No. _____ / 100

still life - emily jan

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by emily jan

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2014

0.

The beginning point: I DON'T KNOW.

Our marriage ended twenty years ago. And yet how strangely vivid a few things remain: the chipped white French coffeepot on Bertha's table, her beautiful mottled hand holding mine while she lay back on her single iron bed that afternoon, the little pile of twigs and leaves smoldering in the yard. An elaborate spoon embossed with an antlered stag, and a quiver of arrows, emblems of the huntress Diana. The heart is a repository of vanished things: the rock of Gethsemane, jars of plum brandy, whole fruit turning in their sleep like infants in the womb, a heavenly blue morning glory. When I was a kid I had a toy, a 'Magic 8 Ball'. It was a hard black plastic sphere bigger than a baseball, with a little window at the bottom. The idea was to ask a question, then turn the ball upside down; a message would float into view, suspended in the black liquid which a little jar inside the ball contained (it was difficult to figure this out). 'Yes' the ball would answer, or 'Perhaps' or 'Ask again later.' Now I think there is a space in me that is like the dark inside that hollow sphere, and things float up into view, images that are vessels of meaning, the flotsam and detail of any particular moment. Vanished things. [1]

I.

navigation. (or, ways to get from there to here.)

There is no original, pre-established ontological difference between subject and object, culture and nature. All objects, human and nonhuman alike, operate on the same flat metaphysical plane. Anything can, in principle, be concatenated with anything else. [2]

We have to trust, from the start, that the objects are fully capable of telling their own stories. [3]

So what do we actually have here? A tableau, but not just. The implication of an infinite plane; the horizontal present ticking below the surface of every painting painted before the 20th century. An accumulation of objects – death and life; verisimilitude and reality; the touchable and the sharp. The heart wants to believe. The eye is looking for truths. The mind wants to think about it but is circumvented.

Seventeenth century Dutch still life encompasses a lot of topics that have been written and talked and theorized about forever. *Vanitas.* Consumption, globalization, or the beginnings of globalization; the future embedded in the past. Colonization; trade routes; galleons crossing the oceans; sea monsters on the maps. Exploration. The new; that which had not yet been named but which could be described with glazes and two-hair brushes, in stories passed from sailor to writer to artist, from explorers to regents to kings.

And here they all are, gathered, monsters next to marvels and all in stages of consumption. Half-butchered, half-eaten, half-drunk. Disappearing and appearing in the same breath.

figure 0: 0 Degrees Latitude. (Horizon)

figure 1: Almanac.

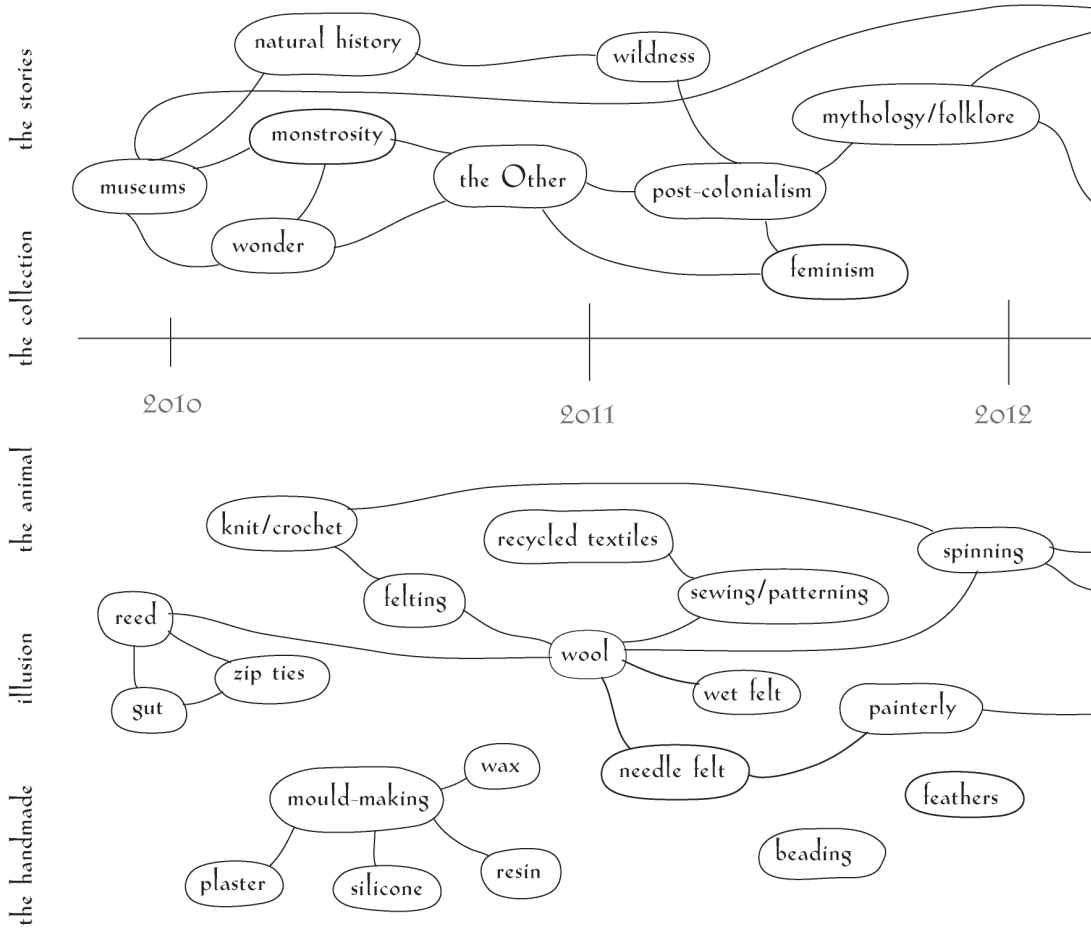
THE THEMES

Exploration
Colonization
The Death of Things
Still Life
Accumulation
Collection
Believability
Offering / Altar / Ritual
Anachronism
Replication
Mimesis
Contingency
Bookends
Finitude
Loss

THE MODELS

Italo Calvino / Invisible Cities
Roentgen Device
The Sandman
Crystalline Structure
Oulipo
Cloud Atlas
Hayao Miyazaki
Michael Taussig / My Cocaine Museum
Walton Ford
The Things They Carried
Thomas King / The Truth About Stories
The Museum of Jurassic Technology
Turducken
Aby Warburg & the Mnemoscyne Atlas
Myst / Riven
Griffin and Sabine
Jorge Luis Borges / The Book of Imaginary Beings
Alchemy
Alethiometer
Laurent Grasso / Uraniborg
Urs Fischer

figure 2: Chronometer.



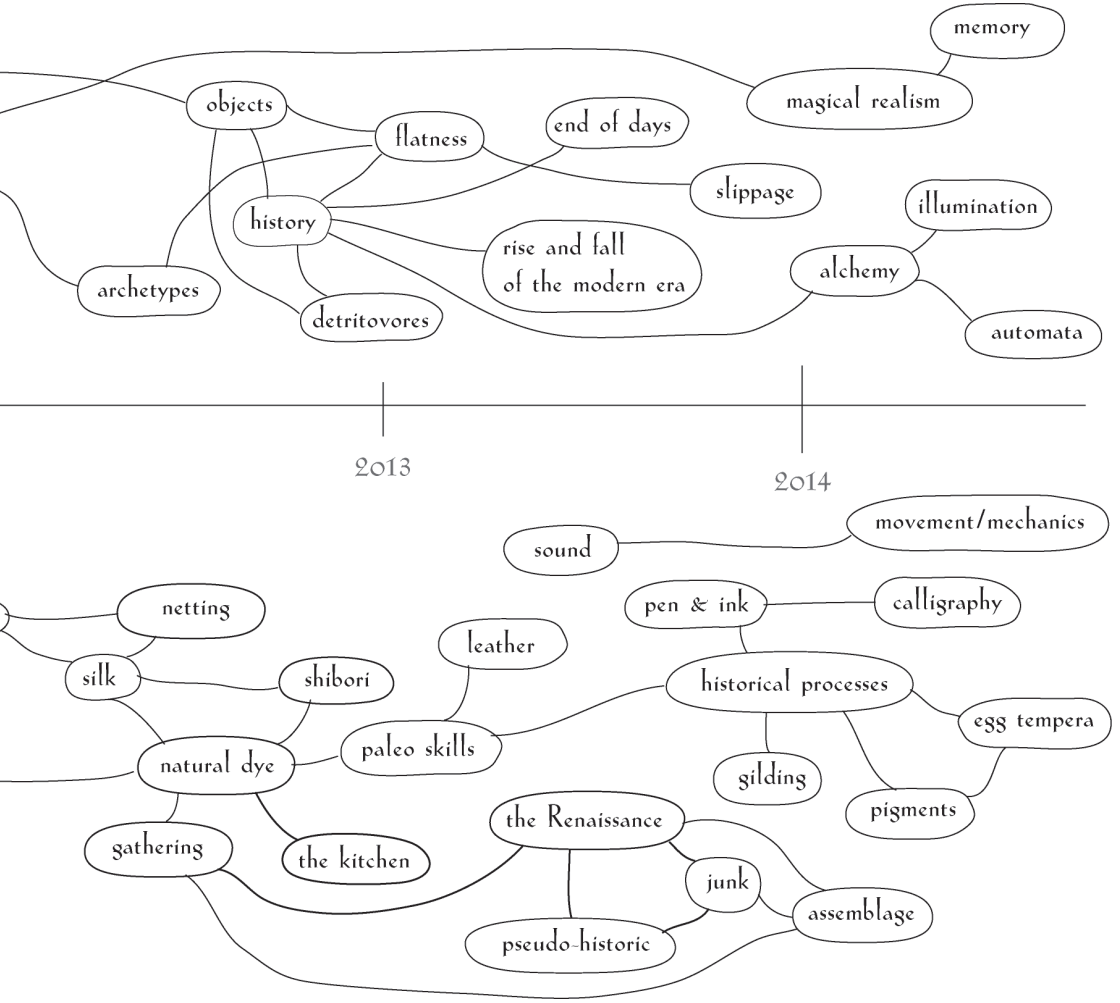

memory
magical realism
objects
flatness
end of days
slippage
history
rise and fall
of the modern era
illumination
alchemy
automata
archetypes
detritovores
2013
2014
movement/mechanics
sound
netting
pen & ink
calligraphy
leather
silk
shibori
historical processes
egg tempera
natural dye
paleo skills
gilding
pigments
the Renaissance
gathering
the kitchen
junk
assemblage
pseudo-historic

figure 3: 90 Degrees Latitude (Polaris)

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.
And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm. [4]

– Dylan Thomas, 1933

figure 4: Sextant.

