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A Crow and a Hanger

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A CROW AND A HANGER

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

Department of Art

by

Kelsey Ann-Morgan Livingston
B.F.A. California State University Long Beach, May 2012
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Abstract

A Crow and A Hanger is a body of work that explores and illustrates the nature of life and death through the use of mixed-media drawing and printmaking techniques. My intention for this work, and this thesis paper, is to explain my thought process and how the imagery came to be. For me it is not at all important for every viewer to fully understand each image and the thoughts that went into the body as a whole. I let the images and their titles lead the viewer in a general direction and allow for their personal history and biases to fill in the gaps. That being stated, the work for me is a kind of catharsis and coming of age tale. It is a metaphor for my acceptance and interpretation of our place in the cosmic scene. I sum up my thoughts with the affirmation that: You are potential...you are ephemeral...you are permanent.

Introduction

It all started with a crow and a hanger...

I came across an unusual nest one day; it was in a city setting, in a tall tree that intertwined with an old wire fence. The bright blue and white color of the nest snared my attention. It had been made almost entirely of old clothes hangers. I later learned that urban crows often build their homes from such discarded objects; using them for both nest building and tool fashioning.

These particular hangers had been repurposed as cradles for a new generation of baby birds. The nest itself mirrored the universal continuation of life. The inorganic, organic, and the cosmic are thus in a delicate balancing act as part of the life cycle displayed through the crows and their ersatz dwellings. The eggs themselves are metaphors for potential, and the microcosm of the nest, their home, an echo of the deeper time and elements of the universe. I made this series as a part of a collective human need to reflect upon and understand the pivotal moments of creation and destruction.

My research into the lore and behavior of crows and ravens, and my art making processes, have lead me to explore the possible imagery within this context. The subject and content of the body of work is based around the crow, as a stand-in for the intangible idea of *life*, while the hanger serves as the memento mori the reminder of death and impermanence of one's self.

"What moves men of genius, or rather, what inspires their work, is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said is still not enough."

- Eugene Delacroix¹

¹ Myers, Terry R. *Painting, Documents of Contemporary Art*. Edited by Terry R Myers. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Subject and Content

Throughout this body of work I refer often to the icons of the nest, the egg, and the hanger as metaphors for the ephemeral, the potential, and the permanent respectively. These objects are the key to the transition from the everyday items that one can view and touch to the larger entanglement of matter and time in the universe. I use birds as a stand-in for humanity, to bridge the mind gap between our quotidian existence and the ineffable realities of death. The bird-form thus serves as representation for the life cycle and softens the anxieties that populate the human mind.

The crow in particular has a universal quality, being native to most everywhere. Crows hold a special place in Western society in particular, appearing in folklore and frequently associated with death. According to James Lipton, author of *An Exaltation of Larks*, the company term for a gathering of crows is called a “murder.”² The fact that crows and other carrion eating birds would often be seen near a newly dead being, and was thus thought of in many cultures as the bringer of death, rather than the cleanup crew. They are often anthropomorphized, providing access to societies’ ambivalent feelings on mortality. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss often referred to ravens, a cousin of the crow, as a mediator between life and death in moralizing stories found around the world. In *Structural Anthropology* Levi-Strauss studied myths through time, and in different locations.³ Strauss states that crows, and other corvids, are like herbivores, in that they do not generally hunt their food. The fact that they don’t seek to end life means that they are thus associated with promoting life. Conversely, they are like carnivores because they *do* eat meat; a fact that makes them promoters of death.⁴ He then surmises that they serve dual conflicting roles in the human mind. Crows are additionally seen as the messenger, or even bringer of misfortune and deceit. He also points out images of the

² Lipton, James. *An Exaltation of Larks*. New York, NY: Grossman Publishers, 1968.

³ Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Revised Edition. Basic Books, 1974.

⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss is the founder of what is now called structural anthropology, or structuralism, which is the study of commonalities in thought patterns in all humanity.

ominous or mischievous black birds are found in art and myths all around the world, some dating back to 370 BCE.⁵

With such an abundance of imagery and lore surrounding the corvid family it would seem that they have lived among humanity, and evolved to be able to deal with our presence in a way that is advantageous to the species. They take advantage of our waste and materials for nest building and tool fashioning. The Behavioural Ecology Research Group at the University of Oxford has been running crow studies for a number of years confirming that these black birds are as clever as some greater apes. In a publication titled: *Cognitive Processes Associated with Sequential Tool Use in New Caledonian Crows*, they confirmed that some species have the ability to solve complex problems and infer information based on pattern recognition.⁶ It makes sense to me that eventually they would find some of our man-made materials that are better suited for their needs than what is available in nature. I referenced the video footage from these studies directly in my intaglio series called *Digging*, Images 13-15, located in the Artist's Images section of this document.

