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TERRA MULTA

by

EMILY ALBEE

Under the Direction of Jessica Jones, MFA

ABSTRACT

Terra Multa is an exhibition of ceramic sculpture and tile installations inspired by historical folktales. Through the industrialization of agriculture and animal husbandry, humanity has created a system that provides surplus for some, while creating food scarcity and environmental hazards to others. Foreseeing a dystopian conclusion to this current trajectory, *Terra Multa* abstracts these stories to create a fairytale for a world that is no longer able to support traditional livestock practices.

INDEX WORDS: Mythology, Enchantment, Disenchantment, Religion, Folktale, Fairytale, The Enlightenment, Agriculture, Food Systems

TERRA MULTA

by

EMILY ALBEE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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2023

TERRA MULTA

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May 2023

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Pippin, who does his best to pretend to be a dog, when he is so clearly a dragon. And to Dana, my best friend, husband, and reluctant editor; the number of run-on sentences you vanquished cannot be understated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This road has been long and winding, passing sometimes through sunny fields and other times through the deep dark woods. I have encountered many people along the way who helped me stay to the path, giving me breadcrumbs when I needed them, or shining a light when the stars were not visible. Thank you first and foremost to Dana, who always knew I was strong enough to make this journey. Thank you to my dog Pippin, for being my animal guide. Thank you to Susan Classen-Sullivan, Matthew Towers, and Rick Harden for showing me the entrance, and to Mathew Dercole, Rachel McNamara, and Sabrina Lemery for helping me traverse the first leg.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I have always been interested in the mythic and the magical, a connection forged when I was young. I grew up with ten siblings in rural New England, secluded on three acres of land that felt like a vast wilderness. For most of my young life, I lived in what I perceived to be a bucolic paradise. On our three acres, we had more animals than I can recount, but from what I remember, there were three horses, one pony, two dogs, and innumerable cats living both indoors and outdoors. The population also included a guinea pig, mice, rats, snakes, a tortoise, a crow, an African Grey parrot who sometimes swore at us kids, in addition to whatever baby bird or pond frog we found and “rescued” that particular day. These animals, along with my parents and siblings, made up my family and my entire world. I was never more comfortable than when I was home amongst the chaos.

In our childhood, our identity is forged by our family and community as much by ourselves. The hope, I think, is that one day we will coalesce into a fully formed and independent adult; an amalgamation of the experiences and lessons our parents and environment instilled in us. The truth is we are always growing and morphing, absorbing information from one experience to another, but during these formative years we collect an exceptional amount of data that has lasting impacts on our developing worldview.

From my mother I received my creativity, my love for animals, and my interest in story. At the behest of my maternal Grandparents, my siblings and I were raised Catholic, and during these formative years we regularly attended church. While at church I listened to the stories we were told, and I focused particularly on the fantastical elements: there was a talking snake in a garden, a sea that split in two, and a man who was raised from the dead. These stories enthralled me so much more than the rigidity of the ethos itself. From my father I received my love for

nature and my appreciation for hard work. I am one of ten children who complete a lineage of ten generations of farmers. Most of my childhood summers were spent on my ancestors' farm in Maine pulling weeds, harvesting vegetables, and learning the value of our labor power. After a few hours of work there was, of course, also room for many more hours of play. If ever there was a place where my soul felt most alive, it is there in those fields and under those stars. From my siblings I received my appreciation for the bizarre and the uncanny. At times we were like a wild pack of dogs or a force of nature. At other times we could be a symphony, fully in sync and harmonizing.

As an artist I work to make sense of the world I am a part of. I channel into my art the sense of wonder I felt as a child. We are living in a moment that feels charged and electric, like a rubber band that has been pulled back for so long you begin to fear the snap. It is difficult, when living in such uncertainty, to know what direction to go. For myself, this is a time of grounding, of connecting back to my roots.

Terra Multa is an exhibition of ceramic sculpture and tile installations inspired by historical folktales that relate to modern agricultural practices. Through the industrialization of agriculture and animal husbandry, humanity has created a food system that provides surplus for some, while creating food scarcity and environmental hazards for others. Foreseeing a dystopian conclusion to this current trajectory, I have abstracted these stories to create a fairytale for a world that is no longer able to support traditional livestock practices.

This body of work centers around my research on the structures of mythology, the roles of folk and fairy tales within society, and the implications of industrialized agriculture. This paper acts as a compendium for the exhibition and will guide you through the research and thought that went into it. In *From Folk to Fairy, the Evolution of Myth*, I will give a broad

overview of the origins of fairytales and the human connection to story. The section entitled *The Disenchantment of the World* will focus on outlining a shift in perspective as it relates to the Enlightenment and the industrialization of agriculture. In *The Vegetable Lamb and the Milk Snake*, I will introduce the two folktales that had a direct impact on the formation of the exhibition. The section, *Material Circumstance*, will provide insight to material and process choices, while the final section *Terra Multa*, will discuss the exhibition in detail, providing insight to my artistic intentions.

As an artist, I see the threads that connect these seemingly disparate areas of scholarship, and work to weave them together to create something new. It should be noted that I am not an expert in these fields. I am merely an observer, plucking inspiration from natural, folk, and scientific history.

2 FROM FOLK TO FAIRY, THE EVOLUTION OF MYTH

In 21st century America everyone knows what a fairy tale is, but few know about their origins. Most often we think about them as stories for children, not grounded in truth or rational thought but rather existing in a realm of magic and make believe. Yet these stories often influence our lives, playing a larger role than many of us realize. In my effort to better understand the origins of these stories, I followed the fairytale back through time and found that its roots wound all the way to the dawn of humanity. To understand the importance of story, we must start with the history of myth.

