

Tim Burton: The Artist's Process



Installation view of exhibition entrance *Tim Burton*, May 29–October 31, 2011, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

TIM BURTON WAS BORN IN BURBANK, CALIFORNIA, in 1958 and attended Burbank High School. After studying at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), he worked as an animator at the Walt Disney Studios before breaking out on his own. Taking inspiration from popular culture, fairy tales, and gothic traditions, Burton has reinvented Hollywood genre filmmaking as an expression of a personal vision.

The *Tim Burton* exhibition explores the full range of Burton's creative work as a film director, artist, illustrator, photographer, and writer.

The major retrospective highlights the artist's rich imagination, lifelong dedication to drawing, lineage of horror and humor, and commitment to collaboration. It brings together more than 700 drawings, paintings, photographs, moving-image works, storyboards, puppets, concept artworks, maquettes, costumes, and cinematic ephemera, including art from a number of unrealized and little-known personal projects. Organized chronologically, the exhibition features three sections: *Surviving Burbank*, *Beautifying Burbank*, and *Beyond Burbank*.

While only a portion of the works on view can be featured in this curriculum, these materials highlight key concepts in the artist's body of work as well as address the larger implications of what it means to be an artist today.

- In what ways is Burton's process similar to or different from other contemporary artists? How does Burton use sketching as a tool to cultivate creativity? How does sketching translate into other disciplines? How can we integrate this idea of process into our own classroom practices? And, how can we, like Burton, work collaboratively to produce imaginative work?

SURVIVING BURBANK (1958–1976)

"When I was growing up in Burbank, the environment was very middle-class suburban, And I felt like an alien," says Tim Burton.¹ He survived this feeling of alienation on the strength of his imagination. He consoled himself with the pleasures of drawing and humor and an interest in visual media that he indulged through colorful forms of popular entertainment: newspaper comics, advertising, greeting cards, children's literature, toys, animated cartoons, monster movies, science fiction films, carnival sideshows, performance art, and holiday rituals, including the art of the Mexican Day of the Dead. Burton was heavily influenced by popular culture and has used his childhood in Burbank as a resource for the subjects and themes that he has explored in feature films, shorts, and commercials since 1982.

From childhood to the present, Burton has expressed himself through drawing. At a young age, he had a teacher who didn't force him to draw a certain way, but rather encouraged students to draw in their own style and approach drawing as a means to explore their fantasy life and emotional core. Burton says, "I was not a very verbal communicator growing up, so it was a form of communication for me."² For Burton, sketching is an activity concurrent with seeing and thinking — the conduit of imagination and an important part of his thought process. His notes and sketches are a way to think through ideas or projects.

- How is sketching similar to the writing process of drafting and editing? How can we encourage our students to use the tools of artists — sketching, revising, editing — as a means to think through concepts, develop and refine ideas?

BEAUTIFYING BURBANK (1977–1984)

Burton's talent matured during two years of study at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and four years working as an animator at the Walt Disney Company. A number of his signature motifs and stylistic traits emerged during this period, such as his creature-based characters, his use of masks and body modification, and his exploration of the relationship between childhood and adulthood.

Many of Burton's recurring themes stem from childhood and adolescence and combine a unique mix of horror and humor. The vast majority of the hundreds of artworks in the exhibition are drawings, from sketches and doodles to cartoons and character studies. Even in the earliest of these, Burton's key themes and storylines are evident: creatures transforming from one thing into another, quirky children attempting to make sense of equally odd adults, skeletons mingling with humans.

Many of the great printmakers in art history have also explored these same motifs. Long before film emerged as the leading mass-culture medium, printmaking was a primary and democratic means of disseminating ideas widely. Burton's emphasis on exaggeration, distortion, and fantasy parallel the work of many artists throughout history, particularly that of the German Expressionists.

- View the enclosed CD to see an idiosyncratic array of graphic works chosen by Tim Burton in consultation with the museum's curatorial staff. Compare and contrast these with works by Burton and with his completed films.

