

Among & Within: The Animistic Spirit

By

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The body of my thesis consists of works that call attention to 21st century environmental issues viewed through a deep ecological filter. I am interested in ancient myths and legends that expound animistic worldviews and in the ways that they relate to posthumanist issues today. I use these philosophies' ideas of "personhood" to explore my own sense of self in relation to my environment and its inhabitants. I am also concerned with establishing a space for meditation where the viewer can contemplate these ideas of personhood. My intent is to show the beauty, the spiritual relationship, and the sadness that exists when humans reconnect to other-than-humans.

The initial explanations of my paintings have been elusive, only revealing their true intentions after extensive research into the natural world and the myths born from this land. I seemed to be drawing images and ideas from an ancient well of stories: 35,000-year-old legends that have their very beginnings somewhere around the Upper Paleolithic Period. These mythical tales of animals, nature and the first people have been passed down, reinvented, and appropriated, for centuries. They have been molded to explain creation, spirits, human nature, the natural world, and the scientifically unexplainable. These very first narratives created the grounds for the religions we know today. The earliest concepts of god and creative forces "were animals—tigers, birds, fish. Their forms and faces peer out from ancient ruins, and from totems and wall paintings of our first religions" (McKibben 61). These animals provided a fundamental requirement for the development of spirituality: reflection and thought. Contemplation of these animals and natural phenomena helped fashion complete ideologies.

There is a word that is used to organize these early stories, beliefs, and worldviews into one neat package. The term is "animism." Research into this subject has fueled and also validated my thesis work. The term is defined in Graham Harvey's book, *Animism: Respecting The Living World*, as such:

Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable)... [A]nimism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationship with other persons. (xi)

The word “person” must be understood in animistic terms, and much has been researched and written about this alternative definition. For the sake of this paper, I will briefly try to illustrate the diverse boundaries of this term in relation to animism as many things can be “persons” including, but not limited to: animals, rocks, weather, waterfalls, and souls. Most importantly, “persons” are those who interact, relate, and communicate. In Western culture and among others, a person is defined as a human and individual. Animists make no distinction. Thomas Hoffman quotes Griffin-Pierce in his academic journal, stating, “All things, including those considered by some to be inanimate, possess a spiritual life force or sacred power” (448). He goes on to explain, “Not only are all these beings sacred, they are related as well. Man is one with creation, not above and not below... Seeing other beings as related to oneself and as holy or sacred will lead one to treat these others with respect” and allow for contemplation and a deeper understanding of the knowledge that exists within all beings (448-449). Other animist observations “suggest that much of what animals do, whether or not humans are watching or implicated, is intentional, planned, and purposive. Animals choose” (Harvey 103). This view has become important in recent times as posthumanists attempt to redirect ingrained speciesist notions and learned humanist hierarchies so that we can reexamine our relationships with and treatment of other species.

Much controversy arises out of this discourse. If animals and others are defined as “persons,” they should have rights. According to law (both modern and ancient) only a “person” has rights, protections, responsibilities, and legal liability. The definition of personhood is tied

closely to concepts of equality and liberty. Remember, slaves and women, in the United States alone, have only recently gained full legal titles of personhood and acquired the rights attached to such a title. Ingrained Western views of nature are not likely to change easily or overnight. Eradicating a weed of this nature takes years to successfully cut out by the roots. A fundamental shift of entire ideologies would have to occur for a reintegration of those things missing from modern society, such as “a full understanding of the multifaceted nature of life” (Hoffman 449). Hoffman looks to Vince Deloria, who wrote extensively on Western and Non-Western views of nature: “Nature should be respected and given its rights...The world could become humane if personal rights are allowed and positive freedom is promoted. The material benefits of Western technology and the spiritual benefits of Non-Western approaches to reality could be enjoyed” (449-450).

