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Making New Stories about Multispecies Kinship through Vital Material Encounters with Clay

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Making New Stories about Multispecies Kinship through Vital Material Encounters with Clay

Kim L. Pace

Abstract

As a contemporary artist sculpting with clay to create story vessels and ensembles of hybrid creatures, I work with the material in what I propose as a creative partnership. The clay is my ‘multispecies partner’—an active participant rather than passive subject in my creative process. This approach collapses the boundaries between myself and the material, we become united in a material network that blurs the delineation or duality between subject and object and the human and nonhuman (Latour 1993). In this manner, I question the human-centric hierarchy inherent in purely acting upon materials. Instead, I pursue an embodiment of a type of human-nature interaction, a connection between myself and the material as a form of multispecies kinship. Non-human elements work with and against my creative choices, obscuring the instincts of subjective decisions. In the context of the ‘material turn’ in art-making and philosophical enquiry, I explore the creation of my ceramic sculpture as it evolves. Clay is a storytelling mode in and of itself, and part of the story-subject that feeds my work, alongside a multitude of other references and ideas. Citing examples of matter transforming, such as clay in creation myths, examples of material animism in folk and fairy tales, as well as my artistic approach to interacting with the material, I suggest how we might re-think matter differently from purely passive or inert. I look to art history for tropes and concepts of art-making that facilitate the expression of unconscious and collective archetypal visual language, and to literary sources that demonstrate some of the best thinking through the vehicle of storytelling. Finally, I explore critical anthropomorphism in relation to representations of the nonhuman, especially in narrative artworks, and discuss how the act of re-storying can adjust our relationship with how we currently perceive the distinctions between subject and object, human and nonhuman.

Introduction

Writer Angela Carter sought to adapt “old bottles”—the form and structure of traditional fairy tales—to fit her “new wine,” a distinctly feminist narrative revision of social expectations and restrictions of women in Western society: “I’m all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (Carter 69). The fairy tales she re-told were the ones we know today, mostly descended from French and German origin. However, Carter endeavoured to change the stereotypical identity of social order for women by shifting the protagonists’ function; for example, portraying them as heroines instead of victims, like Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* (1984).

As a visual artist, my practice braids together sculpture and storytelling. I reimagine ‘old bottles’—ceramic vessels, masks and figures; supposedly minor forms of artistic expression with ancient and rich, storytelling roots; the ‘new wine’ are my contemporary ceramic forms that invoke newly invented stories. I regard the process of making ceramic work as a multispecies collaboration, where the clay is an active participant and I deliberately employ the inherent qualities of the material in the process. I am also advocating for an alternative view of the history of sculpture, one which takes into account lesser trodden pathways, when artists have departed from the canon. Clay certainly features in the history of sculpture yet ceramic work is traditionally less highly regarded as a material for finished work than, say, bronze or marble. These other materials carry associations of monumentality, permanence and stability, whereas clay has associations of domesticity, mutability and human scale.

My approach to working with clay considers how “matter comes to matter” (Barad 169). This enables practices of knowing to be reconsidered in relation to material, for example, as I allow the clay to dictate what I do to some extent, non-human elements work with and against my choices. This tends to obscure the instincts of subjective decisions and asserts the animistic qualities of the material, through which I create representations of hybrid figures that are both corporeal and spectral.



Fig. 1 & 2: Kim L. Pace, From the "Tree Sprites" series, 2020 – 22. Glazed ceramic. Private Collections. © 2023 Kim L. Pace

I assign my own, new stories physical form in ceramic. Amongst the multiple references and concepts that I draw upon are certain archetypes from the realms of folklore and fairy tales. Materials, images and objects are my language, and this text elaborates on my themes and ideas, whilst the sculptures themselves are the conduits through which I primarily speak. My own life is included in the multiple sources that inform my work, i.e., lived experience, memory, dreams and subconscious or automatic approaches. This subjective knowledge sits alongside ideas influenced by psychoanalysis and psychology (the uncanny and social performance, for example); personifications from folklore and fairy tales (primarily of Eastern European origin); the history of feminist-Surrealist strategies of art-making (such as approaches found in Leonora Carrington's and Dorothea Tanning's oeuvres); and the ghost of animism (the belief from religions that view everything as having a soul), which now haunts the Western world in relation to how we think and regard our systems of knowledge.

