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Sentient Beings

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SENTIENT BEINGS

By

Betsey MacDonald

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Masters of Studio Art

In

The Department of Art
The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2009

SENTIENT BEINGS

A Thesis Presented

By

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ABSTRACT

My proposal was to create a body of work consisting of oil paintings with an animal theme. I would strive to produce realistic paintings that would attain a level of naturalistic representation with an emphasis on color harmonies, paint quality and composition. I produced more than 30 oil paintings. My images evolved from portrait like paintings of horses and dogs to animals in their natural environments. I became fascinated with groupings of animals and the spaces between them. I considered different croppings, pairings of animals and interaction between them. As I worked on these paintings, I found I wanted to portray the less pleasant reality of animal existence. I felt compelled to paint their death and suffering. I wanted to make a statement with my art. I began to paint images of slaughtered animals

In creating this work, I've reaffirmed my stance on animals rights, my belief in vegetarianism as an ethical choice and my conviction to live a lifestyle which causes no suffering.

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"When I bestride him I soar. The earth sings when he touches it" (Malone 373).

Shakespeare wrote this about a horse. I can't read it without being moved and truthfully, choking up. Horses mean that much to me. I am overwhelmed by their beauty and generosity. They aren't some little girls' fanciful dream to me, although they were until my first horse arrived when I was five years old. I have had horses ever since, in fact, for fifty years. I have always trained them and cared for them myself. I've bred them and raised babies. I have a race horse who I rescued with a broken ankle from the track. He was an hour from being shot. My old horses stay with me until they die. They are not a frivolous possession. They are my passion. Horses ground me. They connect me to nature in many ways. We, my horses and I, spend hours in the woods, investigating trails and watching wildlife. We fly through corn fields and walk beaches. My horses remind me that life can be grand whenever I am with them.

So, I paint them. There is nothing I would rather study. There is nothing I would rather look at. My brush strokes follow their contours that I know so well from hours of grooming. My colors that I mix come from the highlights I've memorized while riding or while leaning against a fence just watching them graze. I feel a sense of energy when I paint them because I know their energy and power so well and I try to convey that energy.

I used to be a bit embarrassed to say "I paint horses". I attended college in the late 60's, a time when representational art was immediately dismissed as illustrative by my professors. I dreaded critiques. The horse subject was deemed sappy and sentimental, one of those cute, girly themes like kitties and flowers. I'm old enough now that I have come to realize I can paint what I love in a way that is not sentimental but rather expressive of a sincere and meaningful understanding that I have of my chosen subject. In 2D Synthesis, Stephen Fisher told us to draw what we know. I know horses better than I know myself and I find them far more inspirational to look at. Stephen directed me to study the horses of Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix. Their horses radiate power and strength. Muscles bulge with light and shadow. As gorgeous as they are, the horses are stylized, perfect horses. They are all cresty necked stallions with huge haunches and flaring nostrils. They rear and prance. Most horses aren't spirited stallions. They are nurturing mares and gentle geldings, wonderful, calm, giving, backyard horses. These are the horses I know and want to capture in my paintings.

As a painter, I've spent hours studying other painters to learn more about color harmonies, composition and developing a sense of space. I peruse photos of Jenny Saville's paintings with a magnifying lens trying to understand her spontaneity and brushwork. I delve into Lucian Freud's realism. Freud also paints his own horses and

dogs as well as figures. I want my paintings to have the sensuality of a John Singer Sargeant, with warm whites and cool darks defining muscle and bone. I went to the British Art Museum to see George Stubb's work and there I discovered Sir Alfred Munnings. I don't know of any artist who has mastered the art of painting the equine image as well as Munnings. He owned horses. He raised them. He spent his life with them. "What he saw and painted was part of the very soul of the artist and it was his personal involvement with what he depicted that was the basis of his genius" (Peralta-Ramos 13). I know horses as well as Munnings. I, like Munnings, am fascinated with light's effects and paint handling and blending a painterly approach with representational form. With every horse painting I do, I strive for Mullins mastery both of his handling of the image and also of his portrayal of the equine spirit.

Therefore, this graduate work has been about painting horses along with other animals I know well, such as my labs, my neighbors' cows and the deer I feed daily. I want to depict them in their natural settings, relaxing in the sun, making friends in a field or being startled by a sound in the woods. I've worked at creating more than just a likeness. I've become fascinated with investigating paint quality. I've learned to carefully choose colors and to use color to allow my animals to blend into their surroundings, as animals are so perfectly evolved to do. I am delighted by every new color that I mix. I treat each stroke as if I were running my hand over the animal. My strokes follow the contours of the forms to help create a sense of three dimensions. I have thoroughly enjoyed working very hard at this. My passion for these animals has deepened as I've strived to develop the imagery. I have looked at every superficial bone, eyeballs and ears, hair directions, every nook and cranny of a face, whether horse, dog, deer or cow. My own animals are no doubt wondering why I just keep staring at them.

