

**FOREIGN BODIES:
CHALLENGING THE ANTI-ANTHROPOCENTRIC APPROACH THROUGH
PAINTING**

by

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**Submitted to the Institute of Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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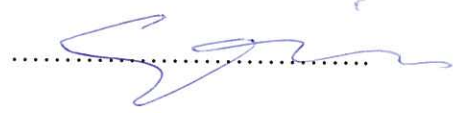
FOREIGN BODIES:
CHALLENGING THE ANTI-ANTHROPOCENTRIC APPROACH THROUGH PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

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Is it possible to avoid an anthropocentric approach while offering an artistic suggestion about being? This thesis argues my artistic practice which is about the blurriness of the lines between humans and non-humans, living and lifeless forms through the concepts of anthropocentrism, evolution and natural history. One of the main points of this thesis is to reveal my anthropocentric motivations to create an anti-anthropocentric artistic suggestion which appears as my inner contradiction in the face of my artistic intentions. Another goal of this work is to explain my method of painting that mirrors the early natural historians' practice of recording nature and to indicate the deliberate choices that were made as I brought together the content of my works.

ÖZET

YABANCI BEDENLER: ANTI -ANTROPOSANTRİK YAKLAŞIMI RESİM YOLUYLA ARAŞTIRMAK ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA

EKİN KANOĞLU

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Anahtar kelimeler: anti- antroposantrizm, insan dışı, beden, maddesellik, resim

Varolmakla ilgili sanatsal bir öneri sunarken insanmerkezci bir yaklaşımdan kaçınabilmek mümkün mü? Bu tez, insan ve insan olmayan, canlı ve cansız varlıklar arasındaki sınırların belirsizliğini insanmerkezcilik, evrim ve doğa tarihi üzerinden tartışmaktadır. Sanat işi üretirken, motivasyonum insanmerkezci bir kaynaktan gelmektedir ancak niyetim anti-insanmerkezci bir öneri sunan işler üretmektir; bu beni kendimle çelişen bir durumda bırakmıştır. Tezimin amaçlarından biri bunu ortaya çıkarmaktır. Diğer amacım ise sanat işi üretirken kullandığım metodları açıklamak ve erken dönem doğa tarihçilerinin metodlarını kendi pratiğime nasıl adapte ettiğimi ve işlerimin içeriğini oluştururken verdiğim bilinçli kararları anlatmaktır.

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INTRODUCTION

A naive but thorough research of almost any part of the living world uncovers astonishingly varied entities. The tiniest creature and the most enormous organism, all other organisms in between these two extremes, and super-organisms are the candidates for manifesting biological individuals. Each of these living creatures has been considered as such in one or another part of the biological sciences (Wilson and Baker 1). Species have been quintessential examples of natural entities.

In a pre-Darwinian discourse, an essentialist method to classify species made sense. God created species and an everlasting spirit for each species so that each is a fixed, non-evolving group of organisms (Ereshevsky 1). This dualist approach was shaken after Darwinism, which suggested an opposing view; “Species are the result of speciation. No qualitative feature—morphological, genetic, or behavioral—is considered essential for membership in a species. Despite this change in biological thinking, many philosophers still believe that species are natural kinds with essences” (Ereshevsky). I advocate for Darwinian thinking that promotes endless possibilities of forms that organisms can embody. There is a great number of species unidentified and unclassified which makes it impossible to curate a complete catalog including each

living creature. Moreover, it is unclear whether identifying each creature would contribute to the development of human knowledge either (Serres 168). Owing to this, one can assume that the embodiment of organisms varies expansively, beyond human observation. Therefore, embodiment becomes fluid, as organisms take shape in infinite possibilities of forms.

Part of my artistic practice is loosely based on these infinite possibilities of forms. I am fascinated by the mystery of transformation and I seek to understand the transformation within nature. I attempt to create works that emit what is called a posthumanist approach, defined by Anneke Smelik as, "...by 'posthumanist', I do not mean postmodernist celebrations or demonizations of the 'posthuman' or technohuman as testimonies to the death of Man, nor do I mean the next stage of Man... What I mean by 'posthumanist' is boundary practices through which the 'human' and its others are differentially constituted" (172). Based on this view, I aim to point out the blurriness of the lines between non-humans and humans. To emphasize this approach, I attempt to contribute to the anti-anthropocentric idea, which deliberately distances itself from a human-center.

