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Wild Figurations

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by Sara Kay Maston



About the Artist

Sara Kay Maston is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the vantage point of animals such as insects, single-celled organisms, domestic horses, birds and rodents. Her work takes the form of ceramics, paintings, and textile installations to articulate parallel lifeworlds that are indicative of a distant ancestor's sense of physicality or distinct rhythm of nature. Maston holds an MFA from York University and is pursuing a degree in Information Science at UofT to develop methods of archiving and mediating ephemeral nonhuman animal knowledge. Additionally, she is a member of the Asian-pop-girl-band-artist-collective XVK, founded by Maston, Xuan Ye, and Veronique Sunatori.

Wild Figurations

Sara Kay Maston

Much of my practice can be categorized as creating works about animals and the wild. I make paintings with figures of bats, worms, spiders, snakes, and horses. This might seemingly be in contrast with my inner-city upbringing. My hometown, Toronto, is mostly characterized by greys, some browns, and more frequently blues from the multiplying reflective condo towers. Nevertheless, I keep a horizontal view of my surroundings, even though my primary experience of other beings is often broadcasted images of wildness from a pocket-sized LED display. While navigating this realm composed of human-made systems, I consider the notion that my body's microbiome hosts a veritable 1:1 ratio between human cells and other microorganisms, bacteria, and fungi (Sender, Fuchs, and Milo 2016). As such, I am conscious of the shared natural environments of a multispecies world—regardless of whether this world is paved under concrete. I take refuge in the purslane growing from the sidewalk cracks, the centipedes congregating around the bathtub drain, and the network of underground rivers that flow beneath my studio.

My home and studio reside on an ever-expanding concrete jungle called Tkaronto/Toronto, which is built on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples and is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. My family is dispersed across and between California and Toronto, with ancestors traced from Scandinavia and China. As a result, I do not carry a strong connection to any one place, although I have been thinking about the notion of responsibility to the local place where we make our homes (Kimmerer 2013). My practice of knowledge and empathy for other living beings stems from a prominent awareness of mortality. Experiencing the death of my mother in my infancy generated an acute sense of the value of life: my own, the lives of other people, other species, and the life of the environment. My responsibility and decision making is informed by perspectives in Indigenous scholarship, such as those expressed by Leanne Simpson, who positions theory as contextual and relational, containing spiritual presence, emotion, whole-body intelligence, and deriving meaning

through a web of interrelated relationships and lived experiences (Simpson 2014). This ecological framework has given me tangible points of reference to holistic spaces shared between humans and more-than-human beings.



Figure 1. Maston, Sara. *Eyes that See in the Dark*, 2020. 82" x 59", oil on canvas, porcelain. Polina Tief photo.

Among my artistic influences are the works of Inuit artists such as Pudlo Pudlat, for his imaginative rendition of hybrid relationships between anthropocentric and nonhuman animal cultures, and Shuvana Ashoona, for her drawings that invite perspectival and relational shifts towards a world where multiple worlds and subsequent creatures coexist. The notion of becoming an integral part of nature rather than merely an observer of nature is cited from various forms of Indigenous traditions and pedagogy. As Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd states, nonhuman animals and human-environmental relations are embedded in every aspect of life, and practicing reciprocity, care, and tenderness towards more-than-human beings is a method of centering these nonhuman relations (Todd 2018).

It is with these teachings in mind that I begin situating my own relations within an experiential field where individuated bodily materiality is already becoming coterminous with internal desires, shifts, and potentials. This proves to be an ethical implication concerning the networked nature of our activity. An acknowledgement of the agency within a more-than-human world is also found in Anthropologists Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese's definition of care—as relational between people, environments, and objects, taking form as practices of empathy, sympathy, and fellow feeling. Care is discussed by Hobart and Kneese as an affective and connective tissue between the inner self and an outer world that, when mobilized, “offers visceral, material, and emotional heft to acts of preservation that span a breadth of localities: selves, communities, and social worlds” (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2). On broadening the scope of care towards the terrestrial, Canadian poet Robert Bringham suggests that humans expand their moral sphere by situating the earth as a reference point (Bringham and Zwicky 2018). Thinking like an ecosystem is a paradigm shift towards cultural and biological disobedience over anthropocentric practices that impart violence on an all-too-mortal world. In a time marked by accelerating climate crisis and mass extinction, embedding individual and collective desires within a living environment necessitates relationships predicated on kinship, a holistic interdependency between all beings. Kinship relations are found in the ontologies of indigenous populations the world over. Careful, reflexive activities undertaken with interconnectedness in mind are vital, they structure commitment to actions undertaken with deep time in mind, necessary anywhere where stewardship intends to exist. It is vital that we learn from these perspectives by shifting our collectivity processes away from accelerated detachment towards rituals of environmental attunement. As anthropologist Arturo Escobar notes, those without rituals that link the self with a multi-species cosmoverse are in dire need of new stories that re-write the sacred and the universe, the human and the nonhuman (Escobar 2018).

