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Tanya J. Behrisch
Simon Fraser University, behrisch@sfu.ca

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Storywood: Collaborating With Opaque Unknowable Others Through Oil Pain

Tanya J. Behrisch
Simon Fraser University, Canada.

Abstract

This paper demonstrates the use of contemplation and arts-based research (ABR) to explore intersubjectivity between myself and other opaque beings. Through a walking meditation, I experience an affective encounter with a plywood board found lying on a beach. The board radiates agency and mysterious stories about its passage through the world. Drawing on philosopher Tim Lilburn’s concept of permeable attention and Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter, I discover the storied nature of the damaged board and resonances between its stories and my own. By practicing perceptual openness, I discern vitality shimmering beyond the visible surface of the board. During my artistic conversation with the board, I experience an ontological shift in my relationship to the board. It shifts from being an inert object to embody a fellow storied agentic subject. This experience offers insight into how I and other modern humans might enter into respectful relations with unknowable opaque others. Drawing on Halberstam’s use of unknowing as a fertile method of inquiry, this contemplative artistic journey invites me to shift away from our dominant epistemological obsession with knowing and understanding towards accepting opacity in others with whom I co-create the world.
Using Arts-based Research to Engage with Opacity

This arts-based research (ABR) paper describes my encounter with a scrap of plywood that compels me to stop, notice, and engage with its unknowable stories. Its ruptured surface hints at mysterious passage and contact with human and more-than-human others. Using ABR, I engage with ambiguous themes, such as opacity, brokenness, and wholeness, that promise no closure. Through oil painting, I confront modern ontological assumptions around human exceptionalism and agency.

ABR is well-suited to exploring themes that undermine neoliberal values of speed, efficiency, certainty, and outputs over relationships, care, processes, and place. Citing hooks, Leavy writes “art carries transformative power that can resist and unsettle stereotypical ways of thinking” (2020, p. 239, emphasis in original). ABR scholars Knowles and Luciani write that art “calls forth different, alternative modes of thinking which implies that protocols or procedures for qualitative research are unbounded, unfettered by conventions which constrain possibilities” (2007, p. xi). They describe ABR’s potential to “[bring] together the systematic and rigorous qualities of the arts” (2007, p. xxi) such as St. Pierre’s use of writing as a “method of discovery” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 827, emphasis in original). She explains that “data might have escaped entirely if I had not written; they were collected only in the writing” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 829, emphasis in original). Using oil painting as part of my ABR, I discern that every thing is storied and comes from somewhere.

Contemplative Walking

This section describes a contemplative walk along a remote beach in St. Vincent Bay, B.C. in July 2022 where my family has resided for 40 years. The sun descends behind the western mountains, draping St. Vincent Bay in a blue shadow. I walk the rocky shore in my clogs, inhaling ripe scents rising from rocks, plants, and seaweed. All beings are tired from the day’s light and heat. Deepening shade cools the air, bringing relief to all who exhale together. I stroll the rocky beach, gazing loosely over alders, blackberry vines, maples, and lichen dripping from ancient fruit trees. My mind is diffuse and unfocused. I resist naming what I see, feel, and hear.

I navigate granite boulders, registering diffusely their textures and diverse shapes. Their tumbled arrangement appears haphazard to me but their descent from the mountain above and possible placement by human hands are a patterned reality knowable only partially to me. These patterns extend beyond and include me. I am content to walk within this familiar yet also unknowable reality. I do not have to know or understand to be in relation to this place. I participate in this dynamic unfolding place by practicing diffuse awareness as things come to meet me.

This beach is no stranger to people, it has seen them for millennia. Building on my previous work on co-arising with unknowable others, I defer to the boulders’ opacity (Behrisch, 2021a, 2021b). Layers of compacted white clam shells and ash lie compressed within a meter of soil. Indigenous people lived and cooked in this place for thousands of years, part of Coast Salish and shíshálh Nation’s ancestral territory (Temprano, n.d.).

