

An Whitlock *Crow(d)*

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An Whitlock, *Crow(d)*

During the opening of An Whitlock's most recent exhibition, *Crow(d)*, many people related crow stories, confirming for the artist that they are present in most people's lives. A beautiful bird, onto which much is projected, the crow is common but extremely difficult to capture. The exhibition, consisting of four installations, three photographs and one pair of boots, provides a balanced narrative, controlling and yet not taming the crow.

The installations in the front gallery initially seem aesthetic and contained. Fifty-two small crows' heads are spread across two walls, creating a black meandering pattern across the white gallery wall. The second installation, subtitled *claw vessels*, shows eight neatly ordered black block pedestals. Four rocks are placed on each pedestal and around them talons are firmly curled. Out of these, in place of legs and body, branches extend. The sculptures have a formal museum quality that is successfully contradicted by the wild growth of branches that escape the cool containment of the cube. The heads, too, when approached, seemed uncannily alive. Each appears to be different and in every stance a look and a call is evoked: a straight head with closed bill is staring; a turned one observing; a straight head with bill open seems to be calling; while another head, thrown back, is screaming. The apparent containment is but a guise for the power of the wild, which refuses control.

In place of an artists' statement we are given a copy of a notice to the residents of Essex which begins: "Due to public demand, Town Council has decided to implement, on a test basis, a more proactive program of crow control. The program will consist of modern scare tactics, including a 'death cry' tape and pyrotechnics (fireworks). The existing propane guns will remain in use." Whitlock discovered the notice in her mother's mailbox one morning. She tells of her stay

with her father who lay dying and of the resounding early morning sound of wings beating, so full of crows was the air. Living in a rural area as she does, dead crows hung in fields to ward off others and machine gun sounds in fruit farms are familiar sights and sounds to Whitlock.

Both the common sight and sign of the bird and the need to move through the experience of such influx and power is apparent in Whitlock's own arduous process of production. For the heads, the artist first made a rubber mold from a taxidermist's model, then a papier-mâché skeleton. She then proceeded to fill in the open beaks, varnish, plaster, and mount them with pushpins. Through this process, the frail object becomes fairly sturdy. The final work involved inserting taxidermics' eyes, sanding the beaks, and applying a modelling compound that suggested the texture of feathers. The result is astonishingly life-like while also unique. Each head contains a characteristic specific to itself and its stance. Perhaps it is through the long process by which the artist so closely acquaints herself with this particular bird that she also manages to enliven the object and to demonstrate the crow's

beauty and power.

A wall installation subtitled *claw sticks* spreads across the back gallery. Out of the strong talons legs grow into thin branches that splay across the wall and out into the room. There are many things to see and feel in this work: crows in flight or crows captured by the earth. The bare branches recall the sparsity of winter and decay, their thin twigs hint at tenuousness. Yet there is also endurance and the promise of spring and new growth, just as the claws are both hanging on and about to ascend into flight, the branches are at once supple and fragile. A small cluster of *claw vessels* are also in this gallery, not as cleanly displayed as in the front, they underline the solidity of rock, the rooted aspect of earth and crow. The strength of the grip here tells us that they aren't going anywhere.

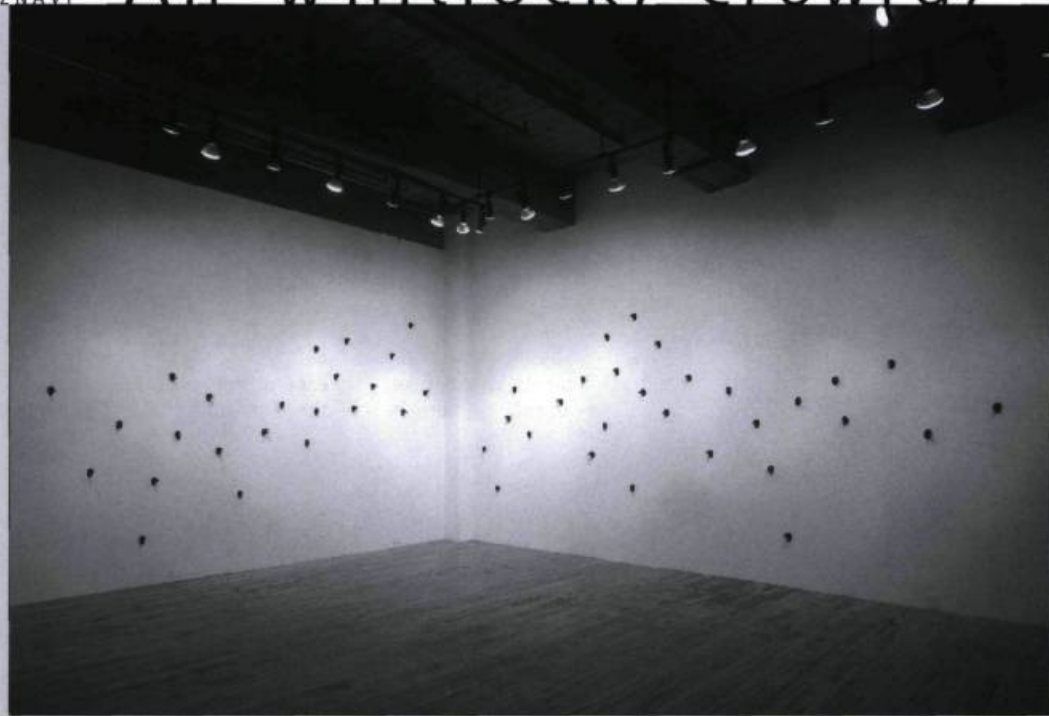
Alone in the room is a pair of workman's boots: one fallen over, one standing up, both empty. Apparently leaden, they are surprisingly easy to lift, made of papier-mâché. Next to the crows' feet, they seem hollow, signalling that the human is equipped but not grounded like the bird. While the power of the crow is apparent even when only its claws are exhibited, the

human's boots are vacant of impact. A sign rather than a presence.

A final element of the exhibition is a series of three colour prints showing bits of corn husks half buried beneath a deep and frosty snow. It is difficult to tell whether the corn is half buried or emerging, whether the snow is piling or melting. It is a hint of food that is not lost but found, it points to fodder for the bird, to the grounded element of nature, to the precarious relationship of nature/culture.

I have been told that the term for a crowd of crows is "murder," which illuminates the human and cultural relationship to this bird, against which machine gun sounds and pyrotechnics are set into action. Like the buried corn, the crow remains insistently present: the heads show its character to be proud, alert, mocking and serene. Underlying all is the endless battle of the corn grower and fruit farmer against this element of nature; a precarious balance exists between these two, and though there may be small defeats and victories, the battle rages on against the murder of crows. ■

An Whitlock, *Crow(d)*
Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto
Dec. 2, 2000-Jan. 10, 2001



An Whitlock, *Crow(d)*, 1997-2000. Installation view. Subtitle: heads. Papier mâché, plaster, modelling compound & taxidermist plastic eyes. Photo courtesy Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto.