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Art, Artifact, Artifice

James Prosek
With an essay by Edith Devaney

Yale University Art Gallery
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Contents

Director's Foreword

Since receiving his bachelor's degree from Yale College in 1997, James Prosek has become an award-winning artist, writer, and naturalist, publishing numerous books, exhibiting his work in museums, and gaining a global following for his deep connection with the natural world. In the present project, he places his own works alongside objects he has drawn from the collections of the Yale University Art Gallery, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Yale Center for British Art to challenge us to reconsider the traditional separation of museum collections into strict categories of "fine art" and "artifact." Juxtaposing objects as seemingly diverse as a Brice Marden drawing and a grackle egg, he shows us instead the similarities between them, and leads us to question whether these distinctions ever really mattered.

Prosek himself works across traditional boundaries; his fifteen-foot-long *Bird Spectrum* (pl. 9)—an artwork made especially for this project that consists of more than two hundred specimens from the Peabody's ornithology collection—attests to that. He makes watercolors, paintings, and sculptures of animals, including fish, birds, and endangered wildlife, while also participating in research expeditions to study ecosystems and collect specimens. He has served as the 2018 Happy and Bob Doran Artist in Residence at the Gallery, as a curatorial affiliate at the Peabody since 2011, and as a member of the advisory board of the Yale Institute for Biospheric Studies. There is no one quite like James Prosek, and seeing the world through his eyes has prompted all of us involved in this endeavor to look anew at objects we thought we had already fully considered.

This project would not have been possible without the encouragement and enthusiasm of our colleagues at the Peabody Museum and the Center for British Art, who graciously allowed the artist into their storerooms on numerous occasions and supported his ideas from the outset. For their willingness to experiment with us as the concept of this show took shape, I am especially grateful to my fellow directors—David K. Skelly at the Peabody and Courtney J. Martin at the Center—as well as their wonderful colleagues. Projects such as this one, built on the premise that mining and displaying Yale's collections in unexpected ways will lead to new discoveries and experiences, are essential to the cross-disciplinary studies we all see as part of the University's core mission.

Throughout the project, Prosek's ideas were championed and honed by a key partner: Laurence Kanter, Chief Curator and the Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of European Art. Kanter brought an editor's eye to the project, along with a deep knowledge of the Gallery's encyclopedic collection and the keen discernment of a connoisseur. The publication benefited immensely from the contribution of a thought-provoking essay by Edith Devaney, Head of Summer Exhibitions and Contemporary Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

For his tireless efforts on behalf of both the catalogue and the exhibition, we are grateful to Prosek's friend and business partner, Waqas Wajahat, who brought his enthusiasm as a collector, advisor, and steadfast supporter of artists and museums to this project. We also thank Donna and Marvin Schwartz for their generous support, as well as Susan and Stephen Mandel, Jr., the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, and the Richard P. Garmany Fund, along with the Gallery's Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund and the Robert Lehman, B.A. 1913, Endowment Fund. Finally, we are indebted to Happy and Robert W. Doran, B.A. 1955, for their key support of the Gallery by establishing the Happy and Bob Doran Artist-in-Residence Program, which provided Prosek with the time and resources to develop his ideas for this project while working on Yale's campus.

Stephanie Wiles
The Henry J. Heinz II Director
Yale University Art Gallery

Preface

Working with an artist, any artist, to help realize a large installation project is a thrilling experience. Working with James Prosek is an experience like no other. The richly fascinating end product is, of course, available for all to see and enjoy, and it is memorialized in this book. The high-octane process of gestation and refinement, of expansion and contraction, of composing and editing, of negotiations, disappointments, and excitement—all hidden from the public behind the seamless facade of the finished exhibition and catalogue—is exhilarating, especially when it is a process propelled by the fertile imagination, restless energy, and boundless artistic curiosity of someone like James. It is not an empty metaphor to say that he is as much a force of nature as nature is the raw material and inspiration of his work. Peering over his shoulder as he studies and transcribes the social lives of trout, listening as he unravels the common threads in tribal creation mythologies and Darwinian evolutionary theory, or following, mesmerized, as he describes the colors of a Carolina parakeet's wing feathers or the inspired if unconscious penmanship decorating a plover's eggs calls to mind Aldous Huxley's sense of wonder at opening the Doors of Perception. James does so much more, however, than simply invite us to walk with him along the paths to discovering new worlds of knowledge and understanding. He makes those paths beautiful, cheerfully hypnotic. He turns them into art.

The genesis of *James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice* dates back some years, when Jock Reynolds, the former Henry J. Heinz II Director at the Gallery, invited James to accept the offer of a Happy and Bob Doran Artist-in-Residence position at the museum. Always working on many projects at once—making, sharing, explaining—James conceived the idea of organizing an exhibition that would itself be a work of art, embedding his paintings and sculptures within a selection of objects from the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, the Gallery, and the Yale Center for British Art. His intention was to illuminate—to demonstrate—the continuum that he has always felt between the natural world around us and the unnatural world of artistic creation. It took no effort at all to persuade me that this was a good idea, and so the roller-coaster ride pushed off.

In reality, however, none of us at the Gallery can claim credit for much more than appreciating a wonderful gift when it is presented to us. James's enviably close relationship with our colleagues at the Peabody and the breathtaking generosity of Peabody director David K. Skelly are the true heroes of this enterprise and the only reason it could be successfully brought into being. Dave's vision for animating the Peabody collections while his buildings undergo massive renovation was inspired, as was the trust and confidence he so obviously placed in James. Clearly, his staff shares that trust and confidence; the loans they have accorded to this exhibition make it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, for which we are grateful and inspired to look for occasions to repay our debt. Perhaps James's vision will lead to an appetite for more undertakings like this one. Even if they were not to rise to this level of creative excitement, they would make a lasting contribution to the culture of thought and experience at Yale, enriching all our lives. I feel privileged to have been a part of the first steps in this Brave New direction.

Laurence Kanter
Chief Curator and the Lionel Goldfrank III
Curator of European Art
Yale University Art Gallery

Acknowledgments

Having grown up in Easton, Connecticut, not far from New Haven, the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History were the first museums I ever set foot in. Being exposed to the wonders of both institutions at an early age—from dinosaur fossils and dioramas to Winslow Homer watercolors and Louis Kahn's architecture—had an incalculable impact on me. As an undergraduate in the mid- to late 1990s, I had the privilege of immersing myself in the collections of Yale's institutions in an even more intimate and rigorous way, through courses and through individuals who took the time to share their knowledge and passions, and to help me see more than I would otherwise have seen. Stephen Parks, a former curator at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, became an early influence and taught me the value of working directly with objects. I was fortunate to have had the late Harold Bloom as my teacher, senior thesis advisor, and mentor—I will miss his support and friendship greatly. Needless to say, the opportunity to put together an exhibition of objects from these museums coupled with my own works is a dream come true.

I would like to thank the following, each of whom has in some way directly contributed to and supported the ideas in this exhibition: Ami Potter, Al Harding, James C. Scott, Michael Dove, Ned Cooke, Mark Aronson, Tanya Kelley, Jeffrey Yoshimine, Andrew Daubar, Heather Nolin, John ffrench, Elisabeth Hodermarsky, Anne Gunnison, Mark D. Mitchell, Katharine Luce, Anna Russell, Cheri Cercone, Jennifer Lu, Cecilia Estanislao, Molleen Theodore, John Stuart Gordon, Brooke Luokkala, Nelson Rios, Stefan Nicolescu, Fred E. Davis, Matthew Hargraves, Elisabeth Fairman, Beth Miller, Cecie Clement, Marilyn Fox, Michael Donoghue, Jacques Gauthier, Jean Black, Tom Lovejoy, the late Michael Coe, Roger Colten, Michael Anderson, Tim White, Eckart Frahm, Klaus Wagensonner, Erin Gredell, Jessie Cohen, Richard O. Prum, Ron Davidson, Sean Cavanaugh, David Polk, Pieranna Cavalchini, Hampton Carey, Annping Chin, Jonathan Spence, Andi and Tim Collins, Mark Bauer, John Darnell, Mark Dion, Manuela and Iwan Wirth, Brian T. Allen, Douglas Hyland, Amy Meyers, Harry Philbrick, Jill Deupi, Peggy Fogelman, Linda Dougherty, Larry Wheeler, Timothy Rub, Tom Loughman, John Ravenel, and Shari Jones.

At the Gallery, I would like to thank Tiffany Sprague and Christopher Sleboda for working carefully, closely, and creatively on the editing and design of this publication, as well as Edith Devaney, Head of Summer Exhibitions and Contemporary Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, for her essay.

I am truly grateful to Jock Reynolds, former Henry J. Heinz II Director of the Gallery, for initially proposing the idea of this exhibition several years ago, and Pamela Franks, former Senior Deputy Director and Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, for her enthusiasm and encouragement during my time as the Happy and Bob Doran Artist in Residence at the Gallery. My gratitude also to Stephanie Wiles, the current Henry J. Heinz II Director—her support made this exhibition possible. My heartfelt thanks to Laurence Kanter, Chief Curator and the Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of European Art at the Gallery, for his crucial insights and his thoughtful guidance as this project emerged, evolved, and came to be. Also critical to this exhibition was the encouragement and open-mindedness of my friend David K. Skelly, Director of the Peabody, who has greatly guided my thinking on ecology and evolution over the years.

I would like to thank Kristof Zyskowski, Collections Manager in Vertebrate Zoology at the Peabody, for sharing his passion for biodiversity, for his friendship, and for our travels together around the world, which influenced many of the ideas in this exhibition.

I have been fortunate to have enduring support from Donna and Marvin Schwartz, Sue and Steve Mandel, and Bill and Pam Royall, committed collectors who also love and care deeply for the natural world. Thank you for believing in me, and in my work, and for your friendship.

For over twenty years now, I have had an ongoing dialogue about art and life with my close friend and art dealer Waqas Wajahat. Our creative exchanges, time spent looking at art, and often-challenging critiques have been essential to the evolution of my work—no one is more deeply involved in what has come out of my studio than him.

Finally, I am thankful to Lauren and Cody for their love and support.

James Prosek

Introduction

Nature makes things. It is restless in testing the limits of what can possibly exist, experimenting to produce what Charles Darwin called "endless forms most beautiful."[1] As children of evolution, humans inherit, embody, and extend this need to make things, relentlessly pushing the possibilities of form and structure in ways both useful and seemingly useless.

The objects in this publication and its related exhibition—whether shaped by the forces of evolution, like the skull of a dinosaur or the bodies of colorful birds, or made by the very creatures that evolution has shaped, like man-made vessels or birds' nests—celebrate the beauty and diversity of nature. The juxtapositions of images are meant to suggest poetic echoes and tensions among and between things. At the same time, they test the boundaries we have traditionally set up between art and nature, posing various questions like: What is art and what is artifact, and to what extent do these distinctions matter? Are they helpful, enabling us to see things we otherwise would not? Or do they limit what we are able to see by drawing artificial boundaries around the magnificent productions of a wondrous and interconnected world? Context shapes how we perceive and treat things, so our categories and classifications, though perhaps arbitrary, are nevertheless important and worthy of examination.

When we see something and identify it as one thing (or as fitting within a certain category), it often loses the potential to be something else. Why should we limit our thoughts and ideas in this way? We exist deeply—perhaps too much so—in a world of concepts of our own invention, made through the reduction of an endlessly complex world.

Too often what we end up with in the process of coming to know the world is a "metamorphosis of the world into man."[2] Our brains evolved to be nimble, to simplify and order the messy, to extract only what is necessary for day-to-day existence, to edit out what is not essential for survival. We prefer the world as filtered by our minds, where it can be made orderly and intelligible, because then we feel we know it, and knowing brings comfort. If we live too much through the lens of our predispositions and the tools we have evolved—our languages and concepts—that reflect them, and not in the world itself, we miss out on an essential aspect of human experience: a direct, unmediated, sensual engagement with the natural world.

Once the complex and chaotic world is made legible through our taxonomies and systems of classification, we attempt to control it.[3] Political regimes have announced and carried out terrifying projects that attempt to force the world to conform to our mental reductions. Racism, sexism, religious discrimination, intolerance of myriad kinds emerge from a belief that there is some ideal form or way of being. But there is no such thing as an ideal form.

The health of our planet depends on an understanding and acceptance that the world is a system, not a place made up of units that fit into neat mental boxes. If we wish to make investigations into disorderly zones, where some of the most interesting things happen, we must find ways to override our strongest urges and inclinations. That is what this book and exhibition in part are meant to urge us to do.

The lines we draw between things, the categories into which we place things, the structures we impose on the world to communicate, and the choices we make based on our personal prejudices can shape not only the way we and others think but also the future of ourselves as a species, and the future of nature.

Over time, humans have learned to manipulate the forces of evolution. Through thousands of years of selective breeding we have made

1. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859; London: Penguin, 1982), 460.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (N.p.: Aristeus, 2012), 13.
3. The use of the word *legible* here is specific to a book by James C. Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science and Professor of Anthropology, Yale University: James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale Agrarian Studies Series (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

wolves into pugs, we have wired trees to grow in fetishistic miniature (bonsai), we have trained and pruned fruit trees to grow in neat geometric shapes (espalier, topiary), and we have genetically engineered plants to be resistant to predatory insects. In each of these examples, and in countless others, we have attempted to harness the vastness and complexity of nature, to bend nature to our will—perhaps under the illusion that we can render it manageable.

At the same time, we learned to make representations of nature, through drawing, painting, making three-dimensional objects, even writing (which evolved from drawing)—seeking to communicate our environment through a kind of mental domestication, reducing forms in nature to symbols over which we feel we have control.

And through mimicry, such as the making of decoys and lures—another form of the representation of nature—we were able to attain subtle power over the habits of nonhuman animals, to draw prey closer, making us better able to catch and kill the creatures that sustain us. Imitation and representation are both devices of artifice, used by artists and artisans as well as by nature. Through the forces of evolution, many creatures have come to mimic others to sustain themselves—for instance, evolving to look like a toxic species to frighten predators or to look uncannily like the plant on which they forage so as to be camouflaged. Darwin believed that our first sounds and words, our earliest language, were in imitation of birdsong.[4] Indeed some of our words to this day are onomatopoeic, like *chickadee*. As hunters know, the imitation of an animal sound, like the call of an elk or the gobbling of a turkey, is an aural decoy that can attract prey—another example of how mimicry and artifice have helped humans survive.[5]

We represented nature in part to trick it; as a consequence, we forged a more intimate relationship with it. The act of representation helped to focus our attention on our surroundings, strengthen our skills of observation, our minds, our memories, our imaginations. Imitation enabled a kind of cross-species engagement, connecting our brains to the brains of other animals and creating hybrid worlds of thought (for example, if you lure an elk toward you by imitating its call, you have engaged its mind with yours). Early innovations in imitation and representation (drawing and carving) coupled with spoken words that represented things and, eventually, written language (pictographs and hieroglyphs, as well as alphabets) have collectively allowed us to create a secondary nature. Once we had the ability to craft a simulated world, a new dynamic developed between the represented world and the world it was based upon—a dance, between the named and unnamed worlds.

Many of the object groupings in this publication speak to an essential question pertaining to arguably the most powerful tool of representation and reduction that humans have ever invented: language. What happens when words are joined to a world that does not have words on it?[6] Nature is an interconnected system, an undivided evolutionary continuum going back several billions of years.[7] To communicate this holistic continuum through language, we have drawn lines between things and labeled the pieces—a necessary process in the creation, retention, and dissemination of knowledge. But when we do this, the recipients of this knowledge inherit a fragmented world and lose sight of the interconnected nature of Nature. We come to live in the map of our making instead of the territory. Yet we must constantly remind ourselves that the map is not the terrain.[8] The danger comes when the lines we draw in nature, which should be permeable and temporary, become ossified and fixed, and we can no longer see beyond them because we are too busy defending them. The challenge is to communicate and celebrate the beauty of diversity on our planet, without embracing an ethos of division.

Humans may 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.[9]

In investigating the human urge to name, order, and classify the world, my own inquiry has been at times less about the objects and the names that accompany them than about the boundaries we draw in our minds in order to have things. I turn to my own early relationship with boundaries to try to understand how and why we encounter them, how they might affect us, and how we might try to overcome them.

I grew up in southwestern Connecticut, next to a drinking-water reservoir surrounded by hundreds of acres of watershed land that had been set aside to buffer and naturally filter the water. This land, once mostly farm fields, grew back into forests and now forms a kind of mini-wilderness.

My road had at one time continued into the center of town, but it was cut off when the valley was flooded to form the reservoir. Today, the street dead-ends at the watershed land. It was here, as a kid, that I encountered "No Trespassing" signs marking the limits of the land owned by the water company. These signs became beacons for me, and their authority stirred me to contradict them. Deer, turkeys, foxes, squirrels, and other animals crossed the line—why couldn't I?

The boundary also presented a conflict in my mind. This land would not have been protected without the boundary, but at the same time, I had trouble with public access being denied, particularly to me. With this line came both merits and faults—sometimes indistinguishable—but one thing was certain: the line had an effect on me.

Crossing the line was empowering and exciting, and not only because the land and the creatures on the other side were beautiful or because the fishing was so good in the reservoir. It was the *questioning* of the line, the small act of anarchism embedded in the trespass, that was so thrilling. As much as I mistrusted the line, I cannot imagine what my life would have been like had it not been there.

In one instance of crossing the line, I met one of my most important mentors—a game warden named Joe Haines, who caught me

4. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin writes, "I cannot doubt that language owes its origin to the imitation and modification of various sounds, the voices of other animals, and our own instinctive cries, aided by signs and gestures. . . . It is probable that the imitation of musical cries by articulate sounds may have given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions." Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection Related to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1871), 1:54.
5. In so many ways, creatures have benefited from the varied powers of mimicry and representation—to learn, to expand their minds, to persist on the planet.
6. We sometimes forget, I think, that nature does not have words on it; we put them there. I am concerned largely with two related questions: Did humans perceive the world differently before they had language? And, how might the world have changed once we put language on it?
7. My *Bird Spectrum* (pl. 9) is meant to illustrate this metaphorically—that the lines we draw between colors on a spectrum in order to label them, or the lines between species on an evolutionary time line, are to a certain extent arbitrary.
8. Alfred Korzybski, a Polish-American scientist, is credited with the famous dictum "The map is not the territory." From his book *Science and Sanity*: "A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has *a similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness. . . . If we reflect upon our languages, we find that at best they must be considered *only as maps*. A word *is not* the object it represents" (italics in the original); Alfred Korzybski, *Selections from Science and Sanity*, 2nd ed. (Forth Worth: Institute of General Semantics, 2010), 24.
9. When it comes to the way we try to straitjacket nature on the ground, examples abound, and these efforts to contain nature often fail. We build cities below sea level in the flood plain of one of the largest river deltas in the world, and then when the levee breaks we wonder why. Nature moves, animals migrate, creatures evolve, rivers flow—every action of every creature affects everything else.

fishing illegally on the wrong side of it. We had a fundamental difference of opinion about what the line stood for, he in his late fifties and I age thirteen. To him, the line was very real; as a law enforcement officer, his livelihood depended on upholding and defending the meaning of this boundary. To me, the line was arbitrary—it was ours, not Nature's.

As my friendship with the old game warden grew, however, part of my education from him—beyond skills related to hunting, fishing, and foraging—was that rules were important and some lines must be respected, even if Nature did not recognize them. I also acknowledged that, as much as I may have rejected the line, it changed my life by introducing me to this knowledgeable, local man who nurtured my young spirit.

In my early adolescence, about the same time that I was trespassing by the reservoir, I began to ask other questions that only years later I came to see as related. These were about words, or more specifically *names* (like those of birds and trees): the authority they projected, the often-fictional lines that needed to be drawn in nature for them to exist, our dependence on those lines in daily life, and their limitations in expressing the beauty of the natural world as I was coming to know it.

If I accepted the names that others had bestowed on nature and saw the world exclusively through the lens they provided, then I was surrendering to a kind of familiarity and predetermined knowledge and was missing out on an experience that was novel to me. It was as if I were presented with an open wood and invited to explore it but was told that I could not leave the path that had already been cut through the undergrowth. The existing path would allow me to traverse the wood and to see its beauty with less effort than if I had to cut a path myself. But at the same time, my perspective would be limited to that specific vantage. More often than not, I wanted to go off the trail, and I didn't like being told I could not.

The more I have examined the nature of boundaries, the more elusive and complex the analysis has become. It is not as simple as "Walls are good" or "Walls are bad." One of the most concise illustrations of the ironies and paradoxes embodied in boundaries can be found in a poem by Robert Frost from 1914 called "Mending Wall."

Up until the early twentieth century, it was common practice in rural New England for two neighbors to meet along a shared property line in spring and "mend" the wall—placing rocks back on the wall that had fallen the previous winter from frost heaving the ground. The poet begins with an observation: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." And later, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down." Nature, Frost notes, will eventually find a way to pull down boundaries, given enough time. While engaged in mending, the narrator, with the "spring mischief" in him, asks why they are bothering to mend the wall at all since they no longer have livestock that needs to be walled in. The response from his old Yankee neighbor is simply, "Good fences make good neighbors." The proverb is a wall in itself, meant to settle the argument, conversation closed.

"Mending Wall" became one of Frost's most famous poems—an allegory for everything from discussions about political borders to personal space—and he was faced with legions of admirers and interviewers who wished to hear his personal point of view on the matter. Which character was he in the poem? Was he in favor of walls or against them? Frustrating for some, perhaps, Frost answered with ambivalence: "I don't know, maybe I was both fellows in the poem." On another occasion he was quoted as saying, "We will always have walls—have always had them. While some are being torn down, others are being built up."[10] In 1957 the *New York Times* quoted Frost responding to boundaries metaphorically, comparing the biological walls in our own bodies to the questions raised in the poem: "All life is cellular. We live by the breaking down of cells and the building up of new cells. Change is constant and unavoidable. That is the way it is with human beings and with nations."[11]

One may think of a wall at first as something that divides, that separates both neighbors and nations, but one of the beautiful ironies of Frost's poem is that the wall and the activity of mending it are what bring the two neighbors together in the first place. Walls can separate, but they can also unite. I met my mentor the old Yankee game warden because of a line—one represented by a "No Trespassing" sign. Lines in the mind (like those between "us and them," or those on a map, invisible on the ground) and tangible lines in the world (fences or walls) are equally powerful; they influence our thoughts and feelings, as well as our destinies.

Today, I live on the same street on which I grew up, and I still take walks in the same woods where I walked as a child. I return often to the point of my early trespassing—the property line around the reservoir I used to cross as a kid to fish illegally. I know many of the metal "No Trespassing" signs—yellow with black lettering—as individuals, each with a unique relationship to the trees on which they are nailed. I remember clearly thirty years ago when the wardens changed all the signs. The old rusted signs read, "No Hunting, Trapping, or Fishing"; the new signs read, "No Hunting, Swimming, or Fishing"—an emblem of changing times.

Decades later, one large sugar maple tree is engulfing a once-unblemished sign (see frontispiece to this essay). Its bark has grown around the corners, concealing the "No" in "No Trespassing." (Is the tree winking at me—inviting my trespassing?) As the tree grows larger, it consumes the sign and tears it down the middle, aided by oxidation from years of rainstorms and humidity. This is not the only "line" the tree has ingested. Poking out from the shaggy bark at its base are segments of a barbed-wire fence that once ran between cedar posts (parallel to an older stone wall) when these were farm fields and not forests—a hundred years ago, or more. I have been told that trees do not talk, at least not in the sense that we can understand their communication, but here is a visual example that illustrates the thesis of my inquiry better than words on a page can.

The lines we draw may be useful to us—even necessary—and are often beautiful, but they are all, ultimately, ephemeral.

10. Robert Frost, quoted in Kenneth D. Madsen and D. B. Ruderman, "Robert Frost's Ambivalence: Borders and Boundaries in Poetic and Political Discourse," *Political Geography* 55 (November 2016): 87.
11. Cited in ibid., 89. Throughout his life Frost appears to have been conflicted about our relationship to walls. In a later notebook he even attempted to begin a sequel to "Mending Wall": "Something there is that doesn't love a wall / Something there is that does and after all." Ibid.

Naming Nature

As an undergraduate at Yale University in the 1990s, I read the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton's *Paradise Lost* for the first time. This passage caught my attention:

> There was a place,
> Now not, though Sin, not Time, first wrought
> the change,
> Where TIGRIS at the foot of Paradise
> Into a Gulf shot under ground, till part
> Rose up a fountain by the Tree of Life;[1]

If the Tigris River bubbled forth from the ground near the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, I reasoned, then it was undoubtedly cold, and most likely there were trout living there. Those trout were descendants of the ones that witnessed man's fall from Paradise. I dreamed of going there to catch the trout of Eden.

After graduation, in the summer of 1997, I set off with a friend from his home in southern Austria to southeast Turkey—through Italy, Macedonia, and Greece, by car and by ferry and on foot—to the source of the Tigris River, to look for trout where Eden was said to have been. This trip married two obsessions of mine: trout fishing (and painting trout in watercolors) and the biblical story of the Garden of Eden (and accompanying concerns regarding the naming of life by Adam).

Not more than a day's drive from Mount Ararat on the Armenian border—where Noah is said to have landed the ark in the flood—and south of blue Lake Van, we found several small tributaries on the map that looked promising. But as we got closer to the Iraqi border where these small streams flowed, we realized the region was too politically turbulent to travel precisely where we wanted to go. Less than twenty miles from the border with Iraq, with the Turkish military actively fighting the Kurdish separatists, we gave up our search and turned around.

My love of trout and of drawing them first led me to my inquiry about naming life and the relationship between word and world. Unable to find a book on the trout of North America as a child, I set out to make one at the age of nine, influenced by the bird paintings of John James Audubon and Louis Agassiz Fuertes. I wrote to departments of wildlife around the country, asking what kind of trout lived in their streams. I received very nice responses from biologists who studied these fish in cold streams and lakes in places like California, Colorado, Maine, and Nevada. They sent me photographs, papers they had published, and occasionally an invitation to visit. I began to make a list of all the different types of trout of North America, but I learned very quickly that no two biologists could agree on how many trout there were. Not only could they not agree on how many species existed in North America, they also could not agree on what a species even was.[2] This was because, as I was learning, language was a tool we used to navigate the world but was not the world itself.

In my youth, I learned to identify things using field guides, in which a picture of a bird or an insect corresponds to a name on the facing page. I had assumed that these books contained the last word, that the names for every organism had been agreed upon by figures of authority. My early research on trout had shaken these assumptions, and I began to lose faith in order and the reliability of names to describe the immense complexity of Earth's biodiversity.

So, what did this say about God's first task for Adam—to name the animals in the Garden of Eden? Was it a fool's errand?

