



**A Remembrance of Awakened Birds:**  
Nancy Mladenoff and Eleanor Spiess-Ferris

September 9 – October 16, 2010



Diane Levesque has chosen a phrase from American poet Wallace Stevens' poem *Sunday Morning* to inform this exhibit. "A remembrance of awakened birds" is full of poetic ambiguity. Who is speaking? Is it the young woman, the *persona* of the poem whose philosophical musings we follow? Or is it something the awakened birds remembered? The phrase is certainly meant to remind the reader of birds awakening at dawn. Perhaps something more sudden has startled them from sleep.

In mythology and literature birds often represented as portents, harbingers, messengers, symbols of hope, doom and emblems of liberty among a million other possibilities. Freud used the term "overdetermination" to describe how one image in a dream takes on more than one meaning; the images of birds in this exhibit offer a multiplicity of possible meanings for us.

Nancy Mladenoff and Eleanor Spiess-Ferris both use birds as symbols and figures, as emblem and signs. Both artists have expressed their hope that each viewer will find associations and significance for themselves in the work.

Both painters use birds, whose complex and astonishing migration patterns, and breeding grounds are vulnerable to climate change, as an essential part of their imagery. Both spent significant time in the woods as children. Spiess-Ferris lived in northern New Mexico and Mladenoff in the north woods of Wisconsin. The resemblance ends there.

Ms. Mladenoff's investigations into environmentally compromised biomes or "broad classifications of land masses recognized by botanists and forest scientists that consist of a predictable zone of tree, plant and animal communities resulting from the effects of climate, soils, and the presence or lack of moisture and or physical variables," recall the work of Audubon and Maria Sibylla Merian. Mladenoff's work retains an element of 18th century rationalism—a belief in the process of observing and categorizing and even making a kind of visual argument—I think some of the beauty of the work comes from an appeal to the future that rational people might heed. Spiess-Ferris locates her invocations in a symbolist landscape, in the complicated overdeterminations of a strangely illuminated irrational dream world where obsessive, magical characters roam among fantastic birds and reptiles.

Among the many visual references in Ms. Mladenoff's work are Fracture Writings from Pennsylvania Dutch folklore, based on European manuscript traditions, blending highly ornamental text and image. While Mladenoff does not use text, she does use divergent significations (images that produce meanings, such as the alphabet or road signs) including computer generated graphic elements. While the images exist in systems, or layers of meaning, these layers interpenetrate.

Another much older visual reference might include the Book of Kells, where one finds figure ground relationships similar to those in Mladenoff's work. Images, intertwining flora, fauna, human figures and the earliest non-Roman transcriptions of the Gospels are distributed in over the page in a fairly shallow space.

The first layer of her large works and studies is painterly and sets up a fluid ground or field of color and movement as well as providing depth. The next layer—the figures on each layer are distributed over the surface of the canvas—consists of naturalistic images of flora and fauna, recording the elements of a specific biome. Mladenoff began exploring the seasons in Wisconsin, but has since moved farther afield, like Audubon and Merian, to record the current moment of various regions, including Louisiana between catastrophes, after Katrina and before the oil spill.

Following Merian, Mladenoff includes both flora and fauna. Among the biomes are salt marshes, savannas, and woods and the Florida Everglades. Hawks, oak leaves, spiders, salamanders depending on the locations, make their way across the picture plane. Reptiles (which likewise play an important part in Spiess-Ferris' work) give us crucial information regarding the health of environments. Mladenoff consults with naturalists in each area she visits, makes extensive notes using photographs, and then lists the species she depicts in each study or painting. These lists intensify the empirical aspect of the work to the point of scientific documentation of an environment at a particular moment and can be potentially be used to calculate shifts in climate and other environmental elements.

The final level of imagery, or significations are fluid abstract glyphs, resembling swooshes and logos, derived from the built environment of a particular region. Solar kites, fences, boardwalks, silos and wind turbines (depending on the site) drift and morph over the surface, or among ornithological, botanical and zoological drawings. Each level is painted in a different style; she often uses stencils, silhouettes and spray paint, in counterpoint with deft naturalistic drawings.

