



THE ONLY SHOW IN TOWN

Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson

DAVID WINTON **BELL GALLERY**, BROWN UNIVERSITY



Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, with Evan Lipton at Jacob's Point

IT'S 4:30 A.M. ON A LATE-JUNE MORNING

when I arrive to pick up Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson from their bed-and-breakfast in Providence. We are on our way south, to Jacob's Point, a marsh in Warren, RI, where Deirdre Robinson and Steve Reinert are researching saltmarsh sparrows. As we arrive, the sun is rising on the marsh, glistening in dew on the grasses, and the temperature is already rising. It is peaceful and beautiful, and awe inspiring. The crew has set up, going about their business of looking for saltmarsh sparrow nests: small indentations in knee-high grasses that are invisible to the untrained eye. Their task is to band the birds and to record their nesting habits, their successes, and their unfortunate and increasing failures in the face of incrementally rising sea levels.

Experiences such as this are commonplace for Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, whose research-based art practice has led them to collaborate with specialists in far-flung natural and urban settings around the globe.¹ Over their twenty-year collaboration, they have created artworks addressing California condors and humpback chub in Arizona's Grand Canyon, polar bears living in Alaska and taxidermied in the UK, seals in Iceland, gulls in Sweden—and our pets and pests in city centers, among other animals. In each of their projects, they examine the “cultural lives” of animals—the relationship

between non-human and human animals and how human culture intersects with, and often interrupts, the balance of nature. Their works intersect with issues in animal studies, as well as broader studies of colonialism, ecology, and climate change.

Which brings us to the saltmarsh sparrow. What story do Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson have to tell us about the saltmarsh sparrow, and what story do the sparrows have to tell about us? Living exclusively in narrow and depleted marshlands along the eastern coast of the US, saltmarsh sparrows are threatened by landfilling for development on one side and sea-level rise on the other. Rhode Island's saltmarshes are among the most vulnerable in the United States because of their low elevation and because the rate of sea-level rise in the Northeast is higher than in other places.²

Saltmarsh sparrows are one of the many species that breed in this delicate and endangered landscape. Nesting on the ground, saltmarsh sparrows—*Ammospiza caudacuta*—have evolved a highly particularized breeding habit that allows them to mate, lay and hatch eggs, and fledge chicks within twenty-eight-day cycles—the time between high tides when the marshes flood. The female lays her first egg five days after mating, then lays one each day for two or three days (the chicks may be the offspring of several males, who have no responsibility for rearing chicks). Incubation takes about twelve days, and it takes seven to eight days for the chick to be strong enough to climb out of the nest (they cannot fly or swim). If the process is not perfectly performed—if the female has mated late or built her nest too close to the water's edge—all may be lost: when the water rises, the eggs can wash out of the nest, and chicks that are too young to climb up the marsh grasses will die of exposure or drown. Sea-level rise from climate change has shifted this delicate balance. Saltmarsh sparrow populations have decreased by 75 percent since 1998, and at some point in the next fifty years

the sparrows will cease to exist.³ Although there are aspirations for floating saltmarshes and other extraordinary measures, the impending loss of the species is accepted fact among the ornithological community; it was this assertion, made by ornithologist Charles Clarkson during an early interview for the artists' project at Brown, that stunned Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson and catalyzed their exploration into the plight of the saltmarsh sparrow.

Avian researchers—like Robinson and Reinert, and Chris Elphick, principal investigator of SHARP, the Saltmarsh Habitation and Avian and Research Program—are racing the clock and the tides to learn as much as possible about saltmarsh sparrows before their expected extinction, and to build support for saving other saltmarsh species. In the spring of 2017, Robinson and Reinert initiated their citizen science project, the Saltmarsh Sparrow Research Initiative (SALSri). The impetus was a serendipitous sighting of a banded saltmarsh sparrow at Jacob's Point, made by Robinson the previous summer. Finding a banded bird is unusual. Curious to know more, Robinson elicited the help of Reinert, a Master Bander. They captured and identified the bird. Referring to the band codes, they learned that she had been banded in Florida on October 31, 2015. This tiny bird, weighing only 0.7 ounce, had migrated 1,243 miles from Florida to Rhode Island—setting the record for the longest documented migration for her species.



Elevation #3: *Salicornia depressa*, 2019
Composite, digital photomacrographic image and wood, 172 x 44"



Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's research-based artworks are multi-disciplinary in nature, most often taking the form

of installations and involving diverse media that include sculpture, found objects and materials, video, audio, drawing, photography and texts. In *The Only Show in Town*, as in their other projects, they “represent the process of research itself.” Through a series of five works in the exhibition, the artists invite us to join them in the saltmarsh and to share their experience, which Mark describes as “the significant search for some understanding not yet known.”⁴

As they entered the saltmarsh on that June morning, the artist team was instructed in the first rule of the marsh: the need to walk slowly and deliberately in order to study the ground beneath their feet, “to distinguish between promising-looking twists of dried grass and the constructions that might hold and have once held the eggs and hatchlings of saltmarsh sparrows.”⁵ Robinson pointed out nests and gave instructions for finding them. Mark was a natural, identifying a nest almost immediately. In the exhibition, this search is translated into an arrangement (a “field” or “marsh”) of photographs. Viewing the photos, which are shot looking down on tangles of grasses, we join in the search for nests, scrutinizing what lies beneath the surface texture to find the tell-tale indentation of the nests.

