

JAMES PROSEK

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SURINAME

February 28 - June 24, 2011

The Gallery at the Whitney

Yale University, Whitney Humanities Center

53 Wall Street, New Haven, CT 06511



Motmot, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 12 x 10 inches

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) spent his later years on a quest for the exotic, living and then dying in the South Pacific Islands of the Marquesas. For Gauguin it wasn't enough to conjure Polynesia from the accounts of explorers such as Bougainville or Pierre Loti, he had to go there himself, experience the flora and fauna, live among the people, and immerse himself in their unique culture.

James Prosek is also a seeker in the natural realm, venturing out to reveal the fantastical and undiscovered in nature through direct personal experience. In his paintings he explores man's changing relationship to nature, often focusing on the interface of science and myth. Prosek spent over a decade traveling around the world to remote and politically unstable areas of the Balkans, southeast Turkey and the Central Asian "Stans," documenting the diversity of native trout through a series of watercolors, which resulted in his 2003 publication, *Trout of the World*. In doing so he was able to record several species before they became extinct, their habitats terminally distressed by human encroachment. Prosek's 2010 book, *Eels*, took the artist across the globe once again to explore the importance of this snake-like fish in the indigenous stories of New Zealand's Maori and those of the Lasialap people, the eel clan of Pohnpei Island, Micronesia.

In the spring of 2010, James Prosek accompanied an expedition to Suriname organized by the Yale Peabody Museum to collect specimens from a previously unexplored region of this former Dutch colony. Neither the valley below the peak where the team set up camp, the adjacent valleys, nor any of the visible peaks had ever been named, possessed, ordered, or mapped by human beings.

The paintings from this expedition, presented in *James Prosek: Suriname*, are divided into two different but related bodies of work: those executed on site in the Wilhelmina Mountain camp; and the canted works, those finished in the artist's studio in Connecticut. By distorting his subject matter Prosek brings attention to human manipulations of nature. He demonstrates that to remove from natural context, to alter, omit or blur is to tell a story. The tension between the real and the imagined forms a space in which our beliefs are momentarily suspended, creating fertile ground for visual ambiguity and complexity.

There is precedent for conscious distortion in art. A well-known example is the skewed skull in Hans Holbein's (c. 1497-1543) painting, *The Ambassadors* in the collection of the National Gallery, London. Here Holbein plays with perception, demonstrating that our understanding of the world is in a constant state of flux. More recently, Robert Lazzarini (b. 1965) has subverted our perception of everyday objects by skewing them. Similarly, by rendering the same specimen in two opposing variations (proportionally correct versus skewed) James Prosek draws our attention to the ever-changing natural world, encouraging us to question our assumptions about the seeming transparency of something even as basic as sight.

WAQAS WAJAHAT
NEW YORK, SPRING 2011



Guyana Toucanet, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 9 x 12¼ inches



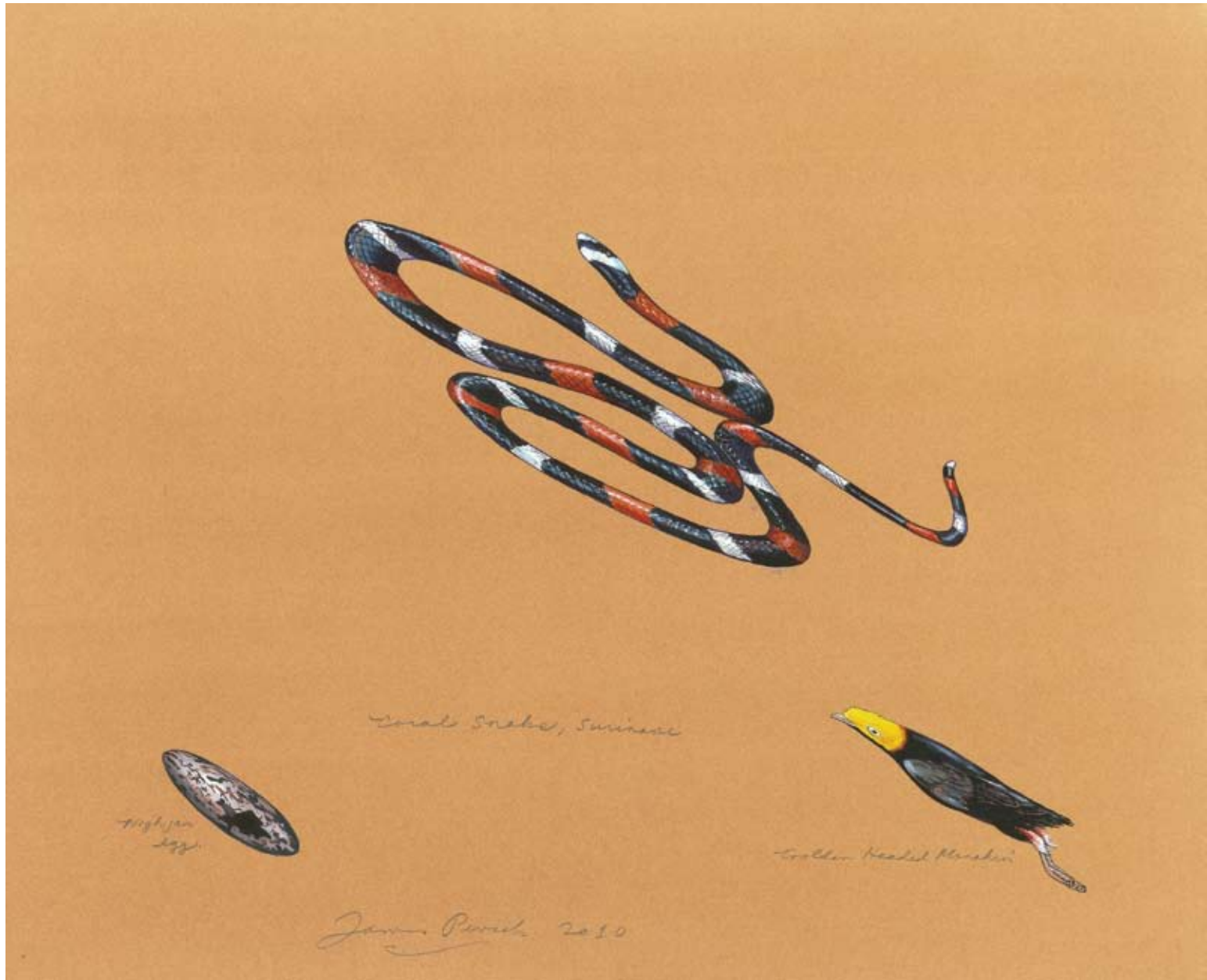
Guyana Toucanet with elements, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 21³/₄ x 27³/₄ inches



