The Nature of My Nature; A Story About Relationships

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The Nature of My Nature;  
A Story About Relationships

by
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A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts  
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

As a second generation Hispanic, I am a painter whose work is informed by my personal experience of displacement and longing to belong. In turn, I hope, this longing inspires an important dialogue about place, memory, otherness and belonging. I work in small, intimate scale, evoking narratives of vastness yet also of solitude. The landscape and the natural environment I represent, become populated by anonymous creatures. Both animal and human, posed in semi-natural and semi-artificial settings.

I was born in Texas and grew up in Missouri. The images I produce are often tranquil and surreal yet are grounded through their inherent familiarity. My use of paint serves as a language that transforms poetry into visual art. I use poetic approach to reflect upon the so-called natural world. Frequently, I relate and even exchange, animals and humans in my paintings. I propose narratives, which express the problematic relationship society has with the natural world. My paintings provide an invented landscape that acts as a metaphor for beings who have been displaced or uprooted from their original environments.

The characters and beings that appear in my work symbolize marginalization. Through ironic humor and understated theatricality my work points at the similarities all biological life shares. The habitats I portray are often unknown and artificial, reflecting notions of absence and melancholia. My work is often underscored by the unavoidable, anthropomorphist approach yet it offers metamorphic shifts. My paintings re-contextualize the unfamiliarity of subjects, to draw attention to connections. I emphasize those relationships in my paintings because I believe that the respect of animals would lead to a more empathetic society.
Introduction

As a visual artist, I promote three main elements which collectively communicate a desire to belong. The first theme that can be seen in my art is the marginalization of the animal. In my work, I represent this physical organism because I perceive the animal as a being which has been neglected by humanity, resulting in a problematic relationship between society and nature. An issue, which I argue, is associated with the power and authority established by previous western philosophy. Since I observe an absence in compassion for beings viewed as other, through my work I reverse this stigma by focusing on the similarities animals have with humans. I accentuate relationships in my paintings to support the minority in which animals are pre-judged as, essentially elevating the status of animals in society through awareness.

Another theme that my paintings contemplate is my identity through remembrance of traumatic experiences. Since I am Hispanic and I sympathize with the minority of the animal, my images often reflect displacement and isolation. These themes are emphasized in my work because they connect to my personal narrative of migrating from Texas to Missouri as a child. Additionally, my work expresses the emotional stress I endured from an absent father and an estranged relationship with my family. Subjects which I absorb into my work as a way of poetically healing.

Lastly, at the heart of my art is my imagination. Through the influence of Surrealism and the metaphysical I create my own reality. In my paintings, I regularly employ poetic relationships, which are conceived by unusual juxtapositions. I highlight these relationships because I believe it’s important to re-contextualize subjects in-order to gain new perspectives, specifically regarding the animal. Often this element occurs in my work through metamorphic
and anthropomorphic shifts. I regularly use the animal to metaphorically represent myself, producing tranquil and surreal paintings, which are situated between an emotional state of melancholy and nirvana. I assume this role of the animal who is eternally searching for belonging because I perceive belonging as a universal desire, one that connects all biological life.
Animal: The Poetics of Nature
I am drawn to animals and natural environment because I perceive the natural world as a place that has been marginalized and neglected by Western civilization, as opposed to the notion of culture. As a Hispanic artist, I paint animals and landscapes because I empathize with the feeling of neglect and marginalization because of my minority within society. Throughout my childhood I have experienced racism, neglect from peers and displacement.

Animals and nature are biological life that I respect deeply. When I paint animals, I am not representing them in a scientific way like that of past animal painter George Stubbs.¹ I do not paint animals because I find them exotic. I also do not paint animals because I desire their beauty so much that I want to capture it and display it like a trophy. I paint animals because I see myself as a being that belongs to nature. When I paint nature, it is because I perceive it as being poetic, because of its smallness and its evocation of minority in relation to culture and society. I paint nature because I have compassion for my fellow animals and I want to give animals the right to share the world with humanity.

In my work a bear, a deer, an environment appears as if taken from a book, resembling illustrations. I paint illustratively because this style reminds me of the connection I once had with nature when I was a child. In many ways painting to me now is what nature was to me then. When I paint, I do so to offer a sense of soothing, healing and to self-reflection for the viewer.

I remember as a child I would often find refuge in the woods after school because nature was the place reducing the pain or frustrations I experienced. It was there, surrounded by tall grass and singing birds, that I found peace. Now, painting is my nature. I choose to represent nature in intimate, humorous and poetic ways because of the nature’s ability to heal. I do not paint illustratively because I cannot achieve a hyperrealism aesthetic through a technique. Neither do I want to simplify the complexities of nature. When I paint illustratively, flat and
stylized, I do so because I want to re-interpret nature, rather then re-represent it. I make images that relate to the wildlife by expressing its playfulness, and by highlighting its mysteriousness.

