

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of organic, rounded shapes. The color palette is dominated by various shades of red, from deep, dark burgundy and maroon to lighter, dusty rose and pink tones. Some areas show a warm, golden-brown or terracotta hue. The brushwork is visible, with thick, textured applications of paint that create a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view of cells or perhaps a cluster of smooth, polished stones.

Human Animal

Amber Alcock
2021

Introduction

In March 2020 the Coronavirus Pandemic finally hit South Africa. Not long after, the president gave the announcement that a nationwide lockdown would commence within days, and I caught a three-hour flight to my parent's home in Swaziland, expecting a three-week lockdown period. I stayed there for eight months.

During that daunting season of remoteness, where phone calls, zoom university, and constant news-watching was the only way I could keep myself from becoming estranged from the world and life itself, my stepdad found a nest on the ground after a storm. He had an odd feeling about it and broke the strange thing open. Within were six thumb-sized chicks; blue waxbills, as we eventually identified them. Raising these baby Waxbills would become an experience I could never quite express in words, but one that would frame my understanding of myself and the world around me, and one that I would eventually try to express in paint over my final year.







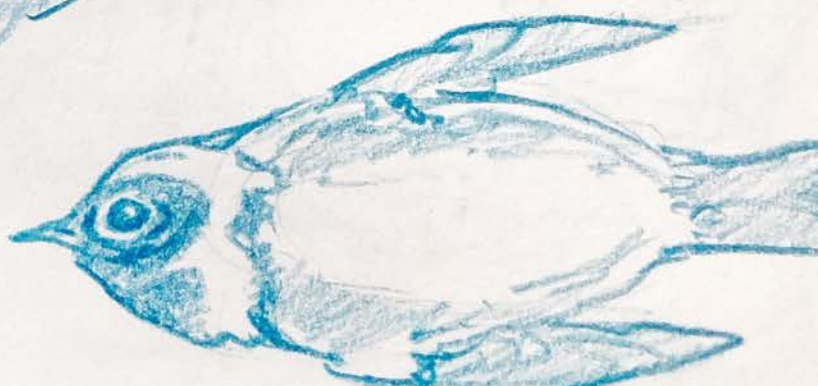
Artist Statement

“There, comrades, is the answer to all our problems. It is summed up
in a single word – man.”

- Animal farm, 1944

I have always held 'fairness' in such high regard, that the blatant lack of it in the relationship between humans and animals has cut me very deeply over time. There is something about the blatant, often cruel disregard that we hold for the natural world that has deeply disturbed me since my first encounters with it as a child; my friend's young brother trying to kick pigeons, a family member intentionally swerving on a backroad to run over a frog, the live chickens packed into crates on the back of a truck on the freeway, etc. I became keenly aware of what I would now call an anthropocentric sickness; humanity's tremendous superiority complex over comparative animal deficiency. What kinds of modern relational modes has humanity formed with nature and the macrocosmic environment? What is the axiom that humans occur not as a part of nature, but as a distinctive and divergent existence above it? Studies of the 'other' and 'othering' have become a central topic in the contemporary debate; I would argue that the animal and the natural world that it represents are the ultimate 'other', and one that we have barely even begun to reckon with. In my work this year, I have tried to bring the 'othered' animal into the human cognisant space, and perhaps bridge the abyss of comprehension in my own way. In my attempts to render the relationship between humans and animals in oil paint or sculpture, I've walked an uncanny line between different elements of both subjects. Fusing cuteness and horror, aesthetics and gore, human-made and body-grown, the faculty of fantasy has been a tool in picking up, picking apart, and putting back together perhaps previously indentured convictions. I hope to suggest specific ethical matters in each painting/sculpture while still inviting the viewer to look closer. Each one of my 'creatures' is similarly heavily affected by the human hand and gaze in some way, even if that touch is surreal in its impersonation of a very real ethical issue.

There are many opposing factors that play important roles in how I have chosen to make images; art history, the place of the animal within that history, the animal in relation to humanities greater modes of being, and my own personal sense of helplessness. Just as there are endless avenues of thought concerning the topic of nature in relation to humanity, there are endless things I would like to say concerning animals, and our deeply flawed attending of them.

