

Collaboration between the Moore Laboratory of Zoology and Emily Arthur has been a great opportunity for us, and we hope that Emily can say the same. Artists and scientists make natural partners, but these collaborations are unfortunately rare. We spend so much of our lives trying to understand the natural world, yet we scientists are often at a loss to describe our spiritual connection to the Earth. Emily has an amazing ability to tell a powerful story using images; she has provided us with a new context to understand the imperiled Coastal California Gnatcatcher and the ecosystem it inhabits.

-James Maley, PhD, Moore Laboratory of Zoology, Biology Department, Occidental College

Much has been written over the course of the last two decades concerning new forms of global communications, diasporas and the resulting hybrid mixings. This “trending” factor has become so ubiquitous as to be carefully avoided by serious art commentators. It is difficult however, to avoid speaking of intercultural migrations and displacements when confronted with the works of artist Emily Arthur. Her central motif, some may argue her iconic signature style, is of one of movement; movement across landscapes, movement from earth to sky, movement of creatures both powerful and threatened. These intersecting worlds are ever colliding, often in brutal and unforgiving circumstances. It is in these moments and in these places that Arthur is drawn.

When tasked with the assignment of characterizing Arthur’s works, the themes of displacement, biological mixings and forced alienation are inescapable. Her messengers – those most vulnerable and threatened – serve as central characters in the deceptively simple passion plays she scripts in her evocative printmaking, drawings and installations. These palettes call for careful witnessing, their layered and delicate washings of colored inks on paper betraying our collective denials.

Arthur’s efforts highlight the forced migrations, the stories both tender and traumatic that narrate our times. Her most recent intervention *Endangered* chronicles the forces of Manifest Destiny at play a century and a half after the phrase was first formally coined to justify the conquest of land and peoples under the rubric of divine providence. In our current global moment, the passive narrative of “Western Expansion” no longer suffices to explain the complexities and assertions of power that may more accurately be framed as the “territorial expansion of the American empire.”¹ Yet our Manifest Destiny ideology continues to inform the manner in which lands, animals and peoples are systematically overrun for the highways, homes and businesses that define our American way of life.

Is our collective failure to halt the massive destruction of our environment a result of the blind faith that higher powers dictate our reality? Or are we willing to accept responsibility for the results of our neglect? In this turbulent global reality, what would intervention look like?

It is in these moments of indecision and confusion that the role of the artist may most clearly be exercised.

Emily Arthur: Endangered chronicles a crime scene in which nature and power compete for survival. The setting is the coastline of southern California where a fragile ecozone known as the Coastal Sage Scrub region is currently protected by a small bird known unassumingly as the California Gnatcatcher. This single species - some estimate only 2,500 total birds - protects an expanse of wild rugged shorelines where a host of insects, plants and animals still survive. Competing groups of scientists argue the merits of protection vs. development, based on both DNA and the physical markings of the birds themselves, drawn from unique holdings of the Moore Zoology Laboratory of Occidental College. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will determine whether an estimated 200,000 acres of California coastline will made available for development.² This potential calamity is almost too great to fathom, leading many to ignore or dismiss the impending dilemma. But Arthur has chosen to stay; to sit with the evidence at hand, a witness to the quiet crisis on the horizon.

Arthur’s projects seek to interrogate systems of power and inequity. Her impulse is to gravitate the center of the tensions, to the very epicenter of the push and pull of human frailty. Our impossible foibles are chronicled in elegant and sparse vignettes that capture the moment at which we could either teeter forward or draw back. We are with her at the cliffside. Do we run or turn our faces to the wind?

The great American Indian intellectual Vine Deloria Jr. stated, “It is becoming increasingly apparent that we shall not have the benefits of this world for much longer. The imminent and expected destruction of the life cycle of world ecology can only be prevented by a radical shift in outlook from our present naive conception of this world as a testing ground to a more mature view of the universe as a comprehensive matrix of life forms.”³ This matrix is ever-present, waiting for an answer.

-Nancy Marie Mithlo, Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Arts, Occidental College and Chair of American Indian Studies, Autry Museum of the American West

¹Louis Sahagun, “Developers Seek End To Federal Protections for California Gnatcatcher.” Los Angeles Times, June 29, 2014, accessed February 7, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/science/la-me-gnatcatcher-20140630-story.html>.

²Vine Deloria, Jr. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing; 30th Anniversary Edition, 2003), 288.

³Virginia Scharff, “Introduction.” In Scharff, Virginia, ed. *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West*. (Los Angeles, CA: Autry National Center of the American West in association with the University of California Press, 2015): 2.

With special recognition to John McCormack and James Maley of the Moore Lab who have generously made their own research and the Moore collections available to Emily Arthur and the *Endangered* curatorial team. Many thanks also to Jon Almaraz for his contribution of the original musical score.

Thank you to the following groups for their dedication in bringing this exhibit to Oxy: Remsen Bird Funds, Center for Community Based Learning, Moore Laboratory of Zoology, Cultural Studies Program, Art History Visual Arts Department, Loren G. Lipsen, M.D., and The Autry Museum of the American West.

Designed by Jack Baker, Devon DeRaad, Ella Fornari



Emily Arthur. Songbirds (with Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly), acrylic on dyed paper, 2015. 40 x 28 inches

On exhibit March 2nd- April 9th, 2016
Opening event March 23rd 5-8 P.M.

Weingart Gallery at Occidental College
1600 Campus Road
Los Angeles, 90041

www.oxy.edu/oxyarts

Emily Arthur: Endangered