Posthumanist thinker Dr. Bayo Akomolafe, who speaks about surrendering Human centrality, emphasizes a ritual of slowness in light of the climate emergency stating that “the times are urgent; let us slow down and listen deeply” (Akomolafe 2021). Artmaking can be an effective tool in both storytelling and embodying a sense of slowness. The *Legend Lin Dance Theatre* founded by Taiwanese choreographer Lin Lee-Chen is focused on the spiritual perception that all elements of the environment contain a soul. Performed in mythical costumes sourced from the Miao and Dong ethnic groups and Taiwanese aborigines, Lin’s sustained process of working through slow choreography elucidating minute details of the environment demonstrates the measured and meditative quality of her practice. *The Song of Pensive Beholding* (2009), for example, is a dance performance produced over nine years as the last chapter to her trilogy, *Heaven, Earth and Human Beings* (2000–2009). When concentrating on the surface of an object, Lin describes looking inwards to express what one sees outwardly in subtle and deliberate movements (Chen 2014). In my own methodology, meticulously exploring the perception of other beings is similarly guided by the principle that looking inward and addressing inner impulses reflects my external perception of the outer world.

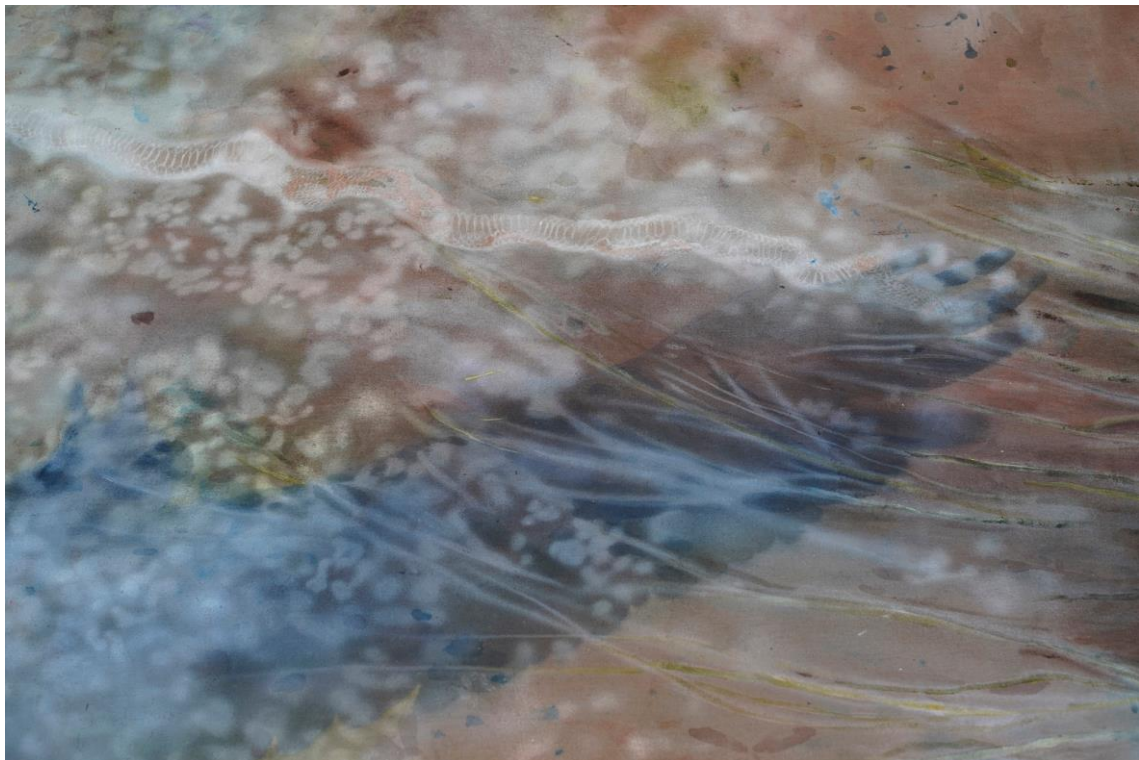


Figure 2. Maston, Sara. *Ground*, 2020. 52” x 106” (detail), oil and acrylic on linen. Daniel Paterson photo.

The approach of looking inward and reflecting on what we see outwardly is also understood as a process of painting. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the interior and exterior vision that relates to the movement of a painter's body left by traces from a brush in paint. According to Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Merleau-Ponty defines the painter's body as an aspect of the world. Explicating Merleau-Ponty, she writes: "We cannot imagine a painting without a body—without hand and eye—or without movement. But the very body that moves and that the painter uses to descend to the depths of being in trying to grasp how sensation and perceptual experience arise—that body is made of the same stuff as the world. It is flesh as the world is flesh" (Nicholsen 2003, 68). By painting with an awareness of my environment, the viscera of thick or thin paint, and the pressure exerted through brushed and wiped marks exhibits both the possibilities and limits of my body's ability to perceive and respond to, for example, the nature of another creature's experience. Painting for me involves a lot of looking. There are also many pauses in-between that may or may not have anything to do with the work itself. To understand these actions within a painting, viewers must be willing to take time considering the concept of the space, the illusion, and the various references that appear within the medium of paint. My perceptual experience of painting requires both mental and physical energy influenced by a variety of subconscious and conscious decisions such as my choice of brush, the colour, the viscosity of paint, the pressure of a mark or the direction and placement of a stroke.