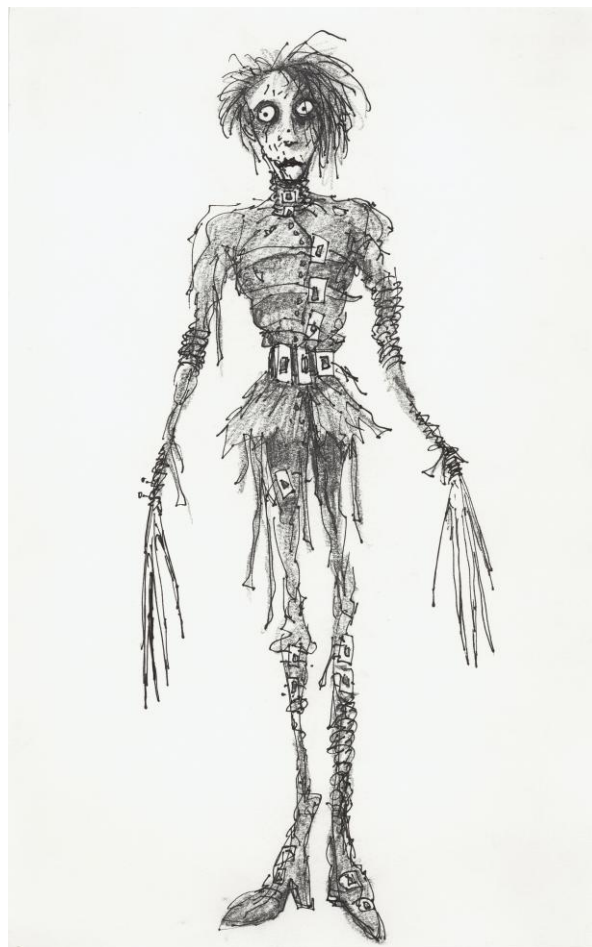
BEYOND BURBANK (1985-)

Burton's career blossomed through his work in feature films. *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman* (1989), and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) made him a brand name before his sixth feature, *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), was released. In this phase of his creative life, rewarding professional collaborations helped bring his personal vision to the screen. Burton often works with the same creative team. Frequent collaborators include film composer Danny Elfman, costume designer Colleen Atwood, animation character creators McKinnon and Saunders and production designer Bo Welch, among others.

- Think of a project where you worked well with others. What role did you play in the team and what role did others take? How did the different roles interact with each other? What made the project a success? How can you adapt this participatory model for youth and for use in the classroom?

CHILDHOOD ALIENATION AND IMAGINATIVE ESCAPE

Burton's early experiences shaped his characters and narratives, which often represent the well-meaning "outsider," the misunderstood, the lonely, and the rejected — all reflections of his childhood experiences. "Those feelings never really leave you," says Burton, "It's just part of your DNA. I always felt like Frankenstein and my neighbors were all the angry villagers."³ To combat the alienation and loneliness that he felt as a child, Burton found joy and solace at the Cornell Theater in Burbank, where he watched old monster movies starring Vincent Price and Christopher Lee. He also occupied his time by watching TV, drawing, and playing in the local cemetery.



Tim Burton (United States, b. 1958), *Untitled (Edward Scissorhands)*, 1990, pen and ink, and pencil on paper, 14¼ x 9 in., Private collection, Edward Scissorhands © Twentieth Century Fox, © 2011 Tim Burton

Burton's misfit character is fully embodied in Edward Scissorhands, the lead character in the 1990 film of the same name. Like his other early films, notably *Beetlejuice* and *Batman*, *Edward Scissorhands* is a "dark story of conflict between good and evil emerging from a swamp of adolescent suburban conformity."⁴ Scissorhands (see the pen and ink drawing above) personifies the themes that recur and reverberate throughout much of the artist's works: the isolation of feeling disconnected from the world at large and the search for true identity.



Tim Burton (United States, b. 1958), *Untitled (The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories)*, 1998, pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 in., Private collection, © 2011 Tim Burton

- **Storyboard it!** – Consider your own life and how your experiences have defined your character. If you were to write a story about yourself, what are the important memories or events that you would include? Why? Make a list of some ideas. Create a visual autobiography using a storyboard, a template or guide that comic book artists and others use for brainstorming. Divide your story into four parts and sketch four different drawings accompanied by written captions. What are the beginning, middle, and end? How will you transition from one scene to the next? Finally, add color to bring the story to life.

