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# The Living Chain: An Applied Exploration of Mythological Narrative and Traditional Printmaking Techniques

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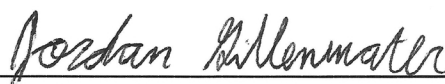
The Living Chain

An Applied Exploration of Mythological Narrative  
and Traditional Printmaking Techniques

By

Jordan Gillenwater

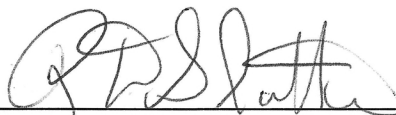
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Jordan Gillenwater, Thesis Author

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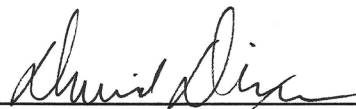
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## ABSTRACT

### The Living Chain

By

Jordan Gillenwater

*The Living Chain* is a body of work built to apply and analyze mythological narrative and traditional printmaking techniques. The work is a collection of prints telling an original narrative that derives much of its visual and thematic style from the works of the Baroque and Medieval periods, as well as significant influence from the prints of Gustave Doré. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ideas, mythologies, histories, and symbols found in and inspiring the work, in order to better understand the work's purpose and its technical challenges. Additional focus is given to the historical significance and cultural impact of meaningful, mythological narratives and the differences between modern and historic narratives told through sequential works of art.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my professors Ralph Slatton and John Hilton for teaching me the wonderful medium of printmaking and for helping me bring this body of work to life.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
LIST OF WORKS	5
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	6
2. LINKING NARRATIVE	7
3. CRAFTING THE WORLD	13
4. INFLUENCES	18
Gustave Doré	18
Kentaro Miura	19
Hidetaka Miyazaki	20
5. THE LIVING CHAIN	22
6. CONCLUSION	36
CATALOGUE OF WORK	37
WORKS CITED	46

## LIST OF WORKS

Figure	Page
1. Usurper (Fig. 3.1)	16
2. Usurper (Fig. 5.1)	22
3. Dear Child, Why Do You Cry? (Fig. 5.3)	23
4. Sacra Conversazione (Fig. 5.4)	25
5. Stories Told (Fig. 5.6)	27
6. Experimental Comic: Blood and Blindness (Fig. 5.7)	28
7. Dramaturgy of The Living Chain (5.8)	29
8. Divine Offering for the Reclamation of the Holy Land (Fig. 5.9)	30
9. Blood and Blindness (Fig. 5.13)	33
10. Ecce Homo (Fig. 5.14)	34

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I have always believed that art is uniquely equipped to tell engaging narratives. Most artistic endeavors spanning multiple works do not attempt to create a narrative but instead seek to look at ideas from many angles or techniques. While both these traditions fall within the purpose of art, I felt the need to create a body of work that focused on this narrative ability through the use of sequential imagery. However, just what this work would be was still unclear.

Coming from a religious background I have long been interested in the importance and influence of ancient stories on culture and the formation of moral systems. I was particularly fascinated by the biblical books of Genesis and Revelation, and I sought to find continuity between these two supernatural books that tie such an unquestionably influential text together. Since I have experience with a Christian perspective, it has always seemed self-evident that a deity must be benevolent, but I soon became fascinated by the paradigm shift that would occur by changing this central idea. While many belief systems do not hold the divine as inherently benevolent, human nature—and subsequently our moral systems—focus heavily on the need to separate order from chaos. This led me to the idea that as long as there is the appearance of order, then good and evil become subject to the context in which this order was created. Imagining a world in which much of the moral structure of humanity could be reversed became a challenge that consumed my work. It was in creating this fleshed-out world that *The Living Chain* found its place and would begin to shape itself as a grand mythological narrative.

## CHAPTER 2: LINKING NARRATIVE

The decision to make a narrative-based work was not a decision made carelessly. Not only does this introduce far more challenges to the process, but narratives—specifically mythological narratives—play a very important role in culture and thus require an understanding of form and meaning that can fall apart if not done correctly. These stories are a perfect mirror for humanity’s ultimate desires, ideals, and struggles, which leads us to the question of why these stories didn’t just articulate these ideas outright rather than crafting an elaborate narrative filled with metaphors and the supernatural. Dr. Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist teaching as a tenured professor at the University of Toronto, discusses this question in his book *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* and lectures sharing the same name. The answer is simply, “because they didn’t know” (Jordan Peterson). The concepts these early cultures were dealing with were so complex that they couldn’t properly articulate them, but they understood enough to know that they had to try or their culture would have nothing to hold on to. Peterson argues that we are only now beginning to scratch the surface of the meanings of these stories and how vital their message is to our understanding of the world. So the articulation of these infinitely complex ideas had to be in mythic form because it allowed personification to make them understandable. Now, we see that these stories have survived and reappeared over and over throughout a multitude of cultures because they are important and have almost become a subconscious aspect of culture and being. After becoming familiar with the gravity of what I was undertaking, I did not want to half-do it. So, for the success of the project I devoted research to both to mythology and fantasy stories but also to the challenges of sequential art.



I familiarized myself with various mythologies over the course of several years due simply to a personal interest, but the research directly involved with the production of this body of work primarily focused on gaining a better understanding of the origin of and importance of these stories. The previously mentioned Dr. Jordan Peterson was instrumental in helping me grasp these ideas. Particularly, his discussions on the deeper meanings of mythological narratives and characters helped craft my own. He goes to great lengths to convey the ideas behind archetypal characters who appear in various stories and cultures yet play the same role. Some of these are the hero, the old king, and the queen of the underworld just to name a few. They all play a distinct role in any narrative in which they appear and often befall the same fate, regardless of any changes in the story's presentation.

