

NEAR DWELLERS

THE TREE MUSEUM & STREET ROAD

LOU FLORENCE

**NEAR DWELLERS
AS ROADKILL**

FEBRUARY 15 - MAY 31, 2025

Near Dwellers is an ongoing series exploring animal-human relationships, with a focus on interspecies interdependencies in the spaces and places we share.

Through the lens of artists and scholars who work intimately with animals and/or with their representation, Near Dwellers opens up new and multi-faceted ways of troubling the purported human-animal divide.



LOU FLORENCE

**NEAR DWELLERS
AS ROADKILL**

FEBRUARY 15 - MAY 31, 2025



All works are gouache on paper, 2024, unless otherwise noted
Inside covers – detail, 'Vulture', 18"x24"
Top – 'Chipmunk' 9"x12"; *Bottom* – 'Mother Raccoon', 9"x12"

Lou Florence opens the fifth installment of *Near Dwellers* by focusing our attention on the topic of roadkill.

The long history of vehicular violence and its fatal consequences for animal lives is without a doubt inflected with human ignorance, cruelty, or indeed, indifference, but how can art help us to contend with the affective experience of encountering triturated animal bodies? What does it mean for art to make visible the ubiquity of such carnage? And how can art bring some critical force to an examination of the social norms that indulge this form of 'hyperautomobile'⁽¹⁾ violence toward animals?

Lou Florence's artworks are a practical start to exploring these questions, and on view at *Street Road* is a series of her paintings of roadkilled animals. Also on view, in a mirror of this work, is documentation from public workshops that records the sightings of roadkill on guided walks hosted by the artist during the exhibition.

The paintings are literal documents of damaged bodies of a range of species. A deer, a vulture, a fox, a blue jay, a woodpecker, a mother raccoon with prominent teats (no doubt full of milk for nursing her young), and so on, together tell a story of animal lives brutally cut down while traversing pockets of their homelands alongside busy roadways.

1. As described by Matthew Callarco (2023), in *Reflections on Roadkill between Mobility Studies and Animal Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.4-7, 5n5.

As a form of documentation, Florence's paintings evidence acts of public malfeasance and are a testament to the harms needlessly and heedlessly inflicted on our fellow neighbours. As paintings, they are also a formal tribute to the loss of an individual's life—a life with its own interests and purposes stupidly ended by humans.

However, the animals are depicted in a manner that belies a fascination with the details of each corpse and invites a wider question: Why look at dead animals?

Indeed, feathers, fur, sinews, and bones are depicted in minute detail and speak to one of painting's oldest traditions: art based on observation. But what is it to 'observe' such works? What kind of looking are we being asked to partake in here? These artworks are all about 'looking at' and, in turn, witnessing the apparent body as a surface. They are not transcendent. They are not an imagining of a spirited life. Instead, we are confronted with the brute reality of the mortal remains of animal bodies horribly ruined but carefully translated into paint on paper.

On the one hand, the images confront us with an objective archaeological record of sorts, as if to say, 'This is a factual account.' On the other hand, each brush stroke speaks to the tenderheartedness of the artist and her sensitivity to what she has witnessed on roadsides. In this light, the act of painting—that is, the intentional choice of painting these animals rather than, say, simply photographing them—speaks to a desire



Left to right – 'Squirrel', 'Rabbit', 'Rat', All 9"x12"



*Top, left to right – 'Green Toad', 'Toad Skeleton', 'Brown Toad'
Bottom – 'Snake with Oak Catkins', 'Snake with Ribs Out', 'The First Snake', All 5"x7"*

to slow down the act of looking, to 'haptically' observe, to 'see-touch' and thereby 'lend [one's] body to the world,' as Maurice Merleau-Ponty says of the act of painting.⁽²⁾

In this sense, Florence intimately engages with a mortal being by meticulously and lovingly depicting each fissured tissue, each hair, and each limp limb of an animal's broken body. We are brought into the world of an artist's forensic care and attention to human harm.

