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The Symbiocene in Artistic and Humanistic Practices

The graphic and textual works included in this volume of *Filoteknos* emerged as part of a collaborative project conducted by faculty members and students from two Katowice-based institutions: the Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Silesia. These works represent a creative reflection on the concept of the Symbiocene (from Latin *sym-* “together” and Greek *bíos* “life”) – an epoch of coexistence, reciprocity, and networked interdependence among species. The Symbiocene rests on the idea of life forms living together – such as fungi and plants, humans and bacteria. The very term *symbiosis* highlights not only the biological necessity of cooperation within biodiversity, but also the urgent need to restore balance among the interests of all beings inhabiting the planet. This is particularly relevant today, as we confront the knowledge that the domination of certain life forms over others – so characteristic of the Anthropocene – has contributed to planetary crises and the degradation of the biosphere.

In this project, we brought together artistic and humanistic perspectives to explore the idea of the Symbiocene, a term coined by Australian ecophilosopher Glenn Albrecht. Rather than treating it solely as a theoretical or philosophical concept, we approached it as a tool for collaborative research and reflection – artistic, literary, and ecological. In the screen printing studio of the Katowice Academy of Fine Arts, led by Prof. Waldemar Węgrzyn and Dr. Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska, students focused on the visual dimension of symbiotic relations, creating original graphic works and objects inspired by the natural world and its complex entanglements. Simultaneously, students of the Writing Art program, within the interdisciplinary course *How to Be of the World? Field Humanities*, taught by Dr. Magdalena Ochwat and Prof. Piotr Skubała, explored the narrative and linguistic potential of symbiotic connections. Their work resulted in short texts – monologues, dialogues, and literary sketches – developed in pairs and grounded in the idea of mutualistic relationships.

The inspiration behind the students' works came from concrete examples of symbiotic relationships, such as the raven and the wolf, the algae and the fungi in lichen, the bees and the deadwood, the mycelium and the trees, or the coral and the zooxanthellae – a relationship that forms the foundation of coral reef existence and entire marine ecosystems. Particular attention was also paid to the concept of the holobiont – an organism functioning as a complex community of many beings – which aptly captures the nonlinear, relational nature of life itself.

In her book *Czuly narrator* [The Tender Narrator], Olga Tokarczuk draws on recent scientific findings to highlight this perspective:

One of the most important discoveries in recent years – one that has transformed our very perception of what it means to be human – was undoubtedly the realization that human organisms, as well as animals and plants, develop and function in active collaboration with other organisms, that there is a tight interdependence among living beings. [...] We are no longer a biont, but rather a holobiont – a collective of various organisms living together in symbiosis. Complexity, multiplicity, diversity, reciprocal influence, metasymbiosis – these are the new perspectives from which we now view the world.” (Tokarczuk, 17)

New humanities and contemporary art theory are increasingly drawing from the natural sciences – not only for inspiration but also as a source of hope in a time of climate and ecological crisis. Symbiosis, understood as the coexistence of organisms for mutual benefit, thus becomes one of the key ideas – not only cognitive but also ethical – for building a realistic, shared future for all inhabitants of the planet.

The students' creative work was preceded by the collective reading of selected texts by Glenn Albrecht, Lynn Margulis, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Donna Haraway, as well as the poetry of Julia Fiedorczuk and her translations of Forest Gander's *Twice Alive*. This process was accompanied by lectures, meetings with natural scientists, and field-based activities in urban spaces – especially along the Rawa River and in the Murcki nature reserve¹. There, we observed both the presence of symbiotic relationships and the places where they had been disrupted or broken. Particular focus was given to lichens – seemingly modest, yet extraordinarily resilient forms of coexistence that serve as living examples of deep multispecies entanglement.

This project marks only the first step in our shared work – both thematically and institutionally. The project itself bears a symbiotic character: it emerged at the intersection of disciplines, across universities, and in dialogue between diverse epistemologies. It is being further developed through the creation of the Symbiotic Collective² – an interdisciplinary, research-based and artistic ini-

¹ The sessions were facilitated by Piotr Skubała, Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, and Magdalena Ochwat.

