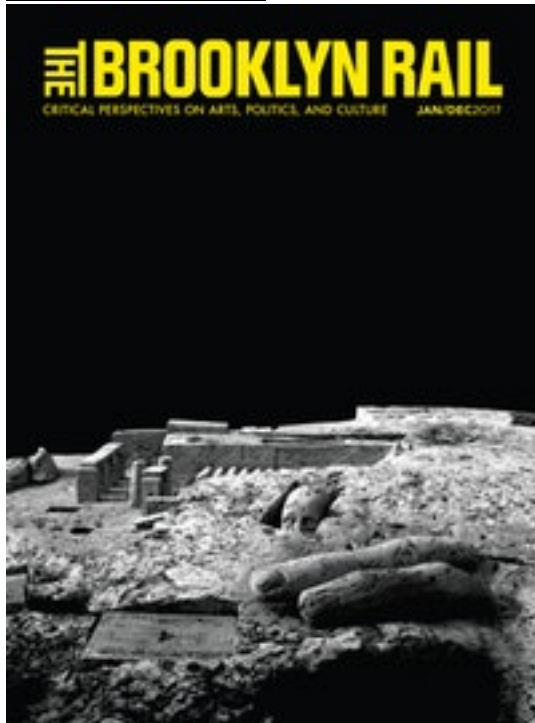


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DUKE RILEY: *Now Those Days Are Gone*

By [Kate Harding](#)

It has been said that adding bacon to anything makes it better. How you relate to this statement depends upon your circumstances, not least of which your relationship to animals and the nonhuman world. Duke Riley has been cultivating a dialogue with a very specific nonhuman population for decades—pigeons. But to focus on the pigeon alone in *Now Those Days Are Gone* would be to miss an invitation.



Duke Riley, *Death from Above* (Detail), 2017. Colored tile composite mosaic on panel. Photo by the author.

Riley has said that he could likely run his car off the road while looking at birds flying—that he “notices” things in this way.¹ From the spanning and intermingling of methods and materials he uses in *Now Those Days Are Gone*, it is clear Riley not only “notices,” but prioritizes this seeing and *being with*. As a result, his work is a determined sharing by all means possible, where to recognize one bird’s identity may be a key to paying attention and then perhaps, each time a pigeon happens by outside of the gallery—which in New York City happens often—a kind of recognition of singularity may occur again.

Bacon, a Canadian Tippler with wings punctuated by black tips and a neck that shines an iridescent green in the sunlight, was hatched in Brooklyn. When Bacon flies, the orange metal band once placed gently around reddish fleshy ankles is tucked up under a soft underbelly of white feathers. Bacon has been cared for, fed, given shelter, and named by a human who has a sense of humor, irony, and possibly an inclination for cured meats. Bacon doesn’t necessarily know their given name is Bacon, but doesn’t necessarily not know either. Bacon’s portrait is one of a thousand embroidered pigeons who appear in Duke Riley’s *The Armies of The Night* (2017). Located with the 999 others at the end of a central long hallway at Magnan Metz Gallery, this back room sits as a pointed repository of collective memory and identities, a loose tiling of the largest open space in the gallery. Here, each pigeon is articulated in machine embroidery on a small uniformly sized hand-painted canvas, the individual physical attributes thoughtfully represented with loft affiliation in words below and anchored by the yellow symmetrical leaf flourish familiar to naval officer hats.

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In a more intimate space within the gallery, a cyanotype print titled, *A Semi-Accurate Depiction of The Baylander 514-IX and its Aircraft While Stationed at Wallabout Bay* (2017) points to Riley’s public work, *Fly by Night*, commissioned by Creative Time and the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 2016. When making a cyanotype print, the inked lines block the light resulting in a white image on cyan-blue paper. The result is a style reminiscent of traditional nautical tattooing. The piece depicts the coordinated mass of pigeons flying in smooth undulations above the Baylander IX-514 below, which has been altered with coop structures to house the two thousand living “aircraft.” The ship is anchored in rolling waters where clues to a space of intersection float and sink—the litter of humanity intermingling with the organic community of the sea.

Directly adjacent to this work, as if on a hinge from the corner of the room, is a large photograph which reverses the blueprint’s process of making. Having tied small lights to a trained fleet of pigeons for his performance, Riley photographed the birds as they flew into the evening, circling above the ship, making their own drawings in the night sky. Through an extended looking, the lines of flight paths are captured on a strikingly dark and clear cyan ground. These two works are positioned so that they reflect one another. The juxtaposition creates a space for wonder – a place to reconsider and question what makes “us” and what makes “them.” Here abstraction is informed by the knowledge that each line is that of a life moving through space.

