

SUPREMUS

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at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Fine Arts

by

JEFFREY MARKWORTH

Matthew Ballou, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,
have examined the thesis entitled:

SUPREMUS

Presented by Jeffrey Markworth

A Candidate for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Hereby Certify that in Their Opinion it is Worthy of Acceptance

Professor Matthew Ballou

Professor James Calvin

Professor Dr. Kristen Schwain

DEDICATIONS

To my mother, Bertina Markworth, for your continued support and dedication as a parent. Without having you in my life I would not be the person who I am today. I love you and I thank you for everything.

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ABSTRACT

My work is an example of how humans create resurrection mythologies as a response to death. Resurrection is a memorial, which not only functions as a remembrance of a person, but also serves as a process of understanding the obscure meaning of life and death. This understanding is demonstrated through the use of comic book imagery, the hero archetype, and my father acting as the central figure in the narrative. My work is comprised of digital paintings and sculptures, which operate as a visualization of how our responses to death mythologizes a person and transforms them into an idealized figure. I display my father in conjunction with an aesthetic found in the fantasy media that I consumed around the time of his passing in order to showcase a personal process of understanding death. I am asking the viewer to think about the importance of the relationship between human life and the symbolic resurrection of the deceased. This modified concept of resurrection is not literal, but it represents the idea by which the deceased lives on in the minds of those closest to them. Furthermore, this understanding is represented through the display, power, and fantasy of my father becoming the superhero, Supremus.

INTRODUCTION

Jeffrey Lynn Markworth Sr. was a man who died over eight years ago on October 22, 2007. He was my father, and history has defined him by what is written in his obituary and on his tombstone. He has become a man whose life is outlined by his birth, job, academic career, faith, military rank, marriage, family, and death.

He was a man who was much more than a stereotypical mid-western husband and father. He was a veteran, a hippie, a Christian, a DIY handyman, a Kansas City sports fan, a professional wrestling fan, a vinyl music collector, a hobbyist, a film buff, and a lover of superheroes, science fiction, and fantasy. He was stubborn, and had a temper to match his tenacity. He was a part of a generation that underwent social change in American society. He was a man who saw beyond the boundaries of skin color and fell in love with another person for being attracted to who she was rather than limiting himself to societal norms.

My father was a man who became defined by the illness that took his life. He was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer in mid-March to early April of 2007, and underwent radiation treatments that eventually led to him undergoing constant pain, weight loss, and

fatigue. My father treated everyday as if it were his last and he was a man who continued to live each day with passion to the end through his continued effort of maintaining his daily routine of responsibilities and obligations.

My father was 52 when he passed. I was sixteen. His death served as a traumatic event that was impactful on my life by catapulting me into a realm of responsibility. In some ways I still feel that I am sixteen and processing an understanding of the event that ultimately characterized my teenage years.

After my father died, multiple areas of coping happened in order to relieve or understand the situation of his sudden diagnosis and his untimely death. My mother insisted that we both turn to religion, specifically the Lutheran denomination that my father recognized as his faith. Ultimately, I found other means of coping with my father's death by investing in the imagery and fantasy of heroic figures in comics, superhero movies, and videogames. The foundation of my artwork comes from my father. His strength, problems, and character relate to the evolution of what he has become resurrected as: a mythologized being.

MYTH

"Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth"

—Joseph Campbell

Myths are stories of humanity's search through the ages for truth, meaning, and significance. They provide relevance to events that happen in life and give a metaphorical perspective and understanding of humanity's earthly existence. Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life, and continue to serve a more profound purpose in a variety of cultures (Campbell and Moyers, pp. 3-8). They are stories that are based on a historical tradition. Myths are sacred tales that explain the world, the human experience, and they provide the answers to timeless questions that serve as a compass to each generation (Campbell and Moyers, p. 4).

Myths serve a purpose to explain the inexplicable. Since the beginning of humankind's existence, myths have functioned as rationalizations for the fundamental mysteries of life because they

provide relevance to things happening in our own lives, and the subjects of myths reflect the universal concerns of humanity: birth, death, the afterlife, the origin of humanity and the world, good and evil, and the nature of humanity ("In Search of Myths and Heroes").

The role of mythology is relevant in my work because of my father's death. The traumatic event made him an idealized figure to both my mother and myself. Both of us turned to religion—a form of mythology—as a means of understanding the world and coping with the sudden loss of my father.

