



David R. Harper

M I D N I G H T

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Art Gallery of Burlington

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agb

ONCE HELD A COD'S OTOLITH IN MY HAND. An otolith is a tiny calcium carbonate crystal, sometimes referred to as an "ear stone," that floats beneath the fish's brain allowing it to sense vibrations in the water. It provides spatial orientation and balance so they can navigate their surroundings. Otoliths grow throughout the lifecycle of a fish by accumulating material on the outer surface. It is white and smooth, like a tiny porcelain shard. It felt like holding magic.

I experienced that same sense of wonder holding the clay body of one of David R. Harper's ceramic birds. Quiet and still, yet it radiated energy in my hand. It was of this world, and not. It *was* this world, and not.

Now imagine that sensation multiplied by 10,000—that is *MIDNIGHT*.

MIDNIGHT is the culmination of Harper's nine-year investigation into the bird form as a conduit to process ideas of presence in absence and the relationship between accumulation and deterioration and, inevitably, destruction. Within their radiating beauty, there is a softness, a stillness, to the ceramic birds that is amplified by the sheer numbers of their presence.

Harper has developed an intimate relationship with this form. When the pandemic forced the world to stop, the idea of halting his hands from doing what they knew best was unthinkable. Yet the pressure to create during a time of deep anxiety was debilitating. Instead, he leaned

into creating a production line of ceramic bird forms. The birds offered the artist a stopgap between projects or a comforting shape to make in times of grief or creative inactivity. It became a crutch—a support in staving off the anxiety of not working. To put this inactivity anxiety into perspective, let me explain that Harper is a maker. Every component of his elaborate installations is adamantly made by hand. If the idea needs to be translated into glass, he learns how to blow glass. If the construction calls for stained glass, he picks up a soldering iron. If the project requires a cabinet, he works to understand joinery.

With the birds piling up in his studio, it was apparent they needed to take shape, in a flock, to allow for a new story to be told. Eventually the work became bigger than him, bigger than the reason he began in the first place; it started to live a life of its own. Each ceramic form became the residue (or dust) of his artistic production and output that clung to the studio, collectively articulating connections between accumulation and deterioration, the measurement of time, and the intimate relationship between an artist and a form.

The studio production line of bird forms materialized an extension of the artist and became a way of rendering thought in form as we ask the big questions that haunt our daily existence. As we see our world falling apart, when in the climax of self-destruction, when ruination has overcome us—what are we doing to preserve ourselves and our cultures? How do we keep moving forward, even when we don't know where we are going or why?



As Harper puts it, "In order to understand something huge, in order to process the unfathomable or un-understandable, you have to break it into pieces and look at each piece. You have to hold each bird in your hand and work it into a form. You have to make the bodies, and then the wings, and then the tails, and attach them all together. You have to trim the forms and turn their heads; you have to wet them and smooth them. Each one is loved, and studied, and held. Each one is a thought or a thinking through of something. For me, to try to understand the big things, I need to break them apart and hold each fragment in my hand."

Harper's birds were first seen in suspended flight in his exhibition *My Own Personal Ghost* at John Michael Kohler Arts Center (Sheboygan, WI) in 2016. It was an installation that imagined a hypothetical studio where the residue of an artist's presence is left behind in his absence, asking if an artist's ideas keep growing and developing when they are no longer in the space. In *MIDNIGHT*, Harper grounds the birds, plucking all 10,000 of them from flight and holding them still for greater observation and reflection. Leaning on the archetypal language of a natural history museum, Harper moulded the birds to resemble the skins found lining drawers in an ornithological department's vault or museum display. Alternatively, his birds sprawl up the walls. In switching that vantage point, the suspended birds become an overwhelming, enveloping shadow.

This is not a mausoleum, however, or an ode to death, but a living space containing the presence of an artist's ever-moving hand.

On a recent visit to the ornithology department at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), the AGB staff had the great privilege to learn from Mark Peck, the museum's ornithologist and Manager of the Schad Gallery of Biodiversity, about the life teeming in their archives. He taught us that those ornithological collections are *not* dead but are living research centres. Even at 150 years old, some birds are active agents in narrating stories of evolution and climate change through observational study and genome research. Just as the taxidermy birds in the museum are alive and speaking, so are Harper's. They ask us to think about love, loss, loneliness, and time—all things that are impossible to fully understand, unless you take them apart.

