

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meade, Fionn, "Angle of Repose," Parkett, No.85 2009

Jean-Luc Mylayne

Having in his own words "sold everything to begin the project—the house, the car, everything," French artist Jean-Luc Mylayne and his wife and collaborator, Mylène Mylayne, opted long ago for a path determined by the restless, shifting focus of his photographs, namely birds.²⁾ Embracing a radical turn away from the workaday schedule of commerce and commute to the patient demands of fieldwork, Mylayne's entire corpus bears the enduring mark of leaving behind the concerns of conventional time. As he himself recounts, "we bought the photographic equipment, and we went to work, and for years we worked together, all alone, without really talking to anyone." The migratory pull of their setting out on an open-ended journey evokes a lesser definition of "turn," as "a choice, a talent" was pursued in the decision to uproot everything and follow the subtle dictates of encounter.

From small rural farms in northern France where many of Jean-Luc Mylayne's first images were taken to repeated sojourns to the American Southwest in recent years, the artist has sought out precise backdrops to rendezvous with such commonplace birds as sparrows, thrushes, bluebirds, and wrens. Eschewing the site-specificity of a naturalist, Mylayne's overriding interest in location brings to mind the *mise-en-scène* of cinema, scouted and chosen for its framing potential rather than any strict depiction of habitat. Consideration of daylight, camera angle, flora, weather, and even the occasional prop or use of artificial lighting outweighs any fidelity to documenting species or terrain, for Mylayne's pursuit is, in the end, a register of ontological awareness rather than an index. Indeed, the fixed camera position, pre-determined frame, and simplified action recall nothing so much as structural filmmaking of the late sixties and seventies—including experiments by such divergent artists as Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, and Hollis Frampton—in its attempt to "orchestrate duration as a significant challenge," to borrow a phrase from film historian P. Adams Sitney.³⁾

Often taking months, sometimes years to accomplish, Mylayne's images distill a fine tension from the highly constructed process of prefigured composi-

FIONN MEADE is a writer and curator living in New York.

ANGLE OF REPOSE

FIONN MEADE

*Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere,
a register in which time is being inscribed.*
—Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*¹⁾

tions and the rush and pivot of a perpetually agitated subject. Once allowed into the larger corpus, an image is noted not by location or specific bird trait but according to the time required to exact the contour of its encounter, just as a given number indicates its sequence within the overall project—considered as an ongoing whole. NO. 4, JUNE JULY AUGUST 1979 and NO. 6, JUNE JULY AUGUST 1979, for example, reveal an early interest in doubling the inherent frame of the camera through the gaps, nooks, and slatted views to be discovered around a farmyard. In NO. 4 a roughhewn window cut into a barn wall centers the dip and trace of a swallow in midflight—empty ground, whitewashed walls, and sloping red-tiled roofs rising into focus beyond—while NO. 5, JUNE JULY AUGUST 1979 lowers the pastoral aperture to the bottom left as the bird's form careens up and into the eaves just before the camera's flash, thrown into shadowed relief on the middle ground of the wall behind. The agile shift from inside to outside here reveals a signature use of multiple lenses—each specially designed by the artist and layered together in various combinations—that allows both shallow and deep focus to occur in the same static moment, shar-

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meade, Fionn, "Angle of Repose," Parkett, No.85 2009

Jean-Luc Mylayne



JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. 381, AVRIL MAI 2006, 228 x 183 cm / 89 3/4 x 72".

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meade, Fionn, "Angle of Repose," Parkett, No.85 2009

Jean-Luc Mylayne

ing the stage with the rippled blur and crease that quivers the surface of Mylayne's assiduous tableaux.

The furtive nature of his pursuit has been distinct from ornithology's representative cataloguing from the start as boundary settings predominate, bringing the subject into focus against a rural landscape shaped by man's labor. Largely devoid of people, remnants of agricultural industry crop up repeatedly, making a recurrent theme of the precarious balance of wildness within a built environment. In keeping with the artist's discretion, this longstanding though understated motif finds its partial origin in the cryptic inscription adorning the frontispiece of every publication on Mylayne's work to date, "A Monsieur Eustache Clabaut, pour son éternelle amitié" (To Mr.

