

Wall Murals

Prosek's wall murals capture the flora and fauna of six distinct global localities: Zimbabwe; Pohnpei Island, Micronesia; Suriname; the North Atlantic; Easton, Connecticut; and Andover, Massachusetts. The black silhouettes of birds against a white background recall the endpapers of Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Birds* (1934), a book that revolutionized the interaction of humans with nature by enabling amateur identification of creatures in the field. In Peterson's book, each bird is accompanied by a number corresponding to a key of names, but Prosek does not want the viewer to be focused on identifying them immediately, so he leaves out the key. In doing so, he forces us to look at the forms and diversity of the creatures and habitats without being able to satisfy our urge to answer the question "What is that?"

In this state of not knowing, we are free to think about nature and to admire its creatures for what they are rather than what their names, and the prejudices that go along with those names, might imply about them.

Printing with Eels

Prosek's "eel paintings" employ the gyotaku method of making prints of fish with ink. Gyotaku originated in Japan as a means for fishermen to record their catch, and from that functional, blue-collar act, the practice evolved into an art form. The fish is inked and pressed on paper (usually rice paper) to capture its unique silhouette and scale pattern.

Prosek began making gyotaku after his first trip to Japan in the late 90s. Usually gyotaku is done with fish that have large, visible scales, but Prosek was able to make impressions of eels that, in aggregate, created a sense of movement and flow, resembling the currents of the rivers and oceans in which the eels lived. Essentially using the eel itself as a brush, Prosek creates clusters of individual impressions. By making several impressions with one inking, he achieves the appearance of depth. The first impression is saturated while the last is ghostly. Combined, they create a composition that crosses the boundary between realism and abstraction.

As someone who straddles multiple worlds as artist, writer, filmmaker, activist and explorer, Prosek has come to personally identify with the hybrid nature of the eel—a fish that looks like a snake, that slithers between fresh and salt water, and can even cross over into land.

Abstract Nature (2012) is his largest eel print. Resembling the form of a large ball, it was made with two eels stamped over 5000 times.

Ocean Fishes

The series *Ocean Fishes* depicts Atlantic fishes that the artist painted life-size from specimens he traveled to see firsthand. As he writes in his book of the same name (Rizzoli, 2012), the paintings “are not pictures of fish to represent a species in a field guide, but portraits of individual fish that I had a personal experience with.”

In each work, Prosek captures the vivid and dynamic colors of the fish that fade quickly when they are taken out of the water. Not wanting his own presence to be absent from the works, he often includes his own reflection in a fish’s eye or scales. “When the fish first leaves its element and enters ours, crosses that space between air and water, that is the moment I try to capture when I paint them,” says the artist. “The painting is a combination of what I imagine the fish to be below the surface and what I actually see when the fish is out of the water, lit by the sun.”

The portrait of each fish includes other flora and fauna—crabs, shells, or beach plants. These supplemental elements relate to the habitat in which the fish live, help establish a scale of reference, and create a strong triangular composition, a trilogy of objects. They also acknowledge that a fish does not live alone in its ecosystem but is engaged with other creatures that affect the way it moves and evolves. Together, the works in this series serve as a quiet conservation statement—simply showing the beauty and monumentality of the creatures we are losing from our seas.

Hybrids

With outstanding sense of detail and precision, James Prosek creates a menagerie of animals that are at once deceptively realistic and fantastical. These “hybrids” reflect both word plays on their names (a parrotfish becomes part-parrot and part-fish) and evolution gone to extremes (a beaver that has evolved a highly useful chainsaw for a tail).

In these particular works Prosek addresses a number of concerns: to foster a reawaking of the imagination and to comment on the tyranny of how we name and rigidly categorize an ever-changing and evolving natural world. Prosek states, “With all the knowledge we have access to today, we may think we know a lot about nature. I am trying to forget. I am pretending to be a naturalist from a time past, to go into the world somewhat naïvely, so I can look at things afresh, with new juxtapositions and combinations.”

Many of Prosek’s hybrids are painted in watercolor and gouache on paper, while others are three-dimensional taxidermied specimens that give full form to the creatures Prosek conjures in his mind, blurring the lines between the real and the imagined.

The Peacock and the Cobra

Prosek’s travels to Southeast Asia and exposure to the miniature painting traditions and mythology of the Indian subcontinent are reflected in his artist book *The Peacock and the Cobra*.

Six intaglio prints are housed in a box that resembles a colonial-era matchbox from Multanshire, a fictional amalgam of a South Asian town (present-day Multan, Pakistan) and British suffix for country (shire). They tell the story of two creatures that, though legendary antagonists, share many similarities. The peacock's elongated neck resembles the cobra's body and both are known for their aggressive hissing and posture when confronted. The conflict between these two enemies is resolved by combining the two into a single, hybrid creature. The hybrid "pea-cobra" comments on the outcome of cultural exchange (in this case, between imperial Britain and India): a fusion of language, food, religion, and ideas.