

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE ANIMALS THAT WE ARE

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Art,

Visual Arts

By

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California State University, Northridge

Dedication

This is dedicated to an amazing semester of friendship, family, and love. We had a semester filled with laughter, tears and fun. Who knew how close we would become in only four months? I will never forget the time we all shared, and will share in the future.

Also, thank you to all the professors who helped guide me, critiqued my work, listened, talked, signed stuff, and responded to e-mails throughout the masters program. Your wisdom will help me immensely along the way.

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ABSTRACT

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In my highly rendered acrylic paintings, I use animals and other natural symbols to create a narrative about modern relationships. My creatures represent raw responses, animalistic behaviors and emotions that are common to all human beings. They are used to show the negative, humorous and tragic aspects of interpersonal relationships, both from experience and collective knowledge.

I use animals because they share similar instincts with humans. Certain types of creatures can represent aspects of reaction, emotion and desire. Sexual desires are rooted deep inside of us, and though we may think human beings are above other living things, these instincts are a sharp reminder of our animal natures.

The surrealist Max Ernst created an alter ego of himself represented as a bird in many of his paintings. Similarly, I represent others and me personally as animals. My goal is to further challenge myself to create new ways to represent the narrative of a flawed human existence.

Background

I was in love, or so I thought. Only fifteen, I thought I knew everything that I wanted and who I was going to be with for the rest of my life. I had met my first boyfriend online through a video game message board that I frequented. Due to my awkwardness as a kid, this message board was a place that I felt more comfortable “conversing” with others. We had several “real-life” dates where we met and did typical dating rituals like going to the movies and so on. Eventually though he had to move to Florida, so it became a long distance relationship. Things became serious and my parents found out about it. They did not want me to see him anymore, but I refused to heed their wishes.

I had it all planned out. At eighteen I decided to rent a car and move to Florida. Sure I left my entire family, pets, and an acceptance to Otis College of Art behind, but I was following what I thought I really wanted. After driving through seven states I finally reached Florida. All seemed well, but then reality set in. We had to get jobs and there were not any good schools around for me to attend. His mother was bi-polar and things were going downhill pretty fast. Eight months living there was all that we could take. We decided to move back to California.

The relationship lasted seven years. Eventually it ended because he was “not happy” and started seeing other people. He moved out and I was alone. I was twenty-three and had never had a real dating experience because I had been in a serious relationship since the age of fifteen. I was being put into a situation I had never experienced. Heartbroken and distraught, I didn't know what to do. After several months recuperating I decided to give dating a try. Because the Internet was my only experience meeting a guy, I decided to try online-dating websites. Initially, it was very overwhelming and I did not expect the immense response of men who wanted to meet me. I narrowed down whom I wanted to meet and eventually dated a few people.

Some of the people I met online were very strange and some were fine. I shortly stopped online dating because it became too overwhelming, like a job. It seemed unnatural and I did not feel right doing it anymore. In the end I realized that many of the men were simply looking for someone to have sex with and just wanted to be friends. In reality, it did seem like an easy way to do that with someone.

I learned a lot about myself by dating others, especially the fact that I have an immensely high sex drive. However, I did not go have casual sex with just anyone that I met, but when I did find someone of interest I stuck with him. It seemed that I wanted sex even though there may not have been the traditional human love feelings that one may associate with it.

After my first relationship ended so badly and I started meeting other men I figured out that I had unwittingly cultivated a negative view of relationships. I felt that we are all just animals doing what instinctively drives us. As animals we have desire for sex, but not necessarily to find a soul mate. I started to believe that love was a figment of the human imagination and that it did not really exist. A monogamous relationship with one person for the rest of my life seemed impossible and idealistic. Even though I believed these things to be true, deep down, I still wanted there to be something more.

Eventually I became attached to another person, but again I was hurt for the same reasons. Things seemed to be more than what they were, and I started to have feelings again. This was cut short after the three year “relationship” came to an abrupt end. However, I find myself going back to what I think will not go anywhere. There is within me a desire to have sex and life long companionship. It is simple, but why do we complicate it?

Introduction

Love is expressed as a human emotion and we believe this to be one of the main things that differentiates us from animals. However, there are a majority of things that we have in common with them. We battle with these instinctual feelings because we claim to be above animals and above our instincts. This is erroneous because we cannot deny the true nature of what we all are. By representing humans as animals, I have explored topics such as online dating, our lives and relationships with and through technology, and the sexual nature that connects us all.

