

RICHARD IBGHY AND MARILOU LEMMENS: LOOK, IT'S DAYBREAK, DEAR, TIME TO SING

CURATED BY SYLVIE FORTIN, BEMIS CURATOR-IN-RESIDENCE

Birds and humans have been companions since time immemorial. Birds' flight, feathers, and songs traverse humanity's artistic and cultural productions, echoing the myriad ways in which our winged comrades challenge our senses and riddle our dreams, capture our projections and fan our desires. But what are we to them? Today, with climate change on the minds of everyone—activists and deniers alike—our interrelatedness thickens, spurring us to address our shared fate with greater attention and care.

In *Look, it's daybreak, dear, time to sing*, Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens present several new sculptures and videos, many of them researched and produced in Omaha during their summer residency at Bemis Center. The project's initial inquiry into birdsong quickly expanded into an exploration of shared territories. The fast decline of grassland



Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens, *Counting Birds for Five-minutes* from the series *The Violence of Care* (still), 2019; HD Video; Courtesy of the artists.

bird communities led the artists to examine recent changes in farming practices and other non-sustainable, productivist relationships to the land. Then, they looked north to Canada, the continental neighbor that shares so many avian species, agricultural trade agreements, and conservation initiatives with the USA. Highlighting the ties that bind humans with birds, this exhibition adopts a more-than-human viewpoint to reveal sites of mutual hope and friction.

Display tables and shelves host a profusion of small wooden sculptures, offering multiple views and paths into the exhibition. The first series, entitled *Futures*, features colorful geometric constructions that explore the economic, financial, and ecological processes at play in North American food and biofuel production by materializing graphical representations.



Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens, *Cleaning the Atlantic Puffins, Tufted Puffins, and Common Murres' Exhibit* from the series *The Violence of Care* (still), 2019; HD Video; Courtesy of the artists.

A second series, entitled *Survival Editions of Popular Wooden Games*, evokes old-time game designs while raising both the stakes and the odds against players. By turning abstract knowledge into concrete objects—sculptures that make abstraction sensate—the works highlight the challenges of multispecies cohabitation in an age of ecological collapse and mass extinction. While the games' odds sharply reduce the possibility of survival, the game itself is evidently precarious: like the sculptures, a few gestures of the hand could dismantle and recompose it. The work's materialist move carves boundless possibilities of refusal and reconfiguration.

Flatscreen monitors mingle in the exhibition space, showing human practices that aim to create the conditions for avian lives to thrive, or, at times, be sustained. Connecting the zoo, the field station, the conservation center, and the backyard, the video series *The Violence of Care* makes the entanglement of avian, human, ecologies, and temporalities immediate and explicit. Care is explored across a spectrum of visibilities and a range of temporalities—preemptive, reparative, palliative, prospective, and anticipatory. It is measured, imagined, at times wondrously quixotic, but never idealized. Care's methods hover between vision or touch, ranging from intimate contact to the extrapolative remoteness of inference.

Counting Birds for Five-minutes takes us to Omaha's Glacier Creek Prairie Reserve where Laboratory of Avian Ecology at the University of Nebraska Omaha directors John McCarty and LaReesa Wolfenbarger perform a five-minute bird count. Widely used to monitor bird populations, the easy and inexpensive five-minute bird count method (5MBC) enables researchers to infer bird populations from multiple field samples collected by scientists and citizens alike.

At Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, the artists shift our attention to the underside of the zoological spectacle, where care is paid employment, but also an invisible labor of love. In *Cleaning the Atlantic Puffins, Tufted Puffins, and Common Murres' Exhibit*, Paul Rollman, Aquarium/Birds Lead Keeper, diligently maintains the titular exhibit. As the birds dive, swim, and move in and out of their nests, he meticulously scrubs the manufactured landscape—a daily task. From the other side of the glass, the camera captures both the birds living their lives on display and the human care and dedication required to make their lives visible. In *Feeding Birds in the Aviary*, Bird Department Supervisor Bob Lastovica brings food to birds living in an expansive outdoor aviary, revealing a carefully designed landscape as well as the logistical and physical labor invested in caring for captive birds. While an uncommon gathering of bird species cohabitate in the aviary by design, uninvited guests, mainly European starlings, have entered and made it their home.



Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens, *Banding Young Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes in Carden Field Site* from the series *The Violence of Care* (detail), 2019; HD Video; Courtesy of the artists.

By contrast, *Feeding Cottonball* presents an intimate domestic encounter. Omaha resident Cottonball has stopped laying eggs, thanks to the venerable age that also prevents her from walking to the chicken house's feeder to feast with her fellow hens. Sara McClure, her human companion, now brings Cottonball outside to hand feed her.

Three videos were filmed in Eastern Canada, following the inquiry initiated during Ibhgy and Lemmens's research residency in Omaha. These videos focus on architectures and practices of care that aim for rehabilitation, preparedness, and release into compromised environments. They also acknowledge the continental—and planetary—scale of our entanglements. In *Rehabilitating Juvenile Crows*, filmed near the artists' home in rural Quebec, eight young American crows fly in the rehabilitation structure that is their temporary home. Different circumstances have led to their need for care: a cat attack, a broken wing, kidnapping, abandonment, and long-term captivity. With space to fly around, play, cache food, and be exposed to the natural elements, rehabilitation readies them for their release.

Two videos feature the Loggerhead Shrike, a species once common in pastures and grasslands across Eastern Canada and now critically endangered, with roughly a dozen wild breeding pairs remaining in the plains of Carden. Every summer, cohorts of young Loggerhead Shrikes bred in captivity in Canada and the USA are transferred to the Carden Alvar before they are released. In *Banding Young Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes in the Carden Alvar*, a team of biologists catch, examine, collect basic data, and band birds prior to their release. This enables the future identification of individual birds, increasing our understanding of their migration patterns and other factors affecting their reproductive success. The second video, *Releasing Young Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes in the Carden Alvar*, follows Hazel Wheeler, lead biologist and coordinator for the recovery



Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens, *Movement of Spot and Futures Market Prices for Agricultural Commodities (2005-2012)* from the series *Futures*, 2019; Wood, ink and natural dyes; Courtesy of the artists.

program, as she opens the enclosure early one morning, allowing the birds to leave at will.

This type of "soft release" enables the birds to habituate themselves to their surroundings and choose the moment of their exit, when they will, hopefully, strengthen the remaining Loggerhead Shrikes population.

The last work in the exhibition is a video animation that humorously ventures into the stakes of interpretation. *What Birds Talk About When They Talk* explores humankind's eternal fascination with bird songs and calls and invites us to consider the effects of our interpretive acts: Do they foster connections across difference? Or limit our understanding of what non-human animals can think and do?

Stretching into the distant past while immersing us into possible futures, the exhibition *Look, it's daybreak, dear, time to sing* invites us to expand our capacity to imagine and build shared future worlds for generations of avians, humans, and a host of other members of our planetary family.

Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens: *Look, it's daybreak, dear, time to sing* is sponsored, in part, by:



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The 2019 Curator-in-Residence program is supported, in part, by Carol Gendler and the Mammel Foundation.

Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens are grateful to Stephanie Huettner, Zach Darwish, John McCarty, Sara McClure, Jack Phillips, Bob Wells, Hazel Wheeler, LaReesa Wolfenbarger, and Susan Wylie. They also thank the Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for their financial support.

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NOVEMBER 20, 2019–
FEBRUARY 15, 2020