

James Prosek:  
*Contra Naturam / Against Nature*

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COVER:  
JAMES PROSEK  
*Roseate Spoonbill, Everglades*, 2016  
Acrylic and oil on panel  
60 x 30 x 2 inches  
Courtesy of Ann Jackson and Ken Wilson  
© James Prosek

# James Prosek: *Contra Naturam* / Against Nature



FIGURE 1 William Blake (England, 1757-1827), "The Tyger," from *Songs of Experience* (1794).

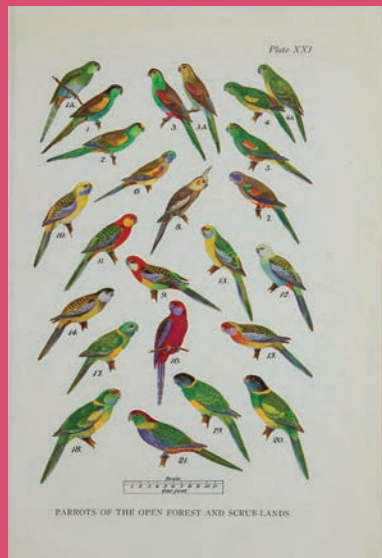


FIGURE 2 Neville W. Cayley (Australia, 1886-1950), *What bird is that? A guide to the birds of Australia* (Plate XXI), 1947. Museums Victoria.

*Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night:  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

— William Blake

Inspired by the work of 18th- and 19th-century writers, artists, naturalists, philosophers, and scientists, James Prosek (b. 1975) mines notions of taxonomy and naming to better understand humanity's fundamental impulse to create order from chaos. Nowhere is this compulsion clearer than in the 18th-century Enlightenment's insistence on the power of reason to cure many, if not all, of society's ills—including corruption, greed, exploitation, and war—thereby creating a more just, equitable, and peaceable world. We know, of course, that this experiment in rationality (which culminated in the Age of Revolution) failed. But we also recognize that the enterprise left many important legacies in its wake, including the Linnean system of classification. A hierarchical naming protocol established in the latter half of the 18th century by the Swedish botanist, zoologist, and physician Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) and used globally to this day, this methodology delineates and communicates Nature's vast and rich diversity according to kingdoms, classes, orders, families, genera, and species. It is also an entirely contrived scheme. These interests are foregrounded in *Contra Naturam*, which features images of a natural—and named—world, inflected by colonialism, globalism, consumerism, consumption, and ecological degradation.

Prosek's site-specific murals depicting silhouettes of South Florida's native flora and fauna are paradigmatic in this regard (plate 1). Far from being slavish interpretations of Everglades wildlife, they are cunning references to "old school" field guides and dioramas; instructional tools that, as wholly

manmade constructs, subvert the natural world through humanity's conventions of classification and naming (fig. 2). The perceptive viewer will note, for example, that the identifying numbers Prosek has assigned each creature have no corresponding key and, by definition, reference nothing. As such, the expected progression of knowledge generation and dissemination is up-ended, reminding us that instructional texts and displays—as well as the Linnean system—are reductive and static. The natural world, on the other hand, is dynamic and ever-changing.

Prosek's compelling silhouettes also contextualize his more direct interpretations of Nature, above all his fish of the Florida Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Beautifully rendered, these works are painted on paper painstakingly stained by the artist with tea; a technique that imbues the resulting works with a (fictional) aura of age, authority, and authenticity (plates 2-6). Prosek surrounds these creatures with harmonizing elements that reference their natural environments and give us a portal into their existence. The animals' presentations—positioned as they are like taxidermy specimens pinned to a board—however, snaps this window firmly shut and telegraphs a message of inscrutable remoteness. This same distancing is achieved through the pyramidal configuration of the works' elements. A pictorial convention more typically associated with Renaissance paintings depicting scenes from the Bible or ancient history (fig. 3), such an arrangement gives Prosek's fish a inert stillness while simultaneously infusing them with a hieratic, almost otherworldly presence. In marked contrast to the solemnity of Prosek's fish pieces (which could justifiably be classified as still lifes), his images of non-native species—including pythons, tigers, and leopards—encourage us to visualize a hypothetical future, pondering the resiliency as well as the fragility of the natural world (plates 8, 9, 11, and 14). Thus, exotic creatures prowl the Everglades' paludal shores, where they also engage one another



FIGURE 3 Raphael (Italy, 1483-1520), *Madonna del Cardellino* ("Madonna of the Goldfinch"), 1506-06. Oil on wood. 42 in × 30 inches. Uffizi Gallery.



FIGURE 4 George Stubbs (British, 1724-1806), *Horse Frightened by Lion*, 1762-68. Oil on canvas. 27.75 x 41 inches. Yale Center for British Art.

in battle, inevitably bringing to mind the British painter George Stubbs's subtly allegorical paintings of warring beasts, which symbolically pit emotion against reason (fig. 4).

Completing *Contra Naturam* is a selection of Prosek's new three-dimensional work, including an orchid "shadow box" (plate 13). Inspired by the dioramas the artist grew up seeing at Yale University's Peabody Museum of Natural History and reminiscent of the avant-garde boxes of American artist Joseph Cornell (1903-72), this small-scale work presents a lush micro-environment sculpted in clay and painted with breath-taking virtuosity. An internal light source further enhances the piece and transports the viewer to a diachronic world, in which time and space collapse in on themselves. Through these works we are reminded that, though James Prosek is deeply invested in the environment, he is not a conservationist or a preservationist *per se*. Rather, he is an artist who uses his creative output to explore humanity and the natural world—framing the Tyger's "fearful symmetry"—while also engaging with 20th- and 21st-century artistic practice.

