From Disconnect to Connect: How to Critique the Objectification of Animals through My Photography

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From Disconnect to Connect: 
How to Critique the Objectification of Animals through My Photography

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Abstract

In this thesis, my photography deals with the long history of objectification of animals in Western culture and philosophy. Aristotle started this objectification because he considered animals were born for human consumption. Later, Descartes finalized this objectification by separating humans from animals. This objectification is still central to the global capitalist system, which consumes animals as an industrial product. Through presenting a documentary of dead or dying animal bodies with black and white photography, I challenge the legitimacy of using animals as products and present the injustice treatment of animal bodies under this objectification. Furthermore, this objectification allows humans to use the animal bodies as a product in industrial and cultural contexts without guilt, so I use photographs to explore the boundary between the human imagination of animals and real animals. The interaction between toy animals and real animals in my images shows how animals lose their voice in our human culture. I want to use my photography to critique a perspective of Anthropocentrism that was defined by Descartes’ distinction of animals. I think humans have placed themselves above animals under Descartes’ distinction, but they have also disconnected themselves from nature. My images become a window to resume the connection through a shared physical and psychological space. My audiences can understand the wildness of animals in this space. Finally, I will advance my project more in the future with a posthuman ideology that will strengthen this connection.
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**Introduction**

In Descartes’ distinction of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, humans are not animals. He says, “the souls of animals are nothing but their blood.” He thinks animals do not have a rational mind, and their souls are only composed of organic compounds. His idea of animals is anthropocentric because humans are the only animals with a rational soul under his distinction. In contrast to humans, animals are automata or beast-machines because their behaviors are based on instinct rather than a rational mind. The legacy of Descartes continues to result in the objectification of animals in Western culture until today. People think of non-human animals as others. His idea offers legitimacy for humans to speak for animals in natural history. For instance, Descartes thinks animals do not have feelings or free will, so the rational human minds can explain animal behavior subjectively from a human perspective.

Since I come from China, I think of animals differently than Descartes’ distinction because my view is influenced by Confucian philosophy. In Confucianism, there is not a strong preference for an anthropocentric view. “while human values are taken to be more important than animal values, animals are also cared for in order to form an appropriate human-animal relation.” For example, I think I am responsible for my family members, including both human and non-human animals in the family. I am not superior to other members of this family. My idea conflicts with a Western ethical system that built based on Aristotle’s philosophy which prioritizes humans in the natural world. According to Aristotle, “In like manner we may infer that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for sake of man.”
He thinks nature creates all non-human animals for humans, so his idea offers legitimacy for humans to use animals as commodities in the capitalist system. Animals are exclusively born for human consumption to determine animals’ value through a capitalist system.

I create my art as a form of protest against the long-term objectification of animals which has been defined by Descartes’ distinction and Aristotle’s philosophy. Throughout my photographic life, I have had a passion and interest in photographing non-human animals. In my mind, animal forms are evocative because they always offer a window to think about nature. When seeing animals in the wild, I can observe how animals behave in the natural environment. Their behaviors inspire me to consider my relationship with nature. Their motion and wildness are a theme I strive to present in my photographs. I have been interested in Erica Fudge's book, *Animal*, which talks about how humanity has changed its mind on non-human animals. Fudge argues that humans have increasingly understand themselves as animals, and they desire to be animals. After their long-term isolation from the natural world, this desire makes humans want to connect to a larger community, nature, through non-human animals. However, this communication is still in progress, and I see my photography as part of this progress.

Black and white photography is a crucial tool for expressing my emotions and thoughts when observing and photographing animals. In the earlier stage of my career, I used black and white to balance different exposures in the same series. However, in my current work, I use black and white to present the seriousness of the objectification
of animals. Nowadays, where everyone lives in a digital and colorful environment, black and white photography can create a sense of history because humans used it to document the world in history before digital photography.