In the beginning of Genesis, God makes things by drawing lines—separating the once-holistic universe into pieces. He divides light from dark, land from water. He gives names to entities that did not exist before—*day*, *night*, *Heaven*, *Earth*. He creates whales from the water, birds from the sky, and Adam, the first human, from the soil. God makes companions for Adam from the ground, beasts and fowl of all kinds, and then brings "them unto Adam to see what he would call them" (Gen. 2:19). Thus, the first human becomes a creator in his own right—naming things into being. But what might we have lost in the process?

The author Ursula K. Le Guin asks this question in her one-page story "She Unnames Them," originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1985.[3] In it, Eve apparently senses that once Adam put names on the animals her relationship to them, and theirs to one another, changes; some ineffable and sensual closeness has vanished. So, she goes through the garden unnaming them. Le Guin writes, in the voice of Eve, that once the animals had parted with their "appellations," "they seemed far closer than when their names stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear." Upon completing her task, Eve hands her own name back to Adam and walks out of the garden in protest.

I first traveled to Pohnpei, a tiny island in Micronesia (only thirteen miles in diameter), in March 2008, to write about a clan of people called the Lasialap, for whom the eel is a totem. Members of the eel clan consider eels to be their human ancestors and therefore do not eat them. In the Lasialap reality, humans can seamlessly transform into eels and back into humans, sometimes becoming a hybrid version of both at once.

I learned on this first trip to Pohnpei that the people have many fascinating customs related to naming, particularly the naming of plants, so I returned several years later to conduct research for a book about naming and ordering nature. Names are a source of power in Pohnpei. Medicine men and women are able to activate and harness the healing powers of a plant by uttering special names that only they know. Parents do not speak their children's given names until they reach two years of age, for fear that an evil spirit will mimic the name, luring the child into the forest where they will kill them. In all aspects of life, names are used carefully. The Pohnpeian origin story of how people received the names of plants and animals is very different from, even antithetical to, the biblical one.

Unlike in the biblical story, in which God gives Adam the task of putting names on the animals, in the Pohnpeian story, two boys go

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton, 1993), 200.
2. Charles Darwin, whose most famous work features the word *species* prominently in its title, admitted that this was an elusive term. In a letter to his friend the botanist Joseph Hooker in 1856, Darwin wrote, "It is really laughable to see what different ideas are prominent in various naturalists' minds, when they speak of 'species.' . . . It all comes, I believe, from trying to define the undefinable"; quoted in Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (London: John Murray, 1887), 2:88.
3. Ursula K. Le Guin, "She Unnames Them," *New Yorker* (January 21, 1985): 27.

out into the forest and ask the plants what their names are. In one story, we tell nature what it is to be called, bringing all our preconceptions and prejudices to the process; in the other, nature tells us, and we listen.

Of course, in practice, the Pohnpeian approach to gathering words—you cannot really even call it naming, it is more learning by imitation—is impractical for the purposes of cataloguing all the life on Earth, but there is metaphorical wisdom embedded in it. This sympathetic approach is consistent among peoples who have needed to maintain a level of intimacy with nature to survive. When I was a child, I knew the trout in my local stream not as members of a species but as individuals—some I had caught and released several times and could recognize based on their unique spotting patterns (visual identifiers—a kind of name—but in an idiom that was not mine). I was not using my learned language as a medium through which to traverse the land; I was using my senses to make direct observations, to melt into the forest and the stream. Names have not helped me achieve my most intimate moments with nature—wordlessness has.[4]

For people who name nature for a living—called *taxonomists* (one could argue that Adam was the first)—the holy grail is discovering and naming a new species. There is, of course, an element of possession and control in the naming process. In a sense, we express a kind of ownership of our children and pets when we give them names. The creation of standardized surnames for members of a population by modern states was a method of fixing their identities, making them "legible" for "the purposes of taxes, forced labor, and conscription."[5] Traditionally, by the International Codes of Botanical and Zoological Nomenclature, to name a new species you must "collect" a specimen—that is, take a life—perhaps the ultimate form of possession. Some have suggested that even giving something a name, without literally killing it, is a kind of metaphorical death, a negation of the thing being named.[6]

The novelist and poet Vladimir Nabokov was an intense amateur lepidopterist and corresponded with the curator of the insect collection at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, Charles Remington, in the 1940s. His poem "On Discovering a Butterfly," published in the *New Yorker* in 1943, recounts that his greatest joy, and highest accomplishment, was to find and name a new species of butterfly: "I found it and I named it, being versed / in taxonomic Latin; thus became / godfather to an insect and its first / describer—and I want no other fame."

To receive a name, an unnamed creature may have to die, but as long as there are humans to use the name and hold it in their imaginations, it will, in a sense, live forever.

In all of these stories of naming, something is gained and something is lost. This is the nature of the world; the tensions that propel experience and narrative exist on the boundary lines—between land and sea, youth and adulthood, innocence and experience, life and death, knowing and not knowing.

4. I wrote about listening to nature in my first book on trout: "I'd spent enough time near my local stream that I could begin to understand her language. Only after I'd become comfortable with her modes of speech—winter silence, springtime growling roar, lazy summer trickling, and autumn calm—did I begin to understand that the stream was not only a place where I fished but also a living, breathing celebration of hardship and joy." James Prosek, *Trout: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 3.
5. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 65.
6. Søren Kierkegaard's "Once you label me, you negate me" is one example. Peter Schwenger discusses this at length in his essay "Words and the Murder of the Thing," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 135–49. In it, Schwenger quotes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (p. 136), who writes in his *First Philosophy of Spirit* (1803), "The first act, by which Adam established his lordship over the animals, is this, that he gave them a name, i.e., he nullified them as beings on their own account." Schwenger also quotes the philosopher Maurice Blanchot (ibid.), who interpreted Hegel's comment thus: "God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared." Blanchot continues, "The death of the thing . . . is the price we pay for the word."

In stories the world over, the creature that seems to most frequently aid this transition, the trespass, the crossing, is the serpent—a lithe creature that lives in several worlds and none, and a hybrid of them all. It is a creature that is hard to name or classify in our minds, and perhaps this is why it serves this role. It moves, but without the aid of limbs. It inspires fear and awe and reverence, universally.

One way that humans are able to transcend the boxes implied by names is through metaphor, and the telling of stories in which the lives and fates of animals and humans are intertwined. The narrative of Adam and Eve, with the serpent who seduces Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge (leading to her and Adam's banishment from Eden), shares a common history with origin myths from India and Indonesia, in which the snake plays the role of monster-seducer or guardian.[7] As people migrated from the mainland into the more remote islands of the Pacific, they brought their stories with them. In much of Polynesia and Micronesia, there are no native snakes, and so the eel (a fish) assumes the role of the serpent as the closest available counterpart. In many versions of a similar story, differing slightly from island to island, the eel is involved in the creation of the most important food plant, which regionally can be the coconut or, in the case of Pohnpei, the breadfruit or banana.[8] These stories most often involve a young girl who goes to the spring hole to get water. When she returns to the village, she realizes that there is a young eel in her vessel of water, and she takes it home as a pet. As she raises the eel and it grows bigger, her parents become afraid of it, and eventually they release it back into the freshwater spring where she found it. As the girl and the eel grow and mature, they develop an affection for one another, and one day, when the girl is washing clothes in the freshwater spring, the eel comes up, wraps its tail around her leg, and violates her. The local warriors in the village run down to the spring, capture the eel, and cut off its head. The girl is conflicted because she loves the eel but does not know how to process what happened. Just before the eel dies, it asks the girl to bury its head in the sand and watch what grows. The girl follows the eel's instructions, and from the spot grows the first coconut tree and, eventually, the fruit—a source of both food and water. The "eyes" of the coconut are said to be the eyes of the eel, and when the girl drinks from the coconut, she is kissing the eel.[9]

In each story—biblical and Indigenous Pacific Island—the snake or snakelike creature gives something in the course of its seduction. Both stories involve fruit trees and a serpent as metaphorical deliverer of sexuality and sustenance (mental sustenance, i.e., knowledge, and/or corporeal sustenance, i.e., food). In both, the journey to the gift is fraught, it is complicated, it is messy, and it involves relationships where the boundaries of cordiality and respect are somehow crossed. Perhaps it is only through conflict, and crossing lines, through the breaking of what once was whole and sacred, that anything of substance can be born. Nothing is created from stasis.

7. Christian missionaries used these similarities to their advantage, enlisting characters or motifs, like the serpent, from Indigenous stories in their work—thus adapting the Indigenous stories, or hybridizing them with biblical ones, to aid the conversion.
8. The Pohnpeian version of this eel story can be found in my book *Eels: An Exploration, from New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Mysterious Fish* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 235–49.
9. There are three dark spots that are free of fibers on the surface of a coconut, sometimes referred to as "eyes." They are germination pores. One is functional and holds an embryo, from which a young coconut will emerge.

1
James Prosek, Study for *Paradise Lost, Ponape*, 2019. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 24½ × 18½ in. (62.2 × 47 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

2
Paul Gauguin, *Paradise Lost*, ca. 1890. Oil on canvas, 18⅛ × 21⅝ in. (46 × 54.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin E. Bensinger, B.A. 1928, 1971.114

3
Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve*, 1504. Engraving on paper, 9⅝ × 7⅝ in. (24.4 × 19.3 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Fritz Achelis Memorial Collection, Gift of Frederic George Achelis, B.A. 1907; reacquired in 1972 with the Henry J. Heinz II, B.A. 1931, Fund; Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund; and Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund, 1925.29

The Color Spectrum

In the color spectrum, as in the evolutionary continuum, clear lines do not exist—we draw them. If you take a bucket of red paint and add one drop of yellow at a time, there is no specific place where red ends and orange begins. Individual cultures around the world have their own novel ways of dividing the color spectrum. Russian speakers, for instance, have two separate words for blue—one for lighter blue and one for darker blue. A group in Papua New Guinea called the Dani has only two basic color terms, one for warm colors and one for cool colors. And, in the language of the Himba of Northern Namibia, the same word is used for both blue and black.

Linguists and anthropologists have studied whether people who have different ways of describing color also see colors differently—for instance, if you have more color words in your language, can you differentiate colors more quickly? And, conversely, if you have fewer color terms, are you less likely to differentiate one color from another?[1] Biologically, humans around the world have the same basic visual equipment, so we should all be capable of seeing the same colors (outside of abnormal conditions like color blindness, of course). But is it possible that having more or different words for things shapes our perceptions in meaningful ways? On this matter, linguist Guy Deutscher has written,

> If different languages influence their speakers' mind in varying ways, this is not because of what each language allows people to think but rather because of the kinds of information each language habitually obliges people to think about. When a language forces its speakers to pay attention to certain aspects of the world each time they open their mouths or prick up their ears, such habits of speech can eventually settle into habits of mind with consequences for memory, or perception, or associations, or even practical skills.[2]

Cognitive psychologist Jules Davidoff said the following at a conference at Goldsmiths, University of London, regarding the Himba and color perception:

> There is no natural category called blue, they were just sensations we want to group together; those natural categories don't exist. But because we have constructed these categories, blues look more similar to us in the pictorial register, whereas to these people in Northwest Namibia, the blues and the blacks look more similar. . . . We are constructing the world of colors and in some way at least our memory structures do alter, to a modest extent at least, what we're seeing.[3]

In a 1994 study by Joachim Krueger and Russell W. Clement, subjects were asked to estimate temperatures at eight-day intervals throughout a year. Sometimes the eight-day intervals fell within the same month, and sometimes they were split by a named-month boundary (like January/February). The estimates were fairly accurate overall, writes David J. Schneider in his book *The Psychology of Stereotyping*, but 85 percent of the subjects "perceived greater differences between rather than within months. . . . This suggests that the subjects wanted to emphasize the differences between months, as we all tend to do in our everyday lives."[4] As the authors wrote in the original paper about the study from 1994, "Merely placing objects into distinct categories affects judgments about those objects."[5] In reality, the temperature may have risen and fallen steadily from, say, August 20 to August 28 to September 5, but the estimated temperature differences were greater between days in August and September than between days that fell within just August.

This example provides subtle evidence of how the distinctions that we make with words and invented categories may affect the human mind. Once units and their accompanying boundaries exist, we give emphasis to them, and we lose sight of the spaces in between. In light of this, how do we best approach perhaps the most sensitive of divisions humans are faced with—the question of how to classify ourselves?

Any number of criteria may be used—occupation, country of origin, race, language, religion, gender identity, or all of these at once. None of these characteristics alone, or perhaps even together, are ever adequate in forming a complete picture of what or who we are—and yet, we continue to rest on them and the neat boxes they imply.

Maria Popova, the creative force behind the literary blog *Brain Pickings*, said on the radio program *On Being*, "I think identity for all of us is this perpetual process that's somewhat like constantly clearing out and rearranging an attic, and it's as much about throwing out all the furniture and trinkets that no longer service as bringing in new ones and in that sense it's just as important to continue defining who we are as to continue eliminating who we're not."[6]

This is a belief that Ralph Waldo Emerson encouraged us to embrace when he wrote in his essay "Self-Reliance" (1841), "Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. . . . To be great is to be misunderstood." Walt Whitman extended this assertion in his poem "Song of Myself" (1892): "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

Identity—who we are—is elusive and ever changing. Our identities advance through complex combinations of who we believe we are, and who we are told we are by the world.

In the past, humans have classified each other based on reductive and arbitrary traits like

1. The idea that the language you speak can determine your thoughts and perceptions was popularized by two Yale University linguists, and this concept now bears their names: the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. They went too far in their thinking that language guides our thoughts, and their work has been largely discredited, but some contemporary linguists still espouse a mild version of this idea.
2. Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Picador, 2011), 152. Italics in the original.
3. Quoted in Tanya Kelley, "World to Word: Nomenclature Systems of Color and Species" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, Kansas City, 2017), 73.
4. David J. Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 109.
5. Joachim Krueger and Russell W. Clement, "Memory-Based Judgments about Multiple Categories: A Revision and Extension of Tajfel's Accentuation Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 1 (1994): 35.
6. Maria Popova, interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, May 14, 2015, transcript, https://onbeing.org/programs/maria-popova-cartographer-of-meaning-in-a-digital-age-feb2019/.

the color of their skin (and sometimes still do), a remnant of a time before genetics, when all we had to go on were physical characteristics.[7] Now that we can read ancestry through our genes, we are aware that skin color is an unreliable characteristic on which to base relatedness. Populations of humans have evolved in isolation for periods of time and have developed unique adaptations for their immediate environs. But, eventually, all humans move, and as they migrate they mix with other populations, who have also been isolated for periods of time. This constant moving and mixing means that the human species cannot be divided neatly into categories, racial, cultural, or otherwise.[8]

This, of course, does not mean that there is no variation—it means that our collective history is intricate and messy. We have learned that, biologically, humans are pretty much the same the world over—and yet within that sameness there is an enormous amount of diversity. How do we convey these two seemingly contradictory truths simultaneously? How do we celebrate our sameness, while also distinguishing ourselves—acknowledging our individuality?

Again, this is the nature of the tension between the named and nameless worlds. We fragment the spectrum in order to have discrete things, but when we pull back, we are forced to acknowledge the arbitrariness of the boundaries we have created. All things are part of one working whole and cannot be easily parsed. We all contain multitudes.

One day, hopefully, we will stop trying to put humans into boxes, and we will simply marvel at the complex web of life of which we are a part, abandoning once and for all our fixation on fixity.[9]

This section includes my *Bird Spectrum* (pl. 9), an installation that uses bird specimens to illustrate the idea of interconnectedness—the continuum of nature. The gradations between colors are intended to be slightly messy, to reflect the fuzziness of boundaries. In addition, the work is meant to be a kind of memorial to these creatures who lost their lives for the advancement of our knowledge, and a testament to the singular beauty of birds. Each tag—which most often records the name of the location where the bird was collected, the name of the person who collected and prepared the specimen, the name of the bird (both common and scientific), and sometimes also the name of the person who named the species—represents the dedication of an individual who worked in uncomfortable and sometimes even dangerous conditions (environmentally and/or politically) to bring the specimens home.[10] As part of my inquiry into naming and ordering nature, I have engaged in this process; the spectrum includes two birds that I skinned and prepared on an expedition with the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History to remote tropical forests in central Suriname, a former Dutch colony north of Brazil.

The Peabody ornithology collection comprises 150,000 specimens collected over the last 150 years on every continent of the world. They are housed in compact metal storage shelves arranged by ancestry (and the Linnaean system of taxonomy)—that is, by what is most closely related to what, evolutionarily. In the *Bird Spectrum*, I have arranged more than two hundred birds not by biology but by color, in the belief that novel juxtapositions can tell novel stories.[11] There are only about twenty museums in the world with collections large and diverse enough in species, color, and geography from which such a spectrum could be assembled.

Color in birds is a subject being studied by faculty at Yale University, most notably Richard O. Prum, ornithology professor and a pioneer in the field of bird vision and the evolution of color in birds. Birds can see a range of ultraviolet colors that humans cannot—which means that if you are an ornithologist studying bird behavior, it is important to be aware of the fact that what you see is not the same as what a bird sees. This spectrum, then, would look completely different to a bird.

Ultimately, this work was created by the birds themselves.[12]

The Abstract Expressionists of the mid-twentieth century were pioneers of the "spaces in between," that vast borderland between visible objects that science cannot quantify—the gap between what one can see and one can say, between word and world. You can see these artists questioning the boundaries, in the Multiforms of Mark Rothko (pl. 12), for instance, or in Helen Frankenthaler's work, when she lets fluid pigment run across an unprimed canvas. In a painting appropriately titled *Low Tide* (pl. 10), Frankenthaler explores the line where land meets sea, metaphorically and materially, thinning the paint to the point where it is almost like water, staining the canvas—her sandy shore. John Constable seemed to have been trying to comprehend this space/non-space, too, when he painted his many cloud studies in the nineteenth century (pl. 14). Indeed, viewing these works is like watching clouds (the dreamy domain of birds) perform a dance, edges forming and dissipating. Or like the surface of the water, reflecting and abstracting our world back to us.

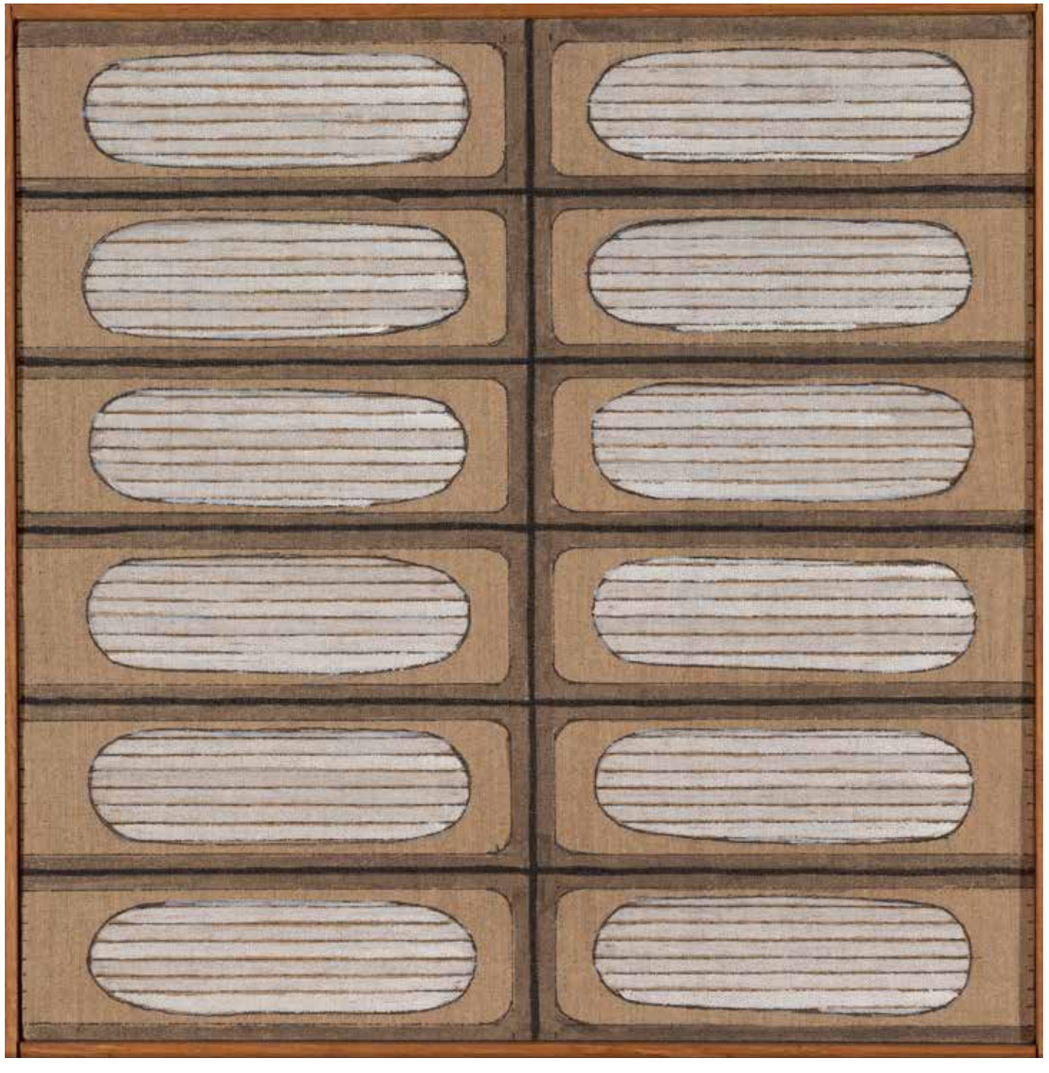
7. For example, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, which has conducted censuses in Brazil since 1940, classifies the Brazilian population into five categories: *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *preto* (black), *amarelo* (yellow), and Indigenous or Amerindian. As is consistent with international practice, individuals are asked to self-identify or self-declare within these categories. They can also choose multiple affiliations, as the color landscape of humans is never as tidy as these categories suggest.
8. Siddhartha Mukherjee writes in his book *The Gene: An Intimate History* that although "variations in the human genome will cluster in geographic regions and continents, and along traditional boundaries of race . . . the actual range of human genetic variation is strikingly low." He adds that "racial categorization of humans is an inherently limited proposition." Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History* (London: Vintage, 2017), 340–41.
9. Ibram X. Kendi warns in his book *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 54, that abandoning race as a concept is not the answer for creating a postracial world, at least not yet: "Race is a mirage but one that humanity has organized itself around in very real ways. . . . If we stop using racial categories, then we will not be able to identify racial inequity. If we cannot identify racial inequity then we will not be able to identify racial policies. If we cannot identify racial policies then we cannot challenge racial policies. . . . Terminating racial categories is potentially the last, not the first, step in the antiracist struggle."
10. The history of collecting in general is controversial, associated in many ways with the complex and contentious history of imperialism. Museums like the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History and the Yale University Art Gallery face difficult cultural questions of ownership and potential repatriation. In 2011, for instance, the Peabody returned to the Peruvian government thousands of objects collected by Hiram Bingham III between 1911 and 1914 at the site of Machu Picchu.
11. The 222 birds in this spectrum include extinct species like a Carolina parakeet collected in Tampa, Florida, in 1882; a lorikeet endemic to the island of Pohnpei, Micronesia; several specimens of the brilliant orange cock-of-the-rock of South American rainforests (my favorite bird when I was a child); a scarlet tanager from Guilford, Connecticut; and an orange fruit dove from Fiji. The individual birds were collected by many influential naturalists and ornithologists, among them S. Dillon Ripley. In 1950, in what was then known as Ceylon, Ripley collected the Sri Lanka blue magpie that is included in the *Bird Spectrum*; he was curator of the bird collection at the Peabody early in his career and went on to hold the prestigious position of Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
12. The incredible beauty and variation in their plumage were fashioned over time in part by the minds of female birds whose individual aesthetic choices—in terms of which males they wanted to mate with—shaped the diversity we have today.

