

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dyksta, Jean, "The Nomadic Ornithologist", *Art on Paper*, July/August 2008, p.24



## THE NOMADIC ORNITHOLOGIST

Photographer Jean-Luc Mylayne goes to the birds

by Jean Dykstra

Photographs of animals—even those exhibited in galleries and museums rather than in magazines or newspapers—tend to lean toward the spectacularly fierce or the anthropomorphically sweet, if they're not gently bemused (think of Elliott Erwitt's dogs). Jean-Luc Mylayne's photographs of birds are none of the above. He photographs ordinary birds doing ordinary things in ordinary suburban and rural environments, but his photographs are both quirky and quietly extraordinary. His subjects are common backyard birds: robins, sparrows, bluebirds, and the like.

He is not concerned with spotting rare species, which is a good thing, because in many of his pictures, the bird in question is a fleeting, shadowy presence—a blur in an upper corner or a tiny brown figure all but camouflaged amid a tangle of brown branches.

The birds, though, are far from incidental: Mylayne has made it his lifelong project to photograph them with a relentless patience that borders on the obsessive. He and his wife, Mylène, live a famously nomadic existence, following his avian subjects throughout suburban France and,

**Left:** No. 406 (April May 2006), C-print (60 1/2 x 60 1/2 in., framed), 2006. All images courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York, and © Jean-Luc Mylayne

**Below:** No. 342 (April May 2005), C-print (88 1/2 x 70 3/4 in.), 2005

more recently, the southwestern United States, setting up camp among them for extended periods of time. Since 2004, the Mylaynes have spent six months each year in Fort Davis, Texas, where three different species of bluebirds convene during their winter migration.

Mylayne carefully frames and composes each photograph, taking lighting (natural and sometimes artificial), composition, and the colors of the foliage into consideration, and then he waits—for days and sometimes months—for the birds to become accustomed to him and his equipment. Eventually, the bird he is waiting for alights within—or flies through—his composition and he takes the picture. The title of each print indicates how long that particular shot took. No. 70, *January February March April 1987*, for example, is one lovely and unusually spare image that took four months to achieve. He does not use a telephoto lens, so the birds must come quite near to him for the close shots, which is one reason his process is so time-consuming. And he does not edit his prints; he makes just one print from each 8 x 10 inch negative and has produced only 150 or so prints in thirty-five years.

That slow pace of production and his rejection of photography's inherent reproducibility are just two of the ways in which Mylayne's work has as much in common with contemporary art practices as with traditional photographic ones. In that sense, he is not unlike such photographers as Hiroshi Sugimoto, Candida Höfer, and Jeff Wall, as curator Lynne Cooke observes in the catalog to his

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recent exhibition at Blaffer Gallery in Houston. Like these artists, Cooke observes, Mylayne has extensive technical skills and a deep understanding of the history of photography but produces work with conceptual underpinnings. His photographs are, for example, as much about time and about the way we look at images as they are about birds. They allude to the way time is marked differently in the natural world—revolving around the rising and setting of the sun and the changing of the seasons, both of which dictate the birds' migratory patterns. But they are also about the way time is portrayed and perceived in the medium of photography. Consider the time it takes him to make one photograph, for example, compared with the instant frozen on film when he snaps the camera's shutter, effectively stopping time. Or consider the way his work slows—resists, even—conventional ways of reading photographs, particularly series. A diptych titled *No. 91, November December 1990*, at first seems to depict the same bird, in the same composition, a few sec-



*No. 9 October 1979*, C-print (40 3/4 x 40 3/4 in.), 1979



onds apart—facing the viewer in the first image, then making an about-face and walking away in the second. But the light is different in the second photograph, and the bird in the first frame stands in a puddle that has disappeared in the second. It may or may not be the same bird at all.

His photographs also demand time from the viewer, often drawing the eye well into a landscape or a tangle of branches before the bird that is the purported subject even registers. Mylayne has experimented with various lenses so that different portions of the same image are in or out of focus. The effect is slightly disorienting, and it slows the viewer's reading of the image. He begins with a standard-focus lens but often places different lenses over it, including a "bifocal lens" that creates a blurred line through the middle of the image while the foreground and back-

ground remain in focus (creating a flickering sense of movement, and mimicking, as Cooke observes, the way an eye scans an image). In a photograph titled *No. 36, August 1982*, for instance, the leaves and branches in the foreground and the distant meadow and trees in the background are in focus, but the yellow bird perched on a branch in the middle of the image is not. (And only after I'd looked at the photograph several times did I notice the small nest in the lower left, with three tiny wide-open beaks.) It's a surprisingly complex picture—a staged, highly constructed photograph that contains a "decisive moment" when everything falls beautifully into place.