

MAKING THE UNSEEN SEEN

# JULIA GALLOWAY'S ENDANGERED SPECIES PROJECT

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson





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**Opposite:** *Juniper Hairstreak*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height. **1** Installation at Gallery 224 at the Office for the Arts at Harvard in Allston, Massachusetts. **2** *Loggerhead Turtle*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height. **3** *Northern Brocade Moth*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height. **4** *Blueback Herring*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height. All pieces: wheel-thrown mid-range porcelain, carved, underglazes, soda fired, refired with china paint, 2019. All photos: Maggie Hamilton.

Using pottery to make a statement is not a new idea. The artist as social activist or visual philosopher trying to change the world is often a misnomer, especially since the stage on which an artist speaks is usually not vast enough to influence real change. But Julia Galloway's *Endangered Species Project*, which is changing the way we see and understand our impact on the environment, is groundbreaking and has real potential to make the unseen seen for millions of people.

#### Connected with Narrative

An iteration of Julia Galloway's *Endangered Species Project: New England* was exhibited this winter at Gallery 224 at the Ceramics Program, Office for the Arts at Harvard in Allston, Massachusetts, and featured 305 urns, one for each listed endangered, threatened, or special concern species in New England (as of 2018). Walking in, I was confronted with the numeral mass of the objects, which literally and figuratively overwhelmed the small gallery. Exhibited on small wall shelves from floor to ceiling and grouped together on over 40 pedestals and 6 tables in the space, the large, lidded

urns are all the same simple shape and size. On the surface of each ghostly, satin celadon container is a detailed rendering of each endangered species—illustrating the smallest Taconic cave amphipod (a subterranean crustacean) to the largest Eastern elk.

The crowded installation, which required visitors to sidle between tight spaces in order to see the work, creates a visceral response. At first, I didn't understand why I felt uneasy, and then I realized that the urns are human-scale, the size that would hold our own ashes. The scale symbolically connects each one of us to the creatures carefully depicted on each container and relates a narrative that we are the ones responsible for their suffering and depletion, and if we are not careful, we too, could soon be endangered. Or, are we already?

#### Conceptual, Political, and Personal

While Galloway has always worked in series or bodies of functional work, this project is quite tangential for her. The urns are technically functional, but they are not made for daily use; they are metaphorical. This project is concept driven, political, and personal.



5



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7

5 *Cerulean Warbler*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height. 6 *Eastern Ratsnake*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height. 7 *Atlantic Leatherback Turtle*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height. 8 Worktable in Julia Galloway's studio with glazed urns ready for the kiln. 5-7 Wheel-thrown mid-range porcelain, carved, underglazes, soda fired, refired with china paint, 2019. Photos: Maggie Hamilton.



8

While her show at Gallery 224 depicts endangered species of New England, it is a small part of a much larger project. Her goal is to create an urn for each endangered species in the contiguous US and have them all displayed together—all 1800 of them—and tour around the country. She wants us, all of us, to be overwhelmed by the sheer scale of it, then thrust into action by the intimacy of it.

As you approach each object in the show, you are confronted with the animal or insect whose very existence is in danger. That's intimate. In many cases the renderings are larger than life. The American bury beetle is only 1½ inches long in real life, but we get an up-close look at its vibrant black and orange-red markings as its shiny body wraps around the circumference of the vessel. Drawn in minute detail in underglaze and glaze, we see every hair on its legs and its sharp, tusk-like pincers. Almost regal looking, he sits boldly against a light celadon porcelain background, which is delicately etched with his natural habitat, the open understory

of forests. On the other side of the urn is a ghostly outline of his mate, busily returning valuable nutrients to the soil.

#### Getting to Know the Species

For this project, the concept drives the techniques Galloway uses to draw each animal. She wants the observer to see and be seduced by each species; to think that it is beautiful, even if it is a slimy New England medicinal leech that lives in river muck. How does one make a leech beautiful? Galloway said the more she learned about them, the less ugly they were. For example, the way water ripples around the mouth of a stone catfish or how graceful a tapeworm looks in water, like flowing ribbon. To be able to render each species realistically, and do them this justice, Galloway took a painting class at Anderson Ranch Art Center to hone her skills. Combining these new painting skills with her more typical approach to surface decoration, she was able to render each species realistically in a rich palette of underglaze and glaze. She then took care to create a background that represented each animal's habitat or environment. Each urn has its own narrative, with each species having the opportunity to play a star role in its story.

Looking at hundreds of Google images, Galloway got to know each endangered species well. Surrounding herself with images of her subject, she starts by drawing directly onto the leather-hard urn. Each animal or insect inspired a different approach to the surface composition. In some cases, such as with the leatherback turtle, the animal is emerging from its habitat and looking right at you, almost as if in a formal portrait. In other cases, such as with the Eastern rat snake, its shiny black body wraps around itself and around the urn, making you chase after it to see its whole body. Galloway also was inspired to show some species in danger, as in her favorite urn in the show, which depicts a loggerhead turtle that has just been rescued from a net, with stylized waves and a busy



9 *Arcadian Flycatcher*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height. 10 *Rainbow Smelt*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height. 11 *Jefferson Salamander*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height. 9–11 Wheel-thrown mid-range porcelain, carved, underglazes, soda fired, refired with china paint, 2019. Photos: Maggie Hamilton.

fisherman in the background. In another, a blueback herring is held by an oversized human hand. Is he being rescued or is he in danger?

