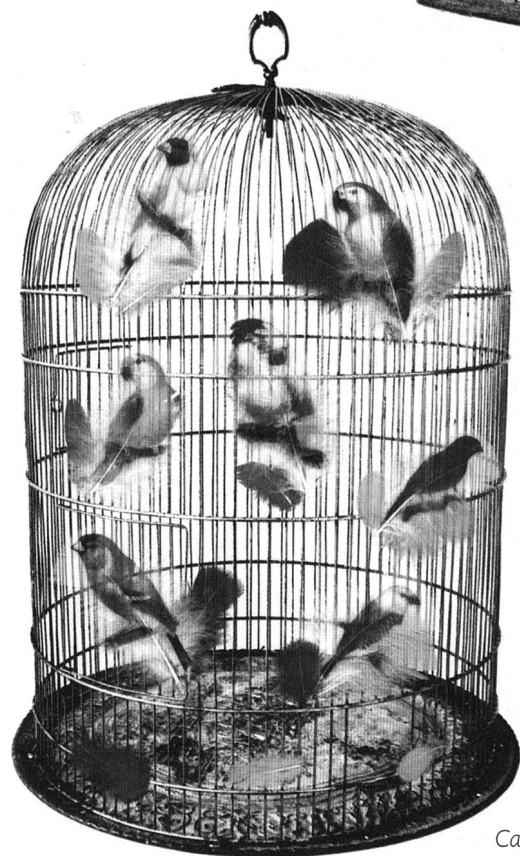


Greenfinches in Maltese cage



Caged Birds

Taking Flight: on Rebecca Jewell

by Gilda Williams, art critic and writer

Rebecca Jewell's art overlaps between two visual pleasures: her *Cape of No Hope* delivers multiple thrills all at once - we admire its perfect natural arc, and how each bird's profile fits snugly within the support-feather's outline. At the same time we appreciate her draughtsmanship and printing skill; the beauty and uniqueness of the owls, ospreys and finches depicted, and the unique irregularity of each distinct feather. Her vibrantly colourful *Songbird Soup* gathers a mass of blue, ochre, red, green and purplish feathers, and upon most feathers we find - to our amazement - the finely executed image of a bird. Each meticulously hand-printed feather seems a miraculous technical feat that conveys their jewel-like, weightless, magical quality.

Not only are birds beautiful, but they dress better than us, sing better, and make better parents. Watching them take flight is, for me, as thrilling as looking at the best art, so the thought of hunting down these exquisite creatures feels about as right as shooting down artworks in a museum. The year 2014 marks a sad centenary: the hunting to extinction of Martha, the last-ever passenger pigeon. In her *Mist Net*, which shows printed feather-owls and songbirds trapped in the whisper-thin and deadly haze of an actual bird-trapping net, Jewell raises awareness of ongoing hunting. She has researched her subject with unblinkered eyes, and has commented wisely that 'The greatest threat to birds is the poverty of those around them': the birds and their hunters share a dependence on the wider human circumstances in which they live. Jewell's art points to the many ways that the lives of birds are entangled in those of humans: in their entrapment as pets (*Caged Birds*); in how they are labelled and archived (*The Art of Falconry*). Alive in cages and nets, or preserved in illustrations and museums, in both life and death birds are perpetually at the mercy of human invention.

There is a hint of the pre-modern in Jewell's art: in the one-by-one, artisanal printmaking; the retro, hyper-detailed drawing technique; the grey, black, burnt red, and sepia inks of the *Cape*; the ancient style of illustration in *The Bird-Catcher*; the vintage frames, the yellowed labels, the old-school penmanship. Jewell's drawings, sculptures, prints and collages remind us that nothing we see exists in isolation: not art, not human life, not nature, not death, not even beauty.

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Jewell would like to thank the Trustees of the British Museum for access to and use of some images in the exhibition, including *The Bird-Catcher*.

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The Feathered Other

by Jonathan Franzen, novelist, essayist, journalist

The primitive and the postmodern intersect in Rebecca Jewell's new work as happily as they unhappily collide today in countries all around the Mediterranean. The primitive imperative to kill or cage migratory wild birds is now abetted by technologies – MP3 recordings of bird sounds, mass-produced nets, late-model shotguns – that give the birds little chance. The result is wholesale slaughter, a wildly unsustainable avian death toll in the hundreds of millions annually. A single mist-net installation in Cyprus, blaring recordings, can take two thousand small birds in one night. A couple of Italian hunters poaching in the Balkans, again using recordings, can kill a truckload of quail in one season. Bedouin hunters in Egypt boast of shooting sixty or more golden-orioles in one morning.

Feathers are what you see on the ground in the Mediterranean, and feathers are both reference and material in Jewell's collages and assemblages. Feathered animals have always been the great Other in the human world: beautiful, graceful, warm-blooded, socially and cognitively sophisticated, omnipresent, and yet – they can fly and we cannot. Envy of birds has historically and prehistorically taken the form of myth, as in Icarus or in the eagle that comes to peck at Prometheus's liver. It has taken the form of deification and ceremonial costume; the robes of chiefs are often adorned with feathers, no doubt for their rarity and beauty but also, I suspect, in homage to the freedom and majesty of the great Other. And the envy has taken the form of murdering birds purely for the satisfaction of it. Is it any accident that, even now, hunters and trappers in the Republic of Malta, a prison-like constellation of rocky islands that birds can visit and leave as they please, take a higher toll per square hectare than anywhere else in the Mediterranean? The lust to kill birds is said to be "in the Maltese blood."

Human envy of birds in its many forms, mythologizing and adornment and violence, is the primitive substrate of Jewell's art. But the way she samples and recombines and repurposes, defamiliarizing everyday feathers in unexpected contexts, some of them playful, some of them wrenching, is quintessentially postmodern. Nowhere is Europe more haunted by the spectre of the postmodern effacement of difference than in the natural world; unless laws are changed and enforcement seriously increased, we are in the age, right now, when bird life may well dwindle to a sterile monoculture of crows and pigeons. Jewell's work points toward a happier outcome, a reconnection with the primal wonder of birds, a recognition of how poor our world would be without the feathered Other.



Puffin. Printed feather