



# The Passenger Pigeon

The Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

January 2007

Vol 43 No. 1

## January Meeting:

Members' Slide Night,  
**Thursday, January 18, 2007, 7:00 p.m.** Sharon Woods Visitor Center. Please join us for one of our most popular meetings of the year. Please remember to limit the number of slides to 10 to 20 per member, so that everyone gets a chance to show their photographs. For those into digital photography, there is a digital projector available. We will be able to show digital photos from CD, DVD or floppy drive. If you have pictures on another type of drive, please contact me well in advance of the meeting to discuss how to show your photos. Alternatively, bring your own laptop. You can email me at lehman.jg@pg.com or call me at 513-622-2399 (work, day) or after 8:00 pm at 513-527-4701 (home).

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## Charley Harper and Cincinnati's Modernist Art Tradition

### **Graphic Content: Contemporary and Modern/Art and Design. (Cincinnati's Modernist Pioneers and their Contemporary Peers)**

Rotation 1: Malcolm Gear, Charley Harper, and Ryan McGinness December 8, 2006 through February 26, 2007. Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.

Round one of a year-long, rotating exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati titled "Graphic Content: Contemporary and Modern/Art and Design (Cincinnati's Modernist Pioneers and their Contemporary Peers)," features two "Modernist innovators" with Cincinnati connections—Malcolm Gear, and local favorite Charley Harper—along with contemporary kindred spirit Ryan McGinness. McGinness, who was born in 1972, represents the younger artists of today whose work continues in or at least reflects the innovative tradition of "Cincinnati's Modernist pioneers" such as Gear and Harper.

Gear and Harper developed their respective styles in Cincinnati in the 1940s and '50s. For a time, Gear, who is from Kentucky, was a student of Harper's at the Art Academy of Cincinnati. During the 1940s and 1950s a number of influential artists lived, worked, taught, and studied in Cincinnati. As a group, and as individuals, they developed an innovative, modern sense of style—not a uniform or codified style, but rather an approach that blended design and art, often using deceptively simple forms in order to communicate clearly and directly with people. A good example is Harper's classic Cardinal which appears in a number of his works. There's not much specific detail in Harper's Cardinals—they're red, have two wings, and little beady black eyes that sometimes float on either side of the head—but there is definitely the essence of a Cardinal in every one of them. The logo Harper designed for Raptor, Inc., is another example of a successful

marriage of art and design.

Gear is best known for the many corporate and event logos he's designed for companies and agencies around the world. A number of these logos decorate the walls of Gear's portion of the exhibit. There are also examples of books, awards, and other items that he designed. McGinness also creates logos of a sort, though his work tends to be abstract and not focused so much on communication as on looking striking, bold, or "cool." That probably explains why McGinness has had a number of his designs put on skateboards and t-shirts, among other items.

Gear and McGinness are talented, and their work is interesting to look at, but the main draw for the majority of the readers of the *Passenger Pigeon* and other nature enthusiasts in our area is no doubt Charley Harper's portion of "Graphic Content."

New York-based graphic designer Todd Oldham is  
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(Continued from page 1) working on a book about Charley Harper, which is scheduled for publication this spring. Oldham first encountered Harper's artwork in the *Golden Book of Biology*, which Harper illustrated in 1961. Over the past few years, Oldham has been promoting Harper's work. Recently, he commissioned Harper to create bird designs for a line of La-Z-Boy furniture, and visitors to Graphic Content can sit on Harper-and-Oldham's collaborative sofas, while admiring Harper's art. Oldham worked with CAC curators to put together Charley Harper's portion of the Graphic Content exhibit; Oldham also designed the exhibition. His championing of Harper's art might partly explain why prices for copies of the *Golden Book of Biology*, *Golden's Animal Kingdom*, and *Charles Harper's Birds & Words* have seemed to skyrocket. In 2000, these books could be had in the used market for as little as twenty to thirty dollars. Today . . . bargains start around \$100.00. The word seems to be getting out about Charley Harper.

