

# Present Portal

By

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SK Reed

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## Present Portal



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## Abstract

*Present Portal* is an exhibition which includes an immersive sunbeam installation, small works on paper, three large paintings, and three ceramic creatures. Fluid and Sci-Fi creatures engage with and learn from more-than-human beings methods of survival on a harrowing planet. All of the work takes place within the large sunbeam, beams which mimic yellow light. The light begins in the middle of the floor and extends up the walls and window. The show is about my own internal transformation which opened me to the non-human voices I have been neglecting. These companions provided me with hope and helped change my lens of the world.

*Acknowledgements*

To all the animate beings who have helped me see ways forward. To Megan Kaminski whose *Writing & Ecology* course changed my life. To the authors, Robin Wall Kimmerer, adrienne maree brown, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs who by the end of this show felt like friends because their words became something I could return to. Octavia Butler's journals became the guiding light that reminded me to believe in myself. To my thesis committee, Norman Akers, Sarah Gross, Megan Kaminski, and Yoonmi Nam thank you for your generosity and wisdom as incredible artists. It took a long time for me to get back to school and I am grateful to have met such role models. There were many times I did not think I could complete this; your belief and reassurance kept me going. To my friends, without you and your help there would have been many more sleepless nights. You helped me cut/glue canvas petals, iron, troubleshoot plaster, glue grass, answered worried texts, and spent days helping me paint and apply vinyl. You cannot know how much love I felt. And to David, thank you for being a safe space in which I felt room to grow.

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*“What we pay attention to grows.”*

-adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*:

*Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (19)



***Present Portal***

My thesis exhibition titled *Present Portal* at The Smalter Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri invites the viewer into a moment of expansion. Sci-Fi creatures engage with and learn from more-than-human companions methods of survival on this harrowing planet. The exhibition features an immersive sunbeam installation, small works on paper, three large paintings, and three ceramic creatures. The entire gallery is covered in bright yellow forms mimicking beams of light. The sunbeams begin in the middle of the gallery floor, growing larger as they stretch towards the walls. When reaching the walls the beams continue expanding as if to touch all that is in their path. The rest of the work, the paintings and ceramics, are situated in this sunbeam, expansion and light acting as a backdrop.

*“All that you touch you Change*

*All that you Change, Changes you*

*The only lasting truth is Change*

*God is Change.”*

-Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (3)

The spring prior to this exhibition I started over in my art practice. Leaving my former work behind, I entered a period of searching. I was experiencing within myself my own transformation, beginning to identify as Queer and non-binary. This personal shift led to a shift in my art practice as well. This opening of self provided me with hope that I could change becoming more than the limitations of this world. Octavia Butler's book *Parable of the Sower* and the belief system her main character, Lauren Olamina creates was on my mind. In this Science Fiction story, Lauren Olamina is forced to leave her home because her town was attacked. She must unexpectedly face the world of chaos and corruption outside her town's walls. She creates a new religion she names, Earthseed which is led by change. This belief system helps her cope with the difficult circumstances she finds herself in. If Lauren's newfound community can continually adapt to change she believes they will eventually take root among the stars. Butler writes an inspiring story about giving way to change in devastating times. Her characters quickly learn to adapt, believing change helps them prepare and puts them in the best position to help shape the constant change around them (Butler 329).

I remember reading this over winter break, before this new body of work that became *Present Portal* began forming. This story helped me embrace this period of unknown. I accepted that I must continue to return to my studio and open myself to new pathways in my life. I was rebuilding personally and in my art practice. It was terrifying, but accepting change as a constant like Butler's characters helped guide me. I had no idea where I was headed. I had to trust the process would take me somewhere better than what I could currently imagine.

