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Visualising Anthropocene Extinctions: Mapping affect in the works of Naeemah Naeemaei

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Abstract

While many writers have advocated the importance of narrative as a means of engaging with the problem of extinction, this paper considers what the qualities of visual aesthetics bring to this field. In addressing this question, the discussion turns to the problem of the ethical limits of art raised by Adorno and takes a theoretical turn away from posthumanism to consider how visual responses can redirect attention back to human agency. The focus of visual analysis is on five paintings by the contemporary Iranian artist Naeemeh Naeemaei. Neither exclusively Western nor overtly internationalist in their approach, these artworks refer to the effects of both hunting and the erosion of trans-national habitats as causes of extinction, yet they also show how human affective responses to extinction can extend across geopolitical borders to a more global imaginary. As such, Naeemaei's artworks are regarded as a form of immanent critique of anthropogenic forcing. Her works adapt older traditions in Persian humanism and art to show not only how the human dominion of nonhuman animals has led to extinction, but also how this leads to an almost incalculable sense of human loss. I argue that Naeemaei's affective imagery of loss is not simply yet another example of how the lifeworld of animals can only be understood from an anthropocentric worldview, but instead points to our inability to yet fully register the immeasurable losses of extinction and what this yet uncharted grief might imply for potential human agency.

Keywords

Extinction, Anthropocene, Affect, Visual Culture, Art

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This being human is a guest house.
 Every morning a new arrival.
 A joy, a depression, a meanness,
 Some momentary awareness comes
 As an unexpected visitor.

The Guest House, Rumi (1207-1273)

Introduction

At a juncture in history when humans and domesticated species comprise at least 96% of the earth's animal biomass (Yinon et al.), the lives, and lifeworlds of the remaining non-domesticated animals have become increasingly precarious. At this pivotal point, as the processes of anthropogenic forcing lead to unprecedented rates of global extinctions,¹ human affective responses to the crisis are shaped by a global range of variable conditions, and are obviously complex. In identifying the particular challenges and advantages of visual culture, however, this article aims to untangle some of those complex feelings as they are communicated through affective visual imagery. At the same time, it seeks to provide a more situated knowledge of those affects by focusing on how the impact of extinction is understood locally and reconfigured in the global context of contemporary art.

In addressing these dual aims, I will focus on the works of the Iranian artist Naeemeh Naeemaei: not only as compelling artworks, but also because while not exclusively Western in orientation they represent endangered animals in the varied habitats of earth, sea and sky extending across a wide geo-political terrain. Naeemaei's emotionally charged depictions of threatened animals are grounded in the specific challenges of local ecosystems, yet I suggest they also address a global imaginary in which the language of bodily gestures has the capacity to convey intense emotions across geo-political boundaries. I also argue that far from adopting the current Western orientation towards posthumanism, Naeemaei's artworks draw on Persian traditions that are essentially humanist, though they also refute human essentialism.

While one of the most enabling qualities of visual culture is its capacity to extend beyond social and geo-political borders, there are of course, exceptions to this even in the field

of representational or figural imagery. Hence while a keeling curve, for example, or other graphic illustrations of climate change are almost universally intelligible, the visual nuances of cultural differences are not always so clear. In the case of artworks about extinction, social differences can obviously also inhibit knowledge of local species, though in figurative art the imagery of nonhuman animals in interaction with human gestures can at least convey something of the emotional range of the relationships between them.

While a strong case has been made for the importance of stories, or narratives of extinction (Rose et al. 1-17; Heise; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*), there are related, yet different issues pertaining to the question of a visual aesthetics of extinction, and not least because urban visual media are saturated with images of animals as semiotic inducements to commodity consumption. These range from visual cues calling for the direct consumption of animal bodies themselves, to images of animals as indices of desire for products as varied as cars, clothing, petrol or perfume. Moreover, that complicated nexus of feelings about animals as the signs or actual objects of human desires is not easily distinguished from deeper emotional currents arising from the *longue durée* of animals as constituents of the human. In this largely unacknowledged history, nonhuman animals not only enabled our capacity to understand the world and thrive in it but are at the very bedrock of our emotional connections to it. We are, in short, so deeply interpellated by historical contradictions in human relations with nonhuman animals (including how we represent them to ourselves) that it is difficult to negotiate how to encounter extinction in ways that will enable its prevention, even as extinction is the very process that unquestionably impoverishes human agency itself. It should be noted, however, that in asking how we represent extinction in human self-images, the 'we' I refer to here does not include people in Traditional Knowledge Systems, but those in urban cultures of the developed nations that have extracted most wealth from the domination of global habitats. For similar reasons, I also refer to the works of Adorno as a Western philosopher engaged in the critique of modernity in its most intense phases of the domination of both human and nonhuman nature.

As the effects of climate change and the global attrition of biodiversity become increasingly unstable, photojournalistic images of stressed, endangered, and sometimes broken animals have become commonplace. These include the typically charismatic creatures of

campaigns for habitat and species protection where the image of a mediagenic animal can be overburdened by its semiotic abduction as the representation of an entire species and varied ecosystems. In the rarefied sphere of contemporary art where representational codes are more complex, the image of a particular animal can carry this same burden as an abstract embodiment of species-life, and this can also entail the problematic question of how a lifeworld reduced to suffering can be objectified by its aestheticization. It is true that visual representations of humans killing animals have very ancient origins, but my general point of contention here has more to do with problems of the particular scale of extinctions in late modernity rather than the endurance of anthropocentrism as such. Hence, at least in the context of the current discussion, my aim here is to privilege the specific challenges to aesthetic representations of Anthropocene extinctions over more general questions of the ontological viability of human attempts to speak for the (subaltern) animal's life and death.

