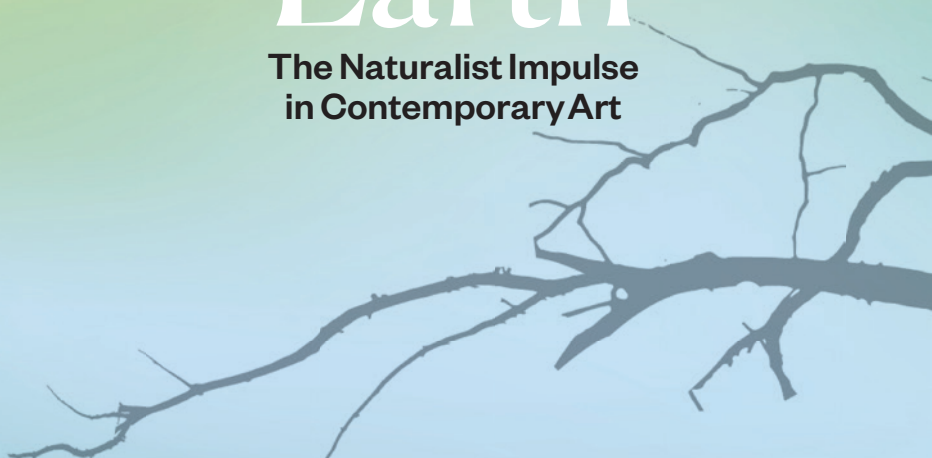


FIELD GUIDE TO

Fragile Earth

The Naturalist Impulse
in Contemporary Art



Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art

The Brandywine River Museum of Art
September 24, 2022 – January 8, 2023

Since the mid-18th century, artists have followed their naturalist impulse — acting as surveyors, collectors of natural material, and early environmentalists. Today the legacy of the artist-naturalist is perpetuated by contemporary artists who continue to incorporate and comment on the natural world in their art. Motivated by urban-industrial development and the subsequent deterioration of our planet due to human actions, contemporary artists revise traditional practices to visualize the effects of global climate change in their work.

Artists Jennifer Angus, Mark Dion, Courtney Mattison, and James Prosek pursue diverse conceptual and material approaches to painting, sculpture, printmaking, and assemblage. Their common passion for nature manifests in a shared aesthetic of abundance and detail, reflecting the overwhelming wonder of nature itself. Together their works create a dialogue that reveals the persuasive role art can play in advocating for the preservation of our earth.

Fragile Earth was curated by Jennifer Stettler Parsons, Ph.D., Associate Curator, Florence Griswold Museum, and coordinated in Pennsylvania with organizing curator Amanda C. Burdan, Ph.D., Senior Curator, Brandywine River Museum of Art.

The organizers at the Brandywine River Museum of Art and the Florence Griswold Museum extend their deepest gratitude to artists Jennifer Angus, Mark Dion, Courtney Mattison, and James Prosek for sharing their incredible work, and for their generous assistance in developing this iteration of the exhibition. We also thank Jenny Chan and her team at Jack Design for their creative design in the galleries and for producing this inspired field guide.

The exhibition is organized by the Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, CT. At Brandywine, it is made possible with support from Barbara B. Aronson and Theodore R. Aronson.

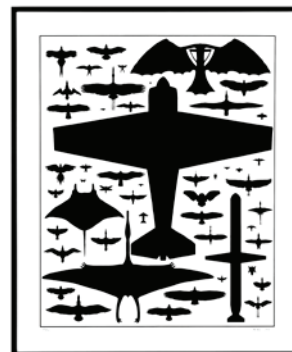
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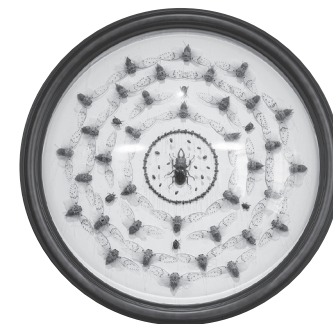
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James Prosek: Questioning Nature's Nomenclature

Based in Easton, Connecticut, James Prosek (b. 1975) embodies and extends the continuation of the tradition of the historic artist-naturalist in New England. An avid fisherman, skilled taxidermist, and prolific author, Prosek immerses himself in nature and follows in the footsteps of renowned observers of nature, from John James Audubon to Charles Burchfield. At the same time, he updates conventional methods to consider how we engage with, identify, and categorize nature. His silhouette-style paintings, reminiscent of field guides, question the significance of naming and ordering nature, and the limitations of those divisions.

In paintings, prints, and sculptures, Prosek investigates the ways in which humans have insisted on shaping nature for our own needs, or have attempted to control or contain it. These themes come to a head in the artist's "hybrid objects," which combine elements of the real and imagined. Whether making paintings of fish from life, printing with eels, or adorning stuffed squirrels with bird wings, Prosek's art reinforces the truth of nature's interconnectedness and encourages audiences to be mindful of our place in that holistic world. Despite grim environmental reports, he cites nature's endurance through earlier climate transformations and remains optimistic about its resilience.



**Never Again
Would Birds'
Songs Be
the Same
(Brandywine),
2022**

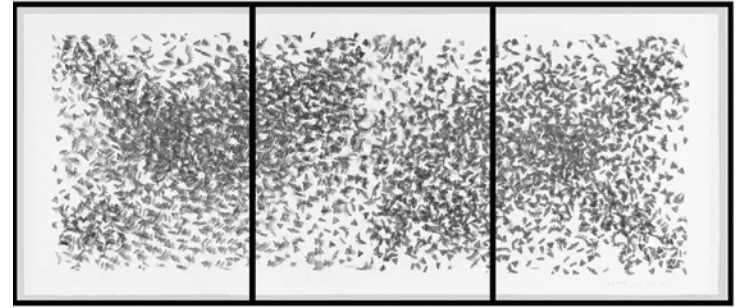
Acrylic paint on sheetrock
9 x 40 ft

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

Prosek's silhouette-style paintings take inspiration from the endpapers of the seminal *A Field Guide to the Birds* (1934) by renowned naturalist Roger Tory Peterson, who revolutionized birding by encouraging birders to identify species by observation, rather than hunting. In Peterson's field guides, as with dioramas in natural history museums, animal silhouettes are identified using a corresponding numerical key. Here Prosek frustrates our desire to know and name by withholding a key. Instead, the viewer is encouraged to examine the animal's form without the crutch of language, thwarting our innate desire to possess and dominate nature. Prosek's mural reflects the irony and difficulty of naming and understanding nature—for nature is always changing, and what it exceeds what we call it.

Here, Prosek's mural portrays the landscape of the Brandywine region in response to his observations during his site visits to the Museum. He includes the sycamore tree famously immortalized by Andrew Wyeth in paintings like *Pennsylvania Landscape* (1941) and native grasses like big bluestem, as well as mountain laurel that grows in the nearby Laurels Preserve.

