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The Human Fascination With Birds: It Passes Like a Thought

By [Contributing Writer \(https://www.newuniversity.org/author/entertainment/\)](https://www.newuniversity.org/author/entertainment/) April 17, 2018

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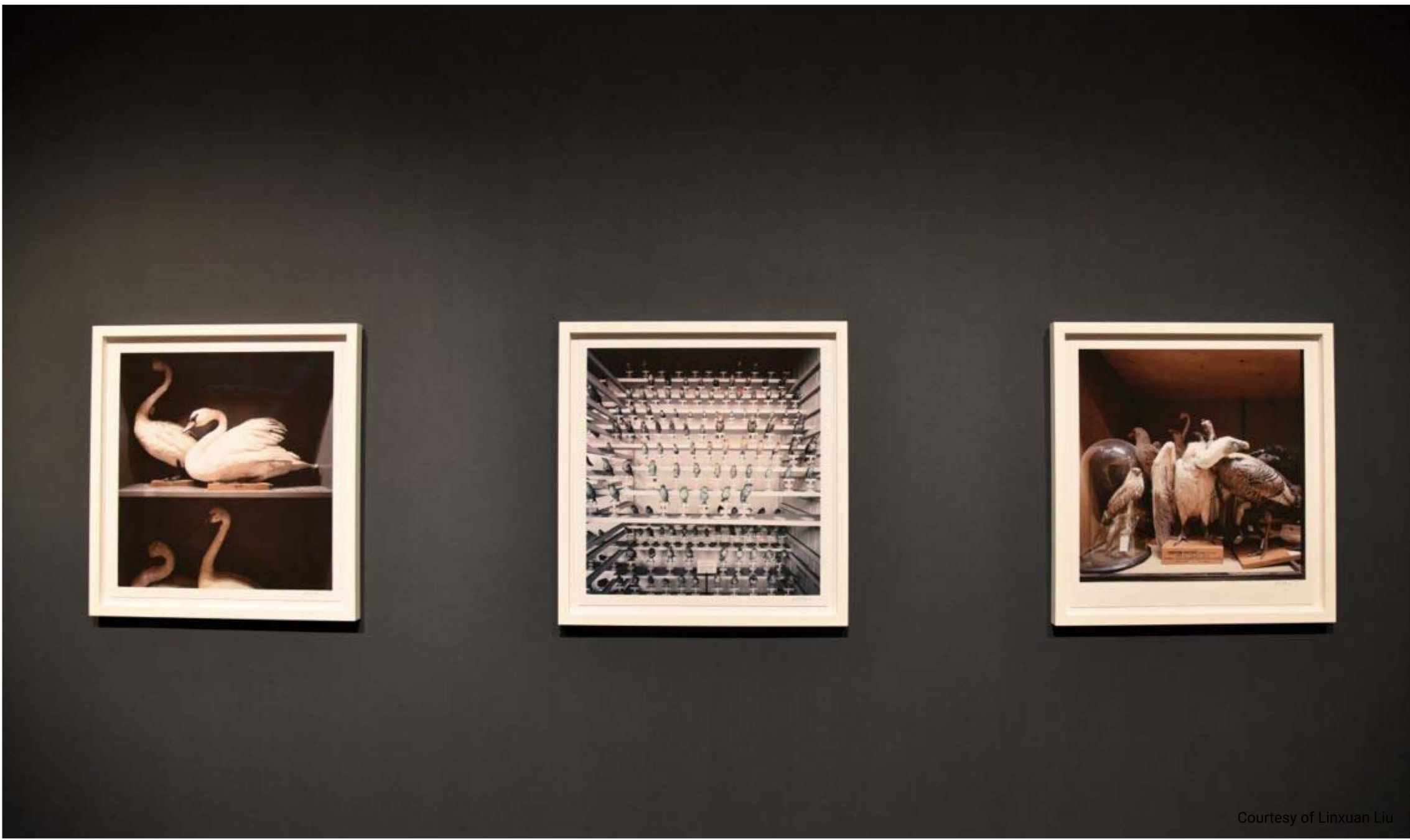
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April 17, 2018



Courtesy of Linxuan Liu

By Chelsea Pan

Birds — overlooked characters in daily life, but idolized figures in the artistic lexicon. They are seen as a “metaphor for the fleeting world,” an ephemeral and visual representation of a transient moment. John James Audubon, American ornithologist, said that “when an individual [bird] is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought ... trying to see it again the eye searches in vain; the bird is gone.” “It Passes Like a Thought,” a spring art exhibition currently located at the Beall Center for Art and Technology, explores the “flight, birdsong and the aesthetic variation of avian species through the work of several intermedia artists.”