I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order.\(^2\)
– John Burroughs

When I was growing up my mother would say “mijo, treat others like you would want to be treated”. Like my mother, I view all biological life as equal. I believe as an artist, my job is awakening compassion for things that ultimately appear or feel unfamiliar. I try to poetically reverse the stigma that animals are not equal to humanity. I want to accentuate the relationship that links the two together.

![Figure 1](image)

In my paintings, I try to emphasize the similarities between animals and humans as a way of mirroring or reciprocating the relationships that all biological life is bound by. My work re-contextualizes a subject, either by making the familiar unfamiliar or vice versa. In my art, I do this by exchanging gestures of humans and animals. An example of this exchange is my 2017 painting *We’re Still Trying to Figure It Out* (fig. 1), which depicts two humans sitting in a grassy
green field amongst a small tribe of goats. The couple is dressed in contemporary clothing, but is shown wearing goat masks. Both the artificial goat like humans and real ones seem to exchange each other’s curiosity for one another. To me this idea of mirroring or reflecting oneself in others, specifically understanding an animal or another as a reflection of the self is an important aspect of my work.

In my work animals and the natural environment are small, referring to the notion of minority. My paintings are also small in scale. Smallness and minority make me think of poetry, of how intimate and personal the experience of reading a poem can be, which I evoke in my work. I also interpret nature as being small because it is often neglected and regarded as disposable or insignificant to culture like art and poetry. When I paint, I often do so on an intimate scale, to illustrate the relationship I once had as a child with the natural world. Additionally, I paint intimately because I want to bring awareness to the opposite of smallness, the power, and the potential and beauty things perceived as small can induce. I relate this fixation on smallness versus power to my own upbringing. As a child I felt small, unimportant and often disposable.

A profusion of recent studies has shown animals to be far closer to us than we previously believed – it turns out that common shore crabs feel and remember pain, zebra finches experience REM sleep, fruit-fly brothers cooperate, dolphins and elephants recognize themselves in mirrors, chimpanzees assist one another without expecting favors in return and dogs really do feel elation in their owners’ presence.³ –New York Times

Some of the most adventurous and influential developments in recent Western art and philosophy have taken a deeply skeptical view of what has come to be seen as the divisive and defensive ‘common-sense’ account of identity. Whether described in terms of the heritage of Enlightenment rationalism or liberal humanism, this account of privileged and empowered individual, often epitomized by the figure of the creative artist or author, has for several decades been the object of a destabilizing rhetoric. By the 1990’s the rhetoric (not always backed by sound historical argument) proposed that the postmodern should also be considered a post-human condition.⁴ –Michel Foucault
As an artist, I live in a period of post-humanist thought and a rise of animal advocacy as argued by cultural theorist and animal advocate Steve Baker in “the Postmodern Animal” and “Artist/Animal”. I make paintings that relate to the marginalization and neglect animals have and continue to endure, however unlike activists or activist artists who work with the archive of images of events, I employ poetry and humor.

I am an animal. I have been one since birth. When I equate myself with the animal, I don’t do so in a culturally colonialist context, which interprets other heritages as animals or unsophisticated and savage. Also, I don’t compare myself with the animal in terms of Aristotle and Descartes philosophical theories of naturalistic schema.

According to Aristotle, for example, animals are best understood as belonging to a naturalistic schema in which they are situated between plants and human beings and as being ultimately (if not entirely) placed in the service of human beings. Both Aristotle and Descartes are representatives of a disappointing trend within Western Philosophy: a failure to imagine the subjectivity of non-human animal life, and consequently, a failure to critically engage questions regarding how human beings relate to (or ought to relate to) animals. Not only have influential philosophers repeated many of the anthropocentric tendencies of the dominant culture, but in many cases, they have sought to provide a rigorous justification for many of our most violent modes of interactions with animals.6 –Matthew Calarco

I don’t see myself or the animal as being less important than humanity or as servants to men, women, and minorities have been notoriously perceived in the Western hemisphere. When I equate myself to an animal I do so as a way of balancing the oppressive tiers of humanity's history of the oppression of animals. When I equate myself to an animal I do so to honor the animal, and to illustrate that I am a being, which is equal to it, not more and not less.

As an artist, I am also an animal because I am often marginalized and misinterpreted. This marginalization is the foundation that I share with the fellow animal.

All sites of enforced marginalization--- ghettos, shanty towns, prisons, madhouses, concentration camps--- have something in common with zoos. But it
is both too easy and too evasive to use the zoo as a symbol. The zoo is a demonstration of the relations between man and animal; nothing else. The marginalization of animals is today being followed by the marginalization and disposal of the only class which, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals and maintained the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity: The middle and small peasant. –John Berger

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated. –Mahatma Gandhi

When I think about the marginalization of the animal I think of the isolation that most animals are confined by. An example of this confinement can be viewed in zoos, farms and other domestic spaces, like the giant concrete wall that runs along the St. Louis interstate. I perceive this wall - like all walls - as a border, which was erected to segregate and control the natural world.

