



landings

lynne roberts-goodwin





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Buen tardes, peripatetic one,

Thank the old gods of storm for the new god of digital technology that allows us to stay electronically in touch while we each scamper about the earth. I'm always thrilled to hear about your latest photo-jant to our beloved India and fantasize that one day we'll ask travelogue maestro William Dalrymple to join us in chronicling an expedition to the falcon reserve in Himachal Pradesh.

Meanwhile, I continue to contemplate the HP falcon image you recently sent to me – one that I didn't see in your studio last August but which now, amidst the gorgeous reproductions of feathers, wings, eggs, pigeons and those electrifying "bad birds," brings a decade of animal portraiture full circle: We presently see the metonymical parts and whole relationship of the small vertebrate animal, removed from local context [the Parisian scavengers notwithstanding], liberated from any imposing ethnographic commentary. As such, we are solely situated in the visual, rhetorical and symbolic arena of birdness. Very daring, my featherless friend, if not entirely dangerous to confront one of the most allegorically saturated icons found across cultures. Then again, you are the intrepid traveller. [So now you're off to the Galapagos as field photographer – eh?]

Professional obligations [!] aside, I did want to say that this new body of work looks like your most personally reflective, dear one. By breaking from the conceptualist vocabulary of grid sign systems, you manage on one hand, to capture the childhood irony of your parent's antique business, and on the other hand, allow the symbolic to absorb the powerful primal energies unleashed by the preparation for a death in the family. I realize that as a thoroughly modern Millie, you shy away from psychoanalytic metaphysics, especially those that have been reduced to the most insipid babble by the most misguided Newtonian causality theory. Still the bejeweled radiance of the trapezoidal wings, the flickering tonality of the elliptical eggs suggest a kind of palpable entrancement with fragile structure supporting elegant flesh and bones.

I suspect the "Landings" series will no doubt, present the viewer with many questions about phenomenological and transcendental content of your work. For those who deny historical, symbolic consciousness, I predict your birdies will catalyze thoughts of the contemporary metropolitan sort, which seems a pity when one considers how the urban bird is only allowed its mythic and evolutionary status by



being reduced to soaring Qantas jets, chicken nuggets and gooey alien eggs spawned for a universe takeover. As for me, I'm shuffling somewhere between the Vedic and Judaic cosmology, falcon missiles trades, and Tweetie Bird. Great is the psychic gap between celestial mysticism, dumbed down totem worship and 21 century war games.

I know, my thinking has cooked too long in L.A.'s multi-culti, sci-fi media stew, but one long, really penetrating look at the iridescent back of those bad birds [live or stuffed] and I see astral homeboy mug shots and 24th century WWD photo ops. Forgive me then for my overarching historical juxtaposition of bird technognosis, to use Erik Davis's WIRED term. Still I'll bet we won't be alone in the desire to open up your photo-literary gesture to comparative considerations. And if you are pushed, do let on that you read Farid Uddin Attar and that Darwinian evolutionary theory is on your mind. Survival of the fittest is, after all, an enchanted idea. Enough said.

Or is it? I see you migrating, if you will, toward the bird mythos in a way that clearly departs from Bill Hammond's fantastically weird, painterly wash of bird/man hybridity as well as from Michael Riley's ancestral Aboriginal iconography. Rather, with your Saatchi & Saatchi layout of objectified "product," you break from the psychological inferences of the Icarus myth long explored by artists — Goya, Cy Twombly, and now the young Art Center student I've mentioned, who is teaching himself to fly. For you, anatomy is destiny, bird is the icon of kinesthetic intelligence. And by emphasizing the luminosity of feathers, rather than their scale or silky slim volume, you quickly dissociate yourself from mid-century. Minimalist accounts of pure phenomenal form. In other words, you leave psychological reduction to retro-fitting, concrete [sculptural] thinkers, in order to allow the photograph do what we, even after the cynical 80's, have all come to expect of a photograph, namely, the representation of a thing linguistically and psychologically tethered to a host of peculiarly human and cultural associations.

