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*Anima Mundi*

Mixed media (plaster, cyanotype, embroidery, acrylic)

My art explores the nature of souls, including the souls of both human and nonhuman beings. I explore the consciousness of the critters that inhabit our planet and by extension, the interconnectedness of our natural systems. During my research, I quickly discovered the similarities between humans and animals, the morality and personhood that exists in each living entity, and the extraordinary capabilities of trees. I was also inspired by the works of Kiki Smith's prints and Tasha Lewis's cyanotype deer sculptures. In my piece, I attempt to blur the lines between human, plant, and animal by combining features of all three into one work.

I wanted to explore the capabilities and limitations of cyanotype in my art by using my own body in the process. I layed on top of a big piece of cyanotype fabric in the sun for around 15 minutes to create an imprint of my body. Then I arranged natural elements like leaves, flora, twigs and other items I found around and off campus on the surrounding fabric. Then I embroidered tree roots/veins onto my body imprint using various red threads and yarn, and added smaller details with red acrylic and fabric paint. For the mask, I created an armature using newspaper and tape, then built on top of that with plaster, spackle, and gesso. Finally, I added further details and natural patterns to my mask with blue acrylic paint.

I chose cyanotype as my medium because the cyanotype process involves the energy of the sun, vital for all living things on Earth to thrive. The animal I chose to craft for the mask is intentionally human-like in its form and features to further blur the lines between animal and human. The roots, on the other hand, take inspiration from metal wire roots from my previous sculptural work at Oxbow. The red, contrasting with the blue, signifies the life force that runs through each of our bodies, stretching out and interlacing with each living soul that inhabits the planet. I invite the viewer to acknowledge the nonhuman within them and as a result, break down the barriers between humans and our nonhuman kin.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF  
HAVING A SOUL



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OS50

*Writer's Note: I am interested in the concept of a soul, namely animal souls. My intent with this research was to understand the interiority of nonhuman creatures and expand my findings to the broader environmental crisis we face today. Some of the questions I addressed are: What does it mean for an entity to possess a soul? How does this shape our understanding of consciousness, and what does the belief in Animism reveal about our relationship with the natural world?*

### **I. The Mother Tree**

Somewhere in the center of a grove is a mother tree, the oldest and grandest of the forest. The trunk of this tree pulses with pure energy from root tip to the tops of the branches. Leaves like feathers and branches like willowy arms wave and whisper old songs to anyone willing to lend an ear. At the base of this tree is where a girl sits with both ears and eyes wide open, basking in the dappled light that washes through the lush canopy. Thick roots curl around her body in a reassuring embrace. The tree and all the others in the grove are the girl's old friends. Just as the woodland creatures do now, her primate ancestors relied on their sturdy branches for survival. The day the apes dropped down was the day all their troubles began.

At the base of this tree, worms and pocket sized lizards snake through towering blades of grass and weave through the satin soil. Above her head a nest of baby birds cry for their mother. Squirrels scramble up trunks with flourishes of their bushy tails, white-tailed deer bound through wide open fields, rabbits curl up with their families in burrows, and the river just past the lopsided mossy boulder pushes through cracks in the earth with a slow urgency. Spiders spin homes of sticky lace and teeny green caterpillars crawl through abandoned holes. Atop the yawning crest on the horizon a ruby red fox screams.

The girl stands and thanks the tree for the shade. The leaves whisper back in the soft rustle of limbs. Just below the soles of her feet, hidden from the human eye, are interlacing chains of white, lacy roots like cobwebs that stretch and twist and turn, connecting every tree in the grove together. She gently tugs on one leaf and feels the motion reverberate through every living thing on the planet.

A bright-eyed doe has strayed from its mother. The dainty creature picks her way through the bracket toward the girl with an unforeseen curiosity. The girl holds her breath as the doe approaches. They lock eyes, girl and doe. The girl can see herself reflected in two pools of dark depths. *A creature with such soulful eyes must have a soul*, she thinks. More than that, she wonders if the forest she spends her days in is alive with beings just like her. The moment seems epiphanous and stirs in the girl a desire to go forth and nurse her own wilderness back to life.

