



ANNIE MURPHY-ROBINSON

TRAUMA AND TRUTH, PROVOCATION AND POWER

anniemurphyrobinson.com // interview by Angelique Joy





Memories: fluid, made up of things real and unreal, of truths and untruths. Etched into a layer of charcoal, memories are refracted, redefined and reclaimed by artist Annie Murphy-Robinson. Drawing on her lived experiences, inspired by the self and the muse she has found in her children, Annie creates hyper-realistic images with paper, sandpaper and charcoal. Each image works to reclaim a story embedded in her past; she works to uncover a narrative within the charcoal that she labours to reveal and bring to life. It is a unique method of image making that peels away, rather than the traditional adding to.

Annie's works are compulsively and obsessively detail oriented, with perfectly glassy eyes and delicate cascading hair drawn from the shadows. Lush textures are created through her sanding back of each charcoal layer; the directional fur of the coyote, the pretty frills on childhood dress-ups and the perfectly drawn creases on the cotton singlet. The rise and fall of light and shadow in each image is striking and intensifies the gaze of each subject, whether looking at the viewer or past the frame. Each image is a perfect reflection, a perfect simulacrum of the female, early lived, experience.



In these hyper realistic charcoal surfaces Annie continues to rewrite the trauma from her past, to reclaim her identity and her moments, to give meaning to the senseless, to empower her voice and quantify her experiences. Each layer of charcoal she etches away is deeply connected to a personal suffering, a suffering much bigger than her.

The personal becomes universal and within the universality of her images, there is a mirror. Through this mirror, we each feel less alone. And here lies the power of her works: through each childlike pose, less passive than expected, we see ourselves as children. We feel our own innocence and agency, an agency ignored due to our age. We see our bravery even though we were not conscious of it at the time. Annie's works reveal power in the darkness and a strong resolve in these childlike gazes. Through each gaze, each story is re-told and each voice is heard - she is heard, we are heard.



"I CONTINUE TO REWRITE MY OWN STORY, TO QUANTIFY IT, TO GIVE IT MEANING"

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IT MEANS TO BE AN ARTIST?

I feel like being an artist is both a blessing and a curse. I obsess over it. For me it is reclusive and isolating, I am constantly comparing my work to others, feeling less than and I wonder if all the hours I spend making it are what I should be doing with my life. That's obviously the negative aspects of being an artist. On the positive side, it quantifies my existence, it allows me to visually connect with others through shared experience. The overwhelming passion that I have for it: it is an outlet for my obsessive and compulsive behaviour and a natural remedy to my melancholy.

YOUR PROCESS BEGINS BY PHOTOGRAPHING YOUR SUBJECTS, OFTEN YOUR CHILDREN. CAN YOU SPEAK WITH US ABOUT YOUR PROCESS OF REFERENCE PHOTOGRAPHY?

I began painting and drawing from life while getting my BFA. When I started graduate school, I began a series of self portraits, large, nude and awkward using a mirror. After I graduated, I began using my daughters as references, and started taking photos and working from those. I have always



had a penchant for collecting old clothes, animal skins and things that reminded me of my childhood growing up in Montana. I feel this yearning to tell stories in my art: old suitcases, dresses and things that are really important to me, for example my grandmother's old black cone bra and a deceased boyfriend's favourite shirt.

I have no real image in my mind when I am taking photos to use. I take a lot of pictures and as I am working things come to mind organically. For example, I may take clothes and drag them in the mud and stain them with coffee or put hair a certain way, or different poses. The images I use are confrontational and/or bittersweet. I have some images that are almost too good to draw – I'm scared to re-create them. Something in most of the images reminds me of myself, how I see myself as a child, through my children.

previous spread
Casey and the Coyote, Night Prowler, 2011
 Sanded charcoal on paper, 28" x 42"

opposite page, left
Casey and the Wedding Dress, 2015
 Sanded charcoal on paper, 42" x 52"

opposite page, top right
Casey and the Red Ball (Profile), 2012
 Sanded charcoal on paper, 35" x 42"

opposite page, bottom right
Casey "Matadore", 2010
 Sanded charcoal on paper, 32" x 42"

left
Sasquatch "Dordogne", 2011
 Sanded charcoal on paper, 38" x 27"

right
Emily "Crossroads", 2017
 Sanded charcoal on paper, 42" x 24.5"



IS YOUR FINAL COMPOSITION CONSTRUCTED WITHIN THE REFERENCE PHOTOGRAPH OR THROUGH THE PROCESS OF DRAWING?

