

Word Birds

An exhibition of Drawing and Sculpture

by

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thesis requirement for the degree of

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in

Studio Art

Render Gallery

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Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2008

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This paper is intended to serve as a supporting document for the exhibition *Word Birds* that was held at the Render Gallery at the University of Waterloo, April 22-27, 2008.

The drawing and sculpture in this exhibition attempt to address the complex relationship humans have with animals and the ways we have charged them with symbolic and anthropomorphic characteristics. The work examines the human tendency to observe, name, and ascribe meaning to animals and speaks to the connection between natural history and human nature. The narrative element of the work is derived from a variety of sources including observation, philosophical speculation, and literary sources.

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Dedication

To my Mother Mary.

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Artist Statement

“The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it.

Thinking perhaps begins there”

Jacques Derrida, 2002.

My practice consists primarily of drawing and sculpture. I make work that examines human relationships and speaks to the connection between natural history and human nature. I hope to explore the dimensions of humanity's self-image in relation to animals and how we have, and continue to, use imagery and narrative to interpret and understand these relationships. Jacques Derrida refers to the gaze of the animal as a mirror in that when the animal looks at us it causes us to reflect on our own being. My use of animal imagery in my drawing and sculpture not only reflects concerns that are related to human self-image in relation to the natural world but also the human need to symbolically reaffirm what it is to be human.

Western cultural interactions with the natural world and our perceptions of animal life are of concern to me. Why do we project human consciousness on animals? What motivates our desire to personify animals? John Berger maintains “the widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery all began as animals started to be withdrawn from daily life” (Berger, 24). Berger refers to contemporary urban life as a place where the animal is no longer common place, in contrast to earlier historical periods where the animal was an integrated element of society.

I am very interested in how subconscious gestures of living beings can communicate what words cannot. Perhaps this is why I use animals as subjects in my work because they are without our words and rely on non-verbal communication. According to Derrida, the name animal is a word “that men have given themselves the right to give” (Atterton and Calarco, 124). The name animal is also a category. The act of categorizing reflects the human need to differentiate and distance the human from the animal. The ability to name through language has remained a fundamental philosophical dialogue regarding what distinguishes human from animal, the bridge between the living being and the speaking being; bios and zoe (Atterton and Calarco, 118). The human tendency to observe, name, and ascribe meaning to animals has become a focus in an attempt to understand the desire I have to represent animals in my work.

The body language of my animal subjects can be read as metaphors for the human experience of desire, isolation and the pack or group mentality. I am intrigued by the complex relationships humans have with animals and the ways we have charged them with symbolic and anthropomorphic characteristics. Steve Baker refers to this phenomenon and states “Symbolism is inevitably anthropomorphic, making sense of the animal characterizing it in human terms, and doing so from a safe distance” (Baker, 82).

I make sense of the animal from a safe distance employing formal strategies such as repetition, scale, texture and material explorations to produce symbolic representations in my work.

Human animal relationships have not only permeated philosophy but also appear in literature and the visual arts. Throughout history, animal-centered myths, fables and works

of art have cast animals as significant players, which function as signifiers for our own experience of the world. Yet it is significant to note that animal imagery was marginalized in ‘serious’ modern art. According to Steve Baker, the image of the animal for modernist artists represented:

The unashamedly anthropomorphic sentiment of an earlier age, which could hardly have been more at odds with the values of the self-consciously serious modernist avant-gardes. The animal is the very first thing to be ruled out of modernism’s bounds (Baker, 20).

Baker also maintained that when animals were depicted in modern art, such as Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, they functioned as necessary political symbols that could be “explained away, and the function of modernist art criticism was to do so.” (Baker, 20).

Animals in modern art were relegated to the fringes of modernist art and criticism along with other referential imagery and suspect topics, such as beauty and sentimentality. These suspect topics have since become a focus for a great deal of postmodern art and discourse.

The 1981 Royal Academy’s exhibition entitled *A New Spirit in Painting* exemplified the shift in attitudes regarding the depiction of animals in contemporary art. Baker stated “The presence of animal images in such numbers certainly appeared to mark an end to one particular version of modernism, an ‘austere’ modernism in which the animal had no proper place” (Baker, 28). According to Baker this exhibition marked a ‘return to painting’ and it would seem a return to the use of referential imagery. The exhibition featured paintings that depicted animals such as Lucien Freud’s *Naked Man with Rat* and Malcolm Morley’s *Parrots* (Baker, 27).