## **II. Continuous Entities in Constant Flux**

How conscious are humans? Does this consciousness differ from the experiences of nonhumans, like animals and plants? Scientists and philosophers have been turning over the idea of consciousness in both human and nonhuman beings for decades and still have not arrived at a clear conclusion. There are many theories, some leaning nonsensical, but others I entertain. The most pervasive philosophy surrounding consciousness was pioneered by French philosopher, René Descartes, called Dualism.

Known to many as the “Mind-Body problem,” dualism addresses the status of the mind in relation to the physical world. Dualists argue that the mental and physical are distinct. They often claim that the reduction of consciousness to physically describable mechanisms is impossible. Conscious experiences cannot be reduced to physical brain mechanics because they

contain all kinds of qualitative properties (called qualia). The hues of red, or blue, or orange, the bite of cold air on my face on a blue-black morning, the touch of soft, spongy moss - these are all conscious experiences, but none of these properties are tangible or can be observed in someone's brain (Kind, n.d.). We cannot find the properties appearing to us in first-person conscious experience in the electrical neurons that continually fire electrical-chemical signals back and forth. The qualia from conscious experience are not the same as physical facts about the brain.

While Descartes' hypothesis attempt to address the hard problem of consciousness,<sup>1</sup> the only evidence we have is cellular structures and organic molecules interacting through chemical reactions. Cartesian Dualism in particular is associated with the belief that animals lack minds and personhood. Descartes's argument was based upon animal's failure to use language. He goes so far as to describe animals as unfeeling brutes: "They eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it; they desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing"<sup>2</sup> (Harrison, 1992). Descarte believed that humans were an exceptional species because they had free will. He thought that animals, on the other hand, behaved purely instinctually, and discounted any notion of personhood for nonhumans (Abbott, 2007).

However, these accounts of consciousness provide no concrete explanation or proof for doubting consciousness in animals and other nonhuman entities. In Thomas Nagel's 1974 essay *What Is It Like to Be a Bat*, the philosopher defines phenomenal consciousness in animals. Simply put, it is the subjective feeling of interpreting the world around you. He writes that "fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism...We may call this the subjective character of experience" (Falk, 2024). Many animals display phenomenal consciousness. In the Cambridge Declaration on

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<sup>1</sup> The unsolved problem of explaining why any physical state we experience is conscious instead of non-conscious

<sup>2</sup> Despite this, he owned a little dog named Monsieur Grat who he lavished with affection.

Consciousness, researchers stated that an array of nonhuman animals, including but not limited to mammals and birds, have “the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors” (Falk, 2024). The implications this research has for the treatment of animals and other nonhuman species is striking, and it extends past the prevention of pain. Sorry to Descartes, but humans are far from unique in possessing consciousness.

### **III. Souls and Soot Sprites**

With the discussion of consciousness inevitably comes the examination of the soul. Consciousness and souls are like sun and sunlight. The sun’s light permeates everything the same way the soul permeates the entire body through the form of consciousness.

From a very remote period of time, all people have entertained the belief that the living person differs from the corpse. In some way or another, the body contains a different principle than the psyche. Some manifestations of the mind that distinguish living from dead are a result of the soul. The soul is something which is of a nature different from that of the body - an animating principle (McDougall, 1912). While consciousness has more to do with a state of awareness of one’s surroundings, the soul is the immaterial essence of a being, associated with morals and identity.

In the case of animals, even if no amount of experimentation can concretely support phenomenal consciousness yet, believing them to have souls akin to our own is a step in the right direction toward preventing large-scale ecological destruction. Humans are not used to that comparison - they are fearful of what it entails. To biologists, however, we are animals. It’s difficult to prove we are different, as no single part of the human brain isn’t found in a monkey’s brain (Paulson, 2013). Yes, the size and strength of our brains differ from any other creature, but

the brain does not differ on a fundamental level. I may acknowledge the dualistic ethical framework of consciousness, but the legacy of Descarte is responsible for consigning nonhumans to a “use” category which further fortifies the barriers between animals and humans (Allen & Trestman, 2023).

