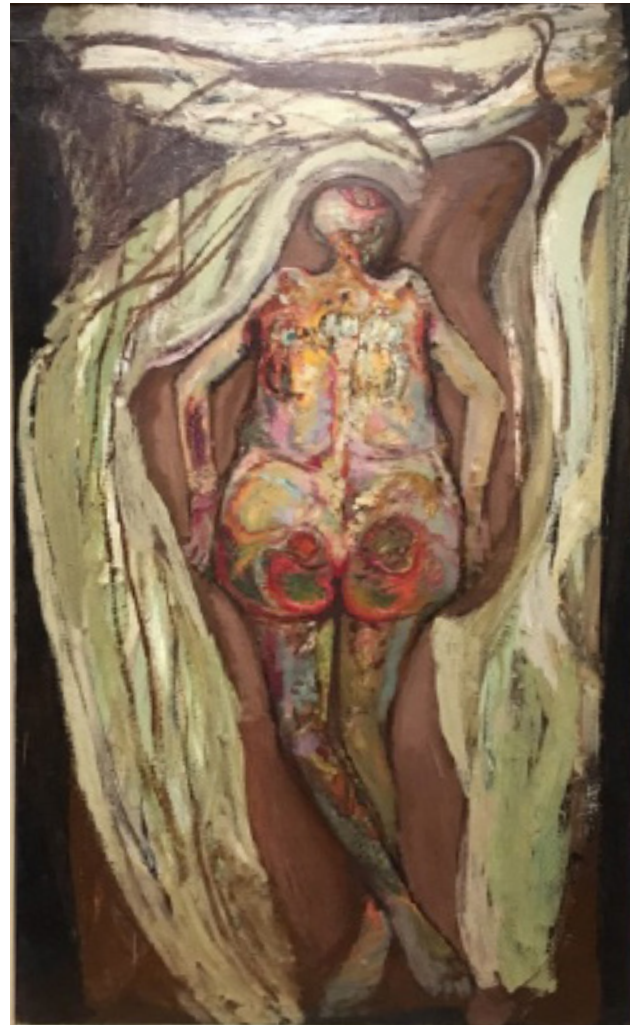

A BEAUTIFULLY GROTESQUE VIEW OF DEATH

LAUREN MCKENNA

Hyman Bloom was a Boston-based painter during the middle of the twentieth century. A 1943 trip to Kenmore Hospital began his artistic fascination with skeletons and corpses. Bloom's 1947 painting, *Female Corpse, Back View*, is oil paint on canvas and depicts one of the dead bodies that Bloom observed in the Kenmore Hospital morgue—an unnamed female body positioned with her back towards the artist, observed as if from above with gaping rainbow wounds throughout her viewable frame due to decomposition (*Female Corpse*). Bloom presents the dead body in a nontraditional fashion, blending the decrepit and horrific equally with beauty and luminescence through the use of unconventional body posing, background imagery, and color choice.

Traditional views of death in society are often clean, clinical, and impersonal as the thought of confronting our ultimate passing challenges human nature; however, Bloom steps into this uncomfortable space, stripping away part of the decrepit nature of morbidity to reveal a combination of contrasting beauty and horror. The first impression of the picture begins with the title, a cool and detached description of the scene, a female corpse, viewed from behind, and this portrayal is immediately contrasted with the more personal image presented in the work, with its bright colors, draped background and humanistic depiction of a body. This juxtaposition of emotional elegance and clinical stoicism is especially apparent in the posture of the cadaver. In modern society, bodies are strategically posed, face-up, with individuals often in their finest clothing, faces shrouded in makeup to hide the pallor that accompanies death. But Bloom rips away



this safety net used by people to protect themselves from their imminent fate by painting the body bare and vulnerable, turned away from the audience, her gaping wounds of decay checkered across her skin. The shocking image leaves audiences uncomfortable with this unconventional portrayal of a corpse; however, Bloom infuses this horrific image with the contrast of the delicate positioning of the body: the woman's legs carefully crossed towards the bottom of the painting as if she was standing, rather than laying down, with her arms resting by her sides casually, unlike the stiff way the dead are often posed in their caskets.

Furthermore, a backdrop of draped white linen surrounds the decomposing corpse, and this deliberate choice by the artist both softens the harsh reality of the women's death and contrastingly makes it more clinical. Bloom uses the background to enmesh both the traditionally dispassionate and surprisingly sensitive aspects of death by choosing a backdrop that resembles a fabric, a blanket of warmth and comfort in the wake of the woman's surprising decomposition, while the white color touches upon the stark side of the hospital reality in a clean and clinical color, which offers little warmth. The fabric also encircles the woman's head, as if it were a halo, creating an angelic, calming image of the grotesque body. Lastly, the body is painted non-traditionally, her gaping wounds of decomposition creating craters of rotting flesh and mountains of protruding bone not hidden by clothing or shading, but on display in a harrowing state of death. In sharp contrast to the decomposition is the rainbow array of colors used to paint the scene. The spectrum of reds, greens, yellows, purples and blues used to fill in the crevices stand in contrast not only with the grim outlook of the decomposition, but also with the traditionally darker blacks and greys associated with the depressing occurrence of death. The colors add a beauty to the body, livening the image and welding together the horrifying with the illuminating. The painting

effectively combines shocking images of death with gentle, pearly colors and imagery to provide a unique vision of the dead body.

Bloom explores his fascination with the body throughout varying aspects of his painted portrait, countering the grotesque with the delicate in order to portray death in a nontraditional fashion. The conflict is surprising and shocking to audiences as society firmly grasps at life, struggling to confront not only the death of oneself, but the passing of those who are most important to them. The artist attempts to encourage viewers to face the eminence of death, shocking them with his blunt and unashamed portrayal of a body alone, while showing the beauty through color choices and body positioning. Facing death can be a harrowing and emotional journey. But the self-realization and actualization can be a liberating experience, and through the painting *Female Corpse, Back View*, the audience members can experience the juxtaposition of grace and shock, confronting their initial ideas and feelings about death.

Citation and Photograph of Painting
"Female Corpse, Back View." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, College Art Association, Feb. 2015, www.mfa.org/collections/object/female-corpse-back-view-35040.