



Vestigial Trail

JIM HOLYOAK

The Kootenay Gallery of Art is a principal gallery for the visual arts within the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. Located in Castlegar, the gallery is committed to include, through exhibitions and programming, a diversity of artists and art forms that enrich, challenge, and educate the audience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge with gratitude that our gallery is located on the unceded traditional territory of the sn̓ɬay̓ckstx Sinixt Arrow Lakes in Castlegar. We would like to thank the Sinixt and the many diverse Indigenous and Métis people who live here now for the opportunity to live, work, and host cultural experiences within this beautiful watershed.

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We especially thank all our members, donors, board members, and volunteers, and artist Jim Holyoak.

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JIM HOLYOAK

**Kootenay Gallery of Art
June 23 – August 20, 2022**

"Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters. Fantasy united with reason is the mother of the arts, and a source of wonders." —FRANCISCO GOYA

ARTIST STATEMENT

My art practice is comprised of drawing, ink-painting, artist books, comics, and room-sized drawing installations. Throughout my life, drawing has been a way of contemplating animals and monsters, perception and fantasy, the real and unreal, metamorphosis and hidden worlds. What we think about, remember, and imagine have powerful effects on how we perceive and experience, on what we believe, and how we behave. This is what prevents me from dismissing the imaginary as completely unreal.

Over the last twenty-plus years, I have amassed an enormous collection of papers—ranging in scale from postcards to murals—that I have drawn on, written on, wrinkled, and saturated with ink. Some are pieces unto themselves, some are pages for hand-bound books and zines, and some are materials for dense installation environments, tailored to the architecture of the rooms that they occupy.

Though the content of my work ranges from the biological to the phantasmagorical, there is a persistent interest in human empathy for other species and in the difficulty of fathoming deep time: the world millions of years ago and the world ahead. The animals I contemplate most are the species that never existed, that no longer exist, and those that are on the brink of extinction. For example, dinosaurs fascinate me because they are completely real and completely imaginary—they are monsters for real. This tension between what is real and imaginary, what once existed and no longer exists, is the uniting principle in all of my work. Just as fairy tales often serve a cautionary function, I hope these drawings of monstrous beings and lonely places will cast shadows of doubt over assumptions of human pre-eminence.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY



Left: *Monster Theory Mind Map*. 2018. Inverted photo of pencilled text. Photo: Jim Holyoak

Jim Holyoak's discipline consists primarily of drawing and writing, artist books, and large-scale drawing installations. He received a BFA from the University of Victoria, an MFA from Concordia University, and studied as an apprentice to master ink-painter Shen Ling Xiang, in Yangshuo, China. In parallel with his solo practice, Holyoak has orchestrated numerous collaborative drawing projects, often with fellow artist Matt Shane, that have sometimes involved hundreds of people drawing together. His work has circulated widely, including at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, KM21 in The Hague (formerly the GEM Museum of Contemporary Art), the Norwegian Drawing Association in Oslo, the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art in Rīga, the Carnegie Mellon International Drawing Symposium in Pittsburgh, and the Drawing Museum in Sweden. Holyoak has attended artist residencies in New York, Los Angeles, Mumbai, Banff, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, England, and throughout Norway. In 2022, his work will be included in the publication *Drawing in the Present Tense*, and his first graphic novel, *Book of 19 Nocturnes*, will be published by Flask Press. Since 2018, Holyoak has been based in Nelson, British Columbia, where he teaches remotely at Vancouver's Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

ESSAY

by Maggie Shirley

Meeting the Monstrous: Wandering the Vestigial Trail

In the art exhibition *Vestigial Trail*, we take a journey through the complex imagination and eyes of Jim Holyoak. He is primarily a drawer, and he works mostly with ink and graphite on paper. Diversity is a key component in the scale and form of his work and how he undertakes his practice. He creates images that stretch from floor to ceiling, as well as small, intimate drawings. While Holyoak's immense drawings are awesome—in the original sense of the word—he also scatters small details throughout the work that require close examination. A dark moodiness pervades many of his pieces, creating a sense of isolation. In others, he injects humour and play into the art. Creating from both observation and imagination, Holyoak inspects the boundaries of existing and fictitious worlds.

