

look. look again.

## The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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It is the mission of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum to be a national leader in the exhibition of significant and challenging contemporary art with an emphasis on emerging and mid-career artists, a world-class innovator of museum education programs, and a vital cultural resource for our community.

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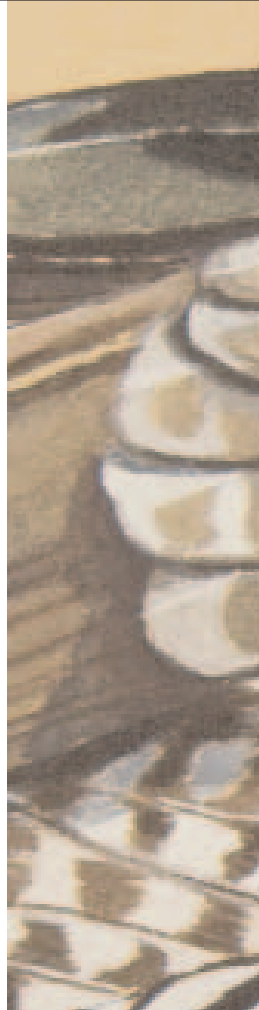
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Untitled (Wood Duck) (detail), 2007



# Prosek



**James Prosek: Life & Death—A Visual Taxonomy**

September 16, 2007 – June 8, 2008

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



## James Prosek: Life & Death—A Visual Taxonomy

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James Prosek is a talented artist. James Prosek is a celebrated author who has published eight books by his early thirties. James Prosek is a superb flycaster, a master at catching trout. James Prosek is a son. James Prosek is a taxpayer. James Prosek is the driver of a beat-up Subaru. James Prosek is a mammal. James Prosek is a Gemini.

All of these things are true, and any one of these facts could color your opinion of Mr. Prosek—Jimbo, Jimmy, James, Jim, JP.

And who am I to point this out? The director of the Museum. Curator of the exhibition. Lousy fisherman. Registered voter. Father. Driver of a beat-up Subaru. Biped. Libran.

The point is we are all complex individuals who can each be classified in a variety of ways. And the process of classification limits us, capturing only a portion of our complexity and uniqueness. The person doing the classifying is generally perceived as being in a position of power relative to the person—or creature, or thing—being named. Parents name babies, companies name cars, scientists name insects and elements.

Yet each of these named things is likely to outlive whoever is doing the naming. Some Studebakers keep on running long after the company is gone; with grace most children outlive their namers; and who can doubt that the insects will be here long after we are extinct? And those elements and minerals and gasses we identify, classify, and name—they *are* us; we are *not* them. A lack of oxygen would spell the end of humans; the lack of humans would mean little to the supply of oxygen.

To identify and to name something is in some ways to limit your understanding of that thing. If you think of your child only as your daughter, as opposed to a fully fledged human being, she is diminished in your eyes, even if you don't realize it. Who among us does not have someone important in our lives who we wish could really understand us, know how special we are, know *all* that makes us unique?

*Columba livia* or Common Pigeon or Rock Dove; one sounds august, one is a nuisance that craps on my windshield, the other sounds like a romantic cliff dweller. Each name refers to the same bird. Our naming obscures the complexity of our interaction with a bird, whose habits and habitats are formed by ours, and vice versa. The act of naming and classifying can gloss over the complexities of artists as well; American painter Barnett Newman is famously credited with having said, "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds."<sup>1</sup> An amateur ornithologist, Newman's point was that while scientists study and assign value to birds' behavior, just as philosophers and critics study and assign value to artists' work, in neither case does the observer, or namer, truly affect the bird or artist. That being said, certainly the bird has a profound impact on the individual ornithologist.

While this is true in the short term, over time the system of naming, classification, and the structure we create to interact with birds, or artists, has a profound impact on their behavior as well as ours. We welcome songbirds in New England and encourage them to overwinter at our bird feeders. Our changing interests and



needs reward certain artists at any given time; in the 1930s we valued gritty, realistic depictions of the *real* America, by the 1960s we rewarded, through exhibitions and sales, artists who celebrated popular culture. We place individual artists into movements, critics and historians name the movements as they go along: *Ash Can School* or *Pop* art.

And now James Prosek is the (unwilling? appreciative? aghast?) subject of my analysis, and his work is labeled by the Museum, classified and categorized by media, size, and title. While useful for keeping order, these labels actually may well keep you, the viewer, from really looking at his work.

Prosek's specimen birds, carefully displayed in neat cases, are classified not by genus but by the artist's signature, claimed as his own, seemingly in an act of great hubris. Perhaps the artist's point, that to claim any dominion over Nature is an act of hubris, applies to your relationship to the artist as well. The relationship between observed and observer is complex.

James Prosek illuminates this reality, with great acuity, and the results are here to challenge you. His *Parrotfish* mocks you with its beautiful rendering and ham-fisted linguistic accuracy. His version of Roger Tory Peterson's endpapers do just the opposite, confounding your sense that you know what you are looking at—ornithological guide transformed into minimal art.

