

Rise Up! Rise Up! A Birds' Guide for Sustained Resistance

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Heavy on our minds are the persisting horrors of violence, environmental destruction and an endless stream of devastations that drench headlines and social media. With the temptation to disengage and divert our attention lurking close behind, the creation of art becomes a seemingly viable means of escape. However, while this is *sometimes* possible, this can't be art's only purpose. In Sue Bland's colourful exhibition *Rise Up! Rise Up!* she asks "How can we acknowledge the horrors and violence present in today's world while also keeping our hearts open?" Answering this question are the exhibition's birds. From the translucent rice paper flocks suspended above, to the flamboyant winged creatures in watercolour and ink, to the fledglings flying up and out of rubble in the frieze below, these vibrant birds appear throughout as communal expressions of grief, hope, joy and rest. With the birds' guidance, Sue provides a framework for sustained resistance, beckoning us to Rise Up! Rise Up!

Crediting birds as the "arbiters between earth and sky," "body and spirit, ... practical and visionary," Sue takes inspiration from birds' duality as the exhibition combats political burnout by balancing both grief and hope. Grounding the entire exhibition in our ongoing realities are ***Free the Prisoner(s)***, ***Ceasefire, No Ceasefire***, ***We once were rooted***, ***How do we imagine?***, ***Each small act***, and ***What if??*** Using hand-carved rubber stamps and repeated motifs, this parading series of friezes depicts the pain felt and experienced across the globe. Violence is cited throughout the series, from airstrikes and flattened cities, to drone surveillance, the uprooting of trees, the putting up walls and checkpoints, and so on. However, while acknowledging these various devastations, this piece also makes space for the small instances of hope equally as real and present. Using the narrative element of friezes, within the shifts from panel to panel are quiet hints of healing and life; birds escaping up and out of their imprisonment, green budding between the rubble.

Using some of the same hand-carved stamps, ***Garden Hopes for a Ravaged Land*** continues this balancing act. Dreaming of a future where all land and people are free, a bombed Gaza City nestles itself in a coffee stain while watercolour and ink people, birds and creatures emerge to replant seeds of resistance and care. The piece acknowledges and grieves the destruction and ecocide in our present world while maintaining hope for a just and loving future.

Part of these aspirations is the visualization of the world we want to live in. In the aptly titled piece ***This is the World We Want to Live in***, a vibrant watercolour and ink scene opens up to reveal the ever-expanding intersections of life. Streams of sunlight, water, air and birds spill out across meadows with humans of all shapes, sizes, and colours as they cultivate, learn, play, sing, move, climb and fly in community with one another. The piece is a hopeful celebration of a future world where all life is honoured.

Central to many of Sue's works is the value of joy. Within the context of our devastating reality, joy is an act of resistance. ***Rise Up! Rise Up!***, is the best example of this. Flocks of ostentatious and exuberant birds with fanciful shapes and hairdos join with an equally as colourful and diverse cast of uplifted people in opposition to oppression. Representing the overlap of protest and joy, these creatures, armed with their rallying cry, refuse to be quieted or subdued. Sue writes "their humour, their colour, their joy, their

laughter, their unity and friendship amidst diversity are necessary antidotes to suppression of all kinds.” It is only through our joy created with one another that we will not only survive but thrive and persevere.

When hope and joy fall short of sustaining our activism, rest holds a necessary role. Sue’s *Nest* intertwines values of rest and care within its fabrication. Padded with soft silk and downy feathers, and woven with long cherished wool in the arms of the medicinal hawthorn, these branches create a warm, protected and safe refuge where rest can sooth and heal the heart. Hosting the branch are a diverse array of vibrant birds - perched watchfully around a central bird nesting. The resting bird can afford rest because of the protection of their flock. By creating this dynamic of care and protection, Sue not only emphasizes the importance of rest for sustained resistance, but that of community.

Community is especially relevant with the flocks of *Rice paper Birds*. Just as fanciful as their painted counterparts, they are collaged from fragments of different rice papers and suspended together midair, brought to life from the shifts in the natural light. Because Sue’s art practice often involves communal making through her playshops, in preparation for *Rise Up! Rise Up!* Sue and I took an evening with some friends and family to gather outside and share in the making of these birds. During this evening we talked, laughed, feasted and crafted together. The result was a diverse range of birds in all different stages of flight, feather shapes and textures, fantastical embellishments, and artistic styles and approaches. It seemed fitting to share in a collective sense of hope, grief, joy and rest while creating art that centred and valued all these expressions of resistance. Afterwards Sue and I arranged our creations across plexiglass panels in preparation for the exhibition. Instantly, similarities appeared across birds of different artists, and they formed a cohesive flock. Together we ruminated about each bird’s relationship, their family arrangements and flock leaders. Not only were each unique bird visually harmonious once gathered together, but their existence became hinged on their correlation to the group as a whole. At the heart of Sue’s exhibition is this idea: in which the strength of our solidarity and activism relies on the strength of our community.

In a time and space in which there is a mounting need for care, *Rise Up! Rise Up!* creates a dialogue around political burnout from a place of understanding and empathy. In opposition to directing our attention inward through shame and guilt while struggling to retain the momentum of our advocacy, Sue refocuses on “the small everyday acts of kindness and generosity that are our real currency.” As explored with Sue’s vibrant flocks, by resting and supporting each other when needed, and grounding our hope for a joyous future in an acknowledgement of the world’s devastations, we can keep our hearts open. It is with these values of community and care that we can emerge together amidst destruction and thorns, to cultivate a garden of life.

Sue Bland (aka Poached Egg Woman) is a self taught artist living in Treaty 4 Territory who explores her world using paper, watercolours, and rubber stamps. She regularly offers art PLAYshops and retreats. Sue’s art explores our connection with the natural world we are a part of. Recently, as a member of Art for Palestine, Sue has joined with the community to create art for protest, education, healing and solidarity.

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