

Taylor Greenfield
MFA Thesis Statement

Strangers

If we choose to let conjecture run wild, then animals, our fellow brethren in pain, diseases, death, suffering, and famine—our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements—they may take part (of) our origins in one common ancestor—we may be all netted together. (Charles Darwin qtd. in Desmond/Moore, 115)

While animals are indeed our collaborators on earth, we humans are often reluctant to concede that sentience and vitality do not wholly belong to us. More often than not, instead of cherishing our earthly companions, we relegate animals to a sleepy, half-existence as our food, entertainment, or in our experiments. People crowd the planet, both physically and psychically, and we continue to expand our reach. However, despite our advantage, humans are missing so much—by failing to acknowledge the worth in our planetary compatriots outside of commercial incentives, we may lose many of them without ever knowing they were there. Only recently have humans begun to realize how deep the waters of biodiversity flow, as well as how integral our behavior is in preserving it. The lives of animals, like the lives of humans, are rich and complex, and deserve careful study. The drawings that form my thesis work explore this complexity, tying together my fervent interest in the relationships between humans and animals, my fascination with the animal world, and my love of drawing.

Although our technological abilities seem boundless, human knowledge of the natural world remains greatly fragmented. Our understanding of how an animal actually experiences life remains shrouded in mystery, even the lives of the domesticated creatures that we rely on for food and companionship. Each new discovery seems to highlight a

different gap in our understanding, and the opportunity to explore an untainted natural world has faded. Humanity's search for resources has left us with countless damaged ecosystems, places that no amount of further interference will restore. We simply do not have enough knowledge to repair what we have broken, and animals suffer greatly from these misadventures. Undoubtedly, some of these gaps in awareness are rooted in the fact that much of what we have learned about our fellow inhabitants is the result of artificial constructs, including various forms of captivity and our rather sordid history of taxidermy.

However, with the development of less drastic approaches to the study of animals, humans have begun to glean considerable knowledge about what occurs in nature through pure observation. Technological advances, such as tracking devices and other types of surveillance, allow us to watch without interrupting—giving us a more accurate picture of how an ecosystem and its inhabitants actually operate. Such knowledge has led inevitably to further questions, and a thirst for understanding remains. The world is a vast place and investigating the lives of animals is only one part of a larger set of questions that concern all living creatures. What makes this mote of dust and water such a special place? What propels us, all of us? In my work, I explore my own answers to these questions, however broad and unanswerable they may seem. This body of work, entitled *Strangers*, is driven by curiosity and deep admiration, investigating the animals that help make this world such a rich and magnificent place.

As a result of these explorations, I have quickly discovered that the natural world is not broken down into a simple sequence of questions and answers. Each of nature's systems is a labyrinth of smaller units, all interdependent on one another. My relationship to the animals in my drawings is based in this interdependence: a complex web of creatures that work together both within their ecosystems as well as within my body of work. Each

animal contributes to the whole, adding their individual instincts and appetites as well as their shapes, textures, and expressions with each new piece. Each drawing features an individual animal, however like an ecosystem this series is only complete when all of the animals are considered together. This is an important element for my work; while each piece maintains its own separate identity, it is essential to consider all of the drawings together in order to grasp their full meaning. In her book, “Animals Make Us Human,” Dr Temple Grandin explains the importance of recognizing that each of nature’s component parts are inseparable parts of the whole.

Bears eat salmon, and in the 1940s Alaskan fisherman were so worried about bears eating all the salmon that they wanted to have a big culling operation. That didn’t happen, and it’s a good thing it didn’t because two field researchers named Scott Gende and Thomas Quinn have discovered that if you don’t have bears to eat the salmon you might not have a forest, either. (249)

Dr. Grandin goes on to explain that bears are somewhat picky eaters—they kill far more fish than they can actually eat, and often only eat a part of the animal and then simply throw the rest away. However, because bears are solitary and territorial, they often take the fish into the forest to eat it. The thrown away portions of the fish then become food for other animals, and nutrient-rich fertilizer for the soil (249). Ultimately, it seems that the only way humans can achieve any degree of understanding about how our planet works is time. The bigger picture cannot be realized by simply backing up or moving forward, it also requires us to wait patiently for the answers to be revealed. In this sense, my drawings pose questions rather than providing answers. Investigations into the identity of these creatures, what their relationship is to one another, as well as the nature their relationship to me and to the viewer are important queries within my work.

