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Art Making as an Ecofeminist Exercise in Understanding Species Extinction and Animal Farming

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The College of Wooster

Art Making as an Ecofeminist Exercise in Understanding Species Extinction and Animal
Farming

by Adrian Rowan

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Senior Independent Study Requirements for the
Department of Art and Art History

Advised by:

Walter Zurko

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“Where, then, is the anxious chaos spinning against our hearts? There is a disconnect between our hearts and our manners, between morality and life, between the lofty realms of our consciences and the base realms of practical, everyday life.” (Bendik-Keymer, 78)

The realities of our catastrophic impact on the planet are irrupting more and more frequently and urgently into the public sphere. Elizabeth Kolbert's 2014 book *The Sixth Extinction* reports that amphibian extinction rates are about forty-five thousand times higher than normal and that "It is estimated that one-third of all reef-building corals, a third of all fresh-water mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed towards oblivion."¹ Meanwhile, in the United States alone, over 9 billion animals are slaughtered every by the meat industry, a figure that does not include any aquatic animals like fish or crustaceans.²

The connection between this mass extinction and industrial farming is undeniable, with animal farming being the biggest culprit in this system. Habitat loss to make way for grazing animals or the growth of their feed (typically corn and soybeans) is the single largest contributing factor to extinction, "...particularly when coupled with other deleterious effects of livestock production, including climate change and pollution"³, with livestock production estimated to contribute to 18% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.⁴

These facts run through my mind often as I attempt to make some sort of sense of what they mean on a personal level. How can I respond to this information in an ethical

¹ Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

² "Farm Animal Statistics: Slaughter Totals : The Humane Society of the United States," accessed March 6, 2016, http://www.humanesociety.org/news/resources/research/stats_slaughter_totals.html.

³ Virginia Morell, "Meat-Eaters May Speed Worldwide Species Extinction, Study Warns," *Science*, August 11, 2015, doi:10.1126/science.aad1607.

⁴ M. de Vries and I. J. M. de Boer, "Comparing Environmental Impacts for Livestock Products: A Review of Life Cycle Assessments," *Livestock Science* 128, no. 1–3 (March 2010): 1–11, doi:10.1016/j.livsci.2009.11.007.

way? The reality is that even if I understand these problems intellectually, it does not necessarily translate to my own life.

Perhaps it is *easier* to keep this distance between knowledge of an issue and our own lives, or to place blame outside of ourselves—on the government, on the corporations, farmers. It is a way to deflect responsibility and hold us morally superior to *the other* that we see as more directly causing the suffering and death that we so abhor. We may feel discomfort about these facts, we certainly do not *approve* of death and suffering, but we rarely feel implicated in the reality of our own role, and we even more rarely comprehend what these statistics mean for the individual non-human animal lives bound up in these systems. Mindfulness of my own role has to be a choice, a choice to move beyond a detached knowledge of a problem and actively implicate myself in its perpetuation.

In order to simplify these concepts and to comprehend my role in them, my Senior Independent Study focuses in more closely, creating pieces about specific species in different classes (amphibians, mammals, birds, and fish), and even further concentrating on specific *individual* non-human animals that live or die based off of human actions. Working across a variety of media, each piece serves as an exercise in understanding the concepts they represent and my role in perpetuating them.

The creation of these labor-intensive pieces acts as a personal exercise in implicating myself in the facts associated with extinction and animal farming and as a way of empathizing with the individual lives involved. Most of these pieces involve repetitive and time-consuming methods. This concept is drawn largely from Jeremy Bendik-Keymer's article "Species Extinction and the Vice of Thoughtlessness: The

Importance of Spiritual Exercises for Learning Virtue”.⁵ Bendik-Keymer describes a spiritual writing exercise that aims to “...to create a habit of thoughtfulness in the *writer*, and by way of teaching, to suggest one to the reader.”⁶ Here I broaden that idea, replacing “writer” with “maker” (myself) and “reader” with “viewer”.