Green Tree Viper, or Parrotsnake (Underside) with elements, 2010
Watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 21¾ x 27¾ inches



Green Tree Viper, or Parrotsnake (Topside) with elements, 2010
Watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 21¾ x 27¾ inches



Coral Snake with elements, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 15³/₄ x 19 inches



Coral Snake and Golden-Headed Manakin, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 9 x 11¾ inches



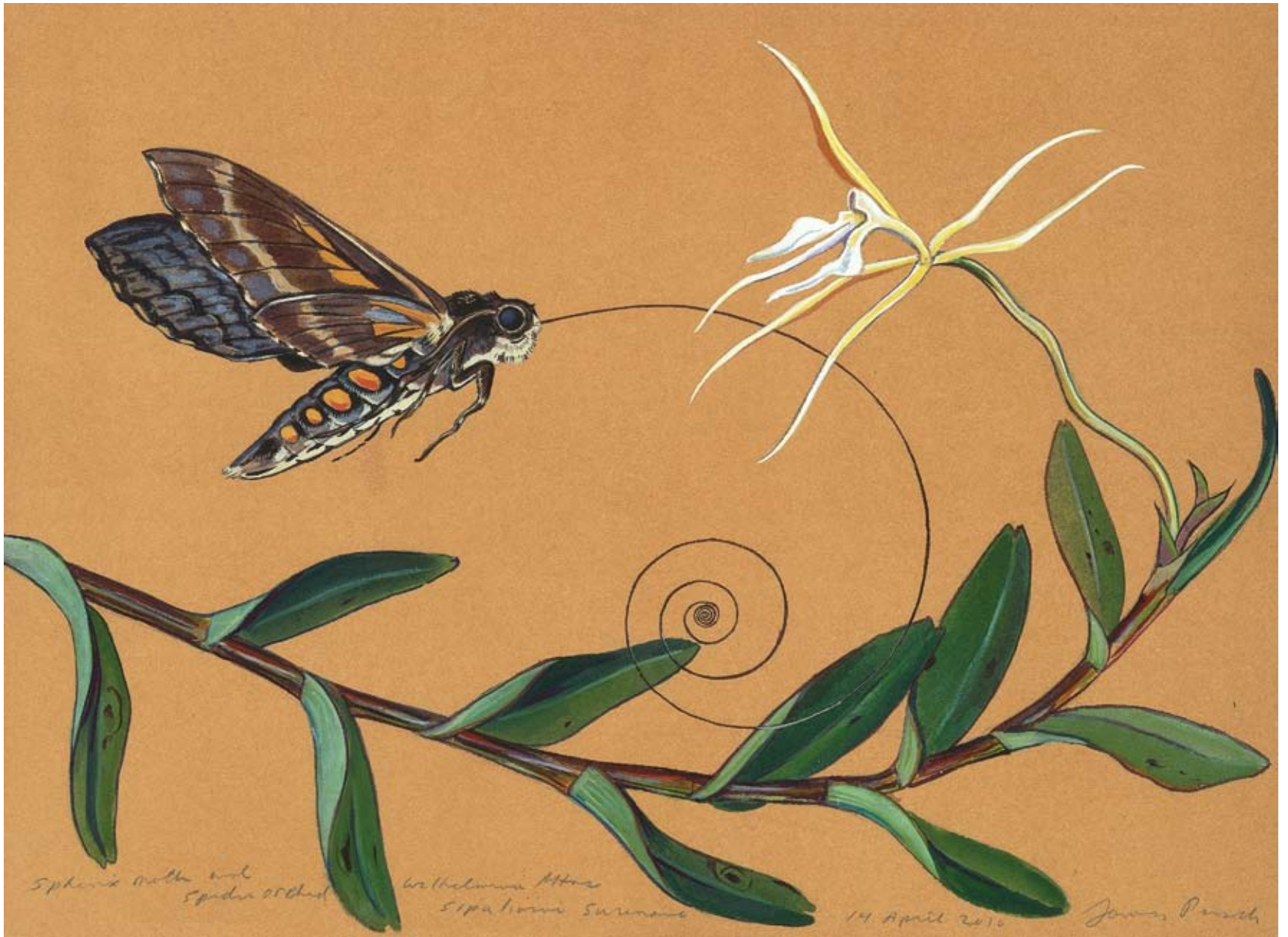
White Bellbird with elements, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 21³/₄ x 27³/₄ inches



