

Arts & Entertainment

To the birds

Richmond Art Gallery's latest exhibits are all inspired by birds

by Chris Bryan
Staff Reporter

Near Susan Bozic's home, red-winged blackbirds sing among the bulrushes at Trout Lake, and mallards paddle contentedly by the end of the pier. But the Vancouver artist is more interested in birds when they're dead.

"At first I didn't want to touch them," she said of her fascination with taxidermy, which started a couple of years ago. "The more I photographed and worked with them, it became normal."

The result is *Incarnation*, an exhibit of 17 black and white photographs in the Richmond Art Gallery's latest show. Bozic's works are part of a bird-theme carried along by Nancy Walker with her exhibit, *Songbird*, and made interactive by artist-in-residence Pat Beaton.

The impetus of Bozic's exhibit was her interest in Dutch still life paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries. While researching them, a painting of a woman with a dove on her shoulder caught her eye. From there, she let her fingers do the walking, finding taxidermy in the Yellow Pages.

There and at flea markets, she found people willing to rent their stuffed snowy owls, Canada geese, Steller's jays, widgeons and pheasants.

She poses the birds in man-made, staged settings. This is intended to provide the viewer with a new way of relating to the birds.

After the "props" have been found, a single photograph will often require 25 to 30 hours in preparation. The Dutch artists were "highly precise and detail-oriented," Bozic said, and her works require a similar investment.

For "Snowy Owl," for instance, the bird stands on a length of curtain. She tried three fabrics before settling on a fourth. The three folds, she said, took 10 hours to get how she wanted them.

"You'd never know, but the point is to make it look effortless, so it doesn't look



Susan Bozic's 'Snowy Owl,' part of her exhibit *Incarnation*, which features photographs of stuffed birds posed in man-made settings.

contrived. It looks natural."

In the photos, the birds are mimicking their former selves, and at the same time going through a process of transformation.

"They're all about stories. I don't like to be specific...so everybody can get something from them."

For Bozic, the use of taxidermied animals in her art are examples of one type of relationship humans have with nature, and how we "modify, control and preserve nature."

"The idea was to make the birds alive. Give them dignity. Give them empowerment."

If you take the song of the Swainson's thrush and you slow it down, you get an incredibly complex melody.

It becomes ethereal, and sounds much like the sound of a bow playing a saw, if you've heard it.

Nancy Walker's exhibit *Songbird* combines her fascination with both birds and saws, dating back almost 20 years. For most of that time, she's worked in collaboration with Vancouver musician Robert Minden, who has travelled the world playing the saw and creating music with a variety of unorthodox instruments.

Like Minden is with music, Walker is classically trained in art. Both explore the use of everyday objects to convey meaning.

Walker said she starts with an idea then decides "what's the best vehicle for that idea."

In her upcoming exhibit, 16 saws, a small hatchet and a trowel will be included in her exhibit. Walker creates scenes on their surfaces using tiny glass beads. One work, titled "Are You Now" depicts five women dancing across the blade. While people might associate the tools with destruction, there's a complex dynamic at play, Walker said.

"You have the saw with this beautiful melody, very much like



a birdsong. At the same time the saw can represent cutting down the habitat of birds so we can make them into urban areas, suburban areas."

An everyday saw may not be considered beautiful, yet its song is. In the bird world, it's often the same, Walker said.

"I've learned that the plainer the bird, the more beautiful the song. The peacock sounds awful."

Artist-in-residence Pat Beaton will give everyone a chance to make their own art.

On the surface of a birch plywood tabletop, she has etched 18 different birds whose songs are often heard in

Richmond, like the chickadee, robin, bushtit and the white-crowned sparrow.

"I want birds whose voices are recognizable," she said, so "when you're out walking you know who's around you."