Solitude is an important subject of my paintings as it represents the relationship most humans have with animals, communicating power and authority. To me the zoo is an example of that authority humans exercise over animals. Though zoos today serve as a place of refuge for endangered animals, in the nineteenth century the zoo had a different function as an endorsement of modern colonial power. The capturing of the animals was a symbolic representation of the conquest of all distant lands. Explorers proved their patriotism by sending home a tiger or an elephant as argued by John Berger’s essay “Why Look at Animals”. The confinement that animals seem to exist in relates to the authority humanity still feels it has over animals. As an artist, my paintings are meant to emphasize this solitude while illustrating that animals don’t belong to anyone. They are protagonists of their own right.

After thousands of years, biologists are concerned about the future of the white-bottomed pronghorn migration pattern. While there have been efforts to protect the journey, such as highway overpasses and antelope-friendly fences, some new barriers are looming. Most immediate is the prospect of 3,500 new gas wells planned on federal land at the southern end of the pronghorn’s migratory path. And then there’s the nearby Jonah Natural Gas Field, which is already intensively
developed. “The challenge is understanding how many holes you can punch in the landscape,” said Matthew Kauffman, a professor of wildlife biology at the University of Wyoming, “before a species migration is lost.”

Originally when I started painting animals, I represented them in confinement as seen in my body of work produced in 2016. *Living in a Memory* (fig. 2), depicts the weathered and yellowed skeletal remains of a chicken.

![Figure 2](image)

This adult skeleton is shown juxtaposed alongside a baby black chick that shares the enclosed space. Above these animals looms a human hand set in a grasping gesture. The painting represents the oppressive role humanity often has over the animal. The series includes trapped animals in illusionistic vitrines. I used the vitrine as a device for displaying grief, melancholy and loneliness. That’s what I saw animals enduring in zoos, history museums and in the work of
contemporary artists like Damien Hirst. I am interested in Hirst's installation *Mother and Child, Divided* (fig. 3) which was created in 1993, displaying two floor sculptures comprising of four glass-walled tanks, because of its relationship with animals that reflect emotions, while provoking a reflection on these relationships. Inside the tanks are two halves of a cow and calf, each dissected and preserved in formaldehyde solution. The tanks are installed in pairs, the two halves of the calf in front of the two halves of the mother. Each pair has sufficient space between so that visitors may walk between the animals. However, in my work the vitrine has a different purpose. It does not represent souvenirs. I don’t want my vitrines to be trophies or victories, which represented value. Rather, I want it to represent seclusion, pain, oppression, isolation and displacement. Also, I do not use the flesh of animals or harm them in any way through my work.

Figure 3
Solitude is represented through space. Most humans and animals that inhabit my paintings are isolated from one another. Metaphorically I use this relationship to communicate the absence or abandonment humanity has undergone regarding animals. Although, they are not meant to appear different. I represent them in this manner because it mirrors the reality I live in.

Another essential concept, in addition to the marginalization of the animal, is displacement. I represent displacement as the otherness that society identifies the animal with. Currently the world is experiencing environmental issues such as the climate change and the depletion of habitat due to hunting and fishing, deforestation and urbanization. These are issues, which collectively are leading to the biggest mass extinction since the Triassic period.11 Because of this crisis, millions of species are being forced to migrate to new areas in search for refuge. My paintings do not represent the chaos of this exodus, nor do they highlight the devastation the animal has suffered throughout times. I represent this issue in subtle and symbolic ways through nostalgia and a sentimental lost world. This the extinction of the animal and by extension, the entire natural environment, is represented by an invented character of an animal in domestic space, on a golf course, in a farm, within a suburban neighborhood. I represent the animal as not the one out of place. Rather, that it is humanity who created this displacement.

Humanity is subjective12 –Ai Weiwei

To me the marginalization and the displacement of others is one of the most pervasive cruelties that a person experiences. My work evokes the displacement in relation to marginalization of animals, but it also mirrors the current neglect some races face because of their otherness. An example of this problematic exchange of rights can be viewed through the unfair treatment of Syrian refugees caused by the current migrant crisis. Due to the disruption of Islamic societies caused by the Syrian civil war, millions have become displaced from their
original homes. As millions migrate to surrounding societies in search for refuge, many face deplorable conditions, and at times are treated like animals as illustrated by Aw Weiwei’s documentary ‘Human Flow’. Like Weiwei, I am passionate about exploring notions of otherness because it is my belief that this term is subjective, like the term humanity. I also perceive that these terms at their core are meant to create separation between individuals. My paintings serve as a narrative, which is created to break apart the meaning of these terms that separates us, and highlight the problematic relationship between culture, nature and otherness.

