

Emilie Louise Gossiaux

Interdependence

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[Emilie Gossiaux](#) describes her thoughts about where she grew up, tactility, ableism, and her upcoming exhibition, *Other-Worlding*, at New York's Queens Museum in December. Gossiaux's joyfulness is nearly palpable in her work. Take her summer 2023 cover for *The Paris Review*. It features a line drawing of her companion English Labrador Retriever, London, who seems to be giving a cajoling leash-tug, ready to leap up or possibly even fly. Yet, the artist's work also points to heavier issues like the human tendency to assert undue authority over other animal species.

Emilie, your ebullient cover for *The Paris Review* got me thinking. Are you someone who relates to literature or other texts?

Yes, I love reading. I read all the time. The way I read is on my computer—text-to-speech. I turn to science fiction, fantasy, and theoretical texts about feminism and disability. Donna Haraway is a writer who I really enjoy for the way she writes about her dog, Cayenne, in her *Companion Species Manifesto* and her book *When Species Meet* about interspecies entanglements. Also, I don't know if you know the artist and writer Sunaura Taylor. She wrote *Beasts of Burden*. That book was transformative for me. I just reread it this past summer. I love her work, the way she writes about disability, animality, interdependence, the intersectionality between animal liberation and disability justice, being human, and embracing your own animal self.

Two of my favourite works by you are the sculptures *True Love Will Find You In The End* and *Dancing With London*. Could you describe how you made these works and what they mean to you?

Dancing With London was the first piece I made about my guide dog, London. I created this sculpture in 2018 after London became ill during my second semester in grad school at Yale. London started to bleed in her mouth and was losing teeth. My partner Kirby and I rushed her to the Animal Medical Center in New York City. The doctors cleaned her teeth but also found tumours growing in her gums, which they told me were probably mouth cancer. We had to wait a week for the biopsy results. I couldn't talk on the phone with the vet, I was crying so hard. That whole week, I was forced to think about London's mortality and how short a dog's life is. She was seven years old, and we had only been working together for about five years at that point. I started to really think about how much London means to me, not just that she is my guide dog, but how I think of her as encompassing so much—my sister, child, mother, protector, and best friend. That whole week I spent in bed with London, drawing her in my sketchbook and remembering our happier times. Early on in our relationship, when we came home from the studio, I would turn music on loud, and we'd dance around the apartment. London would circle around me, jump up and down, and put her paws in my hands. We'd sway back and forth and dance together. That was one of the ways that we bonded. Thankfully, the tumours were benign, but the realisation that London wouldn't be around forever, it changed me. In my piece, *Dancing With London*, viewers can imagine dancing with an animal partner. I made it as a monument to London.

Between *Dancing With London* and *True Love Will Find You In The End*, 2021, much of my work focused on interpersonal relationships with my partner Kirby and my family, but when the pandemic and the lockdowns happened, I couldn't go to my studio anymore, and I was at home all the time with London. Our bond became the central focus again, and I started

thinking about this interspecies relationship with her. I was also thinking about being stuck in a city and longing to be in nature again. London strengthened my connection to nature and the animal world. I thought about London and imagined us becoming one being. When we are together, we become like one superbeing. She becomes my eyes, and I become her hands and voice. I feel like animals don't have the same language we do, but we can still learn how to communicate with them by touching them, looking at them, and paying attention.

True Love Will Find You In The End consists of these two hybrid animal-human bodies. It's about interspecies relationships and tearing down the hierarchy between humans and animals. London's head is on top of my body, and my head is on top of her body. I made the two figures the same height so that they look at each other on the same level. I also like that they echo the imagery in Egyptian statuary. Many Egyptian gods have animal heads and human bodies. There's that respect again that we seem to have lost with the animal world. I don't think of London as my pet. I think of her as my partner

Do you want to discuss memory and how it informs your work? For example, you grew up in and around New Orleans.

