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AUDREY FLACK JAMES PROSEK XAVIERA SIMMONS GUILLERMO KUITCA

HENRI LOYRETTE WITH JOACHIM PISSARRO GUEST CRITIC DAISY DESROSIERS

BROOKLYN RAIL

MAY 2020 · CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE · INDEPENDENT AND FREE

Dear Friends and Readers,

"It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility."

—Rachel Carson

"Two may become enemies, when their ideas are the same."

—Burmese Proverb

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

—Gandhi

"The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action."

—John Dewey

By now, all of us are most definitely familiar with the word *quarantine*, the origin of which is *quarantena*, simply meaning "forty days" as Venetians took the lead of this preventive measure, requiring all ships in port to wait this amount of time to inhibit the spread of the Black Death between 1348 and 1359. Many of us are also too familiar with how the phrase *social distancing* has been detrimental to our psychological frame of mind. We at the *Rail* understood *social distancing* and its negative connotations as soon as Trump announced his 15-day plan to slow the spread of COVID-19 on Monday, March 16; viruses are only transmitted when we get physically close to someone, not when we're talking on the phone, video calling, or for that matter having a Zoom meeting. Our team responded swiftly and launched the next day, on Tuesday, March 17 our New Social Environment daily lunchtime conversations at 1pm (ET) with one unified aspiration: utilizing technology as a platform to welcome and bring together our friends and colleagues from all the creative fields in the arts and humanities while infusing front and center the impending and critical issues of our current social and political lives.

In all truth, being forced to *slow down* by COVID-19, all the while waiting for nature to heal her body from humanity's aggressive abuse for far too long, most of us see this situation as a cogent opportunity for long-awaited self-contemplation about our individual lives in relation to our world. In our political contemplation, we've gained a better grasp of how Trump has fancied himself after Mussolini. (Here we're reminded that Mussolini's

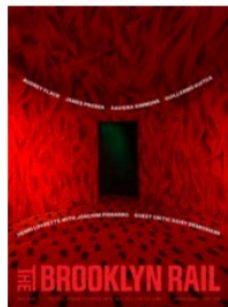
first name Benito was not an Italian name; it was rather given to him by his socialist parents after Benito Juarez, Mexico's national hero. Additionally, Mussolini's fascist doctrine was a replica, a political materialization so to speak of Futurism's advocacy of speed and technology, especially after having met Filippo Marinetti, its founder, as soon as the Futurist political party was formed after WWI ended in 1918. Mussolini created the Fascist Party a year later in 1919.) Trump's mobilization of speed has been his power and his ability to synthesize this animalistic instinct; on one hand, like a hyena sniffing out its prey, as he breaks the conventional decorum of political debate and from every scripted speech. The opposite of Hillary Clinton—whose overt confidence transpired her decision not to visit Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, all the while her bureaucratic rigidity and business-as-usual speech revealed her inability to counter her opponent's improvisation—Trump walks around while talking, thinking on his feet, ready to pounce. On the other hand, knowing that politics-as-usual is synonymous with politics of a monopolistic competition, this is reflected by the two-headed monster of technology and the news media, co-existing and codependent—while the speed in the former includes the various functions of Twitter, Facebook, texting, etc., this communication is incapable of independence from the endless deployments of phrases such as "Breaking News," "Alternative Facts," "Fake News," among other rampant cacophonies, and whereas in the latter Trump has successfully devised an effective political tactic in tweeting as fast and unpredictable as humanly possible, irregularly throughout each day. This tactic has proven to be the GOP's last great white hope for survival in US history, distracting news media and social media addicts alike, while they analyze Trump's 5 a.m. tweet from the night before during their morning "Breaking News," Trump is in fact already at the height of another tweetstorm by noon.

Being forced to slow down has revealed to us that *slowness* is naturally required in our beautiful tradition of humanistic inquiry. *Slowness* is essentially required to write or read a poem, to compose or listen to a piece of music, to make or to view a work of art. (These are facts, not alternative facts. What is a fact after all? In most languages, the word "fact" usually relates to a product of labor.) *Slowness* is timely, and reminds us to respect time

and allows us to heal ourselves. This is a time for us to collectively mobilize *slowness* in the works of the arts and humanities that in turn become an antidote to Trump's toxic deployment of speed. This is a time for us to amplify the beauty of our language against Trump's verbal vulgarity. In fact, we're more alive now than we ever were.