Eustache Clabaut, for his eternal friendship). Formally distant, humble, and always vigilant, Mylayne's gesture of gratitude recognizes the importance of an old friend having invited the couple to begin their project three decades ago in and around the confines of his farm. It was here, working at his leisure, that the unmatched grace and variation of a bird in flight became the subject of so many early images, entering into Mylayne's chosen gap and provoking him to devise a system that might capture multiple planes of movement and light while accounting for such a fitful protagonist.⁴⁾

The formal ingenuity of the resulting images plays the inherent plausibility of the photographic medium against the visible limit of the still image (and frame);



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meade, Fionn, "Angle of Repose," Parkett, No.85 2009

Jean-Luc Mylayne

appearing to be set in motion and hence destabilized, the surface of Mylayne's photographs pulls the viewer further into questioning the legible measure of time and memory.⁵⁾ As each image is presented as a unique print without edition, scale is largely determined in accordance with the appearance of the bird in the actual encounter. However, in asserting and underscoring his conceptual premise, Mylayne's early images often included an idiosyncratic duplication in miniature to the left of the larger print, both a reminder of the diminished vantage of the viewfinder and a nod to the discipline of intervals—the lying in wait. An indication of the artist's mediated intimacy with his restive subject, Mylayne's doubling tactic admits and gives contour to the ineluctable rift between man and bird even as it opens up the narrow margins of his developing project. Resonant with the distance Francis Ponge queries in his poem, "Les Hironnelles" (Swallows, 1951–1956), a displacement of "thereness" in this early structural motif belies Mylayne's unease with depicting the drama of flight: "They put us, they throw us, in the position of spectators... Isn't their remoteness, their difference, from us due to the very/ fact that what resembles them in us is/terribly contradicted,/strained, by their other proximity—to abstract signs: flames or arrows?"⁶⁾

By gradually transitioning away from flight to birds manifestly at rest, Mylayne has distanced himself from the terrible difference that Ponge assigns to the fleeting arrows of abstraction, refining his vision of existential encounter instead around figurative repose. In fact, the only bird to appear frequently in mid-flight in recent years is the hummingbird—including the foregrounding precision of NO. 368, FEBRUARY MARCH 2006, NO. 417, APRIL MAY 2007, and NO. 421, APRIL MAY 2007—whose frenzied wings and febrile disposition give the thrust of its body an unlikely appearance of stillness even against the geologic indifference of desiccated hills.

JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. PO 30,
JANVIER FÉVRIER 2006,
123 x 153 cm / 48 1/2 x 60 1/4".

The slow moving NO. 91, NOVEMBER DECEMBER 1990 gets further into the shift in Mylayne's work toward time's fractured concurrence with pose. A crucial work in his overall oeuvre, the diptych features the ground-level approach and departure of the appropriately named white wagtail. Taking on the guise of a comic "about face" routine, the hello and goodbye of the disinterested lead character is offset by the red door, parked vehicle, telephone pole, and pruned trees providing atmosphere, except that the puddle in the left image gives pause—for a significant amount of time has clearly lapsed between the two images. As the right image soon reveals two additional birds foraging in the blur across its center, just past the retreating wagtail, all givens suddenly become questions: Is this actually the same bird in each image or is one a stand-in? Which image came first? Is the vehicle parked in the exact same spot? Who left their keys dangling in the door? By employing the before and after effect of a rain shower, Mylayne deftly underscores not only a cinematic predisposition to read images sequentially left to right but also an ingrained impulse on the part of the viewer toward identification with any pictured subject. The nearly farcical setup is similar in style to Mylayne's ground-level view onto garish cowboy boots and a country bungalow in the rather iconic NO. 186, JANUARY FEBRUARY 2004, where the nearly camouflaged junco in the bottom left hand corner has taken over the role of spectator, surveying the domestic scene. Mistaken identity, trading places, the subtle discrepancies played out in both works accentuate the increased engagement with artifice in Mylayne's practice.⁷⁾

