Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Sharon Beals

Bank Swallow ***Riparia riparia***
Collection California Academy of Sciences
Latex Ink Print, 2023

Bank swallows or sand martins as they are called in Europe, are named for their habit of burrowing in the sandy erodible soils in which they establish their nesting colonies. An oceanside cliff face or stream bank may be pocketed with hundreds of their tunnels, and the air around it busy with these fleet aerialists hawking insects in dipping swerving flights. Adapting to civilization, they will use quarries, excavated hillsides and even drain pipes as surrogate burrows.

In the Western Hemisphere, they breed as far north as Alaska, and winter as far south as Argentina, returning to their natal colony sites after a migration that can be as long as five thousand miles and take several months.

Because of erosion or parasitic infestations, their tunnels are seldom reused. Instead, males busily scrape at the start of a new burrow, and then court arriving females. Sitting at it's entrance, the male ritually ruffles his feathers and circles his excavations in songful flights. If a female approves of him, and his site, she joins him in digging a three foot, upwardly sloping (and thus puddle proof) tunnel. Their cooperation continues as they gather the grasses, roots and twigs used for the foundation, and the feathers that line the simple nest.

Though spelled by her mate, the female does most of the incubation of an average clutch of four white eggs for about twelve days till the bright pink nestlings hatch, all within a few days of each other and the majority of the young within the colony. This synchronicity may shorten the time their community is attractive to nest predators such as snakes and raccoons.

Both parents feed the chicks insects, first in sticky regurgitated balls, and then whole. In about two weeks, the young of a colony can be seen peeking from their tunnel entrances in anticipation of these deliveries. And at three weeks of age, they will fledge. Bank Swallows usually raise one brood, and if their nest is disturbed, they will abandon it, and rarely will they breed again.

Riparia riparia have been one of the more successful avian survivors around the planet, breeding from western North America to eastern Eurasia, and wintering in South and Central America, Africa and Central Asia. But their populations are in decline, some so dramatically that they are protected under the Endangered Species Act. Predation by feral animals, pesticide use, the erosion of nesting sites, and the loss of insect-rich riparian areas to flood control, irrigation and climate change have all taken their toll.

Excerpt from NESTS fifty nests and the birds that built them by Sharon Beals Chronicle Books 2011

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Sharon Beals

House Wren ***Troglodytes aedon***
Collection California Academy of Sciences
Latex Ink Print, 2023

Named for their habit of nesting close to homes and in birdhouses, this wren's bubbling song, big-eyed, perky-tailed air of curiosity have endeared them to humans for the centuries they have been keeping our company. But these birds aren't without their detractors. In the fierce defense of their breeding territories, House Wrens will destroy the eggs, nests, and even the young of competitors, often those of much less common species. This predilection has lead many to advise against the maintenance of popular nest boxes for this already successful, if not ubiquitous bird.

After migration, a male seizes a domain that contains at least one good nesting cavity and begins to attract a mate. This could be an effort of four hundred sticks, or just ten. If a female approves of him (and the site), she may finish this offering and toss it and start over. House Wrens in the wild prefer tree hollows and woodpecker holes, but frequently claim the nests of other birds such as phoebes, robins, sparrows and orioles and even occupy empty wasps nests and abandoned beehives. By the time a nest is complete, the female may have added over seven hundred sticks, stacking them from 2 to 8 inches (5 to 20 cm) high like a "house on stilts" to keep the inner cup of fine grass, soft bark, wool, or feathers above any puddling rainwater. The cavity can be so well filled that the entry is tight even for these small wrens, but even more so for cowbirds and other nest predators.

What qualifies as a cavity can be creative if not macabre: cow's skulls, the pockets of a scarecrow's clothes or a campsite jacket, old boots and shoes, piles of tin cans, even the axle of a car taken on a daily drive. Materials can be as bizarre, as well as hazardous: thorny sticks of rose bushes, bits of rusted chicken wire, piles of rusty nails, hairpins, staples, and pencil leads. Sometimes they add the egg sacks of jumping spiders, whose spiderlings consume wren parasitizing mites.

The clutch of five to eight white, brown spotted eggs is incubated by the female for up to sixteen days. She also broods the helpless hatchlings, which are feed a diet of insects by both parents. The chicks fledge in about two weeks, all within a few hours of each other. Those left behind, the very small runts, inevitably die, as the parents leave them to feed and guard the fledged young, which will remain in their care for another two weeks.