On behalf of the Lowe Art Museum, I would like to extend my deepest thanks to James Prosek for his

tireless commitment to the success of this important project. I am equally indebted to Kendrick Wilson and Ann Jackson as well as Erik and Casey Waldin for so generously lending works to *Contra Naturam*. Thanks are also due to Waqas Wajahat and the Milton and Sally Avery Art Foundation for their generosity as well as to the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, and the Miami-Dade Mayor and Board of Commissioners for their essential support. A partner of the Lowe's for over six decades, Beaux Arts also played a pivotal role in making this show possible, for which I am most grateful. My final thanks are reserved for President Julio Frenk, Provost Jeffrey Duerk, and Dean Leonidas Bachas for their support of our Mission and Vision as well as for my extraordinary team at the Lowe for their unwavering commitment to excellence.

**Jill Deupi JD PhD**

Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator  
Lowe Art Museum  
University of Miami

## Paradise Lost ?

### JAMES PROSEK

South Florida has become an unintentional and fascinating ecological experiment. Nearly every organism that is released into this fertile climate—from stowaways on cargo ships to escaped pets—seems to thrive, much to the chagrin of conservationists, who are trying to preserve habitats for native species.

The Burmese Python, for instance, has become a scourge in the Everglades since it was first introduced only decades ago. These predators can grow to seventeen feet long, at which point they can swallow small deer and alligators whole. They are changing the ecology of South Florida—but is there not some aspect of their tenacity and resilience that can be celebrated?

A herpetologist friend told me there are chameleons native to Madagascar that are breeding in South Florida. A few of these species may be endangered in their native habitats thousands of miles away. Ecologists have mixed feelings about them living in Florida. These chameleons are beautiful, but should they be there?

On a recent walk down a section of South Dixie Highway that runs parallel to UM's campus, I heard and then saw a group of beautiful blue and yellow Macaws. They were loud and flamboyant, like performers at Carnival. They are a transplant from Latin America but seem as at home here as they do in their native habitat in the Amazonian Rainforest. Seeing these birds made me think that, ecologically speaking at least, South Florida doesn't belong to North America—it belongs to the World. If you consider humans to be part of Nature, and if you acknowledge that we introduced these animals, then, it is, in a sense, is it not natural for these non-natives to be here?

Humans move and migrate; we always have, and always will. And when we migrate, we bring things with us. We domesticated the dog—though some would say that the dog (or more accurately, the wolf) domesticated us. Our ancestors brought dogs with them from Eastern Russia to Alaska over the Bering Land Bridge when they first colonized North America over 15,000 years ago. It is known from genetic analysis that, in turn, some of these domesticated dogs became feral and hybridized with wild wolves in the New World (all wolves with black fur, for instance, are hybrids with dogs). Does the fact that these creatures are impure make them any less beautiful, any less wondrous?

We use disparaging terms, such as "invasive species," to describe the creatures we have introduced, wittingly or unwittingly, to South Florida: But is that really fair? One cannot realistically blame the animals. As Darwin made clear, they (and we, if we are honest with ourselves) are hard-wired to adapt to changing conditions in order to survive. Nature was not neat and tidy in Darwin's eyes but, rather, a thicket of brambles, "a tangled bank."

Being sympathetic to non-native species is not a popular sentiment in conservation circles. I, myself, would most often defend the idea that the native species are always worth preserving at any cost. Still, I have struggled with these questions for much of my life.

In my first book, *Trout* (published in 1996, when I was a junior at Yale), I examined the tensions between native and non-native species of trout in waterways across America. Specifically, I was intrigued by the fact that humans introduced non-native trout to many rivers in the western United States and that those introduced fish, through hybridization with the natives and competition for habitat, spelled the end for many indigenous populations. To counteract this, a chemical called Rotenone (derived from a South American plant)



was often used to kill the introduced fish. Once the latter had been decimated, the native fish were re-introduced. Such efforts are often referred to as “restoration work” in conservation circles. Opponents have referred to such practices—including a recent campaign to cull two million feral cats in Australia—as “animal genocide.”

As I wrote more than two decades ago:

*We can't really reverse the incredible mixing that we've created in our haste to spread the beauty of the trout, and my hope is, simply, to raise awareness about which fish are native and which are not. The brown trout, though non-native, is one of my favorites; he is wild, however, and after a hundred years in our streams is almost as good as native. And since both my parents are immigrants, I'm just as "foreign" as the brown trout.*

Because my parents came from other countries, did that make them any less American? And what is American anyway?

It is questions such as these, as they pertain to both human and non-human animals, that have led me to a personal commitment to examining the words and terms we use to describe the natural world—how might those terms come to affect our perceptions of ourselves and everything around us?

What is natural? And what should be the goals of conservation? I am not sure there is only one answer, and my own thoughts and beliefs in the face of these questions change every day. I think we get stuck in words and expect too much from them.

Similarly, I ask myself—what is the role of the artist/naturalist today in this era where the questions seem to become more numerous and nuanced and more difficult to answer? And, just as potently—what can art

provide in this time when our earth is indeed looking vulnerable to rapid and regrettable change induced by human influence?

I sometimes look for answers in the stories from my childhood that I heard from family about the places they came from.

My father grew up in Brazil, where he fell in love with birds. It is through birds that he introduced me to the beauty and diversity of nature as a child growing up in Southern Connecticut. It was not hard to find an allegory for his conversion to North American from South American. My father's favorite birds—warblers—are, like him, tropical migrants: They spend their winters in Central and South America and in the summer migrate to New England to nest and feed in hardwood and pine forests from Connecticut to Maine. He had simply migrated like the birds he loved; but for him it was a one-way, rather than a roundtrip, journey.

When he came to this country at the age of twelve, he discovered his second and third loves: the sea and the night sky. His dream was to travel and live at sea. He trained in the Merchant Marines at Fort Schuyler (a maritime college in New York) and lived in Miami for a few years, where he was a port captain and part of 1960s South Florida Latin American transplant culture.

Although my childhood was firmly rooted in 1980s New England, inexplicable pieces of my father's upbringing in the tropics informed my emotional and aesthetic sensibilities in ways that I cannot quite articulate. I can remember being deeply affected by a watercolor of a palm tree that hung in our living room when I was a child. I do not know who painted it, but it had come from Brazil with my father and his family in the 1950s. I had never seen a palm tree in real life but, every time I passed that painting, I stopped and daydreamed about the place from which it, and my father, had come. I drew palm trees and macaws and



(left) Installation view; (right) Prosek painting mural with museum staff

other tropical birds, perhaps as a way of making sense of this other world where part of me, ancestrally, had been born.

