

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

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Introduction: Creative process: mortality, entanglement and embodiment.

My practice focuses on embodiment and invisibility, retracing the connections of what we can (or cannot) see and touch, as determining forces that shape human relations with the other. I work with different media to explore elements of strangeness and displacement – both visually and physically. Through this, I question the distinction and the binary that the human species has established over every other living creature, and that I believe needs to be restructured in order to create change in the current Anthropocene epoch. My practice is composed of many elements, methods, and ideas. In this paper, I will review some of those elements and the connections between them.

Overall, my work is about bodies and violence; I use these elements to create a place where empathy and loss mix over and over again, and I originate the possibility for entanglement and love.

Violence destroys connections and relationship, but it can also have a role in making visible and restoring the links that have been broken, as force for generating empathy. Empathy rarely originates from happiness; it is from the violent and traumatic experiences that I am able to create empathic connections. In particular, I look into death, loss and love to ignite an empathic response and to foster awareness on entanglement and its consequences, in a time of climate change and land abuse. Entanglement means tangled connections; it refers to an idea of life based on interdependent relationships rather than individualistic mechanisms. It is an urgent and essential concept to embrace in order to create real sustainability. In an epoch of loss and mass extinction, relations and connections represent danger rather than potentiality, and as humans we are required to accept our own exposure in the destruction we are causing. Love and grieving can allow us to deeper connect with the environment; feeling entangled with death is a powerful way to sustain life.

Embodiment is my chosen tool to examine entanglement and mortality. In both of my experiences with the Land Arts of the American West¹ program in Fall 2017, and the UNM Biology department in Spring 2018, I realized the importance that physicality has over representation, and my practice has shifted from image-based to one that incorporates installation, sculpture, performance, biological material and processes.

1. Background: the shimmer and the violence, *Its Feathers Shine*

In December 2012, I found myself walking through agricultural fairs in the UK, as a stranger of both language and culture; a condition of displacement and isolation so important in creating connections with the more-than-human. I was not sharing language, culture, or interests with the other humans in the space. I wasn't sure which was my place anymore, or if I had one. As an individual, I usually rely on the structures around me to sense my identity. Those structures were lifted and – through this displacement – I was able to connect with the avian population at the fairs; the connection felt strong then and has never left me since. I was there to research a photographic project on food production, but I discovered so much more. It was the first time I saw the shimmer of birds' feathers and eyes staring back at me.



Figure 1. From the series "Its Feathers Shine" (2014)

This triggered and guided me in the realization of *Its Feathers Shine*, a photographic work on bodies, violence, and perception. It represented my first ramble into investigating more-than-human aesthetics and relations, the first time I truly encountered the skin of an *other*, the surfaces of bodies that felt the same and different at once. The displacement allowed me to connect and the feathers' shimmer dragged me in.

2. Specimen preparation, and *Keep His Anger Still in Motion*

I have been working at the Museum of Southwestern Biology at the University of New Mexico, learning how to prepare birds for the avian specimen collection. Once a week, I spend the afternoon cutting birds apart to save tissue samples, skeletons, and skins. Every time it is a deeply demanding experience that leaves me with the intriguing ambivalence of sadness and disgust, mixed with a particular interest in the tactile awareness that I gain from this process. This ambivalence allows me to understand that there is something essential to this experience. I crave this physical contact with the birds, the closeness that comes from it, but at the same time, I am frightened by its violence. I feel as though I am a child who breaks apart her favorite toy in curiosity of wanting to know its interior, with a ravenous excitement that comes, perhaps, from too much affection, and the awareness of destroying the beloved object.

Preparing specimens for a biology collection is a complex ritual. It starts with annotations and cataloging, as it is primarily a process of data recording. During this time, the dead bird remains on the table in a plastic bag for a bit longer, unseen and untouched. The first task is, in fact, to be sure to correctly insert the new individual in the coded system of the museum catalogue, cross matching several series of entry numbers and barcodes. Next, we cut into the birds. Scalpels are not sterilized – just rinsed with soap and water; it is fine since the subjects are already dead, but nevertheless it feels uneasy. At times, no gloves are used as it is the naked fingertips that have inherent sensibility in managing the delicacy of the fragile skin. Skin akin to skin. Eventually, the bag is opened, and the bird taken into bare hands. Before cutting, it is necessary to check for signs of molting, my favorite part of the process. It represents

the possibility of handling the bird, petting it, moving the limbs, enjoying its beauty and weight in my hands. This stage allows me to spend some time with the body, often talking with him or her, before starting the process of destruction for preservation.



Figure 2. Interactions during specimen preparation



Figures 3 a & b Empty skin of female A. Phoeniceus before the stuffing process; finished A. Phoeniceus

A deep sense of connection has been generated by the experience with taxidermy at the museum; touching bodies, feeling flesh, sensing the limits between my body and anything else, all of these inter-actions have acquired a central role in my practice. They represent the physical manifestation of the idea that we are all the same, humans and more-than-humans. We are made of similar tissues: the brain – that holds our memories, feelings and personalities – is made of the same identical pink goo found in other species' skulls, and it works following similar biochemical processes. This embodied perception has acquired more and more importance in my practice. Embodiment pertains specifically of bodies and of processes becoming real within them. The body is intended as a space for understanding, feeling, thinking; the indivisible unit to create contact, a complex, but unitary system interpolated in many other systems.

