

May 19-25, 2005

A New Angle



James Prosek, *Kingfisher* (2004), watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 17 inches by 26 inches.

Fisherman-scholar-artist James Prosek introduces the element of fantasy into his naturalistic works.

by Susan Hagen

James Prosek's work attracts odd bedfellows. Fly fishermen, ornithologists, conservationists and art world cognoscenti rub shoulders at his openings. In Prosek's work, natural history, personal history, political issues and art are interwoven. Born in Easton, Conn., where he currently resides, Prosek was a precocious child who enjoyed fishing and became fascinated by trout at about age 9. His drawings of North American trout species were collected in a book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*, published during his junior year at Yale, and since then Prosek has produced six more books about trout, fishing and outdoor life.

The work in this exhibition — his first at Fleisher Ollman Gallery — begins with the more or less objective depiction of an animal in the quasi-narrative tradition of artist-naturalists like William Bartram, John James Audubon and Walton Ford, but now, after many years of single-minded concentration on trout, Prosek is testing out several new directions at once. As a result the exhibition is not particularly cohesive, but it does map out a genuine process of searching for truth in murky reality and invites this diverse group of viewers along for an interesting ride.

In one group of work Prosek explores the idea of an alternate process of natural selection. These artificial hybrid creatures are like the creations of Hieronymus Bosch, Thomas Grunfeld or Amy Cutler, where different species are imaginatively combined for dramatic effect, though the animals here adopt certain man-made attributes in order to ensure their survival. In *Kingfisher* (watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 17 inches by 26 inches), for instance, the bird has a fish tail, a drill-bit beak and Swiss Army knife tail feathers. Prosek is interested in how we try to classify and control nature, and points out that "scientists are discovering closer

and more fluid relationships between many species because of DNA analysis." These pieces are also suggestive of the homespun chicanery exhibited in the stuffed-animal contrivances and phony documentation of the "jackalope," the Loch Ness monster and other contemporary mythical creatures.

A second group of pieces appropriates a different pseudoscientific approach, with swirling linear patterns around animals poetically suggesting wave patterns or particle trajectories in nuclear physics. *Eel* (graphite on paper, 19 inches by 24 inches) is a wonderfully elegant drawing of a swimming eel with its curving body echoed by the lines around it that, Prosek explains, "depict the residue of movement." This theme is continued in a different way in a third group of pieces. These show hundreds of eels flowing like currents in the ocean, and are made with real eels using the traditional Japanese printmaking technique of rolling ink directly onto a dead fish and then relief printing the image onto a sheet of paper. Though the primary interests in his artwork are aesthetic, Prosek readily acknowledges that he has other motives too. He is concerned about threatened and endangered trout, eels and other wildlife, and actively involved in several conservation organizations. Prosek has also been working on a book on eels as well as embarking on a study of eels in Scandinavia, North America, Japan and New Zealand that will be published in *National Geographic*.

The direct approach of several pieces including *Giant Bluefish Tuna* (watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 60 inches by 144 inches), a life-size portrait of a real tuna that was harpooned off the coast of Maine, is extremely effective. An abundance of moist painterly marks, with just a little extra space around them, work together to create the illusion of a massive spirit fish. The body of the fish feels like the sea itself — flickering blue, purple, black, pink and foamy green light — and is strangely full of life and space and potential. Though it's yet to be seen which of these four new approaches hold the most promise for Prosek, I saw this painting and a few other direct representations as a perfect marriage of art, political issues and life. And, with their bonus abstract paintings-within-a-painting that unaffectedly celebrate the visual aspects of their subjects, they give the viewer the pure pleasure of *looking* and point to an exciting new direction.

Fleisher Ollman is also presenting for the first time paintings by Sean Cavanaugh, a New York artist known for his neoromantic landscapes. The new work in this exhibition shows a transition from the landscape to the individual geographical features of a place, with isolated rock formations, boulders and stones painted like deadpan portraits on bare expanses of paper or canvas. One painting, *Bat's Head*, presents a squarish block of milky gray stone fragmented into tiny cubist shapes; another, *Golden Idol*, highlights a cream-and-chocolate-brown rock with a bluish tinge — and both are flatly painted on bare, unbleached linen. A group of smaller works in watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on paper describe an assortment of stones in a pleasing array of shapes and colors, some covered with moss or lichen, pried from nature and exposed for all to see. The most successful of these, like philosopher's stones, offer detail, verisimilitude and opportunities for reflection to the attentive viewer.

James Prosek: Symmetry & Myth

Through June 4, Fleisher Ollman Gallery, 1616 Walnut St., Suite 100, 215-545-7562