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Assembling the Animal

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree
of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University,
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Abstract

This practice-based research involves an exploration of the significance of the animal with a focus on moral obligations and environmental responsibilities within an artistic practice. It will explore how I can lessen the impact of my art on the natural world and how I can create works that give a voice to the billions of animals whose suffering goes unnoticed by humans. This analysis of these issues will provide a critical response to the treatment of both domestic and wild animals and will examine the modern-day complexities experienced by artists as they navigate producing ethical art in this fast-paced and consumeristic world.

This exegesis consists of three parts: exploring the animal, the environmental impact of art, and the oneness of the natural world, and how these theories have informed my practice. The discussion will incorporate key concepts such as anthropomorphism, the merging of cuteness and inaesthetic traits, eco-materialism and where animal rights meet feminist philosophies. Ultimately, this exegesis works to piece together the broad and complicated aspects of human and non-human relationships and through the use of found material, assemblage-based sculpture, promote critical evaluation of the treatment of animals and the environment.

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Introduction

Ever since I was small, I have *loved* animals, although at times I don't think they shared similar feelings towards me. I once gave my cat's whiskers a trim because I thought they were a little uneven. I was later informed that they were sensitive, that she used them as an extra sense mechanism when in the dark, and that she by no means had enjoyed my generous grooming attempts – oh dear! But now as an adult, all whisker trimming and misguided attempts to show my adoration of animals have *well* and truly been put behind me and I now deeply enjoy using my practice as a form of education around correct animal care and to emphasise my affection and concern for non-human animals in our society.



Fig. 1. Min, my Oma's dog and I, personal photograph by author, 1994.

The need for animal rights and environmental education is imperative for the survival of many species and natural resources. I feel guilty that my everyday lifestyle can impact negatively on many different species and yet benefit me so greatly, and recently I have begun to acknowledge this feeling more than ever. This guilt plays a role in why I have chosen to pursue animal rights and environmentalism within my practice. It felt a natural transition, as I have a background in animal care and am passionate about animal welfare and these personal elements have been able to flow into my practice. Many conversations and observations have come from working with animals, both positive and negative, and these have had greatly meaningful impact in my life.

However, feeling guilty isn't helpful for very long and I have become energised to reevaluate my lifestyle, my art making and where there could be improvements in both. It has resulted in my own in-depth exploration of key concepts such as defining the animal, environmentalism and oneness with the animal and how these can be communicated through my bodies of work.

This exegesis will explore these three key themes within my art and how they have influenced four of my installations over the two-year period of my Master's of Fine Arts at

Massey University: *Treading Lightly* (2021), *Whimsy plus Something the Dog Shat Out* (2021), *Heel, Doggy!* (2022), *Creature Comforts* (2022) and *Plastic in my Fish, Plastic in my Blood* (2022).

Through this exegesis, I wanted to examine my thinking around questions such as: how the animal has been defined within our society, how the role of cuteness affects our thoughts and feelings towards the animal, if anthropomorphism is a relevant and fair use of animal depiction and where animal rights meet feminist philosophies.

The materials I have used to further enrich the key themes in these artworks consist of recycled fabrics, second hand jewellery, cardboard and plastic waste, and ethically sourced dog fur. The inclusion of these materials has helped shape my continued and ever evolving interest in figurative sculpture and deepened my connection with sculpture, for the first time feeling that I have created a sense of purpose for myself as an artist.

One: Defining the Animal

Animal Origins

It's ok to eat fish, cause they don't have any feelings
-*Something in the Way*, Nirvana

Humans are animals. We evolved from African and Asian primates millions of years ago into the beings we are today (Cela-Conde and Ayala 44). Due to this evolution, we are physically and mentally different from where we originated but on a cellular level, we still share many similarities. As stated by Bernard Campbell:

The same compounds, nucleic acids and proteins, are found everywhere; the same energy carriers and enzymes (with identical functions) are present in the most diverse organisms... The differences that separate us from other organisms at the chemical level are very slight (Campbell 414).

This quote presents the idea that internally all life forms on earth are extremely similar, despite our external differences in appearance. These commonalities however have not translated to an equal treatment of all species on earth, with the needs and lives of humans prioritized above all others.

I begin this exegesis with this argument as I feel the reason as to why animals receive different treatment to humans is purely because they appear very different to us. As part of shifting this perspective, I have tried to eliminate emphasis on appearances of animals within my art, instead choosing to focus on mental cognition and strength within relationships. I have done this in the hopes to acknowledge how all beings are fascinating and complex in their unique ways.

Throughout my research, I have greatly expanded my knowledge about the origins of the human and non-human relationship as it has been a question which I have contemplated greatly during my time as an artist. How did the complicated nature of our relationship become what it is today?

One perspective which I encountered was of Christianity theosophy, where animals have been traditionally seen to be lesser than humans. Whilst humans were made in the image of God, the animals, plants, insects and other creatures of Earth were not and because they were not made in His image, they were seen as inferior. As noted by Heather Eaton:

In general, Christianity has an ambivalent and overall utilitarian view of animals; not always and everywhere, but... The prevailing view, by far, is that Christian teachings and cultural practices affirm that animals have utility as a resource for human use and have no intrinsic or moral value (Eaton 39).

