

UNFRIENDLY  
SKIES



GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY  
**SCHOOL OF ART**  
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# UNFRIENDLY SKIES

BIRDS, BUILDINGS, AND COLLISIONS

Rose ANDERSON  
Sandy ANDERSON  
Miranda BRANDON  
Elsabé DIXON  
Sam DROEGE  
Edgar ENDRESS &  
Chris RACKLEY  
Stephanie GARMEY  
Lara GHELERTER  
Aaron HEINSMAN  
Brian HENRY  
Bonnie Crawford KOTULA  
Ursula MARCUM  
Lisa MOREN  
Tim NOHE  
Jenny O'GRADY  
Lynne PARKS  
Elisabeth PELLATHY  
Ben PIWOWAR  
Nicole SHIFLET  
Nick Clifford SIMKO  
Chris SIRON  
Van WENSIL  
Andrew YANG

**A FATAL COMBINATION** of light pollution and glass is killing as many as a billion birds each year in the United States.

Throughout human history, birds have always been near to us. They've graced our culture with their color and beauty, their distinctive songs, their intricate behaviors, and, most significantly, the freedom of their flight. Icarus took to the skies, Leonardo da Vinci designed flying machines, and the Wright Brothers built a plane and stepped into it so that we could be like birds.

Their qualities are pervasive as a symbol throughout our arts, political movements, religions, nations, and sports teams. Birds are emblematic of divination, peace, courage, skill, freedom, and rapacity. To Homer, birds were mediators between the gods and us. They remain representative of transcendent spirituality. We watch them because they instill wonder and instigate

curiosity about their place and function in the world. With birds, our imagination literally takes flight.

Bird populations are in decline due to habitat destruction, climate change, predatory cats, and violent collisions with manmade structures. The Audubon Society has warned that half of our bird species are threatened. We have to help birds on multiple fronts.

The majority of artists in this exhibit directly address the loss of bird life from building collisions. Light pollution attracts birds into manmade environments. A single carelessly designed building can kill thousands of birds during migratory seasons, but windows in the 123 million residences throughout the United States cause much of the carnage. By modifying our urban building designs and residential windows, we can greatly reduce collisions. We know that birds don't strike windows for lack of intelligence; it's just that the drastic human imprint on the natural world

outpaces their ancient instincts for navigation. Unlike us, songbird vision is more laterally oriented. They see differently than we do.

The work in this exhibit incorporates documentary photography, mixed media, portraiture, sound, glass, animation, and installations utilizing bird-strike deterrence products. The works herald warnings, post-extinction scenarios, memorials and proactive solutions. Recognized is the inherent usefulness of birds' services to our collective ecology including plant pollination, seed dispersal, and insect and disease control. Several of the artists are avian conservationists and activists.

This is the future of birds in art: dying or absent. If we continue to live as we do, birds will no longer be symbols of freedom or grace, but absent symbols of human consumption.

—LYNNE PARKS, guest curator



### Yellowthroat Slain

2015  
diptych  
two 18" x 24" chromogenic prints in floating glass mounts  
digital photography/ digital composition

## ROSE ANDERSON

Rose Anderson is a Baltimore artist who uses photography to illustrate the connection between humans and nature. *Yellowthroat Slain* shows one of the bird species most often killed in window collisions.

Contrasting life and death, the artist invites the viewer to consider how human choices affect birds and wildlife.

The title pays homage to Vladimir Nabokov's reflection on life, death, beauty and grief as penned by the fictitious poet in his novel *Pale Fire*:

*"I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the windowpane;  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky."*



### Extinction Ceremony

2015  
8" x 28"  
oil on canvas

## SANDY ANDERSON

In *Extinction Ceremony*, the artist imagines an after-world in which birds are extinct, and can only be remembered through imitation and conjuring.



