

THE HAUNTED EBAY PAINTING

T WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

a little over five years ago, and I was awake instead of doing what I'd normally be doing—namely, having bad dreams that I'll never remember but somehow take to heart and integrate into my day-to-day attitudes and actions.

Drowned in my computer monitor's cold sepulchral glow, I checked my email and got a message from a friend who, like me, was known as a purveyor of "transgressive" literature that tended to glorify the sort of grisly, violent, irredeemable phenomena that outraged and sickened your normal, average, everyday, run-of-the-mill, red-blooded, straitlaced, boring-ass cocksucking motherfuckers. We'd seen it all, and not only were we unfazed, we enjoyed subject matter that made other people vomit. We considered ourselves impossible to offend and disturb.

His email's subject header was a simple but intriguing five words: *If it creeps ME out...*

The email had no personal message. It was only a link to an active eBay auction for a reputedly "haunted" painting. According to the eBay seller, her four-year-old daughter claimed that at night, the boy and girl depicted in the painting would fight with each other and leave the canvas to enter her room. So the woman's husband set up a "motion-triggered camera," which yielded the photo you see at the lower right side of this page. After viewing that photo, the woman decided to forever rid her house of the painting. She put it up for auction on eBay, with a sales pitch mostly in SCARY all caps:

WARNING: DO NOT BID ON THIS PAINTING IF YOU ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO STRESS RELATED DISEASE, FAINT OF HEART OR ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH SUPERNATURAL EVENTS....ONE QUESTION TO YOU EBAYERS. WE WANT OUR HOUSE TO BE BLESSED AFTER THE PAINTING IS GONE, DOES ANYBODY KNOW, WHO IS QUALIFIED TO DO THAT?

Response to the "haunted painting" auction was intense and viral. Over 13,000 unique visitors viewed the auction page, and the painting sold for slightly over a thousand bucks. The sellers claimed to have received over 30 suggestions for how to exorcise their house, as well as seven reports of "strange or irregular events taking place" after viewing



the painting. One person claimed they heard a demonic voice and then felt a strong, sudden blast of hot air. Another said that when he tried to print out the JPG images, his printer ate the pages every time. Others said they cried.

I DON'T BELIEVE IN GHOSTS. What I *do* believe is that anyone who believes in ghosts is a little bit stupid—if not generally, at least when it comes to ghosts. I also believe in a real collective unconscious as well as my own savage, dark, lush 'n' loamy unconscious. I believe that both can be tormented by *nightmares* rather than ghosts, and this painting is a rusty arrow shot straight through the public and private nightmare worlds. From the grim, thin-lipped boy...to the hollow-eyed robot doll girl clasping some metal object like a weapon...to the awful disembodied hands reaching from the darkness to scratch at the window behind the half-dead boy and the never-alive girl...this is a singularly unpleasant image that somehow manages to rise above cheesy

teen horror-movie clichés to fill me with dread every time I see or think about it. There is absolutely nothing nice about it. Like the live televised suicide of politician R. Budd Dwyer, or the song "Frankie Teardrop" by the band Suicide, this painting is an experience forever branded on my brain which probably couldn't even be cleansed by electroshock. I wish I could exorcise the personal ghosts that are conjured every time the painting crosses my mind, but that's a doomed wish at best. Last night when I awoke in darkness to go pee and thought about the painting, my eyes watered a bit from raw animal fear.

The schlocky publicity surrounding the "haunted eBay painting" eventually burned a path to its creator, an Oakland-born artist named Bill Stoneham. He'd painted it way back in 1972 and called it "The Hands Resist Him." He claims the boy is based on a photograph of himself taken when he was five and the eyeless girl-doll is a spirit guide who will lead him through the dream world represented by the hands clawing in darkness behind the glass. Stoneham also claimed that the owner of the gallery where "Hands" was first displayed, as well as the first art critic to review it, both died within a year of first seeing the painting. Stoneham now sells prints of "The Hands Resist Him" from his website and has finished a sequel, "Resistance at the Threshold," which depicts the same scene, only forty years later.

Bill Stoneham, you've scared the shit out of me. After having "seen it all," I realize there are some things I wish I hadn't.