Large scale is also an essential element that I use in my art practice. I use a full-frame digital camera to allow me to capture unique moments of animals in high resolution. In my printing process, I can enlarge my images and present digital noise like film grain. Film grains enhance the texture and contrast in my pictures. Finally, I print these images on matte and natural tone paper to allow my audience to feel like they can almost touch the images.

I have divided this thesis into three chapters associated with my three black and white projects. By critiquing how humans objectify animals in the capitalist system and human culture, I also want to explore new opportunities in which humans and animals can have a shared space that allows humans to reconnect with animals. I believe that this can be an effective way for humans to include animals as part of our society.

In chapter 1, I talk about my series Unnatural Death. During my time in the U.S, I have noticed a vast cultural difference in the relationship between humans and animals. Because of the invasive spread of Western capitalism, Chinese cities have developed quickly, and these cities have become a new concrete jungle. Most urban animals, like stray cats, are not welcome in the concrete jungle. My hometown is near the sea, so I usually see most animals, especially sea creatures, in the wet market. All fish lay on a table in front of the butcher shops in the wet market, and they have a pungent smell that reveals their death. When I see living creatures directly being cut and killed, I feel that
they are hopeless, and I cannot imagine what I would do if I faced a similar situation; it seems like they are born only for human consumption.

After I moved to the United States, I did not see these bloody markets. In American supermarkets, meat is always processed and packaged nicely, and they are served to customers with pride. People do not see the bloody process behind the scenes. People do not even associate beef with a cow because they are even two different words in English. However, Americans often see dead animals on the roadside, and people have a careless attitude toward them. Especially in the Midwest, most highways are unfenced so that animals can cross these highways. They have no choices. The rapid development of traffic systems has sliced off their original habitats, so they must venture through the dangerous human territory. The interstate highway system connects the whole United States, but it disconnects humans and nature.

In Chapter 2, I want to express my concern with the use of animal forms as a visual language in our human culture through my project *Who is a toy?*. Animals do not have a language under Descartes’ distinction. Humans like to use animal forms as a visual tool to express their interior desire, which is hard to explain through human language. So, animal features and characteristics are a convenient method to generalize and symbolize human desire. However, I think humans overuse animal forms to describe themselves. This phenomenon causes the animal form to become simplified and valueless. When animals form becomes human language, the actual animals also lose their voice in human culture. I use toys as an example to investigate the negative effects which that simplification can have on animals.
In Chapter 3, I focus on the conflict between culture and nature in artificial space. Through the photographic medium, I present moments where familiar animals become strange again. This perspective foregrounds the conflict in my project, *Psychological Wildness*. Humans like to form an intimate relationship with animals in their psychological world because they do not want to be isolated from the natural world. This relationship can be a key to rebuilding the interrupted communication between humans and animals. In the physical world, I always see a division between non-human animals and humans. The division is formed through artificial barriers to protect humans, such as glass, concrete, and fences. As a photographer, I want to use my image to suggest a way to eliminate this division. I create a shared space in my image world to allow humans and non-human animals to psychologically communicate their instinct and wildness. I think this communication can go through the physical fences and go into the hearts of both human and non-human animals.
Picturing Culture and Nature in Capitalist Exploitation: How My Photography

Hopes to Support Animals

Over the past six years living in the United States, I have seen the relentless development of roads that isolate wildlife habitat and populations. This isolation causes wild animals to cross these roads, and they may die. Moreover, I have seen people have a careless attitude toward the bodies of dead animals on highways. I think a careless attitude can form a dangerous culture of indifference and hopelessness. I also feel that the tension between humans and animals has increased due to this negligent attitude. This attitude is emotional violence because humans think it is normal for animals to die on the road. As Marc Bekoff said, “our insulated industrialized culture keeps us disconnected from life beyond our windshields.”

I feel I start to lose my connection to nature when our cities expand rapidly and occupy natural space. This disconnection inspires me to create the photo series, Unnatural Death.

