



Photo: Melissa Gamache

## ROBIN CROFUT-BRITTINGHAM

### VISUAL ARTIST

Interview by Harriet Candee Photographs courtesy of the artist

***"Imagination, working at full strength, can shake us out of our fatal, adoring self-absorption and make us look up and see—with terror or with relief—that the world does not in fact belong to us at all."*** —URSULA K. LE GUIN

**Harriet Candee:** Robin, could you explain your artistic vision and mission and how it has evolved? Were you very young when art became the first love in your life?

**Robin Crofut Brittingham:** I've been making art since I was a kid—it's always been something I loved. That said, I've always had a wide range of interests, a bit of an "eyes bigger than my stomach" situation when it comes to creative pursuits. As a teenager, I was set on going to art school, but I pivoted at the last minute and ended up at Bard College, where I studied writing. I returned to visual art when I moved to San Francisco for my MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute.

What's changed most over time is how I've learned to bring all those seemingly disparate creative passions together. It used to feel like I was bouncing be-

tween different worlds, but now, I'm finding ways to integrate them into a single, cohesive practice that feels very fulfilling.

**Congratulations on your upcoming illustrated book, "The Illuminated Book of Birds." This book is the first in a new series of nature books you are writing and illustrating, set to be published in October 2025 by Hachette through Timber Press. How did this project begin, and can you give us a hint about what will come next in the series?**

Thank you! This project has been incredibly rewarding—it actually emerged from one of the lowest points in my career. In 2020, the gallery that represented me closed during the pandemic, and a number of major projects I'd been working on were canceled. I was at a real crossroads, seriously questioning

whether I wanted to continue making art professionally.

So, I gave myself a kind of "artistic bucket list" year—time to try out all the projects I'd dreamed about but never pursued. Around that time, I participated in a show at the North Branch Nature Center in Vermont and added some last-minute bird paintings to the exhibition. One of my bucket list ideas was to write and illustrate a book, and after making those paintings, it suddenly clicked—maybe it could be a book about birds.

What began as a personal experiment turned into something much bigger. *The Illuminated Book of Birds* found a home with a publisher, and now I've signed on to create two more books with Hachette: one focused on plants and another on animals. This series has brought together so many of my pas-

sions—birds, painting, storytelling, mythology—and has really expanded my art practice.

Since starting the book, I've connected with new galleries, including one here in Montreal that now represents me. I've also got several shows coming up this year, including a solo exhibition in Denver and group shows in New York, Toronto, and Montreal. This book feels like a natural extension of my studio work, which has always explored themes of biodiversity and ecological awareness.

**In what ways have you been inspired by David Attenborough, and who else has inspired you similarly?**

Oh, I love David Attenborough. The first series I saw of his was *The Private Life of Plants*, and I was immediately struck by how deeply his passion for nature comes through. He has this rare ability to make anything fascinating—his enthusiasm just lights everything up. From someone else, it might feel dry or academic, but from him, it's completely captivating. He's been especially inspirational for my book project. The way he uses nature as a lens to explore the world really resonated with me. I wanted my book to have that same sense of discovery—to feature birds from all over the world, not just as a regional guide,

but more like an adventure through biodiversity. I am also very inspired by reading fiction and a lot of my ideas have come from science fiction and fantasy. I love Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin and I did a whole show a few years ago that was inspired by a passage from *The Drowned World* by JG Ballard.

**How does creating a book compare to other art forms you have experience working with?**

I really, really loved it. In my usual studio practice, there's a lot of trial and error—it can take me ages to find the right approach to a painting and there is a lot of experimenting. With the book, there was still plenty of planning involved, but once I had the structure in place, I was able to just dive into the painting. Working within that framework felt like a refreshing change. It has also been nice to be able to go back and forth between my book work and my other work since they use different parts of my energy and time. When I am feeling tired of one I can switch to the other.