One film that explores the discussion of souls is *My Neighbor Totoro*. In this animated film, director Hayao Miyazaki imbues his work with a great reverence for the natural world through spirits like Totoro, Catbus, and the fuzzy black Soot Sprites that traverse through abandoned places, ancient trees, and cobwebbed houses. The film follows two sisters, Satsuki and Mei, as they move to the Japanese countryside with their father. Mei discovers a magical world hidden from the tragedies of the adult world - one teeming with forest spirits who ride on the wind and make the plants grow. Rooted in ancient Shinto beliefs that rocks, vegetation, old trees, mountains and rivers, and other inanimate objects have souls or spirits, the film inspires awe in the sacredness of the natural world and mirrors the sentiments of Animism. The idea of Animism is a belief system that attributes spiritual qualities to natural phenomena such as plants, animals, and other elements of nature.

The concept of souls or spirits is tied to spiritual or religious beliefs such as those incorporated in *My Neighbor Totoro*. Satsuki and Mei’s family gains spiritual comfort and healing through their encounters with the forest spirits and we can all learn from their example.. Without these beliefs, the notion of souls is quickly dismissed and the idea that humans are the only creatures with unique abilities and intrinsic worth is reinforced to the detriment of the planet. By denying these critters souls, we have very little reason to care for their wellbeing.

Like the trees Totoro helps grow, our trees have incredible capabilities and hidden networks. Did you know that birdsong helps trees grow? The vibrations of the high frequency

sound opens up the stomata on the underside of the leaves (Bridgeland et al., 2010). These invisible energies and kinships go largely unnoticed. In our culture, plants are reduced to objects when they are instead subjects with extraordinary abilities, gifts, and capacities.

Although scientists warn against personifying natural elements for fear of anthropomorphizing, when speaking about the personhood of beings, it is not about attributing human characteristics to them; it's about attributing plant characteristics to plants or animal characteristics to animals. Similar to how it's disrespectful to try and confine plants to the same category as people, it's also disrespectful to say they have no awareness - no being-ness at all. This denial to personhood is false, refuted by science itself. Scientists have revealed that plants and animals have extraordinary capacities unlike our own, and perhaps all the more powerful. Plants can sense their environment through sound waves, gravity, temperature and light and respond to it in sophisticated ways (Tippett, 2016). For example, trees of the same species are communal, often forming alliances with neighboring trees through underground fungal networks. Through these mycorrhizal networks, water is shared, nutrients are passed, and distress signals are sent to warn other trees about drought, disease, or possible insect attacks (Grant, 2018). While trees and other plants do not have brains, their complex communal networks signal a form of consciousness and communication not entirely unlike our own.

The average psychologist refutes the idea that there is empathy in plants, and even more so in animals, believing empathy to mean putting yourself in someone else's shoes. Humans overestimate the complexity of empathy by overlooking emotional contagion which is easily demonstrable in many animals. If I yawn, you will yawn. If I smile, you will beam in response. These empathetic automatic responses are present in both animals and humans.



In the 19th century emerged the study of primate anatomy and behavior, which drew into focus the similarities between apes and humans. Take chimpanzees, for example. There is ample evidence of animal culture in primates. Different groups of wild chimpanzees have different behaviors, stone technology, tool technology, social customs, and communication signals. While humans are certain that animals only live in the present, unaware of both the future and the past, there is evidence that they can use tools to fix things for the future. In a Swiss zoo, orangutans had a skylight on their cage and dismantled the entire structure so they could spend cool summer nights on the roof of their building. In the morning before their caretakers returned, they would go back in the cage and put the skylight precisely back together so no one noticed (Paulson, 2013).

Chimps, like humans, display a sense of morality. They have an idea of fairness and cooperation, and can exhibit altruistic tendencies. They can be empathic by responding to the distress of others and reassuring them with shared food. Take Peony, a very old chimp with arthritis living at Lincoln Park Zoo. She attempted to join the younger chimps in their grooming session but couldn't make it up to their perch. The younger females saw her struggle and pushed her up to join them (Paulson, 2013).

