

# **LOVE LETTERS TO THE ANIMALS I KNOW**

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## Abstract

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My thesis project focuses on using visual arts practice and storytelling to represent more-than-human animals traditionally categorized as “livestock.” Through volunteer work and relationship building at a farm sanctuary, and respectful creative processes, I am strengthening interspecies friendships and encouraging more empathetic connections with more-than-human animals. Integrating critical animal studies, empathy studies, storytelling, drawing and printmaking methods, I aim to inspire others to reconsider their relationships with commonly recognized farm animals such as sheep, geese, pigs, cows and chickens, and recognize them as unique individuals with agency and inherent value. I value my relationships with the animals who inspire my artwork. First and foremost, my practice is rooted in sincere love.

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## Key Terms

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Farm animals	More-than-human animals who are kept on a farm, generally for agricultural purposes.
Livestock	More-than-human animals who are considered as stock in farms, whose bodies are used to produce various products for human consumption.
Industrial/factory farms	Farm systems where more-than-human animals are raised for slaughter in harsh conditions to maximize profits.
More-than-human animals	All animals excluding humans.
Earth	Both the soil/dirt that animals walk on and the Earth as our shared home.

Note: I use “more-than-human animals” when referring to animals and excluding humans.

Sometimes, I use the word “animals” for ease of phrase or when I am also referring to humans. I also use a plural form for the word for animals, such as “sheeps” and “gooses”, as this denotes the animals as individuals. These decisions are informed by the *HUMN 317: Animal Ethics and Creativity* Course Style Guide, taught by Julie Andreyev at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

## Introduction

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I am grateful to live and work in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang (Montréal), the unceded Indigenous lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation. Tiohtià:ke was traditionally known as a gathering place for meeting and exchange. I am grateful to be in this place, thinking about new ways to connect with more-than-human animals.

During my time as a low-residency MFA student, I developed a project that reexamines relationships with animals commonly referred to as “livestock,” and who are victims of industrial farming practices. The term “livestock” reduces these animals to mere commodities, overlooking their individuality. I advocate for treating farm animals with respect, recognizing their unique personalities. My research questions are:

How does my artistic practice of mindful drawing and printmaking strengthen my own friendships with more-than-human animals?

Can visual representations of meaningful relationships between myself and more-than-human animals, traditionally considered as “livestock,” encourage more compassionate ways of being in relationships with these animals for viewers?

I am passionate about connecting with more-than-human animals, sharing their stories, and portraying them through my visual art. I believe in engaging with them and talking about them with the utmost care to model respectful engagement for art audiences. This method informs my artistic practice. In the following essay, I will first discuss my motivation for creating works exploring interspecies friendship, and honouring more-than-human animals traditionally seen as “livestock”. Next, I will outline the steps that led to the development of my thesis work, along with supporting theories and the work of other artists who are engaging with similar themes or methods. Finally, I will describe my printmaking and drawing practice, which involves

silkscreen, etching and portrait-style drawing and how it deepens my connections with more-than-human animals with whom I have built friendships.

## Motivation

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As a child, I loved walking in the woods with my grandmother and her two dogs. I would spend hours in the forest, known as *Parc des Arbres*, which has now been bulldozed to make way for a new light rail system. During our walks, I loved watching for frogs sunbathing or swimming through the marshland. I was desperate for the creatures to like me, and I longed to connect with them. If a frog jumped in my direction, I would take it as a sign that I could hang around just a little longer. I recognized that the frogs had agency and lives of their own, and that they had their own social structures. I desired to be invited in by them to understand them better. When I looked into their eyes, I recognized their individuality. I wondered: what did they see when they looked into mine?

In my early teens, I fell in love with a dachshund named Cartouche while volunteering at a dog rescue center, and consequently adopted him. His life had an enormous impact on mine. His small body, odd in its proportions, reminded me of a little pig. He taught me to imagine that the pig on my dinner plate had a personality of their own. My outlook shifted as I started to understand the division between animals seen as companions and those viewed as food. I explored *PETA* 2, a branch of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—a website geared towards teenagers. I forced myself to watch videos of the horrendous treatment of animals being held captive for various human uses, bearing witness to their unimaginable suffering. It is of utmost importance to question how the systems that abuse more-than-human animals, particularly those whom we consider food in the West, were normalized as part of our culture. These systems view more-than-human animals as products that can be exploited and

consumed. I did not have intrinsic cultural or religious connections to animal personhood. Yet, my childhood love for my animal companions, initially learned from my mother, led me to cultivate an egalitarian view of all animals.

Donna Haraway writes about the importance of questioning “what stories we use to tell other stories” (12). Considering this, I ask myself whose stories I wish to tell and how. What are the hierarchical implications of being a human representing more-than-human animals? I am uncertain if I have an answer to this question. However, ignoring the subject entirely due to any lingering uncertainty would be much less productive to the cause. So, if my artwork causes someone to think about the individuals I draw for one moment longer than they would otherwise, then I will have succeeded in some way.

With these ideas in mind, I create drawings and prints representing more-than-human animals to promote empathy, acknowledge their individuality, and encourage interspecies friendships. I value my relationships with the animals who inspire my artwork. First and foremost, my practice is rooted in sincere love. I feel proud to know them, I want to honour them and demonstrate my love for them. Through my art, I aim to create deeper connections between myself and more-than-human animals and broaden the possibilities of interspecies friendships for myself and others.



**Figure 1.** *Untitled*, 2022. Photogravure and relief, 29.75 x 44.5 inches.

*Untitled* (Figure 1) is a photogravure print on cotton paper completed in my first semester in the MFA program in 2022. This photo-based work began as a digital image taken during a camping trip in the Parc National Des Grands-Jardins on the traditional and unceded territory of the Nitassinan (Innu) and Wendake-Nionwentsïo Nations. On this trip, walking and observing my surroundings were integral to my work. I encountered several more-than-human beings: mosses, lichens, porcupines, a hare, caribous, and pheasants, each of whom I felt grateful to have encountered, even if just for a moment. This work is significant to my thesis because it is itself a beginning and an ending. I began my MFA program without the intention of creating artwork based on more-than-human animals. While I was deeply passionate about animal ethics, it was a sensitive and heartbreaking subject for me. As a teen, I expressed my beliefs about animals to others but often faced ridicule. This made it difficult for me to share my thoughts on the matter and explore them in my artwork. I am grateful to my supervisor, Julie Andreyev, for supporting



my exploration and experimentation and, most importantly, for reassuring me that this work is important.

The first print I made in the MFA program, when I began exploring more-than-human animal stories, is *Fiona*, an etching on cotton paper (Figure 2). Fiona was a turkey I admired from a distance for several months during winter and spring of 2021-22. I wrote an accompanying story about her:



**Figure 2.** *Fiona*, 2023. Etching, image area 24 x 18 inches.

A single turkey lay in the yard by my mother's home for several days. I spent time there too, watching her from afar. Then, I noticed her limping. I wondered if I should offer her food to keep her nearby to rest her leg. So, I Googled "What to feed turkeys?" and was offered tips on how to fatten turkeys up for slaughter. Then, in the evening, I saw her fly into a tree, her large body perched precariously on a branch. To this, I Googled "Turkey roosting," only to be given suggestions on finding where turkeys sleep to "plan a successful hunt."

The last I saw of her was a three-toed footprint in the snow. I think of her struggle in this world; what is her place here? How can I continue to remember her?

In a dream, Fiona returned to us for food as the snow began to melt. I left her some peas and watched her peck at them, nourishing her large body. Her gentle eyes shifted in my direction, but she looked past me at my mum's neighbour, who came from across the street. He was laughing, but I was not sure why. I thought he was scolding us, but instead, he was laughing at us for feeding her. He remarked that he was hungry for dinner, assuming we would laugh along with him...

The print and story about Fiona function as a kind of observational study. It demonstrates my relationships with the animals I draw and how getting to know them is fundamental to my methodology. Using etching was crucial for this project because it demands meticulous attention throughout the process, from preparing the plate to the drawing. I used a non-toxic acid resist and drew directly onto the resist with markers. The drawing was based on a preliminary sketch. Then, I began to draw through the surface of the resist with my etching needle. Finally, I etched and printed it. Etching is a time-consuming process that involves several stages to complete. The time spent on the process allowed for deeper reflection on Fiona. Etching was used as a method to create multiples and was important for the dissemination of information. I value the link between traditional printmaking methods such as etching and its connection to producing books and telling stories, as this print also functions as a way for me to tell Fiona's story. Creating the

This is a preview of Emma Pallay's 2024 thesis.

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