

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

To Mind the Elephant

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of

Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Casey Thomas Polacheck

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy Helene Adler, Chair

Professor Jordan M Rose

Professor Anna Joy Springer

Professor Monique van Genderen

2019



The Thesis of Casey Thomas Polacheck is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

---

---

---

---

Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

## EPIGRAPH

“Unfeeling, heartless creator! You had endowed me with perceptions and passions, and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind.”

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page .....	iii
Epigraph .....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	vi
Abstract of the Thesis.....	vii
To Mind the Elephant .....	1
References .....	19

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Monosemy, 2019, Casey Polacheck, oil on panel, 18 x 24 in.....	1
Figure 1.2: Concrete Jungle III, 1990, Alexis Rockman, oil on wood 96 x 64 in.....	5
Figure 1.3: Self Portrait of the Artist at Work, 2012, Casey Polacheck, oil on panel, 12 x 16 in.....	7
Figure 1.4: Engraving from <i>Mechanics Magazine</i> published in London in 1824.....	11
Figure 1.5: Border Monument 227, from David Taylor's "Working the Line" project.....	18

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

To Mind the Elephant

by

Casey Thomas Polacheck

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Amy Helene Adler, Chair

The series of paintings and exhibition titled *To Mind The Elephant* depicts the isolated uses and suggested effects of material objects used in the environmental and psychological enrichment of elephants in zoological captivity. These simple tools of animal care are understood as analogous in function to both the artistic practice and viewership. The artworks and objects described shared qualities of perception, creativity, agency and experience between humans and other animal species when their cognitive processes and responses are considered.



Figure 1.1: Monosemy, 2019, Casey Polacheck, oil on panel, 18 x 24 in

The thesis exhibit *To Mind the Elephant* contains an ongoing series of paintings depicting a selection of what will be referred to as environmental enrichment objects. These are materials placed among elephant enclosures by their human keepers. They are singular, sometimes colorful plastic, wooden, stone, metal, or rubber items, such as tires, barrels, planks and posts for the animal to interact with. Systems of them are seen suspended from rope attached to otherwise bare tree trunks. Some are depicted strewn across the ground with no clear intention. Each of the objects themselves holds a position pivoting or swinging at angles that both illustrate and suggest activity. They are part of sparse landscapes, sometimes shadowed and tiered, creating elevation changes and sites for the objects balance and sway.

Through painting, depicting and asking an audience to mobilize these objects mentally shows hints of their zoological intentions. Their invented staging operates with some oblique description of an audience, and relationship to the intended animal user. The objects are often elevated among zoo enclosures, these objects often have dual purposes as displays for human and animal. In one case, they are



useful as to draw out the animal to an active space of a human viewer, and for the animal, these objects are markers of a connection between their environment and themselves. Locating the viewer in these spaces, and in positions relative to the objects' intended users is key in setting up tension between the human and animal.

In this series I am inclined to depict the spaces these objects are located in as ambiguous, hinting at depth and expanse, but shown with hints of the artificial, the shallow, the forced perspective. A relationship to painting history builds here. Isolating them among an ambiguous and open landscape begins to suggest scenarios of these objects having impact on environments beyond zoos. What functions might these objects perform in enriching space beyond enclosures? Could these forms ask questions of spaces and conditions of agencies in the world and perception as a whole? Their isolation also calls forth questions of the objects strategic use, that an object and its engagement can in turn affect or enrich an environment. Isolating these examples of enrichment objects stages a test of their efficacy.

In most institutional cases, these environmental enrichment objects are tools and strategies for encouraging investigative behaviors of many species, like foraging for food, or seeking stimuli signs of prey and peer – some form of novel perception in the environment to offer a change and an effect for the animal. The objects' function is to also provide forms of agency and expression given the animals' fixed settings, to allow opportunity for their experience to be impressed upon the environment, to show evidence of their force, whether it be a push or a pull on a given object. Among their many intended effects in the zoo context, these materials act as psychologically benefitting tools of investigation, simple yet sustaining sources of activity for the animal's mind to work through. The objects and training achieved with them are used to provide, as best as materially possible, activities that are analogous to the animals' natural modes of living in the wild. Dr. Hal Markowitz suggests in his *Enriching Animal Lives*, a kind of handbook for designing enrichment objects for captive animals, that objects should be cheap, durable, safe for the animal, and accessible for their human caregivers to readily distribute. It is implied in the zoological use of these environmental enrichment objects, EEOs if need be, that they contain some notion of an alternative experience of nature, another reflection of ancestry, of life attended to with different goals, different tensions, perhaps fear or scarcity. For these researchers and their animals, supported by studies since the

