NOWHEREWORLDS

The Othered Ecologies of Jim Holyoak

by Tracy Valcourt

As in Hamlet, *the Prince of a rotten state, everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the waiting for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing ("this thing") will end up coming.*
– Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx

The unknown is perhaps the most abstract and formless entity in the human catalogue of concepts and yet it's this which motivates scientific enquiry, underpins and challenges faith, and is the combustion that sparks curiosity. In narrative, the centrifugal force created at the contact point between the known and the unknown is what pulls us in and draws the line taut. In its less generative state, the unknown is a boundless yet strangely claustrophobic space that we fill with a menacing and self-consuming form of potentiality. It is anxiety's habitat—dark, accelerating, expectant—not unlike the universe. It is with such nebulous micro-ecologies, *nowhereworlds* populated by an animal kingdom of both actual and nonexistent orders, that Jim Holyoak, a kind of supernatural conservationist, concerns himself. Fascinated by the "thing," he gives it apparition.

Haunting is historical, says Derrida. History, in its simplest sense, is time complicated by event. Through his constant concern with habitat, what Holyoak is pointing out is that there appears to be significantly more time at one end of the universal spectrum than at the other; never before have human and natural events been so closely intertwined. Merely a blip in the continuum, humankind has made a bottom-heavy structure of time and now balances precariously on a pinnacle supported by a self-made material foundation of fading integrity. The past is fantastical, prone to variation and revision, but the unformed future is positively spectral. As we approach the sixth mass extinction, our reaction is to mediate the event by choosing the most photogenic of endangered animals to act as icons of disappearance. Framed somewhere between nostalgia and prophecy, these threatened species are seen as sentimental specters in a silent wild, and when they are gone the phantom limbs formed by their multitudinous absence will make a kraken of this earth.

With an interest in the notion of deep time, a concept of history being tethered to the creation of the universe, Holyoak describes "Quagmire,"

Preceding spread:
Jim Holyoak, installation view. "Lycanthrope," 2013, Galerie Donald Browne. Photograph: Galerie Donald Browne. All images courtesy Galerie Donald Browne.

1. *Slug* (detail), 2010, "Human/Animal Body Prints," ink lip-print and ink on paper, 46 x 183 cm. Photograph: Jim Holyoak.

2. Installation view, "Lycanthrope," 2013, Galerie Donald Browne. Photograph: Galerie Donald Browne.

2011, an expansive, tonal, ecological, collaborative work, as an attempt to "remember something that can't be remembered." What is to be remembered astrophysicists now tell us is that the universe was once the size of a pearl, which experienced an event called inflation causing it to expand a trillion, trillion times in the knife-edge of a second. We are in fact, as Carl Sagan famously pronounced, "made of star stuff." Imagine that. Most of us can't, and those of us who can, cannot transcribe that inner nebulae into solid shape with the grace and energy that Holyoak does. When the Hubble Telescope revealed images of the Eagle Nebulae in 1995, scientists admitted to being unprepared for the beauty deep space beheld. The most stunning section of the Eagle Nebulae was dubbed "The Pillars of Creation"—three vertical plumes in a corona of light that have undeniably corporeal resemblances. The basis of these images is scientific, the effect is mythical. It is a duality that delights Holyoak and forms the balanced register of folklore and ecology on which his work rests. Drawing partly from life and partly from imagination, he sees the world in a kind of perpetual dusk, where ambiguity blossoms into ambient potentiality such that the veil of grey betrays the perception of flesh for stone, confuses Belacqua for the rock against which he crouches, mistakes the oak and linden intertwined for Baucis and Philemon. Similar to the folkloric landscapes of the Norwegian illustrator Theodor Kittelsen, whose mountains turn troll and walk away or haystacks bend in nocturnal communion, trees in the Holyoak forest are just as apt to run blood as sap through their veins.

Although we believe the mark of an evolved culture to be the exchange of myth for data, we are still very much a myth-based society, where classic tales of antiquity form the foundation of many modern ones. The slow-to-evolve hero, for example, is alive and well and engendering archetypal behaviour in movie theatres and major league stadiums across America. The monster still haunts the moment, its shape mirroring our greatest fears. In the age of acceleration the collective anxiety of the West is likely in the form of something we won't see coming: cells mutating in our blood, cyber-attacks, homeland terrorism.

