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Beasts of Earth and Spirit

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Beasts of Earth and Spirit

by

Molly Katherine Nagel

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Arthur Croyle, Major Professor
Cindy Gould
Debra Satterfield

Iowa State University
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2013

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“They are all beasts of burden in a sense, ' Thoreau once remarked of animals, 'made to carry some portion of our thoughts.' Animals are the old language of the imagination; one of the ten thousand tragedies of their disappearance would be a silencing of this speech.”

(Solnit)

This body of work is based on the spiritual importance of animals in human culture, both past and present, through the exploration of animals with which I have strong spiritual and symbolic connections.

From the earliest images created by humans through our present day, animals have held significant meaning. They have symbolized wealth and danger, strength and sacrifice, the mundane actions of day-to-day existence and the elevation of spiritual experience. Humans have seen animals as gods and as the messengers and favors of gods, and have used animals as metaphor to describe the human experience. From wild to domestic, our world is rich with many species of animals, filled with artwork, totems, alters, shrines, memorials, and other images reflecting our thoughts about them. (Broglia 238-256)

In my childhood I was surrounded by domestic pets and was raised in a family where all animals, even the most conventional, were seen as special, worthy of respect and careful observation. Many children would only be encouraged to look at animals if they were accorded special status, ‘exotic’ animals like tigers in the zoo, or purebred puppies in a

pet store. For my family, just observing from the kitchen window, waiting for sparrows to land at the backyard bird feeder, for example, was a worthy activity one could spend hours engaged in. I learned at an early age to watch animals in motion, assessing how they interacted, what their concerns, joys, and fears were, and learning how similar they were to humans, as well as how they differed in their challenges and concerns, what appeared to make them happy, and what they had learned to fear.

Therein too lies a paradox; animals could be understood as very much like humans, but were different enough that they eluded complete understanding. They became entities apart, and as I followed unknowingly upon many prior generations of pre-Christian cultures worldwide, they became objects of my spirituality as well. Animals filled in the void where humans fell short; no human is as loyal as a dog, as calm and focused as a cat, as fast as a running deer. The spiritual element became even easier for wild animals, whose wide existence away from human eyes could thus appear and disappear like ghosts or angels, existence beyond human sight and understanding.

Through many art traditions humans have used animals as allegory to describe human emotions and other themes of the human condition. Many people will recognize animal metaphors relating to human experiences, such as “angry as a bull”, “spooked like a wild horse”, “curious as a cat”. I incorporated many animals as personal signs and signifiers in my life and creative expression, as representations for emotions, ideas, and even as mental, spiritual masks I wore myself. And I was hardly alone in doing this, for my research led to a wealth of evidence that the act of identifying with animals spiritually has a cross-cultural significance dating back to the dawn of modern human existence.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL RESEARCH

1. Prehistoric representation

“Every animal is a tradition, and together they are a vast part of our heritage as human beings. No animal completely lacks humanity, yet no person is ever completely human. By ourselves, we people are simply balls of protoplasm. We merge with animals through magic, metaphor, or fantasy, growing their fangs and putting on their feathers. Then we become funny or tragic; we can be loved, hated, pitied, and admired. For us, animals are all the strange, beautiful, pitiable, and frightening things that they have ever been: gods, slaves, totems, sages, tricksters, devils, clowns, companions, lovers, and far more.”

(Sax)

Roughly 16,000 years ago, humans in Spain spent hours painting and drawing on the ceiling of a small cave. They drew in fantastic, multicolored detail images of bison, horses, deer and wild boar, animals they would have been familiar with in their late Paleolithic landscape. Today the cave, known as Almatira, (Fig.1) draws visitors from around the world and is known as one of the most brilliant examples of prehistoric art ever discovered. (Clottes 38-45)

Many theories have been put forward as to why humans painted animals on stone- and why they even painted at all. Scholars and scientists have theorized the need to document everyday Paleolithic life, the need for instruction about the world to future generations, and the idea of ‘food magic’ as reasons why human ancestors began making images. The idea of a static, two dimensional images appeared fairly late in modern human evolution, and just what motivated our ancestors to begin making images in the first place is still debated by archeologists, paleontologists and brain scientists today. (Clottes 60-82)

Why they chose the subject matter that they did- large animals- has also gone through an evolution of modern thought. For many years the reigning theory has been that the paintings represented a kind of 'food magic', that is the people living in and around the caves painted the animals in ceremony to symbolically bring the animals closer and improve the chances of successful hunting. (Klingender) In recent years, as excavations at such sites progressed, this idea has come under intense scrutiny, as the animals represented as remains in the 'trash piles' of such sites have little to nothing in common with the animals being depicted at such sites. The animals being eaten in largest number at Almatira were wild goats, which appear nowhere in any of the cave artwork, and there are no remains at all of bison or horses. Similar patterns of human predation appear at other sites, with the animals represented as part of the human food supply playing little role in the cave artwork, and few or no remains of the animals depicted in the art are represented in the archeological evidence uncovered. (Clottes 65-70)