The meeting of these different levels of signification, again reminiscent of the shallow spaces in sacred books, where figures based on nature and ornamental writing meet, represent the collision of two modes of being. Writing and engineering, after all, separate us from nature. I think that she has given up Western perspective (although not entirely, because rendering relies on Renaissance-style techniques for creating volume) as a way of going back to a world where nature and human sign-systems interpenetrate, a place where hierarchies have been discarded.

Mutuality and interdependence are the principles of aesthetic coherence which might guide us to an understanding of our own place in the world. For what it may be worth, these are the principles eco-feminists, such as Rosemary Reuther and Mary Daly who see the domination and subjugation of the earth as parallel to the domination of women in patriarchal societies, recommend. The work is beautiful because it represents something for which we have been searching.

# Nancy Mladenoff



Biome: Louisiana Bayous, 56" x 72", Oil & spray-paint on canvas, 2009

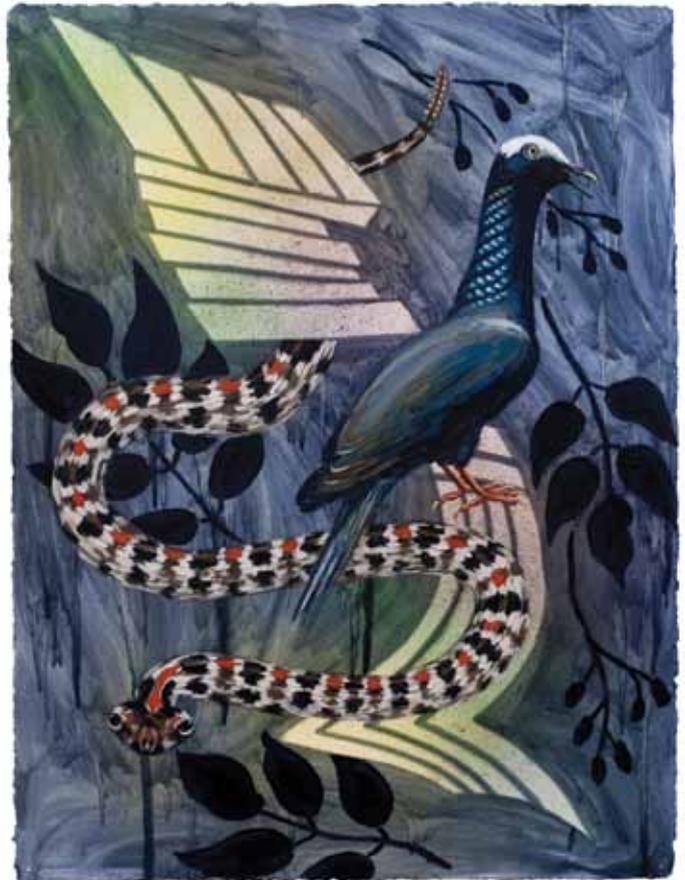
Mladenoff describes her work as elegiac; it documents species which may be endangered, forced out of their habitats by invasive plants, other exotic life forms or human encroachment. Even though I have made a case for a reintegration of imagery, birds and spiders and leaves, et cetera, all inhabiting the same space, they are decontextualized.

Audubon and Merian and others like them, had a purpose in documenting the species of the new world. In retrospect, cataloguing isolates and objectifies

each specimen and this rational process turned out to be a crucial element of a civilization which would subjugate the natural world. The creatures in Mladenoff's paintings and studies often look displaced, despite the painter's efforts to recall their environmental niches. In the end, however, the process by which divergent streams of images, which seem to be riding on air currents, arrive at a formal balance with information, is somehow Utopian. Even though she uses a rational approach, she is able to

come up with something wild and fertile, creating a new language for painting, in which there is space for sorrow and hope, destruction and regeneration in her generative discontinuous flux.

While Nancy Mladenoff makes empirical observations on the condition of nature, Eleanor Spies-Ferris discovers and charts the fluctuations of her inner life in relation to the state of nature and the world through narrative. Spinning stories is not only a way to communicate, but a process of discovery in itself.



Biome: Florida Everglades 2, 30" x 23", Oil & spray-paint on paper, 2010  
Biome: Florida Everglades 3, 30" x 23", Oil & spray-paint on paper, 2010



Biome: Northeast Coast Salt Marsh, 36" x 50", Oil & spray-paint on canvas, 2009



Biome: Florida Everglades, 40" x 50", Oil & spray-paint on canvas, 2010





## Eleanor Spiess-Ferris

Spiess-Ferris works like a novelist who does not know what her characters will do. What if, for instance, birds do not migrate on their own, propelled by some infinitesimal biological circuitry in communication with the earth's surface but instead are carried by a giant woman who comes to collect them or "what is left of them after the destruction we have wrought," as the painter expresses it.