The aim of my work is to explore lesser or non-objectifying encounters between humans and nonhumans. I therefore adopt a new materialist approach of thinking through materials, of material-discursive entanglements. As such, the content here constitutes my explorations as an artist—rather than research or practice-based research. My work is undertaken in the context of ideas pertaining to the feminist new-materialist vision of subjectivity, that highlights the mutual capacity to both affect and be affected by others. Central to new materialist thinking is the idea that matter

is fundamentally multiple, self-organising, dynamic and inventive, shifting between nature and culture, the animated and the automated, bodies and environments.

This dovetails with my deep fascination with stories as the central way in which we make sense of our lives, how we tell ourselves and others who we are. We are all storytellers, engaged in the “act of creation” of the “composition of our lives,” according to anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson (1).

Here, I am going to focus upon the material, specifically the materiality of clay as both conduit for my new stories—the construction of non-linear narratives, that feature invented and adapted existing archetypes from folklore and fairy tales. As a nonhuman entity, my multispecies partner (clay) collaborates in the creation of these new three-dimensional story-worlds. By adopting this perspective and approach to the material as subject, I hope to contribute towards re-thinking our relationships in and with the world, with particular emphasis towards a more inclusive and respectful kinship with multispecies.



Figure 3: Kim L Pace “Vixx”, 2021. From the “Vulpes” series. Glazed porcelain. Private Collection © Kim L. Pace, 2023

Material Matters

In her short essay “Being Taken for Granite,” Ursula K. Le Guin takes on what could be termed as a new-materialist vision and playfully applies it to interpersonal interactions, using mud and granite as metaphors:

Being mud is really different from being granite and should be treated differently. Mud lies around being wet and heavy and oozy and generative. Mud is underfoot. People make footprints in mud. As mud I accept feet. I accept weight. I try to be supportive; I like to be obliging. (8)

Le Guin riffs on a mishearing of the expression being taken for granted. However, there is a double meaning or possible interpretation: she is simultaneously exploring matter, material and consciousness. The wealth of metaphor conjured by mud as a generative and malleable material is presented in stark contrast with fixed, rigid granite and this could be applied to interspecies interactions too: “I am just mud...And so when the people and the huge heavy things walk away they are not changed, except their feet are muddy, but I am changed” (8). When speaking “as mud” (8), Le Guin connects with new-materialist thinking by adopting the position of matter and embodying the notion of empathy –using material as an analogy to do so. This has parallels with my ideas about working with clay and approach to making art.

Evidently, I am materially embodied as is the clay, although the distinctions between human and nonhuman within European philosophy have traditionally been asserted as absolutely binary. For example, Descartes defined the human as *not* an animal, *not* inert matter and *not* a pre-programmed machine. Although the human-nonhuman divide has been foundational for European thought since the Enlightenment, there are, however, many cultures on earth who do not adopt such a partition. Indigenous perspectivism puts forth a multi-nature continuum across all species, meaning that all are considered as being endowed with a soul, much as animistic folklore does. To acknowledge multispecies interdependence and interconnectedness is to highlight our commonalities, and the mutual capacity to affect and be affected by others. We need to develop collaborative bonds, what unites us, in order to address the urgent challenges that we currently face, including sustainability, biodiversity, climate change and habitat destruction affecting the world’s wildlife populations, which have plummeted by more than two-thirds since 1970 (WWF Living Planet Report 2020, 28-29).

Whilst working with the material, I consider one body (mine) amongst other bodies i.e., clay (Bennett 8), effectively collapsing the boundaries between myself and the material. Subject and object blur and a kind of material network becomes apparent—where the delineation or distinct duality between the human and nonhuman merge. For Bruno Latour, the opportunities to create potential networks between humans and nonhumans are constant, and agency arises from the elements in the network coming together through actions (Latour 142). In contemplating what constitutes life, I view the clay as a “vital body” (Bennett 10), and as such am effectively seeking to decentre anthropocentrism’s privileging of the human.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to challenge the Cartesian mind-body dualism and overcome the polarity of materialism and idealism; he showed we encounter the world through embodied perception and that our bodies have ways of being, moving and interpreting the world that exceeds cognitive representation: “We can encounter the world only as situated and embodied beings” (qtd. in Fielding 82).

