

Sarah Haviland

Becoming a Bird

Hammond Museum & Japanese Stroll Garden

July 10 - October 30, 2021



Hammond Museum & Japanese Stroll Garden

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Sarah Haviland Becoming A Bird

Curator Bibiana Huang Matheis

Becoming a Bird is an exhibition of small-scale sculptures in wire and mixed media, along with an outdoor sculptural bench. These works were inspired by my ongoing bird-myth investigations, including my Fulbright research in Taiwan. The exhibition was curated for the Hammond Museum & Japanese Stroll Garden in North Salem, NY, by Bibiana Huang Matheis.

INK WASH EGRET
8"x12"x8"
Ink on rice paper on mesh
2019

The installation was designed for six vitrines with arched or square glass doors in the entrance gallery of the Hammond Museum. It expanded somewhat beyond the individual worlds of those showcases with several small pieces suspended in the gallery and one large-scale sculpture in the garden. Each of these works was inspired by a mythic image or narrative from China, Taiwan, and other parts of the world. These stories are presented here alongside the artwork.

INK WASH STONE BIRD
18"x12"x1"
Ink on rice paper on mesh
2019



Sarah Haviland Artist Statement

Real birds combine with mythical stories in my recent sculptures and installations. These works emerged from 2018-2019 when I spent five months as a U.S. Fulbright scholar in Taiwan, teaching and researching my human-bird theme in traditional and contemporary culture. This research included firsthand image-gathering along with cross-disciplinary conversations with anthropologists, curators, religious scholars, birdwatchers, and environmental artists. The images and stories I continue to gather form a collection that I'm sharing in mixed-media artworks and installations, workshops, talks, and writings such as my Fulbright blog: www.becomingabird.com

The images here feature specific birds and hybrid human-avians as well as mythic figures. In these bird-inspired sculptures, I use common hardware-store metal mesh and wire, as well as colorful recycled materials such as found papers and plastics. With tinsnips and pliers, and techniques borrowed from sewing, metalwork, and papercraft, I turn these everyday materials into delicate, volumetric drawings in space. Through my investigations into the marvel of birds and their influence on human culture, I aim to recall our ancient connection to birds—all the more urgent today.

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WOMAN RIDING AN EGRET
(QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WEST)
20"x26"x14"
Steel, wire mesh
2019

A woman riding on a long-necked bird like a Phoenix, Crane, or Egret is a traditional symbol of good fortune and longevity in China and Japan. Some forms of this image also suggest the Empress, in parallel with the Emperor who often rides on a Dragon. But the image refers back to the oldest goddess of China, Queen Mother of the West, or Xi Wang Mu, first mentioned on oracle bones of the 15th century BCE, predating Taoism. In Japan, Queen Mother of the West is a deity called Seiobo.

In China, the Great Mother was said to be a wild goddess who lived on the heavenly Mount Kunlun or Jade Mountain with powers over life and death. She was famous for tending the Peaches of Immortality growing on the world axial tree. As depicted over the ages in embroidery, paintings, and poetry, the Queen Mother of the West would descend from the sky for legendary meetings with rulers, accompanied by female attendants and three azure birds.



MAN AND CHILD RIDING A PHOENIX

(OLD MAN OF THE SOUTH POLE)

26"x38"x18"

Steel, wire mesh

2020

In Chinese tradition, a man riding on a Phoenix or Crane generally signifies prosperity and long life and may be associated with the Emperor. But an old man with a beard who carries a child on his back is a special character. As seen on temple pillars in Taiwan, he is likely one of the Immortals of Chinese art and legend. These are Taoist spirits who have transcended the human state and gained magical powers to protect against evil. This figure suggests Shou Xin Gong, god of longevity and old age, who often carries the Peach of Immortality. Or he may be the Old Man of the South Pole, a personification of the Southern Polar Star. In Japan, this figure is called Jurojin. One story goes that as a frail young man, he was predicted to die at age 19. But he encountered two men playing checkers and gave them wine and food. In thanks, they decided to switch his life expectancy—from 19 to 91 years. The men turned out to be the stars who fix the dates of birth and death.





MIGRATION MYTHS CARAVAN

What if the many bird-figures of the world joined in a migration caravan? Here are four of their vast number.