Simply put, we need to move beyond labels. We need to truly look, really observe, and perhaps most importantly, realize that we both influence and are influenced by the creatures, objects, and structures around us, whether they be birds or museums.

Harry Philbrick, director  
The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

<sup>1</sup> In a session with the philosopher Susanne Langer at the annual Woodstock Art Conference in Woodstock, New York, in August 1952, Newman attacked professional aestheticians, saying: "I feel that even if aesthetics is established as a science, it doesn't affect me as an artist. I've done quite a bit of work in ornithology; I have never met an ornithologist who ever thought that ornithology was for the birds." He would later hone this remark into the famous quip, "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds." August 16, 2007 < <http://www.barnettnewman.org/chronology.php>

## Bird in Space

James Prosek is primarily known for his faithfully rendered watercolor paintings of birds and fish. In this exhibition, he has ventured into new mediums and formats to expand the conceptual underpinnings of his work. Paintings in oil on wall-mounted wooden boxes depict bird specimens as if they were just pulled from a collection drawer. And actual taxidermic birds, cleaned and prepared by the artist, are presented as works of art in Plexiglas boxes supported by metal posts.

The murals of birds shown in silhouette that confront the viewer at the start and close of James Prosek's exhibition may seem familiar. The images are adapted from the endpapers Roger Tory Peterson created in 1934 for his *A Field Guide to the Birds*.<sup>1</sup> In Peterson's *Guide*, a variety of birds in black and white are shown perched in trees and in flight. A numbered key names each species, and presumably helps us to identify birds in the real world by their profiles.

In Prosek's version, painted in large-scale directly on the wall, the key is gone and we are left to examine the numbered silhouettes devoid of reference. Without the exercise of going from key to image, or image to key, we are in the less comfortable position of not knowing. While the endpapers in Peterson's *Field Guide* frame the contents of his book—a book about the identification and naming of birds—the murals in Prosek's exhibition frame a body of work imbued with mystery, and the potential inherent in letting go of names.

Prosek's practice as an artist is broadening and changing each day, and it is not immediately obvious how he will orient himself to his colleagues in the art field. As a person, Prosek is not a follower—he has very much carved out his own space.



Untitled (Birds in Flight) (detail), 2007

However, his straddling of the fine art and natural history worlds, and his increasingly conceptual approach to his work, shares much in common with artists such as Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. His painting style and process, while singular, is influenced by the miniature traditions of the subcontinent, recently brought to light by Shahzia Sikander and Nusra Latif Qureshi.

There is a long history of birds in art. From Egyptian hieroglyphs to the Pompeian wall paintings, from Courbet to Manet to Brancusi, birds have been used to symbolize everything from longing and the exotic to femininity and spiritual power.

Prosek is an admirer of the way in which Indian and Persian miniature painters, in particular, have depicted the natural world. Some workshops, such as those of the Mughal courts, or the East India Company schools where British patrons commissioned natural history works, had traditions of depicting animals in exquisite and life-like detail. Like the artists in these workshops, Prosek has prepared his paper for the watercolor works in this exhibition by staining each piece with tea before beginning. This softens the ground, eliminating the harsh white of much store-bought paper.

Prosek also balances realism with an interest in geometry and abstraction in his works, as was common practice in miniature painting workshops. In Prosek's paintings on paper, the birds seem to float in an unearthly space. They calmly move as they would in nature, but without the medium of air. Grid lines map out the two-dimensional space of the painting, while more lyrical lines extend from the birds' extremities into three-dimensional space.

Prosek is both naturalist and artist—this marriage of convictions makes him a keen observer and potent translator of the natural world. However, we get the impression that his attention to realism and detail in his paintings is born less out of a



*Untitled (Cock of the Rock, Suriname), 2006*



Untitled (Wood Duck), 2007

commitment to naturalistic accuracy, and more from a desire to pay respect to a world he finds seductive and mysterious. As a self-taught artist, rendering an animal in great detail is also an exercise of skill. Painting and drawing birds from life, with discipline, Prosek has trained himself to be an artist of great technical ability.

In *Untitled (Wood Duck)*, the artist has drawn lyrical lines from the bill of the duck up to the top edge of the paper. The lines anchor the bird to an array of points around the page, like compass points on a chart. With *Untitled (Oldsquaw)*, the lines radiating from the animal are more extensive, with various colors extending from the beak, the tail feathers, and the webbed feet. One line appears to cradle the duck's breast as if providing steadying support.

The radial patterning gives the space around Prosek's birds a structure that commands our attention. A space we might normally overlook is ripe territory for the artist's creative mind. He envisions a kind of architecture that stands in for the web of interrelationships that we cannot see with our human eyes. Perhaps information sent out into the world by living things leaves a trail.

