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When Animals Dream

BFA Thesis 2011

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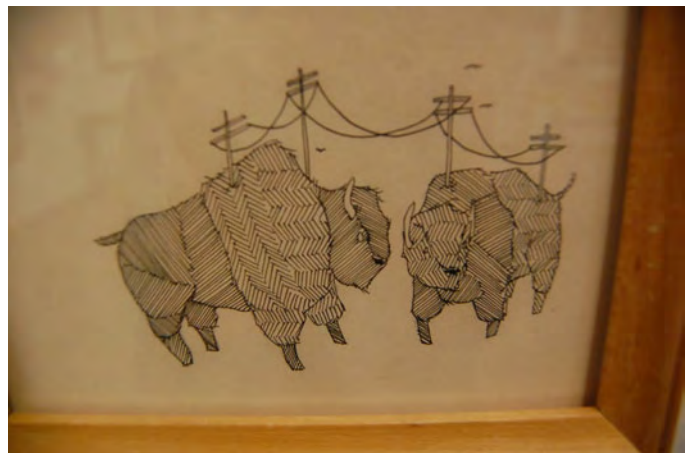
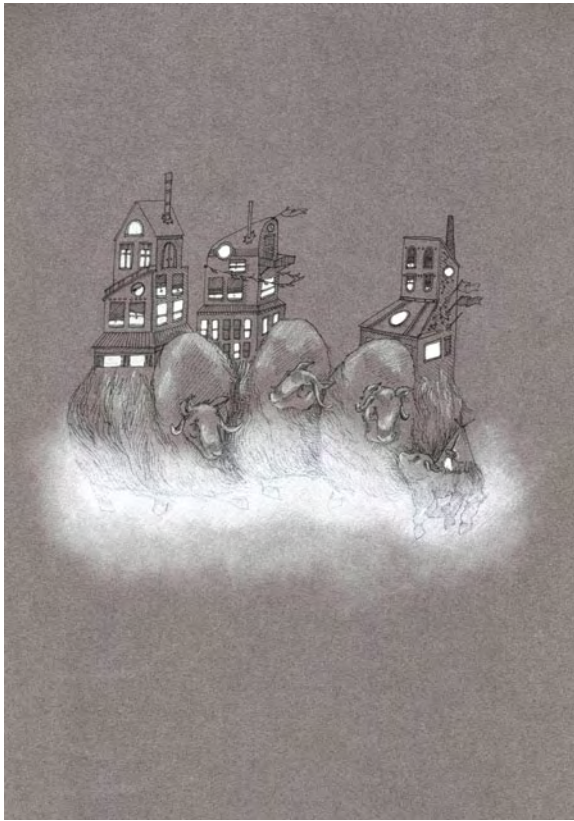
## *One Snowy Evening*

It was snowing, not too hard, but there was a committed blanket covering the downward slope of the tall grasses. Snow always seems as if it has something to say through its piercing silence. It pulls your eyes up and says Look. There is a world around you. I inhaled deeply as I often do when the snow comes. It carries a pure sent of the early morning and mid-December in its clean slate. Surveying the flattened landscape, my eyes darted to the right, recognized a dark figure, and assumed it was another late night worker. We are so easily satisfied and hardly ever bother inquiring further. It's instant coffee, train passes, and faucets that have done it. I don't know what drew me, perhaps it was the snow guiding my eyes, but I turned.

It was a feeling I knew well; one of being called on in pre-algebra when I'd been wandering through the possibilities of what it'd be like to join the circus in my head. A sharp burning punch in my chest, like falling in love. Pounding beats flew from me as I stood there, paralyzed. I just stared and tried not to move a muscle, gawking at the trio. They stared right back like they had something to say. The one at point stepped towards me slowly. I should leave. I should walk away. This is dangerous. I don't want to leave. This is so cool. This is unbelievable. Like a dream. Am I dreaming? One more round of steps without hesitation and she was at my side, much taller than I'd ever imagined she'd be. She nudged my arm twice and I grabbed blindly at what she might be trying to

say. I wanted to understand. I'd always wanted to understand. The two in the back had been slowly walking towards me as well, but took a wide turn around me and gracefully ventured out of sight.

