

Cognition

Orcas have very intense emotional lives. The killer whale brain is an extremely advanced and emotional system. The killer whale brain has a limbic system far more elaborate than humans, with a limbic lobe that consists of three parts, rather than one. The extent of this limbic system allows them to feel profound emotions, and even a sense of self. These emotions also allow them to form deep connections with their pods, especially with their offspring. In the Southern Residents, these deep connections mean they form super tight matrilineal lines where they stay with their mothers their entire lives. This also means if an orca's offspring is taken away from her, she will send out cries and mourn for her whole life, never fully recovering. Ever since the Penn Cove captures in 1970, where twelve orcas were killed or captured, the Southern Residents haven't returned to the spot, even though it was a place they would often go before the captures. The complexity of the emotional lives of orcas, especially the Southern Residents, made me eager to paint the piece that I did.

One thing I realized during my time in the San Juan Islands is that humans are capable of bonding in a very strong way when there are no distractions surrounding them. This connects to killer whales because killer whales have a deeply intelligent and emotional brain, which allows them to connect with each other in an amazingly intense way. This also comes into the motivation of my art piece, which was to try to capture, to the best of my ability, the emotions these incredible animals feel. During my process of making my art I felt intense emotions. This provoked a thought; I am able to experience powerful emotions, and yet orcas experience life with a range of emotions beyond human comprehension. How does their perception of reality differ from mine? This also connects to my time on the boat with the orcas. My day on the water was indescribable, and will probably have me in awe forever. I went onto the boat, expecting not to see anything, but we were able to spot them, and they even came right up next to and under the boat. I am still moved by this because the whales came up to our boat twice in the same day, something that according to our naturalist, never happens. You can't help but start to think that they know your mission and are giving you their approval.

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