**Finding a book publisher isn't easy; many artists must explore alternative avenues to get their books into the world. What was your experience like?**

I was very lucky I think. I have a dear writer friend who advised me on how to start the process of finding a literary agent, which is how I ultimately found a publisher. I think there is a lot of opacity to the process of submitting a book proposal when you are doing it for the first time so I was very lucky to have guidance from someone who had done it. He helped me revise and refine my initial proposal many times before I sent it out. My agent happened to be a bird lover herself, which probably didn't hurt! She took on the project and helped find it a home with Hachette's Timber Press, which specializes in natural history books.

**Creating a book combines exciting moments with challenges. What were some of the highlights and obstacles you faced during this process? What learning curves have you achieved so far?**

One of the toughest parts was having to create so much of the book before I even knew if it would go anywhere. You're working on this huge project without any guarantee that it'll ever see the light of day—it's definitely a leap of faith. But seeing it come together has been incredibly rewarding. I did certain things in the hardest or most time-consuming way

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Robin Crofut-Brittingham: *Most Efficacious When Picked at the Full Moon*, Watercolor on Paper, 16" x 24"



Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *A Better World than this one*, Watercolor on Paper, 40" x 40"



Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *After the Flood*, Watercolor on Paper, 30" x 66"



Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *Portals*, Watercolor on Paper, 74" x 38"

possible for the first book, so I have streamlined my process significantly now that I am working on my second.

**You were captivated by the cobblestone streets, rich history, stunning architecture, the French language spoken everywhere, and perhaps the delicious food once you discovered Montreal. Share your inspiration for being a thriving artist in Montreal and the journey that led you there.**

My husband has family in Montreal, so after grad school we decided to give the city a try. At first, it was tough—I didn't speak French yet, and the winters were definitely a shock, even as a New Englander! But once I got my bearings and learned the language, I really fell in love with it here.

Montreal is such a creative city. It's more affordable than a lot of major cities but still offers all the things you'd hope for: great galleries, museums, performances, and a vibrant arts scene. Now, it's hard to imagine living anywhere else. I am also happy to be able to live close enough to family and friends in the Berkshires that I can visit often.

**Tell us about the art exhibits you have been in over the past few years and how it compares to the ones you have currently participated in while living in Canada.**

Over the past few years, I've shown my work at several commercial galleries in Canada, and I'm now represented by TIAN Contemporain here in Montreal. Because my work is grounded in ecological themes, I'm always looking for opportunities to show in spaces that intersect with science or education—not just traditional art venues. It's really important to me that my art resonates beyond the art world that it draws people in visually and then encourages them to engage with deeper, more critical, or subversive ideas.

My first solo show out West also opens this month in Denver, Colorado. I am really excited to share my work with a new audience. The gallery, Visions West Contemporary, specializes in artists whose work has ecological and natural themes so it's a good fit. I also have an upcoming show at the Berkshire Botanical Garden in Stockbridge this October that coincides with the launch of my book. I am very excited to be having a show in the Berkshires after many years and

hopefully to reconnect with artists and friends in the area.

**In your framing, how do you go beyond the traditional, and how does it relate to the art? "After the Flood" and "A Better World Than This One" are beautifully framed with curved shapes. It's nice that the framing and the art are directly connected when telling a story.**

I got interested in making triptychs at one point because, traditionally, they were used to share stories—often religious ones—with people. I really liked the idea of art as a way to spread a story. At the time, I wasn't sure how I could make something like that happen for works on paper, but my husband's a woodworker, and he figured out how to make it happen. I've now been working with triptychs for almost ten years, and over time I've started experimenting with other unconventional frame shapes, too, most recently the arched top ones. I am also starting to make multi-panel works in different shapes that feel a bit like a landscape when viewed from a distance, which I find interesting.

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Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *Birds of Costa Rica*, Page from the Book, Watercolor on Paper

I became really drawn to frames that felt like terrariums or enclosed natural spaces—they echo a lot of the themes in my work. I also think drawing and watercolor are often treated as preparatory mediums, like a step before the “real” painting happens. I’m interested in pushing that perception—treating these materials with the same reverence, presenting them in a way that feels intentional and unique.

