

TO THE DOGS OR WHOEVER

BY KATE WALKER

ABSTRACT

My creative process is inspired by the natural world and its inevitable conflict with humans. Through intricately layered screenprints, repurposed furniture, or reimagined animal hides, I craft narratives depicting the complex interactions between animals and humans, examining their conflict and the ensuing consequences. I weave layers of information and symbolism from natural history, behavioral ecology, music, and personal experience into each piece.

This thesis explores my artistic practice, discussing its underlying values, and examining the influences and stories behind each piece. Focusing on the narrative of the animal, my body of work strives to cultivate empathy towards them and underscores the importance of human responsibility towards animals in their life or death.

“But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.”

Job 12:7-8

*“My flesh had turned to fur
and my thoughts they surely were
turned to instinct and obedience to God”*

Blitzen Trapper, Fur

Everyone in their lifetime should hold a mouse. Picking up this little creature, one is made aware how delicate it is - from the long bones in its legs to its tiny, rapidly beating heart. It's a delicate life held in one's palm, and you, as the comparatively giant human cradling it, are acutely aware of your interactions with this animal. This moment brings recognition of a life beyond your own, as well as the extent of your influence over it.

I've been lucky enough to have varied experiences with animals. I grew up around cattle ranches and rodeos, watched elk herds in amazement, learned how to track bison and deer, and held little mice. My fascination with the natural world has translated into my art practice, through which I depict animals and their interactions with humans, telling stories and fragmented narratives

of conflict and consequence. My work grapples with ideas of human comfort and consumption and their connection to environmental disturbance and decay.

In creating stories that reveal the symbolic weight placed upon animals as well as the consequences of human interactions, my work attempts to reveal the perspective of the animal, to produce compassion for the natural world, and to serve as a warning to care for nature.

*“They got to the part with the cattle and the creeping things
said ‘I’m pretty sure we’ve heard this one before’”*

The Hold Steady, Cattle and the Creeping Things

Human interactions with animals are incredibly complex, confusing, and paradoxical. Animals are used as food, shelter, entertainment, symbolism, worship, and companionship. Oftentimes, these uses overlap or directly contradict each other. In all these relationships, humans hold the power.

The artist and activist Sue Coe once said, “animal liberation... demands an end of all animal use.” Conversely, in reference to his work that uses animal bodies, the artist Damien Hirst has stated, “you kill things to look at them.” These are opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to our relationships with animals. One values the animal so highly that it asks for humans to end all usage of them. The other alienates and objectifies animals to the point that their lives become meaningless beyond being material and spectacle for humans. I find each of these views flawed as both try

to detach and dichotomize humans from animals. Humans are part of the natural world. We exist alongside and within it. To survive, we must take resources from the environment and from animals. Because humans hold the power in these relationships, we also have a responsibility to care for these animals. An animal should be provided respect through its life, death, and whatever remains.. We often fail at doing this and that is what I am interested in exploring. My work is not an overall condemnation of animal-human interactions. It is a look at the animal's side of these relationships. It is a critique of how the power dynamics of these interactions play out and a look at the ensuing consequences.

"Were our eyes and ears so dull then?"

John Burroughs

Animal encounters were commonplace in every place I have previously lived. I'd hear coyotes calling to each other in the evenings, watch bobcats slink through the tall grass, and have geckos sneak into my room in the summer. These experiences had inspired my art prac-

tice, and my work had focused on observations of animals and telling my personal experiences with nature. When I moved to a city for the first time, I felt the absence of these animals quite acutely. Where were the June bugs that used to tap against my windows? Where was the chorus of spring peepers that lulled me to sleep every night? The initial feeling of loss and disconnection from nature had a significant impact on the direction my work has taken since. I have become more concerned with human impact on animals, mortality, and how animals are lost and remembered. The animals I choose to depict are mostly native to North America. They are ones that I have been able to see or live alongside in the same landscape. Every piece I create has a specific story behind it, designed to bring attention to the animal and its life or loss in death.