What particularly interests me here with the foregrounding of material factors and a reconfiguration of our interpretation of matter, is the potential for new alliances and a focus on the connections between species. This could give us a way to view coexistence and mutual interdependence with greater compassion. In placing the nonhuman at the centre of my work it is my intention to draw attention to the nonhuman nature that has traditionally been devalued in our systems of meaning (Barad 3-38).

Forest sprites and pucks erupt from the chance encounters of materials and chameleon-like surface textures. Catriona McAra, “Kindred”



Figure 4: Kim L. Pace, “Turquoise Leshy,” glazed ceramic, 2021. 20 x 15 x 12 cm / 7 x 5 x 4 in. © 2023 Kim L. Pace

Sea nymphs, tree sprites, rock spirits, mandrakes and “Leshies” (a Leshy in Slavic mythology is a nonhuman forest spirit with agency who protects animals) appear to burst forth from the clay, suggested by punctures and imprints and forms that I conjure up. These creature-like beings infer a highly sentient natural world embodied through ceramic. In my studio, there’s an orchestration between how I approach the clay, along with allowing for the inherent material qualities to feature: a balance between control and lack of control. I ‘listen’ to the clay and effectively allow the material to guide me in making things. The directness of how I work with clay enables me to capture its malleability and plasticity—and the material reveals things to me in the process. The clay surface can be said to resemble a skin that can pucker, bend, fold, bulge, crack, tear and crease during manipulation. It can also be punctured and scored, and it retains the pressure of finger impressions and other imprints upon this skin. It then becomes leather-hard, before drying to a brittleness that can crumble to dust, prior to being vitrified through firing and glazing processes that take the clay to temperatures of over 1000 degrees.



Figure 5: Kim L Pace “Sea Nymph (Deep Sea Dweller)” 2023.
Glazed ceramic. 30 x 11 x 5.5cm/12 x 4.3 x 2 in. © 2023 Kim L Pace

The physical and metaphoric qualities of clay - essentially mud - and its inherent ability to impersonate almost any other material, including for example, feathers, fur, fish scales and rock fissures, feeds into the ceramic sculptural forms I create. I aim to evoke these aspects of our natural environment, although my characters are essentially fabulations—speculative, invented versions of the life that inhabits the world alongside us; proposed future life-forms. The creatures I create are porous, hybrid and diverse beings, rather than distinct representations of any pre-existing lifeforms.

I have been exploring the human-nonhuman hybrid over a significant period of time and throughout the process, I have actively sought to consider the problems inherent in representing the other, i.e., the nonhuman (animal). Grappling with these challenges, I have come to regard the characters that emerge in my work as kinfolk; “fellow beings” (Rolfe and Stark 17-24), if you

will. Where I detect a tangible presence manifested in the works, I regard this as successful according to my aims. I make judgements by means of viewing whether the work conveys an independent quality from me as artist. Is it believable, and does it emit a 'personality' that one might recognise, connect or identify with?

Our bodies—like that of the clay body, are an amalgamation of many previous lives, imprinted by factors from genetics to the weather. Working with clay, decisions are made physically, through the body; I seek the point at which the material presents this certain 'perkiness,' a moment of potential that generates the presence described above, which is an expressive potency of the clays' poise. I see this as a type of channelling of or transference of energy. Working with the clay (mud/earth) I acknowledge its charge; I feel its changes in temperature from cool to the touch transitioning to warmth as the clay takes on my body heat and the water content begins to evaporate.

I work at speed—I avoid dwelling on what I am doing. It is important to the process that I retain a dynamic quality, reflecting my enthusiasm and excitement about the interaction with the material in search of the 'perkiness' described above. Improvisation is key, which channels the vast, unknown quantity of the imagination. The very physical nature of clay acts as a perfect vehicle to enable access to the archetypes of the collective unconscious (Jung) which are central in fairy tales; as hands engage with material, a different level of consciousness to that of day-to-day life is achieved.

This technique or state of working is sometimes known as automatism, a term originally from psychology—found in the work of French psychologists like Jean Charcot—and which was adopted as a central approach by the artists associated with Surrealism. Psychic automatism was derived in part from spirit writings of mediums, thought to be conduits for the afterlife to communicate with the living. The Surrealists attempted to bypass logic and any control exercised by rational thought, externalising the kind of thinking evident in dreams. These artists, working during extremely volatile times between the world wars, looked for ways to circumvent the rational mind and by extension, the rules of society that they considered to be oppressive—including the stark social and legal inequalities between men and women.

