

Natural Fictions

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Abstract

What if myths grew from the earth, unfurling their petals like fists? What if they lived in the undergrowth, in tree hollows, in between the feathers of ravens' wings? My MFA thesis exhibition, *Natural Fictions* (April 17-21, 2023), was produced with these questions in mind. In this support paper, I explore the ways in which painting can be a pathway to enchantment. In particular, I focus on the enchanted gaze, and how this gaze both complicates and enriches our interactions with the more-than-human world.

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I

Monstrous TransformationsLike Smoke or a Haunting

When I was five years old, I thought the stars were tumbling from the sky. It would have been terrifying, had it not been so beautiful. Flashes of light toned the blue horizon black in contrast, casting my baby sister's hair aglow. I had to squint so as to not be overwhelmed by them.

“What are those, Mama?”

“They’re fireflies.”

Firefly. *Lucciola*. It’s one of those words that I like just as much in English as in Italian. Fire: the scent of woodsmoke mingling with pine. Fly: the gossamer wings of pixies and bees. *Lucciola*: daughter of the light - *la luce* - her errant rays transforming into a hundred tiny suns. From our first encounter, fireflies were liminal beings to me. I regarded them as insects, fairies, and dancing stars.

In his anthology, *Italian Folktales*, Italo Calvino reflects on his years spent transcribing oral stories from across Italy. After being exposed to so much folklore, he writes that his world:

...gradually took on the attributes of fairyland, where everything that happened was a spell or a metamorphosis, where individuals, plucked from a chiaroscuro state of mind, were carried away by predestined loves, or were bewitched; where sudden disappearances, monstrous transformations occurred [...] (18).

The words “chiaroscuro state of mind” reverberated through my ribs when I read them. I immediately thought of the baroque tableau that fireflies would paint outside of my grandparents’ cabin. I didn’t know where the cabin itself was located when I was a child. We referred to it simply as *la campagna*, the countryside. For this reason, it seemed to exist outside of time and place altogether, and occurrences which may have felt impossible elsewhere were given a new weight. Of particular concern to me, was the threat of the taxidermy, which adorned so much of the interior, seeking revenge. I could imagine, with startling clarity, the wall-mounted barracuda baring its rows of needle-like teeth as it swam up through the air, toward the bed that my sister and I shared. If Jesus could rise from the dead then it stood to reason that the winged, clawed, and scaled creatures of the household could as well. The cabin burned to the ground in 2007. It was no longer in my family’s possession by then, but in my mind’s eye I still see the denizens of my grandparents’ collection returning to the woods. The image is hazy, like smoke or a haunting.

A Disturbing and Pleasurable Coupling

The “monstrous transformations” that Calvino describes in *Italian Folktales* were synonymous with my Roman Catholic upbringing: bread to body, wine to blood. I continue to witness them long after having distanced myself from the Church. One particular transformation continues to influence my studio practice. It was the end of July 2021, and I was finishing one of my last shifts at McGill University's Morgan Arboretum before moving to Toronto. I couldn't tell if my light-headedness was caused by a creeping sense of nostalgia, or the fact that I had spent another 48-hour work week in an unventilated, sweltering cabin. Incidentally, something had obviously died under the floorboards again, though I couldn't find it. I was eager to get home. Instead, I stood at the base of a long gravel road, the sun beating down on me, dust mingling with the sweat on my skin. As I waited for the final idling guest to leave the property so I could lock the gate, a flash of yellow caught my eye. It was a grouping of sunflowers, growing on the side of the road. I ran my hands down their stems; they felt coarse, hairy. Suddenly the flowers, with their wilting petals and deteriorating centres, took on an animal quality, and I was struck with that stomach-lurching sensation of having come upon roadkill. The uncanniness of the experience led me to the following conclusion: sunflowers are shapeshifters.

Material investigation through touch is a crucial part of my art making process. It was in touching the sunflowers that their hybrid nature was revealed. Since then, they have become a personal emblem of the in-between, or what Donna Haraway might refer to as the cyborg, “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (1). The detailed rendering in my artwork is almost

always influenced by such physical encounters. On my panel, the memory of moss becomes velvet; the sheen of a petal, satin. The character of the original subject is maintained but transmuted through my body, first through my fingertips in an initial woodland encounter, and later in the studio, through the movement of my arm and brush. From the conception of an idea to the completion of a painting, my subjects and I perform this “disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling” typical of Haraway’s cyborgs (1). In this coupling, I produce what could be called a natural fiction. When a physical exchange is not possible or appropriate, such as with fauna, I engage with what I can see or hear: the strange knowing in a hare’s amber eyes, the almost violent beating of a raven’s wings. These material realities fuel my imaginings.

