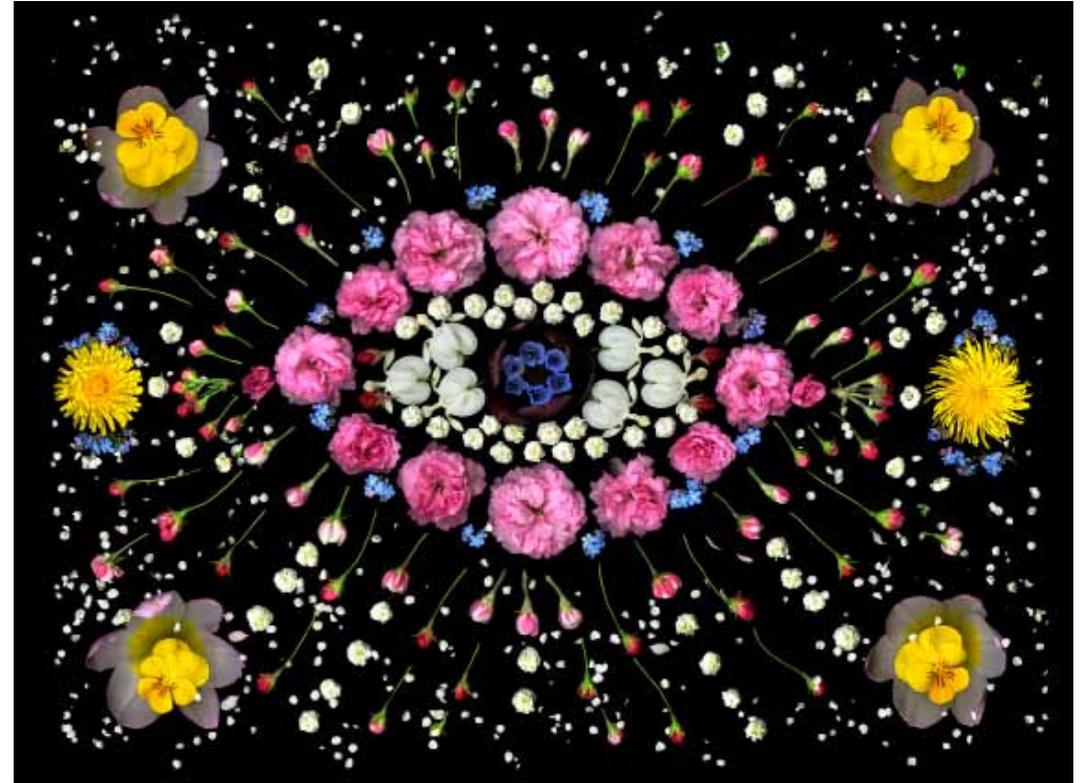


A dense field of bright yellow flowers, likely Portia Munson, against a black background. The flowers are small, daisy-like, and arranged in a repeating pattern. The text 'PORTIA MUNSON' is overlaid in the center-right area in a pink, sans-serif font.

PORTIA MUNSON





# Portia Munson

Little Suns Hollow Bones

May 2015



**P·P·O·W**



## To the Songbird Fallen on the Forest Floor

by Brenda Coultas

Faded Virgin Mary in a Palenville ranch house window. Olana, the view from Frederick's bed. Top of Round Top which is the foam of beer pouring over a mountain. Eye carved into rock on Platte Clove road. Bruderhof girls in blue dresses. Hasidic summer camps. Buddhas in the woods.

A map of Manhattan that charts only the springs  
To point out where the grey spaces turn to hardwood forests and castles.

I never toured Poe's cottage or walked along the aqueduct that brought water from Croton to the city, where he paced back and forth to High Bridge; however, I have driven underneath waiting for his thin body to drop. Am I afraid? I've known ravens less voracious and fatter. A locket portrait of his baby wife cracks our windshield. The fallen Poe fastens his coal-lined eyes, fixes a gaze, a bead, to still my beating heart.

At a forgotten destination  
At a damp tomb  
I did not climb the wooden and sturdy toothpicks of the staircase.  
I did not take from the war chest, ribbons and medals or blueprints for a torpedo or smart bomb. Nor did I take quilt blocks nor wooden eggs for darning socks nor board games of checkers or marbles.

