

FLAUNT



Photo: Gina Beavers, *Painting Model for NFT*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

POOLED | IN CONVERSATION WITH NATALIE WADLINGTON AND GINA BEAVERS JANUARY 2022

For many of us, animals make up as much of our lives as our fellow humans do. Whether it be a pet cat who watches us move through our day-to-day activities or a nightmarish owl that fills our nights with noise, the human-animal dynamic is ever present.

Texas-based artist [Natalie Wadlington](#) chose to explore this dynamic in her new show *Pooled* at Library Street Collective in Detroit, where vibrant oil paintings tell the stories of curious characters as they interact with a variety of both wild and domesticated animals.

Natalie sat down with fellow artist [Gina Beavers](#) to talk about their experiences together at the [Cranbrook Academy of Art](#), creating art during the pandemic, and the way in which we treat other beings—and what that says about the way we treat each other.

Gina Beavers (GB): Maybe we can start with how we met? We met at Cranbrook, you were a student and I was visiting, and you were like my guide. You helped me do everything the whole time I was there. It was really awesome. But also I think, just the role that you were in, in terms of Cranbrook and the program there, I mean, it's a very special program. Everybody kind of signs up to do different things, very communal. So I wondered if you could talk a little bit about going to school there, and what was special about it?

Natalie Wadlington (NW): Yeah, I remember when you came, and we had so much fun together. You were so fun. I had a really good time with you. My job was the visiting artist assistant so I helped people out, but as you were

mentioning, Cranbrook is such a uniquely communal experience, so when we had visiting artists they would stay with us for multiple days. You shared your meals with us and you really got to know us. So when you came, I feel like we really connected, we laughed so much and had a really good time, the weekend that you visited.

I think too, you totally got a taste of what Cranbrook was like. It really was a community experience, with so much studio time. It's structured different in that there aren't any classes, so you are living there, on the campus, and you have your studio, and you are making, having conversations, doing critiques, and things like that, but it gives you a lot of time to *make*. And that's really why I wanted to go there, because I felt like, going into grad school, what I really wanted was just time. Time to get to know myself more deeply, but that you can only get, I think, just through working. Over the course of my experience there I feel like I came in and left with only a deepening of the kinds of feelings and sentiment that I was interested in exploring when I came. That was only refined and deepened. And that definite knowledge about myself — and what drives me to create — has helped me to keep making art after grad school. Now, in the pandemic, and just being alone in the studio, it's only continuing to get deeper.

GB: Because you are in Texas now, in College Station, and you have this amazing set up with your studio behind you. Not just because of the physical setup and being in a different place, but the shift out of grad school, out of that program, what things have you noticed in terms of your work, in terms of the day-to-day?

NW: It's kind of funny because I am comparing both grad school life and post-grad school life simultaneously with pre-pandemic and pandemic life, so it's hard for me to split, because there's so many changes. So, yeah, it's hard to know how to parcel that, but in grad school, obviously, I was really busy, really engaged in a lot of conversations with a lot of artists, and just living a really fast, multifaceted, busy life. As one does in grad school and pre-pandemic. And so then, immediately coming here and having this gorgeous space that's a live-work space. And I have a big studio, but also this is where I live, and so it's super safe, but also, because of that, really isolating. So basically I left grad school and have just been living this very quarantined existence. I feel like that has softened me in a lot of ways, and I think that's, maybe, both the lifestyle, but also just how awful this year has been, and how much has changed. Before, I felt very busy and my brain worked really fast, and I had lots of opinions, now I feel much more passive, I guess. I feel like the world is so unknown, right now, that all I can do is be receptive to everything. I feel much more quiet and what I've found is that it kind of reminds me of being a child, how I feel right now. I feel like I am in a place of childhood, where so much is unknown and scary, and you just feel like everything is bigger than you, out of your control. So the work that I am making for this show is these scenes of these little girls, and they are in this place of wonderment. They are looking at these animals, they are having these encounters that are magical and a little scary. And there's a lot of just looking and trying to understand. I feel like that comes out of my own sentiment of how I've felt this past year.

GB: That's so interesting. I love your description of that and how it relates to this last year and what we've been going through. I noticed this real, I don't want to say symmetry, but there is this way that the figure and the feature, whatever it may be, an animal, are almost in this loop, in a certain kind of way. I was thinking about *The Kiss* by Klimt, and thinking about how it's weird that I am thinking about kisses between these two things, and this is an animal and a person? What do you think about the relationship between these two things? Are they representative of a human and an animal or are they more allegorical? I guess you said there is a little bit of fear and wonderment, but how do you see that?

NW: I think allegorical is a good word. At its most basic level I think what I am interested in is just the dynamic between two beings. Between yourself and another, and how there is so much space for both knowing, but also there's always going to be a little bit of unknowing, no matter who it is. Or what it is. Whether that's nature, or an animal, or another person. Or even parts of yourself that are unknowable. But I think we understand that most acutely with our relationship with animals, especially domesticated animals, I think, are a really good example of that mutual difference. Because domesticated animals have changed in their relationship with us, and we've changed in our relationship with dogs and cats and other wildlife that we encounter, so we are working on each other. And there's so much that we feel we understand about each other. Especially our cats, I feel like we know them really well, but there's always this gap in understanding. And there's always a space where they definitely just have an autonomy that we cannot access, which is true for everybody and everything. I think that's the core of what I am interested in, and all the different ways that that gap in understanding shows up. And it's definitely been amplified this year. I feel like there's so much more unknowing.

GB: That's really interesting. I had this little kitten and I had this, I guess it's kind of a dark thought, because we've never had a kitten before, and we don't have kids. We have this older cat that just sits around and wants to be fed, but doesn't do much. And the kitten, he's like six months now, but he runs around the apartment constantly and is curious about everything. Is this something? Is that something? Is this a game? And I was thinking, is this because he is so young, he is discovering the world and is so curious about everything, when he becomes another cat, is that shift in personality from a younger cat to an older cat, discovering the boundaries of your world? And then once you discover what they are you just become incredibly bored and imprisoned? And then you become the older cat that sits around. Well, isn't that kind of humans too? We are curious and full of all of this and then over time we just ground down when we find the boundaries of our life. The animals in your work seem super animated in some ways, they have varying emotions, so they are almost, like, giving back. So are they kind of avatars for specific things or are you thinking about emotion and expression?

NW: I think it's all of those, because I am thinking of a few different things when I'm thinking of how to treat the animals, and how to treat the people too. There's my ideas about them that I am bringing to the making, and then there's also the way in which they exist on the canvas, like, I don't know, being perceived by others. Then they are also interacting with each other, inside the canvas. And so I animate the animals in a way that I don't animate the people. I think, because, oddly enough, I project less of myself into them, so I think about them as more complete, whereas the people have this rubbery quality. Their bodies look like they would have a hard time moving, and their hands are glove-like, like they would have a hard time grasping objects, and their eyes are really wide-staring, and so they become a little bit less animated than the animals. So it's like "Which one am I putting myself into?" That's a hard question, because I think I am putting some things of myself in both, and then also denying myself in both of them too. With the animals, I think of them as something outside of me.