Harper's elaborate installations are truly awesome in their scope and scale. They overwhelm viewers with abundance through the painstaking production of beautifully crafted and elegantly unfolding narratives on grief, belonging, the complicated relations of humans and non-humans, and how we use objects to inform our notions of self. His exhibitions are fabricated using hundreds of artworks and objects—he typically employs both traditional and non-traditional materials such as embroidery, ceramic, glass, casting dehydrated milk, bone, and charcoal—which take on the delicate histories of the cultural spaces they inhabit with a semi-autobiographical style. For more than eighteen years, Harper has forged a path dedicated to experimental artistic production by fostering a unique relationship with material culture and tradition. From embroidery to taxidermy and ceramics to stained glass, his comprehension and adept understanding of material

histories and practices is unparalleled. Harper, himself a sensitive instrument, is ever-present in the work and remains a ghostly hand that continues to toil in exhibition spaces long after the gallery lights are out. *MIDNIGHT* highlights this distinct material language, his rigorous investigations of presence through absence, and his empathetic probing of the human condition with a self-reflexivity and tenderness that is refreshing. It is a monument to slow and steady production, a continuous distillation of his practice.

This detailed work is further understood in the context of several installations surrounding *MIDNIGHT: The Delicate Days (I, II, III)* (2023) is a series of three wall-mounted cushions of hand-woven linen, silkscreened with found images. Cast ceramic snakes and vintage motel room soaps are gently pressed into the forms and packed in a vinyl protective cover.

In *The Boy Who Slept Through Summer* (2024), a stained-glass vitrine adorned with pressed flowers houses a handwoven lawn chair on cushions with mini cereal boxes from the late 1970s strewn on them and surrounded by pink clay cicadas. Nearby is a stained-glass snake reliquary with vintage cigarette packages embedded in the glass walls of the outlined snake body. These nostalgic artifacts reference another space hollowed of activity: the empty motel room. It is a place of respite but also of an eerie solitude where you could be awakened in the middle of the night by the disturbing drone of static from a television left on.



Photo Credit: Rich Maciejewski



Image Credit: David R. Harper, My Own Personal Ghost, 2015-2016

Wood, Steel, polyurethane, porcelain, glaze, feathers, autobody filler, plasti-dip, linen, canvas, wool, cotton embroidery floss, giclee print on canvas, cottolin, silk flowers, flocking, glass, plexi glass, enamel, cast acrylic, cast paper, latex, plaster. Images courtesy: John Michel Kohler Art Center



Until the early 1980s, midnight was the hour that televised broadcasts ended in North America. The picture would snap to black, and then a test pattern appeared. The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) colour bars signalled the end of a day, the end of information, and the beginning of quiet. This throwback appears on the cots in *Rollaway (I, II)* (2024). The SMPTE test pattern is embroidered on the linen cot covers with the word "Midnight" emblazoned across the centre and ceramic tiles, shaped like motel room fobs, hang from the cushion. Each ceramic has an image imprinted on the surface of bleached curtains, bathroom towels, or aging wallpaper, repeating the image of stillness and loneliness—a presence of absence.

Two clay birds, facing each other, sit atop blown glass perfume bottles nestled in the gallery's niche—a microcosm of the ideas and materials in the exhibition. Their delicate nests, constructed by dipping real nests in pink clay, are placed on covered linen cushions embedded with old, unfolded cigarette packages, against the backdrop of a custom-printed linen curtain. Harper has positioned three nightlights to help you find your way. The bulbs light the smiling faces of Kellogg's original mascots: Snap, the Rice Krispies elf, and Cornelius, the Corn Flakes rooster. The cereal's branding overlays images of faded hotel rooms, turning their smiles into sad reminders of the solitude and dimness of such transient spaces.

Harper's exhibitions carry many concepts that meld together in a single space, as he tries to answer the difficult

Image Credit: David R. Harper, *She Drank the Water that was Meant for the Orchids*, 2019. Cast dehydrated milk, wood, steel, leather, palm fronds, rubber coating, blown glass, stained glass, lead, cast plaster, feathers, atomizers, felt, linen, cast acrylic, fire polished chatons, auto body filler, enamel, taxidermy bird, latex, gum rubber, brass, ceramic, glaze. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Photo Credit: Rich Maciejewski