My 2019 series titled Unnatural Death is composed of ten digitally printed inkjet black and white photographs on luster paper, 18x24 inches each. This series of images focuses on documenting dead animal bodies in different artificial settings. For example, in my work, Secondary Rolling (See Fig 1), I present a sequence of four images showing a scene of a car running over the dead body of a raccoon and not stopping. The dead raccoon remains on the highway without any help or hope. The dead raccoon is isolated in the middle of the road and has started to decompose. The poor situation of the dead raccoon reminds me of a funeral custom in my hometown.
In my hometown, people want to be buried in their family plot after they have died. Because of global capitalism invading China from western culture, many people in China especially in my hometown, have moved to developed countries such as the United States. There, they could earn ten times the money compared to the money they earned in my hometown. Even if they lived in another country, they still want to die in their hometown. They consider themselves like fallen leaves, and fallen leaves should return to their roots. I feel it is the same for the dead raccoon. It has become a flesh and blood mess in human territory. The raccoon never had a chance to decompose to energy and come back to give the energy to mother nature. Its connection to nature is cut by careless driving. The careless driving is only a shadow of the culture of indifference, but it is the symbol of global capitalist exploitation of animals which includes humans.

Besides roadkill, I also include animals that are processed as commodities in the Unnatural Death series. For example, in my image, White Crappies in the Net (See Fig. 2), I present a school of crappies caught in a narrow fishnet waiting for death. I also capture one of the shoes of the fisherman to suggest his careless attitude toward these fish. This ruthless reality questions the meaning of these fish' existence as individuals.
They are born as a product to be consumed by humans. The inevitable death of the fish can make my audiences feel uncomfortable and directly connect to human empathy. If my audiences think about living in a narrow space, how could they live that way?

Figure 2. Gaoyuan Pan, *White Crappies in the Net from the Unnatural Death Series*. 18x24 inches. inkjet Print, 2019

In Hong Kong, poor people face a similar situation as these white crappies. Hong Kong-based photographer Benny Lam documents this housing problem in Hong Kong. Lam spent three years between 2012 to 2015 creating his series Subdivided Flats which contains ten digital photographs. In these photographs, Lam presents people’s life in bed-space apartments through a bird’s eye view. This unique perspective gives the tension between humans and their living space. A bed-space apartment is only equal to a single room occupancy apartment of 80 to 140 sq feet. However, a whole family that usually has 8-12 people has to live in a space for a single person in the United States. The significant gap causes them to not live as normal humans, and they have no hope
to continue their lives. In one of Lam’s images (See fig 3), he presents two children are studying and sleeping in the same place. Their parents are arranging the clothes. Audiences can see everything of the family in the space through the bird’s eye view. This apartment is a home for the family, but it is also a cage for them.

![Figure 3. Benny Lam, Untitled from the Subdivided Flats series, digital photograph, 2015](image)

Even though working-class people can only live in poor conditions in Hong Kong, they are still a workforce to maintain the whole society keeps running. When my audiences understand they may also be used as a tool to sustain the cold capitalist society, they can understand how cruel capitalists can do the same thing to animals. I believe that both roadkill and animals used for human consumption are an extension of capitalist exploitation. My photography becomes a form of aesthetic analysis to critique how
capitalism creates fear to heighten the ethical and ecological crisis around humans and animals. Photography is a window in visual arts to allow humans to face the world. Susan Sontag talks about this unique quality of photography in her book On Photography:

*The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph—any photograph—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects.*

To echo what Sontag said about photography, I think photography itself is a representation of objects and an extension of the objects. This extension can be transferred between images. Photography allows a three-dimensional reality to be captured in a two-dimensional space: the interior space of an image. By connecting all these interior spaces, I can create a world with photos. In my image world, audiences can feel that they should stop the capitalist exploitation immediately. Otherwise, they may face a similar situation as animals are facing now. Audiences may feel guilty for objectifying animals after they see through my photographs.

