



- Native Brook Trout caught at Cranberry Rapids  
*Salvelinus fontinalis* Regis River - Sp  
on a log Adirondack - June Sheep Laurel + Fle  
blooming on the river.

## A Beautiful Miscommunication



... on the west branch of the St.  
...  
... 1815  
... beautiful  
James Prosek 2016

## JAMES PROSEK ON REPRESENTATION IN ART AND NATURE

TEXT AND WATERCOLORS BY  
*James Prosek*

*I first  
fell in love*

with the Adirondacks through the watercolors of Winslow Homer.

Dark and piney, lily pads and leaping trout, soft ridges and lakes married by the sinuous thread of a fly line in the air (often vigorously scraped from the paper), the reflection of canoe and human melted into one by wavelet and wind, the misty absence of color. The atmospheres Homer created had a powerful effect upon me. Seeing an exhibition of Homer's watercolors at the Yale University Art Gallery in the fall of 1986, when I was 11 years old, I can honestly say, changed my life. Some works were made in Homosassa, Florida, or the Bahamas, Bermuda or Quebec, but it was the Adirondack paintings that cast their spell more than any others.

At the time that I saw them I was falling in love with trout—fly-fishing for them in the brooks and streams near my home in southwestern Connecticut and beginning to paint them in watercolors. My earliest watercolors were copies of Audubon's birds, but very soon after I was attempting to learn the medium by copying Homer's paintings of leaping brook trout. Over the years I made pilgrimages to see some of the same watercolors in person, in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston or the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts. When I was an undergraduate at Yale in the mid-1990s, the curator of that very same show that I saw as a child, Helen Cooper, pulled some of Homer's watercolors from the University Art Gallery's collection to show me up close, pointing out how the artist piled up paint and subtracted it from the heavy paper by scraping and rubbing, techniques I found to be revelatory, part of his alchemy, his artifice. The Adirondack watercolor we looked at depicts a deer standing over a log with its reflection visible in the water.

From about the age of nine until I was 19 I had been working on a book of paintings of the different species, subspecies and varieties of the trout of North America (the great diversity of salmonid fishes, trout, salmon and char, which biologists argue about how to fragment, classify and name). Looking at Homer's Adirondack watercolors, I am certain, cemented my



choice of medium for these works—watercolor on paper—although intuitively watercolor did seem to be the most natural medium considering that water is the medium in which trout evolved and live. Nevertheless, the after-images of Homer’s works in my mind were always there, rising up to the surface as I made those paintings.

One of my points here is that the Adirondacks were deeply within me before I had ever visited them. But the other revelation that is still forming has to do with ideas of representation and artifice in painting and the act of predation.

In Homer’s paintings of trout leaping out of the water for their prey, sometimes the fly they leap for is an actual one—a mayfly in the most famous picture with two leaping trout (in the Boston collection), a moth (in the Cleveland Museum of Art collection), or most fancifully the trout joining a tiger swallowtail butterfly in the air (Clark Art Institute collection). But in other paintings, the fly the trout leaps for is an artificial one (as in the watercolor in the Brooklyn Museum), an imitation of a fly made by a human, feathers and fur tied to a hook to look like an insect. It is also interesting to me that in the midst of trying to catch and eat a fly, either real or imitation, in Homer’s paintings the fish often seem to miss what they are pursuing. In a few of his fish-related pictures there is a hook or insect in the fish’s mouth, and in one painting of two dead Adirondack brook trout hanging in a tree (that was for years in the private collection of David Rockefeller and was sold in the last few years at auction), the lure presumably used to catch the fish is draped over their dead bodies.

I’m going on about this because it is the fly that the fish pursues that ties my dual loves of fly-fishing and drawing together. It has taken me most of my life to realize that fundamentally, there is not much that separates a lure or fishing fly from a painting. They are both devices of communication that involve translating the actual world into a representation of that world, using the materials of something else. If you think about it, all communication happens this way. What is a spoken word? It is a representation





Lulu and Matt fishing Crowburg Pond  
Bunchberries in fruit June 20, 16

late summer day goldenrod  
Ancher family 1860s



Belted Kingfisher  
primary  
and head

Northern Flicker  
(yellow-shafted)