Aesthetics are now as much constituted by the imagery of photojournalism, social media or global politics as they are by art or poetry, but the problem at hand is whether a reconciliation between the qualities of visual poetics and the slow violence of species extermination has become increasingly untenable. Indeed, in the case of a general social critique as uncompromising as Adorno's for example, many believed that because he thought the Nazi extermination camps revealed the fundamental social values of late modernity, that poetry was no longer even possible.² As is widely understood, however, Adorno was not predicting the death of the poetic as such, but instead insisting on an art robust enough to resist assimilation by the very processes that had not only rationalised the death camps, but had also continued to infiltrate the dominant socio-economic and political values of the post-war world. Moreover, Adorno's understanding of the 'idea of natural history' was that it unfolded as a dialectical process in which the history of nature is a human historical construct yet is simultaneously one in which human history is a product of nature (Adorno, *The Idea of Natural History*, 111). And as recent revaluations of Adorno suggest, his dialectical approach to nature prefigured the progressive strains in ecocriticism (Johansson 66) while providing a more constructive approach to the challenges of the Anthropocene than the totalising discourses of neo-vitalism or conversely, an absolute alienation from nature (Flodin). Adorno also placed a great deal of

emphasis on the potential of art as a way to see past the constructions of ‘second nature’ to a clearer vision of the nonhuman world (on which I aim to expand in my case study of the works of Naeemeh Naeemaei).

For all his focus on human socio-cultural production then, Adorno saw culture as something that could not be conceived as separate from nature, just as domination and barbarism were not things that human beings simply inflicted on one another, but also on nonhuman animals and nature more generally. This is evident in an observation first published in 1945 when Adorno identified the connection between the ethnocidal racism of the pogroms and contempt for animals:

The outrage over atrocities decreases, the more the ones affected are unlike normal readers... The ceaselessly recurrent expression that savages, blacks, Japanese resemble animals, or something like apes, already contains the key to the pogrom. The possibility of this latter is contained in the moment that a mortally wounded animal looks at a human being in the eye. The defiance with which they push away this gaze – ‘it’s after all only an animal’ – is repeated irresistibly in atrocities to human beings, in which the perpetrators must constantly reconfirm this ‘only an animal’, because they never entirely believed it even with animals. (*Minima Moralia* 68)

Others, of course, have also made the connection between nonhuman animals and human victims of the holocaust (Derrida; Patterson) as they have of connections between nonhuman and human slaves (Boisseron; Spiegel). Yet while the problem of extinction can be differentiated to some extent from regimes of violent incarceration and deliberate extermination, there is also a comparable inchoate violence involved in witnessing such events, or at least in the role of the complicit or quietly acquiescent witness. In the case of extinctions, we are all complicit witnesses to some extent, though as I will aim to explain in the case of Naeemaei’s works, artworks have the potential to offer witnessing, as it were, as a reflective process of witnessing itself.

Since Adorno's death in 1969, humanity has eradicated over 60% of the world's mammals, birds, fish and reptiles (WWF), and though the crisis was significantly less acute in Adorno's time, his comments on zoos and the cultural obsession with dinosaurs reveal insights on what was then only just barely visible as a prospective crisis:

The hope excited by the presence of what is most ancient, is that animal creation might survive the injustice done to them by human beings, if not humanity itself, and bring forth a better species, which finally succeeds. Zoological gardens originated from the same hope. They are laid out on the model of Noah's ark, for ever since they have existed, the bourgeois class has been waiting for the Biblical flood. The use of zoos for entertainment and instruction seems to be a thin pretext... The lion bred on the farm is as domesticated as the horse, which has long since become subject to birth-control. But the millennium has not dawned. Only the irrationality of culture itself, the nooks and crannies of the city, in which the walls, towers and bastions of zoos are crammed, are capable of preserving nature. The rationalization of culture, which opens a window to nature, thereby completely absorbs it and abolishes along with difference also the principle of culture, the possibility of reconciliation. (*Minima Moralia* 74)

For Adorno, art and poetics are situated at the very core of social history: where the potential of immanent critique faces almost inconceivable challenges as the world pivots precariously between civilisation and barbarism. And though this text was written in the mid-20th century, it does not occupy a domain of *afterthought*, the *postmodern* or *posthuman*, but one of immanent critique. As such, despite his position in exile from Europe, Adorno writes from a position *inside* modernity, inside, as he puts it, 'the nooks and crannies' of the 'irrationality of culture'. It is thus from niches in the interior of meta-narratives such as humanism where critique is poised to confront the inhumane in the human, and the knife-edge risk of a modern condition reduced to a state of barbarism. To locate Adorno in a position that resists the posthuman is not to agree with Jay Bernstein's suggestion that Adorno was an anti-Enlightenment romantic seeking a re-enchantment of nature (Bernstein 32-4) – a claim also made by Ray Brassier. But rather to concur with the recent caveat raised by Caleb Basnett that the kind of enchantments which

Adorno disavows are those aspects of Enlightenment thought engaged in the domination of nature (102). And in response to much of the casual anti-scientific approach in posthumanist discourse, I also want to make the fairly obvious point that not all post-Enlightenment scientific thought, or even techno-scientific developments, necessarily entail domination, and they may be actively critical of domination, as is clearly evident in most forms of climate science and conservation biology.

If the Greek etymological roots of barbarism signified all that lay beyond the sphere of Greek language and civilisation, its meaning in late modernity can no longer be limited to a lack of European or Western values but is drawing closer to the notion of a complete absence of any civilised values at all. Postcolonial theory has in any case ably refuted claims for the superiority of European civilisation: including the agenda to civilise the land and animals of European colonies with all their largely unforeseen ecological consequences (Grove). As is well known, Adorno was not exactly restrained in his contempt for what he regarded as the barbarism of much Western popular culture, especially if it was American (Adorno, 'The Culture Industry'). In contemporary usage, references to barbarism can also be a way of registering disgust for acts of extreme cruelty or brutality, and this certainly extends to the outrage in popular media in response to acts of exceptional cruelty to animals which are widely described as barbaric.³

On the other hand, unexceptional barbarism in the treatment of animals often remains unremarked, and in everyday language at least, the casual violence of the factory farm and abattoir, or the slow, inexorable violence of the extinctions that are the concern of this current account, are not commonly described as barbaric.

