

ART

In the galleries: Poignant, powerful warnings about vanishing species

Also: Painters tell evocative stories with no human figures, and an Alexandria show reflects on witch hunts against LGBTQ people



Review by Mark Jenkins

June 30, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



An installation view of the "Silent Fall" exhibit by Dominique Paul at the Art Museum of the Americas. (Rafa Cruz Photography)

In Peter Greenaway's brilliant if difficult 1980 mock documentary, "The Falls," some survivors of a "violent unexplained event" are taking on characteristics of birds. Something like that is happening in "Silent Fall," a survey of work by Canadian artist Dominique Paul at the Art Museum of the Americas. In her collages, videos and interactive artworks, however, the cause of the transformation is not unexplained: It's humankind's greed and heedlessness.

Paul's multidisciplinary analysis of declining biodiversity was inspired by Rachel Carson's 1962 book "Silent Spring" and Donna Haraway's 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." Where Carson wrote a scientific study that focused on the effects of synthetic pesticides, especially on birds, Haraway took a more fanciful approach in a feminist challenge to identity politics.

Some of the collages include pictures of clock and watch faces, as if to suggest that time is running out. The artist expands on that warning with altered maps. One depicts the extent of the British Empire in the 1880s, but it is overlaid with a large rendering of a spider and a list of the contemporary tax havens that enable corporations to evade oversight. Another map depicts North America, adding collage-drawings of two species threatened by the decline in Canada's boreal forest, identified as the continent's "bird nursery."

Some of the pieces seem whimsical. There's an audio device into which visitors may speak and receive a reply in the form of a bird call. A gallery devoted principally to photographs and videos of Paul's performances features a wearable structure covered with stuffed plush animals.

In fact, the costume refers to the massive loss of vertebrates in South America over the past 50 years, a decline of 84 percent, according to data Paul provides. The animals on the main suit represent those that are lost, while the survivors are symbolized by the toy creatures just on the outfit's hat. Contemplating such devastation, "Silent Fall" doesn't literally predict a future of multispecies cyborgs. But it does call on humans to understand and appreciate their common interests with the rest of the globe's beings.

Dominique Paul: Silent Fall Through July 20 at the Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States, 201 18th St. NW.