

Editor's Letter

"Even though I have a certain engagement with science, there are a lot of tools that the artist has that the scientist doesn't. So I can use these tools—humor, irony, metaphor—these are the bread and butter of artists. What artists can really add to a particular kind of struggle is that we have this expanded tool bag."

— Mark Dion

So far, my students haven't complained about all our bird-themed projects this year. We've explored birdhouses, mixed-media birds, clay owls, other birds in nests, penguin collages, and prints. This all started when I received a grant to purchase enough recycled birdhouses for all of my fifth-grade students. I purchased the bird house from a considerate company called GreenBird (www.greenbirdhouse.com), who makes their houses from recycled paper. The birdhouses are intended for actual use, but the questions they prompt for exploring ecological issues may be their most lasting value for my students.

There is a reason canaries were used in coal mines; birds are often the most suscep-

tible of creatures to environmental toxins from fertilizers and pesticides, and to loss of habitat. For all these reasons, birds seemed like an engaging focus to approach the theme of ecology; the study of the way that living organisms interact with their environment. And it seems clear that humans have most impacted our environment, for better and for worse.

I adapted some of GreenBird's



Birdhouse by Cameron Byers.



Nancy with a tin can man at the Idaho Art Education Association conference.

instructional materials as questions to guide inquiry with my students: "What are some positive things humans do to the environment?" "What are some negative things humans do to the environment?" "How have artists depicted these concerns?" and "What can you do to make the world a better place for birds?"

One of the artists I featured in our study of birds was Mark Dion, a contemporary artist (guest speaker at the 2011 National Art Education Association conference in Seattle, and featured in the April 2011 issue of *SchoolArts*) whose work investigates ideas of nature through ecological issues. Birds appear in a number of Dion's installations, known for their combination of natural science collections with taxidermy animals and found objects. Dion's admiration of Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon provided me with additional ornithological artists to include in our classroom inquiry.

Now I'm back to bird watching out my window, hopeful that you will use Mark Dion's tools of humor, irony, and metaphor and *SchoolArts'* articles this month to explore ecological issues with your students.

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