

CALGARY: City of Animals

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ISBN 978-1-55238-968-3

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lisa brawn interview




Artist Lisa Brawn has been a vital part of the Calgary art scene for over twenty years, as a founding member of collectives such as United Congress and Sugar. Brawn has worked in a variety of media, including installation art, but the largest part of her practice is woodcut portraits, most often on thick blocks of salvaged Douglas fir. Rather than using the woodcuts to make prints, Brawn paints the woodcuts themselves, producing strikingly graphic images. One major group of woodcuts consists of series of portraits of pop culture icons, such as movie monsters, country singers, artists, and musicians.



portfolio

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The other major group are portraits of wild birds. These works have been featured on City of Calgary banners, in a bestselling 2015 Andrews McMeel calendar, in Calgary's Festival Hall, and in many other places. Brawn's 2016 show in Austin, Texas, at the Yard Dog Art Gallery, *¿Quién Es Más Macho?*, brought together her two major portrait subjects, pairing exotic characters from the films of Wes Anderson with wild birds of Texas. Most recently she has received acclaim for her 2016 installation *Helios* at the Leighton Art Centre, which involved a "solar-powered, interactive, kinetic sculptural installation consisting of eight large repurposed vintage mechanical horses running wild across the breathtaking prairie landscape."⁵³ She has described this installation as a "re-wilding" of the ride-on urban horses that used to spend their lives entertaining children outside grocery stores and Woolcos.

CIH: *What led you to juxtapose the Wes Anderson characters with the birds of Texas?*

Lisa Brawn: I intuited that there was a common thread running through these, and needed to see them side by side to explore that further. First of all, there is an unmistakable fabulousness; any one of them could be a finalist in RuPaul's Drag Race. The Anderson characters have their arsenal of cherry berets, mirrored aviators, striped headbands, and purple pillboxes, while the wild birds of Texas brought their jewel tones represented by green monk parakeets and the blue-green-yellow-red painted buntings. I would also like to submit their names for evidence: Anderson's Oseary Drakoulis and Vladimir Wolodarsky vs. the wild birds *Myiopsitta monachus* and *Passerina ciris* from the family Cardinalidae. *¿Quién es más macho?* is a running theme I have going at Yard Dog gallery in Austin, and these two seemed like worthy adversaries.

CIH: *Why are you drawn to wild birds as subject matter?*

LB: I have always been preoccupied with birds. I walk a lot and listen for them, and try to find them; for example, if I hear a woodpecker I have to follow the sound until I see him, and then I just stare like a lovesick fool. If a downy is at the suet feeder or a nuthatch is in the maple tree in my yard, the world stops for those ninety seconds or so. They are miniature and mysterious and fantastic, and everywhere to be found. I'm interested in details, so mountains are boring, but I could spend days studying bird nostrils and bristle feathers. It has been a challenge to interpret this information graphically, and the fascination is never-ending.

CIH: *Is there any relation of your work to some of the earlier iconic bird illustrators, such as John James Audubon? He was revolutionary in depicting birds in their natural setting; you don't do that, obviously.*

LB: No, those are too soft. I have an affinity with delineators such as cloisonnists or ukiyo-e printmakers. My Achilles heel is German Expressionism. It sits in the corner of my mind. One day I will open that Pandora's box but right now I am still doing studies. For the moment it's enough that my birds could kick ass in a bar brawl.

CIH: *If you aren't aiming for the same kind of accurate detail that motivated the naturalists, what is important for you to get right? When carving a jay, for example, what are you attempting to convey about the jay?*

LB: It is a very unforgiving medium; one wrong cut and it's firewood. It required tremendous stubbornness to master the technique; starting out I had a 98 per cent failure rate. Now, twenty years later, it is rare for a woodcut to go horribly wrong, but still happens 3 per cent of the time. Over the years I have also raised the bar significantly. At the start, it was a miracle to achieve a decent rendering, for example, that is supposed to be a red-winged blackbird, not a baked potato. Now the measure of success is if the woodcut packs a graphic punch, has an interesting composition that traps your eye, if the colours vibrate, and if there is an access point / opportunity to leave your self and inhabit the subject.

CIH: *What are the iconic birds of Calgary?*

LB: The usual suspects are magpies, chickadees, crows, sparrows, pigeons, swallows, blackbirds, finches, ducks and geese, gulls, hawks, falcons . . . and I would have to add downy woodpeckers, northern flickers, waxwings, and nuthatches. See, I almost forgot ROBINS.

CIH: *Is there a particular bird that for you really sums up Calgary?*

LB: For me, it's the black-capped chickadee. They don't seem to care how cold it is. They are handsome, clever, observant, cheerful, and they just go about their business.











