

# New Berkeley Show Fusing Art, Science Warns of Songbird Collapse Archives

*March 27, 2014 by Rebecca Goldfine*

## [QUIET SKIES VIDEO](#)

A Bowdoin ornithologist, two artists and a composer have collaborated on an evocative new art installation that warns its viewers of collapsing songbird populations while mesmerizing them with its moving images and music.

The installation, called *Quiet Skies*, will be at the Kala Gallery in Berkeley, Calif., through Sunday, March 30. The artists behind the multimedia presentation are printmaker Barbara Putnam, a former Bowdoin Coastal Studies Scholar, and two Boston University faculty: Associate Professor of Art Deborah Cornell and Professor of Music Richard Cornell. They worked with Nat Wheelwright, who is Bowdoin's Anne T. and Robert M. Bass professor of natural sciences. Wheelwright studies the behavioral ecology of birds.

While they work in different disciplines, the artists and scientist share something in common. They are all deeply concerned about the environment, and their work touches on the deleterious effect of humans on habitats and ecosystems. Wheelwright writes in a 2007 article for the *Christian Science Monitor*, "Since my grandfather introduced me to

birds just half a lifetime ago, once-common species have declined by as much as 80 percent due to the usual suspects: habitat loss, pesticides, introduced species, and climate change. The songs of tens of millions of birds have been silenced. It feels as if the lights are dimming.”

The exhibition was only possible through the partnership between Wheelwright and the artists, Putnam said. As much as she can, she aligns her art with scientific research to help convey the knowledge that scientists uncover about the changing world. “I want to create a more visceral response to what is happening in the environment,” she explained. “Data gives people the facts. Art gets into somebody’s soul.”



*Barbara Putnam (left), Richard Cornell and Deborah Cornell (on ladder) in front of the “Quiet Skies” print*

## Quiet Skies

When guests walk into the gallery, they are immersed in a landscape of color, images, video and music. Richard Cornell composed a sound montage of birdsongs, using recordings taken by Wheelwright of Savannah Sparrows on Kent Island in the Bay of Fundy. The island is home to the Bowdoin Scientific Station, where Wheelwright has been researching migratory songbirds for 35 years.

“My contribution is basically a sound piece, a piece of electronic music that contains within it many, many generations of individual sparrows,” Richard Cornell said. “All the generations’ songs are simultaneous in this piece.” He also digitally slowed and expanded the songs, originally one to three seconds long, to several minutes, revealing a level of detail not easily audible to humans.

“It’s not just twittering,” Richard Cornell noted. “The songs are highly structured, and there are ideas that go through the song from one end to the other.” The songs open with an introduction, move into a complicated middle section and end with a trilled descent that relates back to the song’s beginning. The Savannah Sparrows use these musical phrases to mark their territories. Although the song follows a template, each sparrow produces a unique version of the tune.

Richard Cornell also created one of two videos for the show, his being an interactive movie that simulates a wheeling bird flock. “My adaptation has birdlike forms flying through space,” he said. The flock begins to vanish as viewers stand in front of the movie and speak to one another. “Depending on how loudly they’re talking, the flock will disappear or gradually come back.” The audience won’t be told this is happening — they’ll just have to observe how they affect the spectacle.

The artists designed the responsive multimedia exhibition to reinforce the notion of personal responsibility. “We’re trying to...speak about migratory species and the mortality that is occurring because of human interference,” Putnam said. “We’re bringing it close to home.”

Deborah Cornell and Putnam designed a 12-foot by 18 composite of digital prints and shibori-dyed fabric for *Quiet Skies*, forming a backdrop for two overlapping videos. This wall piece is divided into three parts, reflecting the three sections of Savannah Sparrow birdsong. It transitions from cool blues to hot reds and yellows, symbolizing toxicity and warning. They also incorporated one of Wheelwright’s graphs into the piece that depicts the drastic decline of Tree Swallows from 1990 to 2010. The videos projected onto this composite wall shift its surface and texture.

Deborah Cornell contributed the second video to *Quiet Skies*, a piece that “connects to natural forms and progressions,” she said. The video illuminates images of a bird nest and a map of an ancient sea bed, as well as ambiguous forms that could be bones, bar graphs and cautionary triangles indicating danger. “Video projections onto the image surface suggest environmental rhythms and sea forms,” according to the exhibition’s artist statement.

The environmental theme of *Quiet Skies* is not a departure for either Putnam or Deborah Cornell. “We are looking at the interactions between cultural experience, scientific experience and occurrences in the land, the gambling with our natural processes,” Deborah Cornell said.

Despite the urgency of the exhibition’s message, there is another level to the experience of the installation. “It leads us to the idea of the earth regenerating and the idea that somehow, something will happen next,”

Deborah Cornell said. “While I’m not mitigating the importance of what is happening now with the environment, there is a sense that the natural process will take care of itself. There’s always an after.”

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