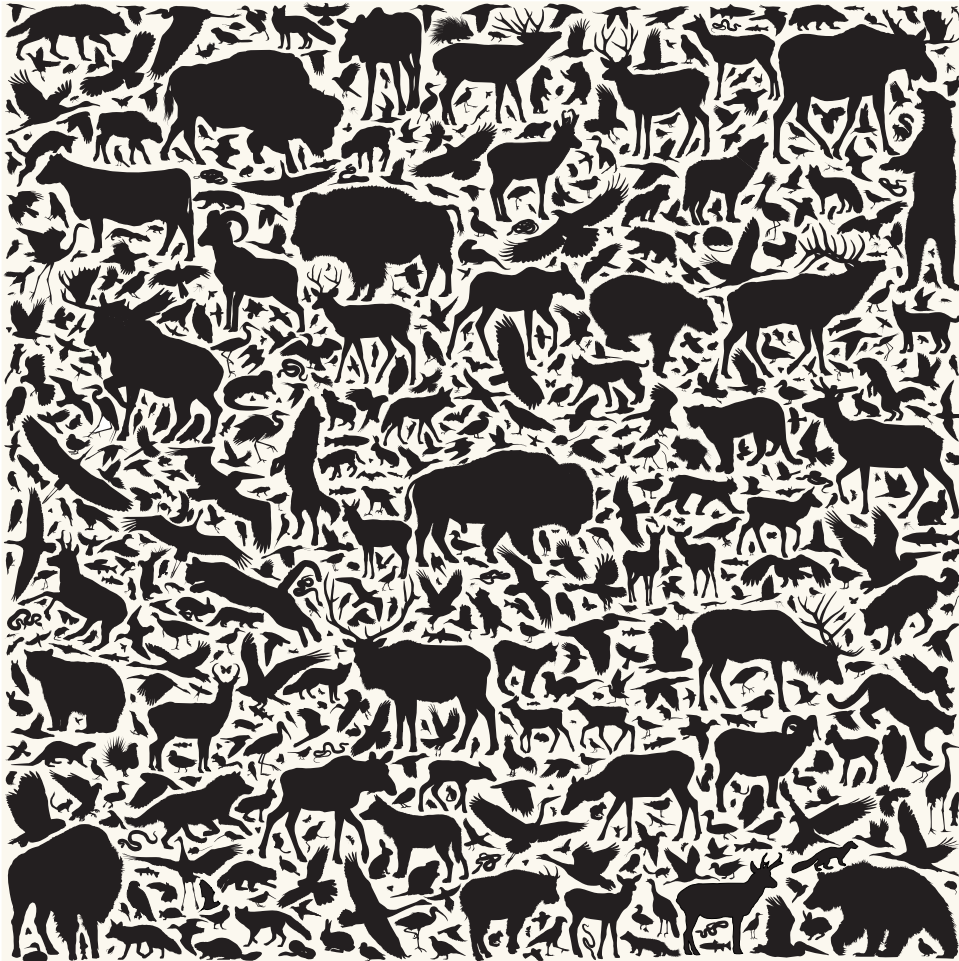


Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box

The Art of James Prosek



January 20 – June 4, 2017
Buffalo Bill Center of the West



Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box

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Artist James Prosek's work is integral to the exhibition, *Invisible Boundaries: Exploring Yellowstone's Great Animal Migrations*, organized in 2016 by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in partnership with Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, the Yale Institute for Biospheric Studies, University of Wyoming's Wyoming Migration Initiative, and Split Rock Studios. Though *Invisible Boundaries* focuses on the seasonal migrations of elk in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, Prosek extends the conversation beyond this single species' story and pushes us to imagine the larger implications of human/animal relations in a changing landscape.

For the *Invisible Boundaries* project, Prosek turned his eye for detail and steady, expert hand to a diverse cast of characters in the Greater Yellowstone whose lives are inextricably connected. This interconnectedness among lifeforms—particularly our relationship as humans to the world around us—is central to his work in general, and poignantly applies to this project in particular. The artist encourages us to see the bigger picture and critically analyze our place within it.

