

Letter from Seattle

Bird Lore

'Welcome back', the driver greets a man getting on to the bus. I am struck by his chirpiness and unusually friendly manner (even by US standards), as he acknowledges in turn those who hop on and off, and who respond in kind. A couple of stops later, we strike up a conversation. It turns out that Nathan is no ordinary bus driver, but a living treasure and something of a Seattle institution. The author of a best-selling non-fiction book that grew out of his blog *The View from Nathan's Bus*, he is also a filmmaker and a photographer with a BFA from the University of Washington. Driving a bus at night along the notorious route 7, the bus I happen to be on, is his 'day' job. Apparently a well-paid one at that.

Sensing an unlikely opportunity to suss out the beating heart of Seattle's art scene, I pick his brains about the city's museums, galleries and art schools. What brings me to Seattle, I tell Nathan, is an exhibition, an action and a theatre performance about to take place at the Frye Art Museum. The Frye meets with his approval, largely on account of the salon-style hang and the thoughtful curating that succeeds in putting a somewhat old-fashioned collection of US and German representational art in dialogue with contemporary art practice. Nathan is rather less enthusiastic about the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), for all its rich holdings, particularly of Indigenous, Asian and Aboriginal art from Australia's Western desert. To his mind, Seattle's strong suit, where art is concerned, is its dense network of private art galleries dotted around the historic Pioneer Square district. 'It's a bit hit and miss,' he concedes (which tallies with my experience, based on the couple of openings I stumbled upon in the area earlier that evening), 'but occasionally you're blown away.'

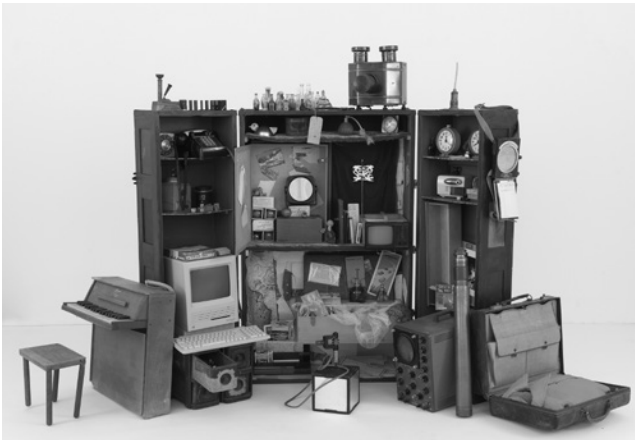


Larry Burnham, *Las Piñatas*, 1960-70

Titled 'THE THIRD, MEANING: ESTAR(SER) Installs the Frye Collection', the year-long exhibition curated by the research collective ESTAR(SER) - single-mindedly devoted to the study of the elusive Order of the Third Bird - marked a temporary reprieve from the museum's cherished salon hang of artworks from the collection of art lovers Charles and Emma Frye. Charles Frye (1858-1940) apparently wanted to bequeath the whole lot to the SAM for the people of Seattle to enjoy, but this unsolicited gift came with a number of more or less reasonable constraints - from collection items needing to be accessed free of charge to their not being



ESTAR(SER), 'THE THIRD, MEANING', installation view, Frye Collection



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under any circumstances displayed next to abstract art – and the museum declined. A decade or so after Charles died, a purpose-built museum designed to house the original 232 paintings belonging to the Fries' personal collection opened to the public in First Hill, rather out on a limb in a neighbourhood better known for its hospitals.

In ESTAR(SER), the eccentric art collector couple found their match. The Frye's chief curator Amanda Donnan discovered their attention-focused practice at the 33rd São Paulo Biennale in 2018, and gave them leave to rehang the core paintings and more recent acquisitions as they saw fit, supplementing those with odd-ball objects unearthed in the museum's storage spaces. The ruling conceit for the show as a whole, that of artworks presented in triads, stems from Bird lore, namely the tale of the 'third bird', the one who pays attention by contrast with his fearful and gluttonous companions – a fanciful sequel to Pliny the Elder's story of the painter Zeuxis, who drew a boy holding grapes that were so life-like that birds came to peck at them. As Donnan explained on a tour of the exhibition, the groupings of three works proposed by the show's curatorial duo D Graham Burnett and Joanna Fiducia (both practising Birds) function as rebuses of sorts for visitors to grapple with and make of what they will. The common ground between often disparate artworks in the trios, hailing from different periods and places – the colour red, the thread motif, light as subject or material – may leap to the eye or require a more sustained engagement on the viewer's part.

Associates of the Order of the Third Bird, who had travelled from far and wide for the occasion, could be found milling about in the old-school Sorrento hotel located a couple of blocks from the Frye the following morning, sporting their tell-tale saffron-coloured ribbons. (Full disclosure: for a brief spell, I co-convoked a London *volée* or local group of Birds.) At the appointed hour, we made our way to the museum in small groups, each of which had been assigned a specific object within the exhibition by Burnett (equipped with metal rods he used to detect the works most in need of our attention). The rituals of sustained attention collectively performed by the Birds, following a set protocol in four stages of seven minutes each ('Encounter', 'Attending', 'Negating' and 'Realising'), mostly but not exclusively engage with a work of art, and not necessarily a good one since these exercises



Carol Mothner, *The Wait*, 1998

are conducted in a spirit of generosity towards the chosen object. It fell to my group to spend time in the company of a piece of hand-embroidered lace, which belonged to none other than Emma Frye. Over lunch, back at the hotel, the five of us took turns attempting to put into words what we had experienced at each stage of the practice in the so-called 'colloquy' phase of the proceedings, which can go on for hours.

One member of our group, fledgling Bird Jo Yaconelli, had been drafted in by attentionauts Kyle Berlin and Hermione Spriggs to play the part of inquisitive Woodpecker in their Bird Theatre, appropriately a three-person show, staged later that day at the Frye's stylish auditorium. Billed as 'Talking Birds: An Inquiry into the Mystery of Radical Attention', this brilliant piece of documentary theatre based on extensive interviews with members of the Order covered pretty much the same ground as the voluminous *In Search of the Third Bird* book that came out in late 2021, but did so with elegant concision. The 90-minute play in four acts followed the ready-made narrative arc embodied by the four stages of the practice that some of us had just engaged in. As Woodpecker put it, "in the 'story' of an action of the Order of the Third Bird, Encounter is like 'Once upon a time', and then there's rising action in Attention, conflict in Negation, and then a kind of resolution or lack thereof in Realisation'.

As we filed out of the amphitheatre, I bumped into Seattle-based Jeremy Buben, with whom I had birded earlier on, and two of his friends. He had told me at lunchtime about the Hideout, a bar around the corner where he curates the artworks by local artists displayed salon-style, much as at the Frye. I suggested that we pop in there en route to the Rein Haus where we were all headed for dinner and related libations. The place had the faded glamour of a speakeasy, and a surfeit of art and drinks on offer, not least a cocktail named after Andy Warhol: a cosmopolitan with an added bonus, a Polaroid snapshot that the waitress took of us as we raised our glasses to toast the Birds.

Agnieszka Gracza is a writer based in Rome.