

JAMES PROSEK: ART, ARTIFACT, ARTIFICE

Cross-collection exhibition by Yale alumnus juxtaposes artists' work with nature's—including a huge dinosaur skull—to question the lines we humans draw

February 14-June 7, 2020

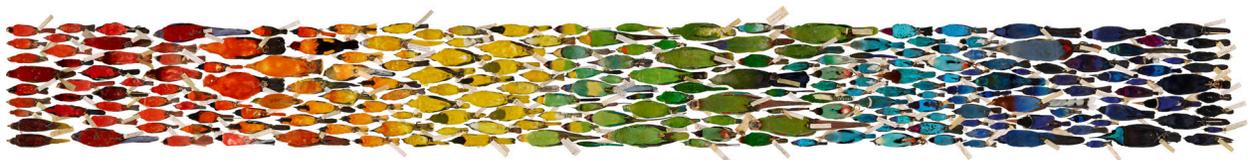


James Prosek, *Study for Paradise Lost, Ponape*, 2019. Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper. Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York. © James Prosek

February 12, 2020, New Haven, Conn.— James Prosek was a student at Yale College in 1996 when he published *Trout: An Illustrated History* (Knopf) to acclaim. Now Prosek (b. 1975, B.A. 1997) has organized an unprecedented Yale University Art Gallery exhibition that questions the human preoccupation with classifying nature. *James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice*, on view February 14-June 7, 2020, places the artist's work in dialogue with a wide range of both man-made objects and those produced by billions of years of evolution, or what naturalist Charles Darwin described as “endless forms most beautiful.” By challenging traditional separations of museum collections into “art” and “artifact,” or “natural” and “man-made,” the artist invites us to explore to what extent these distinctions matter. Is it helpful for us to draw such boundaries? Or do they limit what we are able to see, substituting categories and classifications for experience? “What would happen,” Prosek asks, “if we stop putting things into neat categories and simply marvel at the wondrous and complex world of which

we are a part?”

The exhibition brings together objects from the collections of the Gallery, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Yale Center for British Art. “The Gallery and our collecting partners across the Yale campus share the impulse to collaborate whenever possible,” said Stephanie Wiles, the Gallery's Henry J. Heinz II Director. “This exhibition—particularly the variety and breadth of objects and the many illuminating juxtapositions James has created—is a visible example of the way we imagine collections can flow across campus and create new meaning. We are so grateful to the Peabody Museum for jointly partnering with us on this exciting project.” On display are works



James Prosek, *Bird Spectrum*, 2019. Bird specimens. Courtesy the artist; specimens provided by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. © James Prosek. Photo: Christopher Gardner

by European and American artists, including Paul Gauguin and John Constable, Martin Puryear and Helen Frankenthaler, Japanese woodblock prints, Persian ceramics, an African headdress, Tlingit fishing lures, an Indonesian fish trap, as well as bird eggs, the skull of a *Torosaurus* dinosaur,



Paul Gauguin, *Paradise Lost*, ca. 1890. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin E. Bensinger, B.A. 1928

Babylonian cuneiform tablets, and a bison-horn cup. About a third of the nearly one hundred objects in the show are Prosek’s own, including watercolors, canvases, collages, and sculptures that weave together the show’s major themes—such as “The Color Spectrum,” “Mark Making,” “Hybridity,” and “Artifice”—each of which explores an aspect of the interconnectedness in nature. The exhibition, too, is meant to be a single work.

The centerpiece of the show is Prosek’s *Bird Spectrum*, an installation created from 222 bird specimens from the Peabody’s ornithology collection, which are affixed to the wall and organized by color. Spanning more than 15 feet, the avian rainbow suggests that in the color spectrum, as in the evolutionary continuum, clear lines do not exist. Where, for example, does red end and orange begin? Likewise, it is often difficult to define where one species ends, and another begins in the evolutionary timeline.

Another work Prosek made for the exhibition is *Paradise Lost, Ponape*—installed alongside the Gallery’s *Paradise Lost* by Paul Gauguin. *Paradise Lost, Ponape* was inspired by Prosek’s travels to Pohnpei, a small island in Micronesia, and the Pohnpeian origin story of how plants and animals got their names. Unlike in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which Adam is given the task of naming the animals, in the Pohnpeian story, two boys go into the forest and ask the plants what their names are. In one story, we tell nature what it is to be called; in the other, nature tells us.

Prosek, born in 1975, still lives in the rural Connecticut town where he grew up, fascinated by the beauty and variety of nature—and confounded to find, in his late teens, that genetic analysis was throwing some trout taxonomy in question. “As I learned more, I wanted to throw away the names, step beyond those constraints, in order to preserve a sense of wonder that I had felt from an early age,” he has written.

In addition to publishing several books, Prosek won a Peabody Award in 2003 for his documentary on 17th-century angler Izaak Walton. Since 2011, Prosek has served as a curatorial affiliate at the Peabody, undertaking research expeditions around the world to study specimens. In 2018, he was named the Gallery’s Happy and Bob Doran Artist in Residence. His intimate connections with both museums have made possible first-ever loans to the exhibition, such as the *Torosaurus latus* skull from the Peabody’s Great Hall of Dinosaurs.

James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with extensive texts by the artist (artgallery.yale.edu/publication/prosek) and an audio tour that features the artist, scientists, educators, and curators discussing objects in the show. The audio tour is available on the Yale University Art Gallery’s free mobile app (artgallery.yale.edu/visit/app).



Holotype skull of *Torosaurus latus*, Wyoming, Niobrara County, Late Cretaceous Lance Formation (68 million years ago). Collected in 1891 by John Bell Hatcher. Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, inv. no. YPM VP.001830. Courtesy Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History

On View

February 14-June 7, 2020

Yale University Art Gallery

Related Programs

Opening Program

Thursday, February 27, 2020, 5:30 pm

“Human and Animal Art Worlds”

Richard O. Prum with James Prosek

Gallery Talks

Wednesday, April 1, 2020, 12:30 pm

“Meditations on a Bird’s Nest”

Edward S. Cook, Jr., James Prosek, and Kristof Zyskowski

Wednesday, April 22, 2020, 1:30 pm

“Language Perception and Representation”

Tanya Kelley and James Prosek

All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For more detailed programming information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/calendar.

Related Publication

James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice

James Prosek

With an essay by Edith Devaney, Contemporary Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, London
Hardcover / 144 pages / 9 × 12 inches / 160 color illustrations, including 1 gatefold / Distributed by
Yale University Press / April 2020 / Price \$35; Members \$28

For more detailed information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/publication/prosek.

Exhibition Credits

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Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 250,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel St., New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10 am-5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September-June); and Saturday-Sunday, 11 am-5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

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