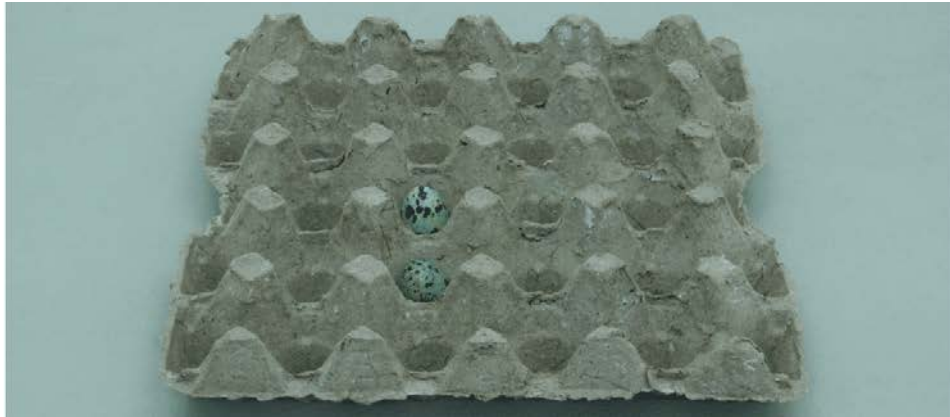


Frieze



Björn Braun

By: Dominic Eichler
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Artists with lofty aims or yearnings are often expected to be as free and as industrious as birds. In a corollary way, birds abound in the visual arts of all epochs; with their gift of flight, their nests and eggs, their migration patterns, song and dance and mock speech, their feathers and their mating antics, they have provided us with plenty of food for thought. The identification of creative people with birds persists into the present too – one thinks of album titles like *I Am a Bird Now* (Antony and the Johnsons, 2005) or of the thieving, magpie-like methods of many contemporary artists.

Fine feathered friends play a large part in many of the works of Björn Braun, including those in his recent untitled solo exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig, accompanied by the artist's first catalogue, *Nest* (2009). On display in one of the venue's first spaces, for example, was a brown and beige argyle-patterned pullover – perhaps formerly the artist's own – hanging on a wire coat hanger and lined entirely with rare cuckoo feathers (*Untitled*, 2009). The work was hung unceremoniously at chest height on a wall in a small room; all alone, it conveyed feelings of social discomfort and of not belonging, albeit expressed with wry humour. Around the corner, the artist offered an escape hatch, removing a window frame despite this year's horribly persistent European winter cold, and then building a wonky birdhouse from its wood – at least in theory. In reality, the gesture had to be faked because of historic buildings regulations (*Untitled*, 2009). Outside the Kunstverein are the remains of an English landscape garden: the chill draft blowing in through the opening seemed to carry with it ideas of a renewed confrontation between culture and nature. Reflecting on the name of the early-19th-century building that houses the Kunstverein, 'Salve Hospes' (Greetings, Guest), I couldn't help but look for tell-tale signs of impertinent visitations by cheeky, winged collaborators.

The exhibition – only the artist's second solo outing – was indicative of Braun's modest yet direct work, which manifests itself principally in two forms: sculpture and quirky, rough collages. Other ornithological works included a sculpture consisting of two stolen eggs in an egg carton made with the mud taken from a bird's nest (*Untitled*, 2007), and a group of nine sleeping nests made over several months by two unwitting 'assistants' – captive male zebra finches – which the artist supplied with various materials (*Untitled*, 2009). Braun told me that the finches constantly demanded material, making and abandoning their nests out of hygienic necessity. While these resting places entailed the transformation of artificial materials, Braun himself has also

transformed pre-existing objects, such as items of furniture or books (including his own sketchbooks), into new forms. First came his wooden studio chair, the leg of which he whittled away, shredded and boiled up long enough to produce a fibrous mass that he used to make a paper canvas. The finished work, *Untitled* (2008), consists of the three-legged chair placed opposite the 'painting', whose size is determined by the volume of material produced. Other works in the same vein include *Das Haidedorf* (The Village on the Heath, 2009), which involved the pulping of an old, linen-covered edition of Austrian writer Adalbert Stifter's eponymous 1840 novel for nature lovers into a paper 'field' painting, and *Untitled* (2009), for which the same mulching process was applied to a park bench; a plank from the seat became the earth and a plank from the back became the heavens in a split-panel composition that looks rather like a wholemeal-coloured Blinky Palermo.



Untitled, 2009. Chair and handmade paper. Chair: 85x50x40cm. Paper: 90 x 58cm. Courtesy: Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe / Berlin.

Braun's many collages – usually unframed and mounted on the torn-off covers of hardback books – are often made while things are on the boil (or his birds are busy). Mainly, he uses images from what appear to be magazines and periodicals from the 1950s or '60s depicting wandering folk, rustic villages, trees, mountains and other landscapes, which are then subjected to a similar process of culling and reuse. Unlike most of the current overabundance of contemporary collages appropriating old found images from multiple sources, Braun's works use only what can be found in the original pictures: he cuts and tears things out, reforming or repositioning them in the finished piece. Take, for instance, *Untitled* (2007), in which a hiker's walking stick has been repurposed as a naked tree on a riverbank that the wanderer has just passed. Both Braun's object-and-paper pieces and his collages share a visual and conceptual hook – one which entails material circulating in the mind, not just as part of a process of transformation, but also to remain on the cusp of what it was and what it has become.

There is such a degree of patient concentration and humility both in Braun's means and in his expression that his work invites contemplation about materiality in art. Production, process and the narratives enfolded in his materials rhyme with one other. While writing this, by chance I caught the tail-end of a television report about how people don't whistle much any more. Whistling is essentially the human imitation of birdcall; in their way, Braun's works suggest that piping out a folk tune or two might not be such a bad thing.