

The Birds

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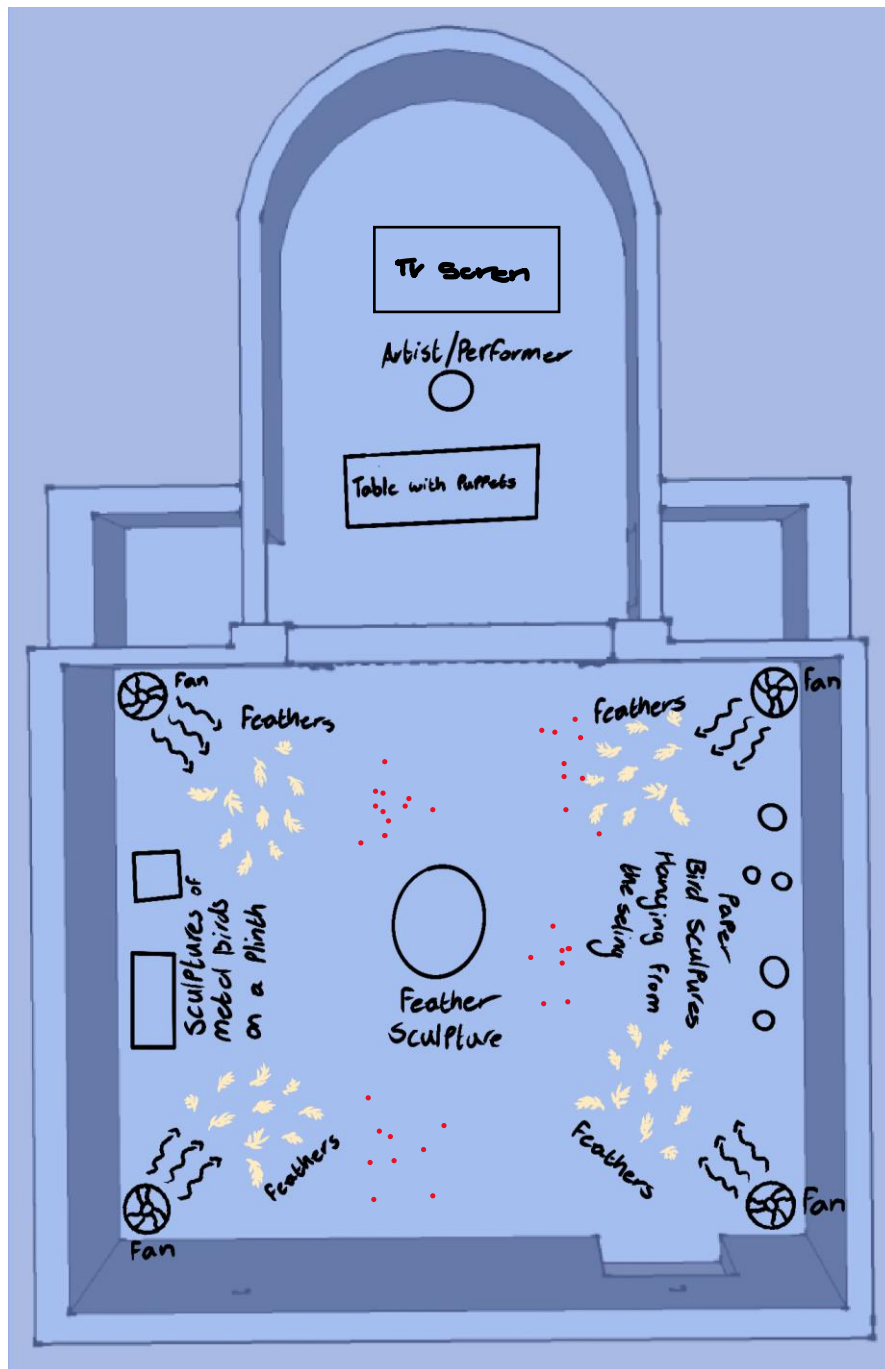


Fig.1: Map of Mission Gallery

Titled 'The Birds', this exhibition brings the work of several artists together to create a room exploring the beauty of birds and allowing the viewer to witness a range of creative responses to themes including avian movement, flight, structure and survival. The exhibition will be shown at The Mission Gallery located in Swansea Marina, a compact gallery space in a former seamen's mission church. The location fits with the theme of birds since the marina, like so many built areas close to the sea, is a hot spot for various species of birds. (Gower Wildlife, 2010) .

The room itself will be brought alive so that it is not a static, silent space. The cries and calls of seabirds, the murmur of birdsong and the sounds of flying flocks will be audible throughout on a series of small speakers around the room. As shown in Fig. 1, in each corner of the main room sits a fan, in front of which a pile of different kinds of feathers shed by a variety of birds is placed, so that the space is animated by a constantly changing choreography of moving feathers. The fans will simulate the feeling of wind blowing through the sky, so the viewer can experience some aspect of the act of birdflight. The different feathers are also to be carefully observed as many birds have complex patterns on their plumage, usually not easily seen when a bird is in flight, or too distant to examine closely.

Posters and publicity about 'The Birds' will suggest that visitors to the show bring their own contributions of found feathers, from the beach, countryside or their own collections, to add to the feather heaps at the gallery, to give them a sense of participation and ownership in the exhibition. As Hans Ulrich Obrist, Curator at the Serpentine gallery in London has said: "social interactions are 'the lifeblood of any curator's metabolism'". (Max, 2014)

On the neutral-coloured walls of the main room will be a series of simple numbers in black, such as 40%, 4000, 1 out of 8, 68%, 73%. These figures represent facts about bird species under threat of extinction, populations that are shrinking, in rapid decline – all across the world. There will also be a few words in black lettering on the walls: agricultural expansion, logging/deforestation, invasive species, hunting and trapping, climate change. (Philipsen, 2020).



Fig .2: *Anomaly*

In the centre of the main room is a piece of artwork by Kate MccGwire called 'Anomaly'. I have chosen to display McGwire's work in the centre for several reasons. MccGwire's work uses feathers and arranges them in such a way within a bespoke cabinet that gives the artwork a fluidity and allows the work to be viewed from every angle. 'Anomaly' is made from magpie feathers which have a multi-coloured shine in the light. We rarely have the opportunity to focus closely on the beauty of this iridescent colouring, but by displaying MccGwire's work as a centrepiece we are able to enjoy it, and her use of so many feathers, coiled in this complex and fluid form, seems to create its own gravitational pull, drawing the viewer in. Because I want the focus to be on the magical colour of the feathers more than anything, 'Anomaly' will be the only piece in the centre of the gallery space, as I do not wish to draw attention away from it by having other pieces obscuring it as you walk in. (MccGwire, 2017).

Inspired by the surroundings of her childhood home in Norfolk where she grew up surrounded by wildlife and birds, MccGwire has adopted a labour-intensive technique where she takes her chosen primary medium of feathers, carefully prepares them and then embarks on each new work by gluing separate feathers in place to gradually build the form. Her work is often displayed in glass cabinets to reference the craft of taxidermy, and it is appropriate to show 'Anomaly', one of her major pieces, as the centrepiece of 'The Birds' at the Mission Gallery.

Displaying a single piece encased in a glass case allows the artwork to be viewed from all angles in the gallery room. Allowing one piece to occupy the centre floor is a visual device often employed by exhibition curators, as is often the case, for example, with the works of Damien Hirst (Wallpaper, 2022).

The strange, coiled form of the work 'Anomaly' is designed to both attract and repel the viewer. "MccGwire describes her work as being like umbilical cords, and explains her intention is to seduce the viewer, "but revolt in equal measure." She explains, "It's really important to me that you've got that rejection of things you think you know for sure." (Taggart, 2018).



