

How Now Brown Cow?

Yvette Watt

The works included here were produced during my PhD which I completed in early 2009. Titled *Animals, Art and Activism: An Investigation into Art as a Tool for Engaging an Ethical Consideration of Human-Animal Relationships*, the research resulted in a body of work that actively encourages the viewer to consider animals – particularly ‘farmed’ animals – as sentient beings rather than as insentate, objectified commodities. This was achieved through judicious use of anthropomorphism or, more aptly, ‘egomorphism’ in the depiction of the animals. The latter term, coined by social anthropologist Kay Milton, places the self, rather than humanness in general, as the primary departure point for any understanding of non-human animals. The activation of egomorphism in the work reflects the fact that my PhD research was driven by a very personal empathy for non-human animals, and a consequent concern about human attitudes toward and treatment of other animals, especially those used for food. Additionally, the egomorphic approach to the depiction of the animals prompts the viewer to engage with the idea of animals as active, self-interested agents rather than simply passive receptors of human ideas and actions.



*Figure 1: Domestic Animals (Culinary Tips), 2007 giclee print and ink
on photo rag paper 80 x 130cm © Yvette Watt 2025*

An active issue in a number of the artworks I produced was the idea of the talking animal, which encapsulates ideas of communication, understanding, and empathy between humans and other animals. This was key to the *Domestic Animals* series in which I used constructed scenarios to imagine the kind of conversation one might have with animals who have been bred for their flesh, milk, eggs or wool, particularly if they were aware of their probable fate. In *Culinary Tips* (fig. 1) I am confronted in my kitchen by a live cow, who would usually only be present in the form of meat or dairy products. *Scholarly Explanation* (fig.2) is set in my studio/office where I am showing the same dairy cow an image in a book of a painting by American artist Mark Tansey. The painting is *Innocent Eye Test*, which also depicts a dairy cow, in Tansey's commentary on the illusionary nature of painterly realism. In my series, *Domestic Animals*, I used a combination of hand drawn and digitally printed photographic elements. The intention was that the combining of the mechanical and hand-

made marks would act as a metaphor for such binaries as human/animal; real/artificial; nature/culture; actual/imagined; veracity/illusion. In essence this mix of handmade and machine-made images is a device to disrupt the ‘reality’ of the situation; to play up the fact that these are imagined scenes and to reflect the ‘out-of-placeness’ of some of the actors, both animal and human, in these scenes.



Figure 2: Domestic Animals (Scholarly Explanation), 2008 giclee print and ink on photo rag paper 80 x 130cm © Yvette Watt 2025

While the inclusion of myself in most of the artworks was achieved through the use of images of myself (or the use of parts of my body in hybrid creatures, such as my eyes or hands), in the *Offerings* series my presence was embodied in the material used to create the image. This series was comprised of portraits of ‘farmed’ animals created by using my blood to paint onto white linen tea towels. The titles of the works include the animal’s name, each of whom would most likely have experienced death at a young age in a slaughterhouse, but

who now reside at a local farm sanctuary. *Offering #1* depicts Lola, a dairy cow rescued by Emma Haswell of Brightside Farm Sanctuary in Tasmania (fig. 3). The animals in the photographs all face the viewer front on, meeting the viewer's gaze in a conventional 'portrait' set up. The viewer is confronted in a variety of ways: by the empowered gaze of the animal which does not privilege the viewer; by the fact that animals such as these – whose body parts or secretions they commonly eat are endearing individuals; and by the fact that these rather sweet images are painted in the artist's blood.



Figure 3: *Offering (Lola)*, 2007, artist's blood on linen tea towels, 71 x 49cm

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As I had anticipated, the blood browned quite quickly, so that the paintings appear to be sepia toned, monochromatic images that aren't obviously painted using blood. This allows the initial engagement to be with the image itself rather than with the fact that it was painted in blood. The intention is that, on discovering the nature of the painting medium used, the viewer would be caused to consider the matter of these animals as flesh and blood.

It was essential that the blood used was *my* blood, as I see these works as gestures of solidarity with those animals that are killed in their billions for meat, milk, and eggs; as a kind of offering, a symbolic giving up of my blood, a recognition of the spilling of the blood of these animals and of the fact that their blood stains the kitchens of most Australian homes. I intentionally wanted to source crisp, white linen tea towels, with the use of linen a clear reference to the linen normally used by artists, while the use of the tea-towels also makes obvious and important references to the domestic kitchen setting, where these animals' bodies are prepared for eating, and where a tea-towel might easily become stained with the blood of the meat being prepared.¹

¹ Although it was not a part of the original intention of the works, I recognise that there are possible religious connotations in this sense of a symbolic 'offering', a kind of small sacrifice that could also suggest a connection between the blood-stained linen of the tea-towels with the shroud of Turin. This is of course dangerous (but interesting) ground to tread.