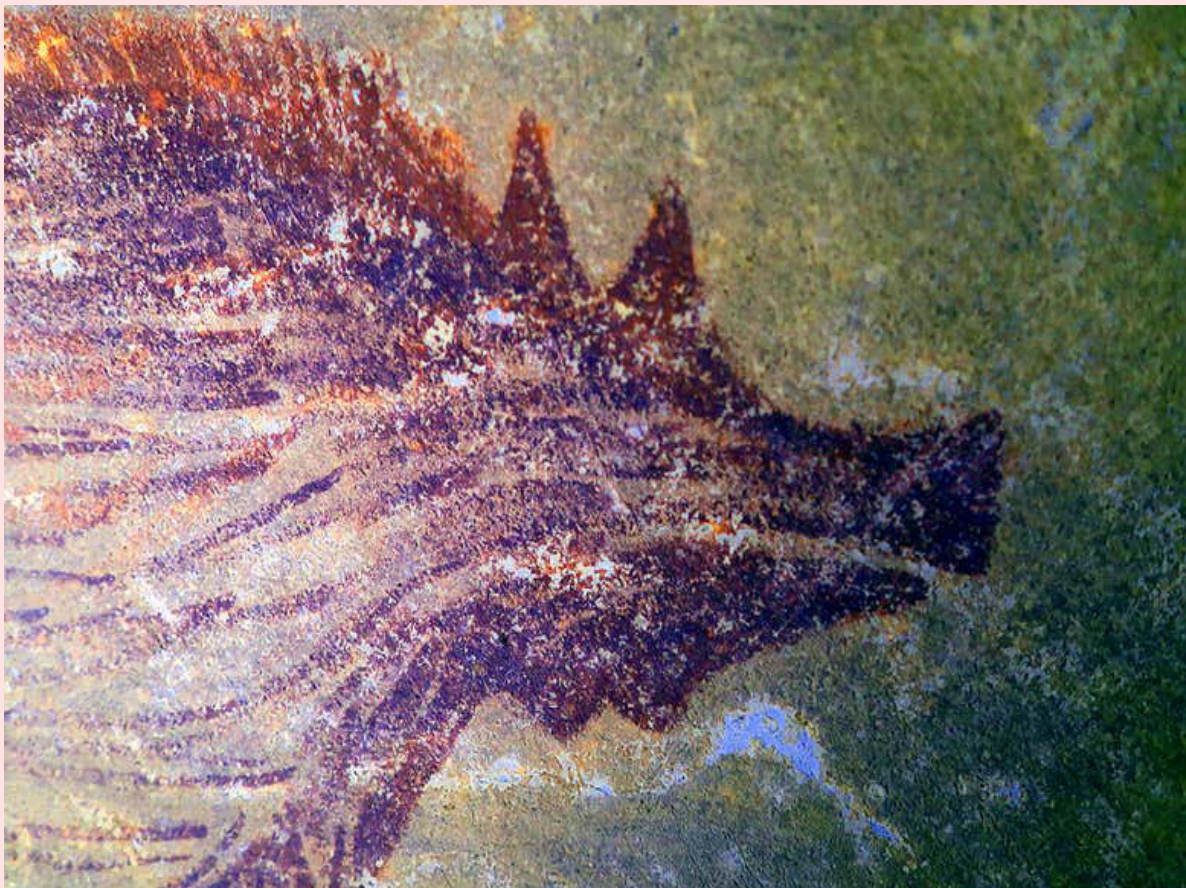


Research

Animals have held a prominent space in human consciousness and thus in art since the dawn of time. We were painting them on the walls of caves as far back as forty-five thousand years ago, as proven by the recent discovery of a drawing of three pigs in the Leong Tedongne limestone stone caves in Indonesia. The animal was the first subject matter of painting, animal blood most likely the first paint. Scientists, Psychologists, and historians alike have worked for millennia trying to understand the purpose of the animal figures painted onto that ancient rock (Cascone, S. 2021) Were they simply a means of passing survival knowledge from one generation to another, or where they sophisticated carriers of spiritual metaphor?

From the very oldest known oil painting, a buddhist mural created in Bamiyan, Afganistan, depicting buddhists (and, oddly enough, a strange two-headed snake looking creature), all the way through European Renaissance's classical art, a strange trend can be observed. Animals dominantly held a position as representational, romanticised accessories to the human condition. Vessels of human symbology. Medieval scholars formalised particular readings of the animal by publishing Bestiaries – books to act as guides for both moral associations and elements of natural history (Bal, M. and Bryson, N. 1991).

Animals and their applied symbolic implications were used throughout the history of art, spanning continents and thousands of years. There are endless Paradigms of the animal body working as a vessel of narrative, in all art, but particularly in painting. The rabbit was almost always a symbol of fertility, the dove of purity, the horse of bravery and regality. A famous example is Leonardo da Vinci's 'Lady with an Ermine, a portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, thought to be started and finished somewhere between 1489 and 1490. The Ermine, or 'stoat', has a coat that changes from brown in the summer to white in the winter. It was a common thought that should the Ermine's coat become dirtied during winter, ruining its natural camouflage, the animal would surely be killed by a predator. This made the Ermine into a powerful symbol of purity, and of course virginity, within classical oil painting. In the portrait, Cecilia Gallerani sits holding a pure white Ermine, the symbol of both her religious and sexual purity. (Lady with an Ermine by Leonardo Da Vinci. 2012.)





Leonard Da Vinci (1489/1449) Lady with an Ermine, Sourced from LeonardoDaVinci.Net

Animals in art history seem to have inhabited two distinctly opposed areas; that of god, and that of food. It is only in very modern times when humanity has become acutely aware of our self-destructive impending doom that comes under the name global warming, that out of pure necessity we have begun to shift our views about the natural world, making way for a new confronting genre of animals in the arts that is not practicality or romanticism but can perhaps be classed as a form of desperate and brutal self-reflection. Our approach has become far more aggressive.

Contemporary art has brought the reality of the animal into the gallery space, with particularly confronting works coming to life, such as Jannis Kounellis's 1969 '12 horses', where twelve living horses were brought and kept inside the gallery. The horse, as a subject of art, occupies the historical function of being an extension of man's physical and mental dominance. A prominent example is the neoclassical 1801 AD oil painting by Jacques-Louis David, 'Napoleon Crossing the Alps.' The painting depicts Napoleon Bonaparte riding a powerful, rearing horse, with intended ease. Even though Napoleon actually rode a mule over the treacherous pass, Jacques was ultimately commissioned to depict Napoleon's glorified victory at the battle of Marengo in 1800, and the horse was a creative liberty taken by the artist to better articulate Napoleons military prowess, as a form of propaganda. The horse served as a powerful motif, articulating Napoleon's supremacy through his effortless control of such a powerful steed (Pollit, B. 2003).

In stark contrast to, and with an awareness of the history of connotations associated with the horse, Kounellis played with our perceptions of the 'romanticized' and the real. '12 horses' is a simple act of displacement; 12 live horses were brought into the L'Attico Gallery in Rome, where they were tethered across the room, watered, and fed for days on end. Kounellis played on the strange fact that in history, the real living horse would have been the mundane thing, while the romanticized, grand oil painting would have been the astonishing thing. In modern times, they have switched places. In 1969, where most viewers from the city would not have seen or touched a live horse in their lives, the work was shocking. Viewers were confronted not by a depiction or metaphor, but by the reality of the living, breathing creature. Viewers were said to be surprised by how quiet the room was, how gentle the animals were in real life. I find this form of simple confrontational art fascinating, especially concerning the lush history that the representation of the horse carries, which Kounellis seems to draw from.



Jannis Kounellis, Untitled (12 Horses), 1969. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome. Photo: Claudio Abate



*Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon Crossing the Alps or Bonaparte at the St Bernard Pass
1800-1, oil on canvas, 261 x 221 cm (Chateau de Malmaison, Rueil-Malmaison)*

Theoretical

In my search to understand contemporary perspectives on the subject, I came across the author Giovanni Aloï who, in his paper 'Art and Animals', speaks closely to what kinds of modern relational modes humanity has formed with nature and the macrocosmic environment (Aloï, G. 2011). Aloï expresses a belief that we need not look any further than the current environmental decline to articulate the wrongness of our present relationship. He claims that through the challenges raised by post-colonial studies, problematic western binaries (the woman, the queer, the black, the savage, etc) have been unpacked, picked apart, and reconfigured through a continuous process of un-learning. Studies of the 'other' and 'othering' have become a central topic in contemporary debate. Aloï argues that the animal and the natural world that it represents are the ultimate 'other', and one that we have barely even begun to reckon with (Aloï, G. 2011).

Aloï poses that the challenge in reconfiguring a better rapport with the natural world lies in suspending our current convictions of what separates humanity from the animal; our axiom that humans occur not as a part of nature, but as a distinctive and divergent existence above it. The attitude of human superiority and authority over comparative animal inadequacy (Aloï, G. 2011). Timothy Morton, in his work 'Ecologocentrism: Unworking the Animal', attunes to the same mechanism of 'deconstruction' as a way of approaching the animal (Morton, 2008)

I believe that this concept was more simply articulated by John Berger in 1972 in his work 'Why Look at Animals', where he describes the 'other' as always existing across an abyss. The abyss is more or less crossed easily from human to human, with the tool of language. Even if the two people do not speak the same language, the simple existence of language allows them to reckon with each other in the same way they would do so with themselves. The human being is aware of 'gaze', and aware of themselves returning 'gaze'. In stark contrast, the animal cannot perceive of anything as more than its functional purpose.

"The animal scrutinizes man across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension,"

Berger, J. 1972

In essence, the silence of animals will forever distance us from any altruistic comprehension of them. Morton gives his own image of the same psychological phenomena, placing the animal, nature and the human being into one incomprehensibly colossal system of life.

Aloï claims that man had long tried to bridge that gap, not by understanding and accepting the animal as something 'other', but by applying metaphor. I take this to mean that humanity, over our long shared history with nature, has desperately separated itself from it, and applied our own narrative to them (Aloï, G. 2011). We have used one of our greatest tools, creative liberty, to try and invent that bridge across the abyss, filling the gap of comprehension with our own imaginings. This has led to stunningly beautiful results of human creation, the entire history of animal representation in art, but also ultimately to a severing of our true understanding of them.