Every boulder holds its outer layer differently, letting it fall slowly away or gripping it tightly. This falling and holding together is always going on over seconds, hours, days, years, centuries, and longer. The tide recedes like a tongue lapping, an animal softly licking itself. A stream filters
down through the hot forest, talking to rocks. Parallel lines of leaf mulch lie disintegrating between rocks, waiting to be carried away by the tide.

Two dead trees, distinctive pillars visible from across St. Vincent Bay, stand to my left. A silvered planed surface catches my attention. I wander towards the object, not naming my curiosity. Sheltering beneath blooms of ocean spray lies a large, irregularly-shaped piece of plywood with rounded edges (Figure 1). I have not noticed it before.

![Figure 1. Plywood Resting On Logs in St. Vincent Bay (photo by author)](image)

**Being Addressed by a Thing**

Modern Western ontology inserts an impenetrable boundary between humans and things: no bridge links subjective humans to the world of inanimate objects. Things are passive; they lack subjectivity, agency, stories, and relationships with others. Their passivity makes them ontologically inferior to agentic humans. However, this board addresses me. It asks me to approach, to linger, and to stop. I feel curiosity about this thing. I walk here every day and have not noticed it before. A diffuse mind gives way to curious questions. How could I have missed this strange thing? What is it doing here? *Who are you? What are you?*

Responding to its pull, I wander over to see it more closely. My perceptual openness to this non-human *thing* suggests I am responding to an agentic *subject*, not an inert object. My diffuse mind that accompanied my earlier walking meditation gives way to alert focus on this being that addresses me. Looking closely, I see a dark layer exposed beneath its battered surface (Figure 2). This plywood comes from trees that grew in a particular place, at a particular angle to sunlight and rainfall. Every thing has a story, often multiple stories. Every thing comes from somewhere. It was part of living trees.
It has its own heritage, legacy, and stories of living in relation with other living beings. No thing is placeless. Handled by human hands, trees were cut, dried, and sliced into plies, glued, stacked, shipped, stored, priced, sold, shaped, punctured, and attached to other structures. This board was *useful* to someone. At some point, it ripped free from another object, maybe a shed, dock, or fishing boat, by wind, waves, or some other means. These agents are part of its stories, and are visible and invisible. Many of these stories elude my comprehension. For instance, how it arrived here, I will never know. Now I am part of its ongoing story, and not at its center.

Plywood technology is ancient, embodying interaction between human and more-than-human agency. Ancient Egyptians discovered that by placing and gluing thin layers of wood together at 90-degree angles, they created material stronger than solid wood. This was particularly useful in areas where trees were scarce. This board’s edges have been softened through abrasion with other objects such as logs, boats, rocks, and metal. Long rusty nails impale it, staining its entry and exit points with rusty residue.

**Vulnerability and Devotion Follow Permeable Attention**

Mary Oliver writes that “attention is the beginning of devotion” (2019, p. 8). I practice paying close attention to my surroundings while keeping my awareness diffuse. Diffusion gestures towards looseness while attention focuses. Combining this into diffuse attention, I discern the greater whole within as I and fellow subjects co-arise. Not separated by ontological categories, we are rather interrelated and interdependent. Diffuse attention makes me porous, sensitive, and vulnerable to my surroundings. I feel vibrancy rippling beyond the visible realm.

In his seminal book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, phenomenologist David Abram perceives the non-human world as alive, agentic, storied vocal, and relationally connected. Non-human beings speak in diverse registers beyond human understanding. Abram describes these others as “more-than-human” (1997), using “more-” instead of “non-” to signify an extension beyond the human rather than a deficit.