I rely on memory when I'm making drawings and sculptures. Visual memory, but also haptic memory—touching something. I draw and sculpt London over and over because she's so available. I touch her all the time, and that gets locked into my memories and my dream world. Dreams are very visual for me, and London often shows up there.

The house where I grew up is not in New Orleans. It's on the other side of the Mississippi River in Gretna, Louisiana. There was a canal across the street from my house, in my neighbours' backyard, and my neighbours didn't have a fence, so sometimes I would go across the street and sneak around the back where there's that big canal. And then, beyond that, there is a forest. I remember going back there and watching alligators in the water. Not very big ones, like two feet or three feet long. I'd also see

turtles, fish, and bugs. Sometimes, I would gaze at the forest too and try to see if I could spot any other animals coming out, so in a way, I've always been mystified by non-human species.

But I haven't lived in New Orleans since I was sixteen. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, I moved to West Palm Beach, Florida, to attend an art high school there. Moving to West Palm Beach—which is very clean and tamed—felt like a big culture shock for me because New Orleans is so wild, and the people there are so creative and free. You celebrate wildness and difference there. Going to the Mardi Gras parades, there are big, colourful floats and people marching with papier-mâché animal heads and masks. New Orleans has influenced my art aesthetic a lot.

My Alligator Girl character came about in 2021 after Hurricane Ida swept through Louisiana. It was the first storm that my parents decided to stay home and not evacuate. I was scared and up all night listening to the news and reading updates. There's this huge old tree in my parents' backyard. If it fell, it would destroy our house. But, thankfully, they were OK. The storm avoided them, but I remember reading articles about how the towns closer to the Gulf Coast got hit the hardest. I read articles about alligators swimming freely in the water that was up to the trees and people's rooftops, and someone was eaten by an alligator. Alligator Girl came out of two different but strong feelings. One feeling was about the Anthropocene and how humans have continually developed and destroyed wetlands and the natural habitats of these ancient creatures. The other feeling came from this feminist anger. The alligator became my alter-ego and how I expressed my rage against the patriarchy and just wanting to thrash around angrily like an alligator.

Can I ask: How do you think philosophically about touch? Touch can be an expression of curiosity and warmth. It can be healing. In the digital age, various realities sometimes create new experiences that might replace other kinds of touch. Of course, there are also all kinds of unwanted touch.

I was thinking about touch, tactility, and materials even before I became blind. Touch is one of the senses that gets overlooked the most. It gets looked down upon because it's primordial. When you think about touch, you think about your animal side. I think one of the problems that we have as people is that we don't know how to touch appropriately. So many times when I'm by myself waiting to cross the street, someone will push me when it's time to go. Or, to get my attention, they'll hit my head. I feel like blind and visually impaired people know instinctively how to touch and extend their hands and arms. There's exploratory touching using your fingertips or the back of your hand to gently explore something. Working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a museum educator, I heard people would let their kids climb all over Egyptian statues. One of the things that I think is important in general for touching each other and touching in galleries and museums is asking for consent first. It's good to know the gallerist or artist before you ask to touch something, but I have gone to galleries and just approached the person who's working there like, "Hey, I'm blind, and I love clay and making ceramic work. Is it OK if I touch this?" And sometimes they're like, "Sure."

When I worked at the Met, if I was planning a programme and wanted to know something more about a painting or a sculpture, the curators would pull out other objects from the collection that I could touch so I could have a better understanding of the painting or the sculpture I wanted to talk about.

Also, philosophically, touch is one of my love languages.

Do you ever think about places where the visual and auditory are privileged, but don't have to be?

I think about how great it would be to have a dance club where you could go, and you wouldn't hear music, you would just feel it! How great would that be? I love dancing so much, feeling music inside of my body. It's vitalising for me.

But in a gallery or museum, especially with contemporary art, when the artist is living, it would be so easy to reach out and ask the artist, “Can this work be touched safely with someone around from the gallery or the museum who can help?” I feel like that’s a missed opportunity a lot of the time. For my upcoming show at the Queens Museum, I plan on having accessible touch programs where people can touch the work. I will have some touch samples, and the sculptures of London will be accessible to touch. Only during programmes, though. Not during regular museum hours.

