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## A Rare U.S. Showing of H.R. Giger's Work

By Eric Gelber

I was fortunate enough to see a rare U.S. showing of H.R. Giger's work at the Fuse Gallery (93 Second Ave. NYC). The show ran from March 17-April 28, 2002. José Argüelles said that "art is a perfect blend of psychic impulse and technical implementation." The same can be said of H.R. Giger's art.

**H**IS IMAGERY CONTINUES TO HOLD OUR INTEREST BECAUSE it inspires us to contemplate the uncomfortable aspects of organic life; the gooey innards, the self destructive and murderous impulses. He also undermines our hubris by making beautiful creatures that echo the human form but differ from it in fundamental ways. **Birthmachine Baby**, 1998, a sculpture in which a tiny humanoid in a fetal position is transformed into a bullet, is a poetic symbol of our self destructive impulses. Giger's sense of humor and eroticism prevent him from being didactic however.

**Birthmachine**, 1967-2001,  
Aluloxal print, Ltd.Ed, 23,  
165 x 190cm

**Mother with Child**, 2001,  
Aluloxal print, Ltd.Ed, 23,  
94 x 102 cm

**Female Head**, 1965-2001,  
cast aluminum with concrete base,  
Ltd. Ed. of 23,  
30 x 14 x 50cm

**Nubian Queen**, 2002,  
cast aluminum, Ltd. Ed. of 23,  
183cm tall, 12kg

9 drawings from Giger's sketchbook.

He created disturbing and original imagery years before he designed the brilliant sets and creatures for Ridley Scott's film **Alien**. Science fiction filmmakers from the 80s, 90s and beyond need to fess up (and pay up), to acknowledge their debt to Giger. His influence on popular culture has only grown. Poor imitations of Giger's creatures and set designs continue to appear in snack food commercials and big budget and B-grade science fiction films. Giger's art has more to do with inner space than with outer space.

A large portion of classic Surrealist imagery has become silly through time. It was intended to be scary, sexy or enigmatic, and now it is laughable. Giger's work remains potent. He said "When I finish a painting, it's like it was done by someone else." Giger's sculpture and graphic art is too meticulous to be the product of automatism. The Surrealists were always trying to get outside themselves (in theory at least). However, all artistic processes are conscious processes. We do not control the content of our dreams. But Giger is able to envision an alternate reality with astounding clarity. Giger follows in the Surrealist

tradition by blending organic and mechanical forms. He is a satirist, critiquing our civilization through the backroads of the imagination. Giger's knowledge of human and animal anatomy invigorates his figures. His sculptures and paintings are crisp and precise. Giger gains strength from his contradictory impulses. He was an architectural and industrial design student and used the airbrush for years because it allowed him to draw without touching surfaces directly with his hand. He plunges into madness with a cool detachment.

Giger's imagination has playful and morbid leanings. He has created some of the most desolate landscapes imaginable. His imaginary landscapes and creatures are a sophisticated blend of sexual and violent urges. Giger understands the essential formal qualities of ancient and primitive statuary. But he is not a primitivist. He doesn't ape the formal qualities of primitive sculptures like the Cubists did. He often builds compositions around solitary figures but not always. His creatures have the same mysterious blank stare that primitive masks do (the facial expressions are completely ambigu-

ous), but they are at home in the modern world. When we gaze at his figural compositions we feel as if we are intruding upon a strange and private ritual.

References to musical instruments appear throughout Giger's oeuvre. The way the retractable set of teeth popped in and out of the alien's mouth in Ridley Scott's film reminded me of a slide on a trombone. **Guardian Angel**, 2002, is a small serpentine creature perched on top of a tall, thin rectangular base. It is a cast aluminum form with ribbed reptilian wings and an elongated skull. Shapes that look like keys on a saxophone are placed on the sides of it. This odd totem represents the artist's imagination. It is a manifestation of his childhood dreams and nightmares, and his adult obsessions.

