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Fang Favorites: How Vampires Seduced the Art World

These filmmakers have inspired everyone from Andy Warhol to Lindsey Mendick.

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Emily Steer • October 30, 2024 • **Share This Article**

Vampires have never been far from the artistic imagination. For many, the bloodsucker's seductive charisma first came to life on screen when Edward Munch painted his as deeply romantic. The artist's moody *Love and Pain* (made in 1895 and later nickenamed "Vampire") depicts two figures locked in a heated embrace. The nude woman's flaming red hair is draped over her shoulders, as she buries her face into the man's green-tinged neck.

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Ambrogio Alciati conjured similar passion for his 1900 painting *The Kiss*, in which a pale woman is bent backwards and ravaged by a dark-coated man with jet black hair. Later, Andy Warhol paid homage to these bloodsucking beauties, shooting a Dracula-inspired film titled *Blood for Dracula* (also known as *Andy Warhol's Dracula*) and *Women in Blood for Dracula* (also known as *Andy Warhol's Dracula*) directed by Paul Morrissey. He also reimagined the devilish count's image in a series of bright red, neon pink and black screenprints, which imbued him with killer cheekbones.

Artemio Rizzolli, *The Vampire* (Love and Pain), 1895, Private Collection. Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

In recent years, contemporary artists have revisited and celebrated the creatures of gothic literature. Their works subvert the traditional approach, which uses monstrosity to segregate and bully, and challenge the persecution of difference in contemporary society.

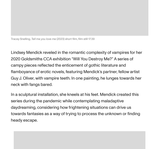
While vampires could be seen as part of this realm, they hold a unique position. Their refined features, dandy-esque style, and lithe forms don't entirely conceal their dangerous potential, but wrap it in an appealing package. Later this year, Nosferatu's central vampire Count Orlok will be brought to life by Bill Skarsgård, an actor with chiseled model looks known for embodying chilling darkness.

Rizzoli, Antonio Ambrogio, The Kiss, 1900, Private Collection. Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

"Vampires have a seductive pull that is alluring yet also dangerous," said artist Tracey Snelling in an interview with Artnet News. Her 3D miniature sets plug into both the grim and theatricality of gothic storytelling, featuring haunted houses, hotels, and street scenes frequented by mythical beasts. Zombies, ghouls, and monsters like Michael Myers from Halloween are flat out frightening, while a vampire can seduce and trick you.

Snelling's pieces mimic the architecture of gothic mansions and more contemporary buildings, highlighting this vicious figure as a timeless threat. Drawing parallels with Grace Jones's 1985 expressive comedy horror *Vamp* and Blade's blood-filled dance floor, some of her works referencing the hidden spaces of underground nightlife.

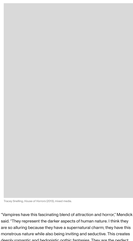
"I'm building a sculpture of Kit Kat, the bar/club in Berlin. How many vampires are there? It seems like the perfect place for them... The Mauerbunker, a former animal research center in Berlin, is another building which I have recreated. Now abandoned, this huge concrete bunker looks like a ghost ship and could easily be home to thousands of vampires."



Tracey Snelling, Tell Me you love me (2023) (from film *Shot at Night*)

Lindsey Mendick revelled in the romantic complexity of vampires for her 2020 Guldemitha CCA exhibition "Will You Desiring Me?" A series of campy pieces reflected the enticement of gothic literature and flamboyance of erotic novels, featuring Mendick's partner, fellow artist Guy J. Oliver, with vampire teeth in one painting, he lunges towards her neck with fangs bared.

In a sculptural metallation, she kneels at his feet. Mendick created this series during the pandemic while contemplating maladaptive daydreaming, considering how frightening situations can drive us towards fantasies as a way of trying to process the unknown or finding ways escape.



