

Susan Askew

The Museum of Human Violence

Book One: History of an Idea

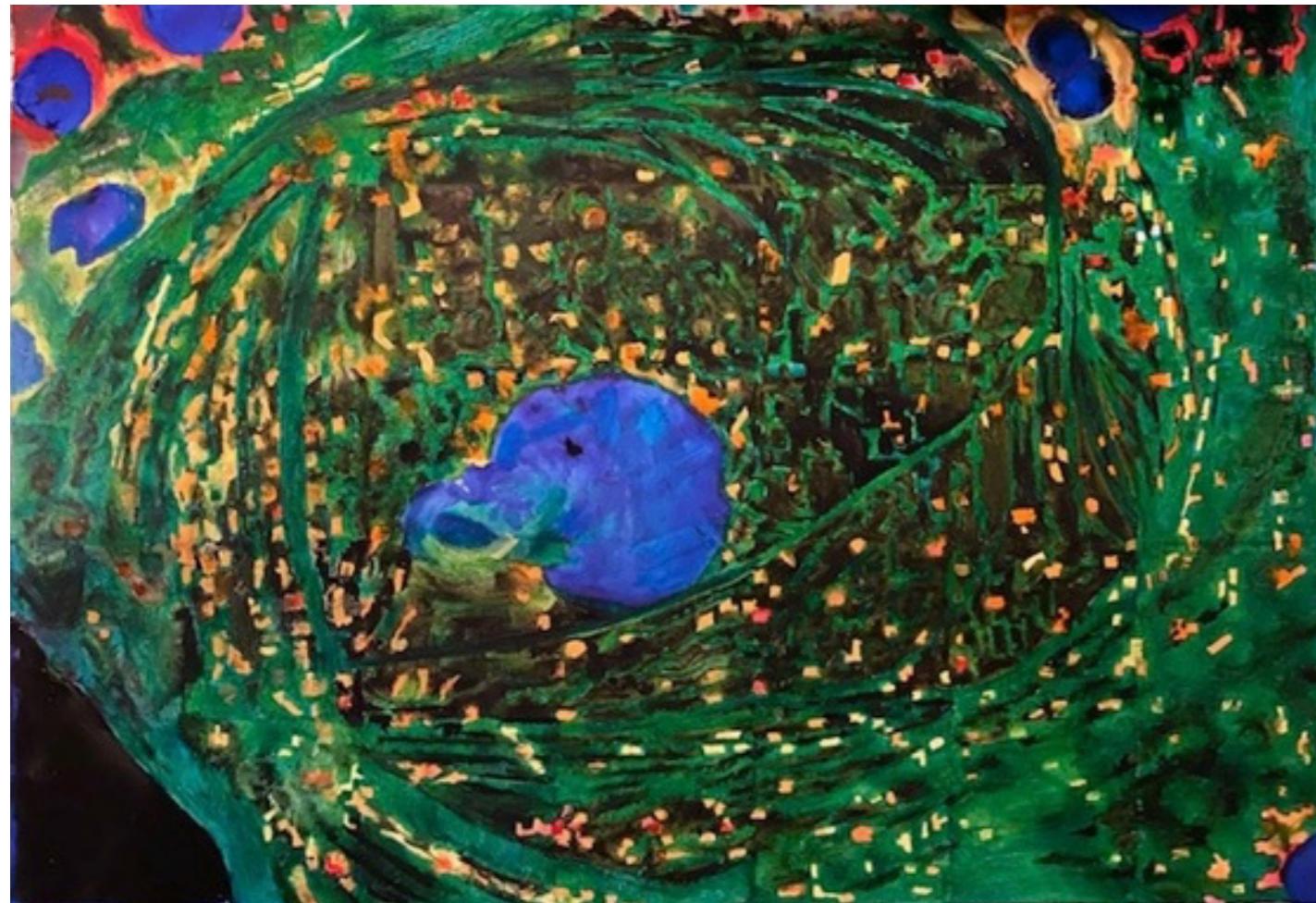
- Research Question
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- Context

All images, used in this project are made by Susan Askew, except in the section in this book (Book 1) on contexts, where others' works are attributed. Images were mages during the year in which this project was the focus, apart from those on the 'posters' for the Galleries, which repurpose drawings made before its start.