² The collective is jointly shaped and actively practiced by Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska,

tiative that brings together the humanities, natural sciences, and the arts to further explore the idea of the Symbiocene and to cultivate practices rooted in reciprocity, collaboration, and multispecies attentiveness.

On behalf of the more-than-human Symbiotic Collective,

Dr. Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska, Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice

Dr. Magdalena Ochwat, University of Silesia in Katowice

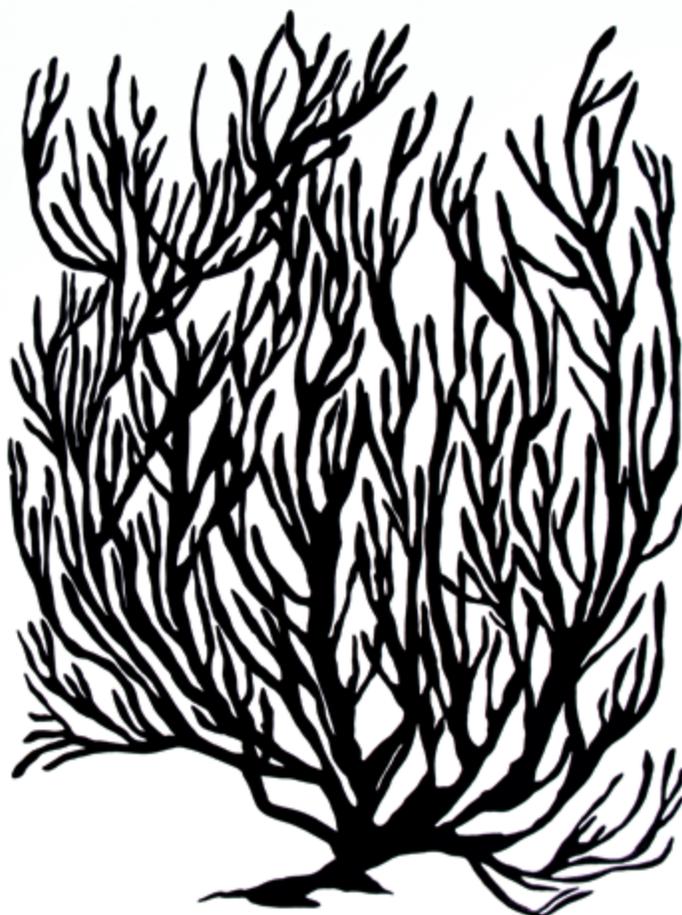
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STUDENT WORKS FROM THE SCREEN PRINTING STUDIO
AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
AND THE WRITING ART PROGRAM

ZUZANNA SZNOBER – *BLACK REEF*

Commentary by Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska, head of the Screen Printing Studio:
“Black Reef” evokes the form of coral – one of the most intricate examples of interspecies symbiosis. This delicate yet powerful structure of life is now particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the climate and environmental crisis. The blackness present in this work may symbolize mourning for life already lost, but it can also be read as a warning: that without care for the networks of interdependence, even the most complex forms of life may disappear.



ZUZANNA SZNOBER – WHITE REEF

Commentary by Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska, head of the Screen Printing Studio:
“White Reef” is a moving image of silence and dying. This delicate visual form evokes the dramatic phenomenon of coral bleaching – a process in which corals lose their symbiotic partners. They become colorless, fragile, and close to death. The reefs are disappearing before our very eyes.

