

2016

I Reach Toward the Ground I Reach Toward Space

Kristen A. Sanders

Virginia Commonwealth University, sanderska@mymail.vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4240>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

©Kristen Ann Sanders 2016
All Rights Reserved

I Reach Toward the Ground

I Reach Toward Space

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

Kristen Ann Sanders
Masters of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016
Bachelor of Arts, University of California Davis, 2012

Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2016

Acknowledgements

To the *Australopithecines*, aquatic or otherwise. To the fragmented femurs and angled pelvic bones and rows of molars and fossilized footprints. To the stone flakes and engraved rocks and stained cave walls. To all of the extinct members of *Hominidae* — the makers, the foragers, the traversers, and discoverers.

And to all those are who are living today that have shown me so much love and support and who have challenged and inspired me along the way.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
The Origins of Image Making.....	1
Revisiting the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis.....	7
Lucy's Wax Body Encased in Glass.....	9
She is the Goddess Technium.....	14
The Nonhuman Human Becoming Human in a Sea of Pink and Green.....	16
The Future Hominid.....	26
Glitzy Nails and Skull Casts.....	31
Prehistoric Sci-fi is my Genre.....	36
Bibliography.....	43

I REACH TOWARD THE GROUND I REACH TOWARD SPACE

By Kristen Ann Sanders, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Imagine one million and six hundred thousand years ago — a prehistoric character points. There in the moistened soil, the hominid *Homo habilis* draws a line, inscribing with her finger the first mark. At the core of my work is a meditation on this very scene as the otherwise unknowable origins of image making. And at the center of this discovery is a prehistoric woman — a previously invisible character within human evolution. My work aims to insert these characters into the origins of tool use, image making, and other supposed markers of humanness while also examining historical representations of women. Like science fiction, the field of physical anthropology allows me to reimagine our past, or even our future, with a criticality of the ways in which patriarchal and religious structures have shaped our understanding of human evolution and our representations of our past. In substituting aliens for extinct species of human ancestors and the unknown of space for the primordial earth as we will never know it, I have a vast imaginable world within which to invent and recreate narratives of origin and discovery.

The Origins of Image Making

Humans are always hunting for what makes us so special, but we've really just expanded upon the discoveries of past animals.

A lot can happen with use of the hand, repetitive behavior, and cognition.

And so, it made me think about the way it all began.

Thirty thousand years ago *Homo sapiens* painted on cave walls

One hundred thousand years ago *Homo sapiens* carved into cave walls

Two hundred thousand years ago *Homo sapiens* became a species

How are *Homo sapiens* different from other species?

Nearly four million years ago the first bipedal hominids walked along a woodland

Sixty-five million years ago the first primates scurried through a forest

Roughly two hundred million years ago the first mammals started to flourish

Nearly four hundred million years ago the first amphibians explored life on land

Well over five hundred million years ago the first marine vertebrates thrived

Nearly four billion years ago the first forms of life were supported on this planet

Where in all of these occurrences lies the self?

Four billion five hundred and forty million years ago this planet formed

Four billion and six hundred million years ago this solar system formed

Thirteen billion and two hundred million years ago this galaxy formed
Thirteen billion and eight hundred million years ago this universe formed

This universe formed

Somewhere within this vast expanse of time lies a particular threshold.

A cusp of consciousness in our animal history.

Day one of humanness.

We already know that image making predates *Homo sapiens* — nearly five hundred thousand years ago geometric engravings were made by *Homo Erectus* on seashells.

We already know that the level of cognitive development required for image making is not unique to *Homo sapiens*.

We're not as special as we thought.

But this would have been too large a step to be the first step.

So what happened before this?

What happened to allow for this behavior to take place?

And who is responsible?

Homo habilis

Homo habilis the handy [wo]man. *Homo habilis* made the earliest of stone tool technologies, chipping away into stones already reasonably shaped for tool use, and slicing sharp edges and flakes used to process animal flesh. Or maybe it was plant matter?

Homo habilis

Homo habilis the handy [wo]man made the cognitive jump from being to thinking to making

Somewhere in this vast expanse of time lies a threshold

Some one million and six hundred thousand years ago

One million and six hundred thousand years ago, *Homo habilis* sat on a stump in the shaded woodlands of eastern Africa and cut facets into stone tools. One million and six hundred thousand years ago, *Homo habilis* was sitting on the edge of a threshold.

Homo habilis, with a petite frame and lengthened arms and a moderately prognathic face and slightly smaller teeth and still shrouded in hair, unwittingly found herself lounging and idle.

Homo habilis sat with this new kind of time — a time that was not productive to tool-making nor gathering nor scavenging nor grooming nor socializing nor sleeping nor copulating nor walking nor hiding.

Black holes ripped apart stars overhead the origins of leisure one million and six hundred thousand years ago.

Homo habilis gazed upward into the cavernous expanse of that imponderable night sky.

Suddenly

Swiftly

Thrown into a state of time that made her cognizant of the time that had happened
before herself

Eyes widening at the tinge of a new kind of feeling

A feeling of awareness

Homo habilis soon felt the weight of her feet against the malleable earth. She felt the weight of her hands hanging down at her sides, brushing against the bark of the stump. Some one million and six hundred thousand years ago, *homo Habilis* looked into the night sky and felt the weight of an awareness so readily and instinctively understood. The origins of a contemplativeness that only this new kind of idle time could birth.