Jane Bennett observes vitality and agency extending beyond the animate realm to include all matter, including inorganic, non-living matter to which Bennett assigns the term “nonsubject.” Bennett “[discerns] active powers issuing from *nonsubjects*, [highlighting] what is typically cast in the
shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (2010, p. ix, emphasis added to original). She notices objects lying on an urban sidewalk commanding her attention: a dead rat, a bottle cap, a mat of oak pollen, and a glove. Noticing these items is Bennett’s affective response to their agency. This signals intersubjectivity between herself and nonhuman objects and where intersubjectivity exists, so does the potential for empathy kinship, withness, and co-arising, which is why noticing nonhuman agency is a political act.

Discerning agency in nonsubjects disrupts the notion that humans are the only relational subjects in the universe. Theologian Stuckey invites us to “step down from our lonely pedestal” to join a community of fellow more-than-human subjects (2010, p. 187). For Bennett, noticing nonhuman agency is a moral obligation. “The ethical task … is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it” (2010, p. 14, emphasis added to original). Bennett writes, “I will emphasize, and overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought” (2010, p. xvi). I take up Bennett’s ethical call to “become perceptually open” to vitality rippling through the more-than-human world.

In an interview with Ruzesky, Tim Lilburn describes the cultivation of permeable attention as a political calling (Ruzesky 2010, p. 29): “This kind of contemplative work is … the true political work.” This comment resonates with Bennett’s ethical call to become perceptually open to nonhuman agency, inviting intersubjectivity between human and more-than-human beings. Part of my ABR is to welcome the unexpected, including the board’s agency to speak to me in a nonhuman register. Becoming perceptually open allows us to “be surprised by what we see” (Dumm quoted in Bennett, 2010, p. 5). Through painting with the board, I experience its agency and stories speaking across the ontological divide. Life is simply more enchanting when we allow for surprises.

I prefer to use Abram’s term “more-than-human” to Bennett’s “nonsubject,” “inhuman,” ”nonhuman,” and “not-quite-human,” as these terms imply deficiencies or negations of human qualities such as subjectivity, agency, and relationality. As I work with the board, the ontological boundary between us becomes a flimsy contrivance. Communication, commerce, and stories pass between us as we co-create the painting. Contrary to modern Western ontology, neither the board nor I are locked into mutually exclusive domains. We are involved rather than separated by an ontological hierarchy.

**Thing Power**

This beautiful weathered multi-storied thing compels me to stop. My mother waits in our aluminum canoe as I consider what it is asking me to do (Figure 3). Bennett calls this *Thing Power,* “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (2010, p. 6).
Invoking permeable attention, I feel a conversation emerging with this thing. I want to bring it home, so I can think about painting with it. I grip the board’s soft edges and raise it aloft; it is heavier and bigger than I initially gauged, its cells likely waterlogged with seawater or rain (Figure 4).

I carry it to the canoe and place it across the gunwales (Figure 5). We paddle home to our cabin, now in shadow. My mother and I are part of the board’s story. We join other humans whose residues remain on the board: people who cut trees, sliced and glued plies, hammered nails, and attached the board to something else. Who these others are, I will never know. Despite not knowing who else handled the board, we are interrelated through our mutual involvement.
What does it mean to be in relation with others I will never know? Queer theorist Halberstam uses *not* knowing as a site of inquiry, calling this “low theory.” “Really imaginative ethnographies … depend on an unknowing relation to the other. To begin an ethnographic project with a goal…and a set of presumptions, is already to stymie the process of discovery” (2011, p. 12). This is akin to beginner’s mind invoked by poet Rilke (1997) and master sculptor Rodin (Corbett, 2017). I paint without a formula for success.

Halberstam values involvement over gaining full understanding of subjects, “revel[ing] in the detours, twists, and turns … that [seek] not to explain but to *involve*” (2011, p. 15, emphasis added to original). This challenges me to stay in relationships with opaque others while resisting the urge to understand them. This is a worthy challenge for me as an artist, scholar, and manager of large teams in a large post-secondary institution. I surrender to not-knowing the board’s stories while engaging with it throughout my painting process. Respecting its opacity requires humility and decenters my humanness in relation to my co-creators.