A Strange Sort of Midwifery

In the woods, sensory experiences act like tracks in the undergrowth, leading me, not toward a destination, but toward questions. What does the hare know? Where is the raven going? The answers are nonsensical, dismembered: something about the waning moon, *amanita muscaria*, leaves crunching underfoot. They linger in my mind’s eye when I return home, an assemblage of both seen and imagined images. Sometimes the images couple and make themselves known to me, forming a strange but complete new whole, though more often I must coax the cyborg into being. Either way, I begin by following the tracks I have observed: the way my stomach dropped when a raven’s croak cut through the air or the scent of pine needles warmed by the sun. Meditating on what shapes and colours those sensations evoke, I comb through the library of reference photos that I have amassed during my walks and begin to digitally collage them, adding additional found imagery as needed.

The hours and days that I spend creating collages are imbued with a sense of the mythic. In all their disparate imagery, the collages act as hybrid creatures. The sense of completeness or "rightness" I that I seek through them is ghostly and ungraspable. In her novel, *The Drowning Girl*, Caitlin Kiernan writes that "[h]auntings are memes, especially pernicious thought contagions, social contagions that need no viral or bacterial host and are transmitted in a thousand different ways. A book, a poem, a song, a bedtime story [...]" (12). Her words suggest that ideas can haunt, a sentiment that I see mirrored in this process. Over a period of days, weeks, or months, the collage is completed; a skeleton, lovely and monstrous, to later be fleshed out in paint.

Oil paint can continually be handled when wet, the painting shifting infinitely as a result. During this liminal stage of the process, the medium is perfectly suited to hauntings; like a subtle, spectral presence, it evades a fixed form. A slight flick of the wrist and a flower will blur into something unrecognizable, there but not there, like God or the feeling of being watched. In *The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy*, art critic and historian, Isabelle Graw, attributes the vitality or "ghostly presence" felt within paintings directly to the trace of the artist's hand (80). I believe that the ghost is already there, waiting. The spectre of the painting always first encounters me in the woods. It gets tangled in my hair with the leaves and twigs and I take it home unknowingly. Days later, it presents itself, causing flitting forms and flashing colours to linger at the periphery of my vision. The spectre gets noisier as I paint. *Move the sunflower to the right. Red petals, not yellow. I told you, red.* Usually, I listen. Sometimes, I negotiate. Just as a saint awaits offerings from petitioners in their time of need, painting demands a material investment from the practitioner. Panels are sanded, covered in oil

ground, and sanded again. Brushes are swirled in solvent and scrubbed in scalding water until the last trace of colour no longer bleeds onto the drying rag. This labour gives physical form to the intangible.

Bringing the ghost of an idea into the world, incarnated in a body of wood and paint, is a strange sort of midwifery. After a few days of intensive work, I find that I am unable to leave my studio without colour caked under my nails or streaked on my arms and face. A glob of paint will land somewhere inconspicuous, under another tube or along the edge of my utility cart. I will skirt against it or touch it while looking for other colours. Then, as I brush a strand of hair from my face or reach for the door handle, I spread it like a contagion. On more than one occasion I have emerged from a state of deep concentration only to find alizarin crimson mysteriously smeared all over my studio, on my hands and right elbow. Painting is a bloody endeavour. It marks my body as my body marks the panel. As such, it feels like a sort of ritual exchange, a form of witchcraft even. In her graphic novel, *Witchbody*, visual artist, Sabrina Scott, writes that “Witchcraft knowledge is body knowledge. A re-integration of knowing. It is thinking with a body. Experimenting with a body. Feeling with a body. Learning with a body. Witchcraft is the act of saying hello. Speaking back to ones who speak with us” (2). The more I paint, the deeper my body’s knowledge of how to achieve the illusion of texture becomes. I do not think about rendering the softer neck feathers of a raven differently than I would that of its wings. I simply do it. My body knows to adjust the length of the stroke, the weight of the mark. My hand speaks to the raven in light and shadow, and the raven speaks back through its solidifying presence. In the quiet lilt of this conversation, the boundaries between myself and the subject I am painting blur. We become entangled.

