

Pasatiempo

Unnatural histories: Penelope Gottlieb's "Invasive Species"

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Before the publication of *The Birds of America*, painter and ornithologist John James Audubon's monumental avian survey that first saw print in 1827, flora and fauna were primarily depicted by naturalists as specimens, separate from any rendering of an ecological context. Audubon's innovation was to situate bird species in something resembling their natural habitats, and that was a big part of the allure for collectors of his prints. Audubon (1785-1851) could not have

foreseen the accelerated demise of numerous animal and plant species in the century and a half since his death. If he did, the man — who is alleged to have held that a day without shooting a hundred birds is a day wasted — would perhaps have been given pause. Despite his interest in birds, Audubon didn't work with live specimens for his compositions, but with dead ones.

“He loved birds but was also consuming them,” said Santa Barbara-based painter Penelope Gottlieb, whose *Invasive Species* series is a hybrid of Audubon's images and her own original work. “His paintings are actually still-lives.” Selections from Gottlieb's works are on view in the exhibition *Cross Currents* at Gerald Peters Gallery. She depicts a variety of invasive botanicals integrated into prints from *The Birds of America*. Gottlieb's interest in this type of plant developed from previous paintings on the subject of extinction. “Invasive species is one of the main reasons that plants go extinct,” she said. *Cross Currents* also features works in bronze by sculptor Peregrine O'Gormley and paintings from conservationist James Prosek.

Each work in Gottlieb's series is titled with the scientific name of the plant depicted. An image of an egret by Audubon nestled among a vase of flowers, for instance, is called *Iris pseudacorus*, after the yellow iris, a species native to Europe but which has escaped cultivation in some regions of the U.S., where it is considered an invasive aquatic plant and a threat to other botanicals. But Gottlieb's paintings aren't really about plants — they're about people. We are, after all, largely responsible for the recent acceleration in extinctions and the spread of invasive plants. “There was quite a bit of debate in the 1990s about if we were in an extinction phase,” Gottlieb said, “and if we were, when did it start, and what should we call it?”

The “sixth extinction,” or Holocene or Anthropocene extinction, is an ongoing event, and ecologists lay the responsibility at the feet of humans. “When I started reading about all of this I didn't really know how I would translate it into my work, but it has ended up becoming my focus: creating this body of work around



the botanical health of the planet,” Gottlieb said. “It makes it interesting to me as an artist when there’s a lot of reading and research to do about what I’m painting. I never got that interested in painting as just a process. That never really captivated me so much as having a subject I could research.”

Gottlieb had a number of Audubon prints in the studio that she obtained from a thrift store. “They weren’t very good quality. They were kind of funky prints, and I had bought them for the frames.” They sat in her studio for months before she got the idea to do an appropriation-based series. At the time she was working almost exclusively on paintings of extinct species, imagining what they look like in the absence of specimens or documentation. “I wanted these to look different,” she said of the *Invasive Species* works. “I found some better quality Audubon prints and started thinking about what I would do with them. It’s so interesting to appropriate, because you’re dealing with history and you’re dealing with another artist’s compositions. Formally, right off the top, you’re dealing with how he designed the plate, where he placed the bird, and what shape the bird was in. I wanted to invade them with these aggressive, non-native species. I didn’t want them to be pretty or nice, I wanted them to be threatening. They ended up being pretty violent — the birds are being strangled. When you look at them from a distance they’re — hopefully — seductive and rendered in a way that’s somewhat seamless. But when you really look at it, you realize the birds are engulfed in these tendrils.”

Gottlieb's visual style is reminiscent of Audubon's, and a cursory glance gives little indication that the paintings are the result of a creative juxtaposition of old and new, his work and hers. But *The Birds of America* provided a kind of precedent for the integration of another artist's work in Audubon's prints. "He always hired a naturalist to do the plants," she said. "He would do the birds, but he would never do the foliage. Already he was using a second artist to do botanicals, and so I figured it was perfectly appropriate for me to jump in there and start adding more."

But Gottlieb didn't stop with the addition of invasive plants. Other elements that tied the concept of invasion to the impact of humanity on the environment entered into the series. "I was thinking of signs and symbols that would add more layers of conversation to the subject and tell more of a narrative. It might not be obvious to the viewer what these things mean, but to me different plates have different stories." In the background of *Iris pseudacorus (Egret)*, for example, she depicts Thoreau's cabin from Walden Pond. "But I put in multiples, like a subdivision or tract development, to kind of convey the invasion of wilderness by suburbia." And in the background of *Typha latifolia*, in which non-native bulrush, or cattail, chokes Audubon's depiction of a wood ibis, a wildfire is blazing. "In Santa Barbara this year we had just terrible wildfires and mudslides," she said. "One of the reasons, I learned from my reading, is that there's these invasive grasses that grow all around in California, in the foothills, and they burn really hot. They create these super-hot, super-fast-burning fires. 'Cheatgrass' is the slang term for it."

Careful observation of some of the knots she's painted into her depictions of the plant life garroting various birds reveals they're done in the manner of *kinbaku*, a type of Japanese knot-tying used in erotic bondage. The idea, again, connects the concept of ecological invasiveness to the manmade. But one might also consider her coded, symbolic use of such imagery as a reflection of the complex, possibly insurmountable nature of the problems that face us in the Anthropocene. The wood ibis strains his neck to pluck a playing card, a symbol of luck or chance — or

more specifically, perhaps, a gamble — from the water. More cards are caught up in the bulrush. “They’re all prime numbers,” she said. “They’re referring to man’s hope that, maybe through science and technology, we’ll be able to save ourselves and the natural world. But I’m not so sure.” ◀