Eaton's explanation highlights how traditional Christian views on animals ignore the scientific, biological understanding of animal genetics and what was previously stated about cellular similarity within species that live on Earth. And understandably so, as religious beliefs precede current research which proves such similarities to be true. However, this quote quickly shows us that in Christian ideology as far back as the first century, animals were branded as unworthy and simply expendable resources for human use. This resulted in various forms of cruelty and abuse, as animals were exploited for their bodies, labour and abilities (Eaton 39).

Through my research around this question, I have further come to understand that the cause of the distance between species doesn't stop with appearances. Communication barriers and assumptions around animal's lack of consciousness have also played a part in how animals have been neglected and abused in our society. As stated by scholar Ron Broglio:

According to a long cultural and philosophical tradition, animals do not engage in the self-reflexive thought that provides humans with individual and cultural depth of being; instead, animals are said to live on the surface of things. Surfaces are seen as fleeting appearances, mere shadows lacking the substantiality found in the 'depth' of human interiority (Broglio 17).

Broglio's words valuably highlight the common belief that animals are void of the depth, character and intelligence that humans possess. This 'flattening' of the animal through Broglio's definition of them existing on a 'surface level' opens them up to various modes of oppression (Broglio 18). Not only are their bodies deemed separate and alien to ours, as described by Eaton, but also their emotions and thoughts, as described by Broglio.

By combining Eaton's and Broglio's perspectives, I came to understand how assumptions regarding the body and mind of animals have shaped how they have been treated throughout history. As someone who has lived with animals, I have identified an interesting realisation that animals who can communicate with humans in a more 'human like' way tend to be treated better. For example, animals that can learn commands through memorising the tone of their owner's voice and may appear to understand what we are saying, such as dogs and horses, are largely given better care than animals who use other means of communication, such as rabbits, rodents and fish.

Throughout my complex exploration of this topic, I began to piece together some of the intricacies of human and non-human relationships by considering animal domestication and the roles in which animals have played in our lives. The process is quite astonishing when you compare, for example, the wolf species (*canis lupus*) to the domestic dog (*canis lupus familiaris*).

Whilst humans are driving thousands of species extinct, dogs have formed a unique bond with humans in which they thrive alongside them. As detailed in an episode of *Explained* (2018), dogs were one of the first domesticated animals, and while it is unknown as to how humans and wolves first became mutualistic, the 'scavenger' hypothesis is a prevalent theory. This theory outlines how extra meat scraps were thrown to wolves and a trust was

built between humans and these wild animals through food. While the wolves gained a food source from co-existing with human settlements, humans also benefitted from the gained protection of these animals against other predators. Ecologist Christopher Schell states that they served as security companions' before becoming domestic companions. The more trusting the wolf, the more food they receive and over generations, this led to an appearance change as the wolves evolved into a new species and 'softer' versions of their former selves (*Explained*).

Treading Lightly

My exploration of 'defining the animal' and my subsequent findings has greatly influenced my artistic practise. For example, I created the artwork *Treading Lightly* (2021) in order to highlight the exploration of animal objectification and how a hierarchy of species informs the level of care which an animal receives. During the first year of my master's degree, I analysed agencies within my practice, and it proved to be extremely helpful as it helped me to rediscover the art form of doll making. I perceived that making a doll or a representation of a living being held a thought-provoking tension between glorifying and diminishing the living thing.

As a child I often played with dolls, and they were a significant outlet for my expression and creativity. I could spend hours playing with them and would often try making my own using doll-making books which I had borrowed from the library. It wasn't until I was much older that I came to understand the concerning comparisons made between the 'othering' of animals and the othering of the woman's body through their depiction as dolls. The doll has been connected to the objectification of women's bodies for decades and this form of 'othering' emphasised a women's physical features over their intellect and identity (Vaes et al. 561). In my opinion, this phenomenon is in parallel to the 'othering' of animals and the disregard of an animal's intellect. Therefore, creating these doll-like animal figures felt like a natural direction for my practice.

A key topic which I identified within my research around 'defining the animal' was the domestication of the dog and the nature of the close relationships which they often share with humans. This bond has largely kept the species safe and well cared for, and in the western world dogs are perceived as distinctly separate from animals which are used for food, clothing and labour. I used *Treading Lightly* (2021) to communicate the concerns I have about this glorification and prioritisation of dogs, and sought to contrast their positionality with lower status animals who are exploited for their meat, such as chickens and rabbits.

Ethically sources materials such as op shop linens, second hand wire and feathers from used pillows were a significant feature in this work. The hair and feathers were used instead of polyester filling, which is plastic based and will never break down. I also collected dog hair

from a local grooming salon which I used both in *Treading Lightly* (2021) and in my later sculptural works.

