



NEV | MUS | OF  
ADA | EUM | ART

Donald W. Reynolds Center for the Visual Arts  
E.L. Wiegand Gallery

160 West Liberty Street, Reno, Nevada, 89501  
775.329.3333 | [nevadaart.org](http://nevadaart.org)

## NV STEAM CONFERENCE

### AFTER AUDUBON TOUR

FEBRUARY 2, 2019



"Today, Audubon's name is synonymous with American conservation, but he was an extravagant hunter. Audubon didn't think it was a good day unless he'd killed a hundred birds. In his lifetime, he killed thousands. Yet Audubon began writing about loss of habitat earlier than anyone else in America. He was the first to sound the clarion call that there was a problem." HUMANITIES, March/April 2007, Volume 28, Number 2.

#### Buck Gallery

John James Audubon, *Ivory-billed Woodpecker*, C. 1826 and Laurel Roth Hope, *Biodiversity Reclamation Suits for Urban Pigeons: Ivory Billed Woodpecker*, 2018

*What was the original purpose of this image?*

John James Audubon (1785-1851) is still the biggest name in ornithology, and his book, "The Birds of America" (1827-1839) set the standard for how to illustrate birds in their natural habitats. In his mature drawings, Audubon is known for his textured use of watercolors, the deliberate way he posed birds (which he killed with fine shot and molded with wires) to accentuate their anatomical features, and his use of habitat details (flowers, berries, predators) to depict the birds as they lived.

The ivory-billed woodpecker feeds mainly on the large larvae of certain wood-boring beetles, but also eats seeds, fruit, and other insects. The bird uses its enormous bill to hammer, wedge, and peel the bark off dead trees to find the insects.

The ivory-billed woodpecker was the largest woodpecker in the United States. Many of the birds Audubon painted are now extinct, along with much of the American wilderness that was their home. "There was such an abundance of wildlife in his youth that he and everyone else thought the supply was infinite," Robert Peck explains. Habitat destruction and, to a lesser extent, hunting have decimated populations so thoroughly that the species is very probably extinct, though sporadic reports of sightings have continued into the 21st century.

*Where else does this bird appear in the gallery?*

**Laurel Roth Hope, *Biodiversity Reclamation Suits for Urban Pigeons: Ivory Billed Woodpecker***

The artist calls this piece: Biodiversity Reclamation Suits for Urban Pigeons. What do you think the title means? Laurel Roth Hope is a self-taught artist and naturalist whose knowledge of natural resource conservation comes from her work as a park ranger. Hope first digitizes and pixelates the feathers and plumage patterns of extinct and endangered birds. She then uses the patterns to crochet bird-size sweaters for her hand-carved pigeon mannequins. Despite the wit and whimsy of Hope's works (which she calls her Biodiversity Reclamation Suits for Urban Pigeons), there is an attempt to portray pigeons as exotic and precious birds—rather than as the reviled pests they are often seen as. In doing so, Hope brings attention to the loss of biodiversity in the natural world.

*What is our relationship with the pigeon vs an endangered species?*

**John James Audubon, *American White Pelican, 1823* and Penelope Gottlieb, *Calystegia sepium, 2018***

*Compare and contrast the two images of pelicans. What ties them together?*

"This beautiful species,—for, reader, it is truly beautiful, and you would say so were you to pick it up in all the natural cleanness of its plumage, from the surface of the water,—carries its crest broadly expanded, as if divided into two parts from the centre of the head. The brightness of its eyes seemed to me to rival that of the purest diamond; and in the love-season, or the spring of the year, the orange-red colour of its legs and feet, as well as of the pouch and bill, is wonderfully enriched, being as represented in my plate, while during the autumnal months these parts are pale." This species is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. It has the California Department of Fish and Game protective status California species of special concern (CSC). On a global scale however, the species is common enough to qualify as a Species of Least Concern according to the IUCN.

Habitat loss is the largest known cause of nesting failure, with flooding and drought being recurrent problems. Human-related losses include entanglement in fishing gear, boating disturbance and poaching as well as additional habitat degradation.

**Penelope Gottlieb, *Calystegia sepium, 2018***

"In my appropriation paintings, I selected plates by the naturalist John James Audubon from his iconic publication; *The Birds of America* (1827-1838). I reconfigured his original paintings with my own comments on nature in the form of invading species entwining and strangling the birds.

