

Goth is the New Black

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The beautiful face of a young woman floats surreally and seductively in a grey abyss. Like a modern medusa, her hair swirls luxuriously around her, simultaneously tempting and frightening the viewer. The exquisite beauty of the woman almost distracts from the alarming fact that she has no body. VR Morrison's painting *Decadent Morsels II* is just one artwork in a revolution that has swept society and in particular, contemporary art. Gothic culture has landed.

Gothic culture originated in the cold, dark depths of the European winter. Yet why does this subculture not only survive but thrive in Australia in the early years of the new millennium, in an environment that is hostile to its very existence? Australia is essentially and stereotypically regarded as a relaxed, sun-bathed, beach environment. With climate change nascent and Australia's long, putridly hot summers becoming increasingly hot, it is remarkable that an alternative culture devoting itself to the dark may not only prevail but prosper. However, alternative cultures thrive in environments that are opposite to their beliefs or sense of style. After all, being different forms the basis of Gothic culture.

One does not have to fit the archetype of a corset-wearing, Marilyn Manson-worshipping, angst-youth to appreciate or relate to aspects of Goth. The modern Goth now takes many forms. Gothic allows people to pick and choose aspects of its culture and adjust it to suit an individual's aesthetic. A Goth favours an alternative to the mainstream, with an inclination to recognise and embrace the dark side of life. It can be described as a dark romanticism and an admiration of beauty and individualism, though the term 'Goth' often varies in definition.

Gothic is able to flourish through its renowned acceptance as an underground culture. Like Punk, from which Goth drew its origins, it is critical of conservatism and offers validation to those individuals and groups that do not approve of commercial ideals. However, when the mainstream accepts Gothic culture as 'cool' and 'trendy', the contradictions become confusing and muddled. Skulls and black lace may be spotted in any shopping-centre or catwalk, vampire literature has taken the world by storm and who could forget the misrepresented 'emo' phenomenon? Indeed, aspects of Goth are becoming increasingly accepted by the majority. Now Gothic has reached its zenith in popular culture, will it continue to survive as a subculture that rejects the conventional? Perhaps it will become unwillingly embraced by the conformist society it so avidly defies, thus ironically being destroyed by its own aesthetic.

Art is often described as a mirror, a reflection of society and its changing nature. Accordingly, art has taken a darker turn. It has plunged itself into dark aestheticism in response to society's current infatuation with the sinister. The exhibition, 'Neo Goth: Back in Black' held at the University of Queensland Art Museum, shows one facet of art's burgeoning interest in the underlying darkness of Australian culture. This exhibition showcased a vast range of artists and artworks with one obvious and topical theme: Gothic culture. A prevalence of skulls, vampires, death, polarising themes, and, of course, the colour black permeated the artworks. Although dealing with ominous concepts and imagery, the exhibition retained a sense of lightheartedness and significant black humour, which is not uncommon in Gothic culture. For example, *Happy Ending* by Nell displayed a grave with a smiling face replacing the customary inscriptions on a tomb stone.

VR Morrison's artworks *Decadent Morsels I*, *Decadent Morsels II* and *Even in Arcadia* were all exhibited in 'Neo Goth: Back in Black'. Their striking simplicity in composition, high realism and large size made the paintings visually arresting. *Decadent Morsels I* and *Decadent Morsels II* both depict the decapitated heads of beautiful models, whereas *Even in Arcadia* portrays a woman shrouded in darkness with a skull delicately resting on her head. VR Morrison's work often deals with opposites. She perfectly portrays femininity and softness in her depictions of women, and yet they are disturbed. A skull dwells on one woman's head, another only has a head. The women are beautiful, but there is an eternal ugliness which haunts. Unusually, her subjects do not reject or fight this grotesqueness. Instead, it is welcomed, embraced even. In a similar way, Gothic culture embraces the beautiful and the ugly. It is able to see splendour in what is considered hideous by most. It is possible that the captivating women of the paintings represent popular culture. Their accessible beauty is that of high fashion models. Perhaps in their acceptance of the disturbing, they too are adopting Gothic culture. Therefore, one interpretation of these paintings is that Goth is being received by the mainstream, by the media, by fashion.

Yet all is not as it seems. VR Morrison's intensely realistic representations of women appear to question the portrayal of females in the media. Her subjects and the media's images are incredibly lifelike, too perfect and too realistic. It is not truth though. Rather, the media attempts to create an ideal of reality that is unattainable, like VR Morrison's surreal artwork. The decapitated heads and skulls, used frequently in her paintings, are an unrealistic contrast to the hyper-realism of her subjects. Thus, the surreal aspect disturbs the typical beauty of fashion models and, in doing so, questions the supposed truth presented by society.

Is this the answer to the seemingly unanswerable: why is Goth culture so prevalent in the 21st century and contemporary art? While it is a recent trend in youth culture, the answer may go deeper than merely a craze. As people of Western society, we are driven and perpetually surrounded by materialism. In this progressively artificial world, where beauty and honesty are often victims of materialistic desires and prescribed beliefs, where is an individual to find truth? This lack of substance in modern society may have led us to the past. Goth offers a refreshing insight into beauty, romance and history in an overwhelmingly plastic society. We have been starved of substance and look to Gothic art and culture for nourishment. It is no wonder that Goth is the new black.