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AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY

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M CONTEMPORARY ART

My art examines social and cultural issues in America, with a particular focus on human rights, mental illness, the black experience, and the influence of inequality. My work has always dealt with social ills. This is partly due to my training and experience as a journalist; it is my job to show people, as James Baldwin once put it, what they don't see. These social and cultural issues are of special concern in the wake of Detroit's rebirth post-bankruptcy. Even as parts of the city see huge positive changes, it still struggles with poverty, gentrification, homelessness, the achievement gap, and under-employment.

My latest work is a series of drawings titled *American Ornithology*. It compares the life of a creature many of us see every day — the Rock Pigeon — to the identity and, in many ways, the stereotypes of black men in America.

Europeans introduced pigeons to North America in the 1600s, at approximately the same time slavery came to the continent. The Rock Pigeon is now commonly found in American cities, occupying the streets. National Geographic has described the Rock Pigeon as being gregarious and forming large flocks; it feeds on handouts and grains during the day. This is similar to the way many people view black men as individuals populating urban landscapes and living off social assistances (the system).

The Rock Pigeon is one of the few birds that doesn't migrate, while also being considered a strong flyer. Brought to this country from elsewhere, they lack the migration gene, and when removed from their environment, usually return home. That sense of displacement and lack of the gene manifests itself in one of many forms of conditioning. As with black men or others from the diaspora, when taken from ones place of origin, and subsequently assigned a certain station within society, this generates a belief that you are only permissible in certain spaces designed or designated for you. You have effectively been placed in a coop. The pigeon, when taken from its environment, usually returns home because of its familiarity with that ecosystem.

These images I've created are intended to communicate why we, as black men, often don't "fly" despite possessing the ability to transcend our circumstances.

They paint a picture of how, most of the time, the damaging environment in which we have been placed by generational systemic oppressions leads to a reluctant contentment instead of being a fleeting station in life.

Pi·geon·hole (verb)

To assign to a particular category or class, especially in a manner that is too rigid or exclusive.

Synonyms: categorize, compartmentalize, classify, characterize, label, brand, tag, typecast, ghettoize, designate