Oil painting is a fertile medium for engaging with the unknown. For poet photographer Suzanne Thomas, art disrupts a priori ideas that dominate encounters with nonhuman actors. Thomas “[wrenches] forms from their original presence in a fluid way of encountering natural phenomena to see the world with a freshness of vision,” enabling her to “[resist] the search for certainty … for singularity of essence or reality—rather [embracing] uncertainty, ambiguity, and a multiplicity of meaning” (Thomas, 2007, p. 46).

**The Shimmering Presence of Invisible Stories**

Mel Chen identifies invisible agency as a “shimmering presence” (Chen quoted in Shotwell, 2016, p. 78). The human hands that cut, manufactured, and drove nails through this board hover like a shimmering presence around this plywood. The long, pointed, rusty nails poking through the board are part of the board’s story. They might injure me while handling the board or damage a wall if I eventually claim it as a piece of art (Figure 6).
I ask my father to pull all 12 nails from the board. Absent but not gone, the holes and rust stains are a shimmering presence, reminding me of the nails. I prop the board on my easel and stand back to regard it (Figure 7). The bashed-up whorled surface is already storied. During the night, the board pulls on my imagination. I ponder its size and heft and wonder whether to cut it in two in order to make two practical painting surfaces. Cutting it would dishonour its long journey and intactness, having survived multiple impacts with other beings. Despite its damage, I feel it asking me to leave it whole and uncut. I am perceptually open and involved with the board.

What should I paint on its storied surface? I resist the compulsion to create something important. I want to stay loose, casual, and liberated from the dream of success. I need to lose my way, to invoke “low theory” in order to hear what the board wants to say. For Halberstam, getting lost opens opportunities for discovery and transformation, inviting me to “consider the utility of getting lost over finding [my] way,” (2011, p. 15). I am learning from this storied board whose *Thing Power* arrested and caused me to engage with it.

**Painting as Devotion**

I scroll through photos of the Francis Peninsula where I walked every day in February while house-sitting for a friend on the coast. This land pulled on me continuously. I could not get enough contact with this place, despite visiting it frequently. It pulled on me when I gazed at its high plateau from my porch, its intelligence waiting, hovering, being itself. It pulled me as I drove along the highway, especially when I walked on the land. It is pulling me right now as I type. I want to be with that place. Painting is my devotional practice, to this place, and to being in conversation with more-than-human others.
I peer at images of a doe and her fawn who allowed me to be close to them. The doe permitted me to gaze at her while she ate, licked her fawn, nuzzled her baby, and chewed cud while sitting on fluffy lichen. She tolerated and maybe accepted me as a temporary visitor to this place. I settled on an image of the doe who watched me return to the land like a devotee over and over as I pondered my doctoral thesis, my mentor, land, and self (Figure 8).

As I gazed at the doe, she turned to look behind her shoulder, perhaps at her fawn, then back towards the Salish Sea beyond me, her attention part of the sentient land. This storied place, its ongoing breath, its ongoing intelligence astonishes me. Despite my frequent visits, it remains
strange; it never becomes routine or ordinary. I stay perceptually open and it continues to surprise me. Using a light wash of burnt Sienna pigment, I sketch contours and map shapes, making the deer prominent but not centered (Figure 9). Nothing should be centered or symmetrical when painting land. Land’s imperfect asymmetry is perfect.

![Mapping Contours](image1)

**Figure 9. Mapping Contours**

**Approaching the Unknown with Intellectual Humility**

I stand back to assess my contours and contemplate the shimmering presence of rusty nails and human hands hovering on the board. Circular gouging caused by pivoting nails speak of the board’s movement through a dynamic environment (Figure 10). Already part of the painting, I wonder if the nail holes, rust stains, and gouging will distract from the landscape or doe. As devotion, oil painting is practice in releasing control over outcomes. If applied thickly, it takes days, weeks, months, even years for oil pigment to dry. The outcome is never foreclosed and it can never be rushed. The slowness of oil painting lends itself to contemplative reflection. Unfolding over 20-50 hours, each painting involves me affectively. Each session is an invitation to begin anew.

