



TARA TUCKER

INTERVIEW BY HANNAH STOUFFER / PORTRAIT BY TARA TUCKER

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN
 YOU CROSS A SPIDER MONKEY WITH
 A CARNIVOROUS PLANT ON THE BACK OF
 A WATER BUFFALO IN WEST OAKLAND? OR A
 CHILDHOOD UPBRINGING IN TAXIDERMY, SERENE
 COMFORT IN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS, AND
 A LONG TIME DEDICATION TO COLLECTING
 SCIENTIFIC ANIMAL STUDIES? THE
 ANSWER: TARA TUCKER.

- 1 Tara is determined to uncover the mysteries behind Bigfoot sightings in Tomales Bay.
- 2 At age 9, she was working in the taxidermy department at the Natural History Museum in Santa Barbara, categorizing bones and skeletons.
- 3 She shares a second home studio in a single car garage with colonies of spiders, highways of ants, and wasps nests.

Longtime Bay Area resident and enthusiastic naturalist Tucker possesses a lifetime of experience that defines the entirety of her work, one of the few whose practice has always encompassed the whole being. From the breach of her existence, to her unconventional upbringing and current interests and inspirations, Tucker's dedication and desire have consistently remained of the animal kind. —Hannah Stouffer

Hannah Stouffer: When coming in contact with an artist's work, or even better yet, having the opportunity to witness it directly, we strive to make the connections. How did this individual's state of being evolve, to be so focused and directed, so structured with individualistic thought? What were you like as

a kid? Do you remember your first interaction with the animal kingdom?

Tara Tucker: I was a super tall kid with glasses and braces. I loved to hunt down the native king snakes and lizards in my backyard and bring them to class for show-and-tell. My family had a lot of parrots, and when my parents divorced, my mom and I got a dog, a Whippet. We got into racing him as a hobby, mostly in Los Angeles. After a while we had lots of Whippets and, because I'm an only child, I thought of them almost as siblings, I guess.

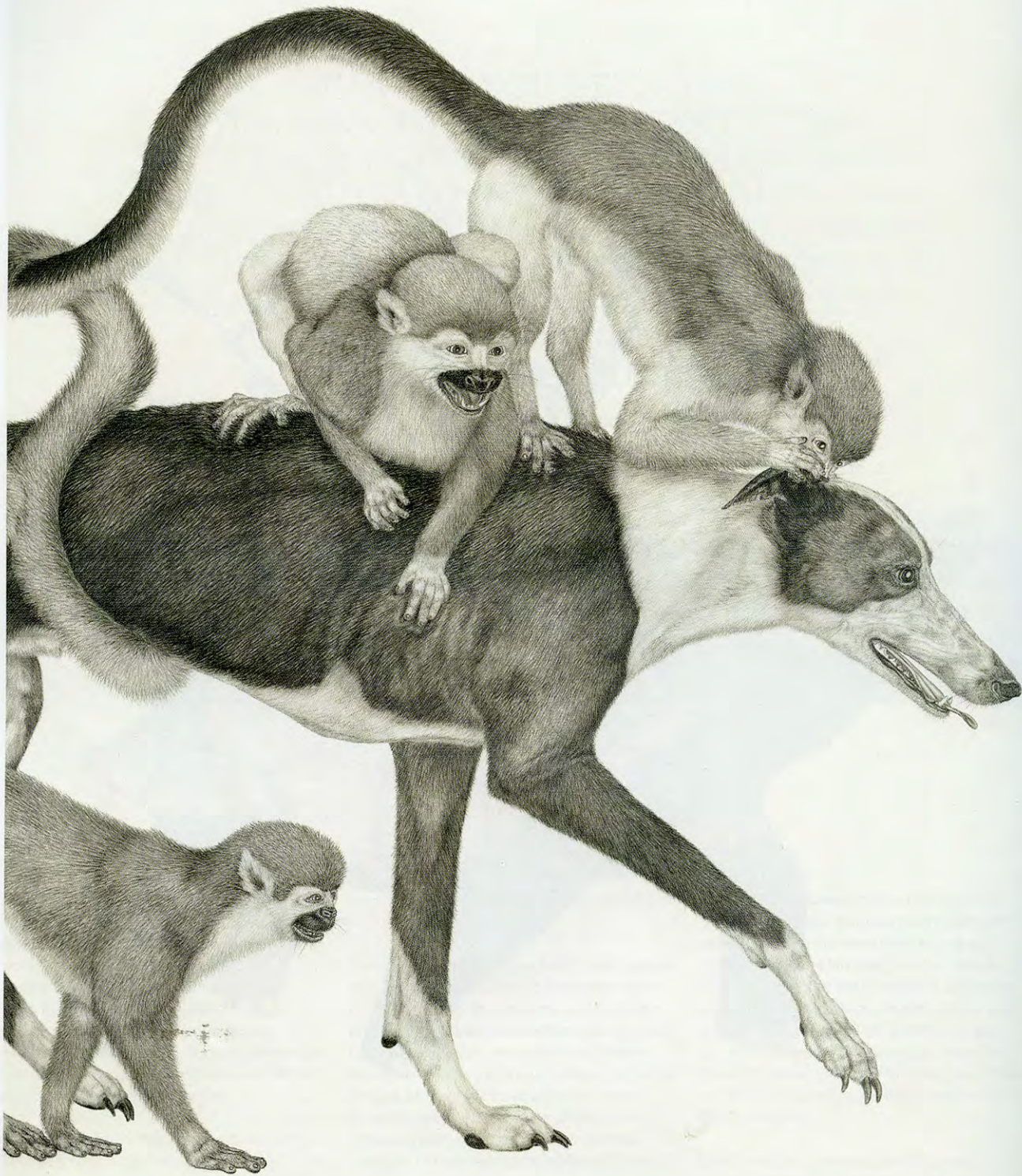
Were you heavily interested in animals then? Did you grow up with a collection of *National Geographic* and pencils, or are your artistic tendencies something that developed later?

