



The Art of Absence

This issue's Aviary artist Brandon Ballengee illustrates loss by literally cutting his subjects out of the picture.

BY RENE EBERSOLE

Published: 12/04/2013

What's the story behind the illustration?

Responding to species loss, I have physically cut the birds from original historic John James Audubon prints. Acquired over several years, prints were chosen from the time when the depicted bird species became extinct. The resulting image minus the subject is what I refer to as a [Framework for Absence](http://brandonballengee.com/frameworks-of-absence/) (<http://brandonballengee.com/frameworks-of-absence/>)

. As humans we have a very difficult time conceptualizing extinction- even coming to terms with our own short lifespans let alone thinking through that an entire group of organisms could be gone forever. So the series attempts to visualize this loss, for example, in RIP Pied or Labrador Duck (2007) the birds were removed from an original 1856 Royal Octavo (hand-colored by one of Audubon's sons) printed at the same point in history the actual Labrador ducks became extinct.

What was the inspiration?

John James Audubon has been one of my favorite artists since I was young. My grandparents had two reproductions from his elephant folio hanging on their walls and I would stare at them for hours as a child--they were alive. Overall, his dramatic depictions of birds and other fauna are not only visually engaging from an aesthetic standpoint, but tell us a story about the lives of these animals--the pictures bring the animals to life. The fact that several of the birds Audubon portrayed have are gone extinct is an important reminder of how quickly species can disappear and why conservation is so important. Without Audubon's art and writing we would have very little record of these lost species.

reminder of how quickly species can disappear and why conservation is so important. Without Audubon's art and writing we would have very little record of these lost species.

You recently did a citizen science project?

During my 2011/12 Audubon Toyota TogetherGreen Fellowship I created large outdoor glowing sculptures called [Love Motel for Insects](http://brandonballengee.com/projects/love-motels/) (<http://brandonballengee.com/projects/love-motels/>) to attract insects in New York City. Working with students and the public trained as citizen scientist we monitored urban arthropod populations at varied locations throughout the city. Turning on at dusk, the artworks used ultra-violet light on enormous sculpted canvases and attracted numerous species of moths, beetles, caddisflies, ants, lacewings, other arthropods, (even mantidflies! in Chelsea) descended on the works. As the insects gathered so did the public to insect watch and explore a side of nocturnal biodiversity many had never seen.

To date versions of the Love Motel of Insects have debuted on boats in Venice (Italy), peat bogs in Lough Boora (Ireland), isolated moors overlooking Loch Ness (Scotland), bustling shopping malls in Delhi (India), outside Aztec ruins (Mexico), New Haven (USA) inner-city bus stops, roof tops in London (England), temperate forest mountain-sides (South Korea), Louisiana Bayous (USA) and others.

What do you think of this year being the anniversary of Martha's death?

It is an important reminder of how species even once very numerous ones like the passenger pigeon can disappear without conservation efforts. Martha is a symbol for why we must keep working to educate, inspire, and realize species protection and ecosystem conservation.