



**EMILY JAN**  
*The World is Bound by Secret Knots:  
Apologues I – X*

# The World is Bound by Secret Knots: Emily Jan's Magnetic Bestiary

By Marie-Hélène Lemaire

Emily Jan's bestiary of hybrid beings is a *wunderkammer* for our era. It caresses us with its intricate beauty and then shatters our certainties; it allows us to breathe deeper, filling our lungs with lush colors, and then forces us to pause, confused within an overwhelming whiteness. To enter Jan's cabinet of curiosities is to engage with a unique embodied philosophy that holds the future of the world.

## I. COLOR AS MAGNETIC AND WATERY

Anthropologist Michael Taussig sees color vision as less of a retinal activity and more of a total bodily activity, which encourages us to become immersed in what is seen. He proposes: "To thus see ourselves in the midst of the world is to enter into ourselves as image, to exchange standing above the fray, the God position, for (...) something more like swimming, more like nomads adrift in the sea, mother of all metaphor, the sea I call the *bodily unconscious*".<sup>1</sup> Taussig sees this bodily unconscious as holding the future of the world.

### Apologue VIII — The Nudibranch Becoming Coral

The algae *zooxanthellae* nestles symbiotically within the coral, feeding it, and by doing so, richly coloring it. The nudibranch absorbs the coral, at once his home and his food. The zooxanthellae can be kept alive in the nudibranch's own tissues, its vivid colors flowing in and out: a multicolored embodiment.

The abnormal rise of the temperatures of the oceans creates a sudden expulsion of the *zooxanthellae* living within: the corals turn completely white. When coral bleaches, is it dead? Can it survive? We wonder...as we regard the vivid colors flowing in and out between bleached coral and nudibranch.

### Apologue I – The Anteater Becoming Flowers

The anteater's whiteness hypnotizes us, a fascinating openness. Can whiteness here become a generative potentiality? Gradually, a bouquet of tulips, a burst of cream and peaches, is blooming from this void. The anteater's black eyes half-closed, musing on his condition as a flower-anteater. His tongue sticking out, a thirst, the pink becoming green at the tip, filling up with chlorophyll, growing green buds.

## II. AMORPHOUSNESS AS ONTOLOGICAL BLUR

Giorgio Agamben states that the only ethical experience is the experience of being (one's own) potentiality, exposing, that is in every form, one's own amorphousness.<sup>2</sup> He proposes: "Beings that exist in a mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality (...). In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness."<sup>3</sup> We see Agamben's ethic of amorphousness as holding the future of the world.

### Apologue VII – Chandelier — Vision and Darkness

Not a transcendent light from above, but vulnerable, below. Darkness coming from all sides. Light spilling on the floor: symbol of life and regeneration. But also: blinding. Welcoming darkness as thoughtful dream, and uncertain vision as our compass.

### Apologue VI – Octopus — Sensation and Anesthesia

Here, the Domestic meets the depth of the Sea. Smooth and delicate porcelain is shattered by a force violently emerging: tea-time cracked open by the Octopus, Monster of the Sea. A red viscosity seeping, numerous arms, covered with suction cups, slumped within tea biscuits. Suddenly alarmed: black ink darkens the water, confuses, paralyzes the senses. We hold our breath for a moment.

## III. THE BODY AS FOLD: A MUTABLE MATERIALITY

### Apologue X – the Anaconda becoming Bark

Is this a snake? Or rather a snake-like embodiment, an indeterminate gliding and ever-folding materiality, magnetically drawn to other materialities? Camouflaged in its surroundings, it is defined by the very bark it embraces.

### Apologue II – Birds of Paradise

A bird of paradise coming down to meet us. It's lapis lazuli delicate claws perched on a branch. Lapis lazuli, crystalline blue stone of the sea, of the sky and of ancient spirits.