Work in progress as of August 2022



**Moth Cluster IV,
2016**

Pen, ink, and silkscreen on paper
65 x 140 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

Prosek's *Moth Cluster* series meditates on the concept of nature's holism, fluidity, and the problematic divisions people have imposed on it. Humans have drawn borders on land to create protected areas like national parks, but those lines are invisible to the animals who instinctually migrate across them.

This print takes the example of army cutworm moths, whose swarms migrate from plains in Kansas and Nebraska to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem of Wyoming and Montana. In their larval stage in the Midwest, the moths are considered an agricultural pest and are targeted with pesticides. Once in the mountain West, however, they provide much-needed nourishment for grizzly bears in the high country (a single grizzly can eat up to 60,000 moths a day). If the moths don't make it to the mountains in sufficient numbers, the grizzlies need to look for food elsewhere, altering their habits and forcing them to lower elevations where they encounter more people. That humans focus their priorities on discrete areas, defined by invisible lines, neglects the reality of nature's interconnectedness.



***Doe Run
Red-breasted
Sunfish, 2022***

Watercolor on paper, 16 x 20 in.

Brandywine River Museum of Art

During summer 2022, Prosek fished on Doe Run, a tributary of the Brandywine River. He caught a red-breasted sunfish and made a painting of it on a very special sheet of Whatman watercolor paper. With permission from the Wyeth family, carefully examined the piles of unused watercolor paper remaining in the Andrew Wyeth studio, selecting a sheet of Wyeth's stock on which to make this painting. Prosek has long has long wanted to make a work on Whatman paper, which was produced at an English mill and was used by many of his heroes from Winslow Homer to Audubon and Wyeth. The mill stopped making watercolor paper before Prosek was born.

Prosek developed a love of nature through his childhood experiences exploring the pond and fields near his home and the salt marshes on Long Island Sound. Today he lives on the same street where he was raised and continues to take inspiration from the area for his art and scholarship, an intimate connection to place which recalls that of Henry David Thoreau's at Walden Pond. Prosek published his first book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*, at the age of nineteen while still an undergraduate at Yale. His third book documented travels in the footsteps of Izaak Walton, the 17th-century author of *The Compleat Angler*, a celebration of fishing and the environment. Early in his career, Prosek was a sought-after authority on fishing, with fourteen published books on art and nature.





Tree of Life **(red), 2021**

Auto paint on metal,
46 x 36 x 36 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

Tree of Life **(black), 2021**

Auto paint on metal,
46 x 36 x 36 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

With these mobiles Prosek extends his exploration of the silhouette form from his paintings into the medium of sculpture. The idea developed out of the artist's interest in lines as connective vectors. In the mobile the African animals are linked and held in delicate balance by the system of metal parts. Titled *Tree of Life*, the piece serves as a metaphor for the complex relationships of animals to each other and to their environment. The sculpture's movement in response to its surroundings relates to animals' movements in the wild when they migrate based on their needs, such as changing habitats or food sources.



Invisible ***Boundaries, 2021***

Acrylic on panel, 22 7/8 x 36 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

Prosek's lifelong fascination with physical and conceptual boundaries that are imposed on nature extends to his interest in the symbols and names we use to communicate nature. Following the insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, Prosek began to consider the reductive symbolism of the American flag. In response, he set out to create a flag that referenced nature, painting animals to represent each of the fifty states, along with the national bird. Animals like Pennsylvania's ruffed grouse and Connecticut's robin are organized into a globe-like circle that interrupts the flag's strict grid and insists that non-human nature is recognized. As Prosek explains, "Many world flags are just grids of lines with no acknowledgement of anything organic. These animals are crossing the boundaries of the flag's grid because that's what animals do—they move and migrate and cannot always see the lines we draw on maps."

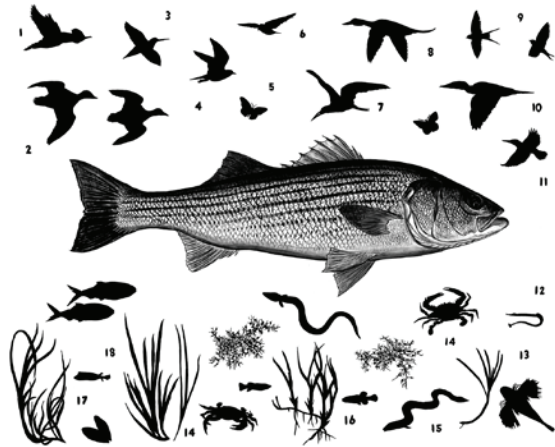


Invisible ***Boundaries, 2021***

Digital print on polyester
vinyl scrim, 16 x 27 ft.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

A monumental version of the *Invisible Boundaries* flag is installed on the façade of the Museum through October, 2022. Prosek is partnering with other experts on climate and paint manufacturers who are producing paints which will absorb carbon pollution from the atmosphere. They hope that future murals painted in high-traffic urban areas will assist in healing the planet by absorbing some of the automobile emissions that hang in the air.



Striped Bass, 2017

Oil and acrylic on panel
33 ¾ x 42 in.

Florence Griswold Museum,
Purchase

In this painting Prosek combines the realism of his innovative, reductive, and abstract silhouettes, utilized in the mural in the atrium. Just as naturalists like John James Audubon and Louis Agassiz Fuertes traveled to observe the subjects of their paintings in life, Prosek has journeyed around the world to study fish and try to capture their dynamic colors as they first come out of the water when caught by fishermen. As the fish lies on the boat deck, still pulsing with life, and the sun reflects off its scales, Prosek creates sketches and detailed notes before returning it to the water. He explains, “These paintings of fish in a way are self-portraits—as much about me as they are about the fish. In the larger fish I have painted my reflection in the fish’s eye, leaning over the fish. I’m not only documenting a species, I’m painting an experience.” Prosek maintains that every representation of nature is a kind of distortion—nature’s dynamism is ever in flux, and cannot be transferred or completely captured by any medium.



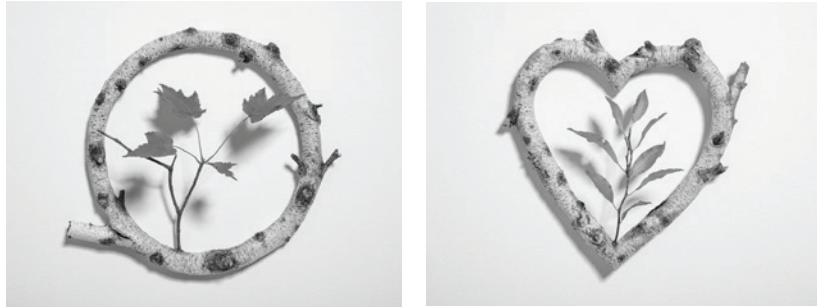
Flying Squirrels, 2013

Taxidermy squirrels, quail, and duck wings, clay flowers, moss, and wood, 26 x 17 x 14 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

Prosek’s use of taxidermy alludes to the irony and tragedy within the naturalist tradition of killing animals in order to name them—naturalists retain the animals’ bodies in order to study them and prove their existence to other by filing them away in natural history museums. His “hybrid objects” move beyond the natural world into a conceptual realm of fantasy, combining the real and imaginary. He describes deceptively realistic hybrids such as these winged squirrels as “creatures that become their names in protest of being named.” Playing upon the linguistic constructs of their assigned name, the taxidermied flying squirrels wear the wings of a domestic quail (white) and a bufflehead duck (brown).

