

Animals Out of the Clouds

I have had an intense interest in animals throughout my life. The forms of their bodies, their behavior, their colorations, the “personalities” they seem to emit... I spent my childhood yearning to be around animals. I even desired to be one at times. My favorite childhood movies and paperback stories were always about animals, and in elementary school, with each visit to the library, I sought out informational books about sea mammals, African wildlife, wolves—all of my favorites—over and over again. I learned all about their behaviors and their appearances while perfecting my ability to draw them accurately.

I also imagined what their lives must be like. To me, they lived in the wilderness and did what wild animals did, but they also had human sentiments. They had conversations with each other, they fell in love, they enjoyed friendships, and became excited over their favorite foods. To me, their stories were similar to what I saw in the Walt Disney movies that I enjoyed so much. During the creation of the 1994 animated film, the Lion King, animators spent countless hours studying and sketching actual African animals in order to represent them as accurately as possible while still enjoying the fabrication of an adventurous storyline and highly unique, playful characters.

A similar approach to art-making has seeped into my own artistic tendencies. For my Integrated Project, I used my creative perception of animals coupled with my educated and practiced eye for accuracy to create a series of eight acrylic paintings featuring combinations of animals captured in scenes that evoke imaginative, fictional narratives. In addition, the project contained a very interesting twist: Every image that I painted was entirely derived from pictures that took shape in my imagination when looking at the clouds in the sky. By searching the skies for intriguing clouds and photographing the picture-like patterns, I was able to use nature as it existed in real life as the main source for the fantasy images of animals in nature that I knew I wanted to paint.

I realized what my IP would be during a car ride late in the summer before the fall 2007 semester began. As the passenger, I was looking out the window at the clouds and seeing what complex scenes took shape in them. The particular scene that I saw that day was of a big, brown bison stampeding into a herd of sheep who were running away,

terrified. A warthog was among the sheep, standing and looking repulsed at the barbaric bison, one hoof lifted with a disgusted attitude. The animals were in a green, hilly pasture, with puffy blue clouds above and among the sheep. *What a great painting that would make*, I thought, and I realized how creating a series of animal paintings derived in this way from the clouds combined my passions for so many things—for animals, nature, painting, photography, and for both imagination and realism.

I proposed my idea when my IP class began and dove into the project immediately. I quickly collected some photographs of interesting cloud formations so that I could start making creative, colorful paintings. I had not painted using acrylics for years, but I realized at once--with substantial relief--that my abilities with the paint still flowed quite naturally, and the images took shape with ease. My speed improved as the semester wore on, and my technique, from complexity of image to the canvas I painted upon, gained strength as I learned from each picture.

I coupled my research with the painting process, seeking works that contained similar subject matter and painting techniques to the pieces I was producing. The artists who offer me the most inspiration in general are painters from earlier centuries who are capable of portraying incredibly realistic images, whether they are painting still life, landscape, or even a scene from a fictional or historical story.

I have always strove to capture light and form accurately, so that the individual subjects of my drawings and paintings looked as close to the originals found in real life as I could manage. Though I strive to paint realistically, I find that my final images often contain a natural romantic flair that I do not purposely include. I admit that I cannot place each animal and plant I have painted on the same level of accuracy as one would find in a captivating Dutch still life, for example, but I have used my tendency toward romanticism to enhance the moods I find to be of great importance to this particular project.

I also spent much time looking at both past and present Native American depictions of animals during my research. Many of these works combine real life and fantasy, and I appreciate the frequent respectful and expressive portrayals of American creatures.

My IP paintings are intended to depict realistic-looking animals in unrealistic situations with clouds as the major influence on how each scene would take shape. I found a few contemporary artists to be useful for how they similarly provided seamless ways to integrate realism and fantasy into their surreal work. Salvador Dali, Sandy Skoglund, and Lisa Dillin, in particular, have produced helpful examples of surrealism that include animals. Another contemporary artist, Jan Brett, the author and illustrator of numerous children's books offered incredible inspiration throughout my childhood. She drew realistic-looking people and creatures immersed in imaginative narratives. Her books are small masterpieces and perfect examples of how I love to work.

By the beginning of the winter 2008 semester, I had finished the majority of my artist research and had completed nearly half of the paintings I aimed to finish by the end of the year, each done one after the other.

The first painting featured a gray wolf on a rocky piece of land with a yellow sea star lying at his forefeet. The wolf shape was immediately apparent in the cloudy dusk sky that I photographed in preparation for painting, but what the wolf had at its feet was less obvious. I settled on a sea star rather than my first choice of a packaged, grocery store chicken, because the object seemed to be fleshy, like a living thing, and easily torn in two. I wanted the object to add an element of surrealism, and a bright sea star would clearly be in the wrong environment, which is attention-grabbing. In addition, with each painting I decided more and more firmly that I did not want to include obvious evidence of humans in my images. The paintings would be strictly about nature. I painted the two animals close to misty, gray clouds that were also found in the guiding cloud photograph, indicating that the animals were high on a mountaintop. Even the blades of grass were derived from the wispy, angled cloud at the lower corner of the photograph's contents. The wolf is bent down, curiously examining the sea star and unknowingly tearing a living body apart. The biggest reaction to this painting has been the question, "Do starfish bleed?" followed by the conclusion that at least the poor thing's arm would regenerate.