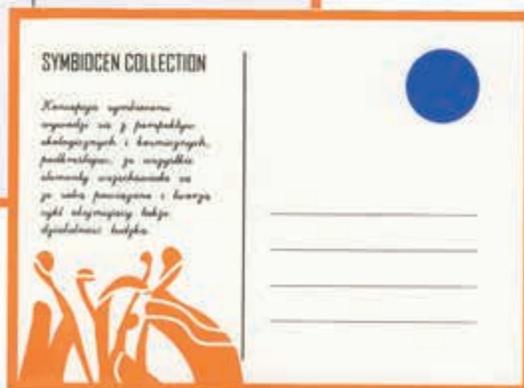


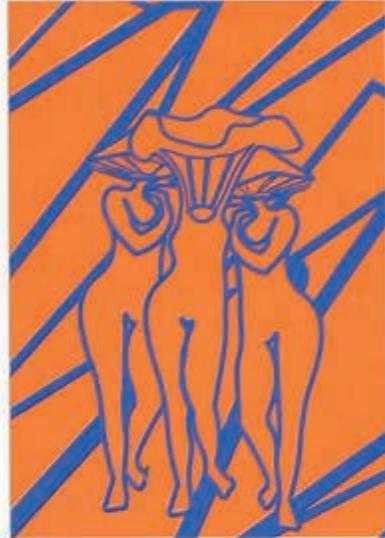
Inspired by the Symbiosis of Algae and Coral

Magdalena Meiksner <i>Fantazmat wspólny</i>	Magdalena Meiksner <i>Shared Phantasm</i>
<p>Budzę się ze snów barwnych i żywych Do ciszy martwej, z lekka osamotnionej. Sen był wodą, ja w nim podwodną istotą. Trwałem tam w stanie splątania; wstęgi światła sączą się tu z powierzchni.</p>	<p>I wake up from dreams both vivid and bright Into dead silence, colored by loneliness. The dream was water, and I – a creature beneath. I remained there, entangled, ribbons of light trickling from the surface.</p>
<p>Zanurzony w przestrzeń bliższą baśniom spełniałem marzenie o byciu jej częścią. Między koral zagościł mir domowy i opowieści o skarbach; wyrzucane są na brzeg raz po raz.</p>	<p>Immersed in a realm closer to fairytales, I fulfilled the wish to be part of it. Among coral, the peace of home took root, As well as tales of treasure – They end up washed ashore again and again.</p>
<p>Kiedy obumierał sen powinienem poczuć. Odcięto mnie od wstąg i miru.</p>	<p>When the dream began to wither, I should have felt it. I was severed from the ribbons and the peace.</p>
<p>Granica fantazmatu jest biała. Białe są mary. Skostniały dom. Lekkie odłamki ich elegii wyrzuci na brzeg woda [...]</p>	<p>The edge of the phantasm is white. White are the mourned visions. A house changed to bones. Light shards of their elegy will be cast ashore by the sea [...]</p>
<p>Budzę się ze snów barwnych i żywych Do ciszy martwej, z lekka osamotnionej. Sen był wodą, ja w nim podwodną istotą. Przecież trwałem tam w stanie splątania</p>	<p>I wake up from dreams both vivid and bright Into dead silence, colored by loneliness. The dream was water, and I – a creature beneath. I did remain there, entangled.</p>

KLAUDIA MUSIALIK – SYMBIOCENE COLLECTION (POSTCARDS)

Commentary by Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska, head of the Screen Printing Studio:
This work is a visual and textual interpretation of the idea of the Symbiocene, realized in the form of artistic postcards. Its aesthetic – simple, high-contrast, organic – draws inspiration from both human and interspecies relationships.





SYMBIOTEN COLLECTION

*W symbiotycznym świecie i tak
lewy, w podległości jako
człowiek, podległością systemu
naturalnego, jako człowiek
i goły, w naturalnym
podległości.*



SYMBIOTEN COLLECTION

*Symbiotyczny system
w podległości, jako człowiek
lewy i naturalny,
podległości, jako człowiek
naturalny.*

AGNIESZKA PRANDZIOCH – *THE HUMAN AS HOLOBIONT* (SPATIAL OBJECTS)

