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The History Between Us

by

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This body of work explores the complex webs between human and animal relations. The comingled history is displayed within individual animal forms that show those characteristics that people today claim they can still “see” in animals. Each work is a visual record showing fragments of the thousands of years old story. The clay and pigments that have been used are equally as significant for their part in the record keeping practiced by our ancestors since before the invention of paper¹.

Early Period

“There is that great proverb- that until the lions have their own historian, the history of the hunt will glorify the hunter” – Chinua Achebe

All things have a history. A culmination of events and consequences that lead up to a beginning that then starts writing new history. This work began thousands of years ago. It starts in the haze that is pre-written history, when our early ancestors were tied so closely to the land and patterns of animal behavior that they found the need for catching and keeping wild animals to help with their daily survival. For some, domestication was a beginning that in turn started to write the tangled web of relationships built on necessity, recreation, and cohabitation. For others the shared human existence meant over hunting, habitat loss, and a quiet slip into extinction. By the time I was born into that history, we had moved well past the everyday connections that people had with animals, due to the advancements of technology. Had I not grown up off dirt roads in rural Oklahoma, surrounded as I was by farms, and our own goats we kept for milk, I may never have cultivated the appreciation for the connections that helped humans arrive at where we are today. In turn I may never have looked past the rose tinted, sterilized accounts of this shared past, into those parts that we would like to forget. Our interactions have not always been pretty or kind and through all of it animals bore the brunt of the cost for much of our survival. I don’t shy away from it and I incorporate the bad with the good in my work. For my part, I believe I owe it to the animals I choose to sculpt.

This Tale

We are not alone on this planet. A very obvious and over simplified observation to be sure, but humanity has been innovating ways to remove itself from the natural world for a long time with
increasing success. That road has been paved with actions and decisions acting as though humans were alone on this planet. Today we have made it as far as allowing entire cities to be separated from animals by a wall of plastic, glass, concrete, and cardboard. This lifestyle is not free and it costs far more than the hard work of humans. The cost is often paid in wildlife and domesticated stock. Decisions to mine resources through mismanaging land and commitments to unsustainable agricultural practices are carried out with extreme harm done to the habitats and animals in the affected areas\(^2\). This has led to the extinction and sharp decline of many species. It is very difficult to see this truth from behind the barriers that separate us. Animal abuse in many forms creeps in behind those barriers to be poorly regulated or reported.\(^3\) It is a two-faced arrangement. Animals are the subjects of and participants in a vast majority of our entertainments. We decorate our homes with their likenesses. Many religions and mythologies use animals as primary subjects. People will attribute animal characteristics to fellow humans with some going so far as to claim that they themselves are animals trapped inside of a human body. The duality of this arrangement is where my work exists.

\[\text{Middle Period}\]

History is not always written. Some stories are told in broken ceramic sherds, stone foundations, and the microremains trapped inside of dental plaque\(^4\). I looked back at how many times

\(^2\) Cropper, Griffiths, "The Interaction of Population Growth and Environmental Quality."
\(^3\) Fowler, "Animal Cruelty Facts and Stats."
\(^4\) Goldfield, "Do I Have Microremains in My Teeth?"
someone had said they could see part of an animal’s past in their present form. This stood out as another way our shared history has been recorded. You can tell when an animal was bred for speed or strength. In some, the shape of their antlers or curve of their teeth remind us of the roles they played in our past. The idea that history could be recorded inside drew me to the idea of opening up the form through windows into their narrative. Often there is too much history to be shown in a single body. There are events and reoccurring themes that stand out and I tie them together to tell the broad story. The imagery forms vignettes that begin deep within the form and spill out into the open, showing what it means to exist along with humans.

**Clay**

The movement of the earth and the cyclical path of water have been a constant presence in the story of humanity. Each civilization has created unique ways to live within these systems. In this weathering, given time, clay is formed. For over ten thousand years humans have been harvesting clay to create with it. Some aspects have changed. There have been innovations in the technology of firing as well as the techniques of mineral harvesting but some aspects have stayed the same. Techniques of building, tool types, and the creation of clay objects themselves that reach back in an unbroken chain of use for thousands of years. Ceramic vessels and figures have been such a steady presence alongside humans that it is easy to recall. This steady presence is the quality I most enjoy borrowing from clay when I am creating these works. Just as animals have always existed beside us, clay has been almost as constant a companion while also being a part of a greater universal movement. I am recording the sliver of history that exists between

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5 Cooper, “10,000 Years of Pottery,” 8.
humans and animals on the medium, which has for its part, traveled the longest road to the present.