In undergoing these exercises through visual art, I am choosing to understand environmental ethics through an ecofeminist lens. This way of thinking emphasizes an attentiveness to one’s own body and the bodies of others in opposition to “...a contemptuous and deliberate denial of the body in ethical decision-making and in the production of knowledge”⁷ common in Western environmental ethics. This doesn’t disregard factual information about environmental problems, but acknowledges the limits of this type of thinking in truly internalizing a problem. In creating representational pieces, I am attempting to attend to the bodies of non-human animals as directly as possible through the physical act of making.

When considered as a whole, the series illustrates a larger picture of how we interact with non-human animals. The result is a series of pieces that are deeply personal, interrelated, and illustrative of the larger issues touched upon above, but the specific and representational nature of their subject matter makes them easy for the viewer to access. This draws the complexities of these issues together in a single statement: Each of us have a tangible effect on other individual lives.

⁵ Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, “Species Extinction and the Vice of Thoughtlessness: The Importance of Spiritual Exercises for Learning Virtue,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23, no. 1–2 (June 14, 2009): 61–83, doi:10.1007/s10806-009-9190-5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Traci Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette: An Ethics of Paying Attention to Animals,” *Ethics & the Environment* 15, no. 1 (2010): 101–21.

The first piece *Slow Disappearance of the Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog* is a series of 20 prints arranged in a 5x4 grid depicting the Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog. As seen in figure 1, the grid is read from left to right and the image on each subsequent print is slightly faded, with the last image (on the bottom left) being almost blank, just a faint outline and the embossment of the plate visible.

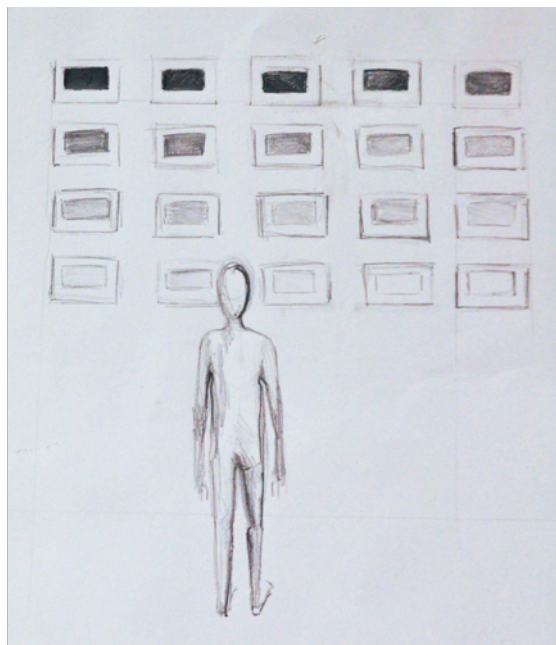


Figure 1. Installation concept for *Slow Disappearance of the Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog*. 2016.

This piece uses hard-ground etching and aquatint on a 5"x7" zinc plate rendered in a style reminiscent of traditional black and white zoological prints (Figure 2). The plate is printed in the same way each time, but before each printing the plate is placed back into the acid bath for 30 seconds so the entire surface is etched. The image on the surface of the plate is slowly eroded away, and the successive prints show a gradual fading of the image.

The mountain yellow-legged frog is a species endemic to California and federally listed as endangered species as of 2002.⁸ As with many other amphibians, this frog is threatened by a large number of extinction-causing factors, all related to human activity.

⁸ "Species Profile for Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog (*Rana muscosa*)," *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Environmental Conservation Online System*, n.d., http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/profile/speciesProfile.action?spcode=D02H.

Once one the most common vertebrates in its range, this species has been on a sharp decline for decades. While conservations efforts are in place, the threats to the mountain yellow-legged frog are numerous. A huge role in their decline is the industrial farming practices common to California, in particular contamination due to pesticide run-off.⁹



Figure 2. Rowan, Adrian. *Slow Disappearance of the Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog*. Detail. 2016. Hardground and aquatint on zinc.

