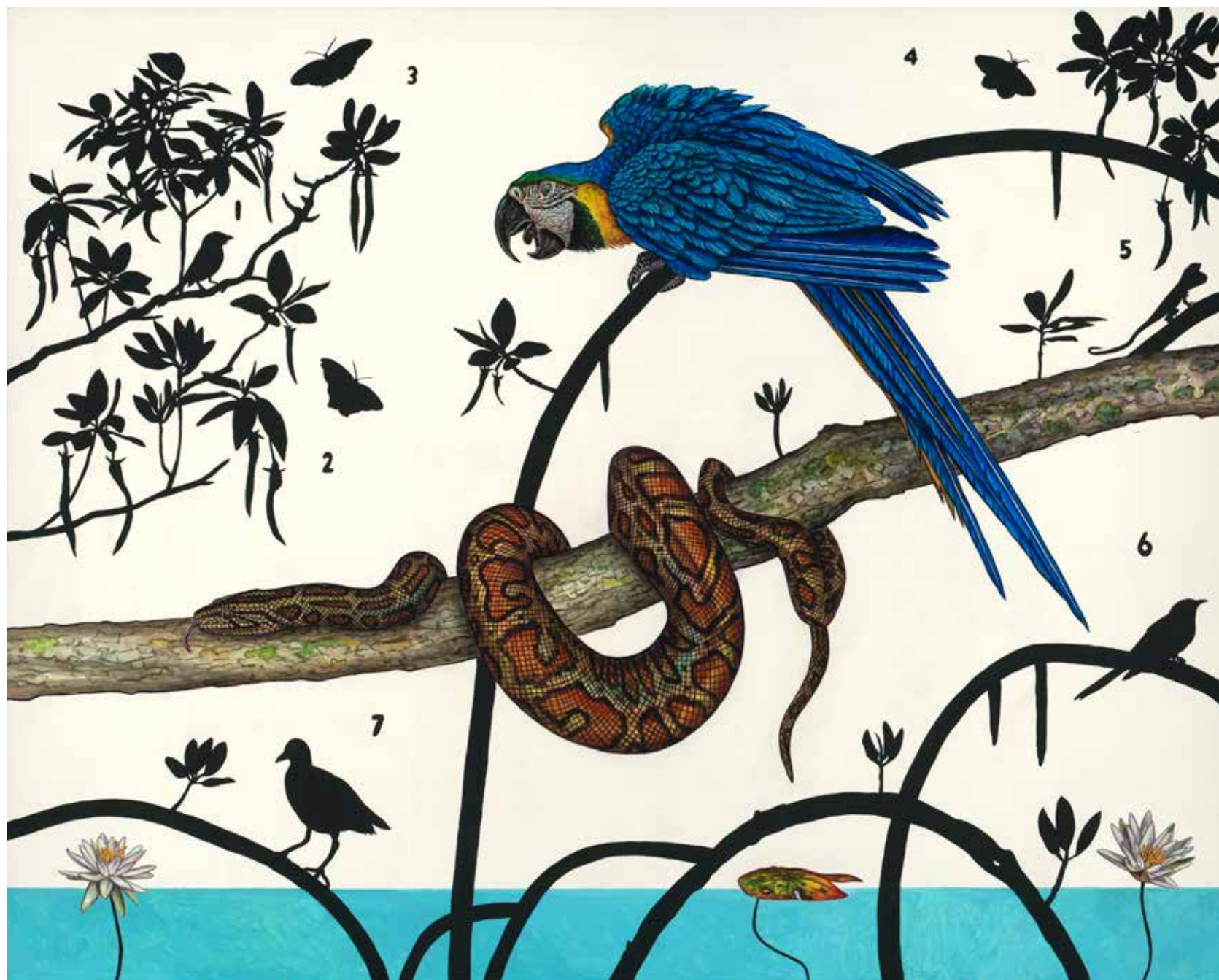


Spring 2020

Yale University

Art Gallery





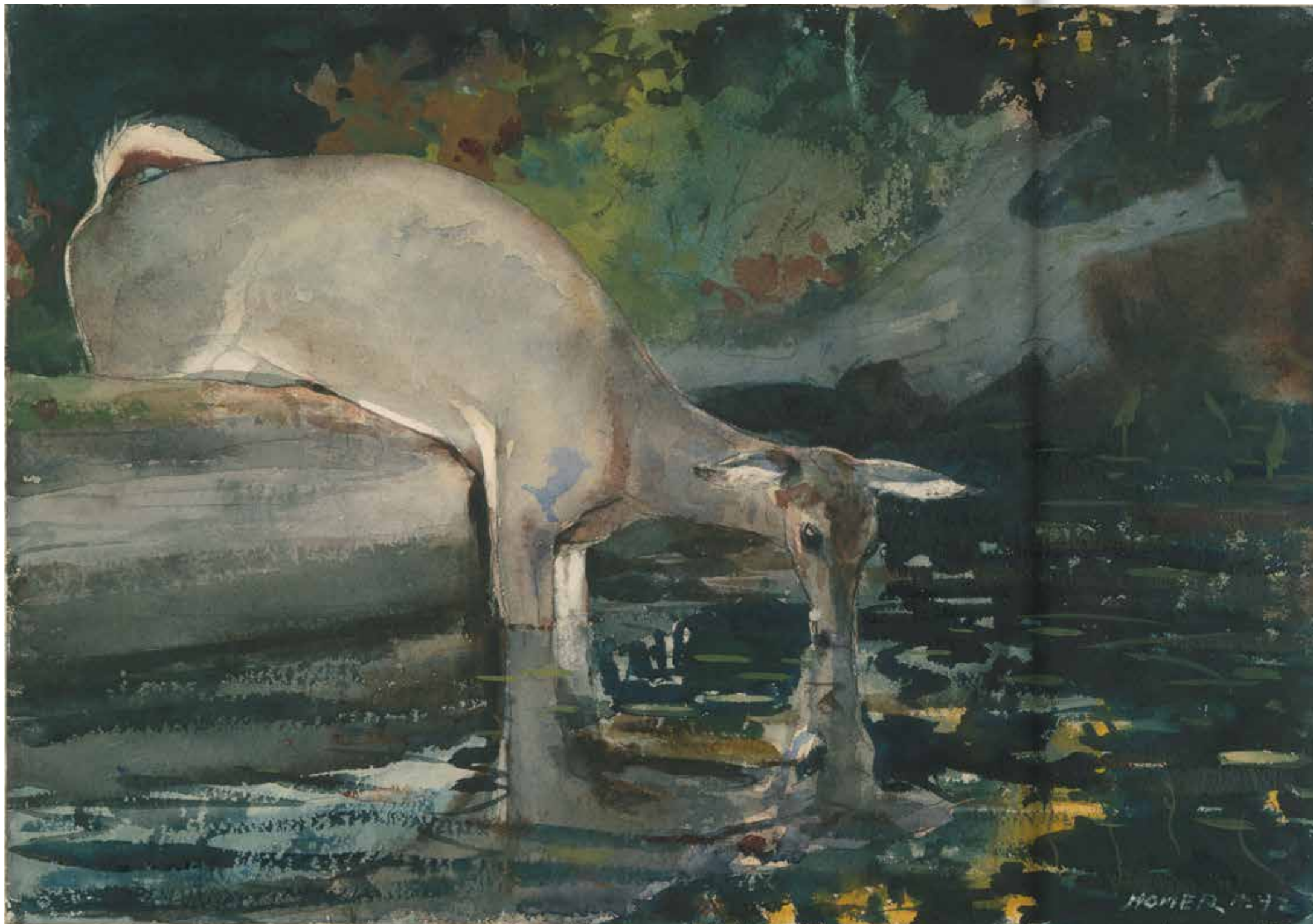
James Prosek

Artist, writer, and naturalist James Prosek, B.A. 1997, became well known when he published his first book, *Trout: An Illustrated History* (1996), while he was still an undergraduate at Yale University. Prosek became fascinated with trout while growing up in Easton, Connecticut, considering the fish from the perspectives of both fisherman and artist. After graduating from Yale, Prosek went on to publish several other books and has maintained relationships with the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. In 2018 he was the Gallery's Happy and Bob Doran Artist in Residence; at that time he undertook some of the work that culminates in the exhibition *James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice*. On view from February 14 through June 7, the exhibition includes objects from both the Gallery and the Peabody, bringing together the natural world and the built environment of the museum.

The Full Spectrum

In this interview with Liliana Milkova, the Nolen Curator of Education and Academic Affairs, Prosek discusses his connection to Yale and his lifelong love of nature, from birds to fish and everything in between. The interview was edited and compiled by Valerie Richardson, Stewardship Manager.

James Prosek at his home and studio in Easton, Connecticut



Liliana Milkova: James, you have a long-standing relationship with the Yale University Art Gallery. Can you elaborate on this relationship and how it has evolved over the years?