The first works from this time began on the ground. I put large amounts of water onto the surface, watching in amazement as I dripped fluid pigment into the water, pigment dispersing in unpredictable ways. This became my way forward, staying open to possibilities and returning to

the studio. I have always been inspired by Sci-Fi, especially Octavia Butler's writing because it speaks of a different world, visionary thinking of other ways of being. It is a space outside of reality where it is totally normal for bodies to constantly change genders or to have mystical powers. Butler's writing is specifically powerful to me because she is good at speaking to the reality of this world through Science Fiction.

adrienne maree brown, one of three other authors who influenced this work, is a big fan of Butler as well. She writes about her relationship to Butler and Sci-Fi in general in her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, "Science fiction, particularly visionary fiction, is where I go when I need the medicine of possibility applied to the trauma of human behavior" (37). In *Emergent Strategy*, brown is inspired by Butler's character's ability to shape change in the harshest of circumstances. She applies Butler's methods, how her characters adapt to change to her own work in activism.

In my own work, I was inspired by brown's ability to apply this story to the real world. I started believing in Sci-Fi as a method of visioning, another world where bodies look different and that is a new normal. Bright and fluid figures, sometimes green, red, or purple were finding their way into the work. I embraced not having control and I left this world momentarily. It felt important that I could not control the form of the body. I started with a loose sketch in water, not totally able to see what I was creating. The water with its own properties would break the initial places I put it. Fluidity became important, giving way to change was important, bodies that were strange and unfamiliar felt important. Collaborating with the unknown on the surfaces I was working with became a way of searching for other ways of being in this world. The fluid and bright bodies were teaching me how to let go in order to see new ways forward outside the ways I felt trapped within in my own life.

*“Perhaps the most egregious thing we are taught is that we should just be really good at what’s already possible, to leave the impossible alone.”*

-adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy* (49)



*Present Portal (Installation View)*

## **Part I: The Sunbeam**

Towards expansiveness I dreamed about this exhibition and how I would incorporate my installation practice. My work was moving to the world I wanted to see rather than pointing out the issues I saw. brown shares another author and activist, Grace Lee Boggs’ words, “Transform yourself to transform the world.” brown explains this means, “to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet” (53). I let this moment of internal transformation guide me, this state of unknown became a starting place. Queerness to me means transcending any one definition of sexuality or gender, for my preferences to not be quantifiable by one word and to be constantly changing. My body became the front line like brown suggests. The unknown and change as a constant in my life and art practice like Butler suggests. While this was scary it was liberating; I

did not have to figure everything out all at once. I felt the most hope, out of the possibility to change I had in a long time. I felt from this destabilizing place, anything was possible and I wanted others to share this feeling. This hopefulness led to the sunbeam, a yellow expansion of line moving throughout the gallery, setting the stage for all the other work.

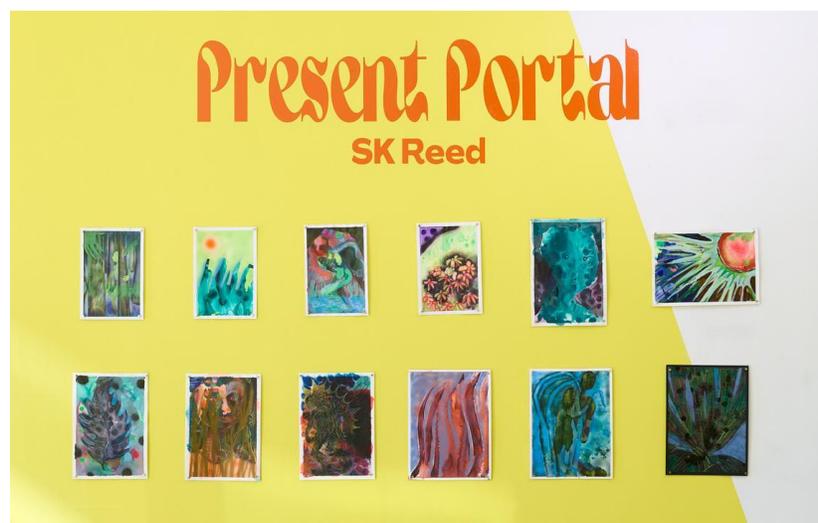
While I felt hopeful, I still questioned the impact of art on people's lives. I often doubt the ability of art to create the change needed in the world. Sometimes applying pigment to paper or building figures out of clay seems entirely detached from systemic problems. brown shares that when she wonders if art is enough to change the large structures of the world she remembers black feminist writer-organizer Toni Cade Bamara's words that, "The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible." brown notes, "Writing is one of the ways I participate in transformation" (30). These words soothed something deep within me, affirming the new direction I was headed and affirming the idea for the installation of the sunbeam.

