

# K R I S T E N   G A N Z

Catalogue 2025



# ON THE MOURNING OF SMALL LIVES

Michealis School Of Fine Art

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"What we once enjoyed we can never lose. All that we have loved deeply becomes a part of us."

– Helen Keller.

# A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S :

To mom,

For seeing the potential in me that I sometimes lose sight of.

To my classmates and Lecturers,

Thank you for teaching me through your own practices. The highest form of teaching is doing. I'm honoured to have been surrounded by so much passion and talent.





## C O N C E P T

My artistic practice has gravitated towards the subtle and sometimes unnoticed intersection between life and death, beauty and pain and presence and disappearance. My practice is a tribute to the hidden and seemingly unremarkable passings that occur in everyday life yet leave a profound effect. The ways in which humans mourn or fail to mourn has been a key interest and I try to express what words fail to when we experience these small losses in a big way.

The natural world reduces life and death to something so mundane and extraordinary that it forces you to consider your own brief life in the larger framework. Animals are the primary exploration of this grief to me as losing a pet is often times our first experience of loss and forms our coping strategies that we carry with us later in life. These brief relationships leave something behind that lingers long after their bodies have disappeared. The quick death of the small and vulnerable is a contrast that I have always struggled to come to terms with. I explore this through the animal forms and materials used in this body of work. Fragile dead birds, wax newborn rabbits, light and dark, rust and bronze. I enjoy working in contrasting materials as impermanence and permanence is conceptually central to my study.



## F I R S T   W A R M T H /   L A S T   L I G H T

First warmth/ last light refers to the brief, almost simultaneous moment of being born and passing away. This is observed through newborn rabbits, who slip in and out of existence so lightly and so quietly. I wanted to capture this feeling of half existence through the use of candle wax which is neither opaque nor transparent. It's not quite solid nor liquid. Its ghostly, ephemeral quality reminds me of these small lives. Candle wax also has connotations to rituals and funerary services in churches.

The lightbox beneath which illuminates them serves as both an incubator as well as a reliquary.









## S N I F F

Sniff features two dog noses and two cat noses inspired by my own pets. It represents the act of preservation through memory, How we as humans try to hold onto what has left us in any way possible. The bronze noses represent snippets of memory. Small remnants of what we can remember as the brain forgets and the earth decays. Our minds are filled with these small memory remnants of all the things we have loved and lost and loved again. Bronze is eternal and represents the everlasting memory while the nose itself is a very personal and sensory element of a pet, often signaling health.

The plaster pillows beneath are visually soft but rendered hard and cold much like the bronze. They too, act as permanent protectors of memory.





## A Q U I E T F L O C K

This flock of birds is about fragility, loss, and the quiet ways life slips away. Each bird was hand-crafted individually, and the time spent shaping them became a way of honoring the lives they represent.

My first experience of death as a child was seeing a small, lifeless bird. That moment, both shocking and strangely beautiful has always stayed with me. These clay birds carry that memory and the way something so seemingly meaningless can leave a lasting impression.

The stillness of the flock reflects the unceremonious deaths that often go unnoticed, the fleetingness of life, and the delicate balance between presence and absence. By creating each bird with care, I try to give a sense of reverence to these quiet losses, inviting viewers to pause and reflect on the fragility and brevity of life.





## C A I R N

This work features a pile of black ceramic objects formed by the imprints of my own hands. They are each unique and represent a moment in the past that has been solidified.

Each held with intention and thought, a way of making care and time itself tangible. The black clay symbolizes mourning and the funerary while the clay itself has been used in many cultural practices, mainly West Africa and Mexico for resurrection and regeneration. The word title cairn is a Gaelic word meaning “pile of stones,” used throughout history to commemorate the deceased, signify sacred sites, or guide travelers through uncertain terrain. They are enduring symbols of remembrance, tangible markers of time, care, and intention. And so, like a cairn, this mound represents what is lost and what is found.