In finding ways to tell these stories, my work has taken the forms of printmaking, furniture, and sculpture. Though my preferred medium is printmaking, much of my inspiration comes from watercolor painters like David Armstrong and Walton Ford. For each of these artists, when it comes to composition, there is no wasted space. Both create incredibly dense paintings, with all of their imagery fully rendered and packed with detail. Armstrong's work is so heavily layered that it is

hard to recognize it as watercolor. It's only when you get close to his paintings and squint that you can see the tiny brushstrokes filling up every available space. In Ford's paintings it is easier to see the layers and brushstrokes only because of the massive size of each piece. In my work, it is my similar love of lines and packing imagery onto the paper that led me to screen print. I find screen print to be the most versatile print form due to its ability to depict broad areas of color and fine, detailed linework. It can also be printed on nearly every surface. Though screen print is often paired with digital or photographic processes, I try to keep those to a minimum in my work. I do color separation by hand and draw my stencils with pen and marker on film. I think that the slower process of working by hand allows for a significant amount of reflection to be taken in between layers. As each choice is deliberate and often irreversible in printmaking, I feel there is a great weight for every mark to be important, contributing to the overall piece.

Beyond his technique, I admire Walton Ford's ability to craft stories within stories, often with hidden meanings. Ford's work takes the form of natural history drawings like those of Edward Lear or John James Audubon, in which he balances dramatic depictions

of animals with scientific inquiry. However, his work often isn't about the animals at all. He has described them as actors or court jesters playing the part of human stories. His piece *Baba - B.G.* depicts a Belted Kingfisher perched over a caught fish while several different kingfisher species watch closely. This painting visually appears like an observational study of these species, but all of the animals are actually allegories for humans. The actual story behind the piece is a trip that Bill Gates took to India, during which he barely left his hotel and embarrassed those who were excited for his arrival. In *Baba - B.G.*, Bill Gates is the Belted Kingfisher giving a lecture on greed and the other birds are the local politicians jockeying for his attention. Though our work explores some similar themes both conceptually and visually, Ford is ultimately telling human stories. In contrast, my work looks at animal-human interactions but focuses on the animal itself. Humans never appear in my work, instead their presence is just hinted at while the animal always takes center stage. My own work, though often existing in a sort of fantastical space, makes references to the animal subject, its natural history, behavioral ecology, and relationship with humans.



So a Few Must Die, to Bring Us Back to Where We Started, screen print, 2023

*“Friday’s grackle rips open doves
Saturday’s grackle steals little loves”*

Edward Carey, Gracklesong for Use in the Household

Grackles are a bird species not held in high regard by most. They are often haggard looking, with feathers and toes missing from frequent fights. They make horrific sounds, high pitched squeals and almost mechanical clicks. The playwright Edward Carey described their bodies as “all cartilage.” Grackles can be found all over North America, in rural and urban areas alike. Their prevalence, as well as their love of grain, has led them to be labeled as pests.

Coyote and deer have followed a similar path to grackles, adapting so well to living alongside humans that they are now considered pests. Deer enjoy crops as much as grackles do and coyotes are considered threats to ranches since they can poach livestock. Each of these species do have some conflict with agriculture and livestock industries, but often with much less impact than reported. Despite this, the label of pest has

allowed a significant number of destructive and needlessly cruel management techniques to be taken against each of these species. Grackle roosts are exterminated en masse, hunting is considered a necessity to control the white-tailed deer population, and the US Wildlife Services kills an estimated 80,000 coyotes per year at the behest of ranchers.

The piece *So a Few Must Die* is screen printed with deer and coyotes suspended upside down and grackles flying about the top half as though lifting the larger animals up. Hunted deer are typically strung up by their hindlegs for processing while coyotes are hung up in the belief that the carcass will ward off other predators. Some ranchers will use so-called “coyote effigies,” in which dead coyotes are hung upside down along fence lines. In the print, their orientation is reminiscent of both effigies and processing, but, counteracting that, the bodies of the coyotes and deer are posed as though they are leaping through the air. One grackle emerges from a coyote’s mouth while another flies up to the deer, a stink melon leaf in its beak. The background wallpaper is also made of stink melon vines, a plant that smells so rotten that humans typically avoid it, but animals readily consume it. The presence of this wallpaper denotes a space exclusive to these animals, a

space that humans would prefer not to enter.

There are certain visuals, iconography, and lyrics that influenced the composition of this piece. The title comes from the song *Two at a Time*, which takes an irreverent tone in retelling the events of Noah's Ark. In this print, the grackle that flies up to the deer with a leaf held in its beak parallels the dove that returned to the Ark with an olive branch, a moment of hope amidst the desperation. Additionally, the movement of the grackle emerging from the coyote's mouth only to reappear in the adjacent print makes reference to the scientific charts of ecosystem food chains. This points out the connected nature of these species, how they hold specialized niches within the same ecosystem. They are essential to both each other and the health of the environment as a whole.