### Impact (Indigo Bunting)

2013  
31" x 44"  
inkjet print

## MIRANDA BRANDON

*Impact* had its origins with Brandon's work as a volunteer with Audubon Minnesota's Project BirdSafe, which monitors bird deaths due to window strikes. While collecting dead and injured birds along an urban survey route, she bore witness to the relatively modern phenomenon of avifauna attempting to navigate the reflective surfaces of built space, with its often fatal consequences.\*

Evolving from that experience, *Impact* literally and figuratively enlarges the issues faced by birds when moving through built spaces, giving visual voice to their plight. Birds appear 6 to 12 times their natural size, depicted as if at the moment of impact or just after: falling through the air, or posed in quiet portraiture with heads drawn at eerily unnatural angles. At such a large scale the birds cannot be easily tidied up and discarded. The photographs demand physical and contemplative space for their subjects, offering in return an intimate view of each bird and allowing

minute details to be revealed. Brandon hopes that the beauty of the birds coupled with their abnormal postures provokes viewers to consider how humans impact the spaces we occupy.

*Impact* is not focused on the statistics of overall population flux, as birds face many issues beyond buildings (i.e. cat predation and habitat loss) and many of the birds found at the foot of buildings are birds not considered at risk for population decline. Instead *Impact* is concerned with how these deaths affect the immediate communities and families of each individual bird and the morality of how we (humans) choose to live with other beings. Designed to generate new awareness and knowledge of the presence of birds in our everyday lives *Impact* expands our capacity to care more about them, and about other non-human animals.

*\*Access to specimens courtesy of the Bell Museum of Natural History*



### Requiem of the Songbird

2015  
window installation  
20' x 9'  
black vinyl and color paper tape

## ELSABÉ DIXON

Scientists estimate that about 600 million birds die in window collisions in the U.S. and Canada every year. Recently a demand for bird-friendly glass among architects, glass manufacturers, and their clients are growing—what quality of living will we have if our songbirds disappear and if plants are not reseeded through bird droppings?

This project consists of strips of black and colored tape running floor to ceiling in the formation of a sonogram taken from the song of a Northern Cardinal (the Virginia State bird). The main idea is that the lines on the window would deter the birds from flying in but will

also be spaced in such a way that they reflect the 2" x 4" scientific evaluation of how birds see.

The work is both a "mapping" of a musical score based on a songbirds call and it also visually deters birds from flying into the window. A good guideline for patterns on a window is the "2 x 4" rule.

Horizontal lines should be spaced no more than two inches (five centimeters) apart, while vertical lines should be no more than four inches (ten centimeters) apart. Birds will try to fly through anything larger than that.



**Window Strikes: Birds Blue**

2014  
30" x 27.5"  
archival pigment print

**SAM DROEGE**

I am a biologist, and work as a biologist for the federal government. Internally, though, I remain a student and employee of the natural world, who has studied and lived in that world as long as I can remember. As a scientist, my work is all in calculations, scientific papers, meetings, and paperwork. However, to illustrate that work and what I do, I cannot help but frame the pictures I take to reflect the joy I see in the animals and plants I study even when the subjects are dead. So wonderful are the palettes and forms that Nature has already created that I never cease to feel a

sense of merging, and try simply to recreate that for others and, selfishly, for my own enjoyment.

The pictures here are stitched together shots of birds that struck buildings in downtown Washington D.C. in the Capitol Hill and National Mall areas and were retrieved during the Lights Out Washington D.C. project surveys. I used a Canon 5D Mark II and 100mm macro lens to squeeze as much detail out of the pictures as possible.

*These shots, as well as vast numbers of stacked shots of insects, are freely available for download in the public domain at: [flickr.com/photos/usgsbiml](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usgsbiml)*



**Land's End**

2015  
36" x 40"  
archival digital prints

**EDGAR ENDRESS & CHRIS RACKLEY**

The project has its origin in botanical, animal, and bird's illustrations created during the so-called "age of discovery" during the early XV to XVII century. As a consequence of the Enlightenment, the images represent a form of understanding and incorporating the new species of the colonies into the system of knowledge.

The project attempts to recreate a fictional landscape, using an illusory prequel of Hitchcock's *The Birds* as a reference. The movie works as a mechanism of a series of questions about the sense of normality incorporated through reasoning and knowledge, and what happens when that is altered by an undefined hostility, where nature

becomes an aggressive entity capable of re-claiming its territory.

