

Bowerbirds have always been interesting animals to me. Upon first learning about them, I was struck with the extreme similarity they have to humans. My final project focuses on the bowerbird's mating strategies, and the relationship their strategies have to human sexual strategies.

Male bowerbirds have a very fascinating way of attracting a female to mate with them. They build ornate structures out of twigs that look something like fancy nests, but serve a completely different purpose. Inside or near the twig structure, bowerbirds place special objects that they have collected in piles. The objects are usually sorted by color (8). The objects they choose could be anything. Often, small flowers, pebbles, beetle shells, leaves, berries, or even small colorful pieces of trash/plastic are used. Some birds even "paint" the inside of their bower with berry juice (7). It seems that each individual bird has a special preference for certain items over others, but not all bowerbirds favor the same objects or color schemes. Birds also see color differently than humans, so things that may look dull to us could be very bright to the birds (6). Bowerbirds tend to have a preference for rare or hard to find objects, and if they can't find rare items, they may favor a large quantity instead (2). Another trend in the bowerbird world: the less ornamented the birds' feathers are, the more intricate its bower (6).

Females browse through many nests in order to find the male who has created the bower that suits their fancy. When a female enters a bower, the male may hide behind his pile of sticks, so that the female can focus on his treasure trove. Some males will even pick out specific items to "show" to females by holding them in their beak. When the female decides that the bower is sufficient, the couple flies off together to copulate (2). The bower, then, is not a nest, nor a 'marriage bed' of any kind. It's a fashion statement.

Why do bowerbirds behave in this way? To us, bowerbirds may look like any other bird. However, compared to most other tropical birds, bowerbirds have very dull looking plumage. They make up for their lackluster feathers by using the most advanced stage of the lek mating system: an out-of-body color display (4). This strategy has major evolutionary benefits to the male bowerbird. Bowerbirds don't take the risk of having brightly colored feathers, which can be quite costly to a species. Feathers might make flying really difficult, or put you in danger of getting spotted by a predator because of their bright colors (2).

The artistic process of the male bowerbird is extremely relatable to humans. Bowers recall the sensibilities of many human artists. Piles can be considered ready-mades because they contain found materials, making them reminiscent of Duchamp (3). Andy Goldsworthy is a human artist who makes goes into nature and creates massive sculptures out of sticks, pebbles, and leaves (5). Are his sculptures a higher form of art than those created by bowerbirds, or is his ability to create just less constrained (he doesn't have to make his sculptures with his beak, after all)? Iris Apfel also comes to mind when thinking about out of body color displays. Her amazing style and sense of fashion recall the bowerbird's sensibility; she wears rare items (jewelry), bright colors and fabrics, and has a 'more is more' attitude (1).

Bowers appear to be more related to form than function, which could place bowers in the category most humans call “art”. My project uses bowerbird nests as a platform to explore the out-of-body sexual displays that humans use.

For my project, I created two ‘human bowers’. I first asked myself what types of things humans use in out-of-body sexual displays. The list includes the obvious things, like flowers, clothing, and jewelry, but also includes things that we don’t always think of as sexual displays, like art, technology, cars, and interior decorating. I think humans can also be attracted to particular color schemes (9). The most interesting thing on the list, to me, is social media. Tumblr is a very interesting website where participants can post and reblog images that they like. Why do we like the images that we like? Are these images a “pile”, a sexual display of some kind? After all, there is no more efficient means than the Internet if your goal is to make a spectacle of yourself. If we show that we have particular interests via social media like Tumblr and Facebook, potential mates may come across them and find that they are interested in us.

I decided to create two bowers because I wanted to show the versatility of the human aesthetic. The sculpture confronts you and asks which display you are more attracted to. Viewers ultimately may decide which one they think is more pleasing to the eye, which is similar to what female bowerbirds do when choosing their mate. The circle around each collection represents a territory. They could be thought of as two different bowers belonging to two different people, or even as two different boards on Pinterest that represent different interests of the same individual.