The sinuous, big-headed creatures and the bespectacled homunculi (Jonathan Swift couldn't have invented better satire) which appear in many of Giger's works are deeply inward; lost in thought. The little men in sculptures such as, **Suitcase Baby**, 1967, and **Birthmachine Baby**, 1998,



**Shafts II**, 1965-2001,  
Aluloxal print, Ltd.Ed, 23,  
100 x 80cm

**Suitcase Baby**, 1993  
in bronze or aluminum, Ltd.Ed of 5  
20 x 50 x 75cm

**HGR Mask II**, 1993  
Limited Edition of 5,  
35 x 19 x 32cm

**Atomic Children**, 2001,  
Aluloxal print, Limited Edition of 23,  
165 x 109cm

Photo: © 2002, Marc Adrian Villas

wear goggles. We do not know if they are happy or sad. They represent the glummer aspects of the human condition; helplessness and introversion. They are safely nestled in a mechanical womb, resigned to their fate. The majestic and deadly creatures in **Aleph**, (a same size limited edition print of the original 1973 painting), and in the other alueloxal prints in the series (**Mother with Child**, 1967, **Alpha**, 1967, **Under the Earth**, 1968, **Atomic Children**, 1968), on the other hand, are predators; sexy, aggressive and repulsive, more than capable of handling any encounter with an adversary. They have the same sharp and pointed curves that extremely thin women have. In fact a number of the creatures in this exhibit are strange cross breedings of waifish super models, insects, and metallic weapons.

Many of Giger's creatures are hairless. Hair is a reminder of our animal natures. By making many of his creatures hairless Giger wedes the biological and mechanical in purely visual terms. His creatures have chitinous skins. As monstrous as Giger's creatures are, they appear to be higher up on the evolutionary scale. Their anatomy is not so different from ours but they are angular, not blocky. They have bony appendages, their spines are visible, egg sacs and veiny clusters dangle from their bodies. The deformations are erotically charged. Giger reveals what the flesh hides. We feel uncomfortable in the presence of these images because the inside is on the outside. The human form seems feeble in comparison.

**HGR Mask II**, 1993, is a self portrait and death mask. Giger's eyes are closed, his hair is flattened out and de-emphasized and his face is covered with slightly raised shapes which resemble circuitry or hieroglyphics. It is fascinating how he makes abstract forms (as seen on the base plate of the sculpture **Nubian Queen**) that closely resemble circuitry and handwriting. The facial tattoos also resemble splotches. Giger accurately equates technology with contagion.

His figures, whether isolated or in couples or groups, are mysterious because we aren't quite sure what they are doing. The wonderful cast aluminum sculpture **Nubian Queen**, 2002, is a slithery pin-up, a beautiful abstract feminine form covered with hoses, coils and levers which are

placed in carefully chosen places. In the pubic area we see two rows of tiny buttons and the spine is a row of bullets on the exterior of the body. The figure has two smooth arm sockets and no arms (which makes viewing this figure even more perverse). Even without the arms this sculpture embodies willfulness, strength and grace. The arms would have interfered with the vertical movement, so Giger left them out. The silvery reflective surface is entrancing and it is hard to resist touching it. This shiny metallic sculpture reminds me of a finely crafted, chrome plated motorcycle. Many of the sculptures in this exhibit have an industrial sheen.

The print series **The Professionals**, 2001, consists of images of a strange and industrious creature which appears in several works by Giger, the Biomechanoids; a tubular, snake-like form, a muscular arm and leg that are interconnected. Taschen Books has published a title that explains these creatures, *The Mystery of San Gottardo*, and Giger's new book also has material on them. Speaking of the Biomechanoids Giger has stated, "Every biomechanoid was once a normal human being until divided into three beings when the extremities were removed. The main part, the torso and head, is the most unhappy of the three, because it has to spend the rest of its life as an amputee in a rolling cart and usually serves only as a biomechanoid trainer. It does so, hoping one day to be reunited with its extremities. The two arm-leg constructs, on the other hand, are ecstatic to not have to heed the brain anymore, since they were sick of their existence as slaves." Biomechanoids keep busy. They are pure action, free from the constraints of the reasoning mind. They are no longer inhibited by doubt, by the Cartesian self. They are a Surrealist's dream. The print series **Feast for the Psychiatrist**, 1965-2000, is a tribute to the etchings of Dalí and Goya. Strange creatures are grouped together or alone in strange interiors doing