As an audience, one might struggle to study each picture to the same degree without the sensation of nausea interrupting one's gaze. The urge to divert one's attention is understandable but how then can art deter us from the impulse to not look at roadkill?

It is worth taking a moment to draw out another aspect of 'looking at' through a comparison with that of observing wild animals in captivity. In spaces such as zoos and game farms, people gape and stare at animals for long periods of time, usually within relative proximity. Housed behind glass and/or cemented enclosures, or fenced in to limited spaces, animals are but a spectacle. As Lori Marino points out, 'One of the most

demeaning aspects of captivity [is] knowing one is being ogled.' She continues by quoting Randy Malamud:

The zoo fundamentally inscribes the looked-at animal inside their cage—or their 'cageless enclosures,' that is, cages that don't look like cages (to us) [...]. We, the people, the spectators, are free, they are trapped. We are in our natural habitats (San Diego, or Hamburg, or London) and they are not. We stay in the zoo for as long as it amuses us to be there and they stay there forever. We can move on to the next cage, or the gift shop, or the cafeteria, while they cannot. We can leave, we can go to places we would rather be, we can achieve privacy from prying eyes; they cannot" (p.105). To deny an animal from living its life in a manner that it is suited to is to watch an animal endure the psychological violence of extreme dependence, tedium, and anxiety.⁽³⁾

In other words, it is to witness an animal that is half-dead. Captivity then is a space of intense scrutiny—of 'looking at' but without recognizing how the spirited life of a fellow critter is being actively destroyed by one's gaze. Ogling an animal half-dead or averting our gaze when it has been roadkilled is to stubbornly persist in the objectification of our non-human neighbours. It is an intellectual trick that not only justifies the harms of speeding through a terrain or containing and controlling other beings' lifeways but that also sustains the erasure of an animal's subjectivity and agency, conceptually reducing them to

2. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1993), 'Eye and Mind', from *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. Revised by Michael Smith in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Galen A. Johnson, ed., Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1993. Page 2.

3. Marino, Lori (2018), 'Captivity,' in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, ed. Lori Gruen, University of Chicago Press.







'Red Fox', 18"x24"



'Vole triptych', 9"x12"

Previous page – 'White Tailed Deer', 18"x24"

dumb automatons who are killable (Calarco, 2023).

How then does Florence's work help us to critically address our ocular obsession with non-human animals? Her careful attention to each individual critter points to an answer: the paintings are not images of types or kinds of beings freighted with the attendant anonymity that such a classification suggests. Instead, Florence's rendered bodies are unique—not simply unique as paintings, but as depictions of unique individuals who lived a particular life, in a specific place, at a moment in time.

This matters to how we acknowledge the individual, spirited, lives that are lost. Jane Desmond observes: 'Roadkilled animals are rarely granted the individuation of subjectivity that pets receive. As 'wild,' not domesticated, animals, they are unnamed and do not live intimately with us in our homes.'⁽⁴⁾⁽⁵⁾ This is significant to how we can begin to really see those whose lives intersect with our own. Each of Florence's images acts as a mode of signification—of naming—and in turn, the paintings put us on the path to recognizing that 'this' individual being

lived and died at a roadside 'here.' 'This' animal is not a symbol of a 'type' of multitudinous 'kind.' Instead, this is of one deer lost to its family, one toad not free to join its mate, one mother raccoon whose cubs will not be nurtured, and so on.

In parallel to Lou Florence's paintings are her four guided group walks that take participants along a stretch of highway (Route 41) directly adjacent to Street Road's premises in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Participants are invited to not only identify and record the remains of animal bodies at the roadside and to act as witnesses to the harms inflicted on individual critters, but also to honour the lives lost to the continuous rush of vehicles.