1970s, within a plastic tube are subtle transmissions of other modes of life, imagined structures of thinking through and considering minds and activity not immediately represented on the surface of these objects or implied in the weight of their play against gravity. And as counterparts, the paintings representing these objects offer similarly open-ended demonstrations of the overlapping functions and effects, of mediating experiences both lived and imagined. The paintings operate as oblique representations of another mind's activity, and in turn, echoes of another environment and animal or self. At some level, the cognitive operations of EEOs and representational paintings are structurally bound.

So in fourteen paintings of similarly small size, the varied types of forms used by caregivers of elephants are rendered isolated on ambiguously defined, sparsely populated fore and backgrounds. Within each painting, the objects and landscapes are somewhat plain in shape and function, seen from an unmanned vantage of an assumed passerby, yet are potent in their prominent placement on the landscape and composition. Each depicted enrichment object swings statically, holding a position of activity in midair, or balanced precariously. Each position hints at, but is absent of, a known animal presence that would hold upright, displace or shift the object.

The viewer is left with actions to infer, complete, or empathically imagine the forces and intentions of the object. Presented with a moment to enact this role, of the elephant striking against a tree trunk or pushing a swinging, tethered post's significant weight against the downward pull of gravity. This process, though seeming rudimentary in reading, establishes a practical connection between human and elephant. There are many logical paths to imagining the elephant, each as sequence of steps the human viewing such a scene navigates mentally, and not entirely on the surface of the painting. A human viewer mentally articulates elephant's proposed actions, defines the potential of the object, then relates those forces to an effect.

Vinciane Despret, in her series of essays "What would the animal say if we asked the right questions?," suggests that the knowledge sought by studies of animal behavior and cognition begin as human-formed conceits. In one, she illustrates what has best guided my research questions – As the animals function in allegory, similar is their role in sciences and humanities, building and conforming to these constructions. But her statements shift when considering what happens to those structures of meaning when

the animal knows something of its test parameters. What does the elephant know of itself in front of that blank sheet of paper?

So rather than target the complete animal, image or author, I value where these “theory of mind” practices strike as an potential expansions of philosophies, humanities, as well as where histories and functions of traditional representation and art viewership are elaborated to include new targets and news means of investigating what they might produce. These changes in definitions, moves towards more biosemiotic categories. This provides a source of identifying and creating the kinds of symbolic or perceptive functions as sources of pictorial tensions or crises of image, as Rene Magritte or Mark Tansey might phrase or render them to highlight their symbolic function. But these are other moments of consilience.

I attempt to take in discussions of the scientific image and what it is required to perform. Early ethologist Jakob von Uexkull used the term “the farthest plane” to describe where a visual or perceptive field truncates, and such an idea might relate to incomplete views of species, imperfect picture planes. Beyond where a scientific image must perform dutifully for its subject and audience, I am interested in constructing an image that knows itself to be part of that system of knowledge production.

The pictorial operates with the most potent ability to enact, to construct histories and trajectories of meaning and narrative fore and aft. And still, it can contend with itself, its interpretation, with its own making or analogous use. Experience functions in this similarly fractured and fraught way. Image and meaning making offer analogous creation processes. These are each piecemeal efforts towards developing an approximate psychological understanding of the animal other or alternative scenario. Both are imperfect constructions towards representing a species. Together, marks play off the mental search images, models, scenarios and accumulated knowledge register against one another. Cognitive studies, animal studies, and any usefulness in the structures of visual culture can account together this way, as flawed representations, something like an a priori attempt at the other. The shared criteria between these modes are the sites of productive shifts, categories of affect and understanding that can expand one another.