question of how one can translate weighty ideas into material form. Like the material accretion of the cod's otolith, or the liveliness of bird skins in museum collections, Harper's installations continue to grow through thick layers of accumulated material knowledge and sophisticated storytelling. His last major installations, *My Own Personal Ghost* at the John and Geraldine Lilley Museum of Art (Reno, NV) and *The Photographer's Shadow* at the Clough-Hanson Gallery (Memphis, TN), are excellent examples of how these webs of overlapping stories are imagined. Told through the material fluency of plaster casting, glass blowing, photo-realistic embroidery, three-dimensional stained-glass sculpting, and cabinetry, Harper creates new worlds. This skillful manipulation of material could also be seen in the ambitious installation of *A Mouth Shaped Room*, which transformed the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum (Milwaukee, WI) from a quiet museum into a space of pure wonder and curiosity. The radical reimagining of the space speaks to his observational prowess in blending history, artifact, and fiction in sculptural form.

Harper's work traverses the intersection of contemporary art, craft, and archives. He has the extraordinary ability to effortlessly move between institutions dedicated to media-specific excellence, to critical contemporary art spaces, to museums with distinct archival collections. He navigates them all with equal dexterity and comfort, engaging a wide audience in conversations of collective grief and trauma.

As an institution, the Art Gallery of Burlington defies the limitations of enforcing a division between contemporary art and craft. I look to Harper's practice as the embodiment of what we strive to illuminate: old technologies in the hands of contemporary artists have the power to tell the complicated stories of our time. Harper has the uncanny ability to do just that, telling the complex and sometimes difficult stories of our everyday lives. *MIDNIGHT* is an epic rendering of that toil and time, as well as the beauty and loneliness, grief, and vastness of their material forms.

Suzanne Carte

Artistic Director/Curator, Art Gallery of Burlington

David R. Harper received his BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in Fiber and Material Studies. His work has been exhibited at a wide range of institutions, including the Museum of Arts and Design (New York, NY), Everson Museum of Art (Syracuse, NY), Crocker Art Museum (Sacramento, CA), Gardiner Museum (Toronto, ON), MASS MoCA (North Adams, MA), Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum (Milwaukee, WI), and Contemporary Zoological Conservatory (Toronto, ON). He currently teaches in the Painting and Drawing department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. www.davidrharper.com

Exhibition List

MIDNIGHT, 2024

Stoneware, porcelain

Dimensions vary

Courtesy of the artist

The Boy Who Slept Through Summer, 2024

Wood, glass, pressed flowers, lead, felt, handwoven linen/cotton, cereal, cereal boxes, aluminum, plastic, porcelain, cicada molts, cicadas, cigarette labels, gum rubber
36 × 48 × 52 / 8" × 26" × 2"
Courtesy of the artist

The Delicate Days (I Poolside), 2023

Handwoven linen, screenprint, soap, stoneware, glaze, polyurethane, vinyl, cotton
34.5 × 23 × 3.5
Courtesy of the artist

The Delicate Days (II Oceanside), 2023

Handwoven linen, screenprint, soap, stoneware, glaze, polyurethane, vinyl, cotton
34.5 × 23 × 3.5
Courtesy of the artist

The Delicate Days (III Vanity), 2023

Handwoven linen, screenprint, soap, stoneware, glaze, polyurethane, vinyl, cotton
34.5 × 23 × 3.5
Courtesy of the artist

Recall, 2024

Handwoven linen, vinyl, found cigarette package, cotton, blown glass, porcelain, atomizer, soap, linen curtain
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Rollaway (I, II), 2024

Handwoven cotton/linen, embroidery floss, foam, aluminum, plastic, steel, vinyl, cotton, porcelain, decals
24 × 36 × 9 / 24" × 39" × 9"
Courtesy of the artist

Nightlight (I, II, III), 2024

Porcelain, glaze, decal, hardware
4 × 2.5 × 5.5
Courtesy of the artist

Public Programming

At the AGB, learning is in the making. Through hands-on workshops and courses, artists can build a greater personal connection to their craft and experience professional growth by learning new techniques, discovering other artists' practices, and understanding contemporary art in greater depth.

Go to www.agb.life/learn to read more about the programs and to register.

Courses

All course fees include material and equipment; registration is required.

Stripe Lab with Amanda Rataj

Wednesdays, October 2–30, 6–9 pm
M \$240 and NM \$260

Learn more about design, colour, proportion, and more in this fun and creative weaving course focused on stripes. Participants will explore stripe design and development through creative exercises that awaken curiosity, creativity, and deepen their understanding of the principles of art and design.