Humans have been telling stories since the emergence of language, and today we call those ancient stories *myth*.¹ Shown through the actions of supernatural beings in *ill tempore*,² myth was used as a tool to connect humankind to our place within this world, and to help us cope with our consciousness. Myth's purpose was not to impart factual information, but to guide behavior; its truths only being revealed when put into practice. This was a time of great mysticism; spirits were everywhere, and the magical realm intermingled with our own.³ The earth was still populated with the remaining megafauna that characterized the Pleistocene. Giant sloths and mammoths roamed the earth alongside massive predators and our earliest Homo Sapien ancestors.⁴ In such a primordial time, those who could extrapolate the laws of the natural world were translating the will of the Gods. They wielded power through the magic of language and story. By explaining how things came to be, while also reflecting the social aspects that were most important for tribal life, these myths played a pivotal role in human social evolution.

¹ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate) 2005, 22-39.

² *Ill tempore*: In the primal times.

³ Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, 22-39

⁴ Yuval N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015).

As time moved on, myth coalesced from ritual reenactment into oral storytelling, laying the foundation for what we today understand as folktales or folklore. While it is difficult to pin down exactly what does and does not fall under the umbrella of folklore, it is generally agreed that folklore encompasses the popular beliefs, myths and customs of a particular community or place.⁵ Folktales, like prehistoric myth, are meant to convey ultimate truths about the natural world, such as seasonal shifts, or the celebration rites of hunting, harvest, and marriage.⁶ Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp also believed that, like myth, folklore is a living entity. Stories are absorbed by the collective consciousness and redistributed throughout the years to reflect the current social conditions.

In folklore, as in myth, reality is not always portrayed literally but can be presented in a way that delivers a specific moral or lesson. You may encounter talking animals like the snake in the garden of Eden, or animal bridegrooms. These motifs originate in, and connect back to, a mythological worldview in which stories sought to teach us about the dangers of the natural world. The animal bridegroom, for example, might represent an important initiatory journey that men must go through before marrying, or represent a maiden's misfortune in mate selection in situations of arranged marriage.⁷

Whereas myth existed in a classless society, folklore arose as a condition of civilization. Folklore is associated with the marginalized groups of societies, the poor, the downtrodden, and the people of the lower classes. Propp argued that once a story or a song makes its way into the

⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5.

⁶ Jack Zipes, *Fairy tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 10

⁷ Jack Zipes, *The Golden Age of Folk and Fairy Tales: From the Brothers Grimm to Andrew Lang* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2013), 206.

upper classes, it is absorbed into the hierarchy of literature and scholarship.⁸ The creation of the fairy or wonder tale is an excellent example of exactly that.

Fairytales were originally created as a parlor game in 16th century France. Aristocratic women would pull inspiration from common folktales, combining and retelling the stories in ways that elevated them to the status of the bourgeoisie listener. The stories would be recast to include only the members of society that were listening, i.e., French royalty and nobility, marking a distinct break from folktales, whose characters did not discriminate against class distinction.⁹

Like the reality bending rules of folktales and myth, the plot of the fairytale was “secondary to the discussion of manners and the enactment of proper behavior.”¹⁰ An integral component of the game was to participate in a critique of the story, determining whether the characters behaved in a manner desirable to the participants. As in Madame D’Aulnoy’s original tale of *The Great Green Worm*, a young princess cursed with ill looks must overcome her fear of marrying a prince who has himself been cursed to appear as a hideous green serpent.¹¹ What mattered most in this story was not that circumstances led the princess to be cursed or to fall in love with a “monster”. What was important, was the way that she behaved, and the manner in which she was treated. On the surface this may have appeared as a harmless pastime, but for the women creating the tales it was also a radical act. They often used the games to insert subversive ideology about how they believed women should behave and treated in aristocratic society.¹² Eventually the fairytale would be institutionalized by French male writers, such as Charles

⁸ Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 7-8.

⁹ Propp, 5-6.

¹⁰ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 28.

¹¹ Marie-Catherine D’Aulnoy, “The Great Green Worm” in *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment*, ed. Marina Warner (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 189-229.

¹² Zipes, 18, 21-25.

Perrault, who cared less for the liberation of women than for introducing a “new genre of art within the French civilizing process.”¹³ For a short time, however, fairy tales were made by and for women of the upper class.

The introduction of the printing press transformed the oral nature of the fairytale into one of literature, cementing it as a product of the upper classes and widening the division between folk and fairy. Once written down, fairytales were bound by the laws of authorship, unable to morph and change to reflect current events or social changes. As a result, both the form and content of fairytales continued to embrace notions of elitism, as very few people in the lower classes could read at that time.

While fairytales were at first intended for adults, by the 18th century they were being used as both education and entertainment for upper class children as well. By the early part of the 19th century the fairytale had been sanitized for children of all class distinctions, reframed as moralistic tales whose purpose was to domesticate the imagination rather than nourish it.¹⁴

The evolution of the animal bridegroom motif shows very clearly the transformative effects the institution had on fairytales over time. The story of *Beauty and the Beast* is perhaps today the most well-known example of an animal bridegroom, and it has undergone many changes since it was first written by Madame Le Prince de Beaumont. Keeping in tradition with fairytales of the time, *Beauty and the Beast* was originally meant to be critiqued by the recipient, used once again as a teachable moment to discuss the fair and unfair treatment of women and their roles in society. Over time, and especially in the 20th century with the introduction of film, the fairytale instead became a tool for enforcing stereotypical gender roles.¹⁵

¹³ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 17.

¹⁴ Zipes, 14.