The juxtaposition of the natural and fabricated elements in the nest are reflections of the ephemeral and permanent coming together to serve the purpose of embracing a new life. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard refers to this type of thought as "anthropo-cosmology."⁷ From the microcosm of the nest emerge notions of cosmic elements that make life. In the vein of philosophical daydreaming inspired by Bachelard I view a nest as a home made to integrate with nature; its edges becoming seamless with the world upon which it is grounded.

⁵ Livius, Titus. "Livy: Periochae 6-7." *Livius.org*. 17CE. <http://www.livius.org/li-liv/perioc/perioc/perioc006.html> (accessed February 02, 2016). In the ancient text *Periochae*, book 7:10, by Titus Livius, of the warrior Marcus Valerius' warrior raven sits on the soldiers crest and attacks his enemies to help him win in battle.

⁶ Wimpenny J.H., Weir A.A.S., Clayton L., Rutz C., Kacelink A. "Tool Publications." *Behavioural Ecology Research Group*. University of Oxford. 2009. <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~kgroup/tools/toolpublications.shtml> (accessed February 02, 2016).

⁷ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994. P.47

Stemming from Bachelard, I now wonder how the earth and its elemental materials came to be; how they make up the fabric of all life, and how they too meet their end. Astronomer Carl Sagan's poetic writing on cosmological origins of our universe provides an accessible approach to my understanding of the universe, and inspires much of my art. His illuminating musings on our place in the universe is beautifully put in this brief excerpt from *Pale Blue Dot*:

Look ... at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam ... It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.⁸

Accompanying his text is an image from space of our galaxy, within the thick bands of dust stands an almost imperceptible blue speck. Since we have been able to see into space, and observe the planets around us, humanity has been awed by the unthinkable magnitude of the universe, and how we fit into the timeline. The book, *A Brief History of Time*, by Dr. Stephen Hawking analyzes the objective truth of the universe; explaining how all life is made up of the celestial dust, given from a dying star.⁹ I reflect this idea through the use of the nebula images within the egg structure. Eggs are pure potential. They have no bias, just elements, and when given time or circumstance they will become something new in the universe. My light boxes, titled *Egg 1, 2 and 3*, speak

⁸ Sagan, Carl. *A Pale Blue Dot*. 1994. <http://www.planetary.org> (accessed December 26, 2015). The above quote was shortened to the most relevant parts. The larger text is beautiful and I recommend it for everyone.

⁹ Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1988.

directly to these ideas; Images: 8, 9, and 10. These along with the rest of the suite of works can be found in the Artist's Images section of this document.

In taking the time to slow down and reflect on nature, I open up an avenue of thought that allows one to take in the harsher truths of existence and come to view life as a rich experience, with all the hardships and triumphs seen in perspective of a larger orchestration of the galaxy.

Relating the science back to the philosophy of the universe, Bachelard describes the human relationship with nests as reflections of a deeper primal instinct, one that we share with non-human life on earth:

Already, in the world of inanimate objects, extraordinary significance is attached to nests. We want them to be perfect, to bear the mark of a very sure instinct. We ourselves marvel at this instinct, and a nest is generally considered to be one of the marvels of animal life...A beginning of a philosophical phenomenology of nests would consist in our being able to elucidate the interest with which we look through an album containing reproductions of nests, or, even more positively, in our capacity to recapture the naïve wonder we used to feel when we found a nest. This wonder is lasting, and today when we discover a nest it takes us back to our childhood or, rather, to a childhood; to the childhoods we should have had. For many of us have been endowed by life with the full measure of its cosmic implications...And yet it is living nests that could introduce a phenomenology of the actual nest, of the nest found in natural surroundings, and which becomes for a moment the center – the term is no exaggeration – of an entire universe, the evidence of a cosmic situation.¹⁰

The nest is itself a home, it echoes the scene of a human home; a home that protects provides, and cradles one life as it creates another. Even down to the cellular level the nest is alive. The crow is an active participant in the timeline of the universe. Human beings have become a part of this tapestry of the crow simply by doing what we do; inventing and creating. The cycle goes on.