The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong in the world
–Paul Farmer
Identity: Belonging and Not Belonging
What is myself? Don’t know, don’t know, don’t know – T. S. Eliot

In the process of making my paintings, I am influenced by my memory and identity, which have been shaped by past experiences and traumas, which I reflect on as a Hispanic painter to better comprehend why I felt marginalized and neglected as a child. When I paint, I often use my memory of distressing events as a tool to help shape the narratives of my work. My identity is reflected in my work through the contemplation of subjects, such as a wolf, a child (fig. 4), which stands in isolation or has been displaced from their original environment because this estrangement mirrors my upbringing. I perceive the relationship between my identity and troublesome memories as an important aspect of my work because it allows me to understand the role memory has in shaping the self. More importantly though, I highlight this relationship in my work because through self-reflection and painting I can heal from my past traumas. Experiences such as my absent father, my estranged relationship with my mother, and essentially raising myself since I was a child.

Figure 4
Everything we remember has such a relation to ourselves as to imply necessary our existence at the time remembered\textsuperscript{16} – Thomas Reid

I envision memory as the heart of my identity. Memory is the heart of philosophical discussions regarding identity as argued by Stanley B. Klein and Shaun Nichols in ‘Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity’.\textsuperscript{17} To me, memories provide the critical evidence of past existence.

Another reason why I believe that past experiences are important to explore as an artist is because in my paintings I relate memory to nature. Like nature, I enter my past to self-reflect, to be soothed and to heal from past traumas. To me nature and remembrance are a source of meditation, a source of poetry, and a source of art. When I represent memories of absence in my paintings, I don’t represent myself physically. Instead, I represent the self mentally and emotionally. In my work, I use memories of past experiences and feelings. The displacement I represent refers to my migration from Texas to Missouri, an experience that caused me to feel estrangement towards my environment. After I have a memory or feeling in mind I model the narrative of my painting around that sentiment.

When I try to reflect on why I believe I am a practicing artist, I remember my mother. I remember her saying to me as a child drawing on the floor “mijo you are an artist, like your father”. I connect this memory to trauma because of my father’s absence. My father had left my mother and I when I was still a baby and I never knew him. Though I relate this memory to trauma, at the time I found peace in this relationship because I always felt connected to my father when my mother would relate me to him through her memories. Typically, these small pieces of knowledge I gained of my father when I was a kid were things I valued as being very precious because I had no memories of him.
(A Memory of My Father)
I did not know his name,
I did not know his age,
I did not know his face,
I did not know his love.
That was the hardest to escape.
–Quiet Artist

Regularly, my father appeared to me as a ghost, something that was absent, and something that was hardly ever discussed and never seen. Almost all the memories I have of my father are memories which my mother and I share because they’re not my own. I always felt solitude growing up because I did not have a father. As a child who grew up without a father I think the best way I could feel connected to him was through my art, through my mother, and through her telling me that I reminded her of him. I became an artist to confront my trauma, and to feel closer to my father and mother. In return, I hope my work provokes a space for healing and for my viewers.

Solitude is an important subject of my paintings to highlight because it mirrors the loneliness I felt as a child. I felt isolation because of my father’s abandonment. I felt solitude because of the size of my environment growing up was small. I felt seclusion because my hometown never felt like my home, which made me feel like I never belonged. I remember when I was a child my mother worked a lot as a single mother. Subsequently, because she was always working I felt estrangement towards her. Though my mother was the only constant in my life, I always perceived her as an elusive figure. I viewed my mother as elusive and felt estranged towards her because I had minimal knowledge of her history. I did not know how I ended up in Joplin Missouri from San Antonio or why. I did not know my Father. I did not know a lot of the answer to the basic questions of my existence.
It’s much easier not to know things sometimes, and to have French fries with your mom be enough. –Stephen Chbosky

This quote explores the relationship “Charlie” the main character of Chbosky’s book ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’ has with his mother. I feel connected to the story of Charlie because as a child I was quiet and withdrawn and I struggled with my identity throughout my adolescence. I also felt like I wasn’t shown the love I wanted or needed at home, which parallels the Charlies story. I also feel like I relate to Charlie because of the relationship he shares with his mother. As a kid the times I felt the most connected to my mother was when I was told that I looked like her. The mirroring of my mother’s appearance always made me feel like I belonged to her. A feeling I longed because I rarely felt that connection with anyone.

Another relationship I share with my mother is through poetry. My mother has always been a silent poet all her life, she would often choose expressing her emotions through writing instead of talking. I remember as a child seeing her scribbling her thoughts onto paper. This is how my mother tried to make sense of the world around her. Like my mother’s Haiku’s, I use poetic expression to speak about the small beauties of the natural world. I am a visual poet who explores emotions through representation and imagery.

