

ART

James Prosek: An American Original

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"Brook Trout," 2009. Watercolor and gouache on tea-stained paper (Image Courtesy of the James Prosek and Waqas Wajahat, New York)

By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**

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As a college junior, he wrote an illustrated history of trout — and he's been an outside-the-box artist ever since.

James Prosek (b. 1975) is the Audubon of fish. John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*, published between 1827 and 1838, is an amalgam of science and art. Audubon's renderings of hundreds of birds, mostly in watercolor, were elegantly engraved in volumes that informed ornithology for generations. The art's gorgeous and cinematic. Whenever I see an Audubon bird, I think of close-ups of movie stars. For most of his career, and he's a mid-generation artist, Prosek has done the same thing with fish.

Prosek is a modern man. He's a fascinating, fine artist but a master of today's media. He makes documentaries, writes, teaches, and promotes conservation initiatives. A few years ago, he retraced the first book on fishing, *The Compleat Angler*, written by Issak Walton in 1653. His documentary on Walton is unusually good.

I've been writing about outside-the-box artists off and on all year. Angela Lorenz makes artist's books. Sheila Hicks is a textile sculptor. Henri Broyard is a young African-American painter. I planned to write about Prosek this month, mostly because he defies boundaries and thinks about art and science. Then, Harold Bloom died last week. Prosek and I were Bloom students at Yale, though of different generations. Bloom taught me about Shelley, Southey, Byron, and Wordsworth.

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Bloom called Prosek "an original." He thought Prosek was the best artist of his — Bloom's — era. What did he mean?

It starts with trout. Prosek wrote his first book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*, in 1996, when he was a junior at Yale. He painted the book's watercolor illustrations of 70 types of North American trout and researched and wrote this first study of trout. Prosek always loved fishing. He learned as a ten-year-old that there wasn't a book on the trout of North America. Over the next ten years, he produced one. He was surprised at the differences of opinion existing among freshwater and marine biologists over which fish were trouts. They weren't turgid, manic differences. To him, they showed deeply informed men and women

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bumping up against nature's inscrutability. He started to question regimes of classification. I think that appealed the most to Bloom. He wasn't into regimes.



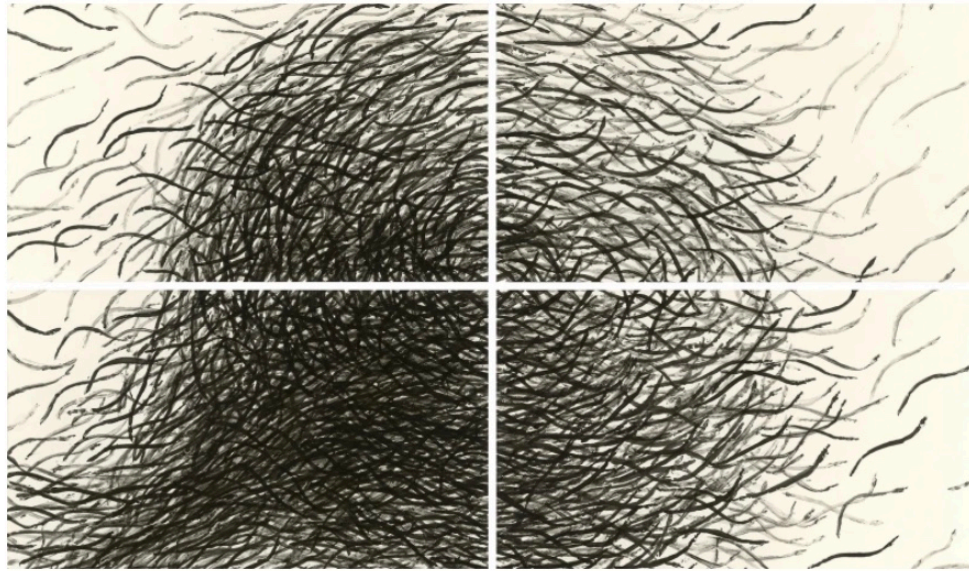
The image is a campaign banner for David Rutigliano. On the left is a photograph of a man and a woman smiling. To the right of the photo, the name "David Rutigliano" is written in large white and red letters. Further right, it says "Our State Representative for Trumbull, CT" in white text on a dark blue background. At the bottom, a red banner contains the text "VOTE November 8, 2022" in white. Below the name, there is small text: "Paid for by Rutigliano for Trumbull, Loretta Chory, Treasurer. Approved by Dave Rutigliano."

