attempts—no matter how futile or how foolish it appears to be. I am the hobo who found out the hard way that the deck is stacked, the dice “frozen,” the race fixed and the wheel crooked, but there is always that one tiny, forlorn spark of hope still glimmering in his soul which makes him keep on trying. All I can say beyond that is that there must be a lot of people in this world who feel that way and that, fortunately, they come to the circus. In my tramp clown character, folks who are down on their luck, have had disappointments and have maybe been pushed around by circumstances beyond their control, see a caricature of themselves. By laughing at me, they really laugh at themselves, and realizing that they have done this gives them a sort of spiritual second wind for going back into battle.

One of my early sculptures, *Self-Portrait Holding a Difficult Pose*, is effective in this way. In it, I am portrayed as a wannabe yoga master hiding the lower half of my body behind a cardboard cutout of legs. My skin is shriveled and covered in boils, and my bare ass is showing from behind the cutout. There is quite a discrepancy between my physical reality and the enlightened master I am trying so hard to project.

All of my sculptures are in some sense self-caricatures like this one. My feet are not trying to pass as yoga masters, but as monumental, serious sculptures. This is obvious from their scale, rigid verticality, and repeated form. But they can barely stand up straight and they are oozing all over the place. They could never
be confused for Donald Judd’s. The fact that they are trying to pass for something they are not, and that they seem so perfectly oblivious, is what makes them pathetic and sets the viewer up to feel pity.

But in the end, pity is not the dominating emotional effect of either Emmitt Kelley’s performances or my sculptures. Though our subject matter is sometimes quite serious and sad, we both handle it with a certain amount of detachment. We relish in the most ridiculous and grotesque qualities of our subjects and even exaggerate them. We don’t dwell over their suffering- we have fun with it.

Many artists like to flaunt their ability to have fun in the face of pain and suffering. Peter Saul probably has more fun than anyone, but Robert Crumb and Paul McCarthy also know how to have a good time. These artists are often criticized for being insensitive and offensive. In a way, they are, because they don’t take pity on themselves or anyone else, no matter the circumstances. To me, their lack of pity shows that they understand pain and suffering as something universal. No one can be singled out as having an unfair amount of pain and suffering in their lives, because life is full of pain and suffering. All one can do is take it as it comes and learn to live in its presence.

I flaunt my insensitivity by presenting my work in an overly simplistic and straightforward manner. There is never any mystery as to what viewers are supposed to look at or how they are supposed to navigate the space. My large sculptures are plopped right there in the middle, and take the general shape of spheres, rectangles, or totems. Sometimes I include models and baby versions
with larger works to make things even more obvious. I hit viewers over the head again with titles like Foot, Poodle, and Bedbug so that there is absolutely no apparent sophistication or sensitivity to things like failure, mortality, and pain.

Sometimes I invite my viewers to take part in leisurely, frivolous, and fun activities that further diminish the serious nature of the work. I invite them to jump on beds, look through telescopes, and play with toy models of larger works. In the current exhibition, I invite them to lounge about on comfy cushions and benches as they enjoy the view of cancerous growth and fungi-infested feet all around them. These additions let viewers know that this work is not meant to be scary and full of anxiety, as is often the case with grotesque work. In this case, it’s about letting your guard down and accepting the grotesque as an ever-present part of your environment.

The first monster I ever made came about because I couldn’t accept my own grotesque artistic process. His name was Stan, and I made him out of all my old failed paintings, drawings, and design projects. I was deeply ashamed of these works- to the point where I banished them and didn’t acknowledge their existence to other people. At this time, my concept of an artist was still based largely on the books I had read about Pablo Picasso in high school. All of these books say exactly the same thing: Picasso is a genius, draws like Raphael at age 10, nothing but masterpieces, ten paintings a day, new style for every new lover, eats fish with his bare hands, bullfights, women, paint. I was young and impressionable, and suddenly had a lot to live up to. I worked hard at being a genius. I worked my ass off, and fooled a few people, too.
But being a genius is exhausting. All that denial really wears you out. So one day I gave it all up and built a crude, nine-foot green monster out of my worst paintings ever. I used stretcher bars for the support structure, cut and wrapped the canvas to look like skin, and glazed everything green for unity. Despite all of the process and destruction he is literally made of, Stan proudly stands naked with his hands on his hips, smiling down at the viewer. His genitals hang eye-level and shit is smeared all over his behind. He is ugly and proud of it, as am I.

I’m still self-conscious about in-progress work and asking for help when I need it, but I’m getting better. When I start thinking like a genius, I just remind myself that I’m making big feet and assholes. Embracing these lowly things as subject matter for my art helps me embrace my own imperfections, to take pride and learn from my failures.
Self-Portrait Holding a Difficult Pose 2005

Stan, 2006
Poodle, 2007

Foot, 2009