

Mercury Songbirds

Mercury Songbirds was inspired by a 2006 article that reported increased levels of mercury in wild songbirds in the Hudson Valley:

“While mercury has often been found in lakes and streams and in fish, Dr. [David C.] Evers’s work documents the unexpected presence of the chemical in birds that do not live on water and never eat fish...”

“Much of the mercury that is causing problems in New York comes from coal-burning power plants, including those in Ohio and other states in the Midwest. Smokestack emissions from those plants tend to drift eastward. The airborne mercury eventually falls to earth, settling in lakes and streams where it is transformed into methyl mercury, which is toxic.”

“The chemical then enters the food chain through worms and tiny creatures that live on lake bottoms. They are eaten by small fish, which then become prey for larger fish. The amount of mercury is magnified as it goes from smaller species to larger ones.”

“Dr. Evers’s work suggests that when mercury falls on land, it is absorbed by soil and by fallen leaves that are consumed by worms and insects. Songbirds then feed on the bugs, absorbing the mercury.” Anthony DePalma, *New York Times*, July 25, 2006

My work is from the point of view of the songbirds. Their environment is slowly being poisoned, but they are not aware of this. There is a continual hum emanating from the piano, which though acoustic is produced by electronic means. It seems like a natural sound coming from the piano, but in its unchanging duration, defies our expectations of how the piano works but also goes unnoticed because of its ubiquity, much as the continual contamination of our environment happens without our awareness or understanding.

Mercury Songbirds was commissioned by the Mandel Foundation and the 2008 Utah Arts Festival. It was written while in residence at the Ucross Foundation.

Keeril Makan
(2007)