Many other postmodern artists have used animals as symbolic surrogates to express human thoughts and feelings. Nancy Graves claimed that she used camels as subjects because she associated them with the ability to survive and demonstrate independence. Working in the 1960's in an environment dominated by men, Graves claimed that these traits were essential for her to succeed as a female artist (Theberge, 58).

Similarly, Louise Bourgeois' sculpture *Maman*, a monumental spider that towers over the viewer, is according to Bourgeois a metaphor for her mother Josèphine who was both a protector and predator (Theberge, 26).

Stephen Balkenhol has frequently used animals as subjects for his wooden sculpture. In a 1988 interview Balkenhol expressed his motivation to work figuratively and stated:

Why I'm doing figural work again is also partly a reaction to the rather dispassionate, rational and very insensuous art of the 70s... It was as if art didn't or wouldn't illustrate anything, wouldn't relate anymore to what was happening externally, but only reflected its own principles and methods and in the end only illustrated itself (Benezra, 63).

It is apparent that 'what was happening externally' for Balkenhol included the representation of the human and animal figure. His work was unlike many of his contemporaries of the 1980's such as Kiki Smith, whose figures were characterized by politicized issues related to the 'body'. Instead Balkenhol often represented human and animal figures playfully interacting with each other, thus sets up ambiguous narratives. He remarked on his animal works, "When I make portraits of animals I tame them, and at the same time I am aware that these creatures have their own *raison d'être*. We didn't create them. If we weren't there they would go on living regardless" (Theberge, 18).

Balkenhol's statement regarding his animal sculptures echoes the sentiments that have become a focus of contemporary philosophical and political discourse related to human and animal interactions. The cultural theorist Linda Vance wrote in regards to the narrative we impose on animals and stated that her concern was "not to make us care about animals because they are like us, but to care about them because they are themselves" (Baker 174). Vance's observations allude to the anthropocentric view through which humans regard animals and their environment. I attempt to make sense of human and animal relationships in human terms since I can never really know an animal. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein alluded to this disconnect between animals and humans when he stated, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein, 223). We cannot fully understand the animal but perhaps the animal can help us understand ourselves.

Like most artists I am partially defined by social, political and cultural influences. The work of other artists provides precedent and context in which I may situate my work and make sense of my practice. Just as Barry Flanagan's use of the hare is a subtle nod to Joseph Beuys, my animal imagery is to some extent influenced by Nicola Hicks' and Tom Dean's most recent works. Both of these artists have used animals as subjects in their work and have, to varying degrees, addressed the tendency to anthropomorphize animals to address issues related to the human animal experience.

I am drawn to the figurative work of Tom Dean, specifically the piece titled *Desire*, which features life size sculptures of cherubs and swans intermingled in a single work. Historically swans were emblems of Aphrodite and symbolic of love. According to Dean "These swans, in their proud maturity, are hollowed out libidinous shells of an idea, erect in

the posture of pride and dignity” (Dean, 2001). I align myself with Dean’s work because he employs classic mythic symbols that are read in terms of human meaning.

Through the Shantz internship I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work in England with Nicola Hicks in 2003. The drawing *The Despot* (Figure 1) was inspired by my observations of the behavior of roosters and hens that lived on the Hicks’ farm in England. The animal subject of the drawing exhibits human characteristics in that it stands defiant and proud and the title alludes to the tyrannical similarities of a rooster and a dictator.

During my stay Nicola encouraged me to draw in her studio and one of the very first drawings I did of a dead bird was done in her studio. Working in such close proximity to Nicola, I feel I was influenced by the scale and style of her drawing. Nicola frequently references mythology and she has used the myth of the Minotaur to inspire several works including the sculpture *Limbic Champion*.

In my work I have explored myths that feature animals as symbolic surrogates for humans. The mythological reference in my work differs from Nicola’s in that I do not depict half-human half-animal as she does in works such as *Wolf*. Anthropomorphization in my work such as the drawing titled *Actaeon* (Figure 2) is implied. I am more concerned with the projection of human consciousness on to the animal rather than the state of either half-human or half-animal.

The drawing titled *Actaeon* was inspired by the tale of this character in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In the story, the hunter Actaeon happens upon the goddess Diana, who was bathing. The goddess is angered by Actaeon’s intrusion and transforms him into a stag as described in *The Metamorphoses*:

Without more threats, she gave the horns of a mature stag to the head she had sprinkled, lengthening his neck, making his ear-tips pointed, changing feet for hands, long legs for arms, and covering his body with a dappled hide (Innes, 79).