For animists, this romantic idea of personhood needs to be applied to whole ecologies, not just to animals alone. All parts of an ecosystem rely and are dependent upon the relations of others within the system. This includes plants, microorganisms, and even the land itself. Deep Ecology was coined in the early 1970's and conceived by the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess. This ideology builds upon animistic examinations of human relationships with ecosystems by delineating specific codes of ethics and “differentiat[ing] between the ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ values of nature” (Bragg 94). It can be seen as a form of animism or, perhaps, ‘deep animism.’ It is concerned with “the ‘deeper’ philosophical questions that underlie human relationships with the environment and questions “the underlying value systems and worldviews that are the ultimate causes of the external environmental crisis” (Bragg 95). Deep Ecology draws attention to other-than-human “communities, needs, desires and rights” (Harvey 180). Deep ecology stresses preservation of ecosystems, not because they are “resources” for anthropocentric needs, but because they are important and viable in their own right. Rothenberg

agrees and states that, “gestalt entities in nature are things to be respected for their own sakes, simply because they are there and near to us. Like friends- we should never use them only as a means to something else... We tend to lose friends if we act that way too long. The same could happen to nature” (11-12). Deep ecologists look inward, focusing on an immersion into nature, looking for a ‘protoconscious.’ They strive to see the world through other-than-human eyes; to “know viscerally, emotionally, empathetically, the pain of the world and its inhabitants” (Harvey 182). By knowing this pain and letting empathy resonate from within one creates an expansion of the sense of self and “the boundaries between self and other are dissolved” (Bragg 96).

My work is, in essence, a form of deep ecology with animistic tendencies toward spirituality and my own ecological identity. My art sometimes uses myths from animistic cultures and symbolism to bond 21st century environmental and posthumanist issues to the mystic. I intend to reconnect the human with nature in a way that is similar to deep ecology, by looking through the eyes of or embodying the feelings and emotions of other-than-human species or things. I struggle to submerge the viewer into a deeper more active mindset that allows for thinking on a more fundamental plane. This plane permits thought about the Earth itself and does not allow for only anthropocentric concerns to prevail.

David Rothenberg quotes Naess, who says, “The planet is more than us, more fundamental and basic than our own single species in isolation” (12). He goes on to explain the Norwegian word *identifisering* or rather *identiting*, which is an active word rooted in exploration and detection of connectedness to others.

Naess “defines ‘identification’ as a spontaneous, non-rational...process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests...these ‘reactions’ include emotions, perceptions/cognitions, spiritual experiences and physical behaviors” (Bragg 95). We “identify” or “discover that parts of nature are parts of ourselves.

“We cannot exist separate from them...we cannot destroy them if we are to exist fully. We must see the vital needs of ecosystems and other species as our own needs...” (Rothenberg 10-11).

This is the underlying philosophy that structures my artwork and drives me to paint. I portray other-than-human persons with the hope that viewers may relate to Naess’s definition of “identification” and look into their eyes, seeing that we must view their needs as our own needs and further our definitions of self in relation to our environment. This is evident in my painting, “Transfigured.” Here *Rana clamitans* is elevated to saintly stature complete with a waxing crescent moon for a halo. I often use traditional Christian symbols to elevate other-than- humans to the level of sainthood. Having been exposed to Catholicism I am familiar with saints and martyrdom. This is the most direct and “Western” way for me to emphasize the importance of these animals that suffer because of human actions, or, rather, inaction in the face of environmental hazards. In the distance farm equipment gathers upon the dusky horizon signaling that this frog’s pond is laced with pesticides, excess nitrogen levels, and dangerous parasites, which have a direct link to abnormalities in amphibians. Deep Ecologists would look through the eyes of this frog and feel the deepest recesses of empathy. The frog’s need of a suitable habitat free of environmental dangers would be experienced as their own need, a right of life. Many environmentalists, though they mean well, still have anthropocentric means to every end. Joseph Kiesecker, a scientist who has researched interactions of parasites and pesticides on frogs, warns, “the physiological problems seen in frogs may foreshadow similar effects on humans” (Danielson 1). It may cause more dismay, for many, to hear that these factors can affect human persons, but it should still cause dismay to know that these factors are affecting other-than-human persons as well.

“Saint Gitche Gumee,” is another work that addresses Western anthropocentric thinking in relation to grey wolves in Michigan. Wolves used to be one of the widest ranging animals

existing from the Arctic Circle to Mexico, and throughout Europe, Russia, and Italy. Today wolves are extinct in most of their range and limited in other areas. A wolf genocide rampaged through America beginning when the “first wolf bounty law... was passed in Massachusetts on November 9, 1630” (Lopez 171). It is estimated that one million wolves were killed, or more, during the years 1850 to 1900. No one knows for sure, “[t]he numbers no longer have meaning” (Lopez 180). In Michigan the same was true, and it wasn’t until the 1970s that wolves gained legal protection, there only being an estimated six wolves left in the entire state (Roll 2-3). Today, because of protection, wolves have regained some of their old Michigan range and numbers are estimated at being in the range of 600-700 individuals. Recently the wolf has been delisted from the Endangered Species Act and legislature was passed in December 2012 that would reclassify the wolf as a big game species and open to hunting and trapping. There is already legislature that allows for the *legal* killing of wolves for attacking livestock and/or dogs. This is, apparently, not enough for those who wish to kill for the sake of killing.

