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A Year of Being With

A Visual Thesis

by
Maisie Luo, MTS' 22

Advisors:
Janet Gyatso and Terry Tempest Williams

Spring 2022

My visual thesis exhibition is shown on the ground floor of Swartz Hall at Harvard Divinity School from April 10 to May 27, 2022 with a gallery talk on April 28, 2022.

The digital version of my visual thesis includes my artist statement, the stories behind the works, photos of each painting, links to the videos, and the recordings of the poems I have written for each painting.

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I thank my friends who have supported and cared for me while making this project. I am grateful for Michelle Bentman who is the TA for my thesis workshop and offered her support and feedback for my work throughout the year. Lastly, I send my deep gratitude to my two advisors, Janet Gyatso and Terry Tempest Williams, for their support, encouragement, and care for my wellbeing, growth, artistic development. It is a true blessing and honor to work with them for the thesis.

Thank you for being with my work.

Maisie

May 2022,
Harvard Divinity School,
Cambridge, MA

Artist Statement

With paintings and videos, I share visions of how to be with others in this difficult time—an important and urgently needed skill for healing that I realized while doing hospital chaplaincy last summer and during my time at HDS. Many animals have been my teachers for practicing being with[1]. For me, being with includes paying attention, listening, bearing witness, feeling with, and, also painting. Being with is a form of love and care—the least and the most I can offer to another being. The paintings and videos I have created did not feel like tasks for a thesis. Rather, they come from a deep felt call to practice being with and reflect on what good I can do with my skills as a being who is deeply entangled with others on earth.

While working, there were moments when I felt overwhelmed by the suffering of the animals and the reality around me. I learned how to chant and the importance of taking a break for myself. The consistent support from many dear friends, my two advisors, Terry and Janet, and the animals have kept me going. I am deeply grateful for them.

I share both beauty and suffering that I have experienced in this year of being with. If any painting, video, or recorded poem moves you, I invite you to hold the feeling for a while. May the feeling from seeing my work be a motivation and reminder for you to work towards healing on earth. Bernadette Demientieff, Gwich'in environmental activist and a mother of five beautiful children and the Caribou Herd, says, "we need all hands on deck now." As I paint, the hearts of the whales, albatrosses, frogs, birds, turtles, elephants, sunflowers, dogs, cats, my family, and the beings I know and don't know are in me, and my heart is in them across time and space. May we continue to love deeply and open our hearts for and with each other.

With my thesis, I send love and prayers to the animals I have painted and to my friends who are always here for me this year. I am deeply grateful for my two advisors, Terry Tempest Williams and Prof. Janet Gyatso. They teach me how to be a better human, how to care for others, and how to sincerely feel joy, love, sorrow, and grief in this difficult time. They have provided me with endless support for many projects and continuously inspire me to imagine and act timely with the skills I have for an alternative future. It is a blessing for me to meet and learn from them at Harvard Divinity School.

1 I first learned about the term "being with" from the draft chapter of Janet Gyatso's work-in-progress book on animals. My understanding of "being with" is slightly different from hers because of my use of painting as a practice of being with, but the stimnulating discussions on the meanings and daily practices of being with animals that Janet and I have have been inspiring for my artistic practice.

With a Young Albatross*,* 2021
Medium: acrylic paint, my dog's fur, wilted grass from Cambridge, MA, and used coffee grounds on canvas
Size: 30x24''



Scan with your phone camera to listen to the poem for the painting

Kneel down on the Midway Islands in the North Pacific ocean and touch the sandy ground with the albatrosses who have been here for generations.

Every day, the albatross parents depart from the island to fetch food from the ocean for their children.
Some fly 10000 miles to deliver back a meal
with a belly full of
what used to be krills and squid but are now plastic trash mainly from the US and China,
the two places I call home.
You regurgitate microchips small enough to fit through the tiny throats of your children,
who, one day, need to fly on their own.

To fly, you need to purge to make your body light.
You lean forward.
Sharp indigestible pieces stuck in your throat. I recall having a fishbone poking my throat and needing to vomit, but it must be worse because it is a belly full…
We know that if the plastic pieces don't come out, you may die, like what already happened to many of your families on the islands.

When you try to purge, you look like you are screaming.
I feel your scream as I kneel on this earth with you.

