

For many weeks after September 11, the United States experienced a fear unknown here since the height of the Cold War. As rumors spread about impending terrorist attacks, many Americans panicked. Being prone to paranoia, I was also afraid: I didn't buy a gas mask, but I did cancel my trip to Los Angeles at Thanksgiving. I was still worried at the beginning of this year, but the alleged imminent attacks had not materialized, so I flew to LA (albeit much more nervously than usual). In this state of heightened anxiety, I saw Jay-Gould Stuckey's "Double Feature". This often hilarious exhibition provided a much needed antidote to my tension. But more importantly, I

found the show's tongue-in-cheek homage to Cold War-era B movies surprisingly relevant to contemporary American fears.

Stuckey's black-and-white drawings and mixed-media works on paper depict the mummies, space men, and warplanes that populated many of the horror and science-fiction films of the '50s. The plots of these movies were often simple allegories: the threatened demise of humans at the hands of a menacing force symbolized the widely held fear at the time that America would be destroyed by Soviet nuclear weapons.

"Double Feature" overtly pokes fun at these films, and indirectly mocks the paranoia that inspired them. In the dryly named MUMMIES MOVING FORWARD, a group of at least ten six-foot-tall mummies stride toward the viewer, some with their arms outstretched. I think I laughed out loud when I saw the mummies, vacant black eyes staring trance-like at me. Not only did these creatures remind me of movie mummies, they also made me think of the ones Scooby Doo and the gang used to encounter.

However, MUMMIES MOVING FORWARD is more than a mere cartoon. It has a deft painterly touch that is particularly evident in the jumble of mummy torsos and legs in the bottom three quarters of the work. In this part of the composition, it is difficult to distinguish body parts, and the work more closely resembles an Abstract painting than a portrait of mummies. Stuckey may have watched many bad movies from the '50s, but he clearly has also looked closely at some of that era's best painters.

Similar humor and skill could be found in a suite of 12 drawings on a wall to the right of MUMMIES MOVING FORWARD. These works, ranging in size from 15 x 15 1/2 to 18 x 24 inches, were arranged in four columns of three. This layout suggested a movie storyboard, and in some instances I could easily construct a funny narrative that linked two adjacent works. For example, in MUMMY SPEAKING, a mummy shouts with fists raised from a podium at what seems to be a pre-menace-the-townspeople pep rally. Similar to his handling of legs and bodies in MUMMIES MOVING FORWARD, Stuckey makes the frenzied crowd an abstract jumble. The orator, I assumed, then appeared in head-to-toe profile throwing up on the ground in the adjacent MUMMY VOMITING. I figured his nausea must be due to stage fright.

Another humorous narrative could be constructed from GIANT MUMMY ATTACK and SWARM, two works hanging together on a wall opposite the storyboard drawings. More significantly, however, these two roughly 3 x 4 foot pieces together make a perceptive observation about human nature. In giant mummy attack, an absurdly massive military assault attempts to destroy a hilariously colossal mummy. As the thousand-foot-tall giant stands along a shore in what for him is knee-deep water, about 100 warplanes swarm around his head and body, riddling them with bullets. Meanwhile about half a dozen submarines swim around his shins, peppering them with torpedoes. His legs are also threatened by a handful of underwater mines. For good measure, a lone tank lobs shells from the beach. The mummy's face anguishes, and he seems on the verge of succumbing to this onslaught. Nonetheless, he has managed to inflict some damage on his tormentors: in each hand he holds the remains of a crushed airplane.

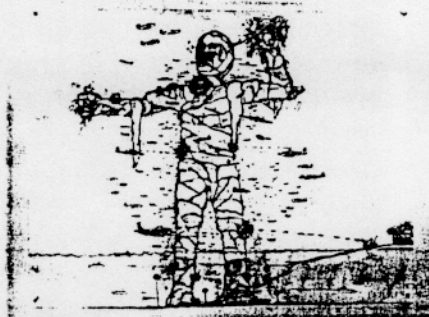
To the right of GIANT MUMMY ATTACK, swarm depicted scores of airplanes engaged in a chaotic, free-for-all firefight. I assumed this drawing depicts what happens after the colossal mummy of GIANT MUMMY ATTACK has been destroyed. The society that had worked together to slay its great enemy dissolves into chaos and turns its guns on itself. History is filled with many stories of Nations following a similar path to disunion. Indeed, now that the terrorists seem to have been routed in Afghanistan, the much ballyhooed unity in Washington, DC has disintegrated into typical political bickering.

I found a specific allusion to Contemporary events in MUMMIES AND PEOPLE, probably the most bizarre of the storyboard drawings. At the center of this work, a man and woman dance while an image of some agitated mummies appears on a large television screen to the left of the dancers. This juxtaposition suggested that the dancing has infuriated the mummies. It reminded me of media reports that Muslim terrorists are offended by what they perceive as the libertine values of the West. The dancers represent depravity, and the mummies can be seen as stand-ins for the terrorists of September.

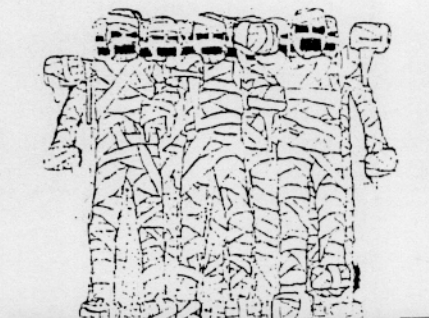
Stuckey, however, completed MUMMIES AND PEOPLE in '00, so it is unlikely that he was thinking of Muslim terrorists as he made this drawing. Nonetheless, my interpretation seems plausible because the fear that MUMMIES AND PEOPLE alludes to is palpable again today. In the movies that inspired Stuckey, the mummies seem unstoppable. In the initial aftermath of September 11, especially when people were dying of anthrax, Americans feared that their government was unable to protect them from terrorists. Moreover, as portrayed in the media, the terrorists appeared as irrational and hell-bent on destruction as Stuckey's televised mummies in MUMMIES AND PEOPLE.

MUMMIES AND PEOPLE and the rest of "Double Feature" were originally scheduled to appear at Post at a later date. By that time, perhaps, Stuckey's work would have lost some of its impact. I still would have been impressed by the exhibition's wit, perceptiveness, and skill. But thanks to the juggled schedule, Stuckey's work indeed resonated with my anxious state of mind, and I saw a "Double Feature" I will not soon forget.

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Jay-Gould Stuckey, "Double Feature," GIANT MUMMY ATTACK, charcoal and oil on paper



Jay-Gould Stuckey, "Double Feature," MUMMIES MOVING FORWARD, charcoal and oil on paper