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WANDA BAXTER

*Crows Too Big to Ignore:
An Interview With Public Artist
Gerald Beaulieu*



Photo Credit: Gerald Beaulieu

INTRODUCTION

Gerald Beaulieu's crows are like massive, soundless speakers. Each is 386 kilograms, 5 metres long, and made of used tires, with open eyes staring out. They say what most roadkill never get the chance to say: "notice me."

The three crow sculptures can be perceived as public monuments, similar to how heroic leaders are memorialized (though in decidedly less-than-heroic poses); opposite to how crows lying dead on a roadside are typically seen—as garbage. Beaulieu's art brings attention to how the crows died and elevates their loss. He makes their deaths impossible to ignore.

I first heard of Prince Edward Island artist Gerald Beaulieu and his public art installation *When Rubber Hits the Road* via a CBC PEI Interview with the artist. On CBC's online channel, Beaulieu is pictured with the crows in front of the Charlottetown Confederation Centre where the huge, rubber-feathered birds are sprawled across the pedestrian concourse and down the stairs. On commission to the centrally located arts centre, they will be installed there until next spring, though they were originally created for the Arts in the Open Festival held annually in Charlottetown.



Photo Credit: Heather Ogg

I was taken aback by the images of the crows. The sculptures are so large and lifelike. Their eyes seemingly express both pain and blame. Huge, rubber, and realistic, they are somehow anything but dead. Because I work to prevent wildlife-vehicle collisions, the crows have particular relevance for me.

Trying to raise awareness of the impacts of driving and transportation infrastructure on wildlife is a difficult task. It is a fine balance to bring attention to the staggering amount of mortality and suffering that results from the collision of wildlife and vehicles, natural and human-built worlds, without turning the public off. But Beaulieu addresses the complicated issue in the most impactful and palatable way. By using pieces of vehicles—the tires themselves—he turns road-killed crows, which are normally the invisible collateral damage of driving, into impossible-to-ignore symbols of the death and destruction that result from our obsession with driving.

The crows are massive, visible reminders that crows (and other creatures) that die by vehicle are dead because of us.

INTERVIEW WITH GERALD BEAULIEU

Wanda Baxter (WB): *What is your background in art? Are you self-taught or formally trained, and is public art always your focus?*

Gerald Beaulieu (GB): My formal education was at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto and I spent a year in New York City at OCAD's campus there. I've been exhibiting in galleries for more than thirty years, but over the last decade I have done more public art mainly because there is more opportunity. Public art competitions are tough, though; only first place is awarded and paid. There's no second or third place.



Photo credit: Gerald Beaulieu

WB: *You wrote in the proposal description of When the Rubber Hits the Road that “there is literally a collision between wildlife and our domestic lives, a theme that I have explored in the past.” How have you explored this theme in the past, and how did you develop this sensibility?*

GB: I worked as a tree planter to put myself through school and I worked in these fourteen-square-kilometre wastelands. They call it tree planting, but we aren't putting trees back the way they were—it was changing things forever. Much of the landscape we see today is the result of human civilization. That's how I began to see the collision of human and nature.

I was also inspired to make this work by a trip to Ireland when a friend we stayed with told us

“We’ll see no roadkill in Ireland” when we headed out on our extended road trip. We drove hundreds of kilometres and only saw one small, dead creature. There’s no wildlife there. It’s a beautifully managed landscape and that’s what your focus is, so the lack of wildlife kind of needed to be pointed out—but it stayed with me, the lack of roadkill, and what roadkill means. Seeing dead creatures on the road can indicate healthy populations. At least they are here.



Photo credit: Gerald Beaulieu

WB: *Why crows?*

GB: For over one hundred years, thousands of crows return every evening to the tall trees of Victoria Park to roost. They are a huge part of the park’s atmosphere and a main feature. The public has a love-hate relationship with these social birds, as they do with many urban scavengers.

I admire crows and other wildlife that adapt to us. They are intelligent and capable of eating a variety of things. It is not uncommon to see crows eating the consequences of our commuting, and roadkill makes a substantial contribution to their diet. As scavengers it is what they do: cleaning up a lot of our mess. One of the risks of scavenging is being hit by vehicles, which doubles the impact of collisions. So, the crows don’t just represent roadkill, but also the layers of impacts of driving.

WB: *Why did you choose the title When the Rubber Hits the Road?*

GB: The material I use in my art is often part of the metaphor. Using tires for the crows themselves turns them literally into the material that kills them. I originally wanted to use the title *A Murder of Crows*, but I thought it would be a harder sell.

I first created the work as part of the Art in the Open outdoor art exhibition held in

Charlottetown at the end of August every year. The three huge crows were assembled and placed so their wing or tail feathers extended into the road, forcing vehicles driving along the ten-kilometre speed roadway to drive over the rubber creature. It was a performance element of the piece—to flip the impact back onto the driver. Most drivers opted to drive around the structures. Just like they will swerve around roadkill.