PERUVIAN MOCHE BIRD-RUNNER

JAPANESE TENGU

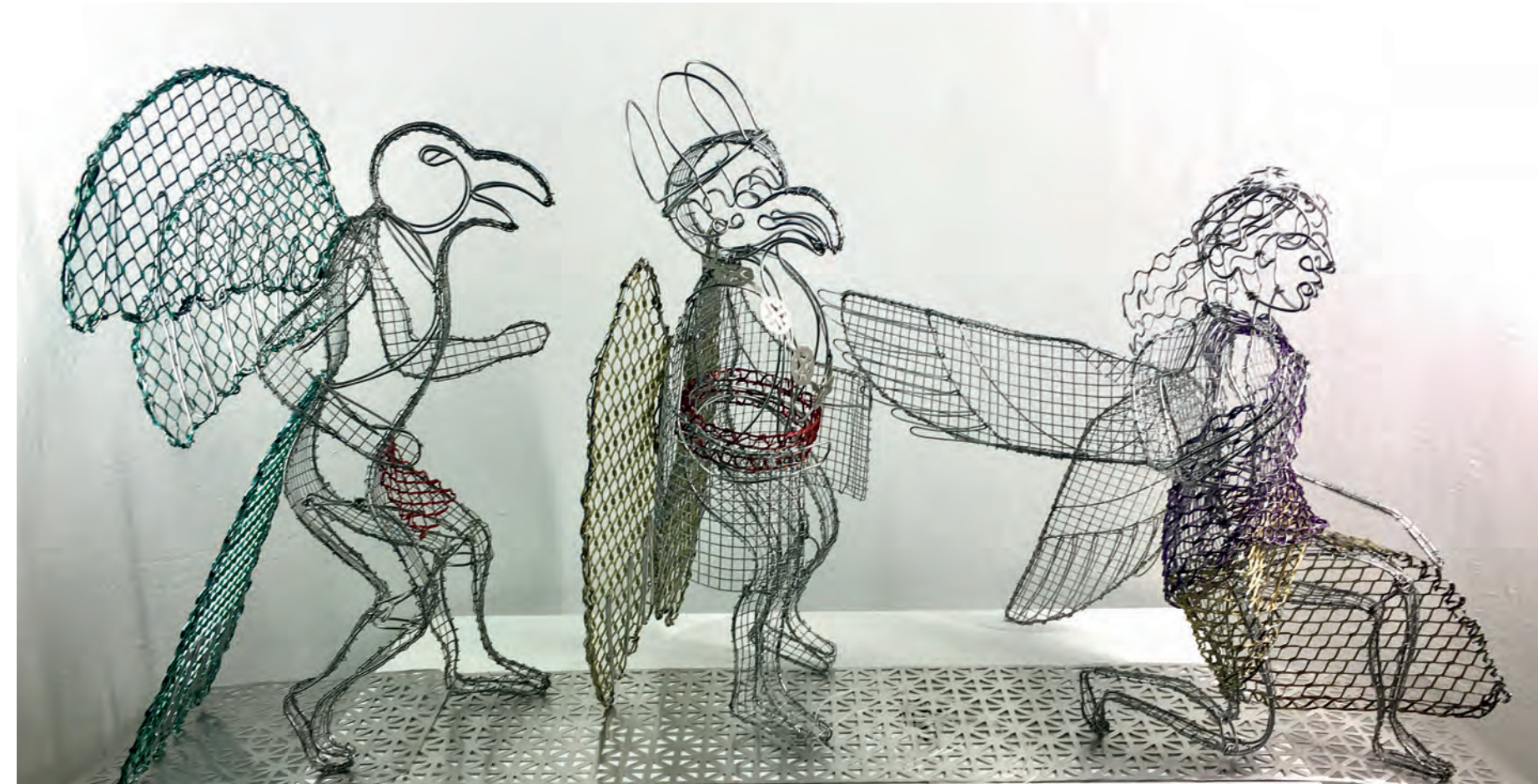
ASSYRIAN GENIE

PAIWAN MOUNTAIN HAWK EAGLE

43"x36"x15" vitrine installation

Steel, wire mesh, enamel

2021



PERUVIAN MOCHE BIRD-RUNNER

14"x6"x10"

The Bird-Runner is found on pottery and jewelry of the Moche culture of north-coast Peru, circa 600-700 C.E. Anthropomorphic figures with hawk-like bird heads, wings, and tail are depicted as foot-racers. In a pair of mosaic earrings, these ceremonial runners or messengers wear vivid colors of turquoise, red, and green stones—like modern superheroes—colors reminiscent of the bird feathers that are part of Andean culture.