James Prosek: This was the first art museum I ever set foot in. I grew up about 25 minutes west of New Haven. My father brought me to the Gallery in 1986, when I was 10 or 11 years old, for the *Winslow Homer Watercolors* show. I began drawing when I was very little; nobody taught me how

to use watercolors, but that was the medium that I started to use at the time. When we came to the Gallery, I was already looking at art books to copy my heroes, Winslow Homer and John James Audubon, so the medium and subjects of the paintings in the Homer watercolors show had a huge impact on me. Homer's paintings from the Adirondacks showing leaping trout, and his great watercolor of a deer standing over a log (*Deer Drinking*; 1892), are particularly memorable.

Then I came to Yale as an undergraduate, and it was a mind-blowing

experience. I started out as an Architecture major, then switched to English Literature, but I took art and art history classes, too. I visited the Gallery with some of my classes. I remember sitting in a session of an architecture class that took place in the Gallery's sculpture hall, which, at that time, housed only Richard Serra's *Stacks* (1990), and drawing the space with the light coming through the windows. I still remember how some other works were hung at that time, like a Rothko near Vincent van Gogh's *Night Café* (1888).

And I also met people, both at the Gallery and at the Yale Center for British Art, who are still here, like Mark Aronson, who was one of my teachers and is now Chief Conservator at the Center. He took our classes to look at paintings and showed us the areas where the works had been restored.

I liked to come to the Gallery at times when I felt particularly stressed. During my freshman year, when I rowed crew and took it too seriously, I would come and sit in the museum when I needed to decompress. And I also

went to the Center to do this, sitting with the Turners and Constables. The Gallery has been a really important part of my life in many different ways. It felt like a home, so having an opportunity to do a project here is definitely a dream come true.

I am glad to hear that you saw the Gallery as a place for respite and reflection. You experienced the Gallery on many different levels: you saw the actual works of art and how they were hung, you engaged in sketching in the galleries, and you paid attention to the architecture as a kind of framework for the collection.

Absolutely. I took art history classes with legendary professors Vincent J. Scully, Jr., and Jerome J. Pollitt, which were unforgettable. We would look at works projected in the auditorium and then go and actually see world-class artworks in the flesh, and the contrast between those two experiences was just incredible. The Gallery was part of my spiritual center as an undergraduate. I never really had any formal training as an artist, so looking at works and copying them was the way I learned how to make art. I feel like students live different lives today with cell phones and email. Even more so today, you need a place where you can slow down and just spend some time observing things closely.

You have also had a lifelong relationship with the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, correct?

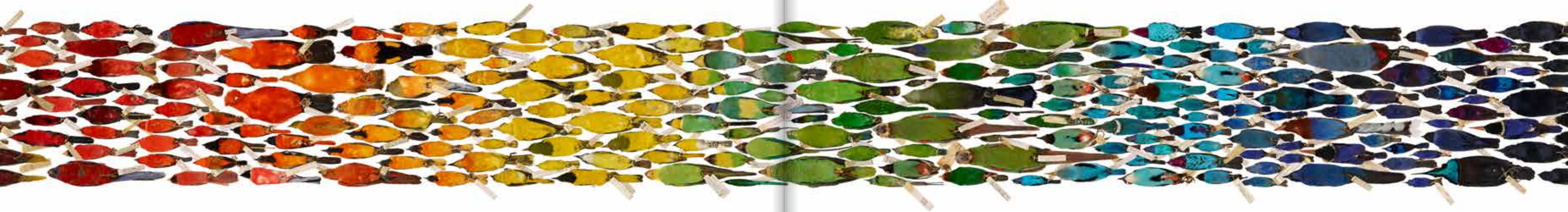
I probably first visited the Gallery and the Peabody at about the same time. My father grew up in Brazil and was the one who introduced me to the beauty of nature. He fell in love with birds as a child, so I did, too. I remember my father taking me to the Peabody's Hall

of Connecticut Birds, where they have a taxidermy male and female bird of each species native to Connecticut.

Everybody loves the Peabody's dinosaur hall and the big mural by Rudolph F. Zallinger, which is the most incredible piece of paleo art in the world. But I am also blown away by the dioramas from the late 1920s and the craftsmanship of Ralph Morrill, a great artist and taxidermist, and James Perry Wilson, the painter of the lifelike backgrounds. The dioramas aim to show the interaction among animals in an ecosystem, and a lot of my work is about acknowledging that the earth is an interconnected system, in which everything interacts and affects everything else.