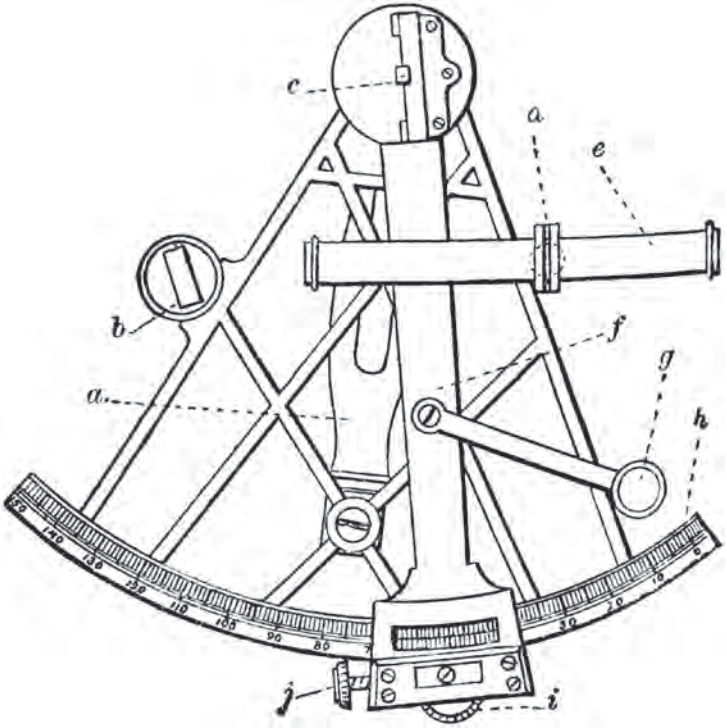


figure 5: The Map & The Key

MIMICRY

humidity

ELSEWHERE

elsewhere

CHI

waiting, latent

EMBEDDEDNESS

seed

FINITUDE

detritus

DESIRE

telescope

LOSS

tooth

DISSOLUTION

attrition

REBIRTH

II

exempla.

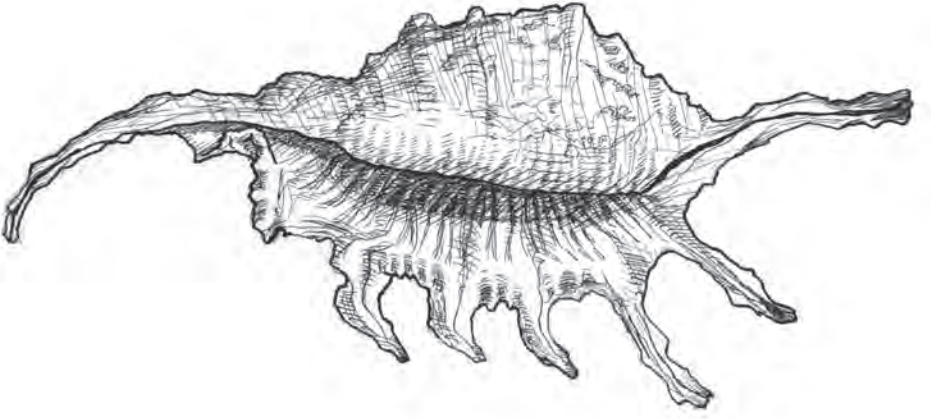
Natural objects hold within them the mystic creative forces of the universe: the shell bespeaks the ocean; the flower contains the energy of soil and sun that brought it into being, and will as quickly reclaim it. The contemplation of these objects, prompted by the painter's labor, introduces cosmic life cycles into the diurnal rhythms of human understanding. Man-made objects may be defined by their functionality, but this infuses them also with the micro-narratives of their daily use. [5]

1. red currants

This is what I remember of that summer: Paris was humid; the Seine was sluggish and sent up fetid drafts to the bridges above. It was the early nineties, and I was a mod-gothy teenager in beat-up Dr. Martins and a floral-print baby-doll chiffon dress over a catsuit that made it very awkward to pee in public places. I was travelling with my family: my parents, eminent neurobiologists in parkas and sensible shoes, and my little brother Max (named after Nobel-prize winning biophysicist Max Delbrück, my parents' mentor), who was at the time a pint-sized Chinese version of Calvin from *Calvin and Hobbes,* minus the tiger.

Preserved in a dusty gold-embossed album somewhere, there is a long succession of photographs of us In-Front-Of-Things: In Front Of Art, In Front Of Bridges, In Front Of Fountains, In Front Of Scenic Views… and then of course the series of Max – seven or eight years old at the time – posing like famous statues In Front Of the famous statues themselves in the Musée d'Orsay. Mimesis in action.

Not in the dusty gold-embossed album is this memory: walking into the gallery, the headiness of summer chilled by air conditioning, high museum walls painted dark colours beneath their heavy crown mouldings. A room full of still lifes – jewel-like, dark, enterable – made more jewel-like by the translucency of the red currants. And a memory of wishing that everything in that room was real, that I could touch the things on the tables; pick up the nautilus shell from 400-year-ago-seas, stroke the feathers of the stilled pheasants, walk right out of this world and into the sepia toned gloom of another century.



2. seashell

Four years in this northern city: whiskey-blurred winters grey and icy and pastis-hazed summers of an un-air-conditioned studio, sweating into ones' respirator and denim apron in the humidity. Three and half years since the last time I looked into the well… all the demons just below the surface of the water, which, undisturbed, reflects like glass. No sign of what is churning below.

Perhaps this is why novelist Haruki Murakami's wells are so often dry… they are like tunnels straight down into the underworld. The demons having evaporated, you are trapped at the bottom; looking up at the small blue circle of sky which you can no longer reach. There are no dragons to stand on top of, no one to fight.

The image I have in my mind of this time is of falling soundlessly through inky black night, and crashing through the thin veil of ice into the water. Falling like suspension; in time, and in atmosphere. Silk, feathers, and fur furl into the dark water. Silence.

Always I am searching for a way back – not to a primordial state exactly, but to a life left behind; forever recreating the universe that one remembers but has acknowledged that one may never see again. In children's stories – Narnia, or Never-Never Land – that once-upon-a-time aliveness recedes into the mists of childhood as the protagonist ages, "grows up." I always had a sneaking suspicion this was actually a normalizing, Calvinist kind of story to tell to children. *As if.* As if I would not choose to stay in the world with the dragons and fairies if I had the choice.

When I was a kid, I loved Rousseau – and that cheesy Californian airbrush artist whose name escapes me now, who painted underwater scenes (tropical seas, migratory whales, and the kelp forests of my youth). Fish as multitudes; mammals as singularities. The view holistic: encapsulated Edens, a kind of completeness or circularity. Glossy peaceable kingdoms that I could hang in my bedroom, microcosms that spoke of the macrocosm beyond the walls, beyond the shoreline that I could sometimes see from my window on clear days – all the way out to the Farallons.

Elsewhere.

Dreaming of the sea: when Joseph Banks or Charles Darwin, the great British gentleman-scientist-explorers of the Victorian age, came back "into the fold", returning to the island kingdom of England after many years of Elsewhere (the return from Narnia of the prodigal sons), did they experience a yearning for the ocean, for the openness, for the 180-degree skies, and for the adventures that happened past the horizon? The hold full of specimens, each one a question, or an answer. The known world used to be represented as a disc, water surrounding land; the sea pouring off the edge, the end, and into the unknown. *Here be monsters.* I imagine them each standing in their

dark wood-paneled studies, in the quiet of late-night London, grandfather clocks hollowly ticking, each holding a seashell to their ears – a Tahitian conch for Banks, a large *Bulla* for Darwin – and hearing the whisper of faraway places.

In his remarkable meditation *Still Life With Oysters and Lemon,* Mark Doty writes about:

> *…a little painting by my friend Adriaen Coorte, champion of the singular. It is the size of a large postcard, and it represents five shells, arranged on that familiar stone ledge, against a background of darkness. Each is completely unlike the other, in color and form. This one is vulval, this one whorled, this tiny whelk is turned away from us, its opening hidden; this snail is the color of cochineal. And in the center, a murex, spiny, balanced on its delicate fishbone protrusions, its dark gate offered to us. This is a poem of difference, of strangeness; here, the painter says, are five things, five from the same category, and look how unalike they are, what dreamy variety the world offers up.* [6]

3. flower

A few months ago I stumbled across the description of a phenomenon I was not aware had a name, much less a name in my mother tongue. It describes the ideal of *livingness* in classical Chinese painting. Traditional scroll painters, like my grandmother, were "ever concerned that their works should resonate with *'chi'* – a term which might be translated here in Dylan Thomas's words as 'the force that through the green fuse drives the flowers'." [7] And I realized that this is the exact quality I have always gone for in my sculptural work. Breath. *Life*. Not a moribund trophy but the spirit of the thing itself. So without knowing it consciously, I have been living within the slippages between Chinese and European traditions of representation this entire time. Ours is an illusory world of wisps, mist, inclinations, understandings. It is not a world of surfaces. Surfaces are what we manipulate, but they are not the soul of the work.