¹⁰ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994. P. 92-94

Process

I do not consider what I do to be of any one specific genre such as “drawing” or “printing,” instead I combine the technique that fits the subject best. The repetition involved with the printmaking process allows for many variations to a composition, and thus widens the possibilities for expression. I am more free to combine processes and experiment with an image to get to a point that illustrates the concept and gives the emotion that works best.

I am interested in compositional tropes where the visual depth of an image is challenged by other elements; subverting and exploiting western ideas of perspective in composition. In mixing perspective styles I create tension between shallow and deep visual spaces. My compositions are stitched together from photography and drawings done from observation. Heavy influences for ideas on flatness or depth come from artists art nouveau artists like Aubrey Beardsley, Gustav Klimt, or Alphonse Mucha. This genre of art between the 1890’s and the 1920’s tended to utilize observational drawing and composition with other illustrative or decorative elements to set mood, and subvert space. Commonly I reference the use of natural forms in much the same way as these pre World War 1 artists did.

Two contemporary artists who use animal and natural forms in their work are Tiffany Bozic and Beth Cavener. My interest in their work branches from the way they talk about the work they make, and what the animal form means to them. Bozic’s work illustrates humanity through the animal and natural form. She talks about it in the context of her life experiences as they relate to the shared, or universal, experiences that all living things encounter. I identify with the sentiment of writer Kristin Farr in an interview with the artist:

A study of animals is a study of the self. In fact, no matter what subject an artist paints, no matter how metaphorical, abstract, veiled, or apparent, it is a self-portrait of the insides and outsides – the internal and external landscape.¹¹

¹¹ Farr, Kristin. "Tiffany Bozic, The Animal in Us." *Juxtapoz*, no. 182 (March 2016): 48-61.

I share this feeling about all visual art in general, but more specifically visual artists often use the animal form as a means of reaching more people from all ages and nationalities. Bozic uses the animal as a unifying element to do away with the inherent biases involved with the human form. Once you put a person into the work there will generally be a tendency to assign cultural information based on the gender and physical features of the person depicted. Animals, especially the crow, can appear genderless, ageless, and thus free of stigma in that manner.

Beth Cavener, a sculptor of animal forms, works with human psychology and body language to make portraits of people or emotional states. She takes a raw feeling out of context and strips it down to its more basic instinctual form. The resulting sculpture exists in the borderlands between human and animal. They embody the overlap between the two categories and convey the more immediate feelings through their pose, gaze, and interaction with the environment. Cavener talks about the anthropomorphizing of animals in her artist statement:

Both human and animal interactions show patterns of intricate, subliminal gestures that betray intent and motivation. The things we leave unsaid are far more important than the spoken out-loud to one another. I have learned to read meaning in the subtler signs; a look, the way one holds one's hands, the incline of the head, and the slightest unconscious gesture. I rely on animal body language in my work as a metaphor for these underlying patterns, transforming the animal subjects into the human psychological portraits.¹²

I contribute to the conversation that these two artists are engaged in by adding my commentary on humanity. I branch out and speak to the very idea of life, and the human need to understand their purpose in a greater time line.

Circumstance has now led me to writing poetry, in addition to (and as a processing mechanism for my understanding of) visual art. The following poem is about migration and finding a mate. I wrote it in part for the challenge but more to express how I feel about adulthood and the new responsibilities I face in this part of my life. Beyond the avian world it is about the human experience of growing up, moving out of the parental home on one's own and trying to make a life worth living.

¹² Cavener, Beth. *About*. <http://www.followtheblackrabbit.com> (accessed March 05, 2016).

Manifesto of the Migration

Armories assemble! Ambush and amaze!

Allegory, a short story, a tale to illustrate:

a bevy, a baptism, a bunch, a business, and a band.

Babble bonds the bale and brood, keeps groups close at hand.

Constellation congregation or Contrarian Company;

a convocation's coalition cries a charge of Coventry.

The diaspora spreads the flock; drove astray a dray.

Dawn has come once again to disseminate dismay.

An ensemble in the warm environment to convey:

explosions of fabulous fantastical farcical displays.