Figure 1.2: Concrete Jungle III, 1990 Alexis Rockman, oil on wood 96 x 64 in

Watching one animal deceive another, a human viewer might ask, “How does the animal conceive of their audience’s attention?” An animal watching the human linger at a tree for hours without foraging, might arrive at their own question, “Does the human have need of food?” Who produces the structures of thought that develop such questions? Who answers? What mediates these attentions? In response, I focus less on the species-comparative efforts, and rather attempt to display attention towards the affecting behaviors and conditions by imagining varied structures of knowledge and mediated experiences of another. This kind of social cognition between species as between viewers and subjects, or between object and acting body, offers potent, but non-exacting maneuvers. That the human is unable to fully engage an experience of the animal, provides a rich distance to investigate from. The animal marks out a space of imagination, approximation, and productive fallibility for the human authored experience. So, what parcels of experience can alter meaning for both subjects simultaneously? What does the method of responding to object and image, with no immediate result form the experience other than the experience itself do for the animal? What does it do for us to try to engage through those same structures of play?

By acting out several elements of this scene, the viewer begins to approach an understanding of the environmental enrichment strategy. Their role as viewer is restaging the goal of psychological inquiry into the environmental and material relationships of the animal, as well as its meaning making abilities. The paintings offer that same set of relationships, only pictorially. These objects, including their construction, and their representations, all function analogously together. Elephants are known through corroborating folklore and scientific study to recollect a wealth of experience with an ability map their environments cognitively. Megafauna in general have been documented as having profoundly expansive effects upon the landscape and ecosystems they participate in as they move through their territories. Again, the mental and physical effects intersect. And here I at least attempt to map that onto human experience.

Also, the image that a term like species-specific behavior conjures can function like an encyclopedia entry, with the entry as one image standing for all. But I see enrichment objects not so much pushing against these definitions, instead valuing the individual, the individual's experience and exhibition of that behavior. Most human made representations of animals had often filtered this out. When animals were utilized as subjects, they became restricted by human concern. Humans and nonhuman animals are all filters and producers of experience. That difference and diffraction of experience creates unique mental representations of worlds not easily shared between species. Attempts to arrange paint into forms can be considered in that same manner. Then, as they carry out the psychological function for their users and audiences, the paintings themselves also function for me as a significant return to a more fundamental framing of painting practice, and an unexpected refining and reflection of personal attention towards thought, presence, setting expectations of creative life, and aesthetic function.

In this series of paintings, though they are simple in function among exclusively human material culture, the EEOs act as vessels for a kind of quiet interspecies ethnography – a study of the meaning and material relationships shared between humans and other beings, as suggested in a survey of similarly framed artwork collected by Eben Kirksey in *The Multispecies Salon*.



Figure 1.3: Self-Portrait of the Artist at Work, 2012, Casey Polacheck, oil on panel, 12 x 16 in

In 2012 I painted an image titled “Self-Portrait of the Artist at Work”, a small oil painting on panel depicting an Indian Elephant and its’ trainer or mahout practicing painting together at a large easel among the sun and shade of an unspecified sanctuary facility. With that work, what began as a speculative joke eventually furthered my interest in the difficulties of studying animal cognition through an analogy with visual art perception and production. By using combined considerations of art making, cultural anthropology of art, and art history to site scenarios molded out of animal studies I was able to find productive play within transmissions between different qualities of species, mind, image and meaning making. The majority of my studies as an MFA candidate likely stemmed from the inquiry leading up to this particular painting. There merged thoughts of evolutionary psychology and cognition, cultural transmission, and perhaps a glancing reflection on structures of depiction from art history. I did not conceive of other permutations for some years.

I previously on slightly knew of some specific animals were observed in research setting and given painting materials as a way to mildly investigate the outcomes, but more frequently as appeal to humans. Desmond Morris’ work with the Chimpanzee Congo documented in his 1952 *Biology of Art*. Beyond allegories seen or heard of in Hokusai’s tale of the elegant landscape paintings of a fowl, or the

