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Transfigūra

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TRANSFIGŪRA

by
Elizabeth Munger

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Book Arts
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Julia Leonard

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Graduate College
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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Elizabeth Munger

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Book Arts at the May 2014 graduation.

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To all the animals I have been lucky enough to know.

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.

Henry Beston,
*The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*¹

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INTRODUCTION

Animals, concepts of memory, nostalgia, and shared stories / myths play a large role in my art work. Cultures have been using animals as a stand-in to explore and describe themselves in relation to one another and the world around us. We see examples of this in traditional narrative forms such as oral myths and stories that were later shared in written form through the codex. In the act of passing on these stories of culture and self we begin to form an understanding of who we are collectively and individually. From this schema we start to create cultural and personal mythologies.

My thesis reflects this concept of building a story formed by personal experiences and memories. With the use of printing, drawing, collaging and book structure I have constructed a visual narrative that draws on the images, concepts, and processes I have encountered over time. Assembling my memories and experiences, unequivocally influenced by artists and stories, forms the foundation of my thesis and begins the telling of my mythology.

CHAPTER I: A BRIEF WORD ABOUT MAKING ART, OR WHY I MAKE ART

My art is a way for me to process information I experience on a daily basis. It gives me a chance to explore ideas, concepts and experiences of the day-to-day in a thoughtful and visual format. Through the physical act of drawing, printing and other techniques I create a visual record of what I am processing internally.

Navigating through these experiences I hope to share a commonality that I believe is inherent in all humanity such as heartache and senescence. Through art I am able to express myself more clearly and possibly more truthfully.

CHAPTER II: AN INSIDE VIEW

Childhood

Influential in my imagery and running parallel to the animals is memory. The majority of my work contains fragments from images and stories of my childhood mostly comprised of books read to me along with ones I later read myself. These mental imprints are seen in the lines I make, the colors I use, and the way I create narrative in my imagery. Often in my drawing I see traces of characters, mostly animals, that I have met before in childhood books. The animals and patterns from Paul Goble's, *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses*, body contortions from Hilary Knight's *The Circus is Coming*, and line work influenced by Maurice Sendak are all relics that can be seen in my work.

Aesop's Fables

Aesop's Fables are stories that I looked at and became interested in how they differed in stature from when I was little and now. The fables of my past loom large in my memory. As I revisited them as an adult they fell short, typically consisting of only a few sentences rather than the long stories I remember. This began my process of exploring how memory creates and changes stories. Picking and choosing details dictates the telling of the story. Through this manipulation memories are kerned and stories are created or changed. While working on *Remembering Aesop*, a letterpress artist book, my brother and I experienced and played with this idea of how we remembered the story to be versus how the story actually was. *The Lion and the Mouse*, an Aesop's fable we both remembered fondly, which in our collective memory included a thorn in the lions paw, extracted by the mouse; in reality it is not a thorn but a net instead (see figure 1).



Figure 1. *Remembering Aesop, The Lion and the Mouse*

The fables also illustrate for me what roles animals played within stories, and how they differed or shared similar roles in different cultures; for instance the wolf in European cultures is often a monster to be slaughtered and in Native American culture the wolf represents a spirit guide that is to be revered. Observing these analogies and exploring them through different interpretations using imagery, materials, form and various art-making techniques contribute to a broader understanding of how I relate to the world at large. In my work *The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Three Allegories* I explore three different interpretations of the wolf and how its role changes based on context and material. The first book reprises the wolf in sheep's clothing in its traditional role of the wolf disguising itself as a sheep while maintaining its wolf-like charms (see figure 2). In *Change*