Online Dating

In the beginning of my first semester in the program, I decided to work on sexual human relationships using animals to represent people. I chose to work on representing the subject of online-dating because of my past experiences with it. I began to express the dating experience by playing with the animal predator prey theme and by making a series of paintings based on this topic. The first piece is titled, “25/F/CA Looking for Love” (Figure 1). The title makes the viewer connect the painting to online dating, because “25/F/CA” is a way that people identify themselves on Internet dating forums and websites. Twenty-five stands for age, “F” means female, and “CA” is short for California. People who are online look for the other individual’s age, sex and location, so they can know the general information of the person and see if they are interested in them. This title is an important element that connects the animals to this subject, because there is nothing else in the painting that references this topic.

These animals represent the life of online dating from the perspective of an attractive female user. The work is autobiographical of my own experience with dating. The gazelle is surrogate for me, but can also represent the general female population. The blue predators around the gazelle are the male Internet users who attempt to contact the female. The painting does not portray this interaction in a positive light, and is clearly making a negative commentary on the situation. She is overwhelmed and being bombarded from every angle. The males are represented as the hunters, seeking desperately to attack the female gazelle. She seems surprised, and that is because it is a new experience. She was not expecting what was coming.

The brightly colored, saturated lines emanating from the gazelle are meant to alarm the viewer. They are meant to give an uncomfortable feeling to represent the emotion that the gazelle feels. The lines are all converging towards the gazelle to reinforce that she is the object of desire or the target. I chose the color pink for the female to identify the gender, as well as to represent desire. Also, in today’s social world, the term gazelle is used to refer to a very attractive female. The other animals were colored blue to represent their cold, masculine energy. Blue is a cool color usually associated with males and I felt it was appropriate to have them in juxtaposition to their aggressive gestures. This is to show that although they are threatening, the danger is not entirely real, because it is all online.

A lion is the main focus of the next piece from my predator-prey series titled “He seemed like a Nice Guy” (Figure 2). The lion is scratching his body and seems pretty content with himself, yet fairly complacent as well. He has killed the gazelle, which is lying dead on the bottom of the image. There are also radiating lines around the lion that has colorful blood dripping from his mouth. The lion has successfully hunted the gazelle. He achieved what he wanted and got the gazelle. He is finished with it.

This is a continuation of the narrative of the last piece. Again, this piece does not have an immediate connection to online-dating, however it does link to the previous painting because it uses the same creatures. The lion, out of the other animals, is the one that caught the gazelle, which in this case is a metaphor for securing a date with the gazelle. The relationship ended very poorly. The deer is dead, but the title implies that the individual may have lived to tell the tale. The gazelle and the lions use similar colors to the previous image, reiterating the gender differences. The blood is done in vivid, unusual colors to enhance the eeriness of the image. The blood is shown to express the damage done to the deer. These experiences are taken from modern day societal situations, such as online dating. They are expressed in a way that can seem animalistic. In other words it was a terrible date.

Animals represented in this context can make the subject seem less serious. If instead of the lion and gazelle there were a man hovering over the dead body of a woman, this would give an entirely different feel and meaning to the piece. It could give off the impression of a serial killer, who likes to eat his women and disembowel them, but since humans are shown as animals instead, the representation takes on a completely different meaning. This is why I chose to use animals to express this subject.

The subject of online dating and social networking is broad in our society today and I felt that it was a subject that could be talked about in my paintings. It is a large part of our lives and continuously grows larger. “With the number of connected Internet users surpassing the entire population of Japan, some authors reason that this dramatic propagation of the Internet is prompting the creation of a new civilization”(Merkle and Richardson). Nearly everyone knows how to use a computer and how to get onto the Internet, which is causing many to go utilize these dating and social networking sites to connect with others. People spend a lot of their time doing it.

“Of the 100 million single Americans out there, some 20 million use online-dating sites” (Miley). This changes the face-to-face interaction of normal human society to a computer mediated one, at least at first, until they decide to meet in person. More people are choosing this way of dating because it helps to find people who have things in common with themselves with little effort. Although this seems like a great tool, “when one considers the characteristics of computer mediated relationships, it is probably not surprising that, in many respects, such relationships could be viewed as being a variance with the face-to-face relationship because they represent a developmental and behavioral sequence far removed from customary methods of finding attraction and intimacy with another person” (Merkle and Richardson). It can make dating similar to interviewing, and it loses the spontaneity and personal aspect of dating in reality.