The frequent subjects of Holyoak's artwork are two of his passions: mountains and monsters. In this exhibition, Holyoak considers the monstrous as it relates to our contemporary landscape. The exhibition's title, *Vestigial Trail*, brings the two ideas together and is a play on the biomedical term "vestigial tail." On occasion, humans are born with flesh protrusions from their lower backs or tailbones. These "tails" are often genetic hiccups—distal remnants of when our ancestors swung from trees. During the Victorian era, Charles Darwin cited human vestigial organs as support for his theory that humans are ancestral cousins to primates. At the same time, royals and the public were delighting in freak shows, which gave prominence to those born with physical anomalies, some of whom were considered monstrous, including conjoined twins, the Hottentot Venus,¹ and people with extra appendages, such as vestigial tails.

The word "trail" in the title of Holyoak's *Vestigial Trail* is a path that leads us from the coccyx into the deep, dark woods. It is a reminder not only of our evolution from animals, but an evolution with long roots into the Earth. According to both myth and science, the human body and the Earth share ancestry in the heavens. As

¹ The Hottentot Venus was Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from southwest Africa. Baartman was forcibly taken to England and displayed in freak shows for her race and body type, particularly what the Victorians perceived to be her disproportionately large buttocks.

astrophysicist Carl Sagan famously said on his popular television series, *Cosmos*, “The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff.” The Earth, the human body, and all plant and animal matter come from this original source. Indigenous knowledge tells us of our connection to the planet. “Okanagans teach that the body is Earth itself,” writes Okanagan author and educator Jeanette Armstrong. “Our flesh, blood, and bones are Earth-body; in all cycles in which Earth moves, so does our body.”

While Indigenous belief retains the connection to Earth, Judeo-Christian culture cut the genetic bond between land and humanity. In the Bible, Genesis (2:7) says that God formed Adam from “the dust of the ground.” Eve was not created from the Earth but from Adam’s rib. From the beginning, Eve was cast as the “other,” not the dominant. “Othering” is a process of separating, and it justifies creating a false hierarchy based on subjective criteria, whether it is race, language, culture, gender, ability, sexual orientation, species, or material form. In the story of Genesis, the snake tempts Eve, she bites the apple, and is cast out of paradise. At that moment, she is separated from the Earth. Who becomes the monster of the story: the snake or Eve?

Monster Theory tells us monsters are born through the process of othering. Jerome Jeffrey Cohen, the father of Monster Theory, states that a monster “is always a displacement.” In Cohen’s essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” where he reveals the nature of monsters and the monstrous, he states it is difficult to define monsters because one defining characteristic is that they don’t fit into categories; they can exist in reality and the imagination. In the current moment, which monster is scarier: the Demogorgon in Netflix’s *Stranger Things* series or Russian President Vladimir Putin?

Giving the example of vampires, Cohen also tells us a monster is born from our cultural fears and that we simultaneously fear and desire monsters. Canadian female impersonator Craig Russell (1948–1990) said in a 1978 interview, “I feel like Frankenstein sometimes, but everybody loves a monster.” As much as the “other” scares dominant culture, it is also the subject of fascination and curiosity.

In the Kootenays, we both love and fear the mountains. As places of play and wonder, the mountains can scare us when the weather turns wicked and the clouds roll in—we become cautious and wary of their power. As the Earth’s temperature rises and our forests burn, the monster comes down from the mountain to chase us and consume our homes. Each summer, as Cohen theorizes, the fire monster gets pushed back, only to return the next year. We can never kill it entirely.