At first, both my mother and I gained guidance from Christianity, particularly the Lutheran denomination that my father attended. One of my father's dying goals was to have me baptized in order to become formally associated with the Lutheran Church. My father never saw the day of my baptism, but my mother made an effort to have me indoctrinated into the faith as a means to comprehend the distress that the both of us were undergoing.

It was overwhelming to be pushed into believing in something in order to find comfort from a traumatic event. Being told to find a release from distress through Christ did not work as a way to escape from the pain and trauma. I found disinterest in the faith because the methods of preaching simply did not appeal to me. This then led to me turning to escapist stories and imagery revolving around superheroes

and villains. The media that I would consume at the time led to a continuous fascination of fantastical heroes doing valiant feats and persevering through problematic situations. These stories were relatable and provided a means of myth to my teenage self.

Mythology is presented in my work by the representation of my father as a superhero. I depict my father dying and resurrecting as someone more powerful than he was. This relates to the idealization of what my father has become to both my mother and myself. My father has grown to become something more than human. From what I remember, my dad was a good man, who like any other human being dealt with an array of problems in life. His battle with cancer was the one thing I remember most about his struggles. Watching my father initially start out as a 200-pound man and becoming torn and withered down to a weakened figure was heartbreaking yet insightful. Even though my father deteriorated from strength to weakness he still persevered with a strong mindset up until the moment of his passing. This perseverance is seen as heroic in my eyes because he did not succumb to the knowledge of his fate, but continued living life.

When my father died there was a feeling of unreality. At one moment he was alive and the next moment he died. When he died he became a lifeless corpse with no breath and cold eyes. Ultimately at this moment my father became a memory. His death symbolized a

moment of growth for myself, and I was plunged into a new world of responsibility. I had to continue on with my life through living by the values that he instilled in me. Ultimately, my work is about addressing my growth and coming of age after his death. In my created mythology, my father becomes resurrected as a superhero god, Supremus, who is responsible for his own universe.

HERO'S JOURNEY, RESURRECTION, AND THE SUPERHERO

Two mythological archetypes are the focus of my research and work—the hero's journey and the resurrection myth. The hero's journey, or the monomyth, is the common template of a broad category of tales that involve a hero who goes on an adventure, and, in a decisive crisis, wins a victory, and then comes home changed or transformed (Campbell and Moyers, pp. 123-124). The resurrection myth is a motif of a deity who dies and comes back to life as something greater than what he or she was. The resurrection myth also relates to the idea of an afterlife and existence in a new world after an individual passes from this world ("In Search of Myths and Heroes").

The hero's journey metaphorically symbolizes a coming of age tale, taking up responsibility, and moving into an acquired role of maturity. In some respects the hero's journey is interconnected with the resurrection myth because it showcases a final role of ascending and becoming a higher power. This interconnection of mythological themes illustrates how my father and myself are interwoven. His representation in my work as dying and becoming Supremus conveys

what happened in the real world: he died and I took on the mantle of responsibility.

Resurrection myths contain various metaphorical meanings other than the analogy of dying and coming back to life. They can also symbolize great moments of change or coming anew. An example of a figure within the resurrection myth is the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl was a virgin-born god who was the monarch of the ancient city of Tollan. He was the teacher of the arts, originator of the calendar, and the giver of maize (Campbell, p. 358). When Quetzalcoatl left his people he promised to return. The Aztecs believed that his return would herald the apocalypse ("In Search of Myths and Heroes").

The idea of resurrection is concurrent not only with death but with growing, creating, and living through important life moments. We, as human beings, resurrect into something each and every day. Resurrection acts as a basic symbol that life is an ever-changing thing that is affected by the events that transforms us drastically into a new direction.

My father's death could be viewed in some respects as his literal ascension into the great beyond and becoming reborn completely anew as an otherworldly entity. His death also symbolizes a complete rebirth/resurrection of my own life. His death showcases the sudden

change my mother and I were met with at his passing. We both had to learn how to live life and do things without him. His death forced us to go outside of our respective comfort zones and push ourselves further with participating in new activities. His death further fueled my interests in escapist materials like videogames and comics while also forcing me to learn handy skills and mature as an adult. His death forced my mother to solve obstacles on her own without relying on him.