Non human and human epithelial cells. Drawings made with biro on PLIKE. A4

I view violence toward other animals as arising from human exceptionalism, so I thought that an exploration of the similarities between other animals and humans might be a useful focus: in this case similar cell structure in the kidneys of humans and pigs. I did not want to reproduce violence in my making - I see a violent response to violence as compounding the problem. (see quote from Weheliye, 2014 in 'Works that Inspire'). I quickly realised that while the image of the human cell was probably taken with the individual's consent, this was not the case with the pig cell, and the pig had likely been killed in order to take the photograph that I based my work on. This makes this early work ethically problematic..



Imagination is..'the capacity to reconnect, to bring together that which is separate.' (John Berger, 2009. 'Why Look At Animals. p. 52. London: Penguin).

Visual Art is about looking/seeing. My enquiries relate to those things that we are taught not to 'see' - where no amount of looking helps, because of the beliefs we are taught by the major institutions, from childhood.

Trinh T. Minh-ha (2016) writes:

'Invisibility is built into each instance of visibility and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle. The two are inseparable, for each is the condition for the advent of the other.'

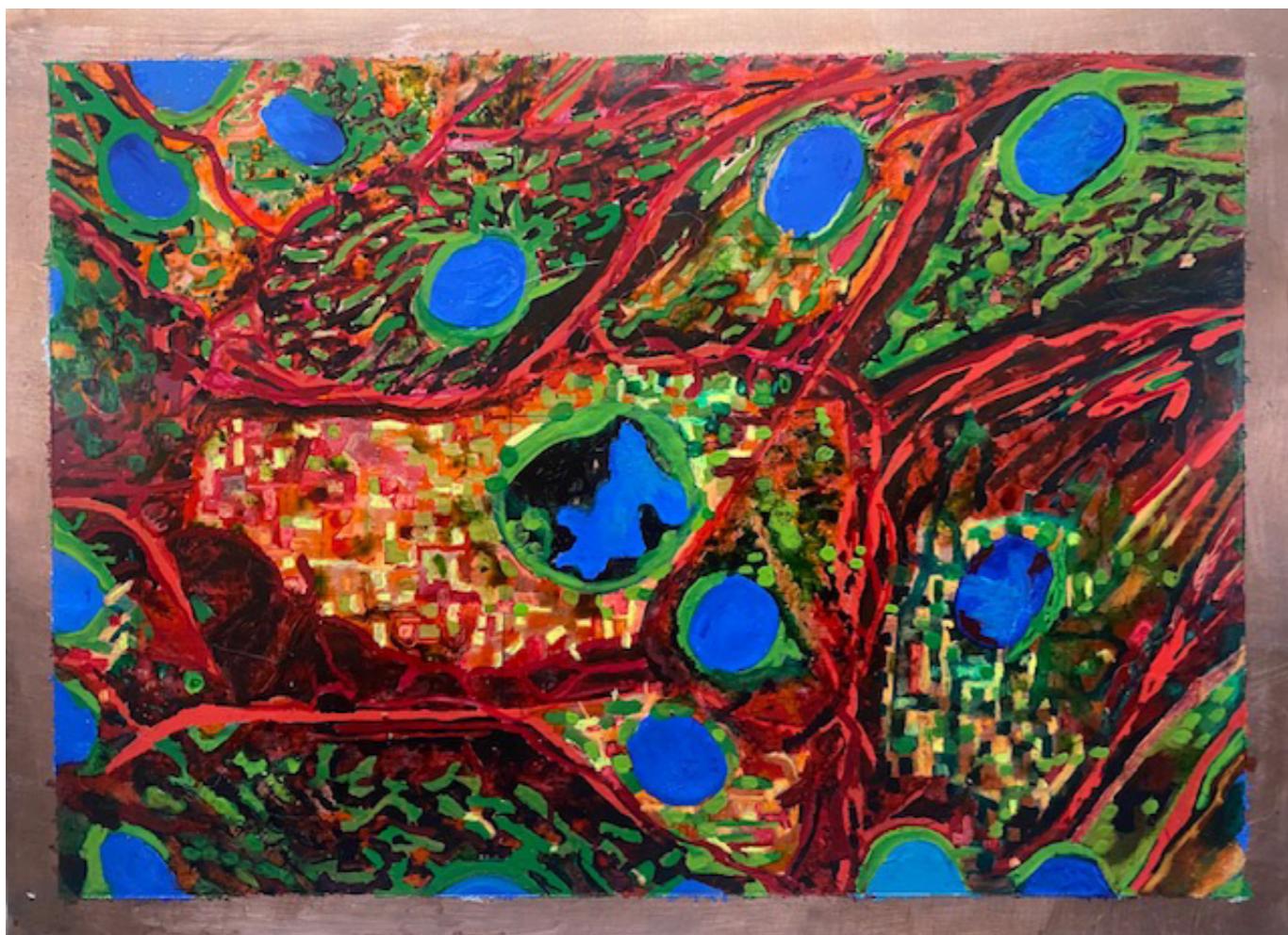
I am concerned with this tension between visibility and invisibility and in how I can question dominant discourses. My focus is the marginalised; no-one is so marginalised and invisible in human society as 'other' Nature, and specifically, 'other' animals (Berger, 1977). Our ways of seeing other animals, and the land are constructed through colonising narratives; filtered through iconography that (dis)colours our perceptions of these other animals and land, and makes them invisible as subjects. (I believe that these violent discourses also distort and degrade our relationships with other people and with ourselves).