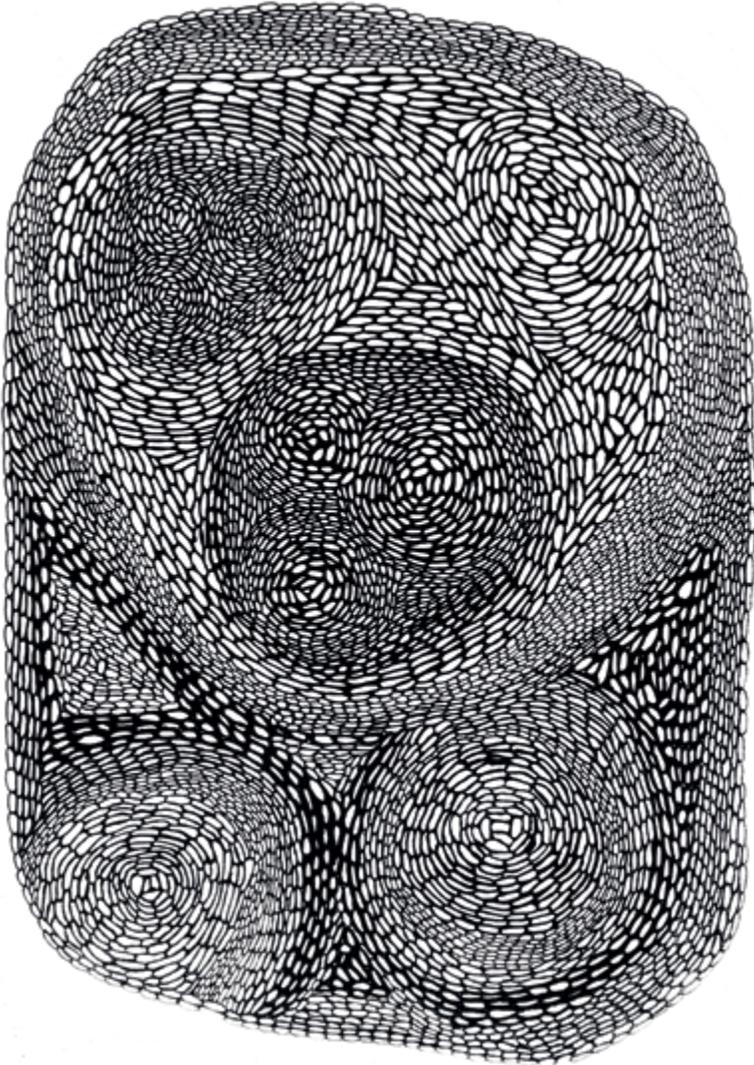
Commentary by Dorota Nowak-Rodzińska, head of the Screen Printing Studio:
This work offers a visual reflection on the idea of the human as a holobiont – a being composed of and sustained by a community of many organisms. The soft sculptural forms are covered in patterns reminiscent of bacterial flora, lichens, or vascular maps – symbolic traces of the life that coexists within the human body. It is a subtle yet powerful narrative about the interdependence we carry inside us.