Once the drawing is complete, Galloway paints the species with a rich palette of underglaze and after the bisque firing, she adds matte, satin, and glossy glazes, carefully trying to capture the texture and sheen of each species' body. The background of each urn is glazed in a pale, satin celadon, which pools delicately in the carving, allowing each species to be the focal point, while its habitat and the narrative emerges quietly. The cone-6 soda firing softens the drawing, which Galloway then enhances with china paint and lusters as needed to make each species come to life and take center stage.

### Taking Steps Toward Change

Thanks to organizations like National Geographic and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, we might be aware that polar bears are losing their ice caps and tigers their jungles. We've heard a lot about the dwindling bees. But did you know about the blue-spotted salamander, the Northern brocade moth, the least shrew, or the Eastern pearlshell mussel? To learn about many of these hidden species for the first time as they are on their way out is devastating. But the urns are empty. These species are still here. To become aware of them and how we are impacting their habitats is the first step toward making change.

To help educate us, and share what she learned, Galloway created a robust 312-page catalog to accompany the show, which includes a full page for every object and species, complete with 2–3 paragraphs about the species and their place in our ecosystem. Wildlife Biology majors from the University of Montana, Missoula, helped her research each species and develop the text, often explaining how each species plays an important role in our ecosystem and what we can do to help their survival. For example, the pink star

moth is struggling in New England due to light pollution, because we like to keep the lights on all night. The catalog, which took almost as long to write as it took to make the pots, is educational, important, and a significant wake-up call.

"At night in the spring I used to hear tree peepers all the time," Galloway told me during our conversation about this project. "Now I don't. Where are they?" Upon reflection, Galloway admitted that this project had been brewing for some time. After all, being a potter is political. It is a decision, a choice to be part of a community, to work from home, to work with your hands. It is a radical idea. But in truth, this project all started with a podcast. In her exhibition catalog statement, she writes, "I was walking through the Minneapolis Airport half listening to a podcast about the wandering albatross. It is the largest of the albatross breeds, with a wingspan measuring 11 feet, and it can keep aloft in wind currents over the southern oceans for a month without returning to land. Because of industrial line fishing, this bird's population is dwindling; the wandering albatross is being decapitated at the rate of one bird every five minutes. In the Minneapolis Airport, I had been walking for fifteen minutes—three albatross. Right there by gate C15, I was actually brought to my knees, stunned by this bycatch carnage." She had to do something.

The something was strongly rooted in Galloway. Currently a Montana-based potter, she was raised in the 1970s on the East Coast in Boston by a "compassionate and active feminist" mother. She taught Galloway that when the personal becomes political, change can occur. She saw this firsthand during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when the AIDS memorial quilt on the National Mall in Washington, DC, made the astounding loss visible and tangible, made something unseen seen in a profound and effective way. Then more recently, she visited the final exhibition of her long-time hero, Akio Takamori, "Apology/Remorse," which showcased drawings and sculptures of



12

12 Installation at Gallery 224 at the Office for the Arts at Harvard (alternate view). 13 *Taconic Cave Amphipod* (front and back views), 8½ in. (22 cm) in height. 14 *American Bury Beetle* (front and back views), 8 in. (20 cm) in height. All pieces: wheel-thrown mid-range porcelain, carved, underglazes, soda fired, refired with china paint, 2019. All photos: Maggie Hamilton.



13

men apologizing, inspired by images of the media. Akio's goal was to illustrate the artist's role in society as "a conduit for catharsis, especially during troubling times." Galloway was inspired to ask herself, "what am I remorseful about? What do I have to apologize for?" Then, the wandering albatross.

The way Galloway sees it, we held our first Earth Day in 1970, passed the Clean Water Act in 1972, and the Endangered Species Act in 1973. They had a positive effect. We have known about our impact on the environment for a long time. Galloway states "During my lifetime, we have not come closer to solving these problems and, in fact, we have actually made things worse. This is a challenge to both me and my generation, who have made a terrible mistake by not picking up the gauntlet passed to us. I cannot save the wandering albatross—I am a potter and a teacher. What I can do is make unseen things seen, and in doing so, I hope to make change visible as well." Thanks to Julia Galloway, I can now say, New England, I see you. I think I'll turn out the lights tonight.

*Julia Galloway's catalog for the Endangered Species Project: New England exhibition is available on her website <http://endangered-species-project.org>.*

**the author** *Leigh Taylor Mickelson is an artist, writer, curator, and independent consultant working with arts businesses and nonprofits to help them develop and grow. Visit her website at [www.leightaylormickelson.com](http://www.leightaylormickelson.com) to learn more.*



14