A couple of years after I graduated, and after I had published books on trout and eels, David K. Skelly, the Director of the Peabody, invited me to speak to his students in the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies about my books and unconventional career path. At some point, I started working on a book about naming and ordering nature, and I wanted to go on a biological expedition to a distant region to collect specimens and bring them back to the museum. I was interested in writing about the process of naming things, like new bird species that had not yet been named.

Through Dave, I met Kristof Zyskowski, who is the Peabody's Collections Manager for Ornithology. In 2010 I joined him on an expedition to central Suriname, in South America, which has impenetrable forests and no navigable rivers and had never before been explored by a biological expedition. We were dropped in by helicopter and remained in the area for three weeks collecting and preparing specimens. There were no names on the rivers, no names on the mountains. No names. So for someone working on a book about



naming, it was interesting to be in this environment and the one giving names to unknown species. After engaging with the Peabody in this more direct way, Dave suggested that I become a curatorial affiliate, which is just a volunteer curatorial position, so I have had an intimate relationship with the Peabody ever since.

Let's fast-forward to 2018, when you became the Happy and Bob Doran Artist in Residence at the Gallery. You have been an artist in residence at other museums, but has working on an academic campus changed the way you think, or changed your philosophical beliefs and artistic practice?

I had already been thinking about these things, about naming and ordering nature, for more than 10 years. But this residency, exhibition, and publication have forced me to make these ideas more cohesive.

By the time I started the Doran residency, I already had a strong relationship with the Peabody. I knew that I wanted to work with bird specimens out of the Peabody's collection, which has about 150,000 specimens and is one of the 20

largest collections in the world. I wanted to arrange a selection of specimens by color to create novel juxtapositions outside the system of Linnaean taxonomy that is typically used in scientific research. I wanted to illustrate the point that nature is an undivided continuum. In a color spectrum, there is no official place where red ends and orange begins, but humans have drawn lines in these continuums, or spectrums, and named the pieces. Different cultures draw these lines differently, and the way we chop up and label the world can actually shape how we see it in some ways.

Through the residency, I was able to reach out to different faculty at Yale. I talked with Claire Bower, Professor of Linguistics, about how language may or may not shape our perceptions. I also talked with Richard O. Prum [the William Robertson Coe Professor of Ornithology], who studies the ultraviolet spectrum of colors that birds can see and that humans cannot, about how a bird would see and experience the bird spectrum that we created at the Gallery. Finally, I connected with Michael R. Dove [the Margaret K.

Musser Professor of Social Ecology and Professor of Anthropology], who works with Indigenous peoples around the world and studies, among other things, how different cultures perceive or break up the color spectrum. We spoke about his studies in mimesis and how cultures develop a reciprocal relationship with nature through imitation.

My exhibition also questions why humans have been making representations of natural objects for thousands of years. Why did they draw animals on cave walls? Why did they make snowy owl figurines out of whalebone? Why did they make fishing lures? Sometimes they created these imitations for predation and survival. For instance, there is a Swampy Cree goose decoy in the Peabody's collection that mimics a goose and was used to lure a flock of geese close enough to be caught. Or, to give an example that is more extreme, there are cultures in which people actually dress like the animal that they are going out to hunt and kill. Siberian people will don an elk coat that includes the head and antlers, and they

will actually mimic the movements of an elk to lure it out of the woods. This action isn't just about getting food, it is spiritual: to become the animal that you are trying to capture is to cross the boundary between us and them.

So the word "artifice" in the exhibition title is saying that we represent nature in part to trick it, but also to forge a more intimate relationship with it. I was passionate about fly-fishing as a kid, and that led me to some of these ideas. I loved trout in particular. They are beautiful and live in beautiful streams, and I felt compelled to draw them and paint the beauty of their colors and forms and varieties. The paintings are essentially a representation of the animals that I had caught, and at some point I started questioning why I was painting hundreds of trout.

Drawing is a big part of your practice. You have said that drawing has made you a better observer (and a better fly fisherman!).

At the same time I was drawing and painting trout, I was also making fishing

flies, which imitate the food that the fish eat. You tie fur and feathers to a hook to make it look like an insect and then you cast that out into the stream. If a fish looks at the fishing fly and thinks it looks like an insect, the fish will veer off of its course and possibly even eat the imitation fly. The fly is essentially a translation device between two animals that shared common ancestry 400 million years ago, which I think is remarkable. It is through imitation that this encounter is even possible. I came to know the trout much more intimately during this process, and the act of producing fishing flies made me more efficient at catching trout.