In solidarity, ever onwards and upwards,
Phong H. Bui

P.S. This issue is dedicated to the extraordinary lives of Helène Aylon, Maurice Berger, Germano Celant, David C. Driskell, and Paul J. Smith, whose profound contributions will perpetually nourish our art community for years to come. We also send our deepest gratitude to Emily DeVoti who, as editor, created and shaped the Theater section from the very beginning, even when the *Rail* was a bi-weekly pamphlet (1998–2000), then co-founding and naming the *Brooklyn Rail* after the L-train as our most popular distribution location. The same gesture is extended to Donald Breckenridge, who has single-handedly formed the Fiction section to what it is today with admirable labor and discerning advocacy for experimental writing. We wish them great prosperity and luck in their next journeys. Meanwhile, with pleasure and enthusiasm, we welcome Lucas Kane and Shadi Ghaheri as our new co-editors of the Theater section along with Will Chancellor and Kaitlyn Greenidge as our new co-editors of the Fiction Section. As the batons are passed on, a new chapter has begun, we're thrilled to also welcome Helen Lee as a new member of the *Rail*'s Board of Directors. We're indebted to Jeremy Zilar, our beloved Board Member and technology wizard, whose support has made our New Social Environment possible. Thank you. Last but not least, we're grateful to our dear friends at Metabolic Studio for their comradery and support, especially just this last month having launched their weekly Interdependence Salons, dedicated to to nature and her sacred resources, among other hidden alchemies, which will surely embellish the cross-pollination between here in Brooklyn and there in LA, elsewhere in between, and beyond indeed. We consider this pandemic to be our most profound shared experience among our fellow human beings, hence we are determined to cultivate and nurture the arts and the humanities as our formidable armaments against any kind of political tyranny.



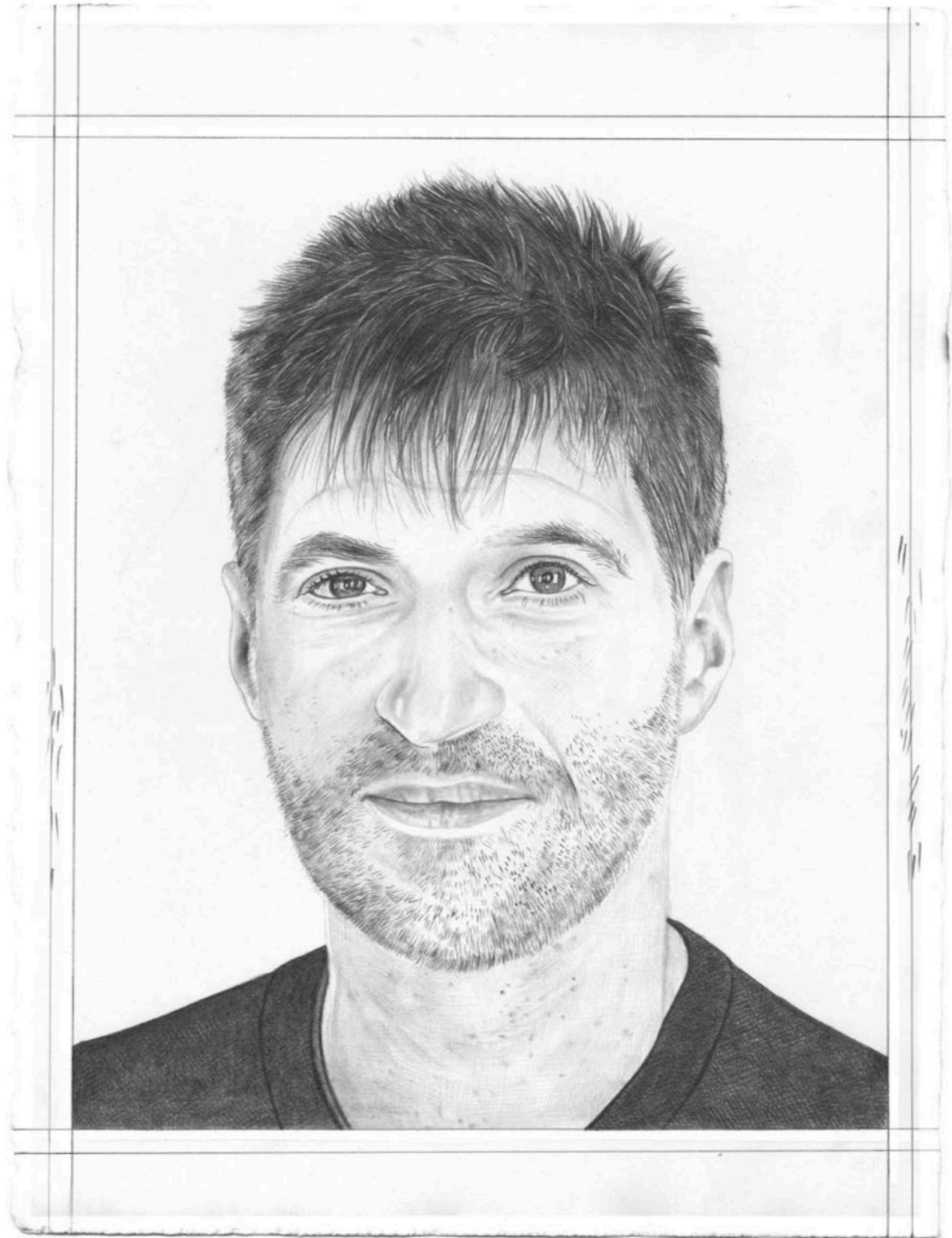
Left to Right:

James Prosek, *Paradise Lost I* (Burmese Python and Blue and Yellow Macaw, Everglades) (detail), 2019. Oil and acrylic on panel, 38 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York.