When finishing the work, I add layers of dried clay and soil back to the surface. So much of the historical artifacts that we study today came from below ground; so much so that we expect extant pieces to be dirty. Those works that were not pulled from the ground still carry with them the dirt and tarnish of ages. Our past has always been covered in the grit of living. There is a familiarity that comes from things that are stained and dirty in this way. These works needed to convey that same familiar, worn feeling. Over time they will collect more as they begin their movement through time until they reach their final resting places.

The Forms

Why Won’t You Dance?

I once witnessed a conversation between a man, a woman, and their daughters. The man told his family that they would be going on a vacation to Alaska so he could hunt bears. The eldest daughter became very concerned and asked if he meant Winnie the Pooh. This man told his daughter not to worry that Winnie the Pooh wasn’t really a bear and that they would soon have a brand new bear skin rug for their house. The woman scoffed and said that she would just put it in storage. The daughter was still upset insisting that Winnie the Pooh was in fact a bear. For that family, the bears were a loved character, a potential unneeded possession to be stored away and forgotten, and a target for sport. Why Won’t It Dance?, (figure 1, figure 2)\(^6\) is a piece of the shared history we have with polar bears. The bear is almost crowded out by the presence of an oil tanker, pipes, and the evidence of an oil spill. There is a deep interior space filled with quaint

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\(^6\) Becky Blackburn, *Why Won’t It Dance?*, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 13.5x8x15.
rustic cabin trappings including a teddy bear, bear skin rug, and kitschy wall hanging above the fireplace mantle. The bear is turned slightly to accommodate the tanker, with a paw outstretched to try and contain the oil spilling from the multiple punctures in the ship’s hull. Polar bears inhabit a place in many myths and religions alongside the popularity of using their likeness as a wintertime decoration.

*Nuisance Or Not*

Once, I was given an opportunity to speak with a research scientist whose specialty was neurological diseases. She told me about how much her work relied on mice as well as the things they have learned from being able to study them. The work she was doing could someday lead to cures or symptom management for diseases. It was quite a different take on a creature that has been considered a filthy nuisance throughout most of our shared history. *Nuisance or Not,* (figure 3, figure 4)⁷ is a mouse form that contains images from the early evidence of their self-domestication when humans began storing cereal crops. There is also a scene from the medieval period when mice were responsible for the destruction of written word recorded on animal hide vellum. On the opposite side are images from their modern contributions to medical research. The mouse form itself is head up, paw out in a pleading gesture. There is evidence that mice were self-domesticators when humans began crop storage. They were also responsible for the destruction of books that used vellum before the widespread use of paper. This put them in the unique position of existing between being considered destructive to humans as well as a source for research knowledge in today’s scientific community.

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⁷ Becky Blackburn, *Nuisance Or Not,* 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 16x7x12.75.
One of my brother’s first jobs when he turned sixteen was part time help on a dairy farm. Almost all of the tasks he was asked to do was helping to keep all the facilities clean, and making sure that the cows were all taken care of. He used to tell us about the different personalities they had and how they all knew when to come up to the barn for milking time. This was a pretty normal thing for us. Many years later I met with some people who moved from Long Beach, California to Oklahoma. They told me that they refused to drink milk because dairy farmers would milk dry cows and harm their animals to get them to produce more milk than they should. I know that having never stepped foot on a dairy farm in their life contributed to their belief in this narrative. 

*Till They Come Home* (figure 5, figure 6)\(^8\) is the figure of a cow that contains a field being plowed with an early period wooden plow. There is an opening that contains religious imagery along with grain offering and hind cut of beef. In the opposite opening is a large table that appears to have been walked across by a cow. There is a hat and meat hook resting atop it and it is balanced between one of the automatic milking cups and large scale renderings of the cow pox virus. Beneath the table are mushrooms growing up from a pile of cow feces. The face of the cow has had one side opened up to show a human jaw with a ceramic beaker buried behind it. The body language of the cow’s form suggests it is struggling under an unseen weight that is pushing it to the ground slowly. Cows have held a very complicated place beside humans. They were both agricultural aids, helping humans create the commodities that they would then use as sacrifices in religious observances. Some of those religions featured cow deities.

