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# LIFE REFINED

living life well

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# FISH out of WATER

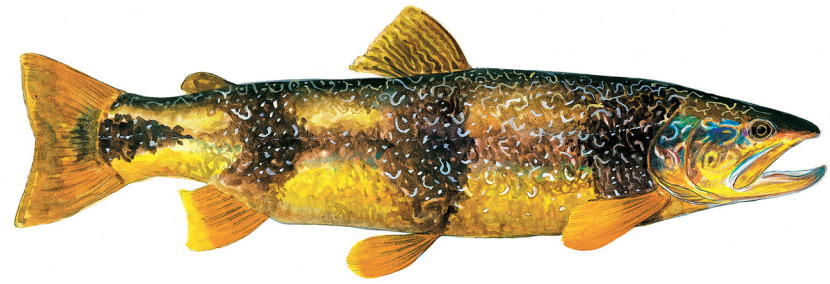
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By Dena Roché

James Prosek has been compared to John James Audubon, the 19th century naturalist painter, but another equally accurate parallel to draw would be to Leonardo Da Vinci.

Da Vinci ushered in the concept of the Renaissance Man in the 15th century, and in the 21st century Prosek carries on that tradition.

An artist, writer, naturalist, filmmaker, musician and philanthropist, Prosek has accomplished more in 39 years than most do in a lifetime. For people who think they don't have enough time in their day, Prosek proves you wrong.



Marble Trout (*Salmo fontinalis marmonatus*) Currier.  
 James Prosek 29 October 2002  
 Easton, CT. A beautiful autumn day  
 rebuild part of the spine with red ink.  
 This is an exceptional specimen of spawning marble trout with  
 vibrant, caught by fishermen in tributary  
 of Stone River, Connecticut.

Prosek got started early in life drawing the birds his father loved when he was just four-years-old. At age nine, a friend took him fishing and he was instantly hooked.

“One day he took me to a stream and I caught my first Native Brook Trout and thought it was the most beautiful thing I had seen,” Prosek says.

That fish spawned the central theme of everything Prosek now does, no matter the medium.

“When I was a kid my passion for these fish was so profound and so intense,” he says, “it was very odd in a way. I fell for the colors.”

Trout became Prosek’s muse. As a child, Prosek continued to draw and paint; he tried to learn more about the species, but realized there was no book in the local Easton, Connecticut library about trout. “I wrote to wildlife departments around the country to find people who studied trout and it became clear that no two biologists could even agree how many trout there were,” Prosek says. “It taught me that creatures don’t fit into nice, neat boxes.”

Disappointed with the lack of research available on trout, Prosek started creating the book himself when he was just 11-years-old. He published “Trout: An Illustrated History”, when he was 19, which features 70 species and varieties of trout, beautifully illustrated in highly detailed watercolors. Prosek traveled to see many of the fish and capture their brilliance as they emerged right out of the water, before losing their natural

luster. The result is vibrant, captivating paintings, each of which reflects Prosek’s experience with the fish.

Today, stream and marine life continue to influence Prosek’s work. His new book, due out in 2016 or 2017, is about how we assign language to objects in the natural world.

“This book is a top priority,” he says. “I have very distinct ideas I want to get out there about how we try to create order and structure where it doesn’t exist.”

Let’s add philosopher to the list of Prosek’s talents. He credits the 12 years he spent working on another book, simply titled “Eels”, for teaching him this very Zen attitude.

“The eel lives in a pond by my house, but they spawn in the Sargasso Sea thousands of miles away. No one has ever witnessed them spawning in the wild. The eel connects my pond to this giant eddy in the middle of the ocean. I want to express to people that what we do in our backyard effects the world. It’s all tied together.”

Prosek is currently working on an exhibition examining the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, slated to open in 2016 at the Buffalo Bill Center in Wyoming and designed to encourage people to think of nature as something fluid, interconnected and changing.

“Animals don’t stay inside the park just because we created arbitrary boundaries,” he says. “To communicate, we chop things into pieces and give names to things and that gives a false impression.”



Beach Rose (*Rosa rugosa*) with rose hips  
 Cape Cod

Atlantic Cod (*Gadus morhua*) Chatham, Mass

Scallop & Eastern mussel  
 Cape Cod

James Prosek 2011





Eel Impressions, 2014. Watercolor on paper



Elephant, 2014. Oil, acrylic and mixed media on panel

It's ironic that Prosek believes that trying to communicate about nature is part of the problem, since everything he does falls in the realm of this necessary communication.

"Eels" was the basis for a PBS miniseries called "The Mystery of Eels", and he has penned over ten books, most recently, "Ocean Fishes", where he traveled the world to see each species up close.

"I was there on the boat when the fish came out of the water and witnessed them in their living colors before they faded away," he says. "The colors of a living fish are very ephemeral. I traveled to west Africa [Cape Verde Islands] to see a big blue marlin, spent seven days on a swordfish boat off Nova Scotia to see a swordfish, went out on a harpoon boat to see a giant bluefin tuna... each fish has a story, some of which are recounted in the book."

Traveling and seeing marine life in their natural environment is a major way Prosek draws insight for his work. He spent seven years journeying through Europe and Asia to bring his book, "Trout of the World" to life.

Prosek has also written for The New York Times and National Geographic, and released four CDs with his band, Troutband.

And of course there is his art. Because for all his accomplishments Prosek considers himself first and foremost a visual artist. He recently completed a mural for the Smithsonian American Art Museum's "The Singing in Silence: Birds in Contemporary Art" exhibit, which was on display through February, as well as a mural for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the largest bird lab in the world. This

year, he has exhibitions slated at the Vero Beach Museum of Art in Florida; the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh; the Leslie Feely gallery in New York and a continuing exhibition through March, 2015, at the Peggy Notebeart Nature Museum in Chicago. Over the years, Prosek's work has been exhibited everywhere from New York to Paris to Ghana and many points in between. His vivid watercolors almost make the wildlife leap off the canvas, and his early love of the colors on fish is evident in his work that is so saturated with color the subjects sometimes appear to be 3D.

Prosek has said that he sees his own reflection in the fish, so it's not surprising such a dynamic personality would create high-energy art.

The artist, Prosek, is also very much like Audubon in his sense of conserving, protecting and helping that which he loves. In 2004 after a meeting in Yellowstone with Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard, the two co-founded World Trout, an organization that raises money for cold water habitat conservation. Through putting his art on T-shirts, the foundation has raised about \$700,000, doled out to grassroots organizations where \$20,000 can make or break a project.

"It's nice to see art doing good," Prosek says.

While the child Prosek drew inspiration from his surroundings, the adult Prosek continues to draw from the same well, living just two doors away from his boyhood home in Easton, and working in an onsite studio that used to be a one-room schoolhouse.

The only difference is that today it seems Prosek is the teacher and we the public are his grateful students. 