

FERAL FIRES AND RE-IMAGINING CREATIVE SELVES

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PART I: FIRE

Fire: carbon dioxide, water vapor, nitrogen, and oxygen.
Fire: life, death, destruction, and rebirth.

Both definitions (above) invoke transitional states of matter. Both the chemical composition of and metaphoric (human-centered) understandings of fire entangle ephemeral properties through relationships with the earth. Wildfire. Campfire. Liar, liar pants on fire. Fireflies. So many meanings of one word. But what about the notion of “feral” fire?

The feral is that which was once domesticated and is now abandoned, un-civilized, or escaped. Feral is of the earth, beyond human-ness. But whatever definition we use, most times when we think of the word feral, we think of what-it-is-*not*, (or) contingent on what-it-used-to-be, rather than the possibilities of what feral might *become*. Feral is a state of being that is defined by what is past, rather than what might-be future. Feral aesthetics brings the language of understanding needed to anchor the journey when literal meaning cannot be exacted. To try renders

us speechless, saying everything but what needs to be said, seen, or heard. As an artist and educator, I wanted to examine these multiple meanings to explore the questions: What can feral (notions of) fire teach us about our (past) sacred selves and our (future) creative relationships with the earth? And how can we honor relationships between art, human experience, and the transitory elements of nature in this epochal moment called the Anthropocene?

It all started with in two parallel times, colliding ... as time and space often do—the moment in which I was seized with a desire to be rid of that which no longer belonged with me and the spontaneous moment when fire created two new forms of art (the photograph here and that which burned into an act of ephemeral creation). The photograph taken and included for this essay (“I Was Told No One Would Come Here”) was captured while I was burning old pieces of my own artwork, art that I did not want to keep anymore.

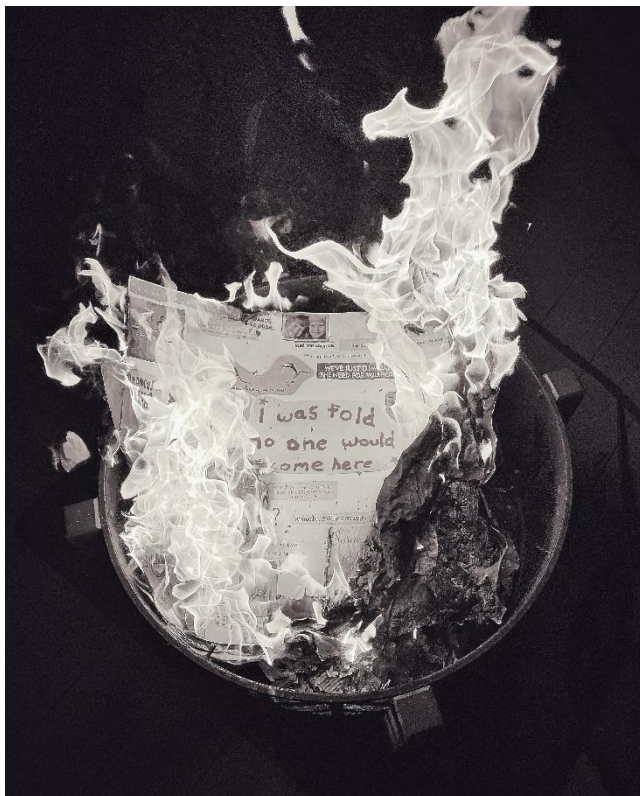


Figure 1: I Was Told No One Would Come Here, digital photograph, McNulty, 2023

“There are these pieces of old artwork I keep staring at!” I complain to my friend Sue. With emphasis I add, “I’m sick of looking at them!”

“Well,” she says matter-of-factly in that same way she conveys every thought she has, “Just get rid of them.”

I ponder how it might feel if I actually *did* let go of these works of art. I do not like them, after all. Most are, in my opinion, not very good. They are failed experiments. Must we keep everything we attempt to create? What would it mean if I were to abandon them? Am I abandoning myself? Am I accepting failure? What am I hanging onto, anyway? I consider my options: tossing them in the recycling bin, the trash, or even donating them to the closest Goodwill, where someone might (just might) see treasure in my trash. None of those options feel right. *I decide I will burn them.* As I gather dry twigs and paper to build the tiny pyre in my backyard fire pit, I recall a song by Lou Reed. In the song lyrics of “Magic and Loss – The Summation” (1992), he writes,

*As you pass through fire, as you pass through fire
Trying to remember its name,
When you pass through fire licking at your lips
You cannot remain the same.*

One by one, I toss them on top. It is hard to let go. I remind myself I am not burning away the memories, just the material objects. I toss them, not all at once. I say goodbye to each one. I watch each painting, sketch, and collage curl and twist in the red and orange flames, diminishing its space on this human plane, as it furls upwards into trails of smoke ... each one a memory from a moment, a person, a place—retelling the stories in my imagination. The aesthetic of each work is disappearing (perhaps) and, I want to believe, will re-manifest itself as molecules and atoms mixing with the night air, becoming a “feral” aesthetic. I now understand ferality, not in terms of what it was, but of what I can *become*. I struggle vainly against this constant flux. With grave perseverance, I struggle to create a fixed sense reality, a world which will remain the same forever. My ideas become epigraphs, a memorial, to what *was* ... even just a few moments ago. If I hold things as absolutes, do I stave off time and space as it hurls us into the unknown?

My brain absorbs the knowledge of day-to-day living, but it is the darkness of my soul that gives birth to wisdom and understanding. Wisdom, unlike knowledge, does not need to play by fanciful, man-made rules. She is wild and, therefore, unpredictable. I have tried in my life to cast a net over her. To lock her away in a closet because she would not play by the rules. Understanding is an act of creation and as such springs forth from the depths of darkness, that place in the universe where we cannot see far enough to name and label what is out there. To understand is to have more questions than answers. It requires that we envision with the eyes of an artist a world born forth out the darkness. We are defined not so much by what we know but by the empty spaces between the lines.

