

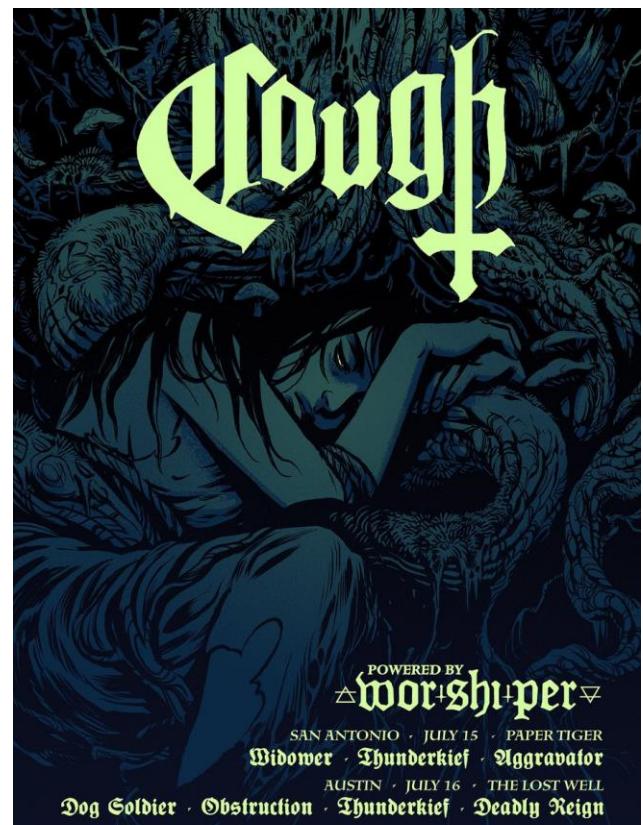
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Visualizing Metal: Artistic Representation of the Extreme Metal Genres

Throughout all genres of music, there is accompanying visual representation presented to either market the material and/or to interpret music through illustrative expression. A prominent example being the work of Wassily Kandinsky, who painted for such operas as Wagner's *Lohengrin* to express his admiration and appreciation of the composition. Alternatively, Alphonse Mucha was commissioned to create eloquent illustrations for many musical productions in his time, dominantly with the purpose of promotion and marketing the performances. Metal in itself has an interesting place in the relationship between visual arts and compositional work. If one were to look at early Black Metal, they would see that the majority of work used both to represent and to market their work takes on a more D.I.Y approach. Thus resorting to utilizing their own photography, drawings, and other such materials to compile a visual analysis of their musical compositions. As Black Metal evolved into mainstream acknowledgment, their resources in promoting their work branched out to incorporating outside visual artists into this process. When examining the artistic relation between music and art, especially in metal, it is the evolution of both the genre and the artists themselves that are important to examine.

As many genres of metal had to initially grow into mainstream attention, many artists did not start their careers or association to extreme metal off the bat. One of the strongest examples of this is an artist by the name of Becky Cloonan, who initially began as a comic artist only to expand her work into numerous metal festivals and individual commissions for touring acts.

Cloonan's work itself feels like the music she is representing. It is often times morose, heavy, eerie, dark, and fearsome. Regularly, it is lyrical and story-telling in and of itself, tying in with her history of



narrative art in comics. One can see the slithering, snake-like, roots enveloping a forlorn and disheveled black haired women, intertwined passively in the underbrush. If a picture says a thousand works, her work is easily comparable to the subject matter of many accounts of Doom metal lyrics. This seamless fit stems from her not only creating work for such genres, but being an avid fan of the genres themselves. She has a strong understanding of unifying her work with the slow, melodic, and heavy pull of her subject, and exemplifies this in her content, color, and design choices to give vision to sound. Cloonan's work also expands into Death and Black metal. She has created promotional posters and designs for Roadburn Festival in the Netherlands that encompass a varied assortment of genres and attendees such as Coven, Bongzilla, Baroness, Oathbreaker, Converge, Full of Hell, and Youth Code to name a very minute few. However even her work for such an expansive festival still feels more sludgy and slow in design, suggesting a comfort level with the themes and material more often associated with sludgier and heavier metal than necessarily hardcore or thrash would. Her work often regresses to medieval themes and notions of death, demons, murder, or black magic, so it fits in ideally with many of the more prominent themes in the extreme metal genres; but, her interests and talents remain varied, and while she has branched out from her initial position as a comics artist, she still regularly balances jobs in both:

"I moved to New York in 1998, and pretty quickly got into the punk and hardcore scene, and started doing album, T-shirt, and flyer art, and I guess just kept doing it. My main job has always been comics, but it's great to be able to work with bands I love, since music is such a big part of my life, and what inspires so much of my art. I just did a poster for Black Sabbath's The End tour, and I was like, "Damn, this is as good as it gets, time to hang it up." Crazy!"