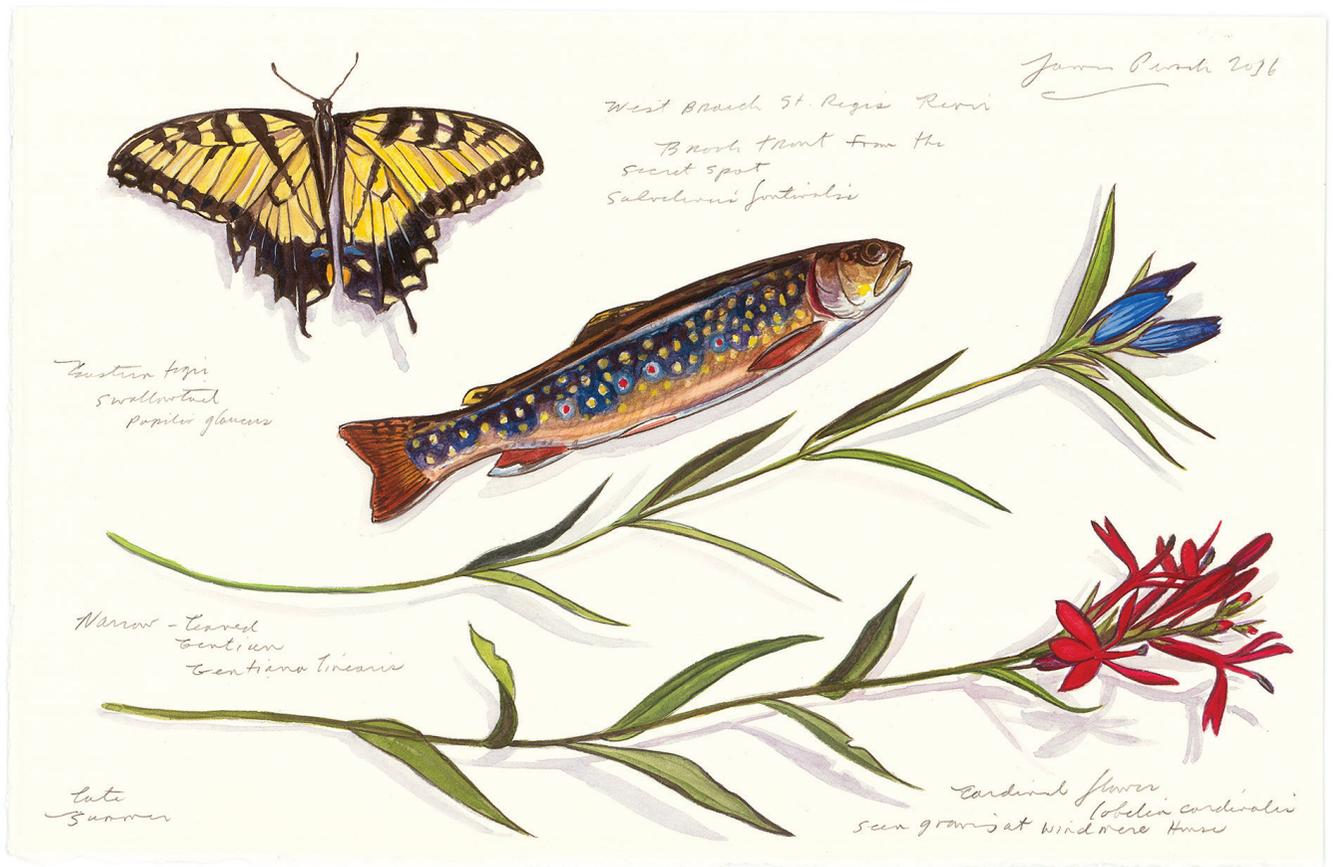
primary and neck  
feathers  
owls

Barned  
owl feather, head

spine grouse  
Birds

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of an object, like a tree, using sound, just as a written word is a representation of something using a mark on paper. The earliest writings were pictographic, derived or evolved from the earliest drawings that we know of, images of bison and lions, or the outline of a human hand. These marks, if preserved from wind and weather, enabled communication across generations, they left behind the residue of emotions, thoughts and ideas.

