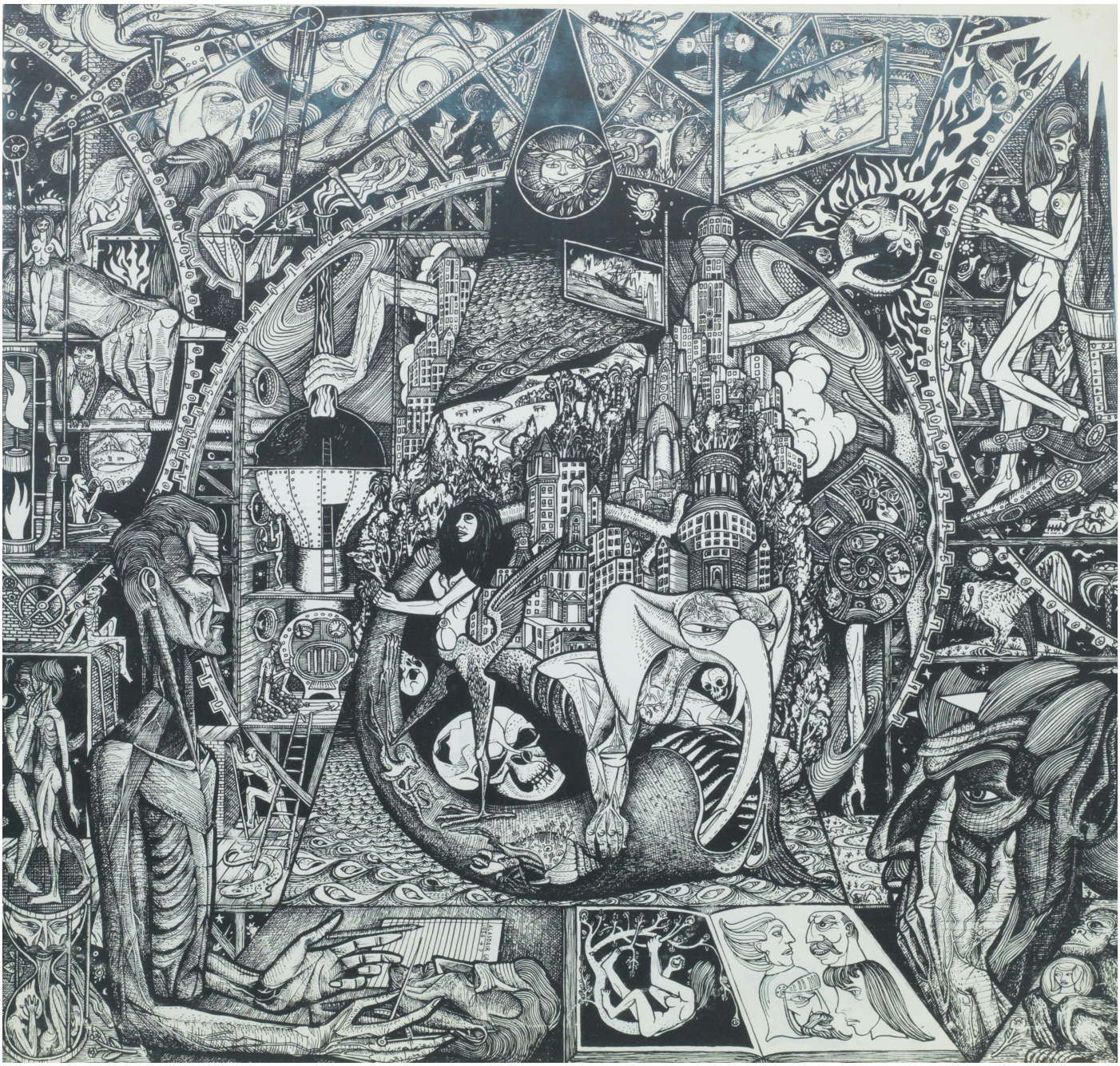
‘Faust in His Study’

BY POLINA SZWEDOWA, 2024

Faust in His Study’ circa 1652 (in the National Galleries of Scotland) is a work by Northern Renaissance master Rembrandt that shows an elderly scholar transfixed by an orb of light in which is contained a secret code.

Rembrandt van Rijn, Faust in His Study, about 1652. Etching, drypoint and burin on paper, plate mark 21,7 x 16,7 cm.