Shall we agree then that this new series, pulsating with pigmentation, levitating off of shimmering, opalescent surfaces, declares its aesthetic divorce from your previous cool, rational, pseudo science of signs, and situates itself in a dreamy transit lounge scenario of Asiaphilic medievalism. The sparkling clarity, the carefree suspension of objects in the soft white [Avedon] void — feathers, wings and eggs floating in the transcendental space of ananda/bliss. All those preparatory nights in at Shelley's in Bombay — did you know that you were going to bring home the solar wings of the serpent slaying Garuda?

The harsher post-colonial critic would pause at your not so oblique intention to raid the Asian exotic. Well — fair enough to think that the scavenger is posed in front of and behind the camera lens. But do tell those who are sceptical that you were formally invited by the head honchos of falcon reserve and add that if all your work suggested was an ideological bust on neo-colonialism [sigh], then let us go home to mourn the sacrifice of marvel. It is marvel, that we're after, isn't it Lynne? The wonder that Cloisonné' eggs in one century, transmogrify into Tamaguchi eggs in another, that in one time-space continuum, the egg is the fertile sign of the cosmos; in another, the generative protein source of high-tech body-building. If you were after only the nefarious, predatory behaviours of birds and photojournalists your photos would never allow us to neurologically drop down into our "god" center and feel the mystical fervour known to Rumi and Gershom Scholem. Sheer ellipticality is simple; our brains, complex.

Which is why bird imagery, whether or not it was shot at the Taronga Zoo in Sydney or north of the Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur, encourages the poesy of anatomical envy in the human. You, I, and a whole lot of other people want our bodies to soar freely through space. Period. Of course, the realist will accept the John Candy and Steve Martin philosophy of life: We are doomed to locomotion by means of two limbs and every kinesthetic prosthetic device we can imagine — planes, trains, automobiles, electronic wheelchairs... it's a consumer's choice. Still, there are wild men plastic surgeons, like Joe Rosen in New England, who insist upon the evolutionary recuperation of our wings — an intellectual upgrade of 2nd century Roman fresco painting — you know, the little winged grottesche, that precede the medieval griffin, found on the walls of the Nero's Golden Dome. On that note, allow me to point out in the Barbara Stafford tradition of musing on European curiosities and marvels, a grotesque image of Alexander the Great in a boat propelled into the air by two large griffins, their eyes and mouth drooling after a fat piece of meat that sits at the end of a pole, held by Alexander himself [What, no servants?!] Intellectual historians Dashton and Parks remind us that flying is one among many medieval royal indulgences. Think how the imperial fantasy has been reworked first by 20th mid-century, American comic book heroism [Superman/Batman] and cinematic anti-heroism [The Birdman of Alcatraz; Brewster McCloud]. I'm sure you can find an equivalent in Australian pop culture.

Hardly as preternaturally charmed as the medieval image but certainly as fascinated with anti-gravitational forces, the American flying fantasy is put into cosmological and visionary perspective with Attar's spiritual parable *The Conference of the Birds*. I mention this because with all of your recent travel to the subcontinent, and your reading of Sufi literature — and given your artistic camaraderie with Rosemary whose own work





frames the science of flight in new aesthetic dimensions — I have come to sense your passion for those gifted with terpsichorean aerial forces. You see a little dynamo fashioned with luminous signs of survival where others like Annette Messenger and Panamarenko see the flawed persona of the industrial age. Yes, we each love P.'s wonky flying machines and recognize his incisive estimation of human industrial arrogance. But his melancholy? His dour intellectual pessimism? Blame it all on the lack of sun and surf in his native Belgium. Blame it on his alienation from nationalist and anti-nationalist quests for stellar power. Still, we must account for Panamarenko's nightmare, for the romance of flying has now been paired with New York Times reports of "terrorist" fantasies: Note the quoted letter writing of suspected villain, "I want to fly the big bird. Anything is possible in the U.S." (2002, sec 1, page 1).

