

Cover Essay

We Are All Animals

Peter Daszak and Megan E. Walsh

EcoHealth Alliance, New York

*We are all animals,
We are all animals,
“I’m a budgie, I live in a cage, I hop about, I eat the
seeds and drink water, I sharpen my beak on the shell,
I tweet,
I bite the bars and ding the bell.”*

Diagram Brothers, ‘We are all animals’ from their 1978 album “*Some Marvels of Modern Science*”

In this issue’s cover art, “Endangered Bird #78,” Juan Travieso juxtaposes painterly skills with masterful pop art to create an assault on our senses—an ironic image of hope and ultimately despair. He forces the image of a bright-eyed honeycreeper, plucked as if from a field guide to birds of Hawai’i, onto a newborn child. The baby’s eyes are closed, its mouth opening to gulp its first lungful of air, a powerful image of renewal and vitality. As we take in the contrasts of technique, tone, and subject, we are drawn beyond the disconnect, and into the intimacy of this picture. What could be, perhaps, two separate images, becomes one chaotic vision of struggle. The baby seems distressed as it comes to terms with its new situation—its life force spilled red across the image. The parent’s hands cradle its body, at once nurturing it, at the same time, perhaps, forcing its entry into the world? Death, or the imminent risk of it, pervades this montage. The parent’s hands are filled with blue, the color of deoxygenated blood, of death. The honeycreeper’s eye focuses not on us, the viewer, but dispassionately on the middle distance, on an escape route, a

small patch of remnant habitat within which to skulk, eke out its existence, wait for its own death and the inevitable extinction of its species. Even the newborn child, with a sliver of blue running through it, is now set on its own inevitable pathway to death. All are connected by this ribbon of demise.

The honeycreeper in “Endangered bird #78” is the Akiapōlā‘au (*Hemignathus munroi*), endemic to the Big Island Hawai’i. Its own demise is typical of this group of Hawaiian birds—common in the late 19th century, its populations were reduced to less than 1,200 through the anthropogenic introduction of rats, pigs, cats, dogs, mongoose, and mosquitoes capable of transmitting avian malaria and avian pox (which forms club-like growths on birds’ feet similar to the blue orbs in this painting). Now extirpated from the lowlands, it persists only in remnant, sub-optimal habitat, in four discrete populations, the smallest comprising just 3 birds, the largest just over 1,000. It represents the same tragic story that befell the Stephens Island wren, the dodo, and probably over a third of original Hawaiian honeycreeper species, including the most recent, the Po’ouli (*Melamprosops phaeosoma*), reduced from a population of 3 to zero despite intense and careful management (BirdLife International 2014; Groombridge et al. 2004). The human baby on the other hand represents a story of biological success, ecological dominance, and rampant population boom. It’s born into a world modified through millions of years of coevolution with other species, and a few thousand more of wholesale scooping, chopping and shifting around to make room for ourselves. Like most attempts to grab space by force, this process has a fair

likelihood of causing our own demise. For we remain, of course, fixed intimately through our connecting ribbon to this honeycreeper and all other species. We are all animals....and we share the cage!

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Juan Travieso is an artist based in New York and Miami. His work explores notions of impermanence and decay through a combined language of pop, realism, and abstraction. Figures, be them humans or animals, are broken up into spaces and forms much like 3d models, speaking to both their temporality and transition into the digital age. In his recent exhibition, *Decadencia*, Travieso transposes his work on endangered animal species with works relating to his own childhood and experiences growing up in Cuba. Juan Travieso is a graduate of the New World School of the Arts in Miami Florida, Art Center

College of Design in Pasadena California, and received Masters of Fine Arts from the Museum School in Boston in 2013.

On the Cover

Endangered Bird #78 (2013) by Juan Travieso. Acrylic and ink on Yupo, 10 × 10 in.

REFERENCES

- BirdLife International (2014) Species factsheet: *melamprosops phaeosoma*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org/> on 14/05/2014
- Groombridge JJ, Massey JG, Bruch JC, Malcolm T, Brosius CN, Okada MM, et al. (2004) An attempt to recover the Po'ouli by translocation and an appraisal of recovery strategy for bird species of extreme rarity. *Biological Conservation* 118:365–375