Flocks cover fields; fleets and families flourish.

Flight and float into the rivers, the waters nourish.

Gangs, gams, and gambits, generations at a time;

gather gaggles to splendid galleries, varied and sublime.

Habitats hum and huff, hangout in hives of hype;

Hordes harvest, hover, and hiss. The season's sounds of life.

An immersion of immigrants glides down from the north.

Imperial nests perched high as impatient winds blow forth.

Juries move down by lands and cross the sea,

A jagger of foreign tongues jump in jubilee.

Mountains mobs memberships mixture;
murmurations mauls and murders.
They build the nests in network numbers.
Noble nyes find safe places for slumber.

Ostentations orchestras cry out at first day's light,
Orders call up to the sky for love - or for fight!

Packs, plagues, parties, panels, pods and parliaments,
prowling patches in a precession of pride and compliment.
The reeds quiver, the branches quake.
The males quarrel, queue, and shake.
Ruffling in the racks and rafters ramble round the ring.
Regattas run the row of ruts and reams.

Swarming spreading lives – squads intermingling.
Sprawling smorgasbords – slews of a-melodic singing.

Tribes tangled up and twaddle together in troves,
teams talk and twinkle while they waddle down the rows.
Undulating unkindness blacking out the sky,
ubiquities of the colony shimmer as they fly.

Waves, webs, and whispers whoop, waddling walks wake.
Wide wing war dances... all to find a mate.
At seasons end, a new life begins,
in this tale of survival, the fittest always win.

Artist's Images

In this section of the document you will see the entire collection of works that make up "A Crow & A Hanger" as it was at the time of the thesis show and defense, as well as installation views of the work hanging in the gallery.



Image 1: "Nesting" 3x3 feet. Relief mounted on panel.



Image 2: "Construction" 6x24 inch, relief print mounted on panel.



Image 3: "Fight" 4x3 feet diptych. Ink wash and relief prints mounted on panels.



Image 4: "Gathering" 12x10 inch, screen print edition on paper.

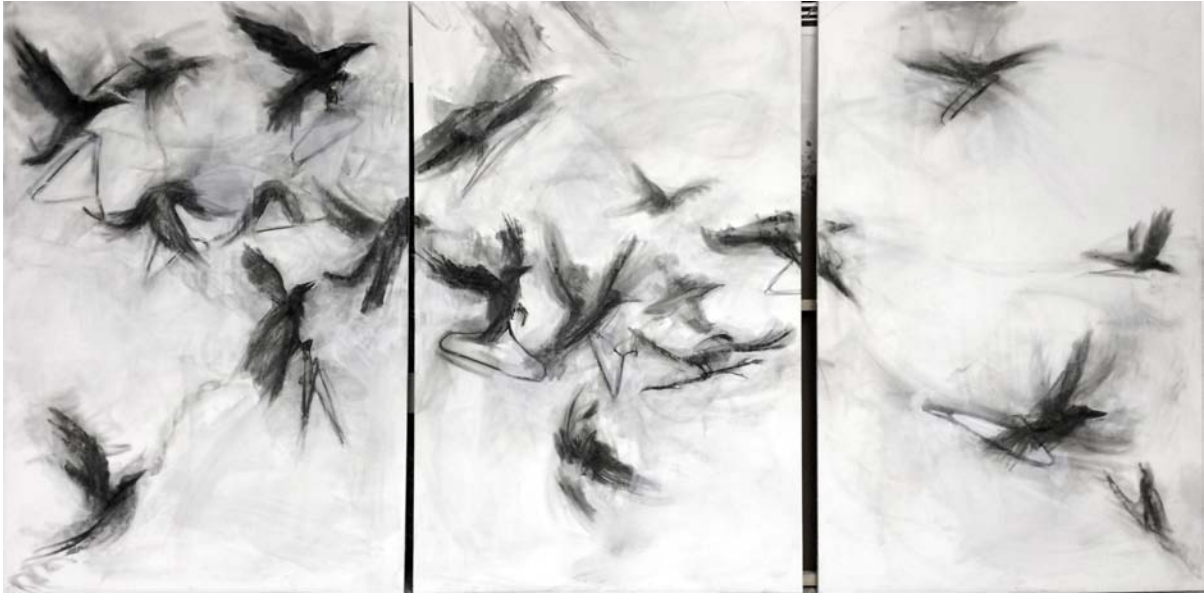


Image 5: "The Murder" (detail) 4x24 feet, Charcoal and gesso on multiple panels.