Some one million and six hundred thousand years ago, *Homo habilis* discovered idleness and in that she discovered awareness. Some one million and six hundred thousand years ago, *Homo habilis* sat on the edge of a threshold.

It was the moment right *before* something happened

Then
Something happened

With the weight of her hands dangling under the weight of her new awareness, *Homo habilis* bent her body forward toward the dirt, crouching down low enough for her hands to rest upon the surface of the soil so as not to bear their own weight anymore.

She felt the soil spread and rise up through the cracks between her fingers.

She dragged her hands forward, letting the weight of her fingers scrape into the dirt.

She lifted her head in realization of the grooves her fingers had just left behind — grooves now seen through her recently discovered awareness.

A consciousness that stirred inside those subtle grooves

Those shallow ravines that reflected the starry sky back into her eyes

Homo habilis lifted her hands up to her face for closer examination.

And with a confident but clumsy gesture she continued to raise one hand and form it into a fist with her index finger extended — the declarative gesture of pointing — and lowered that hand back towards the dirt.

The dirt was no longer a thing to walk upon but instead had become space.

Homo habilis reached toward this space.

In one declaratively clumsy gesture *Homo habilis* dug her extended index finger into the ground and pulled her hand, stiff in that position, backward some six inches.

She lifted her hand to examine the depression her finger had left behind.

Her pulse thickened as she stared into the topography of a deep, finger-sized rut in the dirt.

She had created this

This mark left in the soil was her conscious act

The discovery of the mark

The declarative gesture of mark making

The crumpled edges of dirt surrounding the perimeter of *Homo habilis*' mark reflected the flashing lights of a meteor shower back into her cavernous eyes.

One million and six hundred thousand years ago, *Homo habilis* discovered the mark — a gesture to throw future hominids into consciousness.

A gesture that expanded into everything that we know and have made today.

Some one million and six hundred thousand years ago, a moment in time within the cosmos, a being on a planet only four billion and five hundred forty million years old became aware of itself within that inexplicable space.

Revisiting the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis

Homo Habilis' discovery of the mark, however, was certainly not the first discovery made within our deep evolutionary history. An earlier hominid, perhaps one that spent a lot of her time along a pebbled shoreline, made a significant discovery a few hundred million years prior. She was the aquatic ape.

Expanded upon in great detail by the writer Elaine Morgan, the 'Aquatic Ape' hypothesis proposes a strange explanation for why our hominid ancestors became bipedal and hairless. According to this generally rejected hypothesis, an unspecified hominid species within the genus *Australopithecus* started walking upright and lost its body hair due to a semi-aquatic lifestyle. Why? Spending a lot of time wading through water can get logistically complicated on four legs — you can only get so deep before your head becomes submerged. But, stand taller on your back legs and you can explore much deeper while keeping your head above water. Spending a lot of time in water also, of course, leads to wet fur. Perpetually wet fur quickly becomes an unnecessary discomfort, and so the fur is lost over time.¹ Elaine describes this particular hominid, an *Australopithecine* woman, in strange detail.

If you can picture the famous Lucy, *Australopithecus afarensis*, then you have a good starting point for imagining the hominid woman Morgan describes. Now imagine a hominid that is proportionally very similar to Lucy, but with most other physical features looking more like *Homo sapiens*. Short and squat with long arms and a prognathic face, Morgan's hominid woman is already bipedal and hairless. But, in place of the insulation her body hair would have provided is a layer of body fat. This is much more efficient an

¹ Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman* (New York: Stein and Day/Publishers, 1972), 19-24.

insulator than fur for an aquatic mammal. And because she has this extra layer of fat, she has lips, cheeks, and breasts. Because her head is often just above the water level, her nose is also cartilaginous and projected outward unlike the flat ape nose. And, perhaps most bizarrely of all, she has head hair. After all, without body hair, what else would her infant grasp onto while floating in the waves?²

There's something else that is particularly special about this aquatic hominid woman. Her species has some sexual dimorphism, which explains why her canine teeth are much smaller than those belonging to the males of her species. Because she lacks these elongated canines, she has a hard time breaking open the shellfish that have become a large part of her aquatic diet. So, using her rapidly evolving brain, she has figured out that she can pick up a pebble from the shoreline and use it as a tool to crack open shellfish³. This marks the beginnings of tool use in our ancestral line. Then, after these semi-aquatic traits began to evolve, this hominid woman and other members of her species left their shoreline habitat to find a new home more inland. They spent *just* enough time in the water to evolve these specific traits without becoming fully aquatic.

Elaine Morgan first wrote about this hypothesis in her 1972 book entitled *The Descent of Woman*, making a clear reference to Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, an 1871 text in which he suggests man's superiority over women according to the use of stone tools. Morgan, in a sense, rewrites Darwin's text with an emphasis on the perspective of a hominid woman, positioning her at the center of the origins of tool use. She thus brings women to the forefront of a discussion about human evolution.

² Morgan, *The Descent of Woman*, 27-30, 37.

³ Morgan, *The Descent of Woman*, 20.

Lucy's Wax Body Encased in Glass

As anthropologist Adrienne Zihlman writes in her essay titled, *The Paleolithic Glass Ceiling*, “women in evolution are rendered either invisible nonparticipants or as the handmaidens to men in prehistory.”⁴ Female primates, human or otherwise, have all been subject to this bias of male anthropologists in their research and propositions of primate and prehistoric human social structure. Consequently, this has been especially evident in museum dioramas and other images aimed at reconstructing our evolutionary past.