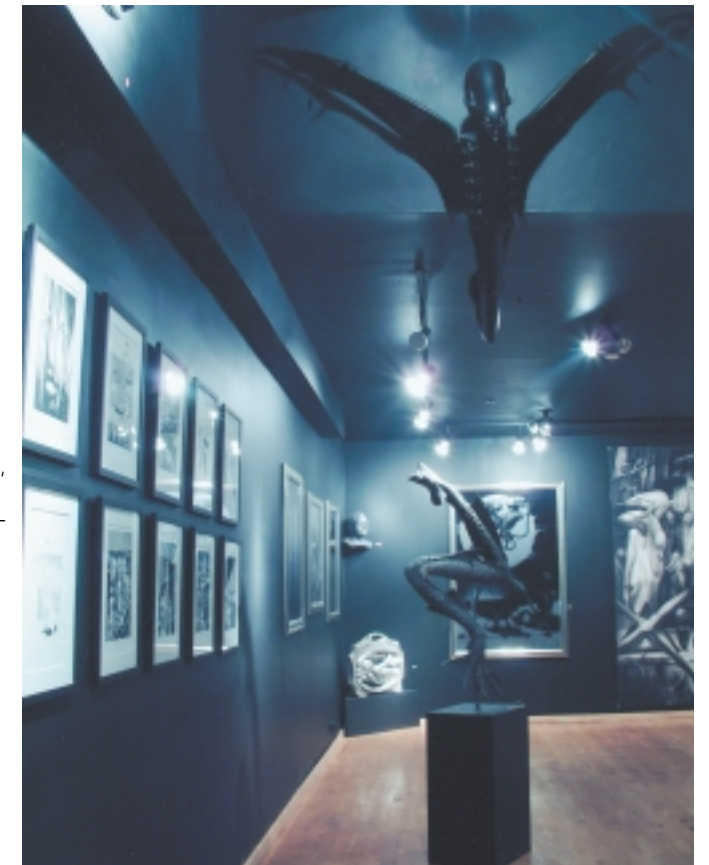
**Mother with Child**, 2001, Alueloxal print, Limited Edition of 23, 94 x 102 cm  
**Female Head**, 1965-2001, Limited Edition of 23, cast aluminum with concrete base, 30 x 14 x 50 cm

Foto: © 2002, Marc Adrian Villas

In foreground:  
 Above,  
**Guardian Angel**, 1997,  
 Limited Edition. of 6,  
 in fiberglass (also available in bronze),  
 100 x 140 x 50 cm,

Below,  
**Zodiac Sign Pisces**,  
 1993,  
 Limited Edition of 5,  
 cast aluminum,  
 115 x 70 x 65 cm

Photo: © 2002,  
 Marc Adrian Villas



**Aleph**, Work No. 210,  
 1972-73,  
 Iris Giclee print,  
 Limited Edition of 6,  
 240 x 216 cm

**Nubian Queen**, 2002,  
 cast aluminum,  
 Limited Edition of 23,  
 183 cm tall, 12kg

Photo: © 2002,  
 Marc Adrian Villas

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suggestive things. These compositions call to mind the apocalyptic worlds of Bosch. The line drawing is delicate and on par with the masters. They are masturbatory fantasies but they also make fun of the self defeated masses.

No one is more aware than Giger that "virtually every major technological advance in the history of the human species - back to the invention of stone tools and the domestication of fire - has been ethically ambiguous" (Carl Sagan). We are never quite sure what role technology plays in his compositions. He obviously finds machine shapes aesthetically pleasing, but what lies behind his impulse to blend organic and mechanical forms? The sensuous feminine forms with machine parts embedded in their flesh, and the desolate landscapes they are placed in are off putting. Giger's art is not far from the realm of comic books. His goal appears to be the full expression of his imagination. Shaft I, 1965-2001, (my favorite work in the show) is another alueloxal print of steep rectangular shafts with staircases climbing up their sides. There is a cavernous darkness between them and they appear to go on forever. This is an evocative and nightmarish image made with a minimal amount of visual elements. This is architecture that has little to do with human comfort. This staircases lead to the center of a madman's mind.