As I've created this body of work, my focus has grown to include more than painting accurate images of animal life. I've made the decision, out of my love for animals, to paint their suffering and their deaths resulting from our brutality. Do animals suffer? Are they aware? Do they experience pain? Certainly anyone who has ever loved an animal would answer "yes" to these questions. I have no doubt that they do. I taught science for 25 years so I don't consider just anecdotal information. I read studies and I try to find the facts.

In *The Spectrum of Pain*, Richard Sergeant writes, "Every particle of factual evidence supports the contention that the highest mammalian vertebrates experience pain sensations at least as acute as our own. Apart from the complexity of the cerebral cortex their nervous systems are almost identical to ours and their reactions to pain remarkably similar. (Robbins 36)

"Responsive to or conscious of sense impressions" is The *Time Dictionary's* definition of "sentient" (Bolander 251). From my life-long association with animals, I know that animals are responsive to and very conscious of sense impression. Hence, my title of this paper is "Sentient Beings". The Dalai Lama has said,

Different forms of life in different aspects of existence make up the teaming denizens of this earth of ours....and all beings primarily seek peace, comfort and security. Life is as dear to a mute creature as it is to a man. Just as one wants happiness and fears pain, just as one wants to live and not die, so do other creatures. (Stromberg 48)

Because of my respect for animals, I've made a conscious decision to avoid being a part of any animal's suffering. I've been a vegetarian for 17 years. I try to "do no harm" which, although I am not a Buddhist, is the Buddhist guiding philosophy. I read about slaughter houses because I think I should know what goes on. I read about factory farms. I ask about hunting experiences. I know that chicken breasts and hamburgers come from terribly abusive places. I know that most people would be horrified by how animals are treated if they bothered to look into our inhumane system of food production. Michael Pollan, in his *Omnivore's Dilemma* says:

The industrialization and brutalization of animals in America is a relatively new, evitable and local phenomenon. No other country raises and slaughters its food animals quite as intensively or as brutally as we do. No other people in history has lived at quite so great a remove from the animals they eat. Were the walls of our meat industry to become transparent, literally or even figuratively, we would not long continue to raise, kill, and eat animals the way we do. Tail docking and sow crates and beak clipping would disappear overnight, and the days of slaughtering four hundred head of cattle an hour would promptly come to an end- for who could stand the sight? Yes, meat would get more expensive. We'd probably eat a lot less of it, too, but maybe when we did eat animals we'd eat them with the consciousness, ceremony, and respect they deserve. (Pollan 333)

Children and adults love to see the little lambs at petting zoos. But yet, at Easter, they can't wait for the leg of lamb. Isn't it clear that "lamb" is a baby sheep, who hasn't even lived for one year? Even if a lamb were a "dumb animal", would it deserve this? However, a recent National Geographic article on animal intelligence pointed out that "sheep recognize different faces (about 50 other sheep and 10 humans) and still know them two years later. They are calmed by familiar faces and can tell both happy and angry expressions (they prefer the former)" (Moral 46) Isn't it well known that veal is a baby cow who has been torn from his mother and tied to a dog house on a short chain

until he is slaughtered? We all know this but we deny it. Some people won't eat veal, but to them beef is fine. Consider this description from *Slaughterhouse*: "Improperly stunned cattle regained consciousness after they'd been shackled and hoisted onto the overhead rail. In addition to kicking and thrashing as they hung upside down, they'd be blinking and stretching their necks from side to side, really frantic." (Eisnitz 28)

I felt compelled to research this and to paint it, to convey this information and to make it public for viewing and consideration. I needed to look at images of these poor animals and to try to paint their horror, somehow while still using beautiful paint, energetic strokes and luscious color. I found it very painful, but necessary, to do.

I hope the paintings are unsettling to the viewer. How can you view the grace of the horse, the expressive and unique faces of each cow, and the relaxation of labs in sun and not know they are all "sentient" and deserving creatures? They all feel the same fear and pain as we do. Their nervous systems are just like ours. Their desire to survive is just as strong as ours. Their ability to experience fear and pain is no different from ours. Robert Lewis Stevenson said, "We consume the carcasses of creatures of like appetites, passions, and organs as our own, and fill the slaughterhouses daily with screams of pain and fear"(Pearce).

