

April 4 - May 10, 2014

Opening Reception: Friday, April 4 | 6:30 - 8:30 pm

Threatened, Endangered, Extinct: Artists Confront Species Loss

Bill Burns, Emmalee Carroll, Sue Coe,
Roger Peet & Jenny Pope
Curated by Matthew Brower



Emmalee Carroll, *5,634 remain*, 2012, linocut, 6"x8"

Artists Confront Species Loss by Matthew Brower

2014 marks the centenary of the extinction of the passenger pigeon. The loss of the pigeon was an important event given that flocks of the birds once filled the skies over North America, obscuring "the light of the noon day sun ... as by an eclipse."¹ The decline of the passenger pigeon from the billions of birds described by Audubon in the 1830s to a lone bird (named Martha) in 1914 was a harbinger of the accelerating demise of species due to human activity. Due to overhunting and habitat destruction, the pigeons suffered from colony collapse: the species fell below a threshold from which it could not recover. As the pigeon's demise reveals, species don't always follow the mythic logic of Noah's Ark, in which they can be saved by a single breeding pair. (In contrast, the plains bison population recovered from near extinction in the late 1880s based on a few scattered herds.) The anniversary of the loss provides an occasion to examine contemporary artists' use of printmaking and multiples to confront species loss. The five artists in *Threatened, Endangered, Extinct* deploy a variety of artistic strategies to explore the precarious position of animals in what has been called the sixth extinction.

While extinction is part of nature and a necessary component of evolution, the current rate of species loss is reminiscent of the five earlier mass extinction events that have marked the history of life on earth. Also called the anthropocene extinction, the current age is marked by rapid species decline and loss caused by human interventions into the environment. In other words, the species loss is both a political and environmental catastrophe:

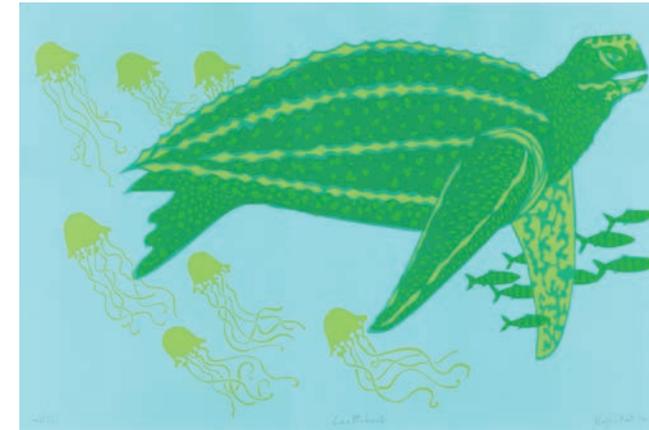


rather than natural or cultural, the crisis is part of what Donna Haraway has called naturecultures.² Responding to this crisis, the five artists in this exhibition use a variety of conceptual, material, semiotic and aesthetic strategies to draw attention and affect change, including humour, irony, reportage and documentation. Their work connects to a long tradition of socially engaged imagery in print media.

Upstate New York artist Jenny Pope makes colour reduction woodcuts to bring awareness to current threats facing animals and the environment. In this relief printing process, the artist works from light to dark colours by carving a single block. The block is consumed during the process and the images cannot be remade after the edition is printed. Pope consults with scientists and reads a lot about the ecological scenes and narratives depicted in her work. This concern with ecology can be seen in *Sleeted Chicklets*, which explores the effects of anthropogenic climate change on Antarctic Gentoo penguins. The increased rainfall in Antarctica brought on by climate change can kill penguin chicks that haven't fully developed their feathers. What results is a beautiful image of horrific suffering.

Pope takes a different tack in *Right Whale Breach* in which the "edition of 97 corresponds to the number of North Atlantic calving females left in our oceans."³ In this work the mechanics of the printmaking process are used to add an ecological message towards representing the endangered whale.

