

HUMAN NATURE

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HOW DOES ANTHROPOMORPHISM AFFECT HOW HUMANS SEE NATURE IN CONTEMPORARY ART?

Animals for many years have been portrayed by humans in countless different forms, as we attempt to understand, capture and control their presence. In modern times we have begun to question the implications of portraying animals, as we seek to define, dominate and understand them in our human minds. In my work I explore human-animal relationships, as well as looking at the environment and the impacts humans have on their surroundings.

Humans attempt to understand the world by projecting meanings and feelings upon animals and wildlife. We surround ourselves with a constructed view of reality, a world in which we, at the top, control all that is below. This anthropocentric way we view animals and nature, and how this effects conservation and environmental movements, is what I aim to address in my sculptural works. By breaking down and representing animals, I deal with the complex issues associated with the animal form, with the intention of conveying to the general public, awareness of the current state of the environment and our relationship with our ecosystem. In this essay I examine the way anthropomorphism affects how humans see nature in contemporary art, by looking at human relationships with different animals, how we use them in our society, and how this shapes conversations about animals in art. These ideas have influenced my work in many different ways.

This is a conversation about animals on the edge of extinction as well as on the edge of society. Humans have a truly unique view of our environment, one often of control and separation, we partake in wildlife tours and observe from behind a screen. Our interactions in nature are constricted and distant. As Malamud stated in "Animals On film", "We don't like to think much about wild, natural animals, because we have just about extinguished wildness and nature. We prefer our animals framed, domesticated, dressed up for our spectacles".¹ This way we view animals, has caused a separation; no longer do we see ourselves as part of the environment but something better and above. We own land, and own animals, we see everything as a commodity that can be controlled. This understanding of animals is deeply ingrained in our society. Starting from a young age, we see depictions of animals on screens and in stories that portray the animal in a certain way, many important lessons and phrases are founded on it.² This use of animals in popular culture has had an impact on how the animal is viewed, as they often become a symbol for something very human.³

The way we use animals introduces challenges for conservation efforts, as certain animals have specific meanings placed upon them. We are more likely to protect some species because of this effect.⁴ For example, when animals are projected as killers and beasts, this image makes it hard for protection groups to gather support and donations for their cause, as people see the animal as frightening and not worth protecting.⁵ This has especially impacted shark conservation, for although shark attacks are rare, movies like 'Jaws' have conceived a threatening image.⁶ In contrast to this, certain animals have had great success in conservation by being portrayed as lovable, cute, and clumsy beings.⁷ This portrayal plays on our hearts and makes us wish to protect what we see as a rather funny, silly animal.⁸ This has been hugely successful, especially for animals like the panda and sloth, with videos of

tumbling pandas and memes of sloths making us feel like we have a relationship with these animals as we see them as children or reflections of ourselves.⁹

Representing animals, even with the best intentions, will unavoidably present some challenges as we cannot help but see the world with human eyes and be influenced by the culture and history that surrounds us. Any images we produce are a reflection of the human gaze, it is not "real". We cannot depict the real animal, as the image is truly just an image and one crafted by us, depicting often what we want to see, not necessarily what is actually there. We tend to depict the beautiful animal, the animal that relates to us. Bearing this in mind, I believe the animal form can, and will, be used to convey a message. We cannot ignore their important role in history and how this has impacted our society. As Baker puts it: "The actual question is what will the animal yet be made to signify?"¹⁰

Photographer Nick Brandt captures images of wild animals, mainly from Africa, and then manipulates the image by juxtaposing it with another time. One of his collections, titled *Inherit The Dust*¹¹, placed "natural" images of living animals back into an environment that they once inhabited, one now dominated by humans. These animals now inhabit as ghosts, a whisper of the past, part of another life and time.¹² These images show the domination and separation of humans from their environment, as the animal is the central focus and seems "human" as the shots portray their loss¹³, while the "real" human figures often appear faceless and inconsequential. This is ironic, because although the animal is the "ghost", the humans seem less present than the constructed animal image, as decay and squalor swallow individuals and amplify our collective impact. Hope is present yet fragile as young individuals, captivated by the animal, interact with these "sculptures" in a landscape they have never seen and may never see. In *Under Pass with Elephants (Lean Back Your Life is On Track)*, 2015,¹⁴ the photograph's composition matches the mood in the image; we can almost feel the sadness and loss of the animals. Alone, the animal image would seem soulless, a collection of missed encounters. On site on the wall of an overpass they dominate yet question the foreign landscape. The animal remains a representation of the living, but a question too of what remains, will we "inherit the dust"?¹⁵