A woman with a tree full of birds wades through water in *Island 2*: Is she saving the birds? Why does she have to wade, can't the birds fly? Or is the branch full of birds like a kind of crown, is carrying them an honor? Many other waders, men and women, have garlands of flowers around their necks. In *Shoreline* (2006) a woman, with a tangle of birds on her head looks back. Is she worried, is she looking back at something? One has the feeling that after a while the narrative may resolve.

The forces of nature in Spiess-Ferris' febrile world, often "a pond in the woods where all kinds of things happen" are entangled, not separate from human action and psychological states. Her imagery is more than ambiguous it is completely unstable. Every creature is moving, going somewhere, often in boats over "brackish water which can be purified by tears," and simultaneously in the process of transformation, within individual paintings and from painting to painting.



*Prairie Pond*, 52" x 47", Oil on linen, 2007

Swans, for instance, can be "nice or nasty", piteous creatures without bodies, only necks and heads, or threatening sinuous and reptilian birds with sharp teeth. In *Gathering Swans* (2002) the woman seems to have control of, or to be using, the swans. In *Holly's Dream* (gouache) the swans are more threatening. They even seem sometimes to be like devils who hector saints and hermits. We might have sympathy with the men, women and enigmatic hybrid beings in the paintings or we might distrust their sideways glances and looks of chagrin as they make their way through troubled landscapes, always at night or in some lurid sunset or sunrise, through stained waters with factories in the back ground. We are always, however, lost with them.

Spiess-Ferris' painted fabulations are rich with accumulated meaning, drawing not only on her own rich imagination and the wealth of a life's work, but arcane

literary and art historical troves. She has followed Bosch, Gustave Moreau, (another *fin de siècle* fantasist) Remedios Varo, and the Chicago Imagists among others into these allusive realms. These dream migrations and her dark wood recall Dante Alighieri. However, the inhabitants of this nocturnal world do not seem trapped or punished, despite some hints at retributive justice. Folly and confusion, rather than sin, seem to be the problem. Her beings and creatures seem alienated, sometimes angry, often perplexed, but they are on a journey, not dammed, and there is no guide, no Beatrice or Virgil.

The work is hermetic and beautifully anarchic at the same time. It parallels Mladenoff's very, very different contemplations and investigations into the state of the environment, and the fate of birds. The anarchic generative qualities of Spiess-Ferris' work, the nightmarish and sublime technical facility of the painter, our inability to come up with simple readings, the infinite narrative permutations—all give us hope in the same way that Mladenoff's work is paradoxically Utopian after all, as is the human imagination, the powers of our science and our stories, our rational abilities and our madness which will help us find our way out of our own dark wood.



Inflated Egos, 63" x 78", Oil on linen, 2008



All That Glitters, 24" x 24", Gouache on paper, 2010



Shallow Waters, 52" x 40", Oil on Linen, 2010



Early Wintertiff, 24" x 24", Gouache on paper, 2010



These two painters, each belonging to a different generation, share one crucial common perspective: neither sees the painting of nature as a spectacle. Although we find the paintings incredibly attractive, we cannot consume them. We marvel at their very different technical facilities, but the work continues to demand something from us. Mladenoff puts her faith in observation and reaches for a restrained and objective (in no way static) model of our current condition. Her aesthetic recalls the idea that art can be both “sweet and useful” as the Roman poet Horace counseled. Spiess-Ferris uses perspective to create depth and delirium, and plunge us into time. She beguiles us with the indispensable power of subjectivity.

At the end of *Sunday Morning*, the speaker asks:

*And shall the earth /Seem all of paradise that we shall know?*

Stevens’ poem allows room for questions about the spiritual and moral consequences contingent on our knowledge of the sensual pleasures of the earth and the workings of the mind. If the earth is all the paradise that we shall know, how do we take responsibility for it? Spiess-Ferris and Mladenoff pose these somber questions for us in color and form. Who has been awakened? Who is remembering? The lack of clarity mirrors our own entanglement with figures and fictions.

