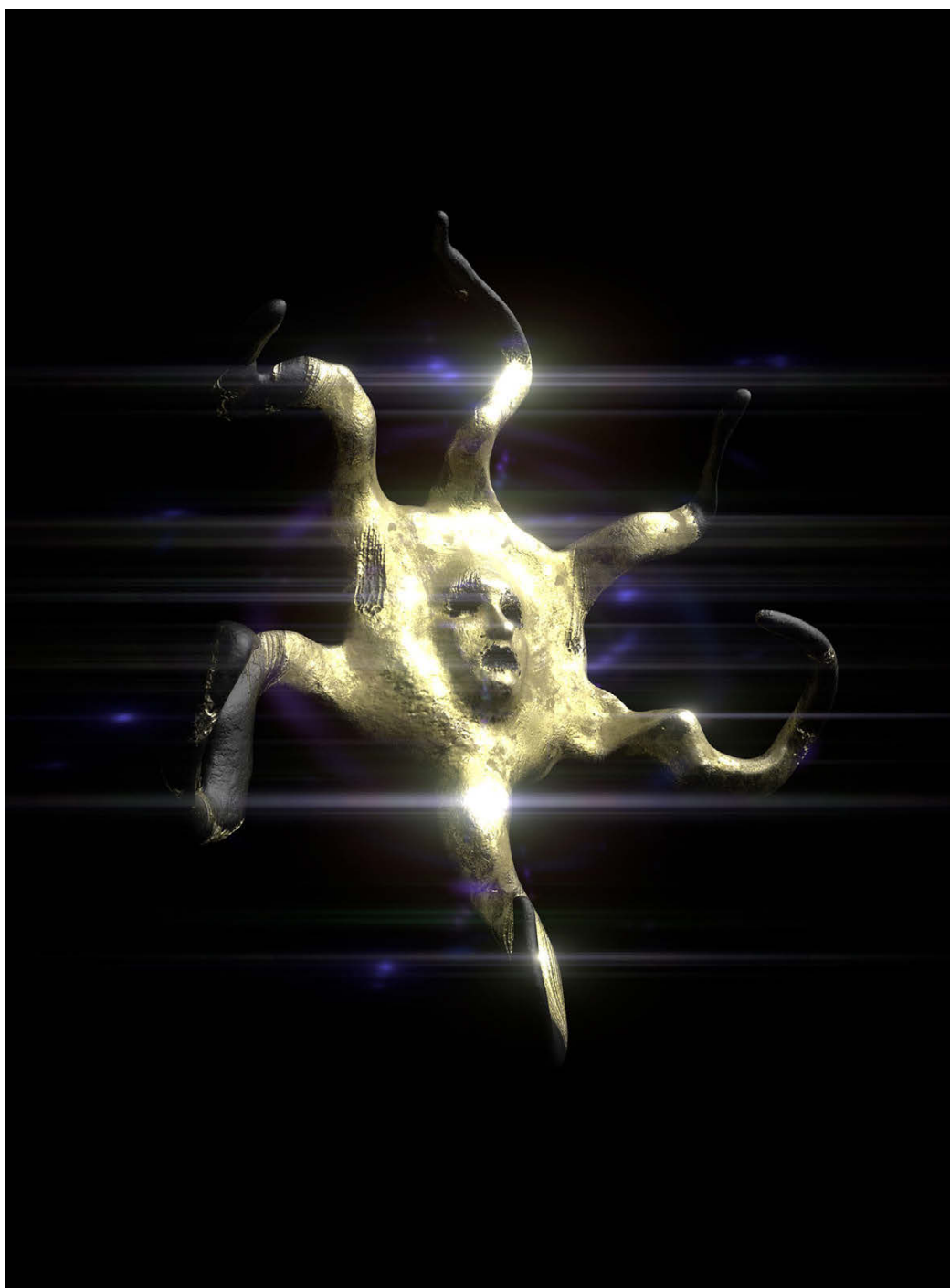


P e t r i - f i e d T i m e

Thoughts on Renderings
by Tabitha Swanson

Artworks: Tabitha Swanson

Text: Alex Leo Freier



›Her brightness breaks through, a strange luminosity‹

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With her most recent series of renderings, Tabitha Swanson invites us to a world full of mysterious creatures, captured in an almost sculptural manner. Once juxtaposed and carefully arranged, Swanson's renderings could be conceived as part of a digital-age cabinet of curiosities that has more to do with contemporary reality than one might assume at first glance. The artist sculpts her pieces in virtual reality (VR), using the program *Adobe Medium*, texturing in *Substance Painter*, and then taking the designs into *Blender*. The renderings are part of an ongoing artistic process. Swanson's figures are constantly transformed; they reappear in different settings and with varying staffage. When processed in videos, the artist does postproduction with *After Effects*. Here, however, we take a close look at rendered shots that, understood as virtual »still lifes«, reveal some insights into VR rendering and digital art at large.