Tracey Snelling, House of Horrors (2019), Hotel Lisella

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"Vampires have this fascinating blend of attraction and horror," Mendick said. "They represent the darker aspects of human nature. I think they are so alluring because they have a supernatural charm; they have this monstrous nature while also being motivated and seductive. This creates deeply romantic and hedonistic gothic fantasies. They are the perfect sexual escapism for humans."

The series also touches on the gap that exists between fantasy and reality. Something that seems idyllic within a daydream may feel unnatural in life. "The reality of the overwhelming element in a normal relationship is someone being too well-obsessed, or too selfish, or people not taking each other's feelings into account," she added.

When making the series, Mendick harked back to her idealized teenage view on Buffy's complicated entanglement with Angel on the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the central relationship in Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire*. Her fantasies stemmed from a desire to be overwhelmed by your partner. To be dominated entirely by your desire for them. In the present day, it's the biggest escapism from the reality of relationships and the struggles we all go through."

Installation view of Lindsey Mendick, "Will You Desiring Me?" at Guldemitha CCA in 2020. Photo: Maria Bonner

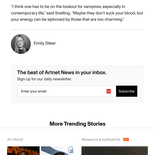
While the vampire is often seen as masculine, some artists have viewed this figure through a feminine lens. In 1897, the British painter Philip Burne-Jones famously depicted a female vampire, sending a potential of the work to Bram Stoker after he finished writing *Dracula*, and joking that it redressed the gender balance. In this work, the vampire is shown as a toxic seductress rather than a liberated, complicated woman. But some contemporary artists have imagined feminine vampires as an icon of empowerment.

Marilyn Minter applied the gloss and glamour of lipstick and glittering beads to her erotic close-up of a fanged mouth and red-smeared teeth (Vampire, 2004). The American artist exhibited in Anat Ebgi's "Vampire/Mother" earlier this year, alongside fifteen others including Mickalene Thomas, Nadia Waheed, and Paula Rego.

Installation view, "Vampire/Mother" at Anat Ebgi, 2024. Courtesy of Anat Ebgi

The exhibition explored overly simplified stereotypes that are imposed upon women and femmes, putting them forth instead as simultaneously sensitive, dangerous and sneaky. "The seductresses can be a bitter, soft and cuddly or she may be a vampire," curator Jasmine Wahi wrote when the exhibition opened. "It is a show that embraces the mainstream tendency to navigate the world through a rigid binary framework."

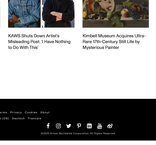
For other artists, the toxicity of the vampire is positioned as a poison that spreads through global power structures. Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer's Nosferatie, starring and co-written by Trinidadian artist and musician Oka, showed at Britain's Spike Island in 2022.



Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer, Nosferatie (2021), installation view. Courtesy of the artists. Commissioned for Hauserwirth, London and Spike Island, Bristol

The film takes an anti-colonial approach to the classic tale, following Oka as he is sent to America in a slave ship, then bitten by the vampire Christopher Columbus. Oka finds himself entangled with the colonial project, until he comes across Rastafarianism and smokes the Devil's lettuce, which freeks his mind.

The story moves from the 1400s to the present day, following a newly liberated Oka struggling against the lasting dynamics of colonialism of which he has been an unwitting participant and proponent. The work brings an uncomfortable question to the fore. "Now you can decolonise yourself, if it's in your blood?"



Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer, Nosferatie (2021), installation view. Courtesy of the artists. Commissioned for Hauserwirth, London and Spike Island, Bristol

The vampire, then, is a symbol of covert destruction. It speaks to behaviors and attractions that get under the skin, not only shaming those it preys upon, but taking over their minds. For many artists, the being that sapps also corrupts, encouraging the other to act upon their worst impulses. This ancient icon of decadence is a mind-reducing relevance in the world today.

"I think one has to be on the lookout for vampires, especially in contemporary life," said Snelling. "Maybe they don't suck your blood, but your energy can be siphoned by those that are too charming."

Emily Steer

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