



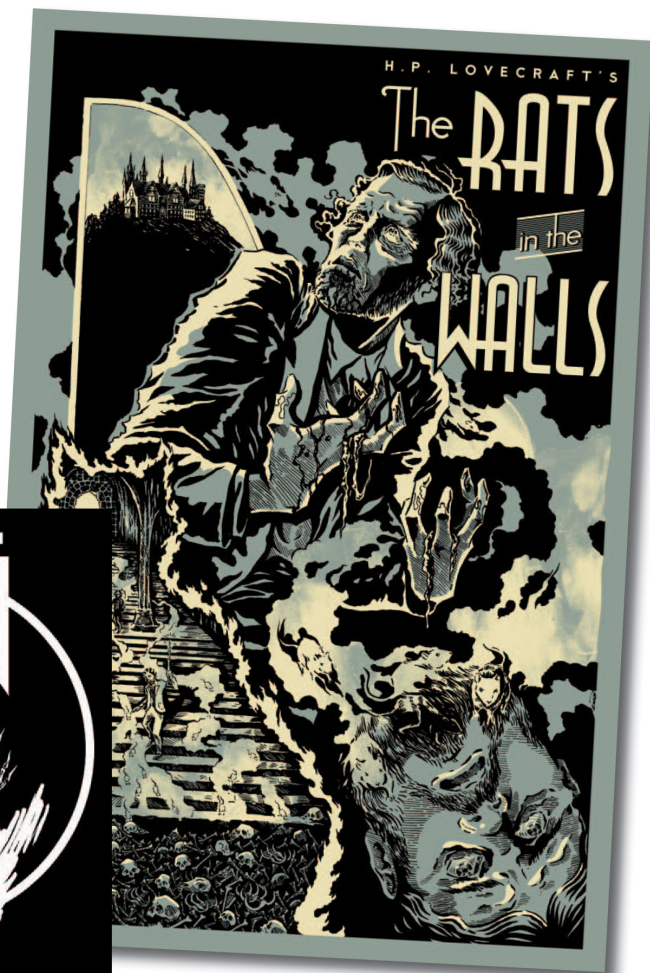
SEASON OF THE HAG

**Inside the lair of Knoxville's
mysterious Hag Cult,
illustrator of the bizarre**

BY APRIL SNELLINGS

G aunt femmes fatale clutch skulls and conjure spirits as they lounge on the hoods of muscle cars and vintage roadsters, their faces framed by pin curls and finger waves. Monsters crouch in the shadows and leer at garter-belted beauties who are often too busy channeling the dead or communing with Satan to notice. Hollow-cheeked men go mad amid swirling tendrils of sickly-green mist.

Welcome to the twilight world of Hag Cult, a Knoxville-based artist who is quickly amassing a following in the booming field of horror art. Locally, you may have seen her work on prints and fliers for Knoxville Horror Film Fest or on Pilot Light gig posters for appropriately morbid acts such as Murder by Death. Beyond the borders of the Marble City, Hag Cult is earning much-coveted wall space in venues such as Los Angeles' Gallery 1988 and Austin's Guzu Gallery. Her work is currently being featured in Guzu's *Something Spooky*, a horror-themed art show curated by legendary comic-book artist Bernie Wrightson and *30 Days of Night* creator Steve Niles.



But few of her fans know much about her, or even her full name. (She identifies herself on her website, hagcult.com, only as "M. Fersner," and uses an alias even on her Facebook page.) She's only done a couple of brief interviews, during which she steers the conversation away from personal matters, preferring to discuss only her work and her influences. In person, she's shy, reserved, and incredibly humble—a personality that seems at odds with her movie-star looks and growing reputation in the genre art world.

SO WHO IS SHE?



THE HORROR, THE HORROR: If you haven't heard of Hag Cult before, you may have actually seen her work—she designs the Knoxville Horror Film Fest poster each year. (The festival was Oct. 25-27 this year).

I met the artist who calls herself Hag Cult the way I meet most of my friends these days: through my association, however tangential it may be, with horror movies.

