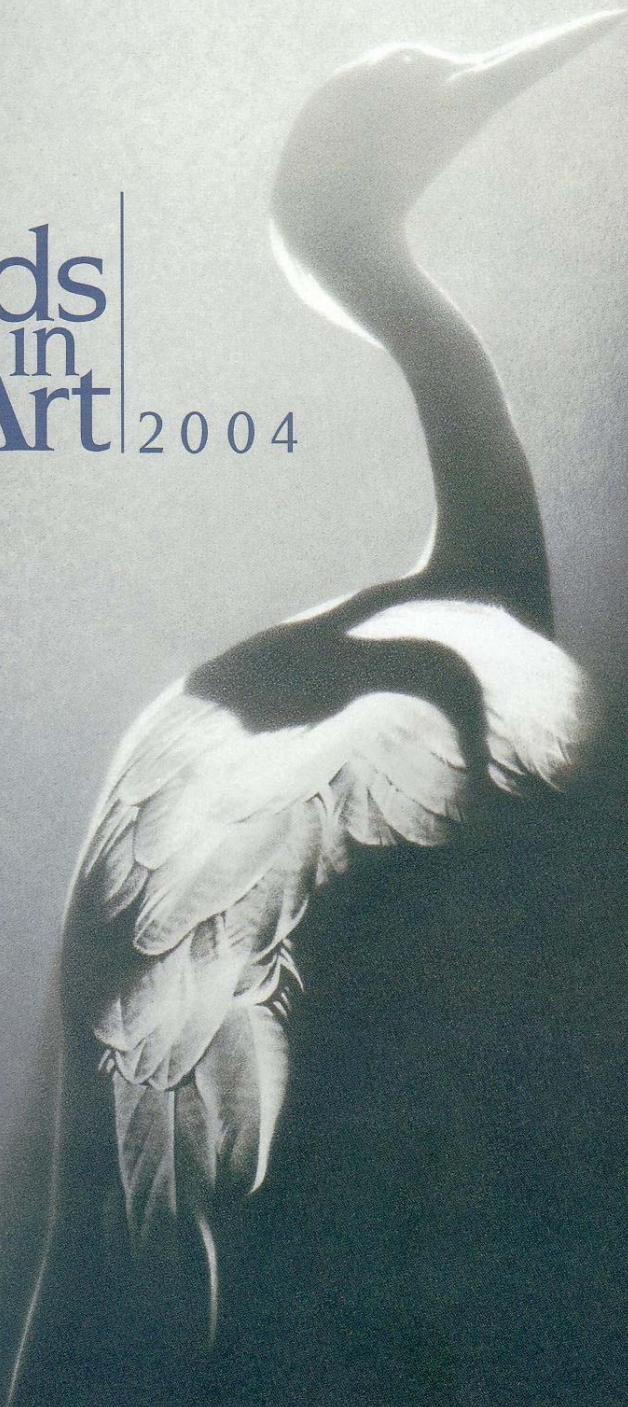


Birds
in
Art | 2004



Birds In Art

Leigh
Yawkey
Woodson
Art
Museum

2004



**The Moment
Between
Movement**

Rebecca H. Rowland



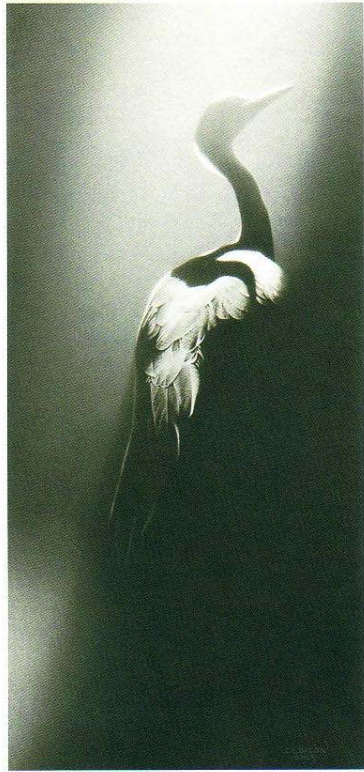
***Sandpipers*, 2004**
Baird's sandpiper
Watercolor on rag board
17 x 11
Private collection

It's early March in Burlington, Ontario. Spring should be coming, but signs of winter linger everywhere. Everywhere except Chris Bacon's studio.

