



JASON MIDDLEBROOK SARA MELTZER GALLERY

Known for his half-solemn, half-whimsical approach to the human-wrought decline of the natural world, Jason Middlebrook is less an environmentalist than a critic of hubris. His site-specific installation at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art in 2001–2003, which consisted of miniaturized layers of rock, soil, and plants, and his recent show at Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles, which featured paintings of a postapocalyptic animal uprising, attested to the artist's misgivings about the advances of human society at the expense of nature. In his latest exhibition, "The Provider," Middlebrook looked to redeem and reclaim the natural world by examining the wrongheaded ways in which human beings relate to it.

Birds were Middlebrook's case study here; the title of the show refers to the creatures' assiduous care of their young. In the paintings of the "Provider" series, 2004–2005, brightly colored ink, graphite, and acrylic renditions of iconic northeastern species, Middlebrook employs a kitsch aesthetic to emphasize our alienation from nature. Functioning as an empty distraction from the new urban boredom, as Clement Greenberg contends, kitsch effectively conveys Middlebrook's message: To make a sweet, schematic watercolor painting of a pair of swans necking or a pert chickadee perched on a twig is to forgo the natural subject altogether, rendering in its place a cipher for nature held at such a distance that the relationship collapses into romantic, synthetic formula.

As a trio of life-size ersatz woodpeckers in the rear gallery also demonstrated, Middlebrook aims not only to highlight the emptiness of our relation to nature but also to reinvest it with content (or at least a gesture toward it). Programmed to hammer their sharp beaks against the wall at



Jason Middlebrook, *The Provider, Crows & Drips*, 2005, ink, graphite, and acrylic on paper, 22 x 30". From the series "The Provider," 2004–2005.

regular intervals, these unique padded-and-feathered steel automatons—based loosely on the pileated woodpecker—drill away at the gallery, as if to make it their home. But their efforts to compromise the pristine architecture are thwarted: A strategically placed nail prevents their relentless beaks from penetrating. Here the artist references a poem by Charles Wright, "The Woodpecker Pecks, But The Hole Does Not Appear," which runs, in part, "How quickly all that we've done / Is unremembered and unforgiven." Handmade stand-ins for the human, the woodpeckers present an anthropomorphized vision of the natural world's indifference to history. But at the same time, their individuality insists on the kind of self-determination that might be considered peculiarly human. Likewise, the watercolors betray a certain earnestness and even a fondness for the birds—many of which are visitors to Middlebrook's upstairs New York yard and thus the subjects of what are essentially portraits.

As a foil for or, alternately, a reflection of the human, the bird loses its status as a being in its own right and becomes an empty type. But by painting an avian neighbor or constructing a one-of-a-kind "woodpecker," Middlebrook grants his subject a kind of asylum from this absolute artificiality, albeit one quickly lost to kitsch. The more he aims to render this or that particular bird, the more obscene and effective his project becomes. So if the "Provider" is our model, what does nature provide for us? According to Middlebrook, a distorting mirror in which we see ourselves and the sad shell that that gaze leaves behind.

—Nell McClister