Back when I still had free time—before I dropped out of the world of the respectfully employed to become a full-time freelancer—I served as a co-organizer of Knoxville Horror Film Fest. I don't remember whether the film festival found Hag Cult or the other way around, but in 2011 the artist began creating marketing materials for KHFF. I met her shortly thereafter.

In all honesty, I didn't want to. I'm perfectly happy not meeting new people. I'm an incurable cat-botherer at parties, a remorseless ignorer of phone calls. I have to fight the urge to hide when I see



someone I know at the grocery store, even if it's someone I like.

Hag Cult, it turns out, is a kindred spirit. She's intensely private, and while there's no sincere attempt to hide her identity, she'd rather haunt a corner than bask in a spotlight. As her work draws more and more attention on the national art scene, that's becoming harder to manage.

Hag Cult's shadowy, intensely cinematic art draws from a wide range of genres, from film noir to spaghetti Westerns to classic exploitation flicks. But, as you'd surely guess, the macabre is her most abiding passion.

"Originally I was drawn to horror because, as a kid, it was a family thing," says the Hag. "We all watched horror movies together and loved being scared. I remember my older brother bringing home the *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* books that had the incredible illustrations by Stephen Gammell, and just being in total awe. As an adult, I continue to love the genre not just for nostalgia but because it's fun and exciting. Who doesn't like the prospect of being terrified?"

[Note: In the recent 30th anniversary reprints of *Scary Stories*, Gammell's

Who doesn't like the prospect of being terrified?

—HAG CULT

terrifying art was replaced with tamer work by Brett Helquist. The substitution caused much wailing and gnashing of teeth among horror fans of a certain age, who have strangely fond recollections of Gammell's bed-wettingly horrific illustrations. We're a strange lot.]

As wonderful as it is to imagine Knoxville's premier horror artist clutching pen and brush in gnarled hands as she rules an unfortunate niece's attic with terrifying accord, the name "Hag Cult" is a playful misnomer. The artist who labors under the sign of the crone is a lovely and very sweet-natured young woman who favors cat-eye glasses, pillbox hats, and leopard-print shrugs. She shares a well-kept, cozy house with her husband, two large dogs, and a reclusive and possibly insane cat. Her love of all things vintage extends beyond the confines of her art; she enjoys cooking elaborate meals on the mid-century stove that came with the house, and when my partner's parents decided to part ways with their elderly piano, it found a home in Hag Cult's garage.

With her olive skin, coal-black hair and ambiguously exotic look, the self-described "slimy old Hag" could have climbed out of one of her own paintings. She often makes her own clothes.

"Hag Cult really was something I came up with when I was working on my website," the artist explains. "It really came from my obsession with aging and my love for the 'old hag' archetypes."

She's referring to both the classic crones of mythology and folklore, and

the more modern, cinematic rendition of the hag. For the uninitiated, it's an archetype that gets a lot of love from horror fans. In fact, "hag horror" is its own subgenre. Also known as "hagsploitation" and "psycho-biddy," it's a cycle of movies that hit its stride in the 1960s and '70s; some better-known examples are 1964's *Strait-Jacket* and 1971's *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?*

In keeping with the spirit of the crone, Hag Cult largely forgoes digital artistry in favor of old-fashioned methods. She inks most of her pieces by hand; coloring is done with paint and brush and only a minimal amount of digital manipulation. Like most successful genre artists, Hag Cult has developed a unique, stylized approach that is instantly identifiable; you don't need to see her signature to know that a piece bears the mark of the Hag.

Even without her more obvious trademarks—sunken-faced women with jutting cheekbones and knife-blade noses; sinister, swirling mist that often entangles her subjects; odd, crescent-shaped skulls—there's no mistaking her work. While many genre illustrators make use of the vivid, Technicolor hues of hot-rod culture or '80s horror, Hag Cult's work is often either monochromatic—her Matisse-inspired print "Thelemic Dance I" was printed in gold ink on black paper—or favors a neutral color palette, such as the pale greens, creams, and black of "I'm One of the Living Dead," a tribute to the 1931 film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, created for the



Oscar Legends show at Los Angeles' lauded Hero Complex Gallery. Her work is highly stylized, featuring heavy, angular lines and dense stretches of inky shadows. Many of her

prints and paintings feature Art Deco-inspired inner frames.