¹⁵ Zipes, 30-33, 44.



Figure 2.1. Illustration for *Beauty and the Beast*.
London: George Routledge and Sons, 1874.

The shift from using these tales as a social critique, to their wider acceptance as entertainment, marked a distinct transformation in the purpose of the fairytale. Formerly used as a tool to think critically, these stories now serve to demonstrate static ideals and values, often

with characters meant to be venerated. Furthermore, the fairytale has been adulterated in the modern era as an extension of capitalistic values, where their value to society lies solely in their ability to generate dollars through sales of film, toys, games, etc. This has led me to the conclusion that the fairytales we are consuming today are essentially dead myths. They are no longer living, breathing entities whose goal is to help us make sense of the world. At best, they are frozen snapshots of our past, keeping us idealizing a reality that no longer exists, and perhaps never did. At worst they have become a form of class control, pushing a heteronormative patriarchal viewpoint.



Figure 2.2. Emily Albee. *Mirror Mirror*.
Clay, Glaze, Enamel Paint. 2021. Approximately 48x24x32 inches.

Embracing the themes of the dying fairytale, I created the work, *Mirror Mirror*, figure 2.2, in the fall of 2021. A young boy sits and stares into a hand mirror, oblivious to the unicorn that kneels before him. The mirror's edge and the unicorn's body are an iridescent purple, a color that invokes feelings of majesty and enchantment, while the boy and the mirror's face are glazed to resemble pewter, a cold hard surface that reflects light and shadow while omitting any details.

Mirrors have long been used in storytelling as a double entendre, representing both transformation and growth, as well as conceit and self-centeredness.¹⁶ In this composition, the boy stares deep into the mirror. Like Narcissus in search of his own reflection, he is unaware that he is a reflection of his own circumstances. The unicorn kneels perfectly still, waiting for the child to look up, break his gaze, and see the wondrous things that exist all around.

¹⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment, The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45-53.

3 THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

“The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.” Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life.”¹⁷

One of the aspirations of the Enlightenment Era was to liberate humans from their fear of the natural world, thus giving them mastery over it. To do this, society needed to eradicate mythology; to “overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”¹⁸ During this time there was a commitment to advancing a scientific and mathematical worldview to replace the stranglehold that organized religion and political absolutism currently held. While the age of reason ushered in many positive changes, such as democratically elected governments and industrial progress, it also began what Max Weber refers to as the “disenchantment of the world.”

As our cultural world continued to expand, society craved the development of empirical knowledge. For the sake of analysis, many thoughts and ideas were cast into dialectical relationships: A vs. B, public versus private, light versus dark, the natural world vs. the human world. This subsequent categorization of ideas and concepts, in the pursuit of worldly understanding, inevitably encroached on the space myth and folklore occupied in the social sphere. While some may have lamented the loss, many more rejoiced when men like Francis Bacon claimed that myth was dead.¹⁹ In many ways, Bacon was right. Historian Joseph Campbell believed that the principal function of mythology was to get in tune with the universe. In *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, Campbell calls out the broken nature of today's

¹⁷ Max Weber, *Science as Vocation* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁹ Horkheimer, 4-7.

mythology, reminding us that “your mythology...has to keep up with what you know of the universe, because what it has to do is put you in accord with the universe as known, not as it was known in 2000 B.C.”²⁰ With the refocusing of our social perspective through a scientific lens, antiquated mythologies no longer serve the same function in society as they once did. This loss has created a vacuum of which modern science and technology has yet to fill.

The irony here is that The Enlightenment and ancient myth were both trying to accomplish the same goal of liberating humans from fear. Historian Mircea Eliade believed that for primitive man, knowing the origin of an object, an animal, or a plant is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will.²¹ This outlook resulted in an Animistic belief system, one in which souls are attributed not just to humans, but also to animals, plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena. With this spiritual perspective, it is easier to empathize with other beings and to see animals, in particular, on equal footing to mankind. From a scientific approach, fear is liberated not by understanding our place within the natural world, but by seeing the world from a hierarchical vantage point.

The social drive for scientific knowledge paved the way for a pervasively secular worldview that resulted in the extirpation of animism. Through this isolation we lost sight of one of our oldest relationships—the animal-human connection. In *Awe for the Tiger, Love for the Lamb*, Rod Preece explores the dichotomy of animal-human relationships throughout history and illustrates the ways that our sensibilities towards animals have shifted over the millennia. Early religious and mythological texts express a clear desire to treat animals with sacred kindness and

²⁰ Joseph Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 22.

²¹ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 6.

respect,²² while later biblical interpretations appoint man “dominion” over the earth and its creatures. The Enlightenment's push towards rationalism and free markets, followed by the industrial revolution's desire for efficiency, has led us to a place where the monetary value of the animal as a commodity far outweighs any concern for the animal as a being. We care less about the soul of a cow, and more about its profit margins.

The degradation of the human-animal relationship helped birth a new way of industrialized food production that has begun destabilizing Earth's Ecosystems. Nature is a complex model of interwoven parts; you cannot pull on one string without affecting another. When you take an animal that has evolved over thousands of years to eat grass, like the cow, and force it to eat corn, you are upsetting the cow as well as the balance of the entire ecosystem. The grasses, the soil acidity, the insects, and water table are all interconnected and are deeply affected by the loss of the other.²³ These changes have had profound effects on our food quality and environment. They have broadly contributed to steep increases in greenhouse gas production through monoculture and feed-lot farming. These same changes have led to instability in food processing and have resulted in the mass inoculation of chicken with Salmonella and spinach with deadly E. Coli.²⁴ While this secular shift led to many breakthroughs in social philosophy and science, it has been largely disastrous for our natural world and animal counterparts.