After he was changed, his own hunting dogs attack and kill him. Ovid described this as follows:

He groans and makes a noise, not human, but still not one a deer could make, and fills familiar heights with mournful cries. And on his knees, like a suppliant begging, he turns his wordless head from side to side, as if he were stretching arms out towards them (Innes, 80).

This myth interests me because roles are reversed; man is transformed into animal and the hunter becomes the hunted. The story also speaks to the division between humans and animals the “living being and the speaking being” (Atterton and Calarco, 118). In my drawing the stag turns “his wordless head” (Innes, 80) in a state of resignation, his legs and hips retain the human form and hint at the transformation. Actaeon is both human and animal “only his mind remains unchanged” (Innes, 79) he is essentially an animal with a consciousness. He in essence represents the debate over what separates humans and animals, the capacity for speech or language, consciousness and the ability to reason. The drawing *Actaeon* is typical of the style and subject matter of my most of my drawings in that I am concerned primarily with symbolism and representation.

The drawing *Icarus* (Figure 3) is a representation of a dead starling. The title alludes to the tale of Icarus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Ovid describes how Icarus and his father Daedalus attempt to escape their imprisonment in the labyrinth by creating wings and flying out. Icarus is warned by his father not to fly too close to the sun but he is so enthralled with the act of flight that he flies too close to the sun, which causes his wax wings to melt and he

falls into the sea and drowns (Innes, 185). The tale of Icarus intrigued me because of the representation of the ‘anxious concern’ that is unique to the parent child relationship (Innes, 185). The drawing began as a study of a bird that I found drowned in a small pond in my back yard.

I have used the image of the dead bird in several drawings (Figure 4). The practice of drawing from dead animal specimens has been done for centuries. John James Audubon, Alexander Wilson and contemporary artists such as Kiki Smith also use dead animals to inspire their work. The image of a dead bird is unavoidably tinged with morbidity yet I hope the drawing could also be interpreted as a *memento mori* in that it reminds us of our own mortality. The Latin phrase *memento mori* is translated as ‘remember that you are mortal’.

For most of my drawings I use watercolour, pastel, charcoal stick and powder. My drawing process is slow and methodical and, to some extent, meditative. I enjoy working with charcoal because it requires time and the slow pace allows me to watch the drawing evolve. I apply the charcoal and then go back into the drawing and erase areas. It is an iterative process of constantly building up and removing of layers. Occasionally one can see the areas where I have erased a section, leaving a slightly animated ghost image behind. I prefer to work on a coloured ground and I often stain my paper with blue or brown watercolour before I begin to draw.

Humans not only project their own characteristics onto animals; we also assign animal traits to ourselves. The science of physiognomy, which was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, cultivated an environment in which one could seek out examples of animality in humans. Physiognomy was a typology based on observation, which maintained there was

a direct relationship between a person's physical appearance and their character (Gunning, 2-4). The science dates back as far as Aristotle and it influenced many artists including Leonardo Da Vinci, Honore Daumier, Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard, Johann Caspar Lavater, Albrecht Durer and Charles Le Brun (Kemp, 2).

Charles Le Brun created a series of physiognomic drawings in which he drew physical parallels between human and animal. The drawings of Le Brun, inspired *The Jury* (Figure 5,6,7) a group of thirteen ceramic bird heads mounted on the gallery wall. The heads are animated studies that take on anthropomorphic characteristics. The heads could be read as a jury or a crowd of gossip mongers looking down from their place on the wall. On the floor below them is a group of birds (Figure 8, 9, 10) that have complete bodies; as if they have broken away from the group on the wall. For me these birds humorously address the notion of pack or group mentality. I enjoy setting up different scenarios (e.g., the distances between them or the direction of their gaze) with the birds.

The bird's physical attributes resemble those of birds of the genus *Corvus* (i.e., ravens or crows). These birds inspire my work because I am curious as to why western culture has cast them, almost to the point of being a cliché, as ominous creatures in so many visual and literary works. It is apparent that humans not only categorize other living beings in terms of taxonomy but also create elaborate symbolic categories as evidenced by the Raven being associated with morbidity.

While each bird is unique, they are all integral parts of the larger group. Even though I employ the formal strategy of repetition, it is important to me that each bird be distinctive,

as if to represent different personalities. The heads are modeled from clay and then fired before graphite is applied to the surface.