PART II: FERALITY, FUTURITY AND FREEDOM

Through this ritualistic burning in my backyard, I was not rejecting my artwork. I was not wasting it. Or abandoning it. I was going to *free* it. More questions and thoughts emerged in my mind as I watched the flames lick at the edges of the papers and paint. I wondered, *What can feral interrupt? Disrupt?* Art, aesthetic, design create or manifest our existence and its possible

meanings ... but also our outcomes, (future) speculative existences. In other words, feral aesthetics serve as tools for disruption and the realization that what has been disrupted cannot return to what it was. According to Tsing et al. (2021), “Feral ... describes a situation in which an entity, nurtured and transformed by a human-made infrastructural project, assumes a trajectory beyond human control” (para 2).

The burning process connected my art to the natural elements around me, around all of us. I was liberating the essence of each piece from its current form. This act of burning my art ... of igniting a human-made work to be released into an ephemeral altered space, got me to thinking about aesthetics. Aesthetics focus on how we navigate meaning through qualities of art and sensory experience. Therefore, a feral aesthetic implies the practice of artistic representation from “untamed” spaces. In other words, feral spaces that can be represented through aesthetic ways of being and knowing. This way, artful engagements become acts of collective experience between spaces of the human and natural worlds, because space is a living palimpsest, an archeology of memory. Art becomes a site of excavation into questions of the social future and how we might imagine aesthetic sites for transformation.

On the photograph included in this essay, surrounded by flames licking at the edges of the paper are the words, “*I was told no one would come here.*” The collage upon which these words were originally affixed (before being set on fire) also relates intimately with the meaning of the lyrics to “Magic and Loss.” When I made this collage, over 25 years ago, I was struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. Art was a way for me to process my struggles with life and death and to discover healing. To be active in my addiction felt like I was lighting myself, and my world, on fire. Addiction felt like a living death. Lou Reed wrote *Magic and Loss* as an expression of his own struggles with death and loss. Fire consumes. But fire also means rebirth. Tossing my old art upon the backyard pyre set it free and, with it, set free that world to which I no longer belonged. The lyrics from *Magic and Loss* speak of ferality—death of the body, but also of the uncolonized or abandoned spaces where beauty and art have lives of their own, unmitigated by human control.

Control = Conquering, dividing, adding, explaining, quantifying, manipulating. Dying.

And if we cannot control it, if it is greater than us, if it invokes terror by its ominous power, we kill it or flee from it. We rely on knowledge to stave off our primordial terror. I am witness to the entanglements between a precarious futurity and belonging to a plurality of memories. Reality has, in this sense, gone feral. Our old maps are indeed ripping apart at the seams. To “capture” ferality, even in art, is an oxymoron. We cannot climb out of ourselves or our condition. But we can re-examine it in unfamiliar, strange, or “chaotic” ways.

PART III: FERAL AESTHETICS

Feral futures make room for futuring, but not just from the studios and laboratories of creative actors or articulate academics. Instead, feral futures allow futuring in and through other lives—in the banal and unruly moments that are too often cast aside, because they cannot, will not, add up to what comes next.

—Jain & Taylor (2020, para 15)

Art is a site of excavation into questions of the social future and how we might imagine aesthetic sites for transformation. Feral aesthetics are tangential to (but not synonymous with) environmental (or wilderness) aesthetics (Brady, 2013) and experience of the sublime. Just as

something cannot be defined as sublime without the relationship to the viewer to define natural wonder on an emotional human scale, ferality is contingent upon its relationship to the existence of that which is so-called “civilized.” That which is feral (including here, aesthetics) exists only in contingency, as does sublime contingent upon a human purview of the natural world (Brady, 2013). But the contingency is becoming increasingly blurred in this posthuman moment called the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is a truly uncanny time, a time when the constructed separation between things—between culture and nature, subject and object, human and nonhuman, life and non-life—is collapsing. As a verb, feral aesthetic is a calling for the, “posthuman cosmic artisan in the Anthropocene” (jagodinski, 2019, p. 34). Feral aesthetics is one concept through which we are reminded that subjectivity is not the property and possession of a separately bodied individual, but that all that exists comes to being through intra-active material processes of emergence. What human constructs do we cling to that we should be setting on fire? How can we ignite imaginary entanglements that decenter human, ego-centered creation in favor of an “aesthetic experience (that) can bring home some of the ways we cannot place ourselves over and above nature” (Brady, 2013, p.197). Feral experiences merged with artistic experiences: temporal and emergent. Fixed and unfixed. Wild (and) tamed. A phenomenon of contradictions, like fire. Fire is tangible yet ephemeral. It embodies both life and death. What does it mean to burn art that has no purpose anymore, the old ways of being and knowing, in favor of a feral aesthetic that, “prepares the way and presents a valuable ground for a moral attitude toward nature” (p. 205)?

I light my work on fire. I am letting go—a ritual enactment of, “letting go of what no longer serves, and discovering what might bring repair and regeneration to a world, and a culture, in crisis” (*Dark Mountain Project*, 2021, para. 2). My work becomes part of the natural world; distinguished from the one fueled by human ego, or my sense of individual creativeness. It is no longer there, but it is still. Burning my art is a way of letting go of what no longer serves my creative practice. It is also a ritualistic means for discovering repair of and regeneration for my artistic practice through reconnections with the more-than-human aesthetic world.

Most importantly, we must carry with us the words of Lou Reed, who reminds us: “Don’t put the flames out ... There’s a bit of magic in everything ... And then some loss to even things out.”

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