A Fluidity of Form

The word “entangled” brings to mind all manners of woodland imagery: a bramble thicket or twigs in a nest, forming a whole. Feminist theorist Karen Barad writes that:

[t]o be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (ix).

In my experience, painting is not an individual affair either. As I have previously illustrated, my paintings are informed by the more-than-human beings whom I encounter in my environment. The idea of an “entangled intra-relating” evokes the constant state of becoming and undoing that occurs when I am collecting imagery for my paintings, and when my brush finally meets the panel (ix). My method of working is both additive and subtractive. Colours are glazed on top of one another, some layers left to dry completely, others wiped away to leave only the faintest residue. From these layers, an image, populated by flora, fauna, and fungi emerges. The emergence is messy and porous. Though my hand marks the surface, I do not feel that I am alone in deciding what gesture occurs next. I am informed by the formal elements of the painting, but also by something distinctly less tangible. It exists within and without me. It is the spectre of the

painting, the shapeshifter. The one who evades definition, is both a metaphor and not. It speaks through me, through the painting back to me, and later, to the viewer.

Painting is a practice of porosity. When immersed in this practice, I have the impression of being completely permeable, unbound to a single form or time. The spectres of my paintings coax remnants from the past into the present. During the first year of graduate school, I found myself deeply drawn to *The Night Battles*, a book by the historian Carlo Ginzburg. In this book, Ginzburg consults primary sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to investigate the history of an Italian agricultural cult called the *benandanti*. The souls of the *benandanti* were believed to part from their bodies at night, to battle witches for the fertility of the crops (2). Peasant testimonies describe them as riding hares, cats, and other animals to these battles. Or rather, riding spirits which had taken these animal forms (3). Some *benandanti* even claimed that human souls manifested as butterflies, so no transport was needed (104). Something about the texture of these testimonies was intimately familiar to me. It was as though I could feel the sensation of flying, deep in the memory of my bone marrow. The origins of this sensation are not necessarily ancestral in nature. Rather, they come from painting, an act which allows me to shed my skin and shift forms.

II

Seeing Beyond Sight

An Invisible Salience

Throughout my childhood, rural Italian folklore mixed with Catholic doctrine, creating a terrifying but magical reality. I was raised with the belief that inside every person was something invisible called a soul, and that the dead could intercede in the material world. This was reiterated by my grandmother's insistence that leaving a candle burning for her late husband day and night throughout the entire month of November was a natural part of the season turning. I knew that there were modes of seeing beyond sight. There was a prickling at the back of my neck that sometimes occurred during prayer, a fluttering in my stomach; the sudden, inexplicable smell of cigarettes and gasoline, which always brought my grandfather's shapeless form to mind. The idea of spirit has never been strange to me, so it came naturally to believe in other invisible things that could dwell among us, unnoticed: elves and goblins in the woods, a troll, hungry for flesh, in the creek. When I was 10, a friend and I built a fort by a fallen tree, in the hopes of glimpsing such fantastical creatures. We never did, but it was enough to see a fox slinking through the grass, a hare paused in the clearing. Observing the fauna made it feel like we had also seen the mythical creatures that we initially sought. To us, they became one and the same.



Fig. 1, John Everett Millais, *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*, oil on canvas, 26 X 20 inches, 1850.

This melding between the world of the corporeal and that of myth is something that I observe in Victorian fairy painting, a genre which I was extremely drawn to as a child. During the Victorian period, advancements in the invention of the microscope correlated with an increased interest in the idea of miniature worlds (Forsberg 640). These worlds of insects and

microbes were invisible to the human eye, similar to the invisible world of fairies. Laura Forsberg, an expert on Victorian literature and culture, writes: “Rather than opposing one another, scientific discoveries and fairy fictions reinforced each other’s imaginative appeal. By combining scientific observation with fanciful imagination, both the fairy and the microscope produce a sense of wonder” (640). Many fairy painters used this scientific advancement to aid in depicting the natural world. John Everett’s Millais’ *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (1849-1850) (fig. 1) was applauded by critics for its inclusion of twenty different types of grass, which they described as having been rendered with “a microscopic elaboration” (641). This component of the painting received more attention than the supernatural figures within it. As such, a keen commitment to naturalistic study characterizes the genre of fairy painting just as much as its fictional elements do. The way that both elements were illustrated to appear equally convincing mirrored my own experience of reality, where for better or for worse, the unseen was just as salient as the visible.