While chimpanzees and other apes are widely accepted in the scientific community to have consciousness, more and more researchers have begun to acknowledge widespread consciousness in animals with drastically different characteristics such as invertebrates, amphibians, and fish. Octopuses can feel pain, cuttlefish store memory of specific past experiences, and bees exhibit playful behavior (Falk, 2024).

At the very same time, a young boy falls from his bike and splits his knee on the pavement. His bright blue bike clatters to the ground, wheels spinning and handlebars askew, and

with bloody hands and salty tears, he cries for his mother. Down the street, an elderly woman flips through the thick, worn pages of a dusty album from her youth. She stops at her wedding photos and traces her smooth, beaming smile with a wrinkled index finger. She smiles too, her weathered face stretching into the very same form. In the wooded park across from the old woman's house, two sisters draw loopy yellow spirals and tiny pink rabbits on each other's arms and legs. Their playful laughter reverberates through the trees and the cicadas hum in response.

If we think about plants, animals, and even rocks as persons similar to us, it forces us to shed our idea of a human-centered world. This secular spirituality is based on the model of interconnectedness. Isn't it exciting what we can learn from other species if we expand our minds just a little?

#### **IV. Think like an Animist**

An understanding of the natural world as rich with souls has crucial implications for conservation because the scope of moral decision-making is expanded beyond a concern for only humans. Animism comes into focus to light a path toward this more inclusive worldview.

Animism is a religious perspective common to various indigenous cultures. According to Victorian anthropologist E.B. Tylor, Animists believe in "the animation of all nature." To Animists, there are spiritual beings that inhabit trees and waterfalls and rocks (Smith, n.d.). While ethnographers and anthropologists have moved past this initial definition, Animism can challenge harmful Western social structures in place.

The modern scientific worldview surrounding the natural world is alienating us from our environment. Animism emerges as a kind of spiritual reconnection with non-human entities through the belief in the existence of souls inhabiting every being. The ways Animists view the

world are fundamentally grounded in interpersonal relationships between humans and soul-having beings. Tom Ingold, renowned anthropologist, characterizes this as a lived practice of active listening - “A condition of being alive to the world, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next” (Smith, n.d.).

Animism provides us with a clear picture of how indigenous people understood the outside world as an extension of their own society and culture, which allowed them to live in harmony with the natural world. In today's world, when nature is viewed as a resource for human consumption, disdain for it easily replaces reverence and appreciation for it. As object, not subject. As other, not together.

The problems we face with sustainability and environmental degradation lie at the juncture of nature and culture, and for this reason we cannot simply rely on a single way of living or knowing that excludes ethics. Respect for nonhumans is nothing more than a survival project.

## **V. A Bucket of Toys**

In Sweden, swarms of jellyfish clog the pipes of a nuclear power plant off the Baltic Sea, resulting in a temporary shutdown. The solution to this problem involves the formation of a fleet of killer robots known as JEROS<sup>3</sup> that chop them to smithereens (Crist & Kopnina, 2014). This is a shining example of anthropocentrism, an ethical belief that solely humans possess intrinsic value. Under this worldview, all other beings are reduced to objects, valued only in their ability to serve humans (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> JEROS: (Jellyfish Elimination Robotic Swarms)

The differences between humans and nonhumans over the course of history are extensive. Reason, language, morality, civilization, technology and free will are all qualities modern science has regarded as lacking in nonhumans (Crist & Kopnina, 2014). This displacement has assembled the living beings on Earth into a hierarchical narrative, with humans at the apex.

There are also material displacements, with animals and nature subjected to large-scale physical dislocations. We've destroyed forests, plowed grasslands, drained wetlands, dewatered, diverted, and controlled rivers, dominated lakes and seas, and used nature for material ends to serve our human egos. We've killed wild animals, persecuted, enslaved, and forced them to flee to more remote locations, and driven them to regional or total extinction (Gribben & Fagan, 2016). As the power of civilized man over the natural world has increased, so too has his blindness to the terrible violence he has unleashed and the wonder of the biosphere's existence. Anthropocentrism has fostered civilization's manifest destiny of unrelenting expansionism and yielded a world out of balance. If only humans matter morally, and if all other beings have instrumental value for humans, if they are denied personhood, consciousness, and souls, then we have little reason to care about them unless we benefit from their exploitation.