I chose John James Audubon because he was a famous naturalist of his era. It was a perfect opportunity for me to engage in a dialogue with the past. His view of nature is very contradictory to a contemporary vision. As he was creating

his masterworks, he also exploited the very nature he so loved. The concept of extinction was not even a conscious thought. The specimens that he painted with such wonderful animation were in fact his own taxidermy. He was quoted as saying that 'A day without shooting 100 birds was a day wasted.'" Gottlieb.

Painting directly over pre-existing Audubon prints, Gottlieb literally envelops the birds in a tightly woven braid of plant leaves, tendrils, and tentacles, so that what would normally be part of the birds' natural habitat has suddenly turned on them as a form of domestic colonization.

*Calystegia sepium* is a plant with showy white flowers. However, because of its quick growth, clinging vines and broad leaves, it can overwhelm and pull down cultivated plants including shrubs and small trees. Its aggressive self-seeding (seeds can remain viable as long as 30 years) and the success of its creeping rhizomes (they can be as long as 3–4 m) cause it to be a persistent weed and have led to its classification as a noxious weed.

*Do you think the artists are drawing attention to these impacts as natural phenomenon or as the result of human impact?*

### **Kara Maria, *Peregrine Falcon & Brown Pelican & Indiana Bat*, 2015-2016**

*Observe how the artist paints the species differently than the background. How is the technique different?*

According to the Sacramento News & Review: "If scientists could record a visual representation of human emotions, it seems plausible that they would look like Kara Maria's paintings. The San Francisco artist's nonrepresentational geometric shapes are exuberantly hued, well-defined and sharp-edged, and they are interrupted by euphoric swirls or by vague, cloudy patches and an occasional flash of a representational item, like a dog or a fly. They're layered, complicated and electric—just like the workings of the mind. Until scientists figure out how to live stream what human emotions look like and project them on a wall, Maria's work may be the closest thing we've got."

The peregrine falcon became an endangered species in many areas because of the widespread use of certain pesticides, especially DDT. Since the ban on DDT from the early 1970s, populations have recovered, supported by large-scale protection of nesting places and releases to the wild.

The brown pelican was listed under the United States Endangered Species Act from 1970 to 2009, as pesticides such as dieldrin and DDT threatened its future in the Southeastern United States and California. In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt set aside the first National Wildlife Refuge, Florida's Pelican Island, to protect the species from hunters. It has been rated as a species of least concern by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The Indiana bat is listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It has had serious population decline, estimated to be more than 50% over the past 10 years. Human disturbance and the degradation of habitat are the primary causes for the decline of the Indiana bat.

*Do you think we have normalized this? Does the artist think we have normalized the reality of endangered species?*

### **Casazza Gallery**

**John James Audubon, *Carolina Parrot*, 1825 and Carlee Fernandez, *Green Parakeets with Branches*, 2003**

*What is society's relationship with exotic and beautiful things?*

The Birds of America includes images for six now-extinct birds including the Carolina Parrot (or parakeet). The bird was declared extinct in 1939. The birds' range collapsed from east to west with settlement and clearing of the eastern and southern deciduous forests. John James Audubon commented as early as 1832 on the decline of the birds.

The evidence is indicative that humans had at least a contributory role in the extinction of the Carolina parakeet, through a variety of means. Chief was deforestation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hunting played a significant role, both for decorative use of their colorful feathers, for example, adornment of women's hats, and for reduction of crop predation. A factor that exacerbated their decline to extinction was the flocking behavior that led them to return to the vicinity of dead and dying birds (e.g., birds downed by hunting), enabling wholesale slaughter.

### **Carlee Fernandez, *Green Parakeets with Branches***

Taxidermy an odd practice, one that is traditionally pulled between human pride, symbolism, and a desire to memorialize deceased representations of the wilderness. Rogue taxidermists create imaginative (and often bizarre) sculptures. Interestingly, this movement has been largely practiced by women. It should also be noted that rogue taxidermy is driven by the principles of recycling, waste reduction, and the use of ethical sources.

Beginning in graduate school, Fernandez developed an interest in using taxidermy as an art-making material. In the early 2000s Fernandez created sculptural hybrids of our consumer age by seamlessly combining rejected skins from a taxidermy shop with everyday objects. In *Green Parakeets with Branches*, initially the parakeets look normal. Further viewing reveals their distortion and mutated condition. Their perfection is maligned by the environmental circumstances implied in their altered state.

*How do we relate to exotic and beautiful things? How do we protect them?*