

Revenge of the Warbirds: The Impact of Armed Conflict on Nature

Terry Graff

Warbird is the name typically given to a crew member of a military airplane. It was originally applied to piston-driven fighter and bomber aircraft from the World War II era and came to include all vintage airworthy military aircraft.

It's also a common reference in popular culture, such as for the Romulan Bird of Prey warship in the Star Trek franchise, which resembles a large predatory bird, a fictional war machine



Krieg Vogel, 2016



Aviator, 2018

that was the inspiration for the Boeing Bird of Prey, a highly classified, top-secret military project aimed at demonstrating stealth technology.

Predator birds have a long history of being associated with war and militaristic nations that extends back to ancient times. The US Air Force's primary fighter jet aircraft, which

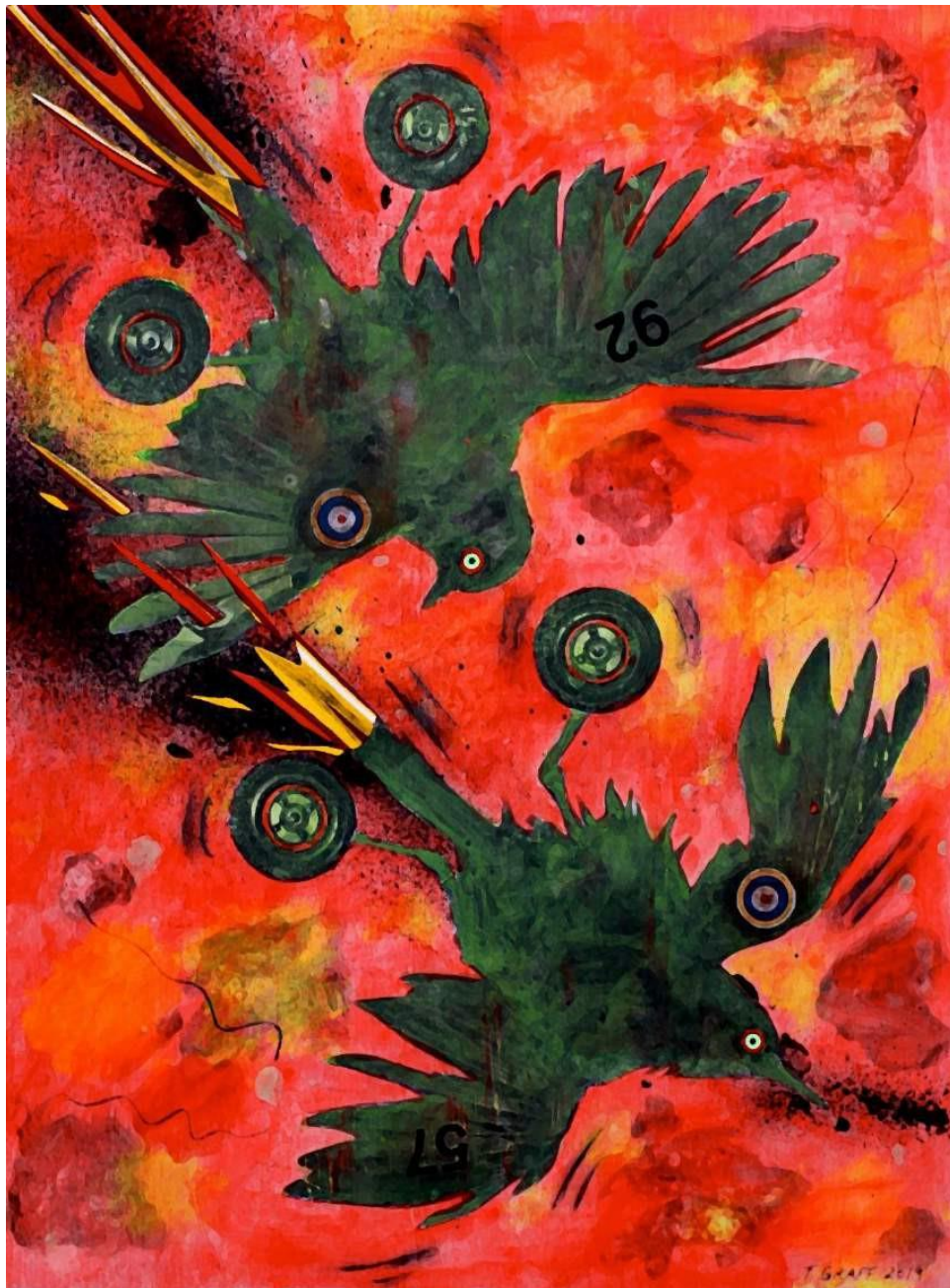


Predator, 2017



Four Warbirds, 2016

boasts superior maneuverability and acceleration, range, weapons, and avionics that can outperform and outfight any enemy aircraft, is called the F-15 Eagle. Among the many other predator bird names assigned to military aircraft are the F-16 Fighting Falcon, the F-117A Nighthawk Stealth Fighter, the UH-60 Black Hawk, the P-40 Warhawk, the AV-8 Harrier, the A-25A Shrike (a small bird of prey), the Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey, and the F-22 Raptor.



