

Antonia Munroe

Rare Bird Paintings

2016

Antonia Munroe's 'Rare Bird Paintings' are inspired by 16th and 17th century artists who began to record the natural world through careful scientific observation. Working on several continents but unbeknownst to each other, the artists were often employed as court painters or had wealthy patrons who were eager to further the emerging field of natural history.

Since 2014 Munroe has traveled to Rajasthan, India to study the techniques of Indian miniature painting. In keeping with the traditional process Munroe uses hand ground pure pigment dispersions which she mixes with a binder to create gouache, the original medium used by 16th century Indian painter Ustad Mansur and his contemporaries. While paintings of this period were always on heavy manuscript paper, Munroe paints on panels prepared with gesso and pigmented clay. She uses brushes made from the underside hairs of a squirrel's tail. The squirrels are trapped, plucked and then released. Nevertheless it is considered illegal in India to sell the brushes.

The process of tracing the bird onto the panel is in strict adherence to tradition. Indian painters have, for centuries copied the original paintings of the early artists (regardless of subject matter). Munroe makes paper for tracing using parchment vellum and dry ground earth pigment which she works into the vellum, leaving a dusty film of color. The image of the bird, under which the vellum is positioned, is then carefully traced with a fine-tipped burnisher onto the panel. The painting then begins, at first loosely filling in the bird body with white pigment and then overlaying many layers of color with single strokes of minuscule brushwork.

During the process Munroe will continually refer to the original master painting for definition and exquisite detail. However, in the end she might stray from the recording of natural history and embellish the bird with imaginary features.

Typically an Indian miniature painting is often surrounded with an elaborately painted border. Unable to resist her enduring fascination with block-printed textiles, Munroe fills not only the borders but the backgrounds of her paintings with her original stenciled designs. Her avian subjects appear as brilliant enchanted creatures often perched on a flowering branch or vine amidst a forest of subtle repeating patterns.

In her ongoing search for new bird imagery Munroe has collected a precious library of mostly out-of-print Indian painting and textile books. Her adventurous forays into obscure museums and bookstores in Jaipur, Ahmedabad, and Delhi have provided a treasure trove of beautiful bird subjects as well as pattern designs. The Turban Museum, housed in the stables of a rambling palace in the pink city of Jaipur yielded a cache of second-hand books filled with unusual bird paintings. The books were displayed in a dark musty corner amongst countless turbaned mannequins. Another outing led to a tiny shop on a busy street in Delhi where every book, precariously stacked floor to ceiling was jacketed in cellophane to keep the dust from encroaching. As Munroe was taking leave her eye caught a title “Birds of India”, lying forgotten on a shelf of old magazines. A pocket- sized tattered little book, the kind one takes on a birdwatching tour, it has provided much inspiration for this collection of ‘Rare Bird Paintings’.

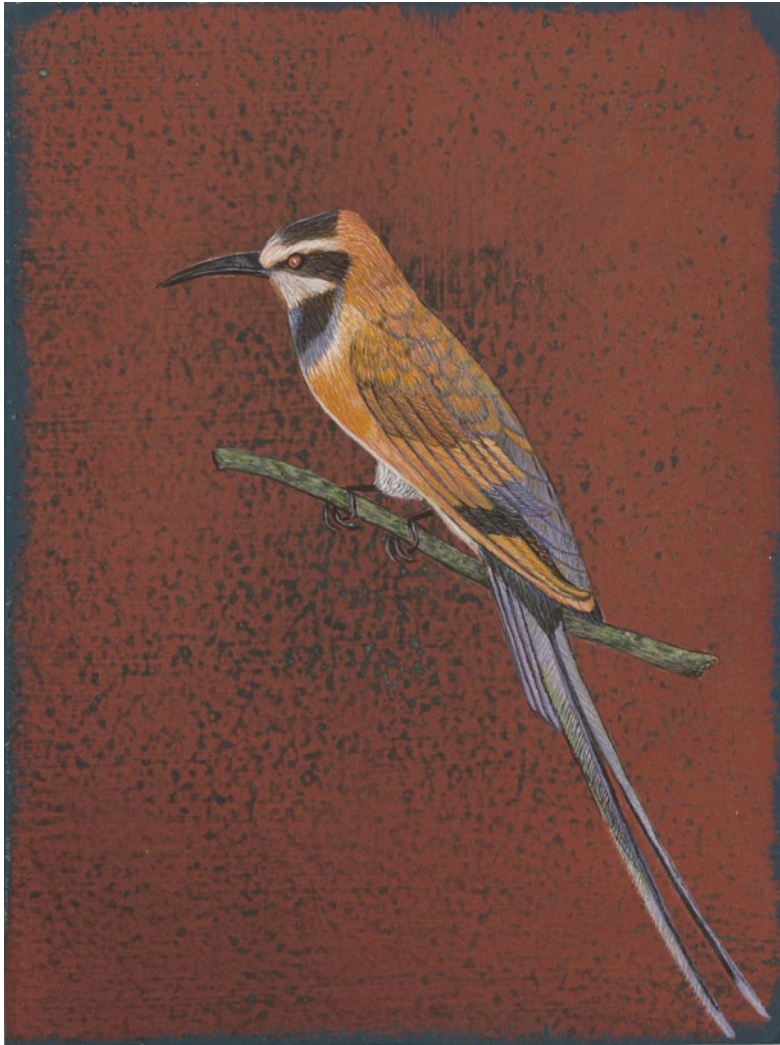
Antonia Munroe
Camden, Maine
2016



A Gold-fronted Leaf Bird, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 8 x 6 in.



