

ARTS | NEW BRITAIN

Creatures Great, Small and Imagined

A visual artist creates a habitat of varied species, inspired by a love of nature, global treks and individual musings.

By SUSAN HODARA

Nearly 700 pounds and 15 feet long, the blue marlin lay on the deck of a fishing boat off the coast of Cape Verde as James Prosek snapped photographs, made sketches and took measurements. Awestruck and moved, he watched the giant fish's colors fade from their living vibrancy to the muted tones of death.

It was those moments that Mr. Prosek captured in "Blue Marlin," his life-size watercolor of the glistening fish. "It's not a painting of a marlin," he said. "It's a painting of my experience with that individual marlin."

"Blue Marlin" now hangs in the New Britain Museum of American Art, where it is one of 50 works in "James Prosek: Wondrous Strange," an exhibition of paintings, prints, sculptures, videos and taxidermied specimens. The show, the artist's largest to date, presents a meticulously fashioned menagerie of real and imagined animals, including a pregnant zebra, a peacock in full plumage and a duck with a drill bit for a beak. Culled from different bodies of work, the selections reflect Mr. Prosek's passionate, deeply considered and sometimes mischievous reverence for the natural world.

A lifelong resident of Easton, Conn., Mr. Prosek, 38, is not only a visual artist but also the author of a dozen books, who has traveled the globe in pursuit of his subject matter. Those travels are obliquely documented in six black-and-white panels of silhouetted birds, each representing a specific location, including Micronesia, Suriname, Andover, Mass., and Easton.

The birds are numbered, evoking images found in Roger Tory Peterson's iconic field guides. Missing from Mr. Prosek's panels, however, are the identification keys that provide the birds' names.

"I want people to spend time looking at them without being able to satisfy the urge to know what they're called," he said. "Because knowing the name of something is not knowing the thing."

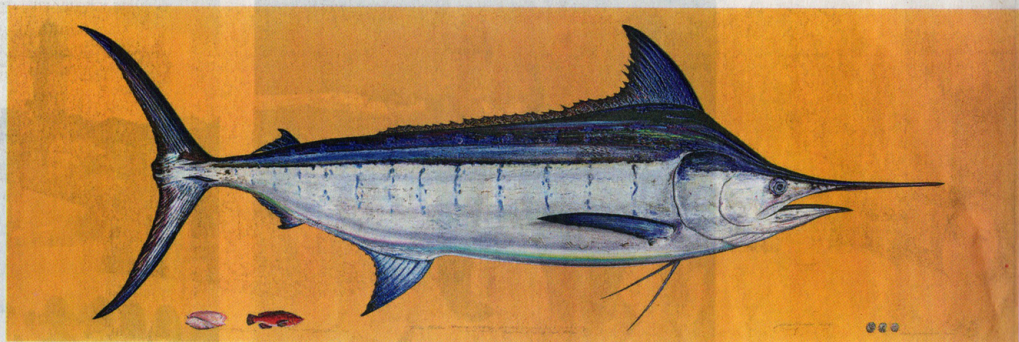
Mr. Prosek's vigilance about the limitations of nomenclature led him to invent hybrid species derived from actual names, like the part-bird, part-fish "Parrotfishe," and "Flying Fox With Lady's Slippers," a serene, taxidermied red fox complete with wings from a surf scoter.

"They became their names in protest of being named," he said of the creatures.

Other invented creatures serve as a wry commentary on contemporary conservation practices. Along with the drill-bit-beaked duck, the taxidermied beaver in "Industrial Evolution" has a chain saw for a tail, and the rosy-hued cockatoo in the watercolor "Cockatoo" has tools appended to its wings. "We tend to protect what is useful to us," Mr. Prosek said. "These animals evolved to be useful so they would survive."

Conceptual analysis aside, the artist's love of nature is manifested in his life-size watercolors of saltwater fish that, like the marlin, he observed on fishing vessels around the world. Standing before his almost 13-foot-long "Swordfish," Mr. Prosek recalled his encounter with the harpooned fish off Nova Scotia.

"They brought it on board," he said, "and the captain started yelling, 'James!



TOP, JAMES PROSEK, NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART; ABOVE, CENTER AND RIGHT, JAMES PROSEK, COURTESY OF SCHWARTZ WAJAHAT, NEW YORK

James! Come look!' And suddenly it flickered back to its living colors, just for a few minutes, then faded away."

Gesturing toward the painting, he said, "This is what it looked like — this crazy blue." Then he noted his tiny reflection in the fish's round eye.

Each painting in this series is composed as a trilogy, with the subject in the center and other elements — small fish, seashells, beach plants — in the lower corners. In "Swordfish," there are two cockle shells on the left and a horseshoe crab on the right.

"They set up a visual relationship," Mr. Prosek said. "There's always some kind of mimicry of shape, color and form. And they acknowledge that there are other things interacting with the fish and actually shaping its evolution."

"But they're also calling into question the hierarchies and priorities we create. The way we order things in our minds and

From James Prosek's exhibition in New Britain: "Blue Marlin" (2014), top; "Zebra," above, (2011) and "Cockatoo" (2011).

A world where the 'Flying Fox With Lady's Slippers' can fit right in.

as physical objects in reality shapes our perception of the world. It's not something to take lightly."

The newest pieces in "Wondrous Strange" — which was curated by Mr. Prosek's gallerist, Waqas Wajahat, Anna Rogulina, the museum's assistant curator; and the artist — were completed after Mr. Prosek's trip last summer to Zimbabwe and Tanzania. Marrying two of his approaches, "Elephant" and "Zebra" are large-scale paintings that are fully rendered color portraits of each animal set against a black-and-white backdrop of silhouetted, numbered birds.

"The numbered birds represent the named world, where we label things and join words to objects," Mr. Prosek said. "Then there's the colorful unnamed world filled with living, breathing individuals."

In "Zebra," the worlds overlap: A silhouetted, numbered bird perches on the ze-

bra's sunset-shaded back. "I think it's a beautiful conversation — a beautiful friction — in all of our lives," he said.

There are warnings suggested throughout the exhibition: of the threats posed by illegal trade in animal parts, of the tyranny of established systems of categorizing biological diversity, of the perils facing the environment and its inhabitants. But there are simple pleasures, too, that museumgoers can experience in the intricate details and the monumental splendor of Mr. Prosek's creations. "Wondrous Strange" is a lush, lively and mysterious habitat all its own.

"James Prosek: Wondrous Strange" runs through June 8 in the McKernan Gallery at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington Street, New Britain. For more information and a schedule of related programming: (860) 229-0257 or nbmao.org.