

Words Paul Brown

WHEN Bryan first saw the painting he began to cry. The college student found the artwork listed for sale on eBay. As he studied the photographs on the auction website, he claims, his computer screen turned white and he felt a blast of heat coming from the monitor, "like when you open a hot oven door". He called for his flatmate, who was watching TV in the next room. Now Bryan was speaking in tongues, tears were streaming down his face, his hair was standing on end, and his face was beetroot red. The flatmate held him and recited prayers. "I'm telling you the absolute truth now," Bryan says, "I have never been so scared in all my life."

Hands Resist Him – a 36" x 24" oil on canvas painting – is one piece of art you probably wouldn't want to hang on your wall. Linked with hundreds of strange occurrences, ranging from poltergeist activity to unexplained deaths, it has been dubbed the 'Haunted Painting'.

Christine, a web designer, began to have difficulty breathing when she viewed the picture. "It felt like my throat was tightening," she says.

Jeff, a horror movie buff, felt nauseous and was overcome with anxiety. "I'm not easily spooked," he says, "but the painting just terrified me."

The Haunted Painting, so the story goes, was found abandoned behind an old brewery by an art picker. It was sold to a Californian woman named Lucy. At the time, she wondered why such an impressive piece of art had been discarded. Within weeks of her purchase, she wondered no more. She took the painting down, locked it in an LA vault, and listed it for sale on eBay, after experiencing a bizarre supernatural event.

One morning, Lucy's four-year-old daughter claimed that the boy and the doll had come alive during the night, and had begun fighting in the room. "I don't believe in UFOs or in Elvis being alive," Lucy explained, "but my husband was alarmed. To my amusement, he set up a motion-triggered camera. After three nights there were pictures."

The photographs, Lucy claimed, showed the boy leaving the painting, apparently under duress from the doll. "We decided the painting had to go," she said.

Word of the bizarre auction spread quickly across the world wide web, as internet chatrooms, message boards, and weblogs filled with links to the eBay listing. As the painting's notoriety grew, Lucy began to be inundated with emails. She received 40 messages offering advice on exorcism and the blessing of her

When this painting appeared for sale on the internet, some who saw it wept in terror. Then it was linked to poltergeists and two mysterious deaths. Now its seller has

house, and many more reporting "strange or irregular events" in connection with viewing the image, including computers crashing, printers going berserk, uncontrollable crying, temporary illness, strange behaviour from children and animals, an "Exorcist-type voice", and a "blackout/mind control experience".

Over the ten-day listing period, the painting's eBay page received more than 16,000 visitors, but attracted just 30 confirmed bids. Many were interested in the Haunted Painting, but few were interested in owning it.

IN Grand Rapids, Michigan, gallery owner Kim Smith was unaware of the hysteria surrounding the painting. A two-and-a-half hour drive from Chicago, Grand Rapids sits among the Great Lakes of the American Midwest. Gillian Anderson, Agent Scully from TV's *The X-Files*, went to high school in the city, but, up until now, that had been just about the most mysterious thing that had ever happened there.

Smith was scouring eBay for new exhibits for his Perception Fine Art Gallery, located in a renovated 19th Century brick building in the city's Downtown area, when he happened upon the Haunted Painting.

"I initially thought it was a Forties American work, and hence pretty valuable," he says. "I can't deny that the sales pitch increased my enthusiasm. So, I took a calculated risk, and bid \$1500 (£900). Fortunately, it came in at considerably under that."

Smith's first impressions upon receipt of his \$1025 (£600) purchase were mixed. "The surface crazing and composition hinted that it might be from the Sixties. I was disappointed that it wasn't older, but still liked the image and talent exhibited," he says. "My wife, Patti, looked at it the way she does most things I buy: 'What did you pay for that again?'"

That should have been the end of the story. But visitors continued to flock to the now-closed eBay auction, finding Smith listed as the auction winner. And then the emails began to arrive in his inbox, with questions, advice, and tales of strange experiences related to the painting.

Kate, a nurse from New York, claimed to be a sceptic, but the picture brought about such a state of anxiety that she nearly fainted. "I am aware of the power of suggestion," she said, "and I assure you that I read nothing about the picture before I saw it."

Little Eagle Heart, from Alabama, sent Smith an email saying, "I am a Native American, and we know evil when we see it. When I first ►

disappeared.



Hands Resist Him
by Bill Stoneham
has caused a raft
of stories and
rumours to sweep
the internet



Discoloured and darkened as a result of using flash photography, these pictures taken by the seller of the painting add yet another sinister dimension to Hands Resist Him. She believed the images show the boy "leaving the painting under duress from the doll". Certainly the doll takes on a skull-like appearance and seems to be holding a gun...