Reconstruction of Laetoli Footprints featuring *Australopithecus Afarensis* couple

⁴ Adrienne Zihlman, “The Paleolithic Glass Ceiling: Women in Human Evolution,” *Women in Human Evolution* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 91.

A good example of this is the American Museum of Natural History's diorama of two *Australopithecus afarensis* hominids leaving behind a trail of footprints. While the background setting of the diorama has changed since its original installation, the figures remain the same. This diorama is a reconstruction of the famous Laetoli footprints, a trail of footprints left by bipedal ancestors 3.6 million years ago in some volcanic ash in what is now Ngorongoro, Tanzania.

In this reconstruction, the figures are assumed to be a male and a female, and the male hominid guides the female hominid with his arm cast over her shoulder. This gesture demonstrates a clear power relationship between the male and female. As Zihlman points out, the diorama (at least as it stood in the 1990's) depicts a scene which mirrors that of Adam and Eve leaving Eden.⁵ The two hominids leave a distant volcano behind as they head toward a presumed unknown wilderness. Referencing this Christian myth immediately recalls woman's passive relationship to man as it is taught in Genesis — that is, that women will be punished for following their own will and that they belong to their husbands.

Such connotations of male and female power dynamics are reiterated in many museum dioramas depicting our hominid and human ancestors. Prehistoric women are often not physically active in the backgrounds of the diorama scenes — while “the male figure stands tall and dominant...the females sit or kneel in a subservient manner.”⁶ Like the Laetoli couple, they also often enforce the monogamous, nuclear family, a concept integral to how many anthropologists previously conceived of our evolutionary transition into becoming human.

⁵ Zihlman, *Women in Human Evolution*, 91.

⁶ Zihlman, *Women in Human Evolution*, 107.

The anthropologist Owen Lovejoy, well known for his work in reconstructing the famous Lucy, is typically cited in recounting this masculinist history. Lovejoy also worked in human origins modeling, and much of his work centered around monogamous mating systems as a requirement for human modernity. According to Lovejoy, “paternity is key to humanity...Maternity is inherently conservative and requires husbanding to become truly fruitful, to move from animal to human...Nothing a female could do could lead the species across the hominoid-hominid boundary.” With his mate at a home base, “a [hominid] male could lead the species across the boundary to the origin of man.”⁷

This line of thinking intersected with the ‘Man the Hunter’ hypothesis, in which anthropologists previously believed that hominid males were aggressive hunters and developed stone tools for processing animal flesh. This model relied on an essentialist, biological basis for male and female behavior to conclude that monogamy and a sexual division of labor was the evolutionary basis for human society, and essentially, for humanness. According to Lovejoy, “for the new strategy to succeed, “the female must remain constantly attractive to the male.””⁸ In a monogamous system where hominid males hunt and use aggression to obtain a mate, females are rendered dependent upon the males, who in turn exchange food, protection, and co-parenting for paternal certainty and continuous female sexual receptivity. Even Lucy, *Australopithecus afarensis*, was colored in this light. As Donna Haraway writes in her book *Primate Visions*, “Lucy was quickly made into a hominid mother and faithful wife, a more efficient reproducing machine than her apish sisters and a reliable, if poorly upholstered, sex

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 282.

⁸ Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 282.

doll. These are the qualities essential to the male-dominant, “monogamous,” heterosexual family.”⁹ The idea of continuous female sexual receptivity may have made sense to male anthropologists in the 1970’s, especially considering that human women do in fact have concealed ovulation, unlike many of our primate relatives who experience cycles of estrus accompanied by visual, olfactory, and behavioral cues. However, anthropologists have since shifted the concept of ‘Man the Hunter’ to ‘Man the Hunted’. We now know that our hominid ancestors were prey to many species from big cats to snakes to raptors. Early stone tool use has also been reconsidered, and anthropologists now suggest that many tools were used instead for gathering and that women were also important tool users. “Among modern human hunter-gatherer cultures, most tools...are used not for hunting large prey but rather for gathering...and, again, most of these tools *are made and used by women*, not men.”¹⁰ And perhaps most importantly, the ‘Man the Hunted’ model reconsiders male aggression and monogamy to instead emphasize female sexual choice and the nuances of social interactions in primate societies.

However, female primates and hominid women are still subject to patriarchal power structures as anthropologists continue to research human history, and biased visual reconstructions of that history, whether in the form of dioramas, documentaries, or movies, remain. While there certainly has been recognition of these previous errors, “the concept of women in evolution remains encased in the glassed-in Old Testament diorama held down by a paleolithic glass ceiling.”¹¹

⁹ Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 282.

¹⁰ Donna Hart, *Man the Hunted: Primates, Predators, and Human Evolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 215.

¹¹ Zihlman, *Women in Human Evolution*, 109.



Still from *One Million Years BC*, 1966

She is the Goddess Technium

Imagine one million and six hundred thousand years ago — a prehistoric character points. There in the moistened soil, a hominid woman draws a line, inscribing with her finger the first mark.

She is the goddess technium.

She has already developed stone tools.

She remembers this time more distant yet, when she waded through cool churning waters and lost her body hair but gained so much more on her head instead.

She remembers that glaringly sunny afternoon when she bent over and reached into that water, her fingers tracing the contours of the pebbles under her feet, and when she rose again she suddenly felt the weight of her breasts upon her chest.

She is the goddess technium, evolving with terrestrial time.

Now she crouches in a jungle, a different kind of moisture. And with her pointed gesture her nails catch the glimpses of sunlight that pass through the leaves. Or is it moonlight? There is a meteor shower passing overhead.