My art practice is centred around environmental concerns and is focused on creating works that depict and represent the current state of the environment. I often use representation to gain interest in the viewer in order to raise awareness of certain issues. My first large scale work that depicted the animal was *The Anthropocene* 2017 (Figures 1 and 2). It was a work that addressed and represented our consumerist society. Made from plastics, it depicted five full size northern royal albatross, which represent the five ocean garbage patches. The year this work was exhibited, it was discovered that, even with protection, constant care, and observation, eight out of nine regurgitations collected from northern royal albatross chicks contained plastic, fed to them by their parents.

I created sculptures in the form of the albatross to represent the growing plastic pollution problem. The image or symbol of the albatross is commonly a symbol of hope originating from maritime folklore. In Dunedin, the albatross is also an image that can bring the message close to home, with the colony being a short drive away from the city. I wanted to use, and add to, the symbolic meaning of the albatross to increase understanding, and further knowledge and awareness of our plastic problem. The albatross is a wanderer, a traveller, and is greatly affected by plastic pollution, and as a symbol of hope, I wanted the works to reflect that – hope for our situation.

In this work I embraced the symbolism of the animal, I used it to my advantage and including how people would view the work. Even the space reflected how we view nature in a constructed way, as the mezzanine above the space acted as a viewing platform.



Figure 1. Tori Clearwater: *Pacific Ocean*, Part of the collection *The Anthropocene*, 2017.

As I progressed through my study I became more interested in an animal's portrayal and how people respond to it in different ways. It made me wonder if physical depiction was the best way to convey a serious message, or if the suggestion of form was more thought provoking. This led me to look at animals in more depth, specifically as tools to communicate. The animal has long been a way to depict human issues, as they are not bound to our different cultures or religions, and so are a perfect symbol to depict all humans.¹⁶ For example, in a Genesis power commercial in New Zealand, a pukeko represents a homemaker.¹⁷ In Queen Bee's Waxing Cat of 2009, the naked cat stands in for "women".¹⁸ The object on the screen is the object of desire, this raw "to-be-looked-at" objectification of women is exemplified by the male gaze in cinema. The gaze directed at animals in visual culture allows the raw material of the animal to be interpreted by the "human gaze", not just that of the male gaze. As Malamud puts it: "Call it, instead of the male gaze, the human gaze; and replace woman with "animal!"¹⁹

Looking at publications by animal protection groups, I came across contrasting advertisements that aim to raise awareness of an issue facing the animal. I found the advertisement where the animal is not pictured, e.g. a lumpy black polythene bag with the caption which starts "This bag contains a dead doggy,"²⁰ powerful, as the animal, left to the imagination, becomes more horrific.²¹ Another graphic advertisement of killer cows by PETA "Eating Meat Kills More Animals Than You Think" depicts a bull tearing into the flesh of a jaguar.²² It is a little ridiculous (no cows are out killing wildlife). Perhaps it's a good depiction of the animal, standing in for the human, but I believe it goes too far and appears so ridiculous that the message and purpose become lost. People can only take so much graphic imagery. In order to communicate a message, a viewer must first be engaged²³, and from this perspective, there is little value in conveying information through artworks that are so abstracted or disgustingly confronting that people do not want to look.²⁴

My work *Plastic Gaze* (2019) included three yellow-eyed penguin sculptures, made of found beach plastic from the local area where they nest. The plastic products were recognisable on close inspection, forming a blistering skin, suffocating and encasing the form. The work lights up to turn the animal into an object of display, highlighting its plastic form and embracing its transformation into a commodified object – both beautiful and disturbing.

My distorted definition of "beautiful" takes advantage of people's natural curiosity and allow them to discover the meaning on their own. I find this a powerful way to talk about the environment; people often shut down when presented with hard-to-grasp or confronting issues, so I attempt to understand what these limits are and make work that people will "like" but also chose to understand.

