

## The Artful Economy of Bill Burns

September 2025

Borderviews

When he was six years old, **Bill Burns** abandoned the idea of being the Pope, or at least an archbishop, and decided he would become an artist. He came to his ecclesiastical aspirations by way of his family, who owned Catholic bookstores in Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg, and he gravitated toward art because of frequent visits to the MacKenzie Art Gallery and the Dunlop Art Gallery, which was attached to the city's public library. It was there that he first encountered Old Master and contemporary art, including the Regina Five and Michael Snow.

The other childhood experience that was to have a lasting effect came through his grandfather's family, who were Saskatchewan farmers. "In those days grain farmers had animals; they usually had a couple of horses, lots of pigs and turkeys, and occasionally a donkey," he says. He saw farm animals as "interlocutors between ourselves and the forest beyond." Burns has always treated animals with care and respect. Before working with the donkeys, he first met with them to "form at least a small, modest relationship and find out what they like. Animals have taught me to slow down a bit; when you're working with donkeys and goats you have to put yourself into a certain kind of character to work at their pace."



Bill Burns, *The Salt, the Donkey, the Goats, the Milk, the Honey*, 2021, performance along the Humber River Recreational Trail, Toronto. Photo: Evan Arbic. All images courtesy the artist and MKG127, Toronto.







*The Salt, the Donkey, the Goats, the Milk, the Honey*, 2021, performance along the Humber River Recreational Trail, Toronto. Photo: Evan Arbic. All images courtesy the artist and MKG127, Toronto.

His first collaboration with donkeys occurred in 2018 in Amden, a municipality in the Swiss Alps halfway between Zurich and Basel. It was the initial performance in what has become a 10-year-long project that centred on the donkey, the goat and the honeybee. It involved loading salt on the backs of two donkeys and walking the animals and their cargo up the mountain for a ceremony in which he combined salt and milk and honey. It was both a celebratory procession and a form of walking meditation. The project was disconnected from the digital and global economies while allowing a re-enactment of trade through carrying salt by donkey, milking a goat and procuring honey from a beekeeper. As an economy, it was a radical reduction in scale but a concentration in symbolic meaning; ceremonies involving salt and milk and honey resonate in cultures all over the world.

“For me art without tension is often not very interesting,” he says. He finds that tension in comparing his small mountain project with the scale of global industry: “It’s millions of containers versus two kilos of salt on a donkey’s back.” In a drawing called *The Silk Road*, 2021, he sets seven varieties of donkey against an equal number of supertankers; on the page his beasts of burden take up more space than capitalism’s monsters of conveyance. “One of the goals I have,” he says, “is to use the tools of the industrial world to make an interference with the accelerated culture.” It is in his character to “look at things sideways,” which is also the way he approaches his understanding of the natural world and the spiritual dimensions that are integrally connected to it. “For me, it has to be at an angle, and not straight on.”

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ABOUT CO<sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS.



KNOCK NEVIS (OIL TANKER) 458 M



MAERSK MCKINNEY MOLLER (BOX SHIP) 399 M



EMMA MAERSK (BOX SHIP) 397 M



VALE BRASIL (BULK CARRIER) 362 M



QUEEN MARY 2 (PASSENGER) 345 M



MS BERGE STAHL (BULK CARRIER) 342 M



USS ENTERPRISE (AIRCRAFT CARRIER) 341 M



AMERICAN MAMMOTH



CATALAN



KULAN



MULE



ZAMORANO - LEONES



AMERICAN SPOTTED



IRISH DONKEY

RIM 2021

SHEEP ARE VERY FRAGILE. CARE IS OF UTMOST  
IMPORTANCE WHILST IN TRANSIT, PARTICULAR  
CARE WHEN SHIPPING BY SEA IS ADVISED,



MERINO



EAST FRIESIAN



JACOB



TENNESSEE  
FAINTER



KARAKUL



KATAHDIN



DORSET



SHETLAND



AWASSI



LINCOLN



HAMPSHIRE



BORDER  
LEICESTER

*The Varieties of Sheep*, 2020, watercolour and pencil on paper, 14.5 × 22 centimetres. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