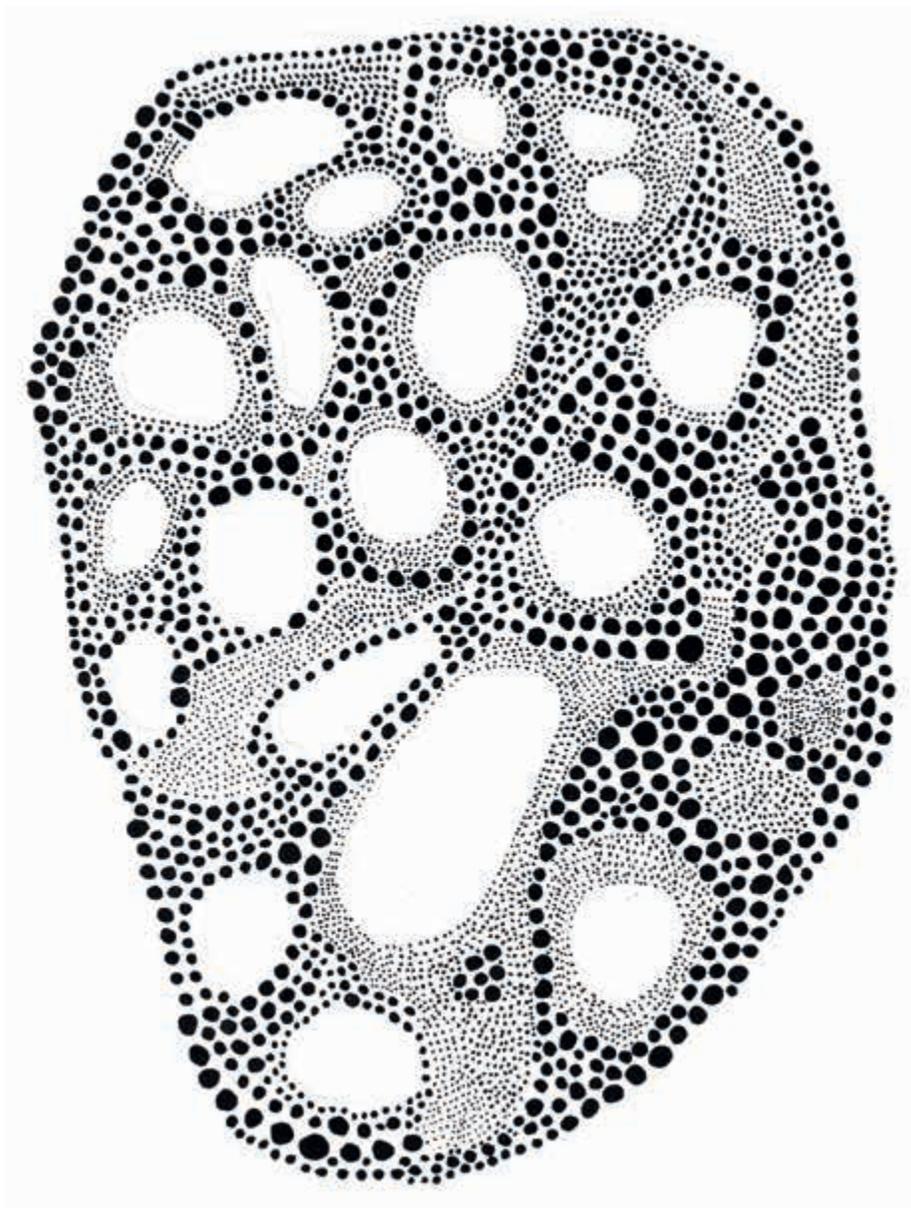
WERONIKA STASICA – SYMBIO-MANDALA 1

Artist's statement:

Struggling with intrusive thoughts and constant anxiety, I sometimes find it difficult to endure being inside my own head. Living often in discord and conflict with myself, I find solace in my relationship with the surrounding world – especially with nature. It is nature that becomes the foundation of my inner peace. I believe that through art, we can shape a space of understanding with the natural world. This direction – aligned with the idea of the Symbiocene – inspires me to create forms that draw on organic motifs and interconnectedness.