While Mark sought out nests, Reinert instructed Bryndis in the identification and properties of cordgrass, salt hay grass, and glasswort—plants common to the marsh. The artwork entitled *Elevation #3: Salicornia depressa* is their 172-inch-high photograph of one such plant, commonly known as glasswort or pickleweed. Fleishy and salt-tolerant, glasswort is usually the first vegetation to appear in high-salt environments, making it invaluable in the establishment of new marshes. Additionally, it provides a habitat for invertebrates, is a food source for many animals, and is edible by humans.

Working with student technicians and a photomacrographic system at the RISD Nature Lab, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson scanned a sample of



Elevation #1: escape/release/escape 4, 2019
Digital photograph, 41 x 27½"



Elevation #1: escape/release/escape 1, 2019
Digital photograph, 41 x 27½"

the grass in more than twenty sections—each section stack-scanned sixty-five times—and later reassembled these in Photoshop to produce this highly detailed image. Its extreme magnification invites us to look closely, to examine the plant in a way not possible with the naked eye, and to recognize in it a bird's-eye view—correspondent with the view of the diminutive saltmarsh sparrow.

Elevation #3: Salicornia depressa reflects the artists' concerns with “plant blindness.” Identified by the biologists James H. Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler in the late 1990s, plant blindness refers to the human tendency to ignore plant species and to disregard their importance.

*We defined plant blindness as: the inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment—leading to: (a) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere, and in human affairs; (b) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the lifeforms belonging to the Plant Kingdom; and (c) the misguided, anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals, leading to the erroneous conclusion that they are unworthy of human consideration.*⁶

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson contend that “in view of increasing species extinction, the world can no longer afford our citizens to see ‘nothing’ when they look at plants, the basis of most life on earth.”⁷ In a symbolic act of respect the artists returned the specimen of glasswort to Jacob's Point and replanted it.

In *Elevation #4: cascade*, a work that snakes its way across the gallery floor, the interdependency and complexity of the saltmarsh habitat is indicated in several hundred ceramic tiles impressed with the names of animals, birds, insects, and plants that live in or frequent the marsh and constitute its ecosystem.

Some of these species, like the saltmarsh sparrow, seaside sparrow, and clapper rail are “obligates” that spend their entire life cycle in the marsh. Others breed in the marshes and elsewhere, and may survive the loss of saltmarshes. Still others come to feed in the fertile environment of the marsh. The artists make visible the richness of species that thrive in the saltmarsh, out of view of urban dwellers. They quantify the variety of plants, insects, birds, and animals that will be lost or displaced when rising waters overtake and flood the marsh.

At Jacob's Point, the artists watched as Robinson and Reinert carefully captured the birds in mist nets, quickly took measurements and banded their legs for future tracking, before releasing them. There is something magical about that moment of release, when the bird is freed and lifts off from the hand of the researcher; it stems from the encounter of two

species in unusually close proximity, and from the release of anxiety in both bird and human as the encounter ends. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson have captured this instant in a series of photographs that they describe as an “homage to the carers of the birds.”⁸ While the photographs are that—a recognition of the humans who truly see and care for other species—they also hold darker implications. For here, the artists present us with an unrecognizable landscape. Colors have shifted to eerie, otherworldly hues: grasses are a mixture of navy and magenta, the sky an odd gray-pink. With these alterations, the artists definitively remove their images from the realm of documentary or environmental photography. Images that would otherwise read as sweet and wistful, take on an ominous and dystopic air. The manipulation in color forecasts our future world, in which the birds that disappear off the edge of the photos or out of the picture frame are no longer simply escaping our grasp; they are escaping our world.

Viewers to the exhibition will note the lack of representative images of our ostensible subject, the saltmarsh sparrow. Reinforcing the theme of “searching” and suggesting the extinction of the bird, the artists offer only one such view, and they position it as the culmination of our viewing experience. A bird blind, traditionally used for viewing and study, sits at the rear of the gallery: Through the window in the blind we observe a three-dimensional likeness of a saltmarsh sparrow. Perched on a branch, the life-size bird ruffles her feathers as she observes her surroundings (the marsh or us). The artists draw attention to the reversal of roles, of the bird observing us or, alternatively, of our attempting to look out through the eyes of the bird. The illusion is created via the theatrical technique called “Pepper's ghost,” which employs a mirror to “throw” an image into view. The image is fleeting, reduced to a ten-second loop that the artists liken to a “relic”—an object of future remembrance.⁹

The extinction of the saltmarsh sparrow is foretold.

