

JAMES PROSEK





Doppelgänger I, 2012, bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
7 1/2 x 2 inches x 3 inches



Sentinel, 2012, bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
9 1/2 w x 4 1/2 d x 13 h inches

JAMES PROSEK: Ocean Fishes & Taxonomy



Blue Marlin, 2012, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper, 60 x 180 inches



Metamorphosis I, 2012, bronze on limestone base, 12 x 10 x 12 inches (two views)

INTERVIEW WITH JD TALASEK, DIRECTOR

Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences (CPNAS), Washington, DC

June 28, 2012

JD Talasek: In the long tradition of natural history painters such as John James Audubon, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Durer and others how do you fit in as a contemporary artist?

James Prosek: For the ocean fishes works, I made a point of traveling to see each fish individually. I wanted to be there on the boat to see the fish as they first came out of the water and sparkled in the sun. In that sense I'm like a natural history painter in the tradition of Audubon and Fuertes who often collected the specimens they painted, saw them in life and then in death. Although Durer drew from life, like in the picture he made of the piece of sod or his rabbit, he also drew from hearsay, not having seen the creatures in life (like with his famous rhinoceros). For me a natural history painting of a fish, like the large blue marlin I painted, is a synthesis of sketches, detailed notes, imagination, and most importantly the memory of being there. Within the boundaries of the fish itself, its outline, is a beautiful world of abstraction where I can enjoy and explore the medium of paint. When a fish first comes out of the water and onto the deck of a boat it is lit with internal colors, flickering with light, but its scales are also reflecting and abstracting the world around us. Every shift of your head, every pitch of the seas, every shadow cast by the boat's rigging or a human standing, affects the experience of seeing that fish—each moment, each point of view, renders the fish differently. These paintings of fish in a way are self-portraits—as much about me as they are about the fish. In the larger fish I have painted my reflection in the fish's eye, leaning over the fish. I'm not documenting a species I'm painting an experience; in that way I'm more like Milton Avery.

JDT: How much then does travel factor into your work?

JP: Some of my works are based heavily on travel and on personal experience and others are made where I have not been to that place or seen that creature and they rely more heavily on imagination. And the sources for my imagination include just about everything I've experienced in my life. I'm working on a series of paintings of mammals from Africa and the sub-continent and they are completely studio works. I'm trying to do something new inspired by something old. Many natural history paintings from the 18th century and before were made by Europeans who had never seen the living animal in the wild, but were painted or drawn from flaccid specimens brought back from the tropics on merchant ships. These artists had to fill in the blanks with their imaginations. Durer's famous rhinoceros drawing from the 16th century was made simply from rumor and description of a specimen that had made it to Lisbon in 1515. These pictures are made from other people's information and experiences. My merchant ship is Google images and pictures that friends have taken and their stories. I like that I haven't been to Africa. I can be sitting in a studio in Connecticut and imagining what it is to be there. I have done this before, in particular with a portfolio of etchings about colonialism involving a conflict and union between a peacock and a cobra. It is a story from the subcontinent and at that point I had not been to India. Not being there or knowing a place in person and making work about it can be as powerful or more than actually going to a place.

JDT: Your exhibition at the National Academy of Sciences focuses on two different aspects of your creative practice; paintings on paper and sculpture. The Ocean Fishes works are clearly out of the natural history painting tradition. Can you talk about what the sculptural works mean to you?

JP: I have been working in three-dimensions my whole life. As a kid I made wood-carvings, some of which I painted. Around 2004 I began making works where I would paint a creature, like a sea-dragon or a woodpecker in flight, and from points on the edge of their bodies draw curvilinear lines that ran from the creature to the edge of the page. Unlike in traditional natural history paintings where you have the common and scientific name of the creature beneath it, I left the names out, and the lines represented my personal vision of that animal's place in the ecosystem, but they also, in a way, seemed to imagine or anticipate the future of the species. It was my own way of ordering the world, and space, and for that reason I realized it was a kind of taxonomy, but one that was personal, individual to me, and not limited by language. They were, in part, critiques of our obsession with naming nature, trying to fit messy and multifarious life into units like species, that are not always clear. I was making a visual taxonomy (this was the title of my 2007-2008 show at the Aldrich contemporary art museum). I started calling these symmetry works.

For years I've been collecting and observing objects I find in nature. My studio is filled with natural history things, nests, eggs, feathers, study skins of birds, riker mounts of moths and butterflies, and also bones. I've been particularly drawn to a few cow vertebrae I picked up on a friend's ranch in Montana. One day, very deliberately, I took one of the cow vertebrae and started sculpting an extension of it, making a new invented form that mimicked the existing one. I realized that

this was a three-dimensional version of the symmetry works I had been doing on paper, except I was sculpting the space around the existing object rather than just drawing lines. They were manifestations of the space between visible objects; that space I feel is very important that science cannot quantify or solve. The aura or energy of even an inanimate object affects everything around it, shapes evolution, just by existing. I wanted to say something about these interstices, these unnameable places. These manifestations, the materialization of spirit, are a visual acknowledgment of this space between things. I'm asking with these pieces—at one point does space become tangible?

