

Kelsey Brennan
Art 301 Paper
Lisa Claypool
Rob Slifkin

The last time I was in here there was a portable air-conditioning unit underneath the two portraits of falcons in the corner across from the entrance. I thought it was appropriate, implying a spill of sorts. Maybe someone dropped water on the floor or maybe it just referred to some sort of failure of climate control. The artist assured us it was not a part of her work but maybe there was a dialogue. It blew air at the photograph by the door, the woman's hair lifting in the breeze.

Today it is raining and the air still remarkably humid. And it strikes me as an odd photograph as I walk into the gallery now that the air in here is so still. Her hair still held up with no movement to keep it there. I keep walking by.

The piece, *Spill*, is the first thing to catch my eye in the gallery today despite being distracted briefly by memory. It is a long photo montage/collage that wraps itself around one wall of the gallery. A collection of images of the body, nature and animals framed together in a long line. It's like a splice of film: A piece of a narrative you can't quite get at, can't quite touch because the before and the after are no longer accessible. Something that once made sense in context is set free to make its own story, its own mythology of sorts. Of course this fragment has been drawn upon; a black stain runs from a screaming mouth, flowing frame to frame: constricting a dead bird, scarring an already injured hand, blinding an owl. Images connected through a violent act but always pushing forward (and backwards), one into the next.

There is something jarring and almost unnatural about these images. Camouflaged figures in the corner are shrunk to the size of Barbie. Falcons are blown up to the size of

people; looking so crisp and still from across the room, but fuzzy (almost vibrating) when seen up close. There are people running next to falcons on the wall in one corner and moments caught in time on the adjacent wall. There is wind caught by a camera and frozen. It seems to be a gesture of control. Maybe it's about giving up control; or maybe it's about having too much.

Between the photograph of the woman's back and the picture to the right of it there are doodles in pencil. Tiny scale-like marks work their way from top to bottom on the seam between the two photos. It is an obsessive gesture and makes me want to draw all over the collage. These little marks ask to be expanded upon, to infiltrate image like ink.

Today it is the portrait of the falcons that catch my eye first. They are so crisp from far away; human sized. Human gestures. Both refuse to meet my eye. The one on the left faces me but its head is turned down, wings raised, almost as a question, or maybe it's a shrug (a defensive gesture). As I move in closer this becomes less and less clear; the image is less crisp than it would seem. It is harder to register close up than from far away. The head especially (and the eyes) become a blur. It's almost impossible to see all the detail, to discern it all. It's the antithesis of a National Geographic Magazine photograph: more clear and defined the closer you go. Here, this close is just a blur of an animal, indicating endless movement; only possibly caught mid-movement or between movement; but never at rest. The photos were taken in northern California this summer during the fires. It accounts for the hazy (almost-rainbow) spectrum at the horizon line in

the background. It's close to home for me and I remember the brown sky; how hard it was the breath. I wonder how those birds feel; if they feel trapped as they fly.

The bird on the right turns his head away from me, wings starting to unfurl, feeling the wind, contemplating flight. He looks like a little person ready to jump. He is more still than his companion self to the left. More clear, but still full of film grain. You can still see the blur of the wind in the down of his feathers: movement of life within a static image. It's the moment before choice (or is it instinct?) kicks into gear. Maybe we are looking at them as if we have hawk-vision. Magnified and half a mile away he is ready. I want to know the before and the after of this story and am reminded of the blinded owl near the end of *Spill*, what it could mean to blind a bird of prey; to take away the glory of its vision. It seems a bitter pain, yet almost a relief for those watching. I can look without predatory eyes staring back. It is disabled, unable to hunt, drained of purpose.

I should return now to *Spill*. It really is beautiful I wish the light in the gallery was brighter or the spotlights less so: You can't get close without casting a shadow. Still, it pops on the wall. Maybe the colors are so over-saturated that the low light doesn't affect piece. It kind of hovers there in the corner.

This should have come first: the frames in sequence. Left to right. Set out like a language, they ask to be read. To be linked to one another but without coherent grammar.

I like it better that way:

Mouth, forest, falcon, bramble, body/hair, green trees, blue goat, tangled/knotted vines, leaf-littered forest, dead bird, undergrowth, cut fingers and pin, blurry dove, woman's

*back, reflection, hawk tail, blurry forest, flying falcon, shoulder, autumn leaves blur,
blacked out owl eyes, fur, pinched flesh (am I dreaming?)*

It doesn't tell you how to think; it just lets you absorb.

Today I sit on the floor. Looking up, *Spill* seems to wrap around me. I must move my head to see all of it; almost like trying to capture a panorama at the top of a mountain. Perceiving information in your peripheral but never quite enough to make it out. The color green seems to predominate the collage; maybe that's what gives me the sense of panorama, of nature, of life. But it is the photos that lack continuity of color (the black and white body images or the blue goat) that really pop out to the viewer and make one see.

I can't stop seeing the first image: the mouth. Although it's the blue goat that first caught my eye, the mouth that is what I can't stop thinking about. It's the mouth that is seemingly the source of the slick black spill of ink. It slithers out like the thought bubble on a cartoon but quietly becomes more sinister: infiltrating other photos in order to blind, mute, and bind the other characters in this montage. It occurs to me that this spillage and slippage of the ink acts as language does: marking these objects as a means of giving a hazy sort of meaning that comes from interconnection. Photography works like this spillage as well, providing a visual dictionary of sorts in which we entrap the world. The action of spilling acts as verb, moving the piece along (creating narrative where there was none; welding together separate frames), forcing violence and control upon those surrounding it. The ink flows and pools and I trace its path, following the marks left behind; am coerced into the role of a spectator for this past event. What I am watching is

unclear. But as I get to the last photo I am compelled to mimic the gesture portrayed. A little pinch of the flesh to ensure that is not a dream.

Pain seems to have a role to play: the dead bird, hunting falcons, blinded owls, screaming mouths, and pinched flesh. But we are always forced away from these images by the ones framing them, it moves too fast for the eye to follow. A cut on a fingertip also catches my eye. Or maybe it's not the cut so much as the woman's hand sticking a pin or toothpick idly into the circular wound as if to trace its pain, as if to seek some sort of meditation in her injury, an obsessive gesture. A relishing of the injury, of the chance to visualize the feeling of pain on the surface of the skin. The inside on the outside. It is poetic with fingers stretched out in a manner that echoes the wings of the dove in the next frame, as though hands could suddenly take flight. It puts me into the mind of the falcons on the opposite wall; how we can see human gestures in their poses. The way they are brought to life by the grain of the film.

Something experienced in time and though time. Maybe that's why I want to add my marks next to the doodles by the woman's back; to reclaim those obsessive little gestures as an attempt to show my place in time. Take my own action and make something new out of the everyday. Appropriate the work and make mine (or is it desecrate and make the work available to everyone?) It makes me think of graffiti on bathroom walls. They do not stand alone and removed from me, these images, they are in the domain of everyone. They are not untouched. We can still see the human hand.