Guillermo Kuitca, *David's Living Room Revisited*, 2014–2020. © Guillermo Kuitca. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Xaviera Simmons, *Sundown* (Number Eleven), 2018. Chromogenic color print, 60 x 45 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo.

Audrey Flack, *Day of Reckoning*, 2020, Mixed Media on Canvas, 72 x 96 inches, Collection of the artist.



JAMES PROSEK with Hovey Brock

“The map is not the territory.”

James Prosek’s love affair with trout fishing at age nine has turned into a life-long obsession with the natural world. After consulting with biologists about trout species at age 11, he realized that there was a profound mismatch between the way scientists classified trout and the way trout actually appeared in nature. As a junior at Yale University, he produced his first book *Trout: An Illustrated History* (Knopf, 1996), an achievement that led the *New York Times* to dub him a prodigy, declaring he was “a fair bid to become the Audubon of the fishing world.”

Prosek hasn’t slowed down since. As a naturalist, he has authored over 15 books on fish, fishing, and nature, and is currently working on another. His research has taken him to every continent, except Antarctica, and the seas in between. Skilled as a taxidermist and painter, he has built a body of work that combines meticulous observation with deep insight into the rhythms and processes of the natural world, as well as our alienated relationship to it.

We met at Prosek’s studio in Easton, CT to discuss his latest exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery, *James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice*. The show combines his art with objects from the collections of the Gallery, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Yale Center for British Art. Prosek put his work in dialogue with these objects to question the divisions of “art” versus “artifact,” or “natural” versus “manmade.” Since his awakening at age 11, his view has always been that these distinctions impoverish our experience of the world around us, to our peril. Unfortunately, Yale had just closed down its Art Gallery the week before due to the Coronavirus, forcing us to make do with a virtual tour of the show.

HOVEY BROCK (RAIL): Really great to be here in your studio. This is so much fun.

JAMES PROSEK: Yeah, wonderful. Thanks for coming to my home in Easton in the absence of meeting at the museum. I think a lot of people are readjusting to what’s going on and hopefully we’ll see how museums handle this. If the closure goes

on for a month or more, then maybe they’ll extend shows?

RAIL: Who knows? Well, as the saying goes: “Never let a crisis go to waste.” The Coronavirus makes a great jumping off point because so much of your work has been about dealing with nature as it is, versus the urge to somehow impose order on it, by naming or other means. Maybe we could just start off the conversation with this great quote that you begin with in your writing for the catalog to the exhibit: “The map is not the territory.”

PROSEK: Yes. So, I could start from the beginning of how I became interested in this topic. I grew up in the town where we are right now, Easton, Connecticut. I lived two houses away from where we are now, in my studio. I fell in love with trout fishing when I was a kid, nine years old, and back then before the Internet, the early, well, mid-80s, I went to the library looking for a book on the trout of North America and I couldn’t find one. And so, I started writing letters to the Departments of Wildlife around the country. In places where I thought there were probably native trout, in Colorado, Wyoming, places with cold water, the

kind of habitat that trout like to live in. I told them I wanted to put together a book on all the trout in North America, and I was painting the fish.

I don’t know why I fell in love with these fish, but they were colorful and beautiful. And back then, I really loved the works of Winslow Homer. He painted these beautiful trout and stuff. So anyway, I got these nice responses back from different biologists who studied particular kinds of trout-like fish, in different states. And I tried to put together a list of all the trout in North America to make what I hoped would be a definitive work on trout, because, again, I couldn’t find a book on the trout of North America in the library.

My father introduced me to nature through his love of birds. We would go out in the field, look at birds and identify them from these books. I thought that all the names of things had been agreed upon, and that if you have a picture in a book that corresponds with the name, that was just it. As I got responses back from these biologists, there wasn’t any consensus. If I asked one biologist to make a list of all the trout in North America, I would get like 10 species. If I asked another one to put together a list of all the trout in North America, I would get 50 species. Not only could they not agree on how many there were, they couldn’t agree on what a species even was.