The original illustrations were created as a means of scientific dominance over the new colonized landscape and as an inventory and re-affirmation of the sublime relation between the colonial powers and the new natural landscape. The prints use a ludic strategy spirited by the artists of mestizo baroque during the colonial enterprise in the Americas by reorganizing the visual grammar in painting and sculpture primarily imposed by the colonizer to create a new narrative, where questions about dominance and representation are incorporated into the main discourse itself.



### **Bird Curiosity Cabinet**

2011  
18" x 21" x 5"  
wood and silk screen printed glass cabinet,  
cut paper birds and nest, cut paper book

### **STEPHANIE GARMEY**

Stephanie Garney has always been interested in the slowing of time and the meditative recollection of the regenerative and corroding events of nature.

In this exhibition of *Unfriendly Skies* her piece *Bird Curiosity Cabinet* speaks to the collection and death of birds. The cabinet can be looked at as an old natural history specimen in a time when birds were over collected and species threatened. Just like the collision of birds into glass buildings are

threatening the population of many species of birds today.

The *Bird Curiosity Cabinet* is also a cabinet of honor and rest for the bird as a magical creature of flight, song, beauty and traveling migrator.

Garney has found birds that have been victims of building collisions and natural causes of death and has made paper cuts and drawings to speak about their fragility and strength in life.



### **Will Somebody Switch That Off?**

2015  
18" x 24"  
acrylic and oil on canvas

### **LARA GHELERTER**

Lara Ghelerter paints a dreamlike scene symbolizing the destruction of birds by our buildings. She finds the feet of dead birds interesting—their shapes carry emotional weight and meaning in their delicate feet juxtaposed with the formal structure of the buildings. By layering multiple thin coatings of paint she can provide a hazy, dreamlike atmosphere to the imagined space.



**Common Yellowthroat**

2014  
5" x 7"  
C-print

**AARON HEINSMAN**

Aaron Heinsman began volunteering with Lights Out Baltimore in March 2014, inspired by the award-winning photographs of Lynne Parks and the leadership of Lindsay Jacks. Struck by the terrible beauty of the corpses he'd discover each morning—the rainbow bounty of a macabre scavenger hunt—Heinsman documented the victims of window strikes that he encountered. At the end of each walk, he'd share the photos of the day's finds on social media, provoking family and friends into awareness and action. He hopes visitors to Unfriendly Skies will be similarly moved to act.



**Dead Birds**

2015  
frame photograph  
12" x 12"  
polaroid enlargement

**BRIAN HENRY**

Brian Henry displays the fragility, beauty, and sadness of a small collection of dead birds. Using expired Polaroid film and a series of chemical baths, he creates a whirlpool of chaotic textures and light. Lights Out raises awareness of the danger of city lights and reflective surfaces resulting in many bird deaths. Brian Henry symbolically incorporates these hazards in the photograph by creating the illusion of stars (by abusing the film) and then printing the image on a reflective, metallic paper.



### Flexible Instincts

2015  
dimensions variable (each object under 4" x 6")  
ABC bird tape, thread, found materials

## BONNIE CRAWFORD KOTULA

*"A thing that always struck me was the contrast between nest and egg, I mean the contingency of the former, no matter how well or even beautifully it was fashioned, and the latter's completedness, its pristine fulness."—John Banville, The Sea*

In *Flexible Instincts*, Bonnie Crawford Kotula stitches discarded objects and bits of string into scraps of American Bird Conservancy bird tape, an adhesive that, when applied to windows, prevents bird collisions. Mimicking a bird's opportunism when building a nest, Crawford Kotula selects materials that are readily available – plastic packaging, webbing for produce, twigs, and wool. She uses decorative stitching techniques to incorporate the found objects with the bird tape, often leaving the ends of thread loose. The resultant objects seem at once perfunctory and considered, contingent and complete.



### going, going...

2014  
13.5" x 12.5" (assembled)  
kiln-formed and cold worked glass

## URSULA MARCUM

Birds have appeared in mythology and literature as messengers, omens, wise beings and fragile connections to the heavens. But in our real, shared world, they are so much more - visual and aural beauty, a link to wildness, and necessary players in biodiversity and pollination.

