



HOLLY LANE

UNEXPECTED FRIENDS



"Animals shall not be measured by man...They are not brethren; they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth."

~ Henry Beston (naturalist)

Light in the Forest, 2020, Acrylic and Carved Wood, 14 x 17 x 5.75 in



CALIFORNIA ARTIST HOLLY LANE

travels a singular path. In an era of distraction and hurry, she is a careful observer and a deep thinker. Her artistic practice conjures an earlier time, when artisans dedicated long hours to fabricating elaborate, process-bound projects like mosaics, illuminated manuscripts, reliquaries, and stained glass windows for the church or other wealthy patrons. Lane's creations exhibit a similar level of devotion and concentration – she paints intimate, jewel-like scenes and sets them into her own imaginatively designed and hand-crafted framing structures. Much of her current work centers on scenes of the natural world and its animal inhabitants, particularly birds.

Lane recently relocated to an area of central California visited annually by thousands of migratory birds. This wetland-filled environment has made a big impact on her. She takes long walks, photographing animal life of all kinds, as well other features of the landscape (leaves, blossoms, clouds), to use as reference for her painting and carving. Attentive to all creatures, she has had numerous encounters with a surprising variety of them, including one memorable experience with a bobcat, which reaffirmed her growing realization that animals have cognitive processes like us. Birds have understandably become a dominant presence, and she now regularly witnesses immense migratory flocks whip up enormous currents of air as they arrive and depart – an awe-inspiring event Lane describes as “epic.” This impulse to move en masse at a specific time and place is altogether alien to us human beings, yet central to avian life. Observing it has heightened Lane's conviction that animals are wholly autonomous beings with a different yet equal position in the world. How else to understand the mystery of a behavior so fundamental to one species, yet so foreign to another? The naturalist Henry Beston (1888-1968) responded to this question with insight: “Animals shall not be measured by man... They are not brethren; they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth.”

In addition to animal life, several of Lane's paintings highlight another phenomenon specific to her new location. Otherworldly sunsets engulf the area's flat, water-filled expanses and create an all-encompassing sensation of being completely

surrounded by intense, color-saturated light. The dramatic effect of light emanating from the sky above and reflecting up from the water below seemed so improbable that at first Lane hesitated to record it. But in several works, particularly *Wading Through Amber*, 2020, and *Ensouled Skies*, 2021, she has given in to its enchantment. In *Wading Through Amber* a group of stately birds stand silhouetted in the deep golden light falling in ribbons across the water. The surrounding range of hills and the reedy shore bask in the same luminous glow. Lane sets the painting in a monumental free-standing structure upheld by two sturdy, honey-tinged arts-and-crafts-style pillars faced with cartouches of graceful cattails that continue the painted scene. A rayed setting sun holds the center of the bordering frieze above, an homage to the source of light suffusing the scene below.

These elaborate framing structures are not simply holders or supports for Lane's paintings, but are intrinsic to them. In conceptualizing this relationship, she describes painting as a vision of the mind's eye, a kind of “mind-space,” and the frame, “as a bodily space, with texture and form like a sculpture, evoking the whole body... an environment for the painting, a natural tabernacle.” Lane references a range of architectural elements and styles, designing and carving intricate pedestals, columns, entablatures, and finials to enhance and extend her painted visions. A self-taught woodcarver, she keeps stacks of sketchbooks and archives of pattern and ornament for reference; she also diagrams every detail before beginning a carving, always in relationship to a painting. Her piece *Ensouled Skies*, with its central image of a brilliant, rainbow-hued sky punctuated with migrating geese, is a good example of this holistic approach. She has transmuted her two-dimensional painted birds into their three-dimensional sculptured counterparts and gathered them along the upper edge of the framing structure. Each bird, individually described by its unique position and attitude of flight, seems ready to take wing into a real world sky. The sunset is acknowledged too, in the central solar carving overlooking the painted scene. She takes another approach in her masterful *Cloud Breathers*, 2020, building out the framing structure horizontally to encompass two additional small paintings. Framed by archways, these quiet moonlit views lead us through doorways into a peaceful nighttime kingdom.



The central painting, its elegant “V’s” of snow geese traveling through a luminous, cloud-filled sky, holds the place of honor. Two columns topped by double capitols flank it on either side. The attendant paintings are marked out too, by spiral balustrades and gorgeous floral-shaped finials. Air and water, cloud and moon, tree and bird come together harmoniously in Lane’s lyrical architecture.

Lane has developed a variety of creative strategies to unite her two mediums. In *Companions, The Three Graces*, 2021, delicately carved and pierced vine-filled doors reinterpret the sinuous motif of the painting’s tree in three dimensions. These wings enfold the egrets in a kind of sacred space, while the elevating pedestal emphasizes their grace and distinction. In *Light in the Forest*, 2020, a stately fallow deer pauses in a ray of sunlight piercing through the surrounding trees. The light catches on the deer’s majestic white antlers, spreading an enchanted glow throughout the scene. On the supporting cabinet Lane has carved slender trees, highlighting them with a tinted green stain to echo the painting and extend its forest light. In a very different mood, Lane’s haunting *Daughter of the Pearl Moon*, 2020, showcases her work with graphite. Here, a white-faced barn owl overlooks its nighttime territory. The scene, ranging from deep-shadow black through stages of gray, describes a riparian landscape punctuated by the cool brilliance of the rising

moon. The owl, her face shimmering with the moon’s reflected light, stands guard over her home. Pillars decorated with branching leaves encase her and moon-shaped finials and a carved moon rise in the frieze above.

Holly Lane’s work invites us to reckon with a crucial question: what is our relationship to animals today? Animals have always figured in our dreams, in our belief systems, and in our art. They have appeared as companions, portents and messengers, and often as specific symbols: dogs for fidelity, pelicans for sacrifice, and ants for industry. The ancient Egyptians had an immense pantheon of animal gods, and numerous cultures consider birds a symbol of the human soul. As the life of Saint Francis of Assisi illustrates, an intimate relationship with animals can be an indicator of sainthood. Lane’s deep affinity with the natural world, and her receptivity to and respect for animals, these “other nations,” shines out in her work, and gives it a special resonance. Like a contemporary equivalent of symbols and portents of the past, her work conveys a message: we cannot help but recognize that animals now carry the implications of their own threatened destiny. They are caught here with us in this “net of life and time,” while we consider our planet’s uncertain future. Like precious offerings, Lane’s creations pay exquisite homage to her animal-world experiences, and to the witnessing of them.



Essay by Helaine Glick
Independent Curator

(inside, upper left)
Cloud Breathers, 2020
Acrylic and Carved Wood
16 x 17.75 x 4.75 in

(inside, lower left)
Wading Through Amber, 2020
Acrylic and Carved Wood
12.5 x 17.5 x 4.5 in

(inside, right)
Daughter of the Pearl Moon
2020, Mixed Media, Graphite
on Mylar, carved wood
14.5 x 20.5 x 6 in

(back)
Companions, The Three Graces
2021, Acrylic and Carved Wood
24 x 16.25 x 4 7/8 in

(cover)
Ensouled Skies, 2021
Acrylic and Carved Wood
16.5 x 17.5 x 4.5 in

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