

Ontology of Practice — Drawing the Unknowable: Wonder, Dread, and Worlds That Look Back

A Visual Exploration of the Space Between Wonder and Fear in Cosmic Horror Illustration

Introduction

Inspiration for this project comes from poverty, growing up and surviving in poverty. I could be the smartest person in the room or the most talented person in the room and it always looked down at, as though it means less, less than the person in a higher tax bracket, and as a kid there is no worse feeling and thinking that you weren't smart enough or talented enough to do anything.

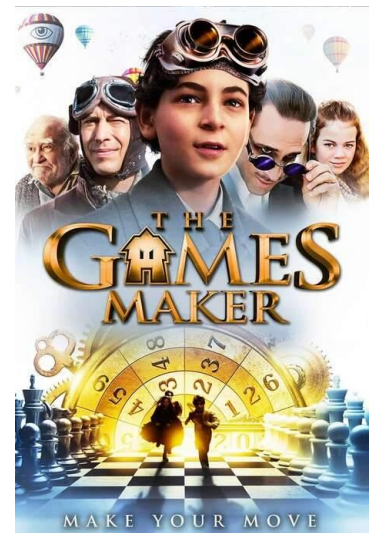
I also found that growing up in poverty made me notice things that most kids would not until a lot later on. I noticed that my mam worked three jobs at once and I noticed that we had to buy the same things on every food shop until the price changed. I have no idea what its like to live outside of poverty and I am fine with that. I love my life and the life that I have made for myself and my family, I know I am smart and I know I am talented. I just wish other people could see that before they see the poverty.

Growing up in poverty, you do not get told anything, in school, at home, on the news, it is like your left out or automatically ruled out of everything important, except survival. I was lucky enough to have a mother that never made me feel like that, every time I had a question, every thought that I wanted to say aloud, my mother listened to every thought and answered every question. Poverty means a lot of unanswered questions, there are people in poverty that are comfortable living like they are less than, because to them its safe. I was not like that, and I am still not.

Which leads me to this topic, I have a vast number of questions about the world, and it seems every day I have a new question, when I was younger my biggest question was: Are monsters real? We see them in books, movies, and TV all the time so they must be, right?

Through this project and the books, I created, I try to answer those questions, how can art and stories answer questions? Can I do that? Probably not, but that is not a definite no, so I began creating, asking big questions, and using my talent and skills to make sense of them. A lot of my questions do not have answers in the world, but that always leads me back to – there was once a day where we did not have a calendar? A clock? Or even a pencil... so there is always an answer, we just have to find it.

However, until we find the answer, I can make sense of the question and get the younger brilliant, unprogrammed (if you will) minds to think and create, because at the end of the day, that is how everything starts.



Between Story and Being: The Ontological Ground of Practice

To create is to question what it means to exist.

Exploring the blurred lines between what is and what could be has proven a dangerously delicate theme when aimed at children, I wanted to make sure that my books felt safe as well as highlighting questions I know many of us have had before, I decided to do a 50/50 split of what is confirmed real and what is still unanswered much like Monsters Inc (Monsters Inc, 2001) . In this sense, my practice sits between two worlds: the accessible and the unknowable, the bedroom, and the cosmos. My “Heroes” are children, toys and creatures who do not conquer the unknown but rather meet it, often wordlessly. They ask, in their own way; what is the universe, and what am I within it?



The child, in my work, becomes an ontological witness – a figure whose innocence grants them access to a metaphysical truth.

Making as Metaphysical Inquiry

If ontology asks *what it means to be*, then practice asks *how being becomes visible* (Jacquette, 2014). My creative process – from writing verse to illustrating form – is itself a philosophical act. Each book begins as an emotional or symbolic impulse rather than a narrative plan: an image of a moon half-eaten, a curtain that hides another world, a child saying goodnight to silence. Through drawing, these impulses are tested, expanded, and reinterpreted.

Through my illustrations. I seek to visualise that collapse not as despair, but as wonder – an aesthetic of beautiful dread that invites reflection rather than fear.

Narrative as Structure of Being

Through drawing, I convey this metaphysical tension in visual rhythm. The compositions frequently transition from light to dark, centre to nothingness, figure to disintegration - a ballet of being and unbecoming. Each mark of ink becomes a philosophical gesture: drawing a star affirms existence, while erasing it questions it.