However, it is presumptuous (and detrimental) to assume that the ecosystems of our planet are mere riddles instead of relationships that require careful investment. The

tendency to see humans as wholly superior, the pinnacle of evolutionary history (and therefore heir to all of the earth's secrets), further separates us from the very beings we should be reconnecting with. In the introduction to his book, "The Bedside Book of Beasts," Graeme Gibson observes:

While reason may help us develop strategies for mending the earth and ourselves, it will not open us to the process and possibilities that will help us reconnect with the animals inside us, which is to say with our biological reality. Until we do that, the mind will continue to spin its wheels. (8)

In other words, discovering more about the lives of animals involves a great deal more than simply applying the scientific method; we must invest part of ourselves. It is important to note, however, that this investment will most likely not result in the kind of complete knowledge that we humans would prefer. Drs. Jesús Rivas and Gordan M. Burghardt best articulate the nature of our attempts at understanding the lives of animals in their article entitled *Crotalomorphism: A Metaphor for Understanding Anthropomorphism by Omission*.

Although it is true that we will never fully appreciate how another animal experiences the world, by doing our best to accomplish this through applying critical anthropomorphism, including the full range of scientific data, we will get closer to understanding the life of the animal. Conceptually the task is no different from that of trying to understand another person who may differ from us in age, gender, sensory and motor abilities, personality, temperament, language, health, profession, wealth, status, or a host of other variables. (Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt, 11)

Even by investing significant time and effort into a greater comprehension of animals, we will only be able to know them as well as we know another person. Ultimately, the thoughts and experiences of any living being belong to them alone; there will always be things that we cannot know about even our closest friends. There will always be gaps, and although this is no reason to quit trying, humans must learn to be

satisfied with an incomplete understanding. My drawings express this imperfect knowledge within the expressive qualities of both the animals and environments within the images: I fully acknowledge my own limited awareness, using the unknown as a foothold to draw from memory and imagination.

This space between the known and unknown is what I find most intriguing about the relationship between humans and animals. The fact that we will never truly understand all the mysteries of animal life is enchanting; animals know things about our world that humans will perhaps never know, or have long forgotten. They keep their secrets well, concealing themselves from us as well as each other with great skill. Each maintains a private knowledge, consisting of hiding places, food caches, and migratory routes, often shared only with their progeny. These secrets are their birthright, and their survival is often based on how well they are kept. This is where the gap between animals and humans is perhaps the widest—we keep very different kinds of secrets and communicate on different levels. Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer describes this distinction between human and animal communication in his poem, “From March 1979” (Tranströmer, 159).

Sick of those who come with words, words but no language

I make my way to the snow-covered island.

Wilderness has no words. The unwritten pages

Stretch out in all directions.

I come across this line of deer-shots in the snow: a language,

Language without words.

Despite the fact that we connect with each other differently, animals and humans still have plenty in common. All living beings have a past, present and future, and our every breath is pushed in and out with an instinctual and ravenous hunger to live. This is

perhaps the simplest of the traits we share, with many more found in our habits and personalities. I find as much significance in our differences as I do in our commonalities, and I continue to search for connections that will deepen my relationship with nature.

In light of this interest, the elements of nature that have always fascinated me most lie within the animal kingdom. I revel in imagining the countless lives that creep about the cold seeps and hot vents of the ocean, or the legions of wildlife that haunt even the Arctic biome. These daydreams are the source of my desire for real encounters, and this preoccupation is ultimately the drive for the subject matter in my drawings. I often find myself in my backyard, searching for my own animal neighbors. There is no greater joy for me than to sit quietly in the woods and fields, waiting patiently for another pair of eyes to find my own. This joyfulness is in part attributed to growing up in Michigan, for although my brother and I grew up in the city, our parents took us camping nearly every summer and we spent a great deal of time exploring our state's finest treasures. On these trips, my parents instilled in us the sense of a larger and more complex world outside of home and school. We learned that Michigan's forests, while not as vast as they once were, shelter a stunning array of flora and fauna (our campsites were never safe from the curiosity of raccoons). We learned that the Great Lakes are just as beautiful as they are terrifying, and that their life-giving qualities are paired with the same kinds of dangers all large bodies of water share. We learned to walk in the woods, to be patient and still, and to leave nothing behind.

