

For a bird, a tree-limb is a perch — a landing between earth and sky, a setting for rest and observation in an existence defined by airborne arrivals and departures, respite and reconnaissance in a migratory life. Outfitted with a nest, this same tree-limb blossoms into an aviary home — a locus for life with a mate and the cycle of bearing and nurturing young.

Emily Dickinson famously wrote “Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul/And sings the tune without the words/And never stops at all. “Deirdre Murphy, too, finds promise on the wing. She envies birds their freedom of movement — their “mastery of the air”; their ability to see from widely and wildly divergent perspectives in spectrums of color beyond what is visible to humans; their capacity to change environment when biology or circumstance calls. She admires their matter-of-fact assimilation to man-made environments, and empathizes with them as they persevere and adapt in the face of man-made change.

DEIRDRE MURPHY ARTIFICE

Rootedness and flight. Home and escape. These are the dualities represented by birds — and the opposing states at the heart of so much existential yearning among humans. Murphy understands life on the move — born in New York City, her peripatetic childhood included formative periods in Paris, France and Manchester, England, as well as points north, south, east, and west across the United States. She’s experienced the pleasures and rewards of wanderlust — as a young adult, she expanded her personal and artistic vistas and experience with a year’s study and work in Japan — and continues to feel its allure. Murphy knows, as well, the drive to build, sustain, and commit to home and family. Since moving to Philadelphia in 1998, she’s married, had a child (Liam, now three), and made her corner of the city a base for life as a working artist and art-educator.

Like Murphy, her subjects — a ranging flock of birds as well as butterflies and one most arresting and arrested deer (more later about this Trickster) — are at home in Pennsylvania. They are native, indigenous, authentic to their locale. Like John James Audobon, Murphy begins by depicting her favored fauna amidst its local flora. Unlike Audobon, she then lets her imagination — and her painterly practice — take flight. Flowers morph into origami. Mountain ranges become A-frame houses become simple strips of folded paper. Her wildlife is vivid, vibrant — and strangely still. This stillness underscores the contrivances of traditional nature painting — Audobon shot his birds before painting them, using wire to prop them into “natural” positions — while staying true to the nature of Murphy’s actual models, most of which are taxidermy specimens of birds studied and sketched at Philadelphia’s Academy of Natural Sciences and stuffed deer (like the aforementioned Trickster) adorning the walls of Joe’s Bar in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

Nothing is what it seems in Artifice. With the power unique to an accomplished painter, Murphy creates credible and thoroughly engaging worlds through the force of her talents. With the brave honesty that is the hallmark of a true artist, Murphy is unafraid to shatter the fantasies she’s conjured by reminding us that we are not looking at actual birds, butterflies, houses, and sunsets — that what she’s showing us are representations of these things rendered in paint on canvas.



Professedly “in love with the formal language of painting,” Murphy sets challenges and parameters for herself as she conceives each new work. She sets sight on taboos—that a figure should never be placed at the very center of a composition; that a picture of deer bounding against a sunset sky can only be kitsch — so she can overcome them. She places herself far out on a creative limb so she might reach someplace new, see something new —

always bringing the viewer with her. Murphy’s hope: to have the viewer join her in fully inhabiting the worlds presented in her paintings, then departing these imagined perches to a life of heightened awareness.

— Matt Singer, Curator
Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, and Writer, Philadelphia Museum of Art