In almost every drawing, the final composition is created through the process of drawing. *Emily and the Ram* were shot against a roll up door which I removed in the drawing process, and I have another drawing in which I put the milky-way galaxy behind a drawing of Emily holding horns on her head. In that particular piece, she is standing on the buffalo rug which she was conceived on.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN YOUR PROCESS OF COATING THE PAPER IN CHARCOAL AND ETCHING INTO THIS DARKNESS WITH SANDPAPER?

I start with softening the paper by covering it with compressed charcoal and sanding it and then sizing away. I then start pushing and pulling the image



forward, toning and smoothing the transitions of value with sandpaper. When I work from reference photos, I brighten the photo to see what shapes and forms are hidden in the shadows. I then balance between the light and dark sides (I love a single light source!) of the image.

UPON FIRST GLANCE, YOU COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR THINKING YOUR INCREDIBLE HYPER-REALISTIC WORKS ARE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS. CAN YOU SPEAK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY INTO A CHARCOAL DRAWING? WHAT DO YOU THINK HAPPENS TO THE WORKS IN THIS PROCESS OF TRANSITION FROM ONE MEDIUM TO THE OTHER?

The sanding process is very physical and demanding. When I'm working, I am labouring; standing and moving, tuning my eyes into detail and form and balancing both the dark and the light in such a way to make it more real and then again unreal, like a memory.



opposite page
Casey "Theodora", 2015
Sanded charcoal on paper, 35" x 47"

left
Casey "Voodoo Child", 2016
Sanded charcoal on paper, 66" x 42"

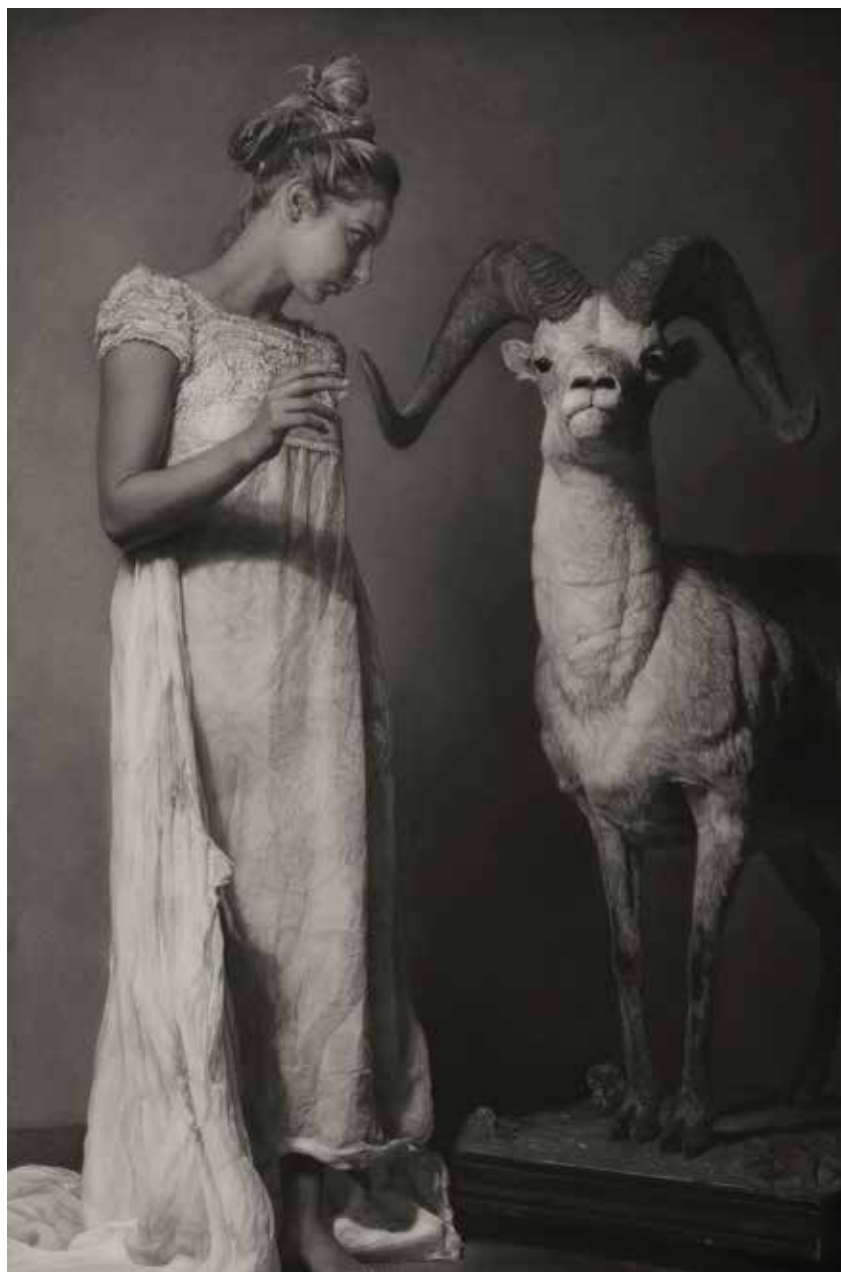
top right
Casey and the Coyote, "Canis Latrans,"
2016
Sanded charcoal on paper, 31" x 42"