Making a mark that actually carries a thought was a huge innovation that propelled humans and helped the human brain to expand. I still believe strongly in drawing as an activity that helps us make observations. I encourage drawing for people who teach science, who teach art, who teach art history, and who teach architecture because there is no more immediate way to transmit

or manifest a thought than by taking an instrument like a pen or pencil and making a drawing.

The philosophy of the Gallery's Education Department is that one must engage in close looking to become a more keen observer. Drawing is an important part of this exploratory process of looking and seeing.

When I sat in on an Italian paintings class taught by Laurence Kanter [Chief Curator and the Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of European Art], it was all about looking very closely at a work to see who the artist may have been by examining the type of brush strokes or the pigments; it was all about close observation. The great reward from looking at great objects is that they keep giving. You keep seeing new things every time you look at them. Objects carry an aura and the energy of the people who made them.

If I understand you correctly, you feel that drawing is the first step to creating and naming art—and natural objects. However, the visitors who come to see your show will first

"I can't say that I find eels to be the most attractive creatures in nature, but after spending 12 years working on a book about them, I have come to find them really amazing and beautiful creatures."

—James Prosek



James Prosek, Study for Island Lost, Ponape, 2019. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper. Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York. © James Prosek

engage with the title: *Art, Artifact, Artifice*. I honestly thought that you would leave your exhibition untitled, given how much you criticize labeling. How might the three different words of the title, "art," "artifact," and "artifice," in that order and grammatical structure, illuminate some of the ideas of the exhibition?

You're right to wonder why I would title my exhibition if part of my work is about being critical of titles, but I have gained a certain acceptance of language. As I said before, language helps us see, but it also can limit the potential of what we see. We may go out in nature and learn from a field guide that a certain bird is a chickadee, and for some people, the inquiry might stop there. This is circular learning, in which a person named a thing and you are just regurgitating the name but not investigating further.

I learned through my trout inquiry that I cannot necessarily agree with

where the lines have been drawn among species. This is what provoked some of these questions that I have been asking, including the ones related to the title of this exhibition. If nature evolved in a continuum and we are all related to everything else on this great timeline going back billions of years, it is not always clear where lines should be drawn. That is true whether you are talking about race, gender identity, or the title of an exhibition.

In Suriname, the first thing we needed to do was cut a trail, because you can't go anywhere without having a path through the jungle. However, once you cut that path, you don't bother to go off the path because it is too much work. But if you just walk on the path that you made, then your perspective is just limited to that path. If someone tells you that a thing is "art" or a thing is an "artifact," that is a path that

someone has created for you. Just like the word "species"; these are terms that we need for convenience. I have read many artists' and historians' definitions of what art is, and they are all different. Some say art is something that has no use or function. For me, all art making has had use for humans. Making marks, whether they are representational or abstract, has shaped the human brain. I think it has strengthened our imaginations and memories, and that we would not be the organisms we are today without art.

Art making and close engagement with art in general have educational value, as they cultivate certain thinking routines and dispositions.

From the very first marks made by man, art making has allowed us to manifest a thought. Before we had marks, before



Floor of Prosek's studio in Easton, Connecticut

we could make a drawing on a wall, we could only carry ideas in our heads and there was no way to record them outside of oral traditions, which are arguably more ephemeral. Once we had a way to record thoughts, they could be passed on physically through the generations, and we could build a body of knowledge. One of the earliest marks might have been made by a person dipping his hand in animal blood and placing it on a wall, and that is a mark that represents a hand. I think that was the beginning of our self-awareness as humans.

However, what fascinates me about nature is that humans are not the only organisms that make imitations of things. Artifice is rampant in nature. Caterpillars mimic the heads of flowers to camouflage themselves. When birds with no nests lay their eggs on the beach, the eggs evolve to mimic the patterns of the stones on the beach. A lot of mimicry is about staying hidden. Animals also have lures that draw creatures in. For example, freshwater mussels have little appendages that they let out of their shells that look like little baitfish, and then bass come and try to grab what they think is a fish. The mussels then spray baby mussels out, which attach to the bass' gills. That is how mussels get transported across watersheds.

Wow! That is so interesting!