One negative aspect of this way of building relationships is the deception that can occur online. People can pretend to be someone whom they are not, as is the case most of the time. Many people state that the people they date online end up looking and being entirely different from what they say on their dating profiles. In “He Seemed Like a Nice Guy” (Figure 2) this type of scenario is represented. The title suggests that on the outside, the male individual seemed like a nice guy, but then once she met him, it was not good. “Online-dating sites have made it easier for people to click with one another, but they still leave something to be desired” (Economist).

Sex and Violence

At first, the two previous works were made to be a representation of the online-dating experience, but although that may be the source of the idea, the painting itself portrays something else due to its violent nature. This was not my initial intention, but the idea of being devoured by the predator is intensely violent and it can be referencing the dangers of online-dating as well as the emotional pains of relationships from my perspective. Dating and meeting strangers from the Internet can be a scary thing. You do not know what they will be like in person, and if they are even being honest about whom they are.

It is also representation of my feelings about dating and relationships in general. The deer is a “stand in” for the victimization I feel in certain dating scenarios and relationships. It is an aspect of my point of view that I do not feel entirely comfortable talking about, so I paint about it instead. Many of my works reference my own experiences in this way. The feelings of being in a relationship can be very intense and emotional. I am very sensitive when I end up letting my guard down and become vulnerable, just like the prey in the work.

Technology and our Lives

Once I felt that I was finished with the online series of work I began to expand on the technological aspect of the dating world and made more generalized pieces referring to it. I feel that technology is such a big part of our lives that it is starting to affect our relationships with others. It has created a whole new culture and opened up a way for people to meet others. It is also used to reconnect with old friends, and keep in touch with current ones. “Networked computers allow social networks to expand and grow in ways that were previously unanticipated. *Social networking*, as the phrase is being used in industry and in pop culture today, refers to the use of a specific type of website focused on the creation and growth of online social networks which allows users to interact.” (Coyle and Vaughn).

The piece “It’s Kind of Like a Small Hard Drive” (Figure 3), embodies this persona of relationships and technology. It has two deer, one male and one female, who are cut in half, their bodies being USB connectors. The female deer has the female port and the male has the male port. They do connect, however they wouldn't really be able to function as normal deer. The awkwardness of the image represents similar aspects of dating/relationships and technology. Their connection also has sexual innuendo attached to it. The male and female parts connect, referring to sex. This gives it a quirky sense of humor that I also incorporate in many of my other pieces.

As I continued with the technology series, I started to focus more on the obsession that we have with it. In “Plugged In” (Figure 4), there is a sheep that is tagged with a power on symbol on its ear. The symbol is glowing, resembling the glow from a cell phone or computer monitor. The power on symbol is on many devices, such as computers, remotes, and other products that we use to connect ourselves with each other. I decided that a sheep was the proper animal to represent the herd mentality that comes with using social media. Many in our society do it and some feel that they are forced into it just because others do it. Few go against the norm and stay away from it. Sheep are domesticated animals that are easy to control. A growing number of people are becoming obsessed with this form of communication, so much so that “city analyst Mark Mahaney recently released some rather astonishing data showing that web-connected U.S. residents now spend about 16% of their total time online on Facebook” (Dumenco).

After the first sheep piece, I decided to play with the idea and created “On” (Figure 5)

and “Off” (Figure 6). These are two pieces that go together. The sheep both have power switches on their bodies, similar to what computers have on the back of their consoles. The male sheep is turned on, while the female one is off and turning away with disinterest. The glow is coming off of the on and of switches, and also from the ram onto the ewe.

I continued to play with the idea of technology and farm animals by doing another sheep piece titled “Power On” (Figure 7), and a cow piece titled “Branded” (Figure 8). These have the same references to technology as “Plugged In”. Using the power symbol, I tagged the sheep and branded the cow to bring about the fact that a large amount of people are owned by technology instead of it being the other way around like we think it is. For example, if the power went out, for some catastrophic reason, many people would not be able to function normally, or be able to get anywhere without a GPS. Those who rely so heavily on technology would be lost sheep.