I began to lose faith in the reliability of names and language to describe the world that I was living in. When I pulled back and started learning more about the processes through which animals react to their environments, and how the forces of evolution shape the organisms we have, I learned that things evolved on this continuum over time. The tree of life is this misleading metaphor, because over long periods of time, it might look like a tree with branches that come off of a central stem and then continues to branch, but within those branches it’s very messy and web-like.

If there is an overarching statement or thesis for what my work has been about, it really all stems from this original revelation—and I was maybe 11 or 12 years old—that the world is this interconnected system that is also constantly changing. Not only are we related to every other organism going back hundreds of millions of years, through common ancestry, but there is another interconnectedness and it’s happening in the present day where every organism in an environment is affecting everything else. To separate one organism from another and call it a separate unit is a little bit misleading. In the Yale exhibition my “bird spectrum” is meant to illustrate this—it’s an installation of over 200 bird specimens from the Peabody Museum collection pinned to the wall in a color spectrum. In the color spectrum as in the evolutionary continuum there are no clear lines between colors or species, we draw them. Colors like red or yellow are simply segments of the spectrum, we determine where one ends and the other begins.

So, we have nature, which is a continuum or a web-like interacting system. But in order to communicate that system through language, we have to draw lines between things and label the pieces. And I feel like once we do that—because humans like the feeling of control and prefer to live

Portrait of James Prosek, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



View of the exhibition *James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice*, Yale University Art Gallery. Photo: Jessica Smolinski

in the illusion of permanence instead of the actual dynamic, changing world—we believe that the world we’ve named is the actual world.

So, getting back to the original question about the quote “The map is not the territory,” we create these maps, or systems, so that we can orient ourselves in the world. Take a name like “brook trout,” which describes the native trout for this area. The best the name can do is to describe a segment of evolutionary history. There’s this organism that has certain characteristics that we call a brook trout. But the idea of this fish reduced and separated from the other organisms that it evolved in concert with, that helped shape what it is by simply existing with it, is a kind of myth.

We can’t forget that those systems and tools we use to navigate and to communicate aren’t the actual territory. And we’ve come to depend on language so much that I think we forget that nature doesn’t actually have language on it. We put it there. Because we can’t create a map that is as complex as the actual world, all our systems of communication are necessarily reductions and simplifications of nature, which is totally fine, but we have to remind ourselves constantly that these reductions aren’t real. But they’re real enough that we’ve been able to use those reductions to survive pretty well because if the human brain actually could absorb all the complexity of the world, we probably wouldn’t be able to get through the day because we’d be too overwhelmed and distracted. So, the brain’s like this reducing valve that allows

us to just filter out what we don’t need and keep what we do need in order to survive.

That love of order and the preference to live in an ordered world and “the map,” as opposed to the actual experiential world, has manifested in some dangerous ways, like when we grow one species in a monoculture. We now know from devastations like the Irish potato famine, that because it was just one species that was being cultivated, that it was more susceptible to disease. If the crop had been multi-species or diverse the entire population of potatoes wouldn’t have been eliminated by one blight. Take another example: our need to fragment forests by cutting roads through them or to create arable land. Or building dams on rivers to harness the power of water for hydroelectricity, to hold water for irrigation, or channel a river with levees so we can build cities in river deltas.

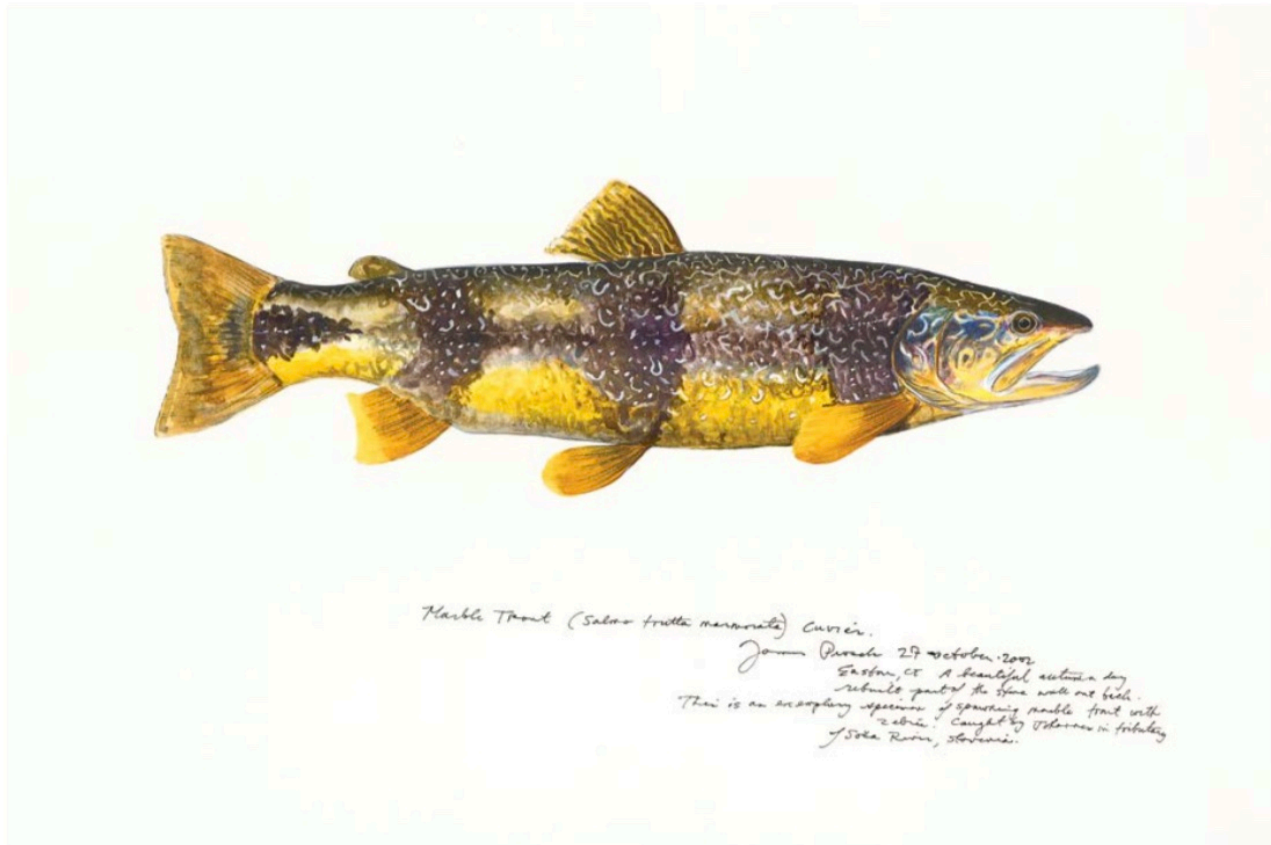
All these sorts of boundaries that start as mental boundaries in our heads, that we manifest on the ground, can have real world consequences. The virus that shut down the museum is a good example of how nature will trespass across the boundaries that we think are there. Scientists hypothesize that the virus jumped from a bat to another intermediate mammal, a civet cat or pangolin, and then to a human. How did a bat virus incapable of directly infecting a human get into a human? We’re not exactly sure. But nature is creative—it found a way. How quickly the world economy can be crippled by something like a virus, something we can’t see with our naked eyes—scientists still debate about what a virus is, whether or not it is

a living thing. We are being forced to embrace nature as it is, messy and beyond our systems of understanding. It’s a little bit of a tangent, but it’s a current day example.

RAIL: But it has to do with your art in the way that you have been exploring these spaces that open up in the gaps where the map doesn’t exactly fit onto the territory. I think that was the point of the chapter in the catalog entry for your current show. The one you titled “The Spaces in Between?”

PROSEK: A lot of artists that I really love show those spaces that we ignore when we fragment the interconnected world in order to label the pieces with language. Charles Burchfield is an example of that. I respond to that most in his watercolors, where the trees are pulsing. Even the telephone poles and wires have these sorts of echoes that are visually manifested in his work. One of the works in the exhibition is called *Marsh in June* (1952–56). And he’ll actually draw the heat and humidity or the sound of woodpeckers, you know, pecking on a tree, with these lines coming off the shapes. Or in Van Gogh’s work like *The Night Café* (1888) in the Yale Art Collection, with the pool table. Around the lamps hanging from the ceiling there are actual brush strokes that show emanating light, which is not how light is seen. Maybe he had a sense that those spaces were visually available.

Science is starting to bear out that there are a lot of things happening in the unseen world affecting everything in the environment. There’s been a lot written lately about how trees communicate



James Prosek, *Marble Trout (Zadlascia River, Slovenia)*, 2002, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 19 x 24 in. Courtesy of the James Prosek and Waqas Wajahat, New York.

through the overstory, through hormones, and underground through matrices of roots and fungi. All are networks that help the whole community of trees actually communicate with one another, or warn each other of dangers that are coming, or getting through climate aberrations like droughts.

RAIL: One of the things that's really interesting about what you do is that so much of it comes out of this intense direct observation. That you're trying to actually see what's there in front of you, which is so hard to do because we have all these filters, language being one of them.

PROSEK: Right. I love language, obviously. I like to write.

RAIL: Well, you're a very good writer.

