



Devil's Colony

Cole Swanson

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Double-Crossing the Devil's Nest: Hybrid Materials and Spaces in the Work of Cole Swanson

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In Cole Swanson's exhibition, *Devil's Colony*, materials and spaces mingle: namely those claimed by humans and double-crested cormorants. Large, black-feathered water birds, cormorants are colloquially named the devil's bird. The roots of their nickname are as complex and ancient as their existence, but suffice it to say, cormorants have been less-than-cherished by humans throughout history.¹ From their acidic guano that kills trees in greenspaces, to their allegedly gluttonous diet that threatens fishermen's stock,² the birds continue to spur debate. Case in point: The Ontario government recently proposed to list cormorants as game birds for an open hunting season. If accepted, hunters "could each kill...14,000 birds a year... [or] take out an entire colony in a single day."³ In Swanson's exhibition, this vilification and dispensability is questioned. The roles and scripts of human versus bird break down as viewers experience jarring juxtapositions, classifications, and co-settlements. No longer are we mere spectators visiting a gallery. We are scientists. We are birds. We are litterbugs. We are monsters.

1 King, R. J. (2013). *The Devil's Cormorant: A Natural History*. University of New Hampshire.

2 Note, ecological researchers have found the opposite. "Cormorants are not detrimental to fish populations ... [as] they feed on invasive fish species of no interest to ... fisheries." Biologists agree cormorants are beneficial agents in the ecosystem. Ruitter, Z. (2019, March 24). "Killing cormorants: Is Ontario's feathered pariah about to be culled out of existence?" NOW, Retrieved from <https://nowtoronto.com/news/cormorants-doug-ford-hunting-ontario/>

3 Nanowski, N. (2018, December 6). "Not many people like cormorants, but should hunters be allowed to kill 50 birds per day?" *CBC News*, Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/cormorant-hunting-hunters-ontario-fishing-1.4933928>

Embodying the Nest-Watcher

The sculpture of a six-foot-one humanoid monster hovers to our left as soon as we enter the gallery. It's an uncanny signpost that can't be missed: This monster is our host. Its thick, lumbering body faces us and, while we view the remaining works on display (especially the wall-to-wall photographs of nests) its vacant gaze tracks our movement.

The creature feels symbolically born from our collective unconscious: simultaneously a bad-guy costume from *Scooby-Doo*, a furry blue mascot, and a mythical Sasquatch on hallucinogens. Its coat is an unkempt, dirty textile composed of frayed plastic waste in blue and yellow. What was once a tarp used for temporary housing, an IKEA shopping bag, or a rubber glove has now been repurposed into the costume of a monster that guards the gallery. Together, the creature's compositional form and placement make us conscious of our own role as embodied viewers. We are watchers being watched. From the outset, we are forced to reconsider our act of observing another species.

Deconstructing the Nest

Select materials found in cormorants' nests — specifically human-made waste — tie our supposedly separate worlds together. This shared materiality is highlighted not only in Swanson's monstrous costume, but in his images of the nests themselves.

Over seventy photographs of the cormorants' nests fill the gallery walls. From the life-size, bird's eye view we have been given, everything from a plastic spoon to a watch band is recognizable. At least one brightly-coloured

piece of litter is tucked or twisted within reeds and rocks of each nest. The survey is fascinating aesthetically and symbolically. The inorganic waste is resilient, recycled by the cormorants. One species' garbage becomes another species' home.

Crossing the Nest

Swanson's monster has been filmed at Toronto's Leslie Street Spit, where thousands upon thousands of cormorants nest each summer. During the winter — when Swanson's performance takes place — the colony has migrated south. Only the nests remain. In his costume of material waste, Swanson lethargically traverses the seemingly apocalyptic landscape. The monster's head bows. It pauses after each heavy step. Hundreds of nests marked with rusted rods by biologists clutter at its feet.

Shot on an overcast day, the contrast of this wasteland against Toronto's picturesque skyline (visible across the lake) is jarring. It's similar to a before-and-after image — construction versus deconstruction, life versus death, nature versus culture — with the added paradox that both spaces co-exist. Like a slum, the underbelly of a settlement we might ignore, the site nevertheless interacts with the city by collecting and transforming its garbage.

We are further invited to visit the site in summertime. In the center of the gallery, Swanson has reconstructed the observatory post that biologists use to study cormorants. Termed "the blind," entering the tunnel-like structure blocks out our view of the gallery. Within seconds, we are transported into nature. A cacophony of squawks fills our hearing. We breathe in the scent of chipboard. A burlap flap brushes our shoulders as we duck deep into the



blind and take in the scientists' view.

Hundreds of cormorants are nesting. The screen playing this video footage is fitted to the blind's window, creating the illusion that the colony is really there. Swanson's raw audiovisual recording might as well be live — or as close as possible to an authentic experience of the birds' nesting site. Cormorants feed their chicks, gurgle their throats, groom their feathers, and swoop in and out of the frame. We're hit with the intimacy and intricacies of crossing worlds: human to bird.

Recognizing these nuanced and complex crossings of materials and spaces between species is what Swanson demands of his viewers. We might do a double-take. We might physically double-cross the devil's nest, loop around, and rethink our relationship with the cormorant. Experiencing *Devil's Colony* resonates the question: Which creature shapes which world?



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Cole Swanson is a Toronto-based artist and educator. Working across media and disciplinary boundaries, Swanson investigates relationships between humans and the natural world. A two-time arts fellow with the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute for his research on Indian miniature painting, fresco, and pigment preparation, Swanson's practice engages materials and their embedded histories to connect and collaborate with other organisms. Swanson's work has been exhibited internationally and has received support from both public and private agencies within Canada and abroad.

Carolyn Topdjian is an interdisciplinary writer and educator with a background in visual art theory and practice. She received her PhD in Social and Political Thought from York University, and has since published numerous scholarly essays and stories. You can find her latest work in *Dreamers Magazine* (Summer 2019).



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