There, amidst the evidence of a busy artist's life, is a stretch of warm, sun-drenched beach showered with bits of broken shells and well-worn stones. Standing in the dazzle of light, at the edge of the receding tide, is a wary sandpiper close enough to touch.

I remember the first time Chris Bacon told me about *Sandpipers*. Even though the watercolor was still weeks from completion, he was caught in the painting's hypnotic spell. "When I first sketched it out, all I had was the bird, the shadow of the bird, and the rocks," he recalls. "I could have just left it right there – it looked like a painting."

The essential ingredients he describes – bird, shadow, and rocks – create the backbone of the painting, a large triangle that takes you through the piece and



Demoiselle Crane II, 2003
Watercolor on rag board
18 x 8 1/2

Collection of Carpédia
International Ltd.

Yellow Warbler, 2000
Watercolor on Arches paper
14 1/2 x 4 1/2

Collection of
Mary and Murray Sinclair



mirrors the predictable stop-and-start, zigzag pathway a sandpiper might travel. Instead of stopping at this point, he let the work evolve and took it to a new dimension, one that is deceptively subtle and hauntingly complex.

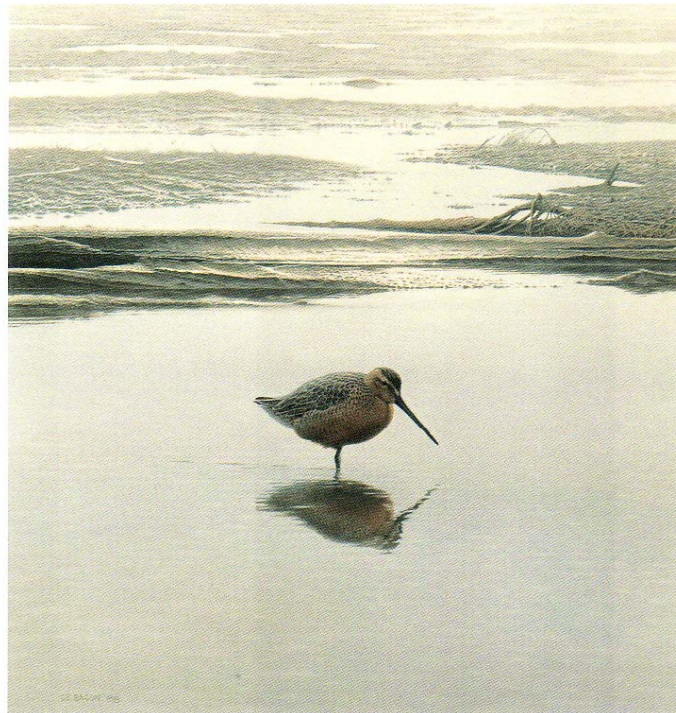
“I started using the particles and the shells as tools to break up the pattern of the bird so he blends in more with the background,” Bacon explains. “The shadow becomes part of the bigger elements and the bird part of the smaller elements.”

“You have this transition throughout the piece,” he notes, “where the light that glitters on the sand at the top turns into the white particles and fragments of shells as you move down. When you come up from the bottom, the little brown particles and pebbles turn into the shadows of ridges from old waves. There’s a point in the painting where it becomes difficult to distinguish between shadow and debris.”

Photographer and longtime friend David Saltmarche points out, “The thing that’s remarkable about this image is that the shadow of the piper becomes like

Tide Pool, 1998
Long-billed dowitcher
Watercolor on rag board
13 1/2 x 12 1/2

Collection of Carpédia
International Ltd.

