

DRONES AND SNAKES

**Native American activists and artists
see incursions like the Dakota Access Pipeline
as violations of their history and being.**

by Jessica L. Horton

IN THE FALL OF 2016, drones moved across North Dakota skies while oil rigs methodically penetrated the earth's crust. Bulldozers cut and cleared unruly topography to make way for the 1,172-mile Dakota Access Pipeline, designed to carry crude oil from the Bakken shale oil fields in northwest North Dakota to Patoka, Illinois. The Lakota people were prepared by prophecy for the arrival of a deadly black snake that would cause destruction in their homeland,¹ a vast area of the Northern Plains that Oceti Sakowin leaders (the seven bands of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota that comprise the Great Sioux Nation) never agreed to relinquish to the United States.² Accordingly, thousands of Oceti Sakowin citizens and their allies gathered in several camps near the Missouri River in North Dakota to prevent the completion of the neocolonial infrastructure, which they considered a threat to sacred waterways and burial sites. State police responded with water cannons, rubber bullets, and sonic weapons, while Energy Transfer Partners, the company building the pipeline, hired an international security company to use counterterrorism tactics.³

The conflict zone of the No Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) movement was shaped by what scholar Lisa Parks terms the "vertical mediation" of military-industrial technologies that connect the surface of the earth to the atmosphere.⁴ The presence of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones) feeding live digital video from above entailed distinctive forms of visualization and control, just as photography and cartography prepared Oceti Sakowin land to be objectified, divided, settled, tilled, and mined following the US Geological Survey led by General George Armstrong Custer in 1874. Today's military

drones, researcher Lila Lee-Morrison notes, administer zones of surveillance and targeted killing by remote control, freeing "cubicle warriors" from the bodily and geographical limitations of the terrestrial battlefield. The devices separate operators from the (typically brown) bodies they are charged with targeting, inviting subjective narratives of threat to fill the gaps in grainy video feeds.⁵

At the same time, the broad commercialization of UAVs (one can buy a drone with a camera at Best Buy for around \$500) permitted civilians—including NoDAPL participants who identified themselves as "water protectors"—to adopt military eyes. This leads Parks to ask, "Do the multifarious uses of drones destabilize [their] militaristic origins and open up the technology to new kinds of contestations and experiences?"⁶ According to Standing Rock Sioux tribal member and UAV operator Shiyé Bidziúl, the water protectors felt safer with their own "eyes in the sky," as live feeds viewed on smart phones allowed them to nimbly respond to police aggression and share select images and videos with concerned members of the public on the popular Digital Smoke Signals Facebook page.⁷ The drones of NoDAPL represent a complex scenario in which technologies with violent origins are bent to the work of "survance" by the populations they were designed to control.⁸

As a non-Native art historian and an ally who has engaged with NoDAPL primarily through proliferating words, images, and actions on the East Coast, I'm not prepared to assess the pragmatic value of drones in zones of conflict. Of interest to me are the political, ethical, and aesthetic dilemmas raised by the captured footage, which can be disseminated and recontextualized in powerful ways. This potential is crystallized in *We Are*

Three Stills from
Winter Count's
video *We Are In
Crisis*, 2016, approx.
3 minutes.

JESSICA L.
HORTON is
assistant professor
of art history at
the University
of Delaware,
specializing in
Native American,
modern, and
contemporary art.
See Contributors
page.



The personification of land and colonial-military-industrial forces connects *We Are in Crisis* to a range of recent new media projects.



Rebecca Belmore;
Fountain
(production
still), 2005, video
installation.
Courtesy Morris
and Helen Belkin
Art gallery,
University of
British Columbia,
Vancouver. Photo
José Ramón
González.

in Crisis, a short video made downloadable for free viewing on Vimeo in October 2016. It is the first in a series of artworks promised by Winter Count, a collective formed by artists Can-nupa Hanska Luger, Dylan McLaughlin, Ginger Dunnill, Merritt Johnson, and Nicholas Galanin to foster creative endeavors in support of NoDAPL and related causes.⁹

WE ARE IN CRISIS is one of an array of post-2000 artworks that adapt the rich possibilities of Indigenous storytelling to the vast challenges of contemporary environmental crises. Such works are distinguished by two features: the artists' efforts to reframe the boom-and-bust cycle of "disaster capitalism" as part of a continuous colonial history,¹⁰ and their use of digital technologies to communicate the regenerative potential of mythic forms.

