

The Ecology of James Prosek



Easton Front Porch

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of James Prosek's work is that while he is telling his own story, he's also telling another story: the relationship between living organisms and their natural habitats. James' passion and enthusiasm for the planet and all of its life forms, is contagious, and his work encourages innovative ways to reconnect with the natural world.

His current exhibit, *Art, Artifact, Artifice*, running through November at Yale Art Gallery, challenges the socially constructed dichotomy between human beings and nature. According to James, our desire to name, classify and label our surroundings, disconnects us from the mysteries and rhythms of the natural world.

He writes,

"We prefer the world as filtered by our minds, where it can be made orderly and intelligible, because then we feel we know it, and knowing brings comfort. If we live too much through the lens of our predispositions and the tools we have evolved—our languages and concepts—that reflect them, and not in the world itself, we miss out on an essential aspect of human experience: a direct, unmediated, sensual engagement with

the natural world.”

He goes on to say,

“Once the complex and chaotic world is made legible through our taxonomies and systems of classification, we attempt to control it. Political regimes have announced and carried out terrifying projects that attempt to force the world to conform to our mental reductions. Racism, sexism, religious discrimination, intolerance of myriad kinds emerge from a belief that there is some ideal form or way of being. But there is no such thing as an ideal form.”

Much like an evolved ecosystem, James’ body of work as an artist and writer is made up of an intricate story, which includes the people and landscape that have influenced his artwork, philosophy and life over the past 44 years. His father, Louis, born in Brazil, came to the United States when he was 12 and moved to Easton with James’ mother, Kristina, in 1974. Louis taught Astronomy, Earth Science and Field Biology at various Trumbull schools, and eventually became the director of the planetarium at Hillcrest School. In the summer, Louis would bring his students on field trips to learn about Marine Biology. James would always join along on the field trips, where he learned to identify local flora and organisms in the woods and streams but also along the coast of Long Island Sound.

From the age of nine, James would go fishing for hours at the Easton Reservoir, which was in close proximity to his house. When he was 15, he met a second mentor. One afternoon, Joe Haines, the local game warden in Easton, spotted James and his friend fishing illegally. James’ friend ran, urging James to follow, but James remained and turned himself in. Although James received a written warning for fishing without a permit, Joe, also an avid fisher, ended up being a life-long mentor to James, teaching him even more about the art of fishing.

James’ fascination with trout, led him on a search to find a comprehensive book on the

different species of trout in North America. After some investigation, he discovered that no such book existed, so he decided to write and illustrate his own.

During summers throughout high school, James traveled around the country, in search of different types of trout. He would catch the trout, document where he caught it, take a picture in its full translucence and send it back into the river. Later, he would create a painting from the photograph, which would spark a remembrance of the feeling he experienced when catching the fish. He also contacted fishermen from around the country and asked them to send him pictures and the names of the different trout from their specific regions. James received an overwhelming response.

In 1996, at age 20, while an English major at Yale, James published his first book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*, published by Alfred A. Knopf. His book includes over 70 watercolor paintings of different species of North American trout. James' colorful and accurate paintings have been compared to those of American ornithologist, naturalist, and painter, James Audubon.

At the time his book was published, James was studying under Harold Bloom, a well-known literary critic, who taught James about the canonization of literary works, which, once again, brought up the theme that has occupied James' thoughts since he was 11: how humans have the desire to classify and label.

Since then, he has published 11 more illustrated books on various wildlife with commentary and reflection, a memoir, and a children's book. He has written several articles for National Geographic, is the author of a Ted Talk and has exhibited his artwork nationwide and worldwide.

James' work is not simply a nostalgia for the past, but a call to social action, one that emphasizes a link between a healthy ecology and a healthy society:

“The health of our planet depends on an understanding and acceptance that the world is

a system, not a place made up of units that fit into neat mental boxes. If we wish to make investigations into disorderly zones, where some of the most interesting things happen, we must find ways to override our strongest urges and inclinations. That is what this book and exhibition in part are meant to urge us to do.”

“The lines we draw between things, the categories into which we place things, the structures we impose on the world to communicate, and the choices we make based on our personal prejudices can shape not only the way we and others think but also the future of ourselves as a species, and the future of nature.”