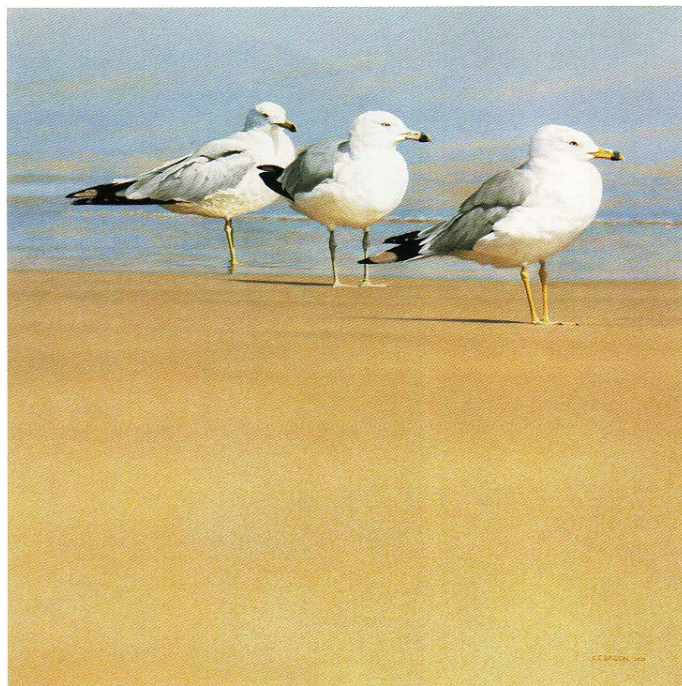


the rocks. It's a dark shadow that has the same sort of shape and the same value density as the rocks in the sand. It is a Zen-like view of what we think of as reality. When I first saw the painting, it reminded me of the rocks at the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan, perhaps the most famous Zen garden."

For the last fifteen years, Saltmarche, who has spent a lifetime in the world of fine art, has been challenged with the demanding task of creating archival photographs of Bacon's delicate, subtle paintings before they pass into the hands of eager collectors. During that time, Saltmarche has had the opportunity to see every piece the artist has done in sequence and witness Bacon's evolution. "There's an honesty and love in his work. You can just feel it. Everything he works on is intimate in scale and responds perfectly to his sense of line and form and detail. He achieves a graceful balance of all the right components."

Good friend and fellow *Birds in Art* Master Artist George McLean agrees. "There are a few artists who stand out, and they stand out because they are artists. They do not just make pictures of animals. Chris has a unique style. His paintings are immaculate. They are conservative in their handling, perfectly rendered, well designed, and conceptually original."

Ring-billed Gulls, 2001
Watercolor on rag board
15 x 15
Private collection



This originality stems from Bacon's commitment to building images entirely from his imagination. Though he studies his subjects tirelessly, the moments he captures are unphotographable, fleeting moments of transition that often go unnoticed. These quiet, pensive, peaceful times last barely longer than a breath.

Three ring-billed gulls pause to address the wind on a seamless expanse of sand, a demoiselle crane looks up into a shower of ethereal light, a stonechat waits for just an instant before disappearing from sight. This is what Bacon calls "the moment between movement."

"It's that spark, the lifeblood of a painting. It's the unexplainable thing that keeps the painting alive for me and takes me back to a particular place each time I look at it. If you look at my paintings from the last six years, you'll find they're all doing that. I'm trying to save that moment forever because it vanishes before you know it."

Even from the earliest works in his twenty-five-year career, Chris Bacon's small, delicate paintings share an unmistakable energy and subtlety that are all his own. "I like to be subtle. I want to dig deep. I don't think you have to scream at people to get them to look at something. If I'm successful at capturing something subtle, mysterious, and quiet, I feel it's a reflection of me."

Sarus Crane, 2003
Alkyd on rag board
11 1/2 x 11

Collection of the artist



Forty-three-year-old Bacon is indeed all of those things, not to mention honest, respectful, and humble – an old soul, of sorts. He demands a great deal of himself and his art and lives in near isolation in order to achieve this. His life spirals around his art, and his art reflects, informs, and interprets his journey as a person and an artist. It's a journey that began in childhood.