bottom right
Stain (affect), 2018
Sanded charcoal on paper, 46" x 29"

I am also always considering my subject, their story and translating all of that through the creation of the artwork. My work is photographic, but different. I'm often praised by others with "It looks just like a photo" - I take it as a compliment because I am not a great photographer!

THE NOTION OF MAKING YOUR WORK 'MORE REAL, AND THEN AGAIN UNREAL' IS REALLY INTRIGUING. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS NOT WITHIN YOUR WORKS AND HOW THAT RELATES TO MEMORY?

When creating my work, I feel like it becomes "more real" in the sense that I am re-creating a moment in time, a super-position that occurs through observation. I'm labouring through that observed moment recording it and



elevating a vision that comes from the physicality of making. Everything in the work matters: the clothes, the furs, the hats and walls. Everything represents objects that I am drawn to, and when drawing my children, I am imbuing them with my past. My children are my future, my DNA carriers. I feel that my art is unreal because of the work in the shadows, the balance of the light and dark and bringing them both in to read correctly. Unreal statement pertains to the value scale in the drawings.

YOUR WORKS FEEL BEAUTIFULLY REFERENTIAL OF THE BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY OF SALLY MANN WHOSE CHILDREN WERE ALSO HER BIGGEST MUSES. WHAT ARTISTS AND ARTWORKS INSPIRE YOU?

Well, of course, Sally Mann! I connect with her work in her *Family* series probably more so than any other artist. I am also obsessed with the Pre-Raphaelites with their nod to the ancient past and longing, sad beauty. I also love Jock Sturges and his prepubescent large scale photos, unabashed and unafraid.

ADOLESCENT MODELS ARE A CONSISTENT ASPECT OF YOUR PRACTICE; WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS PERIOD OF TRANSITION, THIS IN-BETWEEN TIME OF LIFE, THAT INTERESTS YOU SO?

My own troubles began in adolescence, I was a victim of sexual abuse which later turned to self harm, drug and alcohol addiction, and promiscuity. I continue to rewrite my own story, to address the trauma that I experienced and to quantify it, to give it meaning. My art is therapeutic for me both in its meditative making and in the release of victim that lingers in my soul.

AS YOUR CHILDREN GROW, WILL YOU CONTINUE TO CENTRE THEM AS SUBJECTS IN YOUR WORK?

I still am! They are grown, 23 and 20. I also work at a continuation high school where I meet young adults who have also



"SOMETHING IN MOST OF THE IMAGES REMINDS ME OF MYSELF, HOW I SEE MYSELF AS A CHILD, THROUGH MY CHILDREN"

experienced similar trauma to mine. I have lately started drawings of them as well.

HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR WORKS ARE CHANGING AS YOU ARE CREATING AROUND YOUR ADULT CHILDREN?

The work is becoming more serious, more mature as my children are now adults. Both daughters are very tuned in to nature, and I felt a need to bring in animals (taxidermied) to represent that. In *Emily and the Ram (Conjuring)* I wanted to create a feeling that she could bring the Ram to life, that she held a power over death. In *Casey and the Buffalo (the weight, "Americana")* I wanted to show that the buffalo was either protecting her or keeping her prisoner; that was for the viewer to decide.

The women that they have become has also changed the work through the way that they pose and the outfits that they pick out from my art wardrobe to wear. When they were really little I would do super long photo shoots until they got kind of mad and stopped goofing off. As teenagers, they posed in

what they thought I wanted and there is a reaching, or a trying on of different aspects of what they thought "woman" was. Now there is a self confidence that they both exude which has changed the work.

SALLY MANN AND OTHER ARTISTS THAT HAVE CENTRED ADOLESCENCE IN THEIR WORK HAVE OFTEN BEEN CONSIDERED PROVOCATIVE – WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS?