In a brand-new painting, *Untitled (Blue-headed Parrots)*, Prosek has changed the quality of the lines extending from the birds. Here, they are less lyrical and more fraught with emotional tension. The line quality gives the painting an eerie and unnerving atmosphere, as if there were some urgency in the frenetic collaborative gesture of the creatures. This is one in a series of round paintings—a new format for the artist—meant to remind us that the tools of human observation often crop the world in a circle—binoculars, a microscope, or a Petri dish.

Birds are mysterious and captivating—a reality that Peterson’s *Field Guide*, despite its breadth and scholarship, cannot address. Attaching a name to a silhouette in a tree, while helping us to identify the species, may also impede our skills of observation and inhibit our imagination. How do we begin to answer questions like, What does the bird’s presence impact? What relationships is it in? . . . And how would its loss be felt? In his work, Prosek frees our imagination from the constraints of naming and defining nature too narrowly. From this new perspective, perhaps we can begin to understand the system of which we are a critical part.

Jessica Hough, director  
Mills College Art Museum

<sup>1</sup> *A Field Guide to the Birds: Giving Field Marks of all Species Found East of the Rockies*, second revised and enlarged edition (1934; reprint, Houghton Mifflin, 1967).



Untitled (Montezuma Quail, Arizona), 2007



Untitled (Green-winged Macaws), 2007

## Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches unless otherwise noted

### Bird Skins

*Untitled (Common Eider, Rhode Island), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
29 x 14 x 7

*Untitled (Woodcock, Connecticut), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
10 x 5 x 5

*Untitled (Magpie, Utah), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
20 x 8 x 4

*Untitled (Willow Ptarmigan, Newfoundland), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
14 x 7 x 4

*Untitled (Gambel's Quail, Arizona), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
12 x 6 x 5

*Untitled (American Crow, Connecticut), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
20 x 9 x 5

*Untitled (Wood Duck, Connecticut), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
20 x 9 x 5

*Untitled (Surf Scoter, Rhode Island), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
22 x 9 x 5

*Untitled (Cinnamon Teal, Mexico), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
18 x 7 7/8 x 5

*Untitled (Montezuma Quail, Arizona), 2007*

Bird skin, prepared by the artist, mounted on hand-painted MDF base, Plexiglas  
10 x 5 x 3

*The Anxiety of Influence (Self-portrait as a Red Tailed Hawk) (detail), 2006*



## Works on Paper

*Untitled (Wood Duck), 2007*

Watercolor, graphite, colored pencil, on tea-stained paper  
19 x 25

*Untitled (Scarlet Tanagers), 2007*

Watercolor, graphite, colored pencil, on tea-stained paper  
18 x 23

*Untitled (Surf Scoter), 2007*

Watercolor, graphite, colored pencil, on tea-stained paper  
24 x 19

*Untitled (Oldsquaw), 2007*

Watercolor, graphite, colored pencil, on tea-stained paper  
24 x 21

*The Anxiety of Influence (Self-portrait as a Red Tailed Hawk), 2006*

Watercolor and graphite on paper  
29 x 26

## Bird Boxes

*Untitled (King Bird of Paradise, New Guinea), 2006*

Oil on gesso-primed wood  
14 x 11 x 6

*Untitled (Cock of the Rock, Suriname), 2006*

Oil on gesso-primed wood  
14 x 11 x 6

*Untitled (Black Scoter, Rhode Island), 2006*

Oil on gesso-primed wood  
14 x 11 x 6

*Untitled (Rainbow Lorikeet, Australia), 2006*

Oil on gesso-primed wood  
14 x 11 x 6

*Untitled (Lilac-breasted Roller, Africa), 2007*

Oil on gesso-primed wood  
14 x 11 x 6

*Untitled (Red Fan Parrot, Suriname), 2007*

Oil on gesso-primed wood  
14 x 11 x 6

**Tondos**

*Untitled (Green-winged Macaws), 2007*  
Oil on canvas mounted on wood  
60 inches (diameter)

*Untitled (Blue-headed Parrots), 2007*  
Oil on wood  
48 inches (diameter)

*Untitled (Hummingbirds), 2006*  
Oil on canvas  
21 inches (diameter)

*Untitled (Toucanets), 2007*  
Oil on board  
21 inches (diameter)

**Specimen Paintings**

*Untitled (Twelve-wired Birds of Paradise), 2007*  
Oil on wood  
24 x 30

*Untitled (Carolina Parakeets), 2006*  
Oil on wood  
30 x 24

*Untitled (Imperial, Ivory-Billed and Pileated Woodpeckers), 2006*  
Oil on wood  
18 x 24

*Untitled (Winter Wren), 2006*  
Oil on wood  
11 x 14

*Untitled (Toucans), 2007*  
Oil on wood  
23 x 18

**Wall Murals**

*Untitled (Birds in Tree), 2007*  
Oil and latex house paint on sheet rock  
97 x 135

*Untitled (Birds in Flight), 2007*  
Oil and latex house paint on sheet rock  
147 x 139

Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York



*Untitled (Carolina Parakeets), 2006*