

# Lyles & King

## *The Tale Their Terror Tells*

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Curated by Geena Brown & Lauren Guilford  
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Hear the loud alarum bells  
Brazen bells  
What tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells  
In the startled ear of night  
How they scream out their affright!  
Too much horrified to speak,  
They can only shriek, shriek,  
...  
Oh, the bells, bells, bells!  
What a tale their terror tells  
Of Despair  
How they clang, and clash, and roar  
What a horror they outpour  
...  
How the danger ebbs and flows;  
Yet, the ear distinctly tells,  
In the jangling,  
And the wrangling,  
How the danger sinks and swells,  
By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells  
Of the bells  
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Bells*

Lyles & King is pleased to present *The Tale Their Terror Tells*, a group exhibition that considers the intersection of ecology and horror in contemporary art. The artists included in this exhibition operate within the grotesque and monstrous to address the horrifying realities of our world in peril. Guided by the strange, these artists expose the limits and boundaries of our perception and question what it means to be human.

Collective anxiety festers as our self-inflicted apocalypse closes in and disaster takes hold, inflicting destruction that is grossly disproportionate. Yet, we remain paralyzed, trapped in a death cage of our own making. The environmental crisis is no longer looming overhead, it is no longer an abstraction—an unsettling shadow we choose to ignore or hide from—it’s here, screaming. We have spoiled our earthly home that we continue to regard as expendable, unable to accept responsibility for our irreversible damage. Narratives of “modern progress” tell a lethal and self-serving narrative that furthers the divide

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between humans and nature. And now, she is rebelling against us, crying out for collaboration and cooperation. As Ursula Le Guin states, “The trouble is, we’ve all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story. It’s unfamiliar, it doesn’t come easily, thoughtlessly to the lips as the killer story does.”<sup>1</sup> Artists working in the genre we are calling “eco-horror” interrogate the myths and monsters that shape our world, exposing the peripheries of human perception to reveal the vibrant interconnections embedded in everyday life.

Historical notions of the sublime describe nature as a beautiful, mysterious, and terrifying force. The awe-inspiring landscapes of the Romanticists, infused with fear and wonder, speak to humanity’s deep desire to not only understand, but dominate Mother Nature. To quell our anxieties, we made the grave mistake of projecting our will onto nature, creating hierarchical categorizations of the world that would seal the fate of entire species (human and non-human). As we hurl faster and closer to our collective dead-end, our belligerent arrogance and desperate need for power foster collective denial and avoidance, preventing us from seeing the true scope of our terror.

The grotesque suggests a world of multiplicities and unholy disparities, often discussed as the antithesis of beauty and extending beyond a mere visual counterpart to the “ideal” or sublime. Grotesque forms are found in nature and biology: death, decay, destruction, violence, disease, pollution, waste, and deformities we often write off with disgust. As Julia Kristeva proclaims, “The power of horror is contagious. It figures but it disfigures as well: the source of a resurgence in our representations that cut through the forms, volumes, contours to expose the pulsing flesh.”<sup>2</sup> Grotesqueness is where we begin to consider deeper psychological concepts and emotions—fear, terror, humor, anxiety, and disgust—that distinctly insinuates our mortality and the precariousness of our existence.

All sorts of ghosts and monsters lurk and live among us. Capitalism is a fundamentally monstrous concept that transcends borders and bodies, feeding on human and non-human life like a phantom vampire. Haunted landscapes, gnarled by the violent atrocities of human exceptionalism are places where ghosts and the living commingle, whispering stories of pasts and futures. Tales of human desire and fear are marked by capitalist ruins, continually mutating and reshaping the landscape after human extinction. These ghosts send a chilling reminder that non-human matter is not dormant, but living material that holds memories of death and regrowth.

As our collective home continues to perish, we might ask: What kind of radical transformation will enable cooperation and collaboration in lieu of dominance and control? A collective exorcism? How can we face the very real monsters and horrors of our reality in a way that is generative rather than paralyzing? How do artists working in the eco-horror genre help to develop new strategies of survival and kinship (for humans and non-humans alike)? Guided by the collaborative strategies of ecofeminism, we turn to Donna Haraway who so astutely asks, “How can we think in times of urgencies without the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of process that must somehow be engaged and repatterned?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, TerraIgnota (2019): 34.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Severed Head*. Columbia University Press: New York (2012): 103.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke (Durham): 35.