Sara Angelucci: Provenance Unknown
April 10–June 16, 2013
Art Gallery of York University, Toronto
by Jennifer Rudder

Over the past 15 years, Sara Angelucci has worked the rich history of her Italian immigrant family in her art practice. Through the media of video and photography, she probes the family’s place in the larger Canadian narrative during the modernist boom and expansion of postwar Canada. In the exhibition Provenance Unknown, Angelucci continues to focus on themes of identity and loss, shifting from the subjects of the family album to photographs of anonymous, late Victorian-era subjects purchased on eBay and her own studies of birds. In the entrance to the exhibition, a small parlour is outfitted with an upholstered settee and a side table with an open photo album that contains several carte-de-visite portraits from the end of the 19th century. Larger framed portraits de cabinet hang on the wall: one of a large group of people and two sombre portraits. A glass vitrine borrowed from the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto is hung from a dividing wall covered in ornate wallpaper with passenger pigeons designed by the artist. In the vitrine are a variety of once-exotic and colourful taxidermied birds and a small monkey.

Soft intermittent birdsong—a sweet medley of recordings sampled from Venetian gardens and toy bird whistles—calls the viewer into the main gallery.

Inside the installation Aviary (2013), thirteen formal portraits look out at us from the plum-coloured walls. Each stalwart Victorian subject from the framed photos and albums in the parlour has been transformed into a hybrid of human and bird. Angelucci was granted access to the Department of Ornithology at the ROM and given permission to photograph the specimens of endangered and extinct species of North American birds in its collection. With deft Photoshop skills, the artist matched plumage to character, affixing feathers, crowns and downy breasts to individuals in a faithful yet painterly fashion. This act of co-mingling renders the human subjects more exotic while each bird is tamed by its contact with a long dead human. Only the human eyes, ears and clear, high forehead are left bare, looking out at us from now-feathered personas.

On the far wall of the gallery the sombre couple from the parlour portraits is recognizable, metamorphosed into the rosy-breasted Female Passenger Pigeon/extinct and Male Passenger Pigeon/extinct, its receding hairline and wise human eyes unchanged. Red-headed Woodpecker/endangered is matched with a handsome woman, her domed scarlet head and lower face oddly reminiscent of a bearded woman. The nose of the woman in Loggerhead Shrike/endangered is sharpened into a hooked black beak, her eyes ringed in black. These chimeral subjects are uncanny—both astonishing and fearsome—most notably in the photographs of four owls. Spotted Owl/endangered is a dignified elder, with a bunch of face at her throat and grey ringlets on her shoulder. The face of Western Screech-Owl/endangered is at once soft and catlike but also disturbing: his dappled grey spots look like a skin disease. The sad, human eyes of Barn Owl/endangered, are as beastly as those of the bird. Visibly silenced by her absent mouth, the subject’s small sharp beak points downwards to her spotted, downy chest/boobs.

Angelucci’s Aviary is doubly disturbing not only for the reference to the extinction of a large swath of colourful warblers—one in eight species of birds in the world are threatened with extinction—but also for the disappearance of the generation depicted here, from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a generation that will be forced to adapt quickly to the losses of an unshakeable faith in God, a strong connection to the land and a rural way of life. While the losses are not equal, the artworks in Aviary evoke a metaphorical equation between the extinct passenger pigeon and a human generation that will be changed irrevocably in the coming decade.

From the darkened gallery beyond, human voices beckon viewers to enter the installation The Anonymous Chorus (2013). The projection of a photograph is accompanied by choral chanting, the image fades to negative, a wave washes over it and the positive image emerges, revealing a group of 42 men, women and children. Gathered for a formal portrait to mark an unknown occasion on a summer day at the beginning of the 20th century, we recognize the photograph from the parlour. A soprano sings a lullaby written by Charles Ives (1874–1954), an American composer of avant-garde music. As a soft spotlight moves over the faces of each woman holding a baby or young child, the singer mourns the summer “slowly dying” and the coming of autumn. The scarcity of men indicates a period close to World War I: the Gilded Age in America, and the Edwardian era in Britain. A tenor sings as each boy, teenager and elderly gent is lit by the moving spotlight, a remembrance to Ives’s father’s death. On first viewing it seemed that the words being sung were to each child or adult as a hymn to his demise, a gesture of condolence from the artist. On second viewing it was clear that the voiceless, anonymous people are singing “to us”, the audience. The group, now long dead, are resurrected in The Anonymous Chorus through Angelucci’s collaboration with the Oakham House Choir of Ryerson University.

The projection is animated in a manner that is almost imperceptible. The richness of the image in combination with the stirring song engages the viewer so fully that, at first, we doubt the subtle trembling of the shadow of tree branches on the ground. But no, the Japanese lantern and American flag gently sway and the hems of dresses flutter ever so slightly in the breeze. While the photograph alone is incapable of preserving them as subjects, the human voice sing them into being—an incantation that raises them from obscurity for a brief ten minutes, animating this past moment and affording them a voice.

Jennifer Rudder is an independent curator and educator in Toronto.