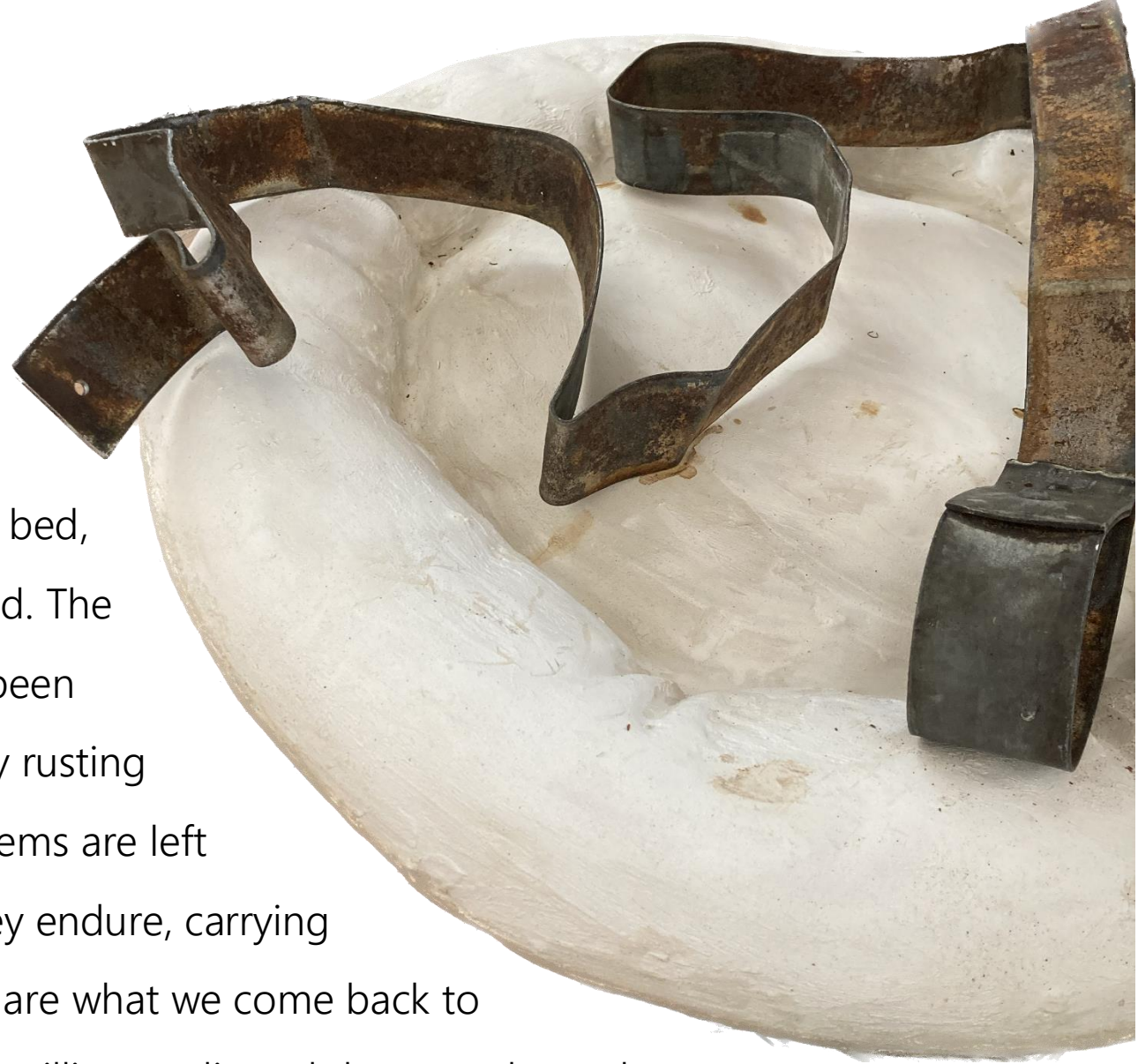






## R E M N A N T S

This work reflects on the persistence of everyday objects after the lives that once inhabited them have passed. The plaster dog bed, once soft and warm is hard and cold. The dog leash made of metal has also been rendered hard and unusable, slowly rusting with time. Once used daily, these items are left behind, their purpose gone, yet they endure, carrying memory and absence. These items are what we come back to after losing a pet or loved one. Not willing to discard them, we keep them out of sentimentality. An effort to hold onto what we cannot get back.