A good example of this is the old king's narrative, as he is a stand-in for one's culture and tradition in relation to the hero protagonist. Often the old king is blind, willfully blind, or simply rigid in regards to the law showing the stagnation of society. This results in corruption and often the death of the king, which flows into the hero's journey of defeating evil and often journeying into the underworld to rescue the dead king. Peterson articulates that it is this revival of the old king and fusion with the hero, who has struggled through chaos to revive him, that represents the restructuring of a society that has lost its way. This motive appears throughout history and in almost every culture, from Egyptian mythology to the Christian tradition.

Studying these archetypes not only gave me a greater appreciation for the ancient stories but also helped me craft the necessary elements for my own myth to look and feel as if it already had a place in the world, rather than something entirely new or too similar to the

point of redundancy. However, due to the nature of the inverted moral structure I was trying to present in the work, I knew that I would have to carefully change or overturn some of the concepts so that elements of the story would feel wrong or backward to the viewer, possibly at a subconscious level. The success of this inversion would be one of my definitions for the success of the work.

The story I was seeking to craft was not one to be written or told orally, however. *The Living Chain* was always intended as a visual narrative, so the challenges of pacing and presenting such a narrative required just as much attention as the narrative itself. While my interest in modern comics was the initial inspiration for the work, I felt that a closer analysis of the form would help in knowing what pieces would be necessary or vital and what could be left out without damaging the narrative. Eventually, my research led me to the works of Scott McCloud.

Scott McCloud is particularly famous for his series of books explaining the history, techniques, and revolutions in the world of sequential art, all while presenting the information in the form of a comic itself. It is a unique technique that makes for the easiest and quickest means to convey visually just what he is trying to explain, which I found extremely helpful in regards to my work. There are three main points he makes that I found particularly insightful, both in technique and understanding of the medium.

The first point I found meaningful was his discussion on how to define sequential art. In this, he is very clear to distinguish “visual arts in sequence” (like film) from “spatially juxtaposed” work (like comics) (McCloud 7). McCloud expresses that mediums like film let images occupy the same space but allow changes in time to show differences in the images that

convey the narrative, whereas comics allow the space that separates the images to define their order and sequence. This distinction becomes apparent when we look at gutter space in comics.

“Gutter space” is a term used to describe the space between the panels or images of a comic. Unlike in film, there is not a clear distinction of time between the panels of a comic. It is in this gutter space between each image that the reader’s mind fills in the gaps of the sequence to create a smooth transition. I felt that this phenomenon was an essential thing to keep in mind while creating my own sequential work.

Due to the nature of the work as prints, it was inevitable that their display would be focused on gallery display, so the space between the works would have to be a factor in the reception of the work. This would go on to affect the content of the individual pieces, as it forced me to keep in mind that the amount of space between the works would influence the amount of time perceived to be between the actions of the images.

The second point I found to be important to my work was McCloud’s chapters on the different types of panel-to-panel transitions (McCloud 74). Panel transitions are how two images interact with one another to create a narrative structure. While a great deal of the information about this topic might seem obvious, McCloud’s articulation and understanding of how these transitions can impact our perception of the story had a profound effect on my compositional planning.

In the end, the type of sequential presentation *The Living Chain* required would need to rely almost entirely on scene-to-scene transition. These transitions generally cross a greater span of time and space than other transitions, and the nature of the narrative as a mythological

one required a level of grandeur that tighter transitions simply would not convey. This treatment would also mean that the information in each piece would have to be handled carefully as to not disconnect the works too much and thus sever their narrative link. While the presentation of the work would not be able to rely on the traditional comic format to imply a narrative flow, there was still one last point I found insightful that aided in understanding the importance of sequential narrative.

McCloud takes the time in his book *Understanding Comics* to show that sequential visual narrative has existed almost as long as the mythological stories that define our cultures. He takes the time to explain ancient sequential drawings from South America that contain details within each image that explain the amount of time elapsing and what is happening in the image despite no appearance of traditional text-based writing (McCloud 10-11). The creators of this pre-Columbian picture manuscript that McCloud referenced were using the art to express changes in time and space. Sequential visual narrative appears again in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and even in European tapestry art. This solidified in my head not only the plethora of techniques I had at my disposal but also the universal need to pass on stories.

Both Dr. Jordan Peterson and Scott McCloud emphasized how influential stories are to us and how those ideas and techniques appear across cultures and time. The combination of these two helped me to formulate the view of storytelling as a “living chain.” A story is the combination of moments and experiences that act as links in a chain that come together to reveal some truth about the world. How these moments are linked can drastically change how they are read, but the reader interacting with this chain continually adds to its length. The stories themselves, the manner in which they are told, and those who tell or hear the story all

play a pivotal role in granting meaning and purpose to the stories, and the further down the chain you go, the more likely you are to find the common links that bind everyone's stories together.

### CHAPTER 3: CRAFTING THE WORLD

While I originally knew that printmaking would be the medium of choice for the project, before any work could begin, I felt that I needed as fleshed-out a world as possible so that each image would have the backing it needed to feel grounded in reality, or at least a possible reality. While there will be inevitable overlap between many of my influences and my decisions for the worldbuilding, I will first focus on the ideas I found to be narrative and aesthetic necessities in crafting this world, rather than the specific people that would influence the individual works.

If the work was going to be about an inversion of good and evil, then I knew there would have to be an embodiment of at least one of these to serve as the reference point. Inevitably, this led me to the realization that I would have to establish a cultural notion of the divine. For this, I looked heavily at folklore and animal spiritualism. I found these animal symbols of divinity to be more pliable in their symbolic value, while requiring less explanation for the viewer. The obvious next step was to decide what animal would become this unifying symbol of order in a morally faltering world. Many animals have such cultural baggage that it would be almost impossible to use them in this new context without explaining to the viewer that I have changed the meaning of the animal as a symbol. So I searched for an animal symbol that had seemingly no appearance in cultural or religious belief systems. Eventually this led me to my living chain, the centipede.