Existence, Faith, and the Cosmic Child

When the child whispers “If I say goodnight... will you say it too?” It is both a prayer and a test. At that moment, I am the child. I am the one hoping for the universe to whisper back. My practice has always carried this double perspective – a creator shaping stories for children, and a seeker searching for traces of transcendence in the act of making. The picture book became my theology; rhyme and rhythm became my liturgy (Eikelboom, 2018).

Through this lens, my practice operates as an autoethnography of belief – not belief in the being but in the inaccessible, and in the human impulse to reach beyond ourselves through story.

The Weight of Silence

When I was illustrating Goodnight Universe, I paid unusual attention to the spaces between things: the blank of the page, the pause between words, the small gaps that hold more meaning than the text itself. Those silences became metaphors for the unspoken parts of faith – the distance between question and reply. Kierkegaard would call that distance “The absurd” (Schufreider, 1979), the gap between human desire and divine unknowability.

I remember sitting in my accommodation late at night, surrounded by drafts and feeling that same silence echo back at me. The creative process itself became a form of existential waiting. In that sense, *Goodnight Universe* was less about teaching kids to sleep and more about teaching myself to rest in uncertainty – to allow the void its own presence. In the simple language of the book, I had unknowingly translated philosophical despair (Fabian, 2017) into a child's bedtime story.

This is the paradox of my practice: I write for children, but I am really writing to understand the adult self – the one that has learned to doubt. The stories become a bridge between the two.

The Friend at the End of the Sky — Hope and the Infinite Other

The way the child speaks to the sky feels like the way I face a blank page. When the letter returns—glowing, vibrating, oddly impossible—I get that same uncanny feeling. Creating is like meeting an “other,” only to realise it is really just ourselves looking back. It is wonderful, and a little frightening.

When the Stars Came Closer — Awe, Collapse, and the Loss of Distance

When the Stars Came Closer was born from a single image I could not get out of my head, the stars drifting down to earth like golden snow. It felt magical at first, but the longer I looked, the more suffocating it became. This image haunted me for years as a kid, lying on the trampoline at night. When I finally wrote the story, it turned into a mediation on proximity – what happens when the divine (or the sublime) comes too close.

Introducing the books – each story and its meaning.

When I look across the six books I have created, I see more than stories – I see a record of my own questions about existence, horror, and wonder. Each title forms a part of a larger conversation with the self, exploring what it means to make meaning in a world that often feels vast and unknowable.

The Personal Stories Behind My Six-Book Series

Each of these books has a personal touch of me in them, not just because I wrote and illustrated them, but because they are all attached to a childhood memory of mine that acted as a stepping stone in my career and my life. I would not be who I am today without them.

My work sits at the crossroads of children's illustration, cosmic horror, philosophy, and autoethnography. Each book is both a story and a way of thinking – a method of drawing the unknowable through wonder, dread, and the child's gaze. Behind each title, I am also talking about how I came to understand my own ontology of practice.

Goodnight Universe

This first book, cozy and unsettling, came from a ritual I had growing up, I could not fall asleep until I had said goodnight to everyone in the house and everything in my room. It was not just cute – it was my first way of controlling my fear. It turned darkness into something familiar, something with which I could negotiate. When producing this project, I realised that these memories became a bunch of philosophical questions, this one being: What happens if the universe does not just receive our goodnight – but answers it?



Films like *Where the Wild Things Are* (*Where the Wild Things Are*, 2009) and *A Ghost Story* (*A Ghost Story*, 2017) helped me see how quiet moments can expand into something cosmic, that would have been overlooked as a kid.

Goodnight Universe became my experiment in gentle existentialism – a way to introduce children to the unknown without overwhelming them, or the parents and guardians.

Its cosmic horror reframed through tenderness.



The Friend at the End of the Sky

This story came from a belief I had when I was younger – that the sky was a place you could send messages to. Paper planes were my letters, my secrets, my wishes, and even simple thoughts, to be launched into the infinite sky.

As an adult, that idea evolved into a transdisciplinary question about communication, longing, and contact with the other side. It is naïve to think we are alone in this galaxy.

Films like *Arrival* (*Arrival*, 2016) and *Contact* (*Contact*, 1997) deeply influenced this book because they treat first contact not as a threat, but as an emotional experience.

In my story, the child sends a message – and something replies.

This book explores the space between connection and fear, and it responds to the cultural moment we are living in – where we are constantly reaching outward, hoping someone or something will answer.