Based on modern research of rock and cave painting cultures in Africa and Australia, a new theory has come to light indicating that the paintings were of religious or spiritual importance- the images were not meant to represent actual animals, but visions of animals from a spirit realm accessed by a group shaman. This theory has gained traction for a number of reasons, including its ability to affix an explanation to cave painting elements that formerly had none. For example across time and cultures, many paintings depict the animals and the space around them covered with patterns of dots or geometric lines that do not correspond to the markings or even the shapes of animals (Fig.2) but they are consistent with the patterns that the eyes see that are generated in the brain in

times of sensory deprivation or the verge of unconsciousness, consistent with what is reported by modern shamans when entering a trance-like state. The large animals of their day had entered the human imagination and had become spiritually significant. Thus animal elements remained important parts of cave painting culture until humans begin to create settlements and started depicting animals in more portable and less permanent ways. (Clottes 90-112)

2. Representation and Symbolism In Early Human Civilization

As the hunter/gatherer model of human existence was replaced by agriculture and settled existence, early cultures worldwide continued to depict animals in spiritually significant ways, and assign cultural meaning and symbolism to animals within their geographic region. One of the earliest cultures that placed animals in high spiritual esteem was that of ancient Egypt, which used animal attributes and physicality to describe and depict their gods and pharaohs. The jackal headed god *Anubis*, for example, was likely inspired by the desert dwelling jackals of the region and their nature as scavengers, which would cause the animals to congregate around burial sites looking for food. (Fig.3) The Egyptians saw these animals as attached to death and the dead, and the god *Anubis*, often portrayed as a jackal or a human with a jackal's head, became the god of the dead and the deity that lead the departed into and through the underworld and presided over the judgment of souls. Crocodiles were both symbolic of the life-giving waters of the Nile, and terrifying harbingers of swift death to those who traversed its waters without carefully watching for their presence. Crocodiles were worshipped and even kept as pets by temple priests, and became the basis for the monster in the afterlife that devours the heart and soul of the wicked, barring their entrance into paradise. (Saunders 100-101) In

fact the Egyptians incorporated nearly every known animal in their region- hippos, lions, cheetahs, cattle, ibis, baboon and more- into their pantheon as gods and goddesses.

Animals appear as symbols in hieroglyphic writing and symbolic artwork as well, such as the dung beetle, who's habit of rolling a spherical ball of animal excrement across the desert sand was seen as metaphor for the rolling of the sun and moon through the sky, (Fig. 4) causing the progress of time and the changing of the seasons. (Klingender 32-59)

In other civilizations such as ancient Greece and Nordic countries, animals retained connections to the gods, becoming the sacred animal companions of deities. Horses, for example, were said to have been created by Poseidon, the sea god, who often took the form of a horse on earth. The Norse god Odin was said to have two ravenous pet wolves, Geri and Freki, who ate from his table, and the god Loki's son Fenrir was said to be a wolf that would kill the god Odin at the cataclysmic end of the world. In both traditions, the distinction between human and animal was nebulous, and gods were regularly said to transform into various animals, father or birth children that were partially or wholly animal in nature, and transform humans into animals, often as punishment for angering the gods in some way. (Saunders 34-47)

3. Animals In New World Cultures

In the native cultures of pre-Colombian North and South America, animals feature uniquely as sentient beings not unlike humans in culture, emotional response and self-awareness. Animals were viewed much as humans but with separate cultures, as tribes to themselves, with greater connections to the spirit world than humans. Animal forms were also not viewed as being fixed states, as many legends tell of shape-shifting tricksters such as coyote and crow, who often changed their shape to appear as humans, other

animals, and even inanimate objects as means to accomplish a goal. In many of these stories animals are advocates for man and their actions directly benefit humans and result in the creation of the natural world. (Erdoes-Ortiz)

In cultures native to the Americas, the animal as a totem has a deeply rooted history in tribal traditions. The animal becomes a symbol for a larger group, signifying traits often associated with that animal. Totems could be of varied importance from one group to another, but the meaning of various totems was often similar among all native groups. The cultural identification with totem animals has stayed strong within these tribes, and individual identification with totem animals has become widespread in contemporary American culture. Similar to original shamanistic traditions, totem animals are viewed as overarching 'spirits' that represent both an entire species of animal, and embody for a group of traits related to the animal that are then associated by proxy to the human who chooses to identify with that totem. (Farmer xiv-xv)

CHAPTER 3: ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

As an artist my work has drawn inspiration and influence from many styles and media, and is illustrated by the variety of media in my exhibition. I choose to work in a variety of forms in order to communicate my ideas. Painting was my first medium as both a child and developing artist, and continues to be the media I return to most often. However, in my more recent works I have merged painting with a variety of sculptural processes and materials to create mixed medium forms. I have often turned to nontraditional art materials in order to realize my works, including industrial and construction materials such as extruded Styrofoam insulation and chicken wire, and faux fur fabric often used by crafters and costume makers.