automatic painting of a donkey's brushing tail, dogs, dolphins, pigs, birds, apes, monkeys and others were staged with their marks and implement. In its most earnest form, the studies were attempts to crack the division between the vaunted registers of process and products of human perception and creativity, opposed to the closest analogous approximations seen in non-human activity. As other biological studies of evolution moved beyond Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and rather furthering the studies more contained within his later work on emotional affect, social and reproductive behavior, and expression within what what later be defined as its ecosystem, researchers also began testing cognition and psychological development through mark-making studies. It was only a research model, but in some discourse, it was an inevitable encroaching of the animal. Within art, the studies were interpreted as affronts to painters. Morris himself was a painter, in addition to primatologist, a surrealist in manner. But the chimpanzee painting studies similar to Morris' could be seen in others like Kohler and others, all researching with their respective animals in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as painting discourse only had just begun to leave behind a strict yet vague commitment to verisimilitude for nonrepresentational affect or motive. Had the paradigm shifts in both science and art of the time been less defensive, the research questions of these art wielding primatologists might have been reframed as a question of looking for colleagues of either field.

But does your colleague recognize themselves as such? Do they reflect upon the decisions that deploy their marks? What else do they associate with that effort, and what is recalled of the process when the art object leaves their sight? I had seen footage of elephants being trained to render an elephant likeness on their painting surfaces with clear ability. Most human viewers would be able to quickly identify the subject of the painting before the animal finished the few fluid lines that made up its four appropriately articulated limbs or curving trunk and tusks. But it was not the deftness with which the animal wielded a brush or color that fascinated me. Noticing the mahout's crop in hand, and inferring the likely limited value and unwillingness of the elephant toward its task, I felt skeptical of the image produced. It was the notion that an animal held within – either gained through human interaction and training or otherwise, still independently maintained – an inexact representational form of itself that it quite possibly did not associate with, yet it achieved through proprioceptive attention.

Beyond this confounding scene of the elephant, its painting and its anonymous trainer, there were questions I struggled with, being an often painting animal myself. Not only was the elephant's image of itself one of psychological tension as it represented the self, but the activity of painting seemed to be disjointed from that image. My response to the scene was a composition likely read first as in structure. It depicted an elephant rendering itself in the act of mark making. But at the time, I was struggling to articulate other questions of my own interests and tendencies as an artist: Does that ability to render oneself in that act of creation give that discreet image and the depicted process of its making or considerations give greater depth or cognitive/creative power? Aren't all representational efforts moored in this same relationship to their own being and difference? I wondered if there were other ways of appreciating both the lacking properties as well as hidden values of the self-image, or the awareness of a process like painting as feedback upon the environment, like an elephant may carve its well worn paths upon the land.

There were other questions within that painting. It produced a curious structure for thinking through other narratives of representing animals, and representations belonging to the animal, either mental or physical. How else might they map their experiences or environments? What non-food material relationships create the most significant experiences? Where are meanings constructed in play? Where can insight form creativity?

In that painted scene, the transmission of culture, however it should be defined, could be witnessed as shared between human and elephant. Though it certainly might have been in part sourced from traumas of denaturing, confinement, and at times physical abuse, most significantly to me was it that sitting on the easel, a pad of paper with that coarse linear elephant in profile was a compelling form of culture coaxed from that plain white surface. It was achieved by years of scaffolding prompts from human trainers. And though it might have failed certain psychological criteria and motivations, that resulting image had to be considered. Was it a deceptive vanity and our own bias towards the graphic communication and entertainment that spurred through the teaching of these activities, or imaginative inquiry to stage art as this fundamental interspecies production? I sought to look for other forms of this exchange were tangible for both non-human and human facilitator. Mirrors, puzzle boxes, masks, screens, models made up my



collections of tools. As an MFA candidate, fields and ideas of biomimicry, observations of animals' folk concepts of physics and eventually readings in biosemiotics all arose in that new line of questioning.

I take a continued interest in directing these attentions between modes of nature and culture, sorting how one can navigate and define interactions of mental and physical space. The objects are able to illustrate the ideas behind the enrichment strategy. Demonstrating how these tools develop, complicate, and compel how the animal relates sequences of behavior and environment does give them an unusual symbolic power despite their simple forms and physical function. They are intended as didactic things. Where they are objects of non-materially productive play, like images and their contained subjects, they are active bridges between the conditions of captivity and nature. A richer imagined world emanates from that object, and denotes the changes of that environment. A barrel swings from a long dead tree. A box tilts towards the waning sun. When they consider both the captive and ancestrally wild animal's life, cognitive processes and environment, there are slippages between modes of play, behavior, experience and imagination.