My Brazilian grandmother, whom my sister and I were sure was crazy but now I now realize was simply in touch with something far deeper that greatly exceeded the grasp of our young minds, used to tell us stories about our family's experimentation with alternative spiritualities (syncretic religion). Our spiritual history, in which Nature was a protagonist, was an amalgam of African, Indigenous, and European traditions. Jesus, the Devil, polytheistic deities, dead animals, a spirit that had scratched my grandfather in Church and left visible marks, buried family photographs, and torrential rains were all characters in these stories my grandmother shared. There was no purity of culture here: The world stage was a great hybrid, intermingling thoughts and experiences through time, as people mixed and moved, in odd and wonderful ways.

The message, if one was to be had, was that the nature I inherited, as well as my personal history,

was messy. In general, my search has never been for neatness or order; my lifelong inquiry has been about acknowledging and finding ways to embrace, the nature of interconnectedness, of complexity.

Humans need to reduce complexity and impose order so as to communicate and navigate the world, but Nature will always trespass across the boundaries that we attempt to set upon it.

I am firmly convinced that the line between “natural” and “unnatural” does not exist. These are just words, after all. Sometimes I think we forget that the world is not comprised of words—we put them there.

**James Prosek**  
Easton, CT  
Spring 2019

# James Prosek: A Nomad Exquisite

MICHELE OKA DONER

*As the immense dew of Florida  
Brings forth  
The big-finned palm  
And green vine angering for life,*

*As the immense dew of Florida  
Brings forth hymn and hymn  
From the beholder,  
Beholding all these green sides  
And gold sides of green sides,*

*And blessed mornings,  
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,  
And lightning colors  
So, in me, come flinging  
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.*

— Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), "Nomad Exquisite,"  
(*Harmonium*, 1923)

James Prosek is an artist who carries the golden threads of Nature's tapestry in his hands. He is the inheritor of a long tradition that begins with the bird imagery of the great naturalist John James Audubon (1785-1851) and continues with the evocative studies of animal tracks and creatures of the forest undertaken by ecological advocate John Muir (1838-1914). Ultimately the projection of the primal and feral, tamed for the public eye, is realized with the popularization of access by the American naturalist, ornithologist, and artist Roger Tory Peterson (1908-96). The latter's remarkable field guides systemized birds and plants with simplified drawings of beaks and leaves: Even children could understand the graphic language and embrace the natural world with this toolbox.

Prosek's impressions of Nature add to and expand the works of these and other artists drawn to celebrate the magic that surrounds us daily and often, even mostly, unseen. He brings an additional ingredient—the voice of a poet—to the mix, and that voice flows through his instruments of choice: pencil and paint. Prosek's impressions of the Everglades for the Lowe Art Museum's exhibition *Contra Naturam/Against Nature* recall the wonder expressed by poet Wallace Stevens as he discovered "the eye of the young alligator" in his yearly explorations of Florida. Neither Prosek nor Stevens grew up in South Florida—the swampy Garden of Eden—so it is with adult discernments and full consciousness that they encountered a new world. They are, again in the words of Stevens, "nomads exquisite," commanding fully realized sensibilities.

This awareness is palpable in the works by Prosek created for *Contra Naturam*, above all his two masterful murals, which incorporate past and present into a projection of the future. Had Prosek set out twenty years ago to accomplish this recitation of flora and fauna, a hymn to the magnificent River of Grass teaming with life, it would have been impossible to include the ubiquitous and frighteningly huge Burmese Pythons. They are not only a symbolic totem

of the *Fall from Grace* but also, in reality, an epic capitulation. The Everglades always had its share of reptiles, including the Everglades rat snake, the Eastern mud snake, and the brown water snake (to name but a few): But then an unnatural act occurred. In August 1992 Hurricane Andrew came storming through South Miami, blowing the roof off of a pet store that carried non-indigenous species as it churned through our region. These creatures escaped into the surrounding landscape where there were no natural predators. Free to roam and invulnerable, pythons took to the mangroves, where they flourished. By the time they were noticed, it was too late. Now these Herculean snakes have proliferated beyond control. Is Prosek's work more than a hymn? Is it also an elegy for our Paradise Lost?

The Everglades were to native Miamians what Walden Pond was to Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) in rural Lincoln, Massachusetts. They provided an arena in the which the mind and soul could roam. The mystic hanging roots and lichens, the odor of decay, and the tangled unkemptness of its prelapsarian landscape fascinated the earlier inhabitants of South Florida. The unstoppable fires that periodically would rage across the wetlands in the hot dry months of summer caused consternation and wonder. Forces of nature provided inspiration and allowed imagination to flourish. Tigers in the Everglades? Prosek's fertile mind took the leap. It is interesting to observe that the artist, who still lives on the same street which he grew up in Connecticut, understands the thread of continuity, the psychic importance of inhaling the essence of the life-giving environment that opens our eyes and seduces our senses. His intense connection to his own fields and ponds informs his ability to dive into this body of work: Or, to use an even more intimate metaphor, Prosek engages the Everglades as one would a lover.

