In fine feather

In covered concrete parking lot in Toronto last weekend, noticed something. They're back. The birds come every spring and make nests in the overhead lighting fixtures. I'm guessing the heat from the bulbs must keep their eggs warm while they hatch. Concrete being concrete, their chirping is amplified, and the rowdy din makes people smile as they pass underneath. They're back from their long journeys, and that means the winter may finally be ending. God only knows where they've been.

Birds have a special flair for migration, spanning the continent, but it is not their sole purview. Humans migrate too – as tourists, as refugees, as immigrants – chasing the promise of warmth and shelter, and opportunity. Toronto artist Sara Angelucci knows all about this.

Talking on the phone this week she told me that she is a first-generation Canadian whose parents emigrated from Italy in the 1950s. Her family settled in Hamilton, her father looking for work in the steel mills. Others followed soon after, but it was a far cry from their small village on the Adriatic.

"Their village is still really small," she tells me. "It's called Force, spelled like "force" but pronounced FOR-chay." She goes back to Italy whenever she can, fetching back and forth across the Atlantic. "I've always felt this very strong sense," she says, "of being both here and there."

Since her first beginnings as an artist, her work in photography and video has persistently explored the sense of longing engendered by that long-ago family displacement.

This abiding theme takes on new form in her just-opened exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University, an ensemble that includes a flock of feathered bird people – posed in all their avian solemnity – as well as a faux Victorian parlor complete with custom-made passenger pigeons and a vitrine filled with taxidermied birds (and a monkey), a video projection, and a sound installation that she made using her expansive collection of bird calls.

Angelucci's bird people, though, are the scene stealers, hybrid creatures migrating through time and space, morphing between species (bird and human) but also between different historical periods and technologies. Unusually for her, these portraits are not sourced in the Angelucci family album or the treasured store of home movies. Instead, she found her Victorian cartes-de-visites on eBay, marrying the faces to photographs that she took of stuffed birds in the vaults of Royal Ontario Museum – all of them species that are rare, endangered or extinct.

Thousands of hours of Photoshop ensued, with the artist taking several trips back to ROM storage to get her plumage just right. The trick, she says, lay in matching the feathered finery to the face and pose of the anonymous human sitter beneath, while also accenting the attributes that human physiognomy reveals. Thus the head and breast of a barn owl is married to the gentry sloping shoulders and downy bosom of a woman who poses sweetly, her lips replaced by a wordless beak. A short-eared owl appears the dapper man of mystery, out for a night of opera or masquerade. A lady woodpecker, with russet plumage, is undaunted in her oddity, and the loggerhead shrike comes straight to us from Henry James, her tight-lidded propriety betrayed by smouldering, black-rimmed eyes. Once the artist's done, the fit is seamless.

Angelucci was as touched by these human subjects as she was by the specimens at the ROM. All of the people on her calling cards had been precious once, she says, their lives and identities distinct. Now, like the stuffed birds, they were adrift in the archive. "I think it was [French contemporary artist] Christian Boltanski who said that you die twice," she told me. "You die when you die, and you die a second time when someone picks up your photo and no one knows who you are." These fleeting souls, at least, have been reclaimed. "If no one cares about them any more," she says of her subjects, "perhaps I can take them into some new way of being."

Sara Angelucci: Provenance
Unknown is curated by Emilie Chhangur, and will be on view at the Art Gallery of York University until June 16.