

## Bird voices

With slow steps, the well-dressed older man approached, curious yet shy. With his left arm propped on a crutch, his body seemed slightly bent, but watchful eyes focused on the tree I was working on.

Where do the bird calls come from?

Out of the tree, I replied, and invited him to take a closer look at my *BirdSongTree Drawing* project in the garden of the Orangery Darmstadt, maybe even pick up a brush and color palette.

Visitors were invited to paint or record the voices and birdcalls on long white canvas rolls emanating from the tree. In my wildest imagination I saw the canvases as possible scores. How would a violinist or a trombonist interpret the drawings? A sharp fluttering noise startled me; then I saw the two wild geese flying over me with outstretched wings. My breath stopped for a moment, then I had to laugh because one of the organizers who had invited me to this outdoor art event seemed to regard them as intruders and enemies. These Canada wild geese are a plague and frighten the native animals, he tried to explain to me with urgent concern.

I'm a hunter, said the older man with the crutch. I worked in the forest for a long time, so I was immediately drawn to the birds I hear here. But I don't see any.

Well, I slowly answered him, it's more about hearing for me actually, not necessarily seeing something real. But something that you recognize and imagine as a bird call. I am fascinated by how one makes something that is difficult to grasp up in one's mind, makes it sensually flexible in one's own body. Develop a kinetic sense of hearing, so to speak.

Now, I can't bend down very well, said the older man and pointed to his legs. I have thrombosis, couldn't sleep most of the night. When you get old, it's like a car. When it's new it runs as programmed, later it fails, and when there are repairs it gets worse and doesn't stop.

I point to the tree. This thuja has a wound too, on one side, it seems to have been attacked and there has been an opening, a gap in the tree. I have hung spectrogram paintings of bird calls there, want to take a closer look? Do you see the different frequencies and sound vibrations?

The distinguished older man takes off his cap and smiles. Even if I can hardly bend down, I would like to paint. I could hardly sleep all night, now I'm walking around here in the park to get some exercise. I was fine last night, I went to my favorite restaurant to watch a soccer game. My team won, but when I wanted to order the restaurant's special,

they had nothing prepared, just brought me a bag of chips. After that I got sick. I couldn't sleep at all. Look, I'm 87 years old, born in 1936. What should I do?

I decide to offer the man a glass of water and invite him to sit down, but he puts his cap on and looks agitated. What is this bird call, I don't recognize it?

I explain that it is the Australian lyre bird, a special bird that can imitate other sounds, even extra-animal ones, such as the lumberjack's chainsaw.

The man doesn't listen to me anymore, but slowly approaches the tree, and seems to be lost in memories.

I was 9 years old when the war ended, my parents and I were living in Gdansk when the Russians came, I was the bad naughty boy; my brother, he was 2 years older, was the good boy. The Russians shot him before my eyes. He was beautiful, with blond curls.

Now the man has to hold back his tears, he has taken off his cap again. His face is soft, he seems to be flying far back in his thoughts.

Imagine, my mother took my dead brother's wool pants and gave them to me to wear. My own was made of very thin material, but my brother had warm trousers made of good material, like those used by the military. I felt miserable, all I could think about was my dead brother. You know, I have two daughters, I still call them "girls" - although, well, they're in their 60s too. I was the bad boy, I always stole during the war - I'll show you one of the tricks we used in the Polish shops.

The man seems very excited and animated now, he goes to the table where I have prepared the brushes and acrylic paint for the visitors who want to paint birdsongs. At the table he shows me the deception trick, he uses a small canvas and a tube of paint.

Then he asks for a brush, yellow and red paint, and goes to the canvases lying on the grass and stretching away from the tree. With difficulty he kneels down and paints a bird's voice.

Now I think I got the lyre bird, he says quietly, he holds back his tears. I'm very worried about my youngest daughter, she's not in a good shape and has mental problems. What's her name again? Well, I told my older girl to take care of her sister now. I might already have some kind of dementia, I can't remember everything.

He straightens up. I put my hand on his shoulder reassuringly.

I think like you, about the car thing, I tell him. In the mornings, my body hurts too, my whole back is sore. I no longer recognize my body exactly. I'm a dancer, I should recognize my body.

Then my visitor laughs and comes alive again. Yes, it's good to recognize yourself: I did 20 push-ups this morning, because without muscles there is no life.

He had phrased it differently, this muscle formula, but when he politely said goodbye, I'd already forgotten which proverb he used, because two children are tugging at me, they want brushes and they want to start painting.

09 05 2023  
JB