

*Wins.* Most of my work in the show was found-wood assemblage with animal stencils or detailed paintings of animal skulls. With all of my animals missing or deceased in a setting of urban sprawl, Tori sincerely asked me how I was depicting nature as winning? I immediately recalled a conversation with the Montana-based artist Mary Ann Bonjorni. We wondered how long it would be into our lifetimes that the natural ecosystems would be completely managed by human beings and the natural order might completely dissolve? These two questions, separated by over a decade removed the final barrier in my mind. I began to allow the colorful, illustrative beasts of fantasy to emerge, first in sketches and then small paintings.

The new series draws from the pictorial traditions of Pop Art and Surrealism, and artists such as Paul Wunderlich, Odilon Redon, Peter Saul, Inka Essenhigh, Takashi Murakami, Nick Cave and Rick Bartow. Each of these painters and printmakers, from Wunderlich to Essenhigh rely on the figure-whether it be human, animal or a mash-up of both. Wunderlich and Redon

employ great textures and layers in their work and use printmaking and painting chemistries to create unexpected effects. Essenhigh and Saul abstract their figures, sometimes to the point of being unrecognizable. While Saul uses intense colors with distinct value gradations and shading, Essenhigh and Murakami employ tight vector lines with solid swatches of color, echoing animation and Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Murakami exquisitely combines cute mushrooms with the horrors of atomic bomb mushroom clouds. Cave's *Soundsuits* have the human figure central to their core, but through textural accoutrements, proportional mutations and playful motion create fantastic chimera and altered proportions. Many of Bartow's human figures have animal heads, while others have human heads with animal bodies. Each of these artists balances beauty with creepiness; they further explore the disconcerting beauty of the surrealist dreamscape. They also continue to prove that painting is a vibrant, living language that has not yet exhausted things to say, despite the overwhelming attitude that "everything has been done before".

My work deviates from these inspirational artists most notably in my commitment to the animal form. With the exception of perhaps Bartow, the artists I have listed as my inspirations still place the majority of their imagery on the human figure (or in Murakami's work anthropomorphized mushrooms and flowers). Obviously animal imagery began in the Lascaux caves, was carried through studies by Albrecht Durer, past Edward Hick's *Peaceable Kingdom* and continues towards Marc Davis's *Bambi*. Yet, somewhere along the way animal-based imagery seems to have fallen out of favor; It has been relegated to posters of cosmic dolphins and black velvet paintings of canines playing card games.

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Spiritual or political concern for the environment and the animals and plants primarily is championed through landscape painting.

It is within these paintings and prints that I hope to balance the seemingly random generation of images from my mind's eye with my personal commitments to animals and the environment (and obviously the betterment for mankind through this process). I hope that by focusing on animals thriving in the Anthropocene I can challenge the viewer to consider how the world could exist in the not-so-distant-future through a fantastic, mythological and fictional portrayal of *nature always winning*. The animal is not the *other* but a potential doppelganger for the viewer-participant.



## Jason Sobottka

*Adventures Through the Anthropocene*

**The Gallery** at Tacoma Community College



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## Symbiotic Mutualism

The natural world is destined for a geo-engineered future, a future where the "balance of nature" is anthropologically orchestrated. How could nature evolve in that environment? What if the flora and fauna flourished? How could that happen? What would that look like?

Symbiotic Mutualism involves multiple organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship. Unlike parasitism, flora and fauna work together for feeding, care or protection. This connective relationship is at the heart of *Adventures Through the Anthropocene*. This illustrative and ornamental work focuses on colorful fantasy where flora, fauna and even human beings adapt, evolve, mutate and merge in order to survive in a dramatically altered, anthropogenic ecosystem. Its historical roots are within the medieval Christian Bestiary: Beasts from nature were depicted in grandiose style to showcase limited zoological knowledge, often in conjunction with biblical allegory. The beasts in this show are created from a similar passion and while their forms may not be as naïve, the element of fantasy remains.

