

How Clive Barker Develops *The Abarat* Through Art

Clive Barker is a prolific horror writer and film maker who went on to dabble in stories for a younger audience with his *Abarat* book series. Barker created an expansive collection of artworks depicting the locations and characters present within this seemingly never-ending universe that has so far covered three books, with a potential two more to come out.

Enough portraits to pave the walls of a street of houses are present on *The Abarat* website and within some prints of the books, allowing readers to aid their imaginations with help from these out-of-the-ordinary visuals. Barker does not sacrifice his style despite his audience, creating this overall striking aesthetic throughout the story he is telling as each book becomes darker and the paintings more grotesque.

This essay will briefly discuss how Barker entwines these artworks into the development of his world, and how they breathe a new life into the story of *The Abarat* that would be missing without them.



Fig 1. The Islands of The Abarat

The conception of the paintings of the Abarat came as an odd striking of inspiration. Barker stated that “I just started painting these pictures [...] what those first paintings were, they came without invitation [...] they just started to appear on the canvas” (Graydon, 2012, 01:24) in a documentary—*Clive Barker: Abarat – The Artist’s Passion*—that detailed his experiences creating the Abarat, and showing off numerous artworks that lined the walls of his home studio with their grandiose scale and bizarre colours.



Fig 2. Clive Barker Painting in his Studio

Within *The Artist’s Passion*, Barker delights in telling the film maker details of the characters while showing their paintings, explaining how their characterisations came to him as he painted. How villains softened, and how environments became real with each layer of paint that was added and scraped away, be it on whim or by decision, by mistake or on purpose.

He describes it as an organic process that allowed him to see more of his characters as they were transferred to canvas, stating “When I started to study him, it also seemed to me that there was this weird sadness in him, which I hadn’t really seen until I

started to paint the picture.” (Graydon, 2012, 12:41) about *Christopher Carrion*, the major antagonist of *The Abarat*.

While Barker’s ideas for this world may have been spontaneous in nature, the style of the hand that painted them was not. He credits part of his stylistic development to Francisco Goya, “A painter endowed with a great expressive capacity.” (Felisati, Sperati, 2010, p.264) who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries, creating a wide variety of work that depicted subjects from the “horrors of monsters” and “the sweetness of children” (Felisati, Sperati, 2010, p.267). Barker’s style is especially reminiscent of Goya’s *Black Paintings*; images created later in his life as the illnesses he suffered from worsened within his isolation. Painted directly onto the walls of his home, left unnamed and undiscovered until his house was examined after his death, the Black Paintings are often a strong source of inspiration for many artists who want to approach and portray a grimmer picture with their works (Felisati, Sperati, 2010).



Fig 3. *Two Old Ones Eating Soup* by Goya

“He would paint with his fingers; he would paint with a pallet knife. He would paint with brushes, sometimes. [...] He kind of taught me really is whatever makes the mark is what is important.” (Graydon, 2012, 05:10) Barker explained, which once again leads to the

more organic nature of his work, how each tool is something that would make its own mark, and how those marks mattered within the creation and how brushes were not the only option to use when approaching oils.

The style that Barker displays and develops through these works are reminiscent of expressionism, a movement that had its origins in both literature and art which lends itself exceedingly well to getting ideas and concepts down in a lively manner full of expression, hence the name (Dhanalakshmi, *et al*, 2023).

Barker clearly values this feeling of expression and life, and ensured to incorporate it into his workflow, mentioning that: "I'm scratching away this red, and just it's bringing through this lovely blue [...] and it just gives this whole thing a kind of energy it wouldn't otherwise have." (Graydon, 2012, 05:54) while working on one of his larger pieces in his home studio.

But how does Barker apply his artistry to his literature? Due to the expansive nature of *The Abarat*, each character, no matter how minor, is usually painted at least once. The written descriptions of these characters and the portraits work wonderfully when separated, but beautifully in tandem to help flesh out the characters in the eyes of the viewer, to allow them to notice the little details that may have been otherwise completely missed.