With this genre, Prosek references an earlier era when myth and science were more closely aligned, and artists were tasked with creating images of fantastic animals by piecing together written and oral tales brought home by travelers. They also recall the hybrid creatures created for display in museums and sideshows, such as those of P.T. Barnum (who lived in Bridgeport, the city south of Prosek’s native Easton, Connecticut.)



***Tree Emoji*
(Myth of Order VI),
2019**

Birch branches, clay, and acrylic paint, 13 x 12½ x 3 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, NY

***Myth of Order V*,
2015**

Birch branches, clay, and acrylic paint, 15 x 15 x 6 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, NY

With these sculptures, Prosek investigates the ways in which humans have insisted on shaping nature for our own needs—controlling and manipulating it. The birch branches have been forced into unnatural geometric shapes, like the perfectly round circle of *Myth of Order V* (2015). With *Tree Emoji* (*Myth of Order VI*) Prosek explores how humans are returning to prehistoric forms of language by communicating with shapes such as digital emojis, instead of words. His heart sculpture also points to the artificiality of language, for the invented design does not resemble the biological profile of any organism's beating heart.

Prosek questions the utility of taxonomic systems invented by scientists like Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), who devised the two-name system (genus and species) for organisms still in use today (for example, *Homo sapiens*). This structure of labeling and classifying, though necessary for communication, fragments nature and does not account for its fluidity, which exists in a holistic and constantly changing continuum. The sculptures' sprouting foliage interrupts the controlled system to suggest the "myth of order." Nature cannot be contained by boundaries, nor will it conform or bend to our will.



***Burned Log with
Clay Flowers*,
2016/2019**

Bronze, clay, oil paint
9½ x 21 x 9 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, NY

***Burned Bowl with
Lemon Egg*, 2016**

Bronze, clay, oil paint, 10 x 6 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, NY

***Deer*, 2022**

Bronze, 22 x 9½ x 9½ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, NY

This series continues Prosek's exploration of the concepts of mimicry and forgery. Nature's ability to camouflage itself and adapt to circumstances is one of its most magical qualities. In these sculptures, Prosek substitutes delicate natural material for heavy, indestructible bronze casts. The vibrant green flowering plant sprouting from the burnt log reflects the artist's belief in the will, and strength of nature to persist despite all odds. The vibrant green flowering plant sprouting from the burnt log reflects the artist's belief in the will, and strength of nature to persist despite all odds. Its black flower shows nature's artifice as well as its resilience—evolving to mimic its new surroundings.

Burnt objects like these may evoke familiar news images of the millions of wildfires that sweep the United States each year. Studies show that forest fires today burn twice the area they did in 1970, with the average wildfire season lasting 78 days longer. Scientists have linked the severe heat and drought conditions that fuel wildfires to climate change. These conditions are only expected to grow warmer and drier as time marches on. It is possible, however, to break the cycle if we are able to lessen the amount of greenhouse gas emissions entering the atmosphere.



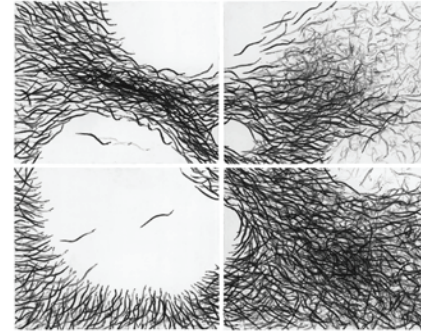
Untitled, 2019

Hand-forged iron eel spears

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

This installation of hand-forged iron eel spears (made in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) from Prosek's personal collection explores what the artist calls "the line between artifact and art" to consider the sculptural, symbolic, and practical functions of these objects, which he has collected from around the globe. At the bottom the artist inserted spears that he designed and had fabricated by a blacksmith in Scotland, which morph from utilitarian tools into something non-functional, as the prongs curve decoratively into symmetrical shapes. He asks, "Is a useless tool still a tool? Is the line between art and artifact simply a matter of its purpose and utility?" The spears are emblematic of Prosek's interest in how context shapes perceptions of objects and the history of humans' relationship to nature.

The spears conjure the physical experience of encountering the fish through the weapon required to harness its slippery, strong, and agile form. They invoke the physicality, brutality, and ultimate fatality involved. While the hunter gains a catch, the eel faces a violent death, and the ecosystem loses an important contributor. The work is particularly powerful paired with *Abstract Nature* (hanging nearby), which was made by using eel bodies to stamp the surface of the paper in order to show their freedom of movement during migration.



Abstract Nature, 2009

Eel stamped with sumi ink on paper, 96 x 102 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Waqas Wajahat, NY

Prosek's work comments on the interconnectedness of the ecosystem using the freshwater eel as a case study. Most migratory fish spawn in fresh water and travel to the ocean to live their adult lives. However, freshwater eels—of the genus *Anguilla*—do the opposite, spawning in the Sargasso Sea in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and migrating to the lakes and rivers of Europe and eastern North America. Ten to thirty years later they make an amazing migration from local waters (like the Brandywine River) back to the ocean where they were born to lay their eggs.

Eels have persisted for millions of years, but populations are now declining due to dams, overfishing, pollution, and global climate change. Prosek's art argues for environmental vigilance 'at home' in order to protect nature worldwide.

Inspired by a Japanese technique of inking fish and printing their impressions on paper called *Gyotaku*, Prosek paints the bodies of eels and uses them to create prints that imagine the miraculous, and little-understood, spawning in the Sargasso. He manifests the eel's likeness directly through marks made with the eel itself. Using the animal as the brush, the artist lets nature speak for itself, creating a work that is at once hyper-real and abstract.



Courtney Mattison: Underwater Worlds Rise to the Surface

Just as early American naturalists recognized the expanded power of visual art over mere words to educate and inspire, ocean advocate Courtney Mattison (b. 1985) makes scientific ideas more accessible through the expressive beauty of her ceramic wall reliefs. Based in Los Angeles, she holds interdisciplinary degrees in marine ecology, sculpture, and environmental studies. Mattison handcrafts intricate and large-scale sculptural installations inspired by the plight of coral reefs. Her work visualizes the effects of carbon dioxide emissions, such as coral bleaching caused by warming waters, and ocean acidification.

Mattison's work raises awareness about the threatened state of reefs due to climate change, overfishing, and chemical and plastic pollution. Few of us may feel connected to marine environments in our daily lives, but all local waters (including the Brandywine) filter into the sea and affect coral reefs thousands of miles away. Although these ecosystems are losing their battle to endure, Mattison's message is one of hope—there is still time for reefs to regenerate if we reconsider our treatment of the environment and its resources.