WERONIKA STASICA – SYMBIO-MANDALA 2

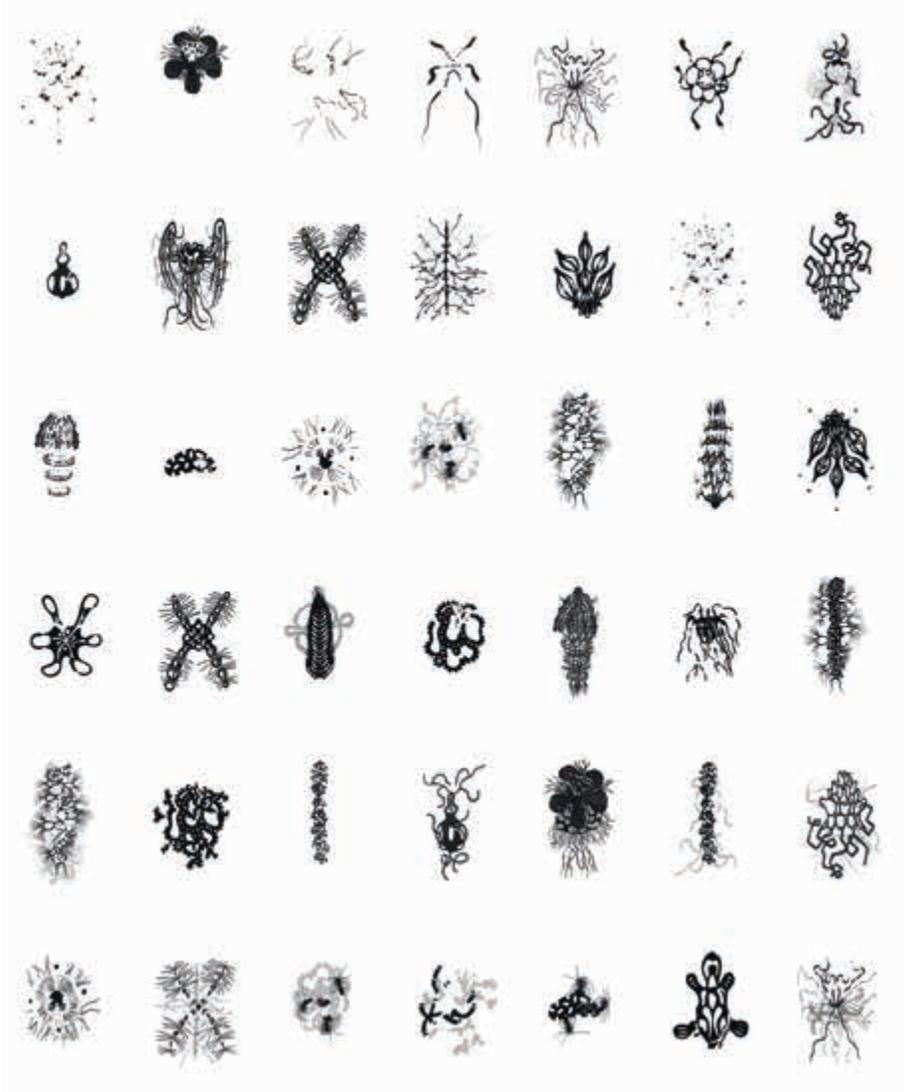


PAWEŁ PROKOPOWICZ – SERIAL ENDOSYMBIOSIS

Artist's statement:

Evolution is a funny thing. How is it possible that from a single particle arises the complexity of processes and fully formed life? How is it that both living and non-living matter can create a dynamic of growth – and endless joy?

We spin around the Sun, surrounded by the vastness of purity – or at least that's the utopia I carry in my mind. Uninterrupted, spontaneous, bold. Was life at the very beginning just like that?



WIKTORIA REJOWSKA – CONNECTIONS

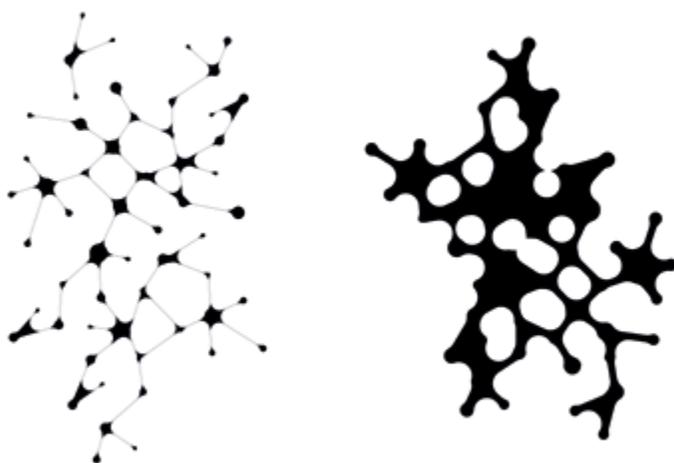
I come here to listen, to settle myself comfortably among the roots, in a soft hollow of pine needles, to rest my back against the column of a white pine and turn off the voice in my head until I hear the voices outside: the wind in the branches, water trickling over stone, the tapping of a nut-hatch, rodents rustling underground, falling beech nuts, a mosquito in my ear – and something more – something that is not me, that does not use words, this voiceless being of others, in which we are never alone.