The Gift of Fairy Tales

The subject of the fairy tale is one of extraordinary breadth. There is notable research published on its anthropological, psychological, and historical significance. Its influence on my own work, however, is less tidily categorized. I resonate with Lewis Hyde's reflection on the subject in *The Gift*. He writes that:

the gifts in fairy tales may, at one level, refer to real property, but at another they are images in the psyche and their story describes for us a

spiritual or psychological commerce. In fact, although I offer many accounts of gift exchange in the real world, my hope is that these accounts, too, can be read at several levels, that the real commerce they tell about stands witness to the invisible commerce through which the gifted come to profess their gifts, and we to receive them (xxxvi).

The idea of a spiritual or psychological exchange mirrors my experience of the painting process, as described in the previous section, "Monstrous Transformations." The result of this commerce is a fully materialized image. The spectre of the painting's capacity to haunt ensures, and sometimes coerces, the work's completion. There are heirlooms bestowed to us that we do not ask for, ancestral woods we would rather not walk. Still, we proceed, achingly aware of our connection to the other, like a bruise that spreads from skin to skin. The imagery in my paintings very rarely describes a specific story or myth. Rather, it is the pervasively murky and magical aspect of the fairy tale genre that I carry with me.

My paintings combine an approach of intense observation with visual fictionalization. Ravens nest on an impossibly large mushroom, a fox stands on its hind-legs and presses a flower to its side. For this reason, my work is often linked to a history of illustration. This is so much the case that toward the end of the second semester of my MFA, an academic suggested that I should consider whether I wanted "to be a contemporary artist or a children's book illustrator." The fairy tale has always been associated with women and children. It is also linked to the peasant class, many of whom, like my grandparents, were impoverished and toiling the land for survival in rural areas (Zipes 24-25). In these areas, where many trappings of industrialization

and modernity had not quite reached, the more harrowing aspects of folklore were kept alive (Silver 45). Much of this folklore functioned as “warnings that nature was filled with modes of being that were not human modes, with forces that were usually indifferent, often hostile and sinister, sometimes truly evil” (Silver 81). Considering these associations, it comes as no surprise that visual media which carries a similar aesthetic sensibility to traditional fairy tale illustration would be dismissed by some as devoid of substance. Similar to the Victorian painters whose work was fueled by growing unrest due to industrialization, my artwork is being produced amidst a time of environmental upheaval. The deeply connective worldview which I explored in “Monstrous Transformations,” and which I will continue to elaborate upon, is intertwined with the subject of magic, folklore, and nature. These topics are interrelated, and in no way incompatible with an engagement in contemporary concerns.

In the painting, *Sun Eater* (fig. 2), a barn owl is perched on a tree trunk, and a mountainscape full of pines is visible in the background. Trapped in its talons like a dead mouse is a sunflower, to which a single moth flutters. The owl and sunflower seem to be lit from within. This surreal lighting choice was inspired by the Dutch artist, Otto Marseus Van Schrieck (1613-1678). Known for his *sottobosco* paintings, the lighting in his work also seems to be entirely dissonant. This may signal to the viewer that the space which they are entering is liminal, both of this world and not. I am drawn to discordant lighting in my own work for this reason. When writing about seventeenth century Dutch paintings, art historian, Svetlana Alpers states that “[t]he problem faced by a modern viewer is how to make this art strange, how to see what is special about an art with which we feel so at home, whose pleasures seem so obvious” (xxii). Thinking about the ways in which my paintings were dismissed as too childish, too easy to look at, I redirected Alpers question toward my own work. *How* is it strange, how does it evoke

something beyond the sum of its parts, despite its whimsical and illustrative quality? I believe that the answer lies in the enchanted gaze through which it is painted.



Fig. 2, *Sun Eater*, oil on panel, 40 X 48 inches, 2023.