She is the goddess technium, a hominid, a discoverer, a maker of meaning.

Soon she will find herself within an indescribable and unnatural space, a darkened void where she will dig into her inner makings and find her structural form.

She is the goddess technium, who in her leisurely time adorns her body in power and desire.



Digital photograph of ceramic figure with filtered light, 2016

The Nonhuman Human Becoming Human in a Sea of Pink and Green

As a species, we rely on vision as our primary sense. So, in my mind, my decision to investigate the origins of image making as a marker of humanness, and in turn make images today, celebrates this important characteristic of my human animal-ness. Why I paint these images rather than utilize photographic or digital technologies is simple — a manual transfer of pigment onto a surface feels closely related to the prehistoric technologies of image making available to our hominid ancestors. Similarly, my use of clay and heat to construct figurines and artifacts also relates to prehistoric technologies that were available for object making.

Another important characteristic of my human animal-ness and a distinguishing adaptation in the evolution of primate vision is the ability to distinguish reds from greens. And while I use a lot of pink and green as well as red and green, any animal would require three opsins (light sensitive proteins in the retina) to visually distinguish the compositions of my paintings. Pink is an especially important color because, in addition to being a compliment of green, it lacks a specific realness. Pink as a color can easily be said to represent the feminine, or rather, the construct of the feminine, and it can also elicit senses of desire and consumption. Beyond that, pink as a color does not always have a graspable reality — it is plastic and uncanny. Pink is rarer than most colors in nature, and as a pigment it is more fugitive and fleeting as it fades faster. Some of pink's natural occurrences, however, are particularly interesting. Female bottlenose dolphins, for example, will sometimes blush pink on their bellies when they are flirting with another dolphin they want to mate with. Often, this exchange also involves a sargassum gift, which the pair carry on their pectoral fins and pass back and

forth.¹² This is a suiting example because beyond the parallel of pink and green (pink belly and green sargassum), dolphins are, in a sense, modern day aquatic apes. Mirroring apes in intelligence and social finesse, dolphins are perhaps what may have come had a certain semi-aquatic *Australopithecine* ancestor stayed in the water.



My Eyes Evolved Underwater, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 64"

¹²*Dolphins: Spy in the Pod*, BBC One, 2014.

Water is a recurring environment for the hominid characters that I paint. Besides its clear connection to the aquatic ape hypothesis, water also represents the original place of evolution for life on earth. In addition, many of my own personal discoveries and encounters with new species have happened underwater. While I reference specific hominid species in my research, the hominids I paint are not specific to any one species. They are a sort of every hominid, meant to be an unfamiliar known working towards something known, or rather, a nonhuman human becoming human. They typically appear as female, and their nude bodies are human enough to become tied to the classic female nude in painting's history. When their hairy, pink bodies are lounging and posing near bodies of water, they immediately reference the trope of the bath painting, intermeshing the imagined gaze of a male hominid viewer with the peeping gaze of men in mythology who happened upon a bathing beauty. In these scenes, the hominid women are also relaxing in leisurely time. Leisure, I content, was a necessary discovery and experience of time before *Homo habilis* could have discovered the first mark, and these images thereby reference the critical time right before an important discovery was made.



Bath of the Early Pleistocene Babes, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas, 58 x 74"

When the hominid characters are not presented within the direct gaze of the viewer, the perspective of the painting starts to take on the hominid's view. Now, instead of existing within a leisurely timeframe, the viewer is placed within the moments of discovery. And, rather than painting a posed hominid woman through the internalized gaze of her viewer, I can start to embody the hominid woman herself, looking down my

chest at the ground where I draw a line in the dirt or inspect the fossilized skeleton of a recent relative. This down-the-body perspective calls to mind the painter Joan Semmel, who between 1974 and 1979 made a body of paintings she refers to as self-images. While many of these self-images also include the downward view of a lover's body next to her own, others such as *Me Without Mirrors* offer a self-reflexive point of view similar to the self-reflexive view of the hominid woman in a quiet and contemplative moment.



There in the Moistened Soil, 2016
Acrylic on Canvas, 30 x 30"



Joan Semmel, *Me Without Mirrors*
Oil on Canvas, 52 x 68"

Other painted environments where my hominid characters exist are jungles, caves, and ambiguous non-spaces. In reference to both the museum diorama as well as digital references such as music videos, the images I paint are undeniably flat. The illusion of space is built up through the accumulation of layers of stains and other transparent paint strata. Other painters like Lisa Yuskavage, whose female figures are enmeshed in isolated fields of color, inspire the luminous glows of color and light in my paintings. And while each of my paintings typically depict a singular figure or event, the juxtaposition of multiple images can start to piece together my alternate narrative of human evolution.



A Prehistoric Character Points, 2016
Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 60"

The clay objects I make, on the other hand, are artifacts. Stylized figurines modeled after the hominid characters exist amongst fossil skulls, stone tools, and flat medallions with words and phrases inscribed onto them. The figurines are at once the objects made by my imagined hominid characters as well as characters of their own posed within their own compositions. This duality shifts around based on the other clay objects that accompany the figurines — next to a stone tool, also to the scale of an

actual stone tool made by a hominid, the figurines become the hominids' fabricated objects, but alone or next to a fossil skull, they become characters in an imagined environment in the same respect as a painted hominid. The word medallions display fragments of my research and the written content behind this body of work — words like “leisure,” “power,” and “point” are just some examples. The word medallions are also a literal manifestation of the first mark made by *Homo habilis* in that they are comprised of lines drawn into a malleable ground. In a sense, they also allude to what the original mark — the line in the dirt — alludes to, which is the beginnings of language. The gesture of the pointed hand, the very gesture that made that first mark in the dirt, is also a gesture to communicate something to another individual.¹³ The point describes a shared dialogue, and the traces of the point are the lines in the dirt.

