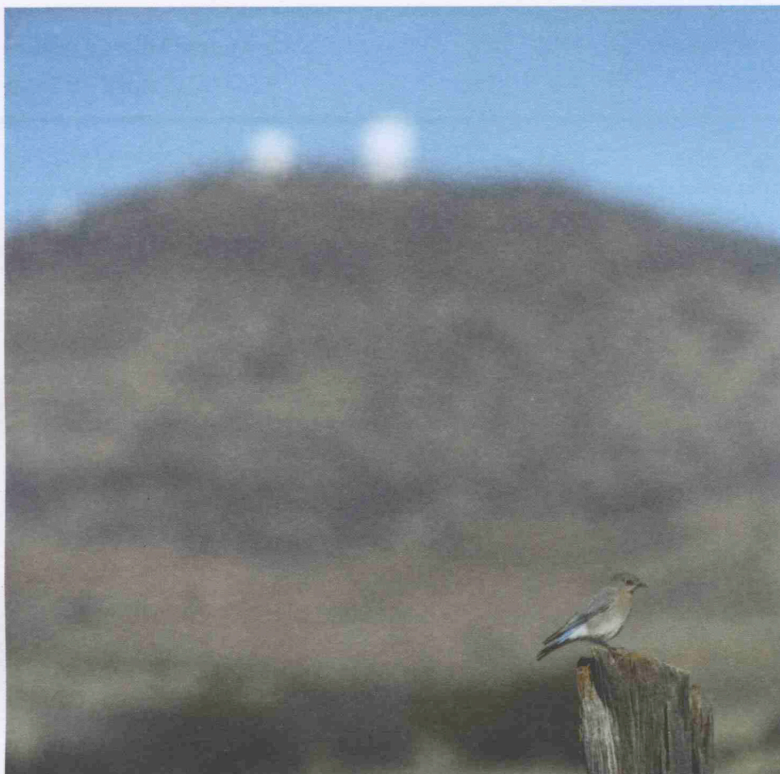


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Herbert, Martin, "Jean-Luc Mylayne," *Art Review*, Summer 2010

REVIEWS: UK



Jean-Luc Mylayne

Sprüth Magers, London  
16 April – 29 May

The contextual shift – this wasn't art, but now it is – has underwritten artistic practice for a century now, and it would be easy to think that it's what Jean-Luc Mylayne's art hinges on. Thirty-four years ago, the Frenchman sold almost everything he owned, moved to the US with his wife and collaborator, Mylène, and started obsessively pursuing and photographing birdlife, recently narrowing his focus to Texas and to three species of North American bluebird. In *No. 507 Février Mars Avril 2007* (2007), one of these alights momentarily on a rotted wooden post. "It took three months", the gallery tells us, "to set up Mylayne's equipment and capture this one image of a bird". If you recognise the please-be-impressed tone (catnip to collectors, surely), maybe you've watched some of the making-of documentaries on David Attenborough's *Planet Earth* DVDs (2006). But Mylayne isn't simply using the gallery as a reframing device, and it isn't meretricious to emphasise the time aspect. These are images of birds, true, but wildlife is not precisely their subject.

The bluebird in *No. 507* only takes up a small part of the photograph's lower corner, the rest of

the large-scale c-print occupied by blurry landscape backdrop: scrub-covered mountains topped by three defocused white shapes, presumably buildings. Even here, the bird is a larger presence than the (assumedly, though I'm no ornithologist) hummingbird in *No. 298 Mars Avril 2005* (2005), which skims the image's base while, above it, a mountainous backdrop seems to zoom towards the viewer across an expanse of barren land. Both foreground and background enjoy some degree of focus, but the middle ground is a greenish haze. Different yet contiguous timeframes are flattened on the surface of the photograph: the eternity of rock, the momentary passage of the bird past Mylayne's unwieldy 8x10 camera's lens, the midpoint that is the artist's own patient waiting. The photograph ends up, unexpectedly, being an excursus on how these temporal dimensions coexist and how, as sentient beings, we position ourselves in relation to them.

But while the bird is a motive, it's also a prize. Consider Mylayne's work as musings on a large humanist scale, and the avian trophy functions as some kind of barely reachable, unpredictable epiphany: the redbird in a dark-shadowed tree in *No. 302 Mars Avril 2005* (2005) is a burst of zesty vermillion that won't be there in a second, and simply asks to be appreciated, chased and then cherished. The two birds sporting around the base of a silhouetted trunk in *No. 267 Février Mars 2004* (2004) are barely visible in low, late-afternoon light; the photograph sustains the hushed glimpse, apparently caught after two months. Again the birds are bigger than birds. Such is the spell of Mylayne's ascetic yet sumptuous art that they feel like anything one chooses to devote a life to: emblems of a pragmatic philosophic system which argues that, in the apparent absence of any higher purpose, it might be worth exchanging hours of nothingness for milliseconds of soul-radiating transport. And that photography, while only a shadow of the experience, might articulate what that means. *Martin Herbert*