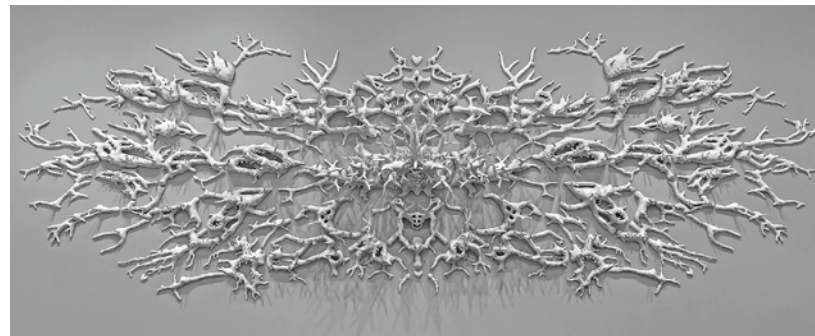
Aqueduct, 2016

Glazed stoneware and porcelain,
approx. 98 x 98 x 20 in.

Courtesy of the artist

With *Aqueduct*, Mattison imagines a scenario where corals will need to evolve to adapt to changing habitats. As she explains, “What if climate change causes tropical sea creatures to migrate towards the poles and invade terrestrial spaces as seawater warms and sea levels rise?” The artist explores these questions through hundreds of ceramic corals, anemones, and sponges installed in an organic growth pattern. They spill from a hand-carved porcelain air duct register, giving the impression that their colonies continue to travel beyond the gallery’s walls. An aqueduct usually describes a conduit that distributes water, but here the corals appear to have journeyed through a passageway meant for air, implying that water is on the way. In this surrealist twist, Mattison suggests the possible consequences of humans’ interventions on nature, which have thrown all of its systems into flux.

Installation of *Aqueduct* at the Virginia Museum
of Contemporary Art, photo by Glen McClure



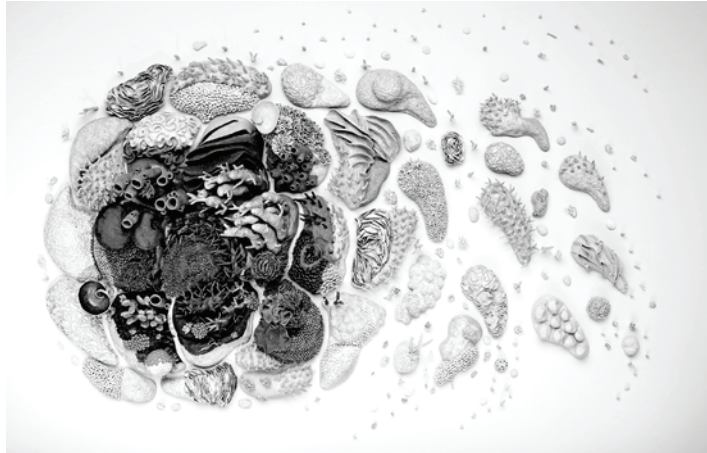
Malum Geminos, 2019

Glazed stoneware and
porcelain, 84 x 250 x 22 in.

Courtesy of the artist

This piece explores the stress responses of coral reefs triggered by rising sea temperatures and the ocean’s changing chemical composition. The title *Malum Geminos* is Latin for “evil twins,” and takes its name from a statement made by scientist Dr. Jane Lubchenco at the 2009 United Nations climate talks in Copenhagen, when she referred to ocean acidification as the “equally evil twin” of climate change, caused by carbon dioxide emissions dissolving into the sea. As Lubchenco has described, “Another way to think of ocean acidification is as osteoporosis of the seas.” Although the term is less well known, ocean acidification may be a problem as proportionately significant as global warming.

Mattison’s intricately sculpted ceramic forms branch across the wall in a pattern that evokes the fate of bleached and eroding reefs. The clusters of white polyps appear to have had their supportive skeletons dissolved by acidic seawater.



Our Changing Seas III, 2014

Glazed stoneware and porcelain, 108 x 156 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Our Changing Seas III is the third from a series exploring the rapid transition of coral reefs from healthy, colorful, and diverse to sickened and bleached. At its heart, the work celebrates Mattison's favorite aesthetic aspects of a healthy coral reef, which is surrounded by the sterile white skeletons of bleached corals swirling like the rotating winds of a cyclone. A "bleached" coral has lost its algae, and its skeleton becomes visible through its translucent skin. Corals typically die from bleaching because they starve to death and easily succumb to disease, however they can recover if the stressors subside and symbiotic algae recolonize them in time.

Whether this sculpture represents a reef collapsing or recovering is up to the viewer, both conceptually and literally. If audiences act quickly to support environmental health and slow climate change, then reefs may have a chance to regenerate, but doing nothing assures their demise.



Gyre I, 2022

Glazed stoneware and porcelain, 75 x 75 x 11 in.

Ethan Lerner, Woods Hole, MA

In her newest series, named *Gyre*, Mattison's intricately modeled coral forms are densely packed into swirling, spiral-like compositions that reference the ocean's system of rotating currents. Ocean currents are driven by winds, tides, and changes in water and air temperature, such as those caused by climate change. There are five major gyres, currents that weave around the globe in a connected system. The term "gyre" is also used to refer to collections of plastic waste and other debris in higher concentrations in the ocean, which are becoming more common. Here Mattison chooses to focus on the hidden beauty beneath the moving water, celebrating the diversity and splendor of coral reef fauna which deserve protection and preservation.



**Hope Spots:
Bahamian Reefs 2,
2015**

Glazed stoneware, 16 x 18 x 10 in.

Courtesy of the artist

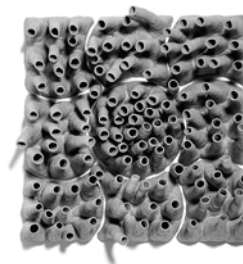
**Hope Spots:
Outer Seychelles II,
2015**

Glazed stoneware and porcelain
17 x 16 x 9 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Mattison's involvement with Mission Blue, an ocean conservation organization founded by renowned oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle, inspired her ceramic series *Hope Spots*, which in her words "celebrates the beauty and value of places that need our protection now more than ever." In her 2009 TED Prize talk, Earle coined this term for marine areas that are especially critical to ocean health, advocating for an ocean equivalent to national parks on land. Today there are over 140 marine areas protected as Hope Spots worldwide, with more nominations under consideration. The artist has created about a dozen sculptural vignettes in tribute to these ecosystems that are especially valuable and in need of protection.

While these locations may seem remote to American audiences, Mattison's sculptures endeavor to inform viewers about our impact on these places.