We have experienced this before with Martha the passenger pigeon who died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914, and with Lonesome George the last known Pinta Island tortoise of the Galapagos Islands, who died on June 24, 2012, and with multitudes of less famous examples of species collapse. In this period of extraordinary and human-generated changes to our environment, how should we respond to the loss of this small, somewhat hidden, and un-iconic bird, whose existence may seem insignificant to those humans who are neither biologists nor environmentalists, nor even avid birders?

For Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson the answer is clear:

*When the extinction of a species occurs, it is neither enough nor appropriate to close ranks and “carry on regardless.” We should learn to grieve and through that process come to an understanding of how it is we are changed—and how it is we should go on.*¹⁰

As artists we consider art to be both the most promising platform and the most likely instrument by which...traditionally discrete knowledge-fields will [combine to] succeed in effecting significant and increasingly urgent cultural and behavioral change.

*And change is the only show in town.*¹¹

Jo-Ann Conklin



LEFT
Deirdre Robinson and Steve Reinert at Jacob's Point

RIGHT
Elevation #5: hide/blind/hide, 2019
Two-way mirror, video, monitor, media player, marsh grasses, wood and MDF, 85 x 98½ x 71"



Elevation #2: moon/wake/moon/wake/moon/wake, 2019
Digital photographs, 11⅝ x 16½" each

Notes

- Research for *The Only Show in Town* was conducted over a two-year period between 2017 and 2019.
- “According to SLAMM (Sea Level Affecting Marshes Model) project maps, Rhode Island is poised to lose 13 percent of its marshes with one foot of sea-level-rise; 52 percent of marshes with three feet of sea-level rise; and a staggering 87 percent of its marshes with five feet of sea-level rise.” http://www.cmmc.state.ri.us/news/2017_1016_wc_rssm.html. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecasts a sea-level rise of nine to eleven feet by 2100, foretelling the demise of RI saltmarshes.
- The results of Reinert and Robinson's study are not encouraging. Of the twenty-seven nests that were monitored in 2018, only nine were successful in fledging at least one chick. More than half of the nests were lost to flooding. 2017–2018 Summary: Breeding Ecology of Saltmarsh Sparrows (*Ammodramus caudacutus*) in Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hvEXL2TqKisV6gUyY_JNmviV0ITA20x/view accessed 2/15/19. “Saltmarsh sparrows (*Ammodramus caudacuta*) were previously classified as Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*), thus the use of both scientific names.
- Email correspondence with artists, 9/27/18.
- Ibid.
- James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, “Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness,” in *Plant Science Bulletin*, Spring 2001. <https://www.botany.org/bsa/psb/2001/psb47-1.pdf> accessed 2/15/19.
- Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, Dawn Sanders, Eva Nyberg, and Bente Eriksen Molau, *Beyond Plant Blindness*. <https://snæbjörnsdóttirwilson.com/category/projects/beyond-plant-blindness/> accessed 2/1/19.
- Conversation with the artists, 1/25/19.
- Email from the artists, 2/24/19.
- Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, “Other Stories...On Power and Letting Go,” in *You Must Carry Me Now: The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species*, Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, Arizona State University Art Museum, 241.
- Email correspondence with artists, 9/27/18.





detail of *Elevation #5: hide/blind/hide*, 2019

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson's projects and exhibitions have been shown internationally in the UK, Europe, Australia, and the US. Their forthcoming solo exhibition at the Anchorage Museum, Alaska, is supported by their 2015–20 Polar Lab Artists' Residency. Snæbjörnsdóttir is Professor and MA program director at the Iceland University of the Arts, Reykjavík. Wilson is Professor in Fine Art and Course Leader in MA Contemporary Fine Art at the University of Cumbria, Institute of the Arts, UK.

LEFT

Elevation #4: cascade, 2019
Ceramic tiles and wood, dimensions variable

COVER

detail of *Elevation #1: escape/release/escape 3*, 2019
Digital photograph, 41 x 27½"

The artists would like to thank Deirdre Robinson, Steve Reinert, Evan Lipton and Katie Christ of the Saltmarsh Sparrow Research Initiative; ornithologists Charles Clarkson and Chris Elphick; Neal Overstrom from the RISD Nature Lab; Kevin Smith and Thierry Gentis of the Haffenreffer Museum; David W. Gregg and Hope Leeson from the Rhode Island Natural History Survey; Mark Bertness, Brown University professor of biology; filmmakers Jim Zipp and Garth McElroy; Bell Gallery preparators Ian Budish and Naushon Hale; the Iceland University of the Arts, Reykjavík, and the University of Cumbria, Institute of the Arts, UK; and for technical assistance from Paul Maguire, Ariadna Mangrané, Michael Coombs, and Dave Norman.

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