Graphic Content spans Harper's entire career. There are examples of early design and illustration work for companies such as Morton Salt; Model-T landscape illustrations for *Ford Times* magazine; illustrations

from the *Golden Book of Biology* and *Golden's Animal Kingdom*; plenty of the bird and natural history-oriented paintings Harper is best known for, including one titled "Feeding Station" (in *Beguiled by the Wild*, Harper explains that it was an assignment to paint "feeding station birds" given him by *Ford Times* art director Arthur Lougee in the early 1950s that first led Harper to consider birds as subject matter for his work); there are also numerous posters, sketches, and drafts; and finally, three new Harper paintings from 2006.

The largest new painting, titled "Limp on a Limb," shows a calico cat draped precariously over a tree limb. It's reminiscent of some of Edie Harper's cat paintings. (Edie Harper's work will be part of Rotation 3 of Graphic Content, running from June 4 through September 3, 2007.) In another new painting, two thirds of the work is a solid block of deep, ocean blue. The top third of the painting is a lighter sky blue. The crown of a Polar Bear head rises out of the deep ocean blue and into the sky while one of Harper's Cardinals frantically flaps its wings to escape its suddenly animated perch. The title of this work is "Scary Scenario," and I assume the setting is not the Cincin-

nati Zoo. The third new work, "Can You Hear Me Now?" features an upside down broken-toothed skull atop an automobile steering wheel surrounded by blooming trilliums. A House Wren is building a nest in the right eye socket of the skull. Next to the steering wheel is a disconnected, skeletal arm, a watch attached to the wrist. The skeletal hand above the wrist clutches a red cell phone. It seems to be a commentary not only on our frantic, distracted lifestyles, but also on the general state of humanity. How much time do we have left? And when we're gone, will we be missed? The answers, if I'm reading Harper's newest work correctly, could be, respectively, "Not much" and "Probably not." Humor is one of Harper's trademarks, but a number of his pieces, like these recent ones, exhibit a decidedly dark humor. In the introduction to the 1974 book *Charles Harper's Birds & Words*, Harper writes "If you find humor in my work, it's because I'm laughing to keep from screaming." That must still be the case, thirty-three years later.

One of the pleasures of this exhibit is that it's not the typical "nature art" show that we've come to know and expect. There are no dusty, stuffed birds hanging from

wooden beams. The room is well-lit and there's ample room to move around and view the work. A block of twelve bird portraits and Harper's accompanying prose poems, which were created in the 1950s for *Ford Times* magazine and appear in the 1974 collection *Birds & Words*, stand out, in particular. It's nice that the exhibit gives space to the informative and often pun-filled prose-poems Harper wrote for many of his works. Not all of the work is stuck to the walls: a painting titled "Almost Caught—Noon," which looks like a renamed or reworked version of "Hare's Breadth," in which the shadow of a hawk (similar to the Raptor, Inc., logo) is just about to cover a small critter scurrying into a hole, is displayed flat atop a table, while a few feet directly above hangs "Almost Caught—Midnight," which many will recognize as a work titled "Owl on the Prowl." There are a number of non-bird works, as well. The vertical "Water Striders (Jesus Bugs)," which leads off the plates in Harper's book *Beguiled by the Wild*, is nice to see in the "wilds" of the gallery space, as opposed to the tiny confines of the bound book; there are also a couple fish paintings, which seem to be of a different style in some ways than Harper's bird paintings. And, of course, there

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(Continued from page 2) are plenty of Harper's ladybugs, which might be more closely associated with him than Northern Cardinals. Back to the birds, though: *Mountain Bluebird*, one of the twelve plates from *Birds & Words*, presents a Mountain Bluebird perched before a rock wall somewhere in the western US. There are American Indian pictographs on the wall behind the bird. Stylistically the pictographs are not that different from Harper's work—obviously “real” people and animals depicted with straight lines and arcs, circles and other geometric shapes. It seems to be a tribute to the so-called primitive artists from a modern artist, and a reminder that as far as the human eye and soul and whatever it is that allows people to be creative are concerned, there is little if any boundary between “primitive” and “modern.” Art is either good or it isn't; old isn't better than new, modern isn't more refined than ancient.

Harper's work is definitely part of our modern times—backhoes, bulldozers, cell phones, dead eagles, pollution, and other examples of our culture's silliness and excess appear in his work. But there's also a truly “eternal” or universal spirit in his work that will probably be appreciated

as much a hundred years from now as it is today and might have been 100 or 10,000 years ago—maybe we could grab a copy of *Beguiled by the Wild*, hop in Mr. Peabody's Wayback machine and find out? Maybe not. In any case, Charley Harper's portion of Graphic Content ends on February 26, a date which is a little closer to the times in which we live, and not that far away. For more information, check out the Contemporary Arts Center's website at <http://www.contemporaryartscenter.org/>, or call them on a good old telephone—but not your cell phone, or at least not while driving a car—at 513.345.8400. The CAC is located at Sixth and Walnut in Cincinnati, near the Aronoff Center.

—Mike Busam

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## January Field Trip

**Location:** Camp Dennison Area and Valley View Nature Preserve  
**Leader:** Bob Foppe, (Cell) 685-2739 or e-mail [fopsinc@aol.com](mailto:fopsinc@aol.com)  
**Date:** Saturday, January 20, 2007, 8:30 AM until around noon?

The Camp Dennison gravel pits almost always have open water and for whatever reasons seasonally attract a great diversity of waterfowl and

waterbirds, usually in significant numbers. Bob knows the area as well as anyone and after viewing the pits plans to head to one or two other nearby spots in the Little Miami Valley. The Valley View Nature Preserve will likely be one of those destinations. If you have any questions feel free to contact Bob.

**Meeting Place:** We will meet in the parking lot of AIM, which is the name of the business which is located on the east side (same side as the pits) of Glendale-Milford Rd./Route 126. The management of AIM has graciously agreed to allow us to park and view the pits from their parking lot. Thanks to Bob for setting this up. This is the business at the extreme north end of the Camp Dennison gravel pits, just south of Fletcher Rd. and the bridge over the Little Miami.

**Directions From the North:** Take I-275 exit # 54 Wards Corner Rd. and go south about 1.5 miles into Miamiville. At the stop sign turn left onto Rt. 126 (called Center Rd. here). Go east a short distance to a stop sign and turn right. You are still on Rt. 126. Go across the bridge and past Fletcher Rd. and turn left into the AIM parking lot.

**Directions From the South:** Take US 50 to-

wards Milford. Just before the bridge leading into Milford, turn left onto Glendale-Milford Rd./Route 126. Go north on Route 126 about 2.5 miles, through the village of Camp Dennison and continuing past the gravel pits on your right. Turn right into AIM's parking lot, located at the extreme north end of the gravel pits.

**Note:** The village of Indian Hill now owns the Camp Dennison gravel pits and has renamed them Grand Valley. Indian Hill is developing the pits as a recreational facility and Indian Hill residents are now allowed access into the gravel pits. This may eventually have negative affects on the waterfowl in the area, but so far it hasn't been too bad. Access is closed to non-residents, which is probably a good thing, as it keeps usage down. I personally still prefer the name “Camp Dennison gravel pits”, because after all, that's what they are and all the pretty names you can think of isn't going to change that fact. And besides, that's what birders have called them ever since the late Worth Randle, CBC founder and naturalist, first put the pits on the birding map 45 years ago.

—Jay Stenger  
 Field Trip Coordinator



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### **Are Your Dues Due?**

If you haven't sent in your dues yet for the September 2006 - May 2007 birding year, please fill out the form below and mail it in along with your membership fees.

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VISIT US ON THE WEB:

[www.cincinnatibirds.com/birdclub/index.php](http://www.cincinnatibirds.com/birdclub/index.php)

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## Bird Club Membership

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Individual \$12.00    \_\_\_\_\_ Family \$15.00    \_\_\_\_\_ Student \$6.00

**Make your check payable to Cincinnati Bird Club, and mail to:  
Peg Gatch, 11 Mound Avenue, Milford, OH 45150**

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