## T H E O R E T I C   A N D   A R T I S T I C   I N S P I R A T I O N

Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* offers additional perspective by emphasizing relationality and care in human–animal relationships.

“Whom and what do we touch when we touch this dog? How does this touch make us more worldly, in alliance with all the beings who work and play for an alter-globalization that can endure more than one season?”

This question resonates deeply with my work, especially the series of bronze dog noses I have been casting. Each nose is a uniquely identifying trace of an individual animal's life. By preserving this tiny surface detail in bronze, I am acknowledging the intimacy of touch and of the countless times that a dog's nose has nudged, pressed or sniffed as part of its relationship with the world and with humans.

For me, Haraway's question frames the work as not only about memory but also about preserving history through form. Another striking idea Haraway puts forward is that humans and animals do not simply live alongside each other but actively co-shape each other's worlds. She writes:

“Companion species signify that co-habitation is not optional; we are in the midst of entangled living and dying together.”

This notion resonates deeply in my work. In my sculptures, I am not just depicting animals but also confronting how their existence and demise influence my understanding of mortality. Haraway's concept of "intertwined living and dying together" effectively captures this dynamic. My focus is not on animals as separate entities but on the mutual vulnerability that exists between different species.

Haraway's main concern is with relationships and how humans and animals are bound together in many ways. She pushes against the idea that humans and animals are separate categories, instead showing how we co-shape one another's worlds through constant interaction. This doesn't just mean pets, although she does write a lot about dogs it also refers to the broader condition of cohabitation and of living and dying together in entangled ways. I find this framing useful because it allows me to think of the animals in my work not as symbols standing in for human ideas but as beings with whom

I share the vulnerability of life.

Ultimately, what I take from *When Species Meet* is that art involving animals can never be neutral. It is always part of a larger web of relations between humans and animals and between life and death. For



me, my work is not about creating metaphors but about participating in that web even if only in a small way. I want my sculptures to serve as reminders that the boundary between species is not really ultimate and that the lives and deaths of animals are mixed in our own histories, memories and grief.

### Historical Influences

Across history, human civilizations have used methods to honour and revere animals that embody intricate ideas about life and death, loyalty and the distinctions among different species. Although very literal examples of animal preservation, I've drawn interest from mummification in ancient Egypt and taxidermy during the Victorian era of the nineteenth century. Despite being far apart in time and use, both express a common human longing to preserve life and resist death and to turn the transient into the eternal.

Rachel Poliquin (2012) notes in *The Breathless Zoo* that taxidermy is "an art of longing". It's a method of trying to cling to something that is no longer reachable. This desire is not limited to the Victorian mind but connects with prior practices of preservation like the sacred mummification of creatures in Egypt. In ancient Egypt some species were perceived as living representations of gods and their preservation was a gesture of devotion. The visual culture surrounding these practices foreshadow

the aesthetics of later reliquaries and religious displays such as gilded coffins, linen wrappings and underground catacombs. Like Poliquin's notion of longing they too embody a yearning not only for the divine but also for the comfort of believing that death can be contained and made meaningful through form.

The nineteenth century's interest in stuffed animals, filled museums, curiosity cabinets and middle-class drawing rooms, acted as both scientific and ornamental. However, Victorian taxidermy was never solely about science. It was profoundly moving, filled with emotion and sorrow. Pets were often also preserved after death. According to Poliquin these pieces demonstrate the "aesthetic of stillness" fundamental to taxidermy. The creature is deceased but it defies decomposition. It exists in a paused condition that both comforts and disturbs the observer. (Poliquin, 2012, p. 18). The "breathless zoo," as she describes it, is a stage of contradictions.

