

For immediate release

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## **Falling Birds sing their stories at the Horniman**

A series of X-ray photographs and poetic texts go on display at the Horniman Museum and Gardens from 19 September 2020 highlighting extinction and the alarming decline in bird species around the world.

The display, **Falling Birds**, was developed by UK-based artist Helena Hunter during her Artquest Research Residency at the Horniman.

**Falling Birds** includes artworks that blend larger-than-life X-ray images of extinct and endangered bird specimens from the Horniman's Natural History collection with fragments of poetic text. These sit alongside taxidermy mounts of birds that Helena worked with during her residency - Passenger Pigeon, Snowy Owl, Kakapo and Huia. X-ray images of the birds are further illuminated on a series of lightboxes as part of the display.

Helena's work asks us what songs extinct and endangered birds might sing? How might we hear their stories and what their representation in the Museum may hide and reveal? The forensic nature of the artworks make visible internal wire structures inside the taxidermy specimens, which reveal the illusion of the 'life-like' birds on display. This alternative view speaks to the process of taxidermy imposed upon the bird by human hands that Helena addresses in her accompanying text. For example, the Kakapo bird's story begins: 'I am full of straw, I am full of the rough hands that made me.'

Helena Hunter says: 'During my residency I spent time writing with extinct and endangered birds in the Natural History collection, photographing X-rays of taxidermy mounts in the conservation department and researching the birds in the Library. The artworks experiment with poetic modes of representation and encounter to create alternative forms of address and interpretation in the museum context. The poems open up questions about natural history, authorship, ethics and gesture towards hidden narratives that are materially entangled in the lives of the birds.'

Jo Hatton, Keeper of Natural History says: 'Working alongside our Natural History curators and conservators to investigate the Museum's collections, conservation practices and procedures, Helena spent her residency behind the scenes encountering many extinct and endangered birds, contemplating their past lives, the reasons behind their decline or eventual extinction, and the links to environmental change and species depletion today. As one in eight of the world's bird species is now globally threatened with extinction, Helena's work connects the past to the present and asks us to consider the lessons we might learn

from the past, and how we might prevent and reduce further loss and extinction now and in the future. One of the poems Helena wrote during her residency 'Acts of Reparation' asks "What do we do with the remains? Forget, or remember more clearly?"

**Falling Birds** was developed during Helena Hunter's 2018/19 Artquest Research Residency at the Horniman. Helena is currently working on a pamphlet of poems and performance from the research material she generated during the residency. The display forms part of a wider programme at the Horniman to improve awareness of environmental issues. Further information on this work and the Horniman's **Climate and Ecology Manifesto** can be found at [www.horniman.ac.uk](http://www.horniman.ac.uk)

**Falling Birds is on display in the Horniman's Natural History Gallery from 19 September 2020 to 10 October 2021.**

Entry to the Horniman, and to see Helena's work, is free, however visitors (including Members) need to pre-book a timed slot via the website [horniman.ac.uk](http://horniman.ac.uk) to enter the Museum.

**Ends**

Picture shows: **X-ray of a Secretarybird**

Caption and credit details: **Secretarybird (X-ray), Helena Hunter, 2019**

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Notes to Editors:

- **Helena Hunter** works at the intersections of visual art, poetry and performance. Her artworks utilise poetic and performative modes in relation to environmental change and biodiversity loss, often blending sites such as the field, lab, gallery and museum. She has a Master's in Fine Art from Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. More information about Helena Hunter and her work can be found at [www.helenahunter.net](http://www.helenahunter.net) and [www.matterlurgy.net](http://www.matterlurgy.net)
- **Artquest** uses research about visual artists working conditions, career barriers, and motivations to develop the professional information, advice and projects that they need. More information about **Artquest** and the **Artquest Research Residency** can be found at [www.artquest.org.uk/about-artquest/](http://www.artquest.org.uk/about-artquest/) / [www.artquest.org.uk/project/horniman-residency-2018/](http://www.artquest.org.uk/project/horniman-residency-2018/)
- **Coronavirus restrictions and impact** – the Museum reopened to the public on 30 July 2020. Social distancing and other safety measures are in place, including a one-way visitor route, and visitors should wear face coverings unless they have good reason not to. **Visitors (including Members) need to pre-book at [horniman.ac.uk](http://horniman.ac.uk) for a free, timed entry slot.** Some attractions including the Aquarium and Butterfly House remain closed. The Horniman Gardens have been open throughout the pandemic and the Horniman is asking the public to adhere to [social distancing guidance](#) in the Gardens.
- **Opening times** – the Museum and Café are open from 10am to 5.30pm daily. Visits to the Museum are free but must be booked in advance at [horniman.ac.uk](http://horniman.ac.uk). The Gardens are open from 7.15am (Monday to Saturday) or 8am (Sunday and Bank Holidays) until dusk.
- **Every month the Horniman was closed cost around £150,000 in lost income** from ticket sales, memberships, the shop and café. In recent years the Horniman has increasingly relied on this vital income to help care for the Gardens, fish and other animals, to run events and to look after the collections. The support of returning visitors, our supporters and their generous donations, are more needed than ever.
- **The Horniman Museum and Gardens** opened in 1901 as a gift to the people in perpetuity from tea trader and philanthropist Frederick John Horniman, to 'bring the world to Forest Hill'. Today the Horniman has a collection of 350,000 objects, specimens and artefacts from around the world. Its

galleries include natural history, music and an acclaimed aquarium. A new World Gallery of anthropology opened in June 2018 and a new arts space, The Studio, opened in October 2018. Indoor exhibits link to the award-winning display gardens – from medicinal and dye gardens to an interactive sound garden, Butterfly House and an animal walk – set among 16 acres of beautiful, green space offering spectacular views across London. [horniman.ac.uk](http://horniman.ac.uk)

- The Horniman Museum and Gardens is core-funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and since 1990 has been governed by an independent charitable trust, registered charity no. 802725. The Horniman Museum and Gardens also receives funding from Arts Council England as one of its National Portfolio Organisations.
- On 29 July 2019 the **Horniman Museum and Gardens declared an ecological and climate emergency**, pledging to place carbon reduction and environmental issues at the heart of its work. The declaration is both a consolidation of existing work and a commitment to renewed ambitions to reduce the Horniman’s environmental and pollution footprint, increase biodiversity, and inspire others to do so. Find out more about the Horniman’s specific commitments as part of the declaration at [horniman.ac.uk](http://horniman.ac.uk).
- **Access.** The Museum and the Gardens are both wheelchair and pushchair friendly with accessible toilets. Limited on-site parking is available for Blue Badge holders. [horniman.ac.uk/visit/disability-and-access](http://horniman.ac.uk/visit/disability-and-access).