

From the Director

I was on the elliptical torture machine at the gym, reading the *New Yorker*, when I came across a profile of Guillermo del Toro that describes him as “less like a disciple of Hitchcock than of Hieronymus Bosch.” My heart beats for Bosch, and suddenly it was pounding. Then I read the description of Bleak House, where del Toro works and where his massive collection resides: art, movie props, figures, kitsch, books—all carefully curated. My heart was racing, and not just from the workout.

I knew I liked del Toro’s movies, but I didn’t know anything about him—how knowledgeable he is about the art, history, film, and literature of diverse cultures across time, and how marvelously he illuminates the connections between them. It was clear that human creativity fuels his creativity. I was convinced that we needed to organize a Guillermo del Toro exhibition at Mia.

The goal of our exhibition is to answer the question, “Where does creativity come from?” It took us six years to pull this off, but it was worth it. We are grateful to del Toro for sharing his inspiration, for lending a bit of Bleak House to Minnesota.

—Kaywin Feldman, Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Director and President of Mia

Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters

Guillermo del Toro (b. 1964) is one of the most inventive filmmakers of his generation. His feature films include *Cronos* (1993), *Hellboy* (2004), *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), and *Crimson Peak* (2015). Through those and many other film, television, and book projects, del Toro has reinvented the genres of horror, fantasy, and science fiction.

Del Toro was born and raised in Guadalajara, Mexico, and began making short films at 8 years old. He read widely and has always collected voraciously,

arranging his prized possessions in environments that nourish and motivate him. Today, del Toro's creative home base is a residence in suburban Los Angeles that he calls Bleak House. The house contains several thematic "libraries" of his collections: books, paintings, drawings, maquettes, artifacts, and more. Bleak House embodies, as del Toro puts it, "the world as I understand it; as it exists in my soul."

Taking inspiration from del Toro's extraordinary imagination and expansive collections, this exhibition reveals his worldview through objects, notebooks, artifacts, and moving-image sequences. Rather than chronicling del Toro's career, the exhibition is organized thematically, beginning with representations of innocence and childhood; continuing through explorations of magic, occultism, horror, and monsters; and concluding with visions of death and the afterlife.

Childhood and Innocence

Many of del Toro's films center on children, whether they are central characters, witnesses, or victims. These children often perceive alternate realities and give expression to unfiltered emotions in ways that adults cannot. Del Toro does not insulate these young characters from fear, abandonment, harm, or even death, an unsentimental approach he relates to fairy tales. "In fairy tales, ogres and wolves ate children," he has said, "and I think that it goes to the roots of storytelling, to have children as vulnerable."

At some level, all of del Toro's films revisit his childhood, which he describes as being marred by repressive Catholicism and bullying classmates. It was redeemed, however, by books, movies, and horror comics. He began drawing at a young age, and to this day he keeps a notebook nearby to record ideas, phrases, lists, and images. These journals are not just resources for his films, but have become essential to his evolution as an artist.

Victoriana

Del Toro has drawn visual and narrative inspiration from the Victorian period (1837–1901), as well as the earlier Romantic era and later Edwardian age. He is also attentive to modern interpretations of Victoriana, from Disneyland’s Haunted Mansion to steampunk, the science-fiction subgenre that invokes aesthetics of the 1800s.

The name of del Toro’s residence, Bleak House, was inspired by Victorian writer Charles Dickens (1812–1870). In his 1853 novel *Bleak House*, Dickens describes the central dwelling as “one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages.”

The Victorians embraced science, seeking to exert dominion over nature through meticulous categorization. Del Toro’s extensive collection of insect paraphernalia—including specimens, images, and trinkets—reveals his fascination with such creatures, although the insects in his films tend to exceed human control in spectacular ways.

Del Toro’s Rain Room

Del Toro wanted one particular space in Bleak House, the area where he most frequently works, to feel like a world apart. Drawing on his early experience as a special-effects designer, he created a permanent thunderstorm in sunny Southern California: his rain room. “As a kid,” the filmmaker recalls, “I dreamed of having a house with secret passages and a room where it rained 24 hours a day.” In addition to emulating del Toro’s workspace, this part of the exhibition highlights his intellectual kinship with authors and artists such as Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), the American poet, author, and editor, and Julio Ruelas (1870–1907), a Mexican graphic artist, painter, and printmaker.

Use of Space (subpanel maybe)

Space and architecture are crucial components of del Toro's cinematic storytelling. He often establishes meaningful contrasts between realms, from underground tunnels, tree roots, and ocean depths to attics, rooftops, and outer space. Bleak House reflects this attention to atmosphere: del Toro hangs every painting, places every piece of furniture and prop, and reviews all colors and patterns.

Magic, Alchemy, The Occult

Del Toro has accumulated a vast library on the topics of magic, witchcraft, and the occult, beginning with a series he pored over as a child, *Man, Myth & Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*, a 24-volume set published in 1970. In this literature he sees evidence of humankind's spiritual and intellectual aspirations, as well as the stakes involved in fulfilling those desires.