When an animal goes extinct, sometimes it is hard to comprehend how it happened. The process can be slow and hard to see. The practice of slowly degrading this image is an exercise in comprehending species loss within a human timescale and in implicating myself in that process.

⁹ Roland Knapp, "Contaminants," *The Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog Site*, n.d., <http://www.mylfrog.info/threats/contaminants.html>.

While this piece is more overtly representative of the loss of an entire species rather than individuals, focusing on the changes in specific details that occur from print to print is a useful exercise in picking out the individual. The display of the series will show the subtle changes from one print to the next while also showing the larger trend of a move from a clear image to little or no image at all.

This process contrasts with traditional methods of etching that allow for the production of multiples. Instead of an edition, this piece is comprised of 20 different monoprints created from the same image. In subverting the traditional printmaking process and its tendency towards exact copies of one image I am forced to further consider the concept of individualism even among a larger category such as a species.

Creating an image reminiscent of zoological prints and then slowly destroying it also serves to break down the traditional system of emphasizing scientific thought to understand an ecological issue.

Human-caused extinction takes on many forms, some more direct than others. The passenger pigeon was officially declared extinct in 1914 when the last known pigeon, Martha, passed away in the Cincinnati Zoo.¹⁰ The role of humans in this case is clear: this bird that used to number in the billions and credited by many accounts to fly in flocks so large they would darken the sky for hours was hunted to extinction within 100 years.¹¹ In this case the issue is largely one of humans underestimating the scope of our impact. It seems impossible that a bird so prolific could have been extinguished so quickly, and this is precisely what made the extinction possible. Hunters employed a

¹⁰ “Why the Passenger Pigeon Went Extinct,” *Audubon*, April 17, 2014, <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/may-june-2014/why-passenger-pigeon-went-extinct>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

multitude of different tactics to slaughter birds in mass numbers, including capturing them in huge nets, setting fire to their roosts,¹² and utilizing a “Judas pigeon”: After a captured bird was blinded, “Rope was tied around its feet and then the bird was tossed into the air to flutter back down, catching the attention of migrating pigeons, and calling them to land.”¹³

This sculptural piece *Partial Skeletal Representations of the Extinct Bird, Passenger Pigeon* is made up of 55 individual sculptures of pigeons (Figure 3). Each bird



Figure 3. Rowan, Adrian. *Partial Skeletal Representations of the Extinct Bird, Passenger Pigeon*. Detail. 2016. Wood, wire, and porch screen.

has a carved wooden skull and body created with the use of a Dremel rotary tool from found wood and then stained a dark walnut color. The wooden head and body each measure approximately 3”x1”. The neck, legs, tail, and wing structure are constructed from a dark grey wire. Tail and wing feathers are cut made from window screen and sewn together. The skull and wings of each bird are modeled as closely as possible to be anatomically correct representations of the passenger pigeon, while the other elements of the body are stylized. The wire elements are inserted into drilled holes in the skull and body and

¹² Ibid.

¹³ thebrainscoop, *Year of the Passenger Pigeon*, accessed March 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPRpX25L5DU>.

held in place by epoxy. Each finished pigeon is around 10” in length with a 12-15” wingspan and is held aloft by one piece of grey-tinted monofilament fed through a hole drilled down the center of the body.

The birds are hung from the ceiling in a flock-like arrangement with at various heights and angles but all following the same flight path. The specific materials were chosen to approximate some of the methods used to kill passenger pigeons. Staining the wood gives the carved elements a charred appearance, the window screen is reminiscent of netting, and the organically bent wire suggests the rope tied to the legs of the Judas pigeons.

While the birds have an overall uniform appearance, because they are all made individually no two are alike. The individual pieces become clearer as the viewer approaches the piece and eventually stands among the flock.