Through my research I only found one instance of the centipede's use in mythological or religious stories and that is its appearance within the Japanese folk story of Tawara Toda as the

giant, destructive centipede Seta. This made the centipede incredibly malleable for my purposes. To me it was the perfect combination of the symbols of fear and evil across cultures. Its long slithering form and fangs are reminiscent of humanity's greatest symbol of evil and change, the snake; its nature as a predatory insect carried with it kinship to the spiders found across many mythological tales; and when placed on the pedestal of the divine, I felt an unshakable link between the centipede and H. P. Lovecraft's eldritch horrors designed to unseat humanity as the universal center of meaning. All of these inspirations came together to give me the tone and feeling I needed to give to my symbol of dark divinity.

The next stage in development was to figure out just what kind of people would not only interact with but worship such a symbol. Even the aforementioned H. P. Lovecraft's horrors and the unifying theme of uncaring gods would be irrelevant were they not portrayed through their interactions with people, as the significance of this complete apathy toward humanity can only be felt through the eyes of humanity itself. This train of thought eventually led to the question of what culture best aesthetically linked itself to the centipede's unique look. As the ultimate form of flattery is imitation, I decided it best to match the look and feel of both culture and divine.

This decision finally fell to the imagery and culture of medieval Europe, specifically the Crusades. I chose this time to base my narrative for a few reasons both visual and thematic. At the time of this decision, I had already settled on referring to the centipede as the living chain in the narrative, and the heavy reliance upon chainmail in crusader armor felt like a natural fit visually and symbolically. Additionally, plate armor allowed for many opportunities to design attire that would not only reference but match the look of the centipede itself. Beyond

aesthetic reasons, this decision to base the world in the Medieval Crusades carried with it a darker symbolic meaning that was vital to the success of the work.

The Crusades are considered one of the most controversial periods within the western Christian tradition. Known as the Holy Wars, the Crusades were deemed to be the will of God, and thus all atrocity was justified under this banner. No greater moment captures this than the infamous massacre of Bezier. It is here that the infamous quote, "Kill them all, God will know his own," is at least believed to have originated. The surrounding event led to the massacre of complete innocents and even fellow Christians. The mentality behind violence committed in the name of the divine, whether justified politically or not, fascinated me and became the basis for the narrative within the work.

For how do we define those we consider heroes and those we consider monsters? Is it not determined by the side on which we find ourselves? Is an atrocity, a massacre to one not a heroic victory to another? Once these questions were in play, I knew just what this body of work would be tackling.

From this point, it was a matter of compiling a system of symbols and actually creating the narrative itself. I allowed most of this to happen naturally, so the symbols are more easily discussed in the context of the individual works. However, I knew the first piece would have to be the one that set the stage for the entire series. It is then that my previous fascination with the Christian Genesis story became important.

Most animals within folk tales do some great deed to earn the respect of humanity. However, the centipede has very little in the way of noble or easily humanizing traits that make it worth worshipping or honoring. They are predatory insects often seen fighting and devouring



larger prey, much like a snake. However, the centipede's means of devouring larger prey is not the same as the snake. Where the snake tried to swallow its food, the centipede attacks and begins feeding on its prey immediately. If this is much larger prey, it will begin to wrap its many legs around the animal to control its movements, while the centipede continues to eat. There is little to describe its means of hunting as anything other than horrific from the human perspective. In my mind, this limited the attributes I could focus on in establishing its divinity, but fortunately, a god based upon violence was just what I needed.

As previously mentioned, the snake is a nearly universal symbol for change and rebirth. In the Christian tradition, it is the origin of or embodiment of evil and chaos. This history makes the image of the snake almost indistinguishable from the symbol of evil and danger in the West. What would become of the one that killed the great liar, the serpent? Would it be seen as monster or hero? The answer to this question resulted in the image *Usurper* (Fig. 3.1).

*Usurper* depicts the fight and subsequent devouring of a snake by a centipede and became the linchpin of the series. It serves as the genesis of the world but also the basis for the formal elements and system of symbols that would influence the entire body of work. The two violently entangled bodies struggle amongst thistles, resulting in an image that, despite its detail and smooth rendering, embodies danger. It is a

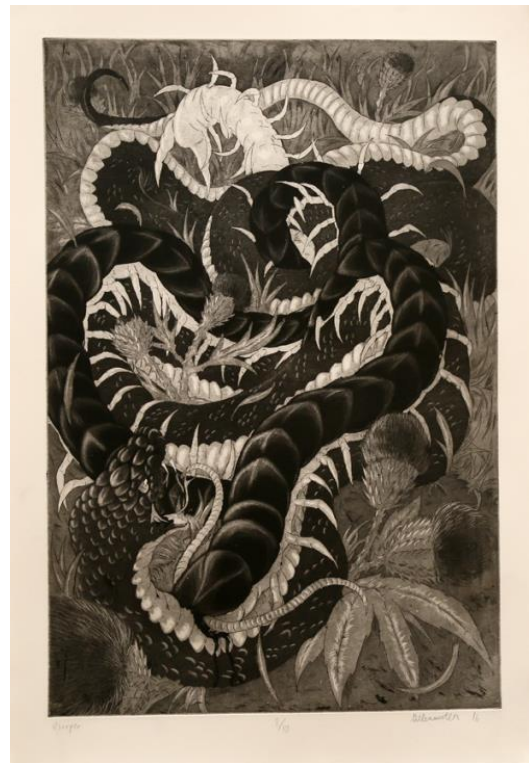


Figure 3.1

fight for the fate of humanity in a mythological sense but even in a naturalistic view, is not something that should be observed without risk to one's person. *Usurper* carries with it just enough symbolic meaning from the Christian tradition that it is recognizable as a morally significant struggle, but it is this final destruction of the avatar of evil that acts to separate *The Living Chain's* moral structure from ours and allows the narrative to become fully fleshed-out.

## CHAPTER 4: INFLUENCES

### Gustave Doré

Before looking at the works of *The Living Chain* in depth, I want to establish the underlying ideas behind the aesthetic choices. Understanding the aesthetic choices behind a work inevitably becomes a discussion of influences and motives. *The Living Chain* in particular was formed by referencing and splicing together historical works and modern styles. As far as direct reference, most of the work pulls from a mixture of the Baroque period as a whole and more specifically to the works of French printmaker Gustave Doré.