"It was a gradual thing," she says of her distinct visual flair. "I've always had a dark style, but it took several years for me to find what I felt most comfortable with in regards to technique. I always struggled—still do—with mastering my craft and developing a style that was all my own. As a kid I would open up comic books and try to replicate what I saw. I think a combination of this and studying different classical artists really helped in my understanding of how to conceptualize color theory and storytelling. I'm a huge critic of my work and there's always room to grow and develop."

Her habit of referencing French painters and early 20th-century design movements isn't the only thing that sets Hag Cult apart from her peers. The dearth of women working behind the camera in the horror film world extends to its canvas and paper counterpart; in my own considerable collection of horror art, Hag Cult is the only female artist.

"It's something I don't quite understand," says the full-time freelance illustrator. "There really isn't a shortage of incredibly talented female illustrators who do genre work out there and who are masters of their craft. It's a bit frustrating and disappointing."

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Lets PLAY Chess





While Knoxville's favorite hag is still a few decades from serving up parakeet salads and rat steaks à la *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, she does display one of the prominent hallmarks of hagdom: It can be difficult to lure her out of her domain. Even if you manage to unshackle her from her drawing table and drag her past her ever-growing stacks of vintage horror memorabilia, she is, like me, an incorrigible shadow-dweller. Get her to a screening of a delightfully terrible B-movie, though, and all bets are off. In fact, the Hag and I were sternly reprimanded for our behavior at a Nashville screening of *Lady Terminator*, aka *Nasty Hunter*. (Be warned, readers:

Nashvillians take their '80s Indonesian mockbusters about vagina snakes and possessed co-eds quite seriously and will not tolerate shenanigans, even if it's just a lot of shouting and giggling from two drunk nerd-ladies. And those guys who said they weren't with us were lying.)

Like most of her peers, the shy, soft-spoken artist traces her fascination with the macabre back to the grimy shelves of the video store her family frequented when she was a child. She remembers walking to the store with her siblings, where she inevitably wound up staring at the lurid horror posters that covered the walls. The hag-apparent was particularly impressed by a standout that most horror fans of her generation will vividly recall: the key art for *Night of the Creeps*, which featured a blank-eyed, bloodied



zombie in a tux thrusting a bouquet of flowers through a broken window.

"Film really helped influence my work," Hag Cult says. "The use of lighting is so important when trying to set a mood for each piece. I really picked this up from watching film noir and classic horror films."

Inspiration, says the artist, comes from all directions, from the famously nutso 1950s EC Comics like *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror* to early 20th-century advertising illustrations. If you see echoes of American portraitist John Singer Sargent and illustrator J.C. Leyendecker in Hag Cult's work, you have a good eye; she cites both as major influences, along with more obvious names such as horror artists Gammell and Wrightson.

"Leyendecker's and Sergeant's uniquely stylized work, their understanding of color and contrast, are a few of the things I admire," the Hag explains. "As for Gammell, his imagery is a great example of the terrifying and effective

storytelling I strive to achieve."

That storytelling is a big part of Hag Cult's appeal. Her work avoids the pitfall of pastiche that often threatens to ensnare genre illustrators; while you can certainly pick out individual influences and references, there's a feeling of a unique universe taking shape throughout the Hag's body of work. There's always the impression of a world that extends beyond the edges of the canvas—that a Depression-era séance in one piece could somehow affect the outcome of an atom-age alien invasion taking place a few frames down the gallery wall.

"It could be that it was something that stemmed from my love of literature and comics, but I've always felt that the job of an illustrator is to be able to tell a story and not just create a great graphic," she says. "There are always different inspirations and stories for each piece. It would be difficult to visually tell a story without an environment, so I always feel like I need to really flesh out that aspect in order to be successful."