White Bellbird, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 9¼ x 12 inches



Left: *Heliconia Flower with Frogs*, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 12 x 8¼ inches
 Right: *Spider Orchid and Coral Snake Mimic*, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 11½ x 8 inches



Sphinx Moth and Spider Orchid, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 9 x 12 inches



Clusia, or Bush Mangrove, 2010, watercolor and gouache on paper, 11½ x 14 inches

SELECTED CHRONOLOGY

- 1975 Born Stamford, CT. Lives and works in Easton, CT
1997 BA, Yale University, New Haven, CT

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Oceanomania: Souvenirs from Mysterious Seas*, The National Museum, Monaco. Curated by Mark Dion.
James Prosek: Suriname, Gallery at the Whitney, Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University, New Haven, CT
Voyage on Uncanny Seas, Gallery Diet, Miami, Florida.
- 2010 *Strange Travelers*, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY, Curated by Mark Dion
Mildred's Lane/Renovating Walden, Tufts University Art Gallery, Medford, MA
Nature, Revisions and Dreams, The Art Gallery at Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL. Curated by Anica Sturdivant
Art in Embassies, US Embassy, Accra, Ghana, Africa
- 2009 *James Prosek: Real & Imagined*, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA
James Prosek: The Peacock and The Cobra, Manhattanville College Art Gallery, Purchase, NY
Breaking the Surface: Painting and Sculpture, Kehler Liddell Gallery, New Haven, CT
- 2008 *James Prosek: The Peacock and The Cobra*, Center for Contemporary Printmaking, Norwalk, CT
- 2007 *James Prosek: Life & Death: A Visual Taxonomy*, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT
James Prosek: Air & Water, Meredith Long Gallery, Houston, TX
James Prosek: Birds & Fish, Wajahat-Ingrao, New York, NY
- 2006 *James Prosek: Blind Birds*, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, CT
- 2005 *James Prosek: Symmetry & Myth*, Fleisher-Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2004 *James Prosek: Monuments to Nature*, Westport Arts Center, Westport, CT
- 2003 *The Desire of Memory*, D.U.M.B.O. Arts Center, Brooklyn, NY. Curated by Waqas Wajahat
41 Degrees North, Gerald Peters Gallery, New York, NY
- 2002 *James Prosek: Trouts of Asia*, Hammond Museum of Japanese Art, South Salem, NY
Pris sur le Vif: Les Peintres Pecheurs, Galerie Larock-Granoff, Paris, France
Great American Artists, Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati, OH
- 2000 *James Prosek*, Gerald Peters Gallery, New York, NY
- 1999 *James Prosek*, Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
James Prosek, Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
James Prosek: Water Journey, Evansville Museum of Arts and Science, Evansville, IN
- 1998 *James Prosek*, Akus Gallery, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT
James Prosek, Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, CT
Evansville Museum of Arts and Science, IN
Hammond Museum of Japanese Art, North Salem, NY
Lafayette College Art Collection, Easton, PA
Mildred's Lane Historical Society Museum, Beach Lake, PA
New Britain Museum of American Art, CT
Union College Art Collection, Schenectady, NY
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

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In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of Whitney Humanities Center programming, the exhibition has been planned to compliment this year's undergraduate Shulman Seminar on the evolution of beauty taught by biologist Richard Prum and philosopher Jonathan Gilmore

The artist wishes to thank María Rosa Menocal, Mark Bauer and Susanna Malan-Bowles

Front Cover: *Guyana Toucanet with elements* (detail), 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 21¾ x 27¾ inches

Back Cover: *View Toward Juliana Top*, 2010, watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper, 8¼ x 12 inches

All works courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat • New York

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