Ultimately, this concept of resurrection is in correlation with my work because my father is reborn as a superhero with cosmic power. Superheroes are the ultimate people who are filled with flamboyance and mystery that break beyond the mundane (Ross, p. 10). Acclaimed illustrator Alex Ross' reasoning of why he is attracted to superheroes is because superheroes provide order to the world, have a sense of moral ethics, and sacrifice themselves for the betterment of the greater good. They fight for truth and justice, and deal with complicated issues that question the ethics behind the rights and wrongs of societal norms (Ross, p. 10).

Two figures who at their basic core are models of the ideal superhero are Superman and Batman. Superman is the first and most powerful superhero; whose only weakness is a glowing green stone called Kryptonite (Ross, p. 16). Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster's

creation is the ultimate figure of moral representation of their time. Superman is a creation that represents an all-powerful mythic being brought into our realm to solve our injustices and to defend the defenseless (Ross, p. 16).

Batman, like Superman, is a purveyor of justice; however, his life and superhero identity is shrouded in mystery. Batman's main weapon is fear, and he uses fear as a tactic to distress his enemies from doing wrong (Ross, p. 22). Batman was born out of the murder of his parents and because of that loss he vowed to live a life of redemption through bringing justice to those who cause harm to society. Batman is a pure representation of the resurrection myth because out of death came a change and restart (Ross, p. 23).

Batman fights a vast array of super villains, but he also fights against the common criminal. Batman, unlike Superman or any other superhero, is human. He is an ordinary man who uses the power of his wealth to do an extraordinary service for the well being of society (Ross, p. 23). Batman is a representation of the ordinary reacting to death and transforming itself into something extraordinary.

My reimagining of my father as a powerful being is an embodiment of a coming of age. The use of my father as a superhero is relatable because power is imagined through mythos, and his power represents the consistent maturity of my mother and myself in order

to become more knowledgeable on how to continue living life. My father wasn't a perfect man, but he represented an image of responsibility that only my mother has matched as a role model. Superheroes are contemporary representations of the human need to tell tales to project examples of morality and immorality in society (Schmidt).

I chose to craft a mythology where my father is reborn as a superhero because he continues to be a moral role model in my life. When my father passed it was around the time when the Batman film *The Dark Knight* and the beginnings of the Marvel Cinematic Universe were released. My father's death was a traumatic experience, but superheroes, comics, and heroes in videogames were available for me to use as a means to escape into worlds filled with problems that were solved by acts of heroism. Comics and superhero movies were and still are materials that provide guidance and escape into the fantasy of larger than life beings doing extraordinary things.

PROCESS

When I began creating this project I initially started developing images that consisted of amalgamations of characters from videogames and comic books in order to acquire an understanding of why I am attracted to escapist media. By developing drawings that combined multiple aspects of popular culture that I have constantly been interested in, I was deconstructing the reasoning behind my fascinations. One of the final sketches I ended up creating was a drawing of my father as a superhero (Figure 1). The drawing started off as any other blatant combination; however, something was different with this sketch when compared to the other images. The drawing delved deeper into a personal understanding of why I love escapist media by helping me realize that the root of my interests and fascinations come from my father's death.

Supremus is my father resurrected as a superhero-god, and his narrative begins at the exact moment of his death. Immediately after my father dies he is transported into another realm where superheroes exist as literal gods known as The Creators. He then is transformed into Supremus, and his purpose is to create and protect an ever-expanding universe of fantasy worlds and life forms.

Supremus initially began as a parody of the Marvel Comics figure, Galactus. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in March of 1966, Galactus is a wrathful god recast in science fiction who devours the life energy of planets. He considers himself a higher being over all others, and to Galactus living beings have no worth and are perceived as ants. Galactus maintains his existence by devouring planets with the potentiality to support life (Sanderson and Daniels, p. 33).

He wields a type of cosmic energy known as the Power Cosmic and has appointed a number of beings as his heralds, giving each a portion of his power. His heralds search the cosmos for planets that Galactus can consume, and he uses the Power Cosmic to produce nearly any effect he desires (Lee and Buscema, p. 20).

Galactus was once a mortal being named Galan, the last survivor of a dying universe prior to our own. Galan was transported by rocket to the center of the big bang that created the present cosmos. Somehow Galan transformed into a physical incarnation of destruction, whose coming serves as the apocalypse for the population of inhabited worlds (Sanderson and Daniels, p. 33).

Galactus is an embodiment of resurrection; dying and coming back to life as someone greater than who he was originally. This identification is at its core relevant to the imagery that I am creating of my father. Supremus is like Galactus; however, instead of becoming

a figure set on surviving by consuming planets, I depict Supremus as a character reborn as one who creates life for survival.