The hair was a mixture of colours and the effect of this was that it would poke through the small holes in the cotton weaves and give the animals a slightly grotesque, hairy and velvety texture. The closer you came the more evident it was, and they almost looked grimy. The dog figure was placed higher, strung with two supports: the body was firmer, and the posture displayed more confidence. The chicken and rabbit swayed on fewer strings, they were closer to the ground and slumping, lacking confidence. When you walked past them, they would gently sway. I wanted these animal figures to appear to be fragile, but also awkward and pointy. Graceful, but still possessing a tension implying that something wasn't quite right. Their feet were made to look as if they weren't touching the floor, never to make a mark on the surface of their environment and lacking assurance that they too belonged on the same ground.



Fig. 2. *Treading Lightly*, Hair, fabric and wire, personal photograph by author, 15 May 2021.

Furthermore, at this time I was trying to distance myself from the idea of my work seeming too 'cute', which had been a critiqued on in the past. Including the dog hair in this sculptural piece was an important way in which I combated this aesthetic. I felt that there was a mixture of desirable and undesirable qualities within the work, and that in viewing it you would feel torn between the two elements. Following completing this work, I contemplated whether making sculptures that contained animal references and elements of cuteness, could undermine my intentions. My concern was reinforced by a lecturer during a critique session of *Treading Lightly* (2021), when they contended that to describe an artwork as 'cute' or 'pretty' could mean that it is disregarded as simply being visually attractive and that the

audience will not search for the deeper meaning communicated within it. However, as my research has developed, I believe the idea of 'cuteness' to be a far more complicated theory than ever.

Sianne Ngai's analysis of 'cute' as an aesthetic category has challenged my understanding that a person or a thing assigned with the cuteness label lacks a certain depth. Ngai states:

The non-aesthetic properties associated with cuteness—smallness, compactness, formal simplicity, softness or pliancy—thus call up a range of minor negative affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency. Cuteness might also be said to epitomise the process of affective 'objectification' by which all aesthetic judgements are formed (Ngai 64-65).

In relation to the animal, cuteness has been known to be an essential part of surviving as a species and therefore, this is how cats and dogs have become so good at it. Cuteness can also amplify the perceived 'helplessness' that allows humans to believe they are superior as a species. However, I feel that this helplessness can go by undetected as in our modern society, cuteness as an aesthetic trait has been frequently commercialised and shifted its meaning into a space of beauty, sweetness and naivety.

We can analyse cuteness as a positive or negative aesthetic and initially, I felt concerned about how others were perceiving my work in relation to its 'cuteness'. The comments I received were strongly indicative of the 'conventional attractiveness' that comes along with cuteness. However, with all that I know now, I believe this to be a lack of understanding on their part, not mine. I am not able to control how others perceive my work but through investigating why I received the response that I did, I ended up being able to better understand my interpretation of cuteness and where it sits within my practice.

I am encouraged by the words of Ngai that using cuteness within my practice is relevant and adds depth to my sculptures and challenges the stereotypical idea of what being cute is.



Fig. 3. A detailed view of *Treading Lightly*, Hair, fabric and wire, personal photograph by author, May 2021.



Fig. 4. *Treading Lightly*, Hair, fabric and wire, personal photograph by author, May 2021.

Issues of Anthropomorphism

The use of anthropomorphism has been featured heavily within my practice over the past two years. Only recently have I discovered opinions that highlight how diminishing it can be to the animal and has made me scrutinise how I have utilised it in the past, and how I might continue to utilise it in the future. As media theorist Claire Parkinson writes:

Anthropomorphised animals are, so the argument might go, subsumed into a human social logic where their commodification, especially for a family audience, is predicated on the erasure of their individual complexity and species difference... anthropomorphism remains to some extent weighed down with associations to childishness, a lack of objectivity and sentimentality (Parkinson 1).

Through reading the work of Parkinson and others critiquing anthropomorphism, the idea of merging human and non-human attributes has caused me some confusion in how I can justify it featuring in my practice.

Initially, I used anthropomorphism to illustrate a connection between humans and other species. By merging their features to remove mental barriers due to lack of physical similarity between humans and other species. Reflecting to the beginning of this exegesis, the abuse and othering of animals due to their fur instead of skin, fins instead of limbs, I have come to enjoy subverting these physical traits between the species and hope there would be self-reflection as a result from that. If a human could see *themselves* as 'animal' would that change how that individual might feel, think and treat an animal.

This is further discussed by scholars Christopher Kelen and Chengcheng You, in their analysis of Lewis Carroll's, *The Walrus and the Carpenter* which features heavily anthropomorphised oysters and a charismatic walrus; "Making a creature appear to be cute may be to not only ascribe it familiar, manipulatable, and unthreatening qualities, but also diminish its actuality as an animal." (Kelen and You 674).

This text has strong use of anthropomorphism, featuring cuteness from the sweet and naïve depiction of the oysters to the greedy and deceitful walrus, and has many layers of moral ambiguity. On one hand, you have the oysters who are easily confused by the walrus, who seem the most 'animal' within this power dynamic, and we feel sad for them as they end up as the walrus' dinner. The walrus displays enough confidence to assume he is the human in this relationship, and we end up hating him for his cunningness and cruelty.