If the Everglades is Prosek's paramour, Nature is certainly his mentor. Many aspects of boyhood exploration, free and untethered, permeate his work and manifest exquisitely in the exhibition's preparatory drawings (figs. 1 and 2). Alligators lurk

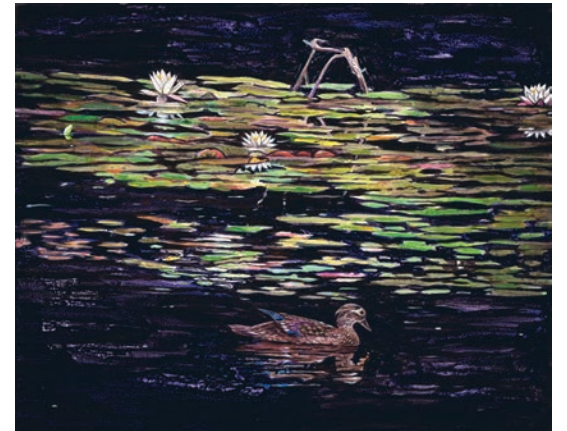


FIGURE 1 JAMES PROSEK, *Pond 1*

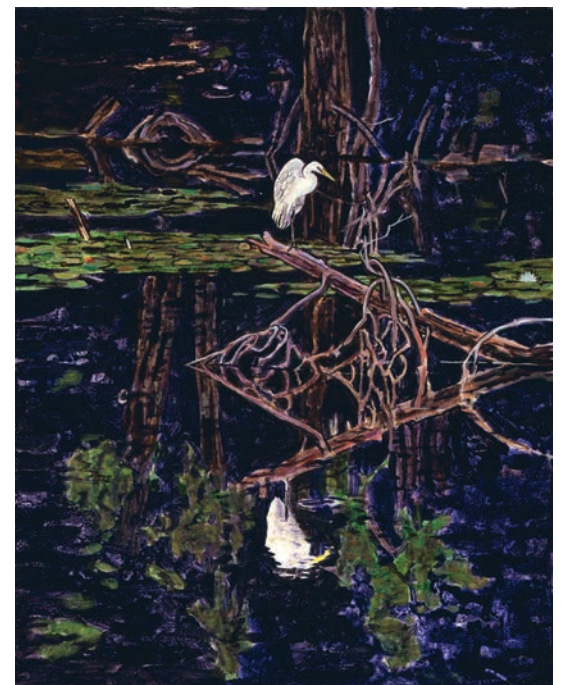


FIGURE 2 JAMES PROSEK, *Pond 2*



on mangroves roots with delicious tenacity. Claws grip pneumatophores and snouts are raised, primeval early warning systems. Moments like these evoke and arouse the timeless sensuality in us all. Another drawing, a Burmese python, grants us a cathartic closeness to an almighty danger. We cast a furtive gaze at something potentially lethal, safe in the knowledge that we can turn and walk away. We are disarmed and emboldened as, with a few strokes of the pencil, Prosek reduces the deadly snake to a loop of lovely textures.

In the duo *Pond I* and *Pond II* (figs. 1 and 2), the artist returns to one of his favorite and long-term companions: water. A self-described acolyte, Prosek has spent countless hours absorbed by the mysteries of light, reflections, and the ever-changing necessity of the reality of what it means to be fluid. In *Pond I* he centers the painting with a floating duck, visualized both above the water line and seen in reflection. Then Prosek lifts the composition with the radiance of two blooming water lilies adrift among the aura of floating leaves. In *Pond II* his white egret, an iconic symbol of the Everglades, casts its shadow to stunning effect into the murky slough, a silent sound.

Prosek is hopeful. I can feel it in his song, a ballad that extols and continues to dream. Yes, the reptiles are keeping us away, out of the mangrove highways we used to inhabit in our canoes. We are in the Anthropocene. But scattered throughout are high notes for the future. Look through this exhibition carefully. There are many bright moments still to be gathered in one's basket. In Prosekian terms, the basket is woven from the saw grasses that once

covered much of the Everglades but are now, like all life there, in retreat from the incursion of salt water and warming climate.

The rich, dark peat soil that underpins the exhibition transforms; leaving us with a conceptual compost. Within it Prosek can even imagine planting a future. As Thoreau reminds us, "*all good things are wild and free.*"

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**Michele Oka Doner** is an internationally renowned artist whose career spans five decades. Her work is fueled by a lifelong study and appreciation of the natural world from which she derives her formal vocabulary. The breadth of her artistic production encompasses sculpture, jewelry, public art, functional objects, video, artist books and costume and set design. She is well known for creating numerous permanent art installations throughout the United States, including "Flight" at Reagan International Airport, "Radiant Site," at the Herald Square MTA station, New York, and the mile-and-quarter long bronze and terrazzo concourse, "A Walk on the Beach," seen by 40 million travelers a year at Miami International Airport. Oka Doner's work is found in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, Musée des Arts Décoratifs (the Louvre), the Victoria & Albert, the University of Michigan, Yale University and Harvard University museums, and The Detroit Institute of Arts, among others. She has received numerous awards, including those given by United Nations Society of Writers and Artists, Pratt Institute, New York State Council of the Arts, and the Knight Foundation. In 2016 she received an honorary doctorate from The University of Michigan, where she earned her undergraduate and MFA degrees. Oka Doner is the author or subject of numerous books, including *Everything Is Alive* (2017) from Regan Arts Press.

# Once Removed: The Nature of Representation

TANYA KELLEY

James Prosek's works follow a long tradition of naturalists who drew flora and fauna realistically. Prosek, however, distinguishes himself through his exploration of the mysterious realm between the actual and the represented. At first, his work seems to be consistent with customary naturalist illustration. Seen alone, the lantern-jawed tarpon, with its 533 distinctly painted scales, is a testament to accurate observation and deft execution (plate 5). When, however, his fish paintings are installed amidst one of Prosek's silhouetted murals of soaring, darting birds and animated aquatic creatures, the viewer peers through a window into the fishes' watery domain where they come to life. Through his use of diverse artistic styles and materials, Prosek represents Nature, but also comments on the nature of representation.