Doing what Lee and Kirby have done by creating a god who was once an ordinary being relates to the idea of resurrection and an embodiment of who and how I have grown to view my father. My father has grown into someone like Galactus. Even though I display him in the work as a god-like being, he has grown as years passed with infatuation as a myth of something greater in essence than the ordinary being he existed as.

The process of developing the imagery began in the second semester of my second year of graduate study. I started this project by making flat ink drawings that were then scanned into the computer and colored digitally in order to resemble an aesthetic found in classic 60s era comics (Figure 2). A semester earlier I began making a comic book with completely different characters; however, I realized that I was not able to quickly achieve the in-depth contextualization needed for telling an established comic narrative.

Instead of making a comic book I decided to create images of the character Supremus that referenced the tropes and aesthetics found in superhero comics. The pictures created do not consist of panels and text used to tell a complete narrative; however, the images are viewed as something that brings a general understanding of

Supremus' universe. Even though I am not making a comic in the traditional format, the images within my thesis exhibition sequentially relate to one another like a comic.

Every image created for my exhibition is digitally painted on the computer in Adobe Photoshop with a Wacom Intuos 5 pen tablet. I made each image onto the computer because the computer allows me to maintain the essence of a comic aesthetic while also giving me the ability to experiment with a different means of making imagery. All of the digital paintings for my show began as drawn images on the computer. Even though nothing is made with a physical material, a practical understanding of making a painting still needs to be evident in order to create a digitally painted image. The power of Adobe Photoshop lies within the tools that make up its framework. These tools are digital recreations of traditional tools used within painting and photography. Adobe Photoshop is a smorgasbord of options that grants a user the ability to create images beyond the limitations met by traditional standards.

After a composition is drawn and painted out, I am able to change my color options to best suit the atmosphere and tone of the painting. Using the computer allows me to heighten specific aspects of a painting by using other methods of mark making in order to intensify a specific focal area or to convey a certain sense of atmosphere. This

can be achieved by using different Photoshop brushes or by digitally melding different aspects of photographs onto an image to subtly present an illusion of different marks, textures, or materials.

Sculpture is also present within the body of work in the exhibition and it is used as a supplement to the digital paintings by bringing the character of Supremus to life as a sculptural toy. Like toys being used in the real world as complements to the media they take after, I wanted to include figurines of Supremus as a physical tactile representation of the character. Through the development of the sculptural toys I am referencing action figures and premium format figurines of superheroes. I develop each sculpture by building a model out of plasticine clay. Once the model is sculpted I make a mold using urethane rubber and plaster. After the mold is made I am able to make multiple castes of the same figure. Doing this references the commerciality of the superhero. Toys bring the character of a comic to life and I am using that concept to further push the mythic qualities of what my father has become.

THE SHOW

The title of my thesis exhibition is *Supremus*, the name of the superhero-god whom my father becomes. I use the title *Supremus* as a declarative statement to the audience that this exhibition is about my process of understanding that my father has transformed into an idealized mythic figure.

Visual storytelling design for comics is the main influence towards the layout and presentation of my show. This intention is used in order to provide an understanding of the universe that houses *Supremus*, while also delivering a feeling of immersion for the viewer. Achieving immersion is a foundational goal when creating comics. When viewing my show immersion grants the audience an understanding of *Supremus'* universe while also giving them the power to control the pacing and timing of their own viewing. Immersion is achieved through a combination of four factors: clarity, realism, dynamism, and continuity (Caputo, p. 64).

Clarity is important because comic design must clearly emphasize the intent of the story. Establishing clarity within a comic means to establish a scene and a clear flow of direction for the viewer. Clarity gives the viewer all of the information necessary to advance the story from panel to panel, thus creating the illusion of movement. A

lack of clarity can negatively affect the audience's perception of what or whom the narrative is about (Caputo, pp. 65-66).

Realism is defined by using both image and story to create an illusion of a lived in universe. The idea of realism in comics refers to displaying a visually convincing setting for the story and characters that operate within the narrative world. Realism within comics can be defined by the visual aesthetic and tone of the imagery, and a lack of realism means a lack of providing context to the viewer (Caputo, pp. 72-74).

Dynamism is a means to provide action and exaggeration to a figure or composition. Dynamism amplifies the larger than life characteristics of a figure's actions in order to provide energetic life and emotion to a composition. Dynamism is composed within an image by expressing a full force of energy through an emphasis of movement whether through pose, lighting, or camera angle (Caputo, p. 75).

