ABOUT HITNES

Born in Rome, where he currently lives and works, Hitnes is a painter and muralist. A frequent traveler, Hitnes has completed residencies in countries including China, Australia, Mexico, Russia, Norway, Colombia, and the United States. His work has been featured in venues around the globe, including the Instituto Italiano di Cultura, New York; Museo Civico di Zoologia, Rome; 999contemporary, Rome; and Fifty24MX, Mexico City, among others.
In Pursuit of the Birds of America  
by Bryan Granger

In John James Audubon’s *Osprey*, 1829, the majestic bird is featured in mid-flight, soaring through the air while clutching its prey in its sharp talons. After capturing and mounting the specimen at Great Egg, New Jersey, Audubon painted the osprey in actual size, barely fitting it on his large elephant folio sheet. He painted it in side profile to fit its six-foot wingspan on the page, but this perspective also conveys the gracefulness of the bird gliding away with its captured prey.

Nearly two centuries later, Italian painter and muralist Hitnes portrayed a similar osprey in flight—with one major difference: the bird is flying away without anything in its grasp. In his *Osprey*, 2017, the bird’s wings, talons, and orientation are all painted similarly to Audubon’s rendition. Instead of the fish in its claws, a few thought-bubble-like tendrils appear, lamenting the plight of the bird: “Searching, Fishing, Grappling, Everywhere.” Next to the large bird, in a partitioned section of the work, various trash and refuse appear. Both in actual form and in drawings, plastic cups, straws, old fishing line, metal soda cans, and other debris litter the pictorial space. In this updated version of the Osprey, Hitnes highlights the current state of this bird, one that must work harder to navigate and adapt to an environment much more affected by humankind than was Audubon’s Osprey. Hitnes made such observations during his three-month, twenty-city trek throughout the United States, seeking areas Audubon was known to visit in order to obtain his specimens. During this journey, Hitnes sought not only to find the status of Audubon’s birds, but also to examine what would propel someone to pursue a quest like Audubon’s, one that would occupy him for decades of his lifetime.

Along his route, Hitnes retraced some of Audubon’s movements, visiting cities like New Orleans, Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York City, among others. While in each location, he ventured into natural areas, searching for the birds that Audubon helped make famous. For Hitnes, the journey was not a performance; rather, he saw it as an experiment—one in which he would discover what it would be like to roam the country as a naturalist in the twentieth century. Hitnes wanted to answer the question: What would it mean to pursue Audubon’s obsessive desires in our modern era?

It is fitting that the exhibition associated with Hitnes’s quest appears in Charleston. Although he was a peripatetic individual, Audubon did have close ties to the city. Not only was he drawn to the region’s lush habitats serving as home to many types of birds, but he also developed close friends in the city, including fellow naturalist Reverend John Bachman, whose wife, Maria Martin, would contribute to Audubon’s paintings. Throughout the 1830s, Audubon traveled often to Charleston, hunting and painting birds. Audubon’s rendering of the long-billed curlew features Charleston in the background, painted by his assistant George Lehman. Other paintings—such as Snowy Egret, 1832; Black-Crowned Night-Heron, 1832; and Yellow-Crowned Night-Heron, 1833—were executed during his stays in Charleston. Furthermore, the College of Charleston’s Special Collections owns a first edition set of Audubon’s *The Birds of America*. Such a connection with Charleston makes the Halsey Institute a natural fit to host the exhibition of Hitnes’s quest.

Hitnes’s works in the exhibition are imbued with the personal nature of his quest. Whereas Audubon’s works are mostly objective—reflecting his naturalistic goals—the watercolors and sketches that Hitnes created refer directly to his three-month journey and the chance occurrences he encountered along the way. Alongside the eponymous bird in his *Barn Owl* (One thing done well, only one), 2017, is an owl pellet found by the artist. After dissecting the pellet and discovering small rodent bones within it, he arranged the bones in an array within the box. Here, he shows not only another side of the owl—that of a voracious predator—but he also includes the actual remains in his artwork as a record of what he discovered. Just as one of the large crows in Fish Crow (Cow-Caw Cow-Cow), 2017, carries a small horsehoe crab in its beak, an actual horsehoe crab shell is featured in the nest partitioned segment of the box. Other objects with ties to Hitnes’s journey appear within the works: a snake skin in American Redstart (The Story of a Birdwatcher), a fishing lure in Green Heron (Skilled Fisherman), and a duck decoy in Marsh Wren (Attraction), all 2017.

At other times, Hitnes uses the opportunity to comment on the bird’s histories and our perceptions of them. In Wild Turkey, 2017, the sizable title bird is a bald eagle perched on a tree. With this juxtaposition, Hitnes recalls an early suggestion that the wild turkey be named as the United States’ national bird, before the bald eagle was selected for the honor.

The dioramas’ multi-dimensionality allows for Hitnes to portray the birds in different environments. For instance, alongside the murder of crows in Fish Crow (Cow-Caw Cow-Cow), 2017, he includes the actual remains in his artwork as a record of what he discovered. Just as one of the large crows in Fish Crow (Cow-Caw Cow-Cow), 2017, carries a small horsehoe crab in its beak, an actual horsehoe crab shell is featured in the nest partitioned segment of the box. Other objects with ties to Hitnes’s journey appear within the works: a snake skin in American Redstart (The Story of a Birdwatcher), a fishing lure in Green Heron (Skilled Fisherman), and a duck decoy in Marsh Wren (Attraction), all 2017.

While on his journey, Hitnes turned to something he does best: public murals on the sides of buildings, often in collaboration with city officials and nonprofit organizations. In stark contrast to his tiny etchings, his murals are at times several stories high, covering enormous walls in mammaded structures. The amazing size of the mural birds is a nod to the large size of Audubon’s prints as well as the herculean undertaking that became *The Birds of America*. The murals convey the birds that Hitnes found, and they stand as a public reminder of the inhabitants of our own environment before such buildings were erected. Now in public form, experiencing the same weather conditions as the painted birds, the murals will gradually change and ultimately disappear, like some of the populations of birds Audubon studied.

Despite vastly different circumstances, Hitnes’s trek mirrors that of Audubon’s in its pursuit of the unknown. Hitnes’s quest reminds audiences of the advancements Audubon made in both science and art; at the same time, it demonstrates the plights of these birds today. As an artistic endeavor, his project prompts viewers to consider what it means to pursue an obsession as fervently as Audubon.

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