

I began this essay with some hesitation. I instantly take to art that is arrogantly beautiful and/or audacious (my favorite thing in the world is Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* [1973]). As I wandered about the little white cube that is Cooley Galley, I was initially unengaged by the quietness of *SPILL*, the most recent work by Los Angeles-based photographer, Liza Ryan (born 1965). Photography is less exciting to me than painting. I do not know Ryan's influences, and I did not listen to her talk. Nor do I know that much about falcons. So it wasn't love at first sight, and the first date was awkward. Through forced proximity, I eventually developed an appreciation, if not some understanding, of her work.

Being a human and therefore curious, I was intrigued by the approximately thirty-foot montage of muted photographs roped together with thick lines of black paint, as it looked like a puzzle, or narrative, that could be followed, maybe even solved. At first, the series appears to be a disjointed grouping of more or less unrelated things: bodies, birds, and landscapes. There is no obvious ordering and none of the individual images are terribly arresting, being manipulated snapshots of trees and falcons (or hawks?) and unerotic human body parts. Generally, they go well together, in addition to the stitching black line, the use of bright colors, contrast, and blurring effect appear throughout the collage in intervals.

The following will be a detailed and painfully long paragraph describing the individual photographs in the series. I should say that the set does not strike me as being necessarily linear, but I will describe it from left-to-right for the sake of convenience. *SPILL* begins weirdly enough with a photograph of an open mouth in profile, the lips lobster red, the beak-like upper teeth rather pointed and having quite the overbite. A thick black line of paint extends out of the mouth like a grotesque tongue or rat snake. The black line ventures into a blurred wooded landscape, then past a falcon flying low over grass. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that its talons are

tethered to the ground with a silver wire. Next is a tangle of brush, then a slightly plump woman's back, with her hair in a ponytail to the shoulder blade, against a flat black background. The inky line interrupts the picture, cutting the woman's body in half. It breaks off and starts again in the upper right corner of the photograph exploring lush, bright green, vine and moss covered trees. By contrast to its interaction with the aforementioned woman, the black line extends and outlines the branches, rather than interrupting the space. The tree pattern is also extended in grey outline into the previous frame. When I first saw the next panel I was excited by what I thought was a silhouette of a unicorn against a turquoise background. Then I noticed its beard and realized with disappointment that it was probably just a goat. Several black lines of paint meet at the top of its skull. The next image is a cluster of sticks with a painted outline. Then there are tree trunks during fall, as orange and red leaves blanket the ground, which are also outlined in black. The black line bisects a considerably thinner panel of a dead or comatose bird lying on its back, like how the rapper Nas said he saw a dead bird flying through a broken sky. Then there is a fallen tree, also outlined, followed by a very strange photograph of fingers from one hand cutting the finger on another hand with what appears to be the shaft of a feather. The charcoal line cuts through this image and the next one is of a blurry white dove. Then there is a photograph of a woman's (maybe a man's?) fairly hairy back, of which the black line cuts out her left side. Between this and the next image, a tree trunk accentuated with the black, there are a bunch of tiny cell-like dots rendered in pencil along the shared border that are almost unnoticeable. After the tree, there is a bird's tail, then dark branches over blurry green. My favorite image is a little falcon speeding through a tunnel created by two black lines over a blurred brown-yellow meadow. The lines end in points stabbing into another woman's back, photographed in black and white. Then there are red leaves and some green ones too, then the

head of an owl with a big black blob of paint over blinding its left eye that extends in a more or less straight line to the end of the collage, which finally includes either a white-blue-green photograph of rushing water or a downy feather, and the last photograph of the back of a woman with brown black hair, her hand grabbing a fistful of bare skin above her right shoulder blade.

The black line throughout the series serves as my tour guide, and he does not seem too concerned with subtlety. The very purposeful “spills” (I am dubious of this title) of paint clearly unite the otherwise juxtaposed images, blurred images of swooping falcons against the forlornly wingless shoulders of humans (who I have assumed to be women). This is made particularly obvious with the last photograph of the woman as a fallen angel. Also, with black paint as their diplomat, a hair can become fused with a twig, and positioning images side-by-side highlights the apparent similarities between veins on skin and on leaves. Without being overtly sentimental, Ryan certainly has some romantic notions about nature, sort of like how its divinity discovers ours. Of course, people are dually a part of and yet separate from nature. Even while indulging in Ryan’s imaginary world, any kind of harmony is very fleeting and imperfect. Humans are included quite awkwardly into this “other” world that is a metamorphosis from the physical into the fantastical, as the interweaving black lines find something alien in their disembodied faceless bodies and do not embrace them.

All the people (besides the mouth) are photographed in black and white and stuck within a dull empty space. Ryan gives her humans no real home, that is, there are no pictures of where people usually hang out, as most people no longer live in the woods. I wonder if Ryan was in some small way engaging the way most people experience art. Galleries are clean, empty spaces, with more or less white walls, with things that are called art hanging on the walls or resting on the floor. The space is important only in its service to enhancing the work. In most cases, the

language of art exists in what is placed on the walls and not in the space itself. The spaces become so interchangeable, they almost don't exist.

Even though I am quite sure that hunter birds have very excellent vision, Ryan makes ample use of blurring effects in her photographs, which even further highlight the freedom of birds in flight, combining past, present, and future, as opposed to the very stationary people stuck in a spot. If only I was a bird, so I could see the world blurred. Ryan expresses reverence, even a childlike wish for the apparent freedom of birds, but thankfully it is limited to the sort of thing where the self-serious *artiste* curses the gulls for their ability to fly and escape the sludge of everyday life. Most people have felt the same desires, either for the freedom of movement or of becoming something else entirely. Ryan and her birds have vaguely abusive love-hate relationship. Ryan ties one bird down and kills another and tries to tether her whole imagined world together. So there is clearly some ambivalence between freedom and connectedness, about trying to unite opposing impulses.

At the opposite corner of Cooley Gallery is another, two-channel work, called *SIGHT UNSEEN*. On the left, there is a projection of a falcon in flight, as it swoops and soars boastfully and occasionally disappears behind trees and over hills. On the right, there is a black and white reel of a woman running desperately without much quickness across a field, looking up at the sky, presumably chasing after the bird. At one point both screens turn into fragmented glimpses of the falcon's wings and tail, and at the end it escapes her. The companion videos and the series of photographs both have an air of futility to them. Obviously, the falcon's unrestricted flight inspires Ryan. Birds are a common enough metaphor for the possibilities of imagination, and the better part of you that just hasn't expressed itself yet. But as the woman in the video runs after the bird in vain, she herself is stuck to the ground, and her efforts are always self-conscious, a

little clumsy, and never quite as unconcerned. Like the woman and the photograph series, human life moves parallel to the grounds and spends much of its time tripping over it. Much of art is based upon despair and suddenly things have gotten so dreary.

I was thinking about all this as I counting the seconds as I was running on the treadmill, sweat pouring attractively down my face and dripping off my elbows. It really takes quite a lot of effort just to stay in the same place.