Described by the filmmakers as an "offering to the water protectors, the land and the water," *We Are in Crisis* combines footage taken by consumer drone in North Dakota with ambient sounds, music recorded in the camps, and a narrative voiceover.¹¹ Disembodied aerial views of oil fields, dams, power lines, free-ways, and railroads are wedded to a mythic language of monsters, drumbeats, and rushing water:

I want to tell you a story. / A being was born out of the anxiety of separation. / It is a fearful creature that we have nourished. / We nursed it, / oil and iron and blood, / let it feast upon our battlefields. / It grew powerful in the shadows of our wars / and it learned to crawl aided by combustion engines. / The beast became cunning / and started a revolution of industry. / Its arms grew and reached out of the killing fields, / where its belly remained, / and found refuge in all our homes. / It brought us many wondrous gifts and promises of leisure. / It had taught us to grow idle and complacent, / stripped us of our natural intelligence. / It convinced us we were special and separate, / that the earth was here for our taking. It created the idea of a void in us / all / that could never be filled. / It lied and said we were created in its image / and that we must consume as it consumes in order to survive. / We are in crisis.

This male voice-over extends the timeline of "crisis" to reveal continuities between drone vision and earlier abstracted modes of perception that helped foster violence against Native peoples and

the land. Indeed, for many Indigenous participants in NoDAPL, this encounter, which the *New York Times* characterized as “a new kind of battlefield,” was deeply familiar.¹² Their ancestors survived the violence of the Indian Removal, when a comparable colonial-capitalist logic of extraction drove US westward expansion.

Rebutting popular pronouncements about nineteenth-century frontier closure, Winona LaDuke, Ojibwa activist and director of the nonprofit organization Honor the Earth, told reporters in North Dakota, “The Indian Wars are far from over out here.”¹³ *We Are in Crisis* similarly reveals that precise geometries of contemporary infrastructure projects, as much as the technologies that deliver their images from the air, are the culmination of forms of disembodied vision that have long facilitated US dominion over Western lands.

As art historian Jason Weems has argued, nineteenth-century surveyors utilized the “predictability of the gridded view” to support the materialization of Manifest Destiny by encouraging settlers to fill patterned spaces on maps with “the stable forms of farms and towns.”¹⁴ *We Are in Crisis* invites listener-viewers to connect contemporary aerial views to the industrial revolution that birthed the combustion engine and enabled machine-monsters—from the transcontinental railroad to the automobile—to “crawl” across the land. The narrator draws out the “anxiety of separation” embedded in such superhuman perspectives.

Wiisaakodewinini (Métis) artist, activist, and scholar Dylan Miner contends that some stories are powerful enough to become beings.¹⁵ The extradiegetic component of *We Are in Crisis* unites the whole sweep of colonial-industrial modernity as a singular beast, a “fearful creature” fed by “oil and iron and blood.” Yet this monster born of the “lies” of technological progress is met by another being who takes shape through the mingled voices of human, drum, and water. The sound of a woman singing is introduced as the drone camera follows the gleaming curves of rivers. The male speaker continues, “Our ears strain to hear / the song our hearts have always felt. / The melody rings out from a voice that was here all along / in a language we all understand.” It is “the sound of our mother’s heartbeat / through embryonic fluid,” a sound effectively “amplified by water.”

We Are in Crisis embraces the noninstrumental value expressed in the Lakota phrase and NoDAPL rallying cry “Mni Wiconi” (Water Is Life). Lanniko L. Lee of the Oceti Sakowin collective, Oak Lake Writers’ Society, describes rivers as arteries, “life-giving and healing forces coursing through *Unci Maka*, Grandmother earth.” They are “part of a larger expression of our relationship to everything that is.”¹⁶ In the video, water is offered as a powerful medium for reembodiment and reconnection. The invitation to “see” a song that “rolls out through hilltops and valleys / along river basins and shorelines” doubles as a challenge to the primacy of military-industrial vision that delivers the same landforms as property and target.

