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## An Autistic Aesthetic of Connectivity

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# An Autistic Aesthetic of Connectivity

Inga Hamilton

As the saying goes, “If you have met one autistic person, you have met one autistic person”. We are all individuals, and yet the portrayal of an autistic aesthetic seems to focus predominantly on one trope—that of clean lines, controlled minimalist spaces, dispassionate removal, and functionality over emotionality. But many of us live with a deeply-connected aesthetic, filled with lush and verdant sensory experiences of rich, and multispecies belonging. An aesthetic in which the autistic lives a fulfilled life of utter beauty alongside all species in a multi-layered tapestry. This is my aesthetic. It is also the sensory submergence I hear many other autistics crying out for on social media forums. The cry of “I just want to live in the woods, with the birds and the animals, where I can be at ease in the beautiful surroundings!” This ideal eschews clutter-free concrete, convenience, and detachment. It is blissful, maximalist, and so much more than minimalist.

Amid the trees and open spaces surrounding my home, I may not speak for days, but it does not mean that I am disengaged or uncommunicative. Take one step here on the Irish bog, and in a moment, your foot will sink through a thousand years of sphagnum moss. The skylark above your head will take no heed, continuing its electronic rave mix of notes as you extricate your foot, minus boot, only to find your other leg equally submerged. You are subsumed in moss and song, communicating with a beautiful landscape that society deems odd and economically unproductive. You and the landscape, a matching pair.

Shifting between forms of communication has led to my current sculpture-based PhD research. As a sculptor and art-jewelry maker, I have had a long career exhibiting internationally, taking up visiting professorships and enjoying extended residencies. With my broad understanding of materials and making techniques, including textiles, ceramics, metalsmithing, jewelry, papermaking and more, I have long drawn similarities between the ways humans make objects and how animals make objects. My PhD focuses on animals who make and the things they make.

Were I to investigate the things humans make, my research would require me to interview humans. Researching animals who make is no different: they must be interviewed, too. It is here that my ability to shift between forms of communication is vital. I interview animals-who-make using a connective communication that I have had since birth. Within the context of my research, this connective communication is framed by the boundaries of Intuitive Interspecies Communication, or IIC. Barrett et al. (2021) describes IIC as,

a non-verbal and non-physical form of communication . . . including the mutual exchange of visceral feelings, emotions, mental impressions and thoughts, embodied sensations of touch, smell, taste, sound, as well as visuals in the mind's eye . . . the practice is often referred to as telepathic . . . While to some the word 'telepathy' suggests a super-skill available only to a select few with special abilities, it is a common intersubjective communication experience for many people the world over. (p. 151)

Intuitively communicating with animals and other species plays an integral role in well-being and "living life in its fullest sense" for many Indigenous and non-Western Peoples (McGinnis et al., 2019, p.162). It has also always been an integral part of my life, with daily exchanges between myself and other species being no more unusual than any human-to-human communication.

Within the bounds of my PhD research, I use IIC to communicate directly with animals. All the animals are free and wild, choosing to take part of their own free will. Remotely, one maker to another, we discuss their making modalities, materials and cultures. My broad anthropocentric understanding of materials and techniques is a liability in a multispecies arena. Through these communications, objects and materials commonly dismissed by current dominant human narratives (including my own) are brought into sharp focus. Animals' alternative viewpoints make visible micro and macro fields of beauty as yet unconsidered. Animals often unseen or regarded as pests, such as an apricot leafminer larva, knowledge share to advance interspecies understanding and multispecies belonging.

As a research methodology, I take the knowledge shared and create jewelry pieces as novel dissemination tools. Here in the form of a ring, are leafminer



*Cake As Protection: IIC with an Apricot Leafminer Larva (2020). Tree resin, birch wood and water-based sealant.*

larvae sculptures cast in tree resin on a wooden shank. The pieces provides a talking point, a place to begin conversations about multispecies belonging and interspecies respect.