The most recent iteration of his cycle of performances took place in Seoul this year. Called *The Great Trading Project*, it enacts his strategy of “bringing small things into the big city.” An earlier version in 2021 had taken place on the Humber River, where a goat led a brass band through the forest until they reached the Oculus Pavilion for the mixing ceremony. In Seoul the performance was called *It’s the Sun and Rain that Makes the Milk and Honey and Salt*. Instead of engaging real animals, Burns and his collaborator, Pascale Déry, had designed costumes from material gathered within a five-kilometre radius of their location. They found most of what they needed in local second-hand shops: the donkey’s muzzle is a Kicking Horse Kick Ass coffee bag, the ears are made from a woolly shirt, and the hooves are Italian pandoro cake boxes; the goat’s ears are fashioned from a baseball catcher’s mitt, the hooves are Meyers laundry detergent bottles, and the muzzle is a cream container with a beard of locally sourced flax. But it was the honeybee whose costume was the most complex: the abdomen is an accordion protein bottle; the thorax, a No Name soup can; the head and sucker combine bottles of Fantastic spray cleaner; and the wings are made from found chenille, which are held in place with a leather vest and magnets. The three women playing the creatures took the opportunity to engage in city life. They went downtown, visited a temple, and lined up to buy metro tickets. Instead of a brass band, the music for the ceremony in this version was supplied by a violinist.





*It's the Sun and Rain that Makes the Milk and Honey and Salt*, 2025, performance at Oil Tank Culture Park, Seoul, Korea. Photo: Chullim Choi.



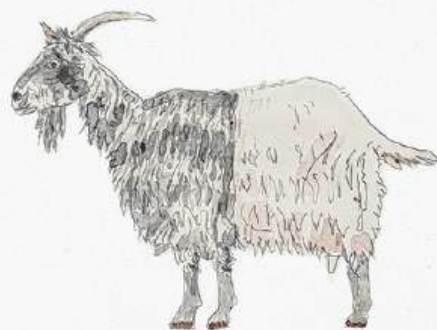
*The Great Chorus*, 2016, performance at Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Artistic Director: Bill Burns. Librettist: Krys Verrall in collaboration with the students of Lord Lansdowne Da Vinci Public Schools, Toronto. Choral Leader: Alan Gasser.

Music is an integral part of Burns's art making. In 2016 at the Royal Ontario Museum, he conducted a choir of 32 children in a two-hour-



long performance of sounds that combined the animal and the mechanical—barking dogs and whirring airplane propellers. (There is a 33rpm recording of the Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Children's Choir, of which he is the artistic director.) One of the songs connected to the project in Switzerland is called "A Ballad of Two Donkeys." The lyrics mantrically duplicate the labour of the work by repeating the line "We climbed" before it shifts into a series of Thank Yous, including the mountains, the bees, the apple trees and the donkeys. But the final acknowledgement broadens the scope of recognized generosity. It simply says, "Thank you, Earth."

Burns picks up that recognition in a 2024 letterpress project called "Animals Need More to Eat." It is comprised of posters with short messages that address climate change and habitat erosion. The texts were suggested by community elders and by two children in the Robert Service School in Dawson City, Yukon. The messages take the form of lamentations and questions: *WHERE HAVE ALL THE CARIBOO GONE?*, *SALMON PEOPLE COME BACK*, *THE RIVER IS NO LONGER DEEP*. The shortest of them is the most complicated: *THE LAND HOLDS SECRETS*. The text was provided by Jackie Olson, an artist and teacher who is a member of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation.



VALAIS BLACKNECK

DOMESTIC GOATS ARE A VERSION OF  
THE GOAT-ANTELOPE. THEIR SCIENTIFIC  
NAME IS CAPRA HIRCUS. THE WILD GOAT  
FROM WHICH THEY DERIVE (CAPRA AEGAGRUS)  
LIVES IN SOUTH WESTERN ASIA.

*A Taxonomy of Goats*, 2024, detail from "Taxonomy Drawings" series, watercolour and pencil on paper, 30 × 95 centimetres. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.





*A Taxonomy of Social Bees*, 2024, detail from "Taxonomy Drawings" series, watercolour and pencil on paper, 30 × 95 centimetres. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

It is a message Burns takes as gospel: "If we don't believe that the land holds secrets, then we're in big trouble." He has turned to animals as a way of unlocking some of those secrets. They are *his* interlocutors, and through them he speaks a language of practical salvation, one that combines pragmatics with ethics. "The animals

are our ancestors, and they are our future and our past. If we're going to fix the damage that we're doing," he says with a conviction that borders on the religious, "we need to have more relations with animals." ■

## BORDERCROSSINGS

500-70 Arthur Street  
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1G7

Telephone: (204) 942  
5778

Toll-free: (866) 825 7165

Fax: (204) 949 0793

info@bordercrossingsmag.com

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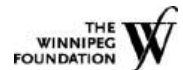
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