Because of this connection to my surroundings, the majority of my drawings concern animals native to Michigan. My desire to understand more about the animals that share my surroundings has inevitably led me to an exploration of the place that I live, and my grounding in the natural world consistently serves as the basis for my work. Each piece

relies on the common thread of human and animal relationships and *Strangers* is a record of my own encounters with animals. Working on these drawings has allowed me to investigate the expressions, gestures, and forms that make animals simultaneously so beautiful and strange, a process accentuated by my own connections with these creatures and the place we both share. The works serve as a witness to creatures outside of myself, and each is a recreation of an experience I myself have had.

Despite my efforts to archive my experiences and knowledge of these creatures, they remain fragmented—each drawing is only a representation, a shadow, of a real living thing. I do not claim to know more than I do about each individual, a reality that has given this body of work its name: *Strangers*. Additionally, each drawing by itself is only one small part of a larger, implied image, and each image in this body of work relies on a collection of information, ideas, and images I have gathered over time. These memories and ideas are the result of many years spent outdoors with no agenda, sometimes carrying a camera and sometimes only binoculars, always wishing I'd remembered bug spray. Sometimes the drawings are layered with multiple encounters, other times they are a testament to a solitary incident, but ultimately all are the product of my desire to share these moments with others and to learn more about these creatures myself.

The process of creating these drawings is just as multi-layered as my encounters and understanding of animals, starting with a layer of gesso brushed onto the paper and acrylic washes applied over the surface. Using a combination of powdered graphite, pencils, colored pencil, chalk pastel and an army of erasers, I push and pull the surface of each drawing. This dynamic way of working reflects both my own state of mind while making the drawing, as well as my experience in nature. The act of drawing invites the type of awareness that forces me to be more observant and mindful of my surroundings,

allowing me to focus in on certain areas of the drawing while letting other portions go unarticulated. As a result of this kind of approach, the drawings contain two different but inseparable elements: the animal and the surrounding environment. The settings for the animals remain consistently blurry and strange, out of focus and defined by my memories and imagination instead of a direct observation of reality. For example, the piece *Stranger* embodies this type of space, combining points of articulated realism within the animal, in this case a turkey vulture, and an abstracted environment (Figure 1). This combination creates focal points within the piece, drawing the viewer in towards the animal, just as one might be drawn to seeing an animal in nature. The settings for the animals are dark and expressive, featuring a combination of deep and shallow space that allow only limited access to the viewer. The raw environments within these drawings are spaces that humans can see but not exist in, reflecting our limited knowledge of the animal world. Instead, they belong to the animals that reside in them, and allow the viewer only small glimpses of their world. The drawing *Undergrowth* demonstrates this with its use of ambiguous space: without a distinct ground plane or sky, the viewer maintains an uncertain relationship with the digging opossum (Figure 2). The opossum is busy, clearly rooted in her environment, but leaves little space for the viewer to join her. As viewers, our perspective is one of quiet observation. Although the viewer is unable to interfere or interact with her, they are still able to witness a singular moment in the life of another being.

The scale of the animal in relationship to their environment helps determine this connection as well. For example, the piece *Murmuration* presents a starling, life-size but fairly small within the image itself (Figure 3). The large, swirling space surrounding the bird references both the patterns that these animals create while flying in large groups as well as their migratory paths; their world huge, encompassing both earth and sky. The

scale of the animal and the surrounding environment parallels the emotional impact of the work; the viewer is privy to both the smallest and largest parts of the natural world, and the smallness or largeness of the creature within the space invites the viewer to consider their own relative size in regards to the enormity of the natural world. *Murmuration* also features an arrangement of white lights drawn with white chalk pastel, a consistent motif throughout this body of work. The white chalk pastel adds another dimension in terms of media, laid over top of the graphite and wash. It also adds another layer in terms of content, and the shapes of the lights alludes to a great many natural occurrences, such as fireflies, the effect of moonlight on leaves, or reflections on water. These elements within the drawing also reflect the sights, sounds, and other sensations within a natural environment that humans, with our limited senses, cannot experience.