These paintings function in a way that is a representation of the elephant's world. She presses a lever, or she spins a top, and the world is changed. Archimedes would propose, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world". These elephants' objects perform an application of that idea, but their goal is not to perform with such scale complexity. It is to show the simple shared quality of experience, to move between the human and the elephant. That these objects are worth considering as artforms for another species, that even without their labels of human concepts, they facilitate interactions between the physical and mental worlds within and perceived from external sources. Recognizing the mobility of an object, discovering its impact and the ability of the environment to shift in form, to be represented and affected in an indirect way. In general, that an animal's psychological needs or function may strike as roughly similar to that of human is useful, however argument by analogy between species cuts away information about differing valuation of shared environments or activities. In some cases, study of animals by humans can overlook the roles that the individual animals themselves enact in those

human modeled scenarios, and degrades the importance of the environment they're in.

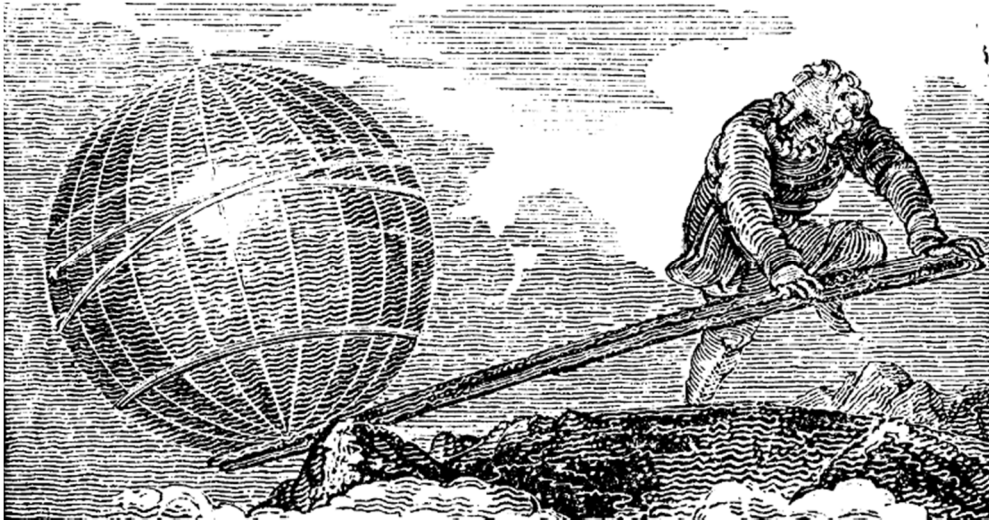


Figure 1.4: Engraving from *Mechanics Magazine* published in London in 1824.

Similar to the research scenarios described in Povinelli's *Folk Physics of Chimpanzees*, where the researcher reflects on the scaffolding understanding of physical relationships of materials by apes, the enrichment objects allow for an exploration of a dynamically changing world, one where outcomes are varied. Through their use, environmental factors are learned to be interdependently related and cannot be predictably accounted for without experience. In other words, it is the process of engaging with the enrichment object that produces the effect upon the animal's mental processes and its consideration of its environment, not prescribed by the object itself.

Though the reasons for and methods of zoological confinement are less the concern here, the environment of captivity does provide a specific set of conditions and vantages that can speak to distance and mediation. Within enrichment strategies, implemented objects or series of actions are provided for the animals to bring out species-specific behavior that their captive spaces do not immediately allot for. With this, they are objects containing and in some way simulating the spaces and behaviors of wild creatures. By showing the animal user and viewer that their contexts can shift, it also intended to encourage them to register the present changes that they themselves can produce upon the environment. The creatures Heidegger once viewed as "poor in world", through the effect of objects he would also qualify as "worldless", all receive the benefit of some semblance of a world they do not immediately, physically

inhabit. There is a mental step to make with the enrichment object's use: put another way, the elephant knocks a ball from one world into another.