Roger Peet is a Portland, OR based artist and activist who prints at Flight 64 cooperative printmaking studio. He is also a founding member of Justseeds Artists' Cooperative, which is devoted to using printmaking to promote environmental and social justice. Included in this exhibition are three screenprints based on paper-cut designs commissioned by the non-profit Center for Biological Diversity as



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Matthew Brower is a curator and writer who teaches in the museum studies program at the University of Toronto. Much of his writing focuses on the role of animals in visual culture. He is the author of *Developing Animals: Early American Wildlife Photography* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

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wrapper images for their Endangered Species Condoms series. *Polar Bear* depicts the iconic species of climate change whose continued viability is threatened by declining polar ice caps. *Dwarf Seahorses* depicts a pair of horses entwined with sea grass, a species in decline due to the aftereffects of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, harvesting for the pet trade, and habitat loss. *Leatherback* depicts a swimming tortoise with jellyfish in the background. The species is declining in part because of the proliferation of plastic waste; the tortoises mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, eating them and choking to death. Each wrapper uses a short rhyme to emphasize its message: “In the sack? Save the Leatherback!” The series links species loss to human population increases but uses humour to make its difficult message more digestible. Perhaps fewer humans would be the most effective environmental program.



Humour is also an important strategy for Toronto artist Bill Burns. This show presents a number of works connected to his *Safety Gear for Small Animals* project including two prototypes for artist’s multiples, *Work Gloves for*

a Small Animal and *Triage Tents for Small Animals*, as well as blueprint works. *Safety Gear* offers prosthetics and assistive technologies to enable animals to survive hostile environments. It proposes to “save” individual animals by further integrating them into the human economies that destroyed their habitat, a doubling down that highlights the absurdity of the technological fantasy of seamless remediation. The works’ deadpan irony plays with cuteness and suggests that through technology animals can thrive in the face of environmental degradation (implying that we may not need to change the behaviours destroying their habitats). The project highlights environmental devastation by suggesting animals cannot survive the current situation without technical assistance.



Irony is also a key component of the prints from the related project *How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats*. The project proposes model technologies for enabling animals, as individuals or in small groups, to be smuggled out of untenable situations and into zoos and sanctuaries. It presents animals as if they were political refugees being secreted across the borders of a totalitarian state heading towards the freedom of the zoo.

Bay Area artist Emmalee Carroll is represented by a series of relief prints depicting endangered species. The works combine depictions of the animals with texts presenting the species name, its habitat, and the number of animals remaining. The format of both *48,700 remain (Scops Owl)* and *1,835 remain (Cheetah)* references postage stamps through their scalloped borders with the number of animals left alive replacing the face value: starkly offsetting the honourific status normally associated with being memorialized on a stamp. *20,000 remain (Ursus Maritimus)* uses its stark black and white imagery to dramatize the effects of climate change on the bears, presenting a mother and cub isolated on a tiny floe. The titles of the works—with their focus on how many animals remain—both document species decline and draw attention to its effects. As Carroll indicates, “I feel like I can reach people through this idea of making them associate the numbers with the particular animal that’s going extinct. I feel like there’s a tremendous countdown, and I have to somehow record these animals before they don’t exist any longer.”⁴

Since the 1970s, upstate New York artist Sue Coe has been documenting and exposing suffering and injustice with her work. Based in reportage and direct observation, she has described her work as a form of activism, slowly changing attitudes and leading to social change. The work shares the burden of witnessing injustice with its viewers seeking to enlist them in valuing life over profit. The works in this exhibition are from her recent

series of woodcuts addressing animal welfare issues, using a poster format that is explicitly political and confrontational. The visceral physicality of the woodcut process materially expresses the artist’s anger at the injustices depicted. The works focus on the economic structures that encourage the exploitation of animals by calling out practices threatening specific animal species. *Poacher Parts Soup* calls out shark fin fishing practices, which mutilate millions of sharks per year, leaving them finless and suffocating on the bottom of the ocean. The snarling (smiling?) shark offering a ladle while surrounded by bloody fins demands that we confront what’s in our bowls.

Moby Dick ironically references Melville’s whale hunting novel in its angry attack on contemporary whaling conducted under the guise of research. Its breaching whale overshadows the sonar-equipped whaler, while the print’s text (“I’m Moby, You Are Dick”) clearly establishes the work’s politics. *Turning a Blind Eye* focuses on elephant exploitation for entertainment in the context of the collapse of African elephant populations. The cruelty that underlies the animal’s performance is brought onstage in the hopes that we can’t unsee it. The images pass on the burden of their witnessed injustice, asking us to see the world anew.