When people feel guilty about treating and misusing animals, I believe an animal’s death becomes an honor sacrifice because they offer their bodies energy for human consumption. However, capitalists dishonor this sacrifice. They only calculate the value of animals based on profitability rather than long-term sustainability. Animal death becomes meaningless when humans do not face the ethical problem of using animals in capitalism. British artist Sue Coe points out that global capitalism is dominant because countless bodies of dead animals form its bedrock.
While making the Unnatural Death series, I also looked through Coe's artwork because she makes art to promote animal rights by presenting animals' death. In 1996, the Four Walls Eight Windows published Coe's book project named *Dead Meat*, a 136-pages illustrated book. These illustrations depict Coe's experience and observation of the meat industries behind our meals. I am interested in Coe's images because she uses animal forms to present human emotion. For example, the cover of this artbook (See Fig 4) is an image that depicts different animals all sitting around a meat product, but they look emotionless and careless about the meat product.
Coe depicts the violence to animals and associates this violence to the most horrible and violent event in human history—the Holocaust. She describes the sense of hierarchy and atrocious situation of animals in the meat industry. The situation of animals is like the situation of victims in the Holocaust. Because Coe’s work directly depicts the horrible situation of animals in the meat industry, Coe’s images work to prevent humans from eating meat. Thus, Coe’s work is essentially animal endorsing art. Steve Baker explains this term in his book, The Postmodern Animal, “Animal endorsing art is an art practice to support animal life itself, and there is some overlap with the work of conservationists, who advocate animal rights.” In my Unnatural Death series, I also focuses on the ethical problems of humans killing animals unnaturally, so I think my works also functioned as animal endorsing art. These ethical problems still exist. I grew up in southeast China, so I have seen how humans treat animals as bloody products in the wet market. Since I moved to the United States, I have noticed that careless driving is why wildlife is killed by humans on the road. Thus, humans should care more about wildlife in our urban areas because humans have taken animals’ habitats and force them to join urban life. To have a better symbiosis with urban wildlife, I think humans need to change their thinking about wildlife. When Humans consider wildlife as part of human society, they will finally make the urban environment livable to the wildlife.
Picturing Culture and Nature in Representations of Animals: How my work presents the artificiality of animal representation.

Beyond my interest in the plight of animals, I also think about how animals are presented in our human culture, especially the culture of images. Because of Descartes’ distinction, humans have been given legitimacy to render animal forms into human language. I think it a non-bloody and “ethical” exploitation of animals. For example, when artists make animals like cats or dogs overly cute and humanized in cartoons, audiences also think about their pets in the same way. So, audiences use human language and behavior to teach their pets. As a result, some animals also lose their voices in our human culture and become belongings of humans. The essential usage of the animal image as a product points out another negative side of capitalism. The negative effect of capitalism causes excess materialism and consumerism, which are not just going to consume animals as physical commodities but also consume the representation of animals as a cultural product that will be reduced in value in the art.

I think using representations of animals as a cultural product is also an objectification that can be associated with Descartes’ distinction. This objectification is a tradition of dishonoring animals. In the contemporary art world, I notice that artists and audiences have already raised a huge interest in using animal subjects. Animals have been rendered as aesthetic subjects to present human desired concepts. However, this rendering can be dangerous. When people say they “love animals” in front of an image of animals, they love the picture of animals.
When we were children, we used animal characters to learn about animal features, especially if we played with animal toys. However, we might not consider that a simplification of animals into toys could affect how humans see real animals. For example, I had a Disney Tigger figure (Fig. 5) when I was seven years old. I loved the Tigger so much because it is a cute and lovely character. However, after I first met real tigers in the cage (See Fig.6) when I was 22, I changed my thought tigers. Even though these tigers were still under control by humans, they still have the wild spirit. This wild spirit can release tigers’ energy through their expression and poses. Real animals can never be presented by an inferior copy of an animal—an animal toy.
I consider animal toys to be simplified cultural symbols used to represent the animal features to humans by simplifying and reducing animals' real form. I believe that this simplification can result in a phenomenon that twists thought about real animals. Steve Baker describes this phenomenon as the “Disneyfication” of animals, which means that the importance of animal images has been diminished by humans. For example, when
people observe a cartoon representation of an animal, the animal character loses its animal identity, such as wildness, instinct, or strength. This stereotype in cartoons becomes an impediment to promoting animal rights through art because animals seem to not deserve the same dignity as humans. As a result, I am interested in critiquing this phenomenon through a photographic lens in my series, *Who is a Toy?*

