EXPLORATIONS OF ANIMAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT
In conjunction with a sabbatical in 2012-13, this project enabled the development of an entirely new body of drawing work that foregrounds ethological, environmental and cultural aspects of human-animal relations. Scientific perspective on the nature and magnitude of animal consciousness is in flux, with the most recent research suggesting that animals are capable of higher order reasoning than previously understood. The resulting artwork, being equally informed by (but not limited to) evolutionary theory, ethology, ecology, poetry and philosophy, explores the mutability of divisions between humans and animals and contributes to this important and ongoing conversation.

RESEARCH
This project initially entailed extensive research on the development of birds and, mainly, the effects of human imprinting on bird and mammal behavior (and on human behavior in response). I was invited to conduct research onsite at Barnswallow avian rehabilitation facility, which will allowed me to study, among other things, eighteen resident birds, all of which are unreleasable and a majority of which are used for educational programming in schools. Of primary interest and importance to my research were the five resident birds that are imprinted: a screech owl, a kestrel, a red-tailed hawk, a great horned owl and a brown-phase hawk. I spent significant time with the imprinted birds in order to gain further knowledge about their behavior, as well as insights into the 8-understood linearisms of the human/animal divide.

In mid-fall of 2012, I traveled to the Moulin à Nef artist residency in Avullier, France, in order to develop some of the visual possibilities of my research. This three-week residency provided a quiet studio and concentrated time for creative work, as well as the opportunity to study the earliest forms of animal art—prehistoric cave art—throughout southern France and northern Spain. This research allowed me to consider both the visual contingencies between past and present (as they relate to human-animal relations) and the range of material usage and style in these works. One of the most significant aspects of this research for my new work was experiencing the actual scale of the paintings and drawings (ranging from tiny to enormous).

In total, I visited thirteen prehistoric cave art sites in the Dordogne region of France and the Basque region of northern Spain, including Grotte de Rouffignac, Combarelles, Pech-Merle, Niaux, Font de Gaume, Issiltrit, Oxocelhaya, L’Abri du Cap Blanc and Cuevas El Pendo, Hornos de la Pena, El Castillio and La Monedas.

STUDIO METHODS
Examining the cave art on site was truly revelatory, as it allowed me to consider the site-specificity of the work, as well as the various techniques employed by our prehistoric ancestors. The highlight of my research in the Dordogne was viewing polychrome bison at Font Gaume. These extraordinary Magdalenian paintings of bison, 80 in all, employed ground pigments – iron oxides, manganese, charcoal – that were brushed and blown on the walls (in much the same way fresco painting was later developed) specifically utilizing the concavity and convexity of the cave wall to emphasize form and girth.

Sensitivity to line quality, scale, shape and perspectival space are superlative in these works. Inspired by the rich prehistoric pigments, I began to experiment with colored pastels and metal leaves on sanded paper in a new series of eighteen drawings called Kith and Kin. Inspired by the cave art in France and Spain, as well as the writings of prehistoric art experts, I identified the way in which humans have to dictate the terms of co-existence at the boundary between species. The numerous up-close encounters I had with various imprinted birds and mammals have left me with a sense of the artificial constraints under which these creatures exist, often at the periphery of our world.

I have come away from this research with a far deeper understanding of the complexity of human and animal relations, particularly the extent to which humans have come to dictate the terms of co-existence at the boundary between species. The numerous up-close encounters I had with various imprinted birds and mammals have left me with a sense of the artificial constraints under which these creatures exist, often at the periphery of our world.

The study of birds and mammals I conducted in the Midwest contrasted quite sharply against what I experienced in viewing the cave art in France and Spain. The overwhelming impression I came away with from the cave art I viewed was a sense of prehistoric humans’ connectiviy with and reverence toward the animals depicted. Words can neither adequately summarize the magnificence of the cave art I experienced nor convey the profound impact the work has had on me.

These two, seemingly disparate areas of research have undertaken in the past year have greatly complicated my thinking and approach to my artwork – which is good. They have heightened my sensitivity toward and understanding of my subject, and the confluence of the two has inspired unforeseeable avenues of creativity.