Prosek himself approaches his subjects with wonder and regard for all that cannot be captured (literally and metaphorically). As a child, he began to paint as an extension of his love of birds and fish as well as his related interest in angling. However, the research and mimetic arts he brought to bear on his creation of life-like fishing lures were cast aside when the wrangle with a live fish began. A tug on the line caused fingers, eyes, and ears to rush into communication with the unknown being on the other end. The field guides informed him in general but, when Prosek set out to identify and depict the actual fish he caught, they did not neatly coincide with the reference books. The discrepancy between represented and actual fish became more obvious as he, while still in his twenties, circumnavigated the globe on an extended fishing trip. Prosek fished the Rivers Tajo, Seine, Tigris, Euphrates, Tsakkar, Detofutamata, and other waters along the latitude of his hometown of Easton, Connecticut, writing about his adventure in *Fly-fishing the 41st* (HarperCollins, 2003). Again, he noticed that some fish were not adequately represented in reference works. Prosek commented, "My trout research was causing me to question the fixity of the field guide model ... and lose faith in the reliability of names." His puzzlement speaks to opposing impulses in human



**FIGURE 1** Caves of Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc (Ardèche, France), Aurignacian era (32,000 to 30,000 years ago).

nature: we crave to define and isolate, and we yearn for a seamless, interconnected whole. No matter the medium one employs—drawing, taxonomy, genetics—we are not satisfied with our limited capacity to represent our surroundings, since none can wholly capture Nature's changing fullness.

In *On Exactitude in Science* (1946), Argentine poet and author Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) wrote about cartographers who "struck a map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it." Measuring more than five feet high by fifteen feet wide, Prosek's painting *Atlantic Great White Shark* embodies a similar conceit: although the simulacrum is the size of an Atlantic great white shark, it is two-dimensional and made of paper and paint, not flesh and blood (plate 6). Nor is it a composite of great white sharks in general, such as one might find in a field guide. Prosek's shark is a proxy for one fish; it is not a synecdoche representing all great white sharks, and

herein lies its value. In depicting a specific animal instead of concerning himself with defining the boundaries of the species, the painter acknowledges its uniqueness.

Prosek frequently asks himself: "Why is drawing still relevant?" Those who drew aurochs in caves probably did not imagine a time when their prey would evolve into domestic cattle (fig. 1). What remains of this extinct species of large bovines are a few fossils, traces of DNA, and images. Cave paintings, naturalistic illustration, and realistic sculptures are among the successive modes of representation that inform Prosek's work. By employing figurative styles that range from the ingeniously simple to the conceptually sophisticated, he comments on the evolution of image-making itself. Just as slowly interbreeding populations undergo mutations and evolve so, too, do manners of representation. Evolution and fixity of species are mutually exclusive. Eventually species described in reference books evolve into other species but, for a while, the depictions linger. Prosek dwells in the crossroads between the real and the represented and, through his actions, his writings, and his creations, comments on both.

He also explores the related evolution of artistic representation, which ranges from black contour drawings to three-dimensional sculptures. Prosek's pictorial work relates to a progression also occurring in language. The artist's silhouettes are hieroglyphic in that his drawn symbols signify real things; like pictograms, Prosek's cyphers are referential. Language triangulates the actual, the symbolic, and the communicator (or, as logician Charles Sanders Pierce [1839-1914] called them, "object, sign, interpretant"). These three elements are subject to an evolution that is both continual and symbiotic. In his mural *Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same*, Prosek's bird figures vanish toward the right edge of the mural, leaving numbers untethered (plate 1).

We search for an explanatory key, but the artist does not provide one, thus rupturing the triangulation of meaning. Is he urging the viewer to intercede in the circular symbolism and step in to alter the real world? His own engagement with environmental conservation seems to affirm this. By linking the real to both the symbolic and the interpretant, Prosek explores how nature, representation, and the mind mutually influence one another.

"Imitating or representing the trout in watercolors and graphite on paper internalized in my mind the features of the creature I was pursuing and trying to catch," recalls Prosek. For prehistoric hunters, prowess in the chase may have been enhanced by the intimacy born of depicting their prey. Along with drawing, Prosek thinks of lures (made from fur and feathers) as well as language as mimicry that we use for communication and survival. Why do we imitate, draw, and name things? For him, skillful representation is a path to being not only a more successful hunter but also a keener observer and a more effective communicator. To wit: Prosek joined a professional fishing crew in order to examine fish closely for his book *Ocean Fishes* (Rizzoli International Publications, 2012). On that trip, the artist astonished a seasoned fisherman who, after ten years of fishing, had not noticed that bluefin tuna have a retractable dorsal fin. In this instance, representation did not enhance the quest, but instead fostered a deeper understanding of the creature and communication with a fellow angler.

Drawing not only brings artists closer to the external world it also reflects the inner-workings of human perception; the way we represent plants and animals reveals technical advances as well as something of our minds' organization. Thus, just as cave paintings convey ideas about a hunter's relationship to his prey, Prosek's silhouettes recall the simplicity of this style of representation. Early naturalists, such as Leonhart Fuchs (1501-66) drew specimens in

isolation, on paper, now yellowed with time, in a manner similar to Prosek's *Cobia* and *Tarpon* painted on tea-stained paper (plates 3 and 5). Naturalist illustrators, such as Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), began painting flora and fauna in their native contexts; Merian voyaged to Dutch Surinam to paint insects. Similarly, Prosek made lengthy voyages so that he, too, could situate creatures, such as the spoonbill, in their natural settings. In the diptych *A Tyger for William Blake*, Prosek recalls the work of naturalists who portrayed both the real and the imaginary (plate 8). Naturalist and philologist Conrad Gesner (1516-65) intended his *Historia Animalum* to be a complete encyclopedia of creatures, including some mythological beings. Prosek's tiger also looks realistic, but the surrounding figures and habitat raise questions. As with Gesner's fictional creatures (such as the sea wolf), the artist's tiger painting cracks open the door to the imaginary.

The second painting of the diptych *A Tyger for William Blake*, takes the imagination further (plate 7). Unnaturally, birds perch serenely mere inches from the thunderous struggle waged between the tiger and leopard. Odder yet is that Prosek integrates this painting of exemplars of the *Panthera* genus into a mural depicting Florida's Everglades. This earnest yet clearly fictional portrayal of Nature calls to mind the imagined creatures Gesner included in his encyclopedia. However, the painter's invented reality stems not from the desire to describe what may have existed. Instead, Prosek wants viewers to consider what the future might hold. We describe and assign the natural world, but the boundaries do not hold. Leopards and tigers once shared a habitat in the vast mangrove wetland known as the Sundarbans, and this is the realm in which the painter depicts them. Yet he hangs the paintings, not in a mural of the Sundarbans, but against silhouettes of South Florida's own lush and exotic flora and fauna. With this juxtaposition, Prosek asks us to imagine real tigers and leopards, perhaps as introduced species,



ying for space in a world they have invaded and made their own.