Do not Look Behind the Curtain

This book is deeply rooted in autoethnography. In my Nan's house, there was a curtain that covered absolutely nothing but a window – but to me, it felt alive. I would stare at it for too long, sometimes it fluttered when the windows were closed, I became convinced it was hiding something important.

That childhood moment now sits at the core of my research into children's ontology: the idea that children experience the world through curiosity before logic. In *Do not Look Behind the Curtain*, I take curiosity seriously. The curtain becomes a boundary – not just between rooms, but between realities. The influences of *Labyrinth* (*Labyrinth*, 1986) and *Beetlejuice* (*Beetlejuice*, 1988) show up in the way the world playfully bends, and how the ordinary becomes a doorway.

The book is about the courage to peek, and the danger of discovering a world that already knows your name.

Mr. Wobbles Comes from the Sea

This comes from another childhood memory – finding a damp, sandy toy washed up on a beach. It looked innocent. But it also felt... wrong. Like something that did not belong to our world anymore. Mr. Wobbles is my way of exploring “the unknown that enters quietly.” He is soft,





friendly, slightly pathetic – but the longer you look, the more you realise he comes with a history you did not ask for. Films like *Ponyo* (*Ponyo*, 2008) and *Finding Nemo* (*Finding Nemo*, 2003) gave me the softness, while *The Lighthouse* gave me the eerie undertone. The sea is never just the sea in my work – it is a liminal space, a threshold.

This book taught me to create ethical dread for children – fear delivered gently, without harm.

Mr. Wobbles is a friend ... but he is also a warning.

When the Stars Came Closer

Some nights, the stars feel too close – like they are leaning in, waiting for you to notice. That uncanny closeness became the emotional core of this book. I

was strongly influenced by films that treat cosmic events as emotional, not violent – *The Fountain* and *Sunshine*, especially, where beauty becomes overwhelming. This story reframes the apocalypse as a moment of intimacy. The stars do not fall to destroy the world; they come closer because they hear us calling but sometimes wonder becomes too bright to bear.

This book sits at the heart of my transdisciplinary practice: is a blend of philosophy, existential fear, and the childlike belief that the universe is alive and listening.

The Caterpillar That Ate the Moon

This one came from a personal moment of creative overload – where I felt like I was constantly consuming ideas but never feeling satisfied. So, I imagined a creature who devoured everything - the moon, the stars, the sky - and still does not feel full. This book is my play with absurdity, hunger, and the void.

Influenced by films like *Fantastic Planet* (*Fantastic Planet*, 1973) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), it leans into surrealism as a way of asking philosophical questions children instinctively understand:

What happens when you get everything you want... and still want more?

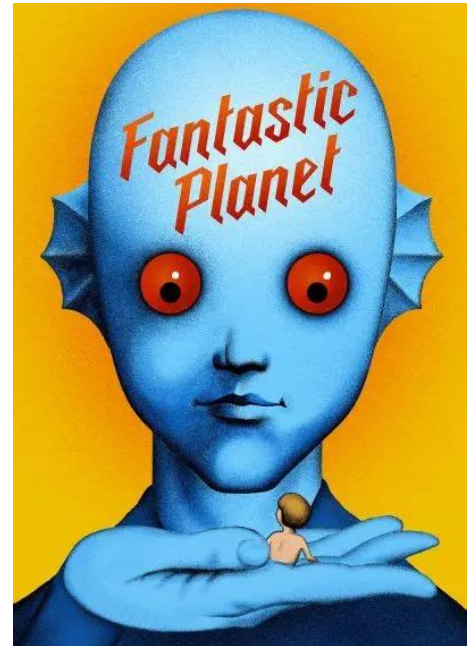
The story ends not with transformation, but with silence – a quiet void that answers back. It reflects my belief, drawn from this module, that the unknown is not always frightening. Sometimes it is simply honest.

Closing

Together, these six books form a transdisciplinary practice that merges illustration, philosophy, horror, and autobiographical memory. My aim is to transform cosmic dread into cosmic wonder – to give children gentler tools to approach uncertainty, and to show that the unknown can be both beautiful and a little bit scary.

Faith Without Faith

The stories are mirrors; the characters are fragments of my own questioning. To draw them is to listen. To write them is to speak, even if I no longer know to whom.



Making, Meaning, and the Ontology of the Image

Drawing is my first language of thinking. Before words, there was always the act of making marks – small universes contained within graphite or ink. When I began illustrating the stories, I realised that image-making was not simply the translation of text, but an extension of being.

