

Jacob Cartwright & Nick Jordan

CAIRO

The breaking up of the ice

Sat 23 January – Sun 28 February

Jacob Cartwright & Nick Jordan,
Paddle steamers in ice on the Ohio river, 2010

The following is a shortened version of an essay which appears in *The Audubon Trilogy: Delineations of American Scenery & Manners*, a new DVD & chapbook publication by Jacob Cartwright & Nick Jordan.

John James Audubon and the Violence of Space

by Devin Zuber

In many ways, John James Audubon (1785-1851) resembles one of the elaborate and unique drawings that illustrate his famous *Birds of America*. On first glancing through his writings, the image Audubon presents of himself is that of a natural woodsman, an autodidact who embodied Rousseauvian principles to learn “to follow Nature in her walks.” However, like the pictures in *Birds of America* that appear to look so natural, to effortlessly present American wilderness “drawn from life,” yet under closer scrutiny reveal themselves to be highly stylized artistic compositions, so, too, does Audubon come to unfold a much more complex and contradictory persona upon closer inspection. Audubon’s *Ornithological Biography* (the text that accompanied the lavishly illustrated *Birds*) indeed constitutes some of the most significant nature writing in early America. The texts are also remarkable forays of a mind attempting to come to terms with itself through a highly creative use of descriptive ornithology for that most perennial of American genres, the autobiography. Audubon’s descriptions of birds, then, are never really just about birds, the more you read into their intricate descriptions. They are records of a consciousness working through the staggering wonder and beauty of the new world as it negotiates a deep ambivalence about the changes civilization and culture were then wreaking on the wilderness.

Audubon’s writings repeatedly fashion him as a kind of all-American frontier boy, and he frequently refers to his “youthful days as an American woodsman,” and a life well-spent observing (and shooting) the wild animals “of his native land.” Yet Audubon did not in fact set foot in the United States until he was 18 years old, and was only naturalized as an American citizen some three years later. In a land made up of immigrants, Audubon’s fiction of national patrimony is a quintessential kind of American performance, one that authenticates and roots his

sense of identity in the drama of civilization unfolding on the frontier, a borderland between nature and culture.

It is this abstract potential of transformation--of the self, of the land, of the two locked inextricably together--that has attracted and repelled many American writers both before and after Audubon. The poet Charles Olson saw this recurrent need for self-invention as an essentially bloody and violent transaction between mind and landscape, one that converted the heterogeneity of place into the possibility of space.

Through the interstices of Audubon’s many self-inventions and contradictions, in the discursive gap between the thousands of dead birds he happily shot and the subsequent astonishing frozen beauty of his illustrations that depended on his careful wiring of bird corpses to achieve “life-like” verisimilitude in drawing technique, one can glimpse this mercilessness of American space, a land running with blood. It is the “real” Audubon who regretted “a day wasted” if he shot any less than a hundred birds that comes nearer to the ambivalent truth behind the deadly toll of his picture-making, the same paradoxical man, an European immigrant, who rails against “the surplus population of Europe coming to assist in the destruction of the forest” by bringing their corrupting civilization into the “dark recesses” of the frontier wild.

In each of the three films that form *The Audubon Trilogy*, Jacob Cartwright and Nick Jordan have provoked a confrontation between the Romantic legacy of Audubon’s words with contemporary images of places Audubon once limned. *Cairo*, *West Point*, and *New Madrid* are dramas of the transformation of place into space, but they are not without their mercy. There is something gently cartographic about their camera’s approach to landscape and vistas, undercut as it is by the intrusion of the bridges, tunnels, and railway tracks that

insistently mark the modernity that Audubon lamented.

Quite specifically, the trilogy's situated presence of roads (and a roadster in "West Point") evokes the American on-the-road tradition that hearkens back to earlier exploration narratives that were intrinsic to Audubon's writing and his myth of self-creation. While the resulting juxtapositions come close to a kind of irony – as when the "Commercial Avenue" sign rots and rusts in front of gutted storefronts in *Cairo* – they nonetheless maintain an authentic pathos for the loss of place, and even fleeting moments of genuine natural beauty (radiant clouds, birds winging on the air).

This differentiates Cartwright and Jordan from other artists who have drawn on Romantic aesthetic traditions for strategies of parodic re-presentation. Audubon's 19th Century words here are jagged and raw when brought into careful constellation with the tarnished images of contemporary place, people, and wildlife – their original ambivalent power is never very far from us. In this regard, *The Audubon Trilogy* joins a growing body of work that is revisiting Romantic tropes to force a charged encounter with the historical present, a flash of doubling time that Walter Benjamin called *Jetztzeit* ("now-time") in his philosophy: an explosive flash of possibilities latent in the past, realized only in a present field. Like Tobias Hauser, who built a replica of Thoreau's cabin at Walden on Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, or Robert Adam's photographs that deconstruct picturesque landscape traditions to focus attention on the effects of deforestation in the American west, Cartwright and Jordan's *Trilogy* activates the latent possibility in Audubon to speak to the precarity of our present moment, be it ecological or economic.

This sense of uncertainty, of an imminent threat, runs as a leitmotif through each of the three films. It is bolstered by Cartwright and Jordan's selection of three of the more overtly sublime moments in Audubon's corpus, places where the representational power of language consistently fails to map out the excess and intensity of an embodied experience. In the *Trilogy*, when these sublime words are juxtaposed against footage of contemporary places and landscapes, a brooding

kind of tension is evoked, a gap between the spoken word and pictured thing that is reminiscent of the original fissures in Audubon's own prose. In *Cairo*, there is a particularly deft use of Audubon's climactic description of the frozen Ohio and Mississippi rivers violently colliding together in a "spectacle strange," as Audubon wrote. Without warning, the camera shifts from scenes of river ice to the desolate streets of nearby Cairo. The violence of nature is brought to frame an urban catastrophe: gutted and burned-out storefronts, abandoned streets, ruined interiors; the images accruing as we hear Audubon describing the "fearful" breaking up of the ice. The striking absence of humans further evokes an uncanny sense of the ghostly (if not the apocalyptic), and Cairo's haunted past as an epicenter of earlier racial violence and lynchings looms as an unspoken subtext in the background of the footage of these rubble-strewn streets. It is an ingenuous cinematic inversion of 19th Century natural history, turning it inside out to read the dire cultural conditions of the present. In this regard, Cartwright and Jordan stay true to the metonymic link between nature and nation that structured the discourse of 19th Century natural history writing. The sum effect of the images and words is to draw a full circle of sorts, portraying the terminal end of the civilizing frontier narrative that Audubon's texts so often celebrated and partook in. The fleeting, beautiful images of birds that survive among these post-industrial landscapes – not only in *Cairo*, but in all the three films that compose the *Trilogy* – suggests the power of these animal beings to persist long after the depredations of humans have run their course. What remains is this visual record of a past and present that will continue to elegize our collective futures so long as we continue, in Olson's words, to perpetuate the harshness of space.

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The Audubon Trilogy: Delineations of American Scenery & Manners, is available to buy from the Cornerhouse bookshop.

Exhibition Related Events

Tour/Cairo, The breaking up of the ice

Thu 28 Jan, 18:00

FREE, Booking Required

A unique chance to meet local artists Nick Jordan and Jacob Cartwright for a tour of their exhibition.

Screening/The Audubon Trilogy: Cairo – New Madrid – West Point (CTBA)

Wed 10 Feb, 18:30

This special screening presents artist duo Cartwright and Jordan's three short films, *The Audubon Trilogy*.

Director post-screening Q&A with Jacob Cartwright and Nick Jordan

Workshop/Drawing Exploration

Tue 16 Feb, 17:30 – 20:30

£12 full/£9 concs, 12 places available

Led by artist Daksha Patel, this workshop will use Jordan and Cartwright's current show as a starting point to explore the art of drawing, inspired by themes of ecology, exploration and the natural world.

Open to all, this workshop will include a guided tour of the exhibition.

Talk/Cairo: The Breaking Up of the Past

Thu 25 Feb, 18:00

£3 full/£2.50 concs

Devin Zuber reflects on how Cartwright and Jordan's short film trilogy engages with aspects of American social, cultural, economic and political history.



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