In the World of Jellyfish

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Artist's Statement

The intuitive and mysterious appearance of jellyfish in my work sparked this series of drawings in which I explore my inner self and emotions. I am interested in our connection with animals and what that can teach us about ourselves. Through an instinctive way of drawing and an exploration of my relation to jellyfish, I have revealed a part of my mind that strives to confront and rid myself of fear. The narrative that carries across the images is meant to show the viewer a progression of feeling overwhelmed by fear and anxieties, but ultimately facing them and letting go.

My drawings show an interest in the self in relation to the natural world I inhabit. I have always believed in the importance of maintaining a relationship with and concern for other living beings that share our earth. I wanted to speak to my interest in other creatures and an understanding that I am a part of, and not superior to, the natural world. Through the exploration of non-human animals, we can grow a greater appreciation for the importance of our world's diversity. My work delves into the ways in which I relate and connect with other beings: through awe, fear and curiosity.

When I began this semester, I knew I wanted to focus on the disconnect I believe to be evident between people and the natural world. After working with animals as the subject of my junior seminar work, my love for animals is a subject I knew I could maintain passion for throughout the semester. At first, I thought I would photograph animals at a nearby rescue farm, and subsequently draw them to show a human animal connection. As I started working and researching, however, the way I wanted to portray my idea began to transform. I began to think about other more interesting ways to show the relationship between humans and nature, which is when a very critical drawing emerged.

Although I experimented with other animals, such as horses and other farm animals, the first drawing I did of a jellyfish was most intriguing to me of all the work I had done up to that point. I think delving into this drawing and the process of making it is essential to discussing my work. After researching the work of Kiki Smith, a contemporary American artist typically associated with the feminist movement, I was interested in the way she combines the human

form with animals and natural objects. Her work addresses many themes, such as the human condition, the body, and nature (Posner 25). A New York Times article quotes Smith, "'my mom always said to trust one's inner voice. I think a lot of making art is listening to yourself'" (Kimmelman). She continues to speak to the intuitive nature of her work, which is an aspect of working I strove for this semester. Many of her sculptures, specifically Born (figure 1) suggest the idea that humans emerged from the animal, that their relationship is integral.

I was also inspired by some of her drawings and prints, in which the human figure is covered up or surrounded by animal and natural imagery (figure 2).

With this in mind, I began drawing my face with the idea that some animal would emerge around me. As I began to draw, very intuitively, I felt that the forms around my head began to resemble the tentacles of a jellyfish. I pursued this feeling I was having about the drawing, and that process was very exciting. Drawing has been my focus in the two and a half years I've been an art major at Allegheny. Getting into drawing was the main reason I decided to change my major, so it felt appropriate to choose this medium as the focus for my comp.

When I work intuitively and without much pre-planning, I create more exciting and evocative work. In the past, I was prone to planning exactly what I would draw or create, and how I would go about doing it. The first jellyfish drawing I did





this semester, along with some previous work, has taught me that I need to follow what feels right, rather than making intellectual decisions as I work or before I start. The dream-like quality of the jellyfish drawing and the mystery of its emergence seemed to speak to a connection with the subconscious mind. This intuitive process felt so exciting that I thought I would start the next drawing in a similar way.

Throughout this semester, I was confronted with a problem I have with the art making process. I am constantly second guessing my ideas, my work and my actions. I felt as though I were in a perpetual battle to stop thinking about the work while I was drawing, or too much before I was drawing. I came to understand that questioning my work is helpful, but only to a certain extent and only when I step back to look at the work. When I was feeling this way, it was important for me to spend a lot of time reading in order to understand how other artists evolve their work and ideas.