Can you tell us about one of your art pieces that signifies with icons and symbols how you feel about certain subjects that could or do affect you? One of my goals with my work is to create a kind of personal cosmology or a set of evolving symbols that live within this imaginary world I keep exploring through my paintings. One early symbol that’s stayed with me really from the beginning of this series came from my time living in California. I loved California but found it such a place of contradiction—lush and fertile, but also marked by environmental extremes and overuse and with so many climate threats looming.

I remember driving through miles and miles of citrus farms and being struck by the image: these endless rows of oranges, both so beautiful and so troubling. They’re a symbol of abundance, but also of control and consumption and these problematic monocultures. That image really stuck with me, and piles of oranges started to appear in my work as a way of referring to those contradictions. You can see them most recently in *After the Flood*.

What is your technical thought process in framing, starting with the shape you choose for the canvas before applying paint?

I design most of my frames in advance and my partner custom builds them for me. However, occasionally, he will surprise me with a new shape or frame he has come up with, and then I have to come up with something to suit the shape, which is a fun challenge. That was the case with *Most Efficacious When Picked at the Full Moon*, which is one of my favorites. I work exclusively on paper—never canvas—so the frame becomes a really integral part of

the overall presentation. I am incredibly lucky to have a collaborator for the frames and I love working with him.

In your work, you are influenced by textile design, particularly by using repeat patterns found in nature. Additionally, the scientific drawings of animals and plants, such as those created by Peter Brown and Sydenham T. Edwards, play a significant role in your artistic approach. These sources of inspiration are presented on exquisite paper and crafted with great care, as they require meticulous attention to detail. Could you share how these influences are reflected in your art and explain their connection?

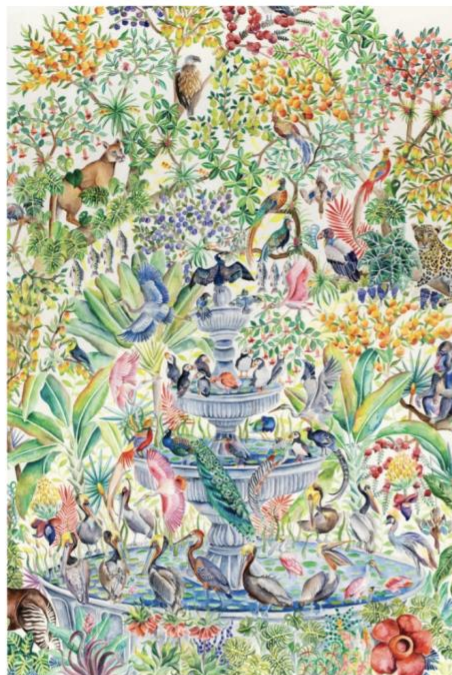
Yes—I absolutely love patterns and textile design. It’s a huge influence for me. I’m especially drawn to repeat patterns found in nature and also to the precision and care in old scientific illustrations. There’s something so meticulous and intentional about them. That kind of attention to detail and the balance between



Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *Birds of the Arctic Circle*, Page from the book, Watercolor on Paper

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Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *Mirage*, Watercolor on Paper, Detail

ways trying to capture in my own work. Another huge source of inspiration for me that uses a lot of patterning is traditional Indian miniature painting. They are these tiny, tiny little worlds that contain multitudes of animals and people. There are beautiful photo reproductions of them available, but I was lucky enough to see an exhibition of them on a trip to London last year, and seeing them in real life totally blew my mind. They are something that is really worth seeing in person.

**The commissioned mural you created in South Africa is beautiful. Can you share your inspiration behind the concept? What factors influenced your design choices based on the space, and how did you decide on your color palette?**

That mural was one of those "bucket list" projects I mentioned earlier — I had been wanting to do more mural work, so I reached out to a few people, and this opportunity came from that. I really wanted to try painting on a dark background, since most of my paintings are done on white paper. I've always loved chinoiserie and the style of traditional hand-painted wallpaper, so I wanted to create

my version of that — but using African wildlife instead. It was such a rewarding project and a special trip, especially since I got to do it when my son was only ten months old. We also got the experience of going out to see a lot of the birds and animals that I ended up including in the mural which was very special. I went to South Africa for the first time when I was 21, and it was the first place that really sparked my interest in birding, so it was special to return there in the midst of this huge bird project.

