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James Prosek: An Un-Natural History

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James Prosek
James Prosek: Un-Natural History

October 21 - December 21, 2011

The Bellarmine Museum of Art
When Fairfield University was presented with a chance to showcase the work of the Easton, Connecticut-based artist, naturalist, film-maker and writer, James Prosek, we knew that this was an opportunity not to be missed. As a liberal arts institution with a clear commitment to cross-curricular initiatives and the integration of core subject areas into the learning of all of our students, Fairfield saw a nearly infinite range of possible points of access in Mr. Prosek’s extraordinarily beautiful paintings. From art history to anthropology, biology to business, all disciplines represented on our campus can not only engage in meaningful dialogues with the works that comprise *Un-Natural History* but also converse amongst themselves using this richly creative and inviting show as a shared topic of discussion. And what better backdrop for such exciting endeavors than our beautiful Bellarmine Museum of Art (itself a true laboratory of learning), which has just celebrated its first tremendously successful year of operation? We are proud to be able to exhibit Mr. Prosek’s truly remarkable body of work in a venue that is capable of supporting the aesthetic allure and intellectual rigor endemic to this gifted artist’s work.

The success of this exhibition would not have been possible were it not for the contributors and supporters who have dedicated themselves to making it a reality. We extend our sincere thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the law firm of Brody Wilkinson PC and Aquarion Water Company. We are equally grateful to the staff of the Bellarmine Museum of Art and to Drs. Jill Deupi, Brian Walker and Scott Lacy for their essays that follow. Finally, our deepest debt of gratitude is to James Prosek himself, whose inspiring works lie at the heart of *Un-Natural History*.

St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit Order, was a stargazer, a mystic and a proponent of the use of the imagination in prayerful contemplation of the divine. I think that he would be pleased and intrigued by Mr. Prosek’s super/natural vision that reveals hidden levels of meaning, beauty and reality.

Jeffrey P. von Arx, S.J.
President, Fairfield University

Plate 1  *Self-Portrait with Toucan Headdress*, 2008/2011
James Prosek (b. 1975) is a man who straddles realms and bridges centuries. Clearly entranced by Mother Earth in all Her terrestrial majesty, the artist – like the creatures (both real and imagined) that he conjures in watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite and mica on painstakingly prepared tea-stained grounds – possesses an ethereal quality that speaks to another, more fluid domain. Prosek’s protean aura is fuelled by his apparent capacity to “channel” several vastly different eras, often simultaneously. It is quite easy, for example, to envision him ensconced in a seventeenth-century Cabinet of Curiosities, lost in the careful study of a prized collection of wondrous exotica. It is equally plausible to imagine the artist surveying the verdant fells of England’s Lake District with the Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) or probing the depths of the animated soul with William Butler Yeats (1865-1939; one of Prosek’s personal heroes and a figure whom he studied closely while an undergraduate at Yale University). Reality, however, judges him firmly in his Easton, Connecticut studio, with its picturesque views of a nearby pond and surrounding fields. There Prosek, when not traveling to the far reaches of the globe in search of specimens, interprets and reinvents nature; often to scale, meaning that works such as his monumental *Atlantic Sailfish* (plate 9) can only be painted on vast expanses of paper laid flat on the floor. Further dissipating the clouds of nostalgic reverie that the artist’s persona precipitates is his critical approach to art-making. Through his subtle, yet pointed, questioning of traditional taxonomies, or systems of order, Prosek reveals the arbitrariness – and the intense power – of collecting, naming, and classifying objects and creatures from the natural world. It is this type of vigorous intellectual examination that makes him uniquely of our age. It is equally what makes *Un-Natural History*, an exhibition of the artist’s most recent work mounted by Fairfield University’s Bellarmine Museum of Art (October 21-December 21, 2011), so lively and exhilarating.

Prosek denies neither the existence nor the utility of taxonomies. Indeed he is quick to concede that virtually from birth we humans exhibit a marked tendency to categorize the world around us (good/bad – edible/inedible – safe/unsafe – etc.). What begins as a basic animal urge, born of an innate survival instinct, however, quickly evolves in nuance and sophistication as our cognitive skills develop and we begin to separate groups of objects – both animate and inanimate – into ever more subtle “classes.” This, in turn, facilitates our capacity to make refined judgments and distinctions, which, by extension, allows us to negotiate our surroundings with increased ease and physical security. The compulsion to classify, however, cannot be explained by a mere yearning for comfort or personal well-being, for mankind displays a proclivity for grouping and organizing that far exceeds a primordial impulse. Rather, this tendency seems to be linked to our desire to maintain a sense of control in an otherwise rudderless state of existence by “pigeon-holing” our world into extant scaffolds of meaning and values. The reward is a powerful sense of command, the self-reinforcing nature of which automatically drives us ever deeper into both our subconscious and our DNA. When extrapolated across societal units, the resulting hierarchies and ranking systems give rise to norms and conventions that govern the interaction of individuals, families, clans, and even nations. Without them, the rules of social engagement and meaningful dialogue would be lost and we, in turn, would be left in a Babel-like state of confusion (both literally and metaphorically).

