



# *Taking*

# Flight

Artist and social justice advocate **sheri crider** examines the world around her.

by Ashley M. Biggers

**Editor's Note:**

sheri crider prefers that her first and last name not begin with capital letters. "I really think of it as a pragmatic way of being, especially as an artist," she explains. "My story of the free-floating search for identity is very attached to finding myself a worker among workers and detaching myself from self-importance."

In sheri crider's "Flight" exhibition, a wooden bird mobile hovers as though in mid-wing beat. Her adoptive grandfather, Willie, constructed it decades ago using dumpster trash he found near his Arizona trailer. Despite crider's dives into drug addiction, homelessness and incarceration, Willie always found a way to listen to his granddaughter. This bird joined a flock of more than 600 that crider created for "Flight" (here and on pages 78–79) as symbols of empathy and visual metaphors for people's migration in and out of the criminal justice system.

The themes of empathy and connection serve as touchpoints throughout crider's journey. She has moved from a life on the streets to one as an artist, studio owner and recipient of the 2016 Right of Return Fellowship, which funded "Flight." Her social justice work emerges naturally from her reimaginings of her place in the world—and her desire to create opportunities for equity in the practice of art. "My unattachment to my origin leads me to be the artist I am and have the lens through which I view culture," she says.

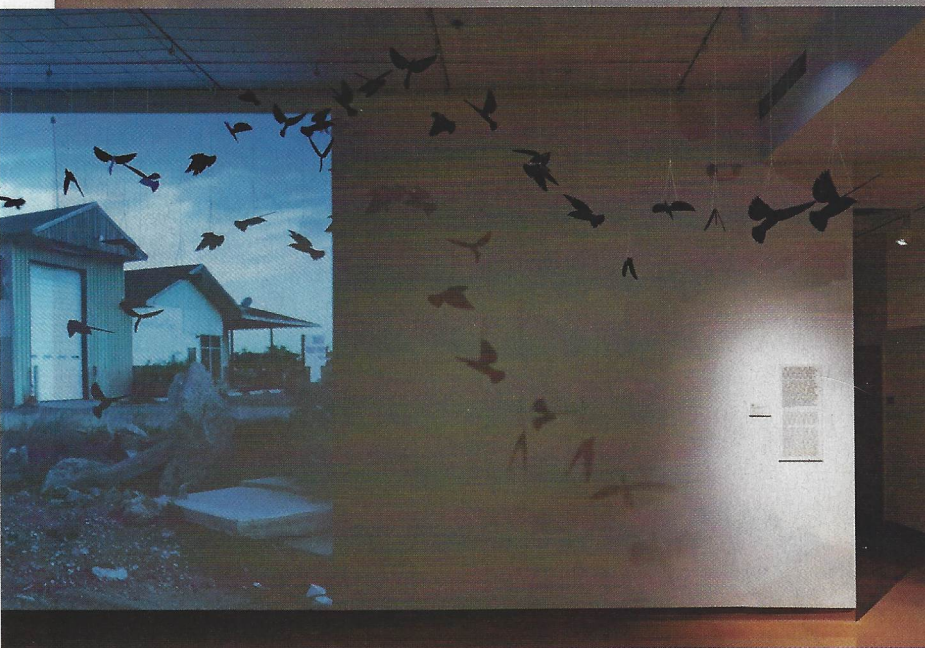
**ADDICTION AND EDUCATION**

At an early age, crider dubbed herself a troublemaker. "From a really naive perspective, I bought into the idea that you were who you were, and I was created to be a person who was in trouble," she says. "Consequently, drinking and drug use was the perfect way for that to happen." She began drinking at age 12 and quickly descended into using marijuana, heroin and other drugs.