![Circular Gouging From Loosened Bent and Rotating Nails](image2)

**Figure 10. Circular Gouging From Loosened Bent and Rotating Nails**

Bennett asks whether modern humans can perceive the extent of vitality residing in the material world: “Is it really possible to theorize this vibrancy, or is it … a quest that is not only futile but also tied to the hubristic human will to comprehensive knowledge and the violent human will to
dominate and control?” (2010, p. xvii). Bennett is calling for intellectual humility. The more-than-human world has value, vitality, integrity, and selfhood independent of its instrumental value to humans. Recognizing limitations to our understanding is necessary to healing our ruptured colonial relationship with the more-than-human world.

Uncertainty, about how the rust stains and salt impregnated within the wood will interact with my oil painting, is part of surrendering while painting on found materials. I release my compulsion to predict, control, and know. There is no step-by-step guide to working with scrap plywood. How good can a painting be on what modern ontology characterizes as discarded refuse, as garbage? Would anyone buy a painting on a piece of weathered and damaged wood? Invoking Halberstam’s low theory, I leave these questions to hover unanswered. I repeatedly have to discipline myself to undo my desire for recognition as an artist, and struggle with this each time I paint.

**Understanding is Not Required for Respectful Relationships**

Halberstam uses naivety to cultivate relationships with others. “The naïve or the ignorant may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices. … we must realize that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once said, ignorance is ‘as potent and multiple a thing as knowledge’” (Halberstam, 2011, p.12, emphasis added to original). By releasing my need to know how the holes, rust, and salt will interact with oil pigment, I linger in ambiguous liminality without feeling paralyzed.

I squeeze titanium white, cerulean, radiant, French and Prussian blue pigments onto my palette, followed by blobs of dioxazine violet, sap green, viridian, and Naples yellow. I dip a fat filbert brush into a tuna can of odorless solvent, and dab excess solvent onto a rag that was once an expensive beautiful bed sheet, the colour of Prussian blue. I live on the ocean every summer and walk barefoot over land and sand, and through water. My heals roughen like sand paper. Over years of sleeping on this sheet and rasping our heals against its thick cotton, we thinned and eventually tore through it beyond repair. I document my intersubjective experience with this beautiful cloth, now a painting rag, in a meditation on the history of Prussian Blue (Behrisch, 2023).

As I paint, inaudible connections between our bodies toughened by summers spent outside, sleeping, and eating tuna, speak in quiet registers. These make me wonder when a painting begins. Does it start when I place pigment on a surface? Or with sleeping on a blue sheet? Or with a tuna sandwich, the can which I use for solvent? These connections weave together with the board’s stories, hinting at the interconnectedness of our patterned ever-unfolding relational world.

I dip my brush into cerulean and radiant blue and drag it along the board. The wood is thirsty and absorbs paint into its dry fibers as a stretched canvas would not. I grab more pigment and thin it with solvent to keep it light and translucent. Using thin pigment allows the wood’s whorls to shine (Figure 11). These dynamic currents ripple through once living wood. They tell stories of energy and nutrients gathering in eddies and flowing within the tree, currents now flowing through our emergent painting. A soft alpine glow hovers above the ground in the photo. Using loose brush strokes, I paint sky down to touch the land. Instead of thinking, I invoke low theory’s naivety and porosity to the dynamic currents swirling before me (Figure 12).
“Be Broken to Be Whole”

The board speaks of impacts and rupture. The gash in the top righthand quadrant asserts itself through swirling pigment (Figures 13, 16, 2). Damage speaks of life lived in friction with the world. To be in relation to others means to experience contact, friction, and potential damage. No one remains unaffected, unchanged, or pure when in relation to others. This board reminds me that impacts I have suffered are stories that make up my identity. There is beauty in treating our ruptures and damage with gentleness. Gentleness and respect are ways of honoring our stories.

