

## CREATIVE WORKS

## Articulating the unthinkable

‘My images are disturbing, because life is disturbing,’ says Dr. David A. Haughton. As an artist, Haughton is influenced by his surroundings: the wild islands off British Columbia’s coast, the intense light in Greece, the patients he treats as an emergency pediatrician in Vancouver, BC. His painting series, *Kindertotentanz*, which he began in 1985, is an exploration of the scenes he witnessed as a pediatric resident in oncology. To the patients’ parents, the medical staff were icons of healing and symbols of hope.

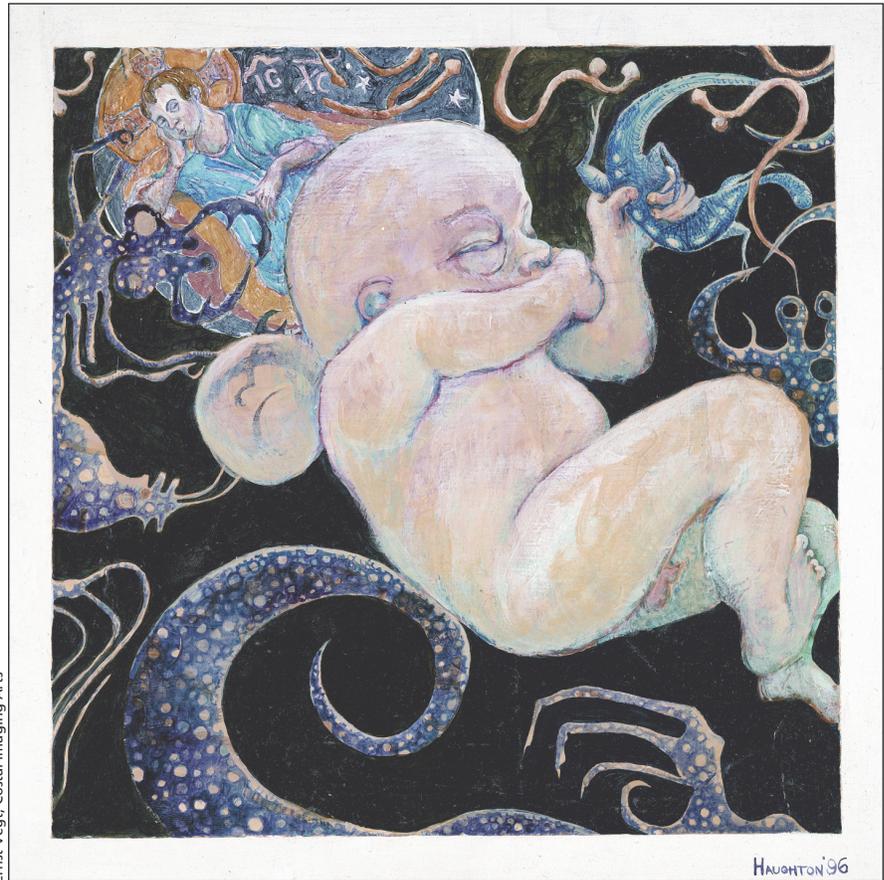
“At our research and teaching hospital, expectations were high for staff physicians to push the envelope and try new medications or new highly toxic medications of therapies on children,” Haughton says. As a resident, he watched as these therapies often had destructive effects. “It was the resident who was at the bedside on a 24-hour basis watching the chemotherapy peel off skin and auger out the gut, while the malignancy continued its immutable pressure of growth.”

Over the past 30 years, Haughton has had 17 solo shows in cities such as Zurich, Switzerland; Boston, Massachusetts; New York City, New York; Los Angeles, California, and Vancouver. In 2008, his work was included in the *Marriage of Art, Science and Religion* exhibition at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Mary-

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land, which specializes in work by self-taught artists. He is inspired by artists such as Cezanne, Winslow Homer, van Gogh and Goya, all of whom were primarily self-taught.

Haughton had been searching for



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HAUGHTON '96

David A. Haughton. “Encephalocele II” *Kindertotentanz*, Series VI (1996). Acrylic on hardboard. 30.5 × 30.5 cm. Artist’s collection.

something “important” to paint since he began making art in 1975. The inspiration for his *Kindertotentanz* paintings came when he saw Maori

imagery in carvings during a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York City. “Seeing for the first time these carvings of beaky birds so filled with malevolence and anger that they bite each other and

feeling my spirit vibrate on the same frequency as it [had] reverberated on the cancer ward.” The carvings visualized the spiritual ennui Haughton experienced as a resident in the pediatrics ward.

The term *Kindertotentanz* is a conflation of the German words *Totentanz* and *Kindertotenleider*, the former referring to a series of paintings produced by medieval artists during the Black Plague and the latter denoting personal grief. Haughton’s paintings are his personal expression of grief, his *Guernica*. In the *Kindertotentanz* series Haughton felt that he was “advocating for the

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David A. Haughton. "Partial Chromosome Deletion" *Kindertotentanz, Series VI* (2000). Acrylic on hardboard. 50.8 × 61 cm. Artist's collection.

children and for what the parents go through."

"When I see the pain in the horror of disease in the innocent, I find myself in an ongoing, somewhat confrontational conversation with God." Paintings such

as "Short Cord Syndrome" (*Kindertotentanz Series VI*, 1995) as well as *Encephalocele II* (1995) depict some of the extreme medical conditions that Haughton witnessed as a resident, along with indifferent saints who seem-

ingly ignore their plight. These saints, who he learned about during his travels to various monasteries in Greece, reflect Haughton's ambivalence toward a god he is "not sure exists."

The paintings are stylized renderings of infants and saints that exist in an existential void of darkness populated by goblins of despair and medical instruments. Like Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), Haughton has tried to communicate horrors that can't be easily articulated. He notes that some members of the public are too horrified to look at his work; others cry or feel that the works' sadness "echoes" their own.

The purpose of Haughton's *Kindertotentanz* paintings is to promote discussion. "The struggle with a disease is demeaning; in my paintings, I attempt to allow the suffering to maintain their dignity." Haughton uses the ambiguity of the scenes to encourage the viewer to find his or her own meaning in the images.

**J. Lynn Fraser BA(d) MES**

Textile artist and writer  
Toronto, Ont.

More of Haughton's art can be viewed at [www.haughton-art.ca/](http://www.haughton-art.ca/)

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David A. Haughton. "Congenital Heart Disease" (1996). Acrylic on hardboard. 30.5 × 61 cm. Courtesy of the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.