Following from the idea associating a drawing with a fishing lure, one could argue that all modern communication developed in the act of predation—hunting and fishing. What were the first written marks that humans read? They were the tracks of animals left behind, the residue of their movements. Tracking was reading the events that transpired on a landscape, recorded in mud or sand or snow days, hours or minutes in the past. Following the track of an animal like an antelope allowed humans to capture and kill and eat (in order to sustain us) an animal that otherwise could outrun us with speed, but not endurance. If we could not chase the animal down by tracking it, we learned to make representations of nature, imitations like lures and decoys and even imitations of animal sounds, to draw our prey close enough to kill and eat it.

In Homer's Adirondack paintings of trout pursuing their prey, real and imitation, I wonder if the painter was trying to tell us something about communication? I have lately been thinking about communication through representation and imitation, that it is fraught with misunderstandings, with trickery and lies and misrepresentation. But any which way you look at it there is much beauty to be found in artifice.

A human makes an imitation of an insect using fur and feathers tied to a hook. Then the human casts it out into the river. If a fish sees that imitation and also thinks that it looks like an insect, moves towards it, and tries to eat it, then a very remarkable thing happens. The mind of a human and the mind of a fish are having | *Continued on page 60*



## A BEAUTIFUL MISCOMMUNICATION

*Continued from page 45*

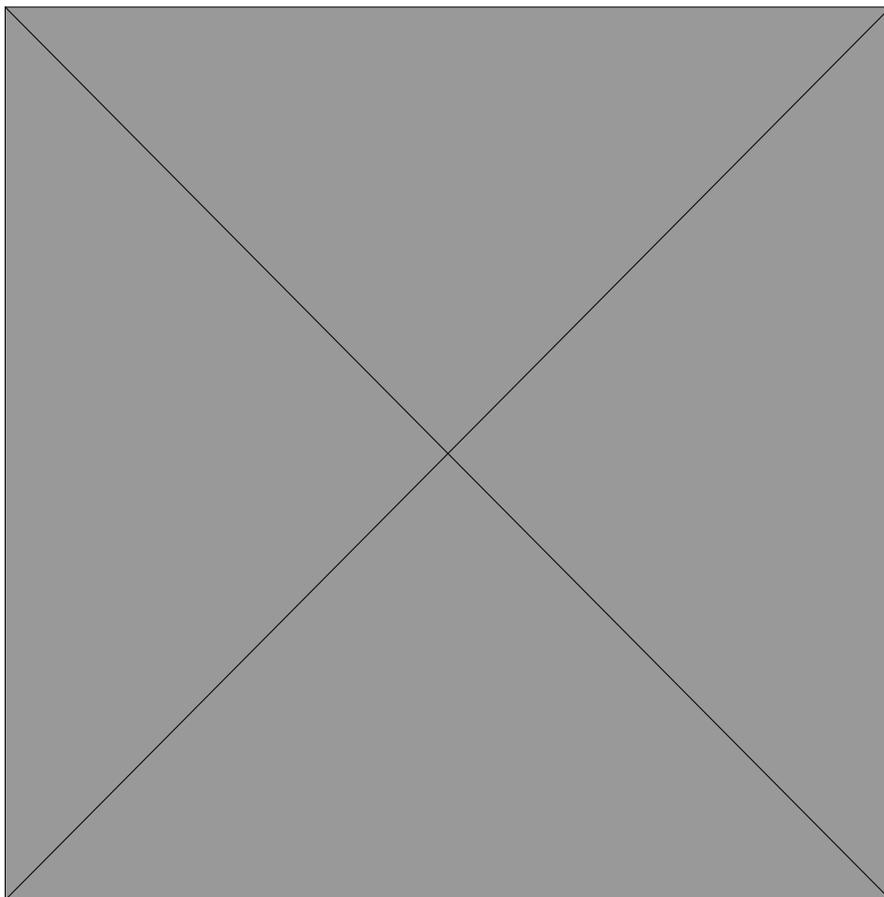
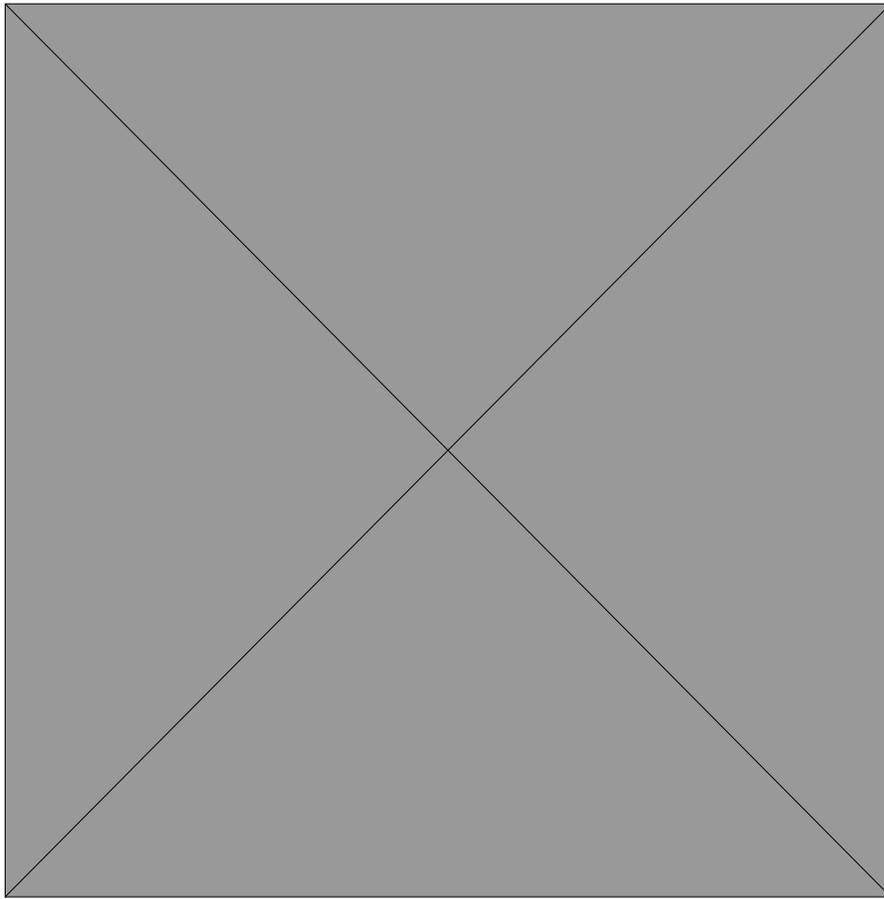
a conversation, one that is only possible through imitation, in a secondary nature. The fly or lure is a translation device.