This piece serves to highlight a contrast between life and death and between abundance and finiteness. While the birds are positioned in a way that suggests life, their visible skeletal structure and the use of a tinted monofilament line used to suspend them from the ceiling confronts the viewer with their actual lifelessness. The large number of uniform birds and their position in a tight flock makes it more challenging to comprehend the birds as individuals, but the variation and the ability to view the piece intimately allows the viewer to consider each bird as a unique individual.

Hand-carving the individual pigeons is a personal exercise in understanding the concept of the individual non-human animal, particularly as it exists within a larger group (such as an entire species). This was a particularly important concept to focus on with the passenger pigeon, a quintessential example of human-caused species extinction. The

exercise demonstrates a turn toward "...a recognition of animals as complex, living beings, rather than as two-dimensional symbols, convenient metaphors, and passive objects of study.”¹⁴

Creating these birds is also an attempt at understanding the concept of species extinction. Extinct animals can only be understood through our ideas of them as presented in text, images, or physical remains. The process of carving a large number of birds reinforces the fact I can never begin to understand a species that only exists as a memory. As I initially carved their skulls, I carefully looked at existing photographs of passenger pigeon skeletons to create an accurate representation. As I made more birds I relied less on actual models and instead constructing them from my own memory. Creating the birds from my own memory built up many layers of mediation between the actual, physical bird I was trying to represent and the final piece. In the installation the viewer is presented with a faint echo of something that once existed.

Installation of this piece is largely inspired by the artist Ann Coddington Rast's 2012 piece *passage* (Figure 4). The density of the grouping creates a visual illusion. The viewer perceives this piece as representing many individual birds, but upon closer inspection it is clear that the objects are not birds, but one repeated shape set at different angles. Tinted monofilament suspending the pieces creates a striking contrast between the straight vertical lines and the organic shapes and their arrangement.

¹⁴ Warkentin, "Interspecies Etiquette."



Figure 4 Coddington Rast, *Ann. passage*, detail 2012. Ceramic slip cast and waxed linen Weston Art Gallery Cincinnati

This inability to comprehend the finite nature of resources continues to be a problem for our society. Today, bluefin tuna populations have been decimated globally due to overfishing.¹⁵ A companion piece to *Passenger Pigeons* is a single sculpture of a bluefin tuna skeleton created with a similar process entitled *One Bluefin Tuna Skeleton*. The head is around two feet long and made up of several individual pieces of bent wood that approximate the fragmented construction of the actual skull of a bluefin tuna. The vertebrae is bent wire with carved wooded protrusions projecting from the spine, with the resulting piece measuring around 6'x1' (Figure 5).

¹⁵ Paul Greenberg, "Tuna's End," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/magazine/27Tuna-t.html>.

While this piece and *Passenger Pigeons* are distinct, their display is interconnected. The bluefin tuna sculpture is displayed trailing behind the flock of birds at eye-level. Installing the two pieces in this manner reinforces the connection between bluefin tuna decline and the passenger pigeon's extinction. We appear to have not learned our lesson the first time, as both species are subject to the same human failure.