Prosek's vivid field sketches and provocative paintings are regrouped and reinterpreted for the stand-alone exhibition, *Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box—The Art of James Prosek*, on view at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West January 20 through June 4, 2017.

COVER ART: *Yellowstone Composition No. 2*, 2016. Mixed media on wood panel, 45 x 45 in.

FRONTISPIECE, INSIDE BACK COVER: *Moth Cluster I*, 2016. Silkscreen on paper, 44 x 60 in. (detail)

BOOK DESIGN: Jessica McKibben, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

PHOTOGRAPHY, pages 6, 7, 14, 15, frontispiece, inside back cover: Tim Nighswander/IMAGING4ART.

ART SCANNING: Donald Sigovich, Westport, Connecticut.

Artworks included in the *Invisible Boundaries* exhibition but not *Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box* are denoted with an asterisk (*). Unless otherwise noted, all artwork is courtesy of the artist and SCHWARTZ & WAJAHAT, New York.



JAMES PROSEK

American Bison, 2014.

Watercolor, gouache, and colored pencil on tea-stained paper, 24 ¼ x 28 ½ in.

Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

William E. Weiss Memorial Fund Purchase. 3.16.2

At the Crossroads of Art, Science, and Conservation in Yellowstone

Karen B. McWhorter

James Prosek is an artist, naturalist, and author. At first glance, many of his paintings might remind viewers of carefully-rendered natural history illustrations. Their familiarity derives from Prosek's use of an artistic vocabulary codified by artist-naturalists like Titian Ramsay Peale, John James Audubon, Edward Lear, and Thomas Moran. Looking to these artists and the field guides they inspired, Prosek often isolates a particular animal or plant from its natural environment, depicting it in exacting detail against a monochromatic backdrop. As in *American Bison* (2014) (facing page), Prosek might flank a central creature—in this case a single buffalo—with a selective sampling of plant and animal specimens of a smaller scale, here three sprigs of Indian paintbrush and a black-billed magpie. These species' juxtaposition suggests a relationship between them, and indeed, these three all are endemic to northwestern Wyoming. His choices of subjects and the way he orders them also calls into question the hierarchies and boundaries that we create in our minds between plants and animals, between species, between everything in nature.

Prosek's frequent choice of watercolor, his preferred medium since childhood, is also reminiscent of earlier artist-naturalists. In this way, too, his work evokes associations between watercolor paintings and exploration. Artists historically used watercolors in the field for practical and philosophical reasons. Watercolors are more portable and dry more quickly than oils and were, and continue to be, a popular medium for painting *en plein air* (out of doors). Watercolors can also suggest immediacy and intimacy with one's subject. A personal, one-on-one experience with his subjects has long been an important part of Prosek's process, which is fundamentally informed by close, attentive observations of nature. His desire to study his subjects in their natural habitats has taken him on journeys to remote and sometimes dangerous places across the globe and, for the *Invisible Boundaries* project, frequently to the Yellowstone backcountry.

Though Prosek's choice of subject matter, his painting style, and his penchant for field work may nod to earlier artist-naturalists, his intended message is more provocative than that of his predecessors. He uses traditional representational techniques but moves beyond documentation to tackle contemporary issues, creating works of art that are engaging and often subtly subversive. Thus, Prosek crafts stunningly beautiful works of art that offer lessons in environmental consciousness.

Prosek's paintings of creatures paired with numbers, like *American Bison (Wyoming)* (2014) (see page 4), suggest that there exists somewhere a corresponding list the animals' names, but this is not the case. He leaves us at loose ends; there's no inventory of the creatures he portrays. Rather than resolve this conundrum for the viewer, Prosek encourages us to reflect on the need to "know" and the imposition of tidy systems on a wonderfully messy world. This is a principal theme in Prosek's work: an examination of our human propensity to name and order nature and, as he says, "our prejudices and priorities" in such attempts at control. His paintings often confront the limitations of language



JAMES PROSEK

American Bison (Wyoming), 2014.