Each of these painters wants to awaken us, and to convince us that we can learn from birds.

Janina A. Ciezadlo July 30, 2010

# Nancy Mladenoff

## EDUCATION

MFA School of The Art Institute of Chicago • BS University of Wisconsin-Madison

## GRANTS & AWARDS

2004, 1996 Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship Award, Madison, Wis.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 Plants, Birds, & Insects, International Forest Art Center (IWZ), Darmstadt, Germany  
2009 Post-Audubon: Birds & Insects, The Arsenal Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
Post-Audubon: Birds & Insects, Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, Wis.  
2006 Nature and others excuses, Wendy Cooper Gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
2005 New Photographs, CESTA, Cultural Exchange Station in Tabor, Tabor, Czech Republic  
New Photographs, Lademoen Kunstner Verstedet, Trondheim, Norway  
2003 Hush, you mushrooms..., Wendy Cooper Gallery, Madison, Wis.  
New Works, Aron Packer Gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
2002 Nu Nature, Fine Arts Gallery, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N.C.  
2001 nu nature, Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, Wis.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 Wisconsin Triennial, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wis.  
Stay With Me: Stewardship in the 21st Century, Freeport Art Museum, Freeport, Ill.  
2008 Small Bucks/Big, Big Bangs, Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, Wis.  
Painters & Sculptors make Prints, Crisp-Ellert Museum, St. Augustine, Fla.  
Girls and Company: Feminist Works from MMoCA's Permanent Collection, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wis.  
51st Quadrennial Faculty Exhibition, Chazen Museum, Madison, Wis.  
The Last Book, project by Luis Camnitzer, National Library of Spain, Madrid, Spain CENSURED  
Workbooks, Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minn.  
2007 WintergARTen, Vogelfrei 7, Darmstadt, Germany  
Native/Invasive, Forest Art Wisconsin, Northern Highlands-American Legion State Forest, Minocqua, Wis.  
2006 From the Ground Up: Linking Art and Nature, Linda Ross Contemporary, Clawson, Mich.  
Between the Lakes, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wis.  
Tandem Press Highlights: 1995-2005, Chazen Museum, Madison, Wis.  
2005 Fantasy Island 2, Drake Hotel, Toronto, Canada  
The Promised Land, Wendy Cooper Gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
Scope Miami, (conjunction with Art Basel/Miami Beach), Miami, Fla.  
Preview Berlin, (conjunction with ArtForum Berlin), Berlin, Germany  
Carry On, Feigen Contemporary, New York, N.Y.  
San Francisco International Art Exhibition, Nathan Larramendy Gallery, San Francisco, Calif.  
2004 Scope/Miami, [Art Basel/ Miami Beach], Miami, Fla.  
Painting without Paint, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hopkins, Minn.  
ArtChicago, Project Space, Chicago, Ill.  
PhotoLA, Los Angeles, Calif.  
2003 Parking Lot, Ten in One Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
Focus-Pocus: Fact & Fiction in Contemporary Photography, The Beaker Gallery, Tampa, Fla.  
Centro-Oestes: Nucleo Madison, Museo de Arte de Brazil, Brasilia, Brazil  
2002 Waldkunstpfad II, Theater Gallery, Darmstadt, Germany  
Hysterical Girl Comics, Davidson Galleries, Seattle, Wash.  
Waldkunstpfad (Forest Art Path), Darmstadt, Germany  
On Nature, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wis.  
Natural History, Aron Packer Gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
2001 Baltimore Contemporary Print Fair, Baltimore, Md.  
2000 52 Artists We Like, Wall Street Viewing Room, New York, N.Y.  
1999 Margaret Bodell Gallery, New York, N.Y.

