

Squirrealism: Psychometry (IIC) in artistic practice

By Carollyne Yardley, MFA

Abstract

Squirrealism: Psychometry (IIC) in artistic practice features multi-species assemblages created from the organic and anthropogenic remnants found composting in the soil around the base of trees inhabited by squirrels. The artworks explore squirrel-human collaboration by considering intuitive interspecies communication, permeable boundaries, and affective-aesthetics. Squirrealism applies a convergence of perceptual methods, such as observing grey squirrels with intuitive field research—psychometry—the extrasensory perception, or clairvoyance, that comes from using my hands. My process developed into a method of artmaking that channels conceptual and material connections between the species to think and make collaboratively.

Keywords

intuitive interspecies communication, psychometry, touch, squirrel, collaborative, squirrealism, art practice

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About the Author

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Fig. 1. Yardley, C. (2023, May 8-12). *Holobionts (series—details), 2019*. Squirrel and human hair, leaf skeletons, magnolia petals, dryer sheet, plastic pieces, seagull feather, oak tree branch, acorns, wax. Twenty-four pieces, dimensions range from 15" x 8" x 2" to 2" x 2" x 2". International Multispecies Methods Research Symposium, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada.

Fig. 2. Yardley, C. (2023, May 8-12). *Molecular (front view), from the Symbiogenesis series, 2020-2021*. Found and foraged cedar bough (sustainably harvested after windstorm), pampas grass, human hair, plastic mesh tree protector, 17" x 10" x 8". International Multispecies Methods Research Symposium, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada.

Fig. 3. Yardley, C. (2023, May 8-12). *Plastivore, from the Symbiogenesis series, 2020-2022*. Gifted human hair, foraged rusty bedsprings, twigs, blue plastic surgical gloves, 37" x 30" x 8". International Multispecies Methods Research Symposium, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada.

Squirrealism: Psychometry (IIC) in artistic practice

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Squirrealism: Psychometry (IIC) in artistic practice features a series of interspecies assemblages—each piece operates as a creative expression of squirrel-human collaboration from a shared urban environment. My research studies the ethology of grey squirrels and their links to human systems to speculate possible futures in hybrid human development through artistic practice. What began with asking what grey squirrels can teach us about Western-centric ideas of taxonomy and supposed boundaries between species systems led to thinking about the matter of molecules we inhabit, inhabit us, move around and between us, and are made of us. I began creating art and thinking with grey squirrels after an interspecies boundary was crossed when I held an injured squirrel in my hands. The intimacy of the encounter touched me and evoked a desire to document my alliance to the squirrel through artwork—thus, Squirrealism was born. Squirrealism developed into a method of art-making that channels conceptual and material connections between species to think and make, as feminist philosopher Donna Haraway says, "sympoetically."

The Eastern grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) is endemic to eastern and central North America and is also an essential natural forest regenerator. After their historic range was destroyed by settler colonialism and replaced with extensive logging and land clearing, grey squirrels became known as synanthropes—species that carve out their existence within human-modified environments and are ecologically related to humans; they literally become with us.

I am an interdisciplinary artist of Ukrainian Canadian settler and English/Scottish heritage. A generational cultivation of intuition informs my artistic process, which begins by channelling squirrel behaviour and drey (nest) making techniques by walking, foraging, and weaving together salvaged remnants composting in the soil around trees inhabited by grey squirrels to stimulate new thought. Intuition, touch, and chance figure into the process during foraging, and again in the studio through psychometry—the extrasensory perception, or clairvoyance, that comes from using my hands to collaborate through the materials gathered from a squirrel-human environment.

Psychometry is an extrasensory faculty based upon the psychic perception of vibrations emitted by our surroundings and from any material held in hand to read an object's history. These vibrations hold within themselves the memory of prominent events taking place there. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, political theorist Jane Bennett argues how human bodies respond to the influence of materials through an "aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality" (8). Psychometry makes it possible to awaken our psychic sensitivity and contributes to the development of our ability to make ourselves receptive to the most subtle vibrations of the environment. Scholar Vanessa Watts (Mohawk and Anishinaabe) describes this non-distinctive space as Place-Thought, where place and thought are never separated; it is "based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (41). Thus, foraged organic and anthropogenic materials are impregnated with vibrations emanating from any beings, such as the humans and squirrels who encounter them.