This referential abstraction is fortified by evidence of a long history of caretaking, which is found in *Tactical Mobile Nocturnal Homing Pigeon Deployment Vehicle of Fly By Night Naval Squadron* (2017)—a 2004 Chevrolet Colorado with a mobile coop attached, complete with pigeon decoys and accoutrements. It includes small cabinets of bird medicines, pigeon first aid manuals and reference material attached to its sides. On the back of the truck, the door to the camper opens to reveal video footage showing pigeons flying at night. This installation expands to include a mural sized coop façade with references to the man-made island, Cobb Dock, where the Navy housed its first and most expansive messenger pigeon operation until 1901. There is also a bicycle, *Even Before the Twin Towers There Were the Twin Towers* (2017), colorfully customized with a bamboo pole flag, supply boxes, and owl decoy among other elements that show how much fun this practiced care can be for Riley.



Duke Riley, *Now Those Days Are Gone*, 2017. Seashell Mosaic on wood in Mahogany frame. Photo: Courtesy of the Artist and Magnan Metz Gallery.

Now Those Days Are Gone (2017) takes its title from a 1982 hit song by the UK pop group, Bucks Fizz. A jubilantly seductive 14-foot-wide sea shell mosaic, it depicts an aircraft carrier framed by a brilliant hot pink sky—an atmospheric telling of either sunrise or sunset. Around the corner from the seashell mosaic, is another drawing on canary paper called *It's Coming Through a Hole in the Air*, which is a line from the 1992 Leonard Cohen song, *Democracy*. The surface of the paper buckles and ebbs as if mimicking the undulations of the bay itself. Seven pigeons punctuate the night sky, each carrying a glowing lantern clutched in their feet, a halo in the darkness as they presumably return to the vast construction of shared human and bird life that floats about in a swirling sea teeming with sea creatures, fish, sharks, trash and even a few drowning members of the Klan.

Just outside the gallery's sky-lit back room, there are four large iconic renderings. *The Four Pillars of Autocracy as Seen from a Brooklyn Rooftop* (*Peregrine Falcon, Coopers Hawk, Goshawk, Red Tail Hawk*) (2017) face the sea shell mosaic, and show no nuanced naming beyond that of species and no human affiliation beyond their large bodily size. The title references an oppressive political order wherein one individual holds supreme uncontested power. The iridescent shimmer of parts of these pieces becomes holographic and mesmerizing next to the dark matte material of torn-edge tar paper. The suggestion of a rooftop brings to mind a witnessing from afar, but the materials' care and application is no less considered than those of the personified pigeons, and the use of pigeon egg tempera, brick dust, aluminum dust, and crushed eggshell on roofing tar paper, speaks to an alignment of the artist with an individual who

uses pigeons as resource. But, as the press release suggests, Riley uses metaphor as well: the mosaic tile on panel series *Death From Above* (2017), also featuring Peregrine Falcons, this time in process of predation, is cited as a “direct response to the post U.S. election turmoil.” It could be simple to see only a binary power struggle when, in an effort to feed, birds of prey become predator. But Riley who cares for animals so directly, acknowledging almost running off the road while watching them, is likely to consider how the “wild” bird population has had to make its own adaptations to live alongside human encroachment, although those adaptations are more elusive than those of the “wild” birds’ domesticated cousins. That unknowing and perceived mystery is not unlike an artist’s pursuit of how to navigate a new political landscape where one’s own practice must be ripped out for examination and reconsideration. It’s clear from the practical materials turned installation, and the drawing techniques in the show that there is revelation and deep, sometimes contradictory, meaning in the details.



Duke Riley, Installation view: September 27 - October 21, 2017. Magnan Metz Gallery. Photo: Courtesy of the Artist and Magnan Metz Gallery.

While there is a joy and focused enthusiasm, Riley also works within the realm of anxiety. In two square colored tile composite mosaics: *Death From Above* (2017) and *The Nature of Abhorrence vs. the Abhorrence of Nature* (2017). In the former, a Peregrine Falcon holds a gray pigeon in its talons, flying up and away on a matte but intricately interlaid whitish sky. Both birds look up and to the left, and you could be forgiven for understanding that the pigeon is being carried and taken on a collaborative voyage as a passenger. Adjacent to it, in *The Nature of Abhorrence vs. the Abhorrence of Nature* (2017), a Peregrine Falcon is shown having just begun to eat a dead grey pigeon, this time standing on its prey to steady it for feeding. The title of the

overtly predatory piece speaks to an idea of “Nature” as symbol and icon; an abstraction for projection while also eliciting a kind of disgust. To make something a symbol forces a separation between that which is now symbol or allegory, and the person or persons using the symbol for their own means. That separation enables abhorrence or disgust and ill treatment. In other words, birds of prey may have been used as symbols of power for hundreds if not thousands of years, and Riley is aware of this, but the needs of an eagle are not abstract to itself any more or less than our needs are to us. Likewise, pigeons and other flocking or herding animals may be visualized as a group, but doubtless each individual has its own sense of self-preservation, interior life and thus self. Just ask “Canadian Bacon.” Duke Riley has gone to lengths to understand and convey the nuances of so many lives and the implications of resisting easy polarization. He stands in the midst of a space of meeting, between land and sea, or on a rooftop, and extends an invitation to care, to notice.

Notes

1. Documentary about Riley’s *Fly By Night*, produced by Creative Time, directed by Olivia Loomis Merrion, 2016

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