Excerpt from NESTS fifty nests and the birds that built them by Sharon Beals Chronicle Books 2011

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Sharon Beals

House Finch *Carpodacus Mexicanus*
Collection California Academy of Sciences
Latex Ink Print, 2023

Once just found in Mexico and the Southwest, the house finch has become one of the most familiar birds in North America. The basic needs of this highly adaptable species are trees and shrubs for nesting; seeds, fruit, and blossoms to eat; and a source of water for at least one daily drink. The new western landscape created as colonizers converted forests and prairies into irrigated farmlands and gardened towns quickly became this bird's new land of plenty. Their second bonanza came in the 1940's, this time on the East Coast, when pet store owners released some illegally caged birds to avoid incrimination. With habitat already tamed, these finches are now found throughout most of the United States and southern Canada.

House finches were introduced to Hawaii sometime before 1870, and there they became known as the Papaya Bird for their fondness for fruit, but the beak sized bites of a flock of finches can be the bane of orchard growers anywhere.

Their yellow or red-tinted plumage gets it's color from the carotenoids of plants; when choosing a mate, females prefer the males that wear the most intense reds. After a singing winged courtship, a pair will bond by "billing," or the mutual caressing of beaks. This inevitably leads to the male miming the act of regurgitating food, or depositing some real morsels directly into the mouth of the begging female, displaying his willingness to feed her and their young. They are monogamous for the breeding season, and sometimes into the next, staying in each other's company throughout the year.
Stories of their nesting habits charm the pages of book: they brazenly occupy tin cans, old hats, stove pipes, woodpecker holes, cactus, hanging nests of orioles, mud nests of phoebes, street lamps, Christmas wreaths, ivy on buildings, anything that provides solid support and overhanging cover.
With the male on guard, the female assembles a cup of grass, leaves, and small twigs, lining it with wool or feathers, or like the nest pictured here, some manmade materials. Both parents feed the nestlings a regurgitated gruel of seeds, plants, and insect larvae. The young fledge in about fifteen days but still beg for food so loudly that a feeding can sound like an altercation. Males feed and guard the young while the females begin their second, or third broods, until they're ready to join a flock of fellow juveniles.

Excerpt from NESTS fifty nests and the birds that built them by Sharon Beals Chronicle Books 2011

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Sharon Beals

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*
Collection California Academy of Sciences
Latex Ink Print, 2023

Who hasn't heard, even loved, the cacophony of a flock of trilling, buzzing Red-winged Blackbirds? The sound track of marshes and wetlands across the country, any cat-tailed pond or reedy roadside ditch, urban park or shopping mall may be claimed by the red-epauleted males and their camouflaged mates,

With the males posted to sound an alarm at intruders, the female builds the nest. Hidden in weeds, or higher in cattails, shrubs, and trees, it is an engineering feat. First she winds plant fibers around vertical stems, attaches a platform of wet grasses, then forms leaves and decayed wood into a nest, adding an optional mud lining to support a grass-lined inner cup.

She incubates two to six blue-green to gray spotted eggs for 10 to 14 days, until, using an egg tooth attached to their beaks, the naked, blind and wobbly chicks break open their shells. Both parents fatten them with caterpillars and insects, including damsel and dragon flies, for two weeks until they are finally feathered for flight.

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Dornith Doherty

Clockwise:

Circuition
Single channel video 7:37 mins, 2021

Phylloxera no. 6
Phylloxera no. 1
Phylloxera no. 3
Phylloxera no. 2
Latex Ink Prints, 2021

1884 The ranch is sold to 2 Frenchmen, Michael Debret and Pierre Priet, who planted more vineyards, later lost to phylloxera.

From the di Rosa historic timeline

The history of the insect pest grape phylloxera and its destruction of European vineyards has roots in European colonization of the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries. Although grapevines were part of the earliest interchanges between east and west, the accidental introduction of the phylloxera organism to Europe from America did not occur until the mid-19thCentury, when the speed of travel increased with the development of steamships, allowing the insect stowaways to survive.

The remedy for the blight was to graft domesticated European grapevines onto wild American phylloxera-resistant rootstock. These new plants (part wild/part domestic) were hybrid entities, expressing characteristics derived from both the scion and the rootstock. These plants reconstituted the French vineyards and grafting continues to be standard practice today.

Circuition is inspired by this story of human/environmental entanglement, cycles and exchange. This single-channel stop motion animation created from hundreds of digitally collaged frames of wild and domesticated grapevines, cycles through flourishing, decay and regeneration of stems and leaves.

Accompanying the video are four images that present highly magnified scanning electron microscope images of phylloxera galls. These lustrous sepia toned photographs make reference to the mid-19thCentury, a time when photography was invented and the phylloxera blight occurred.