James Prosek forces the viewer to confront these ideas, as well as the related artificiality of hierarchies and socially-imposed categories; above all, the time-honored Linnaean system. This classificatory scheme – built on the “essential” groupings of Kingdom-Phylum-Class-Order-Family-Genus-Species – was developed by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707-85) and is

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**Jill J. Deupi**  
*Un-Natural History*
familiar to nearly everyone educated in the post-Enlightenment Western World. Yet some contemporary biologists (notably the so-called “Cladists,” who would prefer to group organisms based on a shared ancestry model) recently have begun questioning the usefulness of this and related approaches. Prosek’s work achieves precisely this same end by throwing into high relief the arbitrary nature of names and what he refers to as “the myth of order.” *Parrotfish* (plate 6), for example, is not only a visual *tour-de-force* that leaves no doubt about the artist’s mastery of the intractable medium of watercolor, it is also a blatant challenge to “stable” taxonomies. By foregrounding what is, at root, an abstract approach to organizing and labeling – and, by extension, conquering or taming nature – Prosek’s hybrid creatures, including his *Parrotfish* and *Rosetfish* (plate 5), throw into high relief just how capricious such schemae can be. Like the artist’s *Sea Pegasus: Nocturne* and *Flying Fish* (plates 3 and 4), they also remind us of the elasticity, the permeability and, ultimately, the desultory nature of names. Prosek’s lyrical *Sea Dragon* (plate 7) and *Caribbean Lobster* (plates 8 and 9) similarly lay bare the arbitrary nature of accepted norms and systems of order. In these works, however, the imposition of a new taxonomy – one based on geometric abstractions derived from the creatures’ own forms – rather than the visual interrogation of names provide the means to the artist’s intended intellectual and aesthetic ends. The results, which are reminiscent of artist Lee Bontecou’s (b. 1931) delicately calligraphic drawings, are as convincing as they are compelling: not only do such images possess an engaging beauty they also dupe us with their air of scientific authenticity and credibility. Thus we fall prey to our own assumptions about power and authority, strictures and order, accepting Prosek’s classificatory scheme as valid simply because it appears to be externally imposed and scientifically derived. This is, of course, precisely what the artist intends.

James Prosek’s creatures evoke the sheer wonder and magic that can flourish in a world freed from construing classificatory schemes and confining linguistic systems. His *Gamba Zoë* (plate 16 [not exhibited]) is, in this context, an expression of the enduring power of both the marvelous and the mythological; forces that not only played critical roles in most pre-modern civilizations but also persist today through organized religion, personal belief systems and age-old superstitions. Prosek’s *Flying Fox* (pages 18 and 19), in both its painted and taxidermied versions, wittily plays off of these same themes. The latter, for instance, taps into the suspension of disbelief that is essential to legend and lore, for the animal’s ducet posture and alluring tactility ball the viewer into forgetting that the specimen upon which she gazes is, frankly and irrevocably, dead. The attached wings, like the attendant hand-made clay flowers that complete the *mise-en-scéne*, are the handmaidens to this ruse, distracting us – if only temporarily – from a far harsher reality. Only when our aesthetic idyll ends (catalyzed, perhaps, by Prosek’s *Flying Fox with Prussian Firearm: The Fox Hunt* (plate 11), which blatantly exposes a mortal gun-shot wound to the creature’s side and showcases the cold hard object of its demise) do we confront the artificiality of the construct; a confabulation that exposes conventional notions of myth, order, collection, classification, naming and even museology. In this, Prosek employs, with great success, modalities reminiscent of the conceptual artists Fred Wilson (b. 1954) and Mark Dion (b. 1961), both of whom question dominant structures of power and authority embodied in canonical museums of art and natural history, respectively.

