

TIME LIVED, TIME IMAGINED

I.

In recent years, figurative painter Colleen Kiely turned to her aging basset hound Beau as model and muse. As the paintings in the series *Beau: Model & Avatar* attest, Beau was a beloved companion whose presence in her life for 12 years charts a complex entanglement of human and canine ways of experiencing the world. Drawing upon her intimate knowledge of Beau, Kiely imagines the inner life of this particular dog and explores more broadly animal capacities and responses, thoughts and emotions, many of which they share with us. While the paintings reflect the bond between woman and dog, Kiely also paints the distance between Beau and her, acknowledging those things they could never understand about each other. The paintings' conceptual complexities may seem at odds with such apparently accessible subject matter – a dog at rest, at the window, in the park – and a narrative based on the artist's and dog's daily routines amidst familiar environs. But they place Kiely's practice in direct dialogue with traditions in art and literature as well as contemporary scientific and cultural studies engaged with redefining relationships between humans and other animals.

An important touchstone for Kiely's conception of the Beau paintings was John Berger's influential essay *Why Look at Animals?* (1977), in which he laments the physical and cultural marginalization of real animals from human experience and the loss of a proximity that had offered "man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange."¹ He

reminds us that the "parallelism of their similar/dissimilar lives allowed animals to provoke some of the first questions and offer answers. The first subject matter for painting was animal...the first metaphor was animal"² and "the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them."³ Drawing on this complex history, Boria Sax suggests in *Animals as Tradition* (2001), "When it comes to establishing the identity of an animal, biology is not nearly enough...Contemporary genetic theory views animals, including human beings, less as individuals or representatives of species than as repositories of hereditary information."⁴ Sax proposes that we define animals in terms of the traditions (myths, legends, literature) that have surrounded them throughout history, a viewpoint which not only links them to human culture but also restores "something of the numinous quality that they had in cave paintings of prehistoric times."⁵

As part of this continuum, Kiely's paintings create a bridge between contemporary visual culture and studies about companion species. Donna Haraway's insights into the history of people-dog companionship describe "an early co-evolution, human-canine accommodation at more than one point in the story, and lots of dog agency in the drama of genetics and co-habitation."⁶ She argues that "co-evolution makes humans and dogs companion species from 'the beginning'" and emphasizes, "Companion species take shape in interaction. They more

than change each other; they co-constitute each other, at least partly."⁷ While contemporary science has demonstrated how close human genes are to those of other animal species, the therapeutic benefits of animal-human companionship also have been well documented. According to biological psychologist Deborah L. Wells, current research "has shown that animals, and in particular dogs, can ameliorate the effects of potentially stressful life events (e.g. bereavement, divorce), reduce levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression and enhance feelings of autonomy, competence and self-esteem."⁸

II.

"The fact was that they could not communicate with words, and it was a fact that led undoubtedly to much misunderstanding. Yet did it not lead also to a peculiar intimacy?" Virginia Woolf⁹

One of the most poignant literary parallels for Kiely's paintings about Beau is Virginia Woolf's deceptively simple yet innovative *Flush* (1933), her "biography" of a cocker spaniel who came into the life of poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1842 as a source of companionship while she was coping with depression and confined to her bed in London. The bond between them develops over time and amidst scenes of Victorian domestic life, Browning's love affair and marriage to Robert Browning, and the couple's relocation to Italy – all told in third person but, most notably, mainly from the spaniel's perspective. *Flush* is an unusual composite of fact and fantasy. It includes historical events, characters, and places as well as insights of Browning via quotes from her correspondence (in which *Flush* is given a prominent role). But Woolf invents "a good deal" about the dog, drawing upon vivid memories of her own spaniel, Pinka. *Flush*'s story, of course, is also Woolf's exploration (verbalized in canine thoughts, feelings, and observations) of the shared yet separate worlds poet and dog inhabited.