Oil, acrylic, and mixed media on wood panel, 45 x 56 in.

in describing Earth's incredible range of biological diversity. Nature is dynamic and yet we expect that static names and categories can define it. We feel the need to organize it, to chop it up—though nature doesn't lend itself to clear divisions, we force them nonetheless. Prosek is intrigued by the conceptual lines we draw between things, like the divisions we create when we ascribe classifications to plants and animals. He is concerned with how these manmade lines affect how we think about and act toward the world around us.

For the *Invisible Boundaries* project, the protagonists of Prosek's paintings are regionally-specific species, with starring roles played by Yellowstone's hooved herbivores including elk and bison, among the most familiar species of the region. Lesser-known actors in Prosek's narratives include the western tanager, the rufous hummingbird, and the army cutworm moth, animals we might not readily identify with Yellowstone but which depend on the area as a stopover on their long-distance migrations. Prosek's inclusion of these species points to the fact that Yellowstone's reach extends farther than most of us realize. Prosek's artwork encourages us to think about Yellowstone as an ecosystem that defies its borders.

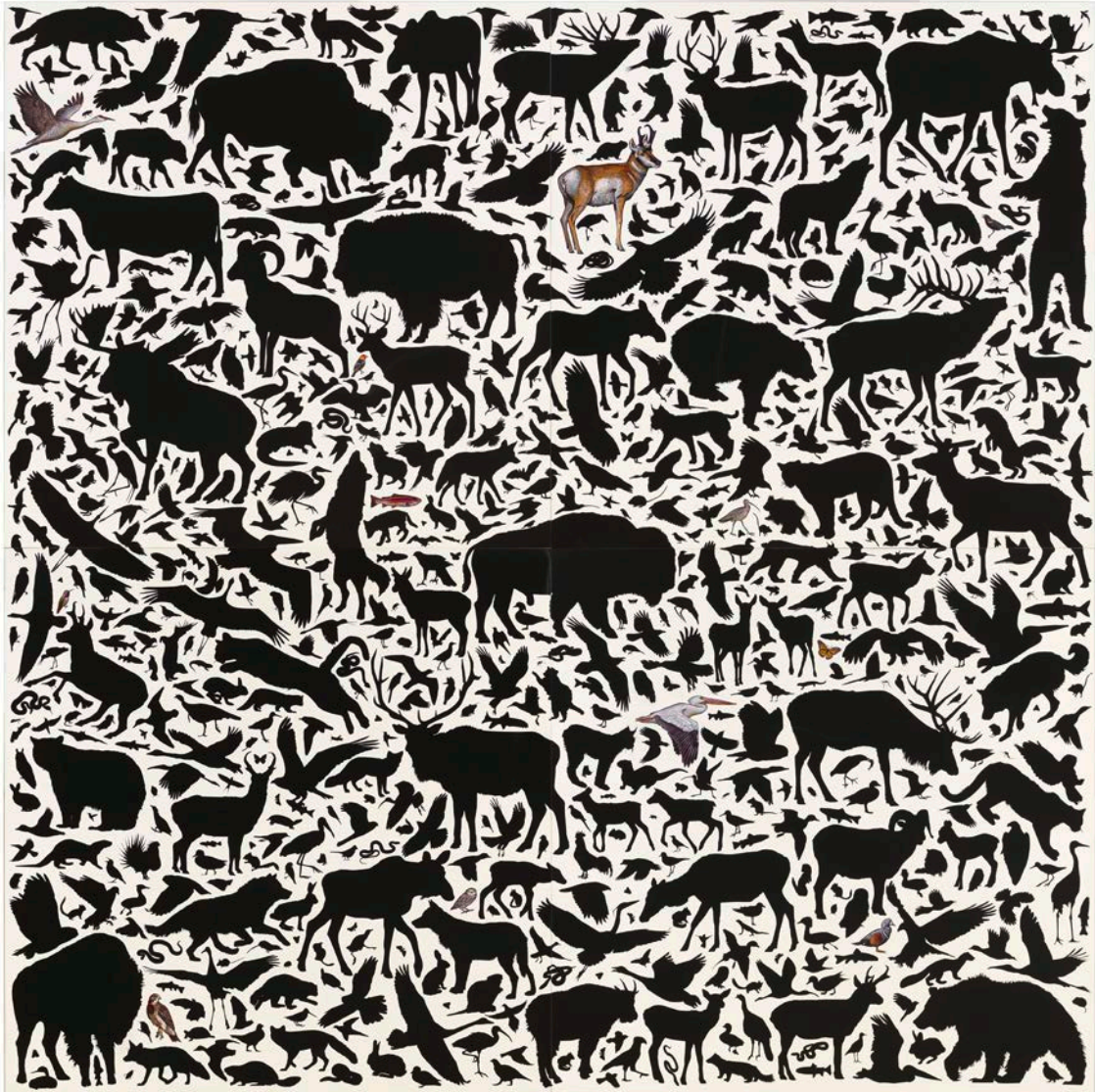
Prosek's paintings of animal silhouettes, like *Yellowstone Composition No. 1* (2016) (see page 6), speak to the interconnectedness of the natural world. These silhouette paintings might remind viewers of a puzzle in which the animals should fit together in one pre-determined order, but don't. According to the artist,

