Sublimity of the Cliché

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In the dark, a rafter covered with nails thus becomes the jaw of a fabulous animal, a lonely lake becomes the gigantic eye of a monster, and the outline of a cloud or shadow becomes a threatening Satanic face.

-Ernst Jentsch, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906)[i]

It is day. No sun is visible, but pale light permeates the surrounding space, rendering it translucent. Weary light reflects off still water in the distance, weakly doubling the low hills it hazily illuminates. It crumbles over the rocks and sand like stale bread, vanishing into a puny pine grove, never to be seen again. It rises slowly, dissipating and folding back on itself because there is no sky, at last clinging to the grimy stone of a sculpted head. Darkness is also present. Darkness in the form of shadow and smoke. Darkness smearing light across scarred metal surfaces. Darkness congealing among pistons and wheels, seeping back down into the earth. On this beach, which hardly merits a name, something nameless stands. Appearing to gaze – or at one time long ago to have gazed, or perhaps to be on the verge of gazing, someday in the eternally distant future – into a void we cannot see. Stalled there or moving imperceptibly. Will it suddenly sputter (back) to life? Faint markings in the sand look as if they could be its tracks. Billowing black smoke that resembles no known climatic phenomenon signals smoldering inner workings – this could mean several things: either that it's firing up, idling heedlessly or finally burning out. To give it a sort of name: sphinx with the body of a nineteenth-century locomotive, gone off its rails and silent as the tomb.

The image is named *untitled (sphinx)* (2016). As with all of Jim Kazanjian's hyper-collages, it was generated through the interrelation of many fragmented source images found online, experimentally combined and smoothed out into an emergent apparition. It is impossible to imagine all of the images that went into making this mechanical sphinx on the beach. Like the shifting and crumbling architectural follies that appear so often in his work, the image's instability gives it a strange kind of life – the life of a fluttering cobweb, perhaps, combined with the life of a demolition site. His art is an impersonal creative frenzy amidst an entropic wasteland strewn with digital data as much as with mud and debris. A wasteland of the unconscious from which the impossible architectures of dreams arise, bearing intimations of the repressed.

A rumor: somewhere in the woods, in a clearing, once stood a Victorian mansion, or at least a pile of rubble suggesting that it did. (Was there ever really a house there? No one remembers...) Then people started hearing noises – day and night, what a clatter! – and seeing smoke rising above the trees. "It must be this, it must be that…" So they investigated. Only one came back, and completely out of his mind. He said that the rubble had "built itself" into a monstrous structure resembling a termite mound stricken by a flesh-eating disease. That a multitude of disparate fragments of ruined mansion and forest could recombine through their own demonic inclinations into such a dreadfully hideous form seemed utterly impossible to me, until… This is precisely the dark and inexplicable process that underlies not only *untitled (folly)* (2010), but Kazanjian's entire oeuvre.

Whether or not the source images Kazanjian draws out of his oceanic database to compose each hyper-collage really do have an innate tendency toward the grotesque, or if it's just his own, the fact that they lend themselves so readily to conjuring apocalyptic moods suggests that there is more than one individual's aesthetic sensibility at play. Just as all the works are untitled, the secret motivations that shape them are also, in a sense, anonymous. If the emergent effect of joining together so many disparate images found online is the perpetual generation of ever more intricate webs of chaos and decay, then isn't Kazanjian simply interpreting what's already there? His hyper-collages would then manifest the dark dreams of a collective unconscious embodied by the Internet. His process, somewhere between reading tealeaves and performing a chemical synthesis, would begin to analyze these dreams.

And yet, when we gaze into these dreams (our dreams?), are we not struck by their melodrama, their storybook grandiosity, as if the Internet were a sleeping child brimming with the clichés and domestic fictions of the evils of a bygone era? We cannot help but recognize the hyper-collages to be not only apparitions, but also masks. They gaze back at us with contorted, half-hidden smiles, as if they were indulging in the gleeful absurdity of a bad horror film. Consider *untitled (ufo)* (2013). All the atmospherics of a spooky graveyard – overgrown, abandoned, moldering. A strange sort of mausoleum incorporating elements of Gothic and Victorian architecture with the suburban melancholy of antennas, floodlights and a satellite dish. Blasting off. To say that the image as a whole is a cliché might not be accurate (I, for one, have never seen anything like it) but it is certainly built from plenty of them. Like a gargoyle face that,

instead of provoking screams, only causes us to smirk, sigh or laugh with embarrassment, a cliché is something so unoriginal and disappointingly predictable that it has become evacuated of its intended significance. But what role do clichés play in Kazanjian's work, where they actually seem intentional, where they might even start to regain a kind of effectiveness? Maybe these building blocks, these raw units of cliché, give us clues about the no longer discernible sources Kazanjian used to construct this apparition.

That there is a certain potential for apocalyptic visions latent in the infinity of images circulating online cannot come as a surprise. From the bits and pieces of repetitive and oblivious data that form the molecular substance of the Internet, Kazanjian meticulously crafts his composite clichés. While these apparitions often depict massive forces of destruction verging on the sublime, e.g. *untitled (sun)* (2006) and *untitled (house)* (2006), they also suggest that it is in the endless charade of hackneyed images that the true signs of the apocalypse are to be found. Kazanjian's visions reveal that the apocalyptic itself has become clichéd, so that we may become attuned to another sort of apocalypse – one of cheap repetition and empty similitude concealed beneath the eternally fluctuating surface of multiplicity. In this doomsday scenario, the hordes of overused images we've seen to death rise again from the grave, overwhelming our dreams and reanimating them as the archetypes of an unfathomably boring and superficial age. And so these visions into the void of infinite proliferation face us with the last true form of nightmarish sublimity still possible in our image-saturated culture: the sublimity of the cliché.