Cronin and Kramer (2018: 84) argue:

'..the repetition of certain kinds of images creates an iconography of oppression when it comes to the treatment of animals in our contemporary society. Artistic interventions have the potential to interrupt this system.'



Both drawings here are in biro on copper. A5. I wanted to show that human and pig cells are equally beautiful.



The central Research question for current work, therefore, started as:

What can I Learn about how artistic interventions can interrupt the iconography of oppression, objectification, invisibility (as subjects) and discourses of violence, in our society; specifically toward 'other' animals?

I explore drawing as a research method to identify/explore/critique dominant controlling discourses; to try to 'see' differently and make the invisible, visible. I am influenced by Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008); Post- humanism and post-anthropocentric theory (Braidotti, 2021, Haraway, 1988), which questions the assumption of human supremacy over the living world; and importantly for my current work, Critical Animal Studies (Best et al , 2007).

General questions for all my work:

- How can I synthesise social critique with emotional experience?
- How can I synthesise a focus on subject and on process/ materiality?
- How can drawing be used as a research method that contributes to new knowledge (rather than draws on knowledge already in the public sphere) (Simoniti, 2021)?
- How can I bring my drawing into the public sphere and move toward a dialogic practice? (Kester, 'Conversation Pieces' p. 23: dialogic art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is – away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward discursive exchange and negotiation).



I moved to thinking my work could bear witness to those killed by the animal agriculture industry. I made 9 of these small (3 x 3 in) drawings in biro, intending to make bigger portraits. This work is based on found photos of those killed, and my drawings do not seem to take the horror beyond a reminder that they were murdered, and a celebration that they lived. As with the cell drawings, I became concerned about the ethics of drawing murder victims. I began to wonder, too, whether work that focuses on commonly shared experiences may be more useful. .