Some of my earliest memories are of my grandmother painting watercolours. The first textiles I remember experiencing other than my blankie and my own clothing

were the brocades with which she bordered the finished scrolls. Stiff and smelling of camphor, they gleamed dully on the table under her work lamp.

While she painted, a tiny me wandered around her domain. Her granny flat was the semi-basement level of our house; because of this, gardens in my earliest memory opened out of windows at shoulder height, and were populated only by tough, dark-leaved plants – holly and camellias, ivy – things that could survive the total neglect of tenure-track scientists living in a coastal city. My grandmother and I used to climb up on the bench seat and out into the back yard through the casement, the white gypsum rocks that seemed to be the "turf" of choice for all the immigrant Chinese families in my neighbourhood crunching under our feet, with the overhang of the balcony above creating a shelter from the rain, and the soft thunk of lemons falling off the tree punctuating the afternoons. I collected these in a basket, because it seemed like the correct thing to do, but my parents were not very domestic, so when life gave *my* family lemons, we bundled them up and gave them to the postman.

My grandmother was the crafty one, the one who worked with her hands. She saved stamps, floating them off of their envelopes in warm water and re-sticking them neatly in a salvaged binder. The best ones came from the mysterious people that my grandmother had left behind in Taiwan when she came to live with us: meticulously etched pictures of elsewhere with the postmark wobbling across them, tiny window-panes into tiny magical Other worlds. I spent hours looking at them dreaming of what might be just past the edges of the picture frame.

The stamp binder lived in her big black lacquered bureau, in one of the many drawers that held a myriad of fascinating things. Tiny silver pearls of traditional medicine like

beads of mercury and vials of russet *po chai* pills, jade bracelets and embroidered handkerchiefs redolent of mothballs. On the top of the bureau was her altar, where she made offerings to Quan Yin every morning and every night, until she had no more mind to remember.

For a year after she passed away, the altar stood untouched, dust settling on fat Buddha's belly and over the offering bowls, now emptied of their water and oranges. A veil of cobwebs formed over the silk flowers in their bamboo containers, flowers she had patiently taught me to make when I was still small. At one point I went looking for something in one of the drawers and found the box of supplies: the sticky stem tape in various shades of green and olive, the multi-coloured ombred lengths of silk, impossibly beautiful and delicate to my child's eyes, still bright a decade later. Petals, sepals, leaves… cut in different shapes, pinched or rolled or folded in different patterns, waiting, latent. Those were the first fibre sculptures I knew. And in a small paper box, finishings: the deep preciousness of each pearl-tipped pin, anthers and stamens to unborn flowers.

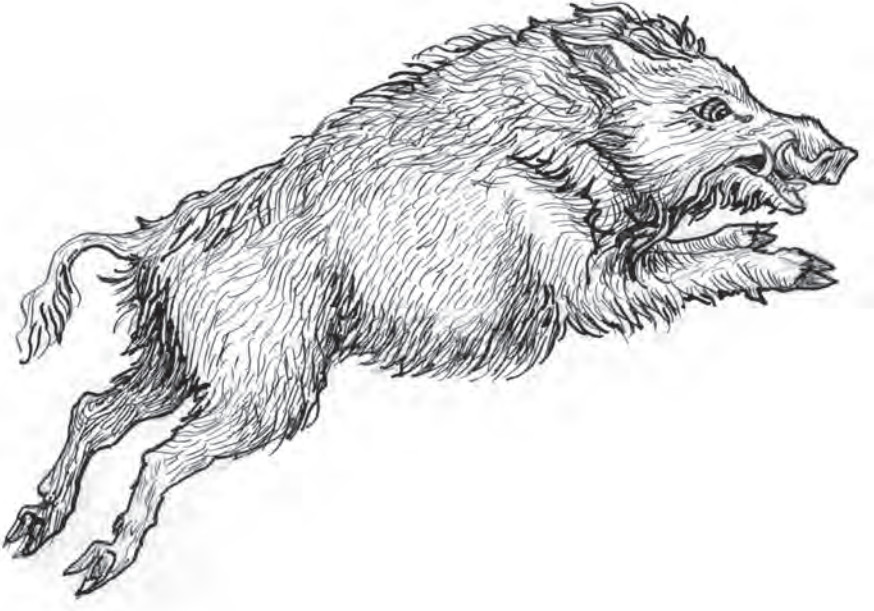
4. caterpillar / chrysalis

My studio work is labour intensive. And I get bored easily. One might think someone who gets bored as easily as I do wouldn't pick such a labour intensive and repetitive way of working, but somehow I unconsciously gravitate back to handwork every time.

So I listen to a lot of podcasts. NPR's *Radiolab* is one of my favorites. There is a story about metamorphosis that I heard a few weeks ago, part of the episode called "Black Box."[8] What struck me most about it was the idea of the future embedded in the past – as a *germ*, in the Latin sense of the word: the start, the seed, something which sprouts beyond its bounds. In this story, the journalist is in the lab of a biologist who works with *Lepidoptera* – the butterflies and moths. The biologist selects a chrysalis, slices it open with a delicate scalpel, and reveals the caterpillar in mid-transition. The journalist pokes it tentatively, and lets out a small scream – the tiny blob of jelly shivers and slumps into a puddle of goo on the tray, completely disintegrated. No

caterpillar, no butterfly, just goo. Yet even within this soup there exists both the memory of the caterpillar and the implication of the butterfly: the invisible seed of wings, eyes, antennae, legs, organs. They were there under the shell of the chrysalis and even under the soft skin of the chubby caterpillar the whole time, invisible but waiting, latent.

This speaks to me of a kind of flatness – the presence of all things in one thing, the presence of all times in one time. An *embeddedness*. Hence, then is implied in now; whatever small future we may still have left, teetering at the brink of the collapse of Western civilization, was already writ on the Dutch table groaning with goods and commodities, beings and objects collected from the natural world. This was the beginning of the Enlightenment, when many of our current ways of knowing and dividing the world came into being, and they came into being largely during – and perhaps because of – the encounters between cultures who had not previously met. With the expansion of seafaring trade routes led by the Dutch East India Company and their ilk, the world suddenly became so much bigger – yet paradoxically more finite. It was a foreshadowing of what was to come: colonization, globalization, war without end, the death of the bees, the Pacific garbage patch, the rise of sea level… rampant manifest destiny and its fallout.



5. boar

Charging down the hillside out of the trees, maggots ghostly swarming in and out of its eyes and its fur, the massive boar hurtles towards the small village like a steam train. This is one of the first scenes of the Hayao Miyazaki / Studio Ghibli film *Princess Mononoke* – the forest god driven mad, poisoned by an iron bullet fired into its side by greedy industrialists in a neighbouring town.

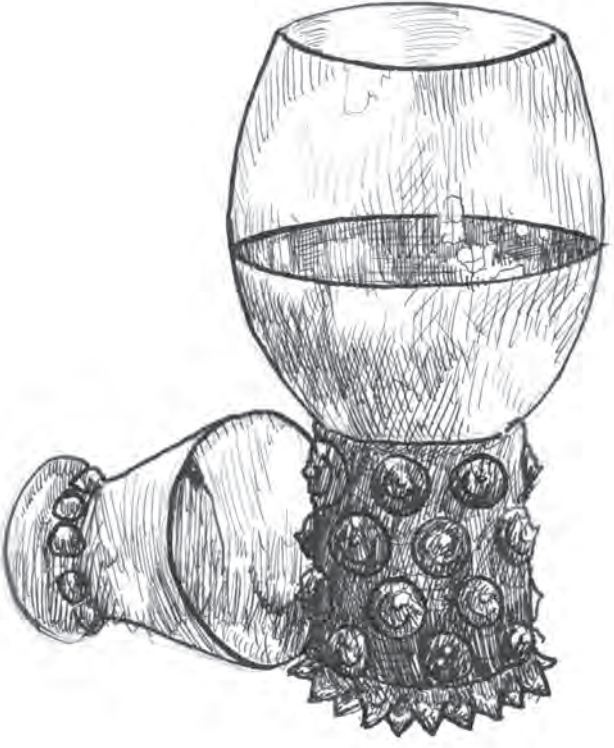
The scale of the old boars of Europe was truly godly, as they grew unchecked by man or civilization into monsters haunting the primeval forests, like goldfish set loose in a lake. They reflected a different time, a different largesse to the world. Now, at least in the California hills, they remain, but smaller, like shadows of their former selves. They are seldom seen; all one usually encounters, hiking among the oak forests, are the troughs they furrow through the duff while foraging.

If we could rewind the clock, could we change any of this? Would it play back the same way? Is it inevitable that we would end up here again? Rise of empire, fall of empire. The collapse of the west, particularly America, where I was born and raised. If someone else other than the Europeans with their incurable manifest destiny had wound up building better boats first…would things be any different? Or does each culture contain the seed of its own destruction? Of global destruction?

There is no nowhere. This we have learned.

Was there a sense of the finitude then? Did they know that there would ever be a last dodo, a last Tasmanian wolf, a last quagga, the way we know with creeping dread that there will be, perhaps in our lifetimes, a last polar bear?