Her brightness breaks through, a strange luminosity is the title of a rendering that shows a strange object. It resembles a childishly drawn sun with six »arms« representing rays of light. The contorted limbs remind one of mollusc tentacles or the extremities of other invertebrates, perhaps those of a sea star, giving the sun a certain vividness. This liveliness stands in stark contrast to the sun's inorganic-looking texture. Its surface appears earthy or metallic. The centre as well as parts of the limbs are covered with a thin, light golden layer, whereas the ends of its limbs are dark grey or black, as if the colour had worn off as the creature interacted with its environment. In the middle of the sun disc, a humanoid face emerges, consisting of the same texture as its surroundings, as if it resurfaced from muddy ground. The mouth and eyes are wide open, almost hollow. The eye sockets look shovelled out, seemingly by the paws of a predator or by a construction machine. Similar, but shallower, scratches can be found on other parts of the creature's body surface. In a contradictory manner, its soft countenance – a fine nose and rounded lips – give the emerging face an overall female impression. A white, blinding shimmer on the object's surface, accompanied by violet reflections, as if the picture were a photograph shot through a foggy lens, is juxtaposed with the dark, vast background of the figure.

The sun – an ancient symbol of goodness and truth, and a natural sign of fertility and the arrival of a new day – appears here as a battered and mangled creature. Nearly drowning in its own materiality, a countenance arises from its disc-shaped body. Through radiant reflections or a strangely auto-generated bluish light, »her brightness breaks through«, as the work's title suggests, and »a strange luminosity« forebodes a new light to come. This process of awakening or coming-to-life is substantiated by the inorganic-looking surface contrasting sharply with the vivid subject matter: the rocky, scratched artifact becomes a tentacled, human-faced being.

Swanson's piece entitled *The Hunger* is equally full of contradictions. It shows an anthropomorphic figurine with a similarly metallic surface. Here too, reflections of a bright, now even more bluish light, shimmer across the figurine's body surface. And similar to the sun-like creature, it has hollow, yet more amorphic facial features: the mouth and nose are missing. The figurine is connected to a ring structure through what seems like an umbilical cord, yet the same structure is connected to the figurine's back. The energy it sucks from the ring might stem from itself, making it seem trapped in a self-consuming process. The hunger for more thus proves to be self-destructive. The horrors of its destructiveness become apparent if we take a closer look at where the creature's navel should be located. For its abdomen turns out to be ripped open; an evil grin with crooked, pointy teeth smirks at us. And it turns out that the umbilical cord is a strange hybrid of a snaky, forked tongue and an insect's proboscis, sticking out through the grin's scary teeth and sucking life juices out of the trunk-like ring structure. With the same pressure of its tongue sticking out, its chest – where the heart is located – is hollowed out.