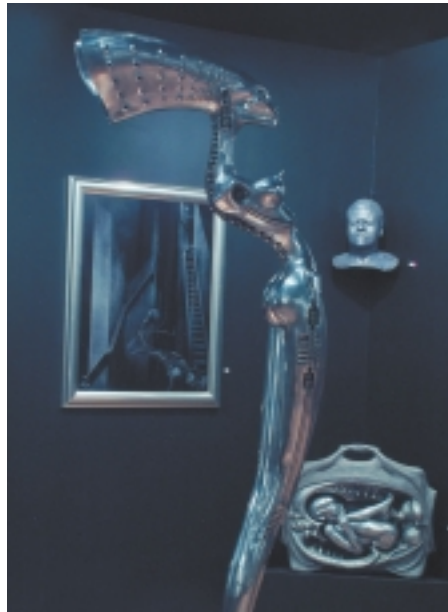
The drawings from Giger's sketch-books included in the Fuse Gallery show are playful and well drawn. They are less finished, the product of playful and curious trains of thought. Giger transforms a bishop into a hard boiled egg, and meditates on the forms of hockey players, focusing specifically on their equipment.



**Biomechanoid**, 2002, Giger's most recent sculpture (which appears on the cover of this issue), is a perfectly balanced upper torso. Made in clay and then cast in shiny aluminum, the artist worked on this sculpture for over two years. Giger fetishizes the female form and mechanical shapes once again. There are fine tipped spikes instead of nipples, no arms, and smooth edged holes and incisions in the figure

**Birth Machine Baby**, 1998, in bronze or aluminum, Limited Edition of 24 21" x 8.75"

Photo: © 2002, Amy Ardrey



**Shafts II**, 1965-2001, Alueloxal print, Limited Edition of 23, 100 x 80 cm

**Nubian Queen**, 2002, cast aluminum, Limited Edition of 23, 183 cm tall, 12kg

**HGR Mask II**, 1993 Limited Edition of 5, 35 x 19 x 32 cm

**Suitcase Baby**, 1993 in bronze or aluminum, Limited Edition of 5 20 x 50 x 75 cm

Photo: © 2002, Marc Adrian Villas

which reveal coils or tubes. Perhaps they are the circulatory system for this strange and erotic creature. There are no eyes but there is a helmet like casing that resembles a human head; in the sense that there is a mouth, nose and sockets for the eyes. Giger is a precisionist and it is just as breathtaking to gaze at the detailed surface of this sculpture as it is to study the marble surface of a Michelangelo statue. Both surfaces, the marble and the cast aluminum, are carefully nuanced and obsessively detailed. Giger picks and chooses what details of the female form he wishes to distort, to fetishize. The viewer is overwhelmed by the meticulousness. Giger, like all important Modernists, gives free reign to his imagination, and understands what makes machine forms beautiful. Is the female anatomy embedded in the machine or are the machine parts embedded in the fetishized feminine form?

Giger's work reminds us of the animal darkness that we rose from not so long ago, but it also has a prophetic quality to it. He points out the fact that our destinies are inextricably linked to technology, the machine. His art is a perfect "synthesis of the contradictions of reality and unreality, of reason and imagination" (Herbert Read). ■

The new, 192 page book, **H.R. GIGER**, in the Taschen/Icons series. Cover photo by H.R. Giger, © 2001



For pricing information on the artworks shown, contact Giger's agent at [www.BaranyArtists.com](http://www.BaranyArtists.com) or (212) 864-2225



Construction in progress at the new H.R. Giger Museum Bar



Photos: © 2002, Megan Rush



**Left side of bar**, pencil on paper, 21 x 15 cm © 2000, H.R. Giger,



**Right side of bar**, giclee prints, Limited Edition of 500, 30 x 21 cm © 2000, H.R. Giger,

## H.R.GIGER MUSEUM

In 1998 the H.R. Giger Museum opened its doors in the medieval Chateau Saint-Germain in the 400 year old historic, walled city of Gruyeres, Switzerland. As the permanent home to many of Giger's key works, the museum houses the best and most extensive collection of the artist's paintings and sculptures, furniture and film designs, dating from the early 1960's till the present day. Many of Giger's furniture and film designs are also exhibited.

The museum's top floor houses a permanent display of Giger's own private art collection and a gallery space in which Giger curates one-man exhibitions on the work of other artists. The museum is a work in progress and soon a new Giger Bar will be completed on the castle grounds. To learn more about the artist and his current projects, visit his official website, [www.hrgigermuseum.com](http://www.hrgigermuseum.com).

H.R. Giger working on the clay model of **Biomechanoid 2002** (the sculpture on the cover) at his atelier in Zurich.

Photo: © 2002, Megan Rush