4
Feather Cape, Hawaii, before 1821. Hawaii mamo (*Drepanis pacifica*) feathers and scarlet honeycreeper (*Drepanis coccinea*) feathers, 23 × 23 11/16 in. (58.4 × 60.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Harrison F. Bassett in memory of his wife, Elizabeth Ives Bassett, and her brother Arthur Noble Brown, 1941.54

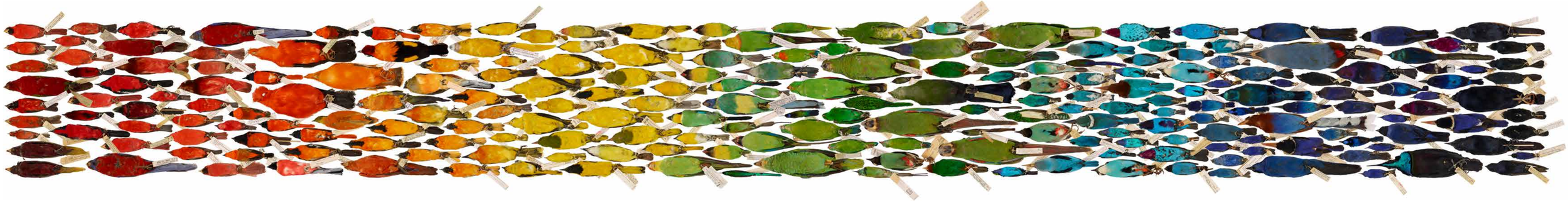
5
Sol LeWitt, *Untitled (JP #3)*, 1992. Gouache on paper, 12½ × 9⅜ in. (31.8 × 23.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935, Collection, 2008.19.1118

6
Morris Louis, *Illumination*, 1962. Magna on canvas, 83 × 12 5/16 in. (210.8 × 31.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935, 1986.97.2

7
Agnes Martin, *Islands No. 4*, ca. 1961. Oil on canvas, 14⅞ × 14⅞ in. (37.8 × 37.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of The Woodward Foundation, 1977.49.16



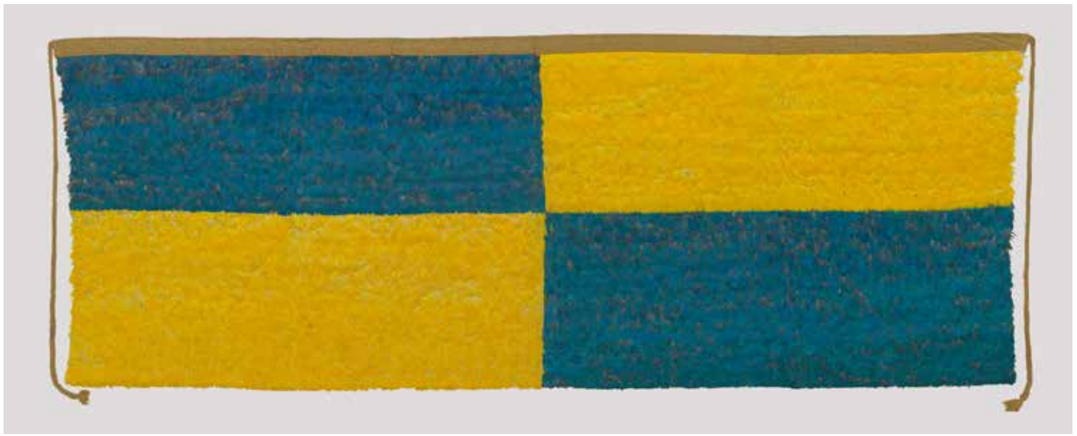
8
James Prosek, *Memory of Life*, 2019. Pigmented inkjet print, 27 × 30 in. (68.6 × 76.2 cm). Courtesy the artist



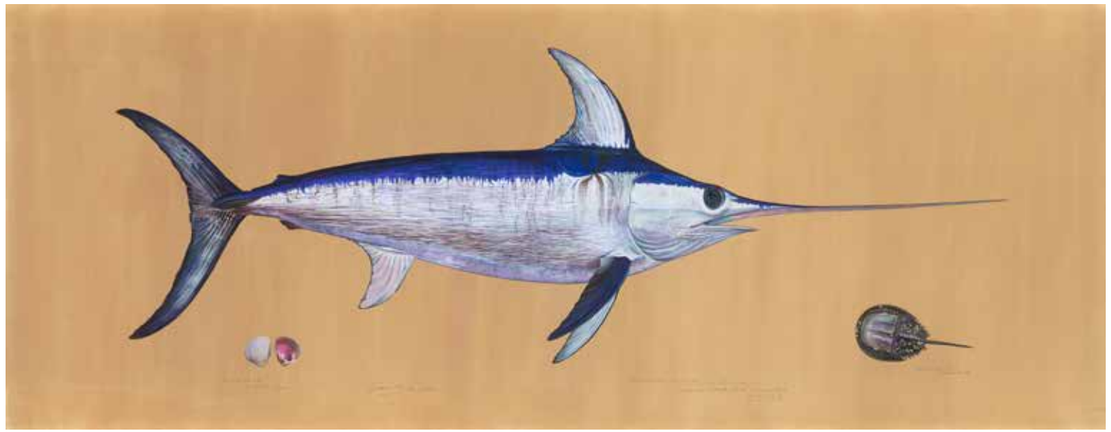
9
James Prosek, *Bird Spectrum*, 2019. Bird specimens, 1 ft. 6½ in. × 15 ft. × 4 in. (47 × 4572 × 10.2 cm). Courtesy the artist; specimens provided by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History

10
Helen Frankenthaler, *Low Tide*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 84 × 81¾ × 1 in. (213.4 × 207.6 × 2.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Susan Morse Hilles, 1964.4

11
Mantle Skirt, Huari, ca. A.D. 1000. Cotton and feathers, 31⅛ × 87 in. (79 × 221 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.145282



12
Mark Rothko, Untitled, 1947. Oil on canvas, 39 × 22⅛ in. (99.1 × 56.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1986.57.1



13
James Prosek, *Swordfish* (overall and detail), 2010. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and powdered mica on paper, 5 ft. × 12 ft. 11 in. (152.4 × 393.7 cm). Courtesy the artist

14
John Constable, *Cloud Study*, ca. 1821. Oil on paper, laid on card, 9⅜ × 11½ in. (23.8 × 29.2 cm). Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn., Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.146

Mark Making

What were the first marks made consciously by humans? What did they look like, and how did we come to make them? Drawing is among the oldest forms of human expression, predating written language, which evolved from drawing, and possibly complex spoken language as well.

In our earliest drawings, we took our cues from nature: footprints made in the snow or soil, the line a blade of dune grass draws in the sand as it is blown across it by the wind.[1] I am speaking of drawing loosely, of course, as making marks that leave behind—that record—a kind of residue of experience, of being, of thought.

Staring at a reflection on a lake or watching our shadows cast by a flickering firelight onto the wall of a cave, we learned from nature how it is possible to make a two-dimensional rendering of a three-dimensional world.[2] Using mud, or blood, or a piece of burned stick, we could make a mark, manifest a thought, get something out of our heads and onto a surface.

Perhaps the first conscious mark was a handprint on a wall. Once made, it would have spoken back to us, persistently—"I am here!" Was the ability to make and reflect on that mark the beginning of our self-awareness, of humanity?

In making marks, we inadvertently discovered a method—one of the most powerful of all time—of pausing time, of documenting a moment that otherwise would go unremembered. And if the marks we made could be protected from the rain and the wind and could be conveyed to another human, we could use them to communicate. Thought and memory are ephemeral and slippery; ideas come and go. Here was a way to make a thought observable as well as stable.

Our first spoken words, our earliest language, similarly helped us to transmit, retain, and reflect on our thoughts. Whether drawing came at the same time, or before, it held the seeds of a tool arguably more powerful—written language—which allowed a thought to survive long after the individual who carried it, or an entire civilization, had vanished. This is a fundamental power of the mark—endurance.

Recent research has shown that the marks made by some female birds on eggs carry valuable information.[3] The egg starts out blank in the body of the bird. In the hours before it is laid, however, as the egg moves through the oviduct, epithelial cells, sometimes described as small "paint guns," release pigment at precise intervals, making unique drawings on the surface (pls. 18, 21, and 24).[4] When a female lays a clutch of eggs, these unique markings allow the mother to identify each individual egg. One could think of these marks, then, as a form of writing—as signatures, or even names. The marks also help a mother bird differentiate her own eggs from those of parasitic bird species—such as the cuckoo or cowbird—which lay their eggs in other birds' nests. The mother bird can recognize a parasitic bird's egg as a foreign body and push it out of the nest before it hatches. If the egg from the foreign bird does hatch in the nest, however, the chick seems to be able to appeal to the motherly instinct of the host bird, who will feed it. In an attempt to have their eggs nurtured by the host mother, parasitic birds have evolved signatures on their eggs to mimic the patterns on eggs of nonparasitic bird species, like a kind of painting forgery.

Marks on bird eggs can also help camouflage them. Many shorebirds do not make nests but instead lay their eggs on beach stones. The mother bird has evolved to lay eggs that mimic the patterns on the stones, sand, and grasses, almost a type of landscape painting, which, in its simplest terms, is just a representation of the world recorded on a surface.[5]

These birds are most likely unaware of the marks being made in their bodies, and therefore are achieving a line of the kind that the Surrealist artists and, later, the Abstract Expressionists strived to create—a mark made outside of conscious thought, a method known as *automatism*. The birds can achieve a purer form of unconscious painting than the human painter ever could.

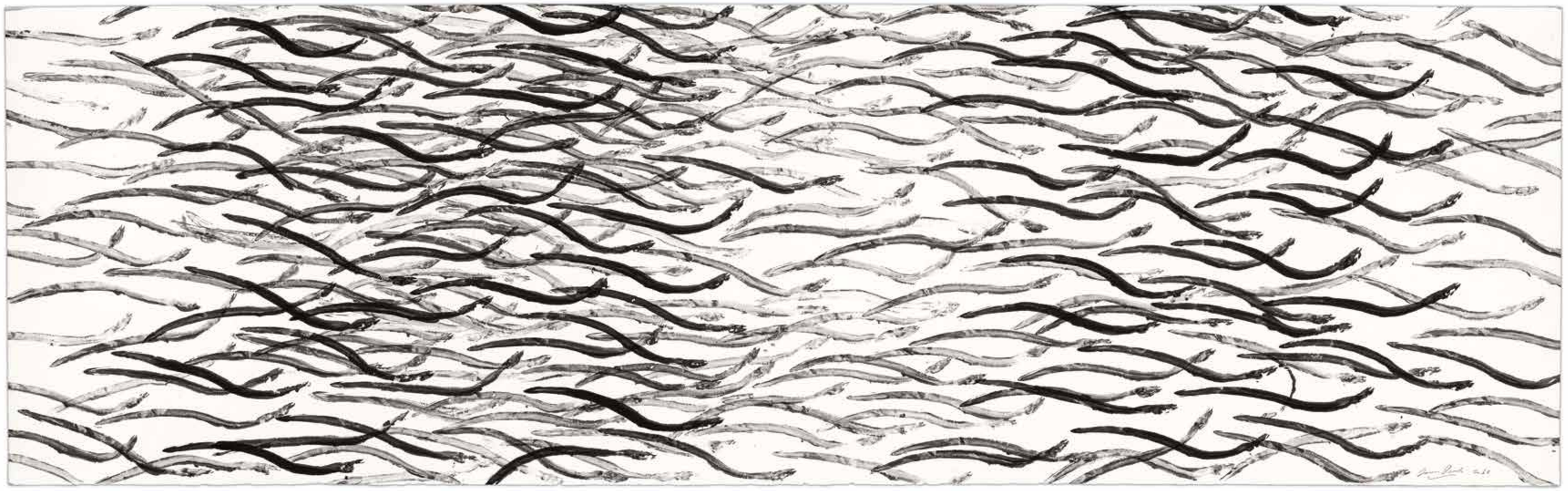
So, which came first, Pollock or the egg? Of course, we know the answer—the birds are a few million years ahead of us. Might Jackson Pollock have marveled at the marks on eggshells while strolling down the beaches near his home in East Hampton, New York, and yearned to mimic them (pl. 27)?

Over millennia, humans have used diverse methods of mark making to try to communicate thoughts and feelings. This is especially true of artists.

In Brice Marden's *Cold Mountain* series, the artist uses sticks to make marks inspired by Chinese calligraphy (for a similar Marden work, see pl. 16, and for an example of Chinese calligraphy, see pl. 85). Pollock splashed, drizzled, and poured paint on the floor to make his famous drip paintings. Earlier mark makers, like the ancient Babylonians, wrote with a reed stylus on wet clay (pls. 19–20); cuneiform has been described as resembling the footprints of birds. (In a nod to this, the tablets shown here actually record information about birds—one lists eggs as sacred meals for the gods of Babylon, and the other records omens concerning eagles and other birds.[6]) British sculptor and land artist Richard Long uses handprints, and French artist Yves Klein used the bodies of women performers. In a series of works I have been making for almost twenty years, I apply ink to a dead eel and stamp it over and over again on the paper, sometimes thousands of times (pl. 15). These works—at once abstract but also hyperreal (because up close you can see the impression of the fish as well as some details of its skin, eyes, jaw, and fins)—are influenced by a nineteenth-century Japanese tradition called *gyotaku*, where an inked fish is used to make a mark on rice paper.

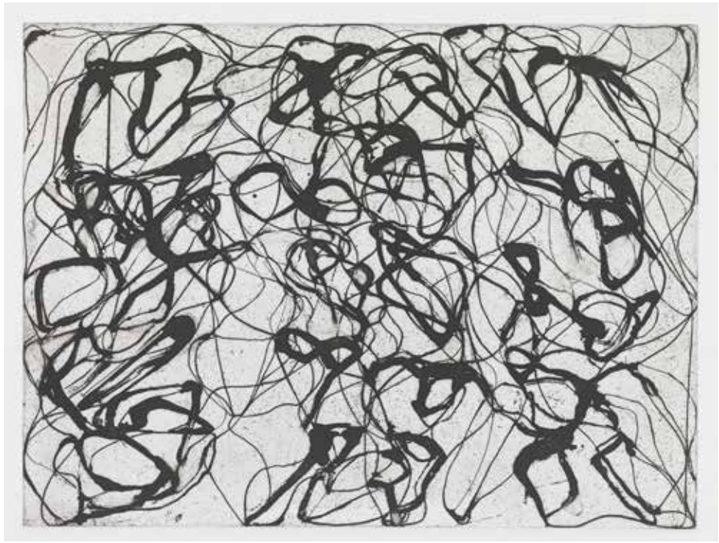
I sometimes marvel at how it is that the primitive tools of artists are still relevant in this hyper-technological age. The graphite pencil, a piece of charcoal, an animal-hair brush with a wooden handle—some of these tools have not changed for thousands of years. When we type a message on a computer and send it to someone, the sentiments may vary, but the mark is standardized. When someone makes a mark with his or her hands, it is unique. Ask ten people to draw a straight line on a piece of paper, and every line will look different, each one the mark of an individual. Nothing can replace the appeal of the handmade.

1. One could argue that the tracks of animals are the oldest form of writing. The ability to read or interpret these marks—tracking—made the land legible to us, allowed the history of movements on the land to be intuited.
2. In the first century A.D., Pliny the Elder speculated in his *Natural History* that drawing "originated in tracing lines round the human shadow." See Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. Henry T. Riley (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), 6:228.
3. See Mary Caswell Stoddard and Mark E. Hauber, "Colour, Vision, and Coevolution in Avian Brood Parasitism," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 372, no. 1724 (July 5, 2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2016.0339.
4. Tim Birkhead, *The Most Perfect Thing: Inside (and Outside) a Bird's Egg* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 85–87.
5. The "sequence" works in this book (pls. 17, 23, 26) were made by taking a three-dimensional scan of each egg, then digitally unrolling and enlarging the images in what is known as a Mercator projection.
6. Thanks go to Klaus Wagensonner, postdoctoral associate, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Yale University, for providing this information.



15
James Prosek, *Abstract Nature No. 8*, 2018. Sumi ink on paper, 27¾ × 87¾ in. (70.5 × 222.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

16
Brice Marden, *After Botticelli*, 1992–93. Etching with aquatint, 8⅞ × 11⅞ in. (22.5 × 30.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Susan and Arthur Fleischer, Jr., B.A. 1953, LL.B. 1958, 2012.137.4.4



17
James Prosek, *Sequence No. 1*, 2019. Pigmented inkjet print, 14½ × 26 in. (36.8 × 66 cm). Courtesy the artist

Clockwise, from top left:

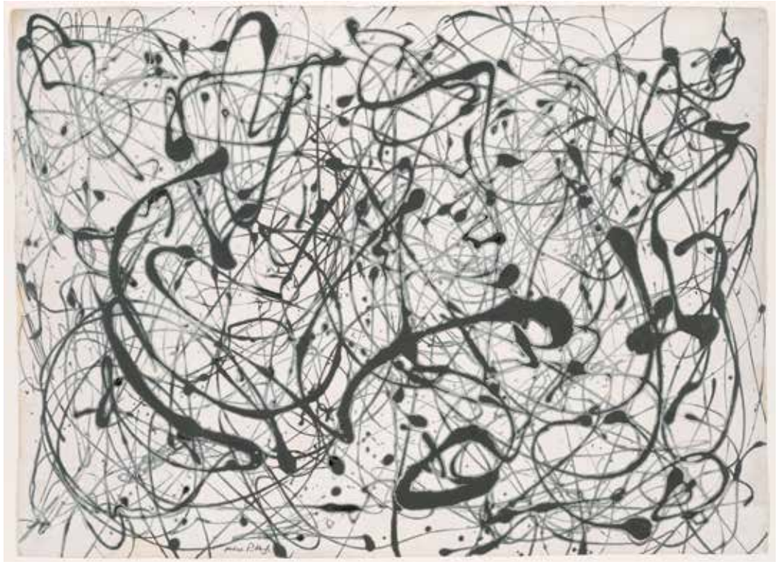
18
Egg of a Great-Tailed Grackle (Quiscalus mexicanus), Texas, Waco. 1¼ × ⅞ in. (3.2 × 2.2 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.145777

19
Tablet Written in Cuneiform Akkadian Listing Eggs for Sacred Meals for the Gods of Babylon, Late Babylonian, 6th century B.C. Clay, 1³⁄₁₆ × 1¹⁵⁄₁₆ × ⅝ in. (3.1 × 4 × 1.6 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM BC.019223

20
Tablet Fragment Written in Cuneiform Akkadian with a List of Omens Concerning Eagles and Other Birds, Neo-Babylonian, 6th century B.C. Clay, 2⁹⁄₁₆ × 1¾ × 1¹⁄₁₆ in. (6.5 × 4.5 × 2.7 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM BC.030146

21
Egg of a Common Murre (Uria aalge), England. 3¼ × 1⅞ in. (8.3 × 4.8 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.147888

22
Jackson Pollock, *Number 14: Gray*, 1948. Enamel over gesso on paper, 22⅞ × 30⅞ in. (57 × 78.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Katharine Ordway Collection, 1980.13.74



23
James Prosek, *Sequence No. 2*, 2019. Pigmented inkjet print, 14½ × 26 in. (36.8 × 66 cm). Courtesy the artist

24
Egg of a Northern Jacana (Jacana spinosa gymnostoma). 1 × ¾ in. (2.5 × 1.9 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.150658

25
Joan Mitchell, Untitled, ca. 1958. Screenprint in 5 colors, 18 × 14¼ in. (45.7 × 36.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Emerson Tuttle, B.A. 1914, Print Fund, 1993.118.1

26
James Prosek, *Sequence No. 3*, 2019. Pigmented inkjet print, 14½ × 26 in. (36.8 × 66 cm). Courtesy the artist

27
Jackson Pollock, *Number 4*, 1949. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint with pebbles on cut canvas, mounted on composition board, 35½ × 34⅜ in. (90.2 × 87.3 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Katharine Ordway Collection, 1980.12.6

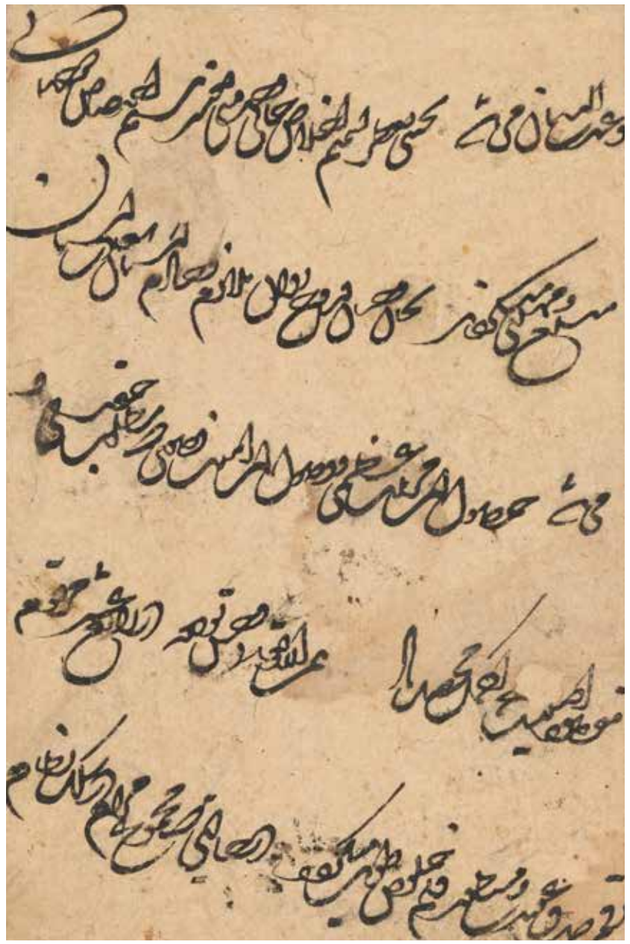
Clockwise, from left:

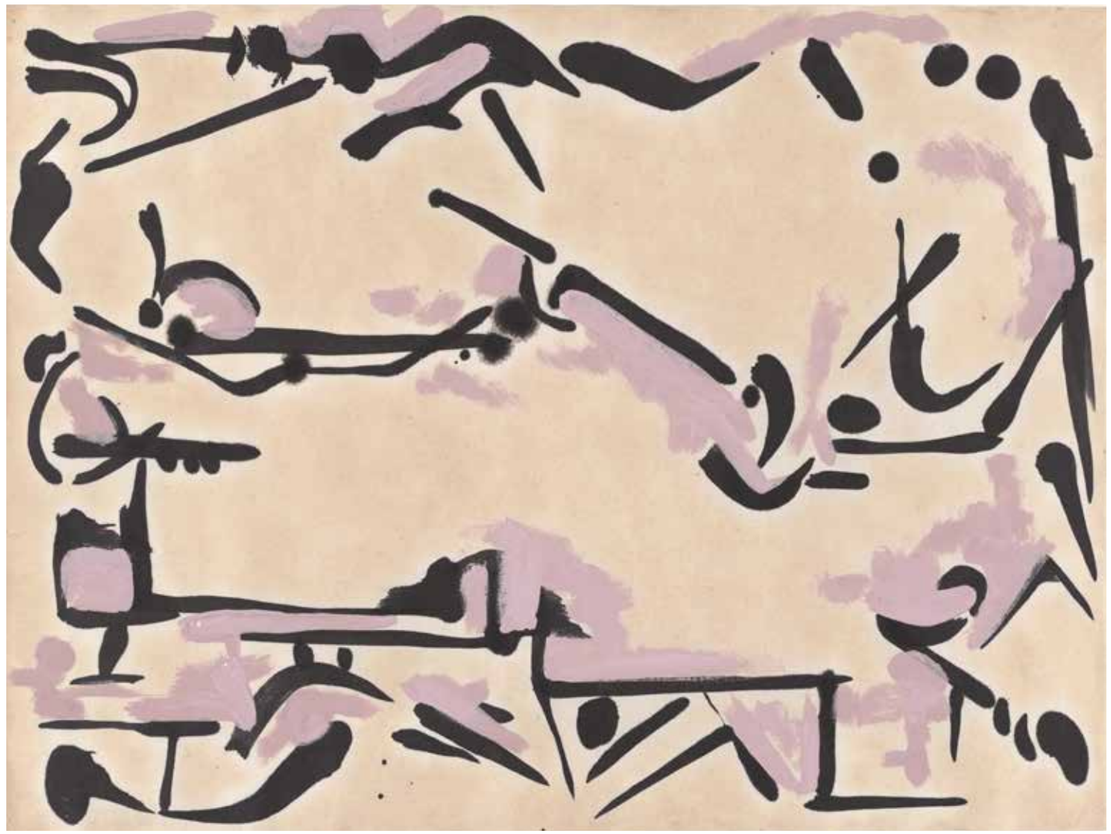
28
Chancellery Document in Nastaliq Script, Iran, 18th century. Ink on paper, 6 × 4½ in. (15.2 × 11.4 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs. William H. Moore, 1951.51.55

29
Bowl with an Arabic Inscription, Iran or Uzbekistan, 10th century A.D. Earthenware with white slip under transparent glaze, H. 3⅛ × DIAM. 9⅞ in. (7.7 × 24 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Fred Olsen, 1954.53.15

30
Bowl with an Arabic Inscription, Uzbekistan, 10th century A.D. Earthenware with white slip under transparent glaze, H. 2⅜ × DIAM. 4⅞ in. (5.6 × 11.3 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Fred Olsen, 1954.53.14

31
David Smith, Untitled, 1953. Ink and tempera on paper, 17¹¹⁄₁₆ × 24⅛ in. (45 × 61.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933, Collection, 2006.52.87





Hybridity

A creature with the head of a beautiful woman and the body of a tiger waits, half in and half out of the water (pl. 35). A man on the shore appears to be taking off his clothes, perhaps with the assistance of his servant. Is he planning to jump in and save the creature because she is in distress? Or is she seducing him, luring him into the water where she will kill him—the tiger heads on her feet and tail making her even more formidable?

She is a hybrid, a vision of artifice. She embodies deception and trickery—her human elements acting as a decoy. Hybrids are liminal creatures, occupying an interstitial space of ambiguity and disorientation. They straddle atmospheres (air and land, land and sea, sea and sky, male and female, human and divine, royal and prophetic, human and nonhuman, real and imagined).[1]

Whether in ancient Greek literature, Polynesian myths, the Bible, the *Bhagavad Gita*, or comic books, hybrids generally have powers beyond the individual creatures from which they are constructed. They are often misunderstood or feared by society because they do not fit into prescribed boxes, but they can also appear as heroes or saviors, and be welcomed and admired.[2] Even as they unsettle and unmoor us, betraying our expectations, they cause us to look and live anew.

At the time of their creation, hybrids are novel and nameless, visual metaphors that transcend language, bringing disparate forms together for the first time. And so, they can occupy, for a second at least, the spaces between named objects. Until, that is, they themselves are named.[3]

What has compelled people to create hybrids? To me, their existence is a firm assertion of humans' intuitive understanding that the natural world is messy, interconnected, and in constant flux. Static forms and fixed states, linear narratives and neat classifications, or any other attempts at codifying nature may serve the human race well for a period of time but not forever. Instead, we have survived by creating or living within boundaries, and then trespassing across them—not only imaginatively but literally.

The spirit or ethos of hybridity is manifested or mirrored in the evolution of modern humans, what we call *Homo sapiens*. All humans are descended from one population in Africa, but, as mentioned in the "Color Spectrum" section, once we spread across the globe and were tested by different cultural and environmental conditions, we evolved slight variations. When those disparate populations migrated and mixed, after relatively brief periods of time apart (a few thousand years perhaps, or less), they brought all their local adaptations to the collective species and made the species as a whole stronger. Hybridity within and across species can produce animals with a larger group of characteristics for natural selection to work from, which means that mixing can produce creatures that are better able to survive a host of ever-changing conditions.

Recent genetic research has revealed that modern humans reproduced successfully with other, more distantly related hominid groups, like Neanderthals. Many of us are hybrids of modern humans and one or several other early hominids.

The human body itself, one could argue, is not a single organism but actually a hybrid biome, a living system. Without the trillions of bacteria that live in and on us, digesting our food and fighting our diseases, we would have trouble surviving. As the poet John Donne famously scribed, "No man is an island entire of itself."

The value of the concept of hybridity to our everyday lives is that it forces us to trespass across boundaries that can otherwise be a hindrance to original thinking and fresh perspectives. This is why many universities, including Yale, are increasingly promoting and embracing interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary behavior—because a melting of the silos, at least somewhat, may create new ways of synthesizing ideas. It may help us live more in the terrain than in the map of our making.[4]

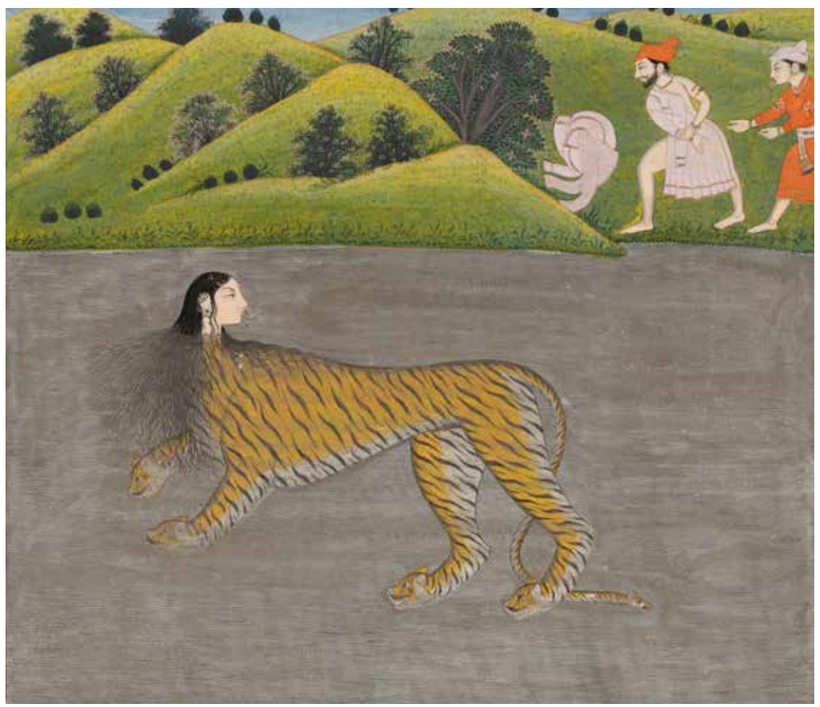
1. This sentence is partially inspired by lines in a paper about the Semiramis legend by Eckart Frahm, Professor of Assyriology, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Yale University, and conversations with Frahm about hybridity.
2. The *taniwha* of Maori mythology in New Zealand, for instance (a guardian that can take the form of a whale, shark, eel, or hybrid of several animals), can be helpful and loved or harmful and feared, depending on the circumstances of the story. In Micronesian stories, human-eel hybrids can be either welcomed or rejected by villagers. The Greek Minotaur, a man with the head of a bull, is banished to a labyrinth where it is fed maidens, while Spider-Man, part-human and part-arachnid, is revered by the citizens of New York.
3. For instance, the centaur, the mermaid, the griffin, and Pegasus.
4. On the idea of the map/terrain, see note 8 in the introduction to the present catalogue.