Indigenous stories are never idle; they are a means of integrating past with present and activating eternal sources of power to bolster specific human struggles.¹⁷ The Winter Count collective takes its name from Plains pictographic calendars in which representations of a single important event for each year are arranged in a spiral. The narrator of *We Are in Crisis* plays a role

akin to that of a count keeper, who is responsible for integrating a sacred dimension into the telling of human histories.¹⁸

THE PERSONIFICATION OF land and colonial-military-industrial forces connects *We Are in Crisis* to a range of recent new media projects that use mythic elements from Indigenous stories and songs to forcefully interpret, critique, and resist ecological devastation. Rebecca Belmore’s video installation *Fountain* (2005), Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’s experimental short film *Bloodland* (2011), and Tanya Tagaq’s music video *Retribution* (2016), all freely available online, portray colonial industries that log, frack, and drill on Native homelands as instruments of rape and other forms of violence against a female earth-body that is anything but passive.¹⁹ In *Fountain*, Belmore struggles with an unknown burden in shallow water off Musqueam homelands. The camera pans across a region polluted by logging and sewage under the flight path of Vancouver International Airport. Piles of wood and debris burst mysteriously into flames, indicating sources of power present in the environment beyond the scope of industrialization. Belmore breaks free of the waves, approaches the camera, and heaves the contents of a red bucket, flooding the lens—and by extension, viewers—with crimson fluid. When projected on a sheet of falling water in the

Two stills from Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’s video *Bloodland*, 2011, 4 minutes, 10 seconds.



Canadian pavilion of the 2005 Venice Biennale, the symbolic bloodshed captured on digital video underwent another shift, conjuring the global scale of liquid and technological networks that connect water, earth, and human bodies in a continuous exchange of material and information.

Bloodland and *Retribution* more starkly link racial, sexual, and environmental violence. Tailfeathers's short film—the artist's first—opens with a montage of icy forests and bloody plastic, set to drum beats and female voices singing and speaking in the Blackfoot language. An Indigenous woman, played by Tailfeathers in a fringed and beaded white dress, flickers into focus, rising from a snow-dusted field. She is seized and mutilated by men in black suits, who wield drills in a simulation of rape and oil extraction. The chief and council of the Kainai First Nation (Blood Tribe, Blackfoot Confederacy) authorized gas and petroleum companies to frack on Tailfeathers's home reserve in Alberta in 2010 without consent from their more than 12,800 citizens. With knowing irony, the artist paid her all-Indigenous cast and

crew with a distribution check from that resource exploitation and credited the tribal and business leaders who approved it for supporting the film. She thereby redirected the capitalist logic of individualism and accumulation toward a critical, collaborative artwork, viewable by anyone with YouTube access.²⁰

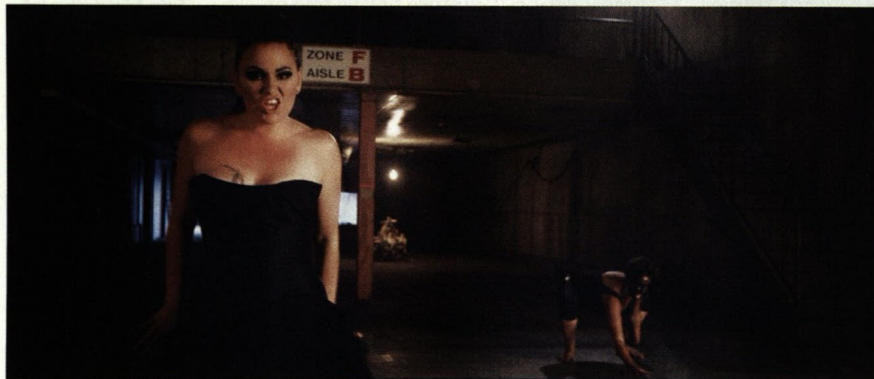
In a parallel Indigenous feminist take on corporate-earth relations, Tagaq's ruffled black gown echoes the appearance of an oil spill in *Retribution*. The camera looks down from high over her heaving, recumbent body in a ravaged postindustrial landscape. "Our mother grows angry," the Inuk singer declares in a tone as uncompromising as her song title. "We squander her soil and suck out her sweet black blood to burn it. . . . The retribution will be swift." Yet the activities of a white canine, an animated moose, and Tagaq's ritualized double with blackened face and animal-like movements suggest alternative modes of living in, with, and as the land. Such practices are carried forward and transformed by Indigenous arts today, including Tagaq's shape-shifting vocals, which blend pop, punk, and throat singing.