I researched artists associated with the Surrealist movement, which began in the 1920s, to explore how they viewed their work in terms of the subconscious. Dorothea Tanning, born in 1910 in Illinois, was very much interested in her inner world and translating it onto canvas. George Braziller speaks of her work as "the opening of oneself to oneself and to the world, guided by art's conscious hand" (Braziller 14). This description seemed to speak to me in relation to the work I was doing; my drawings explore the opening and expanding of myself to aspects of the world. Her painting Sunflower Landscape (Figure 3) depicts a young girl in a dreamy setting amongst larger-than-life sunflowers. The child seems to be an element of the landscape, as one anthropomorphized flower grabs hold of her. The human figure as a mere element of the landscape was common to Tanning's early paintings, which speaks to the idea that humans are only one part of the larger world, not the center of it. Tanning, during an interview in her later life, gave a word of advice to young artists, "Keep your eye on your inner world and keep away from ads, idiots and movie stars" (Glassie). This statement resonated with me, because so often I am prone to being influenced by other people that I disregard what is truly important to me. Tanning's words also made me think about how important it is not to care about what others think. I sometimes worry about what other people will say about my art work, and I have found that it is crucial to do what I enjoy, not what I think others will enjoy.



At the mid-semester review, I was still exploring with other animals aside from only the jellyfish. Talking about my work and seeing it hung on the wall made me realize more fully that the initial jellyfish drawing I had done was my strongest. The front on position of the figure in the drawing, however, was brought to my attention. Because the face looked directly at the viewer, it felt a little ambiguous as to what the drawing was saying about the human-animal connection. I was also asked about why only the head and face was visible in the image. These observations gave me a lot to think about in terms of my idea and how to depict the feelings I was after. After the mid-semester review, I began exploring with different body positions to truly explore what it was I was trying to say about my connection with the animal world.

I started drawing similarly to the way I began the first jellyfish drawing, as a sort of free association drawing, a technique frequently used by the Surrealists. At first, as in the first drawing, I thought I would draw myself and see what natural imagery emerged around me. This is when I understood my interest in the mysterious underwater invertebrate, because the same imagery began to appear again. The appearance of the jellyfish could not have been arbitrary, which prompted me to follow in that direction, creating dream-like images of my body with and around these creatures.

Why the jellyfish? It became increasingly important for me to address this question in order to develop the work further. I started to think about my feelings towards the animal and past experiences with them. I remembered seeing jellyfish washed up on the shore when I was a young girl, or floating in the water, and instantly running away from them. I am still afraid of them, as probably most people are, but doing this work has made me less afraid and more intrigued by jellyfish. My work shows a dream-like interaction with these creatures in which I

confront the way I relate to the species, with fear, curiosity and awe, similar to how we relate to many non-human animals.



I began to research jellyfish, their movement, their anatomy, their predators and prey, not only to understand them better but also in order to draw them. I have watched videos of jellyfish floating and pulsating through the water to truly gain an understanding of their movements. Olly and Suzi are collaborative artists whose work emphasizes a direct observation of animals in their natural habitats. They work together on single drawings often in very close proximity to wild animals. For them, their work is about relaying an experience exactly how they perceive it in the moment (Baker 20). Much of their



Figure 5. Olly and Suzi. Mkomazi Tanzania. 2008. Sepia, ochre and graphite on paper. 30 x 45 inches. http://www.elevenfineart.com/past%20exhibitions/small/Rainbow%20Family,%20Mkomazi.jpg

work is done on land, but many of their drawings come from underwater observations. Olly and Suzi's work and observations feel so authentic to the moments they are experiencing. The jellyfish in figure 4 feels authentic to the creature while still exploring with color and expression.

Figure 5 showcases their ability to quickly capture a moment, or many moments, that feel as if they speak to the essence of the animal. Although I have not truly experienced being underwater with jellyfish, I still looked to their work as inspiration for authentic observation of other species.

