I am an American transsexual who comes from Oklahoma, a state that currently outlaws the gender-affirming care I need to survive.

An insistent minority in this country is invested in spreading the idea that, because trans people threaten colonial and heteropatriarchal expectations of gender, trans bodies are monstrous bodies. Yet, as expressed by historian and theorist Susan Stryker in *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*:

> "I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity. … I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster."

GAST, much like the trans person I am, is a shapeshifter. This word bears the weight of many definitions.

"Gast" is an unexpected guest, a stranger. It is a barren region, a blighted environment—in effect, a wasteland. It is also a demon, a divine messenger, a warning. Finally, in modern English, it is a verb. To frighten. To terrify.

GAST explores the way fear manifests in environments as a result of violence, memories, and both collective and individual traumas. The exhibition reveals how fear can be embraced as a strategy for self-determination and survival.

The word "gast" is demonstrative. It provides evidence—uncomfortably so. Using both the Old English and contemporary definitions of "gast" as a guiding framework, this group show presents artists whose work, both beautiful and fear-inducing, considers relationships between memories, invisible histories, personal and collective hauntings, and physical landscapes.

The artists included are photographers Ashley Michelle Hannah and Colton Rothwell, multimedia artist Hannah Rose Stewart, and graffiti artist vvxxii. Though the art in this exhibition takes on many forms, from analog photography to otherworldly paintings, each is a vessel through which land, memory, and history can speak. The work of these artists calls viewers to look closely, to put themselves in front of the fear, and to sit with it.

Ashley Michelle Hannah (b. 1997)

Backyard Battlefields
2021
Archival pigment prints
Courtesy of the artist

Though they depict nature, Ashley Michelle Hannah's photographs function less as landscapes and more like portraits. *Backyard Battlefields* situates forests as persistent witnesses to history—here, the violence of Civil War battles—where debris of the past resides in the environment itself. The images disclose no moments of pain, or even destruction, only isolation among solitary forms: splintered wood panels, felled trees, gripping roots, twisting branches, and crumpled leaves. While rooted in the artist's personal experiences of grief, violence, and loss, these images grapple with a more universal exploration of trauma as an omnipresent emotion found and stored in the environment.

Colton Rothwell (b. 1999)

Treading Cheatgrass
2021–23
Archival pigment prints
Courtesy of the artist

In *Treading Cheatgrass*, Colton Rothwell adopts the language of 20th-century US landscape photography, famous for crafting myths about the American West, as well as documenting the people and infrastructure that reflect its politics. The work of artists like Ansel Adams (1902-1984), Todd Webb (1905-2000), and Robert Frank (1914-2019) encompass both a romantic idealism of the landscape and a critical view of the material conditions that characterized it.

American West mythology often evokes beautiful scenery meant to convey the privileged space of utter freedom. However, lived experiences tell different stories. Rothwell fled his Idaho home for the more progressive city of Missoula, Montana, where the threat of anti-gay violence no longer permeated his everyday existence. This sense of containment, entrapment, and escape saturates *Treading Cheatgrass*, through both what is visually represented and the camera holder's gaze. The series documents in intimate detail the melancholic experience of loving a place, but being unwelcome there.

Hannah Rose Stewart (b. 1994)
The Diadal
2022
Animated video
5 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

The Diadal is Hannah Rose Stewart's eerie exploration of the effects of institutional architecture in instilling experiences of fear. A faceless teacher's hoarse voice coughs out instructions, shadows stretch over classroom desks, and a viewer is dragged through an infinite forest of looming trees.

The artist appropriates tropes from horror films and video games such as *Silent Hill* (1999), a game whose setting is the haunted northeastern town of Silent Hill, where fog and darkness obscure not only the landscape but the monsters waiting for the player. By adopting the visual language of horror media, Stewart amplifies the hauntological qualities of school systems, calling attention to the insidious role institutions and social forces play in fostering physical environments of fear.

vvxxii (b. 1982)

Untitled
2024
Clay, galvanized metal, interior paint, polyurethane foam, spray paint, tree branches
Courtesy of the artist

Artist vvxxii's sprawling graffiti compositions often feature black forms painted on the walls of abandoned industrial buildings. Sometimes organic, sometimes alien, sometimes seemingly ritualistic, they all retain an element of un-human-ness: an element of monstrosity. In fact, vv describes his practice as a "demonic possession," connecting the realms of humans and gods. For vv, the god is nature.

The Hessel Museum is an unusual site for the artist to work in: it is neither an abandoned building nor a site about to be overtaken by nature. However, vv's mural and accompanying sculpture constitute an environment in and of itself. The work manifests "gast" in the gallery, infecting the museum. Perhaps, in this environment, the installation is the encroaching natural force that constitutes a state of ruin.

A Trans Theory of Fear

by Lucas Ondak

"The Lord rebukes you, Satan, and all of your demons and all of your imps who come parade before us. That's right, I called you demons and imps who come and parade before us and pretend that you are part of this world."

This quote, spoken in 2023 by a Florida Republican representative and directed at a group of trans activists and their allies, demonstrates the current political, cultural, and rhetorical campaigns against trans people. Some people look at anyone who is trans and feel genuine fear. This reaction results in trans people fearing for their well-being, and sometimes even their lives. Our lives are made harder because of someone else's fear.