Like Woolf, Kiely found in Beau an expressive vehicle for art in which lived experience is the basis for the imaginary. The paintings are generated from an archive of her photographs of the dog ("always candid, never posed"¹⁰) that not only serve as

compositional devices but also hold detailed visual information (gesture, expression, light, and activity) that Kiely says she otherwise might not see. While the photographs are records of Beau at specific times and places, the paintings challenge the boundaries between the factual and the invented, clarity and ambiguity; the photos of Beau become conduits for sensations, memories, and fantasies – experiences (canine and human) that Kiely renders visible through the fluidity of paint. The Beau paintings, like *Flush*, are portraits of subjectivity rather than likeness.

Kiely is not naïve about the risk of sentimentality in paintings that, after all, feature her pet dog. Even the critically acclaimed Woolf worried that with *Flush*, the subject was "too slight and too serious," and upon its publication she dreaded its reception: "They'll say its 'charming', delicate, ladylike. And it will be popular."¹¹ In the context of the art world, the esteemed landscape and figure painter David Hockney created numerous paintings in the 1990s of his dachshunds, Stanley and Boodgie, depicting them at play, napping, together, and alone. He felt it necessary to publicly state very clearly, "I make no apologies for the apparent subject matter... These two dear little creatures are my friends."¹²

Numerous artists of Kiely's generation are exploring the human-animal interface in a variety of media and from a range of perspectives (including biotech-art paradigms). Most relevant to Kiely's practice are those whose works also examine the intelligence of the animal sphere in a kind of collaboration with their animal subjects. William Wegman's performative photographs of his pet Weimaraners and Diana Thater's videos exploring technology as a mediator of human exchanges with animal worlds represent but two significant yet differing aesthetic and conceptual possibilities.

But it is equally important to note that Kiely, as a figure painter, is steeped in the tradition of her predecessors at the same time that she seeks to emulate, renew, and at times subvert the tradition. Most notable, in addition to her choice of canine model, is her predilection for a kind of abstracted figuration that can be traced from Édouard Manet



to Luc Tuymans, one that is suggestive rather than detailed and involves a kind of stylistic detachment that is painterly yet economical, less bravura than disquieting. Kiely does not anthropomorphize Beau; rather, with each painting she challenges herself to communicate Beau's canine subjectivity, even if it may be impossible to comprehend fully another species' unique experience of the world. Yet through her attempts, we can imagine Beau's reality as another measure of the world and perhaps in doing so broaden the scope of what we (humans) conceive as knowable.

Kiely's paintings of Beau, like Woolf's biography of Flush, are also moving meditations on the passage of time. They explore the ways consciousness measures increments of time, not only through the extended process of aging but also daily routines (dogs' and humans'). As Kiely reconstructs the late years of her companion, she devotes much attention to quiet stretches of Beau waiting, watching, and dreaming – periods of stillness that occur between more typically memorable narrative actions. Early in her narrative, Woolf imagines young Flush's feelings as he adjusts to city life and a routine of lying at the foot of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sofa, observing the world from inside her room. Toward the book's end, time is measured in the form of the older Flush's dreams and memories: "Flush lay there in the cool... His thoughts turned to Reading for a moment – to Mr. Partridge's spaniel, to his first love, to the ecstasies and innocences of youth."¹³ Kiely's paintings allow for the likelihood that similar reflections on a life well lived might be going through the aging basset hound's mind.

III.

In its subject and composition, *Beau: Window* (2013) epitomizes Kiely's fusion of lived experience, artistic invention, and aesthetic inspiration (in this case, both homage and subversion of J.A.D. Ingres' seated female nude seen from behind, the *Valpinçon Bather* from 1808). Although the palette for dog and environs is similar, the irregular markings of his coat and curving volume of his body distinguish Beau from the horizontal bands of paint articulating the architecture.

The painting is also a compelling composite of place and point of view. Kiely merges the interior of which Beau is a part with the world implied beyond the window; similarly, she complicates the roles of observer and observed. Beau gazes outward apparently undistracted by the observation of him from behind. The artist positions us in proximity to the dog yet separate from him. Looking at Beau looking, our subjectivity becomes entwined with what Beau sees, senses, imagines, remembers.