A related work titled *Sage* (Figure 11) is a drawing of a bird rendered in profile with claws that resemble fingers, which are curled under the robe-like feathers. This drawing also exhibits anthropomorphic characteristics. The eyes of the bird are closed in a contemplative state so that it remains closed-off and distant from the viewer. This bird alludes to the notion of “nature as a non-human space in which humans do not belong” (Brower, 1).

Recently I have been examining ecological issues concerned with loss of biodiversity and the extirpation of native species caused by human activities; specifically, the introduction of non-native invasive species.

My interest in these issues arose when I observed a large flock of approximately 200 small black birds land in my back yard. Initially I was impressed with the numbers and actions of the birds so I asked an ecologist friend of mine about what I had seen. He remarked that they were probably European Starlings and referred to them as “sky rats” since they are considered an invasive non-native species in North America. His remark lead me to do some research on the birds and found that the birds were introduced to North America when Eugene Schieffelin released 80 European Starlings in New York City in 1871 (Todd, 146). Schieffelin did this with the hope of populating the New World with the birds mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare. Since their introduction, starlings have contributed to the decline of several native birds. The North American population of the European Starling has increased dramatically and is currently believed to exceed 200

million¹. Schieffelin was a member of the American Acclimatization Society, which sought to ‘civilize’ the New World by introducing plants and animals that were part of the “landscape of poetry” (Todd, 146).

In hindsight Schieffelin’s actions seem to have been misguided. This is perhaps ironic since the only mention of the starling in Shakespeare is in Henry IV, Part 1 and the bird was used as a tool to incite vengeance. According to Kim Todd the starling that was featured “in Shakespeare’s presentation...was not a gift to inspire romance or lyric poetry. It was a bird to prod anger, to pick at a scab, to serve as a reminder of trouble. It was a curse” (Todd, 139-140).

The fact that Schieffelin and his contemporaries sought to control, organize and ultimately replicate a European ecosystem, which reflected their own version high culture, fascinates me. I made several small sculptures in response to the introduction of the starling and the American Acclimatization Society. The sculpture titled *Schieffelin’s Folly* (Figure 12) was made by cutting a book of Shakespeare to form an egg shape. Each end is capped with metal and one end has a clock key handle. The sculpture is curious and the viewer likely would not immediately recognize the object or the materials used. The watch key suggests that the work is a functional object but upon closer inspection the object’s redundancy is revealed. It is a product of folly.

Using material and methods, which were similar to *Schieffelin’s Folly*, I made several other miniature sculptures titled *Folly, Prototypes* (Figure 13). The scale was altered so they would not allude to functional objects but rather be read as a sort of prototype. These small

¹ The Cornell Lab of Ornithology website http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bios/sp_accts/eust

sculptures could be seen as imaginary prototypes for machines that would produce the “landscape of Poetry”. These works reflect my interest in the notion that people felt, and to some extent still feel, that they could manipulate the natural world to reflect their own cultural agendas. Each small work was placed behind glass and framed in a wooden box. The box references a museum’s system of presentation and organization. The incorporation of time-worn materials such as the yellowed pages of a book and clock parts encourage a sense of familiarity, perhaps even nostalgia.

A related work titled *Word Bird* (Figure 14, 15, 16) was also inspired by Schieffelin’s actions. The sculpture consists of a bird constructed from the pages of a copy of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*. The pages were cut and layered to simulate feathers. The bird is the size of a starling. The bird sits perched in a glass case. It is isolated, almost sanctified, and in its beak it holds a thin strip of paper, which was cut from the book page. On the paper are the following words:

Hotspur. He said, he would not ransom Mortimer;
Forbade my tongue to speak of Mortimer;
But I will find him when he lies asleep,
And in his ear I’ll holloa, Mortimer!
Nay, I’ll have a starling shall be taught to speak
Nothing but Mortimer and give it him,
To keep his anger still in motion. (Newman, 47).

These words are the only words Shakespeare wrote in reference to the starling (Todd, 139-140).

A murmuration, the term used to describe a flock of starlings, was the inspiration for a work that is comprised of 80 laser cut steel starlings (Figure 17) that are individually attached to the gallery wall. There are three different sizes of birds, which range from 2-3 inches in width. I wanted to create a murmuration on the gallery wall, since the shapes the flock of birds form when flying in large groups intrigue me. The birds form a circular shape that mimics the shape of the flock when viewed through a viewfinder of a camera or the lens of binoculars. I specifically chose 80 birds because this was the number of birds that were first released by Schieffelin in New York City in 1871.