With a Sunflower, 2021
Medium: acrylic paint, grapevines, leftover rice, wilted pine needles, sweet potato peels, seeds, and beads on canvas
Size: 24x18”



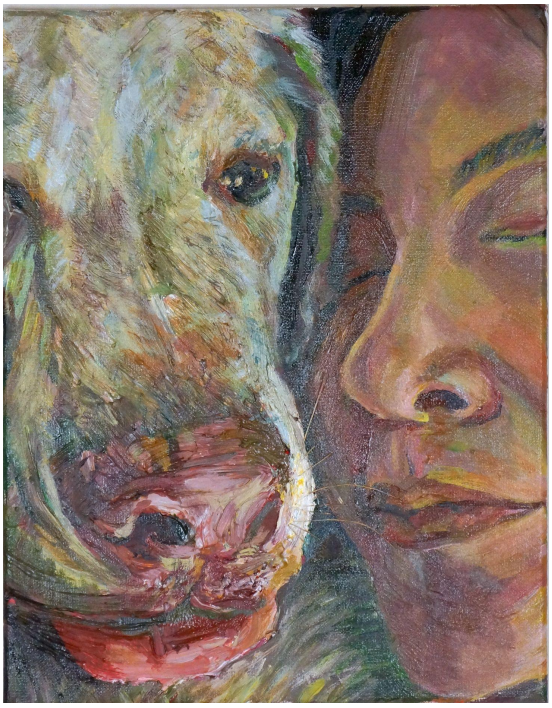
Scan to listen to the poem for the painting

At noon, I go to the garden.
Warmed up by the sun,
You release a scent that calls me to come closer.
Two big-eyed bugs are already bathing in you.
I climb towards the center and face the sun with you.

I lift my hand to touch your petals.
Their softness relieves the pain of my blisters and wounds
from the ongoing extractions and burning,
causing droughts, floods, and saltier soil.

Yet, the resilient you
remain strong to hold all of us
and show us
the bright yellow that still radiates light.

With Norbu*,* 2021
Medium: acrylic paint and pine needles on canvas
Size: 12x15”



Scan to listen to the poem for the painting

Sometimes I wonder if you miss your mother and siblings
whom you slept right next to when you were born.
Now you are with me. How can I take good care of you?

You teach me to be present.
I put down my work, lean close to your body, smell your fishy puppy scent, and
feel your warmth and heartbeat.
I share mine with you too.
To be present with you is taking good care of you.

With a North Atlantic Right Whale*,* 2021
Medium: acrylic paint, seashells from Essex, MA, broken phone cords, twine, pistachio shells, used coffee grounds, and plastic net packaging for fruits on wood
Size: 82x28”



Scan to listen to the poem for the painting

Dear North Atlantic Right Whale:
How much pain do you endure
when the sharp edges of the boats and cruises who don't see you
cut into your waist?
They forget that you live here.

You swim into the fishing traps that are set up in your home.
When you try to escape, you roll.
Yet, the ropes get more tangled and tighter around your
mouth,

chest,
fins, and tail.
You finally drag yourself out of the trap
carrying gears that weigh more than a ton, unable to take off
the heavy ropes cut into your skin.

You carry the weight, sometimes up to six months,
trying to survive
until you get too tired.

There are only around 350 of you left.

Let me untie the knots for you.
Now you can rest.

Every time I untie a knot, I think of you and your family.

Breach, 2021
Medium: acrylic, flour, seeds, barnacles, and beads on canvas
Size: 36x48”



Scan to listen to the poem for the painting

You breach to kiss the sky.
Your body carries water sparkles, like a confetti explosion
In the storm,
the sky, the ocean, and I celebrate you.

Lessons from a Hummingbird, 2021
Medium: Acrylic, pine needles, and corn husks on wood
Size: 14x11”



Scan to listen to the story of the painting

How should I live when I know that climate change is irreversible?
You tell me two stories.

One time, there was a huge fire in the forest.
All the animals fled. As they watched their home burn, they felt helpless and overwhelmed. But there came a hummingbird who decided to find the nearest water and began bringing a drop of water with its beak at a time. The hummingbird didn't think much but just knew that it couldn't waste time. It went back and forth and as fast as it could. The big animals told the hummingbird that there was no use because the fire was too big. The bird told them, "I will do the best I can."[2]

Another time, a baby hummingbird was rescued by two humans. The baby hummingbird needed to eat every 20 minutes. It made the humans put down their to-do lists and just be present with the bird and the yearning for life.

[2]Dirt! 2010.