32
James Prosek, *The Anxiety of Influence (Self-Portrait as a Red-Tailed Hawk)*, 2006. Watercolor and graphite on paper, 29 × 26 in. (73.7 × 66 cm). Collection of the artist

33
Headdress in the Form of a Winged Woman (Tiyambo), Guinea, mid-20th century. Wood, paint, and nails, 40 13/16 × 38 3/4 × 10 5/8 in. (103.7 × 98.4 × 27 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933, Collection, 2006.51.379

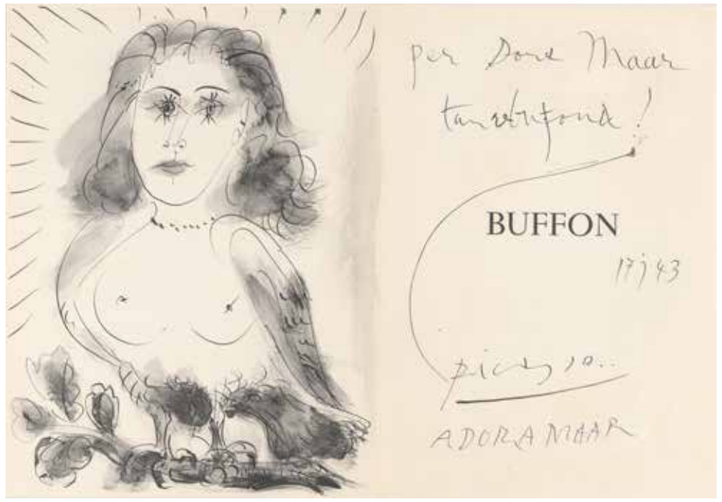
34
Goblet with Harpies, Iran, late 12th–early 13th century. Stonepaste with enamel over opaque white glaze (Minai ware), 4⅝ × 4⅜ in. (11.6 × 11.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Wilson P. Foss, Jr., Ph.B. 1913, 1953.24.15

35
Woman with a Tiger's Body (detail), India, Rajasthan, Guler, late 18th century. Opaque watercolor on paper, 9½ × 10⅛ in. (24 × 25.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Katharine Ordway Collection, 1980.12.67



36
James Prosek, *Geisha Eel*, 2006. Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 44 × 55 in. (111.8 × 139.7 cm). Collection of Andrea and Tim Collins

37
Pablo Picasso, Title page of *40 dessins de Picasso en marge du Buffon* (40 Drawings by Picasso in the Margins of Buffon), 1943, published 1957. Book with 40 drawings and 1 linocut, 14⅝ × 22½ in. (37.1 × 57.1 cm) (open). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., The Ernest C. Steefel Collection of Graphic Art, Gift of Ernest C. Steefel, 1958.52.172



38
James Prosek, *Seakatoo, or Sea Cockatoo*, 2008. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 26 × 18 in. (66 cm × 45.7 cm). Private collection

39
James Prosek, *Turtledove*, 2005. Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 21 × 25 in. (53.3 × 63.5 cm). Private collection

40
James Prosek, *Flying Squirrels*, 2013. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, graphite, and powdered mica on tea-stained paper, 27¾ × 30 in. (70.5 × 76.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

41
James Prosek, *Flying Squirrels*, 2012. Squirrels taxidermy, quail wings, duck wings, soil, clay, oil, watercolor, moss, and wood, 26 × 17 × 14 in. (66 × 43.2 × 35.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

42
James Prosek, *Sea Pegasus*, 2009. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 22 × 17¾ in. (55.9 × 45.1 cm). Private collection

43
Tile with a Capricorn, Dura-Europos, ca. A.D. 245. Clay with painted plaster, 15⁹⁄₁₆ × 16⁹⁄₁₆ × 1¾ in. (39.5 × 42 × 4.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Yale-French Excavations at Dura-Europos, 1933.272

44
Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (detail), 1594. Oil on copper, 9¹⁵⁄₁₆ × 13⅜ in. (25.2 × 35.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Herbert Schaefer

45
James Prosek, *Parrotfish*, 2009. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 24 × 33 in. (61 × 83.8 cm). Private collection

46
Bird, China, ca. 5th–3rd century B.C. Earthenware with traces of pigment, 6¾ × 12½ in. (17.1 × 31.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Wayland Wells Williams, B.A. 1910, Collection, Gift of Mrs. Frances Wayland Williams, 1949.267

Named/ Unnamed

We have explored a bit about why people name things (for instance, to communicate) and why people might want to unname things (as illustrated in the Ursula K. Le Guin story discussed in the "Naming Nature" section of this book), but not yet why people would refuse to put a name on something in the first place.

To be sure, there are many reasons why people might wish to eschew naming. In national parks, for example, it is common practice for field ecologists to number rather than name the animals that they are studying in an effort to maintain a level of distance and objectivity; it is thought that a person is less likely to develop an attachment to "Bear 134" than to a bear named "Teddy." Similarly, there have been debates in Yellowstone National Park about whether or not to name a large number of significant waterfalls that are currently not named on maps. When the park historian Lee H. Whittlesey proposed names for some of them in the late 1990s, there was an uproar among park staff. Many believed the waterfalls should remain unnamed because this implied that humans have not yet been to that location, thus preserving an idea of wildness.[1] Some creeks in the region are named simply "unnamed creek"—which Whittlesey (rightly) argues is still a name.[2]

Just as some reject the naming of natural features on the landscape, artists have challenged the convention of naming works of art. Pablo Picasso, for instance, scorned titles for his works. He criticized the "mania of art dealers, art critics, and collectors for christening pictures." He explained, "A painting, for me, speaks by itself; what good does it do, after all, to impart explanations? A painter has only one language."[3]

By the late 1940s, Jackson Pollock had given up the practice of naming his paintings and started numbering them instead (pl. 27). Viewers should "look passively and try to receive what the painting has to offer," he advised, "and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for."[4] Lee Krasner, Pollock's wife, once explained why her husband stopped giving his works titles: "Numbers are neutral," she said. "They make people look at a picture for what it is—pure painting."[5]

Some artists have found refuge in another seemingly neutral alternative—the word *untitled*. In her 2015 book *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, Ruth Bernard Yeazell, a professor of English literature at Yale, wrote,

> Anyone who frequents a contemporary museum or gallery knows more or less what *Untitled* means—that the artist who produced this work has chosen not to name it and implicitly prefers that the painting speak for itself. Yet I suspect few pause to register how the label acquires its meaning from the convention it violates: *Untitled* signifies precisely because we have learned to expect that in the ordinary course of things, a painting will have a title. Every time our eyes search for one only to find its negation instead, we testify to the force of that convention.
>
> Under modern circumstances of display and reproduction, in fact, *Untitled*, too, is a kind of title: a word that routinely accompanies the work as it circulates in the culture and that instructs us, if only by negation, how to view it.[6]

Calling a work *Untitled* has impact only because the public expects artworks to have titles, in the same way that Le Guin's Eve could not have produced the effects of her unnaming if Adam had not first been tasked with naming the animals.

For some years I have been making murals that attempt to question people's dependence on language when they make observations out in the world. These works depict silhouettes of birds or other animals with numbers beside them, sometimes set in a silhouetted landscape. The source material for these murals are the endpapers of old field guides where silhouettes of birds are accompanied by numbers that match up to a list of names. (One also sees such aids to identification in the keys to dioramas at natural history museums.) In my works, I paint the birds and numbers but leave out any corresponding key, so that viewers cannot satisfy the urge to know or verify the names. The absence of a key is meant to encourage the viewer to enjoy the beauty and diversity of the forms of the birds without using words as a crutch.[7] Some public institutions like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston, or the Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, do not label works of art; their founders did not want viewers to have their experiences with the works mediated by titles or by the names of the artists, as preconceptions about those artists could impact their impressions of the artwork.

Unlike artists, who embrace realms of unknowing and ambiguity, the goals of science and scientists (taxonomists or codifiers of any variety) are quite different—to fragment and name the world so that we can try to understand and explain it, so that we can *know*.[8] The disciplines of art and science, by virtue of their sometimes divergent and conflicting roles, help to define each other and their individual responsibilities. Although not the aim of science, the nature of scientific work gives artists a platform against which to play out their subversions—just as art and spirituality give scientists a platform against which to decry what they might call ignorance in the artist's refusal to explain or name the mysterious.

In his 1820 poem *Lamia*, John Keats remarked that Isaac Newton, in showing how one could produce a color spectrum by passing white light through a prism, had destroyed the mystery

1. Aldo Leopold supported this idea in *A Sand County Almanac*. "For what avail are forty freedoms," he wrote, "without a blank spot on the map." See Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River*, repr. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 158.
2. Lee H. Whittlesey, *The Guide to Yellowstone Waterfalls and Their Discovery* (Englewood, Colo.: Westcliffe, 2000), 20–21.
3. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 144.
4. Jackson Pollock, interview by William Wright, summer 1950, digitized and edited by Maria Caamano, http://homepages.neiu.edu/~wbsieger/Art201/201Read/201-Pollock.pdf.
5. Lee Krasner, quoted in gallery label, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78699.
6. Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, 19.
7. If these pieces "work," it is only because, when a person encounters them, their inclination is to automatically look for a key of names. The absence of a key subverts their expectations, in the same way that seeing a work titled "Untitled" only works because we expect to see a title.
8. Science, to a certain extent, tries to understand the whole by dividing it into discrete parts and hoping that, when the pieces are put back together, it will explain the whole. Art inherently acknowledges that the whole is something different than the assembled pieces and, instead of trying to explain it, attempts to preserve and cherish the elusiveness of personal experience without division.

of the rainbow, referring to Newton's discovery as "unweaving the rainbow." Yet, knowing of Newton's discovery did not, in fact, diminish the wonder I once felt in seeing a rainbow materialize in front of me, so close it seemed as though I could touch it, at the edge of a lake in the Scottish Highlands.[9]

O. C. Marsh, the founder (in 1866) of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History and the first professor of paleontology in North America, spent his career wanting to *know.* He discovered and named many of the large dinosaurs that we first learn about as children—Brontosaurus, Stegosaurus, Triceratops—unearthed from fossil beds of the American West, where their bones had fallen hundreds of millions of years before. His discoveries of extinct animals, made through the lens of scientific inquiry, did not diminish mystery or pose limits to human creativity or expression—quite the contrary. Whatever his motivations may have been, Marsh's work helped illuminate a lost world of giant lizards that thunder and gait in the imaginations of living humans. The large skull shown in this section (pl. 50) is of a dinosaur that Marsh discovered and named as a new species in 1891, *Torosaurus latus*.[10] The skull was excavated in Wyoming and brought back to New Haven, Connecticut, by one of Marsh's paid hands, the legendary fossil hunter John Bell Hatcher. It is the largest skull of any animal to ever walk the earth.

During his time, Marsh's discoveries made him famous, and his reputed arrogance, spirited rivalries (with other dinosaur hunters), and dominance in the field led Mark Twain to satirize him in a short story from 1882 called "Some Learned Fables, for Good Old Boys and Girls." The story tells of a fictitious Western expedition led by a character, modeled after Marsh, called Professor Bull Frog. It is a humorous critique of the scientific quest, and of the pursuit of knowledge in general—the hubris with which phenomena in nature are sometimes searched for, collected, possessed, controlled, and explained. In it, Twain parodies the practice of naming, noting the air of conquest that accompanies the process:

> After another day devoted to rest and recovery, the expedition proceeded upon its way. Some days later it went into camp in a pleasant part of the plain, and the savants sallied forth to see what they might find. Their reward was at hand. Professor Bull Frog discovered a strange tree, and called his comrades. They inspected it with profound interest. It was very tall and straight, and wholly devoid of bark, limbs, or foliage. By triangulation Lord Longlegs determined its altitude; Herr Spider measured its circumference at the base and computed the circumference at its top by a mathematical demonstration based upon the warrant furnished by the uniform degree of its taper upward. It was considered a very extraordinary find; and since it was a tree of a hitherto unknown species, Professor Woodlouse gave it a name of a learned sound, being none other than that of Professor Bull Frog translated into the ancient Mastodon language, for it had always been the custom with discoverers to perpetuate their names and honor themselves by this sort of connection with their discoveries.[11]

Naming gives presence to a previously unknown organism by acknowledging that it exists, but it also serves to carry on the legacy of the person who names it—or in this case, the person after whom it is named. When a scientific name appears in the literature, it is trailed by the name of the human who first labeled it—for example, "*Torosaurus latus* Marsh, 1891." The named as well as the namer achieve a kind of immortality—at least, that is, in the realm of humans.

9. "Enlightenment thinkers believe we can know everything, and radical postmodernists believe we can know nothing," writes Edward O. Wilson. "I suggest there have always been two kinds of original thinkers, those who upon viewing disorder try to create order, and those who upon encountering order try to protest it by creating disorder. The tension between the two is what drives learning forward. It lifts us upward through a zigzagging trajectory of progress." Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 47.
10. *Torosaurus* means "perforated lizard," likely referring to the perforations in the large frill on the back of the skull.
11. Mark Twain, "Some Learned Fables, for Good Old Boys and Girls," in *Sketches New and Old* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1882), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3189/3189-h/3189-h.htm#oldboys.

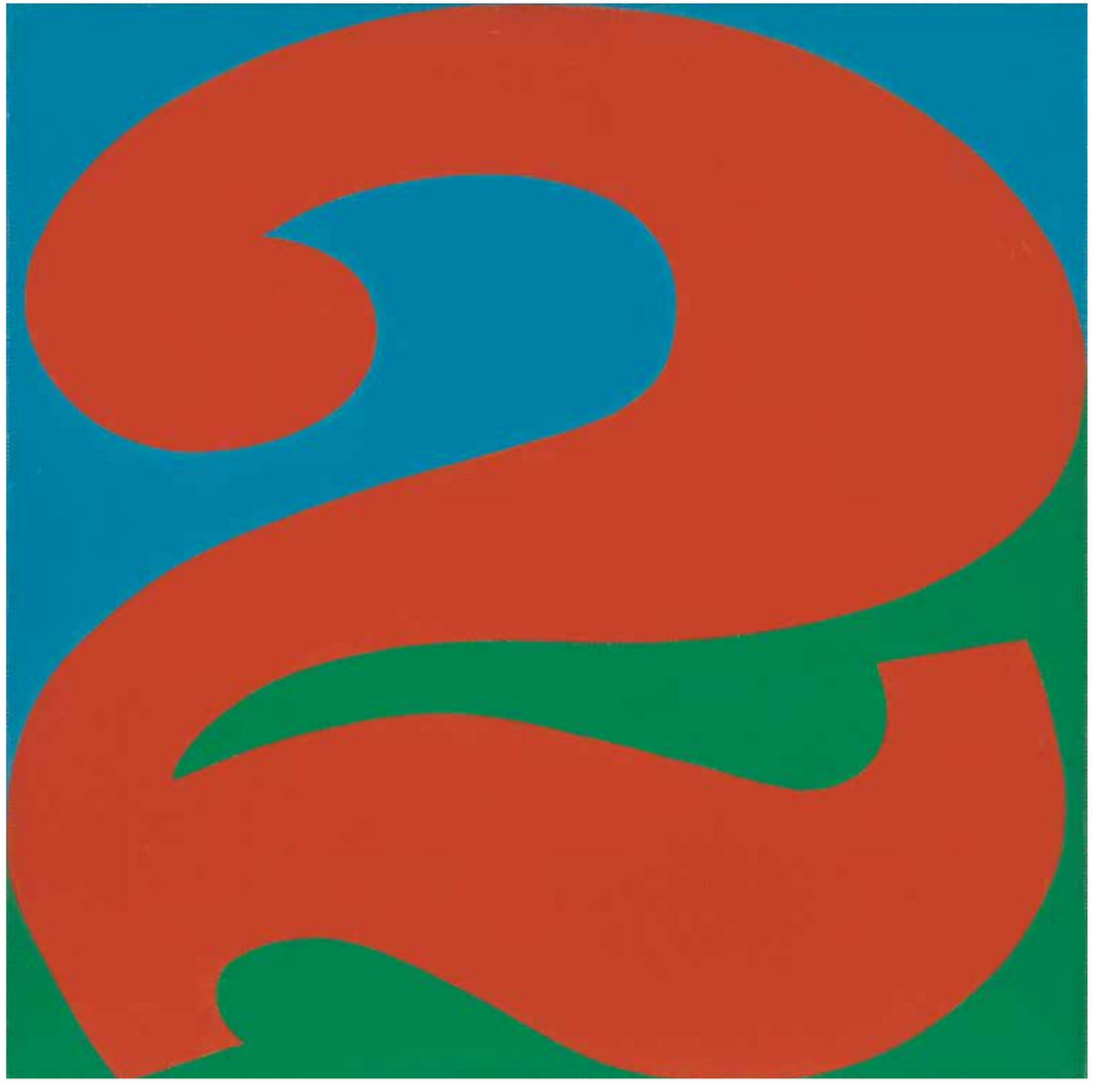
47
James Prosek, *Paradise Lost 2 (Ghost Orchid, Everglades)*, 2019. Oil and acrylic on panel; ash branch; clay with oil and watercolor; and LED lights, 16 × 24 × 9 in. (40.6 × 61 × 22.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

48
James Prosek, *What Once Was Is No Longer (1851)*, 2019. Acrylic, 10 ft. 5 in. × 19 ft. 2 in. (317.5 × 584.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

49
Barbara Hepworth, *Sea Form (Porthmeor)*, 1958. Bronze, 31½ × 43 × 9½ in. (80 × 109.2 × 24.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Director's Purchase Fund, 1961.32

50
Holotype skull of *Torosaurus latus*, Wyoming, Niobrara County, Late Cretaceous Lance Formation (68 million years ago), collected in 1891 by John Bell Hatcher. Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM VP.001830

51
James Prosek, *Passenger Pigeon (with Wild Grapes)*, 2015. Acrylic on panel, 24 × 19 in. (61 × 48.3 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York



52
Robert Indiana, *2*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 12 × 12 in. (30.5 × 30.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935, Collection, 2008.19.321

53
Jasper Johns, *Figure 3*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 9⅛ × 6⅛ in. (23 × 15.6 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935, 1995.32.7

54
James Prosek, *Mirror*, 2011/19. Oil on canvas and elk skull with antlers, tondo: DIAM. 18 in. (45.7 cm); skull: 52 × 40 × 25 in. (132.1 × 101.6 × 63.5 cm). Private collection

Representation and Artifice

I walked several miles over dried leaves, crossed small creeks—some half-burdened with ice—and hopped over stone walls made by farmers centuries before, when these were fields, not forests. At last, I came to the small stream, its water dark from all the autumn leaves that had fallen in it and steeped their tannins.

I cast my lure. It fell and broke the silence of the water's surface. The lure sank, and then I began to pull it in. The willow-shaped blade of the spinner spun around a central shaft. It scattered clouded daylight into the dark pool, catching the attention of a small trout. I felt a strong tug. Seconds later, the trout was flopping on the mossy bank, and I was holding it in my cold hands.

I had desired sensual contact with nature from an early age and, with my father, explored the woods and fields near our Connecticut home. We walked in salt marshes that smelled of sulfur, mud up to our calves. We burned in the hot sun, were mobbed by mosquitoes, got caught in thunderstorms, stood in the currents of rivers. My father brought field guides, and we identified the creatures that we saw. Seeing an animal or capturing it with language was one thing; holding it in my hands—capturing it physically—was something quite different. Feeling a salamander's soft skin; an eel's, slimy and slippery; the body of a small bird, warm and almost weightless, that had flown into the window of our home and died; a dragonfly flapping its wings inside my cupped hands—these are the experiences that stayed with me, that affected me most deeply.

At the age of nine, I was introduced to fishing, and it took over my life. Fishing not only provided a way to achieve that physical connection with the animal—where I could ensnare it, hold it, admire it, and let it go—it also provided a mental connection, through the device of artifice that made fishing possible: the lure. I became particularly enamored of fishing for trout in local streams with artificial flies.

At night, or during winter when the streams were covered in snow, I sat at my desk engaged in two practices of representing nature—tying flies, the three-dimensional imitations of the things the trout eat, and making drawings of the trout in watercolors on paper.

In fly-fishing, you make the fly by tying fur and feathers to a hook with thread. The artificial insect is typically not intended to look like an exact copy but instead just an impression of a particular kind of bug, in profile, size, and color. The techniques of fly tying have been perfected over thousands of years—there are certain ways that feathers and the guard hairs of animal fur can be wrapped and splayed on hooks to make them look like the wings and legs of caddis flies, stone flies, mayflies, ants, and beetles.

In spring, when aquatic insects emerge from exoskeletons as winged adults, the trout rise up from the cold currents and take them off the surface of the water. Usually, before a fisherman makes a cast, he or she watches the seams and eddies, waiting and looking to see these rises—little dimples that show where a fish is feeding. The angler casts the artificial fly out into the stream to try and make it look like it is drifting naturally. If a fish thinks this fake fly looks real, it will come up and inspect it, and if convinced, it will eat it. At that moment, the artificial fly has steered the mind of a fish to connect with that of a human. It seems like a fairly simple thing that has been accomplished, one that humans have been doing for a long time, but to me it has never stopped being anything less than remarkable. In a secondary nature, an imitation of reality, the fly has become a translation device between two languages, allowing us to communicate with a creature to which we are connected by common ancestry roughly four hundred million years ago.

Although making and casting the fly provided a way for me to connect with a fish—both mentally (through artifice) and physically (when a fish is hooked, through the fishing line)—drawing the fish helped me achieve an interface with them that I can best describe as something deeper, as spiritual. When I sat at my desk to draw a trout, marking the outline of the fish in graphite and filling it in with watercolor, I could relive, or recover, aspects of the experience—the sound of the river, the buzzing of a fly by my face, the smell of the air—in amazing clarity and detail. I would write about these moments on the stream with words in my journal, but I could not achieve the same results. The process of drawing allowed me to access deeper recesses of my memory, almost like lucid dreaming. But more than recovering the details of an experience, in drawing the fish, which required close observation and hours of focused attention, it seemed as if I had acquired the ability to guide future encounters with them.

Back on the stream, I had episodes while fishing when I felt I knew a fish was going to bite, and then, as if the power of my mind was channeling reality, a fish would take my fly. These moments were not occasional but, in my peak years of fishing for trout and drawing them, had become relatively frequent.

It had become clear to me that, for multiple reasons, making imitations of nature strengthened our minds and skills of observation—it engaged our senses with the larger interconnected whole in ways that no other aid, tool, or method could. At least, none that I knew of.

Why have humans bothered to make representations of things in nature? Abundant examples over thousands of years from virtually every known culture in every part of the world give evidence that this practice is not a passing whim. Time that could have been spent foraging, hunting, or reproducing was used instead to make drawings on two-dimensional surfaces

or figurines of animals in three dimensions. If there were no benefits in these rituals of imitation for our survival, why have they continued for so long?[1]

When I first saw the drawings of animals on cave walls made thirty thousand years ago at sites like Lascaux and Altamira in southern France and northern Spain, respectively, I felt I knew why they had been made. The practice of drawing brought our ancient ancestors closer to knowing the things they pursued and killed in order to survive by allowing them to internalize the anatomy of the animal and perhaps instruct, communicate, and strategize aspects of the hunt. But there were elements of the engagement that representation enabled that were beyond the apparently practical. Based on my childhood experiences, I felt that these people believed that by making an imitation of nature they could effect a result in actual nature, in the same way that painting trout helped me to intuit when a fish would bite my fly. All the hours I spent drawing trout, in my mind, helped me, in a way, become them. Art, I would argue, is thus in large part an artifact of our early days as hunter-gatherers, of our predatory methods—of artifice.

In 1978 the Yale University Art Gallery mounted a small exhibition of objects from the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History titled *Toys, Tools, and Carvings: Artifacts of the Eskimo*.[2] In the brochure of the exhibition, the American historian William Goetzmann wrote of a whale figurine made of fossilized ivory:

> Obviously, the Eskimo who carved it was familiar with whales from years of hunting and observation. He captured the life-like appearance of the animal because the animal "lived" in his consciousness: occupying myths, stories, perhaps even visions, which took form when he sat down to carve. Eskimos were interested in recording reality as well as influencing it. The Eskimos tried to influence animal spirits magically by carving amulets in the form of seals, whales, birds, and bears. Tied to clothing, held in hand or pocket, these charms symbolized the hunters' alliance with the spirit of his prey. In part, these served to reduce the anxiety of the hunting existence.[3]

Anthropologists have called this use of an imitation or copy of nature made to exert power over the original *sympathetic magic*. In a sense, this is what simulacra used in predatory practices achieve—the lure, fly, or decoy causes the prey to be entranced and to move into a position where it can be captured alive or killed by the hunter. Sympathetic magic shares territory with a capacity, and an urge, in humans described by the anthropologist Michael Taussig as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other," sometimes referred to as *mimesis*.[4]

In the book *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*, the anthropologist Rane Willerslev writes of his time spent with the Yukaghirs, a hunting people of Siberia. He observes a man named Spiridon on an elk hunt. The hunter, wearing an elk-hide coat, moves on skis across a snowy landscape holding a loaded rifle. Spiridon lures the animal out into the open by dressing like an elk but also by "mimicking its bodily movements."[5] In a certain space during this engagement, the predator and prey share in a kind of dance that intertwines their minds and movements. "Thus, it was not that Spiridon had stopped being human. Rather, he had a liminal quality: he was not an elk, and yet he was also not *not* an elk. He was occupying a strange place in between human and nonhuman identities."[6] Willerslev writes that the Yukaghirs live most of their lives in such a hybrid world "betwixt and between: their souls are both substance and non-substance; they are both their bodies and their souls, their selves and reincarnated others; hunters are both humans and the animals they hunt, both predators and prey. The condition of fundamental liminality or in-betweenness seems to have no ending."[7] The liminality described by Willerslev is part of the mental state encouraged by acts of artifice such as art making, acting, performance, ways of documenting and preserving experience, creating a "second nature" to complement and contrast with the real one. The products of artifice are themselves hybrids—part maker and part thing being imitated.

