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James Prosek: Un-Natural History Press Release

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**Arts &
Minds**

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New Exhibition!

James Prosek: Un-Natural History

Bellarmino Museum of Art,

Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT

October 21, 2011 through December 21, 2011

FAIRFIELD, Conn. (September 19, 2011). Fairfield University's Bellarmino Museum of Art announces its newest exhibition, ***James Prosek: Un-Natural History***, on view from October 21, 2011 through December 21, 2011. This visually exciting, intellectually stimulating show opens to the public with a free reception on October 21, 2011 at 5 p.m. The majority of the artist's nearly twenty paintings on view are watercolors. One of Prosek's dramatic *tondos* (or round painting) painted in oil on panel is also included. Complementing these paintings are several taxidermied specimens, mediated by the artist, that "speak" to their two-dimensional counterparts, installed in close proximity. The exhibition features many new works by Prosek, including some he executed specifically for this exhibition.

A native of Easton, Conn., James Prosek's prowess as an artist and an intellectual is matched by his talent as an author and wordsmith. His first book, *Trout: an Illustrated History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), featured seventy of his own watercolor paintings of the trout of North America and established his reputation as a naturalist and a remarkably gifted artist.

James Prosek: Un-Natural History, made possible, in part, through the generous support of Brody Wilkinson PC, a Southport, Connecticut, law firm, features a number of works never before displayed publicly, such as the artist's monumental watercolor of a sailfish, painted to scale at more than 8' in length. The exhibition also debuts several new pieces Prosek created specifically for this show, including a taxidermied fox, complete with bird wings

and custom-made wax flowers, and a meticulously rendered cockatiel, whose extravagant rose-hued plumage is replaced in areas in with tools from a Swiss Army knife.

Parakeets (2006), also on view, is a testament to the artist's facility in oil. This excellent example of a *tondo* anchors the show and provides a dramatic focal point for visitors to the Bellarmine's main gallery. In this and other works Prosek maintains a careful tension between the art of illustration and natural history and the realm of the fantastic achieved through a minute attention to detail and carefully counter-balanced with a deft painterly touch and inspired composition sensibilities. The net effect for the viewer is a visceral experience, as visually captivating as it is intellectually compelling.

"In *Un-Natural History*, James Prosek questions the accepted norms by proposing new and unusual ways for considering the world around us," said Jill Deupi, J.D., Ph.D, Bellarmine Museum director and assistant professor of art history at Fairfield University. "Through his renderings of specimens, both real and imagined, the artist invites the viewer to reflect on the ways Western man has chosen to organize the natural world and to question what these systems say about our culture, our priorities and our values. He encourages us, with subtle persistence, to think about what it means to impose a name on an object or, indeed, a living creature, and how such actions create powerful hierarchies in the inter-connected realms of society, politics and economics."

James Prosek's works, which range from the compellingly realistic, as exemplified in his *Trout: an Illustrated History* book, to the inventively fanciful, as in the current Bellarmine show, have been featured in a number of museums and galleries both in the U.S. and abroad, including the d.u.m.b.o. arts center (Brooklyn, NY), the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Ridgefield, CT), Yale's Whitney Humanities Center (New Haven, CT) and the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco.

"From interests in the medieval world's conflation of the real and the imagined, to Twenty-First Century efforts to save the earth's dying ecosystems, James Prosek brings together the objectivity of a scientist with the lyricism of a poet," said Richard Klein, Exhibition Director at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT. "His work encapsulates the history of culture's ongoing efforts to understand and interpret the living world."

James Prosek's prowess as an artist and an intellectual is matched by his talent as a writer. His most recent book, *Eels: An Exploration, from New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Amazing and Mysterious Fish* (HarperCollins, 2010), a *New York Times* Book Review Editor's Choice, explores both the biological complexities and the prominent role this remarkable fish continues to play in native lore and creation myths amongst traditional peoples such as New Zealand's Maori. He has also authored several books for young children and adolescents, including *Bird, Butterfly, Eel* (Simon & Schuster, 2009) and *The Day My Mother Left* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), and has written for *The New York Times* and *National Geographic Magazine*.