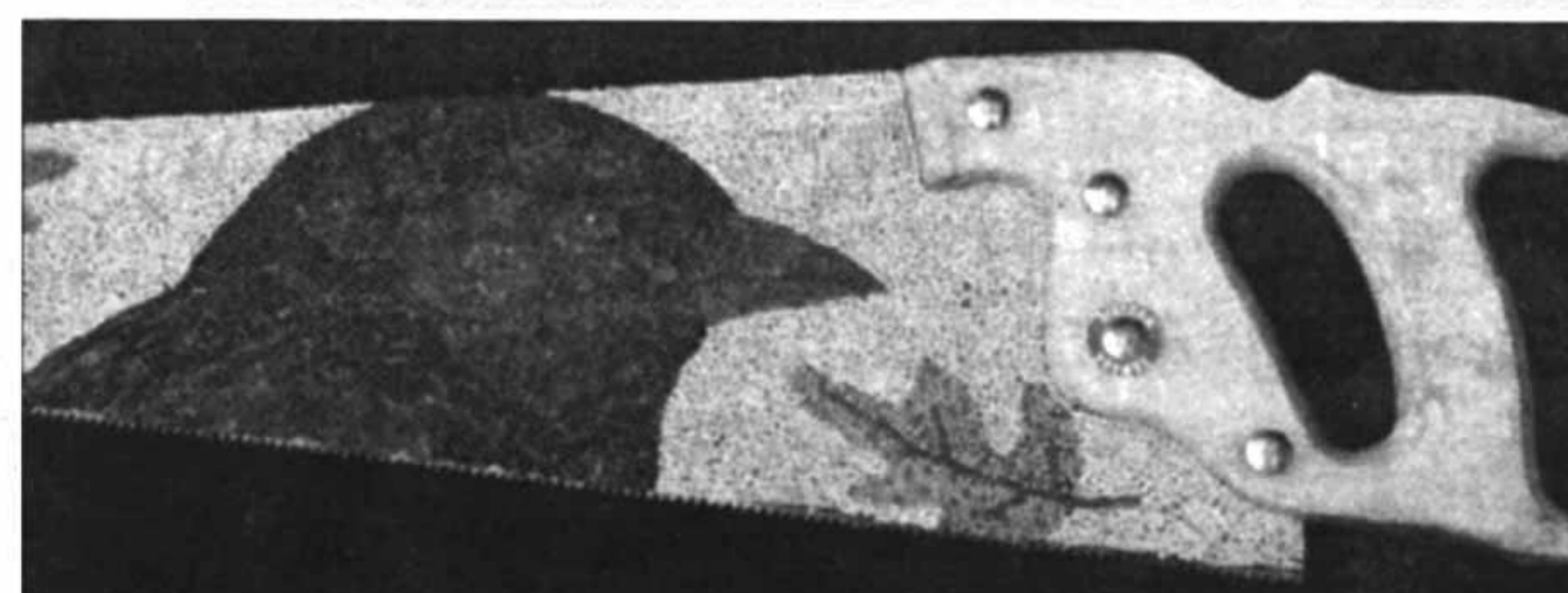
Throughout the exhibition, visitors to the gallery will be able to use crayons and make rubbings from the birds on the table. There are plant etchings as well, so they can be combined to make unique scenes.

In the past, Beaton did the same thing with coyote facts and folklore at Stanley Park, using the table as a way to generate dialogue about how to live with coyotes.

"Kids swarm it," Beaton said, of her previous experience. "Adults come more carefully."

■The Robert Minden Duo will perform tonight at the opening reception for this exhibition, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Richmond Art Gallery (7700 Minoru Gate). The exhibition runs to Aug. 31. The duo's work is on-line at www.lostsound.com.

To hear a Swainson's thrush, and other birds, visit www.enature.com/audio/audio_home.asp. To hear the thrush slow, see www.math.sumysb.edu/~tony/birds/slo-mo.html.



Nancy Walker's *Songbird* combines her fascination with birds and tools.

Mark Patrick photo