Eating a Steak, 2021
Painting Stop-motion animation
Link : https://vimeo.com/660566034
Still shot from the animation:



Rivers of Tears, 2022
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Size: 36x48”



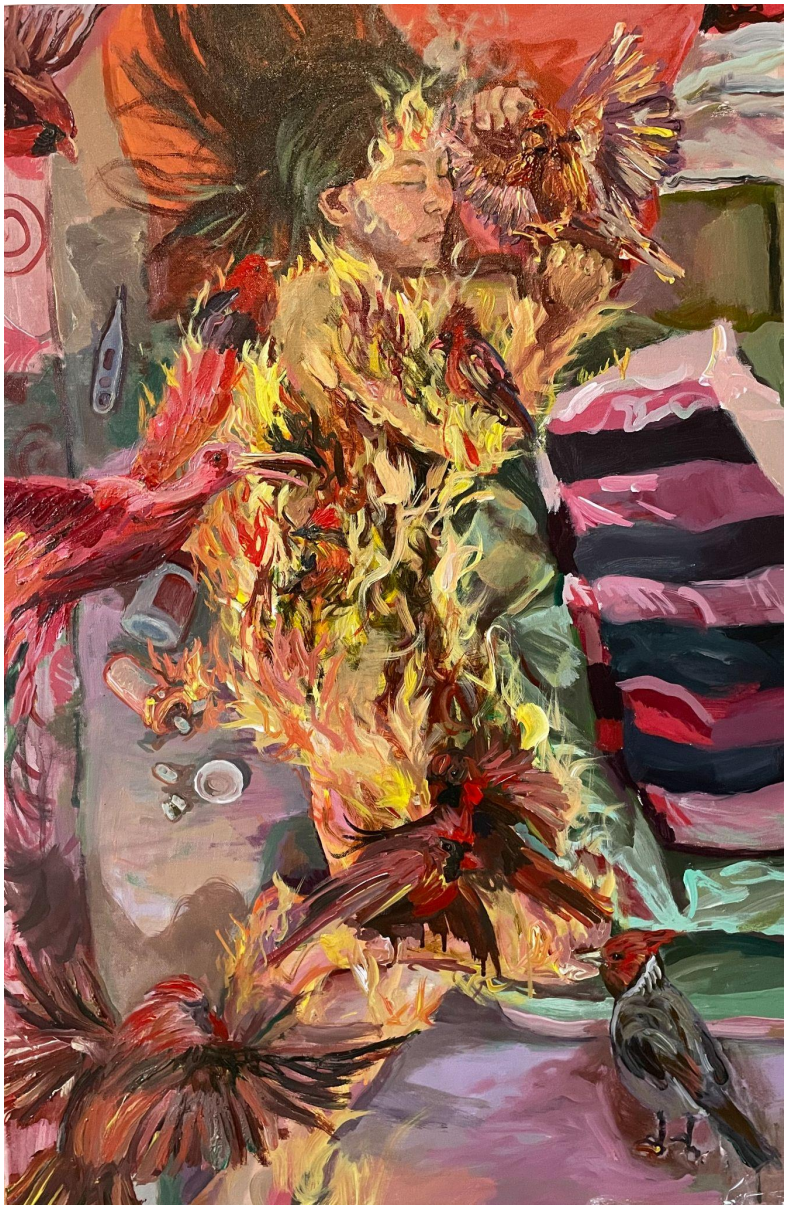
Scan to listen to the story of the painting

While painting, I thought about all the animals who have been with me this year. This poem, “Please Call Me by My True Names,” by Thich Nhat Hahn was on my mind. I read this poem aloud outside one afternoon in January after visiting my dad in the hospital, and a group of wild geese began hovering over me and making beautiful sounds.

“My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so that I can see that my joy and pain are one.”

Burning, 2022
Medium: Acrylic and flour on canvas
Size: 24x36”



Scan to listen to the story of the painting

In February, I had a high fever that the doctor couldn’t figure out why.
My body was on fire.
I became the burning forests,
with a red and yellow plumage of flames.

Bowerbird's Blue Nest, 2022
Medium: blue caps from Harvard COVID testing collected by friends and myself, pine needles and branches from Cambridge, MA, flour, and acrylic on canvas
Size: 18x24''



I would like to thank my bowerbird friends: Emily Ostler, Sue Butler, Swati Chauhan, Morgan Curtis, Naomi Fastovsky, Mariachiara Ficarelli, Yisi Liu, Quinn Matos, Ana Laura Malmaceda, Leslie MacPherson, Jacob Mortimer, Dan Wells, Ven. Mahayaye Vineetha, and Qi Yi who helped me save and gather blue caps and blue trash this semester.

Scan to listen to the story of the painting

Searching for the Blue Caps, 2022
Film
Length: 10'46''
https://youtu.be/sZmIGYHDf2k

Don’t forget about your blue plastic.
Wonder about where it goes.
It could join the great pacific garbage patch and become microplastics blended with the ocean.
It could end up in a bowerbird’s nest in Australia.
It could be stuck in the nose of a sea turtle, or
it could rest in the belly of a young albatross.