Like Edward Scissorhands, Stain Boy, a biohazard superhero, was initially conceived and inspired from a sketch drawn by the artist. Burton first

introduced Stain Boy in *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories* (1997), a book combining the artist's drawings and prose. Even in these short stories, the enduring motif of the outsider and the misunderstood are present. In 2000, Stain Boy became the subject of a six-part online animation series (view it at www.timburtoncollective.com/multimedia.html.) In each episode, Stain Boy works for the Burbank police to investigate and apprehend "social outcasts," characters who exist in the other poems and stories of Burton's book. *Robot Boy*, an animatronic sculpture designed especially for the 2009 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and fabricated at California State University Fullerton, is also based on a character in *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories*.



Tim Burton (United States, b. 1958), *Robot Boy*, 2009, Steel, cast aluminum, LEDs, Arduino programmers, blown glass, copper wire, rubber, electric motor, and paint, 68 x 36 x 30 in., Private collection, © 2011 Tim Burton, Photo by Tom Mikawa

- Look for the Shapes – Burton repeats certain shapes and symbols to communicate his character’s emotions. For example, the faces of his troubled heroes and heroines are often geometric shapes. The eyes, faces, and bodies of many characters are composed of circular or organic shapes. Burton often uses circles to suggest unhappiness. Do *Stain Boy* and *Robot Boy* seem round and sad? Describe their features. Create your own characters using only geometric or organic shapes to create different moods or personalities.

Scissorhands, *Stain Boy*, and *Robot Boy*, like many of Burton’s characters, force viewers to consider how people deal with difference in society. Do you learn to accept it? Embrace it?

Burton’s message in much of his work is: stay true to yourself. His characters do this through creativity. Unfailingly, his heroes/protagonists use their imagination and/or imaginative activity as a response to feelings of disconnection and isolation.

- Creative Solutions – Think of a time when you felt different or at odds with friends, family members, or at school. What contributed to the way you felt? How do you think others perceived the situation? How did you or could you creatively resolve the problem? How would you solve the problem differently today?

HORROR AND HUMOR

Burton believes there is a fundamental link between horror and humor, born from his fascination with monster movies. “Ever since I was three years old, I can remember I loved monster movies and dark, expressionist kinds of things. Being a fairly quiet sort of nonverbal child, you look inward to explore your feelings and communicate through drawings.”⁵ While growing up in Burbank, movies – not museums – were his preferred source of visual culture. Nonetheless, through his love of drawing and his preferred motifs, he finds common ground with artists from many other times and places. In his allegiance to draftsmanship, Burton is part of a distinguished tradition. Since the early Renaissance, drawings have been considered to be especially revealing of the artist’s individual genius and style. Prints, by extension, can distill the hand-drawn line to its essence and reproduce it for mass distribution.



Odilon Redon (France, 1840–1916), *To Edgar Poe (The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Mounts toward Infinity)*, 1882, lithograph, 17¼ x 12¼ in., Wallis Foundation Fund in memory of Hal B. Wallis, AC1997.14.1.1 Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

- Wit and Words – Look carefully at the etching (a type of print) made by Spanish painter and print-maker Francisco de Goya on the following page. What do you see? Make a list of all of the details that capture your attention. What do you think might be happening? In this self-portrait, Goya imagines himself asleep amid his drawing tools with owls, bats, and other creatures surrounding him. This work, satirically titled *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (written in French in the lower left), is part of a series of etchings published by Goya. What do you think this phrase might mean? Does knowing the title change or alter your impression? What artistic choices did Goya make to create a dreamlike atmosphere? Does the interplay of words and image add to the sense of horror and humor? If you could retitl the etching, what would you name it?

Certain periods of art history resonate especially strongly with Burton’s vision. Mannerist artists of the mid-sixteenth century reacted against the tradition and orderly grace of the Renaissance with exaggerated, stylized figural concoctions. At the turn of the twentieth century, Symbolists created hallucinatory worlds filled with outsized eyeballs and insects. (See Odilon Redon’s print at left.) Japanese art has traditionally featured ghosts and demons to represent irrationality, while in Mexican culture the skeleton has both spiritual and political significance.

- Macabre & Mood – Discuss the mood suggested in French artist Odilon Redon’s lithograph (a type of print). Consider the artist’s use of such elements as line, shape, color, or value (a color’s lightness or darkness). Redon was known for transforming the natural world into dark visions and strange fantasies. Throughout his life, poetry and prose exerted a powerful influence on his imagination and functioned as inspiration for a number of paintings, drawings, and prints. This print was inspired by writer Edgar Alan Poe’s tales of mystery and the macabre. Read a poem by Poe and compare and contrast how Burton and Redon use artistic devices to create a mood. Illustrate a poem of your choice, visually capturing its theme and mood.



