



Susan Silas, *Eyes Wide Shut*,
Image #2 of 24, 2010, Courtesy Of
The Artist And CB1 Gallery

Susan Silas CB1 Gallery

DEAD BIRDS CAN BE an endless source of fascination. Throughout history, birds have occupied prominent and diverse roles in art, folklore, religion and popular culture. In religion for example, birds have served as either messengers or priests for a deity, such as in the Cult of Make-make on Easter Island where the Tangata manu (bird-man) presided over a competition to deliver the first Sooty Tern egg of the season to the village of Orongo.

Susan Silas, in her most recent exhibition at CB1 Gallery has cast herself both as a modern day purveyor of bird lore and a shaman of bird dreams, documenting through a series of remarkable photographs the process by which these creatures slowly decay and return to the earth.

In a series of 24 images, ironically entitled *Eyes Wide Shut*, all archival inkjet prints on Hahnemühle photo rag, Silas has captured both the majesty and fragility of birds from the predatory Cooper's hawk to a simple brown mourning dove. The fact she has chosen to document them in various stages of decomposition speaks directly to our own human need to understand the death process, and ultimately, or more profoundly, to attempt to arrest and control the mysterious and the unknown.

These images are stark and unsettling and Silas photographs the birds on white backgrounds as though free floating in space and time; this methodology gives these images a timeless elegance, but it also grounds the birds quite literally in the world of documentation, though they do retain a strange poeticism that is at times extraordinary.

Most of the images are of a juvenile Cooper's hawk, known for its fierceness and unusual hunting style (they sometimes drown their prey or squeeze them to death), and while the bird appears to be in repose as in *Image #6* where its body seems strangely at peace, the most powerful images here are those of the dove — the Cooper's hawk's preferred meal of choice — and hawk positioned together.

In *Image #2* Silas has positioned the bird's bodies as though they were tangled in a romantic gesture, thereby creating an equality between the two species. More significantly perhaps, the image proposes the unavoidable reality that we are all interconnected, dove and hawk, bird and man, man and man, through death. None of us are getting out of this alive, and the poignancy of these double portraits suggests that only in death can any creature mitigate and ultimately transcend its differences with another. Silas celebrates the finality of this journey, not as a somber occurrence, but as an opportunity to embrace the ineffable.

Silas also presents her own body in these terms within the first of a series of photographs from *Self-Portrait Sessions* (2010). Overall Silas' main interest lies in investigating the inaccuracies of perception as it relates to the passage of time, aging and death. The birds' bodies and her own become receptacles for human longing — the longing for home, for family, for life, for fairness, and for truth in our waking lives.

- Eve Wood