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EPOCH TIMES

COURTESY OF JAMES PROSEK



Exploring the Great Spectrum of Nature

James Prosek asks in paint and word why we name the natural world

BY CHRISTINE LIN
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

NEW YORK—Ah, biology class. There might not be another subject in school that involves so much rote memorization. Remember repeating after the teacher? “Kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus ...” Mastery of taxonomy induced pride in some students and annoyance in others. With this hierarchy, we humans seem to have all of creation—from the minutest protozoa to the hugest whale—filed neatly away like cards in a library catalog.

But enter the platypus. This beaver-furred, duck-billed, egg-laying, young-suckling Australian creature seemed to defy categorization when Europeans first saw it in 1798. If its puzzling identity troubled those naturalists, they didn't have to worry long. Later scientists simply invented an order for it: the Monotremata, defined as mammals that lay eggs—

though to a common observer these creatures could just as well be considered flightless birds that nurse.

The seemingly obsessive human impulse to categorize everything in existence, and its inherent traps and tradeoffs, are the topics of James Prosek's current explorations.

Prosek, like the platypus, is a creature who defies pigeonholes. You can think of him as a writer who plays music, a painter who fishes, or a naturalist and world explorer who sculpts and makes films. Prosek prefers to call himself a “professional observer,” though when filling out forms, he's obliged to designate his profession as “artist.”

“I go out and process what I see,” he said during a phone interview from his home in Easton, Conn. “I do it in written form, visual art, music—I find that melodies and playing is another way of communicating. We're not limited to one kind of language.”

PLEASE SEE NATURE ON B5

JASON HOUSTON



James Prosek working on a lifesized marlin portrait in his Easton, Conn. studio.

COURTESY OF JAMES PROSEK AND WAQAS WAJAHAT, NEW YORK



"Black Sea Bass," 2011, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 25 inches by 32 inches.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART



James Prosek paints Cochran Sanctuary, behind the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Maine, while an assistant works on Tanzania, Africa at the Addison Gallery of American Art for the exhibition James Prosek: The Spaces in Between.

Exploring the Great Spectrum of Nature

NATURED CONTINUED FROM B1

A Lifelong Childhood

Prosek is 38 this year, married, a Yale graduate, and lives two doors down from his childhood home. In a renovated barn that functions like a boy's tree house, he spends hours alone, painting and sculpting.

Fishes and birds are his main interest—he has created silhouetted panoramas of birds, vivid, gigantic portraits of ocean fish, Japanese-inspired ink stampings using dead eels given to him by a friend who owns a bait shop. Most of his books and articles, center on fish ecology, fishing, and his deep affinity for all things fishy.

You could say he's never grown up, if you define growing up as sacrificing the endless playtime of childhood for a structured nine-to-five.

"Making things makes me happy," he said. "What I do now is not that different from what I did as a kid. I followed my interests and have been lucky to see them change and evolve. ... The only difference is that now I'm reflecting on what I do and why."

"I didn't become critical of my own process until around the age of 28. What is this strange phenomenon biophilia? Why do humans take to things in nature at all?"

Unlike many self-professed nature lovers who enthuse from the comfort of an armchair, Prosek's passion for the natural world is lived.

His father, who hails from Brazil and loved the lonely seas, was the source of his first outdoor education. He drove

a "busload" of local kids every week to a salt marsh from the time James was 6.

The year he turned 9 was the year his mother left the family suddenly. Around the same time he was introduced to fishing and found solace in the activity.

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Then a pivotal moment came at the age of 14, when a park ranger caught Prosek fishing illegally in a drinking water reservoir.

"Joe [Haines], the guy who caught me, became my mentor," Prosek said. Prosek has written about this relationship in his book "Joe and Me." (Harper Collins 1997)

"He introduced me to ice fishing, foraging, hunting pheasants. He is very experienced in his local environment. Since then I've been attracted to people with strong local knowledge. ... There's a magic to these people."