I wanted *Present Portal* to be irresistible. I wanted to invite the viewer into the expansiveness I was feeling from a breaking down of self. I wanted to focus on hope and challenge others to open themselves to change. The sunbeam begins in a small spot, right where you might stand to view the largest painting in the show, *Lessons from the Wetlands*. It is a painting about breaking down to allow for new growth. I hoped that standing in the beam might inspire a similar feeling within others, internal growth that would radiate out.

The sunbeam installation, made of vinyl and house paint, creates a wider context the painting and ceramic work takes place within. All of the paintings and ceramics took place within this moment of expansion for myself. The space around the individual works becomes a place for art as well, nothing is off limits.

Installation can disrupt the viewer's expectations of a traditional gallery show with white walls and sparse floors. It has the power to activate their senses and allow them to think about the work in a larger context. The sunbeam covers the floor, the viewer walking on the work itself. This helps the viewer to see their relationship to the work, art literally meeting them where they are. Installation speaks uniquely to the space the work is in. For example, the gallery had a large window which faced the street. On the window I placed transparent vinyl lining up with the sunbeam on the floor. As the light for the sun shined in it met the yellow transparent vinyl and cast a subtle yellow onto the wall.

Additionally, there is an ephemerality to installation, parts of this show will not be able to live on. The walls will be repainted and the vinyl flooring will be removed. This feels like life, a powerful moment can never be felt in the same way as it was once experienced but the memory might live on. Giving myself to something that can only be experienced during a specific time together with others feels important. Nothing lasts, the temporality of the present is important. I feel that within my body which fills me with a greater appreciation for being present in each moment.



*Present Portal (Installation View - Small Works)*

*“We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves, there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how less lonely the world would be.”*

-Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (9)

## **Part II: The Small Works**

Something happens in abandonment, in allowing yourself to reach a place of unknowing. When I gave up my old body of work, I felt lost. I entered a stage of searching. I was rebuilding while searching for meaningful connections. The unknown makes space for something new. As I was experimenting with water and thinking about the fluidity of a body, I was enrolled in Professor Megan Kaminski’s *Writing & Ecology* course at KU. Kaminski introduced our class to many important authors who think with other species found outside. They began every class with a centering, somatic exercise which helped ground and practice being more present in our bodies. I appreciated this practice of slowing down, paying attention to breath, and really feeling my body. I had never experienced something this vulnerable and anti-capitalist in a classroom. In my life, because of capitalism I feel I am running from one place to the next, juggling too many things in order to try to piece together a life where I can do what I love. In this rush, things are lost. In doing so many things I was neglecting my body and many other aspects of my life. This five minute exercise set the tone of this course. I felt that I could finally breathe, the anxiety was eased, as I took the time to notice and control my physical breath.

I tried to bring this somatic bodily presence to the small works on paper which were a practice of noticing. I did not plan what I was making but let the marks come to me as I met each surface. What came out were a collection of intuitive marks and subconscious themes I had been taking in. Some of the small works ended up in *Present Portal* and became research for the

larger paintings in the exhibition. I was trying to be more present in the studio even if I did not know where I was headed. In Kaminski's course we talked a lot about embodied knowledge. Our bodies carry important information and can guide us if we slow down enough to tune in.