Sex and Animals

After the online dating and technology work, I decided to broaden my take on human relationships and focus on sexuality and instinct. Humans carry similar urges that animals have such as sexual arousal, yet many people choose to hold these traits back, either by covering them up or denying them altogether. The pieces titled, "Hole"(Figure 9) and "Nipples" (Figure 10) touch upon this subject. Experimenting with different ways to paint and express these instinctual feelings we share, I created triptych style work to show the things most people may think about yet do not openly share. The first painting, titled "Hole" is a triptych, with one square panel on the top of a fleshy orifice. Below that one is a female pig's rear end, brightly colored yellow and pink, with its sexual organs protruding and visible. The final painting below these is of two pigs mating, a yellow male on top of a pink female. Some of the colors blend together and the female pig's face cropped.

The orifice is placed at the top because it is the main prize, what is sought after, by males. In essence, it is what many people think of on a daily basis. A lot of people think about sex more than they would like to admit. I have come to this conclusion because of a study done at Ohio State University with 282 college students. The study found that “men thought about sex more than women (19 to 10 times daily). ” (Contemporary Sexuality) Although the men may have been thinking of it more, the women had it on their minds quite often as well. This piece brings this all to the forefront. It is about the desire to have sex. That desire is very primitive and deep in our roots. The painting may make some feel uncomfortable, but this could be because they might be denying their true nature within. People have sex, and that is apart of life. The imagery suggests the impersonality of sex, and perhaps the mundane aspects of it. The imagery does not imply a fantasy of amazing sex, or of some exciting pleasurable experience. It simply states what is.

The second piece of this series is called "Nipples." It is formed by four small 5"x5" panels form the sides while two 10"x 5" panels form the top and bottom, with a peg in the middle covered in a white shiny ooze-like substance. The images on the sides are close-ups of pig nipples. The images on the top and bottom are of the bellies of female pigs; the top being a sow that has not given birth, and the bottom is of the nipples of a pregnant sow. The close-up nipples resemble phallic imagery and is supposed to hyper-sexualize the piece. The phallic peg in the middle with the sperm is a reference to sex as well. The imagery is

supposed to be extremely sexual and be slightly uncomfortable to look at. Although people have sexual desires, they are not openly spoken of in our society, and these are taboo. This piece brings them to the forefront and makes them hard to avoid.

Animals and humans have similar sexual behaviors. I chose pigs to represent humans because of their resemblance to humans, however in scientific study; rats are usually used because of similar reasons. “Rats resemble humans in many ways. Certain tissues and neuroendocrine systems in rats are strikingly similar to our own (e.g., the control of erection or uterine tissue growth following estrogen treatment)”(Pfaus). Animals are used to research many things related to humans. This is no mistake; we all share a vast amount of genes. However, humans still wish to separate themselves from animals. Reality shows that this is not really the case. “Animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other.”(Derrida) We may have differences in intelligence, and may be more advanced, but the basic instincts are still there. For example,” like rats, humans show patterns of sexual behavior that can be described as “opportunistic,” and will copulate in a variety of circumstances and in all sorts of combinations of partners and sexual orientations” (Pfaus). Species, in this case, do not matter. Both human and animal do similar things. Humans will have sex with more than one partner, even though the collective ideal in our society may be that they choose one partner to be with for the rest of their lives while having offspring with them. Many humans live in a vastly different way, which can be explained by their animal roots.

Process

The connecting factor in all of my work is the process and technique involved. The style is very rendered and skillful. I paint with acrylic in multiple layers, starting from dark to light slowly developing the image of the animal layer by layer. The amount of detail and work put into each animal is obsessive. It is a reflection of the obsession with love, sex and relationships. I put an immense amount of time, effort and love into each animal in order to seduce the viewer with their soft looking, highly rendered fur, skin and eyes. People look at the work and realize the amount of time that it took to make each stroke of fur and this is surprising to them. It is something that takes an immense amount of time and effort that shows the obsessive qualities I can have, and the isolation and loneliness that I may feel. Although there is all this tender love and work put into these animals, they are very separated and lonely.

The Humans

I decided to create a large piece, encompassing these ideas titled, “The Humans” (Figure 11). I created a painting with several hundred livestock animals on it, some copulating, a few running, others in a daze, and some mating with different species and same genders, while flowing into a light. It is supposed to be an organized chaos, much like what human life is. And yet, they all are going towards the same spot. The large cow in the front is in dismay, while trying to escape from the entire thing. Her effort is futile, and she will end up like the others. I believe this is a representation of what human existence can be. Livestock animals were chosen because they are animals that are easily controlled and used. We are all floating through life and sometimes killing ourselves in the process. It seems futile when we are going to be in the same condition in the end. Many people fight our desires and dreams and fit into what is supposed to be the norm in society.