I think fishing is the most boring thing in the world, notwithstanding the branch of the Battenkill River, our country's best site for trout fishing, that runs through my land in Vermont. That said, the watercolors are beautiful. Prosek commanded a rainbow palette — among his subjects are rainbow trout — but he also has a command of texture. These fish look wet.

When I got the book, I thought, "Is this guy a still-life painter or a seascape painter or a pathologist or a taxidermist?" He's all of the above, and more. He can't be classified. Indeed, he's against classification, and so was Bloom. Bloom's famous today for advocating a canon of great books on Western culture — a classification of books worth reading — but he was a scholar of romantic poetry. He taught me the wildness of these poets. They were intellectually feral. They were deeply curious about nature. They loved its unpredictability. They weren't much into beauty. They were into the sublime.

Since *Trout: An Illustrated History*, he's written and illustrated books on ocean fish and eels. The art for the eel book is, because of the subject, an aesthetic collision of the linear with the asymmetrical but then an alliance. There's method to the madness — eels are among earth's oldest creatures, so they've got something going for them in both the durability and management departments — but Prosek is a fine abstract artist. I

and management departments — but PROSEK IS A FINE ABSTRACT ARTIST. I look at the eel pictures with wonder for their energy but also their simple palette of black and gray.



(Collection of Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA)

Prosek depicts animals and birds, too. The birds are usually silhouettes, one of art's most beguiling and reductive media. His animals have an Edwardian opulence, with lots of big, spotted, and lethal cats and armor-plated critters. There's no doubting their presence and authority, but they're not exactly wild. They're illustrative. Prosek places his big animals in an ordered network of branches with a sprinkling of bird silhouettes. Like his silhouettes, they're profiles. They're encyclopedia entries. That's how we make sense of the world.

Prosek's work is about classification. Not its dangers — he's the furthest thing from an outrage pimp — but its irrelevance. An obsession with putting things in groups denies the messiness of life. Prosek's eels have the right idea. They're going in a million different directions. The only thing we can know for certain is nature's willfulness.

He has a new show opening soon at the Yale University Art Gallery — Yale's first show combining things from the art galleries on campus and the Peabody Museum, Yale's anthropological and biological museum. Prosek's show is about nature's incessant creativity, pushing and pulling always to make something new. We can never understand nature's

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aesthetics, but Prosek is always thinking about it.

I was — and then wasn't — surprised to see Prosek's work in a place of pride at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition in 2018. The British ceramic artist Grayson Perry headed the committee selecting the art to be displayed. Perry is a very good artist, and I loved the show. I wrote about it for NR. It's the oldest contemporary art show in the world, and 2018 was its 250th anniversary. It's rare for an American artist to get work in the show since it's almost entirely British artists. I was proud to see the American Prosek prominently featured. His two tiger pictures looked great.

With over a thousand works of art in the Royal Academy show, I focused on other things in my story. Months passed, and I started to write a piece on Prosek a couple of weeks ago. Then, Bloom died. I remembered — a good art historian has thousands of pictures filed away in his head — that Perry had put Prosek's work in the 250th Royal Academy show.

Perry's a potter. Pottery is an ancient art. It's what I call "Ur-Art," a medium as old as humanity. Painting is at the top of the art-history and art-market hierarchy, so Perry is an outsider. He's freewheeling. Perry's a cross-dresser, and while Prosek and I are more likely to shop in the men's department at Brooks Brothers, in art Perry and Prosek don't just challenge the conventional. They ignore it. I also remembered that Perry had placed Prosek's work next to Sonia Lawson's portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the wildest of the Romantics. I don't know whether Bloom saw the show. I think it would have confirmed his thinking about Prosek. He's an original.