The line, the space, the colour: each became a way of asking questions that language could not hold. In that sense, my illustration practice is ontological in itself – a material dialogue with existence. I have often felt that my drawings think before I do. They arrive as gestures rather than answers, as movements that precede meaning.

Heidegger (2016) wrote that art “opens up the truth of beings in its own way.” I think about that every time I draw a child looking into the void. What I am doing, really, is opening a space where truth can exist without being named. The page becomes a small clearing – a worlding of thought, where pigment and silence negotiate what it means to be.

Drawing as Encounter

In *Mr. Wobbles Comes from the Sea*, I drew the creature with deliberate softness – part toy, part something other. I wanted it to be a toy but also something that came alive, taking inspiration from *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, a movie about a toyshop that comes to life, yet every child in the store feels safe with a sense of curiosity (*Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, 2007).

Mr. Wobbles is both comforting and disturbing because he is ungraspable. He mirrors the sea that made him: endless, unknowable, alive. When I draw, I am aware of how easily form slips away. A single line too dark can fix what should remain fluid. That tension – between control and surrender – is where meaning lives.

The Page as Time and Space

I work slowly, sometimes obsessively, on composition. The rhythm of a page-turn feels sacred to me. You will notice that in each story, I gave everyone their rooms, their outside lives brought into the monsters and questions they are facing. That physical motion of turning the page becomes an act of discovery and transgression. Each illustration holds its breath before the next.

What begins as a sketch of a moon can end as a mouth, or an eye, or a hole. Meaning is fluid (Feierman and Oviedo, 2019).

Through these shifts, I have learned that illustration is not about control but about witnessing emergence. The paper reveals itself. The drawing speaks. My task is to listen.

Material as Metaphor

My choice of medium – usually ink, pencil, and muted digital colour – reflects my relationship with fragility. I have never trusted perfection. I prefer the texture of something slightly unfinished, where the grain of the paper remains visible. That roughness becomes part of the story: it keeps the image alive. There is a philosophy embedded in imperfection – what the Japanese aesthetic *wabi-sabi* (Juniper, 2003) describes as beauty that honours transience.



The process itself enacts my worldview: that meaning is layered, uncertain, and always shifting. I often work at night, when the room is quiet and the only light is from my screen or lamp. That intimacy of space makes the act of drawing feel sacred.

Every mark made becomes a small yes.

Seeing Through the Child's Eyes

Visually, I return again and again to the motif of the child gazing outward – at the stars, the curtain, and the sea. This gaze is not fear, its questioning and searching for those answers, or even the monsters. I draw the child slightly off – centre, leaving space for what they see but we cannot. That blankness invites the viewer into the same act of wonder.

In *When the Stars Came Closer*, I placed the skyline quite low, adding very little ground and kid, the tiny self against the infinite — is both visual and philosophical. It enacts the question that runs through all my work: how do we hold awe without being consumed by it?

Through these compositional choices, I realise that my art is not about representing experience but about recreating its emotional structure. The child's awe is my own; the viewer's unease mirrors mine. The image becomes a shared ontology, where myself and observer inhabit the same level of curiosity.

The Image as Being

To make an illustration is to give a spotlight to existence, but not for long. Once I complete the illustration, it lives on in the eyes of the readers, and the minds of the curious.

I often think of my books as small universes with their own gravity – each one orbiting around a question rather than an answer. When a reader opens *Goodnight Universe*, I imagine them entering that space of stillness I once sat in.

They may not know my thoughts, but they feel the same distance, the same quiet. In that sense, the ontology of practice is communal: being is not just what I make, but what happens between the work and those who meet it.

There is something humbling in that. My art is finite, yet the meanings it generates are infinite.

Drawing as a Way of Knowing

The longer I work, the more drawing is a form of philosophy. It allows me to think through touch, to reason through rhythm. Each book becomes a record of how I have seen and know the world at a particular moment in time. The process is auto ethnographic because it documents not only what I make but who I am while making it.

My materials hold traces of my state of mind- the pressure of the pencil, the hesitation of alignment, the choice to leave a space blank. When I revisit old illustrations, I recognise myself not through likeness but through gesture. That, perhaps, is the truest ontology of practice: but our art remembers us. Each line is an index of being- a map of where thought met material, where wonder touched form.

In my work, making and meaning are inseparable. The illustration is both artefact and act – a living moment caught in pigment. To draw is to exist twice: once in the world, and once in the mark. Through this doubling, I have come to understand that my practice is not just about storytelling or aesthetics but about existing consciously within creation.

