

The Peregrine

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I have always overlooked birds as beautiful or important creatures. There is the occasional finch I watch adoringly because he is so small and helpless, but that's it. Listening to a birds' song on a lazy day can be almost meditative, but I rarely have the pleasure. Just noticing a bird takes a quietness and presence of mind it seems I rarely possess. Mesmerized by Liza's huge portraits of a gorgeous falcon it seems to me that I have been moving much too quickly and noticing much too little. It occurs to me that this attention paid to viewing art may be just as well, if not better, spent on nature.

The poet knows that a bird is ephemeral. Meaningfully, purposefully fleeting. Transient creatures, so unlike ourselves, they leave us in the winter to be warm all year round (the vacation schedule of our dreams!) They are not tied a place as we are. They do not fear leaving the safety of their shelter. For a bird, shelter is as temporary and as changing as ones next meal. My attachment to objects, places, and routine is something that is by and large a choice and as such I think I envy the birds' flippant unattachment to the earth. It seems that a bird achieved Moksha long before man.

T.J. Clark, interpretive writer extraordinaire, wrote on such canonical topics as color, proportion, style, and scale. My impulse toward such writing is halted by the sheer pleasure of seeing. If art engenders the writing, it would follow that high resolution photographs will not necessitate the same writing style as 17th century paintings so I

suppose I should not put too much stock in writing similarly. For me, the most striking visual aspect of these photos is the clean composition and the positioning and juxtaposing of body. There are only three main colors in these photographs that a part of what makes them so approachable. Blue is shaded on the horizon—much lighter in the sky than the land—it is hard to make out the foggy horizon since it is sp put of focus. This obscured landscape focuses my eye back on the bird because really where he is matters less than what he is.

In the rightmost image there is a patch of green at the bottom right corner that places this bird in a landscape and makes the landscape look genuine despite its inexactitude. It is the “reality effect” of Barthe--the green signifies the grasses and land that a wild, candid photograph of a bird would certainly portray. The landscape provides the bird with a place to act—he is not a captive object but free to take flight in search of his prey. The bird itself is one of exquisite coloration. When looking for peregrine’s online most did not have this creature’s careful white and brown coloration but were more solidly brown. This is truly a beautiful bird—his coloration like fine clothing. I want to print fabric that mimics these designs—a balance of white and brown with a variety of patterns from Morris code like dotted head to tear drop shaped stains of brown on his white breast. A back like fish scales intricately articulated. There is an algorithm to its beauty. The size and placement of the scale like markings is not uniform, but it is not random. They are much smaller closer to his undercarriage and become larger moving away from the inner edge of his wings. The exactness and purposefulness of this coloring

escapes me in terms of evolution. In fact I don't even understand why birds exist at all. It seems like they could just not—that all earth's creatures could be weighted and tethered to the earth like humans. Aerodynamics took man millions of years to master and we still lack personal flying units promised to us by sci fi writers of past. I sometimes ask with mock outrage “where is my rocket pack?” feeling I have been somewhat cheated by modernity since I cannot fly.

This bird first appeared to me as almost saccharine, he seemed was so sweet. The leftmost photograph shows the bird with his head bent. He looks like he is concentrating or dare I say that he is sorrowful. He is a victim, bringing his wings in to shield himself. He is in the process of becoming still—prayerful, eyes kept to the ground. In the next image to the right he is looking over his shoulder, a sign of vulnerability if not outright consternation. These two images seem as if they could be but a moment apart. The bird rests and is peaceful and, just a moment later, alert with eyes wide open. The bird seems to be living a tiring and beleaguered existence--these photos seem more of psychological portraits.

My newfound interest and care for this bird took me to seek poetry on the subject. What better way to capture fleeting and untouchable beauty than through a poem? Yet, the falcon is not a muse of any loving poems that I could find. I did read some Nietzsche who used birds of prey in an allegorical story about how the killer isn't evil for killing. Evil. I couldn't believe he was calling these beautiful animals killers or implying

that others may see them as evil! I had been so persuaded by the capacity of these photographs to express an emotive and beautiful animal that their role in the food chain had completely passed me by. It occurs to me not that since Liza had these experiences with a falconer, these birds are not just killers; they are in fact killing machines. No longer do they kill out of instinct and necessity but out of training and human interest. These animals have been objectified to some extent, but I imagine a falconer still respects the birds. To interact with such powerful and beautiful creatures and to teach them and work with them must be more of a collaborative effort (especially since Wikipedia says they are some of the most intelligent birds according to some guy).

