ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The Canary in the Lake presents more than 40 new photographic, video, and audio works by Chicago-based artist Alice Hargrave. The exhibition centers on two new series relating to birds and lakes that continue her exploration of climate change-related loss of biodiversity and habitat. The exhibition title references both new bodies of work and alludes to the “canary in the coal mine,” because freshwater lakes function as sentinels of climate change.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alice Hargrave is a photo-based artist working in Chicago. She incorporates sound and video within layered installations of her photographic imagery. Her work reflects on impermanence, environmental insecurity, habitat loss, and species extinctions.¹ Her work has been exhibited at Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth, Minnesota; Newspace Center for Photography, Portland, Oregon; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago; Filter Photo, Chicago; Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago; Center for Fine Art Photography, Fort Collins, Colorado; and Lianzhou Photo Festival, Lianzhou, China; among many others. She has an M.F.A. from University of Illinois at Chicago and a B.A. from Tulane University.

subjective frame

- What do the sounds, colors, imagery, and materials in Hargrave’s work remind you of?
- Is there anything in this exhibition that surprises you? If so, describe what you find surprising and why.
- After viewing the works in the exhibition, share what stood out most to you and any questions you have about the artist, the artwork, or both.

structural frame

- Hargrave’s work combines photography, video, and audio in a variety of ways. Choose an artwork to focus on. Describe the materials and techniques used to create this work. How do these materials and techniques add to your understanding of the work? For example, Roseate Spoonbill calls in Tracing Audubon, depicts repeating patterns of calls from the Roseate Spoonbill, a bird with pink feathers that lives in the Florida Keys.
- What do you know about the subject matter and setting based on what you see and hear throughout the exhibition?
- How are the works in this exhibition displayed and why do you think Hargrave chose to display them this way?

cultural frame

- What references to plants, birds, humans, and the landscape do you see and hear in these works?
- Why do you think Hargrave chose to focus on endangered and extinct birds and lake data to talk about climate change? How are these things connected?
- Look closely at the fabric installations in The Conference of the Lakes, After Farid Attar. Describe where you think each lake is located and what climate change-related issue is happening there based on the colors, images, lines, and other contextual information in the work.

¹ Alice Hargrave, Photographer, quoted in an interview with the artist by the author, 2021.
As a class, analyze patterns in the bird call-soundwaves on Hargrave’s wallpaper. Ask students to try interpreting these calls based on what they see. Explore making and recording sounds with software that produces sound wave visualizations (such as Audacity). Consider having students record bird calls or other nature sounds around them. Then create artworks using a variety of mediums, focusing on textures, lines, and shapes that illustrate the sound patterns.

In Tracing Audubon –1832 / 2021 (last calls), Hargrave photographed her experience of retracing the footsteps of illustrator and ornithologist John James Audubon’s in search for 22 bird species in the Florida Keys. Engage students in a photographic “quest,” searching for an item or object of their choice. After documenting their search, encourage students to analyze their images. Ask students to consider how looking at these images feels compared to the act of searching? Do they have new memories tied to specific images and objects photographed in their series?

Invite students to explore resources at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and as a class, learn about actionable steps to support endangered bird species in your area. Then involve students in creating artworks that highlight and inform viewers about what they learned.

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Analyse works in The Canary in the Lake, looking closely for ways that Hargrave has referenced the interconnections between humans, animals, bodies of water, and land. As a class, learn about the source(s) for your local drinking water. Guide students in researching the plants and animals found around the body or bodies of water. Then engage students in creating “portraits” of these local ecosystems using collaged images and information from their research.