

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Helpfenstein, Josef, "Understanding Life," Parkett, No.85 2009



JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. 414, DÉCEMBRE 2008 - JANVIER FÉVRIER 2007, 123 x 153 cm / 48 1/2 x 60 1/2", (COPYRIGHT ALL PHOTOS: JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE)

**JEAN-LUC  
MYLAYNE**

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Jean-Luc Mylayne

## UNDERSTANDING LIFE

JOSEF HELFENSTEIN

Jean-Luc Mylayne's photographs represent places of transition between human settlements and nature. They do not show the constructed world of cities or highways, nor do they celebrate nature. What they show is the territory in between, ordinary suburban and rural environments. In fact, Mylayne's photographs seem at first sight rather indifferent to the particularities of the environment they present. The real focus in his work is the bird, Mylayne's partner without which his work would not exist. He is mainly interested in small, mostly commonplace songbirds; he does not pursue the larger, more spectacular birds of prey. Locations vary, from France and other European countries to sites in the United States, mainly in West Texas and New Mexico. Neither the location nor the species of the birds are identified in the titles.

Mylayne has predetermined certain conditions of his artistic practice—most significantly his refusal to use telephoto lenses, and his willingness to endure sometimes extremely long waiting periods, until the birds have become familiar with his presence and eventually "agree" to be photographed. These conditions are part of his carefully constructed conceptual framework. Like many of his well known predecessors (Brassaï and Henri Cartier-Bresson), Mylayne searches for the unique picture. However, he is not looking for the iconic, historical moment or event, but rather for the coincidental encounter experi-

enced in his case only by the photographer and the bird. Time, patience, and an unwavering mental focus based on a profound passion for his subject inform Mylayne's work as an artist.

Mylayne's art is based on a fundamental paradox. As frozen fragments of time, photographs always contain and reflect on mortality; they participate in the vulnerability of what they represent.<sup>1)</sup> And indeed, the notion of temporality is at the core of Mylayne's practice. The natural act of seeing performed by human eyes is fundamentally different from a photograph. Human eyes move constantly, very similar to the continuously changing position and posture of small birds. And yet, the very technical principles of the medium of photography limit the final product to the representation of a frozen instant, arbitrarily chosen from the endless and undivided flux of life. This inherent dilemma of the medium becomes especially acute in contrast to Mylayne's subject. Birds have an immensely fleeting presence. They move often and fast. They are usually evasive and avoid the proximity of humans. Their ephemeral nature makes them inaccessible and enigmatic. The very nature of birds evokes temporality and transitoriness, the momentary rather than permanence. Photographs, however, tend to freeze the movement of life. Unlike Mylayne's subject, photographs are inherently motionless, which does not only mean that the figures they represent "do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."<sup>2)</sup> Mylayne is aware of this predicament, and the ways in which he deals with it make his work unique.

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JOSEF HELFENSTEIN was Curator and Director of the Paul Klee Foundation at the Bern Museum of Fine Arts until the year 2000. He is currently Director of the Menil Collection in Houston, TX.

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JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. 445, NOVEMBRE DÉCEMBRE 2007, 123 x 123 cm / 48 1/2 x 48 1/2".

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JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. 352,  
NOVEMBRE DÉCEMBRE 2005,  
190 x 153 cm / 74 3/4 x 60 1/4".

Mylayne's images are usually not taken from close up. It is as if he tries to avoid imposing the cold eye of the camera on his delicate subjects. His photographs are at times inconsistently lighted. Depending on the time of day when they were taken, parts of them can be underexposed. They seem to manifest a cautious approach to his subjects, an attempt to capture their fleeting existence without subjugating them to his equipment and therefore to the hegemony of the human species.

One of the defining factors of Mylayne's practice is the extraordinary commitment to time he makes in order to accomplish each photograph. The amount of preparation time is diametrically opposed to the short instant of mechanically taking the photograph. Mylayne's works have a slow-down effect, an impression that is underscored by the fact that the titles do not identify names of birds or locations, but only contain information about the time it took for the photograph to be completed. This detail tells us that what we see is not "the decisive moment," but rather that the artist was there for a comparatively endless period of time. By disappearing into the landscape and restricting his role to waiting until the bird agrees to act within the preconstructed frame of the "tableau" (a term the artist has used) that Mylayne has created, he rejects the authoritative role of the artist. Furthermore, he detaches himself from the uncritical notion of the centrality of the human subject.

The slow pace of production and rarity of Mylayne's photographs are a paradox that reflects well on his conceptual approach. He has produced fewer than four hundred works in more than three decades. In addition, he never produces more than one print; each photograph is unique. Conceptually, reducing the number of "shots" counteracts photography's in-

Jean-Luc Mylayne

herent inclination to annihilate itself: the more pictures, the greater their tendency to negate one another. The more often we are exposed to images, the less real they become. The more we watch television, the less we know. Mylayne's decision to subvert the convention of making countless pictures and selecting the best ones by producing very few over a long period of time may seem unusual from an artistic and economic point of view. However, it is the only way to create a partnership with the objects of his artistic search, the birds.