Figure 1. Carollyne Yardley, *Holobionts* (series—details), 2019. Squirrel hair, human hair and leaf skeleton, magnolia petals, dryer cloth, plastic pieces, seagull feather, wax. Twenty-four pieces, dimensions range from 15" x 8" x 2" to 2" x 2" x 2". Photograph by Carollyne Yardley.

My process for these assemblages began through a series of multi-day walks. I activated Squirrealism by looking for local grey squirrels and their known food source—mature nut and seed-bearing trees. Eventually, when I located squirrels sitting high up in the tree branches, I started collecting the organic and anthropogenic remnants composting next to one another from around the tree's base: Magnolia petals, squirrel hair, leaf skeletons, seagull feathers, dryer sheet, plastic toy pieces, tree branches, acorns, plastic tree protectors, pampas grass, cedar boughs, and blue nitrile gloves. Remnants were found by chance, thus interrupting any form of intentional aesthetics. While foraging, a squirrel descended from a tree trunk and sat a few feet away from me—often shifting position to look at me through each eye. Eventually, the squirrel disengaged eye contact, and began foraging beside me, as I continued to collect materials without interpreting my thoughts. Back in the studio, I became curious how intuitive methods of touch could visualize hybrid relations.



Figure 2. Carollyne Yardley, *Molecular (front view)*, from the *Symbiogenesis series*, 2020-2021. Found and foraged cedar bough (sustainably harvested after windstorm), pampas grass, human hair, plastic mesh tree protector, 17" x 10" x 8". Photograph by Carollyne Yardley.

Handling the materials prompted corporeal sensations and textures of new thought. I began reflecting on squirrels' use of plastic to build their nests. I began asking: What is the effect on squirrel cellularity? While thinking about each remnant's molecular structure, a series of steps followed. I began a process of "writing through the materials," to understand things, their energies, histories, and potential futures. From a psychometric perspective, this method of attunement collapses time through space, "which is intrinsic to a kind of liminal passage through the object" (Fisher 15). Jennifer Fisher details the use of psychometry and collaboration with psychics in her curatorial practice to channel past events through objects. In forensic crime investigations, psychometry is used to "serve as a telescope to the past, enabling clairvoyant understanding of the historical contingencies of artifacts" (Fisher 11). For me, there is a connection here between psychometry and the "quantum theory of touching" (Barad, "On Touching" 156). I see them operating on the same principles of electromagnetic energies for reading matter and handling materials.

The use of psychometry in my artistic practice has helped me disrupt anthropomorphic assumptions and situate my human animality in a sympoetic relationship with squirrels. For Haraway, we are always already 'becoming-with' and imbricated by all that we touch and that touches us; what and how we touch and are touched by participates in constituting the stories, the worlds, within which we live" (Loveless 22). Rather than studying squirrels as objects I consider "the uncanny in between—the indiscernible zone between human and animal" and channel intuitive ways of knowing through my hands (C. Cox 21). In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett discusses how the "vitality" of materials can "take shape again" and "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (5). The materials from this place are repurposed, but still able to tell stories of past lives; reincarnated and resuscitated, generating ideas,

and ways of knowing to explore animal-human relations. Art makes a difference in this research because it emerges from lived histories and worlds and decenters human language by "...reordering psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems and thus renewing their own tradition" (Kristeva 79). Working in this way, Squirrealism activates psychometry to resist taxonomy and supposed boundaries between species systems to affirm intuition and touch as devices for intuitive interspecies communication.



Figure 3. Carollyne Yardley, *Plastivore*, from the *Symbiogenesis series*, 2020-2022. Gifted human hair, foraged rusty bedsprings, twigs, blue plastic surgical gloves, 37" x 30" x 8". Photograph by Carollyne Yardley.

Glossary

Affiliation: Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway use this term to demonstrate a certain way of thinking about alliances or assemblages and “to mod(e)ify and be modified by others” (Bennett 22).

Ethology: is the scientific study of animal behaviour, usually with a focus on behaviour under natural conditions, and viewing behaviour as an evolutionarily adaptive trait (“Ethology”).

Psychometry: “How psychometric knowledge is produced is not scientifically understood but was identified by the 19th-century Spiritualist James Rhodes Buchanan as an ability to read affective imprints of artifacts” (DeFreitas).

Sympoiesis: “is a simple word: it means ‘making-with.’” Nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 58).

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