



MYFANWY MACLEOD

big birds

Scale tells the story in the Vancouver
artist's Olympic Plaza public sculpture

THE BURNING QUESTION IS “WHY BIRDS?”

BY DANIELLE EGAN

It follows from an interrogation that began 15 years ago, with “Who are you?,” “Where did you come from?” and “Why frogs?” The evolution from that first six-foot-tall, bullet-riddled frog sculpture in 1996 to two massive, 16-foot, 4,200-pound house sparrows seems to make sense. As I sit across from Myfanwy MacLeod for the first time, however, she confounds this neat narrative.

“I thought: Wouldn’t it be great to have a giant frickin’ bird? That was it. Afterward, I had to relate that to the competition brief,” says MacLeod of the public-art process—in this case, a \$600,000 legacy commission by the City of Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic public art program for a permanent outdoor sculpture at Olympic Plaza in Southeast False Creek, a partially gentrified industrial region hailed as a blueprint for urban sustainability. “How does the idea fit in with what they wanted to spin? Do I have to have a reason more than: I want to see a big-ass bird? Of course, but we create narratives to explain things in a tidy way, and there’s that impulse to do that as an artist. But it’s really artificial.”

A refreshing truth, but one I suspect is also evasive. MacLeod has cultivated a thing for trans-mogrifying objects and anthropomorphizing woodland creatures into malevolent effigies. She’s fascinated by classic horror films, cultural superstitions, taboos, stereotypes, consumer fetishism and fairy tales—from the subversive, adult folk-fantasies of the 17th-century French *contes de fées* to modern animated cartoons. She constructs her experiments, often with tableaux that mix sculptural objects with suites of photographs or paintings, so that each experience is like a caper, a crime scene or a paranormal investigation.

With *The Birds* (2010), the backdrop is a concrete plaza surrounded by generic stacks of expensive condos with a view of the busy downtown skyline and the ever-looming mountains. The two

BELOW AND OPPOSITE:

The Birds (detail) 2010

EPS foam with polyurea hardcoat
and bronze 5.05 m high each

PHOTOS HUBERT KANG



massive birds, a male and a female, are fabricated to look like monumental figurines that have busted out of a china cabinet and descended on Vancouver. The birds are positioned on opposite sides of the square, bronze claws curled, as if poised to take flight and start dive-bombing, or to step down from their bench pedestals and stomp around. When the square is unpopulated (we'll return to why later) and appears desolate, you get this uncanny feeling that something bizarre or terrible has happened, that the birds have come home to roost. When the scene is bustling, they're harbingers of an uncertain future, keeping watch over their charges.

"The decision to use sparrows was a conscious choice," says MacLeod, a long-time fan of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and the Daphne du Maurier short story on which it is based, which includes bird attacks on sleeping children. "I wanted an urban bird, but pigeons are depressing, and seagulls, no, not a crow or raven—too Pacific Northwest. But sparrows are fat and cute and sweet and they're everywhere. House sparrows are known as alien invaders because they're non-native to North America, and once they were introduced, they became a dominant species. That's interesting, and I found the oppositional rhetoric weird. It's almost xenophobic."

MacLeod often monumentalizes common objects and manipulates our notions of the familiar and the alien. Here I must return to the frogs, her first figurative sculpture. *The Fountainheads* (1995) is a resin frog-fountain that spurts water out of multiple bullet holes. The sculpture is modelled after photographs of taxidermied frogs and informed by cartoons. It brings to mind a familiar *Looney Tunes* short, directed by Chuck M. Jones and hailed as the *Citizen Kane* of the genre. A demolition man finds a box that contains a frog—clad in a top hat, tails and cane—which bursts out into song and dance. The man attempts to exploit the frog's talents, but it will perform for his eyes only, leading to bankruptcy, homelessness and a trip to the psych ward. Flash forward a hundred years, and another dupe with dollar signs for pupils discovers the singing frog.