**Texture Study I,
2019**

Glazed stoneware,
58 x 58 x 22 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Texture Study imagines how oceans will change as a result of the dangerous homogenization of coral reef species. While a diversity of life characterizes a healthy ecosystem, climate change and other forms of human-caused habitat destruction are triggering more resilient species to become invasive and reproduce at a faster rate while less hearty species begin to go extinct. In this work, one type of tube sponge swirls outward and fills a geometric space. Although tube sponges are not necessarily expected to become invasive, Mattison's recent *Texture Study* series experiments with monochromatic vignettes, envisioning what the seafloor might look like after a mass extinction, when species vanish faster than they can be replaced.



**Surface Tension-11,
2020**

Glazed stoneware and porcelain
42 x 35½ x 6 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Mattison's recent *Surface Tension* series continues her investigations in visualizing ocean acidification. Here the coral's bleached form appears to drip as it dies off and dissolves into the sea. The melting form calls to mind liquid pollutants that enter oceans on both a large or small scale, such as an oil spill from a massive tanker, or the toxic sunscreen that washes off our bodies as we wade into the water to enjoy a swim.



Mark Dion: Engaging the Culture of Nature

Growing up in the area of the historic whaling town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Mark Dion (b. 1961) witnessed the displacement of nature in and around his hometown by commercial development. These early experiences materialized into artworks in the 1980s and 1990s, when he began honing a conceptual practice of institutional critique that offered commentary on humans' treatment of the environment. Dion recognized that the artist must be an agitator, interrogating the dominant culture and challenging perception, prejudice, and convention. Pioneering an interdisciplinary approach that combines installation, appropriation, and performance art with scientific methodologies, Dion has spent his career out in the field studying nature, collecting, and embarking on expeditions that follow the tracks of historic artist-naturalists.

Based now in upstate New York, Dion undertakes diverse projects that examine the ways in which public institutions construct an understanding of history and the natural world. Often working inside their ranks, Dion curates museum collections into new site-specific installations that mix historic objects with his creations in order to bring attention to the culture of nature. Many of the works he chose for this gallery deal with the apparatus of nature study, hunting, and collecting. Dion describes his outlook as realistic, acknowledging that there is little positive news about the environment's decline.



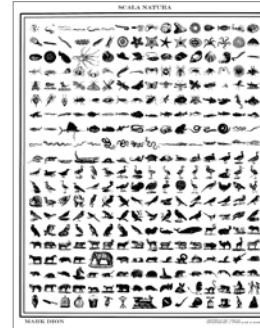
Blood Red Coral, 2013

Resin and assorted objects,
33 ¼ x 17 x 9 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles

This sculpture evokes a narrative that links the ocean's surface with its depths. It conjures an underwater cemetery for refuse that has sunk to the ocean floor and come to rest on red coral. The pedestal, however, indicates a newfound environment for the coral skeleton, which may now sit in a museum or a cabinet of curiosity. The symbolic objects hanging from the coral's limbs invite us to imagine what type of collection this may be: a decorative storage device, a catchall for discarded things, or a symbolic reflection of its collector?

Dion brings our attention to the haunting practice of recasting living things as trophies for ornament and bragging rights. In this case it illustrates what he calls "oceanocide," the destruction of the sea by pillaging its resources. This mournful assemblage reminds us that a collection is formed through acts of colonial conquest. The object of wonder has been taken from the sea and rendered lifeless for another use, with indifference to the environmental consequences. The title *Blood Red Coral* also references the ironic symbolism placed on red coral. Some cultures believe red coral aid in blood circulation and benefits heart function when worn as a gem.



Scala Natura, 2008

Offset color lithography,
50 ½ x 40 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles

This print exemplifies Dion's critique of the systems invented for organizing natural history. Translating to "ladder of nature" *Scala Natura* refers to the classification scheme proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Also known as "The Great Chain of Being," the conceptual scale organized living things with plants and inanimate matter at the bottom and mankind at the top. This hierarchy, Dion explains, "justified the domination of nature and of people over other people, and it makes that domination feel God-given, the natural order of things."

While Aristotle ranked the world's elements from least to most significant, Dion's grid-like composition posits a less hierarchical structure and, in a sense, turns the historical ladder on its head. Dion's images guide the viewer on a narrative journey beginning with microorganisms and sea life, followed by insects and creatures that swim, crawl, fly, and walk. Near the bottom, Adam and Eve (appropriated from a 1504 print by Albrecht Dürer) appear near man-made objects and tools, perhaps suggesting humans' attempts to master nature. The last item, a metronome, marks time at a selected rate by producing a regular, audible tick. By ending on this device, Dion points to the variability of how humans organize and measure time.



Selection of images from *Apparatus, 2018*

Portfolio book containing 20 drawings and packet of insect pins, 7¼ x 7¼ x ¾ in. (portfolio); 5⅞ x 5⅞ in. (sheet)

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

In this portfolio Dion trains our eyes on the tools of the naturalist, encouraging us to consider the implications of how they are used. The artist knows these scientific instruments intimately from his experience stepping into the role of historic naturalists, including William Beebe (1992), Alfred Russel Wallace (1994), Alexander Wilson (1999), and William Bartram (2008), to create installations inspired by their pursuits.

Some of the items Dion depicts aid in wayfinding, measuring, and observing nature. At the same time, these tools can be used to disarm, capture, and preserve nature. While Enlightenment-era expeditions sought to classify unknown terrains, they also contributed to a process of colonial settlement that ultimately displaced native people, spread slavery, and negatively impacted wildlife.

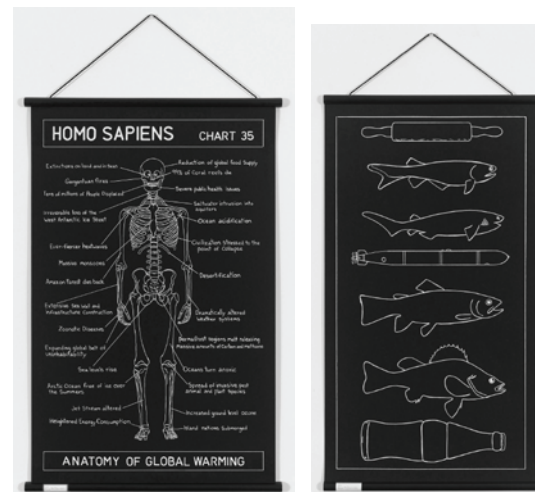


Chart 35, *Anatomy of Global Warming, 2021*

1 color screen print on Iris book cloth, stained maple dowels and screenprinted label 32¹¹/₁₆ x 20 ¼ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

Marine World, 2021

1 color screen print on Iris book cloth, stained maple dowels and screenprinted label 32 ¾ x 17 ¾ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

In his recent work, Dion continues to explore formats like charts and timelines that serve as conceptual maps for ideas about art, nature, and culture. The white on black color scheme of *Chart 35, Anatomy of Global Warming* and *Marine World* alludes to the chalkboards used to teach school children, which have been largely replaced by whiteboards and screen technology. In these charts, Dion imparts to his viewers lessons which were not of much concern when he was in elementary school, but are necessary for the next generation to understand: the effects of global warming and the changing contents of our oceans.