Born in Watford, England, Bacon spent his early years surrounded by birds and the tropical richness of Fiji, Ascension Island, and Bermuda. Even in those early years, he recalls drawing all the time. His mother, perhaps sensing his gift, kept the entire trove of childhood drawings.

Bacon's obvious passion for art was fueled by the artistic talents and insights of both his father and his grandfather, neither of whom had the opportunity to pursue art as a profession. Bacon thrived on the artistic banter and feedback and delighted in sketching contests he engaged in with his father.

At the age of eleven, when Bacon's family settled in Kent, England, his artistic skills met with disbelief when he tried his hand at an annual outdoor art contest held at a local fair. Participants were given art supplies to create a picture of their choice. "For the first two years I entered the contest, I was disqualified

Storm Watch, 2002

Marsh wren
Watercolor and acrylic on
rag board
21 x 7

Collection of the National
Museum of Wildlife Art,
Jackson, Wyoming, Collectors'
Circle 2003 Purchase



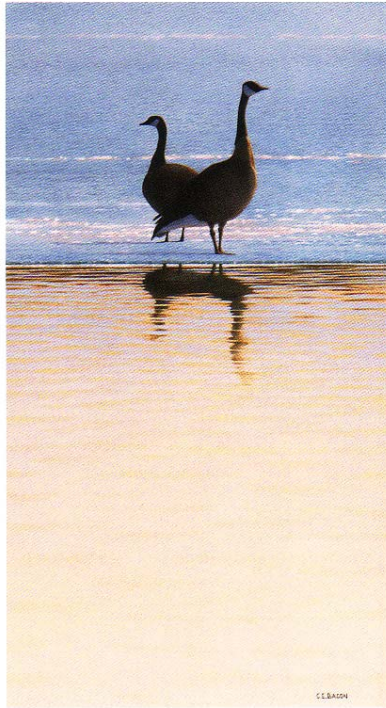
White-breasted Nuthatch,
1994

Watercolor on Arches paper
8 3/4 x 3 1/2

Collection of A. Tom Leousis

because they didn't believe this little kid had really sat down and drawn this picture. They thought I had brought it with me." Finally, in his third attempt, Bacon sat down right in front of the judges, drew under their watchful eyes, and won his first box of watercolors. "At that time, I was constantly drawing. My parents made sure I always had stuff to draw with, but winning this box of paints was pivotal for me."

Not long after that, fourteen-year-old Bacon and his family emigrated to Burlington, Ontario, where he continued to paint with great dedication. By the time he was eighteen, he had accumulated more than twenty paintings. On a whim, he took his paintings to the Alice Peck Gallery in Burlington, where his portfolio was reviewed with great enthusiasm and plans for his first show ensued. On the preview night a few months later, the young artist sold all twenty-two works in the first three minutes. From that day on he has painted for a living.



Out on the Ice, 1995
Canada goose
Watercolor on Arches paper
10 3/4 x 6 1/4
Private collection



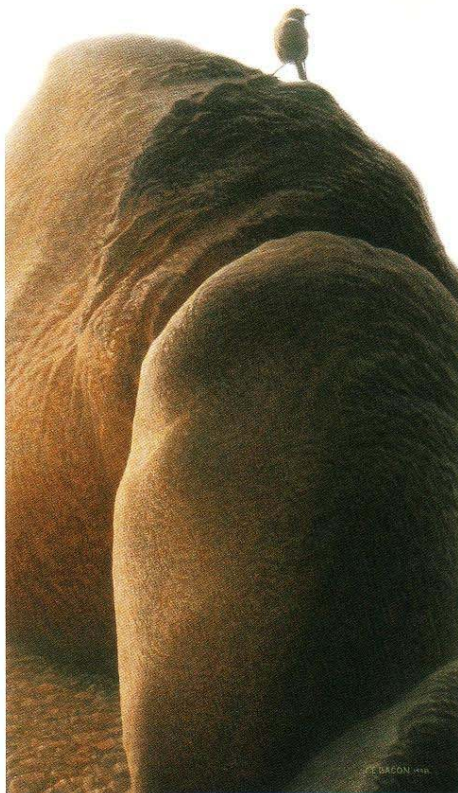
Western Sandpiper, 2001
Watercolor on Arches paper
11 1/2 x 7 1/2
Private collection