The ancient urge to imitate, "a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else," extends in modern times to our reenactments of life in paintings, sculpture, theater, film, novels, and virtual-reality technologies.[8] Perhaps these separate realities help our minds prepare for situations that may happen to us in real life, reducing anxiety, as Goetzmann suggests, and giving us confidence in facing our unknowable futures. In accumulating knowledge through experience and intimacy with nature, and through imitation—often the best way of getting to know something—we become better able to navigate our lives and survive.

However, we must not forget that artifice is ultimately not to be trusted, that representation is not reality. Mistaking the imitation for the actual can have consequences. We could end up, for instance, like the fish who eats the lure: in the frying pan.

René Magritte's famous painting titled *The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)* (1929; Los Angeles County Museum of Art), in which he depicts a pipe and, underneath the image, writes in French, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," illustrates a critical message of this show—that the map that we create to navigate and have influence over the world is not the actual terrain.[9] It may seem obvious that a painting of a pipe is not a pipe, or a painting of a landscape is not a landscape, or a portrait of a person is not the person, or a fishing fly is not a fly. But through the seeming simplicity of Magritte's picture—its artifice—we are reminded not to underestimate the power of second nature.

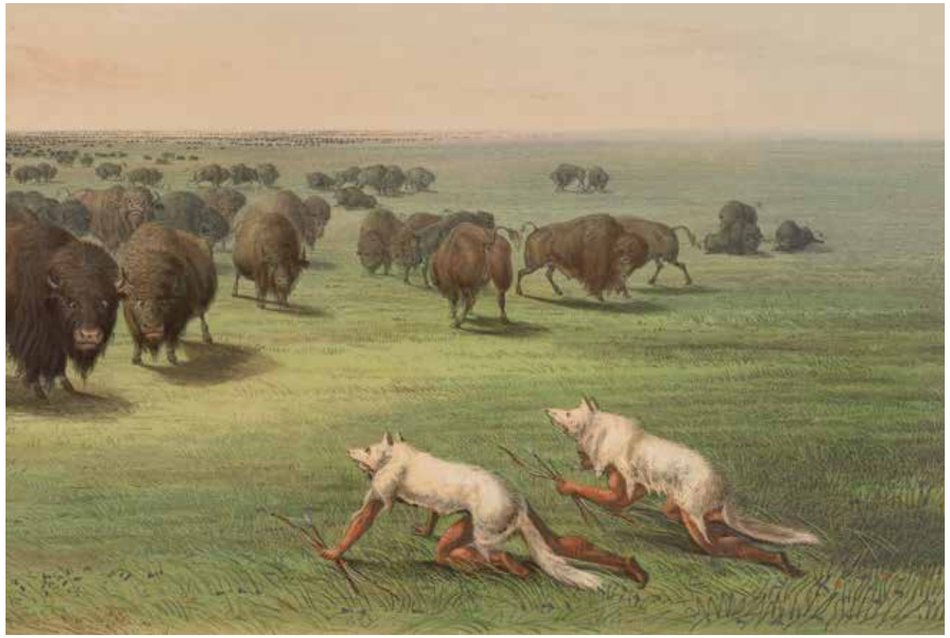
1. Humans are not the only animals to exhibit mimetic behavior for survival. Mimicry, imitation, and artifice are employed by many species, such as those that come to resemble, through the forces of evolution and natural selection, the look, scent, feel, pattern, behavior, sound, or call of other animals. Examples of artifice are abundant and astounding in the natural world. A firefly species, for instance, mimics the blinking pattern of the female of a different species of firefly, and lures males of that other species to them with its signals—not to try to mate with them but to eat them. The anglerfish has evolved a modified dorsal spine that hangs a kind of lure in front of its head, drawing prey close enough to suck into its mouth. The alligator snapping turtle has a pink wormlike appendage at the end of its tongue that lures fish close enough to eat. The nonpoisonous king snake avoids predation by mimicking the colorful banding of the venomous coral snake. There are also examples of butterflies that resemble leaves, a caterpillar with a tail that resembles the head of a venomous snake, and, as mentioned in the "Mark Making" section, a bird whose eggs resemble the stones found on the beach where she lays them.
2. The owl figurine included in the present catalogue (pl. 66) was also in this exhibition.
3. William Goetzmann, *Toys, Tools, and Carvings: Artifacts of the Eskimo*, exh. broch. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Center for American Art and Material Culture, 1978), 13.
4. The term *mimesis* was borrowed from literary criticism; Taussig is credited as being the first to use it in anthropology. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xiii.
5. Rane Willerslev, *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 11.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. Walter Benjamin, quoted in Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 19.
9. For more on this concept, see note 8 in the introduction to the present catalogue.

Clockwise, from top:

55
George Catlin, *Buffalo Hunt, with Wolfskin Mask* (detail), plate 13 from *North American Indian Portfolio*, 1844. Hand-colored lithograph, 18½ × 23½ in. (47 × 59.7 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, 1946.9.553

56
Fishing Lure, Inuit, 19th century. Bone with steel, 7/16 × 6 5/16 × 1 3/16 in. (1.5 × 16 × 3 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.052970

57
Goose Decoy, Swampy Cree, 20th century. Wood, 25 5/16 × 7 7/8 × 20 7/8 in. (65 × 20 × 53 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.143387



58
James Prosek, *History of Artifice*, 2019. Feathers, fur, thread, tinsel, head cement, and metal, dimensions variable. Private collection

59
Martin Puryear, Untitled, 2011. Bronze, 9¼ × 11 × 4 in. (23.5 × 27.9 × 10.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of the artist in honor of Margaret and C. Angus Wurtele, B.A. 1956, 2015.100.1

60
Stickleback Fish Figurine, Inuit, 1950. Stone, 7 1/16 × 3 5/16 × 11 13/16 in. (18 × 10 × 30 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.248010

61
William Edmondson, *Critter*, ca. 1940. Limestone, 14 × 5½ × 23¼ in. (35.6 × 14 × 59.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Iola Haverstick, 2001.147.5

62
Constantin Brancusi, *Yellow Bird*, 1919. Yellow marble, limestone, and oak, overall H. 87¼ in. (221.6 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952.30.1a–d

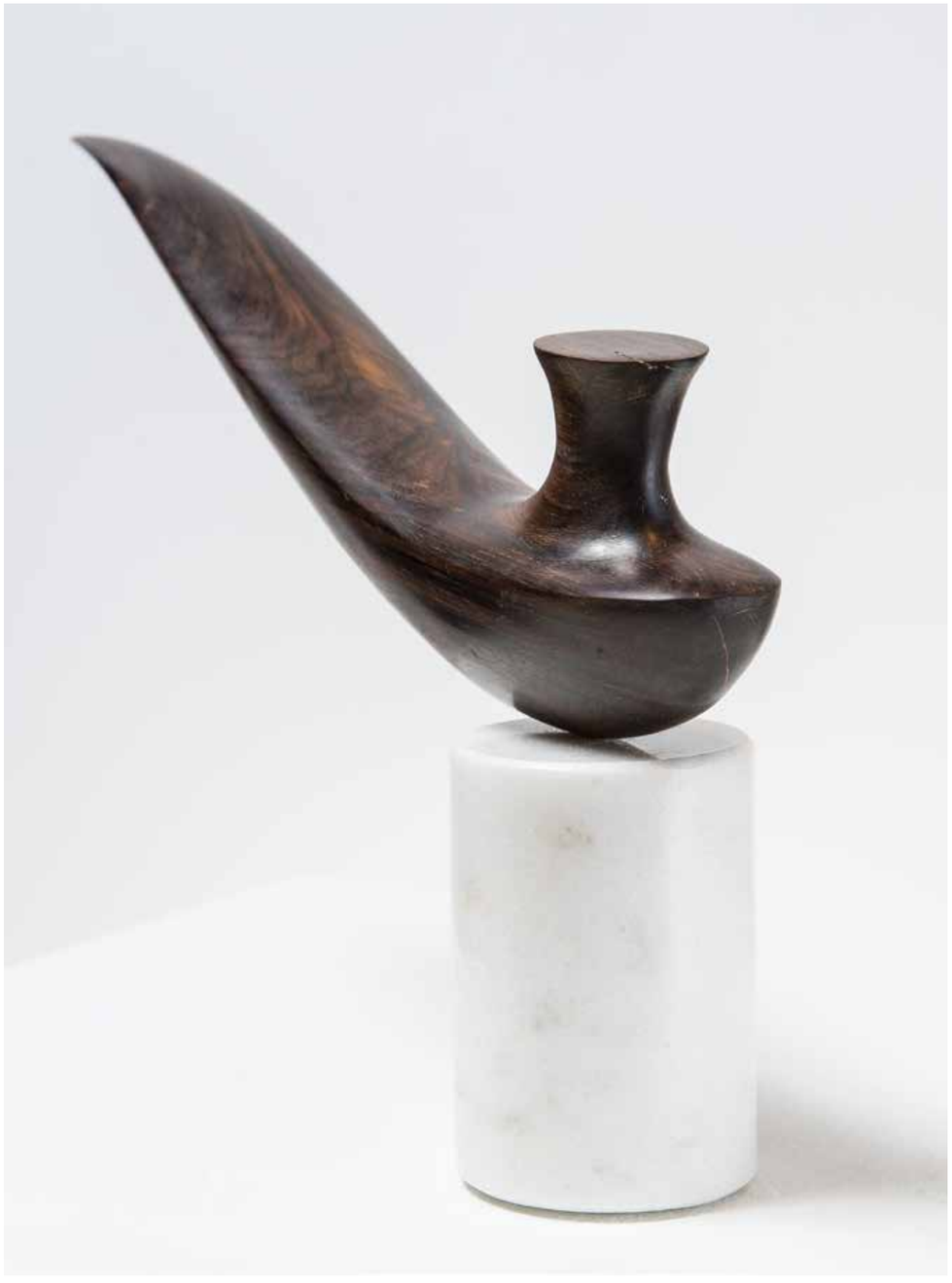
63
James Prosek, *Abstract Fish IV*, 2017. Ebony and bronze with a marble base, 19 × 7 × 3 in. (48.3 × 17.8 × 7.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

64
James Prosek, *The Spaces in Between No. 1*, 2019. Bronze with a marble base, 84 × 36 × 13 in. (213.4 × 91.4 × 33 cm). Courtesy the artist

65
James Prosek, *Burned Log with Flowers (Mimesis)*, 2016/19. Bronze, clay, oil, and watercolor, 9½ × 21 × 9 in. (24.1 × 53.3 × 22.9 cm). Courtesy the artist

66
Owl Figurine, Inuit, 19th century. Bone, 1 3/16 × 4 1/2 × 2 5/16 in. (3 × 11.5 × 6.5 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.248421

67
Wild Boar Tusk Carved with a Dragon Head, Melanesia, Solomon Islands. Boar tusk with red stone, 7/16 × 3 3/4 × 3 in. (1.1 × 9.5 × 7.6 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.236234



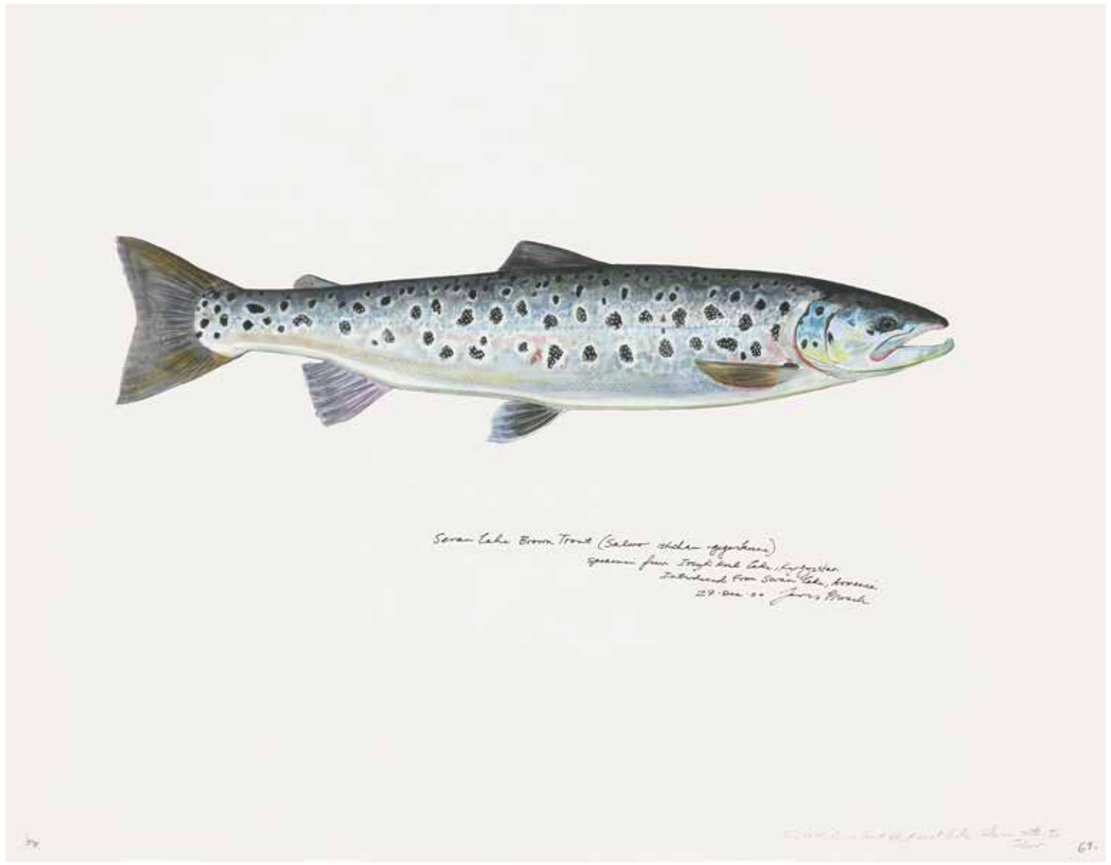
68
James Prosek, *Abstract Bird II*, 2017. Ebony and bronze with a marble base, 6 × 10 × 2½ in. (15.2 × 25.4 × 6.4 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

69
Owl Figurine, Inuit, 19th century. Whalebone with steatite, 5⅛ × 2¾ × 4¾ in. (13 × 7 × 12 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.248130

70
Martin Johnson Heade, *Jungle Orchids and Hummingbirds*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 18¼ × 23 in. (46.4 × 58.4 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Christian A. Zabriskie and Francis P. Garvan, B.A. 1897, Hon. 1922, Funds, 1971.80

71
Swimming Loon, Inuit, 1969. Whalebone, 6⁵⁄₁₆ × 3⅜ × 16⅛ in. (16 × 8.5 × 41 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.248002

72
Drill Bow or Tool-Bag Handle(?) (overall and details), Inuit, 19th century. Bone, ⅜ × ⅜ × 16⅛ in. (1 × 1 × 41 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.248306



73
James Prosek, *Gegarkuni Ischchan (Lake Sevan, Armenia)*, 2000. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm). Private collection

74
Ivory Carved with Kaiah (Kayak?) and Seals, Unangan (Aleut), ca. 1890. Ivory, 9/16 × 6 1/16 × 1 in. (1.5 × 17 × 2.5 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.015594.a

75
Seal Figurine, Yup'ik, 19th century. Ivory with pigment, 9/16 × 1 × 3 1/8 in. (1.5 × 2.5 × 8 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.249158

The Myth of Order

Maps are made by humans as tools to navigate the world, and they necessarily must be reductions, for as Jorge Luis Borges points out in his short fictional piece "On Exactitude in Science" (1946)—in which "a Map of the Empire" is made "whose size was that of the Empire"—a map at the scale of the actual world would be useless. For one thing, it would not fit in your pocket.

Similarly, it is not necessary for our brains to contain all the knowledge and complexity of the universe. Embracing all of it, in fact, would not only be distracting and overwhelming but potentially devastating.

In *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley's book about his experience taking mescaline in the spring of 1953, Huxley writes of what the human brain perceives under normal circumstances, and what it is actually capable of perceiving:

> I find myself agreeing with the eminent Cambridge philosopher, Dr. C. D. Broad . . . "that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main *eliminative* and not productive. Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge."[1]

Huxley calls this capacity in humans to edit the noise of the comprehensive universe the "cerebral reducing valve."[2] Taking psychedelic drugs, Huxley notes, temporarily impairs the reducing valve, allowing one to glimpse "the burning brightness of unmitigated Reality."[3]

Humans have sought to achieve such altered states and expanded awareness for millennia, and they have found varied methods to get them there—ingesting psychoactive plants or fungi, meditating, fasting, sleep deprivation. Such places can be nice to visit, Huxley tells us, but would be unbearable to live in perpetually and permanently.[4] Instead, we must, for practical purposes, occupy, "a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet." The danger, Huxley points out, is embracing "the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness."[5]

In the process of reducing complexity, we make order from disorder and fashion the world to meet our tastes and needs. We like order because it gives us a sense of control and comfort, an illusion of permanence in a constantly changing world. A signature skill of the ordering mind is to recognize patterns, collate resemblances, arrange, classify. "The mind, basically, is a pattern-seeking machine," evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould stated in an interview in 2000. "We tend to seek patterns . . . and then we tell stories about them."[6]

In *Nature's Chaos*, James Gleick expresses a similar sentiment, writing, "The human mind is a powerful pattern-recognition machine, more powerful than any computer yet built. Sometimes it is too powerful; it detects patterns where they do not really exist. Experts 'see' a whole menagerie of too-simple patterns in stock-price graphs . . . or patterns based on spirals and pyramids."[7]

The ability to recognize patterns no doubt helped us survive as early hunter-gatherers, and it still does. Through accumulated experience, we build a store of knowledge and can then make educated predictions about the future. A dark cloud approaching over an open savannah likely means that it is going to rain soon, and that those clouds may carry dangerous lightning. Take cover.

We search for patterns, crave order, and create order in part because we cannot embrace everything at once, but also because we *are* order, in our bodies and in our being. In a sense, our thoughts and culture mirror our biological structure. In another text by Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, the author writes,

> Organisms organize. . . . We sort the mail, build sand castles, solve jigsaw puzzles, separate wheat from chaff, rearrange chess pieces, collect stamps, alphabetize books, create symmetry, compose sonnets and sonatas, and put our rooms in order. . . . Not only do living things lessen the disorder in their environments; they are in themselves, their skeletons and their flesh, vesicles and membranes, shells and carapaces, leaves and blossoms, circulatory systems and metabolic pathways—miracles of pattern and structure. It sometimes seems as if curbing entropy is our quixotic purpose in the universe.[8]

Nevertheless, on the question of whether the world is predominantly ordered or chaotic, the scientific world seems to be divided. Why it has to be one or the other I am not quite sure, as it is probably a push and pull, a dance, between both. But you cannot have disagreements unless you draw clear lines, divide into camps (order or disorder), and as Israeli linguist Guy Deutscher writes in his book *Through the Language Glass*, "academics don't make careers by agreeing with one another."[9]

A fundamental faith in order—in a scientific formula that will explain the world, a comprehensive Theory of Everything—has been referred to as the Ionian Enchantment. "The Ionian Enchantment," biologist Edward O. Wilson explains, is "a belief in the unity of the sciences—a conviction, far deeper than a mere working proposition, that the world is orderly and can be explained by a small number of natural laws."[10] The physicist Marcelo Gleiser, however, has referred to the Ionian Enchantment as the Ionian

1. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (1954; New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 22–23. Italics in the original.
2. Ibid., 26. In his book *Consilience*, Edward O. Wilson writes that "the brain is a machine assembled not to understand itself, but to survive. Because these two ends are basically different, the mind unaided by factual knowledge from science sees the world only in little pieces. It throws a spotlight on those portions of the world it must know in order to live to the next day, and surrenders the rest to darkness." Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 105.
3. Huxley, *Doors of Perception*, 56.
4. Individuals with mental illnesses like schizophrenia, Huxley suggests, lack the same reducing mechanism that psychedelic drugs help impair.
5. Huxley, *Doors of Perception*, 23.
6. Interview with Stephen Jay Gould, March 2000, "Changes for the New Millennium," annual meeting of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5vJBJ8cxKo&t=4s (accessed February 7, 2020).
7. James Gleick and Eliot Porter, *Nature's Chaos* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), n.p.
8. James Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 281–82.
9. Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Picador, 2011), 90.
10. Wilson, *Consilience*, 4–5.

Fallacy (crediting the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin for that phrase). Gleiser says that the idea of a Theory of Everything (or T.O.E.) is a myth:

> The theory of everything is an impossibility as a matter of principle. Science is based on measurements and observations. And the notion that we can . . . have a theory that explains everything assumes that we can know everything . . . [t]hat we can go out and measure everything there is to measure about nature. . . . And since we cannot measure all there is to measure, since our tools have limitations, we are definitely limited in how much we can know of the world.[11]

Even though we can never fully comprehend the workings of the universe, or explain them by a handful of formulas, it will not stop us from believing in order, embodying order, and trying to bring order and neatness to everything around us. Many of us maintain a faith in order just to get through the day—to ease anxiety about the unknown, to live in denial of entropy. We spend our weekends, for instance, cleaning and tending to our homes (or working to make money to pay people to do it for us) so that chaos can be kept at bay. We fix rot and leaks, we paint wood to prevent decay, we exterminate ants and carpenter bees and mice that infiltrate, we mow the lawn and use herbicides to kill the weeds, we prune, we fence, we trim, we remove dead limbs and wilted leaves. Why so much work, so much energy expended, to uphold a fiction?

The works in this section reflect on the ways in which humans attempt to maintain order as part of their daily existence. A few examples are mentioned in the introduction to this book—for instance, selectively breeding animals to have traits we find desirable and useful, or training and pruning trees to grow in certain shapes or forms. We tame nature to serve us, to be loyal to us, to center itself around our well-being. We practice the "Art of Improving Nature," as Louise Bourgeois titles her series of etchings of a woman and a tree (pl. 79).

In a series of works I refer to as *Myth of Order*, I stitch together pieces of birch branches with wire, epoxy, and clay to form neat geometric shapes—circles, squares, and triangles (pls. 77–78). Once the pieces are assembled, I paint the seams to resemble the colors and texture of the branches (trompe l'oeil, a kind of artifice). The finished works show nature as it would look if our minds could shape it—disconnected from the earth, no longer needing soil to survive, bent to our will. The leaves on these pieces are made of clay and never rot or decay. They make the dynamic inanimate, and the ephemeral permanent.

In separate but related works, clay flowers grow from marble bases, not soil (pl. 81). Unlike flowers on living plants that bloom for a finite period of time and then fade, these blossom forever. The tradition of making artificial flowers and trees is quite old. When the leaves had fallen off the maple trees in the gardens of the seventh-century Chinese emperor Yang of Sui, for instance, leaves and flowers were made of glistening fabrics to replace them, and the lake was festooned with both real and artificial lotus blossoms.[12] With enough money, you can appear to exert power over the forces of nature—and time.[13]

Art itself is a kind of taming of nature, a way of trying to contain and frame its vastness in order to feel a sense of dominion over it, of bringing order to the messy world and making it intelligible. The Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes that in landscape painting, for example, "Mountains and rivers are caught by strokes of the brush on canvas or paper. Captive nature is then put in a frame, nailed to the wall of a house, there to be looked at and appreciated or to serve as a pleasing background (a touch of wildness) among the ordered events of social life."[14]

I have been surprised by how many people who see the imagined works that I make—not just the birch branches illustrated in this section but also my tool birds (pl. 106) or flying squirrels with bird wings (pl. 41)—think that they are real. I am always pleased when this happens because I like a world where the lines between what is real and what is imagined are fuzzy. But it may also illustrate a disconcerting reality: how far people have come from having a meaningful connection to nature, to the point that they can no longer tell the difference between the products of the human mind and those of the earth.

In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, American philosopher and ecologist David Abram addresses "the origins of the ecological crisis, or of modern civilization's evident disregard for the needs of the natural world."[15] He suggests that it was the transition from oral to written language that first led to "our contemporary estrangement" from nature—but then, even more so, when written languages came to be abstracted, evolving from pictographs that represented actual things in nature, like cows, cranes, and snakes, to abstract *aleph-beths* (alphabets) that represent sounds. Abram writes,

> With the advent of the *aleph-beth*, a new distance opens between human culture and the rest of nature. To be sure, pictographic and ideographic writing already involved a displacement of our sensory participation from the depths of the animate environment to the flat surface of our walls, of clay tablets, of the sheet of papyrus. However . . . the written images themselves often related us back to the other animals and the environing earth. . . . With the phonetic *aleph-beth*, however, the written character no longer refers us to any sensible phenomenon out in the world, or even to the name of such a phenomenon, but solely to a gesture to be made by the human mouth. . . . *A direct association is established between the pictorial sign and the vocal gesture, for the first time completely bypassing the thing pictured*. The evocative phenomena—the entities imaged—are no longer a necessary part of the equation.[16]

The birch works and other objects in this section ask, in a sense, Is nature in our minds enough? Do we actually need real nature? If we live in the map and not in the territory, what is the danger? Humans naturally prefer geometric neatness, reduction, and order, but what are the consequences—if any—when we impose our predilections on nature?

When the world population numbered in the hundreds of thousands or even in the low millions, our love of order was quaint, a convenience, a way for a hairless primate to survive. Now that we number in the billions, it is a threat to the health of our planet and may be what ultimately destroys us.

It may be more challenging to embrace a dynamic, fluid, expansive, chaotic world, but stepping beyond our comforts and predispositions may be the only hope for us—and for the planet from which we are indivisible.