In my work this year, I have tried to bring the 'othered' animal into the human cognisant space, and perhaps bridge that abyss in my own way. Rather than utilizing the mechanism of 'shock' that artists like Hirst and Kounellis use so successfully, their instruments being the real-life animal body and presence, I chose symbology and imagery as my apparatus. Symbols play such a powerful role in the conscious and unconscious human cognisance, fantasy enacting such a compelling approach in the construction of meaning, that I believe a painting of guts will have a similar effect as to be confronted by a pile of real intestines. I think that human imagination can be an even more powerful tool to manipulate in art than any abject reality. I am certainly inspired by the modes of juxtaposition that artists like Hirst use to fabricate implications, but also heavily influenced by a love of classical art history. In my attempts to render how I see the relationship between humans and animals in oil paint, I've discovered a slightly uncanny line between different elements of both subjects. Fusing cuteness and horror, aesthetics and gore, human-made and body-grown, I hope to suggest specific ethical matters in each painting, while still inviting the viewer to look closer. My favorite reaction I have seen thus far about my work is when people are not sure whether to laugh or feel uncomfortable.

To speak of a specific example in my work where I think humor and horror fused in a slightly distressing manner, my painting 'Me on a Monday Morning' features a Blobfish, floating precariously on a cupcake on the high seas. The story of the Blobfish is a strange one. In late 2003, ecologist Kerryn Parkinson was part of an Australian /New Zealand ocean exploration mission, looking at habitats near Norfolk and Lord Howe islands. During the last week of the trip, she snapped an image of an extremely odd-looking fish that the nets had dug up from the seafloor (Szydlowski, M. 2013). The creature was gelatinous, pink, and fleshy, with an uncanny human-resembling face and nose. In 2010 Parkinson's image went viral online when the strange creature featured in the popular Australian tv show 'The Gruen Transfer', becoming a meme and suitably named the 'Blobfish.' The fish's popularity skyrocketed in fall 2013 when the Blobfish was crowned the worlds 'ugliest animal' by the 'ugly animal preservation society'. The Blobfish became an icon of meme history and popular media; memes, posters, cushions, toys, etc. The most famous meme of the fish was Parkinsons' image with the text 'me on a Monday morning' headlining it. (Lids, F. 2015.)

The truth behind the 'Blobfish,' or the *Psychrolutes Microporosus*, is far more sinister. These fish are deep-sea inhabitants, and within the normal pressured environment of the deep sea, they look almost normal. When they are dragged up as the collateral of colossal, multiple-mile-long fishing nets, their gelatinous bodies are not capable of holding their form in the far less pressured environment of the upper ocean and open air. Thus their bodies collapse and take on the strangely swollen, veiny, human-like look (Lidz, F. 2015.)

In the same way that people likened the Blobfish to an old man, and took it at face value as something hilariously ugly, I thought its appearance was like that of melted icing on top of a cake. What I tried to portray was the truth of an animal that came to such a sad, cruel end, but also some element of how that animal was so wildly and fantastically misinterpreted by modern media.



Studio Practie

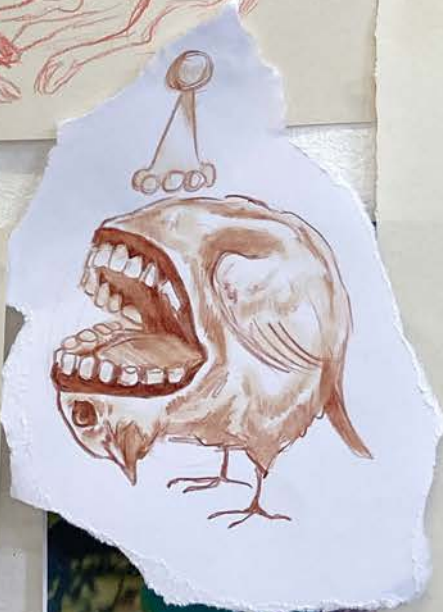
My work this year has been defined by experimentation with imagery, and the symbology that tails it. In trying to tease out meaning through the juxtaposition of 'animal' and 'human', and 'natural' and 'fabrication', research and drawing were my two most important tools.

Sketching allowed me to try different compositions before solidifying them in paint. I found early on that some compositions had power in my mind, but almost none once they were on paper. Some also had power as sketches and almost none as oil paintings (this being the reason why I painted over some of my mid-year pieces.) In the end I have found one or two of my paintings to be far more arresting than the others; these were mainly the pieces from later in the year, born out of deeper research and multiple different sketches.

In trying to capture something slippery about the human/animal relationship, and the gap between 'us' and 'them' that many scholars mentioned earlier have theorized, I hope to have found something that is disquieting. An endless amount of experimentation and learning through crits, sketch, and practised composition construction has led me to a far better understanding of what I want to say and how to say it more or less successfully.