I started to photograph birds whenever I had the opportunity and collected photographs of birds from the Internet. The process of photographing and viewing birds through the lenses of binoculars or cameras has led me to think about the ways that humans observe or engage with animals in their ‘natural’ habitat. The common mantra of most parks is ‘take only photographs, leave only footprints’. This statement reinforces the desire most people have to capture and record their experiences in nature.

These ideas informed a series of small dioramas that are enclosed in wooden boxes (Figure 18). On the front of the box is a small brass tube with a lens on one end. On the end of each of the lens is an inscription that reads ‘for amusement only’ (Figure 20). The inscription is an attempt to address how humans have viewed animals for the purposes of entertainment. When the viewer looks through the lens they see a miniature scene. Each box is mounted to the wall at eye level and contains a different scene that features a murmuration of starlings. One particular view (Figure 19) shows a tiny figure of a woman who appears to be running away from the murmuration of starlings. The scene is humorously reminiscent of

Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* where the main character Tippi Hedren is attacked by a large flock of crows.

One inspiration for the boxes was the original peepshow or view box toys of the early 19th century. These toys were often a box construction with a lens on the front that housed a picture inside. The viewer would peer through the lens to view the picture. The boxes also allude to the museum diorama and the practice of isolating specific taxidermied animals in fabricated landscapes.

The works mentioned above reveal my philosophical concerns related to human hubris and disconnect from animals and the natural world. These works also expose my interest in the materiality of sculpture.

I take pleasure in discovering the subtle nuances of different materials. Given the choice, I am more inclined to address methods and materials than to speak to thematic aspects of my work. Most of my sculpture requires hand fabrication that is often involved and time consuming. The thematic inspiration for my work should be considered equal to the methods and materials that I employ. I hope that my work will not just be regarded as didactic exercises in the polemics of western cultural relationships with the natural world but that the work will remain open to have multiple readings.

The materials I choose to work with include found objects, paper, lead, fired clay, glass, bone and steel all of which have signifying properties that extend beyond the physical nature of the material. These materials intrigue me because each of them has a dual nature that is coded with meaning. I am drawn to the inherent corporeality of a material and what it can say about the sculptural object.

Lead is an example of a material that has the potential for multiple readings. Alchemists believed in the potential for lead to transmute into gold or silver. We now know that lead can be a potent neurotoxin. Thus, viewers may be attracted to lead but they may also feel cautious when interacting with it. I used lead for a small sculpture titled *Gone* (Figure 16) that consists of a cast lead nest that holds a carved bone egg. This work exemplifies my interest in the duality of materials. Nests are commonly regarded as symbols or sites of protection and comfort, but a lead nest contradicts this notion. The small egg was carved from a bone, which I found on Newfoundland seashore. The bone egg also sets up contradictions and associations; it is fragile and is evidence of something left behind, lost or expired. For me it signifies a missed opportunity.

I am fascinated with the contingency of sculpture and how the physical characteristics of a material can play a part in determining the outcome of the sculptural object. Materials such as clay are superficially more compliant and accept manipulation whereas steel or bone requires greater degree of coaxing. I am fascinated by the ability of materials to transform and change states. The vitrification of clay and molten metals and the metamorphosis of soft into hard capture my interest.

Reflecting on my work in an attempt to write about my practice has been an effort of sorting through the pile of motivations, thoughts and actions. My thoughts lead to the action of making work and through this action comes more thought. Ideas and experiences are interwoven with materials and methods. Considerations that shape my work include historical, personal, philosophical and social but at the core of my practice is the action of making.



Figure 1 *The Despot*, 2006, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 40 x 30 inches



Figure 2 *Actaeon*, 2006, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 30 x 40 inches



Figure 3 *Icarus*, 2007, charcoal and ink on paper, 40 x 30 inches



Figure 4 *Memento Mori*, 2007, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 30 x 40 inches



Figure 5 *The Jury*, 2007–2008, ceramic and graphite, 5 x 4 x 5 inches (dimensions vary)



Figure 6 *The Jury* (Detail), 2007–2008, ceramic and graphite, 5 x 4 x 5 (dimensions vary)



Figure 7 *The Jury* (Installation view), 2007-2008, ceramic and graphite, 15 x 5 x 13 inches



