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Taking

# FLIGHT

Artist Christopher Patch describes his migratory path from, and return to, Portland.

STORY & PHOTOS BY DIANE HUDSON

**M**eeting Christopher Patch at his brightly lit studio in the State Theatre building in Portland is not your typical artist encounter. First, it's immediately apparent he's averse to me aiming my camera at him. "Here," he says, pointing to a pile of work in progress. "More of myself is here than here." He waves his hand over his body.

In fact, my first recognition of Patch was through his work, so he has a point. At Portland Museum of Art recently while photographing an event, I met an engaging cou-

## ARTIST AT WORK



Patch's work reflects the influence of folk art and mythology in these two recent woodcuts. Left: *Odin*, 2015, 6.5" X 10". Above: *Untitled*, 2015, 8" X 8".

ple who asked if I'd seen their son's birds on the fourth floor. I had not, but went up to have a look.

Am I glad I did. *Migration*, the title of the installation, consists of 37 intricate, lively, imaginative bird sculptures magically in flight over the stairs from the third to the fourth floor of the museum.

"The birds are from my 'life list,'" says Patch, who has documented his avian sightings since 2005. "It all started when I was living in New York, working in museums and doing installations. My friend working in the Brooklyn Museum was from Minnesota. I'm from Maine. We'd go birding on Staten Island and all around the five boroughs. There's a lot to see in New York, as it's right on a migratory pathway. There are tons and tons of birds in Central Park in a concentrated area. It's funny. Much of my work was inspired by birds in an urban area."

In 2008, Patch did a residency in Florida at the

Atlantic Center for the Arts, where he studied with Mark Dion and others whose work has been enchanted by the natural world. "Dion and I would go to Cape Canaveral, where there are lots of birds to be seen right around the launch pad, including storks, flamingos, cranes, blue bills."

*Migration* was created originally for an installation at Mayo Street Arts (MSA) in Portland. Then it took off.

"I was in a show there called 'Knock Knock,' based on Norse mythology, and the director, Blainor McGough, asked me if I'd do a solo exhibit subsequent to that."

was first attracted to the "maritime motif of his work, his aesthetic and color," McGough said. "When he first told me about his plans for *Migration*, he caught me by surprise. I didn't know he did sculpture. I thought we'd be hanging more prints, paintings. I loved the idea because I love puppets and papier-mâché and I always wanted to do something with that space, the high ceilings." People had floated the idea

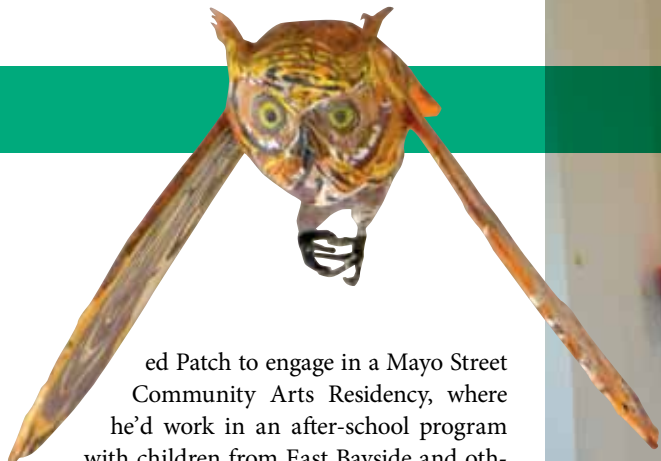
of addressing the vertical dimension before, "but it's never happened. I knew he'd put a lot of thought into the project, so I said, 'Well, let's do it.'"

At Mayo Street—which Patch describes as "an old church with stained-glass windows, a funky space with walls that have their own limitations"—his plan was to "occupy the central space that hadn't been utilized with the vaulted ceilings." The choir loft was under renovation, so there was a cut-out where he "envisioned a piece that would circumnavigate and weave through the space and the cut-out."

At last, the perfect venue. He'd dreamed of making as many sculptures as possible from his list, but with only six weeks to show time, McGough came up with an idea for a more profound experience. She invit-

**"I dreamt of taking a simple walk in the woods. I missed the ocean, my family, and friends."**





ed Patch to engage in a Mayo Street Community Arts Residency, where he'd work in an after-school program with children from East Bayside and other parts of Maine.

"I'd never collaborated before," Patch says, "and couldn't figure out how that would work." But it did.

"He really dug in and took time to work with the kids, teaching them his style and the way he was painting the papier-mâché,

**"I have 150-plus birds on my list and there are only 37 in the flock at PMA. I'd do another installation..."**

and exploring with them ideas about birds and natural history," McGough says.

"My mom pitched in, too," Patch says. "It was nice, because everyone had his or her own bird story. The kids learned about the birds as we went along." More secretly, "I was learning from them and the way they looked at the birds."