My initial exposure to art was predominantly in the form of wildlife art. A gallery in my hometown was located in a shopping mall and showcased primarily wildlife art, and I was allowed frequent access to this gallery in my formative years. I remember pressing my face close to each work, observing the detail of each brushstroke placed by the artists I so admired, and I am retrospectively surprised that the staff never raised objections to a child my age getting too close to very expensive artwork. In middle school, my parents enrolled me in private art classes taught by gallery owner and artist Barbara Prall of Marion, Iowa. The classroom was inside her gallery, and she allowed all of her students unlimited access to the gallery so that we could gain inspiration and ideas from the works being shown. We were also allowed to take home the various art publications sent to the gallery by art dealers, such as the *Greenwich Workshop Catalog* and other commercial art catalogs and magazines. Among my first artistic idols who I still admire were Judy

Larson, Larry Zack, and Greg Bordignon. (Fig.5-7) They, along with many other wildlife painters, who's work realistically rendering the animals I so closely identified with, pushed me to pursue realism in my own work. The enduring influence of wildlife art on contemporary art culture was recently evident in the Brunnier Art Museum exhibition *In Pursuit of Wildlife Conservation; The Art of Jay. N Darling and Maynard Reece*. The importance of wildlife art to the efforts of wildlife conservation cannot be understated, to quote University President Steven Leath's message from the exhibition catalog;

“Through the expressive and passionate visual voices of artists like Reece and Darling, public support is marshaled into actions to preserve, conserve, and save much of America's natural beauty for future generations to experience, learn from and enjoy. As the wealth of our nation is based in natural resources, and our very existence requires that we honor and protect those resources, Darling and Reece have proved to be powerful and inspirational leaders. “America stands with Darling!” was a public rallying cry often expressed during his conservation leadership years, and we are proud to join with him in this effort.”

Indeed, for much of the western world, wildlife art has served a unique purpose in helping viewers to regard animals and natural resources as treasures to be conserved and protected, rather than obstacles to be conquered and eradicated. Bev Doolittle's work melding wildlife art with Native American spiritual themes captured my attention (Fig.8) and Jody Bergsma's watercolors inspired me to consider presenting animal forms in ways

that were not 100% realistic but better conveyed the spiritual sense that proved elusive in formal realistic representation.(Fig. 9)

Aside from wildlife artisans I was and still am an admirer of the artist Christian Peterson, whose fantasy work with realistic styling and intense attention to detail continues to inspire my own work. (Fig. 10) His style of rendering fantastical ideas in a realistic style that connects them to reality has always inspired me to find ways to introduce the fantastic into everyday life in a way that temporarily alters the way reality is experienced. I have to credit Peterson with being the original inspiration behind ‘bloopfish’, which I will discuss later, and being therefore the root inspiration behind my current fish-depicting works.

My earliest creative experiences affected the way I handle acrylic paint to this day. Until I was a high school freshman I really did not appreciate the difference between oil and acrylic paint, and until I was well into my undergraduate education I was unaware that there were significant fundamental differences in how oil and acrylic worked and handled- all I knew was that oil paint was very expensive and, from my perspective at the time, harder to work with due to it’s use of solvents as medium. So for years I incorrectly assumed that paintings that were actually done in oil had either been done in acrylic, or else could easily be done in acrylic to replicate the appearance of oil. I’ve had many people assume my acrylic paintings are done using oil paint because I had managed to make acrylic handle and look like oil, as a result of how I assumed for years that acrylic paint was supposed to look. I have found that acrylic paint contributes to the sense of immediacy I strive for in my work due to its shorter drying time and relative ease of use. Acrylic also lends itself well to a variety of surfaces, which has allowed me to also utilize

it as pigmentation on faux fur and fabric, and as a painted surface over primed Styrofoam forms. I choose to use as much post-use insulation foam as possible rather than purchasing new product, and I cold-carve my works with saws and sanding methods as opposed to using hot implements which melt the foam and release airborne toxins as a result.

When I entered the Integrated Visual Arts program at Iowa State, I was exposed to a wider range of artists and styles that I began to incorporate into my own work. I felt I needed to gain perspective apart from realistically representational works and explore process and materials to a greater degree.

One of the first artists I was introduced to was Rick Bartow. I was drawn to the immediacy of his work, his use of color and the juxtaposition of color fields with loose line work. I also identify with his subject matter, as he deals in the themes of Native American myth and symbolism involving animal spirituality and transformation. (Fig.11)

Later I found Valarie Miller of Steel Cow Studio. Miller has a very specific subject matter- cows. Only cows. (Fig.12) I am drawn to the way in which she paints cows, as beautiful individuals, in a style that is a mix of brushy and blocky with careful attention to color usage and light. Similarly I found Kimberly Kelly Santini's renderings of animals in vibrant but not necessarily unrealistic color to be quite compelling, and they very much helped the formation of color usage in my own art. (Fig.13)

In 2011-2012 I had an internship with the Brunnier Art Museum at Iowa State University and took advantage of the opportunity to explore the works of their vast collection.

