



Symbolic birds take flight and fall in exhibition

By Robert Reid, Record staff

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God sees the little sparrow fall,

It meets His tender view.

If God so loves the little birds,

I know He loves me, too.

19th-century Christian hymn

WATERLOO — Gertrude Stein famously mused that “a rose is a rose is a rose.”

But, as the expatriate American writer knew full well, in the arts (not to mention in religion and mythology), a rose is more than a rose, thanks to metaphor and symbol.

The birds in British Columbia-based, multimedia artist Julie Oakes’ *Swounds* simultaneously embody and transcend their naturalistic identity.

The multi-installation exhibition on view through June 26 is not only beautiful, it is the most compelling and engaging exhibition mounted by the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in some time.

A viewer contemplating the seven installations comprising *Swounds* cannot help being impressed by the thematic associations evoked by Oakes’ clay and glass birds.

The feeling is not unlike the sense of awe one can experience in a church, synagogue, mosque or other holy place, including pagan sacred sites.

Inspired by the 19th-century Christian hymn *God Sees the Little Sparrow Fall*, the exhibition’s centrepiece is *Sparrow Swounds*, a flock of 120 clear glass birds suspended from the ceiling as if caught in flight.

At specified times throughout the exhibition, a bird is released, falling to the floor and shattering, after which pieces are swept up and left in a pile.

Ceiling lights make the birds, which both absorb and reflect light, glitter in perfect, pristine beauty before their fall from grace — an affirmation of the beauty of life, the life of beauty, the beauty of death and the death of beauty.

The birds not only represent the fragility and vulnerability of life, they evoke thoughts about mutability and mortality, with their associated themes of destiny and fate, free will and determinism, design and randomness.



Fallen bird. Julie Oakes exhibit at the Clay and Glass Gallery. Philip Walker/Philip Walker, Record staff Source: Philip Walker, Record staff

Bits of Beauty features 18 birds mounted on a wall panel that appear to be tumbling and free-falling to the point of disintegrating into broken fragments.

Extending their association as holy messengers, birds are also symbols of love, peace and ecological stewardship.

A fallen, broken bird reminds us of the loss and regret that accompany absence of love, whether romantic, familial or communal.

Peace among the world's diverse peoples remains more elusive than ever. Similarly, the desecration of the planet, including the continuous extinction of species, is insistent and pervasive.

Oakes does not exactly anthropomorphize, but human characteristics are sometimes transferred onto her birds.

The Birds Sleep Too features a dozen unglazed, white porcelain birds that appear to be sleeping.

Instead of sleeping as birds do in their natural habitat, they acquire human positions in repose, as if sleeping on beds.

Drawing on a Haida creation myth, *The Raven* is a white, unglazed ceramic bird with a pebble in its mouth.

This is placed beside *Sparrow Christi*, which shows a white porcelain bird crucified on a walnut cross.

The bird is depicted, not in agony, but with an expression of ecstasy, representing the transcendence from a corporeal to a spirit state.

Oakes doesn't restrict herself to birds.

Weeping Monkey juxtaposes a silkscreen print with a bronze sculpture of a monkey, a sacred animal in Buddhist and Shinto traditions, lying on its back in a glass bowl.

Oakes asserts her ecological theme with *Unlucky Bunny*. A white porcelain, pregnant rabbit is suspended, with its hind legs trussed, ostensibly after being shot and being prepared for the table. A brown earthenware, pregnant rabbit lies on the floor in a pool of blood.

She links her ecological theme to the Biblical narrative of the Covenant with *Ark*, a multimedia installation featuring a gouache on paper, large oil on canvas painting of the bow of Noah's Ark.

A procession of ceramic pairs of feet representing an assortment of creatures from the animal kingdom, including humans, parades down a wooden ramp after the deluge.

By turns meditative and moving, *Swounds* offers much to take in and contemplate about life and death, love and peace, ecology and spirituality.

The exhibition reminds us that rather than fearing life and mourning death, we should remain profoundly grateful for beauty and grace.

RCA members exhibition

An accompanying exhibition features new clay and glass works as well as works from the gallery's permanent collection by selected members of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, which is holding its annual general assembly in Kitchener and Waterloo from May 19-22.

Artists include Ann Roberts, David Gilhooly, Jim Thomson, Bruce Cochrane, Steve Heinemann, Harlan House, Peter Powning and Ione Thorkelsson, among others.

Julie Oakes

Julie Oakes: Swounds

RCA Members Exhibition

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery

Both on view through June 26

Information and gallery hours available at 519-746-1882 or online at www.canadianclayandglass.ca

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