**You are a visual artist who has created artwork celebrating the beautiful yet vulnerable natural world. Please tell us about the scientific research and the things you must be involved with to accurately represent themes such as animals, nature, and the human form.**

That's actually one of the things I've loved most about working on my book project — it's given me a way to bring together all the behind-the-scenes research I've been doing for years on plants and animals to inform my paintings. It's become its own project that grows out of and into my other work.

For a while, I was really focused on extinct and en-

dangered species so I was doing a lot of reading about the extinction of various animals and what factors caused it. I had read about this idea that there are still wild, untouched parts of the world where species we think are extinct might still exist. That kind of mystery really stuck with me. I'm also drawn to the tension between nature's beauty and its danger — things like poisonous flowers or animals that are both stunning and threatening. That contradiction is something I keep coming back to in my work.

**Can you explain the thematic interpretations in your work related to overconsumption and environmental degradation?**

In a lot of my work, I imagine this fantasy world where nature has reclaimed the earth, and the people who remain live in balance with it — not trying to control or exploit it like we do so often now. I like including small remnants of human presence — bits of trash, objects left behind — as quiet reminders of the world that came before. It's subtle, but it adds to the idea that something has shifted, and nature is leading again. My most recent work has to do with a mythical flood that has cleansed the earth and left be-



Robin Crofut-Brittingham, *Mural*, South Africa

hind a new world. I'm fascinated by the way floods come up in creation myths across cultures worldwide.

**What advice would you give aspiring artists seeking their unique voice while imagining a harmonious future where humans and nature coexist?**

It really does take time, and you have to let go. You don't need to rush into having a defined style or message. My own work is still evolving, and I think it always will be. Before I started my MFA, I was making work that looked nothing like what I do now. Living and studying in San Francisco shifted everything — not just my art but my entire way of thinking.

The most important thing, I think, is to make work that feels true to you. Artistic trends and styles come and go, but the work that genuinely excites you — the kind you'd make even if no one was watching — that's what lasts. When I look back at the work I made right after college, I feel really self-conscious. Strangely, what I'm making now has a lot more in common with the things I used to draw as a kid just for fun when I didn't even know to be self-conscious or worried about showing it to anyone. There's some-

thing really freeing about reconnecting with that. When I was in grad school, I was surrounded by these brilliant, very conceptual artists. And I remember feeling like maybe my silly drawings didn't quite fit. But I stuck with them because they felt real to me — and I'm glad I did. Over time, I've learned that you can't make art that pleases everyone, and once you completely let go of that idea, you can focus on making work that truly interests you and pleases you. I really believe that people can feel that when they look at the work and I think it resonates.

**Tell us about your favorite place you like to visit, where you can sit and think and enjoy the surroundings and the sky during all of its transitions. And...you remind yourself of what you are grateful for. What might that be?**

There's a lake in Northern Ontario my family has been visiting since I was a kid, and it's still one of my favorite places in the world. It's not easy to get to — no electricity, totally quiet. At night, all you hear are loon calling and the wind on the water. Sometimes the lake is so still, and the stars are so clear that you can't tell where the water ends and the

sky begins. It's this chillingly beautiful moment of stillness and awe and every time I'm there, I'm just overwhelmed with gratitude for the quiet, the space to think, and the reminder of how small we are — in the best way. I often bring painting supplies up there and spend time painting and listening to audiobooks. There is no cell service or distractions, and it's incredibly peaceful.

Robin Crofut-Brittingham's first book, *The Illuminated Book of Birds* will be released on October 21st and is available now for preorder wherever books are sold. She will exhibit original paintings from the book in the Leonhardt Galleries at Berkshire Botanical Garden this coming October. Her show *After the Flood* is currently on view at Visions West Contemporary in Denver, CO.

To see more of her work visit her website [www.robincb.com](http://www.robincb.com) or follow her on Instagram @rob-incstudio