

Taking Flight: on Rebecca Jewell

Recently I've discovered that a fair number of art-world members, like me, are in love with birds.

At first I found this surprising. I'd always kept my bird-crush under wraps – it felt at odds with the urbane, indoorsy glamour of contemporary art. But, after encountering a few other closeted art-loving bird-lovers, I concluded that this is not, after all, so strange. Art-viewing and birdwatching are two among very few contemporary activities whose pleasure, a) hinges purely on looking; b) usually does not require a screen; c) is not X-rated. Watching birds, for me, is comparable to watching tiny, colourful, moving sculptures as they twitch among the branches or soar overhead.

Rebecca Jewell's art exists at the overlap between these two visual pleasures. An elaborate artwork such as *Cape of No Hope* (all works, 2014) delivers multiple thrills all at once: we admire its perfect natural arc, and how each bird's profile fits snugly within the support-feather's outline. At the same time we appreciate the artist's virtuoso draughtsmanship and printing skill; the beauty and uniqueness of the owls, ospreys and finches depicted; and the unique irregularity of each distinct feather. A vibrantly colourful artwork such as *Songbird Soup* gathers a mass of blue, ochre, red, green and purplish feathers; upon most feathers we find – to our amazement – the finely executed image of a bird. Each meticulously hand-printed feather seems a miraculous technical feat, one that matches in art-making the wondrous nature of feather engineering itself.

Feathers exist in myriad configurations: from powdery goose-down; to rough semi-bristles; to seductive courtship plumes. Composed of flat, hair-like barbs in

minutely varied lengths emerging either side of a central shaft, they are exquisitely designed, somehow weighing next to nothing. On top of all that, when amassed in sufficient quantity and distributed over tiny bones, all flapping in formation, these things actually *produce flight*. This everyday miracle endures among the great marvels of the natural world. Rebecca Jewell applies her formidable technical abilities not just to ‘making pictures of birds’ but to conveying their jewel-like, weightless, magical quality, turning both her art and the birds themselves into powerful objects of contemplation.

Her labor-intensive art attests to the constancy of her fascination with these creatures. She goes to great lengths – collaging, drawing, colouring, printing – to draw our attention to the bird’s overlooked beauty. Not only are they beautiful: most birds dress better than us; sing better; and make better parents. Watching them take flight is, for me, as thrilling as looking at the best art. For gallery-going bird-lovers, the thought of hunting down these exquisite creatures feels about as right as shooting down artworks in a museum. If you add that these magnificent ‘living sculptures’ suffer pain, and that their numbers are dwindling, well, the whole bird-hunting enterprise turns excruciating.

The year 2014 marks a sad centenary: the death of Martha, the last-ever passenger pigeon, hunted to extinction in the early 20th century. Jewell has devoted her art-making talents not just to showing her audience why birds merit our attention, but – in artworks such as her *Mist Net*, which show printed feather-owls and songbirds, trapped in the whisper-thin and deadly haze of an actual bird-trapping net – to raise awareness to their ongoing destruction. Jewell has researched her subject with unblinkered eyes, however; she is aware that their hunt is wrapped up within vast economic and cultural webs. ‘The greatest threat to birds is the poverty of those

around them', Jewell has commented wisely, acknowledging the birds' and the hunters' shared dependence on the wider human circumstances in which they live. Looking at Jewell's art, I become aware not only of the visual pleasure I draw from both the living creatures and from art, but of the privilege of my position: I am fortunate enough to look at birds as objects of rare living beauty, not as sustenance.

Jewell does not just produce 'pictures of birds' but points towards the many ways that the society of birds is entangled in that of humans: in their entrapment as pets (*Birdcage*); in how they are labelled and archived (*The Art of Flaconry*). Captured alive in cages and nets, or preserved in illustrations and natural history museums, the birds' existence in both life and death is perpetually at the mercy of human invention.

There is a hint of the pre-modern in Jewell's art: in the one-by-one, artisanal printmaking; the retro, hyper-detailed drawing style; the grey, black, burnt red, and sepia inks of the *Cape*; the ancient style of illustration in *Birdcatcher*; the vintage frames, the yellowed labels, the old-school penmanship. Back in the 19th century, among the first to notice the detrimental effects of air pollution was not a scientist or politician, but an art critic: John Ruskin. Ruskin's attention was drawn as much to painting as to the changing environment around him, and he commented on all his visual experiences uniformly, finding connections across them all. Jewell's drawings, sculptures, prints and collages similarly remind us that nothing we see exists in isolation: not art, not human life, not nature, not death, not even beauty.

– *Gilda Williams*