An important aspect of my research was delving into philosophies regarding the connection between humans and nature. Deep ecology is an ecological and environmental philosophy that speaks to the inherent worth of all beings, not just for the sake of human benefit. It argues that humans are very much a part of the natural world and calls for a restructuring of our habits to destroy it. In reading about deep ecology, I was very interested in the spiritual aspect, which "challenges the (now) conventional notion that human beings are essentially different than, separate from, and superior to the natural world" (Barnhill 12). The philosophy prizes the natural world as vital to who we are (Barnhill 12). Deep ecology argues that observing and understanding the importance of all ecosystems would help in lessening humans' detrimental impact on the earth. "It teaches us to find rapture in a brief staring contest with a weasel, or to marvel at the interdependence of plants and insects in a rainforest, or to celebrate the turning of the seasons" (Barnhill 12). My work is very much interested in experiencing the beauty and wonder of such an awe-inspiring and mysterious creature as the jellyfish. Deep ecology calls for a return to a child-like state of wonder and exploration of the natural world, which I think is a major aspect of my work. As we grow older, there is oftentimes a presumption that we know all there is to know about the world and curiosity is lost. This leads to disconnect with the natural world and callousness to how it is treated.

Ecofeminism is another similar philosophy regarding the human and nature relationship, which I initially thought to be less pertinent to my work, but still key to understanding different perspectives. Ecofeminism is a movement that speaks to common ground between feminism and

environmentalism. It argues that a parallel exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature through the construction of differences into conceptual binaries (Warren). This construction allows for a justification of domination by those ranked in higher categories to those ranked lower. The domination and exploitation of women and of nature sits at the core of the ecofeminist analysis. This argument is interesting in understanding how the human domination of the natural world connects with many other exploitative behaviors. Another aspect of ecofeminism is that women are more closely associated with nature than are men, and therefore maintain a deeper concern for the natural world. I have acknowledged that the beliefs surrounding ecofeminism may have a larger relevance to my work than I recognized during the process, and that further research of the subject would be important to informing my interests.

In addition to researching these philosophies, my research this semester involved exploring the many different ways animal imagery is used in art. I found that sometimes animals are used as symbols for a human condition or behavior, while other times animals are subjects of works purely to speak of the animal itself. Melissa Miller is a Texas based artist whose work is concerned with the human and animal connection but in a different way from my own. Her paintings often depict many species of animals in unusual scenes engaged in behavior that speaks to the nature of human action and emotion. Miller is interested in themes common to both animals and humans, such as power, instinct, coexistence and survival (Kalil 3).

My ideas this semester have evolved more than I ever could have anticipated. Initially, I was simply interested in creating pastel drawings that depicted the human relationship with animals. I quickly began to realize that art making is about having a starting point, but also

about recognizing that the work to follow will inevitably shift and change those ideas and intentions. Although that initial idea still remains at the core of my work, I began to become interested in other aspects that emerged. I learned that discussing the human-animal connection involves more than simply saying that an important relationship exists. My work became about exploring what that connection truly is and exactly how we relate to animals. I wanted my viewer to gain an understanding that exploring the natural world can provide insight into the importance of maintaining it. I think my ideas about animals and humans have room to grow and evolve, which I would like to continue to explore.

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Figure 1. Kiki Smith. Born. 2002. Bronze. 39x101x24 inches. Pace Gallery, New York. http://www.art21.org/files/images/smith-sculpt2-002.jpg

Figure 2. Kiki Smith. Nd. Woman with Bird. Etching. http://aintnohothouseflower.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/womanwithbird.jpg

Figure 3. Dorothea Tanning. Sunflower Landscape. 1943. Oil on Canvas. 14 x 11 inches. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. http://snappycontent.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Dorothea-Tanning-painting-sunflower-landscape.jpg

Figure 4. Olly and Suzi. Albatross. 2005. Sepia and oilstick on linen. 42 x 42 inches. Clive James Gallery. http://www.clivejames.com/gallery/painting/olly-suzi/albatross

Figure 5. Olly and Suzi. Mkomazi Tanzania. 2008. Sepia, ochre and graphite on paper. 30 x 45 inches. http://www.elevenfineart.com/past%20exhibitions/small/Rainbow%20Family,%20Mkomazi.jpg