As well as automatic approaches, Surrealist frottage techniques also feature in the surfaces of my work. One of the key characteristics of utilising such techniques is the generation of suggestive forms that enable multiple associations. Developed by artists such as Max Ernst and Eileen Agar, frottage is usually a drawing process where rubbings of textural forms like leaves and wood are made, that suggest imagery other than the original source. The

resultant images and forms, such as featured on my Story Vessel “Daphne Flees Apollo,” form a micro-world encapsulated on the surface of the work, that I want to “provoke us to see and think with wonder” (Bacchilega and Orme 1-18).



Figure 6: Kim L Pace, “Daphne Flees Apollo,” 2023. Glazed ceramic. 34 x 26 cm / 13.4 x 10 in. © 2023 Kim L Pace

Material, form and colour have their own language that cannot be translated and clay, by extension, has specific attributes and properties constituting a ‘language’ the clay ‘speaks.’ It is certainly a conduit *through* which I speak, as an artist. Indeed, we know language exceeds the tongue, that language is also written in the body and that culture is corporeally inscribed in the ways in which we perceive the world. Working with clay as a sculptor enables both the artist and the viewer to tune into our embodied perception of being in the world. Nonhuman non-lingual sentience may not be fully known via human language, rather through visceral responses or experiences.

When we speak of 'language,' we speak of an ability to communicate, a power to convey information... As humans, we rely upon a complex web of mostly discrete, spoken sounds to accomplish our communication...this association has led many to assume that language is an exclusive attribute of our species. [It]is an extremely self-serving assumption (Abram 166-67).

Clay in its raw state is a character, rather than a passive subject to the creative process, as is the fire of the kiln. Transforming the appearance and constitution of clay, drying it, applying glazes, and then firing it in the kiln is alchemical and unpredictable. When working with these elements, I am collaborating with the materiality of natural forces, therefore the fire or heat of the kiln could also be considered to be another form of multispecies collaboration, an embodiment of a type of human-nature interaction, where I'm connecting with the process as a form of kinship. There can only ever be limited control over the results of firing clay. As Jane Bennett writes:

materiality is a term that applies more evenly to humans and nonhumans. I am a material configuration, the pigeons in the park are material compositions, the viruses, parasites, and heavy metals in my flesh and in pigeon flesh are materialities, [as is] the dust on the floor (viii).

Rather than see clay as a symbol, icon or metaphor—as something other than itself—my approach is an alternative way to view the nonhuman on its own terms and as collaborator in the process. As Donna Haraway states,

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories (12).

Animism and Clay Vessels

This glazed ceramic story-vessel entitled "Sea Groyne" (2023) integrates surface and form. It is a self-contained world, a container of and for storytelling.

Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) proposes the receptacle or container as the earliest human tool, and not the spear. This suggests a shift in the way we view humanity's foundations

from a narrative of domination to one of gathering, holding, and sharing. Le Guin tells of the carrier bag, the sling, the shell and the gourd as containers where everything gets jumbled up in the bottom, entangled with one another, reflecting a sense of complexity and contradiction that is much more like life than the version that features in a linear tale. Unfortunately, the “Carrier Bag” version of the story is much less gripping, it makes for a meandering tale that includes a lot of dull, everyday stuff; there are no heroes, and it is of a collective nature rather than being an individualist endeavour.



Figure 7: Kim L Pace, “Sea Groyne,” 2023. Glazed ceramic. 34 x 22 cm / 13.5 x 9 in © 2023 Kim L Pace

Clay and storytelling are central to the human career. Interestingly, these elements are encapsulated within the vessel or receptacle form, an everyday item we are all familiar with. As well as the material through which to tell stories, like the Greek clay vessels that convey mythologies through the inscriptions on their surfaces, clay also plays an integral part in origin myths from all over the world. Its tactility may offer its own explanation for this: when wet, its plasticity makes it as soft as flesh; when dried, it is as hard or as brittle as bones. The qualities of clay position the human body as embedded inside of and implicated in the use and impact of this material.

