



ART

# Hazards of Duke: An Artist Takes Flight in Chelsea

by SIDDHARTHA MITTER

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**Pigeons have a dear, dear friend in the artist Duke Riley.**

WILL STAR/COURTESY OF CREATIVE TIME



Yard. Fitted with tiny LED lights, they traced graceful illuminated meanders in the gathering night, before a bell rang them back to their coops. *Fly by Night* was one of Riley's typically ambitious interventions, this one completely legal — a commission by Creative Time — as opposed to, say, the time in 2007 when he immersed a homemade spherical submarine of Revolutionary War-era design in New York Harbor and piloted it within yards of the Queen Mary before an armada of law enforcement fished him out. "The FBI didn't think it was so funny," he remembers of that episode. "They still have some kind of open file on me." He was eventually able to get the sub back.

Riley, 45, is known for spectacular ventures with elements of poetry and provocation, usually staged in liminal zones where city meets water and sky: a chaotic naval joust between improvised vessels in a reflecting pool in Flushing Meadows Park; a temporary tavern full of drunk revelers built on swampland off the Belt Parkway. These enterprises tend to make news, as did, for instance, the time in 2012 when Riley set homing pigeons with Cuban cigars in tiny harnesses to fly from Havana back to their home in Key West.



**"The Armies of the Night (partial view of 1,000 paintings)," 2017, Embroidery and paint on canvas, each 14 x 9 inches.** COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MAGNAN METZ GALLERY



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the Dorchester area: “It looked like a sports bar, but instead of pictures of athletes on the wall it was just pictures of pigeons,” he says. When he moved to Providence to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, he lived in a house with pigeons. He became a tattoo artist there as well, a practice he continues on occasion. But his formal subject at RISD was painting, and he later earned a master’s in sculpture from the Pratt Institute, setting up a studio art practice that is just as integral to his work.

Riley’s current exhibition at Magnan Metz is a two-parter: A large temporary space across the street from the gallery displays new work, made in the wake of *Fly by Night*; and in the gallery itself is a mini-retrospective of past pieces and project artifacts, including his original submarine. The show lends aesthetic grounding and context to the performance-style works, and tinges Riley’s rascalion energy with introspection and melancholy. “The studio practice is extremely important to me functioning as a human and artist,” Riley says. Wearing his trademark fedora, he’s made it back to the gallery despite a hangover from the show’s opening party the night before. “Starting with a blank piece of paper and creating another world — even when the projects are happening, it’s an important part because I’m thinking.”

**Detail of "Death From Above" (2017)**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MAGNAN METZ GALLERY

In the past year, those thoughts have turned brooding, related to the presidential campaign and outcome. “A lot of the work has to do with the political climate in the months following *Fly by Night*, when I was dismantling the show, then moved my birds back onto my roof in Red Hook,” he says. The connection was a feeling of threat. Late fall and early winter is when pigeons are most vulnerable to raptors, after migratory birds are gone and small animals have entered hibernation, Riley explains. “And the time when all these hawks were around was just after the election.” In more ways than one, predation was in the air.

Riley processed his feelings in a series of elegant paintings, presented in the manner of a naturalist’s almanac, of the raptors that threaten pigeons in New York City: goshawk, peregrine falcon, red-tailed hawk, and Cooper’s hawk. He made tile mosaics that depict raptors clutching pigeons as they swoop skyward. “Everyone in the pigeon community



other birds. They're these beings that are terrified of the hawk. I was thinking of that stuff, and the feeling of trying to protect the people, and protect your loved ones."



**"Now Those Days Are Gone" (2017)**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MAGNAN METZ GALLERY

One of Riley's signature large-scale drawings, which abound in references and riotous detail, presents the Navy Yard battleship with its upper strata rendered as a kind of Tower of Babel, featuring, amid much else, different varieties of pigeon coop architecture used around the world. The ship was a refuge, he says: self-contained and moored at the Navy Yard, itself a secluded space, all within New York City, which for all its faults remains an open-minded place. "It has always been a place of greater tolerance, as most port cities throughout history have been," Riley says. In one area of the drawing, amid the mermaids and fish and assorted flotsam found in New York's waterways, hammerhead sharks are attacking robed Ku Klux Klansmen, an allegory of resistance and revenge.

The exhibition's centerpiece is a series of nearly one thousand portraits in profile of pigeons, each identified by name, breed, and their flock or owner from among the city's die-hard subculture of pigeon fliers. The portraits are made of fabric embroidered via a computerized process, then stretched over canvas and hand-painted, so they are precise



pigeons were veterans of Riley's 2012 Key West project. Most were borrowed from other fliers and returned afterward. Riley retains around two hundred birds near Red Hook. He flies them in the late afternoon, for a work break with his assistants. "We call it pigeon o'clock," he says.



**The Four Pillars of Autocracy as Seen from a Brooklyn Rooftop (Coopers Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Goshawk, Red Tail Hawk), 2017** COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MAGNAN METZ GALLERY

Riley titled this show *Now Those Days Are Gone*, and while the reference is kept vague, the elegiac feeling is impossible to miss. It can apply to the national climate, and just as well, Riley hints, to a mid-career taking of stock. "I wouldn't call it activism, but most of the work I've done has a sense of optimism about what is possible, of empowerment," he



It can apply, as well, to New York City and the piers, marshes, and estuaries that Riley has explored for years, semi-wilderness zones that invigorate a city's culture, not just its ecology. In 2012, Riley's stained-glass pieces commissioned by the MTA went up at a Rockaway subway station just before the Sandy storm; one panel depicted bungalows swept out to sea. Since then, waterfront development continues unabated around the city, squeezing out the remaining cruising sites, artist's squats, and assorted ungoverned areas. For Riley, this is a loss. "I think it's intrinsic human instinct that people are drawn to the sorts of spaces where water meets land, these abandoned urban areas where you can operate outside the constraints of society," he says. "A city needs to breathe."

### **Duke Riley: Now Those Days Are Gone**

*Magnan Metz Gallery*

*524 West 26th Street and 521 West 26th Street*

*[magnanmetz.com](http://magnanmetz.com)*

*Through October 21*

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