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\(^8\) Becky Blackburn, *Till They Come Home*, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 18.5x9.5x12.
Silk Road

When I am reading through material about the history of different species of animals and their connections to humans, few things crop up so often as the far reaching effects of the Silk Road on the other side of the planet. Camels became the absolute backbone of the trade routes. After the automobile began seeing use, camels lost most of their human partnership. *Silk Road,* (figure 7, figure 8)⁹ is of two camels that contain images from their days as transporters of goods along with images of their modern roles as novelty pets or entertainers. One camel is a dromedary paired with the imagery of goods traded along the western half of the Silk Road. The other camel is a Bactrian and has been paired with the imagery of goods from the eastern half of the Silk Road. Both contain images of the modern facilities that they are raised in and the Bactrian shows part of an arena that they would be featured as entertainment during the days of the big tent circuses.

The Longest Road

We raised milk goats when I was young. We became friends with many of the other goat owners in our area while swapping information, tips, and tricks for getting around problems that sometimes come up. Many of the people we met this way raised goats because they had family or they themselves were unable to drink cow’s milk. Milk alternatives weren’t widely available to us in our area and so these people found a solution in goats. They were always very affectionate with us and would wag their tails when they were happy. As I got older and started learning about the fears of Satanism that seemed to be on the rise. There were images of black

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⁹ Becky Blackburn, *The Silk Road,* 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 14x9x46.
goats that looked more like Hebridean sheep than any goat breed I knew of. It seemed a shame to villainize them when they were such loving animals that did so much good for people. *The Longest Road*, (figure 9, figure 10)\(^{10}\) is the form of a goat that is trying to raise itself up to its feet. Its neck and part of its face has been opened to show the skeletal remains of an early breed of goat that helps tell their domestication story. Beside this opening is another that shows a modern milking stand and woven fabric. Opposite this opening is the scene of a haunch of goat sitting on a stone altar beside Mesopotamian styled brush. This leads into a medieval structure with a thatched roof such as the kind goats would have been kept in.

*Hello, Old Friend*

A few years ago I was in a martial arts training accident. I broke my neck and had to have two of my vertebra fused together so that I could function again. During my recovery I would sit in a big recliner at home to rest. My partner’s dog would always come up to me and very politely put a paw up on my leg to see if I would allow her to sit in the chair with me. When I didn’t tell her no she would ever so gently raise herself into the seat and carefully position herself next to me. All of this without moving me in any way that would have made me need to adjust my head. Dogs, at times, seem so far removed from their wild beginnings. *Hello, Old Friend*, (figure 11, figure 12)\(^{11}\) is a dog in a position of walking while hunched down. Its tail is tucking between its legs and it holds its head down with ears pointed forward. A large opening along the neck shows

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\(^{10}\) Becky Blackburn, *The Longest Road*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 13x7x16.5.

\(^{11}\) Becky Blackburn, *Hello, Old Friend*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 16x9x18.
a replica of the German Dog Tooth Purse, from near Leipzig. It is shown along with dog bones that have been dug up by archeologists. The opening next to this shows the wheel and roasting spit that would have been turned by turnspit dogs. This set-up blends into a small forest where many myths and stories about dogs and wolves occur. This was also shown in many manuscripts that depicted hunting scenes where dogs were featured. An opening in the tail shows a small replica of the Sputnik 2. This is the ship that carried the first living animal, a dog named Laika, into space. The opposite side shows an opening into a collapsed building that rescue dogs would work in. This blends into objects used in dog agility competitions.

_Slapping Away_

My research keeps me online often. I see a fair number of postings from people with very strong opinions about how much or how little people should interact with animals. One surprising source of division on such topics has been bees. There are people who refuse to eat honey because they believe that the bees are being exploited and mistreated in order to cultivate and harvest the honey from them. The thing is, of all the animals humans keep for farming purposes bees are the ones who have the most choice in the matter. At any time, an entire colony can choose to pick up their queen and leave. They stay with bee keepers because they want to.