This approach to immanent critique does not eschew humanism as such, because to do this would be to approach a disavowal of responsibility for the continuation of destructive human agency. Which is to say, the kind of disavowal in Andreas Malm's implication that there is something barbaric about the posthuman refutation of the human at the very point of humanities' most destructive moment (Malm 115). In considering what comes *after* posthumanism (Weinstein and Colebrook), along with Adorno's dialectical approach to relations between human and nature, I want to turn to a form of eco-humanism, or as William

Connolly put it recently to an ‘entangled humanism’ (Connolly), as a theoretical turn away from the posthuman towards a stronger focus on human agency in the degradation of non-human life-worlds.

On this view, since posthumanists are very likely as involved in anthropogenic change as the rest of us, and are at least also complicit in witnessing the global extinction of nonhuman species, the concept is hardly immune from what Habermas referred to as ‘performative contradiction’. In short, by avoiding the kind of posthumanist adaptation of new materialism that privileges a fairly flat ontological relation between the human and nonhuman, I turn instead to how the all-too-human capacity for animal extermination can be assessed alongside shifts in human affective responses to extinction emerging in contemporary culture. This focus is based on the view that at this point of global crisis, a full acknowledgement of the obvious differences in power and agency between human and nonhuman animals is preferable to choosing this particular juncture to focus on how the human is constituted by the nonhuman.

This is not to say that we are not so constituted; indeed, the evolutionary connections between the human and nonhuman have been understood scientifically for well over a century. But as Derrida pointed out over two decades ago, the evolutionary theory that inflicted such a deep wound to the supernaturalism of human exceptionalism has made little difference to the exploitative industrialisation of animal life and ecocide. We have, so to speak, soothed our wounds, at least for now. Or so it seems, since the full implications of the prospect of extinctions on a global scale are only starting to emerge at the level of human affects.

Such affective responses are so replete with the emotional residue of an instrumentalist approach to nonhuman animals that it may at first be difficult to see how deep a wound will be made by their permanent absence. We have not yet really grasped what a human world without the thousands of species we take for granted will actually feel like. Yet consistent with the anthropomorphic contours of this logic, a new cultural imaginary of loss, grief and mourning is emerging which while steeped in resemblances between human and animal finitude, is also inevitably grounded in reflections on human mortality. In the passage from the imagined extinction of the animal lifeworld to human grief and bereavement, the meagre affective

response of sentimentalism is always possible. Yet there is also scope for more robust feelings of tenderness towards nonhuman creatures which are nonetheless indivisible from the recognition of human responsibility for the loss of their worlds.

Naeemeh Naeemaei

Recent paintings by the Iranian artist Naeemeh Naeemaei convey a quiet, yet intense feeling of tender apprehension for endangered animals, and a less restrained sense of grief for those that have become extinct. Naeemaei currently lives in the US, but her work is replete with memories of Iran and stories from her family's history in the Kajpur district to the northwest of the country, near the land-bound Caspian Sea. While she was supportive of Iran's environmental movement and has held exhibitions in Tehran, there are trans-nationalist currents in her work that make it available to wider audiences through images suggesting inchoate connections between the extinction of Iranian species and the regional and global systems of exchange that degrade their habitats.

If internationalism in contemporary art is largely based on conceptual and formal frameworks that are shaped by Western processes of modernity (Philipsen 80-83), there are, as Shmuel Eisenstadt observed, also many modernities, including differences in cultural modernities in the field of aesthetic practices. Such differences are often celebrated in fashionable international art events, though Naeemaei's works are not well known, and in the formalist sense seem to me to have as much to do with ancient Persian culture as they do with the contemporary art world. Her works combine both Western and Iranian aesthetics, including those of scale which in her works is more modest than many of the expansive installations at international biennales, yet which also depart from the intimate scale of traditional Iranian miniatures. As I will go on to suggest, however, Naeemaei's works are influenced by that legacy of sophisticated manuscript and miniature paintings that flowered in the Safavid dynasty from the 16th to the late 18th century, and which itself extended the elaborate animal imagery that had earlier been a feature of Persian pre-Islamic art.⁴ Naeemaei's works do not include the textual scripts that often accompanied miniatures of the Persian Islamic tradition, yet they still bear

traces of the aesthetics of the miniatures in which a highly concentrated and poetic figural imagery provided vivid insights into the early modern Persian world.⁵

To return briefly to the limitations of posthumanism, it is important to note that the history of humanism is not exclusively Western. Edward Said saw it as a far more expansive and potentially emancipatory tradition. And there is a history of Islamic humanism from the mid-8th century Abbasid Caliphate for example, which along with the long legacy of literary humanism in Persia (Dabashi) is avoided in posthumanist accounts targeting the essentialism of Western humanism.

There was a particular tradition in Persian art and poetry where lush gardens typically provided the setting in which human figures were often combined with animals or mythological hybrid creatures (Rohani). Often marvellous in their detail, these images were not represented according to the naturalistic techniques in painting to which early modern Western artists aspired (Grabar). Nor did they aim for rationalist representations of three-dimensional space on a human scale, but instead appealed to viewers through the affective intensities of colour, and diminutive linear depictions of figural form. The texts in Persianate miniatures were often drawn from poetry, yet rather than illustrating their textual sources the imagery presents a kind of visual metonymy in ‘a continuous space that infers a single temporal moment, a representation of one moment in time’ (Roxburgh 24).

Unlike the Western traditions of an everyday world conveyed by naturalism or perspectival depth then, Naeemaei’s paintings share certain aspects of this Persian humanist tradition in their abstracted stage-like scenes where animals interact with silent human gestures. In this sense, her paintings refute prosaic depictions of the visible world by privileging poetic compressions of time as the creatures of the Anthropocene are captured in fatal moments of transition. Yet as such, they also depart from discursive connections with Persian cultural tradition, because they are images frozen as still points in time that are defined by *absence* rather than the vivid presences of more familiar stories. As tableaux composed with recognisably Iranian species, Naeemaei’s animals belong to local habitats, yet they are also trans-national biopolitical creatures captured in a metonymic bind with a more extensive, indeed global,

anthropogenic process marked by the unintentional effects of climate change, the more purposeful annexation of habitats, and even deliberate programs of annihilation.