Yes, Lynne, you have zeroed in on the sage's paradox: The falcon and the pigeon, the lofty and the low-flying traits of human behaviour persist in our post-human time. What once stood for alchemical principles of activation, precipitation, condensation and oscillation now operates semiotically as the design for promoting cross-continental travel and in our darkest of human efforts, killing apparatus. The spectacle of small vertebrate anatomy must share the heavens with spineless, flying monsters.

Thus, where your luscious bird portraits exhilarate by way of an encounter with what my colleague Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe calls "the frivolous," slick pseudo-journalism equates big metal birds with reflexive pride and hysteria experienced as reaction to politically charged wars, i.e., "Black Hawk Down". Where your nomadism has come to recognize the evanescence of life forms, media dramaturges reinforce an enduring eidol of an arms race that turns men drunk with power. Maybe it is time we all read Attar along with Aristophanes (*The Birds*).

Allow me a final narrative that goes to the heart of the paradox:

Last night I listened to a story on the radio about a 50 year-old labourer, named Dennis Hunter who falls in love with a married ornithologist named Martha Kolodny. We are told that Hunter's buddies called Martha, "Mothra," — an obvious Godzilla cult quip. Anyway, I had to ask myself why did the author pick the ornithologist as the object of desire for a labourer? What is it about a bird watcher that could turn on the lights of a middle-aged, unmarried man who claimed his Freudian body dead for over three decades? So here I am Lynne, speeding down the big, broad lanes of the 134, the majestic San Gabriel Mounties are thrusting themselves deep into dark night and I'm suturing thoughts of an ornithologist as erotic and romantic muse to mental pictures of your penchant for blue birds. I thought too of your earlier study of flies — possibly the aesthetic touchstone for your current series — that near pearlescent white background fielding a fly, enlarged





and alone, facing the viewer. Creatures dead, stuffed, plastic or alive, you approach your objects of science with an adoring lover's gaze. I don't remember if we ever spoke of Cronenberg's eroticized sci-fi adaptation of *The Fly* (I do remember our laughing at the idea of you shooting bugs mounted on the Empire State Building); but considering one of Cronenberg's points — human jealousy makes for bad science and monsters — along with the aching story line of *Hunter* and Kolodny, I'd bet a trip to Cochin, that your transcendental empiricism is moved by a naturalist's gift for animal intimacy.

I'm not suggesting your years of practice collapse into a thoroughgoing Darwinian fancy nor do I mean to imply any form of structuralist association with high tragedy. I do, however, want to stake a claim on your own muse tendencies. Think back to the time we spent together with Bakul in Rajasthan. Remember photographing those skinny little birds hanging out at the shoreline near the first lake palace we visited in Jaipur — the one where we were swarmed by the kiddie tourist trade? I can still see the boys trying to crowd your pensive examination of what they took to be usual and ordinary. As we both know, time in India stretches over centuries, but that day, minutes evaporated quickly into an hour as the boys and I stood mesmerized, witnessing you gaze (such a pummelled term of the 80's), crouch, and hop around the sandy beachhead with that hefty 6x7 format camera in your hands. Yes Lynne, your ornithology is sexy because you lose yourself utterly in an act typically restrained by objectivist conventions. Call it mysticism, call it love. That's what *Hunter*, the labourer called it when Kolodny, the doctor of ornithology lit his torch. Leave it to the tired hunter to realize that in our day and age, as we kvetch for more predatory electronic speed, the slow art of bird watching emerges as an endangered species of human investigation.

So when are you leaving for the Galapagos?

Always yours in motion,  
M. A. from L. A.

P.S. Here's the notation for the book on medieval marvels that I mentioned. Thought you might find it worthwhile. See Lorraine Dashton and Katherine Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Zone Books, New York, 1998, pg 97, figure 2.8.2







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