James Prosek also reminds us through his work that rare is the person whose appetite for control is sated by merely naming and/or classifying the objects that surround him or her. To experience a true sense dominion and unassailable control, possession is required. This impulse, which is bolstered by such uniquely human traits as a yearning for fiscal security, a thirst for enhanced social standing, a desire for greater intellectual capital, a Quixotic quest for immortality, the pursuit of pure unadulterated pleasure or simple greed explains, in part, why Homo sapiens are among the few creatures on Earth that collect for reasons beyond sustenance or survival. Prosek, with great subtlety, yet laser accuracy, lays bare these pursuits through his own creation of a body of work that speaks to the possession of the creatures with which he interacts. His *Brazilian Blue-headed Parrots with Butterflies and Flowers* (plate 13), for example, is a fantastic (in the literal sense of the word) aviary – the artist’s glorious creatures forever
stilled in oil on panel yet jovial companions nevertheless. Drill Duck with Pitcher Plant Flowers (plate 15), too, not only play fast and loose with names and order, it is also an addition to the artist’s bestiary that, by all rights, should include unicorns and centaurs cavorting with his mermaids and tool creatures. His Cockatoos of 2008 and 2011 (plates 2 and 14) equally speak to the artist’s highly personal syntax and unique visual lexicon, with implements from a Swiss army knife gamely replacing the cockatoo’s crest in the first instance and wing feathers in the second. James Prosek, a largely self-taught artist, revels in the realistic tactility of a naturalist like John James Audubon (1785-1851). He counterbalances such one-to-one directness with an audacity and wit comparable to that of the watercolorist Walton Ford (b. 1960) and a painterly manner that speaks to his own sources of inspiration, Winslow Homer (1866-1916) and Milton Avery (1885-1965). Like the futurist, often Apocalyptic visions of Alexis Rockman (b. 1962) and the aforementioned Dion and Wilson, Prosek is also an artist who looks established conventions squarely in the eye and poses the disarmingly simple question, “why?” (The answer, of course, is never clear yet alone final). Despite these manifold points of convergence and diverse range of influences, James Prosek – like all practitioners of exceptional talent and a truly original vision – embodies these traits in a way that is wholly, indisputably his own.

Jill Deupi is the Director of the Bellarmine Museum of Art and an Assistant Professor of Art History at Fairfield University.

Plate 4 Flying Fish, 2009
James Prosek is not alone in his fascination with the classification and naming of the animals with which we Homo sapiens share our small orb. This conundrum – what is a species? – is a classic question in biology classrooms worldwide. And it is not as simple as just looking up a definition online. What makes one type of animal “separate” from another can depend on a number of things. We can have ecological species – genetic species – morphological species – just to name a few. Even the definitions of what makes an ecological, morphological or genetic species are muddled. How can we not remain perplexed and curious about determining what is what? How can we not think and ponder about who is who? How can we not join Mr. Prosek’s artistic examination of this age old question?

So, here we Homo sapiens are. We seek to classify and pigeonhole, but complicate the process with each passing day. Building up barriers or breaking down obstructions that used to separate one “species” from another. Genetic modification completely blurring even the best laid identities. What are we humans doing to complicate further this question of who is who and what is what?

With a question that is so fundamental to the science of biology being a cornerstone of Mr. Prosek’s work, it is exciting to bring to our university a small selection of works by this amazing artist, who exemplifies the bridging of the sciences and the arts in this exhibition. What better integration of some of the cores of our academic foundation? And who better to present to us an Un-Natural History than someone like Mr. Prosek, whom I would argue represents a truly gifted Natural Historian.

As a biologist in academia who trains budding new scientists, it saddens me that the study of true natural history – observing what is around us – is a dying art. With our ever-increasing technological advancements, we now know the minutiae of how cells work. We can test which enzyme catalyzes the conversion of one protein to the next, and with increasing detail we are discovering the genetic underpinnings of what makes one species different from the other, and what happens when cells go awry. In this busy world of focus on the infinitesimal, it has become a much rarer pastime to observe and document nature as a whole. With Prosek’s precise renderings of fish, birds and mammals, we see a rebirth in the pattern of classical artists who for millennia have documented the details of their surrounding flora and fauna. In the Bellarmine Museum of Art we see lobsters, a peacock and parakeets, all rendered with the detail and precision that sets Mr. Prosek – coupled with his books and videography of the wonders of life – among the best of 21st-century Natural Historians.

But what of Prosek’s chimeras – those blendings or tweakings of animals we know. A fox with feathers? A fish with the head of a bird? Birds with drill-bits, knife blades and can openers? Or, most surprisingly the eel with the Geisha head? Perhaps the juxtaposition of some of his work is startling. But such creatures do affect our thought process of what and why we classify. We may not agree with his choices: some make us uncomfortable. But we think. We start to look. We observe. We return to those lost skills of examining what we perhaps had not examined before. We follow Mr. Prosek, again, as Natural Historian, into his Un-Natural History.

