

MYFANWY MACLEOD

# The Birds



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## Angry Birds

Discussing her art practice recently, Myfanwy MacLeod spoke of a childhood fascination with two unlikely figures: Walt Disney and Marlin Perkins. For North American baby boomers (and those on their generational coattails like Generation X), Disney and Perkins were quietly influential personalities whose respective and long-running television series *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, dominated the airwaves at a critical time — Sunday nights when families, for a relatively brief but historically potent moment — gathered to watch television together. Airing back-to-back on television during the supper hour, these two series introduced post-war children to an elaborate omnibus of images and stories about both real and fictional animals, and at least for North American audiences, helped shape our perceptions of the natural world.

Through the lenses of these two men — in a world populated by smiling cartoon and animatronic creatures and narrated with sonorous metaphors of herds and prides that were “just like us” — the natural world was anthropomorphized into a corollary and extension of human society. Beyond our domestic borders and our historically cultivated relationship

with dogs, cats and farm animals, they helped shape a radical view of wild animals. No longer a trophy or food staple, animals were something to be marvelled at and, perhaps for the first time, protected. It was a new role for us, and we imagined they would be as eager to get to know us as we them.

Into this mix, and perhaps with obvious purpose, Alfred Hitchcock's infamous 1963 film *The Birds* came as a shocking repudiation, a movie in which the antagonism of the animal kingdom was both vehement and unexplained. *The Birds* distilled Cold War anxieties and contrasted the gentle inclusiveness of Disney and Perkins with a violent and aggressive opposite. The movie swiftly returned us to a picture of the natural world (not long forgotten!) that was mystifying, independent and threatening. Worse, within this world, animals were intelligent and vengeful. Humans were the enemy and it was payback time.

“The Birds” is, not coincidentally, the title of MacLeod's public sculpture for the Village on False Creek, and she freely cites Hitchcock's movie as inspiration. Here, two giant, towering house sparrows oversee passersby and pedestrians like a pair of oversized, militant guards. Observant but relaxed, friendly yet vaguely threatening, these epic sculptures are modelled on one of our most familiar urban denizens. Like squirrels, seagulls and houseflies, the house sparrow is so common as to be taken for granted, which is why it is all the more surprising to learn that it is a ruthlessly successful invader. In 1850, the naturally adaptive house sparrow was introduced to North America by homesick Europeans, and within forty years had populated the continent's fields and backyards so swiftly and totally that it neatly sidestepped the question of whether it was friend or foe. Through an extraordinary shift in scale, MacLeod has cunningly constructed a monument to this quiet interloper in a way that raises provocative questions about its place in our city and the impossibility of any one answer.

— Reid Shier

Reid Shier is the Director/Curator of Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver.

Opposite Installation view of *The Birds*, 2010. Photo: Robert Keziere

Above *The Birds*, 2010 [detail]. Photo: Robert Keziere

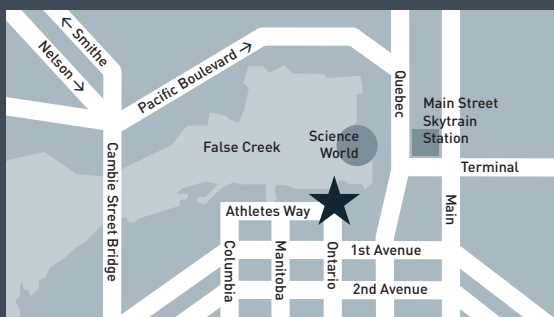


## About the Artist

Myfanwy MacLeod was born in London, Ontario, and received an undergraduate degree from Concordia University (Montréal) in 1990 and an MFA from the University of British Columbia (Vancouver) in 1995. She has held teaching positions at UBC, the University of Western Ontario (London), and the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (Vancouver). Over the past fifteen years MacLeod has exhibited throughout Canada, the United States and Europe, with recent exhibitions at the National Art Gallery of Canada and Vancouver Art Gallery. She is the recipient of a VIVA award from The Doris and Jack Shadbolt Foundation in 1999, and an award from La Fondation André Piolat in 1995. She was awarded the City of Vancouver Artist Studio Residency (2002–2005) and the Glenfiddich Distillery Artist-in-Residence program (2005). In 2008, MacLeod was commissioned to create a public sculpture for the City of Vancouver's Olympic and Paralympic Public Art Program. *The Birds* were permanently installed in April 2010. Her work is held in public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and in numerous private Canadian collections.

Above Myfanwy MacLeod. Photo: Bertrand Gadenne

The City of Vancouver Public Art Program commissions contemporary art for public spaces. The program supports excellence in art making of many kinds — by emerging and established artists, in new and traditional media, from stand-alone commissions to artist collaborations. Projects at civic buildings, greenways, parks and other public spaces are funded through annual civic capital budgets. Private sector projects are funded by developments in the rezoning process. Learn more about this and other public artworks in the Public Art Registry at [www.vancouver.ca/publicart](http://www.vancouver.ca/publicart); subscribe to the Public Art Listserv at the same site to be notified of upcoming artist opportunities.



**The Birds** was commissioned by the City of Vancouver through its Olympic and Paralympic Public Art Program, Legacy Sites, Vancouver 2010.

**Coverpage** *The Birds*, 2010 (detail), Southeast False Creek Plaza, 1 Athletes Way, Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo: Robert Keziere



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