This flawed relationship with the natural world can be traced back to Judeo-Christian roots. Specifically, an interpretation of Genesis in which God gifts man the natural world for his use. "In our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012). The Christian Church believes the human soul to contain the breath of God. But by that logic, so do all of God's creations, nonhumans included. Power over nature is also deeply rooted in Western civilization, where mankind is viewed as stronger, smarter, and more "deserving" of their share of the planet than

their nonhuman counterparts. Rather than asserting dominance over our animal and plant kin, shouldn't we accept that souls surpass the physical form in their interconnectedness?

With the industrial revolution and the advent of modern technology, we can manipulate nature in ways entirely unimaginable to early people. Changing the weather used to be reserved for wizards and magicians, but our daily human existence has accomplished just that. As climate crises appear, humans address them out of self-interest (Gribben & Fagan, 2016). Our anthropocentric viewpoint severely underplays environmental degradation by narrowing the range of societal issues and ignoring greater damages to the planet.

An understanding of animals having minds and being capable of intersubjectivity with other humans “has the practical utility of allowing construction of effective and mutually rewarding patterns of social interaction” (Allen & Trestman, 2023). An anthropocentric perspective is morally flawed and environmentally unsustainable. It denies intrinsic value of all living beings, instead promoting immediate human interests over the long-term health of the planet.

To mend this we should enter a symbiotic relationship with nature with characteristics of Animism rather than an instrumental one. Nature has been rebranded to resources, making it easier for us to destroy “stuff” rather than diverse, living, breathing life. By treating the planet like a bucket of toys to play with, break, and discard, we are destroying precious ecosystems one by one. An Animistic perspective serves as a contrasting understanding of “interiority” from Western views and could be further explored and even implemented to combat human exceptionalism.

“The Earth will not be ignored,” Thomas Berry wrote, “nor will it long endure being despised, neglected or mistreated” (Kingsnorth, 2017). We must change or be changed, and it starts with tapping into your soul.

## **VI. 21 Grams<sup>4</sup> of Identical Essence**

Yesterday morning, a hummingbird the size of a macadamia nut fell like a fallen soldier in the painting studio. Trapped and panicked, breathing rapidly and unsteadily on the cool morning pavement. The sun was just peeking over the studios, but the light was not enough to warm the tiny critter’s frail body. Feathers ruffled, beak covered in cobweb, violet plumage all tussled, I was reminded of my own sickly state years ago. I convalesced in bed, feverish and flushed, my mother brought me warm tea with honey to soothe my aching throat. I drank it in urgent gulps. With the same care, I gently squeezed droplets of sugar water into the bird’s beak and it lapped it up rapidly with a thin pink tongue like a butterfly's.

*I hope this little creature can make it.* I say a desperate little prayer to some higher being. If not, there’s still the comforting thought that both of our bodies will return to the same pool of consciousness. One and many, our energy like the flow of water, inhabits some form. It cannot remain this way for eternity, instead choosing to oscillate in perpetual motion like a body of water. It will trickle back down into the vast ocean it was born into. Each droplet, a different soul. Each soul, identical in form in every twinkling atom. When my decomposing carcass has decayed and fed the roots of a great blooming magnolia or filled the belly of a wood thrush, I’ll know it lives on.

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<sup>4</sup> In a very questionable experiment conducted by Dr. Duncan MacDougall in 1907, the physician attempted to determine the weight of the human soul by weighing six dying patients

Thankfully, the little hummingbird's soul lives another day. With one more drink of water and a cock of its head toward mine as if in thanks, it takes off in a flurry of wings. I blink but it's gone, flown toward the breathing trees and singing birds.

My younger self has recovered too, stepping out on the porch with an unsteady gait. A hummingbird flits between the towering trees of my backyard back home, searching for sweet nectar. I sip my tea and smile as a young doe bounds through the undergrowth with childlike abandon.

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