She followed as they passed, looking back for a second but never again.



I'd forgotten in the moment, but this wasn't the first time I'd had a close personal encounter with a deer. In the fall when I used to live North, I'd been walking home late at night from school, yet again and there they were just yards away locking eyes with me. I joked afterwards that I was a deer whisperer. I'd never been so excited about anything in my life, until it happened again. I don't know why I get so excited about animals, maybe it's simply because they seem so different from us. Next to food and thunderstorms, animals are among my most consistent fascinations. I've been drawing them

for as long as I can remember in various forms, the most famous characters existing in trousers and sweaters. My current exploration of animals began in understanding how they move which allowed me to fully embrace the whimsical possibilities to be invented.

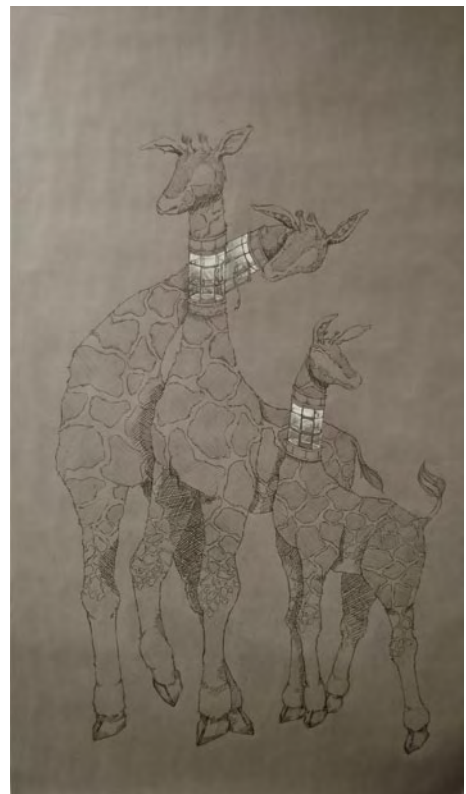
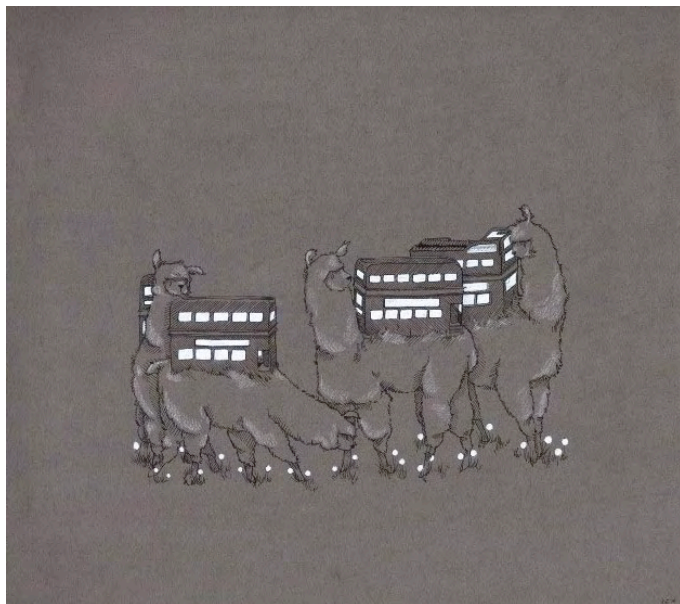
### *Walk an Alpaca*

The endless towering slopes of farmland dotted with turkey vultures passing overhead had faded away since my childhood Fourth of July's. We hadn't taken this trip for 11 years. Late summer nights became early ones as we all were drained by our daily commutes before the fireflies had even considered coming out for an evening dance. Somehow we'd all ended up here again. It was as if nothing had changed except for a few extra attitudes tagging along with the high schoolers. After a weekend of small town and too many mosquito bites, we took to the hills for three hours of farmland back to the crowded subway cars.

The block letters on drug store neon poster board reeked of an Engelman endeavor. We stopped at a farmers market, my culinary crazed sisters' and mother's addiction. My brother and I sat spitting watermelon seeds at the sparrows when my dad mentioned doubling back. I was up from my cross-legged seat on the gravel and in the air at the photo opportunity. As my siblings dragged their feet, we followed the draw of neon signs to WALK AN ALPACA.