Another interesting way to depict and raise concerns about animals is to use the human as a stand-in for the animal. This makes us uncomfortable, and can bring a problem close to home. Using this technique it is possible for us to "see" the un-pictured animal.²⁵ Yet another animal rights ad features a man with a large bull ring through his nose and the caption "Bullfights would stop if tourists weren't led there."²⁶ This 1990 poster about bull fighting was an early example. Despite there being no animal present in the image, the animal's suffering is felt more strongly, as it is in relation to the human. The human is made to be the object or symbol for the animal. The image is more powerful, as we can relate to other people better than we relate to other animals. When the human is treated like an animal, using the symbolic wound of the ring, it opens our eyes to the unseen suffering animal.²⁷

I incorporated this strategy to talk about the animal in my 2018 work *A Crushing Problem* (Figure 2). *A Crushing Problem* depicts me holding up a bag of found ocean plastics. This work is a response to data compiled from flesh-footed shearwaters, where one 90-day-old chick was found dead with a gut full of plastic, which accounted for 15% of the bird's body mass.²⁸ My bag of plastics weighs 8.25kg which is how much plastic would be in my stomach if I was this sea bird. I used raw statistics and combined it with the human body to show how much plastic was really inside that chick. The mass appears much larger and more disturbing when it is held in reference to a human body. People can "enter" the photograph and place themselves in the image. It represents the animal but is not the image of the animal itself.

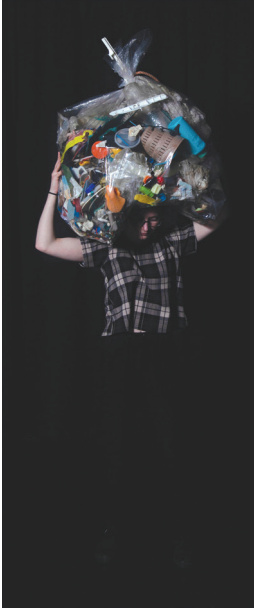
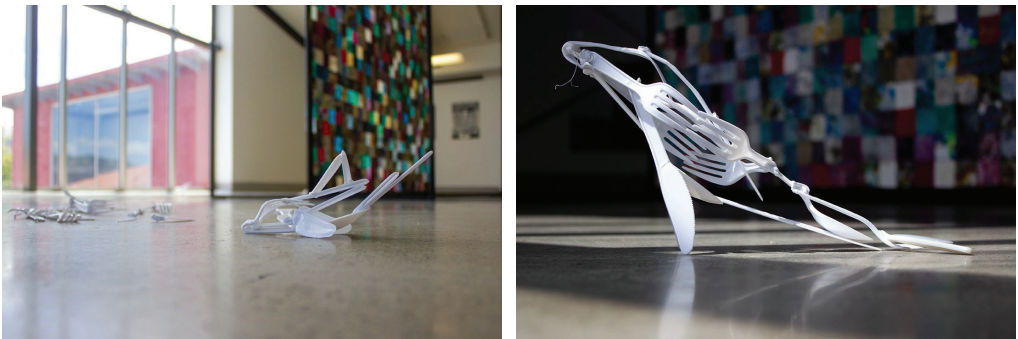


Figure 2. Tori Clearwater; *A Crushing Problem*, part of the series *Where is Away?*, 2018, photograph by Hayley Walmsley.

