

The Oystercatcher

#18 May Day 2021



LAURA CORSIGLIA, A BOOK OF ANGE, I HOPE YOU CAN HEAR THE BIRDS

Often I unfold a small packet that was sent a while back from Humboldt Bay in Northern California. A book of drawings on carefully folded and cut paper, Laura Corsiglia's gift of welcome for a baby whose middle name is Ange. The delicate work is a three-dimensional celebration of winged creatures in acts of love and care towards their offspring. It opens with an image of pelicans, a bird that Laura knows we watch with highest admiration here in the fishing village of Yene in Senegal. Today we spotted our first great white pelicans of the season; the powerful creatures portend good things, whether in a large colony on the water that gathers behind the house in the rainy season or soaring over the ocean. Laura's pelican family emerges from a multi-colored oval form, an egg, a nest, a whole world.

Here in Yene, we wake to the sound of the Atlantic's high waves just beyond the garden wall, to the chatter of weaver birds, to the smiles or cries of Ange, hungry for food. Later in the day we see the weavers in the courtyard, gathering yellow-green fronds from the date palm, similar in color and shape to their own wings. It's September and the birds are building nests, round baskets that hang in endless proliferation from the branches of the gum acacia, like the ripening passion fruits growing on a vine over our heads. We walk again and again down the road to the place near the beach where the trees are most full. The birds are busy here weaving towards their future generation, and they repeat actions and patterns that also impact other creatures in the village and beyond, in ways that we only intuit.

Laura's artworks spring to life in a tension between such intuition and close, direct knowledge of the worlds of birds and other animals. She connects the artist's wondrous flights with pencil to the flights of birds with their hollow bones. She allows movements and actions of animals to dictate the form of her work; the majesty of a winged plunge dive into the ocean calls for a long, vertical scroll, while intimate gestures between birds might result in a small book. Sometimes the birds in Laura's works meld with humans—a pelican, oystercatcher, or eagle's head might join with a person's arms, legs, and feet. But this is not from a desire to humanize animals. Instead, it is a longing to act alongside them, to engender a new way of thinking, and to reveal our sacred entanglements. This process includes chance encounters; a crow and its nest appear as an unexpected message to Laura as we walk down a busy Los Angeles street and these receive tribute in a small drawing soon after, a scene of a crow watching over a human baby in a nest. Looking at this drawing now, perhaps the crow's message—what Laura was able



Laura Corsiglia

to transmit onto paper with prescience—was the upcoming arrival of Ange. She is in the company of the surrealists most concerned with “a habit of mind whose reflections embrace in equality all brother beings, flying, furred and scaled, against the vast background of pleasure and mortality” (as Jacqueline Johnson wrote of Alyce Rahon).

One of the pages in Ange's book is inhabited by two loons traveling on the waters, with a young loon carried safely on one's back. Laura has colored the paper blue and cut and folded it to cause the wavy water to sweep off the page to us. Here in Yene, we see egrets standing alone in the water and wonder if they always act in solitude. We continue to walk down the path to the trees of weavers, and also think of their nests when we greet the fishermen on the beach who are repairing their nets, or when we see tangled, discarded pieces of their old nets wrapped with colorful debris, as if the ocean has tried its own hand at weaving like a fisherman, artist, or a bird. I think so much of these various weavers near the tides that nighttime brings dreams of my childhood home in California, which is somehow submerged into the ocean and where I weave a carpet with my mother in the same terracotta color as the house here in Yene (also the color of current California wildfire skies). Once again we wake and walk, and we see dead pufferfish and purple coral amongst plastic bottles, plastic shoes, plastic petrol cans, plastic bags. We read about the predatory attempts of the oil industry to generate new uses for their unneeded commodities, especially plastic bags, on the African continent. We see and feel and hear from others about the rising tides, floods, and coastal erosion here on the Petite Côte. We watch as a tall neighbor carries a young woman on his shoulders across the main road, which is so flooded from rain that it has become a formidably deep river.