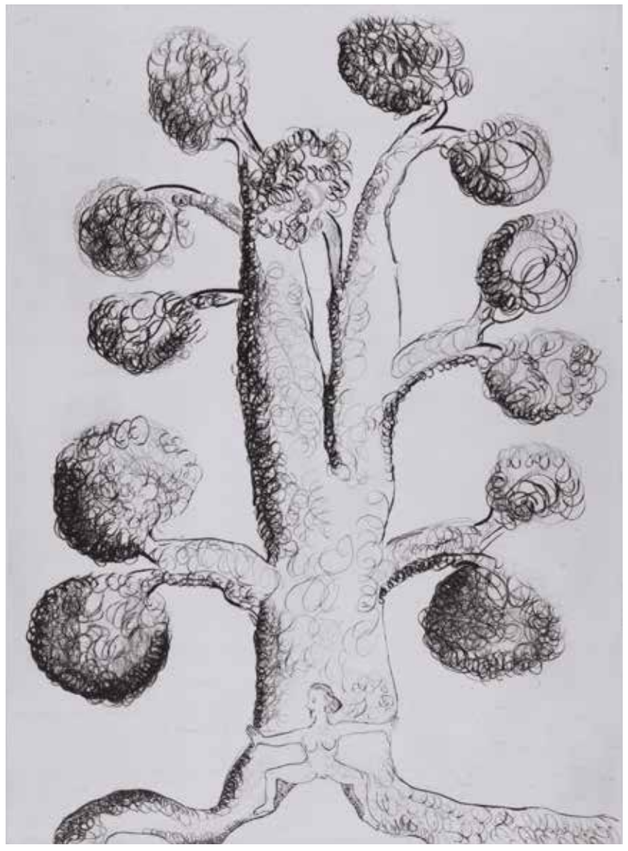
11. Marcelo Gleiser, interview by Krista Tippet, *On Being*, January 8, 2012, transcript, https://onbeing.org/programs/marilynne-robinson-marcelo-gleiser-the-mystery-we-are/.
12. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 66.
13. We try to uphold the illusion of permanence in not only nature but also ourselves. All manner of methods is used to hide wrinkles and white or thinning hair—from moisturizing creams and dyes to injections and surgery—in denial of our aging, our own inevitable mortality.
14. Tuan, *Dominance and Affection*, 4.
15. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 93.
16. Ibid., 100–101. Italics in the original. The legacy of this transition from pictograph to alphabet is still visible in some letters of our Roman alphabet—if you turn the capital letter A upside down, for instance, you can see its origins as the head and horns of a bull.

76
Thomas Robins the Elder, *View of a Gloucestershire Country House: A Garden View, with Picnic Party in Center Foreground*, ca. 1755. Gouache, pen, and ink on vellum, 16⅜ × 24⅜ in. (41.6 × 61.9 cm). Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn., Paul Mellon Collection, B2014.5.6

77
James Prosek, *Tree Emoji (Myth of Order VII)*, 2019. Birch branches and clay with oil, watercolor, and acrylic, 13 × 12½ × 3 in. (33 × 31.8 × 7.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

78
James Prosek, *Myth of Order V*, 2015. Birch branches and clay with oil, watercolor, and acrylic, 15 × 15 × 6 in. (38.1 × 38.1 × 15.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

79
Louise Bourgeois, *Tree with Woman*, from the series *Topiary: The Art of Improving Nature*, 1998. Etching and drypoint, 29 15/16 × 21 7/8 in. (76.1 × 55.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Carol H. and Pierce R. Smith, B.S. 1966, 2012.85.1.3

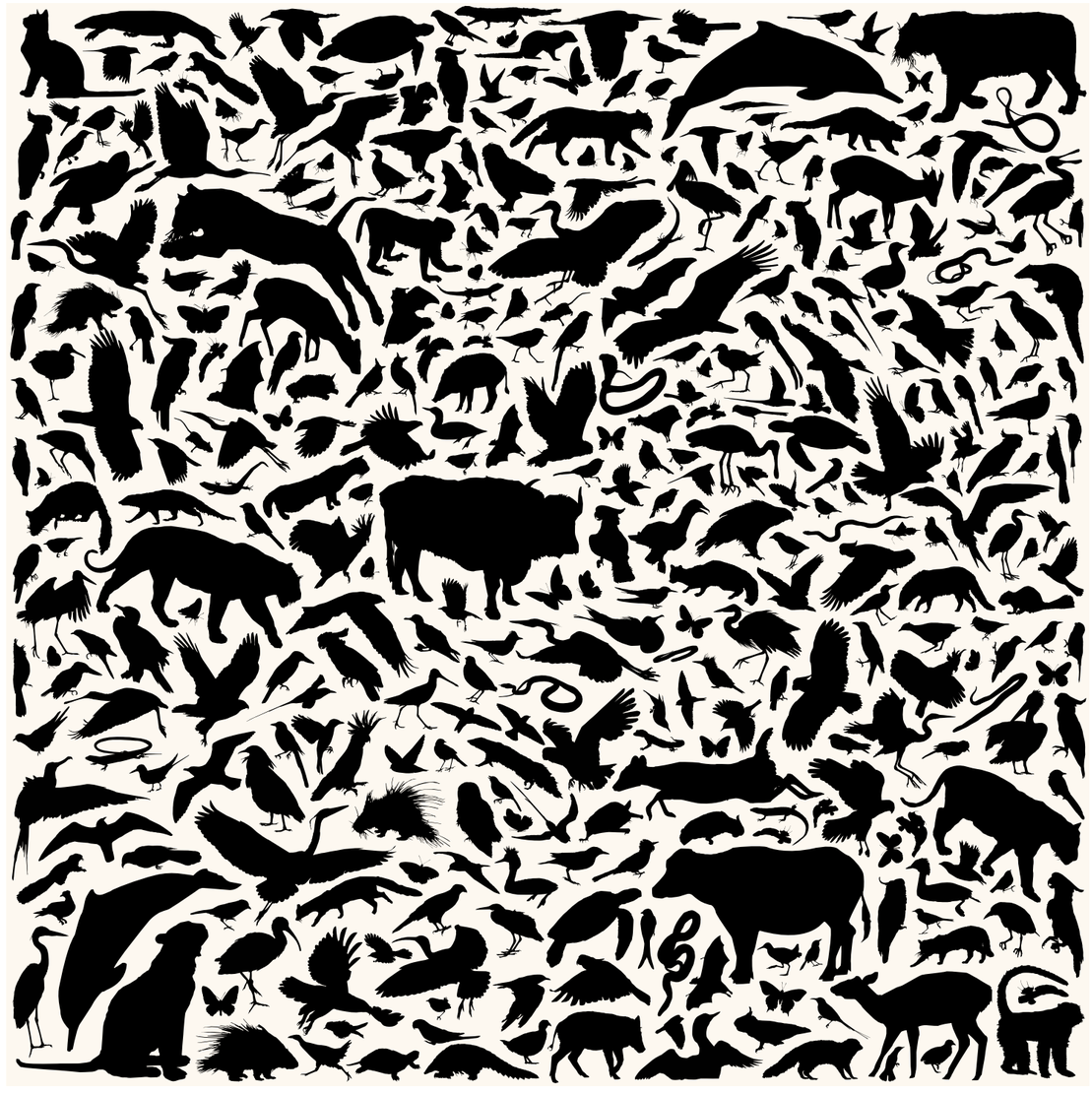


80
Keisai Eisen, *Pure Water* [Man Watering a Bonsai], from the series *Mitate Seven Komachi*, 19th century. Polychrome woodblock print, 7 1/16 × 4 13/16 in. (18 × 12.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs. William H. Moore, 1950.604

81
James Prosek, *Artificial Nature No. 1 (Paphiopedilum purpuratum)*, 2019. Clay, oil, watercolor, and moss with a marble base, 13 × 11 × 4 in. (33 × 27.9 × 10.2 cm) (without base). Private collection

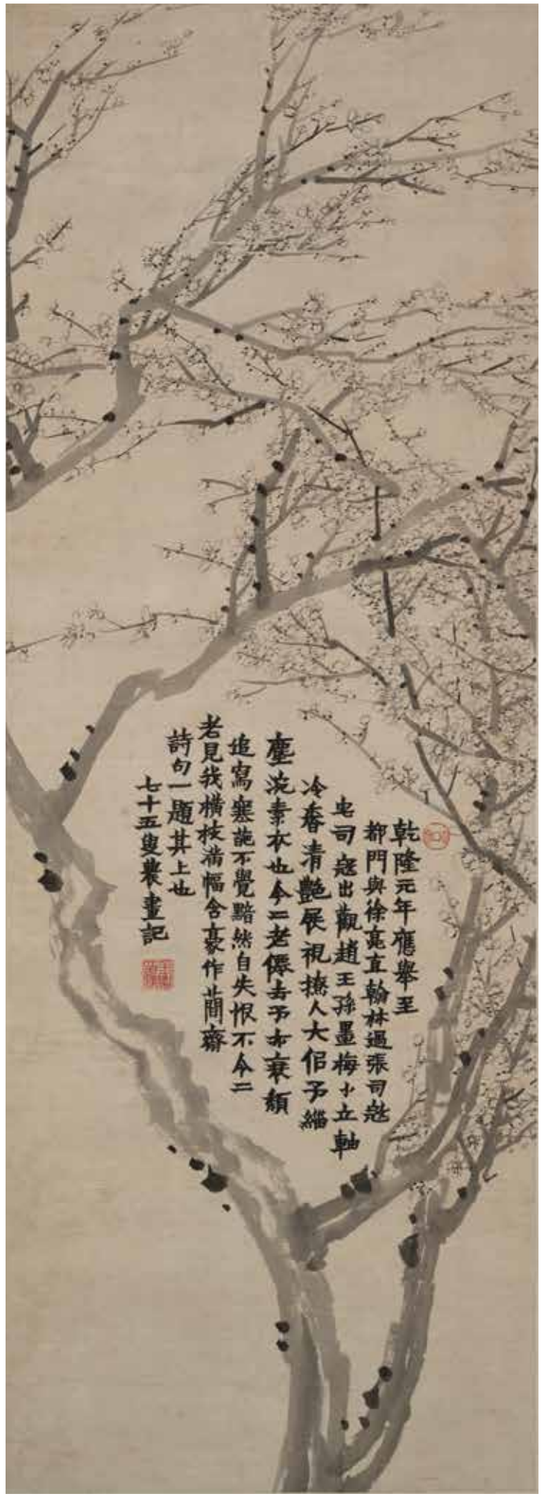
82
The Hundred Birds (detail), China, 19th century. Satin with silk embroidery, 43 × 29 in. (109.2 × 73.7 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs. William H. Moore, 1937.5600

83
Coffin Panel of the Official Djehuty-Nakht, Egyptian, Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12, 2000 B.C. Lebanese cedar with traces of blue pigment, 12 × 3¼ × 38 in. (30.5 × 8.3 × 96.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Anonymous gift, 1937.5903g

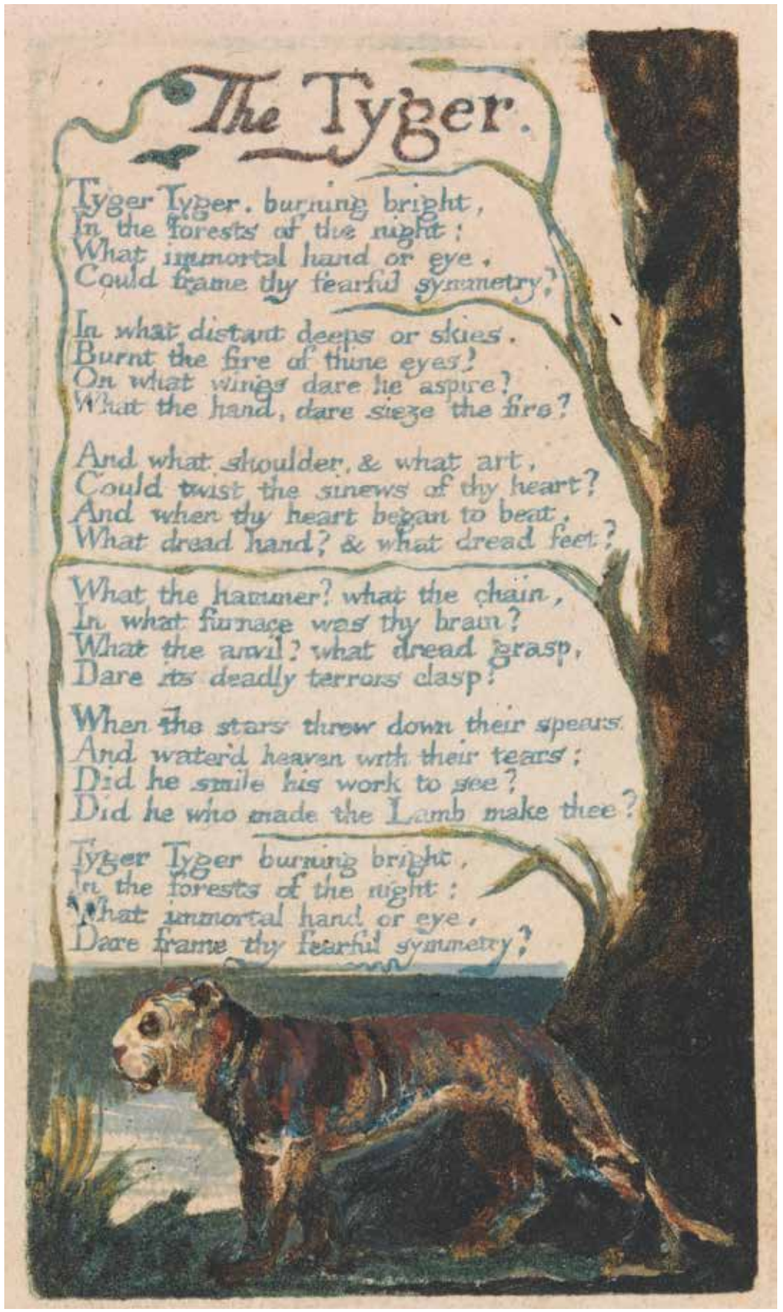


84
James Prosek, *Hong Kong Pictographs*, 2019. Silkscreen on panel, 25 × 25 in. (63.5 × 63.5 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

85
Jin Nong, *Plum Blossom with Inscription in Standard Script (Kaishu)*, 1761. Ink on paper, 45¾ × 16⅝ in. (116.2 × 41.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund, 1976.26.2

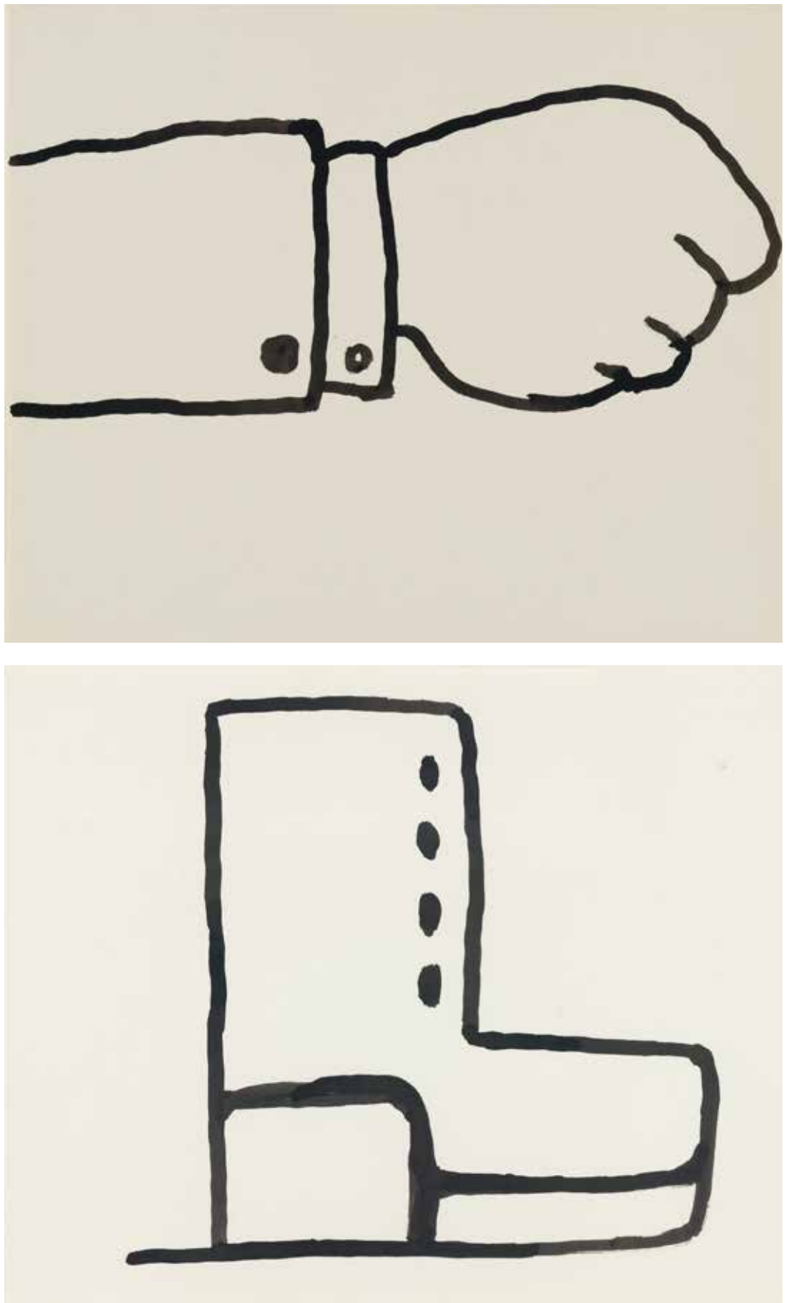


86
William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Copy F), *Plate 42, "The Tyger" (Bentley 42)*, 1794. Color-printed relief etching with watercolor on cream paper, 4⅜ × 2½ in. (11.1 × 6.4 cm). Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn., Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.1573



87
Horse Rib with Hieroglyphics (overall and details), Mexico, Guadalajara, 19th century. Bone, 13¾ × ⅜ × ⅜ in. (35 × 1.5 × 0.5 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.008852

88
Philip Guston, Untitled, from *Suite of 21 Drawings*, 1970. Ink on paper, 13¹⁵⁄₁₆ × 16¹⁵⁄₁₆ in. (35.4 × 43.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Musa and Tom Mayer, 2007.146.1.16



89
Philip Guston, Untitled, from *Suite of 21 Drawings*, 1970. Ink on paper, 13¹⁵⁄₁₆ × 16¹⁵⁄₁₆ in. (35.4 × 43.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Musa and Tom Mayer, 2007.146.1.5

Nature as Tool

Humans value organisms in nature that are either charismatic or useful, and we tend to put emphasis on protecting them over others. The majestic elephant, for instance, gets more attention from conservation groups than the lowly, slimy freshwater eel, even though they are both critically important to their respective environments. One argument for saving tropical rainforests is that the medical cures for a host of diseases could be hiding in the chemical compounds of plants, waiting for bioprospectors to discover them.[1]

Some of the works in this section ask, What would nature look like if it evolved to be useful, or to please us aesthetically or emotionally? Would some animals come to mimic human industry? Could birds and beavers, for instance, grow tool beaks and chain-saw tails to help us with our work?[2] If we can breed dogs to perform tasks for us—to retrieve birds (a retriever) or drive small animals out of their burrows (a terrier)—then is it not too much of a stretch to think that animals might start anticipating our needs and evolve other traits that are beneficial to humans so that we prioritize their protection? In that case, "drill ducks" (pls. 105, 108) and "cockatools" (pl. 98) seem like more than just fantasy.

Many existing forms in nature have been appropriated for human use as vessels or other kinds of "tools"—a turtle-shell cup (pl. 103); a bison-horn cup; a bovine stomach used as a bag to carry water; part of a beaver jaw and front teeth tied to a handle and used as a scraping tool (pl. 99). We have not only adapted forms from nature for our use but also imitated them, and very likely adopted techniques.

Is it possible, for instance, that humans learned how to weave by watching birds make their nests out of grasses and other natural fibers? I posited this in a conversation with Edward (Ned) S. Cooke, Jr., a professor of art history at Yale University who teaches a course on human-made vessels. After looking at an assortment of nests in the collection of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History together, Ned replied, "I don't see how humans could not have been influenced by the building methods of birds. Looping is a technique for starting to make a basket, and birds do this for the beginnings of their nests, [looping material] around the branches on which the nest is hung."[3] Birds have been making what are essentially baskets for thousands of years before modern humans arrived on the scene. An early human could have learned weaving techniques by disassembling a nest to see how it was built or by watching a bird make one—an African weaverbird can construct a nest that looks like a basket in just a few days. Maybe some early human encountered a hanging nest with the eggs of the bird inside it and, after eating the eggs, realized that they could use the nest for holding something else, or could make one themselves with different dimensions to carry other things.

If anything remotely similar actually happened, it would mean that humans learned not only how to make marks but also how to build by imitating nature, mimicking its processes and methods.[4] Nature is our ultimate instructor, the source of our awe and creative inspiration, and this is perhaps the best reason I can think of, albeit a selfish one, for protecting as much of it as possible.

Human art and culture are often said to be a reflection or imitation of nature, but could the reverse be true, too? Can nature come to imitate, be influenced by, or change, based on human art and culture? The answer is yes, absolutely. Simply by existing, humans have shaped the evolution of other animals—and we are doing so more and more. Human-induced climate change, for example, may alter the face of biodiversity on Earth more quickly than anything we as a species—or any species—have done so far, as organisms race to adapt to shifting conditions.

There have lately been many examples of how man's pervasiveness on Earth is changing nature, not just on a cosmetic level but genetically. The author Michael Le Page describes some fascinating examples in his article in the *New Scientist* titled "Unnatural Selection: How Humans are Driving Evolution." He opens with an example of how a native freshwater fish is being affected by an Indigenous Mexican ceremony:

> The Zoque people of Mexico hold a ceremony every year during which they grind up a poisonous plant and pour the mixture into a river running through a cave. Any of the river's molly fish that float to the surface are seen as a gift from the gods. The gods seem to be on the side of the fish, though—the fish in the poisoned parts of the river are becoming resistant to the plant's active ingredient, rotenone.[5]

Le Page goes on to ask, "If fish can evolve in response to a small religious ceremony, just imagine the effects of all the other changes we are making to the planet."[6]

Robert Frost envisioned a milder and more positive version of the human impact on nature in his 1942 sonnet "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." The poem opens in the Garden of Eden. Eve utters her first words, and the songs of the birds in the garden are forever altered by the beauty of her voice:

> He would declare and could himself believe
> That the birds there in all the garden round
> From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
> Had added to their own an oversound,
> Her tone of meaning but without the words.

1. *Ecosystem services* is a common term used to describe nature's benefits to humanity.
2. The beaks of birds are already, essentially, tools—fashioned by the forces of natural selection. Charles Darwin marveled at the diversity of beak shapes in the finches of the Galapagos Islands after his visit there in the 1830s: "One might really fancy that from an original paucity of birds in this archipelago, one species had been taken and modified for different ends," he wrote in his famous account of the trip; see Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (London: J. M. Dent, 1839), 384. Darwin's conclusion was that the finches evolved beaks to help them adapt to eating certain foods. Indeed, on the various islands, the fourteen Galapagos finch species have specialized diets, feeding on seeds, insects, cacti, leaves, eggs, even the blood of seabirds called boobies. The beaks crush, probe, grab, and pick, not unlike the utensils in our kitchen drawers.
3. Edward (Ned) S. Cooke, Jr., conversation with James Prosek, September 2019.
4. The practice of adapting natural design for human use is sometimes called biomimicry. A famous industrial design example is Velcro, which was modeled after the hooks on the end of burrs.
5. Michael Le Page, "Unnatural Selection: How Humans are Driving Evolution," *New Scientist* 210, no. 2810 (April 30, 2011): 32.
6. Ibid.

Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as may be, she was in their song.
Moreover her voice upon their voices
crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds' song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.

Indeed, some birds, like the superb lyrebird, have been known to mimic the sounds of human industry, like chain saws or camera shutters. Studies around the world have shown how birds living in urban areas have had to modify the frequency of their vocalizations so that they can hear each other over the loud city sounds.[7] But this should not come as some great revelation, for as we have explored above, every organism in an ecosystem can come to affect the habits and adaptations of others.

In Oscar Wilde's short essay "The Decay of Lying," originally published in 1889, he wrote, in the voice of his character Vivian, that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." The work is at least slightly tongue in cheek, as this passage illustrates:

> Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art. You smile. Consider the matter from a scientific or metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has born us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.[8]

Vivian is provocatively suggesting that not only does art help us to see and appreciate nature (that, before the French Impressionists painted it, Londoners did not notice the fog), but it also can actually *change* nature. The idea that human habits and culture could alter nature may have seemed like a joke to late nineteenth-century readers, but it is no longer far-fetched—it is happening. The map indeed may not be the terrain, but the map can come to shape the terrain.[9]

Consider the boundary line around Yellowstone National Park. Drawn in 1872 by the geologist Ferdinand Hayden to protect the wondrous thermal features (mud pots, hot springs, geysers, fumaroles) that sit atop the largest volcano on Earth, the boundary defined the area of the first national park in the world. Although there is no fence around Yellowstone—the line is, in a sense, just a line in the mind—the identities and fates of the animals that live in the region change when they cross that invisible boundary. On one side of the line, an elk can be protected as an attraction for tourists; on the other, it can be killed by a hunter as a trophy. Our art, our culture, our industry, our laws, they all affect nature—as evidenced by the "No Trespassing" sign near my childhood home that changed my life.

We make and use tools to help us perform tasks, to communicate, to survive. But we must continuously remind ourselves that we, and the organisms around us, are shaped by the lines we draw in the mind and on the land, by our habits and prejudices, by the tools we invent and use—among them language and maps—and we must acknowledge how we ourselves depend on them, and how they shape us.[10] Henry David Thoreau writes as a kind of observation and warning in *Walden*, "But lo! men have become the tools of their tools."[11] Our systems, structures, and machines, the conveniences we rely on, have become our masters.[12] "The best works of art," Thoreau writes, "are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition."[13]

7. For one example of this, see Erwin Nemeth et al., "Bird Song and Anthropogenic Noise: Vocal Constraints May Explain Why Birds Sing Higher-Frequency Songs in Cities," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (March 7, 2013): 1–7, http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2012.2798.
8. Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying: And Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1995), 47–48.
9. For more on this idea, see note 8 in the introduction to the present catalogue.
10. Edward O. Wilson writes in his book *Consilience*, "The brain determines the fate of the genes that prescribed it. Across evolutionary time, the aggregate choices of many brains determine the Darwinian fate of everything human—the genes, the epigenetic rules, the communicating minds, and the culture." Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 179. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as gene-culture coevolution.
11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1910), 47.
12. Man once thought that language was his servant—but has now become a servant of language; this was a core belief of Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, first published in French in 1966.
13. Thoreau, *Walden*, 48.