Anachronistic in all the possible inflections of the word, the artist's avian performers appear to act against the rush of time in his later work, holding their pose even as time unfolds convulsively around them. With the birds providing a structural pause, Mylayne is able to smuggle contradictory movements and a contingent perception of time into the still image. In a striking passage that could just as readily describe the effect of viewing a Mylayne photograph, Rosalind Krauss has characterized the phenomenological impact of viewing stereoscopic imagery as producing a situation "not unlike that of looking at cinema." Both, according to Krauss, require similar

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meade, Fionn, "Angle of Repose," Parkett, No.85 2009

Jean-Luc Mylayne

kinesthetic operations of the viewer, constantly readjusting and scanning the image in repeated attempts to take it in.

The stereographic image appears multilayered, a steep gradient of different planes stretching away from the nearby space into depth. The operation of viewing this space involves scanning the field of the image, moving from its lower left corner, say, to its upper right. That much is like looking at a painting. But the actual experience of this scan is something wholly different. As one moves, visually, through the stereoscopic tunnel from inspecting the nearest ground to attending to an object in the middle distance, one has the sensation of refocusing one's eyes. And then, again, into the farthest plane, another effort is made, and felt, to refocus.⁸⁾

Operating outside of cinema's darkened room and free of the masked constraints of pre-cinematic devices, Mylayne nevertheless manages to attain the

JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. PO 44, SEPTEMBRE OCTOBRE NOVEMBRE 2001, 190 x 153 cm / 74 3/4 x 60 1/4".



heightened real effect of what Krauss acutely terms the "temporal dilation" of the stereoscopic image; in the shifting planes of focus and middle distance provided by a participatory subject, the artist explores images that sidestep the rationale of photography as time captured for a more open register.⁹⁾ And even though Mylayne continues to acknowledge his own previous statement regarding man's isolation as a paradoxical, ambiguous relationship with time—where "a vertiginous intoxicating acuity is pitted against an insidious otherness,"¹⁰⁾—his work continually revises the gap between.

Whether a bluebird, in regal profile, posing on a barbed-wire fencepost in NO. 414, DECEMBER 2006–JANUARY FEBRUARY 2007, its light blue chest and darker crest disappearing perfectly into a gradation of vaulted blue sky¹¹⁾, or the new still-life juxtapositions of cardinals and *mésange charbonnières* (Great Tit) alongside fallen fruit—including NO. PO 42, MARCH APRIL MAY 2007, NO. PO 30, JANUARY FEBRUARY 2006, and NO. PO 32, MARCH APRIL 2001—Mylayne's images have attained a virtuosity wherein the birds seem to arrive as if for an appointment, their canny presence conveying the event of having been long perceived. Impossible to achieve with either a doubled or elongated exposure, Mylayne coaxes moments of acknowledgment from his accomplice performers that join with the savvy limitations of his technique in seeming to defy the entropy of time. Perhaps no image conveys this more readily than the perched repose of NO. 425, JANUARY FEBRUARY MARCH 2007. Part of a sequence of images that appeared in his most recent gallery exhibition—the vermilion flycatchers of NO. 424, JANUARY FEBRUARY MARCH 2007 and NO. 426, JANUARY FEBRUARY MARCH 2007 complete the trio—NO. 425 features a refulgent being alighted on the tip of a ghosted sapling, the serried folds of a derelict fence, copse of trees, and scraggy ridge beyond. Turned away from the camera but with a discerning glance back at the man behind, Mylayne and bluebird collaborate across the divide.

1) Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1911), p. 16.

2) Both this quote and the one that directly follows are taken from an interview conducted by Terrie Sultan with Jean-Luc Mylayne and Mylène Mylayne in Fort Davis, Texas, on May 16,

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meade, Fionn, "Angle of Repose," Parkett, No.85 2009

Jean-Luc Mylayne

2006, and referenced in her essay "A Matter of Place" as it appears in *Jean-Luc Mylayne* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publisher, 2007), unpaginated.