Laura's work as a wildlife rehabilitator has given her a first-hand view of humankind's profound treachery of the ocean through oil. She

has participated with her partner Monte Merrick in multiple missions after oil spills, including the Cosco Busan disaster in San Francisco Bay, where they spent weeks slowly and carefully washing and rinsing birds. She recounts their names like a poem, "Surf scoters, Scaup, Pintails, Buffleheads, Grebes, Coots." Afterwards, Laura travelled into the city to see an exhibition of the work of fellow surrealist Leonora Carrington and was transfixed by a 1978 painting, *Bird Bath*. The unusual scene of women washing a red-feathered bird in a basin made Laura wonder, could Carrington have also been involved in such a rescue, such a restorative act? It is surely both humbling and bold to carefully remove the toxic, sticky oil from each feather, to work in close communion against powerful corporate polluters. Carrington raged against these malevolent forces, reflecting at one point that artists must traverse "a strange magic ocean," to "cultivate protection against the venom of the world" and find "salvation" for themselves and for the "diseased planet." Birds and bird-like creatures centrally populate the apocalyptic visions in Carrington's writing; *The Hearing Trumpet* concludes with the end of civilization announced by the emergence of a glittering-feathered creature who sprouts six wings, while in *Opus Siniestrus*, mankind desperately searches for an ostrich, the last remaining fertile creature on a fatally pox-contaminated earth.

We should never forget the power of animals that were around for millions of years before humans (such as ostriches). As we look out over the water and watch the pelicans, I wonder how long they have been coming here, since they have existed for more than forty million years. There is a curious medieval European belief about the pelican—visually represented in illuminated manuscripts—that with its sharp beak it pecks blood from its breast to feed its young, which ultimately leads to its own death. If at the time this was a symbol of Christly sacrifice, today it more strongly evokes the venomous self-harm humans have wrought through an apocalyptically misdirected effort to further life. Instead, we long for Yene to have the habitats of its pelicans and its weavers freed from the threat of destruction, and we dream of advocate-artists who search for the exact color through which to convey the pinkish skin of the male pelican during mating season, or the colors of the weaver's nest when it is new (a pale green) and when it has aged (dusty brown like the tree branches).

The final image of Ange's book depicts a hummingbird gathering nectar from a red flower and then feeding its nested baby, a process that also enables new flowers to bloom after pollen grains are carried forth on the bird's breast. These systems of circulation and co-existence are magic-circumstantial, and I am reminded of Suzanne

Césaire's invocation of the "hummingbird women" as part of her call to view nature as the marvelous within the local. Yet Césaire also warns of the dangers of romanticizing nature, understanding that this can lead to its subjugation and the subjugation of many of its inhabitants; she pointedly recalls that within Martinican folklore, grass growing on a grave is the hair growing from the dead woman buried below. Here in Yene, we gravitate towards nature's actions as inspiration for our own work. How can we do otherwise when we watch as a yellow butterfly lands on the passionfruit vine, closes its wings, and is suddenly a dead brown leaf? But the vividly colored remnants of fabric and other debris that the ocean washes onto the shore, in one instance forming a pattern resembling a bird's wings (and by chance, looking like certain abstract passages in Laura's work) are still, as the sun goes down, trash. A neighbor-fisherman tells Ange's brother, what we throw into the ocean, it will throw back at us.

But not everything returns in that way; Laura lets us know that today she and Monte are releasing a healed rhinoceros auklet ("a handsome little seabird") back to its nature home. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a weaver quickly pluck another small piece of palm frond, it ripples in his beak as he flies away, like a child's yellow satin ribbon. Laura's birds, the birds of Ange's book, have helped us commune with the birds of Yene, and what they tell us is that in order to live with and in our natural world we must remember there are always mysterious things we can't see, understand, or control. So we must intuit how to work against the wreckage of injustice, and we must journey together with other species; as Laura reflects, "The direct concern with freedom and autonomy, with surviving civilization or not, as well as with respect and mutual aid, beauty and surprise, is something that links everything." As we once again walk down the village road with Ange we see the trees laden with the weaver's nests, some hanging woven together in twos and threes. We see the nests sway and endure in the strong winds and rains. We think about the coal-fired power plant project in nearby Bargny that was recently cancelled after five years of protests by local activists with the message "NON au charbon." We remember that—as the predator birds hover in the air above—the weavers nest together in large colonies for protection, sending out their songs, displaying their wings, nourishing their next generation. "I hope you can hear the birds," Laura writes us.

Terri Geis