90
Basket, Syrian, Dura-Europos, ca. A.D. 165–256. Reed, H. 3½ × DIAM. 15 in. (9.5 × 37 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Yale-French Excavations at Dura-Europos, 1933.466

91
Nest of a Village Weaver (Ploceus cucullatus), Uganda. 6 × 5 × 4½ in. (15.2 × 12.7 × 11.4 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.136325

Clockwise, from top left:

92
Nest of a Vieillot's Black Weaver (Ploceus nigerrimus), Equatorial Guinea, Centro Sur, Monte Alén National Park. 9 × 7½ × 4½ in. (22.9 × 19.1 × 11.4 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.100887

93
Nest of a Black-Necked Weaver (Ploceus nigricollis), Kenya, Rift Valley Province, Magadi. 12 × 11 × 3¾ in. (30.5 × 27.9 × 9.5 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.136326

94
Nest of a Sparkling-Tailed Woodstar, or Sparkling-Tailed Hummingbird (Tilmatura dupontii), Guatemala, Sololá Department, San Pedro La Laguna. 4 × 2 × 1¾ in. (10.2 × 5.1 × 4.4 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ORN.142517

95
Fish Trap, Indonesia, Lombok, early 20th century. Rattan and hemp, H. 22 × DIAM. 19½ in. (55.9 × 49.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Promised gift of Thomas Jaffe, B.A. 1971

96
Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (S.578, Hanging Single-Lobed, Five-Layer Continuous Form within a Form), ca. 1975. Copper wire, 11 × 10½ × 10½ in. (27.9 × 26.7 × 26.7 cm). Private collection, Connecticut

97
Coiled Basket with Cover, Chumash, 19th century. Rush, H. 8 × DIAM. 11 in. (20.3 × 27.9 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.020648

98
James Prosek, *Cockatool*, 2008. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 26½ × 23½ in. (67.3 × 59.7 cm). Collection of Susan and Dixon Butler

Clockwise, from left:

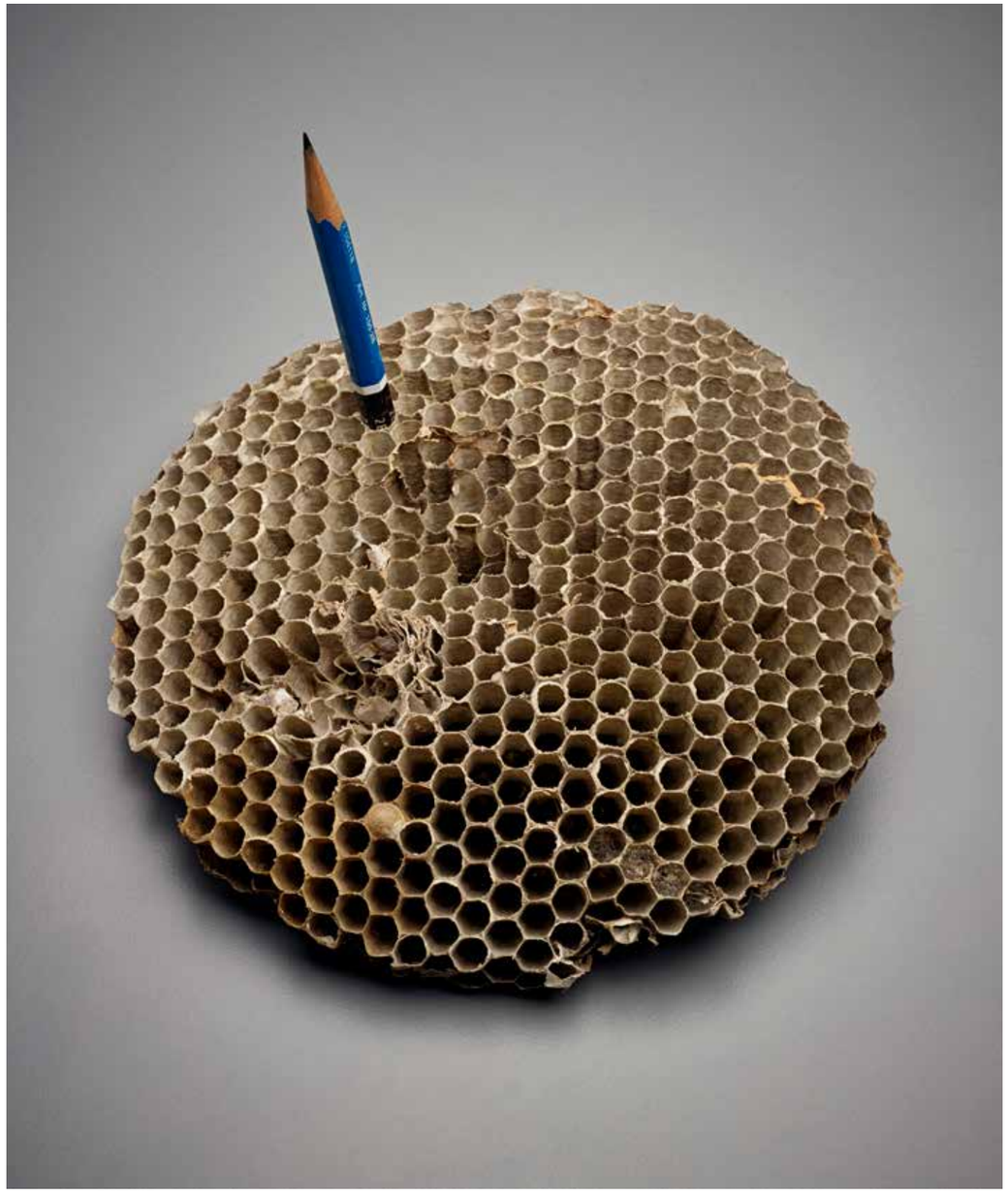
99
Billy Williams (Deg Hit'an [Ingalik]), *Root Scraper*, ca. 1937. Wood and beaver jawbone, 7½ × 2⅜ × 1 in. (19 × 6 × 2.5 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.050097

100
Billy Williams (Deg Hit'an [Ingalik]), *Chisel*, 1937. Spruce and beaver tooth with hide, 5⅛ × 2⅜ × ¹³⁄₁₆ in. (13 × 6 × 2 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.050112

101
Snake-Head Whistle, Unangan (Aleut), ca. 1890. Wood and bone, 1¹⁵⁄₁₆ × 6⅝ × 1 in. (5 × 16 × 2.5 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.010010

102
Toy Sled, Nunamiut, 20th century. Caribou mandible and willow, 5⅛ × 5⅞ × 14⅝ in. (13 × 15 × 37 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.202814

103
Cup, Cheyenne, 19th century. Turtle shell, 1¾ × 4⅝ × 3¹⁵⁄₁₆ in. (4.5 × 11 × 10 cm). Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Conn., YPM ANT.009046



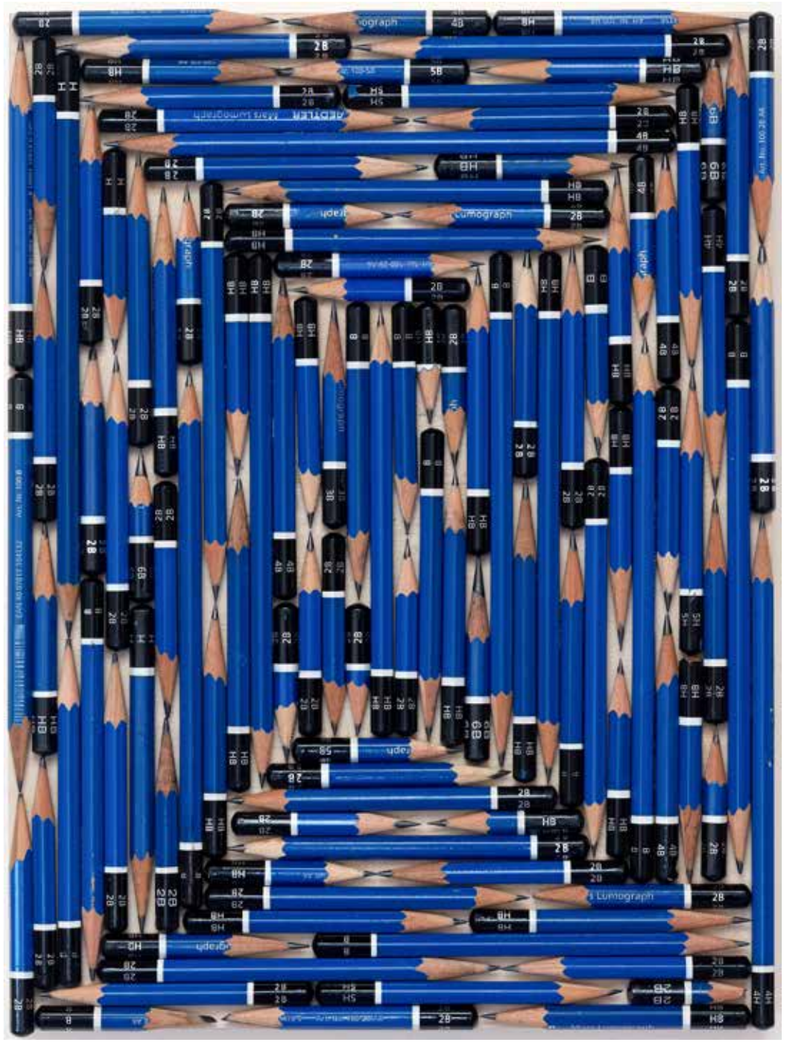
104
James Prosek, *Utility Composition No. 1*, 2019. Paper-wasp nest and pencil, H. 4 ½ × DIAM. 6½ in. (11.4 × 16.5 cm). Courtesy the artist

105
James Prosek, *Drill Duck with Pitcher Plant Flowers*, 2009. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on tea-stained paper, 20⅛ × 15⅝ in. (51.1 × 39.7 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

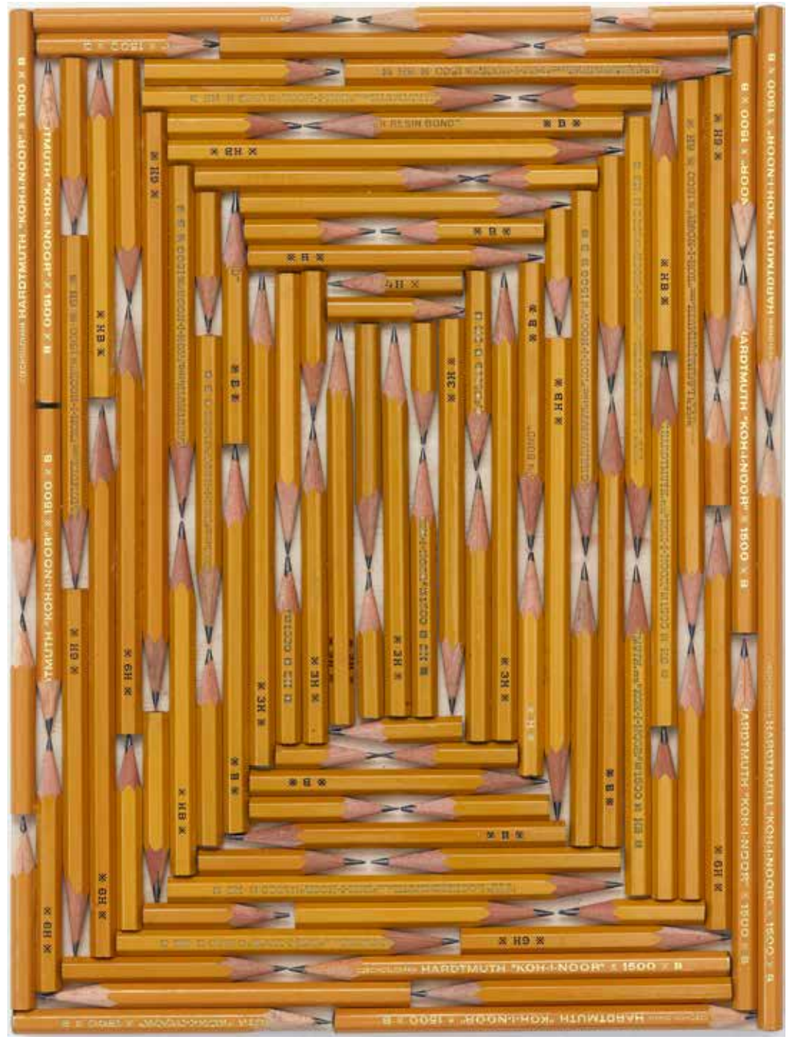
106
James Prosek, *Utility Composition No. 2*, 2019. Bird specimens, drill bit, pencils, fish hook, paintbrush, saw blade, and sewing needle, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist

107
James Prosek, *Minotaur*, 2019. Bison horn, kudu horn, blackbuck horn, oryx horn, springbok skull with horns, and pencils, largest: 34½ × 2 × 2 in. (87.6 × 5.1 × 5.1 cm). Private collection

108
James Prosek, *Drill Duck with Pitcher Plants*, 2009. Hooded merganser taxidermy, wood, clay, oil, watercolor, and moss, 18 × 22 × 14 in. (45.7 × 55.9 × 35.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York



109
James Prosek, *Dis-functional, Blue*, 2019.
Pencils mounted on wood, 12 × 9 × 2¼ in.
(30.5 x 22.9 x 5.7 cm). Courtesy the artist



110
James Prosek, *Dis-functional, Yellow*, 2019.
Pencils mounted on wood, 12 × 9 × 2¼ in.
(30.5 × 22.9 × 5.7 cm). Courtesy the artist

The Spaces in Between

For many years, I would paint a trout and write the common and scientific name under the fish, in keeping with a tradition of natural-history painting of a particular period.[1] Then, at a certain point, I began to grow critical of names. I did not want people to have their experience limited by words—to encounter a painting and say, "Oh, it's a sea dragon," or "Oh, it's a Caribbean lobster," and then walk away. I did not want people to mistake knowing the name of something for knowing something. So, I started to replace the names with curvilinear lines that were my personal expression of the space a creature occupied in an ecosystem, as if the invisible tendrils that hold nature together—the spaces in between—could be seen, or at least acknowledged (pls. 113, 115, 119). Instead of using accepted systems of nomenclature and classification, I created my own visual taxonomy.

After making these two-dimensional works with creatures and curving lines, I began to make three-dimensional versions, taking an object like a deer antler that I found lying on the ground in the woods, and asking, If this form continued beyond itself, what might it look like? I would extend the tines with wire, clay, and paint, sometimes so that they would connect, sometimes so that they would fuse with another material from the environment, like wood from a wild cherry or black walnut tree (pls. 112, 120).

These works assert that both animate and inanimate objects have auras that affect other things in an environment, something akin, at least in sentiment, to what has been called *animism*—the idea that there is a reciprocal force in nature between all things. This concept was intuited by Indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples, while being dismissed by some Western anthropologists as a mystical philosophy, an inability of these peoples to separate the real from the imagined.

There is in fact an invisible exchange between things in nature that one could reasonably call communication. Science is at the dawn of being able to describe it. Organisms like trees, once viewed as inanimate, are now known to send chemical and electrical signals to each other—underground via complex matrices of roots and fungi, and by air through the overstory with pheromones.[2]

For millennia, artists have been trying to articulate what they feel is there but cannot see.

You see it in the work of Charles Ephraim Burchfield, for instance (pl. 111). In his watercolors, he paints the echoes of water, the reverberation of birdsong, the energy given off by a tree. The figures in his landscapes—birds, trees, clouds, telephone wires, the sun, flowers—seem to melt into each other; they have currents that resonate and influence the world beyond them.

You see it in a wooden figure of the Indonesian hornbill, the top of its long bill extending into an imagined spiral shape (pl. 124).[3]

You see it in Vincent van Gogh's *Night Café*, where the artist articulates the glow emanating from a ceiling lamp with colorful, individual brushstrokes (pl. 114). Van Gogh makes us think about light and air as tangible objects, recording movements of the unseen.

In these works, you see and feel the vibrant, pulsing, wondrous, unmitigated, and complex universe of which we are a part.

The unnameable, the innominate, the ineffable is also, in a sense, what abstract artists of the twentieth century tried to express visually. In spring 2003, Kirk Varnedoe, the former curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, delivered a series of lectures at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., called *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock*. These words, delivered toward the end of his final lecture (for which I was seated in the audience), paint a picture of abstract artists as pioneers of the spaces in between:

> Abstraction has been less a search for the ultimately meaningful . . . than a recurrent push for the temporarily meaningless: that is, things that are found not often in exotic realms but rather on the edges of banality, familiarity, and the man-made world. It is the production of the forms of order that are not recognizable as order. . . . Abstract art is a symbolic game, and it is akin to all human games: you have to get into it, risk and all, and this takes a certain act of faith. But what kind of faith? Not faith in absolutes, not a religious kind of faith. A faith in possibility, a faith not that we will know something finally, but a faith in not knowing. . . . From this field of not knowing, from our ignorance, from our dumbfoundedness and disorientation, *artists* . . . make our culture go. They produce from the form of things defamiliarized . . . from the banal, from the points between A and B, from all those momentary interstices where we have no category and no form of understanding.[4]

In the past, the spaces between A and B were the territory of the shaman, who guided people between Earth and the spirit world. This is what was described to me when I visited an ancient rock-art site near Thermopolis, Wyoming, called Legend Rock, where hundreds of drawings chipped into sandstone have survived the arid, windswept climate for thousands of years.

Larry Todd, an archaeologist who had grown up in the vicinity, accompanied me there on a snowy day one November, across a desolate sagebrush steppe ringed by mountains. On the wall, we could see figures that clearly resembled creatures native to the area, such as eagles, elk, bison, and bighorn sheep, as well as others that did not represent anything recognizable. Larry said some of these more abstract forms were thought to illustrate creatures that lived

1. Natural-history paintings of the nineteenth-century Victorian era come to mind, as well as the twentieth-century field guide. Who knows when a person first drew a picture and wrote the name of the thing beneath it?
2. In Africa, one of the main sources of food for giraffes is the leaves of acacia trees, but the acacia has developed a defense. When an acacia tree is being browsed on, it begins to release tannins that apparently taste bad to giraffes while also inhibiting their digestion, making them sick. Once an acacia starts to release tannins, nearby acacias detect a distress signal and also begin to release them. To continue to feed, giraffes typically have to move to a tree upwind of the previous one, a tree that has not yet detected the chemical release from the others.
3. The rhinoceros hornbill does have an appendage on the top of the beak, but here the artist has made it continue well beyond what is found in nature.
4. Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 271–72.

between this side of the rock and the other side. He explained that the Shoshone and their ancestors who made these drawings saw the rock face not as something rigid and hard but alive and permeable, an interface between the human and spirit worlds. The artist-shamans communicated through the rock, traveled through the rock, and the act of drawing aided this conversation. These liminal figures, some of which looked to have the bodies of men and the heads of elk and bison, danced across both worlds. The rock—the wall—was not an impenetrable end to an experience, but the impetus for an encounter.

This again is the irony of the wall—the line, the rock, the barrier, the boundaries that our minds draw around words; they appear at one moment to thwart us, to limit our potential, but their existence gives us motion, animating our lives. The presence of the boundary stirs an impulse to deny its power, the motivation to overcome it, the urge to trespass across it.

This exhibition and publication present a series of observations and cautions, collected while sitting in a chair in my studio, reading or painting, on walks in the woods or by the sea, in conversation with friends, in cars, in planes, on horseback. It is by no means a condemnation of language or definitions, of classification or boundaries, but rather an examination of them. Without the line, limits, or boundaries, without the edges of the paper or the confines of the picture frame, without gravity, or the walls of the art museum, or the prejudices associated with words like *art* or *artifact*, there is nothing, no reason for an exhibition or a book—without *things* surrounded by walls, there is no space between them, and no possibility of trying to fill that space with artistic expression.

In an architecture class that I took while an undergraduate at Yale, students had to propose what we would build on a vacant lot in New Haven in a fairly central part of campus. The professor gave us a few guidelines and some city codes to work within. City codes—legal limitations on the number of stories a building can have, or how many bathrooms—may appear to be the nemesis of architects, but ironically, our professor pointed out, they are often what give us the greatest possibilities. It is within the constraints of a system, of a structure—even an artificial one—that you are forced to find creative alternatives. Originality grows from a ground whose surface does not easily yield. Or, as Goethe said, "It is in working within limits that the master reveals himself."[5]

Not dissimilar in sentiment is William Wordsworth's sonnet from about 1802 reflecting on the beauty of the limits imposed on him by the strictness of this poetic form. The rigor of the sonnet—ten syllables per line, with a specific rhyming scheme—could be seen as limiting the poet's creativity, but Wordsworth suggests that the opposite is true:

> Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
> And hermits are contented with their cells;
> And students with their pensive citadels;
> Maids at the wheel, the weaver at this loom,
> Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
> High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
> Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
> In truth the prison, into which we doom
> Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
> In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
> Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
> Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
> Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
> Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Some who study verse have pointed out several hidden twists in Wordsworth's execution of the poem. The poet follows the rhyming scheme of the Italian sonnet, but he breaks convention with the placement of the *volta*, or turn in the poem's argument or question. Usually, the turn comes between the eighth and ninth lines. But Wordsworth puts the turn at the beginning of the eighth line, with "In truth." In addition, all the lines follow the proper form in having ten syllables, with the exception of the second-to-last line, which has eleven. This is the line in which Wordsworth expresses that liberty is not to be found within boundless possibility, but grows most fruitfully from limitations.

The point, Wordsworth seems to be suggesting, is not to follow the form exactly, or to let limitations be our masters, but to use the existence of rules as an opportunity to create beauty and tension in breaking them.

But how many rules of the sonnet can one break before a sonnet is no longer a sonnet? When the definition of a word is overwhelmed by exceptions, is it still the word you started with? Wordsworth does not give us any guidance here.

Some say the definition of the word *art* is something that is made for its own sake, not for a specific function—essentially, something useless. Things like hammers, fishing spears, decoys, lures, bowls, and baskets are often relegated to the realm of craft or artifact. I imagined a tool that yearned to become art—to push the boundaries of its definition to the point that it would cease to be what it was. In this section there are three objects that represent various stages of evolution (pl. 118). The first is a hand-forged iron tool in its original form, a spear used for catching eels in estuaries (actually, it is a precise replica of a German eel spear).[6] I imagined what this tool would look like if it evolved, specieslike, into a different form. In the second stage, the tines of the spear begin to connect. Once the points of the tines are no longer exposed, they cannot spear anything; their function has been nullified. In the third stage, the tines are fully connected, and the metamorphosis from tool to something new is complete. But what do we call a useless tool? Is there a name for this? Is it a hybrid? Does it live momentarily in the gap, until we give it a name? The tool has shed its function—and the confines of its definition—like a skin. It is liberated from the word.

Can we now, dare I ask, call it art?

5. Likewise, in an interview in the *New York Times*, the Minimalist artist Carl Andre said about his process, "I have found a set of solutions to a set of problems in sculpture, and I work within those parameters. But it is limits that give us possibilities. Without limits nothing really good can be accomplished. I feel liberated by them. I can't tell you the number of awful ideas I've had in my life"; quoted in Randy Kennedy, "For Carl Andre, Less Is Still Less," *New York Times*, July 14, 2011. The Harlem-based designer known as Dapper Dan was also quoted reflecting on limitations and his trade: "Clothes designing sounds fascinating, but it's hard work. Folks don't realize that there are limitations in the body form. We're humans: We have arms, legs, chest. The exciting part of designing clothes is that you can be really creative within the context of those limitations"; quoted in Barry Michael Cooper, "The Fashion Outlaw Dapper Dan," *New York Times*, June 3, 2017.

6. All three objects in *Dis-Functional No. 1* were made in collaboration with a blacksmith in Scotland. The first is based on a photo of a German eel rake or spear in an old book. The second and third are based on my own drawings.

