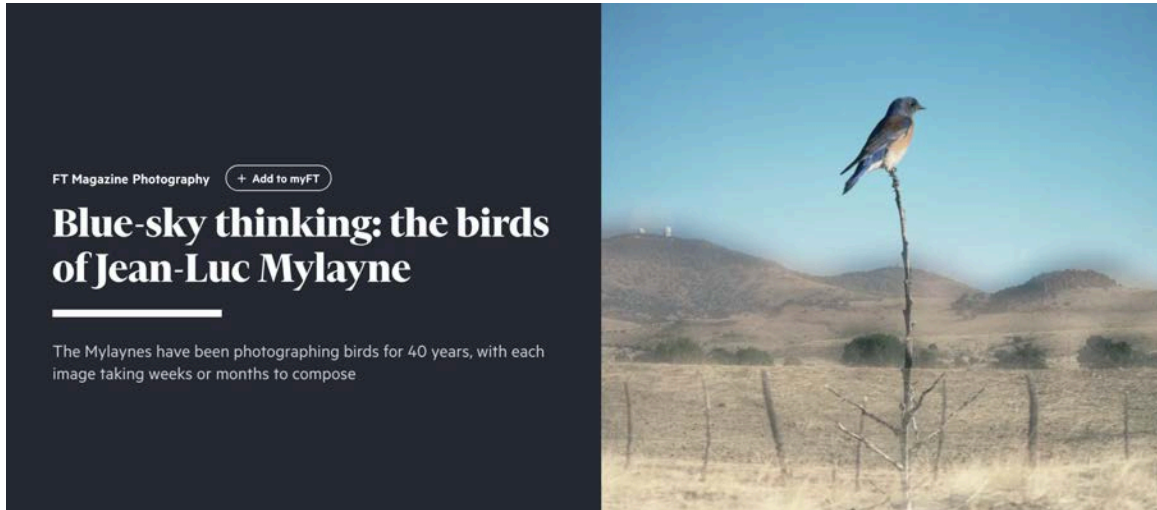


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Liz Jobey, "Blue-sky thinking: the birds of Jean-Luc Mylayne," *Financial Times*, May 16, 2020

## FINANCIAL TIMES



One of the few collateral pleasures of the present crisis has been the chance to hear the birds sing, and to learn how to tell a blue tit from a great tit and a sparrow from a dunnock. But if, for many of us, such things have been a recent discovery, for the French photographer Jean-Luc Mylayne and his wife Mylène they have been the driving force of their life and work for more than 40 years.

In 1978, at the age of 32, Mylayne, a farmer's son who studied philosophy, gave up his job, sold his house and abandoned his surname, taking his partner's Christian name (albeit with a different spelling) instead. Sharing a new name signified the artistic collaboration that would define their life ahead. With the money from the house, he bought a Hasselblad – a high-end camera with a square 6x6 lens – plus attachments, and a van they could sleep in. So began the couple's journey to find, study and photograph birds in their local habitats, first in rural France, later in New Mexico and Texas. Though Jean-Luc operates the camera, they share every other aspect of their production and each print is credited with both their names.

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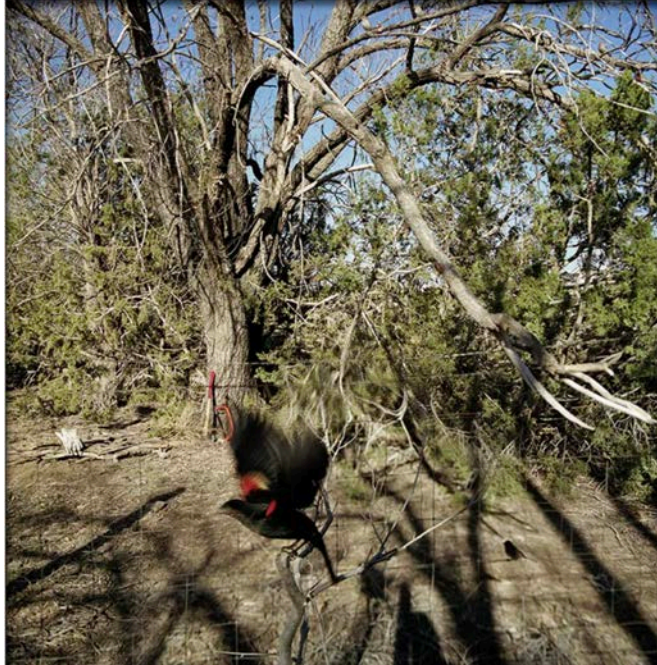


No 25, Juillet – Août 1980 © Jean-Luc Mylayne

Mylayne's passion for birds began in childhood, but the pictures have nothing to do with traditional wildlife photography. Unlike scientific or classification photographs, the birds are not isolated or picked out in sharp focus. Instead, the majority of the pictorial space is given over to the surrounding habitat and the birds are often tiny and barely visible.

