

THE BIRDS

Garrett Pruter

13 May – 11 June 2022

Garrett Pruter's exhibition at Trafalgar Avenue is the first instalment of an ongoing film work in which all the birds have been removed from Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 horror-thriller classic *The Birds*. Through a painstaking process of frame-by-frame digital painting, collage and sound editing, Pruter recontextualises the film, distorting its narrative by physically erasing the perceived threat. Alongside the film, a selection of new prints are presented within the gallery. Taken from the film's opening scenes that precede the chaotic and climatic moments that populate much of the film; Pruter draws the viewer's attention to Melanie Daniels' character (played by Tippi Hedren) in which the camera follows her carrying an empty birdcage. Like much of the film on view in the gallery, Pruter's edit allows the viewer to naturally project meaning into its narrative. In these prints, the empty cage acts as an ominous threat, a structure for something that no longer exists.

On the occasion of this exhibition, Garrett Pruter discusses the ideas behind this work and his wider artistic practice with Chris Bayley and Mels Evers.

CHRIS BAYLEY: I wanted to start by asking about your beginnings as an artist – how did you come to art, or how did art come to you?

GARRETT PRUTER: I don't remember art being a part of my childhood at all. I grew up around Los Angeles in Southern California and remember the constant exposure to enormous billboards, repetitive radio adverts, jingles, televised high speed chases and melodramatic newscasts about incoming rain. I think that contributed to having a deranged relationship to images and media. I distinctly remember going on a tram ride round the back of Universal Studios with my parents where you would see behind the scenes, and we drove by the original house from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) which is located next to the fictional street, Wisteria Lane, from *Desperate Housewives* (2004–12). I thought this was such a brilliant combination of things.

Whilst living in LA, I worked in production design and prop styling and had to go to these enormous warehouses in The Valley [San Fernando Valley] which were filled to the brim with every object you could possibly imagine. I was incredibly fascinated by the archival systems they had in place for these banal objects. Some of these were organised by time period or decade, whilst others would be stored thematically in rooms that replicate a barber shop, pharmacy or bar.

I moved to New York when I was twenty and went to Parson's School of Design with a vague curiosity in art. Aware of my limited exposure to contemporary art practices, I was keen to learn. When growing up, I had looked at art more as a history, something that was reflected on, not necessarily made.

CB: Having grown up in LA, both consciously and subconsciously, film has been embedded in your life from a very young age. This exhibition is centred on an ongoing, ambitious work that appropriates Hitchcock's seminal 1963 horror-thriller film *The Birds*. In it, the small coastal town of Bodega Bay in northern California is abruptly attacked by swarms of birds. In your version you've removed the birds entirely. Through a very simple gesture, you have shifted the film's context and narrative. What was your first encounter with it and why did you choose to appropriate this film?

GP: My parents and I had rented the VHS from Blockbuster in the late 90s when I was around eight or nine.

I had a love of horror films at that age, but instead of watching them, I'd watch the corner of the screen as I was too afraid. However, I didn't have that experience with *The Birds*, partly due to the way my parents engaged with it. I remember them howling at these very over the top scenes and finding it an incredibly strange sensation of humour merging with horror.

I knew that I wanted to work with a film that existed within the wider film canon, a film that was instantly recognisable and something that the viewer might be familiar with so that the distortion could be felt. I'm used to working with found vernacular images that are perhaps more personal, and with this work, I wanted it to tap into the larger zeitgeist.

MELS EVERS: In many of our conversations, you have talked about Hitchcock's in-depth study and knowledge of Bodega Bay's suburban architecture, fashion and hairstyles that have become instantly recognisable in his film. What was it about the director's research and production process that drew you to the film?

GP: The making process is one of the most striking aspects of *The Birds*. The film is based on a short story by Daphne Du Maurier which was published in 1952. When Hitchcock obtained the rights to turn it into a feature film, he spent a considerable amount of time there and took an obsessive deep dive into the real town of Bodega Bay. He sent someone to take photographs of the townspeople to get ideas for the costume and created exact replicas of the buildings. The original story was set in Du Maurier's home county, Cornwall, UK, but there was a very specific, creative decision to shoot and create the film in Bodega Bay. Knowing that, I think it becomes an interesting document of that time and of that town.

This film was a real hallmark for its technical assemblage and was created through a compositing method where you layer multiple frames one on top of the other to create the illusion of a cohesive image. In this case, the illusion of hundreds of birds. From the film's origin, it was a hodgepodge of different scenes collaged together and the visibility of the maker's hand is present throughout. Using an erasure method made a lot of sense when I read about that.

CB: I wanted to ask you about your earlier work, *Halloween (2020)*, which employs similar strategies to *The Birds*. In this work you have manipulated John Carpenter's 1978 slasher film *Halloween* and removed the horror, violence and fear which is central to its narrative. You've described this work as a 'remix' and *The Birds*, in many ways, feels like an extension of this work.