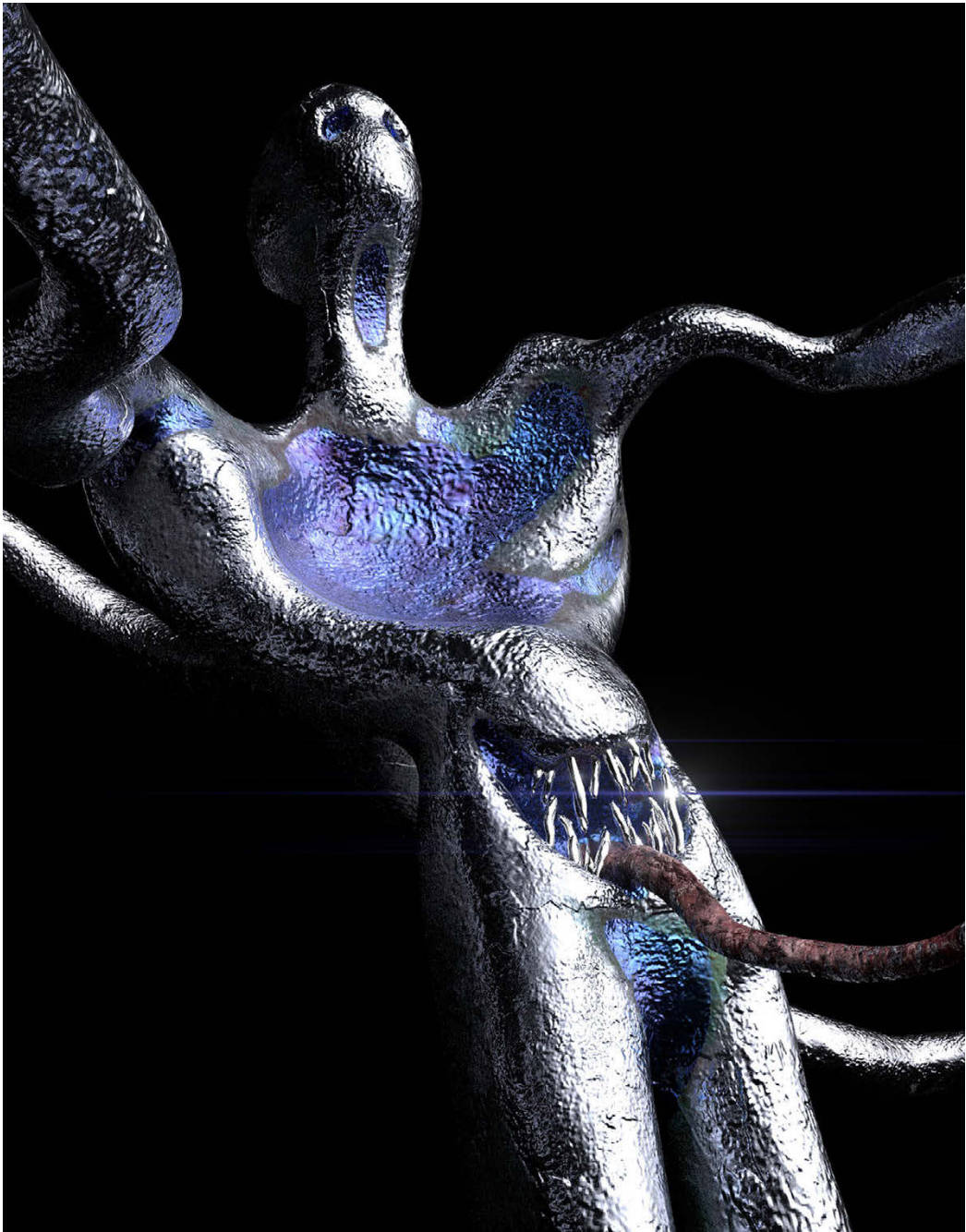
A similar motif of self-consumption is found in the work *Repent*, in which Swanson refers to the mythical archetype of Ouroboros, the serpent that eats its own tail. Here, it does so with crooked, awry teeth similar to the ones found on the silver figurine's grinning stomach. Unlike these, however, the serpent's teeth do not form a malicious smile, but a rather neutral expression, above which one finds big, round nostrils. Swanson's Ouroboros stands in a light grey monochromatic background. Deep shadows with hard edges can be seen, as if the object were illuminated by spotlights in a showroom. Because of its almost circular shape, it seems to gently levitate above the depthless ground. Physical laws are partly disabled in this rendered scene; however, the shadow cast is an indication of the object's location in space. The serpent has a dark greyish and irregular surface that could be of a marble-like material, interspersed with light grey veins. It resembles an archaic, handcrafted artefact. Two etchings that could be runes or other mysterious symbols add to this impression. One of them looks like a crossed-out thunderbolt; the other depicts three directional arrows, radiating at an acute angle from a short streak. They appear to have been manually sprayed or lasered onto the marble surface and glimmer with a metallic sheen. In the same way, the serpent's eye – only one side of the face is directed to the viewer – looks like a cross symbol hastily sprayed onto it. On the inner part of the ring that is formed by the snake, we find irregularly set patches that could represent stitches from a sewn wound.



›Repent‹

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›The Hunger‹





›The objectification of the void‹

A pattern forms in Swanson's group of works that takes up contemporary issues in an unexpected way. The invertebrates that sought to come to life in the tentacled sun disc now reappear as dead feedstock for the construction of human body parts. The artist presents us living fossils, and nothing between heaven and earth, between sky and seabed, is safe from her Medusean ingenuity. Swanson's works are so mesmerising because they unfold manifold layers, oscillating between life and death in an aesthetic, concrete form, and in the mode of an immediate sensual persuasion. An entire natural history is captured in a single image: marine invertebrates perishing to transform into fossils, this dead material then recycled to form an anthropomorphic extremity. Nevertheless, this cyclical notion of time feels more like something to escape from than something worthwhile. Eternity becomes hell when life is unbearable. Hence the emptiness of the self-perpetuating void that is nothing other than the limy hand itself, hence the exhaustion expressed in the other works presented by the artist. And hence the numerous scratches and scars that bear witness to the suffering of the portrayed figures.