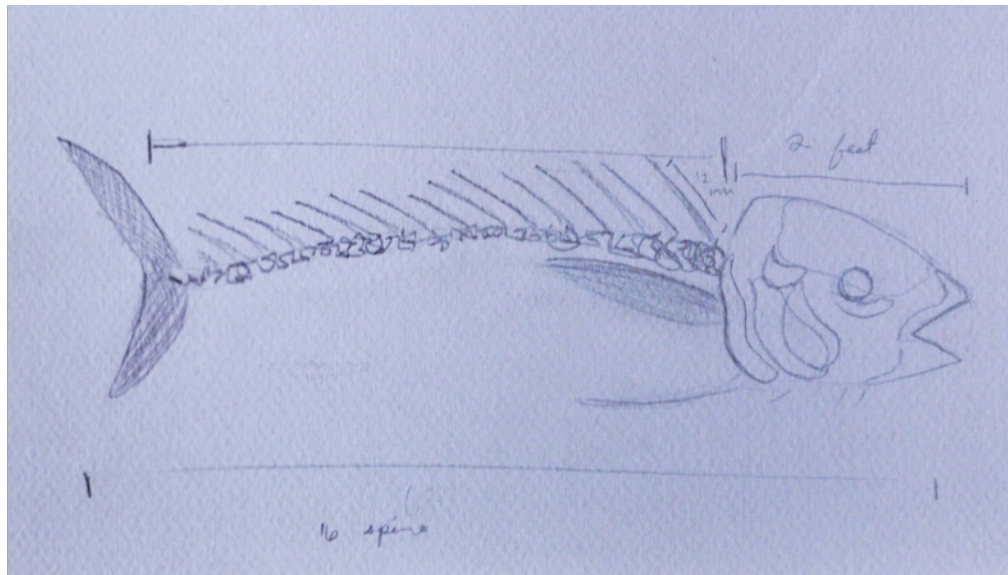


Figure 5. Concept sketch for *One Bluefin Tuna Skeleton*. 2016.

To further the concept introduced *Passenger Pigeons*, it is important include a piece relating to an ocean-dwelling animal, as there is no other earthly place like the ocean that skirts our comprehension of the finite. Its vastness fools us into the idea that the ocean contains an infinite number of resources. Because it is impossible to comprehend that there is a finite number of bluefin, it becomes all the more important to think of these fish as individual beings rather than a harvestable resource. In attending to the body of non-human animal empathetically, we can begin to erase any ideas of hierarchy based on anthropocentric values. Positioning the bluefin skeleton at eye-level

allows the viewer to see directly through the sculpture. Viewed from an angle behind this sculpture or in front of *Passenger Pigeons* will create an illusion of uniformity of the pieces. Because these pieces can be viewed from any angle, it becomes possible to view *other* viewers through the piece.

As demands for bluefin tuna is high and conservation efforts are being put in place, it has become a species that is both hunted in the wild and farmed,¹⁶ thus breaking the differentiation between wildlife and domesticated life. This piece therefore acts as a bridge between comprehending ideas of extinction and ideas of farming. Even if the bluefin tuna is to go extinct in the wild, it is likely to continue to exist in some form in aquaculture. While this means that the species may not be in danger, individual lives certainly are. And the threats imminent here aren't limited to the bluefin. As the demands of feeding ranched tuna, a species that can grow to massive proportions, grows, they "...may end up taking the food of the remaining wild fish that we haven't yet got around to catching."¹⁷

This compounding effect of resource use is common to all types of animal agriculture, so it is important to understand both concepts in conjunction with one another. *Drawings of Farm Pigs, Erased and Redrawn Over and Over Again*, the final piece in the series, is a framed 9x12" piece of lightweight BFK Rives cream paper with clear traces of clearly erased pencil drawings and masking tape. It is an attempt to tie the concepts introduced above while dealing overtly with animal farming. The process involves rendering a detailed graphite drawing of a domesticated farm pig, erasing it completely, and repeating the process over and over again. One drawing layers on top of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the erasure of the previous. Any tears in the paper are repaired with masking tape. There is no visual record of the individual drawings.

The erasure of the individual is overtly present in the language we use to describe industrial farming—we refer to “beef” and “pork” production, or even more reductively “meat”. But what does “pork production” actually mean? Over 106 thousand pigs are slaughtered in the United States each year¹⁸, each one of them an individual, each of living, breathing, thinking, and suffering. This piece reflects the nature of industrial farming. Each pig is easily replaced by another in this system. The individual is disregarded and overlooked, but that doesn’t mean that the individual never existed.

The repetitive action of drawing and erasing the pig is an exercise in understanding how the industrial farming system treats individual non-human animals and to empathize with their suffering. Drawing the pigs helps me understand each one as an individual, but erasing them afterwards demonstrates the replaceable nature of livestock in our farming system. This is a personal exercise in empathy on a number of levels. The physical act of drawing the body of the pig provides “...a kind of empathetic approximation of the experience of others in our midst, which can (and should) inform our responsive interactions with them.”¹⁹ This is brought about by an active decision to pay direct attention to the process of drawing and of what the drawings represent.

