

*“I contemplate a tree.”*

*“The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it - only differently.”*

*“Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.”*

— Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

One day, I walked through a forest far away from the beaten path. I felt as if I was the only one who had ever walked there, who had bent each branch beneath my feet. I became one of the fleeting shadows cast by the bushes as I ran through the undergrowth. I raised my head, feeling the sun blush across my face in welcome. I began to imagine that the trees were whispering to me in a rhythmic and soft melody, that there were kind spirits inside guiding me forward. I had a sudden realization that I had slipped back into the realm of humanity, through my compulsory personification of the nature around me. I began to recall my place, that I am a species that will bring about the destruction of this forest, of perhaps the entire world.

The incongruity between my devotion to nature and my place in destructive humankind is a constant plague on my mind. Living in the bustling cityscape of New York, I am immersed in a world removed from nature. Each day I pass the orange clock which ticks down the years until climate change will become irreversible. In a typical human fashion, my response is to escape. I explore as many parks as I can, research the intricacies of bird migrations or tree systems, and create art project after art project about the relationship between humanity and nature. When it came time for me to pick a thesis, the theme was there waiting for me just like the unhurried and peaceful nature I love. I decided to create a painting series that would be a testament to my ruminations over nature. My thesis will depict the imagery of nature and humanity's relationship that has laid dormant in my mind for years; of mythological creatures that reflect how humans try to control nature, of imagined natural reclamation scenes, and of wishes for a time when the paths of humanity and nature wind tightly together once more.

Much of my childhood was occupied with a fascination with creatures created from myths. Greek mythology absorbed me quickly with its intricate and imaginative stories. The hamadryad fascinated me especially. These spirits are personifications of trees, rooted in place and dying with the specific plant they're tied to. I saw this myth as a metaphor for the larger relationship between humanity and the natural world. The imbuing of trees with human traits may be a manifestation of the human urge to empathize with trees and marvel at their beauty. However, the immobility inherent in the hamadryad's story reflects a human desire to restrict nature.

I began to seek out more and more myths that reflected how humans perceive nature. The Kelpie in Irish folklore is a malicious spirit in the shape of a horse which captures humans and drags them into water to drown them. To me, the Kelpie myth symbolizes how humans fear nature will be the lurking herald of their death. Humans worry that despite their civilized identity, they could

still be usurped by nature at any moment. It's much easier to fear an entity than an unknown possibility, so humans create terrifying natural creatures to personify their innate fears of the world.

The human personalization of nature was not only apparent in mythological figures, but also stood out to me in every term humans use to describe nature. I began to fixate on how humans label certain plants and animals as "invasive." One invasive species that lingered on my mind constantly was kudzu. This vine is native to Japan, but it was brought to the United States to help control erosion. However, it was not regulated in the US and it quickly began to overgrow much of the landscape in the South. It was labeled a malicious species, despite the overgrowth being an effect of unnatural human meddling. This occurrence demonstrates how humans underestimate nature, overconfident in their own abilities to assert their mastery over the natural world.

This example of how kudzu spiraled out of human control captivated me, and I began to imagine a world in which the relationship between the natural world and humanity shifted. I compared humans to other predators, such as the loggerhead shrike which impales its prey on thorns. This bird's actions are a part of their evolutionary survival as a part of the food chain rather than any malicious intent. I imagined a perspective where human predation on nature was a similar action, where their destruction of it could be the very thing that solidifies humans as part of the natural world.