

Full Circle: Return of the Birds

Birds have been a subject matter of sustained interest for Marsha Kennedy throughout her long and esteemed artistic practice. She associates birds with childhood memories; of rehabilitating sick and injured birds, her family's pet canaries, and the sounds of birds in the Qu'Appelle Valley where she spent summers with her grandparents. Beyond the personal, birds also carry cultural, spiritual and ecological meaning for Kennedy, serving as metaphors for hope and regeneration, as well as loss and warnings of environmental peril, like canaries in the gold mine.

Images of birds returned to Kennedy's canvases and panels in 2008 in a series of paintings, titled *Birds, Nest, Water, Sky*.ⁱ The painting, *Honour*, included in this exhibition, is a beautiful example of this work, where Kennedy presented birds or nests of eggs, in lively, exquisite splendor - no lifeless bodies here - composed with domestic items (bowls, cutlery and linens) and set against transcendent or foreboding skies, alluding to the dual metaphorical meanings that these creatures hold for Kennedy, as both hope and loss.ⁱⁱ

From 2008 to 2015, Kennedy produced various bodies of works to explore the cultural associations of humans with birds and other wildlife, exhibiting them in a number of exhibitions in Regina.ⁱⁱⁱ These works included the 2011 series *Crow*, featuring oil paintings on composite gold leaf that spoke to Kennedy's personal association with her own rescued crows, honouring the birds for their intelligence, resourcefulness, symbolism and diverse cultural significance.^{iv} Other works include a series of portraits, featured in this exhibition, of individuals engaged with birds of Saskatchewan to address the need for "an empathetic, revitalized and transformative relationship with the natural world".^v

A more recent series in 2018, *Afterlight*, offers image montages of deceased birds positioned within antique photographs from settler history, a combination of painting and photography, thereby reflecting a significant shift in her practice in terms of her approach, as well as a return to earlier influences in terms of subject matter.^{vi}

"*Afterlight* is a dreamlike, pensive passage into the past where antique, anonymous photographs represent my familial and collective past. Carefully placed bodies of birds charge the image and warn of a looming or uncertain future. These unsuspecting moments of our past hold the values, beliefs and habits that have carried us forward into the Anthropocene."^{vii}

This is not the first time that she has used an underlying photograph for her work - she began this approach during

the creation of the portrait series of 2015 - but it is the first time that Kennedy has "staged" her photographic sources. Using the antique photographs as a backdrop, she stages a mini diorama, placing dead or taxidermized birds in front of the photograph, along with other pictorial elements, like fabrics, dollhouse furniture and antique dolls. The artist then documents the diorama to produce a final image, which is then mounted on panel and transformed with paint through a grisaille method of establishing a monochromatic underpainting and then applying glazes of colour.

She returns to using images of lifeless birds in this series, as in *Stilled Lives*, explaining that the bodies of the deceased birds in relation to the antique photographs are "like omens from our past, warning of pending danger and reflecting their imminent demise through human activity, climate change and habitat loss".^{viii} It is interesting to note that Kennedy also returns to using antique dolls and doll furniture in this series, which is reminiscent of the subject matter in her early prints from her undergraduate program. She has come full circle; in revisiting familial memories in this work, she has also come to revisit early sources of inspiration.

Building on the ideas and approaches of *Afterlight*, Kennedy recently completed a new series, titled *House, Home, Habitat*. The series presents four exquisitely rendered home interiors, each featuring a different animal species within the domestic settings of an older Victorian home. Kennedy's positioning of these species, all of which are listed as threatened or endangered, within these older architectural landscapes alludes to our complicity in these species' loss of habitat, leading to their endangerment, and suggests that our way of life, which includes our habits, values and beliefs, is inherited from our colonial, settler past, where notions of progress and modernization have separated us from living sustainably and in harmony with the natural world. Kennedy encourages us to vision how we can establish a revitalized relationship with nature.

Currently, Kennedy has returned to working with prints, beginning a series of digital prints, based on the *Afterlight* series. Once again, Kennedy is staging her photographic compositions, printing them on paper and then transforming them with watercolours. Reminiscent of hand-tinted, antique photographs, these photo-based works have a wonderfully soft sepia tone, alluding to our historic past and bringing it into the light of our present. It seems fitting to conclude the exhibition, *Embodied Ecologies*, in the same manner that it starts - with prints - coming full circle. It not only speaks to the diversity of her practice, how she has moved through and revisited various media and approaches throughout her career, and yet the foundations, of what initially inspired and continue to drive Kennedy's work, have remained true and steadfast.

ⁱThe series was exhibited in a solo exhibition, *Birds, Nest, Water, Sky* (2008), Mysteria Gallery, Regina, SK.

ⁱⁱThe work, *Faith: American Crow*, from this series was also included in a group exhibition, *Human/ Nature* (2009), Art Gallery of Regina, Regina, SK.

ⁱⁱⁱKennedy's works were included in solo, two-person and group exhibitions from 2008-2015 at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, in facility and permanent collection exhibits, and at Mysteria (later known as Mata Gallery), her commercial gallery at that time.

^{iv}Marsha Kennedy, Artist statement, *Crows* (2011), Mysteria Gallery, Regina, SK.

^vMarsha Kennedy, Artist statement for the artwork, *Resonance*, sourced online at <http://www.marshakennedy.ca/exhibitions/resonance.htm>, accessed August 16, 2020.

^{vi}The series was presented in the exhibition, *Afterlight* (2018), Slate Fine Art Gallery, Regina, SK.

^{vii}Marsha Kennedy, Artist statement, *Afterlight* (2018), Slate Fine Art Gallery, Regina, SK. The term "Anthropocene" refers to the current geological age during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

^{viii}Ibid.