Despite the majority of my drawings featuring Michigan animals, one of the most important natural experiences I've had was not in Michigan, but in Maine. In the summer of 2011, I was given the opportunity to attend the Golden Apple Residency in Harrington, located on one of Maine's many finger-like peninsulas along the Atlantic coast. I spent two glorious weeks soaking in the New England summer: climbing trees, venturing out at low-tide to poke around in the pools and kelp forests left behind by the waves, and taking long walks in the woods. I learned a great deal during this trip, both about myself as an artist as well as the natural world that I hold so dear. As an artist, I discovered that even although I can generate a drawing fairly quickly in its actual execution, coming up with the ideas and imagery for that drawing take considerable time. My experience in Maine allowed me time to explore my options, forced me to be patient, and gave me the opportunity to let go of my assumptions (both about drawing in general as well as my subject matter), and spend time specifically concentrating on generating ideas.

As for what I learned about the natural world, the lessons were endless. Everything there was just as alive as I am, exuding a deep green and intoxicating life force with every gust of wind. Despite my many camping trips and hiking jaunts in Michigan, my time in Maine was unusual somehow. Perhaps my attention was focused differently, but my time in the woods and fields of Maine was very unique (despite Maine's clear resemblance to Michigan's own Upper Peninsula). I experienced the outdoors with fresh eyes, and I was fortunate to see many animals on my walks and many more from the window of my cabin. I kept my window open at night to hear the sounds of the forest behind the cabin and the crash of the waves in front, a welcome contrast to the usual hum of the traffic outside my window in the city. During the day, I spent many hours drawing, but an equal amount of time outside. Each morning I witnessed the waking of a world completely outside of my own, beginning early with the feverish chirping of birds and the echoing calls of seals. Each evening I was greeted with a more subdued but equally active company: porcupine, deer, fox, and a thousand other creatures going about their hushed nightly business. One drawing that stems directly from my time in Maine is *Specter*, an image that encapsulates the mystery and uncanny quality of my time in Maine (Figure 4). *Specter* features an American Eel, an animal that migrates from freshwater rivers and streams to the ocean to spawn. This incredible journey reflects my own (however less arduous) travels from the freshwater of Michigan's own lakes to the Atlantic coast of Maine. Since eels are active primarily at night, haunting the waterways of North America in secret like slippery ghosts, this drawing is the darkest image in *Strangers*, both literally and figuratively. This animal is the most mysterious of them all, an apparition whose life and habits are almost completely hidden in darkness (Prosek, 15)

I found myself particularly drawn to this idea of darkness, and have remained so even after arriving home in Michigan. As I mentioned before, it is the unknowable that I find most fascinating about the relationship between humans and animals; and this mystery is never more apparent than when the sunlight fades. The moon casts a vastly different kind of light than her daytime cousin, dimly revealing the shadows of creatures who are far more at home in the dark than I will ever be. However, despite my inability to see or navigate the night as adeptly as nocturnal animals do, I love this purely magical time. I am often lured into nature by something as simple as the light of the moon or the smallest rustling of an animal in the underbrush. A particular drawing that illustrates this idea is *Aurora* (Figure 5). In this work, a lone deer stands at a distance, wading through a field at dusk. The deer is reflected in the night sky where perhaps the moon would be, demonstrating her affinity with her environment and the dark.