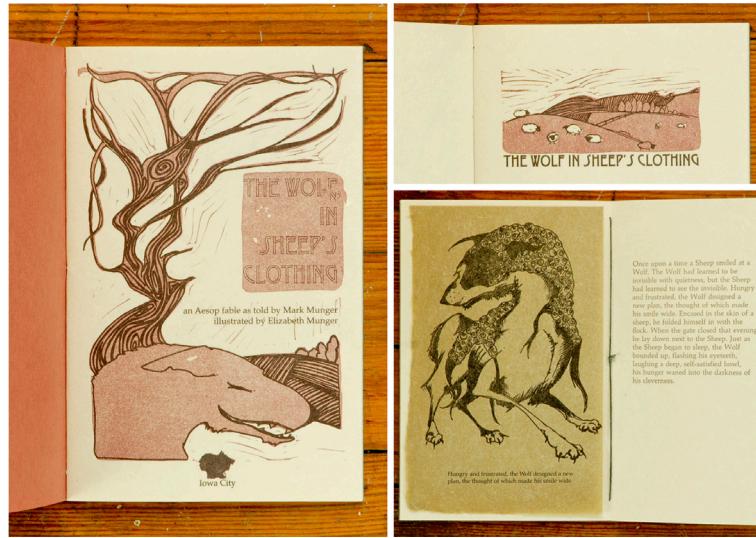


Figure 2. *The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*

Me (see figure 3) the viewer is able to play with the connections of animals to their



Figure 3. *Change Me*

associated anthropomorphic characteristics by rearranging their tops and bottoms along with word play. Among the animals is a self-portrait that allows me, as well as the reader, to observe how my role changes in the context of different inherent animalistic qualities. The third book *i am not a sheep: a confession* (see figure 4) I

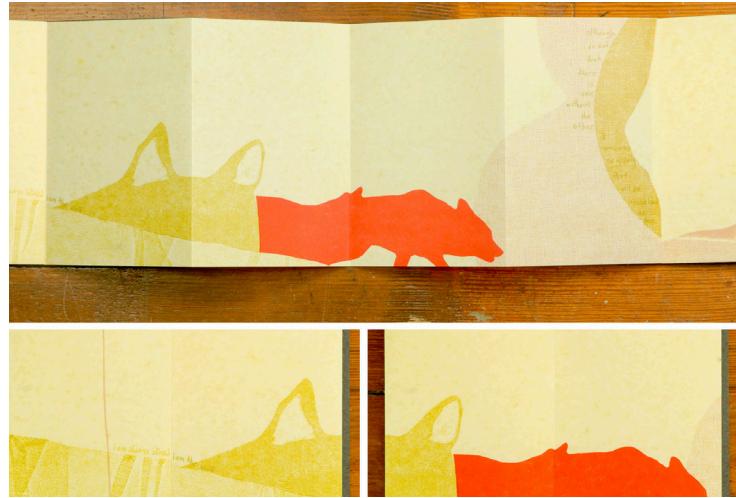


Figure 4. *i am not a sheep: a confession*

examine who I am as the wolf. Abstracted images of a conflicted self-portrait amongst wolves voice my concerns about playing that role within a changing landscape.

Ursula K LeGuin

Buffalo Gals Come Out and Play is a story that has really stuck with me and has remained in my thoughts about animals and people and their relationships and the relationships between the two. In *Buffalo Gals Come Out and Play* there are two types of people in the world, old people and new people. The old people exist as both animal and human, involuntarily appearing in either form dependent on who the viewer is and how they choose to see them. As Coyote explains, “resemblance is in the eye” (LeGuin 31)². The new people have lost the ability to change or see the old people as both animal and human. To me this represents a change from one way of life to another, emotionally, physically or ideologically, and how we talk about that change. We live with our stories / experiences our whole life. When things change, you have to leave old stories

behind to make new ones that help with understanding. This resonates with me in conjunction to myths and memory, and the construction of images and narrative.

Joseph Campbell

His work on comparative mythology explains that myths contain universal themes across cultures that are played out over and over again in different ways. He magnifies the notion that even though we may be different, we share important universal concepts that help to explain the world around us.