A World in a Box, 2015

Set of 27 prints; lithography, cyanotype, digital, screen print, etching, letterpress and woodcut in a custom-made oak wood storage box with etching / letterpress cover image (on lid) and lithograph inventory list (inside lid), 13 1/8 x 10 3/16 x 1 1/8 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

Dion characterizes his projects as “not really about nature but rather they are about ideas about nature.” Like his friend and fellow artist James Prosek, he questions the ways in which humans have attempted to understand nature by breaking it down into units or systems for convenient comprehension. Appropriating historical prototypes, as well as creating his own, *A World in a Box* offers ironic, humorous, and metaphorical charts about the study of nature and how it interfaces with other forms of culture, including histories of science, art, and the humanities. Throughout, the artist reminds audiences that the concept of nature is an inherently subjective and anthropocentric (human-focused) construct, as is our understanding of it.

Some of Dion’s diagrams illustrate natural specimens as devices for qualification or measurement, and others comment on humans’ careless treatment of nature’s resources. For example, the cross-section of a tree trunk’s growth rings serves as a timeline for significant historical events, but the artist notes that its life was ended to serve the trivial purpose of a picnic table. By adding that coda, Dion suggests how paradoxical it is that we cut down trees in order to sit among them.



Still Life in Black and White, 2022

Ceramic penguin, tar, metal bucket, various dime store trinkets, and costume jewelry
48 x 12 ¼ x 12 ¼ in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles

Earlier in his career, Dion used real animals and taxidermy in his work, but more recently he employs imitations. This shift interrogates the difference between specimens and sculpture, and our fascination with authenticity. Dion problematizes these issues in regards to natural history museum displays. Visitors enter such institutions to encounter something “real,” but the “official story” of nature has been constructed from a human perspective shaped by colonialism and capitalism. Many of the specimens were taken from other cultures. Putting them on display in a museum transforms them into objects for consumption, where capital is created through ticket sales.

Dion explains that one of the features that distinguishes humans from other species “is the ability to transform environments to fit our requirements. This skill has changed the face of the planet.” The artist alludes to this transformation with a penguin seated in a bucket of tar and trinkets. The trinkets gesture to the practice of collecting (including Dion’s own approach to artmaking) and the fate of man-made objects on this earth. Tar comes from a chemical process called destructive distillation. It involves heating or partially burning organic materials like coal, wood (in industrialized forests), extracted petroleum, and peat. Despite its organic origin, the tar symbolizes man’s negligent treatment of nature; following oil spills, tar balls pollute waters and wash up on beaches, harming wildlife.



Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered (equipment), 2008

Tarp, hand nets, wood cases, leaf presses, hand tools, nature books, and maps, 17 x 90 ½ x 65 in.

Courtesy of the artist
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles

For an exhibition at Bartram’s Garden in Philadelphia, Dion retraced artist-naturalist William Bartram’s 18th-century exploratory journey from the Carolinas to Northern Florida using his travel journals, drawings, and maps. Navigating by car instead of horseback (with the help of artist Dana Sherwood), Dion collected plant and animal specimens, water samples, and thousands of objects. These were shipped back to the museum to be part of an exhibition in the historic home of John Bartram, the famous botanist and father of William. Of course, the landscape had changed drastically since William traversed it in the 1770s. In place of marshes and forests, Dion and Sherwood encountered suburban real estate developments, theme parks, and highways. Some of the equipment for Dion’s expedition seems as if it could have served as models for the *Apparatus* drawings installed nearby.



Brandywine Conservancy Ranger Station, 2021

Colored pencil on paper,
9 x 12 in. (unframed)

Courtesy of the artist
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles

In July 2021, Dion visited the Brandywine River Museum of Art to familiarize himself with the site and develop a new site-specific work for the *Fragile Earth* exhibition. The Museum planned to commission one of Dion's follies, a decorative architectural form first created for 18th-century European gardens. The artist has drawn on the tradition to produce a range of structures that invite viewers to peer inside and imagine narratives that he suggests through carefully arranged objects. Dion began to develop a folly for the Brandywine with this drawing in response to the site's unique history and landscape. *The Melancholy Marine Biologist* (2017–18 at Storm King) was one of the models for the experience Dion hoped to bring to Chadds Ford.

Sadly, in September 2021, the Brandywine region was devastated by the remnants of Hurricane Ida, causing torrential rains and record flooding that impacted 10 buildings across campus. The site on which Dion planned to build his station was also under nearly 18 feet of water, bringing an unfortunate end to the commission. "A lot of my work is quite melancholy," Dion has said. "It's organized around a sense of mourning in relationship to environmental concerns." Indeed, melancholy is inherent in the potential of this drawing, whose realization was postponed due to a catastrophic natural event. Still, the folly's optimistic flag signals hope that the Brandywine Conservancy will one day have its ranger station.



Hunting Standards (Felt), 2012

Set of 4 silkscreen prints on
colored felt, 20 x 23½ in (framed)

Courtesy of the artist
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles

Dion produced these prints for a series of exhibitions called *Concerning Hunting*, in which he examined "hunting as a cultural practice that is rich in traditions, passionately pursued, and highly controversial." Motivated by the sport's fundamental contradiction—that the price for documenting and understanding nature most often comes at the cost of killing animals—the artist's goal for the project was to walk a tightrope between the positions of animal rights activists and those of hunters, as he himself empathizes with both sides. One can imagine the banner-like images adorning hunting lodges filled with trophies. While they evoke flags of conquest, their cartoon-like style introduces an element of irony. Dion asks viewers to consider the significance of the hunting tradition, and why humans have felt endowed with the right to inflict violence on other species.



New England Cabinet of Marine Debris (Lyme Art Colony), 2019

Wood, metal, plastic and found debris, Lyme Art Colony artifacts
103 ½ x 50 ½ x 25 ¾ in.

Florence Griswold Museum,
Purchase

Dion feels most inspired to “make work in relationship to place.” Following his first visit to the Florence Griswold Museum, he proposed creating this cabinet of debris. Equal parts performance, documentation, and environmental clean-up, Dion and his assistants traversed the New England coast to gather rubbish washed up on the shores. The refuse was cleaned and categorized like cherished relics.

The display references the 16th- and 17th-century European *Wunderkammer*, or cabinets of wonder, which housed exotic objects. The artist’s modern cabinet echoes the historical tradition of presenting objects according to aesthetic similarities. Dion explains that many of these castoffs are attractive because they were originally designed to appeal to consumers. The bleached and mangled condition of these pollutants generates endless questions about their origins: Where did they come from? How long were they lost? Who did this debris belong to, or could it have been mine? While these once-new plastics can symbolize a capitalist domination over nature by their artificiality, their patina now suggests nature’s response. What does our treatment of the environment reveal about what our culture values?