Additionally, the further my research progresses, the greater the anecdotal evidence for IIC being a common autistic trait. On multiple occasions, in private and public fora, university professors and professional teachers of IIC tell me that their autistic students report always having used IIC (or their own version of connectivity). That it

is natural for these students to recognize the agency of all entities, from rivers to plants, and animals to all other living organisms. Indeed, similarly to myself, these students are more surprised that non-autistics don't communicate with other species in this manner and express dismay at what must be a non-autistic's subdued experience of this planet's beauty. Could it be that some autistics, despite historically being oppressed and excluded from society, have held on to a knowledge discounted by modern Western societies?

It is my naturally-amplified neurodivergent connectivity that propels me to live in Ireland/Northern Ireland's sparsely-populated ancient landscape of bogs and loughs. Here, my autistic "wider" sense of self (Davidson & Smith, 2009, p. 900)—the understanding that I exist within a broad spectrum of life, including gender, sexuality and species—allows me to exist in a way that is more than my body contains. Here, my (possibly individually unique) autistic attributes and traits make visible the connected mesh of all living



*The Ancients Series. No.1, The Mother of All Head Worn by Artist. Visual Carlow, Ireland (2015). Textile waste, leather waste, polystyrene, ceramic and resin.*

things. Around me, a universe of connective energetic lines crisscrosses the landscape in a beautiful mesh of pulsating, birthing and decaying entities nurturing one another as if sprung from one bounteous mother.

This amplified connective mesh is not society's dulled concept of nature but is what I can only name as *The Expansive*, a vibrant explosion of life expanding out in every direction—an explosion of which I am very much a part. *The Expansive's* bountiful mother takes form as my first *Ancients* sculpture (above), titled *The Mother of All*, a head and enveloping cape of crocheted lichenous skin, chakra-colored spine, and trailing beaver tail. Life springs from her every step as she wanders the Earth, complete with curled horns and ice tusks. Amid her cape sit hand-thrown ceramic whispering pots: whisper your joys to her and she will capture your woes.

Just as with *The Mother of All*, outward expressions of this connectivity (and others' violation of it through human-exceptionalism and brutality toward other lifeforms) find form in my large, inhabitable sculptures and smaller art jewelry pieces. All aim to dually situate the viewer within the wonder of *The*





*The Ancients Series. No.3, Anger: Fenrir. Rage Sweeps Around. Performed by the Artist (2017). Textile waste, leather waste, polystyrene, ceramic and resin.*

Expansive while simultaneously provoking examination of Western society's crimes of extractivism and species obliteration (treating all that is alive as resources to be extracted and exploited until exhausted).

Rage burns in my core at humanity's contemptible annihilation of Earth's beautiful lifeforms that have evolved over billions of years. We are living in an era I call The Gliddenocene, formed from "Glidden" (Joseph Farwell Glidden, 1813-1908, was the first human to manufacture barbed wire on an industrial scale) and "ocene," for epoch or era. Glidden's commercial barbed-wire venture kickstarted a strangulation, in sadistic steel, of this planet's species and open spaces.

The Gliddenocene is a time of human narcissism, land grabs, and human self-isolation from other species—greedily "protecting" water and food for our own use to the detriment of other living beings. Barbed wire physically reinforces Global North extractivism, tightening a noose around ever-decreasing precious landscapes that are forced to exist in a consumerist cycle of never-ending production, yielding their flora, fauna, nutrients, and buried "commodities" until devoid of connectivity.

Other autistics share a comparable aesthetic to my own. Dara McAnulty (2020), hailing from my area, writes of a similar captivation with entire landscapes. His eloquent penmanship describes both his autistic sense of beauty and almost uncontrollable rage at its destruction.



*The Ancients Series. No.4, The Vulnerable Blamed: Pangolin (2020). Textile waste, leather waste, polystyrene, polymer clay, and resin.*

As a visual artist, my making and my body need to communicate as much as my writing. Making allows me to communicate difficult concepts more fluently. Performance allows me to speak without uttering words. Through both, embodied experiences can flow out to an arena where it is implicitly understood that I am the storyteller and the audience's job is to listen. Here, it is socially unacceptable for others to intervene or speak for me. All too often in society, my autistic body experiences the unsolicited

touch of another person who believes to they have the right to physically intervene or guide me when I am overwhelmed or experiencing a meltdown. Similarly, during my periods of being non-verbal, others demonstrate an unwarranted entitlement to speak for me, as if I neither have the capacity or ability. Communicating my inner landscape through artworks evaporates any misguided entitlement others might feel. Here, my "voice" rings true, whether contemplative, joyous, or enraged.

