

The Guardian



Interview

Duke Riley: the pigeon fancier whose 'avian ballet' enchanted New York

Amana Fontanella-Khan

The Brooklyn artist used to live in a pigeon coop, now he's turned his love of the birds into one of New York's most talked about art works

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Duke Riley is sitting on the Baylander, a Vietnam-era navy vessel anchored in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Around us, gently cooing, sit his prized birds that performed in his free Fly By Night show, which saw 2,000 homing pigeons carrying lightweight LED lights sent into the night sky. The show was a spring phenomenon in New York, with 45,000 people on the waiting list alone. Some called it an “avian ballet”.

Riley was a child when he developed an interest in pigeons. “I used to bring home injured birds,” he says. “My parents didn’t like that.” Later, when he was studying painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Riley moved into a pigeon coop, where he lived for \$25 a month. “When I would

wake up, I would sometimes find them sitting on my comforter,” he recalls. Today, he owns around 700 of the birds, some of which live on his rooftop in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

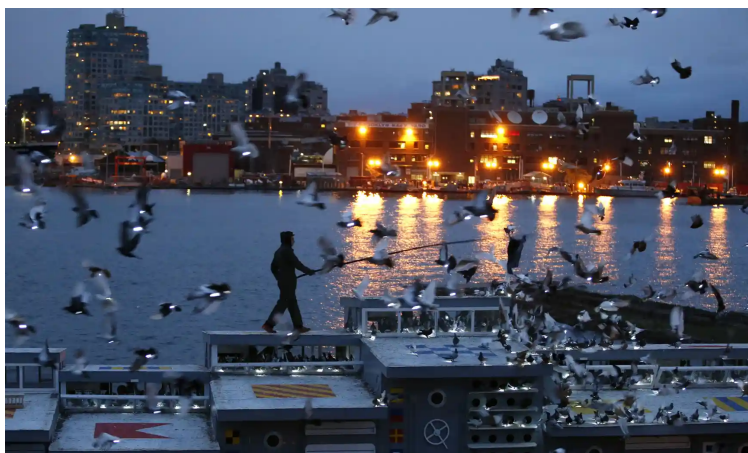
In *Fly by Night*, Riley turned pigeons into spellbinding performers. As he communicated to the birds using an array of flags, whistles and bells, they swooped and soared in unison against the Manhattan skyline.

When you speak to Riley, you get a sense that the pigeons in *Fly by Night* represent oral history – an interest that is reflected in all of Riley’s work: “There is so much information that is not written down. People give credibility to what is written in books. But what is important to me, might be so buried in history that it gets lost.”

Like pigeon fancying.

The term refers to training domesticated pigeons to perform, race and compete, which relies on knowledge that is passed from generation to generation. Riley was introduced to this ancient tradition through a friend, whose father kept pigeons. Riley read Wendell Levi’s authoritative reference book – titled, simply, *Pigeons* – on domesticating the animals. Then he then joined various pigeon racing clubs in Boston and, later, in Maspeth, Queens. But some fellow ornithologists weren’t happy that he used pigeons in the show.

“So-called experts and animal rights activists said birds don’t fly at night. But people who actually keep pigeons know that is bullshit,” he says.



Duke Riley during the *Fly By Night* performance. Photograph: Kathy Willens/AP

The largest naval fleet of pigeon carriers of the US once stood in Brooklyn Navy Yard, before it was decommissioned in 1901. Tens of thousands of pigeons served during the second world war, delivering vital messages across vast distances.

But that is all to be found in history books. What Riley is most interested is unwritten histories, particularly of waterfront communities. “Urban areas are the most hyper-organized space you can find. Every square inch is planned: street signs, traffic lights, addresses. The ocean is the most ungoverned space. This [the waterfront community] is where both those places meet. It is where crazy shit happens.”

All of Riley's major works have been set on water fronts; most probe and push against social boundaries in a spirit of transgression. Riley's previous pigeon piece, *Trading with the Enemy*, from 2013, did just that. Riley flew pigeons from Key West to Havana - a 90-mile flight - which was recorded by cameras that provided a literal bird's eye view. On their return to the US, they carried contraband Cuban Cohiba cigars.

While much of his work involves conceptual performance, Riley is also an artist who works with his hands. He is a tattoo artist who employs a rich array of maritime motifs: seagulls, lighthouses, fish. He makes dazzling scrimshaw pieces - carvings in whalebone that were originally the handiwork of whalers. He also owns several small sailboats, dinghies and kayaks, one of which he built himself.

When elaborating on folk art traditions that are often found among shore-dwelling people, Riley is deeply versed in the contexts in which those pieces, like scrimshaw, were made. "Whaling ships were the only places where international cross-cultural communications happened on the lowest levels of society." This, he says, "was previously only experienced by merchants and kings".

These messy melting pots spilled out from the ships and into the communities that lived by the sea. That is another reason he is drawn to the waterfront. Riley points out that all progressive cities in the US are major port cities: New York, New Orleans, San Francisco. "Port cities are liberal utopian bubbles where tolerance is the only means of survival."

As we sit in the Navy Yard, overlooking the East River, it is hard to avoid that all that Riley loves about the waterfront is at risk here in New York. High-end development of the waterfront for luxury apartments risks robbing the city of its many ungoverned corners. Gentrification is a looming presence in many of his pieces.

Riley recalls a community of homeless people who were living in a tent community in the woods on Ward's Island - located between East Harlem, Astoria and conjoined with Randall's Island. "They were camping, as if they were in the Appalachian trails," he says. This was the 1990s. Today, that community is gone.

Riley is not against development, as long as it is for all. "New Yorkers are in denial that they live on an archipelago," he says. Increasingly, only the rich, he laments, can interact with the water. "I know people from island nations who live in low-income housing. They wish they had access to the water. I would love to see more subsidized marinas. Legally, the water belongs to everyone."

His art demonstrates just what is at stake: it is that space, where the sea meets the land, where humanity is at its most creative. "There is no terra firma. The uncertainty of the land constantly moving and shifting dictates the cultural aspects of waterfront communities. It affects the mindset of the people," he says.

Will the object of his fascination survive? "Waterfront communities are threatened by gentrification and global warming," he says, adding that we aren't aware of the untold negative impact this will have. "It's upsetting - on a global scale and on a personal scale, it's upsetting."

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