

## ORNITHOLOGY: HOMAGE TO RIVERS' HOMAGE TO AUDUBON

By Peter Frank

At crucial times during the last two decades of his career, Larry Rivers (1923-2002) concentrated on portraits of his artistic predecessors and, more importantly, on extrapolations of their artwork. Many of these extrapolations, comprising his "Art and the Artists" series, focus on biographical incident combined with reflections on the artists' pictorial identities, an approach Rivers had long trained on himself. By the time he began this long twilight series Rivers was already famed for documenting often intimate aspects of his own life in a virtuosic manner combining the classic, the gestural, and the mundane, masterfully balancing studied nuance with almost reckless expansiveness. By comparison, his late-period depictions of other artists and their art are more calculated, but – especially in their sometimes-tumultuous extension into low (or not so low) relief – are still conceptually and visually risky.

One of the artists Rivers alit upon time and again was John James Audubon. In fact, Rivers' focus on Audubon's work outlasted that on other artists', persisting for the rest of Rivers' life. Compared to the other masters Rivers chose to honor, Audubon was something of an outlier. His artistic contribution, well known and influential as it is, does not conform to the conventional construct of "high art." Nonetheless, the elegance and finesse of his work had long gained Audubon entry into art museums around the world, well before the distinctions between fine art and vernacular "visual culture" eroded. Indeed, Audubon's unfailingly exquisite, and biologically exacting, renditions of birds of every kind, along with other scientific illustration from the pre-photographic era, helped initiate museological and public appreciation of "low-art" idioms – which fact Rivers, the proto-Pop painter, keenly appreciated.

As well, Rivers was a lover of animals, especially birds. He grew up across the street from the Bronx Zoo (the "largest metropolitan zoo in the United States," according to its Wikipedia entry), which – even before it opened its World of Birds exhibit – featured a bird display whose size and variety was unusual for a temperate-climate zoo. The extended attention Rivers gave Audubon's work clearly manifested the modern-day artist's appreciation not simply for a Pop-art forerunner, but for his subject matter. Rivers' takes on the originals broaden their visual presence, "translating" them out of the Age of Reason and off the pages of books and into similarly readable but technically complicated paintings/low reliefs appropriate to modern art practice. Rivers' embrace of Audubon was thus particularly fervid, more extensive than that of others in the Art and the Artists series, in physical ambition as well as subjective penetration.

His Audubon series, then, constitutes a grande geste on Rivers' part, a sweeping bow rather than a tip of the hat. While other Art and the Artist paintings honored monumental works by monumental figures, the Audubon works themselves comprise a monumental effort – honoring an artist who worked in formats that were anything but monumental. Rivers' Audubonisms do not emulate the intimate scale and touch of the originals, but remember them with their own carefully calibrated contours and colorations. Typical for Rivers, the Audubon paintings zoom in and out, making small subjects large, making vast spaces seem cozy, bringing the viewer's relationship to the figure past the optical and into the realm of the somatic. They may be pictures of pictures of birds, but they are bird-close.

Rivers' Audubon series is thus intricately interwoven with the artist's memory of and response to both birds themselves and the way(s) Audubon rendered them. The contemporary artists gathered in this exhibition engage in similar acts of multivalency. They respond to Audubon's art and the massive undertaking that contains that art; they respond to Rivers' re-interpretations of Audubon; and they respond to their own experiences with birds, and with ornithocentric art in general. They take greater liberties with Audubon's original renditions than Rivers did, but only because their personal styles and, equally, the tenor of the times require it. Throughout his oeuvre, Rivers tempered his relatively cool regard for the image per se with a warmth born of both fondness for the subject and confidence in his own subjectivity; but, characteristic of the post-Abstract Expressionist era, Rivers' eye (certainly after the 1950s) was muted in its passion. These days, the most convincing painting, no matter how reductive it may be in form or composition, feels driven by personal conviction, unquenchable curiosity, and persistent urgency, and we feel that kind of heat emanating from the new work in this show. In turn, such heat re-ignites the pilot light always burning at the core of Rivers' own art.

Riddled with homages as it is, the "Birds of America" show ultimately celebrates the unique relationship in the phylum Chordata between Class Aves and Homo Sapiens artisticus. The singular magic of flight is enough to inspire the imagination, but – as Audubon's work (and Rivers' selections from it) stresses – plumage and body structure also inspire deep aesthetic absorption, and the contemporary artists are moved to (often fantastical) interpretation by the pleasure of the gaze. On one level, "Birds of America" proposes an artistic passing of the avian spirit from generation to generation. On another level, however, it suggests that every generation has its own take, its own birds, its own kinds and levels of obsession and awe. Larry Rivers' mash letter to John James Audubon has occasioned an avalanche of valentines to him from his juniors; but all these lovebirds are of a piece, ultimately honoring not just one another but the extraordinary beasts that inspire them all.

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