

H.R. GIGER

WITH a blast from his airbrush he single-handedly transformed Science Fiction from stuffy space-opera into a scary combination of Horror and hi-tech. He created a Biomechanical Universe in which machines are alive (or is it living things are machines?). His early paintings, collected in his own *Necronomicon* books, frightened and fascinated all who viewed them. In 1979 he designed the creature featured in the film *Alien*, and the rest is history: hundreds of shows all over the world, many more books — and of course designs for more films (*Poltergeist II* and *Species*), inspiration for countless tattoos, and then in the 90s shifting to sculpture and bringing his paintings to life — until finally it took a museum of his very own to contain it all. Now it's *ArtSync's* turn to get Gigerized!



Creator of the Biomechanical Universe!
Photo by Annie Bertram

interview by George Petros

ArtSync: *You gave up working with the airbrush and you no longer paint. In what medium do you now work?*

GIGER: I gave up the airbrush around 1993. Now I work mostly with pencil on paper. I also do drawings with felt pens or with ballpoint pens and, of course, I have my sculptures. Stopping painting was not a conscious decision, but around the same time I started making sculptures again after many years. I could not afford to produce them in the early years of my career although I had many ideas for them.

I'm happy to have been able to produce my 1967 painting, *The Birthmachine*, three-dimensionally. It is a Walther pistol with four Bullet Babies, each one with a gun with more Bullet Babies. The first Birthmachine Baby has guarded the entrance to the Giger Museum since 1998. Later I made the whole gun as the Birthmachine sculpture. This image has appeared many times in my paintings and drawings over the years. It's my expression about the over-population of the world.

ArtSync: *Let's talk about some of your influences. How about H.P. Lovecraft —*

GIGER: Yes, Lovecraft. An old friend of mine, Sergius Golowin, a specialist in myths and fables and magic, gave me a book by Lovecraft in the late 60s and introduced me to *Necronomicon: The Book of the Dead*. He said the entire corpus of my work could easily be pages out of the *Necronomicon*. I very much admire Lovecraft, but his main influence upon my own was simply the name of Alhazred's grimoire [*Lovecraft character's book of magic*] — the *Necronomicon*. There is a funny story concerning Golowin. He used to tell everyone that the walls of my home were covered with paintings from the *Necronomicon*, which at the time was not true at all, but after a while it became true. *Passages* and *The Spell* turned my walls into a sort of Lovecraftian temple, but not anymore, since all those works are now in Gruyeres [*Switzerland*], at the museum.

ArtSync: *How about Aleister Crowley —*

GIGER: Well, everyone who is interested in magic and the occult is familiar with Aleister Crowley, though I must say that I tried to study his books and his system of magic and I found it quite difficult to understand him. I was always interested in what

kind of paintings he made, but it took many years before I was actually able to see them. I have a copy somewhere of the catalogue that was produced for the Crowley art exhibition that was held in London back in 1998, and a catalogue for an exhibition in 1932, in Berlin. Most of the works I've seen are portraits of his friends. He made them look very evil! He also painted the ladies very terrible looking. In my painting women are beautiful goddesses — to me, anyway!

ArtSync: *Ernest Fuchs — I know the two of you are good friends —*

GIGER: I would have to say that Ernest Fuchs has been my greatest and deepest inspiration. He is the founder of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism and in my opinion the greatest artist alive today. And as a technician he is absolutely fantastic, a true master of every medium. If I had seen his work when I was young, I would not have dared to become an artist. His museum in Vienna is the most amazing place. It's a great honor to be his friend.

ArtSync: *What do you think of Mali Klarwein's paintings?*

GIGER: He is absolutely great. We knew each other well. It's a shame his books are mostly out of print. But that's the problem for most surrealist painters and artists. I am very glad to have Taschen and Morpheus International as my publishers, but I think they are also happy to have me.

ArtSync: *No doubt. Do you listen to music when you work? What do you like?*

GIGER: Well, ten years ago or so, I mostly listened to Jazz, my favorite musician being Miles Davis. Some Rock & Roll as well. But nowadays I listen to a lot of film soundtracks. I really love the soundtrack to Coppola's *Dracula*. I'm also a big fan of Puff Daddy, especially the tracks on the *Godzilla* soundtrack.

ArtSync: *What about Electronic Music?*

GIGER: No, not too much. I like Aphex Twin, though. *Come To Daddy* is very good. Very amusing. I like the music very much on *The Fifth Element* soundtrack. I'm a fan of the Propellerheads. As for my work, I do not paint or draw to music. I love silence!

ArtSync: *Have you recovered any of those paintings that were stolen from you?*



above: detail of *The Birthmachine*
left: *The Birthmachine* sculpture guards the entrance to Giger's museum.

Photos by Matthias Belz

GIGER: No, not recovered. Once I was contacted, via my website, about a missing *Alien* painting, the one of the adult *Alien* in profile. This person said that his friend in Australia had this painting and that he got it from someone in London, who got it somehow after the filming was finished in Shepperton. I think he just wanted for me to know, not help to return it. I don't think I'll ever see it again.