Figure 8 *Untitled*, 2008, ceramic and graphite, 15 x 5 x 13 inches



Figure 9 *Untitled*, 2008, ceramic and graphite, 11 x 6 x 17 inches



Figure 10 *Untitled*, 2008, ceramic and graphite, 14 x 6 x 18 inches



Figure 11 *Sage*, 2006, charcoal and watercolour on Paper, 38 x 32 inches



Figure 12 *Schieffelin's Folly*, 2007, book pages, found objects, 3 x 2 x 2 inches



Figure 13 *Folly, Prototype #1*, 2007-2008, book pages, found objects, 2 x 1 x 1 inches



Figure 14 *Word Bird* (Installation view), 2008, glass, wood, book pages, 4 x 1 x 6 inches



Figure 15 *Word Bird* (Detail), 2008, glass, wood, book pages, 4 x 1 x 6 inches



Figure 16 *Word Bird (Detail)*, 2008, glass, wood, book pages, 4 x 1 x 6 inches

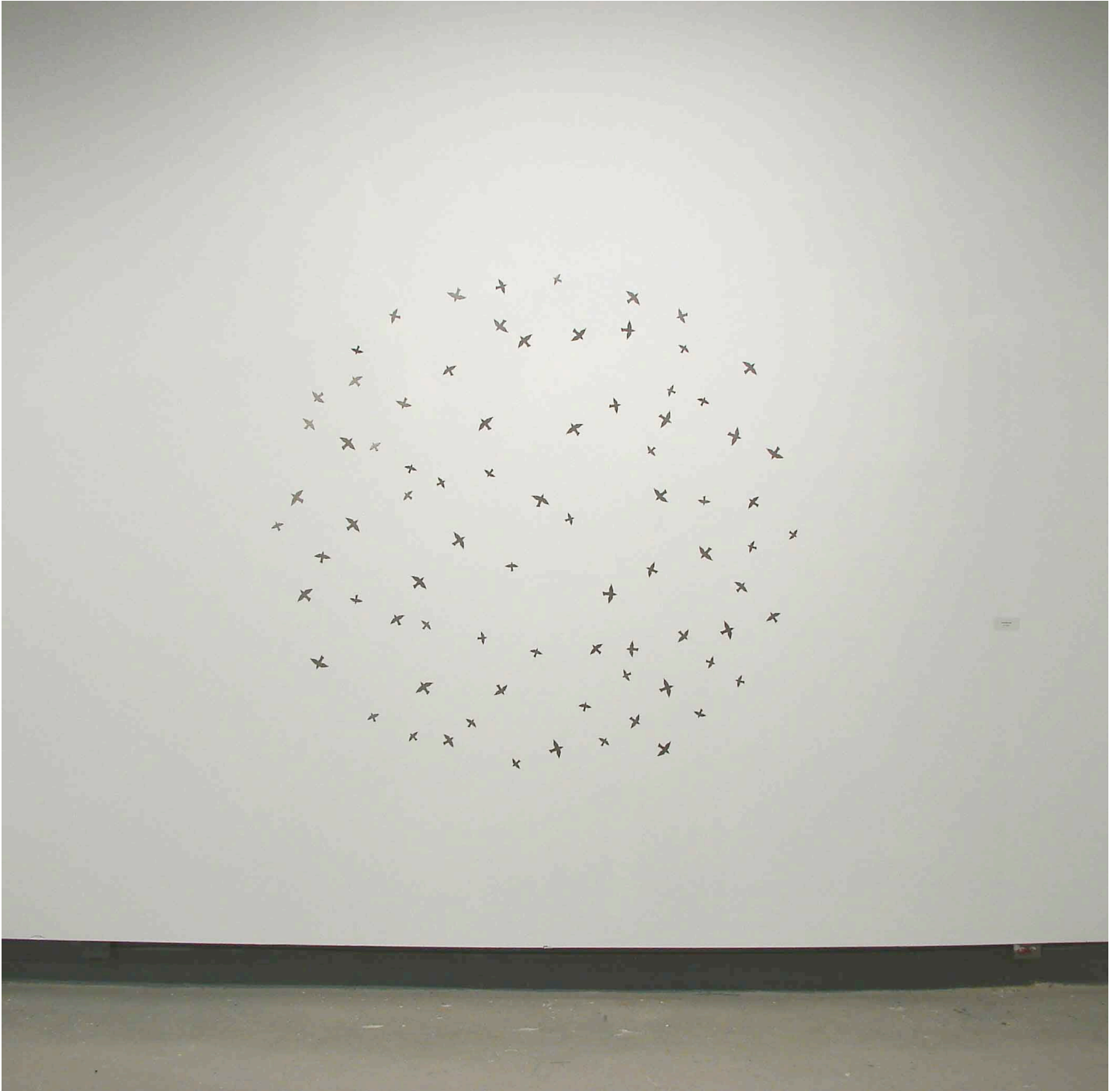


Figure 17 *Murmuration*, Laser cut steel, 80 birds ranging in size from 2-3 inches

