

Echoes of Extinction
Portraits of Endangered Wildlife

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Abstract

Inspired by nature and animals, my series of watercolor skull paintings embody the haunting realization of endangered and extinct animals globally. Using black watercolor on paper, I can capture a ghostly effect of the front profile of the skull. My intention is to complete one hundred and five skulls and four macabre landscape oil paintings of dying or deceased animals in their environment to emphasize the severity of extinction and how humanity is following that pace.

The progression of humanity has caused a huge regression for the other species on this planet. I will be researching multiple species of extinct and endangered animals and the different political systems that have affected them and our ecosystems. The outcome of this series is to allow the viewer to reflect on and experience our existence in this world.

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Introduction

No matter what belief system one might have, the final verdict is that everything on this planet is borrowed. It is up to every being to give it back for future generations. My research topic is the extinction and endangerment of animal species caused by the progression of humankind. I will be discussing and describing how the use of my medium can interpret the presence of these endangered and extinct animals.

The extinction of animals has increased in size with the beginning of colonization. Humanity has displaced and killed off many species for interest and greed. Moving into the present tense, I will discuss the ways our industrial progress has continued to kill off animals and displace them from their environments. This part of history has also been fictionally written to save the reputation of many well-known leaders and institutions.

I will discuss the influences on my personal and artistic life, for they play a key role in my thoughts in this series. Although this series is focused on the endangerment and extinction of multiple species, I have come to acknowledge this series is a proxy to my grieving process to the loss of my father and is also testimony to what I have overcome. I will also discuss the personal relationship I have with animals now and during my childhood, which explains my interest in the topic.

It is hard to undo hundreds of years of destruction, but I do believe there is a chance for reconstruction. Humanity has been able to surpass and overcome many diseases, destructions, and disasters. We have been able to find the resources to recover and prevent future catastrophes. I intend to create these pieces to haunt the public about the loss of animals this world has had. I would hope that the 105 watercolor pieces and four oil paintings created can open a conversation for each viewer about how we have failed to protect the animals on this planet, because it is easier to declare the number of animal species we have lost on this planet, but it is harder to face it.

Main Body

Personal Experiences

My life experiences are heavily present within this series. I have grown up in a big family. I am the youngest of eight. My mother came to the United States as an immigrant from Honduras. She would take us to spend most of our summers in Honduras, in the countryside. I grew up around so many animals and farms and this taught me the many responsibilities we have towards the world. I was raised being taught that we must take care of our animals and land until it is time for them to take care of us. Learning about the responsibilities ranchers and farmers have, has also been understanding that everything on this planet is borrowed. The way our animals are raised, sheltered, and fed speaks volumes about one's character.

Presently, I work on a horse ranch called "La Finca NJ." I am a ranch hand and I help with the care of horses. We also host many events that follow the years of equestrian and rancher traditions. Working at the farm has allowed me to continue embracing nature and the responsibility we have. The idea of nature has always inspired me and has always captured my attention. I enjoy the romanticized parts of nature and I reflect on the saddest parts of it. Working alongside animals I have also experienced the loss of them. It is a sad moment to endure, but we understand that everything on this planet is borrowed. It is a cycle of life, but what if that cycle completely stops?

The biggest experience of loss for me was the passing of my father, Francis Joseph Thurston II. He was fighting a cancer called Leukemia, which brought on many other health complications because of the chemotherapy treatments. My father was an extremely strong, strict, and stoic individual. He was able to mask many of his emotions and move forward with any situations he encountered without complaining. Even during the emotional and physical pain that he experienced during treatments; he would try to avoid heavy pain medicines; he would try to not let it faze him.

Eventually, he began to prepare me mentally for his death and explained to me that I needed to be prepared for when it happens, and he did not want me to complain about

it. He explained how he wanted to live out the remainder of his days, what needed to be done and how he wanted to be laid to rest. Of course, this was not something I was able to take lightly. I understood the circumstances, and although I have experienced grief before, this was deeper. It would have been insensitive of me to quarrel with him about what he asked of me because he was the one dealing with this illness, not me.

One night I received a call from the hospital that he was in the ICU. I rushed to the hospital and spent the night watching his condition worsen. I could not accept what he already did, his impending death. He looked unrecognizable from all the medicine and swelling. I was losing my father right before my eyes. I believe his hearing went last because there were moments when his best friend, Carlo, would speak and his heart rate would go up.