**Meadowlarks & Red-Winged Blackbirds**  
 detail; also on pages 76–77  
 salvaged wood and string



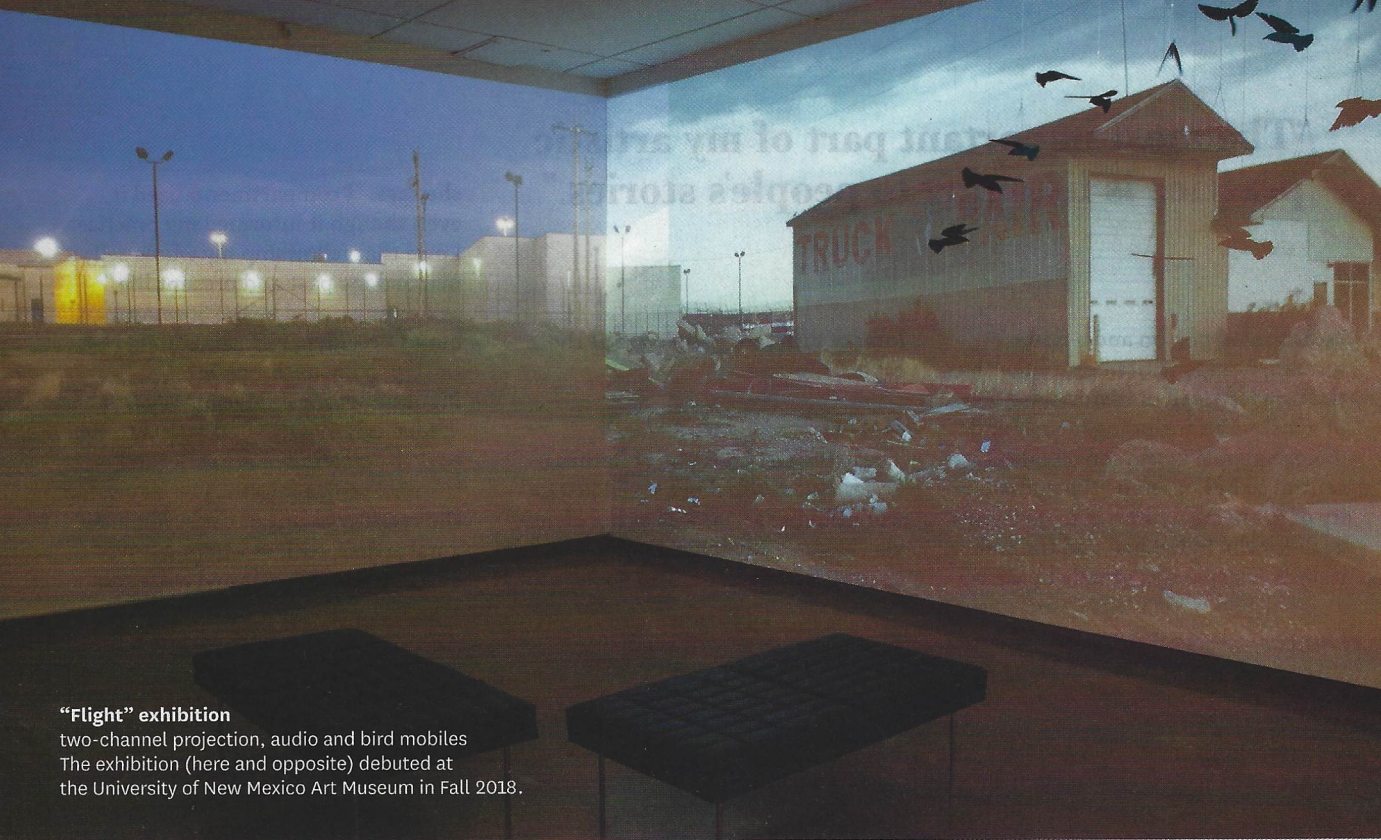
Eventually, she was homeless and living on the streets of her native Phoenix, Ariz. She was first arrested at age 18 for driving under the influence; in the following years, she experienced multiple arrests for substance abuse and violating her probation. By the age of 23, she had landed in a court-mandated drug rehabilitation program in Casa Grande, Ariz.

While there, a counselor named Rosalind asked crider what she was good at; no one had ever asked her that question. Previous counselors had always focused on crider's trauma, not her talents. She recalled a prize she had won in elementary school for drawing and being pulled out of her regular class for special art classes during fourth grade. "Drawing," she said to Rosalind's question.

The counselor drove crider to the University of Arizona and suggested she could study art. The idea felt entirely foreign. Her adoptive family had little interest in higher education, so academia had never been a priority. Nevertheless, she journeyed into that far-flung land. While still in the rehabilitation center, she began taking community college classes. Two years later, she secured an academic tuition waiver and a fine arts scholarship to the University of Arizona.

The road out of addiction is rarely a straight one; crider fell backward during her first year of college. She recalls a day when, while wearing two left shoes, she caught a glimpse of herself in a glass case at a Circle K convenience store. Alcohol and drug use had given her a false sense of belonging, but she didn't have a place then—even within herself. She lost her scholarship, but got herself back on track academically with a massive student loan and a new sense of dedication.

In her undergraduate studies she gravitated to labor-intensive media such as printmaking and ceramics.



**“Flight” exhibition**

two-channel projection, audio and bird mobiles  
The exhibition (here and opposite) debuted at  
the University of New Mexico Art Museum in Fall 2018.

“There’s a weird innate guilt I have if I’m not working hard,” crider says. “I love those media. The process dictates a beginning and an end.”