My paintings focus on the imaginative, highlighting the sensitivity and often emotional state and expression of my subjects. I reflect nature, both the natural world and my own nature meaning my psychological characteristics and feelings. Narratives and storytelling also become a major aspect of my work, which relate to poetry, as poems often communicate or revolve around a plot. Moreover though, my work could be considered poetic because my paintings regularly compare and highlight relationships through unfamiliar juxtapositions.
My relationship with my mother and the memories I have gathered of her, form the foundation of my work and speak about a state of being connected. I relate this connection to my heritage. I am Hispanic like my mother, like her father and like my own. In celebration of these relationships I believe it is essential to continue to build upon the connections between identity, poetry, and Hispanic culture. As an artist, it is important for me to emphasize relationships because they communicate a state of being connected, which my paintings represent. My work reflects belonging as a universal desire, one that connects all biological life.

Contemporary Mexican culture remains for the most part underpinned by the belief system of the indigenous peoples which sees all the components of the natural world as interconnected.20—Christina Burrus

A Hispanic painter who stands out as a major influence on my work is Frida Kahlo, whose painting as she states “carries within it the message of pain”. Kahlo creates her own reality, one that reflects trauma, both personal and cultural. Through this reflection her art absorbs her identity. I also am inspired by a longing to return to my cultural roots. I desire to rediscover the absent origins of my childhood. This poetic relationship can be viewed throughout her work, but the painting I feel the most connected with is her 1946, *The Wounded Deer* (fig. 5). In this particular image, Frida gives the animal her own face, which is positioned towards the viewer. She crowns herself with antlers and an expression of nobility, and places herself in a forest, which is bare and filled with broken limbs. The body of the deer is wounded, pierced with nine arrows, which slowly kill it. Kahlo used the arrows and tortured trees as a symbol of the emotion pain she had endured.21
On the concern of how Hispanic identity is shaped by American society, Mexican poet Octavio Paz argues in “Hispanic Art in the United States” that the search for reconciliation of the self stems from trauma. The first trauma being a result of our birth, a symbol Paz comments serves as a metaphor for our original uprooted lives. This displacement, as Paz puts it is ultimately the main reason why humans search for relationships. Without these relationships, I would argue that the self is more likely to gain more traumas and to feel more isolated. An argument that Paz defends in his essay.

Another point I would argue that Paz defends in his essay is that minorities in America are higher at risk of developing feelings of alienation or estrangement towards their environments. I believe this susceptibility to displacement happens because those who are viewed as a minority are subsequently seen as different or as other. I also think that these
feelings of displacement are caused by the repression of certain heritages origins, a belief Paz also shared.

The Mexicans belong to a country in which various civilizations have raised pyramids, temples, palaces and other magnificent constructions. Yet it has not been able, in this country, to house all of its own children. –Octavio Paz

I perceive other heritages as equally complex when thinking about the history of America. Both African Americans and Native Americans have all been relocated and dislodged from their original homes. I see forcefully exiled beings that have been oppressed by colonialism and taught to forget the memories of their traumatic past. Like for Paz, displacement for me is the most damaging characteristic the self can endure. Displacement changes you, it places you on a journey to survive, to fit, to belong and to reinvent yourself. I sympathize with the feeling of displacement because I have felt displaced since my family migrated from Texas to Missouri. With this shift in my environment and community I grew up feeling disjointed from my surroundings. I remember as a child my mother would always refer to Texas as home. My mother would often say “mijo I think it’s time to return home” when she was homesick. I always felt homesick. I always viewed Texas as my home, which is why I think I felt estranged towards the town I grew up in.

My paintings relate to feelings of displacement as a child and to my history being neglected because after arriving in Missouri the relationship my family had with Hispanic culture became more reclusive. These losses of origins made me feel a loss of self because my environment felt artificial. Even my landscape artificially mirrored Texas, which I believe only added to my feelings of melancholy. Also, my identity felt artificial because I felt like I had to pretend to be someone I wasn’t. Because my new community was predominately white and not familiar with other cultures, I felt alienated. These feelings of being marginalized by my
community were only furthered by the relationship I had with my brother, who had the hardest
time with identifying with Hispanic culture. I remember when he started becoming more familiar
with his father, he learned that his father did not like “beaners” or “wetbacks” or anything that
wasn’t white. As a result, because my brother wanted to reconcile a relationship with his father,
he preferred being called white. Like my brother, I just wanted to fit in. I desired what I believe
most do, relationships, connections and to feel like I belong. Because I felt displaced and isolated
I ended up following in the footsteps of my brother and abandoning my identity that resulted in
me feeling more displaced and further isolated. Like my father to me, I had become a ghost to
myself.
Aesthetics: The Influence of the Metaphysical
At the heart of my paintings is my imagination, a non-real space I frequent to escape from my troubling environment. In the beginning of my artistic practice Surrealism was the only movement that I felt like I shared a profound relationship with because like myself, the artists in this movement seemed to prefer the imaginative over the real. Primarily I found the historical movement compelling because of the aesthetics of the work. My attraction to the metaphysical comes from the artificiality in which surrealists represented reality. I enjoy fantasy because of its dreaminess. Another aspect of the artwork that I find captivating is the melancholia that is occupied in the images. I find Surrealism alluring because it is quiet, most of the work is small in scale and is calming. I perceive it as poetic because of the re-contextualization of objects. I like the strange relationships that are displayed in the work through unique juxtapositions.