Anthropocentrism is a normative approach that manifests, whether essentially or deliberately, a set of convictions or opinions that privilege human experience. This approach has been notably visible in the history of religious thought. It has also taken part in a compelling role in arguments regarding the philosophical importance of non-humans and the natural environment (Boddice 4). In short, "anthropocentrism is this tendency to vastly exaggerate human dominance, understanding, power, autonomy, unity, guilt, virtue, wickedness, and morality" (Sax 36). It is my belief that human guilt, perhaps specifically my own feeling of guilt is a motivation to produce art works. One potential anthropocentric motivation is the guilt that I feel by being human and thinking of what my species has done to nature as well as to each other. Another anthropocentric motivation for my work is the fear that I will lose my humanness by being dead someday. Unsurprisingly, some questions occur as a result of these motivations: Does not my motivation make me a hypocrite in the face of my intentions to produce art works? Is it conceivable to promise an anti-anthropocentric artistic proposition while bearing the fragments of anthropocentrism under my skin? If anthropocentrism is a default aspect of my essence, implanted in me by culture, society, etc., and I endeavor

to dispose of its effects from my system, could I say that this is my experience of being human. I will attempt to write the following pages aware of my own contradictions.

In Chapter 1: Reinvented Natural History, I delve into natural history, science and observation to explain my intention to create an alternative sequence of natural history and the connections between the aspects of anachronism and my works.

In Chapter 2: The Non- Human Body, the distinction between human and non-human is addressed as ambiguous. I also examine various auxiliary images that inspire me to produce my work in relation to Michel Serres' discourse about cancer and the thought "cancer as evolution."

In Chapter 3: The Fiction and Materiality, the concept of material is examined through Francis Bacon's work Sand Dune and my own works. Finally, in relation to all of the above, a number of my paintings in the exhibition are analyzed, anticipating to express some of the points that have been made in this text through imagery.

CHAPTER 1: REINVENTED NATURAL HISTORY

Natural history, anachronism, and observation are the underlying concepts of my artistic works that intends to offer a fictive sequence of natural history. I tried to strengthen the content by choosing the medium of painting which itself refers to a well-established tradition of image making and to a time when visual recording of the world was only crafted manually, to create an illusion of reality and to refer to natural history illustrations. To achieve this, I trained myself to become a better observer of the physical world that we humans mostly exude ourselves from.

In Raymond Williams' highly acclaimed book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, he states that "...nature may be the most complicated word in the language. It is somewhat effortless to categorize three areas of meaning (i) the main aspect and character of something (ii) the essential force which conducts human beings and the world (iii) the physical world itself, taken as with or without human beings." What caught my attention is the meaning (iii), the ability of humans to be able to understand the world itself 'taken as without human beings' (219). If we are capable of excluding ourselves from the physical world in our understanding of language, one can think that we are aware of other entities that live in this world or we are deliberately isolating ourselves from nature by grasping it in a non-trusting, dreadful position.

On the same point of humans excluding themselves from the physical World, Michel Serres once wrote, “Nature is a world that shows no respect for our hierarchies, our egalitarianism, our rules, or our values, but that continues to entice us with its overpowering beauty. Nature is visible most dramatically in the form of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. As the realm of the unknown, it is with us in the form of millions of species that not only escape our control but, in most cases, have not even been identified. It remains, in summary, completely ‘uncivilized’.” Serres talks about how nature appears sublime, demonstrating its unpredictable wrecking or beautiful power, yet has its secrets in its dominant actuality. There is a huge part of nature that humans could not know, thus can not invade and control.

Many things about these “millions of species that escape our control” that are the world of non-humans or ‘the world taken as without human beings’, are beyond our knowledge, even though we have a long history of studying, classifying, dissecting, preserving, examining and observing them. We call these series of actions as ‘science of describing’ or ‘natural history’. It originates from the ancient and medieval definition of naturalia. Naturalia was a Renaissance practice that was concerned with the scientific documentation and observation of species. In this practice of observation and documentation, an artist could be a major contributor (Kaufmann 119). In the times before representational technologies, artists or skillful scientists recorded the world visually and this documentation was only based on observation.

Observing nature and keeping records of morphological forms caused a new practice to emerge, that eventually gave me an idea for my painting practice. Since the Renaissance, natural history illustrations have tried to keep records of morphological aspects of animals, and merging drawings of various plants and animals into one was common (Aloi 73). Consequently, animals and plants seemed equivalent in the eyes of a natural historian (Berger 7). In my paintings, I adopt this old-time practice and merge imaginary plants and animals into one. In contrast to what they do, I attempt to change what I see in nature and imagine plant-like non-human forms to create an alternate natural history.

