



**Paula McCartney:
Ornithological Interpretations**

**3rd Floor Emerging Artist
Series
March 29, 2008 – May 5, 2008
Atrium Gallery**

"By now, people have been conditioned to experience mediated realities through movies, digital imagery, and manipulated photography. As a result, a great deal of artwork being made today shows evidence of an increased attention paid to the issue of fake versus real. Lacking the magic of the latest Hollywood technology,

artists using photography are faced with the challenge of viewers' waning waning belief in the validity of the photograph and their scrutiny of all photographic images. In the game of creating convincing imagery, the motivation for these artists goes beyond entertainment. Often their work is work is intended to call into question conventional definitions of the real and real and the simulated."

Mary-Kay Lombino

Paula McCartney's photographs are filled with familiar nature scenes, thick woodlands of bristling lush evergreens, snowy thickets broken by slender black branches, overgrown riverbeds of tangled vines and barren autumn paths blanketed with dry leaves. There is a relaxing isolation to the photographs, recalling quiet walks along secluded trails. Centered within each image are birds perched upon willowy limbs. The vivid plumage of the each bird vibrates against the muted palette of the wilderness backdrop. The birds sit motionless, impeccably posed within the frame. The composition is

perfect, actually far too perfect. Upon closer inspection the birds reveal themselves as imposters, poorly constructed decorative models purchased from craft and hobby stores. Stiff wire protrusions mount each bird to its perch, matted tufts of over-dyed faux feathers form wings and splashes of paint create eyes and beaks. Some birds are more convincing than others, but all quickly read as imitations. Viewing McCartney's work anew the foolishness of the viewers earlier belief in the validity of the original image lingers. There is an assumed truth and authenticity to nature photography not afforded other genres, creating an effective cover for the momentary illusion to succeed.

Below each image is a label listing information commonly found in bird watching journals or field guides. The label mimics the format of those found in natural history museums and includes the name, location, date, size, distinctive markings and remarks about the field encounter with the featured specimen. The inclusion of the labels adds another layer of false authenticity. Initial questions raised by the image are countered with the passive authority of the object label. The format and content of the label further distort the truth with fabrication. The information regarding location, time and visual appearance is correct, however the identification (the ultimate quest of most bird watching activities) is an approximation. The identification is based upon the visual data gathered from a model, which is a generic hybridization of bird varieties created as decorations, not accurate representations of species. By matching each photograph with a convincing descriptive label McCartney appropriates the language and presentation of the museum, inviting both closer inspection and blind acceptance.

Paula McCartney's exhibition *Ornithological Interpretations* speaks to the human desire to categorize and control nature by restructuring and sanitizing our surroundings to suit personal needs. The series arose from McCartney's long walks in the woods and repeated failed attempts at photographing birds along the journey. McCartney states, "I was interested in documenting birds, but they never landed in an appropriate composition. I decided to take control, buy my own birds, and create and photograph these idealized scenes that I fantasized about." McCartney's resulting photographs portray a false, idealized nature, which challenges our expectations, beliefs and wishes regarding the natural world. McCartney's birds appear at the viewer's

demand, like animatronics animals on a Disney safari ride. The inconvenience and improbability of waiting for the perfect moment is removed, replaced by harmonious compositions of color-matched wilderness encounters.

McCartney's exhibition asks the viewer to contemplate how technology has blurred the distinction between the artificial and the real, and our contradictory desire to have both. In a similar manner to Paula McCartney, British artist Marc Quinn questions the urge to seek, collect and preserve nature. Quinn's work *Garden (2000)* is a series of eight photographs depicting hyper-colored collages of foliage, flowers, and fungi. Unnaturally frozen exotic species of tulips, mushrooms, lilies and roses fill grassy dioramas like psychedelic fantasy playgrounds. Quinn collects plants from around the globe, coating the samples in silicone, preserving them forever in a glossy plastic sheen. The plasticized plants are then arranged in extraordinarily garish and enticing gardens of color. Quinn states "The Flowers are perfect and will last forever, but obviously they are dead: they've been turned into icons, just like movie stars or pop stars who die young. We continue to worship their perfect image, but for them it's over". Quinn's *Garden*, like the faux birds posed throughout Paula McCartney's work embrace the artificial as a desirable, enjoyable, more readily available version of nature, perfected and packaged for consumption. Quinn and McCartney question if anything can be called natural with certainty any in contemporary life. With the continued expansion of genetic modification, advanced biotechnology and selective breeding the natural world feels more like a fleeting aberration or a fantasy world. It is likely that authentic nature experiences will become rare as the technology progresses to cheaply and effectively simulate natural environments and encounters. Raw and unfiltered nature will become a privilege for the wealthy, unaffordable for the average population. Or perhaps we now prefer a Disney-fied natural world of cuddly forests and manicured prairies, filled with structured simulation rather than the gritty reality of "authentic" nature? In the end, the viewer is left to ponder if artificiality is ultimately more satisfying than the natural. SS

Scott Stulen is the Curator of the Third Floor Emerging Artist Series

Mary-Kay Lombino, "Artists in the Garden: Where Nature and Culture Collide" in *Unnaturally* exh. Cat. (Independent Curators New York, 2003) p. 24

Quinn quoted in Germano Celant, "Interview with Marc Quinn" in *Marc Quinn* exh. Cat. (Milan: Prada Foundation, 2000) p.214

About the Artist

Paula McCartney is a Minneapolis-based artist who creates photographs and books that explore the idea of constructed landscapes. Inspired by natural history illustrations, Victorian botany journals, and Audubon's *Birds of America*, the scientific practice of collecting specimens is a starting point for her work. She received her M.F.A. in Photography from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2002. McCartney has received an Aaron Siskind Fellowship, a Women's Studio Workshop Artist's Book Production Grant, and is a 2007 MCP McKnight Photography Fellow. Her work is currently on view at the University of Connecticut Art Gallery, the UCLA Arts Library, and the Rooke Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is represented by KLOMPCHING Gallery in Brooklyn, NY.

image above: *Cardinal* (detail), C-Print 2007