Gustave Doré worked primarily in wood engraving, but the look and feel of his works I found to be very similar to my own work in intaglio etching with aquatint. His extensive use of line and masterful use of chiaroscuro to create dynamic and detailed compositions attracted me to his work, so I studied his composition and value techniques intently both to make *The Living Chain* as high quality as possible and to make compositional homages to his work.

It was not just the compositional and technical aspects of his work that I found to be insightful and inspirational, though. Doré's subject matter and themes tackled many of the challenges I was seeking to undertake. This is particularly true in his biblical illustrations. They presented a sequential visual narrative, but his handling of the medium allowed for greater contrasts between not only the lights and darks of the composition but also of the nature of good and evil. The divine is often presented with radiant lighting descending into the picture plane to contrast and cast shadow upon the figures of evil and even humanity. This use of lighting and hierarchical composition helped me to understand how the manipulation of a composition can drastically change how we view and relate to the characters displayed.

Additionally, his treatment of character had to be much more careful and purposeful than modern sequential works that often take the form of the comic book. These often rely heavily on text to emphasize or establish the characterization, but Doré's works had to characterize these Biblical figures without the aid of the text. Even though the illustrations were meant to accompany the text, the disconnect between the two was just enough to demand the need for highly expressive and readable body language to ensure the image could still be understood without the aid of the text, which was one of the many challenges that would present itself throughout the production of *The Living Chain*.

#### Kentaro Miura

While many of Gustave Doré's greatest works were immense series illustrating the tales of the Bible or even Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, more modern sequential artists were the true inspirations behind my undertaking of this project. As mentioned previously, these modern works often rely more heavily on text than Doré's illustrations. However, the panel-to-panel transitions within the pages were an important reference in understanding the challenge of linking the separate works into a sequential narrative that conveys a passage of time. Although all comics deal with these challenges in different ways, I looked for works that were, again, dealing with similar themes and imagery to *The Living Chain* so that I could understand how the reader or viewer might interact with the work. Namely, I found great inspiration looking at the works of Japanese comic artist Kentaro Miura.

Kentaro Miura is most known for his work on the comic *Berserk*, which tells a dark, gritty fantasy dealing with many of the same concepts I believe *The Living Chain* takes on. Aesthetically, his work is very similar to Gustave Doré's. They both rely very heavily on line and

create immaculate detail to make their figures feel real and grounded. The main distinction I would draw between the two is that Kentaro Miura's narrative in *Berserk* focuses more on the use of extreme violence and horror to evoke the feeling of an unforgivingly cruel world rather than one defined by a contrast in good and evil. This cruel, dark world Miura crafts is actually why his work was so influential in the creation of the world of *The Living Chain*.

The world I sought to present was one that glorified violence and the uncanny as divine, so *Berserk's* presentation of gods and the divine as horrific, manipulative creatures drew my attention. In the later stages of the series, a character known as the antagonist even takes on a traditionally divine look and demeanor casting his actions as truly good by our standards. This creates a tension in the reader, who knows the antagonist's intentions and past deeds but is conflicted by his or her own feelings toward the character. I found this painful disconnect between what we know to be evil and how the world actually reacts to it to be a tremendous exploration of the nature of good and evil as a whole, which has influenced the direction of my own narrative and the characters that act within it.

#### Hidetaka Miyazaki

The last person I consider greatly inspirational in the creation of *The Living Chain* is not even an artist in any kind of traditional sense. Hidetaka Miyazaki is a Japanese video game director, currently the head of FromSoftware, known mostly for his work on the *Dark Souls* series. Coincidentally, this series has many homages to Kentaro Miura's work and thus shares many of the same aesthetic and thematic choices. However, the aspect of my work most affected by Miyazaki's work is the manner of presenting the narrative. Miyazaki's games are infamous for being immensely difficult but also for the manner in which the player discovers

the narrative. Miyazaki does not present absolutes or answers to the questions the world presents. Instead, much of the truth behind world you inhabit can only be discovered in the visual details and placement of objects in the world. The player has to pay attention to where, what, and when things are discovered, as this reveals a great deal about the history of the world. This strategic placement of items and characters helped me deal with the challenge of disconnect between the works. If the individual pieces flowed into one another in a tight story then no piece would be able to stand on its own for anything other than aesthetic quality. So I applied a great deal of what I picked up studying Miyazaki's work to link the pieces of the narrative through the objects, characters, and symbols that reoccur throughout the work. This allowed each piece to deal with its themes in a more specific way, rather than relying entirely on all of the pieces working together but still kept the body of work unified visually and moving toward a final goal.

In addition to unifying the series, this approach rewards a more dedicated and patient form of appreciation and analysis. These symbols and visuals mentioned in the context of worldbuilding allow the viewer to attribute meaning using both the context the work presents and their own cultural context. So the meticulous placement of these details is meant to give the viewer all the tools necessary to unravel the narrative without forcing them to interpret the narrative in the manner I initially desired. By giving this small amount of freedom the work encourages a form of exploration that found integral to the success of the work as a meaningful narrative and as a piece of art as well.