The following morning, while in the room with my father and family, the doctor explained that it was time to decide when to disconnect the machines. The doctor offered to remove the medicine a little at a time. Everyone left the room after that discussion and ten minutes later the nurses ran into his room. I knew at that moment that I had lost him. I knew that he could have heard the discussion with the doctors and made a choice. That day will forever remain in my memories and the experience will haunt me, and I believe because of that painful memory I mostly grieve through my work.

The fear, sadness, desperation, and acceptance hit me in hours. We worked so hard to get him back to a healthy state and from one moment to another it went downhill. It is difficult to believe that the big strong man that raised me, was the same man I was taking care of and lost.

Understanding death and coping with why it happens is difficult, but living with the loss is harder. There will be moments when I come across happy memories that will remind me of what and who I lost, and I relive that loss each time. As the years pass, we learn to adapt and move forward without a loved one or an extinct species, but it is important to understand the connection that ties people, animals, and the environment together.

They cannot exist without one other, and it is important to respect each other's existence.

Work

My formal visual education came along when pursuing my BFA. I grasped the understanding of painting and drawing quickly and understood the impact it has made over centuries and how artists are not only creators but also engineers. In 2018, I graduated with my BFA from New Jersey City University. For my Senior Thesis show I created portrait paintings of female impressionist painters.

My idea was to discuss the undervalued female artist in history and how today's female artist is challenging the status quo. I was able to take primitive black and white photos of artists such as Mary Cassatt, Olga Boznanska, Zinaida Serebriakova, Anna Ancher, Cecilia Beaux and paint them in color. Thus, bringing them back to life. With this MFA Thesis series, I have realized that I am taking the opposite approach. I am creating pieces in black and white, which is like going back in time.

My choice of medium, specifically the use of watercolor, is what allows me to create the ghostly effect in each piece. I prepare each sheet separately and tape the edges to create a clean frame. I apply an underpainting of black and allow a few days for the watercolor to dry because it allows me to lift the color without rubbing the paper too much. Traditionally paint is added onto a canvas or paper, whereas in this series I am lifting and removing paint (e.g. see Fig.1-3). The number of pieces created within the series is 109; this is to represent that this destruction, primarily extinction and endangerment, has continued to evolve and can eventually end with us. I think a part of me wanted these paintings to haunt the viewer just like the memories of my loss haunt mine.

The oil paintings of macabre landscapes bring a distinct perspective to the series. The use of oil paints and under painting were to create the romantic traditional landscape. This is to create a separation in between the watercolors as a statement. The subject of

the paintings is off-putting. Each landscape consists of a dying animal, which gives the viewer the idea of the environment in which these animals have died in (e.g. see Fig. 6).

For me to locate many of the endangered and extinct species I looked through the archives of organizations like the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species to gather the list of animals. Although it provided me with a beneficial amount of information, it did not provide me with images of the skulls. I had to search and learn the anatomy of each animal's species to figure out how to locate the actual skulls of each animal. I was looking for a direct frontal view of each skull because I wanted to paint the skull looking directly at the viewer. It did take me a while to find some of the skulls and I also needed to confirm the accuracy of each animal skull.

Statistics

The International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species has dedicated more than 60 years to researching the world's most comprehensive information on global extinction. They have focused on the endangerment of animal, plant, and fungus species. This provided me with extensive information about the animals I choose to work with. The information I found broke down the details of endangerment for each animal from the year they became critical to the year they were last seen.

The IUCN provides information about habitats and ecology, trade, conservation, and population sizes. This helped me gather the reasons why the animal was endangered. The most common reason for animal endangerment is loss of habitat. This can start with deforestation for construction of infrastructures. Pollution is another major factor that affects the ecosystem and the animals living in it. This creates an inhospitable environment that forces animals to adapt or forces them into a different location. Animals that do adapt to the polluted conditions are subject to illnesses and death.

Currently, the IUCN stated that there are 157,100 species on the list and 44,000 species threatened with extinction. It is organizations such as IUCN that help us record

the regression of our losses. IUCN Red List is an indicator of the health of the world's biodiversity, and it is used by government agencies.