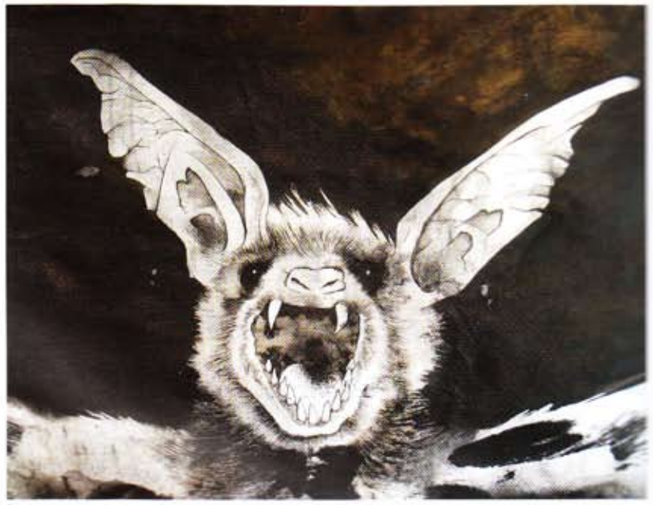
Holyoak has been drawing the monsters for considerable time now and although monster theory can be serious business, the playfulness found in many of his drawings suggests that he has made at least some peace with his demons. Moreover, he reveals that nature myths do indeed live on, if only somewhere below the din of an industrialized surface. In his book, *Landscape and Memory* (Vintage Books, 1995), Simon Schama supports this claim, stating, "our entire landscape tradition is the product of shared culture, it is by the same token a tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions. The cults

which we are told to seek in other native cultures—of the primitive forest, of the river of life, of the sacred mountain—are in fact alive and well and all about us if only we know where to look for them."

Holyoak knows firsthand the forest and the sacredness of the mountain. Growing up in Aldergrove, British Columbia, the shape of Washington's Mount Baker was imprinted into his pictorial imaginary, just as the trace of his trajectory snowboarding down its slopes marked that body. In the spirit of the *promeneur solitaire*, Holyoak has travelled to and across many mountainous and sublime regions of the world, so that his drawn landscapes become topographical conflations of Lapland, Iceland, China and the Canadian Rockies. In 2007, he travelled to China to study traditional ink techniques under the celebrated landscape artist Shen Ling Xiang, known as the "king of nightscapes": "Throughout autumn and winter, I would arrive at Master Shen's house every morning, seven days a week. From 8:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. I would paint beside him in his studio, and also in the fantastical countryside of Yangshuo, in farmers' fields, on the rooftops of village buildings, in muddy riverbeds of the Li River, under the eyes of curious inhabitants." Master Shen spoke no English and Holyoak no Mandarin so the communication was largely gestural and by the end of the mentorship, the two could read each other's thoughts through a glance. While an Eastern perspective on the mountain might not have been verbally communicated to him, Holyoak gained it in the way—according to Master Shen—topography should be graphically recreated, which is slowly and with a sensitivity to change. Of the division between Eastern and Western attitudes towards the mountain, most telling, Schama said, was their perspective on dragons: "While Chinese tradition venerated the creatures as lords of the sky, guardians of esoteric, celestial wisdom, Christianity deemed them winged serpents, and as such, the embodiment of satanic evil." Having no interest in being polarized in any capacity, Holyoak still rests in the camp of veneration and many of the nocturnal animals he draws are chosen out of respect for creatures demonized by misunderstanding. I would offer that these kinds of prejudices towards animals such as bats, wolves and even owls as iconic harbingers of misfortune, are largely founded in a long vein of myth. The extinction now of one hundred species per day occurs because we have given one narrative dominion over another.