The attempt to intentionally eradicate an entire species was a significant factor in the extinction of the Caspian Tiger, a sub-species that once flourished in Iran which was featured in a painting from a suite of works Naeemaei completed in 2011. Of those works I discuss here, this is the only painting in which humans encounter an animal that is extinct rather than endangered by extinction. The Caspian Tiger was once native to the littoral zones of the Caspian Sea that today comprise part of a tense geopolitical region dominated by the five modern energy producing states of Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia. The Caspian Sea itself is in a critical condition of ecological decay due to pollution and overfishing, while access to its extensive reserves of oil and gas continues to be disputed between the bordering nation states. The Caspian Tiger's traditional habitat extended right across the North Asian region of Turkestan into China, a vast terrain colonised in the mid-19th century by the Russian Empire. By the early 20th century, the Russian government introduced an intensive agricultural campaign that aimed not only to develop much of the tigers' habitat of riparian woodlands (*Tugai*) but also specifically targeted the Caspian Tiger for extermination (Leys). These attempts to annihilate the species occurred in Russian territory, but the deer and boar which were the tiger's prey were also widely hunted in Iran, where many tigers were shot by farmers for attacking livestock. These factors, combined with the abduction of tiger cubs as display animals, led to their serious depletion in Iran (Faizolahi 9), and by the mid-20th century the species had become extinct.

In response to this inexorable process, Naeemaei's *Caspian Tiger* (2011, fig. 1) depicts an imagined *tableau vivant* with four veiled, and faceless, Iranian women who have encountered a fatally wounded tiger. This tiger remains standing amongst them despite bloodied bullet wounds to the leg and at the back of the head. It usually took more than one bullet to kill a tiger (Faizolahi), and in this scene the tiger, which was the last of its kind, at first appears to have the physical strength to endure his/her injuries since despite his/her wounds, the tiger seems able to accept the women's embraces. Yet just as he/she may seem ennobled by this act of endurance, this notion is quickly dispelled by the realisation that the tiger is presented in art only by dint of

a violation in life, and is revived from the past precisely because of a pathetic vulnerability to human weapons, and ultimately by the finality of absence.

It has been argued that one of the unintended consequences of the widespread representation of charismatic species in culture and marketing has led to the perception that iconic species are flourishing, whereas in reality this has led to the paradoxical situation where many of the ‘charismatic’ and most loved species are in fact at a high risk of extinction (Courchamp et al.).

Yet, by default, this cultural logic could also work in reverse in stories or artworks where the emotional appeal of animals such as the tiger⁶ is encountered in images of vulnerability and loss, rather than as icons of human ideas of power, ferocity, freedom, or whatever other cultural associations are invested in tigers- including, in the case of Asian medicines, masculine erotic potency. As Nicholas Mirzoeff observes, ‘The Anthropocene is so built in to our senses that it determines our perceptions, hence it is aesthetic’ (223), yet this not to say that aesthetics cannot act as immanent critique to divert these same perceptions in accord with what Mirzoeff calls ‘countervisuality’, and it does not necessarily follow that ‘countervisuality’ should require non-conventional genres or innovative technique.



Figure 1. Naeemeh Naeemaei, *Caspian Tiger*, 2011. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 117 x 190 cm. ©Naeemeh Naeemaei. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

In this work time and history are condensed into a single moment after the manner of Persianate miniatures. But it is also a moment densely compressed by millennia of species-life transformed as a single image of an event recorded in 1959 when the last Caspian Tiger was shot. This historical point then, extends far into the tiger's evolutionary past, yet is also a transitional moment leading unequivocally to a future world forever bereft of Caspian Tigers. Despite talk of rewilding in plans to introduce the closely related Siberian Tiger in the Tugai regions of Kazakhstan,⁷ the Caspian Tiger is now irrevocably lost, and the sheer weight of grief in this work excludes any redemptive programme for the tiger's return.

If this affective intensity of grief cannot provide redemption, it does at least present a human imaginary enabling the capacity to feel the unfathomable loss of extinction, and while it is the very finality and depth of this loss that resists any discourse of salvation, it opens up new ways of disclosing our interdependence with the nonhuman world. It is this kind of last-seconds-before-midnight dialectical potential that Adorno aimed for in his disclosure that the human domination of nature at least retained the possibility of reconciliation. Deborah Bird Rose put the challenges to this kind of potentially recuperative disclosure well when she wrote some time ago of the loss of Australian habitats:

There is no former time/space of wholeness to which we might return or which might resurrect ourselves... nor is there a posited future wholeness which may yet save us. Rather, the work of recuperation seeks glimpses of illumination, and aims toward engagement and disclosure. The method works as an alternative both to methods of closure and suspicion and to methods of proposed salvation. (24)

Naeemai made a daring move designed to disclose the gravity of the extinction of the Caspian Tiger in her own country by basing the figural composition of this work on one of the most well-known modern religious paintings in Iran, Mahmoud Farshchian's *The Evening of Ashura* (1976).⁸ In Farshchian's work a wounded white horse is surrounded by veiled, mourning

women in precisely the poses adapted by Naeemaei in whose own painting the horse is replaced by the Caspian Tiger.

Farshchian's religious picture recounts a long tradition of respect accorded to a much-loved, beautiful horse called Zuljanah who belonged to the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet gave Zuljanah to his grandson Husayn ibn Ali, and it was this same Zuljanah who carried Husayn into the fateful *Battle of Karbala* in the year 680, where Husayn was killed. The injured Zuljanah returned to Husayn's family without him and was said to have wept for his martyrdom. In Iran the story of the death of Husayn ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shia Islam, is commemorated as an important religious observance known as the *Mourning of Muharram* or *Ashura*. And as an annual public holiday, Ashura is widely observed as a day of commemorating Shia identity in the Muslim world, when public processions combined with prayer and poetry recitals are held as expressions of mourning and lamentation for Husayn ibn Ali's death. The public display of mourning during Ashura includes men chest-beating and weeping: during which a horse representing the loyal Zuljanah is often brought into the procession. Naeemaei's reference to

Farshchian's painting of Zuljanah, then, brings many layers of cultural history to the image of the Caspian Tiger: a creature placed in the same pictorial position as noble animal sacrificed in holy war.