PROSEK: I appreciate that. I spend a lot of time thinking about writing, and writing. And obviously, there are also times in the best writing where you transcend the boxes around the words and maybe even go into a little trance. In good writing, the boxes that words create can be transcended. In my writing, I have a relationship with nature that has a strong sense of place. In the exhibition catalog, there's a picture of a sugar maple with a "No Trespassing" sign on it. I live adjacent to a drinking water reservoir and you're not supposed to walk down there, so this is what you see when you reach the end of my dead-end street. I remember when they changed the signs. Probably 30 years ago. Since then, I've observed the tree's growing around the "No Trespassing" sign and kind of obscuring the words and the boundary that that sign represents. The tree and the sign illustrate

what I've been trying to express in my work—that the boundaries we draw between things in nature may be real to us and helpful, but they are all ultimately ephemeral.

RAIL: There was this terrific conversation that you had with Mark Dion about New England in the *Fragile Earth* catalog from the Florence Griswold Museum. There was a shared sense of regionalism between you. I wonder how New England with its industrialized past and deforestation, and then this kind of extraordinary turnover that's happened with its reforestation, has played into your view of nature?

PROSEK: Maybe the history of human interaction with nature is especially visible here, partly because of the history of this region having been glaciated all the way down from the North Pole to Long Island. And when that ice melted, all the rocks that had been dragged down from Canada just got dumped in this part of New England. And I think in a lot of parts of New England, you still can't dig a hole without digging up tons of rocks. The way that the farmers tried to create fields that could be cultivated was to get the rocks out of the soil and build walls. But the walls, some of them, are 200, 250, maybe even 300 years old. In this immediate area the walls show the physical presence of people working the land, and I think they're beautiful. A preservationist might want to return the land to the way it was before humans and bury the rocks back in the soil. Now, I am very conservation minded, but the landscape is the way it is now. And I think these rock walls are really beautiful.

But my father also had this connection to New England. He was born and grew up in Brazil, outside of São Paulo, and he fell in love with birds down there. And when he moved up here, originally to New York when he was 12 or 14, he brought that love of birds with him. After a career in the merchant marine, shipping cargo around the world, he settled in Easton to become a schoolteacher. But he always loved these little birds called warblers that spend the winters in Central and South America and then come up here to New England to nest in the summer. There was this connection with this organism that also migrated from South America to North America. He loved them and thought they were beautiful, but they also reminded him of the little birds that he grew up with seeing in Brazil. Some of them may even be the same birds.

Well, that gave me a sense that, even though I'm here, that through the movements and migrations of animals, I'm connected to other parts of the world, like the eels that live in the pond across the street from where we're seated here. They were born thousands of miles away in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in the Sargasso Sea. And then when they're 15 to 30 years old and ready to reproduce, they go back out of the pond to the reservoir, or somehow find their way. They go down the Mill River, to the Long Island Sound, and then from the Sound to the Atlantic Ocean to a thousand miles east of Bermuda. No humans have ever witnessed eels spawning, the only reason we know they spawn in the ocean is because baby eels have been caught far offshore in fine mesh nets.



James Prosek, *Study for Paradise Lost, Ponape*, 2019, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 24 1/2 x 18 1/2 in. (62.2 x 47 cm). Courtesy of the James Prosek and Waqas Wajahat, New York.

RAIL: Amazing story. I wanted to talk about that piece that you have in the museum that's about the Polynesian story, right? In the section called "Naming Nature?" Because it ties together many strands that you seem to be interested in. Could you tell it?

PROSEK: I became interested in eels because they're in the local environment and because I like to ask questions. I learned at some point that the eels, for instance, as I mentioned in the pond across the street here, were born a long way away in the middle of the Atlantic. I decided to write a book about eels, which I envisioned being a book more about what mystery means, and unknowing, since we don't know where they go to reproduce in most cases, or how they aggregate to spawn, or how they even navigate to get there. There's really not a lot you can write about their natural history, so I knew that writing a book about eels was going to be more about what we don't know about eels than what we do know about eels. If you don't know it, then you can't name it. It's like the spaces between thoughts.

Part of the way through the research for the book, I was talking to a friend, David Seidler, who had

lived in New Zealand for 25 years. He was married to a Maori woman, and he said, "Oh, you're working on a book about eels? Do you know about the sacred eels in New Zealand?" I said I didn't. So, he set me up with one of his Maori friends, D.J., Daniel Joe, to do some research. I went down there and D.J. introduced me to his cousin Stella, who was my guide to the Maori world. Stella introduced me to Maori elders and people who told stories. And around the time I was there, I took several trips, but on the first trip, it was in the news that scientists were putting satellite tags on the eels to see if they could figure out where they go to spawn. The eels in New Zealand are some of the largest freshwater eels in the world and they migrate to some ocean location that nobody knows where. The Maori were unsettled, they said, "why do we need to know where they go to spawn?" For the Maori the place the eels went was sacred—not knowing was important, and something very different from ignorance.