The next piece was very bright in color and in light due to the white sunshine that overwhelmed the cloud image that inspired it. The painting also contained several more complex characters, because there were so many clear forms that took shape in the many expressive, active clouds that I captured one windy and sunny afternoon in a parking lot

as I leaned out the door of my car. A domestic black-and-white goat bounds, frightened, out of the ocean as two giant tropical geckos pursue it with smirks on their faces. A ruby-throated hummingbird hurriedly ushers the goat onto land, putting on a serious expression to get himself and his companion away from any potential trouble. The geckos and the hummingbird are abnormally large in comparison to the goat to add a touch of the surreal to the piece. In the original cloud photograph, on first impulse I saw a burst of flames emitting from the goat's mouth. Since that seemed very cliché, I determined that the shape could also be a spray of water. In the end I determined that that component of the cloud would add little but a silly distraction in an otherwise interesting composition, and I merely indicated the shape with a dribble of water down the goat's chin to show just how deeply he had been submerged a moment ago.

In the third painting, I tried a different organization of space in order to show increased depth in the landscape. I placed the main figures in a lower corner and balanced the remainder of that side of the canvas by framing it with an African acacia tree whose presence was spurred by the leafy, green tree in my cloud photo. The whole scene is set in the African wilderness. True to life, the lioness blends into her environment well, but she grasps a large, unnaturally pastel-colored moth feistily in her jaws as an unexpected element.

I also emphasized a point of view beyond the center-based compositions that I used for the first two paintings when I created a piece about an arctic harp seal over a Costa Rican rainforest. The clouds that inspired that piece were so numerous that I had the option of picking and choosing the shapes that would best contribute to an interesting composition.

The main figures I saw in the clouds were a baby harp seal being carried through the sky by a little brown barn owl. The cloud shape near the "seal cloud" tail was important for creating the long diagonal that I wanted to arc across the canvas, and it finally became a giraffe head after I dismissed the several human-manufactured items that the shape initially suggested. Numerous human-made elements presented themselves in this particular group of clouds, but it was at this point that I decided once and for all that my work would contain only animals and wilderness. I wanted the paintings to purely reflect the animal worlds that I had for a long time imagined.

With the onset of the winter semester, I was building my own canvases, which allowed me to determine the exact dimensions that would be most appropriate for housing each scene. This also permitted me to sand the canvas surface down to an ultra smooth texture that impeccably received the small details that I painted. I used this to my advantage by including many tiny characters in my next painting.

The painting features an exceptionally colossal alligator from the Florida Everglades that lifts a bald eagle into the air with its snout. Small fox sparrows chase a tiny, white mountain goat that is bounding over the surface of the water. I used soft, colorful waves and a blurred horizon line to create a dreamy atmosphere for these characters.

At this point, during the planning stages of my paintings, I made an effort to include a wider range of emotions and relationships in my characters than I felt I had in previous paintings. I wanted my last pieces to have more positive twists to them, and I chose clouds accordingly. The alligator's huge grin is evidence of this new intention.

I settled next on clouds that created an image of a timber wolf grappling with a rather diminutive giant squid. I explored how I could tweak the emotions in the image in order to form a more pleasing tone for my painting. As a solution, I painted a grinning wolf playfully teasing an exasperated squid in a scene deep underwater, using bubbles and washes of blue to emphasize their unusual location. The red squid enriched my collection of work so far by adding a sizable splash of a color that deviated from the typical palette of cool green and blue.

Continuing with a playful theme, the following painting depicted two red foxes and pair of African elephants engaged in a game of leapfrog on the savannah. More than ever, my own smooth canvases permitted meticulous use of color and detail as is clear in the elephant's wrinkled skin and the trio of Nubian Ibex prancing across the golden landscape.

My integrated project came to an end with a painting that expressed my lighthearted mood and the immense satisfaction that I felt about my collection of work. In it, a giant komodo dragon and a much smaller musk ox scale the side of a mountain. Tiny pine trees at the base of the dark, hulking rock clue the viewer in to the animals'

sizes. The musk ox has a comical expression on his face. He looks to be either in mid-sentence or else shocked upon spotting the dragon.

In the gallery display, all of the paintings were arranged on a spacious white wall in a loose configuration that brought to mind the way that clouds float slowly across the sky. Beside the arrangement, a small shelf held three white booklets containing each cloud photograph that inspired the animal paintings. The pages presented only photographs, allowing viewers themselves to match clouds with corresponding paintings and allowing them to use their imaginations to see if they could find in the clouds what I had discovered.

In conclusion, I feel fortunate for having had the opportunity to create the integrated project on which I focused so much energy for the past months. I was able to bring together many subjects for which I have a deep and meaningful passion, and the path of my project was decided entirely on my own. I was able to revisit my love of learning about animals while concentrating on accurate depictions of their forms. I spent splendid times outside observing and photographing nature. I had the chance to paint in my favorite acrylics, spending as much time on my creations as I had in high school where I discovered my adoration of creating art with paint.

I grew as an artist during this experience. Because of my project I have learned to establish a reasonable working pace over a long period of time. I learned to stretch the ideal canvas, to mix perfect hues from unexpected colors, and I have gained experience in how to handle the advice and opinions of others. Most importantly, I believe I have acquired a new point of view. The simple act of finding something more in a shape as simple as a cloud is part of my everyday perspective of the world, and I feel truly fulfilled that I have succeeded in helping to open the eyes of others to the little things in their lives that they may have been missing before.