Among the works I admired most were sculptures by Christian Petersen, particularly his

works depicting animals, (Fig.14) animal sculptures by Gwynn Murrill, (Fig. 15) and the piece *Shoulders of Giants* by Nina de Creeft Ward. (Fig.16) I admired the handling of the form and the care to details of their work, and the artists' abilities to imbue the material with a sense of intelligence and personality- it was more than representing the realistic shape of the animal, the artists had given the animals an individual soul. Like many others I was more recently impressed by the sculpture works of Beth Cavener Stritcher, which employ a sense of anthropomorphism and a blurring of lines between realism and fantasy to explore very human ideas, emotions and situations through the use of animal forms. (Fig.17)

I have always been a follower of Julie Taymor. Her works for theater are as much art as practical stage work and I look to her for inspiration on everything from the unorthodox usage of materials use to ways of depicting ideas in space and relaying ideas to the audience in the most simple yet powerful way. Her use of ideographs- an image or symbol that summarizes a complex idea into one simple thing- informs my own ideas about my art and creative voice. (Taymor) (Fig. 18)

CHAPTER 4: THE WORKS COMPRISING THE EXHIBITION

As previously stated, my media choices and stylistic renderings are varied in order to most successfully convey my message. As a whole I intend for the show to be an immersive and engaging environment for the viewer, and encourage the viewer to personally identify with the works and relate in a personal, spiritual way to the message of the thesis.

1. Great Bear

Great Bear is an acrylic painting on canvas, 9 feet tall and 5.5 feet wide. The bear pictured is an Alaskan Grizzly Bear and it is life sized to a very large male bear. Rather than being intentionally painted in an aggressive stance, it is pictured as a passive and peaceful manner, having just come over a mountain ridge and confronting the viewer with a contemplative gaze, as though the bear is considering the onlooking human just as much as the human considers the bear. There is an intelligence in the bear that, along with it's imposing size, is intimidating without the immanent threat of harm- not because the bear is an unthinking monster, but because the bear is a thinking creature and therefore more similar to a human than dissimilar.

The inspiration for creating this work came from an interaction with several of my peers while discussing the concept of totem animals. The visual image of a colossal bear came to mind for one individual, and the link between the symbology of the bear with traits of this particular person was uncannily similar. Bears are associated with rebirth and creation, due to their winter dormancy and the emergence of bear cubs from the den in

spring. (Farmer) They are viewed as healing and protective spirits due to their seemingly invincible nature and territorial instinct to guard their habitat and offspring. (Farmer 27-28) They are a popular totem animal and their impressive size and strength has captivated humanity throughout time and geography. The bear is presented with a small 'altar' like space in front, made to mimic a natural environment with stones, driftwood, and a stray vertebrae, to indicate the possibility of the bear breaking the wall of the canvas and stepping into the gallery space, making it more confrontational to the viewer.

2. A Dream of Horses

A Dream of Horses is an acrylic painting with charcoal and soft pastel on canvas, four feet tall and six feet wide. The work is comprised of four horses in various action-based poses, overlapping and merging in ambiguous space. Technical aspects of the paint and media handling include spraying the wet surface with water to allow the colors to drip and run, using multiple layers of paint, charcoal and pastel, and a process of layering and erasing to achieve the desired ambiguity of space and form. The painting is a response in part to Paleolithic cave painting, in which forms of animals would often be crowded or overlapped while depicted in various activities such as standing, rolling, running and fighting, with strong dark outlines and naturalistic yet vivid color. (Clottes) It is also a response to the nature of memory itself, similarly stated by Temple Grandin in her works *Animals in Translation* and *Animals make us human*, thinking of the word 'horse' for many people does not conjure the image of one specific, static horse, but instead invokes a flurry of images, sounds, and memories involving the movement of the animals in some way. One of my first memories of interacting with horses was from when I was five or six years old. A cemetery on the edge of the town my Grandmother lived in backed up to

a pasture with several horses, and my parents took my sister and me to see them. The huge figures leaned their heads over the fence to investigate us and solicit attention, and became jealous of one another, prompting intermittent bursts of discord, kicking and fighting on the other side of the fence as the powerful creatures competed for our attention. The memory blurs together as a similar scene to the paintings, full of imprecise space, writhing, power and emotion. In front of the painting on a pedestal is a saddle blanket, which questions of the viewer in how the discordant horses should be handled. Should they be brought under control, broken and steered for human use, or should the blanket be rejected as an unnecessary human construct that the horses are actively rebelling against?

