

Feral Horses of the San Luis Valley, Colorado

Learning and Teaching Through Wildlife Painting and Photography

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The San Luis Valley of Colorado is a high desert environment at the headwaters of the Rio Grande that also contains marshlands, dunes, lakes, and warm springs. This ecosystem supports a diversity of species and provides the natural grazing lands to populations of antelope, deer, and elk. One of the longtime anthropogenic conditions in the San Luis Valley is a presence of unmanaged feral horses. The ancestors of some of these animals are said to have been left behind by the Spanish 500 years ago. For generations the horses occupied a small corner of the Valley, mostly in Costilla County, between the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and San Pedro Mesa. Their population numbered 100 to 150 head. In the 1980s the number of horses began to grow rapidly, in part due to the eradication of predators – wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions; in part due to warmer winters; in part due to the private owners of domesticated horses choosing to turn their animals loose to join the others roaming the valley. Left unmanaged, the horse herds double in population every 4 years. In 2018, the number of feral horses in San Luis Valley had climbed to over 500, depleting the grazing resources for local farmers, endangering local plants and other animals that depend on them, and causing the horses themselves to suffer from starvation.



As a wildlife artist I aspire to bring awareness to ethical and environmental issues facing animals and their environment. I engage the experience of local communities, current policies of wildlife management, and insights from a range of disciplines in humanities and sciences to develop a body of work that helps tell a story. What I have been learning about the feral horses of San Luis Valley of Colorado provides a counter-narrative to the romanticization of these animals by the tourist industry, popular culture, media representations, and public imagination.

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"Ojito Mountain", Brownie Hills, San Luis Valley



"What Where You Thinking", 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 38x41



"Famine to Feast", 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 35.5 x 55

