Queens Museum

Other-Worlding: An Interview with Artist Emilie Gossiaux

Posted on **March 21, 2024** by **Hannah Soyer**

Visitors to the Queens Museum are now able to walk through sculptures of five-foot, smiling Labradors, each holding a ribbon and dancing around a maypole. Except these Labradors are all based on one dog, London—the **artist** Emilie Gossiaux's guide dog—and the maypole is actually Gossiaux's white cane. Welcome to **Other-Worlding**, a fantastical art show melding human and animal experience.

Gossiaux, a ravenous artist from a young age, progressively lost her hearing as a child. When she was 21, she was in a near-fatal accident which ultimately caused her to go blind. Her work, from contour line drawings to sculptures, is born from the particular sensorial experiences of her life. Many of her pieces also pay homage to London (now retired). I talked with the artist about interdependence, her artistic process, and the importance of destabilizing human to animal hierarchies.

Hannah Soyer (HS): One of the things that really interests me about your art is how it shows and demonstrates different forms of embodiment. So I'm curious to know: are there ways that your art practice allows you to explore various forms of embodiment? How do you translate your embodied experience into your art?

Emilie Gossiaux (EG): One of the ways that I embody my experience in my drawings and in my clay sculptures is that I really respond to animals and I think a lot about how animals are also "the other." In [human] society, I'm also "othered." Because of that otherness, I feel a lot of kinship with animals.

One of my sculptures, "Alligator Girl," speaks to the sense of estrangement I feel, just as an alligator or any reptile feels estranged from the environment they're in and how it's changing. Another example is my sculpture "Dog Girl, They Call Me," a small, ceramic, white sculpture of a woman lying down on her back with the dog's head. She has a naked woman's body, but she also has 6 nipples on her torso. This came from my experiences of feeling that people thought I was in their way when I would walk with London.

Also, I'm surprised to find out there's people who don't like dogs, who think that they're dirty or misbehaving or dangerous. That experience puts this other layer over who I am in the world and how people see me. With this new white cane maypole dance sculpture, I wanted to make my white cane a monumental size, fabulous and fantastical.

That really embodies my experience of when I pull out my white cane; I know a lot more people notice me. Even though I can't see how people are reacting, I notice that people get out of my way and they don't want to interact with me. It can feel very lonely when I'm out by myself, which is why it's so nice to walk with London.

HS: Can you talk a bit more about the parallels between animals and disabled people, at least in how society treats them?

EG: One of the things that really upset me and that has really put a spotlight on this is how, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, slaughterhouses were killing off cows, pigs, and chickens because the plants were closed. It really affected me—how can all these animals' lives just go to waste? It made me think about how disabled people are treated during the pandemic, where suddenly their life is not as significant as this nondisabled person's life.

HS: I use my wheelchair everywhere I go, and I think of my wheelchair as a part of my body. Do you see London as a part of yourself?

EG: When London would get in her harness, it really felt like we were one unit, moving in the world together. Down city streets, through hallways, everywhere we went it felt like we were collaborating together. She would make decisions of the safest way to get around something or somebody, and I would give her directions where to go. It really felt like we were becoming one organism, one thinking mind.

When I used to work with her, I also had to start thinking like London. I can't see what's going on around us, but when I felt like she was being distracted or needed a little bit [more] encouragement, I would sense that from her. We'd both be guiding each other, you know? I like to say that we're a "Super Being."

At the same time, I want to talk about and celebrate London's own agency as an animal. We don't really think about animals as having thoughts or feelings or even intelligence. But dogs, cats, all animals have their reasons for why they do the things they do. I see that London has a personality of her own, and I wanted to honor that personality and the person that she is in my representations of her in my drawings and sculptures. I don't think of her just as a tool; I think of her as a partner.

HS: How is London involved in your art process?

EG: I've learned so much from London and working with her. I often think of how, when I was going back to school and was so enamored with London, I just wanted all my art to be for London. When I started to draw her, it just became so natural, like I was expressing a part of myself. I see her a lot in my dreams as well, and sometimes I make drawings of my dreams.

In regard to Other-Worlding, when I was thinking about this imagery of the maypole dance with the white cane and the three dogs, I had already made sculptures of London dancing on her hind legs because that is something that London and I used to do together when we were bonding.

I love to dance for fun and one of the things [we'd] do after a hard day of work [was] put on music and…dance together. She would bound around me, and then she'd put her paws in my hands and we'd just sway together and dance to the music. I could tell that her personality was like mine. We were bonding through the shared love of moving our bodies and dancing.

With the maypole dance specifically, because I feel really connected to nature through London, I think a lot more about the animal world and about nature. The maypole dance is a pagan, pre-Christian tradition. It's one of those things that really has a mystery about it—even though it's still celebrated in some parts of Europe, I feel like its original meaning is lost to us. [Still, the dance] has really become just a part of our imagination—it's an image that almost everyone has seen before and can recognize. It's usually celebrated during the spring, in between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, right when spring is blooming and it's warm outside. It's this time when there's this abundance of nature and beauty.

I wanted to also celebrate that side of London and my relationship with nature as well. This idea of "other-worlding" is not just about imagining another world where you're putting yourself in the mind of an animal, you're also opening up your world to see through different perspectives: a disabled person or an animal, a woman or a blind person.

HS: Talk to me more about the importance of destabilizing the anthropocene [age] and distinct human categories, as evidenced by your show Other-Worlding. Why do we need this?

EG: [As explained earlier, the maypole dance is a tradition from before the onset of Christianity.] I wanted to use that imagery while talking about the anthropocene because during these pre-Christian times there was more of an idea of co-partnership relationships, rather than domination and hierarchies. Humans weren't trying to dominate the land and animals, but instead took care of it and respected it and revered it. I'm in love with that.

I feel like a lot has gone wrong because of the anthropocene [age]: domination over [certain] genders, over species, and land. I feel like that's the fall from grace. A lot of the harm and destruction related to climate change is human-made, because we have lost that connection we had with nature and with animals, and understanding that everything we do also affects them—there's a ripple effect going on.

I want people to be more aware of the choices that they make, and to pay more attention to animals and nature. I also think about that in respect to how humans treat each other. As I've said earlier, society often views disabled people as "others," or as animals. If we can see how we're all together, there'd be a lot less violence and destruction.

HS: Right, it's about getting back to that idea of a relational culture, where we're working together instead of working from a place of dominance. Do you have ideas of how we do that?

EG: Well, I have fantasies of how things should be. It's been going on for ages: the systematic oppression of disabled people, people of color, and animals. First, I think we need more awareness. We are getting that in the art world now—there is more awareness and more representation of disabled people and people of color.

But, in a perfect world, things would be designed differently. We'd be thinking about and taking seriously the question of how we move through the world. We'd have more accessible environments for all people, and a support system that addresses everyone's needs and benefits everyone. It goes back to the idea of interdependence—it takes a city, it takes a neighborhood, it takes care and thoughtfulness to everything going on that we need to be more aware of.

This interview has been edited for clarity and conciseness as necessary.

__Hannah Soyer__'s (she/her) work has appeared in publications such as __The Sun Magazine__, __Bustle__, and The Rumpus. She is the founder of __This Body is Worthy__, a project aimed at celebrating bodies outside of mainstream societal ideals. Her debut memoir is forthcoming from Red Hen Press.

Posted in **Disability History and Culture**, **Interviews**, **Media**, **Storytellers**, **The Arts** Tagged **art**, **Blindness**, **Emilie Goussiaux**, **interview**, **personal story**, **Queens Museum**, **service animal**, **service dog** **Leave a Comment**
