

ALIENATED

the BIOMECHANICAL SURREALISM of HR GIGER

Where to begin discussing HR Giger, godfather of Goth, Alien mastermind, airbrush revolutionary, biomechanical miracle worker? He is the prince of darkness whom we worship and fear simultaneously. George Petros pulls back the curtains.



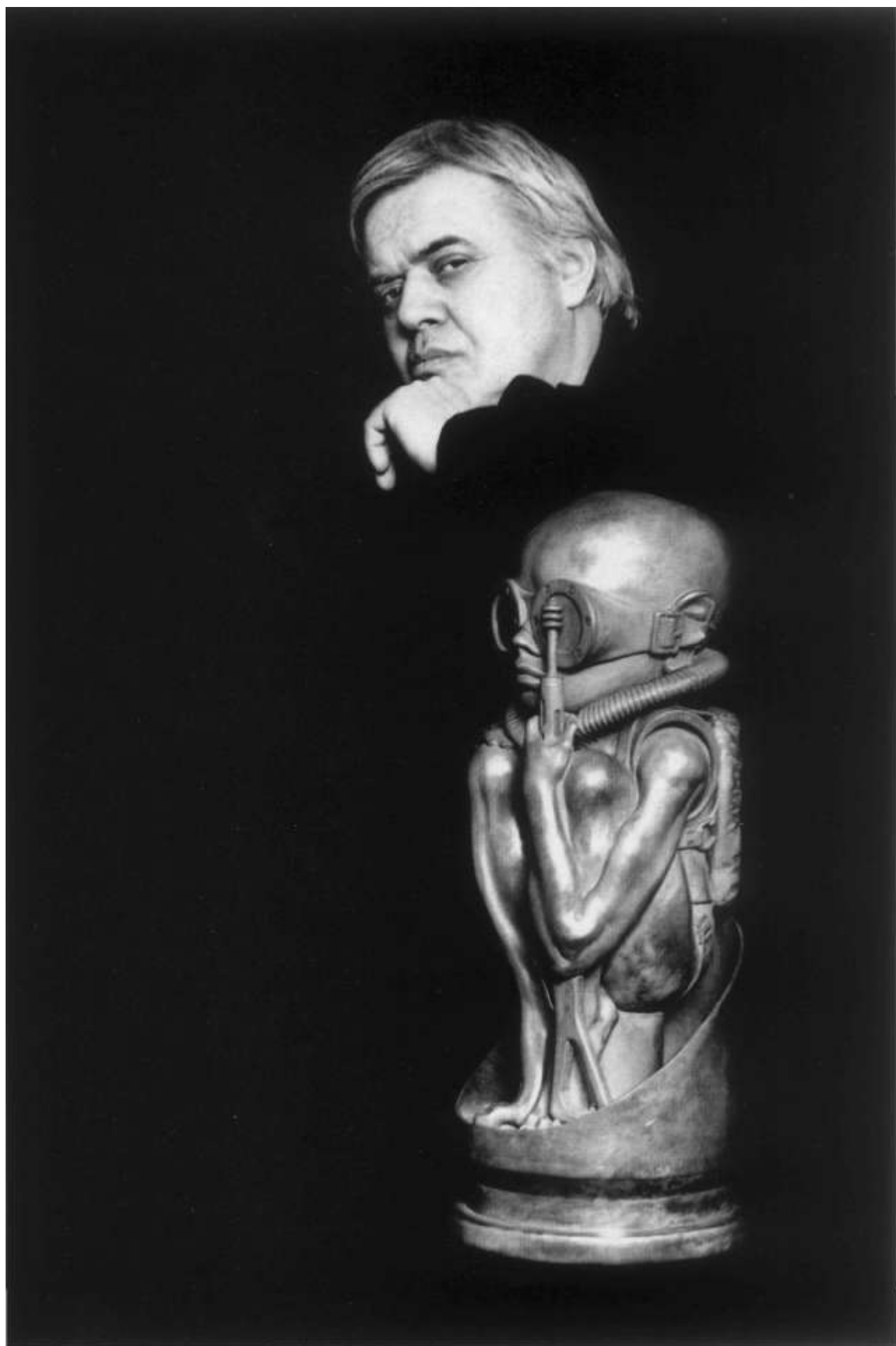
JADED SCIENCE-FICTION AND HORROR FANS jumped out of their seats when, in 1979, HR Giger's amazing Alien creature hit the silver screen. Thus began a stylistic era dominated by the Swiss artist's biomechanical surrealism. Sleek and sexy, scary and sickening, the Alien is the most beloved of Giger's pantheon, which includes living walls of