Rationale

The rationale for this focus on violence to other animals starts from the fact that daily millions of farmed animals are slaughtered. In 2020 (the last year for which I could get accurate figures) 73,162,794,213 cows, chicken, sheep and pigs were murdered. Almost three-quarters of those killed were in the Americas and China. The killing of other animals has increased on every continent except Europe, where it has decreased. (<https://faunalytics.org/global-animal-slaughter-statistics-charts-2022-update/>)

This most fundamental violence is normalised in society. I believe it leads to disassociation from pain and suffering of others. I start with the belief that murder of anyone is wrong.

As well as this, killing, torture, mutilation and cruelty are omnipresent in the farming industry. For example, cows are raped annually and their offspring stolen immediately after birth. Their milk production is kept at a painful and exhausting level. Male chickens are ground alive in the egg industry. Lambs are taken away from their mothers at six months to be slaughtered.

In contemporary art the products of murdered animals are widely used, from gelatin used for sizing paper, to dye's and pigments used in paint and ink. The hair from pigs and squirrels is used to make paint brushes. Additionally dead animals have become 'popular' as taxidermied 'objects' for human spectacle. My first concern is whether mediums I use are cruelty-free, followed by the question of whether they are plastic-free.



In unit two of this work, we were invited to participate in an exhibition of miniatures. I became interested in the idea that very small works ask us to pay attention in a way that perhaps large works do not. It seemed to me that the miniature might challenge us to 'really look', just as we need to 'really look' at the suffering of the other animal .



A series of miniatures, all no more than 10 x 7.5 cm and all biro on plike. The portrait also uses goldleaf and metalpoint.



At this point, I had attended a conference on the importance of objects for colonisation and was thinking about all the objects used for enslaving other animals.

Application

I hope my work contributes in a small way to an ethic of non-violence.

While the ethics of non violence to other beings is the priority, there is substantial evidence of the link between violence toward other animals and violence between humans (see, for example, the National Link Coalition which educates on the link between animal abuse and human violence).

In addition I understand that a plant based diet contributes greatly to a reduction in climate warming , as well as to reduction in deforestation, desertification and other species extinction (see, for example the publication by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, Livestock's Long Shadow: environmental issues and options, 2006 nb. terms such as 'Livestock' should be critiqued).

There is also evidence that a diet based on meat and dairy products is implicated in many human illnesses/diseases (see the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, NHANES).

I began to consider the importance of 'experiments in imagining otherwise' for justice for other animals. The rationale for this is that imagining otherwise is positive and hopeful - it counters the bleak narrative that can paralse action toward change. I made 30 or so collages that are experiments in thinking otherwise about human-non human relationships. Because collage involves tearing and refiguring, it also offers possibilities for deconstructing ideas. Importantly these works repurpose drawings/poetry I made previously of the north yorkshire dales (where I am from), and lead directly to the speculative installation that is **The Museum**