Clay was a primary medium of prehistoric man and some of the earliest examples of pottery have been recovered, in the form of shards, from central

Honshu in Japan. These fragments dated to be around 14,000 BCE are associated with the Jōmon culture. The ceramic figure has constantly been a vehicle for conveying shared narratives; it has been a storyteller throughout the Western tradition, as evidenced by the discovery in 1925 of the oldest fired clay figure, the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, in Moravia (Czech Republic) that is dated 29,000-25,000 BCE. The terracotta vessels from ancient Greece (ca. 1400 - 450 BCE) fulfilled practical functions such as transporting oils and other liquids, as well as accompanying the dead on their journey to the afterlife. These forms featuring surface decoration include, for example, marine life, sea anemones and murex shells attesting how important the sea was as a source of food and wealth; the complex aryballos (oil flask) decorations depict ancient mythological subjects.

Clay operates as a metaphor for the animating force of life, found in allegorical myths such as Prometheus and the Golem, where humanity arose from clay. In many Bronze Age mythologies, God is depicted as a potter; in ancient Egyptian myths the creator Khnum is depicted as a potter who creates men from clay and fashions them on a potter's wheel. In Jewish folklore, a golem is an artificial humanoid made of clay, soil, or dust brought to life by a series of rituals and magical formulas. In the Old Testament of the Judeo-Christian Bible, from the 4th/5th century BCE, there is a reference to the creation of the first man, Adam, who was the original golem: a man made from the earth. "Adamah" means "one taken from the earth" in Hebrew. In many indigenous cultures, it is understood that the body comes from the earth, that mother earth shapes you and you retain an energetic connection with it. In considering the material clay as having sentience, I set up my artistic process to channel the charge or vibration of the material that is not possessable. This highlights what we can perceive as a sentient being and challenges what we think of as non-sentient.

I am intrigued by animism, where matter has animist properties, especially as a way to re-envision and question the subjectivity of the so-called object. Rather than viewing animism as a largely aesthetic phenomena, it is a more political question of what it means to be included in a sociality and on what terms. Animist beliefs and practices have been virtually ubiquitous amongst indigenous peoples on every continent; these beliefs also had a pivotal role in the development of religious thought. It is my aim to imbue my sculptures and nascent beings with a sense of coming into existence, of life arising from matter, as if a new lifeforce is evolving before our eyes. I hope to mess with the binaries of animate and inanimate through my approach, and I

see my works operating as a kind of material resistance to a desensitised and detached anthropocentric society.

There are many examples of animism in Western literature and other art forms, for example, in “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies, or the Second Book of Genesis” by Bruno Schulz, the mysterious father-figure tells us that “lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hides unknown forms of life” (Schulz 66-71). The magical essence of fairy tales work on fundamental principles of magic and animist vitality, and include object and animal metamorphosis, and bodies changing form. Originally a term for folk beliefs—underlying more established religions—that view objects as having souls of their own, animist vitality attributes objects with power and agency: mirrors speak to wicked stepmothers (*Snow White*) and carpets carry their owners to other lands (*One Thousand and One Nights*). These uncanny activities of so-called inert objects spell the presence of magic, strangeness and invisible forces that we do not understand. Many fairy-tale characters are shape shifters that embody a means of flying—perhaps suggesting a way to find and tell an alternative story, that thereby shifts set opinions in one’s mind. Isabelle Stengers proposes:

Instead of the hierarchical figure of a tree, with Science at its trunk, what we call progress would perhaps...[be] called a rhizome, connecting heterogeneous practices, concerns and ways of giving meaning to the inhabitants of this earth, with none being privileged and any being liable to connect with any other (3-4).

Critical Anthropomorphism

I have produced drawings and sculptures of human-nonhuman hybrids where elements of the two were collaged together, for example my “Night Monkey Princesses” series (2007-08). Reminiscent of fairy-tale characters, I was concerned to activate or engender a sense of compassion in the relationship between artwork and viewer, through the wide-eyed appealing expressions of the small mammals. I developed a narrative around the existence and habitat of these creatures, that involved transformation between primate and human on a regular basis. Caught mid-way in an Ovidian shape-shifting world, where figures morph from human to animal and vice versa, I now acknowledge the prominence of the process of anthropomorphism that is present in these drawings, where the body of the creature is unequivocally human, whilst the heads are distinctly mammalian. In considering how we might view the nonhuman on more equal terms, I realise I/we need to adopt a more critical

approach when using anthropomorphism and resist the urge to project our own experiences onto the representations or perceived experiences of the nonhuman.