A Small Minivet, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 8 x 6 in.



The White-throated Bee Eater, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 8 x 6 in.



A Little Green Bee Eater, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 12 x 10 in.



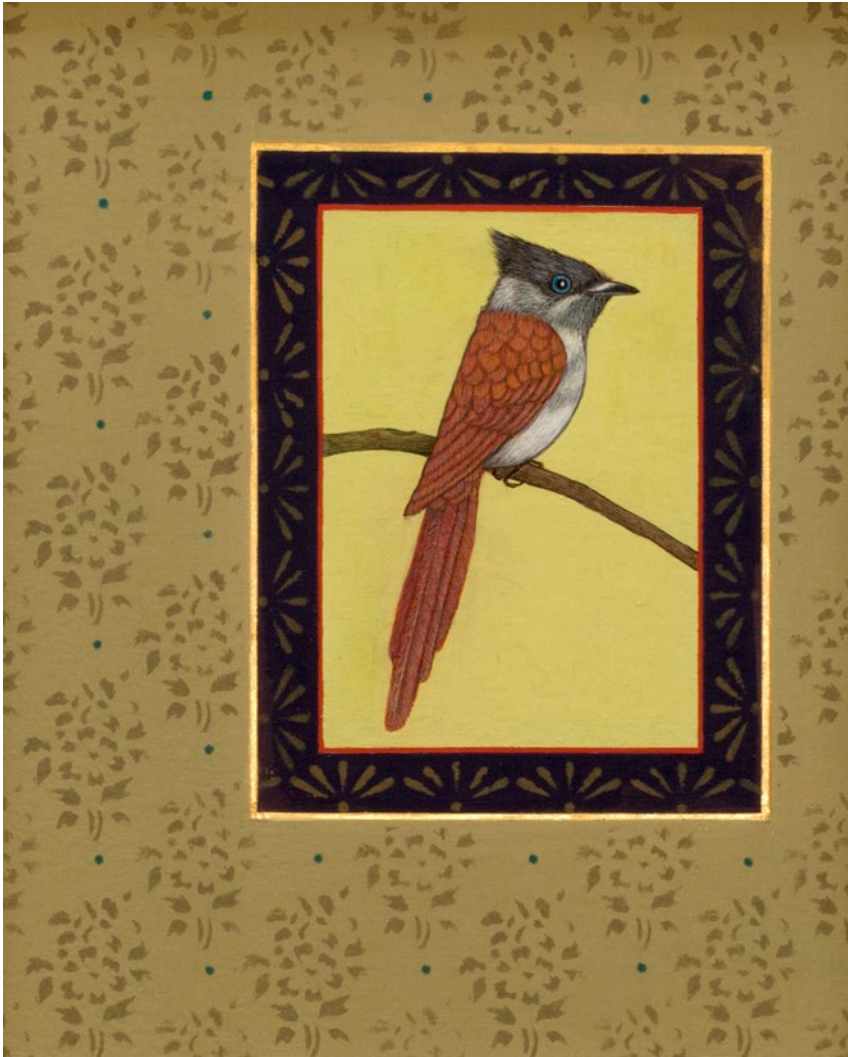
Fairy Bluebirds, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 8 x 8 in.