3) Michael Snow, perhaps the structural filmmaker who shares the most with Mylayne, wrote of his film *WAVELENGTH* (1967) and its deliberate use of panning and tracking shots: "I was thinking of planning for a time monument in which beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure Film space and time, a balancing of 'illusion' and 'fact', all about seeing." As quoted by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 352.

4) Since the 19th century animals have been made to perform for the camera, most often in the name of science but also for the sentimental pleasure curator and critic Ralph Rugoff memorably termed "eco-porn" in referring to what Mylayne's work is not. Historically, animals are viewed as objects for measurement of some kind and not creatures capable of subjectivity; Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography, and his substantial volume entitled *Le Vol des Oiseaux* (The Flight of Birds), replete with photographs, drawings, and diagrams, offers an important precedent of the bird in service to the objective act of viewing.

5) The conceptual underpinning of Mylayne's approach has always complemented the austere formality of his images, perhaps accounting for the appeal of his work to a wide array of artists, including Vija Celmins, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and Richard Prince—all collectors of Mylayne's work.

6) Francis Ponge, "Les Hirondelles ou 'Dans le style des hirondelles' (Randons)," translated by Margaret Guiton, *Selected Poems* (North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 1994), p. 181.

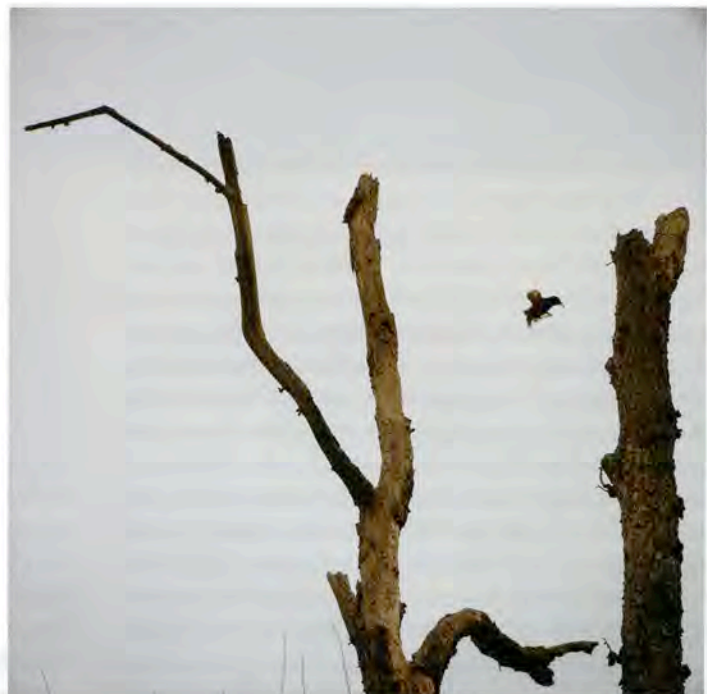
7) Not to be mistaken for a Kantian "disinterest," Mylayne's focus on the contrast of aesthetic relations—between the "any-instant-whatever" legibility of photography's mechanically determined document and the phenomenological encounter of beings, or, likewise, between the adjacent subjectivities of bird and human—refuses to retreat into an acknowledgment of the sublime as proof of man's superiority to nature.

8) Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1986), p. 137.

9) Gilles Deleuze writes of cinema's metaphysic potential to upend the set configurations of empirically measured time (after Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*) that "there are, finally, time-images, that is, duration-images, change-images, relation-images, volume-images which are beyond movement itself..." in *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001), p. 11.

10) Jean-Luc Mylayne, *Parkett*, no. 50/51 (1997), p. 130.

11) Reversing the hundreds of years old European folktale of "the bluebird of happiness"—memorably told in *L'Oiseau Bleu*, a 1908 play by Nobel-prize winning Belgian poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck—Mylayne has found his delight not in his own backyard but rather in a desolate region of west Texas near Fort Davis where all three species of North American bluebird—Eastern, Western, and Mountain—are known to congregate for a short period each winter.



JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE, NO. 79, JUIN JUILLET
1987, 183 x 183 cm / 72 x 72".