We think that by just replacing a missing puzzle piece, like the wolf as apex predator, that the ecosystem will be "OK" again. That may be true to a certain extent but it's certainly not the whole story. In some ways we have to simplify histories and biological interactions in order to tell a narrative, to communicate, but there is a lot of nuance left behind.

At the heart of Prosek's paintings is the idea of connectivity: Yellowstone as linked to surrounding and far-flung environs; Yellowstone's plant and animal life as dependent on each other and their human neighbors.

Yellowstone National Park's nearly rectangular boundary was originally meant to encompass geological and scenic wonders. The region's biological wonders—especially its unique animals—are more difficult to confine. Some insects, birds, and mammals that call Yellowstone home for part of the year regularly migrate well beyond the park's perimeter. Through his artwork, presented in *Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box*, Prosek suggests that trying to contain nature—within park boundaries or otherwise—denies the natural world's hybridity and fluidity.

Excerpt/Adaptation from *Invisible Boundaries: Exploring Yellowstone's Great Animal Migrations* (Cody: Buffalo Bill Center of the West, 2016)



JAMES PROSEK

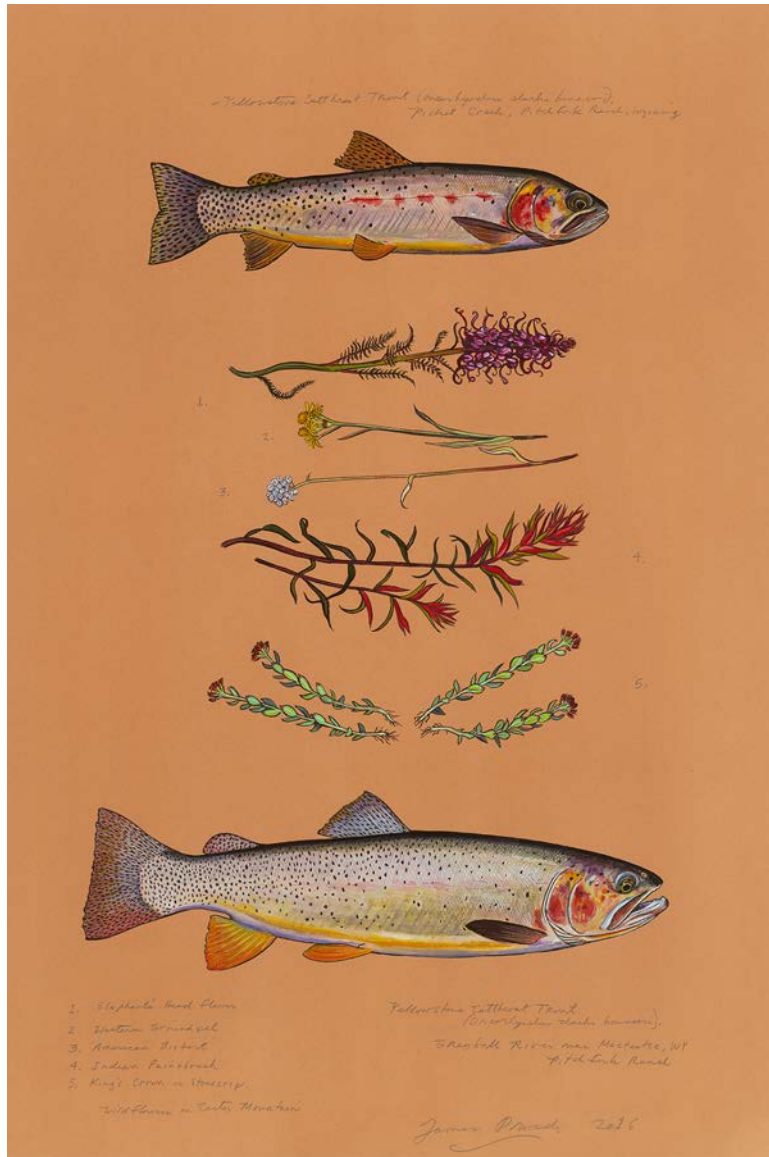
Yellowstone Composition No. 1, 2016.*

Facing page: detail.

Mixed media on wood panel, 120 x 120 in.

Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

William E. Weiss Memorial Fund Purchase. 3.16.1



JAMES PROSEK

Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, 2016.*

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 35 x 24 in.

Private Collection.



JAMES PROSEK

American Elk, 2016.

Watercolor, gouache, and colored pencil on tea-stained paper, 28 x 30 in.

Collection of Amy and John Cholnoky, Montana.



JAMES PROSEK

American Elk (Wyoming), 2016.

Oil, acrylic, and mixed media on wood panel, 56 x 90 in.





JAMES PROSEK

Late Summer Grasses, 2015.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 9 ¾ x 12 in.

Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout and Indian Paintbrush, 2015.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 10 ¼ x 13 in.



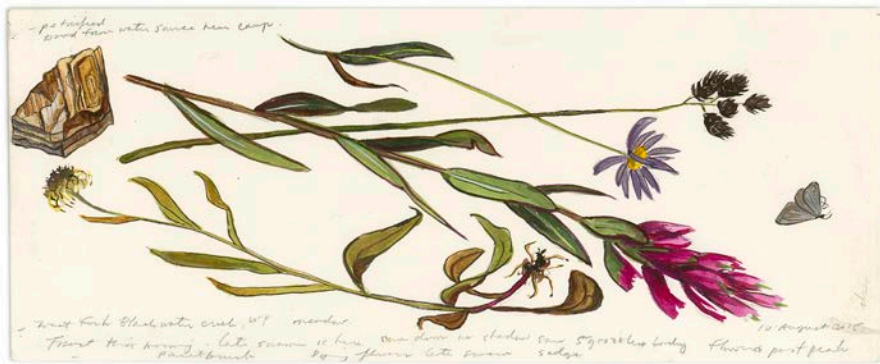
JAMES PROSEK

Cactus with Ant, Pitchfork Ranch, 2015.

Watercolor, gouache, powdered mica, and graphite on paper, 10 x 12 ¼ in.