ArtSync: *It seems that quite a few of your painting have disappeared —*

GIGER: Yes, unfortunately. Apparently my work has some serious fans, some of who seem to be determined



Interior of The Giger Museum
Photo by Matthias Belz

to collect my work one way or another, by whatever means necessary. Another stolen *Alien* painting, one that I like better than the side view, is a painting of a part of the crashed alien spacecraft. It's one of my favorites. More recently, in 2005, right after my retrospective at the National Technical Museum of Prague, while all my work was in "safe storage" in a locked room of the museum, my two very well-known Emerson Lake and Palmer album cover paintings disappeared. It's ironic, but they were quite safe during the time they were on public display for more nearly six months, watched over by the tens of thousands of Czech fans who didn't realize that they would be the last to see them. Well, almost the last. We printed reward posters and had them put up all around the city of Prague but, unfortunately, it didn't help. I am still hopeful that a real Giger fan, an honest one, might know where these paintings are and will contact Leslie Barany, my agent. They will be well rewarded, you can be sure, after the paintings are recovered and hanging in the Giger Museum where they belong! In another case, we are pretty sure we know where four other stolen paintings are — and Les slipped the name of the town in Holland and the name of the man who has them hanging on his wall into one of my books, but the police don't seem to take stolen art very seriously.

ArtSync: *That's lousy. Sometimes bad things make the*

world go around. I know that you paint what you fear —

GIGER: Yes, I have said that. But I also — and mostly — paint what I like! My fears these days are quite boring, mostly concerning money problems — something most artists are familiar with. I have a lot of debts and not enough money because of the costs involved in maintaining the Chateau St. Germain [*the privately-run Giger Museum in Gruyeres*]. I am often reminded that it is not my castle, but the bank's! I hate to deal with these stupid money problems. It's quite stressful and it worries me a lot. The museum takes up a lot of my time, because I have to look after it and make sure it works well, that it continues to attract more people and that it eventually will become well-known and be able to pay for itself. It still does not — and there is always something new that has to be paid for. Right now it urgently needs a new roof. I just need a lot of money — that would be the best thing!

ArtSync: *Back to talking about inspirations — what inspired your painting series called The Spell?*

GIGER: I did some work under the influence of magic, you might say — magic literature, that is. I had recently visited Dali in Cadaques, Spain, and also did the Second Celebration of the Four, a portfolio of photos, overworked with the airbrush, of a ceremony to remember the death of my girlfriend Li. That was the only thing I've done, really, in terms of a genuine magical ritual. At this time, I think 1976, I did the

last paintings of *The Spell*. Everything that I know about witchcraft and magic I put into that series. But in a way, I painted these paintings without anything in particular in mind, without thinking. I went back to Cadaques, just recently, to visit Dali's home and the Dali Museum, with Carmen [*Giger's wife*]. It was wonderful.

ArtSync: *What was the inspiration behind the painting The Magus?*

GIGER: Keith Emerson playing the organ. It was an homage to Keith Emerson.

ArtSync: *How did the Giger Museum get started?*

GIGER: The idea for it came after I had a show in a chateau in Gruyeres in the early 90s. Gruyeres is in the middle of Switzerland, in the French part, and is also where the famous cheese comes from. I loved this village from the beginning. It's very old and sits on a small mountain and is surrounded by thick stone walls. At the top is the castle, Chateau Gruyeres, where my show was — and a little below is Chateau St. Germain. The show was very successful, by the way — close to ten-thousand people came over four months. I was convinced that this place would be perfect for me to install a Giger museum. During this time I had a sponsor, a banker from Zurich, who wanted to aid the museum project, and when I found out that Chateau St. Germain was going to be auctioned, we decided we must have it. But ten days before the auction my sponsor pulled out of the project. So I decided to pay for it myself, which was probably not the best idea I've ever had! [*laughs*] It was quite a lot of money and I am still paying for it today, but I'm happy I did it. Visitors would always want to come to my house to see the originals, and I never had any peace. Galleries and museums could only exhibit some of my art for a couple of months a year. Before, most of my paintings were in storage all year round. Now my art is on permanent display all the time for anybody who wants to see it. Visitors can also see the art I've been collecting for more than 40 years: Fuchs, Dado, Bruno Weber, Günter Brus, Claude Sandoz, Francois Burland, Friedrich Kuhn, Joe Coleman, Sybille Ruppert and many others I have in my collection —

ArtSync: *It's quite a collection. And I see you have lots of shows and retrospectives happening — let's see: Paris, Prague, Vienna, Valencia, and Switzerland —*

GIGER: When you reach a certain point and age, you are finally "discovered" by the museums, or you become difficult to overlook. I'm amused that there's such interest in my art. It's nice that curators send me invitations for shows all over the world. But it's impossible to accept them all, unfortunately. It would have been easier earlier, before there was the Giger Museum. Now I have to be careful and not take away too much from there and disappoint the visitors who come from far away to see their favorite works.



H.R. Giger, *Alien Fondue*
Pencil on paper, 2003
Collection of Leslie Barany

ArtSync: *I want to remind ArtSync's readers that you won an Oscar for your designs for the scariest Sci-fi film ever made, Alien. That creature is part of our collective consciousness.*

GIGER: I am a painter, really, and also not a terrible sculptor. That also helped. [*laughs*] As an artist, at the time, that was the only way I knew how to do it. *Alien* got me more attention as an artist — and many shows. Not much movie work followed. Fine by me. It was nice getting the Oscar, since there wasn't much money. I never thought I'd get a prize for something like that. In people's imagination it became stronger than reality.

ArtSync: *That's for sure! I want to thank you for your time — and keep up the good work!*

GIGER: Thank you very much. •