

Catalogue Essay by Gregory Volk
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RACHEL BERWICK

Rachel Berwick uses elements of natural history, anthropology, biology, entomology and ornithology in sculptures and installations that explore our conflicted relationship to a culturally mediated nature. While scientifically minded, including frequent collaborations with scientists and scholars and extensive research, her work involves both the longing for and the difficulty of ecstatic and cathartic encounters with nature. Complex themes of desire, loss, mortality, the fragility of memory and sheer bedazzlement arise from works that function as unusual combinations of natural history museum displays and contemporary art.

Rachel Berwick is unusually interested in things that are, or might be, the last of their kind. Her installation *may-por-e'* featured two live, shadowy parrots trained to speak words from the long-defunct language of a vanished tribe – the Maypure – from Venezuela. Berwick's installation in Sao Paulo concerns passenger pigeons, once the most numerous bird in North America east of the Rocky Mountains. Already by the 1850's overhunting was drastically reducing the population of these birds, and the last one, named Martha, died in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914. Pure wildness, and surging flocks said to have darkened the skies, were reduced to one final female who couldn't fly anywhere other than in her cage.

Using a taxidermist's cast of a passenger pigeon as her model, Berwick devised 600 birds out of amber and arrayed them on a system of suspended brass rods. Outer rods feature many birds, while successive interior rods hold ever fewer numbers, until there is only one bird in the center – Berwick's version of Martha in her cage. With glowing amber birds and multiple shadows on the walls, Berwick's installation is stunning, but also somber and meditative. Here, the vanishing of a species suggests many other kinds of vanishing as well, including childhood whimsy, beloved friends or family members who have died, and vigorous delights that can only be recalled, but never re-created.