I’m so looking forward to this show. Can you describe more of what you’re planning?

When I applied for the exhibition through the Queens Museum’s Jerome Hill Fellowship for Emerging Artists, I submitted the idea to turn my drawing, *London, Midsummer 1*, into an installation. The drawing shows three Londons dancing around a maypole on their hind legs while holding ribbon leashes in their hands, which are attached to the top of the maypole. They’re in a valley with trees in the background, and the sun and the moon hang together in the sky above the trees. I think of maypole dances as a celebration of summer and humans working together with nature. I’m interested in paganism, folklore, and ritualistic traditions. One of the things I’m interested in about pre-Christianity is how there were more interconnected relationships at that time between humans and animals and with worshiping goddesses. To me, the maypole and this dance—where it’s usually women dancing—they’re symbols of the feminine divine. But then, I reclaimed the maypole for myself. I designed mine to look like my white cane—a mobility tool I use for getting around. A lot of the time, it gets in people’s way, and they yell at me about it. But I’m like, “Fuck you, I’m walking here too!”

So, I want to make this maypole-white cane the centrepiece of the exhibition. It will be fifteen feet tall and take over the space, becoming an icon or symbol of freedom and autonomy, which London is for me, too.

She's given me huge autonomy and agency. I'm also thinking about her agency as well. You can notice her sense of control where she makes eye contact with the viewer and how she holds her own dog leashes attached to the maypole like she's guiding the dance herself.

I think, too, we share an affection for Matisse's *Dance (I)* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the 1909 painting of dancers pulling each other around in a circle, their collective energy seemingly almost lifting them off the ground.

I love that Matisse painting. It's something that I think about. The colours, the movement, and the joy resonate with me and what I'm trying to capture in this installation. At the Met, they have *Nasturtiums* with the *Painting Dance I*, by Matisse, which shows a huge vase of flowers in the foreground, and in the background is *The Dance*. It's a painting within a painting. I taught a course called *Seeing Through Drawing* at the Met for blind and visually impaired artists and students. One of the things that I love about Matisse's paintings is that not every inch of the canvas is covered with paint. Beneath the paint, you can see his drawing. I brought the class into the gallery with the painting and described it. They drew their interpretation and continued working on it downstairs in the classroom, where I had them gesso their paper and draw into that wet paint.

I'm enjoying learning about how you work on a rubber drawing pad that is reactive to a certain extent and helps you feel the lines you make as you draw. Also, I think you keep some of your drawing implements in envelopes labeled with braille.

Yes, that crayon organisation system was a real game-changer for me. I just came up with it in 2020 during the lockdown. Before that, I would ask my studio assistant to pick out a crayon for me, a specific colour that I needed, but since then, I've organised my collection of crayons. I memorised the colours that I had. Then, I created braille labels with envelopes for each crayon and put them in boxes with similar colours.

For the sculptures, my process always begins with a drawing in my sketchbook, and then I turn those sketchbook drawings into larger drawings. It's a way to meditate on the sculpture I want to make. It becomes a discovery, getting the mental image out of my head and onto paper. The mental image guides my hand. All of these sculptures that I'm talking about started with a drawing.

Do you have guiding principles in the studio?

It's so hard to know if you're doing the right thing when you're alone in your studio. One of the things my mentors have taught me is to be honest with myself. My most important guiding principle is to always check in with myself and be honest. Is this piece making me happy? Do I want to take this drawing and bring it to life?

Is there anything you want to add—anything we left out?

Yes. My partner Kirby and London both often show up in my work. I have an interdependent relationship with Kirby, too. He is so vital to me in my life as a care assistant and my romantic partner. One thing people can learn from disability culture is how important interdependence is between you and your partners, your friends, your neighbourhood, and your environment with non-human species, too. Americans overemphasise this idea of independence and individuality. But interdependence is so important. My work is about that.