Contexts

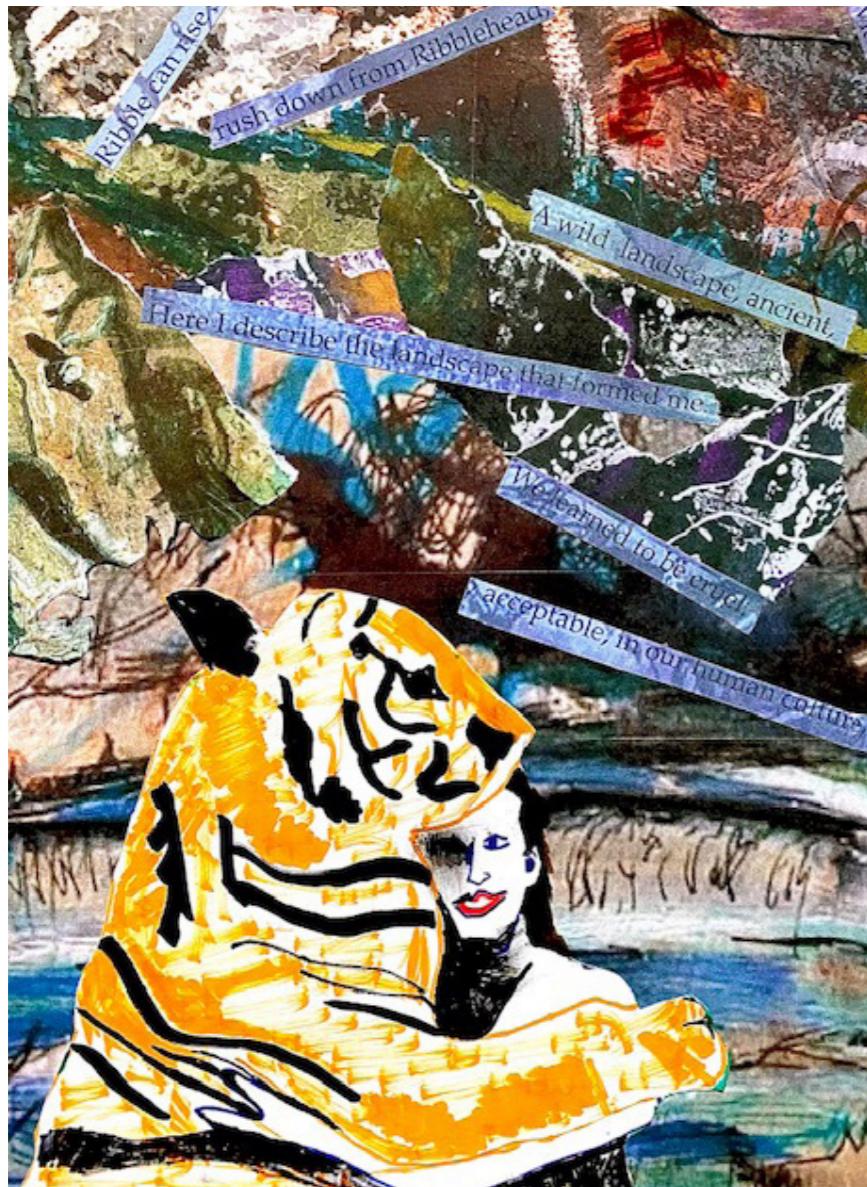
It seems that worldwide we have become more concerned about the impacts of human infrastructure projects on the environment, and non-human life. The Living Planet Report of 2022 reveals a 69% decline in species populations since 1970 - much of it from human causes.

In contemporary art, as I imagine in almost every other discipline, the focus on environmental damage and ecocide has been foregrounded - as I write (August 2023) only last week I visited an exhibition called 'Dear Earth' at the Hayward Gallery. Earlier this year I visited an art exhibiton called 'Science Frictions' in Bilbao, which was inspired by the work of the biologist Lyn Margulis and biologist/philosopher, Donna Haraway. Online there are numerous examples of artists taking this focus, often with a cross-disciplinary approach, for example, Feral Atlas, set up by the anthropologist, Anna Tsing.

These are wonderful and important projects. However I approach them with the question: 'Does the emphasis on non-human life include impacts on other animals, and particularly farmed animals on whom the impacts are arguably the most devastating?'

Surprisingly, non-human animals are often absent in the works I see. For example, in 'Dear Earth' there were only two references to other animals: one a reference to other animals in a painting of the jungle by Daiara Tukano, the other the bird's eye sculpture by Jenny Kendler. Science Frictions is the only exhibition in which I have seen reference to 'farmed animals'. This raises the next question, 'Is our concern for the environment still an anthropocentric one? ie is our concern mostly for its effects on humans and our enjoyment of the landscape?'

There seems to be a gap in contemporary art regarding the relationship of animal justice to other justice issues and ecocide.



Two further examples of collage made from repurposing prior drawings of the North Yorkshire Dales and a poem about my experience growing up there.



Contexts, contd.