My mom volunteered to learn taxidermy at the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum and would take me there after school a lot. The people in the lab assigned me the job to get and number the bones and skeletons so that they could be catalogued. There was a fantastic illustrator, John Schmidt, in the lab who worked for the biologists there. He traveled all over the world to collect specimens and draw the animals. I wanted to either be him or marry him.

When I was 14, I saw a show of Leonard Baskin's illustrations of raptors at a natural history museum. I went home and drew with India ink and a dip pen for hours until I had three huge drawings of a Pacific Muir bird that my mom had at home for a taxidermy project.



Detail of *Old Dog, New Tricks*
Graphite on paper
38.5" x 30"
2009



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I drew every detail the best that I could. It felt like magic, and I was so scared that I wouldn't ever be able to draw like that again.

What was your favorite book growing up?

I have an encyclopedia of animal books that I purchased one at a time from a Vons grocery store near my childhood house back in the '70s. I still use them. As a kid I loved, and still do, books on anything paranormal or about mysterious creatures that may or may not exist.

Have you ever been to the Natural History Museum in DC? That's a good one. Do you take frequent trips like that? Do you seek out the subject matter from your illustrations?

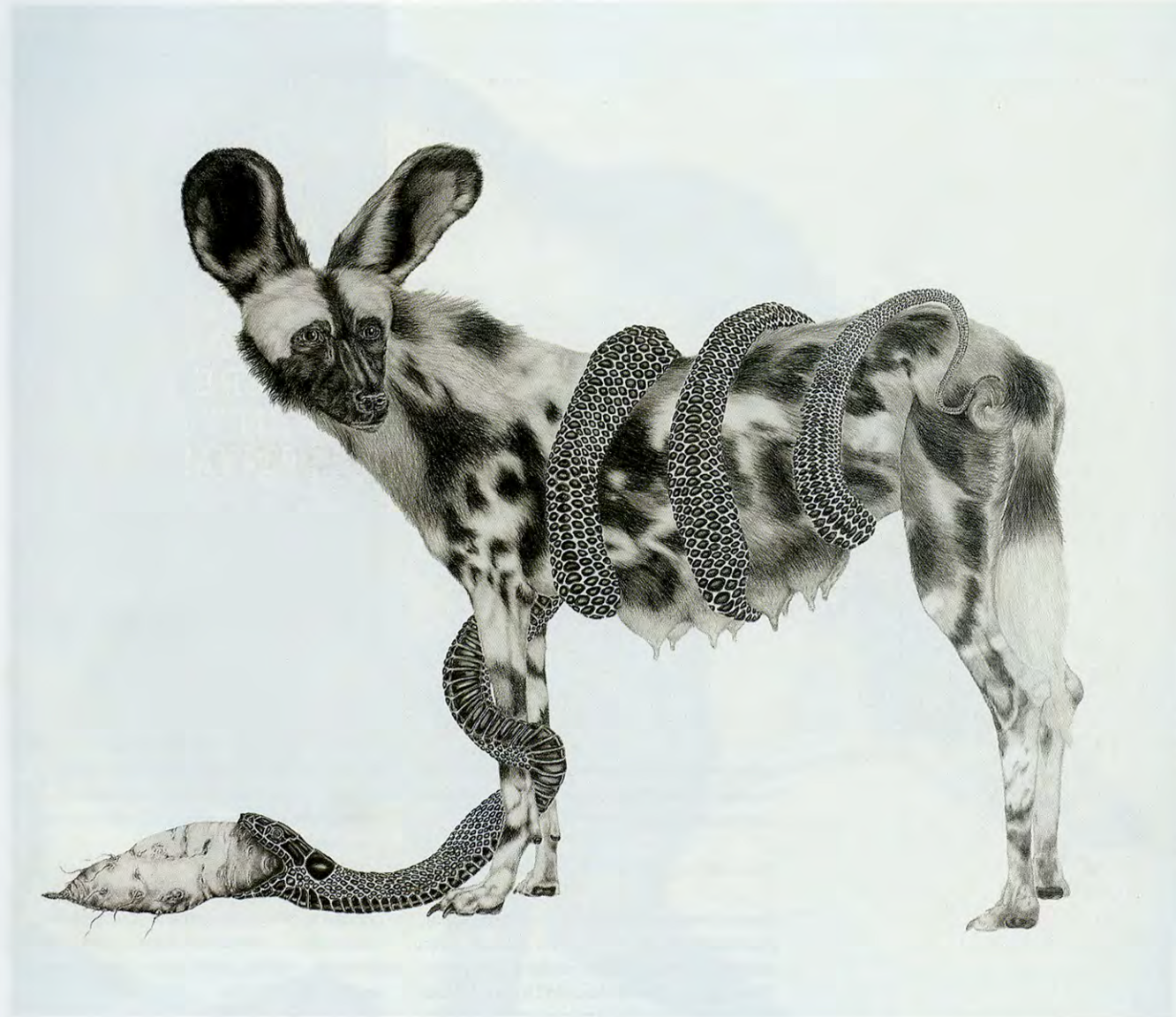
Since I basically grew up in a lab watching my mom deconstruct, then construct birds, natural history museums have been familiar places where I always feel comfortable. Last year I was in Berlin and visited their amazing zoo. New York City's Natural History Museum is impressive, as are the ones in Paris and London. But my all time favorite is the Natural History Museum in Tring, England that holds the Rothschild Collection. The polar bear is smiling because the taxidermist thought it might have been a sweet animal, and the