Brian Walker is an Associate Professor of Biology at Fairfield University.
Tucked in the woods, just far enough from the Merritt Parkway, is a converted barn at the end of a winding road. Upstairs, James Prosek sits on the floor creating a lifesize 700 pound blue marlin that glitters as if it were wet. A sea of photographs and notecards are strewn about the margins of this stunning painting, each one inspiring a unique and minute detail on Prosek’s blue marlin. When I stepped into his studio this giant fish covered the floor. Prosek insisted that I jump over it to explore the rest of his loft, but I needed more time with that marlin. Its lustrous, metallic blue belly captured my attention, before I fell into the deep eyes of this billfish. Knowing exactly where I was, the artist asked what I saw in that eye. He pointed and without a word I could see what made this giant fish real: James Prosek. As sure as he was standing beside me, he was right there, painted deep in the eye of the marlin.

Transcendental son of New England, James Prosek relishes the subjective boundaries of science, biology, and art. His devoted representations of the immaculate details of his natural subjects reveal a profound affinity for natural history. However, like his reflection sparkling in a marlin’s eye, Prosek’s whimsically mischievous streak can transform the world into his Un-Natural History. Sometimes he manipulates color or lighting to share his inner experiences with natural subjects like his beloved trout. Other times Prosek uses meticulous detail to paint fantastic, yet convincing illusions such as a fox with wings. As we left his studio to visit an adjacent workshop, I contemplated what might have inspired Prosek to paint such a creature. Then, perched atop a pedestal (quite literally) I found my answer: an actual orange fox with feathered wings, curled into a ball as if it were resting or preparing to sleep. Prosek not only painted a flying fox, he created one with taxidermy. Still unsettled about the winged fox, it took me a few minutes to realize: I was surrounded by a still flock of modified birds: one had a beak that seamlessly transitioned into a pencil, while another beak morphed into a drill bit. It was only later while recounting my studio visit with friends that I realized the extent to which Prosek pushed his un-natural collections. Some of these friends were somewhat disgusted by the thought of a winged fox and pencil-beak bird, despite my best attempts to verbally describe these imaginative works of taxidermy. My friends couldn’t reconcile the incongruous yet simultaneous combinations of reality and imagination, which happen to be Prosek’s comfort zone – the vividly un-natural.

Allusions to flying foxes aside, Prosek’s imagination may be more representative of the natural world than one might expect. In the process of writing TROUT: An Illustrated History and TROUT OF THE WORLD James peeked behind the biological curtain and found that the trout species he had been studying and illustrating since his youth were far more variable and dynamic than classical biological categories and names, as defined by static traits. In a universe where plants and animals evolve, Prosek is attracted not to equilibrium, but to the elusive fluidity of species, which when captured in art becomes his Un-Natural History.

While embracing evolutionary principles, Prosek sees biological species as impermanent. His work often portrays hybrid natural subjects with physiological details (feathers, scales, fins) so precise that the surreal creatures jar the imagination. His 2009 painting PARROTFISHE (plate 6), for example, combines the head and wings of a parrot with the body, tail, and fins of a colorful fish. Prosek would never suggest that parrots might eventually evolve into fish and return to the sea, but his freakishly realistic PARROTFISHE can inspire the mind to get creative when considering the genetic soup that populates our planet.
As an anthropologist who typically works as a sociocultural interlocutor between technical experts, I deploy a variety of methods to explore and document the ways in which my various host communities and collaborators understand the world. I decided to use one of these methods to see how my Fairfield students interpreted Prosek’s un-natural history. I presented my students with a high resolution slide of the *Parrotfish*; students viewed the painting and then wrote lists of single-word descriptors based on their individual reactions to the painting. I compiled their individual freelists and analyzed them using Anthropac, an open-source software package from Analytic Technologies. Analyzing freelists is an efficient way to document cultural categories and consensus, and my students’ freelists indicated that viewing Prosek’s *Parrotfish* elicited visceral connections to evolution.