Baltimore artist Ursula Marcum explores the human act of collecting, and has long been inspired by the ways in which people seek to collect birds, whether it be scientists amassing the physical manifestations

of birds or bird watchers gathering sightings for their "life lists." The volunteers of Lights Out Baltimore collect the bodies of birds that have died because of fatal collisions with the disorienting light and glass of downtown buildings. These works are a way to recognize the tragedy of the loss of these creatures. But they are also meant to recognize that there is hope - the Lights Out Baltimore volunteers rescue stunned birds and advocate for a safer migratory path though the city.



### **A Purple for Birds**

vinyl on glass

## **LISA MOREN**

Birds have appeared in mythology. This public art project aspires to grasp the diverse capabilities of non-humans. It's an installation for the birds, where humans can share in a visual experience unique to a non-human species.

This project is based on a protein that enables birds to see in the ultra-violet spectrum, just below purple where humans can't see. Some believe birds see a purplish/violet haze throughout

the landscape, especially on a vibrant sunny day. The artwork is made from a vinyl material formulated to be 310 nm in the UV spectrum (or ultra deep violet). By putting this color on windows it helps protect the birds from an epidemic of collisions on what is otherwise clear glass, especially during migration season, and in urban areas.

The pattern is based on a 2:1 ratio tested as most effective to bird

vision with this material. The image is then morphed through data parameters in order to create "organic differentiation" better following migration patterns in nature.

During the day, the glass facade will appear clear to humans, displaying an artwork only for birds. But in the evening, special lights will activate the material in order to assist human's ability to similarly enjoy this sort of cross species artwork.

## **Tardus perditionem**

2015

stereo sound

## **TIM NOHE**

Working in a contemporary Arts building with a prominent glass "jewel box" architectural feature, the artist has heard the dull thump of birds as they crash against huge panes of glass. Some birds are stunned, and many die. This morbid cadence marks time in a very sad sort of music, and moved by this loss Timothy Nohe has created an elegiac work, "tardus perditionem" (slow destruction, from the Latin) in remembrance of birds lost to building collisions.



**Six Birds: Sung/Sung**

2014  
3" x 5" closed; 5" x 10" open  
watercolor paper, cotton thread, watercolors, pencil

**JENNY O'GRADY**

This work explores the legacy of lost birdsong through book arts forms. Each of the six books represents a commonly lost Baltimore bird. When the book is closed, the bird appears to be dead and devoid of color; when its pages are opened, the birds come alive through colorful paper pop-up and poetry that reveals secrets of the voices lost to the lights.



**Wood Thrush**

2014  
archival pigment print  
12" x 20"



**1 W Pratt St.**

2014  
archival pigment print  
29" x 39"

**LYNNE PARKS**

Lynne is a Baltimore multimedia artist who fills her days with birds. She is both a birder and a volunteer for the avian conservationist group, Lights Out Baltimore (LOB). As well as promoting the turning off of nonessential lighting during songbird migration, LOB monitors downtown buildings for window collisions.

As an activist, when you hold a dying bird in your hand, it becomes personal. Seeing these creatures up close sparks curiosity and teaches us about the otherness of non-human species, but it also highlights our commonalities and inter-relationships. From them, we develop empathy.

LOB has two dozen volunteers. As citizen scientists we collect data. As rescuers, we try to fix what's been broken. We hope to save birds so that future studies continue to uncover the many ways in which they are remarkable. As a birder, it seems you encounter as much curiosity from birds directed toward you as the other way around.

A means of contending with the sorrow of finding fatalities is through memorial photography. These are large prints of small birds. Each of the portraits captures a bird in its death pose. Far from being macabre, their delicate beauty and bright colors captivate. Their narrative saddens, but challenges. Contrasted with the organic structure of the bird are lines of manufactured glass. They are marked by the elements that killed them, which indicates our inadvertent but harmful intrusion into nature's pathways. There are also four studies of urban glass environments.