As an introduction to embodiment, somatics, and practice, Kaminski had us read Alta Starr's *Cultivating the Self: Embodied Transformation for Artists* and Ng'ethe Maina and Staci K. Haines' *The Transformative Power Of Practice*. Starr shares, "In somatics, practitioners talk about our 'shape,' which is how in each moment, every nuance of our experience is expressed through the totality of our being, albeit largely outside of our awareness" (48). This greater presence and paying attention to my body allowed me to slow down and to question what was serving my life and was not. It was also a practice of not knowing, not having the answers, and relearning how to be by searching deep within myself. Starr continues, "Somatic practice is intentional practice, with the aim of shifting what we embody. Our somatic practices simultaneously draw us into deeper awareness, while reinforcing and strengthening the skills that are part of our emerging 'new shape'" (54). These words came at the perfect moment. I was allowing myself to break binary definitions of my body. I was thinking about the constant change and fluidity of myself and moving towards the person I wanted to be. Starr's words about our ability to change and shape ourselves reminded me of Butler's ideas regarding change. I was not stuck, there was deeply rooted embodied knowledge I was changing. Starr shares:

If becoming human beings is the task that confronts all people, then we can accomplish it only by reintegrating all parts of our individual and our collective beings, bringing ourselves into right relationship with ourselves, each other, and the planet. Liberation requires each of us to become aware of and dismantle the systems of domination and

exploitation, not only in society, but also as we have internalized them, inevitably, whatever our social location (49).

Ng'ethe Maina and Staci K. Haines' article speaks about default and intentional practices. There are so many practices I have learned through my whiteness and colonialism that reinforce domination, even when I do not realize it. In *The Transformative Power of Practice* they share, the hard work of transformation. Transforming self takes practice, constant noticing of how I am currently engaging, interpreting my reactions, and moving towards greater intention through repeated practice. Opening myself to the agency to claim and affirm my sexuality and gender impacted my life. Having hard conversations with relatives and asserting my ability to make my own decisions helped me separate myself from ideas I did not believe. Haines and Maina share, "As we change default practices and engage in new practices the internal terrain of who we are is changed" (4). Having a visual art practice allowed me to process these ideas through painting. The watery bodies I was making were a representation of shifting, a flexible body always becoming a different shape. They reinforced my ability to change and relearn. They show transparent bodies whose internal terrain is visible. Haines and Maina continue, "Transformation can also bring new emotions that we may be unfamiliar with or not yet identify with, be it compassion, fear, full hearted commitment or having to confront the unknown. The more you notice your emotional landscape being changed, stirred, and engaged, the more you know you are on a road of transformation" (4). In the small works I let go of my previous methods of working in order to confront the unknown, which put me in a humble place of relearning how to live with greater intention. The drawings began more dystopian, dreaming of other worlds where these fluid bodies might exist and eventually turned towards their more-than-human companions who became guides to counter ways of being.



*Creature IX (left) & Symbiosis (right)*, 2023, Acrylic, Gouache, and Color Pencil on Paper, 8 x 12 in

Yoonmi Nam, another professor I was taking hours with at this time, encouraged me to make a hundred of these small works on paper as a way of searching through the possibilities. Repetition reinforced a practice of beginning with the fluid, Sci-Fi creature and then going outside to look and listen. I first encountered this practice of going outside to learn in Kaminski's course. We would go outside and write about our connection to other species: the wind, sun, trees, and birds. I was learning how much I had to learn from all the others who I share this world with. This noticing, quieting, and learning required me to slow down enough to notice how my non-human companions were surviving.

I was inspired by writer Alexis Pauline Gumbs' practice of thinking with non-humans in her book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Gumb's writes:

What does it mean to function as a group in a changing environment? How can we organize ourselves intentionally to combat the embedded isolation of late capitalism? It seems like the dolphins (and our other interloping sharks...the manta rays) have something to tell us. From mothering as an emergent strategy in massive dolphin super-pods to pantropical synchronized swimming as a model of being prepared for large-scale direct action, the dolphins are educating us on how to squad, or pod up" (51).

Hearing the beautiful revelations she was gaining from marine mammals pushed me to see how powerful this paying attention to others outside the human sphere can be. Her examples helped me envision how I might be able to learn lessons from other species around me. More than learning, I was finding comfort in resting my body in outdoor spaces and changing my lens of what was important in this world. I felt cared for by a greater kin that accepted my body as simply another species among many.

