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## Joshua Hagler

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*Since starting the Arteaser Project, I have enjoyed learning from the artists I interview and being introduced to new artists, techniques and ideas. In many ways my conversation with **Joshua Hagler** epitomized this experience, as I frantically wrote down his reference points for follow-up investigation.*

Born on an Air Force base in Idaho, Josh Hagler was raised in a conservative environment. At age nine, his family moved to rural Litchfield, Illinois, where Hagler escaped into the supernatural world of comics:

"I drew comic books religiously as a kid. I loved reading comics, so I was always making these comic books. I was like twelve years old and they were rip-offs of the X-men and so on, superheroes with powers. That's how I fantasized as a kid, just creating these worlds and characters"

At sixteen, the family moved a second time to Arizona and although he dreamt of going to Chicago's Art Institute, he opted for a more practical degree in illustration at the University of Arizona. As part of the first generation in his extended family to go to college, support was not taken for granted and Hagler himself worked for the school newspaper as art director and drawing comics, as well as illustrating children's books:

"My parents just made it apparent to me early on that that was how it was going to be: so its either sink or swim, which I think was a very valuable lesson"

While his love of comics drew Hagler to illustration, he enjoyed the painting classes that he took in college, especially the technical instruction of David Christiana. Discovering the works of **Francis Bacon**, **Robert Rauschenberg**, **Willem de Kooning** and **Lucien Freud** broadened Hagler's artistic horizons:

"I pretty much wasn't aware of anything culturally, except for comic books, until about the time I was about to graduate from school, from art school [...] It all started from that genre - [the] sci-fi/fantasy world - until I became interested in the art world and contemporary art and modern art"

Meanwhile, his horizons were broadening in other ways:

"[I was] always involved the church, both in Illinois and in Arizona. It was in Arizona that I got involved in the campus Christian organizations and stuff like that for quite a while, until [because of] everything from taking classes in philosophy and comparative religion and various things [...] I ended up just getting away from all of it."

After graduating, Hagler moved to San Francisco, using the money from selling his car to get settled. He credits the friends and contacts he's made in San Francisco as pushing his creative work to the next level:

"I kind of see my BFA, my undergrad, as what just got it started, but I think my real education just had to do with moving to San Francisco. That was really more of an education I think, in art terms"

He began working as an illustrator and by 2004 he was doing illustration full time. Hagler also began to familiarize himself with galleries and was able to phase out his illustration business as he sold more paintings. By spring of 2007, he held his first major solo exhibit, called "Bring Us Rapture":

"That was the first body of work that I had prepared that specifically dealt with Christianity, that dealt with - really, what I now kind of realize I was concerned with - which was **grouphink**. I'm interested in the strange creature that is the human being that as an individual behaves one way and then as a social creature behaves another. So I think I've just been creating a mythology based on that"

Since receiving a grant in 2008, Hagler has been able to focus full time on creating the series for his upcoming show, titled "72 Virgins to Die For," in which he goes beyond Christianity to further explore human social behavior in the context of religion:

"It deals with Islam and Mormonism and Judaism and Christianity, Catholicism as well [...] When you take a step back, they're all really similar. They're ideas are really similar, what they require of people is really similar, in certain places and certain times"

One of these common requirements that Hagler reflects on is purity and its relationship to power, control, and violence:

"The way that I'm defining purity is not specifically in reference to sexuality, but also spiritually, intellectually. To me, the main feature of purity is that you buy into idealism of some kind or another - that's the price of admission. So if you're not willing to buy into that wholeheartedly then you can't be pure, and unless you're willing to buy into that wholeheartedly and take a vow of purity of some kind, you're also not as easily manipulated."

To suggest that the applicability of his message is broadly human, Hagler often obscures and distorts the faces of his human subjects or covers them with moths, in reference to a **Sufic** allegorical story about understanding the nature of God only through destructive denial of self:

"The vortex and the moth are two features that I use over and over in this body of work [...] I guess I look at it as alluding to timelessness [...] They're not specific people - they're ideas"

Human subjects are not the only embodiments of purity in Hagler's work: he also uses animals that are treated inhumanely for the sake of indulgent delicacies, such as **Ortolans**, **Baluts**, **foie gras**, and **veal**. Some of these delicacies have religious overtones, but some seem to speak more broadly about violence masked by beauty and purity:

"You follow an obsession far enough and you start to realize that maybe it's not as simple as you first thought [...] It's this feature about human behavior that causes what I think of as violence, whether that's literal violence or violence of the mind [...] It doesn't have to do with a specific religion. A religion cannot be inherently good or evil - it's just a vehicle"

While he recognizes that the destructive facets of human nature that intrigue him transcend religion, it remains his point of reference:

"I keep trying to dig further and further. I think religion lends specificity to sort of ground some of this stuff [...] so ultimately I think that there will always be that aspect of religion there because that is my experience and I think I experienced the most amount of [...] disillusionment."

As Hagler continues to explore deeper and darker elements of humanity, he considers his study inconclusive and remains sensitive to the subtleties of humanity's connection to religion:

"I want to go further into what happens when you take those things away that people believe in. And maybe we do need those things [...] maybe in the end that's what I end up finding [...] I don't really want to make polemic work that is picking on a particular religion, that's saying 'you're the cause of all our problems' "

Laden with reference, Hagler's visually compelling works have a distinct style that often suggest the supernatural in order to reflect on the utterly human:

"It's starting to be something complete unto itself [...] They are myths themselves and they just are now borrowing from religions that people still believe in in a literal way."

Josh Hagler's "72 Virgins to Die For" will be on display at the **Frey Norris Gallery** from **February 5 to March 1**.

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