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At the Katonah Museum, the Art of the Nest

By Susan Hodara
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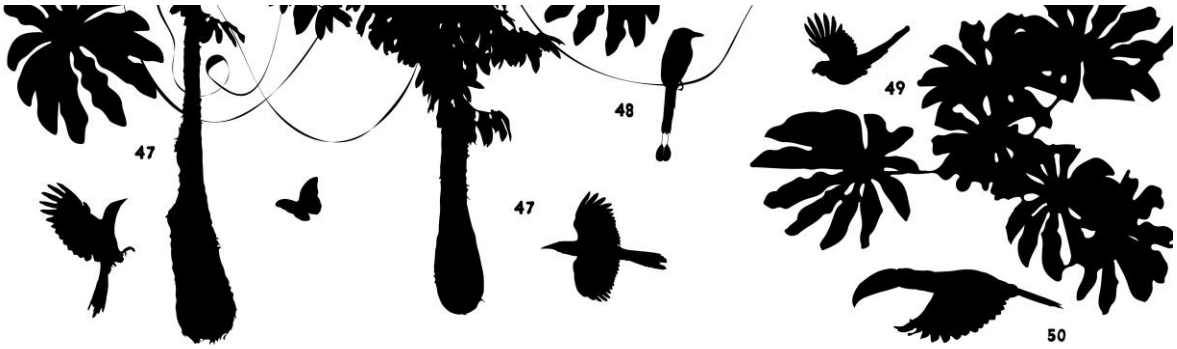


A detail from James Prosek's *Tree of Life*, 2016. Credit James Prosek, via Schwartz-Wajahat, New York

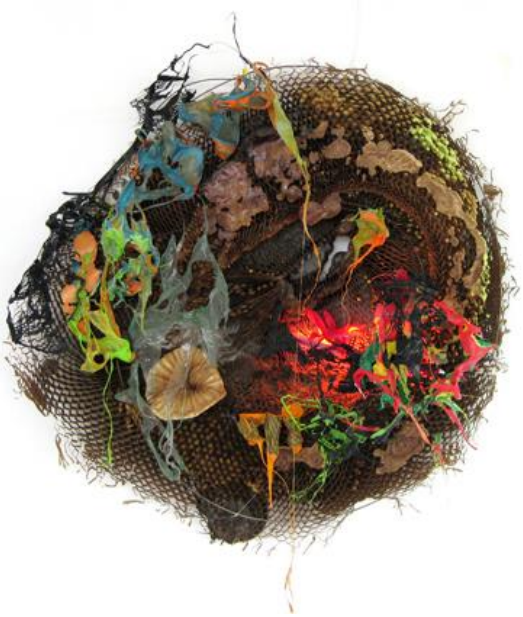
They hang from the ceiling of the **Katonah Museum of Art**, fibrous pouches reaching down approximately four feet. Mysterious and elegant, woven from dried grasses and twigs, they are shaped like elongated teardrops and spin slowly in the air.

These basketlike sacks are not some kind of textural sculpture but birds' nests, built by crested oropendolas and collected in South America. They are specimens of natural history, not normally considered works of art.

But why not? This is one of the intriguing questions posed by *The Nest, An Exhibition of Art in Nature*, in which 33 pieces by 18 international contemporary artists are displayed alongside birds' nests of sometimes surprising contours and materials. In addition, there are several pre-Columbian South American textiles made with tens of thousands of feathers. The exhibition mines the activity of birds, and the aesthetics of their nests, for inspiration and metaphor.

"We are taking a close look at the actual nests," said Elizabeth Rooklidge, the museum's associate curator and the organizer of the exhibition. "But we are also using this familiar form in the natural environment to think about larger things."

Larger things like ecological and socio-political concerns, the creative drive and notions of home. John Burtle's *Nest* alludes to the porous boundary between art and nature, using a multicolored nest made from patches of dried acrylic paint peeled from palettes and paint cans in the artist's studio. Ms. Rooklidge described the sculpture as "probably the most literal in the show in its conflation of nest-building and the human artistic practice."



Judy Pfaff's *Time Is Another River*, 2012. Credit Judy Pfaff

Another exploration of this blurry divide is an installation by Björn Braun. His untitled piece consists of three nests on wooden pedestals, each festooned with unique touches: a burst of orange from a torn plastic bag, strands of gold and silver tinsel, bits of artificial plants. The nests were constructed by zebra finches using items provided by the artist. A video playing beside the nests documents the exchange: Mr. Braun supplying fibers one by one, a finch accepting (or rejecting) the offerings.

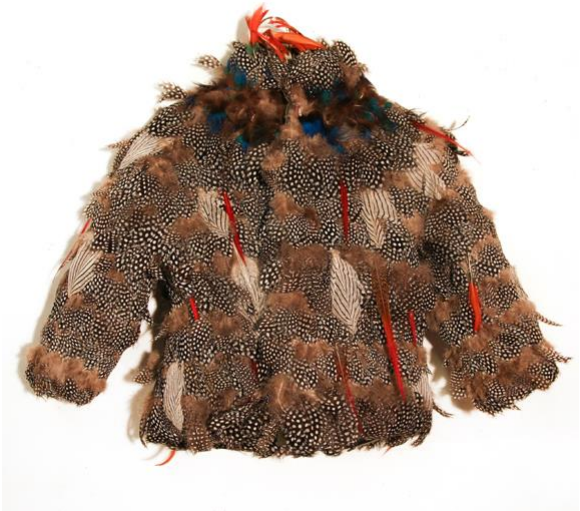
Ms. Rooklidge explained that Mr. Braun had tried to make nests himself but realized that birds were far more adept. "So he raised a pair of zebra finches, and he lets them build the nests," she said. "He conceives of it as a collaboration."