The passenger pigeon’s stark reminder that the appearance of abundance can blind us to the looming spectre of extinction should lead us to at least look clearly at the message of these works. Taken together, the works in *Threatened, Endangered, Extinct* demand a renewed and different engagement with the natural world. They take positions and ask the same from their viewers. Despite their different approaches to representing human effects on animal populations, they all agree with Coe’s statement that “[n]eutrality is position and it is one we can no longer afford.”⁵

¹ Audubon, John James, and William MacGillivray. *Ornithological Biography or an Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America ; Accompanied by Descriptions of the Objects Represented in the Work Entitled The Birds of America, and Interspersed with Delineations of American Scenery and Manners*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia, PA: Judah Dobson, 1831. p 321.

² Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

³ Pope, Jenny. “Right Whale Breach.” JPOP Studios. <<http://jpopstudios.bigcartel.com/product/right-whale-breach-original-multi-block-woodcut>>.

⁴ Carroll, Emmalee. “Statement.” <<http://www.emmaleecarroll.com/statement.htm>>.

⁵ Embury, Gary. “Sue Coe Interview, New York.” Reportager. University of the West of England, Apr. 2012. <<http://reportager.uwe.ac.uk/projects12/coe/topsy.htm>>.

Images:

p. 1 Jenny Pope, *Sleeted Chicklets*, 2008, woodcut, 19” x 23.75”.

p. 2 Roger Peet, *Leatherback*, 2012, screenprint, 12.5” x 19”.

p. 3 Bill Burns, *How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats*, 1995, digital Iris print, 120 x 140cm.

p. 4 Sue Coe, *Turning a Blind Eye*, 2009, woodcut, 17” x 52.25”.

Artists' Biographies

Bill Burns’ work about art, nature and civil society are included in collections at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Cabinet de estampes, Geneva, the Getty Center, Los Angeles, and the Davis Museum, Barcelona. His most recent books include *Three Books and an Audio CD about Plants and Animals and War* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, Cologne, 2011) and *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes told in the form of Ivan the Terrible* (Space Poetry, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2011). His forthcoming book *Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us* is in preparation with YYZ Books (Toronto, 2014). Since 2010 Bill has been artistic director of the Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Children’s Choir.

Emmalee Carroll lives and works in the greater East Bay in Northern California. She is influenced by the natural world and especially endangered species and their dwindling numbers. After a few semesters studying biology at UC Berkeley, Carroll decided to pursue her love for printmaking instead and received a BFA from UCB in 2009. The sciences still play an important part in shaping the direction of her printmaking. Carroll received her MFA in printmaking at the Academy of Art University and was granted a scholarship for a Summer in Italy Study Abroad program. She also completed a 14-day artist residency in Venice in August 2011 in which she made prints on the island of Murano at the Venice Printmaking Studios. Heavily occupied with animal rescue, Carroll has the unique experience of raising and being involved with rare birds. This opportunity to propagate endangered species has given her great amounts of inspiration for her prints. She runs the entire gamut of printmaking mediums – but currently lithography, relief, and mixed media are her favorites...with book arts and letterpress a close second. Carroll runs Feathers and Squares Press in Concord, California and has participated in several group shows in galleries throughout the Bay Area including the Worth Ryder Gallery and the June Stiengart Gallery.

Sue Coe (born 1951 in Tamworth, Staffordshire) is an English artist and illustrator working primarily in drawing and printmaking, often in the form of illustrated books and comics. Coe studied at the Royal College of Art in London, and lived in New York City from 1972 to 2001. She currently lives in upstate New York.

Roger Peet is an artist and printmaker in Portland, Oregon. He spends a lot of his time thinking about the tidal wave of extinction currently engulfing the earth, and what can and can't be done about it. He unsuccessfully strives to balance the depressing truth of the homococene with some sort of rage against the proverbial dying of the light.

Jenny Pope is an artist known for her large, color-reduction woodcut prints, often featuring compelling combinations of species with odd or interesting elements from their natural histories. Her interests include endangered species, invasive species, and the bizarre mythologies that have been created to help explain the amazing things that birds do. She hopes her work provides an interesting avenue for people to contemplate our environment.