My artifact-esque clay figures also draw a reference to the venus figurines of human prehistory. The venus figurines, however, make up only a few of the many prehistoric figurines made, and yet they are the most known. “They are...celebrated for certain attributes exhibited by only a few out of many - large breasts, heavy thighs, wide hips...attributes which, through the discourses of the [male] authors, have often been made into a list of “erotically-charged body parts” made passive and available for possession.”¹⁴ Upper Paleolithic female figurines were, coincidentally, first discovered not long after a shift in art history had taken place. This shift, which took place during the 1830's, marked the replacement of the male nude with the female nude as the

¹³ Lynn A. Isbell, *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent: Why We See So Well* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 150-153.

¹⁴ Margaret W. Conkey, “Mobilizing Ideologies: Paleolithic “Art,” Gender Trouble, and Thinking About Alternatives,” *Women in Human Evolution* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 195.

idealization of the body as well as the erotic.¹⁵ With an idealization of the female body in mind, male authors centered their attention on the nudity and presumed fecundity of the venus figurines.

While the precise purpose of these figures remains unknowable, one theory suggests that figures like *Woman from Willendorf*, in particular, are an example of self-representation. With no mirrors available, prehistoric women had only the foreshortened perspective of looking down at their own bodies as reference, which explains the *Woman from Willendorf*'s narrowing feet and lack of facial specificity.¹⁶ I find this reading of the figures particularly compelling because it takes them away from a male read and places them back within the hands of the prehistoric women that made them. Further, it implies a self-contemplation by these prehistoric women. The down-the-body perspective is not present in my clay figures as it is in my paintings, but the general idea of self-representation is present throughout my practice. I embody my hominid characters, which sometimes lack a facial specificity just as the *Woman from Willendorf* does. I am also a female primate maker, examining my own self and deep history through the imagined bodies of my ancestors.

¹⁵ Conkey, *Women in Human Evolution*, 184.

¹⁶ Lindsay J. Basch and Debra N. Mancoff, *Icons of Beauty: Art, Culture, and the Image of Woman* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 14.



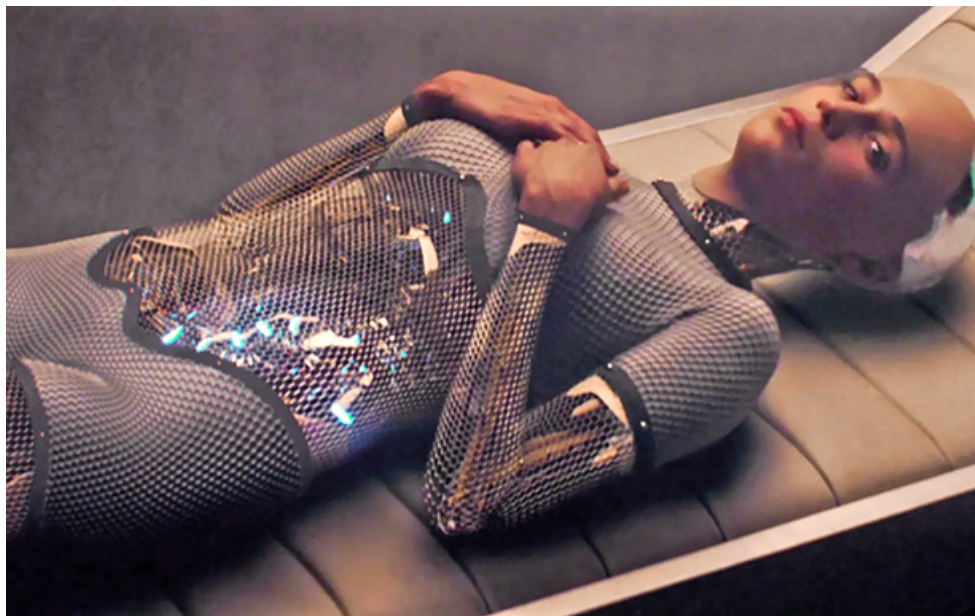
Detail from *How I Learned About the World*, 2016
Fired and Glazed Ceramic, Wood, Fabric, Plexiglass, and Acrylic, 24 x 48 x 37"

The Future Hominid

In addition to physical anthropology, I am interested in science fiction as a genre because of its potential to criticize anything from xenophobia to the use of limited resources in its imaginings of various futures. Sci-fi movies in particular dig into what we define as humanness. *Planet of the Apes*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Interstellar*, and *Barbarella* deconstruct our humanness into things like intelligence, language, consciousness, tool use, experience of time, and even sex, and place these onto the nonhuman human. The nonhuman human, whether animal, alien, or machine, is an imagined being that mirrors us both physically and mentally. My hominid characters are also, of course, nonhuman humans. Sci-fi thrillers like *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* are especially chilling in their portrayals of the nonhuman human *becoming* human. In these two instances, the nonhuman human is an attractive female — in *Ex Machina* she is an artificially intelligent woman and in *Under the Skin* she is an alien wearing a human woman's skin. Both nonhuman human babes use their physical femaleness to manipulate human men. Ava in *Ex Machina* is a visible robot who remains under the control of the man who made her, yet it becomes clear that she is a truly autonomous being. She uses the sexuality her maker gave her to lure another man into helping her escape and live freely. In *Under the Skin*, the unnamed alien woman, played by Scarlett Johansson, lures in men for consumption, until she startlingly finds herself beginning to experience human emotion. She escapes from the supervision of what is perceived of as a male alien to explore her new humanness.