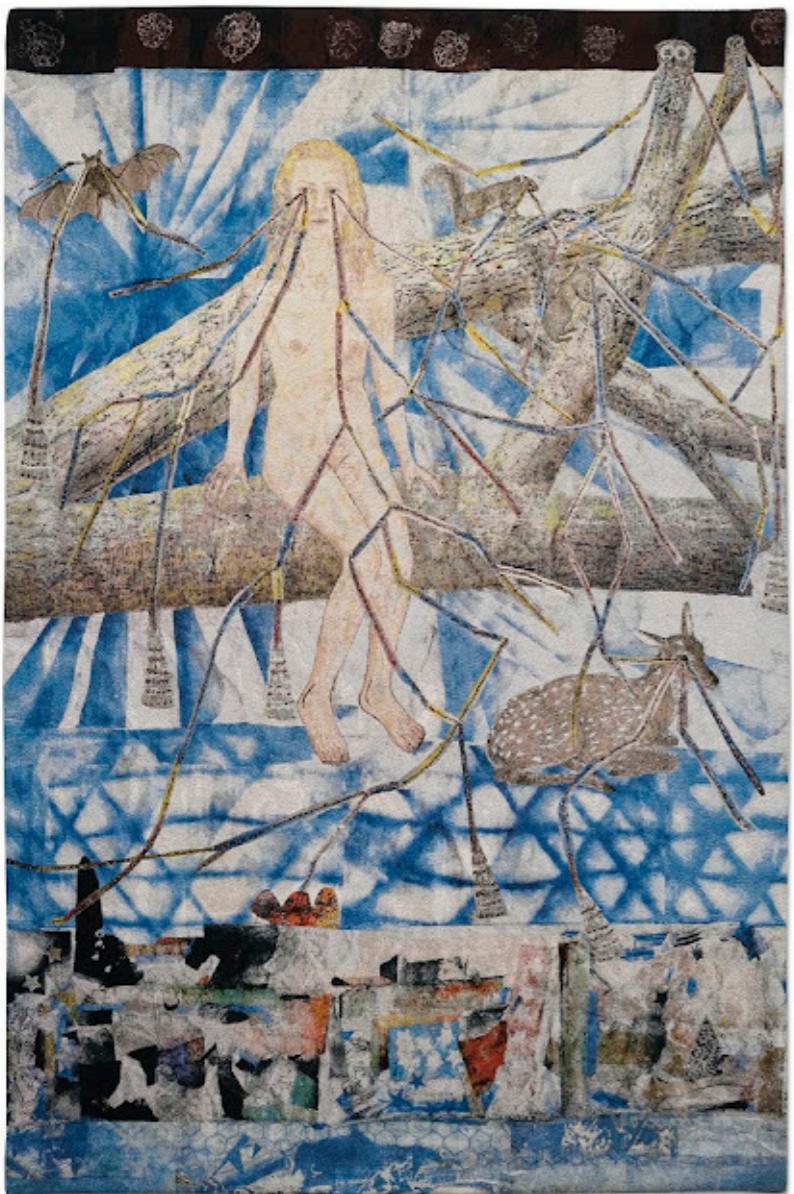
In fact, art focused on ecocide seems slow to recognise that other animals are a hugely important part of the environment, and that we co-habit Earth with them. Instead environmental art, and/or ecojustice art (which are not necessarily the same thing) tends to focus on land, sea, plant, fungi and insect issues.

Strangely, there appears to be an odd silence on the impacts of human infrastructure projects on other animal life, particularly farmed animals. Nor does it appear to be recognised that the issues underpinning violence to other animals are intersectional - that is - they are the same issues confronting all injustices including ecocide, and they stem from anthropocentric, capitalist and colonising views, beliefs and behaviours. These are explored further in the theoretical part of this work.

The remainder of this booklet is focused on some examples of works in both fiction and visual art that either influenced me from the start, or that I came across in my research to find artists working on issues relating to the non-human-human animal relationships.