The creation of the piece effectively involves the complete destruction of drawings in which I put a great amount of time and effort. The destruction of these drawings could happen time and time again in perpetuity. This is a painful process, but one necessary in understanding my personal role in the system it represents. I am creating *and*

¹⁸ “Farm Animal Statistics.”

¹⁹ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette.”

destroying each drawing, but the most important thing about this is that I choose to take part in this process just as people are choosing to participate in an industrial farming system that disregards individual lives (even if it seems much less direct).

While the process forced me to consider these pigs as individuals, two other noteworthy things became apparent. First, while the first several drawings took approximately two hours, I became faster and more efficient as I continued to draw pigs. Second, the paper began to wear down after relatively few drawings, and soon tore through. I elected to repair the torn areas of the paper by using masking tape on the back of the paper. By approaching this piece as an exercise, it was easy for me to reflect on these two details of the process metaphorically. While my drawing efficiency increased rapidly, the paper is a finite resource that was strained each time I drew and erased

another pig. The necessity for regular paper repairs continued with the process. While this exercise initially aimed at understanding the individual, it ultimately served to unify my understanding of the entire industrial farming system and its impacts.

This piece is inspired by the contemporary artist Robert Rauschenberg's piece *Erased de Kooning* from 1953

(Figure 6). *Erased de Kooning*, like much of Rauschenberg's pieces, questions the



Figure 6. Rauschenberg, Robert. *Erased de Kooning*. 1953. Drawing. 25 ¼ in. x 21 ¾ x ½ in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

notion of the artistic process and of the artist as a whole. It was the labor involved in the creation of *Erased de Kooning* that I largely took inspiration from, as the entire process of erasing de Kooning's work took Rauschenberg about two months.

I consider this to be the final piece of the series because it differs so much from the others in its final product. This is a conceptual piece and requires the viewer to consider and visualize the process as most of the information is destroyed. The viewer is forced to confront the idea of loss as they are only presented with a lack of information. Although this piece does not fit with my initial goal of creating work with a representational end product, it is a helpful bridge that can allow the viewer to think more broadly about how process is relevant to the other pieces in the series and can open the door to thinking more broadly about the issues that guided me.

The creation of this series was not an overt attempt to come to any conclusion about how to live one's life in response to environmental issues. Rather, it was a way to challenge traditional understandings of species extinction and animal farming in an effort to internalize these issues beyond rational, intellectual, anthropocentrism that typically undermines any thinking about the non-human animal. It was an attempt to integrate commonly disparate parts with the awareness that "[o]ur full being involves truth, goodness, and beauty—the values for knowledge, action, and connection"²⁰ to give consideration to the non-human animal through "thoughtful, reflective, meditative attentiveness."²¹

My intent was to focus on labor-intensive, repetitive, and process oriented exercises that result largely in representational pieces about specific non-human animals.

²⁰ Bendik-Keymer, "Species Extinction and the Vice of Thoughtlessness."

²¹ Warkentin, "Interspecies Etiquette."

Because of this, a viewer can enter these pieces on many different levels and I am not attached to any particular interpretation. The viewer can choose to engage empathetically with me as the maker as they view the pieces, considering the physical and emotional labor that went into their creation and attempt to understand how that process informs my understanding of the species, animal, or concept addressed. Or the viewer may engage the pieces without considering the process and will view pieces that are merely representational of human effects on non-human animal life. The pieces may be considered completely separately from one another, each one addressing a different issue, or the pieces may be read as intricately connected and related to one another.

It is not my goal to guide the viewer to one specific viewpoint about species extinction or industrial farming. Each individual brings their own history and relationship to non-human animals into this series, and that will dramatically alter the way the pieces are viewed and how the issues that inspired their creation are understood. Rather I hope that the pieces and the personal process that went into them will elicit an empathetic response towards the individual and inspire thoughtfulness towards the issues the work represents.

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