A frequent participant in *Birds in Art* and Society of Animal Artists exhibitions, Bacon also has shown his paintings in venues throughout North America, Europe, and Japan. His work has garnered for him awards of recognition and a collector base that reaches around the world. Despite all this, the most coveted recognition he's received to date is being named the Woodson Art Museum's Master Wildlife Artist. "It's the most significant honor. I can't think of one that's more important. *Birds in Art* is the best forum for birds and art in the world. It raises awareness for birds. I'm sure there are many people who fall in love with birds after looking at these exceptional paintings and sculpture."

Preparing for this year's *Birds in Art* exhibition has caused Bacon to reflect on the path he's traveled since the early days of his career. Back then, he was caught up in the details and the subject. Saltmarche readily recalls Bacon's early work. "The very first pieces I photographed were small watercolors, not much larger than postage stamps, and they were absolutely stunning. On that scale, the paintings were luminous and beautiful quite apart from their subjects. This is central to understanding Chris Bacon's work – it doesn't rely on the subject for its grace or charm or meaning or value. The bird is a bonus."

Stonechat, 1998
Alkyd on rag panel
14 1/2 x 8

Collection of
David and Andrea Shemilt



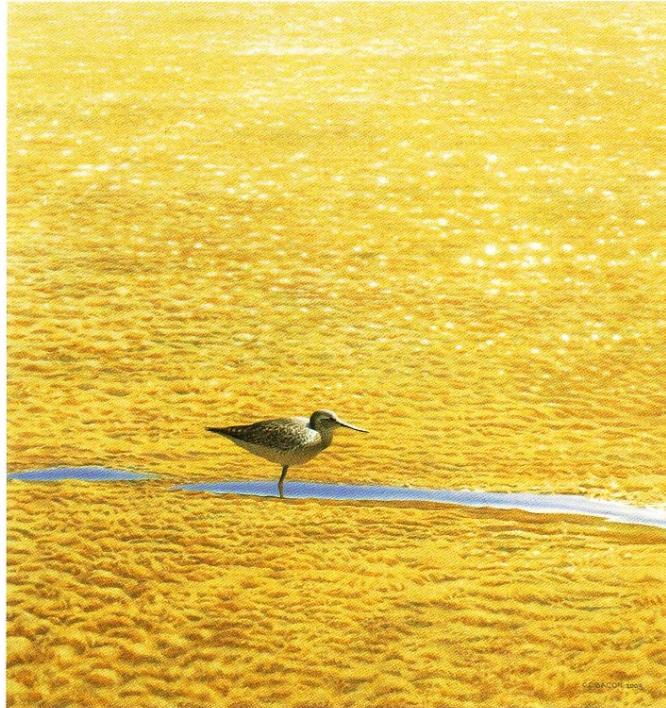
About seven years ago, Bacon began to approach his work in a new way when he created a self-portrait featuring a sandhill crane. The watercolor, in the Woodson Art Museum's permanent collection, draws you into the world of a single sandhill crane standing resolutely in wind-driven sand, staring intently at an egg-shaped pebble. Unlike previous works, Bacon explains, "I was trying to send a message. Every element was a symbol of something significant to me. It was the first painting I identified with in that way."

Since that time, all of Bacon's works have been more introspective. As he notes, "The pieces I create don't always say something about me as much as they say something about the way I feel or think or react to things at the time."

McLean noticed the difference. "When Chris started to think more about concept, he didn't have to get rid of the other things he liked to do, such as

Yellowlegs, 2003
Greater yellowlegs
Watercolor on rag board
21 x 20

Collection of Carpédia
International Ltd.



the minute workmanship he uses. All he had to do was go beyond that. Once he found his voice, I knew he was doing something outside the ordinary.”