3. Discus Dance

Discus Dance is comprised of nine large fish constructed from carved insulation foam and heavy weight paper, primed and painted with acrylic paint. The fish range in size from 18 to thirty inches long and hang suspended in the gallery as though swimming in a loose school. The fish are based on some of the hundreds of color and pattern variations found among discus fish in the wild and in captivity. Discus fish originate in the backwaters of the Amazon River and generally grow to no more than six inches in length. I chose to scale the fish up considerably in order to showcase the colors and intricate patterns of the fish, as well as to emphasize their quality of 'looming large' in the human imagination. Fish in general have various symbolic meanings in different cultures, but their habitat, mysterious and inaccessible to humans, has resulted in their metaphoric ties to intangible concepts such as freedom, happiness, wisdom and transformation. (Saunders 136-140) Their known habit of schooling and staying in a communal group has also made

them symbolic of family and friendship. They become spiritual, dream beings, transforming the reality of the viewer who at once wonders what fish are doing in the air and poses the possibility that the viewer may be underwater with them. This treatment was partially inspired by the work of James Christensen, who often depicts aquatic animals and maritime objects such as fish and galleon ships flying and floating in air. While completing my undergraduate degree I had created a birdhouse based on Christensen's work that included several small fish that hung out away from the bulk of the piece (which was modeled as a small sailing ship.) The fish were made from scrap pieces of wood found in the shop's trash can, and creating them became a shared activity between several of my creative classmates well after the project was finished. They became tokens of friendship, because it took little time to fabricate and paint an entire small fish, and we often made and gave the fish to one another, and they developed the name 'bloopfish' within this social circle. The discus fish of this work are a very similar construction to these wooden bloopfish, and also convey a sense of wonder, happiness and community.

4. Betta Guardian

Betta Guardian started as a materials study to prepare for the making of *Discus Dance*, but evolved into a work in its own right. Betta males are solitary and have evolved the instinct to fight other males for territory. They create and guard bubble nests in hope that a female Betta will choose to mate and produce offspring with them. Over time the nest falls apart, becomes destroyed, and needs maintenance from the male, and he will continually rebuild nest after nest for his entire lifetime, even if a female never appears. It brings to mind concepts that humans hold dear, ideas and dreams that we may defend

long after their relevance has ended. The glass ‘bubbles’ filled with paint symbolize the creative possibility of the nest and the potential for creation, rebirth and destruction.

5. The Nature of Memory

The Nature of Memory is a mixed media sculpture roughly five feet tall and wide, mounted on a wooden panel. It is an African elephant head, of a roughly half-grown female individual. The head is constructed with a hollow framework of chicken wire covered over with folded butcher paper. Over top of this surface is a delicate decoration of white tissue paper with some micron pen and white paint decoration, reminiscent of traditional elephant decoration in India.

Elephants are unique among large animals in the level of emotion and empathy they display. They live in large social groups and bond deeply with one another, and their legendary memories are accentuated by the passing of information between individuals over generations. Elephants are one of only a handful of animals besides humans that are regularly observed to mourn and remember their dead, lingering with the bodies of fallen friends and family members, trumpeting sadly while stroking the body and covering it with brush to ‘bury’ it, and falling into a mourning state of similar actions whenever the group re-visits the site, often many years later. (Bekoff 66-67)

The Nature of Memory in the gallery setting becomes the literal ‘elephant in the room’, and becomes a metaphor piece to discuss the nature of memory and the things to which we attach memory and metaphor. The elephant is large and has significant presence in the gallery, but it’s hollow nature and fragile materials make it shudder at the slightest breeze and touch, and it becomes obvious that this large beast is a very fragile thing, impossible to embrace or touch without fear of damage, in the same way that memory can be a

strong, ever present force in life, but as a thing from the past it can never be touched or truly interacted with fully ever again. The elephant's eyes have a sad, burdened expression, typical of a member of a species which have long, emotional lives that see countless dangers and tragedies, and over the elephant lies decorative adornment that is at once beautiful but holds symbolic references to my own life and the losses I've suffered. The animal bears these memories as decoration, placing my emotional burdens on to it in the same way the older members of a wild elephant herd might teach younger elephants about death and the hardships of life through their own rituals well before the younger animal experience any such events for itself. *The Nature of Memory* becomes memory of relationship, friendship, loss and mourning, while being a beautiful beast burdened but not broken by its emotional load.

6. White Coyote Spirit

White Coyote Spirit is a four-foot square canvas with mixed media background, and a coyote's head protrudes from the canvas as though the animal has broken the flat space and is looking out at the viewer. The head is made from chicken wire and covered with strips of white cotton cloth to resemble facial features and fur of the animal.