To the left of Naeemaei's tiger, a sense of grief is palpable in the faceless figures of the two veiled women whose bodies are slumped together in resignation, as their hands form gestures of shared grief. The figure standing behind the tiger is Naeemaei herself, who faces the viewer only to collapse against the animal's body as she covers her face in a complex gesture suggesting shame coupled with sorrow. It is in the figure of the woman to the right, however, where the affective range of the picture seems most intense. She kneels before the animal in a gesture in which her body is not only weighed down by sorrow, but also suggests reverence mixed with contrition. This woman holds the tiger's massive head in a tender and familiar embrace that would seem to be an incongruous gesture towards such a formidable predator if it were not for the way her bowed head is pressed intimately against the tiger's head. The

only eyes visible are those of the tiger who appears to look directly into his/her own absence in death.

The emotional nuances of the painting are rendered more sombre by the weighty palette in the depiction of the sky and sparse setting. This first appears to be a fairly anonymous landscape, but is actually one of the rice fields that together with various other agricultural developments displaced the tigers' habitat of riparian woodlands. Above all, however, it is the interplay of human bodily gestures surrounding the powerful figure of the tiger that condenses a range of affective responses to extinction: a complex interplay of loss, sorrow, grief, resignation, reverence, and tenderness. This then, is the affective range of responses to the death of a species as it is focused in the final moments of an individual lifeworld, and they are presented simultaneously as the complex nexus of emotions experienced as bereavement.

The standard stage-theory of human bereavement on the other hand, identifies five phases of a psychological process in which denial, anger, bargaining and depression are followed eventually by acceptance (Kübler-Ross). Unsurprisingly, this account of sequential emotions has been contested, and not least because of all the variables of social circumstances (Maciejewski et al.). In cases of natural death, for example, expectation or preparedness is a key factor in resilience following mourning while in cases of unexpected human death the phase of shock or denial is more prolonged. Where this leaves human emotional preparedness in a world suffering a grave loss of biodiversity is a more complicated question, but perhaps the essential question is the extent to which even prolonged human grief about extinction of one species leaves open the possibilities for resilience of another. Crisis is said to focus the mind, yet adaptation to prolonged crises is another matter and a state of grief followed by acceptance of a planetary crisis entailing death of millions of nonhuman lifeforms may yet prove intolerable.

The study of emotional affects in everyday life has recently been the subject of the 'affective turn' in social and cultural theory which has largely turned away from the primacy of reason to privilege bodily affects (Thrift; Massumi; Damasio). Spinoza is often cited as a seminal thinker in this context, though typically through a Deleuzean lens. There are of course many Spinozas, including for example, the studies of his contribution to the secular rationalism and

liberal traditions of Enlightenment political thought that are often marginalised in current cultural theory (Gaukroger; Israel). Distinctions in the reception of Spinoza lie beyond the current discussion, but suffice to say, the Spinoza of recent affect theory is one favouring the primacy of bodily sensations and affective intensities that in Brian Massumi's view are 'irreducibly bodily and autonomic' (28).

Yet as Ruth Leys argues in her astute critique of affect theory, the concept of autonomous emotional affects operating prior to cognition is to separate them from the mind in ways that effectively presuppose a dualist position. As with the case for recognising human agency in the context of posthumanism, however, in my view cognitive agency cannot be separated quite so neatly from emotional and bodily affects (Williams). This is not only important in understanding evolutionary processes, but also in retaining the political agency of reason in the context of environmental crisis.

As many affect theorists have noted, Darwin identified primary emotions common to human and nonhuman animals. What is less commonly discussed, however, are Darwin's observations on how the emotional/cognitive capacities of species are unevenly distributed in adaptation to environmental factors, especially by the human and nonhuman animal memory of specific conditions enabling the cultural, (and in the case of some species, technological) transmission of experience. This is certainly not to suggest that all emotions are culturally specific, nor that they are all intentional or even communicable, but instead to point to a heterogeneity of human and nonhuman feelings intricately enmeshed with cognitive processes and shaped by both bodily and socio-historical conditions. This is, of course, all a matter of degree: a tiger or a bird cannot prevail over bullets, nor a fish over poisonous water, but the differentiation between human and nonhuman feeling in relation to territorialism may not be that distinct, and (as Bentham famously observed) the capacity for suffering affects all sentient beings. It may also be the case that when it comes to predatory hunting, a certain sense of empathy is needed in order to understand the object of prey, and though it has not yet been shown, who is to say that key predators such as tigers empathise with prey in purely instinctual/emotional ways that imply they lack the theory of mind ascribed to human hunters? Whatever is passing through the mind of Naeemaei's tiger in his/her dying moments is as

difficult to understand as any speculation on the thoughts of any other being at such a moment. We can only barely conceive mortality even in human others, yet all beings struggle against it, and the grieving gestures of the women also allude subtly and speculatively to the tiger's own feelings.

In a work of 2011, *Siberian Crane* (fig. 2), Naeemaei presented an image of herself holding a copy of the Koran, the sacred book of Islam, over the head of a white Siberian crane. It is a gesture based on a traditional Iranian custom of blessing travellers before embarking on a journey, in this case a perilous 5,000-kilometre migratory journey along the coast of the Caspian Sea to Uvat in the oilfields of western Siberia.⁹ Thousands of Western Cranes once travelled this route, while Eastern Siberian cranes followed a different migratory path to China to a summer habitat now increasingly threatened by the Three Gorges Dam project. The Western Crane was thought to be extinct until around twenty years ago a pair was spotted in Iran where they were given the Farsi names of Omid (hope) and Arezu (wish). Like many birds, these cranes mate for life, and when in 2008, the female of the pair, Arezu, was shot by hunters, Omid had to continue his long journey alone. Naeemaei does not aim to map the vast migratory range of these cranes, yet it is somehow incorporated in the cartography of affects she presents to the viewer. Human viewers can only speculate on the complex trajectory of the trans-regional map within the mind of the crane, or on what other memories of loss, or sense of apprehension Omid may have felt at the moment of embarkation. But there is a more assured sense of apprehension in this work that is based on what kinds of human violence he is likely to encounter.