My 2020 series titled *Who is a toy?* is composed of seven digital black and white photographs, 20x30 inches each. In this series, I photograph a composition with animal toys in the foreground and images of real animals in the background. This composition reflects how humans impose their imagination of inanimate objects on animate objects. For example, in my images, *Deer Looks Deer* (See Fig.7), I present the toy deer that turns its back to the audience and looks at the real deer in the background image. This composition shows a difference between the human imagination of animals and real animals. I consider that the human imagination can only depict the basic appearance of an animal. Still, it loses most of the vivid detail of the animals when it finally forms an image. The lost details are a reduction of animals, and I use black and white to emphasize the seriousness of this reduction of the animal. The reduction of animals is also a historical issue under Descartes’ distinction.
The reduction of animals is a non-violent way to oppress animals. Humans have reduced the contribution of real animals through a simplified representation of animals in human culture. Alexander Wilson analyzes this phenomenon through a discussion of nature film. Nature films use anthropomorphism to idealize the relationship between humans and animals. They use human language and behavior to speculate on the behavior of non-animals. For instance, when the audience sees a director who creates an anthropomorphic narrative of a group of tigers, they feel closer to tigers because they feel tigers may share similar social structures as humans. However, tigers have a different social network than humans because most tigers are more independent. At the same time, nature films also conceal the business model behind the scenes. This business model encourages creating false representations of animals to pass off as
genuine. Also, most of the animals are trained by humans in these nature films. They are produced to present human fantasies of nature. Similarly, captive animals cannot show an action that they do in the wild because humans use industrialization to change animal life. Captive animals can simply sit down and wait for humans to feed them food. However, animals can also survive in the wild without human assistance. Humans used to think about industrializing animals to “save” the environment, but industrialization is only a way to dominate animals. These nature films show how humans use a superior attitude to industrialize animals through a camera lens. Under this industrialization, some animals start to adopt urban life, such as raccoons and rats.

Even though toys might seem like a representation of reality, they still lose the essential feature of a real animal, which is the spirit of the real animals. For example, in my image, Raccoon and Raccoon (See Fig 8.), the eyes of the natural raccoon reflect light at night, but the toy raccoon is only a blurry, lifeless face. Through presenting the blurry animal toys in the foreground, I suggest viewers ignore them and bring more focus to real animals in the background. However, blurry images of animal toys take up ample space in the images, making it difficult for viewers to ignore them. The struggle of ignoring images of toys represents that simplification is still an issue in our image-driven culture to insult animals.
I first encountered David Leventhal’s photo series while I was making *Who is a toy?* series. I am interested in Leventhal’s photographs of toys and dolls that reflect American culture from a perspective that differs from the dominant media perspective. Leventhal presents how humans shape culture through a focused lens and how culture shapes humans in North American. Of all Leventhal’s series, I have been most engaged with his Wild West series.

In the *Untitled from the series Wild West*, Leventhal presents a cowboy who is looking at a jubilant horse which presents itself. Leventhal’s work explores the stand-out position of the American West as a cultural theme and how social media plays a role in mythologizing this theme. I am drawn to Leventhal’s presentation about how the western United States becomes a seductive myth with its associated elements, such as cowboys. The mythologization of the western United States presents an interior
relationship between human desire and nature. Without an overall capacity of nature, human desire cannot be fit as a conqueror into “unclaimed” territory. Even though there is not enough physical space to allow every person in United States to achieve their cowboy dream truly, this desire continues working as an element that defines American dreams and what it means to be an American. Most U.S citizens try to work hard and make themselves stand out with unique abilities. As a result, many U.S citizens have a romantic perspective about a cowboy in their mental world. This romantic perspective becomes part of Western myths.

