

A surrealist painting featuring a large, multi-eyed, tentacle-like creature with a human face, set against a starry night sky and a dark, rocky landscape. The creature's body is coiled, and its tentacles are spread out. The human face is positioned below the creature's body, looking directly at the viewer. The overall composition is vertical, with the creature's head at the top and its body curving downwards.

THE
IMAGINATION
OF

CLIVE
BARKER

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THE IMAGINATION OF CLIVE BARKER

BY TIMOTHY MORTON AND JENNIFER WICKE

"How do you know but every bird that cuts the airy way/Is not an immense world of delight, closed by your senses five?" So Satan writes, in burning letters above the abyss, in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. And we read those very words, engraved in fiery color, as the book opens in our hands. Clive Barker asks a version of this question again and again in his different works—paintings and drawings, books, films—and gives us the same sensation as Blake does, that of holding in our hands a veritable bible of hell. Barker's compelling images, whether drawn, written, or filmed, hold us in the thrall of the imagination, an imagination that is part of a tradition stemming from the prophetic visions of Blake. Like Blake, Barker works across several media; like Blake's, Barker's imagination holds no bounds.

William Blake's melding of the visual image with the written word was meant to push the viewer/reader past the chains of reason and everyday sight into the visionary realms of unseen truth—without in any way ignoring the exigencies of social and political life, but seeking to reveal these too. To produce this sense of cataclysmic urgency and powerful insight Blake used a full repertory of effects in his art to peel away the veils of the ordinary, from enamel-like colors to an incisive engraved line to themes of seeming horror and perversity, all in the service of the Imagination. For example, Blake was violently opposed to oil painting, such as that of Titian and Rubens, a technique he saw as blurring thought and obfuscating the need for transformations of self and society, writing of his own practice:

SHE'S ON HIS MIND, 1989

INK ON PAPER
15 x 18 INCHES



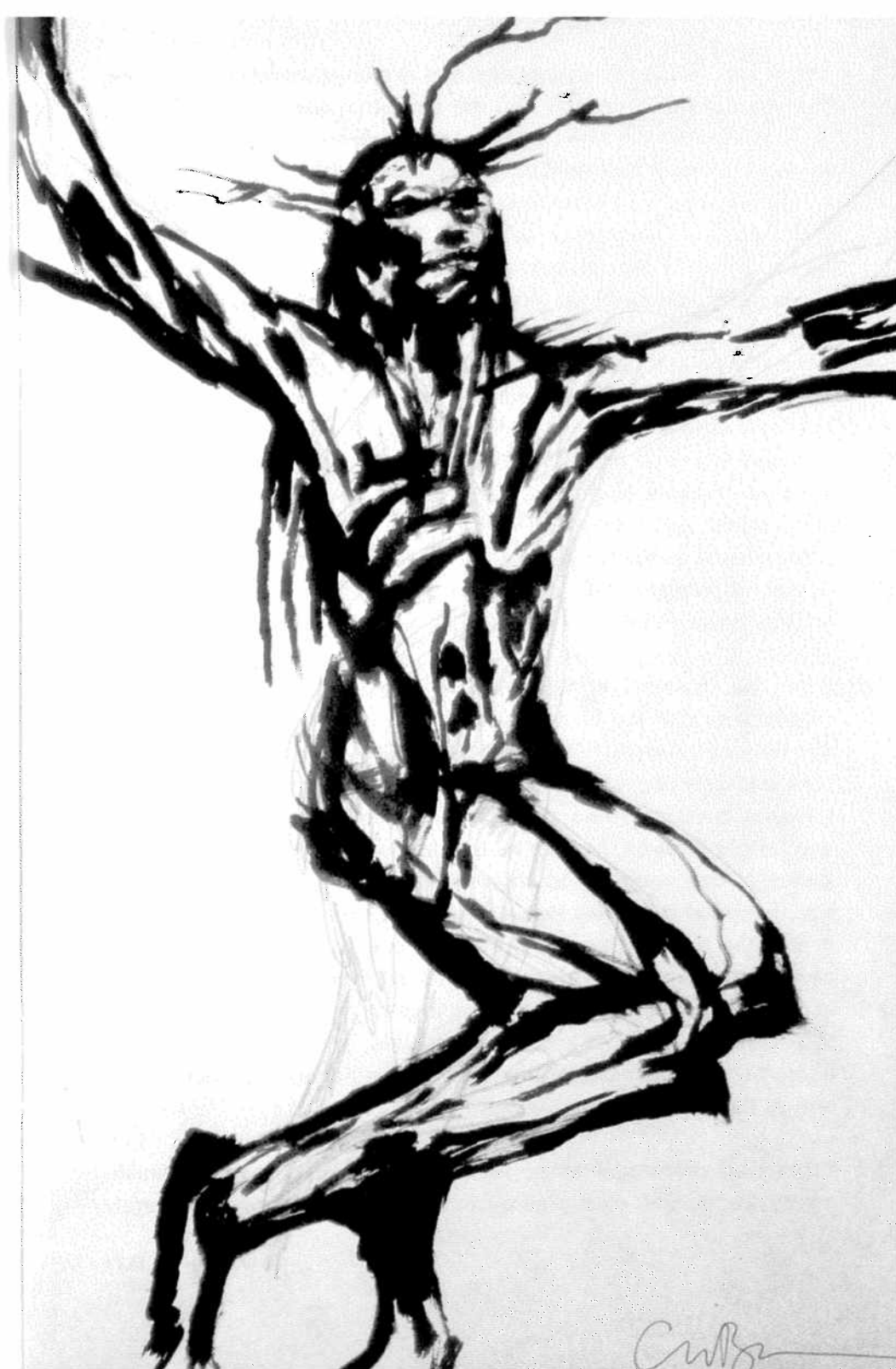
"The Venetian and Flemish practice is broken lines, broken masses, and broken colours. Mr. B.'s practice is unbroken lines, unbroken masses, and unbroken colours. Their art is to lose form, his art is to find form, and keep it."

This emphasis on form may seem paradoxical, given the transformations bodies undergo in Blake, and the often Satanic or funereal settings. However, neither Blake's nor Barker's echoing work is best described in terms of boundary blurring and indeterminacy. The fragmentation of the flesh is not the same as the fragmentation of philosophical understanding. In Barker as in Blake, flesh is finite and desire is infinite, but desire has form: It has names, it does things to us and there is no escaping it.

Clive Barker's paintings and drawings have that same stiletto outline, a (usually) black, sinuous edge which traces a perverse order out of visual and bodily chaos. The tensile outlines inscribe recognizable forms—there is nothing "abstract" about these drawings and paintings, where figural form, however strangely redesigned, is at the fore. Drawn with dynamism and erupting with energy, the lines dance against Blakean washes of gray or muted color, to offer a virtual calligraphy of desire. This is literalized in the drawing which a man's chest hair has become a blazon of writing, with his chest as a veritable page. The springy black lines of body hair form a secret alphabet, a mysterious and sexy script that is truly written on the body.

Baker's art exemplifies what could be called a "materialist mannerism." Materialist mannerism portrays desire enclosed in a cavern of flesh—Barker makes us watch as the flesh is corroded by the acid of desire, or permutated by impossible, fetishistic longings. Through distortion and play, mannerism alerts us to the paintedness of painting, pinpointing the interplay of time and eternity, space and infinity. Our own finite qualities nonetheless let us grasp an idea of the infinite—which in many cases might be the infinitude of desire. The