gorilla looks like it would eat your mother, because, of course, they are man eaters... ha! I haven't been to the one in DC, but now that you mentioned it, I have to go.

Is there a significance in the animals you choose to draw and merge in your graphite illustrations? I notice they aren't mainly North American wildlife, and it seems like there is an exotic draw to them.

I think a lot about human emotion and behavior, and that usually dictates what type of animal I end up choosing. Dangerous animals intrigue me as well as animals with a lot of mysterious habits. Also, I have quite a few drawings of domestic animals paired with guinea pigs and monkeys. I like the mix of wild with domestic. I think it speaks about the unpredictability of the untamed, as opposed to the solidly bred and familiar characteristics of the domestic animal. The orchids, plants, and flowers that I often use are also there for symbolic reasons. I placed the entire plant on the wrists of two spider monkeys to symbolize entrapment and beauty. And one flower, broken and dying, was to symbolize my grandmother.

Some of them appear to be natural occurrences while others are more of a blending of different



features of animals. Do you strive for a connection between the elements or animals?

I want my animals to come from a future natural world where there aren't people anymore. I imagine that evolution has allowed animals and plants to somehow come together in new and fantastical ways. Sometimes I'm just creating a surreal image such as a thylacine with hummingbirds emerging from the mouth, like it's trying to say something. Instead, all of this erratic energy is just shooting out of its mouth instead.

Some of the pieces seem to have a sort of gentle struggle, not a dangerous one, though, just kind of an existing conflict, perhaps a harmony? I always attempt to learn more details about

animals, their behavior, and their environments. Shelter, camouflage, and symbiotic living arrangements between plants and animals intrigue me. Conflict and struggle are key to surviving and it makes for an interesting composition. I feel like all of my characters are going to work it out eventually.