In an effort to undo this misguided system of beliefs, Holyoak's exhibitions such as "Lycanthrope," 2013, or "Oblivion Monstrosus," 2012, read like disordered canons of creation, offering more inclusive taxonomical systems and inviting a lateral understanding of species that stresses interconnection rather than a vertical hierarchy marked by distinction. Taken as a whole, which is how all of Holyoak's projects must be considered, they are unassimilated, unrestrained, unnamable—and by this very definition, monstrous. Individually, the drawings read like exercises in understanding an accelerated world, emerging from a place of creative compulsion and genuine curiosity. Valuing process as much as product, Holyoak is most content when there are both degrees of intention and happenstance in his work; he is flexible enough to see the potential in 'error.' (Take for example the ink spill that morphs into a whale swimming in an inverse ocean of air above the bounds of a Chinese landscape.) Put together, these hybrid images of hybrids suggest multiple points of view and ask more questions than they answer. "Lycanthrope," Holyoak's most recent solo exhibition, is composed of a dizzying assortment of greyscale drawings and paintings arranged largely by intuition, which suggests a dynamism similar to the cooling period after cataclysm (and indeed judging by the artist's prolificacy, you can only imagine Holyoak operates under similar unrestrained physics). Formed of animals, insects, nocturnal landscapes, tree rounds, monsters and whimsical dinosaurs, "Lycanthrope" is a primordial soup of jostled history. Included in the show are samples from his human/animal body print collection, 2009—animal portraits that incorporate skin prints of the artist's own body. A grey wolf shows a streak of human in his torso and his head holds the profile of a human face, his world now seen through human eyes. A hare, which rivals that of Dürer in detail and finesse, springs forward on human feet. Both are fleeing the scene, both will live somewhere beyond the bounds, as monsters always do.

With a longstanding interest in monsters and hybrids and a serious concern for ecology, Holyoak claims the body prints stem from a curiosity about what wisdom could be gained through metamorphosis. The language here is notable: in the artist's mind, we too are animals and hence our behaviour is perhaps driven more by instinct than by morality. His hybrids illustrate the phenomenon that Susan Wiseman, in *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), calls the enactment of the "citizen transformation"—by inserting the human into the animal, we inject the civil into the wild. You can't help but feel sympathy for these animals. These new citizens are disadvantaged by the limits



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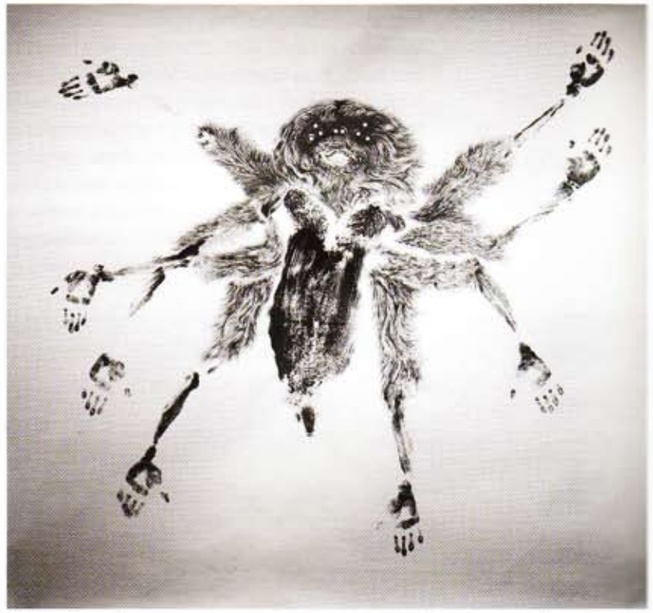

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1. *Little Brown Bat* (detail), 2009. "Human/Animal Body Prints," gouache body print and ink on paper, 92 x 183 cm. Photograph: Jim Holyoak.

2. *Giant House Spider*, 2009. "Human/Animal Body Prints," ink face-print and ink on paper, 183 x 183 cm. Photograph: Jim Holyoak.

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3. Installation view, "Quagmire," 2011, four-month drawing installation in collaboration with Matt Shane, ink, charcoal, graphite and gesso on papered walls, 95 x 15 feet, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Photograph: Yannick Grandmont.