The full title *So a Few Must Die, to Bring Us Back to Where We Started* is a true statement about these animals. These species will continue to have conflict with farms and ranches. Sometimes the conflict will end in the death of the wild animal. However, the current methods of control, the widespread culling and effigies, are excessive, ineffective, and cruel overall.

A few times per year, the resident grackles of my home-

town would merge with the migratory flocks, creating seething blankets of birds that covered hayfields. This would happen around the end of a season - autumn giving way to winter. Despite all of their bizarre traits, seeing the grackles in such massive numbers was an exciting moment. They meant that change was coming. For this print, I chose to have the grackles swarming around the deer and coyote, indicating a coming change. Animals like white-tailed deer, coyote, and grackles are species with mostly stable populations, but there is no surety in nature. History is filled with animal species that appeared numerous, only for them to rapidly go extinct. This piece was designed to honor species that have been unfairly persecuted both historically and today. It is also a warning that they may not always be around.

*“Sweep my mess away, leave my body, leave my bones
leave me whole and leave my soul,
leave me nothing I don’t need at all”*

Johnny Flynn. The Box

Badgers have a unique behavior among similar animals. They collect and bury the bodies of dead animals, even ones that they did not kill. This habit has led to the myth of the “badger funeral,” in which the badger gathers the souls of creatures that have passed away and sets them to rest. I feel that my process of creation is like that of a badger: traveling along - collecting souls. Much of my work is rooted in a concern for the dead and those who have been cast off. This concern manifests itself both in my physical materials and in the stories I choose to tell.

When choosing animal products or furniture to work with, I look for items that are soon to be thrown away, ones that have become obsolete or too damaged to be used. I am not interested in restoration or returning the object to its former self. Instead, I consider how the object can be transformed into something new while

still referencing its history. For example, when I decide to incorporate a fur coat or accessory in a project, I am working with objects that have already been transformed many times. They have gone from living animals to tanned skin to fashion items. They can never return to their original state, so I look to make a new form. In working with materials that were once animals, I think carefully about how I choose to manipulate the fur and hide. The tanned side of a hide, the seams along a fur coat's edge, and sections that are seriously damaged are what I feel comfortable changing and adding to. This is because they were already affected by human hands. The fur itself and any remaining body parts (paws, tails, claws), I leave unchanged. In doing so, I hope to preserve and respect what is left of the original animal.

When it comes to ideas about the use of the bodies of real animals within art, Damien Hirst is often brought up. Though he can make work that is visually interesting, I find that this effect is ruined by the process he takes to create it. Hirst plans out the sculpture he wants to make, down to the specific type of animal body, then commissions a farmer or hunter to collect and kill the animal of his desire. Hirst has used this process for decades now and some of his more ardent protestors

estimate Hirst's kill count to be in the thousands.

Additionally, there has been a resurgence of taxidermy and other ways of using animals in contemporary art. Though I've looked at artists like Mark Dion and Kate Clark, I feel hesitant about my own use of animal bodies fitting into this movement. Kate Clark combines taxidermied animals and sculpted human faces, creating interspecies forms that question a human's place within nature. Mark Dion creates installations of collected and organized objects that mimic museum displays and scientific presentations. His work is meant to challenge how knowledge has historically been recorded and communicated. For both of these artists, the work is primarily about the human. For Clark's work, the hybridization always takes place the same way- the animal's face is replaced by a human one. In these sculptures, the animal often appears secondary and possibly interchangeable. Whether a gemsbok, an axis deer, or a kudu body is used, the specific type of animal becomes less important in the overall piece. Dion's work drops the standing of the animal even further. The displayed hides and taxidermied bodies are typically a small part of the overall diorama, appearing like an object or prop.

Oftentimes, use of animal bodies in art lacks compassion for the animal; they are more a symbol or prop to convey the overall message of the artwork. This comes down to the thin line of personal ethics, a complicated, blurry area of how we interact with and respect animals. In the times I have used animal bodies in my work, the choice to do so was in response to what is left of the animal (the hide, skin, or bones), how it was used (as decoration, food, clothing), and how I can make something new out of what remains. In choosing to pursue this, my interest has always been guided by this idea: the death has already happened, so how do we honor what remains?



*See I Have Built You a Mansion,
Surrounded by That Which You Love*
screen print, found furniture, repurposed fur coat, 2024



*“All reside inside my mind
before I settle down to rest”*

Ceschi, All Dogs Go to Heaven

For most fur fashion garments, just the hide of the back of the animal is used, from shoulder to tail. In the creation of a single coat or accessory, a significant number of animals need to be killed. The use of animals in fashion is now considered outdated in both style and ethics, but the coats and accessories made when fur was popular still exist. Now they are found wasting away in storage and antique shops and trash piles.

