

Margaret Kim

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Fourth Year Arts Award Outcome Report

Faculty Mentor: William Bennett

Taxidermy Lessons in New York City

With the help of Miller Arts Scholars Award, I was able to attend private one-on-one classes at Brooklyn taxidermy last summer.

My faculty mentor was Professor William Bennett, a sculpture professor at the McIntire Department of Art. I chose him to support my sculpture project as he had been a consistent mentor all throughout my sculpture journey since my second year at UVA, and it has been rewarding to learn from him. He is more familiar with my work than any other faculty mentor I had during my time at the university.

In the beginning of the summer, I traveled to Philadelphia and stayed with fellow Miller Arts Scholar Tina Hashemi. This provided a close base to my classes, since they were in New York City. I chose to go to New York City instead of attending classes available in Virginia after research into ethical taxidermy. Brooklyn Taxidermy is one of the few female-led taxidermy studios, who practices consistent ethical taxidermy. They source animals from the local zoo, where animals that have died for natural causes, or animals that were fed to the carnivorous animals are prepared and made available for taxidermy. The taxidermy classes around Virginia or near me all have their roots in hunting, where a hunter kills an animal as a commission for the specific interest of the taxidermist or the students are given the option to bring their own hunted animal. I did not want to contribute to killing an animal just for the sake of learning taxidermy, so I chose to go all the way to New York to attend classes at Brooklyn Taxidermy since they were open about their practices in ethical taxidermy.

Due to COVID, my initial project proposal had to be drastically modified. My initial plan was to take a class at the University of Arts in Philadelphia and group classes in a taxidermy shop in New York. However, many of these classes were canceled, and I had to schedule one-on-one classes with the taxidermist. Because the private classes were more costly than the group lessons, I was able to take less lessons than originally planned. The fox taxidermy course was \$950, rabbit was \$400, and other expenses included travel expenses, hotel costs in New York, and living expenses during my time in Philadelphia and Brooklyn.

During the private classes, I was able to learn about modern day ethical taxidermy practices from the artist, as well as experience preparation of the animal for taxidermy. During my lessons, I learned that taxidermy has a striking resemblance to tailoring and sewing.

To get experience with both small and large animals, I opted to learn how to taxidermy a fox and a rabbit. The process was very similar in both. It started by me preparing the skin,

where a razor blade was used to slice extraneous flesh from the leathery outside, and edges of the skin where the animals was skinned from were cut to have a clean edge, like cutting the frayed edges of a fabric. Then the standing model was prepared. I was more familiar with this step, as it held similarities to my past experiences creating armatures and clay sculptures. Using the plastic mannequin as a base, clay was added to various parts where the animals would have fatty depots, like the cheeks and brows of the face. A spoon like plastic waver was used to keep the ears up.

Then the skin of the animals was dressed on the armatures and stitched on. The process of stitching took needlework that was very similar to sewing clothes. The opened skin in the legs, backside, and tail were all sewed, and the stiches were hidden by the fur. Metal pins were set in multiple parts of the face and body to keep the skin in place, and were removed after the skin was dried.

This was done both to the fox and the rabbit. I found that rabbit was harder, as it had thinner skin, and being too rough, for pressing too hard on the skin, especially in the ears, would rub off the delicate fur.

After the taxidermy was done, I also learned that the art of taxidermy does not just require preparing the animals, but its display as well. The fox was fixed onto a wooden board, and the backing for the rabbit was painted in a shade of pink that has become a constant in my previous sculpture works.

Overall, not only was I able to learn the delicate art of taxidermy, but I was also able to learn the ways a modern taxidermist can ethically source materials from local zoos, veterinary clinics, and accidental roadkill.

