

Red-Tail Hawk/Peregrine Falcon

1

The two large pictures of a falcon in the back corner of the space stand out to me. Though the video playing in the corner to the right of the two pictures is titled *Peregrine Falcon*, from my knowledge of birds I do not think this falcon is, in fact, a peregrine. Peregrine Falcons have completely dark heads, while this bird's head coloring is the same mixture of white and brown patches as the rest of its body and the underside of its wings. In fact, this bird is probably a hawk because its head, in relation to its body, is smaller than the average falcon's head. Falcons have big heads and big eyes, and I imagine that is why they are such fierce predators. Their eyes are so big they seem as though they could spot a field mouse from a mile up in the sky.

These two works are probably 48 by 60 inches, and they are close-up pictures, so the hawks are very large and imposing in the gallery. They differ from pictures one might see in National Geographic. They are like three-quarter length portraits of a nobleman from the Renaissance. Only their top halves are shown, and in both pictures the bird is posing in a very particular manner. In the picture on the right, the bird is looking away to his left, though his body is turned towards the viewer. It is a stately, regal pose, reminiscent of a portrait of a king in all aspects except for the degree in which his head is turned. The fact that his head is turned further than convention requires for this type of portrait reminds me that he is a bird, not human, most likely glancing at the slightest noise, hoping it to be a tasty rodent. However, his wings are lifted in a most

peculiar manner, much like a king with his hand on his hip, or resting on his scepter, might look in his official portrait. His feathers are beautiful.

Is it a he? I'm not sure. I know a bit about birds because I've spent some time in the wilderness. When I first started spending time outdoors, I loved the solitude and quiet of nature. But after many years, I found it was in keeping the company of species other than humans that brought me back to the wild again and again. I realized I was not alone. I spent three months straight in the wilderness of New Zealand, and there is where my interest in birds began. I had a "Birds of New Zealand" book and kept it at the top of my pack. I learned everything I could about the birds that we saw daily. I became a bird-nerd. The New Zealand falcon, similar in size and behavior to this hawk, was one of those birds, though he was harder to spot than the Robins, the Shags, the Wekas, and the Keas. We mostly saw them when we were canoeing because they would fly up and down the riverbed looking for fish, then dive from insane heights to catch one. The New Zealand Falcon is all black (dark, dark blue), unlike this bird who has no black.

I think this bird is a hawk, perhaps even a red-tail hawk, which is a species that is very common in the Western United States. They live in farmlands and meadows. This could be a red-tail because the coloring on its back and outer-wings are feathers that begin brown but fade to a very beautiful red-brown. We cannot see the bottom half of this bird, but at the tail, I bet the brown has faded completely and the red-brown dominates. The one on the left is bowing. His wings act as arms spread out in supplication. However, his beauty assures the viewer that there is none but god to whom he might supplicate, like a king. It is a ritualistic act. In reality, the bird is readjusting an

awkward positioning, or perhaps beginning to take flight. This is a portrait of a beautiful being. He is completely separate from us.

\*I ask the curator if my guess that this is a red-tail hawk is correct, she says yes. Though, it should be noted that it does not matter what type of bird this is. Falcon or Hawk, they possess equal levels of *power, autonomy, grace and ruthlessness*. I will knowingly call it a hawk though it may not be.

2

In the video next to these two pictures, the majority of the time there is a woman on the right running through a field, looking up as she does so every other step. On the left the camera follows very closely what someone told me is a peregrine falcon, though the film is too shaky and grainy, and the falcon is too far away, to gather a guess at the species. The bird is closer now, but the film looks as though it has been sped up, or perhaps the bird is moving that fast. Either way, we cannot tell what kind of bird this is. The woman is closer now, too. The film ends with both the right and the left screens, which are nestled in the corner, showing quick, flurried, close-up images of the bird.

3

I feel as though I was drawn to the two large pictures of the hawks because I want to take those pictures. I want to be this close to this bird. Certainly not everyone in the world shares my sentiments, so how does this change my viewing of the work? Around the gallery there are other images of nature, and even fragments of birds and bird culture (trees as places for nests, the sky for flying, the meadow for eating), but I was drawn to these two because they are portraits of the hawks. They give the respect a hawk deserves. The other images around the gallery include a hawk's tail or back as, in my opinion, a

figural tool, just another puzzle piece to reach an end that does not necessarily have anything to do with the species of hawk. In *Spill*, across the room from my pictures, the fragments of the birds are fragments in a narrative that speaks to our relationship with nature and our place in nature. In the two pictures of the hawk, there is no me. This species was doing fine before humans, and will do fine after. In my view, it is the hawk that is a work of art, not by some divine creation, but by the incredible luck of this planet. I think Liza Ryan does well to portray this with these two works.

