

VISUAL ARTS

Review: 'Duke Riley: Flights of Fancy' at USF connects people with pigeons



Duke Riley, “Roman Polanski,” detail from The Filmmakers, Pizzuti Collection, and “Pappillon,” detail from The Smugglers, collection of John Friedland, 2013.

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Visiting "Duke Riley: Flights of Fancy" is like discovering pieces of evidence from a crime scene. In this colorful exhibition at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, the crime is a gutsy smuggling operation

Their crime boss is Duke Riley, a New York-based artist who is an impresario of events that challenge our way of thinking about land, sea, history and nature.

Don't worry. The feathered criminals are locked up in the coop: An actual, occupied pigeon loft is part of the exhibition that features evidence of Riley's nefarious 2013 operation, "Trading With the Enemy."

A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design and Pratt Institute, the 44-year old Riley loves the waterfront, a place where pirates and smugglers once flourished and where tony waterfront high-rises now dot the shores.

In "Trading With the Enemy," Riley set up shop in Key West, a locale with a rich history of smuggling. After all, Havana is only 100 miles away. He outfitted 25 pigeons with contraband Cuban Cohiba cigars. Another 25 pigeons carried tiny videocameras to document this flouting of the U.S. embargo of Cuba.

In the end, 11 pigeons completed the round trip between Key West and Havana. The others were lost to history or weather. Named after famous criminals or rogue filmmakers, the pigeons are memorialized in this exhibition along with their personalized cigar harnesses.

Also on view are videos from their flight over the Florida Straits and the rooftops of Havana.

In this case, Riley thumbed his nose at the U.S. embargo. His "stool" pigeons carried out their mission undetected by U.S. drones and surveillance satellites. No pigeons were prosecuted.

In 2004, he planted a flag on an uninhabited island in New York's East River in front of the United Nations building during the Republican National Convention. He declared the island a "sovereign nation," was questioned by the Coast Guard and released.

attempted to approach the British liner the *Queen Mary 2* in New York Harbor. He was arrested that time.

Why does Riley stage these stunts?

In our increasingly digital world, Riley's art is a rough comeuppance, a rowdy reminder that nature, history and rogues have always ruled the world. People built cities on waterways. Sailors and pirates ruled the waves. History was written on the high seas. In our constant use of the internet and video games today, it is easy to forget how hands-on history has forged our daily lives.

"I really think it's fun to see how people used to do things in the past," Riley once said. "We can learn a lot about how we do things now."

His spectacular stunts are a way of telling us to get off our cellphones, remove our earbuds and feel the air, smell the stink of the mud, wade in the river water and see the washing of the waves against a weathered ship. He is reminding us to watch the animal world and how it connects with nature.

We live in that world.

"There is a disconnect people have with nature," Riley said in a recent forum at USF.

Also in the USF exhibition are six giant photographs documenting Riley's "Fly by Night," a 2016 project in which he outfitted 2,000 pigeons with small LED ankle bands and released them to fly over New York's evening sky. The threads of light from their flight patterns wove their way over the city, the Brooklyn Naval Yard and the East River, the site of the city's historic maritime activity.

The beautiful photographs are only the documents of a past event that once awed thousands of New Yorkers. These shards of his past projects are fascinating but they are not enough. They do not offer the experience of being able see his projects directly.

"crime" in Tampa Bay so we can see his events firsthand.

Tampa's celebrated but fictional pirate, Jose Gaspar, would welcome him, brandishing pistols and rum.

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