

REVIEWS & REFLECTIONS

WEB OF LIFE

By Adrienne Beth Jenkins

INTRODUCTION

Through painting, I am interested in exploring connections among human, animal, and natural worlds. The human face and flesh, animal eyes, skins, bones, and feathers speak to me, revealing life's wonder and mystery. Inspiration for the work comes from sources ranging from ancient wisdom traditions to modern Jungian psychology and contemporary physics; timeless philosophies suggesting the interconnectedness of all life and reminding us of an instinctive orientation toward union where seeming opposites of matter and spirit, masculine and feminine, heaven and earth exist in harmony. Working with archetypal images culled from nature, myth, art history, and my own personal experiences and memories, a montage of colorful visual impressions emerges, forming new narratives celebrating life's complexity, diversity, and unity, as well as its beauty.

Study of the methods and materials of master painters informs my practice, working with rich oil pigments and using glazing to create a sense of depth or interdimensionality. Intuitive mark making and sweeping use of color enter the picture, infusing energy. I usually begin a painting with an idea of what I want to express, but inevitably fresh aspects come into play—thoughts, associations, feelings, and impressions—that make their way in. Through the paint, I explore these forces working both on and beneath the surface. There's a place I arrive at where the paint is processing for me; things start to take shape and come into a form that I had never anticipated. I go with this flow and am always surprised by how the process of painting itself seems to know more about what wants

to be expressed than my own conscious intent.

In October of 2015 I presented an exhibition of my work, including a painting entitled "Web of Life," and discussed my work at the Pebble Hill Church in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. This gave me an occasion to reflect on my art and on the relationship between humans and nature.

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The title for this exhibition, and its centerpiece painting, reflects an ancient belief in the sacredness of all life, the ways we humans are connected to each other and to animals and nature, and the necessity to acknowledge and honor these relationships. Much as our indigenous ancestors worshipped and honored Mother Earth's ceaseless cycles while also honoring Father Sky and the cosmic sense of being, we stand at a time when much can be learned, shared, and healed through a deeper connection with self, nature, and world.

The paintings are what I refer to as *totems*, or carriers of energy. Historically used for rites of initiation, or passage from childhood to adulthood, totem animals provide a basis for assimilation of the individual into group life, a healing process connecting the individual to nature and the larger world. Created with sacred intentionality, totems serve both individuals and community in establishing connection with the world of animal companions who provide guidance and protection. Embracing the animal nature brings wholeness, an integration of the instinctual psyche with rational, intellectual mind. In *Man and His Symbols*, psychologist Carl Jung said, "Primitive man must *tame* the animal in himself and make it his helpful companion; civilized man must *heal* the animal in himself and make it his friend."

Many of the paintings show humans with animals, sharing the same space, and this is a reference to our ancient roots as depicted in early cave paintings in which humans took on animal qualities—e.g.,

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a human body with bird face—and man is portrayed running with the beasts. At a certain point in our evolutionary history, according to Sigfried Giedion in his *The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Art: A Contribution on Constancy and Change*, “humans no longer mingled among the animals on the walls, but were separated and distinguished from the animals and any roots they might have experienced earlier.” Essentially cutting us off from that alienated past and seeking a new beginning in the twentieth century, the poet Robinson Jeffers called for a human return to oneness with all of life, as in his beautiful poem, “Return”:

A little too abstract, a little too wise,
It is time for us to kiss the Earth again,
It is time to let the leaves rain from the skies,
And let the rich life run to the roots again.

This call to re-connect our spiritual essence with material form was also the underlying philosophy of sixteenth and seventeenth century Dutch still-life painting known as *pronkstilleven* (ostentatious still life) and later, as *vanitas* (literally vanity paintings), which mixed living aspects of nature (flora and fauna) with death and decaying matter (bones), prompting the viewer to contemplate the temporary nature of existence and cycles of birth, growth, decay, and regeneration. Historically, this was a time when foreign travel and global commerce were rapidly developing, and with this the widening class distinctions between royalty and peasant, rich and poor, that exist to this day.

Looking to the future, there is a resurgence of interest and application of the ancient ways of living when humans were connected to earth and the cycles of nature.

In developing fields of ecological systems thinking and eco-psychology, Jane Goodall, discussing the book *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, observes “that by living in greater harmony with the natural world we shall not only help save our planet from destruction but shall also improve our

mental health and be happier and more fulfilled human beings.” And from a scientific perspective, physicist Fritjof Capra, founding director of the Center for Eco-literacy in Berkeley, California, says “to regain our full humanity, we have to regain our experience of connectedness with the entire *web of life*.” In his book of the same title, he applies systems thinking to describe interrelationships and interdependence of psychological, biological, physical, social, and cultural phenomena; a *unifying vision* where patterns, networks, and connections sustain communities and ecological systems.



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Such thinking is actually very ancient, as it appears in the Pueblo Creation Story of Spider Grandmother as told in Merlin Stone’s *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*, Volume II: The council of animals meets in eternal darkness hoping to find a solution to the problems of constant night. As they argue over solutions, Spider Grandmother walks the earth, spinning a web of light, ending the darkness in the world.

In the words of Ted Andrews, author of many books on the topic of animals, nature, and our human connection, “every creature mirrors the magnificence of our own soul.” He continues: “The natural world is a community of plants, animals and humans. All are part of an ecosystem. All are necessary for every other

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aspect. Everything that occurs in nature reflects upon us. Everything that happens to us reflects upon nature. Though we like to remain separate, we are not. We may not recognize the repercussions, but they are real, nonetheless, and we should honor that.”

Adrienne Beth Jenkins is an artist and principal of AB Arts Consulting | Studio based in suburban Philadelphia. Her paintings are in private collections and exhibited at regional galleries and can be viewed at www.abjenkins.com.

Photo credit: Web of Life, oil on canvas, 72 x 108 inches, 2015 Adrienne Beth Jenkins. Used by permission of the artist.