The consciousness and perception I speak to in painting, which is possessed variously among animal species, has evolved throughout hundreds of millennia. Human sentience is but one of numerous forms of animal awareness (Shepard 1997). My work explores methods of animal communication that humans tend to overlook such as body language, inaudible sound waves, scent, or oscillations. In my painting *Eyes that See in the Dark*, for example, a human figure is rendered through echolocation—imagining bat vision—a process similar to how a dolphin visualizes their surroundings by bouncing biological sonar waves off of their surroundings. The work is seven feet tall and four-and-a-half feet wide. When displayed, it is propped up against the wall like a full-length mirror that invites the viewer to adjust their perspective and enter a bat's environment painted from an aerial nighttime vantage point. This work is the result of a method I employ in which I attempt to render visible and unlearn conventional ways of looking by interlinking human and non-human actors across different scales.



Figure 3. Maston, Sara. *Mother*, 2018. 49" x 49", oil on wood, hummingbird, stoneware, bean bun. Jake Zabusky photo.

I choose painting to make slow work. I am susceptible to becoming enthralled in the media of new technical advancements: the temporal acceleration of a perpetual newsfeed tends to eclipse the intrinsic deep timescales of the earth. This type of individuated embodiment separates the organism from its environment. There are unsettling parallels between this techno-utopic sense of time and that of earth's time by describing the correlation between conceptions of a society valuing immediacy, and the decomposition

of earth's capital, e.g. the layers of gasses in the atmosphere (Bjornerud 2020). Painting is my personal resistance to efficiency.



Figure 4. Maston, Sara. *Lotus Vessel and Tea Vessel*, 2019. Stoneware, lotus seeds, porcelain, wood. Daniel Paterson photo.

One of my strategies to slow down the experience of a work is to stage a space in which the viewer may enter the painting from multiple directions and navigate through transparent layers, or around solid space. Sometimes I work on mesh fabric as a method of distancing the viewer from the traditional format of painting on stretched canvas, as well as to further articulate a symbolic space that encourages the spectator to recognize their place and movements in relation to differing sensations derived from the physical composition of multiple forms-of-life (see Fig. 1–3). The scale of these mesh paintings acknowledges and implicates the perception and physical proportions of the viewer. By layering transparent paintings, recognizable elements elusively appear in the field of vision, oftentimes intermingling with imagery that is indicative of a distant ancestor's sense of physicality or an alternative rhythm of nature. These paintings are a response to the states of becoming and un-becoming characterized by multispecies flourishing.

My time within the Covid-19 pandemic has opened space for different ways of being—for better or worse. In the height of the 2020 spring and summer lockdown, as my dependence on online platforms intensified, so too did a specific longing: to dig a hole.

This desire stemmed from a visceral urge to smell different kinds of roots and feel the cool/damp/granular material of earth. I have a friend trained in archaeology who taught me how to dig a very precise hole. The structure of the hole became what intrigued me, but not for excavation or collection purposes (see Fig. 5). As American anthropologist Anna Tsing describes of multispecies assemblages, nested systems are sometimes perceptible, as a mushroom coming up overnight in the cooler fall season, and other times operating in silent interrelationships as in networks of invisible fungi irrigating the roots of trees (Tsing 2015). A simple hole will suffice in allowing closer proximity to what we often overlook: multiple lifeworlds beneath our feet operating in parallel to our own sensibilities of space and time, and to one another.



Figure 5. Maston, Sara. *Distant Ancestor*, 2021. 29" x 29", acrylic on canvas, water. Erin Storus photo.

In the coming months, I will be working on a project as part of XVK (三喜)—an artist collective formed by Veronique Sunatori, Xuan Ye, and myself. Our latest film, *The Auspicious Spell*, will premiere in the fall of 2022 as a three-channel video exploring topics of metamorphosis, foraging, cooking, and vegetable transformations. I am also conducting cross-disciplinary research with media-sound artists Joyce To and Tyler Cunningham to trace the tensions within notions of digital immateriality and the

physical systems that sustain its infrastructure. Our work will culminate in an interactive installation that combines clay instruments and computer-generated sonic gestures.

Building on these musings, I have been thinking about other-than-human animals as artists in their own right, and the possibility of framing cross-species kinship in artistic collaboration. My studio practice has been punctuated by digging holes, spending extended periods of time with more-than-human species, installing work in outdoor spaces, and observing moments of slowness and solitude.

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