4. "Quagmire," detail, 2011. Photograph: Yannick Grandmont.

of human morphology—the wolf cannot see in the dark, and the hare cannot run so fast. Restrained by civility their freedom is caged and the monster turns spectacle. Modernity, technology and a view of nature as resource have shifted our perception of threat, as Wiseman suggests (and Holyoak illustrates): "whereas we once saw the wild incorporated in the civil as threatening, we now see the inverse and the danger and evils of the civil forcing itself upon the natural (wild)." In an earlier version of hybridity, which he began while still a student of Concordia's MFA program, Holyoak produced a series of mythical life drawings with lines as elegant and economical as those of Schiele: a monstrous spouting whale head dominates a crouched human figure; a rabbit's torso reposes sidelong on human legs in a Titian-like pose (the effect is an uncanny division between the erotic and the humorous); a hawk's head turns in regal profile on a female body, which sits in a pose that suggests dominion over something. She has been given wings too. Maybe that's it—flight gives respite to this trip of the earth. For the most part, the human form dominates in these drawings, but the spirit is pure animal. In some cases, the animal heads appear too cumbersome to be supported by such fragile structures and suggest a similar narrative of precarious balance between man and the natural world.

What Holyoak's numerous projects consistently speak to is habitat. The effect is a kind of archival Arcadia in a more potent (but no less playful) version than was offered by Virgil, whose influence was subsequently interpreted by Renaissance painters as a pastoral landscape offering a warm embrace to shepherds and languorous bare-breasted nymphs. In the Arcadia of antiquity, underpinning the idyllic was the bestial. The rustic deity of this mountainous region was the lascivious satyr Pan, and it is here where the first werewolf in Western literature emerges in an ill-fated story of hospitality. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes the king of Arcadia, Lycaon, to be the descendent of a wicked clan formed from the blood of slaughtered giants. On the occasion of Jupiter's visit, Lycaon welcomes him into his home, and as his divine guest slept, Lycaon attempts to murder him. In that failure and as a test, the next day Lycaon serves Jupiter the cooked body parts of a servant. Enraged by Lycaon's violation of the host-guest relationship, Jupiter overturns the table and sets fire to the castle, and as the king flees, the god of all gods sets upon him a lupine transformation. Although not directly influenced by this myth, Holyoak's grey wolf impressively captures Lycaon's fleeing form, which retains vestiges of a former (or other) self.

The host-guest relationship was an important trope in the literature of classical antiquity (and a dominant theme in Gothic literature—think Dracula). Holyoak's exhibition, "Quagmire," 2013, an ambitious three-month nocturnal collaboration with Matt Shane, is a return to the primordial Arcadia. Here we see hospitality as an extended concern of the artists, who ask that we consider humankind's increasingly ingratiating position on the planet, wondering if through decades of exploitation the "guest," as Michel Serres, in *The Parasite* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982) suggests, has not turned to "parasite." "History hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is hospitable space. Plants and animals are always hosts; man is necessarily their guest. Always taking, never giving. He bends the logic of exchange and of giving in his favour when he is dealing with nature as a whole. When he is dealing with his kind he continues to do so: He wants to be the parasite of man as well."

In an interrupted cycle of life, the cities of "Quagmire" metamorphose to wastelands, which threaten to collapse back into the abyss from which their raw building blocks were extracted; on the edge of another abyss, the carcass of a sperm whale presents a spectacle of decomposition as whole cities emerge on her flesh and an open mouth reveals other possible universes in its corporal cavern. Other gallery walls are covered with swollen tangles of branch and root, their reach and depth encouraged by an oxygen-rich atmosphere that we can't see but only "remember." Typical of Holyoak's sublime imaginary, it's a kind of gorgeous nightmare world; a swirl of potential, where one form morphs into another while others remain hidden, unknown, but for the attentive eye of the artist who manifests it. ∎

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1. & 2. ***A Hole in the World***, 2013. In collaboration with Matt Shane. Ink, graphite and acrylic medium on paper. 40 x 40 feet. Permanent installation on second floor of the American Can Co. building, Montréal. Photograph: Jim Holyoak.