MacLeod's simulacrum re-activates viewers' long-dormant memory of that frog film, as if it were a mysterious and thorny event that suddenly demands attention and resolution. When exhibited, *The Fountainheads* was accompanied by a suite of small watercolours titled *Redrum*, which depict a frog slaying another frog. Are these paintings forensic clues to the motives behind her frog assassination?

"I found these magazines with images of 19th-century taxidermied frogs dressed up in clothes and positioned to do different things, like shoot a rifle. Really weird," responds MacLeod. "I was more interested in the trope in animated cartoons whereby someone is shot multiple times, and when they drink, all the water pours out of the bullet holes. I had done several drawings of children using this idea, but thought people would find them too offensive. It was about the physical transformations that the body undergoes in the cartoon realm, and a kind of imperviousness to death."



BELOW: **The Fountainheads** 1995
Resin fountain 15.2 x 10.1 x 12.7 cm

OPPOSITE: **Ghost** 2006 Costumed mannequin 2.2 m x 8.38 cm x 83.8 cm
BOTH COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES
PHOTOS SCOTT MASSEY

Artists are the perpetrators, so they're not always ideal eyewitnesses. Perhaps MacLeod thinks I'm wandering too far outside the purview of *The Birds*. But these works evoke such similar sinister-yet-playful scenarios, and they seem inextricably linked to the folk tales of Vancouver past and present. In 1995, when *The Fountainheads* showed at Access Gallery, photo-conceptualism dominated the local art scene. MacLeod's macabre, funny, pop nostalgia-inducing blend of high- and lowbrow—artspeak welcome, but unnecessary—was an utter delight that invited interaction. She had just graduated, not from Emily Carr, where Damian Moppett, Geoffrey Farmer, Steven Shearer and Brian Jungen made objects that explored the

ambiguities of identity, place and pop, but with an MFA from the University of British Columbia (UBC), under the advisory of Jeff Wall.

MacLeod came to Vancouver in 1992, on the heels of an undergraduate sculpture degree at Concordia University. In the 1980s, she worked in a photography studio in London, Ontario, then hitchhiked around Europe and worked as an au pair in Paris. She was intrigued by the French fascination for American pop.

"In Paris it was all about Michael Jackson and I loved that," she says. "Montreal—and Concordia, in particular—was a whole other scene, lots of sculpture. At UBC, there was very little sculpture at that time, and it received very little attention, and everyone was into The Smiths. I'm all about the moonwalking, so I didn't fit in. At UBC, I thought, What are these people talking about? It was all super-theoretical. Nobody was making objects. I think I do things intuitively. I start first, and the conceptual stuff happens along the way."

MacLeod says her work isn't reacting to the conceptual canon of the Vancouver School, and she doesn't call her approach purposely site-specific. Nevertheless, many of her pieces—such as her *The Tiny Kingdom* (2001) outhouse, her minimalist moonshine still, her renderings of hillbillies, and the giant, fuzzy, club-wielding mascot she designed for the 1999 Melbourne International Biennial—antagonize and heighten the existing physical and psychological tensions of specific coteries, including art dealerships and institutions. Sometimes, MacLeod's objects are big, bold, blunt instruments, like the face-imprinted shovel, *Propaganda for War* (1998); the giant inflatable head, *My Idea of Fun* (1997); and her huge googly eyes, *Study for "Thought"* (1998), a piece that is like a minimalist portrait, in which traits are reduced to that ever-watchful gaze. At other times, her works are small and fragile—for instance, her figurines of wayward drunks and *Ghost* (2006), a child mannequin with outstretched arms, under a floral sheet with crude eyeholes cut out. By manipulating scale and material, MacLeod creates objects that delight, confound and implicate the viewer all at once.

"It's about human form and the relationship with the object, the constant battle," says MacLeod. "That's what interested me about cartoons. Objects possess a malevolent subjectivity. Like rocks lobbed on

to the coyote. The uneasy relationship between the object and subject.”