A Sense of the Uncanny

During my final summer at the Morgan Arboretum, the ferns cast a spell on me. I have been accused of being obsessive on more than one occasion, and for those few months, my attention was firmly fixed on those beings who curled like lace from the earth. I was fascinated by the way they seemed to play a game of hide and seek with my vision. At a distance, they were a sea of vague, swaying forms. Up close, each leaf jutting from the stem was composed of a myriad of tinier ones. I could not scrutinize more than one fern at once without them blending again. It was like they were dancing dizzying reels, or my gaze was. When I began working on the first painting for my thesis exhibition, *A Season for Reaping* (fig.3), I kept that experience in mind. I knew the painting had to fall apart in places. Every fern could not be exactly rendered, as I would have been tempted to do in the past. Analyzing my reference photo, I chose to flatten the ferns by painting them with a largely consistent tonal value. Rather than using light to depict volume in the form, I drew in texture. The visual vocabulary of drawing is present through my line work. In some areas of *A Season for Reaping*, it is only these lines that shine through layers of dark green glaze. In other areas, they fall into darkness entirely.

The fox in *A Season for Reaping* stands on his hind legs and presses a jimsonweed flower to his side. His stance mirrors that of a grim reaper, gripping a scythe. The jimsonweed is splattered with red markings. The contrast of the cool white of the petals and that patterning is stark, almost jolting. This would never occur in nature. I fictionalized the flower, adding red to

its petals to emphasize its toxicity. This way, a correlation can be found between the white and red of the jimsonweed, and the red and white of the fly agaric mushrooms which circle the fox. The viewer's eye is drawn between the two elements, forming a connection due to the colouring, if not the deadly toxicity, that they share. The darkness which pervades the painting eats at the fox's chest and stomach, so that, upon closer inspection, it is unclear whether he is in fact holding the flower, or the flower is piercing him. This ambiguity, paired with the unfocused gaze of his eyes and slight smirk of his snout, imbues the painting with a sense of the uncanny. As the viewer proceeds to move on from the painting, they might notice the slightest glint of grey in the upper left corner of the panel. There, a raven is perched, presiding over the scene.



Fig. 3, *A Season for Reaping*, oil on panel, 40 X 48 inches, 2022

Detail as Device

Another two ravens are depicted in *Untitled (Raven Painting)* (fig. 4). They nest within an impossibly large mushroom. Areas where the pictorial plane is almost entirely black provide a point of tension against the startling red of the *amanita muscaria*. As they are one of the focal points of the image, I rendered the mushrooms to seem as though they are emerging from the panel. Days were spent laying in the various tonal values of the gills. Special attention was also paid to the fallen trunk in the foreground of the painting. Its texture was exaggerated in its rendering, as it provides an anchor in a pictorially nonsensical space. In his book, *All Art is Ecological*, Timothy Morton writes that “beauty gives you a fantastic ‘impossible’ access to the inaccessible, to the withdrawn, open quality of things, their mysterious reality” (4). This is the function I hope for the more detailed areas of my painting to carry out in my work.

A careful attention to rendering juxtaposed against looser mark making is what I regard as beautiful in my own paintings. It grounds them faintly in reality, yet carries the mysterious, illusory quality that two-dimensional artworks, aiming to evoke a three-dimensional world, always do. Attention to detail is a device that I use not only as a method of honouring the subjects of my paintings, but also of ensuring that despite their iconic nature, they feel specific and thus evocative of reality. I made the mistake of rendering one of the background *amanita muscaria* in a generic manner before realizing this. Without referencing any photos, the form I ended up with was that of the prototypical mushroom: perfectly rounded, lacking any real texture to the surface, and thus completely devoid of interest. The result rang hollow, and I chose to begin again. The strangeness of the paintings, and thus the beauty, comes out in the specificity of

the beings that populate them; just as the “mysterious reality” of the woods is made up of individual, unique specimens, interacting with each other.



Fig. 4, *Untitled (Raven Painting)*, oil on panel, 40 X 48 inches, 2023.

An Offering

I have been asked before, whether I considered my paintings to be windows into other worlds. Scholar of fairy tales, Jack Zipes, writes that “the world of the fairy tale has always been created as a *counter-world* to the reality of the storyteller by the storyteller and listeners” (14). I prefer the idea of a counter-world, or alternate world, because it suggests a capacity to shift our current reality through fabulation, rather than escaping it altogether. My paintings are fictions in that I have staged the subjects. They are natural, or organic, in that the images are a result of my own very real, embodied woodland wanderings. Somewhere between these two polarities lives the spectre of the painting. Scientist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, posits that “[p]aying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart” (222). I sometimes wonder if the spectre is just that, the living world speaking to me in a language I can understand, but which defies any grammatical form. To hear its words demands a radical attentiveness on my part. My translations, illustrated in paint, may seem more fantastical to some than others.