For the exhibition *Vestigial Trail*, artist Jim Holyoak has transformed the gallery into an environment where our eyes and ears are invigorated and our imaginations thrive. It is both exciting and unsettling. Within the exhibition space, visitors have the chance to read, draw, and write. Through the processes of disturbance and reflection, can we remember that the mountain, the monster, the other are in fact ourselves? We can’t kill the monster entirely. Can we instead learn to witness, even embrace, our monstrous selves?

Bibliography

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Craig Russell, *RetroBites: Outrageous Craig* (1978) | CBC TV <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWV9bMndut4>

CURATOR STATEMENT

by Maggie Shirley

In these uncertain times, our culture is sailing into uncharted territories. The combination of COVID, climate change, war, as well as political and social unrest, have created a general confusion about our current and future directions. What will happen next? How do we go forward from here? What do we bring with us? Who can we trust?

From the 14th to 16th centuries, the open ocean—and the mammals and fish living within it—were unknown entities, as were the lands newly “discovered” by the Europeans. People’s anxieties overtook their imaginations to the point where they envisioned oceanic creatures with extraordinary powers. European cartographers created images of dragons, monstrous fish, and beautiful sirens lurking in the oceanic edges.¹ Theorist and author JJ Cohen says that monsters are born from a specific time, feeling, and place.² The oceans and distant lands were certainly a dreaded mystery.

If we were to make a contemporary map of the Kootenays today, would it contain monsters? Would the monsters be friendly, fierce, or both? Would they be human or non-human or something in between? Would they keep us away from exploring the edges, in this case the edges of thoughts and ideas?

Jim Holyoak captures some of this tension in his numerous ink and graphite drawings. Two of Holyoak’s favourite subjects are mountains and monsters, and he brings these two seemingly unrelated topics together. In some drawings, the mountains come alive with anthropomorphic features, such as faces. In other drawings, the mountains are home to mythical and mystical beasts. Mountains could be sites of refuge for monsters or hunting grounds to feed their endless appetites.

How we see monsters reflects how we see ourselves. In Holyoak’s art practice, he captures the sublimity of both monsters and the mountains. First articulated by philosopher Edmund Burke in 1757, the sublime

1 Pool, Jeremy. *Sea Monsters: A Voyage around the World’s Most Beguiling Map*. By Joseph Nigg, *Imago Mundi*, 66:2, 245, DOI: 10.1080/03085694.2014.902587, 2014.

2 Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

describes something in nature that evokes a feeling of awe yet has the power to destroy.³ We feel thrilled at the sight of a hanging glacier or thunderous waterfall, yet also potentially afraid. Cohen describes a similar reaction to monsters, which may explain the popularity of monsters in movies and literature: we both fear and desire them.

Through his landscapes and monster portraits, Holyoak deftly illustrates the anxiety and ecstasy of our time, reflecting a gamut of emotions. A sense of loneliness, of minuteness in the face of the colossal, is ever-present. Both monsters and mountains are at times benign and at times hostile. Holyoak gives us an opportunity to gaze at ourselves. Can we see our magnificence and power? How do we react to our ugliness? What is our response to seeing our darkest selves? In answering these inquiries, we may answer our initial question of “How do we go forward from here?”

Maggie Shirley is a poly-media artist and curator. Currently, she lives in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia where she is the curator at the Kootenay Gallery of Art in Castlegar. Shirley has curated a number of solo and group exhibitions, including *Building the World We Want* and *The Hidden Hero Project*. In 2021, she co-curated *Overburden: Geology, Extraction and Metamorphosis in a Chaotic Age* with Genevieve Roberston.

Shirley's artwork is based on thematic research into the human body, environment, and technology, primarily taking the form of installation and socially engaging projects. Her artwork has been exhibited in Ireland, Canada, and Spain. She graduated with an MFA from University of British Columbia Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies in 2013. In 2007, Shirley acted as an invigilator for the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. After completing her undergraduate degree in Ireland, she returned to Canada and worked at Alberta's Banff New Media Institute (The Banff Centre).