Kiely's desire to locate Beau in a legible yet ambiguous place (architectural or landscape) is coupled with her tendency to eliminate any unnecessary information and to abstract surface detail into passages of delicate veils of paint. In *Beau: Tile Floor* (2015), the dramatic perspective and clinical monotony of a long empty corridor are visually and emotionally punctuated by a prone Beau whose torso – an oblong volume of incomplete but recognizable canine body parts – is melded to the tiled floor. But the physical realities of the dog and architecture are subject to the paint's fluidity as drips of pigment subtly disrupt divisions between wall, floor, and figure. Whether sleeping or watchfully waiting, Beau is the sole measure of time and space.

The interconnectedness between Beau and the environs he experienced with Kiely is also at the center of paintings that locate him outdoors. Among art historical precedents for Kiely's images are Franz Marc's paintings of animals, which developed from his involvement in contemporary ethology as well as time spent observing and caring for his mare and dog. *Dog Lying in Snow* (c. 1911), a portrait of his dog Russi sleeping peacefully in wooded surroundings, is particularly relevant. Working with a reductive palette and composition, Marc achieves a formal synchronicity between figure and landscape and communicates an empathy with the dog's experience of the world. In *Beau: Striped Chair* (2015), Kiely closes in on the resting dog comforted by the cushions of a lawn chair. It is a portrait of intimacy depicted in Kiely's expressive rendering of Beau's face and painterly intermingling of the dog's graphic markings, the striped cushions, and patches of greenery.

In *Beau: Powderhouse Square* (2013), Kiely’s complex reconstruction of a routine walk in the neighborhood, we find Beau confronting his image reflected in a mirror propped along the sidewalk. What does Beau make of the dog opposite him? Perhaps he is pondering the same questions of reality and illusion that one periodically faces throughout life: Who is the “me” in the mirror looking back – is it who others see, or is it who one is?¹⁴ Moreover, in the streetscape with parked car that is visible only as a framed reflection, Kiely conveys the intricacies of observation and sensory knowledge that are core components of her painting practice.

Occasionally, Kiely will paint more than one version of a subject, citing “intentionality” and a desire to “reinforce” the imagery as her motivations.¹⁵ The results compel us to think about the myriad decisions the artist makes: How does Beau’s gaze affect our engagement with an image? What roles do light and brushwork play in defining shapes or a sense of place and time? How much or how little detail is needed to convey a subject? Consider *Staring Down the Tiger 1* (2014) and *Staring Down the Tiger 3* (2016). These two paintings, which explore the boundaries between real and imaginary in the figures of Beau and a toy tiger, also reflect on absence and memory. In the first version, Kiely treats the tiger’s pose, expression, and markings with the same degree of verisimilitude as Beau with the effect that the animals seem to be contemplating one another, communicating species to species. The related image (painted after Beau’s death) holds a different story and sentiment. Figurative detail gives way to suggestion and although the tiger’s gaze is unchanged, Beau’s awareness has shifted from toy towards human companion.

Painted in the year since Beau died, *Beau: Portrait with Rainbow and Coneflowers* (2016) is a surreal composite of solemnity and whimsy. A formal black-and-white image of Beau rendered in graphite and paint has the traditional appearance of a portrait medallion made to memorialize a subject. Although Kiely’s treatment of Beau’s image suggests he occupies a time and space removed from this world, he is framed by the colorful bands of a rainbow and behind a foreground of animated pink coneflowers that celebrate life and his years with her.

IV.