There is beauty in the innocence of youth. My children felt safe enough to run around in the summer half clothed, painting themselves with mud and goofing off. I wanted to honour that, to show that this is natural and beautiful, not sensational and abusive. There will always be those who see something wrong in that, either because of their own trauma as a child or a resistance to possibly an "unnatural proclivity". I was giving my daughters the freedom that was taken from me and thus, working through my own abuse.

YOU HAVE TOUCHED ON SOMETHING VERY POIGNANT. THIS NOTION OF CONSTANTLY

opposite page, left
Casey and the Coyote "Animus", 2017
Sanded charcoal on paper, 36" x 42"

opposite page, right
Emily and the Ram "Conjuring", 2018
Sanded charcoal on paper, 42" x 67"

top
Casey "High Plains Drifter", 2014
Sanded charcoal on paper 36" x 42"



left
Casey "The Damned", 2018
Sanded charcoal on paper, 48" x 42"

opposite page, left
Casey "Firelight (listening to stories)", 2014
Sanded charcoal on paper, 36" x 42"

opposite page, right
Casey "Adapt", 2018
Sanded charcoal on paper, 42" x 29"



HIDING CHILDREN FROM THEIR OWN AGENCY AND PROTECTING THEM FROM THE REALITY OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE IS OFTEN THE VERY THING THAT PUSHES THEIR TRUTH INTO THE SHADOWS. THE IRONY IS THAT IT IS OFTEN IN THESE SHADOWS WHERE INNOCENCE IS HARMED. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS?

Wow, that's a good question. I believe my husband and I raised our girls without kid gloves and to be unique and trusting. But of course it is in that trust that can come harm. Through nurturing open and frank conversations about abuse, both girls learned to "read" situations and stay out of harm's way.

PREVIOUSLY YOU HAVE NOTED THAT YOUR INTENT, WHEN CREATING EACH OF YOUR WORKS, IS TO CONFRONT THE VIEWER WITH QUESTIONS. WHAT QUESTIONS ARE YOU POSING THROUGH YOUR WORKS?

I want the viewer to connect through their own experience, to have them question themselves as to why they feel either drawn to the work or repulsed by it. It is my job as an artist to present the work and have the viewer look, linger and ponder. I usually name my works very plainly, with a nod to where I want them to go, or a path they can follow as far as a narrative is concerned.



WHEN SPEAKING OF YOUR WORK YOU OFTEN TOUCH ON TRAUMA AND YOUR LIVED EXPERIENCES. HOW DOES YOUR ARTS PRACTICE WORK TO HEAL THIS?

I have an obsessive-compulsive need to make art. It is very labour intensive, like beating down a brick wall at times - I feel like I'm always going into battle in a way. I actually just bled on the piece I was working on today, *Emily and the Buffalo*, by sanding my thumb down through the process.

I feel that art gives my life meaning, and without it I get depressed. I do believe on a physiological level the natural release of endorphins keeps away the melancholy that is always waiting. It also helps me connect to other people.

I have started teaching my charcoal sanding technique in workshops and I was overjoyed at how close of a community a group of people can become in three days.

DO YOU HOPE OTHERS SEE THEMSELVES IN YOUR WORKS AND FEEL LESS ALONE?

Of course! We are all spiritual beings having human experiences. No-one wants to feel alone. These days everyone seems to post only amazing beautiful pictures of themselves and the perfection of their lives. Not having anything close to that, one starts to think, why me? Why not me? That brings a certain kind of suffering that is deep down and victimises people. My work is so connected to my own suffering that people feel it and thus don't feel alone, at least that is my hope.

ALONG OUR CREATIVE PATH AS ARTISTS, WHILE EXPERIMENTING CREATIVELY, WE EACH OFTEN TELL AND RETELL THE SAME STORY- WHAT STORY ARE YOU TELLING?

My work has changed through the years. I am attracted to more of a narrative now, often using taxidermy animals and hints of witchcraft and ritual, which I find beautiful and mysterious. It is always about the experience of being human and a search of who I am in that process.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW TO BE TRUE OF THE WORLD AND HOW IS THIS TRUTH EXPRESSED THROUGH YOUR ARTS PRACTICE?

I know that we all want to belong, to find our "tribe" and to move through life with grace and dignity. We all want to be heard and to be accepted in all of our beauty and ugliness.

EXHIBITIONS:

GROUP – February 2020: *LA Art Fair*
Arcadia Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA, USA

GROUP – October 2020: *Midnight Garden*, a Beautiful Bizarre curated exhibition, Modern Eden Gallery, San Francisco, USA