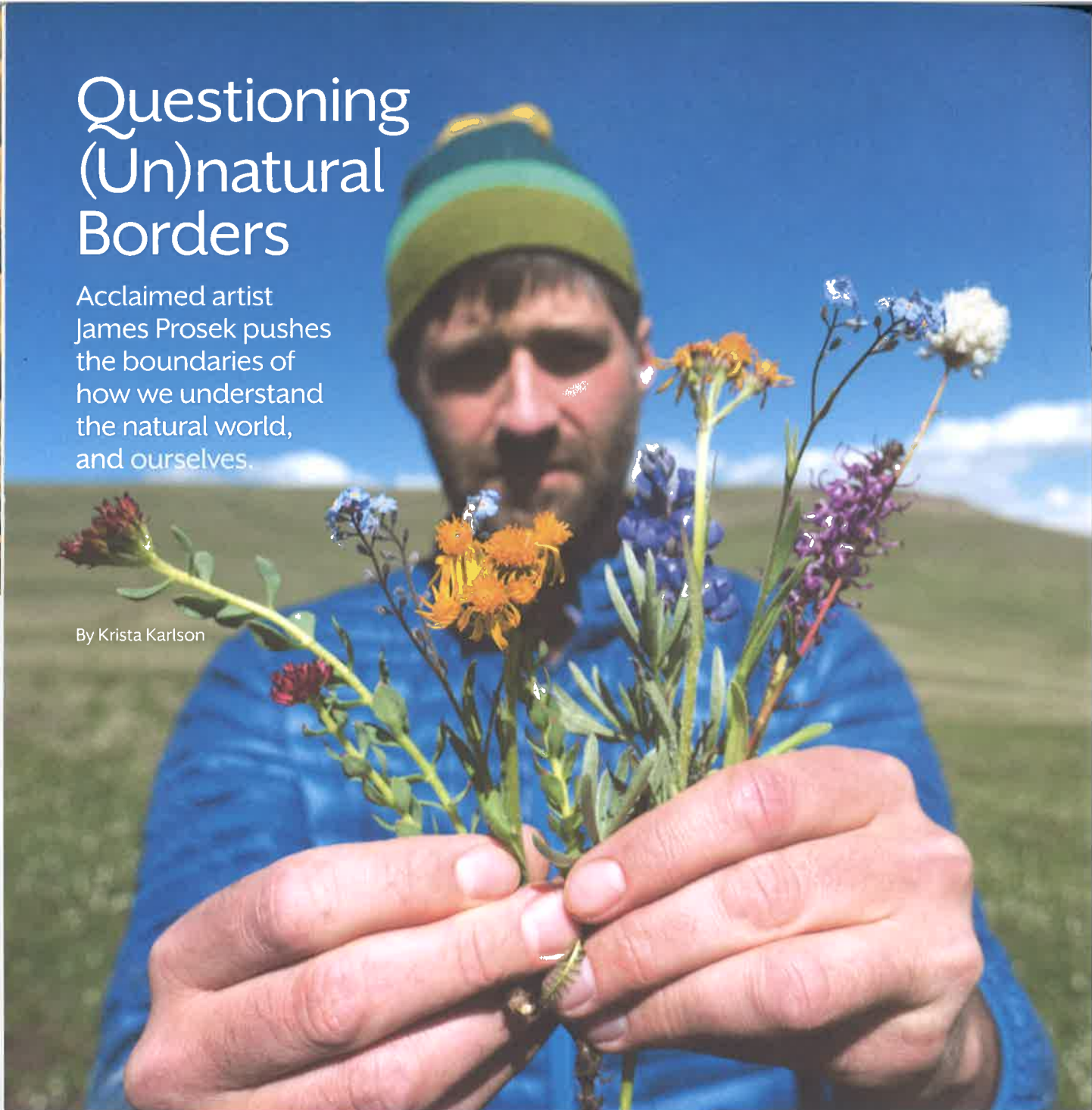


Questioning (Un)natural Borders

Acclaimed artist James Prosek pushes the boundaries of how we understand the natural world, and ourselves.

By Krista Karlson



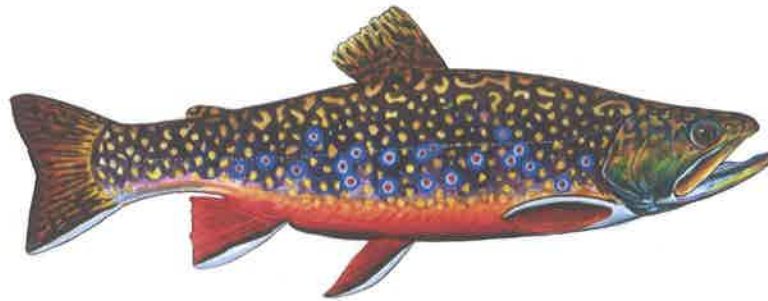
Set against a crisp, white background, a carefully constructed fish beams in reds, browns, yellows, and blues. Its mouth is open. There's an entrancing blue-green ring around its eye. Intricate patterns on the fish's side move from deep red lines to orange spots with eggplant filling, then a few prominent bull's-eyes and a cheetah-like fin.