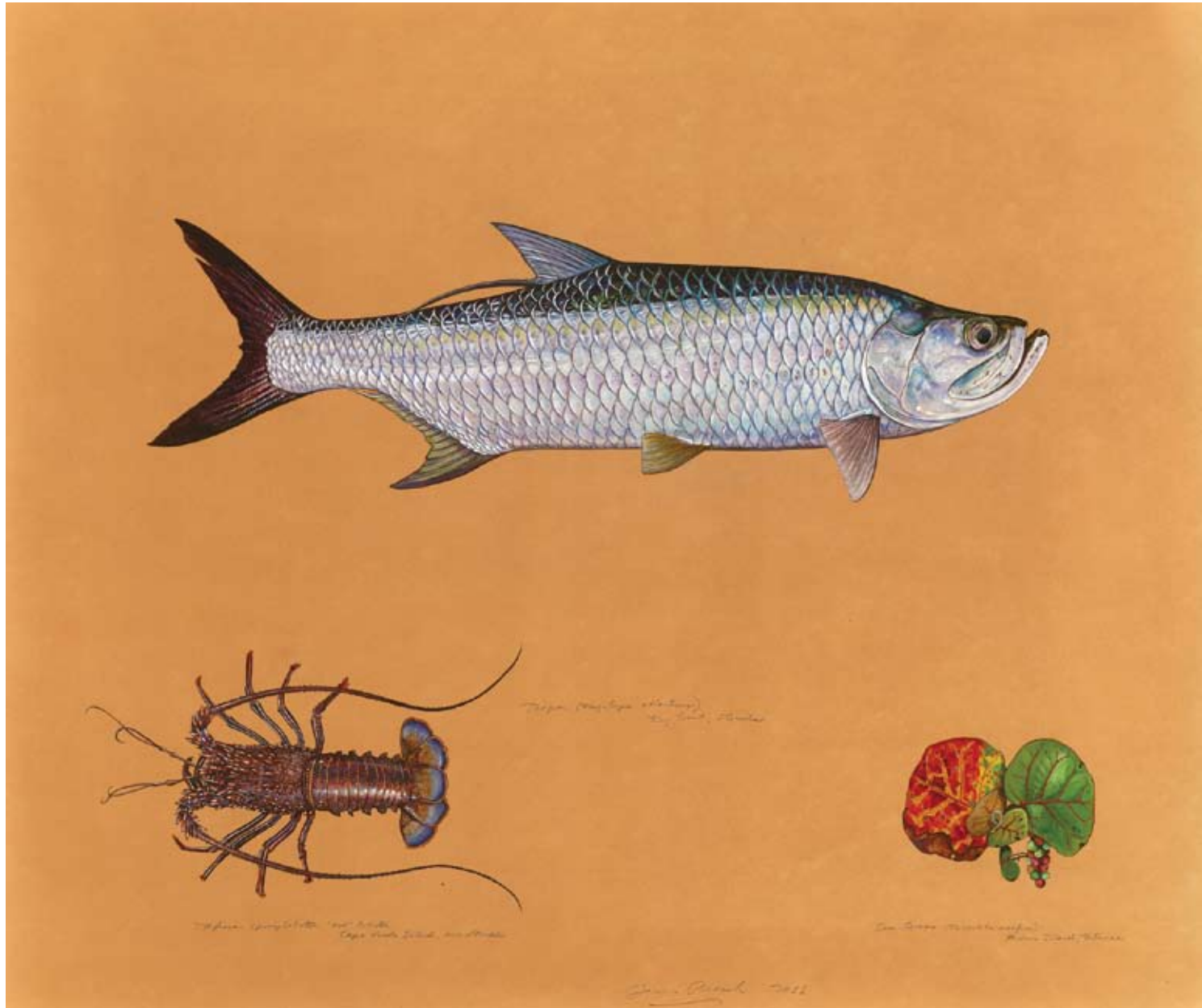
JDT: Can you talk about the smaller images underneath the fishes in your paintings. They are a recurring theme and certainly have become a signature style.

JP: In the Ocean Fishes works there are elements under the pictures. These are carefully chosen to bring out characteristics in the main element in the trilogy, the fish. They are supposed to bring the eye back and forth to different parts of the color and form, to help us see. So this idea of trilogy is related to the symmetry works and the sculptures, but without drawing lines and without sculpting the space. It's just choosing objects that help lead the eye to this characteristic or that. Humans impose order on nature because we are "pattern seeking machines" (in the words of Stephen Jay Gould). I am trying to steer the patterns and associations that we draw with our minds. But this is also a device, drawing on the classical tradition of using strong triangles in composition. It provides an effective structure, almost three dimensional, on which to hang nature, and becomes a kind of taxonomy in itself. Having two elements in addition to the fish activates the space in a way that the fish and the writing could not on their own. The other elements create a kind of push and pull with the fish.

