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Fly Away Home With Duke Riley's Pigeons

Artist Duke Riley's latest performance piece with commissioner Creative Time, 'Fly by Night,' will send thousands of pigeons over the East River and Brooklyn's Navy Yard, illuminating the skies and celebrating a lost New York City tradition



Artist Duke Riley in one of his coops. PHOTO: PARI DUKOVIC FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

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“**THIS IS OUR PIGEON** Ellis Island,” boasts artist Duke Riley as he clammers up a gangplank to the *Baylander* (IX-514), a decommissioned U.S. military vessel docked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The boat’s deck, a landing pad for helicopters during the Vietnam War, is now home to a series of large pigeon coops partly inspired by antique photographs and painted battleship gray. There is a pleasing symmetry to the location, Riley explains, as he points beyond industrial cranes and passing boats to the former site of Cob Dock, an artificial island just offshore that once housed hundreds of homing pigeons, which from the Civil War until after World War II were trained to carry the Navy’s coded messages from ships at sea. “We’re part of pigeon history here,” he says.

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Still, it's safe to say that the Navy's crusty "pigeoneers" (as military trainers of homing pigeons were called) never envisioned an avian project quite like Riley's *Fly by Night*. Over six weekends starting May 7, the artist will release some 2,000 pigeons at dusk, each with an LED light attached to a leg. In what is likely to become one of New York's most ethereal pieces of performance art, the birds will fly en masse over the waters of the East River, swooping, tumbling and swirling against the Manhattan skyline, then return to their maritime coops, guided homeward in part by luminous naval flags Riley has painted on the boat's roof. "It's been my lifelong dream to merge my two interests, water and birds," he says. "A giant boat that is also a floating pigeon coop? I'm going to be like Noah!"



BLING TONE | Pigeons have long been raised by New York's immigrant communities. *PHOTO: PARI DUKOVIC FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

The spectacle is being presented by Creative Time, a nonprofit organization that specializes in provocative public art mounted in historic New York locales. "When Duke described this dream project of his—pigeons flying at dusk, the body of water, the LED lights—we fell in love with it immediately," says Creative Time executive director Katie Hollander. "And Brooklyn Navy Yard is one of the industrial gems of New York, full of character and grit and beauty."

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Riley's work also fits with the currents of contemporary art, says Creative Time curator Meredith Johnson. "There's a long history of artists looking at the relationship between the man-made world and nature," she explains, although using wildlife as actual participants rather than subjects (think Damien Hirst's notorious shark suspended in formaldehyde) is a more rarefied field. She points to Joseph Beuys living with a wild coyote for several days in 1974 and, more recently, Mark Dion's use of live finches in a series of avian "libraries" and Natalie Jeremijenko's work with mussels and butterflies. "It's really a question as old as time," Johnson adds. "Can we connect with animals other than by just intruding on their environment or consuming them? What is our social relationship? Pigeons share our landscape every day but are invisible to most people. This will change the way we look at the creatures forever."

Given *Fly by Night*'s elaborate scale, anyone who suffered childhood nightmares from Hitchcock's *The Birds* may want to admire the flights from afar. The *Baylander* is a paradise for pigeons (the coops are clean and orderly, with one-way portals, known as "buck bars" to pigeon fanciers, and landing boards) but a little intimidating to uninitiated humans. Opening a coop door may cause an explosion of avian activity—wings flapping in your face, claws brushing at your hair, babies squawking in their nests. The air is heavy with the acrid perfume of droppings. But the 43-year-old Riley is in his element. Wearing a black hoodie of his own design bearing the letters *BPC* (Brooklyn Pigeon Crew), he casually scoops birds from their stalls and handles them with practiced affection.

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LIFE OF RILEY | Riley's former projects include 'Trading With the Enemy,' in which pigeons smuggled Cuban cigars from Havana. PHOTO: COURTESY OF DUKE RILEY STUDIO

"Pigeons have been domesticated for thousands of years," he says, stroking a snow-white dove, "just like dogs and cats." In a sense, he is conducting a one-man PR campaign for the once-beloved creatures now often dismissed as dirty urban pests. Riley regards the term "rats with wings," popularized by Woody Allen in *Stardust Memories*, as libelous: "In fact, pigeons are highly intelligent, very clean and have served mankind for centuries. They deserve our respect and should be looked after."