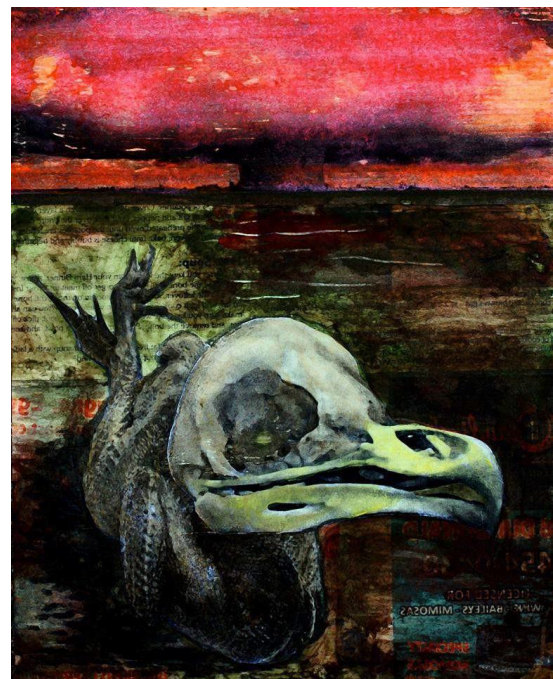
Two Bombers, 2019



Deployment of Warbird #5, 2017

I use the term 'warbird' in reference to my art – drawings, collages, assemblages, and sculpture; more specifically, to the creation of a phantasmagorical vision of bird/machine hybrids or avian cyborgs equipped with combat weapons. The focus of the series, which today numbers over 1,000 works, is on allegorical themes that speak to the all-too-real killing machine of war where the culture of such destructiveness is not only a dominant influence on society, but on an ever-diminishing natural

environment through extensive production of greenhouse gases and pollution, use of chemical and nuclear weapons, and depletion of resources. Expressing the conflictive relationship between nature and technology, and giving a nod to the satirical comedy *The Birds* by the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes, which was first performed during Athens' war with Sicily, my warbirds are a response to the question: "What worse enemy than humankind do we birds have?"



Bird and Bomb #2, 2017



Post-Apocalyptic Cyclist, 2017

Nature is a casualty of living in a state of perpetual war and, ironically, its destruction in defense of one's nation at all costs runs counter to the goal of achieving long-term security. Although long overdue, a group of scientists is currently urging the United Nations to make it a war crime to harm the environment in regions of armed conflict. Military activities not only produce inordinate amounts of greenhouse gases, but also result in widespread devastation

of vast territories leading to species extinction from deforestation, soil degradation, water pollution, bombings, landmines, and radioactive contamination. In World War I, the lands on and near battlefields were poisoned with chlorine gas and mustard gas, and marine ecosystems were damaged with chemical bombs and oil contamination from shipwrecks. The Wake Island rail, a small flightless bird native to an atoll in the Pacific, was rendered extinct.



Refugees, 2019

During the Vietnam War, the US army released extensive amounts of herbicide into the jungles to defoliate the trees so they could locate the enemy. A 1980s study revealed a marked reduction of bird populations because of this activity. More recently, the war in Afghanistan caused a



Dust Off, 2019

dramatic decline (up to 85%) in the abundance of migratory birds, many of which were killed directly by bombs, while others were poisoned by contaminated water. The Siberian crane has not been seen in Afghanistan since 1999, the bald ibis is now officially extinct in Syria, a result of the Syrian Civil War, and several endangered bird species, such as the Saker Falcon, may not survive Russia's war on Ukraine.



Combat Medic, 2016

The numbers on my Warbirds are a reference to annual bird counts, which I am correlating with military identification numbers. According to statistics, 40% of the world's 11,000 bird species are in rapid decline. In fact, in the war on Nature, a myriad of disruptive human activities that includes modern warfare, have altered 75% of Earth's land and triggered a staggering loss of biodiversity and the emergence of an environmental apocalypse. An appropriate term for what humanity has done to the planet is the "scorched-earth policy", a military strategy aimed at destroying anything that might be useful to the enemy while advancing through or withdrawing from a location.



Scorched Earth, 2019

Along with global warming, our hostile battle against Nature has altered the world's ecosystems, collapsing its biodiversity to such an extent that currently one million of the planet's eight million species are threatened with extinction, including almost 1500 bird species. Humanity's seemingly innate propensity to engage in warfare, its inability to achieve peace and harmony with itself, not only inhibits living in peace and harmony with Nature but most assuredly spells our own inevitable doom.



Nature Morte, 2019

Apocalyptic fables and eco-horror or nature-run-amok stories and films are a fitting reference for my Warbird series. In 1971, I purchased a paperback book titled "Eco-Fiction", an anthology of environmental fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It featured short stories by Edgar



The Culling Fields, 2019

Allan Poe, John Steinbeck, Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Isaac Asimov, and other prominent writers. Of particular interest to me was Daphne du Maurier's 1951 short horror story "The Birds," which had inspired Alfred Hitchcock to make his film of the same title.