The bone pieces (and the bronze piece cast from one of them, of a deer antler with the tines connected) are strongly influenced by my exposure to the work of architects and artists who distilled natural forms like Eero Saarinen and Brancusi. I have also been looking at Lee Bontecou, some of her works where she connects objects in space with wire attachments. To me they really are executions of what I was trying to do with the creatures and the lines; they end up being very complex mobiles.

JDT: Over the past few years, we have seen your work exhibited in both fine art museums and in science museums and centers. What impact does this shifting of context have on the meaning of the work—from art context to science context?

JP: By nature of the context in which it's shown, the work can defy certain classifications on its own—take Duchamp's urinal for instance. In a bathroom it is simply a functioning urinal. But upside down and on a pedestal in an art museum, it is sculpture. The context of an object strongly influences our perspective, our perceptions and our prejudices about it. In a natural history museum or science institution a taxidermied fox could be considered an educational element—but what about a fox with wings? With the attached wings it becomes something other, un-natural history, creating a friction between the real and the imagined. I'd like to think the effect is something subtler than a creature P.T. Barnum might have exhibited, though at the root of it some of the ideas are the same. I want the public that views the piece to consider the friction between the object we see and how the brain processes it, or the object we see and the expected institution it is thought to have been made for or fits within. I suppose they are in part critiques of institutions but also of our ways of knowing and of systematics. I've had people look at the duck with the drill bit and say out loud, "Is there really a bird with a beak like that?" and I usually say yes. What is more important?—what we believe... our own human reality? Or the truth of biological reality? In a way whatever we are prepared to believe is truth to us as individuals. There is so much in life we live in conscious ignorance of, our own mortality for instance, or the limitations of a unit like species to communicate biological diversity. We manipulate nature as soon as we look at it—if we see it we process it. Any representation of it is already a distortion, just taking a three dimensional creature and rendering it in two dimensions, like a map. In the past, as in Charles Wilson Peales's museum in Philadelphia, in the 18th century, art and natural history were exhibited together. They have since drifted further and further apart as our classifications for all things becomes more rigid. Maybe part of my work is about reuniting the arts and biodiversity sciences.



Tarpon, 2012, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper, 42 x 50 inches



Drill Duck with Pitcher Plants, 2009, taxidermied hooded merganser, handmade flowers and moss, 18 x 22 x 14 inches



Industrial Evolution, 2012, taxidermied beaver, chainsaw chain, handmade flowers, 32 x 20 x 21 inches

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Flying Fox with Lady's Slippers, 2011

Taxidermied red fox, sea duck wings, hand-made flowers and moss
17 x 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches
Private Collection, New York, NY

Flying Fox with Prussian Firearm: The Fox Hunt, 2009

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
44 7/8 x 48 7/8 inches

Drill Duck with Pitcher Plant Flowers, 2009

Watercolor, gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper
20 1/8 x 15 5/8 inches

Drill Duck with Pitcher Plants, 2009

Taxidermied hooded merganser, hand-made flowers and moss
18 x 22 x 14 inches

Industrial Evolution, 2012

Taxidermied Beaver, chainsaw chain, hand-made flowers
32 x 20 x 21 inches

Sentinel, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
9 1/2 w x 4 1/2 d x 13 h inches

Metamorphosis, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
12 x 10 x 12 inches
Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr. Richmond, VA

Portal I, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
11 1/2 x 2 x 7 inches

Portal II, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
16 x 7 x 10 inches

Doppelganger I, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
7 1/2 x 2 inches x 3 inches

Doppelganger II, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
7 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 5 inches

Portal III, 2012

Bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
13 1/2 x 7 x 19 inches

Metamorphosis I, 2012

Bronze on limestone base
12 x 10 x 12 inches

Atlantic Sailfish, 2010

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
57 1/2 x 86 inches
Collection of Brett and Mark Kristoff, Connecticut

Blue Marlin, 2012

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
60 x 180 inches
Collection of New Britain Museum of American Art, CT

Atlantic Cod, 2011

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
36 x 42 inches
Private collection, Houston, TX

Sea bass, 2012

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
31 x 39 inches
Collection of the artist

Porgy, 2011

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
18.5 x 22 inches
Collection of National Academy of Sciences

Tarpon, 2012

Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper
42 x 50 inches

All works, unless otherwise listed, courtesy of the artist and Schwartz • Wajahat, NY



James Prosek: Ocean Fishes & Taxonomy
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Doppelgänger II, 2012, bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
7 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 5 inches



Portal III, 2012, bone, clay, acrylic paint, black walnut base
13 1/2 x 7 x 19 inches