I have followed this episode since the introduction of the hunting proposal in Michigan and have been disgusted with the discourse surrounding this issue. The animals that would be killed during the hunting season have been referred to as a “harvest,” as if their bodies would be of some use to humanity; as a food source. Their bodies would yield no useful “harvest” except for engorging the prides of men who yearn to disprove their own incompetence and satisfy sick amusements. Charles Alexander Eastman, a Sioux holy man, points out that “one of humanity’s earl[iest] sins was the killing of animals for mere amusement, which led to some dire consequences. Humans and nature are to live in harmony and peace, killing only for necessary use and for no other purpose” (Hoffman 449). The hatred that bites at the heels of wolves is due, only, to lack of education, understanding, and a fragmentation of relation to others. How did so

many forget that, for hundreds of years, wolves and humans existed peacefully upon this land together?

“Saint Gitche Gumee” is another image of a haloed other-than-human person, a black wolf; inhabitant of rugged Lake Superior land. Rifle bullets orbit her, a reference to the new hunting legislation and the years of persecution and hatred. A silver bullet calls upon humans’ fear of themselves in relation to their hatred of their own animality; the beast within; the werewolf. Her yellow eyes glow with a knowledge and power against her dark form which settles like a shadow amongst the icy shoreline. She stares in a focused trance beyond the viewer. In this way I make her non-confrontational and invite deep contemplation. This is important because I do not want to induce any fearful emotions due to the rampant misconceptions of wolves. I would rather encourage emotions based on Renee Askiins’s observations:

Something mysterious happens to us when we hear the howl of a wolf, or look into the eyes of a wolf. Something familiar is calling back to us, or looking back to us. Ourselves? Yes, but we also see the other... The ‘other’ is very important because it is through the presence and respect for the ‘other’ that we recognize and heal ourselves. (377)

I hope that this wolf’s gaze may provide an entryway to Deep Ecological thinking to help guide empathy, understanding and discovery to a sacred knowledge which implores, “that parts of nature are parts of ourselves” (Rothenberg 10).

My paintings become a space for meditation, not only for me, but also where the viewer can reflect on what they are seeing. Iconic placement of subjects within my compositions help focus the viewer’s gaze while also leaving room for symbolic resonance. These centralized compositional elements work because the space that exists around them and the viewers themselves empower the image. This concept is best explained by the Japanese word and perception of *ma*, which is roughly translated to mean “gap”, “space,” or “pause.” *Ma* “also means ‘among.’ In the compound *ningen* (‘human being’)...*ma* implies that persons stand

within, among, or in relationship to others” which, can be interpreted literally or perhaps also in an animistic sense (56). *Ma* is “a pregnant nothingness that is ‘never unsubstantial or uncreative.’ *[M]a* is not merely fecundative either; it glows with spiritual power, meaning, and attraction” (59). *Ma* does not translate to the literal composition of the piece, however, because *ma* cannot be created by compositional elements alone. It has to be derived from an intensification of vision, awareness of place and imagination of the viewer. The viewer subconsciously empowers the image by becoming aware of a spiritual essence that they themselves are creating while viewing the artwork. This action creates a relation to an object (the artwork itself), in my case, an image of an other-than-human person. My hope is that this interaction may rekindle the human-nature relationship and awareness of the spirit that exists within all nature. Perhaps the paintings can help the viewer to look inward, as a Deep Ecologist might or as I do, and see relations through other-than-human eyes or at least feel the spiritual awareness of *ma*.

It is important to me that the viewer experiences this spiritual relationship, the beauty, and the sadness that exists when humans reconnect to other-than- humans. In the book *Dream Animals*, James Hillman explores the relationships of animals with humans by considering the images that haunt human dreams.

There is a fascinating question which lies in the fact that many of us dream of animals that we have never actually seen before. Hillman asks, “Why do they come to us, the animals? Are they coming to remind us of our affinity with them, to keep their presence before us? To guard against extinction, both theirs and ours?” (13).