To support his point, Riley provides a crash course on pigeon culture, starting with the enormous variety of breeds. "Tipplers are known for how long they can fly. People have reported them staying up in the sky for 18 hours. These guys are Egyptian swifts; they're very, very smart. Those ones are Russian High Flyers. They're beautiful, beautiful birds. And that white ashy one is a Damascene. They're believed to be originally from Damascus, a breed dating back centuries to the days of Muhammad." There are Tumblers and Rollers, both known for their acrobatics, and fancy birds such as Satinettes, which are awkward fliers but are prized for their wing patterns. Some breeds have

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elegant white clusters of feathers (called “boots”) around their legs; others have tufts (“caps”) behind their heads. Riley adds that the ancient Christians of Cappadocia bred pigeons for their droppings, a rich fertilizer.

Riley’s affinity for pigeons began when he was a nature-loving kid in Boston and took care of an injured bird. “It kept coming back to me,” he recalls. The avian romance cranked up a level in the early 1990s, when as an art student Riley lived in a pigeon coop for four years in Providence, Rhode Island, paying \$25 a month in rent. “The pigeons were like my roommates,” he recalls. “They would fly in and out of the windows all day, then s— all over my down comforter at night.” (How this affected his dating life one hesitates to ask.) In 1997, he moved to Brooklyn and within a few years enrolled at the Pratt Institute. From the start, his work challenged traditional definitions of mixed media, combining drawings, sculpture, printmaking, mosaics, video and “performative interventions.” Meanwhile, at home he maintained rooftop coops and sometimes even kept pigeons in his living room and bathroom—until an irate landlord would force him to get rid of the birds, even though the practice is not technically illegal. (“People who keep pigeons are always battling misinformation,” he says with a sigh.)



Part of his installation ‘Trading With the Enemy’ PHOTO: COURTESY OF DUKE RILEY STUDIO

Riley soon achieved underground fame in New York for his imaginative performance art, which often connected to his other great passion, water. In 2007, he re-created a primitive 18th-century submarine from the Revolutionary War called the *Turtle* and floated it toward the docked *Queen Mary 2*. (He was intercepted by an NYPD boat as a

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potential terrorist.) Another installation was a speakeasy called the Dead Horse Inn, built from pieces of an old shantytown on a former island in Sheepshead Bay, where a bar had operated outside city jurisdiction for decades in the early 20th century.

Riley drew inspiration from pigeons in his art early on, first in his drawings and tattoos (he founded a tattoo parlor in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, specializing in nautical and avian images; he has three pigeon tattoos himself). Then, in 2013, he created a performance piece called *Trading With the Enemy*: To protest the U.S. embargo of Cuba, Riley trained pigeons to carry cigars from Havana to Key West, Florida, evading spyware that cost taxpayers millions annually. (Riley's video account deadpans: "Homing pigeons cannot be identified by surveillance balloons, nor can they be prosecuted for smuggling.") Soon after in New York, he came across a 1930s pigeon-training handbook from the U.S. War Department, a once-classified document that included a chapter on night flight. "Pigeons have been used to carry messages in every armed conflict since the Babylonians," he points out, and with modern firearms, flying under cover of darkness was essential to avoid being shot at. In World War II, he says, the Nazis used teams of trained hawks to intercept pigeons by day.