In a more symbolic collaboration, some of the artists, who range in age from their 30s to their 70s, incorporated birds' nests, eggs, feathers and sounds into their pieces. To make *Baby Ghettobird Tunic*, Sanford Biggers covered a toddler-size puffy jacket with thousands of feathers to create swirls of white spots, streaks of red, areas of fuzziness and a collar accented with blues and oranges. The tunic, an acerbic statement about race in the United States, harks back to Mr. Biggers's childhood in South Central Los Angeles, where police helicopters that patrolled the neighborhood were referred to as "ghetto birds." On the subject of the jacket's small size, the label text quotes Mr. Biggers as saying, "You can never start running from the cops too soon."

Like a rare bird, Louise Lawler's sound installation, *Birdcalls*, can be heard only every so often — twice an hour, to be exact. Then the gallery becomes an aural aviary, a symphony of screeches and warbles that are, on careful listening, the names of well-known male artists, contemporaries of Ms. Lawler's. As Ms. Lawler chirrups and squawks each name — "Art Art Ar-Ar-Artschwager," "Schnaaaaabel," "Richter Richter Ruscha Ruscha" — the piece becomes an amusing but biting condemnation of a male-dominated art world.

For other artists, nests and birds served as muse. In a process mirroring nest-building, Judy Pfaff entwined found cardboard, foam, plastics and a fluorescent light to create her very nest-like sculptural assemblage *Time Is Another River*.

On an adjacent wall, majestic eagles appear with wings outstretched in two pieces by Kiki Smith. One is a bronze wall sculpture, the other a jacquard tapestry. Ms. Rooklidge said the tapestry, called *Guide*, represented not only a traditional art form but also a domestic good. "It gets at the fundamental question of what separates a work of art from something functional," she said.



Sanford Biggers's *Baby Ghettobird Tunic*, 2006. Credit Sanford Biggers

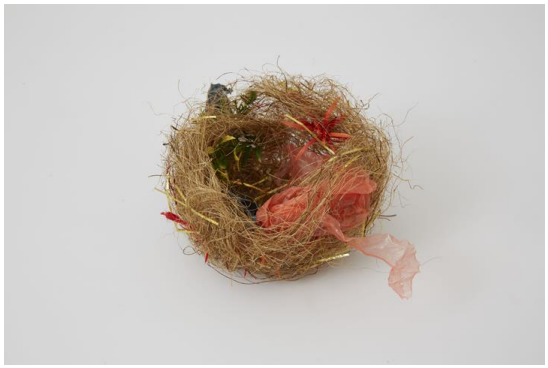
The six pre-Columbian textiles in the show — a circular condor-feather headdress ornament, four

loincloths and a tunic dating back 2,000 years — were once functional objects, but in the gallery they are striking for their boldly colored geometric designs, along with the artistry involved in hand-knotting multitudes of feathers onto strings that were then sewn onto cotton fabric.

Museumgoers might compare such artistry to the dexterity required to construct any of the 13 bird-made nests on view. On loan from the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, these include a fluffy eiderdown nest; a swift's nest of sticks, held together with saliva; a hummingbird's nest, just an inch and a half in diameter; and a common yellowthroat's nest, nestled in an old shoe. Additionally, two monitors play live-streaming video of the nests of great horned owls in Savannah, Ga., and bald eagles at the United States National Arboretum in Washington.

An owl and a hummingbird are among the many breeds of numbered, silhouetted birds hand-painted by James Prosek in the museum's atrium and across one of the gallery walls. The layout of the black-and-white murals mimics the endpapers of Roger Tory Peterson's iconic field guides. Missing, however, are the identification keys that provide the birds' names.

"I want people to get frustrated when they are unable to satisfy their urge to know what the bird is called," Mr. Prosek said at the exhibition opening last month. "Then they can go on to have another experience of just looking and enjoying the diversity of the creatures. Because knowing the name of something is not knowing the thing."



A zebra finch nest in an installation by Björn Braun, 2015. Credit Björn Braun, via Marianne Boesky Gallery

For his mural *Tree of Life*, Mr. Prosek framed a three-dimensional mock fireplace within the painted, silhouetted trunk of a sprawling oak tree. Inside the fireplace is a bronze sculpture of a charred log. "The hearth is a place of warmth in our homes," he said, "the place where we gather and nest."

Nearby, four small black-and-white works by Shiela Hale suggesting glowing constellations in a night sky consist of tiny shards of eggshells glued onto black paper. At the exhibition's opening, Ms. Hale said the collages, part of a body of work called *Fragments*, had emerged from a longing to be able to repair what was damaged.

"It was a response to the dark sense that so much seems broken in the world these days," she said. "How can you repair things that are smashed beyond repair? What can you do with the pieces? How do you put them back together?"

With these compositions, she said, "What happened was not so much repair but transformation."

Ms. Rooklidge noted the parallel between the intuitive work of birds and the intuitive work of artists. "At the heart of nest-building, at the heart of art-making, is this impulse to transform materials," she said, "to gather bits and pieces of things that through a kind of magical leap become these objects that speak to us in so many different ways."

The Nest: An Exhibition of Art in Nature runs through June 19 in the Beitzel and Righter Galleries at the Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay Street, Katonah. For more information: 914-232-9555 or katonahmuseum.org.