

Art and music for the birds

Nature is a valued source of inspiration for artists. But what have artists offered the natural world? Would a bird even like rock and roll?

Conceptual sculptor Elizabeth Demaray, an assistant professor of fine arts at Rutgers University—Camden, is testing the musical tastes of our fine feathered friends with an exhibition featuring four 10-foot red perches offering what are considered to be the best in classical, rock, country, and jazz for local birds.

Demaray's concept of art for the birds hatched from a conversation with co-creator John Walsh, a video artist, who sent Demaray sounds made by the catbird, an avid appreciator of human noise. The Rutgers-Camden scholar makes art that interacts with natural surroundings – imagine spotting a tree donning a sweater or finding a rock upholstered as a baseball. She decided to find out if rockin' robins do exist.

“Humans have an impact on other animals around us. Catbirds and mockingbirds listen to noise we make, but we don't know if they might respond to human sound,” says Demaray. While there have been no scientific studies on birds' response to human music, anecdotal evidence suggests that certain species of bird listen to and replicate human song.

“My interest with the piece was to get us to think about the impact we have on the other species around us,” she adds.

The bird listening stations are part of the exhibition “Inside/Outside: Habitat” on view at the Abington Arts Center's Sculpture Park in Jenkintown, Pa., through Wednesday, Nov. 21. Visitors of the interactive exhibit receive a schedule of songs emitting from each station, which will repeat approximately five songs each.

Birds can tune in to classics like Vivaldi's “Concert in D Major,” Miles Davis's “Blue and Green,” and Led Zeppelin's “Kashmir.” They may also hear songs about the winged life like “Marching Jaybird” by Etta Baker, “Birds” by Neil Young, and “I'm a Cuckoo” by Belle and Sebastian.

“If we're going to give birds music, we might as well give them what we consider to be our masterpieces. But the only gauge humans have on what's good music is our own interest,” says the Rutgers-Camden artist. “Of course, we may find that birds have their own criteria for assessing our music. So, to see it they might prefer Miles Davis to the Dixie Chicks – you should come see for yourself.”

Source: Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

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