I see roadkill where there is a wilting sunflower, a reaper where there is a fox. My gaze is informed by my upbringing. One of ghosts, fairy tales, silent threats, and silent understandings. The paintings are silent too, regarding their stories. The writing I have provided for the works is descriptive, rather than narrative. In other words, the viewer has access to the same information that I do when “reading” the paintings. Returning to the question of how my art can be strange, despite its obvious aesthetic pleasures, I am reminded of a verse from the poet Percy Shelley (1792-1822). He writes that mushrooms are “pale, fleshy, as if the decaying dead, with a spirit of

growth, had been animated” (Lawrence 7). His words are tools of description. In this case, he evokes a sense of something fundamentally rotten emerging from the earth. My tools are colour, light, and mark. They mirror my gaze and are capable of creating an equally evocative result. I suppose then, a better question is “How is my gaze strange?” in the face of modernity. The answer is as follows: I choose to be ensorcelled by the world around me. It is an offering I give for the privilege of being here.

III

Transgressive Timelines

Mourning the Ephemeral

As children, my little sisters and I would spend most of our summers with our grandparents. Behind my Nonna Sinetta's property was a field that bordered a busy street. From June to early October, it was covered in what my mother called weeds, but what I insisted were wildflowers. Nonna Sinetta would let us pick them indiscriminately. It was deliciously dizzying: the humid Montreal air, the hum of insects and passing cars, the stalks of grass growing taller than me so that the little plot of land might as well have been an entire forest. Basket and scissors in hand, she would walk with us, singing, "*Andiamo andiamo a spasso, il lupo sta dormendo*" *Let's go, let's go for a walk, the wolf is sleeping*. The creatures which preyed in the shadowy depths of our lineage were very much human. For this reason, the wolf I pictured napping amongst the dandelions was an enchanted one, more man than beast.

Enchantment is darting, flitting. It exists in my grandmother's garden, when the deep pink roses transition from the peak of vibrancy into decay, their petals thinning and wrinkling like the skin on her knuckles. Bulgarian-French philosopher, Julia Kristeva, explores the coexistence of darkness, pain, and beauty in her book, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. She asks "Can the beautiful be sad? Is beauty inseparable from the ephemeral and hence from mourning? Or else is the beautiful object the one that tirelessly returns following destructions and wars in order to bear witness that there is survival after death, that immortality is possible?"

(97-98). The relationship between the ephemeral and mourning speaks to my own urge to obsessively depict flora and fauna. Like us, these are fallible beings who undergo natural processes of death and decay. These processes are expedited on a mass scale by climate change and deforestation. In third grade, my teacher informed us that by 2015 Canada would be entirely submerged under water. While Ms. Lucy's prophecy has proven to be false, from that day forward my relationship with the woods was tinged by a sense of loss, and thus nostalgia. At its worst, this fear manifested in fits of restless panic and total helplessness. At its best, it coaxed me to observe the world around me with a resolved intensity. I wanted to memorize its colours and textures before it was gone for good. Though a sense of anxiety is rarely present in my work, I continue this habit of close-looking.

Clashing Temporalities

Human anxieties, as well as reveries, have been entwined with the woods long before the anthropocene (Harrison 2). In the past, women with the empty gazes so characteristic of clinical depression were sometimes thought to have been abducted by faeries. A man might tell his neighbour that his wife was "away" even as she continued to hang the washing, for all the village to see. It was understood that she was there in body only. Her soul was in the woods, with the fey (Silver 169). There, she might dance for what feels to her like hours. Meanwhile, in the human world, years passed, and her bodily shell crumbled with age. I have been "away" before. The parallels between madness and atemporality continue to haunt my practice as a result. Like cultural theorist, Mieke Bal, I refer to it as "madness" rather than a specific mental illness, to circumvent "the clinical terms that pin people down not only to a diagnosis but also to a course

of treatment” (50). Bal states, “We can learn from madness - its structural properties, which include a fundamentally anachronistic experience of time” (51). I was struck by Bal’s choice to include the motif of medieval fools in her own video-based exhibition, *Landscapes of Madness*. The fools were “not presented as ‘historically correct’ but as people whose temporality clashes with our time” (53). The idea of clashing temporalities carries a bite to it, a metallic taste and weight that aptly expresses the feeling of isolation and otherness that so often comes with a diagnosis, or long precedes it.



