

Kara Maria

Artist Statement

Human activity is causing the mass extinction of plant and animal species at an alarming rate. I paint carefully rendered, miniature portraits of endangered animals into larger compositions to raise questions about Earth's biodiversity crisis and the place of wildlife within increasingly unstable habitats. The swirling and exploding shapes, bright colors, representational elements, and unlikely spatial relationships of the greater painting illustrate how our progressively chaotic environment is displacing fauna and the systems that support it.

From poaching, farming and agricultural projects, urbanization, and other operations that encroach on natural spaces; to rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, higher temperatures, and the multiplying disasters such as fires, hurricanes, and floods that result from that; the wild animals on our planet are under tremendous risk of annihilation. The consequences of this jeopardize the future of all of us. As a species, humans are not independent from the natural world's ecosystems. The impact of species loss on human survival is a deep concern that informs the ideas behind my artwork. I urge people to contemplate what we risk losing.

Some works in this series include well-known animal representatives of the current trend of mass extinction, such as the polar bear, and the monarch butterfly. As my idea was sparked by reading Elizabeth Kolbert's 2014 book *The Sixth Extinction* (where she asserts that we are now witnessing the largest mass extinction since the eradication of the dinosaurs about sixty-six million years ago), I made a painting depicting a Panamanian golden frog, one of the animals whose story she discusses at length. This frog is one of the many critically endangered animal species that only exist in captivity now. Other paintings focus on endangered local animals—those from the U.S., and especially those from California. I have completed paintings that include a California condor, a northern spotted owl, and a California tiger salamander.

I am also interested in animals that are not endangered per se, but dwell in the wildland-urban interface and have conflicting relationships with the people living around them. Mountain lions, bears, and coyotes, among others, have had their habitats reduced by the growth and expansion of the human population; and they are often hunted and exterminated out of fear. The eastern cougar (or eastern puma) is now considered officially extinct and was removed from the endangered species list in 2018. The California grizzly bear, although designated California's official State Animal in 1953, has been officially extinct since 1924. This is an ongoing tragedy, and an open door to the further demise of wildlife.

Two animals represented in this series also relate to the current COVID-19 pandemic, as it is assumed that the virus travelled between species—from an animal to a human.

I have made paintings of both a bat and a pangolin—the two animals considered most likely to have passed the virus to humans. Both animals are known to carry corona viruses; and are heavily trafficked and sold in wet markets where there is close human contact with wild animals. Both animals are consumed as food; and their body parts are considered medicinal in a variety of cultures globally. This is a prominent example of people's behavior negatively impacting both the natural world, and human health at the same time.

My current body of work was also inspired by my time as an Artist-in-Residence at Recology (the San Francisco dump) from October 2014–January 2015. My project there was to use discarded canvases I found in the trash at the dump site (including amateur paintings and digitally printed, mass-produced artwork from Ikea) and over-paint them with recycled acrylic paint from their Household Hazardous Waste Program. The abstraction in the paintings speaks to the environment of the Recology facility, a constantly churning and tumultuous place. This is where I began including the living creatures that inhabit or pass through the site within the color and form of the larger painting surface. Detailed renderings of seagulls, raccoons, hawks, and other animals are interspersed within the paintings. These animals are far from endangered; in fact, they are thriving on our trash. My experience during the residency underlined for me the interconnected lives of humans and animals, and the impact our trash and desire to consume has on the natural environment. It also piqued my interest in the flip side of species loss—that of overly prolific and invasive species that are also contributing to our biodiversity crisis.

My newest paintings include a variety of animals that are endangered in different parts of the world. Because so much of Earth's fauna is threatened, I want to draw attention to the broad range of wildlife that is disappearing globally: from pollinators like rusty patched bumble bees, mollusks such as Hawaiian tree snails, marine mammals like vaquitas, to larger predators including Sumatran tigers, and many others. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, dozens of species are going extinct every day. *"Because the rate of change in our biosphere is increasing, and because every species' extinction potentially leads to the extinction of others bound to that species in a complex ecological web, numbers of extinctions are likely to snowball in the coming decades as ecosystems unravel."* They predict that 30 to 50 percent of all species will be heading toward extinction by mid-century. I want to acknowledge these animals in my paintings; and depict how environmental turmoil is disrupting the fundamental structures that support survival.

As I write this, I am aware that 2020 was one of the two warmest years ever recorded on Earth (tied with 2016). Also June 2021 was the hottest June on record for the U.S., North America, and Africa—and the fifth-warmest June on record globally. 15,000 members of The Union of Concerned Scientists recently

released a *Warning to Humanity* that if the world doesn't act soon, there will be "catastrophic biodiversity loss and untold amounts of human misery." For instance: the loss of pollinators (including a decrease in the population of bees and other insects) is affecting agriculture already, as a large portion of food and fiber crops depend on pollinators for reproduction; while overfishing and coral bleaching threaten a key source of protein and income for billions of people. These and other repercussions to our economic stability, health, and survival will continue to escalate if we fail to take action now.

On the optimistic side, people are taking positive steps to protect endangered animals. Along with the *Endangered Species Act* implemented in the US in 1973, the efforts of dedicated conservationists all over the world to protect habitat and reintroduce animals back into the wild are making a difference in the survival of species that may otherwise have already gone extinct. One example is the California condor which has been successfully reintroduced into the wild via a captive breeding program by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Although still considered critically endangered, the population of this bird (the largest land bird in North America) is now increasing.

I hope that people will be motivated to safeguard our wilderness and the living creatures that inhabit it, before it is too late. With this series, I want to participate in a broader dialogue with the belief that under the worst circumstances, the best in people also comes through. I am aware that painting might not be the most direct way to bring about change in the world. But I believe that, as Louise Bourgeois said of drawing, it might be "just a little help."

Special note on Seven Deadly Sins series:

There are seven, small paintings that are part of my greater endangered species series, but also form a series of their own—including *Pride (African lion)*, and *Wrath (European hornet)* included in this exhibition. These were intended to address the historical themes of the seven deadly sins through the use of color and choice of images, as well as to present endangered animals that function within those narratives. Each painting contains at least one image borrowed from *The Deadly Sins (Les Péchés capitaux, 1888-1904)*, prints by artist James Ensor (Belgium, 1860-1949).