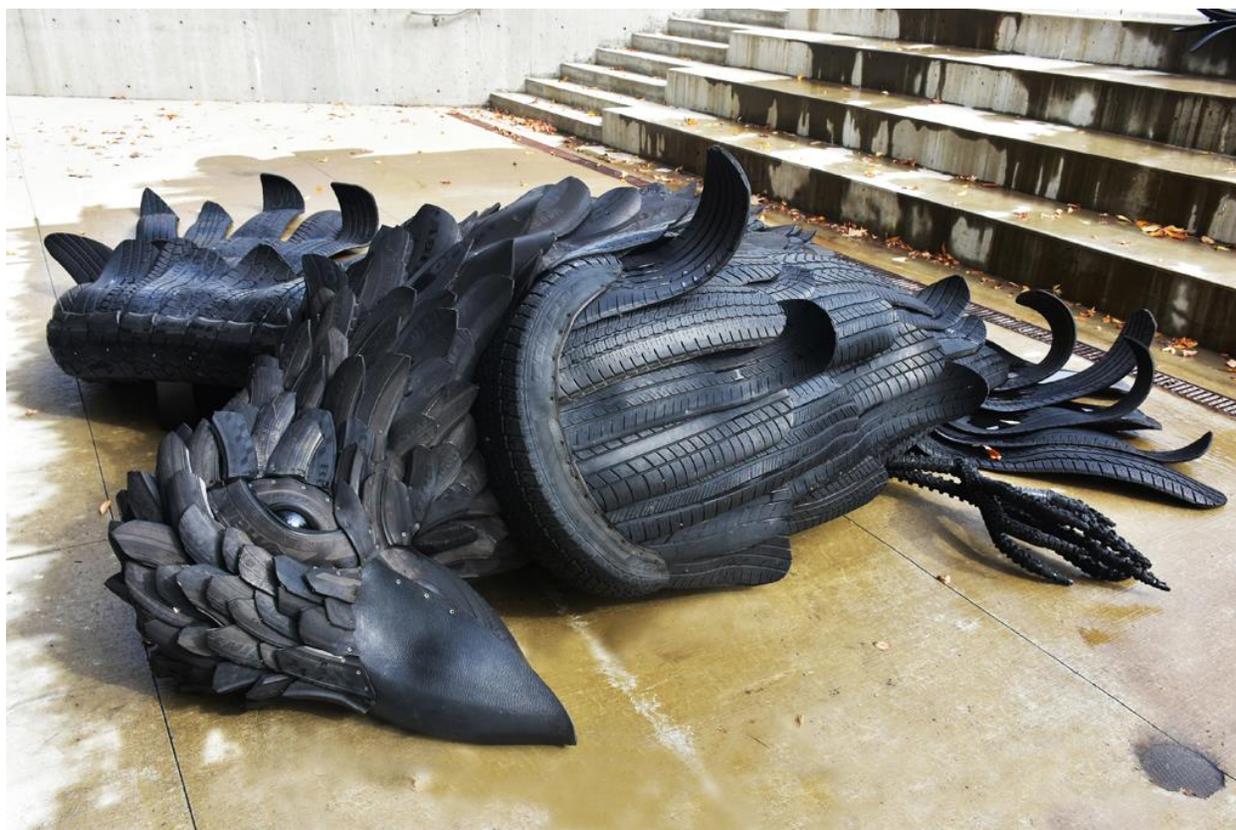


Photo credit: Gerald Beaulieu

Once the Art in the Open festival was over, the Charlottetown Arts Centre commissioned the piece to be located on its property for a year. After that, I'm not sure what will happen to them. I built them like IKEA would: they are connected pieces easy to assemble and can be moved, but they are still large structures. What happens to them next will depend on whether they are commissioned by another gallery.

OUTRO

The crows make a lasting impact—you can't not see them. They clearly represent the incompatible juxtaposition of human and natural worlds, of man-made materials as heavy dead weight compared to the weightlessness of feathers, of the collateral damage of driving that many wild creatures become.

Beaulieu's crows are huge not just because of their size but also for what they say, and how they say it. Their black eyes stare out as haunting reminders that the way we live and move impinges directly on the ability of nature to survive.

Beaulieu's striking and discomfiting installation says, without words, what most of us prefer not to hear. We are the murderers of crows.



Photo credit: Gerald Beaulieu

UPDATE

Gerald Beaulieu's crows have since moved to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick, as part of [Materiality and Perception in Contemporary Atlantic Art: The 2019 Marion McCain Exhibition](#).

For more information on wildlife-vehicle collisions in Canada and efforts to reduce impacts:

[Watch for Wildlife](#)

[Traffic Injury Research Foundation—Wildlife Roadsharing](#)

[Wildlife Collision Prevention, B.C.](#)

[The Mistaakis Institute \(Alberta\)](#)

[Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative](#)

Works Cited

Yarr, Kevin. "Roadkill Crows Installed Outside Confederation Centre Art Gallery." *CBC News*, 9 Oct. 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-roadkill-crows-art-gallery-1.4855138>.

WANDA BAXTER has an MA in English and a Master of Environmental Design from the University of Calgary. She works in environmental policy and planning, most recently as program developer and manager of *Watch for Wildlife*, a wildlife-vehicle collision prevention program. Wanda lives and works on an old farmstead north of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, and is the author of [*If I Had an Old House on the East Coast*](#), published by Nimbus Publishing in 2018.

GERALD BEAULIEU studied art at the Ontario College of Art and Design, including a final year of study at the New York City satellite campus, graduating in 1987. In 1988, he moved to Prince Edward Island where he now works and lives with his family. While pursuing his art practice he also devotes his time to community initiatives and advocacy work.