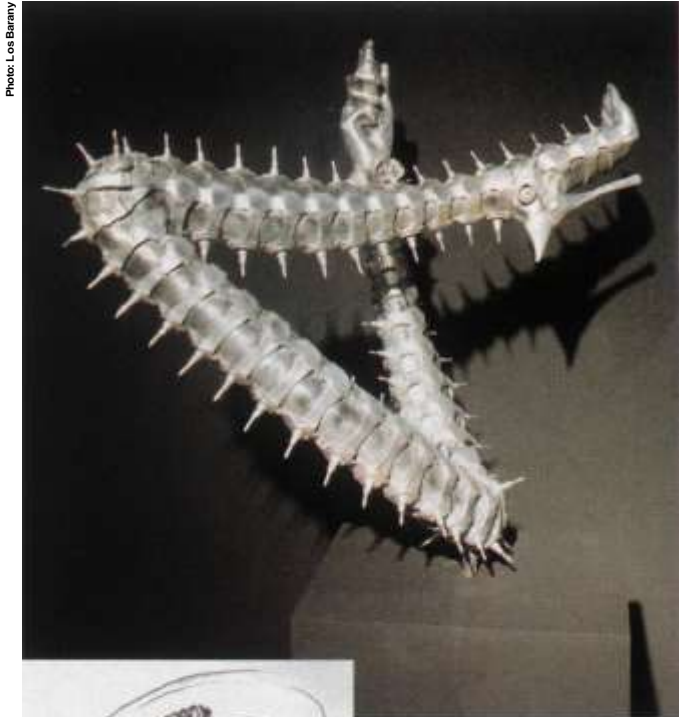
babies, deadly demons, and circuit-encrusted sirens.

Hans Rudi (HR) Giger (b. 1940) came into this world as the Second World War began, in German-speaking Switzerland. His parents made love; the living machine in which he floated built him, nurtured him, put a computer in his head, gave him a ghost, and spit him out. Perhaps during birth he absorbed an awareness of the anatomical details surrounding him. Perhaps sensations of his mother's bio-frenzy implanted themselves among his future dreams. How else to explain the environment in which his mind now resides?

The war isolated Switzerland. Perhaps it informed the twisted landscapes of Giger's art and sparked his fascination with weaponry. Perhaps it's why he placed himself safely at the center of a private, self-perpetuating universe where, guarding his mind from the horror outside, is an even greater horror within. Destructive threats woven into his work loom more forebodingly than any invention of previous crafting—in other words, Giger's creations would easily overcome the most powerful characters of other film fantasies, be they Predator, Terminator, or Freddy Krueger. And Giger's awful places exceed the many Hells of mythology. Sufferers there feel pain more exquisitely, amplified by his perfect machinery of madness.

He's the harbinger of humanity's inevitable transition into machinery. How else to explain his clinical distance from reality? He's always been that way—in his 1997 book, *www HR Giger com*, he kicks off an essay on his childhood with the line, "When I was five years old, I had it all under control!" His father, a pharmacist, discouraged artistic pursuits as unrewarding. His mother, however, encouraged the nascent artist, indulging him with supplies and assistance. When drawing wasn't enough, he escaped from the world via his ghost train, an imaginary conveyance to other





Zodiac Sign Virgo, *edition of five, cast aluminum, 32" x 32" x 16," 1993.*



Biomechanoidsketch.

dimensions. That train came to life in the 1990s when he built, in his garden, an elaborate scale-model railroad on which he and his guests glide through a labyrinth of gruesome tunnels. Living-train motifs figure prominently in his work. Designs for director Ridley Scott's unmade *The Train* wound up in the film *Species*; now he plans to construct a train ride in his museum. But these vehicles aren't the playful choo-

choos of yore: he doesn't downplay the sexual symbolism of a screaming locomotive, nor does he present the glistening tunnels through which it travels as anything other than vaginas seductively leading to doom.

In high school Giger masturbated during class, stealthily, secretly glancing around at the other kids. At home he played with guns and drew. Later, at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich, he studied technical design. His earliest drawings reveal a burgeoning fascination with the erotic. From that point on, he used sexual imagery to engender fear and proceeded to fuck the world with his work.

In later years, his psychosexual impact was never so obvious as when The Dead Kennedys used his painting *Landscape XX* on a poster included with their 1985 LP *Frankenchrist*. The painting depicts no less than a genitalia farm with interacting genders.