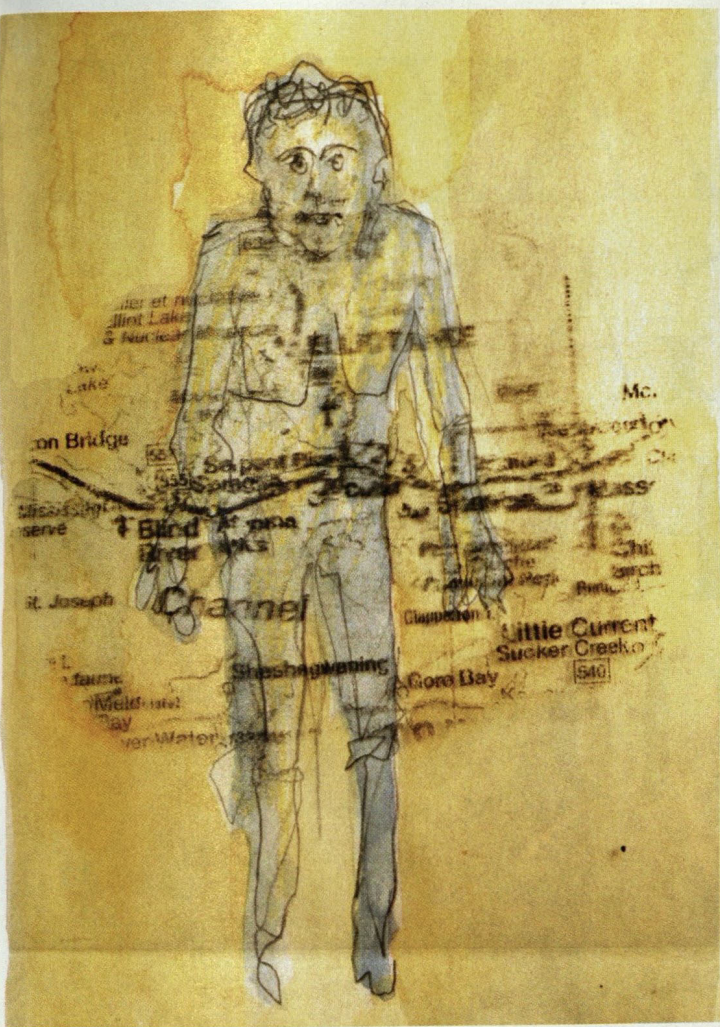
Bonnie Devine and Rebecca Garrett's collaborative short film *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* (2002), and Will Wilson's multimedia installation *Auto Immune Response* (2005–) reference the personification of uranium as, respectively, a *manito* (a spirit resident in the natural features of the land) and a yellow snake. According to Ojibwa and Diné (Navajo) teachings, such beings should remain undisturbed in the ground. Yet radioactive substances were awakened in the second half of the twentieth century, when the US military detonated nuclear bombs on Indigenous homelands, and citizens of the Navajo Nation and Serpent River First Nation were exposed to carcinogenic uranium ore in Cold War industrial mines and polluted waterways.²¹ In *Rooster Rock*, Devine's watercolor sketches are animated and paired with the narration of a vision quest that gives way to irradiation, inspired by the experiences of her uncle, Serpent River elder Art Meawasige. Visitations by animals and a gift of "clear and sweet" water are juxtaposed with gold coins, a map of Canada, and a "river of poison" brought on by the mining industry.²² Using digital technologies to animate drawings and documents, the artists initiate a precarious dialogue between seemingly opposite systems of understanding and valuing the same matter.