In addition to the negative effects industrialized food production has had on the environment, there is also the question of the effects it has had on our soul. In early hunting societies there was a greater spiritual connection with the animal which was centered on a belief

²² Rod Preece, *Awe for the Tiger, Love for the Lamb: A Chronicle of sensibility to Animals*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 12-16.

²³ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, (New York: The Penguins Press, 2006), 70.

²⁴ Pollan, 65-100.

that life begets death begets life, resulting in a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all things.²⁵ As humanity continues to distance itself further and further from nature, we lose our ability to derive joy and simple pleasures from the world we were born into. I believe that this is what Weber meant when he accused the world of being disenchanting. Constantly we turn to external sources and material objects to validate our experiences, never finding a state of fulfillment because the things we are turning to are not capable of meeting our fundamental needs. One of which is a social need for a shared mythology. Mythos has been a part of humanity since our ability to communicate. It seems reasonable to assume that a system of belief above and beyond our secular world is vital to the spiritual health of the population. Now that we are left with nothing but the fractured remains of these ancient stories, folktales, and religion, our society is left wanting, mysticism replaced with consumerism and science.



Figure 3.1. Emily Albee. A Gift to the Future Queen of America.
Clay, glaze, gold leaf, plastic wrap. 2023. Approximately 48x48x54 inches.

²⁵ Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, 10.

In *A gift to the future Queen of America*, figure 3.1, four cherub-like male children surround a four-foot ear of corn. The corn is partially wrapped in plastic and the children are tethered to the ends, wrestling to subdue it. Gold leaf on the husk alludes to the symbolic value of this monumental and vital resource, while the bright, reflective surface of both the corn and the plastic wrap triggers a sensation of desire, an urge to reach out and touch. The four children represent the four cardinal directions, a number that is known to have great importance to many different cultures. In *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, Campbell compares the imagery of the Judeo-Christian sign of the cross with the native American Medicine wheel and Muslim iconography of the Mandala, showing the repeated mythological importance of this number.²⁶

The idea for this piece surfaced while thinking about the inevitable collapse of our own society. Be it in twenty or two hundred years, the odds of America's downfall seem inevitable. In the aftermath of such a collapse, I wondered what new mythologies and stories would spring from the ashes. What symbols would be capable of holding on to enough power, to remain relevant in the next era? I chose corn, plastic, the archetype of the child, and the significance of the number four.

²⁶ Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, 25-47.