After graduating in 1995, an 18-month artist residency led crider to Philadelphia, where she worked as a sign painter to support herself. When she realized her mechanistic work ethic could easily handcuff her to the sign shop for the rest of her career, she applied to graduate school. She completed her master’s degree in 2001 at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, where she continues to live today.

**RE-ENVISIONING  
IDENTITY AND ART**

At the University of New  
Mexico, sculptor  
and professor

Steve Barry introduced crider to monumental-scale sculpture and a post-modern sensibility for materiality. Now crider’s ongoing work involves sculptures comprised of construction waste, like corrugated doors; and a series of paintings combining real structures with imagined spaces, like an Olympic stadium re-envisioned as a Syrian refugee camp.

Her work examines systematic relationships between class, race and gender.

She seeks to illuminate and re-envision identity and art

itself. “My studio is a place to map my complicated understanding of the world,” crider says. “The most important part of my artistic practice is listening to people’s stories.”

Now 50, crider has never worn the label “artist” easily. As a previously



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—SHERI CRIDER

incarcerated person and a queer woman, her identities don’t fit within the romanticized or historicized view of artists. Yet, including herself and diverse people in the conversation is central to her mission. “The possibility of art being a catalyst to do things both for the individual and the community is expanded greatly by what

kind of different people are at the table,” she says.

## RIGHT OF RETURN

The artist’s 2016 Right of Return Fellowship unified her social justice work and her art, as well as her identity, via “Flight.” “My incarceration is a side of my life I haven’t talked about a lot,”

she says. “I compartmentalized it, even though it informed my practice. I owe that fellowship my whole self; it married my past and present life.”

Administered by the Soze Agency, out of Brooklyn, N.Y., and funded by the Open Philanthropy Project, the Right of Return Fellowship invests in formerly incarcerated artists to support the creation of artwork furthering criminal justice reform. The fellowship chose crider as one of the seven inaugural artists, each of whom received \$20,000 toward costs and materials.



Time was another benefit of the fellowship gift. As the owner of a construction company, crider takes on remodeling and building projects to fund her studio practice. With fellowship money in hand, she gained the freedom to explore her personal experiences, the social experiences of mass incarceration and the stories of incarcerated migrants—even before immigration detention hit the headlines. “Flight” opened at the University of New Mexico Art Museum in Fall 2018, and portions

of this exhibition will travel to the University of Arizona in 2020.

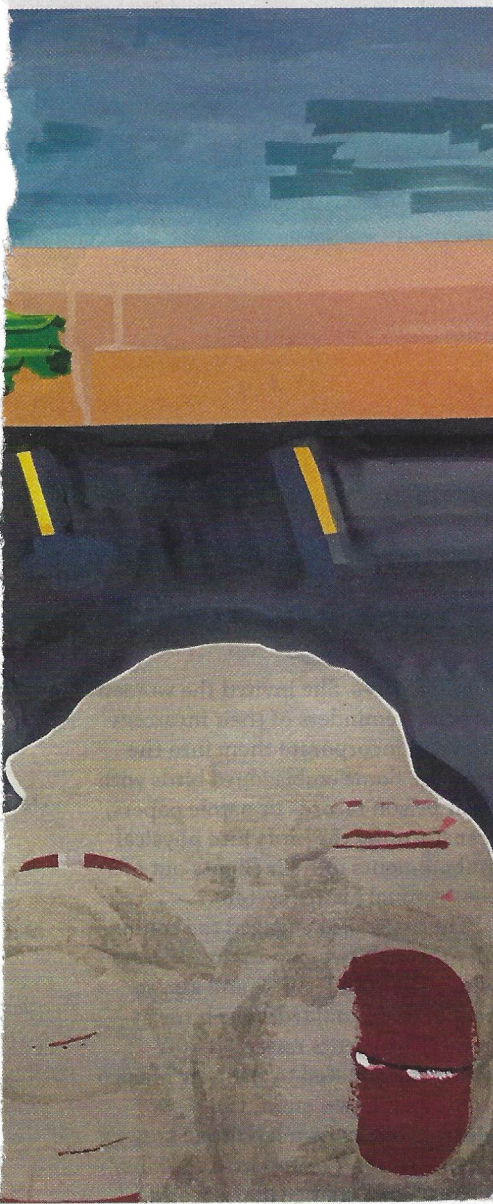
A large projection of the Cibola Detention Center, in Grants, N.M., anchored the exhibition. The facility lost its federal prison contract because of human rights violations and reopened in 2016 as an ICE detention facility. The large-scale projection invites the viewer to stand outside the facility’s fence, considering who’s kept in and out. As part of the exhibition, *Coeval Quivira* involves a series of paintings of

## ART MEETS SOCIAL JUSTICE

With support from the Fulcrum Fund in partnership with the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Albuquerque Community Foundation, crider’s Sanitary Tortilla Factory—her art and gallery space—funded two 2017 social justice artist residencies. Christine Wong Yap hosted storytelling workshops with immigrant groups to elicit personal stories of place, home and belonging, which she compiled into a ‘zine. Alexandra Branch created an acoustic boat from salvaged materials that functions as a gathering space for the community.