One of Wilson's large-scale manipulated digital photographic prints, *Auto Immune Response #5*, features two identical, gas-mask-wearing men joined by a single, tangled air tube resembling an umbilical cord. The artist conjures the Diné twins, Monster Slayer and Child of the Water, who sent enemies into slumber in mythic times in order to clear the earth for human habitation.²³ Behind the twins stretches a seemingly infinite horizon beneath billowing clouds, evoking the sublime element in panoramic landscape photography deployed to encourage the settler takeover of resource-rich Native lands in the nineteenth century. Their eyes bloodied and faces streaked with yellow earth, the heroes have resumed their struggles, this time against colonial-military-industrial monsters not yet laid to rest.

Similarly, the drone perspectives utilized by Winter Count knit a longer history of aerial vision into documentation of a fresh assault on Indigenous bodies and land. *We Are in Crisis* turns on the appropriation and recontextualization of drone

Three stills from Tanya Tagaq's music video *Retribution*, 2016, 8 minutes, 5 seconds. Courtesy Six Shooter Records, Toronto.





footage to tell a story about elemental connections. Yet the outcome of this dynamic is no simple overcoming of the “anxiety of separation” embedded in technologies designed to fundamentally alter life on earth. Following the spiral shape of the Lakota winter count, the narrator repeats the phrase, “we are in crisis” after each episode of the story. Resolution—the triumph of a Monster Slayer or Grandmother Earth—is withheld as the camera pans a final time over the tipis and trailers of Oceti Sakowin Camp, later forcibly closed by US authorities.

The water protectors’ efforts to stop the black snake were stymied, for now, by a federal administration that appears to be at war with the earth itself. Far from over, however, the NoDAPL movement has shifted tactics to match the nature and scope of the battlefield—for example, by taking on financial institutions that fund the pipeline.²⁴ In a fitting parallel, the final frame of *Rooster Rock* bears the inscription, “Not the End.” *We Are in Crisis* likewise turns the story over to diverse listener-viewers, who must continue to tell it under ongoing conditions of crisis. ○

1. The Lakota prophecy is frequently cited by tribal leaders, lawyers, and the media. See, for example, Andrew M. Harris, “Sioux Tribe Puts ‘Black Snake Prophecy’ at Center of Dakota Pipeline Battle,” *bloomberg.com*, Feb. 28, 2017.
 2. On the changing legal boundaries of Oceti Sakowin land in relation to the pipeline, see Nick Estes, “Fighting for Our Lives: #NoDAPL in Historical Context,” *therednation.org*, Sept. 18, 2016. A striking map has been created for #StandingRockSyllabus, an online resource compiled by the NYC Stands for Standing Rock committee in 2016, *nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com*. Regarding the issue of non-relinquished land, see Elizabeth Ellis, “Why We Must Not Forget Standing Rock,” *rewire.news*,

