



JANE KIM

THE MURAL AS A PLEA FOR PLANETARY AWARENESS

INTERVIEW BY **DAVID MOLESKY** // PORTRAIT BY **GINNY CHADWICK**

I MET JANE KIM ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO IN SAN

Francisco when she and a college friend were running a booth at an art fair in Fort Mason, and I have followed her work ever since: birds painted on drywall, wallpaper designs, freestanding drywall constructions and now her expansive murals of feathered and furry animals. Jane gleaned skills from each project and harnessed them together to create her monumental mural for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology: the 40 by 70-foot *From So Simple a Beginning: Celebrating the Evolution and Diversity of Birds*.

Growing up outside Chicago, Jane constantly made drawings and even made a mural of flowers and bears on her bedroom wall. In high school, she focused on painting, drawing and printmaking, frequenting the natural history room at her school with its display cabinets filled with skulls and insects, the subjects of her early work. After graduating with a printmaking degree from RISD, Jane migrated towards western climates and nature, and soon after landing in San Francisco, began exhibiting her bird paintings on reclaimed drywall while also working as a fine art printer and freelance designer.

One evening, I assisted Jane, making transfers of her drawings of jellyfish and birds onto plastic film that I then carefully cut into stencils. On long scrolls of colored paper, she rolled paint over the stencils to make repetitive stamps

of animal silhouettes that she then layered with increasingly fine detail using premixed colors stored in marked jars. The meticulously planned process fused the printmaking background with her interest in the details of the natural world.

Around that time, Jane was accepted into the prestigious Science Illustration certificate program at California State University Monterey Bay, where she learned traditional techniques of drawing from observation alongside contemporary mediums and digital formats. Afterwards, she served as a Bartels Science Illustration intern at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, NY. Rather than taking a typical illustrator's path, Jane had larger aspirations: mural-sized ones.

The summer following her internship, Jane entered an online competition with an ocean conservation theme co-hosted by the event organization Summit and *National Geographic*. The entries ranged from scientifically oriented concepts to more artistic visions. Jane proposed a migrating mural project, painting murals that follow migration routes of the blue whale. It garnered the most votes and was celebrated in an online article. When Diane Tessaglia-Hymes, director of the Bartels Internship, saw the article announcing her star artist's success, she proudly circulated it through the lab. This email caught the attention of the



Mural at the National Aquarium (detail)
Baltimore, Maryland

“AN ANIMAL LIKE THAT COULD REALLY USE A MASSIVE CAMPAIGN THAT USES PUBLIC ART TO DRIVE SUPPORT AND PROTECTION.”

director John Fitzpatrick who realized that Jane was the advocate he had been seeking to realize his dream project: an enormous mural to anchor the lab's legacy. Jane and Dr. Fitzpatrick spent two years navigating the bureaucratic maze and working with donors and board members before a green light was granted. The mural will be completed by November 2015 in conjunction with the lab's centennial celebration.

The first of its kind, the mural represents the diversity of the class Aves, depicting 243 modern families and 26 extinct relatives. As one of the world's most ambitious natural history murals, it is the only one to illustrate all modern families of birds in one place. Atop a painted world map, Jane paints each bird life-sized, taking great care to capture the energy and dynamism of each species. Living birds are in full color, while extinct species are painted as ghosts in transparent grisaille. All modern species, including five recently extinct, are placed within their geographic range on the map. At the far end of the wall, the mural ascends a staircase and shows avian evolution through 21 ancestors of modern birds.

The successive collision of North Eastern blizzards prevented me from visiting Jane's murals, but we were able to talk on the phone between her epically long paint sessions.

David Molesky: What's your process for creating the birds? How much of this project has been a collaboration?

Jane Kim: Creating the wall of birds with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has been hugely collaborative. The key is balancing scientific accuracy with artistic voice. I study a ton of references. Videos are especially great. After delivering a pencil sketch to the lab, they give me feedback. The biologists are extremely precise, they'll literally tell me if a toe is a millimeter too long. With the lab's expertise, nailing

the biology is pretty straight forward, so then the challenge is how do I give this animal life? I study the birds to get a sense of their behavior and try to accentuate features and postures that highlight a unique part of their personality. For instance, the southern cassowary is a big powerful bird that can run up to 30 miles per hour, so I painted him in a moment of action, charging through the rainforest.

Tell me more about the evolutionary aspect of the mural.

The story of the mural unfolds left to right. Birds evolved from dinosaurs, who evolved from fish, so the mural begins with the Tiktaalik, a 375 million year old primitive fish. We selected several species that played a key role in the split from dinosaurs to birds during the Cenozoic period that began 65 million years ago, including the 30-foot long Yutyrannus, ancestor of the first feathered dinosaur. One of my favorite extinct birds is the Ornimegalonyx, the largest owl ever described, standing three and a half feet tall.

What are the murals you created recently for the National Aquarium in Baltimore?

We painted three murals for their new exhibit *Living Seashore*. It focuses on the Atlantic shoreline and there are touch tanks with rays, skates and jellyfish. The first two murals depict the grass and sand dune landscape of the upper beach and a shoreline scene with people. The third piece is called the *Diversity Wall*, a 30-foot mural representing the diverse food web in the Gulf Stream.

What is modge podge and how did you decide upon using that and tissue paper for this mural?

To create the *Diversity Wall*, I used a technique called paper mosaic. It was pioneered by a 19th century artist named Mary Delany who became famous for using tissue paper to make flowers. Most of the animals on the wall are made entirely by laying down individual strips of paper adhered with modge podge, a craft product meant for decoupage



and other paper projects. The texture of the layered tissue paper complements the touch pools and the room's tactile theme. The *Diversity Wall* in particular is a big departure from displays you'll find in most other natural history museums and aquariums. The National Aquarium wanted something that was accurate but had a very bold and strong artistic voice. It was fun to create that with them.

How did you get into using reclaimed materials like drywall in your work and at your SF Dump residency? Such a fitting stepping stone on the path to being a muralist.

Absolutely. At that point, I was working as a decorative painter and saw how much waste was created by construction. I saw value in that waste and started using reclaimed drywall as my palette. During my residency at the SF dump, I had access to tons and tons of waste, which inspired me to have a greater sense of purpose and to be more aware of why I was doing what I was doing. Around the same time, I had a commission at the Conservatory of Flowers. My friend needed someone to paint big

pedestal boxes in a Victorian carnival theme. The boxes had black-and-white patterns and I also worked on backdrops and props.

That kind of public engagement was so much more satisfying than the gallery and private commission work I was doing. I started to long for my work to have meaning in that way, to have it function as a tool that improves public experience.

Now that you are a certified science illustrator, how has this changed the way you use birds in your paintings?

In my current paintings, each bird needs to be accurate, which is different from how I've painted birds in the past, but striving for accuracy always leads to making something better. I think about Da Vinci and Dürer, who believed that nature creates the best design. For the wall of birds mural, I worked with ornithologist Jesse Berry. It's really cool working with scientists who can make great critical suggestions. It makes the end product so much better.

above (clockwise from top left)
Migrating Mural (detail)
Mono Basin Visitor Center, California
Photo by Cody Tuttle

Wall of Birds (Ostrich Bird)
Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Photos by Danza Chisholm-Sims

Wall of Birds (Secretary Bird)
Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Photos by Danza Chisholm-Sims

opposite
Migrating Mural
Mt. Williamson Motel
Independence, California
Photo by Cody Tuttle

What artist or illustrators have been the most inspirational to your pursuits?

I love seeing art and science together. In the museum next to the La Brea Tar Pits, I saw these articulated bird skeletons in cases with backdrops that show what the bird would look like in those poses. I couldn't stop staring at these paintings by John D. Dawson. I loved how the informative aspect could be integrated with painting. I kept thinking that's what I want to do.

What's the next step in the *Migrating Mural* project?

The goal of the *Migrating Mural* is to highlight through public art the endangered animals along migration corridors they share with humans. Our first was a series of six murals of Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep along a 120-mile stretch of California Highway 395. Next we want to feature the monarch butterfly, which has seen its numbers drop 90% since the mid-'90s. The federal government is now considering listing them as an endangered species. An animal like that could really use a massive campaign that

uses public art to drive support and protection. What if we had a dozen murals spanning the monarch's range, from Mexico to Canada? Can you imagine how much support that would generate for such a wonderful, fragile creature? How much habitat could it inspire us to protect? I painted all six murals in the bighorn series, but the ultimate goal is for me to only paint one or two and to create a grant system where we can commission other artists to paint the rest.

Tell me about the process in founding your company, Ink Dwell, and your decision to incorporate your mural painting company versus working as an individual artist.

Given the example of the *Migrating Mural*, it was more important to attach the work to an idea, rather than a person. Yvon Chouinard didn't name his clothing company after himself, he called it Patagonia after a beautiful wilderness. Ink Dwell creates art that's "inked well" with a mission to inspire others to love and protect the natural world—a place where we dwell. I love that a concept like that is bigger than me.



opposite and above
Migrating Mural (full view and detail)
 Lone Pine Regional Airport
 Lone Pine, California
 Photo Cody Tuttle

How have the contributions of your business partner and co-founder Thayer Walker changed the game?

Thayer has played a huge role in developing Ink Dwell. He's a correspondent for *Outside Magazine* and when he told me about the stories he'd write—wrestling with jaguars in the Amazon or diving with sharks—it sounded like a dream. He reignited my love for nature. I'd always thought about getting a Master's in science illustration but his work inspired me to finally do it. Now he's the business backbone of Ink Dwell, sourcing commissions, negotiating contracts and building campaigns so that I can focus on the art. We're a good team.

If you had unlimited funding for a project, what would it be?

Honestly, I have so many ideas. I'd like to design a hotel in the Amazon where the entire building is one big scientific illustration. Each floor would be themed, representing different layers of the canopy. Inside a glass elevator there would be depictions of the way water moves through a tree from root to leaf. The building itself would allow visitors to

deepen their understanding of the environment around them. The list goes on and on, but the common theme is to enhance experience and connect people with the environments around them.

What do you think is the most important environmental issue right now?

Our attitude. Climate change, ocean acidification, deforestation, these are all huge issues, but really they're just symptoms of a much larger problem: a flawed philosophy about our relationship with the natural world. Art can't change the amount of carbon we're putting into the atmosphere, but it can challenge and inspire us to change the way we think and behave—which is the only way we can begin to solve these massive problems.

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For more information about Jane Kim, visit inkdwell.com

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