After looking into animal meanings in society, it made me aware that all materials have an image and meaning placed upon them, due to their history and use. Artists like Tara Donovan produce works with specific materials that convey a certain meaning while initially hiding their true form. Donovan believes she doesn't intentionally represent anything more than the beautiful material and experience that comes with viewing her work. I disagree, as her chosen materials, including certain animals, come with social and contextual meaning. In her work *Haze*²⁹ the material of straws is still recognisable as straws, invoking the social concepts of consumerism and pollution. Donovan's materials are only revealed at close range. This product is a symbol of our modern consumer driven society. In Donovan's work there is a realisation of the material, leading to questions of quantity. In the United States, 500 million drinking straws are used every day.³⁰ To understand this enormity, *Haze* depicts roughly one 240th of this, or six minutes of straw usage. This really puts Donovan's "large" installation in perspective. With access to this knowledge as it portrays the very large impact of a very small object. She says her work is representing nature, but "plastic nature" is very real, with plastic infiltrating every habitat on earth. As one description of her work puts it: "At a distance, one felt that he or she was looking at a formation of encrusted minerals, a cross section of a coral reef, or wisps of a strange, opaque fog."³¹ However, what you are viewing is consumerism. I think this is an effective way of communicating about the environment, as the viewer comes to a realization on their own, upon discovery of the material. With access to facts and numbers, the true scale of the work can be appreciated; it begins to stand for something larger and more complex and this can be appreciated on a human level.

In my work *You Are What You Eat* 2018 (Figures 3 and 4), I used discarded plastic cutlery to create forms of animals that we see ourselves as superior to. They were very fragile, and some of them were broken and destroyed during the exhibition, their tiny miniaturised forms crushed beneath human feet. Making animals out of plastic cutlery was a way for me to question what is in the food chain, using the initially disguised material, as a symbol of our waste, consumption, and pollution. As one of the everyday single-use products that we throw away, unnecessarily, it is an invisible item that has anything but an invisible impact.



Figures 3 and 4 (detail). Tori Clearwater; *You Are What You Eat* part of the collection *Where is Away?*, 2018, photograph by Kathleen Riach.

When depicting the animal in art, it can sometimes be useful to portray them in a representational form, in order to draw attention, raise awareness, and create understanding. Photographer Chris Jordan's works depict "numbers our brain just doesn't have the ability to comprehend."³² The works made of objects, depict things in a way we can understand. In *Year of the Tiger*, 2010, he depicts 3200 toy tigers, which are equal to the estimated number of tigers remaining on Earth - the space in the wild would hold 40,000 of these tigers, equal to the global tiger population in 1970.³³ By portraying these statistics visually, we can understand their enormity. The real animal is at first hidden and it is only upon closer inspection that a realisation and understanding is reached.

My work *The Great Filter* 2018 (Figure 5.) made of multiple plastic tiles, shows how we look at the world and nature as something we can construct, name, and control. The "wall" is an attempt to represent the barriers we have built that prevent us from seeing, although they are the walls that keep us "safe", the walls we build that protect us, both politically and personally. It is also a reference to the theory that there is a "filter" or barrier that prevents intelligent life from developing past a certain point. This to me is important, as how could a species be so intelligent, yet set in motion changes of such an extent that we may lead to our own demise?

This "wall" forces the viewer to renegotiate the space, one work from one side, and a completely different one from the other, as light highlights and darkens certain colours and interacts with others. The see-through quality of plastic means the work changes and interacts with natural light and movement in the space. This addresses photodegradation and its impacts on the food-chain, while also responding to the natural environment outside the gallery.



Figure 5. *The Great Filter*, part of the collection *Where is Away?*, 2018, photograph by Lana Young.

This work was made from 810 plastic tiles, representing the estimated 8 million tons of rubbish entering the ocean every year, so each tile represents one hundred thousand tons. The total weight of the plastic in the work is roughly 200 kg, which is the amount of plastic entering the ocean every second.

I have tried, throughout my research and art, to consider the animal and use it to my advantage to communicate environmental problems. I have used different strategies to do this, starting by using the real animal form to address issues of consumption and waste, then moving to a more representational way of depicting the animal by applying statistical

data onto a human scale. I have also used the human viewer as the unaware bystander, their actions in a space unintentionally having bigger impacts than planned. Lastly, in my large wall work, I have broken down statistics and made something beautiful in the way it looks and repulsive in what it represents. Each of these works challenges different aspects of the environment and attempts to convey to the viewer on a very human level the impacts our modern society has upon the living world. I use plastic as a way to communicate our view of nature as something we control and understand, our human nature.

Tori Clearwater is a contemporary Dunedin based artist working on incorporating environmental data and statistics into sculptural works. She graduated from the Dunedin school of art in 2018 with a Bachelor of Visual Art with honours. She uses found materials to create representational works that comment on the state of the environment.

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