I'm led to think of a scene from Abbot's *Flatland*, when a sphere from the three-dimensional world passes into the characters' two dimensional existence. It expands and shrinks again, seen as only a circle from the two-dimensional characters perception, and they begin to comprehend its unknown volumes. When excluding information from a subjective view, the nonhuman can be considered as actors representing themselves in fictional settings, with their capacities lent to a narrative external to their own. I attempt to avoid getting stuck at this level of rhetoric by using targets belonging to neither species, objects intended for their affecting function, where mutual attentions become layered together. By sharing in visual and material culture, as well as the attached behaviors and their interpretation, we can provide mutual ground for looking and communicating.

In this body of work, my intentions were to ask what enrichment strategies are performing, where they're seen, how they I arrive at this series of paintings after years of oblique searching. It was not the first time that my trajectory as an artist has doubled back in some way, and find new depth. Though I don't always attempt the subject, for many years I have been stuck on the challenges found in tasking myself with the representation of animals, and dissecting the obstacles and loops of thought that kind of enacting required. The animal's role, when described as a major "other" depicted throughout human art history, is our species' likely first examples of a reflexive metaphor. For us, they prompted a challenging reading of other life, the close yet often imperceptible relationship between minds. John Berger lays out the scene across ancient plains, they were both targets and surfaces not only for tools of hunting but projections of our own narratives and models of thinking. They changed how we saw other parts of the world, other phenomena and forms. Stones among the cave were then chosen as painting surfaces for their likeness to animal forms, building up that ability to search for and discern relationships between experiences. Early humans' picture making contorted elements of natural world into representations of other parts, and merged them with our own mental images, imagined narratives and desires. The animal, the entity first experienced as clear and relatable "other" to the human species moved as it reacted to us. It acted out its own worlds, and helped us form the logical structures of our own. It looked back, sharing evidence of its sentience. In

framing my studies this way, I am informed by two symposia held just off campus at the Salk Institute, CARTA's semi-annual meetings, most recently on Technology & Tool Use and Imagination in our current and historical modes. There, discourse and studies of anthropogeny helped me reconstruct questions of what was afforded to the animal in those first interactions. Even to name them was to delineate what apparently could not name itself, to relegate life that was unable to share its own systems of thought. What the animal did not manifest for itself, humans invented around them, including conceptions of self. In attempts to understand and employ those distinct beings as subjects, that continuous imagery of the animal-other proliferated. It propels curiosity towards the animal, towards shedding our layers of invention upon the animal. The human effort to be best attentive to the animal has hopes of seeing the creature for itself, all inventions shed. This might be achieved by the animal exhibiting its own creativity, so that humans may witness a signification, valuation or sublimation beyond a human source.

What was our willingness to ask such questions at that first encounter? Prior to any narratives of Adam's naming of the beasts, and before Linnaeus, who self-described as the "Second Adam", had drafted and ordered taxons of known beings, I think vague ideas of speciation were sparked there upon the painted wall, a division as the set picture plane. There we looked to the marks that make the image, like we look to the animal – as evidence of a narrative both within and outside of ourselves. Narrative and image produce what can be an idealized story, but it can be unapproachable just the same, conceptually flighty. Thomas Nagel's "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" speaks to the intractable task of understanding a nonhuman subjectivity. To his view, the effort to do so is an asymptote, a line that never intersects. But to refer back to Berger's view, we choose to depict the animal not as reliable witnesses of non-human life, but from a knowingly unclear human position, with human factored attentions and values unavoidably attached.

Even when present in close proximity, an experience of the animal occurs imaginatively, from human vantages, through fences lining space and knowledge. Though the barriers between human and animal subjectivity are partially permeable through scientific practice, this artistic body of work is not simply a concern of linear paths drawn through nature. The function of these depictions of objects, like images animals, is to look but also to comfortably not know. Referring to an installation by natural history focused artist, Mark Dion, Norman Bryson writes, "Nature and animals become not fixed entities fully

explained by hierarchies of natural order but provocative forces whose properties remain radically unknown and unknowable.”

For years after that paint by number mountain lion, I was left wondering what that early effort as a paint-wielding animal achieved. What abilities did I exercise or gain? Who was ultimately creating this image? What had I learned of the animal, assembled somewhere between the image on the box, my previous effort as a curious young researcher, my mental image, both prescribed and distorted into what laid before me? That tension between a frustrated projection and an unsatisfied execution remained part of my pictorial practice for many years. The animal was an idealized form, where at some level, one depicted instance of a creature had to correlate and stand for all others of that species. As my conceptual questioning and structures advanced with age and experience, each project had to maneuver and perform flawlessly birds imagined and rendered in flight. And I carried this for much of my time as a graduate student. It incapacitated me for quite some time.