The painting is of a brook trout, a species native to Eastern North America that has captivated artist James Prosek since he was 9 years old. "I fell deeply in love with this fish called a trout," he says. "I can't tell you how consumed I was by this fish."

When he was 12, he tried to find a book about all the varieties of North American trout. But to his surprise, none existed, so he decided to write one. He contacted Fish and Game officers and biologists across the country asking about their trout and discovered they disagreed on the number of species and subspecies that existed. What did it mean that the experts couldn't agree on how many varieties of trout there were, or more basic, how a species should be defined? Could an animal that's not considered a species be protected under the Endangered Species Act?

As the questions piled up, Prosek also started to wonder about the connections between thinking and drawing.

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*Brook Trout (Salvelinus fontinalis) West Branch Spring Run,
Adirondack Park, NY State
June 2012*

“When I sat down at my desk, this strange thing would happen when I was drawing the fish,” he says. “The sound of the stream would come back, and the buzz of the flies or the smell of blossoming flowers in the air.” Later, when he returned to the stream, he found that the act of drawing had sharpened his observation skills and made him a more efficient fisherman.

His father, a merchant marine-turned-school teacher, instilled pragmatism in his son from a young age. “He wanted me to have a decent profession. He said artists starve because that’s what he knew of artists,” Prosek says. But his father never said he couldn’t be an artist. When Prosek enrolled in Yale, he knew he wanted to study drawing and painting. As a freshman, he sent unsolicited book proposals about the trout of North America to 10 publishers. Nine rejected his pitch. But one company agreed to publish the book, “Trout: An Illustrated History,” which was released in Prosek’s junior year.

He remembers receiving the first copy in the mail. “It was a really interesting experience,” he says. “I was just elated that it was coming out.” And he wasn’t the only one. The media quickly picked up the story of the 19-year-old author. Prosek was featured in newspapers, magazines, and on the nightly news. “It was kind of surreal,” he says. From then on, he was known as “Trout Boy” around campus.

Since graduating from Yale in 1997, Prosek has pursued his love of nature all over the world, documenting fish, eels, and other subjects from Connecticut to Mongolia. His paintings encourage viewers to pause and think about the power of categorizing and naming the natural world, and they explore the ways nature is fluid and constantly changing. “Artists live in the realm of mystery and myth and the unexplainable. That’s the realm I’ve chosen to dwell in,” he says.

Prosek, now 43, is tall with salt-and-pepper hair and a gentle laugh that punctuates his words. He lives in Easton, on the same street where he grew up. His studio floor is covered with books, stacks of papers, photos, and sticky notes. “Each pile is a different thought or project,” he says. “The whole floor is kinda like a desk.” Another desk, built about six inches off the floor and tucked beneath a large picture window, overlooks an open field that he and his neighbors are working to protect from development.



Right: The artist’s studio is blanketed with stacks of books, magazines, Post-it notes, and artwork, all research for his projects.



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Top: American Elk (Wyoming), 2016. Oil, acrylic, and mixed media on wood panel.

Bottom: Flying Fox with Prussian Firearm: The Fox Hunt, 2009. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on tea-stained paper.

This window provides a glimpse into Prosek’s other passion: conservation. In 2004 he teamed up with Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard, a conservationist and fly fisherman, to create World Trout, a nonprofit that protects and restores wild species like trout and salmon in their native habitats. The project reflects Prosek’s deep love for trout and his commitment to their conservation. “Life as a human would be much more pale if we didn’t have these beautiful creatures to engage with and fall in love with,” he says.