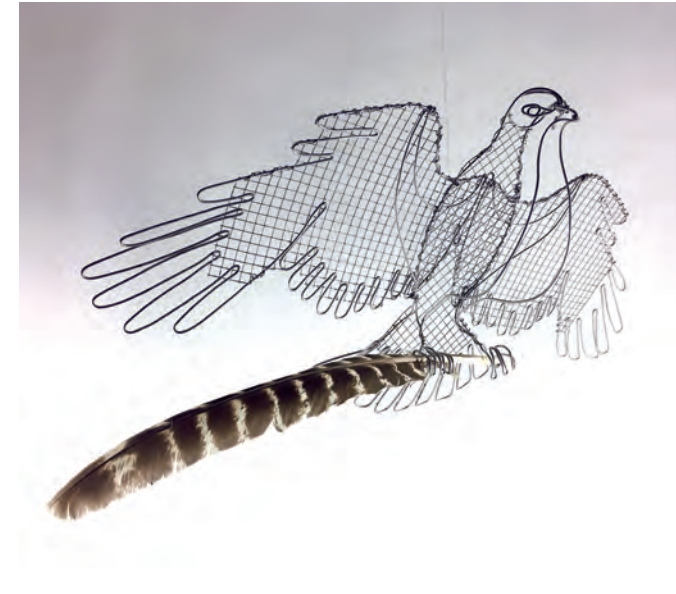
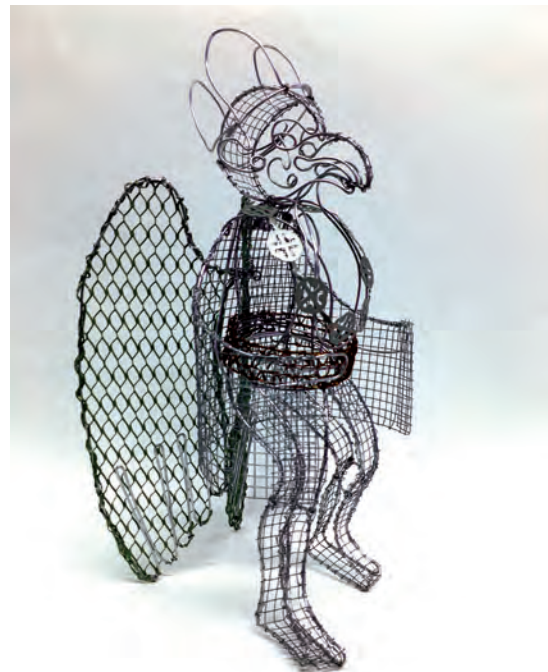


Photo by Howard Goodman

JAPANESE TENGU

14"x9"x6"

Tengu is a hybrid spirit in Japanese folklore, often shown with a long red nose and priestly clothing. This familiar character has an evolving history. Though the name refers to a Chinese dog-demon associated with a meteor, the Japanese Tengu was initially depicted as a bird of prey. It was a Shinto spirit opposed to Buddhism, resulting in stories about tricks played on reverent monks. Later, while the Tengu's magic and ability to fly remained, the bird beak became an anthropomorphic nose. Tengu's image also changed from a martial creature to a protective trickster of mountain forests.



PAIWAN MOUNTAIN HAWK EAGLE

10"x16"x4"

The Eagle is revered in many cultures as a symbol of strength, insight, and courage. In Taiwan, indigenous groups tell stories about their relationship to specific hawks and eagles, whose feathers are collected and worn with honor. The Paiwan have a legend about their origins, related to the 100-Pace Snake, who was their ancestor. This snake with a diamond-back pattern is said to kill humans with its venom before they can walk 100 paces. In one story, the huge viper shrinks and turns into the Mountain Hawk Eagle or Hodgson Eagle—which also has triangular markings on its feathers.