The page is my cosmos; each stroke a declaration of being.

When I draw the child saying goodnight to the universe, I am not depicting them- I am joining them. The image becomes a reflection of me, the reader, and the infinite silence between. That silence, at last, feels like home.

Although the stories appear gentle and childlike, their roots lie deep in Lovecraftian horror – that strange, intellectual dread of the unknowable. H.P. Lovecraft’s writing has always fascinated me, not for its monsters, but for its philosophy: the belief that humanity exists on the edge of a vast cosmic indifference. In his world, fear arises not from what we see, but from the realisation that we are too small to understand what surrounds us. That idea - cosmic insignificance - became the invisible architecture of my own picture books. I wanted to translate Lovecraft’s existential terror into a register that a child might recognise as wonder rather than despair.

Lovecraft’s narrators collapse before the abyss, my characters whisper to it, draw it, or tuck it into bed. Each of the six books reimagines A Lovecraftian principle through the lens of innocence. *Goodnight universe* transforms cosmic dread into a lullaby; the darkness is not hostile, merely infinite.

The Friend at the end of the Sky mirrors the correspondence tales of the whisperer in darkness, yet instead of a madman’s letter, it is a child’s paper plane - hope sent into the unknown.

Don’t Look Behind the Curtain borrows the motif of forbidden knowledge central to The Dunwich’s horror (Lovecraft, 2016) and *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, (Jones, Lovecraft and Broecker, 2015) while *Mr Wobbles* comes from the Sea directly echoes the oceanic mythos of Cthulhu, (Lovecraft, 2024) translating the monstrous into something soft and ambiguous. *When the Stars Came Closer* reinterprets *The Colour Out of Space* (Lovecraft, 2020) as an apocalypse of beauty, and *The Caterpillar That Ate the Moon* imagines consumption on a cosmic scale, where the universe devours itself with quiet absurdity.

What drew me to Lovecraft was not his mythology, but his ontology: his insistence that the universe is vast, indifferent and beyond language - a position both terrifying and freeing. By placing that world view inside the framework of a children’s storytelling, I found a way to soften the horror without erasing it. My books invite young readers to live alongside the unknown, to see beauty in the vastness that dwarfs us.

Like Sartre’s notion of radical freedom in a godless world, or Nietzsche’s declaration that meaning must be created anew after the death of God, Lovecraft’s universe is one stripped of divine structure. Yet where he saw only despair, I found potential. The void that horrified him becomes, for me, a space of creation. Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” (Schacht, 1973) reappears here, not as a return to religion but as an artistic gesture — the courage to make beauty within uncertainty.

The book in my series is, in its own way, an act of rebellion against Lovecraft’s nihilism: *Goodnight Universe*, says goodnight to the abyss rather than fleeing it; *The Caterpillar That Ate the Moon* faces the end of all things with acceptance rather than madness. I do not know about you, but my mother always used to tell me to ignore the scary things or that they were not just my imagination, like the monster under the bed or the scary shadow in the wardrobe, they were not real. However, there is a list of rules similar to this in a place called the Appalachian mountains which stretch 2000 miles from Canada to Alabama, mainly woodlands and some of the rules are, if you hear something call your name – no you didn’t, if something screams or

cries out for help – no it didn't, you aren't meant to acknowledge anything that comes through the trails, never go at night and never go alone.

These things have fascinated me for years because there are some mythical things we are allowed to believe in and speak out to, Santa Claus? The Easter Bunny? The Tooth Fairy? All of these characters if you will, are not real but we are given permission to believe in them and that is okay.

Nonetheless we are told about a Boogeyman, from my conversations this is a different person for everyone, more of a threat to get kids to behave but for me it was something that would come and get me if I misbehaved, instead of playing with curiosity and imagination, maybe for adult minds it comes down to good vs evil and not curiosity.

In merging cosmic horror with existential hope, my practice transforms fear into wonder, and the infinite into something intimate enough to hold in a child's hand.

Reflection, Myth, and the Self as Story

Looking back across the six books, I can see that what began as a series of bedtime tales has become a form of autobiography written through myth. Each story carries fragments of my own experience – fear, wonder, doubt, curiosity -- distilled into the gestures of children and creatures. The act of making them has mirrored the process of becoming myself. This is where the auto ethnographic dimension of my practice emerges most clearly: these are not simply stories about imagined worlds, but reflections of my attempts to understand existence through creation.