White Coyote was inspired by a story passed on to me by a colleague who is an avid sportsman. In 2011 rumors circulated around northern Iowa of an albino coyote seen by several hunters in the area West of Cedar Falls. As both a hunter and conservationist with a deep appreciation for wildlife, he was frustrated that the reaction of everyone but him to this news was to quickly set up a bait stand and try to be the first person to shoot it. He wanted to set up a bait stand and try to shoot it also- but with a camera. He wanted a chance to see the animal for himself, and was angry that his friends and neighbors could

only see this rare and beautiful genetic quirk as an oddity that they wanted to hang on the wall rather than to allow it to live in peace.

This is the idea that evolved into White Coyote Spirit. I thought of white coyote as a totem, a species spirit that was perhaps not a real flesh and blood animal at all, but the ethereal spirit of a species so often maligned and treated as vermin by modern hunters. White coyote materializes out of the void spiritual white space of the canvas, looking out at the viewer, as if in the process of choosing weather to disappear back into the white void of the spirit world, or jump out of the canvas completely to join the world of the living. It has a timeless, ancient quality and a sense of intense personality.

7. Hummingbirds

The Hummingbirds are a series of six paintings of individual hummingbirds in flight. Each painting is an eight inches square acrylic work on canvas, painted with a mixture of studio acrylic paint, iridescent and metallic paint, and adorned with rhinestones and flat-backed crafting gems.

Hummingbirds have become a personal symbol of creativity and inspiration. They come into my life during periods of creative growth and abundance and become little muses to inspire work in various areas of daily activity. Especially poignant were the moments interacting with hummingbirds that actively marked various stages of my life and development as an artist. I found a tiny hummingbird nest outside of my High School shortly before graduating, later I found a dead hummingbird outside of the business where I was working an interim job during the 2008 recession, a few months before I enrolled in graduate school, and watched two hummingbirds fight a tiny but vicious battle

in my parent's garden while I stayed at their home for a summer recovering from an injury.

Although they are a biologically functioning animal like any other, they seem to operate in a dreamlike space, as though a crown jewel came to life and flits effortlessly between present reality and the depths of time and space. I imagine them as I painted them, as tiny objects that drip with jewels, precious gems in their own right that perhaps only appear to be organic creatures because of their speed and agility, rendering their details difficult for the viewer to discern. Each of the six paintings displays a different species of hummingbird, showing the variety of design and adornment present in nature to create individual masterpieces of flight.

8. Tooth and Claw, Hoof and Horn

Tooth and Claw, Hoof and Horn is a series of six masks split into two groups of three predatory species and three prey species. They become three pairs of predator and prey; a wolf and musk ox, a mountain lion and bighorn sheep, and a waterbuck antelope and African crocodile. The masks are mixed media and include materials like extruded foam insulation, cardboard, fake fur fabric, yarn, jersey knit fabric, clay and acrylic paint. This work explores several themes including transformation, shamanism, totemic identification, and natural ethics vs. human morality.

Masks have been used for thousands of years in many world cultures as a way of concealing the self in order to portray another being or another reality. In ritualized masked ceremonies the mask wearer is usually considered to be symbolically transformed into the creature, element or deity they are masked as, bringing the wearer and other participants in the ceremony closer to an alternate spiritual reality. In other

cultures the mask is less for the other participants and more for the wearer, as a temporary transitioning of their own identity into that of another. Even in an act as simple as Americans dressing up for Halloween, the temporary swapping of one's own identity also reveals aspects about the wearer in what they choose to swap their identity for. The mask offers a safe way to shelter one's own being while allowing elements of their personality they would normally hide to show through in the form of their mask or costume. (Shea)

Often the mask wearer in ancient traditions is a shaman, a spiritual leader within the group who's work requires him or her to make contact with the spirit realm in order to divine answers to questions, make decisions and heal illness. Masks and costume are often used in such ceremonies to invoke spirits from this other reality, so that they may help the shaman in sharing wisdom that is necessary for the shaman's task. The shaman may become possessed by the spirit of the animal or deity that the mask worn represents, or he may mentally transform into such in order to fulfill his task in the spirit world. In either case the mask facilitates a change of consciousness in the wearer, helping them to accomplish tasks they would otherwise be unable to complete. (Shea)

In the case of these masks, the viewer chooses to identify with a specific animal, and in doing so, allies themselves with traditional roles and ideas concerning that animal. There are broader categories, such as predatory animals and prey animals, and species distinctions. Wolves for example hunt and live their lives in packs and are social creatures, while mountain lions are solitary hunters that live alone, and crocodiles often live among other crocodiles but have little social bond to one another. Choosing to wear the mask of one of the prey animals may automatically define the wearer as a person who prefers the company of family and a large group of friends, as all of the prey animal

masks are creatures known to live in herds and groups and have a strong instinct to protect and defend their own kind.