The blank spots on the map are gone or full of trash, not dragons. The Pacific garbage patch is proof that things do not simply vanish – the world has grown too small for that. And this is, in some way, a direct result of what began in the 16th and 17th centuries: industrialization and expansion into new resources, which is now burying the world in detritus, detritus which has been rounded up and made into this tableau. They are the tellings, trajectories, intersections of stories, histories, individuals, nations. To borrow again from Mark Doty: "Here intimacy seems to confront its opposite, which is the immensity of time. Everything – even a painting itself – is evanescent, but here, for now, these citizens of the great community of the disappearing hang, for a term, suspended." [9]



6. roemer

My neighbourhood Renaissance Fripe-Prix for me is this: the last stop on the way to the landfill, where objects have one more shot at a life of use, at the affections of humankind. But it is not just a dumping ground, it is also a space that is thick with story. Journalist and southwestern pot-hunter Craig Childs once remarked to renowned antiquities collector Forrest Fenn, "'You've got this deep need to gather things,' I said. 'Information,' Fenn replied. 'It's not the object, it's the story behind the object.'" [10]

In his book (part polemic, part memoir) *Finders Keepers: A Tale of Archaeological Plunder and Obsession,* Childs asks: who does the past belong to? The pot hunters, diggers, collectors, curators, and scientists of the world may be fighting over the deep past, but here, in Canada and in America too, the shallow past, the fragmentary history of our families and our neighbours, is up for grabs: fluorescent-stickered and China-marker-hieroglyphed on the bottoms and laid out on chrome shelves above

racks of second-hand clothing arranged by colour. The assumption is that this shallow past has use-value still, even the broken knick-knacks and packets of total randomness (bagged and tagged in crinkly cellophane), enough to be worth 25¢ or $1.50.

Art students, hipsters, and vintage store hustlers scan the aisles for prizes, intended for use or resale, like panning for gold in the gravel. They are opportunistic scavengers, like the ravens waiting on fence posts by the highway. Every day they show up, hopeful. I wander amongst them, and amongst the immigrants and pensioners, on my own mission. I am scanning for a particular pattern: the whiff of believability, the piece of *now* which will stand in for *then*, in the telescoping of time and place. This is the hunt for me – searching through the detritus of western civilization under the fluorescent lights, through the cast-offs of the excessive life we are swaddled in.

Waves of objects come through the Renaissance, but only some carry strong enough wisps of story to be felt hovering in the air when you pass by. This: an old woman who loved roosters; who died after a lingering illness. That: someone whose ancestors arrived with their prized china; "Wedgewood" stamped on the versos of the few cracked and chipped survivors, the rest lost to the attrition of the years. Whole collections show up, dispersed among the aisles – cats, cheerful pigs, German shepherds, commemorative plates from the Maritimes, ducks, 1980's hollow-plane geometry applied to busts, to vases, to yet more cats. On the bookcase by the door – a woman perhaps, from the township of Mont Royal or from Westmount perhaps, perhaps the last in a long line dating back to the Derbyshire countryside, whose husband died or perhaps who never married in the first place but lived with her sister, who had no children – here is her entire tea service.

The stories are always stronger the more the objects remain together; there are more nooks and crannies for memory to accrete, pooling like heavy vapours. This must be why Childs doesn't like artifacts to be removed from their sites. He argues that the fabric of an object's story is woven of context – not just in archeological terms, where an artifact's position in the strata is critical to the information that it can transmit, but in the relationships set up by proximity, which allows a whispering between things, a whispering that can almost be heard by passersby. Embedded in history, or embedded in the landscape that created them, objects have power, have life. In companionship.

7. hawk

Neuroscientists have proposed that the brain experiences 'peripersonal space' – the immediate space around the body – as part of the body; that 'through a special mapping procedure, your brain annexes this space to your limbs and body,' so that 'your self does not end where your flesh ends, but suffuses and blends with the world, including other beings,' such as one's lover, one's horse, or, the hawk perched on one's arm for hours on end. [11]

If you were to fly over the edge of central California as a red-tailed hawk, you would see the undulating coastline give way to a cleat-shaped bay, edged by marsh, salt flats, and thin beaches in a few remaining places, but more predominantly crossed by bridges and highways, and interrupted by the unnatural shapes of strange jetties and blocks of alluvial pan where there should be no alluvium at all. It is landfill – the detritus of the city crowding into the Bay, peninsulas and jetties made of broken

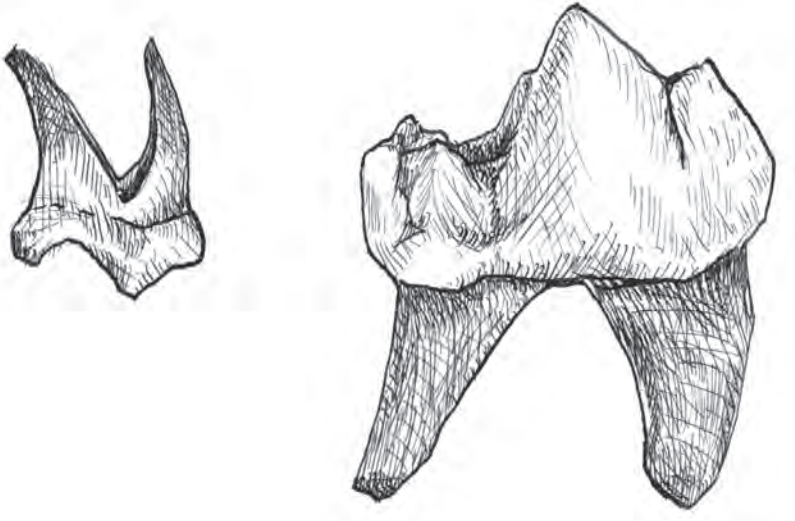
pieces, the collected rubble of the earthquakes and other assorted catastrophes grown over with pampas grass and sea lettuce.

Some have been converted to parks, like Point Isabel, where the idea of Burning Man was arguably born. Social trailing criss-crosses the headland, leading between encampments of army-surplus tents flying tattered prayer flags. The bright and shiny bits that sometimes emerge from the layer cake of concrete and rusted rebar are collected by the denizens of this land's end, redeemed, and made into art. Shopping cart archways, old cable spool towers, the garden of tin-can pinwheels, a row of doors which look as if they might lead to other parallel dimensions, bits of bright metal, spray paint. The landscape includes a massive driftwood dragon, a dancing giantess, and the northern causeway, like a fairground of abandoned booths at a dreamtime carnival à la *Spirited Away*; all silent and fading in the noon sun while cargo ships passing in the deep channel blast their horns, once, twice: the sound melancholy and drifting as they make their way up to the Carquinez straight.

Little is reciprocal between that piece of country and this, except for the post-industrial shoreline and the winds. The howling which here in the north sounds like wolves running the trees, at home sounded and looked like dragons weaving and crashing over the eucalyptus groves on the hills and out to the bay. I remember how they used to whip over the quiet Berkeley nights, thick with electricity and starlight. These are the winds that blew at the changing of the seasons, fighting with each other in passing, the irrevocable beginnings and endings of things. I learned to dread them, but to feel their exhilaration as well. They are the winds that blow comfort out the window and usher in the unimaginable.

In my mind I can ride those winds, but in my own earth-bound form, I am denied. If I could, then perhaps time would telescope, place would telescope, and story and reality would glide over both like the hawk's shadow over the headlands. Maybe it is for this reason that humans have long had the tendency to see birds as potential extensions of ourselves – that which we can project out from our terrestrial bodies to places we cannot reach. The hunt. The hawk or falcon embodies both *see*ing and *see*king as if from a great height. This is a deity's-eye view of the world, encased in a totally animal subjectivity, an alien consciousness. Yet it is a consciousness which has been tamed to the service of people, and perhaps this is the allure, the fantasy that falconry touches: that we can hold a bird of prey on our wrist as a *companion species* (in Donna Haraway's terms), this raptor who could crush our arm so easily, who is all things we cannot be. It is a kind of overturning of the order of things, a meeting of minds which cannot possibly meet, at least not through language. So without words, we send the falcon out to hunt our unseen desires.

I think of poor Prometheus, stealing fire from the gods. The spark of life, the ability both to create, and to destroy – is that not in fact divinity itself? And for such a crime, this punishment: a bird – a raptor, giant, such as once soared across the heavens but are now no more – arrives each night to eat his liver, consuming his gut feelings.



8. tooth

Just who is at home must permanently be in question. The recognition that one cannot know the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship, is the key. That is so for all true lovers, of whatever species. Theologians describe the power of the 'negative way of knowing' God. Because Who/What is infinite, a finite being, without idolatry, can only specify what is not; i.e., not the projection of one's own self. Another name for that kind of 'negative' knowing is love.[12]

The first religions have always been animist – and all things being, if not perfectly equal, then at least equally alive – we look for the seeds of what animates us in the world around us: what pre-existed us, what co-created us. We look for the spirit in things. And so we see God into the world – whether that came from

without, entering us through our senses, or whether we carry that within and project it outwards – does it ultimately matter?

In the end, it is about belief, which resides in the heart and not in the mind. The blotch on the tortilla becomes the face of the Virgin, two rock outcroppings in central China become The Schoolteacher Playing Piano To The Dog. Since the first shadow on the first cave wall, we read not just meaning but presence into the world, *being,* even when it is not overtly there. So perhaps the ghosts and monsters, gods, demons, tricksters, spirit animals and whispering trees, are all manifestations of our longing for the Other; perhaps some Other that we have lost, like a twin absorbed in utero – before consciousness, but not before being.

