

# **BECOMING ANIMAL**

**GILLIAN KING**

Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master's degree Fine Arts

Graduate Studies Visual Arts University of Ottawa

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I thank my art dealer, Brendan A. de Montigny. You have been the wind beneath my MFA wings.

And finally I thank my two cats Toulouse & Frank, my endlessly supportive partner and family; Marty Gautron, Leslie, Dwaine and Everett King.

## INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

### LOCATION:

Ottawa Art Gallery, Gallery 3, Arts Court, 2 Daly Ave, Ottawa, ON K1N 6E2



Gillian King, *BECOMING ANIMAL*, Installation Shot, 2016



Gillian King, *BECOMING ANIMAL*, Installation Shot, 2016



Gillian King, *BECOMING ANIMAL*, Installation Shot, 2016



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Gillian King, *BECOMING ANIMAL*, Installation Shot, 2016



Gillian King, *Terrestrial I*, Cold Wax Medium, Oil, and Raw Pigments on Canvas, 5 x 4ft, 2016



Gillian King, *Detail: Terrestrial I*, Cold Wax Medium, Oil, and Raw Pigments on Canvas, 5 x 4ft, 2016



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Gillian King, *Detail: Pink Lake Mica II*, Cold Wax Medium, Oil, and Raw Pigments on Canvas, 8x 5ft, 2016



Gillian King, *Pink Lake Mica I*, Cold Wax Medium, Oil, and Raw Pigments on Canvas, 8 x 5ft, 2016



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Gillian King, *Detail: Terrestrial II*, Cold Wax Medium, Oil, and Raw Pigments on Canvas, 6 x 5 ft, 2016

## LIST OF WORKS

### LOCATION:

Ottawa Art Gallery, Gallery 3, Arts Court, 2 Daly Ave, Ottawa, ON K1N 6E2

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Gillian King, *Detail: Terrestrial II*, Cold Wax Medium, Oil, and Raw Pigments on Canvas, 6 x 5 ft, 2016

## ARTIST STATEMENT

“What we begin to forget about animals, we forget about ourselves.”  
- Jonathan Safran Foer

The first cave paintings depict non-human animals and human animals, our relationships, and our interactions together using pigments derived from deceased bodies and from the land. The materials consisted of burnt bones, charcoal, and minerals. I also use pigments in my paintings to reference bodies in order to address how we have attempt to separate ourselves from the natural world to the extent that our relationships with non-human animals are fragmented and strained. My painting materials are beeswax, charcoal, natural and artificial raw pigments, and oil paint. My abstract paintings explore the ephemerality of human animal and non-human animal bodies and their interactions. I question what it is be animal, and if it is possible to reconnect with nature and other living beings by addressing our mutual fragility and mortality.

I acknowledge that at first glance my painting practice resembles a combination of visual elements found in twentieth-century modernist painting. As a female visual artist exploring the sameness between my body and other bodies, my practice opposes the ‘god-like’<sup>1</sup> heroism of many painters affiliated with these past movements, notably Abstract Expressionism. The aim of Abstract Expressionist painters was to use gesture to express their personal inner psyche – primarily one that exalted the heroic male. In contrast, I use my gestures to draw connections to all human and non-human animals of all genders in order to unpack our similarities.

One way I aim for inclusivity in my art is by alluding to physical bodies through scale. My practice focuses on creating large works that are approximately the ‘wingspan’ of a human animal. First, I use my hands and nails to move or throw beeswax onto the canvases. These gestural actions create a low relief form. I then throw and pour charcoal and raw pigments onto these low reliefs to capture the traces made by my hands. At times

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<sup>1</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

these marks are reminiscent of non-human animals clawing or digging. The traces left by my body act as a kind of symbolic mapping of a relatable body, and invite viewers to consider their own physical engagement with our landscape and other animals.

From afar my paintings look like they could be photographs of maps or topographical surfaces. This is seen in the larger areas where my gestural actions build low reliefs. Up close the surface materials are naked to the eye and understood as being composed of materials built up over time. This opposition between what is perceived and what is the case is important to my practice because exploring the actions between human animal and non-human animal bodies means to question how we look at, and act, within the natural world. I continue this visual trickery between figure and ground by creating contrast - hard edge lines weave through the rough gestural terrains. I use colours that evoke flesh tones, soil, and ash juxtaposed with bright artificial colours to call into question what is natural and artificial in our epoch. I address our mutual fragility and mortality in the natural world by building up these abstracted bodily surfaces to suggest that the paintings are like exposed bodies in barren topographic terrains, still living and breathing encased in painted skin. These combined elements of visual uneasiness encourage the viewer to have a corporeal relationship with my body and my actions. My paintings are not photographic, they are illusions with textures that create the desire for touch.

The haptic, or sense of touch, is paramount in my practice. It draws the viewer in visually. The haptic allows the viewer to envision their own fingers moving along the skin of the canvas and the bodily mediums squishing through their fingers.

Even though my paintings are abstract, my actions have consequences and I am aware and accounting for them. The act and idea of touching is important during my process because I want to have an intimate corporeal relationship with my materials in order to understand them. By choosing to have direct and intimate contact with my materials and the canvas I create another distinction between my paintings and the paintings of

modernist painters whose bodies were so often distanced from their canvases either through the use of tools or the use of living bodies other than their own. Most importantly, the haptic opens up the possibility to the viewer to experience my process and thematic underpinnings.

Human animals have changed the natural landscape to a point where we have entered into a new epoch - the Anthropocene. Unlike other epochs, the Anthropocene began by our actions and influence on the natural environment. The resulting fallout from our ability to change the landscape of the world has affected how we interact other living beings. *Becoming Animal*<sup>2</sup> explores our relationships as human animals towards non-human animals through large-scale abstract paintings. As a species we attempt to exert control over other animals and our natural environment. *Becoming Animal* questions the hierarchies we place on ourselves and non-human animals to call attention to our sameness. Exploring our similarities opens up a way to look at our mutual fragility and our mortality.

In her book *When Species Meet* (2007), author Donna Haraway explains that “... touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions... Touch and regard have consequences.” Even though my paintings are abstract, my actions have consequences and I am aware and accounting for them. The act and idea of touching is important during my process because I want to have an intimate corporeal relationship with my materials in order to understand them. By choosing to have direct and intimate contact with my materials and the canvas I create another distinction between my paintings and the paintings of modernist painters whose bodies were so often distanced from their canvases either through the use of tools or the use of living bodies other than their own. Most

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<sup>2</sup> The show title *Becoming Animal* has been adapted from various texts including David Abram’s *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (2011), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2007).

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*Becoming Animal2* explores our relationships as human animals towards non-human animals through large scale abstract paintings. As a species we attempt to exert control over other animals and our natural environment. *Becoming Animal* questions the hierarchies we place on ourselves and non-human animals to call attention to our sameness. Exploring our similarities opens up a way to look at our mutual fragility and our mortality.