(Cloonan, Becky-Interview with *Benjamin Bailey* of Noisey-)

Some artists appear to follow the exact opposite path in their career association to metal though. One artists who seemed to grow from the Death Metal scene is Mark Riddick, whose association and style in the metal community has landed him some unexpected clientele. Riddick, like Cloonan, has created promotional work for varied music festivals, such as the Gothenburg Deathfest, and an expansive array of bands. His style is grotesque and revolting in the best of ways, minimal in color (focusing on a black and white high contrast appearance to his illustrations), and riddled in decay. Common themes of death metal are prevalent throughout his work (though he does expand into Doom and Black metal compositionally as well at times): Rotted skeletons with organs and bile draped around them like worms through a carcass, dismembering fellow revenants and tearing the remaining flesh from unconcealed bone. Slime and slobber soak sentient skulls and blood leaks from the crevices between cracks in bone and skin. It is certainly not what one would consider art for a mainstream audience outside of the metal community, however his work has drawn a lot of positive attention

from larger labels and bands, and consequently created a stir among a large number of Extreme Metal fans. One of the most controversial and argued client being Justin Bieber, quite possibly the furthest one could reach from any genre of Extreme Metal. Riddick was hired to create a number of promotional materials in his signature style by the marketing and promotions team representing the Bieber tour at the time. A divisive split between fans and critiques rose, ultimately arriving with this statement from Riddick:



"Now it's time to address all of the mixed feedback regarding these logos. We all know that sub-cultural phenomena find a way into mainstream media; there is a natural curiosity about forbidden things (such as heavy metal culture). This isn't the first time I've been solicited for mainstream work; past examples include requests from the Cartoon Network (DETHKLOK), Volvo Auto, Travel Channel, Ill-Fonic video games, and others. If you think I made a fortune off of these logos you're mistaken. I charge all of my clients the same flat rate whether your JUSTIN BIEBER or NUNSLAUGHTER, etc. Some might think I'm out of my mind, but as an artist I'm always looking for unique and interesting challenges on occasion, especially after doing this kind of work for 25 years, getting out of my comfort zone can be a healthy change every so often."

(-Riddick, Mark)

Ultimately one must reflect on the genre of the music in relation to the responses towards Riddick's art. Metal is inherently considered separated from the mainstream, especially in the case of the extreme metals, and there is a sense of community that derives from that alienation. It is easy to feel that community is being attacked when one introduces something that is avidly seen as being intentionally pushed aside and rejected by the community into it, especially when one might feel that this imposing threat has no true interest in the genre and is utilizing it to push their own financial gain. However, as the recognition of metal and its assorted sub-genres grows, as does the curiosity of both those in and outside of the metal genre to discover "uncharted" territory. It is up to the listener/viewer to discuss and decide in their own groups, and as individuals, if they feel this is an appropriation of their metal community, exploration, or somewhere in the

middle, and where the role of the visual artist stands in this discussion. It is refreshing to see that the artist in question has chosen in this discourse to have a verbal stance of their own, so as one might dissect and interpret it in the aforementioned debate.

Occasionally, the art that represents the music its created to showcase, doesn't really match the appearance of what one would expect. This is by no means necessarily a negative. When looking at such work as Charlie Immer's back cover for Propagandhi's Failed States, its both surprising but appealing simultaneously. Its rich in color and detail and devoid of the glaringly obvious, stark, political meaning one would access from the lyrical content. John Dyer Baizley introduces similar aspects to his own band, Baroness, in their album art. What is impressive about Baizley is that he is equally a musician and an artist, not only creating work for his own projects, but also for Kvelertak, Kylesa, Darkest Hour, SkeletonWitch, Cursed, Black Tusk, and Torche. What first stands out about his work is the softness to it, which is possibly the most surprising aspect. Its not that mentions of the occult and traditional metal themes are devoid from the subject matter, but the manner in which they are handled is almost reminiscent of Mucha or Klimt. Striking gold detailing is regularly present in his work, framing the curved lines of women in floral arrangements and leaning amongst surrounding fauna and flora. It is certainly a deviation from what has been previously explored in prior passages and artists that have been covered. However, despite the bright and eye-catching colors, the rich roundness of the linework, and the allure of the female form regularly present in his work, there is still an air of something sinister. At times, the women in his compositions may delicately hold a knife to the neck of one of the adorning animals, or wasps may emerge to encircle the female form draped over their nest. Arrows and jutting bones sneak through the calm and composed expression of the subject glaring through the viewer. Leaves transform into hands, entrapping a mute, screaming, figure as a horned menace peaks through the cracks of the illustration. It is an excellent, melodic, unification of horror and beauty that exemplifies many of the musicians work it is created for,. Especially when the general interpretation of the music may bring about imagery of only horror sans the beauty to the untrained eye/ear. It is far more delicate and fragile than one may expect, but equally as relevant to the themes and tone of the music as Cloonan's and Riddick's work are to their own interpretations.

Baizley is another interesting artist/musician in that he started out with the intent of pursuing the visual arts as his main creative focus since being a child. He took art classes, attended the prestigious RISD, but grew into creating work for his own bands, as well as peer musicians, out of necessity:

“Several years down the line I realized that, whereas had started out with an interest in becoming a fine artist, I now saw myself taking on commissions in the more proper role of an illustrator or designer, which I’ve never been entirely

comfortable with. Through every path that I've chosen, I have tried to claim full authorship over what I make, so it can suit my needs as an artist first, and then, by proxy, the musicians and artists that I work with are happy with what they get. It's a hard-line stance, but one which bears the most fruitful results."

-(Baizley, John Dyer in an interview with Michael Weigman for Metal Injection, July 10th 2004)



The marriage between visual arts and the musical compositions of metal draws from growth and exploration from both sides. Like design, successful collaboration comes from an understanding of unifying the work, yet also creating variety amongst it. Following the examination of three artists with varied backgrounds, styles, and introductions to working in the metal community, one can see that the art created by each is a direct interpretation to how they as individuals see the music and interpret it. It is not a method of merely making a product or creating a promotion, it is a translation of a language to that of another; and, like

any translation, there are varied dialects that stand out amongst one another. This is why, while there may be an uncountable number of artists creating work for the same genres of music, the specified dialect in which they interpret the music creates such expansive results in their interpretations. It could well be argued that should one examine music compositions based on illustrations or paintings, rather than the other way around, they would find similar results in variations of music based on a singular style or era of painting.

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