Above. Maria Berrio. Collage.



Above. Kiki Smith.
Lying down with wolf.

Left. Kiki Smith.
Congress. Tapestry with
cotton.
(I note the use of collage
and textile in these works
since these are materials I
like to work with).

Works that inspire/and/or focus on human relationship with other animals

Given my interest in 'experiments in thinking otherwise' (Olufemi, 2021) and in critiquing discourses, it is perhaps not surprising that I am influenced by science fiction, and particularly science fiction that questions loss of autonomy and freedom of human beings. In this regard, I am interested in 1984 by George Orwell, Brave New World by Aldous Huxley and The Machine Stops, by E.M. Forster. All these books focus on the use of discourse to manipulate people, and remove their personal autonomy/ability to think. I am also interested in feminist science fiction, for example the works of Octavia Butler, which question both human freedom, as well as human (mis)use of other animals. Questioning discourse about other animals is perhaps the most important focus for my work.

In contemporary visual art there are several artists who specifically focus on killing other animals in their work. Often these works show explicit violence. I wonder whether normalised violent images of other animals helps us empathise with them. Braidotti (2022:226) quotes Weheliye (2014:90) who uses the term 'pornotroping' to indicate the 'enactment of black suffering for a shocked and titillated audience'. Braidotti writes:

Avoiding the repetition of that violence while exposing it remains a perennial challenge for the sexualized, racialized and naturalized others, who are constantly 'othered' in the gaze of their oppressors (p.226)

I am more interested in artists who explore an equal and empathetic relationship with other animals. The work of Maria Berrio and Kiki Smith is beautiful in this regard. In my opinion both artists show a deep sensitivity to the lives of other animals. Kiki Smith has made many works that show how the lives of human and non-humans are entwined, as well as made sculptures that show hybrid non-human-human forms. Both artist might be argued to take an intersectional approach focusing on both gender and animal issues.



Sunaura Taylor. 2014. Self portrait with Manatee. oil on paper. 10 x 14 in.
Taylor argues that in order to stop treating other animals as exploitable things we need to deepen our relationship with them in a non-ownership context.



Rocky Lewycky. Genocide: Is It Necessary? Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History. 2014. Ceramics. Gold leaf plinth. When the sculptures are smashed we see they are glazed inside with bright red.



Haapoja and Gustafsson.
The Museum of Cattle.
See interview with Haapoja:
<https://www.collectorsagenda.com/en/in-the-studio/>

Context, contd

Sunaura Taylor is a visual artist who takes an explicit intersectionalist approach. Taylor is particularly sensitive to the inequalities both 'other animals' and people with disabilities are subjected to, and she explores a delicate, empathetic relationship between non-human and human.

There has been a recent 'Animal Turn' (see Elias, 2019) in Art, as in other disciplines. This often sees artists working with researchers from other disciplines in a study of what is described as 'collaborative' human-non human artworks. I remain to be convinced that this is either collaborative or post-anthropocentric, since collaboration requires humans and non-humans to agree the same goal.

As my work continued on its trajectory toward installation and fictioning (see books 2-4) I searched for visual artists using these methods. For example, Lewycky, combines installation/performance: he makes turkeys from clay - each day he enters the gallery with the intention of smashing one of his works - unless a member of the audience contribute to an animal charity to save it. Another example is the installation 'Museum of Cattle', by Terike Haapoja, and Laura Gustafsson, who tell the story of how Cattle have been used by Humans through the ages.

While contemporary artists are using speculation/fictioning to focus on the future of the Earth, I have not found examples of visual artists using fictioning to present a hopeful vision of the end of human violence to other animals, and nor have I found artists who combine installation with fictioning (I argue that there is also a performative element to a fictional installation, for example in the MHV both curator and visitor take on a performance role, and must decide whether they are human or cyborg or AI).

I hope therefore that my work challenges violent iconographies of other animals/other nature and contributes to artistic methods for animal justice and social justice generally.

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