Del Toro's films are full of puzzles, secret keys, and quests for forbidden knowledge. Many of his characters are scientists, contemporary successors to the monks and alchemists who explored the boundaries between the holy and unholy. Del Toro cites the influence of H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937), the idiosyncratic American writer whose work is considered foundational to the genres of horror and science fiction. For the last decade, del Toro has been attempting to adapt Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) for the screen. Multiple portraits of Lovecraft adorn Bleak House.

Movies, Comics, Pop Culture

Del Toro's obsession with cinema extends from B movies and horror films to directors like Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980), the British master of suspense, and Luis Buñuel (1900–1983), a Spanish director known for avant-garde and surrealist work. As a boy, he watched Universal monster movies on Mexican television and devoured fan magazines, teaching himself English in order to

decipher the puns and slang in American periodicals such as *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Inspired by the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, del Toro constructed an elaborate tableau of toy figurines and then used his father's Super 8 camera to film his own version. "When I projected that first Super 8 reel," he recalls, "something happened that was absolutely life changing." During his teenage years, as the projectionist for his local cinema club, del Toro saw several movies each week and discussed them avidly with other film fanatics.

Del Toro's appetite for film is matched by his enthusiasm for comic books and his admiration for a wide range of illustrators. He has directed several comic-book adaptations, including two films based on Mike Mignola's series *Hellboy* (1993–ongoing).

Frankenstein and Horror

Del Toro has long been fascinated by Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. He was first introduced to the story as a child, via James Whale's 1931 film starring Boris Karloff as the confused and abused monster. As a teenager, del Toro read Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The novel emphasizes the fragility and vulnerability of Frankenstein's monster; as the creature explains to his creator, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous." The story became a touchstone for the young del Toro, who identified with the monster's outsider status.

The potency of the horror genre, according to del Toro, lies in its capacity to generate "images that stay embedded in our minds so strongly." The monster in Whale's film is one such indelible image. Del Toro finds in Frankenstein an analogy to his own directorial approach. Like the monster, his films are amalgams of used, discarded, and diverse source materials, given new life and purpose. "I really think I was born to exist in the [horror] genre," he has said. "I adore it. I embrace it. I enshrine it...For me, it's not a stepping stone; it's a cathedral."

Freaks and Monsters

Del Toro is fascinated with monsters of all types. “It’s either tragedy or superiority that makes a good monster,” he notes. The tragic beings are, for him, beautiful and heroic in their vulnerability and individuality; they also mirror the hypocrisies of society. According to del Toro, the standards of perfection advocated by commercial culture are corrosive, demonizing the flaws that exist in us all. He feels complete empathy with the sideshow performers who star in Tod Browning’s still-controversial 1932 movie *Freaks*, in which so-called normal people are capable of monstrous behavior toward those who are different.

While identifying with the tragic type of monster, del Toro is also adept at creating truly terrifying ones. He begins by thinking of a monster as a character, not simply an assemblage of parts. It must be visually convincing from all angles, both in motion and at rest. He finds inspiration for his monsters in natural history, literature, myth, and art, as well as in his own dreams, nightmares, and fears. In addition to drawing initial concepts, del Toro is closely involved in fabrication and has often expressed his preference for practical physical effects as opposed to computer-generated imagery.

Death and the Afterlife

Del Toro grew up in Guadalajara, Mexico, in the 1960s and 1970s. As a child, he had a number of disturbing confrontations with death, seeing corpses in the street, in a morgue, and in catacombs beneath a church. His strict Catholic grandmother even submitted him to exorcisms in a futile attempt to eradicate his love of monsters and fantasy. He is now an outspoken critic of institutional Catholicism, instead using fantasy in his work to explore spirituality.

In the fantasy realms he conjures, del Toro can tell stories that offer different perspectives on death and the afterlife. In Catholic doctrine, for instance, eternal life is the promised reward for following the church’s teachings. In del Toro’s films, the pursuit of immortality is alternatively depicted as a misguided,

Guillermo Del Toro: At Home with Monsters exhibition section text

arrogant desire, destined to bring about the downfall of those caught up in it. Del Toro's narratives often include characters acting entirely out of self-interest alongside others who are willing to make sacrifices.

Often in del Toro's films, flawed or damaged characters find purpose in community: they take responsibility for their own survival and that of the individuals and environments around them. If del Toro's true subject is loss (of innocence, authority, or ego), he finds hope and redemption in art and storytelling.

Extras:

I am influenced by literature as much as I am by comics, and by fine art as much as I am by so-called lowbrow. But I am not trapped by either extreme. I transit between these parameters in absolute freedom, doing my own thing. I try to present myself as I am, without apologies and with absolute passion and sincerity.

—Guillermo del Toro