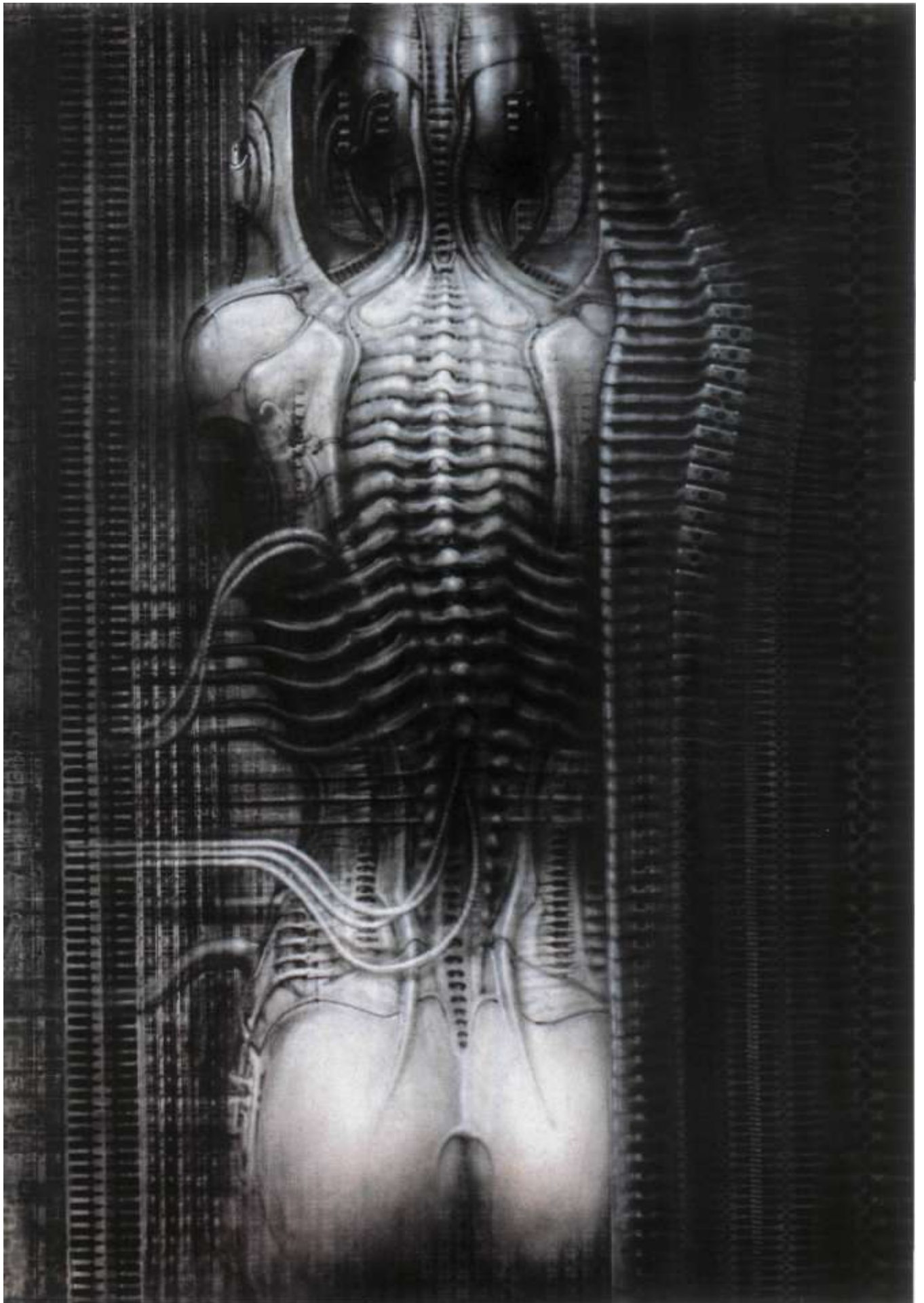


Zodiac Sign Pisces, *edition of five, cast aluminum, 28" x 45" x 26," 1993.*

California authorities quickly brought obscenity charges against the band after an unwitting mom bought her teenage daughter a copy of the album and saw firsthand Giger's trademark terror—in glorious monochrome. The state attorney general declared that if Giger came within reach he'd also face prosecution. That fiasco dealt the band a mortal wound and exposed the artist to censorious scrutiny—and the painting is now priceless. Giger meant no harm to the children of the Golden State; of such work he says, "I don't know what it means. When I finish a painting, it's like it was done by someone else."

In the beginning, he investigated and contemplated. Modeling in clay, he made masks, eyeless female busts, monsters, Biomechanoids (his arm/leg creatures), his ghost train, et cetera. He drew incessantly. "Between 1964 and '68 I used a technique we learned in school for drawing three-dimensional shapes in perspective. It was my first airbrush style—rubbing a toothbrush dipped in ink along the surface of a wire-mesh screen, giving a coarse spray. For the solid black areas I used a Rapidograph pen. It was done on transcop, a transparent paper for architects, so I could scratch away highlights with a razor blade. Between '67 and '69 I worked in oils, and also bought my first airbrush to add white highlights. In 1972 I started painting with the airbrush—first only with ink and water, which gives a warm sepia look. After '73, I added white to get a more bluish effect, going from warm gray to cold. It's called 'grissaille.'

Unfortunately, the colors of my paintings are nearly always printed wrong, even in most of my books. It's frustrating. Due to the CMYK [cyan-magenta-yellow-black] printing palette, there's always too much yellow or red, which makes my paintings either a horrible brown or much too purple. Color is a distraction."



