

The New Bedford Art Museum/New Bedford

The Audubon Legacy and Vault Series: Birds

Rarely is a fledgling institution able to soar like an eagle for one of its first exhibitions, but the New Bedford Art Museum flies high with *The Audubon Legacy*, a three-part exhibition devoted to the great naturalist. Included are handsomely framed favorites from Audubon's original prints, such as *Bald Eagle*, *Wild Turkey*, *Blue Crane*, and *American White Pelican*, and two exhibitions inspired by these images. *Flights of Fancy* exhibits cloth of surprising diversity and brilliant color, including dresses from Guatemala and Japanese wedding kimonos. All of the fabrics have birds as a decorative motif woven, embroidered, or printed on the fabric.

Vault Series: Birds, an exhibition curated by Joan Backes, displays art created by American artists in response to birds portrayed in Audubon's prints. The exhibition begins with dozens of life-size white plaster blue jays molded by Kathleen Bitetti, perched high up on the two-story atrium entrance and lit by a dazzling skylight. The white jays lure the visitor back into a dark bank vault, its original brass-and-steel vault door open for visitors. There, a sound and light installation by Ean White invites the viewer to contemplate birds' flight as a "common human aspiration."

Several artists responded to Audubon's birds by creating political art. Cynthia von Buhler's *Key West Dove* is a large wooden cage that contains a painting of a life-size nude woman and two live doves. The doves perch on gilded branches, their pale, downy plumage hiding the woman's private parts. The sculptural work plays on sex, love, and goddess images. This "Eve" looks warily at the viewer, a woman trapped in a gilded cage.

In *Kingfisher Sketches*, Morgan Bulkeley paints the bird in low relief using the colors of the American flag. The bird becomes a new symbol of U.S. world domination. Miniature drawings fly playfully around the bird, each a cartoon of American political history. A hand chops down a cherry tree; someone spreads gasoline on the ground; birds become airplanes, dive bombing or blowing up. Behind the kingfisher, a head emerges with the evil grin of a warlord.

Extinction is evoked in Diane Horton's *Passenger Pigeon, Migratorius*. Still an active avian species in Audubon's day, the pigeon is an infamous example of human disregard for native wild life. Its fate is indicated by Horton who paints the pigeons as barely visible behind a grid of tightly spaced red rectangles.

Wild Turkey, a life-size bird of fired and glazed ceramic by Louie Doherty, is a sculptural tour de force that reproduces Audubon's print in three dimensions. A comic tone is achieved by Roger Kizik's painting *Perusing Puffins*: the round bird reads an alphabet book in which the letter "S" stands for "stately and plump."

Romantic beauty characterizes several works, including Laura Davidson's delicate *Book of Blue Herons* and Lloyd Gunther Dallett's small, realistic *Vigors Warbler*. Two artists pull away from Audubon's realistic depictions into the realm of abstraction. Karen Kitchel focuses on the beige-and-white pattern of a meadowlark's feathers, a design that would make an elegant autumnal shawl. Paul Plante uses bird's eyes to make bold and beautiful circle-in-square patterns. Six squares feature larger-than-life birds' eyes surrounded by red, yellow, and blue feathers in soft pastel strokes.

—Elizabeth E. Neville