Francisco de Goya (Spain, 1746–1828), *Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1799, etching and aquatint, 8³/₈ x 5¹⁵/₁₆ in., Paul Rodman Mabury Trust Fund, 63.11.43. Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA



Set photographs from the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919, gelatin silver prints, 9¹⁵/₁₆ x 13 in., The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, M.82.287.1a–b. Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

Above all, German Expressionism, which originated around 1905 and was flourishing by the early 1910s, brought intuition and anxiety to the fore. The stark, powerful prints of the Expressionist era seem to presage the haunted interiors and emotive creatures found in Burton's feature films. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 1919 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which illustrates the movement of artistic motifs across media. This story about madmen and murder, directed by Robert Wiene,

is notable for its distorted reality (see the set photographs above). The two lead actors, Conrad Veidt and Werner Krauss, inhabit a jagged landscape of sharp angles; the tilted walls and windows seem to be closing in on them. There is a strong emphasis on light and dark, of being in a dreamscape or in an alternate reality. The sets were directly painted on flat canvas by artists Herman Wear, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig.



Installation view of *Carousel*, 2009, Tim Burton, May 29–October 31, 2011, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, © 2011 Tim Burton, Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

Like many contemporary artists, Burton works with a team to realize his projects and bring his personal vision to the screen. Together with artists, film composers, costume and production designers, animation character creators, and actors, Burton has established a recognizable style and aesthetic that is revered today by an international audience. Burton says, “Every time I do anything, I start with the character.”⁶ Burton communicates his characters and vision to his team through sketches rather than extensive storyboarding.

The *Carousel* installation in the *Tim Burton* exhibition is an example of this type of artistic collaboration. The *Carousel* is based on a pastel drawing on black paper that Burton completed as part of an alien series in 1983. (The drawing is included in the exhibition.) Twenty-six years

later, what began as a sketch became a three-dimensional sculpture, and finally, an immersive environment. Multiple artists contributed their expertise to create a multisensory work composed of layers of creatures. The four-by-six-foot revolving, multimedia, black-light installation hangs from the ceiling and is composed of thirteen hand-carved figures that are suspended from a circus tent structure. Below this structure, a sixteen-inch plasma ball is hung upside down. Longtime collaborator and sculptor Albert Cuellar created the *Carousel* for the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. For LACMA, the installation was expanded to include hand-painted wallpaper. The fluorescent purple and white creatures on the walls mimic the shapes of the characters on the carousel. Calliope music composed by Danny Elfman adds to the surreal effect.



Installation view, *Tim Burton*, May 29–October 31, 2011, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

- 2D to 3D—Using paper, mixed media collage, wire, recycled materials, or modeling clay, transform one of your two-dimensional drawings into a three-dimensional sculpture. Consider how you will make the transition from a flat representation to an actual object of scale. Will you break the drawing into parts or focus on the form of the sculpture as a whole? How will the structure stand and support its own weight? Will you need to enlist the help or expertise of others to realize your vision? What other factors might you need to consider?

Burton is driven to create, and likes to make things. He is an incessant sketcher, drawer, and doodler, as the exhibition so amply illustrates. What is unique about this exhibition is the emphasis on the process over the product. Burton has said that he never considered this body of work as art or artwork; it was not really meant to be seen, but rather was simply part of the process when thinking of ideas or working on projects.

How does focusing on the process allow us, as viewers, to see Burton's work in entirely new and different ways? Does it make you consider your own working style?

Burton's work and the exhibition also demonstrate a blurring of boundaries between fine art and popular culture, transcending the traditional categories of film, drawing, photography, sculpture, and writing. In thinking about those blurred lines, what does it mean for a fine art museum, such as LACMA, to host a pop culture exhibition? And does this change or challenge your definition of art? How so?

- Curate your Own Exhibition—Gather your sketches, writing samples, sculptures, photographs, or videos and design an exhibition or catalogue. What criteria will you establish to determine what is included and what is not? How might you group or categorize your artwork? How will the installation of your exhibition reflect this organization?



Installation view of *Air Dancers*, 2011, Tim Burton, May 29–October 31, 2011, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, © 2011 Tim Burton, Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

Notes

¹ *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 2011

² *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 2011

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 2011

⁶ In Salisbury, Mark (ed.) *Burton on Burton*, Faber and Faber, London, 2006. p. 16

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