In my drawings, creatures engage with the more-than-human species that I was meeting outside. More-than-human is a phrase I first heard in Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. It points to all the other beings we humans share the world with. "More-than" human implies more of a positive and special uniqueness to beings that are not classified as human. They are not less than humans as the phrase "non-human" might imply. Changing the language slightly suggests there is much to the world than humans.

What came out of the experimental drawings was a creature engaging with the more-than-human species I was meeting outside. I was practicing learning with and from these species. I was learning how much I had been neglecting all the voices of the animate beings I share this world with. Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass* writes, "But to become native to this place, if we are to survive here and our neighbors too, our work is to learn to speak the grammar of animacy, so that we might truly be at home" (9). I have been working to see the life all around me, the ecosystems at my feet and in the air. I am attempting to slow down in this work, going on walks outside and sitting to listen to these voices neglected as an anti-capitalist practice.

Kimmerer explains in the chapter, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" the implications of English, a colonizer's language. She describes how many indigenous languages, especially her own, Potawatomi speak of the world as full of life. She describes, English only grants animacy to

humans and even at that they are classified by gendered pronouns. Everything that is not human is referred to as “it” taking away their life. She contrasts this with her Indigenous language, which is full of life-giving nouns. When trying to learn her Native language she struggled because it was so fundamentally different. She mentions how fitting English is for those who want to treat the Earth as a commodity (9).

In the drawings, the saturated and watery bodies meet with more-than-humans. Sometimes the creatures meet these other species in the landscape, grassy areas as reflections on my time in prairie regions. Other drawings feature the fluid body bleeding into the background, like in *Symbiosis*. The orange acrylic pigment bleeds into the blue background. The figure does not appear to be like any human flesh we know due to its fluorescent color. This color reinforces the Sci-Fi feeling. In this piece circular marks of the blue pigment dropped onto the surface of the paper inspired the bacteria-like forms drawn over the blue dots in color pencil. I did not know where this piece would end up but I had been responding to bodies in water. A watery body sort of becomes the background, the separation of the body and background becoming less. A body and its environment being closer linked than realized.

I have found memories of floating in water, growing up on a small lake. On walks I was taking around the time this drawing was made I remember peering into small bodies of water and being amazed at all the algae growing over all that found itself in the water. I enjoyed thinking about all the microorganisms that were most likely doing work I could not see. The blue dots became those organisms. This piece helped lead to a larger work, *Lessons from the Wetlands* in the show, like many of the small works they helped shape my approach in the bigger pieces.

In another small work on paper, *Creature IX* I started with this really bright yellow as the background imitating the brightness of the sun. Then I put water down where I thought the figure

might go, applying high-flow red to that body, a warm color I thought might exist in that same space. The sun was painted in a heavier body acrylic, in a highly saturated green allowing it to feel like it fit in that space as well. I wanted the body to seem as if it were going in and out of the environment so I applied a heavier body acrylic on top of the red figure. Last, like many of the small works I go in with color pencil to make some areas more detailed. The color pencil also adds a contrast of mark against the really soft watery paint, color pencil adds a sharp line rendering some areas. This work also inspired a large work, *With the Sun and the Grasses*.

### **Part III: The Large Paintings**

These smaller works on paper allowed me to scale up to larger works. The viewer is met with three large paintings and one medium-sized work as they walk deeper into the gallery. After completing over forty small works on paper, I was able to see the concepts I was working through more clearly, fluid and Sci-Fi bodies engaging with and learning from the more-than-human world methods of survival. The research that poured into the small works gave me the confidence to scale my methods up. The larger scale now referenced the scale of a human body, allowing the viewer to more easily see the relationship between the creatures in the paintings to their own bodies.