## CHAPTER 5: THE LIVING CHAIN

After all of the research and planning came together, *The Living Chain* finally began to

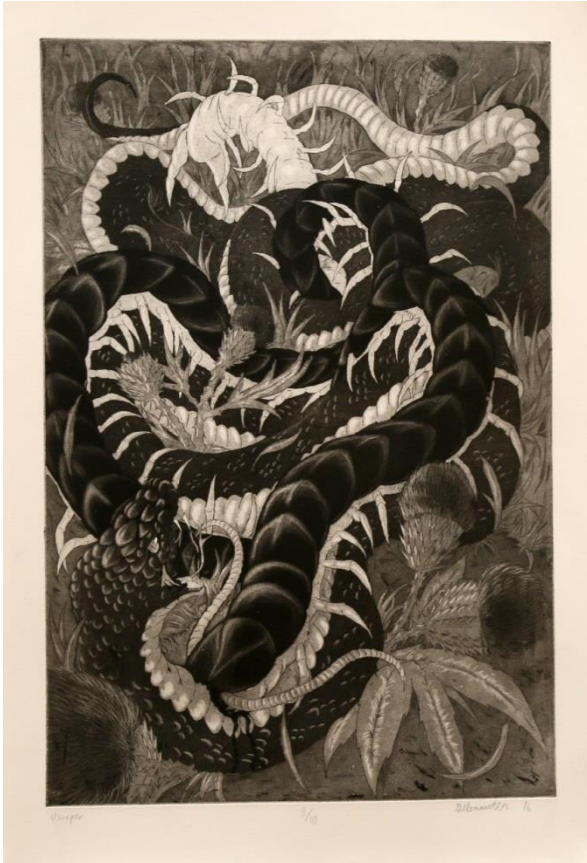


Figure 5.1

Compositionally, the image gives homage to Gustave Doré's *The Destruction of the Leviathan* (Fig. 5.2). I wanted every piece in the series to bear some reference to or semblance of a historical work of art to make the work feel familiar and grounded in our history. Doré's piece depicts the great biblical Leviathan being slain by the divine against a raging sea. *Usurper* shares much of its writhing

take shape, starting with the previously discussed piece, *Usurper* (Fig. 5.1).

The piece shows a centipede devouring a serpent. It is a violent and painful attack based on rare videos of the conflict in nature. I set the image in a field of thistles both to emphasize the feeling of pain and to begin creating a system of symbols for the rest of the work. The snake bares its fangs in aggression but also in pain, as it has become unable to fight back against its aggressor.

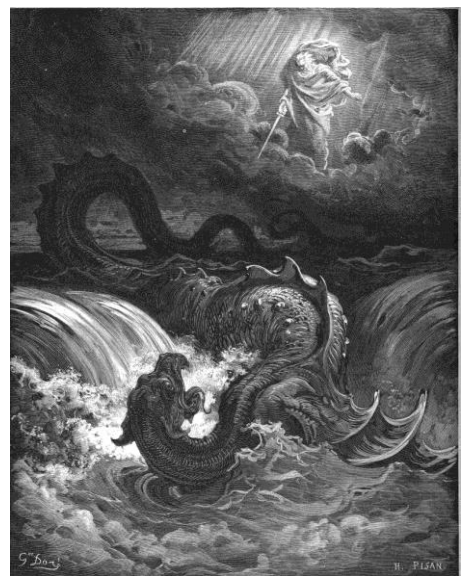


Figure 5.2

energy with Doré's work, but *Usurper* replaces the divine with the dark image of the centipede.

The title *Usurper* is meant to be the first hint of doubt in the moral structure of this fictional world. Going forward, the centipede will be revered as the devourer of evil in the images, but here the centipede is known as a usurper, as if he is claiming the throne of the serpent. Knowing that the serpent's throne is the one of the great liar and avatar of evil casts doubt onto the motivations of the centipede. The centipede itself was partially chosen for this work because I felt it closely resembled a serpent that kept its legs, unlike the biblical story of the serpent in Genesis where God said, "You are cursed more than any livestock and more than any wild animal. You will move on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life" (Christian Standard Bible, Gen. 3.14). Dr. Jordan Peterson has made several references to the importance of the serpent, as the one who "opened humanity's eyes to good and evil," so the destruction of this figure actually prevents humanity from being able to distinguish between the two. In the end, the image raises the question of whether this struggle is a heroic defeat of evil or the crowning of a new, more powerful king of darkness.

The following piece shifts the focus to humanity with a piece based upon the mother and child works found throughout the history of Christian art. The work is titled *Dear Child, Why Do You Cry?* (Fig. 5.3), which is a title closer to the dialogue of a comic or a caption than a typical title. The scene is once again set in a field of thistles to make the image seem uncomfortable



Figure 5.3



despite the relaxing, pure nature of a mother and child scene. The thistle is actually a traditional symbol in Christianity for the Virgin Mary, thus establishing a subtle link between the two.

However, the mother in this image holds two children instead of one. When accompanied with the fact that only the mother and one of the children has a mandorla halo around their heads to symbolize the divine, the image bears reference to the Genesis story of Cain and Abel and the Christian origin of murder. One child quietly sleeps in his mother's arms, but the second child cries as a small centipede crawls across his hand. This serves as a form of foreshadowing for the brothers' lives, as the faithful and the doubter respectively.

The title of the piece is meant to be a question to the child, concerning his distress while in the safety of his mother's arms. The field of thistles and centipedes makes the answer obvious to the viewer, but this question helps create a disconnect between the views of the audience and the actors in this mythological tale. There is also another reoccurring image that makes its debut within this piece, and it is the mask covering the eyes of the mother. Although aesthetically pleasing and decorative, like a masquerade mask, it completely covers the mother's eyes. This implies a willing blindness, much like the old king in classic mythologies, to the danger of allowing centipedes to approach her children and to the painful environment she occupies. This purposeful blindness became one of the final details of the dark culture I was crafting that I felt fully separated it from our reality but also give it a unique look and feel. The third work in the series actually takes this idea of blindness and pushes it to an extreme.

*Sacra Conversazione* (Fig. 5.4) is the third piece in the series and concludes what I believe to be the prelude or build-up to the action of the story. It shares its title with many

works of the Baroque period that depict Mary and the disciples conversing with God, yet this piece could not be more different than these old works.