## CATALOGS, REVIEWS & CITATIONS

Ina-Maria Greverus and Ute Ritschel, Aesthetics and Anthropology, "Forest Art – A Concept for the Future," Ute Ritschel, (p.223-251) Transaction Publishers, Rutgers University, Piscataway, N.J. 2009  
German TV, Alle Wetter, Hessischer Rundfunk (Nov. 26, 2007)  
Komprimierte Kunst im Komponistenviertel, von Rainer Hein, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Nov. 2, 2007)  
Karen Wirth, Workbooks: Thinking and Making, Friends of the Library Magazine, UW-Madison, No. 48, 2008  
Alan G. Artner, Small parts, big picture, Chicago Tribune, Chicago, Ill. (Nov. 3, 2006)  
Jason Mojica, The Promised Land, Time Out Chicago, Chicago, Ill. (Jan. 12-19, 2006)  
Michael Workman, ArtChicago/The Stray Show, Contemporary Magazine, London, UK (Sept, 2004, No. 65)  
Nicholas Frank, Chicago, Illinois, Art Papers, Atlanta, Ga. (Sept/Oct 2004)  
Victor M. Cassidy, ArtChicago 2004, artnet.com (May 7, 2004)  
Odili Donald Odita, Focus-Pocus, artUS, Los Angeles, Calif. (Nov/Dec 2003)  
Nahima Maciel, Fervilhante Center, Correio Braziliense, Brasilia, Brazil (July 16, 2003)

# Eleanor Spiess-Ferris

## BORN

Las Vegas, N.M.  
RESIDES Chicago, Ill.

## EDUCATION

School of the Art Institute of Chicago  
BFA, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico

## SELECTED HONORS

2008 Illinois Arts Council grant  
2000 Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship Grant  
1991 Arts Midwest Fellowship Grant  
1984 The Vielehr Award, 80th Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity, Art Institute of Chicago  
1981 Illinois Arts Council Project Completion Grant

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006 Water (and otherwise), Packer Schopf gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
The Magpie Chronicles, Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art, College of Lake County, Grayslake, Ill. (exhibition catalog)  
2002 Regeneration, Zaks Gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
1999 New Works, Zaks Gallery, Chicago, Ill.  
1992 The Goddess Series, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, Mich.  
Eleanor Spiess-Ferris: An Artist's Journey, Charles Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wis.  
Eleanor Spiess-Ferris: An Artist's Journey, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, Green Bay, Wis.  
1984 New Works, Van Stratten Gallery, Chicago, Ill.

## SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

2007 While All the Tribes of Birds Sang, Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery, James R. Thompson Center, Chicago, Illinois; Illinois State Museum, Lockport Gallery, Lockport, Ill.  
2005 State of Art 2005 National Biennial Watercolor Invitational, Parkland College, Champaign, Ill.  
2002 Ferris: A Family of Artists, Evanston Art Center, Evanston, Ill.  
2001 Illinois Women Artists: The New Millennium, Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Ill. Exhibition traveled to eight Illinois museums and galleries, 1999-2001  
1990 The Chicago Show, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, Ill.  
1988 Watercolor 88, Springfield Museum, Springfield, Mo.  
1984 80th Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.

## SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Block Museum at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.  
College of Lake County, Grayslake, Ill.  
James R. Thompson Center, Chicago, Ill.  
Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, Mich.  
Portland Museum of Fine Art, Portland, Ore.  
Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Ill.  
Wustum Museum of Fine Art, Racine, Wis.

### **Nancy Mladenoff**

1. Biome: Florida Everglades  
40" x 50"  
Oil & spray-paint on canvas  
2010

2. Biome: Florida Everglades 3  
30" x 23"  
Oil & spray-paint on paper  
2010

3. Biome: Florida Everglades 2  
30" x 23"  
Oil & spray-paint on paper  
2010

4. Biome: Louisiana Bayous  
56" x 72"  
Oil & spray-paint on canvas  
2009

5. Biome: Oak Savanna  
56" x 72"  
Oil & spray-paint on canvas  
2009

6. Biome: Northeast Coast Salt  
Marsh  
36" x 50"  
Oil & spray-paint on canvas  
2009

7. Biome: Long Leaf Pine Forest  
56" x 72"  
Oil & spray-paint on canvas  
2009

### **Eleanor Spiess-Ferris**

1. Inflated Egos  
63" x 78"  
Oil on linen  
2008

2. Prairie Pond  
52" x 47"  
Oil on linen  
2007

3. Shallow Waters  
52" x 40"  
Oil on Linen  
2010

4. Island  
Oil on Linen  
56" x 72"  
2002

5. The Disappearance  
52" x 47"  
Oil on linen  
2010

6. All That Glitters  
24" x 24"  
Gouache on paper  
2010

7. Babies Bonnet  
24" x 24"  
Gouache on paper  
2010

8. Early Wintertiff  
24" x 24"  
Gouache on paper  
2010

9. Water Garden  
24" x 24"  
Gouache on paper  
2010



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