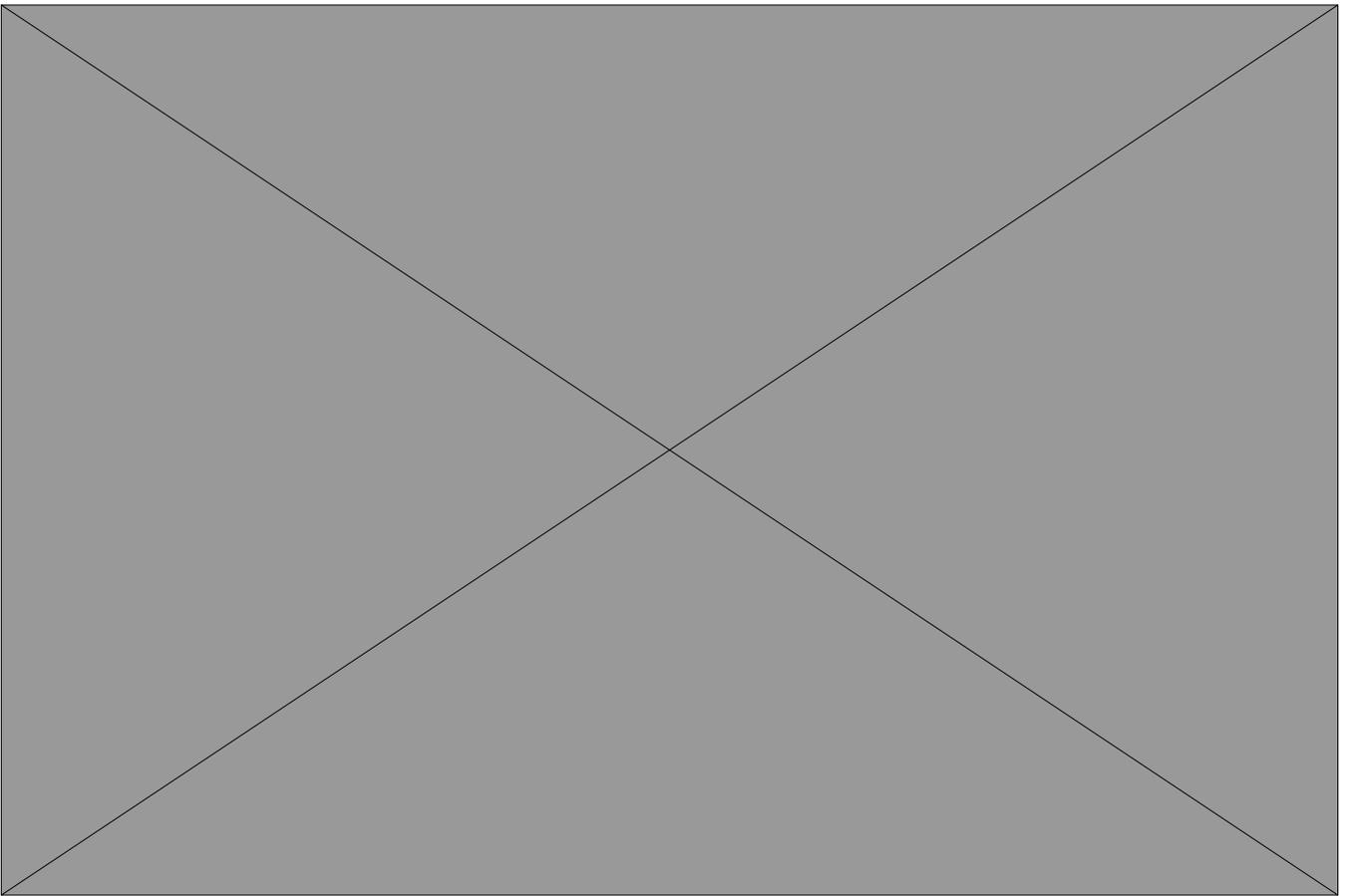
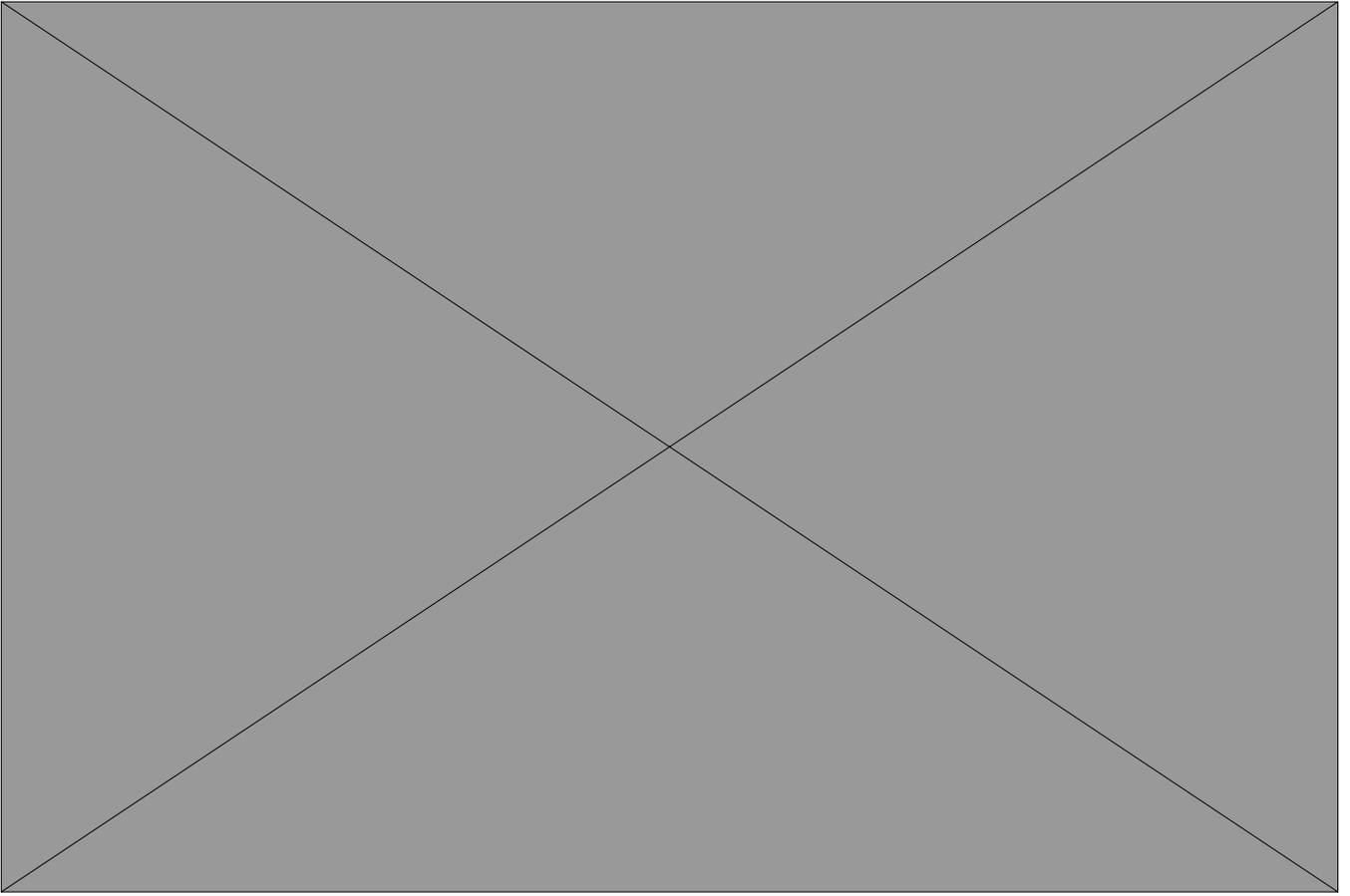
I wonder if Homer knew that his representations of the world he saw in the Adirondacks would act as lures that would pull me toward the Adirondacks? To have lived the Adirondacks first through imitation and then reality has been an amazing journey for me. The simulated world brought me to the real one, and both have had profound influences on myself and my sensibilities and my work as a maker of artifice in different ways.