Installation work is made from bird strike deterrence products. The work raises questions about current building design and offers solutions.

The sound piece includes the songs of the eighty-seven species of birds that are known to have died from Baltimore's buildings.

Migratory birds are a shared resource throughout the Americas that should be preserved.



**Red-cockaded Woodpecker Bird  
Song Visualization**

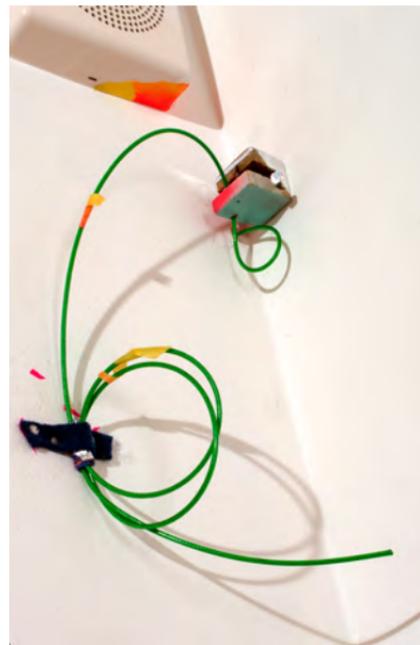
2015  
8" x 8" x 10"  
3D print

**ELISABETH PELLATHY**

Elisabeth Pellathy's practice is a dialogue between relations and process, fieldwork and studio. Materials and data from the field are often coupled with experimental manipulation in the studio. Pellathy incorporates tactile processes with electronic methods and use a range of materials to produce her work. This work tends toward a magnification of the gaps between reality and the poetic, setting the

stage for a compositional relationship between nature and the gallery.

The rearranging of these relationships in the studio is based on current ideologies of accessibility of information, which can often negate the tactile experience of objects. In exploring this gap, she has become increasingly interested in the concept of cataloging the disappearing.

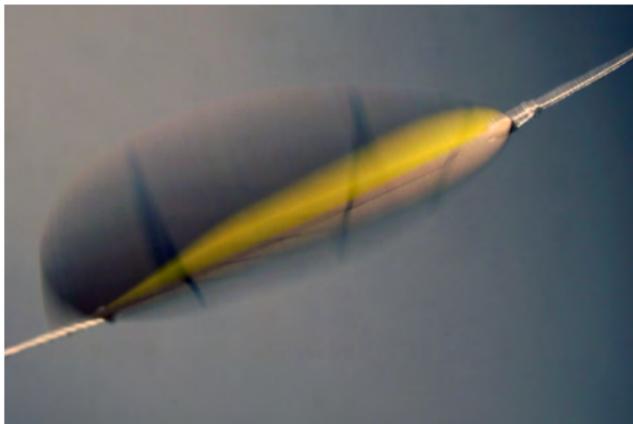


**Nesting Studies #3**

2015  
corner, alarm  
dimensions variable  
wood, cable, tape, paint, fabric, nails

**BEN PIWOWAR**

Ben Piwowar's work uses abstraction to reflect on fragility, adaptation, and regeneration. His objects evoke displaced organisms negotiating with strange surroundings, striving to establish a temporary-but-workable symbiosis—not unlike bird populations contending with urban spaces. Nesting Studies is a body of site-responsive sculptural interventions and related works on paper.



### Thaumatropes

2015  
10" x 3"  
ink and acrylic on paper with string

### Counter

2015  
24' x 6'  
latex on wall

### NICOLE SHIFLET

Thaumatropes are one of the earliest forms of animation. Characteristics of the thaumatrope (the fluttering, the hand-held scale, and the brief moment one has to steal a glimpse of the superimposing image) are all evocative of the small complex creatures that are birds. The visuals of abstracted architecture on one side of the thaumatrope and of colors of birds on the opposite side of the thaumatrope represent two conflicting entities trying to coexist in today's world.



### Avian Dream

2014  
silver gelatin print  
18" x 24"

### NICK CLIFFORD SIMKO

Nick Clifford Simko was first introduced to Lights Out Baltimore through Aaron Heinsman (whose work is also included in this exhibition.) Inspired by Heinsman's passion for the cause, Simko photographed Heinsman in a surreal composition amid several species of the collected birds. In another image, Simko references the mythological Fates who spin, measure, and cut the threads of life.