The story of the monster is fundamentally the story of the land it comes from. The land bears the pressures of social and political histories. Histories that—in their violence, their bloodshed, their horror—make monsters. In "A Glossary of Haunting," Indigenous studies scholar Eve Tuck and artist C. Ree offer a succinct definition of "monster." "What is a monster?" they ask, then continue:

> (A monster is one who has been wronged and seeks justice.) Why do monsters interrupt? (Monsters interrupt when the injustice is nearly forgotten. Monsters show up when they are denied; yet there is no understanding the monster).[1]

In a landscape, monsters do not appear to make something right; instead, they haunt and reveal the crimes of history. Monsters are forces that spring immediately from forgotten injustice. They are evidence of a past wrongdoing, they are a present denial. They are the Other. They are the Self.

This postulation—that monsters are both Other and Self, both documentation and dismissal of historical injustices—became the impetus for *GAST.* The exhibition is inspired by landscapes, by history, and by the monsters that haunt both. A gast is that site of haunting that sociologist Avery Gordon describes in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known. … Those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar when your bearings on the world lose direction when the over-and-done-with comes alive when what's been in your blind spot comes into view."[2] A gast is a monster. A gast

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[1] Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 651.

[2] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.

is a landscape of fear. That is, a land shaped by fear, a land saturated with it.

In scientific language, "landscape of fear" indicates that where, when, and how prey move through an environment is affected by their perception of predation risk, which is influenced by, but distinct from, both the physical landscape and the actual risk of being killed by predators.[3] Or, as science writer Ed Yong describes it, a landscape of fear is "a psychological topography that exists in the minds of prey, complete with mountains of danger and valleys of safety."[4] Fear is not something you think—it is something you feel in the stomach when it clenches in anticipation, in the chest when it tightens with anxiety, and in the throat when overloaded nerves result in laughter and screams. In a landscape of fear, terror becomes a tool of navigation, a tactic of survival; it changes the land and the beings that occupy it. This phenomenon isn't restricted to wildlife. That is, it is felt not just by the deer when it eats more quickly in the open meadow, but also by humans, whose behavior is impacted and transformed by fear. Humans like the artists in this exhibition who, at various points, react to fear, channel fear, and confront fear in different ways.

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[3] L. Y. Zanette and M. Clinchy, "Ecology and Neurobiology of Fear in Free-Living Wildlife," *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics* 51 (2020): 310.
[4] Erica Berry, *Wolfish: Wolf, Self, and the Stories We Tell about Fear* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2023), 232.

Erica Berry, for her book *Wolfish: Wolf, Self, and the Stories We Tell about Fear,* discussed fear's power to impact behavior with biologist Liana Zanette, who invoked the term "landscape of fear" in a 2019 study on ecology and neurobiology. "A body can be changed by its stress response to a perceived threat," Zanette told Berry. "Everything changes after trauma, even plants."[5] In *Wolfish*, Berry goes on to observe: "We need to form fear memories instantly to survive the next day; they are extremely difficult to get rid of because they have to be instant and you can't afford to lose them."[6] Berry and Zanette are far from the first to speculate on this topic. Back in the mid-19th century, Charles Darwin observed the way bodies transform when fear courses through them: how skin pales, pupils swell, hair raises, vision narrows.[7] "Terror begins with the slow burn of transformation," as Berry puts it.[8] This is why the monster is projected onto trans people: they embody the slow burn of transformation both in their physical being and because they symbolically represent the destruction of the gender binary. They threaten the status quo. They are ambiguous, abject, fearsome.

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[5] Berry, *Wolfish*, 45.
[6] Berry, *Wolfish*, 46.
[7] Charles Darwin, "General Principles of Expression—Concluded," in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: D. Appleton, 1897).
[8] Berry, *Wolfish*, 285.

In feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's view, fear comes from the outside in, restricting mobility and constraining those who become its subject. She writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*:

> It is no accident that in political rhetoric, freedom and fear are increasingly opposed: the new freedom is posited as the freedom from fear, and as the freedom to move. But which bodies are granted such freedom to move? And which bodies become read as the origin of fear and as threatening to "our" freedom?[9]

But if fear is a constraining force, it can only contain people for so long. Often, trans people are afraid even as they undergo processes of bodily affirmation such as hormone replacement therapy, gender-affirming surgeries, and pronoun changes. The fear others project onto trans people might inhibit our abilities to receive care, to live as safely as we would like, to be known and loved by our communities: but it does not stop us. Fear involves abjection—a rejection of what is considered "other" within ourselves—and it dissolves the boundaries between what I can and cannot protect my selfhood from. Fear threatens the *I*, and thus fear threatens *me*. The monster is a manifestation of this ambiguity; it is a direct

[9] Sara Ahmed, "The Affective Politics of Fear," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 70.

expression of changing and shifting identities. The monster haunts the blurred lines between false histories and threatening nows. Even today, in this time of increased anti-trans legislation in the US, when people face prosecution for the simple act of trying to live, there is no way to destroy us. Fear instead permeates our existence, becoming not a circumstance but an affect—a feeling one must live with, that one must walk alongside.

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Title design by vvxxii

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GAST was installed at the Hessel Museum of Art on the sacred homelands of the Munsee and Muhheaconneok people, who are the original stewards of the land. Today, due to forced removal, the community resides in Northeast Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community.