So, my eel inquiry extended to other parts of Polynesia and Micronesia. Eels are very important

in the culture of the people in these Pacific islands. One of the most prevalent stories involves a young girl named Sina who goes down to the little freshwater source—freshwater is highly scarce on some of these islands—to get some water for cooking or something. In these little freshwater streams, there are often five or six-foot long eels. When she gets back to the village, in the vessel she notices there's a baby eel in the pot. So, she starts to raise it as a pet and the eel keeps getting bigger and bigger. She's also growing up, becoming an adolescent. Her parents become more fearful of the eel because it's big and eels are just kind of freaky. So, they decide to put it back into the freshwater stream where it came from. But in the meantime, the eel's developed an affection for the girl, and the girl has also developed an affection for the eel as more than a pet. There's an amorous aspect to the relationship. In a lot of these stories, eels can change into people and back. So, there's this seamless hybridity between the human and non-human world.

One day the girl goes down in the stream again, getting water or washing clothes, and the eel that used to be her pet, that's now back in the stream, comes up to the girl and wraps his tail around her leg and violates her with it, essentially rapes her. The eel, obviously, is a very phallic fish. She runs back to the village because she's shocked, but probably also conflicted because she loves the eel. The warriors in the village go down to the spring and capture the eel. They're going to chop off its head. Right before they chop off its head, the eel says to the girl, "Bury my head in the sand and watch what grows from it." The first coconut tree grows from the eel's head. When the girl drinks water from the coconut, it is as if she is kissing the eel. So that's the story, but there's many variations of it.

In the exhibition, the painting that I made accompanies an engraving by this guy, Hans Baldung, who was a student and friend of Dürer, of an Adam and Eve scene with the serpent around the tree of knowledge, and then next to that there's a painting by Gauguin called *Paradise Lost* (ca. 1890) that has two figures leaving the Garden of Eden. In my painting, *Paradise Lost, Ponape* (2019), there's a male eel creature that is half human, half male and a female that is half human, half eel. And there's a large banana tree over their heads and breadfruit. So, on the island that I wrote about in the book called Pohnpei, this tiny island in Micronesia, there's a clan of people called the Lasiyalp that actually consider eels to be their human ancestors. The eels are sort of their totem. And, so, they don't eat eels because they're sacred, and they're in their stories.

In the Pacific Island stories, what I found interesting is that they share similarities to the Adam and Eve story—there is a fruit tree, a serpent-like creature, and there's an awkward seduction that leads to a shift or transition, something is lost and something is gained. In one story Eve is seduced by the snake into eating the forbidden fruit and gains knowledge, a form of sustenance, but as a consequence she and Adam lose their innocence and must leave Paradise. In another, a girl is violated by an eel and loses her innocence, but gains the most important food plant of a particular island—usually the coconut, breadfruit, or banana. So, I found those kinds of parallels intriguing, and the

fact that this limless, snake-like creature seems to produce these feelings of fear and awe, but also reverence universally around the world.

The eel is a symbol of resilience and giving, but also, the eel can be a monster that takes things away like your life or your virginity. Through its beauty and seductiveness, it represents a different kind of world, or enables passage between worlds, not black and white, but a liminal area where things can be in the spaces between things and not be a thing yet, that's why I think I'm really attracted to hybridity.

RAIL: Great, great! I wanted to weave together the connection you made between your fascination with eels, and also by extension, I guess, the story of Adam and Eve, and the difference between what's knowable and what's unknowable—how those two, at the end of the day are miscible—there really isn't a boundary between them. And I wanted to relate that to hybridity, so you did my work for me. So, please say some more about your hybrid works?

PROSEK: Yeah. After years and years of painting trout, I was obsessed with the diversity of these fish and also the idea that they couldn't be contained by names, that nobody could really classify this group of fish.

I mean, I'd been thinking a lot about these things, about nature not being easily divisible into discrete units, questioning whether our taxonomies could be reliably used to describe the beauty of the world. So, I began to make hybrids, because if you put a horse and a bird together, it's no longer either of those things or both of those things. It lives in this liminal or in-between place until we give that hybrid a name like Pegasus or Mermaid. For whatever reason, hybrids have been incredibly important in human history. They've discovered what they now think is the oldest cave art known, in Indonesia, 40, 50 thousand years old. In the drawings, there are hybrid creatures, half animal, half human, some of the first drawings that humans have made.

Why? Why have we felt that there was an importance in combining things? I think the underlying ethos behind that idea is that things can transcend the boxes that we would put them in, which is, I think, how the world really is. And ideas of animism, that every object has a life force, even in non-living things like rocks, that affect other things in the environment—that's what you see in the works of Burchfield or Van Gogh. What art tries to do is to visualize those spaces between things in those unnamed zones. This is how I have tried to live my life, in the in-between. Maybe just questioning what boundaries mean, not even saying boundaries are good or boundaries are bad, because then you're falling into the same trap of the neat dichotomies. In the catalog, I bring up this poem by Robert Frost...