The Nature of Seeing

Maybe what gives people like Joe Haines this magic are the seasons upon seasons they spend in wild places, until ultimately they embody the rhythms and character of the terrain. How dif-

ferent this conception of nature is from the rank and file of predator and prey listed in long columns or remembered from public television footage.

But books that turn nature into understandable chunks are a fine place for a young naturalist to start.

As a child, Prosek spent long hours with the drawings and field guides of his hero John James Audubon.

"As a kid I found great satisfaction in learning the names of birds," said Prosek, who has always had a "love of order."

Then, as he got up close and personal with trout during his fishing trips, he began noticing the great variety in their physical characteristics.

His first book, "Trout: An Illustrated History" (Knopf 1996) features full color watercolors of more than 70 North American trout of the thousands he has caught or seen.

These fish, like speckled, shimmering jewels, look wildly different from each other. But a third of them, he said, represent strains within what scientists consider one species.

"Through trout work I found how unreliable naming systems are," he said. "You can't really define a species. Humans need to name things in order to communicate. But you can't take a fluid thing and chop it up into pieces."

He is currently working on a book and a National Geographic article about how we name and order the natural world.

If there's one thing he hopes his audience takes away, it's to experience nature for oneself. "[Don't] accept the conven-

tional rules that are force fed to you. When you visit a museum, nature is presented to you in certain way. That's not anything real—that's the decision of a few people, the interpretation of a few people. ... The world is there not for naming. Look for yourself and un-name and rename the world for yourself. ... Don't be intimidated by the world as sanctioned by so-called experts. There's so much ego in all these disciplines. The truest experience is seeing things for yourself."

Prosek has upcoming shows this fall at the Addison Gallery of American Art and the Philadelphia Museum.

MEET JAMES ...

... the visual artist

Prosek uses watercolors, gouache, acrylics, oils, wood, bone, colored pencils, graphite, and other homemade mediums to create his portraits of real and imagined creatures, as well as sculptures and abstract works.

... the writer

Apart from his illustrated tomes about fish, Prosek has penned a memoir, a novel, a travelogue about fly-fishing, children's books, and numerous articles for various publications.

... the filmmaker

Prosek hosted "Nature: The Mystery of Eels" for PBS, and wrote Peabody Award-winning "The Complete Angler" for ESPN and Lake Champlain Productions.

... the musician

Prosek and fellow members of Troutband (www.troutband.com) have produced four albums to date. The style is quirky lyrics paired with a '60s rock sensibility.

—James Prosek's website, www.troutsite.com

Joshua Bell Dazzles With Dynamic Performance

BELL CONTINUED FROM B1

Performed as the opening work at the Mostly Mozart concert, "The Linz Symphony" proved to be a more enduring piece than the composer had anticipated. There may be an influence from Joseph Haydn (who was no slouch himself) and his characteristic wit, but Mozart's melodic invention also shines through.

Langrée and His Forces Gave a Charming Rendition

The Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto was also written in haste, not because the composer faced a deadline but because he was going through a pro-

ductive and (rarely for him) happy period. He was in the resort town of Clarens in Switzerland during 1878, enjoying the company of a violinist and composition student named Yosif Kotek.

Tchaikovsky completed the work in 11 days and orchestrated it within the following two weeks.

The work is so captivating that it's hard to understand that the violinist to whom it was dedicated (not Kotek but Leopold Auer) declared it unplayable, and the first performance, by another violinist, Adolf Brodsky, received an unfavorable reception.

Since then, the melodic Concerto has been played by countless virtuosos and orchestras and is among the most popular of classical works.

Joshua Bell, one of our leading violinists, was dazzling at the concert. The orchestra accompanied him superbly. After the deafening applause, the soloist and orchestra returned for a brief encore: Tchaikovsky's "Mélodie" (from "Souvenir d'un lieu cher").

The works on the program may have been written quickly, but when they are performed as well as they were at the Mostly Mozart Festival, they invariably enchant.

Stone lithographic advertising poster detail, China, Ca. 1920



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