Torso, acrylic on paper, 23" x 33," 1980.



HR Giger's tools of the trade.

His work coalesced into a dark and surreal portfolio of skeletal landscapes and abominations. As his masterful draftsmanship got tighter and tighter, traces of his now-familiar style appeared. In the early 70s he did posters and album covers for the German avant-rock outfit Floh de Cologne. He produced a steady stream of graphic images in all media, working for a while with a particular process or material, then switching to something else, always experimenting and trying new techniques. Yet with each new addition to his artistic arsenal, his work took on a more and more singular appearance, so that each piece segued into the next thematically and chromatically.

With the airbrush he created a freehand style realized without the usual aid of frisket or templates (an exception being his fabulous series *N. Y.C.*, wherein he used stamped metal parts as stencils to lay down a skeletal understructure). Giger: "Using an airbrush freehand has become as familiar as steering a car. I become an automaton." He adopted acrylic and ink as his elixir, and the magic commenced. Giger again: "The airbrush, like the gun, is a magic instrument. You can make something happen at a distance; you don't have to touch anything—it's as if it were done by someone else's hands. A painting comes into existence without you touching the surface."

He painted some of his most well-known works on rolls of paper so big that he couldn't view his creation all at once. He attached the paper to very large boards: "I built a hydraulic lift in my home so I could move the paintings up and down through a slit I cut in the floor. That way, I was able to work in my usual way, sitting down with my elbows on my knees."



