



the nest itself—a mud pellet cup, loosely interwoven with feather, hair, plant, and miscellaneous discard, composed by a pair of swallows over a thousand flights to and from forage and structure. While the barn swallow’s English common name, suggestive of its anthropophilic tendencies, only dates back to the 19th century, long ago, it began the transition from constructing its nest on sheltered ledges of cliff and cave to now near exclusively doing so in out-of-reach spots within the permeable outbuildings, structures, and ruins of human settlements.

AVOCET PORTFOLIO 2023

“We write out of where we write from.”
—Lauren Berlant

The *Avocet Portfolio*, consisting of 48 editions of screen prints by 31 artists, was produced over the course of seven summers (1985-1991) at Art Awareness—a not-for-profit arts organization located on the Schoharie Creek in the rural town of Lexington, NY, amid the Catskill Mountains about 100 miles north of New York City. The portfolio presents an array of divergent though not disjointed subjects and approaches to image making. As a collection, the works are not concerted in some effort toward a uniform vision of practice. Rather, in their discontinuity, they provide a glimpse into unfolding networks of shared affinities, concerns, and experiences of a particular time and place. In the corner of each print, a blindstamp of an American avocet marks their affiliation.

For two weeks, a set of prints from *The Avocet Portfolio* was left in my care. Spending time with the portfolio, I found myself returning to the print *Barn Theater* (1985) by Andrea Callard, which depicts another migratory bird, the barn swallow. In the print, two are settled in a nest and another is suspended midflight. In the layers of brown swirls, squiggles, and dots that make up the nest, I envision the materiality of its referent:

them, to make their prints. The studio was outfitted in a print shop that had been set up in the decades prior by mid-20th century textile designers, the Tillets. In the studio, water-based inks—newly developed by Createx Colors and piloted in this project—were used to avoid the noxious qualities of oil-based products. Additional structures on the grounds, including the late-19th century hotel the Lexington House, provided lodging and workspace for each summer’s cohort. Prior to being run as an artist retreat by Pam and Judd Weisberg, the property on which Art Awareness was located had been operated by previous generations of the family as both a resort and a children’s arts camp. While many of the structures were in various states of disrepair, by the mid-1980s they were well-furnished and provided ample space conducive to an energetic environment of experimentation, collaboration, and development of new work, perhaps not unlike the swallows building their nest.

In working on *The Avocet Portfolio*, many artists arrived with their designs in tow. However, several channeled the surroundings of Lexington, the Schoharie Creek, and local flora and fauna into their prints. Among them, Gail Nathan’s *Mind and Body/Getting Well* (1987) portrays the artist doing



yoga alongside a seated figure and flopped-over orange cat outdoors on picnic blankets with the barn theater visible in the background. Rebecca Howland’s *Black Hollyhocks & Bumblebees* (1987) was drawn from the flower garden of Art Awareness board member Theresa Del Pozzo. Another print by Callard, *Flypaper* (1986), shows a group of bats, which resided in the print studio, hovering around lines of bright yellow flypaper spotted with insects. Plants and insects encountered while in residence can be found scattered in an all-over composition beneath an irregular sinuous white line in Kiki Smith’s *Untitled* (1985).

Recurrent within *The Avocet Portfolio* is the presence of elements of energy and connectivity, which can be found in abstract indications of vast distances bridged by media and communications technologies. Richard Mock’s *Man Perceiving* (1986) alludes to telecommunication networks via a blobby red form reminiscent of a telephone emitting a pair of semicircles composed of radiating black lines akin to graphic representations of wireless signals and satellite orbits. In Carter Hodgkin’s *Transmission*



Dreaming (1987) a swirling abstraction of black, green, and white pixels suggestive of 3-bit RGB computer graphics sits atop a copper-colored circuit board-like grid branching outward toward a more organic dot pattern. Meanwhile, in Ann Messner’s *Whirlpool* (1986), an assortment of seemingly nonsensical symbols resembling those used in electrical engineering drawings and circuit diagrams are arranged in a concentric spiral.

Together, these elements contribute to an image of the contemporary world that these artists inhabited from a vantage just beyond the New York exurbs of the Hudson Valley. Looking at these prints, I perceive the spread of matter, services, media, and information extending from the cities across rural regions of the continent through massive utility infrastructures for transit, electricity, phone, radio, and television along with the newly ubiquitous personal computer. The prints in *The Avocet Portfolio*, produced from these successive layers of human settlement, present a postmodern nature in which humans are thoroughly embedded as social and environmental agents alongside animal and vegetal others—a far cry from the romanticizing and moralizing vision of Nature presented in the same region by the



Hudson River School painters just a century prior. I again return to the swallow constructing its nest under some opportune roof using whatever suitable matter might fall within its reach—its lifeworld precluding the possibility of returning to those long ago cliffside abodes. I am reminded of the final stanza of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in which he quotes the poem *Pervigilium Veneris*: “Quando fiam uti chelidon” (when shall I become like the swallow?). Littered within fragments of past poetry, the stanza serves as an acknowledgment of its own process of construction from the poetic ruins of that which precedes it. As I think of *The Avocet Portfolio*, and the collaborative experimentation and exchange occurring over the course of its creation among these remnant structures, I channel Eliot’s intertextual assemblage in wondering: when shall we become like swallows?

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