When I found a sable stole in a second-hand store, I noticed that many of the seams were torn and the fur was starting to curl and fall out along the edges. I had the thought that in this style and condition, no one else was going to take it. Soon after picking up the stole, I heard about a rabbit coat that had spent years in unprotected storage. It was so damaged that the previous owner was offering it for free, considering it to no longer be wearable. Both these pieces were only a few

steps from being thrown away, something I found to be tragic when considering the loss of life that went into their creation.

When I acquired both items, I decided to create a piece that referenced the animals that they used to be. I wanted to acknowledge their history while also creating a new form for them, to create a “second life” of sorts. The end result was several soft sculptures in the form of the original animals, sables and rabbits. Each sculpture is primarily made of the animal’s fur with the skin exposed, showing the stamps from the tanning facility and the stitching that formed them into clothing. Their bellies and collars are formed from the silk lining of the coats and their heads, feet, and tails are sculpted with white clay, reminiscent of taxidermy mounts. These details are left on view to show the history of these specific animals, and all of the different shapes they had been transformed into before becoming their current state of being.

Once the sculptures were complete, I realized I had no way to display them. I began searching around for a piece of furniture that could become a home for them. I eventually came across an old cabinet. The cabinet itself came from a game warden; it was the last remain-

ing piece of his great-grandmother’s dining room set. After giving it a few different paint jobs then many years of sitting in a garage, he’d decided it was time to get rid of it. I acquired the cabinet, stripped and stained it, then screen printed and installed a wallpaper for the inside where the sables and rabbit sculptures would live. The wallpaper depicts sparrows and ravens sitting along the branches of a Texas persimmon tree. Texas persimmon trees produce small, sweet fruits that are nearly impossible for humans to get their hands on because as soon as they get ripe wild animals eat them all. This wallpaper creates an environment specifically for animals, a space for the sables and rabbits to spend their “second life” within. The cabinet becomes both a home and a display for the creatures within. It is also a way to continue the use of these materials and a reminder of our responsibility towards these animals in both life and death.

*“Neighborly with fiddleheads,
copperheads, and moccasins”*

Josh Ritter, Cumberland

Wildlife art has a rocky reputation because of its connections to tourism and a perceived lack of substance. It is often excluded from the fine art world as a whole. It is a shame because I believe what wildlife artists do is remarkably hard. Their work is typically done in realism, as their client base wants something representative of the nature they see. The smallest anatomy mistake can break that realism. Once, my teacher had looked at a beautiful painting of a wild dog and stated, “Look at how tiny his waist is. That dog has no organs.” For all the work that the wildlife artist had put into making that dog look real, my teacher was right. The dog’s torso was too thin, and the entire painting was thrown off as a result. However, there is one particular body part that remains the most difficult to portray and every wildlife artist I’ve spoken with mentions their struggle in its rendering – the animal’s eyes. Eyes are communication, a look at the soul, and a way to understand

intent. When they are off in any way, it is instantly noticeable.

The wildlife artist Robert Bateman is a master of composition and a master at rendering eyes. He has painted hundreds of animals, including many of the same species over and over again, and yet his work never feels like it is treading the same ground. Bateman has a way of situating the animal in its environment that feels natural and unobtrusive. His work feels like we are getting a glimpse of a life before it vanishes into the trees again. He is able to create a tangible stillness, tension, or an explosion of movement in his work, like a snapshot. Bateman manages to create a spark of life in the eyes that he paints, so that all of his animals appear real and like they are breathing. He also plays with the animal's line of sight and uses this to change the tone of the painting. Bateman will often make several pieces depicting the same animal in various moments of their life and then make one painting where the animal is staring out at the viewer. For example, in his arctic series he focused on several polar bears. In *Arctic Landscape – Polar Family*, the mother bear sits, serenely looking into the distance while her cubs rest behind her. This piece is an unobtrusive look at the animals before they move along; a glimpse of a private

moment. In contrast to this, his piece *Arctic Landscape – Polar Bear* has the animal peering over the rocks, looking directly at the viewer. In this work, the viewer feels like part of the scene. They are possibly the reason this bear has turned to look back, rather than continuing on its journey. The look the bear is giving is curious, as if questioning why his life has been interrupted by the viewer. In playing with where the animals are looking, Bateman drastically changes the tone of his work.