In *The Ancients Series. No.3, Anger: Fenrir*, pure, righteous anger is unleashed. The wounded wolf is the power and voice of a victim's rage, rising above their aggressor, on both a local and global scale. Once I inhabit the piece, the very core of the Earth rises up and explodes in a shock wave second only to the hurt in my heart. The wolf head is an extension of me, not a disembodied animal. We embody crushed beauty. The performance conveys vengeance over brutality, protection over violation, connectivity over exploitation.





*Selkie Bridal Bracelet: Dissolvable Jewellery for a Fleeting Moment. Lo/No-eco Impact Body Adornment (2020). Seaweed, salt, and lacquer.*

Rage continues to burn deep in *The Ancients Series. No.4, The Vulnerable Blamed: Pangolin*, this time tainted with fear at the blame laid upon Pangolins for the Covid-19 pandemic.

Critically endangered, pangolins are the planet's most trafficked animal, their scales illegally sold as an ingredient. In 2020, as Covid spread, pangolins were initially blamed for the interspecies-transmitted virus thought to be contracted when their bodies were consumed. The injustice ripped through me. Pangolins were neither complicit in humans eating them, nor responsible for the pandemic. How could people shift the human blame on to our beautiful, scaled kin? How could they not see the pandemic as a man-made illness ripping through *The Expansive*? Amid the rage and fear, I sculpted *The Vulnerable Blamed*, where the Ancient Pangolin in me offers protection when I was vulnerable. Together we create a wounded interspecies huddle.

My autistic brain processes enormous amounts of detail, from the macro of my wider self to the micro details of exquisite beauty in the commonly discarded. Sock manufacturing off-cuts become fur for *The Mother of All and Anger: Fenrir*, and seaweed that was damagingly raked from beaches by local authorities is turned into bridal jewelry with sparkling crystals of salt. These

working materials are jewels hidden in plain sight, visible to those with my creative autistic lens –offering all-important alternative communication possibilities.

Processing the overwhelming amount of detail I see induces both my verbose and non-verbal states. My heightened autistic perception shape shifts in the liminal light on the edge of what is normatively acceptable. Here, my intense sensory experiences crackle and lull. There are moments akin to twilight holding her breath as roosting birds fall silent and trees relax their leaves. Momentarily, just before temperatures dip, there is a heavy humidity of life almost too much to bear. The narrative of the day falls away and we pass into another state where one day is logged and another night commences.



*The Ancients Series. No.2, Storyteller, Storykeeper: Old Broc (2016). Textile waste, leather waste, polystyrene, ceramic, and resin.*

*The Ancients Series. No.2, Storyteller, Storykeeper: Old Broc (2016)*, roams this humid state, shape shifting between the worlds of light and dark. One side sighted, one side blind, this ancient badger draws you to him with the thought lure projecting from his third eye. Stories stick to his pelt like pernicky burrs as uncelebrated beauty slips from a moment. Trapped amid his plaits and whiskers, the stories remain until the time is right, and then they drop to the ground, seeding new forests with old wisdom and folklore. Just as Old Broc shuffles through the forests, I too gently wend my way, seeding society with artworks created through connectivity, blending the spaces between species and hoping my research will form a framework for greater interspecies compassion, hoping others will join me.

So, I leave you with these questions. What if some autistics hold the key to a vital shared narrative of beauty for all? What if we can normalize a

maximalist aesthetic that offers regenerative ways forward for the planet? Could embracing this fulsome autistic aesthetic offer a beautiful way out of the current climate emergency? The answer: I don't know, but I'm going to try my hardest to find out.

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**Inga Hamilton** is an autistic sculptor, activist and storyteller currently researching a practice-based PhD at the University of Sunderland. Through her autistic lens, Hamilton explores a nurturing state of 'multispecies belonging' for the health of the planet, its animals and humans. The recipient of a 2024 Mike Davis Global Design Challenge Scholarship to support her work meeting vitally important goals outlined by the UN, Hamilton's central focus is "The Things Animals Make."