



# GHOSTS OF THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: ZUGUNRUHE

AN INSTALLATION BY RACHEL BERWICK

David Winton Bell Gallery  
List Art Center  
Brown University  
64 College Street  
Providence, Rhode Island

Through February 14

AS THE FIRST DECADE OF THE CENTURY ROUNDS TO THE NEAREST 10, WORLD LEADERS NEGOTIATE CLIMATE CHANGE IN COPENHAGEN, AN ORPHANED ICEBERG CLOSES IN ON AUSTRALIA'S SOUTHERN COAST, AND THE LONG SHADOW OF WINTER SETTLES OVER THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, CHASING FLOCKS OF BIRDS ON THEIR ANNUAL MIGRATIONS SOUTH.



THIS PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: *Zugunruhe* (detail), 2009, cast copal (amber), wood, two-way architectural mirror, moss, metal, polyester resin.  
*Zugunruhe* (detail), 2009, blown and mirrorized glass, moving brass rod, text.  
RIGHT PAGE: *Zugunruhe*, 2009, cast copal (amber), wood, two-way architectural mirror, moss, metal, polyester resin.

Throughout these winter months, artist Rachel Berwick casts our collective gaze back to migrations and mass extinctions of centuries past with “Zugunruhe,” an installation and lecture series at Brown University’s David Winton Bell Gallery.

The curious term “zugunruhe” found life in the 1950s, when ornithologist Gustav Kramer took it upon himself to name the documented behavior of nighttime restlessness in birds just prior to migration.

John James Audubon’s 19th century accounts of the American passenger pigeons’ massive migrations cite “the light of the noonday was obscured as by an eclipse” as the birds passed overhead. In recent enough generational memory to sting, the equally dramatic extinction of what was once the most abundant bird in North America takes the spotlight in Berwick’s installation. It was 100 years ago that Martha, the last of the passenger pigeons, became the bearer of her grim title. She

survived five lonely, terminal years in captivity before her species’ official extinction in 1914.

The entryway to “Zugunruhe” displays a rare copy of Audubon’s 1840 book “Birds of America” alongside literary accounts of this vanished migration, set in subtle wall texts. Perched on a central pedestal, a blown glass sphere holds a brass pointer, which rotates like a compass between the texts as if by magic or magnetism. According to Berwick, the pointer follows a “hypothetical migration.” In the confines of this particular time and space, her device must point to historical accounts in lieu of the real thing. It’s easy to get caught up in the novelty of Berwick’s nostalgic device, which engages passing gallery goers with an almost alchemic curiosity as it chases this grim mythology.

Pulling poignant stories from the long role call of extinction, Berwick is interested in exploring what her fellow humans do in the face of loss — in the case of Martha’s



species, a loss that mankind perpetuated with frightening speed through gratuitous sport hunting. Using references to alchemy, the natural sciences and documentary, Berwick's work also exposes humanity's attempts to recover what is lost, and our tendency toward the folly of willing life into being through mad science.

Berwick, the head of the Rhode Island School of Design's glass department, leverages materials rich in their own physical narratives with polished skill. In "Zugunruhe" and related projects, Berwick worked in copal, an immature form of amber that can be cast in fine detail. The preservative properties of amber led ancient cultures to believe that it had life-giving properties. Berwick plays on this mythology, casting copal replicas of a taxidermied passenger pigeon in rock candy orange hues.

Set in a seven-sided enclosure of two-way mirror, Berwick's avian idols cluster heavily in the branches of a gnarled tree. With subdued

lighting and a play of reflections, to observe the lightly glowing clones within the enclosure is to gaze at the intersection of a museum diorama with a police surveillance room. Viewers, faced with their own reflections in the glass, are asked to question their own role in Earth's ponderous march through life forms and weather patterns.

Kicking off the exhibition's matching lecture series on November 14, Berwick explained that "Zugunruhe" represents the first installment in a three-part series on migration. This episode represents the past with a biting blend of elegance and infamy. Dare we observe Berwick's upcoming visions on our present and future?

| Meredith Cutler



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