My project, *Keep His Anger Still in Motion*, started as response to this experience in preparing the skins. I have become interested in mold making as a way to embody entangled ideas of death and loss. Molds are impressions of what is, or was, there. In that sense, I see a direct connection with photography; both record marks of a presence that sometime, somewhere, were real. Originally focusing on making molds of the hearts of the birds, I quickly became interested in questioning the entire taxidermy process and its illusory essence. I wanted to break the process, stopping and reversing it at the most dramatic point: when the bird is reduced to a mere empty skin. Instead of preserving the outside and the illusion of a prosperous organism, I documented through a silicon mold the emptiness that is left. The result is an uncanny shape, so different from our idea of the structure of a bird.



Figure 4. Studio for mold of sturnus vulgaris (2017)

While working on this project I also discovered that there are strong limitations in the possibilities of working with birds. According to the US Migratory Bird Protection Act (1918), it is a federal crime to be found with dead birds of any US native species. Therefore, I decided to work with a starling I found dead near campus, on a sunny winter morning.

The work is composed of sixty copies of the original silicon mold I made from the starling body, as sixty specimens were originally brought from Europe. Half of the copies are in blown glass, the other half in concrete. The two chosen materials are human made, yet composed of relatively simple, natural chemical elements; they talk of anthropogenic realities, as human-made are the consequences on the ecology of places. Together they create a tension between fragility and resistance, a tension that speaks of human relation with the environment and other species.



Figure 5. Keep His Anger Still in Motion, 2018

Making the mold of the inside of a living being refers both to embodiment and invisibility, of what we decide to see and touch. In general, looking at what is invisible

is at the center of my research. My ongoing exploration of invisible light represents another entry point to understand the relation with the more-than-human.

3. The Open: becoming animal and more-than-human wisdom, *Beauty Needs Protection* (A Flock of 100 Birds Flew East)

If Homo sapiens cannot be divided scientifically from the other primates – as shown, for instance, by the ongoing and never-ending search of the “first” human among the ancient hominids – then the distinction between man and animal becomes a mere optical machine, a point of view, a system of filters rather than reality. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben suggests “the open” as a shared point for building a common shelter for both Man and Animal; the open is the sphere of the perceptual that is common to both. Humans, through recognizing this shared quality, can lift the mirror and stop looking at nature through the lens of separation.

As in the quote at the opening of this section, allowing myself to be open, “to be animal again”, translated to new experimentations that have lead me to relate to animal aesthetics and ethics in new and compelling ways.

One of the most powerful examples happened in the Four Corners extraction zone in Fall 2017, where I witnessed, with great emotional and physical suffering, the dramatic and violent situation of extensive fracking practices common in the region. The feeling of being overwhelmed and powerless activated a re-action where looking at more-of-human ideas of protection represented the only possible alternative to the human destruction I was exposed to. There, the bowerbird's nest as a model, its action, aesthetics, and logic as guides, all of which activated an empowering and healing process. Following a powerful instinct for protection, I built a nest able to include my body. In doing so, I had to give myself the time to face different and new ways of creation first (mimicking the avian aesthetics), and to embody and feel my presence inside a structure that I have never been in.



Figure 6. Still image from video, interaction with the bower at Angel Peak, Four Corners NM (2017)

When back from the field in November 2017, and building the nest again in my studio, I had the time and attention to further engage with non-human aesthetics and strategies. I physically wove together the grass stems, learning how to do it through observation and trials. A physical learning process where my hands were required to act as a beak, the process, asking not for handfuls, but very few stalks at a time, carefully understanding the angles and the weights of materials and shapes with which I had never been in such close contact.



Figure 7.
Detail of
Beauty Needs
Protection
at the John
Sommers
Gallery, 2017.

Beauty comes in contact with efficacy, creating a form of wisdom that is forgotten too often in the human sphere. The bower I built in the Four Corners was all of this; it was the wish for a different story, one in which the being of all species would not be threatened by the blind and violent search for profit. Moreover, it wasn't just the symbol of agency, but the result of active beauty inspired by the more-than-human; its existence the proof of my role as an active agent that can alter the world.

Conclusion

The idea of a more-than-human wisdom is central. In a world shaped by the humanist conception that *Homo sapiens* is the most intelligent, rightful and creative animals on the planet, I find deeply mesmerizing ideas of ethics, knowledge and aesthetics that go beyond the human. The more-than-human agency and wisdom can become an alternative to the structures that brought us the edge of extinction. In my practice, I attempt to explore and connect to alternative ideas of being and thinking; working with bodies and violence to create entanglement, experimenting in order to activate empathy through hybridizing.

Overall, I wonder if sensing rather than obtaining, of allowing myself to get lost rather than advancing - if all of this could become a strategy and powerful tool for

my practice and for the Art & Ecology discourse; a tool for resistance and subversion against the same system based on categorization and separation that has brought us to the Anthropocene. As artist and scholar in the creative ecology field, I want to further explore how ideas of empathy, making kin, and eco-grieving can be used to create something meaningful, connected, and able to create change.

Working with bodies and organic matter, time becomes material itself. My work is made of processes and translations - as light recording, mold making, or the most recent one, DNA manipulation. Accepting and working with a given pace that I don't control, shapes the way I work and create. It is often difficult, since graduate school and society at large is characterized by set deadlines and a fast pace. Yet, there is a virtue in slowness. I see slowness as a way out of the same rational criteria that distinguishes the contemporary capitalist setting. I want to embrace and focus more on this temporal dimension, to further engage with my research.

NOTES

¹ <https://landarts.unm.edu/>