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Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature

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ARTIST STATEMENT FOR SEXUAL/NATURE

REBECCA ANWEILER

Examining notions of the “natural” and the “ideal” as reproduced primarily through educational materials, the *Sexual/Nature* series is inspired by a fascination with knowledge production as it is affected by social climate. Studies of the natural world and developing knowledge about human sexuality are often interconnected. Challenging theoretical paradigms such as evolutionary theory, recent research is providing evidence that animal sexuality is not always attached to heterosexual reproductive strategies. Homosexual behaviours are part of the range of sexual activities of many species, sometimes simply for the purpose of pleasure. This becomes especially significant when we consider how references to a “natural” inevitability or biological determinism are often dubiously applied to human sexuality, providing social/legal/religious systems with rhetorical justification and legitimation.

The series contains a combination of images from three sources related to the cultural construction of sexuality: documentation of the natural world, lesbian pornography, and stills of romantic liaisons from old films. *Sexual/Nature* plays with the notion of desire as shaped by both nature and culture. The choice of source imagery from textbook and encyclopaedic materials comes from a desire to expose these representations as the familiar and taken-for-granted reproductions of what gets constituted as “natural” and “normal.” These photos are often posed in order to best elucidate their educational or descriptive intent. Done for the sake of photographic expediency, posing can also reveal views about the proper conduct of people and notions of the “natural” and the “ideal” in images of nature. Reproducing these kinds of photographs as paintings effectively imitates how these repeated and legit-

imized representations function in the everyday by serving to transform them to the level of the symbolic. At the same time, painting allows the artist to get close enough to find what is left behind of the staged subject, despite the pose.

The cinematic pose was significant in defining Western romantic relationships. The exclusion of any positive references to homosexuality throughout the era of the Hays Code years in Hollywood (1930 to 1968) parallels the suppression of research on animal sexual diversity. The Hays Code was a voluntarily industry-determined set of moral criteria developed to establish ways to include socially sensitive subjects in cinema without being censored through government interference. In particular, these principles curtailed depictions of sexuality, especially any “inference of sexual perversion.” Scientific studies of the animal world have also, until very recently, censored the reality of non-conceptive sexual expression in order to justify Western patriarchal and puritanical notions of acceptable sexual expression. When mentioned at all, deviations from what was considered “normal” heterosexual couplings were often labelled “unnatural.”

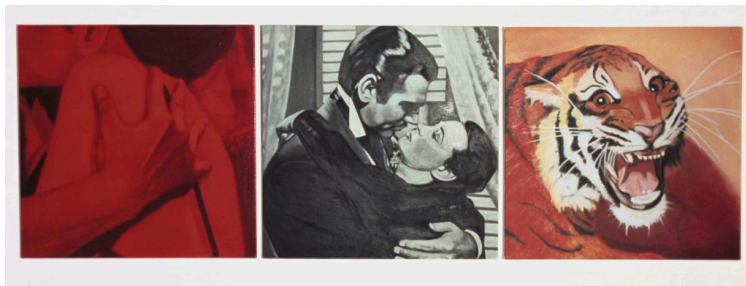
Engaging these parallels in suppression, one set of images for *Sexual/Nature* comes from defining moments in Hollywood films from the Hays Code years, playing with both portrayed and implied romantic relationships between the filmic characters. The films referenced in these works shaped formative knowledge about love and romance for both straights and gays, “a testimony to the vitality and fluidity of desire,” as artist Deborah Bright wrote following her photomontage series, *Dream Girls*. Performances by women from this period of Hollywood film often displayed an intelligence and body language that, while challenging conventional feminine stereotypes, were controlled within the film by the monogamous and heterosexual logic of the narratives.

A second set of images comes mostly from *National Geographic* but also from educational encyclopedic or coffee-table books, from the decades of the Hays Code. While the posed subject is somewhat less controlled during animal photography, various efforts are made to secure good images that involve manipulation of the “natural” environment. My image sourcing reflects a suggestive tension or relationship

that does not necessarily identify biological sex. Many images are of species whose behaviours contest the very narrow claims of heterosexual reproductive strategies that mainstream Western science has championed, such as Bighorn Sheep (in which a significant percentage of the mighty rams exhibit exclusive same-sex mounting preferences) and female Japanese Macaques (a number of whom genitally liase with members of the same sex, rejecting the company of males even during estrus).

The final source of images are cropped selections from the first North American lesbian erotica magazine, *On Our Backs*, published between 1984 and 2006, which took a definitive stance as pro-pornography in the feminist “sex wars” of the 1980’s and 1990’s. A radical publication from the perspective of its presentation of diversity in gender presentation, race, and sexual practice, the magazine did not, as it claimed, portray “real” sex; instead it showed sexual relations under the conditions of staged and photographed constructions of the sexual ideals of the radical feminist lesbian community who supported them. Nonetheless, participants were willing subjects and defined their own pleasure in distinct ways from mainstream pornographic depictions of lesbian sexuality. Their agency in the process speaks to my interest in placing lesbians in the position of the “universal” subject for a change, while at the same time subverting the history of the nude in Western art by their complete refusal of any interest in the male gaze. Cropping the images to focus on hands enhanced their sexual ambiguity and helped serve as an indicator of, or reference to, their subjectivity.

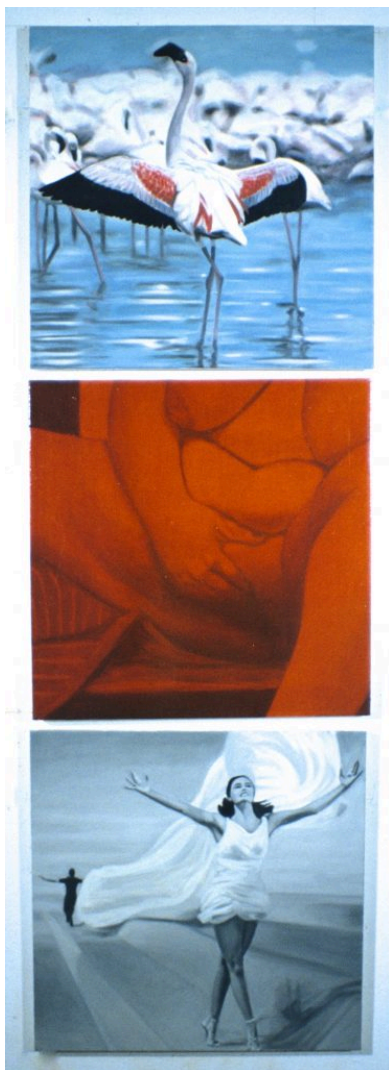
In celebrating human-animal relations with camp humour, the works from *Sexual/Nature* play with personal preferences and subvert social labeling while reflecting on the “nature” of desire.



Cat Lover, Version 1, 2003-4. 3 panels, 2' X 6'. Oil on canvas.



Dog Lover, 2003-4. 3 panels, 6' 2" X 2'. Oil on canvas.



Solo, 2003. 3 panels, 6' 2" X 2'. Oil on canvas.



Watersports, 2003-4. 5 panels, 6' 2" X 6' 2" (irregular). Oil on canvas.



Bareback, 2004. 6 panels, 6'2" X 6'2" (irregular). Oil on canvas.



Animal Lover, 2003-4. 13 panels, 8' 2" X 10' 3"(irregular). Oil on canvas.



Nature Lover, 2004-5. 9 panels, 8' 2" X 8'2" (irregular). Oil on canvas.



Mouse Lover, 2003-6. 5 panels, 6' 2" X 6' 2" (irregular). Oil on canvas.