May 8, 2017: “The contested section of the pipeline, which runs just outside of Standing Rock Reservation and under the tribe’s primary source of drinking water, falls on land that the United States guaranteed to the Sioux Nation in perpetuity by treaty in 1851. Even after the United States broke this first treaty and renegotiated territorial claims with the Sioux in 1868, the subsequent Fort Laramie treaty continued to recognize the territory in question as part of ‘unceded Indian territory.’”
 3. Alleen Brown, Will Parrish, and Alice Speri, “Leaked Documents Reveal Counterterrorism Tactics Used at Standing Rock to ‘Defeat Pipeline Insurgencies,’” *theintercept.com*, May 27, 2017.
 4. Lisa Parks, “Drones, Vertical Mediation, and the Targeted Class,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2016, pp. 227–35.
 5. Lila Lee-Morrison, “Drone Warfare: Visual Primacy as a Weapon,” in *Transvisuality: The Cultural Dimensions of Visuality*, Volume II: *Visual Organizations*, eds. Tore Kirstensen, Anders Michelsen, and Frauke Wiegand, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015, pp. 203–07. Lee-Morrison borrowed the phrase “cubicle warriors” from Peter Warren Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, New York, Penguin Press, 2009, p. 329.
 6. Parks, pp. 227.
 7. In the fall of 2016, Bidzifil partnered with Myron Dewey, owner of the Indigenous media network Digital Smoke Signals, to monitor pipeline construction and address a lacuna in mainstream media coverage of human and environmental abuses by using commercial drones. See #NoDAPL Drones Monitor North Dakota Police, AJ+, Al Jazeera Media Network, Dec. 2, 2016, *youtube.com*. For more on the government and corporate reactions, see John Goglia, “Flight Restrictions Over Standing Rock: Is the FAA Effectively Taking Sides in Pipeline Dispute?,” *forbes.com*, Nov. 27, 2016.
 8. “Survivance” is Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor’s term combining “survival” and “resistance.” It is explained and used throughout his *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Hanover, N.H., Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
 9. Cannupa Hanska Luger told me in conversation on May 2, 2017, that Winter Count foresees an open-ended series of collaborations that will continue to incorporate new partners.
 10. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York, Picador, 2007.
 11. See the description accompanying *We Are in Crisis*, 2016, *vimeo.com*.
 12. Jack Healy, “Occupying the Prairie: Tensions Rise as Tribes Move to Block a Pipeline,” *nytimes.com*, Aug. 23, 2016.
 13. Quoted in Amy Goodman, “Native American Activist Winona LaDuke at Standing Rock: It’s Time to Move on from Fossil Fuels,” *democracynow.org*, Sept. 12, 2016.
 14. Jason Weems, *Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Midwest*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p. 18.
 15. Dylan Miner, “GICHI-MOOKOMAANAN MIINAWAA GICHI-MAAZHIGAAABKOOK: From Big Knives to Big Pipelines,” conference paper for “Ecologies, Agents, Terrains,” Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., May 5, 2017.
 16. Quoted in Oak Lake Writers, “Reflections on Mnisose after Lewis and Clark,” in *This Stretch of the River*, Sioux Falls, S.D., Oak Lake Writers Society and Pine Hill Press, 2006, p. 79.
 17. See, for example, Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 41.
 18. On Lakota winter counts, see James R. Walker, *Lakota Society*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 113.
 19. See Rebecca Belmore, *Fountain*, 2005, *rebeccabelmore.com*; Jessica Bradley and Jolene Rickard, *Rebecca Belmore: Fountain*, Vancouver, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2005; Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, *Bloodland*, 2011, *youtube.com*; Tanya Tagaq, *Retribution*, 2016, *youtube.com*.
 20. Tailfeathers spoke about the film and her activism on a public panel, “Frack Off: Indigenous Women Leading Media Campaigns to Defend Our Climate,” Sept. 20, 2014, at the New School, New York. See *youtube.com*.
 21. Devine in conversation with the author, Nov. 3, 2016; Devine et al., *Stories from the Shield*, Brantford, Ontario, Woodland Cultural Centre, 2004; Michaela Rife, “Will Wilson and Jetsonorama: Confronting Resource Extraction in the Navajo Nation,” *Seismopolite: Journal of Art and Politics*, 2016, *seismopolite.com*; Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p. 99.
 22. *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River*, directed by Bonnie Devine and Rebecca Garrett, 2002, DVD, 32 minutes, Vtape, Toronto. The author is grateful to University of Delaware Masters student Zoe Weldon-Yochim for her research about this artwork.
 23. See Janet Catherine Berlo, “Alberta Thomas, Navajo Pictorial Arts, and Ecocriticism in Dinéah,” in Alan C. Braddock and Christopher Imscher, eds., *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2009, pp. 244–46; John W. Sherry, *Land, Wind, and Hard Words: A Story of Navajo Activism*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2002, p. 9.
 24. Further analysis of what lies ahead for NoDAPL, see Elizabeth Ellis, “Why We Must Not Forget Standing Rock.”

A mixed-medium drawing from Bonnie Devine’s *Book of Transformation*, later used in the animated film *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River*, 2002.