

CHICAGO **From Limb to Limb**

Illinois Art Gallery
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by Polly Ullrich

The Russian writer Boris Pasternak spoke of the world as "an enormous nest, an agglomerate of earth and sky, of death and life." Nests are a "primal image" of refuge, according to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. Looking at a nest, we "place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence," Bachelard wrote in his classic *Poetics of Space*. The nest as an archetypal form is like our house, he adds, "and all the eggs in a nest are kept nicely warm. The experience of the hostility of the world—and consequently of dreams of defense and aggressiveness—come much later."

When Geoffrey Bates arrived at his new job as assistant curator at the Illinois State Museum in 1995, he discovered a collection of 10,000 specimens of bird nests there. These nests were assembled at the turn of the century when there was a mania for anything avian. At the same time, Bates discovered a collection of Native American artifacts, which included hundreds of extraordinary basket works from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus the seed of an idea was born—and the beginning of a remarkable exhibition, "From Limb to Limb," which paired the work of ten contemporary artists, mostly from Illinois, with a selection of objects from these collections. The show recently ended a tour of all four of the state museum's galleries: in Chicago, Lockport, Springfield, and Renn Lake, Illinois.

As Bachelard points out, all living creatures identify with nests as an enduring symbol of warmth and security. "From Limb to Limb," however, suggests that nests are more than that: they may have been a prototype for one of the earliest human-made

objects—baskets—and, by extension, for the creative work that we now call art. Bates has suggested that some of our oldest human ancestors, who were hunter/gatherers, probably scooped up nests full of eggs on food-gathering forays, and then studied them later to learn birds' construction techniques. But even more compelling, by intermingling birds nests, ethnographic baskets, and contemporary art objects that all use linear materials such as grass or twigs interlaced in over-and-under patterns, the exhibition raises questions about the possibility of creativity in animals. It also questions the uniqueness of the human activity of making art, suggesting that human motivation to create cultural objects—such as art—has parallels, and probably its roots, in the animal world.

In the Chicago version of the exhibition, "From Limb to Limb" attempted a narrative with three categories of objects: nests, Indian baskets, and contemporary art. It began with six tiny nests

squeezed into a turn-of-the-century John Karl cigar box with a picture of a Dutch burgher on its cover. These 100-year-old nests—three were identified as Pee Wee, sparrow, and warbler—contained perfect, speckled eggs. They were placed next to a huge Pomo Native American willow-and-reed terra-cotta-colored basket, which then led the visitor to a five-foot-square woven-willow wall piece, *Occurrence*, by the contemporary American sculptor John McQueen. Next came two small Paiute Indian willow water jugs with beautifully pure lines, from the late nineteenth century, then a superbly refined woven-grass Cacique bird nest with a long trailing bottom section and a tiny handle that the bird had probably woven over a twig. The basket implications were obvious. *Ova*, a six-foot-tall free-standing sculpture of interlaced wood strips by Chicago artist Barbara Cooper, followed. The message was clear: first, nest as sculpture, then basket as sculpture, then sculpture as sculpture.

"From Limb to Limb" is probably the ultimate conflation of art

categories. At a time when art is said to be found in everyday life, and the hierarchies between types of art continue to be deflated, this exhibition goes one step further by suggesting that humans are not the only creatures motivated by inspiration and craftsmanship. Inklings of art making could reside in other species. "There is no means of bridging the gap to the consciousness of other living beings," wrote the naturalist Karl von Frisch in his chronicle of animal buildings, *Animal Architecture*. "Some people are convinced that our mental states differ fundamentally from those of animals and that only we humans possess the faculty of thought. . . . But I myself do not believe it." It is a radical but somehow comforting notion that humans—despite our manual dexterity, our technical inventiveness, and our dominant brains—are not isolated in our consciousness, and that perhaps human creativity is not as special as we tend to think.

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Barbara Cooper
Ova, 1994
Wood, 74" x 34" x 40".
Photos courtesy of Illinois Art Gallery.



Cacique Bird Nest
Photograph by Gary Andrashko.

