

A Bird Is Never Just a Bird

To examine the bird as the subject of art is to traipse through nearly every aspect of culture. When mankind first started making art, he drew birds on the walls of caves. For much of art history, a bird was never just a bird. It was a symbol or a metaphor or a nod to some noble house whose patronage the artist wished to woo. The peacock in Antonello da Messina's *Saint Jerome in His Study* isn't just a peacock, it's a declaration of the holy man's celestial immortality and incorruptibility. Winslow Homer's *Right and Left* isn't simply two ducks falling mid-air seconds after being shot; they are, according to John Wilmerding, Homer's illumination of his own mortality following a stroke (*American Art*, Volume 40, Penguin Books, 1976). The only people painting birds as birds were ornithologists like John James Audubon or Alexander Wilson, whose paintings served a scientific purpose and weren't treated as fine art until well after their deaths, when notions of art became more inclusive, largely in part as a response to Audubon and Wilson's bodies of work.

And then came modernity. In 1911, Pablo Picasso paints *Le pigeon aux petit pois* (The Pigeon with Green Peas) where the artist is breaking apart his subject and rendering it in the unrecognizable fashion of Cubism. Picasso would later complain about people who failed to understand what he was doing, "Everyone wants to understand painting. Why don't they try to understand the singing of birds? People love the night, a flower, everything which surrounds them without trying to understand them. But painting — that they must understand." (Pablo Picasso, interview in *Cahiers d'Art*, 1935). A decade later, the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi sent his seminal work, *Bird in Space*, to New York with Marcel Duchamp for a show at the Brummer Gallery. But when customs agents saw the long, thin piece of polished bronze, they did not see a visual representation of a bird in motion, as the artist intended, but a pole of metal they classified as "Kitchen Utensils and Hospital Supplies". The agents refused to release the sculpture without the payment of the appropriate duty. The subsequent court case, *Brancusi v. United States*, expanded the definition of art in U.S. law to include non-representational, abstract, and avant-garde work. From the Ba-Birds of ancient Egyptian art to the totem poles and prints of the Kwakwaka'wakw in the Pacific Northwest, the bird in art has always been a powerful, transformative image.

The six artists featured in this catalog draw upon this history. Donna Dodson's wood carvings, Elizabeth Ostrander's ceramic statues, and Tacha Vosburgh's saggar-fired earthenware evoke the ancient bird goddesses of Neolithic Europe. With his piece, *Turning Great Horned Owl*, Andreas von Huene taps into a bevy of Native American mythologies: from the Apache who feared owls as the embodied spirit of dead to the Hopi who believed the Great Horned Owl helped their peaches grow. In Andy Moerlein's sculptures, the use of birds introduces a symbolic, and therefore human, element that contrasts with naturalistic forms.

In comparison, Ellen Welch Granter's paintings, on the surface, read as straightforward, representational renderings of birds, but on closer inspection, are deeply poetic paintings. Compare, for example, *Flown* (page 6), the only painting without a bird, with the four-panel work, *Gulls*, (page 5). The expanse of sky in *Flown*, painted in cool purples and warm yellows, is given additional emotional power by a title that suggests the birds were once there but are now gone. Granter animates the same purple and yellow sky in *Gulls* where the birds congregate, pair up, and take flight. *Gulls* is about how wonderful the world is when we are in communion with each other. *Flown* is about how we feel when our children grow up and leave home.

In many of her paintings, Granter's compositions are such that the birds are dancing with lines. In *Sound Print*, a white bird holds onto the line; in *Crescent Moon*, it leans against it. In *Fresh Air*, the little black and white birds dance among the lines; in *Whirl*, a blue bird flies around it. What we see is a love affair between the birds and the artist, how she invites them into her paintings, and how she makes them beautiful. Because in art, a bird is never just a bird.

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