

# Matthew Ballantyne: Subversive Subjectivities: Intersecting Reference and Experience

Marcus Prasad



Matthew Ballantyne in studio, February 2018. Photographed by Arsebel Gancena.

After studying art history and literature at the University of Toronto, Matthew Ballantyne moved to Vancouver and transferred to the University of British Columbia, where he is currently in the fourth year of his BFA in visual art. With the ultimate goal of pursuing an MFA, his thought-provoking and delicately meticulous approach to his practice combines the reverence of looking and the formation of either forced or organic connections. Ballantyne states that "nothing is inherently meaningful, but there are a lot of connections to be made" when asked about the references he engages with. "What people do with those connections, I have no control over," he argues. Eloquent titles carrying a poetic cadence aid in offering an iconographic scenario in which a concept, driven by the viewer, may be parsed out.

Deriving influence from writers and poets including William H. Gass and Thomas Lux, Ballantyne attempts to capture a semblance of their linguistic virtuosity and command of the metaphorical through the visual realm. A multitude of optic landmarks with their own subjective interpretations inundate his sculptural and assemblage-based oeuvre, coalescing the transcendence of nature with the secularity of human occurrence. An oscillation between the discrete nature of experience, emotion, and memory contrasts fixed associations of ornithology in order to question our own presumptions and connection-making functions.

Ballantyne attributes the current state of his practice to his experience living in a remote community in the Northwest

Territories in 2012, fourteen hours away from the closest major city. Unbound by the monetary or status-building confines of big city life, his indulgent isolation consisted of a close and timeless exploration with materials in the wild, reading and writing for hours on end. "To have no expectations creates a moment when you can really sink your teeth into what it is you want to do," he stresses. Altering his repertoire through introspective self-reflection, Ballantyne narrowed down his personal motivations in artistic practice, and freed himself to create what he had always wanted.

Offering one of his first works with a personal tinge, *Emanation (For Francis Dicks)* acts as a visual eulogy to the passing of his grandfather. Ballantyne repurposes the radiology mask used in his treatments as a birdfeeder installed in Stanley Park, transforming it into an emanation vessel. Animated through continuous use by birds, the memory of his loved one recurs by forces outside of human control.

His interest in ornithology and its metaphorical underpinnings assumes more of a physical presence in *One for Sorrow*. A taxidermied magpie sits precariously on a propped-up shovel in a small clearing of trees, gently lit by the setting sun, which lends a whimsical, movie-like quality to the tableau. The title refers to a seventeenth-century nursery rhyme about magpies and the significance of the size of their groups, where encountering one magpie signifies dread and unease. Ornithologists have found

Emanation (For Francis Dicks), Radiology mask, bird suet, 2017. Image provided by Ballantyne.



Conversant Swallow, photograph, 2017. Image provided by Ballantyne





Above: Vestment, Kevlar ply from RCKHP body armour, shot 6 times, embroidered text, 2017. Photographed by Asebel Gancena.

Left: Vestment detail, Kevlar ply from RCKHP body armour, shot 6 times, embroidered text, 2017. Photographed by Asebel Gancena.

that magpies can have the mental capabilities of a human child and that when their fellow magpies die, they are able to display grief and mourning. They actively participate in funerary rites, cleaning up corpses and creating wreaths of grass and twigs for them. By positioning the shovel in this piece as if the magpie is using it, Ballantyne challenges the notion that humans are the only compassionate beings, complicating our understanding of ourselves and deconstructing conventions surrounding death.

While much of Ballantyne's work is centered on ornithology, including *Convalescent Swallow* which features a live, serendipitously posed swallow gazing out of a window, his other works such as *Vestment* engage in a similar poetic form of representation emphasizing a particular human tension or contradiction. Embroidering John Bradford's "There but for the grace of God go I" on a sheet of Kevlar that had been shot six times, Ballantyne locates a world view in which state power is equated with god power. The intentionality of the bulletproof vest confounded with the idea of divine intervention produces a functional tautness; our trust in an almighty omniscient being has been replaced with an unwavering confidence in technology.

Although conceptual grounding occupies a significant role in Ballantyne's practice, specificities of medium have had a foundational influence across his development. When first becoming interested in contemporary sculpture and assemblage, he explains, "I would get most of my art viewing experiences through magazines and books." Immediately drawn to work that was mediated through a two-dimensional format, the lack of physical engagement attracted him to communicating ideas photographically and the ways in which the medium could edify and reinforce portrayed meanings.

Although his work has often been redolent with historical and literary influences, Ballantyne states that his penchant for creating a dialogue with the past, present, and future of the art world, artists, and ideas around art, is less of a focus in his work now. Albeit foundational to his practice, he is no longer encumbered by an "anxiety of influence of what has come before, or wanting to create work that will be recognized within a particular paradigm." Situating himself within a specific canon no longer takes precedence in his approach, as he has now become more comfortable in his own thinking and artistic voice, finding his own ways to contribute to the discipline of contemporary art.

In the past year, Ballantyne has specifically honed in on combining his birdwatching life and art-making life. He sees this branch of his practice as existing independently, doing its own work as opposed to needing much background information. When asked about future projects, he explains the trajectory for his text-based work sewn into nylon flags that conform to a standardized framework, one that he hopes to expand. Expressing hesitance toward other future projects, he says that talking about them means he has to commit to them. This perspective of detachment speaks to how his ideas culminate into works that possess a

strong referential currency by letting them exist untethered, rather than forcing them into fruition. With respect to this approach, Ballantyne states that a lot of his works are complete, but that he comes back to them from time to time, allowing each idea and its inherent connections to evolve and build onto itself, paralleling experience, emotion, and memory. "Nothing happens in a vacuum," he states. "Connections are always being made in a web, informing one another."

Marcus Prasad's interview with the artist took place on January 24, 2018.



One for Sorrow, shovel, magpie, 2017. Image provided by Ballantyne.