Figure 8: Kim L. Pace, "LeeMur (Yellow)." Watercolour and pencil on paper. From the "Night Monkey Princesses" series, 2007-08. © 2023 Kim L. Pace

Anthropomorphic motifs have ancient roots as a storytelling and artistic device, common to most cultures, and central as a feature of fairy tales. Many depictions of fairy-tale animals show them standing on two legs and dressed in human clothes. In *Thinking Animals*, Kari Weil puts forward the concept of critical anthropomorphism, based on care and empathy, as something urgently needed by humans to rethink and re-imagine our kinship with non-humans. Central to this is the idea of an openness to re-imagining a biodiversity where humans are no longer at the top. Although as Freud warned us, Darwin's evolutionary theory that states all life forms alive today are evolved from more simple life forms and we therefore share common

ancestors, was (and still is by some) negatively received. Freud perceived the theory to have inflicted a deep narcissistic wound upon the Western subject.

In some fairy tales, the nonhuman represented does fully retain many of its inherent physical qualities, for example in “Otesánek” (Czech for “Little Otik”) by Karel Erben. Of Slavic origin, the story is about a fearsome and insatiably hungry, living wooden log that eventually consumes its caregivers. Branches appear to be limbs, and a mouth is suggested by a knobby aperture in the stump. Clothed in knitted baby-grows in Jan Švankmajer’s animated version of the story, a human couple develop an intense connection with the “Little Otik” tree stump. The sentient log motif also appears in David Lynch’s “Twin Peaks” series; a woman cradles a small log in her arms at all times, claiming that visions of clairvoyance emanate from it. The Log Lady, as she is referred to in the series, assists the police in their investigations of a young woman gone missing in a densely forested region of Canadian wilderness.



Figure 9: Kim L Pace “Otik’s Quest,” 2023. Glazed ceramic. 37 x 30 cm / 14.5 x 12 in. © 2023 Kim L Pace

The tree stump figure and tree sprite creatures have featured in a number of my works. Earlier works in modelling clay such as “Darkus P. Barkman” (2009) & “Edwin Arthur Rootman” (2008), drew upon carved

wooden folk sculptures, and this motif has now evolved into the more recent ceramic “Tree Sprite” series (2020-22), and the story vessels entitled “Otik’s Quest” vessel (2023) and “Daphne Flees Apollo” vessel (2023), where the male figure makes allusion to the hazards of a vivified forest to a vulnerable wanderer.



Figure 10: Kim L. Pace, “Daphne Flees Apollo,” 2023. Glazed ceramic.
34 x 26 cm / 13.4 x 10 in. © 2023 Kim L. Pace

My representations come away from illustrative, figurative forms where a high degree of anthropomorphism is present, in favour of a more embodied vision that bestows the ‘creatures’ with integral material qualities.

The “Tree Sprite (Silver Birch)” work, for example, made from terracotta (red) clay is coated with a white clay that peels in a particular way during firing to produce a bark-like quality. I have then incorporated metal compounds in the glazing process, that transform in the alchemy of the kiln, to enhance the bark-like appearance of the work. These surface treatments are

created in the manner of collaboration with the materials, within the network as referred to above.



Figure 11: Kim L Pace "Tree Sprite (Silver Birch)," 2020. Glazed ceramic. 40 x 18 x 11 cm / 16 x 7 x 4 in. Private Collection © 2023 Kim L Pace.

Conclusion



Figure 12: Kim L Pace "Night Warbler," 2022. Glazed ceramic. 48 x 18.5 x 12.5 cm / 19 x 7 x 5 in. Installation view, Barnwell Park, UK.
© 2023 Kim L Pace

In 2022, I was commissioned to create a number of new sculptures for Barnwell Country Park in Nottinghamshire, UK. The works were part of an outdoor exhibition entitled *Treewilder*, and my contribution included several bird and animal-like forms, reminiscent, for example, of the barn owl, badger and kingfisher who make the park their habitat. The works, *Brock*, *Woodland*

Spirit, Night Warbler, Barny and *Alcedinidae*, were placed amongst the trees and wildlife of the park over the winter months. During the installation, a nuthatch circled *Night Warbler* in situ nearby a lake; then a few days later, the same or another nuthatch appeared whilst the photographer documented the works. Some weeks later during a public talk, a squirrel, robin and nuthatch appeared on the tree alongside *Night Warbler*. What excited me about these nonhuman interactions with the sculptural works was especially the nuthatches, that appeared to be investigating the forms newly appeared on their trees. Could placing works in situ amongst nonhumans be another form of multispecies interaction and communication?¹



