

Murmurs

Bird flocking has long fascinated artists. Recent attempts to catch this complex sky phenomenon, have involved artists and photographers, some immersed in flocks as nature's example of collective intelligence, others in their uncovered organic form. Here we hone in on three flock practitioners; Eberhard Ross, Fiona McDonald, and Lukas Felzmann



Caption

Turning in the sky, instantly changing form, expanding and contracting, vast flocks of birds and the forms they make are one of the wonders of the natural world. They turn our heads, and have done so down the ages. For they are doing something the human creature cannot, and bring awe, delight and reflective moments as a result. Birds flocking, massing and grouping make fascinating organic forms as they move, roll, transform, and reform, across the sky. The sky is a three dimensional canvas of space for these performances. Animals and insects mass on land, fish in water, along with human crowds, and before long, probability suggests, swarming robots. It is looking up at the sky, though, that many humans most immediately experience the avian versions of these collective behaviours. Birds are born with wings and the sky is a partial home, is looked upon on with fascination by earthbound humans, an aspect of the alien avian realm of flight, again inaccessible without technological extensions.

It isn't surprising, then, that artists have been drawn to this decidedly non-human element of nature, exploring the organic forms for the sake of form, and also as a doorway into the deeper workings of nature. If one doesn't find a long tradition of visual work across the arts, this is likely because the means to study flocks, a time based phenomena, hasn't been easy. Leonardo de

Vinci, after all, was consumed by his study of birds' wings, in his search for renaissance mechanised flight. But these were scientific still lifes. It has only been with the advent of photography and film that such study became fundamentally more accessible. Birds are a mainstay of the meeting space between wildlife, ecological studies and the art world, but specific artistic investigation of flocks doesn't appear historically widespread. Today, by contrast, one can uncover a network of artists and photographers, whose exploratory investigations is evidence of sorts that human's absorption in this part of the natural wild, is mirrored in creative expression.

At the general public end of the spectrum, London's Natural History Museum annual Wildlife photographer of the year competition provides an apposite example. One of the most prestigious photographic competitions around, in 2005 the competition attracted 17,000. **Manuel Presti**, a young Italian photographer's entry, *Sky Chase*, was the jury's eventual picture of choice; a dramatic black and white image of a sole bird of prey, a peregrine falcon, swooping into a rapidly scattering flock of starlings. The starlings are almost abstract, a canvas of ink, lines etched in diminishing traces of black, that forms a larger arced field of darkness across much of the centre left of the picture.