Frans Fork—Tributary of the Greybull River, 2015.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 8 ¾ x 11 ¾ in.



JAMES PROSEK

West Fork of Blackwater Creek, 2015.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 5 x 12 ¼ in.

On Carter Mountain above Pitchfork Ranch, 2015.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 5 x 12 ¼ in.

Western Tanager and Short-eared Owl Feather, 2015.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 5 x 13 in.

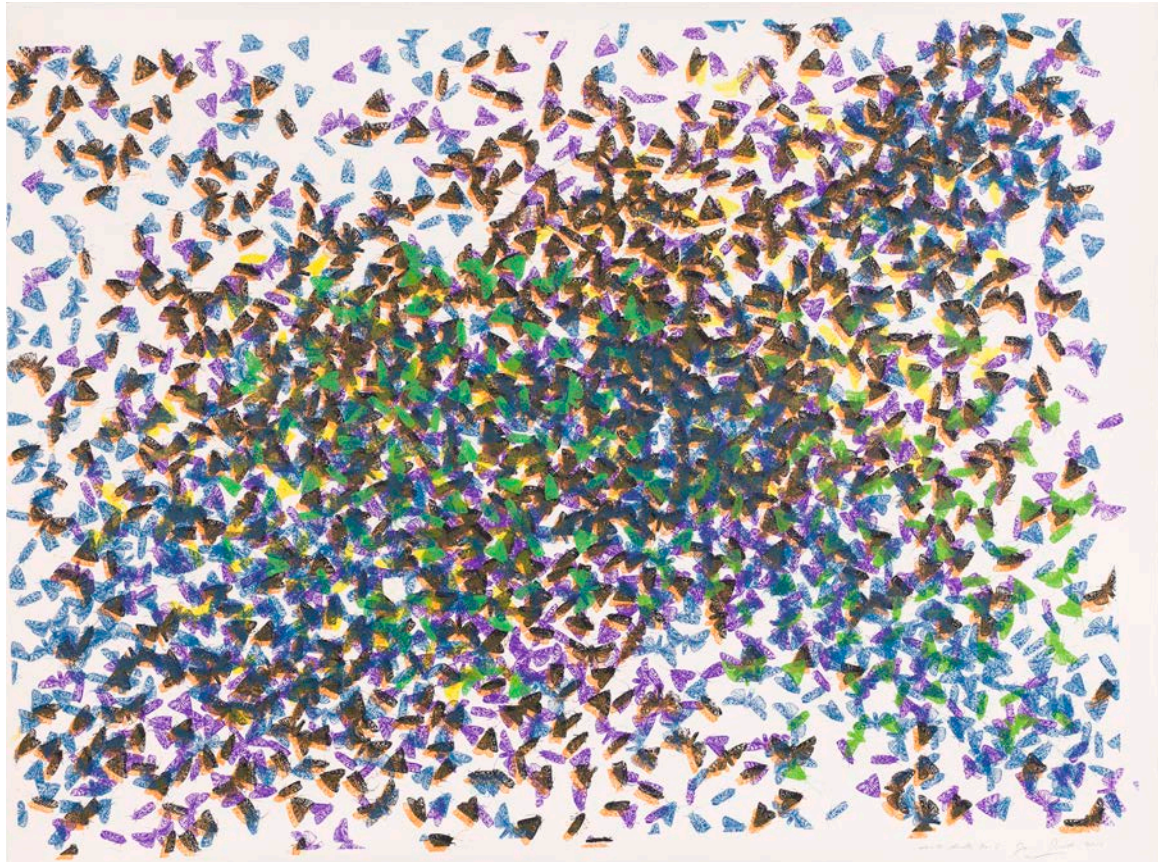


JAMES PROSEK

Bull Moose, 2016.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 26 ½ x 30 ½ in.