Photo by Howard Goodman

ASSYRIAN GENIE

12"x8"x12"

Winged Genies in ancient Assyrian art are muscular demi-gods, depicted with majestic bird wings and sometimes bird heads. They symbolized both protection and fertility for the Mesopotamian kingdom. The Genies are said to be antediluvian sages surviving from the time before the great flood. Usually these beautifully dressed spirits are male, with curly beards, but this one is a beardless figure in a pose of offering.

MAGPIE BRIDGE

(WEAVER GIRL AND COWHERD BOY)

28"x22"x7" each of two parts

Steel, wire mesh, recycled & handmade paper

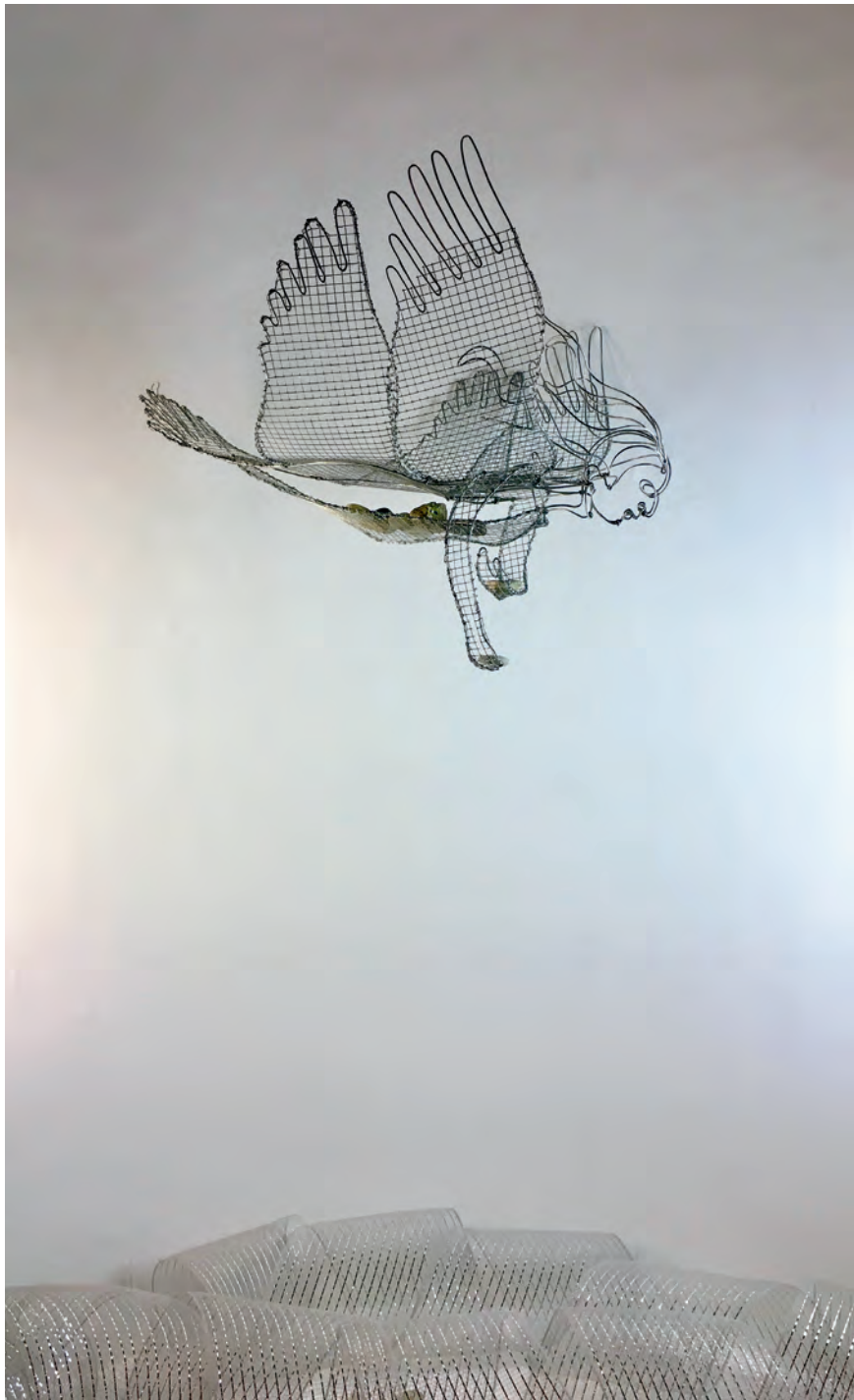
2020

The ancient, romantic story of lovers who meet for one day each year is a familiar one celebrated throughout Asia. In China it has been passed down in song and poetry for more than two thousand years and is considered one of the four great folktales. A celestial daughter known as Weaver Girl fell in love with and married the humble Cowherd Boy. They are associated with the stars Vega and Altair in the night sky. Their union angered the parent deities, who separated the lovers by a river, or the Milky Way. Though details of the tale differ, in all versions they are allowed to meet only once a year, on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month, which may fall in July or August.

In Japan this event is celebrated as Tanabata, or Star Festival, but it dates back to Han Dynasty China. In China and Taiwan the day is called Chinese Valentines Day or Double Seventh Festival, and birds play an important role in the story of the Magpie Bridge. It is said that a flock of Magpies felt so deeply for the separated lovers that they built a bridge with their bodies, allowing the couple to cross the bridge and be reunited once a year in the sky.

Opposite Photo by Howard Goodman





JINGWEI-BIRD TRIES TO FILL THE SEA

15"x20"x18"

Steel, wire mesh, stones

2021

The Chinese tale of the Jingwei-Bird is, like that of Greek Sisyphus, a story of endless effort. A young girl, Nuwa, daughter of the Emperor, drowned while playing in the Eastern Sea. But instead of perishing, she was transformed into a bird known as Jingwei, which calls its own name. The name means Spirit Guardian. Trying to save others from her fate, the Jingwei-Bird carries stones and twigs in her beak, over and over again, and drops them into the water, attempting to fill the sea. In Chinese tradition, the image of the Jingwei-Bird still represents perseverance.