Curated by artistic director David Familian and sponsored by the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, the exhibit displays the works of Lynn Aldrich, Juan Fontanive, Ian Ingram, Richard Ross, Susan Silton, Victoria Vesna and Anne Walsh. Familian notes that “we — as humans — have long since been fascinated by birds. Their seemingly magical capacity for flight, song, and navigation have made them powerful symbols for many cultures.” Each artist tackles this human-bird fascination in a unique manner, adding to the diverse and introspective features of the exhibit as a whole.

Lynn Aldrich’s installation, “Flying Lessons,” consists of unbound book pages from John James Audubon’s “The Birds of America.” The entirety of each page is painted gold with one exception: the bird wings are left untouched. By stripping each species of bird down to their most basic, defining trait, wings, the artist turns these creatures into mere caricatures of their formerly vibrant selves. In her own words, these creatures are “distilled down to” their “shared trait of flight.” These winged pages are arranged on the wall into one large, golden, tiled grid. Several feet away from the shimmering wall on a tree stump lies a pair of binoculars, which the viewer can use to “bird watch.” The audience, a “citizen scientist,” interacts with the display by gazing upon a gleaming wall of wings. The images are “haunting — as if our fascination with [bird] flight has resulted in the destruction of their bodies in order to indulge our primal curiosity,” but the installation simultaneously celebrates this “seemingly magical ability.”

Juan Fontanive’s “Ornithology” series displays Victorian clocks altered to contain “small-scaled kinetic animation ‘sculptures’ that reference both the elegant simplicity of a flipbook as well as the intricate nature of self-regulating movement.” This composition was created by “marrying” clock machinery with illustration, and the end-result is a beautiful and dynamic image that “stimulates the inquisitive nature of humans as it relates to nature and technology,” and invites the viewer closer to examine the fluttering movement in an “inherent need to analyze and understand the complexities of the world around us.”

Ian Ingram’s “The Woodiest” shows a robotic North American pileated woodpecker strapped to a birch tree. His concept is inspired by the mating ritual of this species, its “application to human behavior,” and the “role of technology in collapsing unique animal practices.” The mating ritual of the pileated woodpecker heavily depends on “drumming,” or “rapidly beating [its] beak against a resonant tree trunk to produce a territorial signal that echoes through the forest.” Ingram imitates and disrupts this “rite” by creating a robot that listens for “drum tapping in its original installation location in the woods, and begin its own drum-tapping.”

Richard Ross presents works from his “Museology” series, which contain images that “visualize key issues in museum studies: curation, conservation, collection, history and taxonomy display.” He photographs hauntingly beautiful specimens of museum-displayed taxidermied birds to prod at the human tendency to preserve, collect and taxonomize in order to study and understand nature. His rich archive of material “documents the changing face of the modern natural history museum.”

Susan Silton’s two videos “explore both the lesser-known and popular aspects of birds’ influences on humans.” Her first film, “Lifting Belly,” includes a clip of two “female practitioners of a centuries-old whistling language called ‘Silbo Gomero’” whistling an excerpt from Gertrude Stein’s 1917 poem, “Lifting Belly” into the forest of island La Gomera in the Canary Islands. This project “makes reference to non-verbal forms of communication” that can “emulate non-human communication styles like birdsong.” Her second film is covertly captured footage of “birds in their natural habitat.” The use of a pin-hole sized frame to film allows the viewer to feel “as if they are watching from an obscured location, a private, intimate observation that feels at once commonplace and exotic.” This intimate piece “reminds us of the preciousness of nature, and the delicate temperament that we must practice when interacting with it.”

Victoria Vesna’s installation, “Bird Song Mimic,” allows viewers to participate in listening and responding to “recordings of bird songs or other humans mimicking bird songs.” The goal of the project is to “have audiences listen and relate to the acoustic world of birds in ways they otherwise might not.” Vesna was inspired by “scientists mimicking and attracting birds with digital recordings” as well as “interspecies communication.” Her piece belongs to the larger project “Bird Song Diamond,” a virtual reality immersive project created by the Art|Sci collective at UCLA.

“Parrot Suite #1” is artist Anne Welsh’s contribution to the exhibit. Her video features a “crude robotic parrot” that repeats a “portion of any sound it hears.” In the performance video, the parrot “responds” to five dyadic scenarios: the artist’s voice, recorded sound effects, location sound, a recording of poet Gertrude Stein’s voice, and another toy parrot. In these situations, “the parrot simultaneously becomes a child, lover, antagonist, teacher, student, friend, enemy, musical instrument, machine and echo,” all through repetition of whatever sound it is fed. This piece explores the “innate need to communicate,” the human “fascination with interspecies communication” as with the imitative quality of birds, and “communication between the animate and inanimate.”

The “It Passes Like a Thought” exhibit is ongoing until May 26. This event is free and open to the general public. For gallery hours, please visit the Beall center’s [website \(http://beallcenter.uci.edu/exhibitions/it-passes-thought/\)](http://beallcenter.uci.edu/exhibitions/it-passes-thought/).

All quotes are taken from the “It Passes Like a Thought” exhibit and website.

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