The largest painting and the focal point of the exhibition is the piece titled, *Lessons from the Wetlands*. Many of the works in the exhibition were inspired by visits I was making to the Wakarusa Wetlands in Lawrence, KS. The wetlands are watery fields where water often pools up, leaving swamp-like areas. In the areas where water pools there is a lot of algae covering plant material. Many species stop at the wetlands along their migratory journeys and others call this

place home. Whether just passing through or staying, birds, animals, plants, and bacteria depend on the water in this area for survival.



*Lessons from the Wetlands*, 2023, Acrylic & Vellum on Paper, 89 x 118 in

*Lessons from the Wetlands* is made up of two large sheets of paper, one on top of the other horizontally. While in the middle of working on this piece, I cut diagonally through breaking it up into three pieces. I began this piece by drawing with water, working similarly as I had in the smaller works. This painting is about the cycle of life— all of the plant matter breaking down in these pools of water, the things that were dead feeding microorganisms, giving back to the soil, and new growth coming from that. The central yellow/green body is laying down, giving way. The white triangles around their body could be read as spikes for protection or white light radiating from their body in this process of letting go. Another red figure, arm wrapped around

the yellow/green one, seems to be assisting them in this moment. On the left side of the work, a large green figure stretches from the ground to the top of the painting, symbolizing new growth.

The painting began with a watery landscape, drawn first with water on a sheet of paper that was placed on the floor of my studio. The colors were inspired by an inverted photo of the wetlands. I was thinking about the neglect of these wild spaces yet their significance and importance to many species, including myself. I was also thinking about my disconnection and lack of knowledge about these spaces. The inverted colors became an underpainting that can only be seen in small moments but made sense as a place for me to begin.

The figures were drawn using a method learned in the small drawings, allowing water and pigment to move and bleed in unexpected ways. The figures are surrounded by airbrushed grass forms. The medium sized painting titled, *Grass Windows* helped me figure out how to solve the grass in the large painting. *Grass Windows* worked between the inverted colors and the real colors, a kind of in-between space of reality and unreality. I was responding to the beauty of the different types of grass seen in the wetlands in the wintertime and the movement of the crossing blades. I was fascinated by what felt like small portals or windows, where the different grass blades would overlap.

The edges of the painting are covered in circling grass blades made out of painted paper that was laser cut, creating a portal around the painting. I used similar colors as the grass in the painting. The portal is an important theme for the entire exhibition. All of the large works use a framing device inspired by a circling portal shape made out of plants. The portal alludes to another world yet it is made up of local plants. A type of dreaming that centers our more-than-human companions and suggests the key to a better world is at our feet. At least for me, I know

the key to real change in my life is finding a way to slow down, be present, and learn methods of survival from my non-human counterparts.



*Veins*, 2023, Acrylic, Silicon Carbide, & MDF on Paper, 79 x 52 in

Another painting in the exhibition that considers my relationship with the non-human world is *Veins*. In this painting, the figure is hard to distinguish from the background. I began this painting on the floor of my studio, drawing the figure in water, dripping pigment into the water. Then I would allow that first color to dry and repeat the process with two more layers of water and color. With each application of water and color, the boundary of the body became hazy, and less easy to clearly see. The water would pool in certain places on the paper creating unique forms outside what might be considered a human figure. After creating the form, I worked with water and pigment into the background which overlaid and mixed into the figure.

The result was a barely legible body that almost completely becomes the background. I enjoyed thinking about the boundary of the body in this piece.

In the middle I painted a dead sunflower seen while walking in the wetlands. The plant stands directly in front of the figure creating what could be interpreted as a spine or veins. This reinforces the similarities between these two species by lining them up together and showing their need for one another. The frame around this painting utilizes the same dead sunflowers seen in the painting. I copied their forms and rearranged them into a portal shape around the painting's edges. I like this parallel between the cycle of life in all species, life and death. Even though this sunflower was dead it was remarkably beautiful.