The image depicts a woman with writhing centipedes around her body as she maintains an orant pose in prayer. The setting has changed drastically for this piece to that of an underground cave structure filled with water (or blood, depending upon the reading). The cave is also filled with skulls converted into candles to illuminate the environment, for the sake of the viewer more than the characters. The woman's eyes are actually blocked out once again, but this time by a centipede crawling across them. This



Figure 5.4

again emphasizes the idea of blindness as an act of faith by placing the figure in an environment that takes advantage of her blindness. The image itself is designed to have a sexual connotation



Figure 5.5

with the centipedes' design and actions appearing phallic in nature. This sexualization of faith is based on the work of Baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, namely *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (Fig. 5.5).

St. Teresa's own writing on her experience with the divine is full of sexual

language, which is believed to be a means of conveying the experience in terms that people can understand. A large goal of the Baroque period of art in general was “to involve the viewer.” (khanacademy.org)

Within *Sacra Conversazione*, this sexualization is less about helping the viewer understand the passion and ecstasy of a divine experience and more about provoking discomfort with the event they are witnessing. The return of the mother figure from the previous image solidifies her as the divine mother within the narrative, but the environmental context creates homage to a mother of monsters or queen of the underworld figure that appears in a variety of mythologies. Additionally, the skull candles, which will appear again later, add another element of moral subversion to the narrative. Regardless of whether one chooses to view the interaction as a beautiful moment between humanity and god or a violent sexual assault by the embodiment of evil, the skull candles are the first undeniable reference to the violent nature of this faith system and the demands of the deity. They force the questions of whether or not this is the first time this interaction has occurred and the skulls are the remains of those who came before, or if these skulls are gifts for the gods themselves. Either way, the blindness of the woman prevents her from reacting to or acting upon this revelation that the dead offer, thus leaving her only able to accept the will of the writhing gods that surround her.

At this point, the dark aesthetic of the world had been solidified, but I did not quite feel ready to jump into the action of the narrative involving the brothers from *Dear Child, Why Do You Cry*. The narrative going forward would skip ahead to the adulthood of the brothers, but I wanted to spend some time with the characters to determine their visual designs, personalities,

and roles in the narrative, as the fates of the individual brothers would be used to juxtapose those considered good and those considered evil in the world. So I decided to explore the characters outside of the medium that comprised the series.

*Stories Told* (Fig. 5.6) was the first of these experimental pieces and was done as a



Figure 5.6

screen print with a much lighter tone than the main series. It ages the brothers into childhood as they read an ancient tome. Centipedes crawl along their shoulders, indicating their connection to the divine, but only one of them looks worryingly at the centipede. This plays with a contrast between the two, as one is the accepting and excited recipient of the divine while the other doubts their intentions. As the characters seek to understand the

stories of the past, the image foreshadows the stories of their future, yet all of this is presented in the childish interaction of two brothers.

Next, I put the characters in a comic format, so I could explore their inevitable conflict in a narrative medium. This comic, sharing its name with a later piece in the series, *Blood and Blindness* (Fig. 5.7), shows possible events much further in the brothers' lives than the main body of work explores. A part of a 24-hour challenge, I sought to convey as much about the world and the brothers as possible in a limited number of pages. Attempting to convey this world in the vastly different style of the comic book also helped me to better understanding the differences in narrative pacing the main body of work would have from traditional comics. A compelling narrative in comic form required more moment-to-moment action and dialogue,

allowing the intentions of the characters to be clearer. By articulating these ideas via dialogue, I was actually better able to understand the tone I was trying to convey in *The Living Chain*.

These differences allowed me to flesh out character designs, interactions between the brothers and the centipede gods, the enemies of their society, the ideas behind and purposes of willful blindness, and some of the detailed fears, ideals, and rituals of their belief system.

The story itself shows the final conflict between the loyal, faithful brother and the doubtful brother, who has taken on the form of a beast after his betrayal of the gods. The conflict is presented as a noble destruction of evil, until it is revealed that the bestial brother also hears the voice of the divine. Their respective centipede companions are encouraging them to fight, and both comply. Although it is the unwilling blindness of the beast that causes him



Figure 5.7

to follow its instructions, the loyal brother, whom the centipedes refer to as “hero,” chooses servitude and willing blindness.

This contradiction in the commands of the gods was intended to be the true nature of the centipede. It relies upon and encourages those who worship it to kill in its name so that it might feast upon the dead, in the name of linking the souls of the dead to the “great chain,” which is a play on The Great Chain of Being in medieval Christianity that gave divine right to

rule to kings and priests and absolute authority to the divine. While this idea and several others are not expressed directly in the main body of work, establishing this underlying deception in the lore of the world ensured that the line between good and evil would always be fluctuating in the work.

The final experimental piece was another screen print titled *Dramaturgy of the Living Chain* (Fig. 5.8). Primarily, this piece was meant to finalize the designs for the characters of the story. Though two of the designs here do not make an appearance in *The Living Chain*, the colors and placement of the designs draws parallels between the characters' narrative purposes as divine instruments, heroes, and monsters. All of the designs share references to the centipede, and their armor and clothing are decorated with images of thistles to link back to the early works in the series.



Figure 5.8

One detail in *Dramaturgy of the Living Chain* that did influence the rest of the series is the circular shape linking the images together. The shape is a centipede-based interpretation of the ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail. The ouroboros is a symbol representing an infinite cycle of creation and destruction and appears in a variety of cultures and mythologies in various forms. This centipede rendition of the ouroboros carries with it much of the same symbolism

and became the official symbol for the living chain in the series. Characters could bear this symbol to show loyalty to their god, and in the context of *Dramaturgy of the Living Chain*, the symbol visually links the characters in an eternal drama of gods and fate.

After this period of experimentation and planning for the second half of the series, I took on the largest piece in the series. It jumps ahead many years into the characters' lives as adults, which allowed me to explore in more depth the cultures created in this world ruled by the living chain. *Divine Offering for the Reclamation of the Holy Land* (Fig. 5.9) is possibly the piece with the most hidden detail about this fictional world and its parallels with our own.