This is a story that belongs to one of my former studio-mates: as a teenager, she fell and broke her face, thus requiring maxillofacial surgery. When they opened up her cheek, they found a floating tooth. The tooth was not hers, and that is how she found out that in the womb, she had had a twin; a twin who was absorbed by her body before the first ultrasound, but which left traces of matter and genetic material scattered through her flesh that continued to grow. She tells me that this is more common than we think it is. So perhaps many of us carry a primordial memory: of once when there was only the two of you – the Other, and you – and nothing else. No language, no thought, no naming, so you knew each other better than you knew the world…and then, after a time, there was only one. You absorbed the Other, but it continued to live, to ghost, to grow even, within you. *Teratomas.*

Perhaps the mind (always seeking, cruising the deep waters of the subconscious like a shark ever on the move) fixes dreams, desires, and lost loves – a mirror world, a twin,

which existed before but does not now – onto that which receives the gaze. Paula Findlen writes in her introduction to *Early Modern Things:* "As antiquarians have long known, remaking the past does indeed produce new things or, put a different way, a new use for an old artifact. Like Heidegger's proverbial earthenware jug, it turns out to be meaningless if we cannot grasp the void inside the vessel, the empty, protean space that may be the thing itself."[13] The world, the object, the piece of art, the shadow in the stone, the distant star through the telescope, each is perhaps then just a vessel: to pour our lost Others into, to keep them safe.


1518
AD

9. stag

The Rockies have always had a special place in my heart. From Montana down through New Mexico, crossing the Continental Divide signaled that I was back on my turf, returning home to the West time and again from my life in the East, like a migratory bird in an dented red Jeep with paint flaking off the hood. A bird has to eat, and a girl's got to go home now and then.

But that was later on, during university and afterwards. Before that, the summer I turned seventeen, I spent 30 days out in the high backcountry of Wyoming on a National Outdoor Leadership School course. I had been outdoorsy in high school, so I was not expecting the difficulties such as they came. They sent us out to learn to be strong and to lead, but the principal lesson I received was that the first step in leadership is understanding your own limits. Which I did not, at the time. I was the smallest and the youngest in my group by far, so it was a physically trying and psychologically isolating time. Crossing the Wind River Range off-trail while carrying 70 lb packs, we

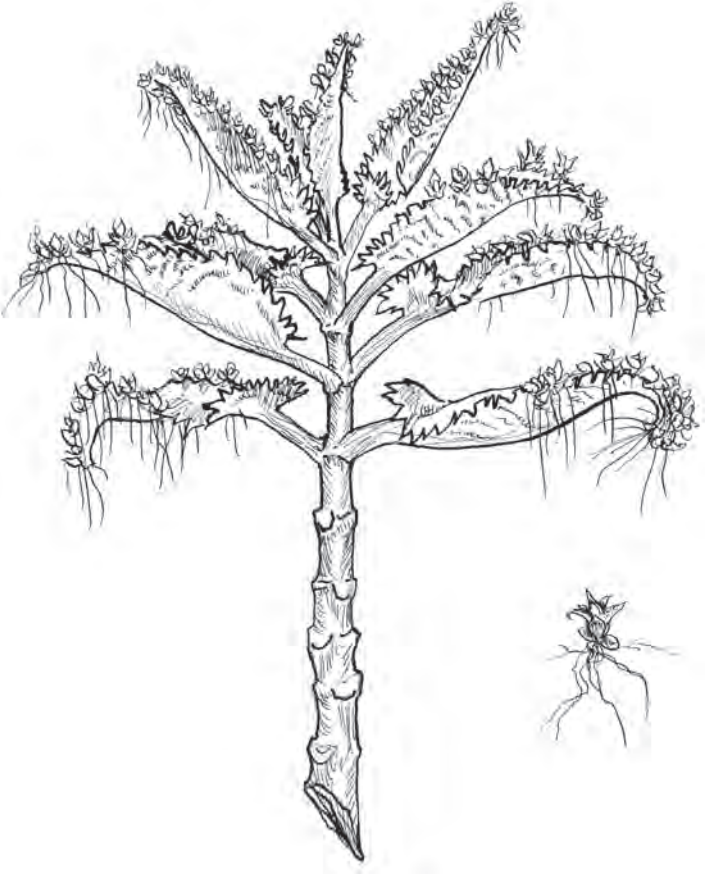
would break camp early, move fast before the uncertainty of high-altitude afternoon weather blew in, and camp early, most days, totally spent. Those afternoons the Midwestern and Southern boys who were my pack team would lounge around camp with their chewing tobacco, shooting the breeze, spitting at random, and often as not waiting to be fed by us girls, whose job it was to cook, or so they figured. I should have too – stayed and rested that is – but inevitably there would come the point each afternoon when I could no longer abide their raucous company, and so I would usually take off to be alone and think. I hiked far enough away that I could no longer hear them, tapping into physical reserves I didn't actually have.

One of those afternoons, a couple of days before we emerged above the tree-line, I wandered off into the woods, climbing the ridge above the valley where we were camped. Out of the corner of my eye I caught whiteness – out there, forty miles from the nearest trail, the only thing it could be was bone. It turned out to be an elk, fallen the season before, and decomposing where it lay. It didn't smell rotten; it was too far along for that – just the faintest trace of that sweet smell of decay floating over the clean tang of disturbed duff and glacial streams. Here was the king of the forest, archetypal, fallen at the peak of his glory and now feeding the ecosystem from the roots up. Branching antlers still reaching for the sky, they charted a pattern of choices, a set of either/or's already past. I thought about the cyclical nature of life, and how, in many ways, we have halted the process of decomposition in the cities – the chemicals, the anaerobic press of landfills, all preventing decay and thus breaking the cycle – and I thought about how we would stifle to death on our own un-decomposed refuse one day.

This is not to say that I am any better than the rest of my kind. I am a collector by nature; it seems to have been my impulse since early childhood, when I would return from the beach with pockets full of shells and rocks, small things removed from their slow attrition. Part of it was the thrill of finding, but there was also something else – building a tiny new world, even if just on my parents' kitchen windowsill, a microcosm to remind me the rest of it was still there, waiting. The wildness beyond the concrete.

Sitting in the falling twilight, I briefly entertained the idea of tying the magnificent rack of elk antlers to the top of my pack and hiking out with it, but it was, of course, an impossibility, with seventy more miles to go over rough terrain, and Dinwoody glacier still to cross, bound together in rope teams. So I pulled a single tooth, and sat by the skin and bones as they slowly, incrementally, caved into the forest floor. When it was almost dark, I went back to camp. The tooth stayed with me for many years, nestled in a yellow leather pouch with other talismans that I found along the way and kept for whatever reason, tiny bits of the world saved from decay, taken out of the cycle.

But not the elk – I left the elk with its magnificent antlers and its hollow-eyed skull, now missing a single molar, where it lay. That far away from the realm of humanity, the elk is probably still there, its antlers long ago fallen to the forest floor, the bones burrowed by beetles and swallowed up by leaf litter. Dissolving into the landscape from which it arose, where I was a visitor for ever so brief a time.



10. mother of thousands

It started with the two tiny cotyledon-leaved baby Malagasy *Kalanchoe* my studio-mate brought home from the Concordia University greenhouse, the summer we started the new studio. The size of a single alfalfa sprout each, we put them in peat moss and watered them. By the end of the fall, they were standing tall, spear-shaped leaves edged with the cotyledons and dangling roots of the next generation, and every time a breeze blew through the window screen, they gently rained millions of babies down over the plaster moulds laid out to cure on our work benches.

Since that first summer, the single *Kalanchoe* proliferated into the dozens, and dozens of dozens. Try as I might, I cannot bring myself to throw the babies out. They find their way into neighbouring pots, and have been rounded up and given to friends, but still they keep coming. And so I return to the Renaissance for ever more of the bowls, teacups, and vessels that were abandoned there when their previous owners either tired of them or died. Reminding us that objects, too, have lifespans, often longer than ours. In the time of the Dutch still life painters, it was due to the care and craft that went into their creation, the sense of their preciousness, and the solidity of the materials used (glass, silver, hardwoods). Now, conversely, it is due to their cheapness,

their mass production, and the petro-chemical industry. Their half-lives are measured by the eon; sheer scale, on every level. What was once truly singular, in terms of creation, has become singular only over time, through attrition.

Many of the processes in my studio are about replication, whether genetic, mechanical, or empirical. Proliferation, and corruption. Slippage: the more fragile moulds degenerate over time, a little further with each usage. This decay is visible in the increasingly wobbly casts of the red currants, just as the degrading of genes over successive waves of asexual reproduction is visible in the increasingly wobbly-looking generations of baby *Kalanchoe*. Too much of the same. Not enough variation. The gene pool on my windowsill is admittedly shallow, but along with my moulds, it is still likely to outlive me, as biologists such as Richard Dawkins like to remind us. Biologically speaking, we are not the singularities we like to think we are. *Authenticity* is a concept that has been both flattened and fragmented. Deep ecology and emergence theory both regularly witness singularities shattering into multitudes and multitudes coalescing into singularities, often in the space of a single heartbeat. Our boundaries are no longer fixed, if ever they were.

And yet.

Over time, the *Kalanchoe* was joined by more succulents, sub-tropical creepers, and other botanical oddities crowding the windows and workbenches, though it is still mightily winning the game of volume if not variety. These are the things I tend, my reason for getting up from the burnt-velvet armchair where I do my reading and writing at home, and going out to the studio. They are the things that need care regardless of what kind of day I am having – and so I go to water the fig tree and

the pitcher plant, the pregnant onions and the string-of-pearls, if nothing else, and often stay…just a little while. A few pours into prepped moulds, a drawing or two… and often the "quick" visit stretches to hours. Much as a friend of mine has a rescue mutt (Rottweiler eyes, sheepdog shag, and an extremely omega personality) that he half-stole half-inherited from another friend. He has become attached to her because she is his excuse to escape onto the mountain; to circle the neighbourhood, to stand in the sun, smoking contemplative cigarettes while she runs in the dog park. For her good. I have come to understand him as someone who must be giving in order to receive for himself, who cannot do the doing otherwise. And as for the dog, she loves him, the first creature who had power over her but chose to be kind anyway. My plants may not have any overt return attachment to me; but they do provide the same excuse.