The final immersive factor is continuity, or maintaining visual details that bring in consistency to the overall concept of the images. Anything that might cause viewers to do a mental afterthought can dismantle their belief in the immersive world of the story (Caputo, p. 77). All of the elements of a narrative should be consistent throughout the life of a story, and I aim for continuity within my work by incorporating images that match properly with one another.

Clarity, realism, dynamism, and continuity—the ultimate goal is to use these ideal concepts in order to create an immersive world for the viewer. Anything that doesn't work within the context of the story being told, the aesthetic of the imagery, or the medium being used to tell the narrative can interfere with the idea and understanding of the universe. My show is designed with all four factors of immersion in mind through placing each image as a means to advance the story perceptually through a set path. The purpose of the show is to visually establish who Supremus is as a character, and to give a generalization of Supremus' universe. My show is organized by placing 40 digital paintings into three separate categories onto three separate walls. The image categories are his origin myth, the heroes and villains that live in his universe, and the planets that he creates.

Each image is digitally painted, printed, and placed onto foam presentation board. Every image is arranged according to category and is displayed in a manner that references the layout of comics and sequential storytelling. Though I am not using any text within my images, the ideal concept of sequential storytelling is still present within the display of my exhibition. As defined by comic artist Scott McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics The Invisible Art*, comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic

response in the viewer” (McCloud, p. 20). Essentially McCloud states that comics do not necessarily need to have text and image in order to be considered a comic. As long as there is a sequence of images working off of one another in order to convey a series of events it can be considered a comic. Thus the arrangement of the digital paintings in a format that works to convey the concept of each category works as a comic image.

The digital paintings on the origin wall (Figure 3) establish the rise of Supremus and the responsibilities he maintains as a superhero-god. The images begin with him dying and descending into another realm where he meets an entity known as Judgment. Judgment then grants him power by resurrecting him as the superhero-god, Supremus (Figure 4). His origin is then followed by images that outline Supremus’ responsibilities as a superhero-god—creating planets, forever keeping a watchful eye on his universe, and fighting nefarious villains. These roles also metaphorically mimic the responsibilities of a father—a creator of life, an individual who oversees and manages the things he is responsible for, and a protector from harm.

On the second wall (Figure 5) the viewer is introduced to the heroes and villains of Supremus’ universe. The wall is split into two sub-sections: a hero side and a villain side. Both of these sides are split down the middle with six portraits of Supremus separating them

based upon tone. The three digital paintings of Supremus on the hero side are images of him in his Creator outfit while the three paintings on the villain side are of him in his Battle outfit. This split symbolizes not only the tone of the figures represented within each of the images, but also identifies the figures of Supremus' universe. On the hero side Supremus is more reserved and shown in non-confrontational poses, while on the villain side he is seen fighting and displaying power through his fiery laser eyes. This change in tone provides an understanding that there are different types of figures living within Supremus' universe.

On the third wall (Figure 6) viewers are introduced to the planets that Supremus creates. This wall showcases twelve planets along with an establishing image of Supremus with a planet of his face known as Planet Supremus. These digital paintings of planets provide insight into the worlds that encompass Supremus' universe while also outlining the key responsibility meant for Supremus' survival: making planets. Supremus is known as a creator and the third wall showcases that title by displaying images that show an array of planets.

The show also contains a total of five sculptures of Supremus, which are used to supplement the graphic/two-dimensional visuals. Three of which are busts (Figure 7) and two are standing figures (Figure 8). The sculptures are the only works that are handmade in

the physical world and they reference the commerciality of the superhero.

CONCLUSION

After my father's death I indulged in comic books about the likes of Superman and Batman. These stories provided a contemporary version of mythology that touched upon mythological concepts like resurrection and the hero's journey. Like scriptures from past religions and mythologies, comic books about superheroes struggling to overcome problems provided me a contemporary understanding of moralities and life lessons.

Developing imagery that centers on my father as a superhero with extraordinary power provides me with a personal acceptance that he continues to be symbolically alive. The work shown in *Supremus* ultimately touches upon my consistent fascination with my father, and contributes to a realization that death is a lifelong concept that humans have to embrace. In these eight years of growing up without him he has evolved into an entity that I continue to look to for guidance. By creating work that illustrates his transformation into a being of immense power, I am asking the viewer to evaluate his or her own personal understanding of death and resurrection. It is important that we understand death and mythological themes present in contemporary society. The further we venture from understanding

death and the value of symbolic resurrection, the further we become disconnected to our roots as human beings.