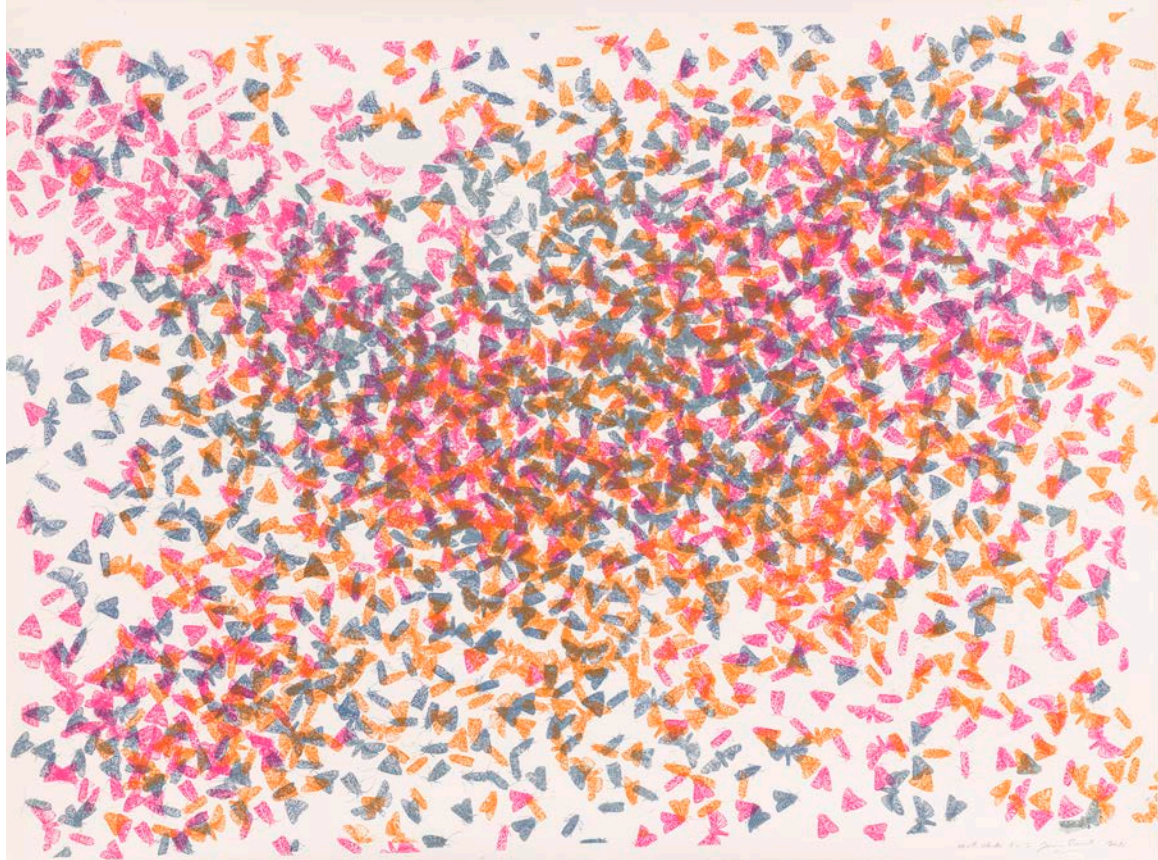
Private Collection



JAMES PROSEK

Moth Cluster II, 2016.*

Silkscreen on paper, 44 x 60 in.



JAMES PROSEK

Moth Cluster III, 2016.*

Silkscreen on paper, 44 x 60 in.



JAMES PROSEK

Grizzly Bear, 2016.

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on tea-stained paper, 25 x 28 ½ in.



JAMES PROSEK

Grizzly Bear (Wyoming), 2016.

Oil, acrylic, and mixed media on wood panel, 45 x 56 in.

