



Z'otz* Collective Ode to the Inside Out Questions



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.¹

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 extinct 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.²

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.

Tatum Dooley is a writer and curator living in Toronto. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Bordercrossings*, *Canadian Art*, *Garage*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Lapham's Quarterly*, and *The Walrus*.

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.



Taking its name from the Mayan word for “bat,” **Z’otz* Collective** consists of three artists with Latin American roots who also maintain individual practices: Nahúm Flores (Honduras), Erik Jerezano (Mexico), and Ilyana Martínez (Mexico/Canada). For over fifteen years, these artists have worked collaboratively out of a shared Toronto studio on drawings, paintings, collages, sculptures, and site-specific installations. After completing residencies in Croatia and Serbia, they began to incorporate ceramics into their diverse range of projects.

These projects include a mural for the 2015 Toronto PanAm Games (which garnered the attention of CBC Sports). More recently, the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal commissioned Z’otz* to create a series of ceramic sculptures. These sculptures have in turn become part of the museum’s permanent collection in the recently inaugurated Stephan Crétier and Stéphanie Maillery Wing for the Arts of One World. Z’otz* Collective has also exhibited widely, participating in over 25 solo exhibitions and 40 group exhibitions in Canada, Mexico, the United States, Serbia, and China.

Erik Jerezano was born in Mexico City in 1973. He is a self-taught artist who has exhibited in galleries and artist-run centres across Canada and Mexico. He has been awarded grants from the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council, and his work was acquired by the Canada Council Art Bank. He has also collaborated on community arts projects in Mexico City, including outdoor murals.

Erik’s choice of tools and media has inspired comparisons to sumi-e paintings (an Asian brush-and-ink painting style). His work lives in a world where the eye is constantly deceiving us. Yet it does so apologetically, where the naivety of the pen and simplicity of paper are taken with grave seriousness. The indescribable softness of the (often) ironic reflexivity of Jerezano’s work binds together the two places where he has been shaped the most culturally: Mexico City and Toronto.

Nahúm Flores was born in Danlí, Honduras and immigrated to Canada at age 17, after living in Mexico and the United States. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing and Painting from OCAD University. He has been awarded grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council. His paintings and drawing installations have been widely exhibited in Canada and Central America. He was one of six artists to win the Bienal de Artes Visuales de Honduras in 2006. His work was also shown in a 2016 solo exhibition entitled *The Inheritors* at the Museum of National Identity in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Growing up in Honduras, Nahúm was exposed to a mixture of Catholic and Indigenous beliefs reflected in daily life. The syncretism of Honduran traditions — informed by social and environmental issues — has affected his perception of life. His mixed media work reflects and explores these influences. Its unique fusion of drawing and matter is also intuitively processed. In this way, Nahúm can give voice to his subconscious, creating expressive figures or amorphous forms that belie his sense of humour.

Ilyana Martínez was born in Toronto and grew up in Pennsylvania, Wyoming, and Mexico. She holds a Bachelor of Design from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and majored in Drawing and Painting at what is now OCAD University. She also studied art and design in Italy, Switzerland, and England. Ilyana has been awarded grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canadian Society of Painters in Watercolour. She has attended artist residencies in Ohio, British Columbia, Mexico, Croatia, and Serbia, and has worked with such prominent museums as the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology (Drumheller), and the National Museum of Art (Mexico City).

Ilyana’s work conjures up places of line, gesture, and colour where contrasting worlds of the urban and the natural coexist and sustain one another to create alternate possibilities. The drawings are layered environmental maps: of the built, of the uncovered, and of the imagined.

List of Works

All artwork is courtesy of the artists; Height x width x depth

Mid Afternoon, 2002; mixed media on paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm
Saving the Hero, 2006; mixed media on paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm
The Red Rope, 2007; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Anemone Sincerity, 2008; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 76.2 cm
Australasia, 2008; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 76.2 cm
Gould's Last, 2008; mixed media on paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm
The Debate, 2008; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Counter Spell, 2010; mixed media on paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm
Cradle of Knowledge, 2011; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Counterparts, 2011; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Fundamental Reaction, 2011; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Horizontal Ambition, 2011; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Leaving with Almost Everything, 2011; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Owl's Cave, 2011; modelled and incised stoneware; 38.1 x 43.2 x 22.9 cm
Huichilopoztlil's Cousin, 2012; modelled and incised stoneware;
40.6 x 17.8 x 15.2 cm
Simultaneous Discovery, 2012; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
Narrated by the Outcast, 2013; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
From series Ancient Lapses, 2013; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
A Singular Apprentice, 2015; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Eclectic Reunion, 2015; modelled and incised stoneware; 35.6 x 43.2 x 48.3 cm
Magnetic Look, 2015; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
The Bitterer the Better, 2015; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Words Were Not Enough, 2015; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Anticipation Was a Small Weapon, 2016; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Colloquial Encounter, 2017; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
From series Ancient Lapses, 2017; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
From series Ancient Lapses, 2017; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
From series Ancient Lapses, 2017; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
From series Anonymous Intents, 2017; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
From series Anonymous Intents, 2017; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
From series Anonymous Intents, 2017; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
Distant Cousins, 2018; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Logic Searchers, 2018; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
After Reading the Book Twice, 2019; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Bygone Burden, 2019; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
Emblematic Lettuce, 2019; mixed media on paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm
Following Interesting Advice, 2019; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Historical Sneeze, 2019; modelled and incised terracotta; 66 x 27.9 x 33 cm
Kings of the Abyss, 2019; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
Soprano, 2019; modelled and incised terracotta; 53.3 x 27.9 x 25.4 cm
Symposium, 2019; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Tips to Climb a Cloud, 2019; mixed media on paper; 55.8 x 38.1 cm
A Populated Thought, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
Alarms of Interception, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Albert's Freedom, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Balancing Act, 2020; modelled and incised terracotta; 27.9 x 21.6 x 15.2 cm
Between Friends, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Breath in the Desert, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Building Infinity, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
Clement's Dream, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Cloudy Metaphor, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Dubious Laughter, 2020; modelled and incised terracotta; 19.7 x 33 x 25.4 cm
Encounter of the Id and Ego, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
First Fabulous Morning, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
La Siesta, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Many Houses of the Fox, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Memory Collectors, 2020; modelled and incised terracotta; 50 x 40 x 33.7 cm
Messenger's Dynamic, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
Mirror of Contradictions, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
Not a Single Sound Was Made, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
Nothing Else Matters, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Shapes of Silence, 2020; modelled and incised terracotta; 44.5 x 34.3 x 31.1 cm
The Shy Agreement, 2020; mixed media; 45.7 x 2,027 cm
Soft Secret, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
State of Clarity, 2020; mixed media on paper; 76.2 x 55.8 cm
The Whisper Before Landing, 2020; modelled and incised terracotta;
24.1 x 29.2 x 19.5 cm
Training the Trainer, 2020; mixed media on paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm
When I Was Invisible, 2020; mixed media on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm
Where the Dreams Dream, 2020; modelled and incised terracotta;
22.9 x 40.6 x 29.2 cm

Z'otz* Collective

Ode to the Inside Out Questions

October 2, 2020 – March 7, 2021

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(cover) *Building Infinity*, 2020; mixed media on paper
(left gatefold) *Owl's Cave*, 2011; modelled and incised stoneware



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