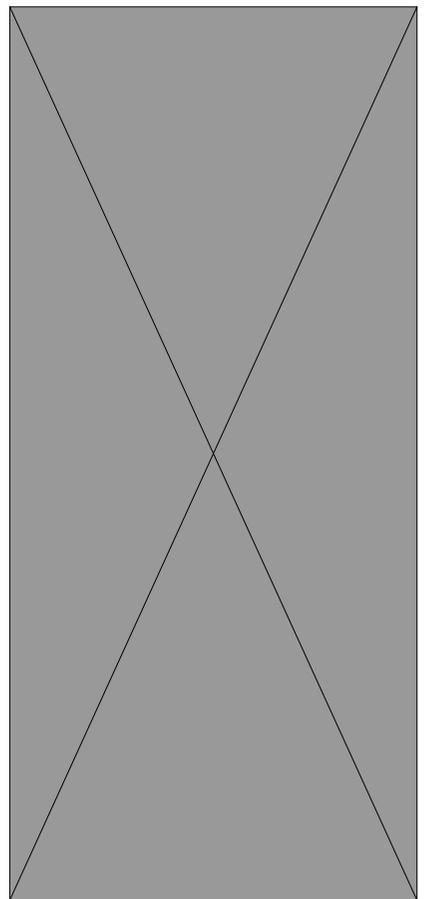
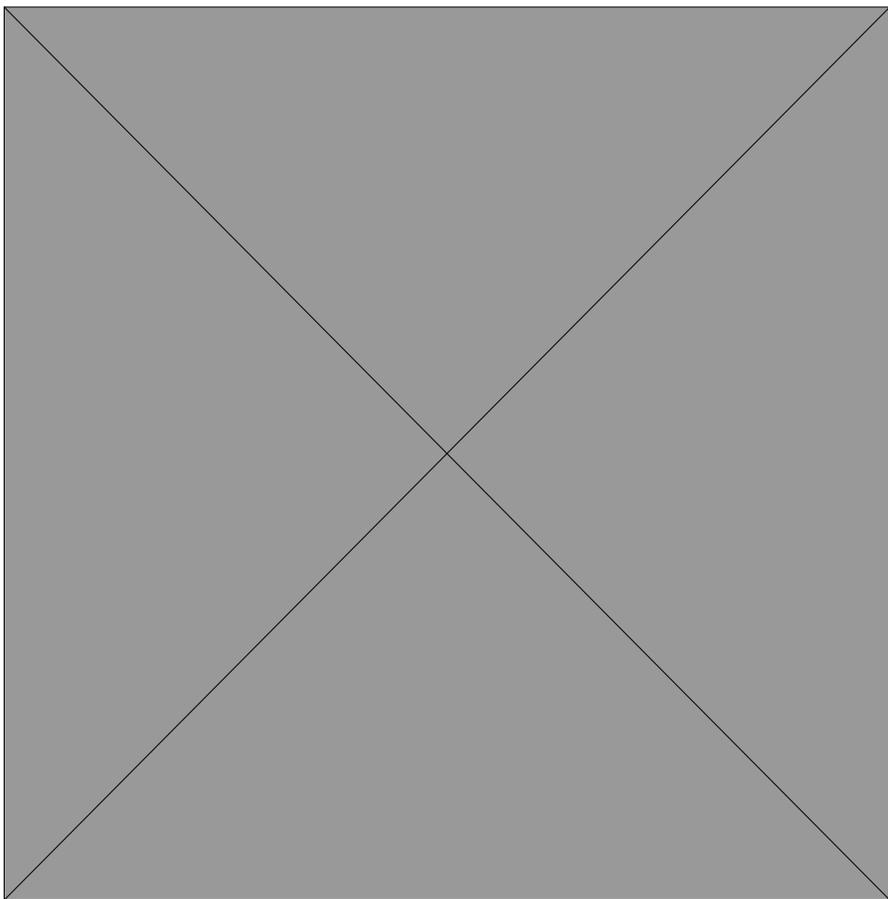
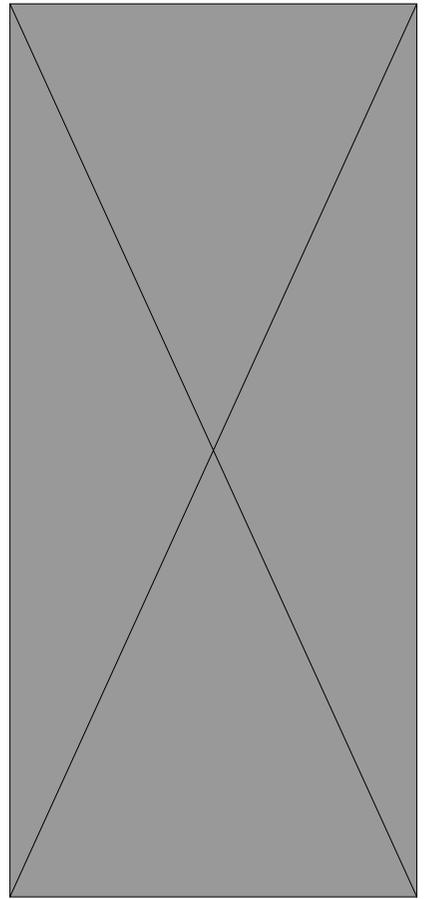
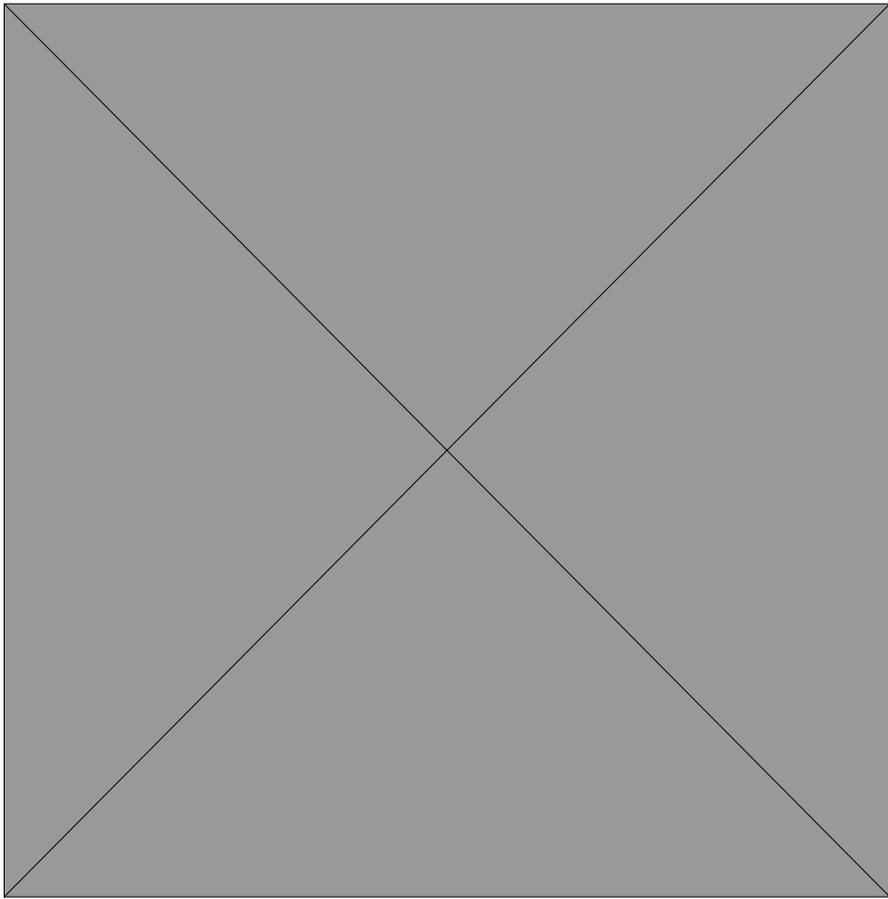
My first introduction to the Adirondacks came because of my paintings of trout, assembled into a book that was published in 1996 called *Trout: An Illustrated History* (Alfred Knopf)—my earnest homage to the beauty of these fishes. My own imitations of nature encouraged others to invite me to see their own real worlds that they imagined I might appreciate and enjoy. My first invitation was to the Ausable Club, in Keene Valley, then the Ausable River in Wilmington, and to the north of Paul Smiths, to fish streams winding slowly through open meadows and bracken. I had fallen in love with the Adirondacks then in person, but only after living and loving it in a representation. Which makes me puzzle even more about the relationship between the virtual or imitation worlds we have always lived in, as a counterpart to the real ones. I've sat by the fire as the snow falls, listened in summer haunted by the loon calls and had many conversations with people who live in the Adirondacks and love it, and all of this has shaped my thoughts and ideas.