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Kija Lucas

Left to right:

Eucalpytus Bloom, 2023
Smolder #33, 2016
Smolder #211, 2018
Olive Bloom, 2023
Smolder #39, 2016
Oak Bloom, 2023
Latex Ink Prints

In October 2017 the Nuns fire swept through the north edge of the di Rosa property, burning a storage barn and the olive grove, which was planted over a hundred and fifty years ago. Olive trees are long lived evergreen trees with an ancient history of human cultivation and cultural meaning. These Mediterranean plants have evolved with an ability to regenerate after fire damage, this can be clearly seen in the scraggly tops and dense new growth at the base in the surviving trees in front of you.

In July of 2015, Kija Lucas was teaching in a Napa classroom with a lot of windows when she noticed that it felt like magic hour at one in the afternoon, the light was warm and lovely, perfect for photography. She went outside to investigate and realized the sun was blocked by smoke and ash raining down from the sky. This was her first experience of the ever extending California fire season and lead to her work on the Smolder series from 2016 to 2019. The charred wood in the images was collected in Napa and Sonoma counties.

The Eucalyptus Bloom, Olive Bloom, Oak Bloom images were made in spring 2023 and represent the regeneration and new growth after fire and the plentiful rains of the past winter. The choice of native oak and non-native olive and eucalyptus flowers reflect Lucas' ongoing interest in botanical colonialism and the ideas of native/ invasive species

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Karoline Hjorth
Riitta Ikonen

Eyes As Big As Plates # Mane (Senegal)
Latex Ink Print, 2019

Mane's advice for a happy life is to be nice. "Whatever the arguments are that you're having with other people, you need to keep a certain kindness and respect." Everyone sitting around Mane erupts into applause three times (first when Mane says this in Wolof, the second time when it's translated into French and a third time when it's translated into English). The applause continues as she emphasizes the importance of education and respecting older people. The audience gathered under the trees in Ndos village square is enraptured.

Mane was born in Jahaua, Senegal, the royal capital where kings used to live, just a few kilometers from Ndos. Now in her late nineties, she still works in the fields, carrying children, water and crops, and grinding grain. "Today life is much more modern, my house has walls [i.e. not just a roof] and diseases aren't too rampant anymore." Infant mortality is also pretty much in check, partly because traditional medicine is not the only trick in the box anymore.

Mane's proudest achievement is declaring herself 100% healthy. She has been able to feed herself throughout her life and the way she has kept up the traditions regarding food is one of her greatest feats. On a bleaker note, Mane feels the absence of big nature: "Maybe there's a divinity behind it, however I still think that we humans can contemplate the environmental decay, especially how the weather is changing and the rains lessening." She remains hopeful and strongly believes that we humans can do something about it, such as getting involved in a tree planting project.

We walk away from the meeting in awe and with a gift, a shaw which Karoline wears to the shoot with Mane the next day and gets covered in tiny, outrageously spiky burrs.

Text from Eyes as Big as Plates, Vol 2

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Karoline Hjorth
Riitta Ikonen

Eyes As Big As Plates # Gunn-Tove (Norway 2015)
Latex Ink Print, 2019

Gunn-Tove works as an emergency ward nurse and a reindeer herder in eastern Finnmark. She welcomed us to join the reindeer round-up in Krampenes to better understand and appreciate the Sami culture through reindeer husbandry. Gunn-Tove inherited the reindeer herd just after finishing her medical studies and her son will take over her reindeers within the next decade due to her arthritis. If you're looking for a career in reindeer husbandry in Norway, you have to belong to a Sami family, or you can always fall in love and marry into a herding family. Twice a year, the free roaming animals are rounded up, marked and set free or sent for slaughter, and Gunn-Tove always looks forward to seeing her reindeer cows and checking that they're healthy and nicely chubby. The schedule for this operation is heavily dependent on weather and the movement
of the herd.

Gunn-Tove hopes that policy makers will wake up to the importance of existing local knowledge and allow the reindeer herders to slaughter their animals humanely in the field. The slaughterhouses schedules also rarely take into consideration factors like the moon, which plays a big part in the Sami culture and affects practical issues such as removing the skin: it pulls off much easier when the moon is waxing. The best time to get a skin for a winter coast is also not necessarily the most profitable time to slaughter your animals.

Gunn-Tove forced her mother to change her surname when she was nine, since it's connected to a long established reindeer herding family and would have led to intense bullying. Her son encouraged her to make the change back to her original family name less than a year ago. "There's a lot of pride connected to being Sami nowadays and my hope lies in strong powerful women who communicate what's at stake and push forward change for the better. We need to communicate to the general public what reindeer herding is and how it needs to be handled in order to survive."