I work with animal imagery and subjects for much of the same reason they are deployed in fables and cartoons. I do not aim to distance myself from those uses. By considering what the structures of such thought require of the creator and the viewer. John Berger’s essay “Why Look at Animals?” describes the valuable layers of simultaneous readings and meanings shared between human and animal. And continuing that trajectory, I can find most examples of anthropomorphizing to be productive associations. Steve Baker writes in “Representing Animals” on anthropomorphization as a generative tool, as any movement between conceptual registers would. They can be read as characterizations of the human, caricature and exaggeration as the traits and behaviors of human life overlapping their wilder forms. But I intend to productively and approvingly compare my efforts as an artist to the elephant’s repetitious batting at a tree trunk or form of plastic to know my effect, to know my inner workings. In the production of this series of paintings, I held the previously experienced object in mind and rendered what I conceived of its connection to its surroundings, established my own with it, and encountered my abilities to perceive and change it, wield its relationships, and fundamentally give it shape as I conceive of it.

I contrast what has been a difficult process of widening my practice, my attention and appreciation of what creative production asked of me. I spent much of my MFA years looking to complicate, to

purposefully and productively turn in a labyrinth I did not know, and it frustrated me to attempt that. But the solutions and growth were in simplifying and refining. It echoed in what this whole project has meant to me, how I struggled to know it, to feel it, and engage with it through doubt, avoidance, and fear. I had to learn myself through a series of objects by pushing myself against a relatively simple machine. I too moved objects around, sought anything useful on the Southern California landscape, all along trying to understand what potential those strange things encountered could perform for me, to anxiously apply those findings. I watched others press their intellectual and physical weight against their respective objects and ideation, and saw my work as limited and unproductive.

Solutions and insight came from unexpected teaching sources while this series took shape. In the wake of various expressions of personal mental health and overwhelming rumination as to why I was following yet failing at a path that I had determined for myself, I arrived at a beginning meditation practice in the last year of the MFA experience. I had fumbled objects of meditation intermittently for years — the free flow of the breath, any patience with my visual field, discomforting sensations in the body, thoughts, the elusive and illusory sense of self. Sitting and gazing into space, sometimes at physical objects, sometimes at light and shadow, I was prompted with phrases like “Who’s looking?” and instructed to simply witness shifting color behind my eyelids. Like with the elephants and their objects, I was encouraged by my own caregivers to see this as benefiting me psychologically, to concern myself with something more immediate rather than ruminated. Outside of the accumulated texts of art history, scientific and theoretical readings, it was my extracurricular work to salvage and reframe how I engaged with experience. It quickly became a mode where I attempted to unknot my difficulties motivating and justifying creative production and research, to limit projection and rumination and appreciate simple unprompted movements of mind and matter. Mostly, it was a place to grow confident in not knowing, but witnessing.

In Dzogchen traditions of meditation, the approach to dissolving a construction of the self is taught as a path. Unlike other teachings, it is summarized as “the path that clarifies confusion.” It is an expansive and narrowed looking without knowing or anticipating the cause or outcome. Elsewhere in this extracurricular practice, I encountered an image or diagram that just as likely would have appeared in Alexis Rockman’s more didactic or palimpsestic compositions of natural history narratives of evolutionary

trees depicted with modern materials and contexts. The traditional image depicts and describes meditation practice as a winding path, populated by several animal characters to represent aspects and forces of the meditator's mind. They are both antagonistic and supporting figures. An elephant represents the difficult of the mind, resistant to being led, prone to its own whims of distraction and will. The elephant changes color in this diagram of mindfulness practice, becoming more cooperative and present.

