

Tongue to the Rock
Alexandra Dodd

She begins by sketching the understory.

Freely, she draws – loosening up her reference images, opening potential layers in the untold story. Tentative ghost forms inhabit the surface. Little more than a whisked line here, the merest intimation of a corporeal curve there.

Again and again, she returns to a touchstone text to attune her brain to the project of painting. It is an extract from Primo Levi's fantastic tale about a sentient centaur struggling to navigate his interactions with the human world. It is a story about the age-old dehumanising tendency of humans to scapegoat others and violently shun difference.

How, then, did these species come about? Immediately afterward, the legend says. When the waters retreated, a deep layer of warm mud covered the earth. [...] Those were the days when the earth itself fornicated with the sky, when everything germinated and everything was fruitful. Not only every marriage but every union, every contact, every encounter, even fleeting, even between different species, even between beasts and stones, even between plants and stones, was fertile, and produced offspring not in a few months but in a few days. The sea of warm mud, which concealed the earth's cold, prudish face, was one boundless nuptial bed, all its recesses boiling over with desire and teeming with jubilant germs.¹

1 Primo Levi, 'Quaestio de Centauris,' Translated from the Italian by Jenny McPhee. The New Yorker, 1 June 2015 [1961], <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/08/quaestio-de-centauris>.

Paint and brushstrokes bring the entangled bodies into being. Two muscular, headless figures holding goats, a winged torso taking flight, a duck, an ox. Or could it be aurochs – the wild ancestor of modern domestic cattle – one of the largest herbivores in the Holocene? Extinct now – gone beings from the before times. Spectres of natural selection.

We've selected many things. But selection also means not selecting billions of other things – and ways of being that could have been. Choosing to survive in this world involves this kind of choreography of choice. I paint the things that were not selected.²

2 Jeanne Gaigher, Interview with author, Cape Town, 17 January 2025.

As she puts paint to surface, she leans into these peripheral things, crafting speculative fictions about body, environment, entities that defy scientific nomenclature. Biological organisms that don't want a name or laugh at the pettiness of their own taxonomy.

Quack quack! Take it back.

The painting takes shape in the spell of the unfolding moment, instantaneously becoming the material record of the quiet furies circulating through her. Into the mysterious depths she plunges. All those quickly shifting moods, states, inner contestations – bloodlike in their metabolic surges. They come and they go.

With them, new forms pervade the surface, human anatomy braided together with other biological organisms, in deep interrelationship. A heterocosm. A sensuous profusion of odd pollinations. She camouflages the human shapes in the environment, enfolding bodies into the life that surrounds them. So close, she thinks, it's as if you could wear this place.³

3 Jeanne Gaigher, email correspondence with the author, 11 February 2025.

Jeanne. She shares a name with an androgynous warrior saint, who was guided by visions. Fiercely independent, driven by devotion to freedom.

Gaigher. Rhymes with ‘Geiger’ – an instrument for detecting radioactive emissions, used in searches for satellite debris or to measure the radiation emitted by a tree in Chernobyl. She is sensitive to particles and rays.

Painting is a way of sensing. As she draws, paints, stitches, prowls about her studio, she also listens. Now it’s music. Driving sound thrashes about her cranium, instigating movement, quickly translated into quick, dry brushstrokes. There is no illusion here. The movement is real. Hard beats driving rapid-fire transmission of neural signals into action potentials – cochlea, temporal lobe, hand, paintbrush, fabric. Make it speak, gesture for gesture.

Now it’s a podcast interview with Polish writer and activist Olga Tokarczuk. The author is speaking about her Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Flights*, which is made of 116 vignettes – both fiction and nonfiction – that treat travel as a corporeal experience. And the words ring true to her own moving body.

We seem to have so much knowledge about place, space and the cosmos, but we don’t know a lot about our own kidneys – our own organs – our animal selves. There’s this level of fragility and a big gap in knowledge when it comes to the way we are composed.⁴

4 Jeanne Gaigher relaying a thought by Olga Tokarczuk, Interview with author, Cape Town, 17 January 2025.

There’s something about Tokarczuk’s non-linear way of writing that is a lot like painting, she thinks. It’s helpful for me to think about painting in this way – as an object that can hold many ideas. Yes, this is it. Even in the very act of painting, she sees herself painting. Recognises that painting is an event – a bizarre, multi-layered event, thick with feelings and opinions and arguments and viewpoints. And there are many events like this one that make up any one painting.

Now the surface is ready to grow layers. Over of the drawing, over of the painting, she lays down the fabric – delicate sheets of spectral scrim to ghost the story beneath. The originating understory is at a remove now, partially obscured by warp and weft of thread, only detectable to the eye as is a dream to the logic of the waking mind. The gauze-like cloth obscures certain elements, while bringing other possibilities forward.

Gaigher’s sculptural paintings resist the containment of flatness, refuse to be inhibited by the frame. Folds, layers and perforations softly insist on a more fluid spatial order.

Layered, punctured, bandaged, stitched. What to make of these somatic mixed-media constructions and the ovoid perforations in the scrim? If the gauze is a bandage, are the punctures wounds in the flesh of the sensory body? ‘The wound is the place where the light enters you.’⁵ So spoke 13th-century poet and Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad ar-Rūmī. Yes. The wounds are portals too – glimpses into the painting’s under-layers and the beginning of this whole story.

5 Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad ar-Rūmī. *The Essential Rumi*, Translated by Coleman Barks and John Moyne (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004).

Remember the earth whose skin you are [...] Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you. Remember language comes from this.⁶

6 Joy Harjo, ‘Remember,’ *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008 [1983]).

Gaigher's gloopy rendition of hybrid anatomies, landscape and sky recall the melting liquefaction of Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Unanswered questions about the relativity of space and time; collapsed notions of a fixed cosmic order ooze into the panic of the present. What kind of Time listens and moves in tune with the Earth?

Time lives in the body, not as the tick of the clock, but as a pulse in the blood. It is a thought, buried deep in nerve, leaf, and gene. [...] Buried deep within each of us is also a 'wild clock' – a set of intuitive, biological traits that help coordinate our smaller existence with the greater wheels of life that turn around us. Embedded within every living thing, these clocks respond to changes in the landscape – light, sound, temperature – allowing time to be experienced as a conversation with the Earth.⁷

7 David Farrier, 'Wild Clocks,' *Emergence Magazine*, 23 January 2025, <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/wild-clocks/>.

Her palette affirms a continuity with Earth and sky. If earlier bodies of work dug deep into the loam with hues of oxblood, cochineal, carmine, moss and peat, her recent paintings bear greater affinity to the light. Dust-green late-summer fynbos comesingles with slate-blue mountain and sky. She is nine storeys up in a 1960s office block on Bree Street. Blaring, shunting traffic sounds and blunt architecture infiltrate the studio through the open windows. But so do Earth and sky – rock and air. They pour in. The mountain is everything – its presence total, pushing in the through the transparency of glass, claiming the moment.

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