Charles Simonds

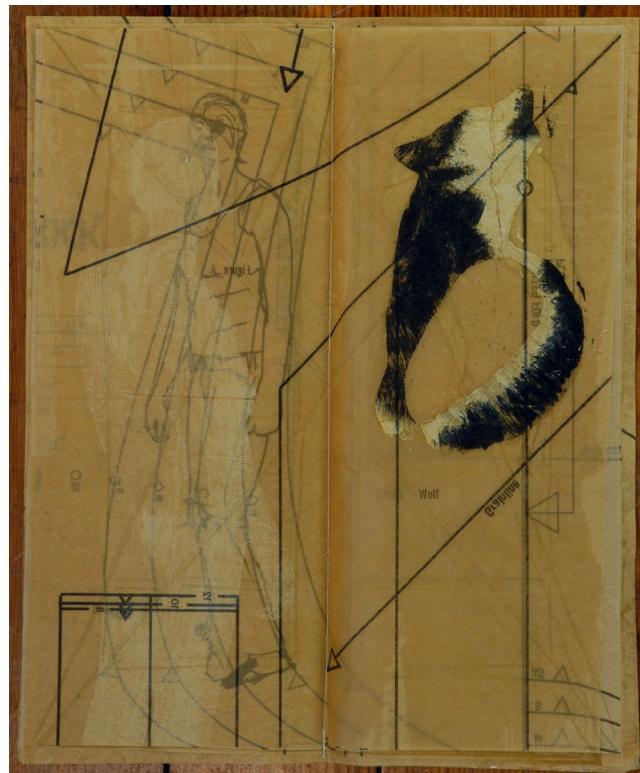
There is a deceptively simple analogy at work in the many clay sculptures made by Charles Simonds; that the body, the earth, and architecture are all different forms of dwellings. We inhabit them all; they are all crucial to our wellbeing; and in various ways they are the outward expression of our inward selves. (Beardsley, John, <charles-simonds.com>³).

As an artist Charles Simonds created his own personal mythology based on the dwelling style of three imaginary peoples and how they think about and record their past, present and future. As part of his investigation into this mythology he uses installations, drawings, sculptures and performances as a way to express and explore his ideas of dwelling and the people that lived there. All of these works contribute to each other and aid in the telling of his mythology.

When I applied this ekphrastic concept of various work it reminded me of a narrative, and how it takes pieces to create a whole. Book structures are like this on a micro scale. The thought of pushing this concept and working on various forms that utilize a semblance of imagery and concepts that communicate together in order to strengthen one another individually and collectively make up a visual narrative that expresses my own mythology.

Ted Andrews

In his book *Animal Speak*, Andrews discusses a way in which we can learn to adapt and function more effectively in this world through observing the animals we connect with. By studying their traits, such as how they communicate, hunt, deal with conflict etc, we are then able to appropriate these attributes in a way that contributes to our understanding of self and our interactions with other people. Take the wolf for example, by learning and understanding how they live and work in groups one can elucidate how to work better when part of a group rather than by oneself. I like that this allows for the animal to stay an animal, rather than understanding it through anthropomorphic anecdotes. I work with imagery that explores myself in similitude with animals or by using animals to represent attributes of human nature. Placing myself in the imagery I am able to play around with the environments or the faces that I'm wearing as a way to see myself in different lights (see figure 5, a. & b.).



a. *A Study in Self Portraits, or I Am Not a Sheep*



b. *Sewn Together*
Figure 5. Self-portraits

More recently my interests are in recasting the role of “animal as human” back to “animal as animal.” Looking at the origin story of the animal and why and where they first appear in our stories to act out our vicissitudes. What is our connection to them, and how we have interpreted and adapted them into our lives?

CHAPTER III: TWO WOLVES

The Two Wolves

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, 'My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil – It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good – It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.' The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: 'Which wolf wins?' The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one you feed.' <firstpeople.us>⁴.

When I heard the story of the *Two Wolves* I felt it diverged from the more traditional Eurocentric story containing a singular moral or theme as in the case of the *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*, emphasizing once a wolf always a wolf, no matter how you dress up. The *Two Wolves* allows for the possibility of two options, pulling and pushing in a constant battle, good and evil occurring simultaneously. The outcome is determined by action not predestined through a singular characteristic, such as the nature of the beast. Initially the concept of having control over your fate rather than succumbing to a predestined nature is what attracted me to this particular story. As I considered more deeply, the question of the wolves their origin story became more intriguing and important. Inevitably I left the story of the *Two Wolves* behind. Redirecting my previous interests in animals and the roles they play for us, I started focusing on the animals as animals and who they are.

Through my thesis work I explore the questions that surround these wolves as wolves: where they come from, and who they are? By creating a mythology I present the wolves in a time when animals and people are not yet fixed; where they are able to take on either form and control their own nature. Juxtaposing the wolves' origin story is the dialogue that is taking place between them. What do they talk about? What do they sound like? Us,

wolves, the universe? What type of language are they using? As a way to better understand the answers to these questions and how they relate to one another I am able to aid in my understanding by employing a physical application of process, drawing, and printing. By making visual work I explore a multitude of concepts through imagery, form and materials and see how the wolves change individually and collectively and what narratives the wolves tell.