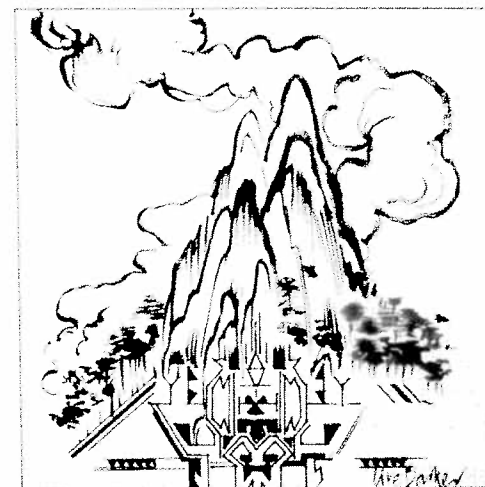
EPIPHANY, 1992
INK, PENCIL ON PAPER
24 x 18 INCHES



asymmetry in Barker's paintings and drawings and films, between the shaft of hell's shadow and the terrestrial space it cuts across, creates a seductive irony. Materialist mannerism is about the ways in which the body can be molded and melted with the tools of desire. If the long neck of a mannerist Madonna shows us heaven's eternity warping mundane space and time, Barker illuminates the modern technologies of the stretching machines. In *Fetish* a penis elongates itself hilariously yet assertively between the bodies it bisects, wearing what is almost a gazebo-like cap of fetishy and fierce black lines—the bodies don't possess the penis they so much desire, it possess them. We are led to think here of how small the gap is between desire and the subject of desire—or, put another way, between eternity and time. Barker's mannerism is materialist because it deals in bodies, uses bodies as the grounding of its exploration. But those explorations are metaphysical—beyond the physical—just as the twistings and torsions of Blake's engravings are meant to puncture the physical world of bodies to illuminate the desires beyond them.

When the character Kirsty, in Barker's film *Hellraiser 2*, reads the bloody writing of the hellbound specter whom she misinterprets as her father ("I AM IN HELL—HELP ME"), She is in the gap between time and eternity; she is in the space of mannerism. Mannerism turns its spectators into gaping statues, as pictures start to bleed and lumber towards them, or as the puzzle-box present it so many of Barker's films opens up to show the desire of its user. But we cannot just stand there and look—Clive Barker's art is about how to act in the gap between time and eternity, how to perform a dance of desire which might banish the summoned demon. His female characters understand this; the men must catch on fast, or die. In order to escape, you have to know your enemies, and outline their forms as strongly as possible. You have to give a name and a determination to their desire.

Blake's art railed against the world-view of those he saw as banishing desire, delight, enthusiasm—heaven and hell—in favor of a purely



WEAWEWORLD, 1987

INK ON PAPER
16½ x 11½ INCHES

rationalist universe; Isaac Newton was one of Blake's particular demons.,

I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour;
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration;
To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion's covering;
To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with Imagination.

Clive Barker not only lives in a rationalized, technologized world beyond even Blake's worst fears, he also exploits those same technologies as the special effects of his artistry. One might say that Barker is like Victor Frankenstein, the monster's creator, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, except without Victor's guilt. What tore Victor Frankenstein apart was that having created the monster, his male Galatea/child, he refused to acknowledge his creation as a part of himself, as something he had made, however flawed, and was thus connected to, as a parent or a double or a replica. Barker does not deny the oft-times horrific creatures, or children, of his imagination, but instead engages them with formal finesse and daemonic inspiration. The universe of monstrous bodies modern science makes possible—prosthetic, computerized, morphic—only extends the monstrous bodily predicament we are in—how to make use of the finite bodily envelope which encloses our infinitude of desires. There is no time for indeterminacy. The world of desire is more real than mundane reality itself. Materialist mannerism does not take its spectators to heaven but to a hell of one's own desiring. There is not time, along this journey, for the rhetoric of the tease, or of disavowal. "But this is what you wanted...this is what you wanted to see, this is what you wanted to know," says one character to another in *Hellraiser 2* as he gazes at his own sadism manifest in hell's picture gallery. Looking at Barker's challenging and unsettling art causes us to recognize that, indeed, we did want to see that, did want to know that. And he gives us room to move—to be riskily

THE EMBRACE, 1992

INK, PASTEL ON PAPER
14 x 11 INCHES



responsible in our awareness of our own complicity in the images, like a baby licking a honey-coated razor blade.

