

Image Formation:
The Photography of Kate MacDonnell

In her picture of a hummingbird falling into formation with silhouetted ladybugs, *hummingbird*, 2005, Kate MacDonnell takes us beyond the classic “decisive moment” of photography to an instant that seems impossible. With an eye watchful for underlying visual structures and patterning, as well as the presence of mind and skill to focus and crop an image at the exact time that chance assembles its elements, the artist has transformed the scenario of a frantic, tiny bird trapped in an office illuminated by cheap fluorescents into a complex formal study—of diffused light, of horizontal bands cut by dotted diagonals, and of gentle color, too elusive to precisely name. The photograph depicts nature operating according to an inconspicuous but beautiful order.

It is hard to imagine noticing this event before it ended, much less thoughtfully fixing it with a camera. But MacDonnell, who also takes atmospheric optical phenomena as her subjects, has disciplined herself to look closely....always. Speaking about “sun dogs,” the partial halos that can form when sunlight passes through airborne ice crystals, the artist noted that it was only after she learned that the arcs of light occur under certain weather conditions, that she began to seek them out and, therefore, see (and photograph) them. Circumstance is at play, but so is attention. It is important not to forget the fine-tuned awareness to the world’s fleeting and nearly invisible dramas in the ease and seeming spontaneity with which a well-composed photograph presents itself.

Variations of the same sensitivities and interests found in *hummingbird*, 2005, manifest themselves throughout MacDonnell’s recent work. An image of scattering black birds, shot serendipitously as the artist watched Alfred Hitchcock’s grim masterpiece *The Birds*, not only reinforces the idea that there can be an intentionality (horrific as well as wonderful) to nature, but further evidences MacDonnell’s investigation of screened light and visual organization. The degenerated representation of the birds reminds viewers that this is a photograph of a once living subject mediated twice over, first by a film camera and then by a digital-still camera. The resulting interference recalls the grid lines of the office light that frames the hummingbird; both are evocative of the pixilation that characterizes many of today’s visual interfaces. But even the intersection of the natural and artificial yields a harmony in these pictures. Indeed, the bright flares that so seamlessly emerge from the cloud-filled skies, which the artist shoots from airplane windows, are often caused by her camera and not the atmosphere itself.

The modest and personal order of domestic interiors is also ripe for MacDonnell’s exploration. *Op Art*, 2007, is comprised of a canted view of colorful twin posters of “Op-Art” compositions in four-square format which resonate with the four inverted pyramids of stained glass that are part of a light fixture in her mother’s home. The origin of the tilt is a bit difficult to decipher. Are the Vasarely-inspired posters hung askew? Does the positioning of a sliver of chairback to the right of center upset our perception of the room’s balance? Is MacDonnell holding her camera off-level? Or does the introduction of a soft, in-the-process-of-forming diagonal generated by wind blowing a curtain into

the left side of the frame interrupt the interior's straight lines and symmetry, and not coincidentally animate the image? There is a similar stirring at the window in the background of *Weston*, 2005, a photograph of a simply furnished room in a Jesuit nursing home and retreat center, which was formerly a seminary and at various points in its history housed the artist's father and three uncles. It is tempting to describe the forces at work in these two images as the opposite of those determining *hummingbird*, 2005. Here, nature initially appears to disturb the equilibrium of the situations photographed. But that explanation is neither fully apt nor satisfying. Rather, as the amorphous form of breath enters the defined structure of a body to produce life, such incorporeal qualities as air and light ultimately claim their own vital place in the order of MacDonnell's photographs.

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