³ Burke, Edmund. “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.” *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Columbia University Press, 1958.







Previous spread: *Vestigial Trail* (installation view). June 23–August 20, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art. **This page:** *Vestigial Trail* (detail, installation view). June 23–August 20, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art



Vestigial Trail (detail, installation view). June 23–August 20, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art



Endless Tangle. 2015. Graphite and ink on Chinese paper. 27" x 54"





Tusks. 2012. Ink on paper. 23.25" x 18". *Astonishment*. 2022. Ink on paper. 13.25" x 16.5"



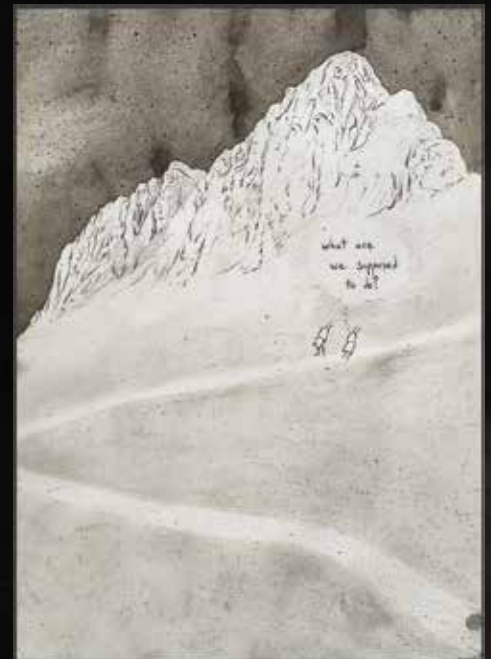
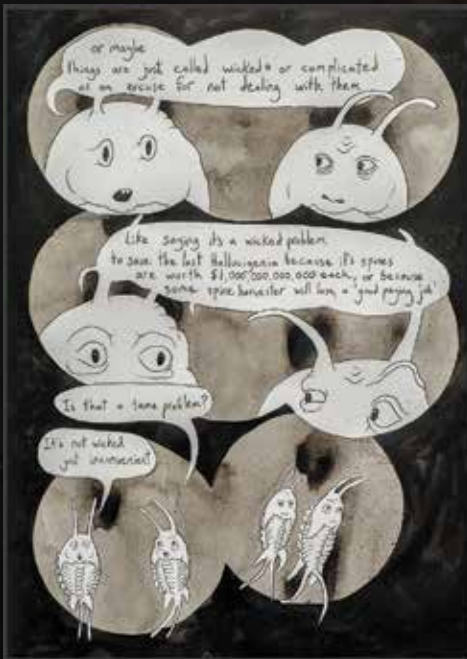
Vestigial Trail (detail, installation view). June 23–August 20, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art



Mount Gimli. 2019. Graphite on Chinese paper. 23" x 16.5". Artist Jim Holyoak drawing Gimli Peak, Valhalla Provincial Park, British Columbia. 2019. Photo: Genevieve Robertson



Wandering Mount Ymir. 2022. Ink and graphite on Chinese paper. 11.5" x 16"



Wicked Problems. 2022. Twelve-panel comic completed in the artist residency. Graphite and ink on paper. Text by Jim Holyoak and Darren Fleet. Artwork by Jim Holyoak. Each panel 16" x 11.5"





Untitled. Created during drawing-music performance with Jesse Lee. June 24, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art. Crayon and ink on paper. 96" x 96"



Jim Holyoak in residency. *Vestigial Trail* exhibition. June 23–July 9, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art



Portal (installation view). *Vestigial Trail* portal to visitor workshop/reading room. June 23–August 20, 2022. Kootenay Gallery of Art



Clockwise, from top left: monstrous library; visitor workshop/reading room; *Monstrous Mind Map*, chalk on chalkboard



Book in Weird Woods. 2010. Ink on paper. 16.5" x 23"



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