My approach to painting almost mirrors a natural historian's careful observation of objects. I adopt a realist style because this natural history tradition is strongly connected to realism. This connection is elaborated by Giovanni Aloï, in his book *Speculative Taxidermy*. He says: "In *Order of Things*, Foucault noted that natural history essentially emerged as a system of viewing beings through a grid of knowledge. The discipline became one of the most prominent in the classical age, a historical period whose episteme involved a substantially deep reorganization of knowledge. At that time, the most important practices substantiating the register of truth in natural history involved the careful observation of objects and transcription into 'smooth, neutralized, and faithful words': realism" (77). In the consonance of Aloï's quote, one can realize that the visual recording of every line, every bit of light and shadow on a surface serves as my aim to depict these things in an observational manner with their materiality coming to the fore.

According to Peter Brooks, realist representation of the world is an attempt to humanize it. He says "If the world around us is not our own, more specifically if it is not human but rather a world of other species and inanimate objects, then the "poem," the artwork, becomes our counteraction, our attempt to humanize the world..." (Brooks 2). Assuming that we take into consideration Peter Brooks' quote above, one could think that painting in a realist style in an attempt to humanize the world, is again a contradictory element in the works. Therefore, it could be said that my formal decisions sabotage the content that I have constructed. Once again, I seem to encounter a contradiction within my practice. However, adopting a realist style to refer to natural history illustration pushes me to devise an illusion of a fictional natural history. By choosing the medium of painting, my subjects can be considered as painted before photography. Thus, one can claim that they were real. Yet, I believe in contrast formal-wise as well as content-wise. To demolish the illusion of reality, I chose to paint my subjects with anachronic objects. Consequently, I manage to build a fictive world and refute it at the same time.



Figure 1: Detail from the painting *Wet Nurse*, oil on canvas, 2018

In the painting *Wet Nurse* (Figure 1), the non-human body on a landscape is painted in a realist style. To flatten the illusion of reality, a plastic barricade tape is included in the painting as an anachronic object, creating a contradiction for the viewer. Plastic barricade tape belongs to contemporary times, while the medium itself and other signifiers refer to the past.

CHAPTER 2: THE NON-HUMAN BODY

Human beings have been classified as animals by scientists, but this notion has not been thoroughly accepted by us humans. We still believe that being called an animal is to say that we don't possess human qualities. The enormous similarity of animals to us only highlights our crucial differences more. Differences such as their lack of speech or their acts which seem to us as taboos (incest, nudity, murder, etc.). Animals are defined by us solely as not being humans, even though in between what we classify as animals there are as much or even more differences as there are between humans and animals. The understanding of this contradiction is expressed through the use of phrases like 'non-human animal' in today's discourses (Sax 26).

The book *Anthropocentrism : Humans, Animals, Environments* states that “very early human beings did not differentiate very sharply between animals and people. In ancient literature, the boundary between man and animal was not definite, as is established by the continual ‘metamorphosis across these boundaries’” (Sax 24). In a microbiological level, metamorphosis is realized as a division of cells. When a cell is divided into two, it finally embodies a shape by the direction of hox genes. This division is controlled. However, some cells may not act the way they are supposed to, hence can become insurgents in the whole working system. When this happens, we usually call it cancer.

Some scientists take cancer as a part of evolution. In their paper ‘The Evolution of Failure: Explaining Cancer as an Evolutionary Process’ Lean and Plutynski assert that: “The idea that cancer progression may be viewed as an evolutionary process is not new: compared a population of cancer cells to an evolving population of microbiota and similarly argued that ‘cancer can be viewed as the operation of Darwinian selection among competing populations of dividing cells’” (1). As Lean and Plutynski address cancer as a consequence of evolution, Michel Serres adopts a different approach and claims that cancer is something similar to a parasite that we must “negotiate a contract of symbiosis”. In his conversation with Bruno Latour, he states that “we might profit from cancer’s dynamism rather than treating it in the future” (168). In the light of these ideas, I depict uncontrollably grown tumor-like creatures’ images to point towards evolution and the circle of life that we carry within us. Cancer is a living creature within our bodies like a parasite, taking advantage of our non-mutated cells, growing rapidly. It is a part of our body, yet an enemy for our individual existence.

I attempt to address this dichotomy in my paintings. The figures in my paintings contain some sort of human resemblance. Like us, they seem fleshy, thus familiar. However, the uncanny and strange depiction of the figures threatens the viewer with their ungraspable nature. They are neither animal nor human. They look alive yet lifeless. In an attempt to grasp the reformative aspects of an organism, I used auxiliary images as source material that also helped me achieve that ambiguous quality formally. This helped me understand an organism’s ability to differ in countless shapes and witness the life cycle before my very own eyes: Plants, animals, skin diseases, deformed limbs after amputation, deformed torsos after the development of a tumor, autopsy videos, natural history illustrations, and medical illustrations.

