

## Taxonomy of cryptozoology

Lately I've been listening to Masakatsu Takagi's album *Marginalia II*. The composition articulates summer with a score of crickets, running water, birds chirping, and unidentifiable howls. The touch of a human hand is almost imperceptible, a gentle tap of a piano key that merges all the elements. Layers of nature, humankind, and the obscure blend together—not unlike the drawings from Z'otz\* Collective.

*Two birds (violet). A foot (suntanned in argyle). Two hands (one transparent, the other monster green). A tree branch that has been meticulously sliced into kindling, which is also an arm. The rings of a tree trunk, or maybe a fingerprint.*<sup>1</sup>

Centred in the middle of a crisp white page, *Mirror of Contradictions* reads like a scientific rendering: meticulous drawings of wildlife, ephemera, and structures. A game of snakes and ladders for your eyes, the narrative flows down the paper like a waterfall.

All elements of Z'otz\* Collective's drawings are intertwined: mystical beings and ecological components cradle each other, a line defines an ankle and heel on one side and a tree trunk arm on the other. Like Takagi's melodies, in which a bird cry blends into water then into a note, Z'otz\* Collective creates works that replicate a utopian fluidity between humans and nature. Are we animals? Or, are animals human? What constitutes shelter? A tree canopy or a house? What I'm trying to say is that the work of Z'otz\* Collective generates more questions than answers.

Formed in 2004, Z'otz\* Collective consists of Nahúm Flores, Erik Jerezano, and Ilyana Martínez, each whom also has an independent art practice. Their process includes passing work between each other to create authorless art with a dreamlike quality. It's impossible to tell which artist contributed what; the mix of ink, watercolour, pen, and paint seamlessly bleeds together to create a textured fabric which sits on top of the page. A tiny Z'otz\* stamp performs the role of a collective signature: a figure bent over with its arms swung high behind them, as if it were submitting headfirst to the power of art.

The imaginations of Flores, Jerezano, and Martínez, now extend to the viewer—the fourth collaborator who naturally projects a narrative onto the art. I imagine children have the most confidence in creating their own winding stories to layer on top of the drawings. The rest of us are too nervous to approach art as a collaborator rather than as a spectator. The collective element to Z'otz\*, along with the multi-faceted elements of the work, challenges an art history

hierarchy which places the artist (singular) as all-knowing and the viewer as a passive participant. The symbiotic nature of their work is echoed in the mini-ecosystems depicted on the page and then extended to the viewer, creating a meta-narrative on the value of collaboration.

*A wonky geodesic dome hovers and morphs into a cell as seen through a microscope. Silhouetted animals dance on top of the dome, hieroglyphics float. Below, a bird looks to the left, a staring contest viewer. A hog lazily looks the other way. An arm reaches up, the space between the pinky and ring finger is articulated by a bird.*

This summer the city has returned to nature. I go for a walk one night and see fox cubs running along the beach, black-crowned night-herons, and a trout that jumps out of the water. On the train I see three blue herons. A scrap between raccoons draws my cat's attention. Bats swoop overhead. I feed stray kittens in the woodshed, only to find they leave and do not return. I, along with many other people, start to grow herbs on my windowsill (my mint is dead after a week of neglect). There's a wildness that feels too integrated to be chaotic, the animals echoing a feeling: now we're the ones cooped up, giving them a chance to run free.

Takagi's music features sounds whose sources can't be located—the cicadas screaming, crickets with their frustratingly consistent beats, the howls of an unidentified creature. Z'otz\* Collective pushes things a step further, visualizing things we can't see, that maybe don't even exist. The study of cryptozoology is founded upon the belief that there are animals yet to be discovered. The Komodo dragon, giant panda, and megamouth shark were cryptozoological until the 20th century; before that, only locals believed they existed. Likewise, there are animals thought to be instinct but are not. We think we know everything, but we don't—the surreal animals of Z'otz\* Collective awaken us to this possibility.

The anthropomorphic-yet-unnamed-animals in Z'otz\* drawings aren't depicted as scary or the Other (as often is the case). Instead, there's a tenderness for the unknown, best seen in the way Z'otz\* Collective depicts hands and feet. These extremities are drawn with so much care—like Michelangelo trying to cram all of humanity into the outreached hands of Adam and God. The animal-like hands that repeat throughout Z'otz\* drawings and sculptures are soft (always slack, never fisted), giving valuable insight into the ethos of the work.

*A one-dimensional face (staring). Floating eyes (four). Constellations simplified into acute triangles. Whack-a-mole holes that lead into the inside of a cave. An owl watching over everything.*

Z'otz\* sculptures bulge—appearing at the same time both hard and soft. A trifecta of elements happen at the same time: the bulbous forms extend towards the viewer to depict faces of animals; sketched onto the clay are one-dimensional details; and within the sculpture is a cavern, creating a plausible shelter. There is no front or back to the sculptures. Instead, as you circle the work (like an animal stalking its prey), different stories emerge and retreat. The past, present, and future interact simultaneously.

The face etched on *Owl's Cave* face is reminiscent of Paul Klee's angel. A little goofy and silly, but isn't life? The writer Walter Benjamin famously projected a world of meaning onto Klee's angel (all of history, to be exact):

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. . . . The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>2</sup>

The creatures of the Z'otz\* canon likewise feel all-knowing: their eyes lock with the viewer, guiding them into the work. Their head tilts away, aware of the past and looking towards the future. The ease with which all the elements come together—the artists with the viewer, nature with the manmade, the known with the unknown—feels like a metaphor for the universe.

## Notes

1. This is the soundtrack that plays in my head when looking at Z'otz\* works, my own contribution to the collaboration.
2. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt; trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969): 257–58.

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