

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WILDLIFE ART**

*UN/NATURAL SELECTIONS: WILDLIFE IN CONTEMPORARY ART*

Exhibition Catalogue Excerpt w/ Permission of National Museum of Wildlife Art (Published in Print: May, 2021)

Essay on “Caravan (Owl)” by Curator of Art, Tammi Hanawalt, Ph.D



PETER D. GERAKARIS

*Caravan (Owl)*, 84 in. x 84 in., Oil on canvas. 2012

National Museum of Wildlife Art Permanent Collection (Jackson, WY)

Purchased with funds generously donated by Adrienne & John Mars

## EXHIBITION PREFACE

*Un/Natural Selections: Wildlife in Contemporary Art* considers the diverse ways that contemporary artists employ animal imagery to address humanity's interconnectedness and ever-changing relationship with the natural world. Comprised of approximately 50 artworks (c. 2000-2019) exclusively from the Museum's permanent collection, this exhibition offers a wide range of works in a variety of media divided into four thematic sections: Tradition, Politics, Science, and Aesthetics. These sections act as overlapping chapters, investigating the ways we use animal imagery to tackle human concerns.

## ESSAY ON "CARAVAN (OWL)"

Multimedia artist Peter Gerakaris grew up listening to the calls of animals and birds. In particular he remembers the time he heard the call and response of a family of owls in New Hampshire: "The call was beautiful and mesmerizing and it triggered something—I found myself wanting to make this larger-than-life evocation of a barred owl."<sup>1</sup> From this propulsive inspiration, he created the enigmatic kaleidoscopic painting *Caravan (Owl)*.

The painting's grand size (seven feet by seven feet) and brilliant palette draw viewers in and invite them to take a more intimate look at its complexities. The bluish and reddish concentric circles that funnel inward lead to the haloed central owl figure, which sits stoically on a gnarled branch. Surrounding the owl, Gerakaris has placed colored autumn leaves, the silhouettes of falcons, and floating bluish orbs.

In creating such a sizeable representation, Gerakaris hoped to convey a mythic aura, or more specifically, "a shamanistic visitation,"<sup>2</sup> in which the owl perhaps suggests a human-to-animal transformation. The owl, he explains, is not so much the ominous creature defined in many cultures as a portent of death, but instead is associated here with his Greek heritage, in which the bird is viewed as a symbol of wisdom. Vivid colors, which contribute to the painting's vibrancy, relate to sound, like the reverberations of owls, or the artist's favored jazz music. The work's title, *Caravan*, comes from the Duke Ellington tune of the same name. The spiral bands, meanwhile, that lead to the owl, represent an ancient and divine form that Gerakaris says he keeps returning to.<sup>3</sup>

Altogether, the collage-like, allegorical painting might be described as a dreamscape. Gerakaris, however, says that underlying the painting's mystic ambiance, is its connection to and celebration of wildlife and the environment:

I think that most everyone's experience of nature is mediated through lenses of culture, whether we have to take in sights through television shows or social media. . . . I genuinely want viewers to feel the excitement that I feel every time I set foot in nature, or see an owl or any kind of animal that inspires connectedness with the nature—that we are a part of it and not apart from it. . . . There are two sides to the work. On the one side there is this kind of ecstatic feeling of . . . the color and dynamic movement of the imagery, which I hope seduces the viewer, but I also hope it might bring them to contemplate their own relationship to the natural world.<sup>4</sup>

The collage aspect of Gerakaris's paintings is his commentary on our fragmented relationship with what we, as humans, consider "wild." Through his own fascination with wildlife and environment he has developed a keen awareness of the survival issues that surround a multitude of species. Thus, recognizing that the wildlife he is so familiar with is in urgent need of our attention, Gerakaris has set out to honor them in the most thought-provoking depictions he can imagine. —*TH*

#### **Notes**

1. Peter Gerakaris, in conversation with the author, December 2020.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Gerakaris is also a jazz guitarist. Peter Gerakaris, in conversation with the author, December 2020.
4. *Ibid.*