In order to explore and express these wolves and their mythology, I pieced together two large collages. Each one is representative of a single wolf; one white, one black, good and evil. I made 4'×8' sheets of handmade abaca paper to accommodate a combination of drawings and printed texture (see figure 6). The



Figure 6. Printed Texture, White & Black

individual collages consist of two layers of paper, connected by hand stitching through the layers. My images convey the wolves occupying a place and time that was before human convention and the struggle of morality. They exist solely as Transfigūra, Latin *trans.* - across, *figūra.* - figures, not as archetypes in our stories. The term Transfigūra has become centralized within my mythology as a word that describes and gives name to the figures that appear in my thesis. It denotes the transcendental transformation of the animal/human while simultaneously allowing for a singular name.

In addition to image and color, texture plays a large role in the visual narrative of my mythology. White and black represent the concept of good and evil, along with the two distinct wolves (see figure 7). The colors are



Figure 7. Two Wolves: White Wolf, Black Wolf

defined by a printed texture that thematically runs through the mythology, made by printing from a collagraph, or a built up relief surface, in this case layers of gel medium brushed on to a substrate of book board, and printed onto sheets of 25" × 38" Sekishu paper. The texture is suggestive of fur, and also is symbolic of the two wolves' dialogue, evoking a primal feel. Embodied in the brush-like texture is evidence of the hand, reminiscent of mark making used similarly in written language especially those of calligraphic form (see figure 8). The texture is

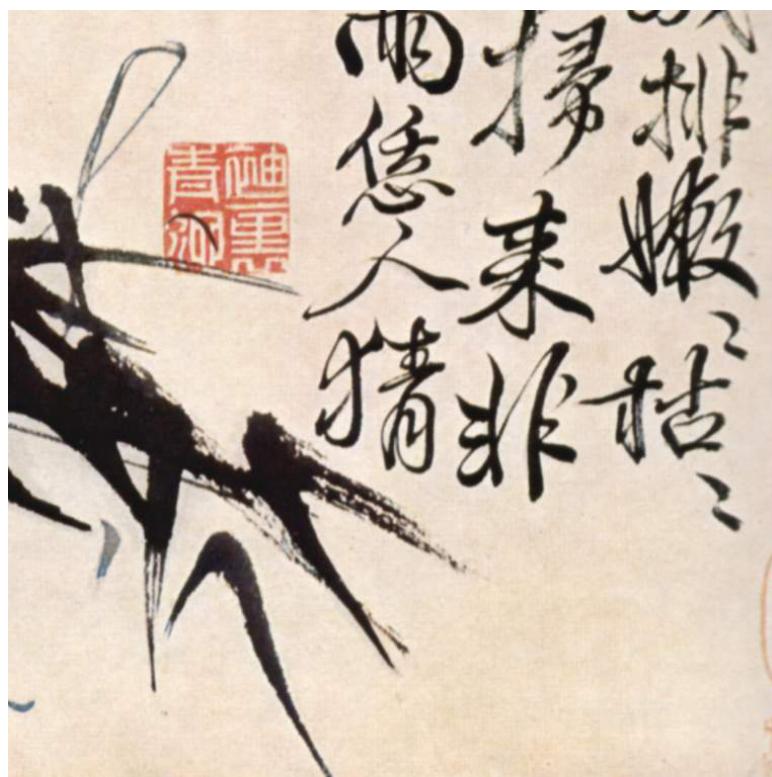


Figure 8. Example of Japanese Brush Writing⁵

also evocative of the OM or AUM,

In the Sanskrit tradition, this sound [OM or AUM] is called “Anahata Nada,” the “Unstruck Sound.” Literally, this means “the sound that is not made by two things striking together.” The point of this particular distinction is that all ordinary audible sounds are made by at least two elements: bow and string; drum and stick; two vocal cords; two lips against the mouthpiece of the trumpet;

the double reed of the oboe; waves against the shore; wind against the leaves. All sounds within our range of hearing are created by things visible or invisible, striking each other or vibrating together, creating pulsing waves of air molecules which our ears and brain interpret as *sound*.

So, sound that is *not* made of two things striking together is the sound of primal energy, the sound of the universe itself. Joseph Campbell likens this unstruck vibration to the humming of an electrical transformer, or the (to our ears) unheard hummings of atoms and molecules. <Gordon, David, spiritsound.com>⁶.