My objective is to convey the sense that being a super-organism is being part of nature. An organism is open to any change, exchange, recomposition, and decomposition. Since my audience consists of human beings, I seek to make them relate to the image that I offer and feel as the organisms that they are, and not solely as human beings apart from rest of the world, nature, animals or plants. Although differing from the rest of nature as beings, we humans are interwoven in the universe’s constant change as natural elements rather than being external observers or being the ultimate entity. Thus, we are

responsible for the part we take in this dynamic reciprocity (Smelik 175). In his article Human Body, M. Jimmie Killingsworth analyzes the theme of human body and otherbeingness in nature through poetry and explains a how a poet celebrates the material existence as the starting point for forming a resemblance between different beings through: "...what he calls the "merge" ("Body Electric," section 5), the tendency toward the unification of individuals driven by the "procreant urge" of all life ("Song of Myself," section 3) to reproduce itself by interpenetrating with other life forms" (Killingsworth 1).

CHAPTER 3: FICTION AND MATERIALITY

An image can provide a surface for us to project ourselves and radiate our feelings and interpretations. Especially in figurative painting, we tend to identify ourselves with the figure whether it is a vase, a dog, a tree or a living bulk of flesh overflowing from a glass cage. From this standpoint, I expect the viewers to project their essence to the surface of the canvas while identifying with a non-human body and recognize the implication that our existence is not unique or infinite.

According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, we are certain about the materiality of the body, however body's incomprehensible capability of this unavoidable 'incomplete materiality' lasts as a continual cause of angst. Therefore, the body is understood as an area not as much as it is understood as an object, that gives us a compelling significance of both 'location and dislocation' (23). In consonance with Mirzoeff's statement, I would like to address the similarities between Francis Bacon's approach in his painting *Sand Dune* and my paintings.



Figure 2: Francis Bacon. Sand Dune, Mixed media on canvas, 1983

In some of Bacon's paintings, the figure is an indescribable mass of flesh that carries the resemblances of human yet it can also be seen as non-human. As in Sand Dune, the viewer observes a bulk of flesh despite the fact that the painting's name refers to sand. Similar to Bacon's approach, I paint masses of flesh, with loose resemblances of a human body. As explained in Chapter 2, my inspirations are the images of bodily deformations that are formed after amputation of a limb or have occurred with the development of a tumor. These directory images hand me the hints of a body's regenerative aspects and its ability to differ in shape. Thus, on canvas, I aim to build my fictional non-human bodies.



Figure 3: Untitled, oil on canvas, 2018

The ambiguity in Bacon's *Sand Dune* is another thing that I find closer to my practice. In *Sand Dune*, the figure's material is ambivalent and surprises the viewer. We know it is sand by reading the title yet we observe more than a bulk of sand. In an Independent article, Tom Lubbock analyzes *Sand Dune*: "It is sand; but of course not only sand. It is also flesh, a pure flesh. This flesh has no rigidity, no internal structure, no tension, no action. It is simply a contour of skin, containing soft blob. ...It is like pure flesh but it also has hints of a creature within it too. An anatomy exists, just about." Like Bacon's *Sand Dune*, I attempt to create a sense of vagueness for the materials of the figures I paint. They are fleshy but they also look like rocks; familiar to our collective unconscious yet strange. In the painting *Untitled*, the subject is a non-human body wrapped in fabric. The material of the body resembles flesh but it also has parts that seem like a geological structure, standing like a pillar. One might argue that it conveys the characteristics of living and non-living simultaneously. The figure suggests us another possibility for the materiality of being.

CONCLUSION

In my paintings, I pursue to imitate early natural historians' approach to keep records of nature. I project their approach to my practice, to investigate the anthropocentrism and its effects that shape us humans. In this paper, I claim that this very anthropocentric attitude towards life is actually what has shaped my practice. However, ironically, my practice aims to promote the possibility of a life that is not anthropocentric. This contradiction made me question the sincerity of my intentions. In the end; I come to the conclusion that while I am sincere about my intentions, as a human being I cannot escape the anthropocentric aspects that are transcoded in me.

Throughout this text, I discuss that the formal decisions are made to reinforce and support the content that I am committed to deliver. To create a fictive natural history sequence, I chose the medium of painting in reference to the history of painting. The style in which I paint is realism and this choice attributes to natural history illustrations. While the historical references strengthen the fictive aspect of the series, the placement of anachronic objects on images opposes a possible fictional plausibility. This contradiction creates an open text for the viewer to contemplate.

In my works, I attempt to penetrate life to understand the materiality behind it, in search for new possibilities of forms and a merge of a vision of materials to explore new forms. Therefore, my final and foremost effort to deliver to the viewer is the biocentric idea that there are endless options of life forms and an infinite materiality of these forms to embody that refutes the specificity of human beings and flesh.

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