Whilst others argue that anthropomorphism as negative, I feel that the *intent* behind it is crucial to determining whether it diminishes the animal or not. The benefit of anthropomorphism is that it is visually intriguing and appealing, there is a charm in it. I feel that approaching it with careful intent, my artwork doesn't fringe on being destructive to the animal. The expansiveness of anthropomorphism allows you to draw as minimally or extensively as you want but still have visual impact, which is vital when creating a narrative within your artwork.

Heel, Doggy!

Heel, Doggy!, 2022, was inspired by species power dynamics, more so a blatant role reversal of dog and the human owner. Anthropomorphism is featured heavily in this full-bellied figure and at the time I was trying to emphasise the importance of scale in my sculptures. The dog figure was slightly smaller than myself, (though I am short, scale still requires close consideration) with a large stomach and skinny legs which feature often in my 'character' design.

The sculpture was again made from recycled fabrics, this time a trip to the tip shop proved immensely useful as I found smelly, old upholstery fabrics. Thick and textured, it was tough to sew through on the sewing machine, and painful to push a needle through the thick fabric. The head of the 'dog' was modelled after a basset hound, an old English breed known for having large ears, a considerable droopy face and throat area, short legs, too short to realistically hold up such a sturdy body. I had encountered an owner at that time who was so very proud of his hound, though I could not help but feel sorry for the poor dog whose owner was none the wiser to the soon to be joint problems.

One of the problematic aspects surrounding purebred dogs is that due to their small gene pools, the chances of inbreeding have been proven to be significantly higher than mixed breed dogs (Yordy et al. 138). Not only do these breeds such as the basset hound, already

present with extreme features, their health is even more so impacted by problems when parents are bred in order to keep their desired traits within the gene pool. For example, dogs that are of a mixed breed can live for around a year longer than purebreds (Yordy et al. 137).

Highlighting the impracticality of pure breeding will always be featured within my practice, as within society it is often overlooked in order to avoid the guilt stemming from supporting such practices.



Fig. 7. *Heel, Doggy!*, hair, fabric and wire, personal photograph by author, June 2022.

The significance of the collar and leash, limply held in the sculpture's hand, it was intended to open a discussion around ownership and the roles between a pet and owner. I had wanted there to be a vagueness within the work, in hopes that the collar, absent of a wearer, would allow the viewer to create their own narrative.

However, as things turned out, I had two willing participants try it on and because this was something I hadn't decided upon, it was quite an odd experience. Two very different people wore the collar and sat on the floor, one being an adult man and the other a young adult woman. I felt surprised that the man would try it on, it is a submissive position and to see him so normally confident and tall, sitting quite small on the floor, felt uncomfortable to witness. The way in which this person normally portrays themselves changed quite dramatically, the collar around his neck and his positioning being on the floor evoked a sense of vulnerability.



Fig. 5-6. Detail view of *Heel, Doggy!*, hair, fabric and wire, personal photograph by author, June 2022.

It was a valuable experience to test this static sculpture as a performance piece. It prompted me to consider the roles of men and women within the animal rights movement. It was easier to see the female body in varying ways of submission because of the way the media we consume portrays women's bodies. I recognised the sense of meekness that the male identifying participant was a significant contrast to the female identifying participant.

I further address the representation of the female body, with relation to the animal in chapter three, 'Oneness (gives me wholeness)'.

Two: Environment(alism)

A Change in Approach

"Modern technologies and political developments have left nonhuman animals more, and potentially less, vulnerable to the whims, fancies, desires, and needs of human animals, as well as to the continuing environmental changes on which all sentient beings depend for survival (Grant and Jungkunz 1)."

After reflecting upon my Honours year and the first year of Masters' Study, I felt a growing concern about the use of materials and how dangerous these chemicals can be to both myself and the environment. Prior to Masters I used many, many sheets of paper in large scale, collage works and then shifted to exploring soft, figurative, sculpture. Aspects of these practices were beginning to weigh heavily on me as I felt my waste production was feeding a problem that I had completely overlooked. I was inspired by a fellow artist Mia Morris', use of natural materials such as linen and cotton and how she sourced her fabric from second hand stores. In addition, I was looking at a doll making artist, Johanna Flanagan also known as The Pale Rook, who used hand dyed fabrics and hand stitching as a prominent feature in her practice. I was charmed by how the natural materials gave life to their work as they were textured and a bit crinkled, frayed at the edges and varying degrees of soft, watercolour like shades.



Fig. 7. Flanagan, Johanna, *Little Bird* (#8), calico, vintage silk and wool. *The Pale Rook*, thepalerook.com/available-work/.

Regarding my own work, I felt there was an artificial quality due to many of my materials having been purchased from craft supply stores. The colours I chose were saturated and garish, I used my sewing machine to piece together my work and the limbs were straight as a pin and stiff, with polyester fluff to give the bodies their shape. Soon it became apparent that in order to pursue textile-based sculpture, I would have more success if I collected my materials in a more considerate and careful way than perusing the aisles of a starched, fabric store.



