



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 6/Issue 2/December 2025

Ecocene Arts



Seeds Over Stems

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Pallay, Emma. 2025. "Seeds Over Stems." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 2 (December): 223–230. <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.140>.

Artwork/ Received: 02.12.2025 /Accepted: 24.12.2025

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Seeds Over Stems

by Emma Pally



About the Artist

Emma Pally is a multidisciplinary artist living and working on the unceded lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation in Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyang (Montréal). She completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Print Media Major, at Concordia University, graduating with Distinction in 2018, a Bachelor of Arts, Psychology Major, at Concordia University in 2023, and a Master of Fine Arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2024. She is a member of Atelier Circulaire and Zocalo, artist-run centers dedicated to printed arts, and the Baie D'Urfé Potter's Guild.

Seeds Over Stems

Emma Pallay

As a child, I loved walking in the woods with my grandmother and her two dogs. I would spend hours in the forest, known as Parc des Arbres, which has since been bulldozed to make way for a new light rail system. During our walks, I loved watching for frogs sunbathing or swimming through the marshland. I was desperate for the creatures to like me, and I longed to connect with them. If a frog jumped in my direction, I would take it as a sign that I could hang around just a little longer. I recognized that the frogs had agency and lives of their own, and that they had their own social structures. I desired to be invited in by them to understand them better. When I looked into their eyes, I recognized their individuality. I wondered: what did they see when they looked into mine?

In my early teens, I fell in love with a dachshund named Cartouche while volunteering at a dog rescue center and consequently adopted him. His life had an enormous impact on mine. His small body, odd in its proportions, reminded me of a little pig. He taught me to imagine that the pig on my dinner plate had a personality of their own. My outlook shifted as I started to understand the division between animals seen as companions and those viewed as food. I explored PETA 2, a branch of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—a website geared towards teenagers. I forced myself to watch videos of the horrendous treatment of animals being held captive for various human uses, bearing witness to their unimaginable suffering. It is of utmost importance to question how the systems that abuse more-than-human animals, particularly those whom we consider food in the West, were normalized as part of our culture. These systems view more-than-human animals as products that can be exploited and consumed. I did not have intrinsic cultural or religious connections to animal personhood. Yet, my childhood love for my animal companions, initially learned from my mother, led me to cultivate an egalitarian view of all animals.

Donna Haraway writes about the importance of questioning “what stories we use to tell other stories” (2016, 12). Considering this, I ask myself whose stories I wish to tell and how. What are the hierarchical implications of being a human representing more-than-human animals? I am uncertain if I have an answer to this question. However, ignoring the subject entirely due to any lingering uncertainty would be much less productive to the cause. So, if my artwork causes someone to think about the individuals I draw for one moment longer than they would otherwise, then I will have succeeded in some way. With these ideas in mind, I create drawings and prints representing more-than-human animals to promote empathy, acknowledge their individuality, and encourage interspecies friendships. I value my relationships with the animals who inspire my artwork. First and foremost, my practice is rooted in sincere love. I feel proud to know them. I want to honour them and demonstrate my love for them. Through my art, I aim to create deeper connections between myself and more-than-human animals and broaden the possibilities of interspecies friendships for myself and others.

