

Dutch masters, dioramas and birds

Artist combines taxidermy and theatre to create striking avian portraits

ARTS PREVIEW

INCARNATION

Susan Bozic

Runs until December 12

The New Gallery

WES LAFORTUNE

You don't usually find artists skulking around taxidermy shops looking for stuffed birds, but that's exactly what Susan Bozic spends much of her time doing. Her portfolio of photographic prints titled *Incarnation* is now being exhibited at The New Gallery.

"I've become friends with a couple of (taxidermists)," says Bozic. "I find birds at taxidermy shops, flea markets – all sorts of places."

The Vancouver-based photographer is becoming well known for her prints of birds photographed in theatrical sets – images that can take upwards of 20 hours to prepare. Her fascination with birds began, oddly enough, when she was studying the pictures of the Dutch masters and saw a 16th century painting that depicted a woman with a dove perched on her shoulder. Inspired, the Concordia University graduate decided to incorporate some of the stylistic elements of 16th- and 17th- century painting into her work.

"I wanted to create unique art," she



American Wigeon (Duck) – Susan Bozic's photographs take birds out of their natural habitats and place them in theatrical settings

says. "And I love birds."

Taking more than 18 months to create this portfolio of 16 x 20 inch silver gelatin photographs of birds, Bozic has borrowed some of the gentle sensibilities of Dutch still-life paintings – such as the use of velvet drapery – and combined them with the immediacy of photography. The results are life-like works that, at first viewing, create the illusion that these magnificent creatures

are just resting before they once again fly away.

"I've had people ask if they were all alive," she says. "I love when that happens."

Prints such as Bozic's *Belted Kingfisher* fuse together natural and man-made elements to create a kind of hyper-reality. The print accentuates the beauty of the bird while suggesting themes of man's dominance of nature.

By introducing a velvet curtain and using it to frame the backdrop, which is a landscape, the print takes on an air of surrealism. The curtain opens up for the kingfisher to witness a picturesque view. But is the land below a welcoming place that will provide sustenance, or a zone of danger where the kingfisher will fly to its own destruction?

Even without knowing that these birds are dead, the viewer questions why they are in theatrical settings. The more incongruous the combination of bird and set, the better the photographs work. The two willow white ptarmigans soaring above a toy-like tree that is planted in a velvet landscape both intrigues and disturbs.

No longer are these just glorious birds. By placing them in carefully constructed sets, they become symbolic of the natural world that is all-too-frequently unappreciated by those of us living in large urban areas.

Although, from an intellectual point of view, Bozic's photographs have little in common with the bird dioramas of Victorian England – such as the pieces at the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton, England, which try to depict birds in as natural a setting as possible – what they do share with those collections is a deep regard for birds and their rightful place in our world.

These photographs can readily be interpreted as an indictment of our cavalier attitude toward the natural world and the species that we share the planet with. However, despite that valid and noble intention, what stays longest with the viewer is not the artist's statement, but how spectacularly beautiful these elegant birds really are.