Unlike the struggling tiger and leopard, Prosek portrays the introduced Burmese python as perfectly at ease in its new Floridian habitat (plate 9). Lounging blithely on a branch, the reptile is as chillingly provocative as a child soldier. Despite concerted human efforts to eradicate them from the Everglades one day, *Python bivittatus* may garner a new name for the species it becomes in its assumed habitat. Our over-developed brains may prove to be no match for their unsentimental adaptability. While his fish paintings represent the object squarely in the role of specimen or prey, Prosek deftly turns the hunt around, situating the viewer, *Homo sapiens*, in a defensive battle position before the languidly confident Burmese python.

Just as Nature evolves, the varied forms of Prosek's art steer our gaze toward the changing nature of representation itself. Ranging from the deceptively primitive silhouettes to the exquisite three-dimensional dioramas of ghost orchids, he knowingly nods to various stages of depiction (plates 1 and 13). The wall silhouettes, which often surround Prosek's detailed paintings, call to mind the outlines of animals in cave paintings. Recalling ancient art, his figures could signify living or extinct species and foreshadow his more fully rendered paintings. While the tarpon and sawfish invite frank inspection as if they were motionless specimens from the pages of a traditional naturalist illustrator, they become

animated by the black figures of turtles, dolphins, and gulls that flutter around them. With the tiger and leopard paintings hung among the contours of alligators, herons, and palm trees, the entire tableau pulses with life. Progressing to three-dimensional realism, the clay ghost orchids are so stunningly convincing that a pollinating sphinx moth might be tricked into landing atop them. One is tempted to say that the depicted and the depiction are one. James Prosek is humble before the immense glory of Nature he represents and astute in his language of representation, for he possesses what the British writer Izaak Walton (1593-1683) called in *The Compleat Angler* of 1653, an "inquiring, searching and observing wit."

I wish to acknowledge Jill Deupi and Allison Kemmerer for their insightful essays on Prosek's work and I especially wish to thank James Prosek for his generous correspondence with me on these topics.

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*All works by James Prosek  
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PLATE 1  
*Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same*, 2019  
Acrylic on drywall

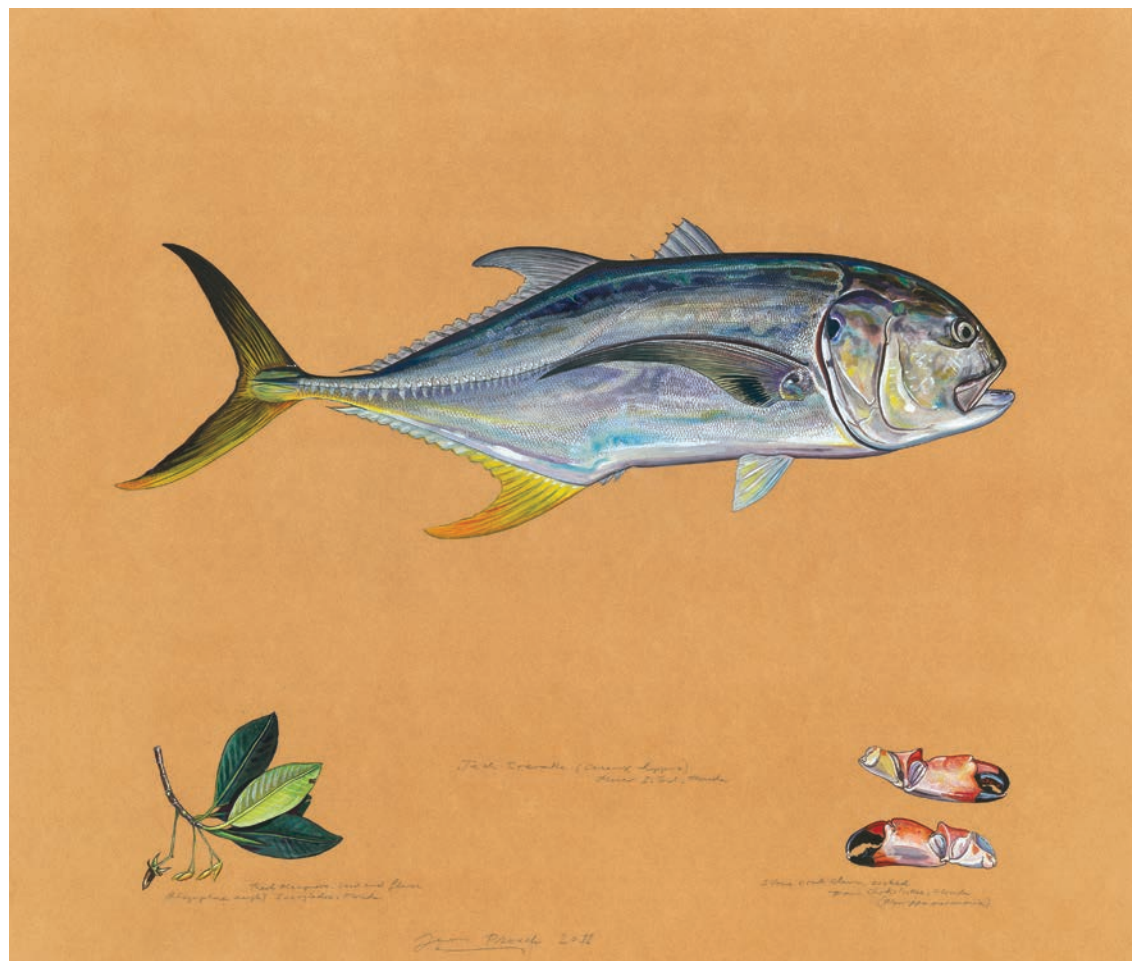


PLATE 2  
*Jack Crevalle*, 2011  
 Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite,  
 and powdered mica on tea-stained paper  
 31 ¼ x 36 ¾ inches