I feed a family of deer daily. I am thrilled to be able to be so close and to watch them. Most people get a kick out of seeing a wild deer and many people I know are horrified by the concept of hunting. Why does anyone think hunting is worse than buying a hamburger? Is it because deer are prettier than cows? Is it because someone shoots the deer? Do they think the cows enjoy being prodded into pens and trucks and being slammed in the head or having their throats cut, often while still alive? I searched the internet for images of deer. I found photos of piles of deer in pick-up beds with gunshot wounds in their sides, proud hunters holding deer heads and deer gutted and hanging. I assume anyone who photographs their killing and posts it on the internet must be quite proud of their prowess. The gutted deer were difficult to paint but I found sometimes I could remove myself from thinking about their fear and pain and focus on texture of paint and on the physical properties of painting but my questions about our humanity keep returning. Gautama Buddha said, "May all that have life be delivered from suffering"(Pearce). I have visions of the terror experienced by these poor deer before they are shot and the terror then followed by suffering until their death. Albert Schweitzer said, "Until he extends his circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace"(Davis 108) Why does man think it appropriate to inflict this kind of suffering on other sentient beings when we no longer have to do it for food?

The movie Babe was very popular. That's "SOME PIG!" Charlotte, the spider, wrote in her web about Wilbur, the pig, in the children's story *Charlotte's Web* (White 78). Do kids know they are eating Wilbur or Babe at a Sox game when they order a Fenway Frank? What happened to that connection? When painting my little pig, I was amazed at the delicate openings in the ears. Ears that are very much like ours. Her mouth was set in a smile but her eyes with the tiny white lashes were very worried. John Robbins says about pigs:

They can be good friends, playful, loyal and affectionate. Watching what happens to these good-hearted creatures in today's pig factories has not been at all easy for me. At each stage of the assembly line they are treated with complete disdain for the fact that they are our fellow creatures. But they are sentient beings, and they remain so to the end. (Robbins 74)

Most pigs exist to end up with a slit throat. They live in sow crates with cement floors and no room to even turn around until they are fat enough to slaughter. I used staccato brush strokes to paint the blood around my dead pig. I didn't think they should be smooth and gentle. Intelligence studies indicate that pigs have one of the highest measured I.Q.'s of all animals, surpassing even the dog. In America, would it be ok to slit the throat of a dog for dinner? Why do we value dogs so differently from pigs when their differences are mostly superficial? St. Francis of Assisi said, "Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission—to be of service to them whenever they require it" (Stromberg 11).

My paintings are my service to them, both the happy animals in their environments and the poor dead souls. Hippocrates believed that the soul is the same in all living creatures, although the bodies of each are different. So do I. I will paint animals as long as I can. I will paint them for me and I will paint them for those who love them and I will paint them with the hope that a few people who view these paintings will give them careful consideration. Maybe they'll order the vegetable pasta instead of the veal. Maybe they'll make a choice to investigate vegetarian options and discover how delicious fruits and vegetables can be. Maybe they'll even find themselves healthier both physically and mentally because of it. In *The Scientific Basis of Vegetarianism*, Dr William Harris clearly lays out the scientific evidence that a vegetarian diet is the most balanced diet for humans. "Vegetarian diets—naturally low in saturated fat, high in fiber, and replete with cancer-protective phytochemicals—help to prevent cancer", according to Dr. Neal Barnard of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "Vegetarian diets also help prevent heart disease" (Barnard). Nutritionists "also discovered that vegetarian diets could, within weeks, significantly reduce a person's blood pressure" (Barnard). "Non-

insulin-dependent (adult onset) diabetes can be better controlled and sometimes even eliminated through a low-fat, vegetarian diet along with regular exercise" (Barnard).

For our own peace and for our fellow earthlings we must take the step to expand our ethics and our values. It is my belief that painting has the power to communicate issues both personal and universal. I created these paintings to engage and disarm the viewer and with the intention of making the viewer question their choices both in diet and in lifestyle. I hope the viewer will live with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake. The decision to become more humane requires becoming more informed and making fact based choices and not ignoring the facts because they are unnerving. We need to awaken our conscience and make our world a more ethical and loving place. We need to respect our fellow earthlings.

Gandhi believed that "the greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated" (Robbins 48). In my small way, on the behalf of our animals, I hope my work will contribute to making this nation great.

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