These influences are evident in another, more recent character that appears in my paintings — the AI woman. She is an artificially intelligent, presumed robotic and

therefore fabricated woman. The AI woman is becoming an increasingly important character as she mirrors the hominid woman as a futuristic version of her. The impetus for introducing this character largely comes from *Ex Machina*'s Ava. While it can be said that consciousness is genderless, Ava's consciousness is placed within a body that it then recognizes as female, and Ava quickly assumes a feminine role and flirts manipulatively to get what she wants.



Still from *Ex Machina*, 2015

Similarly to the de-emphasis of women in prehistory, the trope of the sexualized female robot in film also speaks to the male presumption that women are not fully human beings. Both of these examples utilize a character that is not fully human — a hominid ancestor and a futuristic robot. Both of these characters become a humanized nonhuman, and their partial humanity comes from their femininity. Whereas prehistoric men were considered the discoverers of technology, the bearers of cultural intelligence,

and ultimately the leaders in crossing that threshold into becoming modern humans, male robots in film are given intellectual pursuits rather than romantic pursuits, and in some cases do not even need a human body in order to evoke empathy. Take TARS from *Interstellar* or David from *Prometheus*, for example. One is a moving geometric form and the other takes the form of a male human, but both develop empathetic relationships with their human colleagues without any romantic feelings. Even Samantha from *Her*, who is completely body-less, is sexualized on the presumption that we know what Scarlett Johansson looks like, whereas HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* never needed a physical representation that could be attached to his voice.¹⁷



Still from *Under the Skin*, 2013

According to Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, women in film are often presented as a bearer of meaning rather than a maker of

¹⁷ Angela Watercutter, "Ex Machina Has A Serious Fembot Problem," *wired.com* (April 9, 2015).

meaning.¹⁸ The AI woman in film is a bearer of meaning in the same way that the prehistoric woman was never previously thought of as a maker of meaning. I would contend that a significant, though not unique, characteristic of humanness is precisely the ability to create, communicate, and understand meaning.

In my paintings, the character of the AI woman reveals the partial humanness that she shares with the hominid woman as parts of her mysterious, made body become visible when her skin is peeled away. Yet in painting these characters in moments of discovery and contemplation, I strive to reinforce them as the makers of meaning. I am also, perhaps, proposing that the ability to make meaning may not in fact be unique to humans — it is present in other species and it can be present in artificial consciousness. What is also important about the AI woman revealing what is under her skin is that she reveals herself to be a fabricated being, just as all hominids are. Every way we imagine and illustrate our extinct ancestors is entirely based in our human projections. They are fabricated beings — nonhuman humans made entirely of a human understanding of the world. The AI woman displays a visible exemplification of this characteristic.

Both the hominid woman and the AI woman personify the goddess technium, a fluid character who represents the scope of their evolution. The concept of the technium comes from editor and writer Kevin Kelly, who defines the term as anything useful that the mind, whether human or otherwise, makes. I co-opt this term and apply it to the evolution of my hominid and AI characters, as they are the discoverers of such useful inventions as stone tools, mark making, language, leisure, and consciousness. The goddess technium refers to every hominid and AI woman that I paint — she continues

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 59.

on as a character encompassing the hominid, the human, the robot, and anything in between.



What Happens When I Turn Around and Tell You I'm Real, 2016
Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24"

Glitzy Nails and Skull Casts

The visuals of music videos have been an important source for my paintings. Bright and unnatural colors, fantastical landscapes built from sets or green-screen, and pasted-on digital effects altogether create a visual experience that reads like a futuristic, science fiction-esque scene when utilized to depict my prehistoric imagery. These visual cues not only provide a source of color inspiration but also conflate time within the images I paint. By putting a contemporary filter on my prehistoric imagery, I allow myself to question whether the images I make are images of the past, images of the future, or even images of the present but in a different location within the universe.

Nicki Minaj's music videos provide both a source of empowerment as well as visual sensation. In videos like *I Am Your Leader*, *Starships*, *Massive Attack*, and more, Minaj displays an irresistible use of pinks and greens in her hair, makeup, costumes, and background sets. In the video *Starships*, Minaj even plays an alien woman who emerges from an ocean shore, referencing both the nonhuman human and the ocean as an important site of evolution. Often, light filters in music videos, such as the pinkish tint in parts of Grimes' video *Vanessa*, create the sensation of a glow of light emanating from the figures in the video, and this is often reflected in the pink glows encircling my hominid characters. Kali Uchis is another artist who almost always uses pink glows as well as pink costuming and hair in her videos. Grimes' *Genesis* also uses some dusty pinks in its rendition of an alternate, girl-powered origin myth. Like *Starships*, *Genesis* also features a female figure, dressed in pink, that emerges from an ocean shore. Interestingly, this figure also later morphs into a futuristic, cyborg-esque character donning long, pink nails.