*With the Sun and Grasses*, 2023, Acrylic on Canvas, 99 x 48 x 25 in

The third large painting on the same wall as *Veins* is titled, *With the Sun and Grasses*. This painting is on unstretched canvas and is positioned so that the bottom petals touch the floor. In this painting, I wanted to capture the feeling of going on walks in the wetlands. During my visits there I enjoyed the scale and relationship of my body with the plants. Familiarizing myself with this place, I would walk among reeds that were taller than me. It is a humbling experience

to be within these wild species that rise up to my own height. I felt like such a small part of this ecosystem which was refreshing. I never feel any judgment regarding my body, I can simply be another among the grasses.

Another powerful sensation I wanted to convey from my time in the wetlands was the restorative power of the sun on my skin. While I feel out of place most of the time, when the sun would shine upon me something within me felt that everything would be alright. I chose oranges, pinks, and yellows to show the warmth of the sun in this moment. The bright green body of the figure turns orange in some places visibly showing the sun's impact. Additionally, I was thinking about moments where I would close my eyes and focus on feeling the sun. I was interested in the colors seen and interpreted while the eyes were closed. I enjoyed attempting to describe that feeling in this painting, a kind of warm haze that fell over my body being wrapped in the embrace of the sun.

This entire painting is encircled by coneflowers, a connection to one of the ceramic pieces in the exhibition. The coneflowers heads were painted and then lasercut. Attached to the flower heads was cut and hand-dyed canvas which hung loosely from all the sides of the painting. The coneflowers on the bottom edge draped low enough to touch the floor. This felt important because they grow from the ground. I also liked that they came out into space, closer to the viewer.

The coneflower has medicinal properties and was one of the most widely used plants by The Plains Indians. Many of the Indigenous tribes of the Great Plains saw the coneflower as a cure-all. It was used to aid cold symptoms, sore throat, snake bites, and many other symptoms (Kindscher 86). The coneflower form wraps around the creature in this painting providing healing to all the species in the frame.

I am thinking about the critical connections that have been lost due to colonization and capitalism. There is power in these wild spaces and potential in these species to restore this world filled with immense hate and greed if the majority of the people here could prioritize these voices. I am not sure what is possible but I am grateful for the comfort felt when my body rests here. I hope to reciprocate the care I have felt from other species by sharing them with the public. adrienne maree brown writes, “The Earth is layer upon layer of all that has existed, remembered by the dirt. It is time to turn capitalism into a fossil, time to turn the soil, turn to the horizon together” (49).

#### Part IV: The Ceramic Works



Coneflower Creature (left), 2023, Acrylic on Porcelain, 39 x 21 x 14 | Calamus Creature (middle), 2023, Acrylic on Porcelain, 39 x 25 x 20 in | Yarrow Creature (right), 2023, Acrylic on Porcelain, 42 x 21 x 16 in

In the middle of the exhibition space, on top of the sunbeams which stretch across the floor are three ceramic creatures: *Coneflower Creature*, *Calamus Creature*, and *Yarrow Creature*. Each a Queer, genderless creature covered in wild medicinal plants of the prairie. These works were my first creatures built into a three-dimensional form. I wanted these creatures

to come out into the gallery space, to stand next to the viewer. Each sculpture was coil built out of porcelain clay and then painted in acrylic paint after firing. They stand a little over three feet tall, placed directly on the floor of the gallery.

I enjoy the conceptual differences between ceramics forms and painting. Painting is a medium of illusion and possibility on a flat plane. Painting easily allows me to dream on the surface of paper or canvas. Marks can be made quickly and I can work through numerous ideas with little technical needs. What became important in the small and large paintings was the fluidity of water and what felt like a collaboration between me and the medium— the way the pigment would disperse when I applied water and pigment to the painting on the floor.

I tried a similar application of paint on the ceramic forms, using a large quantity of watery paint, holding the brush high above the sculpture and allowing the paint to fall onto the form. However, it had a very different result on a three-dimensional form. The paint would hit the form and drip down the side, there was no fluidity— at least not in the same way as the paintings. This felt oddly similar to life, the liberation that might happen within oneself is beautiful and expansive, but the way others meet you in reality can make you insecure or fearful. So here, on a fragile, breakable medium that occupies physical space, the mark does not expand in the same way but falls flat.