I found that the process of collecting objects was very important. Within the duration of this project, I made sure to place myself in environments with many small objects that I was free to take. It was important for me to understand the curatorial process bowerbirds use when creating their bower. Many objects in my bower are objects that I have collected over the years, just because I thought they were cute. This includes pieces of brightly colored paper, glitter, string, pieces of broken glass, rusty nails, and hair. I also felt that it was appropriate to buy some of the items. Shopping is very important to humans, especially when it comes to collecting objects that fit a particular aesthetic (branding, in a nutshell). I include some “sexy” looking underwear in order to point out the way humans use clothing to attract mates. Some objects were even hand made by me, like the candles. I include my laptop, which displays my Tumblr blog; a collection of images I appreciate for their aesthetic value or ‘cuteness’. By placing these objects inside of the bower, I am questioning my own seemingly shallow aesthetic impulses, and likening them to animalistic sexual displays.

## Bibliography

**1. Apfel, Iris B, Eric Boman, and Harold Koda. *Rare Bird of Fashion: The Irreverent Iris Apfel*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007. Print.**

Iris Apfel is known as the ‘rare bird’ of fashion. I wanted to reference human fashion because it has a lot to do with bowerbirds. Both humans and bowerbirds exhibit sexual color displays outside of their own bodies. Iris Apfel is a perfect example to make the comparison, especially because of her affinity to wear a lot of bright colors and jewelry all at once.

**2. Attenborough, David.. *The Natural World. Bowerbirds: The Art of Seduction*. December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2000. British Broadcasting Corporation and WGBH.**

**[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xsynmo\\_bowerbirds-the-art-of-seduction-by-david-attenborough\\_shortfilms](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xsynmo_bowerbirds-the-art-of-seduction-by-david-attenborough_shortfilms)**

This movie was instrumental in my bowerbird research. It provided an amazing basis to begin this project. It told me all of the basic facts about bowerbirds: how and why they make nests, male/female relationship, etc. It also gave me some great visual references.

**3. Baxter, Iain. *A Portfolio of Piles*. Vancouver: N.E. Thing Co, 1968. Print.**

I was so excited to find this source in the restricted section of the library. I wanted to see if there was any writing on piles, which is the main form that bowerbirds use to arrange their objects. It talks about the pile within the greater context of art history, and legitimizes the pile as a valid form of art. It includes black and white photographs of different piles, including trash on the ground, breasts, wood, and other types of heaps that one may not have thought of at first.

**4. Burton, Robert, Jane Burton, and Kim Taylor. *Bird Behavior*. New York, N.Y: Knopf, 1985. Print.**

Most significantly, this source informed me that the mating system employed by bowerbirds is the most advanced stage of the lek mating system.

**5. Donovan, Molly, Tina Fiske, and Andy Goldsworthy. *The Andy Goldsworthy Project*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2010. Print.**

The BBC documentary I watched mentioned Andy Goldsworthy in reference to bowerbirds. I thought it would be helpful to cite this land artist in my project because he makes piles out of materials he finds in nature. He often plays with color and form in very similar ways to bowerbirds.

**6. Hill, Geoffrey E. *National Geographic Bird Coloration*. Washington, D.C: National Geographic, 2010. Print.**

This source provided extensive knowledge of bird coloration and the way birds see color. The most interesting thing that I learned is that bird’s eyes are more sensitive to color than humans. They have UV sensitive vision, and see four primary colors. It helped me to realize that I can only assume things about the coloration of the bowerbirds and their nests. Maybe something that looks dull to me is actually very bright to them.

**7. Mirocha, Paul. *Baffling Bird Behavior*. New York: HarperFestival, 1992. Print.**

I learned that some bowerbirds actually “paint” the inside of their bowers with twigs and berry juice from this source.

**8. Morell, Virginia. *Bowerbirds*. National Geographic, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/07/bowerbirds/morell-text/1>, accessed October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Published July 2010.**

This source helped reinforce the information from the movie I watched. The most interesting point that this source made was that bowerbirds are the only animal besides humans that are known to kill another animal for decoration.

**9. Norman, Donald A. *Emotional Design: Why we love (or hate) everyday things*. Basic Books, New York, 2004.**

<http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QtWSu3zBtPoC&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=why+are+humans+attracted+to+luxury&ots=9gDsY1-oJ&sig=Y4Cp1LvO5gvNWkoewIRoHjVR4uk#v=onepage&q&f=false>

I wanted a better understanding of the way that humans relate to objects around them, in order to compare humans and bowerbirds. The text is very broad, but provided some interesting insight that is relevant about human aesthetic sense.













