

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rugoff, Ralph, "Bird's-eye View of the Landscape," Financial Times, January 17, 2000.

## Bird's-eye view of the landscape

Ralph Rugoff admires Jean-Luc Mylaine's startling avian photography

Animal photography dwells near the bottom of the fine art totem pole, and for good reason. Most of it is thinly disguised eco-porn, centre-fold material for wildlife calendars and magazines. Depicting animals as either contemptibly cute or absurdly noble, it inevitably veers between Disneyland fantasy and a star-struck homage to virgin Nature.

The work of French photographer Jean-Luc Mylaine, however, is an exception to this rule. Mylaine, who has been taking pictures of birds since 1976, transforms this vapid genre into a source of subtle and often startling imagery. Devoid of any sentimentality, his best avian portraits achieve an idiosyncratic, off-kilter beauty as elusive as the subjects he pursues.

His first UK exhibition, as we are the first *kairotic forms*... now at The Photographers' Gallery, offers viewers a mini-retrospective of variously-sized colour prints from the past 20 years. A quick glance around the gallery reveals that Mylaine has no interest in depicting the inhabitants of pristine wilderness areas, or creating definitive mug shots of rare creatures. Sticking to agricultural areas and rural suburbs of France, he generally photographs common species, the workaday starlings, robins and sparrows that the average bird-spotter wouldn't look twice at.

Though Mylaine says that he envisions the bird as an "actor" to his "director", he never frames his subjects in glamorous close-ups. Eschewing the use of telephoto lenses, he instead presents them as small details in a larger landscape. In many of these pictures, the birds' presence is almost incidental: they tend to haunt the edges and corners of his compositions. Occasionally they are obscured by foliage, or are partially out of focus, usually (but not always) because they have been photographed in flight.

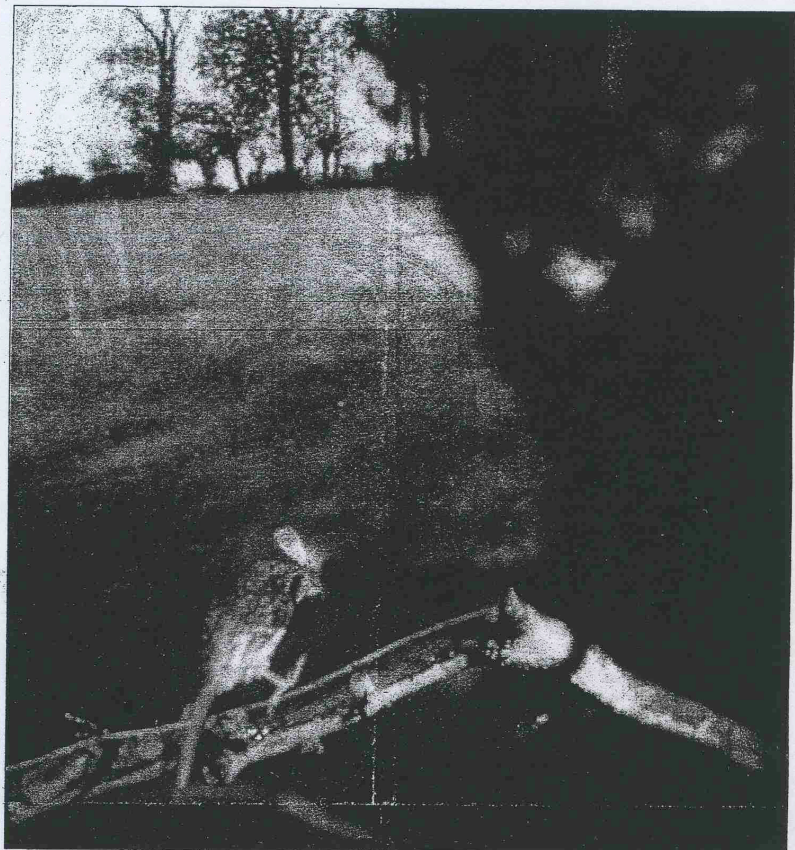
The results are images

which not only preserve a sense of their winged subjects' relative size, but also convey something of the precariousness of avian existence. Despite their fugitive gift of flight, birds in the wild do not often live past their first birthday. By blurring the outlines of their tiny bodies so that they assume a ghostly transparency, Mylaine's portraits eloquently hint at the febrile mortality of hearts that beat at twice the rate of ours.

These are not "poetic" pictures, however. A few verge on the grotesque, including a flash-lit photo of a bird feeding worms to its two newborn chicks, both of whom look like they could be auditioning for the next *Aliens* movie. Other images balance intimacy with a cool detachment. Looking at a photograph of a small bird preparing to drink from a puddle, you feel you have intruded on a private moment, yet the bird still seems utterly foreign, defying our anthropomorphic impulses.

Mylaine is not exclusively, or even primarily, interested in depicting avian character and behaviour. His central concerns are vision and time. This is clearest in a series of quietly disconcerting photographs made with a bifocal lens that renders foreground and background in crisp detail, but creates a flickering blur across the middle of the picture. It's a device that conjures a scanning eye and a sense of flux and movement, even when the featured creature is shown in a static pose.

In place of the fixed perspective of a classical "bird's-eye view", Mylaine's camera anchors us in a ground-level process of seeing. In one photo that is so out-of-focus it borders on abstraction, the artist transforms what might have been a mundane picture of a bird in a tree into a mysterious maze of colour and form. After a moment of adjusting, our eyes start to pick out the blurry details: feathers appear as a wet splash,



'No. 25, July-August 1980': Mylaine's choices of subject are workaday species of bird that the average bird-spotter wouldn't look twice at

branches and leaves form interlacing pools of brown and green, perforated by a few soft drops of blue sky. Perhaps this is how birds in flight perceive their environment. Or it could just be an enticing game of photographic hide-and-seek. In either case, Mylaine's image

time – the way a still image transforms a fraction of a second into an eternal moment. The titles – No. 25, Juillet-Aout 1980, No. 60, Janvier-Fevrier 1987 – highlight another disparity: that between the brief minutes we spend looking at these images, and the lengthy

studying its behaviour and habitat, he spends weeks getting to know his subjects, and allowing them to become used to his presence. He then calculates every component of a picture, from lighting to composition, before settling down and patiently to await the chance arrival of his avian actor.

Needless to say, it is a time-consuming way of taking pictures. As a result, the self-taught Mylaine has produced fewer than 150 photographs in his career. His chosen working method demands a nomadic lifestyle and, much like the migrating birds he tracks and observes, Mylaine has no permanent address.

His dedication gives his endeavour the air of a conceptual project where art and life meet. To some extent, this inadvertently plays to the tendency to celebrate process over product, to value an artist's pursuit of

an idea, or the purity of his practice, over the end result. Mylaine's growing appreciation by curators and critics has sometimes been framed in this light. But while most art championed for these reasons is unspeakably dull, Mylaine's pictures are as singular as is his approach to making them.

The abstract painter Barnett Newman once quipped that art history is to artists as ornithology is to birds. Certainly neither bird books nor the history of photography have much to tell us about Mylaine's work. Ultimately, his quirky portraits bring us closer not to our feathered friends or the way they have been depicted in previous art, but to this patient photographer's perspective on our uniquely human experience of living in time and space.

At The Photographers' Gallery, London, WC2 until January 29.

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Looking, of course, takes time, and the shifting depths of field effectively suggest alternate temporal zones. They also allude to the contradiction of photographic

research the artist engages in before aiming his camera.

For, despite their apparent snapshot aesthetic, Mylaine's pictures are the results of months of planning. After selecting a particular type of bird and