I placed the ceramic creatures near the individual paintings they were inspired by. One next to each large painting in the gallery, standing far enough away to view the entire work just like the viewer might. I enjoy making sculptures that look at their own image for two reasons. One, it allows the image to see itself, a creature staying back at its own image. Having them stare at this moment happening in the painting helps them to dream and continue in this three-

dimensional space. Two, it inspires those visiting the gallery to really think about this relationship of viewing. They are not the only ones in the gallery, they are just another creature.

The *Coneflower Creature* was placed to the right of the sunbeam's center, where I hope the viewer will stand. This invites a togetherness, the viewer and the creature in community. The *Calamus Creature* stands across from *Veins*, both purple in color. Lastly, *Yarrow Creature* with yellows, oranges, and reds stands not far from *With the Sun and Grasses* yet rather than gazing directly at the painting, it peers out the large window next to it. Not only as a way to excite viewers walking by the storefront window but a way to remind the viewer that the work is inspired by the outside world, the more-than-human plants, animals, and organisms that mostly live outside of these gallery walls. There is something about the gaze outwardly that feels familiar to that gaze of longing that many people might be familiar with. I believe that art is impactful and I hope my work inspires others to expand their ideas of bodies and connect with the animate species around them. But I also realize the most powerful moments for me have been in the real wild spaces and that art is still part of capitalism. Even more, the longing and the external gaze expressed in the *Yarrow Creature* piece might be about hope for something else. Turning to the horizon in hopes of another way forward in this often harrowing world.

Each ceramic creature is covered in press-molded clay forms that depict wild medicinal plants of the prairie, the Coneflower, Calamus, and Yarrow. The pain and judgment felt by the creatures by the external world are counteracted by these healing species. The bodies comfort one another, in mutual companionship and their need for each other. As more and more ecosystems and species are lost or threatened due to the climate crisis it is desperately apparent how much humans must work to respect and care for other species rather than their own greed.

The sculptures are a moment of mutual care, of working together, evolving to support each other's lives.

adrienne maree brown writes, “Janine Benyus, a student of biomimicry, says ‘Nature/Life would always create conditions conducive to life.’ She tells of a radical fringe of scientists who are realizing that natural selection isn’t individual, but mutual—that species only survive if they learn to be in community” (14). In this work, I have been learning to see that my survival is connected and reliant on the survival of other species. So much of my experience in this world has been selfish, reinforced by the money markets of capitalism which do not care for how their decisions impact all the animate beings of the planet.

The weight of not knowing how to change the ways of the world due to so much of the power being in the hands of those with enormous sums of money is overwhelming. I often find myself feeling hopeless. Robin Wall Kimmerer shares, “We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves, there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how less lonely the world would be” (9). My exhibition *Present Portal* is about tuning in, slowing down, and paying attention to the intelligences of the more-than-human beings around me in my local landscape. Kimmerer reminds me that I have a greater kin that I have been neglecting. Great importance is placed on our human paternal families, but we have even greater families all around us. I can feel the comfort of these friends when I take the time to sit and listen with them.

In this exhibition I am sitting with adrienne maree brown’s words that, “what we pay attention to grows” (19). The sunbeam, small and large paintings, and ceramic pieces point to these outdoor spaces filled with animate beings that are providing relief and teaching my body lessons on how to better exist in this world. This exhibition was meant to convey that hope I feel when I allow myself a moment of rest, sitting among the grass and beings whose names I have

yet to fully learn. This exhibition is the beginning of realizing a greater kin and prioritizing my time communing with those beings and spaces. I am learning through this work how to trust that all that I need is here. I continue to practice seeing and breathing amongst these spaces. I do not have all the answers but these animate beings are helping me see a way forward, teaching me methods of survival on this planet.



“How can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm?”

...

This is where we start our trans-species communion, opening a space to uplift the practice of listening even more than practices of showing and proving and speaking up. Listening is not only about the normative ability to hear, it is a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in.”

-Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (15)

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