4 THE VEGETABLE LAMB AND THE MILK SNAKE

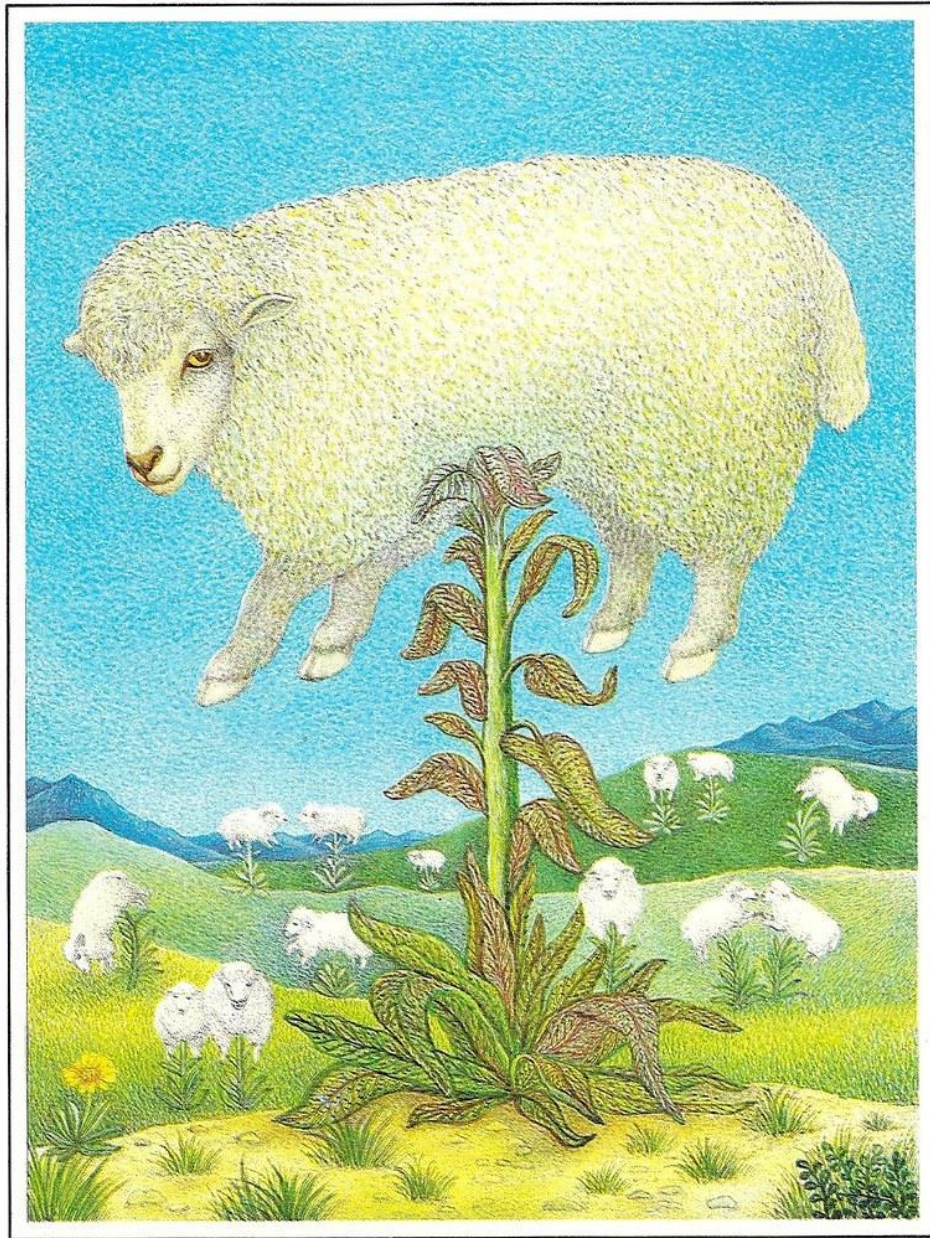


Figure 4.1. Monika Beisner, from *Fabulous Beasts*, 1981.

The Vegetable Lamb, or Borometz, is a mythological creature that hails from the land of Tartary, what is today understood as central Eurasia. The Vegetable Lamb grows from the earth like a plant but looks and tastes like a real lamb. It remains attached to its stalk, like an umbilical

cord, and during its life it grazes upon the grasses and herbs nearby; if there is nothing for the Vegetable Lamb to eat, it will wither away and die. According to legend, the Vegetable Lamb was useful not just for its flesh, which was considered very delicious, but also for its fleece, which was said to be as strong and durable as wool and as fine and smooth as silk. For farmers, the Vegetable Lamb would have been a superior crop because they required very little attention to grow and had no need of a shepherd.²⁷

I first learned of the Vegetable Lamb while perusing Alison Laurie's compendium of *Fabulous Beasts*.²⁸ Upon seeing the image, figure 4.1, I felt an uncontrollable surge of excitement, a sensation I have learned to hone into over the years. I have since learned that this was not solely a creature of make believe or fantasy, but one that many claimed to have encountered. Their existence was generally accepted up until the 17th century, when Sir Thomas Browne, an English gentleman and polymath, listed the creature in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica, or Vulgar Errors*.²⁹ Giving the Vegetable Lamb its surname of Boramez or Borametz, Browne categorized it as mere superstition, casting its lot in with other creatures such as the basilisk and the unicorn.³⁰ Rational minds continue to dispute that it ever existed, insisting that the viewer, while surely mistaken, must have encountered the cotton plant. Even if that was the case, it is interesting to think about what this creature said about the cultural importance of animal husbandry. For me, it is far more enjoyable to believe that they did see it, and that once upon a time, and maybe still today in some remote corner, lambs are sprouting out of the earth like plants.

²⁷ Alison Lurie, *Fabulous Beasts, Tales by Alison Lurie*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981), 11.

²⁸ Lurie, 11.

²⁹ Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or, Enquiries into Very Many Received Tenents, and Commonly Presumed Truths*. (London: Printed by T.H. For Edward Dod, 1646).

³⁰ Browne.

My piece *21st Century Borometz*, figure 4.2, was made in response to the Vegetable Lamb, and was the starting point for my thesis exhibition. When thinking about the umbilical nature of the plants' stalk, I was inspired to make my version a hybrid. Part lamb, part human, it is one plant growing from the same seed. I imagine that when the plant gets to full maturity, the child will be plucked out of the fleece ready to get to work, while the lamb will be sheared and served on a platter for dinner. A never-ending supply of workers and food.



Figure 4.2. Emily Albee. 21st Century Barometz.
Clay and Glaze. 28x14x58 inches. 2023.

The story of the milk snake, while not as fantastical in its appearance, is no less strange. In *Animal and Plant Lore*, a collection of oral traditions and tales by English speaking folk, I came across the recorded story of an American farmer. This farmer, a most reliable source as per the author's claim, insisted that the following story was true: Upon noticing that his cow's calf was getting thinner and thinner with no discernible cause, he set out to see for himself what was going on. Following them closely as they grazed in the field, he saw something that was hard to believe but undeniable to his eyes. While the calf was suckling from its mother, the snake slithered up and stole the udder for itself, placing its tail into the calf's mouth instead.³¹ Reading this tale, I felt the same sense of excitement as I did when I found the Vegetable Lamb, and I felt immediately that these stories came from the same plane of reality. A reality where strange things can happen, and do not need to be explained away by reason or fact.

Becoming obsessed with the image of these two stories, the seeds for my exhibition began to grow. I knew that I wanted to create a new story, and that these two folktales would be pivotal. At first, I thought I was making a creation myth, and so I focused my research into understanding the structure of cosmogonic myth making. But as the work started to take physical form, and as the words started to come together, I realized that my story had more of the feel of a fairytale. It was only then that I learned about the history of fairytales, discovering that even in my ignorance I was starting from the same place as the French women who created their parlor games. I had taken two historical folktales and merged them together, embellishing and elaborating on them to create a story of my own.

My fairytale is not set in the present or the past, but in a dystopian future that feels like it is marching towards us. My audience is not limited to the bourgeoisie or the ruling class but

³¹ Fanny D. Bergen, and Joseph Y. Bergen, *Animal and Plant Lore: Collected from the Oral tradition of English-Speaking Folk*, (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969).

includes everyone who wonders why and how. The exhibition works as a physical manifestation of the world within; the tile illustrations represent the story being told, while the three-dimensional sculptures act as relics. Seen together, they present a cautionary tale of what will happen if we continue to live isolated from nature. The following story is the original fairy tale that I wrote to accompany the exhibition:

The Land of Plenty

An original fairytale by Emily Albee

Once upon a time, neither here nor there, now or then, the Earth was heard exhaling a long and slow sigh of exhaustion, for she had nothing left to give. For too long nothing had been given to her, and the balance once held had long been broken. We had forgotten the cardinal rule, that in order to receive you must first give. In this forgetting, we saw Earth not as our partner, but as a resource to be pilfered and bottled and processed, until almost nothing remained.