Fig 3: *Phoenix*

At the back of the gallery is a large piece by Laura Mathews. Mathews creates many kinds of puppets, but for this exhibition the focus will be on her bird puppets, with which she also performs. This area of the gallery will be designated a performance space, where Mathews brings these puppets to life, giving each one their own personality and movement based on the type of bird. Viewers can interact and respond as they get the sense that the puppets are alive, moving and reacting like real birds.



Fig.4: *The Little Sparrow*



Fig. 5: *Blue Owl*



Fig. 6: *Cherry Bird*

Also in this space is a table so that Mathews can place down / display other puppets while not in use, and a case can be placed over the works to protect them when the performer is not in the gallery. Behind the table is a tv monitor playing a pre-recorded performance of all the different bird puppets so viewers can share this experience even when Mathews is not present to perform. The puppets by Mathews I have chosen to display are: 'The Phoenix', Fig. 3 and 'The Little Sparrow' Fig 4.

Mathews also creates a number of posable models that can be displayed on the gallery table, such as 'Blue Owl', Fig. 5 and 'Cherry Bird', Fig. 6, filling the space with artwork based on our central theme.



Fig. 7: *Low Down*



Fig. 8: *Stand up*

As you walk to the main room of the gallery, on the left there are two pieces of work by Emily Mayer (Figs. 7 and 8), selected because they tie in so strongly to the exhibition's theme. These are sculptures of birds made from different materials such as copper, steel and plastic that Emily collected over her life. (Contemporary and Country, 2022)(1)

"It is the animal which originally informed my ideas for sculpture but it is the materials themselves which manifest those ideas. Now I no longer know which arrives first: an idea for a sculpture from the animal or an idea about the animal through the materials I'm using. I suspect that it is a continuing dialogue between myself, the animal, the material and the making of the sculpture." (Contemporary and Country, 2022)(2)

It is clear to see in Mayer's work that the animal itself inspires the sculptures as if the birds themselves are directing Mayer how to construct them, again playing with the sense of these artworks becoming alive.

I have also chosen Mayer's work due to the contrast it creates with the other pieces in the room. While all the other artworks showcase mainly the outer beauty of the creatures, I find that Mayer's work shows the inner beauty of their anatomical structures and the way in which their forms work, using pipes as necks just as in anatomy we have the trachea and the esophagus (Aurora Health Care, 2024), and using large pieces of metal and plastic to form different parts of the body. The dark tones and hard colours used in Mayer's works makes this work stand out within the gallery space, while still fitting clearly into the overall theme of the exhibition.



Fig. 9: *Small Bird*



Fig. 10: *Hummingbird*



Fig. 11: *Owl*

As you enter the gallery space on the right side, there is a display of work by Zack Mclauhlin (Figs 9, 10 and 11). The works I have chosen to display are Mclauhlin's 'Realistic Paper Sculpture Birds'. These birds are made from various different materials: a hand carved body from bass wood as this type of wood is easy to work with and to carve (NRCS, 2001), "acrylic eyes – he considers a realistic eye the most crucial detail" (All Things Paper, 2016), air dry clay, wire and paper for the feathers and then some paint and varnish for the finished look. Even though Mclauhlin's work is not all made from natural materials, the artwork looks and feels as if you are looking at a real bird. In the exhibition, the paper birds are displayed hanging from the ceiling, each one selected from Mclauhlin's collection posed in the motion of flight, thus creating an entire scene in the gallery based on flight, each bird held up by a strong thin wire, giving the illusion of the birds themselves flying.

"Growing up in the countryside I fell in love with nature, taking in every detail I could, then getting home and putting it into drawings & paintings." (Paper and wood, 2024)

The realistic look of Mclauhlin's work on the right side of the room is to contrast with the work by Emily Mayer on the left side, highlighting the difference between a realistic figurative look compared to a more abstract approach, both of which emphasise the diversity and beauty of birds.

A further element of the overall message of 'The Birds' is to draw our attention to the threat that exists to various species of birds because of climate change. The exhibition underlines this by reawakening our awareness of their beauty and fragility. "Today there is greater awareness of the urgencies imposed by the climate crisis: projects seem to be converging towards the same field of action." (Carimati, 2024)

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