Knowing Dion’s deep interest in history and archeology, the Florence Griswold Museum shared with him remnants collected during excavations that recovered artifacts from the Lyme Art Colony once based on its grounds, as well as marine debris that continues to emerge from the nearby Lieutenant River. The resulting cabinet displays discarded objects of New England’s past and present in order to encourage contemplation of what types of “curiosities” we’re leaving for future generations, and what legacies.



300 Million Years of Flight, 2012

Screen print on paper, 32 x 26 in.

Collection of Tanya Bonakdar

Dion’s work often investigates the visual representation of nature. Here he uses silhouettes to illustrate the history of flight. As a tool of depiction, the silhouette has a long and culturally varied history. It retains close ties to the mythological origin of art. Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History* (ca. 77–79 AD) that art “originated in tracing lines round the human shadow.” In the 19th century, profile portraits cut from black paper became economical and easily-reproduced alternatives to painted portraits.

Within the context of natural history, silhouettes are used as illustrative keys to dioramas in natural history museums, and as devices for field guide artists who advocated for identifying species from afar without killing them. In a different way, the military utilizes silhouettes to identify flying aircrafts. While nature and culture are often seen as separate, Dion’s composition levels those differences by emphasizing what these silhouettes have in common—the ability to fly. His juxtaposition of dinosaurs, planes, birds, and missiles points to how nature and culture must share the sky.



Selection of field guides by Mark Dion

Collection of the artist

Over his career Dion has authored numerous publications, some of which take the form of field guides, each customized to suit a unique project. They can include timelines, historical essays, written dialogues, maps, photographs, illustrations of native plants and animals, or descriptions of the artist's work. The texts are often infused with Dion's humor, irony, and wit, making for a fun read. More than a mere record of Dion's installation, each guide encourages the reader to engage in an authentic experience of a particular place.

Mark Dion with Reiner Speck and Gerhard Theewen, *Theatrum Mundi*, 1997

Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett, *The Ladies' Field Club of York*, 1999

Mark Dion and Anne Wehr, ed., *Field Guide to the Wildlife of Madison Square Park: Mark Dion's Urban Wildlife Observation Unit*, 2002

Mark Dion and Lisa Corrin, Ivona Kaczynski, and Renée Devine, eds., *Field Guide to the Wildlife of Mark Dion's Seattle Vivarium: Olympic Sculpture Park*, 2007

Mark Dion with Bergit Arends, ed., *Handbook: Mark Dion – Systema Metropolis Handbook*, 2007

Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett, *Mildred's Lane*, 2007

Mark Dion, *The Mobile Gull Appreciation Unit*, 2008

Mark Dion with Petra Kralickova, ed., *Field Guide to Ohio University Collections*, 2009

Mark Dion, *A Baker's Dozen for the Goose Tower*, 2010



Mark Dion, *Field Guide, Buffalo Bayou Invasive Plant Eradication Unit: A Mark Dion Project*, 2011

Mark Dion, *An Illustrated Guide to the Oceanomania, Cabinet and Exhibition of Mark Dion at the Oceanographic Museum and Aquarium of Monaco*, 2011

Mark Dion with Ethan Hauser, ed., *A Field Guide and Handbook of Thoughts, Musings, Observations, Case Studies, and Histories (Alternative, Conventional and Otherwise) on the Elevated Structure Formerly and Now Known as the High Line of the Borough of Manhattan for Flâneurs, Cosmopolitans, and Bon Vivants*, 2013

Mark Dion with Jenks Society for Lost Museums, ed., *A Brief Guide to The Lost Museum*, 2014

Mark Dion with Jill Shaw, ed., *Mark Dion: Phantom Museum Wonder Workshop*, 2015

Mark Dion with Lisa-ann Gershwin, ed., *The Trouble with Jellyfish: A Mark Dion Project*, 2015

Mark Dion, *The Wondrous Museum of Nature*, 2016

Mark Dion with Lily Benedict, ed., *Field Guide to Dr. Fairchild's Kampong Laboratory with notes on the surrounding garden and flora*, 2016

Mark Dion, *The Undisciplined Collector*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 2017

Mark Dion and Christine Heidemann, *Collectors Collected*, 2018

Mark Dion with Earle Havens and Lisa Skogh, eds., *A Field Guide to Curiosity: A Mark Dion Project*, 2019



Jennifer Angus: Wistful Wild

Jennifer Angus (b. 1961) works with preserved insects as her medium, pinning them to walls in ornamental patterns reminiscent of textiles or wallpaper, and arranging them in poses under glass domes or in cabinet drawers. A professor of Design Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Angus creates installations of surprising beauty while also informing audiences of insects' importance to the ecosystem. They pollinate food crops, control parasites and predators, produce silk, dyes, and honey, and decompose matter back into the soil.

An artist-naturalist in the modern era, Angus collects her specimens in an ecologically sound manner, obtaining many from insect farms and reusing and repairing them over decades. She considers them “ambassadors for their species” working to raise awareness about the importance of preservation. While none of the species she uses are endangered, their forest habitats have been gravely diminished by humans. Inspired by history, Angus’s narrative fantasies open a window on this reality by encouraging viewers to reconsider their ideas about insects as well as our own consumption of natural resources. Angus aims to generate empathy by imposing order on the perceived chaos of nature—the conversion from “pest” to gem occurs through the power of design.

Inspired by the Brandywine

History, narrative, and fantasy play important roles in Jennifer Angus's work. Her most significant inspiration comes from the Victorian period, an era of great collecting when styles from across the globe were layered into incredibly designed, eclectic interiors. Finding excitement in contrasting patterns, the artist prefers historic interiors as venues for commissions. Angus visited the Brandywine River Museum of Art and toured the Wyeths' studios and Kuerner Farm for inspiration for this gallery's design.



She was most drawn to the wallpaper in the second floor children's bedroom at the Andrew Wyeth Studio and decided to incorporate the repeating pattern into her dedicated gallery space by reproducing the floral motif. Angus punctuated the pattern with framed half-dome vignettes of insects. Surrounding the frames are cicadas pinned in geometric, concentric circles. The artist also superimposed some of her favorite Victorian book illustrations of anthropomorphized insects randomly on the wallpaper. These illustrations of insects acting as humans alludes to N. C. Wyeth's career as an illustrator. A published novelist, Angus shares this love of storytelling with the Wyeth family.

In contrast to the orderly geometry of Angus's insect arrangements on the patterned wallpaper, a "swarm" of cicadas has landed in one area. It serves as a reminder that despite the artist's fantasy, nature can never be truly harnessed, though humans may attempt to control it.



A table contains a group of glowing jelly jars filled with "insect preserves," creating a golden ambience. To concoct them, Angus used natural colorants such as hibiscus, lavender and marigold along with sugar and pectin. An insect was inserted into each jar and sealed with beeswax. The process references global cooking traditions to preserve food, as well as scientific methods of specimen study. Some of Angus's examples feature honey rather than jelly, which adds a sweet aroma that perfumes the surrounding space. The small paper labels on the jar lids reveal the Latin names of the insect species inside, as well as the date scientists gave those names.