Image 6: "Decay" 15x5 inch, intaglio print on paper.



Image 7: "Entropy" 9x12 inch, intaglio print on paper.



Image 8: "Egg 1" 12x16 screen print, etching, LED lights, and marker on glass panels.



Image 9: "Egg 2" 8x12 screen print, etching, LED lights, and marker on glass panels.

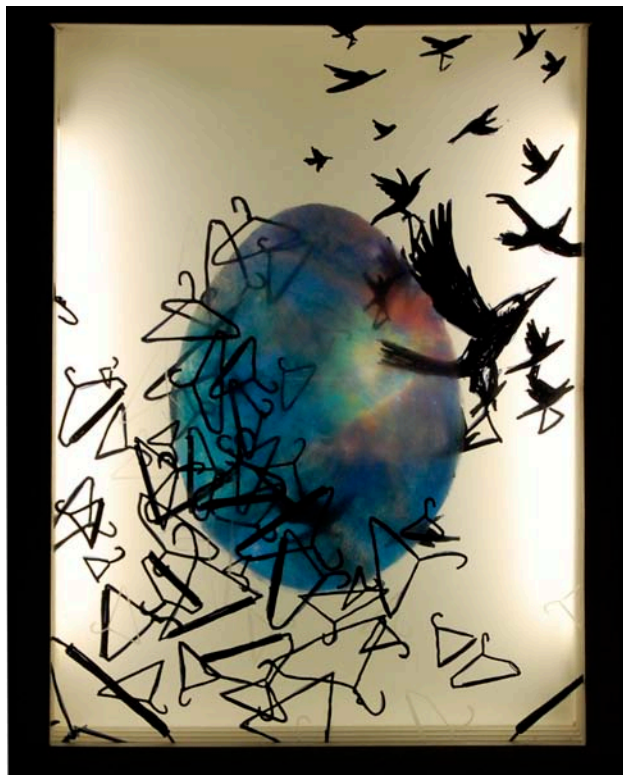


Image 10: "Egg 3" 8x12 screen print, etching, LED lights, and marker on glass panels.



Image 11: "The Battle" 18x24 inch, relief print mounted on panel.



Image 12: "The Nest" 18x24 inch, relief print mounted on panel.



Image 13: "Digging 1", 2x3 feet, intaglio and charcoal on paper.



Image 14: "Digging 2", 2x3 feet, intaglio and charcoal on paper.



Image 15: "Digging 3", 2x3 feet, intaglio and charcoal on paper.