Stories and Reflections

Many animals teach me how to be with. My dog, Norbu, is one of them. When I am with him, he is always alert to our surroundings, and my movements and energy. When I am tired and want to be quiet, Norbu calms himself down and sits right next to me. His body presses against mine. I feel his bodily warmth, short fur, and the movements of him breathing. For a while, I let go of my tasks and thoughts and feel what it is like to breathe with him and sense his energy. Being with Norbu brings me back to the present. I become curious about what he is experiencing in the moment. This way of being with seems essential for forming intimate connections with another being.

Painting has helped me practice being with animals this year. As a painter, the process of close looking allows me to quiet down and be with myself and the subject I paint. I lose a sense of time when I paint. I am often surprised by how fast time has passed. When I paint, I concentrate on the forms, colors, facial and bodily expressions of my subject and how it interacts with its surroundings. The longer I look, the more colors and expressions I see. I put aside projections and fixed perceptions and take in as much information as I can from looking. In the *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton discusses self-emptying as a mode of contemplation and embracing God. He writes that freedom and clarity suddenly open out within you until your whole being embraces the wonder, the depth…of God.[3] For me, focusing on looking and feeling in the present is a way of self-emptying that prepares me to paint and document the information and feelings in front of me. In the concentration state, the boundary between the subject and I begins to blur for me.

The things and beings that I have painted are no longer strangers to me. There is a long-lasting intimacy that comes from being with a subject and painting them. With the animals whom I have met this year, I have formed an ongoing relationship with them through painting even though some of them live far away from me. Some of the paintings were hung next to my bed for a while before Prof. Gyatso generously offered her office for my paintings. When I woke up in the morning, I would see the albatross in my painting and be reminded of the suffering that they are experiencing and the plastics in their belly. When I looked at the hummingbird who offers drops of water to the burning forest, I would be reminded to keep painting about the climate crisis and share my visions of alternative ways of living because there is no time to waste.

Painting is often a lonely activity, and sometimes I have doubts about how impactful the paintings are for raising awareness of our rapidly worsening climate. How can paintings invite people to cultivate compassion? I don't know the answers, but the questions sustain me to keep painting, experimenting with materials and ways of sharing stories to engage with the audience. Through painting, I express my visions and practice being a more mindful and compassionate person. Each painting from my thesis is like a vow I make to genuinely care for another being from small mundane things, such as not buying plastic packaged snacks because they might go into the belly of an albatross, to getting involved in activist work for animal and environmental wellbeing. The commitment sustains my practice as a painter and a motivation to keep finding and practicing more sustainable and compassionate ways of living on earth. It is ongoing.

Paintings

With a North Atlantic Right Whale (2021) is me untying the fishing gears that are tangled on the body of a North Atlantic Right whale. They live along the New England coast during summer, spring, and

[3] Merton 2007.

early fall. There are less than 350 of them in the world because they are often trapped in heavy fishing gear.[4] Cruises and boats also accidentally cut into their waists.[5]

The fishing gear in the painting is made of broken charging cords and fruit net packaging from the tangerines I bought. Repurposing daily trash in my paintings, I become more aware of how much trash I produce every day. Adding the created textures, I also invite the audience to look carefully, notice the trash materials, and wonder where our trash might go after they are sent away. If they ended up in an incinerator or landfill, who would breathe the toxicity from the burning plastic? If they ended up in the ocean, who might accidentally ingest them and suffocate? Creatively using trash is not a solution to the ongoing suffering caused by trash management and pollution to many beings on earth. But it is the least I can do to keep in mind my entanglement with the suffering in my daily practices.

The first time I met a whale was on the island of Maui. One morning when the sun was just coming up, I went out on a kayak with an indigenous Maui woman to the middle of the ocean. She sang a beautiful whale-calling song. Everything was still and peaceful. There were no waves. After waiting for some time, a blue whale gently emerged out of the water and came next to my kayak. I was deeply in awe of the grace and beauty of the giant blue whale. At that moment, I felt how it was a miracle and honor to coexist with this creature on earth. When I imagine the North Atlantic Right Whales being trapped in fishing gears that weigh more than a ton, unable to swim freely in its home, I cannot look away but feel pain in my own body and in my bones. In my painting, I place shells and barnacles collected from the whale's native Massachusetts coast on the whale's body as a gesture of healing. I untie the gears for the whale to pay respect and ask for forgiveness.

This painting has another story. I take my paintings outside to engage with a wider audience. I see paintings as signs in public that spark meaningful reflections. In November, I walked the 7-foot whale painting across Harvard's campus with my advisor, Terry, and her husband Brooke.[6] The endangered Atlantic Right whale swam through Harvard and offered a possible vision of a future where coastal cities might be underwater due to sea level rising and local whales could swim through the cities. During the walk, I felt I was guided by the whale. I knew exactly where to go even though we didn't plan the route. I also felt peaceful that the whale was swimming freely without people's disturbance.

