



The Audubon Mural Project: A Creative Refuge for Endangered Birds

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The streets of Harlem and Washington Heights come to life thanks to an ambitious public art project, the Audubon Mural Project, a collaboration between the Audubon Society and gallerist Elliot Avi Gitler. The project involves artists from the neighborhood as well as from all over the world, including a few Italians and Italian Americans, like Iena Cruz, Gaia and Hitnes.

Who knows what the pioneer naturalist, ornithologist and painter John J. Audubon (1785-1851) would think of today's Audubon Mural Project. Audubon became famous for painting birds. His oeuvre included roughly 450 life-size paintings, which were printed and circulated in staggering numbers.

Now the birds Audubon depicted with great precision in his enchanting book *The Birds of America* (1827 and 1838) have found a new place to nest: on the large facades and store shutters in West



Harlem. In their new habitat, the birds are a call- to-arms to combat pollution, which has led to the extinction of many animal species.

The Audubon Society

Named after Audubon as a tribute to his love and affection for birds, the Audubon Society was founded in the early 20th century to protect the creatures and their habitats. The society's mission is to paint every endangered species in North America. That's no small feat.

According to an Audubon Society survey, 314 birds in North America are currently threatened by climate change. "The report we have done has brought a tremendous amount of attention to the plight of birds," says Mark Jannot, Vice President of Content of the Audubon Society. "What we found is that if you take a look at bird count data from the last several decades, and combine it with information about the climate conditions and weather, such as heat and cold, in the areas when the birds were present, we could determine what the climate conditions are that they need to survive."

The Society's leaders understood that this was something they couldn't ignore, so they launched a climate initiative, and are looking to get the word out in as many ways as possible. The goal is to stir people to take action on behalf of birds as well as on behalf of humans. The murals, Mark continues, are "a way for people to investigate [the issue] and find out more about the plight of these birds."

No doubt one of the things that makes this project so remarkable is its ability to bear its message to a new audience. Far more vital than ordinary birdlife protection campaigns, the Audubon Mural Project effectively addresses a young audience while adhering to the society's traditional practice.

In J. James' Neighborhood

We took a tour of the neighborhood to see the artists' work for ourselves. While each mural has a distinct character, all of the artwork shares a deep, melancholic beauty that renders words obsolete.

The neighborhood is symbolically significant too; J. James Audubon spent the last ten years of his life living right here on the shores of the Hudson River. He is buried in the local cemetery across from a wall designed by the artists Hitnes and Lunar Newyear. Hitnes, who hails from Rome, chose to paint a Fish Crow just a few feet from Audubon's tomb. The bird is often found in cemeteries. "He would have appreciated it," says the artist.

According to gallerist Elliot Avi Gitler, who selected the participating artists, the real strength of the project lies in the diversity of artists and the freedom each has been given. "Everybody brings his or her own version and their own background," says Gitler, "so you have very different kinds of paintings. For example, you have Cruz painting this huge wall and just focusing on one bird and on the theme of survival. And then you have someone like Lunar Newyear who painted 12 birds in the form of one. So I think it is really just a matter of artists taking artistic license and approaching [the project] whichever way they want."

A Migrant's Perspective

When we sat down to talk with Mark Jannot and Avi Gitler, we were in eyeshot of an immense mural painted by Gaia, an artist from Baltimore and a fourth generation Italian American originally from Naples on his paternal side. "Harlem is a neighborhood defined by successive waves of racial and ethnic migrations, so I chose the birds according to their migratory relevance," Gaia told us.

"Within the piece is an image from the height of the Great Migration, the largest movement of people inside the United States in the history of the country, as African Americans fled the oppressive aftermath of the Civil War and went to the industrial North in search of greater opportunity. To the left of the composition is the white hand of James Lancaster resting upon a globe, representing a more sinister form of travel." Gaia's Italian-American origins directly influence his message. "My family's identity is rooted in immigration," he says. "Today Italy is the gate to Europe for so many immigrants from Africa and elsewhere. So I took this opportunity to continue my meandering research regarding perceptions of migration."



Spreading its Wings

A few blocks over, we catch a glimpse of the work-in-progress by Lena Cruz, an Italian artist based in New York, who is just finishing up work on another large mural. The artist is almost swallowed up by the myriad colors of the mural. Curious passersby smile as they snap photos they will later post on social media. Kids look on in disbelief.

“Climate change and the animals and plant life affected by climate change has been the focus of my large scale works for the past few years,” says Cruz. “A project like this, which can help record the species for the future and increase awareness, may be of fundamental importance. And as an artist, I can spread the message and try to alert people. In my current work I cast the endangered Tri-Colored Heron. I created a natural environment in layers of spray paint and stenciling that while dream like and fantastical hide a sad message of extinction.”

As for us, we hope the project will continue to meet with success and that it will carry over into other parts of the city and the world. It deserves to spread its wings.

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