

Erin Jane Nelson on welcoming conflicting influences



June 19, 2017 - Erin Jane Nelson is interested in the creative possibilities of destruction. She "finds a way to make a good use of garbage" through recycling her image archive and studio refuse into photographic textile works. A mess of signs for messy times: her works test the boundaries of image legibility and information. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she balances her practice, her day job as a Curatorial Assistant in Photography and Folk & Self-Taught Art, and running [Species](#), the gallery she co-founded in 2016. Last month, imagined ocean creatures materialized as collaged textiles with translucent skin and viewable digested innards in [Psychopompopolis](#), her second solo show at DOCUMENT Space in Chicago.

As told to Laurel Schwulst, 1881 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Technology](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Education](#).

How did you decide on the name for your gallery?

The world is animated now in a new way through technology: everything is responsive and interactive and algorithmically sorted into types or "species." You could say the technology boom has renewed a sense of magical properties in the world that harks back to the folkloric, like the possibility of a talking tree or an animal guide. In mine and Jason's (the other half of [Species](#)) own work, we have been interested in fables and folktales, associated animal symbols, and animation. So it seemed natural for the gallery space be a reflection of these ideas in our approach to presenting exhibitions. I kind of hate the word Anthropocene, but we hoped to talk to art in the Anthropocene. This was certainly true of our first few shows.

What role do animals play in your own work?

I have been going through this cycle where my artistic impulses are starting to have a stronger visual and structural similarity with my first primal, essential relationships with visual culture and art-making during adolescence—the time when many people self identify as someone who makes things—than with the artist I was trained to be by art schools and the art world at large.

When you go into a professionalized space, you're encouraged to deny some of these more populist takes on art like cartoons and representative rendering. I remember growing up with people who were trying to draw the best horse, for instance, which is not only tied to youth and discovering other species but establishing respect for animals.

Lately we have seen how humanism and human exceptionalism can wreak havoc on the world. I am trying to look into other modes of being that aren't so human-focused. Knowledge and authorship that are more open to collaboration across species is a good next step. There are simply so many things that animals do that open up a lot of inspiration and empathy.



Barmumbiir thru the Wavelight, 2017, Pigment print on Jacquard Cotton, ink, and various fabrics, 46 x 44 in.

This reminds me of your personal speculative fiction, *Psychopompopolis*. How did it come about?

A year and a half ago, I became obsessed with octopus sentience. There were a lot of articles about ocean creatures flowing through my feed. It made me remember the childhood idea of what I would do with my life: become a marine biologist. I thought the ocean was such a magical, unexplored place, and I loved ocean animals and plants. It seemed the equivalent of being an astronaut, except you wouldn't need the same kind of bravery. Today when we think about global warming, we think about what happens on Earth: on land and in the sky. But I think the ocean is where the most visible ecological effects are already taking form and the biggest threat to our safety and survival on land.

When I began writing, I remember thinking all of my research, reading, thinking, and ideas all felt so disparate. They seemed related, but I couldn't figure out what underwater cable networks (like Telecom) had to do with octopus sentience, environmentalism, ocean acidification, the body as a screen, and downloading our consciousness into devices; but I knew there was some kind of line I needed to draw. An expository essay with its associated pretension felt wrong. If I wrote an essay, I could've cited many fantastic writers, musicians, and thinkers in the footnotes, but instead I wrote this inspired fictional story that I owe to them. I remember having the "ah-ha" of how it could work: it began by playfully reimagining myself as a mermaid, or a human-cephalopod.

It's a kind of speculative conceptualism, where you say to yourself, "I've learned all these things that I can't stop thinking about: so what if this, and then what if this, and what if all the what-ifs lead to something else." That's how science fiction or fantasy work I think—it's based in the real to some degree.

How did you come to the title *Psychopompopolis*?

A "psychopomp" is a catch-all literary mythological term for beings that carry souls into the next realm. Examples include the Grim Reaper, the Anubis, Xolotl, Hermes, etc.

I think so much of the 21st century is about understanding a new realm of existence: politically, ecologically, ideologically. Everything feels like it's going upside down. So I imagined this advanced cephalopod species (which are basically human's equivalent but in the water) as being our psychopomp, or our spirit guide into this new 21st century reality where we just go back to living in the water once the oceans rise and consume us.

Wow.

And Psychopompopolis is where they live. It's the city of psychopomps. It's an Atlantis.



Installation of *Psychopompopolis*, 2017, at DOCUMENT, Chicago.

What is the work you've been making around this story like?