I am a 21st century Surrealist. When I say that, I don’t mean that I agree with everything the movement stands for. I do share a lot of commonality with its artists, such as the struggle of self-identity, but I don’t agree with the exotic nature in which most exploited women in. And I don’t agree that madness liberates language from convention as argued by David Lomas in ‘the Haunted Self’. More importantly I do not agree with the sexist nature of Freud’s theory of Psychoanalysis. I consider myself a Surrealist because at the center of my art I am speaking about trauma. I consider myself a surrealist because of the aesthetics I implement into my work reference and are influenced by past members and speak about what is beyond real. I am a Surrealist today because of the poetics I use in my work are meant to re-contextualize the relationships objects have.

I first became introduced to the altered reality of Surrealism when I was a teenager. At first, my encounter with the images of Kahlo, Dali and Magritte was like experiencing first love. For me, the works seemed to visual embody what I felt emotionally. Dali was the first
relationship I had with the movement. When I would gaze at the work of Dali I would feel like the images were communicating to me on a personal level. Like the work not only knew who I was, but was also familiar with my mannerisms. Often when I looked at the work of Dali I was hypnotized by its abnormality.

Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (fig. 6) is quiet like myself. It is small in scale and precious like that of one of my memories. There are objects that I can recognize but they feel unusual in their sense of solitude. The objects are distorted, foreign and appear lonely, almost in a state of limbo. Everything is melting, drooping, weeping as time continues to march on like the ants that mimic the hands on the clock that rest in the shadows. Even the environment appears dead, dry and unchangeable. The land is vast and flat like the one I knew so well growing up. It at times appears endless which reflects the melancholia feeling I sensed when I starred at my own environment. Like the limbs of the tree that make up my history Dali’s tree of life seems tortured, chopped and stunted, stopped by the trauma of its own past.

Figure 6
Melancholia is an important element in my work to emphasize because it reflects the way I felt growing up in Joplin. There is sadness and gloom that invades my consciousness when I think about my childhood. The feeling is deep, and it is infused into my soul. To me this melancholic feeling becomes instilled into my work through several elements. Through the aesthetics of my work I relate this melancholic feeling to the solitude that most of my subjects are imposed in. I connect this solitude to melancholia through the artificiality of my images. I make paintings that are dreamy and take place between here and nowhere. I make work that is familiar yet unusual. Also, I relate my work to melancholia through displacement. Because I perceive displacement as being lonely, I use that isolation to translate the feeling of melancholia in my work. I further develop this feeling in my work by utilizing colors, which mimic that emotional state. I promote the use of grays and blues to further the feeling of melancholia in my paintings like the work of Aron Wiesenfeld (fig. 7).²⁵

Figure 7
There are echoes of another world, a world of neither prophetic ecstasy nor brooding meditation, but of heightened sensibility where soft nots, sweet perfumes, dreams and landscapes mingle with darkness, solitude and even grief itself, and by this bitter-sweet contradiction serve to heighten self-awareness.\textsuperscript{26}

–Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl

Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing who I haunt?\textsuperscript{27} –Andre Brenton

I relate this melancholic feeling to Surrealism because most Surrealists like me struggled with their identity. This question regarding identity is one that plagues the work of Surrealists, which is also argued by David Lomas in “the Haunted Self”.\textsuperscript{28} The trauma that I experienced as a child can be similarly seen in the lives of many surrealists. To me I connect this trauma to the otherness I felt growing up because of the displacement I experienced. Growing up I felt like I did not belong, I felt isolated even alienated at times. Feelings, which I connect with my migration from Texas to Missouri. Many Surrealists experienced these same feelings through exile. Because Surrealists of the past like myself were exiled from their homes in search for safer and new beginnings many of them struggled with feelings of otherness because of their solitude. Like myself many surrealist felt restless because of their frequent movement. Also, many surrealists had unresolved identities because they belonged to multiple nations or nationalities. A struggle I sympathize with as a Hispanic who was raised in an environment that had a very minimal minority population.