Figure 2. Naeemeh Naeemaei, *Siberian Crane*, 2011.

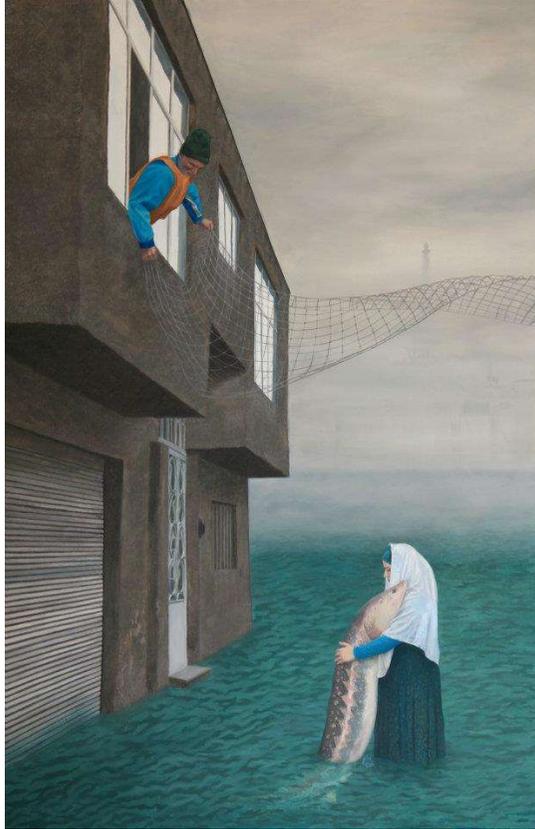
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 152 x210 cm.

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Siberian Cranes have an impressively wide wingspan, and at around 140 cm in height also approach a bodily scale familiar to humans. This comparative scale is clear in Naeemaei's painting where the colours of Omid's white plumage and red beak are also carried through as points of resemblance in the artist's white dress and red veil as she imparts her blessing of hope.¹⁰ Here, as elsewhere, the figure of the artist bears witness to immanent extinction, whilst becoming surrogate witness to a more general human witnessing of extinction. And just as the *Caspian Tiger* as the last of a species could never be merely fungible, so Omid is depicted as an individual living being. If Naeemaei imbued the lost lifeworld of the dying tiger with immeasurable grief, the mood in this image of Omid's transitory world of the skies and wetlands is quieter and more elegiac. The last individual of an extinct species are now known as endlings (Jørgenson), and as in the religious references in the *Caspian Tiger*, this work also captures a single, transitional moment in which Naeemaei solemnly presents the imprimatur of Islam both to Omid on what may well be his final flight, and to her audiences in the Tehran exhibition. In

that context, Omid's name was widely understood as a sign of hope, yet also one conferring an unavoidable sense of fragility: not simply for the wild birds of Iran but also for the vast geopolitical regions of Omid's world. From the oilfields of China to the polluted Caspian Sea and coastal wetlands of Iran, agricultural, industrial and extractive processes continue at a heightened pace in which the lifeworld of the crane is ever more constricted.

In another work from his period, the *Persian Sturgeon* (fig.3), a large fish emerges from the Caspian Sea to seek refuge in the arms of the artist. A fish native to these waters, the Persian Sturgeon, sometimes known by its Russian name as *Beluga* sturgeon, is listed by the IUCN as critically endangered (which is to say it has an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild) largely due to being fished relentlessly for its eggs, or caviar. The names sturgeon and caviar are derived from Farsi, and both the flesh and eggs of this creature are eaten, but it is the female sturgeon's caviar that is rated as one of the most expensive foods in the world. It is largely this gourmet taste for the sturgeon's non-fertilised roe that has led this species to the brink of extinction. The sturgeon does not reproduce annually, so their eggs are all the more precious for this reason.



Naemeh Naemaei, *Persian Sturgeon*, 2011.

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 190 x 125 cm.

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As with the *Caspian Tiger* and *Siberian Crane*, this painting is from a series of 2011 Naemaei called *Dreams of Extinction* and is based on an actual nightmare where the artist found herself outside her grandmother's house in an old sector of Tehran. In her dream the streets were flooded as an exhausted sturgeon swam into her arms in terror as the fisherman threw his net from above. The dream is captured in an instant, yet extends to a time when every last fish is captured as the suspended net threatens both figures. Like the *Siberian Crane*, the *Persian Sturgeon* is an animal that can be represented on a human bodily scale (since they can grow to over 200 centimetres in length) and though at first glance these similarities in scale seem incongruous because birds and fish are usually smaller than people, they are actually depicted on a naturalistic scale. The comparative scale of human and nonhuman vertebrates such as the crane

and sturgeon also consolidates the viewer's impression of potential shared bodily experiences with the human, especially since for millennia humans, cranes and sturgeon have shared this region despite both fish and birds being part of human diets.¹¹ In the *Siberian Crane* Omid stood patiently to receive the artist's blessing with the holy book, but this scene is recollected from a nightmare when the endangered sturgeon has the agency to swim to the artist who will try to shelter her from the unrelenting violence of the age in which they live.

There are many theories of when the Anthropocene first emerged, including those proposing an early Anthropocene arising with the Agricultural Revolution from around 12,000 to 10,000 BCE in the so-called *Fertile Crescent* where plant species were first domesticated. Iran was one of multiple sites across this region where agriculture emerged, including the domestication of the goat which is now understood to have occurred in the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran (Daly et al., 2021). Towards the end of the *Dreams of Extinction* series, in 2012 Naeemaei completed a work *Silence of the Leopards* (fig. 4) where the implications of the early Anthropocene for non-domesticated species are condensed into one scene.