Throughout the last several years as a visual art student, I sought to complicate and contextualize my interests in animal cognition and metaphorical relationships to intersect with painting practice. But with this body of work, it was a need of simplification, a reduction to fundamental experience and perception that allowed me to produce the works. I began the series as a mode of practice, after noting the changes between visits to San Diego Zoo and Safari Park's elephant enclosures, I began creating studies during my visits. I was seeking to research and jumpstart other projects. Some weeks, a tire swung from one post, where a blue ball later replaced it. The containers of food hung some 18 feet in the air. The initial efforts were made to bolster painting practice. An elephant's object painted became an effort to swing a pendulum of production back. Painting an object to know its psychological effect became my goal. Like a narrative of a Dzogchen practitioner, the production itself became the demonstration.

The decisions to paint these sites and objects is informed by enrichment strategies as well. In zoological garden settings, the objects used are rotated often or some cases daily for variation of activities and behavioral responses to be encouraged and expressed. In broader contexts, these objects are used to encourage social bonding when shared between multiple animals, foraging behaviors, and other forms of environmental awareness. Visual art, as a mode of organizational thinking, can help us encourage us to build relationships of meaning, experience, and environment. We develop associations, determine patterns, and do our best to demystify our surroundings. We attempt to convey our vague findings to one another through repetition and demonstrations. The same is seen in the elephant as it tosses a barrel over a ravine, other elephants and humans looking on in the distance. A groove is worn into the earth at chain length. Paint accumulates at the horizon line. Markers of thought are made manifest on the land.

A final point of consideration in this project stemmed from trying to contextualize my work within a family history that brought me to UC San Diego, something that burdened me with quite a bit of guilt,

confusion and hesitation that both marked and sustained my time here. I have avoided or refused to attach it to my life as an artist, though I know it informs, or at least has facilitated my making. My creative work did not contain any tangible signs or acknowledgement for those narratives as a fortunate son of an immigrant family. I could not reconcile playing with images of elephants and chimpanzees with the hardships members of my family navigated before me. I could not address my world the same way, knowing and feeling the difficult circumstances other families faced or were threatened with at the border. Recently, in Geisel Library, a curated display of regional history helped appease some of this self-imposed expectation to confront that history. I did not know how that narrative of crossing something both indelible and invented resonated in me. But whatever materials embody it, I know its crossing to be a productive dialectic. In that display case were photographs of border monuments used as representations of a border between Mexico and the United States. There was no fence, no wall, no guard tower or patrol. Though I'll always remain uncertain of his exact longitude and latitude as he passed from one position to another, I was told my grandfather crossed the border some time in the 1940s, and he would have potentially passed between these markers, though he might not have seen them pass. They were photographs were of monoliths and obelisks, objects prompting divisions between worlds, between invented categories of beings. But those shaped stone pillars, seen on landscapes like those I had imagined and depicted as similar scenery collapsed so many of my concerns together, and eased expectations for myself. Those related visions of a history, a meeting of an imagined line and an unfolding of art objects let me appreciate and arrive at a conclusion that all experience brings me here, where a new attention to simple occurrences and coincidence can help me find a confident balance of knowing and not knowing, and to better engage that experience ahead.





Figure 1.5: Border Monument 227, from David Taylor's "Working the Line" project

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, Edwin. *Flatland*. Simon & Brown, 2018.
- Baker, Steve. *The Postmodern Animal*. Reaktion Books, 2008.
- Berger, John. *About looking*. New York: Vintage international, 1991.
- Danto, Arthur C. *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*. Abrams, 1993.
- Despret, Vinciane. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked The Right Questions*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Dion, Mark, *Mark Dion*. Phaidon, 1997.
- Kirksey, Eben. *The Multispecies Salon*. Duke University Press, 2014
- Markowitz, Hal, and Jenny Markowitz. *Enriching Animal Lives*. Mauka Press, 2011.
- Massumi, Brian. *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*. Duke University, 2014.
- Nagel, Thomas. *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Povinelli, Daniel J, and James E Reaux. *Folk Physics For Apes*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2010.
- Shepherdson, David J. *Second Nature*. Smithsonian Books, 2012.
- Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Ramos, Filipa. *Animals*. MIT Press, 2016.
- Rockman, Alexis, *Alexis Rockman*. Monacelli Press, 2003.
- Rothfels, Nigel. *Representing Animals*. Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Yates, John. *The Mind Illuminated*. Atria Books, 2017.
- Uexküll, Jakob von. *A Foray Into The Worlds Of Animals And Humans*. University Of Minnesota Press, 2010.