Here in this warm space, my obligations fall aside and weep, and my love poem rebound. I want a lover with tree trunk thighs: A young willow that bends with the wind and buds in spring. However, I am cast among the unromantic who powder and spray nature out of our nature and those who hate the feel of moss or dirt.

I dress and prepare to walk a hundred blocks uphill along the Hudson, noting the direction of other people's partners, and the weather and white froth the river sometimes takes on, and the joggers, bikers, strollers, and New Jersey Palisades, those cliffs of amusement parks that once rivaled Coney Island, that island of rabbits.

This walk towards boulders of the Northwest, thrusting without sensuality, evading gravity, of pushing the daily upwards, sucking mud through a straw and making bricks. I set my legs to work mixing the muck for a penny a brick.

Run my hands along the rails. Sleep on a metal bed. Fashion a mattress out of old clothes.  
Open safes and suitcases from an attic. Find vials of serum. The footprint of an Institute for the Feeble-minded. The keys to a once spanking white tuberculosis ward with a sun porch loaded with ivy and honeysuckle, the kind of place a ghost hunter would haunt.

I walk at midnight on the Grand Concourse of my mind, trying to achieve the actual location of movie palaces and boulevards. Uphill to the Bronx to the monuments of Woodlawn: obelisks of the Woolworth's tomb and Herman Melville's meek grave topped with rocks and coins for luck. The 4 train ends here a long way from Arrowhead, with its view of Mount Greylock.

Scale this island  
Unearth Seneca village  
Unblock streams  
Release the river otters  
Restore the oysters to their rightful beds  
Let the beds lie in the earth.

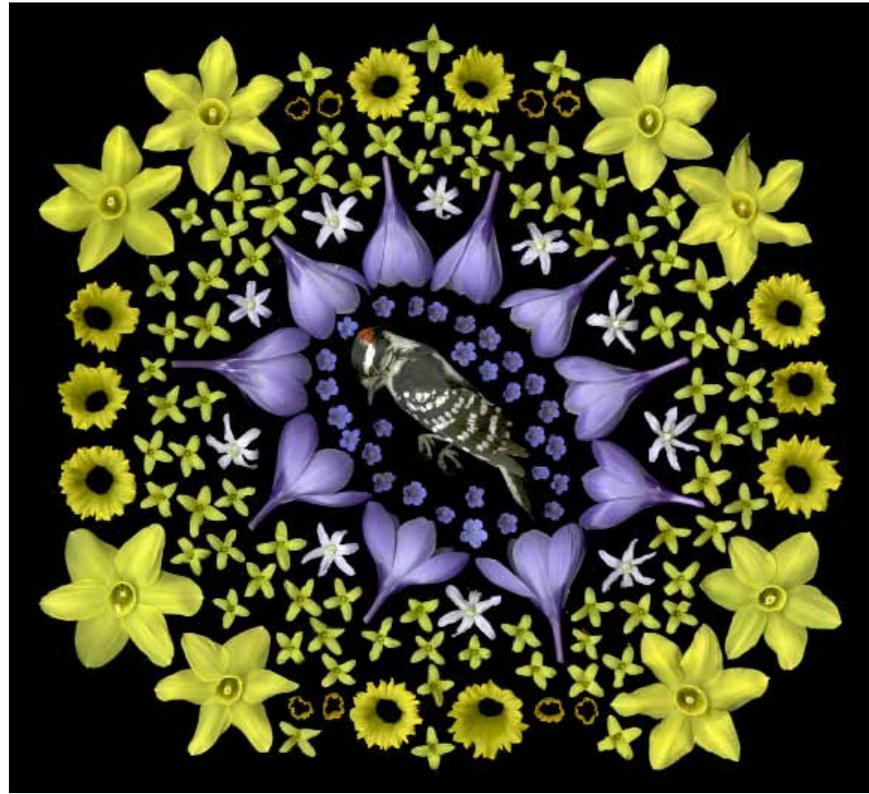
About John James Audubon, take a feather to him.

Birds of America: he had a system. Taxonomy (is that the right word for cataloging species?). Kentucky and Manhattan wilderness. A highway running along Audubon park and marshes, too dangerous to trek. Dog packs. No passenger pigeons and their roosts but Audubon Auto Sales and racetrack.

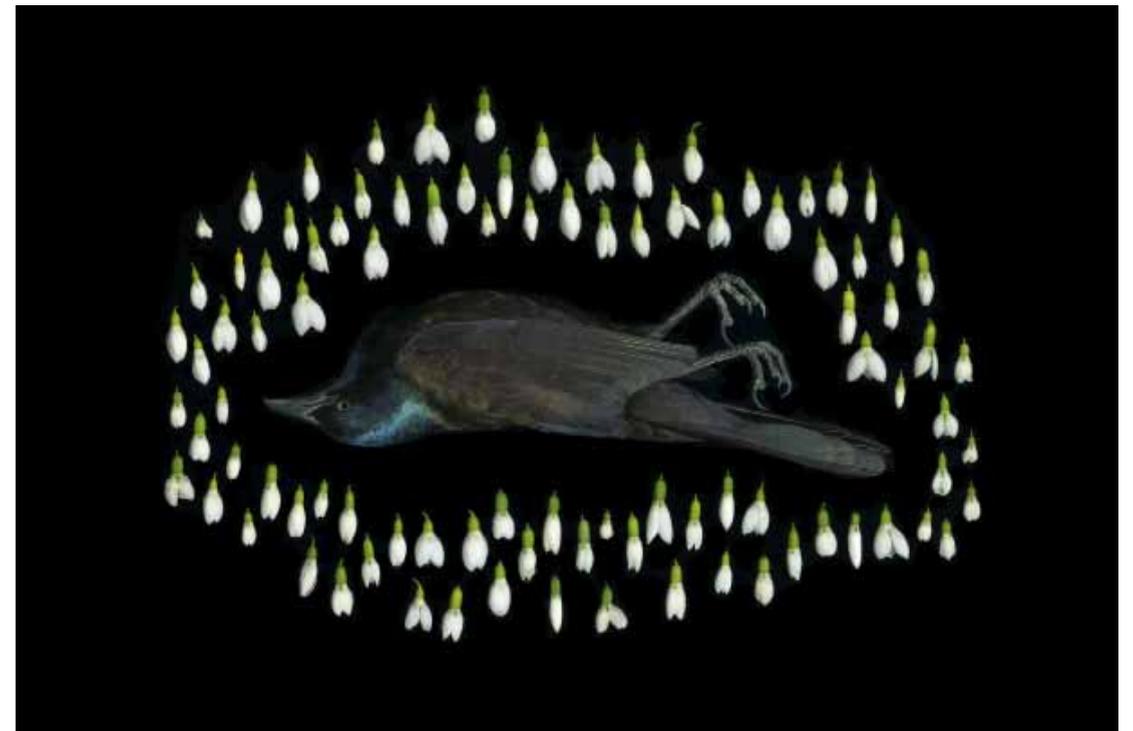
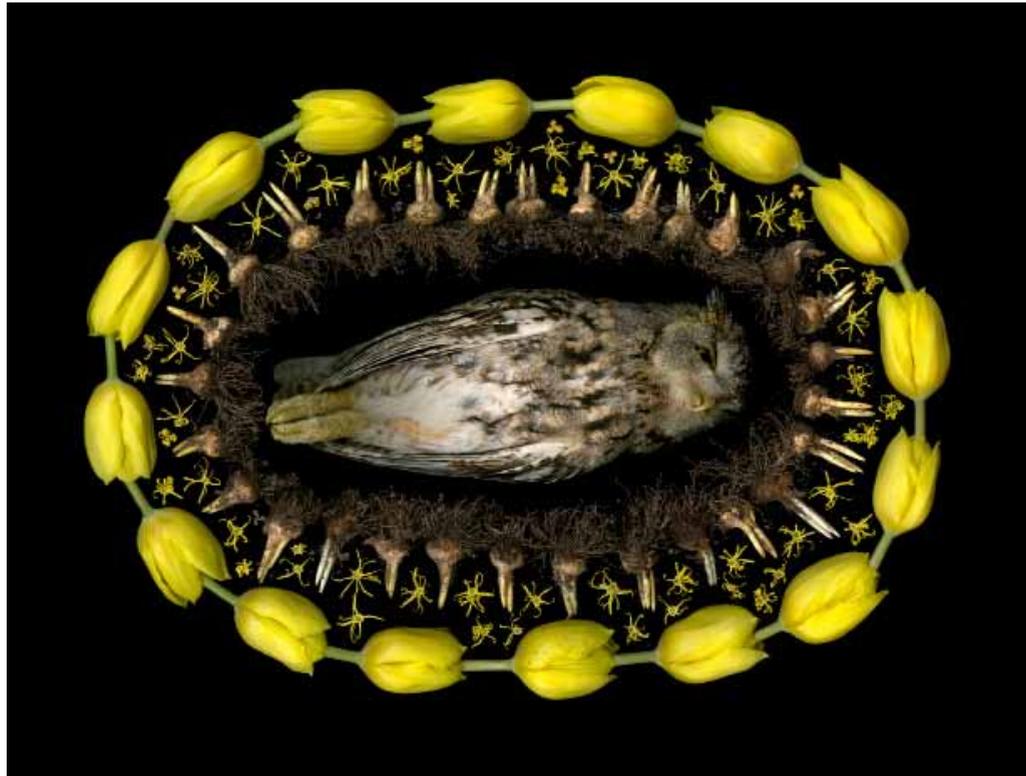
The folio lies under thick plastic, and they turn the page every few days and there is his buckskin suit, his wife's hair combs.

John James Audubon, set your slaves free  
John James Audubon, study these bones  
John James Audubon, pay your debts  
Fire up the smokehouse, and warm up the general store  
I'll set on scales and weigh myself  
Eat crackers from the barrel even as crumbling, stale and mushy as they might be.

Brenda Coultas is the author of *The Tatters* (2014, Wesleyan University Press), a collection of poetry.









## LITTLE SUNS HOLLOW BONES

I created this work with environmental issues in mind. In my Catskill mountain gardens, and the surrounding fields and woods, I am aware of the shifting climate and of the way plants and animals are stressed by human behavior. In gleaning source material for my pieces, I observe how cars, light pollution, big glass windows (treacherous for birds), and farm and lawn chemicals have an impact on natural places and wildlife; the dead birds I encounter often implicate human activity. Conditions in my region are clearly very different than they were a hundred years ago and are constantly changing.

The wallpaper in *Little Suns Hollow Bones*, first shown in my exhibition *Reflecting Pool* at PPOW Gallery in New York City, celebrates the lowly dandelion by presenting a field of them in out-sized scale. Dandelions are hardy and full of life force and they stand proud in the face of our costly, toxic efforts to eradicate them. Observing closely, I am amazed at their miraculous structure of tiny spirals and the way they seem to reflect sun back to the sun, closing at night and opening with daylight. They are harbingers of summer warmth, nutritionally useful, and brilliantly yellow. I wonder: Why are dandelions considered mere weeds, while grass lawns are prized?

Over the dandelion wallpaper are hung photographic images of bird corpses found near where I live. In these pieces, vibrant flowers and colorful plant parts surround the lifeless but beautiful birds. Like Victorian memento mori, these creatures and bones evoke a sense of mystery or even the macabre. In part, the images are meant to honor the birds. At the same time, as with my other botanical work, I am formally inspired by the structure of the flowers, using them to create compositions reminiscent of the mandalas that represent the universe in Eastern religious practices.

I see my work as a record of a specific moment in time. These images document the death of found birds and animals on a specific day at a particular point in history – the contemporary face of environmental upheaval. The blossoms in my botanical pieces are vivid, but captured at a moment just before their demise. This paradox of simultaneous creation and destruction – or beauty, decay, and oblivion – is something I see all around me and my work is a meditation on this.

Portia Munson May 2015



The birds in this work have been donated to the Natural History Institute at Columbia-Greene Community College, Hudson, NY (William Cook, PhD, director).



cover: *Dandelion Suns*

inside cover: *Spineflowers*

2. *Flower Eye*

3. *Lady Slipper*

4. Poem by Brenda Coultas

5. *Downy Woodpecker*  
*Northern Flicker*

6. *Golden Crowned Kinglet*  
*Wood Thrush*

centerfold: *Fox Maze*

9. *Witch Hazel Screech*  
*Owl, Cedar Waxwing*

10. *7 Roses Surrounding*  
*a Bat, Common Grackle*

11. *Crocus Bulbs*

12. Artist's Statement &  
*Narcissus Infinity*

13. *Tree Knife Elbow*

For more information and artist biography, visit [www.portiamunson.com](http://www.portiamunson.com) or [ppow-gallery.com](http://ppow-gallery.com). Portia Munson is represented by PPOW Gallery, New York, N.Y.