Opposite Photo by Howard Goodman



This aviary group presents real birds from near and far, but it might also suggest the famous Persian story of the Conference of the Birds, or Speech of the Birds. The title of the poem comes from the Qu'ran, where Solomon and David are taught the language of the birds. In the story, all the birds of the world, led by the wise Hoopoe, go on a journey to decide who should rule them. They pass through, or fail, many tribulations, until those remaining learn important truths about their goals and about themselves.



Photo by Howard Goodman

AVIARY, OR CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

Steel wire, handmade & recycled paper, plastic mesh
43"x36"x15" vitrine installation
2021

(Clockwise from lower left)

FISH CROW (PURPLE)

7"x7"x11"

NIGHT HERON WITH FANTASY TAIL (BLUE)

30"x12"x12"

TAIWANESE BARBET OR FIVE-COLOR BIRD

(CHARTREUSE)

9"x14"x3"

GOLDFINCH (YELLOW)

10"x11"x5"

SPARROW (BROWN)

9"x11"x5"

KINGFISHER (TURQUOISE)

6"x8.5"x5"

HUMMINGBIRDS (GREEN & PINK)

5"x6"x1.5" each

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (BLACK & WHITE & RED)

12"x5"x5"

SNOWY OWL (WHITE)

11.5"x6.5"x7"



PINK SPOONBILL FLOCK

Approx. 9"x12"x16" each
Steel wire, plastic bags
2021

The Spoonbill is a cousin of Herons, Storks, Ibises, and Flamingos and is found on several continents. But the Black-faced Spoonbill is an endangered species, due to gradual loss of habitat. In Taiwan, where 50 percent of the world population winters, gains have been made through diligent efforts over the last 30 years.

In fact, the Spoonbill was one of the first birds to have been labeled endangered when, in the 1800s, its plumes were prized for fans and hat ornaments. Spoonbill populations were nearly exterminated until they were legally protected.

The pink or Roseate Spoonbill seen here—whose color is due to a diet of crustaceans—is actually only seen in the southern U.S., Argentina, and Chile. Since being protected in the 1940s, it is no longer considered endangered.





WHAT THE EAGLE SAW (EAGLE BENCH)

57"x58"x35.5"

Powder-coated fabricated steel

2016

This functional bench takes the shape of a bird with open wings, welcoming and sheltering. Its abstract classical form suggests the majestic Eagle, honored in many cultures. In the Hudson River Valley, the Bald Eagle has been revived by conservation efforts. The work's title points to the image of the seat as witness.



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