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[Michael Rogers, Flock, Bullseye Gallery, 2009. Review by Kevin Fann](#)

Michael Rogers' *Flock* combines apparently unrelated found objects into a narrative of cast glass and bronze that makes sense in the same way that a great work of fiction or poetry makes sense: through complex, interwoven relationships. *Flock's* eleven sculptures examine the brutal production and creation cycle man imposes on nature. Threads of symbolism run through in the pieces like circular themes in literature and circular traits in human ancestry. Objects in the exhibit include antique picture frames, a crow decoy, paintbrushes, a baby doll, small leather-bound books, and quart jars—all cast in glass and bronze. The symbols etched in glass on various pieces include bees, diagrams of flowers, honeycombed fencing wire, and barn swallows in flight.

The namesake of the exhibit, “Flock,” resembles a wall of framed portraiture in a patrician home. These fine frames suggest old portraits of generations past. The thick glass refracts through a hazy and bubbled interior of yellow and sepia. Behind the glass in each frame, a bronze substrate is attached. On the backside of the glass, an etching of barn swallows in flight shows through against the shiny metal. There are eight of these frames, and, hung on the wall together, they suggest a cluster of windows made from 18-inch wide emerald cut gemstones. Rogers etched the barn swallows large enough so that only one or two birds fit in each frame, suspended in a clouded, translucent sky as though swarming from an unseen barn in the backyard of a deserted farmhouse.

From birds in flight to birds in bondage, the next piece, “The Keeper’s Lament,” changes tone immediately with ten crows hanging upside-down, suspended cocoon-like on the ends of steel wires that connect to large bronze nails in the wall. The birds have been cast in glass from a crow decoy, a hunters’ tool. The crows hang by their tails over a ten-foot-long table, and their wings are wrapped with honeycombed bronze gauze. One of the glass crows doesn’t have honeycomb around its wings, however. That crow hangs closest to a quart jar, as though someone has harvested the vital essence from the bird. The jar sits on a serving tray, also cast in bronze, and several small novels are scattered around the table and wrapped in honeycomb, as well. Bars and bars of bronze fill the interior surface of the table. There are nine more jars on the floor—one for each of the other nine crows. It’s a surrealistic harvest, with allusions to beekeeping, smokehouses, canning, and preservation.

Across the room, a single crow hangs upside-down from a steel wire in a piece entitled “Offering.” This crow is made of cast bronze rather than glass, and, on the floor, two feet under the bird, sits

another bronze serving tray. On this tray, Rogers has piled iron dust and shavings, as though thin splinters of metal have dripped from the bird's beak. These iron shavings turn up in two other pieces, "Joyce's Brush" and "Naruda's Brush," two paintbrushes that have been cast in glass and hung on the wall. A bristling trim of iron shavings frames each glass brush. Some of the iron is missing on one side where gallery patrons have touched, apparently compelled to verify that an unseen, imbedded magnet holds the shavings in place. Rogers etched upon the brush ferrules "Joyce" and "Naruda." Both are names of authors renowned for imaginative, non-linear prose and verse: James Joyce and Pablo Naruda.

In other references to literature, a baby doll has been cast in glass, all slightly detached and segmented and stripped of clothing down to its plastic torso and limbs. A glass bird perches on the baby's shoulder, another on its head, and under the baby's defiant foot sits another bronze book wrapped in honeycomb. The baby has a sullen face. The piece is titled "Darger's Muse." And in "Emerson Dreams," Rogers presents another picture frame cast in yellow glass with a bronze backing. This piece has a barn swallow etched on the backside, as in "Flock," but Rogers has also etched handwritten lines from Ralph Waldo Emerson on the outer surface. Various quotations fill the entire frame. Shadows of these etched words project onto the bird: "Come to me in summers scorching glow/Light and heat, land and sea..." Two other pieces consist of a single antique frame with etchings: "The Language of Bees," featuring bees, honeycomb-shaped fencing wire, and blooming flower petals; and "Gathering," featuring a bee and a flower that has not yet bloomed, its biology organic and resembling a slaughterhouse pluck of lungs, stomach, intestines and bowels.

Finally and as if in punctuation, two clear glass globes about two feet tall sit on separate platforms in the center of the exhibit. The two pieces contain objects within them. Titled "Telling the Bees" and "A Faithful Likeness," they feel like final products of some austere production process. Their glass is thin and delicate, clear and hand-blown, looking very upscale and finished. "Telling the Bees" encases a glass figure of a baby in its globe. The baby gathers red thread in its outstretched hands the way an assistant might hold thread for a seamstress. A bronze key sits in the bottom of the globe, tied to the loose end of the red thread. The outer surface of the globe shows etchings of bees and flowers. In "A Faithful Likeness," a rabbit holds a needle connected to an embroidered white cloth that has a barn swallow stitched with the same red thread. Rogers etched this globe with those ubiquitous barn swallows, just like the ones in "Flock," where we first began.

Elements interweave and overlap in this exhausting work. Moving from piece to piece, the exhibit holds your imagination the way great composition holds your eye: you bounce around from element to element, trying to make sense of the story Rogers is telling, never quite able to escape the highly poetic elusiveness. After all, crows don't produce honey, and hunters don't shoot crows for food. Crows are considered vermin, shot purely for gunnery practice and to train retrievers. Honeybees, on the other hand, are going extinct; nearly half of U.S. honeybees have disappeared over the past 35 years with absolutely no scientific explanation. When they disappear, so will their sweet honeycombs.

Similarly, Ralph Waldo Emerson lived the life of a privileged, collegial New England intellectual. He founded American Transcendentalism and was widely lauded during his lifetime as a man of savory and uplifting literature. He influenced Thoreau and encouraged the romantic notion to commune and learn from nature, all in a place and time ironically on the verge of the Industrial Revolution. Henry Darger, on the other hand, worked his entire life in poverty as a janitor in Chicago. After Darger's death in the apartment in which he lived alone for 40 years, his landlords found hundreds of paintings

death, in the apartment in which he lived alone for 40 years, his landlords found hundreds of paintings and nearly 40,000 pages of densely typed, unpublished manuscripts. Of these pages, Darger devoted 15,000 to an imaginary world he titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. A discarded baby doll is precisely the kind of thing one expects to find in the cluttered nest of a lifelong recluse and (perhaps) genius janitor. He was a man seemingly as expendable as a crow and just as devoted to collecting shiny things from the trash heaps.

Michael Rogers hangs portraits on the wall, and we peer through their thick, cloudy glass at barn swallows. In pristine globes, a baby gathers a key, and a rabbit stitches images of those same swallows in red on white linen. In between, there's a dark harvest of vermin crows, squeezed of their honey and iron platelets, bottled up and somehow distilled into the pages of literary manuscripts. *Flock* is both violent and beautiful, dramatic and playful, images etched from our own past, words painted in iron shavings. Rogers is not making a call for conservation. Instead, he makes a powerful, conflicting, and symbolic statement about the irreversible effect man has on nature. He shows how man destroys in order to create. He points to our betrayal of the agrarian peoples that bore us to this rich point in history, and he seems to lament the insufferably cheery and representational toys for which we have traded the entire wealth of the natural world. Rogers' *Flock* stands as a rebuttal to the notion of human progress, one day as puzzling to a future without bees and crows as *Finnegans Wake* must now seem in the age of information.