In 1958 Alasdair Gray created a lithograph version in multiples from which he then created further dyeline prints as an early foray into edition making.



Alasdair Gray, Faust in His Study, about 1962. Dyeline print, plate mark 63 x 63 cm.

Gray's version of this theme echoes pictorial motifs from the works of several Northern Renaissance artists. This rich and layered image is composed of multiple micro narratives, each in and of themselves absorbing scenes but when viewed together overwhelming. Stylistic parallels bring to mind the works of Dutch artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel.

Pieter Breughel, Inuidia, XVIth century. Engraving, 22,7 x 29,5 cm.

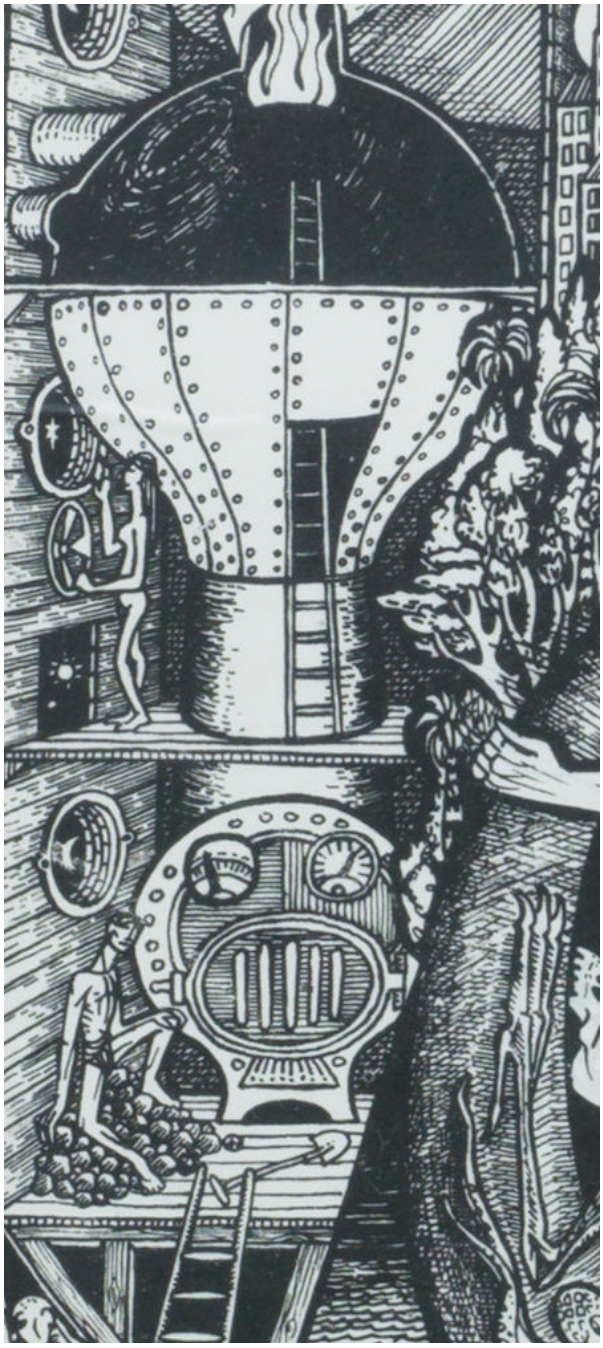
Hieronymus Bosch, The Concert in an Egg, 1561. Painting, oil on panel, 108,5 x 126,5 cm.

The references to these artists are made in Gray's work through the visual cues of materiality and technique but also through image making as a vehicle for sharing the artist's views of society.

The graphic's high viewpoint reminds me of the Renaissance artists' epic compositions, which can also be seen as a gesture of invitation that plays out in multiple ways. Firstly to enable the viewer to witness the scene or scenes playing out in rich, detailed microcosms. Secondly through taking a bird's eye perspective it distances the viewer from these grotesque details even though the close-up immediacy could suggest Gray's internal world. Grotesque motifs are saturated within Gray's version, unwinding a dramatic expression of figures, creatures, and hybrids. Their bodies are composed of individual elements meshed in a singular form, calling to mind chimaeras. In some stories of medieval manuscripts chimeras are described as women with inky hair and the ability to shift forms, which eventually came to represent hybridised creatures.

It is especially interesting to consider an image of the central female figure, a symbolic 'Independent Woman', which as an emblem appears and re-appears throughout the lifespan of Gray's creative work. The figure's wings signal ephemerality, hinting at the possibility of existence in a variety of realms, possibly motivated by a desire to carve one's own path and depart from a sphere characterised by the traces

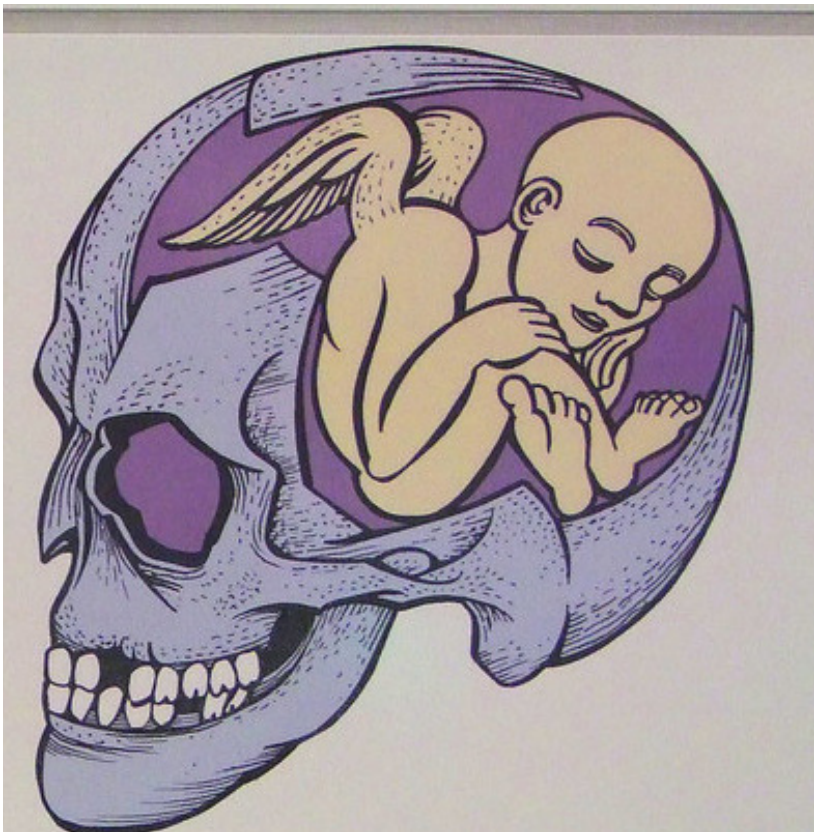
of destruction embraced by the skulls on the picture plane and, most importantly, evoked by the graphic's composition.



It is crucial to note that this 'Independent Woman' is also part of a micro-narrative captured in one of the machine cogs that constitute the image. Within the pictorial composition, the smallest gesture carries the weight of a microcosm constructed by Gray, resembling a miniature theatre supposedly run by motors and wheels. Nevertheless they seem to resist being merely mechanical puppets, as it is a history of moments made of images, fragments, feelings, passions, and details. Why stage it in this way? This could be considered an example of tracing the act or making and sharing this as a process that is ongoing and always 'in the making'.

'Faust in his Study' contains early versions of other Gray motifs like the 'Brain Baby', all of which originate in the work of others. The 'Brain Baby' was inspired by William Blake's 'The Gates of Paradise' emblems from 1793. As Gray commented "Blake, like Robert Burns, never doubted what babies and the wisest people know: what naturally feels good and bad is good and bad, before suppression of these natural feelings perverts them." This motif would go on to be used in future works by Gray as a way of describing the cycle of like and linking it to his idea of creativity being an ongoing cycle, constantly in the making.

Details from Faust in His Study, 1962



Tile from Hillhead Subway Mural, "All Kinds of Folk", 2012

These motifs are fragments of influence, and like all of his work, root it in a rich web of making. This motif works with others to create a visual alphabet which Gray reuses and could be seen as the aesthetic emblems of a broader philosophical position. This could be considered a desire to create his own mark within a wider discourse of making but also as a way of setting limits to control the chaotic mutations of modern life, connecting him with progressive ways of thinking, being, making and re-making.

At the time of writing this in 2024, Polina was studying a Masters in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh. She also assisted in the cataloguing of the main library collection.

THE ALASDAIR GRAY ARCHIVE

Formatted by Teoh Jennings