

AIR & WATER

For years, James Prosek has explored the fish and birds of the world by traveling to their often faraway habitats. He is both an amateur scientist who collects and studies specimens and an artist whose keen eye, exquisite draftsmanship, and superb sense of color capture shimmering, multicolored, and dynamic patterns in both oil and watercolor. He draws and paints birds in flight and details of their gracefully turning heads with feathers so realistically rendered you are tempted to stroke the paper to feel their silky softness. The sheer beauty of his depictions makes it easy to forget that we are looking at dead fish and stuffed birds that the artist prepared himself. Prosek's meticulous descriptions of a multitude of species isolated from their surroundings bring to mind the natural history books we marveled at as children as well as the endeavors of early American wildlife observers such as Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon to create life-size paintings of all the birds of North America. Like his artistic forebearers, Prosek added to his early images both the common and Latin names of each species and its geographical location. In his recent works Prosek has replaced the names with an alternate taxonomy based on geometric lines and shapes.

From his voluminous book *Trout of the World* (2006) - the culmination of six years of research on varieties of trout around the globe - to *Air and Water*, Prosek's work is based on observations he records in pencil and watercolor. While celebrating animals' beauty and biodiversity, the artist also subtly questions the romantic myth of an intact and unaltered nature, as well its classification by Carl Linnaeus, the Swede who invented modern taxonomy in the early eighteenth century. At the time that Linnaeus created categories with which to understand and define nature through scientific frameworks, the idiosyncratic and wondrous collections of natural specimens that were integral to the royal cabinet of curiosities were removed and newly organized as natural history museums. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was one of the first to recognize, some two hundred and fifty years ago, the need to historicize natural history: "Natural History which is virtually non-existent in a historical form - would teach us about changes in the structure of the earth and the terrestrial creatures (plants and animals) over the course of their natural migrations and about ensuing mutations from prototypes of species." ¹

What Kant omitted in his insight about nature as a changing entity is the influence of people and societies on the natural world. Despite the fact that the natural environment around us is changing rapidly and profoundly as a result of exploitation and pollution, the biological diversity presented in most natural history museums, animal guides, and classification schemes is shown as invariable, frozen in time. While at first glance Prosek's work addresses a seemingly abundant diversity of fish and birds, providing rich aesthetic pleasures, we soon come to realize the fantastical and melancholy aspects of his quest. With his paintbrush, he brings to life species long extinct based on detailed descriptions in ornithology and ichthyology books, his own invention, and written accounts of strenuous expeditions to find a living example of a formerly flourishing species. The artist recasts the Western rationalist schemes of studying, collecting, and naming as fluid, complex, interconnected entities that defy closed categorization.

In *Air and Water*, Prosek elegantly articulates the connections among different species and the relationships of both fish and birds to their surroundings. In the drawing *Brook Trout over Golden Trout* (2007), two fish with variations in color, pattern, and the shape of body and fin are positioned one above the other. Undulating lines issuing from the top and bottom of their open mouths form a figure eight that animates the space between them with a wavelike movement. The vividly distinct appearances of these two trout and the lines that connect them suggest their interdependence: if one changes due to external circumstances, the other will ultimately be affected. In other works in the show, such as the marvelous *Spiral Flicker* (2006), the swirling lines around the birds seem to translate their motion into a geometric scheme. The contour of the bird's body is repeated twice to create a dynamic circular movement around a virtual axis where the bills meet. Within the contour lines, the interior form is stained with tea. While the abstract drawings suggest the energetic percussive of the animals' movements, they also mirror and reinterpret the shape of the bodies and the patterns of the scales or feathers. Prosek's drawings point to the natural world as an inspirational source for art and design and remind us that our longing for nature is aesthetic rather than visceral. With his works, the artist poses the question of whether "art will suffer if nature is destroyed or if the human imagination will flourish in its absence."²

RAPHAELA PLATOW

¹ Quoted in Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine* (Princeton, 1995), 8.

² James Prosek in a conversation with the author, May 4th, 2007