© HR Giger

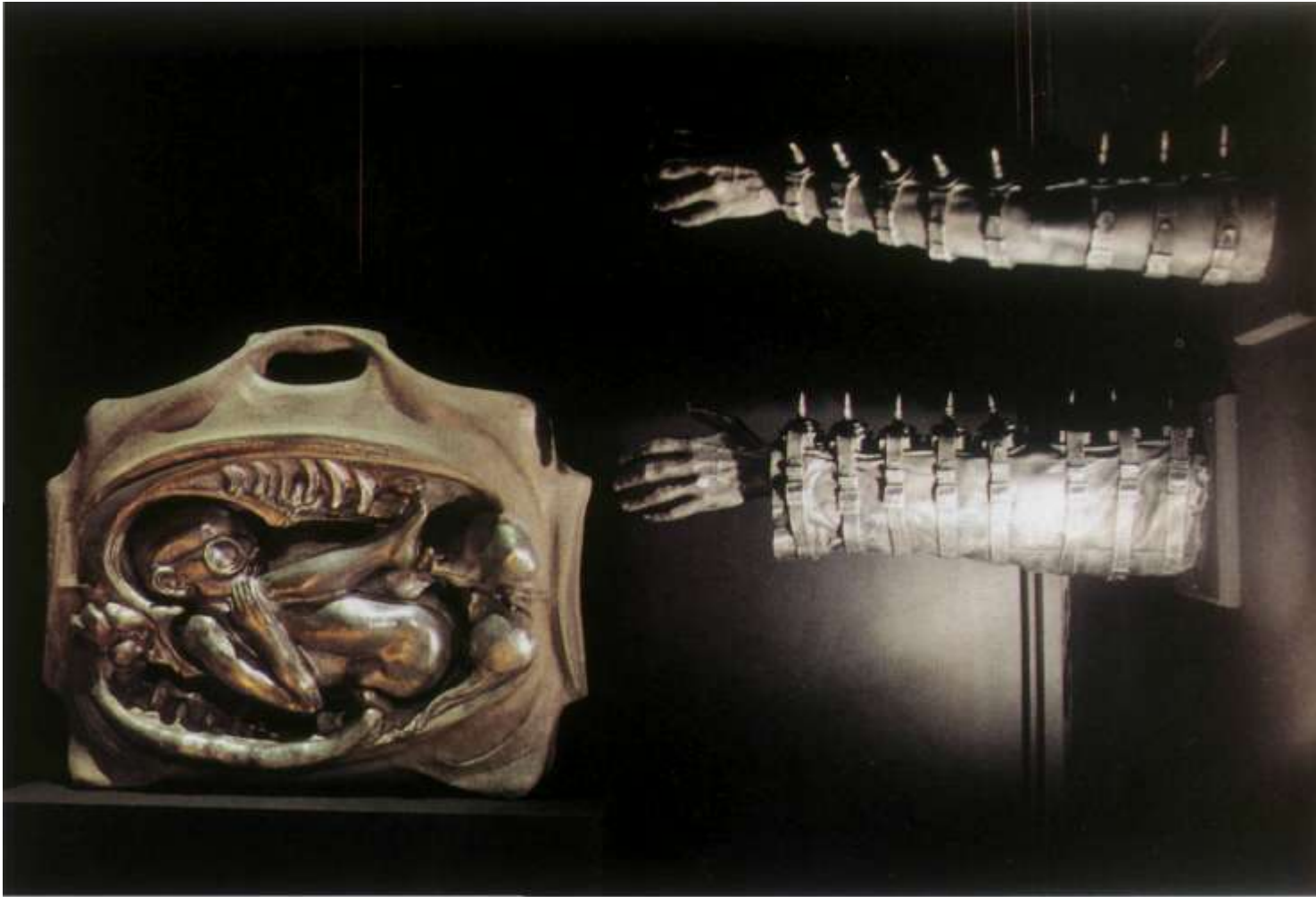


Left: Biomechanoid 70, four-color silkscreen, 23" x 33," 1970. Above: Chinese Evolution, acrylic on paper/wood, 93" x 80," 1981-84.

Photo: Les Barany



Above, left: Watchguardian Head V, edition of five, cast aluminum, 1993. Right: Mask II, edition of five, cast aluminum, 8" x 14" x 13," 1993.



Left: Suitcase Baby, edition of five, cast aluminum, 30" x 20" x 8," 1967. **Right:** Summer Crosswatch and Winter Crosswatch, each an edition of five, cast aluminum, 8" x 25" x 6," 1993.

The paintings came in kaleidoscopic series. *Passages*, *Spell*, *Passage Temple*, *Dune*, *Alien*, *Erotomechanics*, *N.Y.C.*, *Victory*—each successive series took his esteem to higher levels, making him an ambassador of the counterculture despite his shy demeanor. Paintings gathered into books, which became underground sensations. In 1977 the book *Necronomicon* established him in genres as relatively diverse as comics and fine art, and from it burst not only a reputation but influence as well. *HR Giger's New York City* followed, as did his other books *Alien*, *Necronomicon 2*, and *Biomechanics*. Those volumes impacted widely: today, bikers spray approximations of his fluid style onto their gas tanks, set designers borrow shamelessly from his stylistic oeuvre, the epidermally adorned have his images tattooed all over themselves (his color schemes go perfectly with human skin tones), and every Goth household harbors something he inspired—after all, his work does seize the night. And don't forget the album covers for major-label extravaganzas like Emerson Lake and Palmer's *Brain Salad Surgery* (1973), Deborah Harry's *Koo Koo* (1981), and Carcass' *Heartwork* (1993).

In the early '90s, after nearly 700 paintings, Giger laid aside his airbrush. What his mind wrought could no longer contain itself within two dimensions, he felt. Throughout his career he always sculpted, and the three-dimensional stuff eventually took precedence. "I was tired of working with the airbrush—it's a lot of work. I'm now translating my two-dimensional world into reality. Anyway, people always say that my paintings look like sculptures."

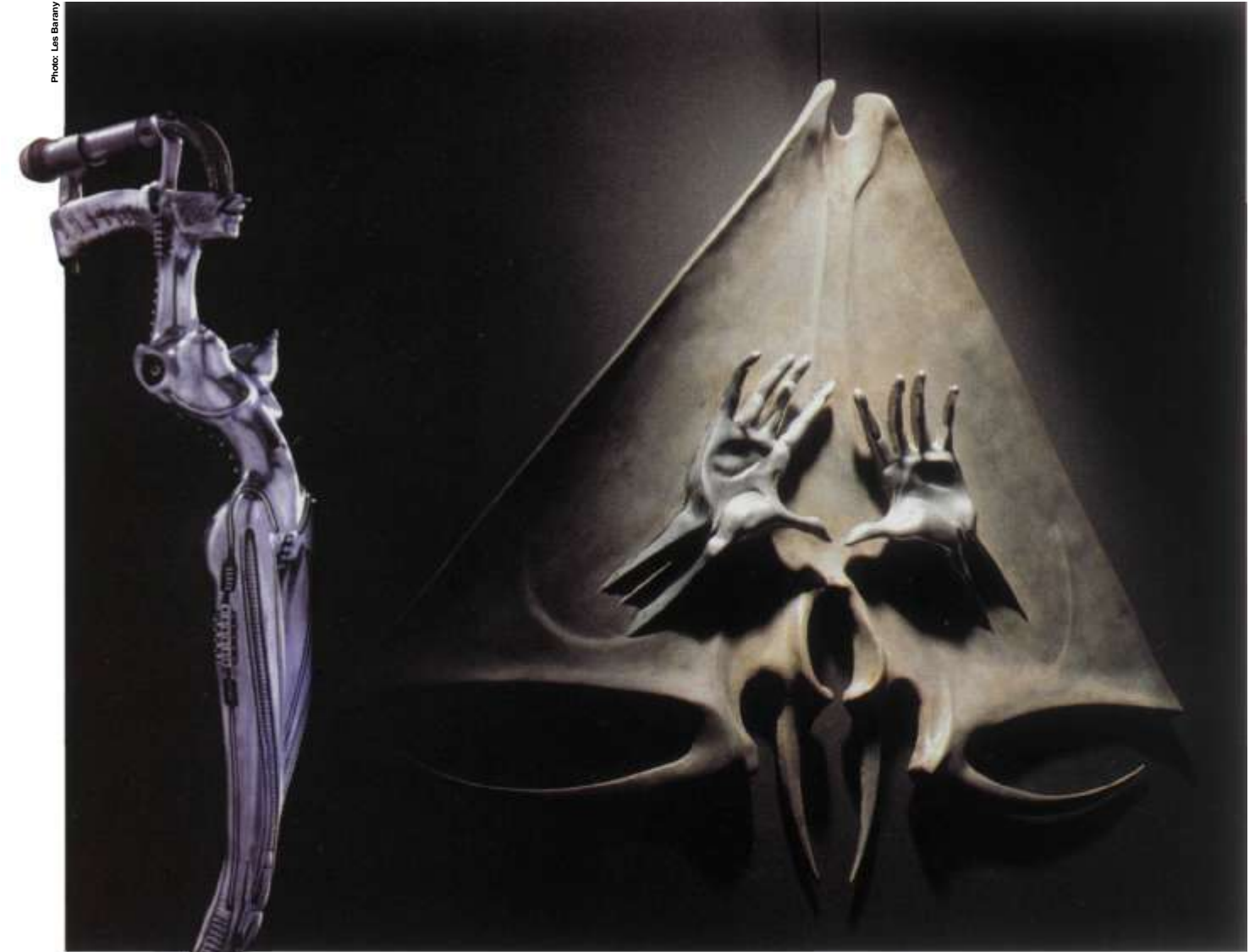
Film department: HR Giger is a household name, best known for his Oscar-winning designs for Ridley Scott's masterpiece, *Alien*. Those designs' baroque functionality contrasted the era's prevailing style, the slick, superheroic sterility *Star Wars* exemplified. His