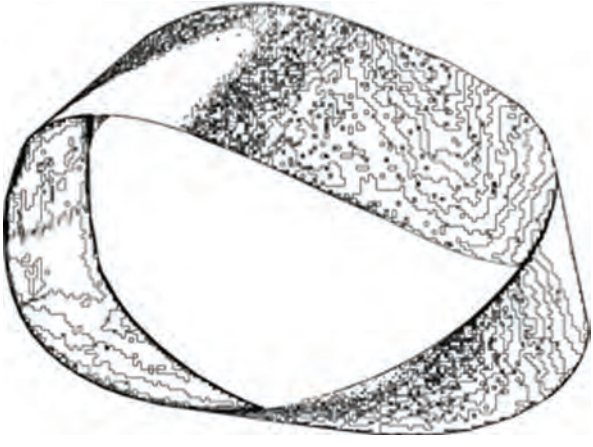
The world teeters on some sort of brink. It seems utterly ridiculous to make effigies of animals or objects dead four hundred years. What magic would I hope to work with them? Still I show up; they are also the things I tend. Slowly they grow.

One last lesson: shared by objects and relationships both – everything is temporary. Nothing is forever. But objects more often than not have a greater longevity than relatedness. The artifacts of a bygone marriage…what to do with them? The relationship may rise tempestuously and crash down upon us, washing away everything that was built between two people, but the objects remain (those that were not thrown out the window or smashed in a fit of rage, at least). Flotsam and jetsam on the storm-stripped shore, they are cast off and half-buried sideways in the sand, like shipwrecks, for future generations to ponder.

III

the ruins.

All the work previously performed for us by the gods must now be undertaken by the objects themselves. [14]



Let me try to articulate what it is about the Dutch Still Life that fascinates me.

Firstly, I care not at all about painting, or the history of painting. Forgive the crankiness and not to diminish the greatness of the actual paintings themselves, but the reason that I do not care about the *history* of painting is that I find it so often to be a lopsided western construction, art history's cherished Master Narrative. Artist Faith Ringgold once asked, "Who said that art is oil paint stretched on canvas with art frames? I didn't say that. Nobody who ever looked like me said that, so why the hell am I doing that? So I just stopped…I don't want to be placed in the bag where I think that all art is about making something that nobody can move." [15]

Who did what and who said what to whom, endlessly reaching backwards and trying to reconstruct (or construct for the first time, as the case may be) our reasons to project forwards – forwards to us, forwards to this world, forwards to this moment as if it were always destined to be, as if it were ordained by God, as if it were the pinnacle of something.

As if there could have been no other way.

Art borrows from Victorian-era biology, which in turn borrowed from Christianity a way of seeing history and existence as a progression, and a divinely ordained progression at that (first by God, then by Science itself). The first cladistics diagrams showed evolution as a tree. But life is not a tree, it is a bush, and a scraggly one at that – with limbs broken snapped or cut off along the way, and cut not by the hand of God or Order but by contingency. As biologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote in *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History,* if you could wind back the tape again and press play, the chances of things working out this way twice[16] – i.e. that we would evolve, that I would be sitting here today banging away on a brushed aluminium keyboard – are statistically insignificant.

Null.

So that is why I put little stock in art history. However, I do have something vested in *history* history. Why? Because – for all the contingencies (and here of course they exist too), for all the blind dumb luck that I am indeed, sitting here in a grey-skied Northern country, pounding away on this brushed aluminium keyboard – this is how things played out. And while I do not believe in the idea of progress, nor believe in the linear inevitability of us ending up here on the precipice, at the end of the party that is (was) Western Civilization, I do believe in

a kind of embeddedness: a kind of time-collapsing reality Mobius strip which, viewed from a certain perspective, places us, in North America in 2014, right back alongside the Netherlands in the seventeeth century.

I see the Dutch Golden Age, which gave birth to the tradition of European still life painting, as a bookend to our own, with four hundred years in between: the dawn of modern capitalist civilization, and its twilight. What came before, a legend; what comes after, a dream – possibly a nightmare. It is as if we were somehow encoded in that time, that our crap-filled world of mismatched injection-moulded parts bleaching on trash heaps and extruded food plopped on cafeteria trays was somehow coded into the era of the great ships which crossed the seas and began really scrambling everything up – people, plants, animals; genomes, ideas, objects.

Of all the things which remain, the genomes and ideas have mnemonic longevity, but most of all it is the object which endures. As Craig Childs so eloquently puts it, "Time was never meant to last. It couldn't. It has no shape. It threads through your fingers like water, no stopping it for any longer than you can cup your palm. Beyond the small memories of our generations, there are artifacts, the substance of history." [17]

Objects are neither right nor wrong. They can be displaced out of their strata, in an archeological sense, but even so, they simply are. And in the objects

are embedded stories, a rhizomatic tangle of narratives and locations reaching far beyond their most recent places of rest. Julie Hochstrasser describes this phenomenon in her essay "Stil-staende Dingen: Picturing objects in the Dutch Golden Age": "Every commodity pictured in still life holds a complex story of its own; unpacking those takes one vast distances outside the borders of The Netherlands." [18] These stories are fascinating, but are also more often than not dark, as the intersections between these threads of story frequently resulted in violence, death, and disease: "…the arrival of exotic objects within the intimate space of Dutch still life bears witness to the global trade network the Dutch commanded during their Golden Age…. Yet the elegant presentation of these commodities (often on silver platters – at least metaphorically, and often quite literally) also conceals the darker shades of violence and exploitation that were the true social cost of many of these luxuries." [19]

So what is the Dutch table then? Not a peaceable kingdom; not a perfect order. They were almost always presented as "heaps" (as Canadian painter Janet Werner once said of her dominant compositional style), a pile of the dead or dying. To pile up game, vegetables and fruits from far-off places – did they come from the market or from traveller's tales? From heresay like Dürer's Rhinoceros? Were they real, tangible, or were they the colonialist's dream – painted to fool posterity? We know that seasonally, many of the painted bouquets were temporally impossible before the age of greenhouse production and jet-planes. As Peter Mitchell so delicately puts it in *Dutch Flower Painting,* "Dutch flower painting is a confection of untruths, which tries to give the taste of reality." [20] So why paint them as though they were really there? And not just the flowers, but the entire so-called "Embarrassment of Riches"

– gleaming fish and stilled fowl, gutted carcasses and mounds and mounds of fruit and vegetables formerly unknown to Europe, regiments of shining glassware, silver and pewter and pearl, and always that one comic red lobster (which in the compression of history reminds of nothing so much as Dali).

When bounty was expressed in terms of an arrangement, objects stood in for ideas, thus impossible combinations of flowers and fruit which bloom in different seasons in different hemispheres express a luxury or an open-handed presentation of the entire world as accessible by galleon, compressed into a single moment in time. But in our age, this heaping is reflected back in a grotesquely warped mirror, when the objects themselves – once dead animals and plants; the harvest brought in by hand – are replaced by multitudes too legion to be counted, much less represented. They are the untold millions – the sheer volume of crap which we have produced and consumed and discarded. Of the Dutch Golden Age, Hochstrasser writes:

> *But what is undeniably striking is the birth of consumer society. Surely it is no coincidence at all. In The Netherlands, early modern things came to this unprecedented focus of painterly attention just at a moment when material culture was burgeoning within the life of an increasingly affluent society, registering once again (as art is wont to do) the themes and issues at the forefront of broader societal concern.* [21]

"Please can we go to McDonalds, Mum. Please."

crap taxidermy

> *[Carl Akeley] had been thinking a lot about sculpture. How materials like bronze or clay could be used by a sculptor to capture the animal's true spirit – its deeper animal essence beneath the skin. Why, then, did they, who worked with the animal's actual skin, do no better? A true artist would no sooner butcher the skins the way they had than a painter would mount his canvas with roofing nails.* [22]

People keep sending me the same link on Facebook. It's a Buzzfeed article titled "19 Reasons Why @CrapTaxidermy Is The Most Horrifying Account On Twitter: Holy Hell." It is admittedly hilarious, and it seems to remind people of my work, albeit in a round-about way. My sister-in-law, Namita, was the most recent to post the link to my wall, accompanied by the quip: "The opposite of what you do."

@CrapTaxidermy is a Twitter feed of really badly botched taxidermy – comically and/or grotesquely so. They are (or were) once real animals – and their skins

are now stretched over poorly made forms, or no form at all (just stuffed with lumpy fibre, as most taxidermy was, before Carl Akeley revolutionized the field). They are stretched over benches, plumbing pipes, the forms of the wrong species, or are cobbled together like little franken-beasts. They are asymmetrical, moth-eaten, mangy, lopsided, rotten-eyed.

And their captions say things like:

"Thank you Mr Taxidermist, you really managed to capture the pure hatred in my little Timmy's face."

"I told you it was fucking hunting season Doreen but nooooo, we had to visit your sisters near the lake!"

"Half Leopard, Half Footstool, all Terror!"

"Tell me the truth Foxy, did you eat my fucking 9 Iron?!"

