

NBAM exhibits offer much to engage viewers

By David B. Boyce
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Throughout the summer months until Sept. 11, the New Bedford Art Museum is packed almost to the rafters with birds. Two of the museum's three current exhibits feature birds — 60 by artist John James Audubon on the main floor, and roughly 90 by his antecedents and contemporaries on the lower level. The third exhibition, mounted in the upstairs vault, is one of contemporary human portraits.

Curated by Janice Hodson and Louis Doherty, "Taking Flight! The Birds of John James Audubon" is a broad-based look at Audubon as both an artist and amateur naturalist who brought a new vision to the depiction of wildlife. For reasons both aesthetic and documentary, his approach resulted in several series of folios and books which spread his fame among collectors and institutions. His images today are regarded as among the best of historic American art.

In the first half of the 19th century, during a visit to the very prosperous city of New Bedford, one of many the artist made to commune with friends, Audubon sold a set of the double elephant folios of his "Birds of America" for \$1,000 (by today's standards, roughly \$21,000-plus). The buyer was the successful whaling merchant, James Arnold, who in 1866 donated the set to the City of New Bedford. Now as a part of the rich trove of 19th and 20th century treasures stewarded by the New Bedford Free Public Library, the Audubon engravings exhibited in "Taking Flight!" are borrowed from this collection.

With the collaboration of the Massachusetts Audubon Visual Arts Center, and several more local, national, and international artists and collectors, the exhibit is augmented with artworks and displays of birds, avian-related images, and even other creatures, like Andy Warhol's captivating image of a "Pine Barrens Tree Frog" from his 1983 screenprint portfolio, "Endangered Species." Several local artists, including Charles Hauck, Robert Hauser, Roger Kizik, and Louis Doherty have lent works appropriate to the exhibit theme.

Given Audubon's importance as a naturalist and artist, it is especially pleasing that the museum has placed the emphasis on the images as art. The first gallery bay offers an introduction, with images and signage delineating biographical information on both Audubon and James Arnold. A comparative hanging illustrates how Audubon's approach changed then accepted norms for the presentation of avian subject matter.

Captured with elements of their native environs, each bird is brought to life within its context, presented life-sized in the double elephant folio format. The installation is particularly energizing for the images, hung as they are in a seemingly random salon-style, which compliments their animation, arrested in mid-flight, or while feeding, fighting, or courting. For Audubon lovers, birders, or those interested in historic art, this exhibit is sure to provide a satisfying museum experience.

Installed in the museum's lower gallery and curated by retired UMass Dartmouth art historian Tom Puryear, "Birds of the Enlightenment: Predecessors of J.J. Audubon and His Contemporaries" is a perfectly fascinating accompaniment to the upstairs display. Puryear amassed these prints during the past year in preparation for this showing, and the collection and Puryear's insights bring a richly illustrated visual and historical context to Audubon's work, as well as the cultural, artistic, and scientific attitudes toward depicting birds across several centuries.

In his statement, Curator Puryear writes, "Audubon was, however, by no means the first to produce crisp and accurate images of birds for sale to an increasingly curious public. He was also, in many ways, the culmination of a trend begun in the late Italian Renaissance, around 1560, to accurately document and classify the apparent chaos of life that surrounds mankind in the natural world. Dozens of publications intent upon organizing and describing the natural world appeared from the middle of the 16th century to the end of the 18th. These are the early years of scientific inquiry. We call this period The Enlightenment."

Curated by Joan Backes, the third exhibit is "Vault Series: Portraits" which features contemporary artwork in a variety of styles and mediums by 16 artists from the United States, Germany, and Indonesia. The group also represents all stages of an artist's career, with some long and distinguished, others in mid-career, and some newcomers.

According to her curator's statement in the exhibition brochure, Backes asserts, "This exhibition includes the traditional media of painting, drawing, collage, and printmaking. It includes new technology with video. These artists' works range from self-portraits, to portrait studies for future paintings, to portraits of others, to experimental portrait drawings and collage, to portraits of family members, to portraits involving the use of memory."

All examples tend to be small, due to the limitations of the vault size, but an acrylic painting by Ruth Dealy, installed on an outside wall, is large. Dealy gradually lost her sight, then regained it after surgery. She states, "This self-portrait pursues what I have come to feel has remained as a visual education from that experience. I hope to paint without the editorial conceit of the sighted. I hope to eliminate the shadow of opinion between my eyes and my hand." Truly, a noble though most challenging goal.

Barbara Friedman offers a portrait of her mother, who is losing her sight to macular degeneration, so the artist wanted to attempt to duplicate an image as seen by compromised vision. The result is intriguing. Victoria Roth offers portraits of her paternal great grandparents from memory, which take on the mythology of memory in near caricatures. In these two images, it's the eyes that bore into the viewer, giving them an immediacy of humanity.

Robert Dilworth's "Study for Elizabeth" in acrylic on canvas presents a minimum of descriptive image in shadows that captures a face without detail, but with palpable emotion. Marc Tasman's video is a compilation of Polaroid self-portrait images, taken over a period of 3,654 consecutive days. He states, "I've become especially interested in how digital information is changing how we talk to each other, tell stories, and transmit culture to future generations." Watching the images progress as a continuous experience is as disconcerting as it is mesmerizing.

Also included are works by artists Fred Bell, Morgan Calderini, Daniel Dallmann, Barbara Drucker, Tyler Inman, Victoria Lockard, Grace Graupe Pillard, John Riepenhoff, and Rafael Salas. Backes had assembled a cohesive exhibit of contemporary images that bring a fresh perspective to the theme of the portrait. For human eyes, the human face in all possible representations will always fascinate.

The New Bedford Art Museum is located at 608 Pleasant St. in New Bedford. For hours and admission details, call (508) 961-3072 or log on to the website at www.newbedfordartmuseum.org.

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