And so it came to be, that we could no longer grow food as once we had. Earths energy was depleted by our blind consumption, and her soils had turned to acid and dust. For over one hundred years we had kept animals in cages, forgetting that they too were her children, and the true shepherds of the Earth were kept apart from her. In anger at these atrocities, the Sun baked the soil, and the Wind swept it all away.

Realizing our folly much too late, the animals were set free onto the emaciated landscape. By then the land was so ravaged by the anger of the Sun, that the animals chose instead to hide in their cages, only coming out at night under the cool embrace of the Moon. It was then, one night, when the Moon was full, that a snake was observed slithering its way up to a mother cow that was desperately trying to feed her only child the last of her nourishment.

Without detection, the serpent pulled the teat from the calf's mouth with such quickness that neither cow nor calf was any the wiser. All night long the snake and calf suckled, one getting fatter while the other slowly withered. This happened for three nights, and on the third night, just as the Sun was rising, the calf could stand no more. It fell to the dry earth as it drew its last breath.

Seeing that her child had died, the mother cow wept with gladness, for now she too could pass on and leave this cruel world behind. Walking back to her cage she laid down for the last time. The snake, however, did not leave the fallen calf but coiled itself around the withered body. There it stayed until the face of the Moon was swallowed once again by the darkness, only recognizable as the void where no stars could be found. On that night there was a shuffle from below, and the cool green tip of a budding plant began to push its way forth from the dark, earthly abyss. Only then did the snake go its own way, for there was more work to be done. By the time the Moon was full again, in the place where the calf had fallen, there stood a magnificent plant, unlike any that had ever been seen before. It dropped to the ground seeds that appeared like ebony to our eyes. In time, we gathered and planted the seeds, and with our tears we watered them.

And so it was seen, in the shady shelter of a miracle, that one by one new plants sprouted: leafy, green, and healthy. Plants that day by day grew bigger and stranger and fatter, still. So strange in fact, that many did not believe their eyes when they saw at first a nose, and then an ear, popping out like budding fruit. Their eyes were not deceived, and before long an entire cow was growing from the magnificent stalk! In other places more plants were sprouting that were not just cows, but chickens and piglets and lambs. We knew then that the snake had saved us all.

And so it came to be, in the land of plenty, that we could grow animals for food, and have no need for our previous ways.

The End.



Figure 4.3. Emily Albee. How it will end.
Clay, Glaze, Majolica, Luster, Grout. 2023. 80x80x3 inches.

5 MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCE

The work in the exhibition *Terra Multa* is almost exclusively clay. With a few small exceptions, every element in the show was sculpted with my own two hands and went through numerous firing processes. By using clay as my primary medium, I am engaging with a ritualistic practice as old as humanity; clay has always been used to tell stories.

The tile work in my exhibition employs traditional *majolica* techniques. This style refers to the act of coating ceramic bisqueware with a tin-based glaze, followed by painting the surface with ceramic oxides and stains prior to glaze firing. Tin glazing has a rich and storied history, dating back to 9th century Mesopotamia. It arose as a response to white T'ang dynasty porcelain, a clay body that was unavailable to most of the world at the time. Creating instead a white glazed surface, Islamic Potters found that while they could not produce the same white high fired clay body, they could imitate the highly decorative surfaces by applying a clean white pallet over their dark earthenware. Over the centuries this technique spread across North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, establishing itself throughout those countries, including Italy where it was popularized during the Renaissance as *Majolica*.³² This technique has been used for centuries, adored for both its allowance of simple mark and pattern making, as well as its elaborate narrative illustrations, as demonstrated by figures 5.1, and 5.2.

The four tile pieces in *Terra Multa* went through the same processes as historical majolica, each undergoing a glaze and a luster firing, before being mounted, grouted, and framed. All of the images are original illustrations which I transferred to the tiles using a traditional pouncing technique. After digitally scaling my drawings, I applied a six-by-six-inch

³² Matthias Ostermann, *The New Maiolica: Contemporary Approaches to colour and Technique*, (London: A& C Black, 1999), 12.



Figure 5.1. Pharmacy Jar (Albarello). The Cleveland Museum of Art. Tin-glazed earthenware. 8-7/8 inches. Italy, Siena, ca. 1510.



Figure 5.2. Bowl with The Virgin and the Unicorn and arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon. Tin-glazed earthenware, Italy, Petsamo, ca 148-88. Fletcher Fund, 1946.

grid across the surface and printed a stencil for each tile. Similar to a form of tracing, I then poked small holes through the lines on the paper image and rubbed charcoal powder through the pinpricks. This left behind a stenciled drawing, which I was then able to use as my guide. For color, I primarily used ceramic oxides of copper, chrome, cobalt, and titanium, as well as some mason stains for a greater range of blues.

To make the intricate ceramic frames, I created a plaster press mold. I then had to determine the shrink rate of both the tiles and the frames, as they were each made with different clay bodies. This required several rounds of testing to ensure that the tiles and the frames aligned proportionately. I used a nickel-based satin glaze on the surface, which after grouting gave the frames an antiquated look.

Each sculptural work was hand sculpted using various building methods, from pinch and coil, to slab and wheel. Over the years I have built a relationship with many ceramic processes, leading to this show becoming a visual cornucopia of all that I have learned.

