

Emilie Louise Gossiaux: *Significant Otherness*

Cassie Packard

June 1st, 2022

The Brooklyn Rail

“How might an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously?” asks scholar Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), a characteristically nimble and excursive text on the imbricated past, present, and future of canines and people. In the follow-up to her 1985 cyborg manifesto, Haraway frames people and dogs as co-constitutive categories—the term “companion” hinges upon a relation or contingency—and characterizes “significant otherness” as a nonhierarchical form of relating that springs from a cognizance of difference and an ethics of attention. Borrowing its title from Haraway’s writings, Emilie Louise Gossiaux’s exhibition *Significant Otherness* at MOTHER explores interspecies kinship and interdependence, both in the context of her relationship with her guide dog of nine years and in connection to the precarious joint present and future that humans share with other species threatened by manmade ecological collapse. This tender and sometimes angry presentation of drawings and sculptures is shot through with the radical intimacy that accompanies recognition of our mutual enmeshment, a perspicacity that is in line with crip ecology.¹

Gossiaux, who lost her vision in a bike accident in 2012, has previously sculpted London, the yellow Labrador who acts as her guide and companion in navigating a built environment and society that assume sightedness. In *Significant Otherness*, the artist replicates objects that

connect her with London—the material manifestations of their particular modes of relating—in earthenware ceramic, a medium fittingly teeming with diverse microorganisms living in relation to one another. Poised atop low pedestals and painted the color of dark brown leather with silvery “hardware” accents, *Leash* (2022) and *Harness* (2022) recreate literal conduits of interspecies connection. The zaftig *Red Kong* (2022), named for the eponymous chew toy into which peanut butter would typically be inserted, and *Green Thing with Treats* (2022), a grooved sphere from which spill five round coins of ersatz kibble, are among the sculpted ceramic chew toys displayed on the floor at a dog’s-eye-view. Prompting viewers to crouch, these stimulating objects, which bear resemblance to modernist sculpture, work to denaturalize an anthropocentric perspective; at the same time, they also gesture to canines’ embeddedness in our contemporary cultures of consumption and commodity fetishism.

Two large, minimal drawings made with ballpoint pen and crayon, *London, Midsummer no. 1* and *London, Midsummer no. 2* (both 2022), depict a trio of dogs upright on their hind legs, a stance that London sometimes adopts as a display of affection. The drawings are closely comparable, as if they were different frames from a single stop-motion. In the celebratory scene, the bipedal canines grasp pink ribbons, dancing around a maypole with their eyes closed. The sun and moon appear simultaneously, inhabiting the same space: a reality of our solar system that overreliance on ocular forms of knowing might obnubilate.

Putting too much stock in binaries and taxonomies, Gossiaux suggests, likewise obfuscates truths. *Dreaming Doggirl* (2022), its title easily forming a continuum of the words “dog” and “girl,” is a small white ceramic canine-human hybrid. The sleeping supine figurine has the head and nipples of a dog and the arms, legs, and pubic hair of a girl (an already-unstable category on several counts). Where does dog stop and

girl begin? Here, the two are not only interdependent but also inextricable; they come into being and dreaming together.

Such hybridity doesn't only extend to humans and canines, though the intimacy and propinquity that have characterized their relationship over millennia of shared history make the pairing an (enculturated) intuitive one. The New Orleans-born artist also depicts, for the first time, the animal that she has taken on as an alter ego: the alligator. *Alligatorgirl* (2022), an earthenware figurine, has a muted olive-hued body, bright yellow eyes, and stout white limbs that are at once anthropoid and reptilian; recessed into the creature's yawning, many-toothed mouth is a lightly incised, rather inconspicuous human face. The ballpoint pen and crayon drawings *Alligatorgirl Riot no. 1* and *Alligatorgirl Riot no. 2* (both 2022), both the obverse to London's midsummer idyll, picture an uprising by alligator-human hybrids with which Gossiaux identifies, enacted against those humans who think themselves exceptions to the rule of interspecies interdependence and entanglement in a shared ecology. Alligators play an essential role in maintaining the rich biodiversity of the wetlands in Gossiaux's home state; because the crocodilians' sex is temperature-dependent, climate change may dramatically skew the female-to-male ratio, curtailing reproductive rates. Jaws snapping, one of three human-limbed reptiles overtakes a lone bed with a pink coverlet that floats, otherwise unoccupied, on waters that keep inching up.

Endnotes

1. See: Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara (eds.), "Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory," University of Nebraska Press, 2017.