

# MIT List Center

## Petah Coyne

Petah Coyne is known for vaguely anthropomorphic works fusing unconventional material such as mud, ribbons, statuary, and feathers. An avid reader, Coyne keeps a large collection of books on birds. And many of her pieces, including this one, feature millinery birds, in this, case peacocks.

"There's a lot of peacocks in it, which is about transformation. I've been drawn to birds. And I suppose it has to do with this whole medieval idea that the birds take the souls to heaven."

Exploring themes of death, transformation, and beauty, Coyne's imposing, often monochromatic sculptures also appear fragile and vulnerable. For Untitled #820S-01, completed in 2001, she covers a piece with a translucent skin of dripping wax so that it seems to hover in the air like a half melted icicle.

"I love wax. It's so much of my childhood, you know, in the churches. It's very religious. And it's so sensual. And there's something about things being very ephemeral."

This work came to MIT as a gift of Vera List, whose generosity also founded the List Visual Arts Center. A great patron of the arts, List was an enthusiastic champion of Coyne's work. And the two became friends.

"Vera was incredibly special because she was not schooled in art. She was just one of those very rare intuitive people. And she had an amazing eye."

Coyne recalls a day Vera List first saw the work.

She was in a wheelchair and very ill at this time. And her grandson was with her. And he said, "Let's take you home. You've been out for a little bit". And she said, "No, no, no. I want to go under Petah's piece over there." She was very insistent, "I want to be alone here under this piece."

And finally I went, and I remember I kneeled down. And I said, "Vera, what do you see? What do you think about?" And she said, "Oh, Petah. This must be what it's like to really die a beautiful death."