Fig. 8, 9. Early experiments in doll making, fabric, clay and buttons personal photograph by author, April 2021

If I wanted these figures to be reflective of my environmental concerns, it was crucial to be aware of what I was doing, not only when it came to the final work but what I would do with the offcuts. I began to use as much as I could of every scrap, incorporating it into the work. I would take loose threads and put them amongst the stuffing, to conceal them but also give them a kind of place to reside, as they were not going to degrade in the bin for many years to come. I soon realised that in doing this I began to give my cast offs purpose amongst my works, and I gained a sense of accomplishment. To give 'trash' a new home felt an integral aspect to my practice, as I can continue to give value to objects that do not have any.



Fig. 10, 11. Hand-dyeing using tea and cotton pillowcases personal photograph by author, April 2021.

Other valuable aspects of practicing environmentally conscious efforts within the studio, is understanding the health impacts that certain materials can have on our own bodies and those of small creatures outside the studio. As writer Linda Weinstraub comments:

Artists may be protected by ventilation systems, but these systems merely transfer offending gases from interiors to exteriors. Likewise, toxic wastes, even those that are disposed of in compliance with safety protocols, are merely relocated from the studio to municipal waste facilities. Squirrels, blue jays, mushrooms, pine trees and insects do not have gear to protect them from exposure to harmful substances. They are victims of artistic creativity whenever studio practice neglects environmental protections (Weinstraub 2).

As Weinstraub so pointedly notes, very often we are utilising potent and carcinogenic chemicals in our daily studio use and from my observations, whilst the use of proper ventilation and safety equipment is heavily recommended, cutting corners can take place. My response to this was only to use materials that were natural, able to decompose and weren't harmful for humans or other animals. For example, I used papier mâché to construct the bulk of a sculpture alongside newspaper, masking tape and tightly wrapped fabric for reinforcing heavier areas. I found this to be accessible and successful in achieving a desired outcome.

Integrating these changes has generated unforeseen outcomes in my work as navigating a practice using at times limited resources can be challenging. The move towards utilising sustainable and low waste materials has only strengthened the connection between the physical and theoretical properties within my art and has provided me with abundant possibility within my practice, where once I felt lacking and empty.

It was during this time of experimentation with newly discovered materials, that I was recommended to research into a Canadian-Jamaican figurative sculptor named Tau Lewis.

Tau Lewis is a notable example of recycling and repurposing within an artistic practice. Lewis's use of found objects such as leather, wire, shells and stones are what she calls her 'material DNA' in which she uses to make her broad range of sculptures. Many of these items are either given to her or found at Salvation Army shops and she describes they 'transmute their received histories and energies' (Goodden 3). Many of the materials and ways in which Lewis makes is time consuming and machine-based making is limited if any. This is in relation to one of her key themes being Black Diaspora and how that has shaped her identity as Jamaican Canadian (Goodden 1).

Lewis' use of found objects was something I incorporated into my practice as I felt it gives my sculptures a deeper sense of already having a history, even though we don't know what that history might be. I am continually inspired by Lewis' use of found objects and how she gives them new purpose, 'transmuting' them within her artwork, charging her sculptures with personality which gives them depth, intrigue and vitality.

The use of scale is an obvious strong point within her sculptures as some are metres tall and drape across floors and from ceilings. The intricacies of the figures from their ruffled and textured clothing to the skilful construction of the facial features and extremities of their 'body'. Lewis' practice has been valuable to mine, to further articulate the broad range of uses for repurposed materials and illustrate how far I could push my practice formally and thematically.

Hairy Adventures

Following my exploration of utilising dog hair and recycled fabric in *Treading Lightly* (2021), I further ventured into using fur in my practice. As previously mentioned, I was able to collect hair from freshly groomed dogs at a grooming salon. Varying shades of brown, white, black and grey, I gathered multiple bags of it, still faintly smelling of the baby powder shampoo the dogs were washed in. The grooming salons have no use for the hair once it is shaved off and I felt this to be a pity, as surely it could have some use. Therefore, I used the hair as an alternative to polyester filling, which is plastic based and would take decades to break down.



Fig. 12. *Hairy Sausages and Other Short Stories*, hair, stockings, wire, calico, personal photograph by author, Jul 2021.

For *Hairy Sausages and Other Short Stories* (2021) and *Whimsy Plus Something the Dog Shat Out*, (2021) I used stockings to encase the fur, instead of the hand dyed, cotton fabric and the results were surprising and exciting. Despite using very few materials, the figures, which I had affectionately named 'hairy sausages', looked shockingly weighty and human-like,

despite being solely filled with hair. These installations were far more abstract than anything I had previously made, as I wanted to experiment with the ambiguity within the use of the stockings and hair, creating the sausage-like characters. This was a way of questioning as to who might be the animal in this work. Previously, I had made firmly defined animal figures and I felt that in this iteration, having an ambiguity between human and animal, could allow the viewer to question their positioning within that space.