This board says “Look at me. I am damaged, whole, and fantastically interesting.” Its weathered beauty underscores that broken things are whole. The board’s ruptured beauty resonates with Lao Tzu’s wisdom that wholeness includes brokenness.

Be broken to be whole.
Twist to be straight.
Be empty to be full.
Wear out to be renewed.
Have little and gain much.
Have much and get confused.

So wise souls hold to the one,
and test all things against it.

Not showing themselves,
they shine forth.

[ … ]

Truly, to be whole
is to return.

(Lao Tzu, 1998 translation, p. 31, emphasis added to original).

Using contours applied earlier as a guide, I begin painting in the landforms. I mix raw and burnt umber with titanium white for the vertical rock face. I use raw Sienna to define a rocky ledge where moisture trickles and gathers, feeding a soft clump of moss. I want the doe to be the focal point, even though she is small, so the rocky mound must not dominate. I stand back to survey my painting. It is ugly (Figure 14).

![Figure 13. Gashes, Holes, and Abrasions Tell Stories of Contact With Others](image)

I try not to let the emergent painting’s ugliness deter me. I practice enduring my feelings of impending failure, allowing them to be hover next to other feelings such as curiosity and wonderment. These feelings are real and familiar guests to my painting process. They are unwelcome visitors, but if I reject them, I reject something alive in myself. Pushing them away invites them to grip me more strongly. By allowing these feelings to hover within me and by resisting the urge to reject them, I try to treat them with compassion. This sometimes enables them to lie down, and stop dominating my consciousness. “Be here if you want; you can stay or go. I am still going to paint.” My fear of failure diminishes as I reach for Payne’s grey and sap green to block in rock, moss, grass, and soil comingling in the dry crisp air. I recall the sound of crickets chirping as I walked on the land.

Things coalesce as I block in shapes. They start to look less ugly, less awkward. The wood’s stories come mingle with the emergent painting. By thinning my pigment with solvent, I allow the board’s cracks and whorls to shimmer through the paint. Circular gouging is present but does not dominate the emergent painting.
Art Invites Participatory Engagement with Unknowable Subjects

Haraway, whose work can be described as speculative feminist, writes that modern humans are not autonomous but instead always making and remaking the world in collaboration with more-than-human others (2016). She calls this process “worlding.” My artistic collaboration with the plywood, doe, and shimmering presence of others is a project of collaborative worlding in which we co-create a painting together. By honoring the plywood's long journey and its resting spot where it summoned me to stop and ponder, I honor its ongoing journey. I get to be part of its journey. As fellow travellers through space and time, our collision embodies interbeing.

I photograph sections of the emergent painting after blocking in vegetation with greens, browns, and blues. Even though I painted these forms, my close-up images reveal strange worlds devoid of familiar references (Figure 15). Rather than reaching to colonize, control, or understand others, art invites us to adopt an ecological sensibility. This engages me in a participatory relationship with collaborators who speak in registers beyond my comprehension. The intellectual humility required here offers me a less embattled relationship with what I cannot know or control. This has pedagogical value in assisting me and other modern humans to make friends with unknowable more-than-human collaborators. For Thomas, art requires a “shifting paradigm framework that urges re-shaping human/non-human relationships and … it is action that calls for participatory inter-action of the self with the world” (2007, p. 49).

I stand back and regard the painting. A large zucchini shape appears across the lower portion. I fuss at it, trying to make it less zucchini-like, but the more I work at it, the more more phallic and zucchini-like it becomes, reminding me I am not in charge. But if I am not in charge, then who is? I need to step away from the emergent painting. Through ABR, I discern my decentered position and embeddedness in a masterfully complex ecology of more-than-human otherness. I need distance from the painting to regain perspective on what is emerging. I set the board in the sun to bake and clean my brushes with soap and water (Figure 16).
Anxiety and Anticipation: Painting the Doe

As I wash dinner dishes in the encroaching darkness, my mind turns to the doe. Can I paint her graceful shape? Painting animals is not my forte; I am more comfortable painting landforms. She is not a toy or cartoon planted in the landscape; she should not look like a concentrated study. She is elegant and willowy. I do not want to sentimentalize her or make her cute. She must appear effortless within her world.