#Selfie #NoFilter #BulletHole [23]

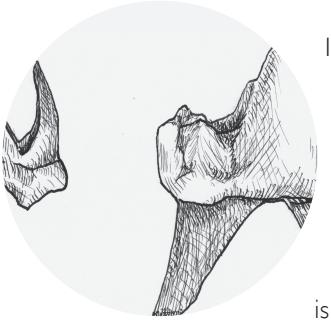
What makes botched taxidermy so woefully tragicomic? Is it the life that is gone, yet immortalized as a terrible parody of itself? The uncomfortable caveat that immortality is not necessarily a positive, in true *Death Becomes Her* fashion? We are not meant to immortalize the ugly; at best, the immortal ugly gets equated with the damned, or the undead: White Walkers, zombies, even vampires (who are beautiful on the surface but corrupt within. Unnatural, thus unholy). Perhaps all these reasons, and

more. But what runs constant through all the possibilities is the inescapable fact that we read ourselves, in sympathy, aversion, or *vanitas,* into these sad creatures. Or as Steven Baker articulates it in *The Postmodern Animal,* "Why? Because the look of the postmodern animal – no surprises here – seems more likely to be that of a fractured, awkward, 'wrong' or wronged thing, which it is hard not to read as a means of addressing what it is to be human now." [24] And Kitty Hauser, in her article "Coming Apart at the Seams," offers the following: "…in the context of contemporary art or photography 'stuffed animals – especially badly stuffed ones – can signify… other kinds of contemporary ruination' by offering, for example, 'a dark view of an irrevocably damaged nature.'" [25]

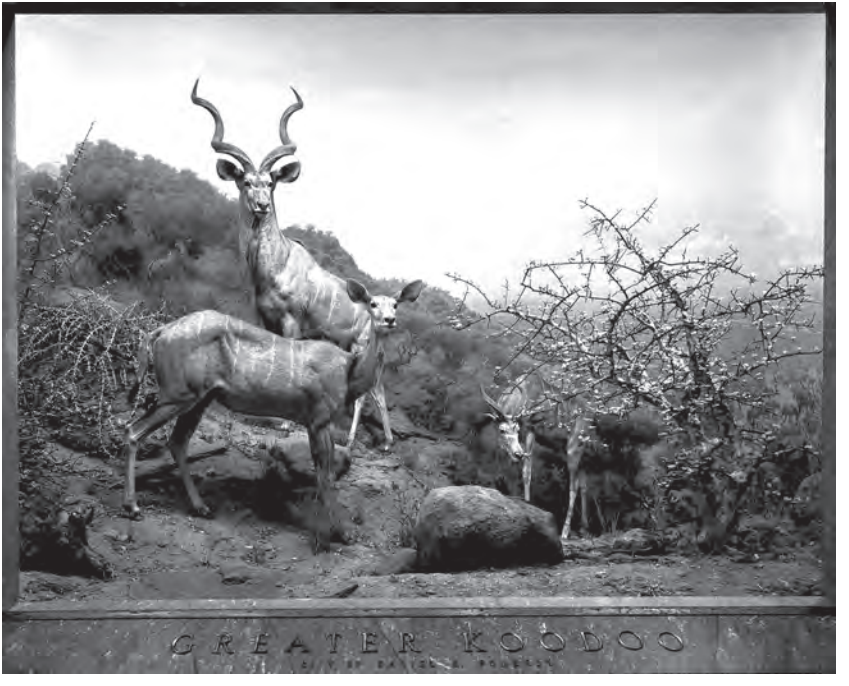
So what did Namita mean when she wrote "The opposite of what you do"? Opposite, meaning: neither "crap", nor "taxidermy". Not "crap," because it is beautiful, or at least well crafted. Not "taxidermy", because the work is both *un-real,* in that the pelts are made from felt, not fur, and industrial substances (resin, silicone, and thermoplastics are the final touch which conveys "life" as opposed to merely "likeness": the wet gleam of saliva or slime, the glow of the eye, the keratinous texture of claw and tooth), and *un-dead,* because the best of my creatures, wronged or not, have that quality of *chi,* breath, or livingness. Even in the fabricated carcasses of this current installation, there is some of the same life which seems to haunt the mythological creatures that I have made before, still inhabiting the body. Here that body is ripped apart,

sectioned into pieces: a commodity, food waiting to be prepared and eaten by men, yet still with that same sentient gleam in the eye.

This stands in contrast to the botched taxidermy, which is resolutely *dead* – so much so that it adds to our aesthetic aversion by being absolutely steeped in our unavoidable mortality. Baker explains: "The verb which Deleuze and Guattari use to indicate the dangers of an insufficiently cautious construction of the imaginatively rethought body, which they famously term the 'body without organs', is *rater:* to go wrong, backfire, mess up, spoil, botch or bungle…The sense which Deleuze and Guattari seem to want to convey through this term is of something that has gone terribly, totally, disastrously wrong." [26] Possibly as wrong as our world has gone.



Someone asked me the other day whether I felt I was playing God when making my work. Perhaps so, in the loosest philosophical sense, in that I have the ability to create alternate worlds – but I cannot animate them (at least not yet). What kind of god can create the appearance of life yet not the quickening? A god of suspended animation is perhaps no god at all. The quickening is supplied from outside the system – it is the viewer who steps in and imagines motion, and thus life, who sees the flicker in the eye of the feathered wolf and jumps back, yelling "it winked at me!!!" Logically, then, God is in the eye of the beholder.


GREATER KOODOO

craft taxidermy

> *…craft is often seen as a sign of failure, but it can also be an escape hatch – a means to think outside the narrow confines of the autonomous artwork.* [27]

Let's take another moment for honesty here. I really despise a lot of contemporary art. Not all of it to be sure, but a certain kind. A certain kind which is all justification, no life, that really refuses the imagination. Asking people to engage on a solely conceptual or intellectual level requiring reams of wall text – what are we hiding in this lack of clarity? Of meaning? Of skill? Is it a refusal to be accountable? If people are going to expend this kind of effort making the work (which might arguably be better spent understanding or addressing any number of other things) – where is the redemptive part?

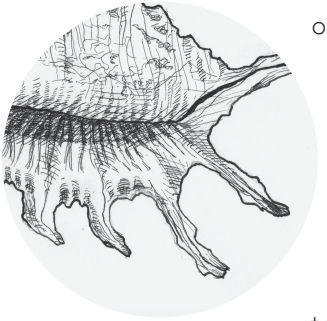
Perhaps that's what draws me to the craft end of the fine art spectrum – because it still retains a tie to something *living,* to *life.* In scholar Glen Adamson's words: "Craft only exists through motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people." [28] As opposed to a culture of glorifying airless, stuffy, dead and disconnected objects displayed in featureless white cubes. Maybe that's why so often it's the public museum over the commercial gallery for me. Galleries can be stunningly beautiful in their suspended animation – a totally rarified atmosphere, an opportunity to step outside the world – but the museum, even full of dead things, ironically still contains life in all its un-predictableness – objects exist in some kind of narrative space in relationship to one another. This may be why even "dead" museum specimens are interesting to me while "dead" art objects are not – because of the life they allude to, the sense they came out of a greater ecosystem. Craft and fibres still have that connection to the living world, and not just the upper middle class West. The *whole* world. The West *and* the Rest. Even under the questionably paternalistic purview of the West's great anthropology collections, the objects still have autonomy. They are their own kind of living thing – they murmur their own stories separate from the stories told in the cards pinned to the walls.

That and, when I was a child, images of humans bored me speechless, unless they were supernatural in some way. This contrariness

upset my resolutely practical father, who believed at the time (though no longer) that I'd only have a future as an artist if I could paint portraits. Thus it made a kind of twisted sense to me when I learned that the Dutch still life painters came out of an abandoned religious painting tradition[29]: the triumph of the Calvinists over the Catholics swept painterly mimesis out of the church and into the home, taking with it the direct tie to not only the symbolism but also to the corporeal reality of the gods, magic, icons and fetishes. The power of the saints then transmuted into their surroundings, into the landscape and natural objects, as "those parts of the picture which were subsidiary to the central human figures began to be worked up with greater care, to give a fuller sense of verisimilitude; eventually, the saints dwindled in size and dissolved into their landscapes, the hams and dead game grew larger and edged the sacred scenes from the pictorial space." [30] And analogously, as artist Mark Dion has described in an ecological context: "…if the neatly edged fox is dissolved into her environment so that all we see is an ecosystem, our current ethical concepts do not really get a purchase." [31] Thus divinity, be it gods or saints or a more disembodied sense of the unity of things, flows back into nature, where arguably it came from in the first place.

Full circle.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that the first thing I can remember wanting to be when I was a little kid was a taxidermist. Understandably, this worried my parents even more, but it was less morbid than it sounds. To me, stuffed animals (I suppose I should qualify: *well* stuffed animals) were magical: totems in suspended animation, not death. They were the connection to a wildness I knew was out there but didn't get to see often enough in my urban upbringing, and as such were a kind of promise. As I got older, I saw much more of this wildness in person; I travelled across the world and back more than once and walked on the soil, stone, and ice of some exceedingly remote places. But that was much later. As a child, the only guarantee that anything resembling wildness still existed were the glimpses I saw on field trips to the state parks (which required a car and adult supervision), and in the museums, which didn't. I could wander through the California Academy of Sciences and stare at the specimens as long as I wanted – from the neutral, formal mounts in their early 20th century oak display cases, row upon row of them brightly lit in the dimness of the Bird Hall, to the full life-groups in their painted dioramas in the African Hall, complete with savannah soundscape – and imagine their life, not their death. They seemed full of magic, as windows to elsewhere.