PLATE 3  
*Cobia*, 2012  
 Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite,  
 and powdered mica on tea-stained paper  
 32 x 38 inches



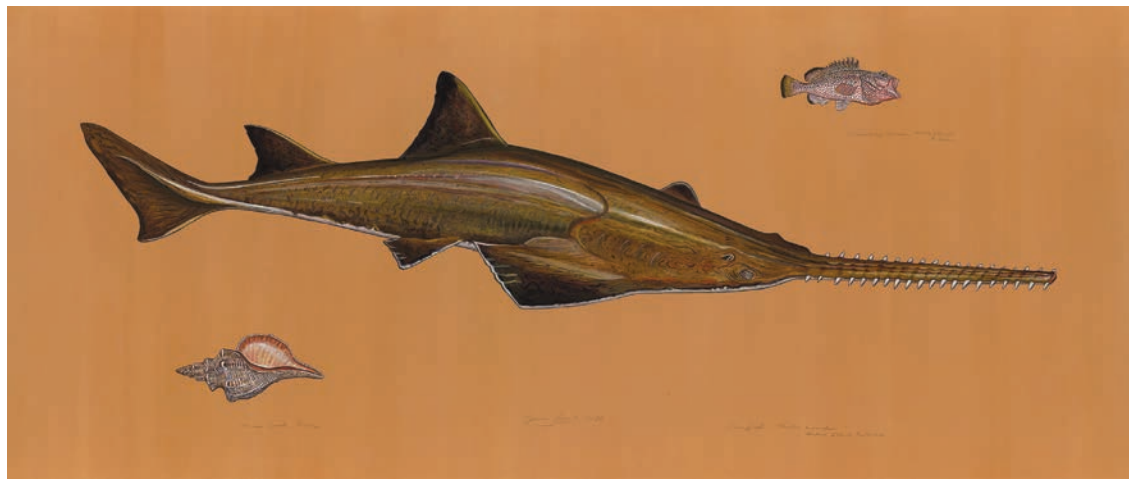


PLATE 4  
*Sawfish*, 2014  
 Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite,  
 and powdered mica on tea-stained paper  
 40 ¼ x 100 inches

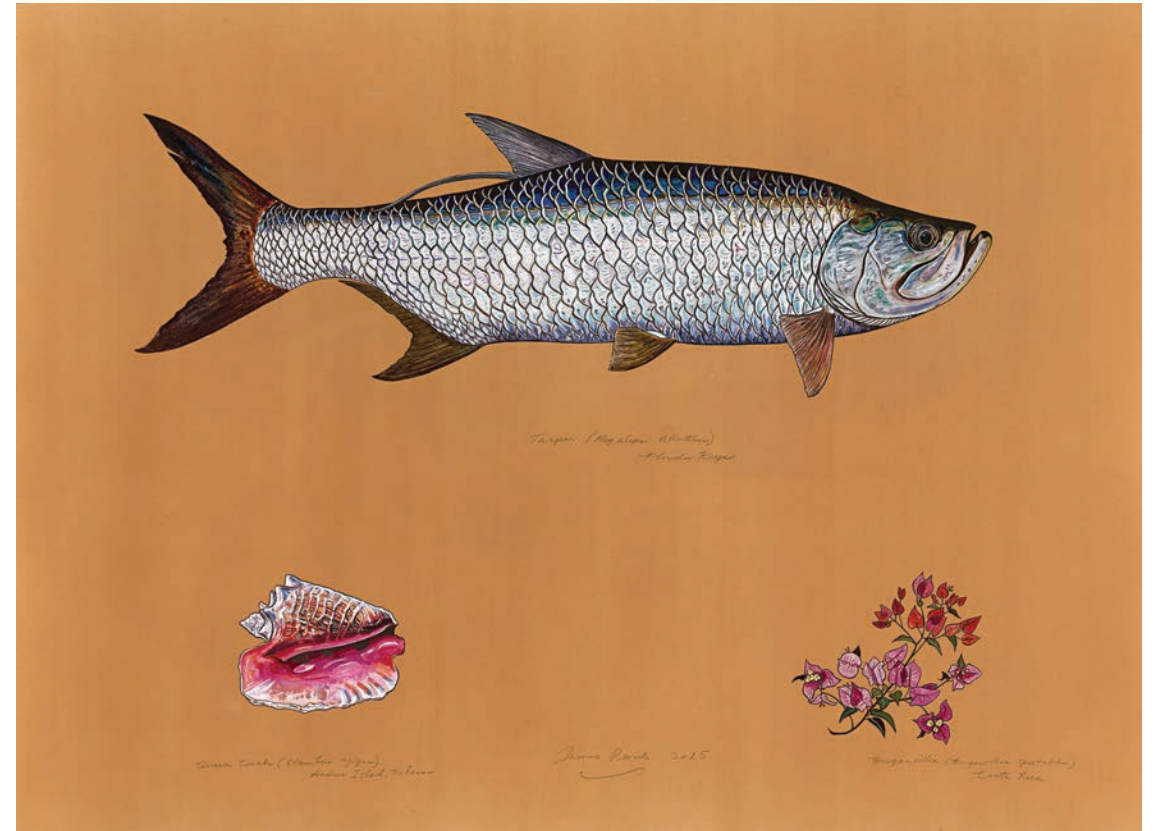


PLATE 5  
*Tarpon*, 2015  
 Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite,  
 and powdered mica on tea-stained paper  
 44 ½ x 60 ½ inches  
 Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Erik T. Waldin