Figure 13: Kim L Pace “Barny (2), 2022, glazed ceramic 29 x 25 x 13 cm/ 11.5 x 10 x 5 in. Installation view, Barnwell Park, UK. Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Collection. © 2023 Kim L Pace

I have explored the entangled lives of the human and nonhuman through my approach to making ceramic sculpture, and in the case of the Barnwell Park exhibition, literally placing ceramic sculptures amongst multispecies. Most of my focus has revolved around the relationships between the human and nonhuman and the ways we are interconnected, taking the perspective that relationships between all things are responsive to one another—everything impacting on everything else, in a two-way, back and forth motion. I have shown this through the explanations and analysis of my creative processes too.

It has been my aim to flesh out how ‘vital materiality’ has proved to be both artistic strategy and conceptual approach in working creatively, thereby blurring or shifting object and subject delineations. In considering how the nonhuman can be viewed on more equal terms, I have suggested we consider all material phenomena potentially possesses sentience, thus rejecting the automatic privileging and hierarchies of humans over nonhumans on the grounds of agency. Taking into consideration the innate human tendency towards anthropomorphism, shown throughout Western visual depictions of animals and other nonhumans, I remain aware of this in my own approach, as I want to provide both space and opportunity for empathy on more equal terms with the other than human. To do this, I bypass usual states of consciousness and delve the ineffable terrain of my own unconscious, for example, utilising methods of automatism and slippages in perception such as pareidolia, the tendency we all have to detect faces-in-things—slices of toast, crumbling walls or cloud formations. Pareidolia also demonstrates that our vision is more subjective than we might think; that, in a sense, you see what you want to see.

I draw upon our collective human unconscious too, by calling on the archetypes from folklore, fairy tales and animist belief systems, which all act as a doorway or portal through which to reflect upon humanity’s gaps in knowledge and understanding. These strategies, however, are, as Cecilia Alemani states, “not a question of seeking refuge in the unconscious or the dreamlike world to escape from reality, but rather, finding some methods to live and look at the world in a different way than the Western or the rational one” (37).

My works of art function in subliminal ways as well as through surface readings; they have the power to suggest other worlds, other forms of thinking and being and tell new stories from a different point of view, thus potentially enabling us to re-interpret everything in our surroundings. Speaking from

first-hand experience, I recognise the potential for shifts in emphasis and meaning in how we tell and re-tell our stories. This is incredibly useful in the process of reframing ourselves, and therefore our relationships with others, including multispecies.

“You are a born storyteller,” said the old lady. “You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one” A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*, 65.

An effective way in which we can change our own life is to re-story it. By taking the events in our life we tell or perhaps the ones we don’t tell and modifying the narrative is to tell a different story, one that might convey an entirely different frame. In re-storying one’s life, we might see ourselves in a different light, re-discover neglected parts of our life story, or put different emphasis on our capabilities. Making change in how we view our relationships with the nonhuman in a collective context could manifest through clay sculptures that convey new, more balanced relationships between multispecies. As Jill Freeman and Gene Combs write, “by taking new meaning from already storied events, [we can] thereby construct new narratives” (42).

By utilising re-storying, as demonstrated through my approach to making ceramic sculptures and the forms I create, we can potentially shift the way we regard our relationships with the nonhuman, and perhaps, in turn, present a fairer sense of cross-species justice. If we embrace our own pliability, like that of clay, we might be flexible enough to view the world in the compelling new ways artists like myself are presenting it, that aim to cultivate a greater sense of kinship across multispecies.

Notes

¹ The curator of the project and exhibition at Barnwell Park, Angela Kingston, asked animal behaviouralist and multi-species author Marthe Kiley-Worthington about the bird interest in my work. This was Marthe’s response:

What are they [the works] made of? Could be just curiosity, very important thing curiosity out of which grows increased learning and finally ‘intelligence’ or mental abilities if you like... so might be that? It [Night Warbler] is a bit queer I think too, so maybe we react in the same way sometimes? I do think curiosity is very under-valued, so beginning to think about it more. It might be that this piece is small and not threatening, not sure the face of a human would help them, but the different colours/stuff making the eyes etc., might increase

curiosity...anyway. Most of the other pieces do not have any contrasting colours so may be that might work, or attract more attention from our sky-friends? What birds, I see robins, nuthatch any others? These are ones that tend to go most to bird feeders, so may be also some association there too?

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