The dreamlike essence that permeates my work stems from my own curiosity of the subconscious. I often dream of animals and many times I embody an other-than-human person in my slumbers, inheriting their individual and original point-of-view. Elizabeth Bragg explains this phenomenon: “Individuals may phenomenologically ‘become’ another being, experiencing

reality through the senses of that other being” (96). She links this idea to the state of “empathy” by defining the word this way: “Interestingly, a psychological definition of empathy includes ‘taking the role of the other, viewing the world as he or she sees it, and experiencing his or her feelings’” (96). Of course, altered states of mind repeatedly produce the most lucid experiences of this kind, including, but not limited to, sleep. This emergent subconscious perspective becomes reflected within my work. Dreamlike imagery of other-than-human persons create strange visions, which, in turn, leave room for emotional interpretation and encourages empathetic contemplation from the viewer. Reality becomes altered. A frog with an odd number of limbs is suspended in an awkward contrapposto haloed by a waxing crescent moon. A wolf as black as dead embers is orbited by rifle bullets. An elk stands with antlers ablaze in a sea of smoke and embers. A giant skull looms above the desert floor like a hallucination induced by starvation.

These images are of an intensified reality: clear, bright, lucid, and surreal. This empowers them as more than nature—they become Nature. They take the roll of symbol. They become the essence, the idea; a transcendent and religious reality. The very nature of symbols is complex and plastic. Symbols evolve as the individual evolves and soon meld into ideals that embody one’s worldview. They give access to deeper, otherwise inaccessible, layers of one’s ‘self.’

Elizabeth Bragg gives an example, summarizing Stefan Hormuth’s book, *The Ecology of the Self*, saying:

[T]he self [is] part of an ecological system that is a conjunction of other people, environments and objects. The ‘self’ both shapes this ecological system and is a reflection of it. Within this theory, objects and environments serve several functions for the self. They may provide a place or tool for a person’s actions or experiences, including self-concept-relevant behavior... They can also be symbols of one’s identity, and the arrangement or creation of environments can be a reflection of the self-concept. (99)

Take, for example, the transcendental skulls that inhabit my work: symbols for death, memento mori, transformation. They also have evolved to fit the niche that is my reality and self-concept. I use this symbolism because it is part of my “ecological system” having been influenced many years ago by my environment. I spent my childhood submerged in the deep quietude of Northern Michigan forests, wandering under tall canopies, my eyes always searching the leaf littered floors for treasures. Mostly I would find small mementos, left by creatures having passed by or shed from others who had passed to other planes of existence. Colored feathers, snail shells, and pretty stones were all very intriguing, but what enamored me the most were skulls. I would rarely find them so it was very special when I did come across one. Always separated from their bodies, they would lie neatly amongst pine needles or half-buried in the sand. Their placement always looked purposeful and dignified like natural altar pieces.

It is because of these findings that I use the skull as symbol today in my paintings. Usually a representation of death, the skull, for me, also signifies a transformation of energy. It signals movement from a reality to an ideal or to a spiritual existence. In my work the skull is Nature, a concept that has evolved parallel to my sense of self. My ecological and metaphysical understanding of my self is definitely a reflection of and also a means to shape this reality. It is my tool of creativity. My paintings become an arrangement of my environment and self-concept. They are a reflection of self and interconnectedness to nature because “[i]mmediate involvement in nature and natural processes orients humans to the reality of existence as it is experienced” (Hoffman 450).

My experiences of this existence have been those of spiritual connection founded on identification of an inherent ancient knowledge that existed eons ago. I continually discover a world, through my artwork and through new experiences and deeper research, where creation and powers of creation are all related and interconnected. Respect of such forces is fundamental

and comes when one is quiet and listens to their own life force—a deep profound truth that resonates, still, and connects one to all persons. We may never know the extent to which the world—the universe—is evidently entwined but we can accept that we are only a miniscule thread. Barry Lopez understands the immensity of this reality: “Wild animals are intricately fitted in the world, an intricacy that, many speculate, goes further and deeper than the catch nets of Homo sapiens’ neurological capacity to conceive” (293). This is what draws me to paint these images and continually search for more information—the mystery and the unknowing. There are secrets yet to be discovered, even if they are not to be understood. I paint not only because of my curiosity but also because of the sadness, the permanent grief, of discovering what humanity has done to the Earth and the truth of the present state of the environment and its creatures. Painting gives me solace, so that what I have learned doesn’t eat away at my soul and helps me—and hopefully the viewers—better connect to other-than-human-persons.

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