If you're not a genre nerd, you get a pass for not knowing that horror art is a very big deal right now. The field has a rabid fan base and its own superstars, such as Justin Erickson, whose horror-themed posters are routinely nominated for prestigious *Hollywood Reporter* Key Art awards (he won top honors in two categories last week for his San Diego Comic Con Godzilla poster), and "Ghoulish" Gary Pullin, whose work can be seen on the covers of albums, books, magazines, and Blu-ray reissues of classic horror films.

According to Pullin, Hag Cult's video-store inspiration is a universal one among horror illustrators.

"Part of it spawns from pure nostalgia," says Pullin. "Horror fans often hold a torch for films and imagery from their past and are sometimes very driven by those lurid, illustrated box covers that grabbed them while browsing the VHS aisles. ... Often, the poster was far better than anything seen in the film, but that's part of the charm. A lot of designers and artists who grew up watching horror films or reading horror books are now

working professionally and are tapping that era, or they want to evoke the atmosphere of a film they loved."

As Pullin points out, the growing popularity of Hag Cult and her fellow horror illustrators is also a response to what has become known as the "floating head" scourge of contemporary movie marketing—dull, cookie-cutter posters that feature the disembodied heads of the films' stars floating against a flat, ugly background.

"It's really inspiring to see less of that kind of thing and to see illustration and strong conceptual designs coming back, not only for re-issues and limited-edition prints for collectors or film screenings but for theatrical and official marketing campaigns," Pullin says. (It feels necessary to note that Pullin has written about Hag Cult in the pages of Toronto-based *Rue Morgue Magazine*, a publication that employs me as a writer and editor. My, what a strange, incestuous world we horror folk occupy.)

The horror-art movement owes a chunk of its popularity to Mondo, an Austin-based shop that commissions

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limited-edition movie posters. For a genre fan, Mondo prints are an addiction, and attempts to acquire them are often exercises in heartache and frustration. Most sell out within two to four minutes of release. Yes, they're that popular.

The hubs of the horror illustration world are predictable—Los Angeles, Austin, and Toronto are three of the field's hot spots—but Hag Cult is helping put Knoxville on the monster-art map. We might not be a horror mecca quite yet, but we're working on it. The city has a thriving and ever-expanding genre scene, thanks in part to its active filmmaking community. Knoxville Horror Film Fest, which just wrapped its fifth annual event, is steadily growing; Knoxville even has its own horror music label called Goblinhaus Records.

"I would say that the horror scene [in Knoxville] has grown since we started doing the festival in 2009," says William Mahaffey, co-founder and director of Knoxville Horror Film Fest. (In the interest of full disclosure, I've pitched in with the festival in previous years, mostly by serving on the jury and helping with PR.) "The zombie walk has gotten more organized and popular, there's that

["Thriller"-inspired] Thrill the World dance event every year now, there are multiple venues screening *Rocky Horror*, and the popularity of the haunted houses seems to have grown. Every year there seems to be new or improved horror offerings. ... I think all of us icky horror fans here have started to band together and make this a good city to be a monster kid."

Judging from the turnouts at Hag Cult's First Friday shows, Mahaffey is right. The events are usually hosted by Crush in the Old City; since the monster-art world often overlaps with hot-rod and pin-up culture, Crush's clientele is particularly receptive to Hag Cult's retro images.

As more and more galleries, not to mention horror enthusiasts, are noticing the Hag's work, her dance card is quickly filling up. Her art will be featured in a number of shows in the coming months, and she's collaborating with her husband, a Knoxville-based filmmaker, on several projects.

Of course, even reclusive artist types need hobbies. Just how, exactly, does a hag while away the hours on a chilly autumn night?

"Strangely, I do fashion design and hat-making if time permits," she says.

I've spent many hours in the company of Hag Cult and Mr. Hag Cult, and even I didn't know that last part. Hags are a mysterious lot indeed. ☘