

## Simplicity

Four beach birds caught my attention, where they hung on the wall, in four diminutive paintings.

The birds ought to be free, I thought.

And, perhaps, they were, on tan-coloured sand, in mid-day light, with hints of cloud and blue in the sky, each bird alone, content on the shore: not netted – or trapped – or injured – or dead.

In fact, all four birds appeared to be moving, positioned differently, four times: a front view, and a back view, and two slightly angled from the side, their heads tilted uniquely in every location, their feet in separate spots on the sand, the light enhancing irregular tones in the feathers, from body to body, as they stepped along the edge of the ocean.

Yes, moving: and free.

And the birds' faces were also distinct, from creature to creature, the eyes wide-open or squinting, as if the coastal setting were changing, from moment to moment, the breeze lifting granules of sand, maybe, irritating to little black eyes, or the waves coming too close, at times, or the bright light piercing too sharply, on a summer's day, for delicate features on small shorebirds.

Were they sandpipers? Or piping plovers? Is that what the artist sought to portray? She captured their beautifully rounded bodies, on thread-like legs, with speckled feathers, in brown and black and grey, the breast visibly white.

And I, too, felt free in the gallery, a former boathouse, it seemed to me, the sliding doors at either end lifted and out of sight, the wind – not rough – bringing the smell of salt indoors,

waving the cloths on the tables and shelves, with murmurs of engines on boats, and calls from birds (seagulls, mostly). I was indoors, but outdoors, witnessing art on the walls, the concrete cracked underfoot (what big boats had it held, in the past?), while I glanced toward the water and air, imagining a dwelling – or resting – place for the four little birds, out there, as I studied the pictures, inside, in paint.

*Beach Bird 1. Beach Bird 2. Beach Bird 3. Beach Bird 4.*

The artist, Andrea Pottondy-Stoffer, had titled – and hung – her paintings in a sequence, the four, square pieces, 6 inches by 6 inches, forming a group, in a larger square, meant to be seen as a set, I felt. *Mixed media*, she noted on her label. Yes, she had mixed her methods, as she had mixed the birds.

But how free were the birds?

And how free was I?

Each bird was painted in oil, on paper, mounted on a box, a shallow construction of weightless – unvarnished – unpainted pale wood: no frame, only the hollow box, protruding almost two inches from the wall, as if the viewer were intended to touch the feathers and sand, and to feel the warmth of the sun, in three-dimensional space. But the painted birds, in each case, were also accompanied by remnants of paper and fragments of fabric: wallpaper designs in pock-a-dot shapes, or lists of numbers and words, like newspaper columns, or documents from ship, these rough-edged scraps mounted and layered beside and around the little creatures. So, the birds, while portrayed on a beach, were seemingly confined to a room, or a human environment, their lives both wild and domestic, with mottled effects in the paint dappled around their bodies, in blue and black and white and orange and gold.

Yes, *mixed-media*: the birds' little worlds weren't, entirely, their own, their presence not in command of that square space: their wings folded, in all four images, their legs unbent (not walking), their ankles dry (not touched by water), as if that small circumference – six inches by six inches – were a little too crowded for an avian creature.

And *Beach Bird 4* was smaller than the other three, squeezed on the edge of the composition, in a lower corner, its eyes virtually closed, its face expressing discomfort, as if it were trapped by the paint and the paper, and the wood of the box.

And, of course, all four birds existed only as works of art. They couldn't leave that indoor place, under the roof of the old boathouse, where they hung on a wall, even though the gigantic back and front doors were open, inviting them out.

Could they hear, at least, as I did, the freer – living – birds, on the water, beyond their reach? Were they content, somehow, to be looked at, and studied, from day to day, as specimens of something real?

Was I, too, not wholly free, tied to my black felt pen and writing paper, for two hours, as I wandered around the gallery, to every fine work of art and craft, while stepping, momentarily, onto the wharf, but returning, always, to the four beach birds, unable to let them out of my sight: unwilling to stop observing, to break the enchantment of entering, imaginatively, into their (painted) existence?

But, no, I refused to believe this train of thought: birds must move; they can't be trapped. They aren't meant to be still. These four beach birds, in paint, were free.

*Look more carefully*, I told myself.

Yes, suddenly, I saw one bird, not four: four angles of a single creature, through four moments in time, in different situations on light white sand, at different hours, with different

inflections of colours in the feathers, and different thoughts in its little mind. I was certain, by then, that the artist was depicting movement, in duplicate images of one bird, the creature, by preference, remaining on a beach, anchored near to the water, probing minutely, not minding the buffeting effects of weather – dark clouds, or boisterous wind, or smearing rain – as each of the boxes, in blocks of time, suggested.

And, yes, this singular bird would leave the gallery, in all four of its postures, when people purchased the paintings, to bring them outdoors, and, then, indoors, again.

Perhaps, I, too, was freer, finally: more discerning, maybe, having watched this bird from every angle, convinced that it must stand still, at times, to observe the shore, as I, too, stopped to study the paint, attractively weathered and crackled, while the bird was also in motion, when necessary, as I was, returning, again and again, to that spot on the gallery wall, and its four sand-coloured boxes.

Yes, this little shorebird would find contentment between the water and land – the waves and sand – not needing to traverse a greater distance – to spread its wings – in its pocket-sized world: feeling free, right here.

Was it piping on the beach, with its slender black beak, the tip resembling my black felt pen? Might it write in the sand, with its pointed bill, or sketch on the water, perhaps?

Then, in that moment, I saw a connection: the artist's brush, my writing pen, and the beach bird's slim black beak had converged. Each instrument served expressively – artistically – movingly – and freely, and, maybe, the little bird was the master artisan: the inspiration for the subsequent art, in language and paint.

With reluctance, I left the gallery, ArtWorks East, to travel west, to return to my town, to leave behind the bird (and the birds), indoors and outdoors, the quiet marina, the arrivals and

departures of fishing boats, the Coast Guard announcements, the moist and fragrant ocean air, the lush green hills across the water, and the task of writing and thinking, for now.

My pen and paper went back in my bag, with my final glance at the wings of the bird: four creatures folded into one, I still felt, which was nuanced, rounded, intriguing, and human-like, and, yes, the artist's mixed media had *mixed* our perceptions of motion and stasis, water and sand, paper and paint, wind and walls, numbers and words, sunlight and shadow, contentment and longing, as I, too, would later layer my writing: *draft 1, draft 2, draft 3, draft 4*.

And each of the boxes on the wall lacked a lid: four shallow sides and a bottom (which became the top, when the image was adhered), so the box, like the gallery, was open. The bird wasn't held in a cage, after all, or confined to a trap, but embraced by a nest, so to speak, or a sandbox (for play), when its slender legs were ready to rest: to nourish a subsequent step: or, perhaps, a beautiful flight.