A Still Moment: Stitching Memories Together with Kate Jackson

Saturdays, October 19–December 7,
9:30 am–12:30 pm
M \$280 and NM \$310

Starting with creative exercises in drawing and collage, participants will create their own unique textile artwork while exploring a different technique each week. By creating samples and gaining experience with a variety of textile materials and methods, participants will create an artwork inspired by their own memories from photos, journals, oral stories, or writing using collage, applique, and embroidery.

Workshops

All workshop fees include material and equipment; registration is required.

Mould Making with David Harper

Saturday, October 19 and Sunday,
October 20, 1–4 pm
M \$100 and NM \$110

Join exhibiting artist David R. Harper for a two-part introduction to the mould-making techniques he used to create more than 10,000 slip-cast birds for

MIDNIGHT. Participants are invited to bring a small, simple object that will be the foundation for making a plaster mould and learning how to slip-cast multiples of your object.

Embellishing Memories: Embroidery on Photographs with Kate Jackson

Saturday, November 16, 1:30–4:30 pm
M \$40 and NM \$45

Kate Jackson will demonstrate how embroidery can be used as a form of drawing to bring new meanings to bear on a nontraditional textile material, such as photographs, by using needle, thread, and simple embroidery stitches to embellish a photograph of your choice.

Radical Darkroom: Lumen Prints with Sonya de Laat

Wednesday, October 23, 6:30–9:30 pm
M \$50 and NM \$55

This workshop in the AGB darkroom invites you to make unique, hand-printed images that reflect personal or collective memory by using objects with recognizable silhouettes, or material that bends light or creates suggestive shadows.

Public Talks

Free programming, registration is required.

Artist Talk (online)

Thursday, November 7, 6–7 pm
Curator Suzanne Carte joins David R. Harper for a conversation - unravelling the big ideas and complex stories in *MIDNIGHT*.

Mark Peck: The Extraordinary Life in a Museum's Bird Collection (in-person) Talk and Tour

Thursday, October 3, 6:30–8:00 pm
For many people, birds are considered the most vivid expression of life. They are seen as symbols of freedom and are admired for their liveliness, beauty, and vitality. But what becomes of them in death? Following a tour of *MIDNIGHT* guided by Stephanie Vegh, Head of Learning, join Mark Peck, ornithologist at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), for his presentation discussing the mix of art, science, and nature found in the ROM's bird collection.

Guided Tours

Free programming, no registration required.

Gallery Guide Tours

First Sundays at 1:00 pm
October 6, November 3, December 1, January 5

Family Days

Free programming, no registration required.

Family Open Studios:

Our Wonderful World

Sundays, September 22–December 8 (excluding October 13), drop-in 1–4pm
Drawing inspiration from our Fall exhibitions, our Family Open Studio programming is all about what makes our world wonderful. From awe-inspiring beauty to optical illusions, our projects are accessible for ages 3 and up and will inspire families to get creative at the gallery and at home, too! This free program is drop-in style, so no registration is necessary.

Burlington Culture Days Family Open Studio

Sunday, September 22, drop-in 1–4 pm

Join us in celebrating the launch of Culture Days in Burlington with our first Family Open Studio for the Fall season! Our family-friendly drop-in studio encourages intergenerational play through activities inspired by our exhibitions, while empowering families to continue creating artwork together at home.

School and Group Programs

Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays,
9:30–11:30 am, 12:30–2:30 pm,
or 6–8:00 pm

Sessions are \$18/person with a
minimum of 15 people

Contact Annie Webber annie@agb.life
to register.

AGB is the ideal place to experience
art outside of the classroom. Through
the gallery's school programs, students
can access artists and ideas as

vehicles for dialogue and become
active thinkers in the creation of their
own works of art. Students connect
to professional arts studios, thought-
provoking contemporary exhibitions,
and a talented team of artist-educators.
Our planned visits, available as one-
time events or multi-week series,
connect students with themes from
our current exhibitions. With David R.
Harper's *MIDNIGHT*, we'll be discussing
ideas around memory, what happens
internally and externally when we are
still and quiet, as well as how we can
deal with overwhelming feelings by
tuning in to our creative inner world.

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The AGB is grateful to the volunteer Gallery Guides for their exemplary dedication to bringing the exhibition to life and to our members for their ongoing support of all the AGB's programming.

The Art Gallery of Burlington is located on the ancestral territory of many Indigenous Nations including the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, and Métis peoples. The territory is mutually covered by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy, the Ojibway, and other allied Nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. We acknowledge that the land upon which we gather, to create and learn, is part of the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

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