Another reason why I always felt eerily connected to Surrealisms aesthetics was because of the poetry I perceived in the images. Like that of the work of Dali and other surrealists, my work shares a commonality in scale. Most of the paintings I make are personal in size and are meant to highlight the relationship I have with things that are small. I perceive tininess as powerful and influential. I view poetry as something that is small yet it is powerful because It
holds the potential to free the mind. Poetry is an important aspect of my work that I like to emphasize because poetry is liberating to me. The scale of my paintings is meant to echo the poetics I view in both art and nature. My paintings act as poetry because they are designed to dissolve the reality around me. When I paint, I disappear into a greater reality, one that is less chaotic and more freeing. Like myself, Brenton argued that poetry was a way to escape from the trauma of the past, a way of liberating the consciousness.  

We make poetry the compensation for the misery we have to bear, as a means of escape form the unbearable reality. A way of spiritually surpassing the sordid life.  

Salvador Dali – Little things
There’s a tiny thing in a spot up high.
I’m happy, I’m happy, I’m happy, I’m happy.
The sewing needles plunge into sweet and tender little bits of nickel.
My girlfriend’s hand is made of cork full of thumbtacks.
One of my girlfriend’s breasts is a calm sea urchin, the other a swarming Wasp’s nest.
My girlfriend has a knee of smoke
The little charms, the little charms, the little charms, the little charms, the little charms,
The little charms prick.
The partridge’s eye is red.
Little things, little things, little things, little things, little things, little things, little things
Little things, little things, little things, little things, little things, little things, little things…

The most compelling aspect that draws me into the aesthetics of Surrealism is the re-contextualization of objects through unfamiliar juxtapositions. I find this aspect to be the most compelling because through philosophical thought Surrealism gave birth to the idea of seeing oneself as animal, or other. An idea, which paved the way for animal advocacy as, argued by Steve Baker in ‘the Postmodern Animal’. The influence of philosophical exploration is important in my practice because I believe this idea of seeing oneself as other is invaluable. I
think to gain a fresh point of view it is crucial to transform the self into another like Surrealists did with metamorphic and anthropomorphic shifts. To me, I believe it is important for humans to step outside of ourselves to humble our existence in relationship to others, specifically in relation to animals.

Through the influence of dreams, I perceive myself as a being who belongs to nature. I would also argue that many surrealist felt similar because of the relationship most had with being alienated, displaced and feeling like they did not belong. Like myself most found refuge in dreams, most attempted to find relationships between animals and the human form like Dali, Ernst and Magritte. Through dreams I experience the metamorphic shifts of life, through birth and rebirth and life and death. Because of this transformation, I can become more compassionate towards others.

An example I that illustrates the power of transformation and the metamorphosis in dreams is the fictional novel by surrealist Franz Kafka, ‘the Metamorphosis’. In this book, Kafka writes about the story of a young man who transformed into a giant beetle-like insect. Through his transformation, the man becomes an outsider in his own home, an alienated man. The metamorphic shift of his physical appearance serves as a metaphor for the humiliation and indifference the man endures daily. An indifference that I think one could only understand if they could step into the life of an insect, animal or even a person who is viewed as lesser than. In my art, I often incorporate metamorphic and anthropomorphic shifts because I think it’s important to familiarize one’s self with the unfamiliar.

Surrealism allows me to delve into environmental issues and animal welfare issues, creating strange worlds that reflect the state of our planet today. –Amy Guidry
Currently, artists who I perceive being influenced by Surrealism and nature like myself are focused on making work that explores the interactions between the world shaped by human and animal life. Like that of my work, often this relationship between the animal and human is illustrated as being problematic, focusing on the troublesome effects humanity has had on the natural world. This relationship I share with current surrealists can be viewed in the work of Josh Keyes (fig. 8) and Amy Guidry (fig. 9) among others. My work also shares a connection with these artists through scale and the poetic notions I emphasize in my paintings. Both the work of Keyes and Guidry is personable in size and has poetic titles, which reflect the romantic relationship they share with nature. Another relationship I share with these artists is the influence of notions like solitude related to confinement, displacement related to migration and belonging. My work parallels these artists through the connection of dreamlike imagery. An aspect of my work that I perceive is bound to Surrealism through the influence of re-contextualization. As a result of Surrealism being an influence, I able to promote curiosity in my paintings. I can make something familiar strange and something strange uncannily familiar. Ultimately it is through surrealism that I can reveal my truth and re-represent the truth of the world around me.
Conclusion

Figure 10

_Never Knowing Where We’re Going, or When We Will Arrive_ (fig. 10), is a triptych that embodies all the themes that my work regularly explores. Through an anthropomorphic lens, I represent myself as a deer that is constantly wandering and searching for a place to belong. The work contemplates space, through a focus on “where”, and contemplates the end, through the word “arrive”. Together, the paintings act as a full story, including a beginning, middle and end. Each of the paintings serves as a scene, individually moving the work forward. The narrative of the work is meant to explore an emotion state of displacement, absence and isolation. All subjects which are superimposed upon each other to speak about the relationship between otherness and belonging.