The sausages had wrinkles and folds which mimicked belly rolls and arm pit creases, they slumped into all sorts of poses due to the density of the fur which is light but also firm and compactly holds its shape. As we might associate stockings or pantyhose with the illusion of skin, their use within the artwork creates a peculiar sense of outer skin. Hair filled the body parts, resembling flesh and giving weight and girth. However, the hair did little to mask any imperfections as stockings are intended to do, instead every little wispy, fuzzy lock that poked through the gaps in the fibre was amplified and embraced.

“The tactile nature of hair and its relationship to the body arguably lends itself to more sculptural forms and installation configuration that it does to two-dimensionality. Because hair is a component of the physical body, it demonstrates the concept of embodiment through its manifestation as (part of) the body, and, by its symbolic and paradigmatic qualities (Hanna 4).”

My artwork entitled *Whimsy Plus Something the Dog Shat Out*, (2021) was the second more 'playful' exploration containing dog hair and stockings. It was a part whimsical, part slaughterhouse and depicted the various ways in which animal bodies are commonly used in society. I focused on the animal body in meat production, the sausages were spiked through handmade meat hooks and dog 'check' chains which were formally known as 'choke' chains and renamed due to ethical concerns regarding their choking tendencies.



Fig. 13. *Whimsy Plus Something the Dog Shat Out*, hair, stockings, chains, wire, calico, personal photograph by author, Oct 2021.

The audience was led around the room to initially see darker themes in the far corner, then merging into varying displays of frivolity; the sausages sitting in hoops, a group hug on the floor. Once again pulling at the tension between the ugly, darker side of something like meat production and the loving, companionship of your family pet.

This was to be my last installation featuring dog hair and stockings within my practice as I had felt the materials were pushed as far as was necessary at that time. On reflection, I felt that working in a more abstracted, improvisational way was extremely helpful for my practice as I realised that I needed to let go of my tendencies to be a perfectionist and have overt control over my process. Spontaneity has been an aspect of creating that I don't feel comes naturally to me and owing to using fewer materials, felt freeing at the time.

With that being said, I gravitate towards laborious and time-consuming ways of making and the desire to make more intricate pieces of work has greatly influenced my practice this year in comparison to last. Much like Tau Lewis, Nick Cave and David Altmejd, I feel that I can breathe more life into my sculptures the more time and effort I spend on them, allowing for a slower, more deliberate consideration of my works, which enabled deeper thoughts and feelings this year.



Fig. 14. Experimentation with papier mâché, dog hair and stockings, personal photograph by author, Sep 2021.

Plastic in my Fish, Plastic in my Blood

My sculpture entitled *Plastic in my Fish, Plastic in my Blood* (2022), was created in response to two advertisements that seemed to be following me across many viewing platforms. They were by a commentary on the vast amount of sea life ingesting plastic through pollution of our oceans made by the environmental organisation Greenpeace. A second advertisement was based around recent findings of plastic being found in humans too. As stated by Heather A. Leslie:

This pioneering human biomonitoring study demonstrated that plastic particles are bioavailable for uptake into the human bloodstream. An understanding of the exposure of these substances in humans and the associated hazard of such exposure is needed to determine whether or not plastic particle exposure is a public health risk (Leslie et al. 1).

The small amount of plastic found in human blood within the study was small and further investigation into the toxicity of the plastic is still to be done. However, it was too late, I was uncomfortable knowing I could have small pieces of trash, floating around inside of my body. We are very aware of the number of animals who mistakenly ingest plastic thinking it is food and due the findings of this study, I feel a strange sense of kinship with the ocean life of this planet.



Fig. 15. *Plastic in my Fish, Plastic in my Blood*, fabric, plastic, jewellery, nail polish, personal photograph by author, Oct 2022.

I constructed a tuna out of many repurposed items and second-hand finds, I chose the tuna due it being commonly used within the food industry. Teal-blue bedsheets were used to make the casing, the filling was polyester fluff from pillows I had slept on for many years, in addition to left over fabric scraps which created the tuna's volume. I had collected fabric scraps and threads in a cardboard box, alongside cardboard and paper which I had taken from the recycling bin outside the MFA kitchen. Filling the tuna with these gathered materials felt invigorating as this practice significantly reduces my waste production.

The hollowed-out middle of the fish is filled with junk jewellery, soft plastic, beads, stones and an old toothbrush I had been holding onto for years. It's quite common that if I know something won't break down after it has been thrown away, I will store it until I find a purpose for it later. Thus, the six-year-old toothbrush finally has been put to use. I utilised these items as they symbolise the waste that pollutes our environment, endangering many species of animals. Plastic and other forms of made-made rubbish is ingested or wrapped dangerously around birds, turtles and many species of fish. Many of these animals end up starving or are in extreme discomfort until they pass away as a result of the excess waste which ends up in our vast bodies of water. Because of this concern, I feel it was a logical choice to use a well-known vertebrate such as a fish, acting as a symbol and help bring awareness to the greater responsibility of limiting and managing our waste.



Fig. 16. Detailed view of *Plastic in my Fish, Plastic in my Blood*, fabric, plastic, jewellery, nail polish, personal photograph by author, Oct 2022.