The quality of light and color that occurs in evening has had a great effect on the types of light and color within my drawings. While subtle, color plays a very important role in these works and the muted tones are reminiscent both of my time spent in Maine as well as my childhood in Michigan. As such, these colors are evocative of memory, and are meant to describe a recreation rather than the more vital and brilliant colors actually found in nature. The faded hues suggest a nighttime setting, when the sun has gone down leaving only traces of what is visible during the day. Even this hint of color, despite being understated, enlivens the animals in the drawings and keeps them from becoming static or sterile. For example, the drawing *Moon* is brought to life with its pale tan and warm reddish brown hues, giving the toad a liveliness he would not have had in mere black and white (Figure 6). Of course, white has a role to play as well, and the brightness of the white chalk pastel accentuates both the deep gray of the graphite and the subtle color, generating

an almost ghostly glow. This glow mimics the silvery gleam of the moon, illuminating the toad as he goes about his nightly duties.

Through my study of drawing as a medium, I have learned a great deal about the rich language of mark making. Truly, these images could only be drawings—this process is both dynamic and subtle, so like the animals whose lives I seek to convey. The act of making these drawings documents my memories and experiences of each animal represented, and each mark is a record of my respect for these creatures and my wonder at the incredible richness of our planet. In addition to the animals from whom I draw so much inspiration, I have several human influences as well. Most notable among them is Dr. Jane Goodall, whose work in educating the general public about the importance of preserving our world is a source of endless inspiration. Additionally, the works of painter Inka Essenhigh are also very influential—I find that her deep colors and loose natural environments also seem to address the feeling of being in nature rather than a realistic depiction of it. Her fields and forests resemble the same places my heart goes when contemplating the natural world, and although her work does not directly concern animals I still feel a strong connection to her paintings. I am also drawn to the work of Amy Stein, her *Domesticated* series in particular. Her photographs are haunting representations of the uneasy relationship between humans and animals, demonstrating how humans both strive to connect with and control our animal neighbors. Musician Laura Veirs has also played an important role in my work; her blend of folk, bluegrass, and blues coupled with a deep affection for the natural world has often added a different and necessary dimension to my thought process. Of course, I would add the unmistakable individuality of every animal I have ever had the pleasure of meeting—each is significant in their own way.

Working on this series of drawings has given me hope that humans and animals won't be strangers forever. Even though the gap between animals and humans seems to widen every day, I am resolute in my belief that the separation between humans and nature is a temporary condition. We have more in common than we realize, or perhaps more than we are willing to admit—and I am hopeful that people will come to regard nature as deserving of their everyday care and respect. This hope is the motivation for my work, which only gains momentum with each new endeavor.

Figure 1. *Stranger*, 2011. Mixed Media on Paper, 30" x 44"



Figure 2. *Undergrowth*, 2011. Mixed Media on Paper, 44" x 30"



Figure 3. *Murmuration*, 2011. Mixed Media on Paper, 44" x 30"

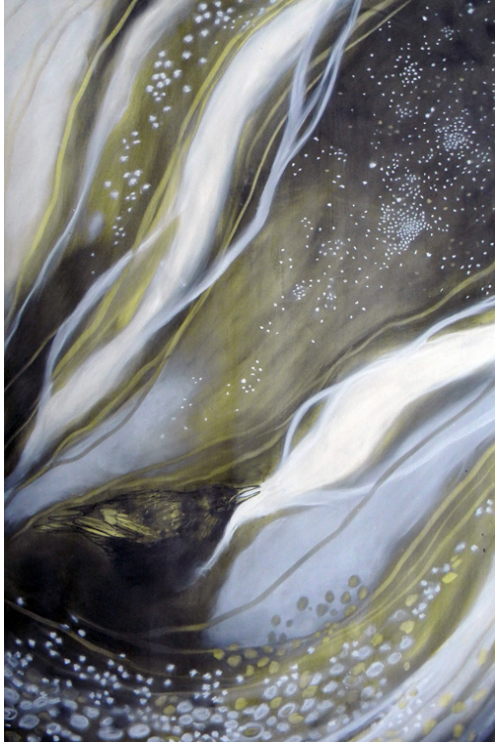


Figure 4. *Specter*, 2011. Mixed Media on Paper, 44" x 30"



Figure 5. *Aurora*, 2011. Mixed Media on Paper, 30" x 44"



Figure 6. *Moon*, 2011. Mixed Media on Paper, 30" x 44"



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