The backgrounds in each picture are blurry landscapes, or at least one can assume they are elements that generally make up a landscape: a meadow, a small mountain, and a lake. However, the blurriness of the backgrounds is perhaps meant to lead the viewer to understand that though they know what hills and meadows look and feel like under their feet, they cannot know what the landscape means to a bird, to this hawk.

The other birds in the gallery serve as some sort of metaphor into which I do not wish to delve. There is the question, the line we walk in defining the purpose of art, or the difference between art and life. It has long been tradition that accurate imitation of nature serves as the most pure, formal expression in art. Nature does not need metaphor to invoke meaning, and the act of painting nature does not need any motivation or intention because the life of nature is so aesthetically perfect. There is no reason other than it is more beautiful than anything that can be painted (in my opinion), but as humans we are driven to create and imitate, therefore nature would and should be our greatest subject. It is more precious (especially now) than any constructed thing. It is more perfect, more complete than any interpretation. Now, photography allows for anyone to take a picture of this perfect environment. Is this art in the way the Poussin's

interpretation of a bucolic landscape with a calm is art? Why not? Is nature art? What are the parameters for being a piece of art? These pictures raise these questions because they are beautiful. This bird is beautiful. Or is it because *I* think they are beautiful that they raise these questions?

4

Thinking back, how can these pictures apply to the separation of art and life? They are not imaginary, so we can rule out any connotations that might give. The birds appear in these photographs as they would in real life. The only thing that could possibly be imaginary about these images would be something we impose upon them. So we are thinking about photography in its purest nature: documentary. Unlike the video to the right, there is no juxtaposition of information. Yes, the same bird appears in two separate photographs hung right next to each other, but there is no juxtaposition of deliberate artistic choices, and it is because they are documentary photos. What choice did Ryan really have in this situation? I am talking about the moment she took the pictures. This is not a person to whom she could instruct. This is a wild hawk, it was chance (guided chance seeing as she sought the help of expert birders) that the artist and the hawk crossed paths. Is this her point? The chance encounter of the artist in the wild means... If so, what metaphor could this serve?

I don't think this is her point: that there is meaning in documenting nature. There need be no meaning in this action, for the results without mediation provide more thought-provoking, emotional responses than any imposition could hope to (for me). She is apparently interested in the "grace, ruthlessness, autonomy, and power," of birds, but it seems she means specifically large, carnivorous, beautiful birds. She is not

photographing grackles or blackbirds. In viewing her video titled “Peregrine Falcon,” it is obvious that the woman chasing the bird, or chasing something, cannot hope to attain the level of autonomy, specifically, that the falcon possesses. This autonomous nature of birds is something I am interested in separately from Ryan’s work. This is a huge part of my bird-nerd-ness.

5

*Spill*, the frieze-like photography piece Ryan created for the Cooley, is reflected in the glass protecting the photographs. There are large birds in this piece, as well as images of nature (leaf litter, tree trunks, nests, moss) and fragments of the human body. The juxtaposition of these images brings a word to mind that has been floating around the gallery as I sit in front of these photographs: mythology. Daphne turned into a tree. Icarus, who attempted to harness the power of a bird, failed. There is a feeling of desire in these works. Desire to be powerful, or at least to understand the power these birds possess. There is also a desire to connect with some sort of mythological time in which meaning, nature, or deities were more accessible. This display is a sort of modern day pagan construction, meant to invoke the power of persuadable gods. The pictures of the hawk, being displayed across the room, automatically contribute to this provocation.

However, had these photographs been displayed alone, separate from the rest of the pieces, I am not sure I would be led to think these things. I think the power of these two photographs is in their autonomy, not as birds, but as documents. They don’t need to be called art to be beautiful or meaningful. This is something Ryan could have intended with regards to these photographs specifically. In the other works, there is so much design, so much *intention*. There is evident deliberation in the video display, *Spill*, and

the rest of the photographs around the gallery, while there is almost a deliberate lack of evident deliberation in these two. This points to an intention separate from the rest of the works, and I think that intention is to call into question the aforementioned qualifications for being art. Like I said, these pictures do not need to be in a gallery to elicit emotion or response. They are beautiful. This is all I need, but for someone who thinks birds are boring, this is probably not the case. However, even if someone thinks birds are boring, could they deny that these photographs, as documents, are autonomous in a gallery-shaking way?

Is there an intentional parallel between the autonomy of hawks and the autonomy of these photographs? This bird is completely separate from me. These photographs are completely separate from art.

6

The regality of the birds is natural, a part of their nature. There is a reason why the bald eagle is the symbol of the United States of America: it conveys regality and power alongside independence and freedom. And yes, these adjectives are human constructs. We impose their autonomy on them, at least the word. We impose everything we think about them *on* them. They are so completely separate from us that my mind is too boggled to approach this issue.

However, I do not think that using my imagination for a moment to pretend this bird is bowing ritualistically or posing for an official state portrait qualifies the photographs as art. These birds do well to confuse the “art viewer” as to their figural meaning, but no meaning is good enough for me.