111
Charles Ephraim Burchfield, *Marsh in June*, 1952–56. Watercolor on paper, 34 13/16 × 25 13/16 in. (88.4 × 65.6 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Katharine Ordway Collection, 1980.13.65

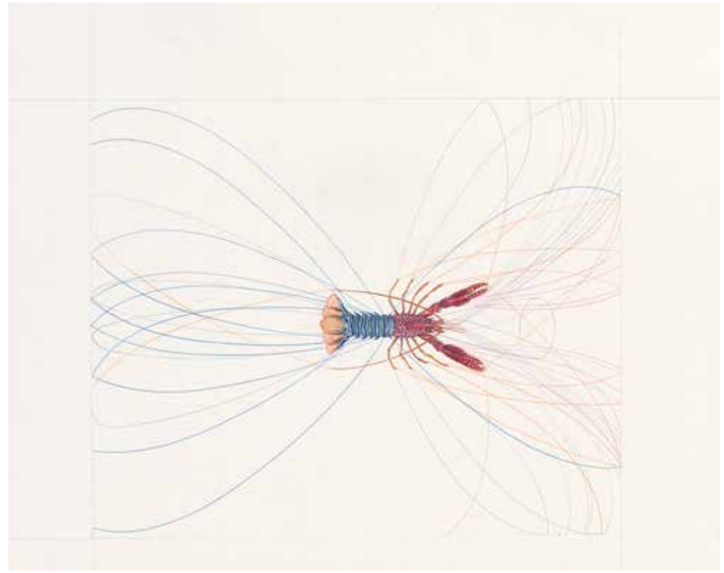
112
James Prosek, *Metamorphosis V*, 2014. White-tailed deer antler with clay, acrylic, and black walnut, with a marble base, 23 × 18½ × 12 in. (58.4 × 47 × 30.5 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

113
James Prosek, *Sea Dragon*, 2005.
Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm).
Private collection

114
Vincent van Gogh, *Le café de nuit* (The Night Café), 1888. Oil on canvas, 28½ × 36¼ in. (72.4 × 92.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, 1961.18.34

115
James Prosek, *Secretary Bird*, 2006. Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm). Private collection

116
James Prosek, *Portal III*, 2012. Bone, clay, and acrylic with a black-walnut base, 19 × 13½ × 7 in. (48.3 × 34.3 × 17.8 cm) (without base). Private collection

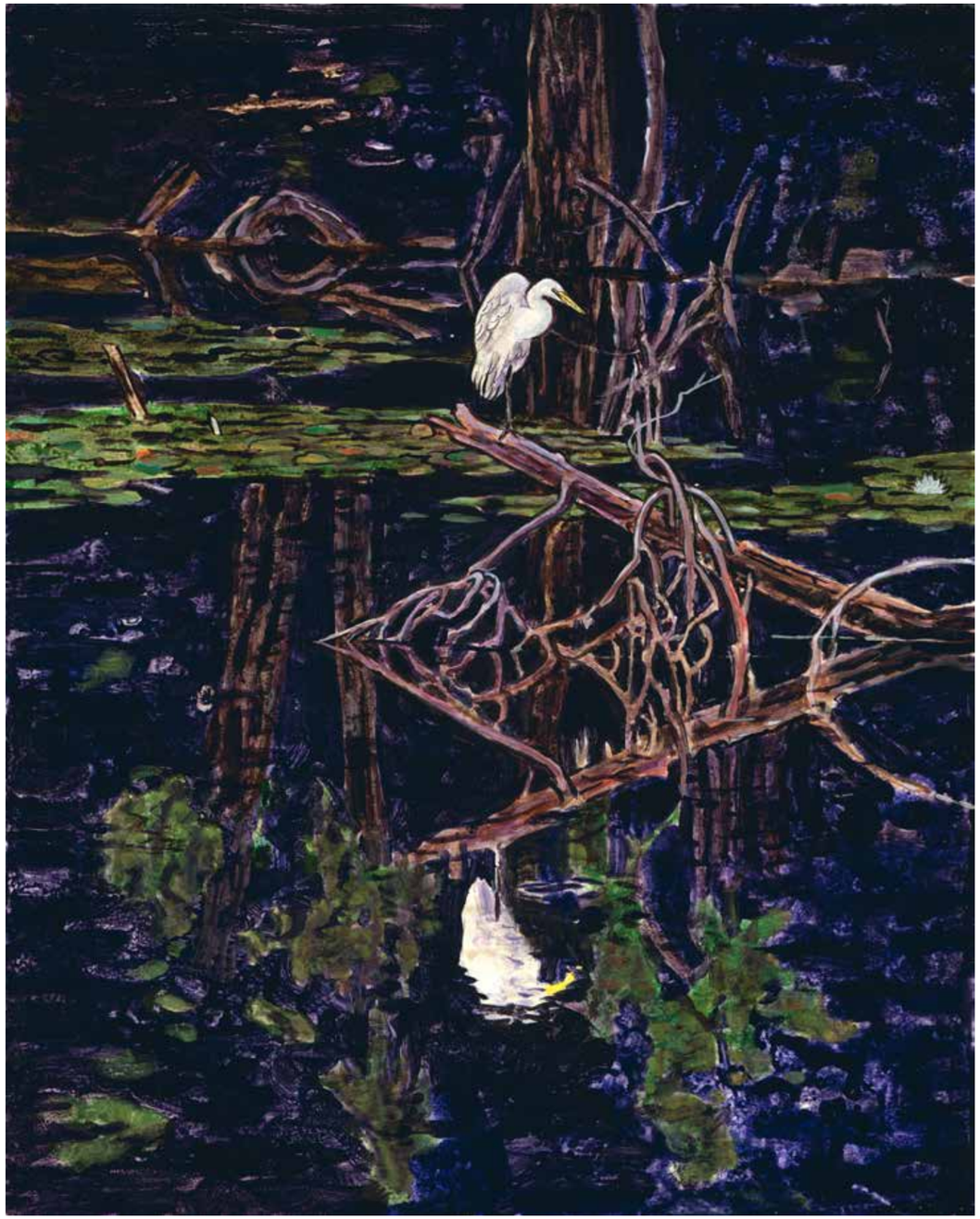


117
James Prosek, *Metamorphosis II*, 2012. Bronze with a limestone base, 12 × 10 × 12 in. (30.5 × 25.4 × 30.5 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

118
James Prosek, *Dis-functional No. 1*, 2019. Hand-forged iron, 16½ × 10¼ × ¼ in. (41.9 × 26 × 0.64 cm); 16¾ × 14 × ¼ in. (42.6 × 35.6 × 0.64 cm); 16½ × 17¼ × ¼ in. (41.9 × 43.7 × 0.64 cm). Courtesy the artist

119
James Prosek, *Caribbean Lobster*, 2005. Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm). Private collection

120
James Prosek, *Metamorphosis I*, 2014. White-tailed deer antler with clay, acrylic, and ebony, with a marble base, 22 × 12 × 11 in. (55.9 × 30.5 × 27.9 cm) (without base). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York



121
James Prosek, *Pond No. 2*, 2018. Watercolor and acrylic on panel, 15 × 12 in. (38.1 × 30.5 cm). Private collection

122
James Prosek, *Sentinel*, 2012. Bone, clay, and acrylic with a black-walnut base, 13 × 9½ × 4½ in. (33 × 24.1 × 11.4 cm) (without base). Private collection

123
James Prosek, *Doppelganger II*, 2012. Bone, clay, and acrylic with a black-walnut base, 5 × 7½ × 3½ in. (12.7 × 19.1 × 8.9 cm) (without base). Private collection

124
Painted Hornbill (Kenyalang), Indonesia, Borneo, Kalimantan, early 20th century. Wood and paint, 31⅞ × 36⅝ × 7⅛ in. (81 × 93 × 18 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Promised gift of Thomas Jaffe, B.A. 1971

There is an extent to which the narrative of Adam and Eve permeates the thesis of James Prosek's present project, *Art, Artifact, Artifice*. This rich subject that examines the human condition is revisited and retold by a number of artists whose work is included in this publication, such as by Paul Gauguin in his painting *Paradise Lost* (pl. 2). Prosek developed a keen interest in this story of the first human beings and their union with the natural world while reading John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an undergraduate at Yale University. In Milton's telling, Lucifer, in the form of a serpent who encourages Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, is a more complex and compelling force than described in the Bible's book of Genesis. That the serpent, or snake, remains perhaps the most loathed—and consequently, most lowly—of creatures has of course much to do with the devil's manifestation, but there are also many folklore tales from around the world regarding this animal's evil deeds and subsequent banishment, as well as its status as a fabulous creature. Prosek has documented that, in certain cultures, the eel is imbued with the same negative characteristics as the serpent. This unprepossessing fish, which he describes as "a metaphor for the resilience of life itself," appears in hybrid form in a new work created for this project that also alludes to the first biblical story (pl. 1).[1] Charged with rich symbolism and set in lush vegetation, Prosek's imagery here includes hybrid male and female figures—half human, half eel—very much setting the tone for the myriad interlocking subjects he interrogates herein.

Evoking the same biblical narrative, Albrecht Dürer's modestly sized engraving of Adam and Eve (pl. 3), from 1504, displays this artist's consummate draftsmanship and sophisticated compositional skill. In addition, the medium reveals his understanding of and abilities in the area of craft, which is also highly pertinent within the context of this project—as are related questions that the engraved print raises: What is the unique quality of a work of art, and does being a multiple lessen its status?

Dürer was trained as a goldsmith before pursuing his interest in art, and he was one of the earliest proponents of the possibilities that printmaking held. This formative experience in mastering a craft undoubtedly fed into his prodigious skill in engraving. The dense and highly accomplished detail seen in his *Adam and Eve* highlights his fascination with and adherence to the classical ideal of human proportions. Dürer's near-perfect figures are in complete concert with their natural setting, to the extent that they exert a sense of authority and influence over it. The Four Humors, derived from Hippocrates, are represented by their associated animals: the melancholic elk, the optimistic rabbit, the phlegmatic ox, and the choleric cat.[2] Nature is therefore shown as being a reflection of the human condition. For Dürer's

1. James Prosek, *Eels: An Exploration, from New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Mysterious Fish* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 279.
2. Adam and Eve represent ideal specimens of their sex, and they are arranged in the print in near-symmetrical poses based on classical representations of Apollo and Venus.

contemporaries, this composition would have illustrated the principles of the medieval system of ordering—the "Great Chain of Being"—and provided confirmation that all was as it should be in this prelapsarian scene.[3]

Even from our twenty-first-century perspective, when our understanding of the complexities of the world we live in is relatively advanced, we continue to be overawed by a fear of chaos—of the forces of nature running amok—despite our collective wherewithal to assume responsibility for the planet's custody. As Prosek has already illustrated in this catalogue, losing a sense of orderliness and self-determination remains a frightening prospect, a dystopian vision.

Art of the past suggests that it was ever thus. Giotto's frescoes in the Capella degli Scrovegni (or Arena Chapel), in Padua, Italy, painted in the fourteenth century, reveal an understanding of these human fears, albeit through the prism of Christianity. Giotto is considered the first of the great painters of the Italian Renaissance and was commissioned to paint the chapel by Enrico Scrovegni. The intensely wrought images of human frailty cover all four walls as well as the ceiling of this small chapel. The most compelling is the *Last Judgment* (fig. 1), situated at the end of the chapel, in which the central figure of Christ separates visions of heaven—where the chosen join the saints in their highly ordered ranks—from those of hell, where scenes of great imagination expose terror, despair, and absolute confusion.[4] Giotto's depiction of the anticipated terror of the afterlife remains affecting because it stirs in us a fear of the unknown, a reminder of the potential chaos that is our final fate. For, despite the Christian content of the fresco, it is the universality of the uncertainty and chaos of birth and death that Giotto, and many of the artists who followed immediately in his wake, articulated so well, and that continues to resonate with modern viewers.

Unlike the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish author Laurence Sterne's eponymous hero Tristram Shandy, who describes, at exhaustive length, his own somewhat comic and chaotic coming into the world, the real experiences of birth and death remain something of a mystery to us.[5] Perhaps, then, over the course of many centuries, it has become hardwired into the human condition to strive to impose and preserve order in our collective and individual lives, as well as in the natural world around us—to make sense of an existence that is bookended by an unruly entry into and exit from the world.

The establishment of order is often synonymous with a sense of personal achievement and, as seen in the "Great Chain of Being," classifications can also provide a guide to hierarchy. Classifications are a testament to our learning and understanding; archiving those classifications allows us to chart academic progress and ensure that the discoveries of one generation can inform the next. In questioning such methodologies, Prosek considers how these systems might inadvertently obscure our engagement with the subject. By referencing the Garden of Eden (pls. 1, 47), where the first exercise in naming took place, Prosek uses his artwork to challenge the efficacy of classification and taxonomy and to demonstrate how the weight of such endeavors can sometimes eclipse our view of and communion with the very nature under consideration.

Prosek's large silhouette murals that evoke dioramas (pl. 48), in which each species (often exclusively birds) is labeled with a random number that appears to be affiliated with an explanatory key, which is in fact absent, have become his signature works. These arresting murals have a

3. The "Great Chain of Being" is a conceptual structure that orders deities, humans (according to their social status), animals, plants, and minerals into a hierarchy. Derived from Platonic and Aristotelian thinking, it developed into a Christian interpretation during the Middle Ages (for more on this, see note 4) and was believed to have been decreed by the Almighty.
4. During the Middle Ages, Neoplatonic writings by the fifth-century theologist and philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite were fully absorbed into Christian doctrine. Pseudo-Dionysius wrote of a celestial hierarchy that included nine separate ranks (or choirs) of angels, which were further subdivided into triad groupings.
5. In the introduction of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760), Sterne informs the reader that the narrator and hero of the story fails to "get himself born in the first two volumes."

Fig. 1.
Giotto di Bondone, *Last Judgment*, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua, Italy, 1303–6

dramatic visual appeal, partly due to scale and the balance and sparseness of the composition, and partly because they embody an element of the familiar. This quality draws the viewer in, and the first impression—that the work encompasses a disciplined account of the natural world—slowly gives way to a more subliminal conceptual message. Often painted directly on the walls of galleries within his exhibitions, these murals form a backdrop that sets the stage for his other works.[6] Their design, which is adapted from the *Peterson Field Guides*, presents in monochrome the taxonomy of the natural world, in which everything is identifiable, everything is related, everything is documented.[7] That Prosek's numbering of each species is not linked to a key or legend suggests a different interpretation, however, one that challenges the pedagogy of classification: nature, in all its diversity, complexity, and evolution, is both conceptually and literally unknowable. The inference is that, although the human species can affect nature through various interventions, it is unable to exert absolute control because it is incapable of fully comprehending nature's ever-changing character. The inclusion here of the number paintings by Robert Indiana (pl. 52) and Jasper Johns (pl. 53) alongside Prosek's silhouette works further contributes to the artist's commentary on the absurdity of the quest for order and knowledge—particularly when considering that Johns described his oft-repeated numbers motif as "things that are seen and not looked at, not examined."[8]

What makes Prosek uniquely positioned to tackle the questions posed in this book is that he has a foot firmly planted in both camps: nature and art. As a lifelong observer of the natural world whose commitment to the subject has brought him on several scientific expeditions to far-flung wildernesses, he has not only garnered a deep practical knowledge of the animal kingdom and its habitat but also developed an acute and highly sensitive understanding of it. Familiar with the wealth of information on the subject from its earliest documentation, including the classification systems of Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin, Prosek tests the limitations of many of these theories while in the field. Meanwhile, in employing his self-taught artist's eye and sensibility, he can articulate his observations in a nonverbal manner, surpassing the constraints of language.

Prosek has frequently been described as a contemporary John James Audubon, the famous ornithologist, naturalist, and painter best known for his detailed illustrations depicting American birds in their natural habitats. In the quality of the execution of his works on paper and panel, his acute observations and command of media are as beautiful and detailed as anything by Audubon. Unlike Audubon, however, Prosek does not just record and celebrate the wonders of the natural world; documentation is not his primary motive. It is his ability to give context to the subject—with which he has already developed a deep understanding and sympathy—within the overall composition that sets his work apart. In *Paradise Lost 1 (Burmese Python and Blue and Yellow Macaw, Everglades)* (see frontispiece to the present essay), for example, the hyperreality of the central animals is framed by a comment on the received wisdom related to them regarding their habitat and genealogy. The effect is that the animals—painted in all their natural beauty—exert an authority over the background of the painting, which represents our limited comprehension of them and their place in the world. This notion of rebalancing the hierarchy between human and animal is also apparent in works such as *The Anxiety of Influence (Self-Portrait as a Red-Tailed Hawk)* (pl. 32) and *Geisha Eel* (pl. 36), which employ the ancient tradition of human-animal hybrids that has origins dating as far back as the Assyrian empire. A half-human, half-eagle figure on a stone relief from the palace at Nimrud, from about 883–859 B.C., uses the same trope (fig. 2). *Industrial Evolution*, Prosek's beaver

Fig. 2.
Eagle-Headed Genie Watering the Sacred Tree, Near Eastern, Assyrian, ca. 883–859 B.C. Gypseous alabaster, 42 15/16 × 30 5/16 in. (109 × 77 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Purchase, 1854.3

6. Prosek's murals have been exhibited at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Asia Society Hong Kong Center; and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, among many others.
7. The American ornithologist Roger Peterson (1908–1996) published a series of field guides that identified birds, plants, and insects. The first volume, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, was first published in 1934.
8. Jasper Johns, quoted in Roberta Bernstein and Edith Devaney, introduction to *Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2017), 15.

Fig. 3.
James Prosek, *Industrial Evolution*, 2012. Beaver taxidermy, chain-saw chain, wood, soil, clay, and oil, 32 × 20 × 21 in. (81.3 × 50.8 × 53.3 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

taxidermy with a chain saw for a tail (fig. 3), develops this idea still further, commenting on both classification and evolution; this work, and others like it, is an acknowledgment of the possibilities of scientific intervention and of how that intervention can disrupt the normal course of the evolutionary process. Prosek's lightness of touch ensures the natural beauty of the beaver remains intact, so that, cumulatively, these works deliver weighty messages in a highly seductive way.

Another question that Prosek poses in his selection and configuration of objects in this publication and the related exhibition is the value and validity of arranging works visually and conceptually, irrespective of date or "category." Of course, by design, this is highly subjective, but to group objects, for example, based on their use of color—placing a "stained" canvas by Helen Frankenthaler (pl. 10) opposite a Huari cotton-and-feather mantle skirt, which dates to about A.D. 1000 (pl. 11)—creates a link across the centuries; each informs and encourages a different reading of the other. Shapes, too, are brought together to form unexpected unions, skeletons from the past mingling with modern and contemporary sculpture, revealing surprising degrees of comparison. Even the very idea of categorization is made visible in Agnes Martin's *Islands No. 4* (pl. 7), the white shapes of which seem to reference the labels in his *Bird Spectrum* (pl. 9).

In keeping with all science and mathematics, the classification of plants and animals is fact-based knowledge, the repository of which develops and diversifies over time, building on verifiable data. In other words, it is linear, constantly enriched with each new discovery. There is a tendency to see all progressions over time in the same vein; however, this view can create problems when applied to other disciplines. The artist Anselm Kiefer, who presents and often challenges contemporary notions of history in his work, has suggested that it is impossible to view history in a strictly linear way because it is subject to constant reinterpretation. He has likened history to clay, which can be formed and reformed, thereby enabling each people or era to write or rewrite its own version of it.[9]

Similarly, art history is also subject to reinterpretation. To a certain extent, the continual reexamination of past artistic tendencies over different times and contexts has a bearing on the enduring relevance—or lack thereof—of works from past eras. The discipline of charting significant artistic movements over time does not yield evidence of a continually increasing flow of artistic development; art, too, is not

9. Anselm Kiefer, conversation with Timothy Potts, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, April 27, 2016.

linear. Instead, each movement appears to be anchored to the historical and social context in which it first emerged and developed. It is inevitable, therefore, that when a work is uncoupled from the climate in which it was created, it undergoes a reassessment; this theory was espoused by the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry and championed by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. According to Valéry, "In all arts there is a physical component that cannot continue to be considered and treated in the same way as before; no longer can it escape the effects of modern knowledge and modern practice."[10]

A month after the expansive and ambitious exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* had opened in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art to very favorable reviews, classicist Thomas McEvilley wrote a critique of the show in *Artforum* magazine, and the article had a profound and long-lasting impact. Well qualified to express an opinion on the subject from his long-term academic interrogation of ancient thinking,[11] McEvilley was straightforward and compelling in his critique. The exhibition displayed "tribal" art—without any contextualizing labels—alongside modern works by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, and Constantin Brancusi as a demonstration of the influence of "primitive" work on Modernism. McEvilley argued that, in refusing to consider how these works were regarded by their creators, "the Museum pretends to confront the Third World while really co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority."[12] This criticism, although directed at MoMA, was not confined to this exhibition, and it resounded throughout art institutions, challenging them to examine the role that "primitive" art played in their collections and displays. In McEvilley's obituary in the *New York Times*, the art critic Holland Cotter wrote that, following the publication of the article, the ensuing argument that played out in the press between the exhibition's curators and McEvilley regarding multiculturalism "would define American art for the rest of the 1980s and '90s. When the dust had settled, it was clear who the winner was, and it was also clear that a new era in thinking about art had begun."[13] McEvilley's comments impacted all subsequent art-historical dialogue, bringing to the fore the inherent problems of classification and the consideration of art in purely chronological terms.

The constant reinterpretation of the history of art—a nonlinear view that favors the creation of many tributaries along the way—is more akin to the organic evolution of nature, with its always traceable origins. There is often a sense that one must look back to move forward in art, as seen in Dürer's debt to the classical era in his *Adam and Eve*. Such connections and references are woven throughout *Art, Artifact, Artifice*, for Prosek is as fascinated by art-historical lineage as he is by references pertaining to nature. Brice Marden's aquatint series *After Botticelli* (pl. 16), for example, reimagines and celebrates the fluid lines of the Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, extracting a sense of the master's depiction of flowing garments and hair. Marden's print also suggests an interest in the calligraphic mark, which preoccupied the American sculptor David Smith, whose ink and tempera drawing is also included (pl. 31); both artists were almost certainly looking further back to Islamic and Asian works that display similar forms (pls. 28–30). Prosek enables this echo of the calligraphic line to reverberate even further, crossing not only centuries and cultures but also species, by introducing alongside some of these artworks an object not created nor crafted by man—the marked egg of a northern jacana (pl. 24), the patterns on which are akin to the marks of automatism.

A key tenet of the Surrealist movement, automatism was considered a mechanism to bring artists in touch with their subconscious, but it could also be argued that, in tapping into their deeper psyche, it brought them into closer union with the natural world. This technique was later embraced by the first generation of Abstract Expressionist artists, who were influenced by Cubism and Surrealism—the movements that immediately preceded them. Like the animal kingdom, artists do not, as a rule, organize themselves into movements. Surrealism, however, is a rare example of a group that was formally established, and each member signed up to adhere to a set of preagreed principles. Abstract Expressionism was much more typical of how movements emerge; this largely social group of artists of the same generation, all living in New York, was resistant to being described by a collective name and so did not readily accept the one bestowed upon it, which alluded to its artistic influences.[14] They were aware that the danger of such classification, regardless of any subsequent reassessment, was to forever identify and contain all their artistic endeavors no matter what future direction they pursued.

Prosek's selection of works for the present project opens up and breaks down many of these received categories. In addition to an academic interrogation of his subject, he has employed an intuitive approach in choosing and grouping works that expands the conventional idea of what an exhibition in an art museum (and the attendant exhibition catalogue) is. Key to this is his interest in "artists who have let nature find a way into their work."[15] This property of content underscores the richness of the subject matter that nature provides. The great biographer of the Renaissance artists, Giorgio Vasari, recognized this, too, when he wrote that "painters

10. Paul Valéry, in his essay "Pièce sur l'art," which forms the preface for Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Penguin, 1936), 1.
11. See Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth, 2002). In this text, McEvilley argued that Western civilization should be considered the inheritor of both Greek and Indian thought; it is a combination of Western and Eastern philosophies.
12. Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," quoted in David Carrier, "Art Criticism That Made a Difference," *Brooklyn Rail*, May 3, 2013, https://brooklynrail.org/2013/05/artseen/art-criticism-that-made-a-difference.
13. Holland Cotter, "Thomas McEvilley, 73; Altered Views on Non-Western Art," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.
14. The art critic Robert Coates, writing in the *New Yorker* in 1946, first introduced the term "Abstract Expressionism" to describe paintings by Hans Hofmann. Through the name, Coates sought to signify the way in which the work combined the emotional intensity of the German Expressionists with the nonobjective aesthetic of the European abstract movements, such as Cubism, Futurism, and de Stijl.
15. James Prosek, quoted in "The Artist in Conversation with Waqas Wajahat," in *Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box, The Art of James Prosek*, exh. broch. (Cody, Wyo.: Buffalo Bill Center of the West, 2017), 24.

owe to Giotto . . . exactly the same debt they owe to nature, which constantly serves them as a model and whose finest and most beautiful aspects they are always striving to imitate and reproduce."[16] The German-born artist and teacher Hans Hofmann, who instructed many of the first- and second-generation Abstract Expressionist painters and inspired numerous artists and critics of the time, espoused a view of nature that chimes with both Prosek's and Vasari's. Hofmann believed that abstraction was limited if there was no reference to nature, for without this rich resource, there was a risk of repetition. One of his students, Lee Krasner, was receptive to this message; indeed, she often stated that nature was at the center of everything she did, and after moving to Springs, East Hampton, New York, with Jackson Pollock in 1945, she took every opportunity to engage with the natural world, bringing elements such as shells, pebbles, and driftwood into the house and arranging them like art objects (fig. 4). When Hofmann was introduced to Pollock by Krasner, he gave the same advice, which elicited Pollock's famous retort, "I am nature."[17] This phrase has been interpreted in many ways over the years, but in the context of Pollock's other interviews regarding his approach to his work, it would suggest that he saw himself, and therefore his actions, as an extension of nature. This reading is certainly borne out in the controlled chaos and organic energy of his drip paintings (pl. 27).

Unfashionably for the period, as it was associated with Impressionism, the Abstract Expressionist artist Arshile Gorky was inspired to draw directly from nature and later to translate this imagery into his canvases, as can be seen in *Waterfall*, of 1943 (fig. 5). Like Krasner's abstract works and Mark Rothko's first Multiform paintings

Fig. 4.
Photograph of pebbles and shells arranged in the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, New York

(pl. 12), Gorky's compositions are replete with biomorphic forms. In Gorky's, Krasner's, and Rothko's works, then, nature has been distilled, reformed, and painted with a sense of automatism. Nature was also of immense importance to Joan Mitchell's work throughout her long career, and she took joy and inspiration from the late *Nymphéas* (Water Lilies) works of Claude Monet, though she never painted directly from the motif. Her works instead relied on the emotional impact of the residual memory of her experience looking at those works. Her resultant

Fig. 5.
Arshile Gorky, *Waterfall*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 60½ × 44½ in. (153.7 × 113 cm). Tate Gallery, London, Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1971, T01319

16. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1988), 1:57.
17. Dorothy Sackler, oral history interview with Lee Krasner, November 1964, Lee Krasner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 6.
Anselm Kiefer, *Aschenblume*, 1983–97. Oil, emulsion, acrylic paint, clay, ash, earth, and dried sunflower on canvas, 13 ft. 2 in. × 24 ft. 11¾ in. (401.3 × 761.4 cm). Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of The Burnett Foundation in honor of Michael Auping, 2002.17.A–D

celebrations of nature (pl. 25), however, were no less potent than those of the French master.

The natural world can also be celebrated by the materials used, or appropriated from it, in the making of the work. To get "in" to his paintings, Pollock deliberately moved away from traditional media and employed household paints and sticks instead of oil paint and brushes. He also often incorporated items from the natural world, such as pebbles and sand, into his work. Similarly, Smith used animal bones and coral in some of his paintings and sculpture. So, too, does Kiefer look to nature to provide materials, such as soil, sunflowers and their seeds, and lead, among many other things, believing that they possess a spirit (fig. 6). Prosek also frequently turns to materials from the natural world. In using an eel as the "stamp" to transfer paint onto paper (pl. 15), he not only creates shapes suggestive of the rhythmic movement of the eel but also imbues the painting with its spirit, or very essence. The incorporation of such natural materials produces works that lie at the very intersection between art and artifact, in some ways increasing the common ground between the disciplines of art and craft. Yet the issue that remains at the heart of the question is the objective for creating the work in the first place. John Graham, artist and mentor to many Abstract Expressionists in New York in the 1930s, tackled the question of whether art and craft are "fundamentally opposed," but he nonetheless recognized that "their departures and methods may have a certain similarity and overlap at times."[18] While Graham's thinking is perhaps inconclusive, it is helpful in underlining the similarities between the two disciplines.

With this project, Prosek demonstrates the interconnectivity of art and artifacts by highlighting their shared reflection of the natural world. The methods of charting and documenting these worlds and disciplines are essential but—again calling on the Adam and Eve narrative—are also essentially flawed, due to the imperfection of human nature. The Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges made light of our propensity to both establish systems of classification and employ those systems arbitrarily in his fabricated taxonomy in the "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge," in which animals are arranged into fourteen categories beginning with "Those Belonging to the Emperor" and ending with "Those That at a Distance Resemble Flies." Within this fictitious description of a chaotic taxonomy, it is the sixth category that perhaps best describes the depiction of the animals (and everything else) in this publication: "Fabulous ones."[19]

18. John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937), 25.
19. Jorge Luis Borges, "Description of the Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge," in "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," *La nación* (Buenos Aires), February 8, 1942.

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James Prosek, *Bird Spectrum* (overall and detail), 2019. Bird specimens, 1 ft. 6½ in. × 15 ft. × 4 in. (47 × 457.2 × 10.2 cm). Courtesy the artist; specimens provided by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History
Endpapers: James Prosek, *Memory of Life* (detail), 2019. Pigmented inkjet print, 27 x 30 in. (68.6 x 76.2 cm). Courtesy the artist
p. 8: Installation view of *James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice, Yale University Art Gallery*, February 2020
p. 144: James Prosek, *Paradise Lost 1 (Burmese Python and Blue and Yellow Macaw, Everglades)* (detail), 2019. Oil and acrylic on panel, 38½ × 48½ in. (97.8 × 123.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York