Fig. 5, *Strega*, oil on panel, 40 X 48 inches, 2023

Madness notwithstanding, I have always felt that my own temporality clashed with the dominant timeline. In the painting, *Strega* (fig. 5), a horned owl soars through the night sky, gripping a limp sunflower in her talons. The owl's open beak suggests that she is screeching, and her eyes glint an almost unnatural hue of yellow. This painting was inspired by my grandfather. He is convinced that a witch tried to steal him from his mother's arms when he was an infant. I was shocked when he told me. Not at the story but at the frankness of his delivery. Aside from the world of saints and our ancestral dead, my family speaks of the paranormal using strictly veiled language. Naturally, I prompted him for more information. What did the *strega* look like? How did she get in? He told me that his mother felt the witch's hand brush her arm as they slept. Regarding how the intrusion occurred, and the witch's appearance, he said only that "she took the shape of wind and entered through the window." In other words, the witch was perceived more so than seen, like a movement in your periphery, or the suggestion of being observed. In *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Professor of Film and Media Studies, Bliss Cua Lim, writes that:

The ethical, political, and scholarly stakes of a temporal critique of the fantastic are much like the problems posed by gods and spirits to the writing of history: the real issue is not so much belief but rather ways of recognizing and translating a plurality of worlds and times, while resisting the tendency to refuse supernaturalisms, or their supposedly superstitious adherents, contemporaneity (21).

My work engages in a critique of modernity's progressivist notions of time by embracing this plurality of worlds. My grandfather's conviction in the existence of his *strega*, as well as countless other folk beliefs, are remnants of a pre-industrial age. They are real to him, and on some level, they are real to me too.

Answers in the Undergrowth

“*Let’s go, let’s go for a walk, the wolf is sleeping.*” In hindsight, Nonna Sinetta’s rhyme implies a sense of urgency. What happens when the wolf wakes up? How far will we be able to travel while he still sleeps? Throughout my MFA degree, I have found myself plagued by similar questions. Studio time so often felt stolen. There was a nagging thought in the back of my mind that perhaps it would be best to focus on one wolf at a time: the next reading, presentation, paper, migraine, tragedy. In *Fermentation*, writer and researcher, Gabriel Levine, quotes feminist writer, Rebecca Solnit, as having said that “understanding the pleasures of knitting or weeding or making pickles might articulate the value of that world outside electronic chatter and distraction, and inside a more stately sense of time” (209). I understood the value of that “stately sense of time,” the peace which being fully engaged in the process of making brings. I knew that it was possible for the studio to act as a container, for time to move in entirely different and satisfying ways when I stopped trying to grip it so tightly. I just could not silence the chatter of my own anxieties for long enough to get there. I was fixated on the idea of linearly progressing through the paintings. A setback felt like time wasted, as opposed to a natural part of a cycle.

Despite the seemingly constant buzz of my own mental chatter, the woods continued to feel atemporal to me. The fact that the woods in question were in the middle of North York, with trash littered between the trees and the sound of traffic roaring faintly in the background, made no difference. In her book, *The Forest and the Eco-Gothic*, scholar of English Literature and Popular Culture, Elizabeth Parker, argues that the woods are a setting in which our myths play out indefinitely. “The forest is where Little Red Riding Hood *met* with her wolf, and is the space in which she *meets* him still” (38). There is a connection between the atemporal nature of the fairy-tale wood, and the anachronistic sense of time which Mieke Bal associates with madness. Fairy-tale time, in its cyclicity, is transgressive. It challenges capitalist ideas of linear progress which have contributed to environmental destruction (Tsing 1). I knew that I had imposed that same notion of progress onto my artwork. The question became how to let that go. There would always be other deadlines looming ahead. How could I stay with the work, without making demands of it? I turned my gaze toward the undergrowth, and the mushroom therein, for answers.