Text from Eyes as Big as Plates, Vol 2

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Karoline Hjorth
Riitta Ikonen

Eyes As Big As Plates # Karin
Latex Ink Print, 2019

Karin's mum had to flee her native Austria to Switzerland because her top-ranking Nazi family had held her hostage and made several attempts to murder her after she told them she was in love with and had become pregnant by a man from Nigeria. Karin's understanding of nature and outlook on life has naturally been shaped by these events, and further colored by her childhood, which was divided between Switzerland, Ireland, Germany and Nigeria. She and her son had just parked their camper vans near Moss in Norway and were enjoying a sunset stroll when we met them while looking for participants.

The next day we all packed into Karin's motorhome for tea and incredible stories of her voodoo grandma, taxi driving in the Alps, photography, climate change, 5G and chemtrails. "My adoptive grandfather, who I grew up with, had tons of books with images of different animals in America and Africa and he said to me 'you'll go and see all of that, please go and see it for me, too.' That gave me a mission and since then, traveling was always something I wanted to do."

Karin has always enjoyed solitude in nature. She goes nuts for landscapes and light, and experiencing this on her own is something she really enjoys. "I never feel lonely as I'm always with myself. Hunting for sunrises and sunsets with my camera gives me so much joy, I really don't need anything else."

Text from Eyes as Big as Plates, Vol 2

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Karoline Hjorth
Riitta Ikonen

Eyes As Big As Plates # Brit
Latex Ink Print, 2018

Brit's connections with the most recent ice age is strong. The city of Trondheim, where she has lived and worked for most of her life, is built on an old sea bed, shaped through ice, rain and the fluctuating electrical charge of clay molecules. Brit has been handling marine clays for as long as she can remember, first as her favorite plaything, later as her lifelong artistic material of choice.

With a continuously packed exhibition calendar and more than forty public commissions under her belt, including art for the world's longest two-lane road tunnel in China, the material choice for this particular portrait was therefore decided on faster than you can say quick clay. After an equally quick drive along the fjord that hugs the city, we descended in a light drizzle to a beach near Trolla with shovels and discovered Brit's wearable sculpture right beneath our feet.

A few hours later, immersed in the elements, Brit attempted to summarize the experience: "The clay was confident today of who was shaping who. I felt its weight, its smell, its humidity, its gurgling sound and its handling of me as a shape, and it was very much an inward journey, a meditation on my relationship with this material throughout my life. The tables had turned today, and the material I'm so familiar with and usually in full control of totally ran the show. It was my turn to get 'attacked' and handled and shaped by my own material."

Text from Eyes as Big as Plates, Vol 2

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Karoline Hjorth
Riitta Ikonen

Eyes As Big As Plates # Tuija
Latex Ink Print, 2012

Riitta's luminous aunt Tuija waded bravely into the dark waters of Lake Kelvä wearing nothing but her favorite plant, the yellow water lily. Her most recent six-week challenge for herself is a swimming regime at the Yrjönkatu swimming pool in Helsinki, where clothing is, of course, optional. Tuija trained as a licensed practical nurse as well as a catering chef. She loves to cook, but finds it impossible to whip up just one main course for her frequent family banquets because, "Everyone should have their favorite dish." Tuija's explosive laughter and lust for life is contagious. She says, "It is simply not worth being cranky, so don't do it." Good advice, as this shoot was as challenging as they come: the water was ice cold, with the daylight fading quickly, the camera on a free-floating dock, and a tiny terrier committed to her mission to rescue the swimming model.

Natural Discourse @ di Rosa

Sharon Beals

California Scrub-Jay *Aphelacoma coerulescens*
Collection of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology
Latex Ink Print, 2023

We can thank California Scrub Jays for our oak woodlands: claiming a territory of over 2 acres, a bonded pair buries a cache of thousands of acorns, remembering most of their locations, but leaving some behind. Using their sturdy bills as nutcrackers, they rely on this food source, especially in winter when there are fewer insects, and for their chicks after they've graduated from their soft baby-food diet of caterpillars.

With the males posted to sound the alarm at intruders, the female builds the nest. Hidden low to the ground, or higher in cattails, shrubs and trees, it is an engineering feat. First she winds plant fibers around vertical stems, attaches a platform of wet grasses, then forms leaves and decayed wood into a nest, adding an optional mud lining to support a grass-lined inner cup.

Year round residents of scrub and woodlands from Washington to the southern tip of Baja California, but drawn to our food-filled trash and bird feeders loaded with peanuts, these opportunistic omnivores are increasingly common in urban areas.