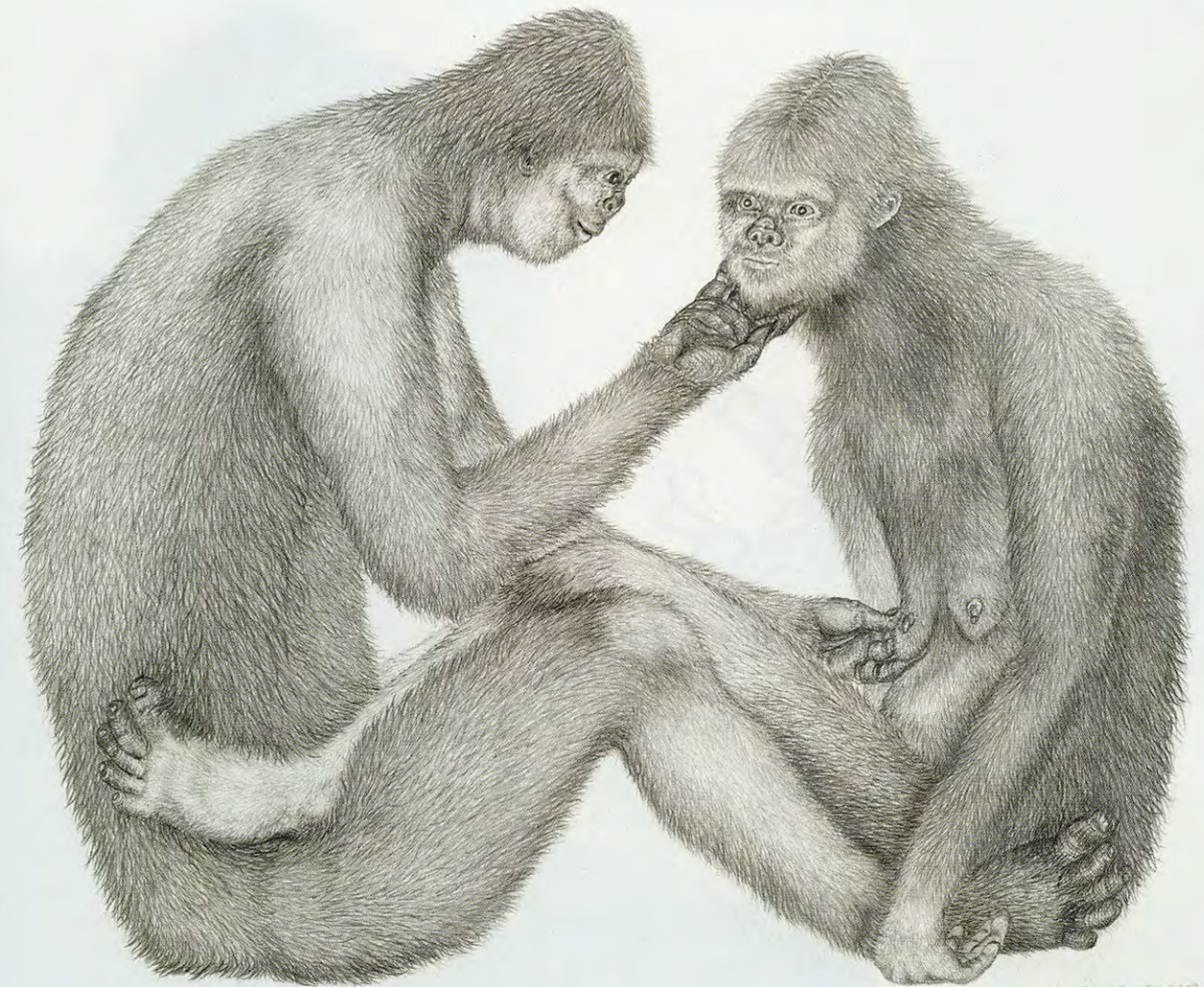
Sometimes I think our draw to nature and the animal kingdom is almost a nostalgic one as we become more and more technologically inclined; do you believe this to be true?

Oh yes. I've really noticed in the last ten years that people have animals printed on everything, the same way with craft and our trying to get back to basics. I think people are in awe of nature much more these days

because we feel more estranged from it. We feel the need to hike in the woods—but not without our cell phone. I think everything will come full circle and soon we will grasp at our own animal roots, hopefully before we suffocate ourselves with technology. As we get more extreme in our technological abilities, we will need the ultimate respite from it, which should be nature and wild things.

Where do you look for reference or research? Are you big into all of the new Planet Earth Discovery Channel shows or are you more drawn to older, archived references?

I'm a documentary nut. I like the old stuff about animals and I try to watch them when I have the time. I buy a lot of old animal books at



garage sales and thrift stores though I prefer black-and-white photographs because I can see the contrast really well. If I am missing a vital detail like what a shrew's toe might look like, I go to the Internet and look it up.

Your illustrations have a historical, traditional rendering sense to them that feels almost scientific. Is this on purpose? Do you ever look to the classically rendered illustrations?