Biographer Jay Kirk captures this feeling perfectly, describing Carl Akeley's dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History:

To look inside this beautiful forgery, he felt sure, one would almost ache to get on the other side of the glass, to enter the sealed chambers where life and death seemed held in suspension. Here was asylum from the ravages of decay and oblivion. And here was the same paradox, to a degree, that every artist faced: to immortalize time, one must kill it a little bit first. What better way to understand the cosmos than to flense it, bleed it, and then build it back up again to spec. All just so that it might be possible – bearable even – to look directly upon the naked mystery of Nature unveiled. [32]

Here is where I first really learned to see, standing in the cool gloom of the natural history museum, sketchbook and pencil in hand, curious onlookers pausing to watch the child draw.

craft taxonomies

> …*What laymen call skill is mostly a matter of taking very great trouble.* [33]

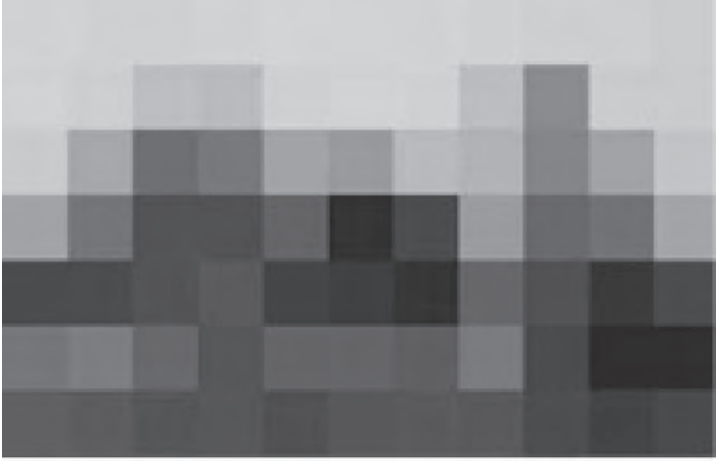
In his weighty essay *Caterpillage: Reflections on Seventeeth Century Dutch Still Life Painting*, art historian Henry Berger writes:

> *If flowers that couldn't have co-existed are brought together in a painting, its visual charge is less that of (what we call today) a bouquet than that of the* Wunderkammer. *In Goldgar's words, 'by picturing them, the artist collected them in the only form they actually could be collected. Still lifes have also been called collections because the logic of the relationships among the different objects is not immediately apparent and requires the logic of the collector's creativity to explain them.' A* bloemstilleven, *then, is the 'copy' of a collection, but of a collection that never existed until viewers assume or decide or get persuaded that it's the copy of a collection that preexisted it.* [34]

Every Dutch still life is then a collection of sorts, but one which is unscientifically grouped, uncategorized. It is a collection presented more like an altar than like a cabinet of curiousity, an altar (to borrow the words of artist Mike Nelson) "built the way a voodoo shrine might be made; you'd take objects from everyday life and place them upon the shrine. So a kitchen bowl might become a receptacle for ceremonial blood, or a cigarette might become an offering to the gods." [35] Objects become potentialities. Each represents a story, a history which may or may not have actually happened. *Histories* are the creation myths of literate societies – the way we conceptualize our origins, the way we tell our being; the reasons "why" that we recite to our children and our enemies. But *history* – the only true history – lies around in objects. They are the only true link backwards, because they were there. As Utah Phillips used to like to say, "The past didn't go anywhere. I can pick up a rock that's four million years old and drop it on your foot." [36]

And as such, objects are a sort of palimpsest. Even the most carefully preserved artifact or life group behind glass bears traces, marks. The objects I create are also heavily invested with labour – not for labour's sake alone, but as a tracery of time, of a thought process, of emotions, days that came and went, and which will not be again. One of my favourite specimens in the Field Museum of Chicago is the Somali Wild Ass – shot and mounted by Carl Akeley himself, and endangered now, so no more specimens will ever be forthcoming – its haunch is cracked and peeling in one spot, like water-damaged paint. I'm sure the

conservators are sad about it, but to me, it's not a bad thing. This is what happens to solid reality over time. The crack is a record. It is the evidence of linear time, the time we inhabit – not boundless time, preserved-in-formalin time, suspended animation – and it reminds us that we are, in fact, the ghosts in the machine.



cracked taxonomies

The entire purpose of the museum, of course, was preservation. Preservation of the past, preservation of the facts. Preservation of the correct order of nature. Now, more than ever, the curators felt that they must preserve specimens of the rapidly evaporating flora and fauna across America's dwindling wilderness. As Osborn's sometimes difficult curator of ethnology, Franz Boas, had said, they were the last generation to be in the position to do so. [37]

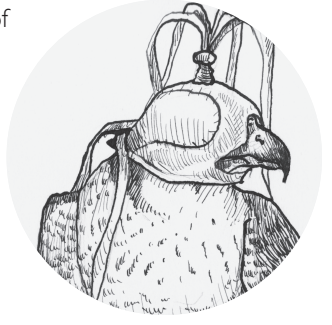
A cold blooded murderer. *That was the way he put it to himself. The feeling was keen. But for what purpose was all this bloody effort? Was this really the only way* – but it was, wasn't it? – *to obtain the necessary data, because without the data, you would have no understanding, no facts, and if you didn't have that, then what would you have? What would civilization be without its accumulation of facts?* [38]

For a long time, I worked with the idea of the Cabinet of Curiousities, the *Wunderkammer*. It has been on my mind for so long that there are still vestiges in everything I do, and it is still the most complete metaphor for my own practice. The most succinct summary of the idea was for me articulated by Barbara Stafford and Frances Terpak in *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen:* "The cabinet of curiousities offers a parallel to the interlocking dynamics of the contemporary universe. Because it tightly encases a variety of wonders, it flattens hierarchies and allows new attachments to spring up…not so much a static tableau to be contemplated as it was a drama of possible relationships to be explored." [39] But the idea that stumped me over and again, in trying to use it as a conceptual framework around which to assemble an exhibition, was its everything/nothing nature. How to get all the "exempla" in line to create a map of the known universe? It was ultimately like trying to picture infinity, and I almost broke my mind, just like Aby Warburg with his *Mnemosyne Atlas.*

Much like the Museum which it evolved into, a Cabinet of Curiousity is an expression of collection and *preservation.* But the Dutch table and all the things heaped upon it are an expression of collection and *consumption.* Where the cabinets of curiousity were created to showcase the wonders accumulating from an ever-expanding world, the Dutch still life signaled, four or five centuries prior to its happening, a kind of implosion. Held in suspension – the time between breaths – an accumulation of things on a

table, neither living nor dead, forms not a scene perhaps but an inventory; the remains of a life that we once chose to document, and now must choose to live even while accepting its loss.

At the end, it is a question of resolution, as in: it all depends upon the resolution at which you view life. Much of the time we are focused on the minutiae of their lives, pixel by pixel, while the bigger picture passes unnoticed. But I have spent so much of the last four years looking at the bigger picture that now digging back down into the fine grain of memory, stories, characters, people – the life I have *actually* lived – is vertiginous. All the contradictions swirl – it is not as if I have not travelled, burned gas and rubber across tens of thousands of miles of road; I am just as responsible for where we stand now as anybody else. Teetering on the brink. But was there some small redeemable action there, buried in the miles, in the stories collected, the places traveled, the people loved? Even at the edge of destruction, what will have mattered is this: the texture of life – that which we have *done* versus that which we have *feared* – in the painting, in the telling, in the making, and ultimately in the dissolution.



Everything laid out on the table.

I know that all of this might be taken as precious, a hymn to so much useless beauty, in an hour when the notion of beauty is suspect – when it seems to suggest a falsely bright view of the world, or a narrow set of aesthetic principles related to the values of those in power, an oppressive construction.

And indeed it might be so, were what matters about still life simply confined to the museum, if these paintings were solely self-referential, removed from the world, an elaborate language of hymns to themselves. If they elided death, the fact of our quick transits in time.

But still life is about the given. And in both senses of the word: that which is always at hand, which we take for granted, and that which is offered, proffered, which the world provides for us, the now. At hand: to be grasped, to be lifted to the mouth.

It is an art that points to the human by leaving the human out; nowhere visible, we're everywhere. It is an art that points to meaning through wordlessness, that points to timelessness through things permanently caught in time. That points to immensity through intimacy…

…Still life. The deep pun hidden in the term: life with death in it, life after the knowledge of death, is, after all, still life. [40]

After the Hunt

2014 -2017

endnotes

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plates

1. **Redcurrants.** Drawn after Woodville, W. *Medical Botany Vol 2,* t.74, 1792.

2. **Seashell.** Drawn from life in the studio, a shell my mother brought me from Florida.

3. **Flower.** Drawn from the blog www.newchinesepaintings.com, entry title: "Gongbi Peony: Rich Infinite Poetic Revealed from the Elegant."

4. **Caterpillar.** Drawn from Google search of a Monarch butterfly caterpillar.

5. **Boar.** Drawn after an etching of a wild boar, Wellcome Library, London.

6. **Roemer.** Drawn after *Still Life with Oysters, Rum Glass and Silver Cup,* Heda, 1634.

7. **Hawk.** Drawn after entry in *Encyclopaedia Brittanica:* "Faloncry Furnishings."

8. **Tooth.** Drawn from life, a pair of coyote teeth pulled from a half-mandible I found on an acquaintence's farm in southern Quebec.

9. **Stag.** Drawn after Wenceslaus Hollar (1607-1677): "A Stag Lying, After Dürer."

10. **Mother of Thousands.** Drawn from life in the studio.

11. *Mobius Strip.* Miscellaneous online image.

12. *Crap Taxidermy.* From the website www.buzzfeed.com.

13. *Greater Kudu: Akeley Hall of Mammals.* From the American Museum of Natural History (AMNHNYC) Tumblr site.

14. *Zhang Wang, stone from California Gold Rush country.* Photographed by a tourist at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum.

15. *Pixels.* Google search for term: "pixels", and re-sampled up to 300 dpi.

about

emily jan is a Montréal-based artist and writer. Originally hailing from San Francisco, California, jan has traveled to 35 countries (and counting) and lived in four, including South Africa and Mexico.

As a wanderer, naturalist, and collector of objects and experiences, she is guided in her work by the spirit of exploration, kinship, and curiousity.

You can find out more about her and her work here: www.emilyjan.com.

a final note

The author was, once upon a time, a musician – and the book you are holding in your hands was written in sonata form.

It is also a puzzle box of sorts; a literary Roentgen device, containing a riddle or two.

Bonne chance et bon voyage.

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~

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