Of the many types of mutilation, etchings or engravings prove to be the most emblematic form. Already found in the self-devouring serpent, etchings only come truly to the fore in another rendering. *A new vessel awaits* shows us a manikin made of a gooey, deliquescent black material that resembles hardening glue. It hunches its back; the arms and neck are positioned as if it were in a pillory. The hands are missing – the forearms simply taper off. Eyes and mouth are childishly etched onto the round, flat face that droops from its elongated neck. The etchings reveal a luminescent orange glow that breaks through the manikin's skin. Two small crosses stand for its eyes. The curved line representing its mouth points downwards, making the face look like a sad emoticon. Engraved runes reveal more of the mysterious light all over the manikin's body. The orange gleaming together with the dark body surface give the impression of amorphous lava. On the manikin's forehead, we find a gleaming Petrine Cross. Blurred reflections of the etchings spread across the image as if it were seen through a smudged camera lens. Through an organic grid structure that scarifies its chest, its heart becomes visible – a glowing orb levitating inside its empty body. Given the stark contrast with the mostly dark image, the orb's warm light makes it akin to the sun ball floating in outer space. It conveys a feeling of immersive solitude and of deep, poignant melancholy.

Melancholy is indeed the hallmark of all these pieces. The artistic medium, a virtual programme, seems to evoke that emotion. Or to put it differently: the works reflect on their technical conditions of production in a very sensual way. The state of melancholy is intrinsically bound to the visual grammar of vanitas. As a classical motif, the melancholic disposition and its visual emblematics are transformed when reflected on and through contemporary media and technology. Virtual reality, which clings to the transient and ephemeral, making it seemingly timeless, is a medium of vanitas in contemporary culture. Old and new vanitas motifs recur in Swanson's works, symbolising the transience of life and the certainty of death – the most salient symbol, as a memento mori, being the skull-like face in *The Hunger*. Other calcareous and bony materials can as well be understood as symbols for the transience of life, such as the limy hand in *The objectification of the void*. Stony animals such as the petrified starfish-like sun or the petrified Ouroboros remind us of the mortality of the body, too. Thought of on a larger scale, these half-dead or already fossilised animals also remind us of the limited capacities of the earth, or even admonish us, theologically speaking, of the sanctity of creation.

The bodies that the artist envisages in her pieces are tormented. Scars, scratches, and incisions, deep folds and furrows ostensibly testify that these beings have been around from time immemorial. The mineral textures of the renderings fortify this view. Lava, metal, marble, and limestone are allegories of the petrification that the digital gaze yields. Within its scope, all life becomes inanimate – hence a possible reading of the images as still lifes.

Then, there are also the engravings that are crucial to an understanding of Swanson's works, because they epitomise the process of inscription that the dispositive of VR rendering imposes on its subjects. By means of digital technology, we capture all qualitative manifoldness to convert it into translatable, discrete units: bits, bytes, and pixels. In the process of digital sculpting, nature and life – as we once thought it to be – are disassembled and virtually recomposed under the rule of the imaginary. This may be understood as a process of inscription – digits are assigned to material bodies; different qualities are standardised by a code. Allegorically speaking, imagining living flesh, this process is best illustrated in bodies that are branded. And this is exactly what Swanson presents us when she etches runic symbols onto the creatures' body surfaces. One could call this artistic process a kind of data visualisation in its mythical countersense.

The endless possibilities of metamorphosis come at a price: the loss of time. These figures are lonesome monads in a vast, empty space. Their surroundings are easily interchangeable, hence the tendency to place them in ample surrealist landscapes. By capturing these chimaeras in the endless space of virtual reality, Swanson's works also capture the melancholic feeling of a time in which possibilities seem endless and yet, we experience ourselves doomed to a circle of repetition. Nonetheless, as the saying goes, where there is darkness, there will always be light. The truth that shines through the glistening white light in many of Swanson's pieces is blinding. The chthonic woman resurfacing from the petrified sun symbolises that hope. The argument of petrification is then easily reversed: what if it is not living beings that become inorganic, but dead matter that comes to life? The work of Tabitha Swanson prompts us to think about branded bodies in the age of their digital reproduction, but also about hope and the dawn of new possibilities. This is the lesson taught to those who dare to see.



›A new vessel awaits‹

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