The image depicts the two brothers from earlier standing atop a mound of corpses, overlooking an army marching into a mountainous city. The brothers' attires are inversions of each other, while sharing many of the same unifying aesthetics. Both bear armor that is based on the centipede and linked



Figure 5.9

chains, which act as symbolic replacements for the centipedes themselves. However, one brother stands stoically in billowing robes with his face hidden behind an eyeless helmet,

encircled by the return of his divine mandorla, while the other stands in his shadow with a less eye-catching form. His mask, resembling the mouth of a centipede, covers only half his face, but his are the only open eyes in the entire body of work, in direct confrontation with the willing blindness encouraged by the divine, which becomes a significant detail in his narrative.

Surrounding the brothers are the corpses of their enemies, which have all donned bird like masks based on the plague doctor masks of the Middle Ages. These enemies were designed to be worshipers of crows, predators of insects like the centipede. Despite the crow's use as a symbol of death, birds tend to be heavily associated with freedom and traditional depictions of the divine, which I used to contrast against my centipede's claim to divinity. Additionally, their armor is based upon the look of Islamic soldiers during the Crusades to contrast against the crusader knight aesthetic given to the servants of the living chain, who drag more corpses to add to the pile.

Centipedes weave in and out of the pile amongst blood and decay to feast upon this offering of the vanquished to their content.



Figure 5.11

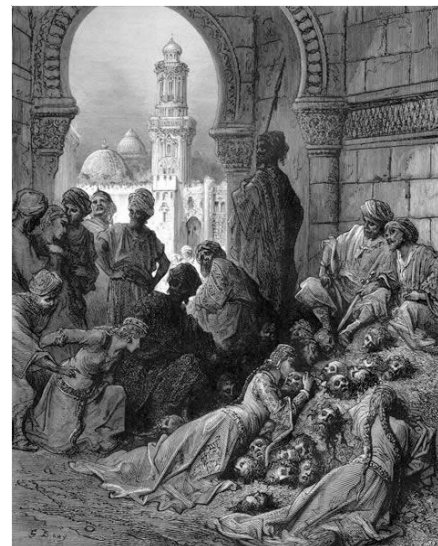


Figure 5.10

Even the architecture and composition behind the action of the scene serves to flesh out the world. The piece is compositionally based on a fusion of Gustave Doré's *The Cruelties of Bibars* (Fig. 5.10) and *St. Louis a Prisoner in Egypt* (Fig. 5.11) shown respectively. However, as mentioned





Figure 5.12

previously, the infamous massacre of Bezier's inspired a great deal of the imagery and themes in *The Living Chain*, as the epitome of blind justification of cruelty. In the background of the image stands a mountainous castle city claimed as the

holy land. This city is based directly off of the city Bezier's and on Paul Lehugeur's rendition in particular (Fig. 5.12). These compositional and detailed homages add a level of significance to the work in the form of an art historical study, but as every detail in the scene bears resemblance to the centipede and this original narrative, it separates itself into something new and difficult to break down easily.

While *Divine Offering for the Reclamation of the Holy Land* serves much of the same purpose as *Usurper*, in that it seeks to present the defeat of evil as a noble act while also hinting at a moral disconnect from our world, the following piece immediately breaks apart the unity created under the banner of the living chain.

*Blood and Blindness* (Fig. 5.13), the work sharing its name with the experimental comic from earlier, throws chaos into the narrative. This is the piece that brings to fruition the parallels with the Cain and Abel story mentioned alongside of *Dear Child, Why do You Cry?* The image returns once again to the flooded cave filled with centipedes and skull candles. The brothers are bound in struggle, causing a torrent through the cave. Composed through the study of many depictions of the murder of Abel and execution images of Goliath, this image is



Figure 5.13

meant to serve as a violent turning point in the lives of the brothers. The doubting brother is pinned to the ground with his right eye gouged out and his other eye focused intently and fearfully at his brother's eyeless helmet. His pauldron, bearing the symbol of the living chain has

been repeatedly scratched and damaged, thus making it more difficult to read, as if he has attempted to remove it, whereas the loyal brother's or "hero's" is immaculate. The hero's right hand clutches a bloody and broken dagger, having just taken his brother's eye, and is positioned to take the second one.

Symbolically, the skulls finally begin to play a role in the narrative. There are four of these skulls in the foreground of the image, compositionally aligned to represent the eyes of the brothers, and all but one has been snuffed out in the turmoil. The only lit candle lines up with the struggling brother's only remaining eye, making it inextricably tied to the notion of blindness in the narrative. Whether this blindness is an attempt to punish or merely return the doubtful brother to the fold is unclear, but the result is the loss of his ability to function outside of the guidance of the divine, not unlike the blind oracles of Greek tragedies or the conversion of Paul in the Bible.

The final piece in the series follows as the immediate aftermath of *Blood and Blindness*. Left to fend for himself in the flooded cave, the doubting brother becomes racked with grief in a piece titled *Ecce Homo* (Fig. 5.14). This title is a reference to the traditional depiction of Jesus beaten and bloodied just before his crucifixion. It literally translates to “behold the man,” which I find to have a deeper meaning within the context of *The Living Chain*.

Above the figure of the blinded brother reaching out to a centipede is the bestial form of the doubting brother, which is devouring and crawling its way through a mass of centipedes. The image is designed to be a compositionally inverted version of yet another Gustave Doré work



Figure 5.14



Figure 5.15

depicting the fall of the rebelling angels (Fig. 5.15). The writhing mass of centipedes signifies a divine presence, but the beast-like figure represents the final fall from grace through devouring or destruction of God.

I found the significance of this action in Nietzsche’s *The Parable of the Madman*. In it, a madman cries in the streets, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers

of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?" (Friedrich Nietzsche).

In this work, I presented a world in which society's moral system had become corrupted, as humanity had become blind to its destruction and made subservient to the words of a collective god of centipedes. However, the act of devouring even this god that corrupted and blinded humanity leaves the man in a bestial, violent form. It is meant to be a final note on this chapter of the story by asking the viewer to question the price of destroying a moral system even if they believe it to be evil. To the brother, do the lights still signify freedom and hope without sight? What is left of man without meaning and value?