▶ viewed the painting, my heart speeded up, I got horribly sick to my stomach. I felt so ill I had to burn white sage to cleanse my house. Please do not put it anywhere there is a child. There is great evil there."

Other correspondents advised Smith to have the painting blessed by a Catholic priest, or even destroyed. He was also offered the services of Ed and Lorraine Warren, regarded as the world's top demonologists. The Warrens' most famous case was the Long Island exorcism that inspired the 1979 movie *The Amityville Horror*.

Smith also received emails purporting to offer insight into the painting's history. One referred to a horrific Forties child murder at a home known as the Sattilo House in Woodlands Hills, California. The ghosts of two children are said to haunt the building. "I have visited this house a few times," said a correspondent named Ailda. "We saw a boy. He was wearing a light T-shirt and shorts. His sister was in the shadows. He seemed to be protecting her. We named them Tom and Laura. When I saw the painting I saw their faces. It's Tom and Laura."

Another email sender, Amber, claimed to know the painting. "My grandmother had the very same painting when I was young," she said. "When she died back in 1978 the painting disappeared. No-one remembers who took it or who it was sold to. The painting haunted me as a child, but my grandmother would never get rid of it. It sends chills up my spine. I still can't think about it for more than a few minutes."

UNBEKNOWN to his correspondents, Smith was already researching the painting's history, a task made easier by the fact that it was titled and signed. Smith sent an email to an artist called WP Stoneham, saying, "Do you know Hands Resist Him?"

"I replied that it was the title of a painting I had completed in 1972," Bill Stoneham explains. "He sent me the eBay page link, and I must admit seeing the close-up of my own face scrolling up the monitor was creepy."

Hands Resist Him is a self-portrait, depicting the artist, aged five, at a Chicago apartment. "The painting was one in a series of family album images, derived from old photographs from my childhood," explains Stoneham, a former *Penthouse* magazine illustrator and now a computer graphic artist. "The title was inspired by a poem my wife wrote about me."

Stoneham read the eBay item description with wonderment, and began to explore the various message boards and chat rooms devoted to his work. "I quickly learned of the

can't recall the actor's name. "As to where it was found, I don't know if the eBay story is true."

ALTHOUGH the original eBay auction has long been removed, copies of the listing remain on the web and continue to evoke strange reactions. "I have been simply overwhelmed by the enquiries I still continue to receive," says Smith. "The reactions seem to range from, 'That's weird!' to 'It made my stomach ache!' to 'Do you know a priest that can cast out the demons in this work?' Most agree the painting has a creepy quality."

So Smith's life has been changed by his purchase of Hands Resist Him, although not in a supernatural way. "I have not personally experienced anything unusual, but a couple of friends have appeared visibly affected," he says.

If Lucy's life has changed for the better since selling the painting to Smith, she isn't saying. In fact, she isn't saying anything. Despite maintaining contact for several months after the sale, Smith has been unable to contact Lucy for some time. "The seller has disappeared completely," he says, "and that has been the case for the last two years."

Today, Hands Resist Him remains in Michigan. "I still own the painting," says Smith, "though I have been tempted with a couple of very serious offers. I look at it often and still like it very much, and may never sell it. Which would mean one of my two sons would inherit it in the future, and neither seem too keen on it presently."

Smith's sons refuse to have the painting in the family home. Instead, it resides in the back room of Smith's gallery. "It is brought out for special occasions, and whenever someone is interested in the story," says Smith. "I have had prints made of it, in the same size as the original, but I am not even listing these on eBay, because I don't want to cheapen Bill's work. Neither he nor I are interested in this image ending up on a McDonald's cup." ♦

To order a print of Hands Resist Him, email Kim Smith at hauntedpainting@aol.com

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growing internet chatter about the painting and the weird reactions it caused in viewers," he says. "If I were to find any insight into this, it's the revelation that people seem to need an external image to define their inner selves, even when these may be disturbing."

The painting was first shown in 1974 at a Los Angeles gallery. On his website, stonehamstudios.com, Stoneham claims that both the gallery owner and the LA Times art critic who first reviewed the show died in mysterious circumstances within the year. When asked about the deaths and other strange happenings claimed to have transpired at the time, Stoneham replies, "Most of the occurrences were coincidental and not necessarily associated with the painting."

The artist is unsure how the painting ended up abandoned behind a brewery. "I seem to recall the painting being purchased by a character actor of some fame," he says. He