

ART

Art Responding to Birds and Their Habitats at One of New York's Great Natural Escapes

Avifauna at Wave Hill in the Bronx features art responding to the lives of birds in New York City and beyond.



Allison Meier 2 days ago



Installation view of Tatiana Arocha's "Perpetual Flight" (2016-ongoing) at Wave Hill in the Bronx (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Did you know that 2018 is the Year of the Bird? Earlier this year the National Audubon Society, National Geographic, BirdLife International, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology announced this yearlong avian commemoration, timed with the 100th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. It celebrates that act's protection of migratory birds, and recognizes the enduring threats to their natural and urban habitats.

At Wave Hill in the Bronx, there are two exhibitions that consider the modern bird. Although not affiliated with the Year of the Bird, they're lively portals into conservation, the biodiversity of New York City, and the artistic influence of birds. *Avifauna: Birds + Habitat* is a group exhibition in the Glyndor Gallery focuses on these ideas, and the smaller solo show *Ecologia: Missing Birds of NYC* in the Wave Hill House features Gabriel Willow's drawings of extinct area birds overlaid on contemporary photographs. Labrador ducks, last seen in 1878, are returned to the East River, and Carolina parakeets, extinct in the wild since 1904, perch in the trees of Union Square.



Ceramic sculptures by Peter Morgan (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Tanya Chaly, "Nature's Syntax" (2018), graphite, colored pencil and punctured drawing on parchment under convex glass (one of nine pieces) (courtesy the artist)

Many pieces directly respond to the local ecology. Jeff Mertz's video documentary has bird footage from Wave Hill, Central Park, Prospect Park, Jamaica Bay, and Governors Island, while Tanya Chaly was inspired by Eugene Bicknell, one of the first naturalists to study bird variety in the Bronx and the Riverdale neighborhood in which Wave Hill is located. Her drawings of birds, framed beneath convex glass, like Victorian specimens, are punctured with patterns of migration paths, food webs, and other charts sourced from scientific documents.

Sarah Nicholls similarly investigated nature close to home, creating artist books that act as field guides on urban wildlife, such as the shore birds and osprey of Jamaica Bay. One whole room is consumed by James Prosek's wall painting, which has silhouettes of a blooming dogwood tree and spring birds, particularly warblers, in a style reminiscent of birding guidebooks. In the next space, Marna Chester's sculptures of bald eagles are supported by frames made from compost and other natural material found at Wave Hill.

Step out from the gallery, and you'll notice tropical birds perched in the bushes and trees. They're part of Tatiana Arocha's ongoing *Perpetual Flight* project. The digital painting series visualizes birds that are being thrown off their usual migration courses because of climate change, and it was sparked by the paired bunting that caused a stir when it appeared in Brooklyn's Prospect Park in 2015, diverted from its historic migration path. As the birds return to New York City this spring, including lush escapes like Wave Hill, it's worth taking a moment to observe their flight and habitats. Climate change and urban development impact the future of all species who call this area home, and recognizing and protecting the lives of birds can have implications beyond the avian world.



Tatiana Arocha, "Kumturu" (2016), digital paintings and collages UV-printed on archival cotton canvas hand-painted with gold acrylic, 48 x 98 inches (courtesy the artist)