When I was a kid I really loved Albrecht Dürer and would look at him a lot. I used to treasure all of the copyright-free illustrations in the Dover clip art books. I also especially love drawings that were done with second-hand information. It cracks me up that an explorer traveled thousands of miles away, came back

and tried to describe an animal to an artist and then that artist usually gave the animal its own visual twist. I feel like that a lot of the time myself, as if I'm now the one with second-hand information. I guess I am.

What were you exploring with the series of illustrations where plants are actually growing out of animals?

I was thinking a lot about shelter and camouflage that also serves as a symbiotic relationship between two very different living things. If it's orchids or carnivorous plants, I think about the insects around the animals that could be beneficial to the plant through pollination or nutrients. Grasses and brush found in fields where the animals live

can be good camouflage from predators or perhaps the grass has simply taken root in the thickness of the wool or fur and has become more of a type of shelter? Propagation would be better for the plants as well. Seeds spread easily when on the hoof.

Tell me about the nature of your studio. Is it obsessively clean or stacked with imagery? A box of a thousand pencils? Do you have any collections?

I have two studios. The one in my backyard I don't use much these days because of the weather, and the bugs getting the upperhand. I think I counted over 50 daddy longlegs just on the underneath of my drawing table, ant freeways and wasps that live in the rafters.



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It's an old 1925 single car garage.

I have another studio in West Oakland that I share with two other artists. It's a lot cleaner, though I have a tendency to have multiple projects going on at one time and leave out piles of pencils and books. I also like to have a wall of photos and things stuck on the wall to look at. By far the most important tools in the studio are my old electric drafting table and my boombox.

I understand that you work very closely with the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, teaching artists with developmental disabilities, which must be hugely inspiring. Can you talk about this and how it ties into your practice?

The Creative Growth Art Center is a huge part of my life. I work there as an instructor teaching rug making. We make one of a kind artist rugs from their own designs. It's a pretty dreamy job. The energy in the large open studio and the immediacy of most of the artwork done there is especially inspirational. No sketches, or staring into space for hours trying to figure out a "plan" before starting a project. It's just "Do it!" If it doesn't work out, start again on another piece of paper or wood or fabric. I've been working there since 2002 and my own art-making

process now closely resembles many of the artists at CG. I just get an idea, get some paper, a pencil and start with the eyes... then I just do it. No going back. I don't erase much either. I learned this all from Creative Growth artists.

Tell me about your recent lecture at the UC Berkeley Art Museum. Did you focus on Creative Growth artists, and the two other art centers like them, and the influence of artists with disabilities on the mainstream art world?

Creative Growth, Creativity Explored and The National Institute of Art and Disabilities (NIAD) were all started by Florence and Elias Katz many years ago. Creative Growth Art Center is the oldest in the nation and most well-known internationally. The Berkeley Art Museum has an awesome show of art from all three centers on display through the end of September. I was asked to be on a panel discussion with two other instructors, Lawrence Rinder and Matthew Higgs. We spoke about the inspirational energy of the artists, the high quality of the artwork, and how it has found its way into the mainstream art galleries all over the world. These artists, individually and as a group, are creating a voice in the modern art world that is being roundly heard and listened to.





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I see that you recently began working on branching out into illustrating on linen. Are you working with new ideas dealing with textiles and paint?

I started drawing with paint on linen just a year ago. I wanted a clearer, bolder look that was also more immediate than what I am doing with graphite on paper. I saw some artists working that way on donated fabrics over at Creative Growth and I guess, subconsciously, I just started doing it, too. It wasn't until I had to prepare for the lecture at BAM that I realized what I was doing. I like the connection to the fashion world and how they treat surface and texture. A textile artist friend of mine, Valerie Gnadt, has been collaborating with me on her weaving and my drawings. If it works, it could be really cool.

Is there a specific show you are working towards for these?

I have two solo shows coming up this year, one at Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco in December and another in November at the Steven Zevitas Gallery in Boston. All of the work I'm doing now will go into these two shows. I work on a series of work all at one time (8-10 pieces) so that they all go with one

another... I'm really busy.

And you're starting a residency in the fall of this year up in Inverness at JB Blunk? What is your goal in attending? Are there certain projects you have in mind that you would like to create?

I'm going to be working at the JB Blunk residency for two months. I hope to start a series of drawings about the local wildlife and will attempt to meet as many of the Inverness residents as I can to get their personal stories relating to myths, folklore, and experiences with animals in the area. There are a lot of white deer around. I want to find out why, and if there are any interesting tales about them. I'm also curious about any possible Bigfoot sightings or strange aquatic life in the Tomales Bay. JB Blunk was really into using the surrounding natural materials in his own work. I will try my best to soak in the scenery of the National Forest adjacent to the property and see what happens.

For more information about Tara Tucker, contact Taratucker.blogspot.com.