Because the masks are displayed with each animal facing its 'competition', there is also another decision the viewer makes in choosing to identify with or wear one mask over another. Nature is often viewed as peaceful and harmonious from a western standpoint, but these masks point out that there is rarely peaceful coexistence in natural order. There is predator and prey, eat or be eaten, kill or be killed. Identifying with a predator means that the wearer is acknowledging an active role in taking another life for basic survival, to feed oneself and one's family, but as seen from the horns and size of the prey, this is hardly an act without significant physical risk of injury or death- prey does not give itself up without a fight. Likewise, wearing the prey masks, one must realize that the sharp horns present are not mere decoration- the animal opposing you can, and will kill you and consume you, and deadly force may be necessary to protect yourself and your family from being the next meal. Being prey does not put one in a passive, peaceful existence any more than being a predator means being in a state of constant bloodthirsty rage and desire to kill. There is not inherent 'good' or 'evil' in either existence or the acts of any animal; there is only survival and the means by which to continue that for another day.

9. The Circle

The Circle is a thirty-six inch square painting, acrylic on canvas, presented in conjunction with a cleaned deer skull on a pedestal. I had wanted to address Whitetail Deer in this thesis, because they are a common animal in Iowa and around the Midwest. They were nearly driven to extinction at the beginning of the last century and made a comeback in numbers so great that they have become a common road hazard and urban hunting

seasons have been implemented to control their numbers. They are such a constant part of the Iowa landscape that they have almost reached the same status as squirrels and rabbits, as animals so common that no one really considers them ‘wildlife’ anymore, they’re simply daily fixtures that are taken for granted. They roam backyards and fields and their bones fill ditches as the result of poorly timed highway crossing. I wanted to create a work that addressed the life through death cycle of the animal, and *The Circle* was the result. The male deer looks out inquisitively at the viewer while the background portrays a semi-abstracted deer skull, representative of the death of such animals, which is a common and necessary part of their existence in large numbers. The skull presented with the painting is a doe skull found with a nearly intact skeleton along the Des Moines River earlier in the semester, and helps convey the temporary nature of the life of this animal, as well as serve as a physical reminder of the animal that is seen often but rarely given much consideration.

10. I Will Follow You Into The Dark

I Will Follow You Into The Dark Is a mixed media drawing on raw canvas depicting two wolves. The canvas is stretched over a panel to provide additional surface support and the media creating the work are charcoal, conte’, colored pencil and a small amount of gesso and acrylic paint. The piece speaks to my own anxiety about relationships and desire for stable companionship.

Wolves are well known for their communal pack living- the phrase ‘lone wolf’ is a known misnomer, as the vast majority of wolves are members of packs ranging from three to thirty individuals. Social bonding activity is constant within the pack and researchers have documented animals to have the human equivalent of best friends and

lifelong-mated partnerships. Pack members will risk their own lives to defend one another from danger, play with one another in times of peace and plenty, and communally help in the raising of new pups. Many who study and work with wolves agree that wolf social structure is the closest non-primate analog to human society known in the natural world. (Dutcher-Ballantine)

I have always been drawn to wolves and come back to them as a subject matter frequently. I identify with them strongly, so wolves in my art always become a kind of stand-in for myself and my own thoughts and emotions. I've had many times in my life ongoing where the feeling of loneliness and lack of social support have felt like a large burden and I have been frustrated to not have a 'pack' to lean on for encouragement and guidance. The pack metaphor is also a two-way relationship, where one individual contributes to others and is supported in return, and I've also felt the desire to help others with their needs, but often become angry and hurt when that help is not reciprocal.

I Will Follow You Into The Dark is essentially a visual manifestation of the desire for partnership, and both wolves can represent myself and another individual in reciprocal roles; One where I act as the wolf with it's head up, willing to support the other in it's time of weakness, and the other where I am supported in my own time of need.

The title of the piece comes from a song by the same title, by the American band 'Death Cab For Cutie', which the band released shortly after the passing of my best friend. The song was powerful and simple for me at the time, as it addressed a similar feeling of wanting to hold on to relationship even in times of death and uncertainty. The title of the song reflects the line of its chorus:

“ If Heaven and Hell decide

That they both are satisfied

Illuminate the 'No's on their vacancy signs

If there's no one beside you

When your soul embarks

Then I will follow you into the dark”

CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In naming this thesis and the accompanying exhibition, *Beasts of Earth and Spirit*, I studied humanity's first artworks and found a melding of two realities from the onset of visual culture. The creatures that inhabit our world and live out their physical existence alongside us have perhaps lived larger in our collective spirituality, becoming dual citizens of both an earthly and heavenly space. Their identities and images haunt and obsess me, push me to find forms and media varied enough to encompass and explain all of the thoughts and dreams I have involving these fascinating creatures, and I intend to continue to be involved in sharing their influence with others through my art. I have deeply enjoyed and sustained connections to my study into this area and consider it only the beginning, for in such research lies the roots of so many of humanity's traditions and deepest longings. Looking back at animals in human history asks us to question our ideas of religion and divinity, looking at them in our present we see the links we make between beasts of burden and our emotions, dreams, fears, and aspirations. Perhaps we keep and demand their company because we want something of them beyond their labor, their companionship and their physical products.

