

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Mikhail, Kate, "The Independent", December 14, 1999.

## Waiting for the bird man of Amiens

A really good  
photograph takes  
time – and for  
Jean-Luc Mylayne  
it may be months.  
By Kate Mikhail

JEAN-LUC MYLAYNE is no ordinary photographer. He chooses his composition, season, weather conditions, time of day, and then he sits down and waits for that critical moment. But where Henri Cartier-Bresson might have waited hours for what he termed "the decisive moment", Mylayne is prepared to put in days, weeks, months – whatever it takes. He's a patient man.

The life that animates his works comes in the form of everyday garden birds – black-birds, robins, sparrows. "It's just birds in bushes," observed one visitor to London's Photographer's Gallery. If only it were so straightforward.

As Mylayne sees it, he is the director and the birds are his actors. He sets the scene, gets the lighting just so, decides the entrance he wants his actors to make – the rest, of course, is out of his hands. After that, it all comes down to time. The concept of time passing and what has been described as the "discipline of experiencing the intervals" is central to Mylayne's work.

Each photograph – and he



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has produced less than 150 to date, owing to the time involved in capturing each image, is entitled according to the number of months dedicated to its realisation. No 96, *August 1990 to December 1991*, was a particularly long haul, with a far-from-accommodating lead actor. The area of marshy scrub land has clearly been carefully chosen with its pond of clear water in the foreground and dry, honey-coloured grasses drawing the viewer towards the horizon past a colourful patch

of autumnal red. The composition is precise and beautiful. Everything is in crisp, sharp focus. Everything except a shock of turquoise blue, a blur of avian motion speeding close to the frame in the left-hand corner. Mylayne may put in as many hours stalking his prey as any wildlife expert, but he's no documentarian. His birds are sometimes in focus, but are just as likely to be in flight or largely hidden, with perhaps a beak or a few feathers just discernible under a tangle of foliage.

Born in Amiens in 1946, Mylayne, who is self-taught, favours a square composition and more recently a bifocal lens to direct the audience to those areas of visual clarity: the foreground, perhaps occupied by the star of the show, and the distance that puts the bird in its natural context. Mylayne's works are a harmonious balance of form, light and colour – the movement of the birds and the deliberate blurring of parts of the images introducing an element of energy and animation.

*September to December 1991* comprises eight frames made up of four mirror images. It is a vast work, focusing on a patch of shallow water – the life source to an abundance of coral-red foliage. The four central panels appear to have been folded together as damp paint, and then opened out again to reveal a smudge of emerald green and black that gradually comes into focus towards the outer edges. Small birds, are dotted about, wading around in water, sending out tiny ripples

with every step they take.

Mylayne's work may be carefully stage-managed, but by refusing to crop in close on the birds and by placing them in their wider habitat, while spending countless hours observing their everyday movements and habits, he manages to capture the essence of the birds' existence – achieving an intimacy to be marvelled at.

Photographers' Gallery, 5 Great Newport Street, London WC2 (0171-831 1772), to 29 Jan