We walked up the short driveway to a cabin smaller than a double wide, my sister Kirby dying of embarrassment. An old larger couple sat in their lawn chairs next to a picnic table with a panting bright white West Highland Terrier sprawled underneath. To the left, the mighty heard stood grazing on less than a quarter acre of sun burnt grass surrounded by an arch of pine. They were much smaller than I imagined, but that didn't make them any less mystical. It took everything in me not to caress every inch of their thick coats, despite the fact it was mid-July. All reason and manner left my body. I stared leaning into the wooden fence, as if it would absorb my body and let me into their world, like I was passing through dimensions.

And we walked side by side, their alert noses feeling through my wavy hair. I pet their thick wool, their bodies seemed so fragile, like sand dollars. Their feet didn't seem to hit the ground when they walked, like a strong wind could whisk them away. We walked together, up and down the short gravel path. Curious head tilts and the occasional nose contact were our only exchanges.



I work mostly on an intimate scale in meticulous illustration and mixed media and collaborating in spectacle theater on a larger than life scale. I love the intoxicating pull of spectacle theater and how it consumes its surroundings and allows for its audience to have a full sensory experience of art. Illustration is a quieter moment, providing the intricate detail that allows for complete control in production and an intimate moment upon viewing. In bringing these two mediums together, I hope to achieve a middle ground where both the sensory stimulation of spectacle and the intimate observation of illustration can be achieved, sort of ‘spectacle illustration’.

### ***The Feeders***

My dad is a bird guy. The first time my mom rode in his car when they were dating, he had a cassette with birdcalls playing. He wanted to be a park ranger when he was a kid. Now, dentist by day “ranger” by night, my dad patrols our property for as long as the sunlight will stick around. Naturally, we have 7 feeders scattered around the yard for the local feathered residents. The high concentration of feeders inhabits the front garden as to cater to the viewing area or the kitchen windows. Countless breakfasts and lunches have been spent challenging my dad to identify whoever decided to stop by (usually English sparrows or as dad refers to them “the mice of the sky”). I really miss sitting watching the birds bump each other off the feeders when I’m at school. They’re tiny

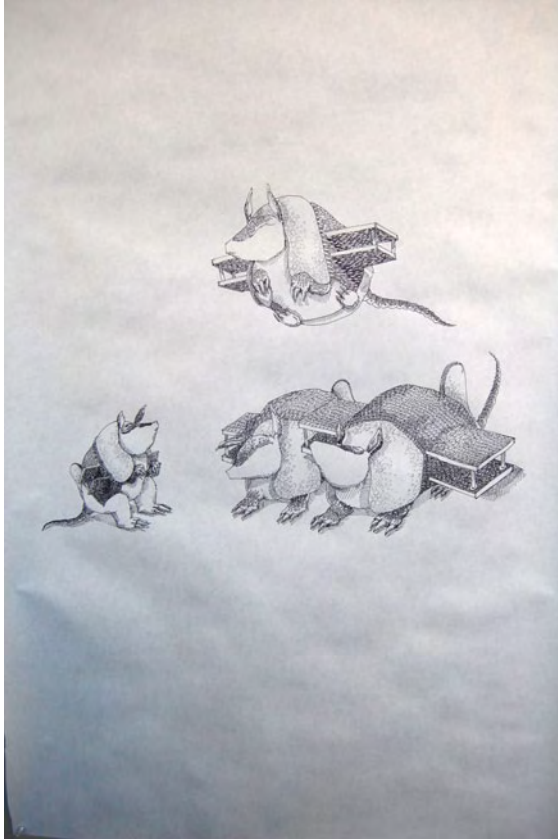
bodies hold so much incredible detail. Birds move on more planes than any other animal, yet they can be smaller than the palm of your hand.