Fig.9 David Levinthal, Untitled from the series Wild West, instant color print, 1989
I consider how people in western culture use the similar romantic perspective to consider animals in human culture. My photographs point out that humans transfer real animals into strange images which diminish the importance of real animals. Cultural symbols of animals are not only a poetic way to express human interior desires through literal animals. More essentially, the symbols occur in important positions which present animals themselves in the human culture of nature. The symbols are also a means to give voices to animals in our culture. I hope that my viewers can learn a lesson about how humans dishonor animals in the long history. Nowadays, if we still want to promote animal rights and change the living situation of animals, we cannot simply save animals by making new habitats for them. We must change how we represent animals.
Culture and Nature in the Psychological World: How My Photography Becomes a Shared Space to Reconnect Humans and Animals

In my project for Kemper Museum, I combine my previous experience of documentary photography and my art practice in which I investigate toys as a form of human culture. I continue exploring a connection between culture and nature in the mental world. My 2021 series, Psychological Wildness, is composed of ten digitally printed inkjet black and white photographs on fine art paper, 30x40 inches each. This series focuses on presenting glass and fences as an invisible barrier that disconnects humans and animals in the physical world. However, my perspective of animals becomes a bridge to lead my viewers to the psychological world of animals and allow the viewers to understand the wildness in these animals. For example, in my image, The Snake on Glass, I photograph a snake climbing the glass wall. This snake still expresses its wildness through action, but its surrounding space suggests isolation to limit the snake in a sad reality. I want to use this perspective to share an experience of observing human desire to experience and control nature. I think the human fantasy of ideal nature can shape animals in an artificial environment.
These artificial environments are built for animals by humans. I divided my photographs based on their artificial context to present three sets in my series, zoos, laboratories, and parks. I learned this arrangement from photographer Richard Misrach. In Misrach’s photo series, *Desert Cantos*, which is composed of sixteen pigment print photographs, Misrach presents a balance between the wildness of the desert and the human effect on the desert. Besides the fantastic landscape view of western United States wasteland, Misrach also offers a human narrative in his series to present the conflict between humans and nature in the desert area. For example, in Misrach’s photograph, *Desert Fire #153*(See Figure 11), Misrach presents a conflict between two men with guns. I think the weapon creates tension between these men. This image
serves as an essential visual break to lead the audience to think about the tension between human and nature can happen between humans.

![Figure 11: Richard Misrach, Desert Fire #153 from Desert Cantos Series, pigment print, dimensions variable, 1984](image)

In my images, I also want to present a similar balance as Misrach did in *Desert Cantos*. Most of my photographs are horizontal, but I include two photographs in vertical view. They are *Eagle on Hand* (See Fig. 12) and *Sea Lion with Hand* (See Fig. 13). These two photographs serve as critical visual breaks in my sequence. They take my viewers back from the interaction between artificial space and animals to a direct interaction between a human hand and animals. I show human hands as a symbol of power to present humans’ direct control of animals. Particularly, in the photograph *Eagle on Hand*, the bald eagle loses its wildness and becomes docile. As the national bird of the United
States, the bald eagle has been rendered as a dramatic language because it represents American ethos like confidence and freedom. However, its noumenon also becomes controllable for humans nowadays, and it has been disconnect from the American ethos.

Figure 12. Gaoyuan Pan, *Eagle on Hand*, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021

Figure 13. Gaoyuan Pan, *Sea Lion with Hand*, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021

We can easily understand zoos and laboratories as artificial environments because they contain metals and concrete material markers of the human world. However, why are parks also considered artificial environments when they have natural elements like trees and rivers? Because they are still a part of human societies. They are built for humans to enjoy nature intimately but safely. In my perspective, parks are giant dioramas.
As early as the beginning of the 20th century, nature dioramas were designed as scenes to represent reality. I consider that they offer an opportunity for audiences to travel to landscapes that are thousands of miles away, and dioramas are also a fantastic visual illusion of a place and a time in history. As humans, we continue to explore the possibility of making new forms of dioramas. With the increasing curiosity, we are not satisfied with a simple static diorama. To have a better diorama to satisfy our desire, we build zoos and parks to allow a micro-ecosystem to exist on the side of our urban life. However, no matter how we change the form of dioramas, their essential function does not change: to record moments of the world for human consumption.