new look took the world by storm, becoming a standard style often appropriated to within a hair's breadth of illegality. Giger: "James Cameron's sequel, *Aliens*, was a great film, but I wasn't invited to work on it. My designs were already done, so they didn't need me."

In 1989, Twentieth-Century Fox hired him to work with director David Fincher on *Alien 3* but inexplicably omitted his name from the film's theatrical release. Giger: "It said only, 'Original *Alien* Design by HR Giger.' They apologized, saying it was a mistake, but it was too late for me. I had to publish the photos and sketches of my *Alien 3* work in my *Film Design* book so people would know I had worked on the movie." Finally, the studio credited him in the video and laserdisc versions.

For 1997's *Alien Resurrection*, Fox proceeded without his input, omitting his name from the credits entirely. "Although Giger did not work on the film, most life forms in the film adhered strictly to his original designs," says Les Barany, Giger's agent. "Fox took the position that they owed Giger nothing. They offered to grant him a mention in the video release if he would only sign a paper acknowledging the fact that they had no obligation to do so. We declined their generosity. We decided that, credit or no credit, everyone knows who the real Alien Father is." The artist waged a propaganda war against Fox via his web site and interviews; the studio ultimately acknowledged his paternity on subsequent releases of the film.

Other important Gigerized films include Brian Gibson's *Poltergeist II* (1986) and Roger Donaldson's *Species* (1995). Alejandro Jodorowsky (in '75) and then Dino Di Laurentis (in '80) both employed the artist's design skills for their aborted attempts to film Frank Herbert's overrated novel *Dune*.



Left/Lower right: Korn Mic-Stand, limited edition of five, cast aluminum, 2000. ©HR Giger.
 Above: Emblem for a Secret Society, edition of five, cast aluminum, 25" x 30" 2 1/2," 1993.

Incidentally, the first *Dune* gig happened because no less a personage than Salvador Dalí showed an exhibition catalog of Giger's paintings to Jodorowsky, whom the artist credits with propelling him into the film world. Unrealized projects like *The Tourist* and *Dead Star* (released 10 years later as *Supernova*, minus Giger's designs) took a toll on his time and energy. His production sketches were in fact full-blown paintings, unheard of in time-constrained Hollywood. He published them in his own books, contradicting a convention whereby every design idea is a proprietary entity rigorously guarded against prying eyes.

In 1989 he delved into work on his ongoing film project, *The Mystery of San Gottardo*, which he subtitles *A Comedy*. Over the ensuing decade he developed the story through text, sketches, and photographs (published in '98 by Taschen Books, in German). At the time of this writing the film remains under construction.