Figure 4. Naeemeh Naeemaei *Silence of the Leopards* 2012.

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 180 x75 cm.

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Here, the artist is surrounded by leopards as she stands before a farmer with his herd of goats and sheep. Their meeting is neither confrontational nor compatible, but instead represents the meeting of two worlds. In one, the world of agriculture, domesticated species are ensured a

future in the domain of human desires; in the other, those animals that remain beyond the agricultural system are presented with a highly uncertain future in the same domain. On the rare occasions when leopards attack humans in Iran, they usually injure men herding sheep or goats (Parchizadeh and Belant), which in turn of course further endangers leopards. Yet there can be little doubt that for all their associations with danger, and perhaps especially as keystone predators of goats and sheep, leopards occupy a powerful place in the human imaginary, as is suggested by this work where the engendered images of these two worlds meet.

It is this potential that Naeemaei developed in her most recent series of works: *Mina and the Leopard*, from which, in conclusion, I will discuss one work from 2019, *The Moon Falls a Thousand Times* (fig. 5).



Naeemeh Naeemaei, *The Moon Falls a Thousand Times*, 2019.

Acrylic and oil on canvas 188 x 147.

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This work is one of the series based on an Iranian folktale about a young woman and a leopard from the beautiful little village of Kandeloos in the Alborz mountains near the coastal region of the Caspian Sea. The Persian Leopard in this story is a native of the Iranian plateau that extends into the Caucasus and Russia to the northwest, and to Turkey in the south. Notwithstanding the cultural history of revering leopards in this region that goes back to the Neolithic era, the Persian leopard is now an endangered species which (despite legal protection) is still poached, poisoned and otherwise threatened.¹²

Like the other works in this leopard series, the painting has a strong basis in narrative, and I earlier acknowledged several writers who have made a case for the importance of narrative in responding to extinction. Yet I have also raised questions on the related, if different, issues pertaining to a visual aesthetics of extinction, and in this instance Naeemaei has developed a visual means of compressing and reconfiguring a legend local to the area of Iran familiar to her.

This is the story of Mina who many years ago used to sing as she collected firewood in the hills. Naeemaei has depicted the particular habitat of the forest in this area where a male leopard first saw Mina and began to follow her lovely voice as she sang. Gradually, in this way Mina and the leopard became friends. After he followed her back into the village one evening, however, a young man who was very taken with Mina and had grown jealous of the leopard gathered some of the other men before tracking him down and shooting him. After the leopard died, Mina left the village in deep sorrow, never to return.

When Naeemaei visited Kandeloos, she talked to many of the older people who remembered a girl called Mina. They recalled how she had befriended a leopard the men later shot, and that she had left the village. Whether or not aspects of this story actually occurred, it is nonetheless a narrative combining aspects of how people across Iran, Turkey and the Caucasus both love and revile the leopard. In Naeemaei's work the image of a woman carrying a dead leopard over her shoulders is also entwined with a more widely known myth across this region in which a leopard was so taken with the beauty of the moon that he wanted to surpass it, so he jumped high off the mountain trying to reach over the moon only to fall back to earth and die. This is a story about the pride and beauty of leopards as the unrivalled predators of their

lifeworlds, but Naeemaei reimagines it through the figure of herself as Mina as she left the village at night to grieve for the leopard in the forest.

At 50-60 kilos, the weight of even a young leopard's body would weigh heavily on a woman's shoulders, yet the visual effect here (as in the case of the Siberian Crane) is again one that invites a comparison with human scale, even if, like tigers, leopards are respected as creatures that could easily prevail over an unarmed human. In this work, the leopard is an apex predator who does finally traverse the moon, or at least as it appears here shattered into the form of its many phases. As such, over time it is a victory that can only occur in death as his pride is brought down by the hunters.

In Naeemaei's *Silence of the Leopards*, the figure of the artist standing amongst the leopards suggests an engendered sense of empathy for the creatures of the wild, which is again reinforced in the figure of the artists as Mina as the female body and lunar cycles are drawn together at a single moment in time. This is not to suggest that Naeemaei is making an essentialist connection between women and nature, but rather that she reconfigures long held cultural traditions in which notions of 'untamed' female sexuality has been associated with the beauty and independence of leopards. While leopard skins have certainly been used to symbolise patriarchal power,¹³ the mythopoetic connections between women and cats are more widely known. And just as the idea of the tiger appeals to some Asian markets as a semiotic of male potency, so the 'wild-cat' image of female eroticism has become a familiar enough cliché in women's fashions. The undomesticated/aristocratic 'chic' of the real leopard-skin coat is a case in point, when as recently as 1962 both Queen Elizabeth and Jackie Kennedy wore leopard skin coats which led to a luxury fashion trend resulting in the deaths of thousands of leopards from various habitats. The International Fur Trade Federation banned leopard skin items in 1975, and to wear such an item today would very likely meet social disapproval, yet this has not limited the consumption of vast numbers of faux leopard skin items. Since fur was one of the very first forms of clothing there is an atavistic tendency in wearing even synthetic animal prints which from tacky leopard-printed polyester to the insouciant urban chic of fake coats seem to have an enduring appeal.

But what is it that really imbues leopards with the appeal they continue to hold for human beings? In many ways, Naeemaei's work provides some of the answers to this question. In Western commodity culture, the synthetic leopard semiotic may privilege the wild over the domesticated, independence over the tameness of the herd, or the predator over prey, but this is only made possible by the dualities through which the sign is determined. Hence one way of looking at Naeemaei's work without necessarily knowing the Iranian narrative, is that it presents a visual condensation of those dualities signified by the image of a wild leopard carried as a dead weight by a woman stricken in grief. It indicates a burden carried in a funereal passage across time, yet it is also a visual account of a love story between a woman and a wild animal that compresses a dilemma at the core of an emerging global imaginary of Anthropocene extinctions. As with Naeemaei's other works, it also presents us with a new kind of map navigating a range of human emotions in this imaginary, and one that can be read from different perspectives.