After staring at these images for hours in the gallery they seem less loveable to me. They are cold and distant, the reflection of the glass keeps me from even seeing them alone—they reflect the work on the opposite wall. I get up off the bench to try to reconnect with these works since I feel there is more they have to offer than this reflexive glare. Up close they are new to me—their feathers are entirely different. I don't understand how I could have not noticed more quickly but their images are less crisp and telling than I thought. Needing to re-analyze these images I will start with the image on the left.

I see myself now; I see my computer and the grain of the wood floors behind me. Unless I view the work at an oblique angle I see myself reflected in the glass due to the placement of the lights. Maybe that means something but for now I am only annoyed.

There is a cinematic drama to these works that is camouflaged when viewed from a distance. The left-hand image always appeared to me to be showing motion but that motion was represented through the placement of the figure. A bird would never hold his wings slightly ajar in a moment of rest—they must be in the process of closing. His head would never be almost to his chest. There was a moment before rest captured, but this movement is shown more vividly when I walked up to get a closer look. The head and the inner part of the wing are out of focus signifying that they must have been moving when this photograph was taken since the rest of the bird is so artfully focused. There is an overlapping of bright white strands of feather on the brown patterning of the falcon. These areas are shown in such great focus that they seem unreal—digitally touched up to change this nature scene into something else. Yet, I doubt that happened and this is much more likely that I don't know what a bird's feathers actually look like. There seem to be even more types of patterns on the bird's feathers than I initially thought with some negative and positive tear drop shaped patterns on the bird's inner wing.

In the photograph to the right the drama of movement is abandoned for the drama of disrepair. The bird is wide-awake and ready for anything. He must be. His feathers are not only rustled there is a very strange looking white fluff on his breast that looks like down. It is a large patch and to me it seems like this bird has been wounded somehow because his feathers are a protective coating for this soft, vulnerable down. Seeing this down is like a rip in a pillow—it is showing and visually spilling out of the bird. This is no longer a moment of paranoia but of righteous concern for his livelihood. I

am worried about this bird; his moment of rest seems like a moment of prayer and respite from the dangers he faces. In this image there is no blurring, no motion being captured. This is the time between moments of action. It didn't occur to me to wonder why this bird had landed on the ground. It now seems unnatural and even perilous.

I read the flyer at the entrance to the exhibit and was interested to learn that she was informed by literature on falcons. Reed does not have a copy of The Peregrine so I read the introduction and a few pages on Google Books. If T.J. Clark was writing experientially and creatively I do not even know how to categorize the writing of J.A. Baker. He literally follows two peregrines near his home for months. Learning to track them through the air, he eventually relates to them so much that he uses the term "we" including himself in their midst. In a pivotal passage cited in the introduction Baker writes

I found myself crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk as in some primitive ritual; the hunter becomes the thing he hunts... We live, in these days in the open the same ecstatic fearful life. We shun men.

As a source of inspiration, Liza was thinking about the subject of birds in a way very much like I am thinking about the subject of art writing and that relationship is unsettling. I wish I was thinking about birds and chasing after them to determine beauty and meaning rather than sitting on a bench in a gallery. Art may be democratic in that we can all see the same thing, but in that we lose agency and adventure. I have never lived or spent much time anywhere that would have falcons I could chase. This seems to me a great loss. It is hard to be somewhere with both art and falcons so it seems that at some

point there is a choice between the artful and the artless—they may inform one another but I am not certain they can coexist. I missed a beautiful sunny day while sitting inside a fluorescent gallery. Bringing nature into the context of the art is complicated since an appropriate and inspired response is to flee the gallery, the man made, the contextualized for the forest to see for yourself.