



## 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.



### CORRELATING EVENTS

#### OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, August 24, 6:30 PM  
Free and open to the public

#### ARTIST TALK WITH HITNES

Saturday, August 25, 2:00 PM  
Free and open to the public

#### FRANCIS BEIDLER FOREST GUIDED TOUR

Sunday, September 16, 8:00–10:30 AM  
Tickets required, space is limited.  
Please visit [halsey.cofc.edu](http://halsey.cofc.edu) for details.

#### HALSEY TALKS: STREET ART

Tuesday, September 18, 6:30 PM  
Free and open to the public

#### FAMILY DAY!

Saturday, September 22, 11:00 AM–4:00 PM  
Open to all members

#### CURATOR-LED EXHIBITION TOUR FOR MEMBERS

Thursday, September 27, 6:00 PM  
Open to all members

### LOCATION

The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts  
College of Charleston  
161 Calhoun Street, Charleston, SC 29401  
[halsey.cofc.edu](http://halsey.cofc.edu)

### PARKING

Available in the St. Philip St. and George St. garages

### GALLERY HOURS

Mon.–Sat., 11:00 AM–4:00 PM during exhibitions, or by appointment  
Open until 7:00 PM on Thursdays  
Free admission!

### CONTACT

(843) 953-4422 or [halsey@cofc.edu](mailto:halsey@cofc.edu)

### BLOG

Learn more about the exhibition at [halsey.cofc.edu/learn](http://halsey.cofc.edu/learn)

### GUIDED GROUP TOURS BY APPOINTMENT

Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to various time lengths, group sizes, and ages. To schedule a tour, contact [halseytours@cofc.edu](mailto:halseytours@cofc.edu) or call (843) 953-5659. Free, regularly-scheduled tours are offered each Saturday at 2:00 PM in the Halsey Institute galleries, unless there is a superseding artist talk.

**MISSION:** The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

### GET SOCIAL WITH US!

 HALSEY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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### SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Viewers of the exhibition are encouraged to visit the College of Charleston's Special Collections to view more objects related to Audubon, including an original folio of *The Birds of America*.

Special Collections is located on the third floor of the Marlene and Nathan Addlestone Library, 205 Calhoun Street, Charleston, SC 29401. Monday–Friday, 9:00 AM–5:00 PM.

#### Image captions:

Front panel, top:  
*Osprey* [detail], 2017

Front panel, bottom:  
*Marsh Wren (Attraction)* [detail], 2017

Inside panel, top:  
Hitnes, photo by Giacomo Agnetti

Inside panel, bottom:  
*American Redstart (Story of a Birdwatcher)* [detail], 2017

All photos of artwork are by Rick Rhodes.



# HITNES

## The Image Hunter: On the Trail of John James Audubon

August 17–September 29, 2018



# 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 Harbor, 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, Grasping, 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, Miami, 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



*Osprey*, 2017



*Barn Owl (One thing done well, only one)* [detail], 2017

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*, 1831—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 art work as a record of what he discovered. Just as one of the large crows in *Fish Crow (Cow Cow Cow Cow)*, 2017, carries a small horseshoe crab in its beak, an actual horseshoe crab shell is featured in the next 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 birds' histories and our perceptions of them. In *Wild Turkey*, 2017, behind the sizable titular 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* is an iconic image of a lone crow seated atop a telephone pole. Similarly, the diorama for *Pelican (The Dinosaur)*, 2017 ponders the titular bird's relationship to dinosaurs. Underneath the large representation of the pelican, Hitnes has created a line of pterosaur-pelican hybrids. Though the pelican may not have descended directly from the reptilian pterosaurs, both species evolved in similar ways, developing throat pouches for catching fish.

During his journey, Hitnes decided to create his own version of *The Birds of America*, using a series of etchings based on his travels. Binding them into a book called *Fragments of the Birds of America*, Hitnes demonstrates that even a large project such as *The Image Hunter* could encompass only a fraction of the work included in Audubon's volume. Yet Hitnes's title also shows that the book doesn't serve as an objective view of Audubon's birds today; it is intended to be a record of Hitnes's journey.

Whereas Audubon famously constrained his birds to fit within the pages of his elephant folio, Hitnes altered the shapes of his copperplates in order to fit each bird's unique geometry. The plate for the etching *Pterosaur*, 2018, which features a pelican looking back over its shoulder, has been cut in the shape of a double pennant flag. This allows for the pelican's body and protruding beak to be captured within the frame. Similarly, with *S*, 2018, an aninga's neck is constrained within an S-shape and its beak points up toward the uppermost corner of the diamond-shaped composition. In limiting himself to

working with miniature copperplates, Hitnes explored Audubon's challenges in portraying the life-size birds within his own limits.

The titles of Hitnes's etchings also point to the chance occurrences and ideas he encountered on his trek. For instance, with *Fuckin Mosquitoes*, 2018, he shows two roseate spoonbills in a marsh setting and titles the work to suggest an onslaught of insects typical to any southern coastal night. Likewise, two etchings featuring crows are respectively titled *Caw Caw* and *Cow Cow*, both 2018. With these titles, Hitnes points out the distinctions between different types of crows, based on the sounds they make.

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 on manmade 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 plight of these birds today. As an artistic endeavor, his project prompts viewers to consider what it means to pursue an obsession as feverishly as Audubon.

Bryan Granger is Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the Halsey Institute.



*Green Heron (Skilled Fisherman)*, 2017



*Wild Turkey*, 2017