There is nothing but to "behold the man."

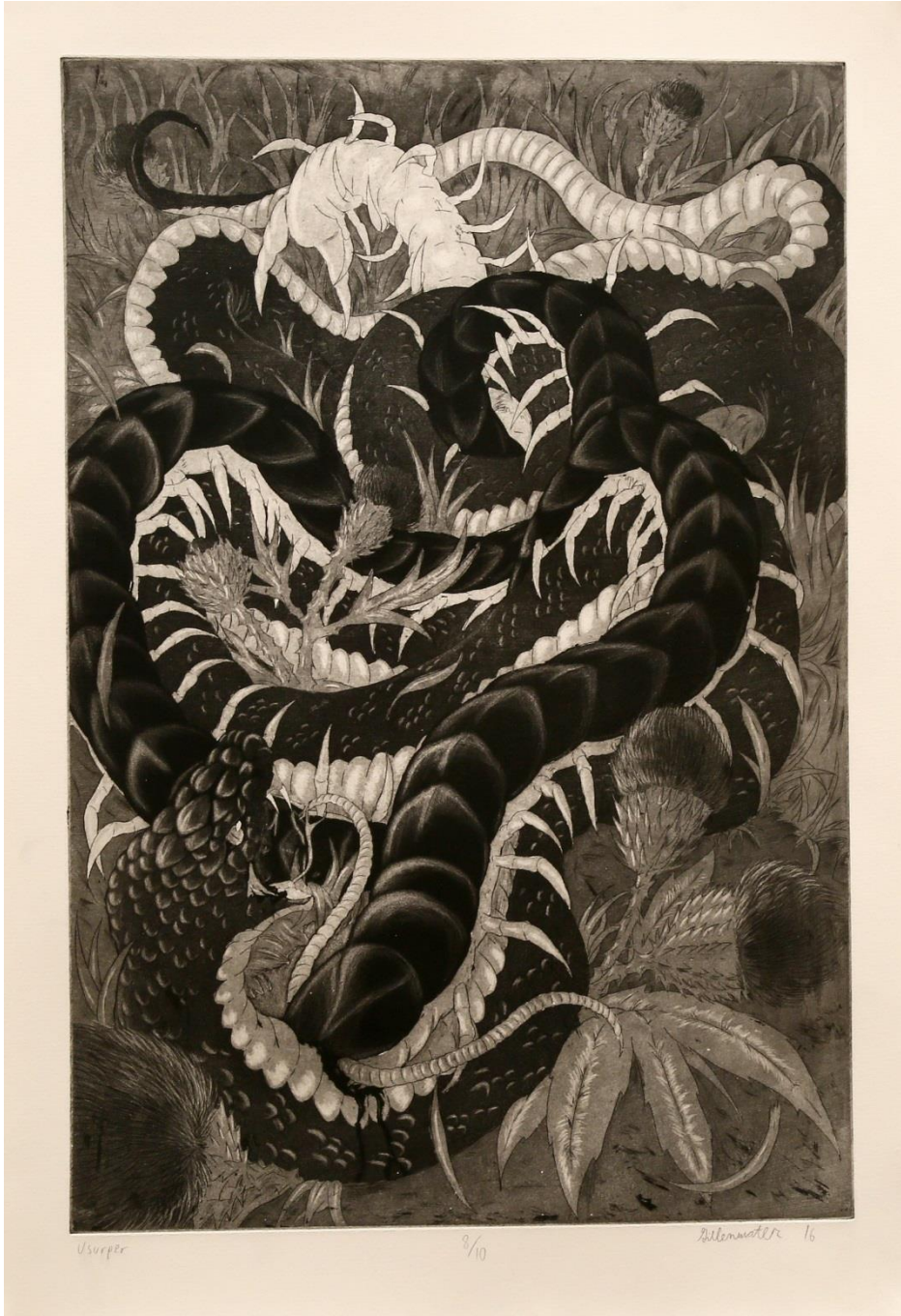
## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Human history is a collection of stories that one by one link together until they create ideals, cultures, and the very world we inhabit. Real or fictional, stories were and are integral in helping humanity understand and deal with complex issues of life and meaning. Bringing the art of narratively engaging works back to the fine arts brings with it the potential for people to not only grapple with more complex issues but also the underlying significance and reason behind our need to tell stories. *The Living Chain* seeks to achieve this goal by exploring the nature of good and evil through the presentation of the uncanny, macabre, and violent as the divine. While the blind acceptance of tradition is dangerous, so too is the rejection of the knowledge and wisdom it carries with it. The true nature of humanity I believe to be somewhere between these ideas. We are beings that build upon what came before us, while pushing the boundaries of our understanding. This work helped me to understand that the act of creation is not one of absolute control but of recontextualization of deep-seated truths. A living chain is one that binds us together but continually grows as we explore the highest and the lowest points of human existence, and those who understand the chain's importance are the ones who are granted the most freedom to build upon it and bend it to their will.

CATALOGUE OF WORK

1. Usurper (18x12)

Intaglio Etching and Aquatint, 2016



2. Dear Child, Why Do You Cry? (9x12)

Intaglio Etching and Aquatint, 2016



**3. Sacra Conversazione (18x12)**

Intaglio Etching and Aquatint, 2016





**4. Stories Told (10x10)**

Screen Print, 2016



## 5. Experimental Comic: Blood and Blindness (24 pages)

Digital Illustration, 2016



## 6. Dramaturgy of the Living Chain

Screen Print, 2016



**7. Divine Offering for the Reclamation of the Holy Land (24x18)**

Intaglio Etching and Aquatint, 2017



*Divine Offering for the Reclamation of the Holy Land*

1/10

Ellenwater 17

**8. Blood and Blindness (12x18)**

Intaglio Etching and Aquatint, 2017



9. Ecce Homo (18x12)

Intaglio Etching and Aquatint, 2017



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