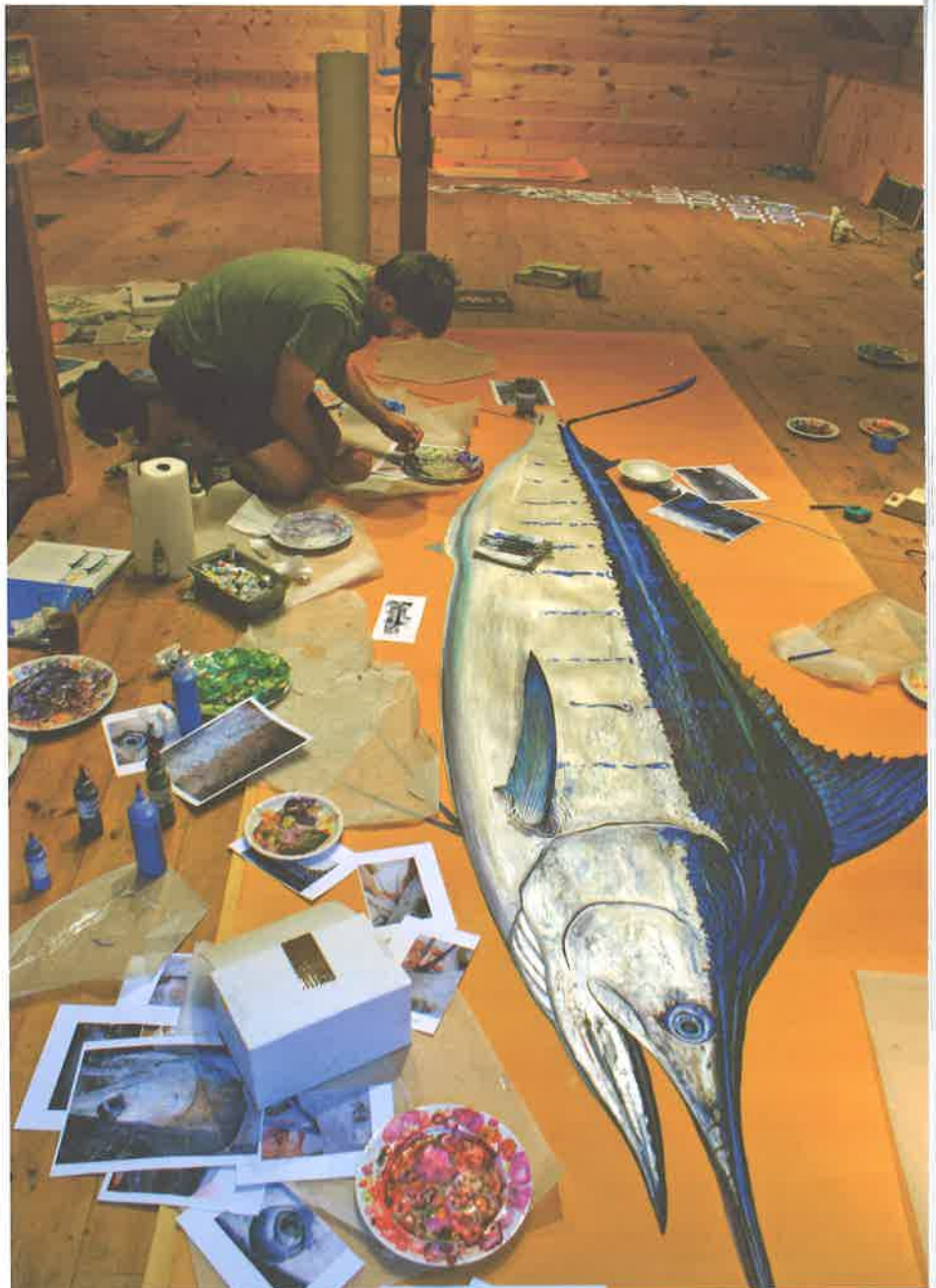
One of these creatures, eels, consumed much of Prosek’s work for nearly a decade. He was first drawn to the animal’s odd behaviors, such as the fact that they spawn in saltwater but spend most of their lives in freshwater. “They fascinated me because they don’t fit into any neat category in our minds. They’re fish, but we look at them more like snakes,” he says. His passion led to a book, “Eels: An Exploration, From New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World’s Most Amazing and Mysterious Fish,” along with several paintings, and articles in *Orion*, *National Geographic*, and the *New York Times*.

"I have these very focused obsessions that will last for decades," he says. His latest is a book—his 12th—that explores the fallibility of language and the naming of nature. He works with a variety of mediums including acrylics, etching, silkscreen, sculpture and powdered mica. But he prefers watercolor. Watercolor is extremely portable, which historically made it the first choice for many naturalist expeditions. "When you see watercolor, that history is kind of embedded," he says. But artists don't like to be pigeonholed. "Sometimes in order to make a statement you have to do something a little different." For Prosek, this means foxes and bears with wings, paintings that place land and sea creatures side by side, and upside down butterflies.

One of his exhibitions, "Invisible Boundaries," explored the impact on migratory elk herds of delineating the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. The interdisciplinary project, a collaboration between the Buffalo Bill Center of the West and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, highlighted the opportunities and challenges of transboundary conservation. "It matters for an animal what side of the line they're on. Even though it's invisible to them, it's meaningful to us," he says.

The paintings in this series are silhouetted landscapes of plants and animals with numbers but no identification key, a comparison to traditional field guides that help users identify species. The silhouettes invite viewers to challenge their instinctual urge to know the names of each creature, instead exploring the ways the creatures come into being through their relationship to the whole ecosystem.

Deciding where to place each element in a painting can be tricky, just like balancing the joys and responsibilities of personal and professional life. As a new father and a passionate artist, Prosek admits that the lines between home and work can get fuzzy. "I can't leave work behind," he says. "[I'm] haunted by it all the time."



Prosek at work in his Easton studio.

The haunts of his mind inspire projects that reveal the immense beauty of the world. He strikes an improbable, but far from impossible, balance between push and pull: pushing against boundaries of order and classification, while pulling viewers in to complex questions and inviting them to engage on their own terms. His work, while intricate, is also quite simple, he says. "I'm cheering for the things that won't be contained."

Krista Karlson is freelance writer based in New Haven. Her work has appeared in Backpacker, The Hartford Courant, and Long Trail News, among other publications.