In the first painting I wanted to begin with a poetic approach by a romanticized reflection of belonging and not. Therefore, there is a physical focus on mirroring. The moon is reflected on the ground, and the deer parallel each other. These elements represent poetic relationships, including the depiction of two deer starring out at the moon. The moon serves as a metaphor for belonging, the only constant in the deer’s life. The deer are shown fascinated by its largeness and its permanence because they desire those qualities. As deer, they are never still and their
surroundings are forever changing. Further because they are constantly being persecuted, they feel marginalized and neglect, they wish to have importance and meaning like the moon does to them.

In the second painting, I wanted to focus on displacement. The deer are shown lying down in a flat manicured field outside their familiar home of the forest. Additionally, the deer are illustrated in a more humanistic gesture. This scene is multilateral and can be interpreted in a couple of ways. First, you can see the deer as beings that are sleeping under the moonlight. Here they rest, dreaming of what their lives could be like if they were accepted. Contrary to the previous narrative, one could also see the deer as dead, departed from their lives of wander. Gone like the land they lay upon. Momentarily the deer have found peace in this ephemeral life.

Finally, in the third painting the narrative ends by communicating a sense of loss. The deer are shown as specters, highlighting the absence or what they used to be. This lack of existence also becomes a metaphor for memory. Like ghost, memory can be seen as the loss of past experiences. Even though the deer appear as ghost, they still wander. They continue to search for their place to belong, i.e. their afterlife. The deer look for something familiar like the glow of the moon which they loved so much illustrated in the previously images. The environment that encloses around them is dark, hazy and tortured. The limbs of the tree are broken and bare, as if a forest fire had burned them up. These tree limbs like the limbs of Kahlo’s Wounded Deer are metaphorical for the trauma the deer have endured.

Melancholia becomes a major part of these works through the color blue that I accentuate in the pieces. I wanted to highlight this particular color because of its association to sadness and mournfulness. I took reference from familiar phrases like “feeling blue”, “blue moon” and the famous musical genre “Blues”. Also, I wanted to emphasize this color because of its strong
association with tranquility and calmness. This color underlines the stillness of the images. The paintings are quiet and peaceful. This melancholic feeling is further promoted through a twilight atmosphere, which creates a state of obscurity and ambiguity. Allowing the work to feel unfamiliar and even at times un-real.

Additionally, the abnormality of my images is encouraged by the surrealist nature in which I paint. The non-real is conjured through a few key elements. Firstly, the works appear dream-like and fantastical through irrational themes, such as deer admiring the moon and lying down in a field humanistically. The most surrealistic scene of the triptych is the last painting. In this painting the deer have transformed into ghost, haunting the remembered space of their past.

Throughout my art, it is evident that my work communicates a desire to belong. Through the representation of the animal I examine the problematic relationship society has with authority over minorities. By focusing on the marginalization of beings viewed as other in my work I communicate subjects, such as neglect, absence and displacement. Themes, which I argue, relate to my personal traumatic narrative, which is why I sympathize with the animal and view myself as a being that belongs to nature. Also, I represent the animal in my paintings so that I can bring awareness to the abandonment these beings have undergone, and elevate the status of the animal within society. Additionally, I express these emotional characteristics in my work as a way of poetically healing from previous emotional pain. Through my imagination, I create my own reality with painting. I use this metaphysical space to both reflect on the artificial and melancholic environment I perceive through a lost society. Moreover, I use my art to generate new perspectives regarding subjects that appear and feel unfamiliar. Ultimately, as an artist I make stories about belonging because at the nature of my nature I recognize that all natural life is interconnected by a desire to belong.
NOTES

1 For more information regarding the scientific nature of George Stubbs animal paintings refer to George Stubbs: 1724-1806, Science into art. 2012. Prestel Munich.

2 Quoted by John Burroughs


8 Quoted by Mahatma Gandhi

9 Ibid., John Berger, *Why Look at Animals*


11 Brad Plumer, article: *There have been five mass extinctions in Earth’s History. Now we’re facing a sixth*. The Washington Post, 2014.


13 Ibid., Aw Weiwei, Documentary Film ‘Human Flow’.

14 Quoted by Paul Farmer


16 Quoted by Thomas Reid


28 Ibid., David Lomas, *The Haunted Self*
31 Ibid., Roger Rothman, *Tiny Surrealism*, Poem by Salvador Dali


Mnn Online. Interview, *see animals and the environment through a surrealist’s eye*, 2016.  


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