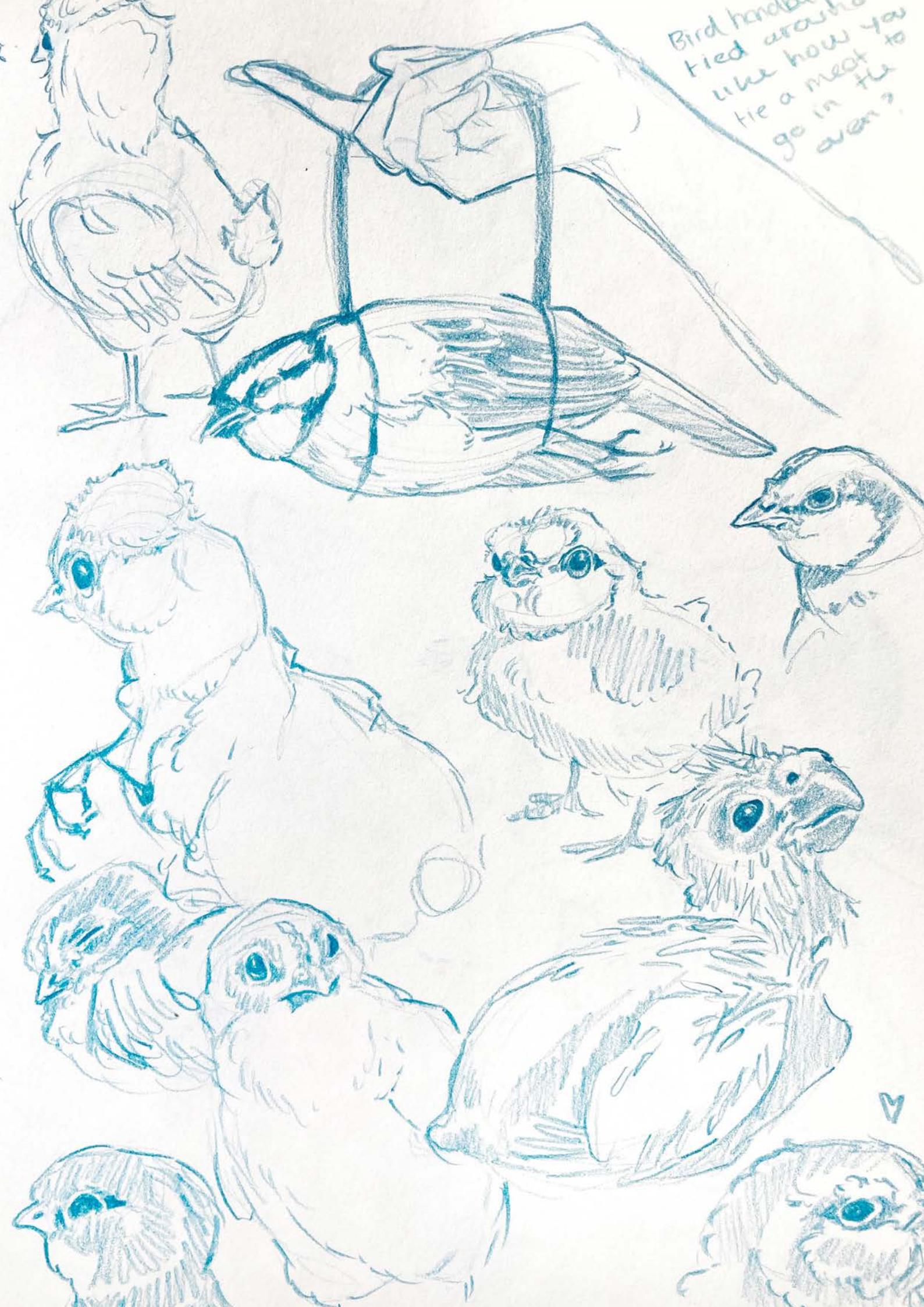
"The challenge posed in re-configuring our understanding of the animal lies in suspending one's knowledge of the certainties of nature itself, to acquire a critical awareness of the relational modes we have established with animals and ecosystems- and find the courage to envisage new ones."