Regardless of their differences, both Egyptian mummification and Victorian taxidermy illustrate a persistent human urge to beautify death. In Egypt, this beauty was revered and sacred and in the Victorian period, it turned more educational and emotional. Both convert the animal body into a container of significance and care. Devoid of life yet infused with symbolic energy. My personal work

ties in with these ideas. The flock of dead ceramic birds are paused in time: lifelike yet inanimate. The baby rabbits molded in candle wax and arranged on a light structure resembling a reliquary. The bronze pet noses nestled on plaster pillows like fragments of the deceased being carefully preserved.

It's an ongoing state of mourning as well as appreciation of animal lives.



A R T I S T : G A B R I E L O R O Z C O



Image by Gabriel Orozco. Titled: "My Hands Are My Heart" (1991). Two silver dye bleach prints; each 9 1/8 x 12 1/2.

Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco is perhaps best known for his understated self-portrait series, *My Hands Are My Heart* (1991). The works are meant to be seen together as a diptych, their dialogue unfolding across the two images. In the series, Orozco presents a simple yet powerful gesture. He stands before the viewer, bare, holding a small piece of clay close to his chest. His hands cup the earth gently but firmly, as though the rhythm of his heartbeat might shape the clay into a reflection of itself. The final stage comes when the clay is placed in the kiln, transformed from soft, malleable matter into a solid, enduring object. The piece becomes a hardened relic. *My Hands Are My Heart* speaks to love expressed through humble gestures. Orozco's hands are both tools and channels to translate thought and feeling into form between intention and material. The series captures the vulnerability inherent in offering oneself: to love is to be open and exposed. Just as clay must endure the heat of the kiln, the heart may face trials. Soft and yielding, it is shaped and molded by love; hardened, it risks breaking. Through these images, Orozco reminds us that love is both tender and transformative, a process that leaves traces long after the gesture itself.

There is a strong resonance between Orozco's series and my Cairn project. Like Orozco, I am interested in the ways clay can record intimate human gestures and moments of care, presence, and touch and how these moments can be solidified into permanent forms.

The difference lies in scope and context. Whereas Orozco's work is intensely personal and performative, a single act of offering and opening. Cairn multiplies this into a collective: each piece is a separate moment, preserved individually yet forming part of a larger whole. The work shifts from a focus on one act of love to a meditation on many fleeting, delicate moments, each held briefly, then rendered eternal in clay. While Orozco captures the pulse of a single heart, Cairn is a landscape of moments, a tangible archive.

## I N C O N C L U S I O N ;

My artistic practice is an ongoing exploration on loss, fragility and the emotional and aesthetic significance of animal life. I explore the delicate balance between impermanence and preservation, grief and reverence, beauty and decay.

Drawing from the insights of *The Postmodern Animal* and Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*, and by the archival approach of Mark Dion as well as historical reflections, my work aims to position animal death as a site for appreciation and mourning. By inviting viewers to consider the unnoticed and unceremonious deaths of creatures, I aim to evoke empathy and reverence for fragile lives by emphasizing the significance of presence and absence. My work represents the human impulse to memorialize and preserve mortality not only in ourselves but in the animals with whom we share our lives and environments. It is a practice that seeks to help me to cultivate an awareness of the delicate transient beauty that surrounds us. An important aspect of my work is the tactile and experiential nature of the materials I work with, which seeks to embody the themes I explore. The work operates as both memorial and intimate encounter, creating a space where viewers can reflect on the quiet losses that often go unremarked in everyday life.



*"What does tamed mean? It's something that's been too often neglected. It means to create ties...  
You become responsible forever for what you have tamed."*

*Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince*

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Courtesy of Gabriel Orozco and Marian Goodman Gallery.*

*moma.org*

