



WILD APPLES

Willing Suspension of Disbelief (detail)

## The Last of their Kind: Sculpture of Rachel Berwick

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As I write this, on the heels of a tepid 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, the work of sculptor Rachel Berwick could not be timelier. Her elegantly constructed installations — of cast amber, glass, steel, video, light, shadow, and sound — address issues of survival, extinction, and loss. Informed by a retrospective view of the history of science, her work has focused on the last members of dying species, including the Tasmanian tiger, a carnivorous marsupial; a subspecies of Galapagos tortoise from the island of Abingdoni; the Coelacanth, an African fish thought to be extinct and later rediscovered alive; and the North American passenger pigeon.

The artist heads the glass department at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and her work has been shown at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) as well as the Istanbul and Sao Paulo Biennials. Berwick, whose mother is an artist and father a historian, describes herself as an artist inspired by information.

Berwick received a 2007 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, and her studies of bird migration in the rare book and ornithology

collections of the National Zoo and Natural History Museum in Washington, D.C., informed her most recent installation, *Zugunruhe*. On view at the Bell Gallery at Brown University this winter, it was the first of three projected installations on the theme of migration. (The term *Zugunruhe* was coined by ornithologist Gustav Kramer in the 1950s to describe nighttime restlessness among birds at the onset of migration.) The piece was a poignant memorial to the passenger pigeon, which once numbered in the billions in North America, before it began being slaughtered for sport and hog food.

John James Audubon's engraving of two passenger pigeons, in his famous folio *Birds of America*, was displayed in a vitrine at the exhibition's entrance. In its opening room — where a glass vessel held a moving dial intended to simulate migration patterns — Audubon's and Alexander Wilson's descriptions of the species' vast migrations, printed in red on beige walls, provided historical context. In a darkened second room, a nine-foot-high heptagonal, mirrored-glass enclosure contained a leafless tree festooned with some two

hundred passenger pigeons cast in copal, an immature form of amber, from a single stuffed specimen. Moss covered the floor of the glass case, which resembled an outsized Victorian herbarium. (The artist cites *The Hummingbird Tree*, an artifact in London's Natural History Museum, as a precursor to her own bird-filled tree. Its numerous stuffed hummingbirds — tawdry in their fading plumage — both fascinate and disturb.) Dramatically lit from above, the translucent amber birds glowed. The mirrored glass heightened light and shadow, multiplying the birds and reflecting the viewer. Bringing the bystander into the piece prompted the question, Are we canaries in a cage of our own devising, orchestrating our own extinction?

Berwick's earlier pieces also subtly interject the viewer's presence. Live birds and the story of a vanished culture figure in her ongoing project *may-por-e'*, shown, among other venues, at London's Serpentine gallery — originally a classical 1934 tea pavilion in Hyde Park. Inside a ten-foot-tall, light-filled, polypropylene terrarium, plants and two parrots cast delicate shadows onto its translucent white walls. This "sculptural aviary" and