Confronting The Artist-Naturalist Tradition

John James Audubon (1785 – 1851) is best known for his exquisite and detailed depictions of wildlife, especially the birds of North America. Audubon had a lifelong curiosity about the natural world and an astonishing talent for drawing. He traveled extensively to study his wildlife subjects, and sketched from live and harvested specimens. Audubon's large-format images of birds and mammals collected in portfolios were wildly popular following their publication, and remain so today.

James Prosek's painting style and subject matter might resemble the work of historical artist-naturalists like Audubon, but his message is more provocative. Prosek uses traditional painting techniques to tackle contemporary issues. He celebrates the natural world's beauty and diversity while calling attention to the hierarchies and boundaries that humans create between things in nature.

Prosek sometimes invokes the works of other artist-naturalist explorers as sources of inspiration, like that of Audubon, Edward Lear, and Albert Bierstadt. To explore the similarities and distinct differences between Prosek's paintings and nineteenth-century natural history illustrations, several Audubon prints from the collection of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West are exhibited alongside Prosek's work in *Yellowstone: Wilderness in a Box*. The pairing of Prosek's and Audubon's art reveals the ways in which the contemporary artist draws on—but also critiques—the imagery and conventions of his forebears.



JOHN JAMES AUDUBON, ARTIST (1785-1851)

J.T. BOWEN, ENGRAVER (CA. 1801-1856)

American Bison (or Buffalo), 1845.

Hand-colored lithograph, 19 x 21 1/8 in.

Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

Gift of The Coe Foundation. 156.69



Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902)

A Bull Buffalo, ca. 1878.

Oil on paper mounted on board, 13¼ x 15¼ in.

Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

Gift of Carman H. Messmore. 1.62



JAMES PROSEK

Bison Cow, Hoodoo Ranch, Wyoming, 2016.

Watercolor, gouache, and colored pencil on tea-stained paper, 27 x 30 ½ in.

The Artist in Conversation with Waqas Wajahat

Easton, Connecticut, in the Artist's Studio

WW: Here in your studio, there are source materials—books, taxidermy, objects from your travels around the world—strewn all over the place. Let's talk about the process you go through to make art.

JP: The papers on the floor are part of my working process—images I cut out, small sketches, ideas written on scraps of paper. Some of them are years old and some I just put there yesterday. My studio is like walking into my mind, it may seem disrupted and chaotic but it is what I need to make work. Through this chaos I find stillness, it's one of the only ways of quieting my mind, to document my thoughts and have them surrounding me is most comforting. When I make work, I experience and process nature. I wouldn't even say I'm observing it necessarily because observation suggests that I'm separate from nature, and in the best moments I am part of it. Back in the studio, I isolate nature from its background to bring focus to its beauty, in order to see it clearly.

WW: I know that immersion in nature influences your work. Why are your own personal experiences in nature so integral to making art—why not just look in a book or go to an art museum, or work from stories?

JP: Actually, I grew up preferring nature in field guides and in books of paintings rather than in nature itself. For me, nature in a book was ordered and controllable. In reality nature is messy and chaotic and overwhelming. As I grew older I began to process nature on my own terms. Museums and books certainly influence me, but I like to go back to the original source as well. I feel like everyone should be able to have that experience—to be able to confront nature in person, head on. There is no substitute for making field studies in the environment. I take those immersions back to the studio, they become part of the conglomerate that is my shifting and evolving identity. But direct experience in nature is an important component of my work, even if I can't always say exactly how it manifests.

WW: Can you describe some of your intent in making the works you do and some of your influences?

JP: Where do I start—I have so many influences. The most important one is of course nature itself. That said, I am mostly influenced by artists who have let nature find its way into their work—from Winslow Homer and Milton Avery to Martin Puryear and Neil Jenney to name just a few. Lately I've been looking at Mughal court paintings and in particular later Company Paintings made for British patrons in the 18th and 19th centuries. They are among the most beautiful and detailed depictions of nature I know.

Primarily, my work is framed by experience, exploring agitations, asking questions, making personal inquiries. It is emotional. I'm constantly adjusting my level of reaction to the world.



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