“...*right now Mabel is more than a hawk. She feels like a protecting spirit. My little household god. Some things happen only once, twice in a lifetime. The world is full of signs and wonders that come, and go, and if you are lucky you might be alive to see them. I had thought the world was ending, but my hawk had saved me again, and all the terror was gone.*” Helen Macdonald¹⁶

Beau came into Kiely’s life with a sense of mission and meaning, when she adopted him from a shelter in Brunswick, Maine in August 2003, “to honor the first-year anniversary of my sister’s death. Years later, I began this series.”¹⁷ As a body of work, the Beau paintings represent a conceptual hybrid of an elegy for her sister, a memoir of the companionship between artist and dog, and a reflection on mortality. A compelling parallel to Kiely’s painting project in contemporary literature is Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2014), a fusion of memoir and literary meditation, observation and imagination that articulates the fragile and complicated bond between hawk and human. Responding to the sudden death of her father, Macdonald adopts and resolves to raise Mabel, a goshawk whose temperament and evolution both mirror and broaden the author’s sense of what it means to be alive. At the heart of Kiely’s paintings and Macdonald’s book are the complex ways animals and people co-constitute each other. For Beau and Kiely, it was the last years of their companionship that engendered new meaning in the form of a deepened partnership and led to the paintings Kiely described as, “acts of embodiment in the face of the ephemeral.”¹⁸

Before Kiely embarked on the Beau paintings, over a concentrated period of three months in 2012, she created a portfolio of 20 drawings, *Gone to Feed the Roses* (its title based on a line from Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem, *Dirge Without Music*). The project pays homage to her recently deceased mother and reflects on the pace of mourning. Three floral arrangements from her mother’s funeral provided the subject for drawings which evolved into combinations of parts of different arrangements and completely invented passages. In the tradition of 17th-century Dutch flower paintings, each

drawing is a synthesis of observation and invention, realism and artifice. Yet in their graphic imperfection and raw beauty, Kiely’s flowers are more closely related to the emotive realism of Odilon Redon’s bouquets.

Drawing offered Kiely a creative process that allowed reflection and magical thinking. Working on two or three drawings at a time and “often letting them sit so I could look at them and see what needed to happen next,” Kiely explained that each of the images was realized, “over time, some over a few days, some over a few weeks. The process was additive and subtractive – sometimes I sanded the surface, sometimes I’d spray it with water to diffuse the graphite.”¹⁹ The media (archival marker, graphite, and gesso) and mark-making (including blind contour) accommodate a dramatic range of expressive states (from fragile and broken to resilient and hopeful), as do the physical characteristics of the flowers which appear in various stages of bloom and decay. Even Kiely’s location of a bouquet on an otherwise empty ground communicates the sense of instability and disorientation that grief can generate.

In retrospect, *Gone to Feed the Roses* anticipated much of the emotive candor that defines the Beau paintings. In both bodies of work, there is ample and eloquent evidence of Kiely’s commitment to finding in lived experience the basis for art that challenges simple boundaries between the factual and the imagined, embraces mortality, and questions the limits of what humans conceive as knowable.

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NOTES

1. John Berger, “Why Look at Animals,” *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. Boria Sax, “Animal as Tradition,” 2001, *The Animal Reader: The Essential and Contemporary Writings*, ed. Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 271.
5. *Ibid.*, 271.
6. Donna Haraway, “Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience,” 2004, *The Animal Reader: The Essential and Contemporary Writings*, ed. Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 365.
7. *Ibid.*, 366.
8. Deborah L. Wells, “Domestic Dogs and Human Health: An Overview,” *British Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 12, issue 1, February 2007, 149.
9. Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 37.
10. Artist statement, colleenkiely.com
11. Woolf, xiii.
12. Randy Kennedy, “Sit. Stay. Good Art,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2012, C27.
13. Woolf, 157-8.
14. Woolf describes Browning standing with Flush in front of the mirror and asking him “why he barked and trembled. Was not the little brown dog opposite himself? But what is ‘oneself’? Is it the thing people see? Or is it the thing one is?”, 48.
15. Artist in conversation with the author, 2016.
16. Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 278.
17. Artist statement, colleenkiely.com
18. *Ibid.*
19. Artist correspondence with the author, June 9, 2016.