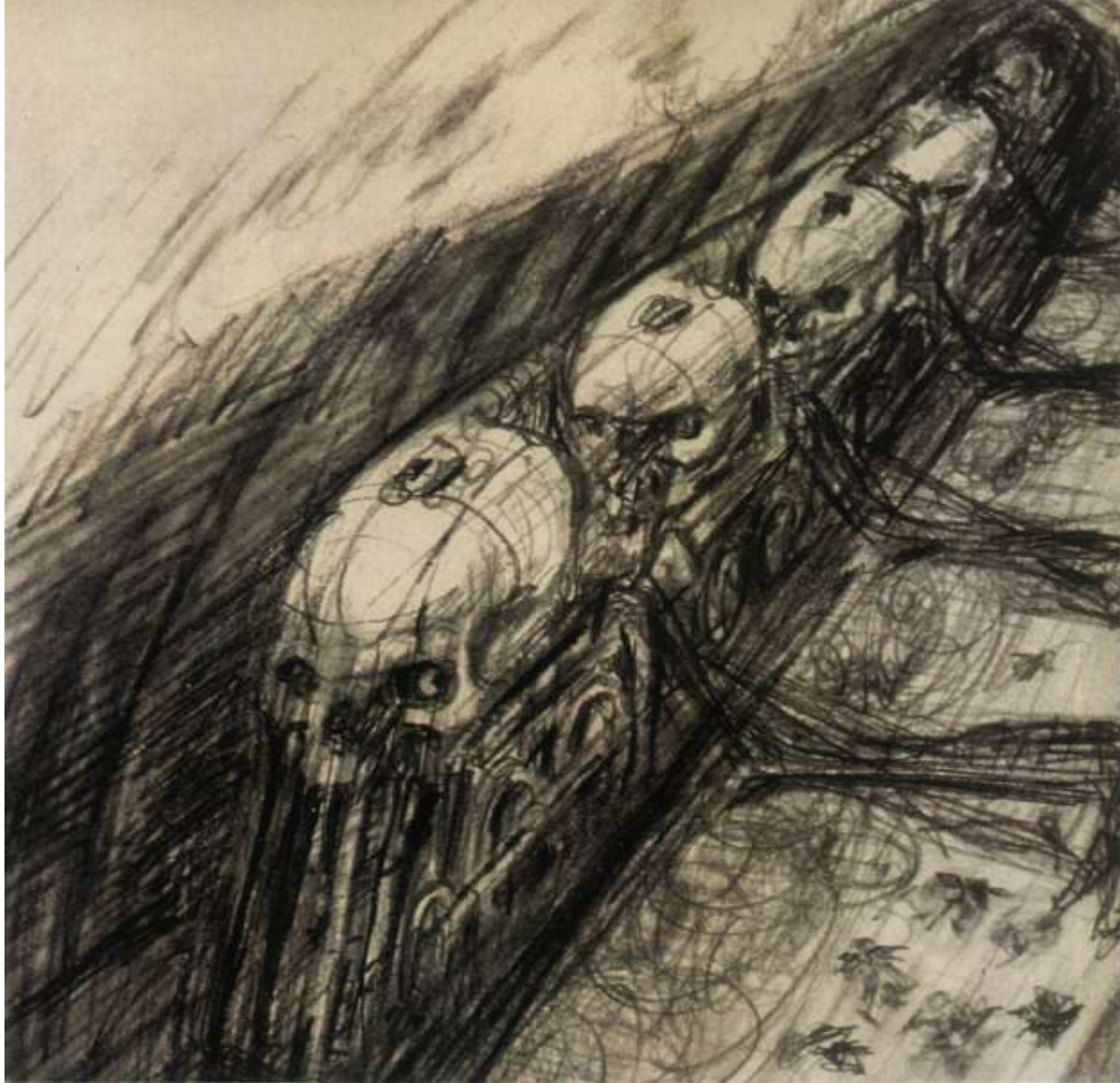
It focuses on creatures consisting of a combined human

arm and leg, at once superior and vulnerable to the humans around them—sort of like Giger himself. They come from an ancient race, mutilating humans in order to propagate. "One of my earliest sketches, *The Beggar*, in 1963, was the birth of my first Biomechanoid," he says. The arm-leg construct, perhaps his favorite spawn, appears throughout his repertoire.

In 1993 his accumulated experimentation came together in a futuristic fusing of the functional and the fantastic. He fractured the familiar Swatch watch into many stylistic facets—giant hologram watches, watches made into sinister masks, watches that injected poison into the wearer—and presented them at New York's Alexander Gallery as *HR Giger's Watch Abart '93* in a joint show with Robert Crumb. One can only imagine why, at the last moment, the Swatch company decided not to collaborate with the artist as planned.

Those watches tell time in the private universe Giger built, nurtured, and gave a brain—his own. He furnished it; he sits at the center on his throne-like Harkonnen chair (designed for the first *Dune* project). He walks on hieroglyphic-relief floor tiles—available in either aluminum or rubber—past (continued on page 74 •)





Above: *Ghost Train* sketch. Lower left: *HR Giger Bar*, Chur, Switzerland, 1992.

