

Art meets science in new Weingart Gallery exhibit

By SARAH CORSA

In a glass case about 2 feet high, rows and rows of small monochrome birds lie with their beaks pointing skyward. Feathers shift from light gray on the belly to smooth dark gray contour feathers on the wings of each body, and two tags dangle from their spindly legs.

This glass case, however, stands apart from the rest of the Moore Lab's extensive bird collection. For a month, these birds — blue-grey gnatcatchers, also known by their species name "polioptila caerulea" — are on display in the Weingart Gallery as part of artist Emily Arthur's exhibition "Endangered."

The exhibit, which opened March 2 and will be on display until April 9, includes two rooms. The first displays prints by Arthur, a the second houses the gnatcatcher specimen, a wall installation of silk drapery, plastic gnatcatcher replicas and a soundtrack of ocean waves and bird calls composed by local artist Jon Almaraz.

Arthur, who frequently focuses her work on issues in the natural world, first collaborated with the Moore Lab last spring when she visited campus to sketch birds in the

collection. At that time, she learned about Biology Professors John McCormack's and James Maley's work defending the coastal California gnatcatcher, a songbird that lives in the coastal sage scrub ecosystem prominent in areas like Palos Verdes and Orange County.

In 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the bird as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, a change that restricted development of the desirable coastal zone where the birds live. However, recent scientific research from the University of Minnesota and the American Museum of Natural History may reverse that decision and subsequently open up the coastal sage scrub regions to development.

In 2013, scientist Robert Zink and his colleagues published a paper in *The Auk: Ornithological Advances* arguing that the coastal California gnatcatcher is neither a distinct subspecies or threatened. Developers — who also funded the paper — used its results to file a petition with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in June 2014 to have the coastal California gnatcatchers removed from the Endangered Species Act list.

McCormack and Maley criticized Zink's analysis in a paper published in January 2015 in *The Auk*. They also recommended that

the sponsors of publications be disclosed, particularly for research that could have such significant and negative environmental consequences.

"The presence of a financial conflict of interest does not necessarily invalidate a study or imply malfeasance," McCormack and Maley wrote. "Yet many journals have decided that financial conflicts of interest should be stated openly because of the demonstrated effect of "sponsorship bias."

Arthur's general interest in the plight of the California gnatcatcher and in issues of displacement led to the collaboration between the Moore Lab and OxyArts.

"Scientists are not the best at communicating what we do and sometimes a partnership, especially a natural partnership like we have with Emily, is a great way to bring a different perspective to what we do and it gives her a different perspective on science's role in development and preventing development," Maley said.

Arthur incorporated scientific references, such as DNA sequences and maps from McCormack and Maley's paper about the California gnatcatcher, into the screen prints of birds, plants and butterflies on candy-colored dyed paper. In the other room, strips of silkscreened organ-

za are pinned to the wall, forming slings for plastic gnatcatcher replicas. Inside these replicas is dirt collected by Biology Professor Gretchen North's class from Palos Verdes, the birds' habitat. Imagery of coastal sage appears across both the prints and the draped fabric.

The specimens from the Moore Lab sit in the middle of the room. Instead of the controversial California gnatcatcher, Arthur used blue-gray gnatcatchers because the Moore Lab has only one coastal California gnatcatcher in its collection, and the sister species share similar coloring. In one corner, a dome speaker hangs from the ceiling, projecting Almaraz's lulling soundscape of ocean waves and gnatcatcher calls.

Nancy Mithlo, exhibit curator and art history and visual arts professor, noted that while the gallery of prints is colorful and bright, the installation room is entirely black and white, populated with textures and sounds that create a sensory experience.

"As you're listening to the audio you'll note that the audio stops abruptly," Mithlo said. "And it's almost for me, as a viewer, a metaphor for what the impact might be if this development is allowed to happen and if this very unique subspecies ceases to exist. Will it be that sud-

den?"

Mithlo's class, "The Culture of Collections: Introduction to Museum Studies," helped curate and host the show by coordinating publicity, leading tours with local students and hosting a poetry contest related to the themes of the exhibition. For Jordan Brethauer (junior), a student in the class, the class and exhibit partnership embody a liberal arts education because of how they combine disciplines.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently reviewing the proposal to delist the California gnatcatcher from the Endangered Species Act and could release their decision while Arthur's exhibition is open, highlighting the relevance of the work.

"Ideally what [artwork] does is it pushes you to a point where you have to have a conversation with yourself," Mithlo said. "You have to check your values. You have to check your lifestyle. You have to check, really, what are your actions, politically, what are your actions spiritually and I think the artwork enables that self-questioning to happen."

An opening reception will be held for the "Endangered" exhibit today at 5 p.m. in Weingart Gallery.