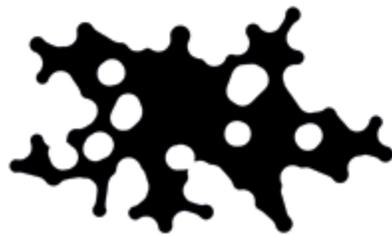
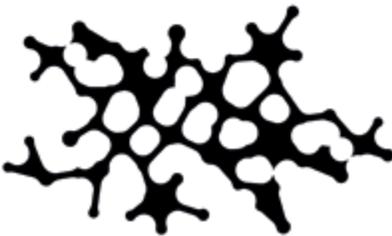
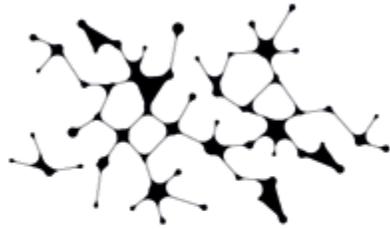
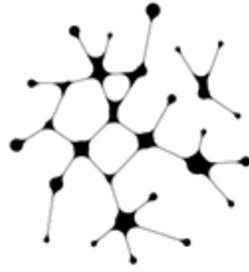
Robin Wall Kimmerer

Artist's statement:

No form exists in isolation – everything is relationship, everything is part of a larger whole. The elements of our reality have always coexisted with nature, even as we continually attempt to subject it to our expectations. With this series of works, I wanted to show that the Symbiocene does not begin today – it has always been here. What has changed is our awareness: now is the time to consciously recognize that we share the Earth with countless other beings.

My project is an invitation to think in terms of interdependence. The world of the future will not consist of separate, autonomous entities, but a pulsating network of relationships. The Symbiocene is an era in which we learn to be together – not despite our differences, but precisely because of them.





The text portrays the symbiotic relationship between wolves and ravens, though it does not name it explicitly, leaving space for the reader's own interpretation.

Agata Plócienniczak

YOU

Look up there. Black shapes drift across the sky above the world we know. Who are they? Life? Death? Everything. Nothing. Wisdom. Foolishness. Joy. Sadness. Fullness. Hunger. Understanding. Unawareness. Simply that. Everything and nothing. The duality of knowledge. They begin where we end, and end where we begin. We have known them for so many years, and yet we know nothing about each other. They are important, yet nearly invisible in our world – as if they weren't there at all. Sometimes they only let out a faint caw above our heads and then vanish for good. Or so it seems... only that... they never actually leave us. Not even for a moment.

We can manage without them, but when we do, our life feels empty. Incomplete. Lonely. We would only realize it if we lost them. That's how the world works: you lose something, and only then do you understand that you loved it. You cannot truly appreciate the world without slowly losing parts of it. And in the end, only emptiness remains. Nothing more.

Now look down there. Grey-brown shapes move through a world we do not know. Who are they? Everything. Nothing. And us? This is our place. We don't know any other way. We need to be free, unbound. We don't know how to settle in one place permanently. We soar among the clouds, and yet so often we yearn for what's below. We are full of uncertainty. Full of contradiction. They don't know about us. Or so it seems. They run through green valleys, and we follow. So different, and yet so similar. We search for something that can become a common ground between us. Often, it happens. In the end, we sit down to a shared meal. We never eat alone.

Loneliness is terrifying. It suffocates with its breathlessness, tightens the throat, clouds the mind. But we are never truly alone. We support one another, even if it's not obvious at first. We become a family. Imperfect. So different. And yet a family supports itself in every way it can. It doesn't always live in unity, but it always complements itself. It never denies. It always watches over. Somewhere nearby.

We are unity.

We are difference.

We support each other – constantly.

We are everything.

We are nothing.