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FELLOW TRAVELLERS

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SKETCHING BEARS

Until a couple years ago I had almost no experience with bears in the wild...and then I suddenly saw them on several occasions. Once while biking on the Chehalis Western trail near my home in Olympia, Washington, and several times while hiking in nearby Olympic National Park. These experiences left me with a mixture of sensations; fear for my safety, gratitude for the opportunity, and profound worry for the well-being of these mysterious wild animals. Recently I spotted a small black bear on the beach of the Pacific Ocean, on the North Coast of Washington State. This bear was contentedly digging through kelp, looking for food about two hundred metres down the beach, when I heard a family of hikers approaching. They excitedly ran toward the bear with their cell phones, trying to get closer for a good picture. Not surprisingly, they startled the bear, and it ran into the woods.

I was thinking about bears when I arrived at the Dunedin School of Art for an artist's residency, in August of 2023. I was excited to start sketching them. I had only sculpted a bear once before, very recently in fact, and it was clunky, awkward and cartoony. While I had familiarity with other forms, such as humans and hares, the bear was still a mystery to me.

My sketches were a little rough and I wasn't sure I could get something completed in the short time I had in Dunedin. But I did a few gestural renderings of ideas on paper and in clay. The bear's form is challenging to capture. The structure is similar to other mammals, but also uniquely different, proportionally. The bear's head is similar to a dog or wolf, but squarer, with eyes straight ahead, and a distinct forehead.

I thought more about style and form. My recent works are mostly naturalistic, but a little fantastical and stylised. I considered clay artists who work in different styles such as Americans; Beth Cavener Stichter; Aurther Gonzlez, Jack Earl, Edith Garcia and Lisa Reinertson. I loved seeing Jim Cooper's colourful and gestural clay animals at Tūhura Otago Museum. I found inspiration in their approaches which helped guide me in my stylistic, technical and thematic decisions.

Once I had a sense of the general design, I needed to work out how the piece would stand on its own. A bear's form can have a lot of bulk, which would be difficult to support on four legs with clay. I decided to work from a solid mass and carve out the contours and spaces between the legs gradually, until the form was strong enough to support itself.



Figure 1. Bear in progress.

I used temporary armatures where needed, but the design ultimately needed to accommodate the limitations of the clay. So, while the bear's head and paws would be realistic in style, proportions would be stylised, to make the clay structure more stable. Based on my general experience, I felt that this compromise would work well.

As I worked, I enjoyed interactions with the delightful ceramics certificate and degree students in the ceramics facility. This was an exciting time of year when certificate students are visiting for a week of seminars and onsite learning with Senior Ceramics Lecturer, Rob Cloughley.

I knew I would add a child to this piece once the bear's form was rendered. After some experimentation I realised that a child in a hooded onesie looked good. The onesie looks comfortable and is suggestive of pyjamas and dreams. I've used it before and it is relatable and fun. A hare was added as a third character. A backpack was added to the child to emphasise his journey through the natural world. I liked the dynamic of a large predator, human child and hare travelling peacefully together. A lot of my work is narratively depicted from a child's perspective. At a young age, we often have a more profound connection with nature, which dissipates quickly as we grow and are integrated into society. I wonder, where does this journey lead as the child grows and becomes part of the global economy, to partake as a predatory force which relentlessly stresses the natural world. Many artists such as painter Josh Keyes, are wrestling with these kinds of issues also. This is my small way of touching on the delicate balance between humans and the rest of nature. It is a dream, but not entirely.

All parts of the piece needed to be hollowed out before firing. The small figures were removed to be worked on separately, and the bear was cut into sections, hollowed, and reattached. Once dry, the piece was fired at a low temperature to fuse the clay. Rather than doing a second firing with glazes, I was certain I wanted to do an atmospheric smoke firing. Rob had been doing some raku firing with the students, and I was given the go-ahead to use the raku reduction container to smoke fire this piece. This is a simple and quick process by which the sculpture is placed in a bin with burning combustibles, and the clay gets reduced by the burning process. The reduced oxygen and dense smoke flash the clay with dark painterly marks which are deeply embedded in the clay, adding depth to the surface.

The remaining days in Dunedin were a joy. The last stage of finishing, which I did with coloured pencils, took the longest. As the Polytechnic switched over to spring term, I was able to visit with many students, staff, and faculty, as they came by to see this slow process unfold. I found some good pencils at Art Zone art supplies store and began layering the marks, enhancing the forms, and adding some expressive colour to the piece. Thankfully the earthenware clay, I acquired from the ceramics department, fired a rich and beautiful deep red orange, and it looked great when smoke fired. The challenge of finishing with colour on clay is how to get the rich colours and expression I crave without diminishing the vitality of the fired clay forms. The coloured pencils offered visual intensity in a very thin layer which didn't cover the clay underneath with a thick material, in the way that slips and glazes often do.

CONCLUSION

Fellow Travellers is part of an ongoing exploration of innocence, endurance, and our relationship with the natural world. The three characters in this dream-like scene occupy different places on the food chain but are moving as one unified group in the moment, in balance and in sync. This ceramic piece was hand built with stoneware clay, oxidation fired, and then smoke fired. Coloured pencils were added at the end.

During the last stage of the process, I had the opportunity to visit Harington Point by boat with my wife Rae. The water, wildlife, and land of this region are stunning and I wondered if it seemed odd to anyone besides myself that I would depict North American animals during my visit. The blue penguins, black swans, and albatross would make great subjects someday if we get to know each other better.

For now it's back to Washington State, and the bears.



Figure 2. Completed clay rendering.



Figure 3. Final stage of hollowing the bear.



Figure 4. Smoke firing in progress.



Figure 5. Smoke fired piece.

Joe Batt was the 2023 Artist in Residence at the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 6. Joe Batt, *Fellow Travellers*, 2023, smoke fired stoneware and coloured pencils, 140x250x380mm. Permanent collection, Dunedin School of Art.