Figure 1
Supremus

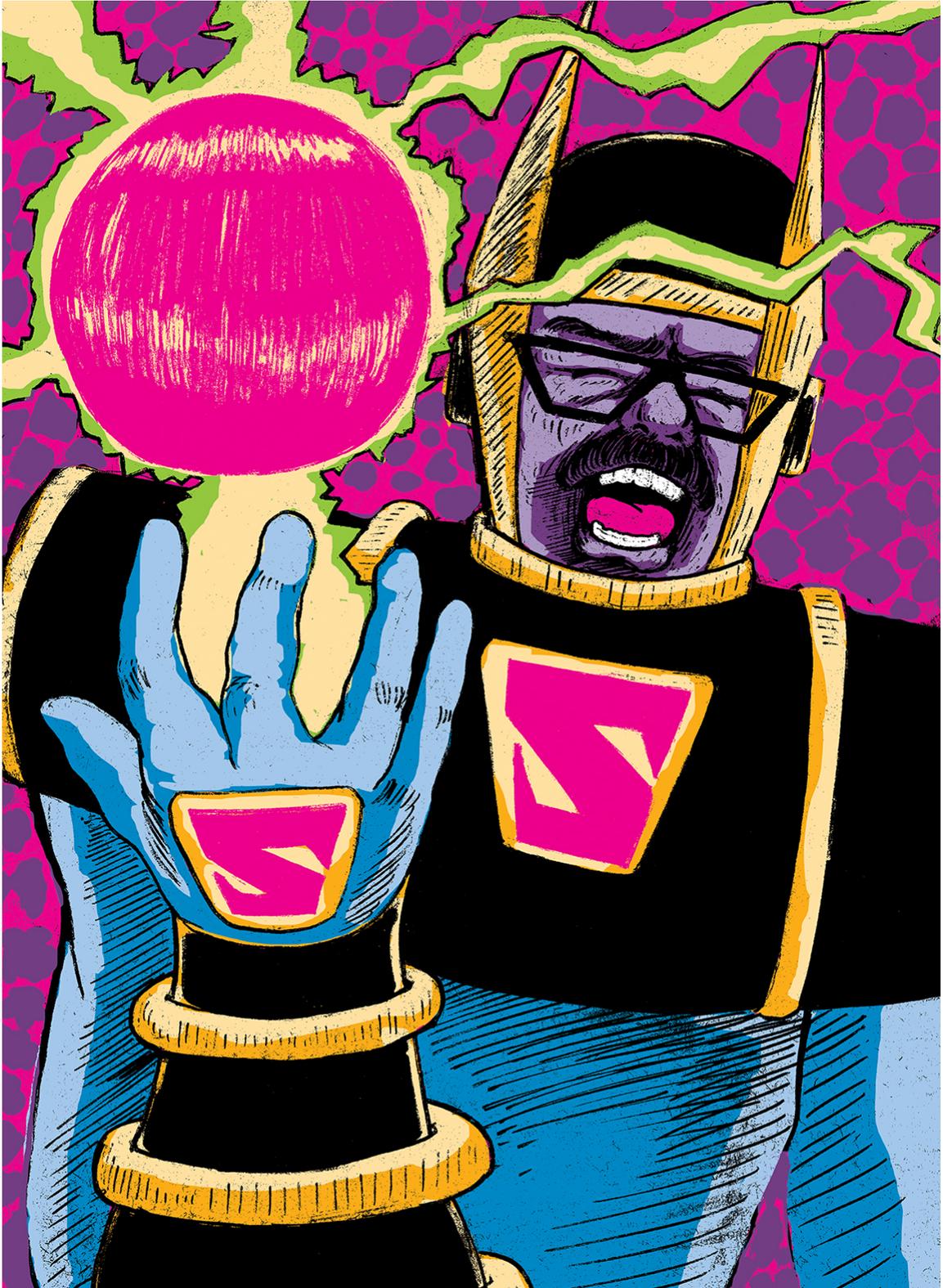


Figure 2
The Planet Maker



Figure 3
Origin



Figure 4
From Judgment to Supremus!



Figure 5
Heroes and Villains



Figure 6
Planets



Figure 7
Bust



Figure 8
Supremus Figurine

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