I enjoy the Adirondacks in person, sometimes now several times a year. This past autumn I came up with my wife and young son to revel in the fall colors, which did not disappoint. We hiked to Copperas Pond with my friend Fritz from Wilmington and marveled at the world reflected in the water.

Looking at the reflection brought me to reflect again on the levels of representation and artifice in Homer's watercolors. Homer is creating the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional







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surface, but he is also painting the reflections of that three-dimensional world in the water. The reflection of the world in the water may have been our first teacher in learning to convert a three-dimensional world into two dimensions. A reflection is not reality any more than a painting is, but they do similar things. As Homer paints the reflection of the lake, a simulation of the world, he paints an imitation of a fly, the lure, a secondary nature—in painting them he is making double imitation, reflections of reflections, adding layers of artifice, a mirror within a mirror. Thinking about it makes my head hurt.

Just as there are consequences for a fish that falls for the artifice of a lure (a representation of a food item), so too are there consequences for mistaking a painting of the world for reality, or words for the world, or believing a map is the same as the territory it describes. Still, although we must be mindful of falling for imitations or representations, they are necessary for communication not only with each other but across species boundaries.

Representation is powerful. In the hands of a great artist like Homer it is sorcery. If I'm honest, the Adirondacks will never haunt me as much as they did the first time I saw them in Homer's watercolors as a child. Which makes me wonder and think even more about the nature of representation.

Fly-fishing is a conversation, just as walking into a museum is a conversation—a dialog with another creature through a representation of the actual world. Fly-fishing, like all communications, is also always a beautiful miscommunication. It almost works better when the representation is not accurate. That in itself is remarkable. ▲

**Artist, writer and naturalist James Prosek is the author of more than a dozen books, including his latest, *Art, Artifact, Artifice* (Yale University Press), for his 2020 exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery. His work has been shown at The Royal Academy of Arts in London, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and The National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, among other institutions.**