Also, since March 2022, there are 15 known North Atlantic Right whale calves this season, which is good news.[7] In 2018, they didn't produce any calves. We need at least 50 calves per year to stop the decline and allow for recovery.

Being with a Young Albatross (2021) invites the audience to imagine being with the albatrosses, who live on Midway Islands and mistakenly eat the plastic floating on the Pacific Ocean for food. I first learned about them in Chris Jordan's documentary, *Albatross*,[8] as a freshman in College. I never forgot the scenes in which the adult albatrosses regurgitate plastic into the throat of their young ones. I also never forget the images Jordan took of the young albatrosses who couldn't vomit out the plastic and died with a belly full of microchips, bottle caps, and other small colorful pieces of indigestible plastic. I imagine what it is like to have sharp pieces of plastic stuck in my throat.

I built a fur coat for the albatross in the painting using the fur collected from brushing my white dog. Brushing and gathering my dog's fur is my care for my dog. Adding a fur coat for the albatross, I

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[4] Fishing gear around the whale's head can limit the whale's ability to open its mouth, which then causes difficulty breathing or starvation. See Baker and Deuel 2019.
[5] NOAA 2022.
[6] Naughton 2021.
[7] CBS Boston 2022.
[8] Jordan 2017.

offer my care to the albatrosses, even though they are far away from me in physical distance. In November, I sent a photo of this painting to Chris Jordan to thank him. He loved seeing the painting.

As I hold the sorrow and suffering in the world, I become more present with reality and also pay more attention to the beauty around me. In *the Cloud of Unknowing*, the author writes that sorrow "makes the soul ready to receive that joy which is such that it takes from a man all awareness of his own existence."[9] Paintings, such as *With a Sunflower* (2021), *With my Dog* (2021), and *Breach* (2021), document the beauty, love, and joy I feel despite this difficult time we live in. I am grateful to have many beautiful things around me.

A Lesson of a Hummingbird (2021) is inspired by a parable[10] I learned from Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement and the Nobel Peace Laureate. In her video, "I Will be a Hummingbird," she tells this story. One time, there was a huge forest fire. All the animals from the forest fled. As they watched their home burn, they felt helpless and overwhelmed. But here came this hummingbird who decided to fly to the nearest water and began bringing a drop of water with its beak at a time. It went back and forth and as fast as it could. The big animals told the hummingbird that there was no use because the fire was too big. But the hummingbird kept going without wasting any time. It told the big animals, "I will do the best I can."[11] Wangari Maathai reflects, "I don't want to be the animals who watch as the planet goes down the drain. I will be a hummingbird. I will do the best I can."

Sometimes, I have doubts about how impactful the work I do is to battle climate change and reduce all forms of suffering in the world. But the hummingbird becomes a reminder for me to do the best I can as an artist and a caring human being because there is no other option.

In *Rivers of Tears* (2022), I meditate on my grief and love for the animals whom I have met, painted, and formed a relationship with. The painting is inspired by my experience doing a Chenrezig compassion meditation with my Animal Ethics classmates and Prof. Gyatso. We sat among golden and red leaves as the sun shined on the ground and began to set. Prof. Gyatso asked us to send out light from our hearts to the beings who are suffering in the world. Many animals and people came to my mind. I sent light to every one of them. At the end of the meditation, we left our light out in the world without gathering it back to our hearts, which is how the meditation is supposed to end. I was glad we left the light with the animals because I cannot imagine how much suffering they are facing.

While painting, this poem, "Please Call Me by My True Names," by Thich Nhat Hahn was on my mind. I read this poem aloud outside one afternoon in January after visiting my dad in the hospital, and a group of wild geese began hovering over me and making beautiful sounds.

"My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,

[9] Anonymous 2019.
[10] I found many similar versions of the story from various traditions in the world, such as the Jataka tales of a baby quail and a brave parrot from Buddhist traditions, the traditional story from the Quechan people in Peru, and the traditional teachings from the Anishnaabe (Ojibwa) people from Turtle Islands.
[11] Dirt! The Movie 2010.

so that I can see that my joy and pain are one."[12]

I visualized the painting, *Burning* (2022), while having a 104F fever in February. As I layed in bed, my body became the forests that are burning around the world. Red-colored birds were coming in and out of my body. In Chinese medicine traditions, there is a saying about the imbalance or illnesses of the bodies being interrelated with the absurd phenomena in the atmosphere. If we see COVID as a messenger between our environment and our bodies and the suffering due to COVID around the world, we might feel an urgent call to reduce our damage to the environment and find alternative ways of living.

