

## *A Gentle Entanglement*

Nicola Bailey

*There must be some molecular record of our touch in the codes of living that will leave traces in the world... We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh.*

– Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003)

To say that Nicola Bailey's practice turns on love reveals little of its seductions – the tenderness of her lines, her figurative sensibility, the texture of her affections. It is perhaps more precise to say that it turns on a *particular* loving, not as a lofty abstraction but as an accumulative verb of quiet devotion. More precisely still: Bailey's practice turns on the deeply felt mutual affinity she shares with her dogs. Her continued reflections on people and animals in relation offer a study in what feminist philosopher Donna Haraway calls *significant otherness*: human and non-human beings in intimate proximity accountable to both their differences and dependencies. To those beings that live alongside one another in profound ways that extend beyond mere coexistence, Haraway lends the designation of *companion species*. The dog – to artist and philosopher both – is the model example of this interspecies entanglement. Ours has been a communion across millennia; one of companionship, complexity, and co-constitution.

Pursuing an affective encounter with significant otherness, the artist's material engagements give form to feeling. Bailey is limber, working across mediums, rehearsing the image-repertoire of the beloved animal. For all her commitment to figuration, she favours a supple looseness, that the animals she describes are never wholly defined but emergent. She pictures her dogs among shades of pink, reaching for an elusive tone expressed only in proximations; a colour with which to embrace, to sanctify – an embryonic shade. Hers is a loving labour, translating a tacit knowledge of each dog's form. It extends an ethic of engagement, a means of apprehending difference "as something other than a reflection of

one's intentions" (Haraway) – an erotics of encounter; a tactile, sensuous rendezvous with otherness.

Bailey more often pictures her dogs sleeping, conferring a figurative expression to the dissolving of wakeful difference. "My animal companions and I spend many hours asleep, our dreams comingling," she writes. "How do these lucid musings dissolve the porous boundaries we have constructed?" In sleep, the distinction between self and other finds a novel fluidity; dreams being the frontiers, as philosopher David Pena-Guzman suggests, "where the lines between human and the nonhuman, the existential and the biological, the transcendent and the immanent begin to blur." That dogs dream as we do is understood as self-evident. That we will never know their dreams, can only hope we might inhabit them, forms part of the necessary opacity that separates the loved object from the self. *The Dreamers* is compelling for this tension: the immediacy of two soft bodies rendered in bronze and the impassable remove of their interior imaginings. Beneath them, womb-pink rose quartz (the province of dreams, perhaps, given mineral weight).

Bailey's dogs are not symbolic shorthand, just as Haraway's dogs "are not an alibi for other themes... are not surrogates for theory." Still, lineages and resonances suggest themselves. Ideas settle on her works, are proposed by the materials with which she shapes them. The dogs of art history and antiquity, of archaeology, gather close; a chronology of our being with and becoming with our canine companions. As for symbols, Bailey gives us birds – these too in repose (her dogs dreaming, her birds lifeless). Their flightless presence was suggested by her first subject; "one of my dogs," she writes, "brought me a gift of dead garden bird he had killed." Gift or augury? Regardless, the dead bird offers the ideal vessel for the artist's parallel preoccupations that traverse geological deep time, climate change, mass die-off, our anthropogenic age. This *giving of symbol* is recalled in the small bronze *Cosmic Counterpoint* (the dog offers only his quarry; the receiver apprehends it as sign).

All Bailey's birds have until now been palmed-sized, shaped by hand for the hand to hold, to know by touch as by sight. Arranged in flightless formation, they appear as artefacts of ecological precarity. In *The Great Silence*, a single bird finds a monumental scale. Its presence is a demand. The work is titled after Ted Chiang's short story of the same name (in turn titled

for the Fermi Paradox), which recounts – from a parrot’s perspective – humanity’s desire to communicate with extra-terrestrial intelligence, insensible to the many intelligent non-human, earth-bound animals left overlooked and endangered. “It’s no coincidence that ‘aspiration’ means both hope and the act of breathing,” Chiang’s parrot says. In Bailey’s *The Great Silence*, there is neither.

“My lover brings me many roses,” Bailey says, echoing the gift of a bird. Here, too, she has been given a sign – one of romantic sentiment. In *La Vie en Rose*, a tabletop tableau with cast roses and bronze figurines, this shade of love is described in both gesture and symbol (an embrace and a flower). The artist follows an expanded understanding of romance, which reaches beyond the image of paired lovers to other unions: that of mother and child, animal and animal, human and non-human. Recalling scenes of encounter, the tableau approaches love as a consuming closeness, which seeks to inhabit “an inter-subjective world that is about meeting the other in all the fleshly detail of a mortal relationship” (Haraway again).

In the shadow of love is the knowledge of its absence – not hate (its antonym) but loneliness. Might *A Gentle Entanglement* be a bid against loss and solitude? Among the textual fragments Bailey accumulates, a quote from John Berger’s essay *Why Look at Animals* (1977) finds particular resonance –

*With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species.*

By way of ending, a revision: To say that Bailey’s practice turns on love reveals little of its seductions. It is perhaps more precise to say that her practice turns on those intimacies that bolster us against isolation. As individuals, as a planetary force; in our homes as in the world. Bailey’s dogs offer us an object lesson in abiding alongside difference, in radical empathy, engendering care and compassion for significant otherness, and for otherness more broadly.

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