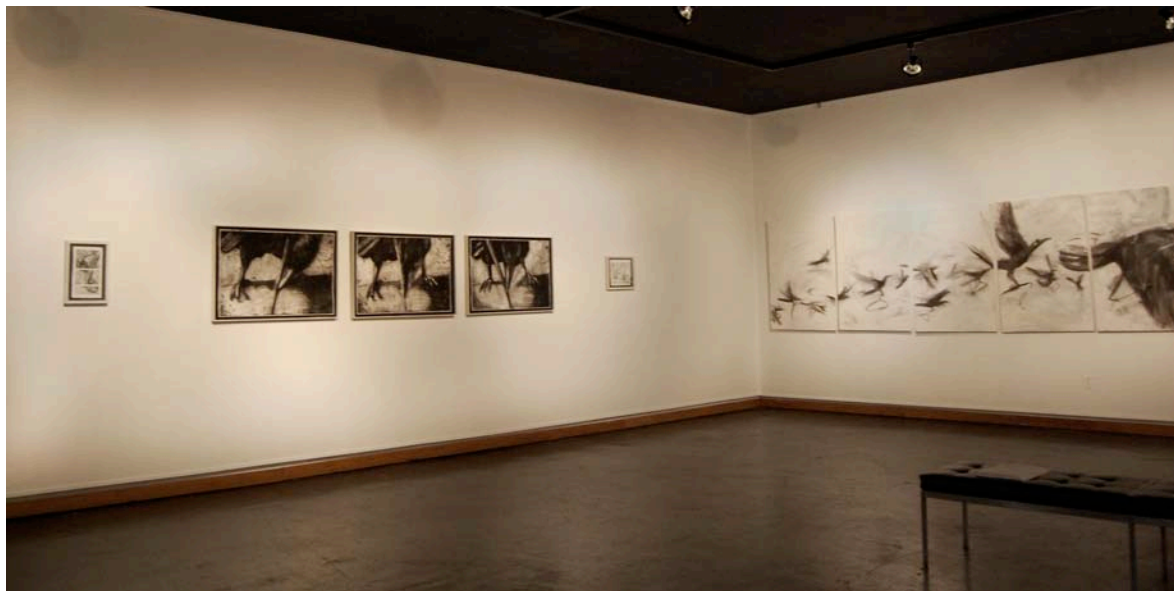


Image 16: Installation shot 1. Foster Gallery, Louisiana State University



Image 17: Installation shot 2. Foster Gallery, Louisiana State University

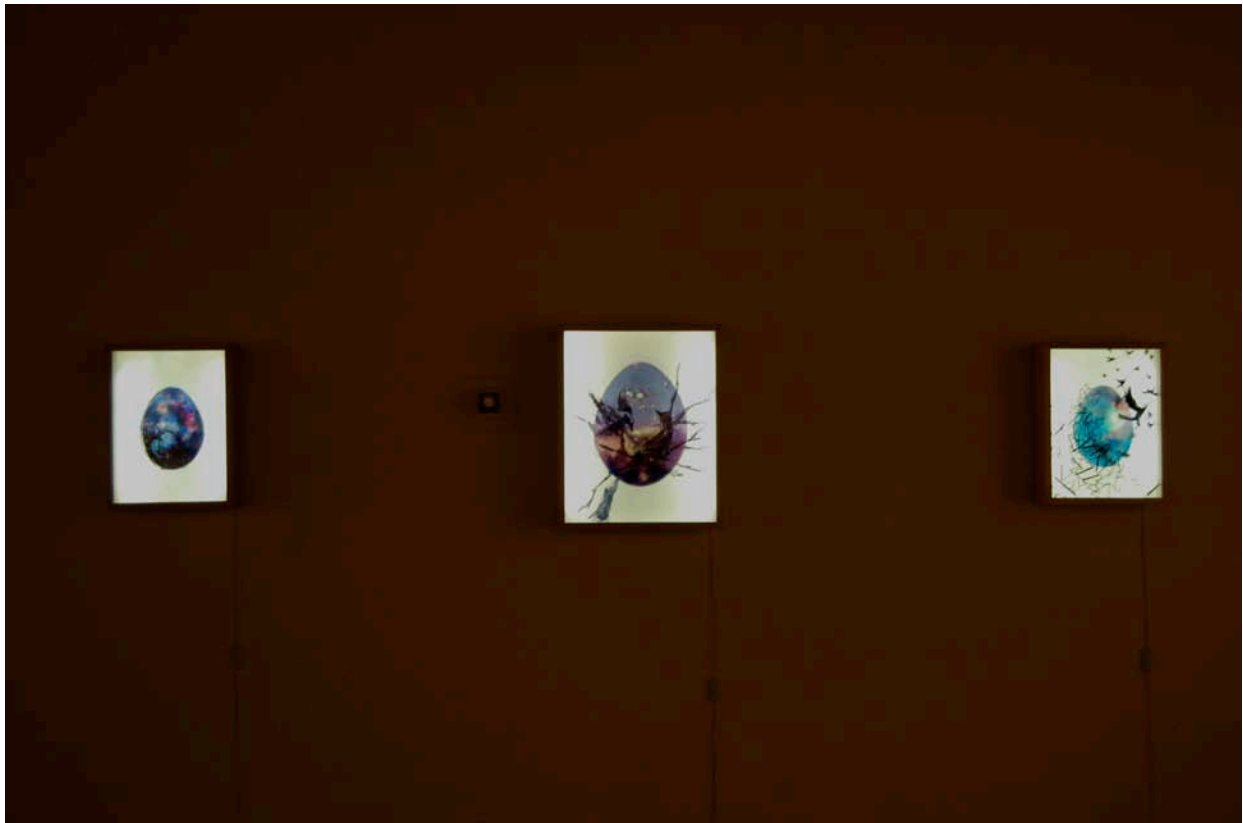


Image 18: Installation shot 3. Foster Gallery, Louisiana State University

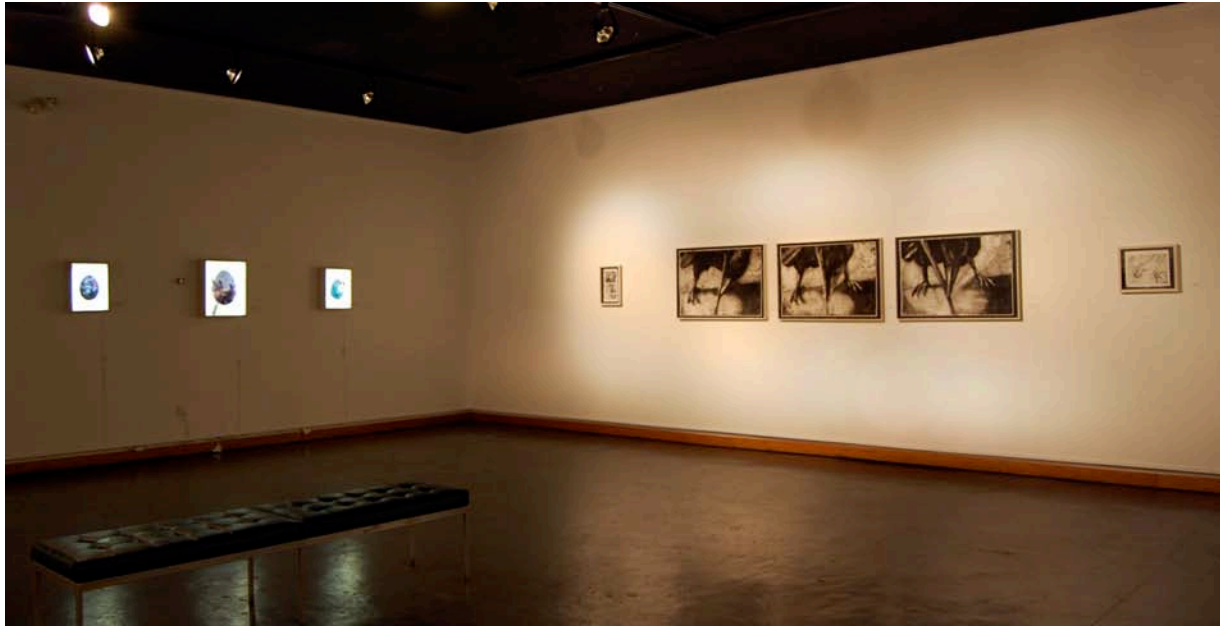


Image 19: Installation shot 4. Foster Gallery, Louisiana State University



Image 20: Installation shot 5. Foster Gallery, Louisiana State University

Conclusion

I look up at the night sky, and I know that, yes, we are part of this Universe, we are in this Universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts is that the Universe is in us. When I reflect on that fact, I look up—many people feel small, because they're small and the Universe is big, but I feel big, because my atoms came from those stars.

- Neil Degrasse Tyson¹³

I do not know if there is a firm conclusion that can (or should) be reached when you talk about the nature of life. I know that through the research and image making processes I have come to feel more comfortable with the death and the cyclical nature of matter in the universe. When I came upon the nest of hangers, I had no idea the journey it would send my mind on. The scene with the plastic nest, and permanence of these materials have brought me to this point of realization and in a way I am more at ease with the reality of mortality and more intimately connected to the greater picture of the cosmic.

I do know that I have a drive for making art, and it seems to me that the most appropriate way to express it is through observation and philosophical musing on some of the important elements in ones life. I want to connect with the universe and to have it reach back and connect with me.

I am potential... I am ephemeral... I am permanent.

¹³ Tyson, Neil Degrasse. *A Quote by Neil DeGrasse Tyson*. 2015.
<http://www.goodreads.com> (accessed December 26, 2015).

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Vita

Kelsey Livingston plans to receive her Masters of Fine Arts, in Studio Art at Louisiana State University in August 2016. She works representationally, through metaphor, focusing on issues of memory and the human condition. She has participated in several international arts programs, and has shown abroad in Italy and South Korea. She earned her Bachelors of Fine Arts in Drawing and Painting from California State University Long Beach. Her work can be viewed at www.kelseylivingstonart.com .