Bowerbird's Blue Nest (2022 painting and video), is a collaboration piece. Because of the pandemic, every student at Harvard is required to do a COVID test every week. One twists open a blue-capped tube and inserts their collected COVID samples. The blue cap is discarded. Since the beginning of the school year, I have noticed blue caps discarded on the ground all over the Harvard campus. I was surprised to see how many there were and that people were just throwing them on the ground. I imagined them floating on the ocean and getting eaten by the albatrosses or getting stuck in a turtle's nose. So I began collecting them with the help of my friends. I would not be able to gather so many caps without their effort and care to search for and save the caps for me.

I happen to learn that male satin bowerbirds from New Zealand and Australia gather only blue-colored objects to decorate their nests and prepare for their dance to attract female bowerbirds. The male bowerbirds used to gather blue flowers and berries but due to the increasing amount of plastic trash, they now mostly find blue bottle caps, blue straws, and blue packaging. Sometimes their head gets trapped in the ring of bottle caps and they suffocate or starve to death.

The practice of searching for blue trash made me become more alert to the trash on the floor and the color blue. My eyes were constantly paying attention to the ground as I walked around. I made a video to document the process. I don't know what will happen to all the blue caps and more that the Harvard community continues to produce, but for now, they are temporarily away from the animals who might ingest or choke on them accidentally.

Stop-Motion Animation

I began practicing mindful eating last year. When I sit in front of a bowl of rice, I visualize how each grain of rice is grown, the sun that each rice plant absorbs, and how they are picked by someone's hands. I think about the energy and resources spent to wash them and deliver them to grocery stores, as well as the energy used to cook them. I began practicing being aware of all the steps of how a bowl of rice comes to be as I eat it. Then gradually, I noticed that I felt wrong to waste a grain of rice. I make sure I eat all the rice. This habit of mindful eating is useful in reminding me of my entanglement with all the food I eat. Thus, advocating for a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle, I decided to depict the experience of mindfully eating a steak and call attention to the unavoidable entanglement between the cow's suffering and the eater in my animation, *Eating a Steak* (2021).

To make the movements of the cow appear natural in the animation, I first closely observe the cow and use my body to understand and imagine how their bodies move in specific situations.[13] For example, I learned that cows first move their ears to listen to the surroundings when they sense danger.

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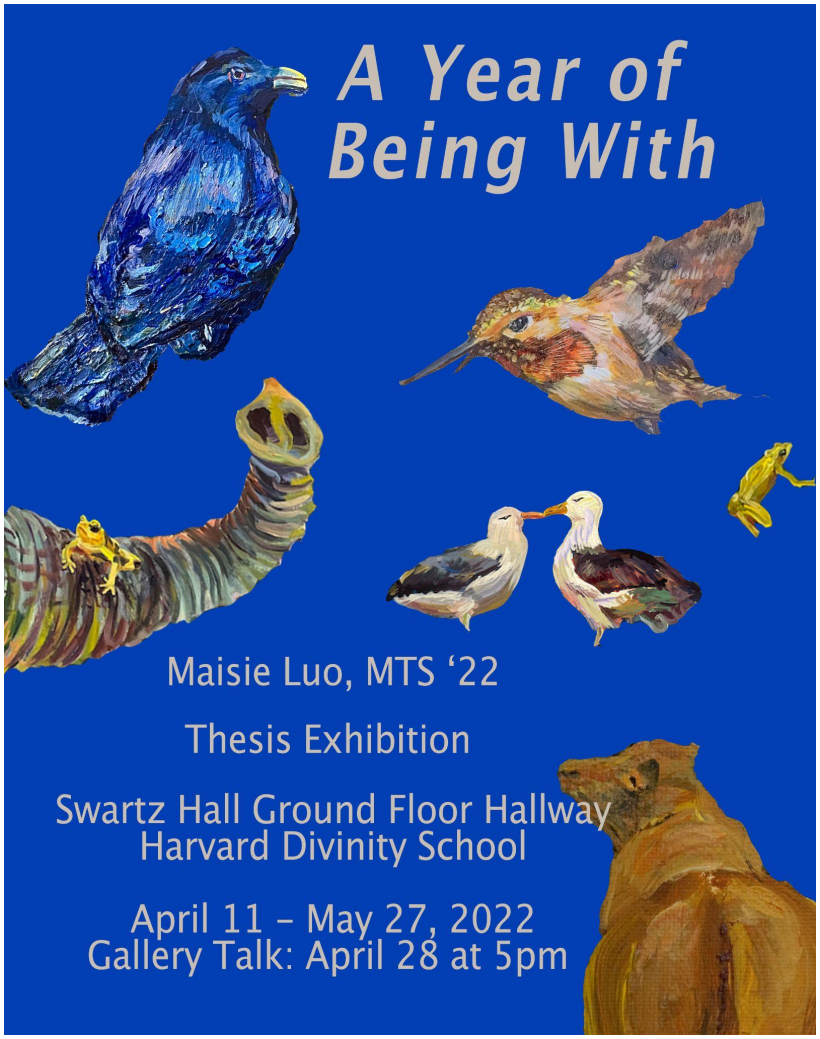
[12] Hanh 2021.