This unstruck sound is an integral part in understanding the wolves' mythology because it places the wolves at the time before there was need for a written or spoken language, a time that I propose all sentience was Transfigūra.

In the midst of printing texture an artifact emerged that connects the thinking process and art making process to the visual mythology, a recording done on tympan paper. To print on full sheets of Sekishu I had to strategically fold and unfold the paper during printing in order to cover the entire surface with texture. Because of the folding I was inconsistently registering the paper, allowing for the inked 12" × 12" collagraph square to impress onto the tympan paper in the same place but with an irregular accuracy. This caused the shape of the square to build up on the tympan with some areas receiving more ink than others. The areas that were repeatedly in contact with the printed paper, due to the varying thickness of the paper being folded and the viscosity of the ink, obscured some of the texture on the tympan paper creating an atmospheric shape in some areas while allowing for more defined stratum of texture in others. This imprint built up layers of texture onto the tympan leaving behind evidence of thought process and art making (see figure 9).

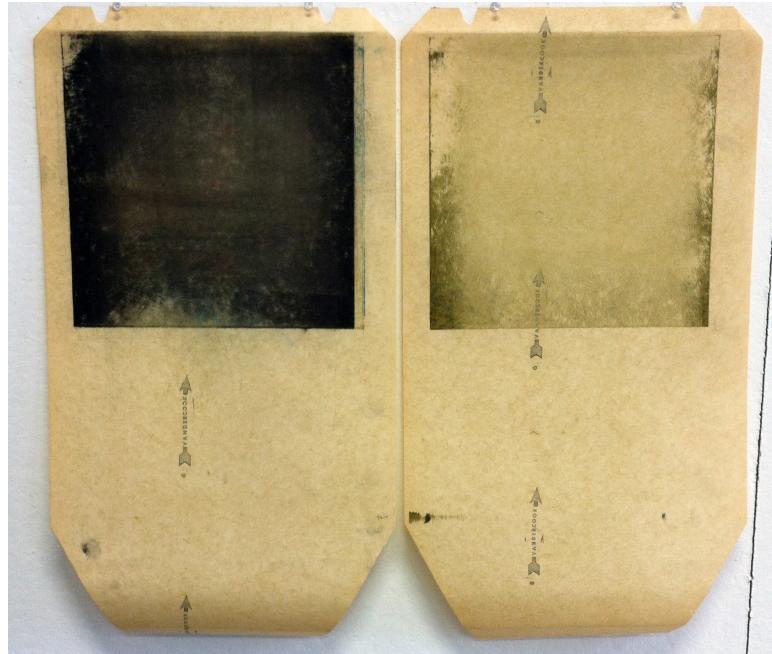


Figure 9. Tympan Artifacts

The dialogue emerges as one of the most important elements for me in this work. The narrative that carries out of the wolves and onto the floor is echoing the dialogue that is taking place in thread between the wolves themselves. The thread as dialogue holds the wolves together. Physically the thread connects the two layers of paper together only where the wolves are communicating. Symbolically it is representing the narrative that is happening not only between the two wolves but also the dialogue taking place between wolf and human as the peripheral shift is happening. This concept underlies the whole piece.

I propose, allegorically, the idea of narrative through association of the object, the book, rather than with text. Expressing narrative simultaneously through book form and text as representational mark making via texture (see figure 10) and thread. Taking advantage of editioned double-sided accordion



Figure 10. Double-sided Accordion

structures, printed with texture, the multiple groupings of black and white forms represent the two wolves and the dialogue they engage in. As a grouping on the floor they pour out of their respective wolf functioning as individual wolves coalescing to a collective pack, symbolic of a coming together of experiences and ideas and then choosing what and how they remember and tell their stories.

CONCLUSION

Starting from childhood I drew images of animals that I connected with through stories, and personal experiences. Later I created images that explored these same relationships but in the context of a larger arena including; the concepts of time and place, and how I see myself moving through the world. Placing myself into the work gave me the opportunity to visually see what I was internally processing, as well as affording me various ways to explore ideas through different art forms. Continuing to explore these concepts I am starting to diverge from my own egocentric story. In discovering the wolves I began to recognize what was most interesting to me about these stories is the animals themselves and who they are outside the story. In the end the wolves have shown me new ways of expressing ideas that combine multi-dimensional thinking and processes to strengthen my art work and the stories I tell.

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