© Willy Spillert



© Mia Boncaglio



HR Giger and 6' 10" Alien actor *Bolaji Badejo* between takes at *Shepperton Studios*, 1978.

HR GIGER

(continued from page 59) walls of tessellated fiberglass babies, also available. Bronze, stainless steel, and rust replace the flesh and bones of another era. In this Gigerized environment of fountains, mirrors, lamps, tables, and trains, he's the sculptor and engineer.

The Giger Bar, located in Chur, Switzerland (his hometown), provides passage into his universe. He created everything within. The lighting, the furniture, the floors, the coat racks—all evoke the terror that gave us the Alien; what once threatened us now seduces us, inviting our tongues and fingers inside. The Bar is a total experience, from the custom-cast doors down to the tiniest Gigeresque detail. In New York, Biomechanical condors and a mask of his face hang from the ceiling of The Giger Room in the church-turned-nightclub Limelight, watching the beautiful people below (Corie Craven puts on the amazing Zen Warp parties there every Saturday night).

In 1997, he founded his crowning achievement to date: The HR Giger Museum, located in Chateau St. Germain, on a hilltop in the 400-year-old walled city of Gruyères, Switzerland. Set in a storybook landscape, the castle hides its horrors and wonders behind three-foot-thick stone walls. Therein many of his paintings hang in all their surreal magnificence (sometimes Giger purchases his own paintings back as collectors make them available). A museum Giger Bar is in the final stages of construction. Except for trips between the museum and his home in Zurich, the artist travels as little as possible because his 18-year-old cat, Muggi, doesn't like his absences.

Giger's art is iconographic and often provides inspiration. Countless tattooed individuals sport his Biomechanical patterns, likenesses of the Alien bursting through their hides, or other of his images. Vans, bikes, skateboards, and snowboards bear his unique textural motifs, as interpreted by other artists. "In misguided homage," he says, "some artists relentlessly copy my style." Forgers prey on him. Les Barany tracks down the most brazen of them, once borrowing the identity of another agent and traveling from New York to Amsterdam in order to stop a particularly irritating imitator from passing stuff off to a Zurich auction house. When Les nailed the guy, it turned out that his daughter was wheelchair bound, and Giger felt too sorry for her to press charges.

In 1997 the artist licensed the use of his 1976 painting *The Master and Margarita* to Glenn Danzig, for the singer's CD *How the Gods Kill III*. They agreed that the image was only for cover art, but it appeared on T-shirts and poster as well. "When we contacted Danzig's people about it, they said it must be the work of bootleggers. It was," says Les. "Once we had concrete proof that the T-shirts being sold in Europe originated from within the Danzig camp, we took it to a lawyer. It was impossible to serve the papers through conventional channels, so we hired a process server who crowd-surfed up onto the stage during a sold-out Danzig show at Roseland in New York and served Glenn the subpoena."

Despite that unfortunate episode, Giger still lends his skills to our nation's rock stars. He recently sculpted a sexy microphone stand for Jonathan Davis, megastar singer of Korn, of whom the artist says, "Jonathan is very inventive and a great interpreter of an absolutely unique music, but like all great singers, he suffers as he does it. I nearly feel uncomfortable watching such a private act.

"In July 2000, Korn was touring in Europe, and Jonathan visited me after going to my museum. We didn't talk much about the designs—maybe he was too polite to make criticisms. He told me I had complete freedom to design the microphone stand as I wanted and that his only concern was that it should be as movable as possible. He also wanted it to be very erotic."

There's always a project in the works—The Zodiac Fountain, trans-Alpine tunnels, stereograms, The Mystery Of San Gottardo, an upcoming retrospective at The Marble Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia, and a new Tarot deck ("I don't like anyone reading the Tarot for me—I'm very superstitious and I hate it!"). He recently signed a licensing deal for European and Japanese distribution of Giger snowboards and skateboards. It never ends.

That, in a nutshell, is the story of Giger's art. Perhaps superlatives are in order here—like, "He slices our psyches into pulsating pixels, then makes us look at them under blinding magnification," or, "More archetypes than Bosch had headaches." But the everyday facts are intriguing enough—his unnerving consistency, his reclusive lifestyle, his influence on Hollywood. And, of course, his unprecedented vision. Les Barany puts it this way: "Giger has envisioned things no human eye has seen. If his work isn't a vision of Hell, then I don't know what is." Timothy Leary asked, "Giger, you see more than we domesticated primates. Are you from some super-intelligent species?" The master sums it up: "The more famous I become, the more I'm tolerated. I'm not such a serious or tragic person—I like fun. And often people don't get the joke!" •

Check out the main official Giger website: www.hrgiger.com. Direct all inquiries to Les Barany at www.hrgigeragent.com or check out his posse at www.baranyartists.com.