With my past work, I was interested in image and object making in a more experimental, tactile sense through image and collage as soft, malleable fabric. But I realized people weren't really understanding how much the work was related to screens or skins. Now, I'm now using a new translucent fabric material that can receive photographic information because it lends itself to operating like a screen or sieve. The images aren't opaque surfaces-they have more depth and innards which feels important.

The story is from the point of view of being inside a psychopomp, so I wanted there to be a digested or inside space in addition to the skin that was photographic. Many of the pieces have constellations of different eyes. They're supposed to stand in for the different souls that are embodied in the psychopomp. In the story, psychopomps found a way to make a good use of garbage, which is a fair description of my practice. I've been recycling a lot of pieces and off-cuttings from my production by using them as stuffing in these new pieces.

In terms of recycling, you once said you're "interested in the creative possibilities of destruction" and that your works are "the result of slowly destroying your personal archive." Is this still accurate?

Yes. I didn't want all of those years in college of believing in the magic and possibility of straight photography and the image to be a total waste.

I have this hard drive full of really earnest high resolution scans. Everyone who has a computer collects things, like informational things, so what's the point of accumulation if you're not purging every once in a while? I don't want to be a recorder only. I love cycling through information, binging and purging: I think that's how my practice works.



Jizo Feeler, 2017, Pigment print on Jacquard Organza and Cotton, various fabrics, aluminum, debris, and styrofoam amaranth, 88 x 75 in.

Out of curiosity, what's the organization of your hard drive like?

I'm very organized. I'm like an inbox zero type of person, so my hard drive reflects that. My digital life is very compartmentalized and understood. I like a clean desktop. I sort my TIFFs and JPGs into different folders. On my hard drive, my organization is mostly chronological. Although it's very orderly, it's often really hard to find anything because I have to remember when I was making what I'm looking for.

It's funny because your work seems so fluid and not necessarily organized. Do you actively incorporate chance into your practice?

Yes. Chance happens to me, but in physical space. I mostly purchase, find, and collect physical objects based on gut feeling, and that totally does not happen in my digital or informational space at all. My tactile visual sensory space is where I freestyle or where things are out of control and messy. I think the spaces working together helped because if it's purely formal experimentation and play, then that's great and there are plenty of areas to do that. But then there's this whole other side of me that I would be denying that is based on research and collection and having day jobs as an archivist for years.

In my professional life, I tend to be the person who organizes the information. I'm not good at cleaning IRL, but I'm really good at keeping digital space clean. I think the mind needs to be organized and understood, but reality should be as entropic as it actually is.



Raccoona Charon, 2017, Pigment print on Jacquard Organza and Cotton, 115 x 240 in.

Can you tell me about your interest in folk art and craft traditions?

I've always been into craft. But it was questioned at the ivory tower style art school I attended, where they taught the Bauhaus without any of the parts of the Bauhaus that were occupied by a female presence. So students learn 2D design, 3D design, color, and everything that was traditional modernism. But there were no textiles, no ceramics, no design objects. It was this white male dominated space that denied any existence of American historical practices that are full of female or non-European authorship in folk crafts. That felt really icky and wrong.

After graduating, I went to New Mexico and then California, where people love the shit out of ceramics and macrame. It was a really encouraging place to get back into "craft" processes like quilting and weaving and pottery. Since I moved to Atlanta, I mostly look at folk as self-taught art, through my day job. I really appreciate the earnestness, clarity, and humor of many self-taught artists and folk artists. There's no art world shrouding of information and intent. It's very heart-on-your-sleeve. It's political, it's ideological, and it's emotional. It feels like what I thought art was supposed to be like more than "crapstraction" or really, really opaque conceptualism and minimalism.

The art world doesn't want to contend with the mess of visual information, which is designated to lower and middle class people. It has to do with the luxury of being outside advertising, visual culture and overload, which speaks to privilege. For the most part, the art world is about the cleanliness and privilege of minimalism—which always wins out in the market.

I grew up in an American suburb where everything was decorated and overproduced, in an area that was once an agrarian place filled with folk and yard art in the South, in a region with a really fraught and violent history. It's natural that those conflicting influences continue to come through in my practice, and I welcome them.

[Psychopompopolis](#), Erin's second solo show at DOCUMENT Space in Chicago, is up until July 8.

Erin Jane Nelson recommends:

[John Luther Adams on Meet the Composer](#)

[Paul Beatriz Preciado: Feminism is not a humanism](#)

[The Undersea Network by Nicole Starosielski](#)

The photographs of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, who you can learn more about in this [editorial](#)

[Minnie Evans'](#) psychedelic garden mandala drawings

Name

Erin Jane Nelson

Vocation

Visual artist

Fact

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Photo: Sarah McMenimen