Still from Grimes' video *Genesis*, 2012

Besides captivating visuals, music videos also offer me useful content, or at the very least, a sense of empowerment from the (mostly female) artists whose videos I watch. FKA Twigs is an artist whose thoughtful music videos provide less of a visual sensation and more of an interest in the power dynamics she enacts. In the video *Papi Pacify*, Twigs is held against a man's chest, and his arms engulf and restrain her head and neck while he inserts his fingers into her mouth. Her own hands, adorned in decadent, jeweled nails, graze over his. In one section of the video play *M3LL155X* (pronounced "Melissa"), Twigs' head is imposed onto the body of a blow-up doll. She lies immobile but also receptive in the center of a bed as a man stands before her,

eyeing her. He works himself up to an excessive level of arousal and has sex with her body, leaving it deflated when he is finished. This scene also mirrors scenes from the sci-fi thriller *Under the Skin* but with reversed roles. Instead of a leering male figure and the deflated skin of a female character as in Twigs' video, *Under the Skin* provides chilling scenes of a female figure, the Scarlett Johansson alien, who lures in male characters that unsuspectingly sink into a darkened void where their bodies are abruptly sucked away, leaving their empty skins floating in the darkness.



Still from Nicki Minaj's video *Starships*, 2012

Another important internet source for my work is a website called *donglutsdinosaurs.com*, a treasure trove of slightly dated photos of topless women posing sexily while holding up skull casts, fossils, and dinosaur models. Many of these props just barely cover their nipples. In some photos, the women are dressed as near-

nude cavewomen with faux dino-tooth necklaces and prop spears and arrowheads. In others, the women sit inside a strange office (or perhaps a storage library for the fossils) with their own underwear and other modern accessories visible. The fetish of the sexy cavewoman, or cave babe, is immediately interesting to me because of its conflation of prehistoric imagery with the performance of an idealized feminine. I also use many of these images as sources when composing my hominid characters because they exhibit a subtle tension in where the power lies. While skeletons, or at least images of skeletons, are really genderless, I often notice a maleness projected onto them. This is especially evident in Halloween decorations. With these skulls, no matter the species, therefore reading as male, an interesting power dynamic arises between them and the manicured hands that hold them. In one image, for example, a woman holds out what looks like a hominid skull in one hand, and points at it with her other hand while making a kissing face. She is clearly performing what she knows to be a playful and sexy pose, but at the same time her kissing face mocks while her pointed finger scolds the very maleness that she is performing for. In other images, the gestures of the posed women are more seductive, but their gentle caresses of skulls pressed against their breasts become nurturing and motherly. In paintings like *No Need to Placate/ Play Cave*, I simplify the skull into a generalized, reptilian skull. This allows for these images to become truly multiplicitous, as the vaguely reptilian skull becomes a marker of a deeper evolutionary history — the hominid woman contemplates her own self and history while holding the skull of a much more distant relative.



No Need to Placate/ Play Cave, 2016
Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 32 x 42"

Prehistoric Sci-fi is my Genre

Not long ago I was floating near the surface of a turquoise and tropical sea. A small, translucent tube, no longer than an inch and a half, drifted in front of me. I slowly reached out for it and touched it with the tip of my finger. It vibrated against my skin and darted away. This experience is an archetypal example of a quiet moment of discovery. The act of reaching toward something unknown constitutes much of the research informing my work as well as the practice of making an image. In this particular instance, I was also able to escape from my own humanness. I was no longer a human swimming in the ocean, but simply a terrestrial animal, levitating within an amorphous space and encountering another, unfamiliar terrestrial animal.

So why hominids? Hominids are the nonhuman humans that we know existed, while AI robots are the nonhuman humans that are coming into existence. I am drawn to the nonhuman human because such a figure provides me with an escape from my body. The nonhuman human allows me to reach beyond the human. How can I escape from my human female body? When I was a child, I escaped through play and exploration. When suddenly I was no longer a kid but instead made to be a little girl, I could escape my body by running off into un-trekked suburban wilderness. There, I was no longer a human but another animal in the wild, searching for what might lie beyond the next forest clearing. Much of my play involved reaching beyond the human. One particular game involved me playing an invented character that was half wolf and half robotic dog — a true hybrid seeking to understand its identity. If ever my play did confront the human, it did so while investigating what femaleness meant through female figured toys that enacted out scenarios typical of rom-com movies. Then I became a

teenager and the breasts I never wanted in the first place were suddenly not large enough, and I began to desperately want the concept of *girl*. How can I unlearn all of this now? How can I escape the body that invites everything from being told I've "got it" to being called a cow? How can I escape a body that's been made to feel completely alien to me? Today I reach beyond the human through my hominid portraits. Whether they elicit a prehistoric or futuristic being, these nonhuman humans are fundamentally alien, and as I embody them I can escape my very real, alien body and the world that has taught me that my sexuality exists only for other people.

With a background in physical anthropology, a true passion and hobby, my obsession with human evolution should come as no surprise. One of the many fields underneath the broad umbrella of physical anthropology is primatology, and beyond my own personal interests, primatology also offers a potential feminist model of science. According to primatologist and bioanthropologist Linda Marie Fedigan, a feminist scientific discipline should be reflexive and aware of the contextual values that constrain our perceptions of the world, strive to empower women by understanding the world from a woman's point of view, understand nature as complex and active rather than something passive to conquer, and shift its language away from hierarchies, reductionism, and dualisms.¹⁹ Primatology as a field saw a shift towards this feminist model during the 1970's when second wave feminism "urged scientists to take account of the female point of view."²⁰ Primatology has since been considered a feminist model of science because it exhibits many of Fedigan's characteristics. Besides having had many women enter its field, primatology also has a well developed female point of view.