I consider her as I lie in bed later. She is the reason I chose to paint the image in Figure 8. She pulled me to walk the Francis Peninsula over and over. I wanted to see her and was surprised every time I did. I wonder whether she is driving the painting, not me. Perhaps she chose me, not the other way around. I feel the painting pulsing outside throughout the night where I placed it under an eave to prevent dew from settling on it (Figure 16).

I feel unsure whether I can paint the doe well on my first try. With each successive attempt, the board will show signs of fussing. This will detract from the breezy style of the landforms. I want her to appear effortless as she appeared in the wild on February 15, 2022. I realize I am invested, that I want this painting to be successful. It has jumped from a low stakes project on scrap wood to high stakes on a storied surface. This makes me vulnerable, fearful of failing. Is it impossible to shed my craving for success? My fear of failure? ABR surfaces these insidious cravings within me. I resist pushing them away and allow them to hover.

I dip a fine-tipped sable brush into solvent and Naples yellow and slowly trace the deer’s outline, being careful not to rush. Peering closely at my photograph (Figure 8), I register her enormous ears. She listened attentively as she gazed past me over the Salish Sea into the middle distance. I sketch her full outline and step back. She looks like a kangaroo-donkey hybrid; her ears seem ridiculously large (Figure 17).
Building on my previous writing about the wisdom of slowing down, I struggle to cope with my fear of failure (Behrisch, 2020). To soothe myself, I murmur inwardly, “there is no need to rush here. You’re doing fine. You’re okay.” Oil painting is a foil to efficiency and rushing. It cannot be rushed; otherwise, it dies before it emerges. Slowly, I color in the doe’s snout with Payne’s grey. I lighten the border between her nose and muzzle with Naples yellow and use Payne’s grey for her large perceptive eye; for her skull, I use raw umber.

I need to define her eye socket so it protrudes from her skull. I reach for my fine-tipped sable brush. Using a light wash of Naples yellow, I paint her upper and lower brows and stand back to regard her emerging shape. She is not perfect, but she is here! I need a reddish tone for the deep bowls of her ears. A prey animal, she is always listening, pivoting to hear to the world approaching and rustling around her. I combine burnt umber with light red pigment and apply this thinned mixture to the insides of her ears, neck, and undercarriage (Figure 18).

I study her image; her legs are indistinct from her body. I decide to leave this indistinction intact. This painting is not supposed to be scientifically accurate. It is supposed to be low-stakes but with each new stage, I am more invested in its success. The painting reflexively looks back at me. While I have embraced the board’s gashes, stains, and holes, the hole beneath the doe’s snout distracts me from her beautiful face (Figure 18). I want her grace to be unrivaled by distractions. I decide to fill this in, not because damage needs to be fixed or erased but because this particular hole distracts from the doe, my central subject.

I enter our cluttered toolroom looking for putty. I have never used putty before but have seen my husband and dad use it. My eyes flicker over assemblages of tools, fasteners, string, tape, wire cutters, and WD-40 spray. I grab the can of WD-40, rip off the lid, bring its aperture to my nose, and inhale deeply. Ohhh yesss. I savor its delicious slippery mineral smell, a luscious compulsion from my childhood.

Replacing the can of WD-40 after a deep inhalation, my eyes alight on two innocuous small
tubs. I pry the cap off one and touch the grey paste within. It depresses under my finger. Putty. This is what I need. Using my small palette knife, I scoop out a pea-sized chunk and press it into the hole beneath the doe’s mouth. It wedges in easily and I wonder if it will shrink and fall out the other side once it dries. I press more into the hole and smooth it with the knife.