A room at Street Road is a dedicated space for reflection, and becomes the epicentre of these mappings of participants' somatic experiences of walking through an animal's home terrain. On display is a loose assemblage of drawings of walking routes, notes, anecdotes, and photos of animal bodies. Video material collected during the walks—filmed by the artist, Street Road, and also participants—is progressively compiled throughout the period of the exhibition and is displayed alongside photographic and written material. We see people walking along a noisy highway, their clothes rippling from the drag of vehicular winds, punctuated by a soundtrack of booming engine noises that tear at one's ears. Immersed in the animal's habitat, we see the walkers pause and gather round each corpse to reflect on the merciless conditions that

-
4. Desmond, Jane C. (2016) *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-animal relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life*, Chicago University Press. Page 142.
 5. Note that Florence's paintings are of what are likely 'wild' animals and although companion animals are frequently victims of the automobile, there is a tendency in scholarship to understand 'roadkill' as referring to non-domesticated animals (Desmond, 2016; Calarco, 2023).



Top Left – Walk 1.
Top right – reflection room in the exhibiton with visitors watching Walk 1 documentation.
Bottom – Documentation in the reflection room from Walks 1 and 2.



'Red Bellied Woodpecker', 9"x12"



'Bluejay', 9"x12"

the local critters endure daily.

A woman kneels and carefully cups a small bundle of dried bones and fur in her hands. She seems practiced in the art of mourning and offers a fitting prayer. Another person reads a personal anecdote of Matthew Calarco's from his book on roadkill that tells of his childhood experience of seeing kittens mutilated by cars, one of them his own pet. The reading is not only an invitation for participants to share their own personal stories, but it also illustrates Calarco's sincere concern for the adverse consequences of our (and indeed, his own) acculturation to what he calls 'hyperautomobility' (Calarco, 2023).

As he says:

'We are taught to avoid truly seeing roadkill that is strewn across our roads—or if we do happen to see it and are bothered by it, we

have learned to dismiss it as an unfortunate consequence, as collateral damage, of a modern way of life that is ultimately non-negotiable and inevitable" (p.4).

Sharing this concern, Lou Florence's art projects urge us to take seriously the specifics of human collisions with local animal life, and in documenting their dead bodies, saying prayers, and sharing personal stories of acts of harm, these acts of looking and walking 'articulate other possibilities for living (and dying), for moving (and staying put), in common with our animal and other more-than-human kin' (Calarco, 2023, p.4). Florence's work sets us on a course for contesting the marginalization of our more-than-human neighbours by recognizing and honouring their own significant worlds, relations, lives, and deaths.

Near Dwellers
Public Lecture Series
online, via Zoom



'Slug', 4"x6".

Street Road and the Tree Museum invite you to join us for discussions of human-animal relations between the artists exhibiting in the Near Dwellers series and guest scholars.

Public talks take place in connection to each exhibition. Dates and times are announced on Street Road's Near Dwellers' webpage and will subsequently be published as a collection of podcasts.

For connection details, and further information about the project's programming, artists, and speakers, please visit our website, and sign up for our mailing list:

www.streetroad.org/near-dwellers

For more about Lou Florence's work, visit:
www.louflorence.com.



TREE MUSEUM

The Near Dwellers exhibition program is a collaboration between Street Road Artists Space, located in Cochranville, Pennsylvania, and the Tree Museum, located on Pender Island, British Columbia.

www.streetroad.org
www.tree-museum.com

Visiting Near Dwellers as Roadkill

Street Road is open Fridays and Saturdays and by appointment. Please check our website for details as times may vary.

Virtual visits can be arranged.
Email us to set one up.

hello@streetroad.org

Street Road Artists Space
725 Street Road
Cochranville, PA 19330

www.streetroad.org



NEAR DWELLERS

THE TREE MUSEUM & STREET ROAD

Near Dwellers is an exploration of animal-human relationships in five parts, with a focus on interspecies interdependence in the spaces and places we share.

Through the lens of artists and scholars who work intimately with animals and/or with their representation, Near Dwellers opens up new and multi-faceted ways of troubling the purported human-animal divide.