Du Maurier wrote several works that explore environmental catastrophe, the sense of nature being turned upside down and becoming antagonistic toward humankind. In "The Birds", she foretells the perils of climate change: "It was unnatural . . . the change was something connected with the Arctic Circle." Much different than the Hitchcock film, her story is not only an extraordinary environmental disaster narrative, but her references to fighter planes and use of



End of Time, 2020

the language of battle draw an analogy between the attacking birds, which indiscriminately kill men, women, and children alike, and the large-scale aerial assault on Britain by Nazi Germany's Luftwaffe during World War II. Set in Cornwall after the war, the author examines its toll on the psyche of the protagonist Nat Hocken, a wounded veteran focused on surviving and saving his family by repeatedly thinking about military strategies.

Although not an overtly political story, when confronted by the assaulting birds, Hocken's wife asks: "Can America not help?", referencing the Cold War and foreshadowing the Gulf and Iraq wars.

Du Maurier writes: "birds that by nature's law kept to their own flock and their own territory, and now, joining one with another in their urge to battle . . . how many million years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this



Duck Tank, 2016



Warbird with Muzzleloader Headgear, 2019



Portrait of a Warbird, 2016

instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines." In Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Mrs. Bundy states: "Birds have been on this planet since archaeopteryx, Miss Daniels, a hundred and twenty million years ago! Doesn't it seem odd that they'd wait all that time to start a... a war against humanity?" Miss Daniels responds: "Maybe they're all protecting the species. Maybe they're tired of being shot at and roasted in ovens and... I don't know anything about birds except that they're attacking this town."



War Game, 2019



Decoy #9, 2020

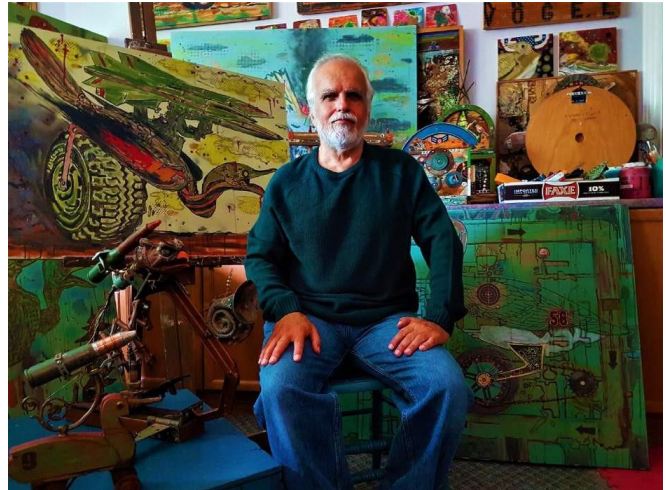


Night Raider, 2019



Doomsday Clock, 2019

Terry Graff is a full-time professional artist who has maintained an active studio practice since 1975. The recipient of major sculpture commissions, acquisitions, grants, and awards, his work has been presented regionally, nationally, and internationally, and includes mixed media drawings, paintings, collages, assemblages, sculpture, kinetic works, and multi-media installations. In 2023/24, his work will be featured in a



national touring retrospective exhibition and major publication titled "Avian Cyborgs". Born in Cambridge (Galt), Ontario, Canada, Graff studied Fine Art at the Doon School of Fine Arts, Doon, Ontario, and Fanshawe College of Applied Arts and Technology, London, Ontario. He received a B.A. in Fine Art from the University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, and a B.Ed in Visual Arts from the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario. He also studied art history, philosophy of art, media arts, and art education at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, received a postgraduate diploma in Fine Art (M.F.A. equivalent) from the Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, the Netherlands, and holds a M.A. in Art Education from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia (Thesis: Art and Ecological Vision).

Along with his intensive studio practice, Graff has had a distinguished career as a curator, art educator, art writer, and gallery director. He has served as director of four public art galleries in



Warbird #8, 2019

four different provinces of Canada: the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the Mendel Art Gallery, Rodman Hall Arts Centre, and Confederation Centre Art Gallery and, also, of the artist-run Struts Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick. He has curated over 200 exhibitions, authored numerous articles, catalogues, and books on both contemporary and historical art, and taught drawing and sculpture at Mount Allison University. As a tireless advocate for the importance of art in people's lives and as an essential ingredient for the health and well-being of communities, Graff has served as a volunteer on numerous committees and

boards in support of cultural activity, has provided public service as a consultant and arts juror at regional and national levels, and has supported countless artists in a variety of capacities. In recognition of his various cultural contributions across Canada, he has received many awards and honours, including the Fanshawe College Distinguished Alumni Award; The Commemorative Medal for the Centennial of Saskatchewan (Official Honour of the Crown recognizing individuals who have made a significant contribution to the Province of Saskatchewan); the Christina Sabat Award for Art Criticism in Atlantic Canada sponsored by the Sheila Hugh MacKay Foundation; and two eagle feathers from the Mi'kmaq First Nation for his work in promoting the art of First Nations artists. Terry Graff lives in Island View, New Brunswick, Canada with his wife Kim and three Siamese cats.



Dove of War, 2016