

# Birds of a Feather/Beall Center Exhibition

March 28, 2018 By [Roni Feinstein](#)



**Ian Ingram, The Woodiest, 2010. Birch pole, monitor, robotic bird consisting of electronics, motors, and plastic.**

At this time of political turmoil, *It Passes Like a Thought* comes as a breath of fresh air. Focused on seven artists who employ avian imagery and themes, the title of the exhibition derives from a John James Audubon quotation that states, “When an individual [bird] is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought...” Presented at the Beall Center for Art + Technology at the University of California, Irvine, and curated by Artistic Director, David Familian, the show offers works in a wide range of media that variously investigate avian flight, language (birdsongs, calls, and the ability to mimic human speech), habitats, and diversity, as well as issues of endangerment and extinction.

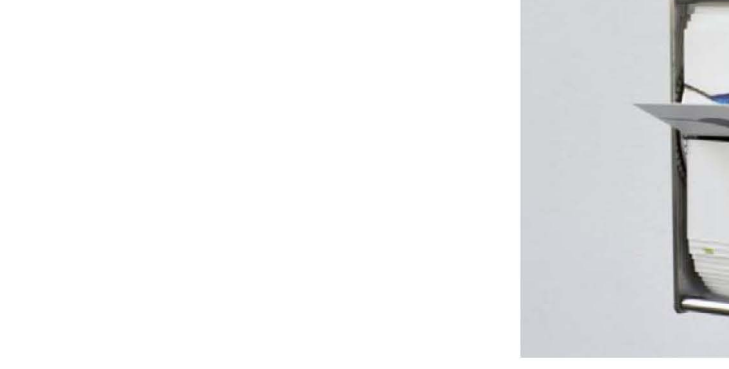


**Victoria Vesna, Bird Song Mimic, 2011-2017. Installation with sound dome, microphones, and speakers.**

As a center for art and technology, the first work that greets the visitor is Ian Ingram’s *The Woodiest*, 2010, a double-headed (one male, one female) robotic woodpecker that imitates the drum-tapping ritual the North American Pileated Woodpecker uses in the wild as a mating ritual and means of siting its nest. While the robotic bird in the exhibition is strapped to a birch tree, it is secured to a tree in a forest in the video projected alongside. It remains unclear, but seems doubtful, whether the actual woodpecker seen in the video is fooled by the drumming of the imposter.



**Anne Walsh, Parrot Suite #1, 2002. Single channel video, 5:00 mins.**



**Juan Fontanive, Ornithology L1, 2018. 4 color screen print on Bristol paper, stainless steel, motor, and electronics, 4.25 x 5 x 3.75 in.**

Mimicry and still more advanced technology is evidenced in *Bird Song Mimic* (2011-2017) by Victoria Vesna, an artist and professor who, among other things, is Director of the Art/Sci Center and California NanoSystems Institute, both at UCLA. Working in collaboration with an evolutionary biologist, an engineer, a physicist, and their laboratories, Vesna produced an interactive installation in which participants listen to and then respond to recordings of bird songs. A computer program evaluates the accuracy of each participant’s “call and response” simulation. (This piece was not in full operation at the time of my visit, so I did not see it in its full glory, as in the image reproduced here.)



**Lynn Aldrich, Flying Lessons: The Birds of America, 1993. Found book pages with gold leaf.**

Humans imitating birdsong is also the basis of Susan Silton’s film, *Lifting Belly*, a work-in progress shot on the island of La Gomera in the Canary Islands, where a centuries-old whistling language based on birdcalls was developed as a system of communication between island inhabitants. The film shows young female practitioners whistling an excerpt from Gertrude Stein’s poem of the same title.

The recitation of yet another Gertrude Stein text is “parroted” in Anne Walsh’s *Parrot Suite #1* (2002) video, which features an endearingly cute and cuddly-looking robotic parrot whose recoding chip and playback speaker allow it to repeat back sounds. The video explores mimicry and systems of communication and takes a particularly amusing turn when a second toy parrot is introduced, producing an audio feedback war.



**Richard Ross assorted photographs, 1982-1993**

It is not the avian capacity for language and communication, but flight that is the subject of Juan Fontanive’s kinetic sculptures, which take the form of small, stainless steel boxes that house clock mechanisms and hang upon the wall. Instead of flipping pages printed with numbers to reveal the passage of time, Fontanive uses 18th and 19th century illustrations of birds arranged in such a way as to present multiple, sequential images of birds in flight. Time and movement are speeded up, so that Fontanive’s dynamic, flipbook-like animations not only show the flapping of the bird’s wings, but produce sounds akin to their fluttering. By way of full disclosure, I recently purchased a work from this Brooklyn-based artist’s

## Ornithology P Series of 2014

which show hummingbirds in flight. The piece is a joy and privilege to live with. The mechanized birds flit gracefully upwards in the manner of the hummingbirds ever-present in my SoCal garden.

Avian flight is also celebrated in Lynn Aldrich’s installation *Flying Lessons: The Birds of America* (1993), which again employs found illustrations, in this case select pages from John James Audubon’s book, *The Birds of America*, which are arranged in a grid on two adjoining walls. Aldrich has painted over the illustrations in gold leaf, leaving only the birds’ wings—the instruments of flight—visible, highlighting their seemingly infinite beauty and variety and calling to mind angel’s wings in gilded altarpieces and attendant sentiments of adulation. Yet another piece by Aldrich included in the show consists of computer printouts of bird’s names that swoop and dip in graceful arcs from the ceiling, while the names of endangered and extinct birds extend from an empty birdcage set upon a desktop.

The taxonomic preservation and collection of birds is the focus of the photographs by Richard Ross, who since the 1970s has created a rich archive of material that documents specimens of all sorts in natural history museums, many of which were gathered together in one of my favorite photography books, the artist’s *Museology*, published in 1989. Birds have long been among Ross’s subjects and the images in the exhibition range from those in which the birds are individually presented and meticulously catalogued to others in which there is an eye-boggling swarm. The beauty, majesty, and variety of these birds, all once living and now some rare or extinct, serve as a wake-up call. Ross’s photographs, like the other works in the exhibition, remind us to treasure these creatures of flight, song, and precious being with whom we share the planet. As *It Passes Like a Thought* makes clear, robotics and technology are no match for the real thing.

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