The room's centerpiece is the magnificent table built with drawers from the cabinet of curiosities that Angus created during her residency at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut. At the FloGris, the artist asked her audience to imagine that Lyme Colony artists had filled the drawers of an old hardware cabinet as a collaborative contribution to a party. Peering into each of the drawers reveals episodic fantasies of insects reading miniature books, playing games, making meals of other insects, contemplating mysterious keys, and conversing with taxidermied toads. The anthropomorphism of the insects,



ensconced as they are in the artist's drawers, domes, or pinned to walls, functions on multiple levels. The artist hopes that audiences' encounters with the beautiful insects as beings generates empathy for these species which do us so much good, but to whom we have not returned the favor.

Ambassadors for their Species

Angus collects insect specimens in an ecologically sound manner, obtaining many from insect farms, primarily in Malaysia, Madagascar, and Papua New Guinea. She reuses and repairs them as often as possible. Insects' forest habitats have been under assault for decades. As Angus has written, "Forests play second fiddle to human demands for agriculture and urbanization. Intellectually we recognize that forests are the lungs of the planet but not enough is being done to protect this precious resource. Virtually every insect on the endangered species list is there because of loss of habitat."

The artist hopes that her audience's experience with her work will inspire consideration of their own behavior and its impact on the environment, prompting them to become involved in conservation efforts, such as rain forest protection projects.

Insects are most commonly associated with unsanitary conditions, disease, intrusion, or destruction—like biting fleas, mosquitos, textile-eating moths, or wood-eating termites. Angus takes these much-disliked species and seeks to rehabilitate their reputation, transforming them with her skills of selection, arrangement, and narrative creativity. Angus recognizes that it is easier for activists to garner attention for larger endangered species like whales, or cuddly looking tigers that remind us of domesticated pets. She encourages us to ask "who will look out for the importance of smaller species?"—the less-traditionally loveable animals, like bees, which have a reputation for stinging people, but serve as the world's most important pollinator of food crops? It is estimated that one third of the food we consume each day relies on pollination by bees and other insects, as well as birds and bats. As one scientist put it, "They are the invisible force working throughout the world to keep it running." Without insects our ecosystem would literally collapse (and some argue it is already collapsing), but despite our dependence on insects, consider how they are treated—as pests and villains. Angus's fantasies open a window onto this reality of nature by inviting viewers to reconsider their ideas about insects as well as our own consumption of natural resources. For Jennifer Angus and those exposed to her art, insects become ornaments and emissaries for environmental protection.

For the Love of Ornament

In characterizing her artistic practice, Jennifer Angus acknowledges, “my first love is pattern,” and adds that for someone like her, “there is no such thing as too much pattern.” This passion is reflected on the gallery walls of the Brandywine, where Angus has installed her insects on top of the Wyeth family’s domestic wallpaper. Rings of cicadas from Thailand are juxtaposed with rows of clear-wing cicadas from Malaysia below the wainscoting, which forms its own “insect wallpaper.” Angus first began using insects to form patterns in 2002, in a storefront gallery in the Queen Street West area of Toronto. She remembers passersby pausing to peer into the windows and exclaim, “I see the wallpaper but where is the art?” These encounters inspired her descriptive term for the work. She watched unsuspecting visitors enter the gallery, step close to the wall, and then (surprise!) quickly take a step back.

There is a tension in Angus’s work, between the beauty and order of her pattern, and our culturally ingrained fear of and anxiety toward insects. Insects, she explains, are usually the last thing we want to encounter in our homes. Taking them out of their natural outdoor environment, the artist places these creatures in a domestic context where such species are prohibited, and where humans often take extreme measures to keep them out, by spraying pesticides or chasing them with fly swatters. However, for Angus and those who encounter her art, insects become ornament.

As E. H. Gombrich has observed in his classic study on the psychology of decorative art, “It is the contrast between disorder and order that alerts our perception,” and creates a sense of wonder. Part of humans’ fear of insects is their invasion of our space, when they swarm around our heads or attempt to make a home in our home. Here Angus presents them in a manner in which they occupy our space but in a controlled and unthreatening way. Pinning them to the wall in an ordered, aesthetically pleasing design, the artist hopes viewers will be amazed, emotionally moved, and receptive to altering their perception of the insect world.

Cabinets of Curiosity

Cabinets of curiosity, which date to the Renaissance, have inspired Angus for decades and she has created several of her own. In addition to examples in this gallery’s central table (created at the FloGris, which has 104 total drawers), the drawers along the peripheral walls come from a cabinet of 170 drawers. Many drawers contain anthropomorphized insects who act out narratives for viewers to interpret. In relation to the exhibition’s theme, certain insects study natural history. They read books on the topic, peer into specimen cases, or stand surrounded by miniature bell jars.

Some of the recurring characters in Angus’s work who perform this task are her “cicada ladies.” These matrons are made with the head of a cicada, the arms of a grasshopper, and a dress cast from beeswax. Angus explains that cicada ladies, which appear throughout her oeuvre, hold a kind of power





over their worlds, where they are always in charge and are usually engaged in learning or teaching. In some ways they evoke the personality of Professor Angus herself (who teaches textile design at the University of Wisconsin-Madison), metamorphized into the guise of insect matriarch.

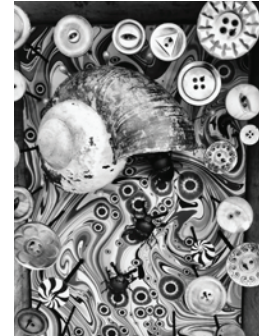
Other drawers allude to the degradation of the environment by human actions. In one vignette a stag beetle examines an antique pesticide sprayer, along with a can of “Red Wing Insect Powder,” whose label reads, “Destroys Flies.” Underneath the sprayer a makeshift grave contains the bodies of the beetle’s friends who have sadly succumbed to the poison. Beside them a ghostly plant matter (wild cucumber) has a skeleton-like, memento mori quality, alluding to the preciousness of life and the impending threat of death.



Some drawers feature insects travelling through forests of burned matches or candles, which represent deforestation by wildfire, as well as the planet’s slow incineration caused by global warming.

Angus extends that symbolism by placing miniature burned books throughout the drawers. In one sense they recall historical instances of book-burning used to suppress knowledge or dissent. In Angus’s cabinet, the books are symbols of knowledge that have been ignored and thus continue to burn up. The artist describes how many people understand the environmental crisis, but they remain in denial of the reports and put their heads in the sand.

Overwhelming evidence supports the fact that climate change is real and human actions contribute significantly to these changes, but the public often turns a blind eye. The matches placed near the burned books also symbolize the fossil fuels that cause our atmosphere and oceans waters to warm, generating an enormous threat to this planet.



Angus’s insect narratives seek to alter public opinion about insects and alert audiences to the fact that life will need to adapt to future conditions without them. To combat insect extinction, the artist advocates for preservation, mindfulness of consumption, and actions which honor all life on Earth, including insects.



**BRANDYWINE
RIVER MUSEUM
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