The use of the fish, in particular, has been an important shift within the representation of animals in my practice because of the lack of sympathy towards fish and other types of vertebrates. Their aquatic habitats greatly contrast ours on the land and furthermore, I feel

that many believe what happens in the ocean is geographically too far away to be of concern. As previously mentioned, fish also have the largest communication barriers with humans due to their vastly different communication styles such as, lacking in facial expression and limited body language, the inability to make any sounds that humans can hear and the inability to touch or be touched due to their delicate, protective slime coats.



Fig. 16. Detailed view of *Plastic in my Fish, Plastic in my Blood*, fabric, plastic, jewellery, nail polish, personal photograph by author, Oct 2022.

The stylistic choices I made when approaching this tuna, was influenced by a fellow animal rights-based artist, Angela Singer. Her practice involves the: "ethical and epistemological consequences of humans using nonhuman life, and the role that humans play in the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment (Singer)."

Singer's work exists within a beautiful, disturbing and romantic dreamscape. She is known for her vintage taxidermy, which she wraps in vintage jewellery and porcelain, balancing on the edge of creepy and cute. This can especially be noted in her below work, *Still* (2015), in which the wide-eyed doe is reminiscent of the beloved Bambi from our childhood. Though this work is darker in its nature as this isn't a cartoon or illustrated doe, but a real, still born doe.



Fig. 18. Singer, Angela, *Still* - from the series 'Dead-eyed', 2015, vintage taxidermy unborn fawn, vintage bakelite buttons, found jewels, porcelain, personal photograph by author, Oct 2020.

Singer's sculptures have been valuable to my practice as she consistently finds a way to balance the beautiful, loving and delicate aspects of the animal, enmeshed with morbidity and forlornness. These contrasting aesthetics act to remind us of the fragility of many animals, which like Bambi's mother, met a sad end at the hands of a human.

Three: Oneness (gives me wholeness)

Animal Rights and Feminism

Animal rights has played a large role within many early (and current) feminist concerns. I discovered most early supporters were women and as stated by Emily Gaarder, these early advocates ignited the crusade with: "a particular sense of ethics, empathy and action." (Gaarder 1).

One of the first documented animal rights events took place in the 1840s and shortly after, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) was created. Within that time of history, it is said that women were compelled to act due to various ethical principles, possibly based on their natural desire to take the role as caregiver. It has also been said that many women held strong feelings for mistreated animals, much like the many mistreated women in society (Gaarder 7).

Because of these early advocates being majority female, it further resonates why animals have always been important to me, along with the women who raised me. All the women in my family and especially my mother and grandmother, have cared for many different animal species. The lack of hesitation to show kindness and understanding to animals has deepened the relationship I have with my mother. She helped to set an example for adopting lost or neglected pets, as all we have owned have been brought home from the SPCA or other rescue organisations throughout Aotearoa. This early influence, which I have been constantly reflecting on within the process of researching and writing, has revealed how consistent and significant showing compassion for animals has been in my life. I feel as if I have come full circle after reminiscing on how these early role models have shaped my life and practice.

As further analysed by Gaarder, showing compassion and emotion is not seen as a stereotypical masculine trait, therefore, it could give reason as to the why men played a lesser role within the movement and explain the general uncaring attitude towards non-human species (Gaarder 43).

There will be many varying reasons as to why women and men had different points of view within this early stage of the animal rights movement, but Gaarder's overview has helped me understand why I might see differences in the responses I receive from my artwork. In the past, I have felt my work has struck a chord with more sympathetic personality types, generally female identifying. I have wondered if because of that, does my work seem inaccessible to those who don't embrace femininity? I am currently still exploring that aspect as femininity has many forms and to be labelled feminine, doesn't mean it has to be pink and frilly.

My understanding of why I have chosen to embrace the stereotypical idea of femininity within my artwork is because I don't want women's role in animal rights to become lost

within the wider picture. Many conversations I have encountered, concentrated on the abuse and neglect animals face but less so about efforts of those who have tried to stop it. It can be easy to acknowledge the cruelty that animals face, but more difficult to make the necessary alterations to one's lifestyle, when animal abuse is deeply entrenched within many areas of it.

As part of my further research on roles of women's animal rights, I discovered feminist vegetarian theory, a term coined by feminist philosopher, Carol Adams, and comparisons between the treatment of animals and women's bodies became a compelling part of my research. As noted by Linda Burke:

For it has too often been the case that those lacking in power have been derogated by likening to 'animals'. To be likened to 'an animal' in our culture is to be diminished, or to be mindlessly out of control... (Gaarder 4).

As previously noted from the Christian view on animals, they reside on a 'lower level' than humans and throughout history people of colour and women have often been likened to animals. Through varying types of media and language, being compared or called an animal has been used to attack and belittle many groups of people (Gaarder 5-6). This kind of comparison has been successfully used to objectify women's bodies and turn them into no more than a piece of 'meat' and as stated by Carol Adams:

Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent. Rape, in particular, carries such potent imagery that the term is transferred from the literal experience of women and applied metaphorically the other instances of violent devastation, such as the 'rape' of the earth in ecological writings of the early 1970s. The experience of women thus becomes a vehicle for describing other oppressions (Adams 22).