-Aloi, G. 2011





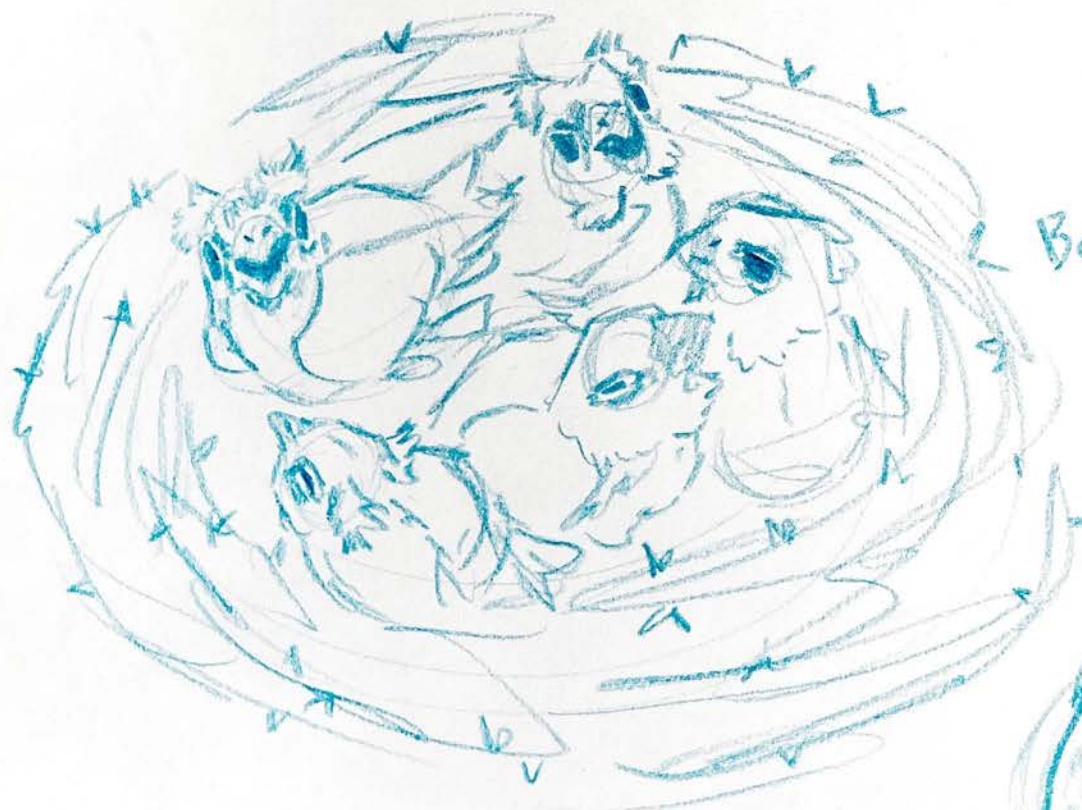
Bird handling
Tied around the
like how you
tie a meat to
go in the
oven?







amber alcock



Bobwhite
nest





Final Pieces

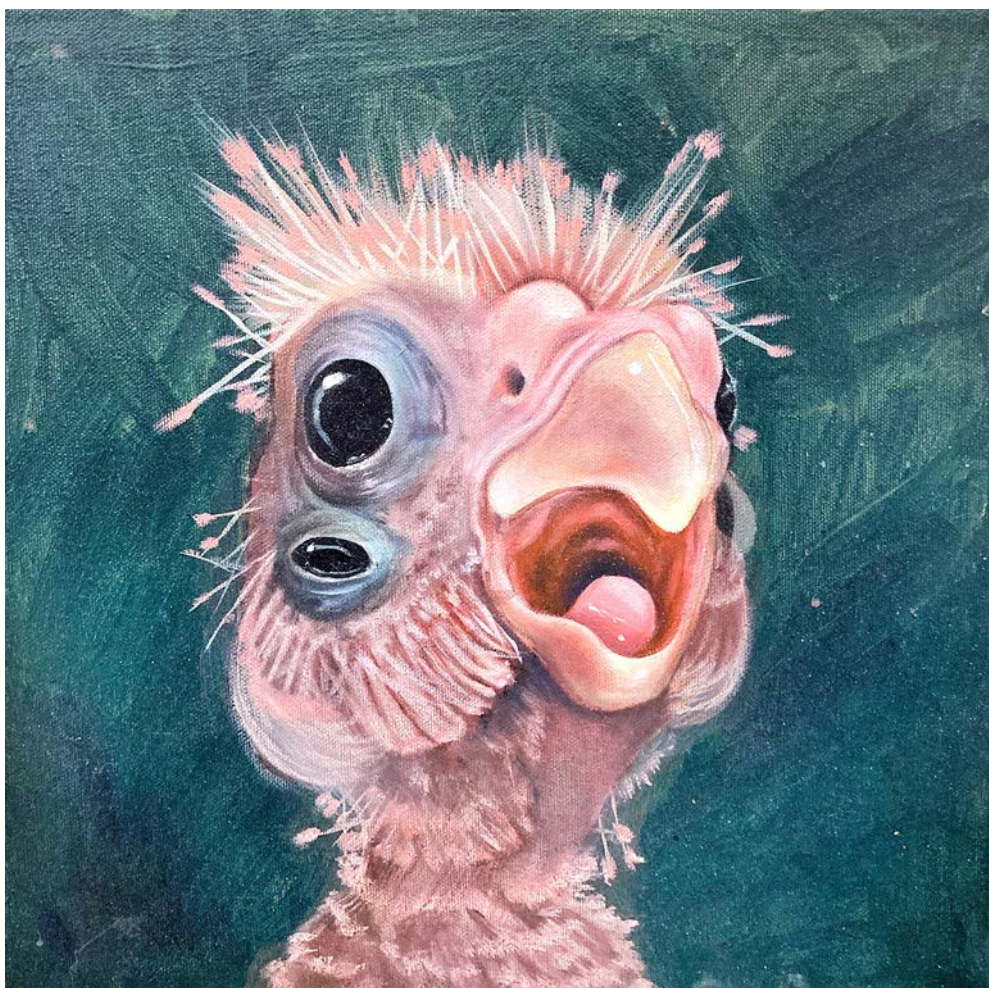
"The 'human' is not at the center of this almost unthinkable network. Nor is 'nature,' nor indeed the 'animal.' For at each node of the network, there is a radical gap. Our encounter with the network at any point is with an irreducible alterity."