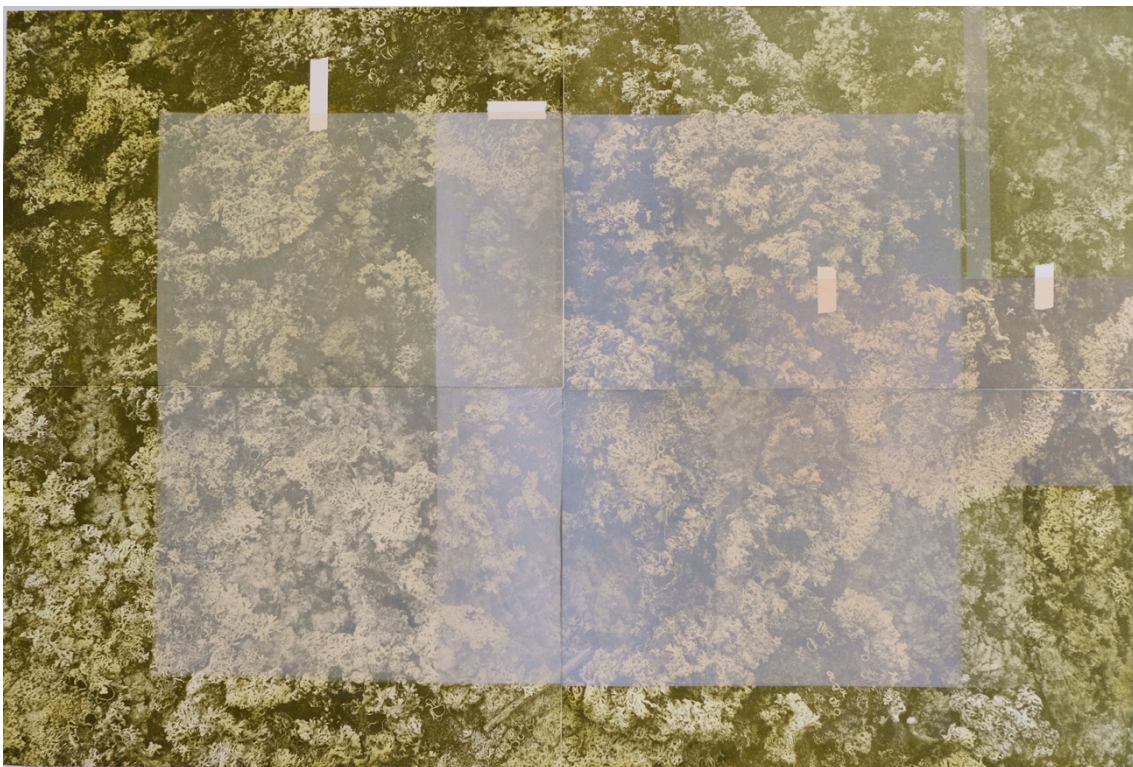


Figure 1. *Untitled I*, 2022. Photogravure and relief, 29.75 x 44.5 inches.



Figure 2. *Untitled II*, 2022. Photogravure and relief, 25 x 30 inches.

Untitled I (2022) (see Fig. 1) and *Untitled II* (2022) (see Fig. 2) are photogravure prints on cotton paper completed in my first semester in the MFA program in 2022. These photo-based works began as digital images taken during a camping trip in the Parc National Des Grands-Jardins on the traditional and unceded territory of the Nitassinan (Innu) and Wendake-Nionwentsio Nations. On this trip, walking and observing my surroundings were integral to my work. I encountered several more-than-human beings: mosses, lichens, porcupines, a hare, caribous, and pheasants, each of whom I felt grateful to have encountered, even if just for a moment. They appear at first to be aerial views. In reality, they are macro photographs of lichens. The translucent paneling serves both as a reminder of the process of creating the work, as I often use vellum to draw, layering it to plan out the image, and as a reflection on the ways humans occupy and divide land for their own uses, leaving little room for our more-than-human cohabitants. The orange line in *Untitled II* references the spray paint marks that identify trees destined to be cut down.

These works are significant to my thesis because it is itself a beginning and an ending. I began my MFA program without the intention of creating artwork based on more-than-human animals. While I was deeply passionate about animal ethics, it was a

sensitive and heartbreaking subject for me. As a teen, I expressed my beliefs about animals to others but often faced ridicule. This made it difficult for me to share my thoughts on the matter and explore them in my artwork. I am grateful to my supervisor, Julie Andreyev, for supporting my exploration and experimentation and, most importantly, for reassuring me that this work is important.



Figure 3. *Fiona*, 2023. Etching, image area 24 x 18 inches.

The first print I made in the MFA program, when I began exploring more-than-human animal stories, is Fiona, an etching on cotton paper (see Fig. 2). Fiona was a turkey I admired from a distance for several months during winter and spring of 2021–22. I wrote an accompanying story about her:

A single turkey lay in the yard by my mother's home for several days. I spent time there too, watching her from afar. Then, I noticed her limping. I wondered if I should offer her food to keep her nearby to rest her leg. So, I Googled "What to feed turkeys?" and was offered tips on how to fatten turkeys up for slaughter. Then, in the evening, I saw her fly into a tree, her large body perched precariously on a branch. To this, I Googled "Turkey roosting," only to be given suggestions on finding where turkeys sleep to "plan a successful hunt." The last I saw of her was a three-toed footprint in the snow. I think of her struggle in this world; what is her place here? How can I continue to remember her?