Two characters that share a portrait almost reminiscent of Goya's work are *Baby Pink-Eye* and *Lazaru*. A goonish duo, who are described as follows: "[...] a three-eyed thing by the name of Lazaru and its sidekick, Baby Pink-Eye" and "Baby Pink-Eye, who had large reptilian claws and the face of demented infant" (Barker, 2004, p.1). While these initial descriptions are sparse, they are brought to life through illustration.



Fig 4. Goonish Duo, Lazaru and Baby Pink-Eye

This portrait creates a much more ghoulish appearance for the two, while also almost oppressing them in darkness to show how their place in the story is within the island of darkness, in service of a dark lord (Barker, 2004, p.1-2). They stand close together, almost huddled in this pitch coldness. This characterisation breathes more into these two briefly appearing side characters, showing them in a way that they would not have been portrayed otherwise. Yet, this depiction is almost in contrast to the portrait of their dark lord.



Fig 5. Portrait of Dark Lord Christopher Carrion

“He has the most piercing eyes of any man Mendelson had met. They glistened in his bald, pale head. As always, he wore a collar of translucent material that resembled glass, which had been devised to cover the lower half of his head. It was filled with blue fluid, which was now suddenly lit up by the presence of several snaking forms. They flickered in their fluid — some white as summer lightning, some yellow as sliced fat—weaving bright patterns around the Lord of Midnight’s head.”

(Barker, 2002, p.142-143)

Similarly, Carrion’s description holds his image briefly, however it creates more of what he is through the creatures that surrounded him, and a few select details of his appearance. The addition of the painting shines a new light onto him, fleshing out this idea and almost giving him a physical presence. Carrion is put onto a blue background and painted with a distinct regalness; the collar in which his nightmares swirl holding a warm contrast while the rest of him melts into the pale and frigid tones around him.

On the other hand, the portrait of Carrion's grandmother, Mater Motley, paints her in an even more isolated way.



Fig 6. Grandmother Matley Motley

“[...] the woman looked like a relic from some antiquated book of nursery tales. She looked ridiculously laughable, so they whispered behind their hands. She was old and unkempt, like a madwoman.” (Barker, 2011, p.439). A character mocked and disregarded, Mater Motley is portrayed in her own isolation. Once more corpse-like, an entanglement of pale and sickly colours make up her appearance. She stands alone with just a small hint of her environment that allows the viewer to deduce details about her already told in the book. They do not lend new information and leave her in her disgruntled mystery.

She stands out in an almost uncanny manner, while most of Barker's other works have bright and daring backgrounds, this portrait of Mater Motley leaves her in an open and blank void.

And much like the quote suggests, the mater does look shockingly ancient, unkept, and quite frankly unwell. Her holding a somewhat even more shocking appearance and depicting than her grandson places her above him in this hierarchy of evil that Barker has constructed simply visually.

Finally, to conclude, Barker uses both his descriptions and paintings in tandem to give information on his characters or keep them in secrecy. Drawing inspiration from artists like Goya, Barker has developed a grungy and expressionistic style that flows organically with the layers of oil and the different tools used.

Building this story has clearly been something close to Barker's heart, and how he views these characters he created certainly points to this. How each description has a face, and how each face holds a place in the islands of *The Abarat* allows the story to have a wonderfully tactile development that the readers have been allowed to peer into and engage with.

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Images

Fig 1.

Barker, C. (1999) The Islands of The Abarat. *The Official Clive Barker Website* [online]. Available from: <https://www.clivebarker.info/beautiful.html> [Accessed 4 December 2024]

Fig 2.

Graydon, R. (2012) Abarat – The Artist’s Passion. *YouTube* [online]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-7bKNI8pKA> [Accessed 4 December 2024]

Fig 3.

Goya. (1819-1823) *Two Old Ones Eating Soup*

Fig 4.

Barker, C. (2002) Lazarus with Baby Pink Eye. *The Official Clive Barker Website* [online]. Available from: <https://www.clivebarker.info/lazarus.html> [Accessed 4 December 2024]

Fig 5.

Barker, C. (1999) Christopher Carrion in Old Age. *The Official Clive Barker Website* [online]. Available from: <https://www.clivebarker.info/carrion3.html> [Accessed 4 December 2024]

Fig 6.

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