The sublime, in its original sense, describes an experience of overwhelming awe before cosmic forces that is then reigned in by the intellect and brought under rational control. The terrifying spectacle of inhuman landscapes or collapsing structures can become a form of aesthetic enjoyment when viewed from a safe distance, and even from up close the dissociative power of the intellect can create enough distance from itself for this perceived mastery of the spectral and destructive to become twistedly pleasing. Indeed, it would seem as if many of Kazanjian's hyper-collages encourage us somehow to laugh into the abyss. And yet there is clearly something more to them that resists this mastery, some other capacity that remains threatening and immediate, as well as strange and wonderful, that sustains this awe and captivates us long enough to look closer and see something more than ourselves.

Often the bizarre edifices that populate the hyper-collages appear to confront the viewer head on, like some kind of alien and potentially hostile life form. In *untitled (fortification)* (2008), a rock monolith juts out of a surging sea, eerily reminiscent of the proportions of a human portrait. However, instead of a face there is an unidentifiable aperture staring directly at the viewer, while steam pours out of a second orifice above. As for the purpose of this fortification, its mechanisms or its makers, nothing is known. Like a house that we recognize as a familiar face and so unconsciously endow with personality, the monolith addresses us as a fellow being, but one whose expression is as inhospitable as it is incomprehensible.

Other structures portray an indifference or ambivalence to humanity that undermines the possible signs of life they offer us. The inner light radiating from the base

of the chimneys in *untitled (grotto)* (2014) recalls the domestic warmth of the hearth while at the same time becoming a sign of hidden danger, inferno or rote mechanical activity. *Untitled (backyard)* (2011) transforms what is commonly a private space of leisure and safety into a desolate, entrapping enclosure, animated only by the slow trickling of gradual deterioration. And the conception of a home as a stable and welcoming place is completely inverted in *untitled (vehicle)* (2013), in which a quaint Victorian house from hell glowers and lurches toward the viewers, pursuing them on caterpillar treads over rough terrain.

Whether they are overtly threatening, subtly disturbing or simply weird, what all of these hyper-collages share is an uncertainty about the different ways that life, mechanical repetition, natural forces and entropy animate matter. All of the structures seem to be in some way active, dynamically decomposing or in a state of suspended animation. The question is always lurking somewhere in the shadows: who, if anyone, built this? In the case of a vehicle in motion, such as *untitled (coach)* (2016), the question can be extended to ask: who, if anyone, is operating this? Perhaps that's why its whimsical design also sparks a twinge of trepidation as we observe it creaking by. Is it alive? Or is it only through its perpetual dying or enslavement to the laws of physics that it takes on the appearance of life? And then, the uncertainty that is the most disconcerting of all: is there even any difference?

From the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century through the Machine Age at the turn of the twentieth, this line of questioning was at the forefront of scientific, philosophical and artistic discussions. The increasing prevalence of

machines in factories and everyday environments was changing the way people understood their relation to the inanimate things around them. The capacity of machines to perform better than humans at certain repetitive tasks was seen as both miraculous and threatening. At that time, fantasies of the automaton, a machine that resembles and behaves like a human, became a common source of wonder and horror. Like the medieval religious statues that were said to cry, bleed or come to life to perform miracles, the automaton blurred the distinction between person and thing, reality and representation. The possibility of humans becoming like mere automatons was another fascinating and troubling aspect of the rise of machines (a possibility that still haunts us today, as our lives become increasingly automated by robots and mediated by gadgets). The concept of the uncanny emerged at this historical moment, and so it is no shock that it perfectly describes Kazanjian's work, which is teeming with references to sculptural and mechanical transfigurations. For instance, in *untitled (station)* (2014) a stone saint appears ready at any moment to proceed forward from his niche to the rumbling and whirring of long silent cogs. This hyper-collage jolts us into recognizing unnerving similarities between the medieval and mechanical artifacts it represents and the digital ones that brought it into being.

According to its inventor, the Machine Age psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, the uncanny is the "dark feeling of uncertainty" that arises when the clear distinction between animate and inanimate, living and dead, biological and mechanical is muddled by some intermediate form.[ii] The horror of this disorientation stems from the recognition that the self is also composed of mechanical, impersonal, alien processes, and is not the coherent

whole it so often understands itself to be. It's not only the fear of our inescapable mortality, but the irrepressible intuition that disintegration and death are ever-present within our lives that gives the uncanny its irresolvable quality. The fracturing of discrete categories into metamorphic continuums that include humans, machines, stones, life, mechanical repetition, entropy, creation, destruction, self, structure and landscape is not isolated to any particular time or place. The link between human and inhuman is universal and now and then it becomes indiscernible, sometimes through art. As novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote in 1884 of the Symbolist artist Odilon Redon: "These drawings defied classification, most of them exceeding the bounds of pictorial art and creating a new type of fantasy, born of sickness and delirium."[iiii] Kazanjian's art is a new type of fantasy – the nameless sphinx on the beach, a Frankenstein's monster without a maker – conjuring ancient and modern forms of the uncanny within an apparition that emerges through the digital uncanny. These visions arise like strangely familiar nightmares from the dark oceanic delirium of online images.

i Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," 1906, trans. Roy Sellars (1995): 12, http://www.art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf (accessed June 22, 2016).

ii Ibid., 11.

iii Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, 1884, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 60.