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James Prosek: An Un-Natural History

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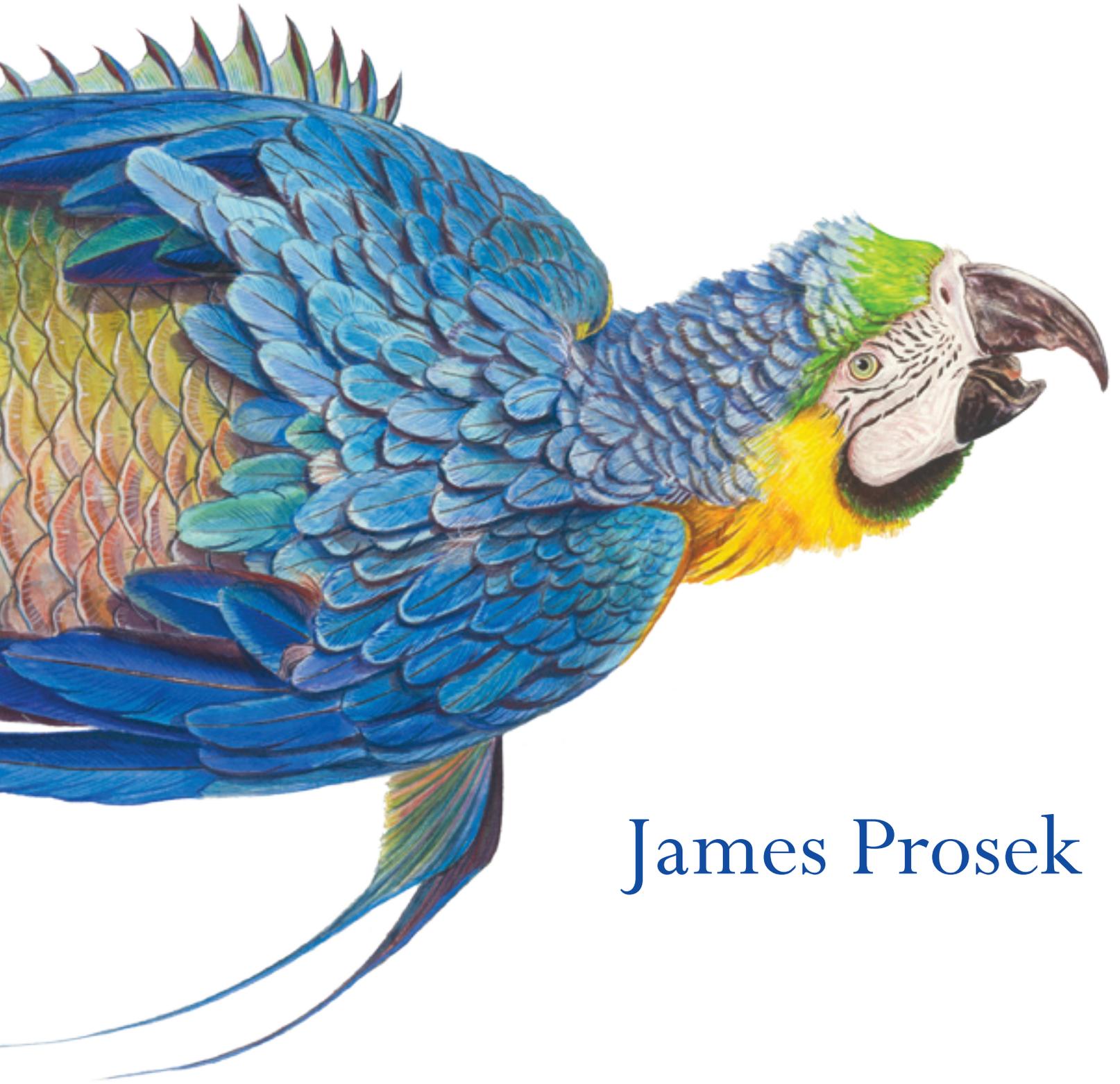
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James Prosek

James Prosek: Un-Natural History

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Scott M. Lacy

Un-Natural History and Transcendental Funk: the Artistic Biology of James Prosek

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 glistens 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 *Parrotfishe*; 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 *Parrotfishe* elicited visceral connections to evolution.

In our small freelist experiment, 51 students collectively listed 177 unique terms to describe *Parrotfishe*. 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 *Parrotfishe*. Similarly, when I asked students to freelist terms to describe the artist who painted *Parrotfishe*, 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 *Roosterfishe* (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 *Parrotfishe*. 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)

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THE BELLARMINE MUSEUM OF ART

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Front and back cover: *Parrotfishe* (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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