GP: *Halloween* was the first project of this kind and the first horror film I re-edited. The horror or scenes of violence are cut so the film has been reduced to around forty minutes, therefore, you are only confronted with character development and the scenes that take place between them. With that work, I reordered the scenes to construct an alternative narrative, one where the characters wander around suburbia or peep at each other through blinds. Whilst I removed these moments, the tension that Carpenter creates within his films still feels palpable. Like *The Birds*, I think you naturally start to project meaning or narrative into it. There's a sense of collective anxiety and mass hysteria that happens in this town where not only are the characters afraid of each other, but also the architecture that surrounds them. It mutates into a story about one's environment or one's internal psyche being the ultimate threat. It's seen as undefeatable because it's the unseen, so it's ultimately unresolved.

ME: The ways in which you have manually erased elements of the original film frame-by-frame, made me think that *The Birds* can be understood as a collage or even a painting. Was it a conscious decision to represent your hand, as an artist, in its making?

GP: I think it's a bit of both. I'm not a special effects expert and it's not my intention to have a perfectly rendered erasure. There are some scenes where there's not that many birds and those moments feel a lot cleaner. In other scenes, I have embraced the hand and the marks I leave behind. That does become a decision. There's a finessing that happens until you can't quite tell the birds were there, but some sort of remanence and for me, that's enough. More important than removing any evidence of my hand is trying to recreate the texture and marks that would be left on the original film. It comes down to simulating

the grain and attempting to replicate the soft lens inherent to the film. This, in many ways, lends itself to painting. There are some scenes in the film where the birds consume the entire foreground so you can't see anything behind them such as the architecture or the human figures. In these scenes, you have to estimate what they would have been doing in those frames. I knew there would be a lot of clone stamping, collaging and piecing things together, but I didn't realise how much of the reconstruction would have to do with the human form. It also becomes more about the architecture and, like Hitchcock, replicating Bodega Bay as seen through the lens of a certain time. The scenes where there's a presence of my hand, or at least someone's hand, feels like an important part of the project.

ME: I would like to ask you about the glamour and campiness in *The Birds* that contradict dark scenes full of fear. How do you think your work impacts this contradiction in the original film?

GP: The campiness is one of the best parts of the film, particularly Tippi Hedren's performance. In the original film, it's in perfect counterbalance to scenes of terror. Without those scenes, I think a lot of unexpected effects happen. In my work, at times, when the edit is a clean removal, one wouldn't know that a bird was there. You really hone in on what the eye can't see.

Often these over the top and overly acted scenes feel very uncanny. Without that counterbalance it feels bizarre. It's very unnerving to watch. At one point in the film, Annie Hayworth [played by Suzanne Pleshette] stares at the sky and says, 'don't they ever stop migrating.' The erasure in these moments of the edit become incredibly sinister. In some of the more chaotic scenes, the erasure becomes very apparent. It leaves behind traces, fragments, spectres or ghosts. These moments unhinge the entire structure of the film.

CB: You've been making this work for over a year and it's still very much in progress. What seems like a simple act is incredibly intensive, sometimes taking a week to complete one second of the film. I wanted to ask you about the importance of labour within this work.

GP: Inherently, this work is a very impractical premise for a project and there's a sense of absurdity in the very idea or attempt of making it. But it isn't enough for it to exist as just an idea. I think the driving force behind it is that somebody is doing this – a work in progress that at some point will be finished. I think it's important that I've devoted thousands of hours to this thing. I see this as a project about time, both time spent, and time passed. *The Birds* started as a lockdown project. One which was partially a way of making work without access to materials or a studio, but also at a time of collective fear and anxiety that existed within that.

CB: And we continue to live in an age of anxiety and threat to humanity, from the living crisis here in the UK to the fragility of abortion rights in the US, climate change, war, migration rights to the rise of the far right. Were you thinking about this whilst making this work?

GP: Definitely. I think that *The Birds* has this ability to shift into multiple types of allegories. One of the most unnerving things about the escalating war in Ukraine is the patterns of atrocities from the past that seem to be re-emerging. There's a feeling of hopelessness and not being able to stop these things from happening even though we can see them coming. In that way, I expect that this project will be viewed differently depending on the year it's shown. At the moment, when looking at the spectral forms, figures and violent light shifts that are left behind, you start to think about them as residues of past horrors. If not that, an omen of something that is to come. An unseen threat.

I think Hitchcock's film is loaded with symbolism and by toying with it, it creates these eruptions of alternative images and symbols. There are so many things one can project into the absence of the birds or the void or vacuum their absence presents. Because the film is still titled *The Birds* and there are no birds in it, it's almost as if the word 'birds' becomes the placeholder for any type of collective fear. I think one of the most striking things about what the film starts to hone in on is Tippi Hedren's character. When she comes to town, she is greeted with this harsh scepticism and xenophobia from the townspeople

who instantly blame her, the outsider, for these unexplained events without any real rational cause. She becomes the monster to justify their fears. It's really easy to associate these anxieties with mass hysteria.