The picture presents the figure of a woman – synonymous with both artist and viewer – who retreats with a dead leopard into a dark forest, and hence into an ever-diminishing lifeworld. In one sense this is an image of retreat from the world. Yet as she is returning to the forest with the dead body of a wild animal who in following her wandered too far into the human world, it could also be said that she is retreating from barbarism. This is not simply the barbarism of deliberate extirpation we are witnessing here, but also a witnessing of the casual, and unwitting barbarism of the world from which she turns away.

Notes

¹ As is well known, there have been five earlier global extinction events, but the claim here is that the sixth is an event unprecedented in human history. In conservative estimates, current rates of extinction are inferred to be at least 100 times greater than the prehistoric rates unaffected by human intervention (Lamkin and Miller). While the Living Planet Index indicates over 60 per cent decline in global populations of mammals, birds, reptiles and fish since 1970 (WWF), and a further 28 per cent of species are now threatened with extinction (IUCN).

² Yet a closer reading of what he actually wrote suggests that though he thought art could survive, it ran the risk of a particular kind of barbarism. His caveat to cultural tradition then, was not so much that poetics could not withstand the scale of violence in modern history, but that there was something *barbaric* about a poetics incapable of dialectical engagements with the historical process itself. Hence when he wrote: ‘The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today’. This is clear in Adorno’s original statement in the essay ‘Culture Critique and Society’ (1949) in *Prisms* (MIT Press, 1955, p.34); the misunderstanding was based on a slip in Samuel Weber’s translation of Adorno’s *Prisms* in 1983 for MIT Press, and was later corrected by Frederik van Gelder of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.

³ In 2015, the BBC announced that an ‘Australia Greyhound Report Finds “Barbaric” Cruelty’ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-32955011> . In 2016 approximately 11 million people signed a petition in which a dog meat festival was described as ‘barbaric’. <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/06/13/chinese-activist-gathers-11-million-signatures-boycott-yulin-dog-meat-festival/> . In 2020, *The Guardian* reported, ““Barbaric” Tests on Monkeys Lead to Calls for Closure of German Lab’ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/15/barbaric-tests-on-monkeys-lead-to-calls-for-closure-of-german-lab> , and *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported ““Barbaric” footage shows Australian cattle slaughtered illegally in Indonesia’ . <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/barbaric-footage-shows-australian-cattle-slaughtered-illegally-in-indonesia-20200818-p55mnt.html> . In 2021 the ABC reported ‘WA Man Fined, Banned from Owning Pets after Barbaric “Euthanasia” Attempt On Dogs’ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-27/wa-man-fined-over-failed-dog-euthanasia-banned-from-owning-pets/13095834>, and *The Daily Mail* in 2021: ‘Owner Who Beat His Dog Bonzo to Death in “Barbaric and Tortuous” Attack that Left Pet with more than 25 Rib Fractures Is Jailed’ - <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9864703/Man-killed-dog-barbaric-tortuous-attacks-jailed-four-months.html>

⁴ The redoubtable Iranian lion or *Shir*, for example was often featured in pre-Islamic Persian art (Root 179). It was a species that once flourished in Iran, but by the mid-twentieth century had become extinct in the wild. It is now the subject a breeding program at Tehran zoo.

⁵ I am referring to the western time scale in which early modernity emerged in the 16th Century. According to Sussan Babbaie, in the miniatures of seventeenth-century Safavid Iran included amusing critiques of occidental Christian cultural values.

⁶ In the survey conducted (in the US) by Courchamp et al. (2018) the 10 animals considered the most charismatic by the public was in this order: tiger (*Panthera tigris*), lion (*P. leo*), elephant (*Loxodonta africana*, *L. cyclotis*, and *Elephas maximus*), giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*), leopard

(*P. pardus*), panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*), cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*), gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), and gorilla (*Gorilla beringei* and *G. gorilla*).

⁷ The Tugai regions are in the Syr Darya River valleys where ecosystems were much damaged during the Soviet era due to its diversion into irrigation for rice and cotton. Closer to the sources of the river in the Tian Shan Mountains of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan there is also significant radioactive pollution from uranium mining during the Soviet era.

⁸ Available at <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/451419/Farshchian-s-Evening-of-Ashura-perfect-expression-of-grief>

⁹ In Siberia the white crane was traditionally regarded as a sacred bird, and in local tradition was the animal shamans chose to transform themselves into to enter another world.

¹⁰ There are now attempts to protect the Siberian Crane which is included in the AEWA (Agreement on the conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds) and part of a MOU on the Convention on Migratory Species and it is included in the Bonn Convention for migratory species conferred in 1985, and which now (in recognition of migration as a planetary pattern) extends to a global scale and includes the Islamic Republic of Iran.

¹¹ In more recent times, while Crane meat is considered *halal*, and therefore permitted as food, the religious status of the Sturgeon as a generally scaleless fish is less certain. Traditionally it was regarded as *haram*, or forbidden food, but in 1983 a loophole was found because the sturgeon has some scales on the tailfin and so Ayotollah Khomeini announced it could be eaten. Since then, local consumption has increased, but it is the massive amount of caviar exported from Iran to Western markets as a luxury item of up to \$10,000 US per kilo that has led to its demise. The Caspian sturgeon is an ancient species that can live at least as long as a human life span. It is also migratory so suffers from the damming of rivers and like many other fish in the Caspian Sea has to live in extremely polluted waters.

¹² In 2002 it was estimated that only 550-850 leopards remained in Iran (Kiabi et al.). Since then, a survey published in Proceedings of the International Annual Symposium on

Sustainability Science and Management gave a very conservative estimate of 71 killed by illegal hunting or poisoning between 2007 and 2011, and Iranian media have reported many more killed since then.

¹³ This is largely associated with prowess and prestige in hunting. It is traditional in many African countries, but also extended to the trophies of white hunters such as Teddy Roosevelt who hung several in his office.

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