I step away to observe the effect. Instead of a rusty hole, now a light cream satellite hovers below her mouth. I use my knife point to etch parallel lines through the putty to mimic the wood’s cracks. I paint over the putty with cerulean blue and titanium white, thinning the pigment with solvent so they blend with the sky. Around the doe, I paint tall grasses swishing and growing around her. They make her look smaller than I remember. I stand back to observe. The patch beneath her snout blends in with the whorls radiating through the plywood (Figure 19). She is at home in the tall grass. Whorls of energy radiate around her in the bright cerulean sky. I love her. She is perfect.

Halberstam laments our modern compulsion to correct, refine, and decode the world we are studying. They invite me to step back from wanting to control, and let others be who they already are. The call for “any kind of intellectual who can learn how to not know the other, how not to sacrifice the other on behalf of his or her own sovereignty, is a call that has largely gone unanswered” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 128, emphasis added to original). I decide not to improve her shape to make her more ”real.” I can honor her without “correcting” her shape. The painting is a collaboration between co-arising subjects: the doe, the wood, myself, my paints, sunlight, and countless others. Haraway calls co-creation with more-than-human others sympoiesis (2016, p. 58).

Figure 19. Deer Amidst Tall Grass, Nail Hole Filled In And Painted Over

Enough Means Resisting More and Closure

I have retained a loose style and aimed for minimal touch ups. I want to keep the landforms blocky and abstract, not busy or detailed. I resist painting too many leaves on the bushes or applying them in a regular pattern, as this creates a fussy unnatural look. Things need to appear non-uniform, as in nature. It is important not overpaint as a painting approaches
“enoughness,” “an experience of inherent contentment that has the potential to undermine a doctrine of ‘moreness’” (Edlinger et al., 2021, p. 159). This requires me to step away frequently to see it with fresh eyes, like strangers encountering one another for the first time, without a priori knowledge or expectations.

Returning to the board, I paint shadows under moss cushions, a lush carpet dripping from rock. This is the doe’s world, this rocky outcrop where she stood one evening in February, aware of me. I step back to assess. The painting is not perfect, but it is alive and has integrity. It tells me to stop painting (Figure 20).

Figure 20. *The Painting Is Enough*

Back in my city studio two months later, I flick on my light and regard the painting standing against my easel. It is not quiet. Its *Thing Power* pulses and pulls me towards it. Energetic currents radiate and accentuate the beautiful doe, my donkey kangaroo deer. While I consciously avoided centering her within the painting, the wood’s pulsing whorls interact with the V-shaped rock to centralize her. The shimmering presence of rusty nails, human hands, unseen objects, and tidal action vibrates within the painting.

Relatives visiting from Vienna, Austria express astonishment at the battered material I have painted upon. I describe finding the wood and being found by it. I tell them it has its own mysterious stories, just like people. My uncle Wolfgang stands in permeable attention, gazing at the doe, taking in the vibrant colours, holes, knots and swooping whorls. I hear him murmur “*Storywood,*” his quiet offering to me and to the painting. *Storywood* embodies *sympoiesis,* collaborative worlding, with more-than-human others (Haraway, 2016, p. 58).
Invitation into Kinship with Unknowable Others

The board and I collided, creating an intersubjective vibrant collaboration with others, including the doe, my paints, summer heat, and feelings of inadequacy. Rather than clinging to an illusion of human exceptionalism, I honor the opacity of these beings through ABR, oil painting and permeable attention. I undergo an ontological shift where more-than-human beings emerge as fellow storied and agentic subjects. Our artistic collaboration offers insights into the generative power of ABR to engage with ambiguous themes. Employing Halberstam’s low theory, I set aside my modern habitual urge for clarity and closure.

I undergo an intersubjective experience through my artistic contemplative journey with more-than-human others, and am reminded that I always arrive into conversations with others whose stories remain opaque. Co-creating with opaque others invites me to be in relationship with unknowable others. From an epistemological perspective, resisting the need to know or understand is both a challenge and invitation into kinship with opaque, unknowable others who never the less make up most of our world.
References