When I present these photographs on the wall, I want to show them as nature dioramas in a two-dimensional format. I use the form of diorama because it can show a frozen moment in human history. The content of nature dioramas in museums diminishes animals because the human imagination was used to shape the animal figures. For example, when I visited the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, I saw a diorama that presented a group of tigers. However, the tiger usually lives alone in the wild. For example, when I visited the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, I saw a diorama that presented different birds together. However, in all these birds, the Chinese grouse and American ruffed grouse looked too close to each other, but they have never met each other in the natural world because they live in two different countries. In my image dioramas, I remove the human fantasy of ideal animal bodies. The content becomes a way for animals to release their energy through their gesture. Even though these animals are in the cage, my audience can see animals
presents themselves out of human control temporarily. For example, in the image *Falcon Take Off*, this American Kestrel named Jet was trying to fly away even though its legs were chained. At this moment, Jet was trying to show its energy through its spread wings. The blurred-on Jet’s body suggests this flying action. I captured this moment and preserved Jet’s energy forever in my image dioramas.

![Figure 14 Gaoyuan Pan, *Falcon Take Off*, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021.](image)

While I was making this thesis series, I was influenced by Sugimoto Hiroshi’s Diorama series. In Sugimoto’s Diorama series, he presents a group of black and white photographs. These photographs are a visual illusion which he made from dioramas in the various natural history museums. In the American Museum of Natural history interview, Sugimoto talked about his work\textsuperscript{xiii}.  

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“I have my ideas and visions of what nature should look like. So I am using this diorama to represent my idealistic visions of nature. This is my fourth trial to be here. I can imagine what would be the scene of nature after human beings are gone. Within hundred years, or five hundred years, we may not be able to live on this planet. Probably if you go back to the same spot, probably it’s well developed already. So we lost nature. This is the collection of lost nature to me.”

Through photography, Sugimoto images a scene that may happen in the future. In Sugimoto’s scene, human has disappeared, and animals become dominant again in the environment. Sugimoto is interested in the development of nature and how both humans and animals contribute to it. For example, in one of Sugimoto’s images, *Polar Bear* (See Figure 15), Sugimoto photographs the diorama of a polar bear and a seal to present a vivid haunting scene. I think Sugimoto uses optical illusion to create the feeling of a still from a classic nature documentary. He blurs the boundary between reality and imagination. With Sugimoto’s master techniques in lighting, he presents a fantastic view of the dead dioramas and makes them vivid again.
Observation is one of the essential functions of photographic media. Unlike other media, photographs are not created from the void. They are reflections and extensions of reality, and a photographer’s unique observations direct this reflection and extension. In Sugimoto’s images, he observes and presents the possibility of making a dead creature alive in the image world. I attend zoos and parks, and I photograph animals from an unusual perspective to show the psychological connection between visitors and animals in the cages in my photographs. For example, my work *Headless Seal* (See Fig. 16) suggests the sad reality that seals are treated as a product to satisfy the human desire of watching underwater animals behind glass. Even though my audience knows that the headless seal is only a visual illusion that I created with a refraction of light in the
aquatic environment, the optical illusion forces audiences to feel the seal’s artificial confinement.

![Image of a seal underwater](image)

**Figure 16.** Gaoyuan Pan, *Headless Seal*, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021

In addition to artificial context, the night is also an essential element in my practice. Nighttime is an irregular period to explore in our urban life. When most human activities pause in the parks, urban animals regain their control of the land and release their wiliness. I wondered at night to record these urban animals. As audiences, they may never have seen the mysterious activity of urban animals before, so I want to share my experience with them. For example, the photograph Racoon Behind Branch directly
presents an interaction between the raccoon and me. My viewers can share the same perspective when they stand at the same point as me.