Emily Jan's bird is inviting us into an alternative paradise. Not the one created by this faraway God: distanced, abstract and attainable only through death. Jan's paradise is right here, with us, a fleshy, material and complicated one, that we sense in the flap of a wing made out of artificial leaves, in the love of a child for the smallest pink plastic beads, and in the never-ending coiling of a sharp beak in a cracked apple snail.

© 2018 Marie-Hélène Lemaire

Marie-Hélène Lemaire is a Montreal-based writer and critic. She has worked in museum education for the past nineteen years, and is currently a member of the Education team at the DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art.

1 Michael Taussig, "What Color is the Sacred?" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Autumn 2006), p. 31.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, [2013 (1993)], p.43.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 182.

# Emily Jan *The World is Bound by Secret Knots: Apologues I – X*

June 28 - July 31, 2018, ODD Gallery

*The World is Bound by Secret Knots* is an installation that initially grew out of the artist's direct encounters with the biodiversity of equatorial South America, and over time, expanded to become a meditation upon the complexity and fragility of tropical ecosystems at large.

The exhibition title is a reference to the 17th century polymath Athanasius Kircher's *The Magnetic Kingdom of Nature*, 1693. As once expressed by the Museum of Jurassic Technology: "Ultimately, Kircher saw magnetic attraction and repulsion as the lingua franca of all creation, governing friendship, love, sympathy, hatred, chemical reactions, planetary action, heliotropic and selenitropic plants, medicinal plants and stones, the wind, hydraulics, the tides, musical harmony; even the nature of God himself, whom Kircher deemed 'the Central Magnet of the Universe'. As Science verges on a workable unified field theory, Kircher's intuitive philosophical understanding of the interdependency of all things seems less and less naïve."

Part natural history and part invention, this bestiary of hybrid beings addresses the ontological blur which occurs between plant/animal/fungus, the temporal blur between living/dying/regenerating, and the shifting boundaries between Self and Other by combining species and objects in hallucinatory and oneiric ways.

**EMILY JAN** is an artist and writer currently based in Montreal. Born and raised in California, she has travelled to 35 countries and lived in four, including South Africa and Mexico. As a wanderer, naturalist, and collector of objects and experiences, she is guided in her work by the spirit of exploration, kinship, and curiosity.

Jan has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally, and has been awarded the Excellence in Fibers Award 2017 (Fiber Art Now and the San Jose Textile Museum, USA), the People's Choice Award at Fiberarts International Triennale 2016 (Pittsburgh, USA), and Third Place in the Salon de Reciclaje at the 6th World Textile Art Biennale 2011 (Oaxaca, Mexico). She has recently been an Artist in Residence at Artscape Gibraltar Point (2018), the Elsewhere Museum (2017) and Denali National Park (2016).

Jan has written and illustrated two books; *still life* (2014) and *A Denali Book of Hours* (2017). [www.emilyjan.com](http://www.emilyjan.com)

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Emily Jan creates contemporary *wunderkammer*: large-scale hyper-realistic installations of handmade flora and fauna mixed with found objects that evoke the faraway and the fantastical. She is motivated by the belief that in this age of mass extinctions and climate change, the importance of being able to envision places we may never personally see, to hold space for them in our minds and in our hearts, is ever greater. To this end, the work seeks to transport some of that distant experience to the viewer – to stretch the boundaries of our collective imaginings in order to encompass the unseen, to learn to love the unknown as well as the familiar, and to re-learn what it means to be a human living in a world roiling with turmoil and catastrophe but yet which is still mysterious and beautiful.

— Emily Jan, 2018

The artist and gallery gratefully acknowledge support from Parks Canada, Klondike National Historic Sites for this exhibition.



Parks  
Canada

Parcs  
Canada

**ODD**  
GALLERY

**KLONDIKE INSTITUTE OF ART & CULTURE**

Box 8000 | Dawson City, Yukon  
(867) 993-5005 | [www.kiac.ca](http://www.kiac.ca)

**KIAC**