**Nocturnal Voyage**  
2015  
stop-motion animation

## CHRIS SIRON

Chris Siron has created artwork in various mediums, but he has melded his curiosity and caring as a birder into this particular work. It specifically addresses the birds and building collisions issue. It is inspired by Lights Out Baltimore, an organization dedicated to rescuing birds as well as educating the public, city leaders, architects, and urban planners about the dangers migrating birds face. He hopes this piece evokes a sense of

the ascent and descent of beings into sympathetic resonance with the main character.

In Chris Siron's animation, *Nocturnal Voyage*, he employs a diversity of materials. The backgrounds used are made up of reproductions from calendars, etchings, oil paintings, and items pulled from a basement full of ephemera and junk. The characters

are also created using various materials. There is pixilation of an actress in a mask, cut-out animation including silhouettes, and 3-D stop-motion of real birds that were victims of the collisions. The frozen dead come alive, although briefly, in the grim reality of manmade environments hostile to birds.

*Chris's info and a peek at his video could be found at [vimeo.com/126855154](https://vimeo.com/126855154)*



**Involuntary Birdslaughter**  
2015  
window 22.5" x 29.5"  
cutouts 30" x 36"  
mixed media

## CHRIS SIRON & LYNNE PARKS

This is a cultural reference to how obsessed we are with crime scene investigations, but with a spin on the deaths of other species. As humans, we are largely unaware of the harm we cause, but we need to learn for the sake of biodiversity and the health it bestows to our ecosystems.



**Our Shame Our Responsibility**  
12" x 21"

## VAN WENSIL

Van is farm manager at Myrtle Woods Farm, a small organic farm in ElkRidge, MD. The motto and mission of the farm is "grow in community with nature." With the death of so many of our birds, a large link in our ecosystem chain is broken.



## Flying Gardens of Maybe

2012-ongoing  
dimensions variable  
retrieved seeds, stoneware ceramic, soil, photographs,  
postcards, bird feeders, mirrors

## ANDREW YANG

In the expanding ecology of a planet where the mythic distinctions between 'nature' and 'culture' no longer hold, how do we and can we participate? As biological agents we might make new sense of our agency, finding opportunities to re-route and re-imagine possibilities that are latent in urban life's uncertainties. Rather than focusing on singular objects and events, one can trace processes of interaction that make up the complex web of creatures/ architectures/ peoples/ institutions to explore what it means to be symbiotically entwined.

The *Flying Gardens of Maybe* is a project that examines this trajectory of thought by engaging with the otherwise unseen migration of plants through the landscape hidden within the high-risk journey birds make through perplexing skies. A project, but to what ends? The engine of life on Earth is possibility within highly improbable; gestures make no practical sense until - even just once - they do. In the Anthropocene, natural history is the new contemporary art.

I would like to extend a thank you to **Don Russell**, University Curator, for inviting me to guest curate at the Fine Arts Gallery and to George Mason University's **School of Art** for their support.

Thanks to **Lights Out Baltimore** for the inspiration and to **Phoenix Wildlife Center** for rehabilitating birds.

Thanks to **Marnie Benney**, curatorial assistant, **Jeff Kenney**, gallery manager, **Kate Himler** and **Fithi Abraham**, installers.

Thanks to the remarkable efforts of the artists.

Thanks to **Chris Siron**, the biggest helper of all.

—LYNNE PARKS, guest curator

## GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ART

THE SCHOOL OF ART educates artists and creative professionals to be responsible contributors to society, preparing them to be agents of change in an increasingly connected, complex, inclusive world. We highly value rigor in conceptual approach, skill in art production, and imaginative methods for implementing projects and engaging audiences. Each student is given a background in aesthetic and analytical judgment, the ethical framework for professional practice, the confidence to be both self-reliant and collaborative, and the mastery of design and production necessary to thrive as a professional artist in a competitive global environment.

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