Mylayne can take months to select, observe and frame the picture. As days go by, while he studies the light, the colour balance and adjusts and readjusts his camera, the birds become familiar with the presence of the humans until they lose their fear and carry on regardless. Even better, some acknowledge the photographer with a glint of recognition.

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No 284, Février – Mars 2004 © Jean-Luc Mylayne

The couple's interest is in common birds, such as tits, sparrows, blackbirds and linnets, rather than exotic species, and they never feed the birds they're planning to photograph. As the years have gone on, Mylayne has switched to a large-format camera, which gives a bigger negative with much more detail, and he has designed custom-made lenses that allow him to have several focal points across the image: some areas are sharply defined, others (which often appear as a band across the centre of the image) are blurred. These multiple focal points reflect the way the human eye scans the image (and the way the bird's eye scans its habitat: birds have a much wider field of vision than humans).

**Writing in 1997, when the couple's work** was not well known, the US curator Lynne Cooke observed that their pictures "seem to belong to the act of looking rather than to depiction". They contain a kind of all-over detail more akin to painting than to photography. The eye never rests in one place for long: it pores over the scene (just as a birdwatcher might do through a pair of binoculars) searching the foliage, the branches of trees and the ground beneath them, scouring hedges, woods and prairies, eventually

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rewarded by an often blurred cluster of feathers that signals the presence of the leading “acteur” – as Mylayne has referred to his avian subjects. Sometimes the bird is at the centre of the image but just as often it is on the edge of it, doubling as a tiny surrogate for the viewer’s gaze, observing the scene from a distance.



No 524, Février – Mars – Avril 2007 © Jean-Luc Mylayne

The lengthy preparation of the picture is at odds with the “instant” characteristics of photography, but the tension between time past and time present, between the carefully planned scenario and the chance arrival of the bird, reflects the artists’ philosophical view of the world. The long, meditative gestation period is emphasised by the titles of their pictures, which are numbered chronologically and dated with the span of months and year in which they were taken. They release just one print of each image, and over 40 years have produced only 565 works.

The Swiss art historian Bice Curiger was the first curator to show their work outside France. The single print, she says, “was part of Mylayne’s concept from the beginning”:



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while the titles of their photographs signify the months of preparation, the single print “symbolises the moment when it happened”, not before, not after. Mylayne, she continues, “wants to reproduce something that is in our nature of perception. The eye must wander and focus back and forth to give you the whole picture.”



No. 341, Avril – Mai 2005 © Jean-Luc Mylayne

Curiger discovered their pictures in a small French catalogue, tracked them down via a poste restante address and met them in a café in Paris in 1994. In 1995, she included five of their works in a large group show at the Kunsthaus Zürich. It introduced them to American curators, and to the New York gallery owner Barbara Gladstone, who has represented them since 1997.

The pair, who rarely give interviews, have never made a lot of money from their work, Curiger says. Most of it was ploughed back into their materials and equipment. But in 2003, they were supported by a grant from the Lannan Foundation in the US and spent the following five winters working first in New Mexico (2003), then in Texas (2004-

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o8). It fulfilled Mylayne's childhood dream of seeing the bluebirds of America and, as is clear from their later pictures, of savouring the backdrop of cloudless blue skies.



PO - 39, Mars - Avril - Mai 2007 © Jean-Luc Mylayne

On returning from the United States, the couple finally decided to put down roots and bought a small house in south-east France, but soon afterwards were forced to stop working when an infection caused Jean-Luc to lose the sight in one eye. Since then they have continued to travel and play an active role in the installation of their exhibitions.

I wondered whether the initial decision to set out on the road had been influenced by 1960s politics. I was trying to avoid the word “hippie”, but Curiger thought to a degree it fitted. “I mean, leave out the ugly clichés of the word and use its highest possible values, and there it is,” she says. “To step out of the frenzy of life and try to find values in nature and other dimensions of the culture.”

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PO – 30, Janvier – Février 2006 © Jean-Luc Mylayne

Two years ago, Curiger curated four decades of the Mylaynes' work in a show at the Fondation Vincent van Gogh in Arles, where she is the director. It is now at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover, and will travel to the Huis Marseille in Amsterdam in the autumn – subject to lockdown regulations.

“I think a lot about [the Mylaynes] in these times,” Curiger says, “with all these urgent ecological questions, with the virus, with what we are living with right now when we see how everything can slow down. I am sure now is the moment to discover this work.”

*“Jean-Luc Mylayne: The Autumn of Paradise” is at the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover (which has just re-opened) until August 23, [kestnergesellschaft.de](http://kestnergesellschaft.de). It then travels to the Huis Marseille, Amsterdam, [huismarseille.nl](http://huismarseille.nl). A catalogue is published by Hatje Cantz/Van Gogh Foundation. Jean-Luc Mylayne is featured in the Hayward Gallery's current exhibition “Among the Trees”, virtual tour at [southbankcentre.co.uk](http://southbankcentre.co.uk)*

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**Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Gladstone Gallery**