We have a complicated relationship. My sister had a parakeet for three days. It died and was quickly replaced by a carbon copy, Peaches. Peaches and I got along really well at first. He'd sit on my shoulder and nuzzle, picking at my hair while I watched TV. His cage was soon conveniently placed next to the computer, so he became a regular accessory when surfing the web. I must have offended him in some way, because one day without hesitation he sunk his beak into my earlobe as hard as he could and we never spoke again. Ever since, I've been a bit skeptical about birds and their intentions. My suspicions didn't waver when I decided to photograph the feeders during high traffic hours.

I walked outside and was greeted by the usual screaming locusts and rustling trees, but this time instead of the occasional chickadee what sounded like hundreds of birds were chatting. The arguing grew louder as I walked further away from my house, but the flock was nowhere to be seen. As my Hitchcock moment continued, I began to feel incredibly claustrophobic and vulnerable in my open back yard. Experience leaves us with fear of the unknown. When I reached the backyard feeder, I was immediately comforted by the shining blue black of a grackle. Grackles tend to look mean. It's in the eyes. Too big for the feeder, he hops around in the cool mud waiting for the remnants of sparrow's snackings to fall. 15 feet and 20 minutes was enough for them to forget I was there. The sparrows were territorial and plump. They'd argue and stick their beaks out at each other, snapping



the air to claim it. Aggressive and honest like professional dancers, they communicated constantly, while the grackle hopped and hoped.



My illustrations are reflections of my psyche. I aspire to be as expressive as they are. At times they are my cheerleaders, a pick me up when I need a distraction from the humdrum of everyday. They are my friends and they are me all at the same time. I admire Maurice Sendak for his relationship with his characters that always seem to come from those around him. Sendak created Where the Wild Things Are based on his European relatives whom he could not understand when he was a small boy. Sendak represents people who were cruel to him in this work as a way of

confronting them. There is always an innocent curiosity, as these characters are not afraid to say what's on their mind.

### *Flying Dogs*

Terriers and water do not mix. At least, that is true in the case of my family's two polar opposite carrier terriers. The west highland terrier we had several years ago had the same aversion to any amount of water. The one summer day we decided to take her to the dog beach, we carried her out to the sandbar and she ran/swam back in and proceeded to roll all over the sand to dry off immediately. In the spring when they decide to cover themselves in mud, a trip to the industrial sink is something they've come to know when to avoid. While all this can be funny and entertaining, there is something really magical about their interaction with the inflatable pool.

When the Midwest decides to treat us to a particularly unpleasant summer day of heat and humidity, my sisters and I resort to the inflatable pool. The freezing cold water comes up to about mid calf on us, a shoulder height wading for the terriers. It could fit a family of four comfortably, but has the structural security of a sea cucumber. It is most often occupied by me, reading *Real Simple* and *Bon Appetit* as the girls lounge in the scarce patches of shade around the yard. They are polar opposites; Tigger with her constant concern for others and Winnie with her constant concern for herself. Whenever anyone picks up Winnie, Tigger is immediately concerned, perhaps a younger

sister mentality. On the days of screaming locust heat in the summer, I scoop them up from their patches of cool grass, take their collars off, and hold them tightly over the cold waters of the inflatable pool. When their feet are about 5 inches from the surface and they can feel the temperature change, they start to swim in mid air. Their feet paddle back and forth just barely gracing the surface of the water, as if they've been touched by fairy dust. And they swim and swim until their feet are safely back on the ground again, then turning around to investigate what they'd just encountered, they dip their noses in and take a taste of the cold filled inflatable pool.



I bring this blatant expression of interest and question into the species I bring to life. Sendak accompanied his vivid illustrations with complex text, creating dozens of books acting as platforms for his characters to explain themselves. My hybrids speak for themselves through their gestures and movements. Body language speaks volumes in expressing a willingness to cooperate, whether or not they are truly engaged, or if they are simply upset or thrilled by a situation. Dutch artist Jeroen Blok

showcases the power of gesture in his work as well, allowing simple forms and shapes to speak volumes for themselves. He believes in the childlike innocence of animals and nature as well as the ever-present madness of the world.