¹⁹ Linda Marie Fedigan, "Is Primatology a Feminist Science?" *Women in Human Evolution* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 61-62.

²⁰ Fedigan, *Women in Human Evolution*, 65.

In addition, primatology remains constantly aware of the dangers of anthropomorphism. It recognizes that primates are cognizant, socially intelligent animals — primates have complex and cooperative social and environmental interactions. Success in primate societies is measured by social strategy and tradition rather than by the presumption that aggression equates social dominance, and many primate societies are female-bonded.²¹ Donna Haraway describes primatology as being “the negotiation of the time of origins, the origin of the family, the boundary between self and other, hominid and hominoid, human and animal. Primatology is about...the possibility and constraints of politics.”²²

Like science fiction, primates and physical anthropology also allow me to reimagine our past, or even our future, with a criticality of the ways in which patriarchal and religious structures have shaped our understanding of human evolution and our representations of our past. Substitute aliens for extinct species of human ancestors and the unknown of space for the primordial earth as we will never know it, and I have a vast imaginable world within which to invent and recreate narratives of origin and discovery. In my imagined sphere, males appear absent. They aren't entirely, as there remain traces of their gaze in the performatively sexy poses of my hominid women. But their absence is a possibility. After all, if *Philodina roseola*, a microscopic freshwater organism, can survive for eighty-five million years with an all female population, why not a primate?²³ What is entirely absent from my imagined sphere is any form of religious

²¹ Fedigan, *Women in Human Evolution*, 88-89.

²² Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 284.

²³ Olivia Judson, *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 214.

mythology, allowing for an unqualified embrace of female power, sexuality, and freedom.

I am interested in creating an alternate human history that pivots off of various points within the history of human evolutionary research, and specifically, the myth of the origin of humanness as being contingent upon male aggression, female receptivity, the nuclear family, and “god.” I want to propose the humanness in quieter moments earlier in time, and the hominid woman carries that humanness in her discoveries of image and language. All of these discoveries start in the quiet, contemplative moment of the discovery of the mark — the line in the dirt made hundreds of thousands of years before *Homo sapiens* evolved. The AI woman then carries that humanness beyond *Homo sapiens* and forward in time, beyond the current thirteen billion and eight hundred million year history of this universe. Yet what I provide in order to piece together this expansive and continuing origin story are painted images and clay objects — an archaeology of my invented narrative of human evolution that becomes ever clearer as more images and objects are unearthed (made).

I am a hominid, pink bodied and hairy headed
with bipedal legs and grasping hands and a protruding brow ridge

I came from the sea, a sea of rocks and stars and cosmic dusts
but also the terrestrial sea
where I found a pebble with a slightly pointed edge
and figured I could use it to crack open shellfish

I was right

I am a hominid, pink bodied and hairy headed
and now I've found a shaded patch of dirt

I crouch down in the moistened soil
to make meaning out of form

With the imprints of the stars and galaxies and celestial dusts within my eyes
my eyes that evolved underwater

I reach toward the ground

I reach toward space

My nail catches the glimpses of light that pass through the leaves
as I draw my finger across the dirt

I am a hominid

discovering the mark, discovering meaning

my pink body and my hairy head and my conscious mind invented symbolic form
and now my body is becoming symbolic form

I am a hominid, pink bodied and hairy headed

and don't forget conscious minded

I see images of my likeness and for a moment I've forgotten that my body is mine

I am a hominid, pink bodied and hairy headed and conscious minded

I invented stone tools and image making and language and even leisure

I am the goddess technium

Somewhere within these thirteen billion and eight hundred million years

I am looking down at my body

making meaning out of form

Somewhere beyond this current history

I exist within an amorphous space

and as my skin peels back my body reveals itself to be made

I am the goddess technium



Installation View of Thesis Exhibition, 2016

Bibliography

Basch, Lindsay J. and Mancoff, Debra N. *Icons of Beauty: Art, Culture, and the Image of Woman*, Volume 2. Greenwood Press, Santa Barbara, CA. 2009.

Conkey, Margaret W. "Mobilizing Ideologies: Paleolithic "Art," Gender Trouble, and Thinking about Alternatives." *Women in Human Evolution*, 172-207. Routledge, New York, NY. 1997.

Dolphins: Spy in the Pod. Dir. John Downer. Perf. David Tennant. BBC One, 2014. *Netflix*, April 2016.

Fedigan, Linda Marie. "Is Primatology a Feminist Science?" *Women in Human Evolution*, 56-75. Routledge, New York, NY. 1997.

Haraway, Donna. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. Routledge, New York, NY. 1989.

Hart, Donna. *Man the Hunted: Primates, Predators, and Human Evolution*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO. 2008.

Isbell, Lynne A. *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent: Why We See So Well*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 2009.

Judson, Olivia. *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation*. Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, NY. 2002.

Morgan, Elaine. *The Descent of Woman*. Stein and Day/ Publishers, New York, NY. 1972.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, 58 - 69. New York University Press, New York, NY. 1999.

Watercutter, Angela. "Ex Machina Has a Serious Fembot Problem." *Wired.com*, April 9, 2015.

Zihlman, Adrienne. "The Paleolithic Glass Ceiling: Women in Human Evolution." *Women in Human Evolution*, 91-113. Routledge, New York, NY. 1997.