The print and story about Fiona function as a kind of observational study. It demonstrates my relationships with the animals I draw and how getting to know them is fundamental to my methodology. Using etching was crucial for this project because it demands meticulous attention throughout the process, from preparing the plate to the drawing. I used a non-toxic acid resist and drew directly onto the resist with markers. The drawing was based on a preliminary sketch. Then, I began to draw through the surface of the resist with my etching needle. Finally, I etched and printed it. Etching is a time-consuming process that involves several stages to complete. The time spent on the process allowed for deeper reflection on Fiona. Etching was used as a method to create multiples and was important for the dissemination of information. I value the link between traditional printmaking methods such as etching and its connection to producing books and telling stories, as this print also functions as a way for me to tell Fiona's story.

My recent work has focused on my rabbit companions, Daphne and Paulette, who were abandoned at the Farm Sanctuary, where I previously volunteered, and I later adopted. Rabbits are highly sensitive animals. Paulette has a chronic respiratory disease, and through research I conducted on their care before bringing them into our home, I learned the importance of noticing subtle changes in their behavior to monitor their health, something I now do daily as I watch over Paulette's condition. My portraiture work always starts with a close, personal observation.



Figure 4. *Daphne & Paulette*, 2025. Etching with chine collé, image area 12 x 9 inches.

Rabbits are a unique species, blurring Western distinctions between livestock, animals bred for science, and companion animals. They exist in multiple realms. Humans use their flesh and fat for food, their skin and fur for fashion, and their bodies for scientific testing. At the same time, rabbits remain deeply symbolic figures across many cultures,

and increasingly, they share our homes as pets. Yet, as companion animals, they are often misunderstood, fed improper diets, and given inadequate care.

Not long ago, while teaching a workshop, someone asked me, quite seriously, if I would eat my rabbits when I'm done with them. I have also heard countless jokes about rabbit soup and stories of family pets who became family meals. I often wonder why people feel compelled to tell me these things, knowing how deeply I adore my rabbit companions. Perhaps it's an attempt to ease their own discomfort when faced with the ambiguity of these animals, creatures who defy neat categorization and stir complex feelings in us.

Daphne & Paulette (2025) (see Fig. 4) does not depict rabbits as part of a landscape or still life, where their bodies are displayed for the human gaze. They take a strong stance and look directly at the viewer. Here, they are neither meek prey animals nor passive subjects; they are individuals who stare back.



Figure 5. *Seeds Over Stems* (Trial Proof), 2025. Etching, 22 x 30 inches.

Seeds Over Stems (2025–ongoing) (see Fig. 5) is an in-progress series of etchings made in collaboration with Daphne and Paulette. I have spent a lot of time watching them eat. Every single time, when they come across a piece of hay with a seed head, they eat it as

usual, but once they reach the base of the seed head, they snap it off from the stem and leave the rest behind. I often find these leftover stems scattered around our shared living space, and sometimes I collect them, keeping them in a small vase on display in my bedroom. I always know these pieces once held a seed head because they leave only the very base attached to the stem. The etchings are drawings of these seed heads, displayed side by side with either Daphne's or Paulette's alterations to the original. For five consecutive days, and I plan to continue this series, I selected a piece of hay from their supply that had a seed head. After drawing the initial piece of hay, I offer it to whomever of them seems most ready to alter it at that moment. As expected, they eat it, leaving only a trace behind. Once they finish, I take it back and draw the newly altered piece of hay.

My artworks are a deeper observation and a more meaningful connection with the more-than-human animals who inspire each piece. I am searching for ways to become more attuned to them, whether through observational drawing, detailed portraiture, or, in this case, through a study completed with one of their favorite foods. Their likes and dislikes, their choices, what they eat and what they leave behind, become part of the artwork.

Notes

¹ The following article draws from my 2024 Master of Fine Arts thesis: *"Love Letters to the Animals I Know,"* on pages 1-7, and includes new writing from page 7 onward.

² Note: I use "more-than-human animals" when referring to animals and excluding humans. Sometimes, I use the word "animals" for ease of phrase or when I am also referring to humans. I also use a plural form for the word for animals, such as "sheeps" and "gooses", as this denotes the animals as individuals. These decisions are informed by the HUMN 317: Animal Ethics and Creativity Course Style Guide, taught by Julie Andreyev at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

³ I am grateful to live and work in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang (Montréal), the unceded Indigenous lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation. Tiohtià:ke was traditionally known as a gathering place for meeting and exchange. I am grateful to be in this place, thinking about new ways to connect with more-than-human animals.

References

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