5th Century Bestiary writer *Herodotus* discussed an early example of Symbiotic Mutualism in the crocodile and the birds that clean its teeth:

*In the water it is blind, but on land it is very keen of sight. As it lives chiefly in the river, it has the inside of its mouth constantly covered with leeches; hence it happens that, while all the other birds and beasts avoid it, with the trochilus it lives at peace, since it owes much to that bird: for the crocodile, when he leaves the water and comes out upon the land, is in the habit of lying with his mouth wide open, facing the western breeze: at such times the trochilus goes into his mouth and devours the leeches. This benefits the crocodile, who is pleased, and takes care not to hurt the trochilus.*

An enduring gift from the Bestiary tradition is the common term *crocodile tears*. The 13th Century Bestiary writer *Guillaume Le Clerc* says the Crocodile does only what is in its nature to do:

*If it meets and overcomes a man, it swallows him entire, so that nothing remains. But ever after it laments him as long as it lives.*

## Adventures Through the Anthropocene

The Nobel Prize winning meteorologist, Paul Crutzen, first mentioned the Anthropocene in 2000. This proposed geological time period marks the conclusion of the Holocene epoch and begins when humankind dramatically shapes the natural systems of the planet.

In my work animals, people and chimera are struggling in this environment. Yet, they are adapting, mutating, evolving and thriving (even if they must combine forces to do so). While the underlying concern in my artwork might be related to science, climate, the environment and animal welfare, these images are the furthest thing from scientific illustration. My works are fantastic, colorful and illustrative and often filled with dark humor. These animals have filled my imagination for many years. I no longer try and censor the beasts that spring

to my mind but instead render them and then try and figure out how they navigate the Anthropocene.

The very first work to illustrate the concept of mutation for survival is a small drawing of two pit bulls; one dog is emaciated while the other is healthy. The stronger one has two small human arms emerging from the dog's chest. *Adaption Saves from Starving* is straightforward: The surrealist mutated dog manages to feed while the other dog is malnourished. Kingfishers are emerging from a bull elk in order to combine vegetarian and carnivorous diets. Some of these combinations and mutations serve an obvious purpose while others might be purely visual or aesthetic decisions.

Spirituality or politics emerge in subtler ways, such as the Kevlar vests fitted to wolves or drone-monitored machine guns ratchet-strapped to endangered rhinoceroses by some well funded animal rights group. The overall theme of survival in the Anthropocene remains but is obviously rooted in contemporary issues of poaching and endangered species protection.

## The Animals and Chimera

Animals have been my subject matter for most of my career. Some animals have been subjects for a great while, such as the birds. The bird naturally harkens back to my childhood dinosaur fascination and has been a constant throughout my career. Other animals, such as the rabbits in this exhibition, are house rabbits that have shared their lives with my family. Wolves, elk and owls are prominent animals in the Pacific Northwest, while other animals, such as the elephants and rhinoceros are the high profile and politicized animals.

As this series progressed the human figure began to appear and greater elements of play entered. These figural elements are either characters personally involved in nature's survival or else represent chimera spirits: inter-dimensional or spiritual beings who have a great stake in the survival of flora and fauna. The Bestiary allusion comes up once again, but this time with a nod to the spiritual concept of stewardship and shepherding the Earth's God-given resources.

The Elkotaur is the Pacific Northwest's

greatest mythological figure: The tattooed hipster, Elkotaur, supplants the classical Minotaur, a creature with the body of a man but the head of a bull. The Elkotaur's halo alludes to a holy part played in the Anthropocene and as the beast fluxes between two different dimensions his tattoos become clear as they too are anthropomorphized pop culture animals. Another mythological beast is the Deer Spirit, standing guard over the deer with carnivorous pitcher plants growing from their backs. She is the patron saint for the merging of flora and fauna.

## Nature Always Wins

The paintings and prints exhibited in *Adventures Through the Anthropocene* stem from images that I have envisioned throughout my life but I hesitated to make real. A convergence had to happen for me to finally render them. The first and second factors resulted from a three-person exhibition at Confluence Gallery and Art Center. The artists included the curator, Tori Karpenko, Stephen Filla and myself and the show was called *Nature Always*