Blok relates our human condition to our loss of innocence and willingness to blatantly explore our childlike tendencies to use our imagination. I have come to realize how my work has grown through its development by embracing these tendencies. When I first began drawing for my thesis, I didn't know much about where it was going, but I did know I wanted to draw these beautiful majestic musk oxen I had seen in national geographic. The houses on their backs just grew organically as the drawing was taking shape. Like the oxen, the giraffes seemed to be investigating each other as if they were coming to life for the first time as they were drawn on the page. They first few clusters of hybrids followed this theme of discovery I'd subconsciously created. It wasn't until I was writing my artist statement that I really took a look at the drawings I'd created and realized the evolution that had taken place. The geese and dachshund, the last hybrids I'd created, were posed in a much more natural fashion. They were existing, not questioning or investigating. This body language was not a decision I had made consciously. As I became more comfortable with the idea of just drawing, the animals became more comfortable with their new attributes. I was willing their expressions in a way that reflected my own growing comfort with them as my project.

## *The Trouble with Screen Windows*

I live in an old brown and yellow crooked house off campus here in Ann Arbor. It really is crooked, if you look at it from the street it seems to be sitting on it self perched so that it won't fall. I occupy the two front facing second floor windows. The left of the two has surrendered its screen window, which is currently hanging by the final upper left corner staple flapping in the wind. Michigan squirrels are massive. Well fed by the ever-growing student population, there is even a club devoted to the well being of the campus squirrels. Michigan squirrels are not shy creatures. They do not fear humans like most animals who occupy areas taken over by urban sprawl, and they are most definitely not skittish or hesitant in their inquiries. I could not even begin to know what drew them to my second story windows, but one warm day early in the fall, a small hole appeared in the larger of the two screen windows. I didn't think much of it, this being an old crooked house, until I caught him in the act. There, on my window a hugely obese squirrel hung from my screen window desperately trying to pull off the screen. I caught the whole thing, providing photographic evidence for my landlord.

My second floor squirrel encounters were going to get much more personal before the year was over. I started to leave my screenless window open to let the fresh air in. I'd leave my trunk right under my window so I could sit on the ground and work, feeling the breeze in my face to wake me up when I got tired of working. One laundry day, I left the window open leaving the room to change

loads. Upon my return I found I had a guest. There sitting upright on my trunk hands folded at his chest was the creature who had torn down my screen. His eye contact was impeccable. My heart burned in shock and I started towards him, hoping my quick larger human movements would coax him outside, but he stayed put. With one more stomp he backed up to the windowsill and stopped again. It was as if he had something to say and I wasn't letting him stay long enough to say it. I was embarrassed at how afraid I was of him. That is until the day he invited himself in once again. I can't be sure this was the same squirrel, but once again this winter upon entering my room, he scurried out from underneath a chair in the opposite corner of the room to stand front and center, as if I was walking in on him. He looked at me for a second greeting me then hopped for the window, which he clumsily missed. He turned to look at me again, this time a bit embarrassed, then made his exit. My heart burned and beat at a racing pace and wished he'd stayed a bit longer.



With themes are much darker than my own, Marcel Dzama's eagerness to jump from the page and into the world lights a fire under me in imagining the possibilities of illustration. Dzama's work includes delicate drawings made for himself and his friends that bare a nostalgic feeling of memories from childhood. Most recently, Dzama expanded into the dimensional world, working on music videos and creating costumes of his characters. He has embraced the concept of 'spectacle illustration' and the possibilities that can grow from the page.

Creating an established narrative or character base on the page serves as backstory, expanding into other mediums. Jeroen Blok emphasizes the importance of exploring the creative possibilities in diverse mediums. This investigation can only enhance a body of work as a whole. Moving off the page, I've been exploring the possibilities of visual narratives in murals, windows, and other means of transforming a space. Bringing characters off the page allowing for more tangible connections can add another direction for minds to travel.