Every bit as much as Blake was, Clive Barker is fascinated by the image of the snake swallowing its own tail. What happens in that weird Moebius strip of self-devouring? It's not just a visual puzzle, where one wonders whether the snake finally disappears after swallowing itself, but also a philosophical riddle of the imagination, since the imagination outstrips its material grounding in a body and thus threatens to consume itself. Baker ups the ante in many of his pictures by giving the phallic snake its head as one huge eye (*Blue Vision*); the gaze of our own imaginations are activated by the eye, desires are aroused by sight, and art is made by manipulating the eye. Clive Barker's pictures suck us in the way the snake engorges its tail, or the way the monster turned on Frankenstein. We don't possess the eye (or the I)—it possesses us. The picture turns around and stares.

In the myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor creates the very image of his desire, a statue that nearly breathes with life itself, and which comes alive before his eyes. Clive Barker adds a twist to this myth: it is as if the sculpture then started work with hammer and chisel on the sculptor himself, or better, as if the principle of sculpture, the aesthetics of molding desire in stone, went to work on Pygmalion in exchange for sculpting his image. Desire returns to plague the desirer. "Hell was what he wanted...hell was what he got," says Kirsty about Frank, in *Hellraiser 2*. Barker discloses the infernal machines which project our images of happiness and of suffering. As in the Neoplatonic art of mannerism, flesh is only a garment, a veil covering a sequence of interlocking relationships. But the unveiling does not lead the spectator to the abstract infinity of God, the One, or the Idea. It leads us to ourselves and our bodies. The infinite riches which a little room displays, the shadows cast on the wall of time, are the tools with which Clive Barker's materialist mannerism shape-shifts the outline of our identities.

EARLY CENOBITE, 1986

INK ON PAPER
16 1/2 x 11 1/2 INCHES



The paintings and drawings in this show are not the "high" art side of an otherwise popular artist. All of Clive Barker's art is serious, and of a piece, in that he inherits the multiple traditions of Romanticism, the gothic, horror, and modernism, and recasts these in light of our postmodern moment. Whether deploying words, or paint, or film-stock, Barker's works are experiments in the art of unveiling. The artist Henry Fuseli commented slightly acerbically that William Blake used "fancy" as the end and not the means in his designs. "He does not employ it to give novelty and decoration to regular conceptions; but the whole of his aim is to produce singular shapes & odd combinations." No one would confuse Barker's depictions with "regular conceptions," either. The word fancy is an out-dated one in our culture, but if we substitute fantasy or imagination for it, we can see that Barker indeed produces "singular shapes" and "odd combinations" out of precisely the same cerebral take on Imagination as an end and not a means. The scabrous wit, the unabashed visceral figurality, the visual peculiarity and the vertiginous eroticism of Barker's pictures employ the fantastic imagination as a way of thinking through, and acting out, the quandaries of our human existence. We are all playing Russian roulette with our pleasures—where we acknowledge that our pleasures include those of domination, of aggression, of devouring. This is why Blake said that "Active Evil is better than passive Good": action itself contains thought, generosity, dynamic energy, while passivity is empty. Clive Barker's art is neither pretty, nor nice, nor passively good. In the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the space between our physical and our symbolic death is haunted with images of our desires from which we cannot turn away. The tiniest impulse could plummet us into hell, or cause us to be reborn as a shellfish, or a demon. Barker's art helps us to experience—to know—the everyday madness of this space between deaths, its horrors and its joys.

TIMOTHY MORTON
JENNIFER WICKE

FROM THE ILLUSIONS SERIES, 1995

INK ON PAPER
29 1/2 x 22 INCHES