ME: Apart from an omen of something that is to come, people might recognise a longing for something that has passed, which can be seen in many of your works. Can you talk about how *The Birds* touches on ideas of melancholia?

GP: A lot of my work has an interest in, or examining the desire of, melancholia. I think a lot of us have been re-examining the past in some way over the past couple of years or maybe trying to reach back into the past to access something we may have missed before. [Sigmund] Freud described melancholia as 'an open wound' and that's always stuck with me, both for its visceral description but also the potential of it. The idea that when you revisit these moments, they are never fully crystallized. Every time you reach back into it, it alters slightly. I think that something like this project, the attempt to replicate the look and feel of some of the scenes with contemporary tools, seems like an impossible task. But I think there's something interesting about the attempt to recreate something that doesn't exist anymore. It has to do with the materiality or physicality of the original film that was made on 35mm film. It was created in a really physical way; I like that idea of going back into that and reforming it.

CB: This film, or the approach you have taken, reminds me of several contemporary artists who appropriate and distort Hollywood films. Throughout this conversation, I've been thinking a lot about the Indigenous Australian artist Tracey Moffatt's film *Love* (2003) which weaves together clips from Hollywood films, starting with scenes of intimacy and love that rapidly shift to moments of betrayal, violence and rage. It also has a very direct synergy with Douglas Gordon's early work *24-Hour Psycho* (1993), where he slowed down Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) so that it lasted an entire day and in turn, it removed all elements of tension and suspense. Who are you inspired by?

GP: I'm a big Douglas Gordon fan and this work owes as much to him as it does to Hitchcock. He opened up a lot of doors in regards to working with this kind of imagery. There's a lot of artists who inspire this work. I think a lot about Paul Pfeiffer and his video erasures of athletes holding the trophies in the middle of crowds [*Caryatid* (2003)] as well as Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010) and the extreme ambition of that project and this disbelief when watching it that somebody did this. I'm also an admirer of Félix González-Torres, Paul Thek and Zoe Leonard. The collective repetition of these artists is what draws me to them. I also find myself returning to Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and this idea of creating something where the build-up, or the process or the waiting for something, is the thing. Building a tension that's never resolved.

ME: We talked a lot about threat, anxiety, hysteria and melancholy but I'd love to end this conversation with something we touched on in the beginning, which was your first encounter of the film, as a child, on the couch with your parents. It sounded like a very warm and safe memory, and I wanted to ask you how you feel hope is present in the work.

GP: I guess hope exists in the way that nothing is ever really permanent. Even the final print that is sent off to the cinema can still be changed over time. I suppose having or stripping the expectation that horrific things last forever, maybe offers some kind of hope. I think the idea of hope comes in consideration of how the film exists within time, or within the world. How the film is perceived.

ME: Your film, or Hitchcock's?

GP: I think both because the original film is still very much in it. It's still that 'open wound'. It's something that will continue to shift as it's viewed throughout time. The original film ends without any real resolution. They drive out of Bodega Bay and there's the hope that maybe someday the birds will no longer be a threat. Perhaps in my version, with the knowledge that the film is a work in progress, eventually there can be some kind of resolution.

Garrett Pruter

Garrett Pruter (b. 1987, Los Angeles) is an American artist living and working in London. He has an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art (2020) and a BFA from Parsons School of Design (2010). Through an interdisciplinary practice of painting, photography, video and installation, his practice investigates themes of memory, absence, repression and desire. Previous exhibitions include *Picture House*, Brigade Gallery (Copenhagen); *Cacotopia*, Annka Kultys Gallery (London); *Generation Loss*, Galerie Virginie Louvet (Paris); *Traces*, Judith Charlies Gallery (New York); and *Scripted Spaces*, Martos Gallery (Los Angeles).

Chris Bayley

Chris Bayley is a curator and writer based in London. He is currently Assistant Curator at Serpentine, London. Previously he was Assistant Curator at Barbican Art Gallery, where he worked on a number of critically acclaimed exhibitions including *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics* (September 2022); *Shilpa Gupta: Sun at Night* (2021); *Claudia Andujar: The Yanomami Struggle* (2021); *Masculinities: Liberation through Photography* (2020); *Yto Barrada: Agadir* and *Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-Garde* (both 2018), editing and authoring publications for many of these projects. Furthermore, he holds the position of Associate Curator at VITRINE, London and Basel where he has curated exhibitions with artists Leah Clements, Kate Cooper, Jamie Fitzpatrick and Jill McKnight, among others.

Mels Evers

Mels Evers is a curator and writer based between London and Amsterdam. He is currently writing a comprehensive publication on queer art and club culture with Tate. He is part of the curatorial team at Avant Arte and works as an independent curator. Previously, he held the position of Assistant Curator at Tate Britain where he curated solo projects, including Ima-Abasi Okon and The Otolith Group. He led on large-scale acquisition projects at Tate with works by artists such as Rory Pilgrim, Ajamu and Donald Rodney. Formerly, he held curatorial positions at Barbican Art Gallery, Liverpool Biennial and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.