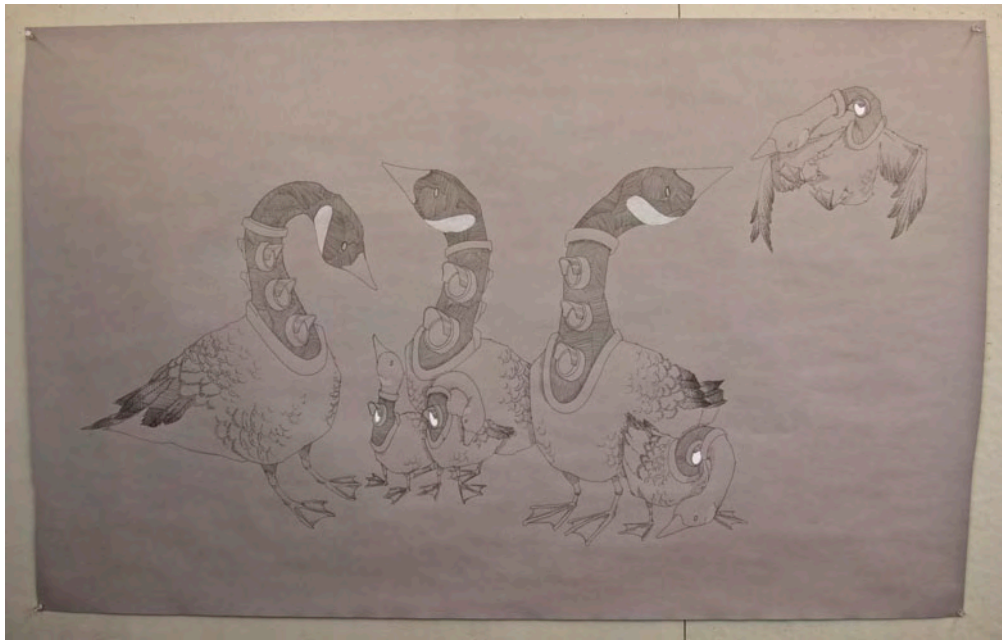
**409**

For Christmas, my mom always tries to set up something that we can all do together as a family gift. This usually consists of a play or a concert the following summer or something of that type. This year, she organized a penguin encounter for our whole family at the Shedd Aquarium downtown. I am a fan of all animals, and penguins are pretty high on the list. Never have I ever seen an animal in front of bars or glass that wasn't native to the area or domesticated. We arrived at the

incredibly crowded aquarium and were ushered into a plush waiting room where we would meet our trainers. I had never seen the museum this crowded before as families and field trips flooded through the doors. A young woman and two elderly men all whose names are escaping me introduced themselves and led us down the spiral staircase to the trainer floor. This is where they prepare the meals for the animals, an industrial kitchen we viewed from afar, and moved in all the animals including the beluga whales. The thought of a whale moving through this hallway seemed incredibly improbable. They'd have to shout "suck it in a little more!" as they forced the great white beasts through the double doors.

We all shuffled into a smaller room where we changed into rubber boots, washed the boots, and then sat in a small area with benches facing each other about the size of a private room on a train car. I rubbed my boots back and forth on the Astroturf floor in anticipation. We chatted with the elderly trainers about transporting fish from the Caribbean eagerly awaiting the arrival of our honored guest. After what seemed like an eternity, she was here. A juvenile penguin named 409 was wheeled in and placed carefully in front of us. We all sat and waited for instruction as the trainer fed her and talked about her many attributes. She sneezed all over my dad several times and picked at my jeans. Her feathers were slick and oily as water danced right off their surface. She marched around and sang and explored every inch of the room with pure childlike excitement. She really was honestly happily curious just being.





In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max is sent to his room only to find his imagination has created a world entirely his own there, populated by wild landscapes and monsters of all kinds. My work provides the escape of being sent to your room. Moments where you feel you can get lost, float, fly, swim or just be. My mind comes flowing out of my hands. I feel a closeness and connection to my animals and their curiosities. They are eagerly inquisitive without hesitation. They embrace their impulses we have as living creatures. And they welcome each other. They greet curiosity warmly and carry on. I hope that audiences can follow by example and introduce themselves, joining in the exploration.

*“There is no greater, freer fantasy than the imagination of children. In the world of a child, nothing is impossible. There are no rules, you are free. You can be everything you want to be. With their imagination, children can make a new reality, which does not really*

*have to exist. We must cherish the child within ourselves. Let our childhood fantasy speak because this creates new opportunities and makes the world funnier, more interesting, and colorful.” - Jeroen Blok*