His observations couldn't be more timely in light of one of the most salient examples of how nature can and will eclipse human beings' attempt at controlling their natural surroundings. James exhibit, opening on Feb. 14, was open for less than a month before the gallery had to close due to Covid-19. As James states, “Nature will always trespass across the boundaries that we attempt to set upon it.” The gallery should be opening again sometime this summer, and the exhibit will run through Nov. 28. If we think about his exhibit within the more grand order of the natural world, the exhibit becomes a living example of the message it hopes to convey.

In his current exhibit, James continues to open up new paths of perception by taking the limitations of linguistic coding one step further. The exhibit juxtaposes “Art” from the Yale Art Gallery and Yale Center for British Art along with his own paintings, “Artifacts” from the Peabody Museum, and “Artifice” (language) to show how there have been various ways by humans of evaluating the natural world throughout time, characterized by different objects, meanings and values. The exhibit also brings to the forefront how art has always been a more effective medium at capturing the mystical relationship between human beings and nature, whereas language tends to draw artificial lines between that connection.

With all of his notoriety, award-winning exhibits and world travel, James still lives in Easton by the reservoir, with his wife, Lauren, and son, Cody, a place where he feels at

home in the world and a strong connection to the land. His father, Louis, lives three houses away with James' stepmother, Lynn.

James remains a significant part of local preservation ventures, which in the past, have included collaborations with Trout Brook Valley Preserve, Mill River Heritage Project, Connecticut Audubon Bird Craft Museum and Connecticut Audubon Society. He is also on the board of the Nature Conservancy in Connecticut.

His exhibits have been showcased at many venues around the world, such as Yale University Art Gallery, Peabody Museum, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Hudson River Museum, Cornell University, Nouveau Musee National de Monaco, Asian Society Museum of Hong Kong, and the Royal Academy of Art in London. He has also delivered countless lectures as a visiting scholar.

To see a complete list of James Prosek's publications, exhibits, lectures and videos, including his inspirational TED Talk, visit his website: <https://www.troutsite.com/>.

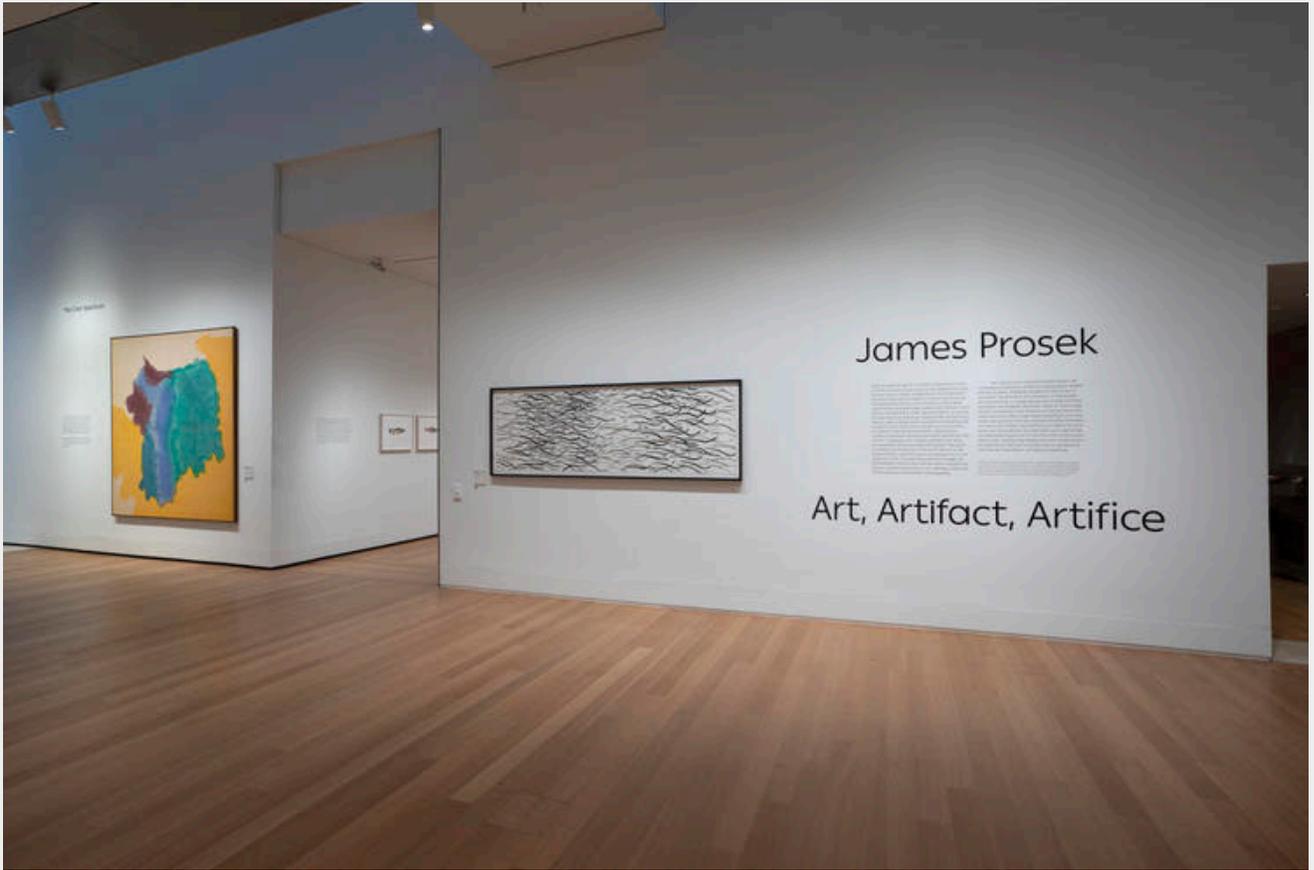
Additional Links:

Art, Artifact, Artifice Art Exhibit. Yale Art Gallery

<https://artgallery.yale.edu/exhibitions/exhibition/james-prosek-art-artifact-artifice>

James Prosek TED Talk

<https://youtu.be/jb8TngyfxiY>



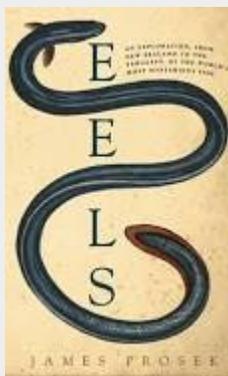
Art, Artifact, Artifice Exhibit. Yale University Art Gallery, Feb. 14 to Nov. 28, 2020



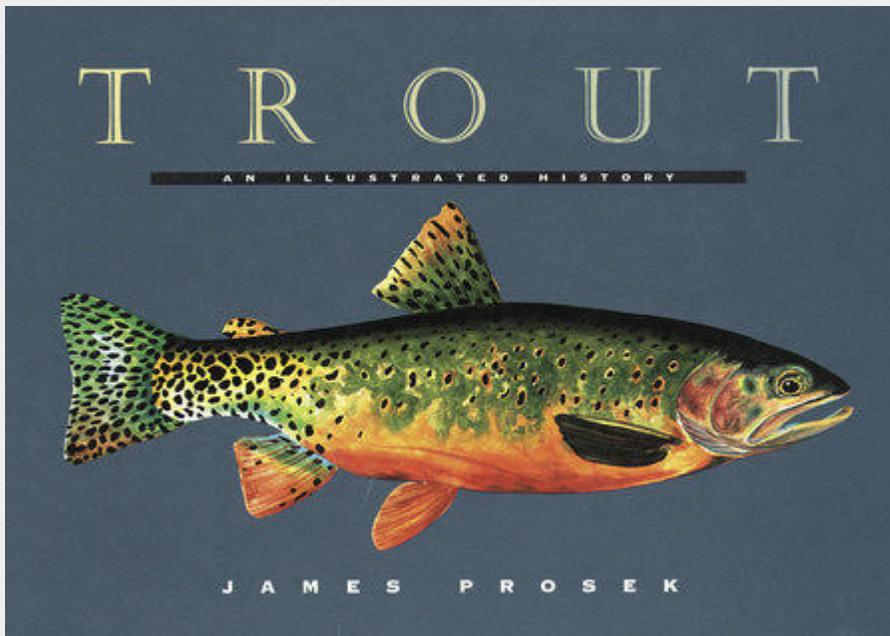
James Prosek, Bird Spectrum. Art, Artifact, Artifice Exhibit. Yale University Art Gallery. From the Peabody Museum of Natural History collection.



James Prosek Mural. The Singing and the Silence of Birds in Contemporary Art.
Smithsonian American Museum of Art



Eels: An Exploration, from New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Mysterious Fish. Published 2010



Trout: An Illustrated History. Published 1996