I have always found mushrooms to exude an eerily arresting presence, as though they themselves were mythical beings, recently escaped from the pages of a storybook. Wandering across a panel with a brush in hand and getting an unexpected result can feel very similar to walking in the woods and discovering mushrooms where there were none before. This feeling of surprise is not possible when I regard myself to be the sole author of the painting, spending hours with my nose an inch away from the panel and willing a transformation to occur. In this state of stubborn fixation, I do not consider the painting as a whole. There is such a difference between trudging through the woods in search of a specific specimen and being motivated by the desire to

walk for its own sake; only to stumble across something lovely and unforeseen as you wander. Likewise, painting with the goal of progress in mind, always results in barren ground. Viewing it as a collaboration between the subjects of the painting, that elusive spectre, and myself yields a more resonant result.

Breathing, Shifting, Fruiting

What the Hare Knows depicts a hare paused amidst a grouping of mushrooms. She looks toward the viewer, aware of their presence. A chanterelle buds, flower-like, from the earth, leaning toward the hare as if drawn to her. Other various species are present too, impossibly close together. The time is unclear, the sky glowing with an orange dusk, and the moon already present. Death's Head moths flutter amidst the growing dark. In her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist, Anna Tsing, asks "How do gatherings sometimes become "happenings," that is, greater than the sum of their parts?" (23). I think about the intrinsic qualities of the paintings that I make: light, form, colour, mark. All of these are the ghosts of my own hand. When they gather, their united presence allows the hare, mushrooms, and moths to emerge. Up until beginning *What the Hare Knows*, this gathering was mediated very carefully. I would painstakingly lay down an underpainting, so that light and texture came first, then colour. With *What the Hare Knows*, I shared as much visual information as I could in one coat, rather than purposely staggering the steps. This allowed the intrinsic qualities of the paintings to interact more immediately, and with greater abandon. Like a network of mycelia spanning for miles underground, they communicated, activating one another, allowing fruiting bodies of fungi

to sprout in new and unexpected ways. Finally, my racing thoughts were silenced. I was wandering again, across the panel, through an atemporal wood.



Fig. 6, *What the Hare Knows*, oil on panel, 40 X 48 inches, 2023.

While producing my thesis exhibition, a peer asked me why I had abandoned a painting in progress, to which I simply replied “It died.” The spectre had left it. She shrugged, “Paintings are dead once they’re finished anyways.” When I asked her what she meant, she explained that the still quality of paintings lead her to this conclusion. Unlike video or performance art, they are seemingly fixed. I believe that my paintings invite a lingering gaze due to their beauty or “mysterious reality” (Morton 4). The lingering gaze’s “temporal element is duration” (Han 86). Therefore, despite their stillness, paintings require a durational engagement from the viewer. My mark making can act as path through which the viewer’s gaze either accelerates or slows as they explore a painting’s imagery. They might rush through nearly black areas of the paintings, then stumble across a detail and stop in their tracks. I noticed that this was the case with the raven in *A Season for Reaping* (fig. 3). As viewers were about to turn away, they would spot the raven’s plumage glinting in the treetop and be drawn back into the work. The surface quality of the paintings only heightens this effect. Sealed with a gloss varnish, they are imbued with a precious luster. The resulting shine requires that viewers actively engage with the objects to see their contents. There is no guarantee that the intricacies of the image will be revealed at a glance, just as the forest floor may not openly display its treasures.

The impact of the lingering gaze is exemplified in an exchange I had with my primary supervisor, Michel Daigneault. One October morning, we were sitting in my studio, quietly observing *Until the Fever Breaks* (fig. 7). “That leaf right there” he said, pointing to the large sunflower toward the left of the painting “it looks like a body. Well, it doesn’t *look* like a body. But it feels like one.” I instantly understood what he meant. The leaf had felt sensual to paint. I

took great pleasure in the way that light and shadow met to create folds in the form. It seemed fitting that a body would somehow be evoked as a result. For a moment after I registered his words though, the limp body hanging from the stem seemed to turn the entire flower into a crucifix. Reflecting on that series of transformations, I am reminded of how paintings have the capacity to stimulate both the mundane gaze and our mind's eye. They act as enchanted objects, breathing, shifting. On countless occasions I have been asked what I want my paintings to *do* — to the viewer, in the world. I want them to live. That is all.



Fig. 7, *Until the Fever Breaks*, oil on panel, 40 X 48 inches, 2023.

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