_Slapping Away_ (figure 13, figure 14)\(^{12}\) is the form of a dying bee. Its legs have curled up and one of its wings is damaged. There is an opening in the center segment of its body that shows a hand being bound in linen wraps. There is an ointment pot and spoon present in the space with the hand. Next to this opening is a large window into objects used in medieval and ancient bee keeping practices that are not centered around the medieval skep. On the opposite side of the

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\(^{12}\) Becky Blackburn, _Slipping Away_, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 18x7.5x13.
body the head and center body segment have been opened up to show the shapes of pollen and the molecular models of the popular neonicotinoid pesticides that are responsible for the declining bee populations. In the adjacent opening is many of the foods that we would be unable to grow without bees aiding in pollination process.

Rooted In The Past

It happened by chance. There seemed to be this creative rut that I could not pull any concepts out of and then one day it was suggested to me that I visit the Belz Museum of Asian and Judaic Art. I almost didn’t go. It was raining and everyone was busy. I made up my mind to go anyway though and there they were. These two sculptures are so large that they take up almost the entire room they are housed in. Half Moon Carving (figure 15)\textsuperscript{13}, and Peach Carving (figure 16)\textsuperscript{14} are two Qing Dynasty ivory carvings that show a moon and figure landscape and a birthday celebration amongst deities respectively. They are such a large scale that it is hard not to be drawn into the multiple vignettes scattered throughout the carved landscape. At first I was envious of the creativity and skill that the artists used to produce them. They remained inspiring to me but I didn’t know what shape that inspiration would take until I began opening up my figures in much the same way these sculptors used a window into the moon and peach to allow their narratives to be viewed inside. These works gave me the push I needed to make the work I need to make.

I have always had an eye for the historical. The artworks and material cultures of the past help to inspire the voice I use when creating these works. To keep the forms from being completely

\textsuperscript{13}Qing Imperial Workshop, Half Moon Carving, 1644-1911, Bone and ivory, 73x57, Belz Museum of Asiatic and Judaic Art, Memphis, TN.

\textsuperscript{14}Qing Imperial Workshop, Peach Carving, 1644-1911, Bone and ivory, 54x52, Belz Museum of Asiatic and Judaic Art, Memphis, TN.
disconnected from the modern I introduce objects that are relevant to the narrative that show not a conclusion so much as it is a current chapter in the ongoing story. Eventually even those objects will reach obsolescence in favor of the new modern but all of these pieces belong to that cycle by the very nature of the historical narratives they hold.

References:


Illustrations

Figure 1. Becky Blackburn, Why Won’t It Dance?, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 13.5x8x15.

Figure 2. Becky Blackburn, Why Won’t It Dance?, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 13.5x8x15.
Figure 3. Becky Blackburn, *Nuisance Or Not*, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 16x7x12.75.

Figure 4. Becky Blackburn, *Nuisance Or Not*, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 16x7x12.75.
Figure 5. Becky Blackburn, *Till They Come Home*, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 18.5x9.5x12.

Figure 6. Becky Blackburn, *Till They Come Home*, 2020, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 18.5x9.5x12.
Figure 7. Becky Blackburn, *The Silk Road*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 14x9x46.

Figure 8. Becky Blackburn, *The Silk Road*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 14x9x46.
Figure 9. Becky Blackburn, *The Longest Road*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 13x7x16.5.

Figure 10. Becky Blackburn, *The Longest Road*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 13x7x16.5.
Figure 11. Becky Blackburn, *Hello, Old Friend*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 16x9x18.

Figure 12. Becky Blackburn, *Hello, Old Friend*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 16x9x18.
Figure 13. Becky Blackburn, *Slipping Away*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 18x7.5x13.

Figure 14. Becky Blackburn, *Slipping Away*, 2021, white stoneware chalk paint and dirt, 18x7.5x13.
Figure 15 Qing Imperial Workshop, *Half Moon Carving*, 1644-1911, Bone and ivory, 73x57, Belz Museum of Asiatic and Judaic Art, Memphis, TN.
Figure 16 Qing Imperial Workshop, *Peach Carving*, 1644-1911, Bone and ivory, 54x52, Belz Museum of Asiatic and Judaic Art, Memphis, TN.