

# Eternity Sensuously Displayed: Yolande Harris' *Eyrie*

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Animals, according to American psychologist James Hillman are "the palpable presence of the regeneration of time, of adapting and surviving life - an immortality utterly of this world, this world its Eden, needing no elsewhere, and no ecstasies"(24). In regarding nature, Hillman invokes a displacement of the "human subject from center stage to the wings [...] sideways to the soul's habitation extended in the world"(1), a tone that resonates in the pleas of environmental writers and activists to consider the plight of other species as equal in importance to our own. The imperatives of climate change and our current global ecological crisis demand this lateral shift, one could argue, in order that we really see the truth of what we are doing to the biosphere and enter into active relationship with its manifold plant and animal species - "the aboriginal inhabitants of this earth, this air, these waters"(1). Artists like Yolande Harris are in the vanguard here, in their gentle but insistent evocation of the metaphysical imagination out of respect (literally, "to look again") for the world.

When I first visited Yolande's studio on the topmost floor of a spacious, rented home situated at the edge of a steep, wooded bluff in an old, established Seattle neighborhood, I was immediately impressed with two things: this was a real garret, and one with a spectacular view. Uncluttered and austere, with a rough wooden floor, it was situated at the top of a narrow third story flight of stairs. The open and airy interior space had the feeling of a calm center for focused and solitary musing, research and responsiveness. Fragments of works-in-progress were hung here and there, readily visible from her long narrow worktable situated in the center of the room. There was a primacy of vision in this room for me, even as I donned a set of headphones to listen to one of her exquisite underwater hydrophone recordings. Occupying the entire upper half of the wall on the west side of the garret was a set of large windows. The view was breathtaking. Hundreds of dizzying feet below, and extending for miles to the west, was the vast body of silvery grey seawater called Puget Sound. Rising up beyond the distant shore were

the blue shimmering mountains of the Olympic Peninsula, clearly visible that day. With nothing much of the Anthropocene apparent in the scene, except the worrisome absence of snow on the peaks, it was easy to imagine launching one's body into that huge expanse and gliding effortlessly across a silent and primordial watery hunting ground. Observing the sweeping and commanding view of the world from those windows was the closest one might come to imagining the view from the eagle's perch on the old-growth fir not far below- the one that, while occupied, inspired Yolande's binocular and telephoto lens-based video (from Latin *videre* 'to see') interventions.

There are many artists in the Pacific Northwest, photographers and otherwise, who seemingly adopt native animal species as personal totems and offer up ever more crisp, detailed and colorful renderings of their encounters. There is something different about this artist's interspecies connection, however, mediated as it is through lens and pixel. The images invoked in *Eyrie* are more of a trace of something felt through seeing, or seeing through feeling. A mutual arising, garret and tree branch; perhaps more metalogue than dialog, more haecceity (the Latin word for "thisness", haecceity refers to the particular qualities of a thing that make it unique unto itself) than metaphor.

A note about the artist: there is a clear sense of highly intelligent, gentle and focused presence when in Yolande's company. You have her undivided attention, which seems to effortlessly emanate from her being- her astonishingly clear blue eyes are more-often-than-not twinkling with genuine wonder and engaged curiosity.

Referencing the work of Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann, Hillman writes that "the self presentation of the animal is its own end, and its color and shape and pattern [...] is the work of very specific biological structures"(23). With more cones in their retinas, deeper, magnifying foveas, and superior color (and ultraviolet) vision, eagles exist in a perceptual world that differs markedly from ours, with a 340-degree visual

field and eyes that can discern detail up to five times farther than human eyes. In Yolande's large Eyrie prints, there is a reciprocity through amplification taking place, a kind of mirroring of magnification and intensification through the electronic sampling of light, relying on the aid of the telephoto lens, the camera sensor (CCD), and a large format archival printer; tools for sampling, magnification and reproduction. Whereas the eagle's retina would likely afford a sharp and detailed close-up of the attentive artist in the garret window, the comparatively frail human relies on interpolated vision for its external imprinting: sampled light data are funneled through innovations like the CCD's Bayer filter pattern, which corrects, for example, the uneven human sensitivity to colors, producing a simulacrum made of orderly columns of red, green and blue pixels. This is also where the poetry of the work lies: Yolande willingly responds, relates with something like deep appreciation and curiosity, to this avian species' visual prowess (as well as the haecceity expressed by this individual eagle) utilizing her own technical and contingent aesthetic proficiency, pushing and then embracing limits and finding an unexpected beauty there. I had the distinct honor of assisting Yolande with the printing of Eyrie in the digital print lab at Cornish College of the Arts where I teach. After careful selection of printing profiles and some tests, we spent the day watching each print slowly emerge from the printer, the ink almost resonating off the paper as it came into the light. The unusual combination of the telephoto lens and the binoculars, which allowed light to seep in and create the effects of halo and color in the videos during the recording process, had somehow transformed the pixels into a prismatic array of pattern and shape. The haloed feathers, the diffuse yellow hue of the beak: color artifacts emerging from pixel patterns emerging from biological shapes. Again, from Hillman: "the biological necessity of the aesthetic explodes the sheerly functional notion of animals [...] Biology itself insists on aesthetic display"(23). Here, the artist's skillful hand, guided by technological ingenuity, was producing its own reciprocal imperatives of creative and aesthetic display.

Hillman also notes that, “to be seen is as genetic as to see”(24). When you listen to Yolande’s hydrophone recordings of underwater environments, you can’t help but marvel at the aesthetic qualities of the auditory sound print of life forms below the surface. Her mentor, ecologist and artist David Dunn , writes that when we are engaged “in more attentive listening, we are drawn deeper into a resonance with life itself”(90). In her writing about the eyrie encounter, Yolande invites you to a different kind of listening: “Can you look through my layered lenses, open your ears and hear the air moving? Can you listen to the distance with me?” It seems clear that it was through this synaesthetic sensibility, initiated spontaneously from her perch at the garret window, that Eyrie was conceived. Hillman again, of the animal: “No Being guarantees its existence; its existence guarantees being. Each animal is eternity sensuously displayed”(24). By actuating the colorful and compositional poiesis of the Eyrie series, Yolande Harris draws us deeper into the resonances of display, of life itself, through her sensitive and elegant transactions with the eternal.

James Hillman, 'Culture and the Animal Soul', *Spring 62 (American Soul): A Journal of Archetype and Culture* (1997): 10-37.

David Dunn, *Why Do Whales And Children Sing? A Guide to Listening in Nature* (Book and audio CD). Santa Fe, New Mexico: Earth Ear (1999).