I am just trying to elevate products of nature to the level of human production. In the show, I juxtapose nests made by animals with vessels made by humans. Again, humans have gained a lot by mimicking the practices and techniques of animals. Charles Darwin actually thought that humans acquired spoken language by imitating the sounds of animals, particularly birds. Did a human learn to weave by looking at an African weaver bird? You can watch these birds making their nests, which they have been doing for thousands of years longer than humans have known how to weave. These are discussions that I also had with Edward S. Cooke, Jr. [the Charles F. Montgomery Professor of American Decorative Arts].

You are working with Professor Ned Cooke's "Ceramic and Wooden Vessels" class. Tell us a little about your experience bringing Ned to the Peabody Museum.

I took Ned to the Peabody to look at some of the nests, which prompted him to bring his class. What he found fascinating was that different birds have different techniques for building their nests, and they use different materials depending on where they live. Some make nests out of straw, and some steal materials from other animals, like spider silk. Or they use grass and mouthfuls of mud from a local pond, which is basically adobe construction. Ned agrees with me about the likelihood that humans learned this method of construction from birds.

You often talk about crossing lines and hybrids, and the exhibition includes objects from both the Gallery's and the Peabody's collections.

I have an interest in hybrids, partly because they cross boundaries. We create boundaries around the things in nature that we name. When a hybrid is first formed, it has a liminal quality; it is between this and that. Often in human history, a hybrid has powers beyond the two individual things that created it. Sometimes a hybrid can be ostracized from society and sometimes it can be embraced, and we even see hybrids in comic-book mutants that have powers that normal humans don't have. This is a theme going back as far as we know in human art and literature, and it is certainly rampant in Greek mythology. Hybrids help us recover the spaces between named objects by combining things. Hybrids also exist in nature. For instance, we have only recently discovered that modern humans mated with Neanderthals, a separate hominid species, and produced fertile offspring. Many of us carry two to five percent Neanderthal genes.

Human and nonhuman hybrids have been maligned or cast out of society throughout history, but they are important to the survival and health of ecosystems. When you combine two things, they have more qualities

for natural selection to draw from and can potentially survive in a changing habitat more easily than a nonhybrid animal. Humans have an obsession with purity, and one point of this exhibition is to examine those urges and try to help us overcome them, because I think they can be counterproductive.

It is interesting to note that, in this exhibition, you are a hybrid, with the dual roles of curator and artist. Has that hybrid role allowed you to do something more, something different to escape that box that you talk about?

For my whole life, I have embraced this idea of crossing lines and trespassing across the boundaries that humans have set in our societies. Artists become artists because they don't like to be put in boxes. I have been somewhat uncomfortable with the label "artist," but it is the one that fits best for what I have been doing for decades. It is nice to be able to break out of that label and take on another role at the same time. The exhibition is meant to be a single artwork in itself, so the curation of the show is part of the artwork.

I want to cross boundaries between disciplinary silos on campus. There are boundaries everywhere that need to be examined. I hope that one day we can transcend a lot of these boxes that we have created and celebrate difference and the beauty of diversity on our planet without being divisive. We look at nature, and we create structures or maps that we impose on the natural world, including physical maps and guides to navigate the world and language that helps us communicate with the world. Then we come to believe that those artificial structures that we have created are actually the real world.

I want to point out that humans are not the only creatures that make exquisite things. Evolution really is the force that shaped everything. Most organisms that have been made by evolution also have the impulse to make things. It is implicitly built into the fabric of organisms because it is the force that drives everything.



Nature is our instructor and teacher, and that is one of the best reasons for preserving biodiversity. It is selfish, in a way, because biodiversity is a source of our own inspiration. This show is also about celebrating the wonders of what evolution has created: nature and the beauty and diversity of the planet.

There is a strong environmental message in the exhibition. I think the biggest issue facing us as humans today is the declining health of our planet and our future: water resources, deforestation, global warming. The best way I can

see to get people to want to protect the planet is to make them fall in love with nature as a whole, as a system, but also with individual creatures. Whether you love birds or insects or whatever, this is your gateway drug to being addicted to nature.

Finally, if you could turn into any hybrid animal, what would you be?

I created a painting for the exhibition that represents the Polynesian version of the origin of man and the

first naming of the plants and animals. I can't say that I find eels to be the most attractive creatures in nature, but after spending 12 years working on a book about them, I have come to find them really amazing and beautiful creatures. If there is an animal with which I identify in spirit, it is the eel. In fact, one of the creatures in my painting has my head on an eel's body.

James Prosek in conversation with Lilianna Milkova, the Nolen Curator of Education and Academic Affairs, in the Margaret and Angus Wurtele Sculpture Garden at the Yale University Art Gallery