Clay is an incredibly labor-intensive medium, an aspect of which I relish. I have always found solace in hard work, and I enjoy the repetition of action and rhythm that working with clay brings to my studio practice.

6 TERRA MULTA



Figure 6.1. Emily Albee. *How it will end*, (detail).
Tin glazed ceramic tile, luster, grout, plywood. 2023. 80x80x3 inches.

The name *Terra Multa* comes from the Latin for *Land of Plenty*. I chose this name as an idealized representation of America, and I used a Latin translation to integrate a scientific world view. It is also the title I gave to the original fairy tale I wrote to support the exhibition. Anything “growing” in the exhibition was given a Latin name, so that the viewer could be certain of its origin. The exhibition works as a physical representation of the world within the fairytale; the tile illustrations represent the story being told, while the three-dimensional sculptures act as relics and totems of the land within. Seen together, they create a feeling of enchantment, while the subtext presents a cautionary tale of what will happen if we continue to live isolated from nature.

The show opens with a view of a large tile illustration. *How it will end*, figures 4.3, and 6.1, portrays the story of the milk snake and the cow, as outlined in the previous section. It can

be seen from outside of the gallery, and sweetly lures the viewer in. Upon entering the gallery, however, the viewer is immediately confronted by *Serpens Rex*, figures 6.2, and 6.3. At just over four feet, the Serpent King sits upon a regal pillow of bright purple, its hands cupped in front of it in a gesture of giving and receiving. The face of a child stares blankly out, calling into question traditional power dynamics. This hybrid being introduces an air of bizarre wonder, embracing the reality bending aspects of folk and fairytales.



Figure 6.2. Emily Albee. *Serpens Rex*.
Clay, glaze, satin, poly fill, and enamel. 2023. 48x48x50 inches.



Figure 6.3. *Emily Albee. Serpens Rex, (detail).*
Clay, glaze, satin, poly fill, and enamel. 2023. 48x48x50 inches.

I am fascinated by the symbol of the snake and its various connotations. In American culture we most commonly associate the snake with evil, deception, and seduction, thanks to our strong ties to a Judeo-Christian mythos. In the Garden of Eden story, the serpent convinces Eve to taste the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, telling her that eating it will allow her to see as God does, to know good and evil. This action angers God, who forces both Adam and Eve from the Garden, casting them out to suffer a life of labor; dooming all mankind to eternal damnation.

This story has colored our relationship with the snake, but in many other cultures the snake symbolizes not wrongdoing and lies, but eternal life, fertility, and abundance.

“The serpent sheds its skin to be born again as the moon sheds its shadow to be born again. The serpent, therefore, like the moon, is a symbol of lunar consciousness. That is to say, life and consciousness incorporated in a temporal body—consciousness and life engaged in a field of time, of birth and death.”³³

The dualistic nature of the human experience regarding the symbol of the snake resonated strongly with me, causing me to question the role of the serpent within the Milk Snake folktale. By casting the snake as the savior, I am rewriting long held cultural associations.



Figure 6.4. Emily Albee. *Three crowns, for special occasions.* Clay, glaze, luster, astroturf. 2023. Approximately 16x16x 7.5 inches, each.

³³ Campbell, *Transformation of Myth Through time*, 20.

Opposite our sovereign sits *Three crowns, for special occasions*, figure 6.4. Each crown represents a different significant agricultural product; there is a Blackberry Crown, a Corn Crown, and a crown of Cows and Tobacco. The Blackberry crown takes us back to my own childhood, where my family's backyard was full of ripe, delicious blackberries. This annual delicacy was something our family looked forward to each year and represents an aspect of my own personal connection to nature and its wonders. It also represents the myth of abundance that is sold to us every time we walk into a grocery store. Shelves overflow with glistening plastic containers filled with all varieties of berries that have been shipped from all corners of the globe. This allows the consumer to create an unrealistic relationship with fruit that should only be available in the height of summer.



Figure 6.5. Emily Albee. Corn Crown.
Clay, glaze, luster, astroturf. 2023. 16x16x7.5 inches.

Corn has been a staple agricultural product in the Americas since the earliest peoples settled here thousands of years ago and continues to be foundational to our food system. Early native growers of corn and maize were subsistence farmers, growing food to bolster calories from hunted game. In the modern day, corn is a mega monocrop and major trade commodity used in thousands of processed and packaged food products, as well as being a staple for industrialized animal feed.³⁴ As a commodity, corn is symbolic of the transformation of the human-nature relationship over thousands of years. Conveniently, this shift also runs parallel to our discussion of the evolution of story from myth, through folk and fairy, to the modern-day unconscious tales told on big screens around the world.

The cow and tobacco crown is representative of change. Both domesticated cattle and the proliferation of tobacco as a trade commodity are products of European settlement in North America. As with the Enlightenment and the “disenchantment of the world,” tobacco specifically undergoes a foundational shift in how and why the plant is cultivated. With the arrival of Europeans, tobacco changes from being a venerated ritual plant to a valuable trade commodity. I share a personal connection with each of these chosen symbols. As a child, the three primary resources that my rural New England hometown produced was that of Cows, Corn and Tobacco. While their economic has diminished overtime, they remain a significant part of my own history.

In addition to their agricultural attributes, each crown’s physical structure is also based on a preexisting historical crown. The corn crown, for example, is based on a Napoleonic French headpiece and the Blackberry Crown on the Portuguese crown jewels, figures 6.6, and 6.7. I based these historical references on my own familial lineage, choosing to reclaim and reinterpret

³⁴ Pollen, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 15-65.

my colonial heritage. Perched on top of artificial grass, these crowns invoke questions of rule and order, life and death, abundance and decay.