[13] In *Imagining Bodies*, JB Steeves discusses the role of the body in understanding and relating to another being with Merleau-Ponty's ideas on the body and imagination. Steeves points out that artists express their own embodied relation to the world. See Steeves .

Careful observation and embodied imagination make me feel the suffering and fear of the cow in a much deeper and more physical way. Then I recreate the movements by painting the next frame directly on top of the previous one. The slow and rather tedious process allows me to stay present with the cows and hold their suffering at the slaughterhouse without avoidance. In the animation, I intentionally show the act of painting, such as dripping wet paint, to spark the viewer's curiosity to imagine my process of being with the cow before its death and form a more personal connection with the cows.

I make stop-motion animation with paint to address issues that might be hard to confront with raw filmed footage and explore ways of storytelling. Creating scenes with paint and composing a narrative helps me present the violence and the cow's fear before getting killed in a gentler way that invites the audience to feel connections with the cow without feeling too overwhelmed and shutting off emotions by the real scenes in the slaughterhouse. I readdress the ongoing violence in slaughterhouses and call for an awareness of the cow's fear in a slaughterhouse and our entanglement with the violence, which then should reduce our desire to consume meat and try practicing more sustainable habits of living.

Exhibition Poster (designed by Maisie Luo)

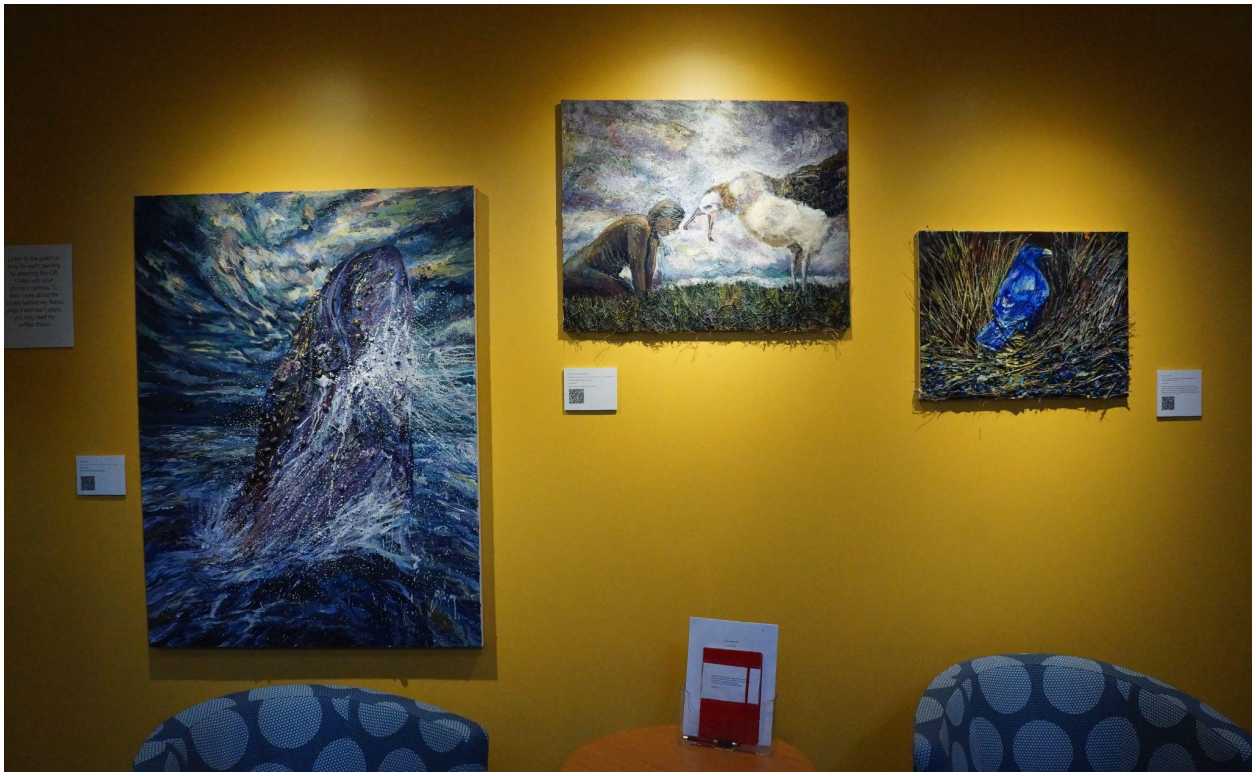


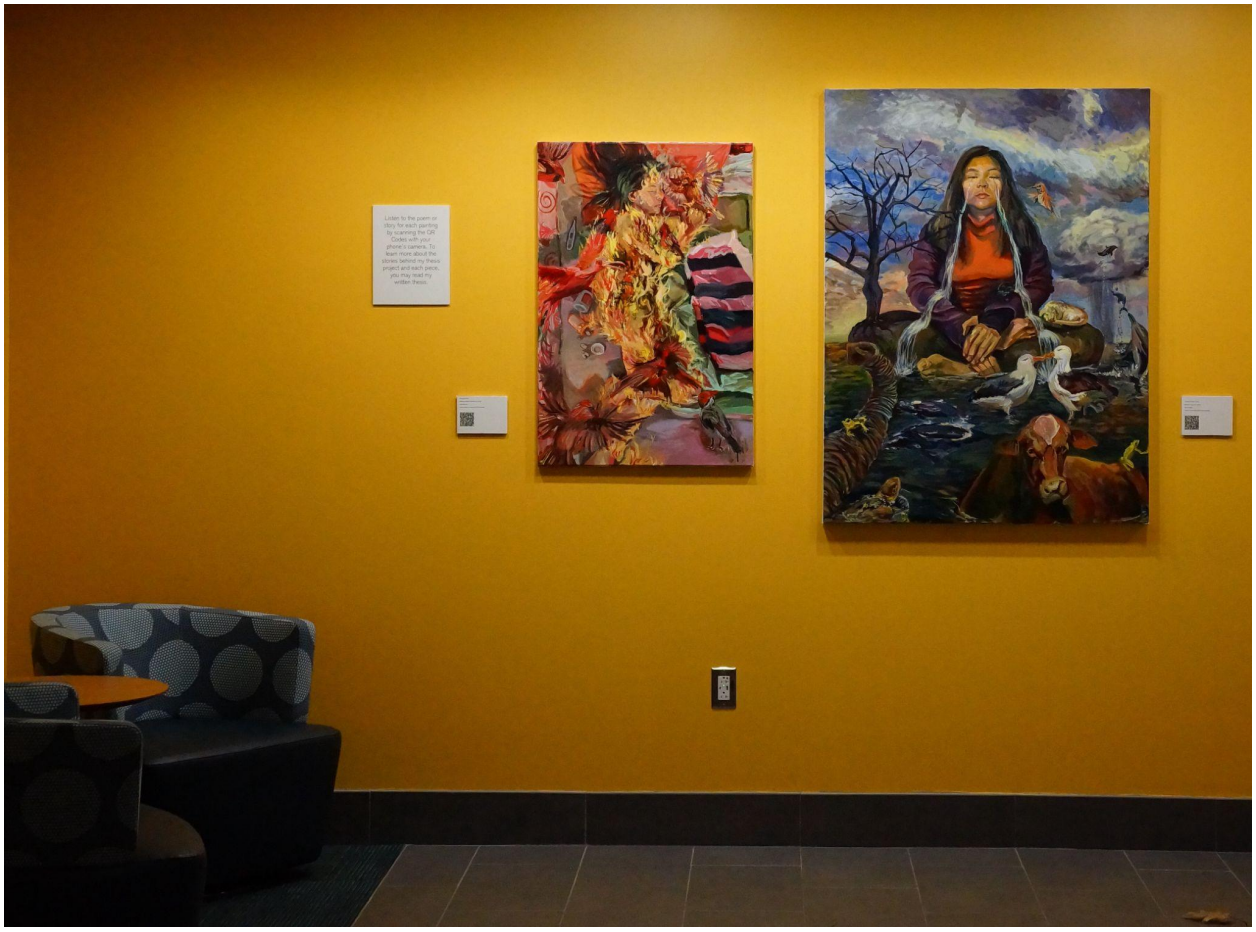
I would also like to thank Katie Caponera, Cathleen Hoelscher, Rich Ferreira, and Robert Deveau for helping me install the exhibition and setting up my gallery talk. I thank Caroline Cataldo for sharing it on the Harvard Divinity School social media. My two paintings, *Rivers of Tears* and *Bowerbird's Blue Nest*, will be shown at the Memorial Church during the 2022 Multireligious Commencement Service, thanks to Kerry Maloney and the service planning team.

Exhibition Photos at Swartz Hall









Gallery Talk on April 28, 2022:



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