The artist made his authorial debut at age nineteen while still an undergraduate at Yale University. It was also at Yale that he laid the groundwork for his Peabody-award winning documentary film, *The Complete Angler* (2003), that retraces the footsteps of the seventeenth-century angler Izaak Walton, whose book of the same name provided a blueprint for the artist's ambitious senior thesis. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r2nRfnpWxw>).

It is his capacity to look simultaneously at fact and folklore, science and myth, life and death that distinguishes Prosek as a writer and artist, as well as cinematographer. It is this same conflation of unusual talents and seemingly opposed interests that makes his exhibition at the Bellarmine so compelling. "James Prosek belongs in the pantheon of great American nature artists," observed Anne Fadiman, renowned author, editor and professor of English at Yale. "But unlike most of them, he's also a fine writer and an original thinker. In both his painting and his prose, he doesn't just observe; he tweaks, plays, and, in effect, enters into dialogues with his subjects."

James Prosek: Un-Natural History features a catalog with contributed essays by Dr. Deupi, Dr. Brian Walker (Associate Professor of Biology), and Dr. Scott Lacy (Assistant Professor of Sociology & Anthropology). There are also a number of cross-curricular programming initiatives hosted by the museum in support of the show. A listing follows.

"James Prosek's images are not only beautiful and frequently witty, they are also thought-provoking," said Dr. Deupi. "His capacity to expose the artificiality of many of the systems that we accept as pre-determined or 'natural' is a talent rivaled only by his skills as a visual artist. *Un-Natural History* will furnish scholars and students alike with

unparallel opportunities to engage in inter-disciplinary conversations and mutually enriching events.”

The Bellarmine Museum of Art is located in Bellarmine Hall on the campus of Fairfield University at 1073 N. Benson Road in Fairfield, Connecticut. Admission is free. The museum is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., from September through June, and closed for all University Holidays. Visit www.fairfield.edu/museum, or call (203) 254-4000, ext. 4046.

James Prosek: Un-Natural History

Public Program schedule:

(all events are free and take place at the Bellarmine Museum, unless otherwise noted)

Wednesday, October 26; Wednesday, November 9; Wednesday, November 30 and 30 and Wednesday, December 7 at 1 p.m. Screenings of James Prosek’s Peabody Award-winning *The Complete Angler* will be screened in the Bellarmine Museum’s smART classroom.

Wednesday, November 2 at 6 p.m. Ms. Fadiman will read selections from her essay “Collecting Nature” in addition to participating in a panel discussion, mediated by Dr. Deupi, with Mr. Prosek and Drs. Lacy and Walker.

Monday, November 7 at 5.30 p.m. James Prosek will deliver a gallery talk on-site at the museum.

Saturday, November 12 at 3 p.m., Younger audiences can enjoy James Prosek’s work in the Bellarmine Museum’s galleries when his children’s books will be highlighted as part of the museum’s regularly scheduled Second Saturday Family Day (12 noon – 5 p.m.).

Thursday, December 1 at 7 p.m. Dr. Deupi will deliver a lecture at the Fairfield Public Library’s Main Library, 1080 Old Post Road, Fairfield, CT, about the Bellarmine Museum in general and the Prosek exhibition in particular.

Visit www.fairfield.edu/museum, or call (203) 254-4046 for details.

Fairfield University offers its students and the regional community a wide array of opportunities to enjoy the arts and enrich their lives through study, performance, appreciation, and thought. The annual Arts & Minds season of events at Fairfield provides an outstanding array of cultural and intellectual events that include the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts season, the popular Open VISIONS Forum lecture series, professional and student performances, art exhibits, special lectures, and a myriad of other lifelong learning opportunities. For further information, visit www.fairfield.edu/arts.

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