And the power tug-of-war between artist, gatekeeper and viewer. Who’s driving the car when everyone has a rubberized steering wheel, giant anvils abound and the scenery is a constantly shifting phantasmagoria? “In one of my favourite cartoons—‘Duck Amuck’—Bugs Bunny assumes the role of animator, controlling Daffy Duck,” says MacLeod. She describes this other famous Chuck M. Jones short, in which the trickster rabbit tortures the jealous, lisping, increasingly hysterical duck, changing backdrops and props and continually erasing and redrawing the duck, so that the viewer is caught between Daffy’s Everyman despair and a troublesome collusion with the rabbit. The cartoon is an animated theatre of the absurd. “I always thought that would be a nice thing to control,” she says.

MacLeod grew up in the 1960s and 1970s on the edges of Ontario suburbs (first Oakville, then London), each with their obligatory patches of nearby woods that seemed big, spooky and full of creepy critters—though these woods would later appear much smaller, and would be consumed by urban sprawl. The eldest of four siblings, MacLeod’s childhood pastimes included hosting séances, orchestrating Ouija board sessions and constructing haunted houses, in which she acted as director, prop-master and costumer. She consumed a steady diet of TV, including *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom* every Sunday night. At the time, MacLeod was oblivious to the dubious “nature” staging tricks going on behind the scenes, particularly Disney’s dark agenda of American imperialism, paternalism, gender stereotyping and environmental exploitation, and these fairy tales’ tendency to pervert our interactions with nature and culture. Upon graduating from high school, MacLeod high-tailed it out of London and travelled Europe. She attended Concordia to study film, and although she failed that class, she received an A in art. It was then that she decided to concentrate on art, which has thus far included an exchange at École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris, various teaching positions, artist residencies at Cité internationale des Arts in Paris and Glenfiddich Distillery in Scotland, solo and group shows and awards. These days, MacLeod is plotting commissions for the Bank of Montreal and a 2013 survey show at Museum London.

“I feel that a lot of what I do is random. I don’t have that much control over the direction it’s going in,” acknowledges MacLeod. “I did a piece called *The Drunkard’s Walk, or How Randomness rules our lives* [a 2008 ink-jet print collage of postcards for the 2009 “Nomads” show at the National Gallery of Canada], about how randomness rules our lives. Drunken walk is a mathematical term for how atoms move through space, knocking into each other. That’s what the process is like for me, bumping into things, trying to find my way in the world. I’ve lived in Vancouver for longer than anywhere else, but I still don’t feel like I belong here.”

Like MacLeod and her massive sparrows, most of us are invader species, for better and for worse. But with *The Birds*, MacLeod has carved out a place in the public conversation. “I was at the site one day,” she recalls. “This woman walked up and said, ‘Did you ever consider that the birds might frighten small children? As a mother...’ On and on. They were the most innocuous things I could have possibly thought to do! I can’t be responsible for how other people will perceive something.”

I think she’s misleading me again. “You’re right,” she says. “I love the



idea of scaring small children. It’s also a reminder of our colonial past, that we do things that might seem quite insignificant, like introducing something that reminds us of home, that might end up having a greater impact than we anticipated.”

With *The Birds*, MacLeod has created a portent for us to reflect on our past fables and follies and on our visions of the future. This spectral scene in an otherwise homogenous urban environment incites us to fix the experience to memory. *The Birds* are preposterous, surprising, precarious and menacing keepers of this time and place. They’re also archetypes, drawing us into a fairy-tale landscape that dwarfs reality. And like the suburban patch of woods that once seemed so vast and spooky, children might return to find them so much smaller than they remembered. Or, given that the Olympic village just went into receivership, rendering the empty condos and its concrete park a ghost town in the middle of the city—ideal MacLeod terrain—they might find that the birds are gone altogether, leaving unreliable memory charged with their survival. ■