Gaarder and Adams contend the animal body and the female body have, in many ways, been similarly persecuted within society. Through this persecution, women have become considerably sympathetic towards animals and their treatment within our society. As explained by Adams rape for example, has been used to categorise sexual violence against women and violence towards animals and the environment, the animal and female body have become intertwined in similar language of brutality. Over time, this language has been exacerbated and has modern-day implications due to the rise of social media and the continued efforts of scrutinising women's bodies.

Creature Comforts

I have a curiosity when it comes to the way animals have been used within interior design. Leather sofas are made of animal skins, most likely cow for its durability and we sit on them whilst we relax in our lounge. Often there might be a cat or dog beside you, and I find it a bizarre juxtaposition that one of the animals becomes a chair that another one then sits itself on. Do they know they are sitting on cow skin? No, they wouldn't, and I often find myself wondering if we didn't have the same feelings towards cats or dogs. What would they look like in place of the cow used for the leather sofa or the sheep for the sheepskin rug?



Fig. 14. *Creature Comforts*, armchair, wicker basket and fabric, personal photograph by author, August 2022.

The bulk of the chair was made with cotton, fleece sheets and other cotton fabrics, I wanted to emphasise comfort and femininity through colour and ruffled fabric but was aware that such softness wouldn't disarm the oddity of the sculpture. The arms and tail were stuffed with fabric and duvet scraps, and the same duvet became part of *Heel, Doggy!* And the wicker side table is second hand. The frilly edged tablecloth added for extra cuteness, as repetition throughout this work amplifies the 'cute' aspects.

The seat of the chair has a very large spring which feels as though it wants to catapult you back out and eliminates any comfort you might assume to get. The tension between how the chair looks and functions is fitting within the realm of my practice and the ideas I am working with. The glass of milk on the side table also indicates certain niceties associated with sitting down in your favourite armchair but the lumpiness from the wicker weave makes it difficult to place the glass down without tipping. The use of pinks and frills was intended to make this

work less aggressive but in doing so the overwhelming texture of all the ruffles piled so closely unintentionally is aggressive on your senses. The loose, frayed edges of the ruffles give the illusion of wear and tear despite it only existing for a few months. It is quite clunky and lacks a certain level of grace, but appears strong and ready to take weight, the large paws are intended to be inviting and to create a sense of security within them. Of course, unlike real leather couches or ghastly animal skin rugs, I wouldn't use real animal body parts within my artwork, but more so would like to create a suggestion through my use of materials.



Fig. 15. *Creature Comforts* (detailed view), armchair, wicker basket and fabric, personal photograph by author, August 2022.

In contrast to my previous sculptures, *Creature Comforts* was approached from a 'softer' perspective, as I wanted to find a way to emphasise my own feelings and relationship with the animals in my home and the bond we share. As said by Vanessa Apaolaza et al.: "Humans develop strong bonds with pets, especially dogs, which can be perceived as a source of unconditional love, acceptance, and emotional support" (368). The bond that I have with animals and how they make me feel loved and needed, has greatly impacted my life and my ability to nurture.

There is a tactility in this work, and many can't help but run their hands along the ruffles, which is a distinct contrast with my dog hair works, as no one wanted to touch or be close to them at all.

However, there is continued underlying tension in my work. What I often see to be 'sweet', others might label disturbing. Likened to something out of a Studio Ghibli film in a critique, I

feel that there is both a quirkiness and an uneasiness about this chair. The flat, downward turned, rag-doll-esque hands exemplify the juxtaposition of creepy and cute as they are round and soft, but also awkward and uninviting. This tension continues to create strong contrasts and visual intrigue within my work, alongside a personal sense of surprise, as I don't fully interpret the visual effects of my sculptures until I step back and analyse them, after having made them.

Conclusion

I often recall the time I trimmed poor Jasmine's whiskers and feel awfully guilty. As an adult I understand that inevitably we all make mistakes throughout our lives.

The mistakes and shortcuts we take living in this modern society, have greatly factored into my choice to pursue animal rights and environmentalism. I wasn't born making careful choices in terms of my recycling habits and what food I was eating, these were later influenced by many individuals who inspired me to be more thoughtful about how I was treating my environment.

My flatmate recently encouraged me to go "zero waste" and a close friend introduced me to vegetarianism five years ago. We set up a compost bin in our backyard and have very little rubbish filling our yellow bin bags because of it. After trying plastic-free July we decided it was "plastic-free every month" for the rest of our lives. A large majority of my friends are growing their own vegetables, planting in their gardens, and almost all of them have multiple plant babies. I am surrounded by wonderful, caring women whom I work with, all endorsing the rescue of animals from local shelters throughout Aotearoa. The artists both locally and internationally that I have been inspired by have had a hugely positive impact on my practice and I feel I have a lifetime's worth of exploration yet to do.

My overall goal is to educate and help each other be kinder to the environment. Through my visual art practice involving animal-inspired representations, I hope I can help create that connection and continue the conversation.

Not everyone will listen, not everyone will care, but a few will and that's all I need to know that my words and artwork have been valuable.

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