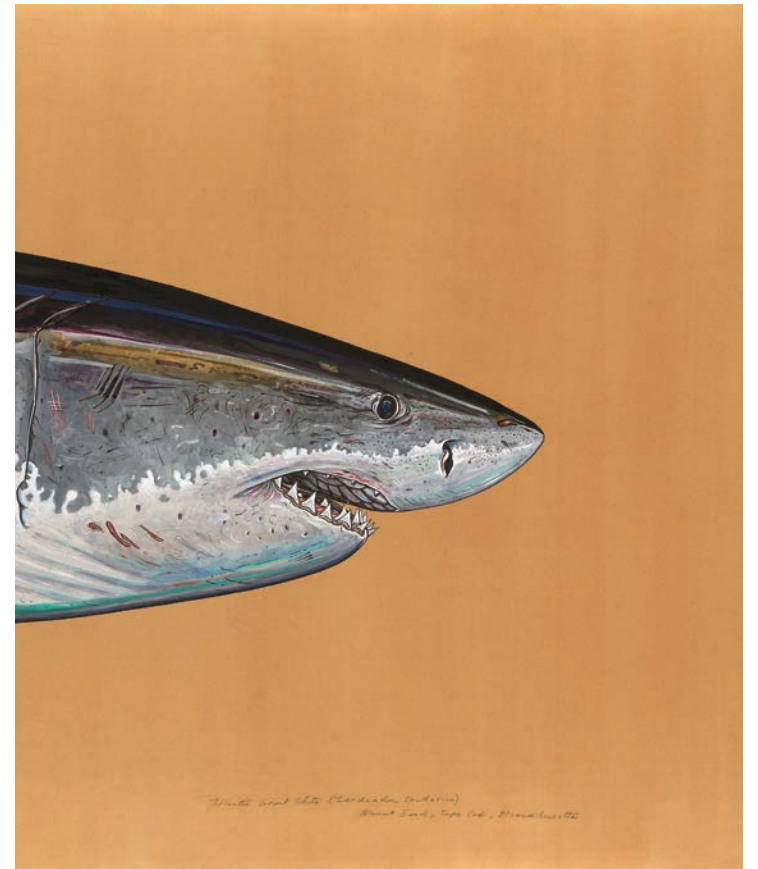
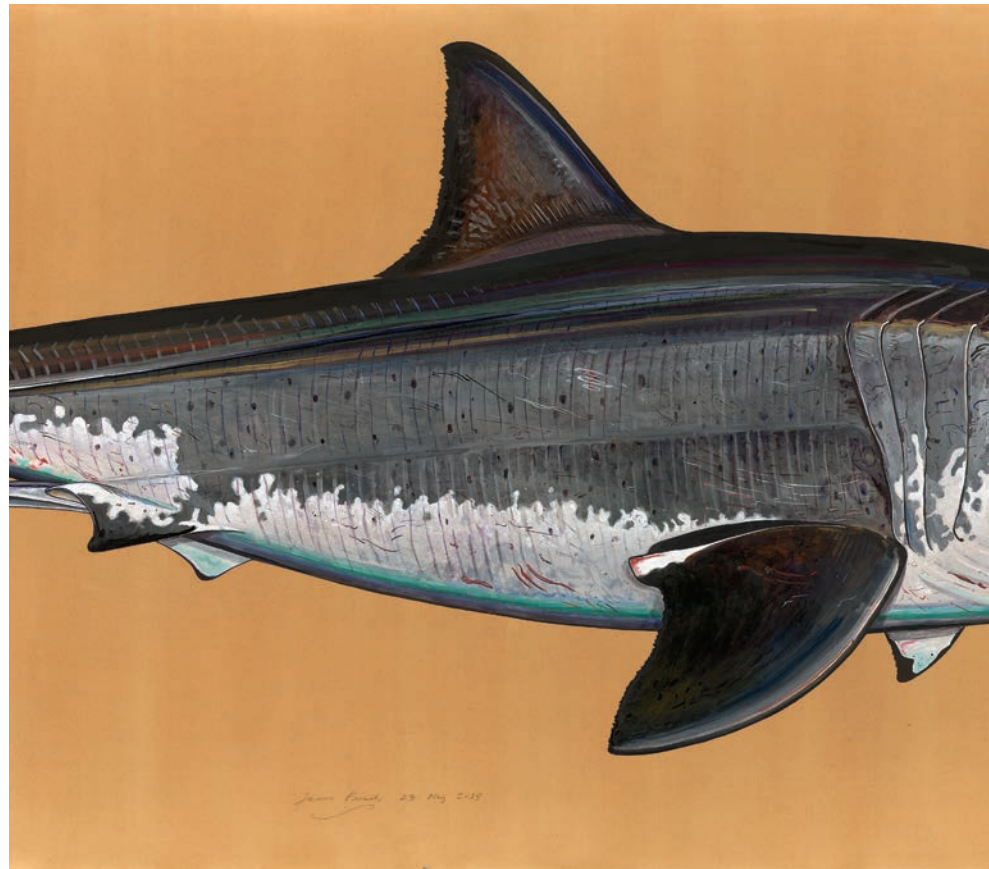


PLATE 6  
*Atlantic Great White Shark*, 2015  
Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite,  
and powdered mica on tea-stained paper  
60 x 180 inches





PLATE 7  
*Roseate Spoonbill, Everglades*, 2016  
 Acrylic and oil on panel  
 60 x 30 x 2 inches  
 Courtesy of Ann Jackson and Ken Wilson



PLATE 8  
*A Tyger for William Blake*, 2018  
 Oil and acrylic on panel  
 45 x 56 inches each





PLATE 9  
*Burmese Python, Everglades*, 2018  
 Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper  
 22 ½ x 22 ½ inches



PLATE 10  
*Watercolor study for A Tyger for William Blake*, 2018  
 Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper  
 22 ½ x 30 inches



PLATE 11  
*Watercolor study for A Tyger for William Blake, 2018*  
 Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper  
 22 ½ x 30 inches



PLATE 12  
*Blue and Yellow Macaw, South Florida, 2019*  
 Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper  
 22 ½ x 22 ½ inches





PLATE 13  
*Paradise Lost 2 (Ghost Orchid, Everglades)*, 2019  
 Oil and acrylic on panel, ash tree segment, clay orchid  
 16 x 24 x 9 inches



PLATE 14  
*Paradise Lost 1 (Burmese Python and Blue and Yellow Macaw, Everglades)*, 2019  
 Oil and acrylic on panel  
 38 ½ x 48 ½ inches