RAIL: I was just going to ask about that because we were talking about these beautiful old walls in New England. But please go on.

PROSEK: When I started this inquiry about naming it was my immediate feeling that it grew out of some agitation, like how dare Linnaeus go into nature and put it in boxes? These nested hierarchical groupings like kingdom, class, order, phylum,

you know? Or reduce every animal to a binomial name like *Homo sapiens*. But if he hadn't done that, we wouldn't be able to communicate units of nature across languages. My problem with names was really that if we live more in the map than the terrain—we lose the experiential world.

This poem by Robert Frost is one of his most famous poems. "Mending Wall" it's called. Two neighbors meet along a common stone wall on their property line in Vermont. I guess it was common practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries, maybe before that, for two neighbors to meet along a common wall and mend the wall or put rocks back on the wall in the spring that had fallen over the winter because of ice heaving the ground or other reasons, like a tree falling on the wall.

So, Frost calls up his neighbor, this old Yankee guy, and they meet along the wall. And the poem opens "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." But walls exist in nature, organisms organize, human bodies, all living organisms, are packets of order in a world that's trying to take boundaries down, create entropy and chaos. So, there's this tension between building and destruction. And Frost is engaging with his neighbor in this process, knowing that nature inherently pulls any walls down.

So, he is sort of prodding his neighbor. He says, with the "spring mischief" in him, to his neighbor, why are we even bothering to do this? You know, we don't have any livestock that need to be kept in or kept out. "My apples aren't going to jump across the wall and steal your pinecones," as it says in the poem. He asks his neighbor, why are we doing this? Why are we mending the wall? And his neighbor, who's an old Yankee, says "good fences make good neighbors." That walls are important because humans like boundaries. In years to come, when the poem became famous, Frost would be asked, so which person were you in the poem, the wall builder or the wall toppler?

And he gave very unsatisfying responses saying: I'm both of them. I'm ambivalent. We need wall breakers and we need wall makers. Part of the irony of the poem is that they wouldn't have even gotten together to have the conversation had the wall not been there. So, the wall could be looked at as something that separates, but it actually is also something that brings people together. There's a beautiful irony in walls. And I've come to accept that as humans on this planet, we need language and the boundaries that it creates. But we also have to keep in mind the nameless world, the unnamable spaces between things. And I feel like that's what I want my work to do, to remind us to live in the actual world.

But the other irony is that I've also come to accept that it's where language fails, that some of the most beautiful creations of humans come from, when there is something we can't describe that's beyond words. We use other forms of expression like dance or music or visual arts to fill those spaces in between or try to manifest those spaces. Or maybe it's not even about creating something visual that's beautiful to look at, but the way for the person producing the thing to cope with that space. They want to share and express it, but they can't because language has a limit to what it can do. I used to think that it was a failure of names. That

that was a bad thing. But it's actually possibly the most beautiful limitation that humans have.

RAIL: You know what that makes me think of? It makes me think of that myth because, when the young woman was violated by the eel, that's a feeling that we all have. It's like, my God, these systems that we have, they don't work. But then he says, plant my head and then you get this beautiful fruit.

PROSEK: Well, and why? Why couldn't she have had a relationship with the, you know, eel, and it's not really clear from the story, is it? From my point of view, you're never clear that it's a violation or a rape. It's maybe an interspecies relationship that can't happen because he's an eel and she's a woman. But why can't they have a relationship? Clearly, she's conflicted as I think Eve was in the Garden of Eden when she is facing her own limitations in the garden by listening to the snake.

RAIL: Well, you seem to travel very easily between the visual and the verbal. I see you as a hybrid between the artist and the writer. About not putting things in boxes, I see an irony in this museum show that you've done because these institutions fix things in our mind, you know. If anything puts things in boxes, it's museums.

PROSEK: But again, I'm going to play the Frost card and say that I'm ambivalent. You know that without the walls of the gallery, you wouldn't have this opportunity to make a condensed statement about why some objects end up in the natural history museum and some end up in the art museum. Without these gallery walls we would not have come together to have this conversation.

RAIL: Should we leave it at that? I'm sorry we can't continue and discuss the trout flies that you tied in the exhibit, in the section called "Representation and Artifice." I told you in an email that it reminded me of Roger Caillois's article "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," since you discuss how human and non-human animals both make representations, whether it's through painting a landscape, making a lure or decoy, or one creature evolving to mimic another.

PROSEK: We can. I can go on and on, but OK.

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