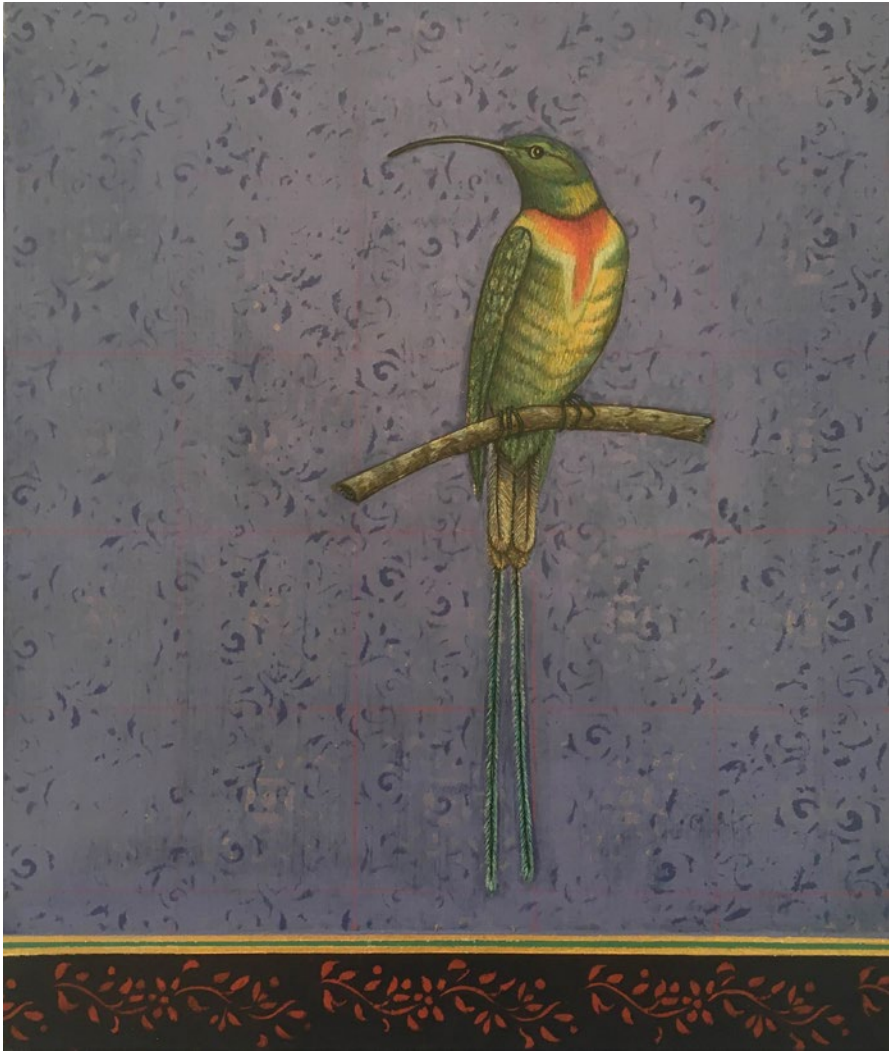
An Imaginary Myna, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 8 x 8 in.



The Splendid Hoeppe, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 16 x 12 in.



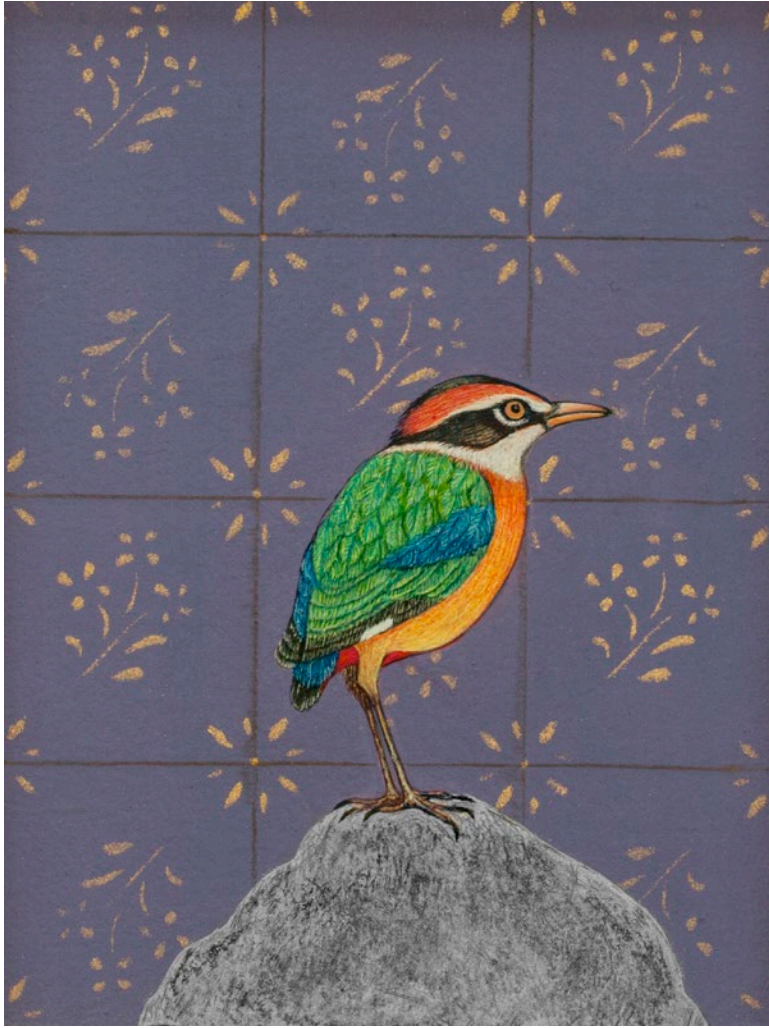
The Grey Headed Flycatcher, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 10 x 8 in.



The Beautiful Sunbird, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 12 x 10 in.



The Sparkling Violet Ear Hummingbird, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 8 x 6 in.



The Indian Pitta, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 12 x 10 in.



A Painted Finch with Red Berries, 2016
pigment dispersion on panel, 10 x 8 in.

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