History

Colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism have created many consequences for humankind. We have progressed immensely as a human race, but these are a few of the main reasons animal extinction and endangerment have increased. Factors that have driven extinction are trophy hunting, deforestation, climate change, and pollution. Each of these has contributed to the deaths of many animals.

The beginning of colonization is when early settlers came to target countries to acquire full control or possession. This led to deforestation and exploiting the land for cultivation. For example, when white settlers arrived in North America, they ripped apart the homes of many native tribes while also killing off the natives' main source of food and cutting down trees and polluting land and waters. The settlers stripped the natives of their sacred homes, people, and beliefs.

In an article by Mamers, she discusses the strategic way that settlers killed off the natives. They were killing millions of bison to help extinguish the Natives (e.g. see Fig. 5). The Native Indian livelihood was based on the Bison. Mamers stated,

“We know that Indigenous Nations and bison herds were closely linked. The vast number of bison herds shaped the lives of Indigenous Nations by facilitating the formations of large, politically, and socially complex communities across the Prairies.” (Mamers)

They would use every part of the buffalo for survival, but they did not abuse the land and animal. Eliminating the bison was a form of genocide, that also left the bison endangered. The settlers also profited from hides and bones. This one of the many ways that colonization has factored into the extinction of buffalo.

Present day industrial projects, that have developed from capitalism, have continued the elimination of animal species, many of which I have depicted in my series, such as big cats, elephants and even orangutans. Some issues industrial projects have created are climate change and environmental destruction. This is from the construction of factories that require deforestation, which is removing animals from their habitats. This construction is also polluting the environment with destructive fumes and spills from factory waste into the waters of the land.

The pollution that plays a key role in climate change results in droughts, extreme weather changes, and coastal flooding. These effects are seen globally. For instance, extreme drought can cause wildfires. In 2023, Australia saw one of its worst wildfires in history, as well as this deluge causing many people and animals to lose their homes, injuries, and deaths. There are also deaths from lack of hydration and excessive heat.

Pollution can find its way into the habitats of many animals. It can fall into the food that they eat and into the water they drink and swim in. This can result in an animal getting sick from eating garbage or drinking harmful water. Imagine what it is doing to us. In a New York Times article, Hauser reports on the 2023 derailment in Ohio, where 38 cars of a train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. The train carried hazardous cargo and set off chemical fires, releasing toxins into the atmosphere severely affecting the ecosystem. Some of the chemicals being carried contained vinyl chloride, which raised concerns about a potential major explosion in the area (Hauser).

Many residents complained about breathing and skin reactions from poor air quality. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources, stated that the derailment caused a chemical spill in “seven and half miles of stream and killed and estimated 3,500 fish.” (Hauser). This also affected other wildlife and cattle. This brings me to the effect imperialism has on the extinction of animals.

Imperialism is a practice of political policies that extend political and economic control over territories. For example, there are certain decisions intentionally being made about the environment meant to monetize rather than restore or protect. These decisions do

not only affect wildlife but also affect residents, such as the ones in East Palestine, Ohio. This derailment created an unsuitable environment to breathe in, and to even drink water in, due to its contamination.

There is even the case of pipelines running through indigenous grounds. These grounds hold a sacred value and natural reserves for the communities around it (Grote and Johnson). In 2006, Nigeria experienced oil spills and explosions from an Exxon-Mobil pipeline. This has caused great devastation for residents and families. This was the result of the exploitation of Nigeria's farmlands and water lands, affecting residents and wildlife. The fact that there are laws that help authorize these extreme projects shows that imperialism is thriving and threatening the future extinction of this planet (Smith).

One of these types of laws in United States is Eminent Domain. Eminent domain is the power of the government to take private property for public use. One example of eminent domain is the creation of Central Park. The government displaced over hundreds of newly free slaves and their communities to create the park that it is today. These of just one of the examples of how the law can be used to exploit the public interest (Fitzpatrick 3).

Another major factor in the extinction of animals is capitalism. The human use of animals has been exploited for greed and monetization. This can be seen in fashion, home decor and even sports. For instance, celebrities and politicians wear the fur of minks and foxes as a fashion statement and these items sell for hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Then there are the sport hunters that kill animals to decorate their homes with the carcasses of animals.

It is a known fact that we, as a human race, have used animals for survival. This has allowed us humans to use animals for food, clothing, and labor. For example, the Native Americans have used the bison as a main source of food and clothing for cold temperatures, but they exercised moderation. They believed they shared the earth with the bison and showed them profound respect. They were grateful for the gifts the bison

gave them. Today's capitalistic use of animals is as a fashion statement rather than for survival, and species are exploited for high-end retail.

Purses, coats, shoes, and clothes are a few of the many factory-made items now extinct animals have been pillaged for. A few of the endangered animals that are used are reptiles, beavers, chinchillas, and wildcats. There are also poachers that hunt animals like elephants and rhinoceros just for their ivory or horns. Poachers take only their tusks and leave the butchered animal there to die. Apparel businesses then use their fur, skin, and ivory to style many of the same people in political office, one of the many examples is Melania Trump (Former First Lady) and Marjorie Taylor Greene (United States Representative.)

Trophy hunting is another component in the endangerment of animals. These are hunters or poachers who go off searching for animals to kill as a sport. Depending on the animal killed, based off size or rareness, they hold a high value for trade. In most countries there is a ban on poaching and hunting, but it is not always successful. There are laws that continue to protect hunters and their accessibility and claim it for the benefit of the community. In the Congressional Research Service report, the government tries to justify this by stating:

Some proponents of trophy hunting contend that the money generated by trophy hunts helps the communities in and around the range areas by providing jobs and money for community services. For example, some found that trophy hunters were willing to pay substantial premiums for hunting trips that were advertised as offering benefit-sharing arrangements with local communities.

The literature often cites community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) as a mechanism to encourage local community involvement in wildlife management decision making and to increase the amount of financial benefits

associated with wildlife-related revenue that accrue to local communities. (18)

This statement is terribly similar to the idea of eminent domain. The government can get power over property and life if there is public gain. If there was a concern for providing jobs for the community, they would create more helpful jobs for the environment. This proves how a part of history can be “justified” to save the reputation of many well-known leaders and institutions to allow destruction (Gladstone 50).

Artists Influences

The artists that have influenced my art are Degas, Caravaggio, Saville, Kusama, Burke, Turner, Carr, Kahlo, and Magritte. I have been inspired by their use of material, color, and subject matter for my own work. My initial approach to my work is very academic, as I prefer to draw or paint figures from life, like my influences Degas and Caravaggio. I like to observe light and colors to reflect what I see. The piece, Wildfire (e.g. see Fig.9), was painted with transfixing the kangaroos in bright shafts of light and darkening shadows. I wanted to capture the intensity of the flames against the dying kangaroo and keep the dark ominous environment of smoke.

With artists like Saville, I have found inspiration to try abstract forms of painting and alternate use of mediums. This helped influence my watercolor paintings. Rather than applying assorted colors of paint, I decided to remove paint from the base color. It was a moment where I realized I was thinking outside of painting traditionally. I enjoyed the process, and I was able to manipulate the medium to give the skull a tonal value. The finished pieces almost look as if they were done in charcoal rather than watercolor (e.g. see Fig. 1-3).

Artists like Kahlo and Carr have similar interests and emotions to mine, and therefore I gravitate towards their work of nature-infused paintings. The emotions that Kahlo invokes in her paintings remind me of the grief I have instilled in my work. In Kahlo’s piece “Henry Ford Hospital,” (e.g. see Fig. 7) she painted a tragic part of her life, when she lost her child, for the second time, due to pregnancy complications. She has

unapologetically shared the painful moments of her life through her paintings, and I share those similar emotions with my father's passing. I also find a similarity in each other's work because of the disturbing subject of death. The painting of the deceased wild horses and the kangaroo running across a burning house are also referencing how climate change has impacted the environments and existence of these animals. The dead deer is showing how our industrial growth has impacted their lives and survival. (e.g. see Fig. 8-10)

Carr's colorful paintings of landscapes remind me of my oil paintings of the deceased animals. There is a similarity in the colors used and the depth of field. She had also taken an interest in and visited Native tribes on the West Coast and there is even a photo of her riding a horse, which made me feel a connection to her as a horse rider. But the landscapes painted were also a connection to the ecosystem.

The artists and paintings that have influenced the pieces in this series are the landscapes of Burke, Carr, and Magritte. Burke's sublime landscapes have created a sense of intensity and compressed depth of field, which allows the viewer to visually fall into the work. The painting *Roadkill* and *Drought* was painted with the idea of depth of field. I created a focus on the subject, the dying animal, and wanted the landscape to be out of focus. The figure of the dead animal is symbolic and is raising concern, confusion, and questions, and this relates to Magritte's work. The random and absurd subjects in Magritte's paintings raise questions about the piece from the viewer. As he quoted "*Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.*" (Magritte). This is the idea I would like viewers to have when seeing a macabre landscape. I want them to look for the hidden meaning behind the dead animals.

I have also researched other artists who advocate animal endangerment and have worked in creative ways to get the message across. Artists like Ruth Marshall and Margaret Wertheim have participated in displays that explore animal extinction. They have worked with varied mediums, creating different perspectives for the viewer. Ruth Marshall has created a series with contemporary textiles. Artists like Wertheim have

used the medium of yarn to create a colorful three-dimensional coral reef. The coral reefs that she is making are the homes to many oceanic species and provide food and habitat.

Marshall has also used knitting as a medium, creating pelts of endangered exotic species. This references back to trophy hunting and poaching as a sport or for decoration. She hangs the hand-knit pelts on sticks, stretching them out the same way they are hung in collections at a Natural History Museum.

The artist Es Delvin has created an installation that holds 243 drawings of endangered species under a dome, that was inspired by the dome of London's St Paul's Cathedral. The piece is called "Come Home Again," and it represents 243 species that are on London's conservation list. The dome represents a sanctuary that invites the public to join a choral group each evening, thus uniting the human voices with the voices of birds, bats, and insects. I really enjoyed the layout of all her pieces in the dome because of how symmetrical it felt. The choice of a pre-lit all white layout and the choir singing gives an ethereal feeling. It was very inspiring to see her showcase endangered species in their purest form.

Finally, English photographer Nick Brandt addresses humanity's destructive impact on the world and animals. One of his most impactful photos is a line of park rangers holding the tusks of elephants that have been killed at the hands of man. Each ranger holds two tusks as they line up one behind the other until a vanishing point.

Personally, this photo is most impactful because of the number of resources and access it requires to put the image together. The tusks of elephants and the twenty-two rangers that protect them are dedicated to the cause of protecting elephants from poaching. This is a powerful commentary on the tragic loss of elephants that have died due to poachers and that is the same intent I look forward to applying with the piece *Poachers* (e.g. Fig. 6).

Conclusion

To sum up, I have created 109 reasons of why climate change, habitat loss, and mankind's greed is the cause for animal endangerment. This has been an ongoing struggle for centuries and the human species has adapted to its losses as a normality. Society has conformed with the environmental changes and utilization that has created animal endangerment. The government has played a key role in helping this regression progress. This brings me back to the issues of colonizing animal habitats, hunting, and pollution.

Many artists have contributed towards the awareness of our human-induced extinctions crisis. They have transformed scientific documentation in the hope of galvanizing mindfulness of global conservation. I look forward to contributing to this awareness and making a grand statement about our loss of species. The one hundred and five watercolor skulls will haunt the room as four bigger oil paintings will remind the viewers of the harsh reality these endangered animals face. The series is haunting as it lines up each skull next to one another along with the macabre landscapes in between.

The layout of this series is hung symmetrically. The watercolor pieces are close in proximity and are placed in minimal black frames. The oil paintings are placed after each cluster of watercolors. I wanted the oil paintings to be the exclamation to all the skulls hanging. There was no preference as to where I hung each skull. I did not hang them in specific categories. Although some of the animal skulls hung are extinct or endangered, no skull had more importance over the other. This creates a tension in the space that I could only hope will bring the viewer into reflection of our existence in the world.



Fig 1. Polar Bear, Watercolor on paper 9x12in



Fig 2. New Zealand Bush Moa, Watercolor on Paper 9x12 in



Fig 3. Clouded Leopard, Watercolor on paper 9x12in



Fig 4.

Men standing with pile of buffalo skulls, Michigan Carbon Works, Rougeville Mich., 1892. photo from Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library



Fig 5. Swift Fox, Watercolor on paper 9x12in



Fig 6. Poachers, Oil on Canvas

36x36 in



Fig 7.

Henry Ford Hospital, 1932 by Frida Kahlo



Fig 8. Drought, Oil on Canvas

36x 48



Fig 9. Wildfire, Oil on Canvas



Fig. 10 Roadkill, Oil on Canvas

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