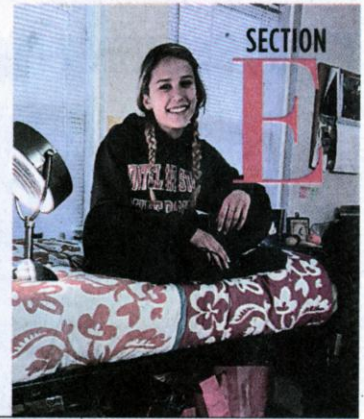


# arts & entertainment

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## Upsetting the natural order

Artist James Prosek goes wild in his 'Un-Natural History' show

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY  
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

It's not the fox with wings that gets you.

It should be. In the great iconography of human mythology, there have been horses with wings, lions with wings and, lest we forget, monkeys with wings. But foxes have never been aerodynamic, outside of the whimsical pantheon of Easton artist James Prosek.

In the new exhibit "Un-Natural History" at the Bellarmine Museum of Art in Fairfield, it's not Prosek's fox, curled in a rigid slumber, a sleek pair of ebony wings sprouting from its shoulders, that catches the eye. Instead it's the sixth-century mosaic, "Separation of the Sheep and Goats," which greets viewers immediately entering the gallery.

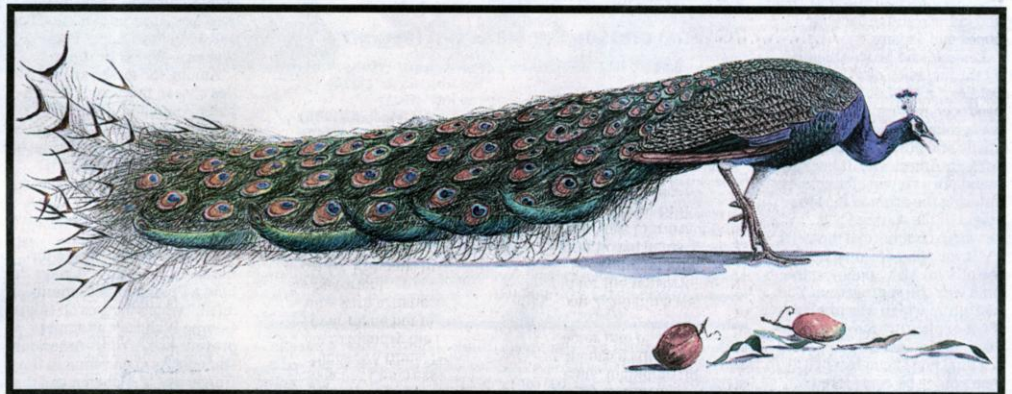
The reference is to the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus separates humanity "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Both in inference and in media, the mosaic is a fitting preamble into the work of Prosek, whose breathtakingly innovative work is all about taxonomy and hierarchy. Since biblical times, it insists, we have been categorizing the natural world to suit our own needs and fancies, even to the point of saving the sheep and

damning the goats.

But in the wild and woolly world of James Prosek, the sheep and goat merge, morphing not so much into a hybrid as into a confrontation. Prosek's work is about the limitations of annotation and the imposition of classification. Who says that this breathtaking malachite-green bird with the cobalt crest should be labeled a parrot, a cockatiel, or, for that matter, an Atlantic cod? Naming, says Prosek, incarcerates creatures that would otherwise defy depiction. Classification, the popular pastime of the 18th century, implies dominion. You name, therefore you own. Or, better yet, you destroy.

With its lapidary precision and riotous colors, Prosek's work bridges the gap between 16th-century Dutch still life and 18th-century scientific illustration. Prosek plays with those iconic works, wryly annotating them with the technical descriptions written in hasty cursive script below the image. He places nearby flora and fauna — beach roses with rose hips or Eastern mussels — below his painstakingly articulated watercolor and gouache illustrations. These sorts of compositional illusions play with our ideas of order, riffing

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BELLARMINI MUSEUM OF ART



Clockwise from top, James Prosek's 'Peacock,' 'Cockatool' and 'Flying Fox,' all on display at the Bellarmine Museum of Art in Fairfield.

### IF YOU GO

"James Prosek: Un-Natural History" continues at the Bellarmine Museum of Art, Fairfield University, 1073 N. Benson Road, through Jan. 27. Admission is free. For details, visit [www.fairfield.edu/museum](http://www.fairfield.edu/museum) or call (203) 254-4000 ext. 4046.

# PROSEK: Clever alchemy of form and function

*Continued from 1E*

on the systematic categorization of species in a delicate balance between the satiric and the hagiographic. Prosek is not lampooning the illustrators who preceded him, but questioning the legacy with which they left us.

The very precision of the illustrations — Prosek defies Audubon-style prettifying — belies the potency of the intent. A hooded merganser, for instance, possesses the bark-like belly and fluffy, fan-shaped crest of the golden-eyed duck. But look carefully at the beak, which merges inexorably into a drill bit. Hence, the title, “Drill Duck.”

Is this humor? An Arcimboldo-inspired send up of the natural world? Sometimes, but it is a gag with a penetrating point. In classifying the natural world, we have sterilized it, and, in a

way, polluted it with our own rational intent.

A glorious “Cockatool,” (2008), its stunning crest replaced with the attributes of a Swiss army knife, is both a clever alchemy of form and function and a jarring bit of cultural anthropology. Have our animals become nothing more than tools, utensils to be employed for our pleasure? Or have we so codified the exotic that we have defanged it, immunizing ourselves from awe?

Prosek’s use of Renaissance era formal techniques — the triangular composition, the glistening, jewel-like tones — underscores the seriousness of his intent. A “Cockatool” from 2011 is even more opulent and swaggering. This time the bird is presented in all its full-frontal swagger, its gloriously Baroque breast a profusion of cotton-candy pinks. In this version it is the bird’s wings that

have the knife’s implements, lending the creature a more menacing, cyborg-like intent. The dynamism between the lethal tools and the docile feathers gives the piece its shimmering energy.

The Bellarmine Museum, housed at Fairfield University, has made the unusual but deeply satisfying decision to couple its permanent collection with Prosek’s work, an arrangement that lends fascinating allusions. That’s because the work is largely biblical, whereas Prosek’s work leans toward the mythological.

In his mixture of precision and caprice, Prosek encourages the viewer to question the demystification of wonder that our relentless pursuit of classification has encouraged. Naming severs the connection between the known and unknown, thus casting off the numinous in favor of the

recognizable. The minute we classify, as Prosek does in the unsettling “Carolina Parakeet” or “Sea Dragon,” we lose the ability to marvel.

So we could never imagine, as Prosek does, in his breathtaking “Flying Fox with Gun,” a nutmeg-colored fox, its belly a matted amber-red, alighting from above the long, sleek pewter barrel of a gun by virtue of its wings. The fox, in Prosek’s abstract work, looks simultaneously impaled and airborne, its obsidian wings taking it above and away from the instrument of its destruction, as if in annunciation, or resurrection, as three 16th-century oak pieces adjacent suggest.

Prosek’s work, which has taken him around the globe in search of exotic species, is a reminder of the power of the exotic and our own relentless insistence on taming it.