In our small freelist experiment, 51 students collectively listed 177 unique terms to describe *Parrotfish*. The top ten most frequently cited descriptors were surface-level, physical descriptors such as “colorful, feathers, scales, yellow, blue, fins, etc.” More interestingly, the eleventh most frequently cited term was the very first “conceptual” descriptor on that aggregate list: evolution. Among the top twenty-five most frequently cited terms, words like evolution, mutation, hybrid, and morphing stood out from simpler terms describing the colors, body, and surface appearance of the *Parrotfish*. Similarly, when I asked students to freelist terms to describe the artist who painted *Parrotfish*, the term “evolution” emerged in the top twenty of 161 terms. Other popular terms students used to describe the artist complement the ambiguity and frequently contradictory fluidity of Prosek’s subjects: natural, unnatural, adventurous, spiritual, inventive, simple, and intuitive.

James Prosek: An Un-Natural History conjoins disparate elements from his world to create whimsical creatures like a *Roosterfish* (plate 5), a *Cockatool* (plate 2 and 14), and a *Drill Duck* (plate 15 and page 27). In so doing, his creations—in paint and taxidermy—poke fun at the seemingly rigid categories we use to understand our world. A funky intellectual cousin of Henry D. Thoreau, Prosek reminds us that the relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world is as playful and subjective as it is scientific. As a social scientist, I’m due for a flight-swim with the *Parrotfish*. How about you?

“The Man of science, who is not seeking for expression, but for a fact to be expressed merely, studies nature as a dead language.”

- Henry D. Thoreau (May 10, 1853)

Scott M. Lacy is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Fairfield University.
Self-portrait with Toucan Headdress, 2008/2011 (Plate 1)
Oil on canvas
21 inches (diameter)

Cockatool, 2011 (Plate 2)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
32 x 27 inches

Sea Pegasus: Nocturne, 2011 (Plate 3)
Watercolor, gouache and graphite on paper
23 ½ x 19 ½ inches

Flying Fish, 2009 (Plate 4)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
19 x 21 inches

Roosterfish, 2007 (Plate 5)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
24 x 31 inches

Parrotfish, 2009 (Plate 6, front and back cover)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
24 x 33 inches

Sea Dragon, 2005 (Plate 7)
Watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper
19 x 24 inches
Private collection, New York

Caribbean Lobster, 2005 (Plate 8)
Watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper
19 x 24 inches
Collection of Judy and Robert Mann

Atlantic Sailfish, 2010 (Plate 9)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
57 ½ x 86 inches
Collection of Brett and Mark Kristoff, Connecticut

Atlantic Cod, 2011 (Plate 10)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
36 x 42 inches
Private collection, Texas

Flying Fox with Prussian Firearms The Fox Hunt, 2009 (Plate 11)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
44 ½ x 48 ¾ inches

Peacock with Mangoes, 2008 (Plate 12)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
27 ¼ x 64 inches

Brazilian Blue-headed Parrots with Butterflies and Flowers, 2007
(Plate 13 and Page 23)
Oil on panel
48 inches (diameter)

Extinct Carolina Parakeets, 2006/2011 (Page 23)
Oil on panel
30 x 24 inches

Cockatool, 2008 (Plate 14)
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
26 x 23 ½ inches
Collection of Susan and Dixon Butler

Flying Fox with Lady’s Slippers, 2011 (Page 18)
Taxidermied red fox, sea duck wings, hand-made flowers and moss
17 x 16 ½ x 11 ¼ inches
(installation view)

Drill Duck with Pitcher Plant Flowers, 2009
(Plate 15 and Page 27)
Watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
20 ¼ x 15 ½ inches

Drill Duck with Pitcher Plants, 2009 (Page 27)
Taxidermied hooded merganser, hand-made flowers and moss
18 x 22 x 14 inches
(installation view)

Geisha Eel, 2005 (Plate 16)
Watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper
44 x 55 inches
(not on view)

Kingfisher, 2004 (Plate 17)
Watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper
17 x 26 inches
Collection of Ken Olshan
(not on view)
The artist at work in his Easton, Connecticut studio

Selected Public Collections

Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, CT

Evansville Museum of Arts and Science, IN

Hammond Museum of Japanese Art, North Salem, NY

Lafayette College Art Collection, Easton, PA

Mildred’s Lane Historical Society Museum, Beach Lake, PA

New Britain Museum of American Art, CT

Try-me, Richmond, VA

Union College Art Collection, Schenectady, NY

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

Fairfield University, Bellarmine Museum of Art, Fairfield, CT

National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC
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Because democracy demands wisdom.

Plate 17  Kingfisher, 2004
James Prosek:
Un-Natural History

Fairfield University
THE BELLARMINI MUSEUM OF ART
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Front and back cover: Parrotfish (detail) 2009, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper
All images courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York
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