No doubt Mylayne is aware of the medium's inherent ideological confines and has decided to neutralize its most disturbing feature—its character as an instrument of power, a weapon—by redefining its use and adapting the machinery of the camera to the utterly unpredictable, elusive patterns of the goings-on of small birds. Mylayne's redefinition of his technical device—to transform the camera into an instrument of slow, philosophical examination rather than quick execution—reflects nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in how nature is perceived.

Mylayne's pictures are the opposite of straight photography; they do not confirm perceptual illusion or visual simplicity, nor do they uphold the notion of photography as the most empirical of all media. Instead, they reflect a shift in perception and ideology away from using the camera as an instrument of dominance and power to an instrument that is able to convey a non-manipulative approach to one of the most "intangible" and delicate species of living creatures. Mylayne's photographs reflect his philosophical beliefs and understanding that in today's world every form of life is fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. It is a shift that indicates a critique of the one-dimensional relationship between man and nature, a move from human-centered to more universal, or earth-centered values.<sup>3)</sup>

Birds are among the most vulnerable animals, threatened by habitat loss and global climate change. Almost all of the songbird species are in steep decline with the Earth becoming increasingly less habitable. And yet, birds represent the geography of life in a more complex sense than most living creatures. Using as their habitat not just the crust of the earth, but also the air above it, birds signify life in the inhab-

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itable world—the precariousness of life in the thin biosphere of our planet upon which all life depends, and within which it exists. Mylayne's tableaux are not photographic portraits of birds; they are attempts to capture their presence as messengers of the utterly rich, mysterious web of life.

Mylayne's art deals with both the notion of reality as well as the phenomenon of perception. Over many years, the artist has developed a sophisticated technique of using multiple lenses in the same picture. His self-reflexive approach, the deep questions he has about the transformation of culture and, in its wake, nature, manifests itself in the multi-focal complexity of his photographs. We usually distinguish in his pictures an inconsistency of representation, a carefully balanced juxtaposition of sharp-focus and out-of-focus areas. Mylayne's decision to use multiple lenses in the same picture breaks the uniformity and transcendence of the photograph and introduces, through the chromatic values of the blurred parts, a painterly element into the work. The birds in these pictures often remain fuzzy and visually evasive; rarely does the bird confront the camera in a way that displays it, in the eyes of the viewer, as an object, isolated from its environment. The opposite is true. Mylayne's depictions of birds avoid disassociating them from the environment of which they are a part.

The inconsistency of focus in Mylayne's pictures invites the eyes to perform in much the same way they perceive the "real world." Their constant movement enables them to adjust to the constructed complexity of the multi-focal spaces in the photographs. What distinguishes the visual perception of the "real world" from the viewing of these works are the complexities of time represented by the inconsistencies of focus contained within the picture frame, which Lynne Cooke notes "stimulates reflections on time."<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in some photographs it is not the bird, easily associated with quick movements and velocity, but the static habitat around it that is blurred, as if vanishing before the viewer's eyes. Changes of focus within the same picture break the illusionist unity of the image; blurring can also indicate differences in temporality (it could be speed as well as timelessness). Whether this working method is the result of an artistic decision or a more fundamental skepticism

(is reality at all knowable?), or both, remains an open question. But Mylayne's technique of multi-focal representation certainly undermines the conventional observation of the photograph as a photograph. By breaking the illusionist uniformity of photographic depiction, the artist makes us realize that his pictures are more than visual records; conceptually speaking, they are also exercises in the practice of photography.

The multi-focal "painterliness," and the denial and critique of visual clarity make it clear that Mylayne's photographs are not portraits of birds, but images of chance encounters, reflecting on a relationship between an extremely elusive animal and the artist, who is a migrating nomad himself (Mylayne has no fixed residence). Birds never appear in an anthropomorphized, romantic relationship to the viewer. They remain distant, untamable, depicted in a way that doesn't compromise their otherness. These photographs never provide the promise that the co-existence or, even less so, the communication between humans and birds is an easy one. On the contrary, the time- and labor-intensive process of making the works functions as a metaphor for how historically charged and fundamentally problematic humankind's relationship with nature has become.

*I thank Laureen Schipsi for her critical reading of this text.*

1) Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 14.

2) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 57.

3) Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life. A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).

4) Lynne Cooke, "Time Lapse" in *Jean-Luc Mylayne* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2007), unpaginated.

JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. PO 63,

MARS AVRIL MAI 2007, 153 x 123 cm / 60 1/4 x 48 1/2".

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