Also, crider engages in direct social justice interventions. In 2017, she organized a sketchbook-exchange program between herself, students at a local high school and girls in juvenile detention at the Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center. The honest and heart-wrenching exchanges became “The Story of Ourselves,” another Sanitary Tortilla Factory exhibition. Ironically, when crider tried to develop her work in the juvenile detention center, the very experiences making her a fitting mentor—namely, her journey out of substance abuse and incarceration—prevented her from developing the project further.

In 2018, crider received a National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant for a Ban the Box project aimed at getting employers to remove a question asking if job applicants have been convicted of a criminal offense.



ABOVE  
**Rock, Paper, Scissors.**  
**Race, Gender, Class**  
bronze, 13x6½x9

LEFT  
**Casa Padre \$48mil**  
**Industry, Viva! Juan Sanchez**  
gouache and enamel  
on paper, 25x40

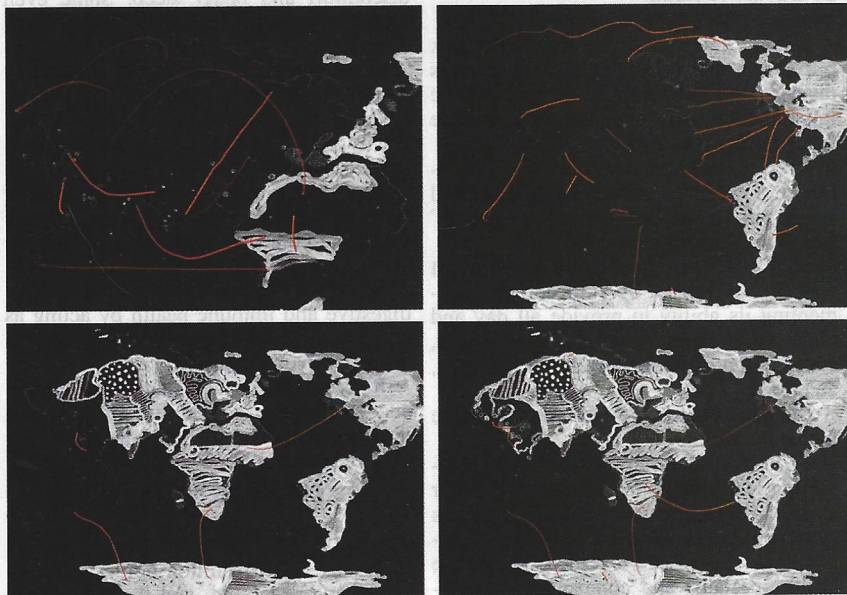


LEFT  
**Cibola Dentention Center, Five Years, \$150mil,  
 Silence Still Equals Death**  
 gouache and enamel on paper, 25x40

BELOW  
**A Brief Visual History of the Mess Called History  
 and Your Tiny Swipe**

interactive tablet with projection  
 The viewer-created swipe interactions (four small images below), which occur simultaneously, overlay a time-lapse drawing of an inverted world map (bottom). The initial swipes randomly use racially- and gender-encoded colors, then fade to red.

▶ TO LEARN MORE ABOUT  
 THE ARTIST, VISIT  
[SHERICRIDERSTF.COM](http://SHERICRIDERSTF.COM).  
 FOLLOW HER ON  
 INSTAGRAM:  
 @SHERICRIDER.



crider says. “Fundraising was a way to have a tangible impact.”

**A PLACE OF BELONGING**

In 2006, crider opened an artist-run space that has evolved into today’s Sanitary Tortilla Factory. Housed in a vacated restaurant where fluffy tortillas once rolled off a production line, the space now accommodates 15 below-market-value studios, gallery areas and shared fabrication space. Artists work alongside Alternative Roots, an art-based social justice nonprofit, and offices for the U.S. Department of Art and Culture.

To other artists, crider offers this advice: “Ask questions and then more

questions. Hold yourself accountable to how your work truly functions in the world. Who sees it? Who cares? What’s the result? Be open.”

A sign at the Sanitary Tortilla Factory hangs over the workshop space proclaiming it “a place of belonging.” It reads, “In my neighborhood, I can be myself, and I can connect with and be of service to my

community.” It seems to double as crider’s manifesto for an art world that’s more open, more inquisitive, and, yes, more empathetic. ♡

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