The technical virtuosity McLean alludes to, though only a means to an end for Bacon, is breathless nonetheless. Watercolor, his first love, has continued to be the cornerstone of his art. “I now know how to work watercolors better than I ever have. Before, I was somewhat limited by it because I didn’t know how to fix things after going too far.”

Some of his more recent paintings show a bolder palette as well. “I used to be afraid of color and paint, putting it on so thin and carefully that, in the end, the result would be weak. I have learned how to push the medium a bit further.”

Yellowlegs, the biggest painting he has done, is all about color. On a birding expedition to North Carolina’s Outer Banks, he chanced upon one of those telltale flashes of inspiration. “I saw a yellow field of algae that had cracked and started drying up in the sun. The Atlantic sky, so intense and blue, was reflecting in the water seeping up through the cracks. Seeing those blue-violet stripes in the yellow electrified me. I knew I would try to make a painting that



Golden Pheasant, 2003
Watercolor on rag board
8 1/2 x 17 1/2
Private collection

incorporated this scene. It wasn't until later, when I saw birds working through these little cracks, that I knew how to give the painting context.”

Despite its flexibility, watercolor sometimes isn't enough for Bacon. He has started to experiment with other mediums to achieve a desired outcome in his work. *Sarus Crane*, for instance, is an alkyd painting that shows a crane stretching in the fleeting remnants of daylight. More than three years in the making, this painting evolved through countless stages as Bacon struggled to achieve a satisfying luminosity. Along the way, it also inspired *Storm Watch* and *Andean Goose*.

Though initially intended as simply mixed media studies to further explore light, *Storm Watch* and *Andean Goose* both became serious paintings with lives of their own. The works utilized the luminosity of watercolor in areas where he needed brilliant light – the light cast in the room penetrates the transparent pigment, hits the substrate, and reflects back at you. He then used opaque pigments, the acrylic, in the areas that he wanted to absorb the light. By pushing the depth of shadow beyond the constraints of watercolor, Bacon achieved a brilliance in the highlights that draws you into both works.

In the end, it is hard to resist a Chris Bacon painting. Each one catches you and invites you to bask in the intimate, inner circle of birdness. A place we crave but rarely experience. A place of mystery, peace, and revelation. We come away from his artworks with a heightened awareness not only of the beautiful creatures with which we share the world but also of ourselves.

After fourteen years in publishing, as former editor of *Wildlife Art* and editorial director of Custom Publishing for MSP Communications, Rebecca H. Rowland is currently a freelance writer and editor who lives in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. She first encountered Chris Bacon's work at the 1990 *Birds in Art* exhibition and has followed it with great interest ever since.



Common Loon, 1999
Watercolor on rag board
10 1/4 x 17

Collection of
Mary and Murray Sinclair

BORN: 1960, England

RESIDES: Burlington, Ontario, Canada

EXHIBITIONS: *Animal Art in the Park*, 2002, Algonquin Gallery, Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario; *Art and the Animal*, 2002, The Wildlife Experience, Parker, Colorado; *Call of the Wild*, 2002, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario; *Nature's Legacy: Wildlife and Wild Country*, 2002, J.N. Bartfield Galleries, New York City; *A Sense of Place*, 2003, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Ontario; *IV Centuries of Birds in Paintings, Sculpture & Fine Prints*, 2003, Clarke Galleries, Stowe, Vermont

COLLECTIONS: National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, Wyoming; Woodson Art Museum

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Finding His Way," *Wildlife Art*, September/October 2004

Birds in Art: 1987-91, 1993, 1995-00, 2003

***Andean Goose*, 2002**
Watercolor and acrylic on
rag board
9 1/2 x 9

Private collection



***Wild Geese in Blue-eyed
Grass*, 2001**
Canada goose
Watercolor on rag board
10 1/4 x 10

Collection of
Clarke A. Nelson

