

Migration I: Sprites of the Sky

This artwork tells the story of the annual swallow migration from Europe to South Africa. These tiny birds, some weighing less than 20g, undertake an epic journey of 6000 miles every year, chasing the summer in search of food, mates and a home.

The journey

British swallows leave their native lands in the autumn months, heading south to find refuge in the glorious South African summer. The birds travel through western France, across the Pyrenees, down eastern Spain into Morocco, and across the Sahara. Some birds follow the west coast of Africa avoiding the Sahara altogether, while European swallows travel further east, down the Nile Valley. Although these birds may be small, they cover 200 miles each day during their migratory journey.

Swallows travel by day at low altitudes and find food along the way. Despite accumulating some fat reserves before crossing large areas of the Sahara Desert, they are vulnerable to starvation during these crossings. It has been speculated that if a swallow is just 2g either side of the ideal weight for migration they won't make the journey. Migration is a hazardous time and many birds die from starvation, exhaustion, predation and in storms.

The symbolism

Migration I: Sprites of the Sky comprises three key elements: Wood, plexiglass and brass. Each element depicts a key element of the migration and has a special story to tell.

The eight brass plates show pivotal points along the swallow's migration path - golden points of certainty and salvation. These birds have followed this path using magnetic compass points innate and as old as time immemorial. Humanity has assigned co-ordinates to these points – numbers and symbols which allow us to classify and reference – breaking down nature to a distinct trajectory. However, the swallows are not dictated to by this rigid system of letters and numerals. They stray from the route, with outshoots and flight paths depicted by the brass rods. These flights of fancy cannot be plotted as a line of certainty from Point A to Point B. Rather, they are dynamic and ever-changing, based on the will and whim of each bird and the environmental conditions experienced along the journey. This shows the fluid nature of flight, an aerial dance of dips and dives.

The wooden birds symbolise the swallows travelling through a particular section of their migration. These birds take on the characteristics of the areas, adapting and acclimatising to their environment, tough enough to withstand the conditions, filling the role of migrant and local. The birds flying around the South African brass plates are hand-cut from four indigenous wood species (Assegai, Yellow wood, Kershout, and Kiaat). As the birds travel through Africa, they adapt to the conditions in these areas and comprise five African wood species (Stinkwood, Zebrano, Ironwood, Mahogany, and Rosewood). As the birds reach Europe and the UK, they take on the form of European woods (Beech, Oak, Cherry, and White pear), perfectly suited for a summer in the North.

The birds which have been laser cut from plexiglass are open to interpretation. Perhaps these are the birds who have been before or will follow behind. Maybe these are the souls of the birds that did not make the arduous journey. Or possibly these are the birds of here and now, darting through the air at breakneck speed, affording us just a fleeting glimpse before we blink and they have vanished. Whatever your impression, these transparent shapes hint at the ethereal nature of the swallows – transitory, fleeting, almost imaginary – mischievous Sprites of the Sky.

The piece has exactly 200 birds which signify the 200 miles they travel each day. Each bird in the installation weighs between 12g and 65g – the exact weight of the birds that migrate from Europe to South Africa each year. One bird faces the opposite direction – symbolising the beginning of a never-ending cyclic journey of survival.