His first night test was in Havana. ("Cuba is off the radar," he says. "I like to develop my ideas with a little bit of secrecy.") Back on American soil, he trained a sturdy pigeon to carry a bike lamp across Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, and the idea of a mass flight with LED lights began to take hold. New York seemed the obvious setting, in part because of its urban environment. "A lot of people don't pay attention to the natural world; they just look down at their cell phones," Riley says. "We're more disconnected from nature all the time." But his broader aim is to champion the oft-reviled birds in a city that once embraced them. A century ago, New York was home to an ethnically diverse community of pigeon fanciers with coops on rooftops across the five boroughs. The birds were raised as pets, or to be raced and "caught" in friendly games with neighbors. "Even in the 1980s, pigeon coops were all over the East Village and Lower East Side," he laments. "Now there are only two in the entire borough of Manhattan." Today, the last collectors are under pressure in other parts of the ever-gentrifying city. "I want to draw attention to the challenges people who raise pigeons face now. Immigrant groups have been forced out of their old neighborhoods, breaking connections passed on from father to son."

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In 2007 Riley floated a replica Colonial-era submarine in New York Harbor. *PHOTO: COURTESY OF DUKE RILEY STUDIO*

Organizing the flock involved logistical problems. “You can’t just go on the Internet and order 2,000 pigeons for tomorrow,” Riley says. Some of the birds were purchased from fanciers, some borrowed, others bred in a warehouse in Red Hook. (Riley took birds out for training flights from the nearby IKEA parking lot.) In February, the flock was transferred to the *Baylander* in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, now an industrial park but once the busiest boat-building center in the United States, where construction went on seven days a week through snow and rainstorms.

Today, Riley’s two-dozen-strong project team seems plucked from a ’70s sitcom. The scale of the operation forced him to hire an expert “coop manager,” Tianna Kennedy, who had run poultry and bee farms upstate. (“It’s been a steep learning curve,” she says, sticking her head out from a penumbra of wings. “I could write a doctorate on pigeon health.”) Working alongside her is Mikey “Rollers” Perez, nicknamed for his favorite breed, which has a knack for aerial rolls and flips. Perez is pigeon aristocracy, a survivor from the golden age of “mumblers” (as fanciers in New York were once nicknamed). He began working with the birds at the age of 8 in Sunset Park,

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Brooklyn, with his uncle and is given to existential musings about pigeon life in the concrete jungle, including the presence of predators. “Hawks have the control in the air,” Perez says. “You can’t do nothing. It’s part of nature; you’ve got to respect that.”

Riley now has a bunk on the *Baylander* so he can live among his pigeons. “I live in dread of the project ending and having to leave this boat,” he says. “If the motor worked, I’d be tempted to disappear with my birds in the middle of the night. I’d contact Fidel and Raúl and work something out.”



Cuban cigar from Riley’s project ‘Trading With the Enemy’ *PHOTO: COURTESY OF DUKE RILEY STUDIO*

SINCE HE MOVED to the Yard, training of the expanding pigeon flock has been nonstop, although Riley prefers to maintain an aura of secrecy. “There are a ton of tricks,” he says evasively. “Everyone argues about the best ways to do it.” The key is patience. “Birds need time to become comfortable. They need to know they are being cared for and fed and to recognize their caretakers. They know they are safe here; it’s a place to return to.” Each day, groups

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were taken a little farther from their coops until they felt free enough to explore the area. Test flights were then made by releasing flocks from more distant locales in Brooklyn and Manhattan.



Artist Duke Riley PHOTO: PARI DUKOVIC FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Riley admits that he doesn't know exactly how the mass flights over the East River will unfold. "It will be different every time," he says, noting that varying tide levels and winds will affect the birds' behavior, and that each breed has a different flying habit. "Some will do figure-eights, others will fly high, or maybe they will all stay in one flock," he says. "Ultimately, the birds will do what they want to do. It's not a circus show. It's more of a collaboration than a performance."

Whatever transpires, *Fly by Night* will offer a spectacle that is unlikely to leave viewers unaffected. "To experience pure wonder and joy is rare and special," says Hollander. "New Yorkers are constantly running. This is an opportunity to escape the daily grind of the city, to experience freedom and connect with nature." She predicts that the performance will likely resonate with those who see it for years to come. "Later on, when you are going to work or picking up the kids or going shopping, you can look up at a flock of birds and be automatically transported," she says. "That's the beauty of art. It provides everlasting memories."