In every drawing and line of verse, there is a trace of me negotiating what it means to be alive, to hope, and to let go.

The Artist as Mythmaker

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949) describes myth as a symbolic map of transformation — a cycle of departure, initiation, and return.

In my practice, I recognise that same structure, but it unfolds internally rather than externally. The departure is from certainty; the initiation is through making; the return is never final. Each book begins with a moment of innocence - a child saying goodnight, finding a toy, peering behind a curtain - and ends with an encounter that changes perception forever. The hero does not conquer the unknown; they learn to live beside it.

John Yorke, in *Into the Woods* (Yorke, 2013), argues that story, as a practice, exists because humans seek patterns and meaning within chaos. I think of this every time I write a new page. The process of crafting rhythm, repetition, and imagery becomes a ritual for understanding the self. The child characters function as mirrors - embodiments of my creative consciousness moving through its own woods.

In that sense, the narrative journey is not about plot but ontology: each act of storytelling performs my ongoing negotiation between faith and doubt, horror and tenderness, nothingness, and love.

Becoming Through Story

Autoethnography invites me to treat my lived experience as research, to use my personal memories as a lens for understanding the cultural. My creative work extends this idea into the imaginative, the stories become not just a reflection of my life but philosophical experiments about how life is felt and what that can mean.

Through them, I have learned that artmaking can be a form of self-mythology — a way of writing one is being into the world. When I look at *The Friend at the End of the Sky*, I recognise the younger version of myself who kept sending messages into the unknown, waiting for a reply. In *When the Stars Came Closer*, I see the adult version — aware that answers rarely arrive but still dazzled by the light. Each story written needed a different piece of me, alongside any memory I used, Goodnight Universe needed faith, Mr Wobbles needed vulnerability and The Caterpillar That Ate the Moon asked for surrender and each of them needed me.

In making these books, I became Illustrator, author and subject, researcher, and participant. The boundary between story and self-dissolved. What remained was a process — where art became the means by which I learnt to navigate uncertainty with grace.

Myth as Method, Practice as Faith

The more I reflect, the more I see that myth itself functions as a methodology. It allows me to articulate complex philosophical ideas through the clarity of image and rhythm. In Campbell's terms, myth reconciles opposites: it makes the spiritual tangible, the unknowable intimate. When I illustrate a child standing beneath an endless sky, I am not just depicting scale; I am staging the relationship between the self and the infinite. The mythic structure offers a frame within which all these ideas can be held without collapsing into ruin.

Yorke suggests that stories work because they mirror psychological wholeness — they bring the fragmented self into coherence. I recognise that impulse in my own making. Each project begins with dissonance: an image or feeling I cannot explain.

From Horror to Healing

In combining Lovecraftian horror, existential philosophy, and mythic narrative, I have begun to understand that the true subject of my work is not terror, but reconciliation. The void remains, but it is no longer monstrous. Through making, I have found what I call *cosmic tenderness* — the ability to look at the infinite and not flinch. The stories teach me that smallness is not weakness; it is clarity. By giving cosmic horror a child's voice, I have turned fear into language, uncertainty into rhythm, and silence into image.

That transformation is both aesthetic and personal — a quiet re-enchantment of being. Me as the artist becomes not a prophet of doom but a translator between the scales of reality. I draw the universe not to take charge of it but to become its friend. That gesture — simple, repetitive, sincere — is my ontology of practice.

Conclusion: The Self as Story

In the end, I have come to understand that my books are less about children and more about consciousness. They are metaphors for what it feels like to exist — to search, to question and to wonder.

The act of making has become both inquiry and answer: to draw is to know, to narrate is to be.

Within this framework, the self is not fixed but continually rewritten. Each story adds another layer to my understanding of who I am as both maker and being. This series stands as a record of that transformation - an evolving conversation between philosophy and practice, between fear and love. And, if ontology asks what it means to be, then my practice replies, quietly but persistently:

to be is to make, to imagine, and to remain open to the infinite.

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AI Disclosure

I understand that AI was allowed for parts of this assignment, and I wanted to disclose why I used it. I used AI for Research and citation searches, structuring advice, and most importantly, I used it multiple times for proofreading and tone help.

I also want to say that I copy and pasted this essay at multiple stages between Google Docs and Word for help with grammar, etc.

I like using Google Docs for spell checks and grammar; I find it more accurate than Word.

I am not sure if this matters, but I had to copy and paste parts of the essay into AI for proofreading. I declare that none of my body of text was written in any way by AI.