Conclusion

Instinctual desires are apart of life, whether we choose to believe it or not. Even though we may be using cell phones, the Internet, and all these other intelligent technological advances, the main thing we strive for is basic and primitive. It is found in all creatures on this planet, regardless of species. Sex, though many choose to think of it as taboo, is what creates life. It is an instinctual action that living creatures do in order to reproduce. Humans simply complicate it.

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Images



Figure 1: "25/F/CA Looking For Love", 9"x12" Acrylic, 2011



Figure 2: "He Seemed Nice", 18"x24" Acrylic, 2011

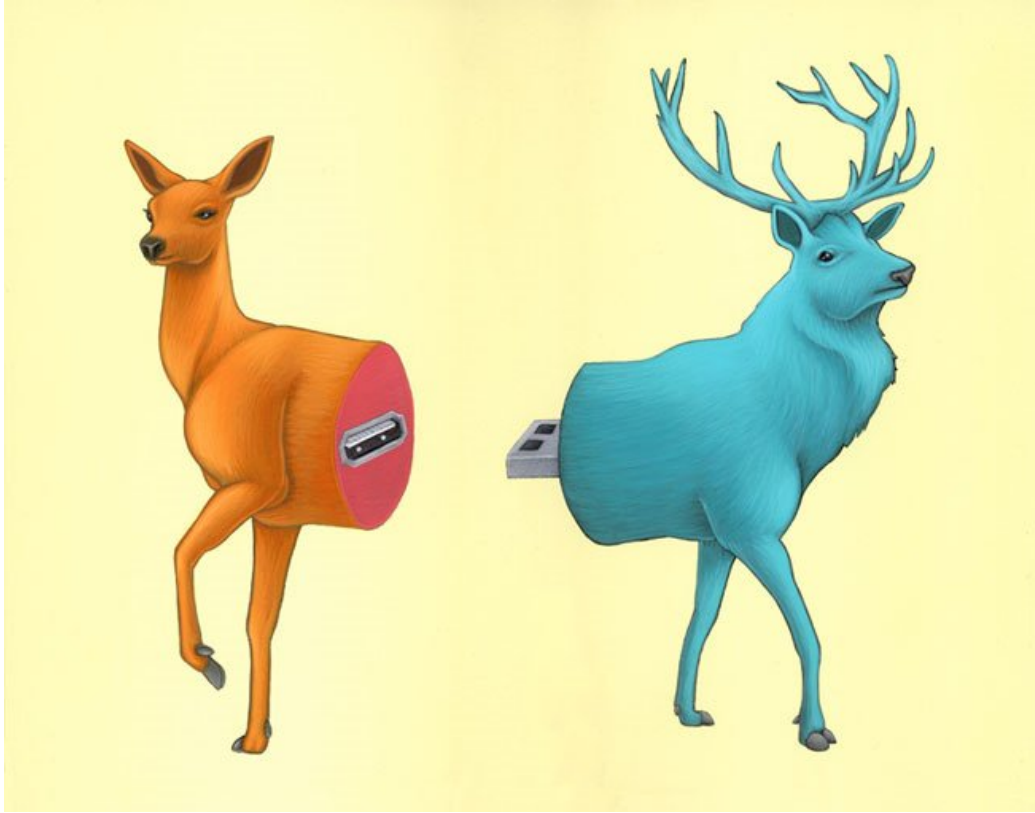


Figure 3: "It's Kind of like a Small Hard Drive", 11"x14", Acrylic, 2012



Figure 4: "Plugged In", 9"x 12", Acrylic, 2012



Figure 5: "On", "8"x10", Acrylic, 2012



Figure 6: "Off", 8"x10", Acrylic, 2012



Figure 7: "Power On", 8"x8", Acrylic, 2012



Figure 8: "Branded", 8"x8", Acrylic, 2012



Figure 9: "Hole", 14"x 28" Acrylic, 2013



Figure 10: "Nipples", 20"x20", Acrylic, 2013



Figure 11: "The Humans", 4'x6', Acrylic, 2013