Figure 6.6. Portuguese Crown Jewels.



Figure 6.7. Emily Albee, Blackberry Crown.
Clay, glaze, astroturf. 16x16x7 inches. 2023.

The works described thus far encompassed the front half of the gallery, creating a sense of magic and wonder. In the rear of the gallery, the second largest of the tile installations, *How it will begin again*, figure 6.8, is displayed centered on the back wall so as not to be visible at the same time as *How it will end*. As this piece represents a new phase of the story, another page of the book, its visual position in the gallery is fundamental to the evolution of the tale. The piece itself depicts the transformation of the calf's body into what will become the life-giving plant; a flowering bush growing from the animal's lifeless body. The leaves and structure of the plant are derived from *Nicotiana Tabacum*, or tobacco, whose flowers are known to release their scent only in the evening. This choice is representative of the progression of the story and symbolic of the natural cycles of nature. Life and death, day and night, abundance and scarcity, the choice of the tobacco flower is a symbolic representation of the natural beauty that often results from a perceived negative circumstance.

Nearby two smaller murals, *Proof of Consumption* and *Evidence of Growth*, figures 6.9, and 6.10, show offstage snapshots of the work of the serpent. In the former a serpent is devouring an egg, while in the latter a chicken is growing from a plant. Like their larger counterparts, these two smaller tile installations represent the turning of the page of the fairytale and symbolize the endless cycles of the positive and negative archetype. *Proof of Consumption* symbolizes degradation, destruction, and death as a coiled serpent consumes a large egg within a nest of other bird eggs. Contrarily, *Evidence of Growth* is a representation of rebirth and fertility equally necessary to complete these cycles. In this way, the tile installations work to move the observer through the fairytale like the pages of a book or the breath of an orator, while

simultaneously representing the infinite cycles of growth and destruction that tell the story of nature.



Figure 6.8. Emily Albee. How it will begin, again.
Clay, glaze, majolica, luster, grout, plywood. 2023. 80x60x3 inches.



Figure 6.9. Emily Albee. Proof of consumption.
Clay, glaze, majolica, luster, grout, plywood. 2023. 32x32x3 inches.



Figure 6.10. Emily Albee, Evidence of growth.
Clay, glaze, majolica, luster, grout, plywood. 2023. 32x32x3 inches.

In the back left corner of the gallery sits *21st Century Borametz*, figures 4.2, and 6.11. The human side looks out towards the crowns and *Proof of Consumption*, while the lamb gazes upon the roots of its origin story in *How it will begin again*. The piece is clearly representative of the human-nature-animal relationship. The human baby and lamb share a body growing from the same stalk as well as an environment and fundamental need for harmony. They come from the

same place and share the same consciousness. They are, however, poised with their focus in opposite directions. These two entities, while sharing a body and natural space, have very clearly different intentions and are positioned to represent this dichotomy. In the agricultural context of *Terra Multa*, this piece is also speaking to the fact that our society largely treats animals as a commodity, but often neglect to realize that our children, or continued civilization, are also contingent on the longevity of the natural world and our relationship to it.



Figure 6.11. Emily Albee. 21st Century Borametz.
Clay and glaze. 2023. 24x24x44 inches.

Directly across from *21st Century Borametz* stands *Familial Burden*, figure 6.12, and was inspired by a biblical verse that speaks of a future utopia. Isaiah 11 6-9 speaks of a time where all living creatures, human and animal, live in harmony together. It reads:

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fall in together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”³⁵



Figure 6.12. Emily Albee. *Familial Burden*.
Clay and glaze. 2023. 28x13x20 inches.

³⁵ Isaiah 11: 6-9

Familial Burden focuses on the consequences of the leopard lying down with the kid, a term for a young goat. In this piece, a leopard-goat hybrid carries on its back the weight of its parents' union. This piece also represents hope, however. The newfound harmony of the prey-predator relationship is meant to convey a feeling that, despite current trends, our connection to nature can be rekindled before both are destroyed.



Figure 6.13. Emily Albee. *Familial Burden*, (detail).
Clay and glaze. 2023. 28x13x20 inches.

And finally, on a long shelf in the center of the back half of the gallery, *Pullum Orchis et Agnus Arbor* sits on display, figure 6.14. Latin for Chicken Orchid and Lamb Tree, these sculptural plants stand in for the harsh reality of what it will mean to grow animals. The

sculptures are lovely and soft, colored delicately and standing proudly. They are fairytale representations of what growing animals would look like. They are a way of understanding, from the perspective of a dystopian future, a broken food system. Of course, when we talk of growing animals, we are drawing parallels to laboratory grown meat products and ultra-processed foods that only further drive a wedge between the human-nature relationship. These industrialized products, while touted as good for the natural world, only take resources out of it. Food grown in a factory cannot fertilize a field. It cannot pollenate a flower or clear forest underbrush. These pieces represent what we would like to believe growing animals will look like, when in reality, it will be a much colder and synthetic affair.



Figure 6.14. Emily Albee. *Pullum Orchis et Agnus Arbor.* Clay and glaze. 2023. Approximately 8x8x10 inches, each.

7 CONCLUSION

Terra Multa is a ceramic exhibition that explores the history and significance of story and mythos in our species' pursuit of our own existential understanding. I believe that the human connection to the natural world is fundamental to understanding our place in it. In recent years, the gap between society and nature has continued to widen, putting our continued existence within that natural world in jeopardy. Through my art, I hope to inspire the same sense of curiosity and wonder that I felt as a child, and ultimately develop that feeling into a palpable reverence that will help us reverse this trend.

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