![Figure 16. Gaoyuan Pan, Raccoon Behind Branches, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021.](image)

Presenting my photographs in a large format allows my audience to see and access animals intimately in my photographs, not to ignore the animals anymore. Also, I use titles as hints to lead my audiences to reach the details. For example, in the photograph *Koi Fish and "Made in USA"* (See Fig. 17), I print the image large enough so that my audience can see the koi fish is consuming the label, and the text says "Made in USA" on the label (See Fig. 18). This enlargement also allows the viewer to see the interaction between culture and nature in the micro world, which we usually ignore as humans. Also, I show the text "Made in USA" in the title as a guide to encourage my audiences...
to explore my images. When I considered how to represent this image, I thought back to Trevor Paglen's photograph, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* (See Fig. 19), which I have seen in the Kemper Museum. This photograph says reaper drone on the title, but Paglen presents a beautiful desert sky in the scene. I wondered why Paglen put the “Reaper Drone” in the title. Until I looked at this photograph carefully, I overlooked the little black point on the right bottom corner: the Reaper drone. Paglen uses this strategy to express a sinister topic by presenting beautiful landscapes. I do the same in my koi fish photograph; the macro and static scene present a poetic moment that a koi fish fuses into the environment. Until my viewers see the label and the fact that the koi fish is consuming the label, and the scene is no longer a poetic diorama on the wall. The label becomes an ugly spot to remind us of what humans do to nature.
Figure 17. Gaoyuan Pan, *Koi Fish and “Made in USA”*, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021.

Figure 18. Gaoyuan Pan, *detail view of Koi Fish and “Made in USA”*, digital photograph, 30x40 inches, 2021.
Figure 19. Trevor Paglen, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, c-print, 48x60 inches, 2012.
**Conclusion**

I have seen animals struggle and suffering under capitalist exploitation. Animals are also losing their voice in the natural history that humans create. I use photography as a visual tool to critique the objectification animals. I also present my aesthetic system to encourage my audiences to resume communication with animals in their mental world passing through physical barriers.

Recently, several scholars have used a perspective of posthumanism to combat the Anthropocentrism which Descartes and Aristotle helped to create. The standpoint of posthumanism critiques the importance of humans in the natural environment. For example, Cary Wolfe says animals are no longer “diminished or crippled versions of that fantasy figure called the human”. To echo his thought, I think humans cannot offer a moral model for animals anymore. Animals and humans are under the same hierarchy and must learn from each other.

Also, artists have used posthumanism as an approach to define the human form in the future. Patricia Piccinini uses human hair as a material in her sculptures. In her work The Young Family (See Fig. 19), the audience can see how Piccinini renders human textures on her sculpture. These sculptures fuse the characteristics of human beings and pigs. The fusion connects humans and animals in a single form. I think this work also critiques the objectification of animals and brings out the human desire to become animals so humans can rejoin nature.
I continue to challenge myself to explore the relationship between humans and animals through the perspective of posthumanism and raise my study of animal forms in aesthetics to a new level. I use my artwork to encourage people to protect animals and encourage people to rethink the position of animals in human society. The rethinking process can be an effective way to invite animals to become part of our human civilization. Once animals become citizens of human society, they are out of the objectification which Descartes and Aristotle created.

I want to continue to explore more relationships between humans and animals outside of the Midwest. In my current and past works, most of the animals are domestic animals which I think people can relate to in the Midwest. This summer, I will move to the southwest part of the United States and expect to see a different relationship between humans and animals in the desert. The desert is not traditionally a part of nature that
humans like to enjoy, so animals in there have not been disturbed frequently.

After building a solid perspective and aesthetic method, I will come back to my hometown in China. I think people in China still have a long way to go to communicate with animals in the urban area. I want to exhibit my work in different regions in China to inspire people to rethink their relationship with animals.
Notes


ii Descartes, René, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. 365


v Fudge, Erica. *Animal* (London: Reaktion Books), 2010. 8


xi Wilson, Alexander. The Culture of Nature North American Landscape From Disney to the Exxon Valdez (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019), 119-156


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