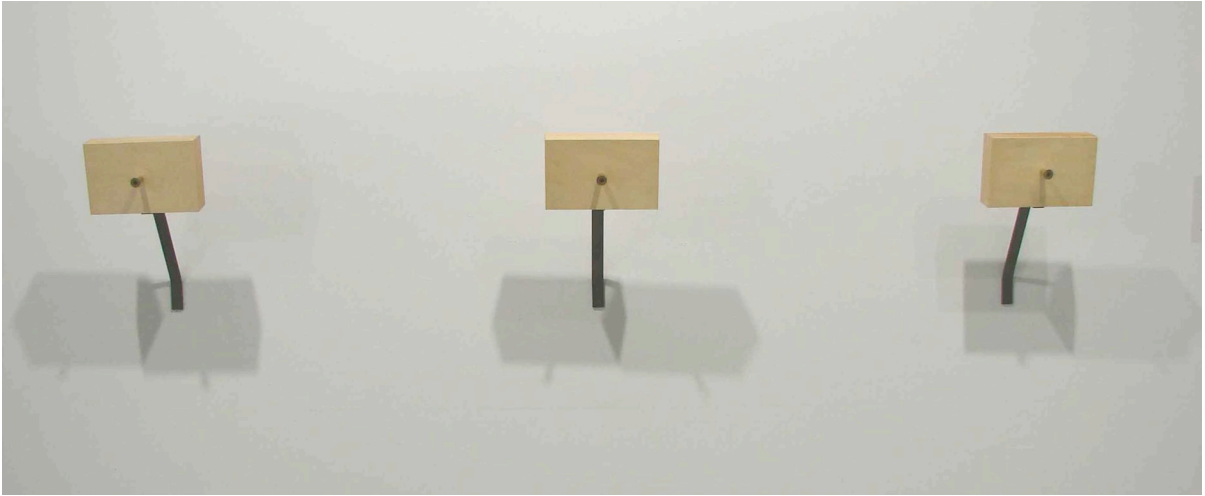


Figure 18 *Landscape of Poetry #1, #2, #3*, 2008, wood, brass and glass lens, steel, 9 x 5 x 3 inches



Figure 19 *Landscape of Poetry #3 (Detail)*

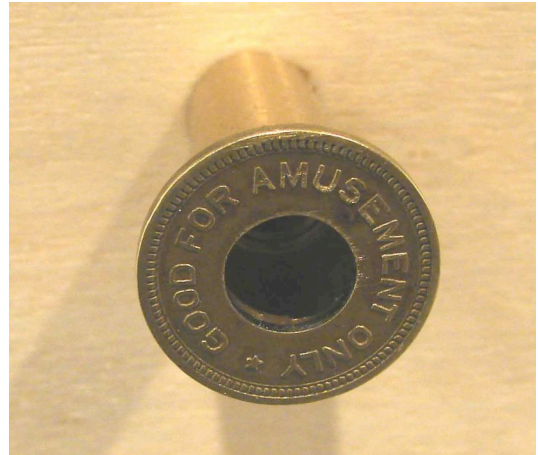


Figure 20 *Landscape of Poetry #3 (Detail)*



Figure 21 *Gone*, 2007, cast lead, carved bone, 2 x 2 x 2 inches



Figure 22 *Gone*, (Detail), 2007, cast lead, carved bone



Figure 23 *Untitled*, 2008, charcoal and watercolour on Paper, 40 x 30 inches



Figure 24 *Untitled*, 2008, charcoal and watercolour on Paper, 40 x 30 inches



Figure 25 *Untitled*, 2008, charcoal and watercolour on Paper, 40 x 30 inches



Figure 26 *Untitled*, 2007, charcoal and watercolour on Paper, 22 x 31 inches



Figure 27 *Installation View 1*



Figure 28 Installation View 2

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