Morton, T (2008)





'Antipathy; a Deep-Seated Feeling of Aversion'
150 x 122 cm
oil on canvas



'Baby'
30 x 30 cm
oil on canvas



'Ecology Ghost'
100 x 100 cm
oil on canvas



'Delicious Rufous'
150 x 122 cm
oil on canvas



'The Duchess'
21 x 29 cm
oil on canvas



'The Duke'
21x 29 cm
oil on canvas



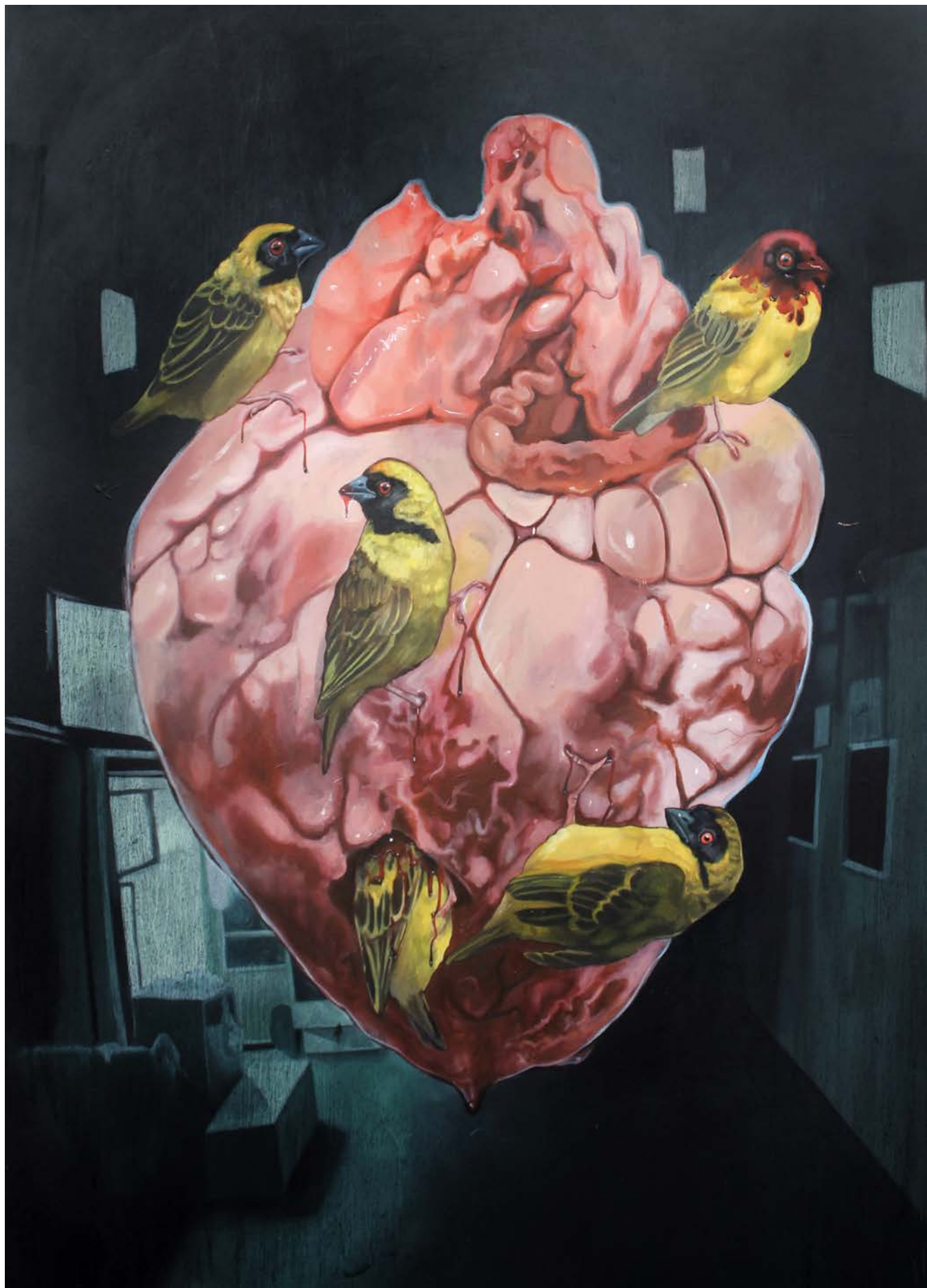
'Burning Eyes'
11 x 18 cm
oil on canvas



'Me on a Monday Morning'
50 x 60 cm
oil on canvas



'the fire of'
100 x 100 cm
oil on canvas



'The Home is where the Heart is'
150 x 122 cm
oil on canvas



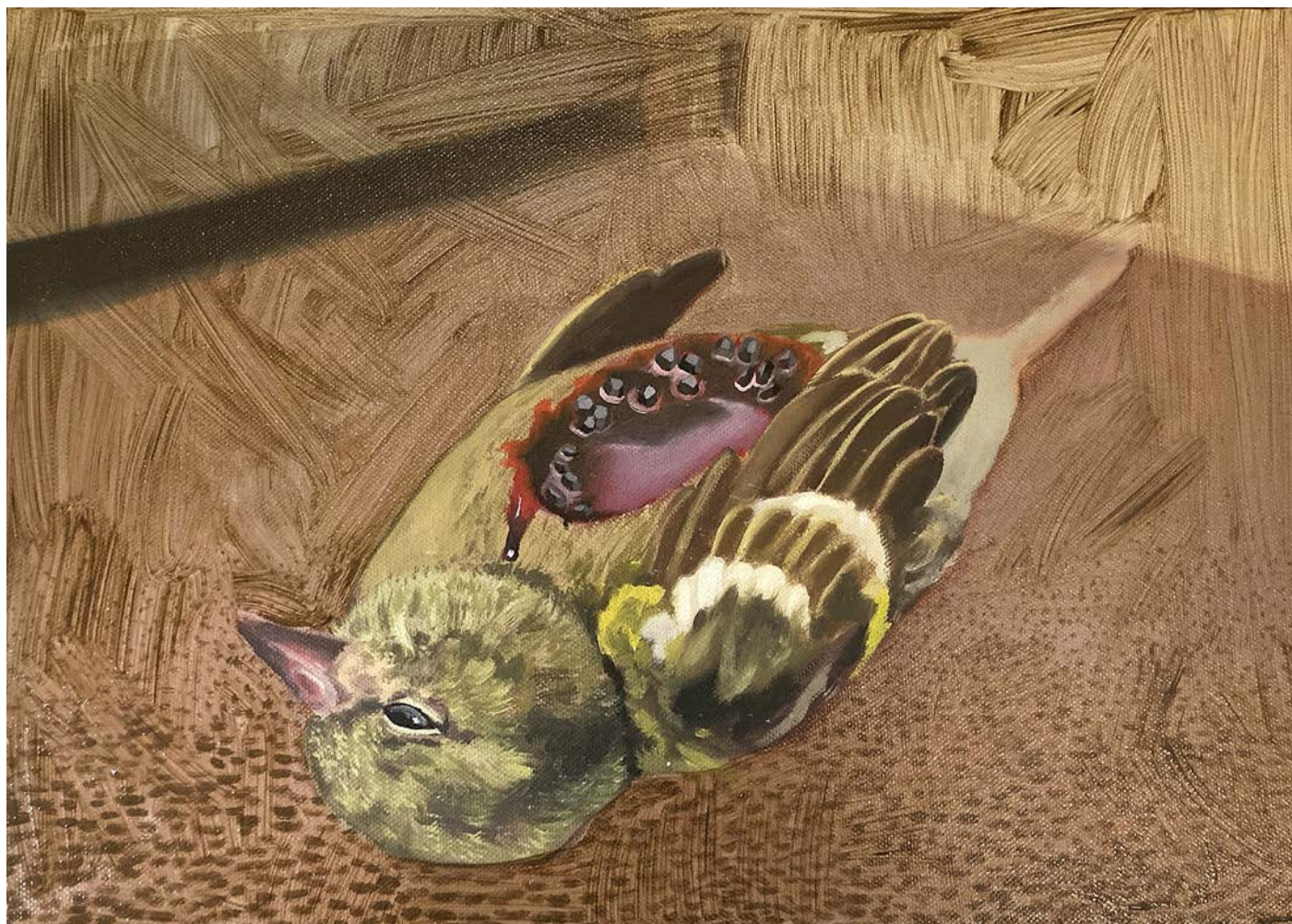
'When the Rooster Crows'
70 x 85
oil on canvas



'Homesick'
65 x 65 cm
oil on canvas



'Fluffy the Apocalypse Bringer
170 x 200 cm
oil on canvas



'Pooling'
40 x 28 cm
oil on canvas



'A Beautiful Dying'
22 x 19 cm
air dry clay, faux feathers, acrylic paint, amethyst
crystals, resin





'The Headless Horse... Man'
40 x 20 cm
Air dry clay, tinfoil, acrylic paint, faux feathers, plastic
jewels, resin





'Who Names a Decapitated Unicorn Beatrice?'
28 x 17 cm
Air dry clay, tinfoil, acrylic paint, faux feathers, plastic
jewels, resin





'A Sad Dying'

11 x 7 cm

*Air dry clay, tinfoil, faux feathers, hot glue, plastic
jewels, teddy bear glass eye, resin*