We want the understanding of what it is to be human by understanding the essence of being a non human, and being not gods or angels ourselves, our next closest connection to a power beyond ourselves lies in the creatures of land, sky and water; these beasts of earth and spirit.

VISUAL REFERENCES



Fig. 1 Bison on the cave ceiling at Altimira



Fig. 2 Spotted horses at Pech Merle, France



Fig. 3 Egyptian God *Anubis*



Fig. 4 Egyptian Scarab Beetle with sun disc



Fig. 5 *Silent Spring*, Judy Larson



Fig. 6 *Morning Solitude*, Larry Zach



Fig. 7 *Farmland Monarch*, Greg Bordignon

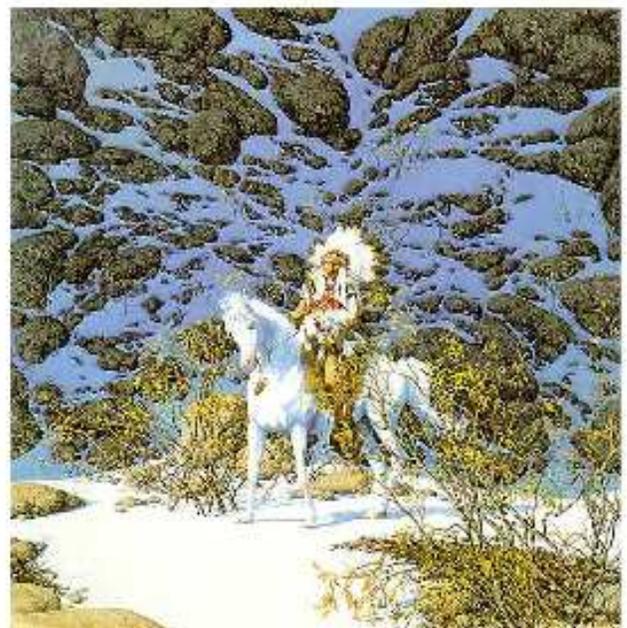


Fig. 8 *Eagle Heart*, Bev Doolittle



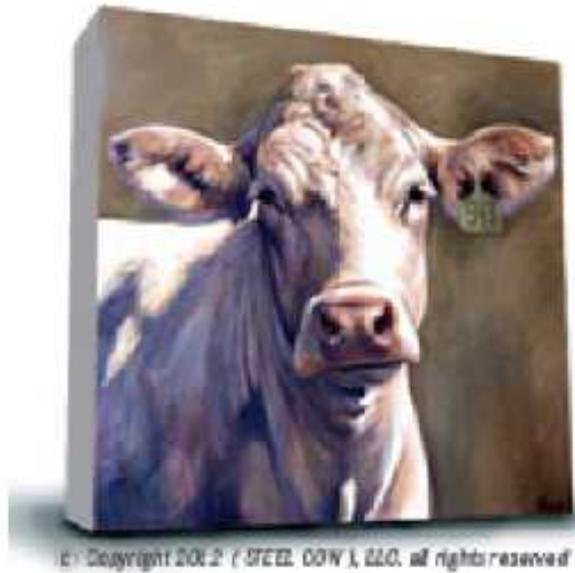
Fig. 9 *Earth Element*, Jody Bergsma



Fig. 10 *Responsible Woman*, James Christensen



Fig. 11 *Hawk On The Ground*, Rick Bartow



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Fig. 12 *Edith*, Valarie Miller, Steel Cow Studio



Fig. 13 *Mr. Percival*, Kimberly Kelly Santini



Fig. 14 *4-H Calf*, Christian Petersen



Fig. 15 *Running Saluki*, Gwynn Murrill



Fig. 16 *Shoulders of Giants*, Nina de Creeft Ward



Fig. 17 *Pleasure*, Beth Cavener Stichter



Fig. 18 Photograph from *The Magic Flute*, costume design by Julie Taymor

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Visual Documentation



The Great Bear
Acrylic on canvas
9' x 5.5'
2013

A Dream of Horses
Acrylic, charcoal and pastel on canvas
4" x 6"
2013





Discus Dance
 Mixed media sculpture
 insulation foam, paper, acrylic paint,
 air dry clay
 2013



Betta Guardian
 Mixed media sculpture
 insulation foam, paper,
 acrylic paint, glass.
 2013



The Nature of Memory
Mixed media sculpture
wood panel, wire, butcher paper, tissue
paper
2012



White Coyote Spirit
Mixed Media
Acrylic paint on canvas, charcoal,
wire, cotton fabric
Canvas size 4' x 4'
2012



Hummingbirds
acrylic on canvas with crafting gems
each canvas 8" x 8"
2013



Tooth and Claw, Hoof and Horn
Mixed media masks
2012-2013



The Circle
Acrylic on Canvas
36" x 36"
2013



I Will Follow You Into The Dark
mixed media drawing on canvas
24" x 48"
2013