I am not attempting realism like wildlife artists are but still the first thing most people notice in my work is that the animals have no eyes. Despite this, their bodies are in motion, jumping and flying across the picture plane. When an animal dies, the eyes are the first body part lost to decomposition. In my work, the animals have taken one step towards death but aren't quite there yet. Their eyes reveal that they are neither fully alive nor dead. Rather, they exist at a possible crossroads. Even though they have no eyes, the animals in all of my prints still have a line of sight. They twist and turn to look at each other and the environment they are in. They are locked in their own story. In this way, the viewer is a voyeur upon this captured moment, the way they are with *Arctic Landscape – Polar Family*. My only print to break this formula is the piece, Hello My

Dear, I Fear I Am Not What I Seem. In this piece, the wolverine turns away from the surrounding birds to look out at the viewer. Like in *Arctic Landscape – Polar Bear*, this direct eye contact with the viewer pulls them into the scene, turning them into a participant in the story.



Hello My Dear, I Fear I Am Not What I Seem
screen print, 2024

*“Watch over your flock
the cracks in the ice will swallow them up”*

Pup, The Coast

My neighbor once gave me eight dead house sparrows as a thank you for a favor. The birds had frozen overnight in an unexpected snowstorm. He had found them huddled up against our apartment building, trying to shelter from the wind.

The house sparrow adapted to living alongside humans thousands of years ago. Their beaks evolved to crack open the seeds that we cultivated. In the mid-1800s they were purposefully introduced to North America but now are considered an invasive species as they compete with native songbirds. Sparrows are commonplace in nearly every city in the United States. Intense extermination campaigns take place across the US frequently, and the sparrows have no way to escape them. Considering their history of evolving alongside humans, they most likely cannot live without us. They've adapted to prefer the nooks of buildings to

forests and fields. The frozen ones that ended up in my hands had chosen to shelter against a human structure rather than the tree line that was only a few feet away. In contrast to a bird that is seen every day, the wolverine has become almost a ghost on the American landscape. It is estimated that only about three hundred remain in the contiguous United States, representing a distinct subspecies from the rest of the population in Canada and Russia. This population loss was caused by historical overhunting and shrinking territories. Wolverines are rarely seen nowadays, and even public knowledge of their existence seems to be vanishing along with them.

The print, *Hello My Dear, I Fear I am Not What I Seem* was designed to depict two different species: one native to North America and nearly forgotten, the other invasive to North America and seen everywhere. In this piece, a wolverine descends from a tree branch, turning to stare out beyond the picture plane. A crack in the branch reveals a stash of dead house sparrows inside. A sparrow peeks from under the wolverine's foreleg and two more twist around each other in flight above him. It is not made clear if the wolverine is the one that killed the stashed sparrows, considering three living birds seem to still be hanging around him. The

wolverine, despite his lack of eyes, looks out at the viewer, involving them in this story.

The scientific name of the wolverine is *Gulo gulo*, the glutton. Wolverines were labeled this because they tend to scavenge for their food and cache it for later. In particular, they like to gather what humans kill. In the print, as the wolverine looks out at the viewer above a stash of dead sparrows, his gaze appears accusatory. In this scenario, it is questionable which involved party is the actual glutton.

“You better bark.”

Josh Ritter, Birds of the Meadow

he final thesis installation has five prints framed and arranged on the wall with the cabinet in the center. Each piece represents a different animal’s story, designed to honor these animals and take a critical look at their interactions with humans. A rocking chair sits next to the cabinet, creating a place for solace or reflection alongside these stories. There is printed wallpaper installed behind, depicting a repeating pattern of a rodeo bridle. A bridle can be a tool of communication and partnership between the horse and the rider. Incorrectly used, it can also become a tool of cruel control. The repeating pattern of the wallpaper serves as a reminder of those relationships and responsibilities that humans hold with animals.

Ultimately, my work hopes to cultivate a deep appreciation for animals while highlighting the profound impact of human interactions with them. Through intricate storytelling, I look to bring together threads of empathy and reverence for nature and the animals within it. By shedding light on the natural history

and behavior ecology of the animals as well as the profound consequences of human actions, my work stresses our interconnectedness with nature. Through narratives that offer insight from the animal perspective, my work advocates for compassion towards the natural world and emphasizes the urgent need to prioritize its protection and preservation.

“But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.”

Job 12:7-10



Final Installation Images