"In hindsight," McGough says, "we should have put it off for a year and applied for grants, but we didn't. With herculean effort this great thing happened. It brought the space to life."

**P**atch's birds, on exhibit at MSA from June through September 2015, were offered for sale, from \$250 to \$1,200 per sculpture. Among the interested collectors was the Portland Museum of Art.

Mayo Street's Larry Hayden, a board member, was thrilled with PMA's purchase of 37 *Migration* birds. "My first response when I saw the installation was that it should go into a public collection, like Alison Hildreth's sculptural piece at the Portland Public Library—it just animates the space."

McGough adds, "While I loved the birds at MSA, I am pleased they migrated."

*Migration* is now in the PMA's perma-



Patch works out of a studio in Portland's State Theatre building.

nent collection. It will remain as part of the fourth-floor "Modern Menagerie" exhibit, further animated with work by Dahlov Ipcar and Bernard Langlais, for five years.

Sculpted, papier-mâché, and collaged, the birds wear Patch's signature style in their windless motion swooping with serendipity. Their distinctive colors and markings were created with discarded pieces from his studio of woodblock prints, gravestone rubbings, and hand-painted papers.

Patch's earliest roots started with drawings under the guidance of his grandfa-

ther, James Guy, a WPA artist and social surrealist. His grandmother, Clara Skinner, created woodblock prints and illustrations for the *New Yorker* and later turned to Op Art, showing at MoMA in the acclaimed 1965 exhibit, *The Responsive Eye*. Going to Guy's shows in New York as a child was an electric inspiration for Patch, now 41. While still in middle school, he began his studies at Portland School of Art.

He went on to complete his BFA in 1997



## ARTIST AT WORK

at MECA and his MFA at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2000. In 2002, he won a Northern Arts Residency at Atlin Centre for the Arts in British Columbia, Canada. He was awarded a Skowhegan School Residency (as recipient of the William Zorach grant) in 2004, with further residencies at Hewnoks Artist Colony in Lovell, Maine, in 2013 and 2014.

**T**hese years reflect the somewhat migratory nature in Patch himself. Following the studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, he spent two years in the Second City finding inspiration from artists like Jim Nutt, who was “part of the collaborative called ‘Hairy Who,’ a group that works with images from popular culture like comics.” Patch was also inspired during this time by Nutt’s renowned collection of folk art: “His house was full of it, fascinating.”

Another influence at the Art Institute was Arturo Herrera, an advisor in grad school. “At the time,” Patch says, “I was focusing more on painting and drawing, but Herrera’s work in collage started seep-

ing in. It continues to play in my work.”

It was also in Chicago that he started making landscape paintings, the beginnings of a yearning for more rural inspiration. “I found living in an urban place without a car meant I couldn’t get away from people. I dreamt of taking a simple walk in the woods. I missed the ocean, my family and friends. I wanted to return to the East Coast.” In the end, “the Midwest just didn’t cut it for me.”

Returning to Maine for two years, Patch landed his coveted Skowhegan School residency. There he met some New York-based artists who lured him to big shows and crowds for the next 10 years. And again the homing instinct loomed: “There was a lot of excitement and stimulation, but to be truly inspired I need a less urban environment. A natural setting informs my work.

“In New York City, even if you have a car, you have to sit in it for at least an hour before

you come near anything like a natural setting. Birding was a way of getting at that, but when you find you know every single lamp post in Central Park by heart, you know it’s time to leave.”

Making Maine once again his perch, working as an instructor and exhibitions coordinator at Maine College of Art, Patch is grateful for his studio in the State Theatre building (homing back to his studio of 14 years prior), although “I have to work full time in order to pay for it.”

Right now, “I have a lot of things going on,” including recent shows at Lewis Gallery in Portland Public Library and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art; at Evans Contemporary in Ontario, Canada; The Parlour Gallery in Brooklyn; the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; the Chicago Cultural Center and Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; and more.

This very second, Patch is working with fellow artists Hillary Irons, Stephen Benenson,



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and Michael Hickey on developing an artist-run gallery, "Able Baker Contemporary," opening soon in the former A Fine Thing; Edward T. Pollack Fine Arts gallery space on Forest Avenue next to Portland Stage.

And he's considering an expansion on *Migration*: "I have 150-plus birds on my list, and there are only 37 in the flock at PMA. I'd do another installation, separate from that one." Patch is pleased with the museum's acquiring the first flock, as he wanted the piece to "remain intact."

He also enjoys the way it's exhibited. The best part? "You can't see it all at once. You see it gradually and have to physically move through it to see it in its entirety